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Peasant Magazine

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Issue #3

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Issue Three, Spring 2025

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Tricia Humphrey, D. G. Ironside & Kelsey Reilly.

Our apologies to anyone we may have missed.

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From the Publisher

Time is the greatest and most valuable commodity.

I had originally hoped to publish Issue #3 in Autumn of 2024, but alas that didn't happen. I moved the publishing date back to December, then February, and finally here we are in March.

Better late than never, I suppose, but it still annoys me that I couldn't keep to a self-imposed deadline and had to repeatedly move it back in order for life to stop interfering with my plans.

And sadly, life is still interfering with my plans, but thankfully it hasn't stopped me.

I have leukemia.

Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) is fortunately treatable, but the pills are extremely expensive. If I lived in the USA I would be as good as dead, as most Americans could not afford to pay for the pills out of pocket and depending upon the individual's health insurance then that might not cover it either.

Thankfully I live in Canada and can benefit from multiple government programs that allow me to get the pills for free. So there is hope for me after all.

Yes, my leukemia did throw a wrench into my writing, editing and publishing schedule, but at least I am not about to throw in the towel or kick the bucket (proverbially speaking).

I can also happily report that my oncologist reads *Peasant Magazine*.

Which brings me back to my earlier thought, regarding the value of time.

Time is the commodity that I use to create this magazine. Time is the commodity with

which writers use to produce their stories. Time is the commodity that editors volunteer to help make each issue possible. Time is needed to make every aspect of every person, place and thing, into a reality.

Time spent with my wife and two kids.

Time spent going to the hospital.

Time spent visiting relatives and friends.

Even the minutiae of time needed to travel is a factor in our everyday decisions. Should I take the train to Toronto or take an Uber instead?

Should I buy the more expensive audiobook (which will be faster to listen to) or the mass market paperback which will be slower and cheaper to read?

Should I hire an editor or edit the book myself?

Everyone makes daily decisions about activities based upon how we value our time.

And how we choose to "waste" our time.

Some people see writing, editing and publishing activities as a waste of time and/or considers them to be hobbies. I see it the opposite way. I recognize that my cash flow from book sales roughly doubles every year.

Anyone who can do math knows that if your book sales are doubling every year then it is simply a matter of time before you quit your regular job and start writing full time. With luck I will continue to find the time to do so.

And to our readers I say: "*Thank you! Thank you for spending your time reading our stories.*"

I know that it was time well spent.

Sincerely,

Charles Moffat

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ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Jeffrey J. Hoy is a retired hospital engineer. Visit [amazon.com/author/jeffrejhoy](https://www.amazon.com/author/jeffrejhoy) to enjoy his sci-fi, Sword & Sorcery, zombie, and WWII survival novels, plus a humorous memoir about his 50 years of working for “the man.” You can also find his short stories at [Draft2Digital](https://Draft2Digital.com). Follow him at threads.net/jeffrey_j_hoy

D. G. Ironside lives in Ontario, thrives at directing plays and coordinating an Improv comedy group, the Old Dance Hall Players. Discover his work in [*Bewildering Stories*](#), [*Dark Horses*](#), [*Schlock!*](#), and [*Aphelion Magazine*](#), plus more at douglasironside.com

Caleb James K. previously published “The Undying Island” in [*The Sirens Call*](#) Issue 65. He hails from Washington, Pennsylvania. He enjoys talking to other creatives as the host of [*The Drunken Pen Writing Podcast*](#). You can find some of his recent works in [*Ethereal Nightmares: An Anthology of Twisted Tales*](#), [*Strange Days Zine*](#), [*miniMAG*](#), [*Diabolic Press*](#) Issue One, and [*HorrorScope*](#) Volumes 3 & 4.

J. D. Dresner debuted his first fantasy novella, “A Goblin’s Mind”, in 2014 and has since published numerous pieces of poetry. His short story “Dragons v. Subways” won first place in the FSF Alliance writing competition. Born in Toronto, he now lives in British Columbia where he works as a professional book designer and editor.

David Carter has previously published “In the Wake of the Red Sun” in [*Die By the Sword*](#) Volume II and “Kai-zur the Godless” in [*Sword & Scandal*](#). David weaves tales of fantasy as a means to glimpse at worlds just beyond our own, where lies beauty as well as carnage.

Lita Kurth publishes fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry. She studied writing at the Rainier Writers Workshop (PLU) and is the author of “One Creative Writing Prompt a Day” published by Callisto Press. Lita has received multiple nominations for her work, won the [*Diana Woods Memorial Award*](#) and co-founded San Jose’s [*Flash Fiction Forum*](#).

Sean Mooney is a stay-at-home dad and forensic anthropologist who currently runs a homeschool group. He enjoys writing multiple genres that include gods, demons, werewolves, magic, mystery, time travel, and spaceships. Visit linktr.ee/SeanDMooney to learn more.

Brigham Magnusson is a high school English and creative writing teacher, a poet, and aspiring novelist. He loves fantasy, is a VMA Poetry Symposium presenter, and won the Mesa Public Schools Voices Contest for Narrative Fiction. His story “Drifting” was his debut and was previously published in Issue 1 of [*Peasant Magazine*](#).

Elliott Capon is the author of “The Prince of Horror”, “The Corps Vanishes”, and “Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch”. Some of his other works appear in [*Amazing Stories*](#), [*American Accent Short Stories*](#), [*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*](#), [*Black Cat Mystery Magazine*](#), [*Black Poppy Review*](#), [*commuterlit.com*](#), and so many other publications that we couldn’t list them all.

Charles Moffat primarily writes heroic fantasy, epic fantasy, dark fantasy, and sword & sorcery. He lives in Ajax Ontario with his wife and two sons. He enjoys archery, fishing, woodworking and bow making. Visit fiction.charlesmoffat.com to learn more or browse at [amazon.com/author/moffat](https://www.amazon.com/author/moffat).

The Battle of Fire God Island

By Jeffrey J. Hoy

“No one has *ever* killed a Gak’shran?” Syues asked of those gathered in the smoke-filled longhouse of Halbarad, the brawny chieftain of the western Cougar Clan. The response elicited embarrassed grunts from the assembled warriors. The mahogany-skinned wizard sighed as he ran a withered hand over his bald pate. He glanced at the blind, emaciated wiseman sitting next to him, but the Seer seemed to be deaf as well.

“Normal steel will barely cut them,” Halbarad replied to the newly arrived ancient one from some mythical, far-off land. He leaned forward from where he sat to return the steely gaze of the stranger many were already calling, He Who Will Come, a great, legendary sorcerer who would one day unite the animal-worshipping clans into a powerful army that would conquer the world. “Even the excellent blades of the Black Riders are repulsed by their scaly hides. Only their own weapons can harm them.”

“No one has ever taken one of their weapons from them?” asked the wizard as he imagined a squat, reptilian-like creature that apparently resembled waist-high, ugly toads that waddled revoltingly on hind legs.

“It has happened only once, and that was several generations ago,” said Halbarad. He straightened and squared his massive shoulders. Firelight flickered

on the hammered bands of bronze that bound his bulging biceps. “There is a chieftain of the eastern Cougar Clan called Jah Kresh, or Wicked Knife. He has one that has been handed down through the years. He keeps it hidden away. The Fire Gods would rip him to pieces if they discovered it.”

“You have not fought back for how many years?” asked Syues disdainfully.

“I would show you a stain on my sword,” said the chieftain, motioning toward the pile of weapons near the entrance, though he made no movement to get it. “It was handed down to me from my father’s father. No amount of rubbing has been able to remove the yellow stain of the Fire God that it wounded.”

“Wounded?” asked the old wizard. “Just wounded?”

“It is said,” said the chieftain with a sigh, “that it is suicide to fight them.”

“So,” said the blind wiseman in his soft, shrill voice, “we fight amongst ourselves instead of fighting the demons.”

“This is true,” said the chieftain sadly. “Our weapons only draw the blood of our own people now.”

Syues turned to the blind Seer. “Explain.”

“In the beginning, many, many generations ago, the clans tried to fight them.” He sighed softly. “But even the first evil creatures, few though they were, were too powerful. Some of the southern clans joined the Fire Gods, gaining

benefit from their protection. From then on, when the clans met at the island for the Tribute, more than just trading and nuptials ensued. If the fiendish desires of the Gak'shran were not met, they would descend from the skies on their nightmarish beasts and destroy whole villages." Mutterings of agreement swept through the lodge. "Ever since, the clans have prostrated to the grotesque gods and given of their own flesh and blood to placate them."

Syues let out a weary sigh and glanced at Morauk and Cahnya, his Gifted warrior companion and the young man's mind-reading mate. He did not have to voice his opinion to the couple, for they already knew his counsel.

* * *

"*There* is Gak'shran Island," said Halbarad, unable to conceal his awe as he and the other mounted chieftains spread out on either side of Syues and Morauk atop the grassy hillock. All around below them a vast army of many clans flowed like a colorful stream around a boulder.

As the host had journeyed south, slowly gaining in numbers, the southern boundary of the Valley of Life had grown into an immense solid wall of gray, snow-capped peaks looming beyond the distant island. At the base of the jagged range spread an immense lake, in the middle of which rose a wide, squat mountain.

"They descend from the western sky," explained Jah Kresh as all eyes stared at the clear blue sky as if they might arrive at any moment. "They fly down on their nightmarish beasts and land on the summit. That is where..." He looked at the others uneasily. "That is where their victims are sacrificed." He, like Halbarad, wore a catamount headdress, the hide and legs of which trailed down their banded arms to end in claws tied to their wrists.

"Who attends these sacrifices?" asked Syues gruffly.

"All clans must be represented," said Souta, a Crow chieftain. His black, feathered headband quivered as he looked around nervously. "It is commanded," he added with a hint of regret.

"How is the summit accessed?" asked Morauk. He already knew the old man's bloody, yet necessary, plan. If, as the chieftains claimed, the Gak'shran never came down off the mountain, Syues would have to go up to them.

"There is only one approach," said Halbarad. "On the eastern slope. It is a rough, steep path that cuts back and forth." Even though the young warrior had asked the question, he looked pointedly at the old, hairless wizard. "It is a very difficult climb."

"I do not wish to have clan fight clan," said He Who Will Come. His steel-gray eyes shifted among the chieftains. "Is there no other way?"

Hyl of the Hawk Clan shook his feathered head. "The southern clans will not raise weapons against their gods. Orichalda will not allow it."

"Pity," said Morauk who, as a warrior, was not used to feeling dread or fear, but even his steed shifted nervously beneath him, as if she felt his uneasiness.

Over many generations, the lake had lowered so that a thin causeway on the eastern side connected the squat mountain to the lakeshore. In olden times the clans had had to pay a toll to the Turtle Clan to be ferried across on boats and rafts, and currently paid the Turtles for the privilege of crossing the thin strip of land.

Morauk felt a shiver go up his spine, even though the mountain did not look so imposing. It did not seem so tall that a strong man or a healthy horse could not scale it in half a day. No, the appearance did not bother him so, but the idea of what had been going on at its summit for untold generations did.

The lower slopes of Gak'shran Island were now occupied by the local clans and others who had already arrived, and from all around its flanks rose the smoke of many fires. He guessed that there were many thousands of fighters camped below the summit.

Beside him, Syues fingered the handle of the strange, double-bladed Gak'shran short sword Jah Kresh had presented to He Who Will Come. The chieftain had gladly given it to the strange elder for,

even though he had been proud to own it, never had the nerve to openly display it. It was forbidden by the Fire Gods for a human to possess, and to even touch one was to invite certain and painful death.

"Syues," said Jah Kresh as he glanced at the slowly moving mass of mounted fighters that stretched all around the knoll. "The southern clans will know something is wrong." He was a tall man, with dark flowing hair and a beard braided in the custom of his village. He was heavy of body, though little of it had turned to fat.

Souta, of the Crows, nodded solemnly. "It is true, Syues. The clans arrive for the Tribute one or two at a time from many directions. But never this many clans together!" He turned his horse in a tight circle, shaking his head at the sight of so many thousands upon thousands flowing like a river below them.

"Rumors have preceded us," said Halbarad. "They know the legend is with us, and many will not be pleased with the changes your arrival brings."

"Will they attack us?" asked Syues, his gaze steady on the distant island. "Or will we be able to reach the island without a fight?"

"Clans do not fight clans at the Tribute," said Hyl indignantly. He scorned the angry looks of the others as he stared at the hooded old man many were now calling Syues. "Fighters may have individual quarrels, but clans do not."

“This will not be a usual Tribute,” said Souta.

Halbarad glared at the others. “We will not strike the first blow against our brothers!” he said forcefully. “If the clans will accept Syues for what he truly is, there will be no need for bloodshed.”

Jah Kresh spoke sharply. “The Gak’shran are small and few, but not weak! Do you not expect them to fight when we turn against them?”

“I expect them to die!” Halbarad glared at the chieftain. “I expect to see their filthy, yellow blood stain the ground for what they have done to our people for all these generations!”

“And what of their winged *kagash*?” asked the Snake Clan chieftain. “How do we slay *them*?” He looked around, and there were many murmurs of agreement before He Who Will Come raised a hand for silence.

“We will continue closer,” said Syues. “Then we will camp and light many fires tonight so those on the summit can see our numbers. Let them wonder at the mingling of our clans.” He glanced around at the chieftains. “Go prepare your people. Let them rest tonight, for tomorrow their world will certainly change.”

With grim nods and determined looks, the chieftains turned and headed down to deliver Syues’s words. And later, as night descended on the camp, the wizard and his warrior rode among them, giving the chieftains encouragement and speaking

of their future and his hopes for their children’s children.

* * *

Morauk found the old man sitting upon a low, grassy knoll soon after the sun had set. It was rumored that far to the west, somewhere beyond the horizon, were the mountains within which the dread Fire Gods made their home. Meanwhile, all around the hill, the din of the great campsite rose and fell in a rhythm not unlike that of an ocean.

“Sit.” Syues patted the soft ground beside him. “You are worried.”

“You are not?” Morauk could not bear to look at the old man—now called Syues—right then. He did not like what was happening to the wizard—or to himself and his wife! There would be much killing soon, and he did not want to be a part of it.

“You may stay out of the fighting, if you wish,” said Syues. “I know what Cahnya means to you, and you to her.”

“I do not worry for myself,” said Morauk, “but I need to make sure she and our coming child will be safe. Halbarad said he will keep her far from the fighting, should there be any.”

“There will be,” said Syues sadly.

The young warrior grunted. “I am worried for you.” He waved his hand to indicate the sprawling campsite. “And them. They do not truly know what they are about to suffer.”

“You would have me try to stop it now?” Syues shook his head. “I am so close to another of the ancient Keys of magick that it excites me!”

Morauk shot the wizard an astonished look. “I am afraid you are still unduly influenced by what the Key of Darkness did to you, Rastar.” He made sure to use the wizard’s given name when he wanted to get his full attention. “Is that why you seem to have no remorse about the death and destruction about to happen?”

Syues sighed. “No, and no,” he said. “What the Key of Darkness changed in me is now of no concern.” He waved a hand dismissively. “What is done is done. Just as you feel compelled to stay by my side and protect me, I am compelled to seek out and destroy the other Keys. And as for remorse...” He shook his head sadly. “I am still the man you left Yasa Toran with.”

“Yasa Toran!” Morauk chuckled bitterly. “What is that? Some mythical place? I certainly understand now that I will never again see our homeland!”

“Yet you will eventually find that which you seek,” said Syues.

“Even if I don’t have any idea what that might be?” He waited, but got no reply.

They sat silently for a while as all around them flickered the light of a thousand campfires. Songs and fights broke out, but the latter were quickly quelled, while the former lasted long into the night. The clans sensed this might be

their last night of joy, their last night of freedom from pain and suffering. Though the Tribute had not yet really begun, many decided to start early. While deals were made and betrothals promised, no one dared mention the uncertainties that lay ahead.

Finally, Syues stirred. “We should turn in, Morauk. I have a feeling there are many eyes watching us from out there. I would feel better with many friends around.”

“I agree.” Morauk stood and brushed at the grass clinging to him, wondering at this unusual feeling of vulnerability in the powerful wizard.

As they walked slowly through the flickering light of fires, several fighters got up and followed Syues at a discreet distance. Soon, the several became more and more until the old man was surrounded by a boisterous crowd and Morauk found himself pushed aside and ignored. Shaking his head, he found his way back to his camp through the seething, swirling tide of rowdy humanity.

Morauk asked after Cahnya, and was pointed the way to the clan’s new, mind-reading wisewoman. It took time to work his way close to her, for even though she had such strange, pale skin and coppery hair compared to the black-haired, dark-skinned clans, they had finally accepted her as their own, and were proud to spend time near their Seer.

When he finally sat down beside her,

he could tell that her mind was overwhelmed by not only all the attention afforded her, but also from the many thousands of excited and agitated minds all around. She leaned on him, her weary expression saying it all.

Not much later her attendants, the least likely of which was Tama, shooed him away. Every time he thought of the strange friendship between her and the warrior, she would tell him everything was fine. He found it so strange that the clansman who had once vowed to kill her had become her most steadfast protector.

Sometimes he felt a bit of jealousy, and even though he tried to hide his thoughts from his mate, she admonished him for even thinking it. If anything, Tama had become like a brother to her. And since she had never had any siblings, she was not going to push the obsessed fighter away.

* * *

Just before dawn came a low, rumbling thunder as of an approaching storm. Few were awake that early, and they wondered at the strange sound that did not seem to come from the sky, but came instead from the ground itself as thousands upon thousands of hooves pounded the earth.

The first wave of attackers slammed into the outer edges of the vast encampment, catching most totally unprepared. Long lances pierced bodies,

and heavy clubs and axes slammed and slashed while horses knocked aside and trampled those in their path. Cries of horror and pain and anger carried far across the grassy plain as the foremost riders angled left and right, creating a bloody pathway for those who followed close behind.

As more and more mounted invaders flowed into the narrowing gap, those in the lead slowed, though their momentum continued into the midst of a camp that was finally rallying to stop the treachery of their brothers. Even though some defenders managed to fight back, few could stand against such an onslaught as the attackers pushed farther and farther into the panicked encampment.

But to what purpose? Many of the enemy became isolated and surrounded and were pulled down and slaughtered, but the leading edge kept pushing into the middle of the chaos. What puzzled many soon became clear to a few; the aim of the assault was the campsite of the Cougar Clan.

Syues tried to rally those around him, but his voice would not carry over the roar of warning, over the clash of weapons, over the cries and shouts and wails. Moreover, the defenders' first instinct was to protect their own. The vast camp began to break into many knots of warriors and noncombatants as beast slammed into beast and man alike, and tents and shelters were knocked down and set afire as blood began to stain the

trampled grass underfoot.

When the distant shouting began, Morauk bounded to his feet, but for the moment there was nothing to do, no enemy to engage. Although he could hear fighting far-off, his first concern was Cahnya. He tried to use his Gift of mind travel to search for her, but where to look in the bedlam?

A shout from behind pierced through the cacophony encircling him. He spun around as four riders from the Eagle Clan broke through the panicked crowd and began wreaking havoc upon the unarmed people.

Morauk ran at the horsemen, screaming his outrage as his weapon flashed through the air. One attacker fell from his steed minus a hand, which still gripped the useless crude stone axe as its owner cried out. Spinning just in time to parry the thrust of a metal-tipped lance, Morauk knocked the wooden weapon aside and thrust upward, the tip of his blade finding the man's gut. Even as he pulled his sword out of the groaning man's stomach, he grabbed the rider's foot and pushed hard, tumbling him from his steed.

Morauk clutched the saddle horn and swung himself up onto the steed's back, swinging his sword to fend off the savage swing of a bloodied battle axe. The axe pushed his blade aside and sliced across the back of his free arm, just below the elbow. As he lost his balance and fell backwards, he took a wild swing at the

man, but missed. The trampled grass cushioned his fall, but he still fought for the breath that had been knocked from his lungs.

All around his head pounded numerous hooves as the fighting continued. He wanted to scream out against the intense pain coursing up his arm, but fought off the urge. He was wounded, but still very much alive while people were dying all around him.

Rolling to his knees, Morauk dropped his sword and slid his dagger out. He sliced a piece of cloth from the rough material of his coat and twisted it savagely around his wound. Putting the knife away, he managed to tie the crude bandage with his mouth and right hand.

A great mass of dancing horses and flashing blades nearby caught his attention. If he was needed anywhere, it would be there. He pushed through riderless horses and fleeing people toward the fighting, almost tripping several times on fallen gear or bloodied bodies. Someone behind him yelled out something about the ghost woman getting away, and that instantly diverted his attention.

"Cahnya!" Someone grabbed his shoulder, pleading with him for help, but he pushed the frantic woman aside. He took a step one way, then another, but had no idea which way his love might be. "Cahnya!"

He turned at the sound of pounding hooves and faced a maniacal Wolf Clan

fighter bearing down on him with a stone-tipped cudgel raised high. Bringing his own weapon up to parry the blow, Morauk suddenly felt a sharp pain in his side and the world grew very bright around him. His sword hand was jarred painfully as something heavy struck his shoulder and sent him flying.

The ground against his face felt cool and moist, but a dark warmth flowed through the rest of his body as consciousness slipped away. His last thoughts were of the copper-haired woman he loved like no other as darkness washed over him.

* * *

The morning of the unprecedented attack on the camped clans, signal bonfires on the island sent thick columns of black smoke into the dull gray sky where they melded with clouds threatening rain. Meanwhile, Orichalda's fighters were fiercely defending the small spit of land that connected the island to the shore. The northern clans had attacked in mass, but the narrow causeway kept them from overwhelming the heavily outnumbered defenders. But it would not last. His fighters could not be expected to hold forever against such an outraged, determined army.

Orichalda stood on the westward slope of the mountain and stared worriedly into the gray distance, straining his eyes for signs of the Fire Gods. If they did not

appear soon, their chosen clan might not last the day. The surprise attack against the assembled renegade clans had gone reasonably well until the one they called Syues unleashed a magickal fire against the attackers, causing even the bravest fighters to flee from such a horrifying death. Many of his warriors had died, or were left to die, but they had done much damage to the rebel clans, and of that he was proud.

And though the stranger's sorcery had indeed proved to be powerful, the wizard would soon be but one against many... If the Fire Gods deigned to come. But if the Gak'shran did not arrive soon, He Who Will Come and his vast host would eventually be able to overwhelm the clans who held the island. Even commanding the high ground would not be enough to defend against such manpower and magick.

The chieftain, adorned in his terrifying, spiked and horned juvenile *kagash* skull headdress, turned and strode to the great stone slabs which were stained with the blood of generations of sacrifices to the Gak'shran. He gazed with a mixture of revulsion and curiosity at the writhing victims chained to the flat boulders, wondering what was going through their minds. Many had screamed in horror at the fate that awaited them, but that had ended quickly as the first to make noise had been gagged with mouths full of filthy rags.

Good, he thought coldly as the victims

gazed at him with terror in their eyes, *the Gak'shran will want them alive and kicking*. He hoped that would appease their anger at the insolence of the renegade clans. Whether the legend they followed proved true or not, how *dare* they rebel during the Tribute!

The Fire God Clan chieftain turned at the sound of his name, wondering what new crisis he had to deal with. Was it not enough to have attacked his brothers without warning, killing many innocents in the heat of battle? He had broken one of the most sacred laws, but had the rebellious clans not already broken more by banding together and following this mythical sorcerer from far away?

“What now?!” he shouted as he strode toward a group of fighters crowded around one slab. They parted at his approach and he nodded knowingly. *Ah, yes! The ghost woman!* He had known of her presence among Halbarad's people. In fact, the aim of the attack, other than trying to kill the strange wizard, had been to capture her and determine if the rumors of her mind-reading powers were true. So far, he had found the reports disappointing.

He stared down at the bruised and bloodied naked woman and shivered revoltingly. Why, she looked like the soft underbelly of a fish! Her body, though well proportioned, was stark in its whiteness compared to the brown of the blood-stained rock. He allowed his gaze to wander up her body, stopping to

marvel at the coppery hair splayed around her head. He could see that some might think she was beautiful, but her pallid flesh held no sexual attraction for him.

She seemed unconscious, but suddenly her emerald eyes popped open and she looked around in a panic. She began to pull and yank at the ropes and chains restraining her, but quickly became surprisingly calm. When she spoke, it was with a strange accent.

“If you do not release me,” she growled, “my husband will rip out your heart and make a trophy of your ugly head!”

Orichalda almost laughed, but he could see the sheer conviction in her face. Well, so be it. He had been the target of many worse, hopeless threats in his life. He leaned forward and put one foot on the edge of the slab, leaned an elbow on his knee, and peered down at her. He found himself staring into two very bright, angry eyes. He glanced at the gray, western sky, then back down at the pale-skinned woman.

“You will soon get to see the Fire Gods personally, white one. *Very* personally.” He smiled grimly as she did her best to suppress a shiver. “You must be cold on that stone, but it will not be for long.” It surprised him when she gave him a low, animal growl from deep within her chest.

“The foul beasts you worship,” she said with a convulsive laugh, “will not make it in time! What will you do then,

mighty chieftain? Even now you worry about the attack from below!”

“Orichalda!” someone called from nearby.

He turned his attention from the poor, pallid creature to face one of his fighters who held out a handful of bands and bracelets and chains of gold that, even though cut and bent and twisted, still gleamed in the dull afternoon light.

“What are these?” he asked, though he already knew from whence they had come. He had not failed to notice the crude cuts and scrapes on the ghost woman’s upper arms and ankles where something had been roughly removed. Her man must be very powerful indeed to have afforded such fine items, though little good it did her now.

The warrior nodded at the bound, naked woman. “She bore these on her arms and ankles.” He held out his other hand to show his chieftain a long leather loop strung with colorful beads and stones. “She is a Seer, Orichalda!” said the fighter nervously. “It is wrong for us to—”

“No!” The chieftain shook his head, and the *kagash* skull moved likewise as he glared at the man. “Maybe the bastard Cougar Clan claims she is one, but she is not a wisewoman! She is nothing! Keep the gold, but toss the rest away! They are meaningless!” He glared down at her. “*She* is meaningless.”

A warning shout went up from the eastern edge of the summit, and others

took up the call. Soon every fighter on the mountaintop had run over to stare down at the attackers who had finally overwhelmed the causeway defenders.

“See?!” shouted the white woman hysterically. “They are coming, Orichalda! They are coming! You will die before the day is done!”

Orichalda turned, his hand on the hilt of his sword, but he quickly controlled his anger. “It is *you* who shall die this day! You shall be split open and eaten alive by the Gak’shran, white witch!”

Excited shouts came from the west, and elation washed through his body. His laugh was like the bark of an animal when he caught sight of huge, winged creatures descending from the gray sky.

Orichalda smiled confidently, shouting directions for the defense of the summit. It would not be long now before this self-proclaimed Syues felt what real magick was all about. Soon the traitors would feel the Fire Gods’ wrath and realize they had made a grave mistake.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the Fire Gods grew larger in the sky. His prayers had been answered. His gods had responded—he knew they would. Now the rebellious clans would see the futility of resistance. They would soon know pain and suffering for their arrogance.

Orichalda grinned wildly, unsheathing his sword and shaking it at the sky, all the while screaming jubilantly the dark silhouettes steadily loomed larger. Today his weapon would taste much blood and

he would live up to his name:
Bloodthirsty.

* * *

Morauk sat astride one of Halbarad's finest horses, a huge black beast. He sat heads above the battle raging for control of the narrow bit of land that connected to the island. All morning the fighting had gone on and on and on. The defenders had erected a wall of sorts, using logs and boulders and hides and anything else they could get ahold of. They had also tried several times to outflank the attackers on the causeway using their rafts and boats, but had quickly retreated again and again under a rain of deadly arrows.

He smiled grimly as the southern clans were finally being overrun, though it had been at a great cost. The defenders were running—literally—for the hills as the overwhelming pursuers poured forth. The battle had turned, but that was not his main concern. In the middle of all this death and dying, his thoughts were only of Cahnya.

When he had regained consciousness back in the main camp and realized that she and her attendants were missing after the traitorous attack, he had flown into a panic. At that moment he cared little for the dead or dying lying all around him. He knew in his heart that Syues needed the clans' support for his own purposes, but these were not *his* people. His people

consisted of only two—the old man, and his beloved mate. And of the two, only Cahnya concerned him right now.

Morauk had spent an inordinate amount of time using his Gift of spiritual projection trying to find her. He guessed where they had taken her, but it had all been for naught; they had hidden her too well. So here he sat, astride a stout war horse, waiting for a chance to take his revenge on men he did not know, and hoping against hope he would be able to find her alive and well.

And what of Tama, her protector? It seemed he too had vanished in the chaos of the attack. Had he been killed trying to protect her? He hoped not. For even though he had no love for the wild-eyed clansman, for with him Cahnya had made at least one devotee, and he hoped the man had not met a terrible fate.

As the attackers advanced toward the mountain, he let his steed make its own way through the death and chaos. Syues was somewhere up ahead, but strangely had not used his magick to help the northern clans break through. He had already weakened himself trying to stop the attack on the camp, for he knew as with himself and Cahnya that any prolonged use of their Gifts was extremely wearying.

He realized that the old man had to rest his mind—or whatever he used—just like a fighting man had to rest his muscles after a hard battle, but for now he really didn't care. His only concern was for

Cahnua. He wanted to find his mate and get away once and for all from the death and destruction that had trailed him and Syues across this northern continent.

Morauk closed his eyes, sighed deeply, and let his ghostly consciousness run free. He swooped across the battlefield, disregarding the fleeing fighters and the bedlam of the battlefield. Then he flew higher and focused his attention on the summit. He had previously avoided the place, having heard of the brutal atrocities the Gak'shran had visited upon their victims. The grisly summit would not be something he wanted to see, but it was certainly something he wanted to see ended.

And that was when he spotted her. Even filthy and bloody, her pale skin shone like a beacon as he flew over the summit. Panic seized his heart, and he dove toward her, instantly realizing what they were about to do. But he was too far away to physically save her!

Beside her, a man wearing what must be an adolescent *kagash* skull, raised his sword toward the sky as he looked to the west.

Bringing his consciousness to a halt directly above his naked mate, Morauk's attention was torn between her and the shouting chieftain. As a loud cheer went up across the summit, he saw why they were rejoicing. Far to the west, their spiky black silhouettes approaching, were upwards of twenty huge creatures, their jagged wings beating slowly as they

descended from the gray, gloomy sky.

The Fire Gods had arrived.

* * *

"We must gain the summit before the Gak'shran arrive!" Halbarad shouted above the din of fighting. He, as well as Syues and others, were now on foot since the uneven landscape had become too rough and steep for their steeds. Many fighters were working their way up the nearby narrow, switchback trail, but it was slow going.

The Cougar chieftain rejoiced that the outnumbered defenders far below had eventually been overwhelmed, and as they turned and fled the northerners made quick, bloody work of them. He tried to remind his fighters that they were killing their fellow clansmen, but the bloodlust had long ago taken over their senses.

"I fear... it is... too late," rasped Syues. He nodded upwards. The sounds of jubilation carried down the bare mountainside. Placing one tip of the wickedly-curved, double-bladed Gak'shran weapon against the rock and gripping it with both hands, he leaned over wearily, trying to catch his breath.

Twice there had been a concerted effort by the defending clans to attack the knot of men protecting He Who Will Come, and twice they had almost succeeded. The Cougar chieftain had wondered why the wizard had not used his powers to protect himself, and now

wondered if Syues even had enough strength—magickal or not—to battle the Fire Gods after having worn himself out defending the camp.

“We still must try,” Halbarad told the weary elder. Even as he spoke, the first of far too many *kagash* began to circle the summit, their heart-rending shrieks piercing the sky.

The first beasts to soar over the foothills were the biggest Halbarad had ever seen or heard of. Several carried two Gak’shran on their backs, while others had a single rider, or none. They swooped low over the cowering men below, all of whom—attackers and defenders alike—stopped fighting at the fearsome sight. The stories of what even one of the monsters could do to a mob of men was legendary. As the creatures wheeled over the battlefield, screeching their disdain at the insignificant fighters below, there were few who did not tremble in fear.

When the first *kagash* landed on the summit, most fighters on the slopes realized that the Fire Gods’ attention was focused atop the mountain, not below, so the bloodshed resumed as the northern clans slowly fought their way up the rugged slopes.

“We must hurry,” Halbarad encouraged the exhausted wizard, and he wondered if he were not hurrying to his own death. Few had ever challenged the Gak’shran since their arrival generations before, and no tale ever told of anything other than death and destruction visited

upon any clan who dared. And here he was, encouraging a strange, tired sorcerer to do the impossible. For that was what he truly believed now. Much of the strength and willpower of the northern fighters had been sapped just getting this far, and he was afraid it would soon all be for naught.

The Cougar chieftain glanced up at the summit, closer now, yet seemingly an unattainable distance away, and watched as the last of the *kagash* swooped onto the top of the mountain. Whatever he had thought to achieve was certainly doomed now that the Fire Gods had arrived. But if nothing else, he would die a brave death today. Of that, he was sure.

* * *

Morauk spun his detached consciousness around and watched a score of the huge, hideous creatures descend upon the summit. Riding upon half were equally monstrous beings that he had never seen before and never could have imagined in his wildest nightmares.

The Gak’shran were fat-headed, neckless, squat, and ugly, and reminded him of misshapen toads attempting to stand upright like a man. They wore no clothing but were draped in leather harnesses and pouches and bags, some of which—and here he felt his far away physical body shake with revulsion—appeared to be tanned, human skin. Gold chains and bands and trinkets

adorned their wrinkled, sickly-gray skin, and each carried a double-bladed, curved weapon like the one Jah Kresh had given the old man.

The Fire Gods had looked quite large and imposing on the backs of their fearful beasts, but when they landed, untied their harnesses, and slid off, the tops of their bulbous heads would have reached barely to his chest. Not that their diminutive size did him any good. He was still too far away to physically intervene. But, mentally—?

Morauk suddenly remembered when he had first reached out and gently touched Cahnya's face with his disembodied hand, or brushed his ghostly fingers through her hair, or the time he had smacked a horse's rump to see its reaction, and it suddenly became clear what he had to do.

He moved his lifeforce closer to the enemy chieftain, who was now shouting gleefully and insanely at his mate and thought back to his previous mental touches. He concentrated, then put every bit of anger he could into his mind... and punched his invisible fist into the fuming face.

* * *

Cahnya struggled with all her might to slip her bonds while the screeching, nightmarish beasts swooped closer and closer. All over the summit the southern clansmen were shouting and whooping

their joy at the arrival of their gods, and the pounding in her brain of their jubilation was overwhelming. Ever since being taken captive, her mind had been assaulted with the crude, carnal feelings of those around her. She had felt her mate that morning when he realized she had been taken captive, and the love he felt for her was the one thing keeping her sane.

They had drugged her, and when she had come out of the grogginess, she found herself bound to one of the blood-stained stones. She could hear and feel the death and turmoil all around as the clans fought each other but could not hear Morauk's thoughts in the cacophony that swirled inside her head. She knew he must be agonizing over her disappearance, and she wished she could let him know where she was.

Then she felt him. The feeling came through so clear that she looked up and expected him to be standing right beside her. He was not physically nearby, but at least his anger at her predicament pushed away some of the lewd and despicable thoughts of the clansmen who were cheering the arrival of the Gak'shran.

She heard his thoughts and realized what Morauk was about to try, she turned and shouted at the chieftain, for she certainly wanted to witness what should be quite a shock to the self-assured man.

“Orichalda!” she screamed as loud as she could. “Orichalda! You steaming pile of Gak'shran dung!”

The Fire God chieftain turned, his expression of jubilation turning to anger. He strode over and glared down at her. “You pale whore! You see what is coming?” He flung an arm back and pointed at the sky. “You will soon feel the claws and teeth of my gods! That is what—”

“You will feel *my* wrath!” she shouted, knowing the exact moment it was going to happen. “Now!”

Without warning, something struck the chieftain’s nose, breaking it instantly. It sent him reeling and he dropped to his knees, blood spurting from his nostrils. Still, he managed to jump to his feet, gripping his sword. Spinning around to see who or what had struck him. Fright momentarily contorted his face and nearby stunned fighters stared too, trying to figure out what had felled their chieftain.

“You should have killed me!” Cahnya screamed. “For now I will make you suffer!”

This time the vicious blow slammed into his throat and crushed his windpipe. The big man collapsed onto all fours; his sword forgotten as it bounced noisily on the rocky ground. Choking, he staggered to his feet, clutching his throat, staring in bewilderment when his bloody blade rose by itself into the air and stabbed savagely into his stomach. It twisted and jerked and pulled back. He looked down dumbly as his intestines spilled onto the already blood-stained ground. He pitched

forward, his expression of astonishment and pain, and his gaze fell on the white woman one last time.

“This is what I think of you and your gods!” Cahnya lifted her head and spit in his direction, then glared at the dumbfounded fighters. “Touch me and you will suffer the same fate!” she yelled, and the floating sword clattered to the ground.

To a man, they began to back away from her.

* * *

Morauk’s head pounded from the effort of mentally wielding the sword, and he barely kept from falling off his horse. He did not know where Syues or Halbarad or Jah Kresh or any of the others were. He was surrounded by a mix of Deer and Bear and Horse fighters, none of whom he recognized. He only knew that they were slowly advancing up the mountainside, and that he needed to follow.

Even now he could not believe what he had done with his mind. It had worked, but it had totally exhausted him. Still, even though momentarily safe, his one love was an impossible distance away, and still in extreme danger. He had to get there before the Fire Gods and their human servants began their savage, despicable sacrifices, or everything in his life up until now had been for naught.

Morauk was barely aware of what was

going on around him, though his weary mind recognized war whoops and the grunts and screams of battle. He finally brought his attention back into focus when he heard cheering and shouting from above. Some of the attackers had made it to the top.

As he looked up, the northern clansmen were making a concerted effort to assault the summit. His spirits rose, for he knew he was closer to his love than ever before. He wanted to make the mental effort to see her again, to hover over her, but he feared what he might find. Was he too late? Had the Fire Gods ignored all the fighting around them to partake of their vile sacrifices? Was the love of his life still among the living?

Just when it looked like the assault would succeed, several *kagash* and their riders launched over the top and landed on the steep slopes among the combatants. It seemed not to matter to the Fire Gods that their winged creatures slashed and bit at anyone, whether friend or foe. Both sides were trampled and slashed and torn apart, and they began to flee downhill.

Morauk rolled off his steed and struggled upwards. When the top came into view, so did a lone, solitary Gak'shran. Of those few he had seen so far, this one seemed the most important. It wore enough belts and pouches and bands of gleaming gold that it did not seem naked. But that was not what caught his attention. The squat creature

held something in its gnarled claws, something small and boxy and made of leather and wood and decorated with thin, inlaid gold.

The creature did not appear to be paying attention to its surroundings as Morauk drew his sword and staggered headlong toward the vile thing. He did not shout or try to attract its attention in any way. He knew this was the opposite of what the clansmen did, since to them there was no honor in sneaking up on an opponent unawares. But that did not stay his attack. He would do whatever it took to kill every Gak'shran he could.

The closer he got to the Fire God, the more revulsion he felt. There was just something wrong and disgusting about its appearance. Strangely shaped muscles bulged beneath the thick, grayish hide, and watery, yellowed eyes with vertical slits glared from the chiseled, grotesque face. Sinewy arms ended in overly-large hands that were more like claws. The creature seemed wrong, as if nature had failed to finish the job.

Morauk almost reached it when it saw or felt his presence. It stopped its clumsy manipulations of the wooden box and looked straight at him. The eyes were not so much evil as they were indifferent, like all the death and dying around affected it not in the least. There was no surprise or hate or seemingly any other emotion behind the sickly yellow eyes. It just stared.

It turned fully toward him, slowly,

unhurriedly, and it seemed to care little that an armed human had come within mere steps of attacking it. Then, almost as though presenting him with a gift or an offering, it held out the gold-trimmed box... and cracked the lid open just a sliver.

For just a moment, a moment that would replay itself forever in his mind, Morauk saw the most beautiful thing he could imagine. If precious metals could be polished to the most brilliant finish and illuminated by the most intense light ever created, it would still seem like a dull flicker of faraway flame on a dark night. For what radiance came from the box easily outshone the sun itself. The beam was nothing if not brilliant, and burning, and blinding. Especially blinding.

In an instant that seemed to last a lifetime, Morauk's eyes were blasted into total blindness. The searing pain stabbed so far into the back of his head that he felt certain his brain had exploded. The pain was so excruciating that he knew not if he fell or ran or his consciousness flew from his body to escape what his physical being could not. He only knew pain, and darkness. But even the darkness did not keep the agony at bay. Only the cool blackness of unconsciousness halted his suffering.

* * *

Cahnya cringed at the approach of

several Gak'shran. She had seen Orichalda gutted like the animal he was and had been momentarily ecstatic. But that had changed when the ugly, squat beings began wobbling toward her. They were not built for walking, but then again, they did not seem to have been built for anything but evil. They paid no attention to the disemboweled body of the chieftain. And even though she was loath to use her Gift, she did not feel any emotions coming from them. They were like animals to her, their minds so different from a human's as to be dark and empty.

Off in the distance she momentarily spotted one Fire God unwrapping what looked like a wooden box, but her immediate fear and concern focused on the three vile creatures approaching her, their yellowed fangs dripping saliva like a starving animal that finally found something to eat. Their eyes seemed as dead as their thoughts were to her, but she knew that their interest in her was not a good thing.

Cahnya wanted so badly to flee, to get away, but knew that any sign of struggle would just excite them, encouraging their depraved blood lust. She couldn't read them, but she got more than enough thoughts and images from the clansmen who had seen what their gods did to their victims to know what she was about to experience. The thought of it was more than she could bear. If she could have willfully stopped her heart to die, she

would have.

She recoiled in abject fear as they hopped up onto the sacrificial slab of stone. One reached out with a gnarled, bony appendage that could barely be called a hand. It touched her, and in that instant she felt Morauk. Her lover and mate was physically close by, and about to attack the creature that had been handling the wooden box.

“You’re about to die!” she screamed in the closest creature’s face, not knowing or caring if it understood human speech. “You and your kind are doomed!”

The Gak’shran closest to her tilted its whole body a little, as if trying to understand her, and that’s when the air all around the top of the summit blazed like the sun itself had fallen from the sky.

Screams of terror and pain carried across the top of the summit, and Cahnya, even closing her eyes and averting her head, was temporarily blinded. And in the middle of her head, along with the anguished feelings of hundreds of others, she felt the intense pain as Morauk screamed out in agony.

Moments later, when her vision began to clear, she saw a misshapen head looming over her, its slavering mouth full of sharp teeth as a revolting, forked tongue flicked out and licked her filthy, sweaty face. The stench of rotten meat and worse engulfed her, and she barely managed to keep from vomiting.

She screamed when something sharp and painful dug into her lower abdomen

and tugged, pulling back and forth as if some wild animal was rending a piece of flesh from a carcass. She knew she and her unborn child were about to die, and her only regret was that she would not be able to ever hold either her lover or baby.

Then something changed. Maybe it was the air itself that suddenly breathed a sigh of relief across the mountaintop. Or was it the sound of cheering voices? Cahnya opened her eyes and saw the three Fire Gods turn as one. Then again, as one, they leapt off the blood-smeared slab of stone and scurried away.

Something was happening behind her, farther back than she could crane her neck. Something was happening, and as the elated emotions of many nearby fighters washed over her, she could only wonder if the feeling came from the attackers or the defenders.

There came a blast of light and a boom of thunder, and it rent the very air above the mountaintop. But it did not resemble the searing, blinding flash of just moments before. This was sharper somehow, focused and flickering, and of a fiery color. Along with the explosion came screams and grunts and cries that did not sound human, and within that noise she found satisfaction, for she knew something bad had happened to the Fire Gods. Something ancient and powerful and unexpected had afflicted them.

When an ancient language pounded through her head, she realized it was Rastar. Or Syues. Or He Who Will Come.

She realized that the wizened old man was visiting upon the vile creatures a magick that was ageless and powerful.

Cahnya laid her head back on the cold, hard stone and began to laugh. Even as she felt the blood flowing freely across her belly from the wounds the Gak'shran had caused, she laughed and laughed as tears of pain and sorrow and joy flowed down her dirty face.

* * *

Halbarad had gathered a small group of fighters around him, and just after a blast of intense, blinding light lit up the sky, he and the weary wizard worked their way around to the western slope of the summit. They crested the top and came up behind the Fire Gods and their dreaded flying beasts. He could only wonder if the bizarre, swaying moves Syues's young fighter had taught his clansmen would work to disorient any of the creatures.

Amazingly, when each man began the peculiar movements, it seemed as if they became invisible to the *kagash*. Instead of being ripped and torn and shredded by the huge flying beasts' claws, they were able to get close enough to cut and thrust and hack at the wings like Syues had advised them to do. The foul beasts snapped and shrieked at seemingly empty air, and the fighters began to bring the monsters down one at a time.

The clansmen, emboldened, turned

their weapons on the squat fiends, but the Fire Gods were not so easily fooled. Or killed. The warrior's weapons just bounced aside or slid off the thick, wrinkly hides, and they began to fall dead and dying at the hands of the Gak'shran.

As the fighting became more intense and chaotic, He Who Will Come finally entered the fray. He strode forth confidently, somehow seemingly taller and more robust than his ancient body allowed. He headed straight for one specific Gak'shran on the far side of the summit, ignoring all the madness seething around him. And in Syues' hand was the short, wickedly curved blade that Jah Kresh had given him.

It wasn't the blade hand that caught Halbarad's attention, but the other skinny, gnarled hand that reached out, seemingly gripping and turning and manipulating the air itself. A glow appeared, soft and warm and comforting at first, like a dying fire, but it quickly snapped and crackled and leapt across the gap and struck the Fire God full in the body like a miniature lightning bolt.

Something small and dark and rectangular fell from the stunned Gak'shran's claws, and that was when Syues dashed across the narrowing gap like a young man possessed, the curved Fire God weapon leading the way.

He first struck one shoulder, the upper of the two curving points easily digging deep into the thick hide when other blades would not. He used it as a lever to

pivot and push the second curved tip up and under the beast's armpit. Sickly, yellowish blood gushed from each wound, and the sound that emanated from the Fire God's fanged maw was something no one would ever forget. It sounded like the combination of a wounded cougar and a frightened auroch screaming in a deep and wrenching pain.

Syues jerked the Gak'shran blade loose and struck again. The wounded creature, its mouth wide open and showing sharp teeth and a flitting tongue, fell to its knees. It was now completely at the wizard's mercy. But there would be no mercy.

Syues paused a moment to look down into the agonized gaze of the squat, ugly creature. He leaned over and spoke to the wounded Gak'shran, saying something that caused the evil eyes to widen before he thrust the sword so that each of the razor-sharp tips dug into opposite sides of the Gak'shran's neck, piecing the thick skin as easily as sliding a knife into an overripe fruit. The curved angle where the two blades met cut into the tightened skin of the creature's neck and took the head off completely. Thick, yellow blood spurted out several times, and the Fire God's squat body collapsed sideways.

A cheer went up across the summit, for as savage fighting kept on here and there, several clansmen broke off their attacks to watch in wonder at the ancient wizard who attacked and killed one of the seemingly indestructible creatures that

had terrorized their clans for generations.

Syues turned and handed the gore-stained blade to a stunned clansman and pointed him toward where a nearby Gak'shran was still fighting fiercely. Then he scooped up the small wooden box, tucked it into his haversack and, in another stunning scene that would be told and retold and sung about for many generations to come, He Who Will Come strode over to one of the larger *kagash* that had been surrounded and was still defending itself against a dozen humans. He shouted to be heard above the din and commanded the fighters to break off their attack.

The sorcerer faced the huge creature silently, concentrating every bit of his attention on it. The fighting and dying continued all around, and there was a rare moment of calm as the two stared at each other; one with death and hatred in its saurian gaze, the other calm and serene.

He Who Will Come raised his hands to begin what most thought would be a magickal spell that would certainly kill the towering creature, but the beast leapt forward, gripped the wizard's thin body with its enormous claws, and bounded into the air, screaming its demon cry trying to beat a hasty retreat high into the gray sky, climbing higher and higher until it was a black dot against the somber clouds.

* * *

Morauk lay on a flat slab of rock near the edge of the summit. His clothing was charred, his skin red and blistered where it had been exposed to the ungodly light, and some of his hair had been singed off. Someone had temporarily tended to his scorched eyes, covering the oozing orbs with a blood and dirt-stained rag. Then they had left him alone to listen to the cries of pain of many others echoing all over the summit. Lying helplessly, he wondered which way the fight was going. And who was dying. Or already dead.

The pain of his wounds kept his attention on his physical self, but he could not just wallow in his agony while Cahnya was so close by. He had to be with her, no matter what was happening. He could not bear to be without her, to not know what was happening to his soul mate.

Morauk screamed within his mind at the intense pain as he began to stumble blindly, desperately across the summit, the futility of his helplessness raging within him. He could hear what was going on, and part of his mind, still accustomed to sight, imagined what the carnage must look like.

It was not a pleasant vision.

* * *

It mattered not that the southern clans had worshipped the Fire Gods for generations. When it was evident that the tide had turned, every warrior began

attacking their Gak'shran masters. Soon each squat creature was surrounded by numerous enraged fighters, all hoping to spill the yellow blood of the vile creatures. They were strong and hard to kill, but not invincible, especially now that some of their wicked weapons had been liberated from the first to die.

Few of the Fire Gods made it back to their beasts, most of which were now incapable of flying. Some *kagash* were brought down by numerous arrows fired from close range into their necks and eyes, and they collapsed, bellowing their pain and anger. Being beasts of the air, they were little match on the ground against the frenzied fighters, though they were still able to kill numerous clansmen with teeth and claws and flailing tails before they were slain. Then they, as well as their riders, were hacked and ripped apart by the crazed warriors.

The fighting began to abate. The young stranger from a faraway land stumbled around the summit, trying to find his mate. He, as well as many hundreds of others, had been blinded by the indescribably bright beam the Fire God had unleashed upon them. Many knew he was associated with the pale wisewoman from the Cougar Clan who was being treated for her grievous wounds. Halbarad and another escorted Morauk through the carnage toward the sacrificial slabs, all the while motioning everyone to keep back.

The gruesome sounds of metal

weapons hacking Gak'shran and *kagash* flesh and bone asunder was mostly carried away by a stiff, cold breeze, but did little to soften the numerous moans of pain from the survivors. Many fighters had died, and many were soon to die, but for now vengeance was the rule.

At one point, the young, blind stranger told everyone to sever every claw and head of the slain *kagash* and set them aside, and make sure every Gak'shran carcass was burned completely somewhere off the mountain. As for the heads of both creatures, they were to be saved for later. The men exchanged puzzled glances, but since this was the warrior Syues had brought with him, they would obey his words.

They led Morauk to his mate where several fighters lingered over her, covering her blood and nakedness with their cloaks. They had done their best to stop the bleeding, but they were not Healers. Those had been summoned, but it would take them a long time to gain the summit.

They approached the terribly wounded woman, and Halbarad was reminded of how green his new Seer's eyes were. They caught his gaze long enough to impart the sadness and understanding of all that had transpired. She tried to sit up, but strong hands held her down. Still, she managed to hold up one hand and call out to him in what must have been her native language. He understood none of it, but it felt like she was trying to comfort him.

Comfort *him!*

Here stood the mighty Halbarad, gore-splattered and only slightly wounded, while the white woman lay dying in a pool of her blood, her mate burned and blinded by the Gak'shran's powerful fire weapon, and she was feeling sorry for him! He had to wonder again who these odd strangers were that had sacrificed themselves for the clans.

They helped Morauk up onto the bloody slab, and as the two clutched each other in an embrace that must have hurt them both, Halbarad turned away. There was still much to be done. He did not know if or when other Gak'shran and their flying monsters would return, or if this one defeat would be enough to drive them away forever. He guessed not. How could the gods, who had subdued so many for so long, just disappear after one battle?

He had seen too much pain and death and strangeness already, yet preparations had to be made for when the Fire Gods returned. And he had many questions racing around in his head. Had the Gak'shran with the blinding device been the chieftain of the Fire Gods? He had seen more of the vile creatures and their flying demons at this Tribute than any other, but how many more might there be in their distant, hidden lair?

He had no idea, and did not think he wanted to know.

He and Syues had been on the far side of the summit when the Fire God magick

had been used and still had been momentarily blinded. And when He Who Will Come had slain the Gak'shran he had thought his amazement complete. But then Syues had challenged the huge *kagash*... and been snatched up like a child's rag doll and flown away! Again, he did not wish to think of where it might have taken him.

There were many questions now that they had won. The Fire Gods had been defeated, but had they really? And what of the southern clans? Could he rally them to his side? Would the Gak'shran return someday and once again visit their evil upon the clans? Had He Who Will Come thought about all this? Had Syues seen what might become of the clans? Did he care?

In the meantime, he had a lot of work to do. His people, as well as those of the other clans, needed a leader. And who better than Halbarad of the Cougar Clan?

The End.



What the Devilkin Spake to the Ocean

By Doug Ironside

Tartarus, I'd read, was both a place and an entity. If an atrocious world of suffering was somehow also a dude, I wasn't anxious to meet that fellow. For our misfortune, we'd been wandering amid the terrors of the netherworld. Just how long, we had no idea, due to the absence of temporal cues. There was no sun. Only lurid lights of vaguely illuminant souls, disembodied and floating in their agony. Thus, there existed no day-night cycle, only endless dusk. The skies, if one could call them that, were a sweep of black tempests and the ceaseless crackle of lightning. Inside those environs, the natural Tartaran inhabitants behaved with only chaos, no

discernable boundaries to their rhythms.

Jadus and I had developed a mutual and ferocious case of insomnia while confined to our sojourn on the shadow plane. Even as we grew mad for lack of sleep, the need for rest grew oddly smaller. After a timeless stretch, we quit attempts at shut-eye entirely. Instead, we walked on, few words between us, choking on burning rot. We trod forward to cut our feet on rough shards and spiked stones; our ruined boots long gone.

For our sneaky and infernal guide, we had Lumpnar, prince of the imps, same as us in exile. He had latched on to become our third after his brief compulsion to murder us had passed.

“There, ahead,” he hissed, floating beside Jadus with his quick-flapping leather wings, all the crimson of his hyper-jointed body. He pointed with the middle of his three crooked fingers, his four knuckled claw. “See with your sorry eyes! The Temple of Ooglatus the Bloated. As I did tell you, he guards passages to the reaching worlds.”

The royal imp was offering what we desperately desired, the possibility of escape. We didn’t necessarily want to go home, for our homeland harboured no clemency for serial debtors and bankrupt agents as we were. To the contrary, we would have sacrificed all things familiar for a clean second chance, anywhere new. We longed for a world where the atmosphere was less than the reek of floating fish.

“Doesn’t look so bad,” Jadus said, looking over the temple’s profane façade, a citadel wide and wicked. The protruding opening appeared as a gigantic, elongated mouth, like that of an immense gar, filled with long teeth, pinkish fangs, and an extended prickly tongue for a welcome rug. Disturbing as that was, our sensitivity to things absurd was spent. We went within. At the door, or the throat more aptly, we met an immense muscled fiend. Sharp horns, broad spiked wings and a flaming axe were accoutrements to its piercing gaze, two orbs of pupilless scarlet. It growled deep.

“Never mind these men,” Lumpnar advised it. “They have come from mortal lands and desire departure. These soft souls are no threat to your bulbous master.”

Our imp had a way with other demons and devils. Perhaps it was his permanent grin, his strangely imploring eyes, or the way he smelled of the powder used for infants. Whatever his gifts, his charms worked again; the guardian fiend gave us passage. Jadus grasped my hand for reassurance as we entered the gullet of black. I gave my man a little squeeze, even though I’d no more courage than he. His eyes met mine for half a blink and I saw his beautiful face, worn and brown and wrinkled. If I looked half as weathered and weary, we were going to need exit from Tartarus, and soon.

“Follow me, Kalvus,” Lumpnar spoke

to me, somehow causing his wiry body to emanate a reddish light. We walked to follow his hovering form, smelling the sickening odor of aged saliva in the narrowing corridor. The tunnel contracted ominously, making me recall anatomy, thinking we were squeezed between soft palate and epiglottis. Jadus and I retched to be so close to the shiny sponge of the walls and yet still, we endured a long, weird walk down a tunnel-esophagus. Finally, we emerged into a palatial room, or stomach. There, the walls had the consistency of soft pink flesh, glistening and gross, acidic globules dripping from the ceiling. There was preternatural light diffused throughout, and there before us, on a throne of hard gelatin, was a massive, distended creature of countless eyes and tentacles. It squirmed.

“Behold!” said Lumpnar, waving and bowing to the awful thing.

Jadus whispered to me, “By all the gods, we pay homage to a hideous mound of slime.”

I whispered back words concerning a well-hydrated girl I once bedded at university. Karla.

The oozing, jelly-like thing spoke in a series of burps and belches, little bubbles bursting. Lumpnar, by some odd miracle, translated.

“The mighty Ooglatus wishes to know why you’ve come. I’ve told him you seek liberation. He understands.”

“It understands?” Jadus asked, incredulous. “Kalvus, this is congealed

madness.”

As we paused, the stink inside the temple grew worse than anywhere else on Tartarus. It was foul, filthy, and moist. I shook my head to get Karla out of it.

“The mighty Ooglatus is recognized,” I said, glancing at Lumpnar. I edged closer to the imp, trying not to be heard, though the yucky lord of mucus had no ears.

“What does it want?” I asked Lumpnar. “You said we could plead for passage. Bargain with it. Er, him.”

Lumpnar scrunched his ugly little face, thinking what to say. He then turned to Ooglatus and belched, spat, and near vomited. His imp features contorted, heaving hard to project bizarre offers. Then the scummy thing on the throne twisted its amorphous mass, loosing dollops of grease and getting gooier. Its guttural sounds reverberated in the chamber, vibrations of a thousand diphthongs. After a long, unpleasant exchange, Lumpnar returned his eyes to us.

“Ooglatus desires sand,” the imp told us.

“Dearest lords. Sand?” Jadus asked, corrosive drops marring his cheeks.

“Sand he uses to scratch his itches,” the imp replied. “He has countless tickles within his gunk and sludge. With grit between such folds, he finds relief. But sand, akin to what you might spy on your own shores, is a difficult find in Tartarus.”

I considered the alluvium Ooglatus desired, only the contents of a typical, everyday beach. We had seen nothing of the sort since our arrival, only sweeps of glass, razor-sharp obsidian, and hardened flows of green-black lava. There were no windswept shores to plunder.

“And where to find such everyday earth?” Jadus asked.

“He has, within this temple, an orifice to elsewhere, where the grit can be procured,” Lumpnar advised.

“An orifice, eh?” I asked, thinking of the imp’s predisposition to mischief, and sometimes plain old evil. I also considered the sorcerous pit into which we’d fallen, our desperate descent into Tartarus.

“There’s not a hole left to trust!” Jadus exclaimed. He was weary of mouths and apertures, though thankfully not my own.

Lumpnar elaborated. “Beyond the outlet is a place of silt and gravel, where you can recover the needed stuff. Return with twin bags full, and Ooglatus will be grateful. From there, he’ll do what he can for you, within the bounds of his power.”

I thought quickly that anyplace with a beach might be bounds enough, no need to return. I glanced to Jadus to witness he realized the same. We agreed, fast and heartily. Ooglatus made a rumbling fetid sound, gross flatulence. We waited for the affront, but the stench in the temple was maxed out.

“That is his warning,” Lumpnar claimed. “His last few drudges died in the

attempt, for the beach beyond is guarded by a power fell and terrible.”

Both Jadus and I instantly demanded details, spewing questions. We couldn’t dare leave the under-realm only to find some alternate hell that was worse, beaches be damned. Lumpnar raised his hands.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he protested. “I am sure there is a way. To show my good faith, I will accompany you to the plane of oceans. This task, one simple thing, and freedom is yours... and mine, as well.” There was a worrisome crook to his perpetual smile.

Even for our brief acquaintance with the prince of imps, we sensed something nauseous stewing besides Ooglatus. There was a plan between them in their murky muck, some secret ploy they’d cooked. Still, there wasn’t much for it. Jadus was wheezing, and so was I. He looked desperate and downtrodden, and my heart beat twice just for him.

“We’ll do it,” I said, with a resolute nod to Ooglatus. Its multiple cruddy weeping eyes did widen, knowing we were galvanized. Truthfully, I didn’t have much steel left to harden my weakened will. Jadus murmured agreement.

“But we want three things,” I said.

“Name them,” Lumpnar said, clacking his claws. Ooglatus pulsed with gooey anticipation.

“Bags and shovels. A bottle of excellent bourbon. Two fine cigars. So, seven things, I guess, plus a backpack to

hold it all, so eight.”

* * *

“Yes!” cackled Lumpnar. Somehow, the lord of slime affirmed us too, with tooting vapors.

How they could get tobacco and whiskey when mere sand was in short supply, I had no idea, but everything was conjured in short order, as was the fissure in space, a spooky tunnel to nothing. Or a sandy coast, we were told, only if we walked through. I examined the worm-like gap and mustered a thought to protest, but then merely grabbed my spade. Jadus looked game, in his exhausted way. I gave a sigh to acknowledge my anxiety to leave Tartarus, a plane of only suffering and villainy. Lumpnar, floating there, suddenly had his own pail and miniature shovel, both of some ultra-light and alien material. He had a colourful towel around his shoulders that I'd just noticed, and he simpered with his fangs, under new spectacles opaque and black. He quivered at the opening, excited to press on.

I shook my head for the strangeness and turned to my man. For all the unknown risk, I contemplated our mortal end. I thought of similes to ease his trepidation.

“You know, Jadus, life... is...” I began, holding Jadus' fingers in my spare hand.

“What?” he asked.

“Ah, there's no sense bitching.”

He nodded, and we stepped through.

We emerged to a vault of stars above mountains, the shine of three familiar moons our triple glimmer of hope. To our right was an evergreen forest that adorned the downslopes of glorious peaks with white at their tips, and to our left was gently lapping water. Behind us, the hole thrummed and hissed out fumes, marking from where we'd come. We stood upon an unknown shore.

First, we breathed, as the imp cursed to see we'd arrived in the black of night. He ditched the dark glasses. We ignored Lumpnar's discontent, only noticing the air tasted like the sea, brine and the sweetness of green. Then we stepped, our poor feet emerged from a torturer's hands. Instead of knives beneath, there was the relative softness of pebbles and cool dampness, twin markers of relief. We giggled.

“We will need a finer aggregate than what's here,” Lumpnar said, his vile form suddenly quite foreign to a place so lovely. He was trying to lead us on, but we were too busy revelling for the passing of pains.

“Come on, come on!” the prince of imps barked. “No time to waste. The guardian of this place does not slumber.”

We had scant details on that, I remembered, considering our haste to depart the underworld. Some nameless, faceless sentinel, a horrendous threat. I imagined what was coming to get us. *A*

sea otter? An eel?

Lumpnar flitted, following the edge where water lapped. We inhaled and staggered on. After a distance, the pebbles gave way to finer stuff, and we asked if it would do. As the imp agreed, we could only notice the perfection of the place, untouched by human want, nothing save natural sweetness. Under the moons, the landscape shone with verdancy and brilliance.

“Hurry now!” Lump commanded, scooping up his share with pace. “Dig now and fast.” He was peeking over his shoulders, expecting something.

Reaching over my head to the pack, I retrieved the hessian bags that peeked out. I then broke ground, Jadus joining me. We had only grabbed two shovels full when the sound came. The sea protested with a thunderous pulse. Water shook and waves began to churn. The tranquility of the surround expired, whereupon the sea showed a simmering froth.

“Oh, no!” hissed Lumpnar, flying about. We saw the imp lose all composure, but it didn’t seem a reflexive act, instead a contrivance.

“What’s this new menace, Lump?” Jadus called, taking a few frightened steps to the water’s edge, waiting. My man held up his shovel in defense, though nothing tangible was there, just mist in swirling clouds.

Then the rising waves seemed to morph into an alarming mass. As it did,

Lumpnar spun in circles, flapping his wings like crazy. Then the sea shuddered again and rose as if alive, a great single surge unbroken. We stood back to watch an immense column of water stand, shaped like a primeval beast. The thing was all grand power, a churning force of the deep. A poor confused fish swam trapped inside it, with other things, kelp and urchins and krill. The monster groaned a fearsome sound and made to destroy us.

“Bwah!” Jadus blurted, falling back upon his bum. As the elemental force came forward, I too raised my shovel, only to defend my love, taking position to guard him.

“Never did I transgress upon your holy place!” Lumpnar said, his eyes wide to project innocence, holding up palms to plead.

“If this is some sacred beach that should not have been touched, we should have been advised!” I called to the imp. Lumpnar ignored me and accused us instead.

“These humans,” he told the tower of the sea, “they were the ones to defile your seaside sanctuary. They made to steal your solemn sand!” The little bugger was selling us out.

“No way!” Jadus bellowed, still reclined, shovel in hand.

“We would never if we’d known!” I shouted to the aqua king.

The force of oceans roared, making sounds that crashing water would, the

expression of its fury. It pointed a pseudopod of liquid at us, and the bags we'd partly filled, its outrage plain. At the furious flick of its appendage, we were swamped with salty sea, like being splashed with half a brackish pond.

"You must ignore the imp," I said, wiping my face.

"Destroy them!" Lumpnar urged. The imp flew fast, down to the incriminating evidence. "Look, look, look," the little devil said, holding up the sacks. "They abuse this place, mighty lord. Down the beach is my passage home. Ruin these humans and I will rid this land of their corpses."

The elemental pulsed forward, and we were within reach.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I shouted, setting down my spade to protest. Plainly, this was a plot to slaughter us, yet for all the deception we still didn't know why.

"This imp has schemes with Ooglatus, master of all things revolting, in the nether-place of Tartarus," I said, as Jadus stood. "They sent us here, a plot they devised to manipulate us. Lord of the oceans, we meant not to steal from your sacred haven."

"OOOH...GLA...TUSS," the elemental overlord spoke, the rustle of raging surf. It seemed pained to speak, but the name of the emperor of goo seemed known.

"Yes, that greasy character," affirmed Jadus.

"No, no, wait!" Lumpnar said.

"Overlord of the deep, exact your vengeance on these thieves! You, you must, you..." The imp was grasping for traction. "I will assist your justice in exchange for water from a nearby river."

Aha. The truth had been spoken. For all that sand was sparse in Tartarus, water was more precious. Even so, we'd forgotten, because Jadus and I hadn't had a drink in forever, despite that we hadn't perished for dryness. Endless thirst was part of the punishing charm. Yet here the imp and Ooglatus had colluded to gain themselves precious moisture, with Jadus and I as the bait.

"This is a ruse!" I shouted to the elemental. "They only want your water, and they've painted us as thieves to get it."

"Do not buy what that little devil is selling!" Jadus pointed.

The beach-lord sloshed in place. I wondered for a beat if it might leave us be or drown us. Then all at once it exploded in action, slapping Lumpnar so hard and so wet that the little hellion flew off in a damp fold, an uncontrolled arc into the night. The imp had been crimped.

"Wait!" was all Jadus said before the elemental hit him just the same. My man yelled out, cast through the air with an AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH followed by the faintest thump.

Standing helpless on the beach, I only had a moment to protest and plead, but the beast thundered me all the same. I left

the earth in a furious lurch, bashed and mashed and barely breathing, the wind rushing past. Barely conscious, I waited to be impaled on a branch or crunched on a boulder.

Whoosh. Thud. Splash.

* * *

I found myself encased in mud and peat. Jadus too, nearby. Somehow, we hadn't died. Instead, we'd plopped into the wet softness of a thick bog, and by some lucky trajectory, landed backside first. It took Jadus a long stretch to get himself out, but he did and waded over to me, for I could not move. Jadus huffed, drenched in sweat to extract me. Then on our feet, an edge to the mire we discovered, and we wandered onto terra firma, so many trees of pine. Covered in mud and exhausted, we huddled together under the thick lower branches of a big fir. There, we arduously enjoyed the returned impetus to sleep.

"Bless the gods that we endure," Jadus said.

"Come on, little spoon," I whispered to him. "Our good fortune isn't over yet."

"Speaking of flatware," he said dryly, "this is no time for your dessert fork to be reaching for the bundt cake."

* * *

The dawn proved we were plainly in an enchanted forest. Lights delicately

danced between silvery branches. We could hear sounds of singing fey, the lilt of candied voices. The shine of the sun touched flowers of every hue, accented by coruscant greens of every shade. We ate our fill of delicious berries and wild mushrooms and climbed a bare hill to gander at the sea. The smells of pollen, new earth and fresh grass were about.

By a strange fickle fate, or the agreeable absorption of muck, my pack had survived, and we made to enjoy the bounty within. I passed the bottle to Jadus after he worked his keen skills, lighting us a fire from practically nothing. His brown face was black with soot for his efforts, but he smiled broad with whitest teeth. Our thirst had returned, and for it, we had whiskey. I retrieved the cigars to wait for a flaming stick.

Staring out at the rise of the sun over the waves, I could not contemplate the depth of our serendipity. "Well, Jadus, we got our bums out of Tartarus," I told him, taking my swig. "I don't think we should head back to the sacred shore, but perhaps we can find a river."

The sun was climbing higher. Luscious warmth flowed like bourbon on glass.

"If you go through hell," Jadus supposed, "perhaps that's just a step to heaven."

"Or you find your way from the sea to the swamp, from the forest to the hills, and your journey's just begun." Always the early glow of alcohol had me poetic.

It had all worked out so well. Then we both saw the flit of red, the flap of a leathery wing. We groaned.

The prince of imps landed, promptly poaching my cigar, sputtering to light it from own witchy heat.

“That’s twice you’ve tried to have us killed,” Jadus protested.

“Well, you know that rhyme they say about the third go ‘round,” Lumpnar said, sucking on my stogie.

“Once is nice, but twice is spice,” I began, newly blithe and forgiving.

Jadus finished. “Third’s never a trice, you’ve drained the device, go more, you’ll have to get ice.”

Ω

The End.

Undying Island

By Caleb James K.

Dreamy waves lapped lazily against the small rowboat’s bow. Starlight twinkled in the water’s ripples, and a couple sat silently as a sea serpent slithered by. Along the boat’s bottom boards, pooling at their feet, their daughter’s blood cooled and coagulated, but her body went unseen. Only the young girl’s parents remained on the rowboat, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the slender slip thwart. They dared not look at each other while the darkness swallowed the island shrinking behind

them.

“It is cool tonight,” the man said, staring off into the black water ahead.

The woman did not say anything for a long time. Occasionally, something would bump into or scrape against the rowboat’s outer hull, threatening to spill the two into the dark murky sea, but neither reacted.

“It was the right thing to do, Cairbre,” the woman said. Her voice ached with acrimony. “Was it not?”

Cairbre was less inclined than his wife to ruminate on what had transpired, so he answered quickly. “My sweet, Aoife. There was no other way. If we did not offer little—” he choked back an unexpected sob. “If we did not offer little Róisín to the Undying Ones, death would continue to plague the children of Aslen.”

“How can you be so sure!” Aoife snapped, sending a shot of sadness across the silent sea.

As though her indignation had invited the ire of a god, a whirling wind blew in from the south and caused the calm waters to crash against their boat’s creaking sides. A wild wave washed the two in salty brine, and for the first time on their trip across the channel, they allowed fear into their hearts.

“Here, my love,” Cairbre said, pulling his wife close. “A storm is coming.”

Aoife pushed away from his embrace. “So be it,” she said defiantly. “We deserve whatever the gods throw at us.”

Another wave rocked the boat. Coal

clouds covered the stars and the moon. The wicked wind's wrath intensified. All was dark. Too dark to see.

"Perhaps you are right," Cairbre said.

"What did you say?"

Cairbre had to shout to be heard over the wind. "I think you are right." He held firm to the side of the boat, but they were leaning significantly to one side.

From far away where the storm first hit, a rogue wave had formed and rushed across the open sea like an unstoppable leviathan. Unbeknownst to the couple in the tiny rowboat, a mad mountain of death towered over them, pulling them closer and closer. In their battle to avoid toppling over, they remained oblivious to the fact that clouds did not conceal the starlight, as they had assumed, but by the colossal wave. The one they were now riding up to the base of.

Aoife grabbed her husband's arm and spoke into his ear. "If we perish on this night, know that I do not blame you."

With that, the power of the sea proved too great, and the boat flipped over, splintering into hundreds of timber shards. In the cold, black water, Cairbre thrashed around desperately, searching for his wife, only to realize that the wave had pulled them apart and all hope was gone.

Whooshing water pushed Cairbre deep down, down, into the fathomless sea. Engulfed by the eerie darkness, he stopped struggling to reach the surface. There was something peaceful about

having the world's weight pressing on him while he floated in suspended animation. His last thoughts were of his beautiful wife and daughter.

Raging across the roaring sea, the great wave carried Aoife back toward the dark island. Spinning, twirling, and whirling, the violent water knocked her unconscious. Fortunately, the whipping winds shifted suddenly and fought back against the wave, diminishing its destructive power. As it neared the island, the tremendous tidal wave had waned enough to avoid total devastation. Aoife knew nothing of this, though.

Limp-bodied, she glided through the salty sea while her mind glided through a familiar dream. Death no longer existed, and she found herself in the past.

* * *

As a child of Aslen, Aoife grew up hearing stories about the Undying Ones. Throughout the centuries, rumor flirted with history until an amalgamation of fact and fiction formed a definitive version of events. Yet it was not until she had reached adulthood that Aoife learned this history from a reliable source.

"Good sir," Aoife said to a local priest after a sermon. "Can you tell me of the ones who inhabit An tOileánach Neamhdha?"

The priest looked around to see if anyone else had heard her question, but they were alone in the old church the

Romans had left behind that. “Young lady, why should you ask about such things?” he whispered.

Aoife breathed anxiously. “The villagers. They talk of—”

“Hush now.” The priest raised his hand for silence. “Let us speak in private.”

He led her to a small room that lacked the threat of eager ears.

“Please, continue with what you were saying,” he said.

“The villagers,” Aoife did not hesitate, “have been talking. They say the inhabitants of the dark island, the Undying Ones, have been crossing the channel in the dead of night to steal our children.” Even if she had not said the name of the island, the priest would have known the one she spoke of. “Who are they? Why would they do such a thing?” she said loudly.

“Hush, hush.” The priest raised his hand once more. “I am sure you have heard tales.”

Aoife nodded.

“Well, allow me to clear some things up to the best of my ability. I do not know all. Perhaps not even much. But I will tell you what I can.”

“Before Aslen came into existence, people said that a group of vagabonds roamed the mainland. Little is known of their origins, but relics of their time have surfaced over the many years since they departed from the country. It is assumed that they had grown wary of the constant travel, and so they took root in the lush

green forest that has since become the wetlands. In that forest, they erected a tremendous temple. While the centuries have not been kind to the structure, it still stands, half submerged in the marshy bog.”

“A group of Roman explorers led by the infamous Vulcan Volesus first braved the temple’s dank and decrepit depths. In doing so, they uncovered a part of the mysterious people’s history in the form of a single sacred scroll.

“Indecipherable to the Romans, they had no choice but to take the scroll to Aslen—which was a relatively young village in those days—and bring it to the one elder priest who could still read the scroll’s ancient script. The single scroll disseminated all the knowledge of the Undying Ones’ history across the land.

As the priest spoke, a sordid tale of blood and death came to light.

Worshippers of a forgotten God called Ogma the Eternal practiced a dark magic unlike any known outside of their temple. Many religious sects and cults from the ancient world were known to dabble in the dark arts, but the Undying Ones only focused on a single discipline: the art of immortality.

Within the scroll’s scandalous script, sacrificial scenes of sacrilege unfolded to reveal an unsanctimonious ceremony. Though the elder priest from Aslen did his best to interpret the scroll, much was lost in his translation from the ancient language to the Romans’ Latin tongue.

The purpose of the ceremony was to grant eternal life to those in attendance, but they made little effort to clarify how the ceremony was performed.

“Pulling what little they could from the ancient text,” the priest continued, “the Romans concluded that the innocent blood of children was needed to appease Ogma. Once the god was placated, his worshippers would feast upon the dead. Somehow, this was believed to grant immortality. Though it must be noted that the Romans took the scroll with them when they had left Aslen, and so there is no evidence of the Undying Ones’ existence beyond their temple’s ruins in the bog.”

“What of the island?” Aoife inquired.

The priest furrowed his brow. “That is where the history becomes too caliginous to navigate. I too have heard the rumors of which you speak, but I know no more than what the Royal Council has decreed.”

“That no children at any time are to be left unattended?”

“Yes.” The priest rubbed his beard as he carefully chose his next words. “I believe that the sightings of these midnight marauders are accurate.”

“So, you believe the tale told by Abbán the drunk?”

“I do.” The priest allowed a smile to grace his bearded face. “A drunk he might be, but he is also what I call a friend. He would not fill my ears with porky pies and faerie stories.”

Aoife frowned. “If what you say is true, then the Undying Ones steal our children from our homes during the night.”

“Now I said no such thing.” The priest grew stern. “At least not in regards to the Undying Ones. I believe they were no more than a cult and have left this world countless moons ago.”

“But you said you believe Abbán’s tale?”

“Yes. I believe he did see black-robed figures exiting a boat that had arrived from the dark island. And I believe he did witness them crossing our beach on their way to Aslen. I will even consider that they could be responsible for the missing children. But what I will not do is entertain these radical theories of a deathless people who defy our gods and the order of nature.”

“What about—”

The priest raised his hand a final time. “That is all, young lady. I told you what I know, and even that is probably too much for your innocent ears to hear. May the gods be with you.”

* * *

Aoife woke from her dream to a seabird pecking at the loose flesh hanging free from a gash on her shin.

“Shoo!” she yelled hoarsely, kicking sand at the bird with her other leg.

The bird flapped large gray wings and fluttered a few feet away. It landed and

took a perch on a jagged rock jutting out of the stony beach. Agitated but not frightened, it watched the woman struggle to sit up and examine her injury.

Saltwater dried out the wound and slowed the blood flow, but the raw muscle exposed to the elements burned. If not for dehydration, Aoife's face, twisted in agony, would be streaked with tears.

Attempting to stand on her own proved futile, and the pain from the effort caused her to shriek. Like the shattering of stones, the sound of her scream sent the seabird scurrying farther down the beach. Wood debris she recognized as the rowboat's remains were strewn about, and after rummaging through the wreckage, she found a sizable plank that would work as a makeshift crutch.

It took some configuring, but she angled the plank under her armpit. The ragged wood wore rough against her sensitive skin, but it was nothing compared to the pain of her injured leg. Even so, she only managed to move from the sandy shore onto solid land before collapsing. Without help, she knew she would not last long. If only Cairbre was around.

"Is this our due punishment?" she whispered.

Close by, a ceremonial horn blared. It spoke a trumpeting truth that tormented her soul more than any words could tell. When she had first awakened beneath the blazing sun, she thought the sea had

returned her to the sacrificial site she and Cairbre had left the night before. To her terror, she had thought wrong. She was now stranded on the wrong side of An tOileánach Neamhdha, The Undying Island.

Panic pricked her body with gooseflesh. The urge to flee was overpowering, but even if she was uninjured, there was no escape; she had no seafaring craft nor the ability to fashion one. With her wounded leg and the horns nearing, Aoife's fate was set in stone. Still, the instinct to survive forced her into action.

Aoife stifled a scream. Using the oversized plank as a crutch, she stole toward the dense foliage to hide, but the plank caught a hole in the ground and split vertically down the middle. A pointed piece pierced her armpit and severed a tendon. In the same instant, all the weight the crutch had been supporting fell upon her injured leg and the immediate stress cracked her tibia in half, sending her sprawling face-first to the dirt. This time she could not hold back her scream, which did not last long as the overbearing pain snatched her consciousness from the waking world.

Right before everything faded to black, she heard a rhythmic chanting coming from behind the nearby trees. It was growing louder.

* * *

Light from the sunset filtered through the trees and bathed an open clearing in pink. At the clearing's center, Aoife stood, rope-tied to a blood-stained obelisk carved from an obsidian block. Forming a circle around her, a dozen black-robed figures with veiled faces chanted a haunted hymn in an ancient tongue.

"Who?" was all Aoife could say. Her blood loss had been significant, and she was so weak she could barely look up at the little girl, dressed in a black robe, standing directly in front of her.

"Mommy," the little girl said in a voice that hissed with a hideous rasp.

Whatever adrenaline Aoife had remaining surged through her body. "Róisín?" A phantom tear rolled down her cheek while she looked upon her daughter.

"You left me here," Róisín said. The hiss did not come from her mouth, but a bit lower.

"My sweet, sweet baby girl." If the rope was not holding her upright, Aoife would have collapsed from grief. "The people of Aslen chose you. We had no choice or—" She stopped to keep from weeping. Forcing a show of stoicism, she continued. "If we did not sacrifice you, the village would have brought you and your two brothers here. Your father and I made the only choice we could."

"Oh, Mommy," Róisín said, "you are so silly. Everything is fine. I have a new forever family." The little girl stepped

forward and the dwindling sunlight caught her face. Her skin was as pale as a corpse and from a grotesque gouge that had been carved into her neck, her words hissed, "Now you get to stay here too." She took her mother's hand in hers. The little girl's flesh was cold and her eyes were cloudy white. "Forever."

Aoife screamed and screamed until she had no voice. The chanting continued long after the moon took the sun's place in the cloudless sky, but day and night held little meaning anymore. Not to the inhabitants of An tOileánach Neamhdha, The Undying Island.

The End.

Rhymes with Orange

By J. D. Dresner

My sister and I have been locked in this little rivalry since... Well, I can't remember when it began. Could've started that one dreary evening after Miss Ingerall's Potions Class when she, fully aware of how skittish I got during storms, conjured up that terrifying, end-of-the-world thunder and lightning illusion. Her magic was so convincing that it had me sleeping with a fairy light on for the next month. But then, I *did* cast that particularly stubborn stink charm on her spell books the day before. She couldn't get the troll smell out of them for weeks. Yep... that might've happened

first.

With age, our pranks had grown more elaborate. They've evolved—now more *game* than *prank*—each with its own set of rules, its own path to victory, if only one could decipher the riddle that ended it. But on the day of my wedding, I was in no mood for riddles. I was in no mood for illusionary mazes.

“There’s only one way out,” said Amber, her illusionary form flickering between pulses of coppery light. Arms folded, she wore that smirk—the one I always loathed, the one that only meant trouble for me. “You need to say the magic word.”

“Tilly’s going to murder me if I don’t show up to my own wedding.” Then, almost as an afterthought, I said, “She’ll murder you too. You know she will.”

“Then, for both our sakes, you’d better get to work.”

Already feeling the beads of sweat tickling down my temples and lining my cheeks, I set off through her infernal labyrinth. Perhaps it was the sheer untimeliness of it, but this felt less like one of our well-crafted games, and more like those juvenile pranks we used to pull on one another in our youth.

I moved quickly, darting from one chamber to the next, slipping through narrow hallways and open archways, hoping (foolishly) that the exit would soon present itself. Peeved as I was at Amber for putting me in this precarious situation, I had to hand it to her for

devising such an elaborate, yet rather beautiful trap. Though the illusion made it feel as though I was wandering a sprawling mansion, the walls and floors appeared to be woven seamlessly within a dense, autumn-touched forest. Dead leaves lined the russet-coloured carpet within rooms made of densely packed trees. Golden sunlight streamed through gaps in the wooden ceiling. Like a ghost, her illusionary projection followed me wherever I went, never walking, always floating. Any other day, I might’ve relished the challenge. I might’ve taken my time dismantling her magic and best her at her own game. But not today. Today I needed to pick up my suit, and the ring, and I had an appointment with the groomer. And I was getting married.

I tried every illusion-countering spell I knew: The Light Diffuser, the Shatter Mirror spell, even the third-echelon General Undoing spell. Nothing worked, and I suppose I knew they wouldn’t. Amber knew my arsenal; she wouldn’t let her woodland manor crumble so easily.

“Amber, please! You’ve gone too far with this one. If it were yesterday... Well, I wasn’t getting married yesterday!” I looked into her gemstone eyes as she hovered before me. That striking, heterochromatic stare of reds and yellows were made all the more vivid while she maintained her magic. When it came to our games and our pranks, we had one rule we held most sacred above all others: see it through to the end. Don’t

cheapen the experience by undoing the magic. Don't take back what you started. If you were going to imposition someone for your own personal thrills, you'd best let them see it through. Still, I was hoping to find a glimmer of hope in that prismatic glare of hers. I was hoping that maybe... just this once, she would make an exception and let all this foolishness go.

"Think of this as a wedding gift," said Amber, showing no sign that she might break our rule for this one occasion, "a reminder of how much you want to marry Tilly."

"I don't need reminding. I need my suit, and Whetherington's closes in an hour."

Amber shrugged, then plucked an imaginary pocket watch from the air, tapping it with mock solemnity. "Tick, tick, tick..."

That was it then: no amount of grovelling was going to get me out of this mess. Either I solved the labyrinth, or Tilly wasn't meeting me at the end of the aisle today. "You're uninvited to the wedding," I said. An empty threat to be sure. "You said there's a magic word?"

"I did!" she replied, a giggle finding its way between syllables.

"Care to give me a hint?" I asked, pressing through the ever-changing labyrinth, wide leaves smacking me in the chest and face as I searched for an exit I hoped might miraculously appear.

"It rhymes with orange."

That was when I stopped, abruptly, her floating apparition now in front of me. "But... nothing rhymes with orange."

She didn't reply.

I pulled aside branches and chairs alike, scouring the rooms for an exit, all the while wracking my vocabulary for a rhyme that didn't exist. Patience fraying, irritation was quickly getting the better of me.

"You look frustrated," mused Amber.

"I'm running out of time!" I began shouting out words, most of them things that *were* orange rather than things that might rhyme with the colour. "Pumpkin! Sunrise! Goldfish!"

"You're not thinking."

I ignored her, storming into the next chamber. Part study and part hot spring, the décor was a mix of loveseats, bookshelves, and fireplaces, interspersed by steamy rivers, trees, and hot rocks. I paused, looking around but not really looking at anything specific. "Why today, Amber? The last prank I pulled on you was over two seasons ago. I got you with that charm that made you think everything was fifty pounds heavier, remember? It was just after you put that Upside-Down Charm on me."

"Well... perhaps that's just the thing; it's been too long. This used to be a biweekly ritual for us."

I frowned. On a shelf filled with brown books, one the colour of orange sap stood out. Wading through a saltwater pool to reach it, I removed the tome and realized

it was one of Amber's spellbooks. "I'm sorry. I simply haven't had the time to think up a good prank."

"You've said that before." Eyelids lowered, she crossed her arms.

"I know, but weddings take planning," I replied, leafing through her magic, hoping to find the spell that trapped me here.

"And after the wedding, you and Tilly are moving to Syndall."

I glanced up. "What does that have to do with anything?" Then it dawned on me. "You're worried we won't be able to do this anymore."

"Don't be ridiculous." She turned her head, hoping to avoid me seeing the crack in her jovial smile.

"Is that why, today of all days, you decided to trap me? Are you afraid this'll be the last time?"

"You're not trapped. The labyrinth can be solved."

"You're missing the point," I said, but there was no spirit in her voice when she spoke. This wasn't fun for her. It was in that moment that I thought she might break our rule for the first time.

I closed the book, trapping my finger to mark the page. "I'll admit we won't be able to spend as much time together. I'm moving, you're not far from achieving Magician Adept status at the lyceum, which means you'll be busy... very busy. But we've been at this so long that I'm certain our games began in a past life." A flicker of a smile touched Amber's lips.

"This won't die."

My sister whispered, "How do you know?"

"Because I need to get you back for trapping me in a labyrinth on my wedding day!" I offered her a dirty look to convey how angry I was at her for pranking me like this, but—truth was—I wasn't angry at all; I was enjoying every moment inside her maze.

As if she'd once been cursed with an Eternal Sadness spell and it had just been lifted, she exhaled through a growing smile, tension bleeding from her shoulders. Colour returned to her cheeks, her forehead, her eyelids, and whatever gloom that once consumed her was now gone. "I look forward to seeing you try."

Returning to her spellbook, I scanned for clues and soon found the very spell she'd used to entrap me within this ill-timed illusion. I read her notes, thoroughly, but there was nothing in there to say what the magic word might be. I read as I walked, eyes fixated on Amber's truly garbled writing while relying on my keen sense of surroundings and superior peripheral vision to find the room's exit. And find the exit I did, though it wasn't in a manner I had expected. Entrenched in the magical tome, I stumbled into a pool of bronze-tinged water. There was no shallow end, and there was no bottom. Right through the algae-ridden water I sank, plummeting into a liquid abyss. But then I was no longer sinking... not within

any liquid, anyway. Passing through the water, I landed, buttocks-first onto a dry, stone floor. It took me a moment to catch my breath, pat myself down, check for bruises. Despite dropping through a lagoon, I was dry as a necromancer's familiar.

I caught my breath and found myself in a darkened pit, the only light a shimmering wave of blues and greens caressing the walls, cast from the pool of water floating above me. Before me lay a lone door with crooked frames that towered ten feet up the wall, and unless I knew a spell to lift me back up through the pool, that door was my only means of continuing forward. I hobbled to me feet, massaged my rump to soothe the superficial (and perhaps imagined) wound it had incurred. I then reached for the knob with a desperate grip.

It wouldn't open.

"There's no ordinary exit," murmured the incorporeal form behind me. "Just a magic word."

"...that rhymes with orange, right," I replied, leering at the knob like I was ready to make an enemy of it. I stepped back, tucked the spellbook I forgot I was holding under my arm, and put my finger to my lips. *Borange, Corange, Dorange...* I thought alphabetically, hoping I'd stumble upon Amber's answer while examining the door from its lock to its... door hinge.

As if to read my mind, Amber's eyes brightened with excitement.

"Couldn't be..." I said, something clicking in my mind. "Door hinge?"

A soft sizzle echoed about the pit as the door glowed an amber orange. Reaching out—not for the knob, but the hinges—I pulled, swinging the door the opposite way it should logically go.

Exiting the maze, I emerged onto a quiet dining patio, overlooking the cobblestone street of our hometown. Amber, now flesh and blood, stood next to a table, leaving her floating apparition behind. Holding two glasses of ruby red wine, she handed me one before stealing away the book I still had tucked under my arm. "To my brother. May your union with Tilly bring about new and fabulous adventures."

I raised my glass. "And may it never break the traditions we love."

She clinked hers against mine, and finished with, "And should the old become stale, may we create new traditions in place of them."

We drank together, and as I looked over her shoulder, I read a sign hanging over a familiar tailor's shop across the street. "Whetherington's", I said. It would appear my sister had thought of everything. I was going to be on time.

The End.

A Goddess in Godom

By David Carter

The red sun was sinking underneath the horizon, night hastening to envelop the world in its black velvet folds. Summer had brought its enervating heat, which made the daylight hours an onerous thing to endure. Thus, it was eventide that was looked forward to with anticipation in Godom. That was when the world was lit, not by some glorious star but by the colors of passion that streaked the benighted skies as shouts of pleasure and agony resounded in the air.

Godom flourished in the summertime, like a bright red blossom of sin. Nestled in the Maloh Plains that were hemmed in by hillocks on all sides, save for the west, where steep cliffs loomed blackly, and beyond that, a foaming ocean roared, the known world flocked to it in hopes of losing sight of their many miseries, to indulge all-too-human urges. Abounding in opulence, it was a city where merchants grew wealthier, where mercenaries mingled with harlots, and where the sick were exiled, lest pleasure be spoiled.

Godom was the place in which a man met God.

* * *

Faint breezes swept the uplands before the cave where Yashaa hid. He doffed his armor piece by piece, his armor that had

become a second skin to him. Save for when it came to relieving his urges, neither pain nor discomfort had aforesaid compelled Yashaa to remove his cuirass, gauntlet, or any part of his knightly accouterments. For the first time, therefore, since he plundered the rune-engraved relics from the devil-haunted ruins of Ain, he felt naked, though his bare flesh had not yet been exposed to the air.

When he divested himself of his wool gambeson, a vagrant zephyr lightly kissed his skin. He became filled with loathing at the sight of his actual flesh. It was scarred, marred by a lifetime of religious rites. This hatred arose not from a disdain for ugliness but from the recognition that his life had been wasted in the worship of a god who did not live.

The King of Old was deaf to his prayers and blind to his ritual acts, and so Yashaa forsook him. He abandoned the monastery where he had lived since boyhood and turned his back on the priests who raised and scourged him.

Yashaa undid the clasps that held together his headgear and placed the skull segment of his helm beside the ground he sat on. He took up the metal mask that had concealed his disfigured face and lifted it to a shaft of sunlight that struck the cavern. In appearance, the mask was the visage of a beautiful man, and off it bounded glints of sunshine.

He touched his scarred face delicately, his self-loathing gradually subsiding as

better thoughts rose above the flood of hate. These were contemplations that revolved around the being he called his new god. Unlike the King of Old, she was real; Her chest heaved with life. Her flesh was palpable; It sank underneath his touch. Her name was Shalemi, and Shalemi was the harlot Yashaa met in Godom.

Shalemi was his fount of inspiration--that deep passion that filled him with a yearning for life. He fell into a pleasant trance simply thinking of her, his soul elevated to the realm in which the cherubim flew. In that very realm where angels soar and sleep, he saw her face vividly. Her forehead was broad, and her low nose bridge was a gentle slope that ended in a rather round tip. Her eyes, which appeared to droop from lassitude, were enchanting spheres. The purity of spring and the fervent heat of summertime were evoked in her silver voice.

Yashaa never knew love. He knew obsession. Obsessed once with an ancient deity, to whom were sung songs daily by barefooted priests, obsessed now with a harlot.

If Yashaa breathed, it was to see her again, for the woman was not now with him. Shalemi was trapped inside Godom. Yashaa had attempted to flee with her on the night they met, but their escape from the city was thwarted by the city's viceroy, Lod. The name alone--the mere thought of the king's right-hand

man--roused deep hatred in his chest. Yashaa saw in the king's deputy no saving grace, and were it not for his seat of power, Lod would neither be feared nor respected by Godom's denizens. Affording a mild comfort to Yashaa was the fact that he had given a good account of himself before he was compelled to draw back in the hopes of coming for Shalemi again. Blood rain fell upon daunted sentries then.

Yashaa placed all his armor inside a sack and garbed himself with leper's garments. Linen bandages swathed his entire body, and a worn cloak covered his tall, gaunt frame. Only his blistered lips and emerald eyes showed. He departed from his haunt and traveled with a fierce summer blaze smiting down upon his back to the Highway of Lepers, the main trail that led into Godom.

Yashaa knew the city must be on alert for him to make his return--that Lod anticipated the chance to kill the man who made a mockery of him. Thus, Yashaa had contrived a plan since he considered that entry would be nigh impossible otherwise.

He had observed the merchants and their trains that came and went on the highway to Godom and studied what each one traded in and what goods they sold. Along the busy path, lepers would gather and beg for alms, even for what meager morsel of food could be thrown to them. Many of these merchants scoffed at them, ignored them, and even

trampled them down with their steeds. Yet among those greedy fat traders, there was one named Moreh, and he sought to teach kindness to the world. Moreh threw moldy bread at the sick and called it charity. He gave them sour milk and called it cream, and he satisfied their throats with bitter waters. In his own eyes, he was a saint who would do anything for the poor.

As the sun rose to its zenith, Yashaa arrived at the Highway of Lepers and there waited for Moreh. Yashaa was well aware that his conspicuous emerald irises and tall frame would sell him out, so he altered his posture to walk with a stoop and a limp and rolled his eyes over so that only the sclera appeared, feigning blindness or some other defect, whenever he came in sight of people. To all, this bandaged man was just another leper. Indeed, none of the sickly exiles who stood by the well-trodden trail so much as suspected him as he drew close, clutching a worn bag in his fist. The rough sack contained his armor, which he was about to trade for a way into Godom.

Not much time passed when the faux leper observed a small caravan approach, headed by a bulky rider on horseback. Yashaa recognized the rotund face of the driver, who, in pride, rode to the gates of Godom. Moreh had arrived for his bimonthly business in the city. During this time of day, only a few outcasts gathered by the road in search of alms. Yashaa ran ahead of them and prostrated

himself just at the edge of the dirt path.

Moreh, as was his wont, halted his beast and reached for his bag of refuse that he called food.

Still with his head kissing the dirt, Yashaa addressed the fat merchant. "Thy servant has come to offer thee a gift."

"Gift!" Moreh sneered. "What is this gift that an exile doth offer?"

Yashaa held up the sack with his armor, shook it so that the sound of clanging metal could be heard, and then released the contents. Shining, glittering silver encumbered the road that led to Godom. The approaching lepers gasped and were about to touch the precious armor, but Yashaa defended the goods with crazed cries and wild gesticulations that made them flee.

Under the sun's golden beams, the armor dazzled Moreh with its splendor. He dismounted and, using a handkerchief so that his fingers would not make direct contact, took a gauntlet up in his hand, inspected it, and mouthed out words in awe.

Moreh coughed to draw Yashaa's attention. Covering his lower face with his loose sleeve so that he might not catch Yashaa's apparent disease, he spoke, "Enough of that crazy act--those friends of yours are gone. Now tell me, leper, where did you come across this? If it was through grave robbing--no, never mind--I do not need to know. I will take your gift, leper."

Yashaa smiled. "I thank thee, master.

Thou art deserving of this gift and more, for thou art most blessed among men, favored by God.”

The flattery made Moreh laugh with deep mirth. “You are right!” Fat fingers twirled graying mustachios as he paused a moment. “I must repay you, leper. As a man favored by Heaven, I endeavor to spread kindness to the world. Ask me one thing without presumption, and I shall give it to you.”

Yashaa's charade continued, with him prostrating himself anew. “Thy servant is not worthy of such lovingkindness as thou do intend to bestow. But if thou wilt condescend to show favor to this lowly man, then I ask of thee but one thing.”

From Moreh's retinue, four armed men had come to see what delayed their master. They encompassed Yashaa on all sides in case of harm. Yet Yashaa heard their whispers, their mutterings that bespoke gossip. It seemed that they, too, were curious as to what Yashaa would ask of their master.

Moreh pushed aside his guardsmen and lifted Yashaa's chin with his sandaled foot. “What do you ask of me, leper?”

He breathed in deep before he answered. “Take, I pray, thy servant into the city. I have a wife there whom I was forced to abandon because of mine illness. For lepers are forbidden therein and must leave the city and all that is theirs, as thou mayest well know. It is the law in Godom.”

A simple but effective plan, Yashaa

had contrived. He had crafted an elaborate story that was made to cater to Moreh's delusions of being a benevolent saint. The delicious satisfaction of playing the role of a savior would be hard to deny.

Of course, Moreh would agree, Yashaa thought.

“Lift the man and stow him away in one of our wains, Shechem! I will do as he begs. Because I am kind. Only, hark, leper! You will disappear once we enter the city. And if you are caught and exiled again--perchance even die--my hands are clean of this.” Moreh swept his hands on his gay garbs to symbolize his innocence of Yashaa's possible execution, after which he clambered onto his steed.

Yashaa walked with a limp as he was escorted to one of the horse-drawn wagons. Anyone who saw it might have sworn the limping gait was natural, yet that notion would be wrong. His stiff walking motion had a simple reason, unbeknownst to all: a long, thin sword was secured to his left thigh. This thigh he dragged aboard the wain, and there he patiently waited for the caravan to resume its journey to the city of sin.

Once inside Godom, Moreh bribed the city inspectors who came by to search all that was his. The green-eyed man was correct. The city, indeed, was placed on alert in anticipation of Yashaa's possible return. Nevertheless, these inspectors were glad to accept Moreh's bribery and left without peering into any of his wains.

When the time to come out of hiding would arrive, Yashaa was to receive a sign. But it chafed him to lie in wait, and so he slid out of the wain before such signs were given. Yashaa stole through the semi-empty streets; His presence might have been no more than a light breeze. Searching for Shalemi, he strained his ears for any word of her, stopping now and again to spy on those few who dared the sun's blazing heat.

Gradually, he began to realize the vain hope there was in his fruitless search. He should have known nothing of her could be discovered on the city streets and byways. She was a criminal for having attempted to flee the city with him, not someone who was merely lost. As he brooded, Yashaa concluded that, after all, it made the most logical sense for Shalemi to be held prisoner in the dungeon underneath the king's keep. Naturally, only officials were admitted into the king's quarters, but that problem was not without remedy. Slaying a sentry and stealing the watchman's regalia off the corpse would furnish him with all he needed to enter the keep. Yet during daylight hours, this would be unwise. He needed the cover of darkness.

For now, he chose to retreat into the shadows of a dusky alley and impatiently bide his time until nightfall. In his mind, there surged prayers to that old god of his, the god he counted as dead because of his silence. Even when months had passed since Yashaa had left his faith, the

memory of his daily meditations was clear. Every formulaic verse was distinctly recalled, as though he had never ceased to pray to The One With Hair Like Wool.

Yashaa indulged in the act of prayer, though now these meditations had Shalemi as the point of worship. She was Woman Incarnate for Yashaa, a realization of the perfect female. The man had lived solely in the company of men for as long as he could remember, so the sight of a woman wrought in him a feeling like that of ascension. A first love's glance, a sister's smile, a mother's warmth--these experiences were never known by Yashaa, yet they were desired by his subconscious mind. Shalemi embodied them all, vastly better than any other woman he had paid to sleep with.

Sacred, sexual, spiritual, soft skin like a jasmine's petal--a mystifying blend of flesh and divinity, god and devil, both holiness and temptation--this was Shalemi, or at least, what Yashaa thought of Shalemi. Shalemi was God to Yashaa.

Night finally arrived, and the bandaged man thrust himself into action, his mind and body refreshed by meditating on Shalemi. Obsession drove him, and faith in an idol spurred him. Yashaa's task now was to find a watchman who walked alone, stalk such a one, and ambush him at the right moment. He found none: All the sentries took up their watch in groups of three or four. While Yashaa could dispatch them easily, it would not be

quiet. The last thing he desired was to bring attention to himself.

It was then that Yashaa thought he heard a familiar voice. It was a man's voice of mockery. Turning aside from a densely packed street, Yashaa headed in the direction of the raucous voice he vaguely recognized. His ear led him down a byway that seemed to have fallen out of favor with the people who trafficked in Godom, for few buildings were lit there. Yashaa crept up to the side of one such unlit building after discovering Moreh's booth nearby. He saw the benevolent saint at a small distance, carrying a conversation with a person who was surrounded by a small retinue of armed men. It was the voice of this other man that struck Yashaa as distinctly familiar.

Lod, Yashaa mouthed. The one who had separated him from his God, from Shalemi. For a moment, Yashaa thought about killing the man. But he opted not to. The decision would be unwise. He could tell Lod's retinue were not ordinary guardsmen.

Each member of his entourage wore wide-brimmed hats and was tall and gaunt, with a history of violence brimming in their fierce stares. Among them, however, there was one who, to Yashaa's observant gaze, was strikingly different--a seeming youth. Yashaa peered deep into that one's eyes. Only the eyes could be seen, as not only him but also all the members of Lod's escort had

their features hidden by a cloth headdress that wound around their faces like a mask. These were Yommite mercenaries, not just guards but men born to fight, who stole into forts and citadels to kill noblemen and lords.

Notwithstanding, Yashaa kept his gaze fixed on the youth, noting how his behavior was different. The way he stood lacked the intent of murder that all the rest had, though he maintained a studied semblance of it. If it was possible, Yashaa detected a trace of feminine grace in his bearing. There was a smoothness to the way he stood, an undulating line that contrasted itself with the rigid posture of the rest of the mercenaries. He experienced something of that high that comes to him whenever he admires a woman, as he focused on this discrepancy. The sensation evoked a nostalgic memory of the last woman he had encountered, Shalemi. He again fell to studying the eyes of the youth and realized that he now saw them in a different light. The two brown eyes now appeared familiar and warm, even like those that belonged to a friend. Yet Yashaa had no friends. He only had Shalemi.

He grinned like a madman. No, they did not keep Shalemi locked in some dungeon. Lod kept her hidden in plain sight. Any other person would have been fooled, yet not Yashaa. Yashaa was obsessed with details; He was obsessed with Shalemi. He knew that the lad was

Shalemi.

Upon this revelation, Yashaa struggled to restrain himself from dashing headlong into the midst of the mercenaries and snatching the lad he thought was Shalemi away. He desperately wanted to but did not know how his prowess would fare against eight of the Yommite assassins. A pair had been tricky to deal with in the past, but eight? Yashaa needed an opening of some sort before he could attempt anything. And so he thought it best to remain observing the scene for now.

He saw Lod jeering the benevolent saint, his expression one of scornful glee. Moreh found no humor in the viceroy's taunts, of course. His brow was furrowed in humiliation and frustration, but he did not answer back, as Lod was untouchable because of his position. It was obvious there was animosity between the two, yet Yashaa could only guess as to why the two hated each other. A woman or a deal gone awry--who knew?

The viceroy absently sifted through the fat merchant's wares, occasionally hurling an insult at him. Lod had no real purpose there other than to mock Moreh, it seemed. Yet Yashaa trained his sight upon the scene, barely blinking lest he miss his moment to strike. When Lod appeared ready to leave, Moreh nonchalantly laid his new goods before him. Pieces of shining, dazzling metal were sat down upon the table--Yashaa's armor. At that instant, Yashaa noted how

the seeming youth shook convulsively, as though struck by sudden dismay.

Lod gaped in unbelief. He took up a gauntlet and traced the finely engraved runes on it, gasping.

"Where did you get this?" the viceroy demanded.

Moreh grinned, wrenching the gauntlet from Lod's grasp. "It was bought for a thousand shekalim pieces! I can sell it to you for ten thousand!"

Angered and outraged, Lod reached his hands over the table and throttled Moreh's throat. Weapons were drawn, and a skirmish ensued between Moreh's retinue and Lod's hired swords. As both sides fought, Yashaa saw the youth draw away from the battle with a sword in hand, flourishing it wildly as though untrained in its art.

Now had come the moment to act. Yashaa undid his bandaged leg, released his needle blade from its sheath, and swept out of his hiding place like a flying shadow. Engaged in combat, the fools were distracted. Lod grappled with Moreh, while straight and curved blades crashed against each other. The youth was confronted by an attacker, but before any offense could be made, Yashaa's fatal point had stung the foe's heart.

Covering the youth's masked mouth, Yashaa dragged the one he was certain was Shalemi into a shadowy alley. She writhed in his grasp, as though she were a squirming animal caught in a snare. Maintaining a tight seal over her

whimpering mouth, he bent his head to her and whispered softly, "It is I." Her muscles relaxed and her resistance ceased at the sound of his voice, no doubt finding the timbre familiar. In the ill-lit back street, he groped at his abductee's head, endeavoring to undo the mask. When it fell off, he gasped, staring squarely into a visage of unmatched beauty that shone even through the gloom. She flooded his mind with a dozen emotions, while his airway was severely constricted by the sight of her.

"My God," he murmured, sagging to the floor. All his strength went away. He now floated amid the clouds of Heaven itself, his soul a wandering star in the cosmic expanse.

"Yashaa!" Shalemi began before checking her sudden exclamation.

He glanced up full into that window of dreams manifest, of sublime loveliness. There was an aspect of sweet melancholy to her. The faux leper had this impression that her face was a mirror, inasmuch as her features were those of relief, accentuated by an undertone of hope. Yashaa regarded Shalemi as his savior, his lone light in a benighted universe. As he lost himself in her glistening eyes, it appeared to him that she might have thought of him in very much the same way.

Arrested by the sight of that tender countenance, Yashaa could not so much as move an inch. Shalemi had to stoop to help him up.

Bent close to him, she then spoke low into his ear, "You must get us out of here. It will only take a short while until you are discovered."

Reason entered his ear alongside her words, her hot breath sweeping against his bandaged ear. Yashaa was roused from his trance and at once began thinking of ways of escape. His resolve, however, was not enough to guarantee a successful flight. The Yommite mercenaries, whose presence in Godom had not been anticipated by Yashaa, were not ones to be trifled with. If he were alone, he might dare fight all those who opposed him, but his goddess stood beside him; She was of greater importance than himself.

It was the thought of endangering her that prevented him from thinking clearly. Urgency only served to fog up his mind. He racked his brains for a plan, but the hurdle of overcoming the mercenaries always loomed large. He noticed her soft features wrinkle in worry and frustration. With a subdued voice that carried an anxious note, she pressed him to hasten more than once. Dismay made her lids tremble, and exasperation made the small lines about her mouth crease deeply. Then, her dim eyes brightened with a new light. Hope glimmered in those two round orbs.

She had arrived at a solution, inspired by Yashaa's duplicitous effort that brought him to the city. Quickly, she shared with him her plan that availed of

their similar heights; It called for them to interchange their garb.

They had their backs turned to one another as they quickly stripped themselves. The strident sound of battle rang in their ears, but more piercing was a stifled gasp Yashaa heard behind him. He intuitively knew that Shalemi had glimpsed his deeply scarred body. The old sting of shame bit at him, and he inwardly cursed his former god, for whose sake he bore these many stripes.

Resent was powerful, its reach extending over space and time. Silence on her part made the experience harder to suffer, but now was not the time to engage with these things, he told himself. Things, he deemed his harrying emotions, as though they were tangible objects that could be forever discarded or neglected. Isolated from the world at large until only recently, Yashaa was not fully aware of what it meant to be human. An obeisant cultist was what he had been--one who never partook of even the most mundane of pleasures like a warm bath or relationships like family.

When they had exchanged their raiment, Yashaa's stare met hers, unsure of what to expect. Yet her expression was one of resolution. Whatever she might have thought of his wounds appeared to have faded into the background of her mind. The success of their plan was foremost for her, he knew. Everything else was of little relevance, as it should be for him. Yashaa put aside his own

qualms, inspired by the woman he called God.

The tumult had subsided, with another soon taking its place. Shalemi was being searched for. Arrayed in the Yommite regalia, Yashaa emerged from the narrow alley with Shalemi crawling at his feet. Garbed like a miserable wretch and cringing just like one, it was impossible to say she was otherwise. Neither could anything be thought of Yashaa, save that he was the very woman being sought. Under the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, his conspicuous green eyes could scarcely be seen, and he affected quite well Shalemi's way of standing with her latent feminine grace. His obsession with her minutiae had its benefits: None could tell he was not Shalemi.

The loud tramp of feet, the deafening sound of swords crashing into barred windows, and the grating noise of Lod shouting orders--everything came to an ominous silence when Yashaa and Shalemi stepped out from the shadows of the narrow back street.

Lod did not move from where he stood, a commanding presence whose cool stare betrayed neither anger nor alarm as he trained his sight on the two. An ensanguined saber was in his right fist, but in his left, he clutched the severed head of Moreh by the hair. He swung the severed head like a toy, irreverent of the life it once bore. Back and forth, back and forth, it swung, dotting the road with blood, until its

pendulum motions ceased. Not once did Lod blink as he swung his ghastly plaything, but now emotion crept up his face, his brazen cheeks pulling upward in a deep, cynical grin.

The creases on his face sunk yet deeper, writhing lines of grim satisfaction. His sardonic smile reached its culmination in a snorting laugh as he swung the blood-dripping, gory thing in Yashaa's direction.

The grim thing bounced once on the street, dirt leaping into the air with the impact, and then rolled until it stopped at Yashaa's feet. He shrank back in feigned fear, guessing that that would be Shalemi's natural reaction. His knees buckled, and then his legs began to sway when, with a cursory glance, he saw what became of Moreh's guardsmen. None had survived: where men once stood, limbs and bodies now rested in bloody pools. Glazed eyes stared out from the mutilated travesties that once were strong warriors.

The Yommite mercenaries had done their job well. It was carnage.

Lod addressed Yashaa, thinking it was Shalemi: "What did you think you were doing, harlot? I would have killed you if you'd attempted to flee." With a jerk of his hand, Lod shook off the blood from his sword. A vague red line now pointed at Yashaa.

"I suppose I might now," he added as wiped what was left of Moreh's blood from his saber. "I have to think about it."

When Lod finally noticed the cringing

figure at Yashaa's feet, he narrowed his eyes in disbelief. With a chortle, he expressed his incredulity: "Was this why you disappeared, you wench? Did you catch him, thinking that by fulfilling your civic duty of apprehending lepers, I might somehow be appeased as viceroy of Godom?"

The chilling air that saturated the death-filled scene took on another quality. It was a palpable tension that impregnated the evening. While Yashaa held his breath with a stolid reserve, he saw Shalemi shaken by subtle paroxysms of fear. It was obvious that she battled doubt as to the outcome of their plan.

Lod's grating laughter resounded in the streets. Waving his sword at Shalemi, he sneered at her, completely fooled into believing she was a mere waif. "Lepers are forbidden here, wretch. Under my watch, all have been rightfully exiled. What does that mean? That means you must be none other than the one who Moreh confessed to having snuck into the city in exchange for a knight's panoply." He licked his lips, and with leering eyes full of lasciviousness, he continued, "You could never have known, but I had combed all of the Maloh Plains in search of the one who last bore that armor." Lod paused, then, more to himself than to anyone else, he mumbled, "It is finally mine!"

Yashaa was baffled. He had been completely unaware of Lod's lust for his silver armor. Until now, he had assumed

his and Shalemi's fugitive status was a natural consequence of attempting to flee the city (harlots were forbidden to exit Godom). He was ignorant of any other motive Lod might have had when it came to seeking his capture.

The viceroy's body shook as though with ecstasy, and his eyes shone with a malevolent light. "Ancient power dwells in that armor. The Kishernite in me knows it! My people were powerful and renowned sorcerers in their time, but, alas, empires fall and new ones rise in their places. Yet I bear all the pride of Kishern in my dark heart. I would have killed countless people for that set of armor!"

Under flickering torch fire, the silver plates of the knightly gear reflected lurid glints and gleams. They lay like precious treasures in Moreh's stall, just behind where the viceroy stood. Lustrous pieces of treasure were the most such armor could ever be for Yashaa. Even then, Yashaa found use in its practicality, not in its monetary value. It afforded him a means to hide his scars from his eyes, and it protected him in battle. He never dreamed of it possessing sorcerous powers.

With a harsh grunt, Lod directed his thoughts at Shalemi. "Let me make things clear, leper. I do not want you to get any wrong ideas about rewards. Do not suppose I will deal lightly with you because you indirectly brought the armor to me."

Their plan now felt as though it bore little hope of success. The king of Godom's decree ruled that all lepers must be exiled from the city. The two had counted on that law to be Shalemi's means of escape--for her, now garbed in Yashaa's leper costume, to be driven out of Godom. Yashaa was to find his own way out, and this he was sure he could do; Entering Godom unseen was much more difficult than leaving it. Neither thought seemed possible now, and, at most, it was only ever a faint chance, Yashaa realized. It was foolish, even, to believe Lod would uphold that law. No longer did it seem to matter that their disguises fooled the viceroy. Of what use was their subterfuge when the freedom they so desperately desired was fleeing their grasp?

Lod jerked his head in Shalemi's direction, signaling a command to his men. Shoving Yashaa aside, the mercenaries crowded around Shalemi and began kicking her. Lepers were often treated with contempt and inhuman disregard, and Shalemi was no different. She suffered their same stripes--partook of their accustomed humiliation.

Amidst her torture of raining blows, Lod stalked up to offer his share of hate and disdain. A huge glob of spit dropped from his writhing lips to fall full on her bandaged face. No single cry, not even a whimper, came from her. Shalemi was utterly quiet; She was unconscious.

Yashaa fumed but held his peace. He

was ready to attack but questioned whether Shalemi would want that. Maybe she would rather cling to the last shred of hope until the very end. At the same time, he questioned what good freedom would be if left half-dead. Silently, he laced his fingers around the hilt of his needle blade, which was hidden between the folds of his billowy silken breeches. Freedom or not, his wrath was being roused and made ready to be poured out.

“You laid your disease-ridden fingers on my armor before you gave it to Moreh,” Lod spoke with a casual tone, completely apathetic to the poor wretch at his feet. Yet he lost his studied disregard when he snapped at Shalemi, “You disgust me, filth! But you ought to thank me. I will rid you of your disease and all your suffering. I will not drive you out of Godom. I will kill you!”

Lod's scimitar was lifted, poised for the slaughter. Yashaa plunged forward, his needle blade in his fist. Despite his lightning speed, his strike was deflected, parried by a sword wielder whose cast was that of a crazed sadist. Frustrated, Yashaa smote harder and harder, sparks shooting upward as his sword met his opponent's with violent force. Though his eyes were focused on the battle at hand, he managed to glimpse Lod wheel about with a gaping mouth on his face, shocked at the intensity of the swordplay.

Yashaa, ordinarily, would have been filled with ecstasy at the thought of fighting such formidable adversaries, yet

with his goddess so close to death, desperation took hold of him. This despair mingled with his innate bloodlust to create a veritable fiend. Lod's sellswords fought against a scarred, disfigured demon, not a man.

An arm flung into the night sky, and then a head came toppling down broad shoulders. Death screams filled the air as warm blood fell like a midsummer shower. Within another minute, Yashaa cut through two more opponents with ease. He ducked to avoid a blow from his right, then rolled out of a swinging strike that might have sheared his head clean off. In that very act of rolling, his sword pierced up into his assailant's side, stabbing the man's heart.

Lod shrieked in terror, his screeching voice piercing through the noise of the city and ringing high above the din of battle.

“Yashaa!” the viceroy gibbered. “You are a demon! Last time, over twenty men fell by your sword--but Yommite assassins! No man alive can match their fury--only a demon can!” He gasped, then, whether spoken from a brief window of sanity or not, Yashaa did not know, but the viceroy shouted out with triumphant glee: “All is not lost! I am a Kishernite! A descendant of mighty sorcerers! I can summon monsters mightier than you!”

Yashaa paid him no heed while he was lost in his frenzy. The emerald-eyed slayer was without thought; His existence

was now purely defined by battle. Lod's threats of revenge were uttered in vain, and his rambling about being of the Kishernite diaspora, who in their time were a great and sorcerous people, held no meaning to Yashaa.

“This Kishernite doth summon thee! Obey him!” shouted Lod above the cries of dying men and the harsh clash of swords.

When the final Yommite mercenary had died at the point of Yashaa's sword, ominous clouds rolled overhead and shrouded the moon and stars. Yashaa regarded not this portent, instead striding up to Lod with his needle blade wet to the hilt with blood, himself oozing lifeblood from a score of wounds. The Kishernite's mouth was gaping open, afraid of the demon who now approached. But the emerald-eyed slayer stopped in his tracks, suddenly aware of the sound of lashing wings.

A giant, shadowy figure hovered above. It swooped down with rushing speed, forcing Yashaa to hurl himself down lest he be caught up by the monster's talons. Lod laughed with exultation. All his boasting and bragging about his Kishernite pedigree was not mere nonsense in the end. His invocation had worked; A hellspawn had been summoned. It was a parody of the Creator's greatest work, a bizarre blend of human and beast.

The thing descended and walked on goat-like legs, bringing its leathery wings

close to its ash-colored body. Though Lod had summoned it, even he was daunted by its grotesque, misshapen face. It bore the head of a swine, with its deep, dusky eyes glaring out in paralyzing intensity. Its upper half was human, save for certain aspects, like its great hands or thin neck that were out of proportion to its body. No weapon did it possess; Its large talons at the ends of its huge hands were its weapons. Like a beast, it bellowed its threats, snorting as it clacked its stained teeth.

Yashaa stood stock still, but it was not fear that froze him. Something entirely other than fear seized him. It was as if, at that moment, he received an epiphany from Heaven and heard a divine oracle.

“The King of Old yet lives,” the oracle solemnly declared.

All of a sudden, his old god felt more real than ever before. The King of Old was not dead, nor was he the invention of phony prophets. How could he be when, before Yashaa's very eyes, there stalked a demon from Hell? If Hell and its fiends were real, then perforce, the ancient deity must exist.

On the verge of further revelation, Yashaa was dragged down to Earth--nay, Hell. With a roar on its foul tongue, the demon lunged itself at Yashaa, forcing him out of his momentary vision.

Emerald-eyed Yashaa did not shrink back but met his foe face-on. At close quarters, his long, thin sword was useless. He grappled with it hand-to-hand

as the fiend's pungent breath stung his nostrils. Sulfur and the fetor of rotting flesh assailed the man, struggling as he was to fight, the fiend's talons sinking deep into his scarred hands.

It was mightier than any he had met. Yashaa quickly found himself on one knee, being driven to the ground with no opening for a counter-hold. He was pouring all his effort now into simply preventing the creature from pinning him down. Still, a question begged to be answered. Why was the fiend not taking the battle to the air, where he would be helpless?

A sudden realization as to why made him grin savagely. The demon was toying with him; Yashaa was mere prey to it. The notion stung his pride and made him aware of just how powerless he was in contrast. In that instance of self-doubt, Yashaa's strength wavered. It might have been a mere flash of weakness, but it was a big enough window to cast him into the very position he desperately sought to avoid. The demon pinned him to the ground, raising dust into the air with their crash.

It appeared to laugh, clacking its horrid teeth as it convulsed with its sick mirth. Yashaa might have known bleak despondency were it not for a single fact that made hope possible. Though huge and imposing, with brutish power surging through its body, the demon was no heavier than a thin woman. This meant a reversal was not impossible.

He had one chance before the demon caught on to his intention. Channeling all of his weight into a single, violent heave, he rolled on his side. Growling in protest, the fiend found itself swept up by the rolling motion until Yashaa was the one mounted atop its beastly chest. It thrashed with its wings, desperately trying to lift itself into the air, but the man had clamped his hands around its neck and refused to let go. The demon gasped violently for air, like one drowning at sea.

A man possessed, Yashaa crushed the thin neck with his vice-like grip, his fingernails burying themselves into the thing's throat. Yet the freak also would not capitulate. With rending force, its talons swept at Yashaa's side, digging deep into his hip. Yashaa, stifling a shout of agony, groaned and panted, yet did not let go of the spindly neck. A lifetime of weird religious rites had inured him to pain and discomfort, but so great was his torture that he struggled to not succumb to his wounds, though most men would have already fainted and even died.

Lod was not entertained by the turn of events. "Kill him, demon! Do thy master's bidding, fool!"

The demon snarled at Lod, hurling choked oaths in an eldritch tongue. Its wrenching movements became more frantic, driving Yashaa to strengthen his grip even further. Though the beast clawed at his arms and marred his face with new stripes, the man's fingers did

not loosen their clutch. Blood ran down his arms in red rivulets. His skin was torn to ribbons in many places. Yet he continued strangling the demon.

The hellspawn gasped and cried out its pain, while Lod, at a distance, hurled insult after insult at it. Yashaa noticed the fiend's talons no longer strove against him; Its arms strained in the viceroy's direction. There, from the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a scene he had not guessed might happen. He saw Shalemi stand on swaying legs, rising from her captor's earlier abuse. A streak of silver shone in her hand.

Shalemi was gripping a dagger in her fist. Yashaa need not ask why. The answer was obvious. He witnessed the result of all her pent-up rage and saw her revenge as she plunged the dagger deep into Lod's stomach, who wheeled a moment too late. However, Lod did not easily succumb to his mortal wound. To Yashaa's dismay, the Kishernite found life and strength enough for one final act of wickedness. The sorcerer wound his bloody fingers around Shalemi's neck, bending her body back as he throttled her to death.

Yashaa's heart leaped to his throat. As weak as she must have been from having recently fainted, she offered no offense; Her end was imminent. The dagger dropped from her limp hand, and the noise of its clatter as it fell echoed in Yashaa's ears.

His hands released their hold on the

demon's neck. The creature was no longer of any concern to him. Truly, everything else faded from view besides Shalemi and Lod. Yashaa, with all the ferocity and swiftness of the lion, rose from the hellspawn and rushed to kill a man. And he would have, had not the pig-faced thing been quicker.

The demon launched itself at Lod and took him up in its talons like how a bird of prey would snatch mice from the forest floor. It flew into the air as its loathsome victim writhed in its clasp. Higher and still higher, they rose, the Kishernite's ghastly outcry filling the night. Against the dark skies, the fiend and its prey were two vague black shapes that hung in the air directly above the city. The phantasmagoric scene continued as first a hand and then a leg fell from the sky in a horrific rainfall of body parts.

The beast ate the head of Lod, the limbless trunk plummeting to the streets with a sickening crash. Lingering in the air with its ghastly laughs, the demon was a stark reminder that there exists Hell and that therein lives life, nightmarish in form.

Yashaa, ensanguined and quite near death, helped Shalemi up but nearly collapsed in her arms. The sight of her precious face revived him somewhat, but he was still much too weary to walk on his own. Although she was far from peak strength, she became his support, and together they essentially limped toward the city gates. Fortunately, though they

walked at a slow pace, the city's denizens were rapt by the horror in the heavens. Yashaa and Shalemi passed by sentries, merchants, harlots, and countless patrons of Godom, yet they were scarcely noticed. No one paid them heed, and Yashaa dazedly wondered if it was because they saw this satanic vision taking place in the heavens as a sign of judgment for their grave sins.

While Yashaa leaned on his sword with his back to the city walls in respite, Shalemi opened the gate, barring egress. With haste, she helped the emerald-eyed slayer onto a horse she stole from the stables, slung Yashaa's armor (which she placed in a worn leather bag) over her shoulder, and then mounted the steed herself. She pulled on the reins and spurred the beast forward.

“We're free,” Shalemi sighed.

Yashaa spoke no word in reply. Exhausted, he was finding sleep hard to overcome. Thus, in this pleasant state, with the cool wind sweeping against his face, his mind drifted to his earlier ruminations.

“The King of Old yet lives...”

On and on did the words repeat in his half-conscious mind. What comfort was there in the thought, however? Where was Providence in the hour of his greatest need?

Bitter, Yashaa swore foul, blasphemous oaths. These imprecations did not go unheeded, however; They received a reply. It was not the King of

Old who answered, but the warm feel of the woman he now entrusted his life to. Shalemi's hands touched his, and the tide of hate abated in his heart to remain, at last, a placid mere that reflected something of peace.

The End.



The Peasant Child

By Lita Kurth

I watch the pink baby gorge at my mother's breast. His beautiful cradle sits in the center of the room, an altar. I run to Mama and claim the other breast.

“No,” she tells me, kind at first, then stern. She pushes me away, her gaze turning to him, Milord-baby. “Now you must suck from the nanny goat,” she says and leads me outside to the tan and black goat. I cry.

Angry days pass. Papa is gone to the war. Milord-baby stays. His satin-lined

crib is always washed. When Milord-baby cries, Mama stops the spinning wheel; She stops stirring oats for our supper and rushes to feed him.

But now Nanny knows me. When I fall and hurt myself, she looks up from her grazing, ready to butt. When I'm hungry, I call her. She comes and stands, gently chewing while I suck her teat, clutching her short, rough hair. Her foreign yellow eyes regard me and mean me well, stranger though I am. Anyone who dares hurt me will feel her horns like stone on wood.

Today, a man in a beautiful uniform came on horseback. He gave coins to Mama. Coins will buy a cow, Mama says. Coins will bring a priest to teach me letters. Cold coins. I wait while they grow in a leather bag.

Fall comes. Milord-baby has a cough. All through the night his weak voice wails, and Mama whimpers prayers, putting a cool wet cloth to his forehead.

When I come near, she shouts, "Go away! Go away!"

I slam the door and cry and wet my worn pants. I go out to the shed where the goats and tools are sheltered. Nanny ambles over to see if I'm okay. She has hardly any milk, hardly any hay.

In the evening, a man comes that I've never seen before. He swings down from his horse with a black leather bag. He leans over the crib where sweat flattens Milord-baby's gold curls. Mama gives the man coins she has saved in the bag.

A day later, Milord-baby kicks his feet. Mama eats again and smiles at me. I turn from her and run to the barnyard.

Spring comes and Milord-baby crawls, looking for me with his big eyes. He makes a loud sound when I walk into the room. I look in his big eyes and whisper, "Stupid baby." He raises his arms and shouts with joy. Stupid baby.

Gorgeous in silk and velvet, he toddles in a silly, bobble-headed way, and mimics Nanny's "Baaaa." It makes Mama laugh. I laugh too.

Out in the yard, Milord-baby sees me nursing from Nanny and wants to nurse too.

"No!" I say ferociously. "She's *my* Nanny!"

Mama lowers my fists, but for once she doesn't let Milord-baby have what he wants. She offers him her breast, but he cries.

When she goes to tend the garden, I say "No!" again sternly and glow with happiness when he sits down and cries.

Summer passes. Milord-baby calls out my name. I dance in front of him to make him laugh. I give him a stick to dig into the ground. When Mama isn't looking, I take some of his special food, his honey-bread, his meat. He watches me with happy eyes. I give him a clamshell I found by the creek. Joyfully, he bangs it on his silver plate.

Now Milord-baby can make his way to the toilet pail and pull up his pants by himself. He wants to follow me to the

creek when I go to fetch water, but Mama says no. Once, when Mama was busy, I let him carry a wooden bowl and help me feed the chickens. “Chick, chick, chick,” I say, flinging the crumbs so they fall wide, and he says, “Chick, chick, chick” and flings exactly like me.

Autumn comes and frost. Milord-baby has soft, warm clothes with fur edging, and shoes. I wear my wooden clogs. Mama makes me a woolen cloak, dark blue. Milord-baby wants one too. I swirl my cloak and stare at the buckles on his shoes. “No,” I say.

Mama says, “Be good to Milord-baby.”

One day, a beautiful carriage rumbles up, shiny doors and shining horses jolting across our yard. Nanny kicks her heels and scampers away. Men in beautiful clothing step down. One drives the coach, one holds the door and leads the horses, one talks to Mama and carries Milord-baby’s cradle and dishes and clothing out to the carriage.

I stare amazed at their uniforms. The last one gives a heavy bag of coins to Mama and takes Milord-baby’s hand.

Milord-baby pulls away, frantic, reaches for Mama.

“Hush, Milord-baby,” she says, “Hush. You’re going for a ride. Look at the beautiful horses.”

The horses stamp; Their harnesses jingle. The sunlight catches the brass. How I long to go where Milord-baby is going. “Can I go too, Mama?”

“No, my son.”

I stare with hate at Milord-baby and the carriage I’ll never ride in.

While Mama is talking to the coachman about the bridge, Milord-baby bolts across the yard. Attendants chase him, catch and carry him to the carriage. I smile. They put him in and close the door. He stands on the seat and pounds at the window, screams in his silks, wails. The carriage wheels grind and thump over small rocks and tree roots and then the horses’ hooves pick up a faster rhythm and the rumble erases Milord-baby’s wail. We watch the carriage until it disappears beyond the hill, and all we hear are chickens clucking, Nanny’s “Maaaaa,” the wind in the trees.

I stand beside Mama, holding her skirt tight in my fist. “Will Milord-baby come back for supper?”

“No, my son.”

I run outside and call for Nanny. I put my arm around her neck, and we walk to the creek. No one toddles after me. Something cries out from a tree above the water. But it’s only a bird.

The End.

Fear

By Sean Mooney

It's the dream. The same dream. Father is there. Mother too. And Kaun.

The small cottage is how I remember it. The table by the hearth. Father's tinkering nook. The one bookshelf where Mother and I would sit and read. The target Father had built Kaun so he could toss his knives and practice with his short bow on rainy days.

I've learned I can speak to them in this dream. I've had conversations that never happened. I can touch and move objects. I can laugh and forget that it is just a dream—that is, of course, until the knock.

And there it is. The heavy pounding at the door cannot be ignored—and it never is. I've tried distracting Father. I've tried jumping in front of him. I've tried holding the door shut. I've tried convincing them to leave before the knock. I've tried and failed. They always answer the door.

Soldiers step into the room. I pull Kaun over to the hearth while Mother steps up defiantly beside Father. And then they draw swords. I grab the cast-iron pan—as I always do. I charge at them as I always do. I deflect one attack on Mother. I trip one of the soldiers. And then, like always, I'm hit in the back of the head.

I wake, drawing in a sharp breath. I rub the back of my head. It hurts. My

head always hurts after that dream. It's still dark out. I can see the moon through the hole in the roof. The attic room is chilly, but there are plenty of blankets. Kaun insisted on the attic room. The dilapidated structure used to be the home and workshop of an enchanter or so the story goes. Who knows anymore? The idea of an enchanter working in A'Talla is impossible to think about. It was even rare in Mother and Father's time—which begs the question of why they moved to this city-state in the first place. Although the building, rumored to be haunted by that enchanter, Kaun still thought an extra layer of hiding was in order. So, instead of a hearth and a warm fire, I have blankets and a view of the night sky. I roll over and see Kaun is awake and staring at me.

"Your nightmare?" Kaun asks with hushed words.

He always calls it my nightmare. It's unusual for him to even ask about it. He doesn't like to talk about it. Not the dream, but the memory. In some ways, I'm surprised he picked this as our hideout. It reminds me of what the cottage looked like afterward. Father's tools, chemicals, all his magical equipment, the books—it was all gone. What they didn't take, they smashed.

"I was dreaming, yes."

Kaun grunts and rolls onto his back. "Dreaming is for the living. I keep telling you that."

It has been nearly ten years since that

day—the day of my dream, of my nightmare. We aren't kids anymore, but something he has never grown out of is his brooding nature. “We are among the living. I keep telling *you* that.”

Kaun throws off his blankets. He stands with fury, but the anger falls away as he steps over and leans against the wall near the window. “We're alive, brother, but I wouldn't say we are living. I wouldn't say anyone in this city is living.”

He slides down the wall and sits. A tiny spark erupts from his thumb while he holds his hand in front of his face. It hovers for a few moments, shifting in shape and size before leaping to his finger, then another finger, and another—back and forth.

“Kaun.” I know he hears my warning tone, but he doesn't react. “Kaun,” I say sternly and throw off my blankets.

“Wait. See, I've almost got it looking like a bear.” The small animal-shaped spark leaps again between his fingers.

“Kaun. Pull the curtain, at least.” I dash over and grab his hand, smothering the flame creature. A sizzle of pain as it goes out. The expression on his face is a mixture of sadness and betrayal. “I'm sorry, Kaun, but someone might see the glow.”

“Sometimes I think you are as afraid and embarrassed of me, like they are.” Kaun pushes me out of the way as he gets to his feet.

“You know that isn't true,” I say, but

he doesn't turn around. Kaun stands for a moment, not speaking or moving. I want to go to his side, but I know better.

“I'm going to work,” he says, gathering up his cloak.

I glance out the window. It's morning, but the sun is still waking up. I don't bother to stop him. “Don't get caught.”

“I never do.”

“You have. Several times.”

“The risks of robbing the rich and giving to the poor.”

“You don't give to the poor. You give to me, and I give to the poor.”

Kaun shrugs and climbs down the ladder out of sight.

My head droops with the frustration of not knowing how to help him. I shake my head while I tidy up our nest. Since it is still early, I take my time freshening up. The contraption Kaun built reminds me of Father. After the first rain poured in through the hole in the roof, Kaun had me bring up a barrel. Then he went to work creating a rig that catches the snow and rain in the barrel, sending the water through wooden pipes and into various glass receptacles he has suspended over a few stone bowls where small fires heat them. This has given us potable drinking water and warm sponge baths. I was very proud of him on the day he finished the project, but I remember his forlorn expression. He was thinking of Father, but instead of saying that, he raged about not having one of Father's flame runes. They never worked for very long, but at

least they made for a safer heat source.

I recheck the sky. I have about an hour before the farmhands gather in the fields. However, this late in the year, I've been doing more maintenance and animal care than fieldwork. I much prefer the open-air tasks. I'm in no rush to get to work, so I take my time getting refreshed. Afterward, I grab the last of our bread and know what my first stop of the day will be before I head to the farms.

With the sun now up, so too had many of the people in the section of the city where we hide out. There are still plenty of shadows, and I keep to those while I make my way along the alleys and side streets to Market Street on my way to the farms. It's a habit, now, to remain unseen. We were terrified that soldiers of the Oligarchy were hunting us when we first fled to the streets. In those days, I tried to convince Kaun that they'd forgotten about us. It was several years before it became true, but Kaun was at least comforted by my lie. In those first years, I would tear down signs promising a reward for our capture. By the time Kaun was no longer sated by my protection and insisted on going out, the leadership seemed to have forgotten about us.

Reaching Market Street only to discover the baker is running late is disappointing. However, the smashed object and abandoned cart near the pavilion are more worrisome. I approach with caution to inspect the pile. I can see a destroyed crate. I search more and find

torn fabric, a small flag, a small money box, but the ripped head of a puppet finally lets me know what I'm looking at.

"Who would smash a puppet show? *Why* would someone smash a puppet show?" I scan the area around the pavilion. In the quiet of the still-waking Market Street, I hear the muffled sounds of fists hitting a body.

I walk quickly towards scuffle and find myself at the mouth of an alley. Two large men are kicking a third figure recently, it would seem, beaten to the ground. I recognize the two men. They work on the farm with me—Ur and Hagall.

"Hey!" I shout, but neither of them looks in my direction. Taking steps toward them, I untie the thick leather loop tethering the cast-iron skillet to my hip. "Hey!" I shout again.

"Ain't none of your concern." Hagall waves me off.

"He's a dirty corruptor. Spreading lies," Ur says, sending his foot into the injured man's gut.

"That's enough," I say, now only a few steps from them.

"Back off." Ur takes a swing at me.

I sidestep the punch, bring the skillet around, and smash it into the side of his head. Ur tilts sideways and falls. I stand ready for Hagall.

"He'll corrupt our children. Teach them to be lazy. People like him take our jobs." Hagall jabs a finger at the unconscious man on the ground.

“He’ll promote laziness and take your job? Do you hear the contradiction?”

Hagall lunges, but his fists hit nothing but air.

I bring the skillet down on Hagall’s shoulder and then ram it into his gut. He doubles over and joins Ur on the ground. “If you lose your job, it won’t be because of a puppeteer. Go.”

One helping the other, Ur and Hagall shuffle out of the alley and out of sight.

I wait a few seconds more before returning my skillet to its leather leash and approach the injured man. He wears a heavy traveler’s cloak and good quality, basic garments. He breathes with labor. I examine his arms and chest thoroughly and find no signs of fractures, although his face is visibly swollen, and I suspect there are bruises in other concealed areas. I glance at one end of the alley and then the other before touching his forehead.

“Please, still be with me.” My mind touches his mind. The alley drops away, and I find myself standing near a forest brook. I see the man. He is slight of build, perhaps forty-five years old, with shoulder-length mousy hair. He’s resting near the bank of the river, tossing stones into the slowly moving water. “Excuse me,” I say.

The man turns to me. “Hello,” he responds, getting up and brushing loose grass from his trousers. “I don’t recognize you. Are you from the village?”

“No. I’m not here, and neither are

you.” His face skews into confusion, and I gently grip his upper arm. “I need you to wake up.”

“What?” the man says, and then a look of understanding creeps over him. “Oh—”

We are suddenly in the alley again. The man takes in a sharp breath and moans.

“Easy,” I say, helping him sit up. “I am Eihwaz.” I ease myself down next to him along the wall of the alley.

The man doesn’t respond at first, pressing fingers to his face, assessing the damage. “I guess it’s good I stay behind the curtain.” A sardonic sigh escapes his lips. “I am Sunna.”

“A puppet master,” I say.

“You’ve seen my show.” Sunna beams.

“If this is your show, I do not recommend an encore.” I glance into my satchel. “I’m sorry, I don’t have any healing oil. But when you feel you are able, I will take you to a healer.”

“I should be able to take care of most of this myself.” Sunna groans and lifts a hand to his face. A soft glow envelops his face, and when his hand pulls away, the swelling around his eye is gone and the cut to his lip looks several days healed.

“Do you use any other magic? Like in your show?”

Sunna glances sideways, a nervous look in his eyes. “Are you going to beat me up too?”

“What? No.”

“Sorry, it’s just that those two men

asked me something similar right before they started beating me up.”

I’m not sure what to say to that. It seems too much to explain. “Welcome to A’Talla.”

Sunna grunts. “I’ve traveled between the city-states. Never have I been given such a greeting. I enjoy bringing my talents to the less fortunate to brighten their days and to the fortunate, hoping my message will resonate with them.”

I scoff. “The less fortunate—”

“Yes.”

“You mean poor.”

“In a word, yes.”

“We’re not poor. We’re kept poor.” I grumble. I’m pretty sure he catches the venom in my words, for he stays silent for several minutes as we rest against the wall. “What is your message?” I eventually ask when the silence turns to awkwardness.

“Ah, well, allow me to answer that by way of addressing your first question.” He does a flourish of a hand motion. An image of a forest floats above his palm.

I’m momentarily mesmerized by the gesture but then clamp my hand down on his. “Best not,” I whisper.

“Yes, of course.” Sunna clears his throat. “I’ve always incorporated magic in my show. Images. Sounds. Little flashes of light. But the years have not been kind to my hands. Manipulating the marionettes is too much for them these days. So I designed a special sympathetic magic link so I can sit back, twitch my

fingers, and get them to do as they would if I were pulling the strings.”

“And this is when those guys attacked you.”

“Actually, no. I hadn’t really gotten that far. I was talking about how my play deals with community and helping everyone, and above all else, being kind. I even have this bit about planting trees as well as wheat. And this is when they attacked. I told them how my characters use magic to help an old man remove an old stump from his fields and plant a new tree to provide shade on the hottest days.”

“Your kind and the type of help you bring are not welcome here.”

“That’s what they said, but with more hitting.”

“You’re lucky it’s so early. I doubt you’d have survived a mob.”

“And yet, you have.”

He tilts his head to me. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Come now. I don’t know what they call it around here, but where I come from, you are a Dream Walker.”

“I won’t repeat what they call it here.”

“But you could be doing so much good with an ability such as yours.”

“Not here. What the Oligarchs lack in leadership, they make up for with fear-mongering. They’re very good at telling people who is to blame for their problems and suffering, and it’s never them. You’re a foreigner, Sunna, and a magic user. You, me—it doesn’t matter what good we do because they’ve been

taught to believe our powers will take their jobs, our ideals will corrupt their children and promote laziness.”

“Teaching children about kindness and acceptance and planting trees promotes laziness?”

“They don’t see—”

I start, but I can feel my face flush and the heat in my words. I pause—Sunna is kind enough to allow me a moment. “You’re in danger as long as you stay.”

“Why do you stay?”

I don’t have an answer to that.

Sunna takes a deep breath, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. “I move around a lot. I like to think I’ve lived a life of doing good. Maybe it’s time to set up an actual shop and become a real member of a community again.”

“Didn’t you hear me?”

He shrugs. He opens his mouth to say something but doesn’t. I feel I know what he was going to say and respond to the unspoken statement.

“This isn’t your fight.”

He sighs. “Some things are worth fighting for. Regardless.”

“Worth your life?”

“Maybe. But there is safety in numbers.”

I’m distracted by something dashing past the mouth of the alley. The figure doubles back, and I see that it is Kaun. He races up to me.

“Eihwaz, we have to go.” Kaun glances at Sunna and then back at me. “Now.” He stands impatiently for a

moment before walking swiftly away.

I sigh. “That’s my brother, Kaun.” I stand and look down at Sunna. “They smashed your stage, but the cart appeared unharmed.” I dig into my satchel. I have one gold coin, one silver, and five coppers. I place the gold and silver into his hand and chase after my brother.

He’s not far. I spot him as he steps into a narrow alley between the Sloppy Tavern and the Cooper. He waits for me about midway along the alley. He’s shifting from one foot to the other like he’s afraid to stand still. His face is a mixture of anger and uncertainty.

“You’re upset,” I say and watch him frown and clench his jaw—he hates when I state the obvious.

“Look at this.”

He shoves a small book into my hands. The leather is well-worn. The pages and ink have seen many years, though there are several fresh entries. I wasn’t looking at words. I flipped through the pages, noting the arcane symbols, magical runes, and incantations.

“Where did you get this?” I shut the book immediately when I recognize its contents.

“Look,” Kaun says, opening the book to one of the recent entries.

I look down at the arcane formula. Alchemical symbols. Arrows pointing to runes. A list of materials. I recall something Father told me once. A formula has a power all its own and will glow slightly upon the page when

completed. This one is glowing. I shut the book again. “This won’t go unnoticed. They’ll be looking for it.”

“You didn’t notice it, did you?” He forces the pages open to that formula again.

My eyes pass over the script. Before I can say anything, Kaun leans in.

“That’s one of Father’s formulas. I know it. I recognize it.”

I turn the book over in my hands, flipping through several pages before returning to the entry. This isn’t one of Father’s books. As worn as this volume is, none of Father’s books were this nice. The handwriting isn’t his or Mother’s. But I must admit, there is a familiarity about the symbols and letters strung together on the page.

“Kaun, it’s been nearly ten years,” I say. I can’t have him falling back into believing that Mother and Father are still alive. “Do you really believe you could tell the difference between something Father wrote and another’s scribbles?”

This time, he snaps the book shut. Turned slightly sideways, he stomps several steps away from me along the narrow alley.

“And besides, that formula was finished. I don’t think Father ever finished any of his research. His projects were always sputtering out. None of his formulas glowed.”

Kaun rushes at me and slaps the book back into my hands. Flipping the pages toward the back of the book, he says in a

harsh whisper, “That’s my point.” He jabs his finger at the formula. “This is Father’s. I know it. And I think you do as well. But *it is* finished.”

I stare at the page. I feel myself falling into his madness. “It could just mean that one of Father’s books found its way into knowledgeable hands.”

“Or...” he says.

I don’t want to answer that, so I ask again, “Where did you get this?”

“I was hiding atop the livery and stables near the western gate. I hoped to spot an early morning traveler coming or going from the city. Instead, I spot these two scribes coming into the city. They were pushing a cart. A tarp was over it, but I could tell the cart was heavily laden.”

“I don’t want to hear this.” I try to step away, but his hand stops me.

“You do. Listen. I’ll spare you the details, but there was a small accident, and the cart tumbled. All sorts of things fell out. Rocks. Some herbs and plants. A jug of water. Some freshly dug-up gems. The scribes scrambled to pick everything up. There were a few helpful citizens—and me—there to lend a hand. I snagged one of the gems. But when I was leaving, I saw a satchel belonging to one of the scribes, so I grabbed that, too. Wasn’t much in it. A couple quills. Ink. Some coins. A bit of rope. A small trowel and sickle. And this book. This page was marked.” He jabs at the page. “There was a list of things they’d been sent out to

collect.”

I don't think any of that proves this is Father's. I keep the thought to myself, but Kaun reads my face because he sighs.

“Maybe this is Father's, and maybe it isn't. I want to find out. And I want you to come with me.”

“A scribe?”

“Yes.”

“That means the palace.”

“Yes.” He gently closes the book and slips it into his bag.

“You're willing to die for this?”

“Some things are worth dying for.”

“Some things are worth living for.” I stare at his face. His face, now thin and dirty. He'll do this without me if he's forced to. “You listen to me. Got it? And when I say it's time to go, we go.”

He nods, making no attempt to hide his joy—and slight smugness.

We leave the alley, rush across the road, and dart through more alleys. We make our way across the city to the river. The Slidr is a wide and swiftly moving river. Across a wide stone bridge are the Keep, the Arena, and the Training Grounds. The palace is on the city side, along the banks of the river. It is a large walled section of the city, also known as Sanctum. The palace itself is really a series of large, opulent homes connected by plazas and gardens. We mingle with the traders and fisherfolk at the small port down river of Sanctum's walls.

“How do we get in?” Kaun asks.

I begin to regret this. “You dash about

getting into and out of places you shouldn't. Why are you asking me?”

“You've been in there.”

I hear the stress in his voice. He's irritated with me, as if I've messed up his plan. I pull Kaun off the road and over to a sloppily stacked pile of sacks. I begin to re-stack them.

“Look busy,” I say when a pair of soldiers enter the dock area. I glance over my shoulder. The soldiers seem uninterested in everything and are soon gone. “I was in there for only a short time, about two years ago. I loaded and unloaded some crates in their market area.”

“They have a market area?” I ask.

“It's small, in a plaza near the river. Only a couple of carefully chosen vendors.”

I nod. “So the Oligarchs never have to leave Sanctum.”

“That was my impression.”

“What else?”

I think for a moment. “There was a garden and a school nearby. And a library, I think. I remember someone telling the haulers to get the crates to the library.”

“Library,” Kaun says thoughtfully. He drops the sack he's holding and tugs at my arm. “That's where we need to go.”

“The library? Why there and not some other location?”

He pulls out the book, but I quickly make him put it away. He, in turn, makes me put down the sack on my shoulder

and pulls me away.

“We have a book, right? Books belong in libraries. Scribes do their work in libraries.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “I feel our plan lacks a great deal of planning.”

“This will work.” Kaun claps me on the back and walks away.

“We still don’t know how to get in there.”

He takes a few more steps.

“Kaun?” I call after him in a whisper, hoping not to draw any attention. I grumble as he ignores me and I’m forced to race after him. The sun is up, but it is still low in the sky, which casts a long shadow over the road up to the gatehouse of Sanctum. I can see a guard, half asleep, leaning against the wall at the end of the road. “What is your plan?”

“I’m going to walk up there, punch the guard in the nose, and sneak in during the confusion.” Kaun readies his knuckles by breathing warm air onto them.

“Wait-wait-wait.” I pull him behind one of the trees along the road. “That’s not going to work.”

“It will if you help.” Kaun taps my skillet.

“Wait.” I sigh and break eye contact with him. I glance around the tree at the guard. “There may be another way.” I remember what Sunna had called me. Without saying anything further, I begin sneaking from tree to tree, using the last of the shadows the best I can to get closer

to the guard. Nearer, but at a safe distance, I signal Kaun to stop and stay quiet. I close my eyes. For a long moment, nothing happens, and then I catch the scent of something sweet, like a fresh pastry, and the world drops away. Everything is dark, but that scent remains. I follow it and, gradually, the darkness begins to fade. I’m back outside on the road leading up to Sanctum, but I’m looking down into the city from the gates. The dirt, the trees, the walls... everything has a fuzzy texture, like it’s not entirely in focus. I try rubbing my eyes, but don’t think I’m the problem.

I look around and notice the guard, oddly completely in focus, only a few steps away. He’s heavily leaning against the wall and his eyes keep drooping closed. There’s a smile on his face, and I wonder if the sweet smell is because he’s having good thoughts about food or because good thoughts smell like sweets in this place. I don’t know, but it does occur to me that the world is out of focus because he’s not entirely asleep. I move toward him before the connection is broken. I don’t touch him, but slouch against the wall next to him. “Such a quiet and lazy day.”

The guard nods.

I’m not sure how I know this, but I get the impression that he’s at the end of his duty, and his replacement is running late. “I can’t wait to get out of this armor and under some warm blankets,” I whisper.

The guard nods.

I lick my lips. I can feel my heart begin to race. The world blinks, and I feel I'm losing the connection. "Oh, look. I'm already in bed." I've tried doing this with my dreams but have never been able to shift the setting. However, this time, the out-of-focus road slowly vanishes and becomes a barracks. Instead of standing beside the guard, I'm now looking down at him dozing in his bed. The room drops away, and I'm out of the guard's mind and standing with Kaun. We watch up the road as the guard slumps further and then slides down the wall. My head hurts. My hands are shaking. And there's sweat on my brow, but I'm very proud of that outcome.

Kaun shoves me out of the cover of the trees and we scamper toward the guard. "Did you do that?"

"Search him. See if he has the gate key," I say.

"How long have you been able to do that?" Kaun grumbles as he searches the guard. After a few seconds, he holds up a small palm-sized metallic box, which he unfolds into the shape of the lock on the gate. "Have you always been able to do that?" There's a hint of anger in his voice.

"Come on," I rush him through the narrow gap of the now slightly ajar gate. On the other side, we step into a large plaza with a maze of open air hallways and colonnades leading away from it. At the far end of this courtyard, we see a cluster of white-robed people directing an

ethereal hand as it pulls away a broken column and another set of white-ropes using a levitating disk as it pushes an intact column into place. We stand in awe for several dangerous seconds before I realize we are in the open. The river is somewhere to our right, and that's the direction I pull my brother in. We find an alcove with some benches overlooking a small garden. I can feel his eyes on the back of my head, so I step into the nook. "We can talk about this later."

"We'll talk about this now," he says firmly.

I sigh and step further back into the alcove. "Now? You want to have this conversation now?" My hushed voice is stern.

Kaun stands with his arms crossed.

"A little. Yes. Kind of." I stammer, trying to keep my voice down. "I've always had very real dreams. Over the last few years, I've been able to manipulate those dreams better. And," I clear my throat as my face flushes with a bit of embarrassment, "lately, I've been having dreams that I'm pretty sure aren't mine."

Kaun's eyes widen. "The baker's daughter?"

"That's one of them, yes."

Kaun shoves me. "You never said. You've never said any of this. Why?"

"I didn't feel we needed anything else to make us feel different."

"But it's okay for me to feel different?"

He shoves me again; this time, I lose my balance and fall against the side of the alcove. Just then, two people in white robes walk by, but thankfully they are engrossed in their own conversation and don't notice us. I wait until they are out of sight and then return Kaun's shove.

"I never said you were different," I whisper sternly.

"You just said we didn't need anything else to make us feel different."

I don't appreciate the mocking tone. "I—" Kaun clamps his hand over my mouth. His eyes are over my shoulder. I turn slowly and spot a purpled-robed man walking by the alcove.

"Follow him," he says and slinks out of the alcove.

I'm stopped by a finger being thrust into my face.

"We're not through with this," Kaun says.

I follow after Kaun and whisper as I catch up. "Why are we following this guy?"

"Purple robes. The scribe I stole the book from was wearing purple."

And then we stop because the scribe stops. He turns slowly toward us, and Kaun waves. The scribe cocks his head to the side, and it's a moment before he realizes that we don't belong here. He turns to run and Kaun charges forward to catch him, but before either has taken but a few steps, I loosen the leather strap and toss my skillet at the scribe. It strikes him full in the shoulder and knocks him

down—and then the skillet hits the ground with a clang. We sprint over to the moaning scribe. I grab my skillet as we drag him away.

"Here," Kaun says, pushing open a gate leading into a private garden. He pulls the scribe from my hands and throws him to the ground. "The more you cooperate, the better it will be for you."

I squat so I am eye-level with the scribe. He's young. Fit, but definitely younger than us. Hardly shaving, if I had to guess.

"What's your name?"

Nervously, the scribe's voice warbles as he says, "Gyfu."

"Gyfu, we're looking for the library."

His eyes widen when I say this. "We don't have a library. Maybe check in town." The scribe tries and fails to make this sound nonchalant, instantly knowing his lie is a failure.

"You know—"

I put a hand up, stopping Kaun from moving closer to Gyfu. "You have a library, and you will take us there. You be honest with us, and you just might live through this."

Gyfu nods a few seconds later, and I help him get to his feet. He leads us along several passageways and courtyards to the river. Along the way, in some of the more shadow cast sections, I notice glowing runes like torches that light up these areas. But Kaun appears too focused on the scribe to notice. Before I can decide whether to point the runes out,

we enter the plaza I'm familiar with. There are only two other people here, down closer to the water. No guards are within sight. In fact, there's hardly anyone within sight. It would seem Sanctum has a much later morning bell.

"Which way?" I nudge Gyfu.

He nods to a set of stone stairs and a building with tall towers. We reach the porch and stand before two large arched doors.

Kaun grabs Gyfu by the back of the neck. "In here?"

"Yes," Gyfu answers.

They're heavy, but the doors open without trouble. Inside is a hall with stairs right and left and a wide archway at the back. Kaun and I exchange uncertain glances. Kaun pulls his dagger and presses it into Gyfu's back. Gyfu stiffens with fear. Kaun takes the book from his satchel and flips to our Father's formula.

"If we get the sense you're leading us around in circles, you'll be the first to die." Kaun shoves the book in Gyfu's face as the scribe nods. "Where would we find this?" Gyfu's eyes drift to the archway at the back of the hall. "Go," Kaun gives the scribe a shove.

Through the archway, to a corridor lined with doors and up a spiral staircase. We come to another hallway, but this one has only four doors. Gyfu comes to a halt and points to the door at the far end.

"Thanks," Kaun says and then strikes the scribe on the back of the head with the pommel of his dagger.

Gyfu crumples to the floor. We leave the unconscious body and move to the far door. It's a large, solid door with thick iron bands and a slightly rusted handle. Kaun doesn't wait for permission. He turns the handle and pulls.

We're standing on a sizable balcony overlooking a forest of tables with tall wall-mounted bookcases around the perimeter of the chamber. Upon each table is a person under a blue haze of energy. At four of these tables where the purple-robed scholars stand, a thread of gold light connects the sleeping person to the outer energy shield. The scribes are reading and copying the words forming on the outside of the barrier. I also count two white-robed figures. The two white-robos are at the same table, their attention directed to the chiseled runes along the legs and edges of the table rather than what is on the table surface. The pair rub oil into the etched wood, strengthening that table's flickering blue haze.

Our arrival does not go unnoticed.

In the blink of an eye, Kaun dashes down the stairs into the room and grabs the nearest scribe. He puts a dagger to the elderly man's throat.

"No one move," Kaun's voice echoes in the chamber.

At a slower pace, I make my way down to the library's main floor and stop to inspect the waist-high marble counters where stacks of pages wait to be bound into books.

“What are you doing to these people?” Kaun seethes, pressing the dagger firmly against the scribe’s neck.

The old man stammers and sputters, trying in vain to pull Kaun’s hand away. “We are conducting research, you unwashed imbecile.”

I can already hear what my brother’s angry response to that will be. I hold up a hand to head off the possible murder of this older scribe.

“Hold, brother, and give me a moment.” I sift through the loose pages.

“What’s over there?” Kaun asks the old man. “What’s my brother looking at?”

“Our research. Now unhand me.” The scribe’s attempt to push off Kaun fails.

There are several stacks of parchment and scrolls. In its rawest form, the information is just a stream of consciousness. I see mentions of sunny days, talk of taverns, this one lists all the bones broken and at what age, but among this babble are ideas. Spells and herb combinations and ‘Alchemical formulas.’ I begin looking earnestly for a specific page, book, or scroll.

“There must be an index... ah!”

At the end of the counter, attached to the marble by a thin chain, is a well-thumbed scroll. I unroll it and see a list of categories. My eyes scan down the list until I see alchemy with a subheading for transmutation. I throw down the index and stomp over to the old scribe. I grab the scribe by the throat and rip him away

from my brother, slamming him to the floor. I’m pretty sure I hear bones crack. I ignore the cry of pain.

“You’re digging into their minds to steal their thoughts and knowledge, aren’t you?!”

“What do you care?!” the old man sputters. “These people don’t even belong in this city.”

My hand squeezes tighter around his throat, and he gasps for air. “Where’s the alchemy section?!”

He tries to speak but can’t. He points and mouths *fourteenth row*.

“Hold him.”

I push the scribe to Kaun when I skirt my brother to move further into the library. I pass row after row of tables, each with a body under a dome of blue energy. At the end of some of the rows, there are banner stands, each a different color with different markings. When I reach the fourteenth row, the banner is red with a triangle emblem. I race between the tables, searching—hoping—I find our parents.

And I do.

There they lay, seemingly asleep, like the rest, under the shimmer of a blue haze. They are in the same clothes I remember them wearing on that last day. They appear not to have aged a day. I reach for Father, but my hands cannot penetrate the shield. I smash my skillet into the barrier but cannot break it. I glance down and see the etched runes. *The figures in the white robes had been*

attending the table, not the bodies on it.
The thought had hardly formed in my head before my arm swung. I slam my skillet into the runes—the blue barrier shifts. I hit the runes again. And again. I hear the shouts of fear and the explosion of scampering feet from the other scribes, too afraid to move before; find their courage and break for the door. I swing my skillet again—the leg cracks. The shield ripples and fades away.

“Father,” I cradle his head.

He blinks, and his eyes open. “Eihwaz?” he says, confused.

“Lie still,” I try to find the words to explain, but there’s simply too much. I reluctantly leave his side and smash the runes on my Mother’s table. The bashing grabs my Father’s attention, and he manages to sit up. “Bjarkan,” he calls out, slides from his table, and comes to her side.

“Daeg,” she mutters.

I don’t need to tell my father to stay with her. I turn to the next table and smash those runes. Then another. And again. And then I stop at the sound of Kaun calling.

“We’re found out. I hear the approach of many boots.”

I glance at the door and then at the surrounding tables. I take in the whole of the library. “There are too many.”

The large library door swings open. A bald man in slippers but a fine red and black robe leads in six guards.

“Seize them all!” he shouts.

From where I stand, I hear more than I see, and my brother drops his dagger. Then there is a rush of warm air as a bright, fiery beast springs into being. The library, lit by softly glowing runes, is suddenly bathed in the heat of an explosion. But despite the fire burning around my brother, he remains unharmed. He stands at the center of it. He stands at the center of a giant bear of flames. I take a firm grip on the skillet’s handle and race toward the front of the library, but after only a few rows of tables, I can already see that my strength in this fight will not be necessary. The guards freeze in fear. They hardly move out of the way when fiery claws attack. The stone and mortar get destroyed and propelled into the air by the fiery claws. Cries and pain and terror rise, followed by the sound of boots retreating.

I reach the front, and the beast surrounding my brother flickers and fades away. I reach out and catch him when he wobbles on his feet.

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Neither did I,” he says.

I ease him to the floor, then move to inspect the damage. The door is gone. So, too, are large chunks of the wall and the balcony floor. The dazed figure in the red and black robe staggers to his feet, a cut on his forehead streaming blood down the side of his face. Before he can say anything, I punch him, sending him to the floor again.

“I know you,” I say. “Oligarch Isa,

isn't it? Speaker for the Assembly.”

“You will be hung for this—”

I press the edge of my skillet against his chest and lean into it. “You don't get to speak. You don't get to justify or explain yourself. You abducted these people. I don't know what else you've done to them, but you have certainly used them against their will. How many people would benefit from the runes that glow but don't burn?” I press a little harder against his chest. “Medical knowledge, levitation spells—so many ideas to make your life easier and healthier. I've seen the pages. I've run through these streets. I know.” He tries to speak. I allow it.

Isa coughs. “Knowledge is dangerous. It spoils the natural balance between those who toil and those who lead. In the wrong hands, it breeds laziness and—”

I lean in on my skillet again. “Knowledge isn't dangerous. Fear mixed with ignorance is dangerous. I'm not afraid of the wizard who can bring rain to a parched land. I'm afraid of the pitchfork-wielding peasant you've convinced to be afraid of that rain.” I stare him down and am happy when he looks away. “We're leaving,” I call out. “Quickly, before those guards find their courage.” I stand and wave over my family and the few others I managed to free. Isa tries to get up, but I press him down with my boot. “We'll be back for the rest.” I allow Kaun to lead the group into the hallway beyond and then take up

the rear.

“You will bring ruin!” Isa shouts after me.

“We will bring change,” I say, not bothering to look over my shoulder.

The End.

The Felling

By Brigham Magnusson

They say the world would end in fire—that it had before, and would once more.

Stars broke through the thick canopy of the monolithic tree rooted at the center of the world. The silver light illuminated pools of blood and bodies sprawled before the great tree. Cinnis knelt at their center, cradling the broken body of a nameless younger soldier in his arms.

Rips in Cinnis's robes exposed his wounds to the night air, but he felt eerily numb for this much carnage. He struggled to feel anything; this slaughter had to mean *something*. But Cinnis felt nothing. Even while holding this body, pierced through with arrows, Cinnis couldn't muster enough emotion to cry. Instead, he knelt there, staring down at the soldier's lifeless form.

It had all been so pointless. All this fighting. All of it for his sake and his gods-forsaken gift. His curse.

He'd never asked to be the Torch. He'd never asked to wield the fires at the heart

of the world. But he'd been chosen—raised from childhood to be some mythical savior of the world—The child of prophecy that would banish the final winter.

And what had he saved? All he'd accomplished was *this*. A field of blood, bodies, and broken dreams. Men who had fought against him to claim him as their own. To leverage his power, to conquer with it. So that when the end came, they could claim victory. No winter, just the armies of men.

But death had not discriminated here. Kings, counts, and peasants had been made equal in the eyes of the carrion birds, feasting in the night. No status or prestige had prevented the rain of arrows from piercing their hearts. No divine intervention had spared the fallen. All that remained was food for the crows.

Cinnis removed the younger man's helmet, revealing a face he'd never known. The soldier wore the tabard of his allies. He'd likely seen this man alive in their camps—joining in songs around the fire, sharing stories about their heroics, their dreams, their scars. Perhaps, in another life, he would have known this young man. Shared a drink and swapped stories. Cinnis could have been his mentor.

Maybe, in that other life, he would still be alive—not a dead, vacant body.

How many of these corpses had been this young? How many lives had been snuffed out, all for this godless battle?

Cinnis didn't know. No, the only thing in his mind, in that moment, was the body of this nameless young man. It felt heavy in his arms, like an impossible mountain imbued with the weight of all his guilt. Guilt for the deaths Cinnis had led them to, for all the blood his existence had spilled.

Anger sparked within him, his stomach churning. What was the point? Why should he carry out the will of the gods? They had the power to stop all of this. Instead, they watched him from the safety of their childish thrones.

He could touch the World Tree and let his power flow into it. Set it afire.

Such a simple task. But it felt so impossible now. He felt heavy with fatigue and grief.

A cinder grew in him, threatening to consume him from within. And a gentle chorus of voices crept into his ear, whispering hints of promise. The voices of the innumerable dead. They alone had refused to abandon him throughout his centuries of suffering.

He'd always repressed their voices—their calls for him to consume everything.

Why obey the gods, indeed? The voices of the dead needled at him. *They only bring suffering. This field, soaked in the blood of innocents, is their doing.*

The whispers grew louder in his mind. "End it all. End the cycle," the voices said.

"I don't know how," said Cinnis, still

cradling the lifeless body of the young man.

“Burn it down,” urged the dead hungrily. “You can do it. You can *avenge* us.”

The fire within him grew in intensity. Heat rose from Cinnis—all the anger and resentment he’d built up over the millennia. Could he destroy the World Tree? The anchor of the cosmos? Could *he* be the Dragon which gnawed at its roots until the Tree weakened and collapsed?

The dead seemed to think so.

How poetic it would be. The divine savior, appointed by the gods to protect the world, to banish the final winter, only to bring about the doom of all. The Torch must sacrifice itself to light the way for others.

But when no one remains, only a flame is left to burn.

Dawn rose behind him, and so did he. He got to his feet, gently placing the body on the ground. “Sleep, now,” said Cinnis, and he closed the young man’s eyes. “Rest with the dead.”

He looked around, surveying the carnage in the golden light of morning. Banners, flags, and weaponry littered the battlefield. So much pointless death. All of it avoidable. All because of the gods. This hadn’t been his fault, or the faults of men. If the gods had never given him this power, everyone here would still be alive.

His path became clear. Yes. He would end the cycle. Become the last Torch. He

would be the revenge against the gods, craved by the dead.

He stepped over bodies as he approached the Tree. Placing his hand on its thick bark, Cinnis could *feel* its magic pulsing, as though it were more than a tree, almost sentient.

One final life to end—and with it, the rest.

Cinnis stepped back, taking in the enormity of the task. Taking deep breaths, he let his mind drift into his inner fire. Tears streamed down his face as he raised his arms. Reaching within, Cinnis pulled that inferno outward, and it snaked up his arms into a weaving mane of fire, caressing his back and shoulders. Power surged from him—the power only he had. A gift meant to save the world.

The gods would wish they had never given it to him.

Cinnis breathed in and out, stoking the flames that engulfed his body.

He could feel the rest of the blaze pushing to come out, to find release, but he held it in, close to his chest. The pressure built; his skin began to tear as the power fought to escape, forming fissures down his limbs, cracking open like fractured stone. Light poured from him, and his skin glowed red-hot, like metal pulled from the forger’s flames.

The chorus of the dead cackled at the coming destruction. Phantasms of fallen soldiers rose from the ground, swarming him, taking him into their arms, whispering regrets into his ears.

Screaming, Cinnis brought his hands together, and the power erupted from him.

* * *

Those who survived that day spoke of the world cracking open when the World Tree fell. The earth groaned, buckling under its weight, and the sea rose up to swallow the land. Howling winds ravaged the world, and the elements ran rampant. Massive roots ripped upward from the ground as the remains of the tree uprooted.

Many say the world will end in fire: that it had before, and would once more. But they have forgotten that the world already ended in fire. It died when the Torch burned down the tree and broke the world.

All that remains are shattered pieces we can only ever hope to rebuild—one broken piece at a time.

The End.

A Thief of Baghdad

By Elliott Capon

By the beard of the Prophet, tis true, my friend, that were a large man to spread his fingers as wide as possible, and touch the tips of his thumbs together, his hands would then just about cover the body and legs of one of the spiders.

This, the beautiful city of Baghdad, at a time about a thousand years after the death of the Christians' Savior, was a truly wondrous place indeed. Baghdad could have been said to be the center of the universe, because the sun revolves around the Earth and the Earth revolves around Baghdad. Commerce flowed through the city like sand running down the side of a tall dune. Spices, jewels, clothing, slaves, animals, salt, fragrances, dyes, foodstuffs... All that was desirable and worthy passed through Baghdad on its way to the rest of the world. Ten times a hundred merchants had estates--palaces--in the city, and a hundred times that number had small shops or stalls where they sold rugs and roast lamb and pistachios and poisons and daggers and seemingly ten times ten thousand other items.

But it was the spiders who were the backbone, the basis, of Baghdad's economy.

Truly, not the spiders themselves, but their webs.

Dim memories and incomplete records merely relate that the spiders were a gift to some unnamed and unremembered Caliph about four hundred years ago from somewhere to the south, from the lands of Nubia, those unexplored, impenetrable lands about which men still say, with a shrug, that if there are indeed monsters living there, then Allah bless them and keep them... *there*. Now of course the spiders were the property of

His Most Serene Magnificence, the Caliph Selim ibn Hassan, and were Allah to truly listen to the pleas of men, He would have no time to do anything at all during the day and night but to repeatedly bless these spiders.

The spiders were mostly dark brown and green, with occasional mottlings of black. Scholars generally agreed that they must have originally been tree spiders, camouflaged to hide amidst the vegetation of their original jungle habitat. Natural philosophers would have loved to have dissected them, but they were needed for business... For their webs... Ah, their webs!

The spiders spun, and spun and spun and spun. Because of their size, and because of some peculiarity of their biology (which no one was permitted to study; When one of them died a natural death, dissection was not permitted: A dead spider was buried with the honors accorded a member of the royal family) their webs were extraordinary. The silk at the middle of each web was of a fineness and a softness to make the best Cathay silk seem like the grittiest burlap. This was used, of course, to make clothing and draperies. The web at the anchor, where the spiders attached it to the walls of their enclosure, was of such thickness and toughness that not weavers but blacksmiths were utilized to cut and work the material. These lines, stronger than any iron or brass known and yet more flexible than hemp, were used to make

sailcloth, ships' lines, fishing nets, tent ropes, even tethers for elephants and camels. The web strands from the middle were used for as many tasks as the fertile minds of men could devise.

Traders came from all over the world to Baghdad to buy or trade for this webstuff. From Calcutta and Peking and Edo came traders bearing obscure spices and beautifully crafted robes and statuary; From Crete and Mykonos came teachers bartering a year of their life in service to a noble family for ten measures of the websilk; From southern España they brought wines and olives; From the frozen North they traded weapons and the furs of bizarre animals; From the Afric coast came slaves and wild cats and other exotic animals.

Caliph Selim owned the spiders. They were kept in what was called an enclosure, essentially a giant square brick pit, twenty feet deep and a hundred feet on each side, topped with a dome constructed of petrified wood and--predominantly, albeit ironically enough--spider web. There were tall walls around the pit, built of rare, imported Asiatic bamboo.

Each day the spiders spun their webs across the enclosure, from side to side or "ceiling" to floor. Each evening they were fed--lamb, goat, oryx, camel (for when Allah reveals the spider of any species that is a vegetarian, blessed be us for it will truly be the end of the world!)--and then they slept... or were at

least in a state of sated torpidity. It was then that the bravest men in Baghdad--and, tis true, the best-paid--would stealthily enter the enclosure and remove the days' production of web. How this was done safely was quite the state secret, honed over many years of trial and error, and widow-pensions.

This new-cut web went right into the Caliph's storehouse, where it was graded, cut and weighed. The next day--each and every day--the most important merchants of Baghdad would come in and buy the web, or at least portions thereof, from the Caliph's treasurer, and then do with it as they would. The price that the Caliph got for the web was so great that taxes in Baghdad were negligible, almost nil. The merchants made so much money by selling processed web to the rest of the world, that they were able to pay the Caliph enormous sums, and he--Selim--being a most prudent and wise man, shunning ostentation--was able to run the Caliphate on little more than what the merchants' fees brought into the public treasury.

My friend... Allah, in His infinite wisdom, saw fit to create the dung beetle, which is in the habit of actually stealing the balls of that product so carefully crafted by one of his peers; This was a propensity that He instilled, in magnified form, in His greatest creation, Man. For surely there were thieves in Baghdad.

To say that these webs were priceless

was not to exaggerate too far. Ten pounds of anchor-web, sold to the right people, could let a man live comfortably for the rest of his life. And so there were many who attempted, under cover of darkness, to sneak into the enclosure and help themselves to a portion of the spiders' product. There were no guards at the spider enclosure, not by day nor by night. Caliph Selim was a fiscally conservative man, not willing to have people on the payroll who were not needed, merely for the sake of show. The spiders were their own guards.

Thieves are rarely philosophers. They think not about the consequences of their crime to the victim, but only of their own needs. They do not think in the abstract, only in the definite: They think of defeating specific locks, not of how the lock was invented. They knew that the spider webs were valuable: They sought to possess them. But they never thought: *Why do the spiders spin these webs in the first place?* These spiders were pampered and well fed; They had no need to hunt or trap their own food. But nonetheless, despite the excellent catering they received, they spun webs--they spun traps--*because that is what spiders do.* Because once the web is spun, it is spun for a reason--to catch food. And food, when caught, is by definition--by being "food"--eaten. Eight legs with uncountable years of hunting instinct behind it is faster and more efficient than two legs controlled by a panic that wants

to send them in three different directions. So common was it to find newly-picked human bones at the bottom of the enclosure in the morning, that note was duly and calmly made in the ledger books, and nothing more.

Caliph Selim, though not a cruel man, would attempt to dissuade such activity by publicly throwing a truly heinous criminal--a child-killer, say--into the enclosure once or twice a year, amid a great deal of publicity. The citizens of Baghdad were not compelled to watch, but those that did were horrified enough to never want to try and steal any webbing.

There was a man, though, in Baghdad, named Ali, who *did* want to get his hands on some of that magnificent web. He was not named Ali ibn *someone*, because his father could have been any one of a hundred merchants, caravan workers, soldiers, or shipbuilders. The last he had seen of his mother she was riding off in the company of a Moroccan prince who was delighted that this young virgin had fallen for his charms. Ali had been eight at the time.

Baghdad was a very large city, a virtual maze of alleys, tents; Structures that were there one day and gone the next. A rat, a lizard, a beetle, a quick-witted child could live there for years, eating and sleeping and thriving without a scrap of possession to call his own. As Ali grew older, he changed his habits, if not his morals. Ali was as

light-fingered as he was brazen, as smart as he was bold, as clever as he was conscience-free. While he still did a little pay-you-never shopping, he mostly made his way by trickery and conniving. Baghdad, as I said, was a very, very large city, with a constantly-shifting population and layout. Ali would grow a beard, steal some upper-class clothing, and “buy” goods from a visiting merchant on consignment, or with a false promissory note. He would then take the goods, sell them to someone for coin or gold, shave his beard, put on a workingman’s clothing, and live comfortably for a few weeks. He would repeat the process as often as necessary, sometimes masquerading as a prince, sometimes as one of those barbarous Latin speakers from the west, sometimes as a doctor, sometimes as a wizard. A thousand years later, Ali and his ilk would be called “con artist” or “flim-flam man,” but the Arabic word for “thief” fitted him truly enough in his own time.

Unfortunately, Ali was growing old. He was twenty-five--to all intents and purposes, middle-aged. He realized he couldn’t keep up this life of constant artifice forever, that one day he would wear the same disguise and the same persona in presenting himself to a former, forgotten, victim, who would then have his head on a silver platter. Literally. At twenty-five, it was time to settle down, to go into a legitimate business, to buy a house and some wives and live in relative

calmness.

Doubly unfortunately, Ali owned very little. What he got, he spent. Over the past several years, he had eaten very well and lodged lavishly (if temporarily) and had known the company of many women (also, praise Allah! temporarily). While he wasn't exactly *corpulent*, the years had been good to Ali, and he was in no condition to sneak in through a window and make off with a chest of jewels, as he might have had in the weeks after his mother left. Nor could he, in one of his little "dramas," as he liked to call them, earn enough to retire on; No, he needed one more big "drama," one more bold (yes, say it) robbery and then he could retire to a life of respectability.

Where else in Baghdad--or indeed, the world--was there such an opportunity but in the enclosure of the giant spiders? What other commodity was worth so many tons of gold, except for tons of gold?

Ali had seen, on several occasions, the devouring of criminals in the spider pit. As a child, he had laughed; As an adult, he had shuddered. There was no way that this round belly of his was going to get into that enclosure, cut a hundredweight of web and escape. Nor could he hire anyone, even among his acquaintances, to do the work for him: Anyone crazy enough to try and steal webbing was going to do it all for himself, not on the behest of another.

But yet, that web was like a crown of

precious jewels sitting on an island surrounded by quicksand: Inviting, glimmering, shining, worthy of the literal king's ransom, the answer to any man's prayers... But *just* out of reach.

Ali thought long and hard about his dilemma, and reached, after much reflection, the only possible solution: Getting the web was impossible.

Therefore, he had to somehow gain possession of the *spiders*.

Again, Ali spent a lot of time in rumination. Any plan to get the spiders would need accomplices; He certainly couldn't do it by himself. That part, at least, was easily done. While Ali had himself never so much as unsheathed his dagger in a show of bravado, many of the people he sold... *acquired*... items to had associates and business partners who would as soon cut a throat as a purse. When the time came, it would be but a matter of a few inquiries and the exchange of a few pieces of gold to get him the men needed to storm the palace and hold the Caliph for ransom, if that's what he wanted. So that was a consideration, put aside, for later.

There were, in his experience, three basic ways to take possession of something that was not, at the moment, legally *his*. The foremost and simplest thing to do was merely to go one night, with his hypothetical accomplices, and merely steal the spiders. He rejected this out of hand. Not even the bravest cutthroat or mercenary soldier would go

along with a plan to herd however many overly large, carnivorous spiders into the back of a cart. A procession of carts or other vehicles carrying these spiders through the streets of Baghdad would surely be noted, even in the middle of the night, even assuming that no one was aroused in the first place by the tumult of untrained spider-handlers screaming as they were devoured by the very creatures they were endeavoring to abscond with! No; It took no thought whatsoever for Ali to reject the premise of merely stealing the spiders.

There were two other methods for getting hold of something he wanted, both of which he had used successfully in his career. One was mere sleight of hand, substituting a chunk of colored glass for the jewel he desired, or a cheap clay statue for the luxurious ivory figure he wanted. This took a bit of study, as he had to duplicate the original well enough to fool the owner until such time as he had left the premises and shed his current disguise. Obviously, this method too was untenable in the present circumstances. Besides being unable to substitute duplicate spiders for the real ones (if he *had* similar spiders, why would he need the Caliph's?) there was still the question of making off with the beasts--which could *not* be done without a lot of people knowing about it.

The third tool in his bag of tricks was one of which he was most proud. Several times in his career as an acquirer of

items, he had actually tricked the owner into *giving* him the item or items in question. Ali fondly remembered one 'drama,' wherein he found out that a certain merchant had received a shipment of cinnamon from far-off Indus. His being the only caravan to evade the ubiquitous bandits and reach Baghdad with the stuff for more than six months, the value of the spice was enormous. Posing as another wealthy merchant--an Egyptian, if Ali remembered correctly--Ali went to the merchant's warehouse to examine the three hundreds weight of the aromatic spice. He gave the performance of his life as he wrinkled his nose and cursed the beard of the merchant's grandfather for his daring to offer such inferior, spoiled, rotten goods. The merchant, of course, saw nothing wrong with the cinnamon and was deeply offended and wounded that the Egyptian (who had been presented to him as one of the Continent's leading spice dealers) would find his goods so unpalatable. The screaming and cursing went on from both ends for a long time, with Ali's superior histrionics putting doubt in the merchant's mind. "If you don't believe me, ask someone else!" Ali finally stormed, and dragged the merchant out into the street, where he grabbed at the first well-dressed passerby and begged him to come in. As the passerby went into the warehouse, he made a face and said, "What died in here? Or are you fermenting camel dung?" In the face of

this evidence, the merchant--begging Ali not to spread the word of his trying to sell bad spices, else he be ruined--ordered his slaves to take the offending product to the communal dump and may the Prophet damn it to hell!

Later that night, Ali and the well-dressed passerby went by the dump and retrieved three hundredweight of perfectly good cinnamon. Good Roman gold was exchanged, the passerby bid Ali a long and happy life, and they parted ways. Ali found a *real* Egyptian spice merchant and was able to live for months on his profit from the sale of that delicious cinnamon.

He had worked similar schemes before and after that, but that had been his best. He sighed as he came to the conclusion that there was no way, after four hundred years of productivity, the Caliph and his advisors would suddenly think that the spiders were no good and be willing to find someone to take them off their hands.

Ali sipped tea at a favored eating establishment and pondered. There was no way under the benevolent gaze of Allah that he could abscond with the spiders. However. However. However...

He felt a thought like an itch at the back of his head. He sat perfectly still, lest he twitch and shake the thought off like a dog scratches away a flea. Something was growing at the back of his mind, where lay hidden his talents and abilities, rushing forward when the

need arose.

He sat perfectly still, waiting for the thought... Waiting... Waiting.

EGGS.

Spider eggs.

He needn't make impossible efforts to capture and transport the full-grown spiders. All he need do was acquire a sac of their eggs. And then he could essentially go into business for himself.

The destination was in sight; The end of the journey was clear. All that remained was to pave the road.

And *that* was Ali's greatest talent.

A few weeks later, one of the Caliph's many servants approached him during the Public Session and told him that there was an infidel come to beg a favor.

"What could an infidel possibly want from me?" the Caliph asked.

"He claims to be a scholar," the servant said.

The Caliph, as do so many in the Arab world, respected and admired scholars whether infidel, barbarian, or believer, so he bade the servant show this man in. In moments, there appeared before the Caliph a bizarre figure, swathed in furs, pasty of face, bereft of beard, wearing under those hot, smelly animal skins not a cool robe but those ludicrous tights favored by the Europates. The man bowed to the Caliph, arms swinging wide to endorse the entire court, and said, "Hispestus ramus thalmus corobundinum questo faccio."

"I can't understand a word this

creature is saying!” the Caliph spluttered.

“Ah, forgive me, most honored ruler,” Ali said in wretched Arabic. For indeed, it was Ali, in one of his disguises; While the Honored Caliph and his court may have been fooled, I know, friend, that *you* knew all along that this was our good thief!

“Forgive me, a thousand pardons,” Ali continued, deliberately butchering his native language. “I meant to thank you for granting me your time.”

“What is your name, stranger, and your business?” Caliph Selim asked.

“My name, sire, is--” carefully rehearsed, so as not to inadvertently reveal his true name!--”Bono Fortunata, of Grenada.” He could have said “Bowl of Feces,” for all anyone at the court understood Latin--after all, no one studies the barking of dogs or the bleating of sheep, do they?

“I am a Professor of Natural History at the University of Blabborundum,” Ali continued. “I have studied your language--badly, I fear--”

The Caliph raised a deprecating hand. “Well enough that I can appreciate that you are making the effort.” A kind man, he always looked for the best in people. Ali bowed at the compliment.

“You are most gracious, my good lord,” he said to the floor. “If I may, lord, I have studied your language with the express hope of being able to come to the beautiful city of Baghdad to study your amazing spiders. Their webs are truly the

talk of the world. I beg your leave to be able to observe them.”

The Caliph uttered a short laugh, dutifully echoed by his courtiers. “My friend,” he said, “You are welcome, but I have to warn you that they object to having their reflexes or their pulses checked.”

This got a legitimate, if brief, laugh from those assembled. Ali almost cracked a smile too, then remembered that his command of Arabic was not that good. He thought for a few seconds, and then got what the Caliph had said. He smiled and bowed. “Yes, my lord, I know their reputation. If, however, you would permit me just to watch, to, eh, oh, *sulumbundum*, what’s the word? ah, to remain by their, eh, wherever you keep them, by day and night, for a few weeks, that I might watch them in their activities, I would like to write a book in praise and in wonder--”

Again Caliph Selim raised a hand. “Granted, granted, my friend! You may cease destroying my native language! You are welcome to watch my spiders at work--from outside the enclosure. I shall pass word to the attendants that you are permitted to be by the enclosure at any time of the day or night, and that you may watch the feeding and web harvesting and any other activities. Have you a place to live?”

Ali had a sudden stab of fear: What if the Caliph, who was known for his generosity, would invite the visiting

scholar to live at the palace? He couldn't maintain this charade, close up, for more than a few moments! But Ali did not live to middle age and earn his admirable girth by being slow-witted. "Yes, my lord," he responded. "I am staying with one of my colleagues, the estimable teacher--" Tiny pause! Did anybody realize it?--"Konstantinos Dimopolous, late of Athens, now residing in your beautiful city."

The Caliph frowned. "I'm afraid I don't know a scholar of that name," he said.

"Well, then, lord, perhaps he is only estimable to us Latin-speakers," Ali said, earning, as he hoped, a quick chuckle from all present and defusing further inquiry by instantly denigrating anyone who was not an Arab. Smiling, the Caliph waved a hand and bid Ali a good day. Bowing profusely, Ali backed out of the room and made his escape.

He was rarely as thankful for anything in his life as he was to get home and get those thrice-be-damned furs off his back!

Now came the part of his plan that was least-formed in his mind. He had to observe the spiders in their daily--and nightly--activities. Then... what? He did not know. That all depended on what he saw. How long did he have to observe? He did not know. He would have to study the spiders until such time as he saw whatever it was that he had to see. And *then* formulate a plan. "*Ahimé!*" he sighed, a word he'd picked up from a

Sicilian smuggler, and that tickled his palate. But, as 'twas truly said, Allah helps those who help themselves. The following day he got to work.

The Caliph's palace was located in one corner of an enormous walled compound. The main gate, which led to the palace itself, was so large that fifty men could walk abreast through it, and it remained open all day and all night. A few guards stood by it, but they were ceremonious, for Baghdad was at peace and the Caliph was a well-liked ruler: All were welcome, beggar and scholar and merchant alike. Polite servants--not armed guards--steered the mendicants this way (around the side), dignitaries *that* way (under the shaded canopies) and others as their station and business dictated.

Were one to walk past the palace itself and wander through the grounds, one would find the stables, the menagerie of exotic and not-so-exotic animals, barracks for the ceremonial guardsmen, tremendous storehouses for the trade goods belonging to the Caliphate, an actual flower garden, tended by (by all estimates) the twelfth generation of one particular family, no member of which had ever done anything but tend to that particular garden, and other sundry buildings and set-asides necessary to the running and enjoyment of the most important city on God's earth.

At the exact center of the grounds, equidistant from the four corners of the

tall walls that surrounded the compound was the previously-described pit that contained the spiders.

It was in here that they lived and did their work. Several attendants--remember, my friend, no

guards--lived in a small barrack near the enclosure and worked with--shall I say *for*--the spiders, collecting the web and distributing food and removing bones and whatever waste the spiders themselves left behind. These attendants were all young men, for they started working in the enclosure at about the age of twelve, and should they serve ten years and live to tell about it (about half did), they were retired with a generous pension. White-haired, perhaps nervous, starting at every shadow or scrape, but able to retire in economic comfort nonetheless.

It was to the enclosure that Ali made his way every day and most nights. The attendants soon got used to his ubiquitous form in its garish costume, standing and watching. There were always a few curious who received permission to watch for a while, but none had ever before been so ever-present. As young men are never too shy to brag, they were more than pleased to answer his never-ending questions.

There were doors set into the bamboo wall, allowing the men access to the inside of the enclosure. Ali took note that no man ever entered one of these doors without being sure that the spiders were

being distracted on the other side--usually by the deposit of a goat or sheep carcass for them to feed on. And that no man actually went onto the *floor* of the pit (no man that ever came out other than bones, that is): All retrieval of detritus was done by ingenious and extremely long poles made of this same bamboo, to the ends of some of which had been attached the sharpest of blades, to others, hooks; To yet others, grabbing claws moved by taut strands of web on small pulley or lever systems. It was painstaking and nerve-racking work, trying to hook a human skull with a twenty-foot long, bending pole with a hook on the end, but the men were extraordinarily judicious in their caution and there were never less than three watching from the top of the wall while one of their fellows was working on the edge of the pit. At night, the little doors were locked tight and the men retired to whatever business they had to attend: There was no need to stand guard.

By his questioning, Ali determined that of the twelve spiders currently in residence, six were male and six female; That twelve was considered a good number, manageable in terms of feeding and containment, producing enough web to keep the Caliphate in humus and falafel, preventing the stresses of overcrowding and cannibalism. The spiders generally reproduced once a year. Each spider had a name, more for bookkeeping purposes than affection, and

as each egg sac was produced the overseer of the pit (another hereditary position) would consult his records and determine that, say, Fatima was eight years old and probably at the end of her web-spinning career. Therefore, when the eggs released their new batch of spiders, Fatima was reverently killed by men with twenty-foot-long knives and one newly-hatched female allowed to take her place. The rest of the progeny would be killed when they were still small, so as not to overburden their small home.

And may it please you sir, the funny Latin scholar asked one day, when is next the time the spiders are expecting their eggs to produce?

The overseer didn't have to check any records. "Within a fortnight, four weeks at the most, my learned friend," he replied.

Many, many people who started out at the age of eight in Ali's predicament had long since starved to death on the street or died in prison or wore the leg-chains of the slave. But Ali had a superior intellect and imagination. He called upon it now.

A friend of an acquaintance of an occasional partner of Ali's was named Rashid the Lion. He was called so not so much for his fierce demeanor, but for the way he wore his hair, surrounding his head like a mane. In Baghdad's subculture of law-avoidance, everyone knew or at least knew *of* everyone else, and so Ali and Rashid knew each other

by sight, by name, and by reputation, even if they had never dined together. Rashid made his living by stealing and distributing big things.

Not the palmed jewel or the contents of a slit purse for Rashid! He had a compound to rival the Caliph's about ten miles from Baghdad proper, in the rocky desert where no one would wander about for mere sightseeing. There, Rashid had elephants and camels, man-sized urns of salt and spices, cloth not by the yard but by the ton, and, to his everlasting frustration, only mere yards of fishing-net-thick giant spider web. If he had goods on his property that, at fair and open market value, would sell for five million dinars, oh, believe me, my friend, he had acquired them for a cost of only ten thousand. An embezzler, a thief showing up with an entire misdirected caravan cannot dicker and threaten to take his business elsewhere. People came to Rashid because they knew he would pay well-minted gold and then forget he'd ever met you. And what merchant, finding cinnamon at twenty dinars to the pound in the heart of the city, would not go to Rashid and buy the same weight at ten dinars?

And so Ali contacted his occasional partner who contacted his acquaintance who talked to his friend who spoke to Rashid, and one evening Ali and Rashid met over cups of spiced coffee in a Baghdad inn that catered to the less than respectable members of society. Rashid

was accompanied by a huge Nubian who remained silent; Ali was reveling in being able to wear “real” clothes instead of his ludicrous Christian disguise.

There were niceties and politenesses and all manner of small talk and chat between the two men as they sipped their drinks and nibbled on pistachio and almond pasties. They were gentlemen, businessmen, and as such did not rush into the boring details of commerce.

After some time, Ali said, “My most honored friend Rashid, what would you do with an unlimited supply of web?” He did not have to say anything more than ‘web.’ Anyone in the world with half a brain knew what was meant by ‘web.’

Rashid uttered a short barking laugh, coughing pastry crumbs onto his robe. “Unlimited web, friend Ali?” he repeated. “My son, I would buy the Caliph and use him for the sole purpose of wiping me clean after I have relieved myself!”

Both men shared a laugh. “No, Rashid,” Ali continued when they had calmed down. “Seriously. If, say, I could deliver to you, to your magnificent zoo out there in the desert, some spiders, what would it be worth to you?”

““Spiders’?” Rashid repeated, as if he had never heard the word before. “You mean, *the* spiders?”

Ali nodded. “Perhaps not the named ones that are now making the Caliph rich, but their progeny.”

Rashid thought long and hard. While

Ali was a master at beguiling and fooling one person at a time, Rashid’s talents ran to big, major undertakings. “I’d need a pit, of course, and men to feed them and gather the web... Hmm... I know of several men who have retired from the spider-service who find themselves needing more than their pensions provide... And selling the stuff... Let me see, if I set up a trading post along the Al-Kassar road, and one on the Himalaya-Ankara road, I could actually intercept business before it reaches Baghdad...” Even though Rashid spoke aloud, he only said a fraction of what was going on in his mind. He was, I cannot state it too often, a genius at undertaking major projects. Ali sat patiently while Rashid pondered, sometimes aloud, sometimes silently. In about ten minutes, Rashid had, in his head, created a massive business empire based on undercutting the Caliphate in the selling of giant spider web.

He suddenly reached out and grasped Ali by the upper arm. “Tis done, my friend,” he said. “When can you make delivery?”

“Doubtless within four to six weeks,” Ali answered.

“Good! That will give me time to make the arrangements. And our *own* arrangement, my friend,” he continued. “Will you take a partnership, or gold?”

“Gold,” Ali said without hesitation. He did not want a partnership--this entire project was about retirement, after all.

“Or silver. In any event, coin: Roman, Greek, Egyptian. “

Rashid nodded. “It can be done. And a figure? I was thinking two million dinars’ worth.”

Ali hid his surprise. That was precisely the figure he had fixed in his mind, and had been prepared for a long haggling session. “Agreed, my friend,” he said.

They toasted each other’s long lives and parted, each to see to his own end of the endeavor.

The attendants at the spider enclosure were mildly amused to see the change that had come over their Latin-speaking scholar. Whereas before he had been curious and a never-ending fount of questions, he now seemed impatient: Sighing, pacing up and down, staring at the spiders as if willing them to do something--tricks, perhaps? Sit up? Retrieve a ball? For three weeks the scholar walked around and around the bamboo wall, sometimes atop the parapet that let the attendants look down into the pit, sometimes pushing past the men as they opened the doors to go about their business. He’d stretch his neck to the breaking point trying to see into each corner of the enclosure, and then sigh, as if disappointed. A few of the attendants passed semi-witty remarks between themselves and toward him, but eventually they came to ignore this new facet of their ubiquitous guest’s behavior.

Three weeks and three days after Ali’s conference with Rashid, he accompanied

the attendants on their morning visit to the pit in order to remove the carcasses of last night’s dinner--two ewes and a massive he-goat who had put up quite a fight. Despite his years of self-training and experience, Ali could not resist drawing in a sharp intake of breath.

In corner Aleph (the pit was marked by an imaginary grid, known to the attendants, in order to facilitate the removal of carcasses and the harvesting of web), hanging from some relatively thin strands of web, was a sac containing perhaps fifty tan-colored spheres, each perhaps the size of a co-co nut. There was Ali’s treasure. There was Ali’s future. There was Ali’s life of luxury and relaxation.

The impatience seemed to gush out of him like a spring flood. He felt himself coiled, panther-like, ready to spring into action. Tonight.

But first...

That afternoon Ali went to a less-desirable section of Baghdad and paid some coins to a man he knew as “No Names.” He had hired this man several times, but the first time he had done so the man had said, “Ah ah! No names!” He told No Names to meet him by the enclosure with a horse-drawn cart and several yards of cheap cloth.

He then went to an even *less*-desirable part of the city. Naked, filthy children frolicked in mud and animal droppings, eating scraps stolen from the communal refuse dump. This was the street in which

Ali himself had once lived, had thrived, and from which had eventually escaped. It felt *fitting* to be back here, on the eve of his greatest act of defiance and thievery against the very city that had let him become a success by forcing him to break its laws.

He surveyed the situation and called a boy of about ten over to him. The urchin had long ragged hair and wore nothing but a dirty breechclout. Ali showed him a copper coin and asked if he wanted it. The boy retrieved his jaw from the ground and said, "Yes, my lord. What do you want me to do?"

Ali tossed the coin--which was probably more money than the boy's family (if he indeed had one) saw in a month--which vanished out of the air as if by magic. "Do you know where the spider enclosure is?" he asked.

The boy thought twice about spluttering his derision to such a stupid question. "Of course," he said.

"Meet me there at the midnight hour," Ali told him, "And there's four more of these coins for you."

Ah, my friend! If Adam, the first man, could be tempted by something as mere as a piece of fruit, can you imagine this lad who had never owned a shirt in his life turning down the offer of real coin? He would have gone there that very minute had Ali not grabbed him and repeated, "The midnight hour."

It was nothing for No Names to drive the cart into the Caliph's compound

before sunset and then just hide himself somewhere. Likewise the child. Ali entered the massive gates shortly after sundown, as was his wont, and, too, lost himself amid the imported trees and statuary. There he doffed once and for all his ludicrous Latin furs and changed into a simple black caftan.

At midnight, everything was very quiet. Ali knew full well that the attendants were all abed by the eleventh hour, and the spider enclosure was far enough away from everything else so that there would be no idle passersby. He approached: Ah, he was pleased! There was No Names, sitting in the cart. Over there, in sight but far enough away to flee if necessary, was the street urchin. Ali gave No Names some more coins and bid him vanish. He opened one of the man-sized doors and peered into the pit. The spiders were quiet, unmoving; They too, it seemed, rested between the midnight hour and dawn... unless disturbed.

Ali quietly called the boy over to him and walked him around the enclosure, to the door at the Gamma corner, diagonally opposite Aleph. He tried to keep the excitement and tension off his face and out of his voice. He had never killed anyone before. He had associated with murderers, had witnessed second-hand the activities of murderers, had benefited from the actions of killers, but he himself had never joined that brotherhood. *Alas*, he thought, offering up a silent prayer to

God, *I would that there were some other way, but there isn't.*

He opened the Gamma door and said, "Look inside, boy. I dropped a very valuable jeweled ring in there. I need you to retrieve it for me."

The boy pulled back a little, torn between four copper coins and an act of insanity. "Have you fleas in your head?" he asked, reverting to the slang of the mud streets.

"Not at all, boy," Ali hissed. "I leaned in to look at the spiders and it fell from my hand. It is directly below, immediately beneath us. A quick jump down, a jump up, I grab your hand, you are in and out in five seconds. I swear it by the hem of my dear mother's robe, which I kiss in her memory. The beasts sleep; It would take them almost two minutes to reach you. I must have that ring back."

Four coins. An equivalent temptation would be offering the Caliph himself the entire world and another just like it. "Very well," whispered the boy. "Where is it?"

"You must lean over, far, like this to see it," Ali said, pretending to stretch out. "It is lying in the shadow of that rock, there..."

"That one...?" the boy asked, leaning far out over the edge.

Ali pushed him, and he tumbled in. He slammed the door shut and ran as fast as he could around to the opposite corner.

It did indeed take the spiders two

minutes to awaken and locate the boy. Even were the pit empty, it still would have taken the unfortunate lad at least ten minutes to climb the slippery, sloped walls. But two minutes, and the subsequent horrible moments that followed, were all Ali needed to open the Aleph door, grab the poles he had secreted there earlier, slice through the web with the knife and then grab the hook-pole to scoop up the web-net carrying the fifty or so precious eggs. He put the eggs in the cart, threw the cloth over it, and calmly drove away.

The attendants, in their nearby barrack, heard the screams, muttered about a clean-up on the morrow, rolled over and went back to sleep.

A wave at the lone man on ceremonial guard duty at the front gate was the total price paid by Ali to leave the Caliph's compound. People came and went at all hours, and besides, he wasn't a *guard*, he was a *decoration*.

Ali took the long ride to Rashid's property at a slow pace, thinking of the money that would soon be his, stopping at a wayside inn for a meal and attention to the horse. He arrived at midmorning. Rashid himself, accompanied by the silent Nubian, met him at the front gate (where *real* guards stood vigilant), hugged him, called him brother, and had the Nubian drive the cart to the enclosure he had had made for the new spiders. It looked something like the Caliph's, except that the roof was of timbers:

Expensive, yes! but not so expensive as the miles of stout web that covered the roof of the Caliph's little zoo. There'd be time to replace the roof with web by and by--plowing profits back into the business, as it were.

Ali stood admiring Rashid's handiwork as the Nubian lifted the sac of eggs and carefully deposited it in the pit. "Friend Rashid," Ali said, "There's just a few things I have to tell you. First of all--"

He never finished his sentence. Rashid had passed a curved dagger of Turkish origin across his erstwhile partner's throat, severing his windpipe and jugular in the same motion. Ali fell dead without further ado.

"Put him in the pit," Rashid ordered the Nubian. "Let him be their first meal."

Oh, what a pity, my friend, that Rashid did not let Ali speak his piece! For what our thief was going to say was, "First of all, never, *ever* let there be more than twelve spiders in the pit at one time." He would have gone on for hours about what he had learned as to their care, feeding, and harvesting, but that first sentence, at least, was of paramount importance.

For, you see, one hundred and four spiders came forth from the egg sac, much to Rashid's incredible, unlimited delight. He had the butcher shops of all of Arabia working overtime providing him with ewe and ram and goat meat. And the spiders spun for him, oh! Indeed they did! Soon enough they were eating

camel and elephant, as Rashid continued to stockpile web, waiting for the right moment to flood the world market.

Four hundred years of practice had made it plain to the Caliph's spider-handlers that a dozen spiders were sufficient for web production and, more importantly, were all that men could reasonably manage. Rashid's pit--yea, even though it was one and a half times the size of the Caliph's--was not big enough for one hundred and four large, active creatures. Nor could the timber roof (recognize, please, that we of the desert are not particularly skilled in woodworking) resist the pressure of fifty or sixty bodies or, five hundred or more strong legs, pushing against it, hanging down from it, rubbing against it. One day--nobody remembers exactly what day, but *one* day--a section of the roof collapsed, leaving a gaping hole. One spider, two spiders, twenty spiders decided to go out and explore the world around them.

They found the food plentiful and tasty. They found no natural enemies, and the only competent predators (creatures like you and me) terrified into immobility.

And so they spread. And spread. And spread.

And that, my friend, and this I swear by the beard of the Prophet, is how the world-wide web began.

The End.

Wolfsbane and Belladonna

I

Butterflies hovered in the moist morning air, their blue and orange wings translucent in the dawn light. The dew laden field of clover shone like a sea of sparkling green carpet, its tranquility disrupted by the onslaught of a white and grey wolf pup. The canine went rampaging through the wet clover as he sought the butterflies, which in turn sought the sweet nectar of the white clover flowers. Nature it seemed was torn between law and chaos, and the wolf pup was the harbinger of the latter.

Dyfan Wrenfellow stirred from his bedding at the edge of the field, in the shadow of a copse of elm trees. He dusted the leaves and dirt off his jacket and his little cloak, content that he had at least slept well despite the chill in the air. He was small, slight of frame, but well built by Habel standards. He was exceptionally short, even for a Hab, and just under three human feet tall, which made him roughly the size of a human toddler.

Every Hab in Habelund liked to be the first to brag about their shortness, anything to distance themselves further from the tall folks that lived further to the north, which they affectionately and derisively called Lub Lubs. In the language of Habels the term Lub Lub, as every Habel knew, literally meant

Tall Tall, but it also implied *Large Idiot*. Thus being considered tall was an insult amongst Habels. The humans meanwhile oftentimes called them *halflings*, a term Habels considered to be derogatory, as it implied that they were only half-as-good or half-as-useful as a Lub Lub.

Which is wholly untrue, as every Habel knew.

Seeing that Dyfan was awake, the wolf pup ran to his master and began licking his face. The Hab endured the canine's affection until the puppy backed away and began wagging his tail incessantly. Finally able to stand, the Habel did so and rolled up his bedding, taking a few moments to clear off any leaves that clung to it.

There was no campfire to put out. Such a fire would only attract unwanted attention.

This was not Dyfan's land, nor did he know who owned it. He had wandered far from home, with nought but his walking stick and a crossbow for protection.

The wolf pup might yip and bark, but he had a lot of growing to do before he could be called a fearsome companion. Dyfan had named the pup *Vukkin*, an old Korovian word that meant *Wolfkin*, and the name felt apt. This was despite the fact that every time Dyfan shouted it he felt like he was swearing. The pup was a Southern Wolf, which was smaller than its northern relatives and had a good percentage of dog blood in it which made

them easier to befriend and train. So far the Habbel had only managed the former. Training Vukkin to behave would no doubt take longer. They had only been traveling companions for about a week.

Amongst his meagre belongings was a collection of herbs in a sack, along with a mortar and pestle so that he could ply his trade as a herbalist. Walking stick in hand and his crossbow slung over his shoulder, he began to think, as he so often did on long walks, about where he was and where he was going.

Last night he had recalled seeing some light in the night sky to the north-west, a sure sign of a settlement nearby. So he felt confident that he was at least heading in the correct direction. Within an hour he topped a small hill and saw the village up ahead, which was little more than a hamlet squished defensively between two bends in a river, with a wooden palisade on the west side to guard the settlement against anyone who might wish them harm.

As Dyfan and Vukkin approached they saw farmers tending their fields, both humans and Habbels, washer women in the river soaking clothes in suds and rinsing them clean, and a lone carpenter mending a sign post next to a crossroads. The newly erected sign at the top of the post read 'Pass Open' with a long narrow triangle pointing north carved into the wood.

"Winter is coming, yet the pass is open?" observed Dyfan as he stopped at

the crossroads. "Shouldn't it be closing this time of year?"

The carpenter chuckled and slapped his dusty apron. "Nay, my good Hab. Tis reopened because the giant who lived near the pass has been killed by a Bogatyr knight, and word has come down from the mountains that a deathless blackguard further to the north was also slain by the same knight. So the way north is now free to travel. At least for now. I will take the sign down again when the heavy snows come, but for now more travel back and forth will be good for our village."

Dyfan pondered the signs on the post and the directions that they pointed. He had come from the west, but if he went south he would end up in the town of Eraska, a place said to be plagued by werewolves. If he followed the road to the east he would end up in Jikolska, a town of which he knew nothing about, and far beyond that lay the elven port city of Yeksereannia, but it was a very long way to walk. If he took the northern pass through the Tranquil Mountains then it would deviate to the north-east and end up at the town of Arcau Falls, which was said to be very beautiful, and from Arcau Falls there was a highway that went to many other regions in Sylvania. If he went that way he might be able to hitch a ride on a farmer's wagon and save himself a lot of walking.

The opening of the pass through the mountains felt like an opportunity to the

wee Habel, a short cut to a faster route. He would be among the first people to travel that road in a long time now that the giant was dead.

“Uh, what was this deathless thing you spoke of?” Dyfan licked his lips.

“A blackguard knight, undead, or so the stories say. Not to worry, my good Hab. He is properly dead and buried now thanks to the Bogatyr who slew him. Word from the south is that he also killed a den of werewolves in Eraska when he passed through there. If you ever meet the Bogatyr, be sure to thank him for us.”

His mind made up, Dyfan thanked the carpenter and asked if there was a green grocer, a bakery or a butcher shop in the village where he might buy some food. Indeed there was. Satisfied that his hunger would be satiated, he walked onwards, his stomach growling, and Vukkin eagerly following at his heels.

II

The journey through the Tranquil Mountains had been even faster than Dyfan had expected. The pass through the mountains wasn't too steep, the weather had been pleasant and the nights only moderately chilly. He guessed now why these mountains had earned such a name. He saw a handful of small nameless villages and hamlets along the way, little settlements that dotted the landscape and were so small that no

cartographer had bothered to put them on a map.

A few ancient castles had provided refuge for him at night, their ruins now home to ivy and grape vines and large wild rose bushes that grew large barbs and few flowers. The popular thing to talk about, as the Habel quickly discovered, was the wandering Bogatyr knight who had come through this way less than a month earlier. None knew his name, but people oft compared him to Sir Dobrynya the Dragonslayer for his good deeds in cleansing the region of monsters.

The road leading down out of the mountains and to Arcau Falls however put things in a different perspective. Here the Habel met and saw more elves, tall haughty Lub Lubs with pointed ears aimed at the heavens, and they had nothing good to say about the Bogatyr.

“Oh sure, he killed the dragon... After he destroyed half of the town with dragonfire!”

“We would've been better off just paying the dragon what he wanted!”

“Never should have hired the lazy bastard in the first place!”

This was a stark contrast to the people in the mountains who had nothing but kind words regarding the Bogatyr. Dyfan couldn't help but think that the silly Lub Lub elves were being unfair to their dragonslaying saviour. If his home village was being attacked by a dragon, and a lone knight arrived to slay the

dragon, the Habs in his village would not be complaining that the dragon had destroyed half the village. They would be thanking their lucky totems that someone had managed to save half the village instead of the entire place going up in smoke.

The farms and orchards surrounding Arcau Falls were untouched by fires, and by the time Dyfan arrived in the town itself he had determined that less than a quarter of the town had been damaged by dragonfire, and the damaged buildings were not wholly destroyed, merely in need of repairs. The elven Lub Lubs, in Dyfan's opinion, were grossly exaggerating the amount of destruction that the dragon had done before the Bogatyr had managed to defeat it. There was no rhyme or reason for it either, from what he could tell.

There was something else that the Habel noticed too. The haughty elves had no shortage of arrows or bows, and their archery skills were legendary. Everywhere he went the elves seemed to carry their archery equipment or kept it close by. Even the elven monks of the Monastery Tree carried longbows that were about six or seven feet tall. With such numbers of skilled archers the elves should have made short work of the dragon...

"You're new here?" asked a feminine voice with a strange accent. Dyfan turned and saw a strange woman. She was a human with flowing black hair, but her

eyes were exotic and enticing, her face sweet like a fresh plum, and her head was framed by a broad floppy hat woven from straw. Her clothes were shabby and mismatched, threadbare in spots and bespeckled with yellow pollen. She was carrying a basket of freshly picked flowers, including foxglove, wolfsbane and aconite.

All poisonous flowers, Dyfan noted, but they also had medicinal properties if used correctly. *Who was this strange woman?*

"You're new here, aren't you?" she asked, pointing with a long stemmed foxglove to the Habel's dirt stained traveling cloak and his walking stick.

"Uh, yes. I am new here. My name is Dyfan Wrenfellow. Who, may I ask, are you?"

"You may call me Soo Yeon. Are you here to sell those?" She pointed to Dyfan's sack of herbs and mushrooms, the top of which was brimming with striped hemlock leaves and smelly white beetleweed flowers. "If you are, I can give you a decent price. I own an apothecary."

She knelt down and stroked the hair on Vukkin's head, to which he promptly rolled over so that she might scratch his belly.

The Habels eyes narrowed, ever wise to a slip of the tongue. She had stated that she owned an apothecary, not the apothecary, which implied that there was more than one apothecary in the town of

Arcau Falls. Still, he wasn't about to shop around for the best price. Sometimes it was necessary not to look a gift pony in the mouth, as the Habel proverb stated. Besides, if the other apothecary was run by an elf, then experience had taught Dyfan that they might be a haughty and thrifty skinflint who wouldn't offer a good price anyway. Sometimes it is better to take a decent offer and not waste time with someone who is unlikely to give a good price anyway.

"By all means, please lead the way to your shop, Mistress Soo Yeon," said the Habel with a pleasant smile upon his face.

She did so, leading him and Vukkin around several corners to a marketplace at the center of the town, and in turn to a tiny shop tucked into the north-east corner of the marketplace. There was already a customer waiting by the door for Soo Yeon to arrive: A tall dark haired beauty dressed in black and white, but unlike most of the elves in this town, this woman was also human.

Soo Yeon smiled at the customer. "Ah, Lady Nightshade, I am sorry to have kept you. Not to worry, I will see you first since you've been waiting." She unlocked the door and disappeared within, raising and lowering a countertop to reach the space beyond. The shop was incredibly cramped, barely enough standing space for three people in the foyer. The shelves were stacked high

with bottles, boxes, and jars containing dried and preserved examples of every kind of herb, mushroom and flower that Dyfan could think of.

"I am not here to buy today. I am here to sell," admitted the customer. "I have some rare mushrooms that I would like to sell. Orange mycena. Are you interested? They're edible."

Dyfan scoffed loudly. "All mushrooms are edible, at least once. But you shouldn't be eating orange mycena."

The dark haired beauty glared down at the halfling. She made a show of smoothing out a wrinkle in the black satin of her dress. "They're quite edible, I assure you. They're not poisonous."

Again Dyfan scoffed, unable to restrain himself. "Orange mycena isn't poisonous, tis true. But they will give you tumours over time, which will slowly kill you and is arguably just as bad. My people have eaten enough mushrooms to know which ones will kill you, quickly or slowly."

Lady Nightshade glared sharply at the Habel and looked back to Soo Yeon, a derisive frown upon her face. "Are you going to take his word over mine?"

Soo Yeon glanced back and forth between the two of them, biting her lip during the process. "I am not as familiar with the mushrooms in Korovia, I will admit. I cannot be selling mushrooms to my customers that might be poisonous, or even those that might cause tumours--"

Lady Nightshade huffed loudly and if

her eyes had been daggers she would have stabbed both Soo Yeon and Dyfan. The door slammed closed as she exited the tiny shop.

The wee Habel stared at the door and looked back to the proprietor of the apothecary. “Is that really her name? Nightshade?”

“It is the name most people know her by: Belladonna Nightshade. I will admit I don’t know her real name. She is a noblewoman whose father lives further north of here. She is certainly wealthy enough to call herself whatever she wants. Why?”

“Because nightshade is a very poisonous plant, as is belladonna. I suspect that she was deliberately trying to poison your customers. She came here and established herself as one of your valued customers, yes?”

Soo Yeon nodded.

“Recently?”

Again Soo Yeon nodded. “Very recently. She arrived soon after the dragon was slain.”

“And then today she comes in trying to sell you mushrooms that she knows are not poisonous, but perhaps she also knows that they cause deadly tumours. She expects you to buy them because she has already established herself as one of your best customers. She knows that you are foreign to these lands and are likely not familiar with the local mushrooms... I cannot help but think that she knew what she was doing, and that her name is

a not-so-clever alias.”

III

The red wine sat in the goblet untouched, not even a lick of it sipped at.

The sumptuous velvety surroundings in the inn suited the needs of the drinker, but it was far too civilized for the thoughts that churned in her mind. Her room was draped in satin and lace, velvet and cashmere, silk and exotic thaka fabric from Azagolia. But such adornments and finery now felt like they were mocking her ineptitude.

Next to the wine goblet was a small silk pouch stuffed full of orange mycena. Enough to kill a small family.

Lady Tsvetomir stared at the orange mycena in dismay, her plan disrupted by the most unlikely of beings: A Habel. A dirty little halfling beggar who was, as best as she could tell, nothing more than a traveling vagabond. And the herbalist who owned the apothecary shop, a foreigner to these lands, now knew enough not to trust her. All of her efforts had gone to waste. Worse, she suspected that the little bastard knew the meaning of her alias Belladonna Nightshade, and might pass that meaning on to the herbalist, a name she had frequently adopted since girlhood whenever practicing her chosen profession: Assassin.

Most people didn’t make the

connection with her name because thankfully most people were uneducated peasants.

Rage filled her and her thoughts whirled. She wanted revenge against the strange little Habel who had dared to defy her plans. But killing a target in a direct manner was not in her style. She needed to be intelligent about the process. Distanced yet dastardly. Precise yet poisonous.

Finally she grasped the goblet, her hand shaking uncontrollably and she drank from it greedily, her refined palate tasting the miniscule amounts of poisons that she had added to the wine in order to raise her tolerance to the poisons.

The solution to her problem was obvious. She needed to poison the Habel, and the townsfolk, in some manner. Two birds with one stone. But poisoning such a large number of people all at once was unlikely. With a small village it might have been possible to poison the well, which was often an ineffective means of poisoning people because the water diluted the poison significantly and required vast amounts of poison to do the task. It was considerably easier to pollute the water by dumping a dead body in the well and letting the rot sicken the local population.

However the people of Arcau Falls got their water from multiple wells, and sometimes from the river, so it wasn't as simple as poisoning the local town well. It wasn't feasible to poison all the wells

simultaneously with the amount of poison needed to make an impact, and impossible to poison the river. Likewise, dead bodies in the wells would attract too much attention and people would simply switch to drinking river water until new wells were dug.

Her original plan of providing tumour inducing yet tasty orange mycena mushrooms to the local apothecaries had been thwarted and had relied upon a long term plan of getting people gradually sick, the cancerous tumours spreading through the populace as they developed a taste for the mushrooms. By the time anyone realized that the mushrooms were causing their health problems it would have been too late. Combined with her other activities to poison local foods, such as apples, lemons and grapes from the orchards and vinyards, she had hoped to kill the townsfolk one by one and make each set of deaths look like natural causes.

But if Soo Yeon and the Habel notified various townsfolk about the mushrooms there might be more scrutiny of her wanderings in nearby orchards and vinyards. Thus that part of her original plan was now jeopardized and had to be abandoned. She had no choice, she would need to find an alternative plan.

Her wine goblet now empty, Belladonna pondered a possible solution.

Bakeries were a possibility. She had previously noted that the people of Arcau Falls didn't produce their own flour,

relying instead upon a miller who was upriver to the west. One mill provided all of the flour for all of the bread and pastries in the entire town. Add something poisonous to the flour and her problem could be solved.

But which poison? Herbal poisons often had a taste to them and possibly colourful. Essence of aconite oil for example was a putrid yellow colour and had a floral scent. She needed something that was tasteless and hopefully scentless.

White arsenic was a possibility. Odourless and tasteless, it was a white powder with an appearance similar to sugar, but it could be ground down into a finer powder and mixed with the flour to become practically invisible. Better yet it was well suited to being hidden within baked goods thanks to its tolerance to high temperatures.

The only problem was finding the amount of arsenic that she would need as arsenic didn't come from plants, it was a byproduct of smelting copper and other metals. She had a small amount in her possession, as arsenic was one of a handful of poisons that Belladonna used in her wine to help build her tolerance to a variety of poisons, but she had nowhere near enough to serve her needs to poison an entire town.

There was no choice... She would need to contact some Xarsians in order to procure the white arsenic in large quantities. She couldn't very well mine or smelt the mineral by herself. It was

one of the reasons why she usually preferred to use plants as poisons. Heavy lifting and sweating, well... Such activities weren't really something she did, and she had scant knowledge of how to properly smelt ores and collect the arsenic. She preferred flowers and mushrooms, and sometimes venomous snakes or spiders.

On the other hand people in the farming village would have zero experience with white arsenic and shouldn't know what it is. It would be very difficult for anyone to interfere this time around. The Habel knew nothing of arsenic. His people weren't really known for their knowledge of mining or smelting. He wouldn't be able to interfere a second time around, and nor should anyone else.

Still, she knew that she had been given a very important task. Poison and kill an entire town that lay on a trade route. She didn't like the delay, nor the wasted efforts, but there was no helping it. She would need to send word to her father via raven to recoup lost time.

Satisfied that at least now she had a plan, Belladonna Nightshade indulged by refilling her goblet with more wine from the decanter, choosing to leave out the tiny doses of poison this time. This time she decided that she would sip and savour it, giving herself time to truly enjoy it.

Revenge would be sweet, she decided. The Habel might know a thing or two

about herbalism, but Belladonna Nightshade knew of many ways to accomplish her task. Killing the halfling would be oh so easy.

IV

The orchards and vinyards surrounding Arcau Falls were home to a wide variety of flowers, and a scant supply of mushrooms, but it mattered not to Vukkin as he leapt through the flowers and chased after the fluttering butterflies. Dyfan Wrenfellow followed in the wolf pup's wake, stopping here and there to grab handfuls of different flowers that he knew had a variety of useful properties.

Marigolds and chamomile, lavender and fennel, echinacea and elderflower, comfrey and yarrow, burdock and dandelion. All had useful properties when prepared as a tea or used as a poultice. He even found a large bed of senna, a handy flower for ridding a person of constipation as it was a powerful laxative. It could also be used for getting rid of ingested poison by forcing the body to get rid of the poison (and everything else) via diarrhea. It wasn't pleasant, but it was a viable solution. He collected a little of each, conscious to leave plenty so that they would grow back and continue to produce for the local herbalists. The wee Habbel concluded that the local elves must have cultivated this great variety of plants for

use in their local apothecaries, for why else would he find such a great variety of useful plants in such a small area outside of a herbalist's gardens?

The weather here was unseasonably warm too, as if the elven lands were under a spell which bestowed the perfect weather for growing things. The legends of elves using magic to help grow their plants might very well be true, he decided.

Tired from his morning exertions, Dyfan crawled under the low hanging boughs of a hawthorn bush and decided to have a nap in the shade. Vukkin cuddled up next to his arm and soon both Hab and pup were fast asleep in the shade.

* * *

The Habbel and the wolf pup awoke to the sound of two men arguing and cursing loudly in a brutish Oraknevia accent. Dyfan blinked and glanced about in the shadows, spotting the two humans from a distance away. A broken wheel had slipped off the axle on the wagon, sparking a long argument over the best way to mend the wheel and fit it back on the axle. The longer the argument went on the louder it became, with more swearing and cursing. At one point the Habbel thought the two humans might come to blows, for they both had swords and daggers on their belts, and indeed reached for them several times, but each

time they managed to come to their senses before violence became a foregone conclusion.

The truly strange thing however was that both men were wearing red cloth masks that covered their noses and mouths, and they were wearing matching red gloves too. Dyfan found this to be concerning as he had only ever worn a similar mask and gloves when he was dealing with poisons that had been ground down into a powder. He might have chosen to help them with the axle, but given that these two men were both armed and his gut instinct was that they were hauling something dangerous, he was loathe to go anywhere near them.

Plus their red masks and gloves did nothing to put him at ease, for this was the favoured colours of Xarsians who worshipped the blood moon Xarsius. They weren't exactly the nicest people as they were fond of crucifying people on large wooden X-shaped crucifixes.

"She isn't going to be pleased if we are late. We need to just fix it for now, get into town and we can fix it properly later."

"And pray she doesn't notice that we spilled half a sack? I have heard what she does-"

"Nevermind that. We can take a small portion from each of the other sacks to refill this one. She won't notice if there is the same amount in each sack and they are all mostly full."

"What of the powder that spilled then?"

"Do we just leave it here?"

"It fell in the mud. She will certainly notice if the stuff has mud on it. Just leave it here."

With much grunting and heaving, the two men got the damaged wheel back onto the axle and they knotted it with rope so that it wouldn't fall off the axle so easily. Into the hole in the axle where a peg should have been to prevent the wheel from sliding off they instead looped a rope through the hole and tied it in a knot. The wheel itself was now bent crooked, but it would suffice to get them the rest of the way to Arcau Falls.

When they were out of sight and out of earshot, Dyfan scampered out from beneath the boughs of the hawthorn bush and went to inspect what they had spilled on the wagon trail. It was like they had said, a half sack worth of a strange granular substance that he didn't recognize. It wasn't sugar, he was certain of that, but it was white and crystalline. Covering his mouth and nose with his sleeve, he crept closer and collected a sample of it in a small wooden container in the shape of a vial, backed away and stoppered it with a cork.

"Maybe Soo Yeon will know what this is," he muttered to Vukkin, but the pup merely wagged his tail in response and gamely followed the Habel back towards the town of Arcau Falls.

V

Soo Yeon studied the contents of the wooden vial, biting her lip and seemingly unsure of what to make of it. Dyfan watched her expression closely, confirming that whatever the substance was it was completely foreign to the apothecary.

“And they were wearing masks and gloves?” she asked, scratching behind her ear and keeping her hand to herself.

“Aye, red masks and red gloves.”

Soo Yeon frowned. “I agree, that is awfully strange. But you said that they were transporting large sacks of this powder? It must have some usage that they would need so much of it.”

She used a small wooden spoon to lift a tiny amount of the white granular material out of the vial and placed it into a polished stone mortar. With a tentative hand she took a lit candle from a candlestick and held it upside down. Realizing what she was about to do Dyfan stoppered the vial with the cork and took a step back inside the cramped quarters of the little shop, his back to the door.

The white granular powder burst into flames, but the flames were blue, not red, orange or yellow as a person would normally expect, and there was a strong scent like garlic and Dyfan’s nostrils and eyes suddenly felt like they were burning. His hands scrambled for the door handle.

The wee Habbel stumbled out of the apothecary, coughing from the toxic

fumes and rubbing his eyes. Soo Yeon soon followed behind him, also coughing and her eyes turning reddish. Vukkin trailed in their wake, the wolf pup yelping and making snarling noises. Sick from the fumes, they both found a water trough meant for watering horses and splashed water into their eyes and faces. Dyfan took pains to wash Vukkin too, washing his face, his eyes and wetting much of his fur in an effort to get rid of the foul smelling fumes.

“What the bloody hell is this stuff?” Dyfan cried at last, glaring at the stoppered vial in his hand.

“Poison of some kind,” Soo Yeon declared. “I don’t know what, but I would bet a gold sovereign that Lady Nightshade knows. This stinks of her work.”

“Yes, well, we can’t very well go ask her if she knows what it is. She is hardly a fan of us right now. Who else do you know who might recognize this stuff?”

“Two merchants that I know might have some inkling of what it is. It isn’t garlic powder, I can say that much. Sure as hell stinks like it though!”

“Only when burnt! And what kind of stuff makes a blue flame? It is unnatural!”

* * *

The side of the caravan wagon proclaimed it to be the property of Yuri and Zochia and it was decorated in a

manner similar to the wagons of the wandering Rovani people. It had huge back wheels, small front wheels, and a team of four horses to pull it if need be. A green canvas covered the back entrance to the wagon and a pair of tables had been set up on the cobblestones, bearing a wide assortment of items for sale, from bolts of embroidered cloth to jars of pickled cucumbers to dwarven crafted tools. The merchants themselves however were an odd pair.

Yuri was nearly as tall as the wagon, topping at least seven feet from his sandalled feet to the top of his furry brows, and his curved horns added another foot of height to his imposing muscular figure. Despite this his jovial grin made the minotaur pleasant to behold, although at the same time Dyfan dreaded the idea of making the merchant angry. He was dressed simply in a kilt and sandals, his brownish-red hide seemingly unbothered by the weather.

Zochia was less than half the height of her companion, but just as wide. She was stocky and surefooted, with thick curly orange-red hair that hung down her back all the way to her belt and she carried a wide assortment of small tools in the leather apron she wore. Her cheeks were covered in freckles, rosy and jovial, her nose snubbed and bulbous and the bridge of her nose was similarly covered in freckles.

Today one of her feet was barefooted, for her boot was clamped tightly between

her knees as she worked with the speed of an experienced cobbler in the task of punching holes through the leather with an awl in the effort of mending it. She barely glanced up as Soo Yeon and Dyfan approached, but hardly seemed concerned when the apothecary woman was uninterested in her wares.

“Good to see you again! Do you have any mushrooms for me?” asked the minotaur, his voice deep and gruff. Dyfan noticed an odd glint in Yuri’s eyes when he spoke of the mushrooms.

Soo Yeon shook her head. “Not today. Give them more time to grow. My friend here-”

Zochia coughed loudly before interrupting the young herbalist. “Are you bringing us a customer or a fellow traveler? Methinks the latter, given the state of things.”

“The state of things?” asked Dyfan.

“Your boots have seen better days.” The female dwarf pointed her awl at the Habbels’ footwear. “If you’re here to have them fixed then you’ve come at the correct time. They won’t last much longer.”

“We’re not here about his boots-” began Soo Yeon.

Dyfan held up a hand to halt his colleague. “How much to fix them?”

Zochia glanced down at the Habbels’ boots. “Four copper pennies should do it.”

“Four copper pennies? That’s highway robbery! I could just buy brand new

boots!”

“You could buy poorly made boots for that price, yes. If I fix your boots then they’ll last a long time.” Zochia didn’t look up from her handiwork. She placed the awl back in her apron and removed a small set of pliers.

“Fine, but I need information too. Can you identify this strange powder?” Dyfan held out the wooden vial and unstopped it for the dwarf to have a look.

She looked and shrugged. “It is white arsenic. What about it?”

“What is it for?” asked Dyfan.

“Many things. We dwarves use it for making metal alloys, but it can also be used for tanning leather, glass pigments and killing rats.”

“Killing rats?”

“Very poisonous stuff,” said Yuri. “You can kill lots of things with arsenic, if you want to, but it usually takes several days. It is handy for killing rats because you mix it with sugar and the rats will eat it.”

“And why would someone need large sacks of arsenic? A whole wagon’s worth?” prodded Dyfan.

The dwarf ceased what she was doing and looked up at the Habel. “Have you seen someone carrying that much arsenic?”

“Earlier today, around noon. I saw two men with red masks and gloves transporting a whole wagon’s worth of arsenic. They had trouble with their wagon axle, but I chose not to help them

because my gut instinct told me not to.”

Yuri and Zochia exchanged worried looks. “You saw two men, Xarsians possibly, transporting a wagon full of arsenic earlier today and you’re only telling us now?” asked the dwarf, her face turning an odd shade of red, which combined with her freckles and red hair made her look very red indeed.

Dyfan held up his hands defensively. “I only just learned what this powder is a moment ago. You-”

“There isn’t enough to poison all the wells,” Yuri decided loudly. “At best they could only poison one well. They would need at least three wagons to poison all the wells in town.”

Zochia snorted loudly. “This Hab only saw the one wagon. There might be two other wagons, full wagons mind you, already here, or soon to be arriving. Or they might be planning to use arsenic in a different way, but to do that they will need to mill the arsenic into a fine powder. We need to learn more, and quickly too!”

“And how would we do that?” asked Dyfan.

The red-haired dwarf looked the Hab up and down. “I’ve heard that Habs are good at sneaking, but how good are you at swimming?”

VI

“Thank the goddess that idiocy isn't

contagious,” Belladonna Nightshade muttered to herself as she surveyed the two idiots her father had sent to her. There was a dungeon in her father's citadel, far below ground, deeper than any mine their family owned, which was reserved for prisoners who were of particular interest. Whoever had thought that the white arsenic was finely ground enough to send it to her belonged in that particular dungeon, in her opinion, and she was already planning how to write such a letter to her father regarding it.

Her father surely would have known better than to send white arsenic that had only been ground down to crystals similar in size to sugar, when what she needed was something akin to finely ground flour.

Nevertheless, the two men were now being put to use as mill labourers, using an old mill stone that Lady Nightshade had been forced to procure, and grinding the powder down, despite their protests. They worked steadily enough, the two men in their red masks and matching red gloves, and sweat stains covered their black tunics as they kept at the task.

Whenever her back was turned she had no doubt that they were working at a slower pace, and taking more frequent breaks to drink water, but she didn't begrudge them that. She was smart enough to know that a thirsty worker was a slower worker, and that a worker who was well hydrated was more efficient. Water in this case was like the grease that

merchants rubbed on their wagon axles: A necessity to make the wagon go faster.

The white arsenic powder clung to the sweaty tunics of the two men, oblivious of the damage it might later cause. No matter, she decided. These two were expendable. Once they had sifted the arsenic into the lone miller's flour their task would be complete. She would be able to sit back and watch the carnage unfold, and these two fools would be the first of many to die since they are drinking water contaminated with arsenic.

Afterwards she would finally be free to leave this horrid town. The elves and other races living together in harmony made her want to grind her teeth in frustration. That and the trees. Yes, the elves were masters of agriculture and growing orchards, but their love of eating fruits and vegetables made Lady Nightshade want to burn the entire town to a crisp.

“Too bad that dragon had failed in his task,” she mused to herself.

* * *

The mill lay upstream to the west of the Arcau Falls, where the lone structure straddled the river on both sides and multiple undershot water wheels were positioned only about two inches directly above a high point in the base of the stony riverbed, ensuring that the mill operated at nearly peak efficiency. Within

the structure a multitude of axles and gears worked together to mill wheat into flour, weave wool, cotton and flax into a variety of textiles, churn cream, and a dozen other uses. During the day the place was alive with elves making their way from one section of the mill to another, each carrying freshly woven linens, bricks of butter, sacks of flour and all manner of goods, but at night it was another story.

The only creatures stirring in the mill after darkness had fallen were the cats, a dozen of them, each tasked with keeping the rats and mice out. But the felines had no control over three different intruders who now made their way to the sacks of flour awaiting delivery on the morrow.

Content to let the two Xarsian goons do all the dirty work, Lady Nightshade was only here to observe that it was done properly. As she did so she found herself a stool and sat upon it, silently drumming her fingers on her thigh as she waited for the two fools to finish their task. Any moment now she was expecting the two men to get the first symptom of arsenic poisoning: Abdominal pain. But while they had yet to do so, she contented herself by watching the cats stalk about the mill looking for prey.

She couldn't help but feel a certain level of affinity for the deadly felines. She and them were both hunters in their own ways. Their methods and their prey were different, but the results were the same.

Killing the elves was a necessity, much like killing the rats and mice, in order to preserve the sanctity of humanity. Half-breeds and their ilk, as Lady Nightshade had learned from her father in childhood, were a threat and had to be dealt with. Elves, half-elves and any measurement beyond that led to weakness. Strength was what humanity needed, and as such Belladonna Nightshade saw herself as an exterminator of such weakness. Not so different from the felines exterminating rodents.

Her mind wandering, she almost didn't notice the shadows behind a few tall barrels that moved. Her thoughts interrupted, her eyes narrowed and she watched carefully, trying to see if the shadows might move again.

The mill had many moving parts. The axles, the gears, and such. It was loud and noisy, more than enough to cover the sounds of any footsteps of intruders. But the moving shadows of the machinery were predictable, rhythmic even. A shadow moving out of place was a cause for concern.

Perhaps the mill wasn't so empty after all.

Belladonna rose from her stool and silently crept over to the barrels where she had seen the shadow move, but what she found beyond them was mere marks in the dust. The footprints of cats and a set of small footprints, like those of a toddler.

Or a Habbel.

The tracks were new. Freshly trodden.

“Bloody halfling!” she snarled beneath her breath and began searching the mill for the intruder. Her mind racing, she knew he had to be here somewhere. But he was small, and like many Habs he was skilled at hiding and sneaking about by virtue of his small stature and tiny feet.

Following the tracks in the dust and flour, she pursued him into the dark recesses between some of the moving cog wheels attached via axles to the loudly moving water wheels.

“What do you think you are doing?” asked the Habbel, drawing her attention to the halfling who was now perched precariously above a railing. She saw now that she had cornered him, as the only way he could escape now would be to plunge himself into the dark churning waters between two of the water wheels. His little cloak wrapped around his shoulders was snapping in the breeze, making him look positively gallant like a great dragonslayer or one of the Heroes of Olde. Obviously he thought he was good at swimming, or else he wouldn’t be standing upon the railing.

“I’m getting rid of some vermin,” Belladonna smirked, coming closer to the Habbel as she prepared to strike like a viper. If she could just get close enough to him...

“You’re a Xarsian, aren’t you?”

“Actually I worship Privica, if you must know. We Privicans have higher

standards, in my opinion.”

“The goddess of vanity? Well, she certainly suits a Lub Lub like you.”

“She’s also the goddess of poison. I don’t suppose a Hab like yourself would know that though.” Lady Nightshade slid one foot closer, preparing to pounce cat-like upon her prey.

The Habbel raised a single finger to his chin, as if to ponder the question. His other hand remained hidden behind his back, as if he was clutching a dagger. “I thought Set was the god of poison... And snakes. Oh well... I guess there’s room in the pantheon for two cowardly gods. I suppose it doesn’t matter who you worship, a Lub Lub like you is always looking for an easier way.”

“Are you suggesting that I am lazy or just a coward?” asked Belladonna Nightshade, her hands gesturing to herself whilst her feet crept closer.

“Why not both? Poisoning a town’s supply of flour certainly sounds very cowardly and lazy to me,” mused the Habbel, his eyes meeting hers. “And not very imaginative either. If anything it was obvious. But I suppose you think you’re very intelligent for coming up with such a plan.” He moved his feet closer to the edge of the railing, but what started as a simple motion swiftly changed when his hidden hand snatched forward and he threw a handful of purple dust into the assassin’s face.

She recognized the scent of wolfsbane powder, but she wasn’t about to let that

stop her. She had built up a resistance to such poisons. Blindly Belladonna leapt to try and grab him before he fell out of reach, catching only his cloak which ripped free from his shoulders. Her eyes blinking away the powder, she witnessed the wee Habel fall into the dark churning depths and vanish from sight.

She watched the waters downstream from the mill for quite some time, concerned that he might swim to the surface, but when he did not she contented herself with the thought that perhaps he was not as good of a swimmer as he thought he was. With any luck she would never see him again. Still as the darkness of night faded away and the light of the sun crept anew in the east she couldn't help but wonder, and worry, of what had become of the little fellow. What if he had already warned others?

Over time this worry turned to panic, and as her two Xarsian goons were soon doubled over gagging and vomiting, the poison making its way through their bodies, Belladonna Nightshade decided that now was a good time to leave Arcau Falls.

Staying to watch the results was no longer a promising matter, but a risky one, and she considered herself to be too intelligent to take such risks.

An hour later as she rode north away from the town she realized that the Habel had been right about her. She truly was a coward. Oh well, better to be a living coward than a dead fool, she

decided.

VII

A mighty hand reached down into the deep water and brought up the limp and soaked form of the Habel. Several swift arm motions brought the large figure and the smaller one to the shore of the river and once there Dyfan was lifted bodily up onto the muddy bank. Behind him the minotaur Yuri promptly began slapping him on the back several times to help him to cough up any water in his throat and lungs.

After much coughing and sputtering, Dyfan took a ragged breath, but the stabbing pain in his chest refused to disappear.

"I thought you said you were a good swimmer," grunted Yuri, the big minotaur clapping the wee Habel on the back several more times for good measure.

"I-" Dyfan coughed and hacked up more water. "I thought I was. The current from the river was stronger than I expected. And I've never swam in dark water before..."

The Habel looked about and saw Soo Yeon standing nearby, both of her arms hugging the wolf pup Vukkin in order to prevent him from running towards his master. "Where's Zochia?"

Soo Yeon set the wolf pup down and pointed a thumb in the direction of the town. "Gone to warn the townsfolk not to

use the flour. Proving it should be an easy matter. Any flour contaminated with arsenic will produce a blue flame and a terrible stench.”

Vukkin dashed forward, ducked beneath Dyfan’s outstretched hands and promptly began licking the halfling’s face. “How do we know that the elves will believe her?” gasped the Habel, still struggling to breathe normally, made worse by the wolf pup’s insistent licking.

Yuri chuckled. “Zochia is extremely stubborn, and she is prone to gambling. If they won’t believe her words then she’ll just wager that she is telling them the truth. I have yet to meet an elf who doesn’t want to prove a dwarf wrong. Holding a flame near the flour will prove her right quickly enough, and then there will be no choice but to believe her. Plus we will have you as a witness, confirming who actually did the deed.”

Dyfan coughed loudly, his lungs and throat still irritated. He had no doubt that he would be coughing for days before the last of the water in his lungs were absorbed into his body. He found himself hugging the wolf pup to get him to sit still, consciously mimicking Soo Yeon’s earlier actions. “I suppose this makes us heroes?”

“Hardly,” grunted Yuri. “I’m a pacifist. This is the most excitement I have seen in a long time. I doubt the elves will raise two eyebrows at us.”

Soo Yeon nodded in agreement. “The elves rarely acknowledge such things.

They consider it to be a person’s duty, and therefore unworthy of any special recognition. You’ve seen and heard how they responded to the Bogatyr saving their town from a dragon? They’re going to spend the next week complaining about the lack of bread to eat.”

“So I should forget about any reward then?”

Soo Yeon shook her head. “What I think you should worry about is what happens if you run into Belladonna Nightshade again. She doesn’t strike me as the type of person who will forget about her failures.”

Dyfan held the wolf pup close, Vukkin’s fur like a warm blanket on his face. His eyes betrayed his true worries however and his lip quivered as he resolved that he must leave Arcau Falls and travel towards the city of Sylvania. Such a city would be teeming with unthankful elves, a metropolis of people, and a refuge for travellers seeking to be far away from Xarsians and Privicans.

Perhaps there he would be safe from his newfound nemesis.

The End.

After Thoughts

By Charles Moffat

Every publication evolves over time. The same is true of *Peasant Magazine*.

During Issues 2 and 3 we have been experimenting with the best ways to format the magazine. For Issue 3 we also tried to have some themes. Some changes may later turn out to be well-intentioned mistakes, but such things are normal.

Which is fine. It just means that we are learning from our mistakes, and that is an important part of the learning process. Nobody is teaching us how to run a magazine. We just have to muddle through it and take the self-taught approach.

Thus we arrive at a topic that I know many people will be excited to hear: Starting in Issue 4 we will begin paying contributors to *Peasant Magazine*.

We haven't figured out how much we will be paying, likely a small stipend between \$1 and \$5 USD per story. At least for now, and we would be increasing the value of that stipend over time as the magazine grows in popularity.

We are also going to begin accepting submissions for cover art and interior art.

In order to pay all of the contributors we will be raising the price of the printed magazine, but the PDF version of *Peasant Magazine* will remain free for now. We are open to ideas for how to best monetize the PDF version and put it behind a paywall.

Note - Some authors refuse to submit stories to literary magazines that are not behind a paywall and part of this is because various publishers prefer that digital copies of content be behind paywalls and frown upon authors allowing their work to be available for free.

So if we can find a way to do this then we can make those authors happy too, and make all of the authors happier because we can start paying them more.

Our goal is to be able to pay everyone for their contributions, even if it is just a small stipend, and to gradually be able to pay more due to more readers discovering and supporting *Peasant Magazine*.

Oh and to our readers out there, if you enjoyed the stories within please remember to post some reviews online so that we can continue to grow our readership. Posting a review costs you nothing but time, but your well spent time means that our stories can reach a wider audience who will help to support *Peasant Magazine*.

Being able to find new authors can be tricky sometimes, especially since everyone has different tastes. Sampling different authors via literary magazines and/or anthologies is an excellent way of finding new authors, and as such we hope that our readers find value in doing so.

Until next time. Happy Reading!

*Don't forget to support **Peasant Magazine** by reading past issues.*

Peasant Magazine, Issue Two - Spring 2024

"A Loyal Man" by Helen E. Patterson
"The Bed of Penitence" by André Medeiros
"The Clock Meister's Revenge" by Geoff Nelder
"A Stable Master's Gambit" by J. VanZile
"Nuttingham" by Arin Lee Kambitsis
"Lights of the Lidth" by Alexis Veenendaal
"The Mists of Gaulion" by Daniel Cano
"Violence's Red End" by Joel Glover
"The Owl" by J. J. Egosi
"Raiders of Pravda Vremya" by Charles Moffat

Peasant Magazine, Issue One - Autumn 2023

"The Pale Lady in White" by Charles Moffat
"The Selkie's Silver Comb" by Alistair Grant
"The Glamouring of Brond Col" by Carl F. Northwood
"The Tone of Truth" by Sean Mooney
"The Choosing" by Len Berry
"The Selkie" by C. M. Neary
"Drifting" by Brigham Magnusson
"The Tale of the Key of Darkness" by Jeffrey J. Hoy
"Beyond Anwar" by D. G. Ironside
"The Hunt" by Liam Porter
"The Last Lesson" by Frankie G.
"With the Death of Kings" by Denise Longrie