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The Gathering®

THE
MONSTERS
OF MAGIC

ANTHOLOGY

Edited by

J. Robert King

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OF MAGIC

J. Robert King



The Monsters of Magic

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S C O T T M C G O U G H

WHO IS QUEEN?



Wasitora stalked her prey. She had heard the caravan approaching long before it ever crossed into her territory, and she smelled the stink of Suq'Atan horses.

She shadowed the caravan from above, in the trees. It was a small procession, with only four mounted warriors leading three ornate, horse-drawn wagons. At the rear of the parade rode another pair of warriors and, judging by the finery of his robes and his steed, a high-ranking official.

The riders carried themselves with characteristic Suq'Atan self-importance, their shoulders square and their eyes fixed straight ahead. They were large folk, well balanced and comfortable on their steeds. Except for the officer at the rear, the warriors wore simple red robes and hid their faces beneath hoods and tightly wound scarves. The officer's face was uncovered; he wore a long, bushy beard cut into a perfect square below his chin; and his robes were of splendid gold and crimson silk. They all carried huge, curved scimitars at their waists. These nomads were accustomed to traveling long distances through unfamiliar and potentially hostile territory.

Even so, none of the Suq' Atans noticed Wasitora. She slid through the jungle's upper canopy so silently and smoothly that she made no more noise than a falling leaf.

Wasitora paused and watched the caravan continue on below her. Something else was in the air, something under the reek of horse sweat and rider perfume. This scent was familiar but unsettling, like the nagging sense that she had forgotten an important detail.

She hooked her sharp claws into the giant bough beneath her and stretched. A ripple of muscular energy flowed from her shoulders to the end of her tail, a full hundred and twenty spans in all. She was covered in thick, silky fur that she spent hours combing with her bristled tongue. Her coat was a hypnotic mural of rich brown shapes, bands of pale orange, and warm golden stripes. Her large round head was topped by two triangular ears that rotated independently on her skull, and she had a broad, hinged lower jaw that hung down to her furry chest when she opened her mouth wide.

She flexed her leathery wings and licked her chops. Keeping a close watch on the caravan, she let out a tiny, irritated growl.

Blissfully unaware, the Suq' Atans marched on.

Wasitora snorted, and an evil gleam sparkled in her huge yellow eyes.

Despite their reputation, the nomads were being careless. In the wilds of southeast Jamuraa, carelessness was lethal. Wasitora had lived, hunted, and prospered in the jungle for twenty of its devastating rainy seasons. She easily took down prey in the air, in the trees, and on the ground. She was the undisputed ruler of her domain, and now she had guests clumsily trampling around in it, stumbling through as if there could be no possible consequence. As if there were nothing in the jungle more terrible than they.

Wasitora licked her chops. She had baited and toyed with many a caravan in this part of her jungle. The most rewarding approach was to pick off the rear of the procession, fade

back into the jungle, and wait until the survivors noticed. After the inevitable fruitless search, the caravan would move on, and she could strike again. The game lay in remaining unnoticed and seeing how long it took for the remaining travelers to break. Sometimes they would halt after the second abduction and make a stand, hurling challenges out into the uncaring jungle. Others would gradually increase their pace after each attack, until the final three or four survivors dropped all pretense of completing their journey and simply ran for their lives.

Wasitora extended her claws deeper into the tree. She liked it best when they ran.

She watched the officer ride away, bringing up the rear of the caravan as was their custom. Her eyes narrowed.

The Suq'Atan was wearing something on the back of his head. It was made of polished bone, painted to look like a dour, square-jawed Suq'Atan face. It featured two glass eyes and even a false beard made from horsehair. The mask stared sternly at the path behind the caravan, a mute and silent witness to the progress they had made.

Wasitora bristled. The backward-facing mask was an old jungle trick, designed to protect the final member of a procession from animal attack. Its unblinking eyes were always alert, and jungle lore said that even the most savage beasts would not attack prey that was facing them.

Did they think she was some kind of animal? A mere brute, enslaved to her instincts?

Angrily, Wasitora opened her eyes wide. Her vertical pupils expanded until only a thin outline of yellow showed around the black. Now she could see the jungle as patterns of hot and cold. Lush greens and bright flowers faded into an otherworldly collage of orange, yellow, and red.

The trees and the jungle floor were a neutral gray, on which the Suq'Atans were like individual flames dancing on dry parchment. The riders shone rosy peach atop their fine horses, which were bright red. Wasitora scanned the

wagons but found only two dull yellow glows inside. The final two warriors were identical to the four up front, but the officer shone like a torch atop his red steed.

With the horses moving off, Wasitora suddenly smelled something delicious in the last wagon. She inhaled deeply, slowly, and nodded. Dried fish. One of the Suq'Atans was carrying some kind of dried, spiced fish that she had never encountered before. It smelled very good.

Carefully, the cat-dragon brought her hind legs up so that all four of her feet were side by side. She half-extended either wing and leaned forward slightly on the huge branch.

The last wagon had navigated a sharp curve in the path and was moving out of sight. The final two warriors turned to the officer, and he nodded them forward.

As soon as the last warrior turned the corner and lost his line of sight to the officer, Wasitora struck.

Her powerful hind legs dug into the branch. Her wings snapped out to their full length, and her great fuzzy tail waved gently behind her, testing the air and balancing her in flight.

Completely silent, she swooped down so that her belly almost touched the jungle floor, skimming a mere span above the ground. She held out her wide flat forepaws, terrible claws extended. The wind whistled in her ears, but the Suq'Atan officer heard nothing.

Wasitora drove her forward claws deep into the soil just behind the officer's horse, rebounding off the ground with her huge, hinged jaws open wide. The recoil sent her sharply up, and her teeth sank into the officer's robe. Wasitora simultaneously pushed off the ground with her hind legs and flapped her wings.

She jerked the officer out of his saddle so hard he had no chance to cry out. Eye to eye with the painted mask, she soared up with the Suq'Atan in her teeth. They shot into the canopy, and Wasitora dodged a series of horizontal branches. Then she lowered her head slightly so that the

final branch slammed across the officer's abdomen.

The Suq'Atan folded around the bough and grunted explosively. Wasitora relaxed her grip, leaving the man draped across the branch. As she sailed over him, she dragged her fangs through his fine robes, along his spine and up the back of his head. The mask popped off and split in two as it bounced down to the jungle floor. Tatters of fine Suq'Atan silk fluttered after it.

Wasitora burst through the top of the canopy into the brutally hot Jamuraan sun, and then she rolled and dived back into the greenery.

Below, the officer hung as limply as a discarded gown, his fingers brushing against his feet as he swayed. He groaned softly, blood staining the ruined robes around his bare, bleeding back.

Wasitora smiled.

She perched on another sturdy branch and then swiftly stalked among the treetops until the caravan was below her again. They were stopped, and the soldiers huddled around the third wagon, conferring and gesturing angrily. They had noticed the loss of their leader. This changed the game, but for the better: Now they looked ready for a fight.

Briefly, it occurred to Wasitora that if she had wanted to make a day of baiting the caravan, she should have chosen a less important target for her first pass. Then she remembered the backward-facing mask and sneered. There really was no other choice. Such a clumsy ploy, against her? The officer had practically begged to be taken first.

A thin, wizened figure stepped out of the third wagon. He wore a black skullcap and a resplendent purple robe that was embroidered with silver stars. His throat bobbed as he talked, and even from her position high in the trees, Wasitora could hear his reedy voice crack. She could also smell the dried fish on his breath, and she growled playfully as her eyes followed his every movement.

"We must continue," the old man said, "and with more

speed. Much more. Jarim was oath-bound to deliver the suzerain's son in time for the wedding."

One of the female warriors shook her head. "We cannot go forward without our leader."

"But we must. Jarim himself told you before we left. We have but three days, and nothing must keep us from reaching the merchant king's palace." The old man clasped his hands together pleadingly, but his voice was firm and commanding. "Nothing."

Bored, Wasitora settled onto her branch and sniffed. Even through the delicious smell of fish, she could still detect the distracting background odor. It teased her, taunted her. It reminded her of her childhood, but she could not say how.

Wasitora had been in this part of the jungle all her life, yet she had never smelled anything quite like it. She rubbed her jaw against the tree, and her claws gouged out little curls of wood.

Below, the Suq'Atans continued to prattle. The warrior woman adjusted her scarf, revealing her angular features. She shook her head and unfurled a long braid of jet-black hair gathered in a series of tight brass rings. "You serve the suzerain," she said to the old fish eater. "But I serve the cavalry. We will search for our leader."

"Your leader served the suzerain, as do we all." He waved his hands around the cluster of warriors. "You are bound by your leader's oath as surely as if you took it yourselves."

Wasitora glanced back at the officer, still unconscious in the trees. The joy of the hunt had gone sour. The caravan would never present a real challenge. They would divide and conquer themselves if she gave them enough time. Plus, she could not escape the distracting odor. She stretched again and wriggled uncomfortably.

She would never be able to relax until she located the source of the strange smell. Best to wrap up her sport here

and strike out in search of whatever was fouling both her stalking grounds and her mood.

"We must go now," the old man insisted.

"Not without Jarim." The woman's face was resolute.

Nervously bunching his gorgeous robe, the old man spoke quietly. "Very well, search if you must. But take only one other rider to help you. The wagons need at least four to travel safely."

The woman nodded. "Agreed." She raised her hood and tucked her scarf back into it. "Make haste. We will catch up to you when we have found our leader."

Jarim's unconscious body dropped heavily onto the roof of the third wagon. Naked to the waist, the broad-shouldered officer bounced once, rolled over on his side, and fell to the ground.

"Found him." Wasitora grinned down from the trees, her yellow eyes shining in the shadows. "Who is queen?" she purred.

She had learned the two-leggers' language through a hundred different pleas, threats, and bargains offered by a hundred different guests in her jungle. They came in all sizes and shapes, in all manner of dress, but they all had one thing in common: They talked a lot. She always relished the brief moment of shocked silence when she revealed herself.

Just now, the look of bewilderment on each Suq'Atan face was priceless. Wasitora took in their shock, their concern, their fear, and her smile grew wider. Then, she pounced.

The old man was canny enough to drop to his knees, so she sailed over him and landed on the jungle floor between the wagon and the mounted warriors. Though she weighed enough to shake the trees, her powerful legs absorbed the impact and her padded feet barely sank into the packed pathway.

The woman warrior's horse reared in the face of the sudden threat. She let out a war cry and drew her scimitar.

With claws retracted, Wasitora swatted the horse across the chest. Steed and rider alike flew back as if fired from a cannon, and the horse whinnied in pain and panic.

As the woman struggled to regain control of the thrashing animal, the five remaining riders drew their blades. They spurred their mounts, two driving left, two driving right, and the last riding straight at the great beast.

Before the horses completed a second stride, a brown and gold blur swept across the Suq'Atans. Polished steel shattered under the force of the blow, and a shower of sharp metal and an occasional severed finger arced high into the air. Five warriors were left holding bladeless scimitar handles or cradling wounded hands to their chests.

Wasitora hissed and snapped at the stunned warriors. Three of the horses threw their riders and bolted off into the deeper jungle. The remaining Suq'Atans gripped their reins and fought to stay atop their bucking steeds.

"Mercy, great nekoru."

She turned and growled. The old man's skullcap was askew, but he had regained his feet. He bowed his head and stretched his arms out wide, his empty hands open and facing Wasitora.

"You may not address me."

"Forgive me, O queen. We had heard this path was patrolled by one of the exalted cat-dragons. We had no wish to intrude, but our need was great."

Without turning from the old man, Wasitora lashed out behind her. Her back claws sliced through a leather saddle and took a small strip of horseflesh beneath. One of the last two mounted warriors howled as he slid from his steed's back and fell under its frenzied hooves.

"'One of?'" Wasitora's pupils widened. "There are none like me in all the world."

"Truly," the old man said instantly. "You are unique. Grace, speed, and power. What a singular blend of virtues."

"Beauty," Wasitora sniffed. "Don't forget the beauty."

"Never, ma'am. Its brilliance momentarily blinded me, so that I could not see."

"Turn, nekoru."

Wasitora's eyes and one ear flickered at the sound.

Breathing heavily, the female Suq'Atan stood with her sword drawn, robes torn and dirty. Only a thin strip of her face was visible through her hood and scarves, revealing fierce brown eyes and the bridge of her nose.

Wasitora reoriented on the old man. "I like your manners," she said. "Give me your fish."

The old man hesitated for only a second. Then he pulled a parcel from a pocket on his robe and began fumbling with the string.

"That's it. Give it here."

The old man held out a thick slab of dried, salted sea bass. With a single swipe, Wasitora snatched it from his fingers. She tucked the morsel into her mouth, and it vanished among knifelike teeth.

Behind the gorgeous monster, the Suq'Atan woman raised her sword. This time, she remained silent as she expertly lunged, her scimitar's edge slashing toward Wasitora.

The cat-dragon spun in place, pivoting one of her back feet as she propelled herself with the other. She passed her forepaw across the woman's face and then completed her spin with another quick shove.

The woman's sword lay in pieces on the ground. Her hood hung from Wasitora's extended claws. Her ringed hair swung freely around her shoulders, and her long, aquiline face was frozen in shock. A thin slash opened over her eyes, splitting her eyebrows horizontally. Blood dripped from the wound and flowed down into her face.

"Go away," Wasitora spoke through a mouthful of dried sea bass, "or I'll pluck your eye out and show it to you."

The Suq'Atan warrior staggered and dropped heavily onto her rear. She blinked through blood and tears, her expression vacant.

Wasitora licked the claw that had speared the fish and glared at the old man.

"What did you call me when I first arrived? Nekoru?"

The old man staggered back against the wagon. He smiled weakly.

"I asked you a question."

"The word was 'nekoru,' Great One. The noble race of cat-dragons." He adjusted his skullcap. "Creatures . . . not unlike yourself. They are more common in central Jamuraa."

Wasitora leaned forward so that her breath rustled the old man's wiry eyebrows. "And you've seen them? Creatures not unlike me?"

"Yes. None nearly so beautiful, of course."

"Of course." Wasitora's thoughts were racing. More creatures like her? That could explain the distracting scent. She had never seen another of her kind . . . never even imagined a creature she could consider a peer. She needed to know more.

"Dispense with the flattery for a moment, no matter how justified."

"Of course, O queen."

"These nekoru you've seen. Do they ever gather in large numbers?"

"Nekoru are rare and solitary," he said. "I have read that they do gather, but no one knows why." The old man took a quick glance over his shoulder at the closed wagon door.

"Pay attention," Wasitora said. "Or I'll have the young manling inside that wagon for my supper."

The old man blanched. He steadied himself on the wagon's rail. "Forgive me, O queen."

Wasitora stared down at the frightened figure in purple. Behind her, the Suq'Atans were regrouping. They had dismounted and tied whatever horses they had to the trees. They stood in a semicircle, mumbling, wide-eyed, fear-struck.

"You may leave me," Wasitora said gracefully. "Your

information and your humble bearing have pleased me. Be on your way and be quick about it."

The old man bowed. "Thank you, Great One."

"Wait," she said. "I want more fish."

The Suq' Atans froze, and the old man bowed.

"Alas, but we have no more. It was a small indulgence I allowed myself for the journey."

Wasitora's upper lip curled, revealing a clean, white fang as long as man's arm. "Where'd you get that fish?"

"We bought it from a Madaran merchant, Great One. He said it was from the Madaran village called Pelada."

She sniffed. "Get some more before you come through here again."

"Of course, Great One. We shall bring an extra wagon load, just for you."

Wasitora's lip remained curled. "You'd better go now. You're starting to annoy me. If you encounter anyone else, any person, beast, or thing, tell them about me. I rule all, from here to the edge of the jungle. And I do not like guests."

"I shall, Great One. For now that I have seen your glory, I cannot help but speak of it."

Wasitora's eyes narrowed again. "Cajolery suits you, old man. Are you by chance a diplomat?"

The wizened head bobbed. "I am Imrul, grand vizier to the great suzerain, Akhmer."

Wasitora shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"No, Great One."

"But make sure he hears of me. The next Suq' Atan caravan that comes through here will pay proper tribute, not skulk through, masked like thieves."

"Of course, Great One."

She darted forward and dragged her spiny tongue up the side of the old man's face. Though she could have easily torn the flesh right off his skull, she merely rasped his cheek and forehead, leaving him red and slightly bleeding.

"That was good fish," she said.

Imrul squinted through the pain. "Thank you, mighty queen."

"Right. Off you go." She stretched up, sniffing the air. Yes. The scent was stronger to the west. The breezes carried it from the great wooded ridges that bordered her jungle.

"Great One?"

She hissed. "This audience is over."

Imrul clasped his hands, almost pleading. "You have not told us your name, O queen. My aged heart quails at the thought of spreading tales of your glory without citing your noble designation."

The great cat dragon smiled, revealing twin lines of razor-sharp teeth.

"I am Wasitora," she said, "first among the elite and ruler of all I survey."

"Hail, Wasitora," Imrul said. "May the divine spirits bless the nekoru queen."

Wasitora coughed derisively. "If they're lucky," she replied, "I will bless them."

* * * * *

Wasitora soared over the thick jungle until the landscape grew rockier. She endured the afternoon sun for several hours, moving ever westward, diving below the canopy only to drink and reestablish the scent trail.

She was nearly there. She could see sharp rock shelves ahead, breaking up the vast expanse of trees. Beyond the ridges were the towering Myar Mountains, but her nose told her she wouldn't be going that far.

The closer she got to the ridges, the stronger the smell became. It increased in complexity as well, subtle variations and shades of sensation that rose and fell like a sea breeze. At full potency, the scent stung like a needle in her brain. At its faintest, it galled her like a maddening itch at the back of her skull.

No fewer than six creatures had come this way during the last day and night. They left few visible signs, but Wasitora knew the jungle well, knew what it looked like after a large, stealthy creature had moved through it. From the familiar pattern of pin holes and claw marks in the trees overhead and the recurring series of bent branches and broken leaves, she estimated each of the six was even larger than she. And they were each headed in the same direction.

She was both excited and annoyed. Excited, because she was tracking others of her kind, perhaps even nekoru she was related to by blood. She had never even imagined they existed, and now they were gathering in large numbers. Annoyed, because her distant relatives were staging a reunion right next to her territory and they hadn't even invited her.

She heard a great whooshing sound from the jungle below — other large creatures nearby. If they were also nekoru, they were aware of her.

A great gray male erupted like a geyser from the canopy. He was far larger than Wasitora, but leaner, more streamlined. He plowed through the thick branches and interwoven leaves almost without resistance, scattering wood and vegetation.

Wasitora drew up and stayed where she was, careful not to let the strain of hovering show on her face. They were well within each other's striking distance.

The gray male had never taken his eyes off Wasitora, and he, too, flapped his wings madly to hover in place.

"I am Uttenatsu, the Striking Thunder." The lanky nekoru spoke with a nasal, almost whispering tone, and his eyes were clear blue. He was a magnificent creature, white-winged and longhaired, powerful and precise as he hovered.

Wasitora caught herself sizing up Uttenatsu as a potential mate and then hissed. "You may not address me." With a broad sweep of her wings, Wasitora darted over the lanky gray male.

There was a blur, and Uttenatsu suddenly blocked her path.

Again, she halted and hovered, staring at the male.

"Your name," he growled.

Wasitora lashed out, driving her forepaw deep into the center of Uttenatsu's face.

The big gray let out a muffled cry as her blow compressed his neck bones down into his spine. Uttenatsu's wings fell limp, and the great creature crashed through the jungle canopy.

Without glancing down, Wasitora spread her wings and resumed her flight to the rocky ridges ahead. One way or another, she was going to free herself of the maddening scent's irresistible power.

Behind her, Uttenatsu impacted the ground.

Wasitora snorted. She wasn't going to suffer any foolishness until she wanted to.

Soon, Wasitora had lighted on the tallest peak of the sharpest ridge, overlooking a grassy valley. There, across several acres of rolling hills, more than a dozen nekoru sat, napped, and glared at each other. Most of them managed to crane their heads up lazily, to make a half-hearted inspection of the new arrival. For the most part they didn't seem interested in anything at all.

There were two main groups, each split into several smaller clusters of ones and twos. To the right, seven or more large males skulked and glowered, eyeing each other sideways and occasionally lashing out. No blows were thrown in earnest, however, and it seemed they were mostly interested in clearing out space for themselves. Across an empty stretch of grass were the females, two clusters and one solitary, off in the shadow of the ridge.

The gathering of nekoru was like some wild dream of colorful danger. The largest male's coat was a field of pure, unbroken black, but the others were all a patchwork of whites, golds, and browns. Never having witnessed the

splendor of so many of her kind before, Wasitora was almost overwhelmed with pride. This was her extended family, and together they created a collage too marvelous, too luxurious for most eyes.

She grinned and licked her chops. Besides, she thought, individually or as a group, none of them is anywhere near as gorgeous as I.

Wasitora leaped from the craggy peak and floated gently down into the uninhabited border between the two larger groups. She settled onto her haunches and began grooming herself. She purred loudly.

One of the females rose, a lean, shorthaired creature with smoke-blue fur and soil-brown socks. She had black ears and pale green eyes. She whispered something to the nekoru on either side of her, revealing needle-like fangs.

The two nekoru flanking the shorthaired female had similar coloring, but one was longhaired and the other had a black mask of fur. They whispered back, and all three approached Wasitora.

She continued to groom herself until they were a short fifty spans away.

"Sodazia," the shorthaired one in the middle said. She kept her cold, calculating eyes fixed on Wasitora. "Magnificent Fortune."

"Yirekabe," said the longhaired, smoke-colored cat. "Beautiful Sword."

"Dhamisara," said the face with the mask. "Razor Wind."

Wasitora continued to drag her rough tongue through the silky fur on her forelimb. She gave her paw one last inspection, placed it on the grass, and turned her head to face the trio. "Who is queen?"

Sodazia smiled cruelly, and her pupils opened wide. "That's what we're here to determine. What is your name, wild girl?"

Wasitora scowled. "Wrong answer." She snorted and turned away.

Before she could take a single step, the three flashed around her and blocked her path. With their wings half-up and their ears pinned back against their heads, the three females hissed in unison.

"Name," Sodazia said.

"Now," added Yirekabe.

"You're new, aren't you?" Dhamisara relaxed, but she didn't back away and she didn't fold her wings. "I've never seen her before. Have you?"

Yirekabe leaned in and took a tentative sniff. "Never."

"She's from the wilds." Sodazia sat where she was, eye to eye with Wasitora. "She probably doesn't even know her name. Or her dam's."

The other two hissed their disapproval.

"Scandalous," said Yirekabe.

"Sad, really." Dhamisara sniffed in false sympathy. "No company, no one to hunt with. How lonely she must have been. How achingly pathetic."

"Just sit at the rear of the pack, dear," said Sodazia, "with the other adolescents. You don't really have a chance this year, so it's best you keep out of harm's way."

Yirekabe suddenly loomed close over Wasitora's shoulder. "Go now," she whispered. "It's nearly time."

Dhamisara braced Wasitora from the other side, hemming her in. "Hurry," she purred, "or we'll have to move you."

A low, urgent growl started in Wasitora's chest. Both of the crowding nekoru took an involuntary step back as the growl climbed up Wasitora's throat, threatening to burst from her mouth.

"Wild girl wants to play," Sodazia sneered. "Perhaps there's enough time--"

Before she could finish the thought, a piercing yowl rose from the opposite side of the valley.

The nekoru around Wasitora peered briefly toward the sound and then glanced at each other. Sodazia glared back at Wasitora.

"On second thought," she said sweetly, "stay right here. The only way you're likely to get a male is if he trips over you."

Sodazia backed away and then bounded around Wasitora, heading for the source of the yowl. Yirekabe hissed one last time and followed.

Dhamisara turned, but she paused to say, "A gift for you, dear." Her claws slid out, and she began a backhanded swat aimed for Wasitora's face.

Wasitora's own claws ripped through the flesh, tendons, and muscle in the gray cat's forelimb long before Dhamisara's blow ever landed. Hot blood splattered across the black mask, and Dhamisara screeched in agony.

Wasitora struck twice more, once across the face and once across the larger nekoru's throat. Each blow left deep slashes in her opponent's flesh, and the haughty creature stumbled and fell like a drunken dog.

Wasitora turned and knocked Dhamisara senseless with a stunning blow from her back leg. The wild nekoru began preening once more as Dhamisara shuddered and then lay still.

No one leaped to the fallen nekoru's aid, not even the two who had stood with her. Instead, everyone's attention was fixed on the source of the yowl.

Wasitora sighed and smoothly turned to see what the fuss was all about.

A huge, golden female was strolling down the rocky ridge. She was lean and sleek, larger even than the brute Wasitora had downed over the jungle. Her fur was a perfect cascade of sunrise and clouds, and it sparkled. She walked with confidence, unthreatened by the field of dangerous predators around her. She was beyond unthreatened: She was dismissive.

With a haughty toss of her head, the golden female sauntered up to a flat pedestal of rock. The smaller females scattered as the grand old dame approached. Patiently, the huge

nekoru turned around, settled in, and positioned herself for the best view of the valley.

She scowled when she spotted Wasitora, and jerked her head impatiently to the side. Wasitora merely stared back.

The sunrise female jerked her head again. "You there," she called. "Clear the field."

Wasitora cocked her head to one side. "Who is queen?"

The giant female flattened her ears. "I am. Kinirashi, Golden Storm."

"Wrong," Wasitora said.

Kinirashi bristled. "You are challenging me?"

"I am correcting you. This is my valley, in my home. I rule here."

Kinirashi narrowed her eyes. "I have not seen you before, wild girl. It has been decades since the Contest has been held in these parts. You are part of the nekoru nation, but you know nothing of our ways. Stand aside before you get hurt."

"Never. You—"

"Enough. It begins." The sunrise female drowned Wasitora out with another earsplitting yowl. Kinirashi threw her head as far back as it would go, howling into the sky, her forehead touching her spine.

Behind Wasitora, the males went mad. In a chorus of spitting, snarling, and throaty roars, they tore into each other. The pure black brute threw himself onto a brown, striped longhair with an enormously bushy tail. A small orange-and-white male leaped from foe to foe, slashing off great strips of flesh every time he landed. All around the valley, multi-ton predators lunged, flew, and rolled at one another while Kinirashi continued to yowl.

Wasitora's gaze darted from the huge golden female to the confusion of scrapping males. Had her people gathered together to destroy themselves? Was this the reason they were so rare and solitary?

At last, the horrid yowl died. Kinirashi glared at Wasitora for a few seconds while she regained her breath. "Remove

her," she proclaimed, "or I shall be the only dam this season. Or the nekoru nation will have but one litter, mine."

Instantly, all of the remaining females sprang to their feet. The smallest was timid, gray and white like a striped mouse. She alone stayed in the shadow of the ridge as the other females spread out, advancing on Wasitora in a line. Sodazia and Yirekabe were several paces ahead of the rest.

Behind Wasitora, the males continued to battle. Ahead, the females stalked ever closer, mere moments from striking.

"You're about to make me angry," she said. She hadn't been really good and angry since a pack of wild dogs tried to back her off a kill. By the time she had regained her composure, the pack was in so many pieces it was impossible to say what animal each had come from.

Wasitora's pupils widened, and she saw the advancing nekoru as a necklace of bright and dangerous gems. They were sharp, these social dragons, sharp-tongued and sharp-eyed. Their teeth and claws were keener still. They bore proud names and vibrant colors, and had long ago decided who among them was supreme.

Wasitora coughed, disgusted. Peasants! None of them would survive a week in her jungle.

She sprang forward, her warning growl rising into a full-fledged roar. She had been pouncing from the deepest thickets for over twenty years, pursuing swift prey through the upper reaches of the trees and beating back competitors. On a daily basis, danger came at her from all directions, and if it was stupid enough to line up in front of her, she could afford to take it lightly.

Broad wings and sinewy legs bore Wasitora onto Sodazia's back before the smoke-blue female could dodge. If she hadn't been hemmed in by nekoru, Sodazia might have been able to jump clear. As it was, Wasitora ripped four long slashes in her foe's right wing and stunned her with a powerful blow to the back of the head. Sodazia dropped where she stood.

Wasitora sprang into the air and lashed out with all four limbs, spinning as she struck. She bloodied a spotted nekoru's nose and broke Yirekabe's jaw. She pushed off these victims' heads and tore a gaping hole across the fourth assailant's chest.

Wasitora quickly dashed across the fallen forms, stomping her wide feet into their backs and driving their bodies into the sod. She reversed and danced across them again, backward this time, all the while maintaining her furious, wide-eyed glare at the final female in the attack.

The last standing nekoru was mix of black and white patches. She was heavier than the others, almost obese compared to the lean, sleek bodies of Kinirashi and her followers. The black-and-white nekoru stood frozen, her mouth open and her wings tensed for a quick takeoff.

Wasitora grinned, her hinged jaw hanging low. "Who is queen?" she purred.

The nekoru glanced up at Kinirashi and then back at Wasitora.

"Not me." The heavysset female sprang into the air, beat her wings, and disappeared into the evening sky.

Beneath Wasitora's feet, the other females shuddered and groaned. Whenever one tried to rise, Wasitora stepped on her head and hissed, "Stay down."

On the opposite side of the field, the males had stopped their fight to watch the action around Wasitora. Most of the males were bleeding, limping, or lying down, but the huge black male was unscathed. He sat staring at Wasitora, with several of the others waiting just behind him.

Kinirashi stood, growling angrily. She shook herself and sent a wave of muscular power rippling down her back. "Enough!" she cried. She stretched and let out another yowl.

Wasitora winced and rolled her eyes. "You've got to shut up now," she called. "Your singing is so bad it hurts my feelings."

The able-bodied males nearby all coughed and snorted

with laughter. Kinirashi saw them, and the awful racket died down. "What," her voice dripped menace, "did you say?"

"I said—"

Wasitora's reply was cut off by a stinging slap from Kinirashi. The sunrise female covered the great distance between them almost faster than Wasitora could follow. She reeled back from the blow, but Kinirashi had kept her claws sheathed, so there was no blood.

"Mind your manners," Kinirashi said, safely back on her stone pedestal. "I didn't get to be queen by taking such sass from my inferiors."

Wasitora sneezed and blinked her smarting eyes clean. The bones in her face felt cracked, and even the slightest change in her expression came with agonizing pain. Wasitora concentrated, calling on a lifetime of memories in the jungles of Jamuraa. She had been injured before, many times, and had long ago learned how to heal herself. She was a wild creature, a link in the jungle's great chain. To restore herself, she needed simply to reaffirm her position in that chain. Healing energy surged through her, as green and lush as harvest crops. She brimmed over with vitality, and the pain in her face vanished as the bones knit. Wasitora glared up at Kinirashi.

"You're not a queen," she snarled. She sat up, forepaws and wings spread wide. "This is a nekoru queen. I have a royal beating ready for you, O Golden Storm. Come and take it."

Kinirashi turned her head. "Wild girl. You have the rarest gift any of us can hope for: a connection to Nature herself. In all the nekoru nation, there are but three who possess this ability." She turned back, her eyes cold. "And I can still kill you five times before you hit the ground."

"Says you. But I say that before you ever touch me again, you'll be face down in the dirt without knowing how you got there."

Wasitora watched the older nekoru carefully. Kinirashi is fast, she thought. Perhaps as fast as I. But she was careless and vain to have landed a bloodless blow when she could have killed. Wasitora would not allow herself to be surprised again. The old dragon was not likely to give her another chance to regenerate.

Kinirashi kept her face turned from Wasitora, but the smaller dragon watched the muscles in her adversary's shoulders. If the golden nekoru sprang or took flight, those muscles would twitch. If Wasitora could strike between the time Kinirashi's shoulders twitched and the pretender queen tore out her throat, victory was assured.

The shoulders twitched. Wasitora lashed out at the blur of motion streaking toward her, silently reassuring herself that she had aimed and timed her counterstrike correctly.

Her faith was rewarded when the tips of her claws sank into the fur under Kinirashi's wrist. The old nekoru was powerful and swift, but Wasitora held the great golden paw at bay, less than a span from her own face. She enjoyed the view of the luxurious extremity, and then Kinirashi drew her paw back.

So quick was the golden nekoru's reaction that Wasitora's claws barely broke the skin on her forelimb. She struck again while Wasitora was off balance, but the jungle dragon hunched her spine and pulled her torso clear of the blow.

Wasitora slapped Kinirashi across the face, a quick pop on the cheek before drawing her paw back. "That's one." Wasitora scored again with another quick slap from the opposite side.

Kinirashi flailed to defend herself, her limbs leaden and slow by comparison. She squawked in outrage.

"Two." Wasitora landed two more slaps, one from each side. "Three, four."

The blows came faster, and Wasitora stopped counting as her paws outstripped her mouth. She alternated right, left, right, left. Kinirashi howled and staggered, but every time

she struck, Wasitora was gone, her stream of stinging blows uninterrupted.

Wasitora found her rhythm. She fell into a smooth, increasingly fast pattern until even she could not follow her paws. In an ecstasy of physical motion, Wasitora filled the air around Kinirashi's head with fur and bone and claws until at last the golden nekoru stumbled and fell into an awkward heap.

Slowly, almost daintily, Wasitora walked up onto the fallen nekoru's chest, planted her feet on Kinirashi's face, and sat on her torso.

"Who is queen?" she purred.

Unconscious, Kinirashi did not reply. However, a low, booming voice rang out from directly behind Wasitora, almost startling her.

"You are, wild girl."

She turned, and the giant black male stood, leering slightly as his tail swished back and forth.

"Mayonako," he boomed. "Midnight. I am the alpha sire." Mayonako quickly glared behind him, and the rest of the males found somewhere else to look. "And you are the alpha dam. The Contest is over. Come." He extended a silky black paw to Wasitora and spread his wings out behind him.

Impatiently, Wasitora slapped his paw aside. "Get away," she snarled. "If you're the prize for winning this contest, I'd rather have lost."

Mayonako's eyes glittered. His pupils were a deep, rich blue. "I am your prize," he said, "as you are mine. It is our way. Only the fittest adults may mate. The others must wait until we have conceived the next litter. And then, only if we permit it." He edged closer and extended his paw again. "Tell me your name, O queen, and I will call you to my side."

Wasitora looked the huge male over, from the tips of his ears to the end of his tail. He was gorgeous. Healthy, muscular, old enough to know his own strength but young enough to

swagger. Every other male in the field was marked, bleeding, or bruised, but not Mayonako. His magnificent fur was an unbroken field of silky black.

She turned her back on him and sprang up onto Kinishi's pedestal. She settled into a comfortable position, facing away from Mayonako, and then glanced back at him from the corner of her eye.

"Piss off," she said. "I'll call you when I'm ready. If I'm ready."

A feline laugh rose from the other males, but Mayonako silenced them with a growl. Slowly, guiltily, the rest of the males withdrew.

Mayonako sat and began preening, affecting a casual, disinterested pose. "I will be here when you are ready, O queen." He smiled up at her. "If you are ready. But please. Tell us your name. Even if you don't want the prize, the next contestants will want to know."

Wasitora yawned. "Later."

"Please." Mayonako narrowed his eyes and licked his lips. "Give us something to remember you by."

The hypnotic stripes and patches on her coat shimmered. "I am Wasitora," she said airily. "Eagle Tiger. Queen of the nekoru and all I survey."

Mayonako tossed his head back and let out an ecstatic wowl. All around the valley, the remaining nekoru took up the wowl. Soon the entire ridge echoed with the cries of jubilant dragons.

Wasitora stared straight ahead, ignoring the cacophony around her. If the assembled nekoru nation could see her face, they would have seen her smile. If they weren't making so much racket, they would have heard her purr.

Finally — she thought, the calm and beautiful eye of a colorful, dangerous storm — I'm getting the respect I deserve.

* * * * *

One week later, Wasitora was once more soaring over the jungles of Jamuraa.

In the end, she had relented. She declared that all of the assembled nekoru could mate if they so wished. She waxed eloquent on the subject of expanding the nation. She magnanimously extended the privileges of sire and dam to all her people.

Below, the carpet of green whisked by. She was hungry now, but she would not stop until she was closer to the coast.

To the east, across the sea, Madara beckoned. She had greatly enjoyed the dried sea bass offered up by Imrul, the Suq'Atan vizier. If Madara had enough fish to dry and sell this far away, then it surely had enough for her and her litter.

Wasitora's stomach growled, and she turned a playful roll as she flew. Her own mother had sent her out into the wilds as soon as she could hunt for herself. She had grown up fast and strong and sure, more than able to care for herself. But she wondered about the rest of Jamuraa's nekoru. They were too much like the Suq'Atans, too concerned with society and ritual. She would raise her children far away from the Contest, far away from the stuffy, slow-moving snobs and their portentous names.

Wasitora rolled again. In a few months, she would have a litter of her own. Several months after that, a year at most, and she would have laid the foundations for an entirely new nekoru nation on Madara.

And one day, years or even generations in the future, her daughters and granddaughters would fly side by side with her sons and grandsons back to Jamuraa. They would seek out the Contest, and they would announce to a sea of awestruck faces who their dam was and how mighty the Madaran nekoru had become.

And her children, and her grandchildren, her enemies and lovers alike, would all answer the question properly.

For there would be only one true and undeniable ruler of the nekoru.

"Who is queen?" she whispered aloud. Wasitora purred as she flew, and she envied any sentient creatures below. While her view included the gorgeous blue sky, the rich vibrant colors of the jungle, and the pure billowing white of Jamuraa's majestic clouds, anyone below could see all that and her as well.

She rolled once more for their benefit, to make their joy as complete as possible, and then soared off into the rising sun.

W I L L M C D E R M O T T

ACH! HANS, RUN!



The beast emerged from the pine trees surrounding its lair, the bloody carcass of an arctic fox impaled on its mandibles. Blood dripped from the paws of the limp fox and plopped onto the snow-covered ground, leaving nothing but wisps of steam. Behind the beast was a trail of tiny holes as the hot red liquid tried to burn its way down through centuries of ice and snow.

Flush with power from the kill, the lhurgoyf towered over the entrance to the cave in the cliff face. As the gangly beast approached the hole, it swung its head—which seemed more an extension of its long neck than an actual appendage—down toward the ground. Dull black skin drew taut over muscles as the beast flexed its arms and legs to bend lower. With elbows and knees splayed and joints jutting almost straight up into the air, the creature crawled into the cave.

The fox dragged on the ground as the lhurgoyf's long, narrow head reached the snow. The fibrous tendrils that surrounded its mouth slowly pulled the kill into the beast's maw while it curled its head upward like a snake about to

swallow its prey whole. But the creature did not eat the fox. Once inside the lair, the lhurgoyf reached into its mouth with one massive hand and pulled the fox back out. Holding the carcass almost gently between two clawed fingers, the beast set it down on a rock in the outer cavern.

Once the sweet scent of fox blood no longer filled its nostrils, the beast stiffened and began weaving its head back and forth to smell the cave. The odor was not right. There was too much blood to have come from the small fox, and another odor mixed with that sharp smell. Something dirty and foul hung in the air and clung to every surface like soot.

The lhurgoyf stalked to the back of the first chamber and snaked its head around the opening to peer into the rear cavern. The beast's eyes widened in horror.

The walls of the chamber were covered in blood, splatters of the viscous ichor reaching all the way to the roof of the cave. Here and there, bits of skin, brain, and intestines stuck to the tacky, drying blood.

In the middle of the floor, surrounded by a lake of red, lay the decimated carcass of a lhurgoyf, a female lhurgoyf. Its head had been crushed, the bones of the skull driven through the brain and down through the bottom of the jaw. Behind the crushed skull lay the dead beast's body, the neck severed. This was no clean cut. The long neck had been hacked over and over again all along the spine until the flesh could no longer hold together. Like the skull, the creature's rib cage had been shattered, destroying organs and spraying gore onto the floor, walls, and ceiling.

With an almost calm stillness, the lhurgoyf took in the brutal scene, but a fire burned within as it treaded through the pool of blood to reach its dead mate. Folding itself down onto the sticky floor, the beast laid its head across the still form and began to whimper like a hungry dog. As it lay there, holding the cooling corpse, the lhurgoyf glanced back toward a crevice in the wall at the back of the cave. The crevice, now empty, once held the beast's only other

treasure, the only thing more important than its mate, the only piece left of its former life.

The beast's eyes flared with anger again as it glared at the empty crevice. Sniffing the air, the lhurgoyf drew the smell of prey into its nostrils. The scent had been left behind by the barbaric murderers and thieves who had entered its lair and destroyed its life — the unmistakable stench of men.

* * * * *

Holgar knelt in the mud and slush at the edge of the frozen stream, shivering as he plunged his thick arms into the water through a hole in the ice. "I don't think this blood will ever come off," he said as he scrubbed his numbing arms.

"That's your problem, Holgar," said Fedor, the scowl on his face quite evident in his voice. "You don't think. You never think." Fedor scratched at the short-cropped beard covering his cheeks and neck, digging at a patch of dead skin on his chin. He wondered, not for the first time, whether life in the Balduvian wilds wouldn't be easier without his brother around. If not for this interminable ice age, he might have had a very different life.

"What d'ya mean?" asked Holgar as he wiped his arms on his leather breeches and stood to face his brother.

"I mean," said Fedor, "the beast was dead after you crushed its skull. The rest was wasted effort."

"Messy effort, too," agreed Holgar, smiling broadly.

Fedor shook his head and groaned. "I just thank the winds that your mayhem didn't destroy these," he said, pulling out a small leather pouch from the pack at his feet.

Holgar dropped to the ground next to his brother and began wiping the red stains from his serrated sword blade. "What are we gonna do with those, Fed?" he asked.

Fedor spread out the pouch and gazed at the large crystals. The gems reflected the rippling water and the

blue-white snow as easily as the firelight. The effect was a tantalizing rainbow that widened Fedor's eyes and his imagination.

"We're going to be warm," he said wistfully, gazing into a world beyond the crystals that only he could see; a world where his next meal didn't come from the end of his brother's sword; a world where his brains were worth more than his brother's brawn. "We're going to be warm for the rest of our lives, Holgar," he said. "For the rest of our lives. Now, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we head to town."

* * * * *

The lhurgoyf bent its head low to the ground and sniffed the ash. It had loped through the wilds all night following the stench of the men. Its mate's bloody scent still hung thick in the air, like fog on a misty morning. The men had stopped here, bedded here, befouled the water with their bodies and their waste here.

The beast snorted to clear its nostrils of the smoke and blood still hanging in the air and prowled around the makeshift camp. Then, with a howl that shook snow loose from the boughs of the trees, the lhurgoyf loped off through the forest again. The beast moved almost silently as its sinewy body found paths through the thick underbrush.

The trail was taking the beast farther south than it had been in many winters, since the time when the burly men had come out of the mountains and settled in the valley where the two rivers met. After a time, the lhurgoyf began to pass signs of man's habitation: patches of felled trees, great pits that stank of ash and burned meat, trampled snow that turned to mush during the day and then refroze as oval patches of ice at night.

If its rage had not clouded its instinct, the creature would have turned back by now. It was heading toward a large group of man lairs. It knew better than to hunt in this area.

The beast knew no fear of man, but it had learned to be cautious around them—a lesson that had come home the night before. But today, the beast had no care for caution, only blood. As it crashed through the brush, it howled again, splitting the air like a bolt of thunder. The beast bounded toward a wooden wall, the only thing that stood between it and the main lairs.

* * * * *

“Ach! Hans, run!” said Saffi Eriksdotter. “It’s the lhurgoyf!”

Hans, barely six feet tall and weighing no more than eleven stones, was still too small to join the hunting parties. In two winters on guard duty, the worst danger he’d faced had been a rabid fox that had nearly nipped his leg. The rush of that evening had long ago subsided, and Hans spent most of his time dozing and dreaming of killing a real beast. Roused by Saffi’s call, Hans pushed away from the post and wiped the gunk from the corners of his eyes.

The beast was already on top of Saffi, pinning his sister to the ground. Saffi squirmed under its immense weight, her arms and legs completely useless. The lhurgoyf pulled her head into its gaping maw and bit down hard through her thick neck. Blood spurted from Saffi’s torso, nearly drenching the smaller guard, as the beast lifted its long neck and tipped its head back to swallow.

Hans opened his mouth to scream, but all that came out was a raspy squeak. He had to find help quickly, before the beast finished its meal. His stomach churned at the callous thought, and tears began to well up in his eyes. But fear overwhelmed sorrow when the beast pushed Saffi’s bloody foot into its mouth and looked over at the young warrior. Hans wasn’t sure, but he thought the lhurgoyf had grown taller. At that point, Hans found his voice and began to scream as he raced into town.



Fedor sat comfortably in the crowded alehouse and waited for his aurochs steak. A half-empty stein of dark brown liquid steamed on the table in front of him. A brief display of the lhurgoyf gems in the bottom of Fedor's pouch had gotten the two warriors the best table in the house, right in front of the roaring fire. The heat warmed Fedor's back as he basked in the glow of the half-drunk ale and the promise of the first hot meal he'd tasted in months.

Across from him sat Holgar, his mug of hot ale already drained. He craned his thick neck back and forth, taking in the room. Their table and chairs were set atop a large Balduvian bear pelt, its thick brown fur protecting their feet from the chill of the stone floor. Pale bear furs hung on the walls to keep the cold at bay. Above the mantle was mounted the blue head of a scaled wurm, its teeth as long as Fedor's short sword.

Intrigued by the glint in his brother's eye, Fedor glanced around the room as well and wondered at the strength and barbarity of his own people. The Balduvian men in the room drank from mountain goat horns. They wore dire wolf coats, grizzled wolverine boots, and pygmy allosaurus armor. Fedor wasn't sure, but he thought there was even a stuffed wiitigo standing in one dark corner.

"We shoulda brought the head of that lhurgoyf with us to hang in here," said Holgar. "We're every bit as strong as them who killed these beasts."

Well, you are, thought Fedor as he nodded at his brother, but as long as I have these baubles in my pouch, I'm the big brother. "Maybe next time you'll leave the head intact," he said. Fedor was about to continue berating his brother when a cold wind ushered in a spine-chilling scream.

A lad no taller than Fedor rushed into the room screaming so loud and fast that Fedor couldn't understand a thing the boy said. A busty barmaid ran to the boy and grabbed

him by the shoulders. The barmaid shook the boy gently to calm him. The boy finally took a breath and gasped out a single word that struck Fedor in the spine like an ice dagger. "Lhurgoyf!" squeaked the boy.

Fedor looked at Holgar. The blank expression on his brother's face told him the big, dumb barbarian hadn't heard. "We have to go, Holgar," said Fedor. "Now!" Fedor stood up quickly, pushing his chair back so hard it tipped over on the bear rug and almost fell into the roaring fire.

"But, Fed," started Holgar, pointing to an empty spot on the table in front of him, "I haven't got my food yet."

"No time, Brother," said Fedor. "Something's come up." He glanced over at the chaos brewing by the door. Several barbarians were all talking at once while the boy in their midst pointed and squeaked. "Or about to come up," added Fedor under his breath.

Fedor grabbed the pouch and left the table without even looking back to make sure his brother was following. He headed for the door, trying to skirt around the excited knot of barbarians. As he drew near, they broke up and moved toward the door themselves. Fedor cursed under his breath. His escape was blocked.

A moment later, the wall around the door shook violently and then shattered. Shards of wood and chunks of dried mud flew into the room. Through the gray dust, Fedor could see a large black form. The inky beast snaked into the alehouse like a river of black that ended in a mouth of sharp, white teeth. Facing this horror, Fedor was glad to have a wall of warriors in front of him. But he still needed a way out.

Fedor turned on his heels and began picking his way back through the suddenly chaotic room. Warriors were rushing in every direction. Those who had weapons moved toward the beast. Others ran for their axes and swords, while some herded their loved ones toward a stairway. The stairs, thought Fedor. That's my exit. A chorus of screams

and a loud crash signaled that the fight was not going well for the barbarians. Fedor drew his sword and headed purposefully toward the throng of young women and children moving up the steps.

"I'll get your families to safety," he told the older warrior at the base of the steps. "You're needed in the fight." The man nodded and moved away. Fedor began moving up the steps past the children and one comely, auburn-haired girl. Fedor smiled at the girl as he slipped past, silently vowing to return for her once he'd sold the lhurgoyf gems.

"Follow me children . . . and young ladies," he said as he glanced down at the girl. But then, Fedor's eyes strayed from the girl's blouse to the carnage below, and his heart sank. His stupid brother had not followed him. Holgar must have led the second charge, for he was now standing toe-to-toe with the huge beast, swinging his huge sword over his head to keep the beast's enormous mouth at bay. Idiot, thought Fedor. He's trying to get that prize for the wall.

Fedor thought for a moment about running back down to help his brother, but realized the folly of that line of thinking. Better that one of us lives through this to reap the bounty of these gems, he thought, and turned back to the young lass with the red hair and inviting bosom. Much better if it's me, he decided. Fedor continued up the stairs, hoping to find a window or balcony that he could use to escape.

* * * * *

The beast felt a surge of strength as the body of the female guard digested quickly in its pre-stomach. When it ate, it became more powerful, and it would eat a lot this night. Even now, as the smaller guard ran away screaming, the beast could smell many men nearby, including the stench of the two who had killed its mate.

As it ran after the little guard, the beast weaved its head

back and forth, sniffing the air. The man-scent in this place was everywhere, but its quarry was just ahead, in the wooden man-cave where the morsel of a guard had entered.

Breaking into a run, the lhurgoyf lowered its head between its pumping front legs and slammed its shoulder into the side of the man-cave. The wooden entrance exploded inward as the wall splintered around the beast's torso, showering it with wood and mud. The lhurgoyf pulled its long neck up to gaze into the room.

A dozen or so warriors were rushing forward. The little morsel was standing with several others to the side. None of these smelled right, but the stench of the place made it impossible to distinguish anything beyond the throng of warriors.

As the first warriors swarmed in, the beast struck like a viper, catching a fat man by the head and pulling him off his feet and back toward the shattered wall. The lhurgoyf's mandibles pushed the large head into its open mouth, while it grabbed the warrior's flailing legs in one massive, clawed hand. The fat arms continued to flail for a moment but then went limp as the beast pulled on the legs and clamped down on his head.

The lhurgoyf swung the decapitated warrior in an arc toward the advancing mob, and the meaty club sent them all sprawling. At the end of the arc, the lhurgoyf released its hold on the fat warrior's legs, letting the corpse fly along with three men straight into another wall of the man-cave. All four bodies went through the wall to land in a heap in the chamber beyond, with several beams on top of the pile.

It had been a great tactical move, but the fat man's head had been less than satisfying. Battle made the lhurgoyf hungry, and hunger enraged the creature. A primal urge to feed welled up inside the beast, threatening to cloud its purpose. It must eat again soon. The morsel still stood against the wall. The lhurgoyf advanced on the small warrior, its mandibles swaying as it opened its mouth.

A new scent wafted into its nostrils — the stench of one of the warriors from the cave, one of the mate-killers. The lhurgoyf turned just in time to see the large barbarian swing his broadsword. He was fully a foot taller than any other man in the room, and his swing was deadly. The beast had just enough time to throw its front paw up to meet the blow. The lhurgoyf paid for the parry with two claws and the toes they were connected to. But the blade veered wildly, and the barbarian was thrown off balance by the sudden redirection of his blade.

The creature rammed its open maw at the huge barbarian to catch him in a death grip. Backpedaling, the warrior swung his double-edged blade above him, forcing the beast to pull up. The lhurgoyf came in low, trying to slide underneath the sword, but the mate-killer jumped to the side and swung his sword back around to parry. Bloodlust welled up inside the lhurgoyf.

The warriors who had been tossed aside by the man-club had gotten to their feet and began to stick their blades into the lhurgoyf's flanks and legs. Most of these attacks were like pine-needle pricks to the lhurgoyf, but one warrior struck a deep gash into its foreleg.

The beast howled in pain and whipped its head around in a blindingly fast arc. Its wide-open mouth dropped down over the head and shoulders of the warrior. It swallowed the barbarian whole before he could even pull the sword out of the wound. The blade clattered to the stone floor, and the beast turned back around toward the mate-killer. As the devoured warrior began to digest inside, the lhurgoyf grew and healed.

The meal was well-timed. The barbarian's next swing would have sliced through the lhurgoyf's neck, but it had grown, and the sword clattered across its ribs. The warrior took a step backward and fought to grip his sword.

The lhurgoyf shot its injured paw out behind the man's legs and dived down with its mouth open and its mandibles waving.

The warrior dodged back from the glistening teeth, caught his heel on its black claws, and tumbled to the floor. The lhurgoyf sprang forward to pin him, just as it had done to the female guard, but this warrior was faster and stronger. He got both hands back on his sword and raised its point just before the beast landed.

The broadsword's rounded end slid into the beast's torso, skipping off a rib and slicing on through as the beast slammed down atop the warrior. Fury raged inside the lhurgoyf, and pain spread through its body. The man grimaced and twisted the blade inside the wound. Fighting pain, the lhurgoyf thought of the bloody remains of its beloved mate to focus its rage. It slammed its mouth down over the warrior's face. Not bothering to use its mandibles to pull the head inside, the creature clamped its jaws together and bit through the mate-killer's skull.

When the lhurgoyf rose, the large barbarian lay still beneath him, his face and half of his skull gone. The lhurgoyf picked up the warrior and feasted, swatting the other warriors like a horse swats flies. By the time the lhurgoyf finished its meal, it was alone. A half dozen warriors lay crumpled around it, while the rest, including the little morsel, had run away.

Its hunger and fury sated, the lhurgoyf sniffed the air. There had been two in the cave, and one still lived. Surrounded by death, it could smell nothing else. It bent low and squeezed back through the hole it had made coming in. The beast was more than twice the size it had been when it first arrived, but the size and strength would soon fade, and the men might get brave enough to attack again. For now, it had the run of the man-group lair, so it began searching for the second mate-killer.

That scent was no longer in the air around the man-cave. The stench of death and charred flesh made it impossible to find the subtle, pungent odor of the second warrior. The only trail it could find led back to the wall where it had eaten

the female guard, and the odor was old. Outside the group lair, the air was fresher, so the lhurgoyf searched along the wall until it found a fresh trail. It led toward the rising sun.

For days, the beast followed the trail, loping through forests, hills, and an expanse of barren landscape. It headed into the morning sun, ever farther from the icy climes of its home. The track was faint, and the beast often had to double back to pick up the scent again. Its rage and hunger swelled with each passing day, never quite quelled by those times when it entered other man lairs. Each time, the lhurgoyf lost its quarry in the stench and was forced to fight its way out of the walls surrounding the man-caves.

Finally the lhurgoyf faced an enormous wall of stone. It was not held together by mud, as were the walls around the other man lairs. Whatever was packed in with the stones was something the beast had never smelled before. It scratched at the white lines but hardly dented the stuff, and the screeching sound made the lhurgoyf cringe all along its spine.

The creature paced up and down the wall. The mate-killer was inside these walls. The beast's rage almost made it want to crash through the wooden barrier the man had entered a day before. But this was no small man-group. The creature could hardly see the corners of the wall, and there were more warriors walking atop them than the beast had fought in any two of the smaller man lairs.

A dozen arrows had shot out from the wall when the beast moved toward the wooden barrier earlier that morning. Now it skulked in a small wood just out of arrow range, moving closer when it saw no men and skirting all around the lair. The beast sniffed the air and waited for the mate-killer to come back out. In the wilds, the lhurgoyf could wait for days to capture prey, but the beast seethed with anger and bloodlust after its long journey. Soon it would vault the wall and suffer the arrows. Soon it would have its revenge no matter what the cost.

* * * * *

Belenda Danisdotter paced the length of her new room, from the wardrobe where she stowed her skyknight armor to the desk, empty except for a tan envelope bearing the seal of the queen. She stopped at the desk and looked down at the envelope addressed to "Lieutenant Danisdotter." Her delicate fingers pulled at each other, and blonde hair fell across her face.

"Are you ever going to open that blasted envelope, Bell?" asked a voice from the corner of the room.

Lieutenant Bell pulled her hair back and glanced at the woman lounging on her bed. Jaya Ballard was almost a mirror image of the skyknight—a reflection from a dark, shadowy mirror. Red hair cascaded down past her almost boyish face to land on supple yet muscular shoulders that were almost as brown as her sleeveless leather tunic. Bell wondered why Jaya had such dark skin in this age of ice. Perhaps it had something to do with the fire magic she employed.

Bell picked up the envelope and turned it over in her hands. "You open it," she said, holding the envelope out toward the task mage sitting on her bed. "I'm too nervous."

Jaya smirked. "I've already read it."

"What?" asked Belenda. "How?"

Jaya's smile grew even wider. "I have talents other than magic, you know," she said. "Besides, they're just orders. I don't know why you're so worked up. You've been a skyknight for a month. It's not like the queen is going to take away your commission now."

"You could have told me sooner," said Belenda, her lower lip jutting out.

"What, and miss the fun of watching you sweat? Open it, and then we can get to work."

Bell sat in the chair by the desk and examined the envelope, looking for any signs that it had been tampered with.

She could find nothing and tore it open, still half-expecting the letter inside to be bad news. After reading the orders, Belenda furrowed her eyebrows and looked up at Jaya. "What do you mean '*we* can get to work'? You're no skyknight."

Now it was Jaya's turn to look offended. "True," she replied, "but neither would you be if it weren't for me. Face it, you need me. Besides, this looks like fun."

"I suppose you'll expect to be paid," said the lieutenant over her shoulder as she opened the wardrobe and pulled out her red and black uniform.

"Of course," said Jaya. "I couldn't call myself a 'task mage' if I didn't charge something for my services." The young mage rolled over on the mattress and reached under the bed to find her boots. Sitting up to pull them on, she added, "Don't worry, it won't cost you any more than normal."

"I know, I know," replied Belenda from across the room, "I'll owe you a favor."

"Another favor," corrected Jaya, a twinkle in her eye that Bell had seen all too often; a twinkle that meant she was probably going to regret this assignment. "Now, let's go see this barbarian the elite guards have in jail."

* * * * *

Fedor sat on the pallet in the corner of the cell. He rested his chin on his palms, feeling sorry for himself and blaming his brother for everything. "Stupid Holgar," he muttered. "If he hadn't gotten himself killed, I never would have needed the protection of these damned Kjeldorans. Now, look at me. Locked up, away from my gems, nothing to show for all my hard work but a cell and a pallet."

"At least it's warm," he heard a soft voice say from beyond the bars.

Fedor looked up to see two women standing outside his cell.

"Not that I would be too happy about being locked up in there," continued the redhead, "but you could be far worse off, considering."

"Jaya, let me handle this," said the blonde, who was wearing some sort of uniform.

The two women turned away from the cell and started to argue. "You'd should let me do this," said the redhead. "I've dealt with barbarians before. I know how they think."

"I'm in charge of this mission, Jaya," said the blonde. "You're here to help me, so step aside while I interrogate the prisoner."

"We need his help more than we need information, Bell," replied the redhead. "Leave me alone with him for a few minutes, and I assure you, I'll have everything I need to handle the situation. Trust me."

At this point, the blonde pulled the redhead away from the cell and started talking in a whisper so Fedor couldn't hear anymore. He hoped the redhead would win the argument. He was more than willing to help her . . . with anything. They came back after a few moments of very heated whispering. Fedor was sure by the smirk on the redhead's face that she had won the argument.

"Open the cell and let me in with him," said the one called Jaya.

It looked like the one called Bell was about to argue again, but instead she pulled a key from her belt and unlocked the gate. Jaya entered and sat down on the pallet next to Fedor. He was struck by both her beauty and her enticing aroma. Barbarian women never smelled of anything except blood and lard. Fedor looked up again as the gate clanged shut. It seemed that Jaya would conduct the interrogation but that Bell would not be leaving them alone.

Fedor cursed to himself. This Jaya might have dealt with barbarians before, but she had certainly never met one as cunning as he. He had secretly hoped to convince Jaya to set

him free, if only he could be alone with her for a while.

"Now, Fedor . . . that is your name, isn't it?" asked Jaya in a sweet, lilting voice.

Fedor found himself nodding despite the fact that he had not given his name to his captors before now. How did the redheaded vixen know?

"If all goes well, Fedor," she continued, not missing a beat, "we should have you out of here in just a few hours."

That brought Fedor back to the present. He couldn't believe his luck. Perhaps this Jaya liked barbarians, even one not much bigger than a Kjeldoran.

Apparently Bell couldn't believe her ears either. "What!" she exclaimed. "There's no way we can release this Balduvian heathen. Not after the trouble he's caused."

Jaya looked at Bell, raising one thin eyebrow slightly. Fedor didn't understand their private language, but Bell stayed quiet. Jaya began to talk more quietly.

"Listen, Fedor," she started again. "You're in a lot of trouble."

"But I haven't done anything," said Fedor. He dropped his head and raised both eyebrows, like a pup looking at its master. This "help me" expression had always worked on Holgar.

"Don't try that with me, Fedor Vohnnson," she scolded, using his full name just as his mother used to. "You and your brother slaughtered a lhurgoyf and stole something very valuable from its lair. Since then you have been running from its mate, which has killed dozens of Balduvians and nearly a score Kjeldorans."

Who is this woman? thought Fedor. How does she know so much about me? He decided to play it straight but keep quiet, so he simply nodded. No sense giving her more of an advantage.

"Now, I can help you," Jaya continued, "but you have to tell me where the gems are hidden."

"But I need those gems to survive out there," blurted Fedor before he could stop himself.

"If you do exactly as I say," whispered Jaya in his ear, "I will give you everything you need to survive in the wild."

Fedor nearly fell over from the warmth of her breath on his skin. The sweet smell of lilacs wafted from her bare neck and shoulders. He pulled away and tried to clear his thoughts. "You promise you won't keep all of the gems?" he asked, trying to sound calm.

"I promise," Jaya purred in his ear again.

Fedor was about to accept the terms, but a nagging doubt lingered. "What of the lhurgoyf?" he said suddenly. "You know it will come after me as soon as I leave the city."

"I promise you won't have to worry about the beast ever again."

"Deal."

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" asked Bell as they climbed the stairs. "How did you know so much about that prisoner? My orders said nothing about gems or Balduvian deaths. I mean, who cares how many filthy barbarians the beast killed?"

Jaya smiled at her friend. "Which question should I answer first, Bell?" Seeing the disgusted look on her friend's face, Jaya continued, ticking the questions off with her fingers. "First, that was about taking care of the lhurgoyf without more bloodshed. How many Kjeldoran guards have died hunting that thing the last two days? Fifteen? Twenty?"

"More."

"All right then," said Jaya. "So if all goes well, I can handle this without any more loss of life. Second, I told you, I have dealt with barbarians before and I have my own sources of information."

"Someone who owes you a favor, no doubt," said Bell as they passed the guard checkpoint.

"Someone I hope will owe me a bigger favor after all of this is done," replied Jaya. "And third, for your information, I care about what happens to the barbarians. They may seem like heathens to you, but they just live another kind of life. They're really not that different from Kjeldorans."

"Bite your tongue," said Belenda, smiling.

Jaya could tell her friend was joking so she didn't press the racial issue. "Bite it for me," she said instead. The two walked in silence for a while as they passed a group of elite guards in the common area just inside the guard house.

Bell seemed to have made up her mind. "Fine," she said. "What do we do now?"

"I am going to retrieve the gems our little thief stole from the lhurgoyf," said Jaya, "while you arrange for the release of the prisoner."

Bell halted and turned to face Jaya. "Let me get this straight," she said, holding her arm out to stop her friend. "You get to go line your pockets with gems while I have to talk the elite guards into releasing a prisoner who has caused the death of a score of Kjeldorans? Aren't you already getting paid for this job?"

"That's what it seems like, doesn't it?" said Jaya, smirking. "Look, I promise that by nightfall your first solo mission as a skyknight will be successfully completed, you will get a commendation for ridding the city of a terrible scourge, and Fedor Vohnnson will get everything he deserves. What does it matter what happens to a few little trinkets that nobody except you and I know about?"

Belenda sighed. "How do I get him out of there?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something," said Jaya. "Those elite guards have egos the size of all Kjeld. Play off of them. Just bring Fedor to me at the north gate at sundown. Then get to the aerie as fast as you can so you can pick me up outside the gate after he leaves."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't know it yet, but Fedor is going to lead us right to the lhurgoyf."

* * * * *

The lhurgoyf sat on its haunches, its elongated legs nearly doubled over and splayed wide as it bent down to eat. The dim sun had come and gone twice since its last meal, and hunger made the rage return. Many warriors had come the first day, but none had survived, and no more ventured out past the great wall the next day. The small squirrel now speared on a claw had led the lhurgoyf to a nest, but the hutch was little more than a bite. It wanted to taste the mate-killer. The beast would storm the large group lair after the dark moon rose. That was the time that men slept. It would feast tonight.

As the beast ate, the wind shifted slightly, and it froze. The scent had returned!

The mate-killer had left the group lair, and he carried with him that which he had stolen.

The lhurgoyf tossed the dead squirrel into its mouth and left the rest of the nest untouched as it loped off through the brush. Its head and neck hung low to the ground to stay out of sight.

When it neared the mate-killer, the beast slowed to a prowl. It kept pace as the warrior walked into the woods. Instinctively, it stayed downwind and cautiously sniffed the air, sensing other men. The scent was too far away to discern; too far away to stop it from catching, killing, and devouring its prey.

The man halted behind a fallen tree, just a few yards from the skulking beast. After adjusting the leather pouch slung over his shoulder, he bent down to climb onto the log.

As the mate-killer surmounted it, the lhurgoyf tensed the muscles in its long, black-skinned legs. It launched its body in a perfect arc through the air toward its target. The

lhurgoyf's front legs slammed into the man's shoulders, knocking him back off the log with a surprised yelp. The beast's back legs followed, landing on the mate-killer's knees.

In an instant, the lhurgoyf was standing atop the small warrior, pinning his arms and legs to the cold ground. Its mouth gaped before the man's contorted face, and mandibles snaked out around the frightened warrior's head.

He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

The beast looked into its prey's eyes, drank in the warrior's fear, and reveled in its own revenge.

* * * * *

As the lhurgoyf was about to grasp Fedor's head with its mandibles, Jaya unleashed a spell that exploded in a fiery blaze, incinerating the trunk and branches of the downed tree behind the beast. A moment later, Jaya and Bell, riding a great, white-necked bird, landed in front of the lhurgoyf.

"Stop, beast," yelled Jaya. "If you wish to live, do not harm him. I can incinerate you just as easily as I did that tree."

"It can't understand you," hissed Bell from behind her. "It's just a stupid beast."

"It understands more than you know," said Jaya as she slipped to the ground. "And language is more than just words. It understands my tone and my body language, if not all of my words."

The beast looked back down at Fedor and snaked its mandibles out to surround the man's head.

"I know you feel you have nothing to live for," said Jaya as soothingly as possible. "But I can help you. Let him live, and I will return that which he stole from you. I will return your mate's eggs."

Bell said, "Eggs? Those gems are eggs? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Shush," said Jaya.

The lhurgoyf withdrew the mandibles, raised its head, and stared at Jaya, sniffing the air.

She stood with her arms lifted and her fingers splayed, looking as helpless and passive as possible. Yet, she knew she could destroy the beast in a heartbeat if she must.

"Let him live, and you may take your eggs back to your lair," she continued. "Let me help you get your life back."

The lhurgoyf cocked its head and stared at Jaya for a long, tense moment. Then, the beast shifted its weight back and sat on the man's legs, nearly crushing his bones. It kept its claws firmly on the warrior's shoulders, but Jaya could tell that the creature's muscles had relaxed. It would not attack.

Jaya took a step forward, nearly stumbling on a root.

Bell said, "Jaya, be careful. What are you doing?"

Jaya straightened up and brushed her leather top. "Providing justice," she said over her shoulder. She then turned to the lhurgoyf and spoke softly and slowly. "You can trust me," she said. "I am your friend."

The lhurgoyf glared at her, its mandibles twitching in front of its mouth.

"Look," she said as she pulled a pouch out of her belt. "Here are the rest of your eggs." She took a step to the side, put the pouch down, and then moved back in front of the beast. "Now, I want to show you something. If you still don't trust me, you can eat me and the scum trapped beneath you."

Fedor gurgled.

The beast relaxed its mandibles. Jaya reached into her tunic and pulled on a chain that hung around her neck. From beneath the leather emerged a silver amulet with a blood-red stone set in the middle. Metal spokes radiated around the gem, making it look like a silver bug. The gem itself pulsed as if it had a life of its own.

The beast stared at the gem. The pulse was tinged with azure.

As Jaya swung the amulet back and forth, the gem pulsed faster until its core suddenly expanded. It enveloped the lhurgoyf and the barbarian warrior in a blue-white glow.

* * * * *

When the gem flashed, the beast's world changed.

In an instant, rage and bloodlust left his body, replaced by something else — awareness. Where once he lived only to feed and avenge his mate, now he felt pain and loss . . . and regret. He had killed many in his pursuit of revenge. What had happened to their families, their mates, their children? In his mindless chase after this worthless warrior, the lhurgoyf had destroyed countless lives and become no better than the beast he pursued.

"What . . . what have you done to me?" rasped the lhurgoyf, finding he could now talk as well as regret.

Jaya replaced the jeweled amulet beneath her tunic. Before it disappeared into the folds of her clothes, the lhurgoyf could see that the center no longer pulsed. The gem was now dull red, almost brown. "I have given you a new life," said the mage, "a new way to view the world. I have given you consciousness and a conscience."

"But I do not deserve a new life," said the lhurgoyf, hanging his head. "I am a murderer, the same as him." At that, the lhurgoyf stepped lightly off of Fedor, but the warrior did not get up. He merely curled up and hugged his legs to his chest.

Jaya moved forward and leaned down to pull Fedor's pouch from his belt. "The pain you caused you did out of love and to protect your family," she said. "The pain he caused, he did out of greed."

"Does that make a difference to the families I ruined?" asked the lhurgoyf.

"No, but *you* can make a difference," she replied. "The mountains are a dangerous place to live. Go back to your

lair, raise your family, and protect the people of the north. I will send word to Lovisa Coldeyes, chief of one of the Balduvian tribes. She will tell the tribes of your loss and of your new life as the protector of the barbarians. Do you accept?"

The lhurgoyf thought for a moment. He recalled the faces of all those he had slain in the last week, the terror he had wreaked across the land. Could he live with that pain? Could he die knowing the debt he must now pay? He nodded to Jaya. "I accept your offer. How may I ever repay you for what you have done?"

"Pay your debt to the barbarians, and that will be enough," she said. "I can always use another favor from Lovisa Coldeyes."

"Please," said the lhurgoyf, "take one of my eggs. I cannot care for all of them myself. I believe they are quite valuable."

Jaya looked down at the pouch. "I will take one," she said, "but I won't sell it. I know someone who can care for it once it hatches. And perhaps I can get him to charge this amulet for me again in exchange."

The lhurgoyf extended his clawed paw toward Jaya. "Thank you," he said.

As she clasped the lhurgoyf's paw, Fedor finally found his feet and bounded off into the woods.

"Shall I fly after him?" asked Belenda, still atop her aesthir.

"No," replied Jaya as she held the lhurgoyf's paw. "He's already paying for his crimes. I told you, he's gotten exactly what he deserves."

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Under the pale light of the Null Moon, the barbarian crouched in the woods. A twig snapped to the left, and Fedor jumped. When the barbarian landed, it had the squirrel by the throat. Fedor had been chasing the creature for

hours and was hungry. The barbarian snapped the neck of the squirrel and raised the limp body up to its face. The squirrel looked smaller now in Fedor's hands.

Eyes darting, Fedor sniffed the air to make sure it was alone. Then the barbarian opened its mouth and tore off a chunk of flesh with its teeth. Blood trickled out of the corner of Fedor's mouth as it uttered a guttural growl. It tore off another hunk of the warm, furry flesh.

T I M R Y A N

THE RELUCTANT STUDENT



Skaven slumped in his chair; the noonday heat and the dreary prospect of spending the next two hours in a lecture hall were sapping his energy. Listless and bored, he began lightly slapping his hands against his legs, adding a long, low string of syllables in precise countersyncopation. Then, glancing sideways to make sure at least a few of his fellow students were watching, he forcefully grunted the last word and snapped his fingers. Turning his right hand palm up, he unfolded his fingers to reveal a bright blue scarab scuttling about inside. The beetle looked so real that yesterday a bird had dropped from the sky and tried to snatch it from his hand. Instead the bird's beak passed through the illusion and scratched his palm.

Skaven's friend Alexys dug her elbow into his ribs. "We've seen that one, Maestro. Haven't you got anything new for us?"

Skaven smirked tightly and pretended not to hear her.

Alexys quietly offered some advice: "You know, if you sit up straight, he probably won't even notice you're playing with that thing in class."

Skaven snorted loudly. "He wouldn't notice if a scarab the size of this building was taking a bite out of his —"

"On the contrary, Mr. Skaven, I assure you both the scarab and its careless creator would find justice to be both swift and severe," Barrin announced, striding smartly into the classroom. Most of the students bolted upright in their chairs; Skaven and a few others did their best to look unimpressed.

Mage Master Barrin of Tolaria stood before them, hands hooked in the crisp velvet lapels of his robe. He glared severely at each student in turn. Barrin allowed the silence to stretch to an uncomfortable level for his charges before speaking again.

"Last night, guards on the southeastern coast of our island found two of Master Malzra's mechanical hawks on the beach, their powerstones completely drained. As every apprentice should know, discharging a powerstone is not difficult; it demands no great skill. It is, however, extremely dangerous and a terrible waste of mana. None of you seem to be missing any limbs," he squinted and peered about the room, "or carrying any devices charged full with mana."

Barrin released his lapels, running his hands up and down them to press out the wrinkles and restore a consistent nap. "I know of the rivalry between you and Master Malzra's artificers. Is it possible that some one of you, or some group, has conjured a creature to attack the hawks? What say you, Mr. Skaven? Engaging in a little blood sport with a scarab the size of this building?"

Skaven closed a fist around his blue beetle before looking up at Master Barrin. "Nope, not me. Sir."

Barrin appeared to consider the response. "Well, it does seem a feat beyond your ability." A few of Barrin's favorite students laughed openly at Skaven's expense.

"You mean just like that great time-expansion spell of yours?" Skaven shot back. The laughter ended abruptly, replaced by a few nervous titters from the slouchers in the

back rows. When Barrin wanted to illustrate how much dedication was required to study magic, he occasionally referred to a single, unfinished spell that he had been working on for more than ten years. The students joked among themselves that Barrin was creating a time-expansion spell, because work on it seemed to expand to take all his available time.

Blood rushed to Barrin's face. His hand shot out, a fashionable swath of embroidered tunic visible beneath the cuff of his robe, and he pointed directly at Skaven. "Never, *ever* forget that it is a dangerous and powerful craft we study. Mana demands force of personality to wield, yes. Even objectionable personalities such as you, Mr. Skaven, can become powerful sorcerers. But there are no shortcuts to mastery. None! You must humble yourself to learn. You must be obsessive in your attention to detail, building sturdy patterns to bind the mana you channel. A brief lapse of control can inflict great damage.

"Have you already forgotten how I had to dispel the horde of miniature goblins that members of this class conjured last year? No doubt some of you laughed as they ran loose in the halls, gouging the bottoms of the walls with their little knives. But how many of you have asked Lydia how she feels about that escapade? How many of you feel shame when you see her limping painfully from class to class?"

A few students shifted uneasily in their chairs.

"Any misuse of mana is a serious matter. It is even worse when valuable artifices are destroyed. Need I remind you that Master Malzra's hawks are this school's first line of defense against invading Phyrexians? Destroying the hawks is not a harmless prank—it endangers all of our lives. I will discover how these hawks were destroyed and their powerstones drained. Whoever is involved, it would behoove you to approach me with the information before I find you. Is that clear?"

The class responded with a sullen "yes."

Barrin nodded curtly. "Good. Now, then, who can tell me the corollary to the 17th Principle of Mnemonic Patterns Employed in Arid Environs?"

* * * * *

Barrin concluded his lecture and stepped out into the fresh air of a brisk autumn afternoon. He made his way slowly across the campus, as if he were the sole member of a funeral procession. Skaven's jab about the time-expansion spell, and the obvious fact that most the students were in on the joke, had wounded Barrin far deeper than he had been willing to admit. But it wasn't the sound of their laughter. . . .

It was that other thing, the old demon that he had been grappling for years: It is a teacher's place to create an atmosphere in which students can learn and can measure their progress against the teacher himself. The excellent teacher should always strive to help the excellent student surpass him, yet the teacher should not be static—he must continue to learn and grow. But who am I to measure my progress against? There is only Urza Planeswalker. The name alone conjured powerful and complex feelings in the Mage Master's mind.

Urza's feats are known throughout the multiverse, throughout time. He may be an accidental destroyer, but he is also a master builder and healer. How can I compete with that? It is bad enough that the students don't know that Master Malzra is in fact Urza Planeswalker—if they knew, perhaps they would understand why Malzra exceeds me. Perhaps they would see me as powerful in my own right and not simply Master Number Two.

A musical trilling interrupted Barrin's thoughts. He stopped beneath a shady plane tree and spied a songbird above him, perched on a branch just out of reach. Smiling for the first time that day, Barrin studied the bird and then

improvised a song of his own, imbuing it with mana. A beautiful turquoise warbler took form on Barrin's arm. With a slight gesture, he sent it to the lonely songbird. As Barrin's bird lighted on the branch, however, the songbird flared its wings and attacked with beak and claw. In a few short moments the warbler was destroyed, and the songbird took flight. As it soared from beneath the shade of the tree, Barrin noted the distinct glint of sunlight on metal.

"An artifact?" Barrin growled, shaking his fist at the now-distant bird. "By Urza's wrath! Yes, that's the real problem around here. . . . He meddles in everything and bends us all to his will. I can't even curse without thinking of him!"

Suddenly mindful that he was standing in the middle of campus ranting at the sky, Barrin glanced about to make sure no students had witnessed his embarrassing display. Relieved that he was alone, Barrin continued to fume:

Urza barely acknowledges my presence, much less my work, my dedication, my power. Does he really think that, given enough time, he can do everything himself? Well, he is not the only one around here who can shape the future. One day soon I will prove it so clearly that even Urza must take notice.

"Time-expansion spell . . . very funny. . . ."

For a moment, Barrin's mood soured further with the memory of his spell's recent failure, but he soon came back to the familiar road of his thought:

Our academy charts deadly waters. Our mission is failing. For all his power, Urza has proven unable to transport us back in time to prevent the creation of the Phyrexians. But where his artifice has failed my spell will succeed. I will ask a being even more powerful than Urza to tell me the secrets of time travel. I will reach into the higher planes and tap the mind of a god.

Calmed and resolved, Barrin made his way to Urza's workshop.

A visitor to the academy, noting the workshop's thick

outer walls, turrets, and fortresslike structure, might conclude that it had been designed to shield its occupants and their treasures. In reality, the building was designed to protect the outside world by containing the sometimes violent energies released by Urza's experiments.

Barrin entered the building and found Urza in one of the smaller alcoves of his workshop. The man stared impassively at a table strewn with all manner of miniature springs, cogs, flywheels, pinion gears, levers, glass balls, scraps of leather, nearly invisible strands of metal, counterweights, and other mechanical devices. Barrin paused for a moment, watching. He half expected—half feared—that Urza held some incredibly complex construct in his mind, and that at the clap of his hands these pieces would fly together flawlessly to form themselves into a physical manifestation.

"Barrin, your laborious breathing is disturbing my concentration. What is it you want?" Urza demanded without shifting his stance one iota.

Barrin was forced to speak to Urza's back: "I'm concerned about those two hawks. Is it possible a Phyrexian has escaped from the time chasm and is wandering the island? Perhaps your hawks gave chase but the Phyrexian was able to destroy them. We may have a scout or an assassin among us right now."

Urza twitched slightly at the suggestion but answered calmly. "There is no smell of Phyrexia on the wind."

Barrin visibly relaxed. "That at least is some good news. Have you spoken to your artifice apprentices, then? Do any of them admit to interfering with the hawks?"

"I wouldn't worry, Barrin. Two hawks and one guard destroyed are hardly cause for great alarm."

Barrin stiffened. "One of your mechanical guards has also been destroyed? When was this?"

Urza picked up a rubber pulley from his workbench, affixed it to the terminals of some testing device, and seemed to consider the results. "I don't know, Barrin. Some

time this morning near Vanish Point. I can't be bothered. Perhaps a few of your unruly young sorcerers have gone beyond summoning miniature goblins?"

"What if that is the case? Suppose one of my students—Skaven for instance—summoned something truly dangerous? Shouldn't we conduct a search and hunt it down?" When Urza offered no response, Barrin changed the subject. "That reminds me . . . Captain Skith should have delivered my Scrying Glass of Catania two days ago. I could use it right now. Have you heard any reports of his ship? What is its name? The something *Feat*."

"I am neither the harbormaster nor the supply chief. I suppose you could say I'm in charge of island defenses, but even that is more of a shared responsibility, don't you think?"

"Fine, Urza. You just keep tinkering away in the dark, but I refuse to sit around and watch the academy spin out of control. First thing tomorrow, I'm going to collect Mr. Skaven. He and I will go on a little hunting expedition and dispel whatever monster is draining the powerstones from *your* artifices. I'll let you know what we find."

Urza's voice seemed to rise hollowly from a great depth: "I wouldn't waste your energy, Barrin. A summoned monster tends to track down its conjurer."

Barrin pivoted on his boot heels, the gold hem of his robe cutting a splendid arc of light. "Just try not to burn the place down while I'm gone."

* * * * *

It had floated serenely, its substance barely distinguishable from the ether surrounding it, occupying a plane of intellect as much as of place or time. It was incorporeal, existing within yet encompassing its surroundings. At all times it felt the comfortable presence of the others, beings like itself who together formed a vast awareness that

observed, considered, and weighed the grand multiverse.

Freely, effortlessly it shifted its awareness down through levels of energy, bringing more planes of existence into focus. The others followed its lead, or perhaps it followed theirs; such was the nature of their collective intelligence.

Something, an anomaly of sorts, attracted its attention. It simultaneously drew upon its own perspective and that of the others. The anomaly appeared as a blue needle piercing the veils of countless planes, moving quickly, precisely, directly to . . .

An enormous breach ripped open; tattered remnants of the being's plane flapped raggedly in the howling void. The anomaly hit the being. It spun wildly from the impact, its mind infused with an alien voice—weak but insistent—madly repeating a question over and over. . . .

The being was sucked into a violent, careening current of mana that spilled out of the breach. Darkness encroached from the periphery of its senses. It cried out, but the others did not answer; it could no longer sense them. It could hear only one voice, one question, as it plummeted toward the void. . . .

It fell, shedding mana, accumulating form. The multiverse seemed to curl in on itself, becoming the inside of a kaleidoscope in which nonsensical images tumbled, formed warped geometries, and then shattered against each other in shards of energy and light. With each crash, the mad voice rang out, repeating its unanswerable question.

Suddenly a hole in the pattern of light opened, and the being fell through. For a merciful moment, everything was dark.

Then it woke in terrified agony.

A great force imprisoned it, restraining, compressing, folding it into dimensions too narrow to contain it. It pushed back with its mind, shocked and horrified to see its prison—a tangle of translucent yet sickeningly corporeal limbs—twitch in response. It pushed again, and an arm moved

heavily. It threw itself repeatedly against the walls of its newly formed body but could not escape. Instead, each effort thrashed a limb and unleashed a spasm of pain. It groaned in confusion. Where was it?

The creature was all but blind. The world around it was a muffled echo through a fog of pain. The reek of decay permeated the air. The being felt as though most of its mind had been severed, and what remained rang with that alien voice and its incessant question. It groped to remember what it was, what it was supposed to be. It remembered the others and howled at their loss, the sound of its own voice alien and inscrutable. Imprisoned here, how could it return to the others?

Slowly, laboriously, it funneled its mind into a linear sequence of thoughts. It had been with the others. The anomaly—that mad voice riding a jagged spike of blue energy—had found it and drained it of mana, causing it to fall to this destitute plane, whatever it was. Clearly, it must gather mana to reclaim its rightful place in the multiverse. The anomaly must have the mana.

Where is the anomaly?

It searched its memory, considered the blue light, the vectors of force, the arc of its fall. It listened to the mad voice in its mind. Through the putrid atmosphere of rotting matter it now perceived in the distance the hazy glow of the anomaly. It widened its senses, choking back a wave of revulsion, and pinpointed numerous sources of mana it could absorb on the way. Yes, there—closer still—it perceived a strong source of mana, a blue orb of energy resting immobile within a fragile wooden vessel crewed by putrid, maggot-infested demons.

A strange hunger, bitter and intense, shot through its being, propelling it forward through the water into which it had fallen.

* * * * *

The Daring Feat sat resolutely just inside the island's natural harbor. She was uncommonly well armed for a merchant ship. The double row of flame cannon along her port side faced the harbor entrance, and her starboard weapons were positioned to strafe the distant wharf and docks. She lay double-anchored, port and stern. Though the stars wheeled through the night sky and the tides bent beneath the influence of the Glimmer Moon, the *Feat's* weapons would remain fixed on their targets. The crew had been granted no shore leave. Instead, they manned their stations as if under sail in treacherous waters. The captain was taking no chances.

Captain Skith stood over a low table in his cabin, shoulder to shoulder with his navigator. A map like no other was spread out before them. At first glance it appeared to be a drawing, executed by an extremely observant artisan, of the complex waves rippling out from a rock thrown into shallow water. On this map, however, the rock was a sphere of ruins on the island of Tolaria, and the lines traced twisting borders of time. More than a decade ago, a time travel machine built by Master Malzra had exploded on the island, shredding reality and forming bands of slow and fast time that snaked out across the land, ending only where sand met sea.

Some time bands, like slow currents, could be entered and navigated safely. Others were fierce maelstroms: Simply sticking a hand inside would instantly rip a person apart. At first light the captain planned to sail out from the harbor, cross the short distance to Tolaria, and dock on its one functional pier. His crew would unload their cargo, carry it to the academy, receive their pay, and depart immediately, their contract with the mage Barrin honored in full.

"Explain the route to me again," the captain urged. "We must be able to lead the crew across that island blindfolded, with a driving rain in our faces and monsters on our tails."

The navigator snorted good-naturedly. "I'd prefer the

beasties be wearing the blindfolds." Pointing to Tolaria's dock, the navigator repeated the drill: "Renauld steps off the ship first, securing the lines here and here. Prence and Flea will then lower the gangplank to him, positioning it here. . . ."

Satisfied with the plans, the captain pulled at the chain around his neck, drawing a small blue stone from beneath his tunic. When he touched the pendant to its twin, mounted on the cabin wall, the stones pulsated with light and a panel sprang open to reveal a large lockbox. The navigator rolled up the map and placed it inside. Once the captain had secured the panel, he allowed himself to relax for a moment. "Let's go topside and see how the crew is faring."

Above deck, the captain sought out First Mate Renauld and found him leaning against the ship's foremast to steady the spyglass pressed to his eye. Renauld scanned the dark horizon beyond the harbor entrance, moving the glass slowly side to side lest the outline of an enemy ship blur with the inky black of ocean and sky.

"What say the watch, Renauld?"

"All quiet, Captain," Renauld answered as he continued to scan the waters. On the next pass he spotted a faint florescence beneath the water, hovering, perhaps drifting on the current, outside the harbor.

Without breaking the rhythm of his search, he called up to the mainmast man. "Glorney, ninety degrees to starboard, just beyond the harbor entrance. Verify a school of lantern fish or a clump of glow kelp."

Glorney shouted right back, laughing. "That fallin' star musta burned spots in your eyes! Ya ain't supposed to look at 'em through the glass, ya know." A few moments later, though, Glorney's voice came back much shriller: "There is somethin' there, Renauld, but it ain't no kelp. It's movin' under the water right straight for us. It's comin' fast!"

The captain stepped in. "Sound the alarm, Renauld."

Quickly the first mate lowered his glass, pulled a reed

whistle from his pocket, and blew a piercing signal.

The captain turned to his navigator. "Secure the wheel and be ready in case we need to get underway." The captain allowed himself the fleetest of moments to note that the navigator was running across the deck even before he finished his command. He would have to compliment the man later.

The captain dived down the nearest companionway, heading for the marine's mustering area. He would order one squad to the deck and one to the hold to protect the cargo. More detailed plans would have to wait until the exact nature of the danger was understood.

As he neared the hold, though, the captain heard ringing swords and an agonized voice shouting curses: "Putrid meat! Die maggot! You demon bag of disease!"

Captain Skith drew his short, curved blade and threw open the door to the hold.

A blue glow of motion whirled inside the low-ceilinged room, its proportions and form a bewildering paradox. It was at once larger than the room, extending beyond its floor and ceiling, and also bent over to fit inside it. The translucent creature seemed to have swallowed one of his marines—it was Thomas. The captain could see the man clawing and swinging his arms, trying to get out; he could also see through the creature to the cargo boxes on the other side of the hold. The monster writhed, its swift appendages blurring the air blue.

"Focus on Thomas," the captain advised himself. "Free Thomas."

He stepped into the room and angled for the monster's side, peripherally aware that Thomas's comrades lay scattered dead on the floor. Now the captain could see that Thomas was actually outside the creature, fighting it, desperately parrying its swift, thrashing attacks. The captain swung his sword in a powerful downward slash. The blade sliced into the monster, caught on something, slipped, caught again, and slid out.

The creature bellowed and whipped around to face the captain. In doing so, it lashed out and caught Thomas on the temple, crushing his head and throwing him to the floor. In the same whirling motion, it struck the captain squarely in the chest.

Captain Skith felt very little as he dropped to his knees. The damage to his body was far too severe to comprehend. Unable to breathe, he toppled onto his back. His vision blurred, and time seemed to slow. His consciousness became a candle flame guttering in its own pool of wax.

Somehow he turned his head and was able to see the monster on the other side of the hold. It seemed a twisted, hunched man with enormous, crooked wings spanning out from its body. Cradled in its arms was some kind of glowing, spherical device it had stolen from one of the cargo boxes. A bright surge of light filled the hold.

When his vision cleared, the captain could see the sphere, now dull and opaque, discarded on the floor. The creature entered his field of vision, towering over him, a blur of blue movement even more transparent than before. It stepped over the captain, straddling him, and then sat on his chest, one crooked arm pinning each of the captain's shoulders to the floor.

As it bent over him, the monster's murky face resolved into a terrible, ruined visage. Its features were but the phantom impression of a man's, compressed and distorted into a rage no human face could express. Fangs extended from beneath the beast's tight, leering lips. Behind its hollow eyes rolled the miasma of infinity.

Two great appendages—like fleshy, bruised slugs—slowly extended from its forehead and plucked the pendant from the captain's neck. The creature seemed to study the stone for a moment. There was a smaller surge of light, and then no more.

* * * * *

Next morning, Barrin found Skaven playing dice with a few of his classmates behind their dormitory. The boy was winning handily and wasn't happy to be dragged away from the game. Barrin gave Skaven one of his walking sticks and told him they were going to hunt monsters.

They left the campus on foot, heading for Vanish Point. After a few hours of trudging through the jungles, pausing only long enough for Barrin to take a breath from his lectures, the Mage Master realized he was still not getting through to his student.

"Your spell-casting is a bit wild, Mr. Skaven. Too many side effects. You must refine your focus and control before you can improve further."

"Master Barrin, if I could just tap a little more mana, my spells would be fully formed and only have the effects that I want."

"I doubt that," Barrin replied. "Right now more power would simply mean bigger mistakes for you."

"How can you say that? I know what I'm doing. I can control my spells, and they do exactly what I want them to do. All you instructors are just holding us back so we can never be as powerful as you."

Barrin grabbed Skaven by the shoulder and spun the boy around to face him. "You can't imagine how wrong you are. I am trying to help you, Mr. Skaven. Some of your smaller spells, such as that dung beetle you like to play with, are well executed, despite your severe misunderstanding of the fundamentals of magic. . . ."

"All I need to understand is how to access more mana. More mana is more power, and more power makes a better mage."

Barrin searched the boy's face for a moment and then released his shoulder and began walking again. "If you really want to learn how to become a better mage, follow me."

Skaven frowned but quickly caught up with the elder mage.

Barrin continued the lesson as if nothing had interrupted: "Do not think of mana as power but as the *potential* for power. From this statement we can derive several principles, perhaps the most important of which is that more mana does not *necessarily* equal a more powerful spell. You must be able to channel the mana efficiently and properly to produce the effects of your spell."

Skaven seemed to think for a moment before responding. "I don't understand what you're saying about the difference between power and potential power. I thought mana was power."

Barrin nodded, pleased that the boy was finally engaged in the conversation. "Imagine all the mana tied to the lands of Tolaria as a vast, still lake of crystal blue water. This lake resides at the island's highest elevation and is contained on one side by a great dam. You, Mr. Skaven, are on the dry side of that dam, at the bottom of its towering wall, and you are looking for water. How do you get it?"

"Open the floodgates!"

"Do you want to drink or drown? Before doing anything, you must consider what use you will put the water to. Powering a turbine, for instance, requires a fast, concentrated stream of water, whereas irrigating a field requires a slow, dispersed flow so that you don't flood the crops. Once you know what it is you want to achieve, you can design your spell: a system of pipes, valves, conduits, spouts, traps, and nozzles to channel the water. Every minute detail must be planned in advance because when you cast the spell, you are attaching your waterworks to the dam; water will instantly shoot through your system. Only when the water is released and channeled does the placid lake churn and flow, creating power.

"A foolish mage, standing at the foot of the dam, might simply drill a hole through it to release the water he needs. No doubt it takes a certain amount of skill to create the hole, but the mage who uses this rawer, brute force is likely to be

deluged and drowned. Even if he survives, the water, once released, must flow somewhere. And I'll tell you this, Mr. Skaven: It is easier to punch a hole in a dam than it is to shove the water back through the hole."

A heavy beating sound echoed through the treetops, and a few limbs waved in the breeze.

Barrin glanced up. "I didn't think any of Malzra's hawks were that large. . . ."

A blue streak shot down from the sky.

"Look out!" shouted Skaven. "A phantom mon—"

Before he could finish, the creature landed on him, crushing him to the ground. A man-shaped beast with translucent blue skin hulked atop Skaven. The young mage lay twisted and still beneath the feet of the winged creature.

The phantom monster shouted, "Vile, filthy, beast! Cursed demon defiler!"

Barrin involuntarily stumbled backward but quickly collected himself. Raising his staff, he uttered a powerful combat spell. Jagged goutts of red fire shot toward the beast.

The phantom monster bellowed in pain and hobbled to one side, erratically flapping its crooked wings to keep its balance. Only some of Barrin's magical fire seemed to damage it. The rest passed harmlessly through.

The Mage Master advanced, shooting another stream of flame that knocked the phantom back into a dense copse of trees. After the initial crash, the woods became deathly silent.

Barrin knelt beside Skaven's still form, desperately seeking a faint pulse or a shallow breath. There was none. Barrin looked at the boy's face, bloodied and broken. . . .

Urza's words yesterday had been a warning: The summoned monster had found its conjurer.

Barrin reached out to close the young mage's eyes and spoke solemnly, "Rest quietly now. This ordeal is over. Such a waste of life here, but when you bargain for power beyond your control, the price is yours alone to pay."

Out of the corner of his eye, Barrin caught movement in the trees. He looked up, shocked to see the monster struggling to its feet. He had not prepared more powerful combat spells. What was this thing?

Barrin stood and shouted boldly: "You have chosen the wrong island to attack, demonspawn! This is Tolaria, home of Dominaria's most powerful mages. You shall pay for the destruction you have wrought here!"

The phantom's entire body contorted and shook. "The destruction I have wrought? Look what I have become. That poisonous voice nearly destroyed me! I will have my mana back and silence it forever." The phantom spread its wings and sprang into the air.

With a single word the Mage Master vaulted upward in pursuit. The creature darted erratically across the skies, climbing quickly. After a few minutes Barrin slowed his flight, the blue, transparent phantom difficult to see against the sky: "You cannot flee me, monster!"

"Silence! I can no longer bear your terrible voice!" the monster cried from somewhere above Barrin.

"My voice? Where have you heard my voice before?"

"How do I travel back in time?" the monster cried. "How do I travel back in time? HOW DO I TRAVEL BACK IN TIME!"

Barrin reeled in the air, stunned, barely hovering. "No," he mouthed. Then louder, "No, it cannot be!"

The phantom's voice was closer now, "How do I travel back in time?"

"You, you were not supposed to be a monster. You should not be here."

The monster hurtled itself against the mage. It grabbed one end of Barrin's staff and shoved the other end into Barrin's stomach, driving him down through the air. His concentration broken, Barrin struggled to hang on as they plummeted toward the ground.

The phantom monster snarled in the mage's face, "You

dare tell me that I should not be here? You think I want to stay on this infernal plane of yours, you putrid pus bag? You think I do not remember where I came from? What I was before you—”

“I could not have done this to you. My spell was not designed to summon, only to, to communicate, to . . .”

“Silence, demon mage! I have tracked you through the arc of your spell. You cracked open my world, siphoned mana from us, pulling me to this corrupt, defiled plane. Now it is my turn. Through you I will draw the mana I need to return home!”

Barrin was horrified, unable to think. It was his robe, cracking furiously in the wind, that woke him to action. Twisting to look over his shoulder, he saw the ground flying up to meet them. They were going to land right next to a severe fast-time rift. Barrin gripped his staff tighter, still locked in a tug-of-war with the phantom, and evoked a spell.

A sheet of water wrapped around the mage to form a cocoon. Moments later Barrin smashed into the ground; the water absorbed the impact, cushioning him. The phantom landed on top of Barrin but slid off, unable to penetrate the water. Still it held the end of the mage’s staff and picked him up by it. The phantom spun its crooked body about, howling with vengeance.

“Now, mage, gather mana for me!” With that the phantom monster thrust Barrin into the rift.

Barrin clung to the staff, focusing on his spell. The faster time buckled the cocoon’s surface, causing waves in some areas and shallows in others. Barrin struggled to preserve the shell.

It held.

The phantom’s fleshy antennae unrolled from its head and wrapped themselves around the staff. Barrin’s water sphere wobbled and weakened. He tapped mana to reinforce the spell but felt most of it drawn off through his staff

and into the phantom monster. It had transformed him into a mana battery, but eventually he would be exhausted. When that happened, the water spell would fail, the fast time would rush in, and the mage would die.

Barrin looked through the watery cocoon into the creature's contorted face, through its hollow eyes, and into the dark swirling mists of infinity that moved there.

How could I have done this? Barrin chided himself. I can't believe I was so jealous of Urza. I'm a fool, and a fool's ending is what I deserve. I unleashed a horrible, devastating spell that despoiled an innocent creature, transforming it into a monster. And Skaven . . . the poor boy. He was caught between the summoner and the monster.

Barrin considered the phantom, its form gradually becoming more translucent. This creature deserves to return to its rightful plane of existence.

Barrin tapped more mana.

Slowly he weakened. He wouldn't have to wait much longer. The phantom monster's countenance twisted slowly from agony to triumph. Vaguely, distantly, Barrin noticed a slight shimmer over the monster's left shoulder. Slowly it whirled and coalesced, taking on a familiar form.

Urza Planeswalker.

The phantom seemed oblivious, its mad gaze boring through Barrin.

Urza, too, looked at Barrin, the planeswalker's head tilted uncharacteristically to one side as if he were simultaneously perplexed and amused. He seemed to remain in that position for half an hour before laboriously raising one hand. A vortex of energy gradually formed between Urza's fingertips. It grew brighter, taking on the form of a perfect sphere.

Barrin gripped his staff tighter, reflexively turning his head and screwing his eyes closed as the plasma ball glided out of Urza's hand toward the back of the phantom's head.

The whip crack of the explosion rocked Barrin. His nose tingled with the smell of air scorched by lightning. He

opened his eyes but couldn't see anything. The watery walls of his cocoon were opaque with steam . . . they were boiling away. His staff was being pulled from the other side, and he clung to it for life.

A moment before the mage's cocoon evaporated, Urza Planewalker pulled Barrin out of the time rift. He collapsed on the muddy ground, dazed, thin wisps of steam clinging to his hair, knees, and fingers.

Urza regarded him: "That velvet robe will never be the same."

Barrin sprang up from the ground before the jest fully registered. He grunted at his colleague and then looked around distractedly for a moment. "Skaven is dead. I thought the boy was to blame for the damaged hawks, so I brought him with me. But it was me . . . it was *my* spell. The monster killed him, and I'm responsible."

"I know," Urza replied matter-of-factly.

Barrin was dismayed. "The phantom monster is gone?"

"Yes."

"You were able to send it back? Back to its own plane?"

"I destroyed it."

Barrin clenched his fists. "Urza, I summoned it! I pulled a living being from another plane and warped it, transformed it into that phantom monster."

"I knew that when I saw it."

"Then why did you kill it? I brought it here, and I was responsible for sending it back. It was . . . I was letting it pull mana from me so that it could return to its own plane."

"Barrin," Urza said a bit more softly, "it is easier to punch a hole in a dam than it is to shove the water back through the hole."

Barrin bent his head and nodded mutely.

Urza studied his friend for a moment. "I understand what you were trying to accomplish with that spell. I've known about your work for some time." Barrin's head snapped up, but the planeswalker continued. "Even though

I am surprised that you had the hubris to think you could demand the secrets of time travel from a god, I understand very well the thirst for power that drove you.

"What I cannot accept is that you sat there in your watery prison cell, resigned to your fate, waiting for that monster to destroy you. Even if you cannot learn from your own mistakes, the least you can do is tell others what you have done and let them draw their own lessons from your errors. You are a teacher after all. And the finest one at the academy."

Barrin was silent for a while as they began walking toward Skaven's body. "I would never have started down this path had I known where it would lead. I will carry the pain of this lesson with me for the rest of my life."

"Congratulations, my friend," Urza Planeswalker replied, only the slightest hint of irony glinting in his faceted eyes. "Perhaps you are finally learning what it means to be human."

B R I A N M . T H O M S E N

UNLIKELY ALLIES AND UNJUST DESSERTS



"Saved by garbage picking yet again."

"Oh, is that why you smell so bad?"

"Now, now, let's not revisit that old controversy."

"He started it, and as I have pointed out on numerous occasions the Strother clans of dwarves are not naturally aromatic. We just have a propensity toward getting in that state through the secretion of natural juices during hard work."

"Like picking through garbage?"

"And other things."

"Such as what?"

"Like saving your two useless lives for one."

"Which wouldn't have been the situation had you . . ."

"Quiet!" a new voice boomed above the others.

The sergeant master of His Lord Ugliness's orcan mercenary brigade had arrived in time to overhear the bellyaching and arguing of the foul-smelling threesome and decided to make his presence known. He was none too pleased that the three slackers manning this remote station on the outskirts of enemy territory were even less soldierly than they were pleasantly aromatic.

Food, or at least what passed for it, was strewn around the campsite, and the dwarf, the orc, and the goblin were once again on the verge of coming to blows.

This was definitely not what the supreme commander had had mind in basing them well within the thrall of the slough of zombies.

The least they could've done is to get themselves killed, thought the sergeant master. At least then they'd no longer be my responsibility.

"By the halls of Monty Ward! I've never met such a lazy bunch of wretches! You're supposed to be soldiers in His Unholy Supreme Commander's legions. You're a disgrace . . . all of you!" he bellowed.

The loathsome threesome just looked at each other and shrugged.

At least they hadn't deserted their post. Something had to be said for that much compliance. (Not that they had much choice: Enemy forces lay before them and hostile allies lay behind, leaving the proverbial no place to run and no place to hide; if such geographic features existed along the slough of zombies, this truly had to be what the poet had in mind when he referred to "between a rock and a hard place.")

"We were just following orders," Elam offered.

"What!"

"He means we were just following orders, sir," Strother explained.

Ropelike veins in the sergeant master's forehead strained out from his reptilian skull. He turned toward the new target of his wrath. "Was I talking to you? Do you see officers' bars on my shoulders? What could possess you to address me as 'sir'? I thought all recruits guilty of that transgression were eaten before their second week of training. I ought to—"

"Actually we're not recruits, sir, I mean Sergeant, and we never passed through boot camp," Borg asserted quickly,

deflecting some of the rage away from his compatriot, "and the orders were from . . . your predecessor."

The sergeant master spit in disgusted response.

Of the three, Borg was, mentally speaking, the quickest on his feet. He must have recognized that this latest orcan supervisor was new and that such a situation meant only one thing: Another supervisor had recently bitten the unholy dust.

The sergeant master paused for a moment as if verging on a period of respectful silence. "Sergeant Louser was a good orc and a credit to our ungodly race. He will be missed."

"Indeed," the three agreed in unison.

"But he's gone now, and you're my headache now!" the orcan superior resumed, his wrath returning.

"Yessirsergeant!" they mumbled in unison.

"So Louser wanted you to stay posted here?"

"As a guard."

"An outpost."

"A guarding outpost for reconnaissance."

"In an outposting guarding sort of way."

"Enough," the sergeant master replied, once again scanning the food remains that littered the campsite. "Now I know where all of the food has gone. Well, there'll be no more for a while. Stores are way down. Some of the meanest of our crew have taken to eating the slow, the weak, and the just plain tasty . . . and unless you want to make the menu, you'd better hop to and follow orders!"

"What orders?"

"My orders!" he said with fiendish glee. "From now on you are an assassin unit on a mission-a-night schedule. Each morning, I will expect a set of scalps and entrails from each of you — or else."

"Or else what, Sergeant?"

"Or else no breakfast," he replied, "and you'll be lunch! I'll be back tomorrow, and you'd better be prepared!" The orcan sergeant major turned to leave.

Strother inquired, "Just one question, Sergeant. What happened to Sergeant Louser?"

"Killed in the line of duty," the NCO replied. "A hungry lord of the pit devoured him when the grub at the mess hall ran out. It happens sometimes. More often than you might think."

* * * * *

Once the sergeant master had departed, the three despicable denizens assessed their desperate situation.

"Being an assassin sounds dangerous," Elam asserted. "Someone could get killed."

"That's the whole idea," Borg replied, slapping his less than perceptive companion firmly on the back of the head.

"Well, better that than being eaten."

"Not a particularly tasty alternative . . . which reminds me. Anybody have any idea what's for supper?"

Strother the dwarf immediately became excited. "I forgot to tell you . . . I mean I was going to tell you before we were so imperiously interrupted . . . that is, I was going through the garbage as you know I like to do, particularly when I am hungry, which seems to be all the time now. . . ."

"Get to the point!" Borg seethed with impatient venom.

"I found another serpent generator."

Elam and Borg groaned in tandem as their eyes were drawn to the rusty hand grinder mechanism that the dwarf was beginning to polish with his own spit and mucous. A serpent generator had gotten them in this situation to begin with. (It had also forestalled their doom . . . but orcs and goblins always tended to dwell on the negatives.)

"After our last go around," Borg growled, "I've kinda lost my taste for serpent stew."

"That's okay," the dwarf replied. "There seems to be something wrong with it anyway."

"How so?"

"It only turns out really poisonous snakes."

"Is there any other kind? All generated serpents are venomous."

"Not venomous," Strother corrected. "Poisonous, as in poisonous meat, as in it makes you sick if you eat it."

"Better to eat it than to have it eat you."

A shadow descended on the group.

"Just what I had in mind," interjected the mammoth lord of the pit as it landed. It licked its massive maw in salivary anticipation of its next meal.

The three dirty denizens had never been so close to such a majestic monster of malevolent magics. The scent of carrion flesh from its previous meal still hung heavy in its wake and would undoubtedly have overcome them had it not been for their own odiferousness.

Elam was awestruck by its sharp claws.

Strother couldn't take his eyes off the fangs that peeked out of its gaping maw.

Borg felt overshadowed by the sheer darkness of its mammoth presence, but nonetheless thought on his feet and said, "Welcome, Your Dark Magnificence. Care for a poisonous snake?"

"By the leprous member of Akin's son, I am hungry!" the dark lord roared. "And it's been a golem's age since I've had a poisonous snake."

"Here," offered Elam, firing up the generator with an artifact he'd managed to filch from an undead warrior. He quickly extracted the wriggling serpent from the orifice of the magical machine.

"HMMMMN," the lord replied, ichorous drool dripping from its mouth as it sucked down the serpent. "Just like Mutter used to make."

"Of course," Borg regaled, "fresh from Mutter's machine of magical malevolence itself."

The dark lord stepped back as if out of newfound respect. "You have Mutter's machine!"

Elam nudged Strother and whispered, "What's Mutter's machine?" but was quickly silenced by a horned elbow to the ribs.

"Indeed I do," Borg replied, "and it takes all three of us to keep it running."

"Yum!" the malevolent critter of the abyss said. "I was nursed on Mutter's ilk. . . ." The creature appeared to break down for a moment, almost on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong, Your Darkness?" the dirty dwarf inquired.

"Nothing," the dark lord replied, using a particularly long talon to flick away what might have been the demonic equivalent of a tear. "Just a childhood memory."

"Do tell."

"Well, as I was saying, I was raised on Mutter's ilk until the sorrowful day my nurse's generator ceased to issue forth its slithery delights."

"What happened to it?"

"I ate it."

"Oh," they said in unison.

"I was young, and I was hungry, and I hadn't eaten anyone in days, and machines of ancient powers are so tasty, I just couldn't resist . . . I just didn't really think clearly. I mean, once the generator was gone, what was there to feast on? . . . Only then did it strike me."

"To think before you eat?"

"Sort of."

"So what did you do?"

"I ate my nurse . . . but I vowed that before I died I would once again know the delights of Mutter's ilk."

"And so you shall for quite a while. Come, let us do business."

Borg huddled close to the lord of the pit, and together they engaged in the heat of negotiation. At last, they shook to clinch the deal, hand with talon and tentacle, at which point the massive minion of malevolence flew off toward enemy territory.

With the behemoth gone, Strother and Elam rejoined their companion and immediately besieged him with questions:

"What was that all about?"

"Why didn't it eat us?"

"Where did it go?"

"What's Mutter's ilk?"

Borg took command of the moment, held his hand up to signal silence, and began to answer their questions in reverse order. "Ilk is the demonic name for ichorous serpents generated by a device such as this. It was designed by the legendary alchemist Mutter Makree, so the serpents generated are known as Mutter's ilk. . . . The lord of the pit went off on a scouting mission into enemy territory. . . . It knows we wouldn't taste very good given the way we smell. . . ."

"See, I told you there were plenty of good reasons to set camp near a garbage dump and/or not bathe."

"Indeed," Borg concurred, surprised to find himself in agreement with the dim-witted goblin. He continued with his answer session: "And . . . the big guy and I cut a deal."

"What sort of deal?" Strother interrogated suspiciously. "It better not involve a certain dwarf here-to-fore before you as the dessert course."

"Goods for services rendered," Borg explained cockily. "You see everyone knows that lords of the abyss like to eat."

"Even I know that," Elam concurred.

"Indeed, they would sooner eat an acquaintance than make friends, and that includes most species of orc, goblin, dwarf, and zombie as well . . . but lords of the abyss do not live by ugly critters alone. They require a certain amount of artifactual additives in their diet."

"I didn't know that."

"I'm not surprised," Borg acknowledged, ". . . and we lucked out by running into one with a hankering for Mutter's ilk. . . ."

". . . from Mutter Makree's serpent generator . . ."

"... which I found in the garbage dump while looking for dinner ..."

"... which is, of course, of artifactual origin, thus making it an artifactual creature ..."

"... thus filling two distinct carrion groups for the well balanced diet of a marauding lord of the pit."

Elam scratched his matted scalp, confused.

"But what good does this do us?" the dwarf asked aloud.

Borg stretched orcish arms around his foul-smelling companions. "All will be revealed shortly," he replied with conspiratorial glee.

* * * * *

"By the happy kerchief of winter's end!" the sergeant master exclaimed as he approached the dirty trio's camp. He was visibly impressed by the six zombie heads displayed on pikes. "You must have been busy last night!"

"Had to work up an appetite for breakfast," Strother explained, handing a sack to their superior, "and the entrails for these lovelies are all right here."

"As you properly ordered," Borg pointed out. "We didn't think you would mind if the scalps were still attached to the heads."

"No, this will suffice," the sergeant major answered, accepting the sack.

Borg continued, "We stored the entrails separately because Elam here was getting hungry."

"And entrails taste so good," the goblin conceded, mock shame in his voice.

"Well, there's plenty more where they came from," the sergeant major offered, "and other juicy parts as well."

Borg raised a claw and inquired carefully, "Well, sir, I mean, Sergeant Master—since you brought up the subject of 'juice,' you did indicate yesterday that if we succeeded in our mission as assassins, we would once again be entitled to rations."

"Of course," the sergeant master agreed. "Assassins such as yourselves have to eat, and one does get tired of zombie flesh."

"Indeed," the orc assented.

"I'll have some of the swamp sprites bring a week's worth from the canteen as soon as I get back to camp . . . and if it strikes your fancy, have the sprites as appetizers."

"It's appreciated, Sarge," Elam acknowledged, licking his maw in anticipation of swamp sprite flesh.

A look of suspicion flashed across the NCO's ugly visage.

"You beasties better not be trying to pull one over on your sergeant major. A thin line separates insubordination from familiarity—the same line that separates being served a meal from being served as a meal."

"Understood," the ugly trio assented with their almost adequate version of an attentive salute.

"Understood, what?" the NCO barked.

"Understood, Sergeant Master of the glorious and most fiendish . . ."

"Yeah, yeah," the NCO dismissed, "as you were. I have to get back to camp. I have my name on the reservation list. I understand the Field Marshall of Martial Darkness is making arrangements for some of us to get to bathe this month, and I don't want to lose my place."

"Understood," Borg affirmed, starting to usher the NCO away from the camp. "Sarge."

The orcan NCO shrugged off his subordinate's arm. "They'll be none of that. Informal fraternization is strictly forbidden. I oughta put you on report . . . but then I couldn't take the credit for discovering such a successful team of frontline assassins." The orc snapped his fingers as if struck by a spontaneous brainstorm. "I know! Consider your quota doubled, and we'll call it even."

"Thank you, Sarge!"

"And don't call me Sarge," the NCO bellowed, hurrying away, sack of entrails in one hand and pike of heads in the other.

* * * * *

The lord of the pit arrived just in time to feast on the swamp sprites. While he ate, orc, goblin, and dwarf charged up the generator with some recently rescued artifacts from a nearby junk pile and produce a basket of Mutter's ilk.

"We lucked out this time," Strother observed.

"So says you," a disappointed Elam countered. "I had my maw set for some spritely delight."

"Strother's right," Borg said firmly. "We better rev up the generator well in advance from now on."

The lord of the pit belched, flame and smoke burping from various facial apertures.

"Just what I needed to cleanse my palate of zombie residue," the demonic critter bellowed.

"Hope you saved some room for Mutter's ilk," Borg retorted, passing the basket of serpents to the demon.

"Of course," the demon replied gleefully, already beginning to guzzle serpents. "It takes more than six zombies and two swamp sprites to fill me up."

"Well maybe tomorrow you should up your serving size to, say, twelve zombies."

"Doable," the demon concurred, belching flame between bites. "Nothing better than Mutter's ilk. . . ."

A cloud of puzzlement passed over the demon's visage, vaguely reminiscent of the perpetual look of half-witted bewilderment that always resided on the face of Elam the goblin.

"There is something tastier than Mutter's ilk," the lord of the pit declared, "but by the sweet revenge of the dark lord and his minions, I can't remember what it is."

"Maybe you're mistaken."

"Not likely," the malevolent minion assured. "I even remember tasting it, artifactual in nature if I recall correctly. . . . I just can't seem to remember what it was."

The lord of the pit wiped its maw with the back of a

taloned paw and slimy tentacle, and offered the now-soiled appendage to Borg to shake, saying, "Good deal! Same time tomorrow, twice as many zombie heads and entrails."

"You'll drop them off before dawn."

"As I did today."

"Perfect."

The lord of the pit turned to fly away but turned back for a moment to add, "I particularly liked the appetizers. I don't fancy zombie flesh much. It's not very filling . . . not like dwarf, or orc, or goblin."

With a hellish laugh, the demon took to the skies, leaving the foul-smelling trio more than slightly uneasy.

"Good thing we still smell," Borg offered uneasily.

"And I may never bathe again," Strother agreed.

"But what if our friend gets a head cold?" Elam inquired.

"Let's hope we never find out."

* * * * *

Each night the demonic lord would raid the enemy forces, feasting on zombie flesh and saving the heads and entrails for Strother, Borg, and Elam. Each day, they slowly built up karmic reserves for what they hoped would be their pension out of this demon's army.

They knew that they had no worries as long as the serpent generator held out, and they knew from previous experience not to overtax such finicky magical mechanisms.

"Men," the sergeant master offered on one of his periodic inspections as he was leaving their camp, "you've done this orc proud. I'll be back tomorrow with a surprise for you, so be ready to be on your best behavior . . . and try to clean yourselves up a bit."

"Yessir, Sarge," they barked back without any intention of removing their bodily filth and jeopardizing their aromatic defenses.

"What do you suppose he meant by that?" Elam inquired.

"Probably wants to give us a medal," Strother offered.

"I'd settle for a few extra swamp sprites. It would be nice if we could save some from His Ugliness Mister Big and Evil Lord of the Abyss. . . ."

"You called," the demon responded, having just arrived on the scene. It devoured the sprites at hand before turning its attentions to the ilk that was ready and waiting for it.

Having eaten its fill, the demon flew off, with a curt "Back tomorrow!" It circled around for a moment and relanded to add, "I hope you have some more appetizers. I'm not sure I can stand another gullet of zombie flesh. Don't fret though. You'll still get your heads and entrails. I'm also still working on that matter we discussed concerning something better than Mutter's ilk. It's right on the tip of my tongues."

With a screech it took to the sky, and the threesome's hopes turned toward tomorrow's upcoming surprise.

"I hope the surprise is something to eat."

"For us or him?"

"Does it really make a difference?"

* * * * *

Before dawn, the lord of the pit made his usual deposit of heads and entrails, but the sergeant master arrived a little later than usual . . . and he was not alone.

"Attention!" he barked good-naturedly. "Everybody up! Now is the time for all master assassins to come to attention."

The three got to their feet. They had overeaten the night before, and their overfilled and fully distended guts had caused them to oversleep. They immediately noticed that the orcan sergeant master was not alone and quickly snapped to attention.

Borg stole a glance at the sky. The sun was slightly higher than usual for the NCO's visit. He hoped their daily appointments didn't overlap.

"As you were, as you were," said the orc accompanying the sergeant master, as if to override the eager officiousness of the NCO.

Borg quickly assessed the newcomer, who was obviously their superior's superior.

The orc was a good head and a half over the NCO and bedecked in a cloak of flayed elf skin ornamented with stud buttons of the finest fairy's teeth. His boots were of tanned unicorn hide with manticore ligament lacings.

This was an orc with taste, class, and prestige. He was well groomed, and nonaromatically challenged.

Could he be a representative from Lord Ugliness himself?

"I am Lord Ugliness," the upper-class orc proclaimed, "and I have come to award you all with medals. You are indeed master assassins . . ."

"Bow your heads," the NCO ordered.

The three complied.

Lord Ugliness continued, ". . . and I particularly wanted to thank you for the steady supply of zombie entrails. Yummy!"

With their heads bowed, the three failed to see the lord of the pit swooping down from above, but they could hear him.

"Something smells good," the demon declared. "Well-groomed orcan flesh. Yummy."

The three looked up in time to see the NCO and Lord Ugliness disappear down the gaping maw of their unlikely ally.

"Mmmmm," the behemoth demon growled in satisfaction. "Clean and perfumed entrails-fed orcan flesh, just another of my favorite things for breakfast."

Favorite things! Borg realized with horror. *We haven't gotten around to revving up the generator yet.*

"I'm afraid that there will be a slight delay with the main course today," Borg explained, thinking on his feet.

"I'll get the generator," Strother proclaimed, quickly fetching the instrument of their salvation, with Elam pitching in to get it up and running.

The demon's maw broke into the widest and toothiest grin any of the three had ever seen.

"That's it!" the lord of the pit exclaimed.

"That's what?" the three asked in unison, hoping against hope that the answer would not involve their getting eaten.

"The something better than Mutter's ilk!"

"Well-groomed entrails-fed orcan flesh?"

"No," the behemoth corrected, snatching the generator from the hands of Elam and Strother, "this!"

"The generator?"

"Indeed!" The demon popped it in its maw. While chewing the source of the three's up-to-this-point salvation and protection from being eaten, it added, "Just as tasty as I remember. Crunchy too."

With a belch, the behemoth took to the skies. "I'll pass on the Mutter's ilk today. No need to dilute the delight. See you tomorrow." Within seconds it was out of sight, leaving the serpent-generatorless trio quaking in their boots.

"Tomorrow?" the three said in unison. "What are we going to do tomorrow?"

"Probably be eaten," Borg offered, "foul smelling and all."

"We could always go back to the main camp," Strother replied, struggling to find a better alternative.

"Where we will probably be eaten," Borg added. "I think that's what happens to those who allow their commanders to be massacred."

Elam brightened as if struck with a brilliant idea. "Maybe we can find another serpent generator?" the goblin proclaimed.

The dwarf and the orc struck him with blunt objects instead.

The three settled in to contemplate the next day, when

they would receive their less-than-desirable just desserts. Their introspection was soon interrupted.

"Goodsirs," a high-pitched, prepubescent orcan voice interrupted, "is this the encampment currently being inspected by His Great and Malevolent Master of Magnificence Lord Ugliness?"

"What if it is?" Elam replied, thinking that fresh orcan capon might indeed make a nice last meal.

"Well, goodsir, if it is," said the page, struggling to endure the personal stench of the three as well as the carrion aroma of the camp, "I have a message for the sergeant master in his company."

"Well give it here," Elam demanded.

"Are you he?"

"He is . . . indisposed."

"He's definitely in something," Borg added, whisking the message out of the minion's hands and reading. "It says here that everyone back at base camp is bathed and deloused and readied for inspection."

"Shhh," the messenger hushed. "I was supposed to be discreet. Lord Ugliness mustn't hear. . . ."

"The only thing Lord Ugliness is hearing right now is belly rumblings."

"The lord is hungry?"

"Many things are," Borg replied. "Now hurry back to camp. You don't want to miss the feast."

"There's going to be feast?"

"Would I lie to you? I'll make sure that the missive makes its way to the master."

The messenger turned tail and hurried back to camp. Elam started to follow until he was detained by Strother's grasp.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To the feast," Elam replied. "I don't want to miss it."

"Oh yes you do," Borg corrected, having just finished penning a note on the back of the missive to the sergeant master, which he then proceeded to read aloud:

"Dear Lord of the Pit:

It is my sad duty to inform you that our mutually lucrative covenant must now come to an end. In recognition of your good faith and our unexpected breach, a feast has been prepared for you at the armed camp three clicks over. The victuals are all freshly washed, just as you prefer them. Enjoy!"

"Well, that takes care of him. What about us?" Strother asked.

Borg affixed the note to a nearby post. "We'd best be moving if we don't want to be appetizers."

"Where to?"

"There," he replied, pointing toward the territory of the enemy. "At least in no-man's land, our reputations may not precede us."

"Yeah," Elam agreed. "Anyplace has to be better than here."

"Rock-hard place—us. Things are definitely looking up," Strother added.

Borg sighed. "Orcs have a pair of proverbs for occasions such as these: 'When looking up, watch out that you don't step in something,' and 'The place that is better than here might actually be much worse.'"

He led his two odiferous companions into the threatening darkness that waited beyond the camp. . . .

PART II:
MODERN MONSTERS



A . L . L A S S I E U R

ERETH THE MIGHTY



In the understory of the magnigoth trees of Yavimaya, there was no such thing as a dry day. The moisture always hung in the air like a veil, covering everything with a foggy, warm mist. A fine film of warm water coated every leaf, forming droplets that fell constantly onto the forest floor far below. The cackles, calls, and chirps of thousands of animals echoed through the trees, joining with the murmur of dripping water to create a symphony of sounds that were strange to Ereth's ears.

She paused, clinging like any other tiny tree creature to the side of the magnigoth's enormous trunk. It wasn't often that Zorich, the headmaster of the academy, allowed one of the acolytes to travel so far from the canopy, especially during these troubled times. Strange and terrifying reports had found their way to the cloistered branches of the school. They spoke of Phyrexian stragglers that had stayed behind after the Invasion. Phyrexians were attacking the new human settlements and destroying the druid enclaves that had formed to protect them. Or so the rumors said.

Instinctively Ereth glanced upward, trembling. She

half-expected to see the glint of Phyrexian skyships in the blue patches of sky that peeked through the branches. She felt nauseated by the thought. If the rumors were true . . .

Fear formed a cold knot in her stomach.

Ereth shook herself. "Stop it," she said aloud. The sound of her voice startled away the rising panic. The stories couldn't be true. "Besides," she said, "Zorich would never let anything happen to us or the academy."

After a few deep breaths, Ereth continued her downward climb. Soon, her momentary panic was forgotten. The sounds of the understory fascinated her, sending her young tree-elf imagination flying. She cocked her head and listened in wonder, trying to separate the tree sounds and put a name to each one. Were they made by normal inhabitants—apes, birds, or animals that dwelled here? Or were they more sinister, unnatural creatures sent by forces unknown, to maim and destroy? Creatures like the ones Zorich knew of but rarely mentioned?

Creatures she could one day create herself. . . .

For a moment she imagined herself as a powerful mage with the ability to conjure creatures at will. She smiled at the thought of mighty battles, crushing enemies with beings she controlled. All of her fellow academy students would take her seriously then! No more teasing, no more "Ereth the Forgetful," or "Ereth Sleepbane" (for her allegedly loud snoring). Then it would be "Ereth the Mighty," feared and respected by all! Ereth smiled to herself at the thought.

She shook her head with a start. "First imaginary Phyrexians, and now this," she murmured, annoyed with herself. "No wonder I never get anything done. If I don't get this goldwort back to Zorich by nightfall he'll have my hide." She sighed, adjusted the large pouch slung over her shoulder, and continued her downward climb.

Carefully, she dropped from branch to branch. The wet, lichen-covered boughs of the understory were hazardous to an inexperienced canopy tree elf, but this was her home tree,

even though she had never ventured so far down its massive trunk. She quickly and confidently descended the slippery surface.

Ereth stopped on every branch, looking for the tiny golden fungus that her teacher had sent her to find. When she found a ripe bulb, she gently pried it loose, wrapped it in a green leaf, and placed it alongside the others. She had explicit instructions to fill the pouch before she returned.

A flash of gold caught her eye. A large bunch of goldwort was hiding beneath a clump of leaves two branches below. Quickly, Ereth lowered herself and inched toward the spindly edge of the branch. As she stepped forward, her foot slid on a patch of slimy moss and flew out from under her. She hit the branch with a thud and instinctively wrapped her arms and legs around it. The wet bough had no traction, and she flipped upside down. Her pouch opened, and the goldwort sailed out. The leaf wrappings fluttered down through the dim light as the golden bulbs bounced on the branches like dozens of toy balls. Everything was still for a moment. Ereth heard the muffled pops of goldwort bursting below her. Then the thin branch she was clinging to broke with an ugly snap.

Ereth crashed through the layers of canopy, trying desperately to grab hold of something that wasn't slick or wet. Sharp leaves and branches cut her face and clothes as she fell. She plummeted through the dense understory, grabbing enough passing branches and leaves to slow her fall but never able to stop it.

With a bone-jarring thump, she hit a huge limb and rolled toward its edge. Desperately she grabbed fistfuls of the sucker branches protruding from the large limb and hung on.

Ereth lay on her stomach, eyes closed, and gulped air, unsure of how close to the edge she was and afraid to move. For a long time, she was still, her cheek pressed against the rough bark, blood trickling from dozens of cuts. When she

opened her eyes again, it was almost dark. Ereth raised her head and looked around.

She had landed in the center of a tree limb that was easily twice as wide as she was tall. Slowly, she rose to a sitting position, checking herself for serious injuries. Thankfully, she found superficial cuts and a couple of nasty bruises but no broken bones. The climb home would be painful but possible.

Ereth sat there for a long time, contemplating whether she should try to get back to the academy that evening or to sleep on the branch. The thought of the ridicule that she would face made her wince, but the idea of sleeping in this smelly, hot, strange place was worse. The lure of the understory was gone. Now it was frightening, dangerous, and far from home.

The sounds in the tree changed, daylight calls and cackles giving way to silence. Usually Ereth loved the quiet moment of twilight, after the day animals had hidden themselves and before the night creatures had emerged. Now, however, the silence meant fear, a long climb in unfamiliar darkness.

A strange noise drifted up from below, breaking the stillness. Ereth couldn't identify it. Nothing this high in the magnigoth tree made such a rustling, heavy sound. Curiosity got the better of her, and Ereth crawled carefully to the side of the huge branch and peered over the edge. She gasped in astonishment and horror.

She was much, much closer to the forest floor than she had thought. The fall had propelled her to within a few hundred feet of the bottom, a place where few canopy elves had ever been. Even in the dim light, she could clearly make out individual plants in the lush underbrush. The floor was covered with a carpet of green ferns, rotting leaves, and vegetation. A web of tiny paths crisscrossed the ground.

But these features were obscured by two huge armies of creatures that swarmed the base of the magnigoth tree. Armored combatants smashed one another with swords, tree

branches, and other weapons she did not recognize. They tore at each other in a frenzy, running through the underbrush.

One army consisted of dark, hunched creatures. Some were scaly, with spikes protruding from different parts of their bodies. Others seemed to have too many arms, legs, or other appendages. Some of the creatures looked like little more than flesh-covered skeletons. Many of them seemed to have metal pieces growing from their skin.

The other army was made up of taller, clearly human defenders. The humans, probably druids, from the look of their clothing, sliced desperately at the dark beasts. Some of the humans rode great cats that swung massive paws at the enemy. More than one of the dark beings was sliced into shreds by those long, death-sharp claws.

Growling with bloodlust, swarms of metallic creatures pounced on the humans. When the creatures darted away, they left only broken bodies tangled in the forest undergrowth.

A large group of the creatures inexplicably screamed in pain and fell in death agony. Some clawed and ripped at their own bodies, tearing away chunks of flesh and metal as they yelled. One pack of creatures ran headlong toward a group of humans but crashed into some kind of invisible barrier. They all bounced backward and disintegrated in a burst of acrid smoke.

"Spells," Ereth breathed.

Slowly the battle moved away from the base of the tree, leaving behind a litter of broken bodies leaking blood and a dark, thick liquid. The crash of battle died away.

Ereth sat, stunned at what she had witnessed. This wasn't like the orderly battles Zorich spoke of, the glorious stories of well-matched armies on a sunny battlefield. This was dark, vicious, and ugly. Who were these beings, and why were they fighting beneath her home tree? Without a backward glance she scrambled up the mighty magnigoth trunk toward home.



"Where's Zorich?" Ereth demanded as she strode into the main hall of the academy. The hall was a large, airy atrium filled with cushions and low tables where students liked to congregate and socialize. The leafy ceiling rose far above them, waving gently in the sunny breeze. A few students looked up, startled by her sudden appearance so early in the morning.

"What happened to you?" one student, Azra, sputtered. "You look like you've tangled with an ape."

Tree bark, dirt, and moss slime streaked Ereth's clothes. Her tunic was torn in a dozen places. Pieces of leaf stuck out from her head. "Fell," she said curtly. "Where's Zorich?"

"Ereth the Forgetful fell in her own home tree!" said another student, Barea. "Ereth Surefoot it should be now!" They laughed uproariously.

Ereth took one step forward and loomed over the two, glaring at them with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. "Have either of you seen the master?" she growled.

Ereth's tone stopped their laughter. Most of the time, they dismissed Ereth. She was a nondescript local elf from a tiny branch village far out on this tree. But now they eyed her with suspicion and a little fear.

"Check the storage room," Barea said. "He was going to take inventory before class this afternoon."

"Thanks," Ereth said as she left.

Sure enough, the door to the room was ajar. A light flickered inside. Ereth pushed open the door and went in. The tiny room was lined with old shelves, bowed with age. Zorich's back was to the door. He was writing something on a sheet of parchment as he counted the contents of a shelf.

"Master, you won't believe what I saw," Ereth began, out of breath.

Without turning around Zorich asked, "Do you have the goldwort?" He had the voice of a singer, and Ereth loved

listening to his lectures, even the ones about mineral content and spell structure.

"Um, no," Ereth began, "I'm sorry. There was an accident, but I have to tell you—"

"No goldwort?" The sound of his scratchy writing stopped. Zorich spun around and glared, clearly annoyed. His bright green eyes flashed and snapped. "I trusted you with a most important job, and you failed me?" Then he caught sight of her appearance and the anger turned to worry. "What happened to you?"

"I fell," Ereth said sheepishly.

Zorich took in Ereth's bloodstained clothing, tangled hair, and the limp, empty bag hanging from her shoulder.

"Not surprising," he said in a more even tone. "It's not an easy place to keep your feet. Can I assume that you lost all of the goldwort in the fall?"

Ereth sighed and nodded.

Zorich folded his arms and cocked his head, peering at her from beneath a shock of dark black hair. He was clean-shaven in the typical elf manner. He had the delicate, timeless features of her race, although lately he appeared tired. Zorich was a harsh but fair teacher. All of the students adored him, including Ereth.

"Yes, I am sorry, Master," Ereth said. "I failed."

"No matter," he said. "I'll make do. Now, what was it you had to tell me?"

Breathlessly Ereth described the events she saw on the forest floor. Throughout the tale Zorich stood unmoving, a blank expression on his face. When she finished, he was silent for a long time. Then he said, "I have suspected that something like this would happen, but I did not know when. I had hoped that the Omlerias would take care of the problem, but clearly they have not."

"Omlerias?" Ereth asked.

"Human druids," Zorich replied. Zorich was one of the only elves in this magnigoth tree to have dealings with the

humans, much to the disapproval of the other academy professors. Ereth and the other students thought him bold and far-thinking and respected him for it. But now his tone rang of disappointment and anger instead of friendship.

Ereth's eyes widened in surprise at his attitude.

Zorich noticed and smiled. "I meant no disrespect to the Omlerias," he explained as they left the storage room. "But the druids are ill equipped to face an enemy such as you describe." Zorich closed and locked the door behind him, and they set off down the long, open hallway.

"But what were those creatures?" Ereth asked, jogging to keep up with the master as he strode toward his chambers. "I have never seen such beings before."

Zorich didn't reply. Ereth followed him through the hallway and up a wide staircase. The stairs were created by dozens of thick branches intertwined into steps. A large opening stood at the top of the stairs. The opening was covered with a thick curtain of leafy vines that parted when Zorich waved his hand. He motioned for her to step inside, and then closed the vine door behind them.

At first glance, it looked like an ordinary room. Sunlight streamed in from tall, wide windows. An enormous carved table dominated the center. A small stack of books was piled neatly to one side. Orderly shelves filled with parchments and boxes lined one wall. Comfortable-looking chairs and cushions were scattered about. Strings of tiny bells hung in the large open windows, tinkling softly in the morning breeze.

Ereth looked around and gulped nervously. Academy legend told of secret experiments and strange objects that Zorich kept hidden away in his chambers. Upperclassmen whispered that his books screamed when you opened them. The images drawn on the pages writhed in pain. Some students swore they saw strange lights and sounds coming from his room at all hours of the night.

"Not what you expected, eh?" Zorich chuckled as he watched Ereth.

Ereth jumped and then looked embarrassed.

"Don't believe everything you hear," Zorich replied. He scanned the parchments on his shelf, chose one, and unrolled it. "Come here," he said.

Ereth peered over his shoulder as he smoothed the parchment out, weighing down its curly edges with books. The page was clearly very old, perhaps one of the most ancient parchments in the academy library. The writing was faded and spidery. A strong musty smell wafted from it.

"Is this the creature you saw?" Zorich asked, pointing to a small drawing at the bottom of the page. It depicted a hulking creature with bulging muscles. Strange mechanical implants had been grafted onto its scaly body. Its head was covered with some kind of metal helmet, but Ereth couldn't tell if it was a piece of armor or part of the creature's skull. The rest of the parchment was filled with sketches and drawings of the most horrifying creatures imaginable. Some were clearly corruptions of common animals, while others were hideous monsters that had no origin in this world.

Ereth shivered with a mixture of horror and delight. "Yes," she said, swallowing hard. "I think so." The writing around the image was strangely familiar. She peered at the parchment more closely, straining to decipher the words.

Zorich snatched up the parchment and quickly rolled it up, shaking his head. He had a worried expression on his face.

"Are they . . . Phyrexians?" Ereth whispered, afraid to say the word aloud. She was old enough to remember the diseases, the death, the unending terror of the Invasion. Were they facing the horror again?

"I cannot say absolutely," Zorich said. The thought seemed to frighten him, too. "I have heard the rumors as well. But they could also be some other race of beings, something we have never seen before."

"You mean something someone had conjured?" Ereth asked excitedly. She immediately felt ashamed of that

feeling. But she couldn't help feeling it—the thrill that came with the thought of that kind of power. "What can we do?" Ereth asked quickly, trying to recover. "There must be a way to defeat them."

Zorich did not seem to have heard her. He stared at the floor, lost in thought.

"You are right," he said finally. "I need your assistance with the research, however."

Ereth was shocked. She didn't know how to respond to such an honor, so she stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Don't think this is a gift," Zorich said curtly. "You owe me for your blunder with the goldwort, and I expect you to pay."

The goldwort! She dropped her head in shame, all happiness gone. Then she felt Zorich's hand on her shoulder and looked up. He was gazing at her kindly. "Of course I will use you. You are the most promising second-year student in the academy," he said. "Sleep, eat, clean yourself, and return to my chambers by nightfall. I need you rested and awake."

He waved his hand at the doorway. The vines parted, rustling softly. Ereth passed through them and sped to her room. Zorich watched her leave. He stood there long after she had gone, deep in thought.

* * * * *

It was late. The sun had set, throwing a blanket of darkness over Yavimaya. The warm breeze through Zorich's rooms had turned chilly, and Ereth shivered as she hunched over yet another book. She had returned to Zorich's chambers as ordered, and he had immediately set her to searching his library for any mention of the monsters she had seen. For hours, she had pored over books. Her head ached, and her backside was numb from the hard chair. Stacks of unopened volumes stood around Ereth's chair, still waiting to be read.

Zorich was standing nearby, reading from a large tome.

Ereth shifted in her seat, trying to find a comfortable position. The chair creaked, and Zorich looked up.

"Are you cold?" he asked. Without waiting for a reply, he muttered something under his breath. Immediately a golden-red ball of light appeared, hovering in the air between them. It radiated a soft warmth that filled the room, chasing away the chill.

Ereth smiled. "Thank you," she said.

Zorich gave her a tired smile in return. "Any luck?"

"Nothing so far," she said with a sigh. "There are a few references to Phyrexians, of course, but nothing else that looks like them."

"Are you absolutely sure of what you saw?" Zorich asked. "I do not disbelieve you, but perhaps the dim light and the stress from your fall played tricks on your eyes?"

Ereth closed the large leather book in front of her with a dusty thud. "I am sure."

Zorich nodded and then rubbed his eyes with one delicate hand. The circles under his eyes looked darker. "I was sure we would find something here. Your skill at research is well known. If anyone can find something in a book, it's you."

Despite her fatigue, Ereth smiled and blushed. It was true that she spent most of her time in the academy library. The books didn't laugh at her or look down on her. But Ereth found more than comfort in books. All those words held the secrets to ultimate power, power to control the world. The power she craved.

"It's late," Zorich continued, jarring her from her thoughts. He looked around the room and yawned. "Tidy up here, will you please? Then get some sleep. We can start fresh tomorrow." He turned and disappeared through a small doorway that Ereth had not noticed before.

"Wh-what?" Ereth sputtered to herself, her self-satisfied bubble bursting as the door creaked shut behind the master. "He compliments me and then tells me to clean up!"

Still grumbling under her breath, she began clearing off the table. She gathered the loose parchments and books that littered the room, and stacked the unread volumes into piles. Most were large and heavy. A few were bound in odd materials that looked like skin, or scales, or other things that Ereth didn't want to inspect too closely. Every time she touched one, she half expected it to do something startling, such as yell or jump. But other than a few puffs of dust and some flakes of leather, none assaulted her.

She absently picked up the book that Zorich had been reading and ran her fingers over the embossed symbols on the dark green leather. The spine had been broken, as if someone had read the same pages many times. As she carried it to the shelf, it seemed to become warmer in her hands. It wiggled. With a yelp, Ereth dropped the book. It landed on the floor with a heavy crash, flipped open, and lay still.

Ereth glanced worriedly at the door where Zorich had disappeared, but no sound came from beyond it. Then she stared at the book, expecting it to move again. She gingerly poked at it with one finger. Nothing. It was cold and dry like all the other books.

Ereth smiled wanly, embarrassed for letting her imagination get the better of her again. She reached to close the book but noticed a large drawing on one page. It was of a huge creature, taller than anything she had ever seen. It looked like an enormous thorny tree or bush, with long arms and fingers. Thin, sharp spines were shooting from its fingertips. An army of bodies lay at its feet, pinned to the ground by thousands of spikes.

For a long time, Ereth knelt on the floor and stared at the drawing. Everything else in the room faded away. All that remained was the image of this grotesque figure, this monster that could smite whole armies with one wave of its hand. A familiar longing stirred inside her, the ambition for power mingled with the delicious thrill of fear.

"What are you?" she whispered, lightly touching the

picture. Pain stabbed her finger, and she drew back in surprise. Blood welled on her fingertip and splashed onto the page.

"Oh no," she exclaimed, her reverie broken by the sight of blood in Zorich's precious book.

"What am I going to do?" she thought frantically, her heart pounding. In panic, she did the first thing that came to mind: She carefully tore the page out of the book, folded it, and shoved it beneath her tunic.

She closed the book and quickly placed it on the shelf. It would be days, maybe weeks, before Zorich noticed the missing page. She hoped. . . .

* * * * *

As the weeks passed, more disturbing news came from the forest floor. By now everyone was convinced that the attackers were Phyrexians. To make matters worse, Yavimaya was filled with countless refugee camps, established by humans who had poured into Yavimaya after the Invasion. The settlements were easy targets for attack, for they were hastily constructed, defenseless, and overcrowded. Druids, led by the Omlerias, did their best to defend the settlements. Everyone feared that elves and magnigoth trees would be attacked next.

Zorich was nowhere to be found. Everyone claimed to have seen the master, but when pressed, no one could remember exactly when or where they had last spoken to him. Even Ereth had not seen him again after the night they worked in his chambers. Although he had promised to send for her to continue their research, no word had come. She was bitterly disappointed, but she had something else to fill her mind.

Every night after lights out, Ereth crept to the library and spent hours poring over translation texts and spellbooks. She discovered that the writing on the page she had stolen

was not a foreign language but an ancient version of her own dialect.

The monster pictured on the page, she discovered, was a thorn elemental. Amid the descriptions of battle and the behavior of the creature was what Ereth had hoped desperately for: the spell to conjure it. It would take her weeks to figure it out, and her heart raced at the idea of mastering such a difficult spell.

But even the excitement of translating the spell could not soothe Ereth's growing panic at the thought of a Phyrexian attack. She was also annoyed that Zorich had forgotten her.

One rainy afternoon Ereth decided to visit his chambers.

When she reached the familiar staircase, she hesitated. No one ever entered Zorich's chambers uninvited. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, she quickly climbed the stairs and pushed back the vine door.

The room was closed and dark. The only illumination came from a dozen balls of warmth that hung in the air, making the room hot and stuffy. In the red and gold light, Ereth saw papers and books littering the floor. Opened boxes were stacked around the room, with their contents scattered everywhere. The large table was piled with open books, broken quills, and sheaves of parchment covered with blotted scrawls. A large, carved, high-backed chair sat squarely in the center of the room. All of the warmth-lights hovered around it.

Ereth slowly approached the chair. As she drew closer, she could hear Zorich chanting softly in an unfamiliar tongue. She strained to make out the words, which sounded somewhat like her own language but not quite. Then she recognized it. It was the language of the ancient book, the language she had spent so many weeks learning. Inside her tunic the many-times folded parchment page seemed to get warm.

Zorich stopped chanting. "Come here," he croaked.

He was in bad shape. His hair was greasy and flat. His

clothing was crusty. He smelled. His beautiful, delicate hands were little more than claws. Ereth had never seen her master, or any other academy teacher, like this.

She was ready to turn and flee when Zorich reached out and grabbed her arm. His grip was surprisingly strong. She winced as his dirty, untrimmed nails dug through the sleeve of her tunic into her flesh.

"I need it," he said hoarsely. "You have it, don't you?"

"Yes," Ereth said.

His grip tightened. "Give it to me."

Despite her fear, Ereth did not like to be given orders. Her anger flashed, and she said, "Not until you tell me what happened to you."

Zorich's head snapped to look at her, and Ereth recoiled. His usually serene green eyes were huge black orbs bulging from their sockets.

"What happened to me?" he cackled. He let go of Ereth's arm and pushed her away.

She lost her balance and fell to the floor at Zorich's feet.

"There are too many; they are too strong," he mumbled.

"The Phyrexians?" Ereth said, scrambling up. "You found a spell to defeat them? What is it?"

"Urza's experiments, Urza's dabbling," Zorich said.

"What does Urza have to do with all this?" Ereth asked. She grabbed Zorich and shook his shoulders roughly. "What is going on?"

"Why did he have to meddle so long ago? Mightstone. Weakstone. Didn't mean to bring the beasts, but here they are. They almost destroyed us once. Now we're paying the price again."

Ereth let go and stared at Zorich, a flickering of understanding in her eyes. "Then the rumors are true," she said in a dead voice.

"Yes, no, maybe, don't think so," Zorich babbled. Then he said, "I found it, you know."

"A spell? To defeat the creatures?" Ereth was astonished.

"Trying to cast it. But it is big. More than I imagined."

The light was dawning for Ereth. To cast such a huge spell would drain even the most powerful mage. To keep it up for weeks at a time was impossible. No wonder Zorich was in such bad shape.

"But we can help you," Ereth said. "The students, the faculty . . ."

"NO!" Zorich spat. Then more calmly he said, "No, no one should know what I have done. The spell, it is dark, black. No one can know."

Ereth stepped away from the chair, nauseated and terrified. Zorich, the master she loved and respected above all others, had used black magic. It was against everything that her race believed, even if it had been done for good. She stared at him, hunched and shriveled in the huge chair, and saw what such black power had done. It made her sick.

But there was another feeling, too. The fluttery excitement. The thrill.

Trembling, she knelt beside the chair and took Zorich's skeletal hand in hers.

"I can help you," she said. "Show me."

Zorich stared at her, wide-eyed and uncomprehending. Then his black pupils grew smaller, and green irises flashed with clarity.

"I will not allow you to become corrupted as I have," he said, gripping her hand so hard that it made Ereth wince. "No, I will not tell you what I have done."

He coughed. "But you can help. I need the page, the spell."

Ereth reached into her tunic and pulled out the well-worn parchment.

He snatched it from her as she rubbed her hand where his nails had dug into her flesh. Zorich scanned the page. "No," he said in despair, letting the creased page fall to the floor. "This spell will take weeks to master. It must be perfect, or it will not work. I am out of time." He slumped in his chair.

"I know the spell," Ereth said with pride.

Zorich's head jerked up. "You know it? How?"

"I've studied it," Ereth replied. "I don't know all of it but I think I could do it. If I had enough power."

Zorich leaped from his chair and faced Ereth nose-to-nose. "Can you? You know the chants, the incantations, everything?"

"I . . ." Ereth said, startled by Zorich's intensity. "Yes, I can."

Zorich began pacing the room. "Yes, I think it can be done, she's strong enough, almost ready, yes, yes," he mumbled.

"Strong enough for what?"

"It's the only way," Zorich said. Then he abruptly turned to Ereth. "The spell I have been trying to cast—I can destroy them one by one, but there are too many. I believe the thorn elemental might be able to defeat them. I cannot cast both spells at once; it is too much—and I fear my magic might be corrupted by the black forces I have used.

"But you know the spell," he continued, "and I have the power. I will channel mana through you. The elemental can destroy them all. Yavimaya will be saved."

* * * * *

Two days later, Ereth stood atop the Mori Tumulus, a tall rift overlooking a forested valley. Zorich was there, as were the highest-ranking druids of the Omleria. Zorich smiled wanly at her, still drained and weakened.

The humans eyed Ereth with a mixture of fear and apprehension. Some were outright skeptical that the plan would work. After all, they muttered, the Phyrexians could not be defeated so easily before. Ereth wasn't so sure, either. If not for her devotion to her master, she would never have agreed to this desperate scheme.

"When?" she asked Zorich.

"Soon," Zorich replied.

A tall druid, a leader of the Omlerias, said, "If the trap works, that is."

Zorich gave the Omlerias leader a sideways glance but said nothing.

Soon Ereth felt and heard the approach of a vast army. The ground trembled like a magnigoth before a storm, and there was a rumble like distant thunder. The rumble got closer and louder. The group on the tumulus grew silent. Zorich whispered for Ereth to stand at the edge of the cliff and face outward.

She planted her feet firmly apart and folded her arms, trying to appear much calmer than she felt. She breathed deeply, forcing her mind to clear and to focus only on the words of the spell.

At that moment, an enormous fissure opened in the center of the valley. The ground rolled and boiled, toppling trees and sending enormous boulders flying upward. A deep moan, like that of a great beast, tore through air. Then a black river of hundreds of creatures poured out of the dark pit.

Ereth dropped her arms and closed her eyes. Zorich's voice entered her mind. *Good, good. Let our minds join, your knowledge and my power, to defeat the evil that has corrupted our lands.* The voice died away, and there was only silence in Ereth's mind.

Without warning, a blast of energy flowed through her. It filled her with a power so great that it made her stumble forward. From somewhere, a hand steadied her.

A blinding light made circles dance on the inside of her eyelids and filled her ears with a high-pitched whine. Then a hot, dark wind roared through her, a thousand pinpricks jabbing her from the inside. The pain was immediate and searing. She gasped and choked, dropping to her knees.

"No," she whispered. "Too much. . . ." The roaring wind grew darker. The pins became daggers trying to slice their way out of her.

The spell! Speak the spell!

Ereth cried out. Her lips began moving, and slowly she recited the spell. When at last it was done, she fell to the ground.

Again, again! Again!

Ereth lay facedown on the ground. There was no thought in her head but pain. The daggers had become swords. Her organs burned, her blood boiled, and her muscles convulsed with each wave of power Zorich sent through her. Zorich's voice came once again, cutting through the agony in her mind. *You can do it*, he said confidently. *You can.*

Again she recited the spell, and again, through the pain. Then finally she heard Zorich's triumphant laugh behind her. The slicing feeling ebbed enough to let Ereth slowly raise her head and look into the valley before them.

An enormous being towered over the vale, standing almost as tall as the Mori Tumulus. It was made of a vast network of tangled branches and vines in every shade of the forest, from the light spring green of new leaves to the dead browns of winter. From its head sprouted vines that cascaded down its back and twined on the forest floor. Its arms were stretched far out from its body, with long thin branch-like fingers that pointed forward. Sharp thorns the size of broadswords shot from its fingers into the armies at its feet. The squeals and screams of dying creatures filled the air.

The pain had lessened a bit, making it easier for Ereth to think. Zorich still channeled power through her and into the elemental before them. His voice floated through the rushing wind, through pain. It said only one word.

Accept.

His voice, so melodic and calm, always reassured Ereth. It did so again now.

Her body relaxed. She opened her physical being to the power, willing herself to accept it all — the pain, the wind, and the darkness. She opened her mind and welcomed the fury. In her mind's eye, she could see Zorich standing

beside her, his arms open wide and his head thrown back. The wind engulfed them, making them both part of a bigger whole. Ereth didn't know where her essence ended and where his began. It didn't matter. The power was all that existed. The power of the land. Of creation. Of destruction.

Slowly she got to her feet. This was her destiny, finally. No longer would she be ridiculed. Ereth the Mighty at last.

Yes, yes! Zorich's voice came through her. It is as I had hoped; it is working. Soon the creatures will be gone!

The elemental was making quick work of the hordes of black creatures. Every step of its enormous feet crushed dozens of them. Thorns shot from its fingers. It ripped up entire swaths of the forest. In one viny hand, it picked up a platoon of soldiers and flung them against the cliff as if they were bothersome insects.

The battle, if that was the name for such destruction, lasted only a few moments. Soon the valley was a littered mess of uprooted trees and dead bodies. It would take centuries to undo this damage.

Then the tenor of the pain and power changed, as if the wind shifted direction but did not alter its force. Ereth could hear the loud cheers from the group behind her, but they sounded oddly distant, as if they came from the end of a long dark tunnel.

Then Zorich's voice whispered, *Lie down.*

Without question Ereth flung herself to the ground. The cheers died. The feeling of excitement in the air on the tumulus changed abruptly to the crackle of fear.

With huge, measured steps, the thorn elemental was walking toward them. As the monster approached, Ereth could see the impossibly confusing tangle of branches and vines that made up its body, its long, long hands and fingers, and most of all, its eyes—the eyes of the forest, of hate, and of revenge.

The power that coursed through her changed so abruptly

that it made her flail against the ground like a gasping fish. The pain changed, too, growing darker, heavier, and deeper. Ereth thrashed helplessly and then felt someone pin her down and hold her protectively. Zorich.

"Don't fight it." There was fear in his voice, but something else too. Joy. "You wanted glory. Now here it is."

Zorich pressed Ereth's head down and covered them both with his large green cloak. She heard a heavy zing through the air right above their heads, and the sickening thump of dozens of long, sharp thorns shooting through live flesh. A large sigh went up from behind them, followed by the muffled sound of bodies falling to the ground.

Ereth pulled away from her master's protective embrace and jumped to her feet. Behind them lay the mangled bodies of every human who had stood on the cliff with them. Their bodies were pinned to the ground and each other, their warm blood flowing in puddles around them. The leader had a single long thorn through her forehead.

Ereth whirled and faced Zorich. "What have you done?"

"You mean, what have *we* done?" Zorich replied gleefully, facing away from the cliff edge. He could not even conceal his happiness. "We, my quiet student, have saved our world!"

Ereth shook her head in disbelief. "I don't understand."

Zorich sent a wave of power through her, and she saw. She understood.

"Humans are the scourge," Zorich said through the pain and power. "Filthy humans, invading our beautiful forests with their camps, their villages, their stench. The only solution is to destroy them all. Then Yavimaya will be returned to the elves. . . . But the humans were stronger than I thought. Even the armies of creatures I created couldn't destroy them."

"N-no," Ereth sputtered. The pain grew stronger. The wind grew darker. Ereth cried out.

"Don't fight it," Zorich repeated. "It won't last much

longer. Soon you will have all the power you have ever craved."

Ereth took a step toward Zorich. She remembered the green book with the broken spine. She took another step.

"Yes, I lied, led everyone to believe the creatures were Phyrexians. It was easy. Thanks be to Urza!"

The pain was growing stronger, darker. Zorich filled her mind with images: how he found the ancient black scroll, how he studied the spell, perfected it, and brought forth dark creatures made to resemble Phyrexians . . . how they took over his mind, growing too strong . . . victories, and then defeats as the humans began winning . . . how he realized the spell would kill him before all the humans were destroyed . . . his desperation to find another way, and his happiness when he realized Ereth could help him.

"You, with your strength, your lust for power, your devotion, you became my key. The elemental can complete the task. It is our last hope."

"No!" Ereth said. She tried frantically to think, but the rushing wind and darkness filled her mind. Her voice was a whisper: "I will break the spell before you can use the elemental through me."

Zorich cackled. "But that isn't my plan."

From somewhere deep inside her, Ereth felt a tugging sensation, as if someone were trying to pull her insides out.

In her mind, she saw Zorich standing before the elemental. The creature bowed to his bidding. But it wasn't the creature; it was her. She was looking out from strange eyes. Her hair was tangled branches, and her arms were long and sinewy. Thorns shot from her fingers. Everything before her died in agony.

Zorich's voice became singsong as he chanted the spell to transfer her soul into the elemental. The tugging became stronger. Ereth moaned and fell to her knees, clutching her chest. The power screamed through Ereth and outward, to the elemental she had longed to conjure. She closed her eyes

and sent a single thought on the stream of power and pain..

Come.

Then, to Zorich, she said, "No."

The master laughed. "You have no choice."

Ereth felt her essence being ripped from her body, but she fought back with all the strength she could muster. In her mind she saw Zorich's shocked expression as she struggled against his powerful pull. She didn't have much time.

Behind Zorich, the enormous head of the thorn elemental peeked over the cliff edge. Something primitive glinted in the black depths of its eyes.

With a terrible, tearing sensation Ereth pulled away from her master's power. She was free. Her body felt strangely light and airy, as if she could float away.

"Rise," she whispered. The elemental's hand rose.

Ereth looked over Zorich's shoulder at the elemental's twisted hand, with its sharp, long thorns pointed at them.

Zorich spun around. His rapturous expression turned to horror.

Ereth smiled.

* * * * *

"What is this, Master?" The young acolyte pointed to a page in the book.

It was an ancient tome, older than any other books in the academy library. Most of the writing was faded and spidery. The page was dirty and creased as if it had been folded. It had been replaced in the book so expertly that the tear was almost invisible. The picture on the page depicted a huge creature that looked like an enormous spiny tree or bush, with long arms and fingers. Thin, sharp spines were shooting from its fingertips. An army of bodies lay at its feet, pinned to the ground by thousands of pointed spines.

"A thorn elemental," said the master. She looked at the class. "Centuries ago the greatest mage of this academy,

Zorich, created it to destroy an army of Phyrexians that had been left behind after the Great Invasion."

The class gasped.

"Zorich," the master continued, "along with a student assistant, single-handedly saved our lands from this terrible threat. The spell is so difficult that no one has been able to cast it since."

"What happened to him?" another student asked.

"'Tis a sad, but glorious, story," the master said. "Zorich successfully cast the spell, but something went terribly wrong. When the elemental had completed its task, it turned on the great mage and killed him, along with a group of druids who had gathered to support him. He was struck by a thorn that impaled both him and his student with a single shot. Once he was dead, the elemental spell faded, and the land was saved."

One student, a tall boy, raised his hand. "I have heard this story. In my village we have a feast day to celebrate his victory. He is revered among the human villagers everywhere."

The master nodded. "We have him to thank for peace."

"Who was the student?" a quiet girl asked.

The master shook her head. "I have no idea."

D E N I S E R . G R A H A M

TRUE ENOUGH



Oly peeled one eye open, his bleary gaze scanning the boughs of the ash tree. Cradled in its roots, he lay where he had passed out, too weary to rouse his old bones.

In his dream, he had stood at the helm of his merchant ship, *The Raw Sin Ontay*, sailing fast under clear skies, some drunken sailor singing his favorite chantey: *Give a pirate a hoist of his yo-ho-ho! And yer in for a real Jolly Roger. . . .* Ah, to breathe the sweet sea breezes once more! But his sailing days had gone down with that ship, and now he saw the sea only in dreams.

"Three plagues and a pox on what tore me from that blissful dream," he muttered. "What was it, anyway?"

The air was calm, and nothing seemed amiss. Neither Steel Leaf Elves nor Benalian townsfolk ventured to this unclaimed land at the meeting of forest and plains, especially by night. The only sound was Old Cassie's growling.

Mad old cur, Oly thought, closing his eye. Even as his mind groped after his lost dream, another thought crept in: Hold on.

Old Cassie never growled. Not for anything. Not ever.

Steady now, thought Oly as he reached for his bottle of rum. His trembling hand sailed straight to it, as sure of its course as a plow horse heading for its stable, but the bottle wasn't there. Oly sat up, ran callused palms over his weathered, scruffy face and wild hair, and opened both eyes wide. What he saw snatched him dead sober.

There before him crouched an abomination to make the darkest demons flee in terror. Its lumpish form suggested that of a man, but a man with bat wings, a scorpion's tail, and scythe-like claws. Its bluish hide seemed to shift and shimmer in the moonlight, and its bones twisted at impossible angles, like a doll crushed under a wagon wheel. A tangle of ropy hair hung in clumps down its neck, and its eyes glowed an eerie green in the suddenly cold night. It lowered its tooth-filled beak to something in its claw. One tug of those jaws produced a popping sound Oly knew all too well. The beak seemed to melt into human lips. The head dropped back, the claw lifted, and a hungry gulping broke the silence.

"My rum!" Oly's indignant outcry surprised him more than it did the creature, which turned to fix him with those ghostly green eyes.

The beast hissed, and a forked tongue flicked the still air. "Yer dreaming, old man," the creature rasped. "You finished off yer rum. What you see is but a trick of the drink." It tossed back the last of the rum and flung the empty jug aside, the undergrowth muffling the sound of breaking crockery.

Old Cassie barked a warning and stalked toward the intruder. The thing raised a claw and sprang at the dog. Before it had gone two steps, it pulled up, yowling and spitting like an angry cougar. Swaying slightly, it bent to pluck a shard of broken jug from its foot.

"Strange dream indeed, old man." Its face split into a broad grin and sprouted giant mandibles. "Best keep indoors for a few nights, though." Then with a running,

limping leap, it flew off toward the plains.

Old Cassie gave a final snarl and charged after the retreating beast but had no hope of catching it. She wouldn't have known what to do with the thing if she had, which was probably why she'd held her attack. She was an old dog, not a stupid one.

Gradually the night insects and animals resumed their usual chirpings and rustlings. Oly let out the breath he had not noticed he was holding and made his way to the edge of the forest. His gaze scoured the starry skies but found no trace of the horrible creature.

"Good girl, Cassie. That's showing the brute who's in charge." He patted her on the head and gave her neck a quick scratch, bracing himself for what he knew he must do.

"Call me an old man, will it," he muttered. "Come on, girl. Let's go warn the folks in town. We'll show that thing what an old man and his old dog are made of." She smiled up at him as only a dog can and gave a hint of a whimper, as if to say she shared both his reluctance and his resolve.

Together they hurried off, the dew on the high grasses dragging at their steps. They made better time when they reached the dirt road leading into the town of Sylvayn. All the while, Oly kept a wary eye on the skies. Old Cassie padded along as if nothing had happened, which only made her master begin to wonder what really had.

"I know what I saw," he said, thinking he didn't sound entirely convincing. "I know what they'll say, but I saw what I saw. I just have to make them believe me."

Smoke rose from the chimneys of the half-timbered buildings as the weary travelers pressed on into town. Candles glowed in some of the windows, though many were already dark for the night. The dirt streets that made up the ambitious little community stood empty at this late hour, but cheery music wafted faintly from the Mighty Boar Inn, just a couple of streets over.

Oly's first instinct was to head for his usual pub, the Salty

Nymph, down by the river on the far side of town. His breathing grew more ragged with each step, however, and he resigned himself to stopping at the Mighty Boar instead, to save precious time and his tired hide. Lamplight and conversation washed over him as he swung the inn's door wide.

"Monster!" he gasped, stumbling into the warmth of the common room. "There's a monster out there!" He had managed to keep his wits about him until now, but the simple act of giving voice to the terrifying vision made it somehow more real. The shock of it flooded over him. "Protect the women and children!"

An awkward pause greeted his announcement, and questioning glances passed among the people clustered at the rows of tables. Even the musicians fell quiet. At a signal from the owner, they resumed their playing.

The innkeep, a stocky man in an apron, took a few steps forward. "Here now, Oly. How many times do I have to tell you? You can't come in here when you've already had too many at the Nymph."

The patrons returned to their tankards and talk. A couple of them exchanged knowing grins.

"It's true, Zahft!" Oly insisted, trying to catch his breath. "I tell you, I saw it with my own eyes. It had wings and huge claws and devil eyes!" He gestured wildly; mere words were no match for the horror he had witnessed.

The innkeep sighed. "Well, you've certainly worked yourself into a state over something. Come on, then. Sit by the fire and have a bit of bread till you're able to make it home." Zahft reached out a hand to help Oly to a chair.

Oly swatted it away. "I know you think I'm just a drunken fool, but Old Cassie saw it, too. She even growled at it."

Complete silence fell over the room. All eyes went to the hound dog already sprawled in front of the fire. Her sides heaved with the breathing of deepest sleep, yet she managed to let out an indelicate sound.

The room erupted in howls of laughter. Patrons nudged

each other and called out rude jibes. Their racket woke Old Cassie, who raised one eyebrow to cast a sorrowful glance over the crowd. This only brought on a renewed fit of merriment.

Oly stood, red-faced, fists at his sides, waiting for the others to compose themselves.

Zahft fought back a snicker. "No offense, Oly, but everyone knows Old Cassie has never growled at anything in all her long days."

"Just the same," said Oly through clenched teeth, "she growled at the monster we saw."

"But that's how we know you were only seeing things, friend. Old Cassie would never growl, even if she did see a monster. That dog has the sweetest nature of any creature that ever lived."

"If not the sweetest smell," added the fiddler, and another bout of laughter rolled through the room.

Oly waved a dismissive hand at them. "Ah, you're daft, the lot of you. I only hope your humor holds up when that thing comes for your families." With that, he turned on his heel and marched out. He clicked his tongue as he went, and Old Cassie hauled herself off the floor to follow him.

No point trying to convince the folks at the Nymph. They'd never believe him either. As he'd feared, they'd made the trip for nothing.

He headed for home. He had almost made it to his tiny house just beyond the edge of town when he heard heavy footsteps pounding after him.

It's coming for me, he thought. His heart thundered in his chest as he cast about for a weapon and found none.

Closer and closer, louder and louder, the footfalls sounded like the hooves of a nightmare closing in on him. Open fields yawned to all sides, offering no sanctuary. Pulling Old Cassie with him, Oly flattened himself in the high grasses beside the path, hoping the meager cover might save them.

It was almost upon him now. The very grass that hid him blocked his view, but he heard the thing approaching, snorting like a charging bull. Just as he thought it might pass him by, Old Cassie gave a low bark and darted out, heading off their pursuer.

"Cassie, no!" Oly cried, leaping to snatch his beloved hound from certain death. He rolled across the path, catching hold of Cassie and carrying her with him as he went.

"Look out, you fool!" snapped a familiar voice.

Oly peered up from the tangle of paws and grass to see his brother reining in his horse. "Tristefan?"

"There you are," his brother said in a tone of deep-rooted disgust. "Lying in the gutter. I should have known that's where I'd find you." His mount danced fitfully beneath him, agitated by the sudden halt. Old Cassie trotted over and nuzzled the man's leg until he leaned down to stroke her head.

"What are you doing here?" Oly asked, clambering to his feet and brushing at the dirt and damp grass clinging to him.

"Looking after you, as usual. Zahft sent his boy to tell me about the scene you made at the inn. Woke the whole house. He was afraid you were too drunk to get home on your own. Thought you might wander into the river and drown. It'd serve you right, I'd say."

Oly scowled at him. "Then you should have stayed in bed."

"And how would it look for the town's mayor to let his own brother go off and get himself killed?"

"Ah, there it is. That's all you really care about. Not me, not my safe return home. Just that I don't tarnish your precious image."

"Now, you know that isn't true," said Tristefan, swinging down from his saddle to place a hand on Oly's shoulder. "I do worry about you. But it's not just you and me I have to look after. What about my poor Mirelda? In a small town like Sylvayn, people gossip. As it is, the old biddies never

give her any peace because of you. Yet you keep giving them fresh mud to sling at her. And what of my girls? They're of marrying age now, but who will have them if their uncle keeps making a laughingstock of us all? Don't get me wrong, Oly. The people in town like you well enough, but they still laugh at you."

Oly kicked at a rock. "Well, you needn't have worried," he grumbled, feeling a bit guilty in spite of himself. "I'm not even drunk this time. There really is a monster. If you're so concerned about your town, you'd better see to that. Cassie and me, we'll take care of ourselves."

Tristefan shook his head. "Come on then," he said. "Let me at least give you a ride home, and you can tell me what you think you saw."

Oly wanted to refuse, but all the running around had worn him out. He climbed up behind his brother. They took it at a walk so Old Cassie could keep up. As they rode, Oly told Tristefan what had happened. When they reached Oly's house, he slid down from the horse's back and asked, "You believe me, don't you, Stefan?"

His brother cocked his head to one side, considering. "I believe you saw something, but I can't say I believe in your monster."

"You'll post a watch at night anyway, won't you? Just in case I'm right?"

"All right, Oly. If it'll make you feel better. You won't mind if I tell folks I think you saw some kind of wild animal, though, will you? It'll make us both less laughable."

At first, Oly didn't answer. "I will mind," he said at last, "but I'll understand."

* * * * *

The next evening at the Mighty Boar Inn, the prominent members of Sylvayn's budding society met to debate the need for posting a watch. Oly convinced Tristefan to let him

sit in, but Tristefan made him promise there'd be "no rum and no ruckus." The mayor also insisted that Old Cassie stay outside, since no one would take Oly's warning seriously with her around. Oly hated to put her out, but she did smell like she'd been rolling in dead things again.

Just as Tristefan rose to start the meeting, a stranger swaggered into the bar. He had to duck through the doorway. A cloak of deep blue velvet swept back from his broad shoulders. His sea blue eyes and chiseled jaw attracted dreamy stares from every female in the room, while his steady gaze and battle-hardened form drew respectful nods from the men. He was the mightiest, handsomest, best-dressed man ever to pass through Sylvayn. "A pint of yer best rum, my good man," he boomed, tossing too much coin in front of the innkeep.

Zahft hurried to oblige him and made change, which the stranger did not take. Instead, he leaned against the bar and listened in as Tristefan gave a watered-down version of his brother's story.

The tale drew snickers from the crowd, and Oly began to wish he had stayed at home. When the mayor asked the townsfolk for their suggestions, the butcher slapped his beefy paw on the table.

"I suggest we forget the whole thing," he said. "It's one thing to stand behind your kin though they're acting the fool, Mayor. But you can't expect the entire town to join you."

"That's right," the miller chimed in. "What Oly drinks is his business. But when he starts raising false alarms about rum-thieving monsters as tall as trees—"

"With fire shooting from their eyes!" added someone from the back.

"Begging yer pardon, my good people." Heads swiveled toward the deep voice. The stranger stepped forward and continued: "No offense, but I think you may be judging the man all wrong."

"Who are you?" demanded Tristefan.

"Flyn LaRoux, at yer service. Call me Flyn." With a flourish he removed his plumed hat and bowed deeply to his captivated audience. "Now as I was saying, there's many a strange creature roams this old world these days. Why, in my line of business I've seen things I never dreamed possible."

Oly took an instant liking to the man standing up to the locals on his account.

The mayor beamed, clearly relieved at finding someone — anyone — on their side. "Your line of business?"

"I'm what you might call a blade-for-hire," Flyn said in his rumbling voice, "and a better one you'll not find. I have ventured from Yavimaya to Llanowar and Benalia to Zhalfir, ridding quiet towns like yours of such outlaws and wild beasts as prey upon peace-loving folk. And some of those beasts I never believed in till I had to fight them for my very life."

"Ooh, that sounds so . . . dangerous," said a breathy voice. Tristefan's daughter Yasmina pushed through the crowd that had gathered around the newcomer. She batted her doe eyes and tugged at a black ringlet falling over her shoulder.

Before he could answer, her sister Lilienne elbowed her way in beside her. "You must be very brave," she breathed, hands clasped just below her silk bodice.

A wolfish grin lit Flyn's features, and he took a step toward the maids.

Tristefan glided in front of him. "Ah, permit me to introduce my *daughters*." His emphasis on the last word, though slight, was unmistakable.

"Daughters?" At the mayor's nod, Flyn replaced his grin with a polite smile.

"Ladies, the honor is all mine," he gushed, bowing to each of them.

The girls blushed and stifled matching giggles.

"And this here's my Atricia," said the miller's wife, propelling her daughter in front of the others. Atricia, a stunning girl but a notorious nose picker, stood gaping. Other voices chimed in, and other girls surged forward.

"Neighbors, please." Tristefan raised his voice to make himself heard above the din. "Let's let Flynn finish what he was saying, shall we?"

The proud parents favored the mayor with mutterings and reproachful gazes. Oly thought they might mutiny, but apparently their curiosity outweighed their ambition. Benches and stools scraped the floor as everyone settled back into their seats to hear their new friend's tale.

Flynn had been watching the whole scene, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. He adjusted one of his many weapons and frowned in concentration. "Yes, well, where was I?"

"You were fighting for your life," Yasmina supplied. A sound like that of a shoe striking a shin followed her remark. She yelped and glared at the butcher's girl, whose angelic smile clashed with her narrowed, spite-filled eyes.

"Indeed," he said. "Have any of you ever battled a gargantua?" Heads shook in silent reply. "And how many of you have even laid eyes on a scyther? Or a spinal centipede?" The people of Sylvayn slouched under his gaze.

"Yet you mock this fellow." Flynn nodded toward Oly. "Why, this good man is only concerned with yer safety. Perhaps you shouldn't be so quick to scoff."

Several people cast guilty glances at Oly. Finally someone said, "Do you think he saw a Phyrexian, Flynn? Those things have been all over the place since the war."

"That was no Phyrexian!" Oly snapped. "You think I don't know a Phyrexian when I see one?"

Tristefan put a hand on his brother's arm, but Oly snatched it away. "Remember your promise, Oly," the mayor said in a low voice.

"I suppose it could have been a Phyrexian," said Flynn

doubtfully, "if the darkness interfered with our friend's vision. Then again, it could have been just as he described, or something even more terrible. I've seen such horrors in my many travels, friends, and there's just one thing I know for sure. Here be monsters."

The townsfolk exchanged fearful glances. Oly couldn't help feeling just a twinge of glee. Teach them all to laugh at him.

"Whatever's out there," said Flynn, "I just hope it's nothing like that last thing I clashed with." A shudder racked his broad shoulders, and he busied himself with removing his cloak in an effort to conceal the movement.

The girls immediately began clamoring to hear more.

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

He averted his gaze. "I'd rather not talk about it." A tense moment passed before he added, "But I guess I'd best tell you. For your own good. Though I'm amazed the creature survived at all."

"Creature?" said Tristefan. "What creature?"

"A wolf." Flynn's fierce hiss cut through the room like an icy wind. "But such a wolf as only exists in wild stories meant to frighten small children. Or so I believed." He let out a dry cough. "All this talk makes a man thirsty. Innkeep—"

The men all chimed in, offering to buy his drink. Coins appeared as if by magic, but Zahft said, "This one's on me."

Flynn drained his mug in one go. No sooner had he set it back on the bar than the men began vying to buy the next round.

"Now, this wolf had been raiding homesteads all over Benalia, mind you, and it had built up quite a reputation for itself. This was no ordinary wolf, people said. It was an enormous beast, and ravenous, they said. It was fearless, they said, and tricky. Very tricky. There were rumors that it attacked people, too, not just livestock. Some thought it was

a vampire hound from Rath, left here when that cursed world overlaid ours. Some even claimed the thing had a sinister intelligence." His gaze swept the gaping crowd. Then he let out a great, scornful laugh. "Fie, said I! It is but a beast, and there's no beast that can escape from Flyn LaRoux!"

Nervous whispering broke out among the crowd.

"One day," Flyn continued, "I stopped in a village northwest of here and asked if they had need of my services. As luck would have it, this mysterious wolf had been terrorizing the town, so they hired me to protect them. Easy money, thought I, and off I went to kill me a wolf. I had him cornered, too, I did. I tracked him to a barn, and I went in after him. The horses were wild with fear, kicking at their stalls and raising such a ruckus I couldn't tell where the beast was lurking. Then it was at my throat. Moved so fast, I didn't even see it coming. I'm not the superstitious kind, mind you, but I'd swear it appeared out of thin air." He paused, a haunted look in his eyes.

The men and women all chimed in:

"How awful!"

"What did you do?"

Flyn stepped into the middle of the room, acting out his story. "I could feel its hot, foul breath on my skin. Its frothing fangs snapped so close, flecks of spittle fell across my neck. So I stabbed it with this dagger!" He lunged forward, brandishing the lower half of a serpentine knife.

The crowd, which had leaned in to hang on his every word, gasped and jumped back.

"This once-perfect dagger," he went on, turning with the weapon held out for all to see, "given to me by a great warrior on his deathbed, forged by dwarfs for a beloved king in the mists of history. This dagger snapped in two in the hide of that beast."

Awed murmurs rose from the rapt audience.

Flyn's voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "And yet the thing lived!"

The people of Sylvayn stood in round-eyed amazement. Finally Tristefan broke the silence. "And you went after this creature? Are you mad?"

Flyn belted out a hearty laugh. "I suppose that remains to be seen, my friend. Anyway, the brute let out a howl that would give the undead a case of the wailing willies and ran off into the night. I did not give chase, and I hope never to see the likes of it again. But if I do," he added, with a grin that hinted at a snarl, "I'll bring a bigger knife." With both hands, he grasped the hilt jutting over his back and pulled forth a gleaming broadsword. This inspired a chorus of oohs and aahs and sly chuckles from the onlookers.

"Nice knife," the butcher called out.

Flyn nodded his thanks and slid the weapon back into its harness. "Even so, I wouldn't tangle with that beast again for a king's ransom."

"But what if that's what's out there?" Tristefan protested.

Flyn turned to Oly. "How long ago did you see this thing?"

"Just last night," said Oly.

"He spotted it near his place," Tristefan jumped in, laying a hand on Oly's shoulder, "between Sylvayn and the forest of Llanowar. He said it . . . ah, headed south."

Oly shot his brother a sour look. "It *flew* south."

Flyn rubbed his jaw. "Nah," he said at last. "The wolf wouldn't have come all this way. Besides, it sounds like whatever it was has moved on. Best to post a watch, though, just to be on the safe side."

He stretched and yawned. "I'm going to turn in so I can get an early start. If you do need my services, you'll find me here." With a grin he added, "Mind you, there's an extra fee for waking me."

"My son will see to your horse," said the innkeep. He led Flyn to the room at the top of the stairs.

Oly followed them with his eyes. Did Flyn's stride seem a bit uneven? Probably from some old battle scar, he thought, turning his attention back to the meeting.

The townsfolk decided to have two men stand watch, one at each end of town. They were just drawing straws to see who would take the first watch when another neighbor came in.

"Evening, Angus," said the innkeep. "You're late. You missed all the excitement."

"Had enough excitement of my own up at the farm," the man replied. "Something got one of my lambs last night. Found what was left scattered all over right behind the hen house this morning."

"May have been that wolf," said the butcher. The group told Angus about Flyn and his story.

"Could have been a wolf, I guess," the farmer said. "Never seen one make such an awful mess of a meal before, though."

"Wolf, Phyrexian, whatever it was, we'd better get out there," said one of the men who had drawn first watch. He and another man quaffed their drinks and went out into the night. A few others headed home to get some sleep before their turn to watch came.

Most of the townsfolk lingered at the inn much longer than usual, though none would admit that it was pure instinct keeping them huddled together like so many sheep. They tarried over their drinks and cheered the musicians to ever livelier tunes, bolstering their meager courage with false gaiety.

When the innkeep's boy dropped a tray full of mugs, the patrons jumped like skittish rabbits. Embarrassed laughter rippled through the room.

Oly sighed. Maybe they were right after all. Maybe he had more to drink than he thought, and his eyes played tricks on him. But Old Cassie *had* growled. Of that he was sure. He went to the window and glanced out at her, snoring on the porch. Of course, she was well past old. Maybe her eyes played tricks on her, too. For all he knew, one of those brigands at the Nymph could have given her some of his rum. Best let it lie, he decided.

Tristefan came and clapped him on the back. "Well, it's time we were getting home. Lilienne? Yasmina?" His daughters let out twin groans of disappointment but got obediently to their feet.

The inn's door slammed open. On the threshold stood one of the men from the watch, doubled over and gasping for air. "The wolf!" he managed. "It's here!"

A wave of shock and terror rolled over the gathered townsfolk. The mayor crossed to the winded man. "Where, Fingal?"

"Came in from the west, moving fast," the man answered, panting a bit less now. "Headed across town. Toward the river. Huge." Pant, pant. "Fast. Never seen anything like it."

"We need volunteers to go after this thing!" Tristefan shouted to the crowd. "Fingal, can you lead the way?"

The sentry's eyes went wide. "Not me, Mayor. I'm not going anywhere near that monster. There's some kind of ill magic to it."

Tristefan turned to the men around him. Duty and fear warred on their faces, and fear won.

"What about Flyn?" a woman cried out, followed by a chorus of agreement.

The mayor hesitated. He looked to the innkeep.

"First on the right," was all Zahft said.

Oly sank back into his chair. So he hadn't seen a flying monster after all. He shook his head. He'd been so *sure*.

He watched his brother run up the stairs and pummel the door with his fists. Even from this distance, the strain showed clearly on Tristefan's face.

"Flyn! Open up! Flyn!"

"What's all that racket?" came a sleepy voice from the room.

"Begging your pardon, friend," Tristefan called in a sugary tone, "but it turns out we can use your services after all. You'll be well paid. Please hurry."

"What's the trouble?" Flynn asked suspiciously.

"Ah, remember that wolf you told us about?" said Tristefan.

"Oh, no. I told you I'm not going after that thing again."

"But you're our only hope!" said the mayor, hysteria rising in his voice. "You can name your price!"

The door swung wide. "I will." Flynn stepped out, wearing a nightshirt and a broad grin.

Tristefan fell back a step at the big man's sudden appearance. He blurted the directions at him.

"Have my horse readied and a leg of lamb brought out," said Flynn. "I'll get my things." He disappeared behind the slamming door.

"Good thing Fingal spotted the beast," Tristefan said, coming back down the stairs. "And good thing Oly told us to post a watch."

The crowd murmured their agreement. Oly accepted this partial credit without comment. And good thing Flynn showed up, he thought, or they'd have laughed off my warning entirely.

Zahft's son, escorted by Tristefan and several other men, went to fetch Flynn's horse. The innkeep got the leg of lamb and went outside to wait with them.

A moment later, those still inside heard a shout. "There it is! Over there!" With a quick glance at one another, they flocked out to the street. Oly hurried to join the crowd of people huddled together under the starry sky.

A near-full moon hung in the chill air. Oly peered, following the tense gazes of the townsfolk to a space between the close-set buildings. From across the town square came an eerie howl that set his teeth on edge.

As one, the people of Sylvayn gaped. What they saw prowling through the moonlight was like no wolf they had ever seen. The sheer size of the beast paralyzed the mind with fright. Under its coarse fur flexed powerful muscle, and its massive jaws glinted with fangs like an assassin's

daggers. A growl echoed in the cobbled square as the wolf stalked in a low crouch toward the crowd. The townsfolk stood like stones, hypnotized by the glowing green orbs that bore slowly, unwaveringly down on them.

As the wolf neared the fountain at the center of the square, it froze in midstep. Its head snapped to one side, and its ears pricked up as if it sensed something. It raised its muzzle to test the air. Then it let loose a howl to sire nightmares for years to come. With a parting snarl at the herd of humans, it tore off down an alley.

A wave of relief washed over the crowd. "What's keeping Flynn?" Yasmina asked in a loud whisper.

As if in response, the swordsman raced out into the night and leaped into the saddle of his waiting horse.

Zahft handed him the leg of lamb and pointed. "It just ran that way!"

Flynn frowned at the crowd. "Yer not safe out here. Get back inside," he ordered.

He rode across the square and tossed the hunk of meat through an open archway and into the walled courtyard beyond it. Then, his cloak waving like a banner, he charged off after the wolf.

Oly heard a strange growl ahead of him and pivoted toward it. Old Cassie had left her post by the door and stood facing the departing swordsman, her head lowered and her hackles raised.

The townsfolk listened a moment to the sound of retreating hoofbeats and then fell over one another in their rush to get back indoors. Goosebumps on his arms, Oly hurried after them. Old Cassie slipped in with them and took up her place by the fire. The crowd stampeded up the steps and into the rooms with views of the square. For several tense moments, they saw nothing but the fog of their breath on the windowpanes.

They heard Flynn shout. The wolf ran through the square, away from the sound, and vanished into an alley on the

opposite side. Flyn rode out, hot on the wolf's trail. Stillness fell once more, broken occasionally by the mercenary's battle cry as he chased his quarry.

A blur of fur and fang shot into the square. If the crowd had stayed outside, the wolf would have barreled right into them. It stopped and turned to face the inn. Its muzzle quivered as it gazed unblinking at the door, as if contemplating breaking it down. The onlookers shrank back to the sides of the windows and peered fearfully down at the beast.

Its nose twitched, catching another scent. The predator slid like a shadow through the square, pausing here and there to sniff out its course and arriving finally at the opening where Flyn had thrown the meat. The trees and darkness of the narrow courtyard engulfed the wolf as it went after the bait.

Oly and the others kept their eyes trained on the archway, waiting for the monster to emerge. With a crash, an immense figure appeared on the ledge right in front of them.

The townsfolk screamed, and their muffled oaths mixed with the sounds of boots scrambling against floorboards and furniture overturning.

Flyn stood on the ledge, wincing at their racket. He shushed them and in a low voice asked, "Did it take the bait?"

The crowd nodded eagerly. "That courtyard's a dead end," said Tristefan. "Hurry, and you'll have the brute cornered!"

Flyn looked toward the dark enclosure, dread plain on his face. Squaring his shoulders, he swung down from the ledge and dropped to the street. With movements almost as silent as the wolf's, he scuttled across the square. As he crept up to the archway, he drew his great blade.

The townsfolk flung open the windows and leaned out for a better view. Even so, they could make out precious little within the walled area. Their champion's broad shoulders and flowing cape blocked most of it from sight.

"Take that, you fiend!" Flyn's shout carried clearly over the empty square as he lunged into the dark courtyard and out of sight. A vicious growl answered him, followed by sounds of a fierce struggle. The warrior's roars of exertion rose with the wolf's snarls. His blade rang, and its fangs clashed.

A glimpse of wiry hide flashed past the entrance. The people of Sylvayn gasped and recoiled.

"Have at you, demon cur!" Flyn's challenge rang out, and the wolf answered, snarling and vanishing back into the blackness of the battlefield. Boots and claws scraped stone. A shimmer of cloak and a glint of steel danced into view and out again.

On the battle raged. The onlookers strained and winced with each attack and counterattack.

At last, dual cries of rage and pain filled the night air. Then a terrible silence fell.

A sickly green glow began to pulse from within the courtyard, and with it came a mournful sound like whirling wind and the moaning of ghosts. The light expanded and grew brighter as the din rose. With a final flare, the maelstrom collapsed back in on itself, blinding the townsfolk, who could not tear their gazes away.

The people of Sylvayn simply stood and stared into the darkness, made absolute by the brilliance that had ushered it in.

As the preternatural void seeped toward a more natural shade of black, a huge form separated itself from the shadows at the courtyard's maw. "It's Flyn!" cried Lilienne, and a cheer went up from the crowd.

Moonlight anointed their hero as he leaned against his sword, chest heaving puffs of air into the cold stillness. His free hand stretched before him in an almost plaintive gesture, and a faint gleam reflected off the small object cradled there. The warrior took a halting step, wavered a moment, and slumped to the ground.



The next day, the sun itself seemed to rejoice as it beamed down on the festivities that honored the fully recovered hero.

"Let's hear it for Flyn!" someone shouted, not for the first time, and a volley of cheers rose in response.

The entire town had gathered to celebrate and heap praises on their savior. A feast fit for royalty was served: roast boar, crepes in chocolate sauce, rum-drenched fruit, and every other delicacy Sylvayn had to offer. And riches. Coins and jewels and ornaments of gold and silver were presented with gratitude and flowery speeches. Music and games and merriment filled the square and spilled into adjoining streets.

Oly had left Old Cassie at home, just to be on the safe side, though he wasn't sure of what. A funny feeling plagued him, as if he needed an answer but had forgotten the question.

Nearby, the town's champion perched on the edge of the fountain, a bottle of rum in his hand. He recounted his tale yet again for a throng of adoring females.

Oly sat down on a cask and listened.

". . . and with the last of my strength, I *thrust* my blade at the monster's heart. But the beast was too fast for a mortal's hand. In one motion, it leaped sideways and went for my flank. See here, where its fangs tore through my cloak?" He held up the damaged garment and peered through the hole at the awed faces around him. "Pure luck it was that it only got a small bite of my flesh, and that in a place where none of you need see it." With a wince and a smile, he put a hand to his seat.

"Oh, you poor thing!" cried Atricia.

"I have something that will make you forget all about it," the herbalist's daughter offered helpfully.

"Hush!" said Lilienne. "Let him finish the story."

"Fortunately, my blow landed better than the wolf's," Flynn continued. "For though I missed its heart, the tip of my blade caught its underbelly, and as it lunged at me, it drove the steel deeper. It fell to the ground, snapping and snarling to the last. Then as it died, an otherworldly light surrounded it, and strange sounds swirled, seeming to come from all directions at once. Brighter and louder and faster it grew. The body of the wolf blurred and turned to mist, whirling up into that supernatural storm. Suddenly it all stopped, and there on the ground where the wolf had lain was only . . . this." With a flourish, he held out the top half of a serpentine dagger.

His other hand produced the bottom half of the dagger, the same one he had shown the townsfolk before the wolf attacked. When Flynn set the pieces together, they fit seamlessly. The girls oohed and aahed.

"Can I touch it?" asked the butcher's daughter, reaching between two other girls.

"Oh, yes," said another girl. "I want to touch it too." All the girls leaned in to put their hands on the now-legendary weapon, jockeying for position and pushing against each other. Soon their jostling took on the intensity of a wrestling match.

"Ow! Who stepped on my foot?" said one.

"Hey, paws off!" said another.

"Quit shoving!" said a third.

One of the girls in front lost her balance, and an avalanche of females fell on top of Flynn. He toppled backward into the fountain with a manly splash.

The girls gasped and wailed and fought to untangle themselves. Lace and ribbons flailed, elbows flew, and curses sizzled.

"Let go of me, strumpet!"

"Ouch! Who's pulling my hair?"

Their hero laughed, water streaming from him as he climbed back onto his seat. He removed his boots and

poured water from them. "Well, I can see yer busy," he said, "so I'll just go change into some dry traveling clothes." Off he hobbled toward the inn, sloshing as he went.

The girls interrupted their melee to urge Flynn to hurry back. "He has the most unusual green eyes," cooed one, gazing at his retreating form.

"Mad cow," said another. "They're as blue as the sea."

"Green," said others.

"Blue," said the rest.

"Did you see the nasty gash on the poor thing's foot?" said Yasmina.

Oly jumped to his feet. "Did you say he has a gash on his foot?" At the girl's nod, he began running around the square, grabbing people by the arm, looking for his brother. "Tristefan! It's him! He's it! Tristefan!"

When the mayor caught up with him, he tried to steer Oly away from the crowd, but the shouting had drawn everyone's attention. "Calm yourself, Oly. You can tell me all about it after the celebration. Sit. Have some pie."

"Don't you see, Stefan? The monster is Flynn! He's a morphling, a shapeshifter." Oly clamped his hands on his brother's shoulders to keep him from turning away. "Remember how I told you the monster cut its foot on the broken jug? Yasmina saw a gash on Flynn's foot. Remember how I said Old Cassie growled at the creature? Well, last night, she growled at Flynn. The monster drank my rum, and Flynn always drinks rum. *Because they're one and the same.*"

"Now why would a monster save us from a wolf?" the butcher scoffed. "Next you'll be telling us Flynn is the wolf as well." He let out a raucous laugh, and several people joined him.

Oly gaped. "That's it! That's the part I couldn't figure, but now it makes sense. It was all just a trick to rob you blind. The monster plays the wolf to scare you, and then plays the hero to get you to hand over all your money."

A deafening silence fell over the gathering as this thought

sank in. The town of Sylvayn took its money seriously. Neighbors exchanged uneasy glances. The girls' mouths dropped open, and Oly knew they were picturing themselves squabbling for the affections of a monster.

Tristefan shrugged off Oly's grasp, his stunned gaze locked on the mounds of riches set out for Flyn. Slowly, the mayor began to shake his head, like a man fighting to wake from a bad dream. Wild-eyed, he looked around at the people of Sylvayn. "My town. My responsibility," he muttered, pacing. "If it's true, what you say . . ." He looked toward the inn, where Flyn would appear at any moment. "If there's a monster . . . if it knew that we know . . ." His jaw continued to work, but no more words came out.

He stopped pacing midstride, and his face brightened. "Well," he said with forced enthusiasm, "I'm sure glad that's only a wild theory. If that were true, we would all look pretty foolish. Wouldn't we?"

The others greeted his declaration with confused stares.

Tristefan smiled encouragement at them. "Think about it. If word got out that we gave a monster a hero's welcome and sent him off with all our money, we'd be the laughing-stocks of all Benalia and beyond. It would ruin us."

Understanding dawned on the faces around him. Feet shuffled nervously. Throats cleared, but no one spoke.

"Not to mention the danger we'd be in if the monster so much as suspected that we knew," the mayor added. "So it's a good thing it's not true."

Oly blinked. "What?"

"Yes," said a shopkeep's wife, nudging her husband. "How lucky for us the very idea is absurd."

"That Oly sure has a wild imagination," he replied with an indulgent chuckle.

One by one, the townsfolk joined in.

Amazed, Oly listened to them until he could stand it no longer. "Suit yourselves," he said, "but I'll not take part in this madness." Anger in every step, he stomped for home.

Not far from the edge of town, Oly heard a horseman approach. "Not again." He turned, expecting his brother, but then his blood ran cold.

Flyn reined in his horse, his bulging saddlebags jingling. He grinned down at the old drunk.

Oly stared at him. "When I was but a lad," Oly said, "I went to sea. One of the ship's mates used to tell of a creature that could change its shape at will. A morphling, he called it. At the time, I thought it was nothing but a fantastic tale. . . ."

"Aye, that's the trouble with tales. Eh, Oly? You never can tell how true they might be." Flyn touched his hat in farewell. "Till next time then. Oh, and Oly, thanks for the rum." He winked a glowing green eye and rode off, a wolf's tail wagging from under his cloak and a tune lilting over his shoulder:

"Give a pirate a hoist of his yo-ho-ho! And yer in for a real Jolly Roger. . . ."

V A N C E M O O R E

SEASONS OF SLAUGHTER



"Demon's blood!" Alcrik swore, hearing cries spread through the herds in the corrals.

Bison and panok calls rumbled through the darkness. It was nearly dawn, and Alcrik cursed as he peered toward the sounds, straining to see what was happening. The mercenary stepped faster toward the far enclosures, wondering if some animal had gotten loose. A young panok brushed against a nearby fence, and the wood shuddered under the stress. A bison was large, but a panok was two to three times as heavy, covered with a thick gray hide instead of a coat of hair. The panok's tiny ears flapped rapidly on its large head, and the tread of its padded feet was quiet. Alcrik passed the docile beast and continued toward the edge of the encampment, where the disturbance grew.

He walked along the temporary tent city. It appeared every five years when the ukrik flowers bloomed. The mustard-yellow plants covered the ground, which groaned under their bounty. The resulting heavy grains fattened animals and allowed vast numbers of beasts to congregate. Plains tribes drove their herds to the sea's edge to cull the

grains, and the Cabal oversaw the slaughter, harvesting tens of thousands of animals. The meat collected during these short months went to feed carnivores in fighting pits throughout the continent.

In the bay, Keldon transports lit up as they prepared to board live animals and put them into stasis. The livestock would be sunk into comas and shipped around the world. Butchers would soon prepare meat for the shorter haul to local cities. A breeze brought the stench of abattoirs and meatpacking plants to Alcrik's nose.

He tried to peer through the false dawn, wondering why fate was against him. He was short and skinny, his frame wasted by too many missed suppers. He had no armor, and his boots were worn. The only sign of his guard status was the spear that rested on his shoulder. At least this job let him eat: The remains of several meals coated his dirty gray tunic, and the rancid grease was starting to stink. The slaughter provided plenty of meat for its workers, and the city dweller had tried to make up for a lifetime of fasting.

Alcrik headed up the road, along a squealing caravan. The wagons hauled salt from western mines and were drawn by undead oxen. They moldered in barns tightly enclosed during the day before setting off after nightfall. The salt preserved the beasts once the sun rose, but their presence disturbed living creatures. Since the sun was still below the horizon, the undead dray animals were still on the roads.

Alcrik left the lane, entering the maze of ramshackle fences. The corrals here were in greater disrepair. Since the encampment was used only every five years, the Cabal allowed maintenance to accumulate. The farther the fences were from the main buildings, the worse their repair.

Alcrik slowed, hearing heavy bodies crash against wooden poles and low stone walls. He cursed his undoubtedly drunken partners who should be with him on the patrol. Should he wait? He was no hero, but the Cabal was more eager to punish than reward, so he pressed forward.

His spear rose off his padded shoulder, the head dull in the dim light.

He came to a sunken corral, a muddy pond half filling it. Water lapped against one corner, and it was hard to see in the shadows.

Suddenly, a group of panoks shouldered through a fence behind him and lumbered forward. The beasts seemed comically slow, but Alcrik wasn't amused. He had seen too many workers crushed by large animals. He ran toward the sunken corral, whose heavy fence could protect him. A network of timber chutes and pens dropped into the water, equipment for washing or treating livestock. Alcrik clambered down a ramp, hoping the structure was heavy enough to resist the herd. The corral bottom came into focus as his eyes adjusted to the shadowed light.

Bison and panok lay in heaps, their bodies unmoving in the bloody mud. Wounds gaped on necks, and viscera trailed away from torn bellies.

Alcrik sank into a crouch and was glad of his spear, the head rising as if seeking a scent. The smell of fear reminded him of the fighting pits, and he crept down the chute toward the water.

Among the bodies, something moved.

Alcrik lunged forward, spearing it.

The water exploded, and the spray blinded him. He shouted for help, but the animals stampeding above drowned out his cries. His spear jerked, tearing free from something as he backpedaled up the chute.

A huge beast roared and rose up.

Alcrik pawed at his eyes, trying to clear them. Where were the other patrols? Something hurtled toward him, and his weapon was jerked from his hands. The corpse of a calf was impaled on his spear, a dead eye looking into his as the water surged.

A huge monster was rising from the mud and blood and bodies, and it vented a fearsome cry.

Alcrik scrambled on his hands and knees up the chute, ignoring the splinters that tore at his palms. He tucked his head and climbed toward the stampede, hoping to lose himself in it. Being trampled is a reasonable risk, he thought crazily as he jumped from the ramp into the river of bodies.

A gust of wind slapped Alcrik from above, and something grabbed his leg, yanking his feet into the air. His face smashed into the ramp timber, the sounds of panic following him into oblivion.

* * * * *

"Another great day," Buric said, inhaling deeply as he approached the death scene. The morning sun hung over the ruined corral and warmed a cloud of flies above it.

Behind Buric, guards cursed and slapped, trying to keep the flies off. The stench and insects grew thicker, the miasma of blood and dung coating his skin as he moved closer to the death scene. Wagons groaned, hauling away animals killed the night before. The dead livestock would be dressed as cut-rate meat. Already drovers argued with the Cabal meat-cutters, trying to claim ownership of animals. Unclaimed carcasses were pure profit, and Buric smiled inwardly with every shout of outrage. Since he was skimming from the top, he felt the wealth rolling in with every angry cry.

Camp Commander Buric was slim, his dark hair in sharp contrast to his pale features. He wore garments that were too fine for his status, especially in a camp where blood and filth were common dangers. However, he was a dandy, no longer young but wishing to appear so. Style was wasted in this wilderness, just as he was wasted.

The guards behind him clumped together, and he waved them apart. Several collided, trying to go the same direction.

"The dregs of the pit," Buric muttered. "Stupid as well as deformed."

The arenas produced a steady stream of maimed bodies

as well as corpses, and many of the guards were ex-jacks missing their original limbs. A warrior scratched himself with a huge insect pincer, the rough exoskeleton reddening his face. Another cursed as he tried to make a bulky metallic leg bend.

Pure foolishness, thought Buric to himself. Finding artisans in this wilderness was less likely than finding a mage to replace an undead limb. Buric belonged in the city, overseeing the collection of debts. This exercise in livestock management was not to his taste. His blue eyes looked with disdain over the surrounding herds.

Drovers forced bison into an abattoir, and butchers went to work. Blood began to spill to the settling ponds. The temperature would rise dangerously in the building, and Buric was thankful to be outside, despite the dust.

He lifted a formless hat from his dark hair and wiped a layer of sweat away. Early morning and already he was wet.

He reached the sunken pond where the killing occurred the night before. More guards and Madga, his lieutenant, waited for him along with the workers clearing away carrion. Carcasses littered the corral, lying in tattered clumps. Scars on the slope marked where animals had tried to climb out before being killed by the midnight raider.

A stony-faced tribesman wandered around the corpses, idly poking them with a light lance. The nomad moved toward the water and the chutes allowing access to the corral floor. The surface was covered with clotting blood. A thin spray of freshwater from a pipe rained on an eviscerated panok, its heavy head twisted back against its body. The tribesman moved closer to the animals by the chutes, only to be waved off by Madga.

The lieutenant peered at the ground, examining impressions in the mud. Buric's second had sent word in the early morning, and the camp commander wondered what she had learned since.

Madga stalked up the narrow wooden chute, getting out

of the mire. Her sword brushed against the timbers as she stepped over a bison calf stuck on a spear like some bizarre appetizer. Buric tried to read her face but that was nearly impossible. Madga's expression was always the same, her features frozen by her heavy scarring. She too was a refugee from the fighting pits. The green-eyed redhead still moved easily, limber even in the cool morning despite her soaking legs. An arena fighter of indifferent ability, she left the games after being blasted in the face by acidic sludge. The druid healer who treated her lacked the power of his Order counterparts. Her flesh healed twisted, and her face could never be returned to its former glory. Once she had been a great beauty, and her form still pleased the eye.

Buric met her at the top of the chute. A dead guard sprawled on the ground, his head deformed by some great blow. The commander could not recognize him and felt no sorrow at the failure. His guards were valuable only because he couldn't easily replace them in this wilderness. In the distance, animals cried as they were loaded onto ships. If only Buric could dispose of all problems so easily.

"Any idea what our unexpected guest was last night? It certainly didn't like the guards," Buric said, his shoe nudging the dead man. With such a head injury, the body couldn't be recycled as a zombie, and Buric was irritated at the waste. He gestured to the guards behind him. "Take him to the grinders." Cabal sausage was infamous for its exotic ingredients.

"There are some prints down in the mud," Lieutenant Madga said, flicking her head back as she scanned the sky. "Big and reptilian. The carcasses were sliced open, and some of the neck bones of the bison were crushed." She gestured to a carcass being winched by a meat wagon over the corral wall. "Takes a lot of power to crush bones like that."

"Sounds like a dragon," Buric mused. He noted with disappointment that the tribesman approached the harvesters to claim the carcasses. The attack had done the Cabal leader

well financially, and he was saddened to lose part of the windfall. "Any idea of the species?"

"I can't even tell if it is a flyer," she said in disgust, sweeping her hand over the ground. "The stampeding herds churned the ground enough to hide the signs of an army. Anything might have trooped through here during the night, and getting a story from these grasping drovers is an exercise in futility."

Buric was constantly amazed people disparaged greed despite the universal enjoyment of the virtue. "Into every life a little rain must fall, Madga," Buric said, enjoying the look of irritation on his aide's scarred features. Then again, she always looked angry under her scars. "We'll hear complaints from the drovers, but you just have to ignore them." An argument broke out behind them as the tribesman contested which carcasses he could claim.

"The drovers can lick my boots," Madga said, turning to look over the sunken corral. "There are a lot of dead animals scattered around, but despite the wounds, not much is missing. Whatever fed ate lightly if at all." She looked back over her shoulder at her commander, frustration showing in her eyes. "If it killed for the sake of killing, I doubt that one night will satisfy."

Buric nodded in agreement, knowing from personal experience that an appetite for murder was rarely sated.

* * * * *

"Nothing yet, sir," a guard whispered to Buric, interrupting his thoughts. The mercenary crab-walked back to his post before the Cabal leader could reply.

"Of course nothing has happened," Buric fumed, regretting he had ever agreed to lay a trap. He inhaled the stench of the killing floor. Hiding in the slaughterhouse had been his own idea, so he couldn't complain too loudly.

Outside, beneath a starry sky, a small herd of bison

moved restlessly in the crowded pens. Despite the spells keeping them quiet, they occasionally lowed, disturbed by the smell of blood and death. Nearby stood the bait, two bulls tied to posts. They panted dully, wounds dripping blood onto the moist ground. Madga had cut the animals, hoping that fresh blood would draw the dragon to the pens.

Buric wondered at his aide's enthusiasm for trapping the giant reptile. A few more dead animals barely mattered compared to the thousands that would fall in the coming months. Besides, the dragon wasn't taking the bait. Boredom seemed the only real danger tonight.

Perhaps it wants more intelligent prey, Buric thought, considering the camp inhabitants. The beast will be hard pressed to choose between the livestock and the men.

He walked to the door, looking toward the pastures in the distance. Like many of the Cabal, Buric had excellent night vision, honed in the cellars of the city. Off to the side he saw barracks and tents tucked against a series of bluffs overlooking the bay.

Madga approached the slaughterhouse, frustration evident in her tense movements. The glow of shrouded lanterns dimly lit her scarred features.

Buric emerged to meet her outside at the door. "Tell me again why any monster would come here."

She pointed to the moonlit beasts restlessly moving in the pen before the slaughterhouse. "The monster killed everything in the sunken corral last night." She said, keeping her voice low as if conveying important information. "It bypassed prey to fall on creatures that could not escape. Perhaps it enjoys the thrill of killing trapped animals."

Buric nodded noncommittally. If nothing happened, he could recover the night's waste by docking her pay.

A guard scrambled toward them, slipping on the ironwood grating over the blood gutters. "Something over the bay," he gasped, resting his hands on the blood-soaked wood under their feet. Neither Buric nor Madga had

expected anything from the sea. "I went outside to relieve myself and spotted something against the moon."

Madga preempted any order the commander might give. "Stand ready to attack when it settles." She sent the man to relay the message.

The guards along the doorways crouched, staring with trepidation at the ceiling above, as if to see through the wooden panels. The moon lit everything with a faint silver luster. Animals in the pens moved slowly, the light from the faraway barracks occasionally glinting from an eye.

The dragon slipped into the scene as a nightmare into a dream. It flew over the building, gliding silently toward the oblivious bison. Claws punched into the sides of a tethered bull, and it bawled like a calf. The rest of the animals scrambled away, crashing against the wooden walls of the corral.

Magic surged, a red cloud snapping from the monster to envelop several bison in pale energy. They stood frozen in the grip of eldritch power, battered by the other panicked animals as the dragon's weight crushed the bull.

Madga sent a wisp of energy leaping out to a series of torches on the corral walls. Each ignited in a flash of brilliant light, stunning the eyes of anyone looking toward them.

Buric wiped tears away, the droplets cool in the night air.

In the midst of the lanterns, the monster was revealed. Its wings were the color of brown sandstone and were tucked around its body, creating the illusion of a giant boulder squatting in the corral. The dragon turned, adjusting its stance on the bull trapped beneath it. Its reptilian head came into view, fangs jutting from the upper jaw down over the lower mandible. Its eyes were well back, and they surveyed the men with crocodilian indifference.

It was a vampiric dragon, a monster rarely seen outside arena summoning.

"Attack!"

Madga's men charged the holding pen, brandishing axes and spears as they tried to close with the creature.

The monster's hand-like fore claws clenched, and it vaulted into the sky. No mere raiding beast, a vampiric dragon lusted for blood and death in epic quantities, and the hapless guards offered a fresh opportunity for slaughter. The leathery beast pumped hard into the air.

"Why couldn't the fools have waited until the monster was mired in the corral?" Buric asked. "Swollen with blood and death, it might have been easier to attack."

Madga shook her head. "Each kill would increase its power."

The creature paused in the sky, stalling as it turned, and fell as a thunderbolt toward the warriors. The monster flared its wings at the last second and plowed into the soldiers. Weapons and bodies spun off in all directions.

Buric ducked as someone screamed past his ear, the howl of fright cut off by impact against the pen's heavy timbers. "Where are the crossbowmen?" the commander yelled.

Madga shouted, "Fire!"

Soldiers outside the fences threw aside tarps, dispelling the illusions hiding them. Their positions were a surprise to Buric, and he realized the dragon was between him and the guards. The ambushers discharged crossbow bolts with wild abandon, barely bothering to aim. The first missile shot by the commander's head, close enough that its fletching brushed his cheek.

Buric reacted, trying to block their inadvertent attack. A single pathetic zombie shimmered into existence before him, its rotting flesh encased in metal-studded leather. Crossbow bolts punched through the flesh as through a doll, continuing only slightly deflected.

Guards pouring from the slaughterhouse dived for cover as they came under fire. A mercenary clutched a bolt that had punched through his gut. The fighter's fingers slipped on the slick shaft, covered with corruption from the pierced

zombie. The wounded man stumbled into the camp commander. "Help me!" he choked, smearing blood over Buric's clothes before being shoved away.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" Buric screeched, his cheek still smarting from the near miss. He punched the hapless guard.

Madga shouldered Buric aside, pushing him onto the foul ground as she tried to restore order. "Pick your shots!" she screamed, her voice cutting through the noise in a falsetto.

A second wave of bolts came close to spearing her. One tore into the arm of a warrior at her side. Blood jetted from the wound, drawing a crazy pattern on the ground as the soldier screamed and staggered before collapsing.

The dragon seemed encased in shadow, difficult to see as it snapped and lunged at the figures attacking it. Gathering darkness around it like a cloak, the reptile lurched toward a mercenary, its jaws snapping shut and pulling him into obscurity. A barrage of bolts passed through the indistinct monster as its victim died in broken screams. The dragon discarded the corpse, bowling over a group of warriors trying to use their spears.

Madga clenched her jaws in frustration, veins bulging under and through her heavy scars. She concentrated, and magic thundered throughout the corral. Her dead soldiers rose, answering her will as they had when living. More were summoned into existence, converging in a circle on the shadowed dragon. Dead hands readied weapons to claim vengeance.

The creature reared up on its hindquarters. Shadows fell away as it regarded the forces opposing it. Blood dripped from its jaws, and a thick-forked tongue slithered over its jowls, capturing the precious fluid. A quavering moan came from the mercenary in its handlike claws. It twisted her head around like a hunter killing a rabbit and then spun the body away.

The limbs flailed wildly as the impromptu missile bowled Madga over. She was only a few feet from Buric, who was crawling toward the gut-shot mercenary.

Zombies advanced, stepping over the lieutenant and the camp commandant and closing to slay the beast.

The monster's head glided forward on its long neck, its tongue vanishing like a snake into its hole. The whistle of indrawn air pierced the night.

The dragon's breath emerged in a wash of ink. It poured from the reptile's jowls and hit the living and dead warriors trying to close with it. Each body streamed vermilion into the black wind, the arterial red fading into the dark cloud. The ebony jet roiled as it swept over more bodies and became the color of coagulated blood. Warriors and zombies vanished in the viscous cloud.

The dragon inhaled. The thick mist drew back into it, revealing pale figures that dropped as if released from the gibbet. Most lay in crusted dust, a few so dry that their impacts sent goutts of disintegrating flesh and cloth up into the air. The living men reeled away, fleeing while zombies launched themselves at the beast.

The monster spun, and its tail scythed them down. It coughed, convulsions wrenching its sides as it pawed its throat. It lifted a fresh corpse, and its clawed hands wrung the body to squeeze every last drop of blood from it.

Buric stood up, furious at himself for losing focus and at his guards for dying so easily. Though no pit fighter, he was still the camp commander, and he would not be balked by a bloodsucking reptile. His anger needed to be sated. Summoning had failed so far: Why bring up the undead only to see them devoured by the beast?

"Devoured . . ." he murmured, ignored the cries of another guard snatched up by the flying giant.

The dragon squeezed the dying man to force out more blood, vainly trying to satisfy its overwhelming thirst.

Buric coiled mentally, loading power into the spell until

it quivered in his mind. He released the wave of ethereal energy.

Power crept slowly away from the mage. Then it accelerated, speeding away until it snapped out beyond the limits of the corral and faded into nothingness. The commander wondered if the spell worked, and then cries of disgust and a nauseating stench bent him over.

Every dead body in the corral liquefied, slumping into corruption that contaminated the earth. Each splash of blood became a pool of curdling, noxious sewage. The living guards lay prostrate, scrubbing vainly at their clothes, which had soaked up the poisonous goo.

The dragon convulsed, its long neck jerking wildly, and a corrupted corpse squirted through its grasping hands. Its hide dripped pollution as the spell continued to dissolve away old blood. The beast smashed into the ground, rolling over the sickened troops while it struggled to expel the newly noxious contents of its stomach.

Buric tried to stand, to cast another spell, but the wrenching of his gut wrung any possibility of magic from him.

Madga stood, streaming the remains of a dead soldier who had entangled her. "Get up," she screamed, kicking a mercenary who squirmed nearby.

The dragon spewed the remains of its bloody meals onto the befouled ground. Its tongue sampled the air vainly for sanctuary from the filth.

Madga drove her soldiers forward, using boot leather on anyone not up and ready to fight.

Buric finally ordered his stomach into submission and stepped forward, the motion drawing glares of loathing from everyone. The Cabal commander ignored their looks, readying himself for another spell, something not so overwhelming.

The monster spread its wings and hammered them down, sending a spray of rotten material splattering across its already filthy foes. It expelled the last of its meal and

dropped the remains of its previous feasts in a stinking line that pointed straight to Buric. On leather wings, it rose and flew toward the sea. Its cry of rage and anger left no doubt that it would be back.

* * * * *

"It flew up the coast," Madga reported, her face more rigid than usual. Soapsuds spotted her hair and shoulders as she tried to relay a report. The lieutenant turned, clasping her hands, and regarded the fabric wall of the bathing tent.

Buric grunted in reply, his eyes streaming as he worked the mildly corrosive soap into his hair. It amused him that the informal setting discomfited her.

The commander had wasted no time ordering the bathing tent heated and stealing the hot water from the kitchens. He ordered Madga to join him, wanting to go over the failure of her plan. Their clothes lay abandoned as they used soap to scrub away the spell's corruption.

"A fisherman heard the beast scraping itself clean on a sandy beach four miles away," the woman reported, pausing as a servant dropped off new sets of clothes and armor. Everything they had worn was being boiled in lye in hopes of removing the polluted stench.

Buric motioned for her to continue and sighed with exasperation as she moved behind a changing screen to continue her report.

"It attacked the fisherman's livestock after its sand bath," she said, hurling her soaked robe vehemently out into the night. Buric smiled at the display of pique. "It was draining a cow dry when the fisher sprinted away and met one of our patrols."

"Did they investigate?" Buric asked, stepping from the turbid water, the stench of the corruption competing with the burning vapors of the soap.

"Probably," Madga replied. She strode free of the screen

and clamped a bracer on her arm. "They sent the fisher and guide back and then vanished."

"That much blood might clean the taste of its last meal from its mouth," Buric mused as he waved a servant in to help him dress. The light grew outside as the sun washed away the moon. "It will take more blood to sate its pride."

Madga nodded in agreement.

Buric ignored the servants and the line of warriors outside waiting to use the baths. The wishes of such incompetent menials were beneath his notice. "Madga," he said as his tunic was secured by his belt, "you must be ready to kill the beast when it returns. A performance as pathetic as last night will destroy you even if the dragon does not."

The lieutenant visibly bit back her first reply. "I cannot guarantee success unless more forces are called in. We lost entire squads last night," she said defensively, drawing her hands through her hair. "Even pulling in the patrols will leave us with fewer warriors to exploit any trap." She met his gaze, rivulets of wash water still dripping over her disfigured cheeks. "The only effective spell used last night did more damage to our forces than to the beast!"

Buric dismissed her insolent reference to his magic, considering instead the quality of the men and women under his command. The slaughterhouses were not prestigious, and he received the dregs of the Cabal guards. He himself rarely won contests of eldritch power. This command was the high point of his career, and a disaster like last night must be expunged by a victory. He walked from the bathing tent with Madga trailing behind. Filthy survivors from the night rushed in despite the cries of the beleaguered servants.

"The loss of animals and your guards is unimportant," he said, striding toward the camp administrative offices. "Any can be replaced ten times over from the arriving herds coming in." He waved inland, purposely unclear whether he talked of livestock or warriors.

"The dragon, however," Buric continued, speeding his

pace, "wants more than common blood." He did not acknowledge the salutes and greetings of the clerks within the building, sweeping into his office and over to the strong-box behind his desk. The spectral energies of alarms and traps swirled briefly over his hands as he threw back the lid.

"Now, it will seek me," he said, rummaging through the contents of the chest. Purses filled with gold and precious gems were tossed aside as he reached a box. Its wood was black, and an unpleasant odor tickled at the mage's throat, the smell pinching his face. "Such a danger calls for the strongest possible response."

Madga watched him open the container, exposing a metal amulet shaped like a broach. An abstract design lay half hidden under layers of tarnish and dirt. It radiated menace, like a poisonous scorpion. The commandant had received it along with command of the camp. The spell contained within was to be used in the direst of circumstances.

"Sir," she said hesitantly, "surely things are not so bad as that. The amulet is meant to fight armies, not single beasts."

Buric knew the use of this bauble must be justified to their masters back in Cabal City. Such items were precious, and expending the amulet's magic would bring unpleasant questions. "Dead is dead, whether by army or flea bite," Buric replied, opening the clasp on its back. He pinned the broach to his tunic. "And since you and your squads will be in front of me, if I use this you will be in no position to complain."

Buric motioned Madga to precede him into the camp. The commander heard the lowing of cattle walking into abattoirs as he followed his deputy.

* * * * *

Warriors and animals stood pale in the moonlight, every waiting hour writ large on their faces. Madga leaned against a fence post. Exhaustion drew her thin as dawn approached.

Buric napped in a camp chair, his eyes opening occasionally to check the guards. The trap had been set all night.

This long-abandoned slaughterhouse was far from the processing camp. Only the teams pulling salt from the distant mines made use of them. Before nightfall, Buric had ordered dozens of animals driven to the remote building and killed. The cattle and panok were tossed into sunken corrals and pits left from the working days of the building. All night the commander could hear small scavengers worrying at the corpses in the still night, but no dragon came.

A turn of wind rolled the odor of new and old death over Buric's face. He rose from the camp chair.

Madga moved slowly, stiff from hours of watching. "Still no sign of it, sir," she said, knuckling a bloodshot eye.

Buric yawned, touching the magical amulet pinned to his tunic. Its disquieting vibrations prevented true slumber, and he felt as tired as Madga looked. He approached a heavy wagon with oxen lying dead in their traces.

The fires of drovers and tribesmen flickered in the distance, and occasionally, wind brought sounds of good cheer. Buric grimaced sourly, remembering how the independent herders refused to give any aid. They celebrated either the dragon's death or his own, not caring which occurred. The Cabal commander hoped the dragon might raid their camps but doubted it. The beast would strike here. A pennant hung limply over the buildings behind him, announcing that the commander was present. An obvious trap, but he doubted the dragon would be fearful enough to avoid it.

Buric stretched, wondering just how much longer they must wait.

Only a fading whisper of magic betrayed the reptile's first attack. No more than a dozen yards away, it appeared, its talons already closing around a shocked guard. The flyer whipped away, its claws sunk deeply in the soldier. It flew low, its wings nearly touching ground with every downstroke.

Most of the guards ducked, their spears and polearms jabbing into the air. Two groups of crossbowmen stood their ground, surrounded by axe men.

"No firing unless it enters the lane!" Madga called, jarred into action. Power flowed from her in a slow torrent, and torches planted in selected parts of the field began to burn in different colors. The lieutenant and her squad leader had spent the day marking out areas that could be safely fired into. Though Buric thought it unlikely a crossbow bolt would do the beast in, his near miss the night before made him an enthusiastic supporter of the plan.

In the distance, the dragon rose over the campfires of the drovers and dropped his kill.

"I wager they want the dragon dead now," Buric muttered smugly.

The beast rose into the air before turning back toward the commander and his men. It seemed to draw shadows into itself, fading into the night even as Madga's power ignited more torches.

"Red torches!" cried the sergeant of crossbowmen.

A compact volley of bolts arced past the red torches and toward the oncoming reptile. The monster flew lower, and its scaled underbelly knocked the flaming brands into a torrent of sparks and embers.

A lone soldier was snatched up, the dragon's dark cloak fraying as it turned sharply and surged upward.

"Yellow torches!"

The second flight of bolts fell below the dragon and speared empty ground. All except one. A single missile ripped its way through the soldier's pelvis before tapping the dragon's wing. The soldier was silent as the flyer climbed.

"Suck him dry," hissed Buric at the reptilian predator.

The armored body dropped free, spinning through the air before smashing onto a heavy corral timber. The splatter told him that the monster was not drinking from its victims.

Curses broke out as those hit by the spray shucked their clothes.

"I thought that would work," Buric muttered. Summoning zombies and soaking them in poisons was a decent plan. Having them run clumsily in circles to draw an attack was Madga's inspired suggestion. If the dragon had even tasted them, it would have fallen and been easy meat for the soldiers below. Now the beast would be more careful, and the commander was running out of ideas.

Buric stepped onto the wagon with its dead team and raised his hands dramatically. The cart was constructed of thick timbers, and several stone blocks were lashed in place. He tripped over a rope of fibrous muscle and sinew. The thick hawser, the dried remains of a giant worm, extended from the back of the wagon and ran under a tarp. It rippled as hidden soldiers readied themselves.

"Stay still and wait for the signal," Buric shot in an angry whisper.

He was the one exposed, and he hated it. That he must serve as bait while Madga remained to coordinate the attack infuriated him even more. The commander glared briefly in her direction, hoping she remembered her order of execution should he die. She looked too calm. Buric wondered if she had a patron who could protect her. He snorted in derision. Had she a powerful ally, she would not be in this cesspit.

He quietly drew on dark energies, trying to hide his intent from the dragon. Entering a near-trance, he fed mana into the gray cable lying beneath his feet. He was going to look a complete idiot if the dragon didn't . . .

"STORM!" screamed Madga.

The code word broke Buric from his thoughts. He hurled himself to the side even as the tarp was pulled back, revealing a ballista. The giant bow quivered with tension, which then was explosively released. The huge bolt leaped into the air.

It missed the oncoming dragon. The beast turned in triumph, but the missile slowed as it pulled the gray cable up.

Buric felt the impact of the ground and his spell at the same time.

The giant dried worm flexed with unearthly vitality, wrapping around the dragon's right hind leg. A bellow of fury reverberated as the reptile tried to pull free, only to stop with a snap, the weight of the wagon imprisoning it.

Buric scrambled away as warriors surged from the ballista to kick the oxen. The beasts stirred, their undead flesh glistening with encrusted salt. A driver cracked the whip to send them on, and they pulled away from the freight wagon. The zombie oxen dragged the undead cable through a massive pulley beneath the freight wagon, each step bringing the dragon closer to the ground.

Soldiers left their positions, spears ready to pin the monster once it lost the sky. It strained to gain altitude but could not.

Buric ran to get clear of the wagon, but soldiers blocked the way. "Stay back," he shouted, hearing Madga bellowing in agreement.

The soldiers ignored them, lusting to be in on the kill.

The dragon came to ground, spreading its wings and slipping to the side. The oxen continued to pull the worm, which stretched but did not snap. It swept under the men like a metal cable, breaking limbs and bowling them over while keening with tension.

Buric tumbled with the rest, his head smashing into a helmet protecting a common soldier's brain. Everything was shadow and lightning as the commander tried to stay awake.

The dragon hopped past him to fall upon the undead beasts that drew it from the sky. Their pallid flesh was indifferent to its attack, but it ruptured the harness, and the cable contracted and lay squirming. It trailed behind the monster as the dragon moved to kill the downed men.

"Damn you," Madga screamed, standing over Buric with a knife in her hand. "Use the amulet!"

What was she saying? Buric wondered. The commander was lost in a land of soundless thunder, trying to understand what was happening. The lieutenant bent over, the knife going to his throat. He felt the tug of the blade against his clothes.

Madga lifted the broach and opened the long pin with the point of her weapon. She summoned mana and then plunged the blunt needle into her chest. The amulet markings called for the caster's blood.

Madga's eyes went wide with horror as the spell spilled through her. She fell to her knees. Magic was destroying her body to feed the unnatural summoning.

With a sick chuckle, the commandant grasped his head and rolled upright. Had she really thought he would use it? Only he knew the true effects of the spell and the need for *personal* sacrifice in calling a jucarri demon. Luck loves a bastard, he thought, enjoying the irony of Madga's embracing destruction without a word from him. He wondered how he might have tricked her had fate not lent a hand.

The ground exploded behind Buric. He rolled over and over, not trusting his legs to support him yet. Ancient bones and crusted blood vented forth, the remains of earlier slaughter tearing through the soil. The jucarri was appetite incarnate, and it devoured everything as it came into the world. Madga's soldiers, living and dead, were sucked down. They disappeared, hands reaching for air as they were buried alive. The Cabal's monster was rising, massive as it pushed through the ground, but still shapeless.

The vampiric dragon left off its attack on the remaining guards and tried to reclaim the sky. Its leg trailed the undead worm, which whipped across the ground only to connect with the jucarri. The dragon's jess became one with the formless mass, its body swelling as the demon incorporated its empty skin. The worm grew into a massive tentacle, manacled dragon and demon together.

The vampiric dragon seemed only a toy kite as Madga's creature reeled it in. Flesh and mud slithered in torrents into the jucarri. It reared up, gaining form as it stood on two legs, a new gash of a mouth opening in a booming cry. Black mud, gray bones, and red meat churned together in its hide. The few living animals in the corral wandered into the maelstrom of flesh, called by some command that overrode the instinct to survive. They disappeared into the demon, their bodies feeding its growth.

Buric lay exhausted, fighting the pull of the jucarri. Something slithered over his fingers, and he recoiled in horror before seeing the salt-encrusted traces of the undead oxen. They still plodded away, their preserved flesh strangely immune to the call that drew the living and the dead toward the demon. Buric wrapped the leather over his wrist, letting the team pull him slowly from danger.

His eyes went to the dragon. It breathed jet, the dark cloud washing over the new flesh that held it. It continued to breathe, straining to bring back a wash of blood, but the jucarri hungered for life and it drew sustenance from the dragon. The dragon lost all control, biting in frenzy, each strike doing far more damage to itself. The demon clutched its enemy to its breast, and the vampiric dragon helplessly dissolved into the embrace.

Pausing to digest this rich meal, the jucarri tried to tear itself from the ground. It lurched from side to side, struggling to drag its massive form free of the muck.

Buric watched as it wailed in distress, its call pulling at him more sharply than the traces abrading his wrist. It was lost, desolate. The jucarri turned and beheld him. It reached out, its misshapen paws becoming more human as it vented its anguish. The surrounding fires and brilliant torches faded as the oxen pulled the commander on, drawing him away from the demon's embrace.

The traces slipped free of Buric's hand, but he staggered to his feet. He weaved a few steps back.

The jucarri clutched at its throat, its cries fading into registers too high to hear. It struggled forward one step, its hand reaching for Buric.

The demon fell, and the concussion boomed through the night. Its frame was wracked with tremors. It twisted on the ground, each seizure more powerful than the last. It flailed, limbs smashing with such force that they shattered. Gouts of soil and meat sprayed out. The jucarri tore itself apart, trying to live, to become real, to exist. Each portion of the strange flesh tried to smash its way through the veil of death, only to lose all form. It took long minutes to rend itself to flinders, and Buric watched every second.

As dawn parted the night, drovers and tribesmen finally reached the camp commander. The reluctant reinforcements found gobs of flesh, still quivering, locked in a vain struggle against entropy.

Buric sent one of them to get the slaughterhouse foreman and then waited impatiently. He wondered who he would have to appoint his second-in-command.

Finally, the overseer arrived, visibly unnerved by the request for his presence. "What may I do for Your Honor?" the head butcher quavered uncertainly. He was a large man in a blood-soaked apron and looked ridiculous wringing his hands.

Buric swept his arms over the undead meat. "More scraps for the sausage grinder," he said, ignoring the butcher's unsteady gulp and walking toward the bathhouse. "Credit it to my accounts as miscellaneous scraps.

"After all," Buric said to himself, chuckling, "Cabal sausage is famous for its low price, not its quality."

S T E V E N E . S C H E N D

AN ATOG COMES TO APHETTO



Rasarm always marveled at how much saliva the tiny atog produced and, although messy, how well it dissolved warning spells.

Yekol snickered and spat another large gobbet onto the glass skylight and its magically warded iron grid. The wine-colored atog appeared sinister with his toothed maw and glowing orange eyes lit from below, but his partner merely nodded to him as he tightened a rope to a nearby gargoyle. Tall for a human, Rasarm loomed high over the atog, though both remained low to avoid being seen against the night sky.

"Be sure to eat it all, or else some guard will notice glass shards on the balcony." Rasarm reminded him. "And then we'll go find Siscera and get her out of here."

Yekol brightened at the mention of the girl. He smiled, despite having a metal strip in his mouth. Quietly crunching it, he reached down to grab panes of glass before they fell loose from the frame.

Rasarm wasn't sure of this plan, but he wanted revenge, and he wanted to save what he could of his family.

On their way to the Krosan Forest, he and Yekol had

returned to Aphetto to visit his father, sister, and brother-in-law. Their house was empty, and neighbors had seen all three dragged away weeks ago. The Potters' District was under a new Cabal lord, and rumors on the streets said that old Lhur's pottery was not up to the standards of their new overlord. He and his apprenticed son-in-law, Farul, were thrown into the blood pits, their property confiscated as restitution by the Cabal.

Rasarm had hated the Cabal long before his return here, and outside of Cabal lands, he and his atog, Yekol, had built reputations as mage hunters. Now, his skills and his hatred came together with blind fury. Rasarm would find the Cabalists responsible for destroying his family and return the favor blood for blood. Already tonight, he and Yekol had at least temporarily reclaimed his father's house . . . and the grisly message they left behind inspired guards to unwittingly lead them here, where he hoped his sister was. . . .

Yekol slapped his foot on the roof and grunted impatiently at Rasarm. He had removed all the glass from the skylight and chewed through much of the iron lattice to allow them to enter the villa. Rasarm took up the coil of rope and handed one end to Yekol. The magics absorbed from the skylight made the little creature strong, and he gripped the rope between his toes and dived headlong through the skylight. Rasarm fed out the rope until he heard Yekol whistle softly.

Rasarm and Yekol communicated quite well, given that Yekol was nearly mute. The atog understood most everything said to him, but he responded only with whistles, grunts, occasional mimicked words, and a laugh comparable to metal shards dragged across slate. Despite that, the two easily conveyed their plans through hand signals and various whistles. Hearing the all-clear sign from the atog, Rasarm let out the rope and quickly slid down into the villa of the Cabal wizard Suarvol.

The pair of them knelt on the balcony, scanning for

guards and exits. They moved cautiously toward the door to their right but froze when sudden noises came from below.

From their footsteps and the clatter of armor, Rasarm guessed there were at least five guards charging along the entry hall beneath them. Two of them seemed to stay downstairs, but at least two mounted the stairs.

Rasarm scooped up the atog and dashed silently toward a nearby tapestry. Ducking behind it, they found themselves in a garderobe. Rasarm clamped a hand over Yekol's mouth to keep him from complaining about the stench.

An apprentice wizard and a pair of armed guards ran up the staircase, past the garderobe, and to a pair of double doors. The trio was too focused on the doors and what lay beyond them to notice the slight swaying of a garderobe curtain.

As they pounded on the doors, Rasarm whispered, "He's in there."

* * * * *

Suarvol lay on a mound of silken pillows, his voluminous front stained by unnoticed spilled wine. He leered at the newest acquisition for his harem. He could command her will by magic or by money, like so many others, but this one resisted more than most. Siscera was her name, according to his chamberlain. She held her head high despite being barely clothed in a diaphanous silk shift. A golden chain led from her ankle to the pillar behind Suarvol's lounging pillows.

Another girl with dead eyes pawed at Suarvol's feet; she wore no chain, her will long ago broken. Suarvol ignored her and marveled at Siscera, the new girl. He began drawing her to him, pulling on the slender golden chain link by link. With each forced step, she wept a new tear, bathing her cheeks and whetting the mage's appetites.

Someone pounded on the doors. Suarvol yelled a

dismissive "Go away!" but was too late to stop the entry of three men—one of his lesser apprentices and two guards.

"Milord Suarvol! Forgive us!" Their overlapping entreaties earned a livid glare from their master. The apprentice waved the other two quiet and continued: "Milord, there is a problem concerning some recent acquisitions of property. . . ."

Irritated at the interruption and the problem at hand, the mage rolled over, pulling Siscera off her feet and onto the pillows near him. "Palin, why do you bother me at this hour?"

The thin, pasty-faced wizard swallowed nervously, and the guards behind him shuffled. "Sir, these men found bodies at your newest real estate holdings—all men who work for us. . . ."

Suarvol glared at him and hissed, "Then I'd suggest you get Skolin or his pet Paeras to deal with this mystery and leave me to . . . train the new girl."

"But sir, Paeras and Skolin *are* the ones who've been killed, along with their personal guards! They were found dead in the former house of that potter," the apprentice bleated as he backed away, his eyes darting to Siscera.

She showed little reaction, but Suarvol blanched. He dropped the chain that held her, and his wine goblet rolled out of his reach. Siscera scrambled as far away from him as the chain allowed.

Suarvol collected himself from the cushions and said, "Have you checked the villa's perimeter?" He stopped, his voice high with tension. Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Double the guards around the estate, Palin, but leave these two with me. The killer may come here next. Then, join me in the sanctum to cast reinforcing spells on the villa's defenses. And you." Suarvol yanked on Siscera's chain. "Come with me." The mage gathered up the slender chain, magically released it from the pillar, and led her toward his bedchamber.

Palin bowed and turned toward the exit, only to be faced by two sharp smiles and a sharper sword. The apprentice failed to yell a warning, only emitting a startled squeak as he pointed at the doorway.

Suarvol, his two slaves, and the guards all turned back toward the door.

Siscera gasped, "Rasarm!"

"The killer!" Suarvol blurted.

* * * * *

"You're exactly right, you fat pig. And you're next," Rasarm said. He let the heavy drawbar fall into place behind him. Yekol hopped away from the doors and onto the pillows, happily wiping offal from his feet onto the silk.

The fat wizard smiled. "Ah, this must be the wayward brother your husband babbled about just before he died in the pits. Palin, deal with him, but keep him alive for the pits." Turning away and yanking cruelly on the chain, the wizard yelled, "Guards!" at the other doors leading out of this room.

Rasarm quickly sized up his opponents. Rage and pain had carried him through the slaughter of six men earlier this evening. He'd not even had time to wash their gore off his leathers. Without a word between them, Rasarm and Yekol chose their targets.

The soldiers moved to the sides to flank him, while Palin drew a wand from his belt.

As he rushed one guard, Rasarm pulled his second sword and knocked the guard's spear point down with both blades. He stomped on the wooden shaft and snapped the spear in half. In disbelief, the guard brought up the broken spear. Rasarm smashed the hilt of his short sword into the man's face, knocking him out.

Meanwhile, the atog clambered up the fabrics around the slim pillars. Yekol pulled a tapestry loose and cackled raucously as he leaped down with it, completely engulfing

the young wizard. Bouncing atop the large velvet-covered lump, Yekol sniffed at its folds until he smelled his favorite scent—enchancements. Palin struggled under the fabric, his wand still in hand, until Yekol bit through the tapestry and two of the wizard's fingers to snap the wand in two. The flash of unleashed magics died quickly, but Yekol suddenly grew more muscular and a deeper purple. His cackle became a deep-throated growl that still didn't drown out Palin's scream of pain.

Rasarm laughed mirthlessly with his atog friend as he sparred with the other guard. "Yekol." He crossed his swords to block a spear thrust at his face. "Go help Siscera, yes?" He nodded toward his sister's retreating form.

The guard took advantage of the distraction and stabbed past Rasarm's swords. The spear tip pierced Rasarm's leather shirt, and pain lanced along his side. Rasarm grunted and clamped his left arm along his side, pinning the spear in place. His foe temporarily disarmed, he buried his right short sword into the guard's chest.

Charged with mana, Yekol sped across the floor, using all four limbs to propel himself past Siscera and Suarvol. He saw the far doors opening, so he barreled directly at them and kicked them hard with both feet. People on the other side yelled and fell over each other as the doors slammed in their faces. Yekol flipped backward to confront the mage and his prisoner.

Suarvol's grin was almost as wide as Yekol's. "A boy and his atog? Those are the forces that stand against the Cabal? I may have to bring my two enforcers back from the dead just to laugh at them!" Suarvol drew a wand hidden beneath vast folds of flesh.

The atog's eyes narrowed, and he let out a resonant growl as he followed the point of the wand.

Suarvol activated it, and a bolt of ice shot out. The frozen barrage missed the atog but locked the double doors beneath a layer of ice.

Yekol launched himself into the mage's stomach and winded him. Gasping, Suarvol dropped the golden chain, and Siscera scrambled away, snapping the chain out of the fat man's reach. The atog dived between the mage's legs and clamped razor-sharp teeth onto his right hamstring.

With a scream of pain, Suarvol fell backward and dropped his wand. He hit the oak floor with a loud impact. Before he could grab his wand again, the atog wrapped his lips and teeth around it.

Having disarmed and disabled his foe, Yekol happily bounded over to Siscera and began to gnaw her anklet off.

Rasarm clutched his spear wound and sprinted over toward Yekol and the fat mage. Another harem girl cowered among the pillows and screamed as he passed by.

Suarvol furiously worked a spell, his hands surrounded by a cloud of blackness.

Rasarm picked up a fallen wine goblet and flung it directly at the wizard's head. The wizard ducked, and the goblet shattered against a pillar behind him.

Black lightning crackled out from Suarvol's fingers, curling about Siscera and Yekol and filling the air with sharp scents and screams. "Now, little warrior," Suarvol sneered, "drop your weapons, or your sister and your pet die most horribly right now."

Rasarm roared and threw both his short swords directly at Suarvol. The fat wizard twisted away from one sword entirely. The second blade buried its point in his left shoulder, and the pain disrupted Suarvol's spell.

Siscera slumped to the ground, unconscious, but Yekol growled weakly and wobbled over to stand with Rasarm.

Rasarm picked up Yekol, and they walked over to the gasping and bleeding mage. Yekol sniffed around the wizard and took the time to bump into the embedded blade and snicker while Suarvol screamed. Yekol yanked a ring off the mage's finger and popped it into his mouth, his eyes glowing slightly as he drew energy from it.

Rasarm leaned over him, nose-to-nose, and whispered, "Why did you do this to me and mine?"

Suarvol laughed in Rasarm's face. "Boy, the Cabal is everywhere, and we do what we will, as power always does."

Rasarm backhanded him across the face, and Suarvol's cheeks contorted red with both rage and shame. "You fat fool. I've killed your guards, and you're helpless right now. Answer my question: What could an old potter and his family have done to deserve this?" Rasarm leaned on the short sword to punctuate his point in pain.

Suarvol roared, reached up with his right hand, and grabbed Rasarm by the hair. Black energy crackled between the two, and Rasarm grew weak as Suarvol drained his strength. "Boy, you know nothing about how to inflict pain and even less about how to vanquish your enemies. Before sunup, your body will decorate my villa gates and feed the carrion crows." Suarvol booted Yekol away without losing his grip.

Rasarm's face twisted in agony, and he tried to drive his sword deeper. Instead, more black magic jabbed into him, and moving like a puppet, he pulled the sword free and dropped it.

Yekol barked, "Ras! Ras!"

Rasarm slowly got up and helped the wizard up as well, his will no longer his own.

Suarvol laughed, his wounds shimmering with black energy and closing while the gash in Rasarm's side grew wider and blood flowed freely down his torso. Yekol leaped at them, clawing at the wizard's grip with Rasarm, but his strength dwindled amid the black energies.

Rasarm grabbed Yekol by his neck and began to squeeze.

Suarvol let go of Rasarm, his magical grasp over the warrior sure and steady. He smiled as he watched one of his attackers slowly kill his own companion. "Once you're done suffocating the atog, Rasarm, be so kind as to run yourself

through," Suarvol said dismissively as he turned to leave the room.

Suarvol clutched his neck, his breath bubbling with blood from a slashed throat. The harem girl stood nearby, gripping the bloodied, shattered stem of a wine goblet. Rage and pain boiled out of her, and she buried the pottery shard into his expansive stomach. The mage staggered forward, grabbing his former slave. He attempted to drain her life to save his own. . . .

Dropping Yekol, Rasarm spun and buried his short sword in the villain's back. "The Cabal isn't here," he whispered into Suarvol's ear.

The wizard slumped to the ground lifelessly, and his blood pooled slowly beneath him.

The girl, long traumatized, fell on him and repeatedly stabbed at his corpse with her crude weapon. The only sounds in the room now were her sobs.

Rasarm staggered to his sister's prone form and cradled her head softly in his arms. Yekol whimpered as he shuffled near, putting a pillow beneath her head and licking her hand in hopes of waking her. The black lightning had harmed her greatly, and her breathing was shallow.

Rasarm sobbed, "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you better. I'm sorry." He hugged them both and cried until his senses fought past his grief. "Yekol, do you smell smoke?"

The atog sat up and sniffed, his teardrop nostrils flaring. He nodded furiously and barked "Fr! Fr!" Looking to the sides of the room, they both saw smoke curling underneath the door-frames. Rasarm got to his feet, still cradling Siscera in his arms.

The doors nearest Suarvol exploded open, a billow of smoke following them. The girl who had been manically stabbing the mage's corpse scrambled backward on hands and feet away from the doors.

Yekol took up one end of the gold chain and waited for Rasarm's directions. Rasarm suddenly realized he'd left both his swords across the room by the corpse.

"Not too bright, man, to drop your guard before you're on safe ground . . ." a strong but friendly voice said through the smoke. The man stepped into the room, a bald, mustachioed human whose face and arms were black with soot and paint. He carried a bloodied rapier, but his face wore a smile. "Thanks for giving us the opening we'd needed; glad we could cover your back to make sure this wasn't a suicidal gesture. Now, you'd best take these." He kicked Rasarm's two fallen short swords to him. "And let's get out of here. You too, girl."

Other men in black came into the room, bringing more smoke with them. They were followed by a large group of women, all clad in gauzy silks or nothing at all, who took hold of the girl and helped her toward the barred doors. Nearly everyone took a moment to spit at or kick Suarvol's corpse.

Rasarm retrieved and sheathed his weapons. "You took care of the rest of the guards? But who are you? Why are you doing this?"

The man stepped closer. "Look, friend, we watched you and your atog take out those Cabal wizards at Lhur's shop, and we followed you here tonight. This fat bastard kidnapped our sisters, wives, and mothers for his harem. We didn't dare take on the Cabal until tonight; while you provided the main distraction, we attacked the guards and freed our women. Now, pick her up," he motioned toward Siscera, "and let's get out of here.

"Oh, and my name's Hural. My mates and I are smugglers and rogues, not mage hunters like yourself, Rasarm, son of Lhur. We can only fight from the shadows and hurt the Cabal in their pockets, not face them toe-to-toe. 'Course, we don't all have an atog fighting at our sides."

Yekol squinted at Hural, and his mouth split into a wide toothy grin when Hural's did.

Rasarm liked Hural instantly but was weak from the fight and kept his guard up. "The smoke?"

Hural knocked over a brazier, setting fire to the pillows and the tapestries quickly. "Some of my more zealous men already set fires here and below. The whole villa's coming down around us. We'll need to move fast to get out of Aphetto alive with our women. Still, the fire's good for confusing the Cabal and making it hard to see what's been stolen or who did it."

Rasarm moved along with Hural and the former harem, thinking about their current situation. Yekol skipped along, his new chain weapon looped around his torso like a bandolier. Everyone headed toward the exits until Rasarm stopped suddenly. Yekol bumped into him, and a low grumble rose from Yekol's purple throat.

"We'll have to stay behind, Yekol. Hural, take Siscera." Rasarm gently delivered his unconscious sister into Hural's arms while both the thief and the atog sputtered in shock. "I want your word she'll get away and be somewhere safe with the rest of you."

Yekol bounded up and down and stomped his feet hard enough to scratch the stone floor—his way of asking why.

"Why?" Hural himself asked.

Rasarm knelt to calm his little friend and look him in the eye. "If the Cabal doesn't find someone to blame, they'll keep hunting for scapegoats. Enough people have suffered. If we take the blame," and Rasarm gestured at the conflagration that was once a villa, "they won't be looking for you or the women."

"But what's to stop them from killing you and the atog and then hunting us all down?" Hural fumed.

Rasarm looked at him with surprise and said, "I thought you knew the Cabal, Hural. They'll not summarily execute anyone who's made them lose this much face. They must make an example of such transgressions . . . in the blood pits. And that's where I'll get my revenge against the rest of them. . . ."

Hural pondered that and then nodded. "I'll make sure

your sister lives a safe and long life, warrior. We all owe you that, at the very least." With that, Hural and his band melted into the smoke-filled night.

Many onlookers came out and stared as the flames licked outside of the windows.

Yekol whined and pulled on Rasarm's hand, wanting to be away from the fire and to make their typical getaway.

Rasarm picked up the atog up and laughed. "No, little atog. You and I are going to make sure they never forget what 'an atog and his boy' can do once we're in the arena. And if I know the Cabal, there'll be a lot more magical items for you to feast on."

Yekol looked at Rasarm and smiled broadly.

* * * * *

In the blood pits of Aphetto, the wizard Huathom screamed as he channeled his rage into the flames that leaped off his fingers.

Yekol burrowed furiously down into the sand just as the fireball exploded above him. His back blistered slightly when the sand turned to hot glass, but he reemerged little the worse for wear. The atog was tired of running around and dodging spells, and he barked at Rasarm, "Yekol no run! Yekol hit!"

Rasarm dodged a lunging hug from a gigantipithicus and slashed his short sword at the ape's massive forearm. He and Yekol were chained together at opposing wrists, and Yekol's jumping threw his shield arm out of place. Even with a goodly length of chain between them, there was precious little maneuverability. "Yekol, circle!" Rasarm yelled as he punched his sword hilt against the side of the ape's head.

Yekol ran around the ape's feet while Rasarm used his swords to protect the atog and keep the biting ape at bay. Once the loop was complete, Rasarm and Yekol backed

away from each other, and the chain looped tight around the ape's feet. It fell backward, and Yekol cackled with glee as Rasarm leaped atop the gigantipithicus and buried his sword deep in its chest.

At the other end of the arena, Huathom spat and began another incantation. His once-pristine red robes were stained with sweat and coated with dust and some blood. He gnashed out the final syllables.

Yekol dived behind the ape's corpse and dragged the panting Rasarm in behind him. They pulled the ape's body atop them. The corpse caught the brunt of the lightning bolt that arced across the sands, and magic vaporized it almost instantly. Unfortunately, some energy arced into the chain between them and shocked them both.

Many in the packed arena oohed and aahed the tactics and waited to see what would happen next.

* * * * *

Lord Flamescar was having a bad week, and his losses in the pits didn't make things any better. He'd handled the Suarvol affair quietly and confidently, and the blunders of his underlings were as dead and buried as they were. However, the fact that those responsible excelled in the arena against all expectations galled him.

For the past four days, this Rasarm and Yekol had defeated all opponents, even when pitted in more than one fight in a day. Lord Flamescar wanted these two dead, despite the profits and people they brought to Aphetto's blood pits.

The Cabal lord looked down into the arena and sighed. He'd hoped Suarvol's younger brother Huathom could bring an end to this. Desire for revenge usually helped an arena fighter, but the wizard made too many errors of pride. At least the fool could injure one or both combatants, if only to increase the betting and the odds against them in their

next battle. From where Flamescar sat, it merely looked as if he would need another lackey quite soon.

The incessant chatter of the crowd echoed the throb of his headache.

At first, Lord Flamescar didn't notice either the shadows or the commotion. A number of wizards in the Cabal's main box suddenly got up and headed toward the jakes. One or two even vomited before they made it out of the box. Their comrades looked at their distress and then noticed the shadows deepening around the front of the box, coalescing into a large form. A few began casting defensive counterspells, only to be stopped by more senior Cabal members. Within the space of a minute, the shadows came together in the form of the true master of Aphetto, the First of the Cabal.

What was mere smoke and shade a moment before now picked up an abandoned wine goblet and stared at the combatants on the sands. The First stood tall but not taller than the wizards around him. His black leathern robes glistened in the restored lantern light, though the light hardly warmed his face. His skin was the color of wet ash, and his eyes the color of soot. Corrupt powers radiated from him. Those who stood too near this harbinger of pestilence vomited, and others farther from his presence merely shivered in fear.

Among the senior members of the Cabal, only Lord Flamescar seemed surprised at the First's presence . . . and that fact forged a cold knot of fear in his gut.

* * * * *

The First's arrival brought silence to the pits, and Huathom paused to look up.

Rasarm did not. He ran forward a few paces, dug in his heels, grabbed the chain, and yelled, "Yekol! Claw swing!" With both arms, Rasarm swung the chain.

Yekol ran at its end and jumped. The chain snapped taut and hauled him airborne, arcing right toward their distracted

opponent. As he swung past at eye level, the atog slashed his claws at Huathom's throat and face.

Many in the startled crowd didn't see the end of the battle. They only heard the wizard's death cry, which signaled Yekol and Rasarm's latest victory. Cheers and jeers came quickly as wager slips flew in frustration over lost bets.

Rasarm and Yekol remained on the sands. The atog hopped all over the wizard, plucking enchanted rings off his hands and popping them into his mouth. Rasarm wiped the perspiration and blood off his face and strode toward the Cabal's main box. Yekol only followed once the chain linking them forced him to abandon checking the dead man's cloak pockets.

It was dangerous to speak to the First without being invited to, but Rasarm had nothing left to lose. "Milord, your Cabal abuses its powers without you in residence. I want compensation for their wrongs against me and mine." Despite a wave of queasiness, Rasarm kept his eyes locked with the First's while he spoke.

The First's face lit with surprise and amusement. "A slave of my blood pits would dictate terms and complaints to me? How . . . quaint." The First sneered, his teeth and gums slate gray, and he turned this cold smile briefly on his Cabal lords. "What is your grievance against the eternal wisdom and benevolence of the Cabal, warrior? Or do you speak for your atog?"

Overenthusiastic laughter followed the First's jest, changing his smile into a glare that quieted most of the sycophants. The First leaned back from the front of the box and took his seat, all the while watching the gladiator who dared confront him.

While Yekol shivered and shied from the First, Rasarm stood his ground. For once, he wished he'd not inherited his father's forthrightness or his mother's stubbornness. Rasarm swallowed once more and spoke: "My father was a potter in

the Ihraem Quarter, and my entire family was executed on orders of Lord Flamescar. Apparently he chose to blame my father for not creating a full dozen custom wine goblets when he had ordered only nine; Lord Flamescar chose to confiscate our home for his apparent loss of face for not having matching goblets for a banquet in the Cabal's honor."

Rasarm shifted his attention between the First and the increasingly angrier Lord Flamescar, who sputtered and fumed. One veiled look from the First had prevented the wizard's interruption.

Rasarm continued, "Your Lord Flamescar sent an old man and his apprentice to the pits, enslaved his daughter as a whore, and confiscated his home for his dim-witted minions. He abuses the power you give him. I answered such abuses with my vengeance. I killed four full mages of the Cabal and their minions, and I destroyed the villa at the heart of the Ihraem."

The First leaned forward, his face mixing respect for the warrior's ability with anger at his having shamed the Cabal.

"Had they been truly worthy of the Cabal, Yekol and I could neither have killed them nor would we have needed to do so. In order for the Cabal and your name to hold any honor, I demand the life of one more unworthy. I challenge Lord Flamescar to an honor battle as redress for the wrongs he has done us both!"

The entire audience leaped to its feet in surprise or disbelief or awe, and the wager-mongers shouted above it all, taking bets. Even the crowd's uproar could not drown out the sputtered gasp of outrage from Lord Flamescar.

The First raised a hand, and the arena fell silent almost instantly. The shadows around him deepened, as did the frown on the First's face. Other Cabalists excused themselves out of the box, fearful of their lord's anger and his loathsome power.

Toward the back of the box, wizards likewise gave Lord

Flamescar as wide a berth. His bald head shining with perspiration, Flamescar stood in shock. He gulped audibly as he came directly under the eye of his pestilent master. Chathos seemed to gag for a moment and then stifled the wave of bile rising in his throat.

"It would seem you have a choice, my ostensibly loyal Flamescar, whose true name is Chathos." The First played cat-and-mouse with his words, but all within hearing knew his intent. Exposing the true name of Flamescar before the common rabble showed the First's displeasure and demoted him publicly. The wizard needed to prove his worth to the Cabal before regaining his title. "You may yet save face by accepting this challenge in the blood pits. That may also prove more entertaining . . . for all of us."

"An-and my other choice, milord?" Chathos stammered.

The First turned partly toward the shamed lord. "You may swear that all these accusations are false and the Cabal still stands strong with our actions." The First paused as Chathos exhaled in relief, but then added, "And I shall need your hand on that oath."

Chathos choked in shock: Only painful death came from actual contact with the First. "But, milord, I, er . . ." He blanched, all color draining away as the First rose to loom darkly over him. He dropped to his hands and knees in supplication at the First's feet, his once-proud voice reduced to sobs.

"It would seem," the First growled, "that this one has proven himself unworthy to sit among the Cabal lords. You and your atog should best be ready, warrior, as your challenge is accepted."

Rasarm nodded solemnly and bowed to the black-garbed lord as he backed away from the box. Yekol tugged on their mutual chain and led the retreat away from the nauseous aura of the First.

The First reclaimed his seat and glowered at no one in particular as he waved his guards over to the still-prone

Chathos. "Introduce him to the blood pits. It is up to him to prove his worth to climb out again."

Rasarm watched as four burly guards seized the former Cabal lord and flung him bodily out of the box and down onto the sands. Wands came loose from Chathos's belt as he fell the nine feet down into the blood pits.

Yekol leaped forward and gathered up the three magical items.

Chathos yelped in indignant outrage, but the roar of the crowds overwhelmed his protests. Unheard-of wagers flew among the spectators, for a Cabal lord's public overthrow had never happened here. Lord Chathos tried to rise but only vomited on the sands as his control crumbled.

"Now's the time to kill the bastard! Kill him!" shouted a particularly loud onlooker. "I've got two hundred gold on you and the atog, boy!"

Rasarm didn't want to lose an honor duel by striking a downed and unprepared foe. He backed across the arena, reeling Yekol after him, to many patrons' boos. En route, he retrieved the second of his pair of short swords, lost during the previous battle.

Yekol happily crunched down on one of his newly claimed wands. Giggling, the atog sucked on its end, as if the action drained its magic more thoroughly.

"Tasty, Yekol?" Rasarm joked. "Let's hope it's not your last meal."

Yekol agreed with ferocious nods and a loud burp that got the crowd laughing.

Chathos showed the source of his Cabal title when he rose from the sands. A ragged furrow of livid red scars brightened with anger and marred his face from his right temple to his left cheek. "You should have attacked when you had the chance, boy. Even an honor battle has little room for charity."

Chathos's first spell surprised many who expected just blasts and bolts from the wizard. He spread his arms wide,

and the sands turned black beneath his feet and all across the arena.

Yekol whimpered when the blackened sands reached his toes, and he clambered up to Rasarm's shoulders rather than stand on the ground.

The warrior soon felt why. A wave of despair and hopelessness overwhelmed him, and he shivered as if the black sand drained the heat out of him. A chance glance at his swords made Rasarm blanch: Mouths moaned at him in the clots of blood on the blades.

Yekol jumped down from his perch. Careful not to touch the sands, the atog landed on an ape corpse. Yekol grew strong whenever he ate magic, and the consumed wand made him very tough. Yekol grasped the head of the ape and ripped it clean off, drawing cheers from the crowd. He then threw the bloody missile at the wizard.

The gory head struck Chathos in his right shoulder and spun him to one side. The black sands shimmered and faded to their normal color, and Yekol's crude interruption gave Rasarm the chance to clear his head. He hadn't enough time to strike back, though.

Chathos quickly recovered, lancing a solid bolt of entropy out from his left hand toward the warrior. Rasarm leaped out of the way and dived face first into the sand to avoid the life-draining attack. Lord Flamescar clenched his fists, black and purple energy crackling between his fingers.

Yekol was pulling an arm off the decapitated ape just as the corpse sat up. Tumbling aside, the atog screeched angrily. All the other corpses on the sand likewise rose at the wizard's command. Yekol shuffled back, but the dismembered arm grabbed hold of his throat and squeezed.

When Rasarm got up, he faced the wizard and four zombies. Yelling a warning to Yekol, he yanked hard on their binding chain. The atog quickly got airborne and out of reach of the ape corpse, but the severed limb still held fast to his neck.

Growling, Yekol pried up its thumb and bit it off. The limb had little gripping power left, and Yekol now used it as a club, battering the red-garbed zombie they'd dispatched only minutes before.

Rasarm swung both short swords ahead of him, and he quickly dismembered one zombie by lopping off one of its legs and part of its hand. The undead body parts kept attacking.

"We've got to take the fight to the wizard, Yekol! Trip line!" Rasarm yelled.

The atog hopped quickly out to the far end of their chain. He barked once, twice, and yelled, "Run!" Both he and Rasarm ran toward the zombies. The chain tripped them up and knocked the undead forward on their faces.

Ahead in the sand, two severed hands and an arm scrambled to grab and crush what they could find. Rasarm and Yekol each grabbed a zombie hand and flung it at the wizard.

The missiles never hit their target. Chathos conjured up a wall of bones, which erupted from the sands and formed a seven-foot-high defense around him. Within his bone-shard barricade, the wizard laughed bitterly and began conjuring again.

Rasarm pinned the most dexterous zombie—the former human wizard—to the ground with one short sword through the back. He then whistled and clacked his teeth together twice.

Yekol nodded and bit in half the two remaining wands he held. He then jumped up to Rasarm's shoulder and balanced his torso on the warrior's left hand. Rasarm threw him skyward, and Yekol landed just short of the top of the bone wall. The atog's muscles bulged as he absorbed the magic of the ingested wands, and Yekol made sure to stay out of the wizard's direct line of sight.

Chathos growled, "You may have saved your little friend for the moment, but all the dead want you with them now."

The wizard laughed evilly and loudly as he cast his blood-call spell.

Boos and jeers swept through the crowd.

Rasarm began sinking into the sand. Looking down, he saw ghostly and bloody fingers materializing and clutching at him. Within seconds, the warrior was pulled knee-deep into the sand.

The First and the other Cabal wizards watched the fight carefully. A few leaned closer to examine Chathos's new spell. They muttered admiration at the efficiency of using recently killed spirits to avenge themselves on their living killer. All agreed this spell could overwhelm anyone in a killing zone such as the blood pits.

Chathos smiled grimly.

Rasarm stabbed his short sword into the sand beside his right arm, hoping to keep his torso above ground against the strong pull of the spell. He yelled, "Yekol! Pull!"

Chathos laughed aloud. "If you've pinned your hopes on that little purple pest, warrior, you're already dead."

Yekol hopped atop the wall and anchored his feet amid a tangle of bones. The atog's limbs sang with magical strength, and he roared as he grabbed the chain with his free left hand and hauled on it with all his might.

Rasarm practically flew out of the grip of the magical spell. Yekol ran along the top of the bone wall, shortening the length of chain and pulling Rasarm up. Rasarm arced high as Yekol yanked on the chain and leaped on the other side of the wall. Both the atog and the man fell together inside the wizard's defenses.

Shifting his grip on his short sword, Rasarm simply let his weight deliver the killing blow.

Chathos only had time to scream, "No!"

The warrior's blade and then the warrior himself landed atop him. The short sword buried itself hilt-deep in the wizard's neck, and a fountain of blood rushed up.

Rasarm rolled away, releasing a breath he'd held for the

past few seconds. He shuddered with relief. As Yekol rushed over to embrace him, Rasarm whispered, "You are avenged, Father."

Yekol muttered "Papa . . ." and kicked Chathos's corpse.

Rasarm stood up, coated in his foe's blood, and wearily bowed to the First, his swords crossed in front of him in a salute between warriors. Yekol picked up two stray bones and mimicked the motion, much to the amusement of the crowd. It seemed that only Lord Flamescar loved his own presence in Aphetto.

"Chathos's head goes on a pike over the main gate. See that the corpse is ground up for mortar to be used in an outhouse," the First directed a servant.

"As for you two," the First rumbled at Rasarm and Yekol, "you have your honor and your revenge. You may now choose to serve the Cabal in one of two ways. You and your chattering companion may serve us directly in Flamescar's former capacity as the lord over Ihraem and its neighbor district of Turam, answering all oaths and earning all favors of the Cabal lords. If that does not please, you may remain as champions in the blood pits, from which you may leave as soon as your winnings have replaced the monetary value of an entire villa, its staff of slaves, guards, and the training of five Cabal wizards. The choice is yours, little warriors."

Rasarm's blood ran cold as he faced the First. The choice was no choice. Rasarm and Yekol would die fighting for the Cabal or die fighting against it, but either way, they would die. The Cabal was everywhere.

Rasarm wasn't sure what bothered him more — the First's cold and triumphant smile or the toothy smile that Yekol wore, mimicking the Cabal leader perfectly. . . .

PART III:
OTHERWORLDLY
MONSTERS



J E S S L E B O W

DELRAICH



In the lower market of Mercadia . . .

Raitrick templed his fingers and relaxed the muscles along his spine. Under his robes, a set of bracers and a lightweight chest plate formed over his skin. He nodded and lowered his hands to the pouch at his side.

"Sleege!" shouted a greasy-looking man in short pants and a red headband. "Someone here ta see ya!"

A tall man in a white overcoat and long, khaki slacks turned around at the summons. His eyes scanned across the bustling market to fall upon Raitrick, and then he smiled—not a predatory grin, but a genuine one—and Raitrick quietly blew out the breath he had been holding.

The tall man edged his way among the shoppers, brushing past the greasy man with the bandana. He patted him on the shoulder and then held his hand out to Raitrick.

"The name's Sleege," he said. "I suppose you're looking to book passage to Saprazzo."

"Raitrick," replied the sorcerer, introducing himself as he grasped Sleege's hand to give it a quick shake. "And

yes, I need to transport something to the coral city. Can you help get me there safely?"

Sleege nodded. "Sure can," he said, leaning back to adjust his belt higher up his waist. "But as you know, the plains between Mercadia and the coast are a dangerous place." He looked Raitrick up and down. "It'll cost."

Raitrick chuckled. "I thought it might." He held out a leather satchel and placed it in Sleege's palm. "Will this do?"

Raitrick watched Sleege undo the ties and open the sack. Inside rested a pile of small rubies and sapphires, diamonds and emeralds. The tall man looked up from his palm, scanning the crowd; then he closed the purse and tucked it tight to his chest.

"Yes, yes," he said. "This will be fine." He smiled. "Can you be ready to go by sunset?"

Raitrick picked up a small rune-inscribed bag resting near his feet, and he patted the satchel that he had slung over his shoulder. "Everything I own is right here with me," he replied. "I could leave now if you're ready."

Sleege tied the small leather sack and pushed it into his pocket. "Meet us outside the market, over there," he said, pointing to where the shadow of Mercadia City stopped and gave way to the sands of the open plain. "Just give me a few minutes to gather the rest of the caravan." Then he turned and strode off into the crowd, swaying side to side like a serpent as he deftly avoided the merchants and consumers.

Raitrick closed his eyes and rolled his neck. The tight muscles pinched and stretched, and the sorcerer took several breaths, trying to relax his shoulders. "Only a few days," he said quietly. "Only a few more days, and you'll cash out." He blew air out his nose. "You're almost there Raitrick. Just relax." He straightened up and headed down a row of booths toward the open plain.

"Fresh bung melons," shouted a woman. "Straight from the heart of the Mirrorwood Forest!"

Raitrick sidestepped a growing crowd before the woman's cart.

"Excuse me, sir." Someone tugged on the sorcerer's sleeve. "Sir?"

Raitrick clasp his shoulder satchel, pulling it closer to his body. He continued through the crowd.

"You look like a man who would appreciate the affections of a woman," said the man at his elbow. "Maybe a nice elf maiden?"

Raitrick yanked on his own sleeve, dislodging the vendor. "Go away," he shouted over his shoulder, picking up his pace. "I'm not interested."

"Well, excuse me . . ." he heard the man say, his voice trailing off into the background din as Raitrick made his way out of the crowd to the edge of the inverted city's shadow.

The crowd lessened here, dissolving entirely by the time the sorcerer reached the guarded entry. An arched gate provided a tunnel through the ten-foot-high ring of trash that surrounded Mercadia. Citizens had a habit of throwing their refuse over the edge.

"Out of sight, out of mind," said Raitrick quietly.

At the gate stood a burly soldier with a halberd and heavy armor that barely fit over his bulging muscles. He nodded at Raitrick, who nodded back as he passed through the gate, under the trash, and out into the bright sunshine. He pinched his eyes closed, trying to lessen the glare from the baked white sand and beige rocks that lay beyond the huge pile of refuse.

From down here, he couldn't see the city far above. The pulleys and ropes of the conveyances that moved people up and down the inverted mountain creaked and swayed as they went about their daily routine. Raitrick waved.

"Be back soon," he said, and then laughed. "No one here to miss me."

A crowd of people and their jhovalls—six-legged pack

animals that resembled cats—slowly moved away from the edge of the market. Raitrick squinted and could just make out Slegee in his long, thin overcoat. As the group approached, he held his arms out wide.

"Your caravan has arrived," said Slegee, a smile sweeping across his face. "I hope it meets with your needs."

Raitrick looked over the collection of heavily packed jhovalls and greasy-looking men behind Slegee. He tapped the forearm of his robe, listening to the satisfying ping of his magical armor underneath.

"If it gets me to Saprazzo," he said, "it could be the Henge Guardian for all I care."

Slegee stepped up beside Raitrick and lifted his arms. "You can ride up front with me," he said, indicating a canvas-roofed palanquin carried by two of the great cats. The caravan leader stepped between the jhovalls and unfurled a flimsy ladder.

Raitrick nodded. "Thank you."

"Let me get that," said Slegee, grabbing Raitrick's bag and shoulder satchel.

The sorcerer drew back, bringing his hand up—a swirling ball of energy gripped firmly in his palm. "That won't be necessary, Slegee," he said, staring the man in the eyes.

Slegee stumbled back. "No offense meant," he said. "No offense."

Raitrick lowered his hand and relaxed the muscles along his spine. The globe of energy sank into his palm, and he could feel his magical armor grow thicker. He took several breaths before letting his shoulders fall again.

"It's all right," said the sorcerer, finally heading toward the ladder. "I can manage my own bags."

Slegee gave a shallow bow, his overcoat swaying softly as he did. "As you wish." Then he turned and snapped his fingers at the collection of men who had stopped to watch. At once, several dozen servants burst into action, tightening straps and redistributing loads.

Raitrick swung his duffel bag over his other shoulder and climbed the ladder. Inside, the palanquin was filled with embroidered silk pillows and colorful blankets. The canvas top cast a deep shadow over the traveling compartment, and the open sides allowed a gentle breeze to wash through, flushing out the warm, stale air.

The sorcerer stowed his duffel behind a pile of pillows in the corner and settled down cross-legged, keeping his shoulder pouch tucked under his arm. The cats on either side of the palanquin began to purr, gently shaking the traveling compartment. Though odd, the sensation rather pleased Raitrick, and he pushed himself deeper into the pillows.

"I see you've made yourself at home," said Slege, his face peeking up over the edge of the palanquin. His smile had returned.

"Yes," replied Raitrick. "This is quite nice."

Slege pulled himself into the traveling compartment and casually pulled up the ladder. "Well, it's a long way to Saprazzo," he said, chuckling. "We might as well be comfortable." The caravan leader sat down on the other side of the palanquin and fished his hand underneath a pile of pillows, eventually producing a wooden box. He ran his hands over the edge, flipped a latch, and revealed several long, golden-brown tubes.

"Cigar?" he asked, pushing the box toward Raitrick.

Raitrick looked at the box and shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?"

"They're from a small island called Urborg—on another plane," he said, cutting the end from a tube. "I get them from this planeswalker who comes in now and again looking for puffer-fish extract or distilled spirits." He shook his head. "Strange cat, that one."

"I'll bet," said Raitrick. He held up a finger and relaxed the muscles along his spine. A small red flame ignited on the end of his upright digit, and he held it out for Slege.

Sleege leaned forward and lit his cigar. "Thanks," he said between puffs.

"Thank you," replied Raitrick. He lit his own and settled back into the pillows.

Down below, a whip cracked against the sandy ground, and the caravan glided forward. The two huge six-legged cats that carried the palanquin moved with a fluid grace that belied their size, and the traveling compartment swayed more from the winds of the plains than the movement of the animals.

The caravan crossed the burning sands in the early afternoon sun. Both men sat quietly, watching the inverted city grow smaller as they headed toward the coast.

Sleege took a large puff from his now half-smoked cigar and then broke the silence. "This your first time to Saprazzo?"

Raitrick looked away from Mercadia City. "No," he said. "I've been twice before. Once as a child and once a few months ago."

"Hasn't changed much, has it?"

Raitrick creased his brow. "No, I guess it hasn't." He took another puff. "I hadn't thought about it before, but you're right. In that same time, Mercadia City has grown tremendously." The sorcerer scratched his head. "Though, Saprazzo is very limited. There really isn't anywhere to grow inside that reef. They have to wait for the coral to expand before they can build anything else."

Sleege held out his cigar, pointing at the inverted mountain. "Soon we'll be in the same predicament. Top of that mountain doesn't have much space unused. Only place to go will be up."

"Or down to the plain," replied Raitrick.

"True, but most people fear the exposure," said Sleege. "They like the feeling of security living atop a mountain."

Raitrick shook his head. "I don't think people fear living on the plains; they just prefer living up higher. They like the

view." He lifted his hands. "The air maybe. But when we run out of room, people will start living below the mountain. The lower market is already there. Why not more permanent dwellings?"

"Yes, the lower market is on the plains," replied Slegee, "but it packs up every night, and it's well guarded during the day." He sat up, pushing aside a few of the pillows. "People are afraid, plain and simple. That's why I'm in business," he said, shrugging. "If people didn't fear the plains and the creatures that live there, they wouldn't need to hire me, now would they?"

Raitrick took a puff from his cigar as he scanned the men riding jhovalls, and the massive packs they carried. "From the looks of things, I'd say you're in the business of trade."

"True, true," said Slegee, sitting back again. "But let me ask you this, then. If you're not afraid of the plains, then why pay me to help you get across them?"

Raitrick looked at the man for a minute and then let his hand slip to the pouch strung across his shoulder. He patted it. "This time you're right," he said. "Under other circumstances, I'd be prepared to go it alone. But this time I'm not willing to take any chances."

"So you will admit you're afraid of the plains?" Slegee smiled.

"Not so much afraid as cautious," replied Raitrick.

"Call it what you will." Slegee looked away.

"I'm not afraid," pushed the sorcerer.

"I believe you." Slegee continued to watch Mercadia drift into the distance.

"It's just that this package . . ." Raitrick stopped himself. He ran his fingers over his forehead and took a deep breath.

Slegee turned to look at Raitrick but didn't say anything.

The sorcerer gritted his teeth. "It's very important to me."

"I see," said Slegee.

The sorcerer watched the caravan leader. His eyes seemed glued to the satchel. It made Raitrick uncomfortable,

and he slid the shoulder strap around to put the sack behind him. Despite all the pillows, the heavy object inside dug into his back. He shifted side to side, and then settled on a position.

The two men looked away from each other and rode on in silence. As the sun began to set, a man in a headband rode up beside the palanquin.

"Gett'n dark, chief," he yelled.

"All right." Sleege nodded.

The man turned his jhovall back toward the rest of the caravan.

"We'll be setting up camp for the night," said Sleege. "I'll have the men put up a private tent for you near the campfire."

"Thank you," replied Raitrick.

The shouted order to halt echoed down the line of men, and the palanquin came to a smooth stop.

"In the meantime," continued Sleege, "feel free to lounge in here. I'll send someone to fetch you when our preparations have been completed." The caravan leader raised a stiff hand to his forehead and gave the sorcerer a salute. Then he tossed the cloth ladder off the edge and climbed down.

Raitrick relaxed a little now that he was alone. "You're one day closer," he said. "Only two more and you'll be rich." He smiled at the thought. "Very rich."

* * * * *

The tent Sleege had set up for Raitrick was simple but nice. The top and sides were made from heavy beige canvas, held up in the middle by a wooden pole. The walls were secured to the ground by strands of narrow hemp rope. Inside were more of the embroidered silk pillows that had filled the palanquin, and a pile of wool blankets.

As promised, the tent had been placed near the center of camp, not far from a large fire. A heavy pig on a spit roasted

over the flames. Sleege and his men sat on small foldable stools around the fire, drinking a golden-colored liquid from large metal mugs.

As the night got later and the sky got darker, Raitrick wandered out of his tent, joining the rambunctious crowd around the campfire.

"Ah, good sorcerer," hollered Sleege, getting to his feet and swaying a little. "Won't you join us for a little grog?"

A cheer went up from the group, and a mug full of the golden liquid made its way across the crowd, passed hand to hand over to Raitrick.

The sorcerer couldn't help but smile at the warm welcome, and he took the grog, lifting it for a cheer. "May you never find a basilisk in your bed!"

The men cheered again, and everyone drank. The grog was both sweet and bitter, leaving a tangy aftertaste in Raitrick's mouth and a light buzzing in his ears.

Holding back a cough, Raitrick blew out a breath. "Whoa," he said. "That'll put scales on your neck."

Sleege laughed and offered Raitrick a seat by the fire. The sorcerer sat down and shared a few rounds with the caravan leader and his boys.

After a couple of mugs of grog, Sleege started talking. "So what business have you in Saprizzo?"

Raitrick smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. He felt all warm and happy. "I'm going to visit an old artificer," he said. "I got something I need fixed."

"Ah, right," said Sleege. "I hear the people in the coral city are good with magical toys."

"This is no toy," corrected Raitrick.

"Oh no?" asked the caravan leader, laughing. "Don't kid yourself, sorcerer. The relics and baubles you magical types tinker with are nothing more than games and puzzles for big children."

Raitrick wrinkled his brow. "I'll have you know that what I've got is a deactivated portal," he said, spittle flying

from his lip when he pronounced the *p*. "It was made by the Phyrexians." He nodded to himself in a very satisfied manner. "It can transport large amounts of stuff over the plains — all the way from Mercadia to Saprazzo — in a matter of seconds." Raitrick waved his hand, taking in the darkened expanse around the whole camp. He lost his balance for a moment but then caught himself and smiled. "And when I get it fixed I'm going to start charging people to use it." Raitrick leaned over and poked Slegee in the chest with an upraised finger. "I'll be rich. And you, my greasy friend, will be out of business."

"Is that so?" asked Slegee

"That's so," replied the sorcerer. "Toys and puzzles." He chuckled.

A man came up with a pitcher to refill Raitrick's grog.

The sorcerer put his hand over the top of his mug. "Oh, no. No more for me."

Slegee elbowed him in the ribs. "Ah, why not? What else have you got to do out here in the middle of this miserable plain?"

The man held up the pitcher.

Raitrick looked to the caravan leader and shrugged. He pulled his hand from the mug. "You're right," he said as the man refilled his grog. "What harm could come of it?"

* * * * *

Raitrick rolled to his side and squeezed one of the pillows to his face. It felt so nice and soft, warm. He never wanted to have to get up.

His eyes shot open.

How had he gotten to bed? The last thing he remembered was . . . was . . . His hand flew to his side. The shoulder strap of his satchel was missing. He pawed around beside him. His fingers found only pillows.

Raitrick sat up. His stomach lurched, and his head spun.

He had to put his hand on the tent pole to maintain his balance. His eye sockets throbbed as he looked around the tent. Getting to his knees, holding back the contents of his stomach, he tossed aside the pillows one at a time. In a few seconds he had searched the whole tent.

Getting to his feet and steadying himself on the canvas, Raitrick pushed through the tent flap. The sun was high in the sky, and he had to shade his eyes. Spinning in a slow circle, he took in the surrounding plains and dropped to his knees. Raitrick burped and then vomited.

"Sleege!" he shouted when his sickness subsided. The word drifted away on the wind. "How could you? How could you?" He looked up at the bare, empty plains and beat his fist against the ground. "You stole my whole life, you bastard. My whole life . . ."

Raitrick put his face in his hands, and he wept. "My whole life . . ." he said between sobs. "My whole life . . ."

* * * * *

Ten days later . . .

"This court finds you guilty of wasting its time," belted a pale, corpulent man with a long, powdered wig sitting crooked on his head.

"B-but—" Raitrick stuttered.

The man in the wig stood up from behind his raised desk, interrupting the sorcerer's objection. "We'll have no contempt in my court."

"Contempt?" interjected Raitrick.

"I said that will be enough." The man with the wig burped before continuing. "Your claims against the honorable businessman Sleege and his caravan are completely unfounded."

"B-but—" stammered Raitrick.

"Furthermore," continued the man, "you have taken up the time of this court and disturbed the magistrate with an erroneous matter."

"Erroneous?" shouted the sorcerer. "But I was robbed."

"Silence!" The man in the wig shook his finger. "The magistrate and this court have heard enough from you." The portly man wiped his hand across his brow, clearing the sweat from his forehead. "You have accused a hardworking and loyal merchant of robbery. This court has found that your words are no more than the ramblings of a deluded and deranged hermit."

"Hermit—?"

"And this court sentences you to two years of 'voluntary labor' in the service of the magistrate, or the equivalent sum paid in jewels at the time of sentencing."

Raitrick threw his hands in the air. "You're sentencing *me*?"

The pudgy man sat back down and peered over the edge of his raised desk. "Do you have a hearing problem?"

Raitrick glared at the man for a minute and then lowered his eyes. "No, Your Honor."

"Good," replied the judge. "Then what will it be?" he asked. "Service or a fine?"

Raitrick shrugged. "I have no more money."

The judge pointed to several large men in the corner. "Then it's 'voluntary servitude' for him," he said. "See that he fulfills his duty to the magistrate." He turned back to Raitrick. "Let this be a lesson to you. Buyer beware!"

A half-dozen armed men converged on the sorcerer, claspng his arms behind his back and poking him in the ribs with the butts of their weapons.

"Okay, okay," shouted Raitrick, standing stock-still.

The soldiers led him out of the courtroom.

* * * * *

"Take this package to the magistrate," ordered the burly ogre. "And be quick, or I'll make you work late."

"Yes, sir," replied Raitrick. He accepted the package and then bowed.

"Damn the magistrate," he said as he carried the package through the city streets. "Damn him," he said again, taking a right and a right again. "And damn these confusing streets."

Unlike on the plains—or in any other city for that matter—in Mercadia City, taking a package from one point to another wasn't as simple as zigzagging through a few turns until you arrived at your destination. The city had a spatial relationship with itself that seemed schizophrenic. Turning left didn't necessarily take you left. Two rights followed by two consecutive lefts would take you left, though only in some neighborhoods and never during a full moon. Even after a lifetime of living in the city and nearly six months delivering packages for the magistrate, Raitrick still never truly knew if he was headed in the right direction.

Raitrick stopped at an intersection. "How many rights was that?" He looked around for a sign that he was on the correct path. On the left stood a tall building whose windows had all been broken and boarded up long ago. To his right, a pale pink light glowed faintly through the green slime caked on a large picture window. Straight ahead were a pair of buildings that appeared to be tenement housing.

Nothing looked familiar.

"Why can't I just make a right turn and have that street take me to the right? I hate this place." He dropped the package on the ground and threw his hands in the air. "Damn them all to the Nine Hells!" he shouted.

A scratching sound echoed through the alleyway behind him, and the sorcerer turned around. About a hundred paces down the road, something darted out from behind a building, something wearing a dark red robe and hunching over like an old woman with the swamp plague. It scuttled along until it found the opening of another alley, and then it disappeared from view.

A shiver ran down Raitrick's spine, and his stomach felt cold. Taking a deep breath, the sorcerer tried to relax, releasing the muscles along his spine. He had to close his eyes, but

in a moment he could feel thick magical armor form over his skin. Picking up the package, Raitrick took off at a run.

Down the street and three left turns later, the sorcerer stopped again to check his surroundings. The streets were narrow here, and the buildings rose high into the sky. Sunlight struggled to illuminate even the flagstones beneath Raitrick's feet.

Up ahead, in a small outdoor pub, a group of grungy men clanked their tankards of ale together. They raised their mugs and slapped each other on the arms, growling and laughing at the same time.

"I guess any time is time for grog when you're a lowlife," said Raitrick into his hand. He pulled his robes tightly against his body and headed down the street toward the celebration. His head down and his package squeezed under his arm, the sorcerer passed the pub.

The celebration abruptly died, and the street went silent.

"Great," said Raitrick under his breath. He picked up his pace and glanced over his shoulder, hoping none of the drunkards had the intention of following him. What he saw stopped him cold in his tracks.

In the middle of the crowd, a mug in one hand, his jaw open wide, stood Slege.

The men surrounding him just stared, their lips still wet with grog.

No one even blinked.

Raitrick came out of his stunned stupor first. He shouted as he released a ball of magical energy from the base of his spine. His voice rose to an intolerable pitch, and all the tankards in the men's hands exploded, splashing grog and shattering pottery.

Slege staggered back a step but was propped up by two of his men. Regaining his feet, he reached for the hilt of a sword at his belt. Others did the same—followed by the sound of metal bits tinkling on the ground. Their weapons too had been destroyed by the sorcerer's spell.

Raitrick let the package fall to the ground.

"Tell me where it is, Sleege," he yelled, his hands glowing red and pointing at the caravan leader.

Sleege dropped the hilt of his ruined sword to the ground and raised his hands in the air.

"Master Raitrick," he said, a smile spreading across his face. "What a pleasant surprise. To what do we owe this great honor?"

Several of the greasy men began to spread out, encircling the sorcerer.

"Oh no you don't," yelled Raitrick. He pointed at the nearest thug. A ball of crackling energy shot out, knocking the man to the ground.

The thug yelled and flailed, and then he lay back, limp and unmoving.

Raitrick turned his attention back to Sleege. "I said, 'where is it?' " His palms grew red again. "I'm not going to ask you again, Sleege."

The caravan leader squatted down, shaking his outstretched hands before his face. "O-okay, o-okay," he stammered. "I—I don't have it."

Raitrick took a step forward. "Then what did you do with it?"

"I." Sleege lowered his head. "I sold it."

"You what?" Raitrick screamed. "You stupid idiot!" The sorcerer raised both hands over his head. "I'll kill you."

A huge ball of flame erupted between Raitrick's hands. Long, stringy strands of fire crackled and tumbled from the sphere. Shadows grew across the sorcerer's face, shimmering and mutating as flames dripped down his arms and splashed into wavering puddles at his feet.

Raitrick arched his back and let out a noise like a tiger roaring. Then he hurled the orb at Sleege. The sound of crackling flames grew. Screams echoed off the walls of the pub and the tall surrounding buildings. Men scattered, and Sleege stumbled backward, his arms flailing.

The sphere landed right where Sleege had been standing. Stringy gobs of flame splashed out in a huge circle, catching the retreating gang of men and their leader. Fire clung to shoulders, arms, and hair. The darkness receded as Raitrick's spell illuminated every corner. The grit and grime on the walls and street stood out in stark contrast, and shadows outgrew the men who cast them.

Then all went dark again, except for those unlucky few who still burned. Screams and moans grew in intensity, and men flailed. Thugs ran down the street, batting at their heads and clothing. Others rolled on the ground. Raitrick watched Sleege tumble back over a chair, his hair and long beige overcoat alight. The sorcerer smiled as the caravan leader beat at the flames and pawed at his face. He stepped forward to look down at the badly burned man.

"Now, why don't you tell me where I can find —"

A chair broke over Raitrick's back, and the sorcerer was forced to his knees. Rolling to one side, he put his hands up over his head. Something else heavy hit him in the ribs, and the wind rushed from his lungs. He rolled again from the force of the blow. Gasping, Raitrick coughed once. Something tangy and tasting of copper filled his mouth. He looked up and behind him and caught sight of a heavy black boot just before it connected with his face.

Blotches of black and pinpoints of white filled his vision. His nose burned, and his brain throbbed. Shaking his head, Raitrick thought of his protective armor.

"Mana," he said, splattering droplets of blood on the ground. Relaxing the muscles along his spine, the sorcerer tried to feed the protective spell he had cast over his body. Reaching down deep, Raitrick willed his armor stronger.

But the well was empty. He'd put too much into his last spell.

Someone grabbed Raitrick by the hair and lifted him to his feet. His head held back, the sorcerer looked up at the burned, oozing flesh surrounding Sleege's eyes.

"You want to know where your precious little portal is?" he shouted, shaking the sorcerer's skull as he did. "Well, do ya?"

Raitrick's face was swelling fast, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He grunted in acknowledgment.

With his free hand, Slegee lifted a singed satchel in the air. "Recognize this?"

Raitrick grunted again.

The caravan leader turned the satchel over, dumping its contents. A line of powdery silt poured to the ground, collecting in a pile like a sand dune.

"How 'bout this?" asked Slegee. He shook Raitrick's head by his hair.

The sorcerer's eyes grew wide.

"Even if I'd wanted to give it back, I couldn't," he said. "Your own spell destroyed it." He spit in the sorcerer's face and tossed him to the ground.

Raitrick grunted when his chest hit the flagstones. His whole body hurt. He could barely see, and he was bleeding from several wounds. Still, he lunged forward and grabbed hold of the pile of fine silt before him.

"Oh, no. This can't be," he said through swollen lips. "Oh, no."

Another boot hit him in the face, and he tumbled to his side once again. He saw Slegee lift the broken leg of a chair over his head.

I'm going to die now, he thought.

Then all went black.

* * * * *

"Just relax," said a voice.

Raitrick lay still. His head hurt, along with his back, neck, and face. He hadn't opened his eyes. The sorcerer took a deep breath. His ribs hurt too.

"You should try to breathe as little as possible," said the voice.

Raitrick wrinkled his face and opened his eyes. He was on his back in a small, disheveled room. A buzzing noise filled his head or the room, he wasn't sure which. A sickly, flickering green glow illuminated the ceiling, washing out all other color.

"You've been out for some time," said the voice.

Raitrick rolled to his side, wincing. He looked up into a long, pale face.

"I'm Kirch," said the hunched-over man.

Raitrick nodded and closed his eyes. "Raitrick," he said, straining to sit up. "What am I doing here?"

"I brought you," replied Kirch.

Raitrick opened his eyes again. The man before him was quite tall and wore simple black robes — shabby ones at that. His skin seemed pale, but Raitrick thought that might be due to the awful light.

"The last thing I remember, Slege and his men—" Raitrick swallowed.

"Yes. I know," interjected Kirch.

Raitrick looked up at the man. "You know what?"

"I know what Slege and his men did to you. I was there."

Raitrick struggled to sit up but couldn't. He settled for holding his head propped up with his hand. He looked Kirch over once more. A large bulb stuck out from his back. It reminded Raitrick of a pregnant woman's belly, only it was on the opposite side of Kirch's body.

The man's pale pink eyes were so damp they seemed as if they might ooze out of their sockets. He smiled, revealing stained yellow teeth separated by gaping patches of black and green. Raitrick blinked and rubbed his eyes.

"The light in here is terrible," he said, and then he looked to the ground. "I don't remember seeing you at that pub."

Kirch laughed. "No, I don't suppose you would have. You took quite a beating."

Raitrick closed his eyes and laid himself back down on the cot. "I guess I'm lucky to be alive."

"There's no luck about it," said Kirch. "Magic, plain and simple."

Raitrick opened his eyes again. "Magic?" he said. "I was healed?"

"You *could* call it that," replied Kirch.

The sorcerer looked down at his hands and arms, examining his skin. He touched his face. Outside of a couple of bruises, everything seemed in order. He touched the back of his head — and winced. A bump the size of a small apple had grown at the base of his neck, and it hurt. He prodded it and then tenderly set his head back down.

"Did you do this?" asked Raitrick.

"Am I the one who gave you that lump?" Kirch chuckled. "No, you can thank Slegee for that."

"No," replied Raitrick, "I mean, did you heal me?"

Kirch shook his head. "Heal you," he said, "no. Ease your pain —" he shrugged — "boost your strength —" he shrugged again — "save your life, yes."

Raitrick lifted his hands to his lips and bowed his head forward as best as he could. "Then I owe you my thanks."

Kirch nodded and turned away from the cot. The stooped man shuffled over to a small table near the source of the pale green light.

"I don't mean to sound unappreciative of your help, but —" Raitrick stopped midsentence, not sure how to phrase what he was about to say.

"But why did I save you?" finished Kirch.

"Well . . . yes."

"I guess you could say I was returning the favor." Kirch spoke with his back turned to Raitrick.

"I don't understand."

Kirch shrugged. "One of Slegee's men had been sitting on me in the back of the pub. When you started blasting, he stood up, and I got away." He fiddled with something on the table, making clanking noises.

"So they were robbing you?"

"No, no. Actually, it was I who tried to rob them."

Now it was Raitrick's turn to laugh. "I guess they don't like any competition."

Kirch turned around and shuffled back toward the cot. He held two plates of food in his outstretched hands.

"I fought back when they caught me, but my magic isn't quite as direct as yours. They beat me up and then sat on me while they drank grog and tried to decide what they'd do with me next." He set the plates down on the ground and then scooted over to Raitrick. The sorcerer struggled a bit, but with his host's help, he managed to sit up. Kirch seated himself on a pile of debris next to the cot, and the two men began to eat.

Raitrick gobbled the food in giant spoonfuls.

Kirch continued his tale between bites. "After you started blasting and I had gotten away, I watched from out that window." He pointed with his spoon to the wall near the table where he'd prepared the food.

Raitrick looked up from his plate. He hadn't realized there was a window in that wall. It was so covered with a dark slime he couldn't see out.

"They pummeled you," continued Kirch. "Then they left. When I came back, you were almost dead." He finished the last bite of his meal and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his robe. "I suppose they thought you were all the way dead."

Raitrick put his plate down on the floor and lay down. The food had helped, but he was still very weak, and his head throbbed.

"But I'm still not understanding something." Raitrick rubbed his forehead, trying to massage away some of his pain. "If you used magic to bring me back to life, why would you say you didn't . . . heal . . . me?" Raitrick's eyes popped open wide. His heart raced, and he pushed with all his might to sit up. He stared at the hunched-over man, his gloopy eyes pale and slimy in the green light. "What sort of magic did you use?"

Kirch shrugged his shoulders. "It took me nearly half a day to find enough rats to bleed just to bring you around," he said, not moving from his seat of debris. "Like I said, you were almost dead. I didn't think you'd mind."

Raitrick swallowed hard, his heart pounding in his chest. "Am I . . . am I a zombie?"

Kirch chuckled. "No, nothing like that. But there were some sacrifices made to bring you back. If you know what I mean."

A shiver ran down Raitrick's spine, and his head felt light. "Black magic," he said softly, feeling his stomach threaten to come up. The room spun, and he watched his own feet grow smaller. His head hit the soft fabric of the cot, and his vision narrowed.

Kirch's face appeared over him. "Rest now," said the dark sorcerer.

The room went black.

* * * * *

Raitrick awoke again with a start and sat up. More of his strength had returned. He felt the back of his head. The lump was almost gone.

Kirch shuffled into the room, carrying a large sack. "You're awake," he said. "Good."

Raitrick stood up, pressing his back against the wall. Kirch stopped, lowered the sack to the ground, and then took a couple of steps back.

"I thought you might want this," said the dark sorcerer, pointing at the bag on the ground.

"What's—" Raitrick's eyes narrowed. Then he lunged forward, dropping to his knees and grabbing up the sack. "My portal?" he asked as he plunged his arms inside and fished around. "You fixed my portal?" His voice rose as he spoke. The sorcerer's hand closed around something, and he brought it into the glowing green light.

Raitrick's shoulders slumped. "The magistrate's package," he said and tossed a smashed box to the floor. Torn sheets of paper shot out holes in its side. He let his body sag, and his hands hit the floor.

Kirch leaned forward, opening his eyes as wide as he could. "You were carrying it when you passed the pub," he said. "You're not pleased I found it?"

Raitrick looked up at the dark sorcerer. He ran his fingers over the back of his neck, trying to massage the tight muscles without putting too much pressure on his lump. He shook his head.

"I was to deliver this to the magistrate," he explained, "as part of a debt I owe the court." He shrugged. "When that ogre taskmaster I was supposed to report to finds out I didn't deliver this, he's going to come looking for me." He sighed. "On top of losing everything, I'm a fugitive now."

"Ah," said Kirch.

Raitrick took in a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then let it out his nose. "Once again Slegee has found a way to ruin my life."

"Indeed," said Kirch. He sat down on a pile of rubble and scratched his chin.

Raitrick balled his fists and beat them against the ground. "Damn you, Slegee!" he shouted. "Damn you." He beat his fists again, pummeling the magistrate's package. "Damn, damn, damn." Papers flew into the air.

After a few moments, the flying sheets settled back to the ground, and Raitrick picked one up, examining it. He read it, and then grabbed another, and another.

"These—" he said, excitement growing in his voice. "These are my release papers." The sorcerer began gathering up the sheets. He laughed as he read over them. "I was carrying my own release papers to be signed by the magistrate." He smiled up at Kirch and then went back to reading. "All I need to do is bring these in and—" He stopped abruptly,

grabbing the page he held in his hands and examining it closer.

Raitrick looked up at Kirch. "How long have I been out?"

Kirch shrugged. "Uh. Uh, I'm not—"

Raitrick shook the papers in his hands. "This needs to be signed within ten days of when I got them," he explained, frantic. "How long has it been since that day at the pub?"

Kirch grimaced. "Almost an entire moon cycle," he said. "Maybe twenty, twenty-five days."

Raitrick slumped to the floor and began sobbing. "No," he said. "Please, no." The sorcerer bawled, crying uncontrollably for several long minutes. He beat his fists against the floor and ground his teeth and blurted out every curse word he knew.

After some time had passed, he looked up at Kirch, still sitting calmly in the corner. "I'd give anything to get back at Slegee. Anything."

Kirch curled his pale lips, puckering his mouth and cheeks. "Anything is an awful lot."

Raitrick narrowed his eyes at the dark sorcerer. "Because of Slegee, I have nothing," he said, "nothing! If it wasn't for him, I'd be rich." Raitrick nodded, lifting his chin high each time he brought it up. "Now I have nothing—worse. Now I have nothing *and* the magistrate's ogre taskmaster looking for me." He lowered his head. "When he finds me, he'll likely send me to do hard labor in the airship hangars below the city."

"I see," said Kirch.

"If I'm going to go anyway," said Raitrick, his head still hung low, "I might as well kill Slegee on my way. At least then I'll have something to show for my punishment." The sorcerer began to sob again.

Kirch stood up and walked over to the table by the window. "I know a way to get your revenge," he said after a long silence, "but it'll cost."

Raitrick sobbed harder. "I already told you, I have nothing."

Kirch shook his head. "I'm not talking about money."

Raitrick stopped his blubbering and stood up. He walked across the room and stood facing Kirch's hunched, bulbous shoulders.

"Tell me, then," he said, staring hard at the back of the dark sorcerer's head and crumpling the magistrate's papers between his fists, "what do I have to pay to get my revenge?"

Kirch turned around slowly, looking Raitrick in the eye. "It'll take a drop of your blood."

Raitrick grinned and clasped the dark sorcerer by the arm. "Then what are we waiting for? Time is wasting."

* * * * *

Raitrick worked tirelessly all night, preparing the dingy room. He removed the cot, the table, and the piles of debris. In the center, as instructed by Kirch, he had drawn a large, perfect circle, separated into five equal parts like spokes on a wheel.

The hard work had felt good, loosening his tired, sore muscles. He'd felt rejuvenated, plunged into his task, slaving away to get his revenge. The thought of getting back at Sleege had given him new strength, and with that strength, Raitrick's magic had returned. Relaxing the muscles along his back, the sorcerer focused his mind on a healing spell, and a wave of total relief flooded his body. The lump at the base of his neck disappeared, and what aches and pains he had were washed away.

Kirch returned to the room just as Raitrick finished his spell. The dark sorcerer carried with him a heavy caldron and a sanguine burlap sack, dripping with red, yellow, and black fluids. He surveyed the room, nodded, and placed the caldron in the center of the circle Raitrick had drawn. Then he stepped to the edge of the chamber and emptied the contents of the sack. Several irregular-shaped chunks of purple

flesh slapped on the floor. They wept fluid in a puddle all around.

"We must cast two spells," he said, raising the index and middle finger of his right hand into the air. "The first to summon a creature to do our bidding." The dark sorcerer knelt before the pile of oozing flesh.

"And the second?" asked Raitrick, watching from the corner.

Kirch looked up as he leaned over the grizzly meat. He smiled, exposing his yellow, rotting teeth. "To bind it to the task of punishing those who have displeased us."

Without another word, the kneeling, hunched-over man plunged his hands into the pile of flesh. It made smacking sounds as Kirch closed his eyes and began to intone the words of a spell. Raitrick listened, but even though he understood the language, he didn't recognize the pattern or even comprehend the meaning of the litany.

As the spell went on, Kirch's back bent as if under a great weight. The man seemed as if he might curl up into a tiny ball, or maybe even collapse into himself. Then his words got louder, and the room dimmed. It was as if the very shadows grew and became opaque. Kirch shouted out one final word and leaped to his feet, his hair standing on end. A loud *pop* filled the room, and Raitrick put his hands to his ears.

Then the room dropped into silence. Raitrick lowered his hands and stared at the creature that had come into being, standing where the pile of rotting flesh had been only moments before.

"What is it?" whispered Raitrick.

Kirch walked over to the creature and placed his hand on its side. The beast had four legs like those of a horse, but it also had the torso of a man and the head of a giant, hideous black frog. It stood nearly twice the height of the hunched-over man.

The dark sorcerer turned to Raitrick and smiled. "This is a derelor."

Raitrick just looked at it, feeling a mixture of awe and terror. He'd seen creatures summoned before, had even summoned a few himself, but never had he been witness to such a monstrosity.

"So, we're going to send *this* after Slegee?" asked Raitrick.

Kirch put his hand in the air. "Time for the second spell." He crossed the room and took Raitrick by the arm, pulling him to the center of the circle. "The ritual is nearly complete." Reaching inside his robes, the dark sorcerer pulled out a wicked-looking dagger with an ornamental bone handle.

Raitrick pulled back, but Kirch had him firmly by the wrist. With a quick flick, the hunched-over man made an incision in Raitrick's index finger. Raitrick hissed and yanked his hand free.

"Your blood," said Kirch. "I need a drop in the caldron—for your revenge."

Raitrick held his bleeding finger with his opposite hand, watching Kirch. After a moment, he stepped forward and let himself bleed. The wound wasn't deep, and it was starting to close, but what blood had come out formed a bead at the tip of his finger. Raitrick flipped his hand, and the drop slipped away, falling into the caldron.

Kirch flung his arms wide, pushing Raitrick back a step and closer to the derelor. The dark sorcerer shouted an unintelligible word and then leaned over the caldron, opening his mouth as wide as it would go. A rushing stream of pale green liquid shot from his open mouth. A hissing sound filled the air as the liquid hit the blood, and wispy smoke floated out of the caldron.

Raitrick took a step away from Kirch. Behind him, the derelor let out a tremendous wail and fell to the floor. It clomped its hooves against the stone, writhing in agony.

Raitrick began to turn around, but his vision blurred, and a pain worse than any he'd ever felt shot through his body.

His knees gave out under him, and he fell, landing sideways on top of the derelor.

He squirmed for a long time. When exactly the pain subsided, he couldn't be certain. He thought perhaps he'd even passed out, but he couldn't say that for sure either.

Now he lay on his back, the pale green glow of the room filling his vision. His arms felt heavy and his stomach empty. He sat up.

Kirch sat on a chair nearby, looking at him. The dark sorcerer smiled.

Raitrick reached out his hand. Where his fingers should have been, a massive claw extended instead. He lifted his other hand. It too was a twisted parody of what he had expected to see.

Raitrick tried to shout and plead for help, but the only sound he could make was a gurgling roar. He looked down at his body. Where his smooth-skinned belly should have been, there was a gaping mouth, full of dripping fangs and flanked on each side by an articulated mandible.

Kirch stood up. "You are no longer the derelor or Raitrick." The dark sorcerer nodded approvingly. "I shall call you delraich."

* * * * *

The merchant awoke with a start.

"Pepita," he said, shaking his wife awake. "I had the most terrible nightmare."

Pepita sat up, clutching an embroidered silk pillow to her chest. She looked around the tent they had spent the night in and then turned her attention to her husband. "All right, Halim," she said, putting her hand to the side of his face. "Tell me what you saw."

"I dreamed that Sleege and his men were attacked by this hideous creature."

"That's nonsense, Halim. Sleege is an experienced caravan

leader." She patted her husband. "I'm certain they can handle anything we encounter between here and Saprizzo."

"But, but, this thing," continued Halim, "was so big. And, and it had a huge, fangy mouth right in the middle of its belly. And it had long, hairy claws." Halim looked to his wife, clasping her elbows in his hands. "And it devoured every last one of them. It ate them all, but they didn't die. They just sat there inside this beast's chest, slowly dissolving." He shook his head, and his eyes became unfocused. "They tried to get out," he said slowly. "I could see their faces. The beast's skin stretched tight over their eyes and mouths as they pushed again and again. . . ."

Pepita squirmed her hand out of Halim's vise grip and ran her fingers through what little hair he had left on top of his head. "There, there," she said. "You were right. That was a terrible dream." She pushed the silk blankets from her legs and got up. "Once you see that Sleege and his men are all alive and well, you'll feel much better." She lifted the edge of the tent flap and threw it back.

Outside, the plain was empty—no men or jhovalls in sight—just shredded tents and rocky sand.

Halim jumped to his feet and pushed past his wife. The plain extended as far as the eye could see in all directions. Sleege and his men were gone.

A line of giant clawed footprints led off into the distance.

T O M D U P R E E

TAP, KRAKEN & POP



Warm blue waves pushed against the side of the *Condrake* and rolled underneath on their way to some unknown distant shore. The sea lifted the massive vessel like a toy in a pond and pressed it downward until it seemed to sink below the horizon line, ready to ride up the next glistening swell. At the same time, the ship rocked gently from side to side as if the hand of an invisible giant were tending a mammoth cradle. Down again, up again, side to side. Plunging, rising, teetering. Falling, leaping, sliding. Again and again and ag—

This is it, Tap thought. I'm going to be sick.

Face flushed, belly roiling, he pushed back from the rail and might have lost his balance as well as his lunch, but Yusuf was there, and Yusuf was built like an ale barrel. Tap backed into the big man so hard he nearly doubled over, and with a surprised "oof!" he started thinking less about the flip-flops in his stomach and more about replacing the wind that had just been knocked out of him.

"Hold there, laddie!" Yusuf whirled Tap around by the shoulder of his greatcoat and looked into the young man's

rheumy eyes. "A spot green about the gills, are we?" Sodden remnants of today's mutton stew spread across the swarthy sailor's beard as he broke into a wide, gap-toothed smile and looked past Tap toward the waning afternoon sun. "Got to get tough, get fit, for there's right smart more brine ahead of us. Waves upon waves. As far as the eye can see, even with the captain's spyglass. Nothing but ocean before our bow, for leagues and leagues."

Tap turned to stare blearily at the undulating blue expanse that stretched out forever, just as the man said. Now a little dizziness began to compete with all his other unpleasant feelings.

Yusuf clapped a burly paw against Tap's head and rubbed his hair mischievously, as if petting an animal. "The ocean, young pup. Every real sailor has respect for it. We can try and learn how to manage on the froth, but we're doomed to fail. Ask any old salt who's spent his life cutting through the caps, any one, and he'll tell you there's only one thing to understand — all else is wallop. One simple fact to learn, and fail to learn it at your peril, you do." He leaned closer to whisper, and Tap endured a noxious odor of greasy mutton mixed with stale tobacco. "*The sea wants to kill you.*"

Tap moaned and headed for the rail again.

"It's a life and death battle, and the odds are not on your side. Because the ocean has so many ways to do you in. You could fall overboard and drown. Or a hungry shark might fancy a man-stew. You could stay up here underneath a sky full of air and still die of thirst, because all that water out there's too salty to drink. Or the sea might bring a storm against our fine ship. It'd make swells to destroy our provisions and lightning to chop our masts and rend our sails, and then it could wait a thousand years for the *Condrake's* very wood to rot away. People change. Even the land changes. But not the sea, kit. It was, is, and shall be. Its aim has always been murderous, and so it remains. Mind the sea, boy. For the next victim it calls — might be *you!*"

Tap almost felt like jumping over the side and ending it all prematurely, forfeiting the game to this terrifying liquid adversary before it had even begun. But the sound of heavy boots on the wooden deck froze him where he stood.

"Enough! Leave the lad be."

Toward the two strode a much leaner man with the quiet confidence of authority and a mane of curly black hair. His brilliant white shirt billowed out around the neck and wrists, fashionably escaping a natty wine-red waistcoat. Outside the coat, hanging from a belt at his right hip, a stone-sharpened cutlass was safely nestled within its scabbard—at least for now. An exquisitely groomed mustache accented the man's long, angular face in a way that often helped him silently promise either menace or seduction, depending on what manner of person had captured his attention. Any number of proud swordsmen and blushing coquettes had been his victims over the years, but only the ladies remained to bear sighing witness in hushed conversation with their most secret confidantes.

"Aye, sir." The big man went rigid, and all amusement drained from his face. The shock of the moment even took Tap's mind off his queasiness.

"You're a fine first mate, Yusuf, and you handle the men well. But you will not disturb our esteemed shipmate any more than the sea already has. Now, if you have no current duties belowdecks, I shall be happy to invent some. What say you?"

"Aye, Captain El-Halal. Right away, sir." The big man fairly scuttled toward the hatch, never looking back, and with remarkable speed disappeared like a rabbit down a hole.

The commander of the *Condrake* turned to Tap and stifled a tiny smile. "Will you survive, young sir?"

"I cannot say for sure, Captain. Certain thoughts only make the situation worse, so I am trying my best not to think at all." Tap's stomach seemed to settle for a moment, but

then the ship's urgent up and down movement brought it into his throat. He staggered back to the rail and clutched it with both hands in a grip that the strongest man aboard would have strained to break. "Now I think I'd better lie down."

"Don't give in, or you lose forever." El-Halal made a slight motion with his hand toward the tiller, and two hulking sailors appeared at his side. The rest of the crew on deck were absently going about their business, but evidently these two had been observing the whole scene at the rail. The order was crisp. "A flagon of strong hot tea, lads, as fast as you can, sufficient to revive a new seaman."

"Aye, sir." One of the men disappeared down the same hatch that had swallowed Yusuf, and after an almost imperceptible nod from the captain, the other returned to his post on deck.

"My extra eyes and ears." The sureness in El-Halal's voice had a merciful soothing effect. "A necessary precaution among men whose profession is plunder. Wait here for the elixir. Don't go below. Otherwise it will be even harder for you to face the deep tomorrow." The captain stared for a time. "I did not expect to be creating an ordeal for you. It is remarkable that you have such an aversion—"

"—to the sea, sir. I know. You say that because of my family."

"If traits were truly handed down from father to son, you would be frisking through the water like a porpoise."

"And his father too, Captain. All of them, for generations past." The conversation was taking Tap's mind off his affliction. "If I took after them, I too would have embraced the bounding main and spent my days smelling of seafood."

"Show respect. The family business is an honorable profession." The captain turned his practiced gaze over the ragged sailors busily swabbing and buffing the deck, intent on their unending job. "Unlike some."

"I don't deny that, sir. But it's not an option for someone

who doesn't have sea legs, or sea fingers, or sea nostrils, or any sea part at all. I don't have them, will never have them, and if truth be known, I'm rather nervous about being on the water in the first place."

"I thought I detected as much."

"And to be so distressed among . . . professionals . . . is a particularly severe embarrassment."

The captain ran two thin fingers along the strands of his mustache to mask the amused grin that was threatening to burst free, and then composed himself again. "Your father rarely has truck with us professionals anymore. His is a world of law and labor now. Not like when we were both still fingerlings and tempted fate together twice a day."

"I know, sir, and I'm very grateful for your kindness."

"Let's not dress up this deed in crinoline, lad. I met with you and your father because many years ago, during a melee on this very deck, his sword stabbed a hole in someone who was trying to do the selfsame thing to me. Any man who strikes sparks in my defense, especially on my own *Condrake*, deserves that much."

Tap suddenly noticed that though the railing was buffed to a chocolate-brown sheen, it wasn't perfectly smooth: a riot of pockmarks and deep gouges memorialized ancient skirmishes that must have taken place exactly where he stood. He jerked his hands away as if the rail were white-hot.

"But our days as shipmates are long behind us. Memories don't pay for food, drink, and companionship. Only gold does that. And your father most assuredly did mention the glittershine. That's why all these boyos are here fighting the swells, trying to keep us afloat until we reach your fabled island. What confounds me, though, is the reason you've taken on all this misery to come with us."

Tap's expression softened, and he looked like his mind was far, far away. "Evangeline, sir."

"Say again?"

A galley hand appeared with a mug of tea and handed the

steaming brew to Tap. He sipped as much of the liquid as he could stand to put on his tongue and found that El-Halal had been right: It did make him feel better. But it burned like mad. He waved his hand in front of his open mouth to fan it and croaked out the word again. "Evangeline."

The mate leaned back and roared. "The oldest tale in the world, Captain. A woman!" Tap turned redder than the hot tea was responsible for, but the sailor wouldn't give up. "Not much of a woman, though, who sends her sweet little beloved into waters so dangerous they might swallow him up for good!" With a glare from El-Halal, the man's sense of humor vanished. In the next instant, so did he.

"She's as fine and fair a woman as they make, sir. But it's not her fault. She didn't send me. In fact, she's probably worried sick by now. It's her father."

El-Halal clapped Tap on the shoulder. "Not a devoted admirer of your goodself, is he now?"

"He's from a long line of sailors too, sir. And another sailor's what he wants for his son-in-law. He's a crafty one. He knows how I feel about . . . this. It's his quest, on the damnable ocean, that's required before I may have Evangeline's hand. He thought that would do the trick: Conspire to send me to sea, and he'd never have to see me again. But I called his bluff. I love her, and I'll do anything to have her, even ship out with you."

The captain recoiled in mock offense.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that. But she's why my father bought you that pint of ale last week, Captain. She's why I'm here, in the last place I'd ever want to be. To sail for this."

Tap reached inside his coat and could smell the scent of the tanner's shop even before he pulled the piece of fresh parchment free. The seaman was as riveted as if he beheld the most luscious maiden in port. Tap carefully unrolled his prize before a greedy gaze; the captain leaned in intently and sighed once with longing.

"Ah, yes. Your map. A chart of some waters I have not

yet sailed. Now, your father persuaded me this would be a heading of some interest to my purse. But he did not see fit to let me study it before laying on provisions."

"Sorry, Captain, but we couldn't let you keep this in advance. You might have . . . forgotten . . . to make sure I was aboard before setting sail. We promised I would make it available when we were at sea, and so I do."

"Very well." The captain politely took the map and inspected it with a practiced eye. "We've made eastward from Rishada, as you asked. Soon we'll be able to sight Saprazzo." Tap scanned the horizon for the island city he'd heard so much about: the one built inside a volcanic caldera that was halfway underwater, so the foundations of the buildings were actually submerged. This was the kind of coexistence with the sea that Tap could relate to. Yes, there was water all around, but you could still be on dry land if you chose. The only problem was the quease-inducing sea voyage you had to take to get there.

"If you see it yet, lad, you're in the crow's nest for the rest of the sail. Come back to business." El-Halal laid the map against a chest and tapped it with his finger. "Take heed now. From here on, we're bound for what you landlubbers call the Outer Sea. Much past Saprazzo, there are few charts to guide us—only the stars and the wind. But you say that somewhere out *here*—far beyond what we know of the Outer—lies the Isle of the Gilded Tree."

"That is the assertion that was given me, sir."

"The tree whose golden leaves fall with the changing of the season."

"Yes, sir."

"And you will relinquish any part of our proceeds—"

"—in exchange for one leaf, sir. That is the quest set by my devilish father-to-be. One golden leaf, for the hand of my angel."

Captain El-Halal smiled. "Brilliant tack. An impossible mission indeed. But the joke's on him: The old man didn't

count on your having . . . friends. Now tell me this, pup: Why do you suppose I have never before heard of this magical locale where money grows on trees?"

"Sir, if *you* knew such a place, would you tell a soul? And risk a rancorous crowd of competition at harvest time each year?"

"Indeed not. But it's a prudent man who plans for every eventuality. And a wise one who always assumes the worst, because that way he'll never be disappointed. So if this turns out to be a fairy tale best fit for children, we have some protection."

"What protection?"

"Why, *you*, my lad. Your father is a profitable fishmonger. He has access to assets, does he. We'll get paid for this voyage one way or another—with golden leaves or with money from your pap's own till. Because if we don't, we'll simply cut your throat." A full smile exposed the occasional gold in El-Halal's teeth, but it was the smile of the merchant who knows he represents spoiled goods, for the captain's eyes displayed not a scintilla of humor.

Tap gulped. All thought of his upset stomach was done; his concern was now focused a bit higher on his anatomy. He could feel his heart merrily pumping blood toward his throat—the insistent noise in his head was probably what war drums sounded like—and hoped he'd be allowed to keep it all inside of him, not spilled out all over the freshly scrubbed deck. "C-cut—"

"But let's not dwell on morbid thoughts." El-Halal's spritely cheerfulness was as upsetting as if he had menaced Tap with growls and threats. "Let's look at the bright side. Your magic island is out there somewhere. In a few days we will be wealthy, you'll have your shiny souvenir and thus your bride, and the sun will shine again."

For now, though, the sun was receding. The light was almost gone. Far away, Tap thought he saw gray storm clouds gathering, but maybe that was just the approaching

evening. This trip wasn't going to get any easier. But his captain was still supportive, in a possibly pre-murderous way:

"Remember, lad. Be brave. Be strong. Otherwise, be sure to lean over the side."

* * * * *

Come four days later—maybe it had been five; one tended to lose count when each day was the same as the last, and the next—Tap's belly had finally called truce. He still had no desire for solid food, taking his infrequent nourishment in the form of hot broth. But at least he could bear to stand on the deck without wanting to end it all.

He was red-eyed from lack of sleep, not only because of the relentlessly rolling waves, but also the cloying odors of fish, smoke, and long-unwashed human bodies. Captain El-Halal's eternally pristine appearance suggested that he understood the purpose of a bathtub and had access to fresh water sufficient to apply that knowledge. But the rest of the crew existed within some unutterably fetid zone far beyond imagining. Should one of these rancid rummies fall overboard, Tap thought, even the sharks would turn away in disgust.

Now the disturbance was elsewhere. No longer within his complaining body, but inside the larger body of the crew. Not a particularly patient lot even in the best of circumstances, these mercenaries grew more restive each time the sun went over the yardarm without producing Tap's gilded island. The map from Evangeline's father wasn't as specific as the *Condrake's* own charts, which El-Halal had cobbled together based on years of experience; he knew they were accurate because they documented places he had actually been. But pushing along the wide potential vector on their current voyage was the equivalent of a blind man feeling his way across a desert. Tap's island must be out there

somewhere, but that was as precise a determination as they could make.

Even *out there somewhere* was more than some grumblers would allow. Tap couldn't walk from one side of the deck to the other without getting stares so malevolent that they could curdle milk, or perhaps even boil blood. Yusuf had a particular snarling interest in Tap; whenever they met on deck, the first mate would pause in his constant stream of orders and stare coldly, this of course making his men stop whatever they were doing and add their own evil eyes to the admixture. El-Halal was of no use, as if he might have helped at all, for he remained below to plot their next nautical hypothesis.

The rumbles were growing so intense that Tap was beginning to fear for his well-being. Then, one blessed day, the cry rang from the lookout.

"Ahoy! Fetch the captain!"

El-Halal was on deck in an instant, with spyglass extended. "Aha! Good lad! Seen, and true!"

Tap squinted with all his might, but he could make out nothing other than the boring horizon line that had hounded them well past Saprazzo. "Seen what, sir?"

"The cloud, young master! Behold!"

Tap stared again, and realized with a start that he had been looking in the wrong place: down. What they wanted to see was up in the air. Disturbing a pleasant blue sky, a ghostly white cloud-puff floated by itself in the distance, looking like a tiny ball of smoke or a hank of fuzzy down. To Tap, the sight simply meant an overwhelmingly nice day. But to the sailors, it meant something else.

"Land's warmer than the sea, boy. That cloud's hugging the contour of an isle!" El-Halal clapped his hands once, and the activity on the deck grew more frenzied as the mates did their best to speed the *Condrake* toward her new destination. Before long, they could all see a rocky coastline harboring a generous cove, with thick trees jutting up in clusters from

the middle of the island, perhaps twenty ship-lengths away, where a stony peak shared the topography.

They dropped anchor and rowed two longboats into the still cove. The landing party included only eight men, plus Tap. El-Halal had long ago learned to keep a solid force on the *Condrake* with cannon at the ready—including his trusted “eyes and ears”—and to accompany the land-bound explorers personally. These precautions helped dissuade any independent thinkers on either side of the gangway. Just part of being a captain.

The cove was shallow, which made the water much warmer than the surrounding sea. Some of the men removed their boots to wade ashore as they pulled the boats to land. For the first time in days, they heard lilting bird-song, and a rustling breeze filtered through thousands of leaves rather than coarse sheets of canvas.

Tap was delighted to be on the ground again, ground that was both solid and sheer. He was glad to notice that there were very few sharp rocks embedded in the sand. The area where the waves were gently beaching was swept perfectly clean, as if by a giant press. The sand was a dazzling white, and it offered respite from the ocean waves while leading into a beautiful grotto about a hundred paces on. The only indication that this island had suffered the ravages of the elements were the craggy coal-black rocks farther inland, whose jagged edges seemed slashed and rent.

“Onward!” El-Halal removed his cutlass from the scabbard and used it to point at Tap and then at the panorama ahead of them. “Lead us, scamp, to your plant of gold.”

El-Halal set the blade playfully on Tap’s shoulder—and his face froze as he looked off in the distance. Tap felt a shiver of apprehension as the captain strode purposefully down the beach, his party close behind.

The captain arrived at a rock, partially imbedded in the sand like all the others. But this one didn’t look pocked and

scraped. It was unnaturally smooth and rounded, as if it had been made by human hands.

El-Halal turned to Tap. "I assumed from your tale that this was a virgin isle. Perhaps I was too quick to judge." Yusuf and two other sailors began to dig. Shortly their expressions turned fearful, and Tap couldn't understand why. A few moments later, with more than half the stone exposed, the landing party was as silent and intent as if sneaking up on an unsuspecting victim.

They were looking at an anchor. Or at least something that once had been such.

It was the kind of metal that even now held the *Condrake* in place; as tall as a full-grown man, heavy enough to stay put even when a galleon strained against it.

The disturbing aspect, though, was its condition. The anchor was torn apart. It had been subjected to such violent force that the thick metal was twisted and bent. The hook on one side had nearly been pulled straight. The chain that once bound it to a ship had snapped away; only three rusty links remained.

"Hellfire." Yusuf could barely be heard. "She must have suffered a storm straight out of perdition."

El-Halal knelt down to examine the heavy chain. "Perhaps, but then, where is the rest of her?"

The others looked around as if they had misplaced something.

"One thing's clear, lads. It develops that we're not the first ones to make this beach. So take extra care as we go on."

As they walked away, Yusuf kept looking over his shoulder at the mangled piece of metal. "Landlubber, let's find your treasure and be gone. That could have been us."

El-Halal halted the men and sniffed the air. "We shall divide the duty. Four and four. We circle around the isle, meet on the other side, and make way back here through the forest."

"What about him?" Yusuf spat in Tap's direction.

"He comes with me. My charm. He's lucky either way. Good for us — or bad for him."

The coastline repeated itself, at least on Tap's portion of the circumference. There was barely enough room to walk single file around the edge of the grotto, but treading gingerly with El-Halal in the lead, they managed to squeeze around it. The leeward side of the island was calmer, but the opposite beach was just as desolate as the two parties rejoined.

"Nothing, sir," Yusuf reported as he caught up with his captain.

"Nor did I expect anything on this tract of sand." El-Halal shifted the cutlass to his other hand. "But we have established one important fact: no sails save our own. We seem to be alone here. And now for the more likely locale: the forest."

Their search for the Gilded Tree was a series of high hopes dashed by mundane reality. The magic tree was as difficult to find as the ship that once had held the sundered anchor. Every time the explorers came upon a new patch of vegetation, the leaves above were nothing but green and the forest floor was made of nothing but compost. Sometimes one of the party reported seeing a shiny glint, which roused everyone to action, but whether it was a reflection of the water or sunshine off a bird's beak, the sum total was nothing that could decorate a royal palace — only material that might be used in its fireplace.

They had been at this for most of the afternoon — for the light was beginning to turn from bright yellow to a gorgeous orange-brown — when they emerged from the last stand of trees and were able to see the *Condrake* once again, proudly waiting just outside the cove. It was a welcome sight for the sailors, but not for Tap, who had grown more agitated with each failed foray.

Yusuf, however, was enjoying himself. "I knew it. I knew it all along. Laddie, looks like you've been hornswoggled.

And we'll be taking our payment in flesh and blood." He raised his own sword. "Captain, let's save some rations on the return trip and let him lie here forever."

"True." El-Halal sidled up uncomfortably close to Tap. "He could have died on the voyage home."

"No!" Tap tried very hard to keep a pleading tone out of his voice. "If you come back without me, you have no way to force my father to pay."

"Of course we have a way. The same method of persuasion we always use." With a metallic clang, eight swords stood ready to face one unarmed and unbelievably frightened person. Tap closed his eyes and tried to think of Evangeline but could only manage to dwell on what an imbecile he'd been. A gold leaf. From a magic tree. Wonderful. These brutes should come up with another fairy story for the trip back, tell his father that they had been attacked by a sea monster, maybe, and poor Tap—

A deep watery rumble sounded from the cove.

Tap opened his eyes. The swordsmen looked back at the *Condrake*.

The ship began to move.

No wind billowed its sails, but the *Condrake* leaped forward as if fifty men were rowing her at top speed. She moved five lengths toward the shore and then stopped. Then she turned and headed out to sea, stopped abruptly again, and crept back stern-first.

They could hear the shouts and screams of the crew on board as they fought to get control of the ship. El-Halal could see one mate stand back from the tiller, the wheel spinning as fast as a child's top. Rolling bubbles surfaced and popped all around the ship, as if the ocean had become exceedingly hot in this one lone spot.

"Reboard!" El-Halal and the others set the mechanics of Tap's murder aside for the moment, leaped into the two longboats, and paddled furiously toward the ship. Tap wasn't accustomed to running in the surf and had to spring

into one of the boats to avoid being left behind. For one terrifying instant, he held on to the side of the boat, his legs dangling in the water, before finding the strength to hoist himself safely in. By that time, nobody was paying him the slightest attention.

As they rowed closer, the *Condrake* whirled around, and her bow faced the island. A hollow clanking sound echoed against the sides of the grotto. Heavy chains began to rise against the bow.

The sound was a hoisting anchor.

But the *Condrake* wasn't doing the hoisting.

A giant green claw, huge enough to encircle a sailor, rose from the depths, the ship's chain draped over it. Another monstrous claw joined it, also clasping the metal links in its razor-like grip.

And then, incredibly, there were more claws. Two more.

Rising out of the water, at eye-level with the tiller, a towering nightmare came to call. It continued to surface until it was half the height of the mainsail. Its four arms were set off of a muscular body that appeared to be equally at home underwater as on the surface. The eyes on its amphibian face were blazing with anger, and it roared through jaws that opened impossibly wide to reveal a set of cruelly efficient teeth. The men on board the *Condrake* were close enough to feel the heat of the beast's breath and smell partially digested fish.

"Kraken!" El-Halal took an oar himself and began to pound against the waves. "Come about!"

Tap, in the other longboat, was so terrified he could hardly think. A tidal kraken? He'd always assumed that was the stuff of legends. Another fairy story, a white lie intended to keep children from wandering too close to the water's edge. But here it was, in front of him, facing all of them. And hopping mad.

Maybe the kraken had been out foraging for food. Maybe it came back and found an anchor disturbing its undersea

home. Maybe this had all happened before. Maybe the way that other ship disappeared was that it got taken apart, piece by piece, by a slaving fiend from the Nine Hells.

It was enough to make Tap yearn for those cozy, carefree days on the ocean. What he wouldn't give to be back on the *Condrake's* deck, trying to keep dinner down, instead of becoming dinner for a real live sea monster.

Two men on the *Condrake* frantically tried to continue what the kraken had started, hoisting the anchor so the ship could maneuver. As the links moved in the behemoth's claw, it tightened its grip and pulled back. The metal screeched and groaned against the capstan. The monster continued to pull, and the men feared the chain would break, but they kept their hold on the winch as the air was rent by a titanic boom.

One of the mates had managed to load a cannon and fire it off amidships, hoping to compete for the beast's attention. The cannonball fell harmlessly into the ocean but probably saved the anchor pullers' lives, for at the sound, the kraken dropped the chain and swam to the port side, toward the sea, where it reared up to challenge the smoking cannon.

The anchor pulled free, and the *Condrake* was afloat just as El-Halal's longboat pulled up to starboard.

"Get me aboard! Now!" Before the boat was even fully raised, El-Halal took an outstretched hand and leaped up to the deck. The kraken lifted two of its arms to grip the cannon, but the barrel protruded through a hole too small for it to push through. It propelled itself higher so that it could drape its arms over the railing. The sudden extra weight made the *Condrake* list to port, and El-Halal and the others struggled to stay upright. The beast wrapped a powerful claw around the hot cannon barrel and instantly howled with pain. Its top two arms flew upward, but the bottom pair were clenched tightly to the *Condrake's* hull.

El-Halal managed to dive belowdecks, and some men actually thought he had deserted them. The kraken withdrew

its burned claw into the water, while its other extremities shook the hull violently and made it difficult for the men to stand. Those who could think clearly began to wonder if it was wiser to abandon ship and take their chances in the water against the teeth-baring beast. How fast could it swim? Probably very bloody fast; it was a bloody sea beast, after all.

The cabin door burst open, and El-Halal emerged carrying a burning lamp. "Have this, you overgrown tadpole!" Under normal circumstances, it would have been child's play to cover the short distance between him and the wickedly grinning monstrosity, but with an ever-changing footing, it was all El-Halal could do to fling the lamp against the kraken's face. Land the glass did, shattering against the leviathan's glistening scales to spread flaming oil over its head.

The roar became an ear-piercing shriek, and the monster let go of the *Condrake* and retreated to the depths. El-Halal continued to bark out orders as it sank.

Tap let out a breath that was quite overdue. He and the others in the last longboat had given their ship a wide berth and rowed behind the creature during all this, and had nearly been swamped during its latest throes. No motion the *Condrake* had made during their trip was even close to this agitation, but Tap was too terrified to feel sick.

He and the other astonished mates on the boat took up oars and made about for the shore-side of the ship, opposite the beast. The mission was to get onboard and out to sea as fast as the *Condrake* could take them, and let this be a story to turn the boys' hair white at the alehouse. They were less than ten lengths to the ship and could see friendly hands extending from the gangway, when the *Condrake* made an impossible motion. It jerked toward Tap's longboat *laterally*, moving starboard toward the cove, denying the position of its prow and its sail. The men paddled back as fast as they could, to avoid a collision. And then the worst thing that ever could have happened *did* happen.

The damnable kraken breached. On their side.

It had pushed the ship and swum under it, and now the monster's massive shoulder rose into the air not five paces from where Tap sat. The churning water lifted the longboat on its end, and Tap was suddenly as high in the air as were the sailors on the deck. Absurdly, he thought to wave at them, but refrained. He tried to cling to the wooden plank that served as his seat, but there was no stopping the rest of the arc, and within seconds, he found himself in the most forlorn place in the world. He was sputtering and kicking on the surface of the ocean.

The kraken roared and whirled, disoriented, trying to find its larger prize, and turned its attention back to the *Condrake*. For now.

Tap didn't sink, at least not immediately. The buoyancy of the salt water was something he'd never before experienced. He hacked and splashed at first, and then was surprised to notice it was easier to tolerate the ocean waves when he was among them than when he stood on the solid wooden planks of a ship.

But one particular instinct did show itself, one that seafaring men knew well.

"HELP!" Tap screamed at the top of his lungs. And the men on the *Condrake* heard him perfectly well.

Unfortunately, so did the kraken.

The beast made for Tap at astonishing speed and would have caught him had not El-Halal decided to join in.

"HEY! AHOY!"

The crew helped as well.

"YA BLOODY FISH! COME AND GET THIS!"

The kraken hesitated, and then selected the venue with the loudest voices. With Tap still paddling, it moved back toward the *Condrake*.

"Get ready, lads." El-Halal, always the thinker, held another lamp in his hand. "One chance. Closer . . . closer . . ."

The kraken thumped against the hull once more and

reared up to take the ship to the bottom of the sea. With one more mighty roar, it would destroy the *Condrake* and all who sailed her. Its jaws opened wide in leering triumph.

"NOW!"

His aim no longer impeded by the shifting deck, El-Halal threw the lamp directly into the beast's gaping maw. At the same time, Yusuf lit the cannon that his captain had aimed only seconds before. A flash and a boom both disappeared down the kraken's gullet.

Its howl shook the men on the deck even more than the release of its lower two arms. But then the death-roar was interrupted, and it fell into a strange staccato rhythm. The sailors looked at each other in puzzlement. Now it sounded less like bragging and more like choking. The kraken fell on its back into the sea and convulsed, sending swells toward the *Condrake* and toward Tap. It shook and shook and finally expelled a massive cough that rescued something from its throat. It was big and round and black, and it fell to the bottom of the sea.

Panting heavily, the kraken extended its claws, and Tap was pulled into its grasp by the immediate undertow. He was in no danger of drowning now, but he was in the grip of a nearly incapacitated sea monster, with claws as sharp as coral. Tap could feel the beast's chest rise and fall, as it took water—or was it air?—into its lungs—or were they gills? He stayed quiet and wished he were invisible. He had but one thought: *Please, please don't clench your fists.*

"Reload!" El-Halal stood above the hot cannon. A crew sweating with exertion prepared a second one for firing. They whooped and screamed and waved their arms to entice the monster. It seemed groggy as it turned in the water to face them, but it managed a hoarse roar as it headed for the ship.

Its first powerful stroke set Tap free and dunked him underwater for one horrible instant. Then Tap sputtered to the surface, riding a kraken-made wave inland.

The beast reached the ship and summoned all its strength to rear up and grasp the rail with its top two arms. The *Condrake* rose up on the port side, and the men struggled to keep their balance. Could the creature be strong enough to tip the vessel over? The monster pulled itself higher and higher, evidently preparing to board the ship—and tear it to pieces.

El-Halal was about to give the order to fire when the men felt a deep gritty rumble throughout the ship. A massive jolt knocked Yusuf off his feet. The kraken still held fast to the rail, but now the port side was unmoving. The sailors looked at the shoreline—as still and level as an oil painting—and immediately realized their plight.

“We’re on sand! We’re aground!”

Dogpaddling in the cove, Tap extended his legs as far down as he could and knew it was true. If he stood on tip-toes, he could touch the bottom. He hopped in the water like some supremely uncoordinated dancer and soon was able to plant his feet firmly. But something seemed wrong as he looked ashore. The mangled anchor they’d found was much farther inland than he remembered. Now, between Tap and the anchor lay an expanse of glistening brown sand and piles of scattered seaweed and driftwood.

The tide was going out.

“FIRE!”

Twin cannons boomed at the captain’s command, and both gunnery teams were far too close to miss. The kraken now had two hot, throat-sized cannonballs lodged in its gullet. It howled and thrashed and tore off a man’s length of the heavy railing. It pitched backward, sputtering, rounded the *Condrake*’s stern, and dived underwater.

The men watched groups of bubbles slowly head out toward the open sea before ceasing altogether. El-Halal ordered both cannons reloaded, and they watched the spot where the monster had disappeared for a long time. It seemed to be gone.

"Lads." El-Halal motioned to the two burly sailors who always kept watch over his person. "Stay." In a practiced routine, one headed toward the tiller and the other climbed the rigging for the crow's nest. The captain selected two more men to stand by on the cannon. "Sound out if it returns, and tell me the instant we can move again."

"The rest of you, abandon ship until the sea comes back for us. I'll not have our fine *Condrake* weighed down by the likes of you boys. Or by too much rum: fetch a cask to bring along on shore leave!"

The men cheered as they lowered longboats and pulled for the beach, where Tap was already waiting for them, dripping wet but on blessed solid ground. A detail took the rum cask and handfuls of tin mugs toward the quiet peace of the grotto, and the captain's contingent approached their reluctant shipmate.

"That was wonderful, Captain! Good shooting, folks! What a battle!" The last remnant of his waterlogged hysteria made Tap sound like an excited puppy.

El-Halal stared unblinkingly. "We don't know if it's a victory yet, scamp. He could be out there making ready to rend us limb from limb. On the other hand, he may have had enough of our *Condrake*. Or he may become a feast for many smaller fishes. But there's nothing to be done. We are here on your island until our boat is lifted." His tone turned low and ominous. "Speaking of your island, I believe we were having a rather intense conversation before we were so rudely interrupted. Now, where were we?"

A ring of swords flashed out and encircled Tap's head and neck.

"Ah yes. Now I remember."

Tap's legs felt wobbly, as if he were walking on stilts very poorly. But he was too exhausted to plead for his life. He shut his eyes and was waiting for the blades when a cry came from the grotto.

"Captain! Prepare to be happy!"

The sailors sheathed their weapons and ran for the grotto. All of a sudden the air around Tap's head felt cooler and cleaner. Then he felt nothing as his head hit the sand, lost in a dead faint.

* * * * *

Tap woke up in the grotto, with tinkly dripping sounds all around. He squinted at the waning golden light and thought he had only closed his eyes for a moment. But then El-Halal was there, obscuring his view, and Tap's head was full of cobwebs.

"You did it, lad. I must confess the mind of a skeptic, but you did it."

Tap raised himself on elbows and then realized the golden light wasn't coming from outside. It was candle-light, reflecting off a mountain of golden metal that a group of El-Halal's professionals was now relocating to the *Condrake*. There were goblets, doubloons, place settings, necklaces, rings, everything that could be stuffed into the rusty, dilapidated chests that had fallen to the bottom of the sea.

"What—?"

"He must have collected all this. Our monster. The fish, they like shiny objects, you know." El-Halal watched his movers with approval.

"And what of the beast—?"

"No sight, no sound. We may have choked him to death, or maybe not, but at the very least he's using discretion around us. Just a few more minutes and we'll be ready to escape his waters, for the tide has finally obliged us. Lively there, lads!"

Tap sighed. So many tribulations. But at least he was still alive. At least he survived the stomach-churning journey, the forced swim, the kraken paw. At least he survived the ring of swords.

The swords!

He came fully aware instantly and fought against El-Halal as he struggled to rise, puffing with panic.

"Stay, lad. Stay." El-Halal's face was somehow beneficent, or as close as the mercenary ever came to that state. "You're in no harm. We apologize for our little display earlier, but our disappointment was boundless. We're only human, after all. But these baubles change all that. And not just for us, but for you as well. Not only do you live, you conquer."

The captain brought something beautiful out of his knapsack. A grail of gold, finer than anything Tap had ever beheld.

"Know what's laid on here, lad?"

"No."

"It's done in—guess what?"

"I can't imagine."

El-Halal paused as long as he could. "*Gold leaf.*"

They laughed and laughed until Tap could laugh no more.

And not long after, Evangeline's father kept his promise. Some special friends of Tap's made sure of it.

S T E P H E N D . S U L L I V A N

CRUCIBLE



① 1 ②

The pickpocket didn't believe a word the prophet was saying. Still, he nodded and mumbled agreeably in all the appropriate places.

The shaman smiled and increased the volume of his sermon. "Fire is *life* here," the shaman said. He pursed his weathered lips, narrowed his dark eyes, and pointed toward the distant fiery peak. "Red magic shapes this world of Rath. Who among you doubts my words?"

The crowd at the edge of the village muttered noncommittally. In the foggy distance, the Stronghold volcano — the dominant feature of Rath — towered into the pearlescent sky. Impossibly tall, it reached up toward the unseen heavens and belched gray-black flowstone into the upper atmosphere. The smaller volcanoes on its slopes glowed red, torchbearers surrounding their titanic master.

The Vec were a pragmatic, adaptable people, long since accustomed to the perils of their volcanic father and its offspring. Though they did not doubt the words of their prophet-in-training, Patwog, neither did his sermon impress them.

Their village, Travec, occupied a unique place in Rath. It crouched at the border of a predatory forest, a root-clogged sea, a blasted plane, and a volcanic mountainside—part of four worlds, yet separate as well. Here the Rootwater Sea leaked from beneath the Skyshroud Forest and thrust a crooked finger of water into the scarred and broken plane. This was one of the few places where the forest did not completely smother the murky sea. Travec stood astride the tiny bay, built on a platform of stout, reedlike wood, supported by massive piers. The settlement's back pylons sank deeply into the chilly waters; its front footings rested on the rocky shores of the volcanic hills.

Patwog pointed to the nearest of the smaller volcanoes. "Behold the acolyte of the great fire!" the shaman said, his dark eyes glinting. A fervent smile drew across his hawkish face. The hot wind whipped his loose-fitting, shabby robes around his thin frame.

The audience on the boardwalk shuffled uncomfortably. Patwog had the Sight; everyone in Travec knew that. He was supposed to be the successor to their current oracle, Retma. There was something about the shaman, though, that disquieted the villagers. He was prone to wild visions and hasty action. At the moment, few of the townsfolk felt very confident of his ability to lead them into the future.

Finding little sympathy in the sea of faces before him, Patwog turned again to the sturdy-looking pickpocket. The thief smiled and nodded encouragingly at him. The prophet smiled back.

"That fire is the power we *need*," Patwog said urgently. "Phyrexians are massing on the plane—not twenty leagues from our village. Are any of you fool enough to think that this terrible army does *not* presage the end of our way of life?"

The villagers grumbled uncomfortably. Though none doubted the Phyrexian threat, few trusted the upstart shaman's hawkish zeal.

Patwog reached toward them as if he might take all of the crowd in his bony hand. "But we can *preserve* what we have. The *fire* will give us that power. I have seen the future." Sparks danced in his dark eyes, and he spoke in the formal tones of Vec prophets. "*The hope of Travec comes from the mountains: Salvation lies in the heart of fire.*" He turned in a semicircle, regarding the skeptical crowd. "The fire magic will give us mastery over our enemies *and* this harsh land."

"*Hard work* has given us what mastery we possess," suggested a tall, auburn-haired woman at the front of the group. She stood stiffly, cradling two small children in her muscular arms. She was larger and more rugged-looking than the rest of the crowd—all save the pickpocket. "We didn't raise this community up from the Rootwater with some magical cure-all. Our future is not in usurping the power of our enemies, but in the strength of our arms . . . and our hearts."

The assembled crowd rumbled approvingly.

The woman, Salla, continued addressing the would-be prophet. "My brother, sitting there nodding at your every word, knows that," she said. "As a future oracle, you should know it too, Patwog."

The shaman forced his face into a condescending smile. "What you call 'mastery' did not prevent your husband's death at the claws of the evincar's raiders, Salla," he said. "Nor is it enough to protect Travec from the predation of the swamp pirates, elf foraging parties, or even rogue moggs. Such 'mastery' will leave us at the mercy of the Phyrexian army. And as we all know, Phyrexians have *no* mercy."

"What our prophet means," the pickpocket said, "is that we can't just *wait* for trouble to come to us." Like his sister, Milgen was larger and more rugged than the rest of the villagers. He shared Salla's auburn hair and her Dal heritage, if nothing else. Mountain-born, the two of them stood out among the smaller, paler Vec. Milgen smiled at the assembly. "We need to work to secure our future—or we'll be caught napping by the coming threat."

"As if you'd know anything about *work!*" scoffed a sallow-faced woman with stringy black hair. She stepped to the front of the crowd. "You've been avoiding honest labor ever since you came here, Milgen—*unlike* your sister."

Milgen smiled at the woman. "Always Salla's lapdog, eh Alli?"

Alli frowned at him and inched closer to Salla and her children, as if seeking the larger woman's protection.

The prophet looked frustrated. "All of you are missing the point," he said. "I have read the *signs*. I have seen our future in the mountain's glow." Again, he indicated the nearest of the fiery titans. "Mastering the volcano's power can save us all!" He picked up a threadbare backpack from the ground nearby and shook it; it rattled, heavy with supplies. "I have made preparations to journey to the heart of the fire. I will harness the power of fire mana for our village. Who will go with me?"

An awkward silence fell over the crowd.

"Is there no one bold enough to seize the chance?" Patwog asked. "Do you all want to die on Phyrexian swords? Come! Change the future! Climb the mountain with me and gaze into the heart of the fire. *There* lies our salvation! There lies the *power!* I have *seen* it!"

"Perhaps we should consult Retma about this," a stout, black-bearded man suggested. His name was Royn, and he was the master of the village docks. He was big for a Vec, though still not as sturdy as Salla or Milgen. He glanced at Salla and nodded approvingly. "Though she came from outside the Vec, the smith is right. We've worked hard to get where we are. We've avoided confrontations with the Phyrexians and carefully built up our trade. If we need to protect ourselves the oracle . . . our *current* oracle . . . will know the proper time. Better you should go back to your studies, Patwog. As the oracle's apprentice, you still have much to learn."

Sweat broke out on the prophet's head, and he looked

around nervously, feeling the crowd slipping away. "Retma is wise," Patwog said, "but conservative in her thinking. I speak of the *future*. I speak of changes that will transform Travec from a humble trading village into a *power* on Rath."

"And attract the fury of the evincar!" someone in the crowd called out.

"N-no!" Patwog stammered. "I speak of *security*." Already, the fringes of the audience had begun to drift back to their homes and shops.

"I speak of the power to defend ourselves from our enemies!" Patwog said, more desperately.

The center of the crowd broke up, many shaking their heads as they moved away.

"Don't you care about our future?" Patwog concluded, almost pleading. There was no one left listening except Salla, Alli, and Milgen. All the rest had left the square.

Patwog scowled and suppressed an angry shudder. "Very well, then. I go alone — for *all* of Travec." The prophet turned and picked up his ragged backpack. He strode to where a long-eared bespak stood loaded down with the rest of his provisions and took the animal's reins. With a final, angry glance back, the prophet trudged out of the village and up the mountain slope.

Salla handed her infant boy to Alli and turned to her brother, the pickpocket. "Come on, Milgen," she said. "The fires are guttering in the forge. I could use a hand with the bellows."

Milgen shook his head. "I think I'll walk with Patwog for a while," he said. "Just to hear him out."

The smith set her elder child down on the planking. "Chelly, go home with your aunt Alli and your brother," she said to the girl. Chelly took Alli's hand; Alli glanced at Salla, who nodded for them to leave. Alli, with the infant in her arms, led the girl away from the square. The smith watched her children and her friend disappear into the alley between two nearby green-walled houses. Then she turned and

frowned at her brother. "I *don't* believe you've suddenly converted to the Vec faith, Milgen," she said. "What is it you want from Patwog?"

Milgen shrugged, grinning. "New opportunities, perhaps. Come with me, Salla. You can't work at the forge forever. This is your chance to get out."

"What makes you think I *want* to get out?" Salla asked. "We came to this village to shape our futures. I married and made a life for myself."

"A life that will find you prematurely old and gray, with leathery skin and no one to share your pillow," Milgen said. "Your husband is dead, Salla. These people will never really accept you. But Patwog is the future. If we throw in with him, the town will be ours one day."

"So you're doing this for social acceptance?" Salla asked mockingly. "Ha! That's a load of dren. If you wanted to fit in, you've had plenty of chances. Instead, you've drifted from job to job, lifted purses from visiting merchants, drank, gambled, and who knows what else." Her brown eyes narrowed, and she looked her brother straight in the face. "What are you *really* after?"

Milgen smiled. "*Profit*. What else? If Patwog thinks there's mana to be found in the mountain, I'm willing to tag along and get my share." He glanced over his shoulder to where the shaman and the bespak were scrambling up the rocky slopes. "I better get going before I lose him." The pick-pocket winked at his sister and sprinted after the prophet, calling, "Hey, Patwog! Wait up!"

Salla frowned.

②

"W-wait up!" Milgen called to the prophet for what seemed the thousandth time. Sweat streamed down the Dal's muscular form, plastering his auburn hair flat against his head. He wrapped his scraped and callused fingers around a protruding rock and hauled himself over the next

rise. This journey was proving a lot more difficult than the pickpocket had anticipated.

Patwog looked back at him and smiled wanly. "The future is for the *strong*, Milgen," he said. The prophet was also scraped and bruised from their long climb but didn't seem nearly so discomforted about it as Milgen. They'd been forced to abandon their bespak the previous evening, when the slope became too steep for the animal. Now, Patwog and Milgen each carried an equal share of the provisions the prophet had brought for the trip.

"I just need to catch my breath," Milgen said, adjusting the heavy pack on his shoulder. "Let's take a breather." He sat down on a convenient boulder and let the pack slump to the ground.

They'd been climbing for the better part of two days now, and Milgen was starting to wish that he had never come. Just when the pickpocket's spirits would ebb, though, the prophet would regale him with fantastic visions of red magic buried within the mountain, of glittering powerstones and glowing walls of precious metal.

Milgen might have believed these things to be the ravings of a fanatic, but during the previous night a storm had passed over them. In the utter darkness, the pickpocket had seen a strange luminescence coming from the mountain-side—a glow made by neither molten rock nor flowstone. As a Dal, Milgen was very familiar with the ways of fire, and this light looked different from any he had seen before.

The next morning, he had taken a bearing on where he'd seen the phenomenon. They were close now, very close.

"Enough rest," the prophet said, starting up the slope once more. "The future lies before us. We must seize it while we can."

"I think," Milgen said, still catching his breath, "that our destiny . . . will wait." The shaman, of course, wasn't listening. After a few moments, Milgen cursed, rose, and shambled after him once more.

By early evening, they reached a large fissure in the side of the volcano. The crack gaped before them, a smile turned sideways—mocking, filled with darkness. A pale golden glow emanated from the defile's innermost recesses, the same glow Milgen had seen the previous night.

Patwog's tanned face drew into a smile. "Pure mana!" he whispered. "It lies untapped, waiting for us to find it and bend it to our will. Come, Dal. We'll show those Vec unbelievers yet."

Milgen nodded. He didn't even mind that the prophet had mentioned his Dal heritage. Milgen could never return to the mountain people; he would always be *en-Dal* among the *en-Vec*. His sister was a fool to believe that she—or her children—could ever be considered otherwise. Milgen accepted his position as an outsider. He intended, though, to be a wealthy and powerful outsider.

The Dal followed the prophet into the defile. They carefully picked their way across the jagged rocks toward the bottom of the crevasse. The air grew steadily hotter as they went, and tiny geysers of steam shot forth suddenly from cracks in the fissure wall.

The prophet stopped and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his shabby robe. "Not much farther now," he said, smiling. If he felt the weight of his threadbare pack, it didn't show.

"Let's keep moving, then," Milgen replied, "before we boil."

They trudged ahead more slowly as the gouts of blinding steam became more frequent. Without warning, the mist parted, and Patwog and Milgen found themselves standing before a gleaming wall that filled the whole of the fissure's aperture. The wall was made of yellowish metal and carved with strange runes and devices. The metal glowed slightly, as though great fires were contained within, though its surface was no warmer than the surrounding rock.

"By the fire!" Milgen gasped.

"Yes," Patwog said. "Fire mana! The power seen in my

visions waits behind that wall! You feel it, too!"

Milgen felt nothing of the sort. He was merely amazed at the quantity of the strange metal. The Vec were a metal-poor people, and—though the prophet had not yet realized it—this wall was a treasure beyond price. But who had put it here, and why? Was it the evincar—lord of all evil on Rath? Was this related, somehow, to the workings of the flowstone and the great Stronghold volcano?

The pickpocket pondered these questions for a few moments and then pushed them aside. What did it matter why the wall was here or who had made it? All that mattered was that he find some way to take a portion of the metal back to the village—a large enough portion that he would never have to work again.

The prophet put down his pack and opened it. He took out a long metal chain, about as thick as a man's forefinger. The chain glowed with a faint red aura of magic.

Milgen's eyes widened. The shaman was clearly *not* so impoverished as he seemed.

Sensing the pickpocket's covetous eyes on him, the prophet looked up. "Find a way to open those doors while I prepare the spell."

"Doors?" Milgen said, his mind still wrapped in thoughts of precious metal.

"Yes," Patwog replied irritably. "The metal doors. See if you can find a way to open them. I prepared a spell that might do it, but I'd rather save the mana to harness the power beyond."

The wall was actually a *door*, Milgen suddenly realized. No wonder the shaman wasn't interested in it! Any treasure concealed behind a metal door must be infinitely more valuable than the door itself! In his mind's eye, the Dal saw the giant doors swinging open and an evincar's ransom pouring out.

The pickpocket moved across the wall, inspecting every carved nuance of its surface. He quickly found a seam running down the middle.

"This isn't all metal," Milgen announced. "Some parts are crystal. That's how the glow comes through." He pressed his face near one small, crystal panel. "There's something moving inside."

"It is what we seek, Dal," Patwog said, fiddling nervously with his long chain. "That is the *power* I foresaw — the fire magic powerful enough to destroy a Phyrexian army. It is everything we need!"

Milgen thought that what *he* needed was a way to open this treasure trove. He also needed a really stiff drink. The heat of the fissure made him feel parched to the bone. He wiped his forehead and blinked back the sweat that trickled into his eyes. As he did, something gleaming far above his head caught his attention.

The object was red and glittered brightly through the steam-shrouded fissure. A *powerstone*. A very large powerstone. The largest powerstone that Milgen had ever seen. It sat twined amid an intricate metal setting above the center crack at the top of the strange doors.

"Have you found the latch yet?" Patwog called from the far end of the doors, but Milgen wasn't listening to him.

With eyes focused on the glowing prize above, the pickpocket began to climb up the titanic rune-carved doors. The surface had plenty of foot- and handholds, but the hot mist made the metal slippery. Milgen concentrated hard to keep from sliding off.

"Where are you going?" Patwog called, dragging his red chain across the bottom of the fissure and standing below the Dal. "Have you found something?"

Milgen didn't answer. His foot suddenly skidded off of a metal carving, and he found himself dangling in the air, holding on by only his fingertips. Below him, Patwog gasped. Clinging desperately to the wet metal surface, the pickpocket slowly pulled himself back onto the carvings — and then took a moment to recover.

Below, Patwog remained silent. He stood amid the bursts

of near-blinding steam and watched as Milgen ascended the final few body-lengths to his goal. The prophet held his enchanted chain clutched tightly in his bony hands.

The powerstone glowed as though molten fire were trapped within its facets. Milgen used his belt to fasten himself to one of the carvings below the gem and carefully reached toward the jewel. The gemstone was about the size of a man's fist and exquisitely cut. Despite the fiery glow, the crystal felt cool to the touch. Reflections of the powerstone danced within Milgen's brown eyes.

The gem's setting seemed to be melded to the doorway, and the pickpocket doubted he could remove the whole piece intact. He thought he might pry the gem free from the setting, though. Milgen ran his fingers over the surface of the stone, and then carefully pried at its edges.

The powerstone moved, ever so slightly, and something rumbled behind the great metal door. A sly smile drew across Milgen's sweaty face. Sometimes, a job required only brute force. He checked the fastening of his safety belt again. Then, wrapping his stout fingers around the powerstone, Milgen pulled.

The gem came free with a loud "pop!" A cascade of sparks shot out of the remnants of the setting, dazzling Milgen's eyes. He tried to cover his face, but as he did, the great jewel slipped from his fingers.

* * * * *

Patwog dropped his chain and dived for the gem as it fell. He skidded across the rough rocks, shredding the front of his tattered robes, and barely managed to catch the powerstone before it hit the ground. The prophet lay still a moment, panting for breath. The ground trembled beneath him. Patwog stood and looked up.

Milgen hung in the air above the door, suspended by his belt, semiconscious. Below the Dal, the great doors swung

slowly outward on gigantic hinges, revealing fiery shapes within.

Patwog's heart thrilled at the sight. Beyond the portal, caged with bars of brilliant red energy, stood a beast from mythology — a volcanic giant. The creature stood as large as the great tower in Travec, over six stories high. It was man-like in shape but much more massive and covered with black, stony scales. Its hands and feet each ended in three enormous claws. Strange organic vents, like tiny volcanoes, rose from its hide and ran along its chest and down the ridges of its back. An eerie glow seeped from the cracks in the creature's skin, and steam curled out of them into the oppressive air.

"Laccolith titan!" Patwog gasped, muttering words he dimly remembered from his training.

The monster furrowed its beetled brow, opened its maw, and roared. The inside of its mouth glowed with white-hot power.

The monster's breath scorched Patwog's frizzled hair and eyebrows. He staggered back and clumsily grabbed his enchanted chain off of the ground. Patwog began to chant, calling forth the spell he had prepared. Sweat poured down his thin frame, and his limbs shook with exertion. He felt the mana flowing out of the stolen powerstone and into his spell.

"I am Patwog, shaman of Travec, heir to the oracle," the prophet said. He tried to sound stern and authoritative, but his voice shook as the ground trembled beneath his feet. "Through you, I shall gain . . . *my people* shall gain mastery over our enemies. N-none shall dare threaten us. I shall f-free you, and you will do a-as I command."

The laccolith titan focused its burning eyes on Patwog. The prophet reached out, summoning all the power of his magic, and the cage of scintillating red energy around the monster pulsed. Patwog's enchanted chain shot forward, as though a living thing, and snaked through the magical

bars. As it passed through, the chain absorbed the cage's mana.

The chain glowed brilliantly for a moment and then twisted itself into shackles around the monster. The bars of the titan's prison vanished like mist on a summer day.

The shackled creature lumbered forward, the magical chain making its movements slow and awkward.

A delirious smile crept across Patwog's cheeks. He blinked the sweat from his eyes.

"I've done it!" he hissed.

* * * * *

Perspiration dripped from Milgen's forehead. The lights in his eyes and the roaring in his ears cleared away. It took a moment to regain his bearings. He realized that he was hanging in midair above the great doorway, suspended only by his belt.

Below him, the huge metal doors stood open. An eerie red glow, the color of molten rock, emanated from inside. It shone across the prophet, standing back from the doorway. Patwog was saying something, but the pickpocket couldn't make out what. All of the shaman's attention seemed focused on something beyond the door.

As the pickpocket watched, a huge creature shambled out of the doorway. It looked like a monstrous, burning statue of titanic proportions. Milgen scrambled frantically to pull himself back onto the wall. His breath heaving in his chest, he looked from the creature to the shaman and back. Patwog slowly retreated from the monster.

"Run, prophet! Run!" Milgen cried, but Patwog seemed not to hear him. The pickpocket unhooked his belt and climbed toward the side of the defile, away from the open doors. He moved up, trying to get off the metal surface above the doorway and onto the rocks, to get a better grip. As he did, a large rock came loose in his hand.

Steam burst out, and he dropped the stone. The next rock came loose under his grip as well, and the next. The rocks tumbled down the fissure's sloped sides as Milgen fought to maintain his hold.

The small rocks knocked loose larger ones, and those, larger ones still. A big portion of the crevasse wall caved in, crashing to a stop just behind the ensorcelled monster.

Holding onto the cliff by his fingertips, Milgen glanced back over his shoulder. Amazingly, neither Patwog nor the beast had been harmed in the landslide. The prophet glanced from the laccolith titan to the steaming pile of rubble and then up at the pickpocket clinging to the wall. The eyes of the Vec shaman and the Dal met and locked for the briefest instant. In Patwog's eyes, Milgen saw uncertainty—fear.

The monster roared. The sound reverberated through the defile like mocking laughter.

Sweat poured from the shaman's brow as he fought for control of the creature. Red energy cascaded from the powerstone, flashing across the enchanted chain like crimson lightning. The prophet's chant built to a shriek, echoing frantically off the fissure's rock walls.

Flexing its huge muscles, the laccolith titan burst Patwog's enchanted chain. Remnants of the red metal hung in tatters across the beast's rocky hide. Patwog's brow furrowed as he tried to will the shattered pieces back together. His talent proved inadequate to the task.

The laccolith titan lumbered forward. The shards of its shackles disappeared in small puffs of smoke as the monster's molten skin vaporized them. The behemoth growled, a low rumble like distant thunder.

The sound shook Milgen to his core. He shouted another warning to the prophet—too late.

The laccolith titan seized the shaman in its claw. Patwog burned to cinders even before the monster finished breaking his bones.

Milgen swore and tried to find purchase on the cliff face. The monster turned toward him, and its glowing eyes narrowed. The creature reared up, and Milgen saw the fiery vents on its rocky skin blaze brighter. Hot gouts of magma blasted from the monster's breast toward the terrified pick-pocket.

Milgen screamed.



Salla wiped the sweat from her brow and pulled hard on the bellows chain three times. A sound like the breathing of a great beast filled the chamber, and the fires of the forge flared brightly in the darkness. She pulled a red-hot piece of steel from the flames and put it on the anvil to work it. Her fireproof gloves and apron protected her as she worked, but the smithy was still a very hot place.

The Dal-born smith looked up as Alli came in from the bedroom where she had been tending Salla's children. The dark-haired Vec nursemaid took a deep breath and coughed it out.

Alli crossed to one wall and pushed open a wide window overlooking the street. The fresh green, light of early morning streamed into the smithy, and a warm breeze chased away some of the smoke. The nursemaid used a prop rod to secure the awning in place and then opened the smithy's other two windows.

"So, where's your *il-Dal* brother?" Alli asked Salla. "I haven't seen him for days."

The fires of Salla's forge seemed to spring up in her eyes. "We are *not il-Dal*," she said. "Neither Milgen nor I."

Alli smiled awkwardly. "Of course, I didn't mean *you*," the thin woman said. "It was just a joke."

Salla turned away and put hammer to steel once more. "Just because we left our tribe doesn't mean we're traitors," she said. "We're no more fond of the *evincar* than anyone else in *Travec*."

"I was kidding," Alli replied. "I meant no offense. The whole village is grateful that you stayed on after your husband's death."

Salla nodded but continued hammering the steel.

"As to your brother, though . . ." Alli added with a nervous laugh. She turned and left the room, going into the smithy's small storefront.

Salla finished pounding the metal and then cooled it in a large trough of water next to the anvil. White steam billowed into the air where metal hit water. She opened a trapdoor in the smithy floor and drew up several buckets from the inlet below to replenish the trough. The water beneath the forge was cold and very deep, plunging right down to the shadowed wellsprings of the Rootwater Sea.

Young Lito began to bawl in the back room. Salla stripped off her work gloves and hung her protective apron on the door connecting the forge to the small bedroom. She picked up her young son and cradled him to her breast.

As she suckled him, her daughter Chelly woke and rubbed her eyes. "Mornin', Mum," the girl yawned. "Wha's all that ringing? Is it noon already?"

Salla listened. With the sounds of the forge still fresh in her ears, she hadn't noticed the gonglike peal of the ancient bell in the oracle's tower.

The sound brought back memories of Salla's dead husband. Together, they had forged the unbreakable, six-story long chain that connected the bell to the bottom of the tower. The bell rang at noon every day, but it wasn't noon now. It also rang when an important person died or in times of dire peril. It had tolled long and mournfully on the day of her husband's death. The sound still echoed in her ears.

A cold chill ran down Salla's spine.

"Let's find your auntie," she said to Chelly. Putting Baby Lito on her shoulder and taking Chelly's small hand, she walked through the forge and into the smithy's tiny store.

She found Alli gazing out the open storefront, across the flowery tops of the nearby buildings, and staring at the tower. "What's happening?" Salla asked.

Alli shook her head and her voice trembled. "The sky is clear. The forest is peaceful. D-do you think the Phyrexians are coming?" Fear played across the Vec's dark eyes.

"Stay here and take care of the children," Salla said, handing her the babe. "I'll see what's going on."

Alli nodded nervously, took Chelly's hand, and clasped small Lito to her chest.

Salla adjusted her shift, buttoned her blouse, and rolled down her sleeves. Then she pushed open the storefront's woven half-door and ran toward the tower.

Travec's buildings were fashioned of the same reed-like wood as its piers. They had coarse-woven fabric mesh for walls, paper windows, and thatched roofs. Spectacular varieties of flowering plants took root in the thatch, trying to reclaim the village for the nearby Skyshroud Forest. The lush vegetation tumbled down over the eaves of the houses in a vast, impromptu hanging garden.

Even after years of living in the village, Salla still found the town stunningly beautiful—so different from the arid mountains where she grew up. The cry of the oracle's bell this morning, though, left no time for such admiration.

When she arrived at the base of the great woven-reed tower, Salla discovered a crowd already gathered outside.

"What's wrong?" she asked the first man she saw. "What's happening?"

The man looked at her suspiciously, the way *en-Vec* always looked at outsiders. "The oracle's been stricken," he replied.

Salla fought down a pang of anger and said, "Stricken how? Is she dying?"

"Oracle Retma has been overpowered by a vision," announced a deep voice from near the tower's doorway. It was Royn, the dockmaster. He often took the lead in the

town's civic affairs. He caught Salla's dark eyes as he emerged from the building's interior.

"What kind of a vision?" one woman called from the crowd.

"Is she all right?" asked another man.

"Her acolytes are with her," Royn answered.

"Where's Patwog?" someone asked. "He should be with her."

"Patwog has not returned," Royn said. "Nor will he return, according to the oracle's vision. The darkness that claimed him is coming and may soon destroy us all!"

The crowd gasped, and a fist knotted in Salla's stomach.

"We must prepare for a great battle," Royn continued. "All of Travec is in terrible danger. Take the younglings, the weak, and the infirm to the docks and wait by the boats."

"Are we to flee our homes?" asked an angry voice.

Royn ignored the cry. "All able *en-Vec* are to gather their weapons and assemble at the town's edge, near the mountain slope." The crowd below the tower began to scatter toward their homes to make preparations. As they went, Royn held Salla with his eyes. "You, too, Salla—if you're willing."

The smith fought down the anger that surged up in her belly. "This is my home too," she replied.

Royn clapped her on the shoulder. "Bring any weapons you've stored in the smithy. Travec will need everything we have."

Salla nodded.

"Look!" cried one of the women straggling out of the square. All eyes turned toward the nearby volcano.

A roiling gray cloud billowed on the side of the nearby peak, as though something huge were moving down the mountain slope. The inside of the cloud glowed red, and sparks shot out of its perimeter.

A panicked cry went up from the folk assembled nearby. Salla turned and ran for her forge.

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"Don't wait for me," Salla called as she hurried Alli and the children out the door of the house.

"But you're an *outsider*," Alli said, holding baby Lito in her pale arms. "No one expects you to fight."

"Despite my birth, I'm as much Vec as you," Salla replied hotly. "My husband was of this village, and so am I. I *will* fight to defend it. Take the children to the docks."

"Mama! Mama!" cried Chelly, stretching out her arms for comfort. Tears streamed down her young face.

Salla knelt and kissed her. "You be brave now," she said. "Show your brother how brave you are."

Chelly nodded, snuffed back a tear, and wiped the wetness from her cheeks with one grubby hand.

Salla stood and kissed Lito on the forehead. "Keep safe, little one," she said to him. The baby cooed, understanding none of it.

Alli stood in the doorway of the smithy, her eyes pleading with the smith to come with them. Salla merely said, "Go!"

The dark-haired Vec turned and fled the building, taking the smith's children with her.

Salla fought back a sob and fetched her favorite spear from its nook on the wall. The weapon was long and stout, almost a lance in size and heft. She had it with her when she first left the Dal. Later, she and her husband had reforged it as a symbol of their bonding. The spear was strong, its lines straight and true and its edges sharp. They had remade the weapon to last the ages. Ironical that they'd had such a short time together. Surely, the spear would outlive *both* of them.

"It may at that," said a creaky voice from behind her.

Salla turned and saw Oracle Retma standing in her doorway. Two acolytes supported the ancient sage. She looked old and frail, her long white hair trailing over stooped shoulders. Her body was little more than leathery skin hung on bones. Gold and green ceremonial robes hung loosely

around her aged form. Her brown eyes, though, remained clear and alive.

"Why have you come, great oracle?" Salla asked nervously. "You should be in your tower."

"My tower will be destroyed," Retma said, matter-of-factly. "All of Travec will be destroyed. The people, though, may yet be saved. This is the place that fate draws me to."

"M-my smithy?" said Salla.

The oracle nodded. "I will wait here until the end — and you will join me."

"But I must fight," Salla said.

"Of course. You must fight . . . at first. But, when the time comes, you will join me. Then you will know what to do. The wellspring of Travec runs deep within this place. The chains that bind us are strong, Salla." She smiled wearily. "I think I'll watch the battle from your roof, if you don't mind. Not so nice a view as from my tower, but less doomed — at least for a while."

Salla fought down the moths swarming in her stomach. "I don't understand," she said.

The oracle put one bony hand on the smith's arm. "I know you don't," she said. "But you *will*. Good-bye, now. I fear it will take my acolytes some time to transport me safely to your roof." The oracle turned, and she and her assistants left the smithy. Soon, Salla heard them outside, squabbling on how best to reach the roof.

The widowed smith took a deep breath to gather her wits. Then she donned her armor, picked up her spear, and collected all the nearly finished weapons into her arms.

5

Salla stood in the skirmish line at the edge of the village. Here, the platform that supported the wooden streets blended smoothly into the encroaching mountainside. Heavily armed and armored Vec warriors stood in a long row on either side of her. All wore grim faces; some looked

around nervously. More than a few eyes fell on Salla's muscular form, and their glances seemed to ask, "What's the Dal doing here?"

Salla clenched her teeth. She stood next to Royn; he, at least, cast no questioning eyes in her direction. The approaching cloud loomed over the next ridge, and a thunderous rumble filled the air. They'd sent scouts to discover the nature of the threat but so far none had returned.

"Look! Look there!" someone cried as a lone figure stumbled over the rise.

It was one of their scouts, but he was hardly recognizable. He bled from a dozen wounds; his face and body were horribly charred and burnt. Terror danced across his wide eyes. "It's coming!" he wailed. "It's coming!" He fell facedown in the dirt at the edge of town and lay there, dead.

Fear murmured through the line as the huge cloud of dust and smoke swept downhill into Travec. The village shook to its pillars with the thunder of the beast's footsteps. A huge, hideous shape rose over the rocky hilltop. Its body shone like burning coals, and its eyes glowed with the white heat of the forge. The dreadful eyes fell upon Travec and the tiny crowd of warriors gathered at its outskirts.

The monster's footsteps shattered the hillside as it lumbered toward the green-roofed city. Flames sprang from the beast's shoulders and breast, wreathing it in terrible fire. As the frightened militia gathered their wits and braced themselves, the laccolith titan attacked.

The sixty-foot-tall monster crashed into the skirmish line, scattering Vec warriors like dolls. Cries of dying men and women filled the air.

Smoke and dust stung Salla's eyes; she could hardly see anything as she moved to engage the enemy.

"Fire!" someone cried, and the air filled with iron-tipped arrows. The missiles broke against the monster's rocky skin or bounced harmlessly off its smoldering back.

Salla ran forward and aimed her lance at the creature's

massive heel. She struck home, and steam burst up where she nicked the monster's skin. The titan bellowed and shook its leg. The jolt ran through Salla's body like lightning and catapulted her through the air. She landed hard against the base of a stout reed building, her spear still clutched in her hands. Her senses swam.

A burning woman ran past, hot magma clinging to her skin. Salla could only watch in horror as the pitiful wretch plunged off the boardwalk and into the water.

The creature effortlessly broke through the Vec line. It toppled the buildings at the edge of town, spouting fire and magma from the vents on its rocky hide. Warriors ran everywhere, screaming and dying, but Royn tried to rally them. The bell in the great tower clanged continuously in a futile warning.

Salla rose to her feet and coughed the smoke from her lungs. The surviving Vec warriors were falling back into the city. They threw spears and shot arrows at the monster, all to no effect.

Turning, the beast focused its burning eyes on the great bell tower. Homes fell like building blocks before the monster's wrath as it lumbered through Travec, slaying those who stood in its way. The flowering roofs of the city withered before it.

The sound of buildings falling and the crackle of flames filled the air, mingling with the cries of the terrified, the wounded, and the doomed. Smoke and burning embers danced high in the hot afternoon breeze.

Salla sprinted through the blazing streets, chasing the beast as it marched toward the great tower. Beyond the tower lay the smithy, and beyond the smithy, the docks. Salla prayed that those protecting the children would see the hopelessness of the situation and flee in boats before the monster reached them. She prayed that Alli would be able to save Chelly and Lito.

As Salla dodged a burning timber that fell in her path, the

laccolith titan reached the Tower of Travec. The desperate efforts of Royn and his warriors had failed. Vec heroes lay like rice stalks before a scythe. Blazing buildings collapsed on the wounded, smothering their cries of fear and pain.

The monster paused at the oracle's home and hatefully regarded the ornate structure. The Tower of Travec was made of the same stout reeds as the rest of the town. The wood had been lovingly fashioned into carved columns, sloping roofs, pointed cornices, and delicate balconies. Flowering vines wound up the tower's six tiers as it reached, needle-like, toward the sky. The tower bell echoed, loud and clear, over the sounds of destruction and death below.

The laccolith titan reared to its full height, standing as tall as the tower's topmost spire. The monster bellowed with rage, drowning out the sound of the sacred bell. Molten fire shot from the creature's ventlike pores, igniting the tower's wooden skeleton. The beast embraced the burning steeple and crushed the bell into silence.

Salla ran forward into the square and threw her spear at the titan's head. The missile bounced harmlessly off the creature's back and fell to the cinder-covered streets. The monster didn't even notice. Hearing cries of fear from the refugees, it turned toward the docks.

The beast moved forward. Its footsteps shook the pillars supporting the wooden streets and set fire to the heavy boards. Then it stopped, caught by its toes.

The bell chain had snagged it, Salla realized. The chain was light and nearly unbreakable, forged in fires hotter than the monster's blood and imbued with the powerful white mana of the oracle.

The creature shrugged and the chain shook free, falling to the smoldering avenue. The titan turned toward the docks once more. As it did, though, something new caught its attention.

White light flared atop the smithy. Lightning arced through the air and assaulted the beast. The monster roared

in pain and outrage as the oracle turned her magic against it.

"She'll be killed!" Salla gasped. She stooped to retrieve her spear from where it had fallen in the rubble of the tower. The weapon's haft had splintered; it was useless.

"Still . . . fighting . . . Dal?" a voice asked from nearby. Salla turned and saw Royn lying amid the ruins. His body was badly burned, his right leg crushed and useless. He smiled weakly and gasped for breath. "Then perhaps all is . . . not lost."

"We must help the oracle," Salla said.

"Can't . . . old girl," Royn gasped. "All I can do to . . . stay conscious. You can't help . . . either."

"Why not?" Salla replied angrily, tears stinging her eyes.

Royn shrugged and a fit of coughing wracked his body. "All our weapons . . . *useless*."

Salla cast her eyes around the ruined tower square. Royn was right; shattered weapons—like broken kindling—covered the burning ruins. They had nothing left. Even the sacred bell lay crushed and broken. Only the long, slender bell chain remained unharmed.

Icy resolve replaced despair in Salla's gut. The former Dal detached the chain from the bell and wound the metal links over her shoulder.

"Good luck . . . Dal," Royn called weakly as she sprinted from the square.



The oracle stood alone atop the smithy, her magic cascading over the laccolith titan's stony hide.

The monster lumbered toward the old woman, bellowing its rage. Travec's wooden streets shook with the titan's anger and the weight of its massive body.

Unsure what she intended to do, Salla ran toward the beast. In her mind's eye, she saw the death of her husband—not so long past—and the deaths of her children, so very close now, at the hands of the monster.

The creature howled again, and magma blasted from its oozing pores. The oracle's magic turned the burning rock aside. It did not strike her, but it did land on the smithy, setting the building ablaze.

Salla's heart ached to see the work of two lifetimes go up in flames. Before her, a portion of the street crumbled and toppled into the dark waters. Salla dodged around the hole and kept running, knowing she could save neither her home nor the oracle.

She watched in terror as the laccolith titan swept the old woman up in its claw. The magic around the oracle wavered like heat rising from Salla's forge and then failed. A moment later, Retma's ancient bones cracked, and she sizzled away into ash.

Salla screamed in rage and despair. The monster belowed triumphantly and turned toward the docks once more, kicking aside the charred embers of the smithy. As it did, it lurched, its foot caught on the stout wooden flooring.

"Its toe is snared in the trapdoor!" Salla realized. The oracle's words flooded back to her. . . . *Wellspring of Travec runs deep . . . chains that bind us are strong. . . .*

In the blazing village behind her, more pieces of the street's planking burned through and fell into the waters below. So far, she and the monster had managed to stay ahead of the collapse. Salla knew what she had to do.

Salla lashed one end of the bell chain tightly to the foundation of a surviving building. Then she ran toward the monster and looped the indestructible chain around its ankles. Struggling in the ruins of the building, the beast paid no attention to her, concentrating on its snagged foot. It pulled free, causing a portion of the smithy floor to crumble into the dark waters below.

With muscles strengthened by years at the forge, Salla looped the chain around the monster and pulled it tight.

Caught by surprise, the laccolith titan tripped and fell into the burning ruins of Salla's smithy. It howled in pain

and surprise, clawing at the burning boards, weakening the structure further.

The chain bit into Salla's bare hands, scraping the skin off her palms. She kept pulling, lashing the monster's ankles together, keeping it from crawling away as the smithy crumbled around it. The planks below its massive body charred and began to burn through.

The chain glowed red, as it had when Salla and her husband first forged it. The smith kept the image of her dead life-mate strong in her mind. She thought of her children and the Travec people she'd come to love. She remembered the oracle and the white mana that had strengthened the bell chain. The metal links burned into her hands, but she did not let go.

The beast turned and saw its true enemy.

Salla gazed unblinking into the creature's fiery eyes as the laccolith titan blasted her with magma.

Taxed beyond its limit, the smoldering platform beneath the titan gave way, plunging the monster into the cold, dark waters beneath.

A great plume of white steam shot up into the sky as the creature disappeared, dragging the last of the bell chain and Salla's charred body down into the depths with it.

⑥ 7 ⑥

Dockmaster Royn sat on a pylon and gazed over the rebuilt village of Travec. A sapphire-blue sky shone overhead, the sky of a new world, one born of toil and sacrifice and free of the evincar's terrors. Dominaria was not a perfect world, but it was much better than Rath.

Royn was old and gray and walked with a limp, but the memory of the battle with the laccolith titan still burned fresh in his mind. As the newly forged tower bell pealed in the background, a crowd of youngsters gathered at his feet.

The children never seemed to tire of Royn's tales. They looked forward most to this particular day — the anniversary of the *Great Deed*.

As the children pleaded with him to begin the tale, the old man's eyes strayed to the nearby smithy. A picture of Salla— young, strong, and proud— formed in his mind. The dockmaster smiled.

"Tell us, Grandfather, tell us!" the children cried.

"Is it true that *she* was the mother of the smiths, Lito and Chelly?"

"Is it true that our Great Protector came from the mountains, and that she had a heart of fire?"

"Did the *en-Vec* really join the Dominarian cause because of her example?"

"If she hadn't died for the village," one asked, wide-eyed, "would the Phyrexians and their monsters have destroyed us all?"

Royn nodded. "Yes," he said. "It's true. It's all true. Without her example, our people would never have survived long enough to pass through the planeshift and become part of this wonderful new world. She showed us that an *en-Dal* can become an *en-Vec*, and an *en-Vec* become a Dominarian. She taught us that the things that separate us are not nearly so great as the fire in our hearts that joins us together."

"Tell us, Grandfather, tell us!"

Royn leaned back on his pylon. His deep voice filled the warm afternoon air, mingling with the music of the bell. "I tell the story," he began, "of Salla the smith— greatest of all the *Vec* ever to live in Travec. . . ."

P A U L B . T H O M P S O N

THE VOICE OF COMMAND



Within the brass goblet, clear liquid trembled. It left flat beads on the walls of the cup, betraying the fact it was more alcohol than water. Mocklen looked up from his writing. The tremor did not surprise him. Rath often quaked at dawn.

Each night tons of flowstone poured from chutes of the great factory surrounding the Stronghold. As it settled into the ground, assuming the final shape designed for it—bedrock, topsoil, gravel, whatever—it displaced the previous day's accretion, pushing it down and away from the font of its origin. Each displacement was magnified by distance until points far from the Stronghold felt the growth of the planet in a very literal way.

The fortress of Tabala squatted in the great northern desert, half a world away from the Stronghold. It was not a desert in the sense understood on most worlds. No sea of sun-baked sand or arid, icy tundra, Rath's desert was a nearly lifeless expanse of naked flowstone, heaved up in great folds and ripples, some as high as fifty or sixty feet, with crevices as deep in between. The monotonous ripples

were formed of yellow rock, the basic skin of Rath. Ridge tops decayed in the heat and sourceless daylight glare, turning to windborne dust. The only water available was rainwater, collected in the deepest rifts and shaded from the light.

Tabala was sited on the only flat plateau in the entire desert. An eon ago, some forgotten evincar stood on this spot and commanded the flowstone to level. Later, gangs of prisoners sweltered by darkness and daylight to erect the fort, a great pile of masonry two hundred yards long by two hundred wide. The concentric walls were roofed over, along with the central keep, giving Tabala the look of a massive ziggurat, rising from the center of the plateau.

Mocklen had been in command eight years and six months. Under him were a nominal thousand men of the 62nd Company, Royal Army of Rath. Half the company were locals, formerly wandering Vec tribesmen. They joined the army to escape the fearful drudgery of nomadic life. The balance of Mocklen's force was made up of Dal and Vec from other regions.

Once the quake stopped, Mocklen lifted the cup and drained the colorless grog. As the burning sensation faded in his throat, a warm and pleasant glow ignited in his belly. He finished his morning entry into the garrison logbook, noting:

Present for Duty: 859

Sick, Wounded, Missing, or Mad: 141

Total for 62nd Company: 1,000 officers and men of all ranks

There was a knock on the door. His orderly, a reedy Dal youth named Vordren, stepped in and said, "A party is approaching the fort, sir."

"Party? What party?" asked Mocklen, closing the log.

"I don't know, sir," the boy stammered. "But they're coming in stalkers."

Stalkers were mechanical walking machines, rarely seen in the remote provinces. Machines meant people from the capital, important people.

Mocklen stood so suddenly he upset the empty goblet. It rolled off the edge of the trestle table.

"Sound assembly!" he snapped. Vordren stooped to pick up the fallen cup. "Never mind the goblet! Form an honor guard at once!"

"Who's coming, sir?"

"The bloody queen of the elves! How should I know? Get going, double-quick!" Vordren hurried out.

Visitors were trouble—nothing but trouble, Mocklen thought savagely as he struggled to get his top collar buttons closed around his thick neck. In a land where temperatures could bake raw flesh hard in a day, the niceties of regulation dress were usually ignored. Cursing, he got the button fastened. The stiff collar cut into his flesh.

Tabala resounded to the flatulent blare of trumpets. In response, the corridors of the fort echoed with the boots of running men.

Mocklen buckled on a half-cuirass and snugged the leather straps. The steel breastplate pressed him hard in uncomfortable places. With his high-combed helmet in place and his best sword hanging from a wide silver mesh baldric, Mocklen was as ready to face the visitors as he could get.

The 62nd Company was drawn up in two blocks, one flanking each side of the open gate. Eight soldiers, chosen for their intimidating height, stood in a double line at right angles to the gate. Anyone entering would have to pass between them. Each man in the honor guard clutched a standard: four banners for the evincar, two banners for the Royal Army of Rath, and two bearing the colors of the 62nd Company.

Every man stood at attention. Their lines were perfect. Not a foot was out of place. Mocklen could almost hear the sweat seeping from eight hundred fifty-nine foreheads, trickling behind seventeen hundred-odd ears.

Everyone could hear the approaching stalkers. The syncopated clatter meant more than one machine was coming. Mocklen gnawed his fleshy lower lip, irritated he'd forgotten to ask how many stalkers were coming.

He expected the machines would halt outside the gate and disembark their passengers, who could then enter Tabala with dignity, on foot. This did not happen. Long, angular shadows filled the entry tunnel, and the clang of moving metal limbs rang against the hard stonework. The first stalker crouched down to clear the tunnel roof. When it emerged, its twin legs uncoiled, raising the passenger car high over the assembled garrison.

It was an impressive device, made of the hard yellow alloy much favored at the Stronghold. Two legs, one on each side of the car, were made of pairs of thick, articulated cylinders. The knee joints hinged backward, like a bird's. Rearing up twice a man's height, the passenger car was long and streamlined, the bow and stern coming out to exaggerated, sharp points.

A second walker, boxier than the first, came out of the tunnel, followed by a third towing an ordinary wheeled wagon. The honor guard tried to stand their ground, but the bulky machines crowded them aside. Soldiers near the gate had to break ranks to avoid being trampled.

Fuming at the disruption, Mocklen bawled for a change in formation. The 62nd Company drew back from the stalkers, reforming into a single tight block on either side of the now-idle machines.

The sharp-prowed stalker emitted a shrill whistle. Steam, strongly scented with oil, jetted from the exhaust pipes. The legs contracted half their length and then locked in place. Behind the first machine, the two cargo carriers did likewise.

A trapdoor in the belly of the lead stalker opened, and a metal ladder dropped out. There was a stir of movement inside the dark square of the open hatch, and then a figure appeared, clad in an elaborate gray and buff uniform.

Clasping the ladder railings and hooking his feet on them, the first visitor slid to the ground in one athletic swoop. Three more, identically clad, followed. They wore short buff mantles and heavy, quilted clothing that must have been stifling in the morning heat. Nevertheless, they formed on either side of the ladder, drew swords, and saluted.

"His Excellency, Light-General Rogur, lord of Peximir!"

A fifth uniformed figure emerged, descending the ladder with more decorum than the first four. When he reached bottom and turned, the four escorting guardsmen clashed their swords together over his head. Light-General Rogur strode through the salute, stopped, and planted his fists on his hips.

"Who's in command of this hellhole?" he boomed.

Half-strangled by his collar, Mocklen stepped forward. "Colonel Mocklen *il-Dal*, at your service, my lord."

Rogur removed his heavy gray gauntlets and tossed them over his shoulder. One of his retinue deftly caught them.

"Mocklen, eh? I know that name. You served with the Dread Lord in the Vytus campaign, did you not?"

"A long time ago, sir."

Rogur eyed the dusty outpost. "Evidently."

He flicked open the frog at his throat and let his mantle fall. Again one of his personal guards caught it before it touched the ground.

Rogur wore a light skullcap-type helmet, made of the same yellow alloy as the stalkers. He doffed this, revealing closely cut hair so black it had blue highlights. His brows were arched high and thin, and his face was innocent of hair. He had the pallor of one who'd spent most of his life in the Stronghold, a blue-tinged paleness Mocklen knew well. He couldn't be more than half Mocklen's age.

Rogur snapped his long fingers. A third orderly stepped forward smartly, bearing a small dispatch case.

"Your orders," said the general. "For you alone."

"Shall we retire to my office, sir, or would you care to review the garrison?"

"I reviewed their dossiers on the journey here," Rogur said with a dismissive wave. "Desert trash, wastrels, and mercenaries; that's what you have here, don't you?"

Mocklen's ruddy face reddened further. "The 62nd Company stands ready for any task the evincar gives us," he replied stiffly.

"Nothing personal, Colonel. Who am I to sneer? After all, this is my command now."

Eight hundred fifty-nine pairs of eyes shifted from Rogur to Mocklen and back again. No one moved.

The colonel extended his hand. "This way, General."

Rogur turned to his guards. "See to my baggage. Get my quarters set up," he said briskly.

The nearest soldier looked confused. "Where will your quarters be?"

Rogur snapped his fingers at Mocklen. "Where are the garrison commander's quarters?"

"My rooms are in the center of the citadel, three levels above ground," Mocklen replied.

"That will do. Get the colonel's gear out and put mine in." The general jabbed a long finger at his retinue. "Mind you, be careful. Anything you damage, you pay for!"

"You're too kind," said Mocklen.

Rogur sniffed. "Not at all! One must keep one's men on their toes. Excuse a scuffed boot today, and tomorrow the culprit will be deserting to the enemy. Don't you agree?"

Mocklen's arm had grown heavy being held out. He said again, "This way, General."

Calf-high boots swishing, Rogur stalked down the indicated passage.

* * * * *

Mocklen's old, familiar quarters had always been a comfortable place—snug and cool within the stone mass of Tabala. With General Rogur there, it felt like a stifling cell.

The general had commandeered his chair. From a capacious bag he drew out three tightly rolled scrolls. Glancing at them in turn, Rogur muttered, "Orders for the former commander, Tabala Fortress . . . yes." He offered the sealed tube to Mocklen. "Read it," said the general.

Mocklen broke the seal and spread apart the wings of the small scroll. "In the name and glory of His Majesty Davvol, evincar of Rath, greetings," Mocklen read aloud. "'On this, the eighty-ninth day of Girdling, we have dispatched our loyal vassal Rogur, lord of Peximir, to assume command of the garrison at Tabala and govern the associated province of Alc-en-Vec.'" The 'province' was composed of wasteland, rock formations, and a few thousand wandering tribesmen.

Mocklen cut through the flowery formal language to the crucial point: The long-smoldering rebellion of the forest elves and nomadic Vec in the south had spilled over into the desert. Caravans far to the south of Tabala had been raided. Army blockhouses had been robbed of weapons and supplies.

"'To prosecute the extermination of these rebels, Light-General Rogur has been appointed to command all royal forces within Alc-en-Vec. Colonel Mocklen will extend all aid to his new commander and offer the wisdom of his years' experience in the region.'"

At the bottom, the message was marked with the seal of the Dread Lord himself. Below the red wax seal, along the bottom edge of the parchment, a single line had been penned in green ink.

I trust you will see this order as it was meant to be seen.

Mocklen did not read the cryptic postscript aloud. Green ink meant one thing: The Dread Lord had added this personal admonition with his own hand.

"Any questions?" said Rogur.

Mocklen slowly rolled up the scroll. "Are we to expect reinforcements, sir?"

"No. I asked for three companies, but they told me I would have to make do with the scrapings already here." He asked about the garrison's strength. Mocklen showed him the morning's entry in the logbook.

"A small force, but applied with skill, it should suffice," Rogur said. "What transport do you have on hand?"

"My men march on foot, sir."

Rogur dropped his hands to his lap and leaned forward. "What? No stalkers? No airships? No beasts of burden?" Mocklen shook his head. "Unmerciful! What about communications? I assume you use standard voiceplates and seefars?"

Again Mocklen shook his head. "All we have are perchers."

Perchers were small flying creatures, specially created at the Stronghold. Covered all over by smooth, leathery skin, they had trumpet-shaped beaks and hollow tympanic membranes at the back of their skulls. To send a message by percher, one spoke loudly and clearly into the animal's beak. Released, it would fly to the recipient by following a scent-trail. The receiver held the percher tightly, almost to the point of crushing it. As the percher struggled and squawked in terror, it repeated the last sounds it had heard. Better-bred perchers even mimicked the voice of the sender, which helped to authenticate important messages. Typically, the creatures could repeat a dozen or so words. Thoroughbreds could speak back more than twenty.

Rogur grimaced. "This really is the dead end of the world!" He leaped to his feet, slamming his palms on the table as he rose. "No matter! I will crush any rebellion I find! I will lay the heads of the rebels' leaders at the feet of the evincar. That should restore me to his good graces. . . ." The young general glanced away, conscious of having said too much. Mocklen gave no notice to his admission.

The rest of the day was spent showing Rogur around Tabala. He inspected every square inch of the fortress, from the parapet to the lowest cells in the prison. In rookeries clustered under the eaves of the roof, Rogur saw Tabala's stock of perchers. The desert breed was larger than the animals used around the Stronghold, and differently colored. Stronghold perchers were colored dark gray. Desert perchers were half again as big and colored dull yellow, like the dead stone sea surrounding them.

By the time they returned to Mocklen's quarters—now Rogur's—the room had been transformed. Maps and standards of the 62nd Company's patrols had been shoved in a corner. Bright tapestries covered the once-bare walls. When the general and Mocklen entered, they found Rogur's private guard clustered around one hanging. On it the moving image of a thinly clad Vec woman performed an exotic dance.

"What's going on here?" Rogur roared. The dancing girl vanished, replaced by a static martial scene of massed Rathi troops saluting the evincar.

"Sir, we—" one of the guards sputtered.

Rogur backhanded the man to the floor.

"You are all demoted one step in rank!" the general shouted. Even Mocklen winced at his powerful voice. "You will march around the outer courtyard in full battle gear until I tell you to stop, beginning now! Is that clear?"

"Yes, General!"

"Get out, scum!"

The soldiers filed dejectedly out. When Rogur mastered his temper, he noticed Mocklen was examining the tapestry, trying to fathom how it worked.

"An invention of the late Evincar Burgess," Rogur explained. "Touching certain spots on the panel causes the images to display." With his forefinger, he pushed a spot on the edge, and the martial scene vanished, replaced by the zooming Rathi airship *Conqueror*, plunging straight at

the viewer. Mocklen ducked, as if to dodge the flat, moving image. Rogur switched off the device, laughing.

Sitting down at Mocklen's table, Rogur poured himself a drink without offering the same to the man he'd displaced.

"I want you to assemble the garrison at daybreak, Colonel. Patrols will be sent out to bracket the desert. If rebels are operating in this region, I intend to find and dispose of them forthwith."

Mocklen saluted. "It shall be done, sir."

As soon as the door closed behind him, the lilting strains of the Vec dance resumed.

Alone in his new, smaller quarters, Mocklen discarded his uncomfortable uniform jacket. He was parched. Downing a quick gulp of grog, it was easy to imagine how a man like Rogur could have offended someone at court—how could he not? His punishment was exile to Tabala, but what had Mocklen and the 62nd done to deserve Rogur?

Thinking this reminded him of the Dread Lord's message. It was still in his sash. Mocklen picked up his discarded jacket and took out the scroll. He read it again.

I trust you will see this order as it was meant to be seen.

The room was not only small, but also dark. Mocklen lit an old-fashioned oil lamp and drew up a stool close to the flame. He held the crackling parchment close to the light and tried his best to see his orders as they were meant to be seen.

Outside, Rogur's guard tramped endlessly around the fort's outer yard. Their metal-clad boots looked impressive on parade, but by morning the hard brass fittings had eaten their way through the snakeskin leather into each man's flesh. Every footfall of the ten-man squad left dark red smears on the pavement.

* * * * *

At Rogur's order, six patrols were sent out to hunt for rebels. Three were to scour the territory south of Tabala,

down to the border of the next province. The remaining three patrols, each a hundred soldiers strong, were dispatched to the other points of the compass. Mocklen was a bit puzzled by their orders, as no rebel activity had been reported anywhere but the south. Why patrol other regions?

Seated in a folding leather chair, his eyes shaded by darkly tinted spectacles, Rogur replied, "Do you think the evincar's enemies will let themselves be found where we think they are?" Mocklen wrestled with the murky question and then admitted he didn't think they would. "So by searching where the rebels are not, we may yet find them," the general said smugly.

Six hundred soldiers of the garrison, plus the usual leavening camp followers, marched away from Tabala. When all six columns were over the horizon, the remote fortress suddenly felt even more isolated. Less than three hundred men were left to man the fort's defenses.

Rogur remained outside for some time, lecturing Mocklen and his retinue on his pet theories of soldiering. It grew very hot, and while Rogur and the colonel were shaded by a canopy, the general's personal guard were drawn up outside the shade. Rathi daylight was no less punishing for lacking a single sun, and as time dragged on the guardsmen's faces reddened.

"One must be a predator, or else become prey," Rogur said, weaving his fingers together beneath his chin. "This is the iron law of our masters and of nature itself."

"That is how things are ordered," Mocklen agreed.

"It's to every subject's benefit to obey the evincar and his appointed lieutenants. We don't wish to harm them, any more than a wise father wishes to harm his children. But they must obey, at once and without question."

"Or face the consequences."

Rogur sipped from a gold-chased goblet. "Of course."

Young Vordren, Mocklen's aide, came running through

the open gate of the fort. A sheaf of foolscap slips fluttered in his hand.

"My lord! My lord!" he called, gasping.

"Stand still and stop panting," Rogur snapped.

Vordren took a few deep breaths and resumed. "My lord, I was unable to send the messages you gave me this morning."

"What! Why not?"

"The voiceplate was not operating properly, sir."

Rogur peered over his tinted glasses. "Lying rogue! The device arrived with me just yesterday. You don't know how to use it, do you?"

Sweating profusely, the youth looked to his former chief for help. Mocklen said, "The journey here must have been very rugged. Perhaps the machine was damaged before it arrived?"

Rogur jumped to his feet. "Nonsense! This ignorant wretch" — meaning Vordren — "has no idea how to operate such a sophisticated device!" He snapped his fingers. "Nidmon!"

A day-burned guardsman stepped out of line. His fair forehead was already starting to peel. "Yes, my general?"

"Go with this yokel and see that my messages to the Dread Lord are sent properly!"

Nidmon saluted. "Yes, my general!"

The guardsman and Vordren reentered the fort. A short time later, Nidmon returned alone.

"My lord general," he began hesitantly. "It is as the boy said. The voiceplate is out of order."

Furious, Rogur made a fist and said, "How has the device failed?"

"The power crystal is live, sir, but no signal comes out. Switched to receive, no messages come in."

Striking empty air, Rogur declared, "This is sabotage!" Nidmon flinched but stood his ground

Mocklen intervened. "The garrison's own voiceplate

failed long ago. I was told by an itinerant mechanician the atmosphere over Tabala impedes the device's signals and on very hot days absolutely blocks them." He added, "We can send your dispatches by percher, sir."

"Stupid . . . I guess I haven't much choice, do I?"

Because of the length of Rogur's messages, the whole text, transcribed on thin vellum, was attached to the leg of a sturdy percher for delivery. No percher alive could fly all the way to the Stronghold, so the creature was sent off to the nearest fort, Ematzin, six days' journey southeast of Tabala.

To guarantee the authenticity of the reports, Rogur supplied a voice message as well. Holding the quiescent percher a few inches from his face, he intoned, "I, Rogur, light-general of the Tabala, commit these messages to the commander of all Rathi forces and to our supreme lord, the evincar."

Vordren took the percher and carried it to the rim of the rooftop parapet. Facing the distant outpost, Vordren flung the animal into the air. Narrow yellow wings flapping furiously, the percher disappeared into the omnipresent haze.

* * * * *

Days passed without word from the six patrols. Rogur chafed at the silence. Inactivity wore on him, and those around him suffered for his ennui. He slapped the garrison's cook, a wizened Vec, when the old man made the mistake of serving white stew three days in a row. Rogur toured the dungeons, finding four prisoners there. Not satisfied with the statements taken from the accused men by Mocklen, he had the prisoners tortured until they confessed. Two were put to death in one day for infractions that merited only a whipping.

On the fifth day after the patrols departed, perchers arrived from the three southern patrols. No rebels found. A few Vec villages had been searched, with no result. Rogur stamped his foot in frustration.

"Send word back to each patrol," he said. "Tell them to look harder! Take some nomads aside and question them!"

"Sir, is that wise? If we abuse loyal tribesmen, we may make rebels out of peaceful subjects," Mocklen said.

"They will obey, or suffer the consequences — and so shall you, Colonel!" Fuming, Rogur stalked off the roof, leaving Mocklen and Vordren to send perchers back to the wide-ranging patrols.

A little after midday a lone creature arrived, fluttering erratically outside the fortress's walls. Instead of landing on the roof, it alighted on open ground beyond the main gate. A sentry called Mocklen's attention to it, who in turn notified Rogur.

A pair of soldiers tried to retrieve the percher, but the bedraggled creature eluded them, flying up out of reach before settling to the stony ground again. Rogur was about to order an archer to fell the creature when Vordren offered to catch it. Speaking soothingly, the youth approached the skittish beast. He brought it back to the commander nestled under one arm.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Rogur.

"It's worn out, sir," Vordren replied. He gently pulled one wing out for the general to see. The tight, thin skin was split in several places. "Thirst does this, my lord. This percher has flown a long way."

"Never mind." Rogur took the animal roughly. Shaking the exhausted animal, he said, "Speak!"

The percher squirmed in his unfriendly grip. Membranes on the crest of its long skull (it was a male) vibrated as it called up the voice of the one who sent it.

"Lord Rogur . . . Captain Zolyat speaks . . . we find . . . traces . . . rebel band. Five hundred strong. Will track."

Mocklen and the other officers present crowded in. "Rebel band? Five hundred strong? Where did they come from?" they babbled.

"Be silent!" Rogur shouted. To Mocklen he said, "Which patrol does Captain Zolyat command?"

"Number Six, the western one."

The general turned the percher over. Every beast had an individual symbol tattooed on its belly, both to keep track of them for breeding purposes and to authenticate what perchers were issued to which patrol. He showed the blue symbol to Mocklen's young aide.

"Is this one of the animals provided to Captain Zolyat?" he said. Vordren avowed it was.

He shoved the percher into the young man's hands and snapped, "All officers to the main hall! Right now!"

Rogur whirled through outer and inner yards, entering the citadel's ground floor. Fully half this level was taken up by the fort's main hall, where stands of weapons lined the walls. Here also was where the troops ate, so there were many long trestle tables. Rogur went to the center of the room and shouted for a map. Two of Mocklen's junior officers spread a large scroll before him.

"In five days' march, how far could Zolyat have gotten?" asked Rogur.

"A hundred to a hundred-twenty gurud," Mocklen said. The city-bred general looked openly skeptical. A gurud was a Vec measurement, equal to twelve hundred paces.

"That ragtag mob can march twenty gurud a day?" he said.

With pride Mocklen replied, "They can, General. My men have long served here. Some have lived here all their lives."

Rogur did not push the point but picked up a pair of dividers. Setting the gap to one hundred, he traced a half circle on the chart west of Tabala. Adjusting the dividers to a hundred twenty, he made another arc beyond the first. Pondering silently for a while, he finally said, "Send word to Zolyat to follow the enemy but not to close with them. Who leads the northern patrol?"

"Lieutenant Florac, sir."

"Order Florac to turn west and parallel Zolyat's force by

one day's march. If either patrol finds the rebels, the other can come to their aid."

"Should we concentrate two patrols on the basis on one report?" Mocklen asked carefully.

Rogur gazed at the map. "If you trust the judgment of your man Zolyat, yes."

Mocklen replied, "Zolyat is a good soldier."

"Then carry out my orders!" Rogur grinned expansively. "This will be a campaign long remembered! I'll have those traitors yet!"

* * * * *

Mocklen knocked quietly on his former bedroom door. There was no response. Hesitating only briefly, Mocklen went in. The hour was late, but he had news that could not wait.

The chamber was well lit by four bright lamps. Evidently Rogur did not like to sleep in the dark. Where the colonel's simple cot had once stood, Rogur's men had placed a large frame and mattress, hauled by stalker from the Stronghold. Rogur was asleep, his knees drawn up close to his chest.

"My lord?" He did not stir. "My lord, urgent news."

Rogur awoke with a start. One hand disappeared under his pillow and returned clasping a dagger.

"Who goes there?" he demanded shrilly.

"Colonel Mocklen, sir."

"Why have you invaded my bedchamber and disturbed my sleep?"

"Urgent news from the field, sir. I thought you'd want to know right away."

Blearily, Rogur put aside the dagger. He sat up in bed. "Yes, yes, very well. What news?"

"Perchers arrived just now from Zolyat and Florac. Florac's patrol has reached the village of Qa. Apparently a sizable force of armed nomads left there two days earlier, taking with them most of the villagers' food and water."

Rogur was all attention now. "Armed nomads? How many? Where were they headed?"

"The Qa-ites are simple folk, General. All they could tell Florac was the rebel band was several times larger than his patrol. The previous estimate of five hundred is likely close to the mark. They went south from Qa. Florac was able to confirm this by their trail."

Rogur poured a cup of wine from the decanter beside the bed. He downed it in one gulp. "So, Zolyat's report was correct!"

"Yes, sir. There's more. The elders of Qa identified the leader of the armed nomads as Sro Valik." The name obviously meant nothing to Rogur, so Mocklen explained. "The honorific 'Sro' is given only to prophets, or holy men. They appear from time to time among the Vec, and they always cause trouble. This Sro Valik may claim religious reasons for what he's done."

"Done? What do you mean?"

Mocklen looked grim. "Lieutenant Florac's message was written on a parchment strip and flown here by percher. Captain Zolyat's came as voice only. His patrol has been ambushed. He lost sixty, killed and wounded."

Rogur leaped out of bed. "They dare attack our troops?" Mocklen nodded gravely. "Then they shall perish, all of them. No prisoners will be taken!"

"Prisoners yield information when questioned properly, sir."

Rogur waved aside his words. "Oh yes, we'll make them talk, but after that it's the traitor's noose for them!" He threw on a robe. "Is Zolyat still in contact with the enemy?"

"I don't know, sir. His message was fragmentary."

"I must get in touch with him. Get me some couriers—they can use my stalker, *Furious*. At top speed it could reach Zolyat in five or six hours. . . . I want the fort sealed and all troops on alert! Prepare a flying column to go to the captain's aid!"

"As you command, General, but I must remind you we have fewer than three hundred effectives here. Tabala's defenses cannot be manned effectively with fewer than two hundred troops."

Rogur snorted. "Tabala has nothing to fear! Barefoot nomads wouldn't dare attack a Rathi fortress!" Mocklen could only bow his head in acquiescence.

Soon the entire fort was aboil. Sergeants roused ordinary soldiers from their cots and mustered them in the humid darkness of the outer courtyard. Torches blazed in sconces along the edge of the roof, fitfully lighting the stark terrain outside. Blades were sharpened, bows were strung, armor strapped on. By dawn, Tabala was ready.

Rogur's guardsmen quickly discovered the stalker *Furious* was out of action. The engine had seized. Dust had penetrated the bearings. The cargo machines were also inoperable, victims of contaminated oil and eroded power couplings. With his own hands Rogur beat the guard who brought him this news.

More perchers arrived from Zolyat and Frolac. The lieutenant had discovered a broad trail in the desert, made by a large band moving southwest. Individual Vec tribes seldom exceeded twenty or thirty, so Frolac reckoned this was the same rebel band that left Qa village earlier. He was following them, albeit slowly, keeping his distance from the larger enemy force.

Zolyat sent more scant details of his encounter. Rebels hid in folds in the flowstone, leaping out and attacking the Rathi troops while they were still in marching formation. The surprised troops were cut to pieces. Only forty men remained fit to fight. Zolyat had no choice but to fall back on Tabala. With wounded men in tow, it would take them a long time to get home.

Rogur recalled all the southern and eastern patrols, ordering them to concentrate not at Tabala, but at a place called Ekzea, a subterranean grotto forty gurud east of the

fort. His plan was to lay a trap for the rebels. If they thought the fort was weakly manned, they might be tempted to attack—at which time the troops at Ekzea could surround and destroy them.

Mocklen cleared his throat.

“Yes, Colonel?”

“General, your plan is sound save for one detail: Ekzea is too far away. Even force-marched, it would take a day and a half for troops there to reach us. If the rebels are as strong as Zolyat says, we risk being overwhelmed before your trap can close.”

Rogur’s entourage braced for an explosion. They were amazed when their choleric commander calmly agreed with Mocklen’s assessment.

“What we need is reinforcement. Where’s the nearest outpost that can help us?”

“Ematzin, sir. Six hundred gurud away,” said Mocklen.

“Send a message to the commander at Ematzin,” Rogur said. “Use as many perchers as needed. I want the commander at Ematzin to fully understand the situation.”

Messages took wing and vanished over the horizon. The result was exactly nil. No answers flew back, and no new reports arrived from the embattled Zolyat or the shadowing Frolac. Soldiers stood at their posts one full day, and then another, and another.

Rogur seethed. “What are your men playing at?” he demanded at dinner four days later. “Can’t they respond? I need to know what’s happening!”

“Our patrols may be unable to reply,” Mocklen answered. “Considering what happened to Captain Zolyat, it’s a possibility.”

Rogur swept a few items off the table in impotent rage and stormed out.

The garrison, nerves strained by being too long on alert, had a bit of excitement that night. Multiple moving figures were seen passing the fort in the distance. Convinced these

were rebel scouting parties, Rogur ordered the soldiers to capture them. They returned in less than an hour with some obviously harmless nomads in tow.

"Greetings to you, O Mocklen! Why are we summoned at sword point?" asked the elderly Vec woman leading the small band.

"Hail, Tant Leva!" Mocklen said. Discretely, he indicated the general, glowering fiercely because mere nomads had dared ignore him.

"Rebels are about," Mocklen said. "Followers of a holy man called Sro Valik. Have you heard of him?"

"Valik? That's a western name, from the high desert. I know him not, but the gods often speak to the westerners."

"These rebels have killed our soldiers and fomented revolution against the evincar!" Rogur burst out. "If you know anything about them, you are duty-bound to tell us!"

"I have told you, O General, what I know," Tant Leva said calmly. "To ask a hundred times will not get you a hundred truths."

The old matriarch was merely quoting a tribal proverb, but to Rogur's ears, it sounded like insolence. He ordered Tant Leva's band confined to Tabala until further notice.

The young Vec men reached for their stone daggers when they heard the unjust command, but they were closely surrounded by Rathi troops. Any resistance might precipitate a massacre. Eyeing each other distrustfully, soldiers and nomads waited to see who would draw first.

Mocklen cleared his throat. "Tant Leva, will your people be our guests? If there is a rebel force operating in this area, your people are at risk, too. We heard the village of Qa was looted by Valik's men. We offer you our protection."

The old Vec woman visibly relaxed. "That is different, O Mocklen. We shall tarry awhile under your walls." She fixed Rogur with one copper-colored eye. "We will not enter in, unless forced."

Rogur relented with a dismissive snort. "Let them remain

outside! No sense infesting our fort with too much vermin!"

So saying, he stalked inside. Mocklen sighed. Tant Leva nudged the stout colonel in the ribs with a bony elbow.

"There's nothing so taxing as a powerful friend," she said. Mocklen nodded in polite agreement, but after seeing the nomads safely encamped, he retired inside, certain Light-General Rogur was no friend of his or the men of Tabala.

* * * * *

It was too hot inside the fort to sleep. Mocklen walked the rooftop, carefully inspecting the tiles and anchor stones along the parapet. The merciless heat ruined ordinary mortar in a few years' time, so a constant watch had to be kept to make sure the fort stood up to Rath's harshest climate.

Completing one circuit of the roof, Mocklen felt weary. He descended into the stifling interior. Though a weighty man, he had a light tread. The whisperers below did not hear him coming.

"— enough of this madness! We had to strike!"

"This is treason, Kylind!"

"This is survival! The general is worse than a bloody martinet. He's an incompetent fool! He'll get us all killed, so we have to get him first!"

A third voice muttered, "What about the colonel? Where does he stand?"

"With us, or in a nameless grave beside Rogur!"

A new voice below announced loudly, "Graves are for honorable soldiers!"

Shouts—the whisk of swords being drawn—and the rapid clatter of booted feet. Mocklen drew his sword and waited.

Hidden on the staircase by the night, Mocklen couldn't see a thing, but he heard plenty. Trading curses and pleas

for unity, men of Rogur's guard fought each other desperately in the deep shadows of the inner courtyard. The clash continued until someone caught the sharp end of a blade. An old soldier could always recognize the groan of a fatally wounded man. More shouts, and more frantic footfalls.

Two Rathi soldiers wearing Rogur's livery appeared below him. Panting, bloody, they started up at a run until they spied Mocklen barring the way. Lurching to a halt, one thrust a sword at him, saying, "Colonel! Give way! We've no desire to harm you!"

"Fools, this is mutiny! You cannot succeed!" Mocklen presented his weapon.

The second guard dropped his sword and clasped his hands together. "You're a fair man, Colonel, a wise man. If you won't join with us, at least let us pass!"

Loyal troops rushed up the steps. "Give up," Mocklen said. "You can't escape!"

The second soldier retrieved his sword. "Better to die fighting than be hanged!"

In concert, he and his comrade charged. They dueled Mocklen feverishly for a few moments, and then one mutineer stiffened and fell. An arrow was buried in his back. Below, one of Rogur's loyalists loaded a new bolt in his crossbow.

"So long as Rogur lives, you're all doomed!" said the remaining mutineer. Without waiting to be shot or slashed, he put the point of his sword to his breast and leaped from the stairs.

The loyalists advanced warily, not lowering their weapons even after they recognized Mocklen.

"Any more of them, Colonel?" It was Nidmon with the crossbow.

"These were the only two I saw."

Nidmon spat on the man he'd slain. "Tell Lord Rogur the vermin have been exterminated!"

Mocklen sheathed his sword and descended among the victorious loyalists.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Corporal Kylind and his malcontent friends tried to assassinate the general," Nidmon replied.

"How many were involved?"

"Three, all dead." Nidmon was *il-Dal*, like Mocklen. "All Vec. No surprise there! They're treacherous to a man—"

"I'll remind you, Lieutenant, that most of my company are Vec, and they are as loyal to His Majesty as anyone on Rath."

Nidmon grinned insolently. "As you say, Colonel."

The dead mutineers were laid out in the outer yard. The night watch was gathered around, and loyal members of Rogur's retinue stood proudly over the bodies.

The general, clad in a soft robe, stood in the gateway and looked pale and shaken. "Enough!" he said, once his men began to laugh and boast of their success. "Hang those traitors by the heels from the battlement, and let's have no more said about it!"

Mocklen escorted Rogur back to his quarters. "Are you well, sir?"

"I was not wounded." Rogur avoided looking Mocklen in the face. "Any word on Sro Valik?"

"None, General. Perchers don't fly at night, but I expect some arrivals after dawn."

"I want constant reports. Wake me if there's anything significant to tell!"

* * * * *

Rogur tottered off into his room. By his unsteady gait and the wine on his breath, Mocklen deduced his commander was drunk.

* * * * *

News did arrive with daylight. Very bad news. Lieutenant Frolac sent word of the terrible discovery

he'd made: the remains of Captain Zolyat's patrol, massacred to a man. The wounds on the slain were fresh enough to bleed, so Frolac retreated rapidly northward, away from Tabala. Signs were clear the rebel force was moving on the fort.

Rogur was galvanized by the crisis. In rapid succession, he issued new orders. All patrols were to return to Tabala at once. The Ekzea ambush plan was abandoned. He repeated his demand to the commander at Ematzin to send reinforcements right away.

"Five hundred armed rebels, maybe more, are coming toward us," he dictated to a brace of perchers. "Send as many troops as you can spare at once! I, Rogur of Peximir, order it!"

"General, wait," Mocklen said after the flurry of new orders was done. "If our patrols have already concentrated at Ekzea, marching directly back to Tabala may send them into Sro Valik's hands."

Red-eyed, Rogur downed a cup of grog and croaked, "What do you mean?"

"The path across the desert is well known. Valik could ambush them at any one of a dozen convenient sites along the way."

Rogur bawled for a map. Unrolling it, he bade the colonel show him the route in question. The track from Tabala to Ematzin wound through the washboard crags, following the easiest line of march. Ten thousand rebels could hide along the way, waiting for the unwary Rathi to pass.

"I see," said Rogur. "Very well. You're the local expert, Colonel. What would you do?"

"I know several secret trails through the wave country, south of Tabala. With your permission, I'll sortie with a small squad, meet the assembled troops at Ekzea, and led them home via one of these hidden routes."

Rogur agreed. Mocklen hand-picked eight soldiers from the garrison as his escort, and they set out before midday.

Rogur and Nidmon stood at the gate and watched Mocklen's small band recede in the distance.

"A brave man," Rogur opined. Nidmon, fastidiously adjusting the drape of his mantle, asked his commander who he meant.

"Colonel Mocklen. Imagine marching off with just eight men after Valik's rebels have already wiped out an entire patrol."

"Did you notice, my general, he took only Vec soldiers with him?" said Nidmon.

Rogur raised a single eyebrow. "Did he?"

"Yes, sir. I notice these things. Eight men, all Vec." Glancing off to their left, where Tant Leva's people were still camping in the shadow of Tabala's wall. "His nomad friends are still here, I see."

"What are you saying, Captain?"

Nidmon bowed his head. "Nothing, my general. Merely an observation — no doubt a coincidence."

Coincidence or not, that day Rogur ordered the main gate closed and barred. This was a hardship for the men inside the fort, as the gate was their main source of ventilation. Inside the heat-baked walls, the air grew close and hot. Even veterans fell ill from the heat, collapsing at their posts.

Rogur knew nothing about this. Once the fort was secured, he crept upstairs in the citadel, anxious not to be seen. He had a mission to perform, an important personal reconnaissance.

He found Mocklen's room. It was a modest chamber, about ten feet square. Besides a cot, there was a folding desk, a wicker hamper of books, and a tin chamber pot. Rogur thoroughly ransacked the little room.

He knew the danger of having ambitious, intelligent underlings. His current troubles began because his adjutant back at the Stronghold, Colonel Rappian, denounced him to the Dread Lord. Rogur had accepted favors from wealthy courtiers anxious to have the ear of the commander of the

Rathi army. All senior officers dealt in influence and bribery; it was part of the Stronghold game. It was grossly unfair for Rappian to betray him and even worse for the Dread Lord to punish Rogur with duty at this dreary outpost. Still, adversity was the fount of opportunity, and if Rogur could smash Sro Valik's uprising, his star would ascend very high—perhaps to the post of the Dread Lord himself? The only thing he feared was renewed treachery at his back.

Mocklen's room yielded nothing—no notes, no diary, no incriminating missives to headquarters. The man was as dull and honest as he pretended to be. Disgusted, Rogur dropped heavily on the colonel's cot and sighed.

A muffled voice piped up beneath him. Startled, Rogur jumped to his feet. He peered under the folding camp bed. There was nothing there but ancient balls of dust.

More carefully, he sat down again. For a second time he heard voices—smothered, indistinct voices. Where were they coming from?

Rogur kicked the cot aside. One of the slate paving stones near the wall had a shallow handhold carved in it. Rogur pulled on the stone, and it yielded easily. A chorus of shrill voices rose from the narrow hole beneath.

Putting a hand in, he pulled out a wire cage. Perchers, six of them. A second cage contained another half-dozen animals. Agitated at being drawn from their dark hole, the perchers chirped and squeaked, emitting fragments of the last messages spoken to them. Through the chatter Rogur heard "*concentrate all forces on Tabala at once!*" It was his own voice he heard, words the commander at Ematzin should have been listening to.

Startled, he opened the cage and pulled out perchers, one by one. He made each one repeat its message. All the clipped words spoken were his, some going back as far as six or seven days!

Rogur trembled. Perchers couldn't lie. They could only speak the last words spoken to them, and hearing his own

orders meant one thing: *These creatures had never been sent, not to Ematzin, Lieutenant Frolac, or any of the Rathii patrols crisscrossing the desert.*

The unassailable truth came to him in a rush. Mocklen was a traitor! The colonel had given himself away by a hundred clues, none of which Rogur recognized until this moment. Mocklen's soft treatment of his men, his sympathy for the wandering Vec tribesmen, his total control over communications going in and out of the fort—all necessary deeds of a turncoat.

But what was Mocklen's game? To undermine the authority of the evincar, of course, but that was strategy. What was his immediate goal?

That too, became clear to Rogur all too quickly. The sudden appearance of a previously unknown rebel band under Sro Valik could not be a coincidence. Mocklen intended to turn Tabala over to the rebels. With the fort as a secure base, Valik could rally all the tribes to him and seize control of the province before loyal forces could be mustered against him. . . .

Rogur gathered up the percher cages and hurried from the room. Jostled, the perchers piped and chattered. Rogur shouted, "Shut up! Shut up!" at the creatures, but the perchers only chattered faster and faster until his past commands became unintelligible peeps.

* * * * *

Young Vordren, asleep in his lonely room high in the fort's rafters, was shaken awake by a wild-eyed general.

"Sir?" he quavered, clutching a thin pillow to his chest.

"Messages," Rogur intoned. He held out two cages full of shrilly piping perchers. "I must send some messages!"

Vordren glanced at the skylight slit overhead. "It's dark, sir. Perchers won't fly when it's dark."

Rogur pushed his reddened, sweat-streaming face close

to Vordren's. "Is that true? Or is it one of *his* lies?"

"Whose lies, my lord?" asked the terrified youth.

Rogur didn't answer, but pushed the cages on the supine Vordren. "To the roof!" he exclaimed. "My messages must go out at once!"

Barefoot, Vordren hastened up the steps to the roof, clutching the cages to his chest. Rogur's heavy tread behind him spurred Vordren onward and upward.

It was still dark. The usually inky blackness of Rath's night sky was highlighted now and then by faint luminous flashes, like lightning high in the roiling gray clouds. Ordinary inhabitants of Rath called the silent display "starfire," a curious term from people who had never seen true stars.

Vordren followed a narrow catwalk to the edge of the parapet. Rogur stalked behind him, face set in a mask of inner turmoil.

The boy held out a percher to the general. "Speak your message, sir," he said timorously.

To Vordren's surprise, Rogur took the percher carefully, almost tenderly, tucking it under one arm and stroking its long, skin-covered skull.

"To His Majesty, the evincar of Rath, from Rogur, light-general of the Royal Army, lord of Peximir, presently stationed at Tabala—"

"That's more than the little fella can remember," Vordren said.

Showing no anger, Rogur set the percher aside and took another. When he had spoken twenty words or so, he set the animal aside and continued his message on the next. He explained his discovery of Mocklen's treachery, the threat to Tabala and the whole northern desert. By the time he was done, only one percher remained of the dozen he'd brought from Mocklen's hidden cache.

"Send them," he said.

"General, they won't leave in the dark—"

"Send them!"

Trembling, Vordren carried the first percher to the edge of the parapet and flung it into the air. It circled the fort, flying slowly, unable to orient itself without daylight.

Starfire flashed overhead. It was the palest of light, like white sparks at the bottom of a deep well, but it affected the percher. After two circuits of the fort, the first creature bore off into the night – west, not south as Rogur wanted.

“You see?” the general said, laughing. “Your animals follow orders better than my men do!”

One by one Vordren launched the perchers. They circled until starfire flared above them, and then they angled away at whatever direction they chose. Eleven beasts flew out, each on a different bearing of the compass. Vordren was appalled. They’d probably never see any of them again. The perchers would fly aimlessly around the desert until heat and exhaustion claimed them. It was a wretched waste.

For his part, Rogur seemed pleased. He came slowly to the rim of the roof, watching the random flickering in the dense clouds.

“Farewell, loyal creatures,” he said. “My life goes out on your wings!”

Vordren glanced nervously at Rogur. “Is that all, sir?”

“All? No. Tell me, boy, how long have you served Colonel Mocklen?”

“Two years, sir.”

“You owe him much.” It was not a question, so Vordren didn’t answer. “How long have you known about his treason?”

“I don’t know anything about no treason, sir, not a thing! The colonel is a very good officer!”

A dagger appeared in Rogur’s fist. “You always handled the perchers for him, didn’t you? Whether you’re part of it or not, you’re too loyal to that traitor for me to trust.”

Seeing the blade, Vordren put up his hands and backed away. “No, sir, please! I’ve done nothing wrong, sir, nothing!”

Rogur advanced just two steps before the panicked boy

lost track of where he was and slipped over the edge. He grabbed at the projecting stone ledge, but he couldn't halt his plunge and disappeared with a final, anguished cry.

Face highlighted by ghostly starfire, Rogur shrugged and sheathed his unbloodied weapon.

* * * * *

Daylight slowly roused him. Rogur opened his eyes, yawned, and took in the morning. On the bed beside him lay his report, detailing in sixteen sheets of foolscap his discovery of the plot to subvert the evincar's rule in the desert. The last half page was blank. Rogur left room to describe the capture, trial, and execution of the archtraitor Mocklen.

In full battle array, he went forth to the main hall, calling for Nidmon and his guards. No one came running or even replied. Irritated, Rogur kicked open the door of the hall, meaning to dress down any soldiers he found within, idling over breakfast.

The hall was barren.

Puzzled, he went to the hearth. The ashes were cold. No one had cooked here since supper last night.

Hurrying through the inner yard, bawling for his men, or any men, to answer him, Rogur found only solitude. Alarmed, he ran into the outer courtyard, where soldiers of the 62nd Company should have been manning the walls. No one was there. Racing along the shaded path between the inner and outer walls, Rogur called again and again to his retinue. Echoes off the hard stone walls were his only answer.

He circumnavigated Tabala, finding no one at all. When Rogur reached the main gate, he saw it was ajar. Like a sleepwalker he approached it. Leaning on the gate, he felt resistance.

There was a body blocking the portal open. Rogur was so relieved to see someone, even dead, he laughed aloud. Hauling back the gate, he stood over the corpse. It was his

second-in-command, Captain Nidmon. His throat had been cut.

Rogur now felt truly alone. He couldn't begin to imagine what had happened to his soldiers. Had the entire garrison deserted, or was this some ploy of the rebels?

Rogur wandered outside. The wind was up, driving loose grit into his eyes. Turning away, he noticed that the nomads' camp was gone. Tant Leva and her people had departed before daylight too. Sword drawn, Rogur made his way toward the only thing the nomads had left behind—a collapsed tent, now flapping in the northerly airs.

He didn't think the Vec ever abandoned any useful object, but on closer inspection he saw why they left this tent. Square in the center of the tattered canvas was the shattered body of Mocklen's aide, Vordren. Rogur hadn't planned for Vordren to drop on the Vec like this, but it was a neat trick. He laughed again, thinking of Tant Leva's face when this little bouquet arrived.

A distant metallic clanking reached his ears. Whirling, he saw movement on the road. Sure enough, there was a sizable formation moving steadily along the west road, directly toward Tabala's main gate. A relief column from Ematzin, or the return of one of the garrison's patrols?

Rogur ran up the stone ramp that joined the road to the gate. From that slight elevation he could see the approaching column was substantial—several hundred strong, at least. He was about to shout and wave to them when the wind scoured across the moving line of men, whipping up their dirt-colored robes. The cry died in Rogur's throat. Rathi soldiers didn't wear robes. Vec nomads did.

Seized with panic, he ran inside and strained against the heavy windlass to shut the gate. Once it was closed, he tried to drag the heavy bolts across to bar the entrance. The bottom bolt he managed, but he couldn't get enough grip on the high bolt to shift it. He gave up and fled deeper into the fort. The inner gate closed smoothly, propelled by a neat

system of counterweights. He locked the mechanism. Tabala was sealed tight.

He had no illusions about his safety. Without men on the walls, the rebels would find their way in. What Rogur prayed for was the timely return of loyal troops. They were his only hope.

From the parapet he could see the Vec wending their way toward the fort. As a gesture of defiance he ran up the royal banner of Rath. It crackled in the breeze.

Spotting the newly raised flag, the enemy halted. Part of the column broke apart, the robed figures dashing across the heat-baked stone field in both directions. They surrounded the fort with a sparse line, kneeling under their voluminous, tent-like garments. The rest of the column closed up and resumed their march.

Rogur remembered his seefar. He fetched it from his quarters and returned to the roof, curious to see the face of Sro Valik, the rebel bold enough to attack a Rathi fortress. Scanning the moving men below, he made out few faces; their sun hoods effectively screened them from view. It infuriated him to see so many rebels were equipped with Rathi arms, claimed from the fallen men of Zolyat's command, no doubt.

The rebels did not halt a safe distance from the walls, but came straight on, as if they knew no one was inside to shoot at them. Tabala echoed with booms as they hammered on the gate. Fools, Rogur mused. Bare hands would never dent the stout iron door.

The hammering died away. Lying prone on the parapet, Rogur peered over the edge with the seefar. His heart raced at what he saw. The rebels were forming a human ladder, a pyramid of arms and legs to boost a few intrepid scouts to the arrow loops halfway up the wall!

In his haste, Rogur dropped the seefar. It ricocheted off the outward-sloping wall as it fell, finally shattering on the ground. The rebels standing back from the human ladder

saw it smash. Tracking upward, they spied Rogur looking down on them.

Disdaining cover, the general rose and shook his fist at the insolent tribesmen. He drew his sword and stormed down the stairs. Alone or not, he would defend his post to the last stroke, to the last drop of his blood!

By the time he reached the outer yard, rebels were dropping from the interior battlement to the ground. Shouting the evincar's name, Rogur charged them. To his surprise, they scattered rather than giving battle. He ended up chasing a trio of robed intruders down the concourse.

"Stand and fight, wretched cowards!" he howled. They would not. When he paused, they stopped. When he pressed his pursuit, they ran. It was infuriating.

Too late Rogur realized their ploy. While a few rebels lured him away, others opened the main gate. The clang of massed weapons behind him halted Rogur's fruitless pursuit. The enemy was inside!

Cold fury filled him. Setting his sword on his shoulder, he faced about and marched back to the main gate. By the time he rounded the curve of the inner wall, he saw the rebels drawn up in close order across the courtyard. They made a formal phalanx, shoulder to shoulder, with blades bared. Their discipline surprised him.

Twenty yards from the hedge of sword and spear points, he halted. Spreading his arms wide, Rogur shouted, "I am Rogur, light-general of Rath! Take me if you dare!"

The ranks parted and a single nomad emerged. He was stoutly built, broad-shouldered and barrel-chested. Yards of homespun swathed him. A bare sword gleamed in his hand.

"A champion, eh? Come forward, and I'll show you how a Rathi lord fights!"

With his swordless hand, the big Vec pulled back his sun hood.

"Mocklen!"

The commander of the 62nd Company stood calmly,

saying nothing. After a moment of astonishment, the general throated a blood-curdling howl and launched himself at Mocklen.

"Die, traitor! Die a thousand times!"

Mocklen easily parried Rogur's wild thrust. They traded many furious cuts while Rogur yelled imprecations. He was half Mocklen's age, but the colonel was a lifelong warrior. In short order he struck the sword from Rogur's hand. When it clattered to the pavement, the men behind Mocklen broke ranks, surrounding the general and securing his lost blade.

"All right," said Rogur, panting. "You've won. Kill me, if you dare! But know this—all that has transpired here is known to the Stronghold! Retribution will come, terrible retribution!"

"Indeed?" Mocklen replied, sheathing his sword. "How did you convey this information?"

"I found your cache of perchers! I sent them out again, with true messages this time!"

"You sent perchers to the Stronghold, from here?" Rogur nodded gravely. "No percher living can fly so far. Not one will survive."

Rogur's smooth pale face twitched. "Then the garrison at Ematzin will come—"

Mocklen shook his head. "Show him, men."

The rebels crowded around them threw off their robes and hoods, revealing themselves to be Rathi soldiers, every one a member of the 62nd Company.

"You're all rebels!" Rogur gasped.

"No."

"You deny it? Every act you've committed since I arrived has been treasonous!"

Mocklen eyed him coldly. "You talk too much, General. It's time I enlightened you to the facts."

He beckoned Rogur to follow him. The general showed no inclination to move, so four soldiers seized him and dragged him along. Mocklen led the struggling man into

the main hall. Taking a seat at the center table before the cook's hearth, Mocklen sent one soldier away with whispered commands. The remaining three stood behind Rogur.

"You're undone, General," Mocklen said, folding his hands in front of him in the manner of a judge. "Nothing you imagine has happened, happened."

"What a pathetic defense," sneered Rogur. "I know all! You've conspired with the Vec rebel Sro Valik to subvert the evincar's rule in this province!"

"No."

"How can you deny it?"

"I can, based on the simple fact there is no Sro Valik and never has been."

Rogur was nonplused by the colonel's bald assertion. He said nothing until the soldier Mocklen had sent out returned with two others, bearing a moderately sized chest between them. Two men in officer's garb accompanied the chest. At Mocklen's order, the chest was placed beside him on the table. The officers stood by, waiting.

"Tell the general your names," said Mocklen.

"I am Zolyat, captain, 62nd Company," said a balding Dal. The scar-faced younger man next to him added he was Lieutenant Frolac.

"When you left Tabala some days ago on patrol, Captain, where did you go?" asked Mocklen.

"To the village of Qa," Zolyat replied.

"And what happened there?"

"Nothing, sir. We camped outside the village for four days and then marched west to Galgal Basin to rendezvous with Lieutenant Frolac and Lieutenant Zeenka's patrols."

"You encountered no hostile activity?"

"None, sir," Frolac concurred with the captain's testimony.

Mocklen leaned forward. "Who ordered you to make these maneuvers?"

Zolyat betrayed mild confusion at being asked such a question. "Why, you did, sir."

Mocklen sat back. "I did. Thank you, Captain, Lieutenant. You are dismissed."

The colonel unlocked the chest and opened it. He took out the Dread Lord's letter appointing Rogur to command at Tabala. "There is no Sro Valik. I created him. This whole crisis, the rebellion in the desert, was a sham. False dispatches and percher messages convinced you a full-scale rebellion was underway, including treason in the Tabala garrison," Mocklen said.

Stunned, Rogur said, "Ridiculous! I don't believe it!"

Mocklen stood. "I've been a soldier for forty years. One doesn't live so long in the army without knowing who's a fool and who's to be feared." He pushed Rogur's introductory scroll across the table. "I obey orders, General."

With trembling hands, Rogur picked up the parchment. He spread the curling ends and saw at once the document was not as he remembered it. Between the lines of flowing cursive script, expertly penned by a scribe at the Stronghold, were other letters—thicker, blockier, written in a muddy brown ink. Rogur recognized the strange stain. A hidden message had been written in invisible ink and brought to light by heating the parchment.

"Read it," said Mocklen.

"To Colonel Mocklen il-Dal, 62nd Company: Greetings . . . the bearer of this document, Rogur of Peximir, has offended the honor of the army. He has too many friends at court for a formal trial and too much influence with the evincar's inner circle to be assassinated. I therefore commend him to your hands. He is not to return alive—"

Rogur's fingers curled into fists, crumpling the scroll. Mocklen nodded to the guards, who pried the scroll from his anguished grip.

Mocklen took back the document and read the rest himself. *"Arrange for him to die in some accident in the desert, or*

exploit his bleating arrogance in some way to cause his fall. The method I leave to you. I do not wish to see his face again or hear his name unless it is to announce his death. The army cannot afford blunderers and fools who rise to high rank only because of their connections at court.' "Mocklen looked up. "Signed, by his hand, the Dread Lord himself."

He spread a number of other documents on the table. "This is a full account of your tenure here, General. Your pointless cruelties. Your persecution of harmless, loyal nomads. Your murder of my aide, Vordren, just last night."

A sly look came to the trapped man's face. "What about my man, Nidmon? Who killed him?"

"Your own retainers. I questioned them myself. When you drove poor Vordren off the parapet, Tant Leva's people panicked and fled. Nidmon tried to stop them. His comrades cut his throat and ran away, believing the fort was doomed to fall into rebel hands. They planned to run to Ematzin and lie that they were the only survivors of a rebel attack." Mocklen clucked his tongue. "Worthy followers for a general like you!"

The soldiers grabbed Rogur, pinning his arms. He said, "Is this the end? First the dungeon, then a noose?"

"What else?"

Harsh pride filled Rogur's face and voice. "Let me resolve the Dread Lord's problem myself."

Mocklen studied him closely and then agreed. The soldiers released him.

"I need a blade," said Rogur.

Mocklen held out his personal dagger pommel first. Lowering his head, Rogur accepted the weapon.

"Thank you," he said. Then he slashed at Mocklen's throat.

The colonel threw himself back, saving his life but not his chin. Keen steel raked over Mocklen's face. Warm blood flowed.

Behind Rogur, the soldiers drew swords and tried to

intervene. Rogur promptly forgot the colonel and attacked them, driving the dagger into the nearest man's armpit. He wrenched the sword from the dying man's grasp and flung himself back. Mocklen got his sword out and blocked Rogur from the table, lest he try to destroy the documents detailing his crimes and incompetence.

"You can't escape," Mocklen said. "You're alone!"

Rogur spat. "Finally I have allies I can trust!"

He ran to the stairs. Mocklen called for help, and a squad chased Rogur up the steps. The desperate general ambushed them twice, killing one man and wounding two more before they boxed him in at the top of the citadel.

Breathing hard, Rogur backed up the steps to the roof. The wary soldiers edged forward, keeping just out of thrusting range.

Rathi dusk was a gray, fading time of day, when shadows did not lengthen so much as thicken. When Rogur emerged on the roof, the wind had died with the day, and the last streaks of light were suffocating under the heavy mantle of clouds.

Mocklen arrived with more soldiers. "There's nowhere to run," he called. "Give up!"

"And die in a stinking cell like common trash? No thank you! Anyone tired of life is welcome to try to subdue me!"

They did try, in sections of five at a time. With the dexterity of a doomed man, Rogur fought them off until he was staggering from exertion.

"Enough cheap heroics," Mocklen said. "Archers, do your job."

Eight crossbowmen formed a double line, the front men kneeling. Rogur cursed and threw his stolen sword at them. Before it hit the slates, the bowmen riddled him with bolts. He reeled backward, disappearing over the parapet.

His sword went wide, crashing into the catwalk Vordren had used to launch perchers. A covey of yellow-skinned

creatures erupted, screeching. They circled as Mocklen and his men went to the edge and looked down.

The colonel said, "I will inform the Dread Lord his wishes have been carried out."

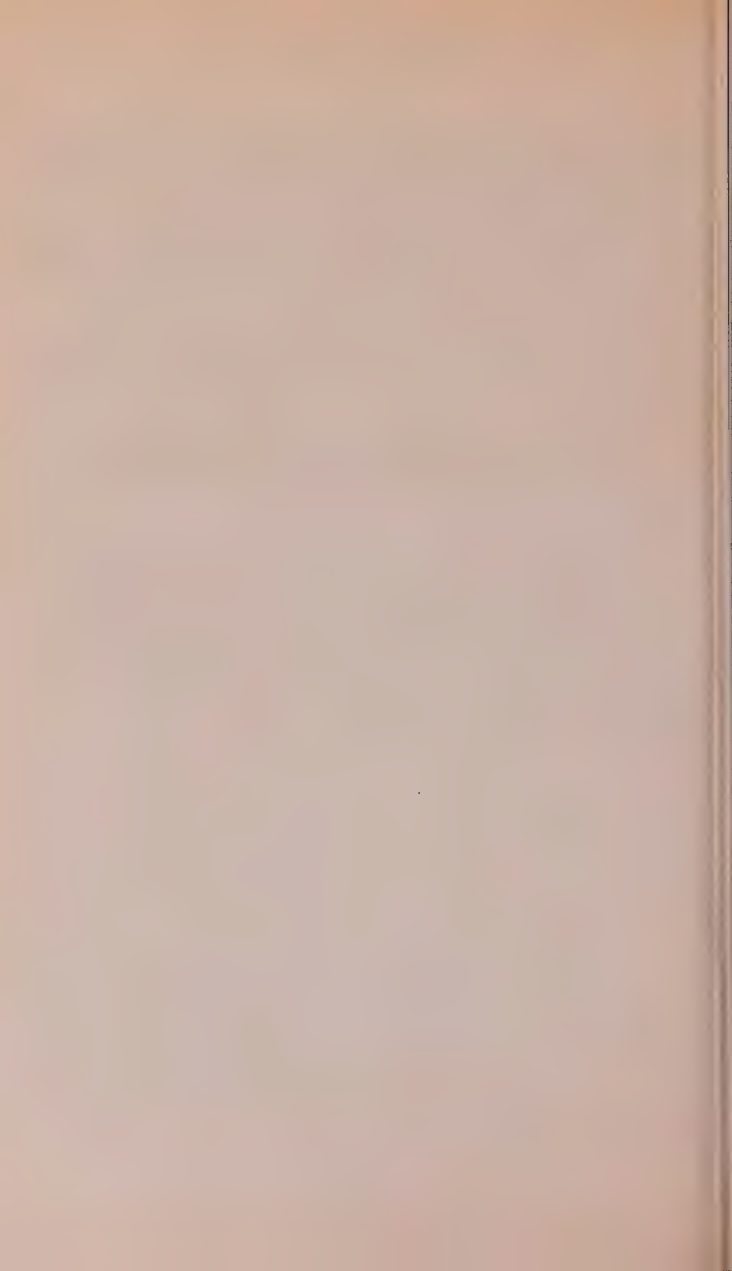
The soldiers filed down the steps, leaving Mocklen alone on the roof. It was fully night by then, and the first flickers of starfire began in the clouds.

A percher fluttered in, alighting on the catwalk. It shifted nervously as Mocklen approached, but allowed itself to be coaxed into his broad hand. The beast was parched and starving.

On a whim, Mocklen pressed it for its message. Rogur's voice, high and shrill, emerged from the creature's beak:

"I'm alone, surrounded by enemies! Surrounded! They're all around! Send help, at once!"

Of all the perchers in Tabala's flock, this one alone he preserved from further work. It lived the rest of its life in a cage on his desk. The message in its brain never faded, and from time to time as Mocklen lay on the soft bed installed in his quarters, watching and listening to the magical tapestry on the wall, he prodded the percher to repeat Rogur's plea—just so he would not forget.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tom Dupree is a former newsman, adman, critic, and editor. His work has appeared in a number of science fiction, fantasy, and horror anthologies, including *The Dragons of Magic* and the FORGOTTEN REALMS collections *Realms of Magic* and *Realms of the Arcane*. He lives in New York City. You can say hi by emailing Tomdupree@aol.com.

Denise R. Graham lives in the desert with her husband Ron and their polysyllabic cat. Clan motto: dry heat my eye. Her tales of fantasy and mystery have appeared in such publications as *Wizards of the Coast's Dragons of Magic* anthology and *Woman's World* magazine. Her hobbies include hiking, travel, and mental instability. She is a grateful member of East Valley Writers.

Allison Lassieur has published more than forty books, including a novel with *Wizards of the Coast*—*LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS: The Unicorn*. She lives in a one-hundred-year-old Pennsylvania house with her husband Chuck.

Jess Lebow is a swell guy. Only a few people have ever told him to his face that he's not, and he doesn't believe those people anyway. He thinks they were probably angry with him at the time, and who can trust an angry person? Jess's first novel, *Wind of War*, was released last December, and he's currently working on the second book in the latest *MAGIC: THE GATHERING* cycle, due out in January 2004.

Will McDermott has clawed his way from total obscurity to relative obscurity in just a few short years. His writing credits include the *MAGIC: THE GATHERING* novel, *Judgment*, and two previous *MAGIC* short stories in *The Myths of Magic* and *The Secrets of Magic* anthologies. He has just finished writing his second novel, *The Four Moons of Mirroden*, which will be published by *Wizards of the Coast* in late 2003. Will lives in Hamburg, New York, with his

comely wife, three young ruffians, and one large, insane dog.

Scott McGough has been writing fiction to amuse himself and his friends since elementary school. This is his fourth consecutive appearance in *MAGIC* anthologies; he has also authored the novel *Chainer's Torment* and is currently completing the Legends II trilogy, *Assassin's Blade*, *Emperor's Fist*, and *Champion's Trial*. For this anthology, Scott spent twelve years living with a nekoru queen, researching the attitude in order to get it just right.

Vance Moore was born in Sunnyside, Washington, in 1967. He learned to read at an early age and devoured the childhood classics of the fantastic—Dr. Seuss, fairy tales, Dr. Dolittle, Oz. He is an avid theater patron and regularly pilgrimages to Ashland and San Francisco. He lives in Bellingham, Washington. His other interests include singing, history, and a smattering of debate. He has written the novels *Odyssey* and *Prophecy* as well as several stories for *Wizards of the Coast*.

Born and raised in Wisconsin, **Steven Schend** has found a new home among the wooded mountains of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. This is Steven's third published short story. He has been an editor and designer for TSR, Inc., *Wizards of the Coast*, *Bastion Press*, and *Green Ronin* over the past twelve years, accumulating more than fifty writing, design, and editorial credits. He's worked on everything from superheroes to science fiction and space opera to high fantasy worlds. For now, though, he's quite content to live in this world and try to make his little corner of it better.

Origins Award-winning novelist **Stephen D. Sullivan** has a basement full of projects that he's worked on over the last twenty-plus years. The stacks include *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*,

The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horrors comic, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, DRAGONLANCE, Speed Racer, Chill, Darkwing Duck, The Twilight Empire™, and many, many others. He wrote three of the original seven L5R samurai fantasy novels: *The Scorpion*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Lion* — the last of which garnered a nice trophy (Best Game-Related Novel, 2001) to add to his clutter. Steve's newest book is DRAGONLANCE Crossroads: *The Dragon Isles*. Check out www.sdsullivan.com and www.alliterates.com.

Little is known about **Tim Ryan**, but several anecdotes are generally accepted as fact. He lives a nomadic life, shuffling between the frenetic lights of Manhattan and the pastoral pleasantness of Indianapolis. He was once snubbed by a French waiter in the Gare du Nord and thrown out of a McDonald's in Frankfurt. He cannot properly pronounce the word "croissant" and refuses to eat burned food. His wife is on the pope's short list for canonization.

Paul B. Thompson is the author of a dozen novels, including DRAGONLANCE collaborations with Tonya Cook, and many shorter works. His newest works include a solo DRAGONLANCE novel, *The Middle of Nowhere*, and the beginning of a new trilogy on the Ergoth Empire, *A Warrior's Journey*. He likes to return when he can to the MAGIC universe, as it gives him a chance to explore the darker dimensions of his imagination. Paul lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with his wife, Elizabeth, and new baby daughter, Sara.

Brian Thomsen, former director of TSR's books and magazine division, has previously authored over forty short stories, two FORGOTTEN REALMS novels, and various works of nonfiction. He has edited collections of the works of Abrose Bierce and Theodore Roosevelt, and a critically acclaimed compendium of American literature, *The American Fantasy Tradition*. He resides in Brooklyn.



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