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Bardic Runes XIII



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RUNEFOLKS

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The reproductive quality is thanks to LASER ZONE.

Many thanks to all who aided in the wide geographical diffusion of the twelfth issue.

Those who have contributed art and fiction are listed above as well as at the back.

May this thirteenth issue provide the reader with at least as much pleasure as the previous ones.

BARDIC RUNES

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THE CURSED STONE

Judy L. Tucker

The crystal sparkled moonbright in the palm of Whisper's hand. It was beautiful, delicate. And worth a king's ransom. Not to mention trouble. She wanted to unload it. A thief would. She should, but Indigo would not have it.

Well, she might as well pick the bone clean. "Let me sell it, Indy."

"We made a bargain with Cyrus," Indigo cut in gently. "You have your fine blade, and I," she smiled lovingly at the lap harp braced between her knees, "have a harp-pack for Moonsbreath. She'll not have to suffer the elements any longer."

Damn honourable bard. I should have known better than to hook up with her. She'd have me be like her. Respectable. Fate worse than death. Whisper changed her tactic. "Redic will try to take it."

"She has tried twice," Indigo said, matter-of-factly, "and failed."

Whisper looked over at Indigo and smiled. "You've heard the saying, 'third time's a charm'. The charm is about to happen. Look around you," she said, "this is a perfect place for an ambush."

Indigo set her harp aside. "I may not fight like you," she said quietly, "but I am not unarmed. My strength comes from my music. It is all I need." She smiled. "Come, rest beside me. Moonsbreath will keep watch."

Whisper peered at the shadows. Then she flicked a glance at the harp. It made as good a watchdog as any, she supposed. "All right."

* * *

Whisper woke to the glowing harp. It dazzled her eyes. It begins, she thought, and grabbed the crystal. She stuffed it in her shirt and faded into the woods before Indigo had time to warn her. Blade in hand, Whisper wove through the trees.

One man found her before she found him. He tried an unsuccessful backstab. She pulled the knife out of the dead man's gut and wiped it clean on his shirt.

Better him than me. A foul odour alerted Whisper to her next attacker. He came out of the brush with a blade in each hand and twirling them expertly, he lunged. The first blade missed, but the second tore into the fabric of her shirt. She winced as the blade burned a bloody trail across her ribs. It hurt, but it wasn't deep.

She parried, then danced away. Her muscles cramped, almost crippling her as his blades came down and lopped off a chunk of her glorious

golden hair.

Now she was angry. Whisper prided herself on her beautiful long hair. It made her look uncommonly pretty, pretty enough to turn a noble's head on many occasions.

She danced, then jabbed. He parried. She jabbed again and broke through his defence long enough to nick his heartbreast.

However, the smell of him almost knocked her off her feet. It wore her down. She was no match for the man's strength, but she made up for that in speed. It was her dancing feet and quick wit that finally did him in.

Threading her way around the camp, she saw Indigo with her own struggle, battling a tall long-legged woman with short-cropped red hair.

Magic flared from the woman's fingers and flew at Indigo. Indigo intercepted it with her own magic, her music, using the harp as her vessel.

"You have promise," the woman said. "I would hate to see it wither. Give me the crystal and I shall spare you."

Stupid fool. Do you think Indy would give it to you, Redic, if she had it? She would die trying to keep it from you.

The woman broke off speech to scan the trees. Whisper sucked in her breath and hid in shadow. Hell. Did the woman read minds?

Indigo paused in her magic weaving. "The crystal does not belong to you."

"Fool, it will be mine!" She spread her hands wide. "I warned you. Now feel my power!"

Magic fire did not encompass the bard, but silence did. Indigo looked up. She opened her mouth to sing and the words died noiselessly. The harp in her lap lay quiet.

Whisper inched her way into the camp. She watched as Redic took out a long knife, raised it, said words that were not heard and plunged the dagger down. Indigo rose up and fought back with Moonsbreath.

Whisper threw off caution and sprang, throwing her dagger hard. The dagger tip struck the woman in the middle of the back. Whisper smiled in grim satisfaction. She retrieved the dagger and then dragged the woman out of camp. She turned to Indigo, but the bard was not breathing. A red stain had spread across Indigo's chest and in its center was the witch's knife.

"Stupid fool!" Whisper muttered, pulling out the knife with an angry jerk and throwing it toward the trees. She grabbed Indigo in her arms and rocked her. "I told you that you'd get yourself killed."

In the silence, Indigo's harp began to sing. Redic's death, Whisper mused, had broken the witch's spell. She eased Indigo down. The crystal rolled out of her shirt and fell on Indigo's breast.

The crystal flared. A bright light snaked out and surrounded Indigo's chest. Whisper reached out to snatch the crystal and moaned as the

crystal burned her hand.

Indigo drew in a breath as her eyes flickered open. She gasped, smiled at Whisper and held out her hand. "Now you know why Cyrus's people want it back."

"You knew its power all this time and you didn't tell me?"

Indigo reached up and caressed Whisper's cheek. "There are some things that are best left unsaid. Come hold me. I am cold. Tomorrow we will deliver the crystal."

Whisper curled next to Indigo and put her arms around her waist. She whispered into her ear, "Think of the gold it would bring."

Indigo chuckled lightly. "No. In human hands it would be an instrument of evil and death instead of healing. Go to sleep."

Whisper sighed and dreamed of the gold coins she could have if she didn't listen to Indigo. Damn honourable bard.

THE FURY OF THE FAITHFUL

D.K. Latta

The full moon gilded the crests of the black water while the air was sultry, the absence of even the promise of a breeze lending a pernicious mood to the late hour. Lightly armoured sentries stood upon the battlements, helmets flaring like balefires when the lantern light struck them. The men peered down into the black depths that licked sleepily at the mossy ramparts fronting the sea.

Katharzi'kan moved silently about his men, his sandalled feet as soft as leaves upon the stone. His cape of angry crimson was thrown back from his left shoulder to better expose his talwar. The drums had been voiceless for nearly two hours, their wafting cadence stilled, and the subsequent waiting made even the bravest shift from foot to foot.

He stopped beside a tall man whose graven features were scars bleached colourless by the passage of time. The older man, called Athzir, glanced at him with dark eyes that scintillated in the torchlight. Katharzi'kan breathed shallowly and stared at the night, listening to the dull, disconcertingly muted sound of the gently lapping tide. Athzir placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Go to your woman," he rumbled quietly. "Anticipation lays its clammy hand more heavily upon her breast than for you or me."

Katharzi'kan stared at his old friend wordlessly, then glanced unsurely again upon the water.

"You will hear the warning bell if we are attacked."

A shadow of a weary smile turned the younger man's lips. He whirled and left the battlement.

He parted the curtain and stared into the chamber beyond. The room was decked with radiant gold and silver furnishings, the walls dressed in complex tapestries, soft silk curtains twisted lazily in the breeze ruffling the glowing torches. It was the finest room in the castle, yet it paled beside the alluring vision reclining upon a scarlet divan. She was as beautiful as a carving plucked from the most ambitious dream of a lovestruck sculptor. Her lips were full and red. Her large, emerald eyes sparkled as she held a scroll spread between her hands; he knew she did not read it, though she tried. Her concentration was marred by worry.

Her alabaster skin shone smooth and soft as silk. Her long raven hair was as woven from the very stuff of midnight. She was slender, yet her full breasts overflowed her décolletage. She wore a long, filmy white gown exposing shapely legs that tapered delicately to crossed feet; she lay stretched upon the cushions, gold anklets glittering.

She espied him and instantly tossed aside her reading. Her bare feet padding softly on the marble floor, she ran and threw her arms about his neck.

"My love," she breathed into his ear, crushing him to her, "are they..."

He stroked her black tresses and looked into her eyes. "No. I came merely to see to your needs, and to spend some time at your side." With a thumb he absently traced her perfect lips.

"Then love me," she said, a tinge of desperation to her words. She pulled him by the hand deeper into the room. "I fear we may never have another night."

As he tumbled with her upon the divan's lush cushions, he said, "We will have many years to live and love and grow old. You will..."

"Hush," she said, silencing his hollow bravado with a kiss.

And as he freed her from her garments, unveiling every aspect of her incandescent beauty, memories came to him.

Six months previous, rats in the hold of his vessel, The Squid's Repast, had gnawed their supplies down to nothing, while staying one step ahead of the cooking pot themselves. He had a cargo of inedible satin he had traded for in Caroul-Tenad, was still a day from home, and he and his crew had not eaten in five.

It was midnight when they came abreast the dark isle of Stagiath. The sea was black as jet, yet glowed in spots with a weird phosphorescence. The strand was ivory in the moonlight and the uppermost tips of the jungle

flowing up the acclivity were laced with the vaporous glow of the lunar face. A sweet floral fragrance wafted to him tentatively upon the light breeze.

A bird cawed from the shadows; otherwise the land was breathless.

"Fruit," suggested Katharzi'kan, leaning upon the gunwale. "Enough to dull our hunger."

Athzir scowled but said nothing. Stagiath was rumoured to be the meeting ground of Shamoboh cultists, who worshipped their most ancient goddess with a zealotry unsurpassed. However, it was the unknown, thought Katharzi'kan, that draped the cult in fearsome cloaks. It was known only that they dressed in ebon robes and tattooed their faces with chalk-white pigment, giving a follower the aspect of a death's-head. Their beliefs and the nature of their deity remained a mystery.

He rubbed his jaw unconsciously. "We will launch a skiff," he said at last. "A small party will search for victuals. The place appears desolate enough."

"Aye," grumbled Athzir resignedly.

Six men landed upon the moist beach: among them Katharzi'kan and Athzir. They moved cautiously inland, bearing torches through the dense jungle. Dates, pineapples and berries they gathered by torchlight and in silence. It was Athzir who touched his shoulder at last, and glancing about them at the impenetrable darkness pressed beneath the eerie stillness, whispered, "We have enough to keep us on our feet."

"Aye," Katharzi'kan agreed, then stopped. "What is that yonder?" He indicated a streak of whiteness glimpsed through the dark branches and ancient boles.

Athzir frowned. "I know not and care less. Let us be away from here."

"Lead the men back to the beach and await me." He grinned at his friend. "I, at least, am curious to see something of these cultists and their deity."

Athzir frowned even deeper as, without a torch, Katharzi'kan slipped soundlessly away. In moments the shadows had consumed him entirely.

Katharzi'kan let moon and starlight gild his path. Even then he moved as much by feel as by sight. Always ahead, like some ivory treasure dangled before a slave to avarice, flashes of whiteness led him deeper into the woods. And always he was surrounded by sound-consuming silence.

He came to a clearing and hesitated before the last branches strung lattice-like across his path, still gleaning only an inkling of what lay beyond. His step faltered for just a moment as he realized how far he had come in this alien place. He inhaled deeply of the sweet air, then in a rustle of leaves he squeezed through.

The whiteness he had espied revealed itself to be a lone fluted pillar, canted drunkenly and standing to one side of the open ground. Small, hand-fashioned stones rose like grave markers amid the tall grass. There were the remnants of a wall that might once have enclosed the clearing in the centre of which was a small building like an open crypt, its interior draped in shadow. The place reeked of antiquity and he could not identify the glyphs upon the markers. He remembered another tale he had heard: that the followers of Shamoboh had merely resurrected or at least adopted the trappings of a much older religion. In addition to the untrimmed grass and the cracks clinging like webs to the stones and pillars, wild creepers and vines hungrily covered most of the rock and plaster structures, like spindly tendrils of some entity unknown to the mind of man.

The grass rustled as he strode forward, a brazen interloper upon this hoary glebe. As he approached the shrine, an unfamiliar shiver rushed up his spine; yet he was bull-headedly determined to glimpse Shamoboh. A pedestal sprouted between the walls, nestled among the shadows. Upon it there was nothing. Even the likeness of their unknown goddess had long since vanished, no doubt stolen by pirates centuries ago, if indeed it had ever existed.

He tried to imagine the ebon-cloaked figures with their eerily marked faces kneeling before an empty temple in this long deserted hallowed ground. To what did they believe they were praying? To what were they praying? He shuddered, then whirled as branches parted noisily behind him. He reached for his weapon, then stopped.

A naked woman emerged from the bush and, seeing him, froze. Then she peered more closely and sobbed in desperate relief. She ran to him, and he stared, made dumb by the sudden materialization of this pale apparition on an island he had thought temporarily deserted. As well, her beauty, clothed only in the brilliance of moonlight, dazzled him momentarily. Then, she was in his arms, trembling.

"You're not one of them," she gasped, glancing furtively about her as might a wild animal. "So I implore you, help me!"

"One of whom? Steady, girl. Tell me whom you fear."

She looked at him, jet hair cascading wildly about her face, green eyes brimming with desperate supplication. "The followers of Shamoboh. I am their prisoner and slave. They keep me as a part of their rituals. Please, do not let them retake me. Kill me if you must. I have no money, but..."

"Nor need you any," he interrupted. "No man of honour can do less than see you off this island and consider himself well paid just for the doing." He took her soft hand in his and started for the brush, belatedly realizing she was terrified of more than the distant possibility of a threat. Amorphous shadows pulled free of the stygian darkness infesting the trees.



Harsh voices mumbled unnaturally as bone-white visages stared out from ebon cowl.

Katharzi'kan scooped up a dead branch lying upon the ground, his knuckles turning white with the grip. "Stay close, and pray if you have a god to pray to." He swung and knocked the closest cultist off his feet, and bloodied the face of another as he flung his arm back again. Clutching her hand, he ran through the momentary gap, and they plunged into the forest, the brush swallowing them instantly.

"I have a skiff and men down on the beach," he gasped as he ran. "Have the cultists boats?"

"Not on this side of the island," she said breathlessly.

"Then we will make it," he said with forced confidence. Behind them he could hear the snapping of branches, the pounding of feet on soft earth, some closer than others.

He whirled and brought the branch down on the head of a robed figure almost on his heels. This sent the man sprawling dazed to the dirt. He made to strike again, but she stopped him with a hand upon his wrist.

"Leave him be," she said. "It is escape I want, not revenge." Suddenly her eyes flared as she peered past him at the shuddering flora. "Please! We must be away." She turned and her lithe white body flickered and disappeared into the darkness. Katharzi'kan raced after her, the blood pounding in his temples. Suddenly they were on open ground and half tumbling down an incline. Soft sand cushioned their clumsy efforts, and as he looked up, a grin broke his features. The skiff and five silhouettes stood waiting by the shore. Athzir stepped forward, eyes wide on seeing his friend's inexplicably frantic return, and with a naked woman.

"What...?"

"No time," gasped Katharzi'kan, hoisting the beautiful woman into the boat. "Cast off. Cast off!"

Black enshrouded figures burst from the brush and washed down the acclivity like the vanguard of a hellish army. Athzir uttered a startled curse, then heaved the skiff into the lapping water. Splashing noisily, he leapt on board, the other sailors flinging themselves likewise. Athzir punted away from the shallow water as two men slipped behind their oars and sent the light craft skimming on the glassy water.

The cultists hit the water in a noisy rain of flesh and cloth but, though only seconds had transpired, the small craft was already beyond their reach.

Katharzi'kan unhooked his cape and draped it over the woman's nude body. She shuddered, then touched his hand with her fingers and managed a frail smile. Then she looked away darkly. "They will not let me go gladly."

"Mayhap they will think it easier to find other prey."

"You do not know them. They will not be deprived so easily."

"Aye," agreed Athzir grimly. "The fanatic is driven by his beliefs as we are by the air we breathe. He is a veritable prisoner of them."

Emboldened by their narrow escape, Katharzi'kan said, "Have you seen Shamoboh? Her likeness?"

Head bowed, the woman quietly said, "I have never actually looked upon her, but they have. And what I have seen reflected in their eyes chills me more than you could know."

Athzir stared at her, stunned. "Then Shamoboh exists? A corporeal manifestation?"

"Aye." She began to tremble.

Katharzi'kan put an arm around her and held her comfortingly to him. Then he glanced at the dark island. Perhaps their escape had been narrower than he had imagined.

She spoke little of her incarceration after that and he did not press her. He offered her a room at his castle upon making port, at least until she had her own plans in order. By the end of the first week they were lovers.

When she was joyful, Katharzi'kan's heart was as light as a breeze. Her radiant smile seemed almost to sparkle off the very walls, to make even the sun seem drab, and her laughter was as the sighing of the wind. And all was blissful.

However, there always remained the rumours that the cultists of Shamoboh were being seen with greater and greater frequency in mainland cities and that they sought a raven-haired beauty. Then after six months of heaven, the rumours ceased and the drums began, echoing from some unknown place over the swells. The cultists no longer sought their prize. They had found her.

Katharzi'kan woke groggily to a bell clanging foggily in his head. His cheek rested on Anaczeriss' smooth belly, his arms wrapped about her naked hips. He shook his head, realizing that they both had dozed.

And again the bell was sounded.

With a curse, he flung himself to his feet, dragging on his clothes as Anaczeriss sat up, startled. "What?"

"The attack has begun." He buckled his belt, then kissed her hungrily. "Do not be afraid," he said as their lips parted. Then he ran from the room.

Moments later, bared talwar in hand, he burst out into the starlight and the frenzied roar of battle washing over the seaward battlement. Black-garbed forms surged over the walls, blades glinting in the lambent glare of torches. His men met them, and the clang of swords laden the warm night air with sanguineous portent. Already men lay bloodied upon the stone,

both white-faced cultists and his own loyal defenders.

He leapt into the thick of it, swinging his blade and slicing black cloth. Though a merchant, and his men sailors and attendants, they had bearded enough pirates in their day that the skills of war were not unfamiliar to them. Old Athzir shouldered up beside him, puffing in great gasps, his clothes darkly wet. Katharzi'kan spared him a worried glance.

"Not my own," the older man said, gesturing at the blood, "not mainly. They were upon us before we knew it. I am sorry." He blocked a cultist's blow and retaliated with a swing that sent the man sprawling upon the ground.

"No regrets," Katharzi'kan yelled, duelling with a stony-visaged cultist. "Just drive them over the wall!"

"Aye!" said Athzir. "Aye! Send them back!"

They fought for a timeless spell, the warmth of the air harrying them, till sweat mingled with blood and soaked the clothes about their bodies. Katharzi'kan bore a gash across his left thigh and another bleeding rent from hand to elbow but he was scarcely conscious of his wounds. One thought only pushed him on: Anaczeriss' safety. Then he spied cloaked shapes slide stealthily through the melee and disappear through the doorway leading to the castle's heart. Katharzi'kan gave chase.

He flung himself upon the backs of two of the descending figures. With a groan and a cry, three bodies tumbled down the stone steps in a tangle of limbs. He staggered to his feet and waved his blade warningly about him as shadow blobs closed in, a half dozen bone-white faces glaring at him. He parried, and spilt dark blood, but then something hit him across his head and he stumbled, warmth rushing down his cheek. He swung blindly. A cultist slipped inside his flailing guard and struck an ill-aimed blow that brought the flat of a sword across his crown. He slumped unconscious to the floor...

"Katharzi'kan? Katharzi'kan! Can you hear me?!"

He opened his eyes, thunder pulsing shudderingly in his head. He stared up blurrily at a craggy face. "Ath-Athzir?" he croaked.

"The cultists have retreated to their feluccas and are on their way to Stagiath by now. Katharzi'kan," he stopped, his words choked, "I have failed you."

Dawning horror filling him, he clumsily pushed away from the big man and stumbled to his feet. "No," he hissed, refusing to believe.

"When they retreated, I counted us favoured. Then I found you unconscious and ran on to your chambers. Anaczeriss is gone."

Leaning wearily against a wall, Katharzi'kan's eyes sparkled angrily. "We must follow, then. And tonight."

It was not, of course, quite so easy. Wounds needed tending,

weapons replacing, and Katharzi'kan's swiftest ship first had to be loaded with light landing vessels. In all, it was two hours ere they set out to reclaim the stolen Anaczeriss. Two hours behind, and a day's journey before them. He related Anaczeriss' tale to his men, her claim that something dwelt upon the island, whether true god or no, that was worshipped by the cultists. Yet, to a man, not one declined to accompany him.

They cut across the salty blue throughout the following day. A dark cloud of doubt shadowed them.

It was night again when a dozen small craft rode the tide up onto the sandy strand, and a score and a half of armed men crept stealthily up the slope to slip like dispelled dreams into the all-embracing darkness of the bush.

The rekindled echo of the drum washed cavernously over the island.

Katharzi'kan's wounds were a melange of varied aches burning beneath his bandages, but he ignored the pain. Leaning against a furrowed bole, he gently parted two branches and peered beyond. The cultists were in the clearing, two score robed fanatics kneeling before the tomb-like shrine. To one side, a lone figure pounded on a skin drum. The moonglow hit the little structure directly from above, smothering its interior in the inkiest of shadows.

When Katharzi'kan had viewed it, six months previously, it had been vacant. Yet the cultists prostrated themselves as if their ancient deity truly inhabited that dark smear of shadow.

For a moment, he found himself waiting breathlessly for some otherworldly shape to ooze forth, undulating its cosmic obscenity upon the overgrown turf. Then he shook himself from his morbid imaginings.

He roared an inarticulate battle cry and plunged through the branches, his men screaming and yelling on his very heels.

The cultists leapt to their feet, shocked to have been pursued to their sacred heart. Some brandished blades, others, perhaps less devout, broke and ran in a momentary panic. Katharzi'kan and his men fell upon the worshippers who remained, demonstrating the same mercy and compassion the cultists had shown them the previous day, which was little. Screams shattered the praeternatural stillness, the clang of steel upon tempered steel, the thud of feet, all desecrated the holy place. Katharzi'kan hewed his way through his foes, advancing upon the small temple, feeling a knot in his belly as he observed no sign of his beloved.

Then he stopped.

Athzir stumbled to his side, his blade soiled red. "We have put them to the run, but they will be back I think. Where is the girl? Have you seen any tra..." The word dropped from his lips as he saw the look of horror

twisting his young friend's features. He followed Katharzi'kan's gaze but, not having observed the temple's emptiness months before, thought nothing of the statue therein; it was presumably Shamoboh. He scowled as he studied the ivory-coloured carving of the naked, beautiful goddess more closely. Then his features paled visibly.

He had believed fanatics to be prisoners of their gods. Yet, it seemed, the reverse was also bitterly true.

THE GOD-RISEN TRIBE

Kyle McGrath

The end of the day was near. The men of the city headed to the city square to talk over the day's events. A bonfire was lit, and the tribesmen gathered around its warmth and fell to telling stories. In the middle of the night there came a lull in the conversation. This was the time of night when the men's gaze wandered the stars and the mind wondered at the fate of the world and the other mysteries of the unknown. One of the younger warriors turned to his neighbor, also young, and asked him, "Who is that ancient one over there, who holds his spear so tightly?"

"I know not," the neighbor said and asked one of his friends who the man was. Soon, a good number of them were wondering about the same thing, and eventually one of the braver men queried the old man.

"You wish to know of me and my tale?" the old man asked quietly.

"Yes." they replied as one.

"Then I shall tell you. In the days when men such as me were young..."

* * *

I was a young warrior much like any of you today. I was stationed at the entrance to the Temple of Huitataloc, which stands at the highest point in our city, glorious Aztlan. On one night when the sky was black and the ghosts of the dead themselves walked abroad, the neighboring village of Culatican attacked us. They set on fire the houses on the edge of the city, and captured the few warriors that tried to raise a defense. Their goal was the rich temple to our new god, Huitataloc, which they intended to sack and destroy. Only I stood in their way, and I was not about to stand against a hundred angry warriors.

At this point, let me tell you something about myself. I was a young man in the employ of the Temple, working as a temple guard. I was not extremely smart or strong, and my family had recently fallen on hard times in the corn-grinding business.

Anyway, my spear shook and my obsidian sword clanked at my side as I watched the raiders approach the temple steps. In only a thousand steps they would reach me. I watched in fear as they surrounded the temple. I decided I had better warn the few remaining priests still in the temple, and the fact that the raiders had bows helped this idea plenty.

I entered the building that stood on top of the temple. To an untrained eye, the building appeared only to contain a blood-crusted altar; but long ago our ancestors had devised a way to hide their inner temples and the jewels in them from wandering barbarians. I knelt at the altar and hurriedly beseeched our god to open the way down for me. I also pressed a sensitive brick that lay on the floor, and I started down the stairway the altar had revealed. At the bottom of a long staircase I pulled a lit torch off the wall and the altar swung back into place.

I knew that this would not hold back our neighbors, for we had actually stolen the idea from their much older city far back in time. Their priests would be able to direct the way down after a few minutes of searching and praying. That gave me just enough time to warn the priests and then save my own skin. I knew I should be ashamed to think this way, but I was no noble Aztilian warrior, just a poor one.

I ran down a short corridor and came to a shut door. I paused briefly there, for I knew as all know that a closed door to the temple proper means that the priests are in holy crisis. I only paused briefly, though, thinking a material crisis was more important than a holy one.

I pushed on the heavy rock slab that was the door and then stepped back to watch it swing slowly open. Inside was a big room that was actually beneath the earth, and the ceiling and walls still showed its original cavern appearance. A large altar sat in the middle of the room, and in a circle around the altar the ten ancients knelt in prayer. The Most Holy Ancient looked up from his throne of diamond and gold and waved me over.

"Most Holy Ancient, the temple is being invaded. We must flee," I said after I had bowed low to the ground.

"I know," came the reply.

"You know? Then you must also know that we must flee!"

"No. Huitataloc has revealed to me that he will come to fight our enemies. He has also shown me that the time has come for our city to rise to the status it deserves," the Most Holy Ancient said in awed tones, as if even he had not expected that to happen.

I was never completely devoted to the gods, believing that men lead their own lives without any interference from the gods; so I simply repeated, "We must leave. We have no more warriors."

"Our god needs no such worldly things. He will come to do battle with the enemy himself."

I gave up and ran to the door. Through the door I could hear the shouts of triumph as their priests opened the secret passageway and they rushed down the stairs. I watched in terrible fascination as the red feathered priests reached the bottom of the stairs and saw me. I was jolted into action when I saw one of the warriors following the priests brandish a spear.

I slammed the door shut and turned once more to the priests. "What shall we do?" I cried out frantically to the Ancients, who still worshipped in a circle around the altar.

"Stand away, and try not to be killed," advised the Most Holy Ancient. He got up from his throne and walked to a circle drawn in blood on the floor. I scrambled to the back of the room and huddled among the uneven walls. I watched in fear as the Most Holy Ancient started to chant, and the other priests joined in, and then my fear turned to pure horror as I felt an ancient presence enter the room, but not from any physical door.

At this moment the enemy chose to burst into the room. They saw upon entering a hideous bird-snake, much like a wingless dragon, solidifying on the altar. It reared up its head to a height of ten feet and proclaimed in a voice of doom, "You have defiled my temple and now must die!" The sound seemed to come from deep within my own body and I knew the enemy heard it because their priests had begun some desperate chanting to their gods.

The dragon-god laughed and hurled itself at the enemy priests. Its two clawed forelegs ripped the priests to shreds and then it was among the warriors, gorging and slashing. I turned my head away and retched, the sight was so horrifying. It continued tearing and killing for several seconds while the doomed warriors tried to fight the dragon-god, then they sought to flee. The terrible god followed them, and the thunder of its passage from the temple shook the entire city.

Through all of this the priests had chanted, and they continued chanting for long hours after.

* * *

"That's the story?" the young warrior asked in amazement, "What happened after that?"

"Well, the neighboring village was wiped from the land by our dragon-god, and our city soon rose into prominence.

Eventually, this city became no more than the spawning place of our great god. The seat of power moved from here to sprawling Tlatachtilan. I have wandered the peninsula ever since. "Now, I am tired and would like to rest. Peace be with you." and with this the old man walked back into the night, leaning heavily on his dragon-headed staff.

THE MAGICAL SWORD

Is the term then accomplished and open the way?
Has the eagle flown forth from the furthestmost tower?
Have the beak and the talons unclosed from their prey?
In this sword is contained all the sorcerer's power.

Has the eagle flown forth from the furthestmost tower?
Take this sword in your hand now, straight raised to the sky!
In this sword is contained all the sorcerer's power.
Down towards the sword will the lame eagle fly.

Take this sword in your hand now, straight raised to the sky,
Nor slacken your grip though it burn like a brand!
Down towards the sword will the lame eagle fly,
Till before you a man without power he will stand.

Never slacken your grip though it burn like a brand.
And dissolved are the bands that the sorcerer spun,
And before you a man without power he will stand,
And three daughters of kings will again see the sun!

Dissolved are the bands that the sorcerer spun,
And the beak and the talons unclosed from their prey,
And three daughters of kings will again see the sun,
For the term is accomplished and open the way!

Ann Keith

HORNHUNTER

Ellen Dawn Benefield

An unnatural silence lay over the hunter's village. The nomads made the lovely green Valley of the Copperhorns their annual summer home. Usually, there was much laughter and dancing, for the Ferinni of Daronnee were a light hearted people and Summerhome was the site of many weddings and festivals.

"Hornhunter! She's calling for you." The tattooed shaman beckoned from the skin tent. Young Hornhunter ducked through the flap, dread weighing at his heart.

The village wisewoman, her brown skin tattooed with henna, sprinkled rose water over Flower Blackbuck. The girl's cheeks were sunken, her breath raspy with the plague that stalked their people.

Hornhunter's breath caught. So many had already died and soon would it take his beloved. He slipped to the limp figure on the furs and stroked her once lovely face. Flower squeezed his hand and choked, coughing. The medicine woman pulled him outside while the shaman blew smoke of cure-all over Flower Blackbuck's face.

"Hazid Hornhunter, you are the best hunter we have. This is no ordinary plague. It is a destroyer, sent by the demon lurking in the ancient castle on the far mountain. Without the magic of a copperhorn, we are doomed. All our people will die. You alone show no sign of weakening. Bring us a copperhorn."

Hornhunter swallowed. "But the copperhorns are sacred, Wise one. How may I kill a magical beast? No one can see them on the plains. They show no tracks, and no hunter can trail them in the dark forest. All who try never return."

The short woman shook her greying head. "It is forbidden to kill the copperhorns except in dire necessity. Therefore, I have never shown this to anyone else."

She held a tiny carving of a twisted horn, made of a glowing coppery substance and hung on a fine gold chain. The woman placed the charm about Hornhunter's neck.

He gasped as he felt the warm carving, a carving of copperhorn. He could feel the magic.

"But surely, old mother, this is copperhorn. Can it not save us?"

"Not enough. Handed down from my mother's mother it was. It will let you see the copperhorns. Go now and do what you must, or your woman and your family will die. Even now your youngest brother has fallen

to the plague. He may not have long.

"One warning, Hazid, try not to take a doe, or forever you will regret it."

Hornhunter swallowed hard. "So be it. May the curse of killing a copperhorn fall on me alone." He tossed back his raven mane and grabbed his bow and supplies. Then he strode from the valley toward the Copperhorn plains and the dark forest, his heart heavy.

The first day showed no sign of the beautiful grazers with their spiralled copper horns. Hornhunter thought of their large dark eyes and sighed. It would be like killing a woman. Only once had he seen a copperhorn, just inside the dark woods as he tracked a great tailed bear. The intelligence and awareness in the stag's eyes had frozen him. This was no mere animal.

Hornhunter sighed as he set up camp and pitched his small hide tent. This hunt was not to his liking. Scouting about for kindling, he stopped and stared. Glowing golden tracks shone in the dusk. Copperhorns. In the morning, then.

Rain fell during the night, the thunder waking Hornhunter. He cursed to himself. No tracks in the morning. Sighing, he rolled over in his furs and slept.

Hornhunter resumed hiking the next morning. The rain had stopped long before morning and the sun shone brightly. A partial track caught his eye. Just a smudge remained but it gleamed in the sun like pure copper. A smile curved his mouth. This way.

Despite his repugnance for the task, excitement beat in his veins, the excitement of the hunt. He had them now. Fresh tracks glowed before him. Swiftly and silently he snaked belly-down through the waist-tall grass, then stared.

"No."

Glowing copper tracks went straight up a sheer black cliff. How could anything lacking wings get up there? Hornhunter touched the glassy cliff. Obsidian. There were no handholds, no footholds and the sharp edge of the cliff would cut his rope to pieces.

Hornhunter's eyes, black as the cliff, narrowed. He would camp here at the edge of the Dark Woods and wait until they returned. The copperhorns did not know that he could see them.

Hornhunter pitched his tent in the middle of the grass and hid. Following an old hunter's trick, he searched for a spicy smelling brush and anointed himself with its perfumed sap. Hazid Hornhunter returned to his tent to wait.

A snort woke him. Carefully, he crept belly down through the tall grass. Parting the grass with his hands, he peered into the meadow and forgot

to breathe.

They were beautiful. Gold and silver moonlight from the double moons gleamed off maroon coats of short velvet, striped legs that seemed too slim to hold them and long, twisted horns of pure copper. All were does with new fawns, save one barren doe who stood watch.

Where were the stags? Best not to take a doe, the old woman had warned, but he had no choice. Regretfully, Hornhunter reached for his bow. One head raised and without a sound, the copperhorns fled into the forest. Hornhunter cursed and gave chase.

The last copperhorn turned to face him, horns lowered. Hornhunter raised his bow, arrow aimed at the noble head, and heard something in his mind akin to laughter. His bowstring snapped with a loud twang. The copperhorn leaped into the forest as the man flung the bow on the ground.

Tomorrow he would get the beast.

At dawn the next day, Hornhunter cursed out loud. All his arrows lay shattered and his bow was missing. Puzzled, he examined the ground. There was one partial copperhorn print. The rest had been brushed out. How could that be?

Shaking his head, Hornhunter pulled his dagger from his girdle and searched for a suitable spear handle, then returned to the obsidian cliffs to find a few pieces suitable for chipping. It would take a day to make a spear, another day that his loved ones might die. Grimly, he pushed the thoughts away and concentrated on the spear.

The next day, Hornhunter entered the dark forest and searched patiently for tracks and clues, a broken twig, a partial print from a fawn. Slowly, he picked out the trail and worked his way through the brambles and trees to an open meadow. He smiled. The guardian stood watch over the herd. Now to cut her out. There was no sense in killing a mother.

Hornhunter tested the breeze. He was downwind. Silently, he crept around behind the rock the doe stood upon and raised his spear. The copperhorns fled into the forest as the doe wheeled with a snort.

How did she know? Hornhunter cast his spear and it missed. She had jumped out of the way before he threw it, as if she had foreknowledge. Hornhunter faced her sharp horns armed only with a dagger, but she merely stood her ground as a roar of rage came from behind him.

Hornhunter raced for his spear as the tailed bear charged out of the trees. Grabbing it from the ground, he spun and faced the beast as it lunged for him, mouth agape. Frantically, he thrust the spear at its throat, evading the heavy paws. Blood poured from the wound and he leapt out of the way as the tailed bear fell, pawing at the spear in its neck. Hornhunter backed away as it died. Why had it attacked him?



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True, tailed bear or as some called it, giant wolverine, possessed nasty tempers but this one had come trailing him. It had gone out of its way to attack him, as if defending the copperhorn. Hornhunter sighed as he skinned the animal. It was valuable fur; it repelled frost in the winter.

He must think. The copperhorns needed water. The guardian undoubtedly would scout the pool of the waterfall. He would be waiting for her.

Hornhunter waited in the brush the next day. He must get her now or it would be too late. Fever rose in him and his throat felt raspy. Sweat dripped off his dark skin. The copperhorn stepped cautiously down the trail, testing the air for scent and pointing her horns around her. Hornhunter held the charm and breathed a prayer to his gods. Somehow in the past she had sensed him but not this time. He triggered the trap.

The copperhorn wheeled as the logs came crashing toward her but this time she was a little slow. One log pinned her slender leg. She struggled as Hornhunter slid down the hill, pulling out his dagger. He stopped for an instant, eyeing her cautiously. He'd best catch her by the horns and cut her throat, then hack off the horns and hurry back to the village.

Hornhunter froze in shock. The outlines of the copperhorn began to fade. A woman lay pinned by one slender leg. She was a beautiful young woman with dark eyes, auburn curls and strange alabaster skin. Her pale legs were striped with the same maroon as the velvety tunic she wore. A small copper horn spiralled by each temple.

"Well, man, are you going to kill me or not?"

She spoke but her lips did not move. Hornhunter's hand dropped. He thrust the dagger back in his girdle as he stooped to move the log.

"I did not hurt you by choice and I cannot slay a helpless woman, even to save my people and myself. Where are your men?" Hornhunter coughed, his tall frame racked with spasms.

"Gone to find better pastures for the newborn. I alone had no child. I was willing to give my life to protect them. You ail, I see. Your face is breaking out. I presume it is the plague and that you wish one of my horns?"

"Yes," Hornhunter said simply.

"Very well. Help me up. My leg is broken."

Hornhunter scooped her up in his arms. Her slender white arms went about his neck, as one striped leg dangled at an odd angle. His heart beat faster as he cradled the light form against him. She pointed and he stumbled in that direction. Dark mist swam before his eyes. They came to a clearing and he blinked. There were bones there.

"Put me down."

Hornhunter complied.

"Make a fire."

Shaking with chills, he managed to gather wood and strike his flint. Slowly the fire grew. From under her tunic the strange horned woman pulled a tiny pot and a bag of leaves. She handed him the teapot. Hornhunter staggered back to the pool and filled it.

When he returned, she held a copper horn in her hand, taken from a skeleton. The horned lady put the leaves in the water and dipped the horn in the teapot, then placed the pot over the fire. Hornhunter fell, rather than sat, by the fire. All went dark.

A cool hand caressed his forehead and he woke. The lady's leg looked normal as she knelt and forced him to drink the tea. Hornhunter drank the strange, sweet brew and his head began to clear. He blinked.

"You may have this horn and the tea, for your people. Take no other bone or horn from this place, else you will be cursed, man."

Hornhunter fainted. When he woke again, she was gone, and he was well. Silently, he gathered the horn and the bag of tea. He took nothing else but memories and knew he was already cursed.

Hornhunter trudged over the hill and into the village. The old woman sat coughing in the grass before the shaman's tent.

"You've got the horn?"

"Yes, old mother. Hurry and cure them. Put the horn and the tea leaves in boiling water to make a healing potion."

"You bring only one horn?"

Hornhunter stared at the knowing eyes.

"Yes."

The old woman nodded. "No man kills a copperhorn doe. Sit. Rest."

Hornhunter dozed for a while. The wisewoman came back and shook his shoulder. She looked much improved.

"Your brother is nearly recovered, as is your love. She asks for you." The shaman held out her hand for the charm.

"May I keep this, old mother?"

The woman eyed him speculatively. "It will do you no good. It will be best if you forget about it. Forget the copperhorn, young fool. Flower Blackbuck awaits you."

Hornhunter entered the tent and knelt by Flower's cot. Tenderly, he caressed her wasted face and kissed her straight black hair. Soon she would recover and they would be wed. All should be well, but the face that would haunt his dreams every night rose before his eyes.

And Hornhunter knew the curse that had fallen upon him. All his life he would see a lovely pale face surrounded by copper curls, and long for the horned woman. This was his punishment for hunting the sacred

copperhorns.

TROUBLE WITH A WIZARD

Mark C Alldis

Life for a hero is feast or famine and just then my belt buckle was tickling my backbone. My last real job was over a month ago and my purse was sucking lint.

A young nobleman had hired me to run off an ogress that had taken a shine to him. Damn thing sat outside his castle walls singing ogre love songs. I don't know if you've ever heard an ogre sing but if you heard it once you'd never want to hear it again; it sounds like two big cats fighting. And ogres are very direct. The lady wanted to make wild passionate love; as tokens of her love she attached well rotted carcasses around the castle.

Making love to an eight foot tall, hairy monster with a face like ten miles of bad road that smells like a corpse left in the sun is not most men's idea of a good time. Ogre lovemaking is rough and the fact that it could kill the average human does not add to its attraction.

The nobleman paid me twenty silver crowns to make the lady look for greener pastures. The lord wanted the ogress dead but twenty crowns doesn't buy dead, I told him. If I'd waited longer, he would have gone higher but I needed the coin.

I found the ogress standing on a hill looking up at the castle. She was so rapt that I was able to sneak up behind her carrying an eight foot pole. It took a good whack on the back of the head that would have killed an ox to get her attention. Then I had to prick her thick hide a couple of times with my sword to convince her to look someplace else for a lover. The look in her eyes as she gathered her rotting offerings was one of the saddest I ever saw. I harried her to her cave to make sure she understood the situation; I ran through the twenty crowns in a flurry of ale and women and was reduced to sleeping outdoors under the stars, eating rabbits that ran out of luck.

My camp was pleasant enough. There was a stream nearby to wash in, plenty of young saplings for a decent shelter and a rabbit burning on the fire, but I was itching for some action. Magra was three days ride away. I was hoping to find some decent hero work there.

Heroes don't last long if they don't develop a sixth sense about danger. I felt the hairs on my neck rise and looked to the trees. The firelight made shadows dance among the trees. I saw one shadow that moved closer to my camp. Keeping my eyes on the fire, I drew one of my swords from its sheath across my back and began to sharpen it. The shadow came closer but was still an indistinct blur.

I soon grew tired of this game of hide and seek.

"You out there! Come in to the light or haul your ass out of here," I shouted. I favor the direct approach in dealing with unknowns. The shadow moved toward the firelight. I stopped sharpening and tightened my grip on the hilt. I only relaxed a little when a woman came into the light. She was tall and appeared to be unarmed. A flowing green gown of the lightest silk hugged her figure at the top and rustled around her feet as she moved. Wild flowers were woven into her long blonde hair. When she was closer, I saw the tips of pointed ears poking through her hair. She was an elf. I kept my hand clenched on my sword hilt. Elves are immortal and long lives make them quirky at best. Some are outright crazy.

She settled by the fire spreading her gown around her legs. Then she looked into my face.

"You're Hogel, Hogel the Hero."

"I might be. Depends on who wants to know."

She laughed. It sounded like water tumbling over stones.

"You're Hogel," she said confidently. She looked at me expectantly and I nodded. "My name is Kesla and these are my woods."

"I didn't see any signs, but if it bothers you I'll be on my way in the morning."

She smiled and sat looking at the fire. I took the rabbit from the fire and set it aside to cool and waited. Time means nothing to elves. If she had more to say she'd say it when it suited her. After the rabbit had cooled, I tore off the least burnt leg and offered it to her. She took it and nibbled at the flesh. Her lips were full and her teeth small and white. The firelight sparkled in her hair.

"You owe me payment. You cut down my trees, used my stream and killed at least one of my rabbits," she said finally.

"My purse is leaner than a widow's cupboard in winter."

"I have no need of gold or silver. As payment I wish a heroic deed. There is a task I need done that demands the skills of a hero."

Great, I thought. My purse is sucking air and the lady wants me to risk my life for no pay. I sheathed my sword and sighed. It's bad enough to risk dying for gold but doing it for nothing always leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Elves are weird folk. It doesn't pay to make them angry.

"What's the job?" I asked.

She smiled and clapped her hands like a child, even though she was probably older than dirt. "There is a man..." she started and I cut in.

"I'm no assassin," I said. "The assassin's guild does not take kindly to those who take their work. I can get in a world of trouble pissing in another man's garden."

"I don't want him killed," Kesla said shaking her head. "He stole

something from me and I want you to get it back."

Retrieval of stolen property is a hero's task, but it's pretty low on the list, though it is above ogress thumping.

"Very well," I said grudgingly. "Who is the man, what did he steal and where is he now?"

"He's a young wizard," she said and I groaned. I hate wizards. Most of them are charlatans, all smoke and mirrors. Every now and then, though, there's one who really has the power. I have a friend who crossed a wizard, something about the wizard's daughter, and he was turned into a toad. It took a year for the spell to wear off and to this day he looks hungrily at flies. Kesla looked at me puzzled but I waved her on.

"He is very handsome. We met here three days ago and we talked all day. When night came I danced for him in the moonlight. Then we made love through the night. When I awoke, he was gone and he had taken my amulet. I don't mind that he ran off without saying as much as a 'thank you, mam' but he shouldn't play with my amulet. It's too powerful a talisman to be in human hands."

All this talk of moonlight dancing and lovemaking was making me very uncomfortable in my lower regions. Kesla was comely enough, a little thin for my tastes maybe. I like my ladies to have big breasts and some meat on their bones.

"You and this magic man had a roll in the hay and he stole your amulet."

"Crudely put, but yes, that's correct."

"And you want me to get it back, but not kill the bastard."

She nodded.

I sighed again. "I'll do it."

"I can be most grateful," Kesla said and ran her tongue over her lips.

"Who's the wizard and where can I find him?"

"His name is Lorenzo. His tower is half a day's ride to the west."

Kesla rose to her feet, brushing grass and twigs from her dress. I remained seated to hide the bulge in my trousers.

"I will meet you here in five days to claim my amulet," she said and then leaned down, stroked my cheek and left. As she walked into the trees, she turned, smiled and was gone.

Goldar's Balls, I thought, as I settled into my sleeping robe. A horny elf, a wizard and I'm involved for nothing more than the hint of a roll in the hay. Sometimes the life of a hero takes some strange turns.

I woke the next morning at dawn. After a less than satisfying breakfast of cold burnt rabbit washed down with water, I broke camp and rode west. A few hours later I saw the top of the wizard's tower peeking over the next hill. At the top of the hill I stopped to survey the terrain.

The tower was a square pile of dark stone rising forty feet in the center of a clearing. I could see only one door. I rode up to the tower, dismounted, then marched up to the door. Eight feet high with a large black iron knocker, it was impressive. A small hinged panel guarded by iron bars had been cut into the center of the door. Hoping to do this the easy way, I raised the knocker and let it fall. It hit the door with a resounding thud. Moments later the panel opened and was filled with a fat face. If this was Kesla's wizard, she had a strange sense of human beauty.

"I have business with the wizard," I said.

"The Great Lorenzo is busy. Come back tomorrow", the face said in a high squeaky voice. Then the panel shut. I pounded on the door with my fist. The panel opened again and two piggish eyes glared out.

"I said the Great Lorenzo is busy. Go away!"

"And I said I have business with the wizard. I've asked politely. I won't ask again."

"Good! Go away!" the fat man said slamming the panel.

Shaking my head, I thought, nothing ever comes easy. I walked to my horse and after a few moments of thought selected my dwarven battle axe. Double headed with a four foot black oak handle, its edges are sharp enough for me to shave with. I took a few practice swings to limber up my muscles. Then I walked back to the door. Running my hand over the wood, I selected the point where I could do the most damage. Drawing back, then using a side arm swing, I hammered the axe into the door. The blade worked out of the wood easily. Muffled shouts of alarm came from beyond the door. I reared back with the axe and then buried it into the door again. It cracked like an eggshell. I kicked in the door and with my axe at the ready, I walked into the tower.

Two servants huddled in a corner and the fat man was trying to hide behind a table. His eyes were wide with fear and all his chins quivered.

"Where's the wizard?" I roared. Frightened people usually are very cooperative. The fat man started to blubber. Tears rolled down his cheeks, getting lost in his chins. He was on his knees holding his hands out in front of him, pleading not to be killed. From the smell, I knew he had just left a brown stain in his trousers.

"Where's the wizard?" I shouted again. He pointed up the stairs. His eyes rolled back and he fainted. I gave the servants huddled in the corner one of my fiercer glares to make them stay put, laid the axe on my shoulder then started up the stairs.

At each landing there was a door facing into the tower. They were unlocked and the rooms beyond were filled with all kinds of strange things but no wizard.

When I came to the room at the top of the tower, I saw him. He was

tall and had curly blonde hair. I couldn't see his face because he was staring into a large gilt framed mirror, at least I thought it was a mirror. He turned to face me. Even with his face filled with anger, he was handsome, a real pretty boy.

"How dare you!" he raged. "Just look what you did," he shouted, pointing at the mirror.

I looked into the mirror but did not see my reflection. What I saw were images of me breaking down the door and shouting at the fat man.

"The technique is good but next time I'll choke up a little more on the axe handle," I said.

The wizard sputtered, then got himself under control. He puffed out his chest and said, "You destroy my property and frighten my servants. What do you want?"

I took the axe off my shoulder and rested the head on the floor. "Kesla has asked me to find something she lost."

Lorenzo's hand went to the amulet around his neck. "Kesla? I know no elf named Kesla."

"You tumble a lady, steal her property and then forget the lady's name. Lorenzo, I'm ashamed of you. Besides, if you don't know her, how do you know Kesla's an elf?"

Lorenzo's face went red, but he recovered quickly. "If you do not leave this instant you will be sorry."

"Come now, Lorenzo, don't make this any more difficult than it has to be. The lady isn't angry. She just wants her amulet back. Be a good boy and hand it over," I said, holding out my hand.

"I am the Great Lorenzo, the mightiest wizard. Feel my power."

"I'm Hogel the Hero. Give me the amulet," I countered.

I felt the hairs rise on my neck. Lorenzo made some gestures and mouthed some gibberish. Then he said, "Be gone!"

One moment I was standing in front of Lorenzo. The next I was on my butt in the dirt outside the tower. I checked myself over. Everything was the right shape and in the right place. I saw something flash in the sunlight and rolled. My axe thudded into the ground on the spot I had just left. I looked up and saw Lorenzo leaning out of a window at the top of the tower.

"I have been merciful this time. Return here again and I won't be so kind."

I got up, dusted myself off and picked up my axe. I noticed that the door had been magically repaired.

I hate wizards and it seemed Lorenzo had the power. Whether it was him or the amulet, it didn't matter. I had been lucky. Pretty boy could have waved his hands, said 'Allacazam' and poof I could have been a pile of horse dung. I cleaned my axe as I walked to my horse. Pretty boy, I thought and

then smiled as an idea took form in my mind. I stowed my axe, mounted and rode away.

I smelled the ogresses' cave before I saw it. There were bones and rotting half-eaten carcasses littering its mouth. I dismounted twenty yards from the cave.

"Yooohoo!" I shouted. Growls came from the cave then the ogress rushed out. She glared about until she saw me. I could see recognition dawn in her red eyes.

"Thugga know you. You hurt Thugga." She rubbed the back of her head and growled.

"Yeah and I'm really sorry about that," I said, "but I'm here to make it up to you. Thugga still want a man?"

"Thugga want man."

"I know a man, tall, blonde curly hair."

"Thugga want! Thugga want!" she roared. She drooled and jumped up and down.

"Thugga follow me. I take you to pretty man," I said.

"Thugga follow! Thugga follow!"

I mounted my horse and rode toward Lorenzo's tower. Thugga followed, occasionally using her knuckles to lope along. When we were near Lorenzo's tower I stopped.

"Thugga wait here," I said pointing to the ground. We were in the trees at the edge of the clearing, out of sight.

"Thugga watch. Soon see pretty man."

"Thugga stay," she said, then licked her lips.

I rode to the bottom of the tower and halted.

"Lorenzo!" I shouted. "I've come to ask you one last time to return Kesla's amulet. If you don't you'll suffer the consequences."

Lorenzo's head came out of one of the windows at the top of the tower. "I intend to keep the amulet. Tell Kesla it is payment for services rendered. Move on or you'll be the one suffering consequences."

"You had your chance, Lorenzo," I shouted then rode back to the trees.

"You saw him?"

"Pretty man! Thugga love pretty man." Her eyes were filled with adoration.

"He's all yours," I said and she ran up to the tower. I dismounted, stuffed some wool in my ears and settled down against a tree to wait.

The wool helped a lot but I could still hear Thugga singing. Hour after hour she sang. Lorenzo rained spells on her but they had no effect. That's why it takes a hero to deal with ogres; magic can't hurt them. Spells roll off them like water off a duck's back.

After two days of the nonstop serenade, I thought I heard Lorenzo calling me. I pulled the wool from my ears and heard his shouts.

"Hogel, I give up. Make it stop and go away."

I walked up to the tower with a long pole in my hands. Lorenzo didn't look too good. His hair was scraggly and his eyes were rimmed with red. I walked up behind Thugga, reared back with the pole and whacked her on the back of the head as hard as I could. She stopped singing, her eyes crossed and she crumpled to the ground.

"Throw down the amulet and I'll get rid of the ogress. You better decide quickly. She's starting to come around." As if on cue, Thugga groaned and moved one of her arms.

Lorenzo tore the amulet from his neck and tossed it down. I deftly caught it, then started to walk away.

"Wait!" Lorenzo cried. "What about the ogre? You said you'd make it go away."

"I lied. This is one lady you won't misuse."

"Hogel! You come back here. Hogel, you bastard, you come back here this instant," Lorenzo raged.

I got on my horse and rode away. From a distance, I heard Thugga start to sing and a long wailed, "Ho-o-o-gel-l-l."

I kept my appointment with Kesla. She was very grateful and thanked me in most satisfying ways. She even gave me some silver for my purse. I never heard of the Great Lorenzo again.

THE DEMON'S WIZARD

Greg Foxman

Raglil staggered into his summoning chamber, his loose robe sweeping the grey dust of the stone floor. His broad shoulders drooped as if he was burdened by a deed too heavy and cruel for one who had lived such a long life. Beneath his white cropped goatee, his breath was thick with exhaustion. The battle had taken its toll.

Torches flickered before him, casting strange shadows on the aged stone. No stranger shadow danced than the one at the distant end of the smoky room. Within an inscribed pentacle of silver chalk on the ground, hardly visible in the dusky haze, a dark figure lifted its head at Raglil's approach.

"I was victorious once again," the wizard's words strained between thin lips. He drew an arm of the teal blue robe over his mouth. The heavy wool darkened with crimson.

"As always, Raglil," the shadowy figure hissed. The creature

standing within the pentagram appeared to be smoke poured into human form. Yet its face was without true features, and its too long arms ended in curved, dagger-length talons.

"As always," Raglil mimicked dryly. Lord Brychard had attempted to throw the wizard from the realm, cast him out of his stone tower and push him into the sea beyond. An army had waited for Raglil outside his gate, torches glowing like field in bloom. There had been so many, too many, and yet one wizard had destroyed them all, the young and the old, the naive and the experienced. They had come to banish him to a place whence he could never return, but he had sent them there instead. If Death had been a man, he would have been honoured to dine with Raglil this night.

The dark form at the room's end had no more words for the wizard. As were the terms of its confinement, it could speak only when spoken to. Its black mouth opened in silence, and the points of jagged teeth flashed a yellowish orange in the torchlight.

"Your information was invaluable, demon. Without it I surely would have died," Raglil said. His voice was tired and passionless. "It was the same when King Horath came to slay me those hundreds of years ago, and then when his son and grandsons sought out their own marks of vengeance. And it was the same each time a band of stalwart adventurers endeavoured to claim my treasures as theirs. Your keen powers of observation and necromancy have been beyond price, Gammu."

The wizard's tower had been the target of many assaults over the ages. Warriors seeking great wealth and song-worthy reputations came to the tower, seeing it only as a trophy to be plundered. Peasants feared Raglil's magic, his piercing blue eyes and his audacity to live unfettered by society's laws. Their clubs and cropping scythes had beaten on his gate uncountable times. Kings and governors feared him as well. They feared his power. Their soldiers had met with him in over a dozen battles. They had turned the green slopes around his home into a cemetery.

"I am here to serve," Gammu muttered. A touch of indignation slithered over its words.

"Yes, demon, I know. I summoned you, imprisoning you here to a life of servitude," Raglil spoke heavily. "My spells are perhaps unequalled, and my books are prized by all who wear robes. Despite all this, I could not have lasted so long." He lifted his thinning arms skyward, and turned so that during his rotation he faced all four walls of the summoning chamber.

Gammu edged forward, careful to avoid the invisible barrier that held him. It crossed its arms over its chest, waiting. If it could, the demon would have sundered the pentagram and met the wizard in a lethal embrace. It dreamed of chaining the wizard's hands and feet, tearing out his tongue and tossing him into the dark of Akkut Sea. Then, released from Raglil's

evocation it would be free to return to the fires of its homeland.

"Without you, demon, I would have died centuries ago," Raglil muttered. He stepped closer to the chalk lines, knowing that he risked everything if he broke them. Gammu was a high demon, too powerful for any but the most skilled of wizards to conjure. It was more than a match for any mortal, mage or not. "Your sagacity and fiendish talents have been my salvation, but I repaid your gifts with a dusty prison."

Raglil's knowledge and occult powers were vast, unmatched except perhaps by the Grand Magus herself. And Raglil doubted that even she had spells to match his. Yet the inferior wizards of kings dared to stand before Raglil, known merely as the Wizard of Akkut Keep, and hurl their most draining incantations. Raglil had sent them all to their graves, but at a cost.

"I am here to serve," Gammu replied blandly, but its dark eyes lit with curiosity.

The wizard had survived Brychard's attack because the demon had seen the strengths and weaknesses of the military formations staged in the knight's mind. It had read his most guarded thoughts and those of his men. Gammu had learned what would frighten the superstitious lot. It had felt their terrors and had advised Raglil on how best to expedite them. With the demon's aid, the wizard had once again escaped certain death.

"I am the Wizard of Akkut, the Slayer of Kishen and Dalrick, the Father of the Worm, the Son of Black Magic. And I am nothing. My life is forfeit. It was lost on the day that I summoned you."

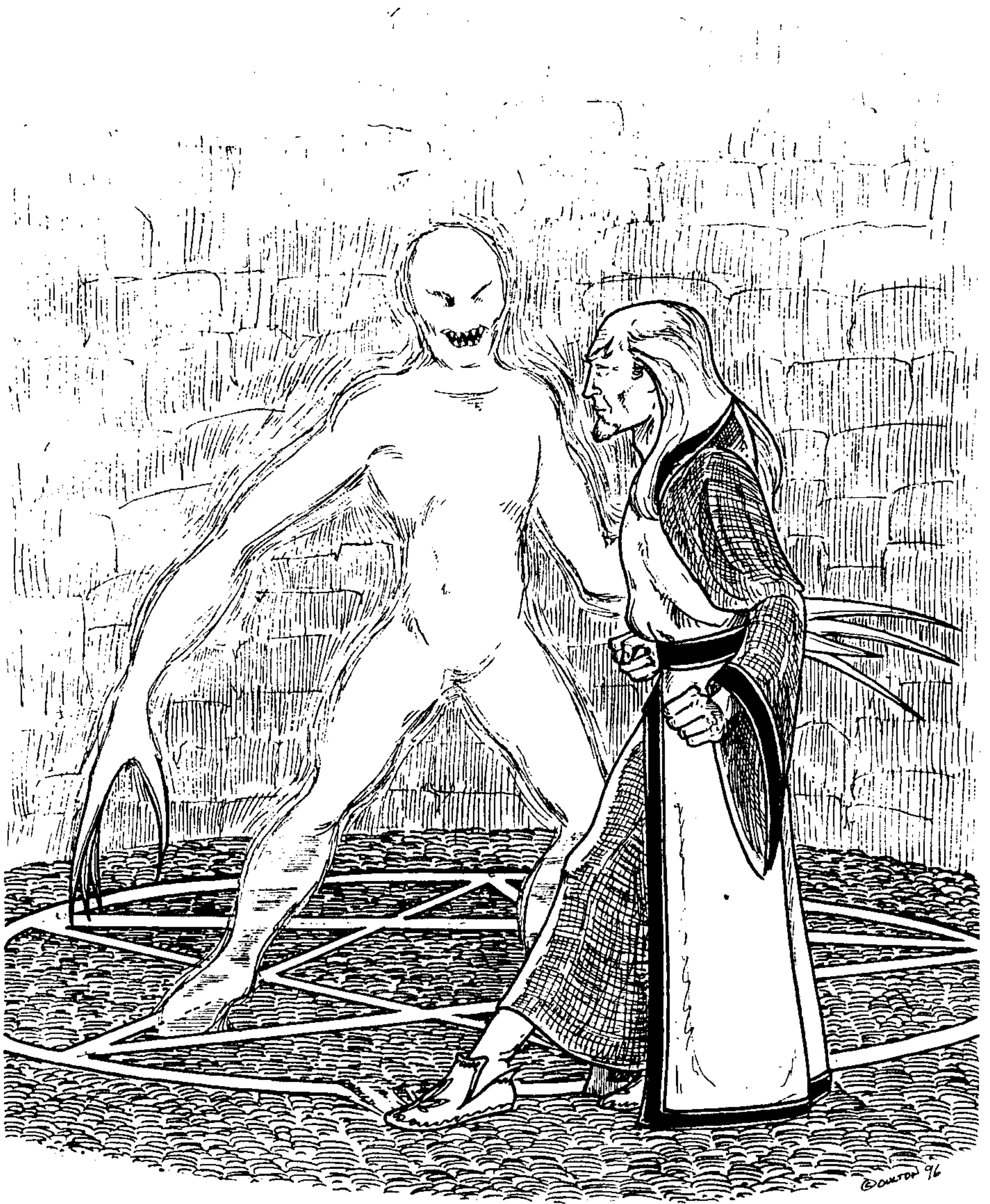
The demon lowered its arms and said nothing.

"You cannot have my soul, Gammu, though mayhap it is due you, but you can have my body." Fearlessly, Raglil dragged a soft shoe over a silver line of the pentacle. "Torture me if you will, slay me if you must, I am no longer your master."

As the wizard bowed his balding head in anticipation, Gammu spread great black wings and moved out of the prison that had been his home for so many hundreds of years. Wall torches sputtered and were extinguished. The chamber's breath was bitter smoke. Cold swept through the tower swifter than the northern winds. Wooden doors creaked shut. The high demon loomed over the wizard that had kept him.

Gammu hesitated. His confinement was over. Raglil had released him. That, strangely enough, meant something to the demon. However, it did not free the wizard of his debt. And that debt would not be paid with the wizard's death.

There were other robes who might wish to bind a high demon. They were not many who could succeed. Yet, Gammu did not want any possibility of returning home only to be summoned to another wizard's tower and enslaved again.



"Raglil, I do not want your blood or your soul. Yet, there is one thing that I need from you." Undulating shadows wrapped around the True, tailed bear or as some called it, giant wolverine, possessed wizard.

"One thing?" Raglil looked up. He said, "If I can make amends and finish this, I will."

"One thing only, wizard, and our business is over." Gammu's teeth gleamed ebony in the darkness. "I give you my word."

The rains were strong and icy, turning roads into impassable mires. The Jeslam warrior shifted his golden scale mail and eyed the stranger intently. He must have pressing need to be out in the storm at this late hour.

Occasionally a wizard would appear and ask to be taught spells that could be found nowhere else in the realm. Thousands of books awaited in the temple, but the price in gold, magic or deed was generally high. Perhaps a merchant caravan might bid entrance after having discovered a treasure too clandestine or too terrible for their purposes. Jeslam magi were known to uncover secrets within tomes and gemstones that had offered death to all others. This stranger, however, looked like neither wizard nor merchant.

"Who wishes admittance to Bodmut shrine?" the warrior asked as golden rain pattered over his armour. He laid a warning hand over his sword. He had disposed of many who had come seeking to conquer the temple.

The stranger approached the lowest of the marble steps. Beneath a ragged cowl, he coughed and said, "A beggar, my lord. I am lost. Is there shelter for an old man to rest his weary legs? And maybe a cup of warm stew?"

The Jeslam warrior could not sense magic or deceit from this stranger. That was only one power of the Jeslam. They were truth finders. A wizard could not come within a league of the shrine without making himself known. This man was likely what he appeared to be, a lowly beggar plagued by the storms. That gave him no right to the temple grounds, though.

"Begone, cadger. Bodmut Shrine is holy ground, no place for the likes of you!"

"You would send an old man away in this?" The stranger indicated the churning clouds. "Please, let me dry my robes, so that I do not fall ill and breathe my last this night." He was then racked by a coughing fit. He faltered and climbed one step. Two.

The warrior drew his sword, a silver shard in the moonlight, and came down the grey-white stairs. He had seen and heard enough. The beggar had defiled sacred ground, a crime punishable by death.

"You would slay an old man for trying to save himself?" the stranger gasped.

Yes, the warrior thought obdurately. He grabbed the beggar's tattered robe, and it fell away. He met Raglil's crystal blue eyes.

The Jeslam warrior blinked beneath the hard rain and stared vacantly at the muddied road and the surrounding greenery. He sighed, having seen no other soul in many days. His job was one of honour and respect, devotion to a greater cause, though he often felt ineffectual. Almost no one came to Bodmut Shrine, and those rare few who did seek to challenge the temple's power discovered his worthy sword. Even wizards had been forced to retreat from his arm, for he had been blessed with an immunity to spells. Such was his lot in life. Drenched and alone, he looked up into the endless night skies.

Raglil moved past the dazed guard and to the top of the steps. He was familiar with Jeslam sortilege. The guard could not be harmed by physical magics cast at or around him. Thaumaturgic bolts would bounce off of his golden scales and magical flames would be as a warm breeze. However, his mind was still susceptible.

The entrance to the polished marble temple was decorated by runes above and draconic stonework on either side. The sculptures were remarkably detailed. Raglil almost believed that he could see their serpentine expressions changing subtly beneath the cold white stone.

He stood before the open entryway and waited.

"By what name do you claim ingress?" The eyes of the marble dragons glowed. The Jeslam warrior had been only a deterrent to travellers. The pillared guardians were the temple's true defense. Here, the wizard's life would be judged.

Raglil thumbed an herbal mixture in a small pocket of his blue robe. He made no sound or sign that he would answer.

"By what name do you claim ingress, Bodmut or Hydrake?" the dragons asked. Lightning crackled along the bottom of dark clouds.

The wizard waved his hand in front of the entranceway. The followers of Jeslam the Truthful, protectors of Bodmut Shrine, referred to themselves by their patron's surname. They were the Jeslam, not Bodmut. That was a common title to any who found guidance in truth. And Hydrake, there was no such people.

Raglil crossed the runic seal without a word, his answer for the dragons. Their eyes dimmed in acceptance. The temple was plain. Corridors led deep into pale stone. The silence was overwhelming. The wizard had lived far from people for years, but he had always had someone with whom he could speak. There were his chiropteran familiars, Azekes and Nimbus, and then there was Gammu. The grey wolves who roamed the chilly woods around his tower usually had stories from their sylvan hunting grounds, and adventurers spoke when pressed. This holy ground, however, where demons

could not traverse, was virtually a defunct catacomb of metamorphic limestone.

The library was larger than he had expected. Bodmut shrine concealed the greatest source of sorcerous texts in the realm. Only the magi, wizards of the Holy Order, had unqualified access to these ancient scrolls and manuscripts. Raglil had once belonged to the magi, but his ways had turned to another path, where good and evil were not as clearly defined. The world was full of subjectivism, confusion and uncertainty, and he had not been able to abide by the inviolable limits of the Holy Order. And so his destiny had led him elsewhere.

"And now I have returned to my beginnings," the wizard uttered musefully. "My fate, a circular path."

Raglil saw the magically hidden book through truth-finding eyes. To most, the wooden podium would have appeared empty, dilapidated and common. For him, however, it was a stand of radiant gold, topped by a crystalline case. Within, the heavy leathern book incandesced, beckoning him.

"You, stop!" a panicked voice cut through the library. Raglil had been overcome by the tome's mystic energies and had lost his concentration on his mind-shielding spells. His wizardry and life-presence had previously been undetectable. Now, the Jeslam were aware of him.

Down a long corridor of grey, a dozen magi and warriors were racing toward him. Raglil's cool visage evaporated and he shouted at the archway at the near end of the corridor. The defenders of Bodmut shrine stumbled to a halt as the ceiling in front of them shattered and collapsed. Albescent dust blew into the library, the sole passage obliterated. The wizard licked his lips, easing the tingle of pernicious magic from them.

The book sang to him. Its hard, bistered cover glistened despite its age. No man had written the book. It had always been here, or so he had been told.

"And it shall not fall into your hands," a Jeslam mage said from behind the bright yellow podium. Glossy raven hair spread before her large eyes. She was young and lovely beyond compare. Yet, she wore the robes of the magi, indicative of long years of secluded study. Raglil had not seen her waiting for him in the shadows.

"Yes, wizard, I am the Grand Magus," she said reading his expression, or perhaps his mind.

Raglil broke into a half-smile. He had long wished to meet the legendary head of the magi, and he was not displeased by what he saw now. He had no doubts that her magics were tantamount to her beauty. Still, he needed the book and he would not allow her to stop him.

"You are so tired, Magus. You need to rest. Yes, a short nap and all

will be well. So sleep and find peace. Sleep, Magus. Sleep."

The Grand Magus grinned back at him, unaffected by his chanting. Considered an infallible spell once completed, Dalmond's Slumber was surprisingly easy to defend against. Covering one's ears or disturbing the caster would disrupt the enchantment, preventing its function. Yet the Magus had done neither. Her mind had withstood an assured magical snooze. Raglil was considerably pleased, though the book awaited him.

Suddenly, alternating bands of pale yellow light flashed around the wizard and he found himself trapped in a cylindrical cage of glinting bars. Through one wall of his magical jail, he studied the Magus. She had not moved nor uttered a syllable to put this spell into effect. Her powers were truly inspirational.

Raglil's gaze drifted to the bright bars that held him. Gammu had lived for ages in a prison of the wizard's making. It had always responded as tradition dictated, never complained aloud and always submitted to the quiet of the tower's peak. Raglil's smile faded. He stepped unfaltering out of the magical cage.

"Shall we?" he inquired and waved to the marble floor between them.

The Grand Magus nodded and levered herself into a sitting position. Raglil joined suit opposite the Magus. His knees crepitated and he could feel long years drive pins into his lower back. He had not had an arcane duel with another wizard since Horath's advisor. The army of blood-thirsting warriors that had surrounded them were without comprehension of the events that had followed as there had been no outward signs that a battle was taking place. Only when Horath's advisor had screamed and toppled onto his side did they get an inkling of understanding, though it was too little and too late.

The book lined library crumbled. Solid marble disintegrated into fine sand and blew away on unseen winds. Raglil and the Magus sat in utter blackness, where torchlight could not penetrate their theurgical contest. Soundlessly, they gathered their magical energies and forced them each upon the other. Time had no meaning in the immensity of their minds.

In a short while, a shrill cry ended the duel, and the Grand Magus brought her hands to her eyes. She gasped for breath, unable to swallow even a dram of air into her lungs, and she slumped to the ground.

Raglil got to his feet and brushed his knees. A tinge of blood darkened his palms. The Grand Magus had truly been the greatest of the magi.

He strode past her body and marvelled at the book in its limpid tomb. He called a spell that would allow him to remove the case without being sent to the ashen sea of limbo, an eternal trap for an unwary thief or overzealous wizard. Then, he lifted the crystal and caressed the book. It sang

to him of a hundred strange names, a thousand and more in languages that spanned existence. Unearthly powers filled him.

He marshalled all of his resolve and opened the book. Pages fluttered through his blood-stained fingers. The golden leaves soon came to rest as if from a will of their own and Raglil found what he sought. He drew his wizard's knife and carefully placed the tip. He muttered an ancient incantation and dragged the bone blade across the open page. White light flared from the book.

"You are free, Gammu, free of this old wizard and any other who would wish to bind you. *The Book of Names* has been lessened by one appellation." Raglil spoke to the high roofed library. To summon a demon, a wizard must evoke it by name. Gammu's name no longer existed in the world, thus its return visit to that smoky dominion below would be without interruption.

The Grand Magus groaned. She clumsily pushed herself up by her arms and rested on one hip. Raglil had let her survive the arcane duel, a dangerous act by any who wore robes. His days of killing, however, were over, as were his days of residing in another's victories. He would live or die by his own deeds, never again at the expense of others.

Had he been younger, Raglil might have conquered Bodmut Shrine and secured its treasures. Unrealized powers would have been his as the Jeslam texts yielded their secrets. Had his beard been fresh and jet-black, the wizard might have slaughtered the defenders of the temple, for he took no prisoners, other than Gammu. Raglil, though, was not young.

He knelt before the Magus. She would recover. He had refused to crush her mental core when finally she had succumbed to his magics. For the first time in many ages he had tasted mercy, a flavour he would not soon forget.

"I surrender to the judgement of the magi," he said to the benumbed Grand Magus. "My pursuance is at its end. I will not flee." The magi could not kill him, for Raglil considered himself without life. He should have died when Horath's army laid siege to his tower. And they could not imprison him, as he had done that to himself when he brought forth Gammu on that same moonless night.

The Magus laboured to meet his eye. Her face was wan, but her beauty persisted. She struggled to her feet with the wizard's help.

"I give myself to you, Jerikka." Raglil muttered. His head hung on tired shoulders. "Your temple is safe from my evil doings."

"Then I accept, dear brother. But know that you, too, are safe from evil in your newly chosen life." The Grand Magus smiled softly, bright blue eyes aglow, and she took the wizard's hand in hers.

Gammu had been a slave to Raglil's summons, and the wizard had

been a slave to his own ill-conceived desires. The high demon, now free from mortal wizardry, had returned home. And Raglil had done the same.

MOTHERING DESTINY

Bryan A Bushemi

“Forge me a weapon of Destiny, smith.”

Jaleen did not look up from her work at the bold, gruff-voiced command; the steady clangor of her rhythmic hammering at the scythe-blade on the anvil before her remained unchanged. She could hear the contemptuous, unspoken sneer of “woman” in place of “smith” in the voice of the speaker, but it would remain unvented. To give tongue to it would mean that the mighty Ankur Blood-Waster would have to admit to himself that he needed the skills of a mere female to accomplish what he wanted done. His huge, scarred hand closed on her shoulder, interrupting Jaleen’s work.

“I said...”

“I do not make tools of war, Ankur,” she said brusquely, shrugging her arm out of his grasp with a fluidly muscular movement. Years of forge-work had given her a strength as unyielding as the metal she shaped so skilfully.

“Bah!” Ankur growled, drawing himself up to his full height of over seven feet. Even as tall and massive as he was, he did not dwarf the ropily muscular woman as much as he would have liked. “You have set hammer to steel to make weapons aplenty, Jaleen Birth-Hammer. I would have from you an axe made to my size; a weapon fitting for a vanquisher of men.”

“No longer, Ankur Blood-Waster,” she replied, saying his earned-name like a curse instead of an honor. “Never again.” Jaleen turned her attention back to the unfinished task before her, mouth forming a grim line. Ankur’s demand brought back remembrances that the tall, wiry smith wanted to forget but never would. It had been her hands, calloused, leathery-skinned and accursedly adept, that had crafted the dweomered weapons borne by a dozen and more heroes whose names were already gilded with the flame of legend. To Jaleen, those same hands were stained an indelible crimson from the blood of the hundreds her sanguinary handiwork had spilled.

“Perhaps such an axe as I desire would be equal in value to your own life,” Ankur said from behind her. The mage-smith’s eyes narrowed into hard slits and she turned.

“Would you risk that my hammer will not find a swifter path to your skull than your axe to my neck?” Jaleen’s forearms corded and rippled

as she gripped the handle of her forging mallet. Her stance shifted from that of one who laboured to one of battle-trying readiness.

Ankur stepped back, a cruel sneer showing through the scarred thicket of his coarse beard. "I expected as much to be your reply, metal-thumper." The towering warrior raised a gauntleted hand and signaled.

Behind him, one hundred yards away, his troop of five hard-bitten campaigners sat on their mounts, apparently awaiting just such a cue. Two of their number rode up to where Ankur and Jaleen stood beside the open-air smithy that abutted Jaleen's simple dwelling. Behind the mounted pair trailed a third horse on a tether, bearing a large, oblong cloak-wrapped burden across its saddle. Upon reaching their commander's position, one of the two dismounted and with his dirk sliced the ropes that bound the bundle, allowing it to slide free to the ground with a thump. Bending down, Ankur's myrmidon yanked the covering off and stepped back.

An invisible fist slammed a cold blow under the arch of Jaleen's ribs and she inhaled with a pained hiss. Bound, gagged, and bruised, her son Kolin lay revealed to her, Ankur's captive. Two years ago, at seventeen, he had ridden off from Jaleen's home without looking back, blaming her for the forge fire that had killed her beloved husband. He had taken with him the matched set of war-axe and beak-backed hammer Jaleen had made for him earlier in the spring of that year as a coming-of-age gift, and nothing else, as he headed off to the Southlands to seek employ as a mercenary. Jaleen had watched him go with a riven heart; now he had returned, to be used as a bargaining lever to force her to submit to Ankur's demand.

"Is the value of your son's life equal to that of the weapon I would have, shaper-of-pots?" At Ankur's signal, the dismounted warrior swiftly knelt, yanked Kolin's head back by his dark hair, and placed the razor-keen edge of his dagger against the young man's throat. One simple gesture from his leader and he would carry out the threat, Jaleen knew. Her proud shoulders slumped despondently for an instant, then lifted as she abruptly hardened.

"You will have your axe, Ankur," she said, fixing the gloating warrior captain with her steely blue stare. "But if one drop of his blood is spilled, I will curse it to your hand, and to failure in battle from now until forever ends." Such an ill-working was not beyond Jaleen's ability, and she knew that Ankur knew that to be true.

"Make it then, Jaleen Birth-Hammer, and I will free your son unharmed," Ankur conceded, matching her glare with one of arrogant triumph. Turning to his men, he ordered: "Take him back to camp and hold him there until I return with my new axe."

The two mercenaries saluted their chief, remounted their captive on his horse, and headed back to where their fellows waited. As one, the whole

troop turned their mounts to the east and headed off. Jaleen watched them go until they passed from sight over a low rise, then turned and went into the smithy with Ankur following smugly behind.

Jaleen set her hammer down and swiped at her sweaty brow with the back of her forearm. Clamped onto the great, thirty-stoneweight anvil beside her forge was the head of Ankur's new axe. The mage-smith had laboured from dawn until dark for each of the last five days, working with an urgent efficiency to finish the weapon as swiftly as possible.

It would be one of her finest creations, Jaleen knew. From the moment that she had taken Ankur's measure for the weapon's size and heft, she could see the image of its final form in her mind's eye. From top-spike to butt-cap it would measure over five feet, with a gracefully curved crescent-moon head spanning more than half a yard along its razor-sharp edge. Backing the blade would be an elegantly functional crows' beak pick that could break even the stoutest armor. In Ankur's cruel, capable grip, it would be a most formidable weapon, and with it he would spill the blood of many foes.

"Steel-man," she said, speaking to the statue that stood beside the forge. At the sound of her voice, the magical metal automaton animated, awaiting her command. "Pump the bellows: twenty strokes per minute." Dutifully, the golem bent to the task, working the handles of the bellows with a tireless rhythm until the coals in the stone forge glowed white-hot. Jaleen unclamped the axehead from the anvil and carried it with tongs over to the forge's wide mouth.

Before she placed it into the forge, she dusted the metal of the blade with a fine coat of carbon shavings and powdered gemstones. The immense heat would release the primal magic contained within the glittering specks, and Jaleen would bind that power permanently into the substance of the blade, creating a weapon of surpassing potency. Taking a deep breath, the smith willed herself into her wreaking trance, and with a swift, sure movement, thrust the unfinished axehead deep into the incandescent pile of burning rock. A fountain of sparks whirled up from the coals, carried aloft on shimmering waves of heat.

Jaleen began her forging chant. The candent maelstrom of airborne embers before her began to swirl and dance to the cadence of the mage-smith's incantation, drawing in upon itself until it had compacted into a point of searing brilliance no larger than a pinhead. Reaching out, Jaleen closed her fingers around the lambent speck, then guided it down into the burning coals. A vision sprang into being in Jaleen's mind. With an elemental swiftness, the arcanelly generated tableau engulfed her, sweeping aside her awareness of all else.

Like wounded tigers, two mighty armies clawed and tore at each other on a muddy plain made seemingly endless by ground-hugging clouds of pitch smoke. Horses and men screamed, indistinguishable from one another, over the din of shouted war-cries and the belling of weapons on opposing armour and shields. Near the centre of the swirling mass of chaotic killing and dying a great axe flashed, wielded by a giant of a man who moved at the head of a rolling wedge of humanity.

With a murderous efficiency, the massive weapon cleaved and tore all who stood before it and its user. The very metal of its construction flared with a hot whiteness like burning magnesium as it sheared through flesh and steel as if both were sun-warmed butter, leaving behind smoking slag and charred meat. With equal ease, the mighty warrior and his followers sliced through the lines of their foes, inexorably turning the tide of battle to their favour. Very soon, what had been a struggle between relatively equal forces became a rout.

As the battle haze lifted and the oppressive smoke began to disperse, the soldiery of the victorious faction herded the wounded and the captured of their vanquished adversaries into the center of the field. Little regard was given to any cries for mercy as the prisoners, numbering more than a thousand, were stripped naked and bound hand, neck, and foot to captured pikes thrust deeply into the mucky ground.

When the last of the captives were so trussed and secured, the axe-wielding giant approached the head of their line. Limbering his arms with vigorous swings of his still-glowing weapon, he stepped to within striking distance of the first of the prisoners. The stark glare of the shimmering heat-light from the mighty axe increased, throwing the whole of the gruesome tableau into harsh relief. With his face shadowed like a bearded skull, Ankur Death's-Master swung his weapon in a waist-high horizontal arc towards the first of the condemned...

Seated on the smithy's floor, head bowed, Jaleen rested beside her cooling forge with the newly quenched battleaxe head in her lap. Despair weighed down upon her like a wagon-load of iron bar-stock. She'd had such visions during her wreakings before, precognitions of the futures that her creations would shape, and they had always cut as truly as those selfsame weapons. If she finished this axe for Ankur, he would become known as Death's-Master; he would fight in the battle that Jaleen had foreseen; and he would mercilessly execute those helpless prisoners. And only the gods knew how many others would fall beneath the bite of Jaleen's handiwork. If she did not finish the axe for Ankur, however, Kolin's life would be just as forfeit.

Turning the unfinished blade over in her worn and scarred hands, Jaleen hefted it wearily, knowing that she was weighing her son's life against those whose lives the weapon would drink in Ankur's hands. She closed her

eyes, but the tears that she had hoped to dam squeezed out and began to track down the creases in her handsome, strong-boned face.

"Forgive me," she whispered, rising stiffly to her feet. Placing the blade on her main anvil, Jaleen clamped it down across the two-finger-deep groove that ran across the width of the quarter-ton block of shaped steel, two-thirds of the way back from the horn. She walked across the smithy to where her tools hung, on the wall that the squat stone structure shared with her house. Taking down her heaviest hammer, the lean mage-smith turned back towards the waiting axe-head. Her knuckles whitened as she squeezed the use-worn leather wrapping on the mallet's two-foot handle. Jaleen's emotions warred within her, freezing her where she stood. She let out a short choked cry of soul-deep anguish.

"Oh, Goddess, guide me and give me strength," she moaned. Raising the hammer, Jaleen took a slow, reluctant first step towards the anvil, then another. Each foot of the short distance across the smithy seemed like a dozen leagues, and each step she took intensified the dead-winter frigidity within her heart. Frost began to form on the upraised hammerhead until it grew so thick that it began to crack off and fall to the smooth-swept stones of the smithy's floor.

At arms-length from the anvil, Jaleen paused for a brief instant that seemed to her to stretch for an eternity, then with all of the force in her body, she struck. The resulting clang of frozen steel shattering was surprisingly quiet, almost anticlimactically so. Both the hammer's head and the unfinished axe-blade cracked in half, and the former bounced off the anvil to land in pieces at Jaleen's feet.

The icy condensation that had sprayed from the forging hammer when it struck the axehead began to melt. Not so for the glacial coldness within Jaleen; the freezing rawness that rested in her breast could have quenched the burning of a star. Eyes like chips of icebound diamonds, she tossed the useless hammer handle aside.

"No," she whispered with a voice like the forerunner of an arctic

windstorm. "No." The word rasped in her throat like frost crystals. "No!" Her firm, low-voiced declaration sounded through the smithy like a battle cry.

"Come, Steel-man," she commanded, beckoning to the heat-tarnished metal automaton as she strode from the smithy. Outside the door of her simple cut-rock and shingle dwelling, she paused. To the east, in the distance, she spied Ankur, drilling at arms with his old axe. Jaleen's mouth curved into a hard, grim smile at the sight, then she went into the house with the golem in tow.

When she came back out, half an hour later, she was clad as a warrior, in an open-faced helm, mail-byrnie, and scale haubergeon. In her right hand she carried a plain-faced, metal-bossed shield. In her left she hefted a spike-backed war-hammer. And in her heart she held all the savage fury of a she-wolf fighting for her cub.

* * *

Jaleen suppressed a groan as the wound in her right thigh gave a painful twinge, reminding her of the healer's advice to stay in bed for at least a week. It had only been five days since Kolin had ridden the ten miles to Creel Village to fetch the physician to tend her wounds, five days since she had taken her son back, nearly at the cost of her own life. But she had freed him, and that was all that mattered.

She paused for a minute to adjust the padding of the wooden crutch under her right arm, wincing as the stitches in her left shoulder pulled slightly from the jostling. Once she was satisfied with it, the smith continued on her way, heading over the rise to the east of her cottage. Topping the small hill, she stopped again, looking down its other side. From where she stood, she could just make out the freshly turned soil of the six graves that now occupied space at the edge of her farm. At the head of each, a weapon had been thrust into the ground to serve as a marker, and a helmet hung on each weapon. Although she could not see them clearly enough to make out the details, Jaleen knew well that all of the steel head-guards bore the marks of her war-hammer, which she had broke on the last of them.

"I told you never again, Ankur," she murmured, focusing her gaze on the largest of the graves. "You'll not threaten anyone else's son, now." Turning back towards her home, Jaleen started back down the hill, limping but unbowed. From the smithy she could hear the regular clanging of a hammer on metal. By the time she was well enough to return to work, she expected that her son would have disposed of all of his former captor's broken arms and armor. All of them, except for the riven axehead that awaited his mother's attention; it would make a fine plow-blade, Jaleen decided, one that would cut the earth like a hot knife through butter. Smiling to herself at the thought, Jaleen hobbled back to her house and returned to her rest.

A NEW MASTER

Peter Gruner

Garvin ran through the woods, whooping for joy. He had made progress; Keon would not be able to suppress a smile. This was Garvin's first vision quest and his master would be proud.

Garvin paused. He could hear the hoofs of a single rider racing along the path. He hid behind a bush and watched. One never knew what to expect from a speeding rider.

The rider crested the hill and started down the path toward the village. The rider was well covered and carried a bow across his shoulders. He glanced toward Garvin, just before passing him and Garvin realized that the rider was a girl.

Well, more like a woman. She had seen him through the bushes and caught his eye. It was a brief view, but he made out the hard expression on her oval face. Her head was covered but wisps of dark hair peeked through, catching the wind.

He ran onto the path to watch her go toward the village. Briefly, he wondered where the woman was off to in such a hurry, but he noticed the sun in the sky. It was almost midday and Keon would not be amused if his apprentice dawdled any longer, vision quest or no vision quest.

Besides, he needed Keon to help him interpret his vision. The image of a hand grasping three coloured arrows came back to him. And fire. In his vision, he ran through some burning woods, looking for something.

It had been worth the trip to the Glender Tump. He started giggling excitedly. It was a grand sign. He felt more elated than when he had been able to shoot his first bolt of fire. Now, the Goddess deemed him worthy of receiving messages. He would be a mage, one day.

As he approached Keon's hut, he felt a cooling sensation in his stomach. Something was wrong. "Keon!"

A soldier came running out of the clearing straight at Garvin. Garvin froze and the soldier punched him viciously in the face. At first it felt like cold water had been splashed in his face, but blood was pouring down his chin and his eyes kept blinking shut.

The soldier grabbed Garvin by the shoulder and pulled him into the clearing. Three other soldiers stood by a tree in front of the hut.

"So, the apprentice returns!" said the leader. "Good, we've been waiting for you." He was larger than the other men and had a wide scar on the top of his forehead. However, the thing which drew Garvin's eye was the amulet.

All of them were wearing identical amulets. Intricate swirling

patterns covered the eye-shaped talisman. Looking at it made him think of worms and beetles.

"Your master was not very helpful. He refused to tell us where you were." The leader gestured behind him and Garvin could see Keon's body on the ground. His white robe was stained red. Garvin couldn't make out Keon's face. It was beaten to a pulp.

Garvin wrenched free from the soldier holding him, only to get the leader's foot in his stomach. While he was bent down, gasping for air, the leader smashed him across the side of the head.

Earth filled his nostrils as he hit the ground. A soldier kicked him savagely in the back. "Enough!" bellowed the leader. "The Azmati want him alive. You'll kill us all if you hurt him too much."

"I don't like this messing with sorcerers," hissed another one of the soldiers. Garvin turned his head to see who was speaking. The soldier seemed to be better groomed than the others and he had dark eyes. He looked at Garvin and spat, "This isn't much of an apprentice. He blundered upon us, he couldn't even tell his master was in trouble."

"It's the amulets, Daxon. They protect us from magic and hide us from sorcerers," said one of the other soldiers.

"Bah! The apprentice should have been able to tell his master was in trouble. What do the Azmati want with him?"

The leader winked at the other two soldiers and said, "Since when are you so familiar with the abilities of magicians, Daxon?" The other two soldiers guffawed and Daxon looked away.

"Besides," the leader continued, "we were paid to do a job, not discuss the reasons it should or should not be done! You two..."

The leader stopped suddenly and fell to the ground. There was an arrow in his skull. Daxon and the soldier that had punched Garvin dove to the ground. The third soldier fell backwards, clutching at the arrow in his throat.

Garvin could see Daxon and the other soldier whispering a plan of attack to get the archer. "Those are the village archers waiting out there to pick you both off at their leisure," Garvin taunted.

The other soldier turned to Garvin and asked, "How many archers in your village?"

"Don't listen to the boy," Daxon sneered. "If there was more than one archer, we'd both be dead. The archer is good. We'll have to draw his fire and then rush him. Now position yourself at the tree over there."

Garvin looked to where Daxon pointed. As soon as the other soldier started crawling towards the tree, Garvin crouched and ran to intercept him. His chest ached, but his head hurt more. Each step felt as if someone was stepping on his skull.



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The soldier turned just before Garvin reached him and slashed out with his knife. Garvin jumped back. "Stay back, boy! Azmati or no Azmati, I will kill you if I have to."

Garvin watched as the soldier inched forward some more and then he dashed towards him, grabbing for his amulet. Garvin pulled off the amulet and jumped backwards. The soldier roared and swung his knife, catching Garvin across the thigh. Garvin tossed the amulet away and fell to the ground.

Garvin scrambled backwards as the soldier scuttled towards him. He threw a bolt of fire, but there was no real power behind it. The flames singed the soldier, but when the soldier realized he was not harmed, he grinned. "Is that the worst you can do, boy?" He crept closer to Garvin.

Then the soldier burst into flames. As the soldier screamed, his body lurched forward and his lifeless hand stabbed the ground. Garvin looked around. That had not been his bolt of fire.

Garvin's attention was drawn by the sound of a horse riding off. Daxon had gotten away.

The rider from this morning came through the glade. She knelt by Keon's corpse. Her dark hair fell over her face as she cradled Keon's head. She turned to Garvin with tears in her eyes. "My name is Nia. I was an apprentice of Keon's."

"I'm Garvin. I had a vision quest," he stammered, trying to explain his absence from his master.

"It is just as well. There was nothing you could have done."

"Why didn't Keon stop them?"

Nia continued to stroke Keon's hair. "You saw the amulets. They carried strong magic to cancel Keon's power. Physically, he was no match for the soldiers."

The Goddess gives with one hand and takes with the other, Garvin thought. The Goddess gave him his vision quest but took away his master. Garvin tried to stifle his sobs. He didn't want to look foolish in front of Nia.

"Gather some wood," she said gently. "We've got to build a pyre and release Keon's spirit from his body." Garvin nodded and set to his task. Nia retrieved her arrows from the dead soldiers.

When Garvin had finished stacking the wood, Nia was putting a saddle on Garvin's horse.

"Why don't I take one of the soldier's horses? They're much stronger than mine."

"Yes," Nia smiled. "They are also very distinctive. Anyone that sees us would recognize the horse as belonging to the army. How would you explain your possession of it?"

Garvin turned crimson. "I hadn't thought of that."

"We must set the pyre and be off. Take only what you can carry."

"Where are we going?"

"To find you a new master. Until then, you are my responsibility. I've inherited you from Keon."

Garvin took a torch and set it to the pyre. When Keon's body was engulfed in flames, they rode off.

DAWN

William T. Erwin

Fire came blazing through the sky, engraving its power into the magical sword the Sorcerer held aloft.

"Behold!" cried Shuron the Supreme, "for I bear the light of the world!" His apprentice Gerrun, an elf, who had abandoned his people and their life to learn the ways of true magic and possibly his destiny, could barely see, so blinded was he by the sword's radiance.

Thus was the birth of Dawn, a sword so mighty its blade would illuminate the way of truth in the coming ages of darkness.

Sorcerer Shuron, gently laid the sword down in the midst of enchanted cloths and began to wrap the blade so as to conceal its power. Finally, Gerrun could see clearly. The elf was older than his master by almost a century. Shuron looked upon Gerrun in silence for some reaction to what had just taken place. Gerrun was speechless.

"Are you not impressed?" the Dwarven sorcerer asked sharply after a moment's silence.

"Yes," was all the elven apprentice could manage to say.

His master smiled. "Excellent." Shuron then gently placed the covered sword upon Gerrun's arms. "Then you may carry it."

Gerrun tried carefully to follow his master back down the hill to Dragon's Keep without dropping the blessed blade. The sword was longer than himself. He could still feel the sword's power slightly penetrating the enchanted cloth. Gerrun silently prayed his hands would not be scorched. The sword, however, felt very light.

Gerrun gently closed his lesson spell-book. He uttered a minor spell and the book floated from his hands back onto his study table. Gerrun thought, "Why did my master forge that blade? There must be a reason, some great threat or evil emerging from someplace." Gerrun could not decipher the puzzle. As quietly as he could he walked out of his small

chambers. There was always a quiet calm during the day about Dragon's Keep. However this night, as all nights, it was not so peaceful. Gerrun always believed that his master was conjuring and consorting with strange spirits and it was their voices which echoed throughout the halls words which Gerrun could not understand.

As quietly as he could Gerrun stepped through the halls and finally approached his master's library. Knowledge from a dozen countries and from just as many generations of wizards were contained in the books and tomes in this library. Gerrun was determined to ask his question. He very carefully pushed open the large library doors. They were not locked.

Gerrun entered the huge library and gasped, for his master was staring directly at him. Fully ready for a barrage of threats of punishment and a lecture, Gerrun lowered his head. Moments of silence passed. Nothing. Gerrun raised his head slightly. He realized his master was staring at him expressionlessly. Shuron was sitting at a large table with a pile of books on either side of him. His pen was still, unmoving in his hands over a single sheet of parchment. Something was wrong.

Gerrun briskly walked over to his unflinching master. He waved his hands in front of Shuron. Nothing. Gerrun glanced at the scrawled words upon the parchment. He could not comprehend them.

"Gerrun," said his master's voice behind him.

Gerrun gasped as he turned toward the source of his master's voice and saw his spirit.

Shurron was garbed in dazzling white robes. He smiled. "Choose and farewell, my apprentice."

"No!" Gerrun reached out to his master. It was too late. Instead of being overwhelmed with grief, he found himself overpowered by the high-pitched summoning voice of Dawn. Gerrun, feeling little choice in the matter, answered the summoning. Calm and controlled, he walked out of the library and down the dark corridors of the tower. He stepped steadily down the long winding stairs towards the ever louder music. Clearly the sword was singing out for Gerrun to wield it. Where was it? Where had Master Shuron hidden it? Suddenly the Sorcerer appeared before him, once more attired in brilliant white robes.

Now Gerrun felt he was by no means his master's favorite apprentice. There had been many before him. He had never once believed that he would be the last. His master only nodded and spoke. "Veeerooon, Mariarad, Tyloob."

Dragon's Keep began to rotate, moving faster and faster. Gerrun finally collapsed to the floor before the tower ceased spinning. Moments later he awoke from unconsciousness. Before him where he had thought the stairway ended there was a hole in the floor. The stairway continued

through the hole and spiralled further downward.

Gerrun's ears were screaming from the music of the sword crying out to him. He followed the stairs to a room filled with thick fog. When he entered, the fog suddenly cleared and Gerrun saw Dawn, the blade standing erect on a pedestal, the jewel in the hilt shining brightly yellow. Then Gerrun saw something else. It was the Darkling. A battle mace like no other, it would bring doom and destruction across the land and the Heavens. Whosoever wielded it would become as a dark demigod. Gerrun realized to his horror that the singing voice was not emanating from the blade, but from the very weapon of evil itself.

Gerrun reached out to wield the mace when something took hold of his very soul. It was the sword, Dawn! Gerrun had to struggle between the two magical weapons. One urged him to be a harbinger of justice and absolute goodness. The other tempted him to full evil and to rule through might and fear. Hate and love permeated Gerrun's very heart and soul. Gerrun felt his mind almost split in half.

"Why? Why me?" Gerrun cried out. "I did not ask for any of this! I want nothing of any of this!" He fell to his knees. Any thoughts or useful spells were gone from his mind. He could only utter one word. "Shuron!" Gerrun's mind then cleared. He felt no presence with him. Only in his mind did he hear the words of a spell. Slowly he whispered them. Immediately his mind, body and soul became his own.

"I choose to become no part of this!"

The radiance of the Dawn and the Darkling subsided. Gerrun managed to pull himself up from his knees when his plain brown robes began to glow and change colour. They changed to a mysterious grey! Shuron was neither absolutely good nor evil. He was simply himself. Gerrun was master of Dragon's Keep. Gerrun then recalled the scrawled words made by Shurron's dying hand, and understood them.

HURRY

Edward F. Stack

Prayers Ily'd heard offered a thousand times in a hundred temples flashed through the young thief's mind as she listened to the sounds coming up the stairs. She considered saying some, couldn't decide which to use, and for a moment she wondered if any gods ever answered prayers foolishly uttered from a combination of childhood superstition and adult desperation. If she had had enough time she would have laughed at herself, but she definitely did not have enough time.

She turned from the landing and ran down the hall, clutching her

few things and searching for a way out. Her leather boots made little sound on the wood floor, and the swish of her cloak was barely audible. From below she could hear the shouts and oaths of the guards who were looking for her and the customers whose rooms they were searching; she knew it would only be a few minutes before the soldiers got everything sorted through and found out which room was hers. The trick now was to be somewhere else before that happened.

How could she have been so stupid! "Sure, Ily, just go out for a stroll and check the markets. With a few silver pieces burning a hole in your pouch you were feeling rich, weren't you? You couldn't just mind your own business!" She was so mad at herself. The problem was that she knew in her heart that in the same situation she'd do it again.

It had seemed so normal, just another day going by. As expected the market was crowded, this being so close to Feast Day and all. So when the Crown Prince's sedan chair was carried through it was moving very slowly. Royal guards were spread around, pushing the crowd out of the way, but the press of the great unwashed was too much for the escort, and commoners occasionally bumped into the chair. Ily watched this happen a couple of times, and saw the prince getting more and more frustrated. "Too bad for the brat," she thought. "What's he doing out today, anyway? Doesn't he have a ceremony to prepare for or something?"

Ily was disgusted by the prince. His fat softness repelled her, and the pallor of his skin seemed unnatural to one darkened by the sun as she was. Cheeks filling out with jowls even at his age, he screamed ineffectually at his escort in his adolescent voice, now high, now low, causing her to laugh silently. At one point she caught the guard captain's eye and knew she wasn't the only one that hoped this child never rose to occupy the throne. All around the pudgy boy his subjects wore rags and stumbled through the mud, while he huddled in his padded chair and tried to keep his silk robes and milky skin clean and pure. "Yeah, right!" she snorted.

It was only when he began striking the people with his jewelled scepter that Ily got mad. Maybe she felt the sting of blows which had fallen on her in days gone by when she was a child. Far worse things had happened before her eyes and she had done nothing. Today, though, she thought, "How dare he, rich and spoiled, taking it out on the poor whose blood runs to fill his parent's coffers so they can pay a heavy bride price that he might marry well."

Then he struck a girl-child on the side of the head so hard that she bled and stumbled, putting her hand on his satin cushions, almost falling under the stomping feet of his porters. Without thinking, Ily stepped up and snatched the scepter from his hand before he could strike the waif again. The

thief, the prince and the captain all froze then, a horrible tableau of disaster. She knew they would kill her for what she'd done.

She ran. There was enough of a crowd that the slim young woman was able to outpace her pursuers for a while, but when she tripped over that boy and his little sister the soldiers closed on her. They must have wanted her alive, for they grabbed her rather than just killing her, and she managed to slip away and run again. She dropped her coin purse. It contained her spending money, and a meal token for the Warped Arrow, where she had slept the night before and now would never sleep again. Although she beat them to the Inn, she didn't quite make it out.

So she was trapped. All the things she owned, all she'd come back to get, were in her bundle; the few gems she'd stolen a couple of nights before, her pack, weapons and leather armour, the wand Lirman had given her for saving Sareeka. And the scepter, of course. Too bad none of it could save her! Sareeka would have been useful now. No wonder the old wizard had wanted her back, as if Sareeka being his daughter would not have been enough. Her dancing green eyes and perpetual grin had masked sorcerous skills Ily wished were her own. Wait! Of course! Sareeka had taught her one spell: invisibility!

As she tried the last door in the hallway, Ily realized that there was nobody else on this floor of the inn. The door opened into a storeroom. Searching rapidly through her pack, she found what was left of the powdered herbs Sareeka had given her to use with the spell, that one time Ily'd actually succeeded in performing it. As she looked at the herbs, the words of the spell came back to her. Now she was all set, if only she could remember the gestures correctly! That was the hard part. Sareeka had explained that the words summoned the magic and the herbs gave it substance, but it was the gestures that gave it form, that made it real, made it happen. According to Sareeka, there were even some spells that didn't require words or material components, but none that worked without the proper gestures. Ily neither knew nor cared if that were true. She only knew that the invisibility spell wouldn't work unless she did the motions properly.

Suddenly Ily heard the clangor of the armored men coming up the stairs, swords and shields banging in the confined space. They seemed to be moving slowly, perhaps fearing that although their prey was cornered, it might have teeth. Glancing out the small window, she could see other guards surrounding the building, and she knew that with that captain having seen her she'd never get out the city gates unrecognized. She needed to make this spell work!

In the hall she heard the first door splinter and she began working the magic. With her left hand up, wrist bent, fingers just so, she tossed some herbs in the air. As they settled down around her, she wove the fingers of her

right hand in a simple pattern, and spoke the incantation. The second door shattered, making her flinch, breaking the form, ruining the spell.

"Okay, okay, you can do this," she told herself, "try again; there is enough herb for two or three attempts." Enough herb, but not enough time! Even as she got more of the powder, she heard two more doors sacrificed to buy her time. As each door was broken down, she could hear the cry, "No one in this room!" and the command: "Right. Next one. Let's go!"

"Those royal guards are methodical," was her thought. "They are also thorough, not likely to miss a room, so get on with it!"

Again, left hand up, wrist bent, fingers just so, toss the herbs, right hand in motion. It was a nice simple pattern. Now say the words and...damn! The pattern wasn't as simple as she thought, and there went three more doors. Four doors remained to be checked by the guards, one pinch of powder to go.

Okay, okay. Just do it. Three doors...left hand...two doors...wrist, fingers, powdered herbs...one door left...gesture, incantation...and her door burst open, the soldiers charging through it, calling back to their officer, "No one here either!"

CAT AND MOUSE

Greg Older

"More Wine here, sirrah!" cried the lordling to the servants.

Squire Milnar drained his goblet and slammed it down on the table, upsetting a plate of stewed lamb. The gravy spilled over onto the embroidered table cloth, which made the host of the celebration, one Sage Tobin of Am, wince. Perhaps, thought the learned scholar, he could find a cantrip in his collection with which to lift away the stain. If there was any justice on God's green earth, mused Tobin, he'd find a cantrip that would move the stain onto the wretched squire's new tabard.

The squire, along with his sponsor, Dame Eidnae, and a gaggle of minor nobles, clerks, merchants, and magi, had been invited to this formal little get-together, as one of the sage's young students referred to the gathering. Representatives of the four courts of the City were present: Swords (nobility), Cups (the archbishop's chapterhouse), Disks (the guilds), and Wands (wizards, sorcerers, seers and others of the learned arts). Tobin was celebrating the completion of his first book, which was being busily copied many times by dozens of scribes and book-binders even as their wealthy patrons ate and drank at the modest little estate of the learned Tobin, just off of the fashionable Steet of Glassblowers. The expense of the

party wasn't necessary but it didn't hurt to court the Courts to ensure the selling of the book. If it did well, it would attract more students to Tobin's feet and the fees for their schooling would keep him well in his old age.

All in all, the party had been fairly successful for Tobin but he had found the squire's behavior most reprehensible. Besides scolding the servants and general abuse of the good nature of Tobin's students who offered to help out with the celebration, Squire Milnar was a most uncouth bastard who was a sloppy eater and a glutton of the worst degree. How the young lordling, who had yet to make the rank of knight, stayed thin was unknown. Surely not from the performance of exercises in the martial arts of horse and sword. Certainly he was handsome, but a dreadful bore as Tobin's daughter remarked when she was unluckily cornered by him long enough for him to make feeble attempts at courtship, or at least entice her to his bed. His greatest asset was his ability to fawn over the elderly Dame Eidnae who took no notice of his barbaric manners, only his flattery.

Perhaps she was going senile, thought Tobin. It might explain why she had decided on the commission of two copies of his work: *Res Principum Remiarum Sero Imperio Gestae* ; or 'History of the Lives of the Later Remian Emperors' to translate it into the vernacular. Though an impressive work, in his opinion, collecting together the words of several great classical writers such as Glomus, Casstoricus and the beloved St Mirus and some not so great writers and various legends, rumours and hearsay, some quite outrageous, it most certainly was not to the taste of the good lady who could barely read the modern tongue, let alone the classical language still preserved by clergyman, sage and sorcerer. The only thing Tobin couldn't figure out was how the squire could afford to live as opulently as he did while he impressed the Dame with his fictional wealth and affluence.

It was then that one of his students, a third son of a Trigulan burgomaster, came up to him and bowed. "Excuse me sir," he begged the senior sage. "There is one who wishes to join the company here tonight though she was not invited to the party, rather, she said, she was invited to partake in your hospitality should she come to the City."

Tobin's eyebrows furrowed in thought, admittedly making it look as if a giant caterpillar had settled on his wrinkled brow. "A lady did you say?"

"Not exactly. But I think it was female at least. It was wearing a dress and skirts and I think it may have bosoms under her tunic. It...she, I mean, is a cat-folk.", stammered the youth.

"Nicila they are called. Don't forget that." corrected the sage. He paused for a moment, letting his finger perch in the cleft of his enormous chin as he searched his memory.

"Tell me son, did this Nicila have any badges or special features on

her clothing? And how many braids are in her hair?" he asked urgently as a flickering moth of memory crossed his mind, drawn to the flame of recognition.

"She has her hair divided into four long braids in the front. I couldn't see the rest since the top and back of her head was covered past those cat-ears of hers. I could see no badges, unless that turquoise-blue shawl over her head means anything," shrugged the youth.

Tobin was startled. "I hope you were civil with her."

"I tried to be as considerate as possible. But why the concern, master, for a cat-thing? It isn't even remotely human."

"Firstly, I dare say it is uncommonly similar in design to us. God, generally speaking, is a conservative in that he seems to keep to the basic form for mortal folk. Upright. Flat feet and flat hands. Five toes on each foot and four fingers and a thumb on each hand. It's really quite elegant. Two eyes...but I ramble."

"If you say so sir." The student half-smiled in silent agreement to his teacher's remark.

"The four braids on her head and the blue shawl indicate she is a magnus, at least an enchantress. Any slight on your part and she might turn you into a frog. Or perhaps a mouse. Cats are quite fond of mice, you know."

The student gulped as his knees slammed together. "I'll let her in. I left her in the entry hall." He ran off in a hurry.

A few minutes later, into the room stepped in the Nicila magnus. She stood just over four feet in height, hardly any shorter than most present, and her robes were simple yet brilliant spun wool dyed rowan, decorated with green leaf and vine embroidery. A brilliant blue shawl hung over her head, held in place by a simple but expensive copper circlet. Her green feline slit eyes glittered out from under her black braids and dark gray fur as she approached Tobin.

A number of the guests first gasped at the presence of the non-human among them but many quickly ignored her presence, feigning a certain worldliness. Squire Milnar, no surprise to Tobin, continued to stare at her, or rather at the curves of her bosom and rear. The Nicila, it seemed, was not without her appeal to the adventurous lecher.

"Ah, my dear," Tobin addressed his guest. "I was thinking it was your mother. It is Jalmina, isn't it?"

The Nicila nodded briefly. Her face bore little expression though her ears by their alert posture spoke volumes of her true state of emotions. "Yes, I am glad you remembered me. It has been some time."

"Certainly. Fifteen years since I last saw your clan in my travels in the North. Ah, how youth passes." He rolled his eyes and sighed.

“You exaggerate your age. Eleven years ago was when you came north asking about the Great Wall in the Edderlands. I may have only been a child but I can recall that year.”

Tobin laughed. “I am an elder now so I can exaggerate. One of the few fringe benefits of age.”

Jalmina cocked her head to the student who was standing by the door, still trembling. “Speaking of which, have you been telling tales about Nicila to him? Not the one about turning humans into mice and eating them?” she said in a raised voice. “That has got to be one of the silliest stories that you have ever told. I don’t know how many times my mother and the rest of the Naea de Parmawennus had to deny that little tale of yours. We are feline-kin but we are not like those little cats that hunt mice in your barns and homes. We do not do that.”

“My dear lady, you wound me so! It is just a little joke to snare the ignorant. Forgive an old man his little amusements.” Tobin bowed deeply and grasped her hand gently as he kissed her softly on knuckles covered with the soft, downy fur of her kind.

She flattened her ears and let the briefest flicker of a smile appear on her face. “Very well, but tell it no more while I am here. I would not wish to make your guests here more uncomfortable than they already are.”

Tobin soured slightly. “If they wish to leave, let them. I am not so dependent as to turn a friend’s daughter out for the company of some wealthy sods.”

Jalmina gasped. “That is hardly the way to speak of hospitality to a guest.”

“My dear,” Tobin smiled “hospitality is an important thing to us humans but it is not as sacred as it is to you. What I mean is, when it comes right down to it, this is still my home and I can at least feel like I’m king in here even though I’m not on the outside and I can at least pick and choose whom I want to retain as an honoured guest and who can depart as an unwanted pest.”

She shook her head in amazement. “You are an outspoken man, Tobin of Am, Friend of House Keminan. I am in need of shelter as I have come to seek placement in the Sisterhood of the Parmawennus here in the City of Mages. You promised you would be as good a host as guest when you visited us once.”

“Certainly. Stay as long as you wish and share my hearth and oven. My wine is your wine. My salt is your salt. My meat is your meat.” Tobin smiled as he recited the Nicilan ritual of hospitality.

“For your hospitality I thank you, House Friend,” responded Jalmina and nodded slightly, averting her eyes in respect.

“Well, now that’s over; why don’t you mingle? That’ll stir things

up, I think. I don't think many here have really had the chance to meet a Nicila, let alone see one up close."

"Because they choose not to, or so I would imagine. We are not popular with humans. Even the canine-like people you call Hood are more welcome in your society than our folk as our ways are more strange than yours."

Tobin snorted loudly. "Strange my foot! You express yourself differently and though occasionally I find the way you Nicila think alien to ours, it's perhaps no worse than those Pagan Thindors or those fanatics in the desert with their Prophet and their scriptures. Sure, I managed to come to an understanding about your culture after living with your House for many weeks. If nothing else, it prepared me when I stayed with a rabbi in Rhodez. Nicila are no more strange than the Jews, the Gypsies, the Hood, the Gnomes or even the Thindors. I'm sure our culture seems equally unusual from your perspective. Maybe if there was more understanding there would be less prejudice; that is, if humans were less prone to imperfection."

"Are you implying that we Nicila are more perfect? There are many that think of humanity less kindly than you do," Jalmina shook her head "but I will heed your suggestion and 'mingle'."

Jalmina went off and hovered around several conversations, perhaps hoping to gain acceptance in a shy sort of way but found herself isolated and ignored by the crowd; if they didn't rudely gawk at her as they would at a midget or hunchback. The old sage became concerned and felt sorry for her but Jalmina remained determined, eventually talking to the young student who let her in at the door. Tobin smiled as she found someone to talk with and a student eager to learn more than just the five disciplines.

It was then that Squire Milnar approached Tobin with a slightly drunken demeanor that the sage found distasteful. "Nice goblets these." noted the lordling as he fingered the careful white-smithery of ivy vines and leaves upon the stem and lip of the vessel. "Is this copper and gold?" he asked.

Tobin nodded. "Yes. Though it is fused into a brass base. The lining on the inside is glass. Why do you ask, Your Honour?"

"No reason. I've seen nothing like this around here before. A most exquisite make this," he mused. "Is it gnome-work from Rhodez?"

"Yes. I received it, as...a gift if you will. It was given to me by a prominent family up north." Tobin shrugged.

"A Nicilan one, perhaps. It is like the circlet that cat is wearing over there." the squire pointed to Jalmina.

"Very observant of you." I would not have thought it of you, silently mused Tobin. "It was one of numerous heirlooms kept by House

Keminan from their old alliances with Rhodez during the reign of King Klen. These goblets were a prize treasure of the house and I believe myself most fortunate to be considered such a friend of their clan that I should receive such a kingly gift.”

“A kingly gift indeed.” exclaimed the squire in jest. “Especially with the shortage of copper the last couple of years. It is perhaps as equally fortunate that the City has no king or he would demand his precious goblets back.”

The sage laughed with pretended amusement at the lordling’s feeble joke as the squire drifted away to once again dote upon his patron. Tobin watched and sometimes chatted with his guests and then grew tired and retired. He told the servants to find a room for the young Nicilan magnus in one of the warmer parts of the house as he turned in for the night.

It was past Matins when the sound of a crash awoke Tobin from his sleep. Though his eyes were starting to fail Tobin in his advancing age, his hearing still remained sharp and he sprang out of bed to don a thick robe in haste. Feeling about on the table beside the bed he found a sheathed dagger and held it tightly as he crept out of his room, silently shutting the door behind him.

The hallway was dark and the sound of voices could be heard from the floor below. At first he thought it was the servants, perhaps the chamberlain. Often they would finish off the opened wine and beer rather than let it go to waste. Tobin didn’t mind it from them as long as they didn’t get drunk. Drunkenness he did not tolerate in his students nor his staff. But the voices raised were not those of his chamberlain, who had been warned once before about drink nor any of his students, who had seen some of their number dismissed for drunken mishaps with the townsfolk. To his surprise one of them was Jalmina.

“What are you doing in here, demajammae? Those goblets are not yours for the taking. Our clan gave him those as a token of friendship and I will not let you steal them!” she said in a firm voice.

“And how will you stop me? Not with that tiny sliver of a blade in your hand?” It was followed by the drawing of steel. “This sword has a longer blade.” Tobin recognized the voice as belonging to Squire Milnar. Tobin fumed with absolute anger at the audacity of the lordling. That is how he could afford such expensive gifts to the dame and his few friends! Thievery was bad enough by the poorer classes but understandable. But from those who consider themselves the masters of society to take by such means from beneath him was intolerable. These were not the Broken Lands ruled by robber barons! This was the City of Mages and the last paragon of Remian Civilization!

Tobin looked over the railing of the balcony at the great hall below.

Jalmina was wrestling with lordling. He had grabbed her wrist and pinned her hand to the table, forcing her to drop her knife onto the floor. "I'll not have you raising the house with your cry so I should cut your throat now. Perhaps though, I could ransom you somehow? Hmm, my kitten, if I could do that then I'd not have to sully my blade with your blood. Make a sound though, and I will slice you open for lute strings."

She looked into his eyes with a cold hatred. "You have broken the hospitality of the house once already. You will not profane it further or you will unleash magical forces against yourself."

The squire softly laughed. "Magical forces." he snorted, "Half the magi in this city are nothing more than charlatans! Do you think to scare me by threatening to turn me into a mouse and then eat me? I overheard your talk with that crazy old man. I know you can't do that." A sneer crossed his face as he spat. "Though maybe I should kill you."

She growled deeply and then spoke the words: "*Jormanlan e Metara, taaet misallahala kennatha mapheatulon esolanae. Nesanae tummana hanathona jeusthon. Humana yonfurna seusa!*"

Tobin heard the sound of steel clattering against the stones. Then there came a pitiful squeak as terrified rodent eyes looked up at her merciless face. She looked down at the former squire with full disgust at the creature that cowered at her feet, as if to beg forgiveness for his trespasses against her and Tobin's hospitality.

"I said that Nicila don't eat mice. Like everyone else, we just kill them." Tobin saw the evil smile cross her face as her sandal stomped flat the tiny mouse into the stone floor.

THE DOOR AT THE FOOT OF THE WELL

Come with me through the door at the foot of the well,
Though the cord be withdrawn from above!
And all ways will be free there to them the world mocks,
And the keys that you hold shall there fit all the locks,
And reversed be the order that was!
For always those intricate strange fashioned keys
You hoarded and clung to for locks such as these.

Ann Keith

RUNIC BARDS

Mark C. Alldis of Stoney Creek, Ontario has had a number of his stories published and is also editor of *Distant Suns*.

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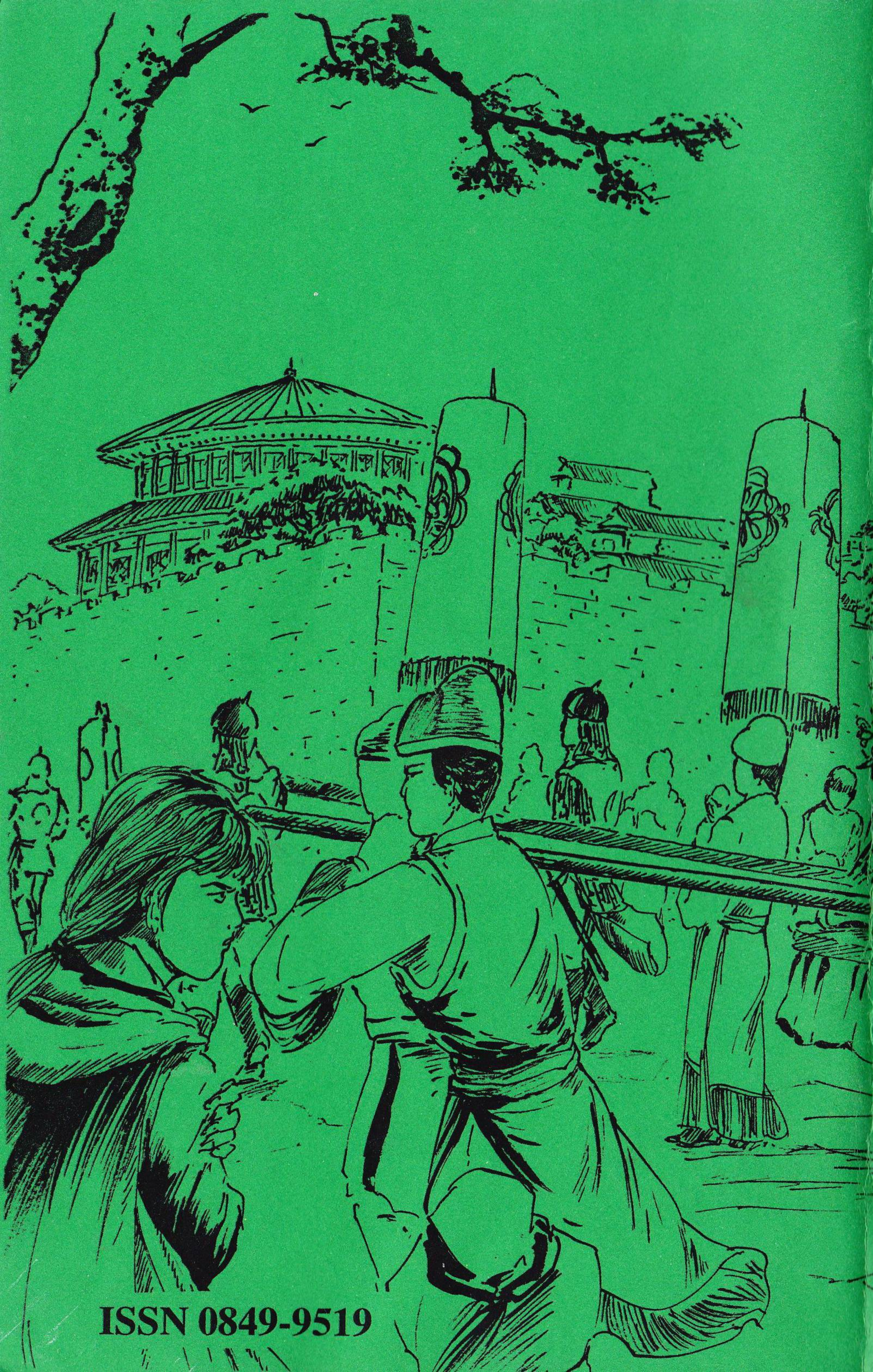
Loyalties by D.K. Latta

and

Thorval's Victory by D. Sandy Nielsen

as the best of that issue.

Readers are invited to write the editorial address (see page 2) and cast their ballot. The winner will be announced in the following issue.



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