



A Pathfinder RPG Story

The Love of
El-Barek

H. Rad Bethlen

"Let us speak," said El-Barek. "Or, allow me to speak. Will you listen?"

"Aye," said Hoskuld, an Ulfen, who had, as a young man, rowed free of the ice-choked fjords of the Linnorm Kings to live upon the water ever since. This was the first voyage the two had made together—and would be the last either would make—yet, amongst the crew, it was the Ulfen that El-Barek was most fond of. He had found, despite the superstitious nature of the Ulfen people, being especially pronounced in his shipmate, that they shared something in common. It was an oft spoke refrain that: "A Rahadoumi laughs at death—but it is a shared laugh, not a defiant one." He knew the Ulfen felt the same; albeit, more defiant than shared.

The two shipwrecked sailors went below deck. Hoskuld sat upon a barrel that had become wedged amongst what remained of the smashed and ruined cargo. El-Barek stood, feet apart, arms crossed over his chest. Neither felt the bite of the wind, that, having gathered the chill from the plains of Icemark, blew through the gaps in the boards.

Both were emaciated, their features made sharp. The reddish-blond had drained from Hoskuld's chin whiskers, just as the warm-ochre had drained from El-Barek's flesh. Slow death had turned them gray. They wore far less than they would have liked. Their coats were without buttons and hung open. They were barefoot, having long ago cut their shoes into strips, boiled these in wine, and eaten them. Even the wine was a memory. The boat rose and dropped on the waves. It had lost its sails weeks prior and was more wreckage than ship.

El-Barek had requested a moment to contemplate the meaning of his life, for he was preparing to die. They had drawn lots, the doomed sailors of the *Dragon's Star*. He was to die so that the others might consume him and live. They had done the same to one prior; a half-elf named Melorca, who, in El-Barek's eyes, had not shown courage when called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice.

El-Barek found it inadequate to reflect alone and in silence. He did not desire a priest, being of Rahadoum, and therefore godless, and besides, the priest had been washed overboard. All he wished was for one who might understand to listen.

"I have no sins to confess," he began. "Nor have I regrets." Hoskuld did not speak, but looked on, his blue eyes sunk deep. El-Barek continued. "I *have* been in love. It is of that I wish to speak." He paused, not knowing how to begin. He began obtusely. "In my homeland, before the gods were banished, there was a Caliph by the name of Abdelraham. He was great because he brought peace to the land and prosperity to the people. He was a loving father to all. He was cultured and wrote sublime verse. He caused much fine architecture to be erected, many temples; which, after his time, were pulled down.

"I've read his memoirs. In them he says, that although he reigned three decades in peace and prosperity, and had the respect and love of his people, and the respect of the genie-folk; who came to his court from lands of brass, of coral, and from cities built of cloud-stuff; although he had all this, including every want of riches and pleasure, and a harem of which the gods were jealous, he had diligently counted the days of genuine happiness that had come to him, and found them to be fourteen."

Hoskuld snorted. El-Barek couldn't help but smile.

"I myself have had twice as many," El-Barek said. "It seems, now that death is at hand, and I've an entire life to reflect upon, I can think of nothing but those brief, bewildering days of passion."

"Tell of her."

"She was fey-blooded," said El-Barek. "Had she come from that great and mysterious oasis, the Eternal Oasis? Or had she come down from the Napsune Mountains, a heavenly bird forced to land? Or had she come from some distant and unknown world, authored before ours, and having been so, is changeable, as was she? She would not say. Although I was madly in love with her, I knew nothing about her."

"Makes it worse," said Hoskuld.

"The words you speak are more true than you know," said El-Barek. "She had hair the color of the fire's dancing flames and eyes like turquoise stones seen through pure water. Her skin was as golden sand under a white-hot sun. To touch it was pleasure and pain."

"Aye."

"Pain," continued El-Barek, "because one could never touch her enough, or deeply enough, and always there is an end to touching, for one can not subsist on love alone. In her absence there is longing for her, and the desire to touch her again, and no amount of camaraderie, laughter, or good work can fill the void she's left."

Both men reflected upon this.

"A fey-blooded woman is a difficult thing for a man of Rahadoun to contemplate," said El-Barek. "For the men of Rahadoun, the women, too, are of a pragmatic bent, live by a pragmatic philosophy. We must, we've no aid from gods. The fey-blooded are beyond philosophy. Contemplation can make nothing of them. They are alive. So very alive! What can a man's mind make of such abundance of life in the woman he loves? To dwell on it makes him drunk. Argh!"

Hoskuld smiled, despite his hunger and the weariness in his body.

"She loved to listen," continued El-Barek, "and would stare at me with the wide-eyed wonder of a child as I spilled out every precious memory to her. Her questions were poignant. She drove to the heart of the matter always, to the emotion, to the very essence of experience itself. I felt more alive recounting my days to her than I did in the living of them."

"Ha!"

"I poured myself into her. She proved a bottomless vessel. She loved to feel the warmth of the sand just after the sun sets and the air grows cool. Also, the coolness of the sand just as the sun rises and the air grows warm. These dusk and dawn sands were ours. We made love on them, lying on the pelts of predators.

"I spoke of my childhood, of my father and his many voyages, of my mother and sisters. I spoke of my youth, of my fights and flights of fancy, of the girls I pined for and the wizened scholars who filled my head with man's accumulated truths. I had tried my luck as an adventurer, seen all manner of beasts and dangers. When a Chelaxian summoned a devil from Hell, he put a stop to my lust for fame and fortune, but not adventure. I took to the sea, as my father before me. It was during a rare stay on land that I met her.

"We spent twenty-eight days of pure happiness together at the edge of the Eternal Oasis, where no man or care disturbed us." El-Barek fell silent.

"What happened?" asked Hoskuld.

"I reached for her one night, the stars above like cold, distant hearts, the logs of the fire aglow but no longer aflame—"

"Gone?"

El-Barek gazed for a long time into his past. "Yes. I searched for her, in that jungle-like wood about the oasis. I searched the dunes. I searched the heavens. There was no sign of her. If it were not for her fragrance on the furs, for the lingering touch of her at my fingertips, if it were not for her breath on mine, I would believe she had never been."

Hoskuld waited, seeing that El-Barek was not yet done.

"Something more was gone," said El-Barek.

"Yes?"

"A piece of me, of course, my heart, my love, my happiness, these things she'd taken, as the poets say," he flashed his eyes at Hoskuld, "yet, something—more."

Hoskuld studied the other man's face.

"When I came out of the wood and ran into the desert I saw what was missing, no, I *did not see* what had always been." He looked hard at Hoskuld. "My shadow—gone."

"You mean—what do you mean?"

"I cast no shadow, still, to this day," said El-Barek.

"But—"

"You've never noticed. None have. A ship is a poor place for shadow-watching. The sails cast deeper shadows. The ship is always being tossed about. Besides, a sailor's eyes are never on his feet but up in the shrouds or out over the horizon. His feet must take care of themselves."

Hoskuld looked down at El-Barek's feet but the two men were below deck and what little light they had was insufficient for shadow-casting. He rose, grabbed his friend by the arm, and pulled him up onto the deck. He gazed for a long time at the sunlit spot beneath El-Barek.

"One hardly thinks of shadows," said Hoskuld, his voice little above a whisper. "One never looks," he lifted his eyes and met El-Barek's. "She took your shadow?"

"I don't know," said El-Barek. "I can't comprehend it. When I went below, to think about my life, to pour over my memories in search of meaning, I could remember only her. She left a few scraps behind, yes, unimportant details, of my life prior to her," he held out his hands, "almost nothing remains."

"Not fey-blooded," growled Hoskuld, "a true fey."

"Yes."

"By Torag," said Hoskuld, "what's to protect a man's mind against such magic?"

"My mind?" El-Barek laughed. "I've little concern for my mind. My heart—" He saw the other men approaching. They had hunger and impatience in their eyes.

"It's time," called one.

"I'm ready," said El-Barek. He turned to Hoskuld. "If I may impose further, friend?"

"Anything."

"The Captain, she condemns us. She prays when she should eat. She waits for deliverance when she should take action." He glanced toward the closed door to her quarters, then back to Hoskuld. "When I'm dead, take my blood to her and make her drink. Tell her it's water, if you must. She will die without." He glanced above, to the heavens. "The gods have forsaken her." He looked at Hoskuld and the others. "All of you. As for me, I don't want their

help and wouldn't take it." He turned back to Hoskuld. "Will you do as I ask?" Hoskuld nodded. "Then there is no more need for words."



H. Rad Bethlen has been compared to Isak Dinesen (*Seven Gothic Tales*) and Fritz Leiber (*Ill Met in Lankhmar*). He is known for his work in the fantasy and horror genres as well as his non-fiction. He has been published in Europe and America.

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