



The Pathfinder Collection

Stories
from
the
Inner
Sea

H. Rad Bethlen

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Rooster & Raven

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For the Daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne

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Introduction

When I began to teach myself to tell stories in the written form I took a brute force approach. I forced myself to face the blank page and put words on it that told stories. I didn't wait for the muse. I didn't make excuses. I didn't allow myself to succumb to my own fears. I was demanding, I was driven.

John Gardner, in *On Becoming a Novelist*, said:

Drivenness only helps if it forces the writer not to suicide but to the making of splendid works of art, allowing him indifference to whether or not the novels sell, whether or not it is appreciated. Drivenness is trouble for both the novelist and his friends; but no novelist, I think, can succeed without it. Along with the peasant in the novelist, there must be a man with a whip.

Taking a brute force approach meant that I had to find inspiration wherever I could. I got the inspiration for the first story I sold from a line in a short story by Ambrose Bierce. It wasn't an important line, but it had mood. That was enough.

The *Pathfinder Campaign Setting: The Inner Sea World Guide* was a source of many short stories and even a novel (*Breaking the Reign of the Dead*). Not all of those short stories are collected here. A few are still in the process of being edited and refined. I hope to release them when they're ready for the world.

My hope is that these stories breathe life into the Inner Sea region. If you tell stories in the Inner Sea, if your characters roam there, may they meet Captain Brindisi or Old Khalden. It makes me smile to think they will. Until that day, I hope you'll read these stories and enjoy them.

H. Rad Bethlen

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The Preservation of Captain Haifa Brindisi

Being a record of tragedy, found in the wreckage of the sailing ship Dragon's Star; which, having been damaged while at sea and later smashed amongst rocks in the Ironbound Archipelago, was the scene of much suffering.

Let this stand as a testament to the weakness of the body, the capriciousness of the mind, and tell that the soul does suffer both. I am the only survivor of the ship *Dragon's Star*. I was born and raised in the fishing village of Arsmeril, on the northern coast of Varisia. My father was from Ustalav, having fled the curse of that soil. Nay, he did not suffer any soil, but passed from land to sea, to be seen no more. What I have of him is precious little; although, it can now be said, and you shall come to believe, that he did not leave me bereft of the gifts of his blood.

I was raised by my mother and uncles, simple fisherfolk; hearty, silent, and devout to the gods. I learned by heart *The Eight Scrolls* and can recite from memory the *Hymns to the Wind and the Waves*, being often of the necessity to call upon the guidance of Desna and the mercy of Gozreh.

I have many male cousins, but none were so by nature drawn to sea than I, and although I was a girl, my uncles did not keep me back, seeing that salt was in my blood. By the time I could balance enough to walk I had my sea legs. While the other girls of the village dreamt of the Eagle Knights of Andoran, or some suchlike romance, I was longing for open seas and fair winds.

If I had known what my fate would be, that I would not sail at the pleasure of fair winds, not at all, but be put meanly to land by the cruelest winds any sailor has suffered, I would that an Eagle Knight had taken me away and kept me in his castle, a pretty bauble, safe from all knowledge of sea and self.

Know that we suffered from a total want of all that would sustain life. The *Dragon's Star* had been battered by waves and was leaking profusely. We had endured relentless winds, which had the sinister nature of the fey. Indeed, we worried that some sea spirit was revenging us for an unknown injury.

First, two pair of our foremost main shrouds on the larboard side were taken by the wind. The next morning our two fore main shrouds on the starboard side were carried away. We applied runner and tackle for the security of the mast. The weather was intolerably bad, day and night. By the next morning the wind calmed. We sang hymns and made offerings to Gozreh. Despite this, the next day a sudden wind came and, to our unspeakable horror, tore clean away the forestay and foresheets. Not only this, the foresail was rent in pieces. We had no recourse and tried our best under a balanced reefed mainsail.

The sea was as mountains upon us and it was here that the ship began to leak in earnest, the wood strained beyond its natural constitution. That night the tack of our square sail gave way. The sail was torn to tatters. Our flying jib was blown overboard. Despite all this we made way, our only bit of canvas being our mainsail. Our ship sat low due to the water we'd taken on. We worked the pumps without respite. Gozreh was not finished. After a calm that put us at ease, a gale blew hard from SSE and took apart our mainsail. We were at his mercy.

...

The *Dragon's Star* sailed out of Magnimar. We'd a load destined for Promise, on the island of Hermea; yes, the home of the great gold dragon, Mengkare, or so it's said, none I know of having seen him. We'd made the port once before and little can be known of the city, for a high, red sandstone wall and gates of burnished bronze keep all within secured against intrusion from outside. We were blown NNW and figured ourselves closer to the Mordant Spire or Syranita's Aerie than Promise; although, we had no way of knowing, having no sight of stars, nor sun, nor land.

A great deal of our stores were flooded, despite our efforts to preserve them. Much of the cargo was of no use. We had only some small amount of flour, sugar, dried meat, raisins, wine, but precious little fresh water. We rationed these but my men, against orders, took the wine to excess and the rationing was forgotten. The storms raged and we knew not which way the wind took us. If we passed beyond the Mordant Spire all was lost, for no ships sail those waters.

We had among us a priest of Gozreh, Timmons, who we adorned with the title of Saint. He was an old sailor of many campaigns. He had seen the Eye of Abendego and many other wonders. He'd been shipwrecked twice before, the second time suffering forty-one days on a barren island. He was of great aid to us. Not only was he immune to the hardships of the sea, he could provide food and fresh water by means of divine largesse. We could scarcely believe our misfortune—and his—when a wave took him overboard and carried him out of reach. He disappeared, and with him our hope.

I cautioned the men against wine, for it does little to aid under such circumstances. They refused to drink the water, convinced it was brackish. The wine being more plentiful, they preferred it. What little water there was I retained, it being my only advantage against Fate. The men were constantly warming the wine, for which they maintained a small fire. It got so that the smell of it was noxious to me.

We'd been thirteen days at the mercy of the storm, tossed terribly, half-sunk, and without means, when I retired to my cabin to await the arrival of Trelmarixian, the Horseman of Famine, for he was surely stalking us. By this time I was emaciated with sickness. Despite having hooks in the water there came no fish. I kept within arms-length only this journal, an ink pot and quill, the dirty water, and Saint Timmon's wand. I must tell of this.

Timmons had fashioned a wand out of an oar that he had with him when he'd been forty-one days upon the rock. The oar, his trousers, and his shirt, were all that had come with him from the wreckage of the *Ruby Prince*. This oar was his means of survival and rescue. He used it to club turtles and crack their shells. He resorted to drinking their blood, there being no fresh water on the island, and gathering their meat by use of sharp-edged stones. He found the highest point and planted his oar, using his shirt as a flag. A ship, the *Kantaria*, which had been blown off course, saw the shirt-flag and sent a boat to investigate.

Timmons brought his oar from that desperate place and, feeling a certain affection for it, whittled it down to something manageable. This he enchanted with all sorts of useful magics. One of its enchantments was the calling down of a pillar of fire, which proved a deterrent to piracy. This wand was in his quarters when he was taken by the sea. I retrieved it, more to preserve the old man's memory, than to make use of, for I had no learning of magic and knew not how to operate it.

...

After a fortnight of hard blowing, the sea calmed. We were adrift. The men came and said they were hungry and having no recourse were going to draw lots to see which among

them would sacrifice himself to preserve the rest. They wished my blessing on this demonic pact. Perceiving them in liquor, I begged them to wait out the day, hoping that our deliverance would come presently. They argued my request, saying what had to be done best be done now and why prolong our suffering.

They said they'd eaten all the leather belonging to the pumps, cut their shoes to strips and eaten those, and had even eaten the buttons from their coats. I warned them against the damage such an act would do to their everlasting souls. I beseeched them to pray. They said there was hunger to contend with, damn prayer. They said they cared not if I acquiesced, having come to me out of respect for my former responsibility as captain, although they contended that circumstances had made all equal.

I told them I would never condone such an abhorrent act and while I could do little in opposition I would not give the order nor partake of their sinful feast. They responded that they required not an order and as to eating or not eating, I was free to follow my own inclination. They left but soon returned and said that they'd come together and drawn lots.

Know this, of those left all were human with one half-elf, who had been my steward, his name being Melorca. They said that the lot had fallen upon him. He flung himself at my feet, pleading that I do something, but I was powerless. The men drug him from my cabin. The manner in which they'd previously gone away to converse amongst themselves, and how the lot had fallen, gave me the idea that the half-elf had been sorely treated. Although, in all honesty, it surprised me that they'd even pretended to treat him as equal to themselves.

They dragged him to the steerage and pierced his neck at the base of the skull. This I was told of later. They cut him open and began to extract his entrails, wishing to fry them for dinner. One man, Dorset, was so taken with hunger he cut out Melorca's liver and ate it then and there, despite the fire being at-hand. He paid for his impatience. That night he went raving mad and was thrown overboard by the others, this, despite their wish to preserve the meat of his body. They were fearful of gaining his condition, should they partake of him.

That evening I heard one of the men say to the others, "Even though she would not consent our getting of meat, let us give her some." One of them entered my cabin with a piece of Melorca's flesh, and offered it to me. I raised the wand and said I'd rather burn him to Hell and the ship with him, then resort to such an act, and further dared him to return a second time with such an offering.

Despite their earlier excesses with both wine and stores, the men rationed Melorca's remains with the greatest of care. All this time I ate nothing, only sipping now and again of the water. Knowing that I had condemned them, and knowing too that their hunger should return, I expected some violence to my person. I slept little and kept Timmon's wand in-hand—as a bluff.

A few days after the last of Melorca had been consumed they returned to my cabin. They said they had seen nothing of land nor sail, had caught no fish, had no fresh water, and nothing else which would sustain life. They again asked for my blessing over the choosing of lots. Furthermore, they argued that all this time I had partaken of no sustenance and surely must be too weak to remain stubborn.

I argued against another act of murder. What good had the half-elf's death done them, for they were once more hungry and desperate? They said lots must be drawn. Seeing as I could do nothing to prevent it, and seeing how unfair their earlier selection had been, I tore a sheet

from this journal into pieces and wrote everyone's name upon a fragment. These went into a can from which I drew a name.

The man whose name it was, El-Barek, a sailor who had come from far away Rahadoun, a man of great fortitude, beseeched his fellows: "I ask no god to help me, for they've done enough to damn us all. I ask only for five minutes to reflect upon my life." This was granted to him. Afterwards, he walked willingly into the steerage and met the same fate as Melorca.

I had suffered more than I ever thought I could endure. I had found a state well beyond weakness. I could barely keep my eyes open or grip my pen. It has taken every effort to keep up a journal.

I drank the last of the water, closed my eyes, and prepared to die. Some time later, I know not how long, I awoke with a greater thirst than I previously had. There was a rich taste upon my tongue. I found the strength to sit up. Besides me was one of my men, Hoskuld, an Ulfen. He held a wooden bowl in his hands, filled with blood.

"Quiet," he said. "Trelmarixian is close. Protest not, for it is too late. Drink." With this he held the bowl to my lips. I drank. I drank not only that single bowl of El-Barek's blood but many. I slept well for the first time in memory and was so completely restored that I was able to leave my bed and walk amongst my men. Indeed, I was so fully restored that I felt not at all the ill effects of starvation, nor of dehydration. The men gazed at me as if I were a miracle. Even though they had consumed Melorca and were now consuming El-Barek, they had little health, keeping just out of reach of the Horseman.

The sky was clear, the sun especially bright. I found that it pained me to remain under it. I found also the smell of El-Barek's cooking flesh to be revolting. The aroma coming from the pail of his blood, however, was so agreeable that before I was aware of myself I was drawing it out with cupped hands and drinking as a glutton.

This made the men wary. They offered me meat but I declined. I was aware of their judgment and returned to my cabin. I licked and sucked every crevice of my hand's flesh. The taste of blood was intoxicating. I sat on my bunk in a state of unwholesome wellness. It was a pleasure to be out of the sunlight.

Despite all I had drunk, I could not refrain from obsessing over El-Barek's blood. I began to jealously desire it for myself. That evening, as soon as the sun fell below the horizon, I went to the deck and found the pail empty. This aggrieved me more than reason would suggest. I was furious and kicked the men awake to inquire if they'd thrown the blood overboard. No, they said, they drank it. I began to accuse them but caught myself and returned to my cabin.

I was too agitated for sleep. I felt that I'd been wronged by my men. I believed that El-Barek's blood was mine. I was in a near frenzy when I came to myself. Where had such thoughts come from? Was I truly so desiring of human blood that I planned vengeance upon those who had denied me?

It was then that I understood why I had been so completely restored by El-Barek's blood. I understood why my father, who I always thought dishonorable, had not stayed to raise me, but had taken a boat and gone alone upon the water never to return. I understood that it was not the cursed soil of Ustalav that my father fled from, but the curse within himself. My father, although he had once been, was not human, nor was I entirely human, and had *never* been. They've a term for my kind, a term told in stories to frighten children, a dhampier. The living offspring of a vampire. A live-born undead.

I barricaded myself in my cabin, fearful that the craving for blood was too powerful a lure. I feared not my men, I feared for them. In time my men came to the door, beat upon it, and announced "land ho." I freed myself and went to the deck. Indeed, there was land. We rejoiced. Here might be civilization and with it hope. If not people and their works, may there at least be fresh water and wild nature with all her bounty. We were at the mercy of the wind and waves. We had not even oars, we used prayer instead. As if by miracle, the waves carried us to the island.

Yet, the miracle failed. As we approached we saw that the island was barren rock. Worse than this, we were being carried toward it with haste. There was no shore upon which to make a safe landing, only sharp rocks. We braced for impact.

...

The ship was smashed upon the rocks. We made our way onto the island. It was but little larger than the *Dragon's Star* and completely devoid of life. Nor was there a spring. There were some divots and natural bowls which we cleaned out in the hope that rainfall would fill them with fresh water enough to drink. Each man watched his divot as if water would appear by necessity alone. Would we once again resort to lots? Not I, for I was twice as strong as all my men combined and could overpower them.

No, there would be no lots. There would be no killing of one to preserve the rest. My men were for *me*. They held my nourishment within. All the blood on that island was mine and would be used to keep me alive until the time when Desna, the goddess of luck and travelers, should vouchsafe my deliverance. If she did not, then the blood of my men would serve only to prolong my misery, nothing more. As to *their* misery, was I not relieving it?

...

The last man was two weeks dead when I accepted the will of the gods. I sucked his blood until it was no more. His body was so drained, so light, being only bones and flesh, it caught the wind and sailed when I kicked it from the rock. I was reduced to my previous state, one of utter weakness. Once more did the Horseman of Famine, that prince of starvation, stalk me. I had done all for naught; sacrificed my soul, my salvation, and secured eternal damnation, for what? A few extra weeks of life upon a barren rock.

...

I was in the ship when I heard a voice. The remains of the *Dragon's Star* had been tossed high enough on the rocks to remain out of the water, and thus had drained. It was the only place of shade and, while certainly not comfortable, it was the only respite afforded me. I was near death and thought myself delirious, when one man inquired of another, "Signs of life?" I turned my head to gaze out of a hole. I saw a man pass by. He was studying the wreckage but had not seen me, sunk in the gloom.

I thought him a delusion and dismissed all thoughts of rescue; which, I had long abandoned in favor of death. Yet the voices continued. I crawled free of the wreckage and saw that a boat rowed close. Five men sat within, fresh, young, well-fed, and shocked to see me. They had come from a ship at anchor, to which they pointed. I saw the King's colors, King Eodred of Korvosa. I was saved.

...

I pen these last words with haste. I must leave my record here, in the *Dragon's Star*. I dare not take it with me, for fear of being found out. Can I digest human food, or must I now,

and forever, subsist on human blood? I shall learn while aboard the *Belde*, for that is the name of the ship.

I will say nothing to my rescuers of what has transpired, or of how I managed to outlive my men. It is enough to know that I leave the truth to rot upon this barren rock as the gods left me. I shall pray no more, but, like El-Barek, whose blood awakened me, I shall exercise my own reason, rely upon my own strength, a strength which has saved me while the gods remained aloof and uncaring. I shall go to Ustalav, to learn what I truly am, or perhaps to distant Geb, where I need not fear.

Haifa Brindisi,
Captain of the *Dragon's Star*

The Love of El-Barek

"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-blonde 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 Rahadoun, 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."

Of Art and Avarice

Old Khalden sat crosslegged on a woven mat at the periphery of the small square, one of many in the gilded city of Oppara, capital of Taldor. He was Kelish, with that race's bronze skin and luxurious black hair; although, his was more white than black. He was blind, having been blinded as a punishment for a crime committed in his passionate youth.

None knew the story. Khalden never spoke of it. When asked, a sentimental mood gathered his features into a wistful sadness and a sigh escaped his lips. No doubt—thought those who saw the old beggar's face at such moments—he had traded his sight for love.

It was assumed that Old Khalden was nothing more than a beggar or perhaps an ascetic, for amongst his few visible possessions was a time-worn copy of the *Order of Numbers*, Abadar's holy book. What use a blind man could make of such a book few could surmise.

Old Khalden was not what he seemed. His begging bowl was never emptied. The coins of silver and copper that filled its shallow depth had done so for years. He seemed to have no need of them. This was because Old Khalden was no beggar at all, but was a member in good standing of the Brotherhood of Silence, one of the most prominent thieves' guilds in the Inner Sea region.

He was retired from active work. He occupied himself with his current duties, that of a overhearer of words spoken, more to make himself feel useful than for any need to impress his betters, for he had already done so. Few could guess that when the blind beggar was not to be found on his mat he was enjoying life's rich bounty, tucked away out of sight in the Brotherhood of Silence's labyrinthine headquarters, one entrance of which, lie not more than a dozen steps from his right hand.

It was night in the gilded city. Few were out-of-doors. The free-standing stalls in the square were covered. Only Desna's glowing orb and an assortment of night-roving birds kept the blind beggar company. Not for long, however. Old Khalden turned an ear to the hidden entrance. The door slid open. To his ear the grating sound was an offense. His hand slipped under the leather cover of the *Order of Numbers*. He fingered the enchanted dagger held within, sheathed, as it were, by the cut-out pages of Abadar's holy script.

"Pissed off Tilly, again" grumbled a youthful male. "Two nights in a row with *you*. I'll make a present to her of those raspberry tarts Mara bakes. Then—" A ruffle of fabric silenced the youth. Old Khalden replaced his palm on Abadar's holy book and resumed his feigned sublime indifference to worldly affairs.

"Why's *he* still awake?" whispered Eshkol. "What company I keep; one blind, the other stupid." He moved opposite the hidden entrance, away from Old Khalden, whose true identity he did not know, the two never having crossed paths in the poorly lit hallways behind the secret entrance. Eshkol found a shadow and squatted on his haunches. His companion, Owen, another young apprentice of the Brotherhood, followed, managed to fit himself into the same shadow, and also squatted. "Dawn can't come soon enough," complained Eshkol. "These watches are pointless. Who's going to sneak in here, anyway?"

"Guards?" asked Owen.

"They don't sneak, fool."

"They—"

"Besides, the only guards that matter are bought off. Do you think the Brotherhood is stupid? You have a lot to—"

"I hear a troubling sound," said Old Khalden, speaking seemingly to himself, but loud enough to be heard by the youths. "It is the voice of ignorance. But how can that be?"

"Shut up, old loon," called Eshkol. Even though he had no fear of the blind beggar he lowered his voice. He elbowed Owen, who lost his balance and fell into the moonlight. He rose, squeezed himself once more into the shadow and squatted. He took no offense at his companion's actions. "You really are useless," said Eshkol. "If they didn't need someone to move around their trunks of loot without emptying them you'd be sitting over there," he pointed to Old Khalden. "How could you fail the first test? The *first* test!"

"They weren't mine."

"That's the entire—Ugh." Eshkol lowered his head into his hands. "They left the gold out to test you," he said, looking at Owen. "If you don't seize every opportunity to take gold when it's right in front of your eyes then how will the Brotherhood know your heart's filled with greed?"

"But," said Owen. "We shouldn't steal from each other, should we?"

"What did Tilly tell you?" asked Eshkol. Tilly was the unfortunate thief who had been placed in charge of the two youths' instruction. "There's no such crime as theft. Remember? There's only the crime of being caught."

"Right," said Owen. "No such crime as—"

"Shut up."

For a few minutes the two young thieves squatted in silence.

"Who's that?" asked Owen, motioning with his head. Eshkol, who had been contemplating how best to rise quickly through the ranks of the Brotherhood of Silence, grabbed his dagger. Owen had a cudgel, owing to his greater strength. Neither youth noticed that Old Khalden's hand was now beneath the cover of Abadar's holy book.

"Who? Where?"

"There?" motioned Owen. Eshkol looked then looked to his companion.

"Are you—" Eshkol looked back at the "person" Owen had indicated. "That's a statue, are you—" Neither boy noticed that Old Khalden's hand was resting on the book's cover once more.

"A statue?" asked Owen. He narrowed his eyes. "Wasn't there last night?"

"No," said Eshkol, "it wasn't. They put it up today. Haven't you noticed them out here working? They spent an entire week clearing—Ugh." He once more placed his head in his hands.

"She's beautiful," said Owen. "Who is she?"

Eshkol looked at Owen, then to the statue. He was about to insult his fellow apprentice again, but the otherworldly presence of the statue gave him pause. The moonlight seemed to animate it. The statue was so expertly crafted that it possessed none of the still-life quality that hobbles the effectiveness of lesser works. Indeed, it appeared so lifelike that Owen could hardly be faulted for mistaking it for a living person.

"How should I—" Began Eshkol.

"Come, young ruffians," said Old Khalden. "You make more noise than a murder of crows." He waved the two youths to him. "In order to silence your ignorant chatter I will tell you what you want to know. Come."

Owen turned to Eshkol.

"Eh, why not?" asked Eshkol.

"We'll get in trouble," said Owen, although when Eshkol rose, he did too.

"We can still see the entrance," whispered Eshkol. "Come on, I'm bored to death."

The pair rose, crossed the square, pausing to gaze at the statue, then arrived at Old Khalden's mat. They studied the blind beggar, looked at each other, then sat, mimicking Khalden's pose, legs folded beneath them.

"All week, I'm listening to the workmen," began Old Khalden. "This morning, when she," he waved his hand toward the statue, whose eyes seemed to have settled on the two youths and their blind instructor, "was placed, a bard came and told her story. Shall I tell you?"

"That's why we're sitting here, old fool," said Eshkol.

Khalden smiled. He patted the cover of the *Order of Numbers*, thinking of its true contents. He remembered how he was in his youth and thought the young thief across from him rather tame. "When the workmen placed the statue," said Old Khalden, "a dwarven man stood in the shadow that you yourselves occupied only moments ago. He was weeping."

"How could you know—" began Eshkol.

Khalden tapped his right ear.

"A dwarf cannot weep quietly," he said, "when they succumb to such emotions, it is with the power of a mountain stream." He organized the telling in his mind. "She was a princess," he said. "One of the many daughters of the previous satrap of Qadira, our old enemy, yes? Now we have peace." He smiled. "And to adhere a man to peace, his heart is secured with love. Or so the bard said." He turned his head toward the statue. He could not see it, but could imagine it. "She was the daughter of man but had something of the djinn about her, that being the genie-folk who flutter upon the wind, lighter than a bird, yet more terrible than a desert twister—should one anger them."

"Old fool, what's this?"

"Go," said Khalden, without anger, "gaze upon her likeness, if you wish to test my telling." The two young thieves rose and went to the statue. They studied it in earnest. The princess, they still did not know her name, was thin to the point of delicateness. Carved into her flesh were swirls and lines meant to represent the straight gusting and whimsical curling of the winds. She had none of the genie-folk's inhuman appearance, being entirely recognizable in form, and of exceptional beauty. The youths returned and sat. Old Khalden continued.

"She was promised to Stavian's Uncle—"

"The Grand Prince?" asked Owen.

"Yes. This Uncle, Hendrik by name, is a most disagreeable man, ugly within and without. He managed to make it to his fiftieth year without once turning the head of a maiden." This made the two youths giggle. "So when he sought a wife one had to be found from amongst the former enemy, a retribution, I suppose.

"The match was entirely inappropriate, of course," continued Khalden. "This princess was shy but watchful. She was like a timid cat, one who is frightened by any sound, yet who is so desiring of petting, she lingers, at war with her own fright. While her betrothed was a man of

large appetites, wont to take in-hand immediately any object of his desire. Only the spite of the Grand Prince kept them apart.

"You see, Grand Prince Stavian did not know just how beautiful his Uncle's bride was until he saw her. He postponed the wedding and housed her in the palace. This was so he could gaze upon her. Even though he couldn't or wouldn't marry her, he could still enjoy the sight of her. He is an exceedingly lecherous man.

"The Princess, her name was Fatima, did you know? Ah, well, so it was. She was used to the beauty of her homeland. The city of Katheer, from whence she hails, is home to more wonders than a man could find on his own, even given ten lifetimes in which to search. Even though we cling to our past glory and see its ghost everywhere, to an outsider, especially a Qadirian, our capital must look like so much tarnish on a golden crown that once shown brightly.

"Her only pleasure was the palace gardens. She used to make many sketches of what she saw there. In her search for arresting views she discovered many of the statues that are hidden within, lost to poorly kept shrubbery. How many sketches of these did she make? How many a likeness in pencil or charcoal before she thought to ask about their creator?

"She learned that the sculptor was still alive. Not only that, he lives here in the capital. I have already mentioned him. He is the dwarf, Ottmar, of whom all of Oppara used to speak. He fell out of favor due to his gruff manner, still, he was given a modest pension. He kept himself busy with an epic work to which he'd devoted nearly a decade of research, planning, and modeling. This was a monumental statue depicting one of the Ten Warriors of the Old Mage Jatembe, who brought light and wisdom to a people lost in darkness, so said the bard. Of these ancient things I know little.

"This statue was of the warrior Mataabō, whose steed was a giant lizard that walked on its two powerful hind legs, a type of creature not seen anymore, the size of which would prove preposterous, were we to see it now. Only the gods know if they once truly existed. Well, Ottmar is a perfectionist. He did not wish to imagine his lizard, but to work from life. He sent to the Mwangi Expanse, you've heard of it? No? It's a vast and wild jungle, against which the sharp blade of civilization has made no cut since Jatembe's time.

"A suitable specimen was brought back along with two natives from the expanse who had some understanding of the creature. Mind you, it was no colossal beast." Here Old Khalden laughed. "It must have stood no taller than either of you and a sight narrower, I surmise. It was half bird, for it was feathered about its head and neck. Yet it had the carnivore's dangerous bite and it possessed claws like reaping scythes. It ate meat, which its handlers were quick to give it, lest it leap upon them.

"Ottmar was making a careful study of this bird-lizard. About this time Princess Fatima learned of her favorite sculptor's identity. She sent him a request, desiring to see him. Even though Ottmar's pension was on the line, the request was ignored. He is one of those singleminded artist who cannot take even a modest break from his work. If Fatima was not so timid, that is, if she possessed more of what we'd call the typical attitude of royalty, she would have had Ottmar drag from his studio and thrown down before her. As it was, she sent beseeching letters and plenty of gifts, thinking to earn the dwarf's good grace.

"However, Ottmar remained obsessed with his work. Now, if you recall, Fatima was like a cat that may or may not conquer its fear and approach. She *did* overcome her timidity and one day, quite without warning, appeared in Ottmar's studio. You might imagine he'd be put out

but the exact opposite happened. Here was this delicate, timid creature, blown in like a blossom, a treat to his eye and so completely unlike him in demeanor that the dwarven artist fell in love. Not romantic love, mind you, but the love an artist has for something beautiful and pure.

“Ottmar now had to make amends for his rude behavior. He gave Fatima the royal treatment, as it were, showing her his meagre studio and his even more meagre quarters. Even though his tools were old they were made by dwarven hands and thus were of the highest quality. Finally, after so much fumbling through social niceties, the two were accustomed to one another. A genuine friendship formed. Many visits followed. In time, when Ottmar was truly comfortable with Fatima, he showed her Mataabō on his feathered steed.

“Would you believe Fatima laughed? Not at the workmanship, which was sublime, but that such a creature existed at all, or ever had. Here, a daughter of the genie-folk, and she doubted the existence of this giant bipedal lizard. Well, if Ottmar wasn’t so enchanted with our princess he would have put her out on her rump. Thankfully, he had a better solution. He showed her the lizard from the Mwangi Expanse.

“Now, mind you, this lizard was no household pet. Ottmar had never so much as touched a brightly colored feather on its head. Not even the handlers, born and raised around such a fantastic creature, dare approach it. This glorified chicken scared them all to death. Not Fatima, the very first thing she did was approach it, hand extended. Thankfully, Ottmar drew her back. The lizard, suffering such an affront as it never had, emitted such a threatening hiss, that everyone present fled to safer quarters.

“Grand Prince Stavian could not delay forever. His Uncle wasn’t getting any younger. The wedding date was set. You might feel sorry for our princess but fear not, such marriages are more for show than for anything else. Still, her fate was uncertain. What kind of husband would Uncle Hendrik make? The question didn’t worry Fatima. She was too involved with her dwarven sculptor, whose platonic love was enthusiastically reciprocated.

“Ottmar decided that his great work would make the perfect wedding present for Fatima. He double his efforts, working from dawn until the wee hours of the night in order to finish the statue in time. His aging body could not endure the work. He fell ill and exhausted and was confined to bed. The wedding date approached but the great statue of Mataabō was not yet complete. What do to? There was no way it could be completed in time without compromising its quality. This Ottmar would not do.

“He decided on a placeholder. He no longer needed the feathered lizard. That part of the statue had been completed. He made a gift of the lizard and of its handlers to the princess. These handlers were pleased, as their pay increased and their living quarters were vastly superior. The lizard too was pleased, for it could now roam the garden outside of the princess’s quarters, instead of the sunless yard behind Ottmar’s studio.

“These handlers found Fatima and the other personages of the palace a most difficult group. While Ottmar respected the lizard’s dangerous qualities, the nobility felt immune to any harm. They had never known anything truly wild. The handlers attempted to communicate the danger involved but were ignored. There were many close calls.

“Now, there was something known to these handlers that was unknown to Ottmar or Fatima. These wise Mwangi tried to express their understanding but somehow they fell short of their goal. What they knew but could not communicate was this; the lizard was young, an adolescent. It was also female. It was rapidly approaching its first season. The females of this

particular species are unusually aggressive during their season. They are motivated to go in hunt of a mate. The poor males of this species are practically assaulted. This aggressiveness is most pronounced in the first year, tapering off as the female ages.

"These wise Mwangi attempted to convince the princess to do one of two things before the first season came; have the lizard killed, or have the lizard returned to the expanse. By this time Fatima was quite taken with this death-dealing chicken. She spent hour after hour observing and sketching it. She could not comprehend the warning given by the lizard's handlers. When they grew more insistent she grew offended. In her naivety she had them dismissed. They went to Ottmar but found him so ill, exhausted, and listless as to be almost insensible. These poor Mwangi had no recourse but to pray to the gods, take their gold, and return home.

"Just about the time Ottmar was returning to health the lizard was coming into her first season. The princess was asleep one night when she heard a most disturbing sound. It was a mournful wailing, a mixture of a scream and a funeral dirge. Although the sound woke her and she heard it still, she thought she was dreaming, for the sound belonged more rightly to the realm of nightmares.

"She followed this sound into her private garden and there found the feathered-lizard curled up in the moonlight, moaning most pitifully. The lizard turned its plaintive eyes on the princess. The pain and anguish of the beast's gaze wounded the princess's sensitive heart. She had no idea of the danger she was in, for the mournful sound was one side of a coin whose other side was rage. The princess, desiring to console the lizard, approached, knelt, and reached out." Here Old Khalden stopped. He could hear the pounding hearts before him and the strain of lungs whose air was held tight.

"Afterwards, the lizard was put to death. The princess—buried in her private garden. A day of mourning was called. Her funeral train stretched across Oppara. This was some time ago, mind you. Perhaps you are too young to remember it? As it so happened, for at times the gods can be cruel, Ottmar had labored with renewed vigor and was near to completing the statue of Mataabō. When he heard of Fatima's death he struck deeply the face of that ancient hero, dropped his chisel and hammer, and once more fell ill, this time of heartbreak.

"Well," said Old Khalden, "this is but one half of our story. For you wished to know of this statue's origins. You have heard of the life and death of Fatima, yes, but there is more to hear about Ottmar. The night grows long and the air cold. I hear my bed calling. Do not yet buy raspberry tarts for your teacher but stay in her ill-favor so that we may speak tomorrow night." With this Old Khalden surprised the two youths by passing through the hidden entrance, the *Order of Numbers* tucked under his arm.

...

"Ah," said Old Khalden, the blind beggar-thief, when the two young apprentices returned to his mat. This time he was prepared for them. A wicker basket was at his left hand. The *Order of Numbers* at his right. He brought the basket around and motioned for the boys to partake of its contents. "Mara was most please to sell all of her tarts before they'd even cooled." He held up a finger. "Do leave a few for your poor instructor. How she labors!" The two boys laughed. He had also a bottle of goat's milk. He set this next to the basket. He knew that boys of any temperament can be pacified and pleased by such things as pastries and milk. It was in this way he found a most agreeable audience.

"Now we must speak of Ottmar, whose fate is perhaps worse than Fatima's. How? Who knows what charity the gods give to those innocent, young princesses who come before them? As for those who've grown cynical by time's many injuries—" He shrugged his shoulders. "Should they expect Heaven after this? Eh? But these are matters for philosophers and priests.

"When we left Ottmar he was bed-ridden, ill of heart. He dismissed his assistants and barred the door of his studio. He could not bare to see Mataabō's feathered lizard, nor the gash that marred that noble warrior's face, for this very wound mirrored the one that cut through Ottmar's soul. You see, he blamed himself for Fatima's death. To mourn is to wrestle with the hard truths of time.

"With Fatima's death his pension was ended. Uncle Hendrik blamed the sculptor too. He even called for the dwarf's execution. Grand Prince Stavian, despite all his evil instincts, hates the sight of blood. Exile? requested Uncle Hendrik. Eh, let it go, said the Grand Prince. And so the world forgot about Ottmar. Both studio and home fell into neglect and disrepair. Animals found their way in, pushing their heads through holes and making nests within Mataabō's crevices and within arms-reach of the once lauded artist.

"What does soul-sickness do to a man? It's misery. Artists, too, are perhaps more vulnerable to such corrosive states. Is it any wonder that Ottmar began to lose his hold on reality? He began to speak to the rats and crows. He gave them his bread, he subsisting on crumbs. Isolation does strange things to a man, believe me. One gets to talking to beasts as if they'd answer. In time, one believes they do!

"One crow in particular adopted Ottmar. Crows, as you know, are intelligent. They have poor manners, yes, but they are smart enough to recognize a good thing when it comes along."

"They know their mark," said Eshkol.

"Yes," agreed Khalden. "This crow figured out that if it stood on the headboard or on Ottmar himself, as he lie under the covers, it got first choice of whatever food was available. Soon this crow chased off its competition. The rats were pecked and squawked at until they went in search of a more peaceful abode. The other crows were harder to dislodge, but, as this enterprising crow grew fat, it was able to oust all others through sheer muscle.

"So, after a season or two we find Ottmar and his crow living like wizard and familiar. Perhaps the following is only the bard's fancy, or perhaps it is truth, who can say? But, this crow, having grown fond of its benevolent provider, or perhaps scheming for more food, realized that an active dwarf is better than an inactive one. This crow began to work on Ottmar. How? It found its way into his studio, no doubt through some hole in the roof. It managed to carry tool after tool from the studio into the house, and drop them noisily on the floor by Ottmar's bed.

"Can you imagine it? What must have Ottmar thought when confronted by the rude persistence of this remarkable bird? Tool after tool, even those whose weight you would think prevented such transport, made their way from studio shelf to Ottmar's bedside. 'What, damn you?' I can imagine the consternated dwarf demand. This crow, and here we begin to mistrust our bard, even in a world such as this, answered.

"It scolded its protector and provider. 'Enough is enough,' it said. 'Back to work with you!'" Said Old Khalden. "Can you imagine it? Eh, there are stranger things. Even dwarves must acknowledge that the occasional crow will talk. 'But what?' Asked Ottmar of his supernatural advisor. 'Fatima!' Answered the crow.

"You see, this crow had been paying attention—listening to Ottmar's lamentations. While man confuses himself with his vast intellect, beasts get right to the issue. The only cure for Ottmar's soul-sickness, knew this wily old crow, was forgiveness. How could Ottmar forgive himself? As a dwarf he must look to stone and to his hands. As a sculptor—well, the answer is obvious.

"Ottmar could hardly grasp what this impertinent crow demanded of him. It was too much for his pained heart. Have you ever tried to keep a crow from a bit of carrion? Kick or scream or throw rocks, they hop about or maybe take flight, but return they will. Before long Ottmar couldn't turn back his blanket, so heavy was it with tools. Nor could he occupy himself with sobbing or painful introspection without getting a motivating peck. What the crow lacked in subtlety it more than made up for in obnoxious persistence. In time Ottmar found himself prying loose the boards over his studio door.

"I'm too crude a man to know how that first vision of Mataabō and his lizard mount must have struck Ottmar. If I know the dwarven character, even that of an artist, once a dwarf takes a tool in-hand, sentimentality is banished. So began the statue you see behind you. This great hero and his lizard mount had one last service to man, for locked within that stone was Fatima, a likeness that belies belief, or so I hear said.

"Ottmar worked as a man possessed. All the while the crow watched. Chunks of stone were split away, falling with a crash. Mataabō must have known his fate, for he surrendered without protest. In the heart of his lizard mount was the stone that would provide a delicate yet enduring beauty. Fatima," Khalden smiled, "Fatima was there. Ottmar revealed her.

"The statue seemed to carve itself. It's like that sometimes, I imagine. Ottmar stood back one day, hammer and chisel in-hand, and stopped. He knew the statue was done, needing only to be polished. He set aside his tools and wept, not tears of sadness, no, tears of joy. He had created a masterpiece. It was as if Fatima was standing before him. His moment of glory was interrupted, however, for the crow was hopping about and making such a racket as to shatter even a dwarf's pleased tranquility.

"What, damn you?" Asked Ottmar. 'Jewels!' Cried the crow. 'Jewels!' Ottmar looked at the statue and searched his memory. He turned to the crow. 'She never wore jewelry, you—' But the cry of 'jewels, jewels', continued without cease. Ottmar thought. Yes, he realized, at the wedding, and everyday thereafter, she would have had fantastic jewels. He had never seen them. He gazed for a long time at his squawking companion. He turned to the statue. How, he asked himself, could he add jewels he'd never seen?

"The crow read his mind. 'Stavian,' it said, 'Stavian.'" Here Khalden paused. He had spoken at length and was thirsty. He felt for the bottle of milk. Owen understood what the blind beggar wished, took his hand, and placed within it the bottle.

"We've saved the rest for you," he said.

"A tart, too," said Eshkol.

"Kind boys," said Khalden. He held out the bottle with one hand, wiping his chin with the other. Owen took the bottle. Khalden did not yet eat the sweet treat, but continued his tale.

"Ottmar went to the castle. He requested an audience with the Grand Prince. It took some time for the prince to recall the name Ottmar. When he did he was curious. He assumed the dwarf wished to resume his pension. People were always beseeching him for gold. He was surprised when Ottmar enquired not about money, but about Fatima's jewels. After some confusion and a great deal of attention to security, they were produced.

"Ottmar was escorted into a dining room. One wall of this room was comprised of windows opening to a lovely garden of fruit trees. Word had gotten around that Fatima's jewels were being retrieved from the royal treasury. The maids, who normally stayed out of sight, determined that those windows must be washed on that day. Two maids stood within the dining room, one outside. They opened the windows and gossiped while they cleaned. Each had her head turned in order to catch a glance at the jewels. The swift breeze of the Inner Sea carried the scent of the fruit blossoms into the room.

At one end of the long table, set out on rich velvet, were the princess's wedding jewels. A guard stood beside the table. A man, associated with the royal treasury, was standing behind the table. Ottmar began to take measurements and sketch out the details of each piece.

"As Ottmar examined the pieces, the treasury-man rattled off the history of each. The twin, lime-green stones, with their milky swirls, set in platinum earrings were from Kyonin. They had come from the tomb of an elven queen. The bracelet had been found in an excavation in Sargava. The stones, which resembled frozen flames, could not be identified and were considered unique. The necklace, and here the treasury-man spoke with marked pride—the maids ceased cleaning all together and listened with rapt attention—was not only an emerald of perfect color and clarity, it possessed an enchantment by none other than Nex himself, or so it was determined, such things are damnably hard to verify. What was the enchantment? None knew. No amount of divination could reveal it. The magic of that immortal wizard was far too advanced to give up its secrets, especially to the ignoramuses who probed and prodded like children. How to activate the enchantment? Ask Nex.

"Each piece," continued Khalden, "was befitting the princess that Ottmar had come to love. He finished his sketches and was half out of the door, the treasury-man donning his silk gloves, the guard looking forward to his lunch-feast, the maids deciding that the windows were sparkling, when there came a sudden flapping sound; wings at close quarters. Ottmar ducked and scrambled through the open door. The guard reached for his sword. The treasury-man reached for the jewels. He was rewarded with a blood-drawing peck on his forearm.

"The crow who had demanded, 'Jewels! Jewels!', materialized. This mysterious bird had been waiting to pounce. You see, it had been present the entire time, having waddled into the room on Ottmar's heels. It had stood in the corner, seen by none, for all attention went to the jewels. When Ottmar finished, this thief, yes, for this bird is as we are, avaricious to the core, leapt upon the table. It grabbed the Nex-enchanted necklace, turned its gaze this way and that, rocked a bit like crows do, then launched and flapped over the heads of the screaming maids. The last sight of that necklace, whose value was inestimable, was its jump through an open window, carried in the glossy black claws of the crow.

"Ottmar was seized at once, drug to the dungeon, and interrogated. His story was told to the Grand Prince, who, would you believe, laughed until tears came. He had the guard and the treasury-man thrown into the dungeon. Ottmar, he released, on one condition: the statue of Fatima was to be gifted to the crown, to make up for that priceless artifact which had flown away. His sense of justice, or was it irony, was most unique.

"Now we have arrived at the end of our tale, my young friends. The statue, which even the daft Grand Prince acknowledges as a work of sublime beauty and unequaled craftsmanship, was far too remarkable to remain out of public sight. So," Khalden motioned to the statue, "there stands Fatima. As for Ottmar—"

But Old Khalden's words were interrupted by a sharp click, nails on stone. He turned his ear to the source. Eshkol and Owen turned to look behind them. There appeared to be no source of the odd sound. Then, as the boys watched, a crow materialized from the deeper darkness, standing atop Fatima. It held in its black beak a delicate necklace, a platinum chain with a flawless emerald. It lowered its head and slipped the necklace around Fatima's slender neck.

"What is it, boys?" whispered Old Khalden.

"The crow," whispered Eshkol.

"What's it doing?" asked Khalden.

"It's got the necklace!" cried Owen.

The crow, which was no ordinary bird, but was some sort of wicked fey or the results of an ancient wizard's troublesome meddling, which, was more commonly called a "witchcrow," turned its black eyes to the seated group of fellow thieves. More intelligence shown within those dark orbs than any natural crow, or indeed, most men, possessed. It extended its wings and fluttered down to the base of the statue. It turned its gaze upwards and seemed to regard the effect the necklace had when paired with Ottmar's masterpiece.

"Owen," whispered Khalden, "club that wicked thing. Eshkol, grab the necklace before it's too late."

As Khalden spoke these words, the witchcrow began to hop and dance. It spat out such unnerving sounds that the two young thieves were slow to act. Old Khalden, more experienced, and therefore less easily dissuaded, threw back the cover of the *Order of Numbers* and plucked out his enchanted dagger. He rose and began to creep toward the racket. When he stepped between Eshkol and Owen they were awoken from their stupor and took to their feet. The witchcrow continued its bizarre dance.

Just as Khalden was within striking distance the witchcrow stopped, turned toward him, and gave a shrill squawk of such menacing pitch that the blind beggar and his two compatriots were stopped. The witchcrow took flight, landed on Fatima's head, bent, plucked the necklace free, then rose up to its full height. It gave the trio the evil eye, nodded its head three times in rapid succession, and disappeared from sight. Only Old Khalden could hear the flapping of its wings as it passed over them.

The trio stood for some time in silence. Eshkol and Owen looked at one another. Old Khalden had his ear turned skyward, a wry smile on his face. Once he was certain the witchcrow was gone and the evening's excitement was through he yawned, stretched, and made his way back to his mat. He crouched, felt for the *Order of Numbers*, found it, and stood.

"Well, boys," he said, replacing his dagger within the holy book and shutting the cover. "A finer ending could not have been had. A master thief that was!" He laughed, turned, and headed toward the secret entrance to the Brotherhood of Silence's headquarters. He paused, turned, and smiled at the two boys. "Leave my raspberry tart out for the birds. One never knows," he said, his voice echoing from the shadows. "One never knows."

Three Familiars

"Magic?" asked Brunhilda, a dwarf, and therefore suspicious of the arcane. She knelt over the rigid body of Remus, found the closeness uncomfortable, stood and stepped to her deputy. He was a young man, until recently a shepherd, named Elgin. His patience and his powers of observation had recommended him to Brunhilda, the Sheriff of Hausswolffen, of which Elgin was natural born, she having come down from Battlewall.

Remus had once been a tutor to White Estrid, the King of Halgrim (the title of King was applied no matter the gender) and therefore an inquiry was being made, whereas the superstitious locals might have otherwise boarded up the tower and called its environs haunted, never to be trespassed.

"A letter," said Elgin. "He must have been writing it when he died. See?" He pointed to the smudged ink in the lower right-hand corner, which had transferred itself to the wizard's cheek, indicating a sudden loss of consciousness. Brunhilda turned, as the wizard was crumpled on the carpet, having slid out of his chair, presumably upon dying.

"The papers bear tracks," said Elgin.

Brunhilda examined what appeared to be paw prints. "An animal's."

"You think he was killed by an animal?"

"Doubtful," she said. "Eh, it's small, judging from the size. Most likely a pet. It must have jumped up on the desk while he was writing." Her thoughts returned to Remus. "Perhaps it was something in the paper. Something he unknowingly triggered, a trap," she said. "Wizards make the craftiest assassins."

"Murder?"

Brunhilda looked down at Remus. "He's not so old. Doesn't look ill." She glanced at her deputy. "There's no marks on him." She looked around the study. "No signs of struggle." She began to pace. "I'm not the right person for this. Damn the riddle that is magic," she said, slamming a fist into an open palm.

"Sven Seven-Eyes is on the way." Elgin said.

"Three days, if Gozreh wills it," said Brunhilda, looking down at Remus.

Elgin had nothing to add.

"Let's look at this letter," she said. "If you're certain it isn't trapped."

"Trapped?"

"With runes, or—How should I know?"

Elgin looked over the pages. "Seems to be plain writing, Sheriff."

"Let's hope."

...

"What can I say to you, my friend?" Began the letter. "I left in haste, without farewell, and with doubt in my heart as to the continuation of our friendship. With the application of that universal salve—time—and with it, logic regaining rule over emotion, I've come to doubt my own perceptions. To make sense of my actions I shall speak of events of which you are unawares and with which, I hope, you shall find cause for forgiveness.

"As you well know it was on account of Agatha, my faithful familiar. She had somehow fallen ill. Cats are wont to catch a bug now and again. I thought perhaps it was the persistent draft in this old tower. If only I could give Agatha a change of scenery.

"What other reason did I need to travel south? It had been years, had it not? Each of us lost in our research, me sorting through the intricacies of enchantment, and you, my once fellow apprentice, familiarizing yourself with those ever-varied denizens of the outer planes. Besides, this tower is too isolated. It was a gift, you know, from my patron and protector, the King. The sea is my neighbor and the winds blow without cease, putting a dreadful cold into these gray stones.

"I set out and you greeted me, if not with the cordiality I had hoped for, then with excitement about your work; which, amongst our kind, is contagious. I must admit, some of your recent 'breakthroughs' alarmed me. Do you not remember what that curmudgeon, Valstaf, said about the Abyss, staring in and what not? Well, it isn't my place to lecture.

"The climate along Lake Encarthan was a welcome change. Even Agatha perked up. Of course, the mice in your tower stepped lively to give her a bit more exercise than she's accustomed to. (My own mice are languid.) As you know, I planned to spend the winter there. I lasted but a fortnight. What must you have thought when you found your guest quarters empty?

"Did you think that I took offense at how little time we had spent in conversation or in shared magical exploration? No, my friend, I well know how a caster's mind works. Time is of the least concern, lest it be time wasted, then we balk. Socializing is not far behind. I was to occupy myself with that tome you have on the crafting of ioun stones. (Shall I yet have that pleasure?)

"As you know Agatha took to you with great curiosity, following you everywhere, butting against your calves when you stopped. I swear she lost a few pounds in her relentless shadowing of you. She even, on occasion, slept in your chambers, or perhaps stayed up to watch you work. I am so used to her lying just behind my knees at night that her absence struck me as a phantom limb. Her behavior was unusual but I took it to be a bit of the animating spirit of youth, brought on, I surmise, by the cat-and-mouse game.

"What was the cause of my rude departure? There's nothing for it but to relate matters as they happened. As I mentioned, Agatha had taken up spying on you. On this particular night she was not in bed with me. Later, I was awoken by her meowing. I brought up a light and saw her in the doorway. She must have come to check on me. Finding me whole and in the expected place she dashed off. I dispelled my light and returned to sleep.

"Before I had quite come under Desna's influence I was awoken again by Agatha, this time climbing into bed. She was less talkative than usual, which I took to be exhaustion, and—again out of character—she wanted under the covers. I obliged her and succumbed at once to slumber. I awoke, as men of our age do, in the middle of the night, and felt for Agatha. She was no longer in bed. Also, her spot was cold. She must not have stayed long.

"I was a bit worried. I called for her but she didn't come. One knows how tied we wizards are to our familiars. I concentrated and began to sense that something was amiss. I went in search of her, calling out her name. I came to your study door, found it closed, yet saw light beneath. I knocked, but you must not have heard. I admit that I knelt and attempted to spy through the keyhole, but saw nothing. I admit also to getting down on my hands and knees and calling Agatha's name through the gap.

"She came rushing to the door, meowing, and attempting to stick her nose beneath. When that failed she reached under, not in that playful-predatory way cats do, but as a drowning man might reach for the aid of one in a raft. I touched her paw to let her know I was

present. I spoke soothingly to her, but alas, I could hear in the troubled warble of her meows that she was scared out of her wits.

"I do not believe you have a familiar, so you may not know that one's attachment becomes such that man can understand beast, vice versa. I asked Agatha what had so shocked her. She was, at first, unable to organize her admittedly simple thoughts. After being somewhat calmed by my voice she was able to communicate her impressions. It was obvious that she had no comprehension of what she had witnessed, save for the animal's instinctive understanding of danger. This troubled me. I caught a bit of the panic that gripped her.

"I rose and banged on your door. No response. I pulled the handle to no effect. I remembered a scroll of knocking amongst my processions and went to get it. I returned and read it, a transgression against you, but Agatha's plaintive cries spurred me to such rash behavior. Much to my surprise the door did not budge. That is quite unusual and quite worrisome.

"Were you in trouble? Had one of your summons gone awry? Had you stared too long into the Abyss and were suffering the consequences? There was one last recourse available. Those with long ties to their familiars are able to scry upon them. I set myself outside of your door, concentrated, and focused my mind's eye upon my frightened familiar.

"I was able to see her and around her the flagstones of your study floor, beyond that, all was fog. I concentrated with greater effort and the fog was partially dispelled. Only the edge of your carpet revealed itself. I spoke to Agatha, encouraging her to find you. She refused, something she had never done, being courageous, or, perhaps, by default, curious. I commanded her and she reluctantly turned and went off in search of you. My vision, centered on her, and still clouded, added little information.

"Agatha halted and began to meow. She would go no further, despite my command, and despite the risk of raising my ire. She then began to hiss, arch her back, and raise her fur against something I could not see. She had not made it far from the door. I heard your approach. I saw your form appear at the edge of the fog. I then heard you speaking to Agatha. Despite your attempts to soothe her she remained agitated. Knowing you were close to the door I broke off my scrying, rose, and knocked.

"You opened the door, after a suspiciously long delay. There you stood, Agatha in your arms. I was surprised to see this, given her previous state of alarm. You were not, however, surprised to see me. I informed you of my search for Agatha, at which time you placed her in my arms. We said goodnight and I returned to my quarters. I could detect nothing of your work, though I looked eagerly over your shoulder.

"Agatha was dazed and exhausted. The two of us went to bed, but, I admit, neither of us slept. I could not feel her mind. Nor could I encourage her to voice her thoughts. She remained distant and silent, staring into the darkness through half-opened eyes.

"There is a spell, rare and difficult to cast, but known to me, in which one can 'read' the memories of one's familiar. It can be a dangerous spell in that it is easy to become trapped in an animal's thoughts, for they are so repetitive and of such a simple, immediate nature that to remember the self and return to the self can sometimes elude the caster.

"Despite the risk, I cast this spell and investigated not only that one night's events but all of Agatha's memories as they related to you. They were patchy and confused, but here I no longer speak of events unknown to you, for you know well what Agatha witnessed.

"While I may have moral qualms about making contact with that realm beyond knowing, I hesitate to condemn you. We all explore, in our own way, those mysteries that grip our imaginations. Still, whatever knowledge you seek by questioning the *Qlippoth*—for what else could such an indescribably monstrosity be—and what sense you are able to make of their answers, can it be worth the risk?

"Perhaps I behaved rashly or perhaps seeing Agatha in that state affected me, but I decided that the healing balm of a change of place had become instead a harm and, I worried, a disease of the mind, for the *Qlippoth* can derange a mind as easily as they can illuminate one (indeed, they may think those two disparate activities one and the same).

"I left that morning without confronting you.

"Agatha remained in her shocked state for days afterwards. I admit, I blamed you, and held a grudge. Now that we are home and she has her obliging mice at hand, or rather paw, I hope she shall come around. I take her current fatigue and listlessness to be the repercussions of stress and travel. I have faith she will fully recover.

"As I said, I have given the entire episode some thought and I must apologize. I—

"It's as far as he got, eh?" asked Brunhilda. She looked to Elgin. "What's a—" She glanced again at the letter, and being unable—or afraid—to pronounce the name, pointed at it.

Elgin made an attempt. "Qlip-poth?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe Sven will know."

Brunhilda looked around the study. "No Agatha."

"Cats hide," said Elgin.

"Cats *do* hide," said Brunhilda. "We had better find her. Maybe Sven knows that spell Remus spoke of."

"Her memories?" asked Elgin.

"Aye."

...

"No," said Sven Seven Eyes, three days later (Gozreh *had* willed it).

"Damn," said Brunhilda. "Would've been useful."

Sven's laughter caused her to arch her brows.

"If it's in one of his spell books, I'll know it soon enough." He pulled back the tattered edge of his robe, revealing an ermine, that is, a white-furred weasel. "What a treat to read *your* thoughts," he said to his own familiar. The ermine looked up at him as if daring his master to attempt it. Sven turned to Brunhilda. "Where's the cat?"

"Must still be in the tower. We never did find her."

"And his spell books?" asked Sven.

"In his library."

"Well, let us find this frightened cat," he said. He looked to his familiar. "A new friend for you. Do restrain your play. She's been through a lot."

...

Brunhilda unlocked the tower. The trio entered, Sven leading the way. "Rather drafty in here." He observed. "Sure he didn't die of exposure?"

"Wasn't this bad before," said Elgin.

The trio arrived (four, if you count the ermine, as all wizards would) outside of the study. A pronounced wind whistled through the partially open door. Sven pushed it open. "A shame," he said, stepping to the center of the room. He knelt and looked over Agatha. Brunhilda and Elgin peered over his shoulders.

Agatha lay in the exact spot where her master had died (his body having been removed), stretched out on her side. Her front paws were black with ink. Her stomach hung open, her viscera spilled out onto the carpet. An orange slime mingled with her blood. Her eyes were open and if it were possible to judge a cat's final thoughts by the cast of its death-stilled face, Agatha's was that of relief.

The trail of slime crossed the carpet to a shattered window, through which a swirl of snow blew. Halfway between Agatha and the window was a second pile of viscera. Sven rose, walked to it, and knelt. "A cast-off skin." He turned and glanced at Agatha. "A *second* cast-off skin." He picked it up and examined it. "Like that of a squid, albeit with tiny bat's wings." He set it down, rose, and walked to the window, peering out. He turned to Brunhilda and Elgin, "We'll need a different spell." He looked at Agatha. "Speak with the dead."

Three Worshipers

In hole—like you say. Nude. Ground moist—moving—biting. Big moon up. Made eyes hurt. Now, little lights. Never knew about little lights—Oh! Voices!

“Why couldn’t we talk inside?”

Woman—not dwarf—like me. I tell—not sound like Mamma. Elf?

Woman: “And why come here, of all places, and at this unholy hour?”

“Walls have ears.”

A man. Know voice? Can’t remember—

Man: “Besides, I want to do something for you.”

Woman: “Start by giving me your robe, I’m cold.”

She need blanket like mine—alive—warm—hungry.

Man: “Use a spell.”

Woman: “I didn’t ask Calistra for that particular spell.”

Man laugh at funny name.

Man: “Ah, here we are. A friend of yours?”

Woman: “Amir Magus?”

Sound like read aloud. Mamma read to me—when I young. I like. She read stories of heroes. She tell when we fight gods. They make us go into rocks. Good thing, say Mamma. We like rocks better. Mamma say gods can have sky. Mamma say sky no good—no ore in sky. Never heard Mamma say funny word woman say. Name? Sound like name hear before—can’t remember.

Man: “I saw you at the service.”

Woman: “No, you didn’t.”

She terse. I learn word. I tell people terse. Mamma terse. She taught word.

Man: “Come now, disguise self is a paltry illusion. You didn’t have the discipline to stick with the arcane, did you? That’s why you switched over. Faith is easier, perhaps? Especially a faith that involves so much—”

Woman: “If you brought me out here to insult me—”

Man: “Amir was a worshipper of Calistra, wasn’t he?”

Woman: “No, he was a hypocrite and a betrayer.”

She unhappy. She cold still. I give her blanket—when I done. You say use every night—even if not cold or tired. You say worms hungry. Bite so much!

Man: “Yet, here he lies, in the graveyard of the temple of Abadar.”

Woman: “Yes, *your* temple. I know.”

Man: “Why is he here?”

Woman: “I’ve already told you.”

Man: “Did you know that Magus left a substantial part of his estate to the church. My church, not your church.”

No talk. What they do? Can’t hear—down in hole. Get up, Master? Worms full. They no bite so much. Put worms in mouth—to eat—like you want. There. Just like you say. Now—standing—see out—hear better. Don’t step on ladder—it talk.

Man: "I suppose he tired of the endless debauchery that Calistra offers. At some point one has to get serious. He seems to have had a change of heart."

Woman: "It happens. Why gloat?"

Man: "What is it that Calistra says about revenge?"

Woman: "Get it."

Man: "You can't 'get it' now, can you? A little late, eh? How does your goddess feel about that?"

Woman: "What makes you think I know?"

Man laugh. Hear before—can't remember. Like name. Should know.

Man: "Pray to her and ask."

Woman no talk. What she do? Me look, Master?

Man: "Then again, maybe that won't work. Seeing as you don't *really* worship her."

Woman: "Excuse me?"

Man: "Let us be honest with one another."

Woman: "I've had enough of this. I should have known better than to have come out here with you."

Her voice get small. Step on ladder. It talk—only a little. They no hear. Can see now. Man close—he look away. Woman mad. She walk.

Man: "We have that in common. As I no longer worship Abadar."

Woman turn. Come back. Don't see me! Get down!

Woman: "What are you talking about?"

Man laugh. He like laugh. Oh, remember! Work for him. He hire me. He give me copper. Dig graves. Copper for you. Under bed. If you need—you have. Okay, Master?

Man: "I began to realize that certain passages in the *Order of Numbers* fascinated me more than others; which, since we're being honest, bored me."

Woman: "And?"

Man: "It dawned on me that what I enjoyed most about Abadar's teachings were the rewards that come from the so-called invisible hand that guides our labors. I wasn't so taken with all the hard work, self-sacrifice, and waiting to get the rewards."

Woman: "So, you're lazy and greedy? I'm not surprised."

Man: "Just as you're lustful. But that isn't what appeals most to you about Calistra, is it?"

Woman: "If you're trying to get at something—"

Man: "How long have we known each other?"

He have bad memory—like me. You help me remember—like to eat worms. Sometimes I can remember on my own—then I feel smart.

Woman: "A decade or more."

Thirsty. Get drink now, Master? Swallow worms—like you say. Have spicy drink. On cart—by pick and shovel. Get out? Want to look at people. Good at climb. Quiet. Remember I quiet, Master? Like when you first show—when I see you.

Remember when they come? They come to see what happen. They think more rocks fall. Master do that. You make rocks fall in cave. You make tunnel. No blame you. Rocks tired—lay down. You dig so much. You no get tired. You say one day I walk—*Spiral Path*. You say—all will.

The last day—when you eat all. We walk and you wait at end—wait for us—like worms wait for us. You biggest, hungriest worm. I saw. I know.

Remember? I came alone. I look at tired rocks—to see if they fall and sleep. I good at that. They let me do it. They say I brave. They say I skinny and fast. Not big and slow, like other dwarves. They say a dwarf need to be all of those things when rocks get tired and fall and sleep. I special. They told. No more rocks fall. They come. They see. They scream and cry. They say, I remember, they say:

“Your beard!”

“Your skin!”

“What happened?”

I show you. They mad. They hack—like at ore. I mad. I make stop. I get long worms out, like you say. They fall. They sleep. They quiet. No mad. I leave. Remember? Be quiet, you say. Leave, you say. Remember? You make hair fall out. You make skin like yours. They angry for what you do. They quiet now. Worms eat.

Man: “I’ve been observing you.”

Woman: “Creep.”

Man: “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Woman: “Well—”

Man: “I’ve noticed that all of your enemies are ruthlessly dispatched, while your lovers are left to linger. That doesn’t fit Calistra’s teachings. I’ve noticed that, over the past few years, you’ve gone out of your way to make new enemies, perhaps to justify expressing your wrath.”

Woman: “Or maybe people are rude and sometimes get their comeuppance. Perhaps you should choose your words wisely.”

Get out hole? Okay? Be quiet. I drink—hide—watch.

Man: “Eiseth.”

New funny name.

Man: “Ah, I can tell by your expression that the name holds meaning for you. A Queen of the Night, I believe, yes? What are her particular obsessions? Battle, revenge—wrath?”

Woman: “Damn you.”

She stand close to man.

Woman: “How—”

Man: “Like any usurer, Mammon has no mercy for those who owe him debts. He’s had cause to appeal to Eiseth. Such alliances work in Hell, why not here?”

They quiet. Get clothes now, Master? Man and woman funny. They look—no talk. Why? Touch lips? No—no touch lips.

Woman: “How long have you known?”

Man: “Long enough. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. Besides, I’m not overly eager to anger one of Eiseth’s followers. Is my secret safe with you?”

Woman: “I suppose it has to be, doesn’t it? Now, if I’m not wrong, you wanted to do something for me?”

Man: “As I said, I saw through your attempts to hide your identity at the service. The look of hatred did nothing to mar the beauty of your face.”

Woman: “You could have complimented me indoors.”

Man: “Certainly, but I couldn’t have divulged the truth, now could I?”

Woman: "Go on."

Man: "I suppose you're not familiar with the funeral rights of Abadar. If you were, you might have noticed that I omitted a few choice phrases, corrupted a few others, and in general, botched the service."

Woman: "No one raised a fuss."

Man: "Oh, after the first few minutes most people stop listening. The living have their own concerns. Even those who attend services regularly haven't quite figured out that some of the new teachings are from Mammon's scripture, not Abadar's. Not that they're overly familiar with the former. Yet, more and more are being converted to the 'new way.' There is a sizable and growing cult to Mammon—regulars in the church."

Woman: "I still don't see the point of all this."

Man: "An alliance. You've shown great skill in dispatching those you dislike. Maybe you can lend your services to a growing church who, despite the obvious benefits of membership, is forced to keep that membership a secret."

She laugh.

Woman: "You don't want to get your hands dirty?"

Man: "Something like that. To show you how generous I can be, I give you Amir Magus. You can have your revenge."

Woman: "I don't get you. He's dead."

Man: "Well, not quite. He's been poisoned. He reposes, yes, not in death, in a coma. All that is required is a bit of—" He pat side. What in pocket? "We had to go through with a burial to ensure the bequeathing of his estate was accomplished."

Woman: "You buried him *alive*?"

Man: "Well—"

Woman: "You're worse than I am."

Man: "You want him or not?"

Woman: "Oh, I want him."

Man: "Do you remember enough of your arcane teachings to read from a scroll? If not, we'll have to use shovels."

Woman: "That's your plan? Trust me to read a scroll or we dig?"

Man: "Well, while the gravedigger has few, if any friends, he might still spill our little secret."

Woman: "Give me the scroll."

Grave—digger? Me! I bury Amir. Ah! I remember. But—oh no. She say funny words. Oh no. Amir. Trouble. Run away? Afraid. Maybe they no dig. I watch. They can't see. Hiding. Woman say funny words. Oh! All the dirt! Flying! She point. Dirt fly over, make big pile.

Man: "Wonderful. I'll fetch the ladder."

He get ladder. Take to new hole. Amir? Will they see? I can't see. Ladder talk. Man opening box in hole. Oh no, he scream. He mad. Woman looking.

Man: "I don't understand."

Woman: "Maybe he did it himself. If I woke up and found myself buried alive I would —"

Man: "He couldn't have. The poison—I don't—"

Oh no. Big trouble. If I— Will they— Help me say the words—please—Master.

Me: "I let the big worm out."

Woman: "What in the Nine Hells—!"

Ladder talk. Man come out of hole.

Man: "You!"

Me: "The worm—inside—the big worm."

Woman upset—back away. She look at me mean. She look like dwarves look when they see me—after you change me. I no like that look.

Man: "What did you do?"

Me: "The—worm—"

Man angry. He reach for weapon. He take from belt. Tip glow. Don't like. He point at me. No! Bad man! Need help. Help!

Me: "Yhidothrus!"

Sorry! Sorry, Master. You say not to say. I scared.

Man: "What did you say?"

Me: "R-R-Ravager Worm."

Stomach hurts. Big worm inside angry.

Man: "It seems my gravedigger has a secret of his own."

Woman: "What did he say? What was it? A name?"

Me: "Yhidothrus."

Man: "A demon lord, one of those brought over from the, ah, previous inhabitants of the Abyss."

Woman: "What's wrong with him?"

Man: "Leprosy?"

Woman: "Is that a dwarf?"

Me: "Dwarf!"

Woman: "I've never seen a dwarf without a beard. It's—Why does he keep— Oh—"

She laugh.

Woman: "The big worm. I get it."

She no afraid. She stand by man.

Woman: "He must be stupid or something. He thinks the intestines are a big worm."

Man: "He's robbed you of your revenge."

Woman: "I guess he'll have to take Amir's place."

Man: "This is a rod of withering. It will weaken him, not kill him. If you'll accept such a worthless worm as a substitute for Amir—"

Woman: "I don't have much choice, do I?"

No! No! Man angry. He hit me! Ugh. Feel funny tingle. I strong. You make me strong—because I ate worms. Green light no hurt. He bad man. He no do what he did. Bad man! Let his worm out! Use knife. Big worm come out. He try keep in. Woman scream. She no weapon. She looks at green-light-thingy. She look at me. She run. I brave, and skinny, and fast. Not slow, like others. Tackle her.

She wiggle. I hold on. I strong. Turn over. Ugh. She hit. She claw. She bite. She bad, like man. I let big worm out. Good. Come out. No more mean words. No more mean look. They make sad sounds. Now they quiet. They sleep—like dwarves who hit you. Worms free. What now, Master? Put in hole? Put dirt?

You say worms eat. You say feed worms. I do. Keep bad man's stick? Hurt people—if need to. Trouble now? I let big worms out—like with dwarves—in cave with sleeping rocks. You say, no go home. You say, leave—be quiet and leave. Leave now, Master?

Yhidothrus: *Yes.*

To Trick a God

I have not heard your pleas in a long time, Maret.

"I need you."

Need?

"Devinti is dead. The young are clever, cruel, and desperate."

The children of the revolution turn on their parents?

"Yes."

You fear them?

"Yes."

Destroy them.

"They are endless."

Doubt? From you?

"One must consider failure."

Meaning?

"What will become of me after death? I have sinned."

How does one escape the repercussions of one's actions?

"I'm asking you."

...

He stood behind Maret. He never faced her. Not even preternatural speed, lent to her by magic, could move her fast enough to catch sight of him. He had always been and would always remain a mystery.

"Can he do it?" she asked.

I can think of no other.

"Will he?"

From behind—silence.

"The price?"

From behind—laughter.

"Take me to him."

...

The valley was a cornucopia of verdant life. There was barely room enough to pass—the flora pressed. The air was dense with fragrance. Countless birds fluttered from branch to branch, disappearing into pockets of sun-edged shadow. A copper-colored fox passed by Maret and her companion, brushing against them. He stopped to sniff Maret's bare ankle before ducking under a cluster of drooping dock leaves.

"Here?" asked Maret, incredulous.

A cave.

Maret folded back the leaves and branches. She slipped her bare toes beneath delicate flowers, her sandals tucked under her left arm. She was afraid to snap a twig, crush a blossom. She was afraid even of scuffing moss from a stone. Who knew what might anger him? With agonizing care she crossed the valley floor. As she approached the base of the cliff she saw the shadowed hollow. It was tall and narrow, like a black-bladed dagger thrust up from the earth, lodging itself in the stone. She paused.

Butterflies danced before her, flitting through the air. She watched them—annoyed. When they passed she intoned a spell. It was a simple cantrip, one that alerted her to the presence of magic auras. Her senses exploded. It was *all* magic. She clenched her eyes shut and ended the spell. After a minute of dazed and wobbling uncertainty her senses regained their courage and function. She heard chuckling behind her and ignored it.

She slipped sideways into the narrow cave. It curled into the stone. She was forced to shimmy herself along, smashing her breasts, scrapping her knees, wedging herself deeper and deeper until she could go no further. ‘At least *he’s* not behind me,’ she mused. She glanced to her side. If the demon with whom she had long ago struck a bargain had followed, she would finally lay eyes on him. There was only darkness. She began a minor spell. The humid darkness of the cave was dispelled as the flickering light came into existence.

Maret would have leapt in surprise, were she not held immobile by the stone. She was face-to-face with another. As she calmed and took in more visual information she discerned that what she had taken to be another fully realized presence was nothing but a face carved in the stone, a partial face at that. A small section of the cave wall had been pressed back into a concave shape. Rising out of this bowl was the broad forehead, heavy eyebrows, high-arched nose, and square cheeks of an aristocratic face. It was as if a clay-worker had come into the cave, pressed her thumbs into the stone, and left her work incomplete.

The eyes opened and stared with stony indifference.

“I—” Began Maret.

Emotion overcame the face: profound sadness. The “skin” around the eyes crinkled. The muscles that directed the cheeks pulled them taunt. If stone could weep it would have. The emotion reversed, returning to normal. A moment later came irritation. The brow furrowed, the eyes narrowed. The anger was subdued but present. The effects of the emotions were so complete they nearly silenced Maret. She was, however, a woman not easily silenced.

“—need a shabti.”

The face lifted, grinding, moving against itself, until a pair of broad, sculptural lips came into view.

“A vessel?” asked the face of stone. The trio of syllables came ponderously, echoing in the small space.

“Yes.”

“To contain?” Again the trio reverberated.

“Sin,” said Maret.

“Sin?” asked the face of stone.

“Can you make such a thing?”

The mouth curled downwards. The face sank, the lower half disappearing beneath the thumb-pressed stone. The eyes closed.

“I fear death,” admitted Maret.

He made no response.

“I fear,” she searched, “judgment.”

The face emerged fully. The eyes opened.

“I’ve lived more than two centuries,” began Maret. She appeared in her mid-twenties—part of the bargain. “I’ve made a pact with a demon. I’ve slaughtered hundreds, thwarted the fates of thousands, subjected entire peoples to tyranny.” The face remained blank from emotion.

"What awaits me?" Maret studied the face in the stone, the face *of* stone. It fluctuated between the lifeless chill of sculpture and the animated warmth of life. The features did not move. It was merely energy, consciousness, that seemed to come and go. Even when this consciousness came, was present, there came no response to Maret's plea. She made another.

"Will I be judged?"

Something affected the eyes. Again, not material, but energy. The word "judged" brought forth a heightened consciousness. Despite this, the stone did not speak.

"I want a shabti to take my place," said Maret, "to be judged, to be punished."

"You want to trick a god?" asked the face of stone.

"Can it be done?" asked Maret.

The face grew contemplative. Silenced reigned for some time. "She judges every soul that passes beneath her never-blinking gaze," said the face of stone. "Each soul is naked before her."

"It can't be done," said Maret, defeated. The full weight of her sin bore down upon her.

"A man beholds a river," said the face in the stone, his deep voice resonating in the small space. "He cups his hand, he drinks. The river is in this man, wherever he goes." The face did not elaborate.

Maret, baffled by the metaphor, asked, "Meaning?"

"What *is* a soul?" asked the stone face.

"I don't—"

"If a soul be a river, can the soul be drawn from? If drawn from, what becomes of that which is taken away?"

Maret could not answer.

"There is but one soul, one river—divided—to which all drops return. First," the face fell silent, studying Maret with hard eyes, "these drops must be—purified—before they return home. *This* is what you fear."

"Yes," admitted Maret.

"It follows," continued the face of stone, "that to be purified in advance is what you wish."

"The shabti?"

"To gather the water which you have fouled, to separate it from the clean. To subject it to—purification." The stone eyes regarded Maret. "This *can* be done."

"Yes!" Maret was giddy. The silence of the stone face dampened her premature celebration. She studied it. "The price?" She could only whisper the question.

"All water returns to the river," said the sculpted face. "Yet not all water takes the same path home."

Maret grew nervous.

"I *can* draw the brackish from the fresh. For this, I will have a handful to raise to *my* lips."

...

What does it mean to be created?

The voice echoed in her mind, although she had no concept of self.

We must be told of being born for we remember nothing.

The voice, deep, resonating, stoic, yet tinted with disappointment and melancholy, was the only thing she knew. It was all that existed. As each word appeared it was defined, comprehended.

Perhaps it is better, for memory is a fickle friend.

A pause. In the silence there was only darkness, nothingness, an imperfect vacuum. Into this void she, having no name, no self, projected only curiosity. The voice had awakened her. In its absence she searched for what else might be.

You will know of your own creation, your own arrival into the physical plane. Know you that these words are not your own? How could you? First, I must situate you in something, so you know where you stop.

She was aware of physicality. She could not picture it, only feel it. Its contours were entirely foreign. Its containment was alien and worrisome. She heard bizarre sounds, the mechanics of her organic systems. They meant nothing to her. She could not place them. They simply existed and she knew they were a part of her. This awareness was followed by still more. She became aware of drawing breath. She became aware of a pump working at the core of her being. She immediately grew fond of the regularity of its action, the singularity of its purpose.

She became aware of the sense of touch. She was aware of something hard and cold beneath her. She was aware from this that she herself was not hard and cold, but its opposite. She felt that there were a grouping of spots, at either side of her, at the ends of twin extensions, more sensitive than the rest. She sought out new sensations. She moved.

She became aware, without definitions, causes, reasons, that she was a collection of natural laws, prescribed actions and reactions, that she, via some unknown power, could command. Even if this command was limited and mysterious, fraught with hazard, it was hers. This awareness filled her with a quiet, beaming happiness, a mystical, spiritual contentment. She had a home.

You begin to understand.

Yes.

She was shocked by her own response. It was inside her. It *was* her. A voice separate from the voice that had authored her with the power of its word. She felt there was more possible. "Yes," she said aloud. The action thrilled her. She learned of her ears. As she spoke, as she breathed in and out, she tasted the air. It was moist, earthen, metallic. She became aware of its odor, musky, organic, and with it her own smell, the smell of her flesh, her hair.

There is one last sense. The one your kind rely on the most.

A soft glow began at the corner of her eyes. The fragments of light reached out and up, forming a halo that grew into a dome. Her eyes worked to make sense of this new information. The fuzzy, indistinct dome of light began to sharpen, gradate, form planes, curves, solid shapes. She knew, the knowledge came to her, that she was in a cave. The planes formed rocks. She was lying on a long, flat rock. The characteristics of the rock she already knew. She knew then that other material things would have their own characteristics, just as she had hers.

She became aware of him. She turned her head and studied him. He too seemed to be made of rock. She wondered if her own shape was like his, elongated, tapering, solid in the middle with protrusions, extensions. She turned and looked down at her own body. It was similar to his but different in a multitude of ways.

"I can read your thoughts."

The voice was no longer in her head but outside of it. She looked again at the stone man.

"Fascinating."

She had watched his lips move. "Fascinating," she repeated, moving her lips. She smiled at the odd feeling of speech, it moved her face, constricted her throat. It was bizarre. When she fell silent the sensations stopped.

She was aware that he was sad. She did not know how she knew this. It had to be something in the way he stood, the way his head bent, the way his features changed. "Already, your mind begins to close. You are becoming limited by your physical existence."

"Limited?" She could not place his complicated, intertwined emotions. "Why?"

He turned away, paced the cave, ignoring her question. He stopped, gazed at her. "I am your creator." She wanted to ask why to this as well, why he had created her, but felt he would give her that same enigmatic look. "You are perfect." He spun to face her. "I am pleased to have made you, pleased to have experienced your first moments." He paused, looking at her. "I am pleased that you exist. You shall fulfill your purpose, your destiny." He stepped forward, stopping beside her. "So few do." He grew sullen. He studied her nude form, his handiwork. His mood lifted. "You shall be like the earth. You shall accept the seed and bring it to fruition."

She lay her head back on the stone and looked up at the concave ceiling. His speech made little sense to her. Two words struck her as poignant, however. "Purpose?" She tilted her head and looked into his face. "Destiny?"

He lifted his stony arm, extended a rough-hewn finger. "To suffer." He touched his finger to her forehead.

...

She heard frantic screams. Her eyes were closed. Her nostrils filled with alien, alarming odors; the stench of sweat, of fear, and something she couldn't place; metallic, organic. She held opposites. Whatever was in her left hand was soft yet firm, warm but rapidly cooling, and slippery. Whatever was in her right hand was cold, hard, unforgiving, dangerous. She opened her eyes. She knew one object to be a knife. Like with everything said in the cave, the meaning came to her. She looked to her other hand—a human heart. She glanced down at her feet—a corpse.

In looking down she saw herself as well. White cloth, now stained red, draped around her, held from gold chains that rest on her slender shoulders. She looked out over the crowd. She was standing on a stone platform, the crowd prostrate beneath her. She held aloft the heart, blood running down her arm, warm and slick. She squeezed, spurting blood from the arteries which splashed on her shoulders, breasts, face. It tasted like iron. The crowd looked up, yelled, and prostrate themselves again. The stone and the crowd was in a clearing surrounded by simple huts and behind them dense jungle.

Another. Whispered the voice in her ear. Tell them, Cyth-V'sug will corrupt the soil, poison the air. Tell them, Angazhan will turn the jungle against them. Tell them, Barbatus will anger the beasts. These foul acts will happen unless the blood flows. Unless their souls are given.

Maret told them. She sacrificed another.

...

She was once again in darkness. The cool, solid bulk of the stone was beneath her. She was disoriented. She blinked and tried to see but couldn't. Other than the feel of the stone there was nothing. She became aware of his presence.

"Can you make light?" she asked.

"I do not wish to."

Although his voice reverberated from the stone walls she was able to place him. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the stone she lie upon. She reached out, felt for him. She found the curve of his shoulder by twisting her arm. Feeling pain, she straightened it.

"I am Maret," she stated.

He did not respond.

"I control a people," she continued. "From them, I make many offerings." She paused, attempting to understand what that meant. "To please demons. I care not if my people suffer or die. I don't care about," she paused again, searching, "anyone but myself."

"Not you."

"Who?" she asked, not understanding.

She heard movement. She knew he had stood. She felt the cool, hard touch of his finger on her forehead.

...

You cannot miss them, Maret.

She stood on the balcony, looking out over An, the "City of Triangles"; the skyline dominated by pyramidal tombs, now shinning deep red in the setting sun. The buildings of An were made of sandstone, the streets paved with the same. Colorful awnings broke the brown-bronze monotony. Long ago, An had been a city of slaves, an unwilling army to build the tombs. Now it was a city of laborers, merchants, free men and women, foreigners, travelers, adventurers. Lights began to flare in the shadows of the city streets as the bronze-colored sun broke the horizon, dragging a blanket of star-punctured indigo behind it.

"Get out of my head."

Tell me, what is it you miss about those savages?

"I miss them. That's all," said Maret. "They were like children, innocent and trusting."

They were currency, to be spent.

"They trusted me to lead them, to keep them safe."

They are safe.

As he said this, the gem, placed on a golden chain hung around her neck, pulsed with light and warmth. Contained within were hundreds of souls, a small portion of the souls of those she had sacrificed. The majority of her offerings went to others, to foul demon lords thrashing in the Abyss. The one who advised her, with whom she had struck a bargain from which there was no escape, took his share. What remained after the gluttonous consuming, like crumbs from a cake, were hers. She heard their muted cries of anguish, anguishing for freedom. She had worn many such gems on her person. Unfortunately, she had been forced to part with all but one. That she was still alive and still possessed even a single such gem was due to *him*.

While walking in the Footprints of Rovagug, in the desert south of the Scarab River, passing from West to East Osirion, she had confronted a terrible sight.

She took it for an abandoned holy marker, some sign of a long forgotten ancient civilization, nearly buried under the wind-shaped dunes. It curved into the cloudless sky, a pillar of gold, with a barb at the top the length of a man. What lie buried at its base she did not know, but was soon to find out.

As she approached to examine the pillar of gold the sand shook beneath her, throwing her from her feet. She scooted away as the pillar curled, aiming its barb at her. What emerged from the sand was as frightening as it was dangerous. It was a golden-colored scorpion that

towered over her, dropping her into shadow. What she had taken for a pillar was its tail. Its pincers were crystalline, the color of rubies, with edges as sharp as cut glass. On its back were hundreds, if not thousands, of baby scorpions, each the span of her hand. They writhed, climbing over one another, a living blanket. As if these sights were not terrifying enough the golden scorpion's head was not that of its kind, but a twisted, discolored, fearsome human head, a woman's head, devoid of any hair, but with long fangs and a serpent's air-tasting tongue.

"Aldinach!" he screamed.

Whether *he* was screaming the scorpion's name to her, or addressing the demon lord of sand, scorpions, and thirst herself, Maret was not sure. Maret rose, backing cautiously away. Aldinach looked just over Maret's shoulder, where *he* was undoubtedly revealing his presence, seemed to frown, then looked back at Maret. She advanced, lowering a massive pincer.

"You've ventured far from the Whispering Sands," he said. "Careful your sister doesn't reclaim them in your absence."

Aldinach paused. She once more gazed just beyond Maret's shoulder. She seemed to be assessing *him*. She turned back to Maret. "You have souls," she said, her voice like quicksand swallowing a panicking victim.

"They aren't for you," said Maret, before she could think not to.

Her defensive outcry amused the lord of scorpions. She advanced another step, her tail curling, a drop of poison clinging to the tip of her barb. "How shall you keep them from me?"

"Do you mean to pose a riddle?" He said. "Is that not your sister's vocation?"

"Speak once more of her," hissed Aldinach, staring just past Maret. "And I shall—"

"Can you be certain?" he asked, interrupting the demon lord. "What of my alliance?"

"You are nothing, a pathetic time-server, a—"

"Perhaps, but it is *whom* I serve, not that I serve."

Aldinach paused, tasting the air with her split tongue, her pincers restlessly clacking, the living blanket of scorpions on her back convulsing in anger. She seemed to smile. "He hasn't appeared to save you. Will he?"

"Undoubtedly not," he said.

"What have I to fear from you, or your," her lips curled into a sneer, "alliance?"

"Actions have repercussions."

"Is there not enough hot air in the desert?" asked Aldinach. "Must you contribute—"

"You can take your chances," he said, undaunted. "Or, perhaps, a compromise?"

"I have not come to compromise, but to take."

"Take you could," he said. "You are the great and feared Aldinach, who drove her sister from her home, whose cult is as vast and as plentiful as all the sand in all the deserts of the multiverse. Still," he seemed to sneer a caveat, "you would risk much for little."

"Souls are no paltry prize," said Aldinach.

"True, and we have gathered many. Take some, a gift from us to you, for the privilege of walking upon your sands. Yet, leave us some, and leave us our lives, so that we may praise you."

Aldinach laughed. "You speak with his honeyed tongue. He has taught you to grovel well."

"Grovel?" he asked. "No, he would not permit me. I praise and offer a gift. Take these souls and use them as you will. Leave us half and our lives. It is a generous gift."

"To me? Or to you?" She laughed again. "I can take." She looked at Maret, who was crouching in the shadow of one of Aldinach's massive pincers, a spell at the ready, a spell, she surmised, that, for all its potency, would do nothing to so powerful an entity as Aldinach.

He made no response.

Aldinach looked back and forth between Maret and the one behind her.

"A clerk," she sneered. "A taker of notes, a keeper of catalogs." She brought her barb closer. The poison threatened to fall. "The tyranny of the bureaucrat. The boredom of a librarian bereft of books." This seemed to amuse her. "Still, *he* is great, even if *you* are weak. I accept your gift. Not half. Ha! You may keep." Her pincer shot out, the tip speeding toward Maret's heart. At the last moment it angled up and knocked against the largest of her gems, the one at her throat. Aldinach smiled. The scorpions on her back danced with triumphant jubilation. "The rest," her pincer moved down Maret's body, stopping at her wrist. With surprising dexterity for such a bulky "digit," she plucked the bracelets from both Maret's wrists. The gems, containing a hundred souls each, sparkled as the desert sun shone through them. "Are mine."

"It is a pleasure to give," he said.

...

"It was a defeat," said Maret.

You fail to appreciate how lucky we are to be alive.

"I thought you were powerful."

I am.

"Ha! That wasn't power, it was guile, artfulness. We lost a century worth of—"

It was a set back, yes, but we shall persevere.

"Will the guardian even accept what we have? What remains is so little."

A soul is a soul.

"You didn't answer my question."

We can offer and ask. Our options were always thus.

"Except we have a fraction of what we had before. Our offering might insult her."

Then you die.

"Thanks."

...

Maret stood within the largest of An's pyramidal tombs. The corpse of the tomb robber, that had revealed to her the secret tunnel that led within, was lying in the corner, his decapitated head in his lap, the gold Maret had given him still in his purse. Maret stared up at the massive beams of stone overhead. She lifted her hand. The six orbs of magical light that she had summoned floated closer to the beams. "Impossible."

How many slaves do you think it took—

"Slaves?" She shook her head. "No amount of slaves could lift those stones."

Some mechanism lost to time? Some techniques man has become ignorant of?

"Perhaps. But what?"

It could be that the Pharoh's magic was potent enough—

Maret laughed. "Only if he truly was a god." She directed the lights away from the beams to the walls. "If he were a god—he wouldn't need a tomb." She stepped to the wall and

studied the hieroglyphs. After several hours of deciphering the riddle contained within the symbols, she stepped to the middle of the room and began the incantation, speaking in the forbidden tongue, forbidden, that is, to mortals, thus to her. When she was done she looked around her. Nothing happened.

"Did I misspeak?"

Not that I could tell.

"Then—"

Perhaps, try again—

The entire pyramid shook. Dust fell from the massive stone beams above. A portion of the wall slid back and down. The shaking ceased.

Or, perhaps, patience.

Maret looked to the darkened doorway. She directed the lights to it and saw a set of stairs leading up. She went. The stairs turned and continued to an opening a third the height of a normal door. She was obliged to crawl through. She stood on the other side and at once saw the room's occupant.

She appeared to be sitting at a table, the flame from a brass oil lamp illuminating a book as well as her angular face. She wore a loose fitting top of pure white cotton. Around her neck was a thick gold necklace studded with gems. Her straight, black hair, four feet in length, glistened in the light. She looked up at Maret, her eyes reflecting the flame's flickering light. She looked over Maret's shoulder, seeing what Maret could not. She was nonplused at the sight of unexpected visitors. She moved her hand over the open pages. Her nails, being several inches long and arriving at points, threatened to slice through the ancient parchment. Maret at once dropped to her knees and lowered her forehead to the floor.

"Oh, great—"

A deafening roar filled the room. This was followed by the swishing of a tail. This sound of swishing came closer. Maret dare not lift her forehead from the floor. Out of the corners of her eyes she saw the woman's lower half, that of a massive lion. The woman growled and Maret's magical orbs dissipated. Only the flickering glow of the oil lamp remained. The thick, black claws of the lamia's paws dug against Maret's skin, not enough to wound, but enough to warn. A human finger touched Maret's shoulder. Then the lamia turned and padded silently across the room. Maret rose, dusting off her knees. The lamia, her back turned to Maret, continued around the table. She bent, reached out, and pinched the wick between her fingers. The room fell dark. The lamia began to speak, her voice husky.

"Oh, Rovagug, may the sound of your voice shatter our worthless souls. Oh, Rovagug, may the pestilence of your breath waste away the flesh we so desperately cling to. Oh, Rovagug, reach up from the earth, open it, let us tumble into your hungry maw. Oh, Rovagug, spew fire from the mountain tops to rain upon our heads. Oh, Rovagug, he who devours, he who destroys. We beseech you. Destroy us! Destroy us! We are unworthy!"

Light poked through the darkness, the sight of distant fires. Maret could begin to make out a blasted landscape. She was no longer in the pyramidal tomb, no longer in An, or even on the material plane. She was in the Abyss. That hostile expanse had wormed its way as close to Rovagug's prison as was able, maybe in an attempt to free him, maybe out of sheer curiosity, or maybe for its own reasons, as the Abyss at times seemed malevolently alive.

Maret stood on a precipice, overlooking a vast range of volcanos, each of which spewed fire, smoke, and molten rock. From these angry peaks, lava flowed. The sky above was smoke-

clouded. Red-yellow sparks fell like rain. The air was heavy with foul gasses and suffocating heat. Maret began a spell, completing it before she suffocated to death. With the spell, she could breathe, although with some pain.

The Abyssal lamia, part woman, part lion, part demon, looked out over the burning expanse, her face aglow. Maret stepped next to her and looked down. A sheer rock face dropped thousands of feet into a fast-flowing river of lava. She glanced at the lamia. The other woman had a look of longing in her smoky eyes.

"To join him," she whispered.

Maret backed away from the edge.

The Abyssal lamia turned. A spectacular eruption framed her. The boom of the exploding mountain top reverberated through the landscape, shaking the ground beneath Maret's feet. The lamia glanced over her shoulder, then turned back to Maret. "He acknowledges us." She looked to the sky, as if awaiting the arrival of some molten hunk of stone meant to obliterate them. When nothing came she turned back to Maret and held out her hand. Maret stepped forward, lifted the necklace, and placed it in the lamia's hand.

"Please accept this, Vaskilli." She lowered her eyes and backed away.

Vaskilli made no movement. She held out her hand as if she held something unworthy of her attention.

'The offering was not enough,' Maret silently cursed. 'It's all over.'

She figured herself for dead. She wondered what would happen to *him*. *He* was not a chosen of Rovagug and no matter what alliance *he* claimed, be it true or false, the god of endings would care not. She began to rapidly cycle through the spells she had memorized and the magical items she had on her person, looking for something to aid her, her drive for survival being that strong. '*He* won't risk helping me now.' She thought. Before she had fallen too far into panic, Vaskilli turned, her arm still extended. She stepped to the edge, turned over her wrist, and dropped the necklace and its soul gem over the edge of the precipice.

Maret could feel her heart pounding in her chest. The necklace took a painfully long time to fall. That it sunk in the lava, she had no doubt. A bluish glow came up from the edge of the cliff. Maret was astonished to see the souls that had once been contained within the gem float into view. The number was alarming. They vaguely resembled their bodily appearances. They collected at the edge of the precipice, floating out over the river of lava far below, and turned their eyes on Maret. They seemed ready to attack her, to revenge their betrayal, when Vaskilli pointed to a massive volcano.

The souls fought against her command, the anger they had toward Maret was powerful enough to hold them near. They inched forward, opening their mouths to accuse, lifting their hands to make their vengeance felt. Maret began a spell but halted when Vaskilli screamed in anger. The souls sped away, disappearing into the obscured sky above. The Abyssal lamia remained motionless, staring out over the expanse of volcanos. Maret, too, waited, for what she wasn't certain.

Vaskilli tilted her head, listening to a voice only she could hear. She remained this way for some time then turned to face Maret. Her tail began to tremble with excitement. She licked her lips, then smiled, revealing a mouth full of blood stained fangs. She began to crouch, an evil gleam coming to her dark eyes. Maret began a spell. Behind her she felt movement. Perhaps, she thought *he* wasn't as quick to abandon her as she had worried. The Abyssal lamia leapt forward, reaching out with both clawed hands.

...

She woke up screaming. The sound rebounded from the cave walls. She sat up, breathing hard, her skin clammy with sweat. She was sunk in darkness, unable even to see her hand before her eyes. As her panic faded she realized that she was no longer on the precipice, that the lamia was not charging toward her. Her breathing calmed and having nothing else to do she lay back down.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Was I there? How did I come to be here, when I was there?" The sound of her own voice was still alien to her, a bit alarming, besides, it was not the voice she wished to hear. She turned onto her side and felt along the edge of the rock. He wasn't there.

...

He stood in the shadowed cavity of a banyan tree, hugged, like a stone captured by the tree's growth and lifted from the soil. He peered down into the valley, his eyes able to see through the flora as if it were transparent. He stared at the cave entrance. Her scream spilled out of the cave, an ill wind that portend storms. The birds nearby took flight. Beneath him, rabbits, who had been scratching their ears with their paws, shot off into the shadows. He closed his eyes and wept.

...

Velles awoke in his cell. He was disoriented. He was in semi-darkness. He was cold. The air stunk of old sweat, urine, and rats. His throat was sore. His body ached. He could barely remember where he was. The effect of weeks of unremitting fasting had been to disgorge him from space and time. He tried to remember why he had chosen self-banishment, why he now occupied a monk's lonely cell. *Atone*. 'Yes,' he thought. 'I am atoning—' For what, he could not recall. He remembered standing before the Abbot.

The Abbot looked up from a scroll he was studying, but did not speak. He combed his white beard with a wrinkled hand. The age spots on his bald dome swallowed the candlelight. His eyes shone with the inner light of self-discipline. Distant chanting could be heard. In the streets below, the commerce of the day was conducted in hushed tones, so as not to disturb the holy men inside the ancient, repurposed citadel.

"My thoughts are unclean," said Velles. "I must—"

The Abbot ceased to comb his beard.

Velles stood up from the wooden plank. His ragged robe, stiff with grime, full of body lice, was rough against his flesh. He took a single step and arrived at the desk. The book was open to the final page. He had labored over the illustration for days, weeks perhaps, in a state of spiritual bliss. He turned and looked to the window at the top of the wall. He could not see out, but light came in, falling on the book. He had no real memory of making the illustration

He wasn't sure where he had acquired the colored inks, the greens and blues and vibrant yellows. He passed his hand over the assorted brushes. They had been used to excess, the bristles worn to nothing.

Authoring the book, writing every word with care, illustrating every page, had been his own idea, his means of atonement. He had meant to write the sacred words, to tell the sacred stories, to put the timeless parables into the mouths of the saints. While this was his intent, it was not the result. He had failed to duplicate the holy book of his god. He *had* succeeded in authoring a book like no other. There were none like it in his monastery's library—in any library—as far as he knew. At first, its contents were a mystery. He had written the words, like he had

illustrated the final page, in a state that couldn't quite be called consciousness. It was not unconsciousness either, but something like being outside of his body. He had not been present, or so he thought, when the words had been written.

Where had he been?

Absent.

Then he read the book and understood.

He looked again at the window. He was a monk, a penitent, one who suffers for faith, not a priest or a cleric, one who spreads the faith. He did not have the gift of divine magic, had not sought it. He felt fear. Not fear of the magic itself, no, fear he could not be trusted with it. He knew his own thoughts. He knew the depth of the darkness within his soul. He had tried everything to rid himself of his burden; beating himself on his back and thighs with a scourge until his flesh flew in bloody strips; starving himself until his bones showed, praying and fasting for days on end. He had spent forty days in the desert east of Ecanus without food or water. He'd survived on sand beetles and faith. How he had survived he did not know. Still, the thoughts came.

Nothing helped. All his life he heard readers reading aloud to themselves from forbidden books. He heard records of travels to lands that could not exist and of what was seen in them. He caught pieces of eldritch magical formulae that he dare not comprehend. He heard truths buried beneath lies, obscured by half-truths. He heard descriptions of a false paradise in which true believers frolicked and by this he knew what they did not. He fled from these voices as one would run from a fiend, yet had never truly rid himself of them.

Then he read the book and understood.

He had written it for none other than himself.

It was his awakening.

A bite from a louse stirred him from his reverie. He felt disgust. He had been in the cell for how long? He had not bathed. He had lost a tremendous amount of weight. A second bite stirred him to action. He shed the robe and with his hands flung the lice from his skin. He stood naked in the shaft of light, looking over his own worn, filthy body.

"I've been a fool." For a moment he was angry at himself but soon realized there could have been no other way. He looked down at the illustration. "Abraxas," he whispered. He reached out and ran his fingertips over the portrait.

Abraxas was the demon lord of forbidden lore, magic, and snakes. What little of him that resembled human was the torso and arms. Even these were covered in a serpent's glistening scales. From the waste down his body formed a trunk which split into two massive serpents, their heads moving and acting as one with him. Abraxas's head was an unnatural hybrid of serpent and predatory bird. A brilliantly colored crest distracted viewers from the unbird-like fangs and the eyeless sockets. Only yellow energy spilled from those twin holes.

A hiss caught Velles's attention. He turned and looked at his discarded robe. From between the filthy folds emerged a slick serpentine body. The scales of its head were coppery, twin black stripes ran lengthwise from just behind the eyes down the serpent's back. Velles turned and knelt. The serpent continued to emerge. Its length astonished Velles, as did its girth, for it was as thick as a man's arm.

The serpent slithered around his legs, between his legs, and spread itself until it occupied the totality of the cell's floor. Only then did it take any notice of him. It turned its head toward his hand. Velles extended his fingers. The serpent tasted the air. It then lifted its head to

look up. Its eyes were dark, so dark that Velles could not see the slit pupils. So hard did the monk stare, so lost did he become in the serpent's luminous eyes, that he was not prepared for the bite. The serpent withdrew its fangs and lowered its head. Velles half-fell against the plank bed. He sunk to the floor. His last conscious thought was of the book.

...

The Abbot smelled something unpleasant. He was standing in the intersection of a hallway he rarely walked. He turned and looked to his left. The U-shaped hall was home to fifteen monk cells. He sniffed, frowned, then began down the hall. 'Perhaps someone is ill,' he thought. He rounded the first curve and saw an open door. That was not unusual, as none of the doors locked. The monks could come and go as they pleased, most chose not to. He stepped into the doorway and looked around the room. The smell was awful. The sun was low in the sky and there was little light to aid him.

The Abbot began a simple incantation. A light began to glow in the palm of his hand. With a bit of concentration he commanded, by thought alone, the action of the magical light. It floated from his palm into the cell. He cried out, ended the spell, and stumbled backwards. An acolyte, hearing the cry, came running and found the Abbot against the wall opposite the open door.

"Master?"

"The flesh—the flesh—" Stammered the Abbot.

"The sins of the flesh?" asked the acolyte, not comprehending.

The Abbot grabbed the front of the youth's robe and screamed. "No, damn you! The flesh!" He released the acolyte, pushed himself along the wall, and fled from the monks' quarters.

The acolyte was taken with more curiosity than fear or good sense and turned to the open door. He too could command the light and did so. He stepped cautiously to the door and shined the light within. In the center of the room lay Velles's discarded robe, brown, crumpled, caked with grime and sweat, hoping with lice.

Next to the robe lay Velles's discarded flesh. Where his bones, sinew, and muscle had gone, the monks would never know. The god to which the monks prayed knew, however, that Abraxas had made a successful claim.

...

"I can feel you grinning," said Maret. "You don't often grin."

Shall I stop?

"Please do."

You're in a foul mood today.

"How long shall we wait?"

Our time is their time.

Maret snorted. "Fine then, tell me. We have nothing else to talk about."

Tell you?

"What causes a demon to grin?"

Oh, just an old memory.

...

The sounds were discordant; various stringed instruments out of tune, chimes struck out of any desirable order, voices rising and falling without purpose, becoming interfering waves

that struck the angel's ears and made him grimace. Tabris stood in the dappled sunlight beneath the massive elm tree, eyes closed. A slight, warm breeze passed through the edge-feathers of his pure white wings and filled his nostrils with the mingled scents of blossoming flowers. As he listened, the cacophony worked its way into a harmony. He was puzzled, puzzled over the fact that, even for a moment, anything but pure harmony could exist where he was.

He opened his eyes. The elm was on a small hill overlooking a shallow bowl of earth. To the left a steep rise of white stone, dotted with gnarled trees and wind-warped bushes, was topped with a shining, golden temple. It reflected the sun's light to such an amplified degree it was nearly impossible to look at. To the right the depression rose to a crest of perpetually flowering trees. Just at the edge of the bowl was an assortment of believers of every intelligent race. It was they who had inexplicably slipped into disharmony.

Tabris studied them. For a fleeting moment they seemed somehow off, but he couldn't place it. The moment was gone before he had a chance to consider its implications, replaced by their playing, singing, and dancing. A shadow passed over the players. Tabris looked and saw an angel dive, bank, then beat her wings and disappear into the blinding light of the temple. He turned his attention back to the players and listened to their heavenly music.

...

"How is he?" hissed Abraxas.

The shadow demon, a pillar of darkness within a deep pool of shadow cast by a massive Magnolia tree, did not turn to his master. He had been ordered to watch Tabris and watch him he would. "He begins to suspect."

Abraxas slithered forward on the massive twin snakes that made-up his lower half, and peered past the shadow demon. At one end of the natural bowl Tabris watched a group of musicians and dancers.

"Must you taunt him?" asked the shadow demon.

Abraxas turned to the demon, who, in the highly fluid caste system, if there could be said to be one, was a minor player, so minor in fact that Abraxas didn't even know his name. That the demon had enough courage to question him impressed the demon lord. He looked back to Tabris.

"A guilty pleasure."

"He's observant still," said the shadow demon, "even if his mind has been shattered by his labors."

"Has he noticed *you*?" asked Abraxas.

This drew a dismissive snort from the shadow demon. The question, to his mind, wasn't worth answering. The less-than-obsequious reaction made Abraxas respect the demon still more. He made a mental note to learn what he could about the willful shadow demon then slithered over the edge of the ridge into the valley below.

...

The musicians paused. In the silence and stillness Tabris noticed that a second angel had come down from the tree-lined ridge. The musicians noticed as well and although they might have chosen to play a song for the newcomer they turned instead and meandered off into the valley. This act, although not necessarily rude, seemed unusual to Tabris.

"Why did they not play for you?" he asked as the second angel stepped beneath the elm.

"They follow the spirit of music, a restless spirit," said the second angel, who was, of course, Abraxas in disguise.

Tabris looked at him and recognized him at last. "Ah, Sabraxa."

"Tabris, brother," said Abraxas, stepping to Tabris and hugging him. Brother was a term of endearment and fact, as, in a sense, all angels were siblings. Despite this, no two angels could have looked more differently than these. Tabris was soft-featured, almost boyish, as if he had never matured to manhood but remained eternally innocent. His soft blonde hair flowed like snow from a mountain's peak between his shoulder blades. His pale blue eyes shown with pure intelligence even in the shadows beneath the tree. He had a preoccupied air about him, as if he were always on the verge of a profound revelation. His outward appearance masked the fact that within he was ancient beyond his years, aged by his unique, hellish experience.

Abraxas, who was again teasing Tabris, had angular features, almost those of a bird, stood upright, had the ready, alert athleticism of a warrior, and was noticeably muscular. His eyes shone a golden-green. While Tabris's wings were white, Abraxas's were various shades of yellow, green, and black and showed a pattern not unlike that of a snake. Tabris had found that unusual but thought it an inappropriate topic of conversation.

The pair enjoyed a pleasant silence, neither feeling urgency about any business, although there was urgency. Abraxas reached out and took Tabris's hand in his own. This was not an uncommon show of affection, for although many angels are aloof and aristocratic, many others are affectionate and benefit from a kind touch. Tabris was more solitary than most angels tended to be. His long years of cataloging and recording, his endless, lonesome travels, the gravity of his charge—to make a complete record of all the gods had created, seen and unseen, good and evil—had made him feel an outsider.

Upon his return he had been lauded as a hero, had been given gratuitous praise, his massive tomes taken by trembling hands and passed between the gods, who marveled over them. He had finally been "put out to pasture," as it were, to revel in his fame and glory, yet he felt alone and friendless. Abraxas knew this, and although affection was not in his nature, he knew it would benefit Tabris to receive it—it was another element of his seduction and manipulation of the fallen angel.

"Tabris, there is—," Abraxas—in angel guise—paused. Tabris turned and looked at him. "Some difficulty."

"Oh?"

"Yes," continued Abraxas. "The organizational schema poses some problems for us."

"It should be quite apparent," said Tabris.

"Yes, of course," said Abraxas. "But, brother, you must recognize that your efforts far surpassed out loftiest expectations. Your particular genius outshines all others in that regard."

Tabris patted the back of Abraxas's hand and squeezed it. "Yes, yes, forgive me. I indulged in some experimentation along the way. Also, I had to obfuscate of some of the more—dangerous material, to protect the casual reader."

"Rightfully so, brother," said Abraxas. "If you could only help us with a few passages we shall endeavor to figure out the rest on our own. I feel guilty asking that much. We all know how you've earned your respite from these books."

"Nonsense," said Tabris. "I serve my maker. My work is never done. Let us go to the great library."

...

Hra'Fen'Kel watched as Abraxas, a demon lord, stood hand-in-hand with an angel, a fallen angel, banished from the brilliant light of the good gods, but an angel nonetheless. The

shadow demon saw both the reality and the illusion, which Tabris did not. 'Green wings, patterned after a serpent.' He shook his head. 'I warned him.' Despite the obvious tell, it was clear that Tabris remained oblivious to the truth. The pair, angel and demon, turned and headed toward the city.

...

He was crouched at the edge of a bubbling brook. He watched as the swift moving water ran over the varicolored rocks. Slender, brown fish raced under his gaze. Movement was reflected on the water's surface. He looked up and saw a hawk pass overhead, a long, furless tail dangling from the rat gripped in its talons. He watched as the hawk landed on a branch and peered around. Once the bird was convinced no threat was near it turned its head and looked over the still twitching body of the rat.

"I don't understand," said Maret, for she had no other name for herself. She had felt blindly along the walls of the cave, found the exit, and forced herself into the light, sound, and life of the valley.

He watched as the hawk drove its beak into the rat's side, shattering its rib cage. The hawk pulled out a mess of internal organs, threw back its head, and swallowed them.

"The natural order," he said. "One dies so another may live."

"But why?" asked Maret, not seeing the hawk, but looking at his broad, stony shoulders, thinking only of her own poorly understood situation.

"The strong beget strength into the world. The weak are sacrificed to this truth," he said, rising.

"Maret?"

He turned and faced her, looming over her. "She is strong."

"Does that make me weak?" she asked, looking up at him.

He did not answer.

"Am I going to be—"

He stepped past her, away from the hawk, toward a moon flower that held closed its blossoms. He began to examine a wheel bug that had climbed up the stalk, looking for prey. It turned its small, dark eyes to him and waved its twin antennae.

"But, I'm—" She reached out, touched his arm. He turned. She stared into his eyes. His face showed no emotion. "*Am I Maret?*" she asked. "If I'm not Maret, *who* am I? If I'm not strong I must be weak. If I'm weak—"

He reached out, extended an index finger.

"No!" she cried. She thought of turning, of bolting, like a rabbit, into the shadow and safety of vegetation, but she hesitated. She had successfully found him by ignoring the plethora of sights and sounds around her. Now that she sought safety she knew not where to turn. Everything around her bewildered her. She was overwhelmed and in being so could not act. He touched her forehead. She fainted. He caught her, lifted her, and carried her back to the cave.

...

The anti-paladin, Kaya, who worshiped the "angry hag," Gyronna, the goddess of extortion, hatred, and spite, sat low in her chair, her legs extended onto the plush, gold-trimmed, red carpet leading from the arched double door to the queen's throne. The grand hall was lined with those nobles who had survived Maret's quick, violent revolution. Mixed with the nobles, outnumbering them two-to-one were the once angry, previously discontented

youths who had helped usher Maret into power. Kaya was the only person disrespectful enough to maintain such a posture in the queen's presence.

Maret peered down the hall from the height of her throne. Half-way to the door she saw a pair of muddy boots. As she watched, the owner knocked the heel of one boot against the toe of the other. Dry mud and not so dry horse manure fell from the boot onto the carpet. The legs drew back and Kaya's head came into view. She rotated her head from one side of the hall to the other, eyeing everyone present, her limp, green-tinted hair falling around her oval-shaped face. She flung her hair to one side, revealing her unhealthy complexion and her large eyes, one putrid yellow, the other royal purple. She looked at Maret and smiled, revealing a jumble of crooked, file-sharpened teeth. Once her presence had been noted by all in attendance she sat back and once again extended her legs.

Maret turned to Devinti, who stood beside her.

He looked at her, a knowing smile on his face. "Kaya. A paladin, ah, anti-paladin, I suppose would be the correct terminology."

"She's got brass balls," said Maret.

"She hopes you'll confront her. She would love nothing more than to trade insults with the queen," said Devinti.

"Why is she here?" asked Maret.

"She's Ramathain's lover," said Devinti. The idea sent a shiver down Maret's spine. "She is also single-handedly responsible for the massacre of the former Prince and his guards."

Maret showed surprise. "She did that—alone."

"Indeed."

Maret looked at the mud and crap-caked boots. "Invite her to diner. I would love to hear her tell of that. What's with her eyes?"

"I believe her mother is a hag."

Maret looked up at Devinti.

"Annis hag," he added.

The double doors opened. An aging, portly man with long gray hair and a clean shaven double chin stepped between the two doormen and stopped. He wore opulent red robes depicting dragons in flight. His pudgy fingers were home to two magical rings and many more non-magical. Three wands hung from his belt and his right hand gripped a sparkling blue staff, electricity arced from the staff, leaving behind the smell of burnt air. Ramathain needed no introduction.

He advanced half way down the red carpet, stopping before the outstretched legs of his half-hag lover. He turned to her, smiled, and winked. He looked to Maret, puffed out his chest and declared: "My Queen, whose rule shall last a thousand years, I have come to present to you those who survived the Red Dragon's Ordeal, the graduating class of—"

As Ramathain spoke Kaya kicked off one of her boots. She slowly, unbeknownst to Ramathain, but seen by almost everyone in the hall, begun to slip her foot under the hem of his robe. When he felt her toes against this inner thigh he choked to a stop. The hall burst out in laughter. Even Maret couldn't help but chuckle; although, she and everyone else had failed to notice that the portly wizard had not blushed.

Ramathain took a defensive step back and glared at the anti-paladin. She, in turn, pouted then bent forward and jammed her foot back into her boot.

"Do bring them in, Ramathain," said Maret once the laughter died down. Ramathain turned, went to the door, and waved his hand. A group of five students advanced into the hall. They were a mix of races and genders. They followed Ramathain to the foot of the queen's throne, all obliged to step over Kaya's legs.

A moment later, when Ramathain began to give his speech, illustrating the rigors and dangers of the Red Dragon Ordeal, a test of his own devising, the hateful half-hag began to snore. When Ramathain began to introduce his students she rose, stretched, and loudly exclaimed, "Ah, Nine Hells, this is boring." She turned to Maret. "I though you knew how to throw a party." She looked to Ramathain, smiled, and began toward him, her two-handed sword clanking at her side. "Come on, baby, let's skip the foreplay and get right to it."

Maret looked to Devinti. The anti-paladin's behavior had to be addressed. There were moments, Maret thought, when she would rather not be queen. When she looked back to Kaya the anti-paladin had started to sprint. As she ran she drew her sword.

"Devinti!" cried Maret.

"On it!" he cried back.

The knights, standing a few steps from the throne, began to draw their own swords but Ramathain had the jump on them. The sparks arcing from his magical staff became a forked bolt of lightning. The two knights, wearing full plate, lit up, jerking spasmodically, then fell, lie motionless and began to smolder.

Maret was halfway through a spell when Kaya dove between Ramathain's students, who were themselves in the process of casting, and leapt onto the dais. She brought her sword down in a vicious overhead chop. Devinti had been quick enough and as the sword came down it slowed to a stop. A band of blue-white magical energy could be seen, bent under the unnatural strength of the half-hag. It was enough to stop the initial attack but Kaya wasn't phased. She yanked her sword back, the hilt at her hip, then thrust it forward. The tip dug into the throne. Maret wasn't there.

"Back here, bitch," growled Maret. She had *blinked* from the throne to middle of the hall. This was the effect of her first spell. She began a second. The students, momentarily confused, located her. Several spells came at her all at once. A massive ball of gelatinous fire and ash appeared directly behind her. She felt the heat against the back of her thighs. A bunch of darts, formed out of magical energy, erupted from one student's fingers, speeding unerringly toward her. A bunch of flying insects were gathering between the palms of another student's hands and would soon swarm over her, making casting almost impossible. A beam of dull gray energy shot from another student's finger but she ducked and it went high. Devinti had successfully kicked the final student—interrupting the student's casting—or she would have yet another spell to content with.

The magic missiles struck her, almost knocking her backwards into the flaming sphere. The concussive force of the bolts nearly knocked the breath from her, which should have ended her own spell, but she managed to keep the words flowing. She finished the spell just as Ramathain was spinning to face her. All around her people were beginning to scream and scramble to safety, knocking over chairs, and each other. She stepped between two overdressed women, dropped to one knee and touched the stone floor just at the edge of the carpet.

The floor shook. The stones between herself and her attackers, who, were conveniently standing close together, heaved, then shaped themselves into a rough wall, pulling the carpet with them, knocking over dozens. The wall curved at the sides and the top, forming a half shell

which now contained Ramathain, Kaya, and the students. On the other side Devinti finished his own spell. A fiendish dire tiger, as tall as the throne itself and weighing as much as the dais it sat on, appeared, roared, and swiped across the group, catching one of the students and dragging her to the floor in a bloody heap. The buzzing insects she had been gathering dissipated.

Kaya turned away from the sudden stone wall to face the tiger. She glanced at Devinti.

"I'll make a cloak out of this and a rug out of you!" she hissed.

Ramathain, being close to the edge, was able to step around the wall without falling victim to the tigers's eager grasp. He grabbed a wand from his belt as he did so, lifted it, and aimed it at Maret. He said the keyword that brought the ruby tip to life. A line of fire shot from the wand. Maret *blinked*, appearing on the other side of a stunned group of onlookers. The ray of fire struck the side of a young man, burning his flesh to the bone. Ramathain frowned and began to search for Maret. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw one of his students, a dark elf male, step around the other side of the wall and point. Several wads of acid sped across the hall. Maret was forced to drop to her belly in order to dodge them, losing the spell she had begun to cast.

"Maret, get out of here!" cried Devinti. He too had begun a spell but had to give it up in order to dive behind the throne. Three of Ramathain's students had cast at him. Two of the spells struck the throne. The final, a cluster of magic missiles, curved around the throne and struck him in the shoulder. He had the immediate thought that he would buy a brooch of shielding—a magic item that absorbed such missiles—should he survive the attack.

"Ramathain, you traitor!" screamed Maret, as she struggled to her feet. She watched as the ball of fire rolled, then leapt into the air, flew over the wall. She could not see that it struck the tiger just behind the shoulder.

"If you can do it," yelled Ramathain, "why not I?" He laughed. "You were a fool to dismiss your demon, Maret. Oh? Did you think I wouldn't find out? That temper of yours will cost you." He lowered the tip of the staff and lightning arced outwards. The bolt struck first a fleeing noble, then leapt to a frightened young woman, then finally sunk into Maret's arm, instantly numbing it.

Maret heard Devinti cry out in pain. She looked but the wall of stone blocked him from view. Ramathain, in a better position, glanced over his shoulder, then looked back to Maret.

"Seems my lover has killed yours."

Maret began a spell. Even the crackle and pain of another of Ramathain's bolts did not stop her. When she finished the powerful necromantic spell an unearthly hush fell over the room. Ramathain staggered back. The dark elf fell to his knees, clutching at his chest. Ramathain turned and dove behind the stone wall. Not that it mattered. The spell knew where he was, it could feel the water in his corpulent body, and it wanted it. Maret watched as the dark elf, the only one affected by the spell she could see, began to wilt like a plant enduring a season-long drought in an instant. His flesh clung to his body, taunt, leathery. Then it began to grow brittle and crack. Finally, as the dark elf fell forward, his entire body began to flake away. When he struck the floor he burst into a cloud of dust. All that was left behind were his bones and pure white hair.

Her anger spent, Maret finally felt the effect of the magical lightning. Pain flowed through her body like bad blood, turning her stomach. She doubled over and vomited. Her head spun and all she wanted to do was lie down in her bed. She forced herself toward the wall, half falling on it for support. She peered around the edge. Her spell, appropriately called *horrid*

wilting, had turned the remainder of Ramathain's students to dust. Only the student killed by the dire tiger escaped that horrible fate and she had accomplished that by dying first.

Ramathain himself had not entirely turned to dust. He was, however, mortally wounded. He lie on his side, his robes deflated, as he had been drastically desiccated. He appeared to be reaching out to Kaya, who sat on the edge of the dais, her back turned, holding onto something. The dire tiger lay beside her, panting its final breaths.

Maret staggered to the edge of the dais and sat down. She ran through the spells she had memorized that morning, searching for one that was relatively easy to cast yet that would finish Kaya.

"He's quite handsome," said Kaya.

Maret turned and saw that Kaya held Devinti's broken body, his head in her lap.

"Damn you," growled Maret, rising and staggering to the other woman. She grabbed the half-hag's shoulder and spun her, or attempted to. When she pulled on the woman's shoulder something hot, red, and liquid gushed from the woman's side. Maret recognized intestines when she saw them. Kaya looked up at her, smiled weakly, then looked down at her own guts. She looked at Devinti, then the tiger.

"Managed to get both," she said, extending one arm and burying her blood-soaked hand into the tiger's short mane. She ran the fingers of her other hand through Devinti's black hair. "Didn't expect to fight such a fierce beast. Never can predict anything when it comes to wizards. Say," she looked up at Maret, "you don't know any healing spells, do you? All I have is inflict." She turned to look at the tiger and fell sideways, her head falling on his. The tiger, his great black eyes staring vacantly, panted several more times, then stopped. His body began to dematerialize. When he was gone, an after effect of the summons spell, the anti-paladin fell further, her head knocking on the stone.

Maret could now see Devinti. He lay on his back, his head in the dead anti-paladin's lap. His chest had been cut open by her blade, his heart sliced in two. She stepped onto the dais and took him from the half-hag's lap to her own and began to cry.

Half an hour later she was still crying. The hall was empty of all life except her. Ramathain had died, although she hadn't yet noticed. A knight appeared at the door. "Queen? Queen Maret?"

Maret looked up but saw only the stone half-shell. "Here," she said, then looked back down at Devinti. The knight ran around the wall. His sword was drawn and covered in blood, as was his armor. He took off his helmet. "Queen, the people have risen against you. They storm the castle. We've turned them away but—" He finally seemed to comprehend the scene before him. "Queen?"

...

The monastery appeared to have fallen into ruin. The town nearby, after suffering plague after plague of snakes, had been abandoned. Even the road that passed nearby had largely been forgotten and was now overgrown. Within the monastery the monks and clerics, who once followed the disciplined path to self-perfection prescribed by Irori, now debased themselves in service to Abraxas.

The change had come slowly. A monk had disappeared, or had mysteriously been killed, none knew, and left behind a blasphemous tome. The book had been put to the flames and the ashes scattered. The followers of Irori tried to put the episode behind them but found they

could not. The blasphemous content from the destroyed book turned up in other books, nestled within the sacred texts, blending with the sacred words.

Slowly, over years, the words penned by Velles, dictated to him by Abraxas, edged out the teachings of Irori. A decade later and the library of the monastery held nothing but the teachings of Abraxas; the dark, corrupting thoughts he passed on to all of his followers. Finally, Abraxas's will was revealed to the monks and clerics. He wanted them to do something for him, something incredibly dangerous but well suited to their particular strengths. He wanted them to collect the scattered pages of the *Book of the Damned*.

That sacred calling would occupy the monastery for the next two decades. It would result in the death of three-fourths their number. Still, with unheard of self sacrifice on the part of the monks and clerics, and all the aid Abraxas could safely give them, the book had come together. Abraxas knew, from experience, that the book never stayed together long. Some working of the book itself kept it scattered, as if that were the only way to keep itself safe. He knew this because this was the third time he had managed to successfully gather all of the pages. He had often, in the thousands of years since the books dispersal, had possession, via his followers, of individual pages. He had never seen one himself. That, he knew, was too dangerous. No, he had done before as he had done now, used proxies.

In the past he had employed a succubus to seduce a powerful warlord. This warlord, Uz, and his half-fiend children, had gathered the book. This was before Nex sieged Absalom, some four millennia prior. Centuries later, when Tar-Baphon was mortally wounded by Aroden, cultists of Abraxas snuck into Tar-Baphon's personal study and stole the *Book of the Damned* from him. A great passage of time lay between then and now. Many individual pages had passed through the hands of his servants. Much had been learned and added to his own library. Abraxas was patient. Under his direction the monks and clerics would learn what they could from the book and he would add more to his copy.

...

"She must hide," said Velles.

Zucra, also known as the Twisted Mouth—although never to her face—was a marilith: serpent from the waist down, from the waist up a six armed humanoid female. A demon of marked ferocity. She stared at the glabrezu with her pupil-less eyes. Velles—now a glabrezu, a bipedal demon with four arms, two of them massive, ending in claws, and two the size and shape of human arms—was physically larger than the marilith, yet he was crouching down, making himself as small as he could. He may be larger, but a Zucra, really, any marilith, but especially this one, was far more powerful.

"She is under threat."

"If she cannot defend herself," said the marilith, "she is too weak to be of concern."

"It's not that. She needs something only Abraxas can provide."

"Abraxas is not to be disturbed."

"I know," said Velles, "he has the *Book of the Damned*."

Zucra arched an eyebrow. Her three pairs of arms folded across her chest. "How do you know that?"

Velles grinned. "I helped him acquire it. When the book was finally assembled he illuminated my dark heart with the joy of success. He also promised advancement. A balor, perhaps."

Zucra rocked back on her serpentine lower half. "You—a balor?" Her twisted lips attempted a frown. All that was available to her was a grimace. "Tell me what it is you want. Perhaps Abraxas shall hear it, perhaps not."

"Maret has made a shabti, or rather, has caused a shabti to be made. It is close to ready and will soon go before Pharasma."

"A foolish plan," interrupted Zucra. "Pharasma will detect the ruse. Why bother?"

"Pharasma will only see the truth if she can feel that what is before her is not wholly and completely Maret. If she cannot sense the true Maret, how will she know that the shabti is a fake?"

"Oh?" replied Zucra. "And how will you hide Maret's true soul from the Lady of Graves? Where in the multiverse can the goddess of life and death not see?"

Velles grinned again. It was becoming a habit. "Into the *Book of the Damned*."

...

Three women stood beneath the enviably named "tree of heaven," rubbing the sleep from their eyes, waiting for the queen to appear. The tree's smooth, brown bark and pinnate leaves were nearly lost, along with the women, in the pre-dawn darkness. Only the moon's dim glow as it hugged the horizon illuminated the garden. When Maret was informed by the royal gardener, kept over from the now dead king's administration, of the tree's genus she chose it as the spot for her early morning obediences to Abraxas.

The women roused when a tall, dark-haired, dark-complexioned, dark-eyed, Garundian cleric of Norgorber—the mysterious god of greed, murder, secrets, and poison—came into view. A hasty alliance had been struck so as to keep the dangerous church from joining the opposing side of the growing rebellion. This particular cleric, the highest ranking priest in the region, had become Maret's adviser, replacing Devinti. Maret was taking no chances since the attack by Ramathain, his lover, students, and the larger attack on the castle by the populous. The cleric was followed by an armed guard. Maret followed this pair, flanked by two more armed guards.

The cleric, who went by the name Meidau, which, in Infernal, meant "death by exsanguination," stood next to the trio of singers. The guards took up strategic positions around the small clearing. Maret, carrying a dagger in her right hand, crossed the clearing and stepped between the three women, who moved to make room for her. Maret studied the branches of the tree of heaven, found one that suited her purpose, and cut it free. She then handed the dagger to Meidau, who put it back in the empty sheath at his belt.

No one spoke.

Maret wore an open-front robe. She was nude beneath. She swept the robe behind her and knelt on the gravel. Her face was taunt with resolve and the expectation of pain. She held the branch above her, head bent, eyes on her own heavily scarred thighs. Meidau looked at the three women and nodded.

The women began the otherworldly chorus, a song mimicking the ambient sounds of the Abyss. Maret closed her eyes. At the first high-pitched wail Maret brought down the branch against her thighs. When the branch struck she said a single, forbidden, mystical word, one of many she would utter during her obedience. Hearing the word stung the singers' ears. They raised their voices to drown out the remainder.

Maret was usually patient, sadistic, even methodical in her self-flagellation. This morning she was emotional. The flesh on her thighs became a patchwork of bruises, welts, and cuts. When her scars began to open, the blood flowed at an alarming rate. Maret no longer

chanted the words, she screamed them. The blood-painted leaves of the branch flew free, clinging to her legs, arms, and abdomen. Blood soaked the gravel and formed a pool beneath her. No one interfered.

Her vision blurred. The thrashing of the branch faded away, although she still felt the sting. The song of the three singers became an increasingly distant sound, until it disappeared completely. Maret no longer saw the trees, bushes, and flowers of the garden. She no longer felt the rocks beneath her knees. The sun was breaking over the crest of a hill. She looked up and saw the silhouette of an abandoned monastery, walls crumbling, overgrown with vines.

A deep, throbbing bass came from the top of the hill. She rose and began to climb. She passed through a gap in the wall, entering a weed-choked courtyard. Within the walls of the monastery the thumping bass was overwhelming. It rattled her teeth and made her joints hurt. She was able to pinpoint the direction it came from and turned that way, arriving at a pair of open doors. There was only darkness within. Not even the sun's light passed the threshold. It was as if a black felt curtain hung just behind the doors.

She reached out and attempted to run her fingers along the unnatural barrier of darkness. It offered no resistance. She stepped in. At first she saw nothing. The volume of the beating increased. She felt it in her bones. Something brushed against her. She recoiled. Another form brushed past her, this time she caught the faint, bluish hue. It was followed by another, then another. Maret could make out humanoid forms, souls, flying through the darkness. She was reminded of those she had sacrificed, captured, and had seen after their release. The souls came from behind her, passed by her, cold and lifeless. She followed them.

The souls were traveling down a hall the dimensions of which Maret could not discern. The hall led to a large room. Upon entering the room, the souls slithered on the floor like snakes, pouring over the lip of a bottomless pit. Within the room the rhythmic beating was almost deafening. Maret noticed one end of a chain was anchored to the stone floor. She followed its length with her eyes. The chain shot off into the darkness, joined by dozens of others she began to pick out of the gloom.

Maret stepped forward, to the edge of the pit. Below, hundreds of souls swam, a terrifying shoal. As Maret watched, several souls broke formation and emerged from the pit. They floated into the air, their blue light illuminating the source of the repetitive bass; a massive heart, covered in glowing runes, straining against its chains.

"The heart—," said one of the souls, as it floated down and stopped next to her. She turned and looked but the soul leapt into the air and flew down the hall, disappearing from view.

"Of the ancient evil—," said another soul, stepping next to Maret. She spun. It glanced at her, then bent like a runner, launched, and sped down the hall.

"Powers the—," said yet another soul, pirouetting around her, turning, and speeding off. Maret watched it follow its companions. She awaited the rest of the statement and although other souls flew around the heart, none stepped to the edge of the pit. Instead, they appealed to her, reaching out.

"Come," said one.

"To us," said another.

"We will know you."

"Come to us, Maret."

"Join us."

"Join us, Maret."

"Read the words upon the heart and rejoice, for your end is near."

The bass of the beating heart was slowly replaced with the treble of the branch cutting through the air and striking her flesh. The howling of the souls was superseded with her own agonizing cries. The heart, the bottomless pit, and the seducing souls faded from view. She awoke in her royal chambers, Meidau standing over her, a look of admiration on his face.

"I've witnessed captives beaten into unconsciousness," he said. "Now I've had the pleasure of witnessing one to it to oneself. Magnificent."

"Send my body servant," said Maret. "To draw my bath."

"The revolution?" asked Meidau.

"After my bath."

"As you wish."

...

Maret, the shabti, but no longer aware of her own fictitious nature, now wholly believing her forced identity, and wholly ignorant of the truth of her existence, attempted to read the emotions displayed on the stone face. It stared from the concave bowl in the cave wall, his aloof, aristocratic features perfectly sculpted and perfectly enigmatic. He stared through her for what felt like an eternity. Only when her patience was coming to an end did a smirk curl his lips.

"It cannot be done," he said. "Your soul is not your own. Nor is its ultimate fate mine to meddle with."

"Maybe you're afraid," said Maret. "I've spent my life rooting out the weakness in my own heart only to find it all around me. I don't need you. I'll tell Pharamasma to go to Hell."

"Perhaps she shall say the same to you."

Maret wished she could turn her back to him. Instead, she began to shimmy from the narrow cave. Just as she began to see the angled light pouring into the cave entrance his face, neck, and shoulders emerged, cutting off her exit. He turned his head to face her, his lips just at her ear. She could not even turn her head for fear of touching her lips to his. Nor did she retreat into the cave, unwilling to show weakness.

"Do you remember your creation?" he asked.

"I don't have time for games."

"Do you recall that I wept for you?" he asked.

"I can't imagine why."

"Would you deny your creator?" he asked.

"I don't know. Who created me?" asked Maret.

"I did."

"Get out of my way," said Maret.

He sank back into the stone, his eyes on her until the last.

"Unbelievable," she said, and shimmied from the cave.

As she arrived at the mouth she called out to her demon companion. "You've wasted our time. He won't do it, or can't." She paused, listening. *He* felt strangely absent, as absent as the songs of the birds and the chatter of the insects. She listened. What had once been a vibrant chorus of life was now mute. She peered out and looked upon a barren landscape. She stepped out of the cave. There was only stone and the howl of wind as it swept through the vacant

valley, rustling her hair and robes. She began a spell but before she could cast it a pair of hands grabbed her ankles.

She looked down. The hands were stone, had come up from the stone, and they were far from alone. The entire valley floor sprouted similar stone hands. She tried to yank her feet free but found herself held fast. The hands nearby reached, emerging on stone arms, to grab her legs, to yank her down. She fell among the hands and screamed as they grabbed her arms, legs, torso. They squeezed and tore. She felt a chunk of flesh rip free from her calf. The hand that had wounded her sunk into the rock, taking its prize with it. A hand grabbed her hair and pulled her head to the rock. Another grabbed the back of her neck. She became panicked, forgot her spells, and screamed for help.

The hands continued their work. She felt her bones snap in their pitiless grip, felt herself being pulled to pieces. The stone hands were ruthlessly efficient. Before long her screams became whimpers, then silence. The hands, clutching the wet, sticky, soft parts of Maret, retreated into the stone, leaving only a smear of blood. Her blood soaked into the stone like moisture into desert pavement. Only minutes after Maret had left the cave she and all signs of her life and death were gone.

From the cave there came the sound of weeping. The shabti's creator stood in shadow, looking out. He had created the shabti, filled it with Maret's sin, and now he had destroyed it. Tears ran down his cheeks. It had, he thought, been a disagreeable task.

...

Maret, the shabti, although she believed herself to be Maret proper, opened her eyes and saw an unbelievable scene. She was crowded together with a countless multitude. Before her two men dressed in ornate robes of gold, on which images of the lives of the saints—or of the martyrdom of the individual himself—had been embroidered, held the limp body of a third man. They lowered it down. The man, who, judging by the pallor of his flesh, was dead, wore elaborate, gilded armor and a cloak of ermine. Around the man stood a crowd of grief-stricken nobility. A priest wearing a diaphanous gown over his black robes began to recite verse from *The Bones Land in a Spiral*.

Rising above the funeral scene was a host of angels, saints, and souls. They floated on the ether. Behind them, the star-dotted sky rose in a fantastic dome. In the distance a massive white spire glowed with its own inner light. Above this assorted group sat a plump, middle-aged woman, her brown hair shot through with silver. She wore a simple dress and had no raiment yet it was obvious she was both wise and powerful, as all deferred to her. The funeral scene faded, leaving only the soul, which knelt before Pharama and her host.

Several of those crowded around Maret whispered to each other, she overhearing.

"A king."

"Who?"

"No, a count."

"Not a king?"

"Pretensions to be king, perhaps."

"Count Orgaz."

"Why does he get to—"

"Just because he's nobility?"

"Fool, he's been waiting here for who knows how long. You simply didn't see him."

"Why the funeral scene?"

"A bit of theatrics, to bolster his case."

There seemed to be some passionate talk amongst the saints. One, a man who wore the rough-made cloth of a desert hermit, was arguing on behalf of the count. Another, an angel with wings of gold-hued feathers, argued against. A soul, that of a woman who bore a resemblance to the count, sat nearby watching the proceeding. Those other souls in attendance, as well as the saints and the angels, all spoke, taking sides, as it were. Some, emboldened perhaps by long residencies, called out their opinions to Pharama. Final judgment, it seemed, was a noisy, chaotic affair.

Despite the disorder, Pharama was unperturbed. She did not silence those in attendance, but sat listening as the sins and virtuous acts of Count Orgaz were presented. After a lengthy appeal by the hermit she raised a hand. The multitude grew quiet. Pharama sat forward and spoke to the soul that had once been a count.

"The saints are for you. The angels against." A knowing smile crossed her lips. "I have found that man is sympathetic to man, while those who have never struggled with the temptation to sin are quick to condemn." She sat back. "I am told that when you died a miracle occurred, that two of my chosen," here she turned and scanned the crowd to her left, spotting the two of whom she spoke, "descended to lower your body into the grave. This was shown to me just now. Your good works commend you. Let the Heavenly archons guide you to your final abode." She nodded and Count Orgaz's soul faded from view.

The scantily clad hermit turned and waved to Maret.

"What!" Cried out one of those waiting to be judged.

"She's just gotten—"

"Unconscionable!"

"A scandal! She's waited but a moment."

"Why be in a hurry? Are you so certain of a good outcome?"

The multitude fell to silence as Maret stepped from the crowd and stood alone before the assembled souls, angels, and saints. The hermit looked down at her, a frown on his wizened face. The gold-feathered angel did not look, but turned his face away. The saints studied her, then began to whisper amongst themselves. The hermit turned his face to Pharama, who looked at him. What silent understanding passed between them Maret could not fathom. Pharama looked at Maret, her brow furrowed.

...

A young woman, a recent addition to the queen's household staff, hand-picked by Meidau, knocked gently on the door of the bedchamber. Hearing no response she opened the door and peered in. She saw no one and entered. She went to the bed and saw the queen's sleep-stilled figure beneath the blankets.

"My Queen?" she asked, reaching out and placing her hand on Maret's scar-covered thigh. "I have drawn a bath. My Queen?" She shook Maret, who woke with a start. Her body's reaction to her self-inflicted pain had sent her into a light doze. She regarded the young woman. "Your bath, my Queen."

Maret rose from her bed, the blood-soaked sheets clinging to her legs. She reached and yanked them free. She took the arm of the young woman and was helped to her tub. The young woman, her body servant, aided her into the bath.

"Forgive me for asking, my Queen, but what has happened to you?" The young woman watched as the blood from Maret's wounds swirled into the bath water, rivulets of red rising to the surface.

Maret looked at her body servant. "One must pay a price for knowledge and power."

The girl went to a small table and retrieved a sponge. She returned and knelt by the tub's side. "I wouldn't know anything about that, my Queen," she said, as she wetted the sponge and began to gently wash Maret with it. "I'm a simple woman." She glanced at Maret but looked back to the sponge. "The daughter of a former—" She fell silent.

Maret rest her head on the edge of the tub and closed her eyes. Her body servant continued to wash her. After a few minutes she rose and went again to the small table. She lifted the edge of a towel which exposed the handle of a black-bladed dagger. She looked over her shoulder at Maret, who still lay with her head back, her eyes closed.

The young woman lifted the towel with her left hand and let it unfold. She lifted the dagger with her right hand and hid it behind the towel. She walked to the edge of the tub and stood looking down into the pink water.

"My father was a minor noble," she said, now looking at Maret, who did not open her eyes. "When you took power my father and brothers were slaughtered by those young men who—"

Maret opened her eyes and tilted her head to look at her body servant. The young woman did not keep Maret's gaze but looked absently into the bloody, soapy water.

"I was taken and sold to the temple of Norgorber, a slave." Now she looked at Maret. "I don't know what happened to my mother or sister."

Maret, not liking the topic, began to rise.

"Here," said her body servant, "let me dry you." She reached out with the towel. Maret watched her. The expression on the young woman's face never changed from grief and sadness, not even when she dropped the towel, it landing half in the water, half out, and plunged the enchanted, poisoned dagger into Maret's chest. She reached out, releasing the dagger's handle, and grabbed Maret. She helped Maret slide back into the tub, she herself kneeling at its side.

"Meidau promised I could get revenge," said the young woman, looking into Maret's eyes. "For all you've done to my family. He promised freedom." She stood and pulled the dagger free. A gurgling spout of blood exited the wound, splashing into the cooling water of the bath. "But I don't want to live anymore." The young woman plunged the dagger into her own heart. She staggered backwards, wavered, then crumpled.

Maret, covering her wound with both hands, whispered *his* name. "How could you—" She coughed up blood. "Have let—" She felt intense heat radiating from the wound in her chest followed by waves of cold. She slid down in the tub until she rest at the bottom, looking up from below with lifeless eyes.

...

Abraxas is pleased. He sent you a vision of your fate. Did you hear the beating of the dark heart? He will hide you in the—

Velles stood at the head of the tub. He looked into the water. It was so mixed with blood he could barely see Maret at the bottom. He looked to the side and saw the crumpled body of the young woman.

...

The Abyss had been waiting to claim Maret's soul. She had, through various forbidden rites, pledged her soul to that poisoned land. In return for ownership of her soul, Maret had received an advance. She was granted an extended youth, knowledge of things no mortal should know, and power far beyond anything she could have acquired on her own—or even imagined. Yet, when the Abyss reached out, it found that another had taken Maret's soul. It raged.

...

"A balor, eh?" Zucra asked, looking at Velles. "A lemure, perhaps."

"Something's gone terribly wrong. I need to speak with Abraxas immediately."

"He doesn't have time for those who've failed him."

...

"You have no power over me!" screamed Maret, the shabti, believing her words to be the truth. "I'm bound to Abraxas, to the Abyss itself. Why am I here? I'm soon to be a demon, torturing pathetic souls like these!" Maret waved behind her, indicated the crowd of waiting souls, who cried out in disgruntled protest.

Pharasma, the hermit, and the assembled saints listened to her diatribe with strained patience. The angels looked on with pity. Just then a twin appeared. Maret looked upon herself. The assembled saints gasped in surprise. A great furor arose in those present. Even the angels appeared at a loss to comprehend the appearance of a "second" soul. Pharasma leaned forward, looked back and forth between Maret and her shabti, then reclined.

"We may begin."

...

An angel, who had for eons taken a body of earth, sat with his back to the valley wall. The sky above was paused in twilight, the sky above mirroring the mood within. The valley, once as verdant as the First World, was now lifeless stone. All was silent until a strange sound began to echo down the valley's length. It was as if a hundred hunting horns called forth. It heralded a prosecution. The stone-angel frowned. The valley filled with brilliant light; which, settled down to something like the breaking of dawn. The stone-bodied-angel shook his head, frowned, and looked away from the source of the light.

"You have been warned." Came a voice from the light, a voice that sounded similar to his own. "You have been banished. Now you must return to face judgment."

"Wasn't banishment judgment?" asked the stone-bodied-angel, turning and looking up. A muscular angel in shining armor, his gold-feathered wings folded behind him, loomed over the stone-bodied-angel, his brethren, sword in-hand.

"It was mercy and an opportunity," said the prosecutor, who had been sent by Pharasma to fetch the wayward sibling. "You should have been redeeming yourself, not proving yourself a vain fool."

"Are *you* your brother's keeper?" asked the stone-bodied-angel. The prosecutor was about to speak, but the stone-bodied-angel waved a hand and began to rise. "It doesn't matter."

"You acquiesce?"

"Put away your naked blade."

The stone-bodied-angel, now standing, began to follow the prosecutor toward the pillar of light. Just as they reached the magical gate to the Boneyard the stone-bodied-angel stopped, turned, and looked out over the valley. The prosecutor gripped his still-drawn sword. The stone-bodied-angel moved his hand in a wide arc. The valley sprang to life. He knelt and held

out his hand. A copper-colored fox jogged forward and sniffed his fingers. He hazarded a single friendly lick. The stone flesh of the banished angel began to crack and flake away. The fox turned, stepped quickly, turned again and watched as the angel's true form was revealed. The fox gazed upon twins.

...

Just as before, there was only void. Then came sensation. Then the power of the word.

"You are never responsible for the actions of others."

Pharasma's voice filled the valley. Maret, for she had no other name for herself, lay not on stone but on something pleasantly soft.

"You are only responsible for yourself."

The welcoming sounds of nature filled Maret's ears. The sweet fragrances of flowers filled her nostrils. Beneath her hands was life-bearing soil, blanketed with clover.

"Go forth to live and act, yet remember that soon you shall be judged."

Maret opened her eyes. The familiar valley walls rose to either side. She had perfect recall of all that her short life had been. She was created not by nature or by the will of the divine, but by a sub-archon, who thought himself greater than he was. She had been filled with the sins of another and made to stand judgment in her place. Those sins had been returned to their rightful owner. While the sins of Maret had left, the portion of her soul that animated her shabti remained. Like a gas it expanded to fill its container. That container was now free to, as Pharasma had commanded, live and act.

The ploy had failed.

One cannot trick a god.

Afterward

I hope you enjoyed these stories. If you have, and if you want more, please check out *Breaking the Reign of the Dead*, a novel set in Geb, Nex, and the Mana Waste. It's free and can be found at brd.pub. If you enjoy my writing and want still more check out my website, hradbethlen.com or search for me on Amazon. If you think my writing worth sharing please tell a friend.

Thanks for reading.



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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