



Three Familiars

A Pathfinder RPG Story

H. Rad Bethlen

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"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."

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"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."

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"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."

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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."



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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