

Tales From The **magician's SKULL**

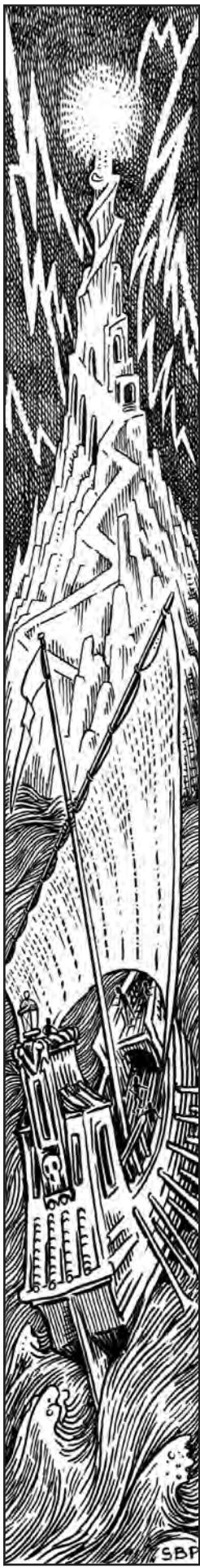
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Sanjulian



A gong shivers... the mists part to reveal a grisly visage lying upon a mound of rubble,
dead but for one glowing, malefic eye...
It speaks, in a voice of cold command: *Silence, mortal dogs! It is time now for*

Tales From The **MAGICIAN'S SKULL**



NO. 3

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ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTINE JONES

THE FACE THAT FITS HIS MASK

From the Adventures of Kormak

By WILLIAM KING

IN the kitchen at the back of his shop, Skardus played with his baby, tossing the laughing boy into the air and then hugging him close. He had been inspecting the one-year-old for stigmata and he was a little worried. The lad looked like a perfectly formed human child except for the tiny claws on his feet and his vestigial tail. It was something they would need to keep hidden until he was old enough to control the Change. Still, that was a bridge they would cross when they came to it. The boy gurgled, said da-da and bit at his ear with small sharp teeth. Skardus was very happy until his wife came into the room with that look on her face that meant there was a problem.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"There's a man out there, says he knows you, smells like trouble." Marla wrinkled her nose meaningfully. Skardus rose to his feet and still holding the baby padded over to the doorway. The baby's happy burbling negated the silence of his movement. He slid the door partially open and looked out into the shop. A big man with greying black hair stood there, rain dripping from his sodden clothing, a sword scabbarded on his back. Something about the stillness of his manner indicated that the human knew he was being watched.

Skardus said as quietly as he could, "I'll hold him here for as long as I can. Take the baby and run."

Marla made a movement with her thumb and extruded one of her claws. Any threat to her children brought out the violence that was never far from the surface among their people. She said. "He's only a human and he does not smell like a sorcerer."

She spoke with the confidence of one almost invulnerable to mortal weapons. He touched his lips to the baby's forehead and then handed him to Marla, kissing her as well.

"Go now." Skardus gave her a grim smile. "That human out there could kill us both in two heartbeats then butcher the little one without a qualm. Get out! Quick!"

Marla stared at him for a moment before she headed towards the hidden trapdoor into the cellar and then the tunnels that led to the undercity.

It was the fear in his voice that decided her, he could tell. She had never seen him so afraid in all their years of marriage. The baby, sensing the tension between his parents, started to whimper. The sound of it tore at Skardus's heart. At the trapdoor Marla turned and said, "Why is he here? Why now? Is it to do with our Anton and his bloody friends?"

Skardus shrugged. "Maybe. Doesn't matter. Go!"

He watched her leave and thought of all the things he should have told her and now might never have the chance to. Swiftly he kicked the rug back into place over the trapdoor, took a deep

breath and tried to settle his mind. He fought down the acid bite of fear in his throat and the urge to extrude his own claws and begin the Change. Now was not the time to give in to instinct no matter how much he wanted to. He had not survived for so long by being a slave to the bestial side of his nature.

He opened the door and strode through into the clutter of his shop, looking every inch the fat, successful all-too-human merchant and not in the least like what he truly was. As he got close he caught the scent that had upset his wife. The man smelled of demon blood and ancient darkness, of agony and terror and a lifetime of endless twilit warfare.

"Sir Kormak," Skardus said. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

Eyes cold and grey as a winter sky looked down at him. Very white teeth showed in a scarred, tanned face. "Unexpected, Skardus? That's interesting."

Then and there Skardus knew it was going to be bad. "Can I get you some tea, Sir Kormak? I was just making some for myself."

The big man shook his head. "This is not a social call."

"Business then? I have some particularly fine high-grade wraithstone, all the way from Umbrea. It just arrived recently, and I could let you have it for a very reasonable price. They say it's the pure blood of the Angels themselves although, of course, I make no such claims myself."

"I do not have time to waste, Skardus," said the man. He did not sound impatient, or even particularly menacing and that was what made him so terrifying. He knew what Skardus was, and he was not in the slightest afraid. "The business I have is not of a mercantile nature."

"Very well then," said Skardus doing a good impression of a huffy, fat, middle-aged man. Perhaps too good. Perhaps Anton was right. Perhaps his face had grown to fit his mask. The bell rang and the door opened. A woman stood in the doorway, green hair rain slick, huge-eyed, with that sadness about her that the Lost always got when they had been too long away from the Green. "I am sorry, madam. I am closing up for the day."

"I just wanted some powdered weirdroot," said the woman. No need to ask what she wanted that for. They all took it to dull their pain and their loneliness. Briefly Skardus wondered what small tragedy had driven her from her forest, and then realized that he could not afford to care. Not with this terrible man within killing distance of him.

"I am sorry, madam," he said. "My stock has run out. I am expecting some more next week. In the meantime, I suggest you try Constantine of Vermstadt. He carries weirdroot that is almost as fresh and well-prepared as my own."



ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW RAY

TYRANT'S BANE

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

THE message arrived in early morning and instructed Benhus to appear at the City Mortuary that afternoon. As this was the first task directly assigned to him by the King, he immediately shaved, bathed, dressed his best, and otherwise attempted to appear professional, seasoned, and thoroughly accustomed to his role as an agent of royalty, all in defiance of being keenly aware that he was none of these things.

Benhus took his worn short sword, albeit in a fine new sheath from his dead master's armory. After a moment's thought he also took the elegant white dagger he'd found there, as its preternaturally keen edge had served him well and he'd come to think of it as something of a good luck charm.

It did seem unlikely he would need either weapon as the royal message informed him that he would be looking into the disappearance of a corpse. A renowned athlete, Viriban, a celebrated runner and caster of the javelin, had become such a favorite of the King that he was to be accepted into the King's personal guard, but was struck down by a sudden malaise. His body had gone missing from the mortuary, and the King was vexed.

Benhus entered his dead mentor's closed bedchamber and squinted grey eyes skeptically at himself in the full-length mirror there. The elegantly cut shirt and breeches hung well on his tall and wiry frame, but he was unaccustomed to finery of any kind and felt he looked a bit of a dandy. He saw his sandy hair was tousled and badly in need of a trim, then turned away from the mirror with a curse. Such concerns were a waste of his time.

Benhus left the white chambers of the villa that had once belonged to Thratos, the King's Hand, and now belonged to him. He was unsure precisely what the King might expect him to do to help locate a dead body, but was somewhat comforted by the message's mention that he was to meet, at the mortuary gates, another also assigned to the task.

The City Mortuary of Frekore was situated at the rim of a complex of dour governmental buildings, and the dusty streets were quiet and empty under the hot sun. The mortuary grounds had trees for shade, and were enclosed by a featureless stone wall, the only ingress a gate of black iron that stood open and unattended. Nobody wants in, thought Benhus, yet they keep coming.

He saw, near the end of the flagstone path to the mortuary's great double doors, a small figure standing in the shadow of a tall palm. As he approached he could see it was a young Southron woman, copper skinned, black haired and so short the top of her head barely reached the middle of his chest.

"You are Benhus?" Her voice was almost a child's, soft, but clear and strong.

"Yes," he said, then added, "you're early," which sounded clumsy to his ears. He had little interest or skill in casual conversation. He squinted at her sourly.

She was clad in dark traveling clothes of rough cloth and leather, with a bag of wolfskin over one small shoulder. The bag was adorned with tatters of cloth, beads and silvery bits of metal. A shaman's bag. At her belt he saw a small curved dagger, its hilt wrapped in wire. Her pointed chin lifted as she fixed black eyes on him, and he saw on her throat the tattoo of a black spider.

"I am Sandril," she said, and turned to knock on the mortuary door.

The door opened almost immediately, emitting a gust of cool, herbally scented air. It was dim within, lit by torches set back from the doorway that now framed a heavyset, balding man in robes of pale blue.

"Greetings," he said, "You are the Lady Sandril?"

"I'm not a noble," said the Southron. "Just Sandril."

"Come in, please. I am Pallos. My partner Mendax and I are the proprietors of these facilities." There was another man behind Pallos, who pushed the larger man aside with ill-concealed impatience.

"I am Mendax, and well able to introduce myself," he said. The second mortician was almost as short as Sandril, with dark hair, a narrow face and sharp eyes that looked Benhus and the Southron up and down. "Our workplace is yours to examine, but I fear you'll not find the remains of Viriban."

"Take me to where the body was kept," said Sandril. Mendax's brows rose.

"Of course," said Pallos. He ran a hand over his pate and turned back into the dimness of the hallway. Benhus followed, blinking to adjust his eyes to the torchlight and realizing, with an unfamiliar discomfort, that he had not been introduced.

"This is a great embarrassment, really," said Pallos. "I wish we had been left to take care of this ourselves. It was an assistant who reported it to the City Guard. Pay no heed to Mendax, I'm certain that it's only a matter of time before the body is found. The only issue might be if Viriban was, um, accidentally cremated."

The group turned into a large, vaulted chamber with grimy skylights providing a dull grey illumination. Some thirty heavy stone tables were evenly spaced across much of the floor so that they had to wend their way between them to cross the room. Most of the tables held a body, some covered by a sheet, some clothed, some stark naked. The herbal scent was stronger here, cloying, almost dizzying, and Benhus realized belatedly that it covered the stench of death.

They moved through a smaller room with walls lined with shelves laden with tools, jars and odd implements, and a single table holding the body of a large man. From there they passed into another room with a conspicuously empty table set against the far wall.



ILLUSTRATION BY RUSS NICHOLSON

FIVE DEATHS

A Story of Morlock Ambrosius

By JAMES ENGE

Nature that framed us of four elements,
warring within our breast for regiment,
doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.

— Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*

THE banefires were burning, blue on the wrinkled black horizon behind them, before wry-shouldered Morlock Ambrosius decreed a halt.

“Are you quite certain it is safe?” the Summoner Lernaion asked politely. He was from the southern isles, as his dark skin (now slightly withered with age) proclaimed; these northern terrors did not impress him. But he had not grown gray in the service of the Wardlands by despising the advice of native guides.

“No,” Morlock replied, with the flat unemphatic honesty that was one of his few virtues as a travelling companion, “it is not safe. But if we go farther in the dark we may miss the Kwelmgrend — that is, the gate to the Empty Ways.”

“The gate to the Kwelmaiar, you mean,” Lernaion remarked, giving the abandoned subterranean realm its dwarvish name.

Morlock looked uncomfortable, but nodded in assent. He seemed to dislike it that an outsider — one of those the dwarves call “the Other Ilk” — should show any knowledge of dwarvish languages and dwarvish ways. This amused Lernaion, because Morlock was not really a dwarf either. Morlock had been raised by dwarves, but his parents were exiles from A Thousand Towers, far to the south from here.

Lernaion was starting to think it had been unwise to admit Morlock into the Graith of Guardians, the small band of seers and warriors who defended the borders of the Wardlands. The young man was clearly troubled, and a troubled Guardian could cause more harm than a thousand enemies from the unguarded lands. Still, he had proven useful in the past, and was proving useful now, though only as a thain (the lowest of the three ranks of Guardian). Recruits from the northern hold of the Wardlands were few, and Morlock’s services would always be in demand by his seniors in the Graith who, like Lernaion, had business in the fire-torn mountains of Northhold.

“Will we find him in the Empty Ways?” asked Morlock, as he crouched down to make a campfire.

“It.” Their quarry was a *harthrang*, a demon living in a human body.

“Will we find it in the Empty Ways?” Morlock repeated patiently. Apart from the subject of his parents, he was a hard man to irritate.

“Yes,” Lernaion said, out of the depths of his private knowledge. “We will encounter it in the Kwelmaiar.” He had seen that much in a dream, a prophetic dream he had sought with much suffering, and to little result. He knew they would find their quarry in the abandoned, ruinous dwarven halls they presently sought. He knew they would fight. He did not know if they would win — that knowledge the dream had denied him, which meant that the victory or defeat was not in his hands.

• • •

THEY came to the Kwelmgrend the next morning in the gray light before dawn. The gate was a long opening in a hillside, partially filled with stony debris. The cave was like a thousand others in those volcanic mountains, but Morlock, after examining a blank and, to Lernaion, featureless rock outside, declared it to be the gate they sought. He stepped forward and reached inside to pull himself over a heap of stones.

A jet of red flame filled the narrow cave and Morlock drew back an arm blazing like a torch.

“Be more careful, please,” Lernaion remarked, with some irritation, as Morlock extinguished his sleeve and glove on a nearby patch of dewy grass. “Our enemy is aware of our pursuit, is powerful and is utterly ruthless. Had that trap been anything but fire you would have been in a bad way.”

Morlock, looking up, shrugged ruefully. Being set on fire did not distress him — immunity from fire was part of the heritage of Ambrose, along with the slightly crooked shoulders. (Regarding both these things there were unpleasant rumors.) “We know he — it is here, anyway,” the younger man remarked.

Lernaion forbore to remark that they knew that already, and set about counter-inscribing the fire-spell in the cave threshold. “This seems to be a mere trigger,” he commented, probing the spell with his Sight, “part of a larger death-spell. We must proceed cautiously.” He brought out a stylus and began to carve quell-runes into the weathered stone.

“There is a thing you have never explained to me,” Morlock mentioned, as his senior worked. While he stood there his hands, as if by themselves, cut away both the sleeves of his tunic at the elbow with his belt dagger, then began to hem the edges of the sleeves, using a needle from his pocket and thread pulled from the sleeve remnants.

“Only one?” Lernaion asked sourly, as he plied his stylus on the gateway stone. He was not as dexterous as Morlock, and never had been. In fact, Lernaion had never seen anyone whose hands were as unpretentiously skilled as Morlock’s. If the boy had half a brain, he was destined to be a master maker.

“This harthrang — it is the creation of a sorcerer.”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. The harthrang was given its body by a sorcerer, the one whom we found slain back in Ranganyen. But the demon itself existed before, and may exist after the death of its vessel.”

Morlock took the correction patiently, nodding as he replied, “And this sorcerer gave the body to the demon as part of a contract — a pledge that the demon would do whatever the sorcerer asked, and nothing else.”

“Yes.” Lernaion thought back with deep distress on the *talic stranj*, the quasi-spiritual corona, that had surrounded the sorcerer’s dead body and the demonic contract. Both had been severed, half-burned and buried, but the past could not be unwritten.



ILLUSTRATION BY BRAD MCDEVITT

BKM-2018

THE FORGER'S ART

A Dhulyn and Parno Adventure

By VIOLETTE MALAN

ALLIT the sculptor turned the piece over in her scarred hands, slowly examining each surface. The late afternoon sun came in through the skylights and illuminated the tools on the workbench, and brought a sparkle to the statue's white surface. Finally Allit tasted the bottom of the piece with her tongue. Parno Lionsmane, leaning at ease against the doorpost of the sculptor's studio, exchanged a glance with his Partner, Dhulyn Wolfshead, perched on a stool nearer the workbench. She raised one eyebrow the colour of old blood and shifted her right shoulder in an almost imperceptible shrug. Allit set the statue of the god Tuluaran down and dusted her hands off on her leather apron.

"Well, to answer your first question, yes, it is a forgery." Allit's voice was a frog's croak.

"You sound sure." Dhulyn leaned forward, and Parno straightened.

"I should be. I'm the one copied it." Allit rested her hips back against the work bench and hooked her thumbs in her apron ties. "When I'm asked to copy something I get a local mage to flavour the materials for me. Works better on metal than stone, but the almond flavour is notable, if you know to look for it."

Dhulyn curled her scarred lip at the word "mage."

"You often get requests to fake art?" Parno softened his question with a smile.

Allit grinned, poking one bent, scarred finger at him. "I don't 'fake art,' my dear. I make legitimate copies, safely marked, as I said. If people choose to use my copies for nefarious purposes, well, that's hardly my fault, is it? Now, as to your second question, I made *this* for the temple of Tuluaran itself. I gathered that the priests of the God of Lost Things occasionally preferred to display this one rather than the original."

"So Tuluaran is a local god?" Dhulyn asked.

Allit wagged one hand in the air. "The main temple — more a shrine really — is in Goranda, but people all over pray to the God of Lost Things."

Parno snorted. "I can remember when I was being Schooled another candidate calling — it seemed like every day — 'Tuluaran! My throwing stars!' And no, before you ask it, he never became a Brother, though his prayer was granted most of the time." He laughed at his Partner's look of exaggerated patience.

"It is possible, then," Dhulyn said, "that someone stealing the idol from the temple, thinking it was the original, may have taken this one by mistake?"

"Exactly."

"And a person sent to deliver such an item might bring it to the purchaser in good faith, but be suspected of keeping the original for himself?"

"Is that what happened?"

"We believe so."

"Are you sure this 'person' *didn't* keep the original for himself?"

Parno looked at Dhulyn. She was senior, it was for her to speak. "Renth Greyfoot, called the Chaser, was a Mercenary Brother. The Common Rule forbids lying between Brothers," she said.

"But not to other people?"

Dhulyn smiled her wolf's smile.

Unlike most people, Allit just grinned back at her. "And no Brother breaks these rules?"

Both Parno and Dhulyn looked at her. Eventually Allit nodded, still grinning. "And where is this person now?"

"Our Brother has received the final sword."

• • •

IT had been raining earlier on the day Renth Greyfoot brought them the idol, but the skies were clearing as he rapped out the entry signal on the street door of the Mercenary House in Bundorm. He shook with fever and cold, barely able to stand, so Parno helped him to a cot in the sleeping room. Dhulyn was on the point of fetching the town's Healer when their Brother's rasping voice stopped her.

"Been to Healers already," he said. "Nothing they can do."

"Why not?" Parno pulled up a stool and placed a wet cloth on Renth's forehead. Dhulyn leaned, ankles crossed, against the wall at the foot of the cot. The bright patches of colour on her quilted vest stood out against the starkness of the plastered wall.

"Isn't a sickness, it's a curse." Renth's voice sounded weaker by the minute.

"Who?" Dhulyn's voice was so cold Parno wished he could have used it on Renth's forehead.

Renth fluttered his fingers as if to push her fury away.

"Start at the beginning," Parno said, shooting a warning glance at his Partner.

"Just finished a guarding job in Goranda. Could have stayed on with the merchant, but once he was home the job got boring. Stayed in tavern just off the docks —"

"Less detail," Dhulyn said, more gently.

"Hired by a Lord Danos to pick up and pay for a package. Gave me four thousand silver marks, said Mercenary Brothers might be killers, but we weren't thieves. Swore me to secrecy, travel alone, the whole quiver of arrows. I could tell the man was a mage. Any Brother could." Renth began coughing and Parno pulled him into a sitting position, holding him firmly by the shoulders. His eyes met Dhulyn's over their Brother's head.

"Is it me, or are there more mages lately?" The small scar on Dhulyn's lip pulled her mouth into a snarl.

"It's not you," he told her, and waited until she finished rolling her eyes. "In any case, mages are the sort likely to be purchasing strange objects from odd people in peculiar places. We've been hired by mages ourselves to fetch things. There can be honest pay in it."



ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

THE SECOND DEATH OF HANUVAR

From the *Chronicles of Hanuvar Cabera*

By HOWARD ANDREW JONES

AS the overseer barred the door behind Jerissa, the clack of dulled swords rang through the practice arena. Outside, in the larger compound likewise walled in gray stone, all was quiet apart from the endless, dispirited patter of rain into the sated earth. The dark skies somehow emphasized the decrepit nature of all the structures before her, from the leaning barracks building and sagging mess hall roof, to the moldy mortar of the stones themselves. When off duty, her women barely filled a third of the dilapidated buildings. Apparently the school had once housed far more gladiators. Now it was only them.

"Up the stairs, Eltyr," the overseer said gruffly.

She knew his name was Kerthik, although she'd never called him that, just as he'd never used her real name. At first the generic "woman" was the least offensive term he'd employed, but after the first week the insults had halted altogether and he had referred to her simply by the name of her sacred corps. Whenever he addressed her now, it was as "Eltyr."

She'd never taken the stairs, which led to the wall's height. Earlier today she'd looked up from the practice yard to see the gladiator school owner watching from the wall's jutting balcony with a legionnaire and well-dressed dark-skinned man. Presumably Lurcan wanted a word with her, although why, she couldn't imagine. She was training her charges the best she was able, and their improvement had been remarkable. No one logical could complain. But then it was foolish to look for logic from Dervani, or perhaps, from the world in general.

The stairs creaked under their tread and she noted the red paint on the finely carven balustrade was chipped and fading. As a Volanus native she had little experience with Dervan gladiator schools, but surely they were usually maintained more carefully than this.

Inside the walls of the training area she heard her sergeant shouting at someone to block with the flat, not the edge, and shook her head.

"They're shaping up," Kerthik said behind her. That had sounded almost complimentary. Surprised, she glanced back, but found little to read, for the brute's dark eyes were flat, expressionless. So too was his face, except that an old scar pulled down the left side of his mouth. He was a thick man, broad through the chest, with dusty, sun-bleached hair, knife and whip at his belt. His entire demeanor suggested power coiled for instant release. In middle age or near it, he took pride in his appearance. His face and muscular limbs were always clean, and his simple tunics well mended or new.

They reached the walkway atop the wall. No one now reclined upon the balcony's couch under the old canvas awning, nor did they sit the bench that crowded close to the sturdy rail.

Again she glanced back at Kerthik, but he pointed her forward. The walkway branched off into the second floor of the stone villa attached to the school. This, she knew, was where the guards lived, and she suspected Lurcan, the owner, made his home somewhere within.

She looked down at her charges as she walked, wondering if gladiators here had ever dared rebel, and if guards had fended them off from the height of this very wall.

Her women, each dressed like her in the scratchy, sleeveless gray tunic that stretched to their calves, had laid down their swords, and were now flat on the wet soil, stretching in unison. Sergeant Ceera stalked among them, correcting even this activity. A Dervan physician had carefully tended her, but she limped still, and likely would to her dying day.

Within the practice field's perimeter a half dozen guards leaned on spears, loafing or leering at women they were forbidden to touch — not owing to the Dervan code that would see men lose fingers for daring to grab a senator's daughter, but because the arena battle lay less than a week away, and Lurcan wanted all of his women in peak condition.

She arrived at last at a cedar door banded with dark iron, tucked beneath a slanted wooden awning.

Jerissa stopped, thinking Kerthik expected her to open the door, but knowing better than to assume when in the presence of a superior officer. And for her own peace of mind she'd reluctantly granted him that designation, for she refused still to think of herself as a slave.

The overseer ignored her unvoiced query and motioned her to one of the two sturdy timbers supporting the door's awning. Here, she realized, they were out of sight of the guards.

Kerthik glanced over his shoulder, then spoke in swift, pressured manner. "The master's visitors want to speak with you. They were sent by a consul. They want to know if you're really from the Eltyr Corps."

Why such secrecy discussing something so obvious? "You know I am."

"Yes. But they don't have to know it."

She didn't understand what he was driving at.

He seized her arm and she immediately pulled back, discovered his grip unyielding as iron forceps. She held off her natural instinct to kick the side of his knee.



ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

S. Dillon

THE WIZARD OF REMEMBRANCE

By SARAH NEWTON

"In the twentieth millennium after Starfall, the rule of the sorcerers of Ubliax imprisoned the minds of men in eternal forgetfulness."

— From "The First Age of Lies", written by Priestess Saranutton for High Warden Drujon, Temple of Memnos the Reborn, New Remembrance, Year 18 NRE.

EVEN during the ages of endless ice, the Earth was old, and many things had already been forgotten. An evil civilisation spread along its antediluvian shores, now long since swallowed by the resurgent seas. Like our own, it thought it would last forever.

Suven the Sorcerous was a murderous man, but not a thoughtless one. His atrocities were measured, and he slew with a wrinkle of distaste on his lips.

"This is my lot in life," he would tell his soul, in the quiet times between the screams. "I was born into this world, like these rude, ill-formed beings that die at my hand. It is the way of things, which it is not for me to change."

His concubines, of whom only the name of Nessa, the most fair, has come down to us, would gaze with compassion at their beloved's furrowed brow, and ease his burden with the arts of their sex. But they grew troubled as their master's gloom deepened, and there seemed no surcease.

"Let us leave the Empire, my lord," they would say. "What matter riches, if misery be our lot? Better to live poor and happy among simple tribes beyond Ubliax's holy crusade."

So Suven would summon the memnovores, as was his duty, and close his doors and stop his ears to the screams as the demons devoured the thoughts of his women in return for terrible gifts. Later, when the sight of their placid faces, cleansed of all care, became too much to bear, he would bow his own head and submit himself, too, to the ministrations of the memory eaters.

The Empire of Ubliax waxed mighty on the strength of its forgetting, and the savage lands of the Men of Mogor grew smaller each year. No one in the Empire knew how long its glory had endured. Some said forever, but Suven had seen the tree-grown ruins in the emptied marches that whispered things had not always been thus. But there were none to remember, and fewer still to care.

One year, Suven wielded the sorcery of the memnovores leading a bright army of killers through the retreating forests of Trokh. In a naked vale of charred and smoking stumps, the Mogor horde had been brought to bay.

"We will raise cities here, my friend!" laughed Krendos, tracing the line of the valley with his sword. "The trollish stench will be gone, and no one will remember they ever were!"

The battle was glorious or, as one might also say, the slaughter terrible. With the lethal dweomers of Ubliax fresh in his mind, Suven feigned the joyous abandon he saw on the faces of his men, and wondered how many of them hid turmoil in their hearts like he. The smoke-swept dusk found him treading the charnel field by a stream of fouled water, dispatching the dying with his blade.

Against a menhir of hideous antiquity slumped a woman of Mogor, clutching a dead infant to her breast. Her tusks were broken, her blood smeared her beard and hair, but light still shone beneath her beetling brow.

"You call yourselves men," the troll maiden rasped as her life ebbed. "You no longer know what that means. Your eyes are cold like the smilodons of the hills. You have sacrificed your humanity for sorcerous domination. I curse your willingness to forget!"

Even as Suven ran the woman through with his sword, she raised a hand uselessly to stay the blade. As she fell to the side, Suven thought he saw the infant in her arms move, as if its life force still remained. He pierced its flesh, too, but it gave no cry, and perhaps was dead after all.

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THAT night's feasting left ashes in Suven's mouth, and everywhere he looked the troll maiden leered from the flickering fires. Unbidden, the faces of his women rose before him, urging him to seek the memory eaters.

His lips curled at his weakness. For the first time, the cycle of atrocity and forgetting filled him with loathing.

Krendos's eyes widened as Suven approached the riverside. In the torchlight, Suven could not meet his gaze.

"I wish to take passage to Ubal-Gathor," he said. "I will undergo the Ultimate Shriving."

For all the carnage of which Krendos was capable, moisture glistened in his eye. He clasped Suven's arm and spoke thickly.

"I will miss you, honoured brother. I will watch for you on the battlefield in the ranks of the Emptied. I will point you out to my comrades and say 'There is a paladin of Ubliax that did great deeds!'"

"There is no need," Suven said, bitterly. "Forgetfulness is all."

"Forgetfulness is all," intoned the other. But only one of them wished it with all his heart.

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