

## INTRODUCTION

by John Gregory Betancourt

John Betancourt. If you're like most readers, you probably won't recognize that name.

Although I've been writing for 20 years and have more than one million books in print (thanks largely to four well-received Star Trek novels), I'm still hardly known. I think my writing is pretty darn good and hope you'll take a few minutes to read "On the Rocks at Slab's"—chances are, if you like classic-style alternate world fantasy fiction, or bar stories, you will.

This eBook—actually, eShortStory—is entirely free. But, as they say, the true cost is hidden. I have a Secret Agenda: if not today, if not tomorrow, then someday in the future I (that's John Betancourt!) want you to go into a bookstore and buy one or more of my books. It doesn't matter if my company published it, or Tor, or Avon, or Pocket Books, or any of my other publishers—I'd like this short story to serve as an introduction to my work. (John Betancourt. Remember that name!)

If you do like "On the Rocks at Slab's," then you might like to know that there are quite a few others in the same series, part of a loose story-sequence set in the world of Zelloque. (The series also includes my novel *The Blind Archer* and its soon-to-be-published sequel, *The Pirates of Zelloque*, plus a third as-yet-unwritten novel.) Most of the short Zelloque stories were collected a few years ago in *Slab's Tavern and Other Uncanny Places*, published by Ganley (which is available-while supplies last-for \$12.00 in a signed hardcover edition from Wildside Press, PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933. Postage is free in the U.S. and Canada; elsewhere, add \$9.00 for Global Priority Mail).

(But I'll never turn down money: if you'd like to make a direct donation to help support my writing and free web publishing, you can send any amount via PayPal to [videotaper@usa.net](mailto:videotaper@usa.net). I'd suggest 25 cents for this story. You can also order a copy of *Slab's Tavern and Other Uncanny Places* and pay for it via PayPal.)

Please do visit the Wildside Press web site: [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com). Click on the Virtual Storyteller to get into the free eBook section. One caveat: Please do not redistribute this book via FTP, Usenet, or web sites; if someone else wants a copy, send them to Wildside Press to download their own. This way they will get the most recent version, you won't use up your own web site storage space, and you'll really, really make me (John Betancourt! Remember that name!) happy.

Thanks!

## ON THE ROCKS AT SLAB'S

by John Gregory Betancourt

The Oracle rode alone through the gates of Zelloque. Around him crackled an almost visible aura of power and authority. The city guard fell in behind him as he headed, intent on his mission, straight for the steps of the palace.

\* \* \*

I was watching two disembodied heads sing drunken songs when the trouble started. A couple of city guards sauntered in, glanced around with disdain, then headed toward my private table. They looked splendid in full uniform, with their red capes flapping boldly behind them. Quite a few of my tavern's patrons made a hasty retreat through the back door. The floating heads vanished in puffs of ethereal gasses. I had nothing to hide—nothing much, anyway—so I waited.

"Ulander," the guard on the right said, "I have a message for you." Only then did I recognize him beneath his red-plumed helm: Nim Bisnar, an old city guard who'd worked off and on for me during the last ten years.

"What is it?" I demanded. "You know you're supposed to use the back entrance. You'll give my place a bad reputation!"

He ignored my protests. "Captain Yoonlag sent us. An Oracle from Ni Treshel—that's right, the Ni Treshel, where the bones of Shon Atasha are kept—came to the Great Lord's palace yesterday. He's looking for more splinters of his god's bones. Somehow he'd heard tales about Slab's Tavern. Now he's persuaded the Great Lord to let him search your place!"

I jolted to my feet, startled and alarmed. "What? When?"

"In an hour, maybe two."

Calling to Lur, my doorman and bodyguard, I dug a handful of silver royals from my pouch and poured them into Nim's hands. "Half are Yoonlag's. Split the other half between you."

"Thank you, sir!" they both said, then turned to go . . . through the back door, this time.

Lur lumbered over to my side. He was a large man, about seven feet tall, with broad shoulders and muscles enough to make him look twice as large. I'd always found those characteristics ideal for my purposes.

"Master?"

"Throw everybody out," I said, "except the servants."

"Sir?" he said, bewildered.

"You heard me. Do it!"

The tavern was large and dark, its dim light concealing crumbling the plaster and foot worn paving stones. Wooden columns hewn from the hearts of ancient oaks supported the high ceiling. Weird shadows stretched everywhere. There were numerous secluded spots, and off at the curtained booths along the edge of the room, illegal transactions were taking place.

I marked the pirates at their tables, with their rich, colorful, jewel-encrusted clothes that mimicked but never equaled nobles' dress, and nodded to the ones I knew: Griel Teq, Hilan Lammiat, Kol Fessedda, a few others. In return for protecting his city's ships, the Great Lord of Zelloque had made his city an open port ten years earlier. In one dark corner a couple of black-robed slavers threw dice; in another, two dock hands threatened each other with knives. With little patience or gentleness, various barkeeps persuaded them to take their squabble to a nearby alley. But mostly the people drank and talked and sang too loudly, the room ringing with boisterous shouts as they swore, laughed and argued.

Lur moved among them, bending now and then to whisper something in various ears. Usually the men would turn pale, then tremble, then bolt for the door. Even the pirates left without a fight; Lur's imposing bulk was just too much for them, I guessed. Within minutes the place was deserted.

For a long minute, I just stood there and pondered the guard's words. An Oracle, coming to search my tavern for a splinter of a god's bone . . .

More than ghostly, disembodied heads that sang drunken songs, my tavern had quite a reputation for strange, magical happenings . . . it had helped keep away all but the least blood-thirsty clientele. Slab's was the sort of place anything could happen. Rumor said that, late at night, drunks sometimes inexplicably became sober, the furniture rearranged itself (always when nobody was looking) and people sometimes vanished, never to be seen again. Of course, that was only rumor . . . but I did know that against the far wall stood a table where chilled wine tasted like warm blood, and there was a certain spot (which moved every night) where Slab Vethiq himself, the man who'd founded my noble drinking establishment, was known to appear from time to time—or at least, his spirit was. And even if Slab didn't come, chances were someone—or something—else would . . . if you stepped too close.

The two drunken, singing heads suddenly appeared over a table. They both wore the colorful silk scarves and earrings of sailors; only the mistiness of their necks and lack of bodies marked them as other than human. One of the barmaids seized a broom and swatted at them until they disappeared.

If the Oracle saw them or anything else magical he'd tear the building down in search of his bone.

I barred the doors and shuttered the windows. At once the barmaids lit tallow candles and set them in various niches. The place filled with a warm, somewhat hazy light. Everyone stared at me, wondering (I could tell) if I had gone completely mad. It was then that I told them, in short, blunt, angry words, what Nim had told me, and what I planned to do about it.

\* \* \*

The Oracle moved through the streets of Zelloque like a hot knife cutting through fat. He wore gold and blue silk pantaloons and a gold silk shirt, slippers of soft, white klindu fur, and he carried a golden wheel in his arms. His wheel glittered brightly, red and blue from rubies and sapphires, gold and silver from the dying sun's light. Behind him, in perfect formation, marched twenty members of the city guard.

He held his divine purpose firmly in mind: to gather all the bones of Shon Atasha the Creator together into one place, to use their magic to summon His spirit back to Earth.

The noise of a hundred tramping feet echoed loudly through the deserted streets.

\* \* \*

Trying to reason with ghosts seldom succeeds. Like with Slab.

I stood before him, as I'd stood before him a thousand times when I worked as his servant, and stared into his pale blue eyes. He wore his finest green robes, the ones embroidered with gold and silver thread, almost as if he expected the Oracle and had dressed for the occasion. "Bones!" he mocked. "Bones!" And then he trailed off in laughter.

I stepped back and he slowly disappeared, disintegrating in wisps of green fog.

"Well," I told him, "at least I'm not going to die by trying to swallow fifty blue-backed crabs—alive!" But gloating wouldn't help; he didn't have to worry about having his livelihood demolished. He could always go haunt someplace else.

I should've known better than to try and persuade him and all the other ghosts not to appear during the Oracle's visit. Now I had a terrible suspicion they'd be certain to show up, if anyone stepped close to their special spot (which, fortunately, was off in one dark corner tonight).

I stood back and surveyed everyone else's work, then gave the signal for the doors to be unbolted and the shutters thrown open. Afternoon sunlight flooded in.

Most of my dozen-or-so employees now sat at various tables, with bottles and goblets of wine before them, looking like the tavern's regulars. I'd stationed them in all the places where I knew odd things occurred; they each had orders to prevent anything unusual from happening at any cost. Only Lur and a couple of the barmaids kept to their regular duties, moving from table to table as usual. For the thousandth time, I thanked my good fortune in having the loyalest servants money could buy. None would give my secrets away.

"Master?" Lur said, looming over me. I took a quick step back and he still loomed over me. "I hear them coming."

Straining, I heard them, too: the tramp-tramp of many booted feet somewhere close at hand. Then they marched outside and halted there. One of the guards, silhouetted in the door, stood for a second and surveyed the place before entering. Then I recognized him: Tayn Lastoq, the Captain of all the city guard, who (unfortunately) was also

one of the few city officials I'd never been able to bribe. Behind him came another figure, the Oracle.

Like all the Rashendi, this one wore gaudy, brilliantly colored silk clothing. He carried his future-telling wheel in front of him like a holy relic, which of course it was.

"This is the place?" he asked, with obvious disdain. He sniffed.

"Yes, Oracle," Tayn said.

"So be it. Find what I seek."

I stepped forward. "Wait a minute—"

"Be quiet, Ulander!" Tayn snapped. I could see the Oracle had begun to annoy him and he was taking it out on me. "I know you better than you think. You know why we're here! Now let us get on with our business."

"I have friends in high places!" He whirled around, his sword suddenly in his hand. Its point touched my chest just below my heart. "Narmon Ri himself ordered the search. You have no choice. Do you understand?"

Lur tensed beside me, growling softly, ready to attack Tayn. I restrained him with a quick look, then turned back to the captain of the guard. "I understand," I told him, smiling faintly. "But if anything's broken, I'm sending Lord Ri the bill."

He laughed, then, and resheathed his sword. "You have a quick wit, Ulander. I'll tell the men to keep the damage to a minimum."

He turned and sauntered out, leaving the Oracle there alone. I heard Tayn instructing his men through the open door.

"Who are you?" the Rashendi asked me.

"Ulander Rasym, owner of this establishment."

He stared at me a moment, eyes strange and dark.

"Perhaps if you told me more about this god's bone, I'd be able to help. What does it look like? Where would it be?"

"It may take any form," the Rashendi said softly, "a piece of marble, a building stone. They try to remain hidden. For years I have located bones for the shrine in Ni Treshel. Each splinter has been different—and yet the same. They have an odd feel, an uncertain look as if their shape is untrue. With my wheel I can perceive a splinter's true nature, if it is put before me." He nodded wisely. "So it has always been. I will find one here, I feel." Then he turned and wandered toward the curtained booths.

Off to one side, I saw wisps of fog beginning to gather above a table. I gestured wildly to one of the barmaids. With a gasp, she seized her broom and stepped forward, swinging madly at the two disembodied heads that had begun to appear. They'd started to sing—

*Vimister Groll was a merry old soul  
Who loved his wine and women—*

but dissipated just before the Oracle turned to look back. The barmaid pretended to chase cobwebs from the ceiling with her broom while two of the barkeeps took turns continuing the song, mimicking the ghosts' high, drunken voices:

*He picked a brew and drank up to  
The point his nose fell brim-in—*

It rapidly became obvious they'd never heard the tune before and were making it up as they went along. Fortunately, they soon became stumped at a rhyme for sausage and grew silent.

Tayn Lastoq and his men entered and spread through the tavern. For once, everything seemed to be going well; they found nothing but dust beneath the tables and under the booths. I followed followed Tayn around, looking over his shoulder, trying my best to bother him.

"You see?" I said again and again. "There's nothing here."

Then I turned around and noticed Slab Vethiq sitting at one of the tables, as solid looking as he'd ever been in life. He grinned at me, then turned back to his wine. As I stared, other people began appearing at the vacant tables in twos and threes. I recognized one, then another, then another. They were all patrons who'd died! Fortunately, they'd brought their own wine.

Nobody else seemed to notice.

The Oracle now stood in the middle of the room as the men searched, ignoring the people seated at tables. He looked mildly annoyed at not having found his bone (though I had repeatedly said it wasn't here in front of him). At last he shouted for Tayn. The captain of the guard hurried over.

"Yes, Oracle?"

"Tear out the counter, then have your men start on the booths in the back. I want it found if it takes all night!"

With a sigh, Tayn turned to obey. I threw myself in front of him before he could speak. "There must be another way!" I said. "You can't just tear up my tavern!"

"I'm sorry, Ulander, but—"

Just then, one of his men chose to step too close to that certain spot in the corner. With a roaring sound, a giant mouth appeared, filling the whole ten feet between floor and ceiling. Its lips were thick and bloodless white; its teeth were sharp, jagged spikes; its tongue lolled out like some immense gray carpet. Gazing down its gullet, I saw only

blackness.

This seemed to be what Slab was waiting for. With an insane cry, he rose and seemed to flow rather than walk to the Oracle. Seizing the Rashendi by the hair, he dragged him forward and into the mouth, vanishing down its throat. The other ghosts of patrons long dead grabbed all the guards, Tayn included, and spirited them off as well.

The mouth closed with a snap, the tongue flickered over the lips, and it vanished with a slight sucking sound.

Too stunned to do more than stare at the now empty corner, I just stood there. Then one of the barmaids began to scream. I heard a slapping sound and she shut up.

I retreated to my booth and sat down heavily. I was ruined, I knew. The Great Lord would have me executed for killing his favorite Captain and twenty of his guards. His assassins would track me down wherever I went. Well, I figured, at least I could get drunk, ease the pain of my death. That was the only advantage left in owning a haunted tavern.

Hearing singing, I looked up. The two disembodied heads had appeared over my table. Slowly they drifted away. Sounds from outside told me a number of pirates had entered. Business went on as usual.

As the day wore on and I got progressively drunker, I began to hear strange rumors . . . tales of how twenty-one of Lord Ri's guards had been plucked from the harbor by slavers—and Lord Ri had declined to buy them back . . . tales of how their leader, Tayn Lastoq, had gone mad and led his men and an Oracle off to fight sea-monsters . . . tales of how the Oracle had disappeared, never to be seen again.

That night, Slab's haunted spot moved into my private booth. I first became aware of it when I looked up and found Slab sitting in front of me, casually sipping a bottle of my best Coranian brandy. He raised it in salute, gave me a knowing wink, then slowly faded away.

I shuddered a bit. That wink had always disturbed me back in the days when Slab still lived and I'd been his right-hand man, with only as much power as he let me have. That wink had been a private sign, one last reminder that he owned the place and I never would . . . or so he'd thought.

But I'd saved my money, made sure I knew all the right people, and finally taken over when he'd died. But for all the documents that said I owned the place, something deep inside me called me a fool, and cursed, and somehow I knew the truth.

I drank more wine and tried not to think. My pains eased; somehow everything no longer seemed quite so grim. Slab, they'd said when he was alive, always takes care of his own. Secure with that thought, I drifted toward sleep.

THE END