

The Pirates of Zelloque

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1

The Brothers Lammiat

To merchants, Zelloque is best known for its pirates. Who but the Great Lord of Zelloque would freely open his ports to such cutthroats? Who but the Great Lord would let stolen goods flow through his city like wine through a tavern? Zelloque is old and decadent. It must surely fall.

-- Uli Dorant,

Before his execution

He jingled the jewels in his beard with one meaty hand. The diamonds and rubies sparkled like the sun at noon, despite the tavern's dimness, and brought a quiet gasp of awe from the scantily-clad serving girl behind the counter. He leered at her.

The jewels weren't real, of course. Not even he, Hilan Lammiat the Pirate, would wear his valuables into a dive like Slab's Tavern.

"So, my pretty," he said, louder than the bedlam of swearing, dicing, fighting and general mayhem behind him. "Let's slip out back for a bit and -- "

"Hey, Hilan!" someone shouted behind him, giving him a hearty slap on the back that sent the breath whooshing from his lungs.

Hilan was not a small man, nor a patient one. Few people -- very few -- would've dared to pound him on the back. He choked, gasped once, then turned with a low growl -- to face his brother.

"I see you found me after all," he said.

Nollin stood there and grinned back, a slightly shorter, more lightly built version of himself. They even dressed much alike, with gold rings looping ears and nose, crimson and silver scarves around their necks and heads. Hilan wore a plain blue shirt and black silk pants that puffed out between waist and knee; Nollin wore black and silver. Matching swords with the hilts made from monkey-skulls dangled jauntily from Hilan's belt -- a gift from their father before the Lord of Zelloque hanged him for treason. Nollin bore less ostentatious weapons. Yes, Hilan thought moodily, his brother and he looked much alike. For that alone he disliked Nollin.

Their father hadn't been able to tell them apart, so one day he'd given Hilan a dueling wound on his right cheek that had left a jagged white scar. Now Hilan stroked the scar and wished his father had given it to Nollin instead.

"You look well," Nollin said.

"Better never to see your face again."

"Now, now, Hilan. Have patience with your kid brother. Blood's thick, eh?"

"Thick enough I haven't killed you. Yet. What do you want?"

Nollin laughed. "Drink up. We have to talk."

Casting a disappointed glance at the serving girl, who fluttered her dark lashes, Hilan drained his mug then slammed it down. He tossed a pair of brass coins onto the counter, stood, and followed his brother out to the cobbled street.

Midnight had scarcely come and passed. All the dockside taverns still rang with the boisterous sounds of sailors at ease. After two long months at sea, Hilan wished he were back inside Slab's place, away from the chill night air and the monsters that haunted it. Still, it was his brother who had come. Best to see what the boy wanted...

They strolled silently past the inns and bars, through puddles of light and shadow cast by dim lamps and open windows, heading toward the long, dark piers stretching into the harbor. Small ships tied to the nearer pilings bobbed like corks on the low waves. Further out, tall, high-prowed, triple-masted sailing ships of the Viandas Mercenaries slowly rolled, proud banners fluttering against the wash of stars. And there were other ships too, traders from Pethis and Coran, galleys from Lothaq and Selambique, even a few slavers on the long voyage between Losmuul and Volise. Scattered among the craft were a few unmarked ships belonging to lesser Lords of Zelloque -- or privateers like the Lammiat brothers.

Still silent, they passed onto the pier. Drunken sailors lolled on the decks of some ships, snoring, eyes rolled back, mouths open. Hilan shook his head in disgust. Spirits of the night could enter a man's body through his mouth, stealing his heart and draining his blood.

The Pirates of Zelloque
"Whose ship?" he asked.

"Mine," Nollin said. "I have something to show you."

At last they reached the Serpent, Nollin's ship, and crossed the rope gangway to its deck. A small, wiry man dressed in white breeches and shirt ran up to Nollin while other sailors watched from the shadows, eyes wide and white as marble. Covertly, Hilan studied his brother's vessel. The entire crew stood present, to all appearances ready to sail at a moment's notice.

"Ship's tight, Captain," the mate said.

"Good," Nollin said. "We leave in an hour." He turned to Hilan with a half-mocking gesture of welcome. "After you."

They went aft to the captain's cabin. After Nollin lit a lamp and set it on the chart table, they sat and watched each other warily for a moment.

At last Hilan demanded, "Well?"

"We haven't trusted each other in years," Nollin said, "and yet I still feel a certain responsibility for you. Therefore I pass on this warning: Soon -- perhaps this very night -- Zelloque will be destroyed. The Great Lord will be murdered and a tyrant will usurp the throne. Leave Zelloque or you will be

killed and your ship taken."

Hilan felt his face flush hot and red at the thought and almost screamed back a challenge for anyone who'd dare to try. Almost. He knew his brother well enough to realize Nollin thought he spoke the truth. But how could a tyrant kill the Great Lord of Zelloque, who lived apart from the world in his palace? The city guard would protect him -- and the whole Zelloquan army, if necessary. It didn't make sense -- the whole tale didn't make sense! No, someone had lied to Nollin. That was the truth.

He said as much.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," Nollin said. He stood and strode to the door to his sleeping chamber, swinging it open.

An old woman sat quietly on the bed inside, her tear-streaked face a web of wrinkles, her eyes dark and downcast. She held herself with the humility of a peasant, yet she dressed richly, as a noble might. The image disturbed Hilan. He stared at her, forehead creased, until his brother shut the door again.

"Who is she?" he demanded.

"Loanu, once the High Priestess of the Shrine of Shon Atasha."

"Once?"

Nollin shrugged. "She dreamed of the coming tyrant and destroyed the shrine before he could debase it. Now that she is no longer touched by her god's power, she is half-blind. I found her wandering the streets in a daze, trying to warn people. They stoned her as a witch."

"You'd believe an old woman?" He snorted.

"Listen to me! She wept as she spoke -- spoke not only of the coming tyrant, but of great visions of far lands, of gods, of dead kings and their treasures! Her tales will set your heart afire as they have set mine -- all you must do is listen to her!"

He shook his head. "No, Nollin. The witch is crazy. Turn her out for the nobles to take care of."

"Come with me. I'm sailing in an hour. Together we could win a kingdom!"
"Brother...."

Nollin sighed and Hilan knew he'd won. "Very well," Nollin said. "I can see you're not interested. Go, then, Hilan -- but remember my warning. The Great Lord will soon be dead, and when he is, you must flee. Promise me that."

"I promise -- if the Great Lord dies."

They stood and started for the door. There Hilan made his mistake: He turned his back on Nollin. Brother or not, he never should have trusted him. Hilan realized it the second he caught a flash of movement from the corner of his eye.

Then Nollin struck him in the head with something hard and heavy, and darkness washed over Hilan Lammiat.

Nollin set the brass candlestick back on the table, then sighed as he looked at his brother's still form on the cabin floor. A trickle of blood ran from a

shallow cut behind Hilan's left ear. A minor wound; he'd soon recover.

Quickly he stripped Hilan of his silken clothes, jewelry, and weapons, then bound him with heavy ropes taken from a chest next to the door. He changed into his brother's blue shirt and black pants, then stood in front of his looking glass, adjusting the scarves around his head. Satisfied, he turned.

Hilan was glaring up at him with slitted eyes.

"I trust I won't have to gag you, brother?" Nollin asked.

Hilan spat.

"Not on the carpet, Hilan. Remember your manners."

"I'll kill you for this!"

"You'll thank me soon enough. You always were stubborn -- and now I'm going to save your miserable life. Ah, how ironic!"

Hilan growled. "More of your talk. I'll see you in Hell!"

"I promised father that I'd look after you. I mean to keep that promise, whether you like it or not."

"You promised!" He laughed long and hard.

"What's wrong?" Nollin demanded.

"He made me promise the same thing! Never meant to keep it, though. I always hated you."

"Then keep hating me. It'll keep you alive." Nollin opened the door and stepped into his cabin.

Loanu lay quietly now. He shook her awake.

"Witch!"

Opening rheumy eyes, she peered up at him. "Who is it?"

"Nollin. You must help me, if we're to escape the tyrant."

Her thoughts seemed to clear, for she looked at him with some measure of recognition. She sat up. "What do you ask of me?"

"Use your magic to make me look like my brother for an hour!"

"I have seen your brother," she whispered, "in my dreams..."

Nollin shook her again. "Do it!"

She stared at him. Her lips began to move. He heard nothing at first, then the barest trace of a whisper, then a low crooning song which jangled his nerves and made the hair on the back of his neck bristle. He shivered uneasily.

A blue glow surrounded her hands. She raised them to his face, touching his skin gently, tracing the line of his jaw, then his nose, then his forehead. Still she sang.

Nollin's vision grew cloudy and distant, as though he looked at the world through a mask. His cheeks felt heavy and numb.

Loanu sank back on her bed. "The magic is done."

Hurrying to his looking glass, Nollin stared at his image.

Hilan's face looked back at him. He smiled; Hilan's face smiled. He laughed; Hilan laughed. The illusion was perfect.

Turning to Loanu, he gently pushed her back on the bed and pulled the blanket up around her shoulders. "Sleep well, my witch," he said.

He opened the door and hurried through the chart room, ignoring Hilan's curses, and went on deck. A breeze heavy with moisture and electricity gusted from the east. Pausing, he studied the sky. The storm would soon break.

"Wait for my return," he called to the mate on deck, who knew his plan, "but have everything ready."

"Aye, sir," Lossar said. "Ready we'll be."

Nollin went to the Falcon, Hilan's ship, and strode up the gangplank like he owned the world. Just as Hilan would've done. He felt a moment's fear when one of the sailors ran forward, but thrust all thoughts of failure from his mind. Since he looked like Hilan, he was Hilan... at least to simple-minded fools like these.

"Sir?" the man said.

"Round up the crew. We sail in a half-hour."

"Sir?"

"You heard me. Get going!" Nollin sent him sprawling with a backhanded cuff, as he'd often seen Hilan do, then watched as the man climbed to his feet and bobbed his head nervously.

"Yes, sir!" He turned and ran.

Nollin called to the half-dozen other sailors on deck, and they put down whatever they were doing and gathered around.

"Most of you have seen my brother Nollin," he said. "He has a plan that's going to make us all rich, and we're sailing with him. Prepare the ship. Jump to it!"

They jumped. Nollin watched for a minute, then grunted and turned to the captain's cabin. Removing a key from his waist pocket, he fitted it into the lock, turned, then pushed into the room.

He sat at the small desk and waited. His muscles knotted nervously and he felt sick at his stomach. Time crawled by. How long would the witch's magic last? He'd asked for an hour, but in her current condition... And how long could he continue to fool Hilan's crew? He stared at the looking glass on the wall as if daring it to betray him.

Feet pounded past his door from time to time; men shouted and swore as they climbed the rigging. The decks creaked and shifted against the waves.

He knew the time had come when a light knock sounded on the door. Opening it, he stepped out and found standing there a tall, thin, square-jawed man dressed in brown and black -- Rilal, the first mate, who hadn't been aboard earlier.

"Sir," Rilal said, "the ship's ready."

"Good." He looked across the deck at the men, nodding slowly. "You will follow the Serpent. Keep a close watch on her -- make sure no tricks are pulled. I trust my brother... but not far enough to risk my life. Eh?"

Rilal nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be aboard Nollin's ship. We sail in five minutes. You're in command until I get back. Any questions?"

He grinned. "No, Captain."

Hilan heard a soft tread and looked up. His muscles ached from straining against the ropes, and though he hated to admit it, he welcomed the excuse to stop.

It wasn't Nollin returned to gloat but the old woman... what had he called her? Loanu? She knelt beside him and ran her soft fingers through his hair.

"Cut the ropes," he said.

"There are no ropes." Her voice was soft, almost sing-song, and she didn't look at him.

"On my arms. See them?"

"The time has come. Do you hear the winds? The end is here. The tyrant has come!"

Hilan strained, but heard no more than the waves and the reaking of the deck.

"He is near. I feel his presence. Shon Atasha protect me!"

Weeping, she collapsed at his side. Her sobs became hysterical. Again Hilan strained at his bonds with no result. If nothing else, Nollin knew how to tie knots.

The door swung open and Nollin stood there, panting heavily, a knife in hand. The Serpent lurched, suddenly, and Hilan knew the moorings had been cast off. Then he noticed the scar on his brother's face -- his own face!

"I'm going to kill you!" he screamed. "Nollin!"

"It's here," he said softly. There was a stunned look on his face.

"Let me loose!"

"Yes... yes." He looked down as though noticing Hilan for the first time. "You must help with the ship. We have to get out of port. The fighting has started!"

Hilan stared as his brother bent and slit the ropes. "Fighting?"

"All up and down the docks. We barely got away in time."

Hilan stood, shoving him out of the way. You bastard. Kill you later.

Clambering out onto the deck, he stared in shock at Zelloque.

The entire city blazed with light. Flames danced among the tall, splendid buildings. Dark shapes were visible in the smoke-filled streets and on the piers, throwing torches onto the ships. The proud schooners and galleys flared brightly. Over the distant slap-slap of waves Hilan heard the screams of dying men.

He shivered and found his brother standing beside him.

"Look," Nollin said, pointing.

Hilan turned. A hundred yards away the Falcon slipped through the darkness, as silent as a ghost, sails full.

His ship. Nollin had saved it. If he'd allowed me to stay in Zelloque...

Hilan didn't know what to say. He turned and looked at his brother. Nollin's face shimmered for an instant in the starlight, and then the scar faded and he was plain old Nollin again, the same as ever. He grinned back like nothing had happened between them.

"Blood's thick," he said.

"Blood's thick," Hilan agreed and shivered again. The breeze had grown colder; he stood there in his undergarments. "I want my clothes back, though."

Nollin turned toward his cabin. "They're too large for me, anyway."

Hilan didn't follow him. Though they would never speak of this night again, never say what they'd felt, he'd always remember what Nollin had done for him, and he'd never be the same.

He watched the city die, and with it, his hatred. He knew he should have burned there as well.

My brother, my brother. Why do you love me?

Nollin came back in a minute and slipped a blanket around Hilan's shoulders. Together for the first time, they waited for dawn.

Plans in the Night

Shon Atasha the Creator shaped the Earth from His body. His bones are the foundations of the world; His blood forms the sea, the rivers, the lakes. From His flesh He made the gods, and he set them in their palace in the sky to rule His creation. Now only His spirit remains, watching all that He made, working the magics to keep it whole, guiding and guarding all of His children.

-- Pere Denberel

Atlas of the World, Revised

The stars, the stars.

Loanu stood in the prow of the Serpent, gazing up into the heavens. A week had passed since she had set sail with Nollin Lammiat. Where are you, my master? she thought. Sadness grew in her, an ache that knew no bounds. Why can I no longer feel your presence?

Shon Atasha the Creator, who moved through the heavens, whose bright spirit had once burned in her like a flame, did not deign to answer. She wept for a time, slowly rocking back and forth, lonely and forsaken.

Something moved overhead like a shadow, for a second blotting out the stars. Her hands tingled. Though the breeze was not cold, she shivered, for she sensed magic all about her, thickening the air, charging it with power.

Again the shadow passed. She had an impression of huge, whispery wings, of eyes that burned ever so faintly blue in the darkness, of sharp ebon-black claws and equally sharp ebon-black teeth. Something touched down on the Serpent's deck for a moment. An instant later it was gone like a phantom wind.

She closed her eyes, listening, letting her senses expand all around her. Moving beyond her body, she flowed out and up, up into the air.

She moved with the shadow, cutting through the crisp night air. More of the shadows joined her. She saw them clearly now: small, gnarled, manlike creatures with wispy wings so frail they could not possibly hold them aloft. She had seen these creature before in her dreams. They served Shon Atasha the Creator as she did.

Higher they soared, and higher still, until the world became a disc below. She could see the rough, unfinished edges of the Earth, where the seas plunged off into nothingness, heading toward the underworld; she could see the high, broken cliffs which no man could ever climb; she could see the monsters that dwelled in the deepest waters, slumbering away the ages.

And Zelloque --

She looked toward her city and cried out. The great wall around the city had fallen. The tallest buildings had splintered, collapsed. Demons moved there now, through the city streets, looting, pillaging, raping and murdering. It would soon be a dead place, and she wept for it.

As her tears fell, glistening like pearls, the winged men drew close around her. Their bodies were gray, hairless, and their eyes full of knowledge too terrible to bear.

"We have given you all that was lost," they told her. "Our master bids you welcome again. He will come to you, so do not despair. For now, go west, ever west. That is where your future lies. This our master has said."

She smiled her thanks.

When she opened her eyes, she stood on the Serpent's deck once more, the stars bright overhead. Again she could sense Shon Atasha's presence, feel him moving through the heavens, watching all below.

"Thank you," she whispered, "my master."

A bag of some soft, velvetlike cloth lay at her feet. She picked it up, turned, and went to her cabin. Inside the bag she could feel the holy objects she'd thought gone forever when the shrine she guarded had been destroyed. The books, the wheels, the Cubes of Shon Atasha -- all here, all in her hands again.

And she now had a purpose: to go west. She would tell Nollin Lammiat when he woke. West!

She clutched her bag tightly. "Thank you," she whispered to the stars.

At the Fortress of Lord Mur

The lands to the west of the Great Cities are best known for having absolutely nothing of interest within them.

-- Pere Denberel

Atlas of the Known World, Revised

Lord Mur governed poor farming-folk in Saliin, but had always held greater ambitions. "Look to the East," his advisors had said when he was a child. "To the East lies wealth and power; to the East lies Pethis, and Coran, and Zelloque, which is the greatest city in the world." Now, on the fifth day of his twenty-third year, Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur stood on the highest battlement of his small stone fortress and looked out toward the sea.

His gaze swept over the mud-and-stone houses of the people (he could never bring himself to call them peasants) he ruled, past the fields of wheat and corn where workers toiled in the August heat, past the sandy hills to the beach. The waves were small and gray and dismal, like the miserable sky overhead. But he would not brood on the problems of his kingdom this day, Nissav swore. He let his thoughts soar birdlike above the water as he turned to face the Eastern lands.

It had been three years since traders brought news from the heart of the world, three long years since he'd heard of the great cities that filled his dreams with splendid visions. He longed for news with a desperation that would have amazed and bewildered his counsellors.

Then he noticed a sail on the horizon. He strained to see, and his eyes picked out a second sail clearly discernible from the first. Not one ship, but two! His heart pounded with excitement. Two ships -- traders! News from the distant kingdoms!

"Ring the bell!" he shouted down into the courtyard.

A bewildered-looking squire wandered out to look at him. "Sir?"

"Go on, you heard me! Run to the corner tower and ring the great bell! Ships are coming!"

Still the boy looked at him. Then he turned with a whoop and sprinted, sandals kicking up small clouds of dust, around the corner of the gatekeeper's quarters and out of sight. In a minute the great brass bell, as ancient as the fortress itself, began to toll. The low, rich notes floated through the heavy noon air, signalling a stop to the day's labors.

Ships had come.

Aboard the Falcon, Hilan and Nollin Lammiat were well into the process of getting drunk.

"Eight weeks out in this miserable place," Hilan said, shaking his head. The bright jewels clipped in his beard jingled softly. "I never would have thought to celebrate such misery."

Nollin regarded him silently for a moment, then laughed. "The celebration's not for getting here," he said. "It's to prevent us from thinking about what lies ahead."

"Even so..." He drank long and deep from his heavy silver goblet. "Even so, I wish we were back in Zelloque this day."

"That's not possible, and you know it." Nollin shook his head. He still remembered his last glimpse of Zelloque as their two ships slid from the docks: dark buildings ablaze with fire, demons moving through the streets, fighting and looting and death. He shivered. No, they could never return to Zelloque.

Now they had a greater task. Loanu had told him of her vision of wealth that lay to the West. Shon Atasha the Creator guided her, and they would sail on under her direction... into seas where few traders ventured, and certainly no pirates. Nollin longed for the power and riches she had promised him. He would follow her till he found them or died.

Hilan drained his goblet and slammed it down. "And the only woman aboard, if you can still call her that, is that witch!"

"Well," Nollin said, "look at it this way -- it can't get worse, can it?"

"I wouldn't wager on it," he growled.

A cry came from the deck: "Town ahead, port side!"

Hilan straightened, grinning. He ran his fingers through his beard, sending the jewels spinning and twinkling with light, then leaped to his feet with a cry of joy. He threw open the chart-room's door and thundered out onto the main deck. Nollin could hear him shouting orders, lengthening the sails, sending the crew scampering like mice with his haste to make port.

He's so like a child. Sighing, Nollin finished his own wine, then put the goblets away and followed his brother onto the deck.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur began preparations for the traders' visit even before the ships signalled back to his men on the beach. (They had to stop; he simply refused to think otherwise.)

Nissav retired to his private suite and flopped onto the long, low couch of white velvet he'd gotten from the last trade ship to pass through, then reached over and rang a small crystal bell. It had been given to him when he was eight -- a gift from traders anxious to please his father, the old Lord. Such simple luxuries, he thought, were the essence of life in the East.

In a few seconds Voyith shuffled in. The chamberlain was a dour old man who'd served the Lords Mur as long as Nissav could remember. Voyith always wore plain gray robes, loose slippers, numerous gold and silver rings on his fingers, and a small silver pendant set with a gray stone. Despite his slow gait and white hair, Voyith held his head high, as though he were noble-born himself. Still, Nissav thought, he'd been a good servant all his life and deserved tolerance in his old age.

"Yes, Lord?" Voyith asked, bowing.

"Fetch my best robes. We will have company tonight."

"The traders, Lord?"

Nissav started. "How do you know about them?"

"Oh, word has spread through the whole fortress, Lord. It's like a holiday. The stableboys are grooming your horses, the docks are being swept and repaired, the cooks have started a feast -- "

"Good, good!" He waved toward the wardrobe impatiently. Voyith's chatter could

run on and on at times, and he didn't have the patience for it now. "Hurry with those robes!

Loanu hunched over the tiny altar in her small, square room. She had turned her cabin aboard the Serpent into a shrine to Shon Atasha the Creator. Softly she chanted now, her quavering voice rising and falling like the break of waves against the bow.

The many-colored Cubes of Shon Atasha lay before her, cast in a pattern she'd never seen before. Purpose lay next to the Red Lord, but the Lord was touching the Blank Face, which meant negation. All the other cubes bore symbols of power, the Rod and Rope, the Chariot, the Crown, Shon Atasha's own bright symbol... strange....

As she puzzled over it, still chanting, she struck flint and steel over a small copper brazier filled with coals and pinches of dried herbs from her medicine-pouch. The coals took light at once, and a thin, sweetly scented smoke rose around her. She leaned forward and inhaled deeply. At once her senses seemed to expand. She became aware of every creaking board in the deck beneath her, every item of furniture in the room, the low bed, the railed shelf full of her few possessions, the cool, ivorylike bones from which the Cubes had been carved. She shut her eyes and drew into herself.

She seemed to be walking down a long tiled corridor which stretched to infinity before her. She'd been here many times in the past: she'd built this place in her mind when her training in Shon Atasha's mysteries had begun. It had been her spot of comfort and withdrawal, a private place of solace and contemplation and realization of power.

Now she knelt. In her vision she closed her eyes, and then, in absolute darkness twice removed from Earth, she sought the guidance of her master.

A knife of light edged through the darkness, like a door into a room full of sunshine being opened and shut quickly. She felt a gathering power, a presence... and an object took shape before her. It was a disk of metal, a pendant set with some gray-green stone.

And then it was gone, vanished as soon as she identified it. She'd been given a clue, and a task: to find the pendant. It would lead her on in her journey.

She opened her eyes and found herself in the corridor. She opened them again and found herself kneeling in her cabin.

The fire in the brazier had gone out. She gathered up the Cubes and set them away in a soft cloth sack, then went to find the brothers Lammiat and tell them of her new task... and theirs.

A bright light winked at them. It came from the end of a long wooden dock that stretched out a hundred yards from the beach below the ancient fortress and its surrounding town of stone and mud-brick houses.

"A mirror. They're signalling to us," Nollin said softly. "Perhaps they're expecting us?"

"How could they be?" Hilan demanded. "We don't know where we are! The Arpaean Sea, huh! We don't even have a chart. Nobody comes here!"

"They'll know where we are."

"Poor pickings, them. Look! Not a single ship at that dock!"

"Signal them back."

"They're probably barbarians."

"Afraid?"

"Rot you, no!" He turned and shouted toward Rilal, the first mate. "Fetch me a mirror!"

Nollin only grinned.

The wind had died somewhat as they approached shore. At their present speed, they'd reach the docks in half an hour or so -- certainly long enough for the castle's inhabitants to prepare a fitting reception. And, Nollin figured, since there were no great masses of wealth to attract pirates in these waters, the townsfolk would be expecting a few poor traders, or perhaps ambassadors from one of the neighboring holds. They would have to pretend to be such. After they'd gained the local Lord's confidence... well, by then it would hardly matter. Their quest wouldn't end here. They'd move on as soon as they'd taken on new provisions.

Rilal brought a small disk of polished metal from belowdecks. "Sir."

Hilan took it with a low growl, then turned back to the shore. He flashed a brief message in the seaman's code, then stopped and watched for a response. It came in a second -- quick flashes of light.

He snorted. "I knew it. Don't even know the code."

"Don't judge them so harshly," Nollin said. "They may have things we want."

"Perhaps."

"How about fresh fruit? Sweet water from their wells?"

A grunt.

"How about unsalted meat?"

"How about women?" Hilan grinned.

Nollin shrugged. "Those, too, I imagine."

"They have something I want," a woman's low voice said.

They both turned. Loanu stood behind them, her eyes dark and strange as she gazed toward the shore. She was on the Serpent! Nollin thought. How did she get over here? The other ship slipped through the water fifty feet away.

The witch wore a pale blue gown with a cloak of deeper blue drawn tight around her shoulders. Her age-lined face was set with determination and her long white hair fluttered loose in the breeze. She gazed at them, but seemed to focus her eyes at some point distant from the ship.

Nollin shivered, then tried to cover his unease. "What do they have that you want?" he asked.

"A pendant. It's silver and set with a gray stone. Get it for me." Turning, she seemed to glide rather than walk across the deck. She entered one of the empty cabins and shut the door without a sound.

Hilan laughed. "You're an errand boy now!"

"No more than before."

That made him pause. Then he gave a shrug as if he didn't understand and wasn't going to try. Turning, he leaned on the ship's railing, stroking the long, jagged dueling scar on his right cheek. His gaze was lost in the distance. Nollin guessed his thoughts were on the women he'd meet that night.

It seemed a regular festival, Nollin thought.

It was noon and the sun had broken through the clouds for a time. Bright red and green banners fluttered from the fortress's battlements, brightly dressed people clustered on the dock and, further back on the beach, all the peasants had turned out to watch the ships and cheer.

The Falcon and the Serpent had separated, the Serpent edging in toward the left side of the dock, the Falcon toward the right. Sailors slacked the sails and dragged out the mooring lines, preparing to tie up the ships.

Hilan stood in the Falcon's prow, feet braced on the railings, grasping the fore's taut rope in his right hand to keep his balance. He'd changed into red silk pants, a silk shirt of a bright yellow hue, and tied red and silver scarves around his neck and head. Gold rings looped his right ear and nostril, and a curved sword dangled jauntily at his side. Two matching knives with monkey-skull hilts had been tucked in the yellow sash around his waist. The jewels clipped in his beard caught the sun and made his whole face shine. He smiled, eager, impatient as always.

Nollin stood just behind him, watching, waiting, evaluating the people on the dock. A small delegation moved forward, three men, one young and richly dressed in green and orange silk robes, the other two older, bearded, more sedate in appearance and manner. He guessed the young one to be lord of the land and the elder two his counsellors.

Good, he thought. It's best he's young and naive.

As the Falcon nosed up to the first piling, Hilan leaped across to the dock and, with a low, sweeping bow to the Lord, said, "Noble-born, I am Hilan Lammiat, from the city of Zelloque. My brother and I seek the comfort of your city for the night."

Nollin snorted. His brother's sudden manners and charming talk seemed so alien he might've been watching a stranger. Then he realized he was watching himself, grossly exaggerated. He'd said those same words to one of the minor lords of Pethis some three years before, and Hilan had been there.

"And gladly shall you have it, sir," the young Lord said.

The mooring lines were drawn tight and fenders dropped in place as the ship bumped lightly against the dock's pilings. After swinging up a small section of railing, Nollin stepped back while two burly crewmen man-handled the gangplank up through the cargo hatch and slipped it into position, sliding home the bolts that held it secure. When they stepped back, he walked down and

joined his brother, giving a less magnificent but more sincere bow.

"I am Nollin Lammiat, Lord," he said, "My service is yours."

The younger man, whom Nollin guessed to be perhaps twenty-five, seemed delighted. "Thank you, Nollin Lammiat. I am Nissavquum al Tepis Mur, Lord Mur of Saliin. I extend to you and your brother the meager hospitality of my lands and keep."

The old man to Lord Mur's right cleared his throat.

"Ah, yes, before I forget. My advisors, Ki Paccif" -- a nod to the right -- "and Loja Toravoon."

"Honored statesmen," Hilan said, bowing again.

Nollin had a hard time keeping a straight face. He'd never seen the dramatic side of his brother before, and it amused him greatly to think that Hilan Lammiat the pirate -- one of the most feared men ever to sail the Seren Sea, with more rewards on his head from the Lords of Pethis and Coran than anyone in remembered times -- could get away with such blatant flattery. He allowed himself a thin-lipped smile. Other men would be quaking at their very presence. Here they'd probably never even heard of pirates, or privateers, as Nollin preferred. After all, they had -- used to have -- safe passage from the Great Lord of Zelloque in exchange for protecting Zelloquan ships, so that made them more than mere cut-throats like Joovis and Nimn and most of the others. Or so he liked to think. And, because his father wanted one of his sons to be a noble, Nollin had been schooled by the best teachers money could buy, and he viewed himself as one of the sea's elite.

"Come," Lord Mur said. "Let us rest inside, where the air's less oppressive. We can discuss the details of your trading later this evening."

I knew they'd think us traders, Nollin thought. Quickly he said, "Ah, sir, there seems to be a misunderstanding. We're not traders." He caught a warning glance from Hilan, but ignored it. "The Great Lord of Zelloque has sent us on a mission which is best not described here, in the open. Pray, let us retire to your hall. Indeed -- " He sniffed. "The air here is too damp for my tastes. My brother is the seaman of the family." It's best to play the noble -- I'll gain his confidence that way.

Hilan was staring at him, obviously bewildered. Fortunately, Lord Mur didn't notice.

"Excellent, excellent! I'll show you the way myself. Of course you'll have the finest rooms for your stay. I'll hear your tale tonight, after dinner, which is the proper time for such matters. I trust your men can see to your boats?"

"Ships," Hilan said.

Nollin winced.

"Ships? Boats?" Lord Mur said. "Is there a difference?"

"Apparently there is," Nollin said quickly, "but I've never been able to remember it myself. Everyone I know gets it mixed up except Hilan."

"It's quite simple -- "

"Not now, Hilan."

"This way," Lord Mur said. He turned and his advisors fell in step behind him, leaving Hilan and Nollin to follow.

"Stay aboard until you hear from us," Hilan called to Rilal, and Nollin said the same to Klaff.

They turned and followed Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur up the steep, winding path to his fortress.

In Nollin's room, a large and amply (if plainly) furnished chamber with a high ceiling and whitewashed walls, Hilan and Nollin sat at a small wooden table. Two wooden cups and a flagon of wine sat before them, untouched. For all they knew it might have been drugged.

"So," Hilan growled, "when're you going to explain?"

"The walls have ears. Later, when we're truly alone."

Hilan surveyed the room, shrugged, then picked up the flagon of wine. It was unmarked. He put it back, a bit reluctantly. "When's dinner?"

"They didn't say. Soon, I should think. Can't you smell the roasting meat?"

"Perhaps we should tour the kitchens? I'm hungry now."

Nissav slipped the stone back into the wall, covering the listening tube. His room was next to Nollin's, although the entrances were on opposite sides of the building. He sighed. "They're not going to say anything."

His counsellors pondered the matter.

Voyith shuffled in and began laying out clothes for dinner that night: a fine white linen shirt with intricate patterns in gold and silver thread, plain black pantaloons, gold and silver slippers, and various rings and signets. He seemed to be moving slower than usual, Nissav thought. Probably listening to their plans.

He cleared his throat and, half-joking, turned to the chamberlain. "Well, Voyith, since you're so interested, what would you do?" It wasn't the first time he'd played this game with the old man. Whenever anything interesting happened, Voyith's opinion seemed to be heard.

The chamberlain finished smoothing the shirt, then straightened. "My thoughts, Lord? Why, I thought it obvious. You should kill them and take their ships."

"And then what would I do with them?"

"Sail your own traders to Zelloque, my Lord."

Nissav caught his breath. A bit of paint and nobody would ever recognize the Serpent and Falcon. He could see what Voyith suggested: himself standing in the front end of the boat -- er, ship -- feet braced on the rails like Hilan Lammiat's had been, gazing off to the left. Around him the crackling of sails, the lap of waves...

"Yes!" he whispered. It was a direct, unexpected blow, the sort of thing which only a servant would have the lack of imagination necessary to think up. But

first he'd find out why they had come. After dinner, that would be the time to strike. They'd be sated with food. No, even better, he'd get them to order their men ashore for a holiday...

Battle

In times past, when demons walked the lands of men, tyrants rose and fell like tides on the seas. Now that demons walk among us once more -- who can say what will follow?

-- Woylo Caseel

Dreams and Portents

The meal was not going well.

Nollin watched with something akin to horror as his brother ignored the fork and knife at his plate and drew both knives from his sash. He attacked the roast pheasant before him as though it were some enemy. Sticking one blade through the bird's chest, he hacked off pieces of meat with the other, speared them, then stuffed his mouth and washed it all down with warm, spiced wine.

The banquet hall was small and comfortable, with a high arched ceiling and pillars set to either side. Oil lamps burned overhead, spreading a pleasant yellow glow. Several dozen people -- all the petty nobility from the land, Nollin decided -- sat around the table. The women wore long, shimmering gowns of pale silks and velvet, with dark hoods covering their hair. The men all dressed in embroidered white shirts and black pantaloons. Nollin looked, but nobody was wearing the silver pendant Loanu had described. He didn't know how they were going to find it before they left.

Everyone had stopped eating and turned to watch Hilan with open mouths. There was an almost tangible undercurrent of shock and distaste. Nollin sighed and rubbed his eyes, wishing himself back aboard the Serpent, wishing himself back at sea -- anywhere else. He should have known better than to let his brother eat with them.

Hilan began cracking bones and noisily sucking out the marrow.

"Tell me, Nollin," Lord Mur said quickly, "what news is there of Zelloque?" He seemed ill at ease and eager to talk about a subject that would take everyone's interest away from Hilan's eating.

Nollin straightened. "I suppose now is a good time to tell you," he said. "The Great Lord of Zelloque sent us out to make a map of this sea."

"For what purpose?"

"Merely to add to his chart room. He has maps for the seas to the East; he decided it's time to chart the West. The map will, undoubtedly, lead to increased contact between Zelloque and Saliin."

"Perhaps even a military treaty, in time?"

"I don't know, but I suppose it's a possibility. The Great Lord will send ambassadors when we return."

"Excellent!" Lord Mur beamed at them. "There's nothing we could wish for more than ambassadors from the Eastern lands."

Nollin smiled.

"How long can I persuade you to stay?" Lord Mur asked.

"Not too much longer, alas. We've much work to do."

"I can imagine. At least let me give a banquet for your men tomorrow night. We'll make it a festival for all of Saliin as well! I'll have my men butcher five or six oxen and we'll roast them on the beach."

Hilan crunched a bone.

"A brilliant idea," Nollin said. "The crews are undoubtedly tired from the trip -- I know I am -- and we can all use the chance to stretch our legs. You have no idea how uncomfortable sea travel is."

"Oh?" said Lord Mur, with a strange intensity. "Tell me about it."

Nollin did, in great detail. And then their talk drifted on to different things. A dozen other conversations started around them as the meal resumed. Nobody mentioned Hilan's manners, Nollin noticed. At least these people had tact, which was more than he could say for his brother.

"Why would he lie?" Nissav wondered aloud. He and his counsellors sat in the library, at an ancient, scarred oak table. He'd never heard so implausible a story as theirs. The Great Lord of Zelloque having a map made just for his chart room, indeed! There had to be another reason. What?

Ki Paccif stroked his thin gray beard. "Obviously the Great Lord of Zelloque has plans for the lands around the Arpaeen Sea. I'll bet his 'ambassadors' turn out to be soldiers and war ships!"

"And," Loja Toravoon added, "you'll be dragged through Zelloque's streets in chains. That's what they do to conquered Lords. And your head and hands will be chopped off in a public execution."

Nissav was grim. "Then we must make sure those ships don't make it back to the Great Lord's city."

"A pity," Ki said. "I almost like Nollin Lammiat."

"But his brother..." Loja said, with a shiver. "A monster!"

On that, they all agreed. They began to count the available members of the guard, plan where to station them during the festival on the beach, and discuss what to do with the sailors they captured. The Lammiat brothers, of course, would be put to death at once.

Nollin eased open the door to his room and looked up and down the stone corridor. Ancient tapestries showing familiar scenes of the twelve gods and the legends surrounding them hung the walls, and a thin red carpet covered the floor's flagstones. At the far end of the hall, near the wide stairs that wound down to the audience chamber, a pair of uniformed men stood watch. Their polished leather armor gleamed faintly, even in the dim light. They saw him and straightened, so he stepped out and closed the door behind himself.

"Ah, good," he said loudly. "Perhaps I can persuade one of you to show me the way back to my ship?"

"Certainly, sir," the one on the right said. He was short, but strongly built. He stepped back and indicated the stairs. "This way. I personally will escort you to the dock."

Escort, or guard? "Thank you."

They went down through the entrance hall, out into the courtyard, through a small side gate (the main gates having been closed for the evening), and down a winding dirt path by the fortress's wall. The night was dark and Nollin had trouble seeing his way. He stumbled and, with a curse, nearly fell. The guard turned and waited in silence. Nollin moved forward more cautiously after that.

At last the clouds started to break up to the north, and there the stars shone bright and cold, providing enough illumination for Nollin to see blazed markers along the trail. He walked faster now, felt his heart racing with excitement. Already he could smell the brine on the wind. For all his city-bred manners, he knew his life lay with the sea. He couldn't stand being apart from her for long.

Nollin felt sand crunching under his boots and found himself on the beach. The docks stood a hundred yards to the left. Both the Serpent and the Falcon looked unchanged. Both ships rolled a bit with the low swells, and he could hear the soft slap-slap of waves against their hulls. A few oil lanterns hung in the rigging, spreading a soft glow across the decks, and he could see his men lounging there. One played a delicate stringed instrument and sang. Others listened, or drank, or told tall tales.

He started forward quickly, eagerly. The guard followed, and soon they soon reached the dock.

Nollin could hear the words of the song now, a ballad called The Seven Lovers. "The night plans all," the old sailor sang, "and no one sees the dawn until it passes."

Nollin smiled. The ballad reminded him of days long past, pleasant days when he and Hilan had been as close as two brothers ever had been. They'd sailed the Seren Sea for two years, striking at night, taking the best of the land and sea. No city's navy could catch them. He remembered....

"Will you be coming back up to the fortress this night?" the guard asked suddenly.

The memories passed. He sighed. "Yes."

"Very well. I'll wait for you here."

"I shouldn't be long," Nollin said, and he continued alone. The sailors on watch had seen him and called to Rilal and Klaff. Both mates hurried down their ships' gangplanks, calling a low welcome.

"Not here," Nollin said, taking both by the arm. He led them aboard the Serpent, into the chart room, and closed and bolted the hatch when they stood inside. "Sit."

As they sat at the small table, he paced before them, thinking of all Lord Mur had said. At last he spoke: "The people here seem honest enough. We'll take on provisions tomorrow, then in the evening the local Lord's going to have a proper banquet on the beach in our honor. He wants all the crewmen to attend."

"A set-up, sir?" Klaff asked. "That would be the time to strike."

Nollin shrugged. "I don't know. They seem to trust us. I told them we came here by the Great Lord of Zelloque's order. We're supposed to be mapping the Arpaeon Sea for him. Tell the men that, in case anyone asks."

"I'll see to it," Rilal said.

"Good. We'll leave a skeleton crew on the ships during the feast -- a well-armed skeleton crew -- and the men who go ashore are all to carry knives and short swords hidden in their leggings. And they're not to drink much. There's nothing more useless in a fight than a drunken sailor."

"Aye, sir," said Rilal. "And we'll have the ships ready to leave at a moment's notice. If necessary."

Nollin smiled. "You've got it."

A knock sounded on the hatch. Nollin started, then strode over and, after unbolting it, swung it open.

Loanu stood there. She dressed all in black, with a thin veil across her face. Her dark eyes locked with his and he had to look away.

"Come in," he began, but she'd already entered.

"Sir?" Klaff said, standing.

"Leave us. That will be all for now."

"Yes, sir."

The two first mates filed out and Nollin closed the door again. When he turned, he found Loanu still watched him. She seemed to be smiling behind her veil, mocking him, as though she knew everything he'd said to Klaff and Rilal and thought it a child's game.

"You haven't found it yet," she said.

"No. I looked, but -- "

"I know who has it. A tall, thin man wearing only gray. I saw him on the docy. His hair is white as snow; he appears old, but is not. Be careful when you take his pendant, for I scent magic about him. He is dangerous."

"I haven't come this far to get myself killed."

"Our journey has scarcely begun. Go now and do my bidding. The rewards for us both will be great." She turned. The hatch swung open without her touching it, and when she stepped out, the night seemed to swallow her.

Nollin shivered. "Yes," he whispered, "my witch."

Far off, he heard laughter. He couldn't tell whether or not it was Loanu's.

The time before the festival passed uneventfully. Lord Mur sent them provisions enough for several months of travel, and all the boxes and barrels were quickly stored away belowdecks. Nollin set his men to refilling the ships' water barrels from the fortress's wells; he didn't let Lord Mur's servants do the work because they might drug the water and he wouldn't know until they'd left Saliin far behind.

Peasants, meanwhile, set up red and white striped pavilions on the beach two hundred yards away, as others dug barbeque pits and piled wood inside them. Musicians came out and tuned their strange, many-stringed instruments. Acrobats smoothed the sand with long wooden rakes and took practice tumbles,

or walked on their hands, or balanced on each others' shoulders. A feeling of high festivity rode the air.

Hilan had long vanished into the town in search of a tavern and serving girls, leaving Nollin in charge of the ships. They'd agreed earlier that Lord Mur and his men wouldn't be foolish enough to try anything during the day, and Nollin knew his brother well enough not to worry about his safety. Hilan could take care of himself.

At last, as the afternoon wore on and the sun began to sink in the west, fading toward a crescent, Hilan returned. His walk was a bit unsteady, Nollin noticed. He'd obviously been drinking. After staggering up the gangway to the Falcon, he entered his cabin and didn't come out.

Wisely, the crew said nothing. Nollin only sighed and continued to supervise the work.

Soon, Lord Nissav thought, they will be mine.

It was an hour till dusk. He stood on his fortress's battlements, looking down on the two ships. About half their crews stood on deck, watching the start of festivities. The rest had already joined the celebration on the beach.

"Lord," a voice said behind him.

He looked over his shoulder. It was Voyith, and he had dressed for travel, with plain brown robes, silver sandals, and a dark brown cape wrapped around his shoulders. A small pack dangled from his right hand.

"What is it?" he said.

"Lord, my father has taken ill. I wish to visit him, if I may. Yghere is able to serve as your chamberlain tonight."

It was strange to think of Voyith as having a father -- he seemed, somehow, eternal. But Nissav felt festive, and it didn't really matter. Yghere Hant, his chamberlain-in-training, could do the work as well as anyone.

"Very well," he said, "you have my permission. Take as long as you need, Voyith. Such matters are often delicate."

"Thank you, Lord. I expect to return tomorrow. I have been told my father will not live out the night." He turned and shuffled away.

And now I must join the celebration, Lord Mur thought. His clothes were already set out: baggy black silk pants, a white silk shirt, a mouse-gray cape. With them lay a small sword. He smiled as he picked it up and tested the sharp steel blade with his thumb. Yes. I might even kill Hilan Lammiat myself.

Nollin wandered through the crowds of peasants and guardsmen, nodding politely to the few nobles he saw. He'd put on his finest clothes for the night: all black, from his long fur-lined silk cape to his silk breeches to his black-leather boots. Even the clasp fastening the cape around his neck had been carved of ebony. When he stood still, you could scarcely tell him from the shadows, which was what he wanted.

Something large and heavy slapped him in the middle of the back. He gasped, swore to himself, and rolled his eyes toward Theshemna, the palace of the

gods, which sails the night-time sky. "Feeling better, Hilan?" he said.

"Yes, brother. Now this is the sort of life I like!"

Nollin turned. His brother was dressed much like he had been the night before, in the brightest of yellows and greens, with a red scarf around his neck and dozens of glittering diamonds in his beard. He wore his two swords with monkey-skull hilts and carried a half-dozen daggers stuck in boots and white sash. Nobody would overlook him in the shadows.

"Then," Nollin said in a whisper, "you've already noticed that Lord Mur's guards aren't drinking anything but water? And that they've got us outnumbered three to one? And that they're all in armor and swords?"

"Sounds like a fair fight, eh?"

"Hilan..." He sighed. "Fights aren't supposed to be fair, they're supposed to be won. Easily. By us."

Hilan grinned. "How long before they attack?"

"I haven't seen our noble host yet. They will probably rush us when he arrives. He probably doesn't want to miss the excitement."

"What about you? Didn't you bring a sword?"

"Strapped to my leg."

"Fine. What do you say we start things off ourselves, instead of waiting?"

"No. Now that we know they're up to something, we should just leave quietly. I'll start rounding up our -- "

Hilan swung away from him and drew both swords in one fluid movement. Screaming a battle-cry, he leaped for the nearest guard. The man dropped his cup and stumbled backward, caught totally unawares. Hilan thrust several times with each sword, piercing the man's armor in a half-dozen places. The guard was dead before he hit the sand. But Hilan had moved on by then, wading into the thick of the guards, shouting and cursing and hacking at them like a madman. Blood-lust shone in his eyes. He laughed wildly, savagely.

" -- men," Nollin finished. He wished his brother paid more attention to what he said. Sighing, he pulled up his shirt, revealing the hilt of a short sword, and drew the weapon quickly.

Fighting had broken out up and down the beach. Peasants fled, screaming in terror, and nobles followed on their heels. That only left the guardsmen and the sailors, all closing around a half-dozen fires. Nollin saw his men draw their knives and short swords. Several caught up burning sticks and wielded them as clubs. Metal rang on metal.

Then two guardsmen closed with Nollin. He retreated quickly before them, parrying their wild swings again and again. They were off-balance, used to firm ground underfoot rather than sand, and Nollin kept them constantly moving, constantly shifting.

Finally, panting, they slowed their advance. The one to the left fell a half-step behind, and that left an opening. Nollin reacted instantly, lunging forward and running the guard on the right clean through.

Jerking his blade free, he closed with the other, screaming a savage battle-cry. The man back-pedalled frantically, then stumbled and fell, sword flying from his hand. Nollin punched him in the face with the hilt of his sword and waded into the fray after Hilan.

He lost track of the time. The battle became of blur of slashing, parrying, lunging. Blood roared in his ears. He felt his sword bite deep into flesh and bone again and again.

And suddenly he looked up and found no one left to fight. All the guards had either died or fled. Most of his crewmen held captured swords, laughing and shouting as they finished off the wounded. He could see only three of his crewmen lying dead.

Mur's guards had been slaughtered. They had been ill-trained louts, he realized. From the number of bodies, he guessed at least half had run away. He shook his head in disgust. Such lack of discipline would never have been tolerated aboard his ship.

As he wandered across the battlefield, counting the dead, he noticed one of Lord Mur's advisors among them, Ki Paccif, whose throat had been messily cut. Nollin distantly remembered the counsellor trying to direct the battle toward its beginning . . . but apparently he'd died before his strategies could be worked.

Hilan had disarmed and ham-strung the captain of the guard and was now savoring the kill, toying with his prey like a cat with a mouse. The man lay helpless on the ground, blood from a dozen wounds slowly pooled around him. He gave a feeble mew of pain and fear.

Nollin shivered. He wiped off his sword, sheathed it, then drew a knife from his boot. He flicked it low and fast, and it struck the captain in the eye, burying itself to the hilt. The man flopped back, twitched, then lay still.

Hilan turned on his brother with a roar of rage and raised his sword to strike. Nollin stepped in close instead of retreating, smoothly drawing one of the heavy silver daggers from Hilan's sash. He pressed the point to Hilan's stomach.

"Careful, brother," Nollin said, voice sharp. "You don't want to get carried away. I'd hate to hurt you. It would go against my promise to Father -- remember, we're supposed to look out for each other."

Hilan snorted, but lowered his sword. "Why'd you kill him?"

Nollin stepped back and tucked the knife into his own sleeve, out of sight. "Human decency. Something you know little about."

Hilan half-raised his sword again. "I'm not going to take your insults!"

"You'd like to kill me now, wouldn't you? Then you could go back to Pethis and loot ships. Don't you think of anything else? Can't you use your imagination? Try to look ahead, at what lies in the next sea! Think of the treasures Loanu will bring us! Think a year ahead, instead of five minutes! We'll both be rich as Lords, Hilan, but we've got to stick together. Can't you see what I'm talking about?"

"You're a fool. The witch has you in her power!"

"You're the fool, Hilan. Very well. If that's all I mean to you, kill me."

Here. Now." Nollin ripped open his shirt, baring his chest to Hilan's blade.
"Go on, Hilan. That's what you want, isn't it? Well?"

Hilan looked away. "No. I don't want to kill you anymore."

"Then shut up and try to act civilized." He wrapped his cape more tightly around his shoulders. "Now let's find our cordial host, Lord Mur. I want to talk to him."

The Siege of Saliin

It is harder to kill a nobleman than a peasant, as any study of history will prove. Perhaps it is Fate; perhaps it is merely luck. I suspect the gods favor those who seize power and have the strength and courage to hold it. Or perhaps it is merely divine whim.

-- Tellerion
Speculations

Nissav was hurrying down the path to the beach when the first peasant passed him at a dead run. The boy's face was white as sun-bleached bone. Dozens of other people swarmed up the trail behind him, pushing their lord aside in panic to escape. And then Nissav heard the sounds of fighting, the battle-cries of his men, the clank of striking swords. The battle had started. Why hadn't they waited for his signal?

He cursed as he shoved through his subjects, hurrying forward, eager to watch his guards triumph over the Great Lord of Zelloque's spies. More peasants pounded by him. Then he came upon Loja Toravoon struggling up the path behind the others, and that made him stop and frown. Both his counsellors should have been supervising the slaughter. What was going on? Who was in charge?

Toravoon heaved to a stop before him, panting wildly. He clutched his chest with both hands. "Flee, my Lord!" he managed to gasp.

"What?" Nissav demanded. "In the middle of my triumph? Have you gone mad?"

"There is no triumph, Lord! The sailors attacked us -- it's an ambush, a trap! Flee, my Lord, flee! Your men are being butchered!" And then Loja Toravoon darted past him and continued up the path, gasping and wheezing all the way.

Nissav stood there in shock. The Lammiats and their men had attacked his guards? How could they have known about his trap? Who told them?

Ki Paccif? Surely not! He'd trusted his councillor all his life. Then where is he?

It doesn't matter now, he thought. What's done is done. I'll gather my men inside my Fortress, then we'll attack the ships and take them.

He turned and ran up the path after the others.

Archers guarded the walls of the fortress, dark shapes moving against a glittering backdrop of stars.

Nollin stood well back, shadowed in a grove of trees. He'd found the archers' range easily enough (fortunately they all seemed to be bad shots), and now he stood well out of reach. He watched and waited and thought. Although the ramparts over the front gate were only half-manned, he had no intentions of losing more of his sailors. Replacements would be impossible to find here, so far from the civilized lands. If only...

"What now?" Hilan asked, from his left.

"We wait till dawn. They won't sleep this night."

"And then?"

"I... haven't decided yet."

A scant hour had passed since the battle on the beach, but Lord Mur had managed to marshall his men and barricade himself inside his fortress. It was the one intelligent thing he'd done.

The puzzle intrigued Nollin. He wanted Mur dead, but didn't want to risk any crewmen to kill him. And they hadn't yet found the pendant Loanu wanted.

"You just don't know!"

Nollin turned. "What?"

Hilan laughed. "But I do."

"Then what do you suggest? That we charge the gates? That we wait until Mur and his peasants starve?"

"Oh most gracious one." Hilan made a low, mocking bow, his grin broadening. "This humble servant wishes to point out that a certain person on your ship has the power to get us inside the fortress walls..."

"Loanu!"

"Of course, brother. She's a witch. She brought us here. She claims to know everything about our journey. She must have foreseen this fight, but did nothing to warn us. If she wants Mur's jewelry, she can get it herself. I'm not her servant. But Mur's going to be mine... until his death!" One hand dropped to caress the monkey-skull hilt of his sword, and he laughed.

Nollin turned and raced down the winding path toward the ships. His thoughts flew ahead, to the priestess and her magic. He knew little of her powers, but surely she could do something to get them past Mur's archers.

By the time he reached the Serpent, he'd practically convinced himself of Loanu's ability to rip the fortress from its foundations, to summon huge monsters from the depths of the sea, to raise armies of long-dead soldiers to fight their battle. Thoughts of destruction and revenge made him tremble with excitement. Swearing he'd see Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur dead before daybreak, he darted up the ship's gangplank, passed the two sailors on sentry duty, then stopped in front of Loanu's cabin. She was chanting softly inside. He paused for a second, listening, then pounded on the hatch as hard as he could.

Slowly, it swung open. Darkness moved inside. He could see nothing ahead but shadow, and shadows of shadow.

"Loanu?" he called. No answer came. "Witch?"

He entered. It was unnaturally dark inside, as though the very room itself swallowed light. The air felt thick and stifling. When he turned around and tried to look through the open hatch, he found nothing before him but velvety blackness. His eyes ached. He squeezed them shut for a minute, then groped his way forward.

Sudden, brilliant light flared before him. Blue-white afterimages blinded him. Softly a single finger, all atremble with age, touched the middle of his forehead, smearing what felt like oil or grease in a line down the bridge of his nose. Blinking rapidly, he found he could see again.

Loanu stood before him. She was dressed all in black so that only her face

showed, and it seemed to float loose in the air like a mask. And, still more like a mask, her eyes seemed empty hollows filled only with shadow and deep memories.

"Why have you interrupted my prayers?" she whispered. "I see blood on your shirt. Tell me, I bid you, what happened."

"Lord Mur tried to murder us. There was a fight on the beach and we killed a good number of his men. Now Mur is trapped in his fortress, but archers hold the walls. I don't dare risk more of my men to take it, and I thought maybe you -- ?"

She sighed and seemed to sag forward as though the weight of centuries pressed down on her. Slowly, very slowly, she shook her head. "I am tired, my champion, and old. My powers faded with the destruction of Shon Atasha's shrine. All this you know. Know also that Shon Atasha speaks but little to me now, and only hints at what lies ahead. I am little better than a cheap festival magicker, capable only of such minor illusions as any other might do. That is why you must find the gray pendant. I feel within it a certain ancient strength akin to that of my shrine. It would let me create reality from illusion, let me see through the eyes of distant kin, let my powers be more than just shadows of possibility. I would use it thus."

"Can you do nothing for me now?"

"What would you have me do?"

Nollin hesitated. "Perhaps if I were to look like Lord Mur? No, even better, like his advisor Ki Paccif, who was killed on the beach. They will not yet know of his death."

"It shall be done." She took his arm and pulled him toward the back of her cabin. "Come."

She stopped before the rear wall, then reached out and drew aside a black curtain. Behind it hung a large looking glass set in a silver frame. Nollin gaped; he'd never seen it before, and Loanu hadn't carried anything that large with her when he took her aboard. Where had it come from?

But she gave him no time to ponder the mirror's presence. She began to sing in a low, powerful voice. Raising her hands, she made odd gestures in the air, her fingers shining like candles.

Nollin stared at his reflection. Strange blue vapours were gathering all around him, becoming a soft blue glow that shrouded every inch of his body. The light seemed to pulse like his heartbeat. His skin tingled. Then the blue settled onto his body in a chill mist, shifting, making him appear almost amorphous. A strange heaviness came over his arms and legs and head. He felt dizzy, shut his eyes, and tried to steady himself.

When he looked at the mirror again, Ki Paccif's pinched face gazed back at him. The straight nose, the brown eyes, the gray beard with only the faintest trace of black...

"The spell," Loanu said, "will not last more than a few hours."

"That will be long enough. Thank you." Nollin smiled and knew the magic would fool even Lord Mur himself.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur stood silently on the battlements of his fortress, looking down on his enemies' camp. Dark shapes moved among the scattered fires. He shivered, suddenly cold, and gathered his cape more tightly around his shoulders.

Something moved forward out of the darkness. An attack?

"Archers!" he shouted. Around him, men leaped to their places, stringing arrows.

A distant shout came to his ears: "Wait, my Lord! It's me, Ki Paccif! Open the gate!" And a dark figure appeared on the road below. Lord Mur could hear him panting heavily.

Turning, Nissav called for a torch. A guardsman carried one up from the courtyard, then tossed it over the wall, toward the figure below. It struck the ground and almost went out, but the man there picked it up and held it so the light showed his face. It was indeed the counsellor.

As Ki Paccif stood there holding the torch, looking up at the men on the walls, his gaze shifted as though he sought his master on the battlements.

"My Lord, let me in!" he called again.

"What trick is this?" Lord Mur called down.

"It's no trick. I bear a message from Nollin Lammiat himself. He released me that I might bring it to you."

"Very well. Wait." Lord Mur stepped back, stroking his chin in thought. His advisor had been reported slain at Hilan Lammiat's hand. It might be a trap... but the fellow waiting below was unmistakably Ki Paccif (he'd know that bulk anywhere), and he saw no unusual movement beyond the walls. The Lammiats' men hadn't massed for an attack... yet.

"Let him in," he called down to the gatekeeper.

Shortly thereafter, Nissav met with his two counsellors and his new captain of the guard in his private chamber. He'd changed into simpler clothing, as befitted a siege: sturdy riding breeches, a gray linen shirt with laces up the front, and light boots.

Of all the people in the fortress, he thought, only his two counsellors would still wear ceremonial robes. The graveness of the situation hardly impressed them... they seemed to think it all some vast game. He realized with a strange uneasiness, then, that he'd entrusted his life to Ki Paccif and Loja Toravoon. Everything he'd ever done, everything he'd ever thought, had been because of them. Perhaps it had been a mistake to give them so much power. Suddenly everything was going wrong --

"We must, of course, attack," Toravoon was saying to Ki Paccif and Laparga, the new captain of the guard. "Our troops outnumber theirs. It should be an easy battle."

"I disagree," Paccif said. "They slaughtered our men on the beach, and there we outnumbered them three to one!"

"We were taken by surprise."

"Half the men fled!" He turned to Laparga. "That's battle-discipline?"

What would my father have done? Nissav wondered.

The new captain of the guard looked distinctly uncomfortable. "You can hardly blame me for the problems of my distinguished predecessor -- "

"Shut up, all of you!" Nissav shouted. "I won't have you bickering like old women! I will make the decision." He turned to Paccif. "Now, you said you had a message from Nollin Lammiat?"

"He offers you terms of surrender which, I should imagine, you will reject out of hand."

"Tell me what they are first."

"Simply this, Lord: open the gates, have the guards surrender, and let him and his men occupy the fortress. In return they'll leave as soon as they have everything of value -- and they won't kill anybody except you."

Nissav was outraged. "Kill me?"

Laparga nodded. "That's very generous of him, all things considered, except for the last part."

"Well," Loja Toravoon said, "I suppose you want to take their offer. Typical of the military mind!"

"Perhaps he's willing to negotiate the terms?" Laparga asked, with little hope.

Paccif shook his head sadly. "He made himself quite clear. The terms are not negotiable. It's a matter of honor, Nollin Lammiat said."

While the others thought about that, Nissav reached a decision. After all, he thought, we were going to try to out-last their siege anyway. What difference does this make? None.

And he said: "We're going to stay right where we are. We have deep wells and plenty of stored provisions; we'll wait them out, no matter how long it takes."

"As you command, Lord," his advisors said. Laparga merely nodded.

"Now get out and leave me alone! I need to think."

They bowed and, turning, filed through the door. As it shut behind them, Nissav began cursing softly to himself.

This is my chance, Nollin realized.

He stood by the door leading into the front courtyard, listening to the silence outside. A light breeze sent the torches flickering; by their light he saw the still, dark shapes of guards slouched on the battlements. They were sleepy; nothing short of a direct attack would rouse them. Drawing a thin-bladed knife from his right boot, Nollin tucked it into the sleeve of his robe and smiled. Then he pushed the door open a bit more, wincing as the hinges squeaked, and eased out into the shadows.

Across from him stood the main entrance. The gatekeeper, a gnarled old guard who looked almost as ancient as Loanu, leaned on the giant wooden wheel he turned to open the enormous main gates. He snored softly.

The machine's counter-weights, gears, and pulleys all lay out of sight somewhere below-ground, Nollin saw, but he didn't let that stop him. He'd seen mechanisms like this in Zelloque. They were childishly simple to operate.

He circled the courtyard as if making one last inspection before turning in for the night. The two bleary-eyed guards he passed saluted him. Smiling, he nodded back and murmured, "Keep up the good work."

He reached the gates unchallenged. They lay deep in shadow, overhung as they were by the battlements. In one quick glance he saw the heavy oak bar across them, which way the wheel turned to open them, and what he needed to do. Lifting the bar carefully, he maneuvered it to the ground. That done, he approached the gatekeeper, drawing a knife. One quick thrust and the old man slumped forward, his snoring stopped. If the blade failed to kill, the poison covering it would have done the job.

Nollin pushed him aside and began turning the wheel to the right. The gates shuddered, then began to move, gliding open on well-oiled hinges.

"Hey!" someone said behind him. "What do ye think ye're doin'?"

Nollin turned and waved. "Lord Mur's orders." The gates stood wide open now. "I'll take care of it."

The guard ran toward him, sword in hand. "Masferigon's fingers, man, close them -- "

A rope ran from the wheel and disappeared into a slot in the stone at his feet. Nollin knelt and sawed at it. The fibers parted easily. At last the final strand parted and the rope whipped past him, down the hole and out of sight. He heard a distant whump from somewhere underfoot, as though a great weight had fallen.

The guard came to a stop before him, looking bewildered. "Lord Mur ordered ye to -- "

"Well, no," Nollin said. "I lied." Then he flicked the knife and it stuck in the guard's neck. A moment later the man collapsed in convulsions.

Nollin waited until the man died, then bent and pried the sword from his fingers. Raising it, he gave a piercing whistle.

A whistle answered from the darkness outside the fortress. The road to the main gate suddenly swarmed with life as a hundred-odd men in battle gear charged forward. They all carried round leather shields against arrows and screamed their most fearsome war-cries. At their front ran Hilan Lammiat, brandishing a sword in one hand, holding his shield before him with his other.

They poured through the fortress's gates just as the alarm went up among the guards on the battlements. A few arrows flew, but the defense was half-hearted at best, with the fortress gates standing open. The sailors gained entrance without suffering a single wound. Most of the archers threw down their bows and fled their positions.

"Split up," Nollin shouted. He gestured to a group of about forty. "You there, rush the battlements. Take prisoners if they surrender, otherwise kill the

bastards."

"Yes, sir!" several shouted. They ran for the stone stairs.

"What now, brother?" Hilan asked. He seemed remarkably restrained. "Lord Mur?"

"Lord Mur!"

With a roar, Hilan waved to the rest of the men. "Sack the fortress! A double-share of the loot to the man who finds Lord Mur and brings him back to us alive!"

A cheer went up among the sailors, then they surged forward, splitting up into small groups. They poured through the doors onto the main courtyard, and in seconds Hilan and Nollin heard the sounds of fighting from within, swords ringing, shouts, curses, screams of the dying and wounded.

"Shall we join them?" Nollin said.

"Yes. I'll kill Mur myself."

"Not if I find him first!"

They looked at each other, grinning madly, and it was like the days of their youth, when they had sailed the Seren Sea together. Hilan stroked the white scar on his cheek.

"A contest?" he said. "Winner gets Mur all to himself?"

"Agreed!" Nollin cried. He turned and ran for the nearest door, getting a quick lead. He'd always been faster than his brother. But Hilan was determined and had a certain animal cunning. No, the race would be close.

The door stood open. Nollin entered the audience chamber and hesitated for a second, looking around. Guttering torches along the walls provided dim light. Several bodies littered the floor, and one lay draped across Lord Mur's throne, princely in death. To the left, in one of the antechambers, he heard fighting. To his right rose the huge stone staircase leading to the next floor.

Hilan caught up and passed him, heading for the staircase without a moment's hesitation. Nollin shrugged philosophically and followed his brother. Together they went up the stairs at breakneck speed, splitting up only when they reached the top and had to skirt a small battle. A pair of Mur's guards stood back to back, engaging a band of sailors, and they were managing to hold their own. Several of Hilan's men nursed bloodied arms where the two had scored.

As Hilan headed to the left, toward the far end of the hall and more sounds of swordplay, Nollin stopped for a moment to watch the fight. His surprise grew; the two guards moved like a team, each covering for the other like only professional soldiers could. Then Nollin noticed the similarities between them: both had strikingly blond hair beneath their helmets, thin noses, pale lines for lips. They had high cheekbones and, for all their gauntness, seemed surprisingly strong. Brothers? Mercenaries? They didn't have the look of Lord Mur and his people.

"Wait!" he called.

At once his men backed away from their opponents. The two guards watched him warily, swords half-raised. The first wiped sweat from his eyes.

Nollin looked them over, slowly circling. They shifted easily, like cats. Shock was apparent on their faces.

"Traitor!" one of them hissed.

"Traitor?" he whispered, puzzled. Then he remembered he still looked like Ki Paccif -- the magic hadn't worn off yet. He laughed and willed the illusion to end, concentrating as hard as he could. The air before him shimmered. When the heaviness on his face and body lifted, he knew the magic was gone. He stood there as Nollin Lammiat once more.

"Put down your weapons," he told them. "You won't be harmed; I give you my word. I see you're not of Mur's people, so I bear you no grudge. Where are you from? Pethis?"

Cautiously, the one on the right shook his head. "Coran." He lowered his sword. "I'm Lan Ralbirnas. This is my brother, Ersal."

Nollin nodded. "Mur is doomed. This fortress will be mine within the hour... you can see what's happening. After this fight, we'll need more men for the ships. If you're interested, I've got a place for both of you. What do you say?"

Lan hesitated. "Perhaps?"

"Good." Nollin nodded. "I assume you've been here long enough to learn your way around. Where's Mur's suite?"

Ersal pointed to the right. "That way. Turn at the corner, then you can't miss it. The doors are painted white."

"Thanks." He started to the right, laughing to himself. Hilan went the wrong way! Then he turned to Lan and Ersal, saying, "Find something else to wear. There'll be plenty of things in the nobles' rooms, so help yourselves. I won't ask you to fight the rest of the guards, just to stay out of the way for now. We'll get everything straightened out later."

"That's fine with us," Lan said. He sheathed his sword, as did Ersal.

Nollin continued down the hallway cautiously, then turned the corner and saw the silver doors just ahead. But, curse his luck, his brother stood at the far end of the hall. Apparently Hilan had come in a circle.

They both dashed forward and reached the doors at the same time. Hilan glared at him. Nollin grinned back.

"A tie."

"Unless he isn't here." Hilan pushed at the door, but it had been barred from the inside and wouldn't open. "All right," he admitted, "we found him."

"We'll rush it on the count of three," Nollin said, stepping back.

Hilan following, growling softly. He raised his sword.

"One... two..."

And on two, Hilan hurled himself at the door. Its light wood shattered easily. He crashed through and sprawled onto the room's floor. With a sigh, Nollin stepped over his brother's body. He found himself in a large, elegantly

furnished room, facing Loja Toravoon and Laparga, the captain of the guard -- both of whom held swords. Behind them, also armed with a sword, stood Lord Mur himself. Mur's face was very, very pale.

Nollin took a fighter's stance as his brother climbed to his feet and raised his monkey-skull sword.

Hilan was laughing. "I won!"

"You cheated."

"He's still mine!"

"Oh, all right. Take him, then. I didn't want to kill him that much, anyway."

They both took a step toward Mur. Then another.

Nollin called, "We only want Lord Mur. If you two lay down your weapons, you won't be killed."

"Toravoon, Laparga, you fools!" Nissav cried. "You should have rushed them!"

Loja Toravoon turned and glared at his master. "You have a sword. I didn't see you rushing them."

"Why you insolent old -- "

"Shut up, boy!" Toravoon snapped. "I'll run you through myself if you don't."

"No!" Hilan shouted. "Don't do that! He's mine!"

The three of them looked at Hilan, who smiled broadly.

The brothers Lammiat advanced another step. Nollin made tiny circles with the tip of his sword, drawing their attention to his blade, while he made a curious motion with his left wrist. A knife slipped into his palm. He threw it, his arm a blur of motion, and it struck the new captain of the guard in the shoulder.

The man dropped his sword and pawed at the knife, cursing. Then he collapsed and writhed on the floor, foam collecting at his mouth. He died seconds later with a sharp cry of pain.

Swallowing, Loja Toravoon said, "Nollin Lammiat, I wish to surrender now!" He threw his sword across the room and raised his hands.

"My, what loyalty you inspire, Lord Mur," Nollin said sarcastically.

Nissav bit his lip. Then he lunged, suddenly, and ran his blade through his counsellor's back.

A surprised look came over Loja Toravoon's face. "My Lord," he whispered. He winced as Nissav wrenched the sword free, then he fell. Coughing, blood streaming from nose and mouth, he died with a low whimper.

Nollin felt something tighten in his stomach and cursed softly. It was one thing to die in open battle. But to be stabbed in the back by a friend...

"For that," he told Mur, in a cold, hard voice, "your death will be twice as long and twice as painful."

Holding his sword ready, Nissav backed up to the wall. He kept glancing from Hilan to Nollin and back again, the tip of his blade darting back and forth between them like some mad insect.

Then the wooden panel behind him slid aside, revealing darkness. A gnarled hand reached out, seized Nissav's shoulder, and jerked him inside.

Lord Mur yelped in surprise.

The panel slid shut with a click.

Through the Tunnels

Monsters live in the odd corners of the world. Some were Shon Atasha's first creations, bizarre things with eyes like stars and bodies of air or water; others are products of magic, creations of wizards whose fancies knew no bounds. The vampire fluffs of Lost Xonthar were (so legends say) one wizard's unsuccessful attempt to breed arboreal sheep. Still other creatures are from the shadowlands, twisted reflections made real by their entrance to our world.

-- Pere Denberel

Atlas of the World, Revised

Nollin gaped at the wall. Hilan ran forward and kicked the panel as hard as he could, but the wood didn't break. He struck it again and again, still with no effect, then backed up and stared at it.

"There must be a hidden catch," Nollin said. He walked forward slowly, studying the wall, but didn't see anything usual. The intricate woodwork might have hidden a hundred buttons, latches, or switches, though, and he never would have seen them. Running his fingers over the panel, then over the moulding around it, he found only dust and splinters.

He stepped away. "We'll need an axe."

When Nissav backed up to the wall, he thought he only had a few seconds left to live. The Lammiats moved closer, swords glinting in the lamplight. Then the two stopped and stared at something behind him, apparently surprised. But he knew that trick and didn't look. Instead, he tensed, prepared to fight.

A hand grabbed his shoulder from behind, pulling him into a secret passage he'd never known existed. He yelped. The panel slid shut, locked with a click, and darkness surrounded him.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

"Your chamberlain, my Lord."

"Voyith? What -- how -- ?"

Voyith spoke an odd-sounding, guttural word, and a reddish light flared all around them, revealing the old chamberlain. Nissav couldn't see where the light was coming from, and shivered, looking first one way, then the other.

They stood in a cramped passage that smelled of dust and rotting wood. The ceiling lay a scant hand's width over his head, the walls so close two men could not have passed one another. His chamberlain turned and shuffled off down the passage, leaving him to follow or be left alone.

He could hear the Lammiats banging on the secret panel. It sounded as though they'd break through in any minute, so he turned and hurried after Voyith. Though the passage divided a dozen different times, the old man never hesitated; he seemed to know the passage well, as though he'd travelled it many times before.

"Where are we going?" Nissav called at last. The floor now sloped steeply downward, perhaps heading toward the beach, but he'd lost all sense of direction and couldn't be sure. He did know that they were already far below the fortress. The walls, seamless, carved from bedrock, glistened with seeping water.

Still Voyith said nothing.

He gave up asking questions and they continued in silence for a time. Finally the tunnel widened and became a natural cave, with stalactites and stalagmites and all manner of strange rock flows draped like carpets around them. Entranced by the cave's beauty, Nissav didn't notice his chamberlain had stopped until he bumped into the old man.

Voyith rounded on him, glaring. "Careful, you oaf!"

Nissav snapped, "How dare you speak to me that way! I -- "

He broke off suddenly as a low, growling roar echoed from ahead.. He shivered, unnerved. What sort of beasts lived in caves like this? He imagined giant bats and slimy, winged things with bulging white eyes and razor-sharp claws.

Fingering his sword, he peered as far ahead as he could, but saw only darkness. Yet something seemed to be moving there...

Abruptly, his chamberlain clapped his hands. The red glow went out like a lamp's flame suddenly snuffed, leaving them in utter dark.

The roar came again, louder than before, nearer. Nissav tensed, a thousand fears running through his mind. He heard the splat-splat tread of great splayed feet --

And then he saw the eyes.

By the time Hilan returned with an axe, Nollin had just about given up hope of ever catching Lord Mur in the secret passage. Almost five minutes had passed, more than enough time for a half-blind, crippled old woman to escape from the fortress. Mur could easily be in the wilds of Saliin by now, safe from them and their men. He might be riding to his neighbors for help, raising an army to retake his lands...

"Damn him," he whispered. Then he moved back, giving his brother enough room to swing the axe.

Hilan raised it over his head, muscles rippling like water beneath his green silk shirt, and tightened his grip on the haft. With a savage cry, he brought the axe down. It bit deep into the panel's wood. Wrenching it free, he struck again and again. Wood chips flew. Sweat glistened on his arms and face. At last the panel shattered, splinters raining down around them.

He kicked the rest of the wood away from the opening, snatched up his sword, and started to duck through. Nollin grabbed his arm.

"Wait," he said.

Hilan wrenched out of his grasp. "We had a deal, brother. He's mine!"

Listen to me! He's gone, so forget about him. He had too much of a head start, and you don't even know which way he went, do you? Nor do you have a lantern. What happens if you get lost?"

He shrugged.

"I'll tell you what. You wander around some more and maybe fall into a trap, or an ambush, or just maybe you never find your way out again. Who knows how

far that passage goes, or where? Think before you go rushing off."

"So how do we catch Mur?" Hilan growled.

Nollin smiled. "We wait. He'll be back soon enough. Trust me."

Nissav stared at the eyes coming toward him. They were red and feral and seemed to burn like embers in the darkness. He caught a strange, sharp smell like an animal's musk, unpleasant, unhealthy, and took several steps back.

Then a strange half-humming, half-crooning sound began. It raised the hackles on his neck, made him shiver uncontrollably. He realized, suddenly, that the sound came from just ahead... from his chamberlain? The thought disturbed him. What was the old man doing?

A second hum joined the first... a harsher sound, full of discords and gratings no human throat could ever produce.

"Voyith?" he whispered. "What's going on? What are you doing?"

He took a step forward hesitantly. Before he knew what was happening, something hard struck him on the back of the head and he saw no more.

By dawn the fortress lay completely in the Lammiat brothers' hands. As an exhausted Nollin Lammiat walked along the battlements, deep in thought, he gazed down on the hundred-odd prisoners massed in the main courtyard. About half of them were guards who'd been stripped of weapons and armor, their hands bound behind their backs. They had black eyes, split lips, and rough bandages over their wounds. Only their eyes moved, following him as he paced. They had the doomed, hung-dog looks of those who expected death at any moment. Their silence was oppressive, unnatural.

The minor nobles of the court crouched there as well. The men glowered up at him, their bruised, swollen faces marking what persuasions his men had used to get their obedience the night before. The ladies looked particularly disheveled, with their fancy coifs in disarray, with their elegant nightgowns ripped and soiled.

Nollin sighed. They clearly thought him a barbarian even though he'd shown more mercy than any attacking army should have. None of the women had been raped; none of the noblemen had been executed after the fight. Saliin hadn't known war for so long that they took his generosity as a matter of course. If Hilan had been in charge... Nollin didn't want to think of the bloodbath that would have resulted. Still, it irked him that the nobles expected to be pampered and coddled and left to their own devices. They'd actually been offended when he wouldn't let them return to their beds after he'd seized the fortress.

Sighing again, head aching, and turned and gazed out across the empty fields. He tried to put the nobles from his mind, if for only a moment.

Not a single peasant was working. He guessed they'd retreated to their houses, holing up until order was restored. Not, of course, that they cared whose order, just so long as their instructions and meals came regularly.

With the wheat almost ready to harvest and nobody working, even Nollin could see something had to be done, and soon, or the whole of Saliin would have a lean, hungry winter.

Hilan had temporarily vanished (having abducted, Nollin assumed, a willing girl from the local tavern), but his brother wouldn't have been very much help anyway. Hilan had a strange hatred of farming, and everything else having to do with life on land.

That meant Nollin would have to get things started himself. No matter what he thought of their Lord, he couldn't leave the peasants to starve. There were perhaps two thousand of them in the village below the fortress, and another fifteen thousand in all the lands Mur once ruled. They'd been innocent. Too many of his crewmen had run away from lands such as Saliin, come to the sea because they'd been starving or because their Lords had been petty tyrants, for him to ignore their plight.

But first, the people in the courtyard. He turned wearily to look them over once more.

Finally, after clearing his throat, he spoke to the guards: "We have no desire to see any of you dead. Our grudge lies with Mur alone. For some reason he tried to seize our ships, butcher our crews, kill my brother and me. We had never done him any harm, nor did we intend to. Now a problem remains. What should we do with you? By all rights you should be put to death, but I have no great desire for more bloodshed. Instead, you will be asked to swear loyalty to Hilan and me. Those who refuse will be sent to live and work with the peasants -- without weapons, of course. Those who obey will be suitably rewarded.

"The nobles... ah, that's a different matter." He smiled down at one of the ladies, who blushed and looked away. "You will be allowed to live as you always have within the fortress walls. I will select the new Lord of Saliin from among you."

"We already have a Lord," one nobleman called out. He stood awkwardly. "What of him? You cannot merely cast him out!" The man held his head high despite his bonds and actually managed a kind of quiet dignity.

"He will be killed," Nollin said. "Hilan and I have little doubt he'll try to recapture his fortress."

"But why can't you just take what you want and go? We can do you no harm now, nor can Lord Mur!"

Nollin sighed. "We can't leave Mur here alive and in power. It's a point of honor. We meant him no harm, and would have left Saliin with good feelings and friendship between us. But his hospitality was betrayal. We were his guests, under his protection. Thieves and assassins are not unusual in the world. But to have one in a position of power, ruling a land, is insufferable. These are crimes against custom and honor which can not be left to pass."

"I believe none of your fancy speech!" the man said. "You want to kill him!"

Nollin smiled without humor. "That, too."

"Then are you any better than Lord Mur?"

"The battle's over and my men hold the walls. If I were your Lord Mur, you'd be dead by now. What do you think?"

The man snorted. He sat down again and stared at the pavingstones.

Nollin turned away, suddenly too tired to continue. The excitement of battle had kept him going far longer than normally possible. Now his head began to throb and all he wanted to do was crawl into a bed and sleep for a good, long while. "Rilal and Klaff, our first mates, will see to all the details of your release."

All at once the prisoners began to talk among themselves, and the babble of relieved voices rose to a deafening level. Nollin winced, trying to shut out the noise. He decided, then and there, to return to his ship. On the Serpent at least he could rest as long as he wanted without being disturbed.

As he walked down the stairs to the courtyard, he saw Hilan run through the main gates. Reluctantly, he forced himself to wave and call a welcome. His brother, Nollin noticed with disgust, looked as fresh and well-rested as ever, strutting forward proudly and cockily. He'd even found the time to change clothes; now he wore a bright yellow shirt, sky-blue pants, and a billowy red cape. Emeralds sparkled in his beard.

Nollin looked down at his own clothes and grimaced. Blood and sweat stained his black silk shirt, and his cape was both ripped and muddy. He gave his shirt a quick brush with the back of his hand, then gave up. It looked utterly hopeless. He'd have his clothes burned. Idly, he wondered if he looked as tired as he felt. He didn't doubt it; virtue had few rewards. Not that he felt particularly virtuous at the moment.

"What is it now?" he asked, as Hilan reached his side.

"Let's go someplace private."

Nollin noticed a small room to his right, beneath the battlements. Once weapons had been stored there, but his men had taken them and now it stood empty. He led the way. Inside it smelled of dust and old leather; dim light slanted down through high, narrow windows. It would do well enough, Nollin thought.

Hilan shut the door for privacy.

"What's so important?" Nollin asked, yawning.

"I found Mur's trail!"

"How? Where?" He found himself breathing faster, his own excitement growing. If they could bring him back alive --

"On the beach," Hilan said, "about a half-mile from here, I discovered tracks leading from a cave. I think he's heading for the mountains. If we hurry, we'll catch him before nightfall!"

"How many are with him?"

"Maybe one. Maybe none." Hilan grinned. "There's an animal of some kind. I didn't recognize its tracks, but it's large enough that someone might be riding it."

"Are you sure it wasn't a horse?"

"I know what a horse's tracks look like, Nollin."

"Maybe they tied cloth over the hooves..." He shrugged. "But I don't suppose it matters."

"No. We'll kill it, whatever it is."

"You don't kill horses. They're valuable!"

Hilan grinned again. "They also taste good."

Nissav woke to pain. It seemed to radiate from the back of his skull -- wave after wave of excruciating, nauseating pain, as if his head had been staved in with a club. He risked opening one eye. The world blurred and sayed dangerously. Groaning, he closed it and wished he were dead.

"You're awake," a familiar voice said. "Get off. I'm tired of walking."

He opened both eyes this time. It took a tremendous effort, but the world stopped moving. His mouth was dry; he licked cracked lips with a tongue that felt like a rasp. Craning his head up, he could just see Voyith standing beside him, looking dusty and tired.

Morning had come and they'd made it to the beach. The sea lapped gently at the shore behind his chamberlain, sending pale blue fingers of water running up the sand.

Nissav rubbed his eyes, straightened, stretched. Then he looked down and saw that he'd been lashed onto some sort of giant . . . black... insect?

He jerked upright and would have fallen off, if it weren't for the ropes around his feet. The insect beneath him waited calmly. It stood taller than a horse, and its chitinous body shone like polished ebony. He rode high on the thorax, just behind the head. An oddly shaped leather saddle had been cinched between its first and second sets of legs.

A jolt of fear ran through him. He began to struggle to get off, to get the ropes from his feet, to get away from the thing.

"He's a landrex," Voyith said. "Pretty, isn't he? I call this one Arlag. His kind is older than humanity. Once they numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but now...." He shrugged. "Perhaps there are five hundred in the last colony. Still, that is more than enough for my purposes."

Nissav stopped and stared at him. "What -- "

"You need help to regain your lands. I have friends. This landrex is one of them. There are more like him in the Raltanian Mountains, and certain others who will aid us, if I ask."

"I don't understand," Nissav whispered.

"You don't have to. Trust me, my Lord Mur. Do as I instruct and the Lammiat brothers will soon be dead. And you will rule Saliin again." He stepped forward and began to work at the ropes binding Nissav's feet in the stirrups. "I've walked since before dawn. Change places with me now."

Untied, Nissav slid to the ground. The giant insect, the landrex, bent and looked at him for the first time. It had two large, many-faceted red eyes (the ones he'd seen in the cave?), along with large, sharp mandibles that looked like they could easily snip a man in half. A pair of long, velvety feelers graced the top of its head. It clicked softly to itself, then made a harsh grating sound.

Voyith clutched a small silver pendant hanging around his neck for a second and hummed back to the landrex, softly stroking its forehead. He put his right foot in the stirrup and swung up onto its back. When he reached out and grasped its feelers like a horse's reins, the insect started forward at once. Its gait was strange and rolling, as each leg took its turn, but it moved faster than a man could comfortably walk.

Nissav watched it warily. He hadn't quite decided what to think. The Lammiats attacking, his chamberlain saving him, waking up on the landrex -- it was all happening so quickly! He closed his eyes, praying to wake up and find it had all been a nightmare.

But he could still hear the murmur of the surf, still taste the salt on the air. Overhead, a gull cried, its voice raucous and out of place in the desolation.

He opened his eyes. The sea still ran to his left; the high dunes of sand, with their scraggly caps of marshgrass, still rose to his right. Nothing had changed except Voyith had ridden up the beach without him. The landrex lumbered on as though nothing would stop it.

Nissav knew he would go with Voyith and the creature. If his chamberlain really could help him win his lands back...

Surviving the Lammiats' attack must have been an omen, he realized. The gods meant for him to follow the old man. Perhaps Voyith would lead him to the paradise he'd always dreamed of . . . to the eastern lands, to Pethis, or Coran, or even Zelloque itself, the greatest city in the world.

He began to run.

On the Beach

Before the gods created man, they toyed with other races, whom we today call the Lost Ones. We know little of their kind: they worked in stone, and here and there one can still find their underground cities, or other monuments to their fleeting greatness. I can but hope humanity lasts longer than they did.

-- Tellerion

Speculations

Nollin Lammiat sat astride a fine black stallion, looking down the coast of Saliin from the top of a hill. Miles of white, sandy beach stretched out before him, broken here and there by outcroppings of black rock. Nothing moved ahead but the flocks of birds -- herons, gulls, others -- fishing in tidal pools. The crescent sun cast the waves in gold and silver, and a magnificent sunset purpled the west. Far behind him he heard the distant jingle of tack and creak of leather. A horse whinnied.

He turned his stallion and rode back down to the beach where the others waited. They'd followed Mur's trail all day, riding their horses as hard as they dared, and found -- nothing. Lord Mur had somehow, impossibly, kept up a steady pace (on foot, no less!) that they could not begin to match. As the day wore on, his trail became older and older; he showed no sign of slowing for any reason.

Nollin blamed magic. What other explanation could there be?

And Hilan blamed Nollin. Nollin could still hear his brother's accusing voice as he rode up the hill: "You said he'd come back. You said we'd catch him." Indeed, it looked like Mur would slip through their grasp. Nollin was certain now that they would never catch him on horseback.

Hilan stood on the beach with ten hand-picked men from the Serpent. They had all dismounted to rest their horses and stretch their legs while they waited for Nollin's return.

"Well?" Hilan called.

Nollin reined in. "There's no sign of him."

"Then we'll have to ride faster."

"No, brother. We'll have to go back to Saliin."

"Who says so?" he demanded. "We'll catch Mur if it takes all night!"

"I say so, brother, and common sense says so. He's moving faster than our horses. Now he's so far ahead that it could take weeks to find him, and we don't have that much time."

"I'll find the time. He's mine!"

With a sigh, Nollin decided to change tactics. He'd picked men from his ship, rather than his brother's, for good reason.

"Go ahead," he said.

Hilan blinked, surprised. "What?"

"I said, go ahead. Go get Lord Mur."

"What sort of trick is this?" he growled.

"You're ever the trusting one. Brother, I've changed my mind. I was wrong to try and stop you. Of course you have the right to track down Lord Mur. After all, we had a gentleman's agreement."

"Gentlemen, huh!"

Nollin smiled thinly. "It only takes one."

Hilan crossed to his horse and swung easily into the saddle. "We're wasting time."

"I'm not going. And neither are my men."

His brother glared, then kicked his horse and made it trot to Nollin's side. "We're all going."

"I have better things to do with my time than chase Mur."

Hilan swore, then drew his sword. "If your men don't come with me, I'll run them through. And then it'll just be the two of us again, and I won't make the same mistake I made last night!"

Nollin motioned for his men to stay where they were, then wheeled his horse and rode thirty yards up the beach. He waited for his brother to join him.

Hilan soon did. "What do you say now?" Hilan demanded.

"Only that your temper will get you killed one day."

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Oh, not by me!" Nollin laughed softly. "My men hold no allegiance to you. If you keep saying you're going to kill them, I won't be responsible for what happens."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Merely cautioning, brother. After all, I promised Father I'd look after you. If they jump you when my back is turned . . ."

Hilan snorted, brandishing his sword. "Let them try! I'd gut them all!"

"That's not what you want, and you know it."

"Oh?" he said sarcastically. "Then what do I want?"

"What's best for yourself, and then for your crew. There's no point in chasing after Mur now, and if you relax and set your feelings aside, you'll see what I mean."

"Will I?"

"And Hilan... I'm asking you to talk to me calmly, rather than try to bully your way through. Is that so much?"

"I still want to kill him!"

"So do I. So what? Now, let's get back to our ships peacefully. You can amuse

yourself in Mur's winecellar for a time. I trust you know how?"

"You're not as smart as you think." With that, Hilan spurred his horse, heading back the way they'd come, back toward Saliin.

Nollin sighed and rubbed his forehead. It was hot and he was tired; the excitement of the chase had given him a sudden boost of energy, but it had worn off hours ago. He hadn't slept in what -- forty hours now? -- and he knew his temper had grown short. He'd been far, far too curt with his brother. Still, he knew he'd been right. No matter what Hilan said, he would have given up the chase. It didn't make sense to continue. Nevertheless, he found the decision painful. He'd been looking forward to Lord Mur's prolonged, painful death.

"Mount up!" he called to his crewmen. "We're going back." He spurred his horse, hurrying to catch up with his brother.

Hilan was sulking, though, and wouldn't speak to him. They rode the rest of the way with an angry, brooding silence between them.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur trailed after Voyith and the landrex for hours. He had to jog to keep up. His legs ached; his chest constricted so he could hardly breathe. Much to his embarrassment, he had to beg his chamberlain to slow down several times. Reluctantly, it seemed, Voyith would oblige for a time -- and then he'd continue as quickly as before, leaving Nissav to stumble and follow as best he could.

As day faded into dusk, the land around them began to change. The beach grew rocky. Tall chalk cliffs rose to their right, and strange birds with bright feathers and hoarse, whispery cries circled high overhead. The sun -- now the thinnest of crescents -- touched the sea with its last rays and set the waves running with jags of gold and silver.

Still Nissav stumbleled on. When he looked up, he saw Voyith ranging far ahead, a dark shape blending into the horizon. He cursed under his breath, feeling his parched lips crack, and forced himself to greater speed.

Suddenly a stitch in his side made him wince. Stumbling, he caught his foot between two stones and fell, twisting his ankle and skinning both hands and knees. He cried out in agony as a sharp, fiery pain shot through the length of his left leg.

Carefully he worked his foot free. For a long time he just sat there and nursed his ankle, no longer looking up, no longer caring whether Voyith abandoned him or not. He felt utterly beaten by the world. Shuddering, he closed his eyes and let his thoughts slip away. He just wanted to be alone, warm, and dry.

Hearing the sharp clatter of insect feet on stones, he looked up and found Voyith glaring at him. The landrex's eyes glowed faintly red in the twilight, lending it an ominous, surreal look. And, in the near dark, the chamberlain also seemed transformed. His face had taken on a hardness that seemed almost unnatural in someone so old. He held his body erect with a stiff-backed military bearing that spoke of both physical strength and inner confidence. In a strange moment of fancy Nissav thought the years were rolling back and, as he watched, Voyith was becoming younger and younger. Then he realized their roles had somehow become reversed, with Voyith now master and he some disobedient underling.

"Get up," Voyith said. He clutched the pendant around his neck.

"I -- "

"Do it!"

Nissav found himself scrambling to his feet almost before he could think. The chamberlain's voice held a ring of command that somehow couldn't be disobeyed.

"Now follow me."

Voyith wheeled his landrex around. It swayed forward, six feet clicking on small beach-stones, a shadow moving into deeper shadows. Nissav could barely see the glow of its red eyes. Cursing, trying to ignore the pain in his ankle, he limped after them.

The world seemed to blur. Time stretched endlessly. The soft lap-lapping of the sea became a deafening roar that forced him onward, ever onward. At last he stumbled one final step and found himself a handsbreadth from the landrex. He drew up, gasping. The creature had stopped. He could rest.

Voyith twisted around in the saddle. The old man's eyes reflected the stars and the sea, cold and inhuman.

"Come," he said, almost gently. "Soon we will be there, my Lord Mur. We must leave the beach now."

Groaning, Nissav forced himself upright. He couldn't feel his left foot anymore. A numbness had settled in: he didn't think, he just moved as commanded.

He followed the landrex through a break in the cliffs, up a wide ravine which ran with a small rush of water. Over his rough panting breath and the pounding of his heart, the stream sounded like a dozen pleasant voices talking all at once. He closed his eyes for a second, listening to the song of night birds, the chirrup sounds of crickets in the scraggly grass. Then Voyith called and he was moving again, scrambling over rocks and brush, heading steadily upwards.

At times the landrex seemed to scuttle up sheer cliffs. When Nissav tried to follow, he found small handholds carved in the rock, as though a way had been prepared for him. He pulled himself up, forcing himself to move one more foot, then another, then another.

At last they reached a wide ledge. A cave opened before them. Somehow, Nissav had the impression it stretched deep into the heart of the Earth. Far down its length he saw a faint glimmer of light.

Voyith paused for a moment, touching the pendant around his neck, and murmured something so softly Nissav couldn't hear the words. The landrex moved forward. Swallowing, Nissav stumbled along behind them.

After fifty yards and several sharp twists, the tunnel opened up into a huge, brightly-lit cavern. It seemed all crystal and light, with huge gleaming spires, vast angles, glittering facets. Nissav gaped, stunned at the beauty of the place. It shone like some forest of diamonds. With every step he took, the pattern of light and shadow changed, walls kaleidescoping around him. He saw himself reflected in the crystals' silver facets, his image multiplied and distorted until it became finally an unrecognizable blur.

Slowly he became aware of the landrexi. They drifted around him like phantoms in the night, moving among the crystals with the grace of dancers. They gathered around Voyith in the center of the cavern. The chamberlain hummed to them and they hummed back. The crystals seemed to catch the sound and carry it everywhere, turning it into an endless rhythmic burr of sound.

Nissav covered his ears to shut it out. He squeezed closed his eyes.

After a time, silence washed over him like an in-rushing tide. Opening his eyes, he found himself surrounded by landrexi. Their dark, multifaceted eyes gleamed. Two of them scuttled back, leaving him room to walk forward.

When he took a step, the two landrexi behind him edged forward. He stopped. Slowly they inched up behind him, growing uncomfortably near. He took another step, suddenly nervous.

"Voyith!"

The echoes from his call brought no answer, no whisper of another human voice. His chamberlain had vanished.

What to do now? Wait for him? Try to find him?

The landrexi didn't give him a choice. They pressed closer, forcing him toward the rear of the cavern, never quite touching him directly, but crowding so he had no place to move except onward. They seemed experienced with herding humans, he realized, as if they'd done it before.

Nissav reluctantly gave in and limped forward, letting the creatures guide him. What else could he do? He wasn't in any condition to fight them.

The far end of the crystal cavern narrowed into a tunnel. The stone walls stood far enough apart for a good half dozen men to walk abreast, but only two of the insect-creatures. The roof arched perhaps ten feet overhead. It, like the walls, had been carved from solid rock; in places he saw chisel marks. He guessed human hands had made the tunnels, since the landrexi, despite their seeming intelligence, had no way of manipulating tools.

As he hesitated, they pressed up behind him again, antennae just brushing the back of his neck. Their touch was soft, like he'd just walked into a spiderweb. Shuddering, he jumped forward, hackles rising, skin crawling. He felt a nagging sense of uncleanness as though they'd left some sort of filthy residue on him. He resisted the impulse to try and brush whatever it was away. He wouldn't show any weakness. He swore it over and over to himself.

The landrexi guided him past dozens of small, gaping doorways. He wondered briefly at the empty rooms. Why have them if they weren't needed? Hadn't the creatures stored food for the coming winter? Still, he hadn't seen more than a tiny section of their hive; if their numbers had been steadily shrinking, as Voyith said, they probably had space aplenty for food.

The tunnel opened into a large circular room with a shallow depression in the floor. Dozens of tall, glowing crystals had been imbedded in the walls at regular intervals. They provided a pleasantly dim light. The center of the room had been marked off with a series of concentric rings, the first decorations Nissav had seen since entering the underground.

Smaller rooms opened off the chamber. Several had been walled off with semitransparent yellow sheets of what looked like gum or resin. Odd shadows shifted behind those walls.

The landrexi didn't give Nissav time to stop and look around. Instead, they crowded him into one of the rooms, a cubicle perhaps ten feet wide and long. Water slowly dripped from the ceiling, spattering into a shallow stone basin that jutted from one wall, while the overflow trickled down to a small hole in the floor. A straw pallet lay on the floor, rank with the sickly-sweet smell of mold.

The place resembled nothing so much as a dungeon cell, he thought. Still, it seemed safe enough.

He glanced over his shoulder. The landrexi's feelers moved up and down, up and down. At last, as if satisfied he wouldn't run away, they turned and walked off. Their feet made tiny clicking noises on the stone floor.

Nissav lay on the straw, ignoring the smell, and closed his eyes. Almost immediately he slept.

He dreamed of great sailing ships, of monstrous red-eyed sailors who turned into giant ants and chased him down endless crystal corridors.

Somewhere close, a woman screamed.

Nissav jolted upright. For a second, he didn't know where he was or what had disturbed him. Then he remembered Voyith and the landrexi. Leaping to his feet, he drew his sword.

The entrance to the room had been walled shut while he slept. A huge sheet of some yellow material now stretched across the doorway. He ran to it, pounded on it with the hilt of his sword. It rang like a bell with a clear, high-pitched note, but didn't yield an inch. It seemed to be made of incredibly hard glass or cut stone.

He heard the scream again, clearer than before. He could see blurry yellow shapes moving on the other side of the wall. The large ones had to be landrexi. Had they taken some woman prisoner?

Nissav found a small patch of almost-transparent yellow in the wall and pressed his eye to it.

Three landrexi ringed a half-naked woman who bled from dozens of wounds. As Nissav watched, one of the creatures lashed out with a forward leg, striking her in the head and sending her spinning to the floor. She screamed again, louder than before, and Nissav felt a sudden wrenching in his stomach, a terrible premonition of horrors to come.

The three creatures leaped forward, mandibles snapping, and the woman's body vanished beneath them. She screamed again for a second, a screech of pain and fear.

"No!" Nissav shouted, pounding on the wall with his fists. "No!"

The woman's cries stopped abruptly. The landrexi huddled over her body, making little hunching movements. When they drew back some minutes later, no trace of a body remained. Even the blood was gone from the floor.

But those screams still echoed in Nissav's mind. He shuddered, sick at his stomach. They'd eaten her. No wonder he hadn't seen any trace of food being stored in their hive. They ate people.

He turned his head away, trembling. Monsters! Demons! He cursed to himself, over and over again until the words became meaningless sounds.

Then he crawled back to his pallet and huddled there, eyes pressed shut, stomach roiling. His hands shook. His head hurt with an ache that he thought would never go away.

What had Voyith gotten him into? What had he ever done to deserve this? He had a terrible feeling inside... a feeling he might be the creatures' next meal.

He wept.

Unhappy Circumstances

Beware the unknown! And if it moves, kill it!

-- Zelloquan proverb

The following days passed all too slowly for Nollin Lammiat. He found himself becoming more and more embroiled in the mechanics of running Saliin as he assumed Lord Mur's duties. Still, when he stood on the fortress's battlements, he noticed clear progress: fully half the fields had been harvested, and work kept the peasants busy. He watched one of the threshing circles, where yoked oxen circled endlessly, their trampling hooves separating wheat from chaff. Young boys sifted the grain in the breeze, then swept it into large cloth bags, which older farmers carried to waiting carts.

He sighed. Domestic chores, despite their necessity, bored him. He longed to surrender his responsibilities here and set sail. The sea called him like a lover too long neglected.

But Loanu and Hilan bound him there. The witch insisted on staying until they found her pendant; Hilan wanted Mur. They had both become obsessed with their private greeds.

Nollin hated it all. He glared at the fields and the people working there as though, through his anger, he could make them disappear. A week of searching for Mur and the pendant with no results! He felt infinitely trapped. His promises were closing in around him like a giant net.

Turning, he stalked down the stone stairs to the main courtyard. The guards on duty snapped to attention, backs stiff, hands resting on the hilts of their swords. Their uniforms were spotless, their red capes flowing. These were the men who had sworn to serve him rather than Lord Mur, but still he didn't trust them. If they'd betray one master, wouldn't they betray another?

Or perhaps they didn't have the imagination for treachery. As he looked upon their bland, contented faces, he saw little to give him cause for worry. He'd never seen a worse group of professional soldiers.

He strode past them, through the open door and into the throneroom. All the valuables from the fortress, except those he'd already transferred aboard ship, had been assembled here: the richest tapestries, the nobles' jewels, the most beautiful furniture. Everything lay in huge, jumbled piles, lending the place an atmosphere of decadent opulence quite unlike anything Nollin had ever seen before. The very air seemed to ooze wealth.

A dozen-odd men and women reclined on low couches, sipping wine or staring off into space. They wore coarsely woven robes of gay hue, reds and yellows mostly, but here and there a trace of gold or brilliant green. They were some of Saliin's petty nobles, but he knew none of their names. They were shallow people, quick to ally themselves with Hilan, quick to sing his praises as their saviour from "the tyranny of Lord Mur." Their faces were pallid, their expressions bland and content.

They barely looked up when he entered the room. Nollin passed them without a word.

Hilan sprawled across the throne, one leg over its arm. He wore bright red today: numerous folds of silk, blood-red rubies in his beard, dozens of ornate gold rings and bejeweled necklaces. Mur's crown sat askew on his head and his pair of matched swords lay on the floor close at hand.

Hilan had been drinking heavily, Nollin saw; spilled wine stained his shirt, and more trickled from the corner of his mouth. He held a heavy silver goblet in one huge hand. When he gestured regally for Nollin to join him, dark wine sloshed over its edge. Instantly a fair-haired serving girl stepped forward to refill his cup. Hilan leered at her.

"Still playing Lord of Saliin?" Nollin said, trying to keep his disgust from his voice. He looked at the thin circlet of gold on his brother's head. "I would've thought you'd have grown tired of that game by now."

"You're jealous," Hilan said, his words slurring together. He took off his crown and twirled it absently with one finger. He stopped, looked at it, then tossed it aside with a sigh. It hit the floor, bounced on end, and rolled over to a chest of silks, where it came to a stop. "Jealous."

"Of what? It takes more than a crown to make a ruler."

Hilan shifted and sat up. "What do you want?"

"You're getting soft. Why don't you go down to the sea, look at your ship? Discipline's lax. You'll find enough there to keep you busy."

"No."

"I want to leave. Tonight."

"No!"

"I can't stay in Saliin another day."

"You think I like it here?" Hilan shouted, throwing his goblet. It sailed three feet over Nollin's head, spraying him with wine. "I won't leave here while Mur's still alive!"

Nollin drew a white silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face and hands in silence. Hilan glared at him. Slowly Nollin half-turned to face the men and women behind him.

"Get out," he said, in a very quiet, very cold voice. His control was perfect. It fed the anger and frustration within him, made him smolder with a fury unlike any he'd felt since he'd last parted company with his brother some three years before. It won't happen that way again, he told himself. I'm older now. I have the self-control I need. I won't try to kill him.

The nobles fled at once, hiking robes up around their knees. The servants followed, closing the huge oak doors as they went. Nollin could imagine them pressing their ears to the wood outside, straining to hear his every word.

Hilan growled. They stared at each other for a long time, neither moving, neither giving the other an inch.

"It's time," Nollin said softly, "to decide who's really in charge."

Hilan stood, shook his head as if to clear it, then reached down and drew one of his swords. The hiss of steel leaving its scabbard grated on Nollin's ears. He drew his own blade smoothly.

"You promised me Mur!" Hilan roared. "I'll not leave until I have him!" He stumbled down from the throne, then leaped forward with a savage downstroke of his sword.

Nollin parried easily, then stepped forward and punched his brother in the side of the head with the pommel of his own sword. He felt more than heard a dull thunk as metal struck flesh, and saw a trickle of blood ooze from a cut just above Hilan's left temple.

Hilan's eyes went glassy. He started to collapse, but Nollin caught him and lowered him to the floor.

"Damn," he said softly. Sheathing his blade, he knelt and cradled his brother's head in his hands, pressing a handkerchief to his wound. White silk reddened with blood.

"Ah, Hilan," he whispered, feeling pain inside, "why do you do this to me?"

Hearing a strange scraping sound, Nissav leaped to his feet and turned to face the sealed doorway to his cell, where dark shapes moved. He heard the humming of insect-speech. The landrexi had come for him, he knew when the yellow wall began to slide to the side.

They won't take me without a fight, he decided grimly, and drew his sword.

His ankle seemed almost well; the swelling had gone down and he only felt a dull, distant itch when he put full weight on it. He'd kill at least one of the creatures, he vowed, rather than give up and let them eat him.

With a low grating, the yellow wall slid clear of the entrance and Voyith stepped into the room. The old chamberlain wore a robe as white as new milk. The silver-gray pendant still hung around his neck, his only adornment. With his long white hair neatly combed, with his hands neatly manicured, Nissav thought he looked ready for some high festinal. Only the pinched, hard expression on Voyith's face spoke of the seriousness of the situation.

"Put the sword down, boy," Voyith said sharply. "You'll injure yourself."

Nissav relaxed. "I didn't expect you!"

"Who were you expecting, then, Hilan Lammiat?"

"No. I... I thought they were going to kill me now." He retrieved his scabbard and sheathed his sword, belting it around his waist.

Slowly Voyith shook his head. "The landrexi are our friends. They are going to help you regain your lands once more. They would never hurt you, at least not while I am here."

"Then why did they lock me up?"

"Merely for convenience." He made reassuring motions with his hands. "You needed time to rest and recover from your escape. Come, now, Lord, surely you've been treated well enough."

"I saw them kill a woman. Oh, Voyith, who was she?" Again Nissav felt mingled fear and horror as he remembered them leaping forward, mandibles tearing into her soft white flesh, forelegs ripping her young body apart. Unconsciously his hand moved toward the hilt of his sword.

Voyith frowned. "I know nothing of this. Wait."

He touched the pendant around his neck, then turned to the nearest creature and made a quick humming sound. It clicked back to him, whistled, clicked again. The other landrexi whistled, too, as if in response.

"There," the chamberlain said. "It's made clear to me. They had a bear down here, a wild animal that went berserk. They were forced to kill it. You were dreaming, and the protective barrier interfered with your vision. There was no woman." He turned to the left, heading up a tunnel.

Nissav followed, protesting, "That's not what I saw!"

"You were sleepy, my Lord. The spirits of the night -- "

"No! I saw them kill a woman!"

Voyith shrugged. "My Lord...."

Nissav gestured vaguely. "I did see it. I know I did!"

"These caverns can play tricks on the human mind. I've seen many strange... things down here. Humans were never meant to live so far from the sun and stars. But come now, the meeting place is just ahead. Our plans have been laid. The landrexi are massing. All they need is you to lead them to victory!"

The tunnel sloped sharply upward, then wound to the left. As Nissav walked, he pondered Voyith's words. Plans made... massing landrexi... a coming battle. Could he do it? Could he lead them in battle? What would the insect-creatures be like as a company of soldiers?

Could he not do it? How could he possibly let Hilan and Nollin rule the land that rightfully belonged to him? What would his father have thought of him if he'd known what would happen? He blushed. No. He had to take control of Saliin again at any cost.

How long had he been kept locked away down here? Days? Weeks? The passing hours had all run together in his mind. Looking down at his left foot, he thought, Long enough for my ankle to heal.

But what if the Lammiats had finished with his lands? What if they'd plundered his fortress, burned his people's village to the ground, then sailed off to continue the Great Lord of Zelloque's spying mission? That thought gave him hope. He wouldn't put it past them to loot his fortress, then flee before he returned. Surely they'd be gone by now.

What would he do if the landrexi got there and found nothing to kill except the peasants he ruled? Whatever Voyith said, he knew the truth -- he'd seen those demon-spawned monsters kill and eat a woman. He felt sick just thinking about it. And their very closeness made him uneasy, as though they might somehow throw off whatever thin veneer of civilization they'd assumed and revert to the savage beasts he knew they truly were.

Ahead Nissav could see brilliant light spilling into the tunnel; the crystal cavern lay just around the next turn. He had to talk to Voyith now, he knew, or he'd never get a chance before the fight.

He stopped. "Voyith?"

"Yes?"

"It's all happening so fast! What if we're making a mistake?"

His chamberlain faced him, looking thoroughly disgusted. "You'd abandon Saliin to those butchers?"

"No, never! But what if they've sailed on? What if we show up and there's no one there to fight? What then?"

"They are still in Saliin."

"How do you know?"

"I have seen them."

"But -- "

Voyith started forward again before he could say another word. Biting his lip, feeling angry and more than a little frustrated, Nissav grabbed the old man's arm and swung him back.

Voyith's face reddened. His right hand moved toward the pendant around his neck, but Nissav grabbed it first and tried to break the silver chain with a quick downward jerk. Before he could, though, the chamberlain seized his wrist and squeezed hard, forcing his hand back.

Nissav gasped as his bones grating against each other. Voyith's strength was incredible, considering his age. Nissav tightened his grip on the pendant. He wouldn't let an old man beat him.

He tried an old fighting trick and suddenly jerked his arm upwards, using the chamberlain's own strength as a weapon. Caught off balance, Voyith loosened his grip for an instant. Nissav wrenched his hand free and felt the chain break. Shouting in triumph, he leaped back, holding the pendant out of reach.

At once the chamberlain seemed to wither like a flower too long without water. His shoulders hunched forward and his expression lost its sharpness. His eyes became weak, watery.

"Give it back," he said. "Give it to me, boy." Feebly, he tried to grab it.

"I've seen how you use your pretty little stone," Nissav said, looking at it. "There's some sort of magic in it, isn't there? Well, you won't have it... not until you answer my questions!"

"They'll kill you," Voyith mumbled.

"What? Who will kill me? Speak up!"

Voyith raised his head. "My pets, of course. Yes, you saw truly in your cell. They eat people. Are you happy knowing the truth? The landrexi are wild, vicious creatures. That stone lets me control them, keep them away from Saliin. Why do you think they've never raided your lands? If I don't have that pendant, they will devour us both!"

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because you're a fool!"

Nissav bristled at that, but said nothing. He glanced down at the pendant, then back at his chamberlain, weighing the evidence. So many surprises --

"Give me my stone!"

"How do I know you're telling the truth this time?" Nissav demanded.

"Look behind you."

Nissav turned. A landrex stood a hundred yards down the tunnel, watching them. Its eyes glowed a dull red. Slowly its mandibles began to move, opening and closing with little snapping sounds. A yellow liquid oozed from its mouth, trickled down its pincers, splattered on the floor. It started toward them, gaining speed, like a wagon running out of control.

Nissav gulped. He knew, suddenly, that Voyith had finally spoken the truth, that the landrexi were beyond his control now, that this one would kill them if he didn't do something.

"Give my the pendant -- quickly!"

Nissav thrust the stone into his chamberlain's fumbling hands. Voyith touched it softly, almost reverently, and whispered something.

Nissav looked up the tunnel. The landrexi was still coming, its mandibles snapping, its antennae waving, its feet clicking on the floor. It showed no sign of stopping. Fifty feet away and coming fast, then forty --

Nissav drew his sword, suppressing his urge to run. His father had taught him that. It had been drilled into him a thousand times by his fencing instructors. He crouched, blade ready.

"Do something, Voyith!" he shouted, raising his sword to strike.

The pendant's stone suddenly pulsed with a soft red light, beating like a human heart. The light grew dazzling, almost blinding. Nissav kept his gaze centered on the landrex. Thirty feet -- twenty --

The creature seemed to be slowing, and as it slowed it seemed to dissolve. Nissav began to see the far end of the tunnel through its body. When it was fifteen feet away, he noticed little lines of electricity crackling over its head and thorax.

The creature halted five feet in front of them. One by one its legs broke off like twigs in a storm, each spinning off to the side. They struck the walls and shattered into thousands of bright sparks.

Voyith's pendant glowed still more brightly. The flare of light blinded Nissav -- and yet he could not tear his gaze away. He felt at once repulsed and attracted by the flow of energy around him. He tried to step aside, but it surrounded him, bound him into its pattern of fire and flame. His arms and legs started to tingle. He gasped in shock as he looked down and found himself floating a half-foot above the floor, surrounded by a halo of red.

Now the power streamed through him like water through a conduit, making his hair stand on end, making his body almost scream with ecstasy. He arched his back, letting it run its wild course through him. He burned in the stone's fire -- and yet he felt no pain. Rather, he basked in the energy, let it lift his mind toward a dizzying peak of joy. He'd never felt anything like it before. He didn't want it to end.

Red electricity snapped through the whole tunnel, bathing them in a flickering

light. What remained of the landrex's body caved into itself and crumbled to dust in seconds. Then it was gone.

The light faded. Not a trace remained of the creature.

Nissav swallowed. He stood firmly on the floor again. Sweat soaked his clothes and ran down his back and sides. He trembled, hardly able to breathe. Resheathing his sword, he staggered to the wall and leaned against the smooth, cool rock, gasping.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," Nissav said when he had his breath back. "I should have known better."

Voyith only looked at him. He seemed stronger, his gaze level now, his expression intense. With a sniff of disdain, he proceeded up the tunnel, leaving Mur to follow him -- and wonder.

The chamberlain had seemed completely human without his pendant. He'd been afraid of the landrex, terrified of dying. Now, with the pendant returned, he'd become cold again, aloof. Nissav had learned more about Voyith in those thirty seconds than he'd ever guessed during twenty years of service.

He grew still more disturbed when he remembered Voyith saying he had kept the landrex out of Saliin for years. If the old man had such powers, why hadn't he used them before? Why hadn't he seized control of Nissav's lands? Why hadn't he forged an empire for himself?

Why didn't he stop the Lammiats from stealing my fortress and slaughtering my men?

Nissav frowned. The more he thought of it, the more the old man's actions made no sense. What was he really after?

"Will you tell me nothing?" he called.

Voyith stopped, as though considering the matter, then looked back at him. "What do you want me to tell you?" He seemed grudging, as though reluctant to tell some great secret.

"Everything. Who are you really? Where did you get that pendant, and why didn't you use it to stop the Lammiats before they took Saliin?"

"I am what you see, nothing more. But I serve another master as well. He gave me this pendant, and bade me use it to keep Saliin safe. It was beyond my power to kill the Lammiats: believe that, Lord. Only now, with the help of the landrex, can we stop them."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Would you have believed me?"

Nissav hesitated, then shook his head. "No."

The chamberlain nodded slowly, then turned and continued on. A large doorway appeared, and when he passed through it, Nissav found himself once more among the shining crystals. The cavern widened, gleaming white and silver everywhere. The roof arched a hundred feet overhead, and the sounds of their footsteps echoed and re-echoed all around. Dozens of landrex wandered through the room, passing between tall growths of crystal, letting their reflections scatter until the whole place seemed full of sun and shadow.

"Who is your other master," Nissav asked suddenly.

"He... is like a god. He will come here, in time; but for now his powers are limited and he must rely on servants to look after those lands he wishes to protect."

One like a god is watching over Saliin. It made Nissav feel good to know that. It gave him confidence, courage.

Voyith stopped and began to hum. Somehow the pendant's chain had become whole again; he wore the gray stone around his neck. It seemed to flicker with a faint light of its own.

The landrexi moved toward them, circling around, coming closer and closer. Nissav felt a sudden tremor of fear, but they seemed harmless now -- and as they hummed back to Voyith, the crystals caught the sound and carried it through the cavern like the sweet voices of a choir.

At last the sound stopped. Nissav looked expectantly at his chamberlain.

"Mount up," Voyith said.

Two landrexi shifted and moved forward. Both wore small leather saddles strapped to their thoraxes, just behind their heads, with stirrups sized for human feet. They knelt before the old man and waited calmly.

Nissav looked at the chamberlain, who only motioned him forward. Slowly, cautiously, Nissav approached the first creature. It looked at him with glassy, multifaceted eyes. Carefully setting his left foot in its stirrup, he swung into the saddle, wincing as a quick needle of pain shot through his ankle. His mount climbed to its feet and raised its head.

Voyith climbed onto the other landrex. He hummed to the rest, touching his pendant lightly with his right hand, and the creatures began to line up two abreast. He and Mur remained in the lead.

Nissav reached forward and grasped his landrex's antennae. They felt surprisingly soft and warm, like down-covered leather, and trembled faintly in his hands.

As he tightened his grip, the landrex moved forward with a slow, swinging gait. Glancing over at Voyith, Nissav saw that the chamberlain, too, had taken his steed's antennae and begun guiding it forward. Together they wove their way through the glittering spires of crystal, through the silver cavern and into another large tunnel that wove snakelike upward through the mountain. As they progressed, the passageway at times it widened into caverns, but these were dark, with few crystals to light them. At other times the room grew so low that Nissav had to duck so he wouldn't hit his head.

Fifteen minutes later they reached the mouth of a cave. A breeze rich with the tang of sea-brine blew steadily into the tunnel, and Nissav could see a dazzling tapestry of stars through the opening. He breathed deeply; he'd almost forgotten how good clean air tasted.

When he looked over his shoulder, down the tunnel, it seemed more bleak and foreboding than ever. Glowing pairs of red eyes shifted there, swaying left and right, up and down, as the demon-army marched steadily behind.

His landrex clambered out. The wind, strong and chill, bit at his face and

hands. Shivering, Nissav drew his cloak tightly about him.

They were on a little plateau halfway up a mountain, he saw now. Behind him cliffs rose to Hell's Sword, the highest peak in the Raltain Mountains. A flat, grassy area extended twenty years before them, then dropped away; hundreds of feet below he could just make out mist-shrouded waves.

"Hurry up," Voyith called. "If we travel quickly, we may yet reach your lands before dawn."

Nissav glanced back; landrexi were pouring from the cave's mouth now, swarming across the clearing. He swallowed uneasily. Then Voyith was beside him and he had no time to worry. He turned and gazed up the coast, imagining he could see Saliin's soft lights in the distance.

Voyith started forward. "Hurry up, boy!"

Nissav realized he'd let go of his landrex's antennae. He took them again and let the creature find its own way forward. Behind, the other creatures followed, their hard black feet clattered like hooves on stone. He thought back to his days as a child, back to the times he'd dug into ant-hills with a stick just to see the little insects boil out of their hives by the thousands.

Now he'd become one of them. The Lammiats, who'd stirred up Saliin, would feel this hive's sting. Hilan and Nollin Lammiat would die for all the trouble they'd caused. He'd take their ships and sail to Zelloque, and there he'd prove a match for the Great Lord and all his kind. He knew it was his destiny more surely than he'd ever known anything in his life.

Of Pirates, Goats, and Bulls

Look to the stars, for Shon Atasha's bright spirit moves there. Look to the stars, for the palace of the gods lies there, the lanterns in its windows glittering like bright embers. Look to the stars, for the future is written there for all who would see.

-- Traditional

Nollin had taken to sleeping atop the fortress's highest tower, in a hammock slung between two stone buttresses. It was the coolest place he'd found, except for the wine cellars, and he didn't relish sleeping in a cramped earthen room full of dust and spiders and the smell of wet and mold.

Tired as he was, sleep wouldn't come tonight. He knew what was troubling him: his fight with Hilan. Hilan hadn't spoken to him in days, and now spent his daytime hours in Mur's throneroom, drinking, whoring, carousing with the nobles he'd collected about himself.

The situation reminded Nollin of the last time he and his brother had parted company. Their fight had been over a woman, then: Tsira, beautiful deadly Tsira, whom they'd taken from a captured Pethis slaveship. She'd played them off one against the other, promising love and pleasure.

He'd quarraled with Hilan for hours that final night, and when things got out of hand, it had been Tsira who stood back and laughed until the tears streamed down her opal cheeks.

They'd made her choose between them. And when she wouldn't, it had led to blows, then swordplay.

Nollin had won. He'd left Hilan bleeding, near death, and sailed off with his prize.

Later, Tsira abandoned him in Zelloque, taking a fortune in jewels with her. When he tried to follow, he found her betrayal complete: mercenaries were waiting to ambush him.

He'd escaped, but barely, and only then had he seen how she'd used them both, how she'd turned them against each other. But by then it was too late; he and Hilan were sworn enemies -- and Nollin had thought he'd never see his brother again. It had taken three years to win his brother's trust.

Now his thoughts returned to their argument on the beach. Already he regretted it. He should have known better than to try and bully his brother into leaving Saliin; subtlety worked better than force with Hilan.

Sighing, Nollin stretched and looked up at the night sky, studying the various unchanging constellations. Directly overhead the Bull and the Red Goat circled each other endlessly. Strange, he mused, how like them we two are. Hilan was the bull of the family, ready to charge and gore his opponent, while Nollin was the goat -- smaller but sturdier, with horns and hooves with which to fight when cornered, but also the intelligence and stamina to survive when life became hard.

He heard footsteps on the staircase that led up to the tower roof and at once recognized Hilan's heavy tread. Since Hilan made no attempt to hide his presence, Nollin knew his brother had no intention of trying to kill him. He'd either forgotten or put aside their argument and now had something else to say.

In a moment Hilan's head poked through the open trap door. He glanced around the roof, grunted once, then continued out.

He'd changed clothes yet again and now wore a plain gray shirt and black pants, with a pair of swords and several knives hanging at his belt. No jewels sparkled in his beard; no fancy scarves hung around his neck. He almost seemed an ordinary sailor, rather than the flamboyant pirate Nollin knew him to be, and his expression was surprisingly somber.

Nollin sat up in surprise. "Hilan. Is something wrong?"

"No. Yes -- I mean, yes!"

"What?"

"You're not making this easy, brother." Hilan took a deep breath and turned to the left, looking out to sea. "What happened earlier today... I want you to know... I'm sorry."

He didn't look Nollin in the eye. Still, Nollin could hear the pain in his voice, and the confession itself moved him more deeply than he would have expected. He felt a warmth, an uprush of emotion he hadn't felt since that night three months ago when they'd sailed from Zelloque as friends reunited.

"Hilan..." he whispered.

"You were right," Hilan continued. "Mur is gone; there's no reason to be here. It was... stupid and selfish of me to make you stay. We'll leave tomorrow."

"Thank you, brother."

Hilan looked at him, face creased with sorrow. Perhaps, Nollin thought, my brother is not the bull of the family, but I am. He didn't think he could have found the strength to apologize.

They embraced briefly, awkwardly. At that moment Nollin felt closer to his brother than he'd even been before.

For a time they just sat and stared out to sea, watching the play of starlight on the waves. It will be good to go home, Nollin thought sleepily.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, Hilan was gone. After that, he slept more soundly.

For a second after he woke, Nollin didn't know what was wrong. Then he recognized the noise: the sounds of men rushing to battle, of swords leaving scabbards.

Cries of fear and alarm rang all around.

Someone shouted, "To arms! We're under attack! To arms --" and then his warning ended in a brief, startled scream.

Nollin tumbled from his hammock, ripped sword from scabbard, and ran to the edge of the tower's roof, expecting to see hundreds of well-armed soldiers running ladders up to the walls. Instead, he saw dark phantom-shapes gliding silently along the battlements below, phantom-shapes with eyes that burned red like the fires of Hell.

One of the shadows ran along the top of the fortress's battlements, passing a scant fifteen feet below the tower in which he stood. Nollin eased back six inches, eyes narrowed, watching. When the creature neared a guttering torch, he saw it clearly for the first time.

It looked like a giant insect, nine feet tall with a body black as polished ebony. Blood dripped from its mandibles.

Antennae moving up and down, it reached out with its clawed forelegs, plucked the torch from its stone holder, and heaved it over the wall. Then the creature continued its rush down the battlements without wasting a second, heading for the next torch.

Nollin just stood for a moment, shocked, bewildered. Then he realized what the creatures were doing: trying to throw the fortress into darkness. Their glowing eyes must mean that they could see in the dark.

He ran to the side of the tower facing the inner courtyard and leaned over the wall. Fifty feet below, several dozen guards stood facing a small crowd of the creatures. Hilan stood among the men, shouting orders, forming up defensive lines. The battle hadn't started here yet -- perhaps Mur was supposed to be directing it.

Most of the courtyard's torches had been extinguished and men moved in near darkness. That was a mistake which had to be corrected at once.

Leaning forward, he shouted, "Hilan! Up here, brother!"

Hilan looked up and gave a brief-but-elaborate salute. He grinned as though enjoying himself. "What?"

"They're trying to put out the torches. Don't let them -- they can see in the dark!"

Hilan turned and barked orders to his men. Quickly they lit fresh torches. The creatures retreated to the edge of the shadows, as though half afraid of the flames. Nollin wondered if fire might not be an effective weapon.

Then he heard a scraping noise behind him. He whirled in time to see a long, black leg snake up over the top of the tower's wall. It hooked around a jut of stone. A second leg followed a moment later. They glittered like carved ebony, hard, impenetrable.

Nollin shivered, suddenly afraid. This thing wasn't natural; it had no place in the world. It seemed more a product of nightmare than reality. Magic had created it, he knew. And, as with all such sorcery, he couldn't help but wonder if mortals like him could possibly stand against it.

Now he moved forward, tightening his sword grip, steadying himself to swing. One quick blow to the head might kill it, but he'd have to strike before it gained the roof. He had little hope of beating it in a fair fight.

And then it heaved part of its body up into view. Blood covered its head, and Nollin could see a bit of red cloth -- like what the fortress guards wore -- caught in its mandibles, as though it had recently fed on one of his men. Tensing, Nollin shifted to the right, trying to find the best place to strike. Its underside looked soft...

A third leg appeared, and then a fourth. It pulled more of its body over the top of the wall.

Nollin leaped forward, feinted to the right, then slashed the creature's right front leg. His sword bit deep into a joint halfway down the limb and lodged there. He twisted the blade hard, trying to work it free, while he kept a close watch on the thing. It just stopped and trembled all over, as if it didn't know what to do.

"Go on!" Nollin heard a voice say. It sounded close. He couldn't see anyone, though --

He wrenched his sword free and slammed it down on the same joint as hard as he could. It slid through chitin, muscle, and cartilage like a hot knife through fat, completely severing the limb, which flopped to the side and twitched faintly.

The creature made a low moan and started to back down the tower wall. Nollin lunged forward and tried to run his sword through its head, but the blade deflected off its armorlike shell.

The thing swiped at him with its one remaining foreleg. Nollin felt claws just graze his right shoulder as he danced out of reach. He glanced down and saw a rip in his shirt and a spreading stain of blood, but couldn't feel the wound. Just a scratch, he decided.

He circled to the left, looking for an opening. It maneuvered to face him. It seemed to draw on some inner reserve of strength, for it raised its head a good half-foot, then pulled itself the rest of the way onto the roof in a single movement.

Only then did Nollin see its rider. "Mur!" he gasped.

Lord Mur seemed equally startled. Then he reached forward, grabbed the creature's antennae, and screamed, "Kill him!"

Nollin turned and ran for the trap door. Bare seconds ahead of Mur, he scrambled through, into the tower. Twenty steps down the stone staircase, he paused and looked up. The creature completely blocked the opening. It couldn't fit through the trapdoor, though, so Nollin leaned against the wall, breathing hard. He could hear his heart beating in his ears, feel it pounding in his chest.

The creature made low grunting noises, then clicked and whistled. He heard Mur say, "Go on, you stupid landrex -- get him!"

Then the landrex reached down and hooked its leg under the edge of the opening. Nollin heard a ripping sound and saw the trapdoor's wooden frame tear free. The creature dragged it out of the way, then started pulling up the large, flat roof-stones one by one.

"Damn," Nollin muttered. He turned and trotted down the steps more carefully now. Mur would be inside the tower in minutes; before that happened, he planned to be well gone. He'd find Hilan and get back to the ships. It was one thing to fight a human army, but he didn't think they'd stand a chance against these monsters.

He wondered what horrible price the Lord of Saliin would have to pay for their service.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur watched with anger and disgust as his landrex

tore up the tower's roof. Nollin Lammiat had been in his hands, but Voyith's stupid creature had let him get away. He cursed helplessly. It wasn't fair. And now he had to destroy part of his own fortress, too. The damage would take weeks to repair.

He reached forward and grabbed the landrex's antennae. "Stop," he said, maneuvering it back toward the edge of the roof. He'd come up here to direct his troops in battle but had a better prize in mind now. He could beat Nollin to the ground and kill him as he left the tower's courtyard door.

The landrex pulled itself over the tower wall and started toward the ground head-first. Nissav found himself looking straight down a fifty-foot drop. He swallowed, queasy. It didn't help that his landrex only had five legs; its swinging gait made him think they were about to plummet at any moment.

Then his landrex stopped. It shook all over like a dog throwing off water, whistled shrilly, and let go its grip on the tower. It tumbled forward into a somersault, and as it spun, Nissav found himself looking up for a second -- to see Nollin Lammiat leaning out one of the tower's windows, sword in hand, grinning madly.

That last image burned in his mind as he fell. The drop seemed to last forever. Then they hit the ground hard. Luckily for Nissav, his landrex landed on its stomach. He felt more than heard the sickening crunch as its body armor cracked and splintered, then the saddle jammed up into his stomach with the force of a sledgehammer, knocking the wind from his lungs.

He rolled on his side. For a long minute he couldn't breathe. His throat felt like he'd swallowed a large rock. Eventually, he managed to pull his legs from the stirrups and crawl off the landrex. His sight grew dark, and he thought he was going to die.

No, Nissav thought, Nollin Lammiat can't win! Then his chest eased and he managed to take a shuddering breath of air. His stomach hurt. His lungs burned. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and suddenly he threw up.

You will pay for this, Nollin Lammiat! he swore, as he tried to spit the taste of bile from his mouth. I'll see you dead this night!

Nollin watched with a measure of joy as the landrex fell twenty feet to the shadowy ground below.

As he'd run down the tower steps, it moved past the window next to him. He'd jabbed his sword into its soft abdomen almost without thinking, then twisted as hard as he could. The weapon had almost been wrenched from his hand as the creature fell. It hit the ground with a hard crunch and didn't move again. He couldn't tell if it still lived, but it didn't look like it was going to get up and fight again.

Lord Mur didn't move, either. Nollin hesitated, trying to decide what to do. Follow Mur? Unfortunately, the former Lord of Saliin had fallen on the wrong side of the building, halfway between tower and fortress wall. If only he had fallen on the other side, Hilan could have made sure he was dead.

As Nollin watched, Mur crawled off his creature and moved out of sight. Nollin strained, but couldn't make out anything more; it was just too dark down there. All the torches but those in the main courtyard had gone out.

He heard the click-click sound of insect feet on stone and looked toward the

battlements. A large, dark figure moved there. Red eyes turned to look his way. What had Mur called it -- a landrex? For a second, Nollin gazed back, then he ducked away and continued down. The tower's door, he knew, opened up on the courtyard where Hilan was commanding guards; there he'd join them to see what could be done about driving the invaders back.

He pounded down the last few steps, threw open the door, and found himself looking out into a full-scale battle. Dozens of guards and sailors fought the creatures. Their swords flashed in the torchlight, cut through the air, struck the landrexi and penetrated their hard chitin or bounced off.

As he watched, one guard fell as a clawed foreleg struck him in the head. Pel, one of the oldest sailors on the Falcon, screamed and reeled back, blood streaming down the side of his face from where he'd been hit. He collapsed and didn't move. Other men stepped forward to take his place. The few sailors wielding torches as well as swords seemed to be holding their own, Nollin noticed, though none of the landrexi lay dead as yet.

And Hilan... Hilan stood side by side with Rilal, facing a pair of the creatures. The landrexi's mandibles snapped. Their forelegs wove back and forth with an almost hypnotic movement. One of them lunged forward suddenly. Hilan parried with one sword and made a quick counterthrust with his other, stabbing the landrex between its mandibles. The blade of the sword slid into the creature's head a good foot and a half before stopping.

The landrex reared back with a high-pitched scream, jerking the sword from Hilan's hand, and stood on its two back legs. It shook its head violently, but the sword didn't come loose. Slowly, the creature toppled. Its head struck the flagstones and cracked open, spilling a gooey white liquid.

"Wait!" a loud voice called from overhead; a high-pitched whistle followed. Instantly the landrexi drew back, leaving gasping men to lean on their swords and watch with wary eyes.

Nollin stepped out from the tower doorway, sword in hand, and tried to spot whoever had called off the creatures' attack. Yes... there, on the tower opposite him, just where he'd glimpsed figures a moment before, stood a landrex with another rider. He could see them silhouetted against the wash of stars. If there had been a decent archer among Mur's men, the shot might have been possible -- not that any archers, inept or otherwise, still remained on the battlements to attempt it. The man on the landrex looked down on them wordlessly, as if deep in thought.

Nollin edged out into the middle of the courtyard, heading for his brother's side. When he reached Hilan, he whispered, "I think we've overstayed our welcome in Saliin."

"Mur's here. He's got to be!"

"He was."

Hilan looked at him. "Was?"

"He was riding one of those creatures. It tried to climb onto the tower where I was sleeping, but I killed it. It fell on the other side -- and Mur fell, too." That was at least part of the truth; they had both fallen. Nollin had no intention of telling his brother that Mur had crawled away. He knew Hilan too well. As long as Mur lived, he wouldn't have a chance of dragging Hilan from the fight.

"He was supposed to be mine."

"I didn't exactly have a choice, did I?"

Hilan grumbled, but said nothing more. Cautiously he moved forward and retrieved his sword from the dead landrex's head. It was covered with the thing's blood. Wiping it on a dead guard's cape, he backed up to rejoin his brother.

They both looked to the tower, where the man sitting astride his landrex still watched. The stranger chose that moment to speak:

"Citizens of Saliin, you know me: I am Voyith, chamberlain to His Eminence, Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur. Lord Mur has returned this night to reclaim his lands and title. Throw down your weapons and you will be spared; keep them and my servants will kill you as surely as they will kill the Lammiats and their crewmen. Saliin will be ours again this night!"

"Wait!" Nollin cried, turning to face the crowd. "He's lying; Mur is dead. I killed him on the other tower. If we stand together, we can hold them off -- "

"Your Lord lives!" Voyith screamed. "Look -- he stands beside me!"

Another landrex with rider appeared atop the tower. Mur dismounted, moving to the edge of the tower, looking down on them. His face was a pale circle by the dim light of the courtyard's torches.

"I am your Lord!" he shouted. "Put down your weapons, my friends! I have returned to free you from the Lammiats' tyranny!"

"You said he was dead!" Hilan turned savagely on his brother. "You lied to me!"

"I saw him fall! I don't know how he lived. It must have been magic of some kind. Look around you! How do you think these monsters exist? How do you think Mur got their help? By asking for it?"

Hilan shook his head, and Nollin gave a quick sigh of relief. They'd have enough problems without fighting among themselves.

"Throw down your weapons!" Mur called again.

Across the courtyard, Mur's former guardsmen hesitantly set their swords and daggers on the flagstones and backed away from them. Above, Mur began to laugh, a high, quavering sound that set Nollin's skin acrawl. At last only a handful of men -- sailors all, plus the brothers Lammiat -- remained armed.

"Slowly," Nollin whispered, "move toward the throneroom door."

For once, Hilan obeyed without argument. The others eased back as well. Then a high whistle sounded and the landrexi sprang forward like a pack of hounds unleashed, mandibles snapping.

"Run!" Nollin shouted. He bent and caught up a fallen torch as he headed for the huge double-door just ahead. He entered almost on his brother's heels and the sailors slammed it shut, ramming the bolts home.

Hilan sheathed his sword and made a quick search of the antechamber. A three inch thick oak bar had been set out of sight behind a tapestry. He dragged it out, hefted it easily, and slipped it between the door's large,

intricately-carved wooden handles.

"They won't get through that in a hurry," he said.

"Don't count on it," Nollin said. He could hear them moving outside, their clawed feet tapping on the flagstones. Something scratched on the door like a dog wanting in. He knew it wasn't a dog. "They'll come through the door whenever they're ready."

"Well," Hilan said, "have you got a better idea?"

Nollin's torch had almost gone out; he swung it over his head so it flared for a second, then burned with a steadier light. "Of course," he said.

The topmost panel of the right-hand door splintered, suddenly, making them jump. A long black foreleg reached through like a hand extended in greeting.

Hilan snarled and drew one of his monkey-skull swords. He stepped forward, set his feet wide apart, and raised it over his head. Muscles corded like bands of steel in his neck and shoulders as he brought down the blade. It sliced through the creature's leg halfway between joints. The clawed limb flopped to the floor, and Hilan kicked it aside.

A white, oily liquid spurted from what was left of the leg, then the creature jerked its stub out of sight. It gave a high, keening sound of pain. Then the doors shook, wood creaking, hinges groaning, as the creatures pounded viciously.

Nollin knew the barrier wouldn't hold them back much longer. "Follow me," he called. He jogged to the left and up the huge stone staircase, toward Mur's private chambers. Hilan might have forgotten the secret passage there, but he certainly hadn't. If it could whisk Mur to safety, it could do the same for them.

The main doors burst open just as they reached the top of the stairs and rounded the corner. Since they stood out of the landrexi's line of sight, Nollin thought they'd be safe for a few minutes more. He pressed on; Mur's room lay just ahead. From below came the sounds of the creatures' search as they stormed through room after room.

They reached Mur's chamber a moment later. The outer door had been repaired, but not very well; it wouldn't hold long against the landrexi. Nollin barred it as securely as he could.

Turning, he looked at the sailors. Luin and Chal were young, inexperienced; they wouldn't be much good in a fight. But Goth, Wen and Rilal were seasoned fighters and might well give them the edge in a close battle.

The secret panel had been boarded shut. Hilan crossed to it, sheathing his sword, and began ripping boards away one by one. Nollin ran to the far wall and set fire to the huge, moldering old tapestries hanging there, hoping smoke and flames would confuse the landrexi and give them more time to get out of the fortress. Already he thought he heard creatures prowling the hallway outside.

When the entrance to the secret passage had been cleared, Hilan stood back. "You have the light," he said, with a little bow. Then he grinned. "Please lead us, brother mine."

Nollin said nothing. He ducked through the opening and stood in the passageway

for an instant, watching the torch. The flame flickered in a sudden draft from the left. He knew they'd have to go that way to get out.

As he started forward, he called, "Stay close behind me, and watch your feet. There's no telling what's in here."

Testing each step before he took it, looking for traps in the walls, ceiling, and floor, Nollin led them on in what seemed a snail's pace. His men followed in single-file close behind while his brother brought up the rear, drawn sword held ready. Hilan seemed almost eager to face the landrexi again.

"What do you mean they've vanished?" Lord Mur demanded. He didn't understand how an army of landrexi could miss seven men who'd boarded themselves up somewhere inside his palace. As he paced the tower roof with nervous, frantic energy, he glared at Voyith. "Well?"

"My Lord," Voyith sighed. "Whatever they've done, wherever they've gone, the landrexi just can't find them. Perhaps they went into one of the secret passages."

Nissav cursed himself for a fool. "Of course!" he said. "They saw the one in my chambers when you rescued me! They must have fled through it."

Voyith smiled a bit. "If so, they will be quite surprised. That particular passage has but three exits... and more than a hundred traps scattered through its tunnels. There is only one safe path to any of the ways out." He chuckled. Nissav didn't like the sound. "They will die soon enough, if they tried to escape that way."

Nissav snorted. "I'll believe they're dead when I see their bodies."

"Have you lost all your faith in me, my Lord?"

"Humor me. You seem good at that."

The chamberlain frowned. "Very well," he said. "If you wish, I can send a couple of our friends to watch the exits. If the Lammiats and their men try to leave, they will be killed. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes. Do it now, quickly!"

The chamberlain turned toward one of the waiting landrexi and made a soft clicking sound, then whistled several times. When he touched the pendant around his neck, the creature turned and scurried to the edge of the roof, slipped over the edge, and started toward the ground.

Nissav rubbed his breastbone. It still hurt where the saddle had struck him, and he knew he'd have a painful bruise there for many weeks to come. Still, it could have been far worse; he didn't seem to have cracked any ribs. The landrex had broken his fall with its body.

When he looked up, he saw flames dancing in the windows of several rooms in the east wing of his fortress. He couldn't believe it at first, and just stared in horror. They'd set fire to his private chambers. Everything, all his books of poetry, all his clothes and valuables, it would all be destroyed if he didn't do something. He gave a low moan of despair and grabbed Voyith's arm. "Look!"

"Please release me, Lord."

"But the fire!"

The chamberlain pulled away. "The landrexi are safe; they left at the first sign of flames. There's nothing to worry about."

"Stop it!"

"How do you suggest? I can piss on it, if you wish. Otherwise..."

Nissav cursed and ran to the edge of the roof. His guardsmen milled uselessly in the inner courtyard.

"You down there!" he called. They looked up at him blankly. "The east rooms are on fire! Get water and put it out, and call peasants from the village to help you! Now hurry!"

Voyith only smiled. When Nissav turned and saw, he knew how helpless he'd become.

The tunnel wound deeper and deeper into the earth. Nollin held up his hand and everyone behind him stopped. The sand on the floor looked unusually smooth just ahead. He'd already found two death-traps -- a concealed pit with iron spikes at its bottom and a trapdoor that swung open over a hundred-foot-drop into a dark pool of stagnant water -- and he planned on taking no chances. He knelt and slowly ran his fingers through the sand.

Hilan pushed through the crowd behind him. "What is it?"

"A wire," Nollin said, as he exposed it. He stood, stepped over it, then looked back. "Be careful, won't you?"

Hilan scowled and followed him, then the others. They took large, exaggerated steps over the wire.

"What's it lead to?" Hilan asked, studying the walls.

"I don't know. Want to find out?"

He shrugged.

Nollin leaned forward, grabbed the wire, and gave it a strong yank. It came loose in his hand. He stood and looked at it more closely.

"It's rusted through on both ends. It wouldn't have hurt us."

The others laughed with nervous relief. Nollin smiled and tossed the wire back onto the sand.

"Come," he said. "Let's get away from here."

He led them down the tunnel. Before they'd gone thirty paces, a loud grating noise came from behind them, followed by an even louder thump.

They all stopped and looked back. A huge slab of stone had fallen from the ceiling, completely blocking the passage. It would have killed him, Nollin knew, if he'd stepped on the wire and the trap had gone off as planned. He swallowed.

"At least," he said, "now we don't have to worry about anyone trying to follow us."

They continued in silence.

Nollin smelled the sea: of that he was certain. He motioned for the others to stop.

They'd walked a good half hour since finding the trip-wire, and at last the passage had levelled off. Ahead, it seemed to open into a larger room -- perhaps the cave Hilan had found? Nollin strained to hear and was almost certain he detected the murmur of surf.

"Careful, now," he said. "I think it's just ahead."

The others said nothing, but followed when he started forward again. Sure enough, the tunnel opened out into a natural cavern; the curved white ceiling reached high overhead, and stalactites and stalagmites rose from the floor and hung from the ceiling all around them. The air smelled thick, heavy. Somewhere close, water dripped.

The wind was stronger now. The torch in his hand flickered wildly, throwing weird shadows all around them, and in more than a few of the shadows Nollin thought he saw tiny yellow eyes peering out. He said nothing to the others but continued down the path, a bit faster than before.

The floor had been levelled by human hands, Nollin could see the marks of chisels and sledgehammers where limestone flows had been chipped away. Abruptly the path dropped six inches and sand crunched underfoot.

Ahead, through a large gap in the wall, he glimpsed open water. Low waves rippled with the silver light of the stars. It was the most welcome sight in the world.

A half-hour hike down the beach, he figured, and they'd be to the ships. In forty minutes they could be sailing again, heading west, toward the treasure Loanu had seen in her visions.

Smiling at the thought, he lowered his torch, planning to grind it into the sand so it wouldn't be seen by anyone outside. The men behind him laughed with nervous relief.

Then a landrex lumbered into the cave, its faceted eye flickering in the torchlight. Nollin froze. The two of them just stood there and stared at each other. The silence grew.

At last the creature gave a sharp whistle and leaped straight for his throat.

War and Peace

There are those who are born to lead men into battle, and those who are born to follow. There are those who are meant to sow the crops and those who are meant to reap their profits. And there are those who are destined for great things, who take on all roles at once: soldier, farmer, prophet, priest, and king.

-- Setlor Ru

Philosophies of Life

Nollin shoved his torch at the landrex's face and the creature jerked back like a puppet on a string, making unhappy clicks with its mandibles. As it paced back and forth like a caged animal trying to find a way at him, Nollin drew his sword. Behind him, he heard the others doing the same.

"Circle around it," Hilan called. "We can kill it easily enough!"

The sailors moved forward and took up their positions, Hilan and Luin and Rilal to the right, the others to the left. They ringed the creature, shouting, taunting, poking it with their swords so it didn't know which way to turn. Nollin kept thrusting his torch into its face, and it stumbled back, half-blinded, confused, trying to escape.

With the creature's back toward him, Hilan leaped forward and took a hard swing at one of its rear legs. His sword bit halfway through, stuck for a moment, then came free. The landrex whined, a chilling sound. It tried to put weight on that wounded leg, stumbled, went down. Nollin stood and watched as the others leaped forward and hacked wildly at its head and limbs. At last it just lay there in a puddle of its own blood, legs twitching faintly, mandibles opening and closing by reflex.

Nollin put out his torch and led the way onto the beach with more caution, but saw nothing to threaten them. The landrex seemed a lone sentry.

He breathed deeply, smelling the sea, letting the wind run fingers through his hair and whip his clothes around him. It felt good to be away from Saliin and its oppressive atmosphere. Soon, the ships...

"Look," Hilan said, pointing.

Nollin turned, hand dropping to the hilt of his sword. To the west, toward Saliin and the ships, he saw several bright orange glows lighting the sky. One came from the fortress, he knew -- the fire he'd set had probably run out of control. But the other... it didn't come from the fortress, he could tell. It came from nearer the water.

"The ships!" he gasped, shocked. "They're burning the ships!"

"Mur wouldn't dare!" Hilan growled back. But his voice held little hope.

They moved up the beach faster now, almost running, Hilan leading the way along the firm sand near the water's edge. Nollin felt despair rush through him, despair and disappointment and a kind of sullen resolve. If he had to die here, he'd make certain Mur died, too. The ships! How could Mur even think of destroying them?

Waves beat against the shore; spray cast a haze along the beach. He couldn't tell if the salt in the water or his own fear and shock brought tears to his eyes.

The last twenty minutes of the trip became a dreamlike blur to him. He was distantly aware of Hilan taking the lead, but didn't care. How could Mur destroy their ships?

He felt someone take his wrist and pull him away from the beach, up toward the cliffs. He looked up and saw Hilan there, sword in hand, a grim, hard look to his face. Moving slowly now, cautiously, they eased around a bend.

Both ships lay at anchor fifty yards out from shore. Lanterns in the rigging cast warm glows across their decks, showing the Falcon and the Serpent safe, their crews aboard.

Nollin almost shouted in triumph. His men, he saw now, had set the docks on fire -- that was the glow they'd seen. The fire had kept the landrexi from swarming over the ships as they cast off the mooring lines, he realized. Closing his eyes, he breathed a silent prayer of thanks to Faramigon, the god who guards the sea.

Arrows that stuck in the sand, and in several of the landrexi, marked where archers from the Serpent and Falcon had done their job. The men had not been caught lax, it seemed.

As he watched, part of the dock fell into the sea, sending a bright stream of sparks shooting skyward. Silhouetted against the red glare were at least a dozen landrexi. They glided back and forth, back and forth like caged animals. A fresh volley of arrows from the ships cut through the air. Several struck the creatures' tough hides and deflected to the side, but one hit an eye and passed completely through the landrexi's head. That one went down with a squeal of pain.

"Why don't they swim out to the ships, sir?" one of the sailors asked.

Nollin turned to face Luin. The boy seemed fascinated by the landrexi and watched them with wide eyes.

"I don't know. Perhaps they can't swim."

Hilan grinned at him. "But we can!"

Nollin grinned back. "And I think we're going to."

Quickly they stripped down to their undergarments and hid their clothing and weapons near the cliff, out of sight. Hilan stubbornly refused to surrender his swords, though, and kept them belted tightly around his waist.

"You'll sink with all that weight," Nollin said.

Hilan glared. "I can take care of myself."

"As you wish." He looked reluctantly at his own sword, wishing he could keep it, then turned to face the sea. "We'll all have to go at the same time," he said, "and once we start, there's no turning back. You know that, don't you?"

He looked at each of them in turn. Luin and Chal whispered, "Aye, sir!" as Goth, Wen and Rilal nodded solemnly.

"Then let's go!"

Turning, he sprinted across the beach. Chal and Wen passed him in a moment;

the others trailed not far behind. Hearing a whistle, Nollin risked a glance to his left. The landrexi had noticed them and started in their direction.

He put all his effort into running. Breath tore into his lungs and his legs ached, but the sea grew steadily closer, and in a moment he'd reached it. He splashed out knee-deep, then dove in and kicked as hard as he could.

He swam underwater until he thought his lungs would burst, and only then did he surface. Panting, he looked back toward shore. Everyone had made it safely into the sea, even Hilan laden as he was with two swords, and the landrexi made no move to follow. They just paced up and down along the beach, out of the waves' reach.

Nollin struck out toward the Serpent, anchored two hundred yards ahead. Then, remembering his brother, he turned and swam back a little bit. Hilan floundered heavily, looking as graceful as a beached whale, but kept moving at a steady pace. Nollin swam easily next to him, ready to help if necessary.

Hilan growled, and glared, and made it clear he'd rather drown, but Nollin stayed by his side.

They reached the Serpent just as dawn broke in the west. The pale crescent sun gave a thin, reedy light as sailors lowered ropes. When they had all climbed to the deck, Nollin looked across at the fortress and grinned. The fire there still burned: he could see a huge blot of smoke rising steadily from one end of the fortress to another. When one of the roofs collapsed and flames leaped hundreds of feet into the air, he knew the fire would have to burn itself out; nobody could stop it now.

One of the sailors offered Nollin a towel, which he accepted gratefully. His smile broadened as he began to dry himself off. He was laughing by the time they pulled his exhausted brother aboard.

"What's so funny?" Hilan demanded.

"I was just thinking about our friend, Lord Mur. We've burned his fortress, killed most of his soldiers, and forced him to surrender the rule of his lands to demon-creatures... and he's going to think he won!"

"Bah," Hilan said. He grabbed a towel and began cleaning his swords with it. "I want him dead!"

"No." Nollin shook his head. "We're sailing west. We can't hope to beat him now: there must be hundreds of those landrexi and we'd never be able to fight our way through. You said we'd leave here last night; I'm holding you to your word."

Hilan glared at him. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"But what about the treasure?"

"What's up there burned. I took more than enough for us already; it's been split up and stowed away on both ships."

"You never told me that!"

"It didn't seem to matter."

Hilan gestured vaguely. "Then we'll go. Give the orders, brother. I'm sick of this place!" He turned and went below.

Nollin looked at Klaff. "You heard him, so jump to it! We sail in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir!" Klaff said, and he turned and began calling orders. Men climbed the rat-lines into the rigging, sails were unfurled, and the anchor dragged aboard. The message was passed to the Falcon, and Rilal hurried to ready that ship, too.

Nollin watched the work with a feeling of satisfaction; between the two ships, they couldn't have lost more than a half-dozen men to Mur's attacks -- probably less. The loss hurt, but it could have been much, much worse. Looking across the deck, he saw -- a bit to his surprise -- that Lan and Ersal were working side by side with his sailors. They knew the ropes and did their tasks without being told. He grinned. Yes, it hadn't been that bad after all. Now, with food for a month and money enough to buy provisions at any port they found, he thought the remainder of their quest would be easy.

Then he remembered the despair he'd felt when he thought the ships had been burned, and again he thanked the gods that the Falcon and the Serpent still sailed. It seemed Loanu had been right when she said Shon Atasha the Creator favored them.

"Keep a steady course," he called to Klaff, as he followed his brother below.

Nollin had just finished dressing when a soft knock came at his door.

"Come," he called.

The door swung open and Loanu stood there. The witch dressed all in black; a veil had been pulled over her face. Nollin was glad he couldn't see her eyes; they seemed the most terrible part of her.

"Why are you leaving this place?" she asked. Her voice was hoarse, strange.

"We've been driven out. Mur returned with an army of creatures to help him. If we'd stayed, we would have died."

"You must go back. I need the pendant. You promised to get it for me."

"I can't," Nollin said. "You must understand, it's not possible."

"You must make it possible."

"I -- I'm sorry, I can't."

She said nothing, but continued to look at him. Nollin felt uneasy, disturbed, but he refused to back down now.

"Put Saliin from in your thoughts," he said. "Hilan and I are decided in the matter. We won't go back."

"You're afraid," she said.

"No!"

"I see it in you. Fear stretches like a shadow through your mind."

He shivered, looked away. Then he forced himself to face her. "You're right. I am afraid of them. Afraid of what they'll do to me, to my ship, even to you. These are demons! Even your magic couldn't help us."

"With the pendant I could do much."

"I'm not going to die trying to get it for you."

"Very well," Loanu said. "You are a fool to pass it by, but if that is your will, I must live with it. Yet think on my words, young Lammiat. And think of the power that might have been yours." She turned and seemed to glide through the door. Untouched, it shut behind her.

Ah, my witch, he thought. Perhaps you are right, and you do need that pendant more than I know. But I am afraid of Mur and the landrexi. Still, it doesn't matter now. I value my life more than all your powers and promises of riches. There will be other lands and other battles. Be patient: there is time enough for all you want.

Time enough.... He only hoped it was true.

11

Ker Orrum

It is said that humans who serve the gods are forever changed by the unimaginable powers surrounding them. If the passage of time can warp a board on Earth, what can the passage of time in Theshemna do to men's souls?

-- Avden Prish

The Aeglian Chronicles

Darkness: absolute, thick... and empty. She found no sign of Shon Atasha the Creator, whose bright spirit dwells in the empty places beyond the edge of the world.

Sighing, Loanu opened her eyes, stretched, and slowly got to her feet. She had been sitting cross-legged in her cabin for hours now, searching for her master. His presence eluded her. Now she felt utterly abandoned, utterly alone in the world.

He was displeased. That could be the only explanation. A sour taste filled her mouth as she thought of how close she'd been to the pendant, how close she'd been to fulfilling her mission for Him.

Well, if He wouldn't speak to her, nothing could be done about it now. She had to redeem herself. She had to... she didn't know what.

Crossing to the door, she pushed it open and went out. It was night and the stars overhead glittered like tiny bits of glass. She searched the heavens, but found nothing there to help.

Again the bitterness filled her. Her hands rose, gestured vaguely, sank back down to her sides.

She knew what had to be done. She must return to Saliin and find the pendant. That could be the only answer, the only way to redeem herself in His eyes.

Nollin had no intentions of helping her, and Nollin controlled his brother. Yet if Shon Atasha wouldn't help her, perhaps another god-servant would...

She began to pray, and into her prayers she wove the names of all the gods who

rule Theshemna, the palace in the sky.

She felt a flickering awareness, a flitting touch like a spiderweb across the skin of her mind. They were listening to her. She spoke her desire.

A moment later, blue flames rose in a pillar before her. She watched, entranced.

The flames receded, leaving a matte-black rectangle as high as the ceiling and as wide as the walls. It rippled faintly, as though an unseen wind stirred its surface.

A man stepped through it into her cabin. His hair and beard were short and brown, his eyes a piercing blue. He smoothed his red robes, then sat cross-legged in front of her.

"I am Ker," he said. "I heard your call."

Loanu smiled. "Then you know what I want."

"Yes, a magical jewel. But I can do little to aid you; there is a war being fought in the Great Lands. Zelloque has fallen to the demon-wizard Suthyran, and his creatures are marching on Coran."

"I dreamed of Suthyran. Is he really so powerful?"

"Yes," Ker said, "and he is reaching still further; even here his presence is felt. I believe you have already encountered his creatures."

"The landrexi," she said, nodding.

"There are still others ahead of you, demons from the coldest of the shadowlands. Your ships are two weeks from a village. One of Suthyran's servants rules there. If you end his power there, I will help you take the gem when you return to Saliin."

"Is there nothing you can do now?"

He shook his head. "I am marshalling human armies to defend Coran. That demands my immediate attention."

"Then thank you," Loanu said. "I will do what must be done."

Ker nodded, rose, and gave her a respectful bow. Then he stepped back into the dark rectangle. It folded into itself and vanished a moment later.

Loanu sighed and climbed to her feet. Now she had a task, a direction once more. Another of Suthyran's servants... what sort of demons would this one command?

In times of trouble, look not to the gods, but to yourself.
-- Coranian proverb

The Lammiats sailed west for two weeks. The winds were strong and steady, the skies a bright, cloudless blue, the sea crystalline.

While Hilan drank and stayed in his cabin aboard the Falcon much of the time, trusting Rilal to keep things running smoothly, Nollin worked alongside his men on the Serpent, supervising their tasks, helping where help was needed. He kept the sails trim and the course steady, and slowly he relaxed and fell back into the easy rhythm of life aboard ship. As his memories of Saliin faded, he began to enjoy their voyage once more. It was more than just a quest for riches, he thought. It was an adventure, a chance to see strange lands and people.

Loanu kept strictly to herself (at prayer in her cabin, he guessed), and he didn't press her to join him. She made his crew nervous. It was best if she remained apart; that avoided all manner of problems.

One evening he stood gazing across the water between his ship and Hilan's. The Serpent's bow cut cleanly through the water, throwing up a spray that wet his beard and clothes. He breathed deeply, enjoying the smell of salt and brine. Overhead, white canvas snapped in the wind; behind him his men moved about their tasks with cheerful efficiency. For once, everything seemed to be going exactly the way he wanted.

As he studied his brother's ship, Nollin let his gaze follow the high line of her prow, pass the three tall masts with their square rigging, cross the cabins to the stern. The crew seemed occupied with their work, happy.

He looked back to his brother's cabin, hoping to see Hilan coming out on deck. Instead, he glimpsed someone dressed in black entering, then the door swung shut. Loanu? he wondered. She was the only one who wore black on either ship. What business could she possibly have with Hilan?

Shaking his head, he decided he must have been mistaken. He'd seen Rilal enter the cabin, he thought; the growing darkness and the distance had played tricks with his eyes. Still... he couldn't get rid of the thought that it had been her.

It's easy enough to prove, he thought. Turning, he went aft to her small cabin and knocked loudly.

When no answer came, he knocked again, then again. At last, finding the latch unfastened, he entered.

The room was empty. Cursing, he jerked the hatch shut.

Why would she talk to Hilan? he wondered. He decided not to mention the matter to her, at least for the moment. It was best to wait, to watch. Both she and his brother longed to return to Saliin, he knew, so perhaps a common goal had bred an alliance. If they were planning something together, he'd make sure they wouldn't catch him unprepared.

Hilan stretched, scratched his ribs absently, then yawned. It was an elaborate game: he didn't want the witch to know how interested he was in what she had

to offer. She'd come to his cabin unannounced, entered without knocking, and walked up to the chart table behind which he sprawled. He'd looked at her veiled face with disinterest, growling, "What?"

Now she said, "We must return to Saliin."

"Nollin said to sail west."

"That matters little now. I must go back to Saliin. I have no choice. Perhaps there are others here who believe as I do. Where do you want to go?"

That surprised him. It had been months since he'd had any say in their destination. Nollin had set their course, and he'd thought she told him where to go. Interesting... But what if Nollin had put her up to questioning him as some sort of test?

Cautiously: "What if I tell you I'm content to follow my brother?"

She laughed. "I would call you a fool and a liar."

He stirred a bit, but managed to control his anger.

"I know all your dreams and secret desires," Loanu continued. "I know you want to kill Lord Mur. This is yet possible."

"How?"

"There are many ways. He treads an unsafe path, trafficking with demons. The slightest push may send him tumbling from safety."

"Riddles! I have no time for such. Speak plainly, witch, or return to your master."

She smiled a bit behind her black veil. "We must give Lord Mur time to rest, time to lower his guard. Then we will strike. You shall take control of both ships: this I have foreseen. You will know the time when it comes." Turning, she glided toward the door.

When she was gone, Hilan bit his lip and frowned. To kill Mur... yes, that certainly appealed to him. But to wrest command of both ships from Nollin? What would that gain him? Power over our course. He didn't like not knowing their destination. Yes. He smiled and thought he might well go along with Loanu's plan, if the time felt right, if it wouldn't cost him his new-found friendship with his brother. She said I'd know when the time came. All he had to do was watch... and wait.

In a darkened room, in a lonely town, sat the wizard Karemas. He was old and worn and more than a little mad: it showed mostly in his eyes, which revealed an almost haunted pain.

Before him he had sketched an intricate design full of waving lines and tracings of circles. As he brought his attention to the pattern, it rippled and began to move.

When the lines blurred together, he focussed his thoughts on a person, on a place not too far distant. And he spoke a name: "Voyith."

A moment later the lines shifted once more and he gazed at the chamberlain's face as though through a clear pool of water.

Voyith nodded in recognition. "What news?"

"They will be here tomorrow night."

"Excellent." He smiled a bit. "When you have their ships, let me know."

"As you wish. And you won't forget our bargain... ?"

"No. You will see the Great Lord of Zelloque destroyed. This we have promised."

"Make sure of it." Rising, Karemas rubbed out the pattern. Instantly Voyith's image vanished.

Toward noon the next day, the wind began to drop. By mid afternoon it hardly filled the sails. The air grew stifling without a breeze, and Nollin often found himself staring to their port side, at the coast. Wild and green with luxuriant growth, the trees there beckoned with the promise of shade.

"Sir," Ersal called from his perch in the rigging, "there's a small town ahead."

Nollin turned. He could see a faint dark smudge far down the coast in what he guessed was a small harbor. That would be a good place to shelter the ships until the wind returned, he thought. And there would be fresh water, fresh vegetables, and most especially fresh meat.

He let his ship edge closer to the Falcon, and now the two slipped through the water barely twenty yards apart. He shouted across the low waves, and Rilal turned and jogged to Hilan's cabin.

In a moment, Hilan appeared. He came to the deck railing and shouted, "What now, brother?"

Nollin pointed. "A town! We'll put in there for a night!"

Hilan shrugged. Then he turned and went back to his cabin.

Typical, Nollin thought with distaste. His brother seemed notably unenthusiastic about the prospect of going ashore. Still, perhaps that's best. Hilan had certainly made a mess of things among the gentry in Saliin.

Nollin stayed on deck and watched the town grow nearer. The breeze fell to a whisper, and their speed dropped to the barest crawl, but still their little progress cheered him. Once more he had begun to look forward to seeing new lands and new people; that they would most likely be poor fisher-folk made little difference.

The town sat on a hill overlooking a small natural harbor. It was a typical fishing village, with small docks, several cramped warehouses, perhaps two hundred whitewashed houses in all. Several dozen boats of varying sizes had been tied up or drawn ashore for the night, and bright yellow nets had been spread out to dry in the sun. No large fortress like Lord Mur's brooded over the buildings; the place would be run by a local council of elders, or perhaps by some minor noble. Nollin smiled. It would be a pleasant enough place to relax, and surely nothing could bother them here.

At midnight, they reached the inlet. The water ran deep enough, so both ships

pulled up to the docks. Several waterfront brats came running to take the ropes and moor the ships in place, and after ships had been secured and the gangplank lowered, Nollin strolled down to greet the few villagers who'd gathered to watch.

Before speaking with the men, though, he gave a large Zelloquan copper to each of the boys who'd helped moor the ships. They took the money with muttered thanks and ran off.

Nollin looked up as an old man stepped forward from the knot of townspeople. He was dressed in baggy white pants and a gray silk shirt, and atop his head, set at a jaunty angle, was an intricately sequined cap. This had to be the town's leader.

"We bid you welcome to Yasne," the old man said, with a slight bow. "I am Aarnal Mundi, and the hospitality of my house is yours."

Nollin bowed in return. "Thank you, sir," he said. "I am Nollin Lammiat, humble servant of the Great Lord of Zelloque."

"Indeed," said Aaranal. "We thought you traders."

"No, alas. We are mapmakers, charting these waters for the Great Lord's archives. The calm has left us stranded here."

"You are welcome to stay until the winds resume. There are several taverns here... though our local vintage will doubtless be poor fare for the noble-born likes of you. There are several shrines to the gods as well, should you wish to make offerings. I trust your stay will be a pleasant one."

"I'm certain it will be."

"There is, however, the matter of the docking tax..."

"My first mate takes care of such matters," Nollin said. "See him in the morning and all will be arranged."

"As you wish." Aaranal bowed again. Turning, he motioned to the thirty-odd men and women behind him. "Move along, now! Lanji, Cernol -- don't you have homes and wives to attend to? And Kaeline! What about your shop? You'd leave it to your sons to run? I thought not!" And all the people turned and started to wander off, looking faintly disappointed.

In a moment, the dock was deserted. Nollin looked up and down, but saw no one anywhere. Few lights showed in any of the windows; no voices broke the stillness of the air. He shivered. The place seemed empty, eerily quiet. He didn't like the feeling.

Hilan had wandered from his cabin and now leaned on the railing, chin in his hands, watching. Nollin thought he saw a faint smile on his brother's face.

"We'll stay aboard our ships until tomorrow," Nollin said.

"If you so command," Hilan said.

"Is something wrong?" Nollin asked. "What do you mean, 'If I so command'?"

Hilan shrugged, stifling a yawn. "It's late. I'm going to bed. I'll set the watch and see you in the morning."

"Fair enough," Nollin said. I am tired, he thought. I must be imagining things. Surely Hilan and Loanu can't be planning anything!

But still he worried. Hilan's smile always meant trouble for someone.

Snakes

After Shon Atasha created the Earth and the gods, His spirit moved among the stars, to watch and to wait and to guide the few servants He kept for himself. It is He who knows the future of the world. It is He who will guide it to its final destiny.

-- Tellerion
Speculations

The next day was quiet, calm, and smotheringly hot. Not a trace of wind stirred the dust in the streets; heat shimmered over the buildings in rippling waves.

Yasne seemed an honest enough place: the fisherfolk were up and out at sea with their nets well before dawn. Shops along the waterfront opened early, displaying local wares and food, and Nollin went shopping with the ship's cook. They bought enough fresh carrots and beans and meat for more than a few hearty meals.

The taverns opened early as well, and Hilan and most of the sailors roamed among them, drinking and carrying on as sailors ashore are wont to do. Later Nollin joined them, but he stayed only a brief while, finding their drunken antics boorish at best. He longed to take part in their fun, but just couldn't appreciate such shallow comradeship. And, as their captain, he had to keep apart from the men, keep himself above them at all times. So he sighed and went back to the Serpent and read from the precious few books he'd managed to bring from Zelloque.

So did he pass the hours. The next day brought no wind. The sky remained cloudless and as blue as any he'd seen before. And the day after that, and even the day after that brought no sign of wind.

Growing bored, Nollin took to pacing the docks and staring out to sea, or just sitting by himself and brooding over what lay ahead, what had happened in Saliin, what Loanu and Hilan might have said or agreed to do when they'd met in secret.

A small fishing village is not the place for pirates, Nollin thought as he wandered down the short, wooden dock toward his ship. Perhaps, tomorrow the winds will come.

But he'd thought that too many times now; a week had passed since they'd made port in Yasne. Glancing back at the low stone buildings, the few men and women who walked about on various errands, he grew still more depressed.

The place had even gotten to a few of his sturdiest men. They wandered the streets as though in a daze, or slept, or came aboard ship and went through their duties with mechanical efficiency. They seemed preoccupied, remote from the world. And Nollin found he didn't blame them.

Yasne had become a drab, dismal place, full of the stink of fish and fishermen. Nothing interested him here; nothing remained but to watch the sea and wait for the wind's return.

He heard footsteps behind him. They were heavy and seemed to drag a bit, as though the men were drunk. Nollin stopped and sighed. Hilan again. "I do wish you'd drink less."

Nollin turned, expecting to see his brother standing there, but instead found

one of the villagers, an old, scraggly-bearded man whom he'd seen once or twice in the small dockside tavern. The fellow was dressed in worn linen shirt and pants, and his beard whipped back and forth as he shook his head madly.

"Snakes!" he whispered. "Help me! You must stop them -- stop them snakes!" He fell to his knees with a hoarse gasp, clutching at his throat. A choked gurgle came out.

"S-snakes..." He fell to his side and writhed on the dock.

Nollin swallowed, stepping back uncertainly. He'd seen drunks by the hundreds in all the great cities, in Zelloque, in Pethis, in Coran. He'd heard drunken men rave and he'd watched drunken men die, but he'd never seen anything like this before. Snakes? Still, he felt an obligation to help.

Perhaps, he thought, this is what sets me apart from my brother.

"Come on," he said, stepping forward to help the old man to his feet. "Let's get you home where you belong."

Then he saw the snakes. They appeared like a gathering fog, slowly, almost imperceptibly coming into existence. They seemed more shadow than substance, ghostly gray things less than a foot long, each with pale eyes that glowed in the twilight.

Nollin gasped and drew back, too shocked to run, too shocked to look away. He rubbed his eyes, thinking the snakes some illusion, some trick of the dying crescent sun. But rather than fading like the hallucinations he believed them to be, they grew yet more substantial, yet more solid. He could see the scales on their backs, etched as though in glass. As he watched, more and more of them appeared: they seemed to ooze from the air itself, from the wooden pier, from the man's clothing. The dock filled with their writhing bodies. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds of them.

They swarmed all over the old man now, through his hair, around his neck, over his hands and face. He opened his mouth to scream, and as he did, they poured down his throat, choking him, strangling him. His eyes rolled wildly. He continued to claw at his neck, hands twitching and jerking. His face purpled as he tried to breathe, couldn't.

Nollin took another step back. Fear swept through him like a sudden wind. This was magic unlike any he'd ever seen before.

The man gave a final twitch, then lay still. Dead, Nollin could see. He didn't touch the body. The snakes seemed to have vanished.

Throwing back his cloak, he drew his sword in a quick, fluid movement, then studied the dockside buildings. All the villagers had disappeared... almost as if they'd known what would happen and didn't want to get involved. Shadows ran thick and deep in the alleys; all the windows except those belonging to the two taverns had been firmly shuttered.

What did the old man say about snakes? That I have to stop them? He swallowed. How? Nollin didn't have the faintest idea.

Still, he'd seen enough to know magic was involved, magic powerful enough to threaten his men and ship. He'd have to investigate for that reason alone. But he also didn't like seeing innocent men killed; he'd avenge the old fisherman's death, if he could.

He strained to hear. Small waves lapped at the boats tied up along the docks. From the Serpent and the Falcon came the creak of wood as both ships shifted on a low swell. Only the tavern echoed with the sounds of men at ease. A few sailors sang drunkenly; others offered toasts to gods and good fortune. He heard nothing else, no sounds that spoke of trouble beyond the old fisherman's murder.

Something scabbled near his feet. He leaped back, dropping into a fighting stance. It was the old man. Somehow, impossibly, he was moving. Nollin stared, bewildered, amazed. He'd just seen the fisherman die. He was as certain of that as he was of the snakes.

As he watched, the old man rose unsteadily to his feet. His movements were jerky, unnatural, and he held his head at an odd angle, bent up so he stared at the stars. Without a word, he turned and wandered back down the pier toward the center of the village. Nollin swallowed and shook his head, hardly daring to believe what he'd seen. The snakes, the old man's death, it was all so bizarre!

He couldn't help himself. He ran forward and seized the man's arms, pulling him around.

"Hey -- " he began, then stopped.

The old man's eyes seethed with shadows. Nothing human remained in that blank expression. The fisherman jerked his arm free, turned, and continued his stiff, unnatural walk through the village.

Shocked, Nollin stared after him for a moment. Then he turned and ran as fast as he could for his ship.

Nollin found Loanu sitting quietly on the deck of the Serpent. Again she was dressed all in black, as was her custom, with a thin black veil across her face. Only her dark eyes showed. She slowly turned and looked up at him. There was such sadness in her gaze, such old pain newly awakened, that he found himself loathe to speak to her. He felt like an intruder here, in her presence, even aboard his own ship.

"Loanu," he said quietly, "I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Ah? Nollin, dear boy, you interrupt only the dry, dusty dreams of an old woman. I watched the stars for a sign from my master, but saw only emptiness this night. The age of forgetting is truly upon us." She sighed. "Something troubles you, I see." She leaned closer, studying him. "Speak. What is it?"

"Snakes... I saw..." He hesitated, not quite knowing where to begin. Finally, slowly but carefully, he told her all that he'd seen, all that the old man had said to him. "What did he mean? What caused it? Who --"

She raised one gnarled hand and motioned him to silence. "I have heard of such things," she said, so softly he had to strain to hear. "They are demons, brought to this world to serve, just as the landrexi were brought to the world."

"Demons?"

Loanu leaned back. Her eyes were strange, unreadable. "There are magics best forgotten, best left unknown. The spells to summon demons to Earth are one. I

have seen things that would kill most men. I have walked the shadowlands, the reflections of this Earth cast across all eternity. I have seen the gods in their palace in the sky. I have drunk from the river of time, which winds throughout all our lives. These things I know."

"And now?" Nollin said. "What can you do now?"

"Now?" And he could see her smiling beyond her veil. "Now I have you, my champion. Find the wizard who controls the demons. Kill him!"

"I'll... see what can be done."

She looked up at the stars. "There is a strangeness to this calm, I think."

He blinked. "What?"

"Have you wondered why the winds failed you here? Perhaps there is more motive than you know." Again, that enigmatic smile. She stood abruptly and shuffled off toward her cabin. Nollin could see the weight of ages pressing down on her. She would say no more, he knew.

Straightening, he looked toward the village. Windows had been unshuttered; lights blazed within the houses. He heard faint strains of music from the odd many-stringed instruments the local musicians played. Once more people wandered the streets. Of the old fisherman, of the shadow-snakes, not a trace remained.

As Nollin walked, he couldn't help but brood on everything. Damn Loanu and her hints! She never came out and said what she truly meant. She had implied some wizard had caused the calm. And that would mean he wanted them here, in Yasne . . .

Nollin bit his lip. Then he turned and entered his own cabin, bolting the hatch shut after himself. He had much to think on this night.

When the pale crescent sun dawned, Nollin still sat at the chart-table, staring down at the maps before him. His eyes were bleary, his face haggard from lack of sleep. He ran a rough hand through his beard and hair, stifling a yawn.

The map he'd made of their voyage through the Arpaeen Sea lay spread out before him, with the towns and villages they'd passed marked in colorful splotches of red and green and gold. Yasne was but a pinprick of yellow in the upper right-hand corner. Soon, he knew, they'd be beyond the bounds of this map and he'd have to start another. He'd tentatively sketched in a rough outline for the sea ahead based on old reports he'd once read long ago, but they covered little more than a small fraction of their journey. His planned course took them west into the next sea, the Sarnal, far beyond the routes of even the most daring Zelloquan traders.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. Still no sign of wind. He'd hoped, prayed, that Loanu had been wrong and today the winds would return. Now with each passing hour it seemed more and more apparent that she'd spoken the truth. But why would a wizard want to keep them here? It didn't make sense... unless he wanted something they had.

There came a light knock at the door. He jerked upright. "Who's there?"

"Your brother."

When Nollin crossed and unbolted the hatch, Hilan pushed his way in. He wore gaudy greens and yellows today. Dozens of sapphires glinted in his beard, and his pair of matched swords swung at his side.

"A locked hatch? Afraid of the dark, Nollin?" He laughed. "That's not like you." Crossing to the chart table, he threw himself down in one of the chairs. It creaked ominously as he tilted it back on two legs and put his feet up.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Nollin said.

"Sorry." He grinned. "Some of your men deserted last night, you know."

"What? Who?"

"Just a couple of sailors. Don't know their names. I saw them helping one of the merchants this morning."

"So? The merchant probably paid them for a couple of hours' work."

"They pretended not to know me. They said they were fisherman."

Nollin shrugged. "I'll have Klaff find them later. I'm sure it's nothing important."

Hilan looked at him closely for the first time. "Why don't you sleep more? You look terrible."

"I know, I know. Look, Hilan, something important's happened."

"What?"

"There's a wizard in the village. Loanu says he's the one who caused the calm that's stranded us here, and that he's dangerous. We've got to find him."

Hilan snorted. "Fine witch, her! It took her seven days to discover there's a wizard here? I don't believe it!"

"You've seen her magic. You've seen what she can do -- "

"What?" he growled. "Cheap festival tricks. Illusions. She hasn't done any real magic as far as I can see. For all I know, she's the one who's got us stranded here."

Nollin shook his head. "Hilan -- "

"I know, I know! Trust you. That's what you always say."

"She got us out of Zelloque before the demons came, didn't she?"

He grumbled, but nodded.

"Then trust me this time, too, Hilan. Let me get my sword. We'll take a look around the village, see if we can find that wizard."

"We won't," Hilan said. But now he didn't sound so sure of himself. He watched as Nollin buckled the swordbelt around his waist, and not a trace of his usual humor remained. He's more worried than he'll admit, Nollin thought. He swallowed and picked up his sword. "Let's go."

The Wizard's Book

Throughout history wizards have sought power -- over the physical world, over their fellow men, over their own destinies. Is it any wonder wizards are so hated and feared?

-- Tellerion

Meditations on Magic

Karemas watched Hilan and Nollin's two ships from the highest window in his house. He wore plain gray robes, rather than the loose clothing of the fisher-folk, and his short gray beard masked much of his expression. Now he gazed at their ships with a longing that made him want to rush his plans, to seize them now, before he was truly ready.

"Have patience," he whispered to himself, looking out across Yasne. The people went on with their tasks cheerfully, ignoring him, just as they'd been instructed to do. Even the dozen-odd sailors he'd... recruited over the past few nights bent to his will like grass in the wind. The three he'd sent to help the fishermen worked calmly and efficiently; the eleven still on the ships continued as though nothing had happened.

Nodding happily, he shut the window, latched it firmly, then turned toward his workroom. Yes, it had taken more effort than he'd used in quite a while to take the three sailors and the old man in one short night. It had left him weak, physically spent, but it had been worth it. Tonight he'd go after the Lammiat brothers themselves. Then it would only be a matter of time before he completely controlled both ships.

He sighed, thinking again of his homeland. Narmon Ri, the Great Lord of Zelloque, had driven him from that city many years before. He'd watched from a secret room in his house while the city guard ruined half a lifetime's work in the space of fifteen minutes. They'd smashed his collection of rare elixirs, burned his scrolls and books, slaughtered his helpless servants before his eyes. He'd watched; he'd waited. When they left, he'd fled through the catacombs beneath the city.

He'd sought refuge in many temples that night, but none would take him because of the book he carried, the only thing he'd managed to save from Narmon Ri's purge. Yet it was the rarest object in his collection, a volume so old scarcely a handful of men in the world still understood the language in which it had been written. He'd spent the forty-odd years of his exile trying to master it.

Six months earlier, a stranger named Voyith had visited him. He'd offered Karemas the key to the book's puzzle in exchange for help in conquering the local people for his master, Suthyran.

Karemas had agreed at once, without a second's hesitation. What did a few humans more or less mean to him? Soon he would be ready to return to Zelloque. He smiled. It was a pained, pinched look. Yes, it would be good to return home. With Voyith's help, he'd be able to exact his revenge, make the Great Lord pay for all the pain they'd caused him. He had such plans for Narmon Ri...

"I tell you, you're mad to listen to her!" Hilan Lammiat scuffed at the rutted street with his boots. "Let's go back to the tavern. There's no wizard here!"

For once, Nollin had begun to wonder if his brother might not be right. They'd questioned a dozen-odd villagers and all had denied the existence of any

wizard. The men and women seemed sincere enough, all too eager to help -- perhaps a little too eager, for Nollin's tastes. One old woman had even offered to cure warts for a few copper pieces. And, to add annoyance to frustration, a pack of eight or ten dirty-faced children followed them through the streets wherever they went.

The sun edged steadily toward noon. The village was hot without a breeze to cool it, and Nollin's shirt stuck uncomfortably to his back. He tried to stay in the buildings' meager shade, but there just wasn't enough.

Is it possible, he wondered, that Loanu is wrong? Or are the villagers lying? But why would they lie? What could they possibly gain? They hadn't seemed the least bit insincere when he'd talked to them. Still...

Hilan poked him in the shoulder. "Well?"

"Let's look a bit longer," he said.

"You can look by yourself, then. I'm sick of this place!" Turning, he stomped back toward the ships.

Nollin sighed. "Fine. Go if you must. But if I find the wizard and he kills me, it'll be your fault."

His brother either didn't hear or didn't pay any attention.

Nollin sighed and started up the street in the opposite direction. The children followed after him, giggling and whispering. He looked back and scowled, but they too chose to ignore him. Frustrated, he turned the next corner and pressed himself against the building, out of sight.

A boy of perhaps eight rounded the corner at a trot, almost bumped into him, then tried to dart away with a startled gasp. Nollin caught his arm and hauled him back. The other children stared at him, at his captive, but kept well out of reach.

"Get out of here!" he shouted. They stared, shocked, then turned and fled, squealing like stuck pigs. In a moment, the street was deserted. Nollin could imagine them rushing home to their mothers with awful stories about how he'd imprisoned one of them.

He looked at the boy more closely. The lad was thin, with shaggy black hair, a dirt-smudged face, and bare feet. His muddy clothes were much too baggy, obviously hand-me-downs from an older brother.

Nollin reached into his pouch and pulled out a single silver coin. The boy's eyes bulged. He'd probably never seen so much money before.

"You want this?" Nollin asked.

The boy looked at him, eyes wide, saying nothing.

"Well?"

"Y-yes, sir?"

"Very well, but you'll have to earn it. Understand?"

The boy nodded.

"First, keep your friends from following me everywhere I go. The next one I catch I'll whip until he's bloody. Understand?"

Again, the boy nodded.

"Second, I seem to have gotten lost. Where does the wizard live?"

Without hesitation, the boy turned and pointed to the left, at one of the taller buildings in the next street. "That one, with the red tile roof."

Nollin smiled triumphantly. Never trust a child to keep a secret, he thought. They'd sell their parents for enough candy. He only wished he had thought to ask one of them first; it would have saved hours of questioning.

He looked up at the house, studying the shuttered windows, the tiled roof that looked in disrepair, the sandy-brown stone walls. It seemed a gloomy enough place, suitable for a wizard. He had no doubt the child had told him the truth.

He offered the coin. The boy grabbed it and ran.

Hilan swaggered down the street, leering at the women sweeping porches or emptying wash-water into the gutter. They blushed and did their best to ignore him. He was well aware of the magnificent figure he cut, in his finest silks and jewels, and he didn't mind showing himself off. Still, he soon grew tired of his sport, in the heat, and headed for the Falcon.

And then he couldn't help but think of his brother. Ah, Nollin, he thought, you're so gullible. Why don't you listen to me? He knew that witch, Loanu, had lied. The villagers proved it. There never had been any wizard here.

As he walked, he grew angrier. What right did Loanu have to send Nollin to do her bidding? None. What right did she have to send them both on mad hunts for non-existent wizards? None.

He didn't like the way she'd twisted Nollin around her finger like some child's plaything, and he didn't want to end up that way himself. Is that what she plans to do with me when I return to Saliin? he wondered.

He didn't like the idea of serving her. Scowling, he decided to confront her, to tell her what he thought of her plans to control him.

Grimly he marched down the pier, then up the Serpent's gangplank. The first mate hurried forward.

"Can I help you, Captain Hilan?" he said.

"I've come to see Loanu."

"Aye, sir. She's in the chart-room waiting for the captain to return."

Hilan noticed how Klaff phrased that: not waiting for Captain Nollin to return, but waiting for the captain. That was another thing that bothered him: Nollin taking charge of the whole expedition without his consent. Their whole trip had been one disaster after another, first with Mur escaping, then the landrexi attacking, and now Nollin bossing him around. He growled to himself.

"What, Captain Hilan?" Klaff said.

"Hm? Nothing. I'll take care of this myself. Go back to your duties."

Klaff nodded curtly, then went back to his seat, where he had been repairing a torn sail.

Hilan headed back for the captain's cabin and chart-room. He pushed open the hatch, entered, and closed it behind him. Loanu, he noticed, sat with her back to him, poring over one of the maps.

"It's about time you got here, Hilan," she said, without looking up. "I've been expecting you. You certainly took your time."

He snarled, "Mind yourself, not me. I didn't come to listen to you whine, with your pretty little tricks."

She turned to look at him. The veil she usually wore had been drawn aside and now he gazed full into her face. Her eyes were dark, unnaturally dark. And he saw something reflected there that made him uneasy. Quickly, unable to help himself, he looked away.

"You are a fool," she said, very softly.

He forced himself to turn, to glare at her. "I came to tell you to leave my brother alone. There's no wizard here, and there never was."

"How then, Hilan Lammiat, do you explain the calm that keeps you here?"

"There's been calm weather before. It's nothing new to a sailor."

"How about your crewmen that don't recognize you?"

He started. "How do you know that?"

"I know all that happens on this ship. The walls are my ears, and the masts, my eyes. Do not think me a a helpless old woman, Hilan Lammiat. I am far from that."

He looked down at the floor for a moment, not answering, all his plans suddenly jumbled and confused.

She smiled -- a look that mocked him. He wouldn't have tolerated that from anyone else, not even Nollin, but he found he didn't care, somehow, when it came from her. Now he just wanted to get away from her, to gather his thoughts --

"Soon we will return to Saliin," she said. "Bide your time, my friend. Soon all will be well again."

She raised her right hand, tracing an odd pattern in the air. He saw a brief shimmer of blue, then the world blurred. Distantly he heard her voice, but the words were heavy, strange, and he could scarcely comprehend what she was saying.

"There is a wizard," he heard, and he found himself agreeing. "You want to help Nollin. You know you can't leave here until that wizard is dead. Go!"

Hilan barely heard her now. A rage had begun to build inside him, a rage unlike any he'd felt before. He longed to have the wizard in front of him, skewered on his sword. It was what he wanted, and he gave in to it

unthinkingly. To kill the one who kept them here...

Even before Loanu had finished talking he'd started for the door, intent upon his mission.

Nollin stood studying the house. Its windows had all been tightly shuttered; its door, when he tried it, proved to be bolted from the inside. If not for the thin plume of smoke drifting up from its chimney, he would have thought the place completely deserted: not a sound came from within.

"There you are, Nollin!" he heard someone call.

Turning, he saw Hilan several houses away. That surprised him. Nollin had never known his brother to change his mind about much of anything, without proof, and he certainly didn't have any... yet.

Hilan trotted over to his side, panting for breath. He'd obviously been running. In this heat, without reason, it was almost unheard-of. Nollin thought, then, that something had to be wrong with the ships.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Hilan looked at him strangely. "Happened? I'm here to help you."

"I thought you didn't believe in this wizard."

He shrugged. "This is the place?"

"Perhaps. I bribed a child. He said the wizard lived here, but I've seen no sign of it, myself."

A bearded old man carrying a huge basket of fish shuffled past, wheezing for breath. Nollin stopped him. "Is this where the wizard lives?" he asked.

The old man turned to face him. It was only then that Nollin recognized the same fisherman who'd warned him about the snakes, the fisherman who'd died on the docks. The old man's face was slack, his eyes glassy. He seemed to gaze through Nollin, rather than at him.

"Wizard?" the man mumbled. "There's no wizard there. That house has been empty for as long as I can remember."

"Somebody's in it now," Nollin said. "See the smoke?" He pointed.

The old man looked. "Don't see anything." He started on his way again, and this time Nollin didn't try to stop him.

"Curious," he murmured.

"This is the place?" Hilan said again.

"Yes. It has to be. Let's try around back and -- "

"Kill him!" Hilan cried, drawing his pair of monkey-skull swords.

"No, Hilan, we need -- "

Hilan charged the door. He hit it with his shoulder and wood splintered. He backed up, kicked the lock savagely. The door burst open, hinges shrieking.

" -- to use subtlety," Nollin finished. Sighing, he drew his sword and followed his brother.

It was dark inside, musty and close. The air held something sweet, too, Nollin thought. Not decay... but perhaps burning herbs? Somehow he'd expected something more gruesome to welcome him into a wizard's home.

Then he saw the eye. It floated, silent, unblinking, just above the door. When he turned to face it, it faded away from view. He swallowed hard. The wizard, it seemed, knew they were here.

Hilan, too, had paused. Now Nollin listened, too, straining to hear over the wild beating of his heart, the roughness of his breath.

"Where would he be?" Hilan asked.

Nollin shook his head. "Perhaps a private room."

"Then onward!" Brandishing his swords, Hilan charged through the high archway into the next room.

Sighing, Nollin followed him into what had once been a large reception hall. Sunlight knifed through gaps in the shutter slats, showing long, dust-covered wooden benches along the walls. Above them hung faded, moldering tapestries. Other than that, the room was empty. Two small stone staircases led from it, one going up, the other down.

Please don't say it, Nollin thought, looking at his brother.

Hilan grinned at him. "Two staircases," he said, "one for each of us."

I knew it, Nollin thought, and he said: "Perhaps it would be best if we stayed together."

Grinning, taunting: "Afraid?"

"No!" Nollin hesitated. "I'll take the upstairs, then."

Hilan turned and ran for the down staircase. Reluctantly, Nollin turned to his. He knew it was foolish to split up, but pride wouldn't let him admit his fear. Sometimes, brother, I think you're insane. He checked his sword, then started up.

The steps were broad and steep. Little puffs of dust rose around his boots. He kept his left hand on the wall for balance and his right hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to draw it at the first sign of trouble. He reached the second floor and prowled through it quickly, finding little of interest. Most rooms contained nothing but old furniture. Nollin could tell by the dust on the floor that they hadn't been disturbed for many years. Two of the bedchambers, though, showed signs of recent habitation: one contained a large featherbed, a scattering of books and other personal effects, some old clothes. The other held a pair of thin pallets, perhaps for the wizard's servants.

Cautiously, he moved up the narrow, winding staircase for the third floor. He heard a slight creaking sound from above, so stopped. If anyone were going to try to ambush him, this would be the spot. He drew his sword, took a deep breath, and crept forward.

As soon as he stepped into the third floor hallway, two men jumped him. Both wore loose linen clothing like the other townspeople, and Nollin felt certain he'd seen them in the tavern once or twice. Both also held heavy wooden clubs, which they wielded awkwardly.

Ducking a wild swing, Nollin retreated, keeping the tip of his sword high. Fortunately the narrowness of the hallway made it impossible for both men to face him at once. Now the first fisherman moved forward, raising his club for a sharp, downward blow.

Nollin leaped forward, thrust, and ran his blade through the man's chest. The fisherman looked down as if startled, then up as Nollin jerked his sword free. He stepped forward as though uninjured and swung his club.

It just grazed Nollin's arm. Cursing, Nollin took a quick step back. By all rights the fisherman should be dead now. He glanced at his sword and noticed there wasn't any blood on its blade. Swallowing, he took another step back.

The man pressed forward, raising his club again, and Nollin slipped one of the throwing knives from the sash around his stomach. He tossed it underhanded in an end-over-end roll.

At this distance he couldn't miss. It stuck in the fisherman's left eye.

The man reeled back, pawing at the knife, and managed to remove it. He made no sound. A white milklike substance oozed from the wound.

Nollin moved forward now, more confident. Again the fisherman raised his club, but this time Nollin was ready. He lunged, but instead of going for the easy chest target, struck higher, flicking the blade across the man's one remaining eye, completely blinding him.

The fisherman dropped to his knees and began to feeling his way toward Nollin. The second man pressed forward now.

Drawing a second throwing knife from his sash, Nollin readied himself. Now that he knew how to hurt them, it wouldn't take long to finish off these two. Then he'd go see what trouble Hilan had gotten himself into.

Hilan, for all his bulk, could move as softly as a cat when he wanted to. He chose to now. Testing each board in the staircase before putting his full weight on it, stopping for half a minute whenever he made the slightest noise, he moved steadily downward.

The staircase ended at a door. He pushed it gently with his fingertips and it swung silently open on well-oiled hinges. He found himself looking down a stone corridor lit only by a single flickering torch. Again he crept forward.

Ahead, to his right, a door stood slightly ajar. Through the crack he glimpsed movement. He smiled coldly. This was what he'd been waiting for.

After taking a half-step back, he kicked the door open and leaped through, brandishing his swords. A quick glance showed him the room: a richly furnished chamber with bright tapestries on the walls, scattered pieces of carved furniture, and several tables piled high with papers. A fireplace against one wall radiated a cheerful warmth. The center of the room had been cleared and intricate geometric designs drawn on the floor. And, in the middle of the design, behind a large wooden stand upon which perched an open book, stood a tall, gaunt man.

The wizard looked almost emaciated, with a short beard the same gray as his robes. His head had been shaved. He barely glanced up as Hilan burst in, but kept reading from the book and mumbling to himself.

Hilan laughed. It would be ridiculously easy to kill this wizard. He raised both swords and charged.

Before he'd taken two steps, though, the wizard stopped mumbling, looked up, and spoke a single word. Immediately Hilan found himself unable to move. His arms felt leaden, his legs impossible weights. Something burred like a cicada in the back of his mind. Distantly, as though in a dream, he heard the wizard speaking to someone else.

A man came out from the corner of the room. While Hilan watched in helpless terror, the wizard's servant pried both swords from his hands and began to bind his arms and legs with heavy ropes. The servant's fingers were sure, certain, and Hilan knew as he watched that he'd never be able to free himself. He had a sudden, sick feeling of despair.

At last the man finished and moved away. The wizard said another word and the heaviness on Hilan lifted. Abruptly finding himself able to move, he began to struggle frantically to escape.

"I'm shocked that you would disturb me," the wizard said, "in the middle of a spell. Don't you know how dangerous that is? Fortunately no harm was done this time. And," he went on, watching Hilan's muscles bulge as he tried to break the ropes, "it's no use fighting. Tying knots is about the only thing my people do well. They are rather... limited in their abilities. I haven't been able to teach them anything they didn't already know. But you and your brother... ah! There are so many possibilities."

Hilan glared at him. "Let me loose!"

"Do not be stupid -- Hilan, isn't it? -- and do not try to argue with me. Why should I bother when soon enough you will serve me gladly?"

He went to a table and sat, taking up a pen. Slowly, meticulous, he began to draw. When he said, "Voyith!" a moment later, Hilan jerked.

That was the name of Lord Mur's chamberlain, Hilan remembered. Voyith had been the one responsible for Mur's regaining control of Saliin. What could this wizard possibly have to do with him?

The wizard spoke first: "I have the Lammiats now."

"Bring them," Voyith said.

"I planned to. The trip will take nine days."

"My master will be pleased."

"Just so he keeps his word." Rising, the wizard came back and resumed his position behind his book. He began to chant again, voice rising and falling like the murmur of surf.

A cold rage had been building inside Hilan since he'd heard Voyith's name. Mur had been responsible for stranding them in Yasne. Loudly he cursed the wizard, Mur, and most of all Nollin. They should have stayed and killed the Lord of Saliin, rather than flee. Now another of Mur's men had caught them.

He stopped straining against the ropes. Instead, he studied the room, trying to find something, anything, to help him.

He noticed the stand on which the wizard's book rested. It was tall, graceful, made of intricately carved wood... an art object, designed for beauty rather than function.

He swung his legs around and struck the stand's base with his feet. It toppled easily. The wizard gave a sharp cry of dismay as his book fell into the fireplace.

In an instant, though, he'd seized tongs and pulled it from the flames. The book's corners were a bit scorched, the edges of the pages a bit blackened, but otherwise it appeared unhurt. The wizard sighed. He brushed it off gently, touching it like a man would touch the woman he loved.

Then he righted the bookstand and moved it a more respectful distance from Hilan's feet. "You really should be more careful," he said. "Were I less benevolent of nature, I might well kill you. However, you will serve me soon enough. Kindly lie there calmly and wait. It won't hurt for more than a moment."

He bent over the book and began to read. The words were strange, harsh, guttural. Some seemed more sobs and wails than anything else, and all held an inflection that grated on Hilan's nerves. He began to fight desperately against the ropes. He felt something wet on his wrists and realized he'd rubbed them raw and bloody. Perhaps, he thought, the blood might let him slip loose...

Still the wizard chanted. Hilan saw tiny spots of black appear in the air around himself, each no larger in diameter than his thumb. Through them oozed ghostly, smoke-colored snakes. They seemed to writhe to the rhythm of the wizard's voice.

They swarmed over Hilan's body. He felt their cool, scaled hides sliding over his hands, his face, his eyes --

After blinding the second fisherman, Nollin backed up to the end of the hall. He ran forward, leaped, set foot in the middle of the first fisherman's back, cleared the second, and found himself at the head of the staircase once more. He started down at a trot. Behind him, he heard the two fumbling their way in pursuit.

He found the second floor empty as he'd left it, and the first floor the same. No sign of Hilan. Sighing, he took the one remaining staircase, the one to the cellars below the house.

Even before he reached the the last step, he heard chanting from ahead. He shivered, unnerved by the sound. It was like nothing he'd ever heard before.

Taking the torch from its holder in the wall, he moved silently toward the open door ahead. Through it he could just see Hilan's bound feet, and over Hilan swarmed the same black snakes he'd seen on the fisherman on the dock.

Nollin plunged into the room. He saw the wizard before him, standing behind a book on a tall, ornate stand. The wizard didn't glance up, didn't stop his chant for a moment. Nollin leaped forward and brought his sword down in the crease of the open book. The blade sliced easily through the thin snakeskin

binding, shattered the bookstand into so much kindling, and made the halves of the book flop apart like a fish cut in two.

The wizard shrieked and dove after half of the book, trying to turn the page, trying to continue his chant uninterrupted. Nollin didn't give him a chance. He thrust the torch at the wizard's robes and set them afire.

Again the wizard shrieked, this time from pain and fear. As he tried to beat out the flames with his hands and half of the book, Nollin turned to his brother. All the snakes had scattered to the corners of the room, filling the shadows with dim movement. He noticed another fisherman holding a club, but this one stood off in the corner, watching the scene with vague indifference -- waiting for orders, Nollin guessed. The wizard was too preoccupied to give any, at least for the moment.

Bending, Nollin cut his brother free. He noticed the blood on Hilan's wrists, but said nothing.

Hilan, showing no sign of pain, leaped to his feet. He rushed to the table and snatched up his weapons. Then he started for the wizard, raising his swords, face twisted with rage.

The wizard, though, had almost put out the fire. Nollin seized his brother's arm and forced him toward the door despite his protests. He had no intention of fighting both the snakes and their master.

"Let go of me!" Hilan roared.

Nollin didn't. "Trust me," he said.

Hilan tensed, as if preparing to fight, then abruptly relaxed and went with Nollin. "This time," he whispered.

Two torches lit the room. Nollin caught up the pair and tossed them into the hallway, hoping to win a few more minutes by leaving the wizard in near darkness. Then he pulled the door shut and wedged the end of one torch between the door's handle and the outside wall. Now that it couldn't be opened from the inside, they had the wizard trapped.

They paused there, looking at each other, panting for breath. Hilan grimaced. "You should have let me kill him!"

"You had your chance and he won."

"He used magic!"

"What do you think he would've done if you'd tried to kill him a second time? Helped you? He was distracted; that's why we managed to get out. Damn!" He grabbed one of his brother's bleeding wrists and looked at the wound.

The skin had been torn away in a complete circle around the wrist. It bled freely. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the wound, then began tying it tightly to staunch the flow of blood. Hilan winced a bit as he worked, but said nothing.

Nollin said, "Can't have your sword slipping, can we?"

"It's nothing. I've fought with worse than that!"

"You're my partner now and I'm not going to let you take stupid chances if I

can avoid it." If he has a conscience, that will make him feel guilty about whatever he and Loanu have been planning.

Hilan said -- too quickly, Nollin thought -- "We've got to kill him, and then we've got to go back and kill Mur."

"We already decided -- "

"No! You decided. Listen, Nollin, Mur was responsible for this wizard attacking us. I heard him talking to Voyith."

"How?"

"Magic of some kind. It doesn't matter. I heard them. Mur still wants our ships!"

Nollin studied his brother. He's telling the truth, he thought, a sick feeling in his stomach. Mur really did send them. He said: "We'll talk about it later tonight."

Hilan nodded. "Good."

"First we'll burn the house. That should take care of the wizard."

"Quickly, then!" Hilan picked up the torches.

As they turned for the stairs, there was a frantic pounding on the door. The wizard shouted for help and called both their names.

Nollin stopped, moved back beside the door, expecting some trick. "What do you want?" he called.

"Quickly, you must let me out! The dark! The snakes! The snakes!" And then Nollin heard a strange, half-stifled scream, followed by a thump like that of a falling body, and then nothing more.

He had a strange, uneasy feeling, and in his mind he could see the fisherman on the dock once more, the snakes swarming over him, pouring down his throat. The memory made him sick. He wondered if that was now happening to the wizard, if he were being devoured by his own demons.

The idea disturbed Nollin more than he wanted to admit. For a second he wished he could be harder, stronger, more like his brother. Hilan would have taken a perverse delight in knowing the wizard's fate.

"Come," he said to Hilan, turning away before his brother could see the pain on his face, the weakness within him, "we still have a lot to do."

That afternoon, the wind came from the west. It howled through the village streets, whipped through the ships' rigging, set the waves running high and choppy.

That afternoon, Hilan and Nollin burned the wizard's house. The dry wooden floors and interior walls caught at once, and flames and showers of sparks leaped high into the air, driven up like fireworks by the wind. Thick smoke filled the air.

That night, mourners filled the streets. Over half the village had suddenly and inexplicably died: most of the adults, several of the oldest children.

Nollin said nothing, but he suspected these were the people whom the wizard had possessed with his snakes. Twelve sailors died as well: the three who'd claimed to be fishermen, plus the men who'd seemed withdrawn, distant to him earlier.

The surviving villagers wound through the streets of Yasne in a long, orderly procession, flailing themselves with branches cut from live oak trees, trying to drive away any bad spirits lingering. Their cries were sharp and pitiful.

Aboard the *Serpent*, Nollin stood on deck and watched the fisher-folk march along the dock. By the pale light of the stars he could see their faces, upturned, glistening with tears. They rocked back and forth, back and forth, and he could hear the women sobbing.

They blamed him for what had happened, he saw, and for an instant he let himself feel guilt. If he hadn't killed the wizard, their loved ones would still be alive. He felt a wrenching inside as he gave the order to cast off.

"Aye, sir!" called Klaff, and the ropes were pulled from the pilings. The sails went up with a sudden whisper, then they cracked and snapped in the breeze.

From the *Falcon*, Nollin heard his brother laughing and toasting the wizard's death. He wished he could be so unfeeling, so removed from the emotions of others. Then from the *Falcon* he heard Loanu's voice as well, low but unmistakable. He strained, but couldn't make out her words.

Again, the twist of pain within; the betrayal he saw coming, but couldn't stop... Again he heard Hilan's laughter: loud, coarse, violent.

He wondered what his brother might even now be planning with Loanu, and for an instant he thought how much easier things would have been if only he'd waited a moment longer before attacking the wizard. Then he put that thought from his mind, knowing he never would have let Hilan die. He'd risked too much to keep his brother alive. He hoped Hilan felt the same way.

Resigned, he knew he'd wait and pray he was wrong. Perhaps, he thought, I am too paranoid. But in the past paranoia had kept him alive where other men would have died.

He forced his attention to Yasne once more. The villagers were staring at him from the end of the dock. He thought of the shock and anger and betrayal they must feel. He swallowed, again feeling guilty.

"How was I to know?" he silently asked the heavens. If fate had been kind, if life could have for an instant matched the old fairy tales, then the villagers might have lived on when freed from the wizard's spell. But no, the gods were cold and uncaring, and miracles would never come.

Perhaps it would have been better to let the wizard live.

Then he shook his head. No. It's better this way. He had to stop blaming himself for what had happened. The villagers, he knew deep inside, were better off dead than possessed. He only wished the people of Yasne could understand.

He turned away, refused to look at them any longer. Still he heard their wailing voices. And still he knew the pale, pale faces of the children on the dock would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Mur, he swore, would pay for all the harm he'd done.

Plots in the Making

In the early days of the world, when the gods moved through the lands of men in human form, a great king arose. His name was Uccanu Hzin, and he united half the world beneath his red banner. So it was that the god Faramigon came to him in the guise of an old witch, promising to tell the king's fortune. When he had paid her, Faramagon prophesied a short reign and a violent end to Hzin's empire. Uccanu Hjin was, of course, displeased, and ordered the witch's head cut off. When the soldiers seized her, though, they found only empty skin -- a husk, cast off when Faramigon needed it no more. Distant, mocking laughter could be heard. The next day, the king, his court, and his whole city sank forever beneath the sea. Beware the pride of power.

-- Anonymous

A Child's History

Loanu walked across the starlit deck of the Falcon. Swirls of shadow flowed around her, the patterns of dark and light washing across the deck, hiding her movements. She breathed deeply. The air was cool, moist and somehow rich.

Ahead, another figure stirred. It was Hilan Lammiat, shifting uneasily from foot to foot as he stared across the water at his brother's ship a scant fifty feet away.

This will be the final test, Loanu thought, approaching him.

He didn't seem to notice her at first, but then he turned. Loanu saw no sign of happiness on his face. He appeared uneasy, disturbed. Or was it fear?

"You must take the ships now," she whispered. "It is time to return to Saliin."

He looked again over the water. Leaning on the rail, sighing a bit, he did not answer.

"The time is right," she said.

"Is it?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then why does it feel so wrong? So much like betrayal?"

"A little pain now will make our success all the sweeter."

"How would you know what I feel? You're not even human anymore."

"Perhaps," she said slowly, "I am more human than you know."

He turned on her sharply, grabbed her arms, shook her. "No!" he shouted. "You're just trying to use me, like you use him!"

Shocked, more than a little frightened, Loanu just stared at him. He was not to have touched her. How could she have foreseen such a reaction? He was so unpredictable, so violent. She had never expected him to resist physically.

"Obey me," she said, trying to push him on by will alone. "Obey me and I will give you all you desire, Hilan. You wish to rule your brother. You wish his obedience, his loyalty. You want his men and his ship."

"No!" he said. But she could hear the truth of it in his voice.

"Yes!" she breathed. "Release me!"

Instead, his grip tightened. She felt his muscles surge as he lifted her over his head. She gasped as he heaved her over the side of the ship. She glimpsed dark water rushing up at her.

Closing her eyes, she let herself drift on shadow. There came a moment of vertigo, then a cold breeze on her face. When she looked again, she floated slightly above the Nollin's ship, far from Hilan Lammiat.

She stepped down, felt herself solidly on deck, and turned to look across the water. Hilan could no longer see her, she knew: she had gathered shadows around her like a protective robe.

Grimly she smiled as Hilan leaned over the railing and searched for her body. He'd obviously been listening for a splash that never came.

Let him worry, she thought. He feared magic, feared her power. She could smell it every time they met. A period of uncertainty her would only strengthen that fear.

She had underestimated Hilan Lammiat, she realized. In his crude way, he was quite strong-willed. It made the whole situation all the more precarious.

They had to return to Saliin. She had to return to Saliin. No alternative remained. Her plan had worked well thus far; the wizard in Yasne had unknowingly served her purpose. He'd let her manipulate Hilan, made him bait to lure Nollin back to her cause. If she continued, she thought, her plans would surely succeed.

In the morning she'd go to Hilan once more. He could not be allowed to think he might harm her or influence her actions. Yes, a night of wondering... It would give her time to think, to gather her strength. It would give him time to worry.

And she knew already how relieved he'd be to find her still alive. She smiled in anticipation. If not his actions, at least their course was known to her.

She returned to her cabin, and there she sat before her small altar. Closing her eyes, she began to shape a man's face in her mind: Ker, the wizard who served Derethigon.

She called his name, and a moment later an image of him appeared in her mind.

"Yes, Loanu?" he said.

"The wizard is dead, consumed by the demons he brought to our world. All is as it should be in Yasne."

"I will keep my promise. Tell me when you reach Saliin, and I will come."

"It shall be so."

Opening her eyes, she found herself alone in her cabin once more. Softly, she began her evening prayers. Around her she felt the flowing, all encompassing presence of Shon Atasha the Creator. He was pleased.

Return to Saliin

Magic is the easiest path to power. It is also the most dangerous.

-- Neraff Tev

Meditations on Life and Magic

Four hours later, when they dropped anchor for the night, Nollin met his brother in the Falcon's chart room. Rather than his customary bright clothes, Hilan wore plain grays and whites, perhaps expressing some inner gloom. Pulling up a chair, Nollin sat across from him, studying his face, looking for some clue as to what bothered him. It wasn't that Lord Mur had ordered a wizard to kill them; such treachery they could deal with. This was something else -- perhaps Loanu?

At last Hilan sighed. "Voyith," he said. "That's who the wizard was talking to. Mur wants us dead, brother."

"We've known that for quite a while."

"But he wasn't sending wizards to kill us!"

"His power can't extend very far. We'll soon be away from him."

"I don't like running from a fight."

Nollin said nothing. He'd backed himself into a trap: whichever way he turned, he faced disaster. When he'd made his decision to leave Saliin, it had been for the good of both ships and both crews. If he gave in to Hilan and Loanu and went back now, he'd not only be endangering everyone, but weakening his authority.

He didn't mind the danger of the landrexi or their master; careful planning could defeat them. The real problem lay with Hilan. Brother or not, Hilan could never be allowed to take control of the ships. Whether the power was stolen in rebellion or given freely by acceding to his will didn't matter; if Hilan won out for even a moment, the consequences might be disastrous. His brother was petty, impulsive, a gambler. That Hilan had lived so long was as much a matter of luck as skill. Nollin preferred to leave nothing to chance, and that meant making all the decisions himself.

Silently cursing his predicament, he realized he never should have expected his brother's cooperation. In Saliin, he'd gotten Hilan to cooperate by constantly being right. That had been a sharp blow to Hilan's pride. He should have known his brother's thirst for power would return in time. What it came down to now was a matter of forestalling the rebellion, of cutting it short and turning it in upon itself. He couldn't give Hilan a chance to gather support among the crew. Or Loanu.

I need a diversion, he thought, something that will give Hilan enough to do to satisfy him, something that will distract Loanu from setting him against me.

Loanu would never be satisfied until she had that pendant, and it lay back in Saliin. The problem was simple: he had to win her back. Without her support, he'd soon be replaced.

So they would return to Saliin, but just to find the pendant for Loanu, not to kill Mur. It would be a quick raid, into the fortress to snatch the pendant from Voyith, then back out before anyone could stop them or muster any real opposition.

The plan was more desperate than most, but he knew it could work. And he knew it would solve his problems with Loanu and Hilan. He'd win back the old woman's support by getting her pendant, and Hilan would be placated. They just wouldn't be going to kill Lord Mur. Nollin grinned.

It would look like he'd planned their return all along. He decided to tell Loanu that night.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur had seen things go from bad to worse after leading the landrexi into Saliin. Voyith had done everything he'd promised, sure enough: the brothers Lammiat certainly had been driven away, and Mur certainly had regained control of his fortress and lands. Unfortunately, the price had been far higher than Nissav ever could have guessed.

After the Lammiats had fled through the catacombs, surviving numerous deathtraps despite all of Voyith's promises, and after they had escaped to their ships, the chamberlain had sent most of the landrexi back to the Raltanian Mountains. Unfortunately, the creatures decided (without his knowledge or permission, Voyith claimed) to eat first.

They'd fallen on the peasant village around the fortress like a pack of starving wolves, ripping through the mud-brick walls of houses with their armored claws, attacking anything that moved, human or animal. They'd dragged their prey out into the streets and eaten it alive, ignoring screams of protest, ignoring the few valiant men and women who tried to fight them off. The gutters had run thick with blood.

And Nissav stood on the fortress battlements and watched it all with a sick shock. He had screamed for Voyith to call off his creatures, and he had screamed to the landrexi, and finally he had screamed to the gods in their palace in the sky. And when no answer came and the winds blew the stench of death to him, he'd retched until he thought he'd die himself, so great was his agony.

And Voyith had been nowhere to be found.

Later his chamberlain said, "I worked in the throneroom supervising the remaining guards, whom I set to repairing the damage caused by Hilan Lammiat's drunken excesses. Doubtless the stone walls proved too thick; I heard nothing, Lord."

Nissav didn't believe him. It seemed too incredible that Voyith could save the whole of Saliin in one moment, then let it be ravaged the next. If someone had wanted to destroy his lands, he could not have done a better job.

After the bloodbath, several dozen peasants had crawled from the wreckage of their homes, from boarded-up cellars and secret compartments. They'd come together and wept for the dead. And he hadn't the courage to face them. He'd sent Alim, the new captain of the guard, in his stead.

In all, one hundred and twenty-three humans now remained in Saliin, guarded by eight landrexi.

"Soon," Voyith would say, "when things are safe, I will send these last few away as well."

"And when will that be?"

"Soon," he promised.

And, Nissav swore to himself, when they go, I will see you dead and your head stuck on a pole over the gates. You've done more to destroy Saliin than the Lammiats ever did. He wished he'd never listened to his chamberlain, never accepted the landrexi as his allies. Finally, he wished his father were still alive; the old Lord of Saliin would have known what to do.

Helpless, he cursed his fate.

An Alliance Reforged

Men pass from history like leaves in the wind; the gods retire periodically to their palace in the sky. Only Shon Atasha is eternal, and His plans encompass all, man and god, land and sky, and even the least important flea in the ear of the least important dog in the world.

-- Tellerion

Meditations

Nollin wandered onto the main deck of his ship and leaned heavily on the taffrail, letting his gaze sweep out over the sea. Dawn broke, the thin crescent sun like a bowl overturned in the east, spilling a pink and gold wine across half the sky. Beyond Hilan's Falcon he could see the silhouette of a rugged, hilly shore. They had skirted the small peninsula yesterday, before dropping anchor.

He studied his brother's vessel. Sailors were at work applying oakum to parts of the deck amidship while others were running down gantlines of laundry they'd set up to dry during the night. He looked over the prow with its carved wooden bird's head, across the deck, and past the three masts to the stern.

When he looked back at his brother's cabin, he glimpsed the hatch swinging shut. It reminded him of the time Loanu had snuck in to see his brother (had it been only a week before?) and he wondered if it had been her this time as well. Were they still plotting together?

Easy enough to find out. Abruptly, he turned and stalked back toward Loanu's cabin. He pounded on the hatch, waited for an answer, and when none came, pushed his way in.

The room smelled of incense and herbs. The bed had been neatly made. The small shrine in the opposite corner looked well-tended. Of Loanu, he found no sign.

Cursing, he closed the hatch and leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, eyes closed. He knew where the witch was: talking to Hilan, plotting with him, deciding how soon to strike to take over the ships. Suddenly, his head hurt. He wondered, then, if his decision to return to Saliin might not have come too late. He prayed it hadn't. He could never let Hilan have command.

Aboard the Falcon, Hilan sat at his chart-table and regarded the witch through half-closed eyes. So, she hadn't drowned after all. He felt a brief stab of disappointment, but pushed it away: he hadn't really expected to kill her, but it would have made things vastly simpler. She was just trying to use him, he knew, pitting him against Nollin so she could divide them and rule them both. Carefully he kept his rage from showing. That was one lesson he'd learned well from his brother. Out of Loanu's sight, the fingers of his left hand caressed the monkey-skull hilt of one of his swords.

"I see you have recovered from your tantrum," she said, moving slowly around the room, examining the various trophies hung on the walls. She stopped before a stuffed human hand that clenched a knife menacingly. After a moment, she moved on, toward the skull of the first horse Hilan had ever eaten. She continued: "I trust you have rethought your decision."

"You can go to hell," he said, unmoving.

She turned and raised her hands, began to gesture and speak in a low, strange voice. A heaviness came over him. Distantly, he heard her voice: "The time is right to seize Nollin's ship. He won't be harmed. You will see to this. But

you also want the power I can give you."

Hilan felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into a warm, dark, friendly place. He found himself agreeing with everything the witch said.

"You trust me completely. I am your friend, your companion, your confidant. Tell me that you believe me, Hilan."

"I believe you," he whispered. It seemed so true to him, as though he could never have thought any other way.

But some portion of his mind began to protest. He looked away from Loanu, confused, disturbed. His head ached, suddenly, with a sharp, throbbing pain.

Then his fingers curled around his sword's hilt almost of their own will. He stood, drawing the blade, pushing his chair back so hard it slammed against the wall.

"No!" he screamed. A blinding rage tore through him. Barely, he held himself back. "Get out or I'll gut you!"

Loanu pointed toward him and whispered something he couldn't quite hear. Immediately his sword took on a white glow. A second later, it burned his hand like a white-hot ember.

Yelping, he dropped it. The sword bounced on the floorboards and the glow faded.

"I'll kill you!" he said.

"I can defend myself, as you have seen." Loanu backed toward the door. "Think on what I say. We may yet wait before winning Nollin's ship, but not forever."

Hilan growled and shook his head, frustrated, somehow betrayed. "I'll talk to Nollin," he said. "And then we'll see who's in charge!"

"I doubt if you will," she said. "Look inside yourself, Hilan Lammiat, and you will know the truth." And then the door closed and she was gone.

That night, they found safe harbor in a small, uninhabited inlet. Waves lapped at a narrow beach. Rocky gray cliffs rose to the right and left, topped with a lush growth of forest, and down a break in the cliffs tumbled a small, quick stream.

Maneuvering the Falcon and Serpent side by side so hawsers could tie the ships together took nearly an hour, and by the time both ships bumped fenders, the waning crescent of the sun casting a thin light over the water.

Nollin examined the bitts where the hawsers were tied, nodded approval, then stepped across to the Falcon. His brother met him there, dressed in all his finest green and yellow silks, catseye gleaming in his beard. A large axe dangled from one hand.

Hilan grinned. "Good night to go ashore, eh, brother?"

"Perhaps," Nollin said cautiously. "What do you need an axe for?"

"I'm going to cut some wood for spars. Come with me?"

Nollin thought: Why does he need me? He could cut more than enough wood alone.

Perhaps he's planning an accident ashore . . .

But that didn't sound like either of them. Hilan would be more direct; Loanu would certainly be more subtle (and less bloody) if she wanted him dead. Did Hilan just want his company? Somehow, he doubted that, too.

Reluctantly, Nollin said, "Very well. I was planning to go ashore anyway for a bit of hunting."

Hilan nodded. "Get your bow."

"All right." Turning, he went back to his cabin.

By the time he returned, a small boat had been lowered into the water. Hilan already sat holding the oars, the axe at his feet.

Nollin climbed down and sat facing his brother, looking toward the beach, shortbow balanced across his knees. Rilal cast them off. Hilan pushed away from his ship and began to row with deep, powerful strokes, sending the boat skimming over the water.

As soon as they were away from the ships, Nollin said, "Why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

"About?"

"You don't need me with you."

He shrugged. "That witch, Loanu, is trying to betray you."

"Oh? How?"

"She wanted me to take over your ship. She offered me your crew."

Nollin didn't let his surprise show. I seem to have underestimated you again, brother.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

Hilan stopped rowing. "Why do you think?" he demanded. "I owe you a lot, Nollin. I owe you my life, my ship, everything. I gave my word I'd go along with you. Although I may not like what you're doing, I stick by my vows. And you're my brother, Nollin. Do you think I can forget that in just a few weeks?"

Blushing, feeling guilty, Nollin looked away. "I thought you had."

Hilan snorted and started to row again. "Loanu knows everything that happens on our ships. I had to get you away to warn you."

"I already knew."

"What?" he demanded. "How?"

"I've seen her talking to you several times. She's been keeping herself apart from me lately. It wasn't hard to figure out what she was doing."

The boat's keel scraped sand. Nollin climbed out into knee-deep water, pulling the boat ashore. Hilan joined him, and together they beached the craft.

"What are you going to do about it?" Hilan said, hefting his axe.

"I've been planning our return to Saliin, of course. First, I had to find out whose loyalty I still held. Now that I know, we can set sail for Mur's lands tomorrow morning. We'll get Loanu the pendant she wants."

"You should kill her now, while you still can."

"She's the key to finding a treasure, remember."

"If it exists!"

"I believe it does. And I know she believes it. Since she needs the pendant, it's my duty to get it for her."

Grudgingly, Hilan agreed. "You must have a plan, then."

"Of course." Smiling, Nollin told his brother of his idea for a quick raid into Saliin.

"What about Lord Mur? What about that wizard we killed?"

"The wizard's dead; he can't hurt us now. And forget about Mur. All we want is the pendant, nothing more."

"You said I could kill him!"

Nollin sighed. "You're right, I did. Perhaps we can compromise, then. If an opportunity presents itself, we'll go after Lord Mur. Is that fair enough?"

Hilan only grinned.

"Don't tell Loanu we're going back," Nollin said. "In the future, make sure you tell her nothing of importance. If we need to talk, we can go ashore. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Hilan said quickly. Hefting his axe, he turned and hiked up the ravine toward the trees.

Morning in Saliin: grim, depressing. Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur went to his throneroom slowly, almost reluctantly. A heavy, almost tangible gloom ran through his fortress. Few nobles moved through the halls, and these were dour faced and slower moving than he. Nissav said nothing to them; they barely acknowledged his presence.

Incense had been burned in the courtyard all day, but didn't quite manage to hide the stench of death that came from the village. He'd ordered what was left of the peasants' bodies removed and buried, but he guessed the men hadn't finished the task yet. He sighed.

As he settled back on his low throne, he wondered, What more can possibly go wrong?

At that point Alim, his newest captain of the guard, entered looking quite distressed. Alim's face was ashen and dark circles surrounded his eyes; he obviously hadn't slept.

"Lord," Alim said, kneeling.

"Rise and make your report," Nissav said.

"Lord, all the peasants from the village. They're gone."

"Gone?" he said. "What do you mean, gone?"

"Just that." The captain of the guard shrugged helplessly. "They fled during the night. Now there is nobody to work the fields, nobody to remove the bodies, nobody at all."

"What about those in the outlying villages?"

"Lord." He looked down. "They're gone as well."

Nissav found himself gripping the arms of his throne so hard his fingers hurt. Thousands of men, women and children didn't vanish in the space of a night. It was inconceivable. Where could so many go?

He stood, descended his throne's two steps to the floor, and began to pace. Alim cringed as he passed. Sighing, he wondered what to do about Alin. The man had been promoted to his position the week before because of his age. At thirty-seven, he was the oldest guard still alive. His inexperience showed; his insecurity showed; his doubts showed. Nissav longed for his counsellors, then; they would have known what to do.

"Very well," he said at last. "The guards will just have to work the fields for the time being. Most of the harvest is already in, since Nollin Lammiat (may he die soon) had the foresight to take care of it, and we'll have a good six months to find the peasants and drag them back before things get truly desperate."

"Sir," Alim said, "they took the harvest with them."

"What? And you let them get away with it?"

"I didn't know they were gone until this morning!"

"Get your men. Ride after them. Make them come back!"

Alim was shaking his head. "There are only three of us up today, my Lord," he whispered. "Most of my men are sick."

"Sick?" he demanded. "Why wasn't I told immediately?"

"Sir, the peasants seemed -- "

"Never mind now. What's wrong with your men?"

"It's their stomachs. Something they ate, I think. Bad meat, perhaps, my Lord."

The curtains behind the throne stirred and Voyith stepped out. Nissav ignored him until the chamberlain coughed lightly.

"What is it?" Nissav said impatiently.

"It seems the wells have been poisoned, my Lord," Voyith said. "I went to draw a pail of water this morning and noticed an odd smell. I made one of the dogs drink it. He died from convulsions shortly thereafter."

"Who would do such a thing?" Nissav demanded, paling with rage and shock. But even as he spoke he knew the answer: his chamberlain.

But Voyith said, "I know nothing of the matter, my Lord. Perhaps it was the peasants. They seem to have left."

"I'm sure," Nissav said, but he studied his chamberlain more carefully now. The old man seemed to be smiling as he stroked his pendant and studied the new captain of the guard.

Soon, Nissav thought, you will have to send your landrexi away. And then I will kill you myself. The idea gave him a little comfort.

The Fall of Saliin

Demons are a difficult matter: they are of our world, but not truly a part of it. They are shadows of real creatures from the reflections our Earth casts across eternity. They crave existence as a thirsty man craves water or a hungry man craves food. Beware, for they are more dangerous than any host of earthly creatures.

-- Pere Denberel

Far Lands and Shores

Nollin stood by the wheel discussing their course with Klaff. It was noon; the sun above was hot and bright, making the sweat trickle down his back and sides. He'd been working hard all day beside his men, shunning all thoughts of Loanu and what she had tried to do.

She came up behind him when he wasn't looking. "Nollin Lammiat," she said, "I would speak to you."

Even before he turned, he knew he couldn't escape. He'd put off facing her too long; now he'd have to listen to her and tell her his plans. Well, he'd been expecting it.

"Carry on," he told Klaff, then turned to Loanu and nodded toward his cabin. "Let's go inside."

She followed him into the chartroom and closed the door. She seemed subdued, and that puzzled him. It was almost as though their turning back hadn't surprised her.

"Why didn't you tell me we would return to Saliin?" she said.

"I thought you wanted to go back."

"Yes, of course, my champion... but how can I help you if you fail to tell me your plans?"

Nollin dropped into a chair and frowned, for an instant giving way to anger. "How can offering to give Hilan both ships help?" he demanded.

"I wished to return to Saliin."

"I knew that already."

She smiled. "It worked, Nollin Lammiat, that you must admit."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, but he had a strange feeling she'd planned it all.

"You must believe me," she said, "when I tell you that I will never do anything to harm you or your ship. But we had to return for that pendant. I knew Hilan could never seize the Serpent, that you would respond to any such threat by finding a path that would satisfy all concerned. You have done so; my faith in you is thus rewarded."

Nollin frowned, surprised and a bit confused. She had manipulated him with far more subtlety than he would have believed possible. Swallowing, he had to admit she'd succeeded in everything.

And Hilan had been right, too: she'd used them both. She'd even counted on their refusal to be used and made it part of her plan. He swore never to

underestimate her again.

She laughed lightly, like a child. "Do not be concerned, my champion. What I did will serve you as well as me. I am not a fool."

"But I am," he said bitterly.

"Is it a fool who loves his brother, his ship, and his own life? No, Nollin Lammiat, you are no fool. You are cleverer than most. But remember this: I serve Shon Atasha the Creator, and you can never hope to outwit His purposes. It is He who guides me, He who steers our passage. I will protect you and your men, lead you to your fortune, but my first loyalty is always to Him. To serve you both, I must have the pendant."

"I think I understand," Nollin said. He knew he could never hope to outwit a god. It was a depressing thought.

"Good," Loanu said. "Then we understand each other."

He nodded. I understand, he thought. But I don't have to like it.

"I have asked a friend to help us take the pendant," she said. "He is a wizard, and he serves the god Derethigon. I will summon him when we reach Saliin."

"What can he do to help?"

She smiled mysteriously. "That remains to be seen."

They sailed past small, deserted-looking fishing villages, including Yasne. There Nollin looked at the dark, empty houses and thought of the children. He almost ordered the ships to stop, to see if they might do anything for the people, but managed not to. It was a difficult, painful choice. He still remembered those empty, desperate faces staring at him as they left. He still felt the villagers' pain.

"It was for the best," he whispered.

Over the next two weeks, the winds blew fair and they made good time. At last tall cliffs appeared to their right, topped by scraggly clumps of grass. Nollin recognized the shore and knew Saliin lay just ahead.

Here they dropped anchor. They would set out after nightfall, when Mur and most of his men would be asleep.

As they waited, Nollin brought out heavy crossbows from the ship's stores. Their iron-tipped bolts could penetrate the finest steel armor; they would be more than enough to kill landrexi.

"Nollin," said Loanu from behind him. "This is Ker, the wizard who will help you take the pendant."

Nollin turned. A man in a white robe stood next to Loanu, smiling faintly. His short hair and beard were brown, his eyes blue, and he nodded a greeting.

"Welcome," said Nollin cautiously.

"You seem uneasy," said Ker, looking from him to Loanu and back again. "Is something wrong?"

Nollin hesitated. "I've never held much store by wizards. Every one I've met has tried to kill me."

The wizard laughed. "Please, be at ease. Neither my god nor Loanu's would bring ill to you; your fate is bound to theirs as surely as mine. Great events are happening, and you may well play a key part in them."

"What do you mean?"

"Hasn't Loanu told you? All the world is divided. A demon-sorcerer named Suthyran has entered our world, and his armies have already taken Zelloque. Pethis and Coran are besieged. Caluur still stands, as do the rest of the great cities, yet it is a grim time for them, and all are afraid."

"That can't have anything to do with us!"

"How do you know?"

Nollin stopped, puzzled. "We're so far away -- "

"Yet Suthyran's power extends even here. Did you not kill one of his servants in Yasne?"

"I didn't know -- "

Ker chuckled humorlessly. "The one who holds Loanu's pendant is another of Suthyran's servants. When we take it, his power will be gone."

"Why is it so important?"

"I only know there is power within it. I suspect -- ah, but it is better not to voice such things. Let it be enough for you to know that great power is locked within the pendant's stone, and with that power in our hands rather than Suthyran's, many human lives will be spared."

Nollin shook his head. "It's all so confusing -- "

The wizard nodded. "I understand. Do not worry about the war, or Suthyran. It affects you little for the moment. The pendant is all that matters. Loanu must have it."

Toward midnight, Hilan rowed over to the Serpent along with ten of his best sailors. Nollin was waiting for him, along with another ten picked from his own crew. Everyone wore good swords and carried crossbows. Leather straps around their chests held extra bolts.

"Who's that?" Hilan demanded, nodding toward Ker.

"A friend," Nollin said. "A wizard Loanu brought here to help us take the pendant."

Hilan just grunted. "Ready?"

"Of course."

Klaff had already lowered a boat and Nollin's men began climbing down the into it. Nollin followed them and took his place in the stern at the rudder. Ker came last and sat next to him. Something white glimmered in the wizard's hands, and it took Nollin a minute to realize it was a wand.

The mooring lines were released and the rowers bent to their task. For a moment Nollin turned and looked back at his ship. Loanu stood at the railing, watching him, and he could imagine her smile of triumph. A bitter feeling rose inside him.

His fortress resembled a mausoleum more than anything else, Lord Mur thought. It now held more corpses than living people.

He reclined in his throne, a bottle of wine in one hand. Tilting it back, he drank until even the dregs were gone. Then he dropped the bottle and heard it clink against the others already on the floor. He winced, swore, and picked up a fresh one from the crate beside him. After pulling the cork with his teeth, he took a long swallow.

Three days ago, his captain of the guard had started reporting the deaths. Each person who'd drunk the poisoned water had slowly slipped into unconsciousness, then convulsions, then death. He'd lost count after forty of his friends had gone to meet the Dark God.

His captain of the guard had died the day before. Only then, when he was alone, did Nissav begin drinking, and he hadn't stopped. Now his vision was blurred and he could scarcely grip a bottle, but the haunting thoughts still rang through his head as clear as a bell on a quiet day.

His fault. It had all been his fault. The Lammiats capturing Saliin. The landrexu killing his peasants. Voyith poisoning the wells (and he was certain now that it had been his chamberlain) -- it had all had been his fault.

He wept. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have listened to Voyith? How had he let his lands, his life, be destroyed?

He hated Voyith. Again and again he vowed to find the old man and kill him, despite his landrexu guards. But he lacked the force of will to do anything about his hatred. Instead, he mumbled curses to himself, and drank, and cried for what might have been.

At last he heard noises. Screams, he thought with a giggle. Dimly, he looked up. The room flickered around him like a candle in the wind. The bottle slipped from his fingers, spilling wine all over his clothes, but he scarcely noticed.

Screams? He was certain he'd heard screams.

He got to his feet unsteadily and staggered toward the once majestic staircase. Now ashes from the half-burnt walls covered it, and the unburied corpse of a guard lay spread-eagled in its center like one last grisly ornament.

The world blurred and twisted around him as he moved, the shadows distorted, a dull roar filling his head. His fault. All his fault. He seemed to be walking in a dream. Somehow he found himself upstairs, in the unburnt part of the fortress, near the bedchambers of Saliin's petty nobles. The corridor swayed and he caught his balance against the wall.

The screaming started again, but it was distant, muted. As he watched, a pair of landrexu dragged a fat old man out into the hall and tore him apart, mandibles snapping like butcher's knives. Blood spurted high in the air, spattering his face and arms, but Nissav continued down the hallway as though

he'd seen nothing.

Figures on the tapestries seemed to move as he passed them. They laughed and beckoned to him, speaking in strange tongues which he could almost comprehend.

He wandered on. He found Voyith at the end of the hall. The old man was laughing soundlessly, clutching the pendant around his neck. Without thinking, Nissav tried to draw his sword, but couldn't find its hilt. He lunged at the chamberlain anyway, trying to grab him by the throat, and as he leaped he seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Then Voyith knocked him down and kicked him in the face, still laughing.

Nissav crawled to the corner and vomited. He could still hear the figures in the tapestries calling his name. Turning, he moved toward them, toward the peace and calm they seemed to offer.

As Nollin walked through the dark, deserted streets of the village, he grew more and more uneasy. A deep, unnatural silence stretched around him. Not a bird, not an insect made a noise. The only sounds were their footsteps.

Something terrible had happened here. Almost unconsciously he moved closer to Hilan, drawing comfort from his brother's presence.

"The landrexii," Hilan said suddenly. His voice sounded odd and out of place in the quiet.

"Yes," Nollin agreed. That had to be what had happened. The creatures had destroyed the villagers, or driven them away. For some reason Mur had let them do it. He felt a deep disgust for the Lord of Saliin and knew, then, that he couldn't leave this land without seeing Mur dead.

During his occupation of Saliin, Nollin had done as much for the peasants as he possibly could. He'd made them bring in the harvest so they wouldn't starve. He'd reorganized their fields. He'd made sure season's final plantings were finished on time. He had felt a duty to the land and all its people. Seeing both destroyed so meaninglessly outraged him. His heart beat faster and his hands grew sweaty as he thought of the thousands of ways he'd like to see Mur die.

A few lights yet burned in the fortress's windows, the sole remaining sign of human habitation. No one manned the fortress battlements and the gates stood wide open. Nollin hesitated, suspecting a trap. He motioned two of his men forward to investigate.

They crept from shadow to shadow so stealthily that at times Nollin lost track of them himself. As last he saw them silhouetted in the gateway for a second before they passed into the courtyard.

Ten minutes later they were back, panting for breath.

"There is no one on guard, sir," Slar said. "I can hear someone talking in one of the halls, though."

"Very well," Nollin said. If Mur was stupid enough to give them a chance to enter the fortress by surprise, he certainly intended to use it to their advantage.

He drew scarves from his pocket and began tying them over his boots to muffle the noise. Around him, his men did the same.

When he finished, he looked at Ker, whose face was grim, and at Hilan, who was calmly checking the crossbow he held.

"Ready?" he asked.

Hilan grinned. "Of course, brother. But don't forget that if we see Mur, he's mine."

"Let's go."

At last the landrexi finished eating and marched off. A few red smears on the cold stone floor were all that remained of their meal.

Nissav managed to stand. Again he began to cry, but this time helplessly, like a lost child.

His mind wandered for a time. He played games with the people from the tapestries, tag and catch-me, skip-the-horse and hide and seek. He felt free and happy with them, and safe, so safe. He never wanted to leave.

But at last he grew aware of himself once more, and he found he'd returned to his throneroom. A solitary torch guttered from its niche in the far wall; he could barely see by its dim, uncertain light. Throwing himself onto his throne, he reached for another bottle of wine, but the crate was empty. He'd drunk the last of it.

His stomach began to heave, but there was nothing inside him except emptiness. He choked, coughed, spat, and felt no better. He sank back, eyes closed, and again he lost track of the world.

When he looked up again, he found Voyith standing in front of his throne, flanked by the eight landrexi. Shadows covered the old man's face, making him look... not sinister, but hollow, as if his body were a shell with nothing human left inside.

Voyith laughed harshly. "I wanted to see your death," he said. "I wanted to savor it. That's why I saved you for last."

Nissav said nothing.

"Come, now, my Lord Mur. Surely you won't disappoint me. Aren't you going to beg for your life, my pretty little pet?"

"Is that all I was to you?" Nissav heard himself ask.

"You were less than that. A pet I might feel something for. You were merely a tool, a means to an end."

When Nissav said nothing, Voyith laughed again.

"I told you I serve another master," the chamberlain continued. "His name is Suthyran. Soon his demon-armies will sweep across the west, and his black banner will fly proudly above this fortress. Already Zelloque has fallen to him, and now he marches on all the other eastern cities. In time the world will be his."

"No," Nissav said hopelessly.

Voyith mocked him with a smile. "Your death has come, my Lord Mur. Save your words for the Dark God. You will dance in his fires and die a thousand, thousand deaths in the underworld. I know he will hate you, as I have always hated you." He stepped forward, raising hands toward the pendant.

There was a low whistle, then a solid thunk. Voyith staggered, a startled expression on his face. He looked down.

The tip of a crossbow bolt protruded three inches from his chest. Blood gushed from the wound, staining his white robes. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but blood streamed from his lips. Suddenly he forced himself upright, one hand tightening on the pendant around his neck. With a gurgling sound, he turned. Eight inches of wood, with bright yellow and blue fletching, stuck out from his back like a banner.

Stunned, Nissav looked at the doorway. There stood Hilan Lammiat, calmly loading another bolt into his crossbow. Beside him was Nollin Lammiat, and around them at least a dozen other men, all with loaded crossbows.

"Kill them!" Voyith shouted to the creatures, blood spraying from his lips. A sudden red light appeared around him, pulsing. Abruptly his body seemed to fold into itself, and he was gone.

The eight landrexi standing in the middle of the room trembled. Several turned slowly toward Hilan while others, mandibles clicking, faced Nissav.

Nissav covered his head, suddenly afraid to die. Then the people from the tapestries were around him once more, comforting him, taking his hands and pulling gently.

Laughing, Nissav went away with them. He did not look back.

Nollin took aim and shot at the landrexi closest to Mur. The bolt smashed through the creature's head, leaving a large, messy hole and splattering its gray brains across the room. The bolt buried itself in the far wall. Around him, the others let loose their shots. Bolts hissed through the air, struck the landrexi, cracked their black chitin like rocks through a thin sheen of ice on a pond.

The fight was over in a minute. All the landrexi fell in the first volley. Now the creatures lay twitching faintly, oozing a thick white liquid from their wounds. Calmly the men moved among them, sticking their swords through the creatures' heads, making sure they were dead. No one moved to reclaim the spent bolts; somehow, Nollin didn't blame them.

Lord Mur cowered on his throne, his arm still covering his head. He was screaming mindlessly.

Hilan pulled him to his feet and shook him savagely. Mur's teeth chattered, but he stopped screaming. His eyes rolled wildly. He began to drool. Clearly disgusted, Hilan pushed him away. Mur collapsed on the floor in a disjointed heap.

"Get up," Hilan said, nudging him with the toe of his boot.

Nollin pulled his brother away. "Leave him," he said.

"He's mine to kill. We had a deal!"

"Look at him," Nollin said, feeling sick. All his pent-up hatred was suddenly gone, turned to pity. It seemed Mur hadn't been responsible; the other man was, the one who wore the pendant Loanu wanted. The one who'd served the tyrant who'd taken Zelloque. "He's mad," Nollin said softly. "The gods have touched his mind. Could you kill him as he is now?"

Reluctantly, it seemed, Hilan put down his sword and went to Mur. He shook the younger man's shoulder gently, but Mur only whimpered.

With a grunt, Hilan stood. "At least the other one's dead," he said. He sheathed his sword.

"Not so, alas," Ker said heavily, moving closer to the brothers. "He has fled. Nothing so simple as a crossbow bolt could kill him. It will take magic."

"Where is he?"

"All sorcery leaves traces. He has gone east, into the mountains, where the rest of his demon-creatures are hiding."

"Wonderful," Nollin said. "And I suppose you want us to follow him."

"You have given your word to Loanu, have you not?"

"Yes," he said grimly. "Let's get back to the ships." He did not look at Mur.

As they left the village, Nollin glanced back. Dawn had lit the sky with pale yellows and pinks while they were inside, and the air had the crispness of a hot autumn day.

A figure appeared silhouetted atop the fortress's highest tower. It had to be Mur, Nollin thought.

As he watched, Nissavquum al Tepis Mur, Lord of Saliin, leaped from the battlements, plunged down, and vanished from sight.

Nollin winced. It seemed Mur had found a measure of strength in his insanity.

Then Nollin turned and followed his brother back toward the beach. They still had a long walk ahead of them. And somehow, although Mur lay with the rest of the corpses inside the fortress, he didn't feel like a hero.

He began to pray for the dead.

Hell's Sword

When Shon Atasha created the Earth, he did not worry about right or wrong or good or evil. Such distinctions came later, from the imperfections of lesser creatures.

-- Tellerion

Speculations

Loanu sank to her knees before the shrine in her cabin. She felt a gathering presence almost before she'd closed her eyes, almost before she'd driven all thoughts of the material world from her mind. The presence took shape, and images appeared: a huge disk turning slowly in the emptiness of space, with the sun circling it in an endless pattern of light and dark; the ruined city of Zelloque, with grim black banners flapping over its fallen towers; Hilan and Nollin's ships moving across the Arpaeon Sea; the empty, desolate fortress of Lord Mur. And the vision stretched beyond, into the next sea, and the next. She glimpsed their ships moving there like phantoms on a night breeze.

"Yes, my master," she said, knowing this would be their course. And when she'd said that, again she saw the shining city that was her goal. She saw how far ahead it lay, now, and she paled at the length of their voyage. Yet she trusted her master to guide them safely to their destination.

There came another vision: dark tunnels crawling with antlike creatures, dens, warrens, a whole mountain honeycombed with passageways. She saw herself walking with Ker through the mountain, saw them destroying and destroying until the landrexi lay dead, their mountain home shattered.

She knew what must be done; such creatures could not live. They were of the dark, of the nightmare shadowlands.

She finished her prayers, rose, and went to meet the others as they returned from Saliin. Ker would understand what she'd seen, what they had to do.

"I don't believe it," Nollin said, pacing angrily. As soon as they'd set foot aboard his ship, Loanu had dragged him and his brother, plus the wizard Ker, into the Serpent's chart room to tell of her vision. Nollin went on, "How can you expect us to kill all the landrexi? It's insane. I want nothing to do with it."

Loanu leaned forward, her gaze intense, her anger almost tangible. Nollin shifted uneasily. Damn her! he thought. Why does she do this to me? He valued his life; he didn't like to take unnecessary risks, like chasing those creatures back to their nest, wherever it was.

Finally the witch said: "I have no choice in the matter."

"It's your plan!"

"No," she said. "Shon Atasha told me the landrexi must be destroyed."

Ker added, "They are a blasphemy, never meant to exist in our world. Further, they are Suthyran's servants. Would you leave the humans in this part of the world at their mercy?"

"They're only peasants," Hilan said. "What do we care what happens to them?"

"No," Nollin said unhappily. "I suppose we can't leave them."

"Nollin!" his brother said.

"Don't you trust us to protect you?" Loanu said to Hilan, voice sweet.

He growled at her, shook his head, then shrugged.

"Think of the fighting, then," Nollin said. "You can kill things to your heart's content." He turned to Loanu. "Very well," he said, "we'll go, and we'll get the pendant this time. But remember one thing: you're coming with us. You and Ker can be the first to meet the landrexi."

"Of course." She smiled.

Ker nodded. "It's best that way."

Grumbling, Nollin went to tell Klaff of their new course. He knew Hilan would soon embrace the idea of chasing down landrexi. But he didn't like it, and knew he never would.

Damn his sense of honor. And triply damn Loanu for putting him in this situation!

They sailed up the coast for two days, passing empty beaches, desolate chalk cliffs, barren lands where no sane man would ever make his home. Mountains grew in the distance. It was there, Ker said, that they would find Voyith and the landrexi, beneath the tallest peak, which he called Hell's Sword.

Finally they reached the base of the first mountain, where huge blocks of black stone had tumbled into the sea in ages past, and there they dropped anchor. It seemed a desolate place: the scraggly trees on the mountainside had twisted, gnarled trunks, and the few with leaves looked sickly. Even the tufts of grass here and there had a diseased yellow-brown color, as though near death. Only thistle seemed to thrive.

At daybreak, Klaff gathered all the Serpent's men on the main deck. Nollin climbed to the quarter deck to address them.

"You've seen the creatures that attacked Saliin," he said. "Loanu has brought us to their home. Hilan and I -- and Ker and Loanu -- are going ashore to kill the remaining landrexi, to make sure their kind will plague man no more. The gods are with us, and we must surely succeed. We need a few more to come with us. Who will volunteer?"

At once everyone shouted to be chosen. Nollin held up his hands until they grew silent. "Klaff, Ersal, Bayden -- " and he called up ten crewmen to join him. Aboard the Falcon, Hilan would be doing the same.

He set the rest of the men to scrubbing down the decks and scraping barnacles from the sides of the ship to keep them busy, then went with the ten he'd chosen to pick out crossbows. At noon they were to lower a boat and row ashore, where they would join Hilan and the rest of the men. Nollin smiled a bit at the thought. If they had to attack the landrexi in their nest, he wanted his brother at his side.

They couldn't land at the base of the mountain itself because of the rocks, so they rowed parallel to the shore until they found a small beach. While their men dragged the boats to where the tide wouldn't float them out to sea, Nollin and his brother joined the wizard and Loanu for a council of war.

"Voyith is there," said Ker, eyes narrowed as he stared at the mountains. "This whole place reeks of magic." His finger stabbed at a nearby ravine. "I can see a path which spells have hidden. That is the way we must go."

"But where will it bring us?" Nollin demanded. "Paths lead to doors. If we go that way, they'll know we're here and be waiting for us. We should find our own way."

"No," Ker said. "I feel eyes upon us already. They will know whichever way we climb. The footing on this path will be safe once the spells are removed, and it will be the quickest route inside. We must take it."

Nollin finally nodded. "Clear the passage for us, then."

Ker strode away from them, to the ravine. His wand appeared in his hand as he stretched his arm out. Then he began to sing words Nollin could not understand, but which nevertheless held him enthralled. He found himself straining to hear, felt his heart beating faster, felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to bristle.

A pale blue glow surrounded Ker. He stretched forth his wand and blue fire flowed down his arm like water pouring from a broken dam. The flames touched the ravine and travelled up it, deepening in color, intensifying. Everything shimmered in patterns of turquoise and cyan, ripples of blue and deeper blue spreading outward like rings in a pond.

Abruptly Ker lowered his wand and the blue vanished. Nollin blinked. The ravine had become a winding stone stairway leading up, twisting out around the side of the mountain.

The boats securely beached, the sailors had been watching the wizard with awe. "Hurry up," Nollin called to them, and they scurried to take up their packs of supplies. Then Nollin hefted his crossbow and started forward, Hilan at his side.

They walked in silence for over an hour. The stairway had been worked into the stone by human hands, Nollin saw, but that had been long ago; in places, feet had worn the steps until they were almost polished, the marks of chisels and hammers now barely visible.

The stairs entered a cleft between the two tallest mountains; steep cliffs rose to either side. Of the landrexi Nollin saw no sign, but he felt certain they were there, watching, waiting with their master.

They had just reached a wide terrace halfway to the peak when Ker raised one hand and called a rest. The sailors sat and drew water and food from their packs, passing it around. Nollin took a deep swallow from a waterskin, then went to join the wizard where he stood talking to Loanu.

Both of them seemed unbothered by the climb, which Nollin found odd, especially considering Loanu's age. He'd thought himself in the best of condition, but the muscles in his legs had already begun to ache. He found himself as thankful for the break as his men. Both the witch and her wizard friend had magic to draw on for stamina, he reminded himself.

"It won't be much further," Ker told him. "Once your men are rested, we will enter the landrexi's tunnels."

"How do we get in?"

Loanu pointed to the right, to a large slab of stone that seemed to jut from the side of the mountain. "Move the gate."

Nollin strolled over to it. When he pressed himself flat against the mountainside, he could see a dark space behind the stone and feel a cool breeze blowing gently from some hidden cave. The slab hid an entrance to the tunnels.

"Look at this, will you?" he called to Hilan. His brother joined him, and the rest of the sailors followed.

Hilan looked the stone over once, then nodded and hooked his fingers around its edge. "Lend a hand," he said, and Nollin and two of the sailors found holds.

Hilan set his feet and began to pull. Muscles corded in his neck and back; the strain showed in his face. Nollin braced himself and pulled as hard as he could, too.

Finally the slab began to move, sliding doorlike on hinges. With a grating noise, it stuck halfway open, and not even Hilan's strength could budge it further. Still, it left a hole large enough for a man to slip through.

Now that the door was out of place, Nollin could see the chisel marks around its edges; human hands had made it long ago.

Loanu pushed past him, slipping through into the mouth of the passageway. "Yes," she said, voice echoing strangely, "this is the way. This is the place Shon Atasha showed me in my vision." She started forward, paused, looked back. "Are you coming, Nollin?"

Swallowing, Nollin hefted his crossbow. "Break out the torches," he said to his men, and they opened their packs and drew them out, along with flint and steel.

"Wait," Ker said, and before they could strike them alight, he spoke a single word. All the torches flared suddenly.

Several sailors dropped theirs with startled yelps, then shame-faced picked them up. They weren't used to magic so close to them, Nollin knew. But they would have to get used to it -- there would be magic aplenty inside the mountain.

Grabing a torch, Nollin ducked into the tunnel after Loanu. Ker joined him a second later, holding his wand before him. It glowed with a cool white light that reminded Nollin of the stars.

"Where will they be?" Nollin asked. "And how will you find Voyith?"

"They are all around us, in the nearby passages, massing for an attack," Ker said. "I will take care of them when the time comes. Voyith is ahead. You and Loanu will have to take the pendant from him while I keep his creatures busy. Now, follow me."

Before they'd gone fifty paces, the tunnel turned and doubled back, then turned again, joining another, larger passage. This one had small bits of glowing crystal imbedded in the walls every few feet. Ker hesitated a second, looking first one way then the other, before picking the left branch. Its floor sloped ever so slightly downward, heading deeper into the mountain.

Hearing noises from ahead, Nollin tensed. He motioned to the men behind him, and they readied their crossbows.

Moving slowly, cautiously, they rounded a corner and entered an immense cavern whose ceiling was lost in flickering shadows. Dozens of passages converged here, huge square doorways opening to the left and right. Nollin sensed movement in the darkness.

"It's an ambush!" he shouted, suddenly realizing the truth. "Get back!"

The sailors scrambled for the tunnel through which they'd entered, but it was suddenly full of landrexi. Nollin glanced back and saw Loanu and Ker pressing forward to the center of the room.

He caught his breath. From all the doorways, like a black tide, swept dozens -- hundreds -- of the creatures.

Extinction

If there is one law to govern all mortal creatures, whether man or beast or demon, it is simply this: do what you must to survive.

-- Tellerion

Speculations

Crossbow shots dropped the first three landrexi in the tunnel, but the ones behind pushed their way inexorably forward. His men would never get out that way, Nollin saw.

"Get to the center of the room!" he shouted. Ker and Loanu were up to something there --

As the men turned and ran past him, Nollin remembered how the creatures feared fire. He called instructions to their men, and they formed a protective ring around the wizard and Loanu, torches outstretched.

The landrexi were closing in --

Ker was working magic, his wand raised toward the roof of the cavern, singing in the same odd language he'd used on the beach --

Nollin found his mouth suddenly dry. They'd just have to hold off the landrexi until Ker's spell was done, he thought. Raising his crossbow, he took careful aim and fired at one of the approaching creatures. It hit, staving in one side of the landrex's head. The demon made a wild chittering, stumbled, and fell. The victory was almost unnoticeable; within seconds other landrexi were climbing over its body.

As his men began to fire their shots, Nollin dropped his crossbow and drew his sword. He kept the torch in his left hand. When he glanced over at his brother, he found Hilan grinning happily, brandishing his pair of swords with monkey-skull hilts. This was the sort of fight Hilan liked, Nollin thought: a test of personal strength against odds which would make the most hardened gambler cringe.

The landrexi all drew up ten feet away, pacing back and forth, not quite willing to approach the torches. They seemed to be working up to an attack, chittering wildly among themselves, venturing closer every minute.

Nollin glanced back to see how Ker was coming just as the wizard finished his spell. Suddenly the cavern crackled with energy, and blue flames thirty feet high roared up around the circle of men.

Nollin pressed his eyes closed, dazed. Bright after-images like those from looking at the sun too long swam in front of him. Squinting, he tried to see clearly. The fire had forced the landrexi back, he noticed. The creatures swarmed over one another thirty feet away, unable or unwilling to approach the wall of blue fire. They made little clicking, whistling sounds with their mandibles.

"This way, come quickly!" Loanu called.

Nollin sheathed his sword, snatched up his crossbow, and obeyed. The blue flames arched overhead now, enclosing them in a tunnel. His men followed as he ran its length, toward the far wall and the dark entrance to another passageway.

He stopped and counted the men as they passed: all twenty were there. Hilan

came after them, and then Loanu. Ker was slowly backing toward the passage. He seemed to be directing the blue flames with his wand, shaping them, slowly pulling them back as he retreated.

Suddenly Nollin realized what the wizard was doing: he was letting all of the landrexi into the cavern, then slowly encircling them with the flames like a fisherman netting fish. In minutes he would have all the landrexi penned in the middle, walled in with his blue flames.

"Come," Loanu said, taking Nollin's arm and tugging him on down the tunnel. "He has kept his part of the bargain; the landrexi are trapped, and he will keep them there. Now we must find Voyith."

"Where will he be?"

"Down, in the center of the mountain, laying his plans."

She led them through tunnel after tunnel, deeper into the mountain, for what seemed hours. The air grew damp and cold, and in places water pooled across the floor. Finally they came to a second cavern, this one even higher and wider than the one in which Ker had penned the landrexi. Weird flows of rock glistened wetly on the roof and walls, jagged spikes like teeth, sheets like flowing capes, countless odd designs and wavelike patterns.

Here too were the signs of man: crystals glowed overhead, and broad steps had been cut into the rock, leading down. Translucent squares of yellow stone had been set into the cavern walls at seemingly random intervals.

A shadow moved behind one of the yellow stones. Nollin motioned for silence, pointing. And now that he looked, he saw movements behind most of the yellow slabs, ghostly shadows flitting back and forth.

"More landrexi?" he whispered to Loanu.

"No," she said. "Something else... I am not certain. Open one."

Nollin motioned to his brother and a couple of the men, and cautiously they approached the yellow slab. There were handholds cut into it, he saw; it either rolled or slid to one side.

"Easy now," he said. "Just a few inches to see what's behind it, right?"

Hilan nodded grimly. "Aye. And be ready to slide it back."

They slipped fingers into the holds and pulled. The slab slid to the side with surprising ease. As it began to move, a human arm suddenly thrust through the opening, straining to push it the rest of the way.

Nollin and his brother stared at each other. "Pull!" Nollin said, and they seized the handholds and did so.

As the yellow slab slid clear of the opening, a man in rags staggered out, and the stink hit Nollin: the mingled odors of sweat and piss and unwashed humanity. Half gagging, he covered his mouth with a perfumed handkerchief.

The man -- dressed in a tattered, dirt-smeared uniform -- Nollin knew him. It took a second for that to sink in. The fellow was one of Mur's guards, or had been. He just stood there gasping for breath and staring wide-eyed at the Lammiats.

"What are you doing here?" Nollin demanded. "What happened?"

"Sir -- " His voice was a croak. "The creatures, they attacked the village at night -- they took us all prisoner -- brought us here -- "

"Why?" Hilan demanded.

"They kill and eat us. They ate my brother and his family! By the gods, they ate them!"

Nollin shivered. "You're safe now," he said softly. "Our men will help you free the others and get to the surface. After that, you'll be on your own. Saliin is only a week's walk from here. You should be able to make it back."

"Thank you, sir... thank you!"

Nollin nodded reassuringly, then went back to Loanu. After he'd told her what the man had said, she nodded. "Demons eat human flesh, true," she said. "Your men must take these people to the surface. If they stay here, they will die."

"But what about you?"

"You and Hilan may stay with me; I will not need the others."

"As you say."

Nollin gave the instructions, and the sailors busied themselves rolling back the rest of the yellow stones and releasing the prisoners. After escorting the peasants to the surface, the sailors would then return to the ships and wait for the Lammiats.

"Hilan!" Nollin called, and his brother trotted to his side. "We still have to find Voyith," he said.

Hilan grinned.

The three of them continued their descent into the mountain. The passages grew smaller, the ceilings lower, until the Lammiat brothers had to stoop to continue. Still Loanu urged them on. The pendant lay just ahead, she promised.

At last the corridor leveled and opened onto a huge cavern. Against the far wall, raised up on a dais, sat an immense throne. Dragons carved from obsidian formed its sides: their eyes glittering red with rubies. Twined serpents formed the back, each scale carved from a single emerald. And on the chair sat Voyith.

The chamberlain stood suddenly, white robes flowing. The pendant around his neck blazed with an inner light.

"Give it to me," Loanu said, "and I will spare your life."

The chamberlain laughed. "I have been waiting to kill you."

"Give me the pendant."

"Try to take it!"

"If I must, I will."

Nollin motioned to his brother, who nodded. Slowly they drifted away from Loanu, Nollin to the right, Hilan to the left. It was an old strategy: divide your opponent's attention, then strike. The chamberlain didn't seem to be paying the slightest bit of attention to them -- which had to mean, Nollin thought uneasily, that Voyith thought they posed no threat. He remembered Hilan shooting the old man in Saliin. A crossbow bolt through the heart hadn't slowed Voyith for a second.

Sensing a change in the air, Nollin glanced back at Loanu. A swirl of colored sparks surrounded her, and as she strode forward she seemed to grow with every step, her face changing, her body changing. No old crone, she -- a warrior-witch now, young, armored in silver, with a sword as bright as the sun.

Voyith, too, had moved forward, one hand touching the pendant at his throat. His body twisted, shimmering, and a white landrex loomed there in his place, the pendant around its neck. Mandibles snapping, it leaped at Loanu.

But in a blur of motion she was gone, dancing to one side, cutting with her sword. Its blade pierced the chamberlain's thorax, splitting chitin. A white liquid bubbled out.

With a roar, the landrex rounded on Loanu, forelegs striking like flails. She parried, parried again, was forced backwards step by step by the strength of its attack.

Nollin raised his crossbow and aimed at the creature's head. While Voyith took this form, he thought, he also took its weaknesses. If he could distract it for even a second, Loanu might be able to finish it off --

Murmuring a prayer, he pulled the trigger.

Whether it was sheer improbable luck or whether a god had heard him and bent the course of his shot, Nollin never knew. The bolt struck the creature's head, ricocheted, and hit the pendant. The chain snapped; the pendant started to drop. Screeching, the landrex tried to grab it with its mandibles -- and instead batted it across the room. The pendant skittered to a stop at Hilan's feet.

When Hilan scooped it up, the white landrex shimmered. Howling with fear, with anger and frustration, the creature began to pulse with a deep red light. Quickly it shrank, writhing horribly, like a worm cut in two. Suddenly Voyith crouched there, a bent-shouldered old man in white robes.

Loanu stalked toward him, a thirty-foot-tall giantess in shining armor, her sword upraised. Voyith screamed and raised his arms.

And Loanu clove him in two.

Things didn't seem to make much sense after that. Later, Nollin vaguely recalled scattered images, bright lights, colors which had no name on Earth.

He remembered Loanu, human sized once more, but still in her glowing armor, still young and unbelievably beautiful, taking the pendant from Hilan and putting it around her neck. The chain was whole -- hadn't it been broken? -- but that didn't seem to matter anymore. He remembered following her up a long passageway that seemed to never end, thinking, This cannot be real.

Sometime later they were back with Ker, in the huge chamber where the landrex had attacked. Hundreds of the creatures swarmed like ants in the center of the cavern, penned by a circle of blue flames.

Loanu had become her old self now. She grasped the pendant, pointed one hand at the landrex, and a stream of light leapt from her fingers, striking the nearest creature. It gave a loud, pained wail, then stumbled and went down. Its body rippled like waves on a stormy sea, and the creature began to disintegrate, jags of light breaking through its chitin like sun through a clouded sky. And as it died, the glow spread from one landrex to another until they all glowed more brightly than the sun.

And then, like candles being snuffed out, they were gone.

Later still the Lammiats were outside, Ker with them, again without transition, all standing on the peak of a nearby mountain. Nollin could see the Serpent and the Falcon, small as toys on a pond, far below. On the other side of the mountains he could see a line of several hundred people wandering up the coast toward Saliin: the peasants had made it out.

Loanu held the pendant before her. It glowed hot and white as the sun at noon. She turned to face Hell's Sword, hand outstretched.

The ground underfoot trembled. The mountain jerked, buckled, seemed to move. The upthrust spire of rock that had given the mountain its name tipped and fell, an avalanche that grew until it filled the ravine and blocked the entrance to the tunnels.

Now black clouds were gathering over the mountains, spreading across the sky like spilled wine. They boiled and seethed unnaturally, unlike anything Nollin had ever seen before. A shadow fell across him as they covered the sky.

Blue lightning flickered, and it began to rain, a cold gray torrent which quickly soaked clothes and hair. The wind howled, driving tears from the corners of his eyes. Still Nollin strained to see.

Flashes of lightning showed the land heaving, its rocks tumbling through the air, the very fabric of the earth grinding, ripping, tearing apart. The sight made him shudder, but he forced himself to look on it, at the raw power before him, knowing he would never see anything like it again.

The air filled with the smell of hot steel. He shivered and abruptly became aware of the water running down his face and back. Wrapping his arms around himself, he tried to get warm.

"Here -- " Ker was saying, but the words were lost in the wind. A huge black rectangle stood there. Nollin found himself holding one of Loanu's arms, supporting her as she sagged to one side, and for some reason he carried her through the rectangle and down a long blindingly cold corridor.

Nollin woke and for a second didn't know where he was. He sat up and found himself in his own bed, aboard his own ship. He ached all over and allowed himself a low groan. He had on just his undergarments; quickly he changed and went out on deck.

The worst of the storm had passed; rain fell as a faint mist and the wind had dropped to a light breeze. Overhead, sunlight broke through gaps in the clouds.

He crossed to the rail and stared back toward shore. The land had changed enough to be all but unrecognizable now, he thought. Hell's Sword, the landrexi's mountain, no longer existed. It had been completely leveled, its rocks broken, its tunnels filled, its crystals smashed and buried.

He remembered it vaguely, as through from a dream. But what of Loanu?

He felt a light hand on his shoulder, turned, found her standing there. She seemed tired, exhausted, and new lines creased her face. But still she smiled triumphantly. "It is done," she said, "my champion. Now set our course. There is much that awaits us to the west."

"Yes," said Nollin, and he called the orders to the crew. He remembered the treasures of which she had spoken, the riches beyond measure. Then he thought of the power she had shown the day before. How hard would it be to win such prizes, with Loanu and her pendant to help?

Sails were lowered; the anchor was raised. Both the Serpent and the Falcon began to move, heading west into uncharted waters. It would be good to move on, Nollin thought, to see new lands and new people. And, if treasure lay ahead, it was all to the good.

He smiled. "Yes, my witch," he whispered. "Much awaits us in the west."

THE END

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