

THE
BARROW

THE
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MARK SMYLIE



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and on the setting and characters
created by Mark Smylie in the comic book *Artesia*.

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*For Monika,
with my love.*

*For John and Hidetoshi,
with my thanks.*

*And for those who have been waiting patiently,
with my apologies.*

THE KNOWN WORLD

IN THE YEAR 1471





PANOCH
SEA

GOLDEN
SEA

PALATIA

DÉSKÉDRÉ

KHAEL

THE
SUN'S
ANVIL

THE MIDDLE
KINGDOMS

ILLIA

THE
RED
STATES

MERA ARGENTA

LEAGUE OF
CITIES

MERA
HELIA

AMORA

EMPIRE OF
MID-GOLA

ULIK
DESERT





THE SUN'S ANVIL AND THE SEA OF SANDS

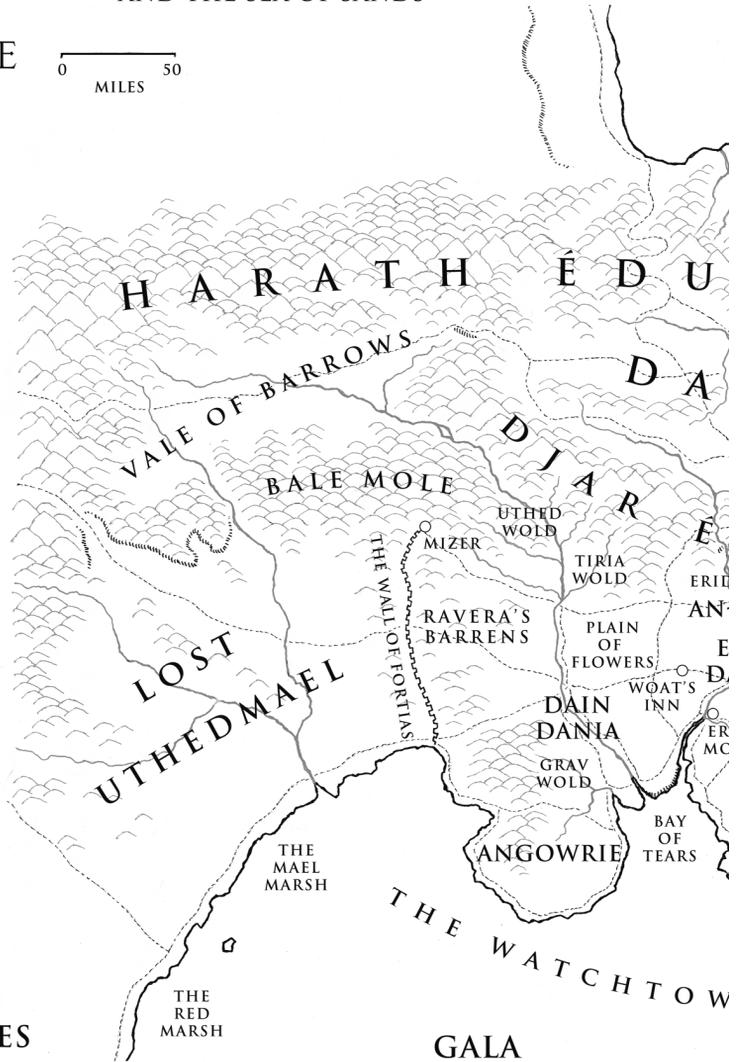
TO LAGAPOLI
& THE CITIES OF
THE DÉSKÉDRAN
COAST

0 50
MILES

THE DAIN ÉDUINS
& THE KINGDOMS OF THE ISLIKLIDAE

THE
RED
WASTES

TO MELOS
& THE EMPIRE OF
THESSID-GOLA



GALA
GALIA

THE MIDDLE KINGDOMS

WHEREIN OUR STORY LIES



TO PALATIA

COAST OF BLACK SAILS

GALA
DESKA

MERA
AUDRA



TO ILLIA
& THE SUN
COURT



TO THE
LEAGUE
OF CITIES

MERA
DÜRE

MERA
ARGENTA



TO YEFRAM
& GRAWTON
& POINTS WEST

TO
PIERHAM
& THE
ABENBRAE

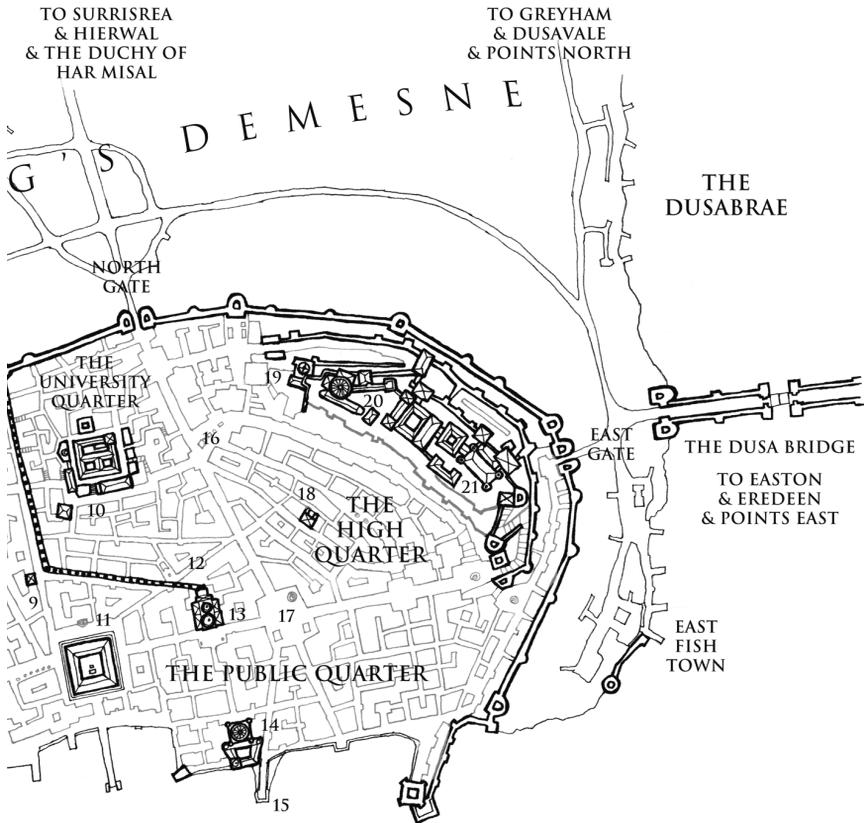
THE HIGH

THE OLD AQUEDUCTS

1. THE MARKET HALL
2. MARKET PLAZA
3. FULLER CORT'S LAUNDRY
4. THE NEW BATHS
5. LOW PLAZA
6. THE GATE OF ELDYR
7. THE GATE OF ERGINUS
8. THE SLEIGHT OF HAND
9. SAYLES & GRIM
10. THE UNIVERSITY
& ITS COLLEGES
11. THE FORUM
12. BAKER STREET
13. THE OLD BATHS
14. THE PUBLIC TEMPLE
OF THE DIVINE KING
15. THE FUNERAL PLAZA
16. THE HIGH PLAZA
17. THE PLAZA OF ERGIST
18. THE HOUSE OF ORWAIN
19. THE CHAPTER HOUSE
OF THE INQUISITION
20. THE GREAT TEMPLE
OF THE DIVINE KING
21. THE HIGH KING'S HALL



TO
DURINHAM



THE GIVENWAIN
 ALSO KNOWN AS
 THE BAY OF GUIRANT

THERAPOLI MAGNI
 CAPITAL OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOMS

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PROLOGUE
IN THE HILLS OF
THE MANON MOLE
IN THE YEAR 1471A

Somewhere in the dark, a woman whispered.



As was in the nature of the upper reaches of the Manon Mole, the hillside did not provide a great deal of cover for the men trying to hide upon it: dried chaparral, small gullies, and outcroppings of exposed and weathered stone. Further down in the lower hills the trees and thickets would be larger, closer together; not quite a wood, but easier for men and even horses to hide. But here, further up, where the wind was stronger, where the wind was weirder, the hillsides were not kind to those that did not wish to be seen. A set of sharp eyes would almost certainly have counted out eight of them, spread out a bit along the slope, huddled by rocks and small brush, clustered in two small groups of two, a group of three, and a last lone figure bringing up the rear: rough men—for they were all men save the woman in the rear, but she was dressed as a man, which in the Middle Kingdoms was essentially the same thing—not quite arrayed for ambush, but who nonetheless preferred that others did not spy them so quickly, and who made do as best they could with what skill they had and with the scant protections provided by the uncaring earth.

But even sharp eyes might have missed the three men the furthest up the hill, almost a hundred yards ahead of their fellows, firmly pressed

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against a hillock rise of gray-green moss and dark stone in the weird wind, and peering intently up the slope toward its summit. That summit bore a crown of upright stones, ancient *menhirs* marking a place of *fae* power, and a pathway of more *menhirs*, some of them fallen over or reduced to piles of rock, was visible up ahead of them. The man in the furthest lead didn't pay them attention, instead focusing his own sharp gaze on an outcropping of rock and stone just below the summit of the hill. From most angles the outcropping would have seemed solid and unbroken. But from the vantage point the trio had chosen, the thin vertical maw of an opening could be seen, an entrance through the rock into the hill's side.

The man in the lead studied the thin sliver of darkness in the rock for long minutes, not moving, pressed flatly against the side of a large block of mossy stone. He was dressed in a dark brown high-collared long coat of stiff leather, tight blue-black cloth breeches, and black leather boots, all splattered with mud and dirt. His clothes were finely crafted, and dull bronze buttons, corded trim, and faintly embossed patterns in the Athairi style on coat and breeches prevented them from being described as plain. But they were also worn and rough-used, the mark of a man who spent long days in travel. A point dagger and heavy-bladed falchion were strapped to his side by a broad black leather baldric, which doubled as an extra layer of protection across his chest.

He had a spyglass in one of the satchels strapped to his body, but they were close enough to their intended destination that he did not need to use it. His sharp eyes would occasionally flicker left or right, to scan along the hillsides and nearby ridge tops, or up to track a sparrow hawk wheeling in the distance against the clouds, only to return to stare at the door into the earth. He listened to the weird wind, hearing the faint jangling of small bells and the whisper of what could have been a song sung backwards. He sniffed the air, and inhaled wet earth and old stone, moss and scrub thickets and tree heath, and from somewhere near the hint of something dead and rotting.

The two men hidden in the rocks slightly behind and below the man in the lead did their best to imitate his stillness, but despite their patience

IN THE HILLS OF THE MAPON MOLE

and good sense, neither was a woodsman, either by training or by birth-right. They did not see what he saw, or hear what he heard, or smell what he smelt. The closer of the two had blond hair and fair skin, a golden youth of noble breed and bearing, though dressed down for the occasion. His fine travel coat and breeches were woven of good dark wool with silk trim, the sheen of the weave enough to tell that they were of quality. His sword brace held a dagger with a silver-wire-wrapped pommel and a matching rapier. He was obviously charming and just as obviously trouble. He bore a faintly bemused expression on his face as he waited for the man in the lead to move, but his eyes were nervous.

The third was older than his companions, perhaps almost forty years of age, but improbably he was also quite handsome despite the wear and tear: chiseled sun-burnt features, a hint of mischief about the weathered mouth, cunning in clear blue eyes, rough stubble and dirty blond hair dangling before his face, the air of surety and danger about him that came from being a veteran (though a veteran of what might have been less certain). He was dressed in a simple padded doublet of black cloth, opened to reveal an unbuttoned shirt and hairy chest, two long daggers strapped to his side and a scabbarded broadsword and round metal shield slung over one shoulder, along with several leather packs and satchels. Vambraces of dulled steel were strapped over each forearm.

It was this third man who finally stirred and spoke. “Black-Heart,” he grunted. “Can we get on with it?” He spoke low but did not bother whispering; there was no one nearby to hear them.

The man in the lead stared at the hillside ahead of them a moment longer, then turned and looked back. His name wasn’t Black-Heart—it was Stjepan, son of Byron and Argante—but enough people had called him Black-Heart over the years that it might as well as have been his name. His features were distinctly Athairi: sun-kissed copper skin, short-cropped dark hair, high cheekbones, and a sharp, prominent nose with a diamond-shaped bump in it. Stubble darkened his chin and jaw. His left ear was pierced twice, as was common amongst some Athairi men, and set with small silver loops. He would almost certainly have been considered

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handsome, at least at first glance, until perhaps the eyes. His eyes were piercing, even unsettling to many, and his sharp gaze was tinged with a hint of hate, or perhaps simply disgust, as though whatever he was looking at had been judged and found wanting. And that gaze fell on the third man, and for a moment the third man regretted speaking.

Stjepan stared at him a second, then looked past him to take in the rest of their group, a hard-looking lot of grim-faced murderers and thieves spread out in the brush and rock below them, all dressed in dark travel clothes, haphazardly armed and lightly armored, with an occasional cuirass or ringed brigandine amongst them. They had been told to stick in pairs, but Stjepan noted that one man had moved forward to join the group in front of him, leaving a slight figure alone in the rear. He squinted and frowned in annoyance, though as he was often frowning it would perhaps be better to say that his frown deepened. But he was not surprised; that last figure in the rear made many men uncomfortable, though they could not perhaps put their fingers on why.

He turned back to look up the hill.

“We’re fucked,” Stjepan said, low and calm. “No cover between here and the entrance worth talking about. Not for our lot. The old *fae* stones might help a bit, Erim and I could maybe make it there without anyone seeing us, but not the rest of us. Not in the day. So either we make a straight run for it and hope no one’s watching, or we wait until dark.”

“Shit,” swore the third man, his sure expression wavering for a moment. “Shit,” he repeated.

“It’s all right, Guilford,” said the second man. He glanced around at the nearby hills, the expanse of the range across the horizon, and made a short subtle gesture with his hand. “We haven’t seen anyone for half a day. Not since that backwater village where we left the horses.”

Guilford looked up at the second man. “You’ve never been up here, Harvald. Stjepan and me, we have,” he hissed. “There’s always someone watching up here. If it isn’t one of the bandit knight descendants of the Wyvern King waiting to rob you blind, it’s some of the fucking hill people, waiting to cut your throat and cook you for dinner. Those same fucking

IN THE HILLS OF THE MANON MOLE

villagers watching our horses are probably following us, waiting to do us in. *If* they're not busy chopping up our horses for their cooking pots."

Harvald's bemused smile grew wider in response. "It's true I was not summoned to the campaign against the rebel Earl of Orliac, praise be to the Heavens, so I defer to your combined experience of these hills, of course," he said. "But is it possible, given the disastrous outcome of said campaign, that you're just shitting your pants at the memory?"

"Fuck you, Harvald," hissed Guilford, suddenly angry enough to make most men take a step back. "You weren't fucking there. Night battles, ambush and kidnappings, corpses strung up and flayed . . . the people of these hills do not fight fucking straight. They're vicious little shits worse than anything you've ever seen in the big city. And the Rebel Earl and his men are still out here somewhere, a thousand fucking strong."

"No doubt," said Harvald, nodding sagely. "No doubt."

Guilford was about to respond when Stjepan glanced back. "Shut it, both of you," Stjepan said in a quiet voice that brooked no argument. Guilford was a Marked Man with a crew and certainly thought of himself as tougher than Stjepan, but still he paused, and nodded.

Stjepan turned back and contemplated the hillside ahead of them. His stern gaze swept over the ring of *menhirs*, nearby hillsides and brush covered slopes, rocky crags and bleak summits, and in the distance the main high range of the Manon Mole, snow-capped against cloudy gray skies. It was a beautiful sight, he realized. *Almost as beautiful as home.*

He listened to the weird wind for a little bit longer.

"Ah, fuck it," he said finally. "Let's go."



Somewhere in the dark, a woman whispered. They had come creeping to her in the dark, her children and her lovers, her Nameless bringing word of brazen interlopers, cruel huntsmen from the cursed lowlands. Eleven men, one of them fae-born and marked with wood-magics, and another a Servant of the Bright King walking

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in disguise. It was not the first time that men such as these had come, though the Servant of the Bright King surprised her. Did he come as an emissary? Or as an enemy? So she had rolled her bones—for of bones she had plenty—and she had been filled with despair.



Erim glanced about, mostly behind them back the way they had come, as was her job as the last in the line. She was supposed to be paired with Gap Tooth Tims, but the moment they'd stopped he'd slunk forward to hunker down with Porter and Smitt behind some thorny bushes. She didn't mind; in truth she was probably better off alone, so she could move quick and quiet, and without having to worry about what Gap Tooth thought of her. She counted off the others in the group ahead of her, looking at the backs of their heads: Gap Tooth and Porter and Smitt, then old Jon Pastle and Llew the Stew, then Colin of Loria and the tall thin man everyone called the Stick. A mix of Aurian and Danian commoners, united in their greed, amorality, and desperation. A hard lot, meant for hard things, and therefore perfect for the occasion.

Up beyond them she could make out the three men way up in the front. Three handsome men, clinging to a hillside. Some might have considered themselves quite lucky to stumble into those three, in a different place, say in a tavern or a revel or feast perhaps; except for the aura of danger that lurked about them, and that hard gaze of hate in the lead. But that gaze might just quicken some pulses all the more. She wondered at the fact that the three best-looking men in the group were the ones in the lead. Was it just coincidence, she wondered, or did men like that get together and plan it all out, the worldwide league of dashing rogues?

Her mind wandered unbidden, staring up at the three of them, back to a story she'd heard being loudly told in a tavern back in Therapoli by three sailors just returned from the decadent cities of the Déskédran coast. The sailors had been on a merchant cog that had stopped in Lagapoli, looking

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to trade for spices. Like all good sailors they had visited its infamous temples to Dieva, the Evening Star, and they regaled their eager audience with lurid stories of the priestess-prostitutes there. A particularly beautiful one, a raven-haired temple dancer with bronze skin dressed in nothing but golden chains, bracelets, and anklets, had invited them to experience a rare and special sacrament to her Goddess; and there on the altars of the temple they had lain with her all at once. They claimed she'd cast some spell over them, and anointed their cocks with a special oil so that they found themselves harder than usual, and that after furiously fucking her for what seemed an age they'd spent themselves the first time, only to find themselves still hard, and that they'd then switched places and rutted her again until they'd spent themselves a second time, and finding themselves still hard had switched places yet again; so that by the end of it they'd each spilled their seed one time in each of her wet, eager orifices. The sailors had claimed the Dėskėdrans even had a name for it, the *trepballas treferrai*, and they'd claimed it was the most intense sex they'd ever had.

Not everyone listening in the tavern had believed them. One old man said they'd been fooled by the priestesses there, who he said dosed their patrons with a potent of the poppy plant that made men have vivid waking dreams of impossible acts of pleasure.

But she had believed them. She had been surprised to discover how very, very much she had wanted to believe them.

She flushed at the memory of that story, and felt herself grow warm and wet between her legs, and she was briefly ashamed at being aroused while hiding behind a rock in the middle of some of the most dangerous country in the whole of the Middle Kingdoms. She took a deep breath, and dug a nail into her wrist to give her mind something sharp to focus on. If she had been a different woman, she would have quickly offered a prayer to some god and a warding sign to drive off Ligrđ, the Queen of Perversion; but in her case she knew that was of no use, and she just gritted her teeth at the pain.

Erim looked up and saw the three men up in the lead rise. No more sneaking about, then. Guilford turned and signaled to his men to follow

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them up the hill. And they were indeed his men, the seven between him and her. If anyone had asked Gap Tooth or the Stick “Whose man are you?” they would have quickly answered: “I’m Guilford’s man, Guilford of the Run Street in Vesslos.” A meaningless answer, in most quarters, as Guilford wasn’t a noble or a knight, just a rough man that other rough men followed; but in other quarters, it meant a great deal, as Guilford bore a brand from the Guild of Therapoli. Everyone knew that Stjepan and Harvald were true Kingsmen, with Harvald noble-born to boot, and so what their answer would be. But if someone had asked her “Whose man are you?” she wasn’t sure how she would answer. Not just because she wasn’t a man, but because she didn’t belong to anybody. And in most of the Middle Kingdoms, that meant you were nobody.

As the group started up the hill she was glad to be moving again, stretching her long legs. She saw that a few of Guilford’s crew mumbled curses and hobbled about, cramping after being immobile for so long, and she stifled a needless laugh. *No point in making this lot hate you even more*, she chided herself. But as everyone started to get stretched out they picked up speed, conscious now of moving up the hillside in the open, for anyone to see.

She moved quickly, her soft calf boots quiet against the mossy earth. She wore a black cloth doublet with dark bronze studs and brown leather cord trim, fitted tight against her boyish figure, and black flared breeches, puffed in the Eastern style. She was splattered with mud and dirt like everyone else. A pair of point daggers and a wire-hilt cut-and-thrust rapier hung at her side from a black leather baldric, the surface tooled with ornamental squares. Her dark hair was cut short and trim along the sides and back of her head by her ears, but then a bit longer on top and in front, so that wavy locks fell in front of her blue eyes. She wore a black silk neck scarf wrapped tight to hide the smoothness of her throat. Like several other members of Guilford’s crew she wore a metal codpiece that poked through a flap in her breeches. Not as large as had become the fashion in the eastern Aurian lands of Dainphalia, where in imitation of their king, knights and courtiers wore steel metal codpieces sculpted into impressive (and in some cases very lifelike) erections. But her codpiece was of some size, nonethe-

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less. As a woman, she would have been considered plain, perhaps even mannish; her eyes were small, and her jaw too square. But as a man, oh, yes; she made a very pretty and attractive young man in the eyes of most who saw her, even if in her case the codpiece turned out to be empty.

Her breathing was hard but measured by the time the group reached the rocky outcroppings near the top of the summit. She looked up at the stone circle above them and slowed, watching Guilford's crew disappear into the earth one by one. The entrance into the earth looked to her like it must have been a natural fissure in the rock at some point. But the carved narrow arch, eight feet in height, that became visible through the split in the rock was clearly made by men. She saw that Guilford's crew was about to leave her behind and sped up, sliding her rapier and one of her point daggers out of their sheaths as she did. She caught up with Gap Tooth and Porter just as they slipped through the entrance, and she barely had time to think before she was through the arch into the darkness.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. Gap Tooth had a torch out in one hand and a heavy axe in the other, and that helped a bit, but not much. She could see several torches appearing and disappearing ahead of them as they moved through the earth. In the flickering torchlight she could see that they were in a narrow shaft that appeared to have been carved out of the rock itself, and she felt more than saw the packed earth under her boots. Behind her the entrance was a bright vertical crack in the dark; the wind whistled past the opening, making it sound like someone was whispering behind her, and she suppressed a quick shudder. The group was moving forward and she followed. She saw the torches ahead of her lowering into darkness, and soon she was at the top of a narrow stone stair leading down into the earth. Gap Tooth went ahead and she had to be careful following, as his torch was right below her and it sputtered and coughed smoke and embers into her face if she was too close behind. The stairwell was steep and narrow, and it almost felt like it was more like a ladder made of stone; if there had been defenders below it would have been a tough fight. The ceiling of the stairwell was close enough that she could put her hand against it to help brace her way down.

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They hit the bottom of the stairs and found themselves in a small room, a landing of sorts. Arches were set in the four walls, one being the arch they had descended into the room through, and the other three opening onto stone stairs leading downwards. Each arch was set with human skulls along its entire curved length, and each skull was marked on the forehead with an ugly black rune. She didn't know magic, not the way that Stjepan and Harvald did, but she instinctively knew the runes were bad runes. Her left hand, holding the dagger, went to her chest, and she felt for the amulet tucked under her doublet with a couple of spare fingers: a bit of amber with an insect trapped inside it, set in a gold chain and enchanted. It had been a gift from Stjepan, back when she'd first done a job with him. "To ward off black magic and the Evil Eye," he'd told her. And she'd believed him.

She watched and listened as Stjepan talked with Harvald and Guilford on the other side of the small (and now very packed) room. Everyone was crowded in on each other, trying to stay in the center, trying to stay away from the stairwell openings. *Too close*, she thought. *No room to fight swords here, daggers only.*

"... No, the spirits here are long gone," Stjepan was saying as he consulted a map in his hands. "The account we found in the archives said that during the Wars of the Throne Thief an expedition mounted out of Truse had come here, and that a company of priests and magisters led by none other than the knight Sir Olsig had worked a great ritual and driven all the trapped guardian spirits out."

"The Ghost Killer himself. Trust us, if there were still ghost wardens present here, we'd already be in big trouble by now," said Harvald. He looked around at the arches, eyeing the skulls that decorated the arches with a kind of wary nonchalance. "Can you imagine the struggle to purify this place? All these skulls..."

Guilford shuddered. "Who were they, do you think?" he asked. "Victims of the Nameless Cults? Or adherents, letting themselves be bound here as guardians?"

"Doesn't really matter," said Harvald with a shrug. "The end result is the same."

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Stjepan moved in front of the archway to the left of the one they had entered from and slipped the folded map back into his stiff square satchel. He pulled out a piece of chalk and marked the side of the arch with an arrow pointing down. "This one, according to the map in the archives," he said to the group. "I'll go first. Follow the downward arrows, then reverse them if you have to get out." He gave them all a wry half-grin, and Erim watched as he took a torch and started down the narrow, steep staircase.



Her whispers grew more urgent now. Once long ago this had been a place of great power, until the book-men had come from their tower on the Plain of Stones and rendered this sacred place silent with violence and the curses of their false Divine King. Long years it had taken the Faithful to restore the temples and shrines, and her chest swelled with pride to think of what had been accomplished; but with that pride came despair, as well. If only she'd had a few more years, or had known how to bind the guardian ghosts. The Nameless at Dyre Callum had promised to teach her the ritual, but always they delayed, and raised the price, and now it was too late. And so she whispered what she knew, and called for His help.



Downward they'd gone, hitting on three landing rooms like the first one above them, and on each landing Stjepan had picked out and marked an archway down; after the first one on the left, he picked out three on the right. Some of the landings had other stairs going up rather than just the one they entered through. Erim started to have an inkling that the whole hill must have been honeycombed with stairs and rooms going up and down. By the fourth landing, she could feel the weight of the earth around and above them, all those narrow steps winding back up through the dark, and she could feel the panic starting to eat in the back of her throat. The air here was

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totally still, *dead*. She could see it in the wide eyes and sweating brows of the other men as well. The descent had started to take its toll on them.

“Two hundred and six,” she heard old Jon Pastle whisper.

“What?” hissed Porter.

“Two hundred and six steps, so far,” old Jon whispered back. “I counted ‘em.”

“Aye, I was counting too,” said Llew the Stew. “Thought it was two hundred and four, meself, but close enough.”

“Fuck me,” someone moaned, but she couldn’t tell who it was.

Erim had never been good with numbers bigger than she could count on fingers and toes, thus ten times ten she could handle up to a hundred; so the idea of being two hundred and six steps below the earth was only slightly more scary than the idea of counting that high. Men who knew the lore of numbers, like Stjepan and Harvald, and could count and do additions in their heads, always impressed her; but then, Stjepan and Harvald were practically magicians. Llew the Stew used to be a steward, hence his name, so it made sense that he could do numbers; but she was a bit surprised that old Jon Pastle could count in his head like that. Then again, he probably didn’t become *old* Jon Pastle without learning a few tricks. She wished she’d been smart enough to even think of counting the steps, though she wasn’t sure what good it did them.

Luckily this landing seemed different than the others. Instead of opening onto more staircases up and down, the archways opened onto straight level passages lined with stone slabs. Stjepan picked one, marked it, and slipped through it, followed quickly by the rest of them. Erim found herself last again, though being rearguard had now taken on a different tenor. Behind her stretched the inky blackness of empty tunnels and stairs up and down through the earth, and the darkness was starting to fill her with fear. She hurried to keep up with Gap Tooth and his sputtering torch as their short column moved through into a wider antechamber, with pillars carved out of rock and black arches opening into who knew what, and then a turn and out into a short passageway again. She was starting to get worried that if she panicked she wouldn’t know how to get out,

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that she'd forget to look for the markings and take a wrong turn. Or if the torches all went out; how would they even see the chalk marks?

Suddenly they slowed, and she almost ran right into Gap Tooth's back. She wasn't sure what was happening ahead, but the entire group was moving with caution, backs crouched, weapons and shields up. Instinctively she did the same, adopting a fighting crouch, dagger and rapier ready, side-stepping her way forward. The moment she did she found herself calming, the familiar pose triggering a steady breath. *Ah, right, that's what training's for*, she thought to herself. It was an odd feeling—fear and excitement coursing through her, preparing her body for a fight or for flight, and yet at the same time the calm of her training settling in, centering her, making her feel safe and certain. *I know what to do*, she thought. *I'll just kill whatever comes in front of me.*

And then she was moving in behind Gap Tooth into a large underground chamber, and she straightened and let out a long slow breath of relief and wonder as she walked forward. The torchlight from the others spread out with them throughout the room, lighting its high walls and ceiling with flickering hues of red and black and orange and illuminating other archways opening out in its walls to other dark chambers. Several great columns flanked the central aisle of the chamber, carved with obscene images and strange, barbaric letters that she couldn't read, and there were frescoes of some kind on the soot-darkened walls. But at that moment it wouldn't have mattered, because she couldn't take her eyes off the great bronze idol that grinned at them from the other side of the chamber.

Twenty feet tall it must have been, depicting the seated body of some demonic creature, the top of its head and horns almost reaching the ceiling. It cradled a massive brazier in its cross-legged lap with its hands, and there was a wide stone altar set before it. She brushed her hair out of her eyes so she could see it better, and wondered for a moment how they'd even gotten the massive idol into the chamber; perhaps the bronze had been poured and fired right there? Or perhaps some foul sorcery had moved it through the earth? She stared at its face, at a wide flat nose, a grinning mouth of serrated teeth, two great spiraling horns jutting out and up from its forehead.

PROLOGUE

Beneath heavy brows flickered two sources of reflected light: its eyes were great red gemstones easily the size of her head. Her eyes trailed down and she saw that the creature's nipples were two large spikes jutting out from its chest, and that behind the brazier its long thin phalli emerged from its lap like a thick curved spear. Given the broadness of the idol—it was probably twenty feet wide at its base—the thinness of the phalli struck her as almost comical; but the bronze phalli had to be almost eight feet long, curving upward at an angle over the brazier to a sharp, barbed head. She swallowed hard and blinked.

“What the fuck is it?” she finally asked. It was the first time she'd spoken in hours, and she forgot to pitch her voice low as she usually did. She glanced around quickly, mentally kicking herself, but she saw that the others were so busy that they must not have noticed. Harvald and Stjepan were already hauling themselves up the side of the great bronze idol, and about half of Guilford's crew were excitedly but quickly overturning urns and pots scattered along the walls and corners of the chamber, emptying the temple offerings into their bags and satchels, while the other half stood guard at dark entryways.

But Guilford heard her and responded, though if he noticed that she sounded more like a woman than usual he gave no sign. “One of the *Rahabi*, the evil spirits of the Underworld,” he said as he walked over to watch Harvald and Stjepan's progress up the idol. He'd moved quick and one of his satchels was already heavy with coin and metal, poured out of one of the offering urns. “Might be a *Bharab Dzerek*, if I'm not mistaken. Spirits of iron and fire, amongst the guardians of the Six Hells, and often they are patrons to those in the Nameless Cults who worship Nymarga, the Mask of the Devil. For we are indeed in one of their temples.” He made a sign to ward off Evil, and she followed suit.

Harvald paused midway up the statue, using one of its spiked nipples as a foothold, and turned back toward them. “I've read about how they use an idol like this,” he said casually. “Some of their victims are slaughtered on the altar there. But for their special rituals, they impale their victims alive on this giant spear of a cock right here, and light the brazier up all

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nice and hot, and roast them over the fire.” He grinned, waving up at a set of chains and ropes and pulleys that hung in the dark up by the ceiling. “Barbaric, don’t you agree?” Something in his voice made her think that he didn’t really find it all that barbaric.

It was not hard to remember what she’d heard as a little girl about the Six Hells, back when she listened to the old wise women whispering in the herb gardens, back when she still went to the Divine King’s temples. The Old Religion of Yhera, the Queen of Heaven, did not agree on much with the younger cult of the Divine King, but they both agreed that there were Six Hells in the Underworld. They both agreed that Hathhalla, the lion-headed goddess of vengeance, had created and ruled the Six Hells, and that she had appointed Servant-Rulers for each of the Six Hells to act on her behalf.

On the first Five Hells there was common agreement about who ruled them and whom they were for. The Servant-Ruler of the First Hell was Amaymon, the Whisperer, the Prince of Intrigue and Secret Power. He was served in turn by the *Baalbazor*, great barbed and horned demons, and he ruled over a Hell reserved for the greedy and corrupted, such as thieves and grave robbers. The Servant-Ruler of the Second Hell was Geteema, who was once the beloved sister of Geniché, the Queen of the Earth and the Dead, before Geteema turned on the Queen of Heaven and waged war against the ancient people of Düréa. She was served by the *Golodriel*, winged demons with vulture heads, and ruled over a Hell reserved for the jealous, the covetous, and the ambitious. The Servant-Ruler of the Third Hell was Ishraha, the Rebel Angel, who had rebelled against the Divine King and been thrown down for his impudence. He was served by the *Nepbilim*, great giants and hell-goblins, and ruled over a Hell reserved for betrayers, oath-breakers, and usurpers. The Servant-Ruler of the Fifth Hell was Irré, the Black Goat of the Wilderness, the Black Sun, the bow-bearer of plague and fire. He was served by the *Bharab Dzerek*, great demons of fire and iron (a statue of one of which she was apparently standing before), and ruled over a Hell reserved for the merciless, callous, and savage, such as murderers, pillagers, warmongers, and destroyers.

PROLOGUE

Most of the men she was with were destined for either the First or Fifth Hells, she would guess.

Both the Old Religion and the cult of the Divine King agreed that the Sixth Hell had no ruler, just an empty throne reserved for Nymarga the Devil for when his spirit finally passed into the Underworld. But after that they parted company a bit. In the folk lore of the Old Religion, Hathhalla had set a pack of the *Tiranhim* and *Iyyim*, wolf and jackal demons, to rule a Hell reserved for the eaters of unsanctified meat until Nymarga arrived to take his rightful place. But the temple priests of the Divine King rejected that interpretation of the Sixth Hell, as they rejected sacrificing meat to the old gods, and so they said instead that the Sixth Hell was for apostates, idolaters, and heretics who rejected the divinity of the King of Heaven and made sacrifices in the old way.

She'd eaten unsanctified meat in her time, so she sort of hoped the Divine King's priests were right, but in Erim's mind this argument was strictly for the temple priests and hidden priestesses; none of those Hells really mattered to her. The only Hell she cared about was the Fourth Hell, ruled by Ligrid, the Queen of Perversion. Ligrid was served by the *Gamezhiel*, demons of lust and sex that could seduce or rape the unwitting and unwilling, and Ligrid ruled over a Hell reserved for the depraved and lecherous, such as rapists and molesters. For the perverted, the licentious, and the wicked.

For people like her.

She stared at the phallic spear. She couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to be suspended spread-eagled in the air and lowered onto that evil-looking tip. Which hole would they use as their entry point? Would it feel good at first, then turn to pain? And then the fire would come . . . *if only they didn't roast you in the fire . . .*

Erim shuddered, and almost sobbed, and she shook herself out of her fear and wonderment. *Do something*, she thought. *Set yourself a task*. She was about to go collect some loot—it was why she was there, after all—but then a glint of light off the altar top caught her eye. She stepped forward and inspected the altar before the huge idol; the surface of the altar was smeared and splattered with black ichors and dark dried liquid, but some

of it looked fresh. She reached out with a finger to test some smears of liquid on the stone surface, and she experimentally tasted a drop off her finger. She spat to the side.

“Black-Heart. This altar’s been used recently. Blood. Probably human. This temple’s still active,” she called out huskily. Old Jon and Smitt perked up their ears at that and walked over, nervously standing beside their captain as they looked over the altar.

“I thought you said this temple was desanctified and purified by the priests during their raid,” said old Jon. “And that they’d left all the temple offerings behind, refusing to take the blood money.”

Stjepan had managed to work himself up on top of the idol’s head, and he was leaning over its brow, trying to get the gemstone out of its right eye with a small curved metal pry bar. He didn’t look away from his work as he responded. “Aye, so it said in the archives. But that was two hundred years ago. Plenty of time for the Nameless Cults to rededicate it. And to add to the offerings in the meantime.”

“Fuck me,” said Smitt angrily. “Boys, hurry it up!” he called out, and the men ransacking the temple offerings started to move faster.

“Shit, Harvald,” said Guilford. “I told you someone was watching us come in here.” He looked around in disdain. “Fucking hill people. All sorts of forbidden shit hidden up here in their caves and chasms, where the sunlight of our Divine King does not shine so brightly. An active temple? Getting in here was too easy. Where are the fucking guards? Where are the priests? Why no new guardian spirits?”

Harvald grinned casually down at them, perched on the shoulder of the great idol. “Come now, Guilford,” he called down. “The Nameless Cults might be forbidden but they can be found anywhere, even in the bright, prettily decayed streets of our beloved capital.”

“Aye,” agreed Stjepan, though he didn’t bother looking up from his work. “Even amongst the priests of the Sun Court of your Divine King.”

“You’re a heathen fucking Athairi bastard, Black-Heart,” Guilford replied, though there was no heat in his words and he grinned amiably. “You keep your Old Religion shit to yourself.”

PROLOGUE

“Stjepan may be Athairi and a heathen, but he’s our heathen,” said Harvald. He was the only one amongst them to always call Stjepan by his real name, Erim had noted.

Guilford gave a short bow. “Aye, one of the High King’s own fucking cartographers, at our service.”

“Aye, as long as all this remains our little secret,” Stjepan said. And with another grunt he succeeded in prying out the gemstone eye with a loud *pop*.



They moved in the dark with her now, her Nameless. Sharpened bone spears dipped in shit and poison, curved swords and wicked implements of pain and war, fierce masks of horn and brass, short horn bows pulled with fire-sharpened arrows; pride and despair filled her again. The roll of the bones had been bad, very bad, and so she whispered still, promising fresh blood and meat and spirits bound in chains, promising herself to her Liege for Him to do with as He pleased. She hoped that He heard her, hoped so very much that He did.



Harvald hefted the gem in his hand while Stjepan stuck his hand into the empty eye socket of the idol, searching.

“Look at the size of that gem,” Guilford said quietly.

Harvald smiled down at him. “Here, catch,” he said. He tossed the gemstone down to Guilford, and Erim’s eyes went wide and her heart leapt into her throat as it caught the torchlight in its blood-red facets tumbling through the air. In a flash she pictured it shattering against the stone floor, but it landed smoothly (albeit heavily) in Guilford’s hands. He grunted in surprise but didn’t drop it. Guilford weighed it for a second with a grin, then wrapped it in a soft cloth and slipped it into his shoulder bag,

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already crammed with cooper, silver, and gold coins. “As per our agreement,” Harvald called down.

“What, you’re just giving it to him?” Erim said, her mind boggled.

Harvald laughed. “Ah, young impressionable Erim. Things are never what they seem. Never get distracted by the obvious bright bauble.” Stjepan, having not found anything in the hollow space behind the right eye gem, scrambled across the top of the idol’s head to its left gemstone eye and he began working to pry it out; Harvald followed across the idol’s face as he spoke, using its nose and teeth and brow as hand and foot holds. “There’s treasure, and then there’s treasure. The real treasure here isn’t these gems, but what we hope to find behind them.”

Guilford leaned closer to Erim. “Don’t listen to the University boys, kid,” he said conspiratorially. “They’ll just get you deep in the shit. Better to stick to the simple things in life. Gold, wine, women . . . and gems the size of your fucking head.” He winked at her and she felt a little warm inside.

“Maybe the gems are fake?” she asked him. “You know, made of paste or something?” She’d heard of clever men who could do that back in Therapoli.

“No, I’m pretty sure they’re real,” Guilford said. “Red *topakh* crystals out of the mountains on the other side of the Red Wastes. They’re not as valuable as you might think, but these two specimens will fetch a high enough price for me to be able to buy myself a house back in Vesslos’ Free Quarter.”

Stjepan pried out the second gemstone with another loud *pop*.



She could bear them now, in the great temple, defiling it. Rage built inside her, displacing the fear, the hopelessness, and she whispered fiercely, summoning Him up from the dark depths of Hell. Something was coming, she could feel it now, but would it be too late? Did He come himself, or send a blessed servant?

PROLOGUE



Stjepan handed the second gemstone to Harvald, who tossed it down to Guilford. Stjepan didn't mind giving up the crystals as part of the pay for Guilford and his crew, who were worth every penny amongst the dangers of the Manon Mole, but he still felt a pang of regret as the gem sailed through the air, and he silently wished that Harvald were not so cavalier about it. "Here, a matched set," Harvald called down as Guilford caught it. Harvald, coming from the landed Orwain family, holding the Barony of Araswell, could shrug off a thousand shillings or two with nonchalant ease, but that was several years' wages for Stjepan and most of the men.

"You two are fucking crazy," Guilford said, shaking his head as he wrapped the second gem in cloth and slid it into his satchel. He hefted the satchel over his shoulder, tying a spare strap across his chest to secure it. It was very heavy now, and he gave himself a small shake to try and settle all the weight he was carrying properly.

Harvald grinned down at them. "Maybe, but you're right here under the ground with us, yeah?"

"Too true, too true," Guilford laughed. "*A baseborn fool am I, am I, sings the bard.*"

Stjepan tried to ignore them as he fished around in the second eye socket, biting his lower lip. This hollow was a little deeper than the first, and his fingertips brushed against something hidden far back within it. "Definitely something . . . ah, got it!" he said, and he slowly pulled out a long slender copper tube faintly inscribed in runes. Holding it carefully, he inspected it with narrow eyes.

He could see three different runes etched repeatedly in the copper surface, all from the *Labira Grammata*, sometimes called the Witch Runes of ancient Ürüne Düré, sometimes the Riven Runes. One was a *ward* rune useful against magic and divination; the second was a rune of *structure*, to give strength to the scroll tube; and the third a *hex* rune. The second and third runes were inscribed in touching pairs, so that in some way their magic was combined. The *hex* rune gave him pause; often they triggered

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at the mere sight of them. But he was protected by his own charms and amulets, and had not felt or heard any of the usual signs that his own wards had been challenged by an active and dangerous spell. So something else, then, tied to the structure of the tube.

“Runes of warding against detection,” he said quietly to Harvald. “And against it being opened, I think. A hex of some kind on whoever does the deed.”

Stjepan moved back from the edge of the idol’s head so that Harvald could clamber up and look. The top of the idol’s head wasn’t perfectly flat, instead being slightly curved, but there was plenty of room for the two of them to settle in and spread out a bit. Harvald slipped a carefully wrapped torch from one of his satchels along with a small packet of powdered and enchanted *ajuga* flowers. He crushed the packet open in his palm and blew the contents onto the torch, and suddenly it bloomed with a heatless blue flame, lighting the top of the idol’s head so they could see what they were doing. Stjepan pulled a soft cloth from one of his satchels and set the scroll tube on it so it wouldn’t roll. The two of them looked at each other as they knelt and crouched over the scroll tube, Harvald with an irrepressible grin, Stjepan with a small smile finally tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Harvald reached into one of his satchels with his free hand and pulled out a small vial of clear elixir. Stjepan knew it would be a potent of the *wormwood* plant, prepared as a bane against enchantments. They started whispering the words of the cleansing rite together over the scroll tube, as Harvald poured a bit of the liquid in the vial onto it. “*Demes matta, illumematta, porte a matta. Grammata illuso resistrata libri. Grammata libri. Porti ouset matta. Grammata illuso resistrata libri. Grammata libri!*”

Stjepan could feel a bit of pressure building up behind his ears, as though he had climbed to a great height, and they both started repeating the words of the spell faster and faster as the pressure built. Stjepan started to feel dizzy, and fear gripped him that whoever had made the inscriptions had done so too well. But then the runes on the tube began to glow, faintly at first, then more strongly as though they were etched in liquid fire. The runes grew very bright, and for a moment Stjepan thought his head might

PROLOGUE

burst, and then all of a sudden the runes fizzled and *popped* with smoke. They both froze in mid-syllable for a moment, and then relaxed as the runes dimmed.

Stjepan waved away the smoke as Harvald grinned and laughed.

“What’s in the tube, then?” called up Erim.

“If we’re lucky, a map,” Stjepan said with a slight cough.

Erim peered up at them. “What? A map? A map is worth more than these gems?” she asked. Guilford chuckled.

“Well, that depends on what the map is to,” Stjepan said. “How’d we get here, to this treasure, young Erim?”

Erim paused, thinking for a moment. “Well . . . a map, yeah?” she finally called up to him.

“Yes, copied from the cartographer’s archives at the High King’s Court,” Stjepan said as he inspected the ends of the tube until he found the seam of the cap on one end. “And how do we get to the *next* treasure?” Stjepan slowly uncapped the tube, and paused, holding his breath. When nothing happened, he relaxed and let out a long sigh. He tilted the tube and carefully slid out a rolled piece of parchment.



Slowly, slowly, her Nameless slid forward, filtering through the outer chambers, bristling with death and vengeance. Firelight flickered ahead from the great temple, and glistened off barbed points and horns and chains. Her fevered whispering dropped low. If only the roll of bones had not been so bad, she would have been filled with joyful gladness at the slaughter that was about to commence.



Erim smiled brightly. “Another map,” she said. “That map.”

Stjepan unfurled the parchment paper on top of the bronze idol’s head

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as gingerly as he could. He had spent a long time handling maps and papers that were centuries old and practically disintegrated in his hands, and he had no desire for their prize to be snatched away from them now that they were so close. But he was happily surprised that the parchment appeared to be soft and supple. As it opened, his tone became almost reverent. “For the likes of us, the map is always the thing,” he said quietly. “It leads us to the next prize, the next journey, full of possibilities and promise.” Stjepan spread the parchment out, slowly revealing a set of symbols, drawings, letters, and diagrams.

What a thing of beauty, he thought. His face relaxed into a smile for the first time in days, and he lost his train of thought staring at the map.

“Every map is a chance to remake ourselves and our fortunes, find a way out of the lives that imprison us,” Harvald said, picking up where Stjepan had left off, his tone almost as reverent. Almost. “And this map . . . if it’s what we think it is . . . this one could be a map to end all maps.”

“They’re fucking dreamers, kid, always looking for the treasure that will let them write their names in the history books,” said Guilford. He clapped a hand onto Erim’s shoulder. “Trust me, keep your eyes on the prize in your hands, the one you can actually touch, not the one in your mind’s eye that you can only get in your dreams.” She swallowed hard, looking up at his handsome face, feeling the warmth of his hand on her shoulder. Part of her wanted to melt inside. He didn’t seem to notice, and he turned and looked up the idol. “What’s this map supposed to be to, then, Black-Heart?”

“The Barrow of Azharad,” said Stjepan in a whisper, staring at the map. Harvald opened his mouth as if to stop him, and then just winced when he realized it was too late, and hoped that no one had heard what Stjepan had said.

But if a pin had dropped in that chamber then, it would have been as loud as a clarion bell.



PROLOGUE

She froze, bearing the words spoken in the great temple, and her Nameless froze with her. She had heard the words in the tongue of the lowlanders, the Middle Tongue: the Barrow of Azharad, one of them had said. She'd heard him as clear as day. And she was filled with rage and wonder and disbelief. Could it be true? Could such a Secret have been hidden inside her own temple all this time? She suddenly understood why the Servant of the Bright King was there. But in an instant she also knew she would have no part of the great endeavor, and she felt a hollow pit opening inside her, the rage and wonder turning to despair and giddy hope; she stifled a sob, and cursed the uncaring bones.



“What’d he fucking say?” hissed the Stick, standing tall and straight and with a frown on his face. They were all standing and looking up at the top of the idol now, the urns and offering pots forgotten.

“The Barrow of Azharad,” said Guilford quietly. His grip on Erim’s shoulder had suddenly gone hard, his fingertips digging into her flesh even through the doublet, but he didn’t realize what he was doing. She bit her lip against the pain, and against something else. Erim was a bit confused; she could sense the others in his crew coming closer, the sudden tension in the chamber.

“The Barrow of Azharad,” Guilford said again, and laughed suddenly. He’d heard any number of men, in any number of taverns and street corners, claim they were going after that barrow. Hell, he’d had any number of peddlers offer to sell him a map to it. Or to the tomb of Palé Meffiré and her enchanted horn, to the Barrow of Githwaine the Last Worm King, to the secret hiding place of the Throne Thief, to any of dozens of legendary hoards and treasures. And he’d known better each time, had laughed and moved on. But Harvald and Stjepan were different. Stjepan was different.

Stjepan didn’t bullshit.

Particularly there, in that place. Deep under the ground, standing before a great bronze idol of one of the *Bharab Dzerek*, with the blood of who

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knew how many victims smeared on its altar and its great phallic sacrificial spear, Guilford could feel it in his bones. There was no way Stjepan would bullshit him. Not about this. And he knew that map was real. *He could feel it in his bones*, and he laughed the laughter of a man who suddenly realized he was going to be rich beyond his wildest dreams. “You’re . . . you’re going after *Gladringer*. You’re going after fucking *Gladringer*,” Guilford said, having to repeat it to himself in order to get his head around the idea.

“Well,” said Harvald faintly, smiling and trying to make the best of a bad situation. “If the map is real.”

“You fucking cheap bastards!” Guilford roared, suddenly very angry. Erim thought he was about to rip her arm right off. She hadn’t felt him draw it but his broadsword was in his free hand, the tip pointed up toward Harvald and Stjepan up above them. She wasn’t sure what to do. “You think to foist us off on these fucking coins and a pair of gems while you go after the *sword of the fucking High Kings*?”

Stjepan snapped out of his reverie and in an instant realized the mistake he had made. Cursing inwardly, he stood up on top of the idol, his head almost touching the ceiling, and looked down on Guilford and the others gathering on the other side of the great brazier below them. “Don’t worry, Guilford,” he said calmly. “You and your crew can be in on that job too. My word on it.”

“Black-Heart, you better fucking believe—”



She could hear the dissension in the great temple before them, and she took a deep breath and a step forward. This was their moment. As she did, so did her Nameless, and one of them accidentally let the barbed metal tip of his spear catch on a low-hanging arch. She whirled on the Nameless responsible, fixing him with the Evil Eye, but the damage was done.

She cursed the bones. They were always right.

PROLOGUE



Guilford cut himself off before finishing his sentence; almost everyone on the temple floor turned to the left as one and raised their shields and weapons.

The sound they'd all heard from the dark of the outer chambers, despite their fixed attention on the sudden prospect of fame and fortune, had been unmistakable.

The sound of metal scraping against stone.

Everyone froze, poised as though prepared for war and listening, staring at the yawning black arches that were visible beyond the columns on the left flank of the chamber. Gap Tooth Tims was closest to the arch from whence the sound had seemed to come. He swallowed hard, then inched forward until he reached the line of columns. He paused there, one of the thick massive columns by his left shield side, almost using it as cover as he peered intently into the dark arches beyond. He raised his shield, an old steel heater that had kept him safe through many a fight, until the top was almost level with his eyes, and lay the tip of his broadsword to rest on top of the heater, pointing into the inky blackness beyond the arch.

Erim found herself holding her breath along with everyone else as they watched his progress. She felt a sudden pang. Gap Tooth was her line mate. She should be backing him up. But Guilford hadn't let go of her shoulder, in fact he had pulled her back until she was almost behind him and he had practically placed himself as a shield between her and the arches. It was an oddly chivalric gesture, and for a moment she wondered: *does he know?*

And then Gap Tooth was turning and yelling "We are discovered!" and she didn't have time to think about anything else but death. She had barely started to duck before a flurry of arrow shafts peppered the room, hissing out of the darkness. She heard screams as some of the men were hit even as they were diving for cover. The volley of arrows still seemed to be in the air when dark shapes began to swarm into the chamber, bristling with horns and barbed points, rushing amongst the now scattered men. For a

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split second she was afraid they were being attacked by a horde of demons up from the bowels of one of the Six Hells, but then it registered that they were men, men wearing masks made to resemble horned demons, men wearing black feathered hides and a hodge-podge of armor pieces about their bodies (when they were clothed at all), men wielding spiked clubs, archaic curved swords, and barbed spears.

She practically breathed a sigh of relief. *Devil-worshippers. Nameless Cultists. Followers of the Forbidden Gods.* Joy coursed through her. *I know what to do*, she thought as she plunged the tip of her rapier into the throat of a horn-masked man running straight at her. She felt his spiked club whistle past her head as she ducked under it and the cultist's momentum took him past her and she almost lost her rapier, but she managed to wrench it out of him, sending him spinning and blood arcing even as she sidestepped another horn-masked berserker and punched her dagger into his gut. *I know what to do. Thank you, gods*, she thought.

Atop the idol, Stjepan snarled a curse. At the first volley of arrows that had scattered Guilford's men, he immediately started to roll the map back up. Harvald crouched next to him, putting the heatless torch down onto a seam in the great idol's head and holding the waiting scroll tube for him, and together they carefully slipped the map into the tube.

The moment they were finished Stjepan turned and glanced over the chamber below them as Harvald dropped the scroll tube into one of his satchels. Black shapes swarmed throughout the room. *Too many of them*, he thought sadly. It looked like Llew and Porter were down already, and as he watched a gaunt, naked horn-masked man covered in blue-ink tattoos ran a barbed spear through old Jon Pastle. He could see Guilford laying about him with heavy blows of his broadsword, while Erim moved smoothly, surely, even gracefully through the battle. *But we might still have a chance*, he thought, and he crouched, preparing to start clambering back down the idol.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked behind him. Harvald shook his head and nodded up at the ceiling.

"There's always another way out," Harvald said quietly. Stjepan looked past him, and was surprised to see the outline of a trapdoor in the ceiling,

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now illuminated by the heatless torchlight. He didn't remember that on the maps.

Erim was almost in a trance. The fighting on the temple floor was chaotic, brutal, a real every-man-(and-woman)-for-himself melee. Which suited her just fine. She figured she was better at fighting this way anyway, where she didn't have to worry about anyone else, about keeping the line, about the shield wall or the pike hedgehog or the other things that soldiers trained to formations had to think about. She could just *flow*. So she did. She practically danced, and everywhere she danced a man with a horn-mask died. Somewhere she could hear a woman's voice chanting, singing, and she wondered if she was imagining it, or if some dark *fae* spirit was playing an accompaniment as she worked. She danced over the body of Colin of Loria, his ugly blond-haired head split open by a sharp blow, his brains leaking out under her boots, and the horn-masked swordsman who had killed him gurgled a scream and dropped to the ground, blood spurting from his missing sword hand and a perforated lung. She danced in next to the Stick, beset by two horn-masked warriors, and stabbed one horn-mask up through the throat into his brainpan, and then with the withdrawal she cut the other horn-mask's bloated belly open, splashing his guts all over the floor. She danced back-to-back with Gap Tooth Tims, glad he was still alive, and put one rapier point through a horn-masked spearman's eye even as she drove her point dagger into another's groin. The horn-mask screamed at her for his ruined manhood, and she kicked him full in the face, sending him flying back through the air.

Bodies were dropping left and right, and Guilford could hear that terrible chanting, but he could also hear a voice in the back of his head: *you're going to make it*. Smitt went down trying to hold his guts in somewhere on his left, but Guilford could see the Stick still fighting to his right, and he caught flashes of Erim and Gap Tooth fighting back to back, and he marveled for a moment. *We're going to make it*. He smashed the rim of his shield into one of the devil-worshipper's faces, feeling skull and flesh crumple underneath the blow, and brought his broadsword down in a long arc onto another man's shoulder, almost cutting him lengthwise in two.

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Then he saw her. A woman emerging in the dark from behind the last of the swarm, a giant vulture-head mask on her face; she was topless, a black feathered cloak about her, a shimmering black metal dress around her legs as she swayed in a ritual trance, in a full-throated chant, and now Guilford could just about make out the words, though he didn't understand them: "*Sseniss huthadde, Bharabazzhi. Venai. Venai. Festa bus goblin gaspa, Bharabazzhi. Venai. Venai!*"

Guilford smashed a horn-masked cultist aside, and dropped his broadsword. He reached down for a barbed spear lying on the floor, picked it up, and hefted it once. "King of Heaven, guide my throw!" he whispered, and then he hurled the barbed spear across the room at the priestess, catching her full in the chest. Her chant ended abruptly as she went flying backwards with a wet thud.

It was suddenly quiet again, except for the heavy breathing of tired men and the moans of the dying.

Guilford looked around. Gap Tooth and Erim were all that were left standing, and Gap Tooth was wobbling, blood soaking the breeches of his right leg; they looked at each other, then at the carnage around them, panting, weapons streaked in blood. Well, not *all* that were left standing; Guilford glanced over to where he'd last seen the Stick, and for a moment he was confused by what he saw until he realized that the tall man had been decapitated, his head nowhere to be seen, the body still standing upright and swaying.

And then the Stick's body fell over.

Guilford knelt down and picked up his broadsword. He picked his way through the bodies, some still and silent, others quivering and moaning, over to where the priestess of the Nameless Cults lay. Her body was shaking; she was still alive, despite the barbed spear springing upright from her chest. He looked down dispassionately and noted that her body was beautiful, with pale alabaster skin, a flat stomach, curved hips, and firm full breasts with pierced nipples; now ruined by the spear plunged through her center. He'd probably missed her heart by an inch or two, but there was no doubt she'd be dead soon. He could hear her trying to say

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something, whispering to herself in a strained gurgle. He used the point of his sword to tip her vulture-headed mask off and grimaced. Her body might have been beautiful, but it was a hideous, almost deformed face that looked up at him with hate-filled eyes, hate-filled eyes that had an oddly insane look of triumph about them. She grinned and bared her filed and sharpened teeth, and then coughed blood, still trying to say something. He thought for a second she was laughing at him, though he had no idea what she would have thought funny about a spear through the chest.

“Fucking hill people,” he muttered to no one in particular, then raised his voice to a shout. “Black-Heart! What was she chanting?”

He looked up and was surprised to see Stjepan helping Harvald disappear into a hole in the ceiling above the great bronze idol.

“She was performing a summoning,” Stjepan called down. “Something’s coming. We should go.”

Guilford turned and looked out the darkened arches that had spawned this horde. They yawned black in front of him. And where before the air had been still, now he could feel an ill wind, a weird wind, from beyond the arches.

Something was in the corridor beyond.

Guilford went very pale.

“Something’s coming,” he said weakly.

“Get up here!” Stjepan shouted as Harvald’s boots disappeared into the ceiling. “Now. Climb, climb!”

In a sudden panic, Erim, Guilford, and Gap Tooth Tims all rushed for the great bronze idol and started to clamber up, Gap Tooth stumbling and almost falling as he tried to run. Erim reached it first and she swung up the sides of the idol quickly, barely sparing a glance at its long curved phalli as she passed it. Guilford was next, and then Gap Tooth slammed into the base of the idol last. Throwing away his heater he tried to haul himself up, but his wounded leg made climbing difficult. Guilford was surprised to find himself slowed a bit by the heavy bag of loot tied onto his back.

“Fucking help me, you bastards!” screamed Gap Tooth. Guilford looked down, and saw that Gap Tooth was having trouble, and wavered for

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a moment. He cursed, and looked up. Erim had stopped, almost at the top, and was looking back down at them.

“Keep going!” shouted Guilford, and he turned and dropped back down to the crook of the idol’s arm. He reached down, grabbed Gap Tooth’s hand and hauled him up into the idol’s lap.

Erim watched this for a moment, helplessly, and then she heard Stjepan above her speaking calmly. “Erim,” he said. “You have to keep climbing. Now.” She turned back and locked eyes with him, meeting his sharp gaze, and suddenly she felt very calm and sure. She nodded, and in a short move she was the first to reach the top, and Stjepan helped pull her up and then in one smooth motion he lifted her so she could reach the trap door. She quickly pulled herself up and out.

The torches and braziers in the temple chamber started to flicker and go out as Guilford sensed rather than saw something big and dark with glistening spikes and horns slowly squeeze its way through the arches into the room. A smell hit them all then, the smell of a thousand rotting corpses, boiling sulfur, and buckets filled with fresh shit and stale semen. Guilford vomited into his mouth, the stench was so foul, and he abandoned any thoughts of trying to help Gap Tooth. He turned and tried to spring up the sides of the idol.

Stjepan could see the darkness spreading, the scattered dropped torches guttering and dimming. The darkness slowly swallowed up Gap Tooth as he scratched at the bronze idol’s chest, trying to find purchase to reach the idol’s shoulder with only one leg to stand on. Gap Tooth retched and started to scream, and then Stjepan couldn’t see him anymore, couldn’t see what was happening to him, and Stjepan was thankful for the darkness then.

Stjepan reached his hand down as Guilford reached the perch of the idol’s shoulders and started to clamber up its face. The darkness in the room was almost complete, the single heatless torch atop the idol was all that was left, and it barely illuminated the two of them. Guilford looked up at Stjepan, and their hands finally locked. Stjepan could barely see his face in the waning light, and Guilford wore a look of desperation and terror, as though he knew he was spent, the fatigue of the fight and weight on his back was draining

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him, and then suddenly his expression changed, his grasp went soft, and his eyes went slightly glassy. Guilford gasped softly.

And then there was a wet, chewing, rending sound that Stjepan thought was just about the worst thing he'd ever heard.

Guilford's eyes rolled, watering with tears, and then finally with a last bit of will he was able to focus them on Stjepan.

"Promise me, Black-Heart," he hissed, suddenly fierce. "Fucking swear it!"

Stjepan nodded grimly. "Seven days of prayer, to guide you to the Heavens," he said softly. "You and yours will have it, I swear it."

Guilford nodded, and as he looked into Stjepan's sharp eyes it occurred to him that for the first time he wasn't looking into Black-Heart's usual gaze of hate or stern judgment, but instead saw nothing but a look of love and compassion. He was surprised, and opened his mouth to say something, when he was pulled with a sudden yank right out of Stjepan's grasp and down into the darkness.

Stjepan turned and leapt, catching the edge of the trap door and pulling himself up into the ceiling just as the last torch guttered out.



When Erim finally stumbled out of the rock onto the high hillside, she gasped and sobbed and fell to her knees and crawled and rolled. She did not think she had ever been so happy to see the light of day. Her mind was mush, driven into fear and panic by the wild run through the dark, following a single torch held up by Harvald and Stjepan with his map. She didn't know how he'd found their way out, but somehow he'd managed to orient themselves on his map, and up and down stairs they'd scrambled and climbed, legs burning with the effort, and then up, and up, and up again, until finally she'd felt packed earth under her boots and she'd seen an upright sliver of bright light up ahead.

Her hands dug into dirt and peat moss, and somehow that steadied her, even though she knew that somewhere deep underneath the solid earth was

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hidden a chamber of horrors. She crawled to get away from the opening into the rock, seeing Stjepan and Harvald downhill a bit, also slumped to the ground, panting and heaving. Harvald was on all fours, his head buried in his chest, whispering in prayer, and she briefly wished she had a god or goddess to pray to. But there were none but the Damned that would take the likes of her, so the temple priests had assured her when she was young and they had played with her in the dark.

The sun had broken through the clouds while they were below the ground, and she leaned back on her haunches, reveling in the light and heat. She unstrapped her water bottle and brought it to her lips, the cool clean liquid tasting unbelievably sweet on her lips, in her mouth, in her throat. Harvald had slipped the copper scroll tube out of his satchel, and he was staring at it in wonder. She saw Stjepan stand and walk a few feet to face the sun, and he sank to his knees, his hands open as if in supplication.

Stjepan was Athairi, and like most of his people he was of the Old Religion, and worshipped the Queen of Heaven and her Court. He would never have uttered the Divine King prayer for the Dead. But most of the men who they'd just left behind had been brought up in the cult of the Divine King, as was the wont in most of the eastern Middle Kingdoms. And so it was a variant he uttered, the so-called Erid Prayer for the Dead, first worded by the Athairi to pray for Danian comrades who had died by their sides.

*Dawn Maiden. Awaken!
Bright Star. Awaken!
Sun's Herald. Awaken!
And announce the death of
loyal servants to the Divine King!
Dread Guardians, light their way
on the Path of the Dead!
Seedré, Judge and Gatekeeper,
welcome them below, and know that they are claimed!
Islik, King in Heaven, once King on Earth!
Your servants fall to Death, your hated enemy!*

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*King in Heaven, know their names:
Jon Pastle; Colin, son of Corwin of Loria;
Smitt, son of Heoret; Jack Porter of Vesslos;
Tims Orwed; Llew, son of Duram Tain;
Cole, son of Gable Gower;
and Guilford, son of Guy of Vesslos.
Send your bright messengers to the
place of Judgment, to claim their spirits
from the grasp of their accusers!
Bring them from Darkness
to your Heavenly Palace!
Save them from Death!*

She knew without having to ask that Stjepan would utter that prayer each morning day and night for the next seven days, until either their spirits had found their way to peace in Heaven or judgment in the Underworld, or had been lost forever. She frowned.

“Cole, son of Gable?” she asked.

Stjepan looked over at her. He thought she looked exhausted, frightened, exhilarated. He smiled softly. “That was the Stick’s real name,” he said.

He looked at the ground for a moment, and then stood and surveyed the horizon with his sharp gaze. He listened to the wind, to the faint jangle of unseen bells, to a song that seemed to be sung backwards. He sniffed the air, smelt wet earth and old stone, moss and scrub thickets and tree heath, and from somewhere near the hint of something dead and rotting. The sadness in him grew deeper and was joined by . . . anger? Hate? His gaze grew piercing and unsettling, as though he was a man with murder on his mind.

“Let’s get going,” he said finally, and started off down the hillside. Harvald shook himself, and followed, rubbing his hands as though he was a child about to open a present.

Erim looked about, at the three of them on a sunny hillside, with ancient *menhirs* ringing the hilltop and the high range of the Manon Mole off in the distance, the blood of a dozen men splattered on her clothes to mix

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with dirt and mud. She suddenly thought to herself that if anyone asked her, she would say she was Stjepan's man. She shuddered in the weird, high wind, and looked back over her shoulder at the cleft in the rock.

"See you in Hell, boys," she whispered. It was the closest thing to a prayer that she could offer. And then she turned and was off down the hillside.



Somewhere in the dark, a woman whispered, and something huge and hungry feasted and fucked.