



**By Lee Patton
& James D. Mills**

Illustrations by Jeff Koch,
Anastasia Patton

VIOLET FLAMES BURNED low and sickly within the cressets encircling the underground chamber. Amid the shallow vault of the ceiling, writhing shadows bred with the licking, fiery tongues, gave birth to the foul schemes hatching below. At the center of the chamber, three grim figures, robed in black and cloaked in sendal mystery, stood around a broad scrying basin carved from a single obsidian slab. They watched in sepulchral silence as the image of an old man, his ratty gray beard split by a grin riddled with missing teeth, shimmered, then faded. The disembodied tittering of the specter lingered above the mirrored surface of the water for a moment less than comfortable. Silence resumed; the putrid pallor of the flames brightened, took on their wonted infernal hue.

Standing opposite his two companions, the lone figure lifted his pallid hands, their slender fingers bedecked with rune-engraved rings, and lowered his cowl. His silver hair was close-cropped and unkempt, his sallow face, at once in the prime of youth, yet buried in the ancient depths of age beyond counting, was framed by low, sharp cheekbones, set with a

long sloping nose and thin, pale blue lips. Looking out from under a high brow, his eyes were like black jewels, sunken deep within their sockets and flickering redly in the lamplight.

Orved Sepah shifted his hellish gaze to the figure on his right.

For a moment the figure was still, then lowered his cowl in turn. Bald and gaunt, darkness pooled in the weathered crags of his face, drawn taut by the grimace hidden beneath a thick black beard. He returned Orved's gaze, peering over a snubbed nose, his left eye wandering to some point in the umbrage beyond. "The wizard is a fool."

"Perhaps, Varchuun." An inane giggle pranced off the thick, gluttonous lips of the left-hand figure as he pulled back his cowl. "But Phrygian Black is powerful." Stringy blonde mustaches drooped over his overwide smile, several teeth glinting gold, like the earrings which depended from his bulbous lobes, ending in little bells that tinkled ceaselessly.

"So he is, Smeyakh." Orved pressed his fingertips to his mouth. "And a powerful fool is a useful tool."

Smeyakh chuckled to the chime of his bells.

Scowling, Varchuun glared at the charlatan who dared call himself a High Priest of Enostran; then, he looked to Orved, saying, "Yet, his champion, this Tarmun the Roach—"

"Is an insect! Once he has found

that which we seek, I shall crush him beneath my heel and send his wizard wailing back into the Void from whence he came."

"You mean to betray the wizard?"

Orved laughed, turning toward a far wall clothed in rich arras and darkness. "Sacha. Varvar. Attend me."

All sound faded, and the flames in their cressets guttered and diminished. Sound suddenly returned, and the fires quickened back to life. Two figures, hooded and cloaked in black, separated from the shadows. In unison they lowered their hoods; Sacha, upon the left, gazed with sea-blue eyes from under long, flaxen curls; Varvar, upon the right, stared with verdant eyes beneath a canopy of sable tresses. They stood with eyes downcast, their expressions dolorous, though each possessed a beauty disturbing in its unnatural perfection.

"My dread Omens, sweet daughters." Orved approached the omens with the slithering grace of a serpent, caressed their cheeks, ran his thumbs over their full, rosaceous lips. "Go. Summon your brother."

Smeyakh's cackinnations clamored throughout the chamber like the tolling of funereal bells.

"This is foolishness in sooth!" Varchuun made a warding gesture with his hand and spat upon the cracked flags. "He is half mad, wholly dangerous; and you would set him loose upon the land? We cannot

control him!"

"How he achieves our ends is irrelevant. We need not control him. He will find great pleasure in the task I have in mind." Sneering, Orved faced the omens. "Now go, inform Ryedvest that I wish to speak of these matters." Sacha and Varvar turned to leave. As they passed out of the chamber, Orved spoke: "Tell my Harbinger I wish to speak of blood—and death."

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TARMUN THE ROACH had been in piss-poor situations, but none so rank as this. Trudging through a musty ruin, his breath drained from his aching lungs with every step. Every footfall landed heavier on the cracked, mossy flags. His bones protested every movement, as if he had spent the last month gorging himself.

"Explain it again," Tarmun panted, "where in Grahtz have you taken us?"

"No Grahtz here, friend!" said the blind wizard trailing behind Tarmun, holding on to the Roach's girdle, his ethereal orb of emerald mage-light hovering at the van. "We're far from that treacherous snake, I can assure you. We're nowhere near anywhere. We could walk and walk and find nothing but unfamiliar pastures, strange mountains, unrecognizable languages."

"What you say seems impossible, as if you've brought us to another world, just as Idraan arrived in ours."

"Precisely! You've got the meat of it."

Tarmun bared his teeth, his incredulous shout brewing in his hard stomach—his litany was severed at the stem as rocks fell somewhere deep in the crypt.

"Ho!—" the wizard leapt on Tarmun's back, clamping his cold fingers across Tarmun's mouth, reeking of spoiled cheese. The lumbering Wystran snarled but fell silent as a dark shadow stretched across the intersection of corridors. Tarmun crouched behind a shattered bust, the wizard still dangling from his neck.

A din of gibbering clicks emerged from the deep. He clutched the hilt of his greatsword, *Redquill*, protruding over his shoulder as a hulking monstrosity of clacking chitinous plates navigated the passage by tapping its hooked appendages on the ground.

He thought surely the beast would notice them, throw itself careening down and splattering them into pulp with one fell movement. But it simply continued its way further into the crypt, unbothered by their presence.

The wizard unlatched his gnarled fingers; Tarmun breathed relief. "Blind and deaf," the wizard explained. "Rakuzhasii hunt through vibrations in the ground, but they can only perceive stimuli in their immediate surroundings. Good thing you've a keen ear! They feed mostly on unwitting tomb raiders in tight

quarters."

"This world you've brought us to is fraught."

"Aye—just so. Yet it was I who brought the rakuzhas here from our world. Albeit that was when it fit in the palm of my hand."

Sickness churned with the boulder in Tarmun's belly. "Where might such a devil spawn? Surely not near Wystra."

"No, no! Trouble not, for these prefer the desert heat. You shan't ever catch one wandering into the chilly shadow of Castle Morose."

The wizard's words only troubled Tarmun further; the Warrior Queen had commanded that he soon march south, past the Golden City, to ravage the far-southern Valentine Outlands, on the border of the unnatural Idraani desert. He swore an oath to dismantle the tyrant's trade route, against any foe. He would operate in the very place where these monsters brood, assuming he survived this job that he took from a seemingly innocuous blind old man in a tavern, not two days past. *Oh, how circumstance always seems to wriggle free of mine fingers.*

Carefully, quietly, Tarmun crept down the hall whence came the monster. The wizard sneezed an alien word of power which strengthened his globe of emerald light; the expanded field of illumination revealed a chamber scattered with fading frescos and red potsherds. Another word

sent the globe to hover as a lamp just below the vault of the ceiling. Centering the room was an ornately carved sarcophagus, the likeness of a frail woman rendered upon the white limestone lid.

Tarmun sighed at the sight of it. *Another bloody wizard...*

The wizard hopped to the sarcophagus, running his bony hands over its surface. Pressing his face to the stone, he wheezed, "Good gods! We've finally found it... Pry it open, friend!"

An iron prybar materialized in Tarmun's hand, though its heft made it seem as if it were instead made of lead. He chuckled beneath strained breaths and plunged the claw between lid and chest. With much heaving and effort—more than he would have thought, but every action seemed to require more of him in this foreign hellscape—the seal broke, and the ornate lid crashed and cracked upon the floor.

Inside was naught but the polished bones of a hand. The wizard scrambled into the coffin and swept the bones into a leather bourse, promptly tying it shut 'fore Tarmun could grasp exactly what it was they had traveled so far to claim. He tossed the bourse to the Roach.

"Keep it safe!" the wizard hissed. "Now, we must make haste—"

Tarmun's ears pricked up; the ceiling groaned, the walls shuddered. Tarmun dove into the wizard, both of

them flailing onto the ground.

"Gods in Hell, man! You've nearly killed us!" the wizard spat.

"Hah! You would have been paste were it not for me!"

Black sighed and wriggled his arm free of Tarmun's heft and pointed to the ceiling at an avalanche of stones and debris suspended in midair, enough to have swallowed them both. He shrugged and waved his hand, sending the pile clattering into the far edge of the chamber.

"I hired you for your brawn and your sword. Not your danger sense. You know nothing of this place—now, get off me, you damn oaf!"

Incensed, Tarmun gripped Redquill's hilt. He might have liberated the ol' bodac of his intestines... were he not the key to getting back home, lest Tarmun be trapped forever in this strange world where everything was heavier and smelled of moldering spirits. Still, Black was right. Two days had they spent searching in the dark realms of Enostran; and for what? The hand of some long dead wizard? Tarmun was tired of knowing nothing.

"The High Priests promised me a king's ransom in rare jewels, and for you, access to the forbidden knowledge of another world... for a sack of bones? What's so special about this ancient hand that we risk being buried in the tomb which holds it?"

A somber expression unusual for the wizard weighed upon his face.

He looked at Tarmun, and despite his apparent blindness, gazed at the northman with eyes that seemed to have seen more than any sane, mortal man ever should.

"Tarmun... There is a power here, a darkness that—"

The scrape of leather over stone sounded from the doorway. The Roach and the wizard exchanged worried glances and scrambled to their feet.

A dark figure stood within the yawning arch, framed by the pale green light against the shadows from which he emerged. Clothed in black and armored in a mail coat of black-iron scales, he stood a head shorter than Tarmun, with his hand resting on the lobed pommel of the broadsword hanging in its scabbard from the broad girdle about his waist. Mage-light glinted atop his peaked helm, and its armored visor bearing the image of a dragon, which covered only the left half of his face, snarled in savage contrast to the smile splitting the grim warrior's lips as he drew a long dirk from its sheath.

"A darkness too terrible to comprehend. For those too afraid to use it." The warrior's voice was the hiss of a viper, his words dripping venom.

Tarmun glanced at Black; the blind gaze of his arcane guide was inscrutable. He looked again at the newcomer. "Be you an emissary of the High Priests? Have you come to aid us?"

The warrior's cachinnations were pitched with insanity. "Indeed, those holy fools call me Harbinger, though I serve none but the Great Dragon." His blue eye narrowed, flashing like a shard of ice on the frozen wastes of the Wyse under hoary moonlight. Fury drew his lips into a thin, quivering line. "I have come to claim what is mine."

"What is yours?" Tarmun asked, shifting under the unnatural weight of his mail corselet. "And what is this about a bloody dragon?"

"Be silent!" the wizard snapped, his blackthorn staff clacking upon the flags as he stepped forward. "Here is no friend. The High Priests have betrayed us, sent their assassin to add our bones to this tomb."

"How... perceptive." The Harbinger shrieked with laughter. Falling silent the next instant, he aimed the point of his dirk toward the wizard. "Says the perfidious Phrygian Black, the sightless conjuror who requires the aid of a witless insect, who would break his pact and claim the power of the Dragon for himself."

Teeth bared beneath the bristling stubble of his brown beard, Tarmun seized the hilt of his greatsword, but before he could draw it, Black lifted his hand.

"Do not trouble yourself, Tarmun." The wizard held the emerald gemstone which capped his staff to his open palm. "I'll deal with this worm myself." A spark shot into his palm,

ignited into an orb of cerulean flame. Despite his blindness, Black leveled his flame wreathed hand at the assassin.

Tarmun knew then the wizard had opened his third eye, his second sight trained on the one whose insolence had kindled his wrath. *This fool is about to be naught but ash.* He almost pitied this hapless Harbinger. Almost.

He failed to notice as the assassin flicked the edge of his dirk over his thumb, its dark blade drinking the offered blood. His hidden left eye flashed crimson behind the visor.

The sage light of the chamber suddenly dimmed; all sound grew muffled, choked, as if Tarmun were caught under water, drowning, and the space around the Harbinger warped and shimmered for a flickering moment. The next, light and sound returned; and where once stood the fell assassin, there was now a tall, red haired and broad-shouldered woman of unconventional yet striking beauty. Clothed in leather breeches and belted tunic, she peered longingly at Black, her eyes seeming to shift color between sky blue and verdant green.

The wizard's breath shuddered; the flames in his hand diminished. "Kateryna..."

"Phrygian..." Her frightened gaze flickered about the chamber. "Where am I?" Her wide eyes fixed on the wizard's still smoldering hand. "Why do you summon your fire

against me?" The woman's panicked face twisted into a demon's mask, malice parting her lips in a wicked grin. "Would you watch me burn again?" Hysteria fueled her screams as a pyre of witch-fire kindled at her feet, her body consumed by the flaming crimson tongues.

"Kat—no!" Black gasped.

The woman's immolating wails shook the crypt as melting flesh and sinew sloughed from her bones. Wailing turned to demoniac laughter, and the charred skeleton crumbled away to reveal the Harbinger. Burning wrath flared in the wizard's hand; that same instant, the Harbinger drew his blade across his palm as he raised his hand. Tendrils of shadow burst from the dark corners of the chamber, coiled about his forearm like blood-starved pythons. The umbral serpents flowed into the wound; his left eye flared once more with an infernal light. The sorcerous assassin aimed his hand at Phrygian Black.

Tenebrous threads of blood-tinged shadow lashed out from his fingers, coiled about the wizard's neck and limbs. As his staff clattered to the ground, the Harbinger made a fist, and the threads constricted, binding Black. "You wanted to sample the power of the Dragon. Now come down from your high city in the sky," he yanked on the threads, pulling the wizard face-down to the floor, and drove his dirk through the umbral cord and down

into the stone, "and crawl upon your stomach to eat the dust of the earth."

Redquill leaped from the Roach's shoulder, and in a single motion he brought the gleaming blade down upon the vile threads strangling the wizard. With a sparking clangor the great blade recoiled from the threads, intact and tightening. Brandishing his blade, Tarmun growled, facing the assassin. "Release him, dog!"

Leaving the dirk in place, the Harbinger stood, laughter seething from between his teeth. "Only obedience shall free your master—bring me the relic, insect. Or watch as my hex chokes the life from his decrepit bones."

Tarmun took a fighting stance, fatigued by the stream of entitled bastards speaking down to him. Besides, the Harbinger had no reason to allow him to walk away. *I must destroy this devil. Quickly.* "Speak not your lies in mine ear. 'Tis your blood that shall feed my Redquill!"

"Ah, your blade would spin a mighty tale," the Harbinger said as he drew his sword hissing from its scabbard. Like the fetid scales of a serpent, the black blade glistened, the ripples of its crimson pattern welds flowing along its length as rivulets of blood. "But my Blacktongue whispers the mysteries in my ears." The Harbinger leveled his blade with Tarmun. "She speaks of oblivion, sings to me of your death!"

With a roar Tarmun charged; the author of the devilish interloper's destruction, Redquill's blade swept with broad strokes, its gleaming point ripping through the gloom. But the sorcerer had his own tale to tell, and the reviling tongue of his black blade licked out like sable levin, the rebuke of his counterattack ringing out over the crypt walls.

Raising high his blade, Tarmun dropped it like a guillotine in a sweeping arc meant to steal the sorcerer's legs. The Harbinger leapt, nimbly avoiding Redquill's razor wind, and ascended over the Roach's head, landing behind him.

Tarmun swung round, his blade thundering in the wake of his straining thews. The Harbinger flung Blacktongue in a backhanded slash, knocking Redquill aside; then, drawing a hidden dagger from his sleeve, thrust with his off-hand blade. The broad blade snagged in the rings of Tarmun's mail, caught by the thick linen folds of his gambeson beneath.

The Roach laughed madly and smashed his rock-hard forehead into the sorcerer's masked face; the jagged edges of the dented visor carved a line across Tarmun's scarred brow. The Harbinger howled, stumbling on his heels.

Fervent eyes wide, Tarmun lunged, heaving Redquill before him to run through the pale, otherworldly bastard. In the second it took the

Roach to close the distance, the sorcerer touched his thin fingers to his neck, coating them with crimson streaming out from beneath his disfigured visor.

His covered eye smoldered like a blood moon on an overcast autumn night.

A frigid gale disgorged from the sorcerer's lips, and Tarmun crashed face first into a black wall of cold limestone, dislodging his crooked nose for the nth time. He snarled a curse, shaking his head against nauseating agony. Tarmun wiped the blood and sweat from his eyes, wrenched right his broken nose, then looked up at the towering, charred battlements of Castle Morose looming over him. No longer was he trapped in the depths of an alien tomb, but back home in the empty, shadowed streets of Wystra.

"Morgana's tits!" he cursed, swinging his head side-to-side, searching desperately for the wily assassin. *Have I been sent back?* 'Twas a tempting prospect, yet proved false by his cramping thighs, his burning shoulders, the finger-filled bourse hanging heavy from his belt. Sweat pooled under his arms, bloomed across his chest as his armor suffocated him with sweltering weight. Remembering Phrygian Black's words, *'walk and walk, and find nothing but strange mountains,'* he fondled the bourse at his side and knew that he was farther away from home than he had ever

been.

"Stand down, boy," rumbled a heavily accented voice, not unlike that of the Enostrani Harbinger. Unlike the Harbinger, however, this voice summoned tremors in Tarmun's knees.

Hunger wracked Tarmun's hard, flattened stomach. He turned round to find himself gazing up at a thin, pallid man leaning upon a black-satin cane. Breath seizing in the back of Tarmun's ragged throat, he groped for Redquill's hilt; his small, soft hands closed on naught but air.

Tarmun shrank before the ghostly visage of the Lord Edgar Martikov of the Black House, a man whom he had long ago sworn to destroy, and had failed to thwart at every turn, even with the Warrior Queen at Tarmun's back. Lord Martikov reached down, seized a moldering piece of bread clutched in his tiny fingers.

"I'll never stand down, dog!" Tarmun spat, yet he cringed amid the shriek of his prepubescent voice. A too-wide grin peeled across the foreign lord's face.

"Then I shall squash you, *insect*."

The word Martikov chose freed Tarmun from his nightmarish reverie. 'Twas the lord of the Black House himself who had first dubbed Tarmun *the Bleeding Roach*; only the Enostrani Harbinger, with his loose grasp on Pidgin Valentine, had ever called him an *insect*.

Growing in stature and in

sweltering courage, Tarmun bared his teeth and towered over the pale man. Lord Martikov's smirk morphed to wide-eyed terror as the hulking Wystran closed his massive hands round the lord's frail face.

Tarmun snarled and heaved, digging his fingers between the seams of illusory flesh, biting his quicks like ice water. He howled and tore, and rather than the sensation of flesh rending from bone, he felt the rigid curl of metal whine through his very bones.

Iron clattered upon stone; Tarmun blinked and found himself standing again in the crypt before Ryedvest, unmasked, Blacktongue lying on the ground. The Harbinger's right eye twinkled lazuline in the emerald mage-light. The left, slitted as the eye of a serpent, set within a mangled socket around which blossomed glistening black scales, flared like the living fires of Grahtzildahn above the seared, tattered flesh, and the exposed sinew beneath, spread over the left half of his face like the charred canyons that webbed across the Demon King's infernal wastes.

Tarmun dropped the ruined dragon mask at his feet.

The Harbinger's lips curled back, revealing half a row of savage, filed teeth. He barked guttural words in an incomprehensible tongue and held out his bleeding hand; the shadowed tendrils released their hold upon the

struggling blind wizard and drove themselves into Tarmun's chest, flinging him through the stone wall and careening into the open air....

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RYEDVEST STARED AT THE bourse clutched in his hand, taken from Tarmun while in the throes of the sorcerer's illusion. Cackling in glee devoid of sanity, he tucked the relics within his girdle. Falling silent, the sorcerer lifted Blacktongue off the ground. Sword in hand, he stepped toward Phrygian Black, who still lay prostrate upon the flags. It was only then that Ryedvest heard the wizard's murmurs, his lips pressed to the stone, and a faint rumbling which pulsed through the earth.

The rumbling pitched to a thunderous roll, and a cacophony of chittering clacks and chitinous scrapings sounded from the corridors behind. Ryedvest snarled. "What blasphemy have you conjured, you blind fool?"

With an agility almost preternatural in its swiftness, and an infantile tittering, the wizard shot to his feet and leapt through the hole in the tomb wall. The orb of light above shrank and followed on his heels.

As the tomb was cast into a near absolute darkness, the approaching chthonic din took on a more horrifying aspect; but Ryedvest was a child of the Void itself. The very shadows of Hell were too lurid for his sight.

Placing a hand to his right eye, the sorcerer uttered the old words. Like that of an owl, his eye now shimmered with a copper sheen. Grip tightening on Blacktongue's hilt, Ryedvest spun about—and beheld the horror of another world, of another hell.

Standing upon eight spindly legs, the chitin-armored demon rose to the height of a small elephant from the shadowed realms beyond Satar to the east. From its head, in place of eyes, extended long antennae that swept the ground, while its chelicerae clacked, and the pincers of its forelimbs snapped incessantly. A clear, venomous fluid seethed from the tip of its segmented, curving tail.

Fear brushed down his nape on prickling fingers. Ryedvest considered following the wizard through the wall, unconsciously taking a step back. Leather scraped against the rubble-strewn stone; the insectoid horror's tail flickered. Only the instinct born of a lifetime of combat saved the sorcerer as he sidestepped, deflecting the lashing tail at the last moment. The tip sank into the ground. Blacktongue flashed in a darkling arc, and Ryedvest severed tip from tail.

Chitinous plates hissing, the creature wheeled with profane speed, swinging its pincer into the sorcerer's side. Mail scales splintered under the force of the blow that hurled Ryedvest to the other side of the chamber. Searing pain burned through his ribs

as he rolled to a crouch, sword raised. Pincers snapping, the horror scuttled around, blocking Ryedvest's path to the damaged wall. Standing still, its antennae swept out once more.

The creature is as blind as its master! Panting, the sorcerer slowly stood. *It must be deaf as well, for the sound of my breath surely would have drawn its attack. Then how...* Ryedvest recalled the rumbling in the earth. *The wizard drew the creature somehow with his enchanted muttering. It sensed the vibrations in the ground.* His shimmering gaze shifted to the chamber entrance. *I cannot fight this demon here, trapped in this tomb. If I stay, I shall be torn apart.*

With the softness of a stalking panther Ryedvest padded toward the archway. His path to the arch brought him agonizingly near the clacking horror. As he passed the creature, a loosened scale on his mail coat dislodged and fell clattering over the floor. The sorcerer whirled just as the creature's massive pincer closed on his body, one jagged edge tearing his exposed flesh beneath the shredded mail. Ryedvest roared his agony as the horror drew him toward its dripping, clicking jaws.

Blacktongue licked out, an abyssal thunderbolt, and the sorcerer drove his dark blade into the creature's maw. The horror reeled back, releasing Ryedvest, his sword still lodged in its mouth. Hesitating but for an instant,

the sorcerer spun about and sprinted for the archway. The scrape of the creature's legs at first pursued haltingly but gained speed as Ryedvest entered the corridor.

The horror charged, drawing nearer by the second; and Ryedvest knew he could not outrun it.

Screaming in nauseous pain, vision dimming, the sorcerer dug into his wounded side, and with a handful of hot blood and torn flesh showered the hall with viscera. Serpent eye blazing, he shrieked the old words, then dropped to a knee and pressed his palm to the ground; sanguine fissures burst outward and up through the cracked stone to join the gore painting the ceiling and walls, lacing the hall with a lattice of blood-tainted, crystalline shadow.

The chittering horror was but several paces away.

Ryedvest made a fist; jagged spires of rock erupted through the floor, walls, and ceiling, and closed on the horror, crushing it in a maw of stone fangs.

The creature's chelicerae clicked spasmodically as Ryedvest stepped toward it over putrescent streams of fetid blood. Standing before the demon, he stomped, pinning its writhing head beneath his boot, then reached down and pulled Blacktongue from its rancid maw. With a feral roar, Ryedvest took his sword like a butcher's cleaver to the horror. The

insect's twitching husk stilled long before the sorcerer's blade ceased its rise and fall.

Spitting on the ruinous heap at his feet, Ryedvest suddenly staggered back, vomiting blood and bile. Panting, he wiped his blade on his trousers, turned and sheathed his sword. The sorcerer took a few steps along the corridor, then slumped against the wall.

Ryedvest collapsed to the floor. Pain lanced his side; he held his hand to the wound; it came back red and filthy. Blood continued to seep between the scales of the rent mail coat. With a chuckle, he pulled the bourse out from his girdle, gazed at the bones inhumed therein. *At last, you are found.* How this Phrygian Black had discovered the relics was but another mystery in their legend. *We had thought you lost for centuries.* Kalis, the greatest of Enostran's necromancers, who led its armies to victory in the second war to drive the Dragon from the land.

A deathly grin split the sorcerer's face. *Yet all the power you possessed could not save you from the Serpent's fangs.*

The tale of that night was well known among the initiated: Kalis was at last destroyed in a raid on her citadel in Sevas. But not before her personal guard was slaughtered outside her chamber; her captain, Izrak Laav, was the last to fall, died at her feet. The Dragon's emissary obliterated the witch a moment later, though her final

necromancy succeeded in resurrecting her faithful captain. In the aftermath, only the bodies of her warriors were found, and a smoldering crater where she had stood.

Did he bring you here? Is this truly all that remains of you? Ghostly rumors, whispered among the undead slaves of The Call, claimed that her captain carried still another set of relics. *You are well-named, Ferryman.*

Red ambition flashed in Ryedvest's eyes. The grave-spawn would not be difficult to find. *The power I would gather unto myself!* Fingers closing around the bourse, his maddened laughter harried the hall; and as if by an executioner's blade, his laughter was suddenly cut off. Ambition died on his tongue, and Ryedvest stared at the bones once more.

Of all the devils spawned from that hell of a war, there was none more terrible than that pit-born fiend. *Izrak Laav. Better, it would be, to cut my own throat...*

A painful shudder shook Ryedvest as he rose to his feet, turned his shimmering gaze back along the corridor. With the passage to the tomb now blocked by solid rock, and the monstrous carcass of that insectoid nightmare, it would take him hours to circle around the isle and pursue his prey deeper into the bowels of Ost'safir. Were it only the insect, Ryedvest would be content to let Tarmun scurry and rot in the maze

of the necropolis into which he had flown.

For the necropolis of Ost'safir was a labyrinth, a true city of the dead, with its tortuous passages, its eldritch temples to the dark gods of the Void, and its towering crypts, rising like skull-encrusted spires into the black gulfs of the underworld. And greater terrors even than that which festered at his back stalked those haunted depths. No, there would be no escape for the Roach alone from that blasphemous city.

Yet Phrygian Black, the blind wretch, commanded the magics of another world. Likely, he would soon lead his pet insect to crawl up from the dirt.

The sorcerer laughed as he limped several paces back along the corridor, before resuming his wonted, arrogant gait. *Then, as a viper in the dark, I shall wait and let my prey come to me.* The shortest path to the surface would lead his foes back to the cave mouth, and the fane to the Dragon carved out from its very walls, which served as entrance to both the tomb and the necropolis further below. Ryedvest would prostrate himself before the Great Serpent's idol and pray; for favor, for strength, for revenge, he would pray.

And he would wait. Until the empyrean dust of the stars fell upon the face of the earth, and all of creation was shrouded in the black winter of

the promised end, Ryedvest would wait...

To crush his enemies.

And sow their bones in the ashes of the heavens.

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TARMUN'S UMBER EYES snapped open, his pupils dilating as his awareness flushed out of a miasmic dream of his fraught youth starving beneath the shadow of Castle Morose. He lay still upon a pile of rubble, gazing up at a high, denticulate ceiling, awaiting the crushing agony which would surely flood his body the moment he so much as twitched.

The pain never came; instead, a sweet aroma of herbs and honey suffused the air, a cool breeze tickling his stubble. *I must be dead, then. My bones smashed to countless pieces.* That notion dispelled once the bright emerald light of the bloody wizard's sorcerous globe seared Tarmun's eyes, now so adjusted to the dark.

"Good," Phrygian Black huffed, hovering over Tarmun. "My spell worked. I feared you had already hit the ground by the time I thought to cast it."

Tarmun groaned and struggled upright. While he was spared the agony of a thousand broken bones, his muscles ached and cramped, both beneath the great weight of Enostran's air and the seizing panic that flowed through his veins like rattlesnake venom when he realized he had fallen

from a height three times that of the charred Wystran fortress.

Stripping off his tattered mail, he peeled the bloodied linen off his chest and doffed his greaves until he wore naught but small clothes and his worn leather boots. He tore his undertunic and bandaged himself however he could.

Breathing deep relief, he groped for his belt, searching for the sacred bones. His hand closed upon naught and his breath again hitched in his throat. "I've lost the bones."

"Yes. The Harbinger snatched them amid your hallucination. I do not fault you, for his wiles even fooled me. He must be some sort of empath; he knew exactly both our greatest shames. He even spoke broken Valentine!"

"We must take them back."

"Hah!" The wizard threw back his head in a maddened guffaw. "Not a chance, Tarmun. Any good wizard knows when he's outmatched—those who fail to see their failure are not wizards for long! What we must do is find our way out of this necropolis..."

Much of Wystra languished beneath the looming shadow of Castle Morose, a tall dragon-cooked fortress upon a hill of glittering white. The courtyard wherein they had landed was swallowed by subterranean penumbra, though it must have once known the grace of daylight, by the shattered planters decorating the corner of every

thoroughfare. Vacant market stalls littered the grounds, whose granges were filled with shriven, blackened foodstuffs. Petrified stems and vines and leaves had once strangled a great dried-up fountain of cracked limestone, polished smooth, that had gone dull over countless centuries. There was no obvious course of escape, nor any indication of how far they must climb to escape back into the light of day.

"Can't you just," Tarmun waved his hands in the air, "open a gate—as you did to get us here?"

"Nay—I'm afraid not. At least, not this far underground. The bedrock causes interference, which leads to unpredictable mishaps in the casting of sorcery. Such things are no bother with simple cantrips. Never mind that, perhaps, my illuminating globe shines too bright." Tarmun winced as the emerald light flared with the wizard's words, "But in the manner of returning to our own world intact... I'd prefer to nix every risk, if possible."

"Intact?" Tarmun knitted his brows. "Explain, wizard."

"There's always a chance—a *small* chance—that the gate closes too soon, possibly while one is passing through its threshold. In which case..."

"I see."

The wizard made a popping sound with his lips, flicking out all his bony fingers. "Messy, messy!"

The duo started down the

thoroughfare in an arbitrary direction and eventually turned around to follow a cool, sweet breeze that swept across the plaza in regular intervals. The longer they spent in the ruins of Ost'safir, the less the city seemed dead. Dormant, perhaps, was a more apt descriptor. Bodies littered the streets, the alleyways, the canopies. Though none were grotesque in their rest; their remains had been picked clean, the scavengers leaving naught but polished white bones—not unlike those which they had lost to the Harbinger—laying intermingled with heaps of dusty linen and silk garments of alien design.

Tarmun began to hear voices, echoes of distant conversations, as if people still congregated around the bend to discuss the weather, as they might have ages ago when Ost'safir remained insomnolent. Upon rounding those corners, the conversations suddenly ceased and there was, of course, nothing awaiting them but more piles of bones.

Tarmun nudged Phrygian Black each time new whispers wriggled into his perception. The wizard only scoffed, as if Tarmun had simply been hearing things. Hours passed, and Tarmun considered the wizard's doubts: Perhaps he was hallucinating?

"*Praise the Great Serpent!*" a man called behind him, his sonorous voice unmistakably present.

Tarmun swung about, unleashing Redquill. "Who goes?"

Yet there was no one.

"Need I sedate you?" the wizard sneered. "Listen to me, Tarmun, there is no one living in this place aside from you and me, and probably that bastard Harbinger."

"I learned long ago to always trust mine ears."

"Not while an illusionist is about. Don't trust anything you perceive until we escape this hellscape!"

Following the source of the wind, they soon crossed from the plaza into a courtyard furnished with blackened boles of dead date palms and walled by building-sized installations of etched limestone, lacing across the courtyard like the wall of a labyrinth. The script written upon the stone was entirely foreign to Tarmun. The bemused expression the wizard wore as he dragged his fingers across the etchings confirmed that they were just as strange to him.

Muttering a word of power, an emerald light flickered within the wizard's cataract coated eyes. He spoke again, this time in a strange, guttural tongue unlike any that Tarmun had heard before. As the words rolled off his cracked lips, the breeze shifted suddenly to gale, whipping Tarmun's hair into his eyes, prodding soiled linen into the wounds upon his chest as if someone were driving their fingernails into his rent flesh.

Tarmun growled his frustration and tied back his wild mane, knotting

the hair behind his neck. Wiping his eyes, an array of orbs, glowing faintly of lavender, flitted about the courtyard above the remains of ancient Enostrani. Tarmun stared at them in wonder, thoughtlessly approaching the nearest one.

As he drew near, he again heard the unknowable whispers of a conversation held in times long past. Even though he did not understand the words, he knew the interlocutors spoke about matters of spirit.

"This was a temple..." Tarmun said wistfully, reaching out for the magnificent orb.

"That was one function of this place," said the wizard, still running his hand upon the scriven stone, entirely disinterested in the northman's whimsy. "Thinkers of all sorts once gathered here. Theologians, philosophers... This text speaks of The Dragon of Ost'safir; its eternal conflict with a crowned King of Kings; a Redeemer of humankind. I wonder—"

The orb was warm to his touch and flared, momentarily blinding Tarmun. Phrygian Black's musing ceased with a suppurating sound like water pouring into Tarmun's ears. Shaking his head, the northman blinked half a dozen times. The courtyard was bright; the polished limestone slabs refracting sunlight like mirrors. Where once were the tattered remains of people and hovering orbs, were now living,

flesh-and-blood people.

"Hah!" Tarmun barked, eyes wide with wonder.

The scholars paid him no mind, as if he were no more out of place than they. Unlike the dusty archives within Castle Morose, this courtyard was alight with life and conversation. People from all walks of life gathered and peacefully debated. Some were more heated in their discourse, but all around kept a respectful distance from one another, maintained open, unthreatening stances.

Laughing like a mad buffoon, Tarmun hopped across the courtyard prodding his big ears into any niche he could find. Though he understood nothing of what he heard, he was convinced that he had unlocked some font of greater wisdom. A waterfall had spilt upon him, a sensation akin to drinking the finest mead after a battle won. Giggling, he made to clap his massive hands upon the frail shoulders of a yellow-robed monk, overcome with an urge to take the Enostrani stranger's ear into his mouth and bite down on the cartilage as might an over-excited pup to its siblings.

Instead, Tarmun fell through the monk to the flags in a wheezing heap. He spun on his back; his sight consumed with flashing stars as cold hands smacked against his cheeks.

"Snap out of it, damn you!" the monk yelled in Tarmun's native tongue. "Wake up!"

"I'm awake! I'm awake!" He laughed as if the unseen assault were tickling him.

"Gods in Hell, and up above!"

Tarmun stopped laughing then, as a searing pain wracked his entire form. Pressure gathered within his hard skull and his flesh ached as a sudden fever pitched and broke. Ears, popping Tarmun gasped, finding himself laying supine in the shadowed courtyard of sleeping Ost'safir, Phrygian Black's grotesque mask of concern hanging over him.

"What—what in Grahtz was that?"

"A spirit had taken you," the wizard said, offering a hand to help Tarmun sit upright. His frail bony fingers boasted a surprisingly strong grip. "I had to cast a spell to free your mind."

"Is that not risky? Better just to leave me."

"Nonsense." The wizard waved a dismissive hand. "I brought you here—it is my responsibility to take you home. Besides, it seems I've weaved my sorcery without—"

A distant rockfall quashed the wizard's words. The ground quaked, the towers bordering the courtyard shuddered; their roofs collapsed.

"Damn it all!" The wizard drove his blackthorn staff onto the flagstones at his feet, chanting eldritch words of power.

Tarmun knew not what fell words

the wizard uttered; but he understood nonetheless that Ost'safir had finally awakened—and it meant to swallow them whole.

Phrygian Black rose his staff above his head, his sonorous voice coalescing with the roar of the earthquake destroying what remained of the city. An emerald window of pearlescent glass yawned open before them. As the wizard drew a relieved sigh, a crack lanced across the window's surface. Window and wizard both warped, stretching towards the ceiling, before their bottom halves slung upward like a great, sorcerous slingshot.

The wizard's scream peeled through air, rattling Tarmun's keen ears; the words stretching as did their speaker. "Sur—face!"

Tarmun stumbled out of the way of a gargoyle falling from a high tower, now sitting sideways across the thoroughfare. The wizard was gone and with him, his mage-light. Blinded, injured, and trapped within the cyclone of destruction, Tarmun found himself cradled within a hotbed of misfortune. Never one to mope, the northman closed his eyes, and took single measured breath.

He scaled the etched wall, then leaped across the avenue to the leaning tower, quivering and grousing beneath his feet. Then, he ran the length of the tower towards its sloping, pointed roof. Reaching the top, he opened his eyes and gazed into a sea of writhing

shadows and crumbling stone, consumed by the dim luminescence of thousands of wandering spirits. His ears twitched, filtering the noise for a sign, any sign which he may follow.

A hissing whine resounded somewhere east—air escaping the cavern. *With luck, so shall I.*

From building-to-building he leapt, climbing upturned walls and sagging rooftops. His breath smoldered in his lungs; his knees rattled with every hard landing. Soon he found himself back upon the ground, sprinting for the wall of bedrock which bore a—hopefully—northman sized hole.

Lavender orbs strobed upon the track, homing in upon Tarmun. He screamed as one came close, whispering of a sumptuous dinner upon a terrace, some thousand years past. The orbs shot through the air in chaotic bursts. The northman ducked, sucked in his gut, threw himself sliding to the side, then rolling back onto his feet, running until the hissing breeze swelled from whisper to shout.

Then, he came upon a great wall of bedrock, ascending towards the surface the entire height of the fall he had just suffered. The ghostly orbs converged upon him, dozens meandering in a menacing formation seeking to add Tarmun's bones to their ranks.

Tarmun's eyes bounced from place to place, squinting into roiling

penumbra, searching for the escape he was now certain existed.

"Hah!" Tarmun rattled, locating the doorway some twenty feet above. He started up the wall, which began as an acute slope but quickly steepened. He quickly ascended the first half the wall, then jumped and clung to shallow handholds, inching his way up the second.

The orbs crashed into the bedrock below Tarmun, coalescing into a clumsy pile like drunkards swarming a lone privy. Tarmun's arms bulged and ached with the pain of lugging his added weight. Not five feet from the ledge, his cramping fingers began to slip. He gasped, his foot plunging into a pool of ghostly lavender. Sick fermentation ran up his leg, wracking his entire being with noxious spasms.

Tarmun took a final glance at the obscured, darkling portal that may have meant his salvation, a wheezing giggle escaping him as the ghosts of Ost'safir finally seduced and sedated him.

The earth shook. Towers fell. Tarmun the Roach let go.

Closing his eyes, he thought to revel in the sweet embrace of hungry spirits—but the spirits did not take hold of him. Blazing light peeled at his eyes. Phrygian Black stood upon the ledge, his blackthorn staff aimed at Tarmun. Sweat dripped down the old coot's face, and he roared as he flung the northman out from the sea

of dead and crashing into him upon the landing.

"Gods in hell!" the wizard spat. "No time to tarry, the portal is about to close!"

Mind reeling from his sudden shifts in circumstance, Tarmun could only nod as he scrambled to his feet and helped up the wizard. Together, they took flight up the narrow cavern to the Temple of the Dragon.

* * *

DAWN HAD MUSTERED its hordes of golden light in its waking campaign against the shadows amassed in the cave as Tarmun and Phrygian Black careened from the shaft and raced across the temple grounds. The portal at the cave mouth was yet open. But for how long, Tarmun dared not guess.

The Roach's gaze flitted left and right; the terraced galleries carved out of the cave walls appeared empty; none lurked in the shadows cast by the great domed monoliths rising upon either side, etched with the images of demoniac forms which beggared description, their bases carved to resemble a mass of withered human forms being crushed by their perdurable burdens. Toward the idol of a three-headed dragon, standing the height of three men and hewn from a single slab of black jade, they ran.

Fear laced tingling threads along his spine. Though the dragon was the devil of another world, his soul

recoiled at the sight, and he knew by some primal instinct that the bourns of reality were scant obstacles for the dragon's taloned reach.

A glint of steel up near the dragon's heads; just as warrior and wizard passed beneath the idol, Tarmun suddenly wheeled, Redquill's blade humming as it rose to meet the plunging sword of the Harbinger. Swift enough, he was, to deflect the killing stroke, but the force of the blow yet sent Blacktongue's tip tearing through Tarmun's shoulder.

Black cried out in alarm.

The Harbinger reached out with blinding speed, swiped his fingers through the blood oozing from Tarmun's shoulder; at the same instant, the sorcerer's leg lashed like a dragon's tail as he drove his heel into Tarmun's ribs. The Roach reeled, and the Harbinger spun about with evil words upon his tongue, threads of blooded shadows extending from his fingers. The sorcerer swung, even as the threads wound themselves into a crimson cord, and like a serpent's tongue whipped at Black's chest. A thunderous crack; and the wizard was hurled from the cave and through the portal.

The echoes of Black's initial cry died out.

The portal guttered like a starved flame. Horror seized Tarmun's heart with a cold fist. *I'll be stranded here!* But the portal stabilized. Though for

how long, he could not know. Tarmun shifted his smoldering gaze to the Harbinger, who stood before him panting with blood seeping out from under the scales of his rent mail. *That just leaves this fiend.*

A wicked grin split what remained of the sorcerer's face. Blacktongue glistened in his grip.

Tarmun stood with legs braced wide, Redquill's shining blade held before him.

Only the quaking rumble of the sinking necropolis passed between them.

A shock from below ripped through the ground and the sorcerer staggered. Freed from the weight of his armor, Tarmun pounced with the speed of a hunting tiger. Yet the Harbinger recovered in an instant, coiled, and lunged to meet the warrior.

Blades flamed in the mourning light, and the clangor of their steel was drowned in the roaring waves of sound erupting from the depths. The Harbinger's Blacktongue flashed like thunderbolts sent from the burning heavens; Tarmun's Redquill whirled as a hell-spawned tempest raging upon the cold wastes.

Tarmun parried a thrust which grazed his brow and staggered back toward the dragon idol. Choking laughter seethed from the Harbinger. Chest heaving, his hand held to the grim wound on his side, the sorcerer approached. Breath hissing

and bleeding from a score of cuts on his body and limbs, Tarmun wiped the blood streaming into his eyes. His benumbed grip tightened on Redquill's hilt. Another monstrous tremor wracked the cave. Tarmun's ears pricked up; a shearing crack sounded from the idol behind. He glanced over his shoulder. With a shriek of mad triumph, the Harbinger lunged.

Shifting his body to the side, he let the sorcerer's blade graze his ribs. Stifling the agony searing his lips, Tarmun smashed the pommel of his sword on the Harbinger's sword arm; the sorcerer's cry was mingled with the splintering of bone. As the Harbinger's blade clattered over the floor, Tarmun dropped his own, lifted the bastard by neck and groin, spun about, and hurled him crashing at the feet of the dragon.

The idol crumbled. Pinned beneath one of the dragon's snarling heads, the sorcerer groaned, a welter of crimson rising about him.

Tarmun reclaimed Redquill from the fracturing floor and closed in to claim the relic. And to end the sorcerer's wretched life.

The Harbinger suddenly hissed his evil words and dragged his left arm through the pool of blood. His serpent eye blazed with arcane fury and burst with a steaming squelch. Convulsing with blood-mad, shrieking laughter, the sorcerer pressed his palm to the earth.

Staggering back, Tarmun watched horrified as tendrils of crystalline blood and shadow wove like a web throughout the cave floor, walls, and the high vault of its ceiling. *This is no man, but a demon from the very pits of Grahtz!*

Coughing blood and bile, the sorcerer turned his remaining eye, lit with blue bale-fire, on Tarmun. "Come then, insect! Crawl upon your stomach," he made a fist, "to eat the dust of the earth!"

But Tarmun had already wheeled, sprinting for the portal as the cave collapsed at his heels with a deafening roar.

"Embrace me beneath the ashes of the heavens!"

Waves of stone cascaded around the Roach; the portal was just out of reach; Tarmun leapt, thrown out of the gates of Hell on a gale of dust and shattered rock... and the shrieking laughter of the damned.

* * *

TARMUN SAT UP GASPING for breath. Winter cold seared his lungs, and the icy fingers of frozen grass prodded his thighs. "Where..." Grown wide, his eyes darted about. With a sigh, his hand closed upon the hilt of Redquill.

"Gods above! You survived!" Phrygian Black cackled with glee. "Did you recover the relic?"

The warrior shook his head.

Black frowned but said nothing.

"And where were you?" Tarmun glared at the wizard.

Black feigned injury. "Keeping the way open for your sorry, barbaric hide."

Snarling, Tarmun leapt to his feet, blade gleaming in the afternoon light. Laughing, he placed a hand on the wizard's shoulder.

Taking in the austere beauty of the scene, Tarmun's gaze swept over the frost-coated slopes, over the snow-shrouded peaks of the Guardians looming in majesty upon the horizon and settled on the small village where this fool's errand began. "I never thought to be happy to see the Shins again."

"Ha! Perhaps you may put down here, once your service to the Warrior Queen is done?"

Tarmun smiled wistfully. "Maybe... One day."

"Come, let us get back to that empty tavern before you freeze to death." The wizard set off in the wrong direction.

Snatching a handful of Black's robes, Tarmun hauled him round and, wayward wizard in tow, headed toward the village.

Chimney smoke cast the town in shades of gray, and the clatter of wagon wheels and smithy hammers composed a song of civilization. Walking along the street, Tarmun became keenly aware of his nakedness as passing men huffed, women

blushed, and snickering children whispered amongst each other.

"Haste, old man. These people feast on mine body with their eyes, though I've had little to eat but moldering bread these past two days. Besides, too long have I been gone, and must return to my duties."

Black chuckled as they approached the door of the tavern inn. "Fear not, young Roach. The trader's caravan shall not set out until morning and has been perfectly safe here in the village." The wizard's features grew somber. "It is the journey south, fraught with many perils, which will require the protection of your mighty blade!"

Lee Patton is a Christian and Army veteran from North Dakota. His fiction has been featured in *The Literary Fantasy Magazine*, *Battleborn Magazine*, and *The Penmen Review*. His debut Sword & Sorcery novella, *A Valley of Shadow* was published by The Arcanist: Fantasy Publishing.

James D. Mills is Editor-in-Chief of The Arcanist: Fantasy Publishing. His Sword & Sorcery has been featured by the Chain Story. He is author of the Dark Fantasy novels, *Ashen Rider* and *SOIL*.