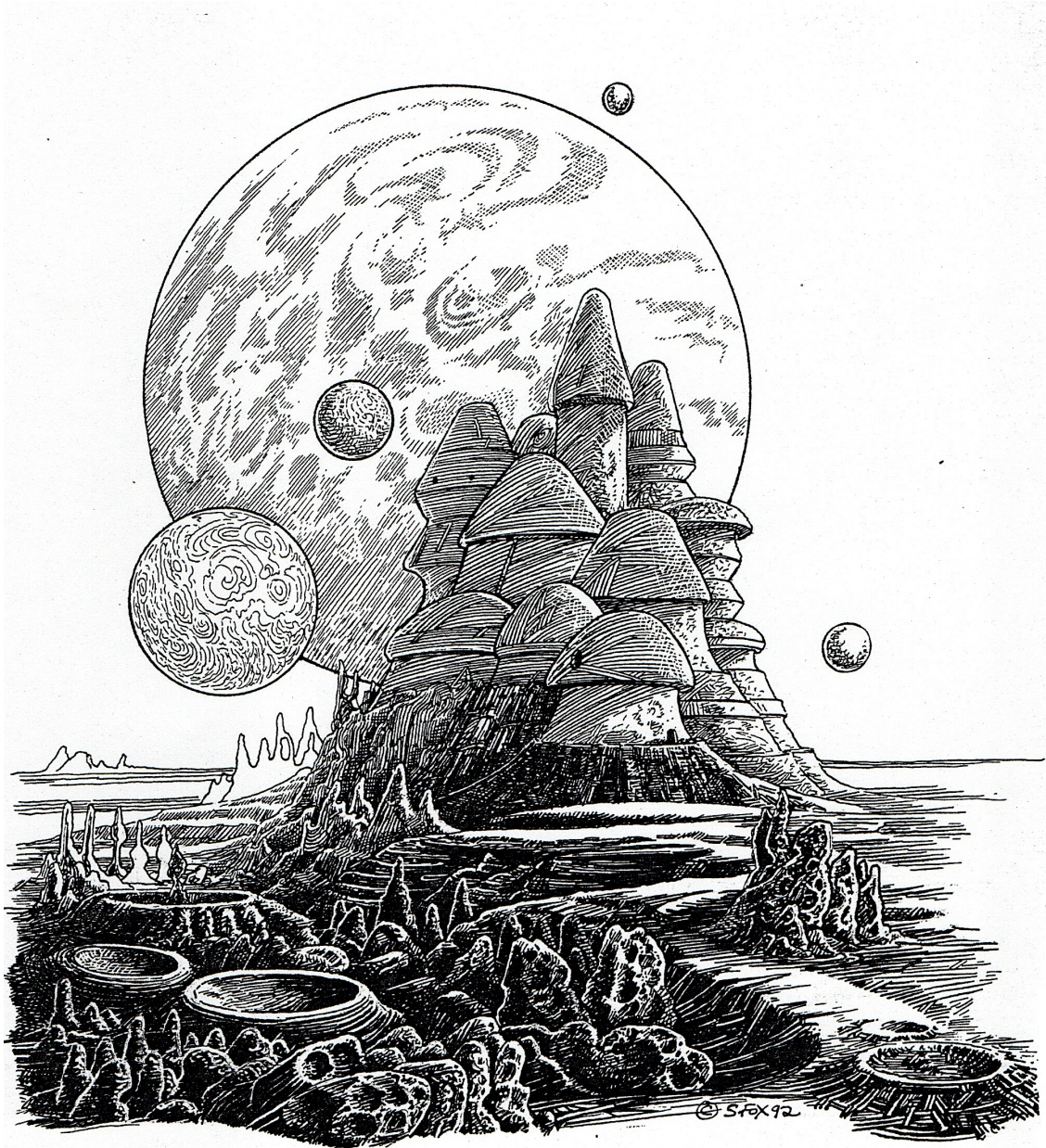


Eldritch Science



July 2026

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Eldritch Science

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Editorial

You may notice something different about the cover of this issue of *Eldritch Science*. The QR code is a link to [Eldritch Science Online](#), a YouTube channel that will feature additional content not featured in the fanzine. In an effort to engage new audiences, N3F is expanding its social media presence. I am planning reviews, readings, and the occasional sporking to keep you entertained between print issues.

Now, on to the issue:

First up we have a continuation of Alex Chouinard's cycle of tavern tales told by adventurers. If you've ever participated in a D&D campaign that went terribly wrong (or right, depending on whether you're the DM or the PC) then *A Giant Discovery* is for you. *Fear The Looking Glass Kid* looks like a simple detective story but becomes something much deeper: what happens in a society that tries to combine clerical magic with full religious freedom?

For those of you who (like me) enjoy the Old West as much as you enjoy fantasy or science fiction, then you'll want to read Chris Bunton's *The Shaman*. You may remember him from his excellent story *The Necromancer* last September. This one is shorter but still hits like shot of whiskey in a dusty saloon!

Filling out the issue is an entry from N3F's 2023 Short Story Contest, Emi Sada's *Silver and Bone*. Friends, lovers, or mortal enemies? Or maybe all of the above at once? You'll have to decide. And finally, Russ Bickerstaff's *Not Really There* will make you think twice about setting aside your dreams and ambitions.

As usual, feel free to send Letters of Comment, suggestions, submissions, etc. my way. Until next time, happy reading!

A Giant Discovery

By Alex Chouinard

"This is Tuesday, I guess," I said as we were huddled behind the snow-covered mountain peak, shivering but far from being miserable. The only things I could see were the shadows of a thin forest, my two companions, a roaring campfire, and the invaders who sat by it enjoying their feast.

"How many are there, Harda?" asked Maushi. He was our spirit summoner from the warmer areas. He had the head of a cat and the body of a human but was covered in soft, tan fur. Instead of hands or feet, he used paws, and, of course, he had a long tail. His ears were hidden under the maroon hood of his robe, which hid all sorts of things. He always had things like lizard's feet, dyed fur, vials of sand, and anything else I could think of.

He held a small farming scythe in one hand. "I see four big folks with shields and spears and only a single giant in bronze armor, and, yes, the giant seems to have left heading east," I told him.

"Well that is probably a good thing. The heavy snow without audible wind is a good sign from The Green Wraith. The low visibility of the trees is a bad omen from The Stag Queen and the Giant going east is a neutral sign from the Angel Maker," he declared it like it was a completely rational, bloody magic.

"Three now? I thought you said you worked for only one spirit?"

Hasker started.

Hasker was a dwarven Thaum. He wore a small amount of armor on his chest and a helmet. They were both carved with runes to ward off the cold and harm. He had a golden beard and hair which leaked out of the helmet and an ax carved with all sorts of other weird runes. His right eye was grey, and his left eye was dark green.

"Well, we are about to go into battle against a powerful group of foes. I ought to read the omens from anything and everything I can *before* I risk my life for that fat duke," Maushi explained.

"Well, you can make that offering with a *little bit* of our rations, dweeb. After that, I'll need a moment to focus on my grit," I dryly responded. "Tell me, what is this grit nonsense you keep mentioning?" Hasker asked.

"Grit? Oh! Well... It's um. It is the will to survive increased tenfold by determination. Some call it Kick, the breath of life, but in truth, it's just grit. Those who are gifted or determined enough can harness this power for increased muscles, reflexes, abilities, and senses. I heard there are some who figured out how to use it to infuse weapons with elements or something. But those are just rumors! I learned it when I was a little hatchling on the streets, Kothmantear. I guess

those who found me thought I had what it took. That's my view of it, but it's not exactly a complete one. I slept a lot in 'class,'" I explained with a bittersweet grin on my face.

"Harda, I think you mean Ki, not kick." Hasker tried to correct me. "Nope, I'm pretty sure it's Kick."

I then noticed Maushi throwing food down the mountain. It was my cookies. MY cookies. The natural result of this was that I tried to strangle the idiot and nearly gave our position away. Hasker was the only force in the known universe who was able to stop me. After I got over his flight of fancy, I realized this was his stupid offering to 'The Stag Queen.' With some plans and forgiveness, we were ready.

My allies both crept down the cliff face a little in order to make getting the jump on them worth it. In my case, I planned to do that literally. I put on my helmet and focused on my grit.

I first thought of the future: the battle ahead, the clank of blades, death, and fire. I remembered who I was, a warrior. I then recalled the past: the crummy streets, the constant hunger, the grind for scraps, the gangs who tried to take us away for brothels and worse, and the blood I spilled to stop that from happening.

Then, I just took deep breaths. In and out, in and out. Rise and fall, attack and block, offense

and defense. I ground my teeth. I knew the true strength.

I leapt from the mountain and pulled out my bastard sword. The blade was simple and short, only eighteen inches long, with a stone handle and a slightly bent crossguard. This made it great for piercing the muscles and hiding from my foe. The crossguard was inscribed with four words in draconian form, the only four that ever made any sense: *I fight to survive*. She may not be big or enchanted, but she got the job done. I aimed my falling body onto an unsuspecting grunt.

They were big folks. They were brutish offspring of humans from the far north. Though known for worshiping giants and being extremely strong and tough for their size, they are slow and not the brightest. My target looked dumbfounded as I came flying in from the sky. I landed right on top of him. My sword rammed into his skull. He let out screams while blood and bone shards pinged on my armor. His body collapsed as he went to his knees. His death was the first brush stroke in what was to be a painting of blood and gore.

The other invaders from the north were quicker to react, drawing spears and great swords. They were all men with thick beards wearing animal hides.

The largest one let out a scream in their dead language: "Nor hal mor eh...KAS KOR!"

I did not understand the words, but I understood the creature's intention.

Before the heathens could advance upon me, my allies interfered. An axe came flying from on high, striking a savage on the head and flying back into the white expanse. The warrior was now bleeding and staggered, but not yet dead. Another charged me, only for a mysterious ray of light to shine from the east into the poor warrior's eyes, blinding him. I took my chance to charge him, kicking up the ankle of high snow like it was nothing.

First, I rammed my blade into his leg, stabbing deep into his muscles.

He hollered in pain and bashed his shield into my helmet. I felt the pain instantly explode onto my forehead and my vision went white for a split second. I stumbled back a few feet. That brute's shield blow might have killed a cockroach but not me! The warrior limped into a weak fighting stance. His fury was barely held back by a scrap of discipline. He then lumbered over to me and tried to finish me with a blow to the chest plate. I rolled out of the way of the slow attack. I got up and stabbed the warrior in his spine twice.

"Hor Ka!" he cursed as he fell to the ground.

Before I could put the man out of his misery, I heard another attacker from behind me. A poorly aimed attack pinged off my armor. A warrior

rammed a blade towards my throat. I barely managed to get out of the way of the metal as it sailed inches from my neck. I twirled around to stab my steel blade upward and graze his wrist. To my surprise, he didn't even wince. I slid back, and my foe bolted away in terror. I turned to see his source of fear.

Suddenly, charging in from the east came a shadow. The giant had returned. His slender form was clad in segmented bronze armor, which seemed to glow and draw power from the dozen-foot-wide inferno between us. He held a massive warhammer, one big piece of carved stone. His entire body was covered in thick, dark brown fur. His face held nothing but two white eyes that burned like hateful stars. The giant raised its weapon and pointed it at me. It opened a maw that seemed to stretch from ear to ear, if he had ears.

The giant slammed his hammer into the bonfire, creating a tidal wave of burning logs and embers. "What the!?" I yelped, shocked that the creature used its greatest fear as a weapon--fire. For nothing else can kill a giant with such certainty and speed.

Even with enhanced movement, I couldn't get out of the way in time, so I dove to the ground as the burning tide flew over me. I felt a blazing log skid off the top of my back. I then got up to my

knees to see the giant ready to squash me like a bug with its mighty hammer as the sizzle of the fire was dying around me. There was not a hint of emotion in his soulless visage, but right before the blow came, he was suddenly compelled to panic, and he madly tossed the hammer through the blizzard-filled sky. I swear I saw the monster's eyes widen in fear. I turned around to see the witch doing some sort of...dance? I tilted my head in utter confusion, *Weirdo*.

I got to my feet and advanced to face the last of the warriors. Hasker's ax had finished off the third heathen, and the second had fled to the wild. The last one wielded dual battle axes. He had green eyes and red hair that was thick, long and dirty. The man let out a scream of hate and charged at me. His fighting style was random and reckless, but his size advantage made him effective at holding me back. I hate being short, but I was forced back, step by step, thanks to his spinning attacks. I studied his attack technique, waiting for a single moment of pause. My chance came when he opened his frame up. I finally leapt at him and stabbed him in the thigh. He fell to his knees, and he let his axes go. He knew he had lost and made a single request: a painless and honorable death. I saw the request as just.

As I started to back away, the corpse was immediately crushed by the giant's foot. I gulped,

realizing that I would have died if I had not answered that seemingly random choice correctly. The nightmarish behemoth stood over me, and slowly drew up his mighty hammer once more. Just then, my allies came out of the great white shadow.

Hasker took out a small rune that glowed a deep blue. Suddenly and out of nowhere, an ephemeral doppelganger appeared right beside me. The dwarf just loves using that stupid thing. I knew the giant would notice the illusion's lack of prints in the snow and would ignore the illusion. So, I leapt at my target with a burst of grit. I soared right toward the upper leg intent on ripping his armor apart.

The giant suddenly changed the grip on his hammer. Once he corrected his stance, he unleashed a mighty side swing which struck through the illusion and into me. Luckily, I was hit only by the shaft instead of the hammer. I felt the air rush out of my lungs, my blood vessels buckled, and my ribs cracked. For a moment, my vision made me see doubles and I forgot about my power and slipped...but only for a second.

I clung to the massive weapon for my dear life. I waited for the giant to hold it above his head once more, and then I let go. I fell toward him with all the grace of a meteor and aimed myself toward the edge of his chest plate. I knew that there was a

weakness in armor, for it was bound by ropes. I flew down to the giant's left torso. In one glorious moment, I pulled out my sword and rammed into the weak point, slicing the ropes. The chest plate fell off like an unhinged door. The giant raised its hand above me as if I were a loathsome pest. He brought his hand down on me, only for it to cramp up mid-attack. I saw that a specter had begun distracting the giant. Maushi's ad saved me once again. I focused inward and into my belly. I scraped my inner fire into a powerful blaze and unleashed it upon the giant's chest, a jet of fire from my mouth. Dragon's fire. He screamed in fear and agony as the flames washed over his greasy fur. He tried to roll onto the snow to put it out, but it was for naught. By then, it had spread under his armor. I was barely able to limp away with my aching stomach. The dying monster whirled round creating a tornado of fire.

"Hor Mor daskil motal goh!" he screamed in agony. His armor was turning bright orange from the heat. This continued for a minute longer until his body finally went still on the ground.

There was a long pause... the canvas was complete. We stood there for a moment, silent. I could've used a cookie...but nooo Maushi threw them over a cliff. Ugh, this job can be a hassle.

We both paused for a moment. There was a scream in the distance.

"That was the last of the raiders!" I exclaimed.

"Yup! Come Maushi, the slaughter is yet to be done!" Hasker ordered.

We didn't have an official leader, but we all agreed that Hasker was the go-to decision maker. He was calm, polite, and reasonable, not a weirdo who commits minor necrophilia. But most of all, he was smart. I swear he could name every bone in my body and every town on the continent of Kiffer.

My adrenaline faded. The pain consumed my nerves, and I fell to the ground.

"You were beaut-. I mean, you breaking your ribs was super cool?" Maushi asked. Hasker facepalmed.

"I am fi...ne... yeah, I need healing," I said, coughing up blood from the early blows. While grit is fantastic for helping with pain resistance in the heat of danger, its nature is to dump pain on the user all at the moment the host is out of danger.

Hasker immediately handed me a healing potion. The brew was a master work of magic and artifice; mineral water infused with a healing magic or something and covered in layers of runes to preserve the magic. These drinks were quite rare and expensive. They were sure expensive, even refilling them cost more than a farmer's harvest. I unhinged the cork and chugged it down. The potion had not one taste but two, the tingly

zing of the mineral water and the sour sap of sorcery. I felt it mend my bones and blood vessels over a few minutes. "Now, I am better. Let's go!" I exclaimed.

We began marching down the mountain following the cries for help, the footprints, and the blood in the snow. Our breathing was weighed down by the cold air and our fatigue. We plowed through the snow and woods as screams faded, dislodging stones and trying not to slip. Finally, we came across the straggler being dragged off by a pack of nine wolves. He seemed to have lost an eye, and his chest was ripped apart. His intestines were scattered across the field. Another wolf dragged off the stolen great sword in his mouth, and two other wolves laid dead on the ground. One had its head chopped off, and the other was lifelessly still.

But these wolves were odd. Instead of having white fur to blend into the snow, they had stone gray fur that almost looked like quills or stone plates. Others had deer horns, and there was even a death maw in the mix. Oddly, they just dragged their kill away rather than feasting on it.

We were barely able to hide ourselves in a bush. We were about thirty feet away from the kill zone.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Hasker with a hint of concern in my voice.

"I'm just as stumped as you are...these are not natural creatures. They are probably monsters, but this many variants meeting up to work together is unheard of unless of course... no, there is no way." Hasker muttered. "I don't think we should pursue them. They have finished our job for us. While I will not ignore the strangeness of this, I feel we should not question the strands of fate. Instead, we should just be thankful that we have been aided by them rather than hindered," Maushi suggested.

"Well, I would agree with you if these monsters weren't a threat to the village of Hothkar. That place already has its hands full of the slaughter of Morfil.

The point of coming out here was to clear out those raiders so that Hothkar was not the next to fall. What if perhaps fate is giving us a challenge. Besides on a more material note, the duke might give us some extra cash for killing off some of those wolves." Hasker explained. I nodded along.

"May I commune with my mystical patrons for a moment?" Maushi asked.

"I am afraid the vote is against you, Maushi," Hasker answered.

We began to track the pack of wolves down. It wasn't very hard thanks to the blood-filled canyon of snow. Every now and then I felt like we were watching. It felt like we were no longer hunters,

but something else, something less. It was about an hour before we decided to take a ration break. We moved on without a problem. The cold winds were dying down in the forest.

After two more hours of hiking, we finally came across a cave. It was a small passageway that seemed to be mined out and was free from moss or vines. There seemed to be a small orange light at the end of the tunnel. I couldn't help but feel like it was trying to invite us in. I felt like we were making a terrible deal. For once, Maushi was right, but I was going to keep that thought to myself. I was not willing to fold over some bad feelings or superstitions.

"I don't think we should go in. This place is loaded with negative karma," Maushi begged.

"Really? When are we going to get just a little extra glory for fighting a wolf or two? Nonsense! You're just a pussy cat!" Hasker pompously announced.

He seemed calm, almost excited, but what worried me most was the glint in his eyes.

We began to make our way into the cave. It was cramped to the point that we decided we needed to travel in a single file. I was in the front, Hasker took the middle, and Maushi held up the back. After a few minutes of nervous marching, we finally entered a larger room. It was a circular chamber, twenty feet in diameter, with a domed

roof. There were two passages to the right and left. In the middle of the chamber sat a huge bowl studded with rubies. An inferno brewed in the bowl, bathing the chamber in its heat and light. The flames didn't seem... normal. They seemed to reach out for us like we were a morsel of food. I would have sweated if I could. My scales would not permit such relief.

"I think you're right about thi-." My speech was cut off by the howl of wolves. I quickly focused on my grit.

A pack of beasts came charging in from the entrance. We rushed into the chamber and got into position. The first up was a pair of antler-wearing beasts. I used focus and strength to grab them with the antlers and found that they came off with ease. In my firm grip, they died.

Caught off guard, I was then slammed back by another wolf in stone plating. I tried to take out my blade and stab it between the plates. I missed it, and my blade got chipped. Luckily, a golden wing covered in eyes sliced into the neck of the beast without leaving a single scratch. The creature let out a whine and fell to the ground dead. I glanced over to see Maushi's paw stretched out and glowing with the same golden light. Before I could regain my footing, the fires in the ruby-encrusted bowl lunged out at me. I managed to roll out of the way before I was

reduced to cinder. Hasker then pulled a small rod out of his chest of pocket and thrust it into the air. A shimmering blue barrier leapt forth from the and contained the fire's destructive power.

Before we could catch our breath, a death maw pounced onto Maushi, digging its claws into his meager flesh. I rushed over to the beast and stabbed it in the back, killing it instantly. With not even a second to regroup, I pulled out my crossbow and delivered a lethal, point-blank shot to a quilled wolf who approached from the corner of the cave. More still came. I felt another quilled beast bite into my angel. I winced in pain and then stabbed my blade in the monster's eye. Hasker used his returning ax to finally slaughter the last of the wolves. I could ask him how to use runes. The fire had been smothered by his magic rod. The room plunged into darkness. For a moment, I felt as if death would slice my throat. Another flame was born with Hasker being its master.

Covered in blood, we paused to catch our breath. Hasker's shield dropped as he paused to process what had just happened. "What the hell was that!? The wolf-monsters were more coordinated than the giant's forces!" I roared.

"I told you...we should have just quit while we were ahead... but nooo! We just had to push on!" Maushi ranted.

Hasker butted with an opposing mood, "Don't

you know what this is? A mega dungeon! We are rich! Trinkets and treasures! Our sacks will be flooded with gold! Then we will buy the land and profit!"

Maushi and I exchanged nervous looks. A flaw infested all dwarves: greed. There was no talking him out of this... but we couldn't just leave him here to die. We played along, hoping he would wisen up.

"Harda! Behold! This dungeon bore fruit for us! Look! The bowl of fire!" Hasker exclaimed.

I nervously walked over, and I peeked over the edge. In it was a man cleaver that was as big as I was. Its blade was a dark silver that faded to dim gold along the chaotic and spiky edge of the blade. The handle was a solid steel rod that had leather wrapped around it. I picked it up to find it was strangely lightweight. I then gave a few practice swings and smiled. It had a little bit of its weight forward, but that gave the chop of a gnarly ax.

"So, what's the deal with these mega dungeons?" I asked with a smile on my face.

"Well, no one is sure where mega dungeons came from in the first place. Their origin is a subject of great mystery. The first one was found underground in Renfur during the Spring Ages. In each mega dungeon, there are large complexes that are guarded by monsters and traps, but also store loot. Both of these things were replenished

on a daily basis. Renfur put a tax on any loot leaving it, and that is what fueled their expansion into the empire we see today! Over the ages, a few more have been discovered, each one behaving in a slightly different way. Why they behave the way they do is unknown,” Hasker explained.

Maushi made a strange motion toward us. We both had a golden shimmer for a moment. I felt comfort in my chest, like the family I never had was there to support me.

“I have given you both a blessing of protection to balance my karma. While I wish to leave this place and never come back, I only ask that we just try not to go too deep.”

“No problem... weirdo,” I mocked the spellcaster with a friendly grin on my face. Maushi gave me a shy smile. Even though I thought he was a weirdo, with his timid wisdom and castings, deep down I knew he meant well.

“Hey Maushi, I will make you a bet. Have you ever heard of that grafting stuff?” I asked him.

“Yes, I have, but I swear if you are about to say I’m made of grafting, you are fully mistaken. I am from a fully organic race, not some Doctor’s mad taste in fashion,” he explained.

I gasped, not expecting such wit from him. My nostrils flared in embarrassment.

“Does this bet involve one of us being

grafted?” Maushi asked with interest. It looked like my plan of dealing with his stress had paid off.

“Yeah, if we all manage to get one magic item. You have to get a graft of my choice for a week. If we must flee early, you get me a graft of your choice for a week...deal?” I asked with a smile. Maushi had the same smile creeping onto his face.

I knew that with his crazy mind he would surely come up with some terrible mutation for me. Maushi smiled, and all he said was ‘deal’.

We then had to decide which passage to take. The left passage was made of cobblestones, and its floor was covered in grime. The central route was covered by rough, almost natural stones. One could hear the faintest sound of flowing liquid coming from it. The right passageway was made of temple-like marble decorated with pointless columns that were covered in stones, bloodshot eyes, and mouths filled with teeth-like claws. They reminded me of the tales of demons that I heard from fellow orphans, *but those were just stories... right?* We decided to take the left route.

We began our march through the artery. We could only see a few feet ahead into the lefthand side of the belly of this seductive beast. The scent of damp moss and wet stone filled the air. Nothing but the echoing march of our armor filled the silence of the dungeon.

I kept marching on, my mind feeling bored

and dull, step after I felt a stone plate sink. I heard a click. Our hearts skipped a beat for a moment.

“Trap,” Hasker peeped.

“But from where?” I mumbled mainly at myself. We all saw a light from behind, and then we felt heat.

Maushi then can sprinting past me and screamed in pure terror, “RUUUUUUUN!”

We burst into a sprint without a second thought. The huge inferno had begun to catch up to us.

“HOW THE HELL DID STEPPING ON A PRESSURE PLATE TRIGGER THIS?!” Hasker yelled.

“I have no idea!” I cried back in pure terror. Maushi took out an antler from his rod. He began to mutter a strange chant under his breath. Suddenly, a large gray spectral stag appeared from the wall. Maushi climbed on. It scooped Hasker, almost crashing into the wall thanks to his weight.

I then turned on my tail and tried to launch myself at the conjured beast. I landed in its antlers. The creature buckled and almost fell over. I struggled to climb onto the thing’s neck while it buckled. The blaze charged in, now only a dozen paces away. The deer then started to stagger forward quickly enough to ensure that we would escape the fire with only our pride hurt. Picking up speed, dashing down the hallway, and outracing flame, we finally managed to reach the chamber

hidden behind a wall. The flame roared past us.

The deer disappeared as it fell to the floor, and we all fell to the floor. After the fire subsided, we were able to catch our breath... or so we thought.

We were in a dark granite chamber that had a giant ceiling and huge pillars lining the walls. It felt like we had entered the temple of a dark god. We could see perfectly fine in it for some reason, maybe some magic on the ceiling to ward the darkness away, who knows?

The fire ignited a ring of oil on the ground. In the ring of fire laid eleven small piles of treasure. Without a moment of hesitation, Hasker ran forward and started shoveling gold into his pockets. I would have joined in the pirating, too had I not seen why the treasure had been divided. For the oil, a fiery pentagram formed inside of the ring. I didn’t know much about magic, but I knew that was bad. Hasker stood right in the center of it.

I tried to warn Hasker of the potential danger, “Hasker! It’s a trap!” He laughed it off like we hadn’t just been nearly killed.

“Run? Now? No! We just got what we were after! Gold! Glorious gold!” He squealed with delight.

As he did, the flames turned blood red.

“We are going to be ric-” Hasker’s gloat was cut off by a golden chain wrapping around his neck. He then slammed onto the floor. A shape

rose forth from some forsaken realm of greed. The gold and gems seemed to melt and slither toward the rising shape. The head of a vulture was the first terrible thing to rise from its terrible realm and join this world. Its skin was withered and wrinkled, and it had a sickly green hue. Its eyes seemed to hold more eyes inside of them, and its many suckered tentacle-like tongues reached out of its stone beak. The creature rose from the vortex, revealing its furry torso. From it sprang forth a long, dark blue, wrinkled, triple-jointed arm that ended in a talon. Its wings absorbed the gold, molding them into long spiked chains. The monster had a large serpent tail, which had myriad bulging eyes and hungry mouths sprouting from it.

A shrill chant of cruelty bellowed from the horror, "Hello...Hasker." The nightmarish monster tried to choke Hasker. The Thaum desperately reached for a rod, his hand missing twice in his frantic grabs. On the third attempt, he ripped it from his belt and, suddenly, the chain shattered. For a moment, an icy blue shimmer seemed to wash over Hasker. The creature's many appendages were maimed and slashed by the energy field Hasker had created. The monster yelled in pain, giving me a splitting headache. The thing flung itself on top of the force field. It let out another roar. I was shaken once more by a terrible ache in my mind. Maushi and I stood there

struggling. The incapacitating dread and blazing headaches were nearly intolerable. This was the stuff of literal nightmares. The darkness of thinking life incarnate! Sin given flesh. It was a demon.

Maushi let out a chant. His eyes started to glow a light brown. I suddenly felt my head's agony fade away. I felt something on top of my head. It was a pair of magic... antlers? I looked to see that Maushi was using magic to adorn himself with the same spectral ornaments. I gave him a nod, and we charged in to save our friend.

The horrible beast turned toward us and leapt from the top of the barrier. Its heavy chains nearly caused it to hit its head on the floor, due to their sheer weight. It tried to lash its tongues onto my face, but I lunged out of the way in time. I tried to counter the attack with my blade, but the creature blocked the blow with chains. Hasker had realized that the chains inside of his sanctuary had turned into coins, and he tried to collect them.

Maybe that greed was who he truly was-Focus! The monster slowly raised its many jointed appendage.

"Your love of money benefits us both," the creature announced in its otherworldly voice.

I suddenly felt a burning sensation on my thigh. I realized the thing must have unleashed a coin curse or some other strange magic. I was able

to focus my grit and charged forward. With a scream, I slammed my blade into the demon's thick tail. Black and red blood sprayed onto us both. The tail wiggled, writhed by its own accord, and its many mouths screamed. The monster took my aggression as an opportunity. Its left wing wrapped many chains around me. I tried to get out of the way, but the chains seemed to perfectly seek me. Maushi's blessings and my strength tried to fight them, but there were too many. In the blindness, I felt my valor fade. The chains grew supernaturally heavy and tight. The cruel weight pressed onto my small scaled body. Was I already dead? The demon's shirl giggled told me no. My bones cracked.

Suddenly I heard a blood curdling cry of pain. Maushi would surely die without aid. His body was crushed by cruel chains.

An old war saying came to mind, 'The front line dies first.' I felt my grit return to me as the chains loosened their grip. I then burst out of them in a moment of furious power. I was shocked by what I saw. The scream was not from Maushi, but the demon. The strange cat had used his scythe to cleave off the wing that bound me. The demon was on the floor, trying to get back up after losing its lower section. I saw that any blow Hasker or I had made on the abomination had been replaced by tentacles or spider legs. Even the

severed tail had managed to transform into some sort of new creature, which moved with the use of three donkey legs like a stool. Yet, I saw no reaction on the stump that the chained wing once used.

I charged in, ready for my vengeance. Maushi tossed me a small glass bottle of water before I could attack.

"Douse your blade in the water! Make sure the demon can't recover from your blows! Hurry!" he cried as the demon got up with the use of two new kobold legs.

"Water is terrible for swords!" "Just do it!"

I quickly obeyed his command. The vial of holy water was very small, and I couldn't figure out how to open it, so I just smashed the bottle onto the blade and hoped for the best. It was able to gain the upper hand against the physically weak summoner. After a few split seconds, Maushi was overwhelmed by the abomination. It grabbed his throat with its talon and lifted him off the floor. It then slammed him to the ground with a thunderous smack. Maushi went limp, dropping his only viable weapon. *NO!* The beast then slowly raised him into the air and opened its beak, ready to feast. Yet, it could not help but savor the moment.

I then dashed forward and raised the glaive into the air, letting out a dragon's roar. I slammed

the blade into its torso, burying it halfway. I would have finished the job if the second demon hadn't used its eldritch power to make the blade so heavy (for me only) it was impossible to remove.

At first, I panicked – my mind raced, "How the hell am I going to kill this thing? I don't have any wea-...wait,"

I then remembered the magic antlers on my head. I leapt up and grabbed the beast with the head and rammed the antler in the monster's eye. It shirked in rage as it let Maushi fall to the ground. The demon's many eyes spewed out of the wound. It flayed in anguish. I struggled to stay on for a few moments until I realized I could use this to my advantage.

I waited until his beak would launch toward its gruesome offspring. Then I let go. I soared right into the monster. It tried to get out of the way of my attack, but it was caught off guard on its new preparation of legs. I rammed the antlers into it, and it died with nothing but a whimper. I then quickly got up to face my true foe once more.

The outraged and desperate creature shambled toward me. The monster tried to come up with a witty lie, but he just couldn't,

"Will you.... Just die!"

In a sudden flurry, it grabbed onto my helmet and squeezed. It was a mind-warping pain, threatening to send my skull asunder. Frantically, I

clawed at my helmet strap, and I almost sliced my own throat in panic. It was lucky that it was a pick block and I fell out of it. I rushed into the creature's mist and grabbed my sword from its back edge and the handle. I kicked the beast and pulled the blade through the monster. The dying demon screamed, fell like a tree, and then sputtered on the cold earth. The thing tried to flop away onto the floor. It let my anger drive me into hacking the monster into pieces, again and again. I finally stopped once I saw that not one of the pieces were moving. The remains slowly melted into a pool of pitiful ichor. I stood there for a moment... silence. I was alone for a moment to process what had happened.

I muttered curses under my breath, "A little extra, really, dumbass?" I felt the antlers fade off my head. I looked around to make sure nothing else was coming. That's when I remember...

"MAUSHI!" I cried as I ran over to him. He was on the cold stone floor, not moving, and his nose had blood pouring out of it. I checked his pulse and thankfully it was still there. I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding out. He was in no condition to walk, so I put him on my shoulders. I was happy, not, grateful to be alive, but then I saw Hasker.

He was on the ground. His forcefield deactivated, neck rendered into a wasteland of

dark blue bruises, with small rivers of blood, it was bound by a tight, spiked chain of gold. His eyes had nearly popped out of his head. His face was pale as a blanket of grim snow and twisted into a frozen scream. I didn't even bother to touch him, he was dead. I gently placed Maushi on the ground. I sank to the ground on my knees.

"This is what you deserve," I cursed him for this madness. In hindsight I realized it was cruel and harsh. Sure, he was a complete cowardly ass then, but for the few weeks I knew him... he was a kind and noble person, who liked gold a little too much. I checked his ice-cold corpse for those healing potions. Thankfully, they were still intact.

Somberly, I drank the second one down. It healed me quickly, and I poured the last one to Maushi's lips...*Don't even think about it.*

I then heard a loud crash from behind me. I turned around like a tornado on demon dust to see a treasure chest. It was flat and made of black wood bound by metal. I ignored it.

Nine days later

"Ok...Open the gates!" The Dwarven guard barked over to the gatekeeper. The large, runed, steel gate lifted itself with a series of clangs. I looked out of window of the carriage. The northern wind was blowing hard that day in the mountains. I sighed and looked over to Maushi who was barely lucid after his injury. "This... is

where... you're from... right?" he asked in a nauseous tone.

I gave him a sad smile and nodded.

"Yeah, Kothmantear, I grew up on the streets far below where we are about to enter, The Barracks District is put here to stop invasions." I explained to him. The mountain coach slowly rolled into the vast mountain city.

"So, the...whole thing is inside of the mountain?" Maushi inquired. "Yup,"

"Sounds like a terrible way to live. So out of tune with Mother Nature. Doomed to never see the stars. What would drive anyone to such madness?"

"Only madness if you don't mind not getting your entire town blow away by a strong breeze, or burned by bandits, or flooded and all mother nature's other forms of... tough love?"

The Barracks District was a large and impressive sight. The main hall was seventy feet long, fifty feet tall, and only fifteen feet wide. The area was illuminated with torches. There were ornate carvings telling tales of battle stout folk won. While many might just see it as art, it was more than that. It was bragging and a warning. "We were mighty warriors and still are, do we really wish to fight?" I saw majestic doors which lead into the training ground and armories. Rows upon rows of dynamic arrow slits waited for

anyone foolish enough to attack. All of these things were designed to be both pretty and powerful.

The guards were the same as well. Their armor were plates of dragon steel (My sword happened to have true dragon steel too). The dark metal was light and super strong. Despite not being able to see their faces, I could point out any of them, mostly thanks to each having differing armor designs. All of them had the emblem of Kothmantear, a hammer. One had the head of a lion, another ton of script. They were the city guardians and champions of justice, but not all of it and not always.

“That’s the trip, yay bunnies! I hope you have a fine day in Kothmantear!” a guard cried.

“Of course, sir!” Maushi peeped, his hair raising in embarrassment. “Thanks.” I could help but be a little bit proud. Now that we were back, we needed to talk to the man who sent us on this quest in the first place, High Duke Jawin, The Gluttonous. Despite having a crude and ultimately true title, he was a decent and cheery man. He was fat but not obese. One of his virtues happened to be patience, so we decided to do a few things before seeing him.

The first thing was getting Maushi healed. It turned out Maushi had this thing called a concussion. The doctor in town told me that he

used his herbs to stop it from becoming permanent injury long enough for a better doctor to fix it; however, there was a problem. The moment we tried to climb a flight of stairs, he fell over. He would act like he had downed a thousand mugs of ale. I had to carry him most of the way, which gave me judgmental looks from people.

After that, a dwarf gave me directions to an Apothecary. I made my way through the narrow city streets. They were more like large halls. The sound of clanking hammers and the drunken choruses fulfilled my soul. For these sounds marked my years as a late, when things got better. When I finally managed to be something other than a rat in the mining district. After a little more walking, we stood before an infirmary that was good enough to make Maushi sane. We put it on the duke’s debt since Maushi somehow convinced me to try that stunt. Finally, it was time to finish the deal.

I laid down on the granite slab. I was happy and nervous about the transformation ahead.

“Are you really sure you want to do this?” Maushi asked nervously.

I shot down his concern with a hand wave, “I lost the bet fair and square. What was that thing, Hasker...Hasker.”

I felt a brief wave of sadness, but I shook it off.

I had known him for only a little while, and we all knew the risks of our work... and he had all seen death long before we took this path. We had made our prayers.

The kobold grafter broke the somber silence. "I must ask you...Harda Gothric, do you want this? I can't do the ritual if you don't want to be changed. I need your desire to work the magic."

In truth, I wanted to try out a new look, but that was too much money, so I would settle for whatever Maushi had in mind.

"Just don't make me an undead Maushi," I said and smiled at him.

Maushi understood my cryptic insult and whispered into the grafter's ear. Smiling, I readied myself for the change.

"So, what was did you change?" Alphonse almost begged in frustration. He then started searching all over Harda's upper half. She gave the healer a sly smile. Suddenly, a pair of wings burst forth from her shoulder blades. They were small and scrawny, clearly only for show, not flight. Their bones were just like dragon's, but they were made of antlers. Their leather webbing told the tale you had just heard: the battle in the mountain, the discovery of the cave, the wolves, the blade, the deal... the demon, and the creation of the wings.

"Hold on, is that Maushi getting the same pair of wings?" Nactay inquiries, pointing out the final panel, show Maushi getting the same pair of beautiful wings.

"Yes, he thought that they would be best as a pair."

You ask to touch the beautiful tapestry of warped flesh and bone. It feels like butter is in your hands. You all send a minute staring at the gorgeous thing. Then, you realize how awkward this could be for her, and you all try to change the subject. Harda suddenly extends in front of her face long ugly bones, which she glosses over. They suddenly went back into her shoulder blades, adding a palpable mass to her back.

You were interrupted by a racket upstairs. You know that someone will surely complain about this noise if you don't deal with it quickly. You excuse yourself to silence the noise. You can't help but feel sad at the end of this sage. But you didn't need to find the noise source, it found you.

You see two figures walking down the spiral staircase. The first one is a human who had simple blue robes, a pointed hat, black hair, slanted eyelids, and light brown skin. He carried nothing but simple wooden stuff and a book. You almost gasp in awe at the sight of the man. You had no idea how he managed to slip into the tavern without people losing it. He was a wizard, a

whimsical wanderer of the world, an immortal observer of history, and the strongest type of magic user in Animus.

He addresses his loud partner in a calm and collected voice, "Yes I called it cave dragon."

The second fellow was an elf in similar attire, but it was dark red and he had a deerstalker's cap. His robes were adorned with a few runes. He had white hair, dark emerald eyes, and his skin looked like real gold. He held a bag full of what seemed to be stones or maybe potatoes?

He appeared strangely exhilarated by the wizard's claim and inquired in a booming tone, "But you have registered that kind of thing with the Registry of Monstrous Things!" He was probably a Thaum ...and a rude one at that!

You shush them. They keep chatting loudly. You try again. They keep arguing.

Nactay stands up and belts forth a command: "BE QUIET!" His voice boomed like thunder, and they were both silenced.

The man you think is a wizard apologizes, "I am sorry for disturbing the night's quiet." Thaum says sorry as well.

But could you trust the idea that this man was a wandering wizard? He could easily be a fake. You heard a story about a girl who trusted a 'wizard' and got scammed out of her money and husband.

You ask the man if he is a wizard by any

chance. The whole tavern goes silent.

"What?" Harda asks in pure confusion. The wizard has a slight smile across his face.

"YES! I AM!" he dramatically points a finger at himself.

"You? A wizard? I didn't think any could travel to big cities here anymore," Nactay inquires.

"Well... I am from a different continent," The wizard explains.

The elf abruptly introduces himself, "I am Lennic, a professional detective!"

"Tell me, what have we stumbled across?" the wizard asks. He slowly scans the room taking in each and every one of your friends. You pause for a moment, not sure what to say.

"I guess you could say we were having a story contest... real stories,"

Harda answers for you.

"Well... I do love myself a good tale after a long and relaxing day of travel," The wanderer replies.

The investigator sitting beside Harda blasts questions, "Harda Gothric, the owner of the Hell Fire Dungeon? May I have an interview?"

Harda recoiled in the man's acrid breath, pushed him away, causing the elf to crash to the floor.

"Right... Later then?" he asks. Harda rolls her eyes.

Nactay takes pity on Harda and tries to change the subject, "Well, you are a detective! Do you have an interesting case you could contribute to the little anthology we have been making?"

The investigator pauses and thinks to himself.

"Sure! Why not! I guess I could tell you about the case that made me a minor celebrity and kick-started my career, The Ashen Murders!" he announces with a dramatic flair.

He pauses, waiting for a gasp or some sort of reaction. The only reward he gets for his 'surprising revelation' is a "what?" from Harda.

He looks at you all like you're from some weird planet that has no magic, only humans and very advanced technology, and of course the best author ever!

"No one knows about them? Really? The time seventeen people were killed, and eighteen temples burned? Cearley, it must at the very least ring a tiny bell of some sort?" There was a long silence.

"What?" Harda broke in one final time.

"Fine! I guess I will have to tell you the story myself! Duchess Harda Gothic, High Healer Witner, Priest of Olgazzo and mercenary, Captain Nactay, Chocxie The Chanter of The Underworld, and-"

"Get on with it!" cried Harda.

"Fine! I, Lennic Kascer, I present The Ashen

Murders!"

Fear the Looking Glass Kid

By Alex Chouinard

It was raining in Falley's Capital City of Corran.

The onslaught of water was coupled with the calls of countless holy instruments: thundering drums of Oolgalzo, shiny bells from Sollas, blaring horns for Bayamor and many more, each signaling the time for a sermon or a mass. I found it funny how different these religions were in beliefs and ideals, yet it felt like the same stuff was repacked, with a new aesthetic: "Obey my path".

I gazed up at the imposing temples and cathedrals of the Choir Ward. It was easy to navigate the neighborhood since I normally went there for walks. Each one reached up toward the planet they were devoted to, but for now, they would have to settle for almost reaching the veil of rain clouds. Dwarves and elves were rushing for church, a gilza preaching the idea that we should all get gills grafted and live underwater, and a kolbold making a dire statement, "Sollas is the creator of the sun and harvest! All, even the gods, must bow to her!"

This is all normal in the Choir Ward. The sights, the sounds, the feeling of stones, and even the taste of the mist were normal, but the smell was not. It should have been incense. Instead,

there was the smell of ashen wood and scoured flesh. I turned a corner in the labyrinthian streets of the ward to finally reach my destination.

In the last two months, seventeen temples have been reduced to burnt husks. The attacks always happened at night, and while there was a full-time worshiper inside it. Unfortunately, the worshiper never survived.

People had all sorts of theories about what was going on or, to be more accurate, people they blamed. The main theory was that some blamed the thaums, and someone always blamed the thaums. Ever since the fall of Malnor, some people have held an irrational fear of rune workers, believing them to be the root of all things that were evil. While some thaums are willing to fulfill this prophecy of spite, most of us just try to keep their distance.

The second main theory was that this was the work of worshippers of either an evil god or a “dead” one. While I guess those who worship Sharlenmay, the God the Thieves, could be behind it, I find it highly unlikely, since the freedom to worship any God or Goddess had recently been legalized. Attacks like this would risk everything. So, I doubt any of them would be willing to put that on the line.

The third theory was that the worshippers of the King of Kings were behind it. There was zero

evidence for this ridiculous notion, of course. It was only a theory because people hated them. There were a few other ideas here and there, too. Demon cultists, gangs, dragons, and countless other theories were floating around. However, they were all equally baseless. It was a shame really everyone had to blame they didn’t like rather than just accepting that the case was not solved yet. I had my ideas, but they were just as silly as the others. With each temple destroyed, the rates of crime and political instability rose, and it meant that solving the case was a top priority. The temple was once an impressive monument to Bayamor: the God of Dragons, Fire, Forges, and Trade. I remember seeing it on my daily commutes through this district. The building functioned as a small market. It was about fifty feet tall, short by temple standards.

Guards shooed away the crowds of onlookers who were driven by morbid curiosity. I weaved through the crowds and guards. I was stopped by a firm hand on my shoulder.

“Boy, like I said earlier, there is nothing to see h-” I flashed my badge.

“You, an inquisitor? I can hardly believe it! Very well do your duty,” the guard awkwardly bowed.

I was part of the Gods’ Eye, a detective agency for the city. We were sometimes called inquisitors

due to our sharing a similar role to a religious order called the Inquisition. They were from the days when the true Patheon were trying to establish their dominion. The badge that I showed the guard was an ellipse of mosaic of stained glass in the shape of its namesake, with my name carved on the rim. For the first few years of its existence, the organization struggled to be close to the worthy of its name. We called ourselves the *Gods' Eye* after all. For a while, the Holy Council considered the organization to be a waste of time. However, their leader, a human named Emily Lockheart, was convinced that the organization just needed a little more funding and help from other organizations outside of the country. The council was so enthralled by her speech that all of them agreed except Lorgar Vandire, the oldest member.

The Gods' Eye went through a renaissance. New agents and tactics were introduced from across the continent. I was one of these new agents. I had just been hired by the new thaumian agency, The Icy Looking Glass. The thing that made that agency click was its use of Thaumaturgy. It was taught to every new member of the order. I was top of my class and wanted to help establish justice in places far yonder which brought me here. I once lived in a secular tundra, but I now live in a tropical holy land.

"What can you tell me about what happened here?" I asked another detective on the scene. She was a dwarf wearing black and white, probably a forensic from a Ritain agency. Her department specialized in biological forensics. It made sense, Ritain invented biomancy after all. With the corpse being char, her skills were limited.

"I know this was a temple to Bayamor. The preacher was young and he was supposed to be a nice guy. We believe that the attack happened during the night, just like all the others. The spell used to raze this place managed to reduce the steel to its molten form. The user of this magic had to be very strong," she replied with a look of deep concern on her face....which I ignored.

"What wasthepriestlike? Werethereany witnesses? Whodoyouthinkdidit? What isthemurderweapon?" I inquired, with rapid speed.

She retorted with yups, nos, okays and a get out of my face, as she slowly backed away. I was then left there in silence.

"My God- I mean well, shoot! I did it again!" I shouted out loud. I knew my greatest strength was asking a lot of questions, but my greatest flaw was not knowing when to slow down to take in answers or give people breathing room. *But why was that a weakness!? Shouldn't asking a lot of questions be a great strength!? But of course*

people have to have their manners and their customs.'

"I guess my brother was right about me never getting a girlfriend," I now muttered aloud to myself in self-pity. I was caught in for a second only to snap out of it, remembering that I have a job to do. I took out my signature looking glass of the order I used to work for. I began to investigate the ruins of a crime scene.

In the order I used to work for, the first thing that they taught you to make was the violet-looking glass. It was a magnifying glass that had golden runes on the outside of its copper rim. The looking glass that I mainly used now was made of copper infused with golden runes. The runes that infused over and over again were that of two circles, one inside the other, with a gold in the center. It is said that the shape is supposed to represent knowledge and how it is more valuable than gold. Others would argue that it shows the nature of power and how magic has no beginning or end. The lens was made of blue-tinged glass and seemed to be strangely shiny. The device could use a special form of light to detect magic of any type. It was my finest and only use the art. I held it up to my eye and gazed upon the world from an azul tinged lens.

The lenses revealed the breezes of magic. The breezes of magic take the form of streams of

glowing, golden orbs. These floating rivers flow through wood, stone, and even flesh. It gives me goosebumps and chills down my spine even thinking about it. The only solid thing that can interact with the breezes of magic is metal. When they interact, metal can then be forged or warped into different shapes. These runes are then bound to the will and mental energy of the creator. They are the most important part of thaumaturgy.

Whether this alchemy is the source of all magic or if there is an even more powerful source hidden within the folds of creation is yet to be known or even fully understood. Whatever the case, when the orbs are found immobile in clusters around items, it means they are enchanted.

I saw that there were only a few breezes of magic. The closest one was a dozen feet above me. At first, there was nothing of interest. I sighed, maybe this case was not meant to be cracked. After all, there is not much to look for in piles of cinder and a corpse that could barely be recognized. Even if this case could be solved, I knew I didn't stand a chance. I was a nobody. I was just thrown into this case. Them sending me here is a sign that they were at a loss.

I then noticed a cluster of breeze orbs swarming around an unseen object like a swarm of bees. I hadn't seen it earlier because it was close to the ground. *Of course the evidence is on the*

ground you idiot! Get yourself together! At first, my mind tried to deny the truth. *Maybe it was a trinket of the priest or perhaps... Wait, could that be...the murder weapon? This might crack the case wide open!*

I felt an old, cold hand land on my shoulder. The frantic storm of my thoughts were suddenly dispersed, and I was back to the present. I yelped, only to be met by a friendly face. It was Lorgar Vandire, Cardinal of Sollas, the Goddess of the Sun and Harvest and the oldest member of the council. His white robes were woven with green on the bottom to represent the harvest and the gold was laced on the top in the shape of the sun. His old wrinkled face had a shy and humble smile upon it. He wore a large cone-like hat on top of his head, except it was puffed out in a strange way, making it almost look like a cloud. Despite his hunched posture, he towered over me. I can hardly imagine how he must have been in his youth. He could have easily been a warrior of faith in his prime. He leaned his giant torso on a large staff made of marble. On its top lay the symbol of Sollas: a green sun where the rays ended in the tops of golden wheat, carved in jade and amber. How the old, withered man managed to carry around that staff was a mystery I would never have the privilege of solving.

"Your Holiness!" I yelped out in fear and

immediately bowed down, a nail nearly stabbing my hand. I had heard tales of the grand processions that demanded the attention of all. Had I offended the pope by not noticing until now? Likely.

"No, no there is no need for that... There would be if I were a young, pompous man, but I have been humbled by my age. Having back pain can put things into perspective," he jokes. Each word was chosen carefully. His voice was disarming, kind, and gave me a pleasant tingly sensation every time I heard it. I felt like I had known him all my life. His words were both the trusty advice of a friend and gospel from the stars. I wanted to make him proud. After all, he was the voice of an Idol. *Wait, I can show him the clue in the rubble.*

"Sir, I have found something under the rubble that I think you should see!" I declared with glee. His eyes widened for a second.

"Well," he pondered, "I think I know someone who knows a thing or two about fire runes. He is in the trade ward, but you will need to meet him during the night, since he is busy during the day. His name is Valcaldo Nalance. Take this letter of recommendation! Make sure not to open it before he sees it!" His instructions were not to be questioned. As he pulled out the letter, it was a simple white scroll with a green seal.

"Oh, thanks for the lead!" I exclaimed as if I were his personal lap dog. I couldn't help but be grateful. To think the Cardinal had gone out of his way to help me.

The Faithful continued to speak, "Boy, you must be weary. Falley's recent opening up to the world has brought in trade and wealth; there is no debating that. I fear that this boom will bring those who would love to tear down the gate to the gods, rather than give the praise and honor that our idols deserve for making this world. These attacks may only be the first sign."

His voice turned from friendly and playful to a quiet, grim and thunderous, full of righteous conviction. I took a few steps back. I felt a chill run down my spine.

"Well...You don't mean thaums do you?" I asked with offense coating my voice. Despite being a great help to many, thaumaturgy has always been a distrusted art. Our magic had always been related to the Alchemist Nation of Malor and their great folly. Falley's former total political and economic isolation nature made it nigh impossible to be a thaum unless you were a part of the underworld. However, things have hopefully changed.

"What? NO! You are not a part of the problem. I refer to things like pimps or madams, the worship of dark gods, necromancers, demon

cults, drugs and so many other things. I fear for the purity of this nation. While some thaums worry me, they are closer to the bottom of my lists of concerns." His voice seemed nervous and shy, as if he was hiding something.

There was a long pause. I then started asking him questions. "Well sir, who do you think did it? Is the council worried? Are you ok with getting old? No, that is a personal question..." Rather than filing me away, he nodded and answered my questions. Oh, how I have waited for someone to actually listen to my barrage.

"Well, I am not a detective, and I feel my prediction would be shallow and short-sided. However, if I was forced to guess, I would say demon worshippers. Yes, the council is very worried about the destruction of the temples. Faith is of the highest concern in our holy nation of Falley. The humiliation of losing these many monuments to one unchallenged criminal would be worse than when Ritmig had to give up their secrets of biomancy. The other nations would withdraw aid, unable to take us seriously. It would be a step backward from progress and one towards darker times." He seemed like he was choosing his words again.

"And yes, my fellow child of the sun... I'm perfectly fine with getting old. I have been blessed with wealth and power for most of my life, which I

have used to bless the common folk. I have for a long time, acted as the voice of tradition and reason. Now, my sun sets and I will harvest a fine retirement once my heir of faith takes my place. I guess what witches say is true... you know, about that karma thing. Anyway, I have rambled long enough. It was a pleasure talking to you!" The man's voice was now quick and kind.

An acolyte or secretary of some sort cried out for him, "Your Holy Slowness! We need to attend the noon meeting of the cardinals!"

"Yes, yes!" the pope seemed to wave her off like she was some sort of loathsome tick.

"I should be thanking you! You are such a kind old man! I will!" I thanked him and then dashed off like a fool.

...

I stumbled my way through the trade ward in the dusk's veil. My feet pattered upon the cobblestone street. It was about closing time for most of the markets around here. Merchants were packing up all sorts of things: rare foods, tools, and pointless pieces of merchandise. I saw a man on a donkey lighting the night lanterns one by one while humming a hymn of protection. I guess he was worried as much as most people were, or he was just as faithful. The buildings were mainly well-made wooden houses. It was nothing like the breathtaking superstructures of the Choir Ward.

Yet, they held the beauty of simplicity.

I had been asking around for this Valcaldo Nalance for about an hour with no luck at all. Most people hadn't heard of him, and others tried to steer me away from him, saying he would be a bad influence for a child. They quickly apologized when they saw my badge. I was about to give up when I was finally told the correct way to get to his residence. Their instructions led me to a very rundown apartment complex, its windows cracked and its wood rotted. I asked the owner about this enigmatic expert named Nalance. He then gave a shocked look followed by a laugh, "If it weren't for the name 'Nalance' I would have said we didn't have one, but if you can call a whacked upped rock craver an 'expert' on anything, then be my guest. He is on the second floor, door number 2. Or the only thing that has puke on it." I made my way up there and knocked on the door with the metal number two on it and the vomit stain. There was a long pause. I recited the instructions in my head. *This was the place, so where is this guy? Was he out?* After what felt like an eternity of second-guessing and waiting, a slot in the door opened.

"What do you want?" the man inquired in an aggressive tone. He expected me to threaten him. His eyes were bulging and stained a dark crimson.

"Nothing sir, I heard you were an expert on runes and hoped you could help me with a case," I

replied trembling. The disgraced mountain kin turned his head like a curious beast. His pupils dilated, like a wolf ready for the moment of violence.

“How much are you paying?” He asked in a gruff tone, his pupils gently expanding.

I slowly pulled out a scroll from my robe. I wondered if he might just snag the scroll, hoping money was inside, and slam the door shut.

“This is a letter of recommendation from Lorgar Vandire,” I explained to him.

The door finally opened. He was a dwarf; he had a horribly trimmed beard. He had worn stained robes that hadn’t been washed in months. His lips were cracked and dry. His black hair seemed to be falling out. That was the strangest thing of all. Dwarves were supposed to be immune to hair loss. In fact, most dwarfs would consider losing their beard close to the pain of death itself. Their beards could become corpse gray but never fall out. I took a step back.

He snatched the letter out of my hand and examined the seal with his beady eyes and a large sniffing nose. Yet, he never bothered to break the seal.

“Boy? How did you get this? You didn’t steal this, did you?” he asked with an angry tone. I showed him my badge. He examined and sniffed that too.

He then smiled with his decayed teeth and spoke like I had told him a good joke, “Well, I guess you're either a terrible investigator or a terribly lucky investigator... or you’re the best liar and thief I have ever seen... and I will gladly welcome both into my house.” With that, I was invited inside with a grab of my collar.

His lair was a small apartment made tiny by countless pieces of junk. The furniture consisted of a few skewed chairs, beds, and tables, most cracked and broken, but a single chair was brand new. The chair was wooden and dyed green (making this chair cost twice as much as the rest of the furniture in this room combined) and had a sun carved into it. The wooden floorboards were loud and creaky, threatening to give way any moment. He ushered me to his scratched, rickety table.

“Do you... know... The Cardinal?” I asked him with hesitance, I felt so confused by the contrasts around me. He was half mad but was also recommended by a pope. He was poor and seemed unhealthy but also had a priceless chair just sitting in the middle of this junk heap. He could sell it for so much. His answers will likely not be simple.

The man gave me a smile and spoke with dwarven jolly. I feared he had lost “Well, you see... I was once a master thaum, who focused primarily

on war runes. I fought against the Third Great Hobgoblin Horde in the wastelands. While the Third Great Horde is considered to be on the weaker end of the wars, make no mistake, it was a war. War is hell. I tried to find a release. I found shadows of vice instead. Yet once the war ended, I found that the shadows don't leave your side. They grow. My friends and family could do nothing to stop me... For the shadows were too thick to let me see the light of their guidance. When my family and friends knew I would not listen, they did the only sensible thing and abandoned me. Once my friends left me, my finances and reputation deteriorated as well. I found myself becoming closer to the wrong side of the law. I felt that I was doomed to drown in my own shadow and become a demon of these streets. Lorgar and Sollas's light proved me wrong. The road took many years, and it was filled with many setbacks and failures. However, I let the shadow go bit by bit. Now, my mental battle ends, and the rebuilding of my life may begin."

Valcaldo Nalance gave me a warm smile, full of grandfatherly pride. He then pulled out another scroll from a random cubby. It was a long declaration from the great priest himself. It talked about how proud he was of him for overcoming his demons. Shocking! The idea that the pope would go out of his way to help someone on such

an individual level seemed so unlikely.

Normally, at this point in the conversation, I would ask a legion of questions, but I still felt weird. I asked only for aid.

"So, onto the subject. I'm looking into *The Ashen Murders*. I could use some help with it," I explained to him. Vacaldo raised an eyebrow at this inquiry. His joy quickly faded.

"What? Does he..." The dwarf let out a tired sigh, "You think a thaum is doing this? I doubt it. If one were doing this, they would probably be attacking a lot faster than a few times a week. Also, the sheer magnitude of the destruction is extremely hard to recreate with runes. The only person I know who is capable of doing that with runes within miles of here is me. However, it has been months since I have worked on anything like that. I did lose track of an inferno rune in my time of shadow. I would try to track it down, but if I had sold it, and it was recreated by another... there was no way to tell where it could have gone," he muttered in a sad tone.

I nodded along with his lament. I was then forced to wonder if he really was the one who did it... *no, of course not*, I thought to myself. *He has been in contact with a cardinal and straight-up explained damning evidence to me. He would either have to be a lucky fool, or an outright mastermind to make it this far in his crusade*

without a single decent clue being found. But maybe Vacaldo was a pawn in a much greater game?

“Well let’s see what this stupid letter is about anyway,” the dwarf declared.

He drew the scroll close to his face. He then cracked it open, only for black powder to be sprayed from the seal. He sniffed it in. His eyes dilated once again giving me a look of betrayal. He stumbled onto the floor. He screamed in horror as he convulsed upon the boards.

“Sir, are you alright?” I asked in a panic. His screams were drowned by blood and froth that clogged his throat. Unfortunately for both of us, he lived. A horn started to sprout from his thigh. It was made of gnarled bone and was covered in blood. His eyes became blood red and filled an animal’s rage. His finger grew large bony claws covered in blood. It slowly rose from the floor.

I had only heard rumors of something like this existing, but I never thought it was real. There were rumors that a cult of lust had created a drug that was both extremely addictive and infused with demonic essence, called demon dust. It would rot teeth, wither hair, bleed eyes, and ruin the mind. It would make the person willing to do anything to get more, including joining the cult that made it. If treatment or purification was not sought out, the person risked suddenly and

violently mutating into a demon-like creature.

Most die of their mutations shortly after the overdose. However, if help is granted, almost anyone can recover in time.

The monster launched at me from across the table. I barely managed to duck under it in time. It managed to catch itself as it nearly fell to the floor. It then hurled out a burst of blood and froth. I pushed his table out of my way and snatched the scroll and his letter from the table. I would surely need it.

My mind raced with thoughts, *What in the hell is going on? Why was there demon dust inside of the seal? Was someone trying to kill him, kill me?* My ponderings were cut off by a second charge from the monster. I was not able to escape from it this time. It grabbed me by both of my arms, piercing them with its claws. I screamed in pain. *This was it...this is how I die, being ripped limb from limb. I had so much to live for. I don’t want to die a nobody, a kid, a noob, a loser, and a virgin.* I begged the universe and whatever else could hear me.

The thing spat blood on my clothes and then it stared into my eyes with its pair of bloody growths. For a second, I could swear I saw him draw bloody tears as if Nalance was weeping at what we had become. I grabbed a random chair leg that was lying on the ground and whacked the

creature with it. The leg broke into a shower of useless splinters. The monster suddenly twitched in agony. I saw his skull crack as a final bony horn violently pierced out of his head. I was then crushed by his weight and covered by his blood and gray matter. After a few minutes of struggling, I managed to push his corpse off my body. I vomited on the floor. Thankfully, it was a quick banishment for my supper.

I then heard the cladding clank of armor and the cries of...Lorgar. "Don't you hear it? The boy has murdered his partner in crime! Paladins, we must destroy him!"

For a second I felt like a thousand swords had pierced my heart. *Lorgar...was the mastermind behind this? No he can't be... but that was the only thing that made any sense. He was the one who laced that seal..to make a fiend release on demon dust, just to kill me.* My brain raced through a thousand possibilities. He must have destroyed the temples, and then planned to blame it on Valcaldo and me. The knot of magic must have been his holy symbol or maybe that conflagration rune that could have taken Valcaldo out without him noticing. But somehow, even though I had known him only for a few minutes, I felt like I had made a lifelong friend. *Could it be that all of that was a mask that he had worn for decades? If so, why take it off now?* I wondered to myself.

I then remembered the problem at hand. I knew they knew about my nature as a sun blessed elf and therefore knew I could use illusions. I smashed a window with a chair, entered the fetal position in a corner, and then I used an illusion to make it seem as if I were a barrel instead of a person.

The paladins bashed into the room. Their armor was silver and outlined with gold and emerald. Even in the dim light of the room, the armor was glistening like the sun. According to legend, a paladin's light shines through all deceptions. I hoped that was merely a legend. They all seemed to be the exact same height and body shape. There was no difference in their postures or even mannerisms. The steel carried scimitars and bucklers with intricate patterns upon each. Both of them were left-handed. I could not see the people hidden within the armor. Some might have tried to talk to these champions, but I knew differently. I knew that they were the personal bodyguards of a cardinal which meant they were probably willing to die for him, regardless of what the man had done. The words of a cardinal are the law for followers, and they were gospel to paladins.

"Oh, Godly One! It seems the prisoner has escaped through a window!" The Paladin's voice was slow, muffled and deliberate, yet it somehow

also managed to seem pious and doting. I couldn't tell the age, species or gender of the person.

The high priest spoke with a fire that had long been dormant, "Yes! He must have! Hurry! We must not let the traitor escape judgment! Let the Ashen Murders continue!"

They then suddenly rushed down the stairs... After taking a moment to comprehend how easy it was to hide from them, I began to sneak my way out of the room. For some strange reason, no one had bothered to investigate the commotion.

...

This is Choir Ward. I made it! If I can get my hands on the...thing. Maybe I can convince the people that there is logic to my claims! I turned one corner and then another corner and another. Blood and pain trickled from my arms. I did not have time to treat the wounds, and worse, the drops were making a trail of blood that could be followed. There was no one on the streets... no witnesses. I was alone for a moment. Then a click, a whistle, and then a sharp pain in the back of my leg.

I tried to dismiss it, and I might not have even noticed it, but then my pain roared. It rippled throughout my leg, and I tumbled to the floor. My savagely wounded arms were not able to catch my body, which slammed onto the ground. Looking around, I saw a blurred landscape and three

figures closing in on me. The only thing that was clear to see was the crossbow bolt. It was made from the finest wood and its white had been stained red from my blood. I felt an iron foot slam upon my neck. I felt myself losing oxygen. I tried to cry out and pry off the foot, but my efforts were smothered. It was worthless. My efforts were in vain. Lorgar stood over me. His face twisted into a look of hate and disgust. At first, I thought it was meant to me, but then I wondered if he was disgusted with himself.

"My faith tracked you down. It will now smite you," he spoke gravely. The one who pinned me down raised a blade above his head. For a second, the moon reflected on its blade making it seem like it was glowing.

Drunken laughter and hooting interrupted us. A happy and wobbly voice pierced the air. "Lorgar! Hey! What's up, man?" The priest facepalmed like a relative just mentioned an embarrassing memory.

"Hello, Dashwood. It seems you have been enjoying a night of unproductive partying?" the cardinal mused.

The unknown stranger let out a laugh and then noticed me, "I am making friends with common folk and... um, why are you killing this youth? Get off him!"

The paladin didn't move an inch. Lorgar then

called his armored one off me. I gasped for air, the blur retreated and I gazed upon... my strange messiah.

Dashwood was a tall man with grape-purple skin, goat legs, and large black horns, a satyr. His eyes were the swirling colors of wine-red and purple which could be found in the most expensive of dyes. He was clad in green, a loose toga. An amulet of a black goat's head rested upon his chest. The amulet represented Lucica, god/goddess of alcohol, parties, romance and sexual activity. The idol's reputation was controversial to say the least. Most followers were hedonists and the only "honest" followers were wet nurses who helped deliver babies. The High Priest of Lucia had two companions of sorts: one a male elf and the other a female human. Their robes were loose to say the least. They were both leaning on him and giggling.

"If you're wondering, the child is in fact the mastermind of the Ashen Murders!" Lorgar decried. Despite the fire in his voice, he was struggling with his facade. That sentence probably sounded better in his head.

I was quick to counter him, "No! I am framed! Lorgar Vandire is behind this! I know I sound mad, but I can prove it!"

"Nonsense, heretic! You dare accuse me of destroying temples and killing priests? YOU ARE

LOW! LOW! There is no need for a trial for you, vermin!"

I closed my eyes. Even if I could convince this debaucherous rando of the truth, there was nothing he could do...or so I thought.

"Fellow Cardinal... you and I both have the right to convict a citizen of Falley once a year without trial. However, it only takes the objection of another cardinal to make that right null. Plus, I have doubts about this one. You are a slow mover and a kind, reasonable man. However, your mood reminds me of a younger man, a more zealous one."

The priest cut off Dashwood with the suddenness of a heart attack. I know this because I nearly had one when he did.

"You DARE take his side? Come now....I know we have had our differences, but I have changed. I would not do this," he declared.

We then both gave our accounts of the story. I gave the truth and Vandire told the same except he, of course, took out any part that made him guilty and reframed his pursuit of me as 'divine guidance' rather than complex plotting.

"I swear the murder weapon is in the rubble of the Bayamor temple," I pleaded. I felt tears surge from my eyes, while he just shrugged his shoulders.

We began to slowly tread to the temple. The

few people who still wandered the streets watched us from afar. They could tell a storm was brewing. They should have run but wanted to watch. Each step felt like a fall of a gavel. I tried to give Dashwood the letter, hoping it would have traces of demon dust on it, but I realized that the rain purified the envelope. He didn't have any real evidence, but he did admit the seal smelled strange. *Damn, that would've been the end of this had I just kept the letter safe!*

We finally reached the ruins of the temple that had once been a place of trade. It was now a single man's grave. If things went right, it might be the last of its kind. If things went wrong, it would be the last of me too.

"There is no real evidence here," Lorgar announced slowly. He unleashed his zealous fires for the moment at least. He was probably wearing the mask of the old man who had greeted me here only a few hours ago.

Dashwood frowned for the first time. "I sure hope you are right," he grimly stated.

I was confused for a minute until I realized that he was probably sobering up to reality. The idea that either his friend or some young teenaged boy was a mass murderer was too much to bear.

"Watch, I will show you the murder weapon," I almost whispered. I remembered the location of the knot of magic. I then began to move pieces of

the rubble out of the way, scratching my hands as I searched. I tried to look a bit farther, but nothing. I felt my heart drop all the way into the bottom of my feet. I was doomed. I should have seen this a mile away. I am a terrible detective. I was foolish and fell for every damn trap. I couldn't even find a clue by myself.

"I told you! He was bluffing! I shall now smite him, and we will be done with this business!" The faithful smirked. I bowed my head in shame. Tears started to flow down my eyes, and, for a moment, I was afraid that I would burst into tears, crying. Dashwood gave a bored look and spoke with a more bored tone, "I guess I was a little drunk beforehand. Well, what are you waiting for? Finish him off!"

I closed my eyes and waited for death. "Paladins, destroy him!" the preacher barked. But Dashwood interrupted, "No no no... You do it, Lorgar, not your paladins. Use your miracle to utterly destroy the murder."

I dared open my eyes. Lorgar turned and stared with a confused look. "What is the difference, you time-wasting fool?" he cried with a hint of fear in his voice.

"The difference is that I can still object," Dashwood countered with a smirk on his face. He stroked his friends' hair. There was a long pause of silence. "Well... What are you waiting for?"

Dashwood mocked Lorgar for his hesitation.

Lorgar paused for a moment longer and then finally responded, "I am out of miracles," Lorgar muttered.

Dashwood perked up; interest like Lorgar had just admitted he was into 'cat boys' or something. "Ah, you're out of miracles, yet we are supposed to only use them with council approval?"

"Well, I just used a few in self-defense," the priest denounced the accusation with a shaky voice.

I considered chiming in but realized that both they and the guards were completely distracted.

"Really now? Even though you also insist on picking from the finest warriors in the kingdom and require them to spend their lives guarding you around the dial?" He mused. Lorgar's face was starting to turn red with frustration.

"Well, at least I have guards instead of WHORES!" Lorgar countered with a yelp.

Dashwood put a hand on his chest and pretended to be offended. "Well, at least we enjoy ourselves. They have a little more bite than you would expect, and they are well paid. They are not just minions, they're my friends with benefits. Most of all we give each other a good time," he explained with a sinister grin on his face.

While the two engaged in their petty squabble, I took out my looking glass and searched

the area in the hopes of trying to find the amulet. I scanned over the rubble to find the knot of magic once more. I had nearly lost my life thanks to forgetting the spot. I crawled through the rubble, grunting in pain as the claw wounds on my arms and the crossbow bolt wound on my leg were poked and prodded by the pieces of rubble. Even if I survive tonight, I might be slain by my sickness. Suddenly, it felt like it didn't belong. I felt a warm glow as if it wanted me to find it. It felt polished and smooth. I pulled it out of the rubble. It was my prize. I lifted the holy amulet of Sollas.

"Proof! THE CARDINAL'S HOLY SYMBOL!" I hoisted it up into the air with a sense of mad pride. *Am I really saved? Can I prove the truth with this simple lineup....No, that is the reasoning of the mad...but maybe, I can get a confession out of him,* I wondered in my mind.

The Cardinal looked over at me with a terrified look, but he quickly doused it with the fires of rage.

"Lies! You probably just planted it there!" the holy man objected with great haste.

Dashwood spoke in a slower tone, his uncaring attitude fading into serious concern. "I am not so sure, My Good Friend. You didn't have your amulet on during the meeting earlier today. Almost the entire council noticed, and you just shrugged it off. I assumed you just made a silly

mistake. You are old after all. However, I must admit this is starting to look suspicious,” he said. Lorgar put a hand to his mouth, offended, and staggered while his frail body swayed like he suffered a painful blow. I am not sure why he did this. Maybe he was trying to look innocent? He was truly hurt by his words. He then gave me a wide eyed look.

“Clearly you must be mad. I MUST END THIS NOW! Paladins! Kill him!” he yelled with malicious intent.

The paladins turned and fired their crossbows in an instant. I heard their shots wizz over my head as I ducked down.

They would have fired again, had they not been assailed by a couple of blurred figures. A rosy mahogany smelling mist arose from the melee, almost like a comical dust cloud.

Dashwood then raised his holy symbol of the black goat and spoke a prayer of reality warping intent, “QUEEN OF THE WOMB AND LORD OF THE REVEL! I BEG YOU, RESTRAIN THIS MAN SO HE MAY NOT TAKE AWAY THE ULTIMATE FREEDOM!”

The skies were pierced by a geyser of living wood which engulfed the schemer and his thugs. When the dust settled, I found Lorgar and his paladins were gone, engulfed by an endless tangle of vines. It was massive, reaching over half the height of the chapels and at least fifty feet wide.

The vines were loose, green, and fresh at the top. As one’s gaze descended, the tangle looked more like a set of oddly bent sticks that had stood since the dawn of time, their frail bark already falling off. The things’ roots had decimated the cobblestone streets for hundreds of feet. People would now know of today’s terrible revelation.

I turned to see that Dashwood’s friends had transformed into strange creatures with goat horns and large bat wings. Their eyes were now glittering like violet runes. Their skin was light blue and deep purple.

I found them beautiful somehow. Everything about them was perfect yet forbidden. They fluttered back over to their employer and then doted on him as if nothing happened.

“What was that?” I asked in confusion. I hear Lorgar struggle within the tangle, his cries muffled. Dashwood turned to me and spoke with a strange mix of casualness and satisfaction masking his deep despair.

“Why, these are my darling succubuses. These devils are born from the actions and souls of the lustful, but tame. While not considered truly evil but most they were looked down upon by many due to their sensual nature. Now let’s get to the bottom of the matter.”

He then waved his hand and the vines untangled just enough for him to make his way

inside. I paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and followed. I am not sure whether he saw me or not. It was only a six feet walk or so until we entered the main chamber. The tangle incorporated Lorgar as a part of the wall, who was still struggling within his prison. Dashwood waved his hand and some of the vines crumbled so the criminal could speak.

"Release me at once!" the old man cried.

"Lorga-"

"Let me g-"

"Lor-"

"This is madness!"

"Wh-"

"I Dema-"

"LORGAR!" Dashwood screamed with a paralyzing rage. My heart skipped a beat, and I'm pretty sure Lorgar's nearly stopped.

"Personally, I don't want to think the kid is right. We are friends and even though I tease and make fun of you... I don't actually hate you. But every action you have taken suggests you're guilty. You not wanting to take up a meeting, your rage, and you technically attempted to commit murder...You nearly had your bodyguards kill a kid. That forces me to consid-"

Lorgar cut in his defeated voice and said, "I did it. I was going to blame the Thaums and try to use that to convince you that we needed to get rid

of them. Their magic is unnatural and a blight to all that is holy. Have we forgotten Malnor and the atrocities that came from the Thaum and from sin? This is why we made Fallay, to make a nation uncorrupted and unburdened by such things. Yet, I must wonder if my wrath was worse." He burst into tears and wept on the floor. I decided then that I should stop eavesdropping.

I then started to make my way out of the twisted thicket. I ended up waiting with the two devils and three new guards and it felt like we were all siblings listening to our parents' fight in the next room. The guards were wearing pure steel armor. Purity represented their pure aim of enforcing the law despite any bias. I sat down on the natural bench that the tangle had created. One of the guards tended to my wounds with impeccable skill and speed. The bandages and herbs were so good that I had almost forgotten about the great amount of punishment I had suffered throughout the night. Then we waited. I was starting to drown in the awkward silence. So I struck up a random conversation.

"What planet are you from? Cuz you are truly heavenly!" I tried to flirt. *Is this how flirting works?*

The divine creature looked at me with an eyebrow raised, but then laughed. After that, there was more awkward silence, so I decided to

try my luck some more.

"So... Ummm. You're a succubus. Do you, I guess, like being one?" I sheepishly asked. The attractive creature turned toward me and she sighed.

"Well, I guess it is like asking what it is like to be a son of Sollas or what is like to be a rock? You only have your own life experiences. I think I might have been human once... But those memories seem like a dream that I can almost remember. I guess, I would describe life as a devil, like a dreamy party that has no beginning or end, a sense of holy and pure joy filled by the endless consumption of earthly pleasures. Some of those pleasures are so strange that they are physically impossible on this earth, and I indulge myself. Other times I give pleasure to others as a favor, and, rarely, I have a duty like this. I can also change my sex at will or wrap my body into countless shapes. My idol's realm is a vast garden full of parties and acts of love, both enduring and mad. A fun time never gets old... even when it has been going on for like two hundred and fifty years. My name is Jasmine," she said, trying to put a genuine smile on her face.

"Wait, you can be a guy?"

"Yup"

"You probably make a great guy," I said. *What the hell did I just say?*

"Well, you would be a great woman."

"Uhm, thanks?"

"Do you have any past times?" I asked.

She blushed, and responded, "Nothing, but parties and naughtiness. Well, I have begun to take an interest in martial arts. Which is how I ended being Dashwood's bodyguard. I have to thank you for having a normal conversation, despite your attempts to charm me."

She then gave me a shy smile. For a moment, things were quiet. Then Jasmine spoke up again, "You know, I find this land of the living so strange."

"In what way?" I asked curiously. I had my appetite for my usual endless swarm of questions, but I would be a fool not to get information about this.

"Well...This place is so boring and dull and everyone seems to find me 'inappropriate' or 'lewd'". She then paused trying to find the right words. "But things here change and then stay the way they are. In the Gardens, a man can become a woman, a snake, be turned into a small ball, and then be eaten. Then they come back like nothing ever happened in a moment. Here, things change slowly but surely. A kid grows up over the decades and then has a family. That man might then make a mistake in love that costs him everything, and there is no way to undo what they did. So they work to recover their fortune. There is something

so sad and terrible about that idea, but also, it's beautiful," Jasmine said as she closed her eyes, recalling a painful memory.

For a moment, I wondered if she had been that mistake tempting someone away from happiness in an accident.

Dashwood dragged Lorgar out of the tangle of wood. The guards were surprised, to say the least, and hesitated to put him in chains. The vines rotted away and turned to dust, leaving the two paladins laying on the ground, perfectly still. The nervous trio of guards crept forth, maces drawn. One of them began to reach his hand out toward the armor.

"I must have killed them," Dashwood realized with a hint of horror lingering in his voice. One of the metal-born zealots grabbed the poor man's fingers and twisted them backward with a loud crunch. The man yelled in pain and dropped his mace. The paladin grabbed it and slammed the second guard on the head with the handle. The warrior fell to the ground cold.

The second one followed the first example. They pounced off the ground at a thunderous speed. The first knight blurred towards Dashwood. Jasmine and her partner tried to intercept the charging crusader, but the killer pulled out a dagger and stabbed its way through them with blind rage. Its attacks were sloppy and

disorganized, but they spilled blood, nonetheless.

Lorgar managed to wiggle out of his fellow High Priest's grasp. Instead of running, he turned towards the fray, getting in front of Dashwood. I continued to watch on, helpless.

"I beg you to stand down. We have lost we-" Lorgar's cry of shock was cut short by a cold dagger stabbing him in the heart. The knight trembled and fell back in shock of what he had done.

Lorgar's eyes went wide as he crumpled onto the street. He locked eyes with me. I wanted to look away. He smiled and sputtered his last words. "I am sorry. Forgive them, as they do not know what they do." He then silently slumped onto the ground.

"TRICKSTER!" The knights raged beyond logic and reason. The murderer would have removed two High Priests from Animus if the other had not charged in.

The others raised their own stolen maces and bellowed a prayer with cold, hard, fury. "DIE YOU TRAITOR! FOR YOU TURNED FROM THE SUN!" Their weapons glowed with holy brilliance as it was slammed into the failure's head. The warrior died instantly from the blow. The living knight got on his knees and tried to heal the High Priest, but it was too late. It was not hard to see why he was old. If the blade didn't kill him, the shock would.

Taking in the sudden burst of violence, I felt dizzy for a moment. I then felt a swell coming from my throat. I bent down and let a foul tide of throw-up loose. I had not seen this much death before. Sure, I had seen plenty of corpses, but this was fast, violent, and, most of all, unnecessary. I rushed over to Jasmine and scooped her up in my arms. "Ohmygodsareyouok?" I asked with pressured speech.

She looked up at me with a smile on her face. I had no idea why I cared about her so much at that moment. Maybe that was just her supernatural charm, maybe it was something more, hard to say. I was young and did not really understand love.

"Yeah, he ruined my wings, but I can get those fixed," she spoke with wounded pride. Jasmine got up and hobbled her way over to Dashwood. I then realized that our gruesome spectacle had begun to gather a crowd, a huge crowd. There must have been hundreds of people. They stared at us like deer realizing they were in a hunter's sight. They now knew Lorgar was dead. Lorgar the kind, the eldest, and the wise. I couldn't help but think if I had I not been tricked so easily, this never would have happened. But why did Lorgar never reclaim his amulet? Had he simply been dragged away by red ribbons, or did he not want to be seen messing with the rubble?

The galloping of horses echoed through the harrowed street.

"In the name of the gods, leave! There is nothing to see here!" cried a warrior clad in silver plate armor. He and a dozen other knights rode on horseback. Their galloping ceased once they surrounded all of us.

Oh my, it seems they brought out the finest the city had to offer, I thought to myself.

Dashwood spoke with a somber tone. He did not dare try to hide his grief

"Narcar, I don't know how to say....this-" The disgraced warrior abruptly interrupted and explained it all. He ranted on and on about Lorgar's mad and desperate scheme, his critical mistake, his horrific attempt to fix it, and his death by his own fanatic guards. I could hear the shame seasoning his trembling voice. He removed his helmet, cast away his arms and presented his wrists to be chained. Narcar gave a nod, and the criminal's request was granted.

"So, Dashwood, did this kid really crack the case by himself?" Narcar inquired in a skeptical tone.

"No it was re-" My attempt at being humble was cut off.

"REALLY! IT WAS ALL HIM!" Dashwood interrupted. "What no-" He then grabbed me by the shoulders and whispered in my ear, "You got a

bright future kid. You just have to fake it till you make it.”

“And that is exactly what I did,” said Lennic with a mix of satisfaction and disgust in his expression.

“So, you just got lucky?” Harda asked with confusion.

“So did you, Harda, find that dungeon? If so, was I able to find the holy symbol? Are our accomplishments all lies? No, of course not!” Nactay responded.

“Our careers could be severely damaged by these stories ever coming out,” Alphonse mused.

“Maybe, we should make an oath to never tell each other’s stories. What is said here stays here,” You suggested. Slit eyes squinting, he tilted his hat. You move to object but then realize that pretty much everyone but you has spilled their guts and life stories onto the tavern floors, creating a gory pile of angst and triumph.

“I swear on my tavern, my hope, and on my luck, to never retell these tales,” Nactay said, putting one hand on your heart and the other in the air as you swear your oath.

Nactay follows suit and swears a different oath. “I swear on my god, my ship, and my crew, to never retell these tales.”

Then Harda, “I swear on my grit, my wealth,

and my wings to never retell these tales.”

Then Alphonse, “I swear on my skills, my gloves, and on the hope for honest kings to never retell these tales.”

Then Lennic professed , “I swear on my fame, justice, and my runes to never retell these tales.”

Finally, the wizard, garbed in blue and with a little bit of a glimmer in his slanted eyes, spoke his oath, “I swear on my legs.”

All turned towards the wizard wondering if he has gone mad.

“To never retell these tales? What? Why are guys looking at me like that?” he asked.

“Why did you swear on your legs?” Nactay asked.

Youke responded in an almost offended tone, “Well without my legs, I could never be a wizard!”

“Why is that?” Harda asks.

“Well... why a wizard needs to wander the world to gain the words of power. The first wizard gained that power by accident. He merely traveled until he almost died of old age and gained immortality. The wizards know words that can be very powerful. Some might say even magical. You couldn’t help but roll your eyes. However, now none may speak of this saga. I will tell you of a very special tale,” the wizard declared with a smile spreading across his face. This story would be a fine tale indeed.

The Shaman

By Chris Bunton

The Shaman and his war tribe of demon-filled cave bears hunted Rex Hanson.

He had violated the boundaries of the burial ground, which caused the shaman to appear along with his ancient protectors. It must have been some kind of spell which summoned him.

They raged behind Rex's horse. A pack of them in pursuit with that crazy shaman riding on the lead bear, screaming curses. The shaman's head was scarred and bald from a former scalping, and he wore nothing but a breech cloth. His chest bore scars from his own stone blade. In his hand held above his head was a rattle made from the skull of a stillborn child, on a stick with feathers and other unidentifiable things.

The bears glowed in the darkness. They roared through impossibly savage mouths, filled with rows and rows of teeth no real bear ever had.

Terror filled Moondance, as froth flew from

her mouth. Real bears were bad enough, but these things were unreal. Her hooves pounded the ground in relentless torment. Rex spurred and shook the reins on his faithful mare, but the beasts gained ground, roaring above the sound of the shaman's otherworldly war cry.

The desert flew by in the night with those glowing green eyes in pursuit. Moondance needed to stop, her chest heaving, her body lathered in sweat. They both needed to stop. There was no escape. Rex knew this and felt that Moondance knew it too. It was time to kill or die.

Rex turned the horse and leapt off, filling his hand with his silver Colt Navy. He hit the ground, rolling into a crouch and losing his hat in the process.

He fanned two rounds at the shaman, causing the beast pack to turn aside for a moment. Long enough for Rex to find some cover behind a large rock.

He wished he had grabbed his rifle from

Moondance, but it was too late now. Several of the beasts leapt at his rock, swiping at him. He dodged, ducking down just avoiding a swipe.

Crack!

He fired a shell into one of the beasts and it fled.

They can be hurt by lead apparently. Rex crouched back down. He scanned the darkness in front of him in the moon's glow and the green eyes staring at him. The shaman began to chant from the back of one of the beasts. *Some kind of incantation*, Rex figured.

The sky above the shaman began to swirl in neon colors opening a portal that began to pull sand into it. A fierce wind escaped the hole with a foul smell of sulfur and decay.

Rex pulled his red bandana around his face to help keep the sand out of his lungs and bowed his head to protect his eyes. Where was that hat?

But the chant continued and rose in pitch to a

wailing scream. Strange drums from the other side of the portal began to roll in time with the shaman's words.

Rex did not know what to do. He looked around for Moondance and saw her standing nearby.

Good old girl. Rex crawled on his belly through the shifting sand toward her. He was surprised the open portal hadn't driven her off. She was used to her fair share of the supernatural, but this was a little too much to ask.

As he crawled, he came across his hat and put it on his head.

Rex reached Moondance and looked up at the portal to see some kind of tentacles with leathery slimy skin reaching down from above. Each one ended in a head with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth and red eyes.

The tentacles were searching for him and his horse. Slithering along the ground. They were hungry and wanted to feast on them. The shaman

was offering a sacrifice, and Rex was on the altar.

Rex mounted Moondance and spurred the horse to speed. He drew his Navy, cocked and fired a round at the shaman as Moondance leapt and hit the conjuror during his conjuration, knocking him from the back of the bear beast.

Rex kept going. He turned and fired and fired. He cocked his Navy again and click.

Empty.

He holstered the weapon.

The tentacled sky beast was not to be denied and started feasting upon bear beasts, while they screamed and ran.

Rex looked back to see the shaman holding the Hydra-like creature at bay with his crazy witchy rattle. Rex pulled Moondance to a stop and turned her. He ripped his Winchester rifle from the holster on the horse, aimed, and fired--hitting the shaman.

The rattle fell from his hands, allowing the

Hydra monster freedom to grab his former master and rip him limb from limb, while devouring him piece by piece, as heads whipped in taking bites from the screaming man.

Rex spurred Moondance to get away, as the portal closed. The tentacles retracted back inside leaving only darkness.

The desert returned to normal, and Rex slowed Moondance to a walk. Then, he called a halt to camp for the night. He was tired and needed a rest and had a strange hankering for some jerky.

Silver and Bone

by Emi Sada

"You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me, and still come with me, and hating me through death and after."

— Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*

I

People don't often knock on the witch's son's door. It might be the effect of the lavender fields all around the hut (nothing screams *distrust* like lavender), or the immortal reputation of his late master, or—quite possibly—the human skull nailed to the door. Nevertheless, when it comes to him, the village whispers, leading to a whole lot of rumors and not a whole lot of visitors.

Which is why the knock is a surprise.

He's dusting an ancient teacup from his master's collection when the sound comes. At first, he chalks it up to the wind. The door's an old thing, its iron hinges creaking every time the sky stirs—it's high time he got it fixed; but then again, it has been for half a century and he still hasn't bothered—and so the witch's son does what he does best: he ignores it.

But then it happens again. And again, and again, until there can be no doubt that the unlikely has come to pass: he has company.

Don't get him wrong. It's not *unprecedented*. It's just that nothing good ever comes from a knock on his door. The good people downstream seem utterly convinced that crossing the bridge to his side of the woods will get them cursed at best, and hung as porch ornaments at worst. So, to come all this way? It means a curse is the *least* of

their worries.

Only the darkest despair ever leads people to his door.

"What's it gonna be this time?" he asks to the silent collection on the shelves. "Hellhound bite? Dead aunt that won't quit? Moon tea? It's been a while since we've had—"

He opens the door.

A girl blinks at him dazedly.

Then she collapses headfirst into the floorboards.

"—that."

II

One glance at her attire is all he needs to know. The salt packs in her belt; the Greek fire vials poking from her pockets; the silver longsword hanging at her hip.

A dragonhunter.

And, judging from the gaping wound in her side, a nearly dead one.

He's treated worse. Of course he's treated worse. He's amputated limbs and burnt out infections and yanked spirits back into their still-breathing bodies by the wick of their soul threads.

It still takes him all night to get her stable.

By the time the sun is blinking over the horizon, the witch's son is *spent*. His hands are covered in

poultice, his clothes are stained with blood, and died a chew toy.

the scent of death is everywhere. Hovering, like a The hunter's back is taut with pain, but she promise she still might keep. doesn't make a sound. Only the quiver of her skin

He doesn't even realize he's passed out until gives it away. "I'm starving, though."
something jolts him awake.

When he opens his eyes, room bathed in the bowl. "Why are you so impatient to join my skull shades of impending dusk, the girl stares back. collection, Lucy Walker?"

"Nice skull," says the dragonhunter, half- "Why do you even *have* a skull collection?"
propped up on her elbows, nodding at the jar on Lucy throws a glance behind her shoulder, to him the shelf. "What'd it do to end up in skeleton jail?" and to the shelves lining the walls.

For a moment, the witch's son just *looks* at her. He lets his eyes wander with hers, all around The girl who'd almost died. "Pulled his stitches," the living room. The early morning light bathes it he sentences, and the dragonhunter quickly lies in greys. "Eh. Came into it."
back down. "As in, inherited?"

III

"This smells horrible."

Her name is Lucy Walker. Freelance except for the crack running down from the crown. dragonhunter, daughter of the British Isles, and His skin prickles at the sight of foreign hands on it, quite possibly the worst patient he's ever had. but she handles it with care. Reverence, even. "You're welcome to smell worse. As in, like a "They have names? All of them?"
corpse. Roll over."

Lucy scrunches up her nose. "Tastes horrible, course. They were people, once."
too."

"That's because you're not supposed to *eat it*." The witch's son drops his gaze. "No." He walks
He slathers the golden-green poultice over the raw into the kitchen, beginning to put the poultice patch in her side, taking special care with the spots away. "No, I don't."

the fangs went in. Any deeper, and she would've For once, Lucy doesn't press.

IV

“Why do you live here all alone?”

The witch’s son throws an apple in the air. He doesn’t usually cook for himself, but with Lucy around, he quickly figured out it was either that or find his armchairs chewed. “Why do you hunt dragons all alone?”

For a moment, Lucy’s gaze is lost. Faraway. But she schools it quickly. “Oh, you know. Beats working as a laundry maid.”

“Does it, though? I don’t often get laundry maids with their sides bitten off here.”

“That’s because I take care of the water wyrms.” She pulls out a necklace from her shirt, lifting it over her head. “See?”

The witch’s son doesn’t take it, but he leans closer. A thin silver chain, lined with fangs of wildly different shapes, colors, and sizes. Earth drakes, air leviathans, fire wyverns. “Quite the collection.”

“Thanks.” She loops it back around her neck. “Though they’re not exactly trophies. More like... reminders.”

“Of what?”

“Failure.”

The single word catches him by surprise. That, and the tone it’s spoken with. Soft, heartbroken guilt.

When he finally turns from the stove, Lucy’s

face is lacking all its usual playfulness. Instead, a bitter smile is there, pulling her lips taut like the edges of a wound. “No one really knows anything about dragons. What they are, where they come from. What they truly want. We kill them because they’re dangerous, or because we crave what they’re guarding, and we never ask ourselves *why* they’re guarding it in the first place. Why they’re so desperate to protect.”

Suddenly, his throat feels tighter. “Sounds like you might be overthinking it, Lucy.” A beat goes by, then two. “Maybe they’re just monsters.”

“Maybe.” Lucy’s gaze drops to the fangs, a crown of bones around her heart. “But we don’t *know* that. And every dragon I have to kill is a dragon I fail to understand. So that’s why I keep them. To remember the ones I couldn’t save.” A watery laugh. “Sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

His eyes flit to the skulls on the shelves. “Nah.” Their empty sockets return an empty stare. It couldn’t be otherwise. “Not that crazy.”

The hunter tucks the necklace out of sight, and the witch’s son falls quiet.

V

Lucy doesn't stay very long. Just under a week, in fact. Enough for her wound to seal up and the toxins to be purged from her bloodstream.

The witch's son expected this. Everybody leaves the hut eventually.

What he didn't expect was for her to *come back*.

"Hey!" she greets with a bloody arm. Her grin clashes horribly with the three gashes over her right shoulder. "Got any stinky poultice left?"

And then *keep coming back*.

Mangled. Bloodied. Beaten an inch from finding out the truth about God.

"Love what you've done with the place," she winks on a chilly autumn night, wobbling on a single leg.

"I didn't change a thing."

"Then why's there two of you?"

Once, she shows up with her hair *still on fire*. "Wyvern?" the witch's son asks casually, grabbing the garden hose.

Lucy grins. "Wyvern *nest*."

"Show-off."

Sometimes, she won't even bother to *knock*. He'll be in the middle of taxiderming a crow, and the next second, Lucy Walker will be standing in his living room, shaking snow out of her hair and

tracking blood on his floor. "Hey. Is the kettle on?"

"That depends. Are those spikes in your back?"

Other times, she won't even be strictly conscious. He'll just find her passed out on his stoop in the morning, on his way to water the plants, and sling her over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes. At which point she'll usually give her first sign of life: "Tea."

"I can do that *or* I can stop the bleeding."

A groan. "*Tea*."

Before he knows it, Lucy has become a fixture, as much as any piece of his late master's collection.

Only, for the first time in his life, his master has nothing to do with it.

VI

"Why are the villagers so scared of you?"

They're taking a walk between the lavender fields around the house. Lucy's idea. Apparently, the witch's son *doesn't get enough sun* and looks *as pale as the bones he keeps*. "Why don't you ask them?"

"I did. They gave me garlic and a cross."

"That's nice of them. Now you won't have to worry about your dinner being bland ever again." He steps gingerly on the path, keeping his distance from the overgrown stalks threatening to tickle

him right in the nose. Lavender, much like Lucy, witch's son tears gaze away. "Maybe they just has no concept of boundaries. "Or, you know. think that where there's smoke, there's fire."

Running out of firewood."

"Yeah? Then it's a good thing I'm here."

A playful shove. "I'm serious. What's got them Grinning, she catches him by the arm. "Don't so worked up?" Her fingers trail over the lavender worry. I won't let the big bad dragon eat you."

stalks, casting long shadows in the waning light. "Oh, I'm not worried." It's a lie. A lie, a lie, a lie.

Soon, it'll be dark. "Is it Steve the Thief?"

"I've got a good protector. Right, Steve?"

"It's not Steve the Thief." The witch's son Lucy shoves him again, and the witch's son glances back to the skull acting as a knocker on his narrowly escapes a lavender bath.

front door. "Though, I won't deny it, he probably helps."

VII

"To keep the villagers terrified of you?"

If only it were that simple. "Look around, Lucy. Dragons can't leave their treasures. They're There's enough stuff here to fuel superstition for forever tied to them.

centuries."

"You said you inherited your collection. From whom?"

"What, the lavender?" It's ancestral magic, older than blood. "My

"And the river. And the salt cliffs. And the magnesium geysers just *above* the salt cliffs. Not master."

"He wasn't your dad, then?"

to mention the iron mines downstream." No matter what, a dragon won't let danger

"All the more reason! You've got, like, *four* natural defenses." She gestures broadly around come to its most prized possessions.

"Nah. The villagers just assumed."

herself. "This is the safest place on the hillside. A dragon-proof fortress."

No matter what, a dragon will never be parted from what it holds dearest in the world.

Lucy's white tunic swirls as she turns. Like this, standing at the center of the path with her arms

"Do you miss him?" Lucy asks after a moment, expression faltering in the lantern-light.

wide, surrounded by the purple strokes of earth and sky, she reminds him of a goddess of old.

The witch's son looks around the hut. At all the artifacts that never belonged to him. "It's hard to miss him when he's everywhere."

Before the crosses—before the stakes. The fangs around her heart glisten in the dying sun, and the

"So this stuff—it's all his?"

"Mm. Gave it to me for safekeeping. Guess he thought he'd come back for it."

He didn't. Eliphas Barthes knew exactly what he was doing. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." The witch's son lets his eyes roam over the shelves. A sea of valuables, and a guard dog's bones. Then, his gaze flits to Lucy. To her bag, ready to go in the morning. "Me too."

VIII

At one point, Lucy starts bringing him gifts.

"Found this in the mountains." She holds out the oblong skull with both hands—a sheep's, most likely. "Thought you might like it."

The first time it happens, the witch's son has to school his surprise. "What were you doing so far north?"

"Hunting." She isn't covered in blood this time, so she must've not found whatever she was hunting for. Or it must've not found her. "Been following a trail. Strawberries?"

Goats. Hares. Squirrels. Soon, his collection has taken over the kitchen, too.

"Are you sure we can't fit it on the counter?"

"Lucy, it's a *bison*."

"Centerpiece, then."

It's a rainy autumn night when a faint knocking

startles him awake.

He half-expects it to be the wind. Just in case, he checks.

And there she stands.

Soot-stained. Soaked. Shivering.

On her lips, a wavering smile. In her hands, a charred skull the size of an apple. A dragon skull.

A child's.

"Can I come in?"

It's the first time she's asked.

IX

"The next one will be my last."

She speaks the words in somber resolve, once the clouds have parted over a misty morning after.

Around her cup of tea, her fingers are still trembling.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. No more."

He knows what she means. He wishes he didn't. He wishes Lucy Walker had left her heart behind where the bones of that little skull lay to rest, forever shielded from the pain of living things. *Safe*. "One last chance to figure it out, and then I'm done." The fangs are bunched up in Lucy's fist, glinting like tears. Silver and bone: a synthesis of what they are. Dragons, and the ones who hunt them. "One way or another."

"Stay."

Surprise crosses over both their faces. Lucy recovers first. "What about the dragons?"

"Forget the bloody dragons. Someone else can die for them."

Somehow, Lucy's smile is still as warm as that first day. Warm, and just as sad. "They don't have anyone else."

Neither do I. "Lucy, please."

"I have to."

"No, you don't. It's suicide."

"Then come with me."

The witch's son hasn't had a heart for centuries. Today, he feels it drop. "I—" The hut crowds around him like a maw, each artifact a shark's tooth. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. We'll go past the fields."

"I can't."

"We'll walk across the river."

"I *can't*."

"Right." She bites her lip, casting her sad smile to the floor. "Gotta keep the collection safe."

He wishes he could let it burn.

X

Watching her go is agony.

He stands in the doorway. Lucy stays one step ahead, bathed in the golden hour glow. Around

them, the wind is picking up, making the stalks shake and sway. "Promise you'll keep the kettle on for me?"

"Yeah." His throat tightens. The next words come in a whisper. "I promise."

The dragonhunter smiles.

Then she turns. She turns to the lavender fields, and his head starts throbbing; to the bridge, the river that will carry her away, away, *away*—

The witch's son grips his chest. A hollow pounding keeps cutting his breaths shorter and shorter, the image of Lucy overlapping with the last dragon that will take her, take her ***away from***

him—

When the storm breaks, it breaks under clear skies. It breaks with a roar, and a whirlwind, and a sea of uprooted lavender stalks. It breaks with Lucy Walker looking straight at him, fangs glistening around her heart.

It breaks, and it breaks them both.

By the time he sees her draw her longsword, the witch's son's thoughts are hazy. Red fills his vision where the golden light once was, and the glint of silver plucks a howl from his chest. He rises, and rises, and steam rises to his throat. Burning, like a thousand fiery flowers.

"*Lucy...*" It comes out as a rasp. Hollow, monstrous.

But Lucy doesn't see the monster in his eyes.

For whatever reason, Lucy has never once seen him as the monster the world knew him to be. It's half-charred now, and a piece of jawbone has fallen off, but all in all, it does its job alright.

And so, Lucy doesn't run.

Dragons can't leave their treasures. They're forever tied to them. The witch's son sits at the kitchen table, sorting through boxes of dried leaves. In the next room, antiques litter the shelves. Soon, he'll need to get

(A clash of bone and silver; a chaotic chorus in to work on them. Dusting, and repairing, and his head. His scales sizzle, and the voice within counting them one by one.

rears back in outrage, calling *mine, mine, mine*—) Soon, but not yet.

It's ancestral magic, older than blood.

(The human dances around him like water. Her window. On the wall, hanging in full sunlight, a eyes glint like water, too. But her smile is there, row of fangs dangles from a silver chain. One of always there, warm and familiar and sad, sad, *sad* them isn't as perfectly-set as the others, but he —) doesn't mind it. His hands still bear the scars from

No matter what, a dragon won't let danger that work. Untreated, even now. come to its most prized possessions.

(She drops her longsword, arms opening wide half-drowned out by the kettle's whistle. A gap in as he lunges, as the last glimpse of reason at the his teeth shows as he speaks. "I was thinking Chai. back of his head screams at her to *run, run, RUN* You up for Chai?"

—)

No matter what, a dragon will never be parted rummaging for biscuits when, unexpectedly, a from what it holds dearest in the world. sound comes his way.

A knock on the door.

XI

The witch's son blinks. "Huh." He waits, listening to the wind outside, but there's none.

People don't often knock on the witch's son's Hasn't been for ages, really. "Looks like we've got door. Even though the lavender's regrowth has company."

been painstakingly slow and patchy, and barely As he makes his way to the doorway, he passes anyone remembers his late master anymore, the through the living room. The collection stares at skull at the door still has the effect of a warning. him from above, like trees in a graveyard. He

wonders how the shelves would look, licked by flames. Maybe one day he'll get to find out.

"Guess we'd better see what they want," he tells his companion, raising his palms to the light.

Looking, as the face in his hands almost looks back. Bone-white, and silver-still. "Right, Lucy?"

Not Really There

by Russ Bickerstaff

I'm looking right at the wall. And I know that it's there. But I also know that I can walk through it. So maybe it's only there as a hallucination.

That's a visual illusion or something like that. But I know that the wall bearer. I just know that I can walk through it. And there isn't anything that's terribly good about that. I mean, somethings fundamentally wrong if I can walk through the wall in question. I mean, I don't really feel good about the situation. But nevertheless, it's right there. So I feel kind of strange about it.

I don't know exactly how it is, but I came to be

aware of the fact that I could walk through this wall. I mean, I haven't. But I know that I can. And there's something kind of weird about that. I mean, just because I can doesn't mean I should, right? And I don't know what I would find on the other side of that wall if I did walk-through it. I mean, it could be anything, right? Or it could be a trap. That's entirely possible. I mean, there would be a novelty of walking through the wall. But then there would be something awful and unspeakable on the other side.

Of course, if it was going to be some sort of a trap, then it wasn't really well lined up, was it? It's not like anyone's told me, but I can walk through that wall. I just came to the realization. And generally speaking that sort of thing isn't really compelling or effective for a ramp, is it? I don't think it is. Sort of insinuating that someone can walk for a while doesn't necessarily mean they're going to be able to do so. So they're probably going to question whether or not it's even real.

They're probably not going to do so. They're probably not going to actually walk through the wall in question. And tell it wouldn't really be a terribly effective crowd that's what was going to be going on. So I don't think that's it.

Nevertheless, the wall is there. And I have the unshakable understanding that I can walk through it. And so I feel kind of like I have something special about me. Some kind of special power. I mean, that's kind of cool, isn't it? I think it probably is. Although it's really more of a distraction than it is anything. And I don't really like that kind of distraction. I don't really like that kind of an experience. I don't want to have this knowledge this horrible knowledge that I can walk through that wall. And until I walk away from it knowing full well that there's this wall somewhere on my daily life, I can just walk through. But there's got to be something else, hasn't there? One does not simply acquire the power to walk the rest single wall, does one? I don't I really don't.

And so I spend the rest of the day, looking at the rest of the walls. The walls in my office. The halls at home. The walls at the restaurant that I go to at the end of the day. And I'm looking around. And I'm absolutely certain that I can't walk or any of the rest of the walls. It's just that one wall that I can walk through. That's the only wall that I can walk through. And I don't know exactly how it is that I'm supposed to feel about that, but I mean...I'm feeling more or less okay about it...at least for now.

And so I'm falling asleep and I know that I'm having dreams of this wall. And I'm having dreams of walking through the wall, but I'm not having any specific dreams of what happens when I get out on the other side of it all. I just keep dreaming about walking through the wall. Then that's it. That and nothing more. So I feel kind of weird about it. I mean, I wake up, thinking about the wall. And I wake up, thinking about walking

through the wall.

And clearly that this is a sense of repetition.

And then perhaps it's something that's only going

to be resolved when I actually do walk through it.

And at this stage absolutely certain but I'm going

to walk through it at some point in the future. I

don't know whether or not I'm going to do that

today, though. After all: I'm kind of busy. And

there's no telling what's going to happen to me on

the other side of the wall. I want to make sure that

I'm getting the work in that I need to get in.

It's entirely possible that what lies on the

other side of that wall is going to be very

monumental. And it's probably going to take me

out for the rest of the day or even the rest of the

week. Whatever it is that I find on the other side

of that wall. So I don't want to run the risk of a less

than productive day as a result of doing what it is

that I know that I can do. I just don't know why it

is that I can do what I can do. And I don't know

why it is that I would do what I can do.

Time passes. I quickly get entrenched in work.

Thoughts of the wall that I can walk through are

somewhere in the back of my mind. I know I want

to walk through the wall in question, but I know

that I'm going to walk through it eventually. Just

not today, that's all. I've got too much to worry

about. And then...tomorrow is Friday and I've got

a date for Friday night, so I'm not...and then

there's the weekend, so I'm not even coming into

the office. And then there's that deadline on

Monday...but I know I'm going to be walking

through that wall. I know I am...



All in the Family by
José Sánchez