

Unnnamed Journal



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From the Publisher

You may have noticed that this issue was late. This was due to a protracted Mexican standoff involving one of our contributors, a swarm of beige-jacketed realtors, and an ibex. We have resolved the matter to everyone's financial and/or intellectual satisfaction. Incidentally, ibex is delicious when properly salted.

You also may have noticed that we skipped a month somewhere and are now putting out issues in what were our off-months. This was the result of a series of editorial meetings that tended, due to creative differences, to mission-creep into UFC simulations, debates on the finer points of *Game of Thrones*, and attempts to recreate (strictly for scientific purposes) the Roses of Heliogabulus. We're almost done paying off the settlements.

But your patience has been rewarded. This issue is filled with quality content. First, John Barleycorn attempts to render Post-Apocalypitica in Hemingwayan/Ramond Carver-ish prose in *The Filth of Living*. Then, Alfred Underhill begins his own serial novel, *Ulysses and the Fugitive*. It looks bloody interesting.

Then the aforesaid contributor, Andrew J. Patrick, gives us evidence of his recent discovery that Robert E. Howard could actually write, with a 7,000-word blood-and-thunder bit of Conania entitled *The Dying Goddess*. He has muttered something about "world-building," so if he becomes the next George R.R. Martin, you can nerd-point to this magazine as where the madness began. I can see the Reddit posts now.

Enjoy your subscriptions.

Thomas Fitz
Publisher

The Filth of Living

By John Barleycorn

The battle-wagon was somewhere in the dark, slag-filled corridors of Jersey Hills hunting for cybbies, drinking moonshine with grencrum chasers, when Maxi started to get quiet. They'd been having fun up until now, making noise and blowing the roofs off the abandoned gas stations with the pulse gun mounted topside. They weren't really expecting to find cybbies. But it was a good way to get your rocks off. It was a good way to get out of the Castle.

But after Turner shot a HEAT round into the ruins of a strip mall, watching the shell of a tobacco shop go up alongside the shell of a Pilates studio, he looked at Maxi and she wasn't smiling. That's when Turner knew something was up. Maxi always smiled to see fire in the warrens of Jersey Hills.

"What's up?" said Turner.

Maxi didn't say anything, but dropped the ash of her hand-rolled cigarette into her box of swag: baseball cards, Pokemon figurines, broken plastic robots and My Little Ponies with hair frightfully unkempt. Somehow the ash filtered through this sour mash of nostalgia and settled in the bottom of the box. Turner wondered why she did this. She never took any of the items out, not even to clean them off. Yet she never went anywhere without it. Even though it made a terrible ashtray.

She looked at Gore, the driver, a cheerful guy in a stained blue Mets Cap.

"Silence the fuel," she said, "Go to hybrid power."

"You got it," said Gore.

Suddenly the noise cut out and the battle wagon cut quiet as a whisper through the warren of blind alleys and wide thoroughfares that made up Jersey Hills. Brick walls and stucco walls and walls of pressed garbage emerged and died in conformance to no known pattern but Gore kept up with it. Gore knew these warrens. He came from them; a real barrow-boy.

After a while Turner lost track of what direction they were going in, or how close they were to the glow of the Hive. It all seemed the same: dead empty, a shadow of a world lost forever. A drunk's vision of a city, a toilet and walls to lean against. He could make no sense of it. But hat wasn't his job.

Meanwhile Maxi plugged her soft blue eyes into the oscilloscope. She read the bouncing line like a signal that told her when cybbies were coming. Maxi was one of the best readers in the Resistance. It was why she was still alive and uncybbbed and nearly thirty. Or past thirty. Turner didn't know Maxi that well, or women, but he knew enough not to ask. She looked good naked, anyway.

"There it is," said Maxi, "stop here."

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Turner put his head next to Gore's and looked out the battle-wagon's front eyeliner for what they'd supposedly driven into the warrens for. A sphere, no wider than a basketball, glowing deep blue in the dusk. Floating in the air. A matrix eye, gathering intel for the perfecti in the Hive. Suspicions confirmed: cybbies about.

Turner looked at Gore and Gore looked at Turner and Gore grinned and Turner sneered.

"Ten-to-one it's a trap," said Gore.

Turner looked at Maxi, who had pulled her eyes out of the scope and was powering down the detection gear so she could power up the wagon's electromagnetic blast array. She paid Turner no attention while she completed this task, and none while she finished her cigarette. When the last tendril of smoke left that, she flicked the butt into Turner's chest.

Turner watched it bounce off his chest and spark onto the floor. He stepped on it with his dirty boot. Then he looked up.

"Of course it's a trap," said Maxi. "Suit up, you're going out there."

Turner nodded.

* * *

Ten minutes later by the Castle clock he was walking out of the battle wagon, Maxi aiming a slug rifle over his shoulder, Gore up on the pulse-gun. Turner felt an electric tension in his body. It had been a few weeks since he'd gotten to take apart some cybbies. He'd been working munitions and supply shifts at the Castle to overcome a shortage in High Command's strategic reserves. There were never enough bullets or enough batteries. Besides, it was a good way to pick up extra scrip. He was saving up to take Maxi down to the spa clubs underneath Barre. Not that she knew that.

He approached the matrix eye and did the protocol: slapped it with an ion spike and then, while the thing whirred and hummed out of the circuit interrupt, opened the access panel underneath and plugged in a portable power diverter. Within a few minutes, it would suck the juice right out of the thing. The blue glow faded and the sphere began to sink slowly down to earth.

"Turner," said Maxi on his headset.

"Yeah," said Turner.

"Three of them, three o'clock."

"That all?" said Turner.

"Probably not," said Gore.

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"Well, if you see any more, keep them off of me," said Turner, and he moved his helmet just enough to get them in his peripheral vision, but otherwise did not move a muscle.

He saw the three. Two females and a male, by the look of it, although cybbies tended to androgyny. One of them was white, one Asian, and a third either Hispanic or Arab. Not that it mattered. The diversity of cybbies was skin deep. Underneath, they were all part of the Hive.

They wore oiled boots and pressed trousers and puffy jackets, all in slightly varying shades of brown. Underneath their clothes they had stun weapons and soul spikes, but otherwise they looked like hikers from a lost civilization wandering through the burned ruins.

Turner let them get close. He let them get very close. Close enough to see their dead black doll eyes. The Hispanic one, the male, raised a hand with a stun weapon in it without appearing to aim it. Turner felt a jolt of bliss. This was going to be fun.

The pulse-gun on the battle wagon went off and Turner hit the deck. The round missed him and missed the male cybby but it did cause him to turn and finally acknowledge the battle-wagon's existence. Cybbies were crap at tactical awareness. They didn't have to be any good at it.

The round also disoriented the other two, but it hit two more that had emerged from an alley of garbage and ripped them into tiny pieces. More were coming, but that was expected. It was always expected.

Turner popped up and had his flash whips out and slashed the arm of the male cybby and the head of the white female. That one wandered around the fight like a dead chicken until it fell over, which Turner found very funny. The Asian female tried to jab at him with a soul spike and she got within his reach but his armor was of the newer kind and too hard for the spike to get through. Turner grabbed her arm with one hand and brought his elbow down on her elbow and felt an entirely satisfying crunch. The face of the cybby registered no pain - they never did - but she dropped her soul spike and disengaged.

More rounds from the pulse gun cut over and around Turner and blew cybernetic humanoids to Kingdom Come. Gore was good at what he did. They were all good at what they did. He wondered if Maxi was watching him.

Turner spun in an arc with his flash whips slicing around him. The air crackled and sparked as free neutrons were cut from the nitrogen in the atmosphere. He caught the male cybby - now armless - trying to grab Turner's leg and bite it. Some of the newer ones had spikes in their mouths and could cyberfy you that way. But Turner cut his face off and as the shiny blood and smooth tissue ripped off Turner kicked at the hybrid plastic-bone skull. The head cracked and it flopped at an ugly angle and the rest of its body went with it.

The matrix eye finally fell to the ground with a comical clank.

* * *

Turner spent a handful of time burning the bodies with a napalm-lime acid that would render the cybbies unrecoverable to the Hive. He counted - twelve. Not a bad takedown for a three-man crew. Maxi had the

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receipt sent to High Command before Turner was done. They would be well paid for tonights work. Turner could practically smell the spas.

When he got inside, Turner held up the head of the white female to Maxi. "For you," he said. Maxi laughed and set it down on her console while she helped Turner out of his gear.

"That's contraband," said Gore, with a furrowed brow.

"You're contraband," said Maxi.

When he had his armor off, Turner didn't get undressed right away. He sat in an undershirt and boxer shorts in a seat with disintegrated upholstery that no longer adjusted for lumbar support. He felt entirely at ease in his sweat, and Maxi had only smiles for him as she plugged wires and nodes into the cybbie's spine.

At last she got it wired properly, and the eyes of the head came open. It blinked in confusion for a second or two, and then looked around itself with its lips curling up in abhorrence.

"Ew," it said. "You people."

"Hello, my lovely," said Maxi. "You get to be our mascot now."

"You're disgusting," said the head.

"We're filthy," said Maxi.

"We're alive," said Turner.

"You're over," said the head. "You're refuse. We are humanity now. We are the future."

Maxi flicked the things forehead, and she repeated herself: "We are the future."

Maxi did that five or six more times, and each time the head that looked like a female human but was really part of a cybernetic hive mind just kept repeating "We are the future...We are the future...We are the future..."

They laughed as the battle wagon drove through the warrens in the inky night. **UJ**

Ulysses and the Fugitive

By Alfred Underhill

Chapter 1 :A Quiet Drink

The crowd at Bar Bar was on the thick side. The Jukebox played Tom Waits while Ulysses waited for Giles to get back from the men's room with their drugs. He poured himself some beer in the muted light and scanned the dive bar. Hipsters, college kids, locals: all occupied in their own conversations and affairs. Another night in Denver, he thought.

Giles walked over to the table and sat down. His easy smile was exaggerated by a maniacal gleam in his eyes. The deal must have gone well.

"So," he said, "How'd we do?" Ulysses gave the room another quick look around after asking his question.

"Great!" Giles practically yelled. Ulysses motioned toward the table with the palm of his hand. "we did great," Giles's voice was quieter this time but no less enthusiastic. "Bloke came through. We got acid, weed, some K, and he threw in some blow for an extra twenty."

"That why you're all pumped?" Ulysses didn't try to hide his disdain. The telltale sniffling Giles made told him all he needed know. "You can keep the coke," he said, "you know I don't do that shit."

"More for me, mate." Giles was grinning and dabbing at his nose. "Let's not be sour, eh? What say we get another pitcher? It's on me." He was trying to be magnanimous, and Ulysses did want more beer.

"Sure, yeah. Let's do another round. We'll head back after that." He forced a grin as he spoke.

"Right! I'm on it," Giles snuffled. He was already walking toward the bar.

Ulysses shook his head and watched his friend chatting up the bartender. He knew Giles would stay until the place closed if he could. And why not? He was young, on vacation in a foreign country; he was casual, not a care in the world.

No, it was Ulysses who didn't feel comfortable here. There was just something about being in a dive bar at home that made him uneasy. He went to much sketchier places when he traveled. Hell, he met Giles in a bar worse than this when they were both backpacking in Cambodia. Maybe it was the distance that made him comfortable? Or maybe he just felt more at home when he was a foreigner? He knew the real answer was probably some combination of the two. There was just something comforting about being alien and far from home.

Giles came back with a fresh pitcher. He poured Ulysses a pint and poured himself one, then settled into his chair.

"Cheers," they both said, clinking glasses. Ulysses drank a third of his pint before setting it down. Giles eyed him

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inquisitively, sniffing slightly.

"You seem rather quiet. Something on your mind?"

Ulysses looked at his friend and shrugged. "I'm just thinking about why I'm not feeling this place tonight. No biggie. You've heard this stuff before. No need to rehash it." He fidgeted with his pint glass, and looked toward the Jukebox.

Giles nodded. "Uneasy being home, eh? I understand. I like this place, but I can see why you wouldn't with it being so close. If this bar were in Sydney, I wouldn't fuck with it."

"Right," said Ulysses, "I figured you'd get it. Just the old hometown blues. Maybe I should switch my search to places outside Denver?"

"Couldn't hurt," said Giles, before taking a swig of beer. "Maybe something on one of the coasts? Though a job abroad would probably do you better. I'm looking for something in Japan that'll last at least a few years. I'll look for work in China and Singapore too."

"Not the good old U.S. of A?" Ulysses grinned at Giles, genuinely this time.

"Oi, two things: first, fuck you. Second, this country's got its charms, but I don't think I'm cut out to live here for more than a few years."

Ulysses laughed while giving Giles the finger.

"I say that, in part, because the number of quality places to live here in the U.S. is declining and getting more expensive."

"You really think so?"

"Well, I could be exaggerating a bit. But then again, with few exceptions, the middle states of this country aren't doing well. So that limits some prospects right off. Why live somewhere with a low cost of living if I can't get a job? Right now, it'd be more effective to go some place more expensive, where I'll be more likely to get a job that'd pay more. 'Course then the cost of living is higher, so looking for work in the U.S. is fucked either way, really."

"Jesus, this conversation took a depressing turn," Ulysses said looking into his beer glass.

"Who's the whining bastard that started us on it? Maybe you ought to change your stance on having a little bump? Might fix your attitude."

"Nah, it's cool. I told you I don't do that shit. I'll be fine," said Ulysses. "I do appreciate your take on this country. It helps a lot to have an outside perspective from someone in a similar boat."

Giles nodded to him. "It'll come good for both of us, but it'll take some looking. Knowing what's what and what's worth it is the first part of the game. After that, it's just pushing until you get something you want." Giles gulped

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down the rest of his pint, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm going to hit the loo."

Ulysses finished his own pint once Giles had left the table. He refilled both of their glasses, emptying the pitcher. They'd finish their beer then head back to his apartment. Maybe he'd smoke a little when they got back, try to mellow out.

Giles emerged from the bathroom. Ulysses watched his Australian friend walk a few feet and stop at a table where a couple of young women were checking their phones. He saw Giles introducing himself, asking what their names were. They didn't seem interested in making conversation. It looked like the redhead was just pretending Giles wasn't there. The dark haired one that wore too much makeup was looking intently toward the bar. Ulysses followed her gaze to a tall, solid looking guy who was frowning intently back at her. Oh shit, I need to go grab Giles before he gets himself crushed, thought Ulysses.

Walking toward Giles and the two young women, Ulysses tried to draw his friend's gaze, but he was oblivious. The frowning guy was moving in that direction too.

"Hey, Giles," said Ulysses, "we need to finish our beer and go home." He had reached his friend a few steps ahead of frowning guy.

"Lee, I was just introducing myself to Chrissy and Rona here. Girls, this is Lee."

"Hi," said Ulysses hastily to both of them, looking over at frowning guy who had just reached the table. "Giles, good buddy, we need to go. Now."

"What's the rush, Lee? I was thinking—" Giles was cut short by frowning guy's fist hitting his jaw. Chrissy screamed as Giles lurched away from her. Ulysses was trying to get himself between frowning guy and Giles, when someone behind him wrapped their arm around his neck.

Whoever had a grip on him was trying to execute some sort of sleeper hold, but it wasn't working. Ulysses began to alternately jam his elbows into his assailant's ribs. In front of him, Giles was trading blows with frowning guy, when someone else hit the Aussie from behind with a bar stool. Ulysses's strangler's grip had loosened, and with a few more strikes he was free of the hold. He sprang forward, into the blossoming brawl, toward a staggered Giles. Ulysses kicked the back of frowning guy's knee so that he pitched forward into another combative patron, whom immediately began wrestling with him. Ulysses grabbed Giles by the sleeve and made for the door.

Someone threw a bottle that narrowly missed the back of his head and shattered next to the door. Another glass missile erupted into shards by Giles's feet, prompting him to let out a howl. Ulysses shouldered the door open and pulled Giles out of the bar with him.

They hurried along the sidewalk. Any second frowning guy or someone else would come out after them.

"You okay?"

"Fucking cunts got me in the leg with that one. Think they cut me, but fuck that. I'll have a look when we're farther away. Let's go!"

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Ulysses nodded, and the two crossed the street quickly. They went down the block and took a right turn. They were out of sight but needed to walk up a little further before they'd be able to hail a cab. As they rushed along, they could here sirens in the distance.

"Sounds like we left at the right time, eh?" They paused at a bus stop.

"Yeah, I'd say so" said Ulysses. "Getting arrested for assault, property damage, and the drugs you're carrying would've been game over for both of us." Ulysses watched the gravity of the situation dawn on his friend. "They probably would've just sent you home and said you couldn't come back for awhile. Me? Well..."

"You'd've been fucked, even if you didn't end up in prison. I know how it is with jobs and employers here. Fucking stupid." Giles shook his head. "Thanks for getting us out of there. I don't know what that cunt's problem was. Fucking punching a fella for talking to some girls without so much as a, 'oi, fuck off!' first. Bloody yanks!"

"You're welcome, Giles. But tell me something: has that ever happened to you back home?"

"Fuck off, Lee."

Ulysses chuckled, turning his gaze downward. "How's your leg? Do you need stitches or will a bandage suffice?" Giles pulled up his damp trouser leg gingerly. Beneath they could see a decent amount of blood that had started to thicken in texture. It stained the top of his sock. There were a few lacerations on his calf, but none of them looked deep.

"Should be all right once I clean it up. I'll check for glass once it's washed off. If I'm wrong, I'll take me-self to the doc-in-a-box."

"If you say so," Ulysses replied. "I'll hail us a cab." Ulysses stood on the curb and waived to several taxis before one finally stopped to pick them up. The ride home was short and quiet.

* * *

“O kay, now that you're all cleaned up and I've had a little to smoke, let's review our plans for tomorrow.”

"We need to get the car," said Giles. His leg sported a clean bandage and was propped up on the arm of the couch. "Then we load our gear. We'll hit the market for the food and whatnot we don't have. After that, it's just the road until we reach Black Rock."

"That's the general plan," said Ulysses. "I wanted to mention something specifically important: I bought a larger tent that has partitions inside. So we'll still hear each other when we're around, but we won't have to see anything."

"That's handy. I don't think my delicate mind could handle the sight of nasty old Lee's unspeakable habits!" Giles put his hands to the sides of his face, impersonating Macaulay Culkin from Home Alone.

"I'm pretty sure you've seen most of them at this point, Kevin" Ulysses replied. They both laughed. "There was

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something else I wanted to check, though. Can I see the stuff we picked up earlier? I want to figure out how much and when at the burn."

"You plan too much my friend," Giles said with a sigh. "It's all in my bag; have a look."

Ulysses got their drugs out of Giles's bag and began taking inventory. He peered at each of the little plastic bags individually, ignoring the cocaine. It looked like they had enough weed to share with others if they wanted to. There was a decent amount of everything else for two people but not more. Overall, their supply looked a little slim, but it would do the job.

"Does the stash meet your satisfaction, Herr Doktor Lee?" Giles was using his bad German accent.

"Ja, das ist gut," Ulysses responded. "All right, I think that's everything I can think to check tonight. I'm going to wind-down for a few, then go to bed."

"Cheers, mate."

Ulysses nodded to his friend as he walked through the doorway into his bed room. **UJ**

The Dying Goddess

by Andrew J. Patrick

I

*"In fair Gellendria, the sails are bright
The Lady of the Sea stops night,"*

-Tale of the Vendines

Above the deep blue waters of the Great Syndric Sea, far into that continuous archipelago known to the men of Cevalon as the Spear Isles, a tall and elegant statue held a proud stance above the city of Guhlia. It was the statue of Alia-Venda, the Lady of the Sea, and the chief divinity of Atmos, the island where Guhlia was founded long ago by such races of men that braved the ocean's vastness. She had been built of bronze by her priestesses, who had woven into the metal an alchemy that defeated the salt in the air, keeping it bright and shiny for centuries, so that she caught the afternoon sun and shimmered like a beacon over the horizon. Her arms outstretched in welcome, and in lieu of legs she bore a mermaid's tail.

The ship came over the horizon in the arc of the afternoon. From the high temple of Alia-Venda, which was still the highest point on the isle of Atmos, one could have spied it sooner. But no one was looking. The Temple had been in disrepair ever since the Captain's Wars a decade ago had torn apart the Gellendrian League. Now the great statue of Alia-Venda, Lady of the Sea, looked out alone, and her acolytes huddled nearer to the base, as children hiding in their mother's skirts.

That day the city of Guhlia, the great port of Atmos and once the Chief city of the League, was also quiet. This was by custom. On the ninth day of the week the harbor closed and ships forbidden from setting out or plying their wares. A ship that arrived on Seasday had to receive special permission from the Harbor Master.

The crew of the ship did not know this. If they had, they would not have cared. The crew was made up of castaways and brigands and dead men. The dead men rowed, animated by a magic too dark for mortal ken. The brigands were reformed, turned away from their crimes and cruelties, and served at the pleasure of the ship's master in expiation for them. And the castaways served out of gratitude for their lives. The ship was black of hull with red sails, and known by a single name throughout the Spear Isles that extended like a ladder away from the Great Continent of Cevalon: *The Dread*.

The Dread skimmed across the waves like a bloody angel and arrived in the lonely port with the sun behind it. The piers were stuffed with ships but empty of men, and so the *Dread* dropped anchor and put a launch into the water. Dead men rowed it in to shore as the shadows crept across the empty square beyond the harbor.

When the launch got to the wall of the pier, a man leapt up and sprang onto the harbor. He stepped up and looked out at the square before him. To his left stood the Great Temple of Avia-Venda, which he had heard men speak of with regularity as the *Dread* had crossed the Spear Isles. He looked at its delapidated state with a sneer, but noted

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the tall bronze statue of he Goddess. The man was not the sort who cared much for pieties or architecture, but he could tell when something had been made by powers beyond his ken. He took the vision of the powerful Goddess with the failing worship seriously.

Across the square, another temple had risen, built of red brick interlaced with a dark shiny stone very like onyx. It had no statue, nor symbol, nor sign, and jutted upwards in the shape of a ziggurat. The man surmised it to be a temple because he could divine no other purpose for it. It had, it seemed, no point of egress.

"You there!" said a voice.

"Aye, me here," said the man, "what of it?"

Three men in bronze surcoats with a blue mermaid approached. Two held spear and shield, while a third had a short sword on his belt and a scroll in his hand. He was portly, with a thin black beard. This one spoke: "In the name of Gevandrin, High Captain of Atmos and First Sealord of the Gellendrian League, I ask your name and business here."

"My name is Tygg," said the man, "and by business is my own. What do the servants of this High Captain care anyway?"

The portly man absorbed this remark with narrowing eyes. "I am Lekri, the Harbor Master, and I am the one who will decide if you and yours gain entrance to Guhlia."

Tygg sized up the spearmen to Lekri's right and left. "How do you think to stop me?"

"Insolent dog," said Lekri. "This is my city and my harbor. I will know your business."

Tygg took a step towards Lekri, but the portly man's eyes showed no fear. The spearmen might be better than he thought.

"My business," Tygg said, "can be seen by any fool. Cast your eyes at the ship that brought me, and guess for yourself."

Lekri looked at the Dread and paused. Tygg knew well what that pause meant. Reputations preceded. Perhaps Tygg would be spared the need to fight his way ashore. That was always more trouble than it was worth. But somehow, the thought of the insolent fat man with his guts pouring out over what he called his harbor amused rather than bored Tygg.

"This ship is an abomination," came an oily voice from Tygg's left. He and Lekri looked to see a man in dark robes standing with his hands folded together. He was bald and his cheeks and brow were tattooed to resemble a lizard's scales. Vertical scars sat above and below his eyes.

But that was less remarkable to Tygg than the trail of women behind him. They were dressed in sandals and short cotton shifts and each had an emerald on her brow on a leather strap. They resembled crowns, but nothing else regal in the women's appearance could be seen. They stared blankly ahead and hardly seemed to breathe.

"Lord Sephar," said Lekri.

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"Master Lekri," said the man. The women said nothing.

"I was just about to return this man to his ship," said Lekri.

"Were you?" said Tygg.

"He is a barbarian," said the lizard-man. "We do not want his sort here."

Tygg responded to this with a raised eyebrow and a smile.

Lekri cleared his throat. "We know your ship, and we know its business. You are corsairs and demoniacs. We are Atmos, the Daughter of the Sea. There is no place for you here."

"Well, then, Son of Atmos," said Tygg, dropping into a fighter's crouch, "remove me."

The lizard-man hissed something in a guttural tongue Tygg did not understand. The two spearmen beside Lekri stepped forward, and lowered the points of their weapons. Tygg grinned and put his hands at the hilts of his two short swords.

"Kill him," said Sephar.

Tygg's swords came loose and he stepped forward to meet the spearpoints of the guardsmen as they thrust nearly in sync. He batted them aside, one and then the other, and with a step was ready to slice Lekri's weakly bearded face. The spearmen readjusted their points but they would not be fast enough.

"What is the meaning of this?" bellowed a voice from Tygg's right.

Everyone turned to see the arrival of a single man. He was tall, green of eye, in a bronze cloak evoking the statue of the Goddess. The spearmen bowed their heads and Lekri made obeisance with a hand to his chest.

"My Lord," he said.

The man stepped to Tygg and looked him in the eye. "You are Cevalese."

"I might be," said Tygg.

"Lord Gevandrin," said Lekri, "This man is a pirate. I was just about to..."

"Sephar," said Gevandrin, not taking his eyes from Tygg, "what concerns you of these matters?"

The lizard-man smiled. "I was merely offering my advise to our illustrious harbor-master."

"Of course."

Gevandrin stepped away from Tygg and looked out into the harbor where the Dread lay anchor. "I see," he said,

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and then turning back to Tygg, "and you came to our harbor alone?"

"Those rowed me ashore," said Tygg, pointing to the dead men in the boat, "but in a manner of speaking, I came alone, yes."

Gevandrin nodded. "What is your name, Cevalese?"

"I am called Tygg,"

"And your ship?"

"The *Dread*."

Gevandrin stroked his iron-grey beard. "I thought as much. Lekri, Tygg will come with me. See to your duties."

Lekri drew himself up to protest "My Lord..." he said.

"To your duties, Lekri," said Gevandrin, "Ships will put to sea tomorrow."

Lekri's face grew red, but he bowed in obedience. "As the High Captain commands."

Gevandrin walked away, beckoning Tygg to follow with a gesture. Tygg sheathed his blades and, with a mock salute to the harbor master, followed a few steps behind, out of the growing shadow of the great brick ziggurat. As he left, he saw the lizard man and his thralls moving swiftly in the other direction.

II

*"A hundred men the sea may drown,
A hundred beauties she may crown,"*

- The Tale of the Vendines

The smells of brine and barrels greeted Tygg as he walked from the square in Gevandrin's wake. He could see at last signs of life: smoke rising from chimneys, the sound of laughter in alehouses. But there remained a furtiveness on the narrow streets themselves. The few people who Tygg saw did not meet his eyes, and would step away quickly.

"There is fear here," Tygg said, partly to himself, but partly to see how Gevandrin would react. He made no sign of having heard.

At last the cobbled street opened up to a plaza containing a fountain and a ship. The fountain had a smaller version of the great statue by the harbor and smelled of seawater. The ship, or more properly, the forecastle of a ship, had been sealed with some cunning art in a golden lacquer and transformed into something very like a fortified tower. Guards of the kind Tygg had just tangled with stood at the arched entrance.

Tygg stopped and looked at it, examining for points of defense and points of weakness.

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"Are you coming, Cevalese?" said Gevandrin.

"This will not stop a determined assault," said Tygg. "It is all for show."

"You are full of insight, barbarian," replied Gevandrin. "You see a fearful people and a display of power. Shall we go inside and discuss how you may help with those?"

"Who said I wanted to help?"

Gevandrin snorted. "You did not need to. You are on our side, barbarian, for two reasons. One - you offend Sephar, who fears you. Two - *You are the Dread.*"

"I am not the *Dread.*"

"Do not be clever with me, barbarian. You know what I mean."

"Do not be clever with me, islander. You do not know the *Dread*, or why it is here."

The two men sized each other up. Gevandrin was bound to respect the hard edge of Tygg's grey eyes, the quality of his mailed armor, and the overall strength of his frame.

"I know enough," said Gevandrin.

Tygg did not move a muscle.

"Very well. Come inside and we shall talk of my city, and your ship."

Tygg watched the spearmen as he walked through the arch. They paid him no mind, but kept their eyes tensely forward.

Inside the atmosphere was more of a counting-house than a castle. Clerks in dark green tunics made entries into ledgers and tabbed coins onto scales. They worked hunched over and so deep into their labors that they did not even stop to notice their High Captain walking through. Tygg smiled. This, he knew, was the real power of a seaport like this: to trade and to tax and to amass wealth while standing still. It was a subtle power, which was not Tygg's way. But he was not so devoted to his strength as to fail to respect the hidden kind.

At last Gevandrin made his way to a solar, rich with purple curtains and bronze inlay. Open windows let in the scent of the sea and the sight of the horizon over a promontory. In the center of the solar was a stone table into which a chart of the wide oceans had been painstakingly carved. Gevandrin sat down roughly in one of the chairs and cocked a knee over one of its arms. He snapped his fingers and a servant appeared, bearing goblets and a decanter. He cast his eyes downward as he poured a dark wine with a powerful scent, and served a goblet to Gevandrin and one to Tygg. Then he made his exit.

"Is that a slave?" asked Tygg.

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"In a manner of speaking," said Gevandrin.

"Again with cleverness. A man is or is not a slave."

"He belongs to an order of our Goddess, an order that serves. I do not own him. He is kept at his duties by devotion to Our Lady, not by fear of a whip. We do not sell slaves in Guhlia. That vile practice led to the downfall of our great League."

Tygg drank his wine. It was rich and strong and left a powerful tang in the mouth as it passed, almost like poison. But it was not poison.

"This is Vendine seawine," said Tygg. "I had heard it was no longer made."

"It isn't," said Gevandrin. "The vines only grew from the white face of Mt. Atmos, outside the city. Some months ago, they withered and died. This is among the last of our casks. Our trade has collapsed accordingly. This is the fear that you saw on the streets: fear of destitution. It is said that the Goddess has abandoned us, and Atmos itself will sink beneath the waves."

Tygg swallowed the rest of his wine in a gulp. Gevandrin gaped at him, as though Tygg had not heard what the High Captain had said. But Tygg had.

"You know differently, though," he said.

Gevandrin cleared his throat. "The vines withered on the day the new temple appeared."

Tygg raised an eyebrow "Appeared?"

"I cannot explain it. One day a great storm came out of the East. The clouds were black as the ocean deep, and the lightning like thick glowing serpents. It thundered at us for a day and night. The next morning, the great brick beast was sitting in our harbor square, and the tattooed priests were among us. The vines have not grown since."

"Dark storms, Dark arts."

"Aye," said Gevandrin, "but they hid their darkness at first. They had gold and healing arts. They seemed our friends. But then they started taking thralls, aping the great Orders of our Goddess. We were fearful, but many felt indebted to them. They have fastened themselves like a barnacle, and we do not know how deep the rot goes."

Gevandrin stood up, left his wine on the table, and stepped to Tygg. "Even among my own men, they have secret servants. You saw Lekri. He pretends to be my dutiful man, but in his heart he serves..."

"Serves who?" said Tygg.

"That's just I; we do not know. Their rites are secret, for them and their adherents and their thralls alone. The very name of their god is a mystery. None who have made their way into the ziggurat have ever returned, save as mindless slaves of the priests."

"Mindless?"

The Dying Goddess

"You saw them. They have neither will nor awareness. Even priestesses of Our Lady have been ensnared. Whatever darkness these lizard scum serve, it is powerful."

"It always is," said Tygg.

Just then a young woman came to the solar. She had the same green eyes as Gevandrin, who greeted her. She wore a thick robe of blue and green and her hair was done up with bronze trinkets in the shape of waves. A bronze circlet encased her throat.

"Fera," said Gevandrin.

"I was told to find you here," the woman said. She noted Tygg's presence with a knowing lift of her eyebrows, as though she had a purpose for him as clearly as the High Captain did.

"This," said Gevandrin, "is my sister. Pledged since she was a girl to the highest Order of Alia Venda, inducted into mysteries even I know nothing of. Someday she will speak for the Goddess herself."

"My brother speaks from pride..."

"Tygg," said Tygg.

"Tygg," she said. "I saw your ship from our temple. Is it the one you suspected, brother?"

"It is," said Gevandrin. "He is of the *Dread*."

"Your reputation precedes you," said Fera.

"And what reputation is that?"

Fera smiled. "It is said that you slay pirates, free slaves, and return ransomed captives. It is said that you hunt rumor and myth of every demon and dark thing from one end of the Isles to the other. It is said that dead men row your ship, and that your captain is never seen..."

"...And that we eat sharks and lay with mermaids besides. Rumor is treacherous, priestess."

"But when it's all you have..."

"...It spreads. So does bilgewater. The more fool he who swallows either."

"Do you deny any of that...Tygg?"

"I deny everything and nothing. I have my own goddess, who has her own truths. Rumor may spread as it will."

Just then the servant with the downcast eyes returned. This time he had three goblets. He poured and offered to each, but Gevandrin refused. Tygg saw just a flicker of note in the servants eyes, but he made his exit with the same

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silence as before. Tygg raised the goblet to his lips, but caught something strange in the bouquet that had not come to him before. Looking up, he saw the same servant watching from the door on the other side of the great table. "Stop!" Tygg shouted, and striding over to Fera, swung his hand and knocked the cup away. Gevandrin started and Fera jumped back in shock and alarm. With a hand upon the table, Tygg leapt to the door and, reaching into the candlelit darkness, seized the man by the scruff of the neck. When he shoved the man back into the room, Gevandrin was holding Fera by the shoulders, both of them watching him.

"The wine!" yelled Tygg. "What was in the wine!"

The servant said nothing, but kept his eyes upon the floor as Tygg shook him.

"Did you taste something?" said Gevandrin.

"No," Tygg said, "I smelled something off. In the wine, and in his manner. This servant of the Order is not your friend. What was in it, you cur?"

"But I tasted nothing," Fera said.

Gevandring and Tygg both looked at her. "You drank some?" Gevandrin asked.

"Yes," she replied. "But I..." and then her words drained away.

A thin pitched laugh arose from the servant's throat. "It is too late. She has drank. She is ours. She is Ours!"

Tygg silenced the sepulchral voice with large hands wrapped around his thin throat. A moment and a twist and the servant dropped to the floor as dead as a dishrag.

Fera, held by her brother, became dreamy and numb. She no longer drew breath, but stared with wide unblinking eyes at nothing at all.

"Fera!" shouted Gevandrin. But she did not hear him. She heard nothing. She saw nothing. She stood with fixed gaze and arms at her side.

"We know the means of the enthrallment, at least," said Tygg. "I suspect there's more of your seawine grapes on this island yet, befooled with some charm that makes slaves."

"Milk of the Lothus, perhaps. I've seen it."

Tygg shook his head. "Lothus wears off after a few hours. This is something else, to last so long."

"Perhaps they feed the thralls it constantly."

"And perhaps your sister is only thinking hard. We can 'perhaps' our way to a watery grave, if we keep at it. Think! That servant brought three cups. You refused yours, and I smelled the wrong in mine. But we were all intended to be as she is, drones of these tattooed priests and their nameless god."

"So?"

Tygg smiled "So..."

III

*"She comes upon the waves,
She drowns upon the sands,
She kills a demon born,
She robs him of the land,"*

-Songs of the Dread

She lay upon her cot steeped in sweat. The air was thick. A thin blanket and nothing else covered her. She dropped in and out of consciousness with the regularity of the waves. But the passage between one state and another did not matter, as she did not move when awake nor rest when asleep. She simply suffered.

Above her taking pains equally endless was a mute woman who changed the compress on her head and checked her pulse. The second thing was merely an afterthought. The mute had seen her mistress through this fugue of death more than once. She had learned to read the signs of it. It was coming to a head, and soon...

Heavy steps trampled down the stairs. The mute looked up to see Harldr, the sailing-master, flanked by two redbearded Hagroners with cutlasses. They came to the cot and looked at the trembling patient. Awe and deceit mingled on Harldr's face. He had been a pirate, commanding a fearsome crew, before encountering the *Dread*.

"No change, Caraca?" asked Harldr. The mute shook her head.

"A ship with no captain," said the sailing-master, "and no mate, and no sign of seeing either. And a damned ship besides. How long are we supposed to let men wait in harbor, while the stores run low, a rich port in front of us? Answer me that."

Caraca stared at him to no effect.

"Put not your false hex on me, mute. The slaves on this ship may fear you, but I know a slashed throat when I see one. You have no powers but silence." Haraldr walked past Caraca and opened the cabinet on the far side of the cot. He took out a cutlass made of folded steel and a heavy brooch containing a purple cats-eye gem inlaid in gold with a brass chain. He put the brooch around his neck and strapped the cutlass to his belt and went over again to the cot.

"Captain," he said, and when he received no response, "Mistress," and then finally "Drea". The woman just lay upon the cot, breathing. Harldr snorted and signaled for the two Hagroners to come to the cot. They stepped past Caraca and, at another signal from he sailing-master, lifted the ailing woman off of it.

"I know you for loyal, Caraca, but..." said Harldr, but then stopped when he noticed the cabin was empty. The mute had vanished.

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"No power but silence?" said one of the Hagroners.

"A power you ought command for yourself, Fyrk," said Harldr. "She's just a silent old crone. I'll spare no time on her. Take this load to the deck."

Fyrk and his fellow exchanged a roll of the eyes and then did as their new captain - for so they had agreed among themselves - commanded. The woman was light in their strong arms and they had no trouble traversing the stairs with her in their hands, Harldr behind.

Once up on deck they made their way to the gunwale while Hardly scampered up the gangway to the poop deck. He brandished the cutlass and announced his mutiny to all the crew. A few cheered, mostly ex-pirates who longed for their former profession. The rest looked at the woman in the Hagroners hands and their sailing master bearing the captain's accouterments and they said nothing but returned to their work.

"Not impressed, eh?" said Harldr. "Very well. The captain makes no difference to the rats, I guess. Then we'll just unload unwanted cargo and be about our business. Make ready the longboats! There's a rich port to be had!" He signaled again to the Hagroners, who, without ceremony, tossed the woman overboard. She hit the waves with a soft splash and no sign of her followed.

But no longboats made ready to sail. No one paid any attention to Harldr or what he had done. Harldr stood and watched them with utter confusion. "Do you not hear?" he yelled. "I am your captain now. Must I toss you all over the side?"

"You are new," said a voice behind him. Harldr turned. He saw the mute Caraca flanked by dead men, grey-skinned and black-eyed and betraying no animating spirit but standing there in uncanny threat regardless.

"Who said that?"

"You are new" said the voice again, and again it seemed behind him. Harldr turned again and saw only the crew, ex-slaves and a few ex-pirates, going about their tasks. One former corsair, a huge bearded beast from Beyond-the-Axe, looked at him with piteous eyes, shaking his head.

"You ought not have been made sailing-master," said the voice, again behind him. Harldr turned again and Caraca was before him, locking eyes with him. He heard the voice again. "You do not know the *Dread*. I warned Drea not to appoint you, but we had need of a sailing-master and you were skilled."

"I am skilled," said Harldr.

"You *were* skilled," said the voice, and the sailing-master felt a strong tug on his chest. He looked down and saw a blue-hilted dagger with a dark triangular blade emerging from his heart.

He fell to the ground and with his last breath saw Drea, his captain, emerging from the deep in a geyser of seawater.

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"Please," said Fyrk, "We meant no harm. We thought you were dead."

The two Hagroners were on their knees in irons before Drea. She had changed from her filthy bedclothes into a leather cuirass and boots, and had replaced the cutlass and brooch to her own person. She looked much refreshed. "Please," said the other Hagroner, who's name was Dake.

"It is a great wickedness to be led astray," said Drea, "and Harldr alone bears responsibility for that. So I will dispose of you. You will remain on the *Dread*."

The breath caught in the throats of the two Hagroners, unbelieving of their fortune.

"But mutiny is also a great wickedness, and for that I must punish you." She raised a hand and with a gesture summoned Caraca to her side. She looked into the eyes of the mute. "They are yours," she said, "Make dead rowers of them."

Dake screamed in protest at this, but Fyrk only lowered his head in shame. The dead men seized them with horrible iron grips and led them, raving and silent alike, down into the lower quarters of the ship. Soon the noise ended and only the swale of the harbor knocking against the hulls could be heard.

Drea looked out over the harbor and felt great clarity. The thing was *there*, she knew it. Their search had not been in vain. She would find, here at the end of the Spear Isles, a true Shard of the Sword. A relic of the genuine Godblade. An object that could make and unmake reality. Her illness had drawn her to it like a moth to a flame. She had been getting weaker, and sicker, as they had sailed. So many false hopes. So many dead ends. So many islands abandoned with only time and blood to mark their journey. But she read the signal now, the sense inside her own soul. She *knew* this time.

But she could proceed no further. She could not risk herself blindly scouring through Guhlia to seek what she wanted. She needed to know who had it, and how it could be obtained. She needed intelligence. She needed Tygg.

She would wait, scanning the city and its bronze goddess while the light fell low.

IV

*"No matter how subtle the wizard,
A knife in his back
Will seriously cramp his style."*

-The Book of Jhereg

They walked through the quiet streets and saw nothing, for the night was even quieter than the day, as the paralytic pall in the soul of the people tightened yet its grip. Fera's step was light and soft, and she moved with an almost serpentine grace through the narrow alleys, drawn by a lorelei unseen. Behind her, trailing her by some few steps in a mummer's mockery of her emptiness, was Tygg.

He had followed her from Gevandrin's solar, pretending to be as enthralled as she, walking at the same steady pace, keeping his eyes as narrowly focused on what was before him, trying to keep his mind sharp with the tedium, trying

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to keep a sense of his location through Guhlia's winding streets. He knew, of course, where the ziggurat was. He had seen it from the harbor square. But what he wanted, what compelled him to this farcical deception, was to know how to gain entrance to the place. Only then could its secrets be unlocked.

The squat brick ziggurat rose in the distance, jutting up with Mt. Amos in the background, seeming to climb over the mountain itself. This seemed absurd to Tygg, but his eyes experienced it nevertheless. *Some charm or illusion is this*, he thought, and kept his eyes at Fera's back. As they approached, others joined them, men and women of all walks of life, walking in mesmerized helplessness toward the mystery temple. Many had been poisoned, it seemed. Many would join the cult. Tygg nearly lost Fera in the crowd but kept close to her. They came to the wall, and in perfect unison of the kind that soldiers drill a lifetime for, stopped.

Tygg looked up and down the wall but saw no gate or any kind of egress. He began to have his doubts about the worthiness of his plan. He felt his dagger cloaked under his tunic and set his teeth.

A hum began to arise in the crowd. Tygg could not tell if it was the people who hummed or some other force, but it filled the air with a strange charge and made his very skin resonate. As it built, the hum began to make his head pound. He closed his eyes but could not cover his ears, or at any rate, dared not. His jaw felt the strain and his muscles were tense as a drawn bowstring but still the hum built. Just when he felt he could bear it no longer, an intuition of some kind told him to open his eyes, and he did. Before him the wall itself was shifting, glowing, transfixed with a lurid pale green light emanating from within. He watched, fascinated, forgetting the earsplitting hum as the wall of the temple melted away as though it had never been, and the crowd, and him, going through the wall itself without taking a step, simply shifting from one place to another as by the operation of some cosmic hand moving the very earth on which they stood from one receptacle to another. Tygg felt ill.

Soon the hum stopped and some equilibrium returned. He saw above him a dome of black metal that burned at the edges with the same pale green light. He saw around him torches that burned with no earthly flame but with orbs of cold light. He saw a phalanx of tattooed priests standing before the crowd of new thralls. In front of them was the lizard man from the harbor, Lord Sephar.

The next thing Tygg noticed was a thick pungency coming from behind the priests. It had the same register and stink as the foulness he had detected in his wine. As the priests moved forward to gather the thralls, they revealed a bulbous vat that sat upon a single thin metallic stump that squeezed and pumped like a vein. In this massive gourd frothed a sickly grey liquid that oozed from open tubes into casks below. The casks were filled by wide-eyed thralls with a red substance that looked like wine. Occasionally the casks were changed. The stench pierced Tygg's nose like a blade and he fought not to retch.

While he held himself together, the thralls banded together in tight circles around the lizard priests. Tygg did not notice this at first, and when he made a few hasty steps to put himself in a circle, the crowds parted and he was facing Sephar. The priest stared at him with a queer predatory yellow in his eyes, as though he was commanding Tygg with his mind, or perhaps casting some spell upon him, but nothing happened. This went on for a few moments and Tygg began to consider just pulling his dagger and going for the man's throat or chest to see what would happen. They'd probably overwhelm him but he had felt cruelly denied after that incident in the Harbor Square, and anyway what else was he here for?

"You sham poorly," said Sephar at last.

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"Well enough to get this close, priest," replied Tygg, and the dagger was in his hand, and slashing at the lizard-man's robes. He gave a cry and fell backward, and Tygg leapt at him. Sephar blocked a killing blow to his chest with his arm, which took the blade to the hilt. He howled in pain but Tygg could not press his advantage or even retrieve his blade, for the hands of thralls gripped him on all sides. He could have taken any one of them barehanded, but in that dense mass they felt no pain and pressed themselves ever tighter around Tygg. He was shoved and prodded and forced against his will for a long while to a precipice above a massive iron cauldron and pushed in. Nothing greeted him but the cold metal and he cursed as he stood up.

"Of all the damned fool nonsense," he growled "what sort of death trap is this? What's coming? Some Deadlands serpent? A Mountain Lion from the Axe? Or are you going to just drown me in that filth you pass off as wine?" He received no answer but his dagger tossed in after him. It clattered on the iron floor. Tygg looked up and saw Sephar standing over him. The tattooed priest showed Tygg his butchered arm and smiled. Then he walked away.

V

*"And when all is past
And come to dust
The Goddess lives again."*

-The Widow Fragments

How long Tygg sat in that cauldron he did not know. The longer he sat, the less he liked it. His intuition was not wrong: some form of cruel death was waiting for him. And it followed that if they did not introduce him to it immediately, it was like to be some darkness they had to conjure. And one they had perfect confidence in. Returning him the dagger was proof of that.

The cauldron was smooth as glass on the sides, and slick with some strange grease, or he might have climbed out of it out of sheer boredom. But Tygg accepted this. Sometimes it suited Tygg to be reminded of where his impetuosity could get him. It was a staple of his wisdom that he who threw himself into action first had the advantage of any others, but like all wisdom, it had its limits. Sometimes he who left into the breach first was only the first to discover why he never should have.

Such was life.

As Tygg brooded, he began to hear a sound. It was something like a hum, like the one that had met their entry into this unholy place. But this time the noise was different. This time it had a shrillness, a cacophony, where before hundreds of voices were twisted to meet the same queer tone. This time it did not sound like human voices, but a torrent of screams and...something else. This time it sounded like something trying to break through onto reality itself. It unnerved Tygg like a thunderstorm unnerved a stag: he did not understand it, but knew it meant no good. The screams and the something else grew louder, and underneath Tygg heard a noise like the crunching of air itself. Tiny flashes of light burst in the air, making pockets of heat. The iron walls of the cauldron began to shake. Tygg held himself in a crouch to keep his footing, but before long the air was bursting in his eyes and the cauldron broke and collapsed and Tygg could do no more than try to fall capably. He tumbled into the void. He came to himself a few seconds later and heard again the screams in the far off distance and the horrible inhuman sound underneath them. But also something else:

"Is this how your plan was supposed to work, barbarian?"

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Tygg blinked his eyes and saw Gevandrin standing over him, smirking, with a troop of men behind him. He wanted to remove the High Captain's smirk with a rock but he was also pleased to see him.

"This is how all his plans work," said another voice, and then Tygg saw the only being he ever consented to obey. His captain, Drea.

In truth theirs was more a partnership of equals than a master and a servant. Drea came of an ancient house of Dohmite nobility and Tygg of clan raiders along the fiery mountains of Koseria. But they had fought great evils on the shores of Cevalon, and even journeyed into the Dead Lands where no man could walk. And they had lost a companion together.

Tygg stood and answered Drea "What kept you?"

"The blood was on me," she said. "I fell into the sea before I came to myself,"

"Fell?"

"Was thrown, then," Drea said, irritated at the petty truth. "By the way, Harldr is dead."

"Caraca warned you about him."

"I know."

"I am sure this discourse is of great significance," said Gevandrin, "But there are other matters..."

"He's right," said Tygg. "These lizard priests are bringing something into our world."

"Something?" said Gevandrin.

"So they do have a Shard," said Drea.

"I did not see that," said Tygg, "but half the city is in this temple tonight, and the priests have them calling for some beast of outer dark. You hear that sound?"

They listened to the mad cacophony for a moment, and felt the chill of it in their blood.

"Sound is their weapon. The poison that entralls is some charm, I cannot tell what, but it is sound that transported me here through their walls."

"And sound that allowed your captain to breach them," said Gevandrin.

"That's her favorite," Tygg said.

Drea pursed her lips. "These priests, they tattoo themselves to have the look of lizard skin?"

The Dying Goddess

Gevandrin nodded. "If tattoos they be."

"Then it sounds like an offshoot cult of Kal-Ophicor. The Stone Eater."

"That sounds nasty," said Tygg.

"It is. Thon Impyros himself spent a great deal of time suppressing Stone-Eater worship in the North a thousand years ago. Strange that a piece of it would have come this far into the Sea. And yet," she added after a moment, "not strange."

"Much history then," said Gevandrin.

"Much," said Tygg. "But only two points matter: One, can you kill it, and Two, who has a blade for me?"

Drea pulled her own cutlass and handed it by the hilt to Tygg. "I insist," she said.

"You didn't answer my first question," said Tygg, as the light from the gilded blade danced on his visage.

"I'm about to."

* * *

They charged the assembly of priests and thralls without a casualty. The thralls, deep in their guttural mad cries, could not be co-ordinated to offer any resistance, and so offered none. The priests were joined in the invocation, and so did not notice the war party in their midst until several of them had already fallen to the spears of Gevandrin's men. But Sephar was not so easy to kill. Despite the wound in his arm he grappled with Gevandrin and pushed him nearly into a cask of poison wine before Tygg, with a clean slash of the cutlass, removed the priest's unwounded arm.

Sephar howled in pain, but his voice only joined the torrent of scream that seemed to bring the terrible something closer and closer to the edge of reality. He raved in many tongues but Tygg understood the crazed glint in his eyes. They were too late. Suddenly great screaming stopped and a silence like a wall fell upon the maddened crowd, and like a damn bursting the dome above them splintered into nothing and a darkness like ink swept into the chamber. Kal-Ophicor had come.

Above them screamed a mouth with lowing red and silver tendrils of wispy nothingness. It bit and gnashed and seemed to devour light itself. It crunched down upon the dome and ate the great glowing black metal like a shark. It ate down upon the great vat of poison and humans screamed and it screamed the louder. It ate the rock upon which Sephar lay dead and the priest with it. It bit down and ate the heads and limbs off men. It bit and bit and bit. Tygg scrambled away from the maw as best he could and tried to guide others with him but there were too many. As the Stone Eater bit down it claimed more and more human flesh with it. The floor became slick with spattered blood.

Then a shrill sound pierced the din, and Kal-Ophicor shuddered, and bones and rock fell out of the screaming maw. The shrill sound came up again, and again, and each time the Stone Eater wriggled away from the source of it like a hooked worm, but there was nowhere to escape underneath that broken dome of hellish metal. Tygg looked up and

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saw Drea, floating in the air like a leaf, with a blue fire in her eyes, emitting from her mouth the sound that the beast recoiled from. It did no more than annoy his own ears.

Kal-Ophicor retreated into the outer dark and took the dome and the brick walls of the temple with it. Drea stumbled and Tygg took her by the waist and she steadied herself on him and they looked around at the confusion and the corpses and they remembered how many such scenes they had witnessed in their days, and they smiled at each other to have survived all of them.

* * *

The *Dread* sailed away on the morning tide, overladen with gifts from the grateful citizens of Guhlia. Gevandrin and his sister, who had miraculously survived the incident with no memory of it, were especially generous. Gold and jewels from the public Treasury of Atmos as well as their family's private treasure were pressed upon the Captain and Mate of the *Dread*.

These mattered nothing to Drea. She cared only for the small trinket they had found underneath the broken poison vat - a small piece of black metal with an oily sheen, that seemed to take the shape of a teardrop.

"I think it's the Carador," Drea said, "the Liar's Kiss."

"Is it a Shard?" asked Tygg.

"It's talked about as a possible one," Drea said. "We may have to sail back to Cevalon to know for sure."

"What are you going to do with real Shards when you find them?"

"I don't know. What does one do with weapons of darkness if you have no darkness in you?"

"Says the woman who is rowed across the sea by the dead."

"I knew you would say that."

"Yet you gave me the bait anyway."

Drea ran a finger along Tygg's chin. They watched the statue of Alia-Venda disappear to the horizon.

"Many said I looked like her," said Drea.

"I heard the same thing," said Tygg, "I don't see it." He grinned at her and they turned away. **UJ**