

Deliverance from the Eye

By
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Armend tumbled to the ground inside the alcove. Even though he had never been in the room before, he landed cleanly on the padded window seat and, from there, let his momentum carry him forward fluidly and soundlessly into a roll to the floor. He had seen many similarly arranged alcoves in noble houses and the ability to make his limbs like putty when he fell was now as second nature as walking. It was often said that professional thieves were either very good or very dead, but Armend had no desire to be either. There was a rare third category, reckless genius, with which he preferred to identify, which was why he was here, in the most dangerous place in the entire city. He surveyed his surrounding sharply, but there wasn't much to see. The alcove was no bigger than a closet and a heavy velvet drape hid all sight of the room beyond. He froze, listening, his breath, like his movements, easily silent now.

At first, he could hear nothing and was about to relax with relief but then, there was something, a scraping sound, very soft, almost furtive, but unmistakable to his practiced ear. It was uneven and only audible occasionally. No other sound accompanied it, not human footsteps, and certainly not the heavy booted tread of the Divine Guard. It was probably a mouse. Even the grandest palaces were never as free of vermin as their owners would like to believe. Or perhaps a bird that had flown in through the open window, or even a pet monkey. Still, there was no harm in waiting a little to see if it would go away. There were many hours of darkness left for him to accomplish his task and far better to be cautious than to be caught.

Armend shuddered. He was no coward. Once he had smuggled a letter to a prisoner in the Imperial dungeon. But there, if you were caught, they only killed your body. Here in the Basilica of the Eye, capture meant death on the altar of Torash. The physical death itself was said to be agonizing beyond words, equal to the grimiest of lay tortures, though there were no living witnesses to provide details, and then the prospects for your soul after were equally dark, an eternity in the God of winter's frozen belly. Torash had always wanted lives but, for the most part He had been reasonable about requesting that a body be left out ritually to feed His creatures.

But the Covenant of the Eye had changed all that. According to its tenants, Torash and his fell bride required at least ten freshly spilled lives a month and, whereas before, such sacrifices could be cleanly beheaded or have their throats slit, now they must endure the slow rites of the Covenant that killed by inches and in agony. The Covenant of the Eye was a relative newcomer to Azgeras, its meteoric rise in the capitol city within living memory, if only aged living memory. They might have come into being in some other city, somewhere like Shulroth, permanently stained with a reputation for accursed wizardry. In the beginning, they had been granted their humble request to be allowed to occupy a long-deserted temple, but their influence had grown rapidly, helped no doubt by their constant need for sacrifices. Even though the official word was that most of their victims were criminals, no one wanted to be too vocal in opposing those always in the market for people to kill.

Now, although the Covenant of the Eye was not named as the official faith of the state, it had the ear of the ruler and great store of treasure, including most of the official saints' relics, was kept in the Basilica of the Eye, which brought him back to his reason for being here. The relics were much sought for various magical and healing purposes, but the priests of the Basilica were very sparing in allowing access to them, charging steep fees for their use and being most selective in what requests they would

consider in the first place. Lord Formain's eldest son lay fevered with an infected wound got in some back-alley duel over a strumpet and desired the use of the finger of Ruka, said to be beneficial in such cases. Being on poor terms with the priests, Formain knew they were unlikely to allow him use of the relic, even if he beggared himself giving tribute which, given that he had three other sons, would have been a foolish thing in any case. Instead, he had hired Armend to remove the relic for him. It had been a stupid thing to agree to, but Armend had been flattered that Lord Formain had wanted him for the job. His pride was a weak spot and he...

He shook himself. Waiting here accomplished nothing. The faint sounds from beyond the curtain had subsided and it was time to move. Quickly he drew up the rope and stowed it under the cushions on the window seat, then pushed through the curtain. Beyond, in accordance with the directions he had been given, was a study, the walls paneled with bookshelves and scroll cases. A great desk stood in the center of the room, its drawers the ideal place to find maps, keys, and other useful pieces of information. But Armend hardly even thought of that now for his well-honed senses quickly alerted him to the fact that he had made a severe blunder and was not alone in the room.

At the sound of his entrance, a figure started up sharply from behind the desk, clad in the ordinary garments of a ship man or thief, loose colorless pants and tunic bound in about the waist with a thick sash and the feet were bare. A leather strap passed from one hip to the opposite shoulder holding a sword sheath across the back. The skin had a warm healthy pallor and masses of tawny hair swept down past the waist and half over the face. Armend narrowed his eyes, sensing something distinctly odd about the figure. The length of the hair was certainly unusual, almost unknown, but it was not beyond reason that some wild barbarian from the outer edges of the world, like the uncivilized northern raiders, would grow a lion mane like this. More troubling was the shape of the figure itself. Though obscured by the hair and the looseness of the garments, he could tell the body before him was unusually small and slight, lacking the height as well as the broad shoulders and barrel chest of a typical warrior. He would have written them off as a professional thief or spy alone rather than a fighter if not for the great sword and also that the hands and lower arms which could be seen where the sleeves fell away, showed the sinews and muscles of a swordsman. Although the indent was not great, there was a slight curve at the waist. As bizarre as the idea was, he could think of no other explanation.

"You're a girl," gasped Armend, louder than he intended, surprise getting the better of his caution.

"What of it," the other snarled, remembering to keep her voice low, and cast back her head so that her hair parted, revealing a face that left no doubt as to her gender. Though hard and strongly chiseled, her features were undeniably those of a woman, with dark blue gray eyes whose depths were veiled, not by lashes or coquettish lowering of the lids, but by will alone that sealed her inner self away from the sight of others.

"Why are you here?" He succeeded in keeping his voice down this time.

"I could ask you the same, but I don't need to. It is plain you are here on some illicit mission and if you had half a brain you would know that I must be on the same." Her voice, like her face, was clearly female, though deep and rough for a woman, but possessed in addition, at the edge of hearing, a richness that might come into play in formal discourse, as opposed to her unpolished ordinary speech.

"Very well, I came to rob, to take the reliquary of Ruka for my employer, and whatever I please for myself."

She spat "Demjukpa rot you," she snarled. "You came to steal the reliquary and you couldn't wait one more day? It isn't going anywhere."

"What? So you could get to it first?"

"No, I have no use for such baubles. I came to free the prisoners. They will be dead tomorrow, bled to death on the altar, their life oozing painfully away. These wretched people have no one else to save them and now you are in the way, and most of all I came to free Izja, the one who has been raising

opposition to these cursed priests.”

“No, need to be so harsh, my lady.” He tried to sound gallant, not knowing what else to do. “Since we seem to be going the same way and our aims in no way contradict, why not go together?”

Her eyes sparked with gray lightning. “Do not flatter yourself. I do not *need* you but, since this is the best way to ensure you do not rouse the temple guards, I will agree to it. However, know that if you bungle things, I will knock you senseless and leave you for them to find.” Armend felt himself too much of a gentleman to say he would do the same but, privately, he wondered if he would, should it make the difference between life and death, or worse, the tortures of the temple. She eyed him levelly for a moment as if waiting for further challenges then, satisfied that none were forthcoming, she released his eyes and turned her attention back to looking through the desk. She seemed to have some sense of what she was doing which was a comfort to Armend but he still questioned her, if only to calm his own nerves.

“I’m looking for the key to the walkway to the middle dome,” she whispered.

“We have no need to waste time looking for a key. I am most skilled at lock picking.”

“My compliments, oh great thief,” she said dryly. “However, you cannot pick this lock. Look.” She reached into the back of the draw and pulled out an object, holding it up for his inspection. It was a small metal ball, cast in the likeness of an eye, the token of the sadistic priests. From one end, two prongs emerged, one about half the height of the other. Their outer edges were rigidly straight but their inner edges curved away from each other, and small spikes adorned the prongs along the top and outer sides.

“What is that?” he asked incredulously.

“The key. Now, we must not waste any more time,” she whispered as she pocketed the strange device, and he followed her through the door and into the great open space under the eastern dome. The inside of the dome was a pallid gray with a slight pearlescent sheen, like the snow under a dead winter sky or possibly even the sky itself. Looking up into it was like staring into a vault of nothing. They were about halfway up the side of the dome where a walkway ran the full circumference, a railing of heavy stone along its outer edge. Although the posts of the railing were thick enough to provide concealment, it came only to about waist height and so would not hide them unless they were crawling or crouching. As soon as they cleared the door, the woman grabbed him and jerked him towards the floor, but Armend needed no prompting. Momentarily safe, they peered out of the narrow spaces between the posts of the railing.

Below was a great open space, paved with more of the cloudy marble with a basin of water in the center. It was not a true fountain as no water leapt above the surface of the pool. But it did come bubbling up from some unseen reservoir, making the surface of the water roil like a frothing pot and yet it gleamed like ice, sharp, rainbow hued sheens dancing across the constantly shifting hills and valleys of its surface. A lamp of chill silver, a winter lantern, rested on a stand, barely clearing the surface of the water and though it looked small from this height, it threw out a cold blue light that reached every surface of the chamber, even far up into the dome, lending a faint shimmer to the emptiness. Bright shafts of it lanced across the surface of the pool, picking out the ice rainbows on the bubbles, like the sun on colored glass, and making paths of light on the floor beyond.

Directly across from them a pair of carved double doors stood open and, to all appearances unguarded. A glimpse of a marble hallway beyond was just visible and he did not need her sharp nod to know this was their next goal. His gaze scanned along the walkway and stopped abruptly at another door on the right wall. Only a single door and, this time, tightly closed, it stood about halfway between them and their goal, flanked by a pair of the yellow and black clad guards. They stared blankly towards the opposite wall, their heavy five bladed weapons held stiffly upright, giving no sign they were aware of any others in the great chamber.

Beside him, the woman cursed softly, too faint a sound to echo and probably covered by the sound of the fountain coming from below. “They weren’t here before,” she hissed. “Some priest is praying at

the altar there. We must be gone before he comes out.” Creeping all the way around the left curve of the walkway on hands and knees would be tiring and painful, extremely slow and still carried a risk of discovery. He pointed towards the fountain and mouthed the word down. She nodded and turned to the left, leading him along the wall where he could already see a stair head some twenty paces beyond the door they had come out of. The stair was of stone, winding around a single column and this was fortunate for it meant they could stay close in, under the shadow of the walkway. The steps were only white stone, not marble, but they had been worn smooth and he felt his toes clutch tightly against their cold surface, looking for purchase and he put his hand against the central pillar to steady himself. Fortunately, their bare feet allowed them to descend both swiftly and silently and, once they reached the lower level, they could stand upright without fear of being seen.

Stone benches ran along the walls to provide seating for those waiting for audiences in the rooms above but there was still space for them to move under the walkway if they were careful. The woman lead the way, back the direction they had come, so they passed below the door they had come out of, then around to the right and now they moved with great care, knowing they were beneath the very feet of the guards. One shifted slightly and the sound echoed loud above their heads. They passed two more spiral staircases on either side of the guarded door but, of course, these were of no use to them. On they went, under the door to the hall they sought to reach, until they came to a fourth spiral staircase which they ascended, remembering to drop to hands and knees as they emerged back onto the walkway.

Creeping back to the door was nerve wrenching. Their uncomfortable posture forced them to move slowly and yet Armend's heart was hammering at him to hurry. If the two guards left their post, they would be heading directly for this door and, if the woman was right and one of the foul priests was with them... He willed his mind to blankness. One did not get far in this line of work by being afraid. Limbs that trembled were unsteady. A second's hesitation could spell doom. Despite his nerves, they reached the door without incident and crawled through, then got to their feet as soon as the hallway hid them from the view of the room behind. Here the walls, ceiling, and floor were still made of gleaming marble but had grown darker, angry storm gray, not drained and pallid, lit with more of the cold blue lamps, though these were much dimmer, a chill glow rather than a blaze. The main passage ran mostly straight, though here and there it curved, never making a sharp turn, but, frequently, narrower side passages branched off. These were without light and soon faded to dead blackness and, from them came a chill dampness. Armend caught his companion's eye and inclined his head towards one, mouthing the word “short cut.”

Fiercely, she shook her head and kept moving. When he looked at her questioningly, she whispered, “No one knows where they go...or what might be hidden there.” From time to time, she would kneel by the wall and cock her head to one side, listening, before lowering her ear to the floor, perhaps feeling for vibrations. Then she would beckon him forward and spring to her feet again even as she did so. At the sight, Armend muttered an oath of admiration under his breath. There was no denying she moved like a cat, fluid and effortless. If her figure had been more curved, her features less hard, what a woman she would have been. He shook himself, half fearfully, to clear his head, a part of him convinced her steely eyes could read his thoughts and she might butcher him for them. Quickly he made the sign against the evil eye.

Suddenly she paused, head turned, listening. Armend did the same and clearly heard the sound of approaching feet. At once they dashed for the nearest side passage, retreating into the darkness and pressing themselves against the walls and floor. The marble was cold and clammy and utterly smooth. As they crushed themselves into the stone, the chill crept into them, numbing them to the bone. It felt as if the marble was oozing like the slimy skin of some aquatic creature, beads of foul liquid welling from unseen pores. As the footsteps drew nearer, they slowed their breathing. They saw the guard pass and waited until the sound of his feet had faded before moving on. Armend was more than glad to leave the

clinging darkness of the side passage and hoped they would not have to hide in such a way again. Now he could well believe that nameless horrors lay hid there.

Up ahead in the faint glow of the lights he could see more of the gray marble as if the hallway ended abruptly. He felt a pang of fear that the woman's directions had been incorrect or deliberately false and they would now have to turn back and seek a way through the clammy darkness of the side passages if, indeed, they had not already walked into a trap. He strained his ears for the sound of pursuit behind but could hear nothing. To his relief, it turned out this was no dead end, merely the sharpest turn the passage had yet made. Though, even now, it did not form a corner. The hallway continued at nearly a right angle but, this time, they could clearly see where it ended and at the far end, it opened out to the right, from which flowed a stronger light as well as the sound of several voices and the clink and scrape of utensils on plates.

“Mess hall,” his companion whispered and, in the face of all logic, began to move down the hall towards the opening. He drew back and she made a gesture of exasperation and impatience. “Store room,” she mouthed, pointing up the passage where he could now see a darker shape in the dull gray of the wall. She motioned him to wait a moment and darted forward to try the door but it did not yield. There, she half knelt to examine the door pull. He saw her slender fingers searching along the edge of the door. Then she set her shoulder to it but did not shove. Instead, she gradually applied pressure, then abruptly stepped back as she felt the door begin to give, so there was no loud sound from the door abruptly breaking free or from her falling to the floor. At once she leaped forward again, swift and silent and slipped out of out of sight behind the door.

Armend also withdrew behind the bend of the passage. There was a chance, careful though she had been, that someone had heard and, the last thing we wanted was to be caught exposed in the passage between his current location and the door with nowhere to hide himself. He waited for a moment, listening, but there was no significant change in the hum of the voices from far down the corridor. Quickly, he dashed forward and slipped through the door as well, then eased it shut behind him, and was immediately smote by a wave of heat, very comforting after the eerie chill of the dark passages. Several beds of glowing coals ran down the center of the room. Great metal cauldrons stood on trivets, boiling and filling the room with steam and though the metal spikes around the pit were now empty, the strong smell of roasting meat left little doubt as to what they had recently been used for. Along both walls were sacks of grain, sealed jars of oil, wine, and various food stuffs preserved in brine. Nets holding cheeses and smoked meats hung from the ceiling. Armend felt his stomach lurch and his palms itch. Time spent skulking around the homes of the rich had fostered in him a certain taste for fine food, filched in pinches and nibbles from feast trays, kitchen boards, or even from the spits and baking stones themselves and, while this was hardly palace fare, it was fresh and wholesome, better than street food.

A jug of that wine would earn him many a free drink at a certain tavern he knew. But no, there was no way to carry it, certainly without it being dangerously obvious. It would slow him down, make noise, and he might drop and break it. Besides, disrupting the room might give their presence away and that wasn't worth it. He was going somewhere better, somewhere with gold. He had thought they might hide here until the meal was over but now saw they had a far better option. There was a door on the opposite wall, directly across from the one they had entered by, that would let them out into another hallway, allowing them to skip the mess hall entirely. As, they moved across to it, Armend ignored the temptations of the shelves with difficulty, thinking how he might pick up something on their return trip, and when they reached it the woman leaned against the door, listening.

As he came up behind her, she held up her hand and then spring back gesturing furiously. “Back,” she hissed. “Back and hide. Someone's coming.” In the small room, lit with lamps and the glow from the great hearth, it was much more difficult to conceal themselves than in the dark corridors. Quickly, they pulled some of the bags and barrels slightly away from the wall and crouched behind them.

Footsteps could be heard coming down the passage. Though the sound was muffled by the door, Armend guessed there were three or four people in the group. Then the door was wrenched open. This side seemed to stick slightly as well, probably as a result of the wood swelling from all the steam in the air. At least it would now be easier for them to open, assuming they were still alive at that point.

Three men walked in, off duty guards no doubt, though they had set aside their elaborate tabards and wore only plain black shirts and breeches. They also carried no weapons, at least none large enough to be visible but that did not mean they were not dangerous. If nothing else, they could easily alert the large number of men in the mess hall, who, even unarmed, were more than sufficient to overwhelm them, and fetch more help if need be. The three men seemed in high spirits but were, at best, only slight intoxicated and Armend grimaced with disappointment. He might have guessed the temple would have higher standards of conduct than some courtiers' houses he had robbed. He felt the woman beside him tense, then will herself back to relaxation and he echoed her example for everything from movement to simple breath was more controlled and, therefore, quieter when one was relaxed.

The three men seemed eager for more food, walking about the fire and eyeing the empty spits with evident dismay. One even turned over the ashes with the toe of his thick leather boot but found nothing. Some looked longingly up at the hanging cheeses and hams or at the jars on the walls, then tore their eyes away. Evidently, there was some rule against taking these things that they dared not counteract. Eventually, they settled for some of the fried cakes, stacked to keep warm next to the fire, and some apples from one of the barrels, thankfully a barrel on the far side of the room. But, once they had obtained the food, they did not leave as he had hoped, but lounged against the wall beside the door and fell to talking. Armend clenched his teeth in frustration. There was no telling how long they would stay now. From his position, among the sacks and barrels, he could only see them indirectly through a small crack and, in her more deeply crouched position, the woman could probably see even less than he. But, at least, they could hear clearly, despite the roar of the fire.

"I'm not looking forward to the long night tonight," one of the guards said bitterly. "I deserve this extra fuel to do their bidding."

"Stop your grouching, Semis," snickered one of the others. "You sound like an old woman with rheumatism. Who among us hasn't stood guard through the night? Breath steaming and feet fair frozen off too. You should be glad it's not winter."

"There are worse things than cold," objected a third. "When the priests are spoiling for their dark rites, then there's a chill in the air worse than any earthly cold."

"Just so," Semis cut in, "and that's what we have tonight. The green moon's one day from the full, when the sacrifice is done, which is bad enough. But this time, they have something special, some political prisoner they're very glad to be rid of. I'm just here to do my job, not to ask questions but it's no good pretending it doesn't freeze the blood." They lingered for a while longer, munching apples and staring into the fire but they spoke no more of what took place in the tower, turning instead to lighter talk of the world outside, almost as if the speaking of it had been too much and they wished to cease to think of it. The conversation went on for what seemed like hours longer but probably only lasted a few minutes and then the three men went back out the way they had come, miraculously leaving the door slightly ajar behind them.

Neither Armend nor his companion moved for several moments as they listened to the footsteps and voices recede back up the passageway. When the sounds had been swallowed again in the general hum from the mess hall, they got to their feet cautiously and climbed back over the sacks and barrels. Armend's heart was hammering but scarce more than could be expected on a dangerous job like this and he was pleased at how little it troubled him. Years of training and experience served him well and, after this night, there would be nothing to frighten him as nothing could compare to this risk. But the woman was as at ease as he. Although he could see by the slight pallor of her skin, the tight lines around her

mouth, that she was not foolhardy and insensible to the danger, her movements were easy, unhampered by nerves, as she walked towards the door and peered through the crack the guards had left. Their relative calm was fortunate as there was no method of performing this stage of the mission safely. They had to go several feet down the hall before they could turn aside, out of sight of the entrance to the mess hall and there was no telling when more of the men at arms might decide to wander down to the storeroom.

“One at a time,” she whispered. “No sense risking us both. I'll go first.”

“Out of curiosity, how do you plan to get the prisoners out once you have them. I doubt they can scale the walls, especially in their present condition.”

She pulled a sour face. “I'll take them out through the main temple on the ground floor, of course,” she said, as if daring him to challenge her. “There is no other way.” Absolute madness. The main floor was the official face of the temple, open to the public and, therefore, patrolled by guards all night. One master thief might, just might, be able to make it through. A group of people with no stealth training would be dead in under a minute. Armend promised himself to make sure he was not with her when she attempted this insane getaway. Probably, the best plan would be to just grab the reliquary and bolt before she had a chance to even attempt it. “After all, I came in that way,” she finished almost proudly, then was gone, sprinting down the hall while he was left cursing her stupidity. Chances were that she had already been seen or had left some sign behind her and the whole tower was probably already on alert or soon would be. This task had been dangerous enough without another's reckless behavior making it worse. She had disappeared round the corner by now and Armend had half a mind to let her go on alone and complete his own mission later in the night. But no, it would be better to keep an eye on her, to make sure she did nothing else foolish that he might unknowingly walk into if he stayed behind.

With that thought in his mind, he eased the door open and took off running down the hall, rounding the corner without incident but, before they had gone twenty paces down the hall, they heard the sound of footsteps leaving the mess hall and caught the noise of clinking steel as well, signaling that these were no unarmed men off-duty. They redoubled their speed to put more distance between them and the hall and now Armend was glad he had stuck with his companion for, even in the bewildering twisting maze of the passages, she never hesitated for more than a breath over which way to go. Her briefing must have been extremely thorough, that or she was simply guessing blindly. The official gods had no love for thieves, but Armend prayed to Dechmas that this was not the case and that she would do nothing stupid.

The noises from the mess hall and of potential pursuit were growing fainter behind them but, before they had completely died away, there was a fresh snag, as they found their way blocked by a door of heavy wood banded with metal and thought the metal was skillfully wrought, including a plaque in the center bearing the symbol of the eye, it was also tarnished and the wood was naked and unpolished, showing the door received little use, especially of a ceremonial nature.

“Where are we?” Armend whispered fiercely, his chest tight at the thought that she had led them wrong. “This doesn't look like the grand entry into the central dome.”

“Of course not,” she replied with obviously strained patience. “That entry is always heavily guarded, but this is a back door for things like servants and supplies.” As she spoke, they heard the guards come nearer and they froze, breath shallow and silent. Armend saw her hand reach behind her shoulder to rest against her sword hilt and he knew she was getting ready to fight for their lives if they were discovered...well, her own life anyway. Saving him was probably nothing more than a side effect for her. But it never came to that. The footsteps seemed to pass by them and recede again in the opposite direction, probably going to take up a post somewhere in the other two domes. “They were on the main path,” she said grimly. “If we had gone that way, they would have walked right into us.”

From her pouch she drew the strange ball key she had taken from the desk where Armend had found her and snapped it open. The curved metal slid easily into the lock, but it did not turn easily for lack of use had rendered the lock old and rusty. She was strong enough to eventually be able to force it,

but they were losing valuable time standing there. Worse, the metal on metal made a hideous grinding noise as the rusty lock and key scraped against one another.

“Here.” He tried not to sound too superior, though a large part of him longed to, as he fumbled in his own pouch and brought out a small bottle of oil he carried especially for this type of circumstance. It was a work of but a moment to fit the specially shaped opening into the lock and pour, after which the key turned easily and quietly. The woman offered no words of thanks as the door swung open, but she did nod in acknowledgment. The door opened into a small room with a few chests lying about. Probably, these had once been used to store ritual garments and tools but the layers of dust on them indicated that most were seldom used now. On the far side of the room, the passage made a sharp curve as it veered back towards the main hallway, which they reached after only a brief walk. Beyond was a high arch of intricate old stonework but, at the top, the image of the eye and five rays was crudely hacked into the key stone, harshly superimposed by the temple's newer and less skilled inhabitants.

Again, the woman went forward alone, crouching cautiously, and held up her hand but Armend did not need the warning. From the glimpse of the long T-shaped hall he had caught through the arch he had already guessed that this was the place where the three domes joined and, as such, it was a prime location for guards. Surprisingly, it was no more than a few minutes before she waved him forward but, from her urgency and the speed with which she slipped around the arch, he could tell they had little time to make it to the next cover. Either they had arrived exactly as the watch was changing or were attempting to slip through while the men on duty were at the far end of their patrol. The retreating backs of a pair of guards in their formal yellow and black, heading down the third leg of the passage, confirmed this and he joined her in sprinting as fast as he could for the arch that led to the middle dome.

Fortunately, their bare feet were almost silent and what little gear they had, had been specially made to not jingle or creak whereas the heavy boots of the men at arms sent up echoes rippling along the gleaming walls of the passages, effectively concealing any noise they were making. Still, when they passed through the arch and crouched beyond it, he did his best to keep his gasping breath as light and silent as possible. They squatted, pressed flat against opposite walls, staring across the corridor at each other as the sharp, clipped sounds of the watchmen's tread came nearer again. The two guards paused directly outside of the arch they had just passed through and lingered there for a moment, while Armend did his best to eliminate even the slight remaining sound of his breath, then returned to their patrol and the woman rose to her feet almost immediately.

His eyes followed her and he stifled a gasp. The corridor beyond stretched away into the dimness, lit at wide intervals by the icy lights but the entire length, both sides, was lined with statues, no more than a few feet apart. He had heard of course, of the corridor of statues, some of the carvings long predating the rise of the priests of the Eye, and before kings and holy men from the mists of time before the people of Azgeras were anything more than wanderers living in hide tents and following the herds of deer across the frozen waste. But it was something else to see it with his own eyes, the silent figures, slightly larger than life, stretching away into the distance, their hollow eyes staring inexorably. Most were of gleaming black stone but the oldest, that had once been exposed to wind and weather, were worn, and pitted to dullness and their features eroded to the point of un-readability, a mystery in some ways more frightening than the frowning countenance of the others.

They moved quickly, stopping every few minutes to duck behind the statues when the guards came back to the central arch, until they were far down the corridor. But, despite their speed, Armend managed to recognize some of the figures: Irikul holding his head while standing on a serpent, Raulina clasping a burning scroll, and King Pevrunad of Tesha presenting a model of one of the many temples he built in his life. He even thought that he saw Ruka, holding a winter lantern in one hand and raising his other hand to show his missing fingers, one of which, the sacred finger of the relic, had brought him to this place. The long, straight hallway was a danger of course. If someone appeared in the archway at

either end, they would command a view of its whole length and it was unlikely the two intruders would be able to dive behind the statues quick enough to avoid being seen. But, miraculously, their luck held and they reached the further end without incident. Here, a short broader stair ran up to a grand landing and the entry to the main dome. Below were a few small doors to storerooms and side passages but their way lay straight on, into the heart of danger and not around it. And here their luck finally ran out, for a pair of guards stood flanking the doorway at the top of the landing, their five bladed standards held stiffly in front of them.

At first, Armend wondered how the woman, who had been so careful up to that point, had allowed them to be spotted so easily. She hadn't even bothered to stop and listen at the foot of the stairs as she had done in other places where guards were far less likely. But, as she drew her sword, a long blade with a curiously hooked tip, not even breaking stride, as she mounted the final steps, while the guards fumbled to lay down their cumbersome staves and draw the swords they kept hidden in their surcotes, he realized it had been deliberate. She must have been informed that the landing was never left unguarded and the guards were changed only at times when navigating the rest of the basilica would be the most difficult. Perhaps she also knew there were few other guards in the vicinity so there was little risk of being overwhelmed with reinforcements. By springing directly to the attack, rather than wasting effort on futile stealth, she had meant to seize the advantage. But, whether her plan had been wise or no, they were all in now and the best he could do was to draw his own sword and come to her aid.

So quickly did she rush into the fight that the first guard did not have chance to draw his sword and had to ward off her first stroke with his elaborate staff, a pole with a ball on top from which protruded the five blades. Most were hooked or curved like an ax blade or a scythe, three in front, one in back, and the fifth was a straight spike at the top of the ball. Designed to represent the symbol of the eye with five rays, it was also meant to look as intimidating as possible, and so it did, to ignorant common folk. From his long experience dealing with guards, Armend knew that most pole arms looked more frightening than they actually were, being too slow and too top heavy to be much good against a light and agile opponent and this one had to be worse than most. If they hit, those hooks would gut a man in seconds, but the amount of control needed to achieve such a hit with those same hooks pulling it all out of balance would be almost superhuman.

He could see now that even the act of parrying had pulled the man slightly off center. The guards were chosen for strength and skill and, most likely, had been given at least some training in fighting with their decorative weapons so the recovery needed was very small, so small a less practiced eye might never have caught it but, even that was enough to give her an opening to dart in and slash her blade across his arm and the man's face twisted. It was hard to say how deep the stroke had gone. They probably had mail under their surcotes but, plainly, he had felt it and now he seemed to be favoring that arm slightly. Realizing he was out matched, the guard flung his staff at his attacker and began to retreat rapidly down a side corridor but Armend had no time to spare him further thought. The second guard had taken the time to stay back and draw his sword properly but was unable to aid his companion for now Armend had come up and forced him to face the new threat.

This was the part that Armend hated. The guard raised his great length of gleaming steel and Armend stood before him armed only with the slender, light blade of a thief. He could sneak and run and climb better than the best and when there was a target to be dispatched or a witness to be silenced, he could do himself credit with a shot from afar or a swift ambush but fighting toe to toe was his weak link and he knew it. These men were far stronger, with years of training and superior weapons. Only with cunning and, at least as much luck, could he hope to prevail. Quickly, he darted in and thrust at his opponent. It was best to bring a fight to a close as soon as possible before his adversary's great weight and strength could tell and before he could make some fatal blunder.

But this time it was not to be as his opponent, almost casually, knocked his sword aside.

Recovering speedily with his light blade, Armend turned the parry into a back cut and slashed the man's arm but the blade rang and sprang back, foiled on a hidden coat of mail and his eyes narrowed with apprehension. This did not bode well. There were few places where one could slip a blade through armor, sometimes via openings under the armpit where the sleeve joined the body. But these were tricky enough to hit when the armor was exposed, and you could see where to aim. That left the unfortunately small target of the face and neck which was also the place that even the untrained were most instinctively protective of. These men wore steel caps but, thankfully, no full helms or chain hoods so he had the full throat as well as the back and sides of the neck to strike at.

Scarlet pain cut across his upper arm, and he felt the cold smoothness of the blade as it sliced into him. He had let his wits wander as he strategized and seen the blow coming too late. This was one of those serious errors that were bound to happen if he let things drag on for too long. He drew back, breathing hard, trying to process the pain and clear his head. He kept his sword raised and weaved, snakelike from side to side to evade the heavy blows the other continued to throw at him. But now there was even more need of haste for the wound would sap his strength still more quickly than simple exertion. Taking a firmer grip on his hilt, he raised the weapon and dived forward again. His opponent parried easily but he was expecting that and made no attempt to resist. Rather, he dropped to a squat and ducked under the other man's arm, releasing his own sword as soon as he was clear so that it fell, clattering to the stones. Bounding back to his feet, he pivoted so that he was now behind the man's back. The guard started to turn but Armend sprang before he could make it around, locking his legs around the man's waist and one arm around his shoulders.

The great sword was now useless as there was no way his opponent could reach him with it though he did flail about wildly while pounding the hilt against Armend's legs in an attempt to dislodge him but Armend hung on grimly despite the busing pain and began to grope for the dagger at his belt. By the time the man bethought himself of the oldest trick in such a situation and began ramming himself back against the hard stone of the walls, Armend had found the dagger. He gasped as the air was forced out of his lungs and he felt his flesh crushed between his ribs and the marble slab. Almost, he gave into the pain and let his limbs go numb, but his life depended on staying where he was and, just in time, he forced his grip to lock even tighter. The guard, realizing his attempt to shake Armend off while stunned had failed, planted his feet for another bash into the wall. But now Armend had his dagger out and, as they crashed into the stone, a second time, brought it forward and slashed the man's throat, not quite fast enough to stop him from smashing into the wall but it did lessen the impact. The body recoiled forward and Armend quickly released it and stood as it crumpled forward in a heap.

He could feel his heart hammering and he steadied himself with a hand on the wall. He would never get used to it. Although he risked his life daily, unlike those who fought for a living, he was unable to simply accept the razor-edged dance of death with blades as a matter of course. Every time he survived, shocked relief flooded thorough him, making him dangerously lightheaded, and the blood sang in his ears, possibly masking warning noises. The blood. In the midst of the fight, he had forgotten he was wounded and turned to look at his arm. It was bleeding much less than he had thought it would. Perhaps fear had made it seem more severe than the reality, but it was rash to be certain of such things. Almost mechanically, he began ripping cloth from the garments of his fallen foe for binding it, having just enough presence of mind to take from areas that were lower and towards the back so they were not already saturated with blood.

Yes, he was alive but for how long? Would they be suddenly overwhelmed by a detachment of fresh guards who came to help their comrades? With relief he noted the fight had been conducted in almost absolute silence. Of course, there had been gasping and grunting and the clash of steel but their opponents had made no attempt to call for help or even to shout challenges, which could only mean that they knew the chance of anyone being within earshot was so small as to not be worth the breath expended,

which was reassuring but might not last long if the other guard had gotten far.

He turned to look down the passageway and saw the woman had brought her opponent to bay in less than a bow shot's length. She had him up against the wall and was attacking full force. Her sword, while not quite as broad and thick, was easily as long as that of her opponent and, despite her ability to move like a cat, she was clearly capable of holding her own in a fight. Like Armend, she must frequently fight opponents of greater strength and weight and had learned to compensate for it. But, in her case, the compensation was so automatic and second nature that she was unaware of it and even he, as an outside observer, could barely detect it. More, the dark stains seeping through the bright yellow cloth showed she could do what he could not, rend the mail and the flesh beneath. She herself appeared uninjured beyond a high color in her face and slightly elevated breath and he felt a twist of bitter envy as he pulled the bandage tight around his throbbing arm with hands that shook from fear as well as exertion.

As that thought turned in his mind, while he still stared, dazed and glassy eyed, she made a great swing that clove down the side of the man's unprotected face, spraying blood onto the wall in a dark lattice. It wasn't enough to kill but her opponent reeled back, stunned with pain and half blind with blood. She caught the hilt of her sword in her second hand and thrust forward two handed, aiming at one of the wet stains, indicating where the mail was already weakened. The gleaming steel went in smoothly and blossomed red out the back. She paused for a moment, impassive, while the man writhed, impaled on her blade, blood frothing between his lips, then drew the whole length back out in a single swift motion, twisting it slightly so that the curved tip scored the wound on the way out and the body fell to the ground with a disturbingly moist sound. She wiped her sword across it, a smear of dark blood on the yellow cloak, then seized it under the armpits and began dragging it up the hall towards him. Armend was impressed. Moving a body in full armor was no light feat and, though it plainly wasn't easy for her, she was doing it and doing it quietly at that. Seeing him watching, she cocked her head sharply in the direction of the doors, snapping Armend out of his post battle haze of relief at finding himself still alive.

They needed to get the doors open and the bodies inside before a patrol or anyone else who might have heard the struggle happened by. Despite the signs that there were no other guards nearby, the sooner they covered their tracks the better. There was no sign of a lock or bolt. He took his sword, the blade of a thief, specially designed for such a task, and slipped it through the gap between the doors. The sword caught, grating against the wood. He had had the blade made as thin as possible while still being functional, but would it be enough? There it was, the bar on the far side of the door, very heavy to lift, especially at the end of his sword, rather than close against his body. The muscles swelled and strained in his arms, burning deepest in his wound, and then he felt the bar move, fall to the floor, and the door shuddered at the impact. The sound of the heavy bar striking the floor was somewhat muffled by the thick wood, but it would be courting death to assume no one had heard it. Not waiting to catch his breath, he seized one of the doors and dragged it open. His companion who had reached him by now, disappeared through the opening, pulling her corpse behind. He hauled his own man after as she lifted the heavy bar back into place. If a patrol came by now, they might find the lack of guards suspicious but at least it would be extremely difficult for them to attempt further investigation.

Armend turned from the doors and looked full on the inner sanctum of Torash. Even lit only by the smoldering lamps, gold was everywhere and the lamps themselves shone from behind their chased panes of gold. Two great torchieres stood on either side of the altar, casting harsh shadows from below on to the white marble images of Torash and his dreadful queen, making them even more imposing than their wont. In the near corners, lamps spotlighted their sons, the beast-man and the tamer of sea monsters. The other two children must be at the lamps in the far corners though, at this distance and in this light, he could not see clearly. And, all along the walls, where the full light did not fall, something glowed among the shadows like embers, careless swaths of gold and jewels. Even a practiced thief like Armend seldom got so close to this kind of wealth. He had already risked his life by coming here. A few extra

trinkets slipped into his pockets would never be missed, especially compared to the value of the reliquary he had been sent to take. But, before he could take a step, he felt something thin and cold as pain against the underside of this jaw.

“Straight on is your way.” The woman's voice came from behind him and he felt the sword point against his neck shift slightly as she stepped closer.

“You traitor,” he snarled, wondering mutely what to do.

“No, I merely guard against your treachery. I cannot risk having you alert the temple as you flee with your booty. Once the prisoners are free so shall you be as well.”

“Torash blast the prisoners,” Armend raged to himself but thought it prudent to say nothing aloud. As much as he wished to spend as little time in this place as possible, to say nothing of venturing further, to the dread room of sacrifice itself, he seemed to have no choice and, if he appeared complaint, she might let her guard down and allow him to slip free.

They crossed the room in silence, the floor rough against their bare feet, for the smooth stone of the outer halls had given way to the mosaics which Azgeras was famous for. Here and there flecks of gold winked amidst the dull colored stones as their long shadows paced beside them across the scenes of legends, the gift from Torash of the first winter lantern, Sligoth forming and releasing the great sea beasts, or Gorna infecting with a touch. And in one panel, a dragona, one of the foul creatures from the barren north lands of Kaymen, a very unusual subject for a mosaic and of strange style as well, showing far more curve than the flat angular Azgerasian figures. In better circumstances, he would have taken this as a hopeful sign that there might be some Kaymene treasure about, carved ivories and gold work, crude but heavy, good for melting down. But now, it was of no matter, for he could get none of the treasure, whatever its origin. In fact, as he half slowed to cast a longing glance at the gold close to the wall, he felt her sword press more firmly against his neck.

They had almost reached the middle of the room now and an uncomfortable feeling was growing on him that he was being watched. Panic was a dangerous liability but he could not quell the feeling. Perhaps it was only the proximity to the altar. On it, amid all the splendor, lay a battered bronze box without carving or jewel, the reliquary of the finger of Ruka, the prize that he had come for. But it was not within grasping distance and, had it been, to reach for it could mean death. So, he passed on under the lowering statues. The flickering light cast up on them made the shadows crawl across their face, creating the illusion of movement and their protruding eyes seemed to stare, adding to his unease.

Desperate to look elsewhere, though to appear not to, he focused his gaze on the vast reaches of the dome beyond the statues' heads. Like the floor, the ceiling was all mosaics, though the figures were too far away to clearly make out. Up, up it curved to the highest point, almost directly above them now. And there, suddenly, the top of the dome bulged in, not from some fault of construction, but as if a miniature upside-down dome had been built there, even more heavily overlaid with gold and gems than its surroundings. But now the statue was at his shoulder, and he was able to lower his eyes without looking in its face. As he did, he saw dark flecks against the limpid whiteness of the marble on the altar and knew them for blood splatters, now long dried. This was not the altar of great sacrifice, where the true horror was practiced, but evidently some lesser rite had been and he was glad indeed to move past it or would have been if his destination had not been, perforce, the dark opening on the far wall which led to that place of terror.

The stairs beyond did not spiral, but wound back and forth as they made their way up the side of the great dome, twisting and turning until he lost all sense of direction. In these narrow corridors, she pressed less closely upon him but remained always in the rear so there was no way for him to go but up. At last, and far too soon, a pale square could be seen above them and they found themselves climbing through it and into the chamber at the top of the great dome.

Armend emerged first and weakly fell on his knees retching, overcome by the stench alone. The

smell of unwashed bodies, of sweat and piss, was familiar enough to anyone who had visited the lower sections of the city. But this was not the smell of a simple lack of bathing. This was sweat and piss born of abject terror and beyond that, almost swallowing up everything else, was the reek of dried blood, so strong that he glanced up, fully expecting it to be visible. Away, to the left in a pool of pallid moonlight the dreadful altar crouched, a squat black thing. He could see no indication of any bloody miasma around it, but he could *feel* it, a touch of dizziness tinging his horror and a strange sensation seemed to be almost pulling him towards it. Fortunately, the way was blocked. A row of stone arches ran the length of the room between him and the altar, forming a narrow corridor around him. But the openness of the arches was crossed with bars of metal so he could see but not reach the dread stone.

“Get on,” his comrade's voice hissed from behind. Suddenly feeling confused as to how much time had passed, he staggered forward on his knees and heard her come up through the opening. Using the bars like ladder rungs, he managed to haul himself to his feet and, somewhat to his surprise, was able to stand. The smell was less nauseating now though the thick blood stench was giving him a headache. She came up beside him and pointed diagonally across to another row of arches, one of which was dark from lack of bars. He nodded to show he understood and moved forward, soon reaching a similar opening in their own colonnade, giving them a direct route to their goal but one that would lead them directly passed the altar. He glanced questioningly at the woman.

“There is no other way,” she replied. “This passage goes to a dead end.” And her rich voice now sounded strangely thin and flat. As they moved forward, the floor of the chamber seemed to slope down, pulling them closer to the center of the room. Beside him, the woman lost her footing, showing the slope was not purely imagination and, on reflex, grabbed the closest thing to steady herself, the altar. Also on reflex, Armend turned to her and saw her fingers, white in the moonlight, gripping the edge of the black stone, stretched with tension. Unlike the rest of the temple, this stone was dull and unglamorous, almost like a dead, soulless thing. Cut deep into its surface in sharp lines was the image of the eye and five blades and at one end, an orb of the same black stone sat on a small tripod, though what human skill could have made such a perfectly round shape of stone, smooth as cast metal, he did not know. The red reek was far stronger here and, though he could not see it against the blank black surface, he could sense the years of blood seeped into the stone.

“On, quickly.” She pulled herself to her feet, her chest heaving from ragged breathing. As she tossed her mane of hair out of her face, he saw the whites of her eyes were unusually large and the eyes themselves looked strangely glazed. But they reached the far arch without further mishap and though the smell of human filth grew steadily stronger as they passed under it, he was glad as this distracted in some small way from the blood smell. The corridor beyond this arch was wider than the one by which they had entered and to their right a line of sloping partitions ran across the wall, closed by low gates like animal stalls and, as in stalls, the floor was covered with straw, now quite rank.

In the front stall lay a man, curled into a fetal position, chained to the wall by an iron ring around his neck. He was mostly naked, and his skin was covered with sores from lying in the damp and dirty straw. In a sudden flurry of motion, his comrade pushed past Armend, vaulted the low gate, and was on her knees beside the man, trying to wake him. She seemed to have forgotten Armend and, although he could have made an attempt to escape, he seemed to lack the will, frozen in horror and fascination at the scene before him. The man's eyes snapped open, eyes that had the same wide, glazed look as his companion's, and he shrieked, “it's here. It's watching me.” The woman clamped her hand over his mouth, gesturing frantically for him to be quiet but he took no heed. “The dweller in the darkness, it thirsts.” He pulled himself free and crawled back to cower in the corner, his chain hissing through the straw after him like a snake.

She came back over to the gate, her face grim, and clutched at Armend's shoulder. “Quickly, check the other cells. There must be one who will show reason.” The next cell was empty. The one

after that contained a woman but she appeared insensible, the marks of a severe beating fresh on her body. But the man in the cell after hers was sitting up, knees drawn to chest, and though his eyes too were strange, they watched Armend and his companion approach in a normal, sane way.

“Rescuers?” he asked, his voice the harsh croak of one long without sufficient water. “I didn’t know I was so valuable.”

“Then you are Izja, the one I’ve come for.” He nodded. “Yes, you have many friends, but even more valuable is what you stand for.”

“Be that as it may,” Armend broke in, even as Izja’s face curved into a grin of relief. “We had best go quickly. Your...ah...companion’s welcome may have alerted someone.”

Izja shook his head. “No, he does that frequently. Many do. If he even woke the priest, which I doubt at this point, at most he would come to the door of his chamber and throw something at us.”

“What does he speak of?” the barbarian woman asked.

Izja shuddered. “I have dreamed it too. A black thing, like five snakes, dragging me down, down into the darkness. Sometimes I see the shadows move in the corners of my vision.”

“How do we release you?” she asked, and Armend was very glad that this particular train of conversation had been halted.

“The key to the chains is that way, among the instruments of torture.” He swayed slightly and his eyes closed. “It’s all a torment, the instruments so close, the way they make us look upon the stone of our death, and the reek, the constant reek of blood. I can see as it flows out from the altar like a flood to drown me. This is nothing like even the worst sacrificial rites of Torash that are spoken of in legend. We have lost our way.” He shook himself, as if trying to cast out the thoughts.

“Come, we need to find the key.” Armend was already moving towards the shadowy area on the far side of the cells.

“Have a care,” Izja called after them. “The priest sleeps in the chamber beyond. If you make noise in there, it may wake him.” The small storeroom was tightly cramped, the entire space filled with haphazardly placed tables, piled to overflowing with a motley and disturbing array of metal objects, knives, hooks, some barbed as if for catching fish, chains, manacles, and nails, all the way from normal carpentry sized to great stakes. More of the same hung in tangled masses from the walls and a row of stone urns sealed with wax ran along one wall. One was unsealed and a bit of medicinal scent came from it.

“A salve to make the blood run,” his companion whispered, her voice strained with keeping her disgust in check. Moving alone was difficult enough in the crowded room without upsetting all the metal objects, to say nothing of trying to search through it. At last they found the key dangling from a hook driven into a wooden beam against the back wall. A tangle of chains and manacles hung from the hook as well which they had to dig through to reach the key. Some of the chains as well as the inside of some of the manacles were studded with cruel spikes and barbs and their hands were scratched and raw by the time they retrieved the key. Armend was more than pleased to leave that dreadful room behind as he still felt lightheaded and being exposed to the instruments of torture made him feel he might vomit. The smell of blood was growing stronger again, as if it were wafting from the grisly tools or was it only his distraught mind making him believe that? “They are monsters,” she whispered in agreement, seeing his stricken look as she fitted the key into the joint in the ring around Izja’s neck. “How many more of you are there. No one should die like this.”

“I am not sure. Four, I think. But leave the man in the cell next to me. He caught the bloody flux and, if he is not dead yet, he is too close to walk.”

“I will leave him but not for them,” she replied grimly, passing the key to Izja as she slid the ring from his neck, setting it down carefully so it would not clang. He rose, a bit unsteady on his feet at first, and began to free the others, while she moved to the next cell and slipped a dagger from her waistband. The man must have been weak indeed for he gave no cry and the gurgle of blood in his throat was so

faint Armend could scarcely hear it. Sickened as he was by the sudden death, Armend appreciated her principle in allowing the man to die free. Even chained to the wall, he was freer than he would be if the priests were to subject him to whatever they did with the hell tools in the next room. If they were captured, would she give him the same privilege...and would she allow him a choice in the matter?

While this was going on, Izja had freed the two prisoners they had already seen. He had done something with the crazed man so that he came quietly, though he still darted his head around and twitched erratically every few seconds. But Izja shook his head over the woman. "I can't wake her," he said. "We'll have to carry her." Armend was about to say that he must be insane and they could not risk everyone else's lives in such a way, but his companion had already stepped forward and taking the limp form Izja handed to her over the low gate, setting her gently on the ground, as he went down the hall, passed the dead man, to free the final prisoner.

Armend knew the whole situation was madness. He should be protesting the insanity of carrying added weight in such a place or, better yet, making a quick dash for his own freedom. Despite the strange floating feeling that made him loath to do anything, he roused the will to look back toward the way out, gauging his escape route and felt all his blood turn to ice. Only the extreme constriction of his throat kept him from uttering an piercing shriek. On the slope of the floor in the main room, between them and the exit, something was moving, crawling. At first, he thought it was an emaciated dog with no head. But the tail was too long and looked exactly like the other limbs, right down to the knotted lumps he assumed must be swollen joints. He looked again and there was nothing except for an especially dark shadow stretching away from the side of the altar. In any case, he had lost all desire to cross the room alone. Izja returned with the final prisoner, an older man with gray hair and a long beard, now much matted. Still, he seemed in better shape than the girl and the twitching man.

The woman returned from the storeroom where she had slipped off while Armend had been distracted and held out a pair of sacrificial knives. "I know this isn't much," she said, "but these are the best weapons to hand at the moment." Izja nodded and put the knife between his teeth and the older man did the same for they needed their hands free to carry the unconscious woman.

Armend felt his skin crawl as he stepped out onto the sloping floor of the main room. The crazed man began gibbering incoherently and Izja mouthed something to him around the knife. Armend hesitated for a moment to walk through the shadow of the altar. but it was only a shadow. Still, passing through it seemed to take an eternity. His breath rasped in his throat, and he felt sweat run down the back of his neck. Not much further now and it would be over. They were leaving. He needed to be careful, or he would neglect to take the reliquary. In fact, this was the first time he had thought of it since he had set eyes on the altar. Well, think of it now for it would be in his hands soon.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a limp, heavy object striking the ground, mixed with a strangled, desperate curse, and then screaming beyond all terror. "It has come, the creature of nightmares," the madman cried, capering up and down. Armend turned and saw the graybeard flat on the ground, flailing about as if trapped in quicksand. The body of the girl lay crumpled where it had fallen when he was suddenly jerked to the ground. What appeared to be a strip of cracked and worn black leather was wrapped around the old man's ankle. Following this back to it's source, they saw it came from the altar, from a small slit in its base, which they had overlooked in the shadows before. Clearly this was no mere piece of leather as it did not lie flat while dragging the body, but twisted and writhed, nor did it remain taut. There was no way it could pull while keeping slack unless it were a limb with strength of its own. As if to remove the only remaining doubt on this issue, two other shorter lengths of the living leather wriggled from the opening. The three together completely filled the narrow slit, crushed together in the struggle to squeeze through an opening too small for them. The grappled man gave a pained grunt and they saw that blood was running down from the grip on his ankle. Even in the dim light, they could see the blood was bright red and free flowing.

Releasing his hold on the unconscious girl, Izja leaped forward and stabbed at the coil, but the knife glanced aside. He grabbed the coil with his hand and began to saw at it as if he were really cutting through hard leather. His actions were in vain as the knife was designed for cutting through soft flesh and could hardly scratch the unnatural hide, but, at least, the attempt had released the others from their shocked paralysis. The woman had drawn her sword and was running back. It took Armend a moment to realize he had done the same. The tentacle let go of the bleeding ankle and lunged at Izja. At the same moment, the rest of the thing strained its way from under the alter and came crawling across the floor towards them, its final two appendages slithering behind it.

Armend recognized it now as the shape from his imagination but saw the swollen knobs on its limbs could not be joints as it was able to move and coil as if it were completely boneless. Already it had the woman about the waist but she was fending it off with her sword, keeping it from encircling her upper body, her feet planted wide resisting its efforts to throw her to the ground. Another of the black coils reared up directly in front of Armend striking like a snake. He managed to dodge the first time but it recoiled and struck him in the arm. For a moment, he thought he really had been bitten by a snake as he could feel fangs slice into his flesh. He brought his sword down as hard as he could on the thing where it lay across the floor and it snapped back, revealing not punctures, but slits in his arm, as if made with a surgeon's scalpel. The blood came out fast and red and he felt an instant weakness and nausea and, while he reeled from it, the thing lashed itself around him, pinning down his sword arm. He had just the presence of mind to cast the other arm wide and keep it free, but it did little good. Trying to pry the coils loose with his fingers was like trying to break iron bars.

It came at his arm again and he braced himself for it to cut into him again but it did not. Instead the end of its appendage nestled gently against the bleeding wound and the entire limb began to pulse slowly in and out. With horror Armend realized it was drinking the blood, sucking it up through one or many openings at the end of the limb and, worse yet, that as it did so, a change was coming over it. The dried and cracked skin grew smooth, even glossy and began to swell and plump out from its former flat and withered state. At first only the tip of the appendage, nearest the wellspring of blood was affected, but when he saw the effects begin to slowly creep up its twisted limb, Armend lost his last hold on rationality and began to yell and beat at the thing with his fist in a desperate attempt to escape.

Almost unconscious from exhaustion and blood loss he was finally liberated from the black writhing nightmare when the warrior woman leapt to his aid and severed part of the twisted coil that was holding him, though she narrowly evaded slicing into him as well. He blubbered to her pointing at his bleeding arm and she nodded her head in understanding. "At least now we can cut it," she said grimly pointing to the sleek smooth part she had been able to lop off. "The drinking makes it soft." The part she had cut now thrashing like a beheaded serpent but the wound on the part of the limb still attached to the rest of the creature was rapidly healing, its edges turning in on themselves to create a hideous scab. No dark ichor came from the wound and only the faintest thread of blood which Armend thought was likely his own, not the creature's.

"Protect me while I bind the wound," he said, already reaching to tear a strip from his tunic. "I think the blood attracts it."

"Yes." She stepped in front of him and did her best to beat back both of the appendages that were bearing down on him. Fortunately, the one that had bitten him no longer had a means of cutting but it struck at her over and over, the suppleness of a whip combined with the force of a club and he could see her body reel under the blows. As quickly as possible he pulled the makeshift bandage tight around his arm and came forward to aid her.

"What have you done?" A cold tremulous voice cut through the sound of the battle. "Your heretical acts have called down the wrath of Torash." In the archway that led to the prison cells stood a figure in robes white as the moonlight, the five pointed eye blazoned on them in silver, scrawny hands

raised in a gesture of despair and condemnation.

“The under-priest guard,” Izja cried from somewhere behind them.

“You belong to the god,” the priest snarled as he stepped forward, though not too close. He seemed hesitant to come within reach of the writhing black shapes.

A shrill cackle answered. The madman who had been cowering in a corner now stepped forward. “We are not for the old man” he cackled. “We belong to the red drinker, the five-fold beast of nightmares. Is that your god?” Even as he stood thus, undefended, outlined in the light, one of the black limbs came whipping around and seized him. Izja sprang towards him from where he and the other man had been standing guard over the body of the girl, but he was not fast enough. The heavy coils held the man down as the lips felt along his shoulder to his neck, slashing his throat. Armend thought it would begin its sick feeding at once, but it only draped yet another coil over the bleeding neck and proceeded to slash the body until his skin was slick with red, the victim's last faint gasps of life pumping his blood through a thousand holes. Even as the man's breath stilled, the rise and fall of his body continued, or so it seemed. But no, it was only the pulse rippling down the creature's limbs. Not one mouth only did it have but its whole length must be punctured with foul suckers as it drank his life from every one of his many wounds. Intervention was futile and Izja fell back, returning to his struggle to defend the living, taking a wound on his leg in the process, though he managed to keep the thing from attaching to feed. The amount of blood the creature pulled from the dead man's body was vast compared to what it had obtained before and that, combined with the fact that it could take it in through many points, not just the tips of its limbs, meant the foul metamorphosis was far swifter and its skin became sleek as velvet, shiny as black glass as it swelled to easily twice its original size.

“It's too big” his companion half muttered to herself as she lunged to parry one of the darting coils. “Now it's trapped with us.” Fighting for his own life, Armend took a moment to fully comprehend this. Then he remembered the thing's horrible struggle to squeeze through the narrow opening under the altar when it had been withered. Bloated with blood as it was now, it could not retreat even if it wished to. A new realization of the finality of their situation swept over him and, as it did, the floor seemed to slide beneath his feet. The blood smell, almost forgotten in the battle, came crashing upon him like a wave, almost as if the more the beast drank the more the air stank. Again, he felt ready to empty his guts at the smell alone. So, it was no wonder that, when the stones bucked and rippled once more beneath his feet, he lost his balance. Suddenly, he was aware his back was unguarded. The woman had left him and was racing back towards the priest. “If we wake tomorrow on the fields of Kacytelium, then you shall come with us,” she yelled. The priest laughed scornfully like the snapping of ice on a frozen river but did not step forward to meet her. Seeing the wisdom, no matter how desperate of her course of action, Armend scrambled to his feet and staggered after her.

“Fool,” the priest sneered. “I have already sent a message. The High priest will know of this soon and once he arrives there will be no escape and no mercy.”

“Coward,” she snarled “Face us if you dare.”

“He's afraid.” Armend glanced over his shoulder at the writhing limbs in swift pursuit.

Her lip curled in understanding, then she lunged forward, crying, “taste your god's blessing yourself.” The priest stepped back, raising before himself a slender silver rod, tipped at the end with a five spiked ball like the staves of the guards but much sleeker and more elegant. Armend stumbled behind, expecting to be seized by the ankle at any moment. But it never happened. The thing hung back at the edge of the circle of moonlight as if reluctant to approach.

The priest laughed “The servant of my Lord knows its own and bows before the power of its master.”

“If it were myself, I would not be so eager to own the kinship.” The woman raised her sword and swung it with all her force. He parried with the silver rod and, slender as it was, it did not break. Then,

he reached out with his other hand and touched her, almost casually on the arm. She gave a sharp cry, more of shock than pain and sprang back sharply. Quickly, she shielded herself and moved to raise her sword again, but the movement was slow and jerky as if her arm had become stiff and weak. It seemed to not be working properly as though ruined by age. The priest raised his symbol of office and she moved too slowly to be able to parry. It slashed her across the face, the five points, sharp as needles, leaving a row of bleeding scratches like claw marks. The priest laughed cruelly and raised his rod again, aiming at her eye this time. She wasted no time worrying over the loss of her sword arm but stopped the silver shaft in her left hand holding it away from her face. The priest tried to touch her on that hand as well but was not strong enough to let go of his rod with one hand and keep pushing it forward. Instead, he slowly worked his hand up the shaft getting closer to hers. Armend felt hot rage blaze inside him and, not pausing to think, he blundered into the priest from the side, knocking him to the ground.

“How dare you!” The priest struggled to his knees, a colored bruise already beginning to disfigure the pale skin of his cheek. He waved his rod and Armend tensed to block it, but it turned out to be just a feint. While Armend was distracted waiting for an attack that never came, the priest reached in with his other hand and brushed his attacker's leg and the touch was cold, as cold as the depth of ice in the most bitter winter, the kind that could adhere to the warm flesh in seconds so that Armend expected the skin of his leg would tear away when the priest removed his hand and only his eyes told him it did not for his leg was numbed past all feeling. The cold wormed inward turning his muscles stiff as if he had been toiling in the snow for hours and still it seeped down until it chilled his very bones. Now there was pain and rending ache, but he could do nothing. The agony was buried in his very core, sheathed in a cast as hard and unfeeling as ice itself.

The fact that the creature was coming towards him made it that much more horrible. He tried to take a step but his frozen leg was as unwieldy as a bar of iron and as heavy. It dragged along the floor like a dead weight, and he could feel nothing through it, as if his foot had gone to sleep but far worse, and so he could not use it for balance at all. The floor seemed to be sliding out from under him and he crashed hard to the ground. One of the black serpent limbs was wriggling towards him, and the priest stood over him grinning as he raised his rod. Armend struggled wildly to rise or at least crawl away but he could gain no purchase with his numb limb. The silver star of pain came slashing down and he turned his face away, shielding his eyes, shivering at the thought of the needle-sharp spikes about to pierce his flesh.

But the pain never came. Instead, he heard the priest cry out and the silver rod fell to the floor with a clatter. The woman stood beside him, her right arm still hanging limply but her short knife was in her left hand and the blade was dripping in blood that came from the wound she had dealt to the priest's arm. She struck like a maniac, again and again, her knife a whirlwind of red. Although none of the cuts were deep or vital, the priest's white robe was streaked with scarlet and it was clear that the pain of his lacerated flesh as well as the resulting rage made it difficult for him to focus on anything else. He did not see as she raised her foot to kick him, a thing that, at that moment, Armend greatly envied her ability to do.

The force of the blow sent him reeling down into the hollow around the altar, until he tripped over the approaching coil and fell forward on his face. The creature reared up on its black length, the end of the limb waving back and forth like a snake sizing up his pray. For a moment, it hesitated, clearly reluctant to attack this particular man. The priest tried to raise himself up to his knees, blood running down the skin of his arm and back. A drop of blood fell from his trembling hand and, as if in answer, the thing, at last, stuck, diving down from the side to give the priest a massive body blow. There were hollow gasping sounds as the air was forced out of his lungs and with no air left, there was no scream as the coils began their rhythmic suction. As he was already covered in blood, it was impossible to tell if the thing had slit his throat as well or simply drained him dry. Thrusting the bloody knife back into her belt, the

woman turned to Armend with a look of grim satisfaction on her face. She held out her left hand to help him to his feet. The thin scratches on her face had already scabbed and the blood that had run from them had dried in dark trails on her face.

“I don't know if I can stand,” he said, hesitant to take the offered hand, shamed at the thought of needing help from his captor.

“Yes, you can. It doesn't last. I can already feel a small amount of life coming back to my arm.”

“How nice for you,” he replied bitterly but he took the aid she offered. Rising was externally difficult as he had to put his full weight on her shoulders to avoid losing his balance again. But, once fully on his feet, he was able to stand upright on his own without over much effort. She stooped and held out to him the priest's staff. It was too short and thin for a proper walking stick, but it did allow him to hobble along slowly. Fortunately, the appendages that had perused them were distracted, devouring the priest. The others were still focused on Izja and his comrade who stood back-to-back over the body of the girl, fending them off with their knives. So, he was left to get his bearings which was fortunate as the floor now seemed to shift more than ever. Even the woman beside him with two good legs was having difficulty keeping her feet. Worse, there was a strange high pitched wheezing sound at the edge of hearing, growing steadily louder, that made it difficult to think. The sound filled the air and the way it rose and fell with a rhythm like breathing reminded him of bagpipes, though the noise was far shriller and did not carry a tune or bear any other resemblance to music. Rather the way it would start and stop, sometimes long and sometimes short, seemed like a code, even almost like speech though there was nothing even remotely resembling words. As he struggled across the tiled floor, Armend waited eagerly for signs that life was returning to his leg. So far, all that had happened was an ebbing of the frigid pain. At the moment he could feel nothing and that was preferable to him.

As they approached their companions, they could see Izja had also discovered the creature's new vulnerability. Severed lengths of the limbs littered the ground but the odds were still against them as the thing had now swelled to twice its previous size. There was no way of knowing if its strength increased correspondingly but, even if such was not the case, the added bulk made it easier for them to be pinned down and crushed by the writhing limbs. The shrill wheezing climbed to a piercing pitch and Armend instinctive put his hands to his ears, letting go his prop, and crashed to the ground. But it was all for naught. The sounds continued there, painful penetrating into his head as if coming through his brain as well as his physical ears. He jerked in agony and...yes.... felt the faintest pressure of the cold hard floor against his foot, the slighting feeling of his toes in the involuntary spasm. Filled with renewed hope, he struggled to his knees. The strange sounds were still drilling through his head but now he had the strength to bear it.

Life had plainly come back to the woman's arm as well. She was in the thick of it now, wielding her sword two handed, slicing through the creature much more effectively than Izja and his companion could with their short knives. But she seemed to be having trouble breathing, more than her exertions would indicate, appearing to sway before his eyes, half shrouded in a strange red miasma. The blood stench had at last become visible, thick clouds were obscuring and cloaking everything they could reach but they did not come from the dead bodies, now drained on the floor. Rather they came from the creature itself, even from parts where it had touched no blood. The red poison came in small clouds like dust rising up from a dry road, from every surface of its body, not continuously but in rhythmic pulses, not corresponding to the creature's movements, or any other sign he could see and it was too intermittent to be its breath. It would start and stop with no clear pattern. Sometimes long and sometimes short, and yet something about it seemed intimately familiar.

He pushed himself to his feet, his toes pressing against the floor, able to feel it full now...his leg spasmed slightly as if unaccustomed to standing and then it was over. He was as firm on his feet as ever or would have been if it weren't for that cursed whistling noise and the smell. And then suddenly it all

came together. The creature was making the noise by pushing air out of unseen holes in its body and with the air came the red haze and the stench and he must go right into the thick of it to fight. Drawing his sword, which he had had to sheath to better lean on his walking stick, he charged forward. Even though he was rushing into unknown horror and likely his end, the exhilaration of being able to run, to feel his feet pound against the ground, made it all worthwhile. Just as he reached the others, the warrior swung her sword down in a mighty cleave slicing through the creature right where the limb met the body, deep into the glossy black flesh, but it did not fully sever the limb which began to writhe and thrash widely and the sounds in his head became so harsh and fearful, he knew they could be nothing but hate filled curses.

Paying no heed to the looming danger, she raised her sword again quickly, before the thing's unearthly healing could take affect and this time, managed to cut through it fully. Immediately, the entire limb went still and limp, all powers of life removed and crumpled to the ground. Almost at once, she went down beneath the other limbs that turned on her in what could only be a fully intelligent fit of rage, only one staying to hold Izja at bay. Armend waded in, hacking about widely. He hewed away two of the appendages that had buried her and hauled her from under them, but the other was wrapped around her leg, pulling and twisting. If something was not done to stop it, it could well snap her bones in its crushing coils. Again and again he pierced the skin with his blade, up and down its length, headless of the sticky vapor it sprayed into his face, until it spasmed and let go. She struggled up, obviously in pain, straining to drawn breath into her lungs, so recently released from the squeezing pressure.

"We must cut them all off," she gasped, "down to its base and then it will be helpless."

"Recover yourself. I will begin" he said pushing her behind him and raising his sword just in time to deflect the crawling limbs that were coming towards them again. She fell back but only for a moment. Now, all four of them stood together, the two with knives on the flanks, keeping the other limbs at bay while those with swords advanced, shearing writhing lengths in front of them down to the very center of the body. Armend had no idea how long this final stage of the struggle went on but when at last, the thing lay, an armless quivering disk, like a bloated cake of sod, he felt wearier than he ever recalled being before. Izja looked worse still, his face drawn and white from blood loss and the weakness of deprivation his captivity had brought him.

"Forgive me," said the woman. "I have no food or water. I came as light as might be."

"You have already done more than we could have hoped for," Izja replied with gratitude. "We must be strong. Just give me some clean cloth to bind my wounds." Aching in every limb, Armend wanted nothing more than to collapse on the floor as the bearded man had done but fear kept him on his feet, even though his legs trembled with the exertion.

"Do we have time for this?" he asked feverishly as she began tearing strips from her shirt to help Izja. "I do not want to be here when the high priest answers his lackey's summons."

"I doubt he actually did call him." Izja looked up from binding his leg. "If he summoned the high priest every time there was a disturbance outside his chamber he would not keep his position for very long."

"Or his life," the older man added with bitter humor.

"I agree" said the warrior woman. "He seemed far too amazed to see us to know what was going on in advance"

"But why take the risk," objected Armend sharply. "The longer we are here the greater our peril."

"If we rest here for a minute we can run the harder if there is need," she said curtly. "Now sit down like the rest of us." He considered trying to make a getaway while the others were weary and wounded. But even as he thought of the possibility, he found he had already eased himself down on the floor, his exhausted limbs a step ahead of his mind. There was no refreshment, and the ground was cold and hard but the sheer relief of not having to support themselves was pure bliss. As another blessing, the

unconscious girl opened her eyes and was able to sit up with assistance. She was still very weak but the prospect of not having to carry her was heartening to the others.

But, suddenly, Izja pointed in horror. Following his gaze, they saw the creature, though armless, was still alive. The blob of its body pulsed slowly and, as they stared, it crept forward ever so slightly, using a rhythmic in and out movement to pull itself across the floor in the most tiny increments.

“Pissing Tem's luck,” cursed the gray beard, dragging himself to the altar with grim determination. Picking up the strange round stone, he brought it back and dropped the heavy object onto the creature. There was a wet squelching noise, like a foot sinking into heavy mud and they saw the whole body quiver from the impact but, pinned under the heavy weight, it seemed to have lost even its limited ability to move about. Still, the incident had greatly unnerved them all and no one wanted to remain in the chamber longer, despite their weariness, so they all made haste to descend the stairs. Feeling their way along the steps in the dark, hurt and limping, especially at speed, was no simple task and there were more than a few twisted ankles and barked shins by the time they reached the room below. The chamber looked no different than when Armend had last seen it, though it felt like a lifetime since he had last stood here, something he had thought likely he would never do again. Filled with a rising wave of wild elation, he raced forward and seized the reliquary from off the altar, heedless of the baleful eyes of the statues or the distressed cries of his companions.

And then everything seemed to go mad, almost as if he were hallucinating again. All he could see was the gleam and smolder of the gold, not just along the walls now, but everywhere. Surely, they could not have added more treasure while he had been in the chamber above. No, he and his companion had barred the door behind them, and the bar was still in place. Then the gold must breed like a living thing. The piles ran up the walls and out along the floor. Eagerly, he pulled off the remains of his shirt and knotted it into a makeshift sack into which he began to stuff everything within reach, indiscriminately. The sack bulged almost to splitting with the coin. At this rate he'd have no room for the gems, but the gold was there, and he couldn't help seizing handful after handful of it.

“You fool.” Izja's voice seemed to come from a long way off. “Why burden yourself when we may have to flee for our lives?”

“This is what I came for,” he snarled back, “and if it wasn't for your rescue, I would have been safely on my way long ago,” his voice rapidly climbing to a dangerous volume.

“Leave him.” The woman's voice was weary. “Perhaps he will create a useful diversion.”

“No chance of that.” Armend had finished filling his shirt as he called to them almost gaily and turned to rejoin them. The bag did not hold much but it was still enough to make him rich, too bad there hadn't been room for any of the gems or jewelry. The others winced at the jingling sound his pack made but he remained oblivious. In fact, the comforting heft of the gold against his side soothed many of his fears and he barely glanced at the lowering statues as he passed through their shadow. Still, he could not shake the strong feeling of being watched. The lanterns must be burning low as their flickering made the ground in front of him seem to move. Strange that none of the rest of the tiles looked this way. The light also gleamed off the mosaic in front of them at a sharp angle as if the tiles were set in almost vertically. Perhaps, it was nothing more than that. Then the girl behind him gave a shrill scream as a section of the mosaic lifted into the air and, though she was still little more than half conscious, Armend could take no comfort in the possibility that she might be imagining it for he could see it too.

The section that had raised up was the head of the dragona. Its burning yellow eyes and flared nostrils now hovered in the air, the head upright as it would be on a living animal but, as it waved and snaked side to side, they could see it was still flat tiles. If it faced them straight on, they could see only the outer edges of the tiles but, if it twisted to the side, the full hideous face of the dragona was revealed and from the back of the head, the neck came curving down, then to the side, to join with the body that still lay embedded in the floor. In the fearful silence that followed, they heard the thing hiss and then its

head shot forward, snapping at Izja who sprang back just in time to avoid it.

“See, it can't reach us,” blustered Armend, his voice full of a bravado he did not feel. “No need to fear. We can just go around.” But even as he stepped to the side, the head swiveled to follow him...and came towards him, its body folding up from the ground to follow. The images of its legs folded out from its sides until they stood at the right angles to the body, which was magically still fully tiled behind where they had lain. Legs folded out from the opposite side as well and both they and the side itself was fully tiled as well, as if the mosaic had a second side hidden under the floor. It came racing towards them, the sharp points of its elbows jerking grotesquely back and forth above its shoulders and the long tail looping and coiling behind it, rattling against the mosaic floor.

The way it veered to the side as it came on left no doubt that Armend was its target. His hands full of his clumsy bag of treasure, he was unable to draw his sword. Before he could set down his burden or balance it on his hip with one hand, the mosaic dragona had reached him and buried its teeth in his leg. The fact that the fangs were flat in no way made them less painful or damaging. He could feel them slicing through his flesh as easily as a knife cuts roasted meat at a feast. Despite the white-hot pain, the lack of burning and swelling seemed to indicate that the bits of ivory did not carry the venom he had heard filled the mouths of real dragonas. Flinching in pain, he lost his hold on the bag and it crashed to the floor and burst open, coins skittering across the ground like a horde of gleaming ants. With a cry of mingled rage and suffering, he drew his sword and brought it down on the thing's head. But the weapon glanced aside on the hard tiles and the thin blade shattered, leaving him with only a couple inches of notched steel at the hilt. Fortunately, before the beast could do any more damage, Izja ran up and kicked it in the side, making it let go. It snarled, the tiles on the sides of its lips rearranging to expose more of its teeth as it lunged at Izja but, as soon as he dodged, the baleful head swung back towards Armend.

“Get it away from me,” Armend yelled as he floundered backwards, tripping over the riches on the ground. Izja lunged forward, seizing the beast behind the head like a snake, then straddling its body with his legs so that it was pinned and unable to reach him with its claws. But the tail whipped back and forth, the rough tiles of the mosaic lacerating his flesh. “Kill it, kill it,” yelled Armend.

“How? Its entire body is hard stones.”

“Dragonas always have a weak spot.” The woman came up behind them. “Most often it's in their throat.”

“No throat here,” said Izja grimly, his hands locked around the creature's neck almost palm to palm.

“Still, we can make a break for it,” said Armend eagerly.

“And leave me here I suppose,” Izja shot back angrily, his knuckles going white in the effort to keep his grip.

“I will stay with you,” the woman offered. “The rest of you get to the hallway. Once they are all safe, we can fling the dragona away, run through the door, and slam it behind us.” Izja nodded assent as the dragona gave another violent thrust, almost tearing itself from his hands. The girl began hobbling towards the doors as fast as she could, which was at best a slow walk despite the fact that the older man kept pace with her and allowed her to lean against him. Armend turned to follow, the coins sliding under his feet at every step, threatening to send him sprawling. Better in his hands, he thought, than under his feet and stooped to start gathering them up, hearing the woman give a scream of rage. Nor was she the only one. With an envenomed squeal, the mosaic ripped itself away from Izja and came hurling at him.

He turned to face it and went down, sliding on his treasure. Winded so he could hardly move, he saw it bearing down on him, mouth gaping to show the teeth opening to rip out his throat. Quicker than thought, the warrior woman stooped to grab something up off the floor and flung it towards the beast with deadly aim. The blur of silver and blue struck the thing on the side of the head, sending it reeling. The gleaming object skittered across the floor and gradually slowed to resolve itself into a heavy goblet

set with blue gems. The dragona was snapping its head back and forth and making a strange hollow sound, the tiles on one side of its face crushed and broken by the impact. As it started back towards them, it seemed less steady on its feet and kept turning its head from side to side to face first one of them and then another with its undamaged side.

“It's half blind,” cried Izja in wonder.

“Impossible,” said the woman. “A dragona's eyes are covered with hard scales.”

Izja shrugged. “This one's eyes are bits of tile like the rest of it.”

“Never mind what it's made of. Kill it.” Armend grabbed the cup and threw it at the creature again, but the fact that he was panicked and also lying propped on an elbow did nothing for his aim and the missile went wide, not even grazing the oncoming beast and the head shot forward, the jaws snapping closed scant inches from his face, its claws scrabbling on the tiles of the floor. Izja had seized its tail just in time but could not keep his hold as the dragona whipped around, diving under its own tail to come at him. Armend struggled to get to his feet but collapsed in pain on the first attempt. The fall had wrenched his knee and it would not support his full weight.

Izja released the tail and raised his blade to defend himself but, as soon as it was free, the dragona showed no further interest in him, turning back towards Armend. He tried desperately to crawl away, frantically grabbing handfuls of gold and throwing them into the creature's face whenever it got too close. He could hear the pounding of Izja's feet on the tile near him, mixed with a skittering sound as they sent coins flying and could see the flash of Izja's knife at the edge of his vision. Eventually, Izja managed to get between him and the dragona, providing momentary respite. Armend pushed himself to his feet and began to hobble away, dragging his injured leg behind him, not sure what he meant to do or where he was going, other than away from the thing.

“Izja,” the woman's voice cut through the sounds of battle and Armend's own labored breathing. “The others have cleared the door. We can go now.” Armend looked back in horror as Izja stepped away, attempting to disengage, which was not difficult for, as soon as the way was clear, the dragona made for Armend again. Sparing no backward glances, Izja turned and raced for the opening, his companion at his side. They were leaving, abandoning him here to be torn apart by the creature alone. He opened his mouth to call a curse after them but, before he could, the dragona was upon him and he was fighting for his life.

Yes, he had a slight edge now that the creature was blind in one eye. By always moving so that its blind side was towards him, he kept it constantly off balance, reorienting itself and unable to put full power behind a strike. But the blessing was thin indeed. The dragona could whip its head around so rapidly that he had to be always on the move to keep even this small protection, sending bolts of pain twinging up his injured leg. And, always the blasted coins were snarling about his feet, sucking like a quicksand bog, threatening to throw him again. He had no weapon. His sword was useless, and he knew a direct strike would snap what little was left of the thin blade. All he could do was whirl it about wildly, like some idiot farm boy trying to scare crows, a paltry distraction at best. Sooner or later, his footing would falter and then it would be the end.

A dull thud reached him, and his head snapped round, momentarily distracted, only to see the dark, gleaming wood of the inside of the great doors as they slammed shut and he knew he was trapped inside with the creature. Even as his panic and despair reached new heights, Armend realized this was a distraction he could ill afford and, as he whipped back to face his attacker, he felt his foot slip and his injured knee would not respond fast enough to let him recover his balance. He swayed wildly, half falling and, as he struggled to stay upright, he felt teeth sink into his leg but, even as he yelped in pain, Armend was relieved that it was his already injured leg. A slightly greater limp might make the difference between life and death but was much less likely to do so than a second injured leg.

He tried to pull his leg free but the little, needle like teeth were sunk firmly into the flesh and the

dragona pulled back, shaking him almost playfully like a dog. He reeled drunkenly and felt himself spinning out of control to one side, grabbing desperately at the only solid object he could reach, a heavy stone vase. His fingers locked against the cool smoothness of the rim and his head snapped forward, almost hitting the hard stone as well but, by sheer good fortune, his forehead struck his grasping knuckles instead. The pain was excruciating but the danger of a broken nose or, far worse, temporary black out, was avoided. The contents of the vase rattled from the impact, striking his fingers from the other side. Most were light, frivolous, imitation branches and fronds of pure gold. But one had bruising force, a bronze rod topped with a stylized, carved head, Kaymene like the dragona itself. His battered hands closed around it in desperate hope, and he staggered up on his good leg, turning to face his attacker. The dragona recoiled, its head whipping back like that of a snake preparing to strike. The scepter was clearly meant to be merely ceremonial and was balanced poorly with all the weight in the head so, when he swung, the dragona easily side stepped, though he could still see how it had to compensate for its blind side. With a snarl, it snapped at him, and he struggled to recover in time to parry. Still, the scepter was sufficiently light that, when held in both hands, it was easy enough to control, especially when he moved his hands closer to the head to balance the weight better. This was the matter of but a second, but the shorter reach was unfortunate for the long neck of the beast already out matched him in that regard. The trick was to get close enough to strike without being mauled, especially when he was slowed by his injured leg and, even as he thought that, his foot was sliding yet again on the cursed coins. The dragona dared forward with an eager snarl and only a swift parry with the rod saved him from losing part of his arm, that and the fact that its missing eye made it misjudge the distance.

But his narrow escape had given him an idea. Stooping, he gathered a handful of coins which seemed to make the thing throw itself upon him even more viciously but, as it did so, he flung the coins into its face on the good side and, when it was turned away to protect its remaining eye, he brought the staff down on the other side. The blow made the head snap to the side, twisting the neck roughly and the dragona cried out, a high pitched yet mighty scream like a wounded eagle. It staggered sideways, seeming dazed from the impact and he struck again, before it had a chance to recover. This blow also was solid and he thought he could see faint cracks forming in the mosaic tiles of its face. Hope surged in Armend but it also made him careless. His next stroke went wide and the dragona managed to scuttle back out of range. But there was no chance of making an escape while it was on the retreat for, as soon as he took a step towards the door, it came after him again. This time it latched into his arm, fortunately not deep but too close for him to effectively strike the head. Turning slightly, he brought the metal shaft down on one of the splayed, clawed feet planted close beside him. There was a sharp crunching noise, horrible as the crushing of living bone and the dragona jerked away, leaving two of its toes behind. He felt his stomach lurch at the sight but the mutilation had the desired effect of forcing the thing to release this arm. Now the panic of prolonged combat was creeping up, threatening to overwhelm Armend. As his most recent blunder proved, he could not reliably hope to stand long against an opponent, human, animal, or whatever the thing he was now fighting was called.

Before the creature could fully recover from its latest injury, he swung the rod full force, down like a sledge hammer. The knob of bronze connected squarely, and the cracks spread and widened. A piece on the back of the head split off and fell to the floor and the dragona screamed, no longer a cry of rage but a whimper of pain. The thin whistling sound was bone chilling as was the act of watching a creature of stone suffer pain. But Armend felt only a fierce joy at this. Beyond the hope of life, he felt a sadistic hatred towards the thing that had threatened him. He brought the staff down over and over again. More chunks of mosaic broke off. Underneath was the rough gray morass of mortar, looking disturbingly like living brain matter. The dragona's mouth was open but it no longer made any sound, as if it had lost the capacity. Its head snapped back, no longer smooth and snakelike but wild and erratic. In truth, all its limbs were flailing about in a jerking and spastic manner. Armend struck again and this

time connected squarely in the middle of the forehead, slamming the dragona down so it cracked its chin on the floor. Again and again, he pounded down on it, swinging the rod with all his strength, until nothing was left of the dragona's head but a few bright scraps of tile, like tiny jewels, and a smear of gray powder from the crushed mortar. The last vestiges of agonized twitching faded from its limbs.

Armend stood, panting, slick with sweat from fighting for his life. His wounds throbbed. Sweat running into them stung, and he could feel the pressure as his ankle swelled. Every movement, even the act of drawing breath, hurt. But there was no time to rest. Guards could have heard the fight or have discovered the other fugitives and now be on high alert. Tearing his already ripped shirt to strips, he bound any undressed wounds and tied his ankle as tightly as possible, to cut the swelling and make it bear his weight as much as might be. The sleeves of the shirt he made into a hollow sash into which he tucked the reliquary and several of the most valuable large gems, leaving the fortune of a lifetime spread upon the floor, for his injuries prevented him from carrying a heavier weight.

The thick solid doors were hard to open for he had to brace with his hurt leg and push with his good one. But he bit down hard on the leather of his wrist brace and endured it, though it took some time after for him to stop limping. Fortunately, because he was barefoot, he was still able to move down the halls with relative silence and was able to retrace his steps without serious incident, though he did have to hide behind one of the statues in the hallway as a patrol went past. The rope was safely concealed in the side chamber where he had left it and it was the work of but a moment to cast it down through the window. The decent was trying as he could no longer use his legs to brace himself away from the wall but had to descend loose and swinging, struggling to hug his body against the rope with his weak and injured limbs. His skin was bruised and scrapped from swinging against the stones by the time he reached the ground but from there it was a quick limping run to the shadows of the buildings surrounding the plaza and to safety. Certainly, he was eager to hand the relic over to Lord Formain so there was no risk it would be found on his person, but the worst was over.

As he moved further away from the baleful tower, he felt the frantic hammerings of his heart slow but it was not replaced by the wild surge of elation he usually felt after successful thefts, especially challenging ones, no swelling of pride at having cheated death and outsmarted those who thought themselves his betters. Armend was done with high-risk scores, at least for the time being. His fee for delivering the reliquary would keep him fed for a long time before he even had to worry about trying to sell the jewels. Yes, there was more than enough time for him to lie low while his wounds healed and the high alert that was sure to result from this night's events died down. Even though neither he nor the rest of the city would ever forget these things had happened, he would have been heartily glad if it were possible.

Yet, even so, he felt a certain warmth of gladness when he heard, a fortnight later, sitting outside the tavern, that Izja was back. Somehow, he had managed to make the all but impossible escape through the gauntlet of the lower temple. In the past, Armend would have been on edge with curiosity, for professional reasons, to know how it had been done. But now, the thought hardly crossed his mind when he heard that Izja and his brother, a priest of Torash, though not of the cult of the eye, were firing the city with the call for a council to revise and standardize the laws of both church and state. He had never given much thought to the man's political ideas, nor did he now. The gladness was for the man himself, as if they were longtime friends, despite the fact that they had never spoken before that night and almost certainly never would again. Ah well, he sighed and took another swallow of his beer. You couldn't stand shoulder to shoulder with a man and not feel some kinship with him. Or a woman either, and it wasn't exactly kinship he felt towards her. He scowled, not liking to think of her. If Izja had escaped, then she must be out there somewhere too, unless she had had to sacrifice herself to secure his escape. Not likely with her skills. But, assuredly, it was even less likely they would ever meet again. He shuddered slightly, disgusted with himself. She made a fine man indeed, but a horrible woman.

Throwing back his head, he drained his mug and sauntered off in search of one of the tavern girls for some horizontal refreshment.

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