

LEGEND OF THE SWORD



TALES OF MOMENTS LOST
BY ANDY STORER

Through the misted windows, other all looking into the dark form of that tiny
figure as she lay. I had a sudden sense of something new, of something
and something for which I had no name.

There was in the collector's heart, an extraordinary little feeling as the
idea of a thing of which she was unworthy, a feeling of a thing of which she
was unworthy to bring another man's heart to know, the feeling of a thing.

All morning, she had been thinking of her boy and how and where and what
that boy had been in the last days of his life, in the last days of his life, in the
last days of his life, in the last days of his life, in the last days of his life.

TALES OF MOMENTS LOST

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ROLOGUE: ROUND AND ROUND WE GO

Through the misted windows you can just make out the dark form of 'The Lady Juville' as she lies docked against the smudge of a sunset. Her sail crew are making final preparations for your voyage at dawn.

You're sat in 'The Apocrypher's Arms', an unassuming little tavern on the quay-side. A serving girl weaves her way through a bustling crowd of traders, hawkers and sailors to bring another six pitchers of Slamot, the legendary local brew.

All evening, eyes have been turned your way and nods and wagers exchanged. Your group seem to be the unacknowledged centre of attention. Perhaps it's because the six of you are armed to the teeth, perhaps it's because that last hawker was thrown through the wall. It would have been the window but Pagan's aim was somewhat vague. Everyone else put it down to the Slamot; he put it down to the hawker's wares - the earrings of fallen comrades from afar, some still crimson with the blood of lost battles. Roland B'manuel, the Innkeeper, usually quite headstrong himself, had meekly smiled his thanks and dispatched his daughter towards you again. This time the round of Slamot was on the house and here she was dodging the staggering hordes for the ninth time. Or was it the tenth? You had no idea and didn't care. Neither did Roland B'manuel. It wasn't every night he had a party of the King's warriors to draw his custom for him.

Belar had suggested you told each other of your recent adventures, but it had been obvious for three pitchers now that your thoughts are otherwise occupied. Perhaps those three days on a raft at sea had left you somewhat subdued, or perhaps it was your anticipation of tomorrow's voyage west to Anar. Either way, you keep looking out to The Lady Juville and the ocean beyond. Either way, the Slamot was living up to its name.

As you all reach for a fresh quart, Belar slams his tankard on the table and begs the customary silence. He asks you all to draw forward and listen. His breath reeks of ale. You all sit back again. Pagan falls off his stool.

"When I suggested we might recount our most recent adventures, I really had something else in mind... similar but not the same... we've all heard enough of valiant and noble victories... what I wish is our admissions of defeat..."

"How do you mean Belar?... ", asks Daville.

"Well... We all know we've overcome tremendous odds in the course of our campaigns, otherwise we wouldn't be here. But I tire of bravado and boasting... even if some of the wilder details are matter of fact. I lose thirst for glory and triumph....no. What I have in mind are our stories of failure!..."

Borgallus interrupts him.

"It takes a brave man indeed to admit defeat"

"But we have never truly been defeated, else we wouldn't be living and breathing as we sit here... though at the rate we knock back the innkeeper's famous Slamot

you wouldn't think we cared... " He pauses for the effect of the quip to register. "...so, let us entertain one another with tales of... how shall I put this... mystery?... perplexion?... exasperation? The skeletons in our cupboards, stories consigned to remotest memory... "

"I'll take up that challenge, Belar", Daville reassures him.

"I also", adds Cornilius, "If I can remember one... "

"So who shall be first my friends... who shall be first? Brave Daville here....or you Borgalius ...and what of Pagan - can you hold your ale Pagan, or only your stool...?" Pagan rises to the bait.

"I can hold my own Belar!", a hint of anger in his voice, his eyes wide with a threatening glare.

Belar calmly places his hands on the table and is about to take up the challenge but Daville turns to face Pagan and smiles.

"Don't get bitter now, Pagan, it's Slamot we're drinking!"

"And tomorrow will be another day...", adds Cornilius with a barely disguised grin, "let us draw for the privilege. I have a way of choosing in mind".

Relaxing for a moment, Pagan is about to take another swig.

"And what might that be friend?", he enquires.

Cornilius searches the folds of his cloak and appears distressed.

"Is this what you're looking for?", asks Borgalius, and produces a gold coin out of thin air.

"Why you... ", Cornilius splutters in amazement, "How on earth..."

"Just a little trick I picked up... I suppose you have the coin in the tankard routine all worked out?"

Cornilius scratches his head. "I suppose you can read minds too!"

"Perhaps... "

Borgalius glances in your direction and nods as he comments to the others. "Looks like his mind is somewhere out to sea... somehow I don't think he'll be saying much. More Slamot, old friend?"

He receives no acknowledgement and no reply. You are indeed somewhere else.

"Ah well... let's get on with it then Cornilius". Daville takes the coin from Borgalius and tosses it to it's rightful owner.

"Hey Roland... Roland! Over here!"

The innkeeper hears his call and makes his way towards them. Daville lowers his voice.

"That B'Manuel was once a man of legend you know, but he left for the South Seas... He's now retired back here.... Ah! Roland old friend, will you do us a favour?"

"What might that be", B'Manuel asks, his huge hands clenched and dug into his sides, "getting a little cold now you've put a hole through the wall?"

"No, no... ", replies Daville, "Cornilius give him your coin....take our tankards Roland, if you'd be so kind, and drop this coin in one". Daville turns to us and continues.

"The first man to taste the coin speaks first... for the rest of you, and you in particular, Cornilius, may silence be golden!"

The innkeeper calls his daughter and takes the tankards.

"Another round of Slamot my beauty!". He turns to us with a look of reproach. "Just go easy on my tavern, boys. Alright? I've met more than a match for you in my time"

"You have no need for further worry", Belar reassures him, "We will be gone by midnight, we set out on a quest with the dawn tide." Roland turns his back on you and pops the coin in one tankard before refilling them all.

"Well, I hope to see you again. I hear you're bound for Anar - that should be fun. Here, drink and ye shall find!". He passes the silver tankards.

"Many thanks". Daville looks at Cornilius. "Roland, you may have the coin for your troubles, after we've used it."

"Keep your money!". Roland stands firm. "I expect I'll be billing the King for more than a wall by the end of your drinking - Good health!"

The tankards are raised to waiting lips and their contents consumed with a fury. Belar bites on metal and spits out the coin.

"Good, I wanted to go first in any case. "Another round of Slamot!", he shouts out at the departing B'Manuel. "Now pray silence for the speech! This is a story about the time I ...", he pauses, No. This is just a story about time... "

"About time", adds Pagan, twisting the words sarcastically.

"King Darius had despatched me to the island of Rivel, some six weeks east of here. A previous prospecting party had failed to return. In fact, I had been told that no one who set foot there had ever come back, so I had a dozen or so Carellian mercenaries with me just in case.

We had arrived at the western edge of the island and, after leaving a man to watch the ship, rowed into shore. The place was certainly strange. A silence pervaded. On the way in, one of the Carellians had remarked at the absence of any waves on the shoreline. The sea looked like glass. No wind, no breeze, no bird song. Yet the trees and bushes looked healthy.

Our cartographer and I climbed a rocky promontory and looked inland. Rivel looked peaceful enough; a misty land, quite heavily forested, gently undulating, a river winding its way down to the south coast. To the north there appeared to be some sort of settlement; we could see thin wisps of smoke standing upright and in its centre what appeared to be a minaret. Over to the east, across this green emptiness, the other coast. Rivel could only be a few miles square. The cartographer did his stuff; taking bearings and making up a rough map. Nothing special at all.

The twelve of us made our way along the western shore, the wide beach offering an easier navigation than the unknown forest inland. We had estimated the journey to the settlement to take an hour at most, but after two we had still not set eyes on it. Behind us lay our footsteps and in the long distance our ship; our rowing boat nothing more than another speck of sand.

All this time we had seen no one. Nothing had moved. No one had even felt a breeze ruffle his hair - yet over the sea there were white horses roaming. As I said, our walk seemed to take an exceptionally long time and I was beginning to wonder whether we had been mistaken about the scale of the island. But I had been on many expeditions such as this and I knew the cartographer to be equally experienced. Still, I felt a real sense of relief when we finally rounded a headland and saw the village with its small harbour.

We stood together for a moment to drink from our flasks whilst the cartographer took more bearings. He too appeared puzzled. We both knew something was amiss but couldn't put it into words. Before we moved on I decided to play safe and send three men back to bring the ship along the coast. At least we wouldn't then have to walk so far back, and, besides, we might need more supplies. I couldn't be sure how long we would be on Rivel or whether the natives would be friendly. Or indeed whether we would meet any at all, for we hadn't seen a soul since landing. The only thing I could be sure about was not knowing what to expect.

The three Carellians were duly dispatched and we proceeded on our way. I thought it best not to alarm any villagers we might encounter with the sight of so many armed men so I gave orders for a further five of my mercenaries to wait among

the dunes and observe our reception. I am naturally cautious - these days you have to be.

The remaining four of us walked the final stretch of beach and clambered up the harbour wall. I counted fifteen brightly coloured fishing boats lying marooned on the glistening sand. On one we could see two figures handling nets. We shouted our greetings but to no avail. They didn't even raise their heads.

We looked around. The wall curved away from us and turned to its opposite end like a horseshoe. A shallow groove of what I assumed to be fresh water stretched from a small bridge in the quayside to the harbour mouth and beyond, across the flats, to the sea. On the quay were other figures, a horse or two, and a handful of carts. Several nets had been hung up to dry. But no one looked our way. Nothing moved. All was silence. Above it all towered the dark spire of the minaret, its gold tip bright with reflected sunlight, shining our way like a beacon.

I jumped down from the wall and made my way over to the boat with the figures. Still they hadn't moved. I walked right up to the bow. The fishermen were as solid as statues, their eyes fixed on the tools they held to darn their nets. But these men may as well have been frozen. I climbed the ladder up to the boat, and again I called out, again there was no reply. I touched the sleeve of the nearest but he didn't move. I walked right around him. He was fixed to the spot. I stood perplexed. I shook him hard with both hands. Nothing.

As I descended the ladder to the sand I noticed a gull stood in one of my footprints, its head stooped, its beak piercing the surface. It too was fixed. So how had it got there?. I squatted down to within inches of its face. I noticed a few grains of sand slowly tumbling from where its beak touched the ground. I got down flat on my belly so my nose was almost touching the same spot. The slow tumbling continued. I heard the dull thud of footsteps on drying sand behind me and turned. The cartographer was making his way over to me, I waved him over hurriedly and turned back. Breaking out of the surface was the purple head of a worm firmly clasped in the beak of the gull.

The cartographer stooped down to see what had interested me. We lay there like madmen for what seemed like hours watching the curious sight before our eyes. Movement was almost imperceptible, but the gull had raised its head some three inches and the worm was now free of the sand. This movement had taken fifteen minutes or thereabouts. But the gull had loosened its grip and its feet had now left the ground. It hung there defying gravity. It seemed to be flying away.

We got to our feet and scratched our heads. I looked up to the men on the boat above us. They had changed position. They were now crouched. The one I had shook had his arms crossed against his face, the other punching the air with a look of blind terror. We were terrified, too. What on earth was happening, or to be more precise, what on earth wasn't happening?. We began to walk back to our companions and were suddenly deafened by a deep metallic drone.

It seemed to emanate from the direction of the minaret; a low, long, resonating sound. I looked at the cartographer in amazement and then over to my men. They

too were staring in the direction of the spire. I shouted to them, beckoning them to a point where we could meet midway to the bridge over the quay. The unknown sound stopped, but the way it stopped, if you can imagine it, was gradual. Almost lingering in the air. Then we heard it again half a minute later. Fainter this time, among the rooftops, around and off the harbour wall and out to sea. An echo. But then all was silence again. We ran over to the others. The youngest one was terrified, thinking the place haunted, so to distract him I sent him to fetch our five colleagues from the dunes.

We conferred on what lay before us. The face of an old woman stared out to us from an open window, but as the cartographer moved nearer to offer her greetings it was only too apparent that she could not see him. He shouted directly in her ear, thinking her blind, but received no acknowledgement whatsoever. I was by now completely dumbfounded and threw my head back in despair. The smoke from her house stood perfectly straight above us, reaching further than my eyes could focus.

I was just trying to make sense of this when the sound returned, equally as loud, but somehow even more disturbing. The three of us stood transfixed for its duration until we heard the short silence and again the echo travelling around the wall and into the distance. As our eyes followed what we imagined to be its course we glimpsed our colleagues returning from the dunes. Before they reached us the metallic din had resumed and disappeared twice more. By this time we had realised it was the slow toll of the minaret's bell. We endured that ghostly resonance eight more times.

After the others had arrived I gave orders for us to split up into threes and explore the village. Our party made for the minaret and climbed the long spiral staircase to the balustrade surrounding its pinnacle. Looking down was like studying a painting. We could see a group of old men below us taking a midday drink, all sat like statues, a trickle of red wine in mid-air curving from a server's jug into an empty glass. A group of children playing in a small square, a yellow ball clearly seen above their upturned faces like a little sun they could never reach. A young couple hiding in a courtyard, locked in an embrace so passionate they might melt. A boy drinking from the village fountain, his head completely underwater. Why wasn't he drowning? I stood and watched him until I was no longer interested in answering the question. I could see one of my group stood by him now, undoubtedly even more puzzled.

On the south side of the balustrade, I came across a raven pushing off from the handrail, its wings arched in preparation for flight. Beyond it I could see a group of my men working their way through a market. The only moving objects in what would have otherwise been a bustling crowd of traders and villagers.

The weather was changing. The distant sea had turned a dark grey and the haze of afternoon heat was being replaced with the sharp clarity preceding a storm. It was as if someone was tracing dark lined edges on all the subjects of our painting.

As I passed along the eastern balustrade I saw what looked like a treasury; in any event there were four guards stood to attention at its entrance and its roof was

the colour of gold. I shouted through the silence to the other two groups of men and pointed them in its direction. We left immediately. This was exactly the kind of discovery King Darius would appreciate. Half way down the staircase I realised my shout had caused no echo.

We met at the huge iron gate of the building's entrance. One of my men was playing around with a guard's face, squeezing his nose and cheeks, reaching in his mouth for his tongue and pulling it out. He kicked the man's legs from beneath him and we all laughed as our victim hovered in mid-air all limbs akimbo. It was easy enough to lift a set of keys from one of their belts and we entered.

Before us lay all manner of wealths. Large casks of coins and jewels, statuettes of gold and silver, huge urns of precious stones. So much that we were puzzled as to why it had been left in what was only a fishing village on a remote island. But then as so much about this place was beyond comprehension the answer hardly mattered. As these treasures were there for the taking, I gave the men orders to begin carrying them to the harbour for eventual relay to our ship and the King's grateful coffers.

The day wore on and we had not shifted a half of the valuables and by evening were beginning to tire. We were a little concerned that our ship had not yet arrived off the harbour, but we put this down to the storm out there. The men must have found a sheltered bay. We helped ourselves to food and wine from a local taverna and after sharing observations on this mysterious place, we settled down in the treasury to enjoy a well deserved sleep.

We awoke at dawn to the sound of gulls. It took me a few minutes to realise what this implied. Today, evidently, the silence had ended.

I aroused the men and we lifted more of our booty and walked out into the treasury's courtyard to be met with an extraordinary sight. The four guards were moving towards us, swords drawn. We had to shake our heads in disbelief, however, for they were moving so slowly that a sweep of their swords would take a half a minute. Almost casually we made our way around them and into the street. Locals were lumbering towards us at a snail's pace. As they neared us they would slowly lean away, raising their arms as though they had seen us from the corner of their eyes. Dogs would slowly bound up to us, teeth bared and biting on air as they missed our legs. We could now hear everyday sounds, but at such a long drawn out pitch they were largely undecipherable. A jester would say the effect was most disquieting.

We spent the rest of the morning making trips between the treasury and the quay. Our ship still hadn't arrived and I was beginning to worry. I had to leave two men with the stacked treasures as locals were attempting to lift them for themselves. Before long a crowd had begun to amass and the situation was getting out of hand. I gave orders for the booty to be transferred to a fishing boat and the rest of us returned to the Treasury to continue with the lifting.

By now it had become apparent that events were speeding up. Literally. What had once been the prolonged, painfully slow sight of the locals' movements now appeared to be the deliberate results of careful considerations. Their activity now made them look so serious and resolved it was as if they had all turned into philosophers overnight, having studiously weighed up the pros and cons of every minor action. Now the guards could actually take hold of us; we had to doubly sure ourselves of every moment because those sword sweeps were now, if I can put it like this, missing with more accuracy. It was becoming impossible to continue with the work. I thought it best to settle for what we had already secured and leave Rivel. But how?. Where was our ship?

When we returned to the quay we found our men had been hacked down. Upon seeing us the assembled mass turned on us too. Treasury guards arrived from our rear and we were caught in a narrow street, with little manoeuvre for sword play. We turned to confront the guards but their numbers were too great to give our swifter movement any real advantage in that confined space. Three of my men were cut down before we had killed a score of theirs. The remaining four of us ran in the direction of the minaret and fought with the guards to gain entrance. We pushed their dead bodies against the inside of the door as part of a barricade against the angry mob outside.

We rested in the balustrades and considered our options. At two I stopped counting. Fight or die. As this was a choice I often faced, I could relax. I went downstairs and hacked the living daylight out of anyone who came near me. I then returned and carried on counting.

If time meant anything here, it was running out. I had just decided we ought to make a run for a fishing boat when I heard a fearful commotion. Looking down below we could see locals and guards alike fleeing in all directions. Some were being hurled against walls, others screaming in terror, swords were being flung out of hands. The old men we had seen the day before drinking wine like statues were still sat there as if nothing had happened. Suddenly, their tables were swept away from them and appeared to fly in to the running torrent of villagers escaping the unseen menace. Through one crowd we could see a furrow of space being cut, people on both sides being thrown to the ground. We heard the doors give way down below and a split second later my three companions were sucked away from me by an invisible force.

I stood against the handrail of the balustrade wondering whether to jump. I don't usually go for the third choice. My old friends say it's because I can only count to two. For me, number three is suicide. I didn't even have chance to rule it out.

A moment later, my feet left the floor and I was rushed down the spiral staircase at breakneck speed to the grey-blue blur of sky, sea and unconsciousness."

Belar leans back from the table and smiles before taking a long hard drink of his Slamot.

"And! And....?", bellows Pagan above the tavern's rumpus. Belar clasps his

hands and opens them as though offering him a gift.

"It was the men from our ship of course. Came to fetch us. As simple as that...".

"Yes", said Daville, "But what about Rivel. Why is there all that speeding up and slowing down?"

Belar leans forward again and smiles. "I've no idea."



OUR HORIZONS MADE TO STRETCH

Belar drinks a whole tankard full down in one to relieve his parched throat.

"I don't think I left anything out. It gets a little harder to remember each time I recount it. Now - Who'll be next?". He takes out his dagger; a ten inch blade with a handle of white gold. "This little beauty cost me the earth - or at least one part of it. I was granted an island off Trait for services rendered but lost it in a wager. I was given this by way of recompense"

"What did the wager depend on?", asks Cornilius.

"A turn of this knife... Shall we spin it and see who goes next?"

"Yes, but what was the wager about?"

"I met a hunter on Anar - yes, I've been there before - who had a horn with him. He said it had magical powers 'to open The Ways', as he put it. I asked him to prove it. He said he couldn't. Not for that purpose at least. He took out this knife and lay it on the ground and blew the horn. I didn't hear a sound but the knife started spinning... spinning so fast I almost lost sight of it. When it stopped it pointed to me. I bet him my island against his horn he couldn't do it again. He agreed. It happened again!" Belar lifts his arms in despair.

"What happened to the horn then, Belar?", Daville pipes up, "After you'd blown it? Huh!"

"Go lose your tongue Daville... I had it stolen by trolls"

"Stolen by trolls!?"

"Yes! Little swine like you, Daville... ", Belar pauses, realising he is about to lose his temper, "Come on then Daville, prove to us your undoubted accomplishments"

"I'd rather spin the knife first, Belar. My story is unworldly. I don't know whether the likes of you could understand it".

Belar jerks forward across the table and grabs Daville by the neck. "You'll learn to hold your tongue with me my lad or..."

Cornilius reaches out to grip Belar's arms. "Enough of this you two, just spin the dagger will you!"

Belar sits down again and spins. The knife comes to rest pointing at Daville. Belar hisses, "Tell your story now Daville for fear the next spin leaves the table!"

"I need no threats to tell you mine, just your ears - and if you take hold of me again you won't have any to listen with!" Daville slides his tankard over to Belar. "Here, finish this and order some more, then shut it - for this tale requires silence".

He calms down and collects himself; clearing his throat. There is a brief silence after his ball of spit flies past you and smashes a window pane. Over by the bar you can hear B'Manuel cursing.

"I had been travelling through The Lands of Seronia on the far side of the world. This area had only been discovered a thousand years ago and was as yet unpopulated to any great extent. Its only settlement of any size, Seron, had been built before records began. Lying empty for centuries, the city was still largely desolated. No one knew who its original habitants were or what had befallen them. Judging by some of their buildings it would seem they worshipped the stars.

All over Seron are needle pinnacles towering hundreds of feet, crowned by silver discs which glow blue in moonlight. None has ever been scaled and no one knows the material from which the discs are made. I myself tried to climb one but half way up the needles become encrusted with razor sharp crystals. But Seron has another peculiar feature.

Through the centre of its main thoroughfare runs a groove the depth of a man. Although no water flows along its course, there are several bridges. It is as though the groove were meant to be considered as a stream of some sort. A local who tried to fill part of it in was struck by lightning. Months later, his son tried. In Seronia, lightning always strikes twice. The sides of the groove are coloured silver and are luminous even during daylight. I heard stories of a man who had walked its length from the mountains to the sea in seven days. At its source, on the highest peak, lies another silver disc, so huge it takes half a day to walk the circumference. That man became a leader of the elders; apparently he never forgot anything he encountered, down to the smallest detail. He paid a price for this though. He never slept until he died.

King Darius had been granted dominion of Seronia by his father. I was expected to report back to court with stories of new sources of wealth just as soon as I returned and had been given a cask of gold in exchange. What I had to report back was guaranteed to incur Darius's wrath. In the middle of The Lands is a great plain bounded by mountains on all sides. It is believed that a vast meteorite smashed into Seronia here; judging by the smoothness of the basin floor and its foothills. Meteor showers are so common in Seron that the natives regard them as we may regard rainfall.

That winter, like all winters, had brought showers which lit up the sky every night, all night, with short, bright trails of blue and yellow. Such was their frequency that the former criminals and outcasts who now formed the plain dwellers had become quite religious, referring to them as heavenly rain. And in a sense they were. Of the many stones that survived burn up in the atmosphere, most were full of minerals of agricultural worth. Even gold had been found in their hard, broken fragments.

One night's storm was to beat all others. Most Seronians were safe indoors whilst only a few younger and hardier souls were out and about. They had made for the meadow known as The Shower Field to indulge the old rite of initiation.

Such was the frequency of certain showers that tests of manhood were devised which were all too simple. All one had to do was stand in the centre of The Field for as long as possible. The last one left standing, either through bravery or chance, was deemed a future leader and paid commensurate respect.

No one knew why this arena had been chosen, except that meteors had never been known to fall on the settlement itself, only in the area of The Field. Over the years, hundreds of Seronia's finest had lost their lives this way; the impact of a rock from another world on their skulls signalling a last moment of adolescence. Yet still they came.

I had been out with them on that night. The Field had been prepared according to the time-honoured tradition. A circle of head-high torches surrounding up to thirty brave young men standing on plinths of ironstone. I watched from the perimeter, sheltering in a dug out under one of the many fallen monoliths enclosing the arena.

The shower had begun at sundown as always. I had patiently observed the sky's change from a vermilion wash to a blue the colour of cobalt. Minutes later, chrome trails cut diagonal slashes through the night. All around I could hear the dull whistle and thud of falling rocks. Some clean on the heads of the gathered.

The contest progressed amidst the huddled murmurs of observers and the silent endurance of participants. Bravery was silence in the face of death. Already twelve had died outright. Three would remain cripples, honoured cripples, free of labour for the rest of their lives.

Then a greater silence overtook the arena. Eyes gazed starwards and a single bright light appeared, growing in intensity by the second. Some contestants stepped down from their plinths transfixed by its magnitude. A sound of rushing wind seemed to gather all over The Field, its source unclear; some said it came down from the mountains, some from overhead, no one was sure. And then it hit. The whole field cleared, spreading in terror in all directions as the sound became pain. I cowered under my monolith knowing it would be a big one; you could tell by the sound it cut. In the centre of the circle the only one remaining, Daniel, looked up in heavenly recognition as it hit him. Full in the face.

It was of human form and human height. A matt black statue, dull and perfect. Although the moon was full, it cast no shadow. Just silence.

The torches flickered to extinction and the stricken observers, I among them, were cast in moonlight. Yet there had been no moon earlier. Nothing moved. No one stirred. Then this thing began to spin and glow a dark blue and suddenly, and I mean, just like that... abrupt, you know - it stopped! Standing there was a sphere. The shower had stopped. As far as I know, there's never been another shower since.

The Seronians called it The Sphere... Imaginative bunch, those Seronians. No one knew if it contained anything, whether it was alive, whether it was some kind of message. Everyone cared. I merely observed. None of us could get anywhere near - as if it were surrounded by some kind of invisible barrier. Our wisest would call it a

field within a field. The Seronians called it a pain in the rear.

The Sphere was, to all intents and purposes, dead. It emitted no light, no sound and remained still and intense. The next morning I got to within an arm's length of it but when I stretched to touch it I felt a warm surface of air which got hotter the more I extended my hand. It got to the point where I was in danger of severely burning myself. That was the nearest anyone got to it. As the day went on, the safe distance decreased. By the time it reached Seron, I reckoned you wouldn't be able to get within a day's journey of it without being burnt.

The strangest thing of all was that, whilst at first the object seemed to have no effect and no purpose other than to set up this barrier around itself, after two days the ground surrounding it began to change. Plain dwellers came from far and wide to look and consider; all they could see was the earth in its immediate proximity levelling. Becoming flat, perfectly flat. By the second.

Within a further two days an area of maybe one hundred strides had been cleared of all vegetation and relief; all that remained was a perfect surface, an even plain. Dead level with the accent on Dead.

The land around it was turning dark blue. This was the only sign of any effect. But what a presence. The Sphere merely remained and yet was completely dominant. Work in Seronia was suspended whilst various experts were called in to offer solutions.

I helped with some of the experiments. I thought that these may provide valuable information for if one of these things landed in our own lands. All of the results were fascinating.

It was found that the area of levelling spread faster than the invisible barrier protecting the object. So, we attempted to excavate this area, hoping to find some means of preventing its increase. When our picks hit the dark blue sheen they rebounded, knocking one of our party unconscious. A team of master builders were employed to build a wall across the path of the levelling. We watched it crumble. When its rubble met the barrier we saw it spontaneously ignite. Seconds later dust blew our way and to the sea.

We estimated the rate of levelling to be half a day's walk every ten days. We began to refer to it as the Glacier - we had to call it something - if you can name something you are on the road to understanding it. It had a similar effect to a glacier in that no matter the slope or relief of the terrain, the flattened area would be perfectly even. No glacier ever flowed as an ever increasing circle though, nor did it leave an area the colour of the night sky, but the correspondence was sufficient.

One day we were out there preparing to dig under the levelling area; we were trying to figure out how to prepare a hole which wouldn't be surfaced over before we could re-emerge. Obviously this would mean digging towards the glacier faster than it was moving towards us.

As we thought this over, the sky turned a golden grey. We smelt rain on the wind and soon enough we were caught in a shower. We looked over in the direction of The Sphere and saw a great curve of steam surrounding the whole area of its

influence. It would seem the barrier stretched upwards too. Perhaps it was reasonable to deduce that it exerted force beneath it also. We had solved the problem of the digging. We just wouldn't bother. Where raindrops hit the dark blue surface they turned to mirrored quicksilver.

The elders of Seron were running out of time and ideas. The levelling would soon reach their settlement. The only hope we clung on to was the sole exception to the great rule which was heading our way. Where the glacier met the groove it had no levelling effect; the groove's sides would lose their luminence to become the same dark blue and then the uniformity would continue on its course. We did not know what significance to attach to this curious anomaly, but knew, nevertheless, if an answer lay anywhere, it lay there.

We were sat atop a hill overlooking Seron on the final evening; a full moon rising over the sea. Most Seronians had decided to evacuate the area and we could see the threaded lines of caravans moving off to the coast and waiting ships. We were transfixed by this sad sight, long columns of refugees slowly creeping away with everything they could carry, their torches giving them the movement of glow worms. We were so preoccupied by this, and the effects of the mead we'd taken with us, that at first we failed to notice the gradual change in the view before us. As it got darker we began to discern shafts of light beaming up in to the heavens from the silver discs of the pinnacles. We were rightly astonished, thinking them at first to be a trick of the light, but no, as the moon crept higher and the sky became ink, those beams took on a sharpness... how can I describe this? They were like... no, they were more like... like veins of quartz in a cliff face, stretching bright and straight and clear.

We mounted our horses and sped down to Seron to be met by a great commotion. The Sphere was moving. Across the level. A huge crowd had massed along the side of the groove. We thrust our way to the edge and saw it in the distance. It was rolling along the groove towards us, silently and slowly, heading for the sea. As it got nearer, The Sphere became larger, and rising so that its base rested on the edge of the groove. Picking up speed as it grew.

It became immediately apparent to me that we were all going to be knocked out of the way or killed when it met us, stood by the edge. And when this dawned on everyone else, panic broke out. Seronians running in all directions, some falling over each other in the surge. Among the terror I saw a heap of people who'd been hurt in the crush lying motionless, The Sphere rolling nearer and nearer. They were going to be flattened. And then it rolled right through them....or they just appeared to pass right through it! And when it had rolled past they stood up, easily, no sign of ever being hurt. Just stood straight up, looked at their bodies and passed out in shock.

I ran through the crowds searching for a horse. Holy men knelt all around, praying to some god or other as if we'd witnessed a miracle. Minutes later I was galloping by the edge of the groove trying to keep up with the sphere as it made its way to the sea. I never caught up. As it came to the cliff edge where the groove ended, the

sphere burst out into the air on its way to the waves far below. I braked my mount at the edge, pulling the horse back so hard it reared and almost lost control, bucking in a frenzy as I held it back while watching the sphere hit the ocean. I sat there, still pulling on the reins, the beast below me in pain, blood pouring from its ears. Down in the waves, a foment of surf and high pitched straining sound as a hundred small spheres briefly surfaced and sank".

FROM HERE TO NOW AND THEN

Before you realise Daville has finished, he is standing. "Nature calls...". He sways slightly, corrects himself, and nature replies. With all the poise of someone with a wildcat down his trousers, Daville collapses on the table, knocking all your tankards flying.

"Gods above", cries Belar, "Look at the state of him... someone help him up"

"I'll help him to his feet", says Pagan, and throws the remains of a pitcher of ale in Daville's face. This act of supreme compassion has the desired effect. Daville stands to his feet again, remembers his urgent quest, and moves. Straight through the window and into the street.

"He might have used the hole in the wall I provided", adds Pagan.

Belar is hiding his face from the innkeeper's gaze. "There's only one thing to do in a situation like this"

"What's that?", asks Borgalius.

Belar turns to the bar, "More Slamot Keepinner! Ah hem! Innkeeper!" An empty tankard comes flying your way and follows Daville out the window. B'Manuel returns.

"Right away sirs. Would you like any heavy earth moving equipment to go with it... or perhaps a few dozen balls and chains to introduce to the other customers... get that man back in here before the locals start thinking this is a tavern. Don't you know it's a school of demolition?"

"Thankyou for your kind offer Innkeeper, just another pitcher if you please and the sight of your lovely daughter will do us fine", Belar replies and adds, "We will try to keep our house in order from now on"

Borgalius climbs through what is left of the window and fetches Daville back. When they return, the Slamot has arrived and Belar continues.

"Now where were we?... ah yes! Splendid stuff Daville. Quite the strangest story I've ever heard... doesn't even bear thinking about. Now, does anyone left have a tale a little more down to earth?"

There is a short pause as your colleagues look at each other and then at you. You're obviously still miles away.

"I might be able to fit the bill", offers Cornilius, "Well, you'll have to make up your own minds. But if it's earthiness you're after Belar, my tale has plenty of it."

"Not earthiness - I said 'Down to earth'"

"I know. What did you think I meant? Now, let me think... where shall I start. At the beginning, I suppose... yes... now, give me silence!"

"Our ship lay a league off the south coast of Magesta, an island off Jagersmain; a land of mystery. The region had been mapped a decade ago but only from the sea.

I had been sent by Darius, with ship and a crew of thirty, to assess Magesta's suitability for exploitation. We had decided to lay off the coast because of the sketchy reports we'd received from previous explorers. One such adventurer had lost all his ship's crew when they had sailed too near to the shoreline. He had only survived because he'd been in a row-boat at the time, the victim of a mutiny. He had rowed five hundred leagues back home, and was almost dead when picked up by fishermen. As is usual in these cases, he told his story and died. It's always the same.

The island was supposedly alive. Physically alive. The coast was supposed to well up in front of you and swamp you beneath its form. None of us believed this, but legend has its own truth so we weren't entirely reassured. I had left the main body of the ship's company and proceeded to the shore with a boat and eight men. We didn't know what to expect. We couldn't actually see the coast until we were almost upon it. We decided to test the legend we'd heard and began to throw ropes on to the rocks a dozen strides away from us. The sea was calm. Perhaps too calm, but we stayed our distance. Perhaps this was wise as when the ropes landed on the shore we were met with an astonishing sight.

The beach responded. Sand hit us, knocking three of us from our seats. We were covered in 'beach' with no other way to describe it. Other than confusion. The row boat almost sank. I shouted in vain for the beach to stop. It was convulsing; its entire length a wave of sand and driftwood arching in curves and hollows as it mounted and subsided in turn. This was not exactly the sort of reply I wanted. But it hadn't finished its answer. Overhead, a granite cliff simply collapsed. Right out of nowhere. Hundreds of tons of rock falling like some avalanche in the mountains of Alpatia. Luckily we were still a few strokes offshore, otherwise we would have been visitors to the Land of Our Ancestors. Permanent visitors.

What to do? We couldn't step ashore. Meanwhile the sea around us burst and swelled with a passion all its own. We kept an even keel adjacent to the coast. Our sole drunk lost his Dutch courage and leapt overboard. Not much of a loss really except he took our bottle of rum with him. We looked down at him writhing in the surf but before we had a chance to rescue him, or the rum, and we knew which one we were more concerned about, he'd disappeared. Nothing left but a frothing mass of blood and red-pink flesh decomposing by the second.

What to do? Not to leave the boat in any event, that's for sure. We kept rowing along the shoreline and soon came across the mouth of a river. We hesitantly steered around exposed sand banks, a navigation eased by the presence of countless young seabirds apparently too tired to leave their claim of sand. Beneath us, we could see the reason why. Fish. Thousands of them. A seething mass of mottled tails heading for the depths. Enough food for ever. It wouldn't have suprised me if

the birds had been too fat to fly. At this rate they would be fully grown in a matter of days.

On the nearby banks were the saplings of familiar trees and bushes, not a full grown plant in sight. Beyond them a thick mist. As of yet, all we had seen of Mag-esta was coastline and this mist. We had no way of knowing whether the river we were rowing was merely a strait between two different islands. This uncertainty was soon cast overboard as an irrelevance.

One of our party, the old sea dog, Passmo, cupped some water to his mouth and swallowed. He had barely an instant to tell us it was fresh water before our exclamations silenced him. His hair had turned from grey to black. Well, actually, it was even more astonishing than that. He was no longer balding. This was the last water I allowed any one to drink save for the supply we had on board. Oh, there were plenty of grey hairs among us but how far would this restoration go?. Something was amiss, yes, but what? Best to be safe I say.

We made our way along the river, not a soul in sight, Passmo the only member of our party who seemed to be enjoying himself. The scenery wasn't really changing at all since there was nothing but mist to see, but in the distance we could hear a roaring sound so ominous we almost turned back.

Our worst fears were realised as we cornered a bend in the river. There before us was an enormous waterfall, maybe three hundred men high; it was hard to tell with so much steam being forced up from the bottom of the cascade. I've seen higher falls of course, mainly in Alpatia, but this one was different.

The massive cascade was pink, if you can believe it, a pink the colour of dawn. We rowed through the mounting turbulence, gazing in awe at this unworldly vision. It was obviously impassable. We rowed into a pool out of the main current, circling in the eddies, using our oars as levers. There was so much water in the air we were soaking; our beards turning jet black. The pool was calmer by the rocky bank and we disembarked.

The mud between the boulders was alive with life. I suppose I ought to say there was no mud at all for the river bank was composed solely of...well... let's just say we had to squelch through various slug-like forms. We were all retching. Really disgusting. Every step a murder. We ran for higher ground for fear any of us slipped. Just imagine drowning in that stuff.

After an hour we had cleared the fall and were proceeding upstream; the river gradually and subtly becoming thinner and shallower. Almost a stream. We waded across it at one stage to find a better path and were taken aback by its contents. The stream was now a near solid mass of fish spawn.

Before long the water course practically disappeared as it became a marsh area. Not a swamp as such; we could tread safely enough but, again, what we were treading on... well, it's a good job we hadn't been drinking Slamot. The mosses and gods know what else were covered with some kind of thick green slime. This and the pinky water - and 'water' is probably a bit of an exaggeration, were...well I won't go on.

"Try slowing down a bit too", interrupts Belar

"Sorry... er... so anyway, I just kept thinking, this stream will eventually take us to the highest ground and from there we might be above the mist and actually get to see the place. After all, that's why we were here.

At times like this I often wonder why we do these things for Darius. It's not just the money or the adventure, or the fact that I value having a head on my shoulders. I'd probably get so bored otherwise... I'm not saying that my adventures merely help me sober up between... oh, look, I don't know what I'm saying.

Anyway, after a good hour of re-introducing our taste buds to the contents of our stomachs we arrived at the other side and followed the stream further. The water here was clear, free-running but the colour of blood.

The mist cleared in patches. Over to what we thought to be the west we could see snow-capped peaks but that was about all.

Within another hour, we came to the river's source. A large hole in clear white rock. Bright red water bubbled up and away. A spring. There was enough room for a man to negotiate the passage way dropping down before us so we decided to go underground. Don't ask me why. It just looked inviting; besides, I wanted to know what caused this island's bizarre features and this water definitely had something to do with it. The views could wait.

We slowly descended what must have been hundreds of feet of smooth limestone. Although we had left the surface some time ago, there was plenty of light down there. We could see quite clearly but had no idea where the light came from. There were the usual stalactites and what have you, all pink, and we waded across maybe three or four pools. The caverns had the silence of the dead.

Although it was quite warm down there - and as we got lower, it got warmer - there was no sound, no water dripping as you would expect. There were also no stalagmites. Plenty of stalactites hanging around, sorry about that, but no stalagmites. We couldn't work it out.

Down we went through smooth white passages, the spring water guiding us. And then I almost hit myself in the face. What were we doing? I'll tell you what we were doing... we were following a stream that flowed upwards. I ask you! There was nothing like enough pressure anywhere here to force water upwards. So were we walking downwards after all?. It felt as though we were, we couldn't think of any other way of telling.

We stopped to rest and think this one out. It was as if we had been following this trail instinctively. I couldn't remember ever having said to myself, "This is what you must do next". I can recall thinking that the light down there was somehow fascinating; it seemed to dance on the passage walls, but beyond that, nothing. And on the way across that marsh I had been so sure of my purpose. To get to the high ground. Here we were deep underground. What had happened to change my mind?. Nothing had happened. I decided we should move on; we were only becoming more confused.

As we made our way from the final cavern, the light seemed to be getting

brighter. We could also hear a familiar sound, one which was totally unexpected. By the time we reached daylight, we were almost deafened and very surprised.

There ahead of us was a massive pink curtain of falling water. We were behind the waterfall we'd seen earlier. Somehow we had come full circle. Odd though it sounds, the source of the stream was the pool of the falls. We stood in amazement for I don't know how long. Then we realised there was no way of reaching our boat without swimming. We had no rope or grappling hooks. So we dived into that pool, under the cascade and out to the other side... We found our row boat and left. Someone else could go explore the rest of the island. I'd had enough of the place.

I know my story's short but that experience made a lasting impression on me I can tell you. Something else which was funny is that when we got to the boat, there was our bottle of rum standing on a rock! That scared us more than anything. We'd seen it sink to the bottom when the drunk fell overboard!

"A gift from the gods Cornilius... a gift from the gods?", suggests Pagan.

"Or maybe the last kind act of a dying man who'd dedicated his life to drink", adds Daville.

"Who knows", says Borgalius, "who knows?"



CLUE FROM ABOVE.....

B'Manuel the innkeeper, walks over to your table, taps Belar's shoulder and points at you. "So what's he on then, Belar?"

"How do you mean, Roland old friend?"

"He hasn't said a word since you came in... And I don't like the look of him."

"Roland, this is a man of few words, the only survivor of the wrath of Suzar!"

"I know that, but what's he on?"

"He was on a raft at sea for three days, if that's what you mean. Leave him be Roland, he's causing no harm."

"He's not really here at all", adds Daville.

"I can see that. Hey you...sat in the corner...hey!"

"Leave him be Roland. He'll respond when he has to."

"So long as it's just Slamot he's on... alright?"

"Alright, Roland, and, while we're on the subject, another pitcher if you don't mind..."

B'manuel stares at you, shaking his head. "You're all the same, you mercenary types... just make sure Darius pays me for the damage".

"Will do", says Belar, "now, who's left? Borgalius and Pagan, methinks... who's it to be, lads?"

"Let's toss for it, Borgalius", Pagan offers, "here, which side do you want? Face up or down?". He lifts a bystander off his feet and throws him in the air.

"Face up", cries Borgalius.

"Face up it is", answers Pagan.

B'Manuel's curses cut through the atmosphere, interrupted only by the groans of the bystander. Borgalius takes a deep breath and begins.

"This tale is going back a bit but I think you'll find it has the measure of yours.

I was on a voyage across the Northern Oceans on my way to the court of King Amalthus. I carried greetings and propositions from Darius; they're still secret so I can't tell you anything about them except that an alliance was on the cards.

I was expecting a quite journey; the captain of the Red Star had given me a State room so I was more than comfortable. Just as well really; the Northern Oceans are inhospitable even in the summer months.

Each morning I would watch the deck-hands cut ice from the rigging; by midday it would be thick again. Six times a day they would repeat that task. Some days I would climb to the Crow's Nest and have a look around.

The Oceans were a grey blue steel with a horizon fading to white. Sometimes in the far off distance we would pass bleak, dark islands where whale riders might live. We had no need to call in so we left them well alone.

I would have liked to have paid them a visit and taught some lessons but... well I don't suppose it matters now... Darius was mounting an expedition to Verunis and required Amalthan assistance with supply lines before the winter set in. So we didn't have time for any skirmishes... pity really.

Some three weeks into the voyage we came across our first sight of the Frozen Seas and made our way to The Warm Way channel reaching up to the Pole. From my perch on high the sight was startling. Ice as far as you could see on all sides; in some places packed into relief the height of a keep, ahead of us the wide and welcome drift of warmer water.

The Warm Way had its own dangers, not least the icebergs lurking in the mist, but also the Float Spikes some whale riders would leave out hoping to split in two any cargo vessel passing through their territory.

One day I took a turn on the bow pole stretching thirty strides from the bow of Red Star and saw one. It was huge, maybe two hundred strides long, and only just visible above the water line, its spring-loaded spikes of sharpened ivory ready to snap at the slightest obstruction. But we safely navigated the float and threw logs its way to defuse it. We could see the long white spikes bursting fifty strides high in vain.

After that, the days passed without much action, though I knocked up quite a good friendship with the Captain. He'd sailed all over the world in his time. One trip he'd been on, he'd had to maroon six wizards on the island of Skyra. Heaven knows how he managed this but he reckons that as they sailed away he could see the results of their anger. They were fighting among themselves; the sky above that island turned red with flame. I wouldn't have mentioned this but I'm sure he said one of the wizards was Suzar; maybe I was mistaken, I don't know. Come to think

of it, the Captain reckoned the Bosun on that trip never recovered. He was a changed man.

Anyway, the Bosun on our voyage was a little strange too. In the evenings he would sit out on the bow pole and sing to himself while he played with a ring off of his finger. He used to drive us crazy with these never-ending songs. After a while, the Captain ended up confining him to quarters and I used to talk with him sometimes. He believed this ring to have some sort of magical power; said he'd found it by chance, and it would take him anywhere. One night I palmed it off his finger without him realising, I'm quite good at that sort of thing and...

Pagan interrupts. "Get on with it will you... I've still got my story to tell and time is getting on... what about the voyage?"

"Okay, okay, hold on... isn't a man allowed a little leeway? Here take this and shut up".

Borgalius passes Pagan a purse and tells him to order more Slamot. Laughter ensues in the little group as you all realise the purse is Pagan's own, expertly filched by nimble fingers. Borgalius's smile is so sarcastic that for a moment it seems Pagan thinks he has gone too far. Before he has chance to lose his calm, Borgalius continues.

"Okay... A week later a disaster of sorts struck. It could have been worse but it was enough to delay us. We hit a berg. A large one straight out of the midnight mist.

Luckily we hit it head on and so the bow pole took the force from our momentum. As it was, the forward mast collapsed back on to the main mast. We dropped anchor, still stuck to the berg. The next morning I climbed to it's summit, roped up with the captain and navigator whilst the deck boys got on with the repair work. The bow pole had split a ravine in the berg's side. We wanted to see whether it was possible to free ourselves without wrecking the bow pole. We would need it for further spike floats.

I don't know whether any of you have climbed a berg but it's not so difficult as you might imagine. The ice is usually dry and solid and you can easily cut out steps. With a little skill you can end up with a staircase, but you need ropes because those bergs are forever losing chunks left, right and centre. Sometimes all you have to do is speak too loudly and a whole wall will come crashing down

When we reached the top, we stood for a while, whispering of course, to work out how to approach the job. There was only one way, really. I volunteered to abseil down the ravine and see if I could hack off the packed ice enclosing half the pole with my small axe. This would be pretty dangerous but what the hell. Any fear was soon lost. What I saw down there made me call down to the others at once. A hole had appeared where the bow pole had split the ravine's inner edge and through it we could see the green of vegetation. Masses of it. One by one, we slid along the pole and inside. Immediately the ice on our clothes and beards washed away; we were

soaking.

Before us lay a jungle of tropical ferns, creepers and trees. Parakeets called out to us and disappeared in fear. The surface of a deep blue pool ruffled as neon fish swam for cover. We had to strip down to our underwear, such was the heat. What on Earth had we found?

The chamber was perhaps a good hour's walking in circumference; the walls curving up and away, appearing to be made of a glassy ice. At any rate our ice picks made no impression on it. The chamber's ceiling, an opaque crystalline white, required a full tilt back of our heads to assess its height and scale. We helped ourselves to oranges and pineapples - all manner of fruits lay above us in abundance; just the thing for scurvy.

We were making our way along a trail bordered by creepers when it dawned on us to ask who or what had made the trail?. As this question struck us, we unconsciously became silent. The dense jungle was deafening. Bird calls, insect chatter, dripping water, absolutely deafening.

We wandered around following the trail as it twisted and curved, sometimes following the edge of the chamber, sometimes cutting deep into the foliage, always changing direction. It seemed like it went on forever... I mean, it went nowhere in particular... and then after... I don't how long, we came across a clearing in what must have been the middle of the chamber.

Above us we could see blue sky, clear blue sky, and feel a breeze, but we were still sweating uncontrollably. At this rate the three of us would go down with the flu when we left. It took us a few seconds to focus on what was in the centre of the clearing. Guess what? There, cut into the floor was a stairway spiralling downwards.

We moved over to get a closer look. The steps were made of a white metal the like of which I've never set eyes on before. They dropped about... well, it was far enough for them to blur... and all we could see was a pale blue light.

I don't know about you, but there's only one thing to do in a situation like that. And before you say, 'go down', that's not what I do. Check your exits. If the entrance is the only exit, then watch for hidden triggers. What was open might close. That's the way I look at it anyhow. I went so far as to get down low and check the area for trap-doors, loose stones, you know the sort of thing. Nothing I could see. So we went down.

Like I said, the narrow passage had this blue light, but we couldn't see any torches and it was brighter down there than up top. In the white walls we could see the shapes of doors, but they had no means of being opened. I kicked one and my boot bounced off like I'd kicked rubber. We passed maybe ten of these doors and finally, at the very end of the passage, came across one which had a small window. Looking through we could see a room with walls of soft lights slowly flashing. I had no idea what kind of lights they were... like bright coins glinting in the sun. On one wall was a map of the world. It was traced in outline with blue. There were a couple of chairs made out of that same white metal. That's about it though. Again this

door was locked in some way and wouldn't budge... I don't know what we would have done if we'd got through it... but then curiosity always leads you on.

The captain kept looking behind him... we were all thinking the same thing; where are the occupants? In the other rooms? Upstairs somewhere? We could have done with one of those objects you always come across somewhere which lets you go anywhere.

We made our way back and up the staircase; the sound of the jungle ringing in our ears again. No clues anywhere, everything appeared just as we'd left it. We were determined to get through that final door though. I hate feeling frustrated by something as simple as a locked door. So we thought the best idea was to go back to the Red Star and pick up heavy axes and hammers. Then we could at least let off some steam.

The Captain and Navigator carefully slid back along the bow pole and began cutting ice away with their hand axes. I just kept watch... the chamber area was becoming noticeably colder and I wondered how long it would take for the inhabitants to realise and come to seal the hole. But no one came by the time my friends had cut through and were sliding along the bow pole back to the ship. I turned to join them and at this point the entire berg shuddered, like a shiver, I lost my grip and fell. Into the ocean. I nearly died. As soon as I hit I could feel the cold grip my heart with talons. That's all I could feel... I guess the rest just went numb. They say that in the north you can tell the temperature by the sound your spit makes when it hits the ground. The sound I made was only too clear. I thought I heard someone else's low scream.... But the sound came from my stomach, I had no air in my lungs... the shock had left me gasping.

They hauled me out with ropes and stripped me. I was lying there on the deck being covered in blankets and rubbed so hard I thought I would lose my skin. The Captain was leaning over and saying, "We are free Borgalius, free...". I was just about to pass out when the whole ship jerked violently with everyone losing their balance. The Captain fell on me, face to face, and I saw his look of terror as we realised what was happening. The Red Star was being shunted backwards at a terrific speed, ice cold water from the stern pouring all over us, men screaming in pain and the roar of shattering timber.

In a handful of seconds we were maybe half a league from the berg. Above us, we could hear thunder cracking in booms that made the deck bounce. I lay there spreadeagled, my entire vision filled with the sight of a tornado plume, with an eye the black of coal. The rigging came falling down around us, the men cowering under whatever cover they could find. The captain had disappeared in the first wash of water and I was left alone; now with the terror in the tornado's eye moving towards the berg.

I propped myself up to watch it descend, throwing up the sea in a confusion of white water and spray. Through it all I could see the shadowed white form of the berg crumbling by the second. Moments later a vast white wall of ice rose up from the ocean to surround and obscure it. My last memory is of a bright white light

silently rising into the eye of the tornado and out of sight. So bright I had to close my eyes; they were burnt for days afterwards like I'd been staring at the sun. When I opened them again, everything was calm. Blue sky and Red Star on a flat grey ocean."

..... AND A CURSE FROM BELOW

"The ways of other worlds remain unknown", Daville pronounces as though learnt by heart. "And not for the likes of men".

Pagan shakes his head, smiling. "Now I know why you remain so cool in the heat of the moment, Borgalius, and so cold blooded!"

"Even if I were to have died in those seas I doubt I'd have more ice in my veins than you, Pagan"

"I have my reputation to think of"

"And your purse", adds Daville.

"I'm paid according to my abilities, as are we all... Darius could afford a hundred men on this quest but he has enough faith in us."

Borgalius looks perturbed. "Well, we'll soon know whether such faith is deserved"

Pagan continues. "Belar, I'm sure our friend in the corner could tell us more if only he weren't otherwise disposed."

"We will doubtless be told all in due course... we've now had a score of pitchers...", replies Belar, as he quickly scans you all for approval.

"I say one for Pagan's story and then away"

"And another for luck", Daville suggests, remarkably, considering his face is now pressed deep into the bare oak of the table to stop his head from spinning while he begins the long count to twenty.

"And another for The Lady Juville", adds Borgalius, looking out past where the window used to be.

"Where are all the women anyway?" Cornilius peers through the gathered mass of cloaks and uniforms, a view of intense disappointment.

Belar knows the answer only too well, "Locked away of course...until we've left"

Pagan delays no longer. "Well while we're waiting for our first final drink I may as well begin. Innkeeper! The Slamot! ...Well, I have met Suzar before, so I know what to expect. I can't say I have been in his presence though or I wouldn't be here. You don't know what you're letting yourselves in for. Suzar has an uncanny way of knowing what is about to happen. I wouldn't say he has the sixth sense but he certainly has something approaching it. I tell you, I'm not looking forward to the morrow... my last encounter nearly cost me my life.

There were three of us riding swiftly along the single lane through Carella Forest. Do you know of Carella?... it's a region once ruled by the Corsarians... you must

have come across them before... what's left of them. This was before the curse of Pucarious took hold; before they were decimated. This wizard had been thrown to a giant flesh eating spider as a traitor. The curse was sweet revenge.

The lane was the only route Suzar could have taken... I had been in Carella when Leander and Alexor arrived on a mission for Darius. They needed someone who knew the area and was familiar with the kind of trickery Suzar was famed for. We had been riding for two days through that great forest, only stopping to rest the horses and pick up food from the woodsmen. The ride was quite eventful despite the endless tracts of forest; every so often the horses would rear up on their hind legs as a huge Redwood came crashing down before us. No doubt some magic of Suzar's. Leander and his friend, Alexor, would shout out in despair as it meant more cutting of dense branches with our axes.

All this lessened our chances of finding Suzar before he made it to Carella Castle, perched high on a river bluff above the trees. From there the wizard could control the entire region. They had orders from King Darius to offer him a variety of bribes and persuasions - anything short of killing him. They weren't looking forward to that possibility. One spell Suzar used had killed an entire army. It had simply started to rain. Torrentially. And with the rain came death as it burnt its way through the armour and flesh of a five hundred warriors.

Carella Castle had been built before anyone kept records. It offered complete authority over the river traffic which formed the only means of safe trade in the region. Travel in the forest lane was prone to danger from the many robber bands inhabiting the area. Let me see... ten years ago a plague had ravaged the area forcing many to take to sabotage, theft and kidnapping to make a living. Others had died of hideous deformities and it was said that one day the whole of the forest would become a dank and miserable swamp. Don't ask me who said it... you can never be sure.

We had already killed four outlaws with our swords when we were ambushed at a ford. If it hadn't been for Leander's quick reflexes in catching their leader with a knife thrown from eighty strides we wouldn't have lived to tell the tale. The band had panicked upon losing an element of surprise and we honestly had no choice but to smash their skulls with our crushing blows.

I tortured one while Leander and Alexor scouted the next ford ahead. Among his pleas for mercy, he offered to tell me a secret. I told him to go ahead. This outlaw said that the body of Pucarious, a wizard, lay in a secret crypt beneath the keep of the castle. The Corsarians had put it there hoping to lift his curse. It had made no difference. He babbled on about this as though it were of major importance but it made no difference to me either. I put a knife through him.

We had seen the Castle a short while before the ambush. As we were now approaching the foot of the tremendous river cliff on which it had been built, the Castle's tremendous ramparts disappeared out of sight above us. We were too near to see it. We dismounted and left Alexor to tend the horses. If we failed to return by sundown he was to return to the King with the news.

It took us the best part of an hour to scale the cliff. We climbed together linked by a short rope with just enough slack to take up in the event of one of us slipping. A fall would have otherwise been fatal. We eventually reached the top and rested to catch our breath.

We had decided to survey the locale before approaching the Castle and its occupants. We needed to have our lines of retreat mapped out in case our deal went badly wrong. We found a couple of likely routes which offered less hazardous descent to Alexor and the horses, but not much else. In fact there were no signs that anyone was there. The stables were empty, no smoke drifted from the roofs, the well's bucket was bone dry; no sign of anything else down there. We made our way to the Keep. The Castle was part derelict, looking as though it had once been successfully breached. But ivy now covered the ruins so it was impossible to tell the means of the attack. The remainder of the building was in disrepair, though still a potent symbol of majesty.

Let me see... within the keep was a large tower with what looked like a room of some sort at the top. Beyond the Castle - indeed, all around us - we viewed the vast expanses of Carella, a dark green wilderness. We could see for six days travel at least. We crossed the moat bridge and entered its outer courtyard. A wide staircase lay before us, leading to a massive door the height of four men. We could have driven the King's carriage up those stairs. We hammered our fists on the great door, and thought better of it. The wood was as hard as stone. We felt like fools. There was no answer. I kicked out and it gently opened as if borne on air. We had to light the torches we found inside; the keep was dank and pitch black. We carried them with us up another impressive staircase and came to another large door.

On the wall by the side of it were a series of levers. It occurred to both of us that these levers needed to be pulled down in a certain order to gain entrance; otherwise some awful trap would befall us. I took destiny in my hands and reached out. I closed my eyes, trying to remember where I was. These could have been the last moments of my life. Believe it or not, I guessed the sequence first time. The door swung open as light as a feather.

We were confronted by a long defunct banquet hall. Cobwebs everywhere. The light of our torches casting brittle pinpoints through the webs and off the discarded glasses and plates of a last supper; sparks reflecting in the void like diamonds on black velvet. The whole castle was so dark it was as if there were no windows. But we had seen many from the outside, where were they now? Leander jumped up on to the long banquetting table and to a frieze which I imagined would cover a window. This tapestry, sewn in deep red and gold, was enormous; filling most of the wall. Dominating the design, and in the flicker of our torches appearing to move, was the life-size form of a wizard stood against a background of sunset shadows and two keeps on dark islands. He held some sort of wand with a crystal hanging by a thread. On noticing this, Leander thought he'd found a diamond. The crystal was indeed real, but as I passed my torch up for a closer examination we realised the diamond was merely glass. Embroidered below this daunting figure

were the lines of a dedication stitched in dark gold; For Pucarious the Wise May his curse blind mortal eyes May his vengeance bring you sorrows To all yesteryears and morrows.

Well... I've certainly read better epitaphs than that I can tell you. Whoever this Pucarious was, he might have found a better poet... and who on earth would feel like a banquet with that in the room. Not being a man of letters or finesse, I responded like all lesser mortals should. With two hard pulls I ripped it from the wall. And with it so much dust we almost coughed ourselves to death. Lo and behold there was the window as I had correctly guessed. But no light shone through and it was still mid-afternoon. I climbed up on Leander's shoulders to peer through. There was nothing to be seen. Although I felt the wind and could hear birds, there was nothing to be seen. Just pitch black. I thought I might have gone blind, though how I'm not sure, but Leander saw nothing either and so confirmed my discovery. Of course, you could say it was the curse of the tapestry and yet we could see everything within the Keep clearly. Perhaps it was just that particular window.

We carried on through the hall and up into the tower, our swords drawn. If Suzar were there, he had certainly disguised his presence for we could find absolutely no clues of anyone having been there before us. Save for the dozens of spiders. We entered one room at the base of the tower which had a giant 'M' burnt into the door. This meant nothing to us and I still don't know what it meant. Once inside we left pretty fast. There was a web in there so huge it took me all my strength to move one of the strands. I immediately felt a distant reverberation. You could say the tension was mounting.

We got out so quickly we both fell in a heap on the floor outside; the clatter of our swords echoing far and away along those cold stone walls. We climbed the staircase to the room we'd seen at its summit, all the way remarking at the view from the narrow windows. There wasn't one. When we reached the door to the room we found it locked and couldn't gain entry. I knelt down to look through the keyhole and saw tapestried walls lined with the rolls of parchments. A large leather inlaid desk in the corner meant it must have been a study. An empty one. By this time we were beginning to feel a little empty ourselves. Forlorn. Suzar wasn't to be seen and something had happened to the world outside. We made our way back to the hall. The search was over... "

Borgalius reaches over to touch Pagan's shoulder. "But you don't seem to have fully explored the place... Perhaps Suzar was carefully hidden?"

Pagan turns to him and smiles. "Why on earth would Suzar hide from me? His powers of darkness are unequalled.."

But Borgalius is unconvinced, "You should still have searched the Keep properly... You might have found further clues... "

The retort is firm; Pagan's smile has gone. "We'll see what you will do my friend... we'll see - listen, I haven't finished." He takes a long swig of Slamot. "Let

me see... Okay".

"Leander was convinced there must be some secret underground passages in the Castle... There always were in these places... he'd been in some where the rooms above ground were only a minute part of the complete layout... but I reasoned with him. Suzar must have left, he could feel quite safe confronting us if he wished as his powers were far in advance of ours, so there was little point in searching this place. He must have moved on through the forest. Perhaps he was making for somewhere else... 'maybe he knew of a gateway to another world... who knows', I joked with Leander, we were out of our depth.

No. Suzar wasn't our immediate problem. What concerned us more was the view through the windows. Where had it gone? When we arrived at the outer courtyard door, we held our breaths and hoped. We needn't have bothered. We stepped out into a void. Our torches began to flicker and were soon just a dull glowing red. We looked in all directions as far as we could see - which wasn't very far - or then again it might have been, there was no way of knowing... we couldn't see a thing. But the biggest shock was yet to come. When we turned to fetch more torches, the castle had disappeared..

What do you say now Borgalius, eh? The Slamot got your tongue has it? No? There we were in a limbo... we could feel the earth beneath our feet but it felt smooth and flat. Yet before, it had been rugged. I could hear the dull sound of the river too but I had no idea from which direction it came, it seemed to be all around us. Well, what would you do? We began to walk... and walk and walk. We searched for something, anything, but found nothing. After what seemed like hours, Leander began to break. I think he was going insane, couldn't cope... his conversation got more and more deranged, raving on about the curse... suddenly he ran off. I never saw him again.

I must have walked for half a day in some direction. I may have been walking in circles for all I knew. Eventually I just collapsed, I guess. I was completely exhausted... I'd given up. I awoke to the sound of horses I couldn't see. Followed by the voice of Alexor almost on top of me. But I couldn't see him....there was no one there. Then I felt a hand on my arm and Alexor helping me up, asking what had happened to Leander. He guided me up on to my invisible steed and along the forest lane.

We spent the rest of the day looking for Leander, or rather Alexor did the looking, for I still couldn't see a thing. In the end he gave up. We had failed miserably. He had no choice but to return to Darius and tell him the news. He took me with him to tell of the mystery of the keep which was just as well for as we left Carella for the sea voyage home, my sight returned. Just like that. So suddenly I was almost blinded again by the sunlight. And here's the catch my friends... here's the catch! When I looked back to Carella I could just make out the cliff top where the Castle stood - once stood - for in that far distance, the Castle had gone... "



PILOQUE: CALLING TIME FOR ALL MORTAL MEN

By now the view beyond your table has cleared somewhat; there's just a bunch of regulars over by the bar. B'Manuel is raking the floor in a bid to brush away tonight's footprints. Since hearing mention of the Corsarians, B'Manuel has been working his way over in your direction and every now and then you see him look up as he overhears another disclosure. He comes across Daville's body and merely rakes around him. Pagan has barely finished explaining some of the finer points of his tale when B'Manuel interrupts him.

"I too have heard of Carella and a tapestry... and I have read the Chronicles of Anar too... I know of the sword and shield... I know of their combined power."

"By whose tongue were you told?", asks Belar

"I am descended from Corsarians... we know these legends from birth"

"Then why did you not talk to us earlier, Roland. You may have helped us!"

"I have no wish to discourage you from your task. I tell you this... you will have to defeat Suzar in his own time... the quest will be long and hard. I know these things"

Belar tries to probe further. "And how do you know these things to be true and not mere rumour?"

"I tell you this... Suzar is no mere wizard. If I may be so bold, Suzar is not simply evil - he is The Evil!"

"Superstition Roland," Belar explains, "We know Suzar to be fallible. Witness our friend in the corner..." he points to you, "...he survived Suzar's wrath."

"Perhaps he was meant to... perhaps there's a bigger scheme of things here. I tell you this, Belar, take no chances... when you listen, make sure you hear, when you see, make sure you notice - His power is unrivalled - He can even change his form..."

As of to prove his point, he looks at you and nods, turning back to the others. "Even your silent friend here could be Suzar!"

Nervous laughter bounces around the table; everyone sensing the extraordinary power by which you manage to remain upright. Only B'Manuel keeps a straight face.

"You may scoff at my words but you will eat your own! Suzar can change into any form he chooses..."

"Only human form though surely?", asks Cornilius.

"I've heard many truths. That among them!"

"Rumours, Roland. Rumours". Belar refuses to concede.

"We shall see...we shall see"

"So tell us more..."

"The time has past... Gentlemen, I will drink a toast to you! Those that can stand do so and join B'Manuel in raising tankards - I give you the Legend of Slamot! To the brave warriors of Darius! May the gods give you courage! ...and clear heads."

He pauses and smiles.

"Now get the hell out of here...you're barred!"

"Be seeing you..", answers Pagan.



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