

Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE CHOOSER by T. Rios. The author writes, “I’m T. Rios, a writer, frog-lover, and public-transit enthusiast. I have an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and my work has previously appeared in publications such as *The Billfold*; *10,000 Tons of Black Link*; and *Rabbit Rabbit*.”

Page 3 – THE MEAT GRINDER by Dan Rice. Mr. Rice, of Tumwater WA, writes, “I have two published short stories to my name. My sci-fi short story, “14 Days to Planetfall,” was published in *Fever Dreams Magazine Volume 6*. Earlier this year, my horror short story, “Columbia Power,” was published by *Dark Fire*.”



THE CHOOSER

by T. RIOS

Generally, they were young; and, invariably, they were alienated. They were servant girls, farmer boys, and blameless bastards. They yearned for something greater, but couldn't imagine what that something might be. The war (no matter where they were, there was always a war) leaned too heavily against their dreams.

This was when she came to them. Her standard practice was to wait for a crisis that forced them to reconsider their place in society. For the bastards, this was usually an argument with their legitimate siblings; for the servants, an order too disgraceful to follow; and, for the farmers, a garrison stationed on the far side of the pasture. It was at moments like these, she found, that people were most eager to believe in something.

There were some among her kin who swore this was proof of the essential inadequacy of humanity. She wanted to disagree with them, but had to concede that there was a certain amount of selfishness at play. If they'd been paying any sort of attention, the young and alienated would've noticed that there were plenty of things outside of themselves to be horrified by. Years of colonization that demanded a reckoning; a battle between heirs that partitioned the country; or barbarians beating against the gates—the situation was always dire, and everything was always on the verge of collapse. But, personally, she found their self-centeredness

endearing. The unsteady burn of their feelings stunk winsomely of living.

During the visitations, her patter was always the same: YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN. YOU BREATHE MORE DEEPLY THAN THE REST OF HUMANITY. YOU ALONE CAN SAVE THIS WORLD FROM EVERYTHING IT'S BECOME. Trial and error had taught her that she was most effective at her flattest.

There was always an adjustment period. With a stammer and a shake, the chosen would insist that she must be mistaken. They had employers to placate, livestock to feed, half-brothers to please, and couldn't possibly abandon these responsibilities for something as woolly-headed as The World. But, eventually, they came around. In the end, the chosen always set out boldly into the world, and soon accumulated an entourage of do-gooders in their attempts to remake it.

This pleased her. There was a hole in creation, and her children were helping to fill it. With every life they saved, every cease-fire they struck, and every tyrant they defeated, they dragged existence that much closer to the oneness and harmony that were supposed to be its center.

There was only one part of her job that she disliked. Eventually, towards the end of their journeys, there would come a moment when her chosen called upon her. And even though she wanted to be proud of them—

because summoning a celestial being took no small amount of prowess, magically speaking—they were in no mood to be praised. Instead, they wanted answers.

Usually, this came after a death. Perhaps it was a favorite amongst their followers, or a rival whom they'd been on the verge of redeeming; but, regardless, the loss struck them as irreversible, irreparable, and inconceivable. Of course, it wasn't. In the grand scheme of things, in fact, it was relatively minor: but this was they wanted to hear. If she tried to speak to them of oneness and reconciliation—how, if all things belonged to one body, they were never truly dead—there was a sea of wailing and gnashing of the teeth.

At moments like these, she tried to remind them of the importance of their work. The notion that some lives mattered more than others, that some blood was purer than others, and that all conflicts had to end in violence: surely, the chosen understood that such ideas couldn't remain unchallenged? That allowing them to fester and spread would be bad for the world?

But appealing to the world was never the right move. It only provoked more tears and shouts and questions that defied easy answers. Invariably, they would ask why she couldn't wave her hand and make it go away. And even though they never specified what 'it' was supposed to be, she still tried to respond honestly. She would remind them that she didn't have that kind of power—that she was only a servant, and not the creator. But this never settled the matter. "Whoever, then," they said.

Thousands of years, she still didn't know how to respond to this 'whoever.'

Instinctually, she knew that any divine attempt to fill the hole would be a disaster—that it would take nothing less than rewriting the rules of the universe. And while creation might've been flawed, it was nevertheless a creation. It was riddled with ruts and roundabouts and other burrows that people dug for themselves—things that, ultimately, it would've been a shame to burn.

In the long run, it was better than the burden be shifted onto the shoulders of a chosen view. It might've been slower and less effective, but it was safer—and that mattered, yes? Even if one of them failed to make that much of a difference, there would always be another. No matter how bleak things became, there would always be a light to illuminate the way. Nothing would need to be erased, rewritten, or razed.

But this was one thing to shout into the ether, and another thing to say to the face of the person being choosing. The moment when their bodies sagged under the immensity of their tasks, and the knowledge that creation itself didn't care if they broke them—this was the one instance when she wished that things could be different.

But the feeling faded the second they turned their backs and broke the enchantment. There was, after all, still the starry dynamo. And its light, while broken, was nevertheless enough to illuminate the war-ruins that she was standing in, and the shards of stories that were buried beneath them. ❖

THE MEAT GRINDER

by DAN RICE

Pekelo Baast stared through the rusted steel bars of his cage at the golden haired Queen of Darkness with lust and the hatred of a religious zealot. Her most striking features were her gemlike eyes that did not protrude from her face. His toad-like orbs bulged from his face like a matching pair of white pustules.

The only thing he hated more than his own eyes was the Queen of Darkness for she had used her magic to enslave his god.

A loud clank of chain, the steel bars before him slowly rose.

“Pekelo, take this. Snort it,” came a gruff voice from behind him. “Hurry, you stupid worm. You best put on a good show for the Queen.”

Baast would put on a good show, no doubt about that. He faced his trainer, a fat old warrior named Sig. A pasty hand held a small pouch full of white powder, a drug that induced insatiable bloodlust. Pekelo grabbed the pouch and turned back to the rising gate. He feigned snorting the drug, palming the pouch.

“That’s a good, boy,” Sig extolled. “Put on a good show or die trying, maggots.”

Baast stomped the ground and wordlessly screamed as if enraged by the drug. He was naked except for a loincloth, a dirty rag that stunk of sweat and mildew. Scars crisscrossed his pallid skin, his only trophies from the blood sports. His life revolved

around killing and worshiping Thien Ga, his people’s snake god. He dreamed of something more, of experiencing life beyond being a gladiator before he died and Thien Ga guided him to the afterlife in the Land of Endless Summer.

When the bars were fully raised, Baast charged into the meat grinder, a circular amphitheater with high walls inside a vaulted cave deep within the underworld. The tiered seating was chock-full of spectators ravenous for blood. The cage clanged shut behind him. The screams of the crowd washed over him and thousands of bulbous eyes watched him. The Queen of Darkness watched him too with her sparkling blue eyes that reflected the dim light of the gloam stones ensconced in the amphitheater’s walls.

He took in the scene as he sprinted across the bloodstained stone floor to the weapons arrayed in the heart of the meat grinder. At least two other boys raced toward the weapons, but there might be more that he didn’t see, up to five if past experience was any measure.

Baast reached the weapons first. Snatching a mace with a wicked spiked head, he smashed it into the wan face of the lad who reached the weapons second. The lad crumpled to the floor like a wet rag and convulsed.

“I’ll see you in the Land of Endless

Summer!” Baast shouted.

Two boys, one armed with a spear and the other with an axe, danced around each other. The smart move may have been to let them fight it out and then dispatch the survivor. Hell, if Thien Ga spat venom, the two boys might kill each other and save Baast the trouble. But he needed to put on a good show. Not seeing anyone else to kill, Baast charged them.

Without the deafening roar of the crowd, Baast might not have been blindsided by something crashing into his back. The impact caused him to lose his grip on the mace that flew from his hand to strike the floor and then spin away into the darkness. Gangly arms wrapped around his neck choking him, and a pair of skinny legs entwined his abdomen. He stumbled, but managed to stay on his feet.

Baast reached a hand behind his head to try to dislodge his attacker. Teeth chomped down onto his hand. He screamed in pain. The bastard could bite. With a sharp tug, he freed his hand from the gnashing teeth.

“Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Go to sleep,” the attacker screamed.

As Baast struggled, he saw another boy squatting near the wall of the arena. The boy was so scrawny and hairy he couldn’t be a native of the underworld.

“Sleep now. Sleep,” the attacker shrieked, tightening his grip around Baast’s throat.

Baast fought to breathe, his vision became tunnel-like. He stumbled over an unseen weapon and teetered until he slipped on the blood slick ground. His feet flew out from under him and he landed hard on his assailant.

The fall loosened the demon boy’s grip and Baast scrambled free. Gasping for breath, he stood and reached a hand to his throat. That’s when he noticed the throbbing at his right hand. A quick inspection showed that he bled from mangled flesh between his thumb and index finger.

Baast faced the demon, a skinny boy taller than even him, now armed with a scimitar. Dodging a savage slash, Baast gave ground.

“Why won’t you sleep?” the boy raved, his bulging eyes bloodshot.

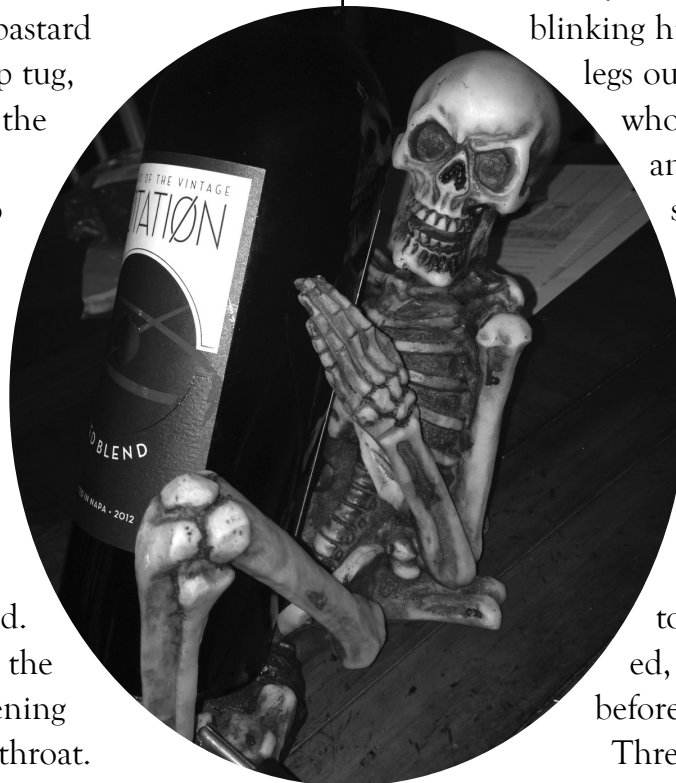
Sidestepping a wild swing, Baast threw the drug that he still had palmed in his left. The white powder dusted the gangly boy’s face. The boy halted his advance, rapidly

blinking his eyes. Baast kicked the legs out from under the boy, who fell hard on his back and lost his grip on the scimitar that clattered to the floor next to him.

“I’m wide-awake,” Baast said, snatching the sword and raising it to strike.

“No, no, I don’t want to sleep,” the boy pleaded, flinging his arms before his face.

Three times Baast struck,



hacking halfway through a forearm. Blood sprayed his legs and sword arm. The fourth strike sunk deep into the boy's forehead.

"A good fight," Baast said. "Thien Ga will lead you to the Land of Endless Summer."

Jerking the scimitar free, Baast searched for his next opponent. He spied the spearman struggling to free his weapon from the body of the axman at his feet. Baast recognized the spearman as Kar, a new boy who had a reputation for being clever and having a mean streak. Kar might be mean, but judging by his bloodshot eyes, he was stupid enough to snort the drug.

Not seeing anyone else alive, Baast closed in on his prey. "Your turn to die, Kar."

The boy shouted something in return that Baast could not understand over the boisterous crowd. Kar freed the spear from the body of his fallen opponent.

That was when everything went to hell. A bright luminescence in Baast's peripheral vision made lightning strikes of pain shoot from his eyeballs straight into his skull. The intensity of the pain dwarfed just about any agony he had ever suffered.

Clenching his eyes shut, Baast dropped his scimitar and pressed his hands over his bulbous orbs. Something was pressed against his torso, searing his skin. Screaming, he stumbled away from the scorching heat.

Lowering his hands, he opened his eyes. Everything was painfully bright and out of focus. An undulating ball of light moved toward him. The stink of smoke filled his nostrils, promising more burning flames. He retreated, holding a hand before his

eyes.

Thien Ga spat venom in his eyes, that was for damn sure. He needed to pull himself together and fast or he was dead meat.

Baast made out his assailant, the runt he'd seen earlier. The runt's eyes didn't bulge from his head like a toad's, definitely a topsider. That meant the boy's eyes weren't as light sensitive as those born to the underworld. Kar stalked up behind the topsider.

"Come get me, you scrawny maggot," Baast snarled, beating his chest with clenched fists.

The topsider didn't return the challenge, but he fixated on Baast. Behind the runt, Kar approached slowly, the pain caused by the torchlight likely taming his desire to attack like a berserker.

As the topsider neared, Baast clenched his eyes shut and prayed to Thien Ga. "Spit venom into the eyes of my enemy, Lord of 10,000 Skins."

The light diminished although it was still bright. He opened his eyes to narrow slits and saw proof that his snake god favored him. The runt was face down on the stone with a spear protruding from the small of his back. The torch flickered next to him still held in an outstretched hand. Behind the runt, Kar doubled over in obvious pain with his hands shielding his protuberant eyes.

Shutting his eyes and turning his head away from the torch, Baast rushed Kar and the dead topsider. The damnable light made his eyes and head throb more with every step. Stopping next to the runt, he kicked the torch away. He recovered from the blinding light faster than Kar. With both

hands he pulled the spear free of the top-sider.

Kar lurched toward Baast, hands reaching for the spear. Baast backed away and let the drug crazed moron trip over the dead body. Kar fell face first to the stone. When Kar pushed himself up to his hands and knees and raised his head, Baast jabbed the spear through his mouth.

“None too cunning, none too mean,” Baast said, twisting the spear as he withdrew it.

Kar collapsed, dead.

The crowd roared and stomped their feet in approval. Pekelo Baast held the spear in his left hand and faced the Queen of Darkness. Baast held out his right arm, revealing the crude snake carved into the inside of his forearm.

“Thien Ga! Thien Ga!” he bellowed.

The Queen of Darkness smiled and Baast thought she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He wanted her. But he was a son of Thien Ga and wanted her dead for enslaving the snake god more. Hefting the spear, he hurled it. He knew that the spear was unlikely to harm the Queen and that he would suffer for his act of defiance, maybe even be executed. But what the hell, if he succeeded in killing the Queen, the payoff might be freeing Thien Ga. Payoffs didn’t get any bigger than that and he owed his god for spitting venom into the eyes of his foes.

The Queen dismissively waved her hand. The spear fell from the air as if it had struck a barrier to crash against the stone floor.

“I am Pekelo Baast, a son of Thien Ga,” he roared, pointing to the primitive snake

scar on his forearm. “One day you’ll pay for what you have done.”

Hands grabbed his arms. A dozen or so trainers, enough in number to overwhelm him and lead him from the meat grinder. He struggled halfheartedly against them. Too much struggling would earn him a beating.

They left Baast in his cage. Usually the victor had his wounds seen to and was given a hot meal. He expected nothing beyond execution.

Sig stomped down a dim corridor, stopping at the cage. He held a curved knife in his hand and used the blade to rattle the bars.

“You stupid little maggot,” Sig raged, his jowls quavering. “I ought to gut you. Throwing the spear? Going to get me dead with your antics.”

Sig thrust his knife through the bars. Baast scrambled to the far side of the cage to avoid being gutted. Sig withdrew his knife and held it before his face, inspecting the blade as he spoke.

“Your damn lucky you’ve never set eyes on that sniveling snake god of yours. I’ve seen what the Queen has done to Thien Ga. That serpent can’t lead you to the Land of Endless Summer,” Sig said with a sinister smile that revealed rotten teeth.

“You’ll wander Death’s Racetrack then burn in hell,” Baast snarled.

“Fanatic.”

“Thien Ga has kept me alive.”

“Your training has kept you alive. You should be thanking old Sig for teaching you how to fight.”

Baast met the glare of the old warrior, but he remained silent.

“Nothing to say? Good. Now, listen up, worm. There’s an important man who wants to meet you. He’s only reason you’re still alive.”

“Don’t want to meet him,” Baast said.

Sig rattled the cage with his knife. “You best answer all his questions and be respectful. You don’t, I’ll know and I’ll make you suffer.”

Baast nodded in agreement. The old warrior was an experienced torturer.

“Did you bite off your tongue?” Sig demanded.

“I’ll answer all questions and be respectful.”

Sig grunted and stomped down the dim corridor.

The important man was preceded by a faint glow that illuminated the corridor and cage just enough to cause Baast’s eyes to dully ache. When Baast saw the important man striding toward him with a gloam stone in one hand and black goggles in the other, he was dumbstruck.

“You’re a damn topsider,” Baast said.

“You’re observant,” the topsider said sardonically. “Pekelo Baast, correct?”

“I am,” Baast growled. He felt envious of the man’s eyes that were not protuberant.

The topsider looked like a man who knew how to fight. He wore a well used chain mail hauberk and at his side hung a long sword with stained leather wrapped around the grip.

“I am Captain Qara Unegen,” the topsider said. “I saw you fight. Your cunning and spirit are very impressive. Not taking the drug...clever.”

“You saw that?” Baast asked, surprised the topsider knew of his ploy.

“I had an excellent seat to watch you fight. I doubt many realized you threw the drug in that boy’s face. Given time and proper training, you can become a warrior with few equals.”

“I’d be a warrior without equal. No chance of that though,” Baast said, shaking his head. “The Queen will see me executed for throwing the spear.”

“I have requested that she spare you. She agreed. I need warriors who lack the qualms of ordinary men when it comes to killing and taking risks.”

“I’m confused. You’re a topsider, an enemy of my people,” Baast said.

“The situation topside is complex. I am an ally of your Queen. Travel to topside with me. You will receive proper training.”

Qara shoved the goggles through the bars. Baast took the goggles in his hands and inspected them. The covers for the eyes were a woven mesh of black fabric.

“For the light?” Baast asked.

“The goggles will cut down the light topside while allowing you to see, albeit imperfectly. You will still be in pain.”

“I can master pain.”

“I believe you can. Do you accept my offer?”

“You’ll see that I have my wounds tended to and get me a hot meal?” Baast asked, holding up his mangled hand.

“It’s a long journey, you will need to eat and I won’t have you dying of an infection.”

“After the training, what then?” Baast asked.

“You will follow my orders unquestionably. You will kill at my command.”

Baast had no future in the underworld except death and afterlife in the Land of

Endless Summer or the wandering of a forlorn soul on Death's Racetrack. He wasn't ready for either journey, he meant to fulfill his dreams of living a life outside of the meat grinder first. Truth was, Thien Ga blessed him as never before and likely never would again.

"Topside can't be any worse than here. I'll kill for you," Baast said, figuring he could strike out on his own once he learned how to survive topside.

Qara Unegen smiled. "Sig, bring the key."

The fat trainer trudged into view, squinting against the glowing light. In a meaty hand he held a rusted key ring with nigh a score of keys clinking together.

"This maggot is dangerous, sir," Sig said, his tone more solicitous than Baast had ever heard. "Let out of his cage less than most boys 'cause he don't know his place."

"Did I ask for your opinion?" Unegen asked.

"No, sir. Just words of warning."

"Open the cage," Unegen said impatiently.

Sig respectfully knuckled his forehead. He sorted through the keys as he tromped over to stand before the bars. As he inserted the key into the keyhole, he gave Baast the evil eye, a baleful narrowing of his bulging orbs. The look declared more loudly than words, screw this up, maggot, and you'll be pleading for a slit throat to end your suffering.

A loud mechanical click echoed when the cage was unlocked. Sig opened the door that squealed on its hinges as grating a sound as wailing infants.

"I'll see you in the Land of Endless Summer," Baast said as he darted out of the cage.

A meaty hand clamped down on Baast's forearm. He tried to break away, but Sig held him fast.

"Maybe I'll send you there first, worm," Sig growled, his breath stinking of alcohol.

"Try, old man."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Unegen's voice cut through the stale air. "This is not the time to settle disputes. Release the boy, Sig."

Sig dug his sausage-fat fingers into Baast's forearm until the lad grimaced in pain. Then the old warrior released Baast, cracking a smile. One day, Baast prayed, Thien Ga, spit in the bastard's eyes and condemn him to Death's Racetrack.

"Follow me," Unegen commanded.

Baast followed, he never saw Sig again.

The gloam stone held by the captain offered the only light in the underworld passageways. Soon they had passed beyond Baast's minuscule world. The twisting corridors seemed to be haphazardly tunneled out of the black rock. Not once did Baast see another soul although on occasion he heard the deep voices of underworlders in the distance.

"It's safe to talk here," Unegen said, coming to a halt. "Just keep your voice down."

Baast nodded. The passageway was dank and the plop of dripping water echoed from nearby.

"You still have your goggles?"

"Yes," Baast said, proffering the goggles.

"Lesson one," Unegen said. "Never lose your equipment. Before this day is out, you

will need your goggles.”

Baast frowned, he knew the journey topside took more than a day. “The deal is my wounds tended to and a hot meal.”

Unegen smiled. “Fear not, I will see to your wounds and provide you food. We won’t be leaving by the usual routes. There is another that leads directly topside. That is how we will escape after you kill the Queen.”

Baast was stunned. Kill the Queen? But this topsider and the Queen were allies.

“Show me your forearm. The one with the snake carved into it,” the captain said.

Baast held out his forearm, revealing the crude image of the snake god.

“There is a prophecy that mentions a boy marked by the image of Thien Ga who is destined to kill the Queen of Darkness,” Unegen said. “The image might be as refined as a stinking pile of dung, but that is the mark of our snake god.”

Baast was skeptical, he wasn’t the only boy to carve the image of the snake god into his body. “You’re sure I’m the one mentioned in the prophecy?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

From somewhere nearby came the heavy thud of boots. Unegen touched the top of the gloam stone with his free hand. The stone flared brightly, causing pain to shoot from Baast’s eyes into his skull and he stifled a groan, then the stone stopped emitting light and they were plunged into darkness.

The boots stomped closer

until it sounded like there must’ve been a dozen men or more passing by right next to them. But then the footfall faded, diminishing to nothingness. The only sounds Baast heard were the plop of water and their own breathing. They waited in darkness for a goodly period before Unegen relit the gloam stone. They stood silent for even longer until the captain spoke.

“The defiant boy marked by Thien Ga will wield the night,” Unegen said. “The night will pierce the Queen’s armor. I hope that you are the defiant boy.”

“The night?” Baast said, familiar enough with the concept of night to know that it was not a weapon. “I need a weapon, not that that will make any difference. She has magic.”

Unegen nodded. “That is true. But you too will be armed with magic. The night referred to in the prophecy is Nightfall, a



sword imbued with magical powers. That is the weapon you will wield. As for being close enough to use it, I have a plan. I need to know that you are willing to follow me to the start line of Death's Racetrack and obey my orders unquestioningly."

"You're the Queen's ally. Why assassinate her?" Baast said.

"Opportunity. The political situation topside is complex."

"As you said before," Baast growled.

"A second lesson. Be flexible to seize auspicious opportunities," Unegen said.

Baast considered his options. What Unegen proposed was undoubtedly a suicide mission. Unfortunately, Baast needed the captain as a guide to escape the underworld and he had another reason for accepting the mission.

"I won't pass up a chance to free Thien Ga," Baast said.

"Excellent," Unegen said.

Unegen led Baast out of the dark passages to corridors that were lit by intermittently placed gloam stones that emitted fainter light than the captain's stone. Soon the glowing stones appeared at regular intervals and the murmur of conversation, laughter, and the shouts of children were heard. Baast was intrigued, he was used to the racket that preceded death.

The passageway opened into a massive cavern lit by the twinkle of gloam stones scattered across its expanse like the bioluminescent eyes of rock lizards. In the distance, children played and women washed clothing in a vast pool that reflected life around it on its mirror surface. The aroma of cooking meat wafted from nearby, making Baast's mouth water and his stomach rumble. He

licked his lips, he was always hungry, especially so after killing in the meat grinder.

"I never knew a place like this exists," Baast said.

"I didn't bring you here to be sentimental," Unegen said. "We have a job to do."

The captain flicked a finger across the top of the gloam stone, dimming it, and led Baast to the left along the cavern wall passed evenly spaced cave mouths.

"Here we are," Unegen said, leading Baast into a darkened cave.

The gloam stone illuminated a small room carved out of the black rock. On the floor a pile of straw served for a bed - clean straw Baast noted enviously. Against the back wall next to the straw was a wooden trunk secured by a heavy padlock. Unegen placed the gloam stone in a bowl on top of a rickety table. Beside the table sat a stool.

"Sit," Unegen said. "I will call for food."

Baast sat and waited as the captain ducked out of the cave. Unegen returned before Baast's curiosity forced him to go exploring.

"I will tend to your wounds while we wait for the food," the captain said, crossing the room to the trunk.

Unegen knelt and unlocked the trunk. Baast craned his neck to see the trunk's contents, spying the black hilt of a sword partially hidden under clothing. The captain closed the trunk and relocked it.

Crossing to the table, Unegen unlaced a leather satchel. He placed it on the table and unfolded it to reveal bandages and a vial of red liquid. The captain removed the vial and held it up.

"Serpent's Venom," Unegen said, removing the stopper from the vial. "It's a

mixture of venom from Thien Ga and wine. It will clean your wounds and make them heal faster than is normal.”

Baast looked at the vial in awe. “Thien Ga’s venom is in that?”

“Yes,” the captain said with an amused smile. “I must warn you. When I clean your wounds you will be in pain.”

“Worse than boiled wine?” Baast asked. That was what the barbers used to clean wounds before sewing up flesh.

“You be the judge.”

Unegen moistened a bandage with a bit of the Serpent’s Venom then pressed the bandage against the burn wound on Baast’s torso. Baast howled, it hurt far more than boiled wine. The burning caused by the venom didn’t fully abate until after both his wounds were cleaned and bandaged, and a young woman had brought trenchers piled high with steaming meat and jugs of water.

Baast attacked his food like the half starved boy he was, savoring every bloody morsel. The food was far better than anything he’d ever eaten in his life and for the first time in his memory he felt satisfactorily full once finished.

After the meal, Unegen reopened the trunk, tossed Baast moldy smelling cloths with a gruff order to put them on. He also retrieved the sword with the black hilt and a handheld crossbow. As Baast pulled on the ill fitting clothing, Unegen told him the plan.

They would pose as supplicants to gain admittance to the throne chamber. The Queen was overconfident in her magical protection and favored efficiency over security when dealing with her subjects. This meant they were unlikely to be searched for

weapons. Subterfuge and a treacherous guard in the captain’s employ would ensure Baast made it within striking distance of the Queen. A passageway leading topside was hidden beneath the throne provided their escape route.

Baast frowned as he cinched a belt around his waist. He deposited the black goggles in a pouch attached to the belt. “Suicide mission.”

“The sword. Draw it. Test its weight,” Unegen said, picking up the sword and handing it to Baast.

Grasping the scabbard in his left hand and gripping the hilt in his right, Baast drew the sword. As the sable blade ushered forth, the light of the gloam stone diminished, going faint like a guttering torch.

“Behold Nightfall,” Unegen said. “With this sword you will kill the Queen.”

The blade seemed to consume light. Baast’s doubts about the sword being magical evaporated as he stared transfixed by the weapon.

“Remember to keep the sword by your side and hidden by your cloak. We don’t want to draw attention to our weapons,” the captain said, donning a cloak that hid his sword and the handheld crossbow at his waist. “Do you still think this is a suicide mission?”

Baast shrugged. “If I’m the chosen one, we might have a chance.”

“Come on then. Time to meet the Queen.”

Baast and Unegen queued in a line of supplicants before the massive steel door that led to the throne chamber. Two guards armed with halberds stood before the door. A third guard, with his half helm in the

crook of his left arm, walked up and down the line of supplicants, glaring menacingly.

With a deep groan the steel door opened wide enough for a young couple to scurry out, eyes rolling with fear.

“Get a move on, you slugs,” a guard growled.

The couple broke into a run and disappeared from sight.

From beyond the door a resonant voice called. “Next.”

The line of supplicants shuffled forward. The door thudded shut. Twice more the scene played out then only a bent shouldered oldster sinking of piss stood ahead of Baast and the door.

Heady excitement coursed through Baast, a familiar feeling that he had felt every time just before he entered the meat grinder. Unconsciously, he bounced on the balls of his feet and clenched his hands into fists.

“Why you squirming, worm?”

Baast looked up at the glowering face of the guard patrolling the line of supplicants. Hidden by the folds of his cloak, he inched his hand toward Nightfall’s hilt. His instincts told him that the instant of kill or be killed neared.

Unegen stepped forward next to Baast and threw back the hood of his cloak. The guard turned his malevolent gaze upon the captain.

“Captain Unegen,” the guard said, respectfully. “This is the runt you’ve taken from the meat grinder?”

Baast wrapped his hand around the hilt of Nightfall.

“He is, sergeant,” Unegen replied. “The Queen asked to see him before I take him

topside.”

“You could’ve scheduled an audience,” the guard rumbled.

“True, but that would mean a formal event,” Unegen said, cordially. “The boy is so uncouth it would be wasted upon him.”

“Huh,” the sergeant grunted, turning his gaze back to Baast. “Show me your face, maggot.”

Baast released the hilt of Nightfall, using his sword hand to hold the cloak close to his body. With his other hand he threw back the hood of his cloak.

“Mind your manners while you’re inside the throne chamber, boy,” the sergeant said.

“Yes, sergeant,” Baast said.

The sergeant nodded to the captain and walked off.

“So much for anonymity,” Unegen whispered to Baast. “Stay focused on the mission.”

Not long after the encounter with the sergeant, they were called to enter the throne chamber.

As soon as Baast passed beyond the steel door, lightning strikes of pain shot through his eyeballs. Damn the room was bright. Squinting, he took in his surroundings.

The room was cavernous, carved out of the same black rock as the rest of the underworld. Ensnared in the walls of the cavern, scores of gloam stones cast their pale light, illuminating the golden haired Queen of Darkness upon her obsidian throne. At the sight of her fine features and her lovely azure eyes, Baast felt the familiar rush of lust and hatred. He clenched his jaw as he resisted the urge to draw Nightfall and charge

the despot.

A stout underworlder stepped forward from beside the steel door. He carried a heavy wooden staff in his hand that he struck against the cavern floor.

“Captain Unegen and the boy from the meat grinder,” the man proclaimed in a resonant voice.

At least a dozen guardsmen arrayed in two lines before the throne formed a pathway to the Queen. Baast saw that the underworlders wore goggles like the pair Unegen had given him.

“Captain Unegen, what an unexpected surprise,” the Queen said. “Please, approach.”

Unegen walked down the pathway between the guards. Baast followed at the captain’s shoulder, only to have two guardsmen block his way.

“Allow the boy to approach,” the Queen said.

The guards stepped aside. Baast had taken no more than half a dozen steps when the captain spoke.

“I would not allow him to approach any closer, my Queen. He is an assassin armed with the sword Nightfall.”

Baast felt intense pressure against every inch of his body and could not move. Fear kindled in his mind – magic. Part of the plan, remember the mission, he reminded himself. Staying calm was a challenge when the force holding him squeezed his chest, making his breathing labored.

“What betrayal is this?” the Queen of Darkness snarled, her face contorted in a sneer.

Through the mass of armored guardsmen converging upon him, Baast saw

Unegen throw aside his cloak and draw the handheld crossbow, each movement as precise and graceful as a dancer’s. The captain raised the crossbow and fired. The quarrel tore into the Queen of Darkness’s throat. She slumped on her throne and reached her hands to her neck. Her long graceful fingers came away coated in blood. Her eyes widened in shock and her mouth hung open as if to scream, but only blood gushed forth.

Several things happened at once. Someone screamed that the captain had attacked the Queen. Baast realized that the unseen force that had held him in place was gone and that he could move again. Most of the guards converging on him turned their attention on Unegen, who had drawn his sword. Only two guards reached gauntleted hands to seize Baast.

Back stepping away from the approaching guards, Baast drew Nightfall. As the sable blade slid from the scabbard, the light in the throne chamber dulled and his eyes no longer burned nor did his head throb. The chamber reverberated with the clash of steel, the groan of the door opening, and the cries of men.

Over the din Baast bellowed. “I’ll see you all in the Land of Endless Summer!”

Featherlight in his hands, Nightfall slashed through the air. The closest guardsman lost a hand, the black blade cutting through armor like it was warm butter. The guard fell to the floor screaming, clutching at the bloody stump. The second guardsman tried to draw his sword, but he was too slow. Baast finished the fool with a single thrust to the chest.

Baast jerked the blade free from his fall-

en foe and started laughing. He felt more alive and in control of his own destiny than he ever had in the meat grinder. With Nightfall in his hands even grown warriors were no match for him. While holding the sword he was Thien Ga's chosen one.

"Pekelo! Remember the mission," Unegen shouted.

The captain was surrounded by at least a half dozen guardsmen, surely enough to overwhelm him although that was not the case. Two guardsmen lay dead on the ground at his feet. The others attacked in unison, but somehow Unegen evaded their swords, twisting and spinning like an acrobat while his blade struck like an angry viper.

The mission. Remember the mission. Baast looked to the throne to see that the Queen stirred, very much alive. Her long fingers wrapped around the shaft of the quarrel, wrenching it from her throat. A scarlet waterfall spilled from the mangled flesh, staining her skin and dress.

"Thien Ga, spit venom in the Queen's eyes," Baast said.

Baast heard shouts behind him and glanced over his shoulder. The mean sergeant and his two comrades charged into the chamber, but Baast could reach the Queen and put her to the sword before they overtook him. He saw a fourth underworlder, the stout herald with the staff. Deciding the herald was not a threat, Baast turned back to the Queen.

Something hard struck Baast across his upper back, causing him to stumble and nearly fall. He whirled to face his attacker, the fool with the staff. Baast was struck again, this time against the chin - crack. His

head went all woozy and he backpedaled drunkenly before falling heavily onto his butt. His vision blurry, he saw stars and his head hammered with pain.

After Baast blinked his eyes several times, the stout man charging with the staff held high overhead came into focus. In desperation, Baast thrust Nightfall before him. The fool impaled himself on the obsidian blade.

Struggling to his feet, Baast pushed the dying man from Nightfall. The sergeant and the other two guards bore down on him. His legs were leaden and he felt dizzy. Unless Thien Ga blessed him right now, he was dead.

The big sergeant, gesturing with a broadsword held in one massive hand, shouted to his men. "Go kill that damn topsider. The maggot is mine."

One guard held back, allowing his fellow to move ahead of him then drove the spike of his halberd into the back of his fellow guardsman who crashed to the floor and convulsed.

"Kill the Queen," the treacherous guard screamed, charging the sergeant.

Baast strode on wobbly legs toward the Queen upon her throne, taking a wide berth around the ongoing melee. Unegen still battled on despite being surrounded by at least five guards.

The Queen of the Darkness, her throat a crimson scarf, slowly rose from her throne. She stood a head taller than even her biggest guard. Her azure gaze found Baast as he lurched toward her. Those eyes, so beautiful. Baast felt the heat of lust and hatred burn through his body. He wanted her right there, right now, but as the chosen

one he wanted to kill her more.

“Death’s Racetrack awaits you,” Baast bellowed as he raised the sable blade to strike her down.

“Wait, boy,” the Queen said, her voice a weak, gurgling wheeze.

Baast tensed half expecting her, despite her depleted state, to cast magic upon him once again.

Instead the Queen said. “I will take you as my lover, boy. I know you want me.”

Baast laughed so hard that his entire body shook. She reached a hand into the folds of her dress. He grabbed her by the wrist and saw that she held a small dagger. She struggled against him, but magic was her strength not physical prowess. He squeezed and shook her arm until the dagger fell free. Slamming his shoulder into her chest, he knocked her down onto her throne.

“It’s your eyes I want, not you,” Baast said, thrusting Nightfall into her chest. “If I see you in you Land of Endless Summer, I’ll kill you again.”

The Queen’s eyes went wide in shock, almost bulging, and she made a burbling gasp. Pale blue light radiated from around the wound in her chest and was sucked into Nightfall. Wrenching the sword free, Baast held it coated in oozing blood before his eyes. More pale blue light spewed like lifeblood from the Queen’s wound and flowed into the sword. As the light was consumed by Nightfall, the spark of life grew dull in the Queen’s orbs. When the blue light winked out of existence, the Queen of Darkness let out a long sigh and her body sagged.

For good measure Baast stabbed Nightfall into the Queen again. When he pulled the blade free no light gushed from her body, only blood.

“Thien Ga, you are free,” he breathed.

Baast turned to the fighting to watch Unegen disengage from the remaining three guards and run toward him.

“Behind the throne,” the captain called.

More guards, these men armed with crossbows, poured into chamber through the doorway. Just as the captain reached the throne, he stumbled and caught himself on the obsidian chair. A quarrel protruded from his back at the shoulder.

Baast darted behind the throne, the captain right behind him.

“What now?” Baast demanded.

“I must locate the switch,” the captain said, running his hand over the chair back.

From in front of the throne came a shout. “Steady now, boys. They ain’t got nowhere to run. We can turn them into the



pincushions with our crossbows.”

A quarrel skimmed off the edge of the high backed chair, shooting away into the darkness. Baast crouched lower, looking around to either side. The guards hadn't rounded the throne yet, but they were close.

“Ah, here we go,” Unegen said.

The declaration was followed by a loud mechanical click and the dull scraping of stone against stone. Slowly, the throne slid forward across the floor, revealing a dark a staircase.

The guards shouted in surprise and fear.

“Quickly now, the guardsmen will find their nerve,” Unegen said, face as pale as a specter.

They ran down the dark tunnel, Baast allowing the captain to lead the way. Suspecting Nightfall might be consuming the limited radiance, Baast he returned the blade to the scabbard. After a few moments, he saw that the tunnel was narrow and roughhewn.

“I see them!” a guard bellowed.

A quarrel whizzed by Baast's head.

“How much further?” Baast demanded.

“Not sure,” the captain said, his sword slipping from his grasp to clatter against the stone. “It terminates at a ladder carved into the rock.”

“Great,” Baast grumbled, struggling to imagine how Unegen would ascend the ladder.

Up ahead Baast saw a faint glow, squinting he saw the wall where the cave terminated. Behind them came the stomp of boots and the shouts of angry guards. The captain stumbled, but Baast caught the small man.

“Stay on your feet or we're dead,” Baast

warned, glancing over his shoulder. Three, maybe four, guards pursued them.

When they reached the wall, Baast found grooves carved into it, like the rungs of a ladder, leading up a narrow shaft barely wide enough for a man. Baast looked up the shaft to see a bright pinprick of light that made his eyes burn and he squinted.

“Put on the goggles,” the captain said. “The light will become more intense as we climb.”

As Baast fumbled with the pouch at his waist for the goggles another volley of quarrels clattered around them. A fiery fissure of pain tore across his left cheek. He reached a hand to his cheek and it came away slick with blood. He'd been grazed.

“Climb!” Baast bellowed.

Unegen started his slow ascent. Daring a glance at their pursuers, Baast counted six guards reloading their crossbows. To a man the guards had removed their goggles to see better in the dark tunnel.

Baast pulled the goggles over his head, placing the fine black meshes over his eyes. The world dimmed, the craggy rock wall became less perceptible. He looked up the shaft to the brilliant pinprick of light that was partially obstructed by the captain. The radiance was still bright, but no longer made his eyes burn.

Baast climbed the ladder, the rock cool to the touch. The hand and foot holds were unevenly spaced and oddly sized. He quickly caught up to the captain whose labored breathing had morphed into panting.

Glancing downward, Baast saw the guardsman at the base of the shaft. At least two men had dropped their crossbows and covered their bulging eyes with their hands.

“Your goggles, fools,” someone shouted.

A metallic clink echoed through the shaft. Baast clenched his teeth, knowing that the guards had just taken a shot at them.

“You stupid worms are terrible shots,” a guard raged, the big sergeant by the sound of his voice. “Climb! Now, before they get away.”

The guards clambered up after them, shouting exhortations and curses.

The light was closer now, its brilliance causing tendrils of pain to scurry like cockroaches over Baast’s eyes. Groaning, he halted his ascent, squinting against the light.

“Climb, Pekelo! We’re almost at the top,” Unegen shouted.

Baast clenched his eyes shut and climbed.

Pulling himself out of the shaft, Baast opened his eyes to cracks only to be blinded by blazing light. He clenched his eyes shut and threw his hands over his goggles. That helped, but by Thien Ga he feared opening his eyes again.

“Calm down,” Unegen from nearby, his voice weak. “Your goggles are positioned incorrectly. Let me help you. Lower your hands.”

Baast lowered his hands.

“Don’t be startled. I’m going to adjust the goggles.”

Baast felt the goggles readjusted.

“That should do it. Open your eyes.”

Baast opened his eyes to minute slits. There was pain, but not nearly as intense as before. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness, a world of browns and greens came into focus.

“What is this place?” Baast asked, awed

by his unfamiliar surroundings.

“The Forest of Woe,” Unegen said and gestured to a pile of large gray rocks next to him. “Quickly, block up the shaft.”

The first stones Baast pushed down the shaft were about the size of a man’s head. The stones smashed against the sides of the shaft as they fell and occasionally a scream could be heard. Finally, Baast pushed a rounded boulder onto the shaft, sealing it.

Muscles aching, Baast sat down next to Unegen. The captain shivered uncontrollably and sweat glistened off his face.

“You must remove the quarrel,” Unegen said.

“I know a dying man when I see one,” Baast said, standing and walking around to the captain’s back. “I’m not a sadist. Might be better if I cut your throat.”

“I have another lesson for you,” Unegen said in a quavering voice full of determination. “Never give up. That’s what makes men like us feared. We never surrender. We will fight to the death. Most pertinent to this situation, we always have one last trick to play. In my cloak there is a hidden pocket. Inside that pocket is a vial of Serpent’s Venom. If Thien Ga is free of the Queen of Darkness, then the potency of the potion will be greatly increased. I believe it will be enough to save me.”

“Where’s the pocket?”

“To the right of the small of my back.”

Baast retrieved the vial and deposited it in the pouch at his waist.

“You don’t lack in faith,” Baast said, wrapping his hand around the shaft and placing his free hand against the captain’s bloodstained cloak.

“How could I? You are the –,” Unegen’s

words became a scream as Baast yanked the shaft free.

Moaning, Unegen collapsed onto the undergrowth.

“Try not to move,” Baast said, kneeling beside the captain and tossing aside the bloody quarrel.

Baast pulled aside to cloak reveal the blood stained puncture in the chain mail. He retrieved the vial, unstoppered it, and upended it. When the potion splashed onto

the wound, the captain howled.

While Unegen thrashed and moaned, Baast prayed. Eventually, the captain fell silent. When light in the forest started to wane, the captain pushed himself up to sit cross-legged and smiled at Baast.

“Thien Ga is free,” Unegen said.

Baast smiled. ❖

END TRANSMISSION