

THE
CHRONICLES
OF THE
MAGI

THE SWORD OF LIFE

Dave Morris

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THE MAGI

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

W. B. Yeats

One:

The Pommel Stone

The old woman hunched over the cards, her breath a misty plume in the chill evening air. Beside her, the campfire crackled and spat sparks up to the grey sky. Altor waited patiently, smiling to himself as he saw the look of intense concentration darken the woman's wrinkled brow. When she looked up she was not smiling.

'This is an irresistible fate,' she said, gesturing at the cards. 'Your destiny is sealed by the Norns themselves. You will undertake some great task, a quest of tremendous importance.'

Touching a card with one thin brown hand, she went on: 'From the first card, which is the focus of the reading, the quest will involve the setting to right of some ancient ill. Another interpretation is that you will repair something that has been broken.'

'Perhaps the tiles on the monastery roof need fixing again,' said Altor flippantly, but the old woman ignored him.

'The Knave here suggests one you shall soon meet. A friend or companion, perhaps. The next card suggests that a long journey lies ahead of you, and the surrounding cards indicate great hardships to be endured along the way. This card, the Hosts of Yeth, shows that those obstacles will be both many and dangerous. Powerful forces will oppose you. Turning to the next card, we see your near future. The Archon, icy of gaze and stern of countenance. A ruler, or at any rate a man who expects to be obeyed. If your quest is not in his interests then you can count on him to oppose you. But take heart, young man, for here beside him is the card we call the Wise Mother. She is the feminine principle—the gentle dreams bidden

by lullabies, of tales told by a warm hearth, selfless love and the comforting word.'

Altor had been listening with amused scepticism, but the woman's words awoke an old sorrow. Raised by monks from early childhood, he had no memory of his own parents.

The old woman gathered the cards and began to shuffle them, meeting Altor's sad gaze with her dark sunken eyes. 'The Knave, who came first, is a stark contrast indeed to the Archon, and you noticed that their faces on the cards were turned away from each other? Though some will oppose you, the cards seem to say, you may find one to be your friend.'

Altor shrugged and got to his feet, stretching his broad shouldered frame in a massive yawn. 'If you say so.' He dropped two silver coins into the old woman's hand. The firelight made them blaze like droplets of blood, reflected in the dark pools of her eyes.

Night was darkening the sky and closing a wall of blackness around the campfires. Altor had joined a number of other wayfarers who for mutual protection had banded together to travel through the great forest of southern Krarth. A pilgrim who had been waiting nearby, seeing that the fortune-teller was finished with Altor, came hurrying over to learn what the cards said about his own destiny. Pondering the meaning of the old woman's prophecy, Altor walked away across the clearing, which was now bustling with activity as merchants, hunters and pilgrims prepared camp for the night.

In the time since Altor had sat down for his card-reading, some foresters had appeared with their families and were now roasting haunches of venison on a spit. Altor sniffed the aroma of the meat longingly, but in the cook pot over his own campfire simmered only a thin broth of roots and herbs. He hunkered down beside it and poured himself a bowl, regretting the two coins he had given the soothsayer which might have been better spent to buy a loaf of bread and a slice of venison.

The plangent notes of a melancholy tune drifted across the clearing. Altor looked over to see a man strumming a lyre. He wore

a tunic and breeches of cotton that had once been white, perhaps, but now were travel-stained and grey. As he sipped his broth, Altor studied the man's strong proud face, idly wondering what had brought him to this desolate spot. The wistful melody he played was nothing like the ballads and jaunty jigs of a typical minstrel. Impelled by curiosity, Altor strolled over to listen to the music.

The musician looked up as Altor approached. He saw a big youth in the simple homespun tunic of a warrior-monk. In the months Altor had been travelling, his close cropped hair had grown into a corn-coloured broom on top of his wide brow, and combined with his earnest expression and honest yeoman's face it made him look intimidating and comical in equal measure.

Without ceasing to play, the musician smiled and said, 'I noticed you getting your fortune told. Anything interesting?'

Altor laughed self-consciously. 'She claimed to foresee a stirring destiny for me. It sounded just the thing for a hero, but I'm afraid that in this case the cards must have got mixed up.'

The musician nodded as he plucked the strings of his lyre. 'The monks of your order are warriors, though. Don't you like the idea of being a hero, lad?'

Altor reddened, not sure if the man was teasing him. 'I had a letter for Brother Emeritus, one of the sages of our sect. Having delivered it, I'm now on my way back to Osterlin Abbey, in Ellesland. It's not my duty to go off involving myself in mysterious quests, even if any came along.'

Altor waited, but the musician had nothing more to say. He seemed lost in his oddly poignant melody. Altor looked past him to the edge of the clearing, where a circle of foresters wrapped in long grey travelling cloaks were peering intently at a game of Krarthian chequers being played by two tall men. The chequers players hunched over the board, which they had placed on a flat stone between them. Patting their hands to stave off the chill, they crouched like dire wolves in their mantles of blue-grey fur, so engrossed in their game as to be oblivious of the onlookers.

The rules of Krarthian chequers differed from the version played in Altor's homeland, but he understood enough to follow the basic moves. Instilled with a warrior's training, he found the military precision of the game fascinating and, forgetting the musician, drifted over for a closer look. The players had deployed their pieces across the board like two generals sending forth troops to battle, so it was with surprise that Altor saw one of them abruptly move a piece into a position where it was swiftly taken. A cunning trap, he wondered, designed to lure the opponent into a costly exchange of pieces? But no, the other player swiftly captured several pieces without risk.

Soon, as night settled over the forest, the game ended. With the white counters forced together in the middle of the board, the player controlling the black pieces surrounded and eliminated them all.

As each piece was taken, one of the onlookers would lose interest in the game and, turning, go back to his bedroll. Altor, absorbed in the game, failed to notice this until the last white piece was swept away and he looked up to find he was the only spectator left.

The two fur-cloaked players rose and nodded curtly to each other. Neither winner nor loser showed any emotion. Altor wondered if this was because of sportsmanship or sheer indifference.

'I'd like a game,' he said, 'if either of you gentlemen would care to explain the moves.'

They ignored him, packing up the board and pieces without even giving him a glance. Altor was left alone to watch them walk away through the flickering orange glow of the camp fires.

A sense of unease gnawed at him. There was something odd about the game, and something very sinister about the foresters themselves. Or then again, it might just be his imagination... Altor shook his head irritably. The abbot had believed him mature enough to be entrusted with this mission. He was ashamed at himself for getting spooked by the loneliness of the spot and the unfriendliness of strangers. He strode back and fed some more wood to the fire before climbing inside his sleeping bag.

All around the clearing, the sounds of talk and laughter gradually faded as people turned in for the night. But, much to his annoyance, Altor found that sleep would not come. He shut his eyes, but the sounds of the crackling fires and the sighing of wind in the pines remained to disrupt the stillness of the night.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright, every nerve in his body tense. Just on the verge of sleep, a sudden thought had startled him back to wakefulness. Staring around the clearing in the dull gleam of the campfires, he saw now what he had failed to notice before. The pilgrims and ordinary travellers were arranged as the white pieces had been in the chequers game. The fur-clad foresters who had watched the game had placed themselves around the perimeter of the clearing in the same deployment used by the black pieces just before the game had reached its sudden end.

Cursing himself for a fool, Altor snatched his sword from its scabbard and jumped to his feet. That was why the chequers players hadn't cared about the outcome of their game—they hadn't really been playing at all, they had been planning their attack! A cry of warning whiplashed from Altor's lips even as he bounded across the clearing towards the spot where the two chequers players lay. Whatever skulduggery was afoot, those two were obviously the ringleaders.

The nearest of the two started to rise with a growl. Quick as he was, Altor was quicker. He planted his sword-point at the man's throat and met his glare of furious hatred with a stolid look. Behind, the other man crouched like an animal at bay.

'It's past your bed-time, isn't it?' said Altor in a level tone. 'Planning some mischief?'

'What's going on?' a voice called blearily across the clearing. 'Keep it down, can't you? Some of us are trying to sleep.'

The chequers player deliberately leaned forward so that the tip of Altor's blade pricked his skin. A tiny bead of blood formed at his throat. Then he drew back, and at once the wound closed. As Altor stared in astonishment the man smiled, baring long canine

teeth that filled his mouth.

‘We are not as you,’ said the other, edging forward. ‘We are night’s brood, the brothers of wolves...’

‘Werewolves!’

Altor threw himself backwards. He acted not a moment too soon. Unconcerned by the steel sword that was powerless to harm him, the first werewolf brought his hand up in a scything cut. Talons slashed at thin air. The attack would have ripped out the young warrior-monk’s bowels if he’d been a fraction slower.

The commotion had roused one or two of the sleeping travellers nearby. They woke just in time to see some of the fur clad foresters leaning over them, then long knives snuffed out their lives.

Altor, rolling across the ground, flung aside his sword and instead pulled a burning log from the fire. One of the werewolves barked an order and a group of the silent foresters loped forward to the attack. Altor thrust the burning brand into the nearest man’s face and, as he reeled back with a scream, pushed him onto the knives of the others. Blood spurted in the firelight. Altor nodded to himself with grim satisfaction. Even if he couldn’t slay the werewolves themselves, at least the foresters who served them were not immune to death.

A cold metallic light now crept across the scene. Glancing aside, Altor saw the rising disc of the Blue Moon, one of the five swift comets that swept the skies of Krarth. As its beams struck the two chequers players, they began to transform. Hair bristled on their hands and feet, their faces stretched to the shape of vulpine snouts. They dropped to all fours as the fur spread across their bodies. Slavering jaws spilled hot saliva on the frosty grass as they fixed their eyes on Altor. Then, raising their muzzles to the Blue Moon, they gave vent to long horrifying howls of murderous intent.

It was a chilling sound, and more than enough to rouse any of the travellers who had not already woken. Some screamed and caught up their belongings, intending to flee. The foresters fell on them swiftly, slashing with their long knives. Some of the pilgrims took up

cudgels and quarterstaves, determined to fight to the last.

The night was split by roars of anguish, the moans of the injured, the screams of the dying. Altor struck at one of the silent foresters, catching him across the brow, and the man fell in a shower of red sparks. Another came charging forward with a loud cry. Before he could reach him, Altor wrestled the knife from the fallen man's hand and flung it to impale the other in the throat. He collapsed across the body of his comrade.

Altor planted himself with his back to one of the campfires so that he could not be outflanked. Flailing desperately to right and left with the burning brand, he managed to hold his foes at bay. Soon, seeing no way past the young warrior's guard, the werewolves' henchmen fell back. Altor took advantage of the respite to look how the others were faring. Some of the pilgrims had fallen, others were fleeing into the gloomy depths of the forest. A brave few still fought on as he did. Further away, on the other side of the clearing, a group of Kurlish traders were rallying their hired guards to attempt a charge.

Another adversary lunged close, almost taking Altor unawares. The man ducked under the arc of fire from the swinging brand, but Altor twisted aside and smashed the heel of his left hand against the man's jaw, sending him sprawling. Even as he fought, part of Altor's mind had time to wonder why the werewolves had attacked. Not merely for the traders' gold, surely? More likely for the sake of wholesale slaughter, but that too was strange. Normal wolves preferred to pick off solitary prey rather than choosing a battle where they would be outnumbered.

He looked around for the werewolves themselves. There was one—a great hunched shape with eyes that blazed balefully in the dark. It was crouching over a fallen figure and gore ran freely from its jaws, black like oil in the dim light of the Blue Moon. Altor heard its snarling voice as it called to its brother, and by concentrating he could make out the distorted words of its speech.

'He does not have the stone,' it said.

The other werewolf prowled nearer, gave the corpse a sidelong

glance. 'He has hidden it. No matter—he will never get to find it now.'

'Our work is done, then,' growled the first. 'Come!'

The last word rose in a long eerie howl. At once the fur cloaked foresters paused and fell back, turning to follow their werewolf masters into the forest. In moments they had been swallowed up by darkness. Altor and the survivors of the travelling band stood dumbstruck amid the carnage.

Despite his youth, Altor was the first to recover from the shock. 'Check the wounded,' he said to the leader of the Kurlish traders. 'Use torn blankets to staunch the bleeding. You,' he added, pointing to one of the pilgrims, 'you have a bag of herbal remedies, I believe? If they're at all effective you'd better fetch them now.'

The mercenaries whom the traders relied on to protect their wares had done little during the fighting, too stunned to do much more than grab their swords and shields. Now their captain came forward and offered to organize a search of the surrounding forest. 'We need to round up those who fled or they'll die of exposure,' he said.

Altor was on the point of joining the search party when he noticed a feeble stirring from the werewolves' savaged victim. There was a groan and, stooping, he recognized the musician he had spoken to earlier. 'Don't move,' he said. 'I'll get help.'

The man stared at him from a face as white as clay. His eyes were fiery with pain. 'I'm beyond any help,' he gasped. 'But they didn't get the stone...'

His voice trailed off momentarily as blood came bubbling to his lips. Altor, who had been trained in all aspects of warfare, recognized that death was near. He did not try to delude the man. 'It's true you're dying. Tell me your name; I'll see you get a decent burial.'

The man stared back and then, mustering the last of his strength, struggled to a half-sitting position. 'Haversack...' he muttered. Altor saw it lying nearby and put it into the man's hands. Reaching painfully inside, he took out a parcel wound with velvet cloth. His hands stained the velvet as he unwrapped what lay within. It was his lyre.

Altor thought that the man intended it to be buried with him, but suddenly he began to pound it against the frost-hardened ground. Altor saw that the effort was causing him agony and tried to gently take it from him, but the man was determined. On the third attempt, the base of the lyre broke open and a round glittering object rolled out.

Altor picked it up. It was a magnificent jewel that sparkled with inner light, catching the blue moonbeams and the red glow of the fires and transmuting them into a blaze of vivid colours.

‘The Five are gathering power...’ gasped the dying man, somehow finding the strength to raise himself on one elbow as he spoke his last words. ‘Soon they’ll return to the world. Only the swords can stop them—the Sword of Life and the Sword of Death. That gem is from the pommel of the Sword of Life. You must find the other pieces.’

Altor was dismayed. ‘I pray you, do not charge me with this quest. I am not free to undertake it. I have other responsibilities.’

The man’s breath came unevenly, his eyes clouding as he sank back to the ground. ‘You must... You must stop the Five...’

‘Who?’ Altor shook his head. He did not like to refuse a dying man’s request, but his first duty was to return to Osterlin Abbey. ‘There must be somebody else. Tell me who to give the gem to—I can do that much.’

The man’s voice was so weak that Altor had to strain to catch his words: ‘Take the pommel stone to Kalugen’s Keep. Give it to Janirus. Then you’ll know.’

He said no more but gave a deep groan and went limp, his eyes freezing in the sightlessness of death, still fixed imploringly on Altor’s face.

Altor rose to his feet. He was torn. Duty required him to return without delay to his abbey. Honour demanded that he carry out the dead man’s final wishes.

Suddenly the choice was simple. ‘Very well,’ he muttered grimly to the night wind, ‘I’ll go to Kalugen’s Keep.’

Two:

Kalugen's Keep

The Keep of Magus Kalugen stood in the heart of the icy plains of Krarth, a monolithic citadel of black stone beneath skies that were blue, cloudless and cold. The monotony of the surrounding landscape was relieved only by the occasional stunted willow tree growing beside muddy ponds. The Keep itself dwarfed all around it, like a tumble of dark rocks that had fallen from the heavens.

As Altor approached the towering walls, a bitter wind blew across the sere grass of the marshes and sent sluggish ripples through the puddles of mire that occupied the hollows. He was anxious to complete his task, hand the pommel stone on to the one the musician had named, and quit this forbidding place. It would be best not to waste any time. In only a matter of weeks the marsh waters would begin to rise, drowning the land and the causeways leading to the citadel. Then Kalugen's Keep would be shut off from the outside world for another year. No one would enter or leave in that time except for the magi who ruled the land of Krarth, borne on their flying carpets. Only in mid-year would the citizens of the Keep be allowed to emerge and sow their fields with straggle-wheat before the harsh winter once more set in.

Jostling through the gabbling throng of merchants and peasants pouring along the causeway, Altor entered the massive gate. The colossal grey stone blocks were like the maw of a hungry demon, its teeth the iron spikes of the open portcullis. Ahead stood sentries armed with pikes. Big surly men, they glared at Altor as though he were a notorious criminal or a carrier of plague, but once he had

paid the gate toll they waved him through into the city without another glance.

Inside, the streets were narrow cobbled lanes lined with shuttered grey buildings. Altor had expected as much, Kalugen's Keep having a grim reputation. To his surprise, however, the whole city was festooned with multi-coloured flags which belied its dour semblance and gave it an almost festive air.

Somebody barged into Altor from behind and an eloquently acid insult was flung at his back. He turned to find himself face-to-face with a young man of about his own age. That was the only thing they had in common. Although he had a sword at his hip, the other was not bulkily muscled like Altor but had an acrobat's trim physique. And his clothes were not the rough homespun of any common traveller. Even his boots, though he had obviously worn them for many leagues, were as fine as any southern courtier's, with their silver buckles and miniver lining. He wore pantaloons of gold velvet and a waistcoat studded with purple and red stones over a loose cream silk shirt fastened at the collar by a fire opal set in a silver clasp. His hooded cloak glittered like coal in the bleached daylight and his long black hair was swept back and bound in a pony tail under a jaunty hunting-cap set off with a single white peacock feather.

It was the peacock feather that struck Altor as most appropriate. He leaned down towards the young dandy and listened impassively as he finished his tirade.

'...you fog-witted yokel, can't you watch where you're going?'

Altor chuckled. 'Sorry, but wasn't it you that bumped into me?'

'What else do you expect, if you stand in the city's main thoroughfare gawping at your surroundings like a puppy in a boneyard?'

A group of merchants with heavily laden pack mules were just now entering the city, so both Altor and his new acquaintance were forced to move down the avenue into the main square. Here Altor noticed a booth set on a raised platform behind a rack bearing three splendidly-coloured coats of arms.

The press of traffic into the square carried them both over towards the platform. A man with a long nose and longer beard emerged from the booth and peered critically down at Altor's companion. 'Ho, fellow. Yes, I mean you. Our lord the magi seek champions. Did you wish to apply for the post?'

The dandy swirled back his cloak with a raffish gesture. 'Of course not.'

The man nodded. 'I thought as much. In that case, kindly move away from the front of the booth. Your costume is liable to distract people's attention from the magi's banners.'

The dandy spluttered in indignation but, unable to think of a suitable retort, strode off into the crowd. The bearded man was on the point of withdrawing into the booth when Altor caught his eye. He gave the young warrior a long thoughtful look. 'Perhaps you should consider becoming a champion, lad—assuming you aren't just some farmer's boy who stole that sword.'

'This sword is my own,' retorted Altor, 'and I know how to use it. But I am confused by all this talk of champions. Don't the magi of Krarth have men-at-arms aplenty to serve them?'

'I see you are a stranger to these parts. Otherwise you would know that every thirteen lunar months the magi converge here for their great contest. Each appoints one or more champions to descend into the Battlepits. The winner is he who returns from the underworld bearing the Emblem of Victory.'

'What do the magi stand to gain from such a contest?' asked Altor.

'Some say it's just a game for them, others that the magus whose champion wins the contest gains a tribute of gold and magic from all the others. All I can tell you for sure, lad, is that if you become a champion you'll never want for anything again.'

'I'm not interested in such a reward,' said Altor. 'I have to get back to my monastery in Ellesland. I only came to Kalugen's Keep so I could give this—'

He patted his money pouch, feeling for the pommel stone, and suddenly his heart ran with ice.

‘It’s gone!’ Altor stared white-face back towards the gate. ‘I must have dropped it when I paid the entrance toll...’ He took three steps back across the square, then stopped and shook his head helplessly. ‘I’ll never find it.’

The bearded man clicked his tongue. ‘Valuable, was it, this thing you lost?’

Altor shrugged. ‘It’s not that. I swore I’d bring it to someone in the city. I’d better go to the police barracks. Maybe somebody found it and handed it in.’

‘The barracks! You could wait there forever for an honest militiaman to turn up,’ said the man cynically. ‘If anyone in the Keep found your treasure, lad, you can bet it’s snug in their pocket. Failing that it’ll be trodden under a foot of mire and slush. Take my advice and forget about it.’

Altor stared at him in amazement. ‘Forget my sworn oath? How can you say such a thing? There must be something I can do.’

‘Well...’ The man tugged at his beard. ‘I can’t see how you could find your property now with anything less than sorcery. And, although there is much sorcery in the Keep, it is all in the hands of the magi.’

‘Then I must ask a magus to help me.’

‘The magi don’t concern themselves with ordinary mortals, lad. You’d have as much luck praying to God for a silver florin to turn up in the next loaf of bread you buy.’

Almost beside himself with dismay, Altor stared around the square. Then his gaze lighted on the rack bearing the magi’s coats of arms and his frantic confusion was swept away by a cold determination. He reached out for the nearest banner, on which long-limbed violet dragons cavorted across a sable field.

Leaning on the rail above, the bearded man smiled guardedly. ‘A good choice, lad. That’s Magus Byl’s pennant. You’ll find him a generous patron—if he deems you worthy to serve him, that is.’

‘I’m not interested in his generosity,’ said Altor, speaking quickly before he had time for second thoughts. ‘Not for gold, at any rate.’

I'll only ask him for one boon—'

The bearded man held up his hand. 'That's between you and him now. Go to meet him at the Blue Tower next to the Delicti Canal. Wait by the gargoyle trough.'

Carrying the pennant, Altor made his way off through the teeming streets. It was now getting dark and link-men scurried to and fro carrying flaring resin torches to light the way for shoppers and merry-makers.

A crier passed, extolling the virtues of his patron in a piercing nasal voice. Altor accosted him and got directions to the Delicti Canal. Turning off the main street, he left the noise and bustle behind and walked down a hushed alley. The sounds of festivity gradually faded into the distance. The canal was a ribbon of black ooze in the moonlight. Passing over a narrow bridge, Altor approached the darkened spire of a tower. A stone trough carved with gargoyle faces stood beside the door. Evidently this was where he was to wait.

A breeze blew along the canal and stirred a pungent odour up from the stone trough. It took Altor a couple of seconds to place the smell. He knew it from the funeral rites sometimes held at Osterlin Abbey. Charred bones.

Raking through the bed of damp ash filling the trough, he found a few hard fragments of bone. It was the remains of some kind of burnt offering. Then his fingers touched something else, and even as he brushed it clean for a closer look he began to feel a sense of mounting horror.

The object was a melted silver ring. This was the scene of a human sacrifice!

The moon glimmered behind dark clouds. The breeze stirred silver-sketched ripples on the black surface of the canal. Far off in the busy streets, the echoes of revelry sounded like the sighing of mournful ghosts. The tower seemed to radiant watchful silence.

Altor felt the hairs on his neck rise. Slowly he moved one hand to the hilt of his sword.

There was a rustling in the bushes behind the tower. Suddenly a

black shape came somersaulting noiselessly through the air. It moved so silently that it might almost have been a trick of the light, but Altor's instincts were not fooled. He lashed out with the banner in his left hand and the figure jackknifed, plunging into the canal with a single heavy plop like a large stone.

Two more black-clad figures came from the direction of the bridge. Digging his hand into the trough, Altor flung bone-dust in their faces. They paused spluttering. Altor's sword shot from its scabbard, sliced the air. One head bounced across the cobblestones. The other assassin gave a muffled snarl and fell back clutching a gaping wound in his chest.

Something hissed through the air behind him. Altor whirled, snatching the banner around to use as a shield. The wooden haft splintered under the impact of two sharp-pronged throwing stars. Altor locked eyes with the one who had thrown them—a fourth man dressed all in black. This one also wore an amulet at his neck: a black badge decorated with prancing violet dragons.

He was reaching to his belt for another throwing star. Altor vaulted the trough, ducked low as the star went singing overhead, and came upright with his sword against the assassin's chest.

'That's Magus Byl's badge you wear,' said Altor. 'Why would he send you to kill his own champion? Talk!'

The assassin's only answer was a soft chuckle as though at a private joke. Slowly he lifted his head until he was staring Altor straight in the eye. Suddenly he swayed back. Altor, thinking he was trying to escape, pressed the sword-tip forward. But instead of dodging to one side, the assassin only gave a resigned shrug and thrust his body onto the blade. Blood spurted darkly in the moonlight. Giving a single gasp, the assassin convulsed and died.

Altor lowered the body to the cobblestones and wiped his sword clean. He did not resheathe it. Common sense told him that it would be best to give up any hope of working for Magus Byl. But both curiosity and the warrior's spirit drew him to the tower. It rose like a black talon against the star-dusted sky. Beyond its lightless

windows, Altor was sure, lay the answer to the mystery. Why should the magus who sought to employ him have ordered his death? What had Magus Byl to gain?

He sighed and flung the door of the tower open. Enough moonlight spilled in to show a bare vestibule with a spiral stairway winding up towards the battlements. Ascending with sword in hand, Altor soon found himself in almost total darkness. Feeling his way a step at a time, he came to a doorway. He reached out to test it and it creaked open at his touch, admitting him to a moon-bathed sanctum.

The room seemed to be a shrine to one of the countless demon gods of Krarth. In the centre was a block of obsidian with a gore-soaked fur pelt draped across it—an obscene travesty of a holy altar. Pallid flames swam above iron basins on either side. A pall of grey vapour hung in the air at chest height. Beyond the altar, a wrought-iron gate led off into another chamber. Warily Altor crossed the room. Beyond the gate, the flickering flames barely illuminated a tall robed figure with skin like alabaster, stretched out across a black divan.

At the sound of Altor's approach, the figure stirred and looked up. At his mouth, sharp slivers of ivory caught the wan light. 'Well,' he said, his voice like the grating of a sarcophagus lid, 'I take it the mortal is dead.'

Altor ducked his head in a deep bow. 'Master, he is. Shall we... um..?'

'Drain off the blood, bring it to me. Burn the bones and meat as usual.'

Magus Byl scrutinized Altor for a moment in the gloom, then turned away and sank back on the divan. A jewelled cup rested on a table by his side, and from this he took a sip of something thick and dark.

Altor's heart was pounding. His instinct was simply to turn and flee, but he knew that he must do nothing to arouse the vampire's suspicions. 'And the pennant, master?' he said with a husky voice.

‘Shall I return it to the recruiting booth?’

Magus Byl looked up sharply. Instantly he had uncoiled, so that now he no longer reclined languorously on the divan but stood upright. His black and purple robes cascaded like streams of frozen liquid over tarnished silver chainmail.

He extended a pale long-taloned hand. ‘Come closer.’

Altor gritted his teeth. What had he said that had given him away? The assassins must have already had some arrangement for returning the banner and enticing more victims here. With his hands behind his back still holding the sword, he stepped closer.

A cruel sneer playing on his lips, Byl studied him through the iron gate. ‘Thou art not my creature...’

‘Nor shall I ever be!’ cried Altor. Lunging with all his strength, he drove the sword between the bars of the gate. There was the scrape of steel on ancient marble-hard bone, a puff of dry brown dust as it impaled the vampire’s heart, a deep grave groan from bloodless lips.

But, although crippled, Magus Byl did not fall. He raised his white hands to grip the gate. Altor, horror-struck, tugged at the sword but the hilt slipped out of his grasp. He backed away unarmed.

With the sword driven right through him, Byl resembled a giant insect impaled on a pin as he agonizingly inched the gate open. His voice escaped in gruesome gusts: ‘Come, whelp... take back thy sword... Draw it from the stone of my heart, the cage of my bones... Now it is I who shall impale thee and drink deep of thy vein-wine...’

Altor, retreating, stumbled against the altar. Reaching out to steady himself, his hand squelched against the blood-soaked altar cloth.

The shock was all he needed to break the vampire’s spell. Turning, he ran from the tower and did not stop until he stumbled back on the busy streets where merrymakers laughed and sang and the music banished thoughts of the stalking dead.

Three:

Caelestis

Altor returned to the main square, at this hour almost deserted except for a few beggars and stragglers on their way home. A torn scrap of paper fluttered past and he trod on it: a poster proclaiming the magi's contest.

The bearded steward was snoozing on a bench just inside his booth. Beside him, a brazier gleamed hot and red in the icy night air. As Altor approached he opened one eye and yawned, then blinked in puzzlement and sat forward to give the young warrior a closer look.

'Weren't you here earlier? You took Magus Byl's pennant.'

'Magus Byl apparently wasn't interested in the contest,' said Altor. He glanced at the rack, where one pennant still remained. 'Whose banner is that?'

'Magus Balhazar's.'

'And is he a vampire?'

The man chose to take this as a joke. 'I hardly think so!'

'Good.'

Altor reached for the banner, but just then there came a loud outcry from the far side of the square. He looked up to see the young dandy he had encountered earlier. His cloak swept out behind him like a bat's wings as he ran, and hot on his heels were several guardsmen of the night watch.

'Stop that thief!' bawled the irate sergeant of the guards as the young man came racing past the booth.

Altor stepped forward without thinking and put out one arm. The dandy skidded to a halt in front of him and glanced up in surprise.

For an instant their eyes locked, and Altor saw a look not of panic but of agile cunning. Then the young man ducked under his outstretched arm and reached for the last pennant. Altor lunged for it too. They both gripped the shaft at the same time.

The guardsmen pounded to a halt and began to fan out. 'So, villain,' gasped the sergeant, 'will you come quietly?'

The dandy looked at him in disdain. 'Villain, you say? I am Caelestis, the champion of Magus... of Magus...'

He turned to Altor who, although bewildered by the turn of events, found himself saying, 'Magus Balhazar.'

'Champion?' The sergeant tucked his thumbs in his belt and rocked with breathless laughter. 'You're no champion, lad. You're just a pickpocket and I'm taking you in.'

Caelestis stared back at him defiantly. The other guards hefted their cudgels and stood glowering. For a moment there was a tense silence, then the steward cleared his throat. 'The youngster's right,' he said. 'You can't arrest him now he's taken Magus Balhazar's banner.'

Altor suddenly realized what was happening. Tugging the banner away from Caelestis, he said, 'I was here first. Rightfully it is I who should be Magus Balhazar's champion.'

'Aha!' cried the sergeant in triumph. 'As I thought. Arrest this miscreant.'

Two of the guardsmen stepped closer. Caelestis wove away from them and snatched back the banner. 'Not so fast. The banner is mine. How can this oaf be the magus' champion? He doesn't even have a weapon.'

It was true. Altor had left his sword buried in Magus Byl's black heart. Rather than go into that now, he simply planted himself in a solid stance with his big arms folded across his chest. 'I need no weapons,' he protested. 'The monks of my order are trained to fight with empty hands if need be.'

'Indeed?' Caelestis cocked an eyebrow. 'I doubt whether Magus Balhazar would be impressed, however.'

Altor snorted in derision. ‘Do you think he’ll be impressed by having a pickpocket as his champion?’

The sergeant flung up his arms in exasperation. ‘Enough!’ He turned to the steward. ‘What is the law? Are both these youths now employed by Magus Balhazar? Frankly I’d be happy to arrest the pair of them.’

‘I have committed no crime!’ pointed out Altor.

‘And I myself am merely a suspect,’ said Caelestis, ‘until my case comes to trial.’

The steward leaned on the rail in front of his booth and stroked his beard thoughtfully. ‘Both took the banner at the same time,’ he announced at last, ‘so both are eligible to serve the magus. Consequently they are immune from prosecution.’

At this the guards gave sighs of disappointment and started to wander off. The sergeant spat on the ground to show his opinion of the steward’s judgement. Fixing Caelestis with a beady stare, he said, ‘Just you wait, lad. I’ll be waiting outside the Battlepits for you, and if you fail then you won’t be able to count on the magus’ protection.’

‘If he fails,’ said the steward laconically, ‘then he’ll be past caring about the laws of mortal men.’

Altor and Caelestis arrived at Magus Balhazar’s mansion just as the gongs of the citadel were sounding the hour of midnight. A long avenue flanked by trees strung with paper lanterns ran from the gate to the white marble portico of the main entrance. The two youths stood outside in the street and watched a stream of elegantly costumed guests arriving in carriages. From inside the house wafted the strains of pipe music.

‘It seems the magus is having a party,’ remarked Caelestis. ‘One of us is dressed for the occasion, at least.’

Altor had been struggling to keep his temper in check ever since the incident in front of the recruiting booth. Now he rounded on Caelestis and, grabbing him by the brocaded lapels of his jerkin, lifted him up onto his toes. ‘Let’s get something straight,’ he growled.

‘I’ve got no intention of teaming up with you for this contest. I need to win because I need a magical favour, and my best chance of winning will be on my own. When we meet Balhazar, I’m going to tell him that you only took the banner in order to avoid arrest for petty crime—’

Caelestis extricated himself from Altor’s grip and smoothed down his lapels like a cat grooming itself after a scuffle. ‘Surely I am innocent until proven guilty?’ he objected. ‘Unfortunately that sergeant was the sort of man to jump to conclusions, so if I’m to avoid jail it looks as if I must serve as Balhazar’s champion. Believe me, if there was any alternative I’d take it. Unlike you, I’m hardly eager to risk life and limb in the Battlepits.’

‘Fine,’ said Altor. ‘So leave now.’

‘I’d be under arrest before dawn. No, my friend, I’m afraid we’re in this together.’

Altor scowled. ‘Come on, then. Just don’t call me your friend.’

Sentries with drawn swords patrolled the avenue, icy-eyed men with grim faces of granite. They took no notice of the other party guests, but stared long and hard at Altor and Caelestis. As the two youths stepped through the gate, four of the sentries raised their swords and approached with a determined stride.

‘Here’s trouble,’ Caelestis remarked out of the corner of his mouth.

But just as the sentries were about to challenge them, Altor raised the magus’ banner. Its pattern of gold-&-scarlet eyes flared like fire in the light of the lanterns. The sentries saw it, and although their expressions remained as unchanging as if hewn from rock, the eager bellicosity in their eyes dulled to a look of disappointment. Grudgingly they waved Altor and Caelestis by.

At the door they were met by Balhazar’s usher, a thin man with a bald pate and ginger sideburns that sprung in alarming tufts from the side of his face. ‘Greetings!’ he cried. ‘Your names are not on the guest list, but the banner you bear is as good as any invitation.’

Caelestis looked past the usher into a spacious domed hall where the party was in full swing. All the revellers wore masks to conceal

their identities. Pipers on a minstrel gallery overlooking the room played tunes to set the feet tapping, while on a dais behind the tables which almost overflowed with food and wine a group of lithe acrobats were performing a complex and spectacular dance.

A fetching girl in a costume of gauze and blue feathers caught Caelestis's eye. 'I think I'll mingle,' he said.

Altor planted the banner in front of him. 'We're not here for merriment,' he said to the usher. 'Will you take us to Magus Balhazar, please.'

Instead of answering at once, the usher summoned a footman with a brisk snap of his fingers. Pointing to the drinks and sweetmeats on the footman's tray, he said, 'My master will perhaps speak to you presently. In the meantime: eat and drink, enjoy yourselves.'

'I would enjoy myself more if I could see the magus right away,' insisted Altor. 'Since we are supposed to enter the Battlepits on his behalf tomorrow, partying is the last thing on my mind at the moment.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Caelestis, tasting a jellied fruit from the tray. 'All work and no play, as they say...'

'There is nothing to prevent you from speaking to Magus Balhazar,' said the usher, 'if only you can identify him.'

Altor and Caelestis looked at him, but their puzzlement only provoked a broad grin which caused the ginger sideburns to rise like porcupine quills. With a theatrical flourish, the usher gestured behind him at the dozens of masked revellers.

'What do you mean?' asked Altor.

But Caelestis understood. 'It's a test. If we want to be Balhazar's champions we have to prove our worthiness.'

Altor stared around at the sea of masked faces. 'What sort of test is this?' he demanded. 'The Battlepits contest is a life-or death struggle, not a footling parlour game. Let me fight one of the magus's sentries if he wants proof of my skill.'

The usher only shook his head. 'My master wants a champion who is capable of more than just brute force. This test will show whether

you have your wits about you.'

Altor and Caelestis exchanged a look, then slowly surveyed the room. It was a daunting prospect. How to identify the magus among all these revellers?

On the basis of costume, perhaps? There was a man in a sequined mask and jester's motley capering for the amusement of his friends... Too undignified. On a chaise-longue sat a well groomed gentleman in a domino cape romancing a girl in black velvet. But surely such familiarity would be unbecoming in a magus. Perhaps the man in the bear costume who stood at the back of the room swinging a bell without a clapper? No, too obscure—frivolous, even.

Caelestis glanced out into the garden. There two men stood beside a fountain, deep in conversation. One was dressed like a torturer, the other like a perfumed dandy.

Caelestis signalled to Altor. 'Possibly one of those is our magus,' he said, pointing the men out.

Altor grunted sceptically. 'Why not the fellow there in the green wig?'

Caelestis glanced across the room. 'He is talking to a servant. A magus would never do that.'

'How about the gaunt individual standing by the table? The one with the grey robe and blue face-paint.'

'Magus Uru's colours!' scoffed Caelestis. 'It's well known that Balhazar detests him.'

'That one there, then,' said Altor less certainly.

'I overheard him speak as we passed. He told a indelicate joke to two ladies, which is not the sort of conduct I'd expect of Magus Balhazar.'

'How would you know? Are you in the habit of attending his parties?'

'Well...' Caelestis appraised the man in question more carefully. 'Ah, see—he drinks pink claret from a long-stemmed glass! Do you suppose Magus Balhazar was raised in a pig sty, that he would behave with so little etiquette?'

Altor shook his head. 'Absurd. I think you're making all this up.'

What possible reason do you have for thinking that Balhazar is one of those two by the fountain rather than any one of fifty others?’

Caelestis held up a finger. ‘Well, let us see...’ Cupping his hand to his mouth, he leaned over the balustrade of the patio.

‘Balhazar!’ came a plaintive voice from the fountain. ‘Balhazar, hear me. I am a water sprite and I hereby serve notice that I have taken residence in your fountain. Please be so good as to have these fishes removed, as I find their company offensive.’

The man in the torturer’s costume rounded on the fountain. ‘What?’ he cried, incensed. ‘I will not be spoken to with such audacity! Get you gone at once from my fountain, sprite, or I’ll shrivel you with spells of drought, desiccation and pollution!’

Caelestis vaulted over the balustrade, landed lightly on the grass beside the man, and bowed with a flourish of his feathered hat. ‘My lord Balhazar, I presume.’

Balhazar stared at him, cheeks puffed with outrage. ‘Who are you? How did you get in here? Is this your water sprite?’

‘There is no water sprite,’ said Caelestis with a wink. Cupping his hand, he threw his voice again, so that now it seemed as if Balhazar’s wine-cup emitted a mirthful chuckle.

Altor, seeing that Balhazar was not finding these tricks as amusing as Caelestis did, quickly stepped in. ‘Lord Balhazar, we’ve come to champion you in the Battlepits,’ he announced, holding out the banner.

Balhazar glared from one to the other, eyes wide and white in a face purple with indignation. His mouth twisted to and fro. He seemed on the point of unleashing a curse that would fry them in their boots, then suddenly he threw back his head and gave a bellow of delighted laughter. ‘Ah, what a jape! I thought my little test would root out a resourceful wizard to serve me. Instead, it seems, I’ve got myself a cunning knave and a crop headed monk!’

He waved his hand and instantly the party fell silent. Turning to face him, the hundreds of revellers bowed like marionettes and then dissolved into empty air.

‘Illusions...’ gasped Altor.

Without deigning to answer, Balhazar led the way in from the garden. They stood in an empty ballroom. The guests, the food the sentries and the dancing maidens—all were gone. Only the usher with the ginger sideburns remained.

‘These are my champions,’ announced Balhazar simply.

He had not paused to speak, but walked on past the usher and swept from the room. The usher turned to Altor and Caelestis with a smirk. ‘Come, I’ll show you to your rooms. Make yourselves comfortable by all means. The odds are that this is the last night of your lives.’

Four:

The Underworld

The usher came to fetch them when it was still an hour before dawn. ‘The magus wishes to make an early start to avoid the crowds,’ he said.

Altor had already been up for over an hour. The discipline of the monastery was in his bones, and after morning prayers and meditation had come the exercises that honed his battle skills and kept his body strong and supple.

Caelestis adhered to a very different regimen. Clutching the bedsheets, he snarled in protest as the usher tipped him out onto the floor.

‘Getting cold feet?’ said Altor. ‘There’s still a jail cell with your name on it.’

Caelestis grumbled and rubbed sleep out of his eyes. ‘Cold feet, pah! We’re only Balhazar’s champions because I had the wit to pass his test. Where would you be if not for me? Still wandering around Magus Balhazar’s ballroom gawping at illusory guests, that’s where!’

The usher returned a few minutes later to escort them downstairs.

‘For breakfast,’ said Caelestis as they descended the stairs, ‘I shall have three boiled plover’s eggs, devilled kidneys, fried wild mushrooms, spiced sausage and some of those herb and turnip rissoles for which Krarthian cuisine is so justly renowned. No, on second thoughts make that two eggs—I don’t want to be running around the Battlepits on an overfull stomach.’

A servant came over and held out a couple of pieces of toast on a plate. Altor grabbed his and gnawed on it while he went to look out

of the door. Caelestis scowled and was about to wave the man away when hunger got the better of pride. He took the toast with a sigh.

Balhazar waited outside in the frosty courtyard with a retinue of foppish courtiers and rouged madams. Without a word to his champions, he climbed into a sedan chair and was borne aloft by four footmen in long blue leather coats. The retinue slowly filed out of the courtyard, following Balhazar's sedan chair along the grey pre-dawn streets.

'Quite a crowd,' remarked Altor, nodding to the townsfolk standing in sullen silence at the roadside.

Soldiers in the livery of the city militia came marching with raised pikes from a side street. The townsfolk made a show of cheering Balhazar's procession, only to lapse back into silence when the soldiers had gone.

'Apparently they're not enthusiastic about the magi's rule,' said Caelestis to one of the courtiers walking beside him.

The courtier shrugged. 'A ruler can either be loved or feared, never both.'

As they approached the city gate the crowds grew thicker. The retinues of other magi were also here. Altor saw a curtained carriage. The crest on its side, depicting a group of sinuous violet dragons on a black field, was familiar—as were the sable uniforms of the three champions walking beside it.

Caelestis noticed the look Altor gave the carriage as it went by. 'Who's that?' he asked.

'Magus Byl,' said Altor. 'I sought employment with him last night, but he already had his champions and was only interested in my blood. I thought I had killed him, but apparently I lost my old sword for nothing.'

'He wanted your blood? You mean he's a vampire?'

'I shouldn't speak ill of the dead. Let's just say he's not the type to go sunbathing.'

Caelestis whistled between his teeth. 'And let's hope he's not the type to bear a grudge, otherwise we can expect his three champions

to come looking for us.'

'What difference does it make?' said Altor, shrugging. 'In this contest we're up against everyone else anyway.'

The procession left the city and headed out across the cold tundra. Groups of peasants already at work in the frost-hardened fields looked up glumly as the procession went past.

Along the horizon stretched a line of stone mounds, each an entrance to the underground catacombs where the contest would take place. The retinues of each of the magi made their way to one of the mounds. Not far off were three bronze-armoured barbarians, brothers from the Gnawing Wastes, who were championing Magus Tor. Altor watched them limbering up. They swung their huge battleaxes lustily and bellowed out huge gusts of steam into the chill air. Altor soon had their measure—they relied on energy rather than skill. An opponent who remained unintimidated by their shouts could soon beat them.

Satisfied, he turned his attention to the other champions he could see. Magus Kalugen, overlord of the city, had chosen an albino swordsman who had apparently won the contest for him last year, but had squandered his reward in a matter of months and now was forced to stake his life a second time. Altor saw the telltale signs of a year wasted on merrymaking: bleary eyes, swollen red nose, a slight paunch. The former champion already looked a beaten man.

Altor felt cold eyes on him. At one of the further mounds stood a solitary warlock whose name had been mentioned by one of the sentries: Icon the Ungodly, from Yamato in the distant east. He bore the pennant of Magus Uru. His twin swords were unscabbarded, the naked steel stamped with subtle runes.

Altor and Caelestis followed the carriage of Magus Balhazar to a heap of ancient stones where the magus' glyph was just visible on the heavy lintel, worn smooth by wind and snow and stained with brown lichen. Beneath it yawned an open pit that seemed to descend into the cold heart of the world.

The magi waited until all their champions were ready. There was

silence apart from the wind howling across the plain. Each man looked around. For many it would be the last time they tasted fresh air or saw the daylight.

Altor stared down the dark tunnel. ‘Curious to think that Death waits below for most of these men,’ he muttered.

‘Oh, very cheerful,’ said Caelestis. ‘That’s the sort of pep talk your abbot would give you, eh? How about concentrating instead on the fabulous wealth that could be ours?’

Magus Kalugen raised his arms. All eyes turned to him. A portly man in white robes decorated with cursive slashes of black, he was transformed by the grandeur of the moment into an awesome figure. His voice, magnified by magic, boomed across the plain.

‘Loyal and brave champions,’ he said, ‘you stand on the brink of the greatest adventure of your lives. Somewhere in the catacombs below our feet lies the Emblem of Victory. If you can find it and return it to the magus who has employed you, your reward will exceed the bounds of avarice. Other than this, the contest has no rules. Alliances and betrayals, stratagems and lies, duels and ambushes—all are fair game. Whether you live or die is written in the stars. So go down now and face your destiny.’

Kalugen lowered his arms. The wind returned, keening across the barren landscape, flattening the dry grass and whipping at cloaks and hair.

Altor and Caelestis looked at Magus Balhazar where he sat in his carriage. In a gesture of urbane disinterest, he extended his hand towards the entrance to the underworld. Then he turned away and signalled to his coachman to take him back to the city.

‘I don’t think he rates our chances,’ said Caelestis.

Altor spat. ‘Who cares? I’m not doing this for him. Are you ready?’

Other champions were already descending into their respective mounds. Altor led the way under the lichen-stained lintel and down stone steps into the darkness of the underworld.



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