



Vrenna and the Little King

by Michael E. Shea

"The agent of the Eye has arrived."

The courtier opened the large oak doors and the cloaked man entered the hall. His cloak billowed out behind him as he walked down the hall and saluted, left arm across his chest. Only his nose and mouth could be seen but Pavo knew who he was. They all did.

Light shined through tall stained windows high on the walls sending beams across old maps and unrolled scrolls on the table. Duke Gevold Abondel sat at the end of the table, Pavo sat on his right while Weleand sat on his left. Both Pavo and Weleand watched the cloaked man as he sat down but the duke continued writing on a scroll with a gold-tipped quill. Whether he was too stupid to pay the man any care or had some other reason to ignore him and his obvious threat, Pavo did not know. Few ever ignored an Agent of the Eye.

"You called for us," said the cloaked man. His use of the plural word "us" was an obvious reminder of his station and power. Was he reading their thoughts right now?

"I did," said Duke Gevold, finally looking up and addressing the cloaked man. "We have need of your aid."

The cloaked man did not move. Gevold continued.

"Whispers travel north of a royal struggle in the desert city states. While city lords battle for slaves and trinkets with their neighbors, a new king has surfaced with a lineage going back to the old empire. They say, under the right circumstances, he could unite the southern cities into a single kingdom with a single ruler.

"We just finished displacing the Voth king only ten years ago. The emperor has no wish for another war. We will stop this new king from taking power before he is ever crowned. While the slave lords of the south send their own murderers, I have little faith in their abilities.

"Find someone who we can trust to find this king and prevent his rise to power. We must end his legacy before it begins."

The cloaked man continued his still silence, pondering the orders before him. A thin smile cracked across his face. Pavo's skin grew cold.

"I know just who to send."

#

Tal'Varen watched the woman as she walked towards him and his two men on the southern path leading into to the mountain pass. She looked up as she approached, revealing a face of ivory skin, black hair, and eyes as endless as the blue sky. Her unblinking gaze made Tal'Varen nervous.

He would not show it, though. His two men, trained slaves of Dan Trex's army, stood next to him wearing the standard bronze and hard-leather armor of a Trexian soldier. Tal'Varen wore the same armor with the cloak of an officer slung over his left shoulder but he did not wear the bronze helmet or mask worn by the other two soldiers.

Tal'Varen's head filled with questions. What was this woman doing here? What business would a lone woman have this far south of the major city-states of the desert? How did she arrive to Tal'Varen's post unmolested and unharmed? How did she arrive here at all?

Tal'Varen didn't suppose it mattered. She would make fine entertainment for he and the two slaves. She was the first woman they had seen in nearly three weeks.

Tal'Varin and his men had seen nothing but slave caravans since arriving at the post a month past. They waited for any sign of the wandering king; a lost noble and his displaced escort. A messenger had arrived two weeks earlier saying they had wounded the king and routed his men in the sand hills to the north. Except for another slave caravan a week later, Tal'Varen had seen nothing until this woman walked into their camp.

Tal'Varen learned one valuable lesson in his five years as a commander in the largest army since the days of the Old Empire. Show your force early and show it strong. An enemy with a broken spirit was no enemy at all. Tal'Varen did not wait for the woman to approach any further. He did not give an order of command. He stepped forward and shoved the woman hard.

She did not fall as he expected. She slid back on the heels of soft leather boots drawing Tal'Varen's own short blade from his belt as she backed off. Tal'Varen was not a slow swordsman. When he felt the tug at his belt he had reached down to stop the hand that drew his own sword. As fast as he was, however, the woman was faster. He gripped only the razor-sharp blade as it slid out of his oiled leather sheath, cutting his fingers to the bone. Blood gushed from his ruined hand and splattered to the ground at his feet. Karda and Jakios, the slave warriors at his side, cried out and drew their own swords as Tal'Varen stumbled back.

Tal'Varen watched Karda swing a high cut at the woman. She lunged forward, cutting over her own shoulder with Tal'Varen's blade as she slid under the attack. The man screamed and fell, his arm locked out in a clawing grip to the sky.

Jakios too burst into motion, turning and running down the path. Vrenna chased the man down and cut deep

across the back of his neck. The blade cut through the leather coif of Jakios's helmet. Tal'Varin saw the white bone of the man's spine in the shining red sun as Jakios fell dead.

Tal'Varen picked up Karda's fallen blade in his right hand, clenching his left into a fist dripping streams of blood. The woman approached slowly, tossing aside Tal'Varen's sword and drawing a black-hilted saber from her own belt. She stepped within five steps of Tal'Varen and turned to the side, holding her sword in a reverse grip behind her. Tal'Varen raised his own sword high over his head.

Morning sunlight shone past the two figures poised for battle on the open road. It shined off of the steel of the blade in Tal'Varen's hand and from the black metal of the woman's saber. They both breathed deep, their eyes locked on one another. A drop of sweat rolled down Tal'Varen's cheek. Blood dripped from his ruined hand. He did not move.

Tal'Varen and the woman flashed in motion. In a single cut the battle was over. Tal'Varen stood behind the woman, his blade pointed low. She stood past him, her own blade held high in the air. Tal'Varen exhaled his last breath as his lifeblood ran down the inside of his armor to pool at his feet. The world went dark as he the ground raised to meet him.

#

Oben Tvees stepped out of Fena Kreen's alehouse and into the cool air of the early evening. He breathed deep, letting the cool air wash out the smoke of the strange plant the desert riders insisted on smoking throughout the night. Behind him, Oben heard the roar of a man who drank too much. Only one of the desert riders would dare to drink that much these days. The villagers knew better.

Once the small mountain village of Fena Kreen had been safe and prosperous, growing wealthy on the ore of the mountain tunnels, but twenty years ago the bandit lords learned of this wealth and took matters into their own hands. The hard workers of the village were replaced with slaves working all through the night. Those who made their living on the ore of the mountain either left, starved, or were cut down by the new rulers of Fena Kreen. Only those who supported the desert bandits and their slave workers continued to live free in the village. Oben wondered how long that would last before they too were replaced. Oben turned west and watched the dust clouds rise above the northern peaks. Hundreds of slaves dug day and night in the hundreds of tunnels woven into the mountains. Caravans of armed mercenaries protected carts of ore-laden rock traveling down the single narrow mountain pass. They returned with chains of replacement slaves; men, women, and children; bought fresh from the cities of the slave lords.

Oben had heard that one in five died within a week and three of five within the month upon arriving. The slaves filled their lungs with dust and bent their backs like twisted tree limbs in the mines. They dug deeper than the village miners ever had. One morning before the red sun shone over the eastern peaks, Oben awoke to the deep rumble of the ground. He learned that one of the tunnels had collapsed with over thirty miners trapped inside. No rescue was sent and the remaining slaves of the desert riders dug in new tunnels hearing the screams of their suffocating companions on the other side of the rock.

Oben hated what his town had become.

The echo of boots on rock turned Oben's attention to the east. A figure walked out of the gloom of the approaching night. The figure wore a dark hood pulled low and tall leather boots. As the figure approached, Oben saw glimpses of light skin and the curved figure of a woman. Oben saw her blue eyes blaze in the setting sun. She wore a belt around her hips hung low on the left side. A black hilted sword hung from the belt, its hilt shaped like the body of a scorpion. She wore high-cut leather breeches, a small leather chestguard, and little else.

Oben's mood fell further at the site of another desert mercenary, coming to take her cut of the town's lifeblood. Something had the desert bandits flocking to the city recently. Elik'Don, the town's ruling desert rider, had hired a hunter of the western mountains to track someone in the mountains. His bandits searched every cart of travelers or supplies that passed through the village or across the mountain's only pass to the desert below.

Oben's anger turned to fear when the woman's eyes met his. For a moment, he thought she would open up his belly with her black hilted sword. He saw the cold look in her eyes and the gliding dancer's steps she took. He saw how her relaxed hand brushed the hilt of her sword. Three black diamonds stood out on the left side of her pale neck. This triggered some old memory for Oben, a story told by his father before he had died of the vulture's cough one winter, but he could not remember what it was. The woman walked past and entered the alehouse behind him without a word. Oben had no doubt about her. She was no simple bandit or ruffian; She was a murderer.

#

Gavik knew the smell of danger. He had survived his whole life by knowing how to smell danger. There were few left in the desert that had not acquired this skill. Elik'Don, the leader of the Riders of the Blue Rose, could smell it. Gavik saw his employer's eyes narrow in his sharp tanned face. He saw Elik'Don's body tense. Cend, Elik'Don's second rider, smelled it too.

Danger had entered the alehouse of Fena Kreen.

Gavik turned slowly to the door, his hand slipping to the familiar smooth bone hilt of his long dagger. He knew Elik'Don's hand had fallen to the leather wrapped hilt of his short sword and Cend's hand had fallen to the curved jeweled hilt of his scimitar, an expensive blade taken from the hand of a dead merchant.

It wasn't the smoothness of her step as she walked past the three men that scented her as dangerous. It was not the sword on her hip or the steel glint in her eyes. It was not the line of blood on her chest, still fresh from the look of it. It was that undefinable quality that only hunters and killers could see. She was beautiful, with a lean lithe body. No doubt other less experienced men in the alehouse lusted after her, but no one at Elik'Don's table did.

"Who is that?" Elik'Don asked Cend. The mercenary leader's right hand man seemed to know every bandit, ruffian, or sellsword in the south desert.

"I never saw her before," said the smaller man scratching his thick beard. "But I think I recognize her."

"Remember hearing how the slave lords of Tog Aru killed each other in the streets? Only two combatants survived the fight. I think she is one of them. She has the same look I had heard about. I heard of those three marks on her neck as well.

Some of the men also talked about a woman like that in the pit fights of Tog Veel." Cend breathed deep, lost in his own stories. Elik'Don wiggled his hands and glared at the man, beckoning him to continue. "Oh. She, uh, did rather well, I hear."

The three men watched the woman sit down and order an iron mug of water before they turned back to their business.

"So what is the situation, Cend? What news of the roads?" asked Elik'Don.

"Dan Trex's soldiers infest the desert like shit beetles. Every crossroads is blocked. Every trade route is patrolled by at least two dozen men. Every city, town, or well has at least six of his men waiting for the

wandering king to come by and have a drink."

As Cend spoke, Gavik saw the alehouse keeper enter the doorway. He was a stout man of perhaps fifty summers with wisps of hair floating above his balding head. The man watched the woman drinking her water with hateful eyes then his eyes fell to Elik'Don's table. When he saw Gavik looking at him, the alekeeper looked away and went back to the kitchen.

Gavik could hardly blame the man for his feelings. His own town had been razed by bandits over the price of goats. His father had been killed, his mother and sister sold to slavemasters. Gavik had been sold into a slave army as a scout, using the mountain hunting skills his father had taught him as a boy. Elik'Don purchased him for three times his price two years past. He was not a bad master, treating Gavik as he treated his other sellswords, but the memories of his slaughtered village ran deep.

"What do you think, Cend?" Elik'Don's voice brought Gavik back to the present. Cend scratched his beard again before answering.

"I think you are right. I think if the wandering king still wandered, Dan Trex's men would have found him. I think he slipped past the eastern blockade and came up here. All the signs point this way. Trex's men haven't bothered to come here because they assume he cannot get past them. Slaves come up and down these passes every week, it would take little to slip past. If you want to hide a man, you hide him among men. He probably came here two weeks ago with the last slave caravan from Gazu Kadem and hides in the abandoned tunnels in the mountains. That's where I would go."

"That is what I am betting on. That is why I thought our friend here might be useful." Elik'Don slapped a hand on Gavik's bare shoulder. "If we move fast enough, we can find him and hand him to Trex or the king of Gazu Kadem before anyone else suspects he was ever here. Well." Elik'Don's eyes moved to the woman sitting and drinking her water. "Almost anyone."

#

Oben awoke with his bladder aching as he had nearly every night for three seasons. He looked at the full moon as urine burned through his penis. He whispered a prayer to a dead god, knowing relief would not follow. A gleam of moonlight on metal caught his attention. Something dark moved on the rocks behind the alehouse. Oben did not move. He watched, seeing nothing until another slight shift caught his eye. It was the woman from the alehouse. She moved without disturbing a single rock. Her hood covered her head but her long legs and slim figure was unique in this place. Oben watched her disappear behind a boulder as the woman headed up and west towards the abandoned tunnels.

Oben waited a few breaths and then tied his trousers. Had the woman already found this wandering king? Did she know where he was when even Elik'Don's fearsome mountain hunter, Gavik, did not? Would she kill the king this very night or take him down to Trex's men? How would she get the king down the only road leading to this city without confronting Elik'Don's men? Curiosity's grip tightened further and Oben found himself tying his boots and following the woman up the mountain.

Oben could barely make her out among the shadows of the rock. She traveled along a goat path leading to the abandoned mines of twenty some years past. For nearly an hour Oben followed the woman and never once did he hear a rock fall. She walked with ease along a narrow path with a sheer drop on one side. As she disappeared around the bend, Oben hugged the opposite cliff wall and shuffled along the narrow ledge. When he rounded the same bend he saw the woman disappear behind two large fallen rocks along the base of another peak. A tunnel entrance dug into the mountain wall between the two boulders. A red glow brightened between the two rocks but Oben would never have seen it if he hadn't seen the woman step into it.

Oben waited a moment and then stepped into the cave himself.

Oben saw an older woman clothed in rough burlap kneeling over a pot of bubbling stew. A boy sat on a large bag of rice and wheat dressed in similar garb. However his posture was sharp and his skin was smooth. The boy looked up at Oben with deep brown eyes.

Oben opened his mouth to speak but the sharp edge of a blade against his throat stopped him.

Before dawn, Oben returned to Fen Kreen, his life forever changed. The woman in the shadows, Vrenna the boy had called her, did not kill him. Alvia, the older woman recognized him and spared his life with a single word in a language Oben did not recognize.

The woman, Alvia, served Oben a bowl of stew. They ate late in the night, she explained, to avoid the watchful eyes of the hunters. She told Oben their tale.

The boy's father, the wandering king and rightful heir to the old empire, died from the rot of a spear wound. The boy was now the last heir. The woman, Alvia, fled with the boy as the last remains of those swordsman loyal to the king, died on the spears of Dan Trex's murderous slave warriors.

The woman, Vrenna, had traveled half the desert to reach them here. Her role was still a mystery to Oben but the boy king and his loyal servant trusted her. She had cut through the lines of Trex to reach them and soon, the older woman explained, she would lead them out. The caves were not safe. Elik'Don and his hunter were just the first to narrow down their escape to the mountains. Others would soon arrive as well.

The boy spoke too. He spoke of a land divided by war, famine, poverty, and slavery. He spoke of the legends of the old empire. He didn't speak like a little boy, he spoke like a king. Hours later, as Oben walked across the narrow ledge above the drop, Oben realized he would be willing to die for this king. He had no idea if the boy stood any chance against those who sought his death, but he would keep the secret. Oben remembered what his town had been like before the desert riders had found it. What they had done to his town was motivation enough to see what this king could do. This boy had given Oben something he never had.

Hope.

He would help the boy king escape from the mountain tunnels. He hoped he would do so before others came looking for him. Oben did not realize how soon they would arrive or how horrible it would be when they did.

#

Gavik sipped at his warm ale when the smell of danger once again flowed into the alehouse. He turned slowly and looked to the door as Elik'Don, Cend, and the rest of the patrons of the alehouse did the same.

Two men stood at the alehouse's door. They were small and dressed in the strange clothing of the north. Each wore a leather three-cornered hat, a dark cloak, and tall soft leather boots folded down at the knee. Each wore a boiled leather chestguard fitted with a thick leather collar. Old scars marked the collars and chestguards of both men. Three belts criss crossed their waists and hung down low on both hips. Ornate rapiers, left-hand daggers, and two pistols hung from the belts of each man. Gavik had seen such weapons before but they were both rare and expensive.

The older of the two stood in front scanning the room with a hawk's eyes. The nostrils of his pronounced nose flared and deep lines ran from the side of his nose to the outsides of his mouth in a permanent scowl. The man took off his hat and ran a hand over his bald head. He tucked the hat under his arm and his eyes fell to Elik'Don's table.

The other man, younger than the first by perhaps twenty seasons, had dark hair and dark eyes. He was taller but lean like the older man. The younger man walked to the corner of the alehouse and sat at an empty table. His hand rested on the butt of his right pistol while he waved the alehouse servant girl, Hena, away.

The older man walked across the silent alehouse, his hard bootheels knocking on the wooden floor. He sat down at Elik'Don's table and dropped his hat on the table. Gavik had little doubt that those eyes had seen the deaths of many people. He could feel the aura of murder all around this man. He was saturated with it.

"You lead the Blue Rose sword riders, yes?" The man's words were sharp and distinct. He spoke each word with strength and authority.

"I do." Elik'Don swallowed. It was clear to Gavik who led this conversation. Gavik could hardly blame Elik'Don for handing it to this stranger.

"You and I are here for a similar purpose. We both seek the wandering king. However you wish to bring him to the boy king of Gazu Kadem and this I cannot allow. If we join our forces, I will pay you one third more than he will and I will pay you half of that up front." The man placed a leather purse on the table next to his hat. "Do you agree?"

Gavik gave Elik'Don and Cend credit for not even considering stealing from this man. The desert was full of the bones of brave men.

"We agree."

The older man kept his sharp eyes on Elik'Don and then a smile broke across his face.

"Good." The man sat back in his chair. "My name is Barton. My companion is Kes." Gavik looked to the younger man but the man had not moved. "Let us begin tonight. What do the villagers know of the wandering king?"

"I don't know," Elik'Don said. "They're just villagers."

"Ah, but perhaps among these villagers there is a hero. Extraordinary circumstances can turn any villager or slave into a hero." The older man, Barton, drew one of the pistols from his belt and everyone at the table sat back in their chairs. "Do you know what this is?"

"This small thing let Faigon's emperor win the Voth war. The Tower of the Eye will tell you their mindbenders changed the tides, but these weapons let ten thousand solders defeat one hundred thousand Voth barbarians. This weapon turned villagers into heroes."

Silence fell over the bar. Barton smiled at Elik'Don. In a flash of motion, Barton turned and fired. The gun's roar made Gavik's ears scream. Smoke filled the bar. Someone cried out but few heard it through their ringing ears. When the smoke cleared, Gavik saw a young man, a herder of goats to the east, sitting back in his chair with half of his head missing. Blood rushed from his shattered skull to the floor behind him.

Barton turned back to Elik'Don. Gavik's hand slowly moved to his bone-hilted dagger but a metal click stopped him. He turned and saw Kes sitting with his own pistol across his lap, the boar's head hammer drawn back. Gavik moved his hand away from his dagger.

"Let us find out what they know." Barton stood and holstered his smoking gun as he walked to another table. He sat down next to a single middle-aged man, a tinsmith named Fak. Fek looked at Barton with wide frightened eyes.

"Kes, bring the girl."

Kes stood, his hand still on his pistol, and walked to Hena, the bar's serving girl. She was young, perhaps fifteen seasons, and homely. Kes tilted his head towards Barton, his dark eyes not leaving the girl's own. When she did not move, he put a firm hand on her shoulder and guided her into the seat across from Fek. Fek and Hena looked to each other and then to Barton. Kes stood behind Fek.

"My dear. Do you know where the wandering king is?"

The girl said nothing. Barton looked at her for a long time and then turned to Fek. Barton drew his second pistol and placed it on front of Fek, the deer-headed hammer cocked back.

"Pick up the pistol." Barton's voice was the only sound in the alehouse. "Pick it up. I will not ask again."

Fek picked up the pistol with shaking hands.

"Point it at her." The girl began to cry. Fek looked at her and then back to Barton. Barton spoke again, speaking each word as though he were sounding them out. "Point it at her."

Fek pointed the gun at Hena. Tears rolled down her face and she closed her eyes.

"Do not worry, my child. We will not hurt you. Where is the wandering king?"

"I don't know!" she wailed. Barton watched the girl weep and then turned back to Fek.

"Shoot her in the face." Fek's own eyes broke out, sending streams of tears down his face. His hand shook as he looked at the girl. Barton's eyes narrowed. "Shoot her or we will find your family and kill them in the street."

Fek looked at the girl and back to Barton. Fek gritted his teeth and his eyes went wide. He began to turn the gun towards Barton but he never finished the movement. His body went rigid. His eyes bulged. His mouth opened wide and Gavik heard a grunt from deep in his chest.

Kes drew the thin blade of his left-hand dagger out of the back of Fek's head. He wiped the blade on Fek's shoulders as Barton took the pistol from his hand.

"You see, lord Elik'Don? Take a commoner. Put him in an impossible situation and he becomes a hero. He would have shot me rather than kill this beautiful girl. Kes?"

Kes drew his rapier in a blur of steel and pierced Hena through the chest and into the back of the chair. He drew the rapier out and wiped it on Fek's other shoulder as a blood sprayed from Hena's chest. Gavik heard air hissing out of the wound in the girl's chest as her lungs filled with blood.

"I expect it will be some time before the villagers patron this alehouse. Tomorrow we will start going door to door. The night of heroes has ended."

Gavik watched the girl's last breath as the two men left the alehouse. Sobs erupted from the alehouse's other patrons. Gavik felt nauseous. It was one thing to kill a man in battle, Gavik had killed many, but to kill a young girl who knew nothing at all. That was more than Gavik could stomach.

Gavik turned and saw the alehouse's owner, Oben Tvees. The man's face likewise revealed the panic and shock of the rest, but Gavik saw something else. The man was conflicted. He fought to keep a great secret he

wished to reveal. Oben Tvees knew something.

Gavik watched Oben leave through the back door of the alehouse and after a few moments, he followed.

#

Oben stepped into the night and vomited on the rock path. Tears flowed down his cheeks as the image of young Hena filled his mind. Oben had known the girl since she ran around her father's legs. Her father had been one of the first miners killed by the desert riders and replaced with slave workers. She worked at the alehouse through pinches and jibes to keep her and her brother from starving. Now she had died for a secret Oben kept.

A powerful shove sent Oben crashing to the ground. The palms of his hands tore open on the rocks. His pants split in the back. Strong hands spun him over and the tip of a sharp knife pressed against his throat. It was Gavik, Elik'Don's hunter.

Gavik's lean dark body crouched over Oben. Gavik's hair hung in dark braids from his head, held back by a bronze band across his forehead. Swirling tattoos lined his long muscled body.

"Where is the king." Gavik whispered the words close into Oben's face. He saw murder in Gavik's dark eyes. He thought of Hena sitting just a short distance away, her blood in a pool around her small feet. Oben began to weep.

"This was a good town. We worked hard and ignored the desert wars. We kept peace. We don't deserve this."

"You saw what those men did to that girl. Tell me where he is and they will leave here," said Gavik.

"They will never leave here. You will never leave here. They will murder and rape and burn us all. She was just a girl." Oben sobbed. "She was just a girl."

Gavik took the blade away from Oben's throat. He asked again.

"Where is he?"

Oben told him.

#

The burning fire of dawn broke across the eastern peaks. Five men climbed up the trail to the abandoned tunnels of the iron mines. Gavik led the men, thirty or forty steps ahead of Kes and Barton. Elik'Don and Cend walked behind.

Gavik's steps were sure. He knew the cave Oben had described. Gavik's soft leather shoes stepped easily over the jagged rock. His thoughts were not as steady. He turned and looked at Kes, the northern man who had killed a young girl without a thought the night before. Kes's dark eyes looked up and met Gavik's own. Behind him, Barton removed his hat and ran a hand along his smooth scalp.

Gavik turned and continued his climb. His mind kept falling to the eyes of the girl trying to breathe as her heart pumped blood into a hole in her lungs. His sister had been that same age when they had taken her.

Gavik's head pounded as the memories of his family being ripped apart flashed in his mind. He remembered his father's dead hand on the bone hilt of the dagger Gavik had tied to his waist. He remembered hiding under

a cart as his brother was ridden down and pierced with spears. He remembered laying there in the dirt for nearly a day until the bandits had left.

Gavik stepped around and walked along the narrow ledge above the gorge. When he had crossed it, he turned and saw the woman, Vrenna, looking back at him with her sharp sky-blue eyes. She had her scorpion-hilted saber drawn. An older woman and a young boy stood behind her.

The boy stood straight and tall. His hair was cut short. Though barely ten winters, the boy stood with an authority of someone twice his age. The memories of his childhood flowed through Gavik. The words Oben spoke to him returned, like a growing tree from the tiny seed of Oben's words. He saw his brother and sister. He saw the girl, Hena. He saw one hundred such killings he had seen over the year. Gavik looked into those eyes and realized he looked into the eyes of a king. His king.

Gavik drew his bone hilted dagger and breathed in a deep breath. His eyes once again met Vrenna's. Gavik turned and began walking across the narrow ledge. Kes reached him half way.

Kes looked with confusion at Gavik, his dark eyes narrowing and then widening as he saw betrayal in Gavik. Kes's hands flew to the hilt of his rapier but Gavik placed his own hand over Kes's draw and hammered his dagger up underneath Kes's chin and into his brain. Kes's eyes rammed to one side and his teeth chattered together as Gavik pulled him over into the gorge.

For a man of nearly sixty seasons, Barton's speed was remarkable. The old man drew and fired both pistols before Gavik could even begin to attack. One of the pistols misfired in a puff of white smoke, but the other crashed and sent a ball of lead tearing into the hollow of Gavik's left elbow.

Gavik went cold almost immediately. His vision fell into a tunnel and while he saw Elik'Don and Cend cry in surprise, he could not hear them. Gavik fought through his shock and he stabbed hard into Barton's side as the older man began to draw his own rapier. Barton's eyes went wide. Gavik pulled the dagger out and stabbed again, higher. Blood rushed over his hand and Barton fell over the edge of the drop, a trail of blood following him down.

Gavik fell to his knees and he looked up to see Elik'Don's fury. The Blue Rose leader drew his own bronze sword and rushed Gavik. Something flashed past him on the rock wall. It was Vrenna.

Vrenna cut low under Elik'Don's high swing. Blood sprayed along the rock wall and the Blue Rose leader screamed and fell. Cend swung horizontally at Vrenna with his own jeweled scimitar but Vrenna hit the wide blade with the butt of her saber and the scimitar blade shattered. She slashed again and opened up Cend's throat. The man toppled backward into the rocks below.

Gavik watched the man fall as darkness overtook him.

#

It had been a year of bickering and arguing, a year of threats and ultimatums. It had been a hard year for Oben Tvees, but they had won.

Oben gave the bar over to young Ides and walked out into the morning air. He nodded to a huge man leaning on a spiked club as he walked down the back path. The men who walked the streets of Fena Kreen were indistinguishable from the mercenaries who ruled Fena Kreen but a year previous, but Oben knew who these men worked for. He had no fear of them.

After a few bloody months, months of murder and secrets buried in the tunnels, no more bandits tried to take

the town for their own. No more slave caravans came back. Those slaves remaining now walked Fena Kreen as free men and women. The route had opened again and the town again traded with its neighbors. Money and food once again flowed into the small town.

Oben smiled as he walked along the familiar route of the narrow mountain pass. He knew eyes followed him as he walked, but they were the eyes of friends.

Two stern armored men pulled back the leather flaps of the cave, now a furnished audience hall. Oben stepped in and bowed.

Vrenna stood to one side of the raised platform of the king. She wore a strange armor of black leather and shining steel. She wore a gleaming helmet hooded in leather and adorned with a silver half moon on the brow. Her scorpion hilted saber hung on her hip. She took off the helmet and smiled at Oben.

On the other side of the platform stood Gavik. Like Vrenna, the hunter wore black leather armor with steel fittings and a cloak of dark gray. His bone hilted dagger hung on his belt. His left arm ended in a steel cap half way to the elbow. Oben remembered what a bloody job it had been to cut off the man's arm when the wound of Barton's gunshot had sent black tendrils of rot through Gavik's body. Now, Gavik seemed not to mind. He told Oben that he had lost an arm but it was a small price for the regaining of his life. Like Vrenna, Gavik now wore the tattoo of three black horizontal diamonds along the left side of his neck.

The king, now twelve years old, sat on a throne of masterwork wood and dressed in a simple tunic of cotton. His own advice had turned the favor of the village. He was a boy well beyond his years. The young king smiled at Oben.

Oben smiled back.

END

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