

DELTA OF THE DAMNED

by Robert Zoltan

*A barefoot walk where razor sharp thorns grow,
A hungry beast both murderous and cruel,
Lost in a land where deadly ice winds blow,
A million insects blended in a gruel
(and add to that an old man's putrid stool),
A thousand vipers in a pit that hiss,
An old crone's lately drowned lips to kiss.
These things now seem to me like honeyed ham.
For rather suffer I this whole vile list
Than face again that delta of the damned.*

— From “The Recollections and Admonitions
of Dareon Vin”

A mid-sized triangular-sailed cargo ship crawled south through the sludge of the Rhuggara River Delta under a blistering tainted sun. The poet swordsman, Dareon Vin, sat upon the bowsprit, staring forward as if in a trance, blinking only when sweat dropped into his burning eyes or a bug tried to fly through his pupil into his brain. He swatted at the mosquitoes that fought for a seat at the dining table of his arms. What skin he could not bear to clothe due to the oppressive heat was covered in welts, cuts, bruises, and a paste composed of smeared black mosquito corpses and blood (either his or that of other crewmembers). A desperate crazed look vibrated in his eyes matched only by that of his comrade, the Indari warrior he had nicknamed Blue, due to the blue tattoos covering Blue's body. Though even more of Blue's skin was exposed, those tattoos were now barely visible, for they were masked by the same marks of hardship and pestilence. Blue leaned against the port rail, allowing the mosquitoes to bite, his left hand gripping the hilt of his longsword as if he were about to draw it and kill someone, possibly Dareon.

Dareon cursed the passenger ship that had departed Mubaccu without them, the only monthly one that sailed west to their home city of Merth. He cursed the gang that had robbed him and Blue of their cash three weeks ago while they were walking home from a night of dancing girls and too much kokay, the local liquor brewed from sugar cane. And he cursed Captain Kwesh, whose descriptions of the difficulties of a journey to bring mangrove poles back from the Rhuggara Delta were so downplayed that they amounted to perjury.

The only positive note struck in this orchestra of misery was that the job was done. They were leaving not after two weeks as estimated, but three weeks after entering the delta through a small inlet from the Sea of Kardon.

Dareon could not fathom why any man would return to this hellish place. As bad as it had been for him and Blue, they had been spared some of the hardest labor endured by the crew. Dareon and Blue had simply acted as guards to prevent the natives of the region from sending their relatives to rob the ship after the natives helped deliver and sell the mangrove poles to Captain Kwesh in the first place. Yet each year this crew, or the ones

who survived, came back for the same job. Dareon decided they were either stupid or damned or both, for no one in his right mind would willingly return to the Rhuggara Delta.

Dareon would later write in his journal:

“The Rhuggara Delta was an unending watery maze of hostile and sometimes deadly miseries, a fetid swamp-like region that alternated between torrential rain that beat down so hard it could nearly drown a man, to a blistering sun that struck like a hammer of flame. After the rain, the heat produced a plethora of noxious bogs emitting choking vapors, and summoned back the mosquitoes from their short feeding reprieve. As for those bloodsuckers, Blue and I had never seen their like. The mosquitoes we had suffered in other places were, in comparison, like domestic house cats to these savage black leopards. They moved in armies like a black mist, attacking any exposed area of skin ruthlessly and repeatedly with a seeming endless thirst and capacity for blood. They made sleeping almost impossible, as mosquito nets were only partially effectual. More often than not, one found oneself trapped inside all night with an angry vampire possessing unquenchable thirst. That was only the mosquitoes.

The scent of dates eaten by some of the crew brought swarms of stinging flies and bees until the dates had to be thrown in the river.

The mangrove poles themselves were as tough as cured leather, taking ages to cut, and causing nicks and bruises while being loaded. All the while, ticks fell from dying trees to attach themselves to heads and necks, sometimes passing on a virulent disease that eventually killed two of the two-dozen crewmembers. Sailors wading in the water to load and launch the ferries with mangrove poles to take to the ship were assaulted by leeches that were drawn to legs like flies to rotting meat. But no one paid attention to the leeches because they were too busy watching for the crocodiles. These prehistoric terrors, some of which measured almost twenty feet in length, watched silently for the unwary, and dragged one careless crew member down into the murky depths while the other men screamed and scrambled back to shore. The poisonous vipers were well behaved in comparison.

Of the twenty-one crewmembers remaining, four were sick with a fever, and three were suffering with infected cuts. All the crew were pale, sickly, and exhausted. Since reaching the delta, there had been not a single laugh, song, joke, or even a smile. Had there been, it would have been interpreted as a sign of fever or madness.”

—From the Recollections and Admonitions of Dareon Vin

At about the same time that Dareon had noticed the look of murder in Blue's eyes, his own mind, usually engaged in composing verse, had been entertaining a fevered fantasy of killing the Captain and ordering the crew to take the ship out of the delta, and if the crew refused, killing them all with Blue at his side in a murderous and unjustifiably satisfying spree. For a single tense moment, his hand had strayed to his rapier, and his mind had teetered on the knife-edge of madness. It was just then that the Captain had announced the ship cargo filled, and ordered the crew to take them out of the delta.

That was two hours ago. But they were not out of hell yet.

The currents were chaotic, and the crew had to be ever vigilant or they would end up stuck in the shallows or wrecked on a jutting dagger of land. Due to the continual torrential rain, branches of the river appeared and disappeared, reformed and rerouted, so that exiting the delta, Captain Kwesh was faced with a waterway literally different than the one they had traversed north three weeks before. All the Captain could do was push south using his best instincts, taking the widest courses, and hoping they would emerge into the Sea of Kardon instead of reaching some dead end or wasting hours or even days traveling in blind loops.

Dareon heard screeching monkeys from the shadows of the thick trees on the left shore. They sounded angry, and why wouldn't they since they had to live here. Dareon was about to attempt a joke, his spirits having lifted just a tad thinking they might actually make it out of damnation, but when he glanced at Blue's grim countenance, he reconsidered. The Indari sometimes didn't appreciate his jokes even in the best of moods.

Dareon faced forward and tried to concentrate on the distant hope of a bath, of a good night's sleep, of a decent meal, and of not being bitten every minute of the day. A breeze blew across his face with a slight coolness that raised his spirits. Did he detect a hint of sea air? He was about to ask Blue, since the Indari's senses were sharper, when he saw a dark shadow in the air ahead.

"More flies," said Blue.

"Flies?" asked Dareon in disbelief. He stared at the approaching black cloud. It was far denser than any swarm of mosquitoes they had seen, in appearance like a solid liquid mass. It seemed impossible.

"Surely not!" said Dareon.

"Then what is it?" asked Blue. "A storm cloud hovering five feet above the river? It's flies, I tell you. Listen."

Dareon heard a growing hum. He called out to the Captain.

Captain Kwesh strode to the bow and gaped at the cloud. "Alab Dala protect us!" He alerted the crew.

Blue pointed to a river channel branching off to the left. "We better take that for now. We can double back if need be against the current."

The Captain hesitated, disbelieving his eyes. "Maybe they will move aside."

A couple of minutes later, they still had not, and the cloud was only fifty yards from the ship.

"Flies. Definitely flies," said Blue. He swatted the rail and held open his palm. It was a razorfly the size of a bumblebee.

"Gods!" said Dareon, staring wide-eyed at the monstrosity.

The Captain shouted an order and the helmsman veered left just as the ship pierced the edge of the cloud. The crew screamed and cursed as enormous flies swarmed upon them and attacked with bites as painful as bee stings. But as the ship proceeded down the branch, the flies did not pursue.

Kwesh ordered the crew to lower the sail and throw down anchor, waiting for the cloud of flies to pass. But the flies simply hovered, blocking the entrance back to the main course.

They waited. An hour later, the cloud still hovered in the same place.

"That's odd," said Dareon. He gave Blue a glance and the Indari grunted.

“Perhaps this branch leads back to the main course,” said Captain Kwesh, but not hopefully.

Blue stared down the new channel. He sniffed and squinted. “I don't like it.”

“Nor I,” said Dareon, but he was glancing in the opposite direction at the flies.

“It's nearly sundown,” said Kwesh. “We'll stay here for the night. In the morning, surely the flies will have moved on and we can return to the main channel.”

Dareon and Blue liked this news no more than the crew. But they accepted it, and spent a fitful night of sleep, grateful at least for a slight breeze that lessened the mosquitoes.

In the morning, they awoke to find the cloud of flies still waiting.

“I'll be damned!” said Kwesh.

“I'm beginning to suspect you already are, Captain,” said Dareon. “And us along with you.”

“We may as well try this branch,” said Kwesh. “We can double back and risk the flies if it comes to that.” He gave the order to raise the anchor.

Two sailors tugged at the rope. The anchor stuck. Several more crewmembers helped heave and the rope finally gave way. The anchor broke the surface, and the sailors exclaimed. Dareon, Blue, and Kwesh went to the rail. Emerging with the anchor from the brown soup was the skeleton of a man. The anchor had caught his ribs and hooked him like a fish.

The crew stared and murmured with troubled voices. Some fingered charms upon necklaces or bracelets.

“What are you waiting for?” asked Kwesh. “Heave it aboard and free the anchor.”

The men dragged the skeleton over the rail and onto the deck. They removed the anchor from its ribs, and were about to toss the skeleton back overboard when Kwesh stopped them.

“Wait! What is that?” asked Kwesh.

Something glinted on the skeleton's wrist.

The sailor most resembling a skeleton spoke up. His name was Deejo, a brown mummy of a man who looked seventy but was probably in his fifties, aged by the hardship of his profession.

“Leave it be, Captain. This place is cursed and anything buried in it can only bode ill for this ship and everyone on board.”

“Be still, Deejo,” said Kwesh. “I'll make the decisions on this ship.”

Dareon, Blue, and Kwesh examined the skeleton. It appeared old, maybe ancient. The only object remaining upon it was a thick bracelet of tarnished metal bound around the wrist, engraved with faded characters. And soldered onto the bracelet was a device with a strange crosswise configuration, unlike anything they had seen before.

“This writing is of no language I know,” said Kwesh.

“Nor I,” said Dareon.

“He must have been sleeping in this delta for hundreds of years,” said Kwesh.

“No,” said Blue. “Thousands.”

“Thousands?” replied Kwesh in disbelief. “You believe so?”

“Yes,” said Blue.

“I've never seen anything like this,” said Kwesh pointing to the device on the bracelet. “If it's that old, it must have value. Cut the bracelet from the hand.” He gestured to a crewmember.

Deejo objected again, but Kwesh waved him aside as if he were used to the old man's superstitious ramblings.

“You say thousands of years, Indari,” said Kwesh. “Another race is said to have dwelt here in ancient times. All that's left are a few cairns, bits of wall, and according to rumors, one or two strange ziggurats no one has seen.”

“Or some have seen and never returned to tell,” said Deejo.

Captain Kwesh and a couple of the other sailors laughed.

“Deejo hates this place, yet he keeps coming back with us,” said Kwesh to Dareon and Blue.

Deejo grumbled something under his breath.

Kwesh continued. “Some say that the man who finds one of these ziggurats will be rich, for they are likely tombs of kings, filled with treasure for the kings to take with them into the afterlife.”

“There are other legends,” mumbled Deejo.

“Of course, if they exist,” continued Kwesh, “they likely have been ransacked by now. No doubt I will have to spend my life satisfied with lesser treasures: mangrove poles, dates, spices, fish oil, mosquito bites.” He shrugged. “Well, Alab Dala will provide.”

Captain Kwesh took the relic into his possession and ordered the ship to continue down the course. He also sent a man up into the crow's nest, hoping to discern the channel's destination.

Dareon and Blue went back to their place near the bow. Old Deejo was engaged in his duties nearby. After the old sailor finished, he stood at the port rail, kneading some beads in his hand and chanting under his breath.

“Deejo,” said Dareon.

The oldish man limped over. A mangrove pole had fallen on his foot, badly bruising but not breaking it.

“You've come to the Rhuggara Delta many times?” asked Dareon.

Deejo nodded. “Since I was barely a man.”

“What *other legends* were you referring to?” asked Dareon. Dareon had found that legends and myths often contained useful kernels of truth, if one could sift them.

Deejo paused a moment as if remembering details. Then he waved an arm toward the land around them.

“There was once a great kingdom here, a magnificent civilization of people who were like unto gods in their knowledge and beauty. For a time this kingdom prospered under wise and benevolent rulers. But then, it is said they came into conflict with another race and war broke out. In their desire to destroy these enemies once and for all, the priests of the great city trafficked with strange magic left over from a before time. Not satisfied with the power from their kindly and just gods, they sought to call others from the Outer Dark. Through doors in the minds of the priests, strange beings crossed over into our world. They gave the priests the power needed to defeat the rival kingdom. But when the war was done, as price of payment, these demons in the guise of gods enslaved and fed upon the people. The priests fought back with their magic and imprisoned the

gods in stone. But in the conflict, the land was cursed and laid to waste. Those that survived forsook this damned region and went to other parts of Plemora. Some say that the ruins now in Archea are remnants of the kingdom they established afterward. But never did they achieve their former glory, and they soon dwindled and were forgotten in the dust of the past.”

“If there had been a great kingdom here,” said Dareon, “I think we would see more evidence than a few crumbling walls and standing stones.”

Deejo gestured downward. “It was sucked down into the mud, as is everything in this accursed delta.”

Dareon glanced at either shore and absently scratched his latest bug bite. “Hm. Possibly. Well, thank you for your enlightening tale.”

Deejo limped toward the stern.

“What do you think of that?” Dareon asked Blue.

Blue shrugged.

Dareon shook his head and sneered. “It's the same everywhere. People long for a golden age when troubles were few, men and women were wise and beautiful, children well-behaved, and no doubt, everyone shat gold nuggets.”

“I suppose, in a way, even my people have such tales,” said Blue. “No happy ending in this one, though.”

“That too is the same,” said Dareon. “The quest for forbidden knowledge that ends up biting them on the ass.”

“Why did you ask him?”

“I was just searching for any hint that might help us get out of this delta,” replied Dareon.

“I'm all for that,” said Blue. “I don't know about this land being cursed, but there is something unsettling about it.”

“You mean beyond the horrid weather, dangerous sailing conditions, and hostile wildlife?”

“Yes, beyond those.”

Dareon narrowed his eyes at Blue. “What does that Indari intuition of yours tell you, if anything?”

Blue surveyed the surrounding banks of cypress trees, tangled vines, and rotting vegetation. He closed his eyes. “The mosquitoes are gone.”

Dareon glanced around. “You're right. But you don't need intuition to know that.”

“Do you hear the monkeys anymore?” asked Blue.

Dareon shook his head.

“Where are the birds?” asked Blue.

Dareon frowned. “I haven't seen or heard anything alive since we took this branch.”

“No,” said Blue. “Apart from the vegetation, it's desolate. Everything has gone.”

“Not everything,” said Dareon as his eyes darted toward Blue's left arm. Blue followed the direction of his gaze. A huge green fly with scarlet eyes had alighted on Blue's arm bracelet.

“Hold still,” said Dareon as he leaned forward. He struck like a cobra with his hand. The fly buzzed off into the air and flew ahead of the ship down the channel.

“You're losing your touch,” said Blue.

Dareon stared with furrowed brows after the fly. “I could have sworn I hit it.”

“That was *me*.”

“I've never seen a fly that big move so fast,” said Dareon.

“I'm not sure I've ever seen a fly that big,” said Blue.

“Did you see that strange black square marking on its back? That wasn't a razorfly. Well, now we know there is *something* alive down here.”

“That doesn't make me feel better,” said Blue. His eyes narrowed as he stared down the channel.

A shout from the sailor in the crow's nest ended their conversation.

“What is it?” asked Captain Kwesh.

“A building of black stone, off the starboard rail, rising from the jungle.”

“A building?” asked Kwesh. “Do you see people?”

“No. But the trees block the lower portion. It looks like a pyramid shape, square at the top.”

Kwesh's eyes widened. “Man the oars! Tell me when we're even with it.”

Dareon turned to Blue. “I don't like coincidences.”

Blue stared at the shore to the right, his mouth set in a grim line.

Dareon called back to Kwesh. “Captain, what do you intend?”

“Intend? You heard the stories. If it's a ruined temple or crypt, there could be treasure inside. Who knows? Maybe this waterway was too small for a ship to traverse until the recent rains. We may be the first ones to see it in millennia. We're here. It's worth a look, anyway.”

Chatter broke out among the sailors. Dareon expected grumbling, but instead noticed curiosity and even excitement among the crew. Even one of the sick men showed interest. The Captain's tale of ancient crypts full of riches had obviously affected them. But it was Deejo's story that lingered more in Dareon's mind, like a foul aftertaste.

Dareon snorted. “It seems the chance of easy riches is a temporary cure for fear, fatigue, and even illness. I suppose they're tired of killing themselves for mangrove poles. Can't say I blame them.”

Blue grunted. “Let's hope they don't kill themselves for something else.”

The sailor in the crow's nest yelled down shortly thereafter, and Kwesh ordered the crew to drop anchor. The ship was dragged to a halt in the sluggish current. Ten of the healthy men prepared for shore and boarded the boats. The other four remained behind with the sick and injured.

Dareon and Blue stood by and observed.

“Well?” Kwesh asked them. “What are you waiting for?”

Dareon glanced at Blue, and Blue gave him tacit agreement.

“If it's all the same to you, Captain, we'll just wait on board,” said Dareon.

“It's not all the same to me,” said Kwesh. “What did I hire you for?”

“To guard your mangrove poles,” replied Dareon.

“No, to guard my crew,” countered Kwesh. “Come on. If we're lucky and there's treasure, you'll get a share. You're the best fighters aboard and I might need you. We don't know what we'll run into.”

“That's what concerns me,” muttered Dareon to himself. But he chose not to argue with their employer over the strict definition of their job. Their pay was essential for living expenses and passenger fare when the next ship left Mubaccu for Merth. And more than ever, Dareon wanted out of this region, never to set foot in it again.

He sighed and gave Blue a look as if to say, “What can we do?” Blue growled, but gave a slight nod.

“Coming, Captain!” said Dareon with forced cheerfulness.

Deejo, who was to stay on board, grasped Dareon's arm as he headed toward one of the boats.

“Take this,” said Deejo, pressing something into Dareon's hand.

It was a round stone carved with an asterisk in the center, surrounded by a line spiraling out into a circle.

Dareon smiled. “I thank you. But no need. I have this.” He patted the handle of his rapier. But when he tried to return the stone, the old sailor thrust it back.

“Take it! It may protect you against those of the Outer Dark.”

Dareon slipped it into his tunic. “If you insist. I shall return it shortly.”

“Alab Dala go with you!” said Deejo, making a gesture in the air and bowing.

Dareon gave him a nod. Then he boarded one of the boats with Blue, and they were lowered into the river.

They rowed to the right bank, tied the boats to trees, and clambered ashore. The crew pulled out machetes and began hacking their way through the jungle.

Dareon and Blue stayed in the middle of the line, hands on their swords. They saw no birds, no bugs, no snakes or lizards, nothing that walked or flew or crawled.

After cutting through the jungle for nearly half an hour, Kwesh ordered a sailor up a tree to check their location. The man climbed a cypress. He returned a moment later to report.

“We need only continue on our present path. We should reach the clearing soon.”

A few minutes later, they emerged from the jungle. Dareon noticed a strange cast to the light. The sky was still cloudless, but murky, as if viewed through a dirty lens. The sun seemed to linger there only as an afterthought. A brown shadow lay over the land. Dareon felt as if he were standing in the penumbra of an eclipse. Instead of providing a sense of opening and freedom, the clearing felt like a collapsing dome, crushing down upon him.

He could see that the Indari felt it, too. Blue unconsciously went into a slight crouch, and his eyes darted about with that wild look of the alert animal that Dareon had seen many times.

The crew halted as their eyes fell upon the black structure about fifty yards in front of them.

It rose in the clearing like the haft of an axe in the landscape's flesh. Thick stone slabs, matte black, slanted up with not a single shelf or step for one hundred feet. The top was sheared off.

They approached the structure. Its surface was untouched by any moss or vine. Even the ground vegetation ceased within thirty feet, leaving only mud and a few fallen stones that once may have been markers or a partial wall. The building was devoid of detail except for some strange symbols that were nearly worn away about a dozen feet up in the center of the side facing the crew. Beneath the markings was a square slab of stone ten feet wide indented into the pyramid.

Kwesh ordered them to circle the structure, but they found no other detail, and came back to the side with the indentation.

“That looks like an entrance,” said Kwesh. “Let's give it a try. Though I'll be surprised if we can budge it, especially after all this time. It must weigh ten tons.”

Several crew members put their shoulders to the square and pushed. As Kwesh had guessed, it did not move a fraction of an inch.

Dareon wondered if there might be an entrance at the top of the structure, but he suggested nothing. He was not eager for it to be opened, for he was pessimistic about the chance of treasure being contained within. It was just as likely that they would become ill from some tainted air trapped inside for centuries.

Then one of the men called the Captain over.

“What is it?” asked Kwesh.

“Behold this crosswise slot cut into the center of the square, like a keyhole.”

Kwesh swore, but in delight. He pulled the bracelet from where he had tied it to his belt. “A key! The dead man carried a key!”

A chill ran down Dareon's back, which was odd in the humid heat. He looked at Blue. The Indari's eyes were narrowed at the black structure. Blue backed away a step and his hand strayed to his sword. He turned to give Dareon an intense stare.

“Captain,” said Dareon, “perhaps it is best not to disturb the dead.”

“Ha!” replied Kwesh. “Now you're starting to sound like Deejo. I'll be damned if I'm not going to do everything I can to open this thing, especially seeing no sign that it's been opened before, and thus, never plundered. If this key fits, Alab Dala has smiled on us this day!”

“I doubt Alab Dala has anything to do with it,” said Dareon, but only Blue heard.

Kwesh lifted the bracelet to the hole and inserted the key. It fit perfectly.

The crew held their breaths and stared like men hypnotized.

Dareon drew his rapier. Blue drew his longsword, pointed the tip diagonally down until it rested on the earth, and turned until he had drawn a circle around him in the muddy ground. Then he stood like a statue facing the pyramid.

Kwesh tried turning the key clockwise but it would not budge. He cursed.

Dareon did not know exactly why, but he breathed a sigh of relief.

Kwesh tried counter-clockwise and the key turned a short way then stopped.

Nothing happened.

Kwesh cursed again and turned the key back clockwise. It continued about a quarter of the way around from its starting point and stopped with a click.

A muffled grinding sound was heard, followed by the grating of stone on stone. The slab moved inward several feet and then slid to the left to reveal an opening of darkness.

With a buzz, the huge green fly with scarlet eyes that Dareon and Blue had seen earlier zipped between them, over the heads of the crew, and into the square black hole.

Dareon grimaced and glanced at Blue. The Indari raised his sword.

“Can't see a damned thing,” said Kwesh, trying to peer in.

Then Kwesh and the other nearby crew members cried out, gagged, and backed away.

Dareon caught the hint of an overpowering stench, rotten, acrid and metallic. A dark mass emerged from the pyramid moving like a thick swarm of flies. The men retreated. Before they had gone more than a few steps, the mass coalesced into the form of an impossible nightmare.

Its head was that of a fly, ten feet wide with scarlet eyes, and its mouth was a grotesque slash of uneven jagged fangs ending in a harpoon-like proboscis. Its massive body was also like that of a fly but with a dozen clawed legs that heaved it forward through the mud with an almost desperate motion, as if it had just been born into this world. Damp transparent wings were stuck to its back and from between the wings six long segmented tentacles with spiky hairs like those on its body sprouted up and squirmed like maggots.

The tentacles shot toward the crew. Each one whipped around a sailor, including Captain Kwesh, lifting them through the air and smashing them to the ground. Then it tossed the bodies through the dark entrance behind it.

The remaining crew turned and ran screaming in terror for the jungle. Dareon and Blue backed away but stayed facing the horror with swords raised, as it peeled the wings up from its back with a ripping sound and launched itself through the air.

It was upon the sailors before they could reach the trees. In a few moments, it landed back at the pyramid with its tentacles full of victims. These it did not crush, but instead held in the air, its tentacles wavering. A strange green light flowed from the demon's head and through the tentacles to envelop the men.

Blue drew and hurled his hunting knife at the demon's right eye. It struck but glanced off the faceted organ.

The sailors held by the tentacles turned pale, then shrunk like mummies and broke apart like sandstone, their remains crumbling to the ground.

Dareon moved to the right so that the thing could not easily attack both him and Blue. It launched itself through the air at the Indari and landed with a thunderous splat in the circle where Blue had stood. The Indari had saved his life with a prodigious leap, tumbled, and regained his feet. The demon whipped a tentacle at Blue. The Indari swung his sword and struck the appendage. His blade broke, and he was knocked to the ground. Another tentacle wrapped around him and lifted him up. Blue had slipped his arms to his sides to protect his ribs before being grasped, but even the great strength of his iron-thewed arms was unable to free him from the monstrous grip.

Dareon threw his dagger. It plunged into the thing's fat body. An unholy sound like metal scraping against metal ripped forth from the hell of its jagged maw.

Dareon dashed around toward the thing's flank, hoping it needed to see with those horrible scarlet eyes. A tentacle shot toward him and Dareon danced to the side. His rapier was almost within reach of the thing when another tentacle struck him down. His rapier flew from his grasp and landed in the mud.

Dareon was lifted into the air. The demon held him in front of its eyes, as if gloating or lingering over its meal. Dareon was all but crushed to unconsciousness by the demon's clasp. A few yards away, he saw Blue smothered in a sickly green glow. The Indari no longer struggled. Remains of the sailors covered the muddy ground. The others were dead in the black pyramid.

Dareon felt his hope being drained from him even faster than his physical strength. He was engulfed by horror and despair, descending into hell for the final moments of consciousness.

How Dareon found the strength to act, he would never know. He would later ponder whether it was that nebulous trait known as courage, or perhaps sheer stubbornness when it came to giving up his life. Or maybe Deejo's simple charm gave him the magical aid he

needed. But in fact, the source of his strength in that seemingly hopeless end came from something far stranger. For a moment so brief it could not be measured, Dareon had an inner vision of himself as a vast eternal being that was merely operating the temporary form known as Dareon Vin as a child plays with a doll. This astounding revelation was beyond the grasp of Dareon's brain, and was thus forgotten the following moment. He only knew that he was roused by a strange volition, and filled with a new energy and will whereas before his life force had been all but sapped.

He reached to his thigh strap with his one free hand, drew his second dagger, and struck. Its point thrust perfectly between two protective coils of the tentacle, and plunged to the hilt. The demon let out a surprised screech and released its grip. Dareon fell, landed, and bounded several steps to snatch up his rapier. The demon lashed out another limb like a giant whip. He dove under the tentacle, rolled forward, and sprang like a grasshopper through the air at the demon's head. The tip of his rapier pierced the thing's enormous left eye and plunged straight into the demonic equivalent of a brain.

A scream rent the sullen swamp air like a knife through the flesh of the world, a scream unlike any that had ever been heard on Plemora before or would ever be heard again. The demon jerked back its head while Dareon still grasped the rapier, throwing him twenty feet away into the mud. He looked up to see the demon thrashing about, and was nearly knocked over by Blue's body as it flew through the air and tumbled next to him.

Dareon dragged the Indari's body toward the dubious cover of the jungle with desperate strength, going almost deaf and mad from the unearthly screaming that had never been meant for human ears. Then the screaming stopped and there was a noise like a sudden burst of flame. Dareon looked up to see a mass of flies that then exploded in a green cloud. The edge of the cloud drifted toward him and he vomited as he caught its scent. Choking and coughing, he heaved Blue into the trees. He looked back to see the cloud dissolving. The body of the demon was gone, though whether it was killed or only banished from this world, he neither knew nor cared.

He collapsed next to the body of Blue. Though the Indari's copper color had returned, Dareon could not detect any movement of Blue's chest. He put his fingers to Blue's neck and felt for a pulse. At first, there was nothing. Then he caught a faint beat. He massaged Blue's arms and chest, and patted his cheeks. A moment later, Blue's mouth opened in a gasp. His chest rose and fell with regular breath. Dareon sighed and lay back on the dank ground next to his friend.

A few minutes later, a mosquito landed on Dareon's cheek, plunged its proboscis in, and began to feed. Dareon was too drained to even swat it away. He smiled faintly and let the bug enjoy its meal, taking its presence as proof that he was alive and the demon was gone.

An hour later, the remaining crew, under the command of Deejo, rowed back against the current to the main branch. As Dareon had guessed, when they returned to the main river course, the cloud of flies that had blocked their way was gone.

Dareon had returned the stone charm to the old sailor, saying it had saved his life, though in truth he doubted it had.

Dareon and Blue now sat on the bowsprit, enjoying the feel of an unmistakably fresh cool breeze in their faces as they sailed down the river, coming ever nearer to the

freedom of the sea. Within minutes, the river opened up from the small inlet and back into the Sea of Kardon. The entire remaining crew shouted prayers of joyful thanks to Alab Dala. Dareon was tempted to join them.

“Blue,” said Dareon. “Have you ever had the feeling, the intuition that, well, you are more than you seem to be?”

“What do you mean?” asked Blue.

“I'm not sure. I've just had this funny apprehension of myself since that ordeal. Almost as if I'm forgetting something rather important.”

“A close brush with death will do that. And that was the closest brush we've ever had.”

“Brush?” said Dareon, turning to Blue with raised eyebrows. “That was no brush, my friend, but a scrape. Nay, a solid slap!” He swatted Blue's arm and only stung his own hand. The Indari didn't even flinch.

“We're lucky to be alive,” said Blue, nodding. “By the way, thank you, Dareon.”

“Don't thank *me*,” said Dareon, instinctively.

Blue looked at Dareon with a furrowed brow. “Well, who should I thank?”

“I'm not sure,” said Dareon with a frown. But then his face relaxed, and he sighed, as the fresh wind caressed his face and filled the sail.