

THE CURSED CUFF



by
Aaron Rosenberg

PIRACY, MYSTERY, & ADVENTURE

awaits a pair of...brothers?



Sundra is a prince running for his life.
Ruhi is a young woman disguised
in order to seek her freedom.
When they are captured by pirates,
they claim to be brothers.
Now the pair has to navigate cruel masters,
mysterious murders, missing mages,
vicious feuds, and violent storms.
But at least they have each other.

A swashbuckling series of pirate mysteries set in the epic fantasy world of Eldros Legacy, from the bestselling author of the Belleant Chronicles, The Adventures of Cannon Belle, Rise of the Phoenix, and the Twin Cities Cryptids urban fantasy series!

The Cursed Cuff

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BIRR Blackjaw sat at the rough-hewn table, his back against the heavy timbers of the tavern's rear wall, peering out at the room over his ale. To his right, Sorjax sipped at his wine, the mage's round face wrinkling in distaste with each mouthful of the inferior vintage. To his left, Nathander quaffed his own ale with only slightly less gusto than Birr himself, while chaste Melirria contented herself with drinks from her waterskin, unwilling to risk any of the establishment's cruder beverages. They had recently completed yet another heroic task, fighting their way through the treacherous Bloodslicked Maze of Mount Hist and slaying the monstrous Iron-Tusked Boar it housed in order to rescue the hapless children stolen away to serve as bait (and food) there, and were now relaxing and enjoying the warmth of a job well-done. Yet, already, Birr could feel his coiled limbs aching from restlessness. They would need another quest, and soon.

As if summoned by his darkening thoughts, his eye caught on motion from the tavern door, a flicker of coppery flesh wending

between the tanned and weathered hides of the general customer. Long hair the red gold of a sunset floated behind, and there was just a momentary glimpse of eyes like amber, deep and warm, all of which had Birr's pulse pounding. He half rose from his seat, catching his friends' attention and, with a jerk of his black-inked jaw, redirecting their gaze out toward this new vision.

"Not an established patron, I am guessing," Sorjax opined, his deep voice always at odds with his soft, pampered appearance. "I wonder what has driven her to enter this den of carousing?"

"Perhaps we should ask her," Nathander suggested, earning him a frown of mild rebuke from the maiden at his side. "Purely in a desire to help, of course," the wily rogue added quickly.

"I will bring her back here," Birr vowed, standing fully and stepping out past the others. His long legs quickly carried him across the crowded room, his broad shoulders forcing others to make way, and the axe and sword crossed over his wide back, preventing any from protesting at such treatment. Within moments he had reached

his quarry—and, for an instant, stood as if stricken with his first full sight of her.

She was glorious, her long hair as lush and full as her features and her figure, her gaze somehow both smoky and innocent. Those enticing eyes widened, her full lips parting in surprise as she gazed up at Birr, but he caught the hint of a smile as well, and the flutter of lashes.

“Have you come seeking aid?” he asked. When she nodded he took her elbow in one hand, the slender limb disappearing within his grip. “Come.” He was careful not to tighten his hold, merely using it to guide her back to the table where his friends awaited. “Sit.” She did so, taking the seat Nathander gallantly offered, and Birr returned to his own place, where he could gaze upon her beauty more easily.

“My thanks,” she said, the first words out of her lips, and her voice was as husky and alluring as the rest of her. “My name is Jessinda and yes, I come seeking aid—not for myself so much as for my mistress and her family. Please, you must help me!” Her lower lip trembled enticingly, her large eyes filling with tears, and Melirria, ever the tenderest of them, laid a comforting hand on the other woman’s arm. They were like sunset and moonlight, Birr thought, the one all sultry and seductive, the other all cool and chaste. Both lovely, but in entirely different ways.

“Tell us what happened,”

Melirria urged now, tossing her snow-white braid back over her slim shoulders, her emerald eyes warm with sympathy. “We will help if we can.”

Jessinda ducked her head in gratitude. “Thank you. My master Tharigar and his lady wife Deidre own an estate called Emberwild, on the edge of the Hearthlands where it meets the Razorcliff Mountains. I serve as Deirdre’s lady’s maid, though I also help care for their children Darian and Theresa.” She swiped at her eyes and Nathander, ever the smooth one, produced a scrap of cloth for her to blot the tears away. After recovering herself, she continued.

“The area is often beset by the undead, gaunts and ghouls, zombies and skeletons. Most of the time, my master’s wards are enough to keep them clear of the estate. Recently, however, their attacks have grown more frequent and more frantic. Then, last week...” She had to pause, her bosom heaving as she struggled to regain composure. “Last week, they broke through the wards. We retreated to the house, which they ringed in. Then a figure appeared among them, as much skeleton as man. It carried a long, dark staff and, raising that, it spoke words whose very utterance burned inside my head. My lady bid me flee, then. ‘Find help,’ she begged, and I swore that I would.” She swallowed hard. “I had barely escaped the house when black

bands wrapped around it, dimming the entire structure as if it lay encased in shadow. Nothing stirred within, as if they had all been frozen alive.”

Sorjax was frowning, his long, slim fingers stroking his trim beard, his bright blue eyes alive with interest. “That sounds very much like a spell of immobility,” he agreed, “yet I know of no one who could cast such over an entire house. That speaks to a level of power beyond any mortal mage.”

Birr grunted. “Can you break it?” He suspected axe and sword alone would not be enough.

His wizard friend began to shake his head, but Jessinda shifted, clearly wishing to speak. “I did not know where to go,” she told them tearfully, “and at first, I just wandered aimlessly. Then I came across an old traveler’s camp. There, the fortuneteller, a wizened woman named Phaedra, read the cards for me. She told me of an artifact, the Filigreed Cuff, which she said had the power to dispel even such a powerful enchantment as that.”

It was Nathander who nodded. “I have heard of this cuff,” their roguish friend acknowledged, his eyes glittering green as any cat, his dark curls falling artfully around his lean face. “It is powerful indeed. Yet, last I heard, it was held by a madman whose strange words and astounding deeds had many people flocking to his side.”

“You speak of the prophet

Latimar,” Sorjax said. “He is said to be cruel, driven entirely by a lust for power and a desire for adulation. Such an artifact in his hands can only cause misery, strife, and worse.”

“Then we must wrest it from him,” Birr stated, pounding both fists on the table and causing the jacks and steins there to jump about, his friends and their lovely guest to startle as well, “and use it to free these poor souls from their unjust imprisonment.” His blood was boiling at the thought of such villainy, the idea of the heroism needed to rescue them, and the gratitude the beautiful Jessinda might bestow upon him for his efforts.

The others all nodded agreement. “Yes, we will help you,” Sorjax told Jessinda, who beamed through her tears like the sun peeking through clouds. “We will secure this cuff and use it to break the spell upon your mistress and her family.”

“Oh, thank you! I will be forever in your debt!” Her hands flew to her chest, fluttering there like trapped butterflies as Jessinda gazed at each of them in turn, her eyes finally landing on Birr. “I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

He already had several ideas on that score, though he knew better than to voice them in Melirria’s demure presence. Perhaps there would be time later. At the moment, he downed the rest of

his ale, tossed a few coins onto the table, and stood, forcing his friends to do the same.

Their next adventure awaited!

LATIMAR proved easy to find but difficult to reach, for he had chosen to occupy the Unrested Plains, once the site of a legendary battle and still said to be haunted by the ghosts of the armies slain there. The Plains were nestled amid the Snowfangs, and the four friends—with their sultry new companion—braved ice and snow and bitter wind climbing among those peaks to find the path through them to the valley hidden at their center. Only Melirria's two animal companions, the spotted great cat Stalker and the horned owl Swoop, seemed happy on the trek, though Birr's shaggy warhorse Ironbite bore it all with little complaint.

Passing onto the Plains was as if slipping from nightmare to dream, the air going at once from frigid to warm, from sharp to sweet. The clouds that hung over the Snowfangs, dispensing their steady volleys of hail and sleet, dared not cross the peaks' ringed border, creating an oasis of blue sky and sun. Looking down upon the gently rolling greenery there, Birr found it hard to reconcile such an idyllic spot with its fearsome history and blighted reputation.

"Do not be deceived by its peaceful demeanor," Sorjax warned as they stood together, studying

the calm before them. "Evil does not always sit upon the surface. The darkness here goes deep, and though it may slumber now, it is never far from waking."

Nathander laughed, tossing back his curls. "I will step lightly, then, so as not to disturb its rest," he promised, and beside him Melirria smiled, charmed by him as always. Birr took their sorcerous friend's advice more seriously, but even so, it was difficult not to laugh as they rode down out of Winter and into Spring. Even Ironbite neighed in pleasure, clearly pleased to leave frost and frozen hooves behind.

The Unrested Plains were not so large as to hide the vast array of tents and lean-tos occupying its center—or the palatial structure at the collection's heart. Though it too was made of cloth, it had many peaks to it, as if someone had sewn several of the shelters together, and a bright orange banner waved from the highest point, displaying a strange creature that appeared half serpent and half great cat.

"It is the image of the dread Coilclaw," Sorjax informed us with a frown. "Latimar has taken the creature for his totem. I do not know if that is merely hubris or if he in fact has such a beast under his control. If the latter, we must be wary, for it is said to be a fearsome foe."

"So am I," Birr boasted, pounding his broad chest with both fists, and the others smiled. Jessinda's gaze lingered on his impressive

musculature, he noticed, and their luscious companion blushed when he winked at her. There had been no time for dalliance during their trek thus far, though she had lavished attention on him. Meantime, her open admiration fueled his desire and buoyed his spirit as they galloped down out of the mountains and across the plains.

They were still well distant from the tents—for the Unrested Plains proved larger than they had first appeared—when Nathander reined in, gesturing for the others to do the same. “We cannot simply ride in and seize the Cuff,” he warned, his long face intent. “Latimar is powerful himself but his followers are fanatic and will tear us apart if we so openly despoil him. We must find a way to take the artifact and escape unnoticed.”

Melirria frowned, studying the sea of tent tops just visible ahead. “I could transform myself,” the lithe druid admitted, green eyes studying their distant objective, “and, with Swoop, fly in unnoticed. But if I encountered resistance I might be unable to secure the Cuff alone.”

Nathander rested a hand upon her arm, and the others pretended not to notice how she flushed with pleasure at his touch. “No, we cannot risk you,” he insisted. “Especially since, if the tales are true, we will need Sorjax to defeat whatever protections Latimar has placed upon himself and his possessions. We must all go together.”

“Can we not pose as supplicants and enter thus undetected?” Birr rumbled. “If he seeks followers, surely he would welcome more, especially ones as mighty as ourselves.”

Nathander considered that, rubbing his chin as he thought. “Yes,” he agreed at last. “Appealing to his ego would most likely distract him from any danger. In order to appear truly under his thrall, however, we would need to enter unarmed, visibly placing our safety in his hands.”

Birr bristled at the thought of laying down his weapons, nor did Sorjax or even Melirria seem happy with the notion. Nathander merely laughed at their obvious concern.

“Fear not,” the rogue assured them, green eyes alight with mischief. “I said ‘appear.’ We will not be powerless, though we might seem so.”

Birr grunted, and Sorjax and Melirria both nodded. Jessinda seemed content to follow their lead, and so it was that, a short while later, they rode in among the tent city, empty hands raised high, backs and belts and saddles bereft of anything that could cause harm.

“We are pilgrims, come to worship at the feet of the mighty Latimar!” Nathander called out in a carrying tone. “We have traveled far to offer ourselves, body and soul, into his care!”

People had emerged to watch them, and at the rogue’s words a

mighty cheer went up. "You are welcome, friends!" one older man called. "You will find peace here, as we have!" another cried out. "Rejoice and be saved!" a woman declared.

Riding among them, hands reaching out to pat his arms and sides in support, Birr could not help noticing that something seemed off in everyone's gaze. He glanced sidelong at Sorjax, and the mage nodded.

"They are ensorcelled," he said softly, his own blue eyes narrowed in a scowl. "Latimar has enthralled them somehow. We must be wary when we come into his presence."

That took some time, winding between tents, but finally they reached the tent palace and reined in. A young man took their reins as they dismounted, frowning thoughtfully at Stalker where the great cat curled around Melirria's legs, Swoop perched on her shoulder.

"Only supplicants may enter," the youth warned. "All other creatures must remain behind." He glanced over them before nodding. "And you must be unarmed, but I see you have arrived in such a state."

"What need have we of mortal weapons, when Latimar's blessing is upon us?" Nathander replied, and if his tone was a trifle mocking the youth did not or pretended not to notice, merely lifting the tent flap and waving them through.

IF Birr had expected the interior to be the same plain canvas as the exterior, he was quickly disabused of that notion. Tapestries and silks had been hung from the tent's sturdy crossbeams, creating heavily textured, richly patterned walls. Filmy curtains crisscrossed the space, dividing it into smaller chambers. The ground was hidden beneath rich rugs and sturdy candelabras, tall as a man, produced a golden light throughout, gleaming off fine wooden furnishings' gold and silver ornaments. It was as if someone had constructed an elaborate palace, only to close off its windows and then hide any evidence of its true construction.

Another youth was waiting for them just inside, and gestured for them to follow, leading through the silken maze toward a vast chamber at the tent's center. The large space was directly beneath the tent's highest peak, its top lost in shadow, and an ornate, faceted gold lantern hung from that point, shedding its light onto the massive gold throne there—and the man sprawled upon it, awaiting them with one hand upon the head of the stunningly beautiful dark-haired woman at his feet and the other idly swirling a gem-encrusted goblet filled with blood-red wine.

This, then, was the famed Latimar. Birr studied the man as they approached and dropped to their knees a few paces away. Though not tall, the self-styled prophet was broadly built, and his rich robes

did not conceal the thick slabs of muscle across his chest and shoulders, or the way his arms barely fit within his sleeves. Between those and the scars crisscrossing fists and face, Birr knew the man had been a brawler, and a successful one, at that.

What, then, had changed to make him into this petty despot instead?

Perhaps it was the finely wrought cuff upon his wrist. It covered much of Latimar's forearm, the metal glinting coolly in the lantern's light, the gems set there winking in blues and greens. Birr thought the work as delicate and lovely as any he'd seen before, yet there was a sense of great age about the jeweled accessory—and of great power.

"Greetings, supplicants!" Latimar's voice matched his appearance, being rough and gravelly. "Welcome to my little oasis, where all who wish it live in peace and harmony!" Though his words were heavy with scorn, there was an undercurrent to them, like an echo, that tugged at Birr's heart. What would it be like, he wondered, to give himself over to such a master? To lay down his arms for good and live at peace? He was not worthy of such happiness, he knew. And yet he found he yearned for it with all his being.

A sharp pain in his ear almost made him clap a hand to his head.

It vanished at once, however, and Birr found he could think clearly again. Beside him, Sorjax nodded. Ah. So that was how Latimar had gained his many followers!

Nathander had bent forward until his forehead touched the rugs at his feet. "You honor us, noble Latimar, by allowing us into your presence and inviting us into your domain," the rogue declared, and for an instant Birr worried that his friend had truly succumbed to this charlatan's trickery. Then Nathander glanced back at them and winked.

"We want nothing more than to pledge ourselves to your service."

Sorjax was already performing the same deep bow, and Birr followed along, as did Jessinda. Melirria hesitated, frowning, until

Nathander reached out and yanked her down beside him.

Fortunately, Latimar did not seem to notice. "Yes, yes, you are most welcome," he told them, waving his goblet about. "However, you will need to offer up tokens of your loyalty. You will join the others and ride out from this valley, seeking riches with which to demonstrate your faith." His eyes settled on slim and lovely Melirria, and lush, seductive Jessinda, and a leer stretched his thick lips. "Though there are other ways to serve."

"Ah, alas, milord," Nathander replied, ever quick-witted. "We



have all taken vows of chastity in your honor and cannot now forsake them, lest we besmirch your good name.”

The cult leader frowned. “Such a waste.” But he waved the little group away, his attention already wandering back to the pleasures at hand. “Very well, then. Begone, until you have that with which to display your love.”

Rising to their feet, the group backed away. Once beyond the wide central chamber, they found the same youth waiting to guide them to the tent’s entrance.

“By Sylerri’s Healing Springs!” Melirria burst out as soon as they were in open air again. “I could feel his foul touch upon my mind and soul, like a dark blight attempting to corrupt my very essence!”

“I don’t think it was your essence he was after,” Nathander told her with a knowing wink, quickly skipping away, hands up, to fend off the attack that nearly followed. “Sorry, I’m sorry! But yes, I felt his presence as well.” He dipped his head toward Sorjax. “Thank you, my friend. Without your aid, I fear I might have fallen under his spell.”

The mage nodded, though he seemed distracted. “Yes, the protection charm worked better than expected,” he admitted. “I had feared it would not be able to cover us all effectively.”

“What do we do now?” Jessinda asked, interrupting his thoughts. If she was as disquieted by the cultist’s attentions, she did not show

it. “That was the artifact we seek, correct?”

There seemed little need to answer that last question, but the first bore heavy thinking. “Let us survey the area and take the measure of his followers,” Birr suggested after a moment. “That may present ideas on how to obtain the item we seek.”

No one objected, and they soon split into two groups, Birr and Sorjax going one way with Jessinda following while Nathander and Melirria went in the other direction. “You seem troubled,” Birr commented to his friend as they began making their way through the strange tent village, keeping his voice down so only the mage would hear. “What is amiss?”

Sorjax shrugged. “I do not know, in truth. Only . . . my charm only worked on you after I jabbed you in the ear. I suspect Melirria’s own faith protected her far more than I did. Jessinda and Nathander, however . . . well, it is lucky I underestimated the spell’s potency or their own mental fortitude, I suppose.”

Birr glanced over his shoulder at the beautiful woman trailing them. For an instant, her eyes seemed almost to glow like Stalker’s, gold in the first tendrils of dusk. Then she smiled at him, a slow, sensual expression, and he forgot any other concerns.

THEY were halfway round, by Birr’s estimation, when he caught sight of a woman nearly

his height, broad-shouldered and well-muscled, with thick black hair in a heavy plait down her back. For an instant, he froze, blinking to clear the memory, yet still she remained, hefting two large buckets yoked together. "By Jawbone's teeth!" he declared, barreling forward as Sorjax struggled to keep up and Jessinda broke into a trot behind. "You there!"

The woman stopped as if frozen, staring at Birr as he approached. Up close, there was no mistaking the strong, chiseled features, deep-set eyes, proud nose—or the azure tattoo that covered her right cheek. "You are clanless?" he stated in disbelief, but the ink upon her face did not lie. "Whence came you?" For surely his own tribe would never have cast out one such as this proud female warrior, even before its untimely demise!

She lifted her chin, meeting his eyes, her lips twitching into a scowl. "What matters that now?" she replied. Her gaze flicked to his jaw and the black ink permanently staining it. "So, a Jawbone. I have not seen any of your ilk in many a year. You are far from the Embodied Steppes."

Sorjax had caught up to him by then, Jessinda at his side. "A friend of yours?" the mage asked, and Birr was forced to shake his head.

"We have not met before, yet she is of my people." Or had been, before she had been shunned by whatever tribe had birthed her. She was the first steppe-walker he

had seen since escaping the devastation, however, and so Birr set aside his own reservations and held out his hand. "Birr Blackjaw."

"Riana," she replied, clasping his wrist in proper fashion. The way her lips twisted said she knew full well the shame she was admitting to by omitting her affiliation, but she lifted her chin, daring him to comment. "What brings you here, you and your friends?"

Birr frowned, studying her. Her gaze seemed clear, her actions decisive, unlike most of those around them. "We came seeking guidance, purpose, and a place to call home," he answered after a moment. "We had heard of this Latimar and the society he was building, where all were welcome." Releasing her hand, he glanced around them, studying the people from many kingdoms who moved past unheeding. "It appears the tales were true."

Riana snorted. "Oh, yes. Many sheep from all herds," she agreed. "Meek and mild and easily guided. If that is your idea of paradise, you have indeed found it." She shifted the yoke upon her shoulders, water sloshing in each bucket. "I'd best be getting these back."

"Perhaps I will see you around," Birr offered, and she gave that barest nod before stomping off without a backward glance. For his part, however, Birr watched her go, all but entranced.

So focused was he, he did not notice Jessinda gliding up beside

him until he felt her hand upon his arm, her touch cool yet sending tendrils of heat through him. "I would not have thought you so taken with a woman of such rough aspect," she remarked, her tone sharp and vaguely sulky. "Was I mistaken in gauging your interests?"

Shaken from his thoughts, Birr glanced down at her, that glowing gaze, those soft and inviting curves. "No," he replied, his voice going husky with desire. "You did not. It is merely that I have not seen another of my people in such a long time."

"Of course." The smile Jessinda granted him was bright as the sun. "It is always good to remember one's roots." She had not removed her hand, he noted, and in fact snuggled in against his side as if taking shelter there. It was a shelter he was more than happy to provide.

Sorjax spoiled the moment by clearing his throat. "Perhaps we should continue on," the mage suggested, and Birr nodded, unable to argue. The mission came first.

He was pleased, however, that Jessinda stayed all but molded to his hip as they resumed their journey.

IT was dark by the time they met up with Nathander and Melirria, back where they had left their horses. "This place is a maze," the druidess remarked upon their reunion. "There seems little reason to its structure, and most of the people here seem dazed, barely able to answer the simplest questions."

"They are not in their right minds," her companion agreed. "Whatever Latimar almost did to us worked well enough on the rest, and either he somehow renews the compulsion regularly or once laid it remains indefinitely." He scratched at his long chin. "It may make our task easier, however, since few here will have the wit to question or oppose us."

"Yes, only Latimar himself, though that may well be enough," Sorjax replied. "We are best waiting until dead of night, when he is most likely to sleep. And we can but hope that he removes that cuff before taking his rest."

Any other remark was cut short by the growling of Birr's stomach, easily audible to his companions. "We should find food and somewhere to take a moment's rest," he suggested, peering about them. "I did see several firepits, back that way."

The others nodded, though Nathander hid a laugh, and allowed Birr to lead the way, retracing his steps until he came to one of those spaces mentioned. Several people were roasting various meats there over the fire, and baking bread and tubers within its coals. He spied Riana among the rest, two men beside her who could have been Birr's cousins if not for their thick beards. Upon seeing him, the trio pushed through the crowd, stopping mere feet away.

"So," the larger of the men stated, thick arms folded across an

impressive chest. “Riana said she had spied a Jawbone here, though I could scarcely believe it. You’re a long way from the Steppes, eh?”

“As are you,” Birr replied, hands on his hips. “I had not expected to encounter kin here, either. In truth, I had given up hope of ever seeing any of our kind again.” He offered his hand. “I am Birr Blackjaw.”

“Harl,” the man replied, accepting Birr’s clasp with a hand every bit as big and just as callused. “And this is Iargen.” Both had the same tattoo as Riana, marking them as clanless outcasts. Yet, in the moment, Birr did not care. He was thrilled to see others who had been raised on the Embodied Steppes as he had, and in the same traditions.

All three already had food in hand, he noted, rough wooden platters piled with meat and bread and potatoes, and they waved behind them toward a table. “Find yourself some food and join us,” Harl suggested, nodding toward an open space beyond.

“Should we leave you to commune with your people in peace?” Melirria asked once the trio had departed. “We would not wish to intrude.”

Nathander disagreed, however. “We should stick together,” the rogue argued. “And your friends aren’t under Latimar’s spell, which means they could be a source of information—or a potential threat.”

Birr had noted that as well—he was certain he could handle any one of the three in a fight, and possibly two, but did not want to assume he could best them all at once. Now he nodded. “Aye, best you join us.” He grinned, having just reached the table and being handed a food-laden platter and a leather flagon of ale. “Now let us eat!”

They found Harl, Iargen, and Riana seated upon the grass and squatted beside them, all soon eating in companionable silence. It was only after they had cleared their platters that Harl spoke.

“You said you had given up on seeing anyone again,” he said slowly, picking food from his teeth with a long, slim, needle-like blade. “Yet when I last rode the Steppes, there were tribesmen aplenty. What has befallen our people since?”

Scowling, Birr rubbed at his jaw. He did not want to tell this tale, yet he knew they deserved to hear it. “It was the Maelstrom,” he answered at last. “They fell upon us like locusts, striking unawares during the height of the Long Night, and cut our people down like wheat at harvest.”

Iargen, who had stayed mostly silent, gasped. “Those fiends!” His voice was higher than expected. “And on our most sacred eve!”

Birr nodded. “I was battling several of them,” he explained, “when one landed a lucky blow to my temple. Next I knew, I was coming

to beneath a pile of corpses. I dug my way out and beheld only death, as far as the eye could see." The vicious raiders had clearly thought him dead as well and had heaped him there with the rest before riding off to despoil the tribes' homes and sacred spaces. Remembering it all now, he shook his head. "I vowed to ride after them and avenge our people, but I was still dazed. I found a horse still able to carry me but collapsed across his mane. When I recovered, we were far from the Steppes. I decided then to recover my full strength before seeking vengeance."

He glanced up from under his hair, afraid he might see scorn written upon his kinsmen's faces. Yet all he read there was sympathy and shared grief. "You did well," Riana assured him roughly. "Adding your name to the roll of the dead would have served our people not at all. While you live, you still have a chance to avenge them."

"Yes." Birr cleared his throat. "Perhaps the four of us—?" Harl was already shaking his head, however.

"When I was struck from my tribe's song," the bearded man said, "I swore never to step foot upon the Steppes again, by Razor-skull's hammer and Thunderfist's spear. I cannot break that vow, not even for the people who cast me out before meeting their own dark fate."

Iargen and Riana nodded. "We

have made a new life for ourselves here," she explained. "And it is not so bad—if you like sheep."

Nathander leaned forward. "Yes, we noticed a certain . . . lack of awareness," he commented carefully. "Yet you three appear unaffected."

"As do you," Harl replied with a knowing grin through his beard. "Latimar's power overwhelms the weak and the unwary. We are neither. We stay of our own accord, not because he has enslaved us but because, as long as we are willing to labor like the rest and to defend this place, we are welcome and need not fear attack, betrayal, or exile."

Riana frowned, tossing her plait back over her shoulder. "Is that not why you said you had come, for just such a refuge?" Her dark eyes were sharp, and Birr thought they had narrowed with suspicion.

Fortunately, Nathander answered for them. "It is indeed," he agreed charmingly, spreading his hands wide, his eyes all but aglow. "And we are glad to find others here with their wits still about them, for life among only sheep would be dull indeed." They all laughed at that, and Birr relaxed a little. He noticed, however, that their three new friends stayed alert for any trouble, so chose to do the same.

"We had best find a place to camp for the night," Sorjax suggested when they all eventually stood, brushing leaves and grass from their clothes, and gathered

their empty platters and flagons. “In the morning, we can ask about finding or establishing more permanent accommodations.”

“There should be space around that way, out toward the horse pens,” Iargen offered, pointing to one side. “All the areas closest to Latimar are long since claimed, of course, but the advantage of this valley is that there is still plenty of room to expand.”

After bidding them a good night, the trio sauntered off. “Do you think they bought it?” Nathander asked once they were gone.

Birr frowned. “I would not want to bet our lives upon that,” he replied. “Best keep sharp—and find a site different from the one they suggested.”

Suiting action to thought, the five of them ventured in the other direction and, with a little walking and some small effort, located a quiet stretch of level ground thick with soft moss. There they stretched out to nap and wait until the moon was high and they could enact their plan.

Lying there, arms behind his head, staring up at the stars, Birr thought about the recent encounter. He had assumed he was the last of his people left alive. But if those three had survived, clearly having left the Embodied Steppes before the Maelstrom’s cowardly attack, others might have as well. Perhaps even some from his own tribe.

If he could find them, Birr realized

for the first time that he might have a chance at something even greater than revenge. He might, with Jawbone’s blessing, be able to restore his people.

The thought warmed him against the cool night, and he smiled as he shut his eyes and forced himself to sleep.

BIRR awoke to a hand upon his arm and was halfway to reaching for a weapon when he recognized the gentle touch and the soft voice whispering his name. “It is time,” the voice added, and he blinked, looking up into the sweet visage and emerald eyes of Melirria.

“Nathander has gone ahead to scout,” the druidess added as Birr sat up, shaking his head to clear the last of the cobwebs from his mind. He rose to his feet and stretched, limbering up as Melirria moved on to wake Sorjax and finally Jessinda. By the time she had, the rogue had rejoined them.

“The coast is clear,” he stated quietly, his eyes a-glimmer in the dark. “Evidently Latimar trusts in the quagmire of followers he has settled around him and posts no other guard.”

“What is our plan, then?” Birr asked as the five of them began their march back toward the cult leader’s massive tent, moving as quietly as they could to avoid waking those slumbering all around them. “Simply steal inside and claim the cuff, by force if need be?”

Sorjax shrugged. “We have no better notion,” the mage admitted. “Though I suspect the greater trick may lie in escaping this valley upon taking that artifact.”

They continued on in silence, crouching and staying to the shadows cast by the various other shelters about. It was a clear sky but moonless, the stars above doing little to alleviate the dark, and Birr took that as a good omen.

Right up to the moment a tall warrior woman stepped into their path. “You!” Riana snarled, a sturdy branch clenched in her fists. “You did this!”

Birr frowned at his distant kinswoman. “Of what do you speak?” Had she somehow divined their larcenous intent?

She glared at him. “Do not dissemble! We bade you welcome, and this is how you repay us? Traitor!” And she charged him, makeshift club held high.

He reacted instinctively, yanking his axe free of its sheath and meeting her attack with a swipe of his own, the heavy axe blade shearing clean through the branch a short span above her hands. Riana gaped at her truncated weapon, then at his own.

“You bring weapons here to this place of peace,” she said, venom dripping from her words, “and conceal them for some ill intent. No wonder you felt the need to silence Harl. You fiends!”

She leaped forward again, casting the branch aside to lash out

with fists alone. Birr followed suit, switching his axe to his off hand and punching her full in the jaw. The impact rocked her head back and halted her lunge, sending her reeling backward. Not giving her a moment to recover, he followed after, striking her twice more in rapid succession. When she hit the ground, she was already unconscious.

“What did she mean about Harl?” he asked the others, but they all shook their heads. Even Nathander, the only one of them to have been moving about alone earlier.

“Most likely they quarreled and he stormed off,” the rogue suggested. “Then she got it in her head that we were to blame. Regardless, we’d best continue on.”

They did so, Birr’s axe now visible in his hands, though at least Sorjax’s spell still covered his sword. Upon reaching Latimar’s tent, they found it unguarded, neither of the previous young pages in sight.

“Stand lookout,” Nathander told Jessinda. “Cry out like an owl if anyone approaches too closely.”

She blinked slowly, her long lashes fluttering. “I would feel far safer staying with you.”

But the rogue shook his head. “It will be too dangerous. And we will need you here.”

Not giving her further time to argue, he ducked beneath the tent flap and disappeared within. Melirria followed at once, then

Sorjax. Birr took a step but Jesinda grabbed his arm.

"Please," she pleaded, pressing her warm, supple body against him. "Do not leave me alone!"

He did not wish to be parted from her, but he was also not about to let his friends face the cultist alone. "I will return soon," he promised, reluctantly freeing himself from her grasp. "Stay here, stay quiet, and call out if you are in danger." Then he slipped away after the others.

The tent felt colder, darker, and more ominous all cast in shadow. Birr could not see his own hand before him, not until he heard Sorjax mutter something and a small blue light appeared overhead. "Come," the mage told Birr. "Nathander and Melirria are somewhere up ahead."

Birr followed his friend, and soon the foursome was reunited. "Up ahead is where we met him before," Nathander informed them, gesturing ahead. "I would guess his bedchamber to be close by. We should fan out and search. Shout in case of danger, or if you locate either Latimar or the cuff."

He strode off, the shadows swallowing him up. Birr could see Melirria torn between following her heart or his instructions but at last, with a sigh, she ventured off in a different direction. Birr nodded to Sorjax and chose a third direction to explore, axe at the ready.

THERE was no way of telling where he went in that darkness, so Birr merely stumbled about, seeking anything that might guide him to their target. At one point he became tangled in sheets or tapestries or some other fabric and, his temper flaring, lashed out, his axe slicing cleanly through the barely seen cloth. The way became easier after that, though he knew the signs of his devastation would be plainly visible when dawn came.

At last he cleaved aside another cloth and stepped through into a wide space occupied only by a heap of furs at its center. This, then, must be the cult leader's bed. Yet where was the man himself?

Approaching the large pile, Birr was startled when a portion of it began to shift, an odd hissing reaching him that was both dry and sharp. As he watched, the mound's perimeter unwound, the sharp clatter of scales sliding across one another filling the chamber. Soon a strange creature towered above him, its body that of a massive serpent but its head furred and whiskered, with tufted triangular ears and almondine slit-eyed eyes.

This could only be the fearsome Coilclaw!

It snarled at him, rearing back like a cobra before launching itself, its fanged jaws open wide. Birr dove out of the way, rolling to his feet, and lashed out with his axe, the weapon's curving edge biting deep into the creature's side. It

yowled in rage, its enormous tail that was the size of a large child and barbed like a scorpion nearly impaling him, but Birr twisted aside and lopped off the enormous stinger, spinning to score a long cut across the beast's upper length as well. The Coilclaw writhed in agony, its great head lunging again and again as it attempted to rend him with its dagger-like teeth. But each time Birr dodged or twisted or parried, cutting the creature in response.

After a minute of this, the Coilclaw pulled away as if assessing. Birr was not fooled, however. He could see the malice dancing in its wide eyes. Thus he was ready when the tail suddenly wrapped around him. Dropping his sword, he took his axe in both hands and chopped with all his might.

And the creature screamed as Birr's mighty blow cleaved it in two.

Both halves spasmed, and he ignored the lower to slice again at the upper, carving another segment from its serpentine form. The Coilclaw was no longer able to hold itself up, and slithered across the ground instead, its only intent to bite and gouge and chew and devour.

Retrieving his sword, Birr met it with both weapons, the sword stabbing through one eye and the axe slashing the other.

The Coilclaw screamed again, blind and truncated, but already its cries were losing strength. It

still thrashed about, and Birr was still wary, for a wounded beast was twice as deadly. He waited for his moment. Then he suddenly stepped into the creature's path, just to one side of that deadly mouth. Raising his sword high, Birr brought the weapon down, spear-like, to impale the Coilclaw's head at its peak, blade piercing skull and driving deep into the brain.

The creature bellowed, twitched once, and collapsed.

Birr did not give himself time to rest or to admire his handiwork. After all, he had dispatched the guardian, but where was its master?

He discovered the answer to that when a pair of arms wrapped around him. They were like coils of iron, utterly unyielding, and Birr struggled to free himself, his own limbs pinned to his side, sword and axe cold against his thighs.

"So," that rough voice said behind his right shoulder. "I thought I might have visitors this night. Shame it is not your comely companions. And sad that you would do unwonted violence upon my beloved pet."

Birr scowled, redoubling his efforts, but it was no use. Latimar was too strong and had the better position. He could not break free.

Which meant he would need to use his head.

"Sorry to disappoint," he growled—and slammed his head back. He felt the crunch of the man's nose

shattering, and Latimar cried out, his hold slackening. Birr tore himself loose and spun, axe sweeping in a lethal arc—

—before slamming, with a loud clang, into Latimar’s metal cuff. The weapon was stopped cold, and the impact jarred up Birr’s arm, causing him to lose his hold on the axe. It clattered to the ground and was lost from view.

“You are not the first to seek my death,” Latimar warned as he and Birr circled each other, both in a half-crouch, arms wide, hands open and loose. “You shall not be the last. But you will not live to see any future attempts.”

The cultist sprang at Birr then, surprisingly light on his feet, trying for another grapple. Birr slapped the man’s hands away, receiving a jolt upon contact like handling an electric eel. They continued to circle, each wary of the other.

It was only when vines shot from the sides to capture Latimar’s wrists and ankles that Birr knew at least one of his friends had found them.

“By the carnelian gaze of Tarubai,

let your limbs lose their strength and your mind its clarity!” Sorjax called out, the merest edge of his magic enough to set Birr’s hair on end.

Latimar only laughed.

“Is that your best, little mage?” he taunted. “While I wear this cuff, your incantations cannot reach me!” He flexed, and the vines snapped like bowstrings. “Nor can these plants hold me!”

In that moment, while he was distracted, Birr yanked his sword free and lunged, the blade’s razor tip aimed at Latimar’s throat.

The cult leader’s hand snapped forward, catching the blade mid-thrust.

The gems on the cuff winked, aglow all on their own, and Birr found he could not advance the sword, despite all his strength.

Sorjax emerged from the shadows, a bolt of searing light streaking from his fingers to strike at the cult leader, but when Birr could see again, he was unsurprised to find Latimar unharmed.

Nathander leaped in next, his twinned daggers spearing in from either side, only to be rebuffed



fully, the rogue tossed aside like a leaf on the wind.

Latimar laughed, twisting about to study the others, Birr's sword still trapped in his hand. "None of you are a match for me. Submit now, and I will show mercy. Do not, and I will be forced to eliminate you."

Birr gritted his teeth and pushed harder, trying to drive the sword in by mere will alone. Melirria summoned more vines, and Sorjax another spear of energy. Nathander readied his daggers for a second attempt.

Then, out of nowhere, a figure appeared behind Latimar, hefting something large, golden, and many-limbed.

Clang!

The heavy gold candelabra slammed into the cult leader's head, knocking him to the ground with a grunt. He raised his hand, the cuff winking and gleaming there—

The newcomer struck him again. And again. Until the great and famous Latimar was sprawled lifelessly upon the rugs there, black blood seeping into the rich fibers.

"Well." Jessinda—for it was she—lowered her makeshift weapon. "It seems he was prepared for all manner of deadly device—but not for an attack by his own furnishings."

"Indeed." Sorjax stepped forward, rubbing his chin. "Clearly, a flaw in his defenses. Well played, madam."

She beamed at him, and Birr felt

his blood heat in a manner that had nothing to do with combat. "Thank you, good sir. And all of you." Her eyes were upon the cuff the dead man wore, her winsome form already bending toward it, her delicate hand stretching out. "With this, I can finally free my mistress and her family!"

Jessinda was quick, but in this case Melirria proved quicker—the druidess swooped in and tugged the bejeweled cuff free. "This object is a threat to any around it," she warned, tucking it away in her pouch. "Yet by my lady Sylerri's grace, I may withstand its evil lure. I will ensure it is not misused or misplaced on the way to Emberwild."

For an instant, it looked to Birr as if Jessinda might object. Then she smiled. "A wise precaution." She shivered, though in truth it was not cold. "But perhaps we should be on our way quickly, before anyone finds their patron dead at our hands."

That was easily agreed, and moments later they were following Jessinda back the way she had come. Nathander did pause to collect handfuls of gems and gold, but that was merely a bonus for an artifact retrieved and a cruel tyrant overthrown.

As they stepped out into the fresh night air, Birr could not help but wonder what would become of Riana, Harl, and Iargen now.

RECLAIMING their horses, they stole quietly across the Unrested Plains until Nathander and Sorjax judged them far enough from Latimar's demesne to mount up and kick their steeds to a full gallop. From there they raced for the valley's far side, hurtling up one of the Snowfangs' icy passes until the tents vanished from view. Only then did Sorjax slow his mount to a careful walk.

"We should take shelter until dawn," the mage advised. "Too many creatures may stalk these peaks, and I would feel calmer were the sun to shine down upon us and any such dangers in our path."

The others nodded and Birr dismounted, trusting Ironbite to stay with the others. "I will find us a place," he promised, stalking forth. Though his own home had rarely seen snow except along the tallest steppes, still he was well accustomed to cold and to wind-carved cliffs, moving easily through ice-choked passes and discarding at a glance many openings that would have trapped a less seasoned traveler. At last Birr spied a tall, narrow cleft whose dark shadows promised a deeper space beyond.

Creeping forward carefully, axe and sword in hand, he slipped through the opening, pausing to let his eyes adjust. After a moment he could see well enough to discern a wide cavern, tall enough for the horses and broad enough to accommodate them all. Several

bones around the edges suggested a ravenous previous occupant, yet they were old and yellowed, and the space had that dusty smell of a place not recently used.

It took less time to retrace his steps, and soon Birr had rejoined his friends. "This way." Taking Ironbite's reins, he led them to his discovery.

"An excellent spot," Nathander commented once they were all within and had a small fire started in one corner, where an outcropping hid it from the outside world. "Well done, old friend."

Birr nodded—and froze as a gentle hand came to rest upon his bicep. "Yes, very cozy," Jessinda agreed, those amber eyes warming him more than any fire, her slow smile promising far greater delights. "If only it were more private." With a trilling laugh she moved away, accepting the water-skin Sorjax held out. Birr watched her tilt her beautiful face back, the stream of water leaping to her full lips, and gulped. What was it about this woman that held him so in thrall? It was not as if he had not gazed upon great beauties before! Yet he spent the night seeing Jessinda every time he closed his eyes, and dreaming of all the things her sultry gaze promised if they were only alone.

THE next morning dawned cold and clear, good for traveling. After washing up as best they could, the quintet set out once more.

“We are a long way from Emberwild,” Jessinda said, having to shout over the wind that bit at them through their clothes. “It lies there, by the Razorcliffs.” She pointed to another mountain range far across the land, only visible because of its great height and their own. Her lips trembled. “I worry that, if we must continue at this pace, we will arrive too late to save them. Perhaps if I took the cuff and rode ahead, I might allow them to fend off the horrors until you could arrive and dispatch the threat once and for all?”

Birr considered that a sound plan but the others were already shaking their heads. “We could not possibly let you throw yourself into solitary danger, no matter how laudable your loyalty to your mistress and her family,” Nathander told her, only the twinkle in his green eyes suggesting anything besides untarnished truth. “We will all go together, and thus all arrive as one, ready to face any peril in unison.”

Jessinda harrumphed and tossed her mane of hair back but did not argue further.

Later, however, when they paused in the shelter of a standing circle to consume a hasty meal, she found her way to Birr’s side. “Your friends are kind,” the lovely maiden told him, pressing the length of her body to his in the lee of one stone. “But surely, with you at my side, that would be enough to defeat all the forces

arrayed against us, and we could move more quickly beside? There is also the matter of that privacy I spoke of before,” and her hand caressed his chest. “Should we ride out ahead, we would doubtless find ample time to . . . dally.”

Birr smiled down at her, his large hand draping possessively across her hip. “Indeed, I would love nothing more,” he assured her, drinking in her beauty as her body’s heat ignited his own. “Yet I could not abandon my friends and would fear for their safety if I were not with them, even though they are each puissant in their own right.” He smiled. “But fear not, once we have rescued your mistress we will have time for that dalliance we both crave.”

She blinked up at him under her long, thick lashes, the hint of a pout upon her lips, but at last she sighed and nodded before rising upon tiptoes to brush those same lips against his weathered cheek. “I look forward to that, mighty Birr, and bid you dream about it in anticipation.” She sashayed back toward her horse and he watched her go with undisguised lust.

AS Jessinda had predicted, their trek across the land was not quick. Though they did their best to make haste, still the quintet was slowed time and again by various dangers, geologic obstacles, and meteorological hazards. They lost several days fighting past the Frost Gnomes of Indegard and more

battling clear of the Eternal Skirmish, were forced to slow as they maneuvered around the Golem Lord and his army of unliving mechanical warrior beasts, and had to backtrack at one point when they slew the Noxious Spider-slug and, in doing so, unleashed its toxic fumes across the entire series of chasms it had claimed as its lair.

Thus it was weeks later when they finally crested a tall hill and their lovely guide was able to say at last, "Behold, Emberwild!"

Peering down at the narrow valley below, Birr was forced to admit that the place suited its name, for it resembled nothing so much as a dale that had been swept clean by fire and then allowed to run wild out of the ash. What few trees he saw were covered in thick vines which also concealed much of the ground, allowing only the occasional tough blade of grass or scraggly flower to poke through. Severe-looking shrubs stood unmolested, presumably because their twisted branches and wickedly pointed thorns fended off even the most persistent rival vegetation. The entire expanse had a dark, gloomy look, as if the colors had been bled away and shadows had filled in the empty spaces.

At the valley's far end, with its back up against the mountains, stood a single massive old house, its tall columns like great tusks in a gaping maw, the pair of windows atop its steep roof like a judgmental gaze. Birr could not tell what

color of material the building might be, only that it appeared wan and faded along with its surroundings.

Jessinda appeared ready to kick her horse into a gallop, but Birr caught hold of the beast's reins. "Steady," he warned. "We must assess the danger afore we plunge headlong into it." He was proud of himself for showing such unusual restraint, and Sorjax nodded approval, but the lady at his side balked.

"What? We are nearly there," she cried out. "All we need do is cross the valley and wield that cuff's power to break the spell and free my mistress!" She reached out toward Melirria. "Would you deny me that honor?"

The druidess hesitated, but in all fairness she could not refuse such a noble request. With a shake of her head, white braid flying about her, she drew the enchanted item from her pouch and offered it to Jessinda.

As she accepted the potent trinket, Birr thought he saw a flash of something dark in the lovely woman's eyes, and a grin upon her inviting lips. Then it was gone, and she cradled the object to her ample chest. "Come," she said, turning her horse to the left. "The quickest path down lies this way."

They fell in behind her, but Sorjax made sure to ride up alongside Birr. "I see no signs of this army of undead," the mage whispered for his ear alone. "This worries me."

Birr nodded. He had noticed the same—nothing stirred in the valley below save the vines. “You think they lay in wait?”

His friend frowned. “Best to stay alert, just in case.” He pulled ahead and Birr took the moment to check his weapons, the sword and axe crossed upon his back and the short spear hanging from his saddle. If danger came, he would be ready.

The trail Jessinda took them toward was narrow, with many switchbacks, and they were forced to travel it single file, walking the horses carefully over loose rock and dirt. Eventually, however, they all stood upon level ground once more.

“Let us proceed slowly,” Sorjax warned. “We cannot assume the creatures have left your mistress and her family unguarded.”

The others nodded—all except Jessinda, who laughed. “They trust too much in the spell, and in the thought that no one escaped to seek help,” she answered, a smile lighting her face. “Now they will learn their error!” And she spurred her horse straight toward the manor beyond.

“Jawbone’s teeth!” Birr was after her in an instant, but while Ironbite possessed great stamina he could not outrun her swifter steed, especially carrying his master’s greater weight. Melirria caught up and passed him, Stalker bounding along beside her and Swoop sailing overhead. But even she could

not entirely erase the other woman’s lead.

By the time they caught up, Jessinda had reined in, leaping down from her horse to face the manor house’s wide marble steps. “I have returned triumphant!” she declared, raising the cuff so its fine metalwork and many jewels caught the thin light. “Behold my prize!”

And, as if summoned, the undead poured from between the columns, leaping down the steps and sweeping toward her in a great ravaging horde.

“No!” Birr tugged on his reins and Ironbite reared, lashing out with both front hooves to strike down two of the creatures. He laid about him with axe and sword even as his steed returned to the ground, cleaving heads from shoulders and kicking the bodies aside. Melirria, eyes closed and fingers clutching the talisman at her throat, called upon the nearby vines to ensnare attackers, while Sorjax hurled tiny but deadly bolts of eldritch flame and Nathander sliced and pierced with a sharp dagger and an equally sharp rapier. Yet the creatures kept coming, more and more of them.

“Get behind us!” Birr called to Jessinda, leaping down and forcing his way to her side. “Quickly!” He struck down another of the undead and was about to carve up another when something like a wave of cold swept over him, freezing him solid in an instant. He watched, unmoving but aware,

as the same fate befell his friends. But their foes were unreasoning abominations. Whence came this strange paralysis?

He had his answer when a breathtaking face swam into view, amber eyes hooded but still mesmerizing, full lips curved up in a vicious smile. "I am sorry, my love," Jessinda all but purred in his ear. "If only you had dallied with me when you had the chance." She raised her hand—Birr saw the cuff gleaming upon her wrist—and a bright flash dazzled his eyes, blinding him and stealing away all thought and emotion.

BIRR awoke to find himself bound, his arms stretched backward, hands tied together by rough rope. Whatever he was strapped to was wide, curved, and cold to the touch. He was also on his feet, and after a second, his vision cleared enough to register his friends similarly restrained against tall marble pillars. Ah. Glancing about, he saw the steps descending just before their feet, and the blighted valley stretching beyond. They were at the front of the very manor house they had sought to free.

Facing them was a veritable legion of the undead, mostly skeletons and zombies but with some gaunts and ghouls scattered among the rest. At their fore stood a strange, mismatched pair, a tall, skeletal figure in a dark hooded robe and a more curvaceous one

with familiar features and hair like burnished copper. The hooded one leaned upon a long dark staff of some strange, twisted material, so black it hurt Birr's eyes to gaze upon it more than an instant.

"So," the figure said, his voice harsh and dry like a whetstone against rusted steel. "These are the would-be saviors. How noble."

"Noble indeed," Jessinda agreed, her amber eyes alight with glee. "Without their aid I could never have procured this, my lord." She raised her wrist, still adorned by the Filigreed Cuff. Against the gloom all around, and the shadows from her companion's staff, she seemed the only spot of life and color, like a flower in the desert, with the cuff's gems at the center of that bloom.

Birr bared his teeth at his former paramour, feeling as if a fog had been lifted. "Deceiver!" he spat. "Turncoat! You have betrayed your mistress and master, and for what? To ally with this creature for the promise of power? Of glory? Of riches?"

She only laughed at him, revealing her even white teeth, yet even the sight of her chest heaving in amusement could not dilute his anger. "Oh, my poor barbarian!" she crowed, arms wrapped around her waist to control her own laughter. "So strong, so fierce, and yet so dim! There is no betrayal here, save when I turned against you. For allow me to introduce my one and only master, the mighty Tharigar Flametongue!"

Beside her, the tall figure tossed back his hood, revealing the long, gaunt features of the unliving, and swept into a bow. "At your service, and in your debt."

Birr stared, attempting to wrap his still foggy thoughts around this new revelation. Beside him, however, his friends were quicker to catch on.

"Flametongue," Sorjax repeated. "I have heard of you. A mighty sorcerer, and possessor of the last relic of a forgotten god." The mage's bright blue gaze was fixed upon Tharigar's staff. "Yet, last I knew, you were still among the living."

"Indeed," their captor replied. "Yet the years began to weigh upon me, and I feared my vitality would fade, and my acuity soon after. Thus I effected a change." He held out his arms for their inspection, turning slowly about. "Now I am preserved, my mind forever intact, my strength beyond what it was, and with many other new benefits to my undead state." A scowl touched his thin, bloodless lips. "Save one."

It was Nathander who spoke you the control you seek?" he

up. "You lack blood and a beating heart. And there are those magics which require such."

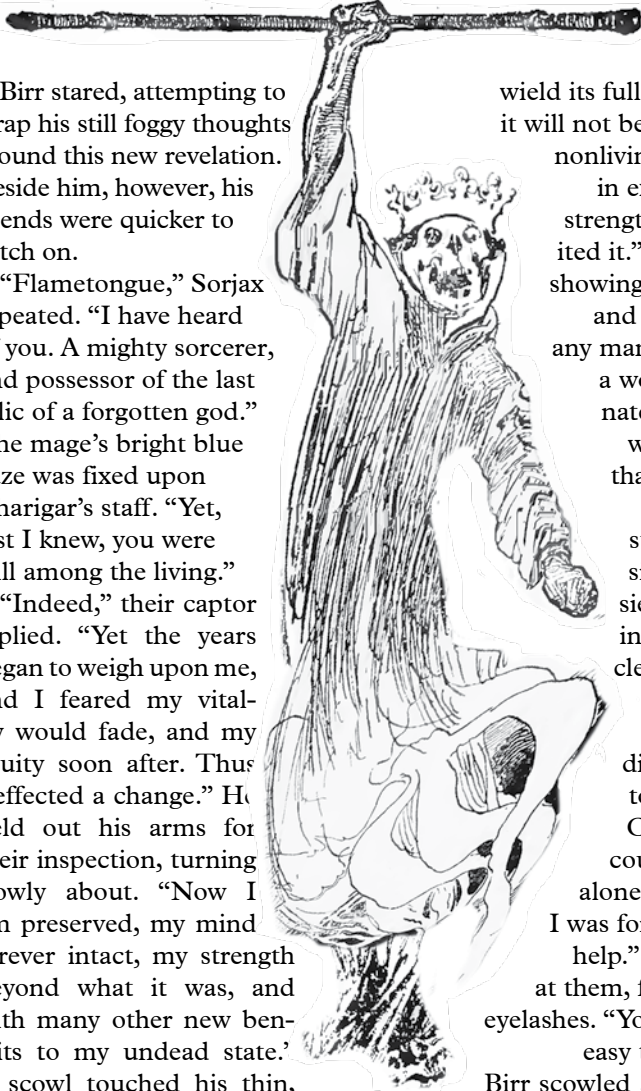
Tharigar nodded to him. "Indeed. I am still the master of this staff, but can no longer

wield its full strength, for it will not bend itself to a nonliving will. Thus, in expanding my strength, I also limited it." He grinned, showing teeth longer and sharper than any man's, more like a wolf's. "Fortunately, I found a way to resolve that quandary."

Jessinda stepped to his side and curtsied, still alluring despite her clear allegiance to the fiend.

"My master dispatched me to retrieve the Cuff. I knew I could not do so alone, however, so I was forced to enlist help." She smirked at them, fluttering her eyelashes. "You were all so easy to convince."

Birr scowled at her. "Why would that bauble grant



demanded. "It will not restore you to life!"

The sorcerer laughed, a grating sound. "No, nor would I wish that. But this is no mere bauble. Its power is far greater than any of you realized. For it is part of the mythic Crown of Tarru-Syn!"

The name struck no chord in Birr, but both Sorjax and Nathander sucked in breaths of surprise.

"Yes," Tharigar agreed, grinning. "You know the legends. Though the Crown was broken apart eons ago to prevent any from repeating its owner's folly, still its fragments have immense gifts. This one expands the powers of the mind and will, allowing its wielder to impose those on others. With it, I can bind the staff to me fully once more and regain its full use while losing none of my own might nor the fresh gifts of my undead existence." His grin widened and his eyes lit from within. "With the Cuff and the staff, I will spread my reign across the entire world!" He held his free hand out to Jessinda. "And now, if you would, my dear."

As she accepted Tharigar's hand and let him spin her into a tight, lascivious embrace, Birr reached his limit. To be spurned by the duplicitous beauty was one thing. To be captured, bound, and threatened, those were risks of this path he had chosen. But to have to watch as she gave her attentions to such a creature? No, it was not to be borne!

With a mighty heave, Birr yanked his wrists apart. The ropes holding them could not match his strength and burst with a sound like a hard rain. He was free!

As he turned to his left, reaching to free Sorjax, a screech sounded from above and a dark shape dove down from the roof, claws outstretched. It was Swoop!

A growl alerted Birr as a large, spotted form emerged from the shadows behind the pillars and bounded forward. Stalker went straight to Melirria's side, a single swipe of the great cat's claws shredding her bonds, while Swoop severed the ropes binding Nathander and Birr tore apart the ones confining Sorjax.

"Now, my friends," Birr stated, turning to face the sorcerer and his lover, and the undead surrounding them. "Let us put an end to this evil, once and for all. Jawbone!" And, with that, he leaped into the fray. Skeletons and zombies and ghouls surged forward but he smashed them away, his eyes upon a certain golden-hued vixen.

It was time for Jessinda to pay for her treachery.

Their sudden escape—and subsequent attack—had startled the diabolical duo, who separated to stare as Birr and his friends hurtled toward them. Sorjax called out, "I will deal with Tharigar!" and Melirria and Nathander both split off to the sides, clearly intent on containing the sorcerer's undead servants. Which left their betrayer to Birr's

tender mercies. Though his axe and sword were nowhere to be seen, he knew he would not need them to dispatch the woman or at least subdue her. Closing the distance, he lashed out with one fist in a vicious swing, intent upon knocking her cold with the one blow—

—and stared, astonished, when she raised a slender arm and stopped his swing cold.

“Oh, did I forget to mention?” Jessinda said with a little laugh, the musical peal turning sharp-edged. “I’m not the housemaid. Or a maid at all.” Right before his eyes, her lovely visage melted away, like wax from a candle. It left behind a wizened face, long since desiccated, with only wisps of straw-like hair and eyes that glowed more a dull red than warm amber. She grinned, showing teeth like her master’s. “I am a lich, dear boy. Still want that kiss?”

Still laughing, she flung Birr away as if he were a small child, bowling over several of her minions in the process.

Shaking himself, he rose and quickly charged again. This time, however, he was more wary of her unnatural strength and speed. At least he did not have to worry about holding back!

Jessinda met him with a fierce howl, talon-like fingers carving the air as they sought to sink deep into his flesh.

As they traded blows, Birr caught glimpses of his friends. Melirria and Nathander, with the aid of Stalker

and Swoop, were keeping the horde at bay. Sorjax was trading sorcerous blasts with Tharigar, brilliant golden bolts for ebon darts. Neither seemed able to gain ground, but Birr knew if the battle continued their adversary’s undead nature would give him the edge. They had to turn the tide, and soon.

He saw his opportunity when Jessinda sprang into the air, grappling him and trying to rake his back with her claws as her legs wrapped around his waist. Before, he would have welcomed such close contact. Now he shuddered at the feel of her ancient flesh on his own skin. Forcing squeamishness aside, Birr grabbed her around the waist with one arm and clamped onto her wrist with the other. “No kiss,” he growled, “for your heart belongs to another!” And, with a twist of hip and shoulder, he flung the evil woman into her master, knocking them both to the ground.

In that brief respite, he turned to Sorjax. “Here!” Birr shouted, holding up the Cuff he’d just stripped from Jessinda’s wrist. “Destroy it!” And he tossed the enchanted bracer to the mage.

“NO!” Tharigar screamed, struggling to shove Jessinda aside and resume the attack. The undead sorcerer was too slow, however. Even as he lurched to his feet, Sorjax caught the artifact, held it high—and blasted it with a blue light that seared across the land.

When Birr was able to blink

away the tears, he saw his friend's hands were empty.

"Damn you!" Tharigar bellowed, throwing himself at Sorjax. "I'll tear you apart for that!"

The loss had unsettled him, however, and his attacks were wild, frenzied, uncontrolled. Sorjax remained calm, beating aside the sorcerer's blasts. Then Tharigar swung his staff, trying to strike the mage down through sheer force alone. The momentum carried him off-balance—and Birr took that moment to slam into the fiend, shoving him bodily to the ground.

The staff flew from Tharigar's hand, landing with a clatter several paces away.

Eyes wide, the sorcerer reached out, desperate—and stiffened as Sorjax's next arcane bolt took him full in the chest. With a hiss, Tharigar burst into flame, crumbling to ash almost before the light and heat could register.

"Tharigar!" Jessinda had regained her feet and now stared at where her lover and master had been. "You'll pay for that!" She dove for the staff herself, but Birr got there first, kicking it aside. She glared up at him, murder in her eyes—and then was knocked backward as Stalker pounced, the great cat's jaws clamping down around her neck. A single snap, a toss, and Jessinda's head rolled loose, quickly crumbling away along with her body.

Tharigar's power had evidently been preserving many of his followers. With his death, the bulk of

his undead army also collapsed, the older falling to bits. Those who remained fled. In minutes, only the friends remained.

Birr glanced about at the dust and debris, then shook himself. Overhead, the sun was burning through the haze, color slowly returning to the land. "I do not know about the rest of you," he stated, brushing himself off, "but I for one could use an entire vat of ale to clear my throat."

His friends laughed and nodded. Together they sought out their missing gear and their horses, which they found tied behind the manor in what had once been stables. A short while later, the four of them rode out, Jessinda's riderless horse following behind.

It was over.

MELIRRIA eyed the abyss-dark staff leaning against the wall at Sorjax's side. "You are certain you can contain its ill intent?" she asked, her hands clasped around the flagon Nathander and Birr had persuaded her to take.

The mage chuckled, his blue eyes bright. "Indeed. For it is not truly evil, though its powers are tied to the dark. The staff itself is merely a tool. And one I have already begun to master."

Birr pounded back his ale, slamming the flagon back onto the table. "At least some good came of this, then," he grumbled.

Across from him, Melirria ventured a smile, reaching out to pat

his hand reassuringly. “More than some,” the druidess assured him. “For we have removed a great evil from this world.”

Nathander nodded. “Aye, even without the Cuff Tharigar would soon have spilled forth from that valley and begun spreading his taint across the land. We are all well rid of him. And of the Cuff, as well.” The rogue raised his own flagon to Sorjax.

“Yes, well . . .” their friend looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I did not, in point of fact, destroy the Cuff.” As the others gaped, he hastened to explain. “It is far too powerful for me to erase. I did, however, banish it from this plane.”

After a moment, Birr clapped Sorjax upon the back. “It is no longer a danger to us, and that is enough.” The others nodded their agreement.

They drank in silence for a few moments, and Birr found himself reliving their recent escapades. Indeed, it had not been all bad. They had eliminated both Tharigar and Latimar, freeing two places from those men and their lust for power. Yet still he found himself unsatisfied. But perhaps the next quest would prove more straightforward.

As if the mighty Jawbone had heard him, a figure approached their table, clearing his throat. The man was older, tall and worn bonethin, though his dark eyes spoke of intelligence and great depth. His clothes looked hard-worn, as did the man himself. “Begging your pardon,” he began hesitantly, his voice high and clear. “But I had heard, that is I hoped, you might help me. I am a preacher and was recently set upon by bandits, who stole near everything from me. Including several venerable relics that were entrusted to my care.” His gaze was full of desperate hope, and Birr felt himself stirred to action. Nor was he the only one.

“Please, sit with us, sir,” Melirria offered. “And tell us more. Mayhap we can help.”

“Thank you, oh, thank you,” the preacher replied, accepting the chair Nathander rose to offer him. “My name, by the by, is Chanter Hollow.”

Birr nodded, then grinned as he caught Sorjax’s eye. It seemed their next adventure was about to begin!

The End

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About the Author

AARON ROSENBERG is the author of over 50 novels, including the *Twin Cities Cryptids* urban fantasy/cozy series, the *DuckBob* SF comedy series, the *Relicant Chronicles* epic fantasy series, the *Areyat Islands* fantasy pirate mystery series, the upcoming *BEO Reports* urban fantasy series, and, with David Niall Wilson, the *O.C.L.T.* occult thriller series. His tie-in work contains novels for *Star Trek*, *Warhammer*, *World of Warcraft*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, *Shadowrun*, *Mutants & Masterminds*, and *Eureka* and short stories for *The X-Files*, *World of Darkness*, *Crusader Kings II*, *Deadlands*, *Master of Orion*, and *Europa Universalis IV*. He has written children's books (including the original series *STEM Squad* and *Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles*, the award-winning *Bandslam: The Junior Novel* and the #1 best-selling *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*), educational books, and role-playing games (including the original games *Asylum*, *Spookshow*, and *Chosen*; work for *White Wolf*, *Wizards of the Coast*, *Fantasy Flight*, *Pinnacle*, and many others; the *Origins* Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets*; and the Gold ENnie-winning *Lure of the Lich Lord*). He is a founding member of *Crazy 8 Press*. Aaron lives in New York with his family. You can follow him online at gryphonrose.com, on Facebook at facebook.com/gryphonrose, and on Bluesky and X @[@gryphonrose](https://twitter.com/gryphonrose).



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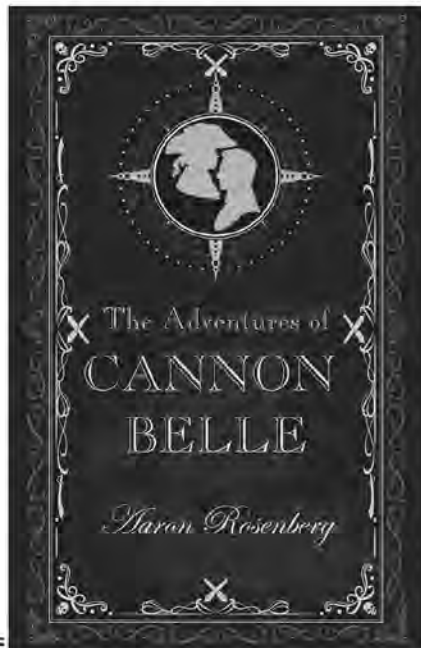
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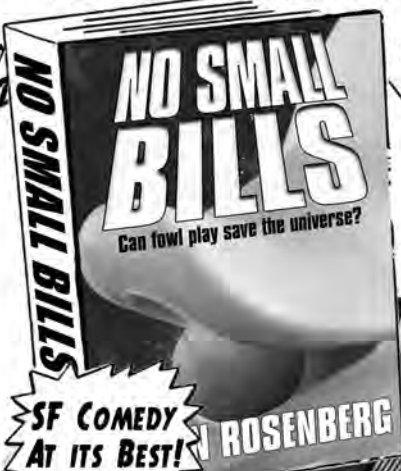


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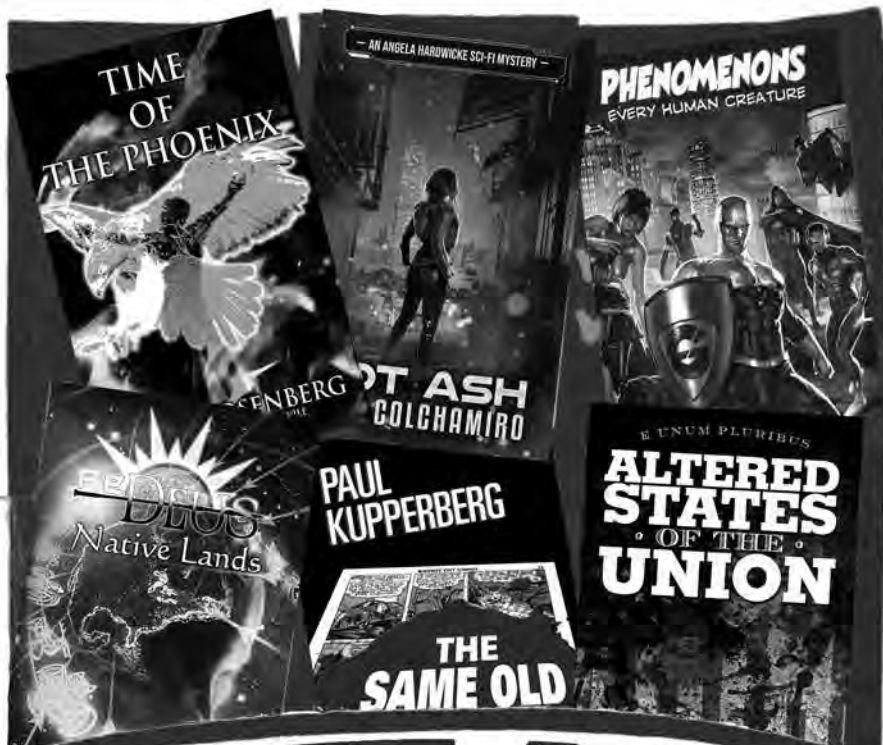
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