

The UNDERGANG



GILLIAN

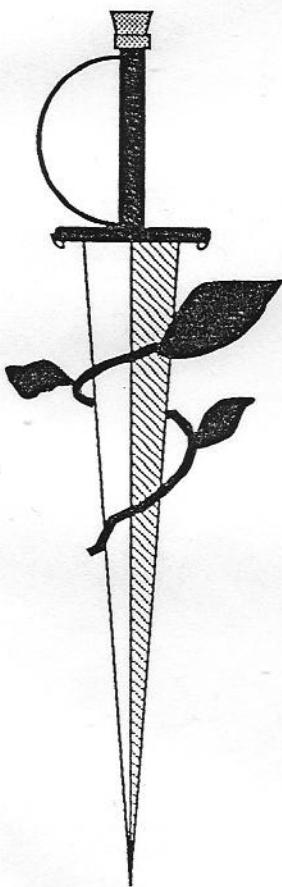
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EDITOR'S NOTE:

THE MATERIAL PRINTED HEREIN IS STRICTLY
THE OPINION OF THOSE WHO SUBMIT IT AND
DOES NOT REFLECT THE OPINION OF THE
EDITOR OR THE STAFF.

Dark Talk

In Austin there was Barad-Duin,
There trouble was always a brewin,
'Til Cain there did linger,
Grabbed crotch and threw finger,
Now Barad-Duins a ruin.

Rad Mimester





ONE-LINERS

"Barbarians must eat their toenails to survive."

- Booga

"How can we have a war when you're singing peace songs?!"

- Sinjin, Master of Mortals

"Stop fighting! We're trying to have a ditch-battle here!"

- Mathieu of Tadashii Nakama

"Good always loses because Good is stupid!"

- Black

"He reminds me of a slug. I keep wondering, if I sprinkle salt on him, would he shrivel up and disappear?"

- Yonekawa-Gaiga Eemi

Hear someone say it?? Send it in!!





The Hunt

By Krake

Anhungered hounds with eyne like coals,
Their baying faint and echoing,
Pursued by those who lost their souls
In following the Horned King.

The Master of the Hunt is he
With antlers clawing at the sky.
Til Domesday must his huntsmen ride:
The Ones Who Neither Age Nor Die.

(The horns resound,
The hoofbeats pound;
O fly, wayfarer, fly!)

With bows and boarspears in their hands
The host ride horses through the mist.
On moonless nights they roam the lands
Where Roman roads decay and twist.

And finding men upon their way
Those hunters see but beasts of prey
(Alas for the traveler gone astray
Who shall not live to see the day).

The horses scream and gallop on.
The silent wraiths that ride them
Raise and shake their bows and spears
Saluting him that guides them.

A hundred hounds with eyne like coals,
They whine and sniff the morning.
And onwards flow those cold, cold souls:
Companions of the Horned King.

Krake
Oct. 1985
AS XX

Untitled

I wear no mask.

I have no need of one.

I stand as an island in the tumultuous sea of humanity.

All alone, and always lonely.

From the wellspring of love I draw my sustenance.

The dream of friendship is my dream.

I wander the worlds with an unstable soul,
ever empty and always full.

Searching, searching, for what I know not.

I dance the Spiral Dance in joy,
to the tune of the screams of my anguished soul.

I do not know who I am-

I look in the mirror and I see a stranger.

Shelton Greenfire

RUNES EVER DANCING
a serial by 'Manda Dee

0. Quiet Prologue

The city of Penambra is a maze of tunnels lit by phosphorescent lichens and the glowing eyes of Drow Elves. The Elf called Ash walks listlessly past the curtained doorways. From inside the busiest tavern in Penambra he hears the voice of a friend of his: Xarasmul the Elementalist. The sign lashed to the stalagmite outside the entrance proclaims the Fleshless Fist Tavern.

Within are quite a few whispering Drow-folk. Their skin is dark, from ebony black to dusky periwinkle. Their hair is fair, bleach white. Xarasmul sits in a corner with two companions; they are not familiar faces here. Thieves, assassins, and more prowl about, putting together various schemes of mischief to perpetrate upon the world above. Ash moves aside a curtain and sees all this as it is illuminated by a single candle in the center of the room.

"Good dusk, Master Xarasmul," says the youth.

"Same to you, Ash," says the Elementalist Drow. His voice is unmistakable, low and rich as it is. Arioach and Manrel nod as Xarasmul quietly introduces them. Ash looks on in awe of Manrel's terrifying sword. This must be some great warrior-hero, then. Arioach is quite tall for a Drow and his eyes seem to shift color. Ash finds it difficult to look into those green-to-gold-to-blue eyes. Who ever saw a Drow with blue eyes?! Arioach is used to this reaction and he grins.

Xarasmul relates briefly how Xarasmul and his friends travel the overworld in a land called Barad-Duin. He tells of the Humans who live there in far greater numbers than they are seen here in Penambra, of their inscrutable ways and their towering ambitions to rule great areas.

Ash is at a loss to contribute to the conversation. He has spent most of his life learning the trade of a burglar, a break-in artist. When he has proven his impeccability as a thief, his master has assured him of bigger heists in the surface world. "But 'till then," he tells Xarasmul, "I've no adventures to speak of."

"Hasn't old Kithgain promoted you to journeyman yet?" says the Elementalist. "With Narlynd dead I thought you were next in succession."

Ash shakes his head. "Narlynd didn't die. He's in the town torture chamber for stealing from the mayor. Kithgain's publicly decrying my guild brother but I know Kith is proud of him."

A squall erupts from the corner: two Drow have started a cockfight with a pair of blinded cockatrices. The normally silent Dark Elves begin to grow garrulous with drink as they bet on the outcome.

"Take me with you, Xarasmul!" says Ash suddenly. "This job is a dead-ender. I'll be watch-boy forever if you don't help me." The watch-boy is the lookout who must lead any constabulary on a wild goose-chase at the first sign of interest; the position is usually thankless and unprofitable.

Arioach says, "Heh." At the same moment Manrel says, "Hmph." It is the Drow equivalent of belly-splitting guffaws. "There are few Drow above. It is a world of Humans, huge and ponderous, who have a bizarre way of doing things. There are mountains, and there are seas, and the ceiling is a bright unreachable blue called 'sky.' That is no place for you, my boy."

Ash protests that he is old enough to have women, that he is old enough to be a journeyman thief. It is no use. Manrel and Arioach look on with amusement. They recall their own days of apprenticeship to cruel masters in the school of hard knocks. They know that a Drow cannot be helped to manhood; he must battle for his position as fiercely as the cockatrices who tear one another's breasts in the gaming ring.

Ash grows crestfallen, then sullen. The three adventurers must leave. Manrel's hand is reluctant to sling his blade back on his shoulders for the demon within it has warmed the hilt lovingly for its master. Ash hears it whispering to Manrel. The swordsman and the Elementalist leave together.

Arioach stays to toss the innkeeper a silver coin with a tower imprinted upon it. But Drow alone, of all faery-kind, favor cold iron. The ducat is flung back in Arioach's face.

"None of that filth here," snarls the wiry innkeeper. With a shrug Arioach throws him a few dull metal coins with rust on their edges. "Better," grunts his host.

"How old are you?" asks Arioach of Ash, turning so abruptly that Ash nearly bumps into him.

"Twenty."

"Then tell your mother tonight to find another to fetch the well-water. Tonight we move on Kithgain's citadel."

Bewildered Ash sputters, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Shhh." Arioach grins. "It isn't really your business. I'm just telling you because that means you won't give Manrel any trouble when he cuts off your old master's ugly head."

"So now what am I supposed to do?" says Ash. He is, in fact, an orphan. Kithgain has raised him since he slew Ash's parents some years back. "How do I get out of Penambra?"

Arioach considers a moment. "There is a cistern on the east side, where water drips down the walls into the pool. If you swim across it, you will find a large stone on the far side. Behind the stone is a tunnel that leads to a waterfall. Climb the rocks there and you'll be looking out at a surface-world stream."

The realization that his fate is in his own hands dizzies Ash. He thanks Arioach but the tall one has already vanished. Ash watches as the emerald green cockatrice tears a great gash into the flank of the white one. He feels his pocket for a coin to place a bet on the white one. Instead he finds a dagger, placed there with great subtlety by Arioach. The knife is amazingly beautiful, of excellent workmanship. It is worth far more than the six iron coins that Arioach took to pay the innkeeper.

He laughs and resolves to leave Penambra. By sunrise he has crossed the greenish water of the reservoir in the chamber on the the east side. The tunnel is easily found. The waterfall is slippery and once the rushing water pushes him back into the stream. But Ash is determined and the sight that blinds him when he conquers the waterfall makes it all worth the effort.

There is a green forest, a silvery-black brook, and a brilliant light. Sun, he remembers it is called.



I.

Penumbra stepped into the circle of inlaid brass. The room in the Keep of Barad-Duin was nearly bare of magical energies. The mage Thariand stood nearby, gauging her performance as she read from a magical book. The star upon his forehead seemed the only source of mana.

Thariand divined her spirit as best he could: it was very faint. The absence of a magical "flavor" to her being he found unpleasant. Ah, there it is he thought: her astral cord. It was a dull white, and stringy to boot. It should, of course, have been silver, thick and resilient. Thariand had seen enough.

"Enough, Penumbra. Stop incanting," he said. But Penumbra had once been a sorceress; her concentration was tightly focused. She kept on speaking the arcane syllables, oblivious to all around her. Thariand motioned with a crystal-tipped wand.

A small thunderclap made the tower tremble. The Dark Elf snapped out of her trancelike state, and nearly dropped the heavy book. Thariand laughed.

"Well, milord Starmage? Any explanation?" said Penumbra. She wiped a fine sweat from her brow and took a deep breath.

"Yes, indeed. Any magic laid upon you hurts your astral body. Since you have no core to your essence, an enchantment struggles to cling to you. That is why no spell of protection lasts very long."

The Dark Druids had been there the night before. Tonight they would come again. "I must have some sort of shield, Thariand!" Penumbra exclaimed.

Thariand shook his head. "There is nothing you can do to avoid your fate tonight." The mage swallowed and turned away. For he knew that the Nameless Dark Elf was embroiled in the games of Mephistopheles himself. To tamper now would hurt his efforts towards protecting the entire Black Tower. And tonight that protection would be needed, for it was the night of the coronation of Conor Thorhammer.



With a large sword on either side, Penumbra sat at the tables of House Fallenstar. Gifts were presented to the Dwarven lord who now ruled in Barad-Duin. Penumbra silently drank a toast to him, for Conor was an honorable sort and she admired that.

The Inquisitor Ahrmaand interrupted the proceedings and began to speak of crimes. "There is, in this very hall, a traitor!" he proclaimed. "Stand forth, the Lady Penumbra."

The Riders of the Storm, who sat a Penumbra's table, rose with her, ready to protect her. "No, that won't be necessary," she murmured to them. With great apprehension and discipline, they sat down again. Guards of the Tower, under Ahrmaand's command, searched the table.

In the middle of the feast a trial ensued. A grovelling minion dragged forth the two great swords Penumbra had carried into the hall. "This is the sign of treason, my lords and ladies," said Ahrmaand. "She has been seen entering a Drow village."

Penumbra gave a sharp cry in Dark Elven; it sounded like a screeching bark. "Ynearach! See how they wrong me! Is this what comes to pass, when a Dwarf sits on the throne of Barad-Duin?"

Duke Conor sat impassive as the courtiers struggled to read his expression. Ahrmaand ordered Penumbra to be led away by his assistant, who everyone called "Cardinal Fang."

"It appears," thought the Dark Elf, "that I am not to be given to the Dark Druids tonight. This 'interrogation' should prove amusing."



Fang prepared his favorite implements for his guest. Penumbra noted that all of the tools were iron. They would not require heating to burn her.

She inhaled sharply as they were applied to her arms. Brand marks appeared. "You're supposed to ask me questions first," she said drily.

"Ah, yes." murmured Fang. "Um...What were you doing in the Drow city?" A guard nearby cringed as Fang brought up a cold poker and pressed it to her cheek.

"Now this is where the prisoner—" *ptew-splat* "spits in your face," hissed Penumbra. Fang roared with anger and wiped the spittle out of his eye. The guard saw a pale blue stain appear where he wiped his hand on his white robes.

The rest of the session was less productive. Penumbra said little and Fang grew exasperated. The guard (who was dressed quite impressively in the armor of a dungeon sergeant) tried desperately to avoid watching. But although Fang was vicious he was neither deadly nor skillful. He had caused far too much pain far too soon. Penumbra's mind turned pain to a mild pleasure. The guard would ensure Fang did not kill her; she actually felt sorry he had to watch.

Penumbra was still conscious when Fang had finished. She looked down at herself. Criss-crosses of red marked her from crown to toe. Fang left to change into clean clothes and the guard unshackled her wrists and ankles. She recognized him as one of Arthon's men; Captain Arthon had a reputation for chivalry and kindness.

"*O ye Sundered Flesh and Shattered Boneshards,*" she began her chant. It sounded dreadful but it was, in fact, a spell of healing. Dusky vapors like tentacles rose up from the ground and caressed her body. The burns were vanishing as if they were erased. "*Let the Tendrils of Darkness heal these wounds!*" As she collapsed in exhaustion, the guard picked up her body.

He carried her swiftly through the dungeons of Barad-Duin, to where her friends awaited. Vespius and Moonsword were concerned but she smiled when she opened her eyes. She assured them she was well.

Moonsword said, "You're in time for the fifth course."

"What?" said Penumbra.

The assassin informed her she had only been gone for half of an hour. It had seemed like hours. Penumbra climbed the walls of the tower and resumed her seat at the tables of House Fallenstar. Two angry Dark Druids stalked by, not noticing her. "Of course!" she thought. "With no Name, they can't See me."

Thariand moved unseen quietly repairing the magical breach where he had let Penumbra in through a window. "What are you up to now, Lord of Lies?" he thought.



The shade of Romerion Landsinger gazed upon the reflection of the moon in the River of Blood. He was no stranger to dissolution of this sort, for he was an Elfin spirit of the older order, almost a force of nature. Though he lacked a body he was still coherent, and moody as well. With a practiced maneuver he floated through all the halls of Barad-Duin's Tower. He found nothing of interest.

In an instant he had traveled to Ahrmaand's tower. Sensitive to all manner of psychic signs, he found the Lord Inquisitor with ease. "Yes," he thought, "Ahrmaand is indeed a Vampire, with a blazing aura... what's this?" Ahrmaand's figure was bathed in a purple light and Romerion found the light harsh and stinging to his bare ghostly form.

Suddenly Ahrmaand turned. "Romerion! Is that you, my friend?" His eyes were slits of radiance.

Romerion refused to answer. He drifted out towards the sea to seek solace on the beach. He heard Ahrmaand laugh aloud, then. Heard the shrieks of a maiden whose blood would go to feed the Viscount Ahrmaand.

Silently the spectre wept. For he remembered that it was Ahrmaand who had used his powerful touch to kill him, and although he had been revived, he had become too weak to fight off the Dark Druids who had later descended upon him.



Deep within his sanctum sanctorum, Thariand watched the ghost depart, watched Ahrmaand's unholy feast. The mage sight grew dim and, having no wish to see more. Thariand let the vision pass. Upon his forehead the blue star dimmed. For an instant a faint flash of purple blazed out. Thariand sat cold and alone.

He sipped a cold beverage but its taste brought him no pleasure. An uncharacteristic irritability struck him and he cast the drink at the barred window. A flare of energy from a magical ward consumed the cup as it moved through the bars.



Instead of traveling above ground. Penumbra went through her private passageway to the network beneath Barad-Duin. She made her way to the secret apartments of a man called Nightstalker. She found one of his mercenary Drow barring her path.

"Well, now, what have we here?" he said, his eyes glinting. "If it isn't Penumbra."

Penumbra decided on a bluff. "Out of my way, Shesmiar. Or perhaps I should cast a spell..." She began the chant that would magically transform him into sentient slime had she the power to cast it (which she did not). Shesmiar was taken aback by the intensity with which she recited the spell and he moved away.

Suddenly she leapt forward and put sword to throat. "On second thought..." She cast a quick sleep spell. "*Listen and let your thinking cease; the Tendrils of Darkness bind you to peace.*"

Shesmiar murmured, "Nightstalker is gonna kill me for this..." He let out a big yawn and collapsed.

"Perhaps," said a voice behind them. "Perhaps not." There stood Nightstalker in the corridor, covered, as usual, with only his eyes visible.

