

# Prisoner of the Skep; or, How I Encountered the Slivers—and Lived to Tell the Tale!

Jennifer Clarke Wilkes

From set *Magic 2014*

*“One emitted a strange series of buzzing clicks and guttural commands, then clawed arms emerged from all of them. Is there no limit to their adaptations?”*

—Hastric, Thunian scout

Being a Report on an Urgent Threat to All Civilized Nations *by Hastric, scout in the employ of Ardestan*

A seeming eternity of struggling through the savagery of a benighted land at last brought me to the borders of the territory I had sought for so long. Ragged, starving, and harried by bloodsucking vermin of every description, I no longer resembled the bold adventurer who had set out to find glory and fortune in the wide wilderness. Shelter and sustenance were my primary needs now.

I surveyed my surroundings. I had come at last to the shores of the Eastern Sea, an ill-starred realm that had seen much conflict in past ages. The echoes of ancient mage wars still rang here, preserved in weird formations of unnatural stone and amber shapes that sprouted like some unholy forest from the wave-battered cliffs. Every rock, it seemed, held ancient monsters birthed in a primordial chaos, now preserved as eternal shadows in the tortured earth.

Strange marks scarred the stones and the thin, sour soil. They resembled the scars left by beasts to mark their territory, as bruins claw the trees. But these bore no resemblance to any spoor I had encountered in my many expeditions, and I began to fear I was among beings unlike anything familiar. The scoring seemed to change midway through an individual’s passage, growing deeper and farther apart, then nearly vanishing as they became finer and smaller. I had crouched down by a cliff to examine a set of tracks more closely, reaching to extract my notebook and pen so as to record them with as much exactitude as I could, when a sound from above alerted me to danger. I started to look up.

Too late.

I was struck with all the weight of a basher’s cudgel, and all sensibility fled for a time.

Awareness returned, along with an unholy head-ache and a weird, shrieking gabble. I cracked open my eyes to find myself partly buried amid loose earth, slabs of shale, and other detritus, at the bottom

of a subterranean cavern. Dim light filtered through a small opening high above, where the earth had apparently given way. My small blade, the only protection I had brought on my journeyings, was not to be found, and was most likely entombed beneath the rockfall.

I apparently had tumbled into some sort of beastly nest. On every surface swarmed beings out of nightmare, with gleaming, gemlike eyes and “hair” more like the squirming tentacles of a jelly-fish or polypod. Many were of bestial appearance, but a few could generously be considered humanoid. All were covered with chitinous plates that glistened and slid about like oiled pieces of machinery. The creatures chattered to each other in a never-ending racket as they pursued rote tasks with no apparent purpose.

As my head cleared, I began to wonder: How had I survived my untoward arrival? I focused for a moment on my physical condition and felt nothing more serious than a few scrapes and an egg-sized swelling at the base of my skull. I tried raising a half-pinned arm, experimentally, and saw, to my horror, that during my unconscious state my natural... inclination had shaped my body to resemble those of my strange companions—the limb tipped by a clawed and jointed member. Instinctively, I began to return my form to its most typical state. As I did so, the chattering grew louder and more excited, and the upper limbs of the nearer creatures began to ripple and re-form themselves. Before my very eyes, they became tentacular, then sported five-fingered hands that clutched at the air.



Predatory Sliver | Art by Mathias Kollros

Apparently the things had thought me one of their brood and had left me to my own concerns. Though they clearly had some sort of shapeshifting ability, I sensed that too rapid or extreme a change on my part might be perceived as a threat. I relaxed again into the form of the others and rested quietly. The incessant noise returned to its normal low thrum, and the creatures focused again on their ceaseless

work. It dawned on me that my circumstances offered a unique opportunity to explore and learn more about this strange colony, as long as I could avoid hostile attention.

On looking more carefully about my surroundings, I noticed something else. Everywhere, in the slabs of shale stone that formed the cavern, I could see myriad fossilized creatures. They were scaled, plated, with crablike claws, long tails, elongated probosces. Something about them was inescapably familiar, and in a flash of intuition I realized that those preserved specimens must have been kin to the beings that surrounded me. What had happened to change them so fundamentally?

Perhaps my investigation could turn up more about their history and origin. Fortunately, my journal was still within reach, the bent quill yet caught amid its pages. If I could hunch my posture and keep my body turned partly away from the others, I might be able to surreptitiously record my experiences.

I began to unearth myself from the rubble, carefully, all the while attempting to mimic the alien movements of those around me. Their unearthly thrumming was beyond my ability, however. There were several openings in the cavern, and I started moving slowly toward one of them, when the hive was thrown into disorder by the sudden appearance of a monstrous specimen of their kind. It boomed at the smaller creatures in an imperious fashion, and they scuttled about into a formation at its feet. When I remained, irresolute, the giant turned its horrid face to me and repeated its dreadful command. I decided to join the general movement rather than risk suspicion.



Striking Sliver | Art by Maciej Kuciara

The large one moved purposefully into a tunnel, followed by the flock of smaller beings and myself. I quickly lost track of the many twists and turns and branching ways we followed, until we finally arrived in another chamber. I squinted in the light, which, though feeble, was nevertheless brighter than

my previous location. Around me rose tier upon tier of shelves built out of a curving wall seemingly crafted from amber slabs. A sickly yellow glow filtered through those plates, in which were suspended inhuman forms. Myriad openings snaked off in every direction, including up and down.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw that scores of other creatures filled the place. Many were like the drones (or “thrums,” as I had begun to think of them) that surrounded me. Others, somewhat larger, crouched against its walls, scratching at the soft stone, while more yet creaked and clicked in what sounded like a chant. Beyond were shapes that confounded my eye: translucent globes that grew like pustules from the walls, nightmare shapes twisting within their membranes. They resembled nothing so much as eggs, but what embryos would they hatch? Other thrums crawled over and between the swelling pods, evidently tending to them as worker bees within a hive.

Under me was stone, within which gaped the form of another ancient horror. The petrified behemoth was clearly akin to those that filled the walls, but it was even more insectile and alien than the fossils I had seen before. It was also immense, greater in size than a dragon. Of more immediate import were the heaped shreds of armor and clothing, and the fragments of bone, that mutely told the fate of others who had preceded me into this monstrous den.

I became aware of strange marks in the shale walls: some sort of crude carvings amid the ever-present fossils. Intent as I was in studying my surroundings, I did not at first realize that the leader was “addressing” the group again. At its signal, the thrums spread out across the chamber and began to sway in time to the chanting. I imitated their motions as best I could, wondering all the while what purpose this gathering served.

The noises ceased. A new figure had entered the chamber, not as large as the one that had led us here, but which exuded obvious authority. Its form was closer to human than those I had seen up to this point. All eyes were on it as it began to declaim in a clicking, fluid speech. Although I could not understand the barbarous sounds, there was obvious organization that suggested at least a somewhat higher level of intelligence. (I have dubbed this form “primes” and the more bestial versions “predators.”) It turned around and around as it spoke, gesturing at its audience, at the walls, at the horror in the stone floor. Its form twisted and shifted constantly, at times resembling the preserved specimens that loomed in the amber, at others the various forms that surrounded me. It alternately grew heavier, more thickly armored, with oversized claws and fangs; then stretched out into a more serpentine form; then returned to its original shape.





Steelfrom Sliver | Art by Chase Stone

I perceived that it was leading a call-and-response, the spectators moving in precise patterns and answering its clattering in ritual fashion. A particular sequence of clicks and buzzes was repeated over and over. Was this some sort of religious ritual? Perhaps the strange performance was recounting the story of the creatures' origin or arrival on this world. Or maybe it was a war dance!

Though the thought of escape was uppermost in my mind, I realized that I had a duty to warn the civilized world of this uncanny threat. The more I could learn of their history and nature, the better I could arm society against them. Then, while the hive was occupied, I might best be able to explore its secrets. Only after studying all I could might I seek clean daylight again.

Swaying along with the crowd as best I could, though my throat could not form the barbarous sounds they made, I slowly moved toward one of the entrances. I slipped partly into the tunnel, apparently without attracting noticed. I fumbled out my notebook and hurriedly sketched out some of what I saw. Some dried ink yet remained on the pen's nib, which I moistened with my tongue—sufficient for a crude record at least. I would have dipped it in my own blood if necessary.

I backed away farther from the singing hall, and soon was plunged into endless dark. Only by touch was I able to progress, fearing at every moment that my hands would encounter some plated monster. My ears strained for the sound of the omnipresent hum, which I turned away from whenever I found a suitable passage. I sensed the weight of the rock above me, felt the air grow thick, and knew that I descended. Gradually, I picked my way downward. The alien scent of the hive, whose tang had filled my consciousness for so long that I had ceased to notice it, began to thin. In its place was a new smell: salt water, sea wrack. Somewhere nearby there must be an outlet. I let my senses guide me onward, though I still shivered at the thought of nearby horrors.

Slowly I grew aware of a change in the texture of the primeval blackness. The smell of the sea grew stronger, and I began to make out the vague shapes of my surroundings. Step by step I edged forward, until I came to an opening into a new cave, quite unlike those I had seen till then and evidently uninhabited. It seemed much older, somehow. Bluish light faintly illuminated the expanse from a small opening on the far side, and I could hear, echoing within the gloomy confines, the beat of surf on shore.

I stood on a veritable pavement of fossils like those I had seen suspended in amber, as well as among heaps of long-dry bones and carapaces both in the shape of my captors and those of bats, fish, and insects. On the walls were daubed some shapes that suggested insects and small flying animals, as well as the ever-present fossils, in slabs arranged to show them prostrate. A long gap, and then some uncouth scratchings, imbued with pigment, that depicted beings like those that swarmed above. The first ones in the sequence were small, four-legged but with the unmistakable tendrils these creatures all shared, then more and more varieties and sizes, including the bipedal specimens that seem to direct the colony's activities. Some flew with bat wings, others sported great horns, yet others had finned feet like those of frogs; there seemed numberless adaptations of shape.

Whatever had transformed the progenitor race had evidently occurred in this seaside cave—and for all I knew, many others like it. Evidently, those ancient predators had eaten the smaller creatures, but how did that connect to their peculiar evolution? The strange dance I had observed might have been intended to reproduce this event in some way. Perhaps a strange disease, or a magical curse of some sort, had been carried by the food animals? Or the plated horrors might themselves have come here from another world—borne on a storm of the Æther, perhaps—and been irrevocably changed by their arrival here.

My whole being rebelled against the idea, but cold, logical deduction led me to the inescapable conclusion: This great hive was built, not found, by the brutish-looking things that now inhabited it—or at least by their forebears. Although they clearly had no sophisticated intelligence, they were clever and organized enough to present a terrible threat.

My reverie was broken by rasping cries behind me, as a number of the horrors burst through the tunnel I had followed. There was no more time to study the mystery, and I sprinted for the sea-cave's egress, adopting as I did so a form better suited to an aquatic escape. Some of the creatures bristled, hedgehog-like, as the various plates and spines of their bodies elongated and then were launched as deadly missiles. Clouds of darts flew about me as I leapt into the water, and one pierced my leg. But my disguise preserved me, and as I slipped beneath the blessed waves I could no longer hear the chittering screams.



Thorncaster Sliver | Art by Trevor Claxton

I append now for your edification a summary of the characteristics and forms of the beings I encountered, as well as the hurled plate that injured me, with its mysterious fluid still evident, if coagulated. You will find also detailed sketches of that great nest or hive, which in their clattering tongue they name the Skep. I have dubbed these strange creatures “slivers.” Uncouth though they may be, they constitute a serious danger to civilized folk everywhere. The more we can learn of them and their strengths and weaknesses, the better we can prepare to exterminate them. For the sake of progress.

