

T.A.N.J. #139
The River Pilot's Tale
by Tal Meta

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Hardby, dockside, 11th of Harvester, 576CY

Tespos walked along the fog shrouded streets of Hardby, alone with his thoughts in the darkness. Though young, he was already an accomplished river pilot, and knew the fabled Selintan like the back of his hand. His mother had been a simple peasant girl, but pretty enough to capture his father's heart, and stay his wandering eye long enough for her to give him 4 sons before the birthing of the fifth claimed her life. Of all his brothers, Tespos had his mother's looks, so it was by his clothing and lifestyle alone that most folk knew him as a Rhenee.

As he put his foot upon the stairs leading up to the door of Brinlan's, a taproom popular among Rhenee-folk, he heard a familiar voice urgently whispering from the shadows of the nearby alleyway. "Are you sure you weren't followed?" whispered the voice of his youngest brother, Nellan, from the deeper darkness off to the right.

Shrugging his shoulders, he dismounted the stair and stepped into the alleyway where his brother was lurking. Nellan's clothing was similar to Tespos, but shabbier, and mostly hidden by a fine new cloak of deep brown. "Why should anyone follow me, dear brother? I'm a mere river pilot, not a man of any wealth. What's with all this cloak and dagger nonsense, anyway?" As if to make his point, Tespos fingered the material of the cloak in question. "Why ask me to meet you for some drinks and then drag me into this alley?"

"I need you to come with me. I've recently come into some money, and I've bought a riverboat. I need a pilot, I need YOU with me. Will you join me?"

"Money? You?" Tespos' voice rose with amusement, as he planted his arms squarely across his chest. "Where would you come into enough money to buy a whole riverboat Nellan? Not playing cards, I'll wager. You've got the worst luck and the least sense in our whole family. Come on now... what's all this really about?"

"But Tes, I really have. I.. I've made some new friends, and they've loaned me the money I needed to buy the boat, on the condition that I take them upriver, to the banks of the Nyr'. A few hundred miles, and then the boat is mine, no, ours to keep! It's the Nwalr, Hemet's old ship... "

Tespos took a step backwards from his brother, turning to leave the alleyway and his fool of a brother behind. "The Nwalr, Nel?" he said, turning at last. "Shelb wouldn't have sold his father's ship so soon after his passing. What's he to do, without a ship to sail on to the Meet?"

"Nevertheless, he did. Kastrel can be quite persuasive, and money talks louder than words, even to Shelb."

Tespos exited the alleyway, shaking his head and forcing Nellan to follow him. "And who is this Kastrel, anyway? Sounds vaguely Suloise. Another of your wharf-rat friends?"

"No brother, not at all! He's a foreigner, a powerful sorcerer! He and his friends just need to go upriver a ways..."

Tespos finally turned and stalked away from Nellan, unwilling to hear anymore of this mad plan of his. First money, now sorcerers. You'd think even dimwit Nellan would have sense enough to leave anything involving wizards and sorcerers alone, but apparently not. I'll not be a part of any such madness, Tespos thought.

Behind him, Nellan tried to keep up with his brother, all the while watching the shadows for imaginary pursuers. Kastrel had warned him that their journey must be kept as quiet as possible, and that there might be those who would try and stop them from completing it. Tespos was complicating things by rushing off like this; he needed his brother, and wouldn't settle for another pilot.

Neither man saw the three hooded figures shadowing them along the rooftops.

When Tespos cut between the fishmonger's and the ropemaker's shop, he could see the mast of his captain's ship, the Calandra, over the shacks along Hardby's harbor. He also caught a flash of movement above him, but the last thing he was expecting was an ambush.

As the brine-soaked net settled over his head and shoulders, he struggled to get his dagger free, but to his alarm the net constricted about his neck and tried to force itself into his mouth as he cried out for help.

Nellan came around the corner a moment later, oblivious at first to his brother's predicament because his eyes were on the street behind him, anxiously searching for prying eyes. The next thing he knew one of the

hooded figures was right there in front of him, a leather sap coming in fast at his right temple.....

Aboard the Nwalr, Hardby Harbor, 12th of Harvester, 576CY

Nellan awoke in darkness, smelling the familiar scents of a hold, and could feel the gentle motion of a ship at port. His head felt like he'd been kicked by a mule, and he couldn't feel his hands. Rolling over (or trying to), he discovered that his hands were tied securely behind his back, and probably had been so for several hours. With some effort, he could move his fingers, and he did so vigorously, trying to get the blood flowing into them again. Once he began moving, a faceless creature perched near his head began humming loudly, quieting only when a hooded man clambered down the ladder into the hold to stand beside him.

"Ah, Nellan. I must apologize for my servant, Dessar. He exceeded his instructions and was a bit too rough on you; I assure you, he has been punished, and will not be joining us on our journey. Your brother is upstairs, but has not yet awoken." A knife slipped from the man's belt, and as it slid between Nellan's wrist and the ropes that bound him, he could feel the metal of the blade, warm beyond reason, trying to twist in his grasp to cut more than the ropes. "I would not have left you here so long, but I was in the city, purchasing supplies for our journey."

"Kastrel? What is the meaning of this? Why did your men attack my brother and I in that alley? Now he will never agree to work with us!" Nellan, still dizzy from his injury, tried to regain his feet, but fell noisily to the floor.

"But he will. I fear that your powers of persuasion are not so great as mine, friend Nellan. Once I present my case to him, I am certain that he will join us on our adventure." Offering his hand to Nellan, Kastrel lifted the fallen man to his feet. "Come now. We still have a few other crewmen to recruit, a task which you are my better".

Tespos felt the pain in his arms first, exacerbated by the rocking of the boat. Opening his eyes, he could see that he was in a cabin above decks, and that he was alone except for a hooded figure seated a few feet away.

"Good morning, pilot Tespos. I am sorry that our first meeting had to be under such circumstances, but since you would not listen to your brother's offer, now you shall listen to mine."

As Tespos tested the chains that held his arms above his head, he took a moment to put his feet beneath himself again. Many thoughts ran through his mind, but most centered on the identity of his unknown captor.

"Kastrel, I imagine?"

"You are a perceptive young man, pilot Tespos." With a wave of his hand, the manacles about Tesbos' hands released themselves. "Please, come over here and partake in what I have to show you."

Kastrel indicated a piece of parchment that lay upon a crate next to the chair he sat upon. No words were written upon it, but it did bear the likeness of his brother, Nellan. To his astonishment, the picture moved and changed, seeming to follow Nellan through the busy streets near the docks. No sounds could be heard, but it was clearly Nellan, with an angry bruise above his right eye.

"By your witness, Tespos, that is your brother, is it not?" Kastrel asked, indicating the image.

"It is. I see that his claims of your sorcery were accurate enough, but I warn you - I will have no part in it."

Kastrel's hood nodded, and with a finger gesture, the image of Nellan stumbled and fell in the street. "That was but my finger. If I chose to use a knife, he would be bleeding, now. Is that what you want for your brother, Tespos? To be cut down in the street, never knowing or seeing his assailant? Or for yourself? My need of you is temporary, and I offer great reward. I have the means to compel you, but I prefer my servants willing. What say you?"

"I will need some time to think this over." Tespos said, rubbing his wrists. "Might I have a day to think on it?"

"You may have one day, but not to consider my offer. Use it to settle your business elsewhere. I warn you: I am not accustomed to taking 'no' for an answer. Any attempt to flee this city before we sail tomorrow will result in your brother's immediate death, and your own before you've gone a league. Remember that, pilot."

"One more question, if you please," Tespos ventured, hoping to get a useful answer, "Why do you wear that hood? Are you human, even?"

Kastrel paused for a moment, his back to Tespos. "I am many things, pilot. Some of the answers I could give might surprise you. Suffice it to say that I am human enough, but I have taken a vow to never again reveal my face to anyone except my lord. More than that you do not need to know."

With a swirl of cloth and leather, Kastrel exited the cabin, leaving the way clear for Tespos to do the same.

East-side Hardby, 12th of Harvester, 576CY

Tespos walked along the Promenade, certain that even though he could detect no one following him, he was under careful observation. He kept trying to tell himself that it didn't matter.

He'd returned to his room at the dockside flop, and changed his clothes into something less conspicuous, more cosmopolitan. From there, he'd gone directly uptown, and wandered for a bit, hoping that whoever was watching him would grow inattentive. While in a certain bar, he'd ordered a drink, shot it down and left, a pattern he repeated three times. At the third bar, the glass he was given bore the Glyph of Pursuit at the bottom of it.

He'd been noticed.

Tespos knew a lot of people. While most sensible Rhenee-folk shied away from worshipping any of the local gods, one of Tespos' younger brothers, Wanud, had left the family to join the Summoner's creed shortly after his manhood rite. Though they'd not seen one another in many years, Wanud had run into Tespos a year before, and in addition to telling him how to contact the cult if he ever needed to reach him, recruited him as an Investigator. Tespos doubted he'd ever rise much higher in the cult, but he'd used his position as a river pilot to keep an eye on matters along the banks. Kastrel and his companions certainly bore investigating, but he knew he was out of his depth.

Under the guise of leaning back and enjoying the music being played by a young minstrel at the back of the place, Tespos twirled his finger in his glass, while his other hand went through the motions of spelling out his problem to his seniors watching from the shadows. He could only hope there was still enough time for help to reach him before the Nwalr left port the next day.

Fanethrill, a village 10 miles north of Hardby, 14th of Harvester, 576CY

Movaro rose early, as he always did, and moved about his simple home preparing to meet the day. Leather and steel were all he wore in the warmth of summer, so it took very little time for him to don his ceremonial armor and greet the dawn.

Locals had called the rock he climbed 'the Sword' long before he'd arrived to make it one of Kelanen's more famous shrines. Standing atop the 'pommel' of the stone, 10 meters above the earth (it really did look like a sword that had been stuck in the earth halfway; a better natural monument couldn't be hoped for), he could see for miles around. Several Blades sat arrayed beneath the stone, gazing upwards at him as he began his morning ritual dance, there on the pommel of the sword.

As the sun's first rays caught the flashing of his blades, so too did the first sounds of trouble reach his ears. Looking downwards, he nearly stumbled at what he saw.

A dozen black-armored knights, visors closed, were advancing on the assembled faithful, swords drawn. He could hear his faithful invoking Kelanen's magics, but his trained eye told him that it would not be enough. He spun through the final bridge of his morning display, shortening it immensely, but adding the most holy of invocations, that of the Nine of Blades.

As Movaro dropped to the earth, the knights began their advance. The circle of swords he'd invoked spun out to meet them, and to his horror each one shattered as the swords the knights wielded parried their first attacks. One of the Blades tried running, but was cut down by the knight nearest him in an almost off-handed manner.

The leader of the knights waited, almost patiently, for Movaro to come to him. As the other knights went through the motions of casually slaughtering the rest of Movaro's initiates, the priest and the knight danced around one another, taking each other's measure.

After a few moments, Movaro knew that his opponent was playing with him, lengthening the battle to play out some ritual of his own. He could not guess the purpose of all this senseless slaughter, but he knew that he could not be a party to furthering it. With a simple flourish, he fell on his own sword, calling upon Kelanen to take from his enemy whatever it was he sought.

Kelanen must have heard his plea, for the knight's sword, which had been aimed to cleave Movaro in half, instead struck the stone called Kelanen's Sword and sundered it, causing the large rock to fall over on its side.

A deep sigh could be seen to come from the knight, before he signalled his followers to follow him back the way they'd come.

the Nwalr, 70 miles north of Hardby, 15th of Harvester, 576CY

Tespos stood at the wheel, watching the familiar banks roll by, and reflecting on the trip so far.

Nellan had hired a good crew, he had to give him that. He knew most of them, had worked with them before on a variety of boats. Nearly all of them considered their passengers to be demon spawn, if polite, courteous demon-spawn. The two groups had little contact, and both seemed to prefer it remained that way.

Kastrel's followers numbered fourteen, and all of them hid their faces from view beneath a variety of hoods or masks. Except for their physiques, their voices were nearly identical, with an odd accent that even the widely travelled Rhenee could not place. They kept to themselves and stayed below decks most of the time, only showing themselves when they wanted to stop for awhile to "take in the sights" or so they claimed.

Tespos had made careful note of the equipment they took with them on their little jaunts. They all had horses, large and uniformly black. Most he'd guessed had armor as well, and weapons, though they kept these carefully bundled against close scrutiny. They'd disembark before first light, ride off to wherever it was they went, and return shortly after dawn.

Tespos would have paid a goodly sum to know where they went and what they did, but he knew better than to reveal his hand or to tip any of them off that he might be more than he appeared. He could only hope that his superiors were indeed watching where he could not, and that whatever mischief these men were about would be revealed and ended before it was too late.

Razan's Bluff, a village 90 miles north of Hardby, 16th of Harvester, 576CY

Bradask trailed the men who departed the Nwalr at a discreet distance, and was not greatly surprised to see them stop and don their black plate armor. Though made in an unfamiliar style, these were undoubtably the men who had slaughtered Movaro and his followers at the Sword two days before. What Bradask did not know yet was why.

He'd guessed correctly, though, that whatever it was they sought, it had to do with Kelanen, his worship sites and relics. That was why he'd been chosen for this mission. Of all the Avengers in this region, only he was also an initiate of the Sword Lord.

Razan's Bluff was a small village, and it wasn't even shown on most maps. Its people fished the river and farmed the lands, and generally led placid, peaceful lives. Not a place to warrant the attention of a dozen armed warriors with a Kelanen fixation, unless you counted Shamlane, the local sage and historian.

Shamlane was well into his second century, and looked it. Half-olven by birth, his father (so he claimed) had known Kelanen when he was a youth, and had trained under him in swordsmanship. Shamlane had made the study of the Hero and the Hero-god his specialty, and was known to pay well for knowledge and relics related to his chosen field.

Shamlane's most prized possession was a replica of the sword known as Swiftdoom. Forged by the same swordmaster, it lacked only the intellect and special purpose of Kelanen's legendary weapon. Unwilling to part with his trophy, Shamlane eventually acquiesced to permitting a shrine to be erected on the grounds of his estate, so long as no more than 1 pilgrim per month petitioned for access to the sword in question.

Bradask rode ahead, being fairly certain that he knew where the knights would be riding. Rousing Shamlane from his bed proved difficult, and cost him more time than he cared to lose, for the sound of hoofbeats could be heard once Shamlane finally opened the door of his manor.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" Shamlane sputtered, shaking his fist in Bradask's face, as Bradask pushed past him inside the manor. "I have not offered you sanctuary here. You will explain yourself, young man!"

"Honorable Shamlane, my name is Bradask, and I am a servant of Tritherion, as well as a Blade of Kelanen." He said, pulling the elderly man along with him down the hall. "Enemy knights are at your gate, noble sir, intent on stealing the crystal sword and despoiling the shrine upon your grounds. If there is a hidden way out of this house, I urge you to use it sir!" As if to counterpoint Bradask's words, the door behind them splintered and buckled, as a sword split the heavy ironwood like glass.

"This way..." Shamlane whispered, opening a secret panel leading into darkness.

All through the house, the sounds of vandalism could be heard. As the knights above ransacked the sage's library and halls, Bradask and Shamlane moved beneath the house, trying to reach the crystal sword before any of the knights did.

Shamlane eventually indicated a ladder along one wall, and told Bradask to climb up and how to retrieve the sword. As Bradask climbed the ladder, he could hear the knights shouting to one another in their foreign tongue, which sounded to Bradask's ears like a dialect of Suloise. As he slipped the sword from its hiding place, the door behind him slammed open and one of the knights burst into the room.

Since he already had the sword in his hand, Bradask took advantage of the knight's momentum and plunged the sword deep into his breast. It felt very light in his hands for a hand-and-a-half, but it did its job, and that was all Bradask cared about. Another knight followed the first, and was dispatched, before Bradask could re-enter the secret panel and climb back down to rejoin Shamlane.

Once outdoors again, Bradask set Shamlane on his own horse and bade him ride south, as fast as he dared. Bradask took advantage of the confusion in the house to steal one of the knight's own mounts, and was only too pleased to nock and fire one of his hoarded Black Arrows at one of the knights through a broken window. He paused only long enough to watch that same knight fall over backwards before riding off hard, to the north.

the Nwalr, 100 miles north of Hardby, 16th of Harvester, 576CY

Kastrel stood before his assembled men in the hold, forcing them to remain at attention, while he paced before them, shaking with rage.

"Three!" he shouted in their native tongue, causing the man before him to stiffen even further. "Three of our countrymen fell to one warrior! And why? Because you allowed yourselves to get sloppy! I should expose the faces of all of you, but I cannot. I cannot because we eleven are the last of our kind, the last of our creed upon this world. A world ripe for the King of Swords to claim as his own, once we have eradicated the worship of this false Sword Lord!"

"The shrine at Two Ford lies ahead of us, and so too, I expect, waits the warrior who took the lives of our brothers. The man who brings me his head shall be my right hand, now that my own flesh-and-blood, Kistren, lies buried in the earth. Avenge him, and avenge the honor of our faith! Dismissed!"

Kastrel left the hold only after the last of his men had departed. Stepping out onto the deck, his eyes surveyed the foreign stars, seeking familiar patterns, and finding none.

He reflected on the night, three winters past, when he and his men first set foot upon this world's soil. The ruined temple that had held the promise of such great power, wrested from him by that wretched minstrel, Vincent. The collapse of the gateway back home, and their flight from the suddenly revitalized priests whose demon-god had been unbound by the minstrel's aides.

Someday, he reflected, when the King of Swords took his place among the gods of this foreign land, he would lead a force of his men back to that place. They would kill the priests who had broken personal oaths to him, bind their demon-god anew, and that pathetic minstrel and sorcerer Vincent would finally learn the price of stranding him here. His troublesome followers would be found as well, and made to pay their measure.

Someday, he thought to himself. Someday everything would be made -right- again.

Two Fords, 120 miles North of Hardby, 17th of Harvester, 576CY

Kastrel and his men had ridden out before dawn, just like always. Tespos watched them go, knowing they'd run into some sort of difficulty the last trip out, and hoping they'd run afoul of it again. It was with some surprise, then, when a blue-sashed warrior in chain armor walked to the foot of the gangplank and asked for the master of the vessel to come forth.

As Nellan talked with the stranger, Tespos took his measure from the wheeldeck. His dress marked him as a follower of Kelanen, but Tespos' keen eye could make out the Glyph of Pursuit prominent on his belt buckle. His heart rose with that familiar symbol, knowing that his superiors had indeed been able to put people on his trail.

The man himself looked ordinary enough. A few inches shy of six feet, with light brown hair and a small mustache. Well built without being over-muscled, he seemed well travelled and self confident. Tespos longed to be able to speak with him, but understood that it was probably better that he did not quite yet.

He hoped also that this man was the one responsible for the trouble Kastrel had met the day previous, though he was troubled by his presence here, instead of wherever Kastrel and his followers had gone.

The shrine at Two Fords took the form of a small arena a few miles outside town. Built to house only a hundred-odd spectators, it nevertheless was known as one of the finest fighting schools in the central Flanaess.

Yara Lenith was a woman in her mid thirties, formerly from Nyrond, and among the highest ranking clergy serving Kelanen, as well as one of the few women to have ever risen so high. Though never married, she'd had an almost scandalous number of lovers across the years, and still possessed beauty enough to further the score.

She'd been warned the night before to expect trouble, so she had called in all six of her students as well as called in favors from old friends who were still in the local area. Even still, as the nine mounted knights rode into the arena, her heart was heavy with the knowledge that it was all to likely several of her people would die this day.

As Kastrel rode beneath the arch that permitted entry to the arena, he could feel his horse shudder slightly as they crossed and broke some magickal barrier; expecting further magic, he gave the stands a careful looking over. He counted four hiding there, and called to his men to mark their positions. The priestess and her followers had chosen the center of the arena to make their stand, so he had the balance of his men ride at a gallop around the perimeter of the circle while he rode inwards to view the assembled Swords before him.

He paused for a moment, surveying the scene. Of the four in the stands, two were magically active, and the others were likely bowmen. He smiled at the last, hoping he was correct. He'd nearly drained his magical resources preparing for this battle, and hoped against hope that the warrior who'd slain his brother Kistren with that foul Black Arrow had another nocked this morn; it would suffice as justice, for now. But for the moment, he had one last spell to cast...

Yara felt her neck hairs prickling as the knights rode through the warding spells she'd placed without even flinching, though she saw the leader's horse stumble a bit. That one she studied closely: larger than most men she'd known, and clad in uniquely sculpted black plate armor. Each of his men wore armor similar to, but not as ornate as their masters. She wasn't certain, but she could almost swear one of the demonic faces on the leader's armor -winked- at her.

With a practiced eye, she tried to study their leader, perched upon his horse at the center of an eight-pointed star of whirling riders. It was almost too late that she realized that this symbol had a greater meaning to the riders and their leader....

Kastrel raised his hands high above his head as he shouted the final words of the incantation he'd been reciting. Fire arced along his upraised arms as a black cloud formed between himself and the enemy priestess. Almost at that same moment, a pair of arrows sped their way towards him, but just as suddenly both turned upon their paths to strike the bowmen who'd fired them. One had been familiar and black, and Kastrel smiled to watch it's flight.

From the smoke a fiery form emerged, crouched, and lept towards the stands, intent upon the closest mage Kastrel's Sight had revealed to him. His riders, with remarkable discipline, reigned in their horses and dismounted with a crashing of boots like thunder; two climbing into the stands while the other six moved to confront the six initiates who guarded the priestess.

Yara cursed under her breath. She'd not expected sorcery from these warriors; Bradask's warning hadn't contained that information. The Black Arrow he'd loaned to Eliena now likely lay buried in her own heart, and she could see Verdin down with a wound from his own.

She could see Warnes furiously casting another bolt of ice at the fire-demon closing on his position, while Armam concentrated blasts of lightning on the knight climbing to meet him.

This wasn't going at all the way she'd hoped.

From his mount, Kastrel surveyed the battle thusfar.

His fire-demon had been defeated, but not before draining the mage it had battled of all he held ready, and sorely wounding him. The archer with the Black Arrow lay dead, he was certain, and the other soon would be, for he could not hope to match Jeggen in swordplay. Martol was injured, but the mage he faced was quickly expending his repertoire, and would soon be forced to flee or die.

Of the initiates on the floor of the arena, three lay dead, to two of his own. Outnumbered, the rest would surely join their companions soon; as if on cue, the tally became four to two.

The priestess gave a high shrill cry, and her followers turned to look. She gestured at Kastrel in a way he understood.

Let it be between us, alone.

Yara watched with every fiber of her being as the knight dismounted and walked towards her. Instinctively she knew that here was a warrior every bit her equal, and any advantage she could gain concerning his style of swordplay could spell the difference between life and death.

The blade he bore was a greatsword; hard to parry, but slow to attack. He wielded it one handed, like it was a blade one third its size. She'd have to try and stay within its reach, if she expected to survive.

All other fighting ceased once Kastrel and Yara joined swords in the arena.

Yara and Kastrel circled one another, occasionally feinting with their blades, taking one another's measure. Then suddenly, Yara spun inside the reach of Kastrel's blade, moving for a backhanded stab to the gut.

Almost as she thrust for his belly, she spun back away, crying with pain and leaving a fine line of blood in her wake. From the breastplate of Kastrel's armor, the face that she'd seen wink at her before smiled a bloody smile at her, then leered evilly.

Kastrel followed her, swinging his blade in a deadly downward arc; Yara rolled inside of it and kicked upwards, catching Kastrel in the belly and actually lifting him a few inches off the ground. She tried to put one of her swords under him as he landed, but the face on his armor spat blood in her eye, spoiling her aim.

Yara gave ground before the knight's next assault, trying to circle the center of the arena. The defensive move gave her time to invoke Kelanen's major gift, and as the swords formed around her, she sent each one to assail her opponent in turn.

Kastrel cursed as the spectral blades assailed him, but he knew that the power of his sword was greater than these magical replicas. Though one managed to pierce his shoulder, the others broke against his blade as he parried them; though magically summoned, they were only steel, and not demon-forged as his sword was. The woman was skilled and nimble, he'd give her that. But all her spinning and prancing would avail her not once his blade bit flesh....

Yara watched carefully as the knight dispatched her blades, for that had been their only true purpose. Each of the blades fought with her skill, and in her style; the one that cut the knight had come in from the right, low, spun upwards and back. He fell for it once; let's see if she could do it again....

As she spun in again, she tried to complete the move that had injured him once, but he moved, ever so slightly, anticipating the blow. A dagger she hadn't seen before appeared in his off hand, and he drove it right up under her chin. Her last thought was of the world rushing away...

For good measure, Kastrel plunged his sword into her body as it fell. As he did, Yara's followers broke and ran. Those in the stands managed to escape, but the Blades on the field all perished. The shrine was quickly and efficiently defiled, and they rode back to the spot where Nepaj and Rolun waited.

But when they arrived, they found the two warriors dead in their saddles, each slain by a Black Arrow.

Pelpatast, 135 miles North of Hardby, 18th of Harvester, 576CY

Tespos had partially beached the Nwalr at the small village of Pelpatast so that various repairs could be made to the ship, and to dispose of the bodies of two of the passenger's horses, who had died of some mysterious ailment in the night.

The passengers, though seemingly unconcerned at the loss of the horses, welcomed the break as well, as all of them seemed to have various injuries to recover from after the previous day's adventure. Of the eleven who had set out, only seven had returned; a lucky number, though not so lucky for Kastrel and his masked cohorts it would seem.

Kastrel hadn't repeated the dressing down of his men like he had two nights before; though difficult to assess the mood of a man whose face could not be seen, the set of his shoulders seemed to be one of resolve, or perhaps resignation. His men, too, were unnaturally silent, even among themselves, though they noticeably avoided their commander when they could.

Tespos would have given anything to know what had -really- been going on, but expected to hear the full story only on the return voyage, as they made stops and picked up news along the way.

the Selintan River, 15 miles North of Greyhawk City, 25th of Harvester, 576CY

Tespos was in high spirits. They'd made a four day layover in Greyhawk City, taking on supplies and new crew members. Several had been only too happy to be off the Nwalr, considering it and it's 'cargo' to be cursed and dangerous.

He was whistling to himself, and trading jests with Nellan right until the moment he saw the galley bearing down on them out of the early morning mist. Without thinking, he tried to evade it's ram, even though there was no way the barge could avoid it. Several crewmen near the bow of the barge lept overboard as the galley struck the barge soundly and stuck there, fast.

Tespos was reaching for his blade, prepared to do battle with what were obviously deranged river pirates (they weren't hauling valuable cargo, just a bunch of crazy masked warriors) when he saw that two of the 'enemy' boarders wore bright cloaks with the Pelorian Sunburst-and-Sword symbol of the Brightswords, a company of Pelorian knights based out of Greyhawk City.

There were also a several more warriors behind them, all bearing the symbols of local, friendly cults. Crying out in the Rhenee tongue, he called for his fellow shipmates to give way before the invaders, for they were not the object of their raid. Most of the boatmen simply leaped overboard, not willing to take any chances.

Bradask had ridden hard the past few days, calling on favors left and right. He'd ridden as far as the shrine at Pendrose, on the banks of the Nyr Dyv itself. His bretheren had loaned him the money to purchase this galley, and he'd loaded it with warriors sympathetic to his cause.

Warriors and knights serving Pelor, St. Cuthbert, Kelanen and even his own Tritherion now swarmed aboard the Nwalr, prepared to put an end to the reign of terror her passengers were creating along the river. Soon, Bradask felt, things would finally be put right again...

Unprepared for a shipboard assault, Kastrel and his men were caught without their armor, though they all kept their weapons close out of habit. As rhenee sailors dove overboard and swam for shore, the Nwalr and the galley embedded in her bow slowly drifted back downriver, out of control.

He'd killed two men before he reached the upper decks, and he saw Jeggen go overboard after being struck in the head by a warrior weilding a mace. He killed the mace wielder himself, before he finally spotted the one man he wished to face more than any other.

Bradask watched Kestrel fight his way through the press of warriors to meet him, and welcomed the chance to send him on to Nerull's Court. Shamlane's replica of Swiftdoom sparkled in his hands, catching the morning sun as it burned through the mist and shedding rainbows all about him.

As Kastrel strode within Bradask's reach, the replica of Swiftdoom he wielded seemed to come alive, pulling Bradask into a flurry of cuts and parries that he knew full well were beyond his skill. The only cut the sword did not protect him from was a minor nick to the right cheek; and it was only then that Bradask saw, out of the corner of his eye, the other followers of Kelanen fall as one to the deck in prayer, or so he thought.

Kastrel realized the signifigance of what was happening almost too late. In his homeland, only the most fanciful legends spoke of the possibility of the divine manifesting in the mortal realms; the gods could not be called by mortals. Here, on this world, this was obviously not the case.

The warrior before him now was distinctly taller, and in his left hand he suddenly wielded another sword, also with a crystal blade, that Kastrel soon learned could not be parried even by his own demon-forged blade! When he tried to parry it, it passed through his sword as if it weren't there, and struck deep into his thigh, forcing him to one knee.

Realizing that he now faced not a mortal man, but some aspect of the god Kelanen himself, Kestrel knew fear for the first time in many years. He knew that his chances of defeating a god were slim, but he was not a man who could yeild, not even at a moment such as this.

Forgoing any attempt at defense, he struck hard at the arm that wielded Sureguard, and even though Swiftdoom moved to intercede, struck hard enough to maim the arm and force Bradask-Kelanen to drop the sword that could not be parried. Kastrel kicked it away, grinning ruefully that there was enough mortality still within the being he faced to make mistakes; perhaps he might win the day, afterall.



But Kastrel was not a studious man. He fancied himself a man of action, and had risen to become a priest of the Sword-King by his willingness to put action before mere words. He understood, in his way, that Kelanen's faith would oppose the coming of the King of Swords; even on his homeworld, other Sword-Gods had opposed his coming.

But the concept of studying Kelanen's faith was beyond a man like Kastrel. Had he taken the time to learn more than just the locations of Kelanen's shrines, to study the lore and legends surrounding the cult that had grown up around his memory, he would have known what was coming next.

Behind him, Sureguard rose, as it was empowered to do. It rose, and then like a spear, it pierced Kastrel from behind, and the force of its strike carried him up and off the deck of the Nwalr, hurling him into the water.

From the decks a cheer arose, for the rest of Kastrel's men lay dead or captured. Bradask-Kelanen knelt where he had stood, waiting. For what, though... he did not know.

the Selintan River, 15 miles North of Greyhawk City, 26th of Harvester, 576CY

Nellan had argued through the night, but in the end, he accepted the coins the priests of Tritherion offered. Barely enough to purchase a new, if much smaller riverboat, he'd kept trying to explain that he'd no knowledge of what Kastrel and his followers had been about, and shouldn't have to forfeit his ship over what was really just a misunderstanding.

Tespos stood on the shore, where the remaining Blades, with the help of one or two Avengers, were disassembling both ships and using the planks to build a crude shelter for the man who had once been known as Bradask of Libernen. He was much more than that now, and his followers had decided to build and dedicate a new temple to Kelanen here, on this site.

Arrangements would be made to use the stone of the fallen Sword to the south as its foundations, and the stones from Yara's arena would be brought as well. All the fallen shrines would be recycled for materials to build the largest temple to Kelanen in the Flanaess.

Kastrel's body was not recovered from the river, and there was no sign of Sureguard, either. Bradask-Kelanen was not yet in any shape to answer questions regarding either, so the matter was dropped, for now. Tespos wondered, though, if Kastrel were gone for good....

Zagig's Bridge, a few miles south of Greyhawk City, 28th of Harvester, 576CY

Kastrel could still feel the wounds the crystal sword had inflicted on him. They were remarkably resistant to magic, so he'd have to let them heal in their own time. He wished fervently that he'd been able to retain that sword, but he'd lost it in the mud at the bottom of the river.

He'd lost his bid for supremacy over the Sword-Lord, but in a way, what he'd gained was far more valuable. His faith would yet flourish upon this world, he knew. He would spend some time gaining new converts, and when the time was right, together they would bring Mabelrode, the King of Swords to this world.

And Kastrel K'antos would be the focus of his incarnation. His avatar... a god.