

FORGOTTEN REALMS

# LADY OF POISON

THE PRIESTS



BRUCE R. CORDELL

**T**<sub>HE</sub> **G**<sub>REAT</sub> **D**<sub>ALE</sub>

**R**<sub>AVAGED BY</sub> **D**<sub>ISEASE</sub>

**P**<sub>OISONED WITH</sub> **T**<sub>REACHERY</sub>

Gameliel woke his thralls. There were preparations to make, rot to culture, spells to unsheathe. He wouldn't allow the newest, most important outpost of the Rotting Man's empire to fall back into the idle hands of idiot druids. He glanced at the dark shape that still hung impaled on one of the great stones, smirking. The blightlord felt the weight of the Keystone's cord around his neck. With it, Gameliel possessed the power of the Mucklestones. There was no place the Rotting Man and his most powerful servants could not penetrate at whim. But first, he had to prepare the ambush.

*Award-winning game designer Bruce R. Cordell brings us a tale of faith, prophecy, and destiny that can only be seen through the eyes of*

THE PRIESTS



**THE PRIESTS**

***Lady of Poison***

BRUCE R. CORDELL

***Mistress of the Night***

DAVE GROSS

***Queen of the Depths***

VORONICA WHITNEY-ROBINSON

***Maiden of Pain***

KAMERON M. FRANKLIN

Also by Bruce R. Cordell  
(as T.H. Lain)

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***Oath of Nerull***

FORGOTTEN REALMS



THE  
PRIESTS

# LADY OF POISON

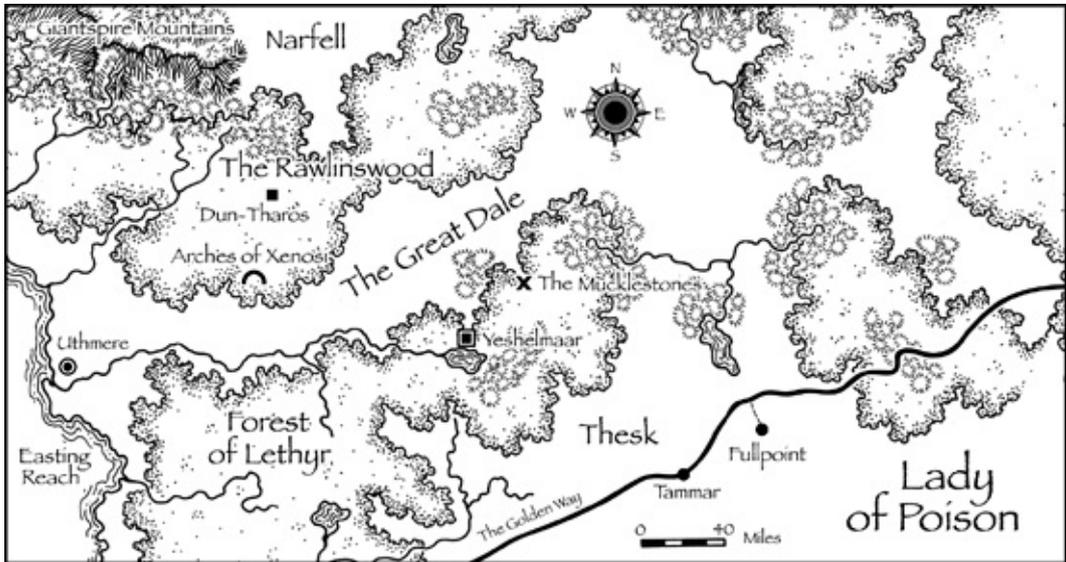
BRUCE R. CORDELL



**FOR DEE**

## A<sub>UTHOR'S</sub> N<sub>OTE</sub>

Story elements introduced in *Unapproachable East* lay foundations on which *Lady of Poison* was constructed. Rich Baker, Matt Forbeck, and Sean Reynolds deserve praise for their extraordinary sourcebook.





# THE N RISTS

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## PRELUDE

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Decay has a power all its own.

When the healthy and whole softens, crumbles, and liquefies, an indefinable essence wafts away like putrid steam off stagnant beach sand. Decomposing flesh of what once lived radiates an essential energy in its dissipation. That power of dissolution can be siphoned by those with the proper cruel knowledge, and the appropriate twisted desire.

The Rotting Man had both.

A crystal vase held a single flower, its petals the color of bone. The flower had only four petals, each knife-sharp and strangely heavy. The vase stood upon a slab of rough cut stone; it was an altar. There, in the heart of the Close, light penetrated, but not easily. Natural light was stained and filtered by petrified limbs and leaves of ancient trees whose hearts were pure rot.

A hand extended from the darkness toward the flower. The fingers, only a little less thin than the flower's stem, stroked a petal. The entire bloom turned black with decay in seconds, and fell, stinking, to the altar-top. Somewhere in the world, a servant died. Such was the power of the Rotting Man.

The Rotting Man was an artist of putrescence. For light, he had no use, unless he could squander its promise, turning light to malaise. In music, he preferred the decrescendo, always. Promotion was a rare event in the Rotting Man's organization, though the Blightlords, his foul lieutenants, did achieve their position through applied deceit.

The hand returned to the darkness, shaking just slightly. He was always in pain. Such was the price he paid for Talona's gifts.

A tangle of twisted thought sparked across the pits of his hungry mind. He sensed it then. It was coming. A prayer would soon be answered, the fulfillment of which would spell his end. Soon. Any moment ...

A ray of light fell secretly into the world, shining from a place so far beyond

the sphere of the world that miles could not be used as a measure of distance. The light was a shaft of burning hope, let down to banish what shadows it could. The light was so fierce that it could scour evil with its mere presence. It sought the Rotting Man.

He laughed with rare pleasure.

The Rotting Man was ready. To him, the light's arrival was not secret. In fact, he anticipated it.

He recalled the years during which he had bred the perfect vessel to contain that light. Spilled blood, the trace of failed enterprise, and the mournful cries of dying prisoners shorn of freedom and dignity, all these he had incorporated into his living prison. Such a wonder of grotesquerie. Oh yes, the Rotting Man was more than ready; he was primed.

Whence came the light, he cared not. Containing it was all that mattered. Oh, the light was so optimistic, so imbued with good intentions, so ready to be corrupted by the Rotting Man. The sentient light was oblivious of danger when it arrowed down at him from heaven.

The golden ray was gulped down by the Rotting Man's living vessel in a single instant. Absorbed, but for a tiny glint that escaped his notice. A flicker of hope, shorn of the flush of full strength, fell to earth unmarked and enfeebled. Too enervated to retain knowledge even of its own origin, the remnant was accepted into the mortal world in a guise not intended.

The Rotting Man failed to realize that he had not captured the light in its entirety.

But eventually he began to suspect.



THE **N**RIESTS

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*Autumn, 1368 DR*

Ash.” Hemish nearly dropped the child. From her lips the word issued, as plain as day. He took a deep breath, and instead of dropping her, he stroked her baby-brown hair. He continued along the road away from the small village, shaking his head. It was not the first time she had spoken.

Hemish was a man of simple means, a keeper of cattle. He had seen small magic, wonders, and the flashy spells of hedge wizards. He’d even once visited the city of Two Stars, and there witnessed a duel between feuding sorcerers, but a baby that could speak? Never had he heard of such a thing, but in his hands he held just such a wonder, though in truth, the only word she ever said was ‘ash.’ Not knowing whence she came, Hemish had taken to calling her the name that she repeated at odd intervals.

When he found her, she lay silent on a bed of emerald moss that grew up around her like a tiny cushion. She lay on her back, reaching up with her baby fingers as if attempting to touch the overhanging forest canopy. Appalled to see a child exposed to the elements, he scooped her up and brought her back to his home in the village straightaway. It was only later that she began to speak.

No local farmer or forest hunter had since appeared in town to lament a lost child. There was no claim at all upon her, save his own, and he was uncertain that he wanted to press it. He had decided to seek once again the glade where she’d first come into his life. Perhaps he could discover clues of her origin that he’d earlier missed.

He cradled the girl in his arms protectively, despite his unease. Tree branches waved idly in the late evening breeze, stirring up the scents of pine, loam, and forgotten days of sunshine. The faint smell of the child, babyish and powdery, put Hemish in mind of his own daughter, before she was grown and married away.

Soon enough he arrived in the glade where he’d found the child. All was as he remembered, though the season had advanced, and seedlings and other forest growth were failing with the year. He scuffed around with his boots, looking to kick up any item or other telltale clue hidden beneath the layer of pine needles. When he turned up nothing, he moved to the base of the sapling where he’d found her.

His brows furrowed. The luxuriously soft bed of moss where he’d found her three tendays past was decidedly dead. What’s more, it seemed afflicted with some brackish rot, which had eaten away at the heart of the bed before finally

killing it. The rot had spread to the sapling, which drooped lifeless over the blackened moss bed. All in all, a nasty blight.

After a search of several minutes, Hemish admitted defeat. He could find nothing—he chalked the blight up to coincidence. He sighed, chucked the baby on the chin, and made for town.

“Looks like it’s going to be you and me after all, tyke,” said Hemish, as he looked down into the face of the child.

The baby stared back with eyes the color of a cloudless sky. Guileless and pure they seemed, and Hemish felt his urge to protect the girl grow stronger.

It was a journey of less than an hour back to the village. In all that time, the child refrained from fussing or crying. Hemish headed straight down the main way. He turned a corner and spied Mause. Before he could make a break for it, her gaze locked on him. She stood in the middle of the road, leading a nag with a bedraggled mane. He pushed on, accepting the inevitable. Mause regarded him with a cruel turn of her lip as he moved closer.

At first, she was content to merely skewer him with her knowing gaze. Hemish cursed his weakness in asking the woman’s advice on the child. How could he have guessed she was so superstitious and hateful?

He hurried on, making as if to pass her. He attempted to fix an expression of defiance on his own features.

As he pulled up even with Mause, she murmured, “She still talking?”

Hemish paused and sighed, “Yes. Only the one word, though.”

As if to demonstrate to Mause, the baby in Hemish’s arms said, “Ash.”

As she did so, one of her infant hands reached toward the horse Mause led.

“What’s she want?” scowled the woman.

Hemish moved a step closer to the bedraggled animal. Mause was not a particularly kind master, and the draft steed was obviously sick. If Ash wanted to feel the horse’s mane, he saw no harm in it.

As the child’s hands combed through the equine’s tangled mane, a brilliant blue spark jumped between her fingers and horse. The horse raised its head suddenly, neighing! Its clouded eyes cleared then sparked with vitality. The matted hair in its mane smoothed. The creature nearly danced, as if restraining itself from rearing.

“By all the gods of hearth and home,” Hemish mumbled, “what happened?”

He knew what had happened. The girl had the hands of a healer.

“Ash,” she crooned in his arms.

Mause’s expression, too, changed. Scorn made way for fear. The woman pulled her horse quickly away.



THE **N**RIESTS

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Spring, 1373 DR

The air was too warm for Marrec.

The link chain of his armor hung heavily on the padding he wore between the silver mail and his skin, causing sweat to bead and run. He removed a gauntlet, stuffed it into his belt, and mopped his brow. He felt the old scars beneath his fingers, scars hidden by his hairline. He hardly gave them a thought. After a lifetime of repressing those memories, recollections of his past rarely caught him off guard.

Marrec looked over at his companion who walked with him down the tree-lined road. He felt a little envious of Gunggari, who didn't wear much of anything, save for a collection of strange tattoos, thick-soled leather shoes, and a breech-clout. Earlier, the noon-day sun's glare had been tempered by a breeze, but the road had passed into a forested acreage. The trees stood tall on either side but failed to reach their branches across the gap of the road. The sun beat down through the gap, but the trees blocked the cooling breeze.

"Hot enough for you, Gunny?" Marrec asked his friend.

Gunggari shrugged and smiled. "Good weather for walking."

"Maybe, if you're not wearing fifty pounds of armor," snorted Marrec.

Gunggari Ulmarra was a strange one. Though he'd traveled with the southerner for over two years, Marrec was still unused to the man's disdain for the trappings of civilization, especially clothing. All Gunggari cared about was the long, stout wooden tube he carried, which he was currently using as a walking staff. Marrec had seen Gunggari use the thing as a warclub and a musical instrument with equal facility. Colorful designs dotted the tube's exterior. It was called a *dizheri* and was an object peculiar to Gunggari's home. Gunggari didn't talk much about the nation of his origin, other than to say he hailed from the far south "beyond the girdle of the world" in a place called Osse. There Gunggari was known as a tattooed soldier. Marrec wasn't sure if the name was a designation or a title, as in *The Tattooed Soldier*. The Oslander had never deigned to explain, and Marrec didn't push him on the topic, especially because so much time had passed since they took up traveling together.

"Ask Lurue a boon—perhaps a cooling breeze?" joked Gunggari.

Lurue was Marrec's patron goddess, to whom he owed fealty and from which he drew much of his strength. Because he was already annoyed by the heat, Marrec chose to interpret the statement seriously.

"Gunny, you know I can't waste her time for personal indulgences. Besides,

it's getting worse." He admitted the last almost under his breath.

He sighed. Contact with his patron goddess, Lurue the Unicorn Queen, was growing ever more difficult. Just to see if he could, he mentally probed for the connection that used to form as easily as shafts of sunlight find the forest floor ...

Marrec nearly stumbled for lack of concentrating on the uneven path.

"Watch your step," grunted Gunggari. "The stones will catch your feet if you let them." The Oslander pointed ahead, where the path ascended quickly to the crown of a hill. The west flank of the hill was hidden in crowding pines and firs that cast long shadows over the rocky way. Gunggari gave him a sidelong glance, "Are you tired? We could stop for a rest, if you like, or—is something else bothering you?"

Marrec sighted. "Lurue's silences have grown, Gunny. Last night, I almost felt as if she were absent completely. When it came time for my nightly prayer of renewal ..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That ever happened before?" quizzed Gunggari.

"No, at least not so completely. My connection has been deteriorating these last few years, like I said before, but this is the worst it's been."

"And ... your vision?"

The Oslander referred to a dreamlike visitation Marrec had received several months earlier.

Gunggari continued, "Are we close enough that you can go without guidance?"

Marrec answered, "We're very close. I know that much."

The Oslander offered, "Perhaps her attention is being drawn elsewhere."

Maybe so. Where before the cleric had felt the presence of Lurue in every prayer, observance, and divine ritual, the presence had become uncertain, spotty, and sometimes altogether absent. Marrec shrugged. The cleric had met other servants of the Unicorn Queen, and while most seemed unaffected, a few reported feeling similarly to Marrec. Those worst afflicted could no longer trust that the divine spells they cast in Lurue's name would return anew each day. Marrec suffered the same humiliation.

"Gunny, the vision was real. I didn't dream it, if that's what you're getting at."

The tattooed soldier raised both hands in a conciliatory gesture, said "I know, the 'Child of Light in Hemish's charge.' "My feet grow weary—I hope we find this Hemish in Fullpoint."

A vision had come to Marrec. From within the brilliance of a crescent moon, the silhouette of a unicorn spoke to him. The enchanting voice

instructed him to seek the Child of Light and the child's guardian, Hemish. The voice indicated that finding the child would help both Marrec and one other in similar straits.

"I hope so, too," Marrec answered his friend.

Gunggari continued, "Even if it comes to nothing, I enjoyed our trip across the Sea of Fallen Stars. It nearly rivaled my trip across the Great Sea. I trust your last divination, the most recent one."

Marrec realized the Oslander was not needling him. Gunggari merely said what was on his mind, nothing more or less. As his friend said, his last pure divinatory contact with neglectful Larue pointed unerringly to the village of Fullpoint. Fullpoint lay several leagues west and somewhat south of a large city called Two Stars. They'd traveled along the trade road known as the Golden Way since debarking from their ship in Telflamm. They had turned off southeast before reaching Two Stars, to Gunggari's disappointment. The visitors had been told that Two Stars was a city where Trade was coddled as if a favorite son, and nothing was forbidden.

Marrec said, "The closer we come to finding Hemish, and hopefully this mysterious Child of Light, the spottier becomes my contact. I doubt that Lurie does not want me to answer this riddle, and I don't think she is becoming neglectful ... I think that she is somehow being prevented from making contact ..."

Marrec stopped speaking and cocked his head.

"Did you hear that?"

Faint cries and the ring of metal on metal echoed from over the hill. A thick stream of smoke tumbled up from behind the rise ahead. Something was burning, and it didn't look like a chimney.

"Let's go!" shouted Marrec.

Racing to the top of the hill, Marrec and Gunggari saw the source of the cries and smoke: a small village in the forest clearing was under attack. Creatures swarmed around the buildings, smiting villagers and setting fire to buildings. At first glance, the attackers seemed to be small animate trees.

"By the Ancestor," muttered Gunggari. The Oslander swept up his walking staff, ready for trouble, brandishing it like the warclub it actually was. He waited for Marrec's cue.

Marrec took a second to take stock.

The attacking creatures were not trees after all. In fact, they somewhat resembled humans, though their skin was the deep olive-green of a pine needle. Their flesh was woody and tough, but they all sported oozing sores from which a putrid slime seeped, as if they were slowly rotting. Their hair grew out in long, thick locks scaled like the bark of a young tree. Their eyes gleamed black with hatred. The creatures seemed somewhat familiar to Marrec, something he'd learned about in his training: they were similar to

creatures called volodnis, but he didn't think true volodnis had such a sense of rot or decay about them as these oozing creatures had, but he was no expert.

Buildings continued to burn. Several humans and attackers lay wounded or dead in the village street. If the creatures had some goal, it wasn't apparent, unless it was simple mayhem.

A sickening realization occurred to Marrec. He said, "Gunggari ... I think this is the village of Fullpoint!"

With that, he leaped down the other side of the hill, pulling his spear from where he kept it strapped to his back. Called Justlance, the spear tip was fashioned of gleaming adamantine in the shape of a regal unicorn horn. It was possessed of a potent enchantment that Marrec's past enemies had learned to fear, if they survived their initial meeting.

Gunggari followed Marrec but first raised one end of the long warclub to his lips. He blew down the hollow tube carved through the bole. A noise blazed forth. The sound, like a huge animal roaring or screaming—Marrec could never be sure—froze the volodnis and villagers alike with its hackle-raising ululation.

Marrec used the moment of distraction to run right up to one of the startled outlying attackers. The blighted thing had been in the middle of throttling a young farmer. Barely pausing in his dash toward the center of town, the unicorn warrior swept the tip of his spear across the volodni's neck. With a gurgling cry of pain, the creature flopped to the ground, oozing a combination of clear sap and black rot. Its former captive jumped back, gasping for breath, but Marrec was already running toward a larger concentration of attackers.

Gunggari was right on Marrec's heels. The tattooed soldier was far quicker than Marrec, especially without armor weighing him down, which proved lucky. A blighted volodni Marrec hadn't noticed jumped him from behind. Gunggari's warclub crunched against the creature's head, and the beast bleated and fell away from Marrec before it could do much more than scratch at his armor. Marrec darted a glance backward and saw that Gunggari had engaged the creature. He knew it'd take but seconds for Gunggari to dispatch an average foe. For all Marrec's physical prowess, he knew that the tattooed soldier was his better in straight-up combat, but not by much.

The other attackers began to respond to Marrec and Gunggari's advance. Marrec could hear them calling to one another, warning of the counterattack. Their speech had the sound of pine-needles rubbing together in a strong wind. Ahead, the creatures began to mass. Other outlying attackers began to fade back into the trees.

It was difficult to estimate how many rot fiends had to be dealt with. Marrec spied more of the creatures running off into the trees that lined the town to the northwest. Good, the fewer he had to deal with the better. Unfortunately, a few braver creatures ahead were obviously prepared to receive their charge. Better take it slow.

“How many, do you think?” asked Marrec, pausing his headlong rush.

“More than ten, less than twenty,” responded Gunggari, as he came up alongside.

“Like those odds?”

“I’ve faced worse.”

“Then let’s show these failed trees their mistake,” exclaimed Marrec. “I’ll take the right flank. You got left?” Gunggari nodded.

They charged. Marrec peeled off to the right, Gunggari left. The volodnis’ force split roughly down the middle, but those making up Marrec’s half failed to turn quickly enough to defend against his initial spear thrust. The spiral spear-head began to glow white, a light akin to the moon’s glow, though it wasn’t too distinct in day’s full light. The first one went down with a spear thrust to the eye. Black rot spewed but failed to adhere to Justlance, just one of the advantages of a weapon blessed by a deity.

Two other creatures rushed forward where their brother had fallen. One attempted to duck under the shaft while the other offered a distraction. Marrec had been a spear fighter long enough to know that the first rule of the spear is to never allow an enemy to get under the range of the shaft. He backed up a step and choked up his grip. A slash across the creature’s exposed stomach ended its days. The other used that second to launch itself, but Marrec knew what he was doing. Without changing his grip, he swung the butt-end of the shaft around in a violent figure eight, catching the monster on the temple. The beast was stunned just long enough for another thrust. Another rot fiend down.

Something banged against his left shoulder hard enough to spin him half around. Another blighted volodni, a thick cudgel in hand, had appeared from the rear, landing a solid blow. Pain arced from his shoulder a second later, but it wasn’t fast enough to stop him from downing the author of his discomfort with an expert thrust of Justlance.

Only four more were facing in his direction. He’d thinned them enough to tell that much. Behind them, a furious churning of limbs, clubs, and shouts showed that the tattooed soldier was still on his feet. Marrec had expected nothing less, but it wasn’t the time to get cocky.

The villagers who’d borne the brunt of the attack were taking advantage of Marrec and Gunggari’s advent to pull back from the conflict. Some had pails and were shouting about the fire. Good. If they were quick enough, only a few outbuildings would burn.

“Marrec!”

The unicorn warrior’s gaze snapped back to the fight. Apparently their foes had decided that splitting themselves between Marrec and Gunggari was a poor choice. They’d rectified it by concentrating all their attacks on Gunggari. The Oslander was pressed up against the wooden palisade, keeping his

attackers at bay with crushing swings of his *dizheri*. Even as he watched, Gunggari batted one of the creatures back so hard that it actually flew several feet through the air before tumbling into a dead, oozing heap. The smell of putrid rot intensified. Another scored a hit with its cudgel, causing the Oslander to stumble.

Time to bring to bear another facet of Lurue's power. While he reveled in his martial skill, the divine power Lurue granted her servants was just as potent, or it had been, before the change. These days, each spell was hard won, and Marrec used them sparingly. Each one he used was a precious gift, that seemingly could no longer be replaced.

Taking one hand from Justlance's shaft, he began to inscribe a Sign of Capitulation in the air with one finger, drawing lines of burning fire with quick strokes. Before he could properly finish, a volodni menacing Gunggari glanced back, squealed, and tried to stick a sword in Marrec's belly.

Marrec had to abandon the spell before finishing the air rune.

"Curse you!" exclaimed Marrec, fumbling backward. That spell was hard won, and he wondered if he would be able to renew it or another of its potency with things being what they were. To see the spell wasted without effect made the unicorn warrior see red. "Rot take you!"

The blighted volodni followed up on its success by pressing its attacks with a series of wild swings, some of which landed. None pierced Marrec's silver mail, but each would leave a painful bruise.

"Think you've got me?" Marrec asked his attacker. Taking up Justlance in both hands, he knocked aside his attacker's blade, then completed the motion by driving the shaft a foot into the creature's breast. "Turns out, you're wrong."

In the meantime, Gunggari had eradicated a few more attackers. As Marrec moved in once more to help the Oslander, the remaining creatures broke off and fled toward the trees. Marrec launched his spear at the hindmost rot fiend. The shaft arrowed through the air and struck a volodni's retreating form at a distance of thirty feet. The force of the cast knocked the creature to the ground, pinning the beast where it lay. The volodni moved no more, though it commenced leaking a tainted fluid.

"You like risks," commented Gunggari, as the Oslander began to stoically clean the sides of his musical instrument-cum-warclub. "What if your throw had merely lodged in the rotting one? He could have retreated with your weapon."

"The shot was clear; I knew I wouldn't miss. Besides, perhaps, even after all this time, you don't know all Justlance's abilities."

Gunggari raised one eyebrow. Marrec just smiled without elaborating. He was naturally lighthearted and preferred to focus on the positive, though internally he still cursed the loss of the Sign of Capitulation. He quickly paced the distance to where his spear still stood quivering in the form of the

blighted volodni. The stink was unpleasant. Pulling the shaft free released an even stronger whiff of corruption which pushed Marrec back.

“Phew! These things aren’t undead, but they are almost as rot-infested as an animated corpse.”

“If not undead, then what? I assumed they were the work of necromancy,” called Gungari from where he stood, still cleaning his *dizheri*. Because it was his sole possession, the tattooed solider was never lax in the instrument’s care.

“Don’t know. Something bad, though,” Lurue’s cleric offered, grinning at his own understatement.

A few villagers, having saved what buildings they could from the fire, eyed Gungari. It was obvious they didn’t quite know what to make of the southerner. The Oslander pretended not to notice the looks as he finalized the process of returning the *dizheri* to an unblemished state.

Marrec walked toward two who seemed to have led the fire-extinguishing initiative, an older man and a stern, dark haired woman. As he walked up, the woman eyed him.

She said, “You have the thanks of Fullpoint, but if you’re looking for a reward, I’m afraid the town’s treasury was used earlier this spring to buy seed.”

Marrec shook his head, “Nope. It was a deed done for pure purposes, and with the blessing of Lurue, the queen of goodly peoples and beasts everywhere. My name is Marrec, and I am Lurue’s servant. My friend’s name is Gungari Ulmarra, and he is a traveler from far lands but a good soul.”

“I’m Tansia; this is Korven,” the woman said, pointing to the older man. “You have our thanks. Though we can’t pay you in coin, we can put you up and feed you and your companion for as long as you wish to stay in Fullpoint.”

“Very kind, Tansia, but perhaps you can answer me a question: I seek one named Hemish, Hemish of Fullpoint. Do you know this man?” Hope pitched Marrec’s voice slightly higher than his normally smooth baritone.

The woman nodded, looking bemused, “Hemish? Of course. He keeps cattle. He lives just east of here on the town’s edge. I can take you there.”

“Please, lead on.”

As they walked, leading a procession of the curious, Tansia asked, “Pardon my curiosity, Marrec, but what brings you to Fullpoint after Hemish? He is a simple man, and he and his daughter keep pretty much to themselves.”

Marrec said simply, “He was revealed to me in a vision.”

Tansia nodded uncertainly but said nothing more. In short order, she led him up to a home little different than many of the other village buildings. It, too, showed signs of the recent conflict. Marrec decided he didn’t like the look of the bashed and ruined door, which hung off its hinges. He rushed up the two steps and looked inside. He had Justlance ready in case of lingering rot