

PLAGUE DAEMON

The Second Tale of Orfeo • by Brian Craig

'DO YOU THINK it's easy to be a hero?' Averil said to him. 'Do you think you can carry daemon-slaying knives without cost? Do you think that the curse with which the Lazarite tried to damn your soul is an untroublesome thing to bear, to be shrugged off like a little scratch? Harmis Detz, this entire nation is under a curse, and will fall to the forces of Chaos and the foul breath of plague unless we can save it.'



IN THE WILDEST reaches of the Border Princes, the kingdom of Khypris is thrown into turmoil when barbarian tribes descend upon its rich, fertile lands. Soldier of fortune Harmis Detz finds himself fighting more than mere human enemies when a cruel twist of fate sucks him into a far more desperate endeavour – to find the real source of the evil that threatens Khypris. Can Harmis and his companions possibly triumph against such a foul and unnatural adversary as a servant of Nurgle, lord of pestilence?

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THE WIZARD'S HOUSE was built on a rocky promontory, so that the waters of the tarn were on three sides of it. It was by no means a palatial edifice; its foundation was a rounded rock of no great size, so that the house too was rounded, and twice as high as it was broad. The causeway connecting it to the shore looked to Harmis as though it had been deliberately narrowed at one point, so that only two men afoot or one on horseback could comfortably pass through the bottleneck. The causeway was not very long – only thirty yards or so – but it was obvious that the house would be difficult to invade by that route.

The tarn was very still and unnaturally dark. There was little enough wind, and the rocky ridges around the lake shielded its waters, but still there was an odd absence of waves. Though the sky was clear and the sun shone the water was not blue, even in the unshadowed centre; the tarn fully deserved the name which had been given to it, for its surface was indeed almost black. Harmis could not tell whether this was because of the colour of the rocks which trapped and held the water, or whether it was some mysterious property of the water itself.

There was no evident way to approach the house clandestinely, for it had narrow windows on every side, and there was not so much as a bush or a bramble-patch anywhere along the shore. Nevertheless, the mutants and their monstrous masters paused well below the level of the tarn, and the sorcerer dismounted. Then he and his companions made their way cautiously forward, walking along the edge of the lake in single file, as though they crouched behind some protective barrier.

Harmis, still watching them from above and behind, realized that the magician with the contorted face must be shielding them in some way to prevent their being observed from

the house, but that he had not troubled to shield them from the view of watchers in a place where no watchers should be.

Harmis regretted now that he had not ridden on ahead of the party to give warning of their coming, though he was still very uneasy about the prospect of taking a hand in the battle which would shortly commence. Reason suggested that if the attackers were creeping so carefully they must expect to derive a considerable advantage from surprise; he could only conclude that a conflict of wizards might benefit as much as any other from forewarning and time to prepare.

Was it still possible, he wondered, to give such a warning?

There was no way now to race ahead of the monstrous company below him – not, at any rate, without exposing himself to their attention and whatever violence they might be able to aim at him. He realized, though, that he had other resources, and he took out the mirror he had taken from Lavarock's body, pausing to polish it briefly on the sleeve of his tunic.

Without removing the cord from around his neck he angled the face of the mirror to catch the sun and deflect a narrow ray across the dark water, aiming at the highest of the windows which faced him. The distance was so great, and the window itself was so deeply shadowed, that there was no way to know whether anyone was in the room, or whether the flash of reflected light could be seen if anyone was.

He tilted the mirror from side to side so as to send an intermittent signal which would be more readily glimpsed, but after a few minutes he stopped and put it away. He clicked his tongue in frustration, because he could not be certain that anything would be achieved if anyone within the house had caught sight of the winking light, if the sorcerer's spell of concealment was sufficiently effective.

Feeling utterly helpless, he watched the mutants and their dreadful companions make their way painstakingly to the end of the causeway.

He saw the attackers distribute themselves as though for a rush, and wondered briefly whether the sorcerer intended to blast the door from where he stood. In fact, though, the dire magician stood back, and it was one of his unhuman companions who stepped forward, bearing a heavy halberd, ready to make a solitary charge. The three remaining monstrosities

spread out, two with longbows at the ready, the third with a massive spear.

The halberdier was the one with the scaly skin and snakelike tongue; he was the most powerfully muscled of the beastmen, though he was not as huge in the midriff as the one with slimy fur. When he charged the door, Harmis was astonished by his speed, and it seemed as though he might cover the thirty yards in a matter of three seconds despite being weighed down by ragged armour.

But the snake-tongued monster had covered no more than half the distance when something reached out of the water and caught his ankle, bringing him down at the narrowest part of the causeway. It was a long, black tentacle, smooth and leech-like.

Harmis had heard of creatures called lashworms which could thrust out a saw-edged tongue in whip-like fashion to sting a victim, but if this was a relative of such creatures it was far cleverer than they, for the tentacle was clearly attempting to coil itself as tightly as it could about the body of the man which it had tripped.

The halberdier tried at first to pull himself free, as though he could not believe that such a thing might hold him against his will. But though he heaved with all his weight, the black thing merely stretched, absorbing the strength of the pull. Then the scaly titan slashed at the prisoning cord with his weapon, trying to cut through it. The tentacle was severed, and the part which was still anchored underwater was snatched back beneath the surface, gouting purple ichor – but the disconnected part still writhed and wrestled at the snakeman's feet, as if trying to knot itself about his calves. And when the one tentacle was severed, three more rose sinuously from the depths to wrap themselves around the prisoner's other leg, his waist and his arm.

Harmis saw the sorcerer signalling angrily to the reluctant mutants, urging them to run forward with their swords to cut and slash, but they moved forward very reluctantly, with one eye on their own feet – and as they rose from their crouched positions to run to the aid of their misshapen ally, an arrow flew from a window high above the door to take one full in the chest.

If the advantage of surprise had not been lost as soon as Harmis sent his signal, it was certainly lost now, and whatever resistance the inhabitants of the house could make had been mustered to the cause of its defence.

One of the hideous bowmen immediately sent an arrow through the window from which fire had come, while the spearman tried with threatening gestures of his weapon to urge the mutant troops on to more enthusiastic action. The mutants, realizing that they were within easy bowshot of four or five different windows, became keen to reach the cover offered by the walls of the house, and ran forward to help the beleaguered halberdier.

The snakeman was quickly freed by the chopping of their swords, but the mutants were instantly made targets themselves, and as the severed ends of the tentacles squirmed about them they became panicked and began to get in one another's way. One, accidentally cut by a companion's blade, howled in anguish and in pain. Another was tumbled into the water – Harmis could not be sure whether he had been seized by another of the groping tentacles, or tripped up by a severed end, or simply bundled over by one of his own kind.

Harmis looked back at the sorcerer and saw him moving his arms, as though willing his servants to succeed, or at least to press on more ardently. He knew nothing of magical combat save for what rumour had told him, but he had always been sure that tales of magicians hurling lightning-bolts at one another were over-imaginative. The wise fighting man, as he knew from his own training and experience, tried to exhaust his opponent while sparing himself, and Harmis judged that some such tactics were being used here. The hideous magician was determined to draw his enemy's fire before unleashing his own – his mutant pawns were little more than cannon-fodder in his eyes, and even his monstrous servants were being urged forward to take a heavy burden of punishment upon themselves, so that their master's task might be light enough to bear when he finally consented to unleash his own power.

Another arrow soared from the house – not from the same window as before – and struck one of the misbegotten bowmen full in the chest. But he did not fall; instead he ripped the arrow from his own flesh with a grimace which made his

gargoyle of a face uglier still; with a defiant flourish and a contemptuous cry of rage, he hurled it away. The other bowman had returned fire instantly and accurately, but whether his arrow might have struck home inside the house there was no way to tell.

The snakeman had reached the door by now, and two of the mutants were still with him – though three more were now blocking the causeway while they struggled with all their might to throw off the serpentine coils of the liberated tentacles. More of the black things were already rising from the dark water to join in the attempt to anchor them. Those of their companions who were as yet unencumbered were bustling about behind them, trying as best they could to cut them free, but the causeway was not wide enough to make the task easy.

Harmis knew only too well that he would be out of his depth in such a fight as this, but he nevertheless began to move closer. He wished that the slope behind the fighters was steeper, so that he might think of starting a landslide, but the bare and weathered rock held no such promise and he had no bow with which to fire at them from a distance. The best he could hope for was to come to a position from which he could throw one or both of his knives – and that a situation might somehow develop which would allow him to do so without being instantly slain in reprisal.

The halberdier was hacking at the door now, his blows seemingly driven by superhuman strength. It was clear that his weapon had a very sturdy blade – he was wielding it almost as though it were a battle-axe, though no merely human arm could possibly have used it thus. The door was splintering already, and now there were four mutants waiting with him, though one more had been dragged into the turbid water while two others had won free and two more had been entangled in their turn.

As the door caved in, an arrow sped out, obviously fired from very close range. It hit the snakeman squarely in his throat, and though he had his own scaly armour there the point cut through it. The arrow must have grazed past his spine, for it cut clean through his neck to jut out behind.

The shot would have killed a man on the instant, but this monster did not fall dead. Instead he staggered back, clutching

at the bloody wound with his hand. As he staggered, his other hand – which still held the halberd – jerked convulsively, causing the blade of the weapon to describe a deadly arc which struck the head of one unwary mutant from his shoulders and made the others screech with dire alarm.

For a moment or two the snakeman tottered, but then – incredibly – he recovered his balance. Harmis was almost sure that in spite of the arrow through his neck he would somehow have recovered sufficiently to continue his attack, but while all eyes were briefly on him there was a strange explosion within the fabric of the broken-down door, which turned all of its splinters into flying wooden daggers.

The splinters showered the attackers clustering about the wounded snakeman – though he must have taken the main force of the blast himself, because eight or ten more makeshift arrows were suddenly standing out from his torso and belly. The force of their collective impact, which caught him while his balance was still precarious, swept him backwards and sideways so that he plunged into the tar-black water with a mighty splash, and sank with unnatural rapidity.

One more mutant was struck dead by the flying splinters, and two others howled with anguish as smaller slivers of wood drove into their bodies. One of them had received a thin sliver in the right eye, to judge by his reaction, and Harmis saw that he had lost all further interest in carrying the fight into the vestibule of Astyanax's house. But one of his companions, whose blood was well and truly up, leapt boldly into the breach – and the fact that he had done it seemed to all those looking on to be a significant turning of the tide of conflict.

All of a sudden, the whole company was charging, careless of the danger which still waited on the causeway – but Harmis saw that the black tentacles had been too badly cut about to offer much more resistance, and it was obvious that the first enemy to hurl himself through the door would by no means be the last.

Again the Bowman within the house fired through the doorway, and again his target was one of the unnatural things – this time the hairy and tearful one which was the largest of the four – but even though the arrow hit it in the chest the monster was not stopped in its charge.

Harmis came closer, moved to hurry in spite of his anxieties. His heart was hammering harder than it ever had before, and could not have raised more fever in his blood had he been in the thick of it. Now that he saw how badly the battle was going for the defenders of the house he was frightened and alarmed, but he did not turn and run from the fight because he still felt that it was his fight as well as theirs – that the conflict had first been joined when the mutants attacked Vimera, and that he had never been out of it.

Ahead of him, the sorcerer was still gesticulating wildly, urging his vile companions on with little cries of delight. Harmis reached the last possible hiding-place, no more than a dozen yards behind the foul-fleshed creature, but there he stopped and dropped out of sight. Reason and panic were curiously allied within him, urging him to wait and husband his resources.

When he looked up again, there were only two figures left standing on the causeway. One was the creature whose face was a twisted skull; the other was the semi-blinded mutant, who was trying to defend himself one-handed from a single groping tentacle while clutching his wounded eye with the other hand. The others had all gone inside, and what magic tricks they might still have to face Harmis could not tell.

He did not have to wait long for one of them to return, for barely three minutes had passed when the creature with the most curiously twisted horns ran out, his loathsomely ruddy skin catching the bright sunlight vividly. He was waving wildly at his ugly companion and the wizard on the shore. Even as he came, though, he was caught in the back by a fearsome bolt of force which almost split him in two, and as he was bowled over by it he cannoned into the bone-faced creature and knocked him down.

The skull-faced monstrosity tried immediately to rise but his arm was seized by one of the black tentacles, and then by another. It seemed that they combined what force they could still muster in order to make one last assault upon him, grappling with him in a seemingly desperate attempt to hold him down. Like the snakeman earlier, the creature with the inside-out face had not sufficient presence of mind to cut and slash in deft fashion – instead he wasted his strength in heaving and

hauling and trying futilely to break the bonds which held him.

But if this was a victory of sorts for the defenders, the sorcerer was not in the least dismayed. He ceased his excited gesticulation, standing erect and holding himself rigid. He raised his bony wand and pointed with it, and Harmis knew that the moment of crisis had arrived. This was to be the final blow.

Harmis saw two mutants staggering from the blasted doorway, intent on making their escape from whatever fury they had found to face them in the house; their one-eyed companion turned also to face the spellcaster. All three of them put up their hands in useless protest when they saw that they were not to be given time enough to reach the shore; clearly they did not relish the prospect of being caught in this kind of crossfire.

One of the mutants actually dived into the dark water of the tarn rather than face the bolt of wrath which was coming – the others tried as best they could to move around the rock on which the house was standing, to obtain whatever shelter the curving walls could provide.

Harmis saw that someone else was in the doorway – but after the briefest of glances the figure retreated inwards again, unwilling or unable to face what was coming.

Harmis imagined that he could feel the radiation of power from the sorcerer as the beam of destruction was gathered into his skeletal staff, ready for dispatch. Harmis had ceased to calculate consequences by now; he had only the dimmest awareness of the fact that while the sorcerer was working his spell he might be vulnerable, and that was not the reason why he acted when he did. It was blind determination which drove him – something more akin to madness than to intelligence.

But whatever it was which impelled him, Harmis nevertheless stood up, and snatched the knife from the scabbard at his right shoulder. He took three paces forward, and hurled it with all his might at the sorcerer's broad back.

It was a blow which would certainly have killed an ordinary man, yet it was almost as if the sorcerer did not feel it at all. He did not fall, nor was his body convulsed by the shock. Neither did he turn; it was as though he was so utterly wound up within the spell he was casting that no earthly force was capable of interrupting him.

Harmis saw no obvious physical manifestation of that spell's culmination; no jet of flame sprang from the wand's knobbed head, no bolt of lightning flashed through the air. Yet the air seemed to hum and throb with a strange, barely audible sound. For two seconds, that was all. Time itself seemed to have been suspended.

Then there was such a shock within the stone walls of the house that they crumbled and split, and a terrible noise of cracking wood and falling debris could be heard within.

The surviving mutants shrivelled within their skins and died; the creature which had defied nature by wearing its twisted skull outside the flesh of its face ceased immediately to struggle, and was dragged into the water by the black guardians of the causeway.

Harmis, without thinking, threw his second knife.

Like the first, the second dagger hit the sorcerer hard and true. There was no way, Harmis had supposed, that any living creature could survive such a double blow, and he was glad to see that now the spell was discharged the sorcerer fell, releasing his wand and collapsing in a heap.

Harmis took one step forward, but then he paused, for the sorcerer was not yet still.

The grotesque spellcaster tried to stand up, pushing down with his hands on the rock, as though he could not believe that he had not the strength to lift his raddled but muscular body. Try as he might, though, he could not do it.

When he had accepted that he was unable to raise himself, the sorcerer turned in agonized fashion to see who had struck him down. Harmis, nauseated by a thrill of pure terror, felt that he would only have to catch sight of the bright, keen eyes which were set in that sick and mutilated face to be struck dead in his turn.

He did not want those frightful eyes to look into his own, but when he tried to turn away, he found himself as helpless to run as the sorcerer had been to rise to his feet. He was compelled to wait for the awful wizard to look at him, and though no more than a second could have elapsed before the gruesome head turned, it seemed like a long time.

He caught the merest glimpse of a look of hatred which must surely have hurt or blinded him, but then the magician's

vile and dreadful face was caught by a rictus of pain which made it somehow less terrible. Then, and only then, was Harmis sure that he had actually achieved the death of his enemy. His terror was abruptly transformed into the wildest exultation as he realized that he had killed a mighty man of magic – that he had become a hero fit for the stuff of legend.

It did not matter that he had struck from behind like a hired assassin; it did not matter that his enemy had been distracted, channelling all his power into a bolt to be hurled at an enemy who was his equal. All that mattered was that he, Harmis Detz, had destroyed a great evil – and had reaped such incredible vengeance for the slaughter in Vimera that his brother Lavarock must be screaming his triumphant thanks in the cold night of the afterworld.

But the sorcerer's eyes, clouded as they were with pain and death, had not entirely lost their power to hurt. While the thrill was still in him, Harmis felt as though a cruel hand had clutched his throat, and he was brought to his knees within an instant, choking and vomiting.

That wretched nausea was not the worst of it, for he felt something else which he could not quite describe. It was as though a cold dark tide was gathering inside him – a dire sickness of the soul which would surely leave an expanding void at the core of his being, an emptiness which could never be filled again. He was invaded by the sorcerer's sight in a way he had not thought possible, laid open to expose abyssal depths within his being whose existence he had never known. And though he knew full well that he was not being killed – that his heart would not stop and that use and command of his senses would return to him – he was aware of being altered, and made into something other than he was.

He understood – because it was part of the sorcerer's intention that he must understand – that a curse had been put upon him by those eyes. Though he was untouched by the leprous and claw-like hands, he was *marked*. He had been deliberately tainted by a gaze which had the power to make him more vulnerable to foul disease, and might serve him worse than that, by making him an object of attention for the daemons that served the Master of Uncleaness to whom this sorcerer had sold his soul.

Harmis suffered an instant's painful nightmare, lest he too should be hideously distorted in his physical appearance, and made into a thing which ought never to have been created or enabled to live, but that nightmare did not last.

As he fell unconscious, his last thought was that it was not, after all, such a pleasant sensation to be a mighty monster-slayer.

The adventure continues in
PLAGUE DAEMON!

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