

## Green Shadows - Dray Prescot Short Story

By

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In their engaging way the Star Lords hurled me headlong into rip-roaring, blood-pulsing adventure stark naked and unarmed--and, as well as adventure, into diabolical situations where I could get myself killed with spine-shattering ease. Like now.

The situation into which I tumbled was clear, simple and deadly. The Everoinye sent their phantom Blue Scorpion, all gigantic and glowing, to snatch me up from home in Esser Rarioch. They dumped me down here where squamous monsters with fangs and exceedingly sharp claws sought to rip me up for a light snack. In a gravel-floored cavern lit by pale phosphorescent fires I, Dray Prescot, of Earth and Kregen, had to be about my business with sharp promptitude.

"Be quick! Or we're all dead!" The woman crouching against the cave wall shrieked it out. The two men with her just screamed.

On the gravel a few paces off lay a harness of plate armour. From its breaths and sights flowed a greens ichor. The cavern stank with the throat-clogging odour of rotting flesh. In the visor an Acid-Head Gimlet stuck fast. The gauzy wings of the dragonfly killer shimmering with pseudo-life reflected for a ghostly moment in the blade of the sword as it tumbled from a lax gauntlet onto the gravel.

Time only to feel a heartbeat of sorrow for the poor devil who'd worn the plate--a gloating hissing and movement against the cavern's oppressive radiance snatched my attention. In the mouth of the tunnel ahead bulked the monstrous shape of a reptile-man, and from his green-taloned hand a second Acid-Head Gimlet flew.

The wings glimmered in the phosphorescent light. The gimlet head glistened with the acid that would melt me down to the soles of my naked feet. No time to do anything but dive forward in a desperate try for the sword fallen from the armour's open gauntlet... My fingers touched the hilt, knocked it a handsbreadth across the floor. No time now to curse, to do anything but scabble forward, seize the sword and flick it up in the way the Krozair Disciplines taught.

[click me]

The Acid-Head Gimlet bounced against the blade, caromed off and smashed his deadly head against the rock wall.

The reptilian monster-man charged. He was not as deadly as his pets. His sword, a huge and ponderous affair, swung up as I slipped on loose gravel. The blade sliced down like a sickle of the Reapers of Men. A roll saved me so that I

could hurl myself up and snout my borrowed weapon forward. The sword was a serviceable cut and thruster, a thraxter of Havilfar, so I gripped the hilt in both hands and drove straight on. The blade slid in and in. After a few moments in which I felt the sensations of a man trapped in a whirlwind, his convulsions ceased.

An old fighting man and leem-hunter does not wait around after a single combat. There would be plenty more monsters in this labyrinth and although I bore them no ill will I fully intended to do my best to keep my head on my shoulders, oh, yes, by Krun! Instantly, all a part of the same movement, I leaped away to the side, slimed blade up ready for the next one who came howling from the tunnel. This one tried to be clever and attempted to use a technique old when men fought with flint weapons. He went down and the rest fled.

The woman said: "Hai, Jikai!"

By the disgusting and putrid eyeballs of Makki Grodno! I shook my head and looked at the tumbled--and infinitely pathetic--heap of armour.

"A small jikai, perhaps." I said, for that word denoting a truly tremendous, heroic deed, seemed out of place in this depressing cavern of blue phosphorescence and shadows and dead men. The poor devil of a Chulik had not been altogether clever wearing plate armour down here. Despite his fanatical training from birth in the arts of combat, held just been too slow to dodge.

She saw my glance. "He was our champion, Nas Chendo, to whom we paid much gold to protect us."

"Let us not," said the full-fleshed man whose veined face shone blotchily red and green, sweating, "speak ill of the dead." He was dressed in dark practical leathers which, to my eyes, did not suit him. He was more of your sumptuous clothes man, used to dealing in the good things of life, a Merchant Adventurer, I guessed. The broken ends of his purse chains showed that down here in the Moder his merchanting had gone as badly as his adventuring.

The second man stared fixedly at me with his slanted, round slit eyes, yellow and bold. "Where did you come from jikai?"

Now, when you deal with sorcerers and folk of that uncanny ilk, it's best to be extremely wary. These people were venturing into the mysteries and terrors of a Moder in search of loot and magics. They'd know damn well I hadn't been with them in their party when they'd started. I used a facile excuse. The effect of the horrors employed to guard the tombs and the treasures within a Moder in Moderdrin, the Humped Land, situated in the centre of Havilfar, is to shred away disbelief in the strange.

"I've been wandering about down here--Havil alone knows how long--lost all my belongings--I'm very pleased to see you. Where is the rest of your party?"

For a moment I thought the sorcerer might not accept this explanation. His cat-face, with the arrogant whiskers and slanted feline eyes, regarded me fixedly. He was, I saw, a Sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis, clad in splendid vestments of silk, richly decorated with gold thread. He was of the lordly ones of the shadow realms, who commanded, who wielded enormous but subtle powers. From his belt dangled gold chains. His beringed fingers touched his lips and those slit eyes stared on me, saw my naked body, the slimed sword--and this powerful man licked his lips and stumbled over what he would say.

"We have been separated--we are lost--and Nas Chendo--"

"But now we have a new champion!" The woman's voice rippled lightly in the cavern. I detected an incongruous note of amusement in her tones.

The man in dark leathers who had some respect for the dead spoke in a voice

that would, in other circumstances, have been fruity. "Llahal and Lahal, jikai. This is the Lady Shamsi and this is San Ferald. I am Nath Jadrelgen ti Riptanporth."

"Llahal and Lahal. I am called Jak ti Tamlin."

That was enough for now. Jak is a name I use often. Tamlin is a charming little village on the island of Veliadrin. Dray Prescott's name is not unknown upon Kregen, what with all the stories and plays and puppet shows, and these people would scarcely be surprised to run across him all naked and unexpectedly. And so, I looked more closely upon this Lady Shamsi.

Her appearance was surprising on a number of counts, one of which was not so much the colour of her hair, a deep and lustrous green, as why she had chosen to dye it that colour at all. Her features were regular and decided. Her face was white. One hears of white faces; hers might have come freshly from the flour bag. Inevitably, her eyes were green and the heavy eyeshadow a subtle variation of the same colour. Her mouth was red, and a white tooth showed a tip just indenting her lower lip. Some folk find that no blemish but an added attraction in a pretty woman's face. She wore a white thigh-length tunic with a shimmery green undersurface, and black tall-boots with tops of lizard skin, gold buckled. Her waist and arms were cinctured by gold bands.

From time to time she spoke softly to the clinging creature perched on her left shoulder, a hairy, bright-faced little monkey with great intelligence in his round puzzled eyes... Around his neck an emerald green, brass-studded collar, such as the chavniks of Hyrklana wear, was missing three of the flower-stamped, pseudo-golden studs. The chain attached to the collar chingled with the soft, luxurious sound of solid gold. Mili-milus, the Kregans call these friendly monkey-like creatures, and savants argue heatedly over whether their chittery sounds constitute a language, and if, in consideration of their well-proven emotional attachments, they might be considered as human beings.

This russet-haired mili-milu made no sound, squatting on the white and green shoulder of the Lady Shamsi. She reached up her hand covered by a glove very similar to the thickly-padded glove a falconer wears and stroked the hairy fellow.

Around her neck and loosely fastened by a turquoise-headed stick pin she wore a red scarf. This she now unwound, replacing the stick pin in her tunic, and handed to me.

I gave her thanks and wound the scarf around me and hauled the end up between my legs. The scarf was not, unfortunately, scarlet. The poor dead Chulik's armour yielded a broad belt with broken lockets-- the scabbard was missing--and this I fastened around me. With the thraxter in my fist I went forward and took my place before the others as we left that cavern reeking of death.

One of these three people was the reason the Star Lords had pitched me headlong down here. One of them had to be protected. Which one? I did not know. Perhaps all three? That made no difference. I eerie perils lurking in the unplumbed depths of the Moder.

Clad only in a scarlet breechclout and wielding a Great Krozair Longsword, I, Dray Prescott, Vovedeer, Lord of Strombor and Krozair of Zy, have fronted many dire perils on Kregen. Oh, yes, that wonderful and terrible, beautiful and savage planet four hundred light years from the world of my birth has afforded me great hardship and dangers aplenty, and, also, the most marvellous of joys.

Now, with only a thraxter to match the red scarf I would have to do what I could. Yes, by Zim-Zair!

With the return of colour to his cheeks, Nath Jadelgren took on some of the self-importance natural to him. He glared at the Fristle Sorcerer of the Cult of Almuensis. "Why did you not cast a spell, San Ferald? Havil knows, the situation was desperate enough."

The wizard was still gripped by fear. With a despairing gesture he lifted the broken ends of the chains on his belt. "When we fell through that misbegotten trap I lost my Book--"

"As I lost my purse," said Jadelgren with great malignity. Then what the sorcerer was saying struck home. "You mean you cannot cast any magics, here in this dreadful place?"

"I tried to memorise some of the various arts--but the Book--it never leaves me--it is my life--it is more than my life--"

I said: "We must push on if we are to rejoin your party. San Ferald, as we go perhaps you might try to recall a useful spell or two you have in your head."

The Lady Shamsi laughed. The tiny mili-milu jumped.

Ahead, the rock corridor stretched unbroken to double doors at the end. We proceeded cautiously, probing and looking.

San Ferald, with some hesitancy, said: "I think--Yes! I can recall exactly Sheomanar the Mad's favourite casting. The Sleety Tomb!"

In a shrill and near-breaking scream, the Lady Shamsi cried: "Then you must use it now!"

Her voice broke into a babble of prayer and her hand pointed starkly down the corridor. I stared and, for an instant, could see nothing to warrant alarm. Then a vicious horde of winged creatures broke from the walls, buzzing, and stormed towards us.

"Fliktitors!" shrieked Jadelgren, collapsing backwards. Squamous, buzzing on glistening wings, with fangs and claws that would strip us to the bone, The Fliktitors swooped. Not one was larger than a terrestrial domestic cat.

San Ferald took a sliver of crystal from his pouch and grasped it pointing at the multitude of little horrors. He started to declaim. Like a scything blizzard sweeping across the Ice Floes, the Fliktitors swarmed upon us, screeching. Perforce, I set myself with the single sword to do what I could against them.

We would have been totally overwhelmed, there was no doubt of that, by the ponderous thighs and mountainous hips of the Divine Madam of Belschutz! From the Sorcerer's outstretched shard of crystal a sleeting storm of ice spread in a glistening cone. Each barbed and fanged horror was encased. Each one fell to the floor numbed and prisoned in a miniature example of Sheomanar the Mad's favourite casting--The Sleety Tomb.

We spent some time waiting to recover from that ordeal and I learned some of the familiar reasons why these people had ventured down here. The Humped Land, the wide area of Monsters and Moders, attracted many diverse folk; all sought something special to them. Jadelgren's merchanting had sunk into a decline, so that financially he was at rock bottom. San Ferald had heard strongly substantiated rumours that a highly powerful Book, a Hyr-Lif of enormous thaumaturgical knowledge, had in the long ago been secreted in this particular Moder. Both men hoped to gain what they most desired.

The Lady Shamsi merely laughed so that the mili-milu jumped. "I seek my pleasure down here, and if fortune comes my way among the gallant adventuring, why, then I am doubly rewarded."

My own story was simple; I was a paktun hired as a guard.

When we'd recovered sufficiently to push open the double doors we stepped

through into a vast and ebon chamber. Robed in black the walls, black the throne, black the candles and black the obscene statue of a forgotten god. The massed candles threw an oddly mellow light, out of place and unsettling, upon that sombre scene and upon the two balass doors beyond the throne. The eyes of the statue glittered no and seemed to watch our movements.

"Why was I persuaded to venture into this awful place?" Jadelgren's voice quivered. "By Havil! I regret it now!"

"You came, as did we all, to gain magic and treasure and plunder the tombs." said the Lady Shamsi. "As we all admitted." She smiled graciously upon the Fristle sorcerer. "You did well to remember your spell, San Ferald. No doubt you will recall more for us?"

"I do not think so, my lady. All that is in my head is a childish exercise--"

"No matter." She interrupted brusquely. Her gloved hand stroked the mili-milu who crouched down, his chain chiming. "We must go on. Which door, do you think?"

It was all one to me. Yet I could clearly see the excitement seething in this sharp and haughty lady. She'd come down here primarily for the thrill of it and one felt a certain admiration for her poise amongst all these terrors. As for Jadelgren, his face now shone as green as before, with the veins pulsing blue. He said very uneasily to me: "I don't like the look of that statue's eyes."

"If we do not touch anything and go carefully," I told him, "we should regain the safety of your main party."

"That Havil-forsaken trap! It snatched away my cross-bow as well as my purse. Look!" He showed me the ring on the little finger of his right hand. A cut sapphire, it was engraved with the representation of an archer. "This ring gives me the accuracy to hit nine times out of ten."

"Very useful - if you had a bow."

Now, from my previous experiences down a Moder I had gained an inkling of the way the Moder Lord liked to toy with those bold fellows and ladies who had the effrontery to go delving down among the treasures. Every now and then as the delvers proceeded they would come across a chamber handsomely furnished, with broad tables and comfortable chairs. Those fine tables would be covered with dishes containing--food! There would be silver goblets with fine wines. Needless to say, by this time my inward parts were groaning with the stark necessity of finding and devouring vittels. I surely needed a wet, by Vox!

Of course, the Moder Lord, guardian of the treasures, only sets out these tables of gourmand food and fine wines so that he may continue to keep the delvers going in order that he may torture them further.

"Aye, jikai," he said on a gusty sigh. "Well, Lady Shamsi, I do not know which door." He hunched up his shoulders in the incongruous black leathers. "Nor, by Hanitcha the Harrower, do I care to choose!"

The contrast between the demeanour of the two men and the woman struck me forcibly. They'd all fallen through the same trap, they'd encountered the same dangers, yet the men had gone to pieces. Truly, if this Lady Shamsi was not a Jikai Vuvushi, a Battle Maiden, then she would be welcomed with open arms into any regiment of Warrior Women.

She continued to babble her prayers in a low and barely audible voice, yet this did not detract from the impression of fortitude, rather, it perhaps revealed the inner source of her strength. She stroked the mili-milu. Most folk like to stroke these friendly creatures, to rub their noses in the sweet-smelling hair, to caress them. She had her face turned away, staring at the statue.

"If," quoth Ferald the Sorcerer in a quavery tone, "that thing comes to life, I can do nothing."

"But you told me you remembered another spell!" She swung about, alarmed and angry. Her green eyes slanted upon the Fristle.

"Yes, my lady a trifle of foolishness learned when very young--a baby spell--"

The ebon statue, ten foot tall, seized a double-bitted axe and jumped for us. His eyes blazed. All the horror of this unholy place concentrated in those glaring eyes.

I leaped forward. "Leave him to me!"

Do not think I was vainglorious or wishing to prove my right to be called jikai before these people. Oh, no, by Zair! I was in deathly terror lest the Star Lords banished me back to Earth. And, also, I suppose in those days, I was stupid.

We fought. Axe against sword we battled around and around that ebon chamber with the tall unflickering candle flames and drapes black as the hour of dim on a night of Notor Zan.

Far above us the Suns of Scorpio, Zim and Genodras, sent down their streaming mingled radiance, shining ruby and jade, and down here we faced the horrors from the tomb. In the end I cut the statue to pieces and sundered him in black fragments upon the marble floor. Green smoke puffed from the splintered detritus, a stifling odour of rot stank in our nostrils. The Lady Shamsi clapped her hands together, white flesh and solid glove, calling again: "Jikai!"

The other two delvers jabbered in frenzied relief, the little mili-milu remained silent, crouched upon the lady's shoulder. I just felt a testy embarrassment that the great word jikai was being banded about like a clipped copper ob piece.

Around the Lady Shamsi's neck a triple-gold chain hung down, its ends vanishing under her tunic between her breasts. She pulled up the chain and I caught a single glimpse of a round white object which she instantly clasped in her bare hand. She no longer stroked the mili-milu.

The merchant adventurer in his ridiculous black leathers glared at the two doors past the throne. "The wiles of Spag the Junc foil us at every turn. At his evil pleasure we are lost." He swung up a shaking finger. "If we are to choose, then let us take the left hand door."

"The right, surely?" said the sorcerer.

Once again the Lady Shamsi began her low-voiced muttering, apparently intoning private prayers for our safe deliverance. I was just thinking that her display of spirit shamed us when a stunning crash smashed into the chamber and destroyed any problems of which door we should choose.

The entire throne crashed to the floor. From the black and cavernous opening so dramatically revealed a shrieking horde of skeletons burst upon us.

There are many forms of Kaotim, the Undead, upon Kregen and these were not apim skeletons, the bones of Homo sapiens. I recognized them by the lean viciousness and the snarling reptilian jaws, the vindictive speed of their onslaught, their very blasphemous possession of vigorous life in forms that should be dead and buried. They were Schrepims, incredibly fast and deadly, inordinately difficult to kill. And I must slay them all a second time!

My sword blurred into action. Commonplace words, perhaps, but only with the aid of Zair and Opaz and the utmost exertion were we to come out whole from this fraught encounter. So - my sword swept into action, slashing and hacking, for to thrust was useless. Swords and axes swirled about me. I fought. Oh, yes, Dray

Prescot, rogue and emperor, can at least fight.

In a situation as desperate as this, could there be any shame in fighting?

Now, I have been called an onker, stupid, a get onker, an onker of onkers, more times than I have mentioned. And I own to trying to see the best in people until I am proved wrong. I began to see the pattern, and to add up what I should have added up long since.

This was why the Everoinye had despatched me here. The trap through which these delvers had fallen had sundered all their chains--purse, Book, sword--but what of the Lady Shamsi's chains? And who stroked a friendly little mili-milu wearing a heavy gauntlet? She'd not even bothered to talk to him properly, to call his name. And lizard-skin around the tops of boots--were they then lined in reptile scales? I'd not seen the Fliktitors until after she called in alarm.

Perhaps the most damning piece of evidence was the relief with which she'd given me the red scarf... Her decisiveness and sharpness had earlier given me the idea that had she not been a lady she might well have acquired a sobriquet. She'd be called Shamsi the Otlora. Otlora means no nonsense. In this stark adventure down the Moder, she'd earned that name, by Krun!

As I fought and ducked and slashed, I yelled: "San Ferald! Use your spell! Now and quickly. Before it is too late."

"But it is only a silly--"

"Cast it!"

The reptilian skeletons pressed on and I chopped them. I took a nick or two, which displeased me mightily. San Ferald took a bright red ring from his pocket and began to chant.

The Lady Shamsi laughed, a shrill, triumphant scream. Her white face now quite clearly showed green traces where the artificial whiteness of cosmetics was wearing away. And I battled. By the Blade of Kurin, I fought!

Pallid with fear, Jadelgren stood close to the sorcerer as Ferald chanted. The Fristle held the red ring aloft. He pointed it at the skeletons of the Schrepims. I shrieked.

"No! No! At the woman! At Shamsi!"

He was well into his chant now. I simply roared at Jadelgren, putting all the old devilish cutting command into my bellow.

"Jadelgren! Swing him around. Pivot him at the lady!"

As a farmer swings a scarecrow, so Jadelgren swung the sorcerer. The pointing ruby ring aimed at Shamsi--the spell climaxed in babbled confusion--and all the skeleton reptile-men disappeared.

My sword slashed at thin air.

"It will last only a moment!" screamed Ferald. "It is weak and she is strong, strong!"

The Lady Shamsi stood with her left thumb in her mouth. She made sounds like: "Coo. Glug."

"It is for soothing babies to sleep Before any of us could move, a hairy motion on her left shoulder drew our rapt attention. The little mili-milu simply took the turquoise-headed stick-pin from her tunic and drove it deeply into her eye.

Long before she fell to the floor, her clothes, her flesh, her scales, sloughed away. A skeleton reptile-woman, she sprawled, a mere scattering of yellowed bones.

"She was sent by the Moder Master to betray us," said Jadelgren afterwards as we fought our way back. "You shout mighty loud, Jak ti Tamlin."

We struggled higher into the next zone--which is another story--and then, thankfully, we could hear the voices of the main party and lights bloomed a welcoming rose and gold along the rocky walls.

"Sink me!" I said. I stroked the little mili-milu. His collar and chains had been taken off and thrown down upon the pathetic green-dyed wig and pile of yellowed bones. His thralldom to the reptile sorceress had ended. Perched on my shoulder he chattered happily away, a warm hairy bundle of loveliness.

"I wouldn't have had to shout so loudly if I'd had my wits about me from the first. By the Black Chunkrah! All the clues were there."

But, I think, and to my shame I confess, it was the sight of my face as I fought and commanded, that old demonic Dray Prescott Devil Look, that so galvanised Nath Jadelgren into instant action.

Of one thing I was very sure. I'd have to be excruciatingly careful how I explained my foolishness, and how the little mili-milu had joined us, when I got home to Esser Rarioch and told it all to my own bewitching Delia.

[click me]

-- THE END --