

THE TOMB  
Jack McDevitt

The city lay bone white beneath the moon. Leaves rattled through courtyards and piled up against crumbling walls. Solitary columns stood against the sky. The streets were narrow and filled with rubble.

The wind off the Atlantic smelled of the tide. It shook the forest, which had long since overwhelmed the city's defenses, submerging ancient homes and public buildings, forums and marketplaces, and even invading the sacred environs, a plaza anchored at one end by a temple, at the other by a tomb.

The temple was of modest dimensions. But a perceptive visitor might have recognized both Roman piety and Greek genius in its pantheonic lines. It was set in the highest part of the city. Its roof was gone, and its perimeter had largely disappeared into the tangle of trees and brambles.

Save for a single collapsed piler, the front remained intact. A marble colonnade, still noble in appearance, looked out toward the tomb. Carved lions slumbered on pedestals, and stone figures with blank eyes and missing limbs kept watch over the city.

Twelve marble steps descended from the temple into the plaza. They were precisely chiseled, rounded, almost sensual. The marble was heavily worn. Public buildings, in varying states of disintegration, bordered the great square. They stood dark and cold through the long evenings, but when the light was right, it was possible to imagine them as they had been when the city was alive. A marble patrician stood over a dry fountain. Weary strollers, had there been any, would have found stone benches strategically placed for their use.

The tomb stood alone at the far end. It was an irregular octagon, constructed of tapered marble blocks, laid with military simplicity. The marble was gouged and scorched as high as a man on horseback might reach. And the elements had had their way. If ever it had borne a name, it had long since been worn smooth.

The tomb itself gaped open. The door that had once sealed the vault was gone.

Above the entrance, a device that might have been a sword had been cut into the marble. In keeping perhaps with the spirit of the architecture, it too was plain: hilt, blade, and crossguard were all rectangular and square-edged. No tapered lines here.

The vault rose into a circular, open cupola. Two marble feet stood atop the structure, placed wide in what could only have been a heroic stance. One was broken off at the ankle, the other ascended to the lower shin.

On a tranquil night, a visitor so inclined might easily have apprehended the tread of divine sandals.

Three horsemen, not yet quite full-grown, descended from the low hills in the northwest. In the sullen wind they could smell the age of the place.

They wore animal skins and carried iron weapons. Little more than boys, they had hard blue eyes and rode with an alertness that betrayed experience with a hostile world. They were crossing a stream that had once marked the western extremity of the city when the tallest of the three drew back on his reins and stopped. The others fell in on either side. "What's wrong, Cam?" asked the rider on the left, his eyes darting nervously across the ruins.

"Nothing, Ronik—." Cam rose slightly in his saddle and looked intently toward the quiet walls that still strove to guard the city. (In some places they had collapsed or been pulled down.) His voice had an edge. "I thought something moved—."

The night carried the first bite of winter. Falon, on Cam's right, closed his vest against the chill, briefly fingering a talisman. It was a goat's horn, once worn by his grandfather and blessed against demons. His mount snorted uncertainly. "I do not see anything."

The wind was loud in the trees.

"Where?" asked Ronik. He was broad-shouldered, given to quick passions. His blond hair was tied behind his neck. He was the only one of the three who had killed. "Where did you see it?"

"Near the temple." Cam pointed.

"Who would be inside the city at night?" asked Ronik.

"Nobody with any sense," Cam snorted.

Falon stroked his horse's neck. Its name was Carik, and his father had given it to him before riding off on a raid from which he never returned. "It might have been best if we hadn't bragged quite so loudly. Better first to have done the deed, stayed the night, and then spoken up."

Cam delivered an elaborate shrug: "Why? You're not afraid, are you, Falon?"

Falon started forward again. "My father always believed this city to be Ziu's birthplace. And that,"—he looked toward the temple, "—his altar."

Cam was, in some ways, a dangerous companion. He wanted very much to be esteemed by his peers, as they all did. But he seemed sometimes extreme in the matter. Willing to take chances. He wanted to be perceived as a warrior, but he had not yet proved himself. He was looking for a chance. His hair was black, his eyes dark. The rumor was that he had been fathered by a southerner.

Cam was middle-sized, and probably did not have the making of a good warrior. He would serve, his comrades knew. He would not run. But neither would he ever achieve great deeds.

The road had once been paved, but was little more than a track now, grassed over, occasional stones jutting from the bed. Ahead, it angled around to the south gate.

"Maybe we should not do this," said Ronik. He was perhaps everything Cam would have liked to be. He was tall and strong, and had, until this moment, always seemed utterly fearless. The girls loved him, and Falon suspected he would one day be a war chief. But his time was not yet.

Cam tried to laugh. It came out sounding strained.

Falon studied the ruins. It was hard to imagine there had ever been laughter within those walls, or the birth of children. Or cavalry gathering. The place felt somehow as though it had always been like this. He patted his horse's neck. "I wonder if the city was indeed built by gods?"

"If you are afraid," said Cam, "return home. Ronik and I will think no less of you." He made no effort to keep the mockery out of his voice.

Falon restrained his anger. "I fear no man. But it is impious to tread the highway of the gods."

They were advancing slowly. Cam did not answer but he showed no inclination to assume his customary position in the lead. "What use would Ziu have for fortifications?"

This was not the only ruined city known to the Kortagenians: Kosh-on-the-Ridge; and Eskulis near Deep Forest; Kalikat and Agonda, the twin ports at the Sound; and three more along the southern coast. They were called after the lands in which they were found. No one knew what their builders had called them. But there were tales about this one, which was always referred to simply as "the City."

"If not a way station for the gods," said Ronik, "maybe it serves devils."

There were stories: passersby attacked by phantoms, dragged within the walls, and seen no more. Black wings lifting on dark winds and children vanishing from nearby encampments. Demonic lights, it was said, sometimes reflected off low clouds, and wild cries echoing in the night. Makanda, most pious of the Kortagenians, refused to ride within sight of the City after dark, and would have been thunderstruck to see where they were now.

They walked their horses forward, speaking in whispers. Past occasional mounds. Past stands of oak. A cloud passed over the moon. And they came at last to the gate.

The wall had collapsed completely at this point, and the entrance was enmeshed in a thick patch of forest. Trees and thickets crowded in, disrupting the road and blocking entry.

They paused under a clutch of pines. Cam advanced, drew his sword, and hacked at branches and brush.

"It does not want us," said Ronik.

Falon stayed back, well away from Cam's blade, which swung with purpose but not caution. When the way was clear, Cam sheathed his weapon.

The gate opened into a broad avenue. It was covered with grass, lined with moldering buildings. Everything was dark and still.

"If it would make either of you feel better," Cam said, "we need not sleep in the plaza."

The horses were uneasy.

"I don't think we should go in there at all," said Ronik. His eyes narrowed. It was a hard admission.

Cam's mount pawed the ground. "What do you think, Falon?"

Had he been alone, Falon would not have gone near the place. He considered himself relentlessly sensible. Fight when cornered. Otherwise, the trail is a happy place. He was the smallest and youngest of the three. Like Ronik, and virtually the entire tribe, he had blond hair and blue eyes. "We have said we will stay the night," he said. He spoke softly to prevent the wind from taking his words along the avenue. "I do not see that we have a choice."

Somewhere ahead a dry branch broke. It was a sharp report, loud, hard, like the snapping of a bone. And as quickly gone.

"Something is in there." Ronik drew back on his reins.

Cam, who had started to dismount, froze with one leg clear of the horse's haunches. Without speaking, he settled back into a riding position.

"Ziu may be warning us," said Ronik.

Cam threw him a look that might have withered an arm.

Ronik returned the glare. Because Cam was the oldest, the others usually acceded to his judgment. But Falon knew that, if it came to a fight, Ronik would prove the better man at his back.

"Probably a wolf," said Falon, not at all convinced it was. Wolves after all did not snap branches.

"I am not going in." Ronik dropped his eyes. "It would be wrong to do so."

Cam rose on his saddle. "There's a light," he whispered.

Falon saw it. A red glow flickered in the plaza, on the underside of the trees. "A fire," he said.

"It's near the tomb." Cam turned his horse back toward the gate.

Ronik moved to follow, paused, and clasped Falon's arm to draw him along.

Falon tried to ignore his own rising fear. "Are we children to be frightened off because someone has built a fire on a cool night?"

"We don't know what it might be." Cam's voice had grown harsh. Angry. His customary arrogance had drained away. "We should wait until daylight, and then see who it is."

Falon could not resist: "Now who's afraid?"

"You know me better," said Cam. "But it is not prudent to fight at night."

Ronik was tugging at Falon. "Let's go. We can retire to a safe distance in the hills. Stay there tonight and return to camp tomorrow. No one would ever know."

"We would have to lie," said Falon. "They will ask."

"Let them ask. If anyone says I am afraid—," Cam gripped his sword hilt fiercely, "—I will kill him."

"Do as you will," said Cam. "Come on, Ronik."

Falon shook free of his friend's hand. Ronik sighed and began to follow Cam toward the gate, watching the plaza as he went. Falon was about to start after them when Ronik, good decent Ronik, who had been his friend all his life, spoke the words that pinned him inside the city: "Come with us, Falon. It's no disgrace to fear the gods."

And someone else replied with Falon's voice: "No. Carik and I will stay."

"Ziu does not wish it. His will is clear."

"Ziu is a warrior. He is not vindictive. I do not believe he will harm me. I will stay the night. Come for me at dawn."

"Damn you." Cam's mount moved first one way and then another. "Farewell, then." He laughed through his anger. "We'll see you in the morning. I hope you'll still be here." They wheeled their horses and fled, one swiftly, the other with reluctance.

Falon listened to the gathering silence.

Be at my side, divine one.

The fire in the plaza seemed to have gone out.

Just as well. He would leave it alone. He rode deliberately into the city, down the center of the avenue, past rows of shattered walls and open squares. Past broken buildings. Carik's hoofbeats were soft, as if he too sensed the need for stealth.

He entered a wide intersection. To his left, at the end of a long street, the temple came into view. The city lay silent and vast about him. He dismounted, and spoke to Carik, rubbing his muzzle. Leaves swirled behind him, and Falon glanced fretfully over his shoulder.

Moonlight touched the temple.

He decided against sleeping in the plaza. Better to camp out of the way. He found a running spring and a stout wall on the east side of the avenue. Anything coming from the direction of the tomb or the temple would have to cross a broad space.

Falon removed the saddle, loosened the bit, and hobbled the animal. He set out some grain and sat down himself to a meal of nuts and dried beef. Afterward he rubbed Carik down and took a final look around. Satisfied that he was alone, he used animal skins and his saddle to make a bed, placed his weapons at hand, and tried to sleep.

It did not come. Proud that he alone had stayed within the city, he was nonetheless fearful of what might be creeping up on him in the dark. He listened for sounds, and sometimes stationed himself where he could watch the approaches.

But in all that rubble, nothing moved. The smell of grass was strong, insects buzzed, the wind stirred. A few paces away, Carik shook himself.

Then, as he was finally drifting off, he heard a sound: a footstep perhaps, or a falling rock. He glanced at the horse, which stood unconcerned. Good: Carik could see over the wall, and if something were coming, he would sound a warning.

Beneath the skins, he pressed his hand against the goat's horn to assure himself it was still there. And then drew his sword closer.

Somewhere he heard the clink of metal. Barely discernible, a whisper in the wind.

The horse heard it too. Carik turned his head toward the temple.

Falon got to his feet and looked out across the ruins. A deeper darkness had fallen over the thoroughfares and courtyards. The temple, no longer backlit by the moon, stood cold and silent.

The sound came again.

A few gray streaks had appeared in the east. Morning was coming. He could honorably retreat, leave the city and its secrets, and still claim credit for having stayed the night.

A light flickered on again in the plaza.

He couldn't see it directly, but shadows moved across the face of the temple.

He shivered.

"Wait," he told Carik, at last, and slipped over the wall.

Rubble and starlight.

He crept down a dark street, crossed an intersection, passed silently through a courtyard and moved in behind a screen of trees.

The tomb glowed in the light of a lantern. A robed figure crouched on hands and knees as its base. The face was hidden within the folds of a hood.

The figure was scratching in the dirt. It stopped, grunted, looked at something in its hand, and flipped the object away. Falon heard it bounce.

The entire area around the tomb was dug up. Piles of earth were heaped everywhere, and a spade leaned against a tree.

Falon surveyed the plaza, noted sparks from a banked campfire behind a wall to the north. Saw no one else.

The hooded figure picked up a second object and seemed to examine it. He turned so that the light from the lantern penetrated the folds of the hood. He was human.

Falon breathed easier.

He was collecting what appeared to be broken statuary. One piece looked like an arm. And suddenly, with a swirl of robes, the figure raised his lantern, picked up a stick, and

looked directly toward Falon. Falon stepped out of the trees.

The man watched him warily. "Who are you?" he asked.

The voice suggested that he was accustomed to deference. "I am Falon the Kortagenian." He showed the stranger his right hand in the universal sign that he was not hostile.

"Greeting, Falon," said the robed man. "I am Edward the Chronicler." The light played across his features. They were cheerful but wary. He wore an unkempt beard, and he looked well fed.

"And what sort of chronicle do you compose, Edward, that you dare the spirits of this place?"

Edward seemed to relax. "If you are really interested, it is indeed the spirits I pursue. For if they live anywhere on the earth, it is surely here." He held the lamp higher so he could see Falon's face. "A boy," he said. "Are you alone, young man?"

Edward was short. His head was immense, too large even for the corpulent body that supported it. He had a tiny nose, and his eyes were sunk deep in his flesh.

"I am not a boy," said Falon. "As you will discover to your sorrow should you fail to show due respect."

"Ah." Edward bowed. "Indeed I shall. Yes, you may rely on it."

"Edward-that-pursues-spirits: what is your clan?"

The dark eyes fastened on him from within the mounds of flesh. "I am late of Lausanne. More recently of Brighton." He eased himself onto a bench and drew back his hood. The man would have been the same age as his father, but this one was a different sort: he had never ridden hard. "What brings you to this poor ruin in the dead of night?"

"I was passing and saw lights." Yes. That sounded fearless. Let the stranger know he was dealing with a man who took no stock in demons and devils.

"Well," offered Edward, in the manner of one who was taking charge, "I am grateful for the company."

Falon nodded. "No doubt." He glanced surreptitiously at the tomb, at the open vault. At the passageway into the interior. "Your accent is strange, Edward."

"I am Briton by birth."

Falon had met others from the misty land. He found them gloomy, pretentious, unbearing. It seemed to him they rarely spoke their minds. "Why are you here?"

Edward sighed. "I would put a name to one of the spirits and answer a question." He picked up a leather bag. "May I offer you something to eat?"

"No. Thank you, but I have no need." He looked at the Briton. "What is the question?"

Edward's eyes were unsettling. "Falon, do you know who built this place?"

"No. Some of our elders think it has always been here."

"Not very enlightening. It was constructed ages ago by a race we barely remember."

"And who were they, this forgotten race?"

He seemed to think about it. "Romans," he said.

Falon ran the name across his lips. "I have never heard of them."

Edward nodded. Branches creaked. The flame in the lantern wobbled. "The world is full of their temples. You undoubtedly rode in on their highway. The hand that built this city created others like it from Britain to the valley of the Tigris. They devised a system of laws, and gave peace to the world. But today the Romans and their name are dust."

Too many words for Falon. "What happened to them?"

"That is the issue of the moment. To discover what force can initiate the decline and cause the fall of such power."

"Only the gods."

"The gods are dead." That bald statement, impious and blasphemous, shocked him. But Edward seemed not to notice. "They were lost with their worshippers."

Falon muttered a quick prayer. He had never heard that kind of talk before. "Why were the worshippers lost?" he asked. "What happened to them?"

He sat down on a piece of broken marble. "Maybe lost is the wrong word. Better to say forgotten."

"And why were they forgotten?"

"Because they failed to create an institution independent from the state that could carry their memory forward."

Falon nodded, not understanding, but not wishing to betray his ignorance.

"A society of scholars might have done it," Edward continued. "Or an academy. A foundation. Even, for God's sake, a church."

Falon shrugged. "What do you seek here?"

Edward looked into the vault. "The identity of the occupant."

The night air was cold. "Then you are indeed too late," he said finally, pushing a piece of rubble aside with his foot. He looked at the statue, half-assembled like a puzzle. There was part of a leg, a trunk, a shoulder, a shield. The leg matched the figure atop the tomb. The shield was emblazoned with the same sword device that marked the front of the vault.

"No," said the Briton. "I think not." He shifted his position trying to get comfortable.

"Then who is he?" Falon asked.

Edward clasped his hands in his sleeves to warm them. "A matchless commander. The hero who might have prevented the general disaster. Dead now these fourteen hundred years, more or less. The chronicles are sometimes conflicting." He straightened his robe, adjusted it across his shoulders. "Does the name Maxentius mean anything to you?"

"No," said Fallon.

"He was a tyrant who controlled the Roman capital when this city was young. A vicious, licentious, incompetent coward." Edward's eyes locked with his. "Under his sway, no man's dignity was safe, nor any woman's honor. Wives and daughters were dragged before him and abused. Those who protested were put to death. The people were enslaved. The soldiers were the only order of men he respected. He filled his land with armed troops, connived at their assaults against the common people, and encouraged them to plunder and massacre. He was a symbol of all that went wrong with the Empire."

Falon's hand fell to his weapon. "I would gladly have ridden against this monster."

The Briton nodded. "There was one who did. His name was Constantine, and I have no doubt he would have welcomed you to his cause."

Falon felt a surge of pride.

"Constantine appears to have recognized that the Empire, which was fragmented in his time, was disintegrating. But he laid plans how it might be preserved. Or, if it were already too late, and collapse could not be prevented, he considered how its essence might be passed on." Edward shook his head. "Had he been able to defeat Maxentius, things might have been different."

"He failed, then?"

"He was a reluctant crusader, Falon. And he marched against Maxentius only when the tyrant threatened to invade his domain."

"I cannot approve such timidity."

Edward smiled. "I would be disappointed if you did. But Constantine wished to conserve the peace and welfare of his realm."

"And where was his realm?"

"Britain. And here."

"But I do not understand." Falon grasped Edward's shoulder. "If this Constantine was a commander of great ability, as you have said, how did it happen he did not prevail?"

"Heroes do not win all engagements," Edward said slowly. "Maxentius sent army after army against him. Constantine swept them away. Most of the Italian cities between the Alps and the Po acknowledged his power and embraced his cause. And at last he appeared before Rome itself. The seat of the tyrant." Edward paused. They were exposed out here and the wind cut through Falon's vest. The Briton looked at him. "Are you cold?"

"No. Please go on."

"Maxentius had by far the larger army. He also had armored cavalry, a type of opponent you will never see. Fortunately. But he chose not to rely on military force alone." He broke off and walked into the shadows. Moments later he returned with a woven garment for the young warrior.

Falon took it, thanked him, and pulled it over his shoulders.

Edward resumed his seat. "There was, across the Tiber, a bridge that connected the city

with the plain. This was the Milvian Bridge. Maxentius directed his engineers to weaken it. When they had done so, he rode out to engage the invader.

"Constantine was waiting, and the armies attacked each other. It was a ferocious combat, and advantage passed back and forth, from one side to the other. The issue remained uncertain through much of the day. But gradually, Constantine's troops gained the upper hand."

"Now," urged Falon, "strike the chief."

"Yes," said Edward. "One might almost think you were there. And he did. He rallied his personal guard and drove the tyrant onto the bridge. But Maxentius had foreseen this eventuality, had planned for it. He retreated across the treacherous span. Unmindful of caution, Constantine pursued, bleeding from a dozen wounds."

"And in that terrible hour, when Constantine had reached the center of the bridge, the tyrant gave the signal, and the structure was dropped into the Tiber."

"The coward," snarled Falon. And then philosophically, "Valor is not always sufficient to the day. Constantine need not be ashamed."

"No, certainly not."

"And did there arise a hero to avenge him?"

"Yes. But that is another story, for the avenger lacked political wisdom, and soon after his success, the Empire's lights dimmed and went out. Then the world fell into a night that has had no dawn."

"But what connection has the tale with this vault?"

Edward held out the lamp. "Perhaps you would care to inspect it with me?"

"No." He drew away. "No, I would not do so." To invade the resting place of the dead was to invite bad luck.

The Briton rose. "As you wish." He smiled, the way one does with a child. "But for me, the moment is at hand." He excused himself and walked into the vault. Falon watched him go. Remembered the condescending smile. And decided that as long as he didn't touch anything he'd probably be all right. So he followed.

It was damp and cold. Mulch and earth and weeds covered the floor. The walls were moldy and cracked. The ceiling was low. Falon had to duck his head.

"There were rumors," said Edward, "that Constantine survived his fall into the Tiber. One account, of which I have a copy, maintained that he was taken injured and half-drowned to a friendly but unnamed city. According to this account, he lived in that city one year. Others say three. It's difficult to be sure what really happened. The best sources agree that he hoped to lead another army against Maxentius. But apparently he never fully recovered from his injuries—." Edward shrugged. "I've looked many years for the truth."

"And how would you know the truth?"

"Easily. Find his tomb." He kicked away dead leaves and dirt and pointed toward scratches on the stone floor. "Here is where his sarcophagus would have been placed. His armor would have been stored on the shelf."

"For use in a future world?" asked Falon.

"Perhaps in a better world."

"Then this is his tomb?"

"Oh, yes, I am quite satisfied on that score. Yes: unquestionably he was interred here."

Falon wondered how he could possibly know such things.

"While he lived, he talked of building a second Rome, in the east." His voice filled with regret. "Something to survive."

The smoke thrown up by the lantern was growing thick. Edward lapsed into silence. He coughed, tried to wave away the noxious cloud. "We're done here," he said.

"Good." Falon seized Edward's elbow and steered him back up into the starlight. The air was clean and tasted good. "But how can you be sure this is his tomb? No name is engraved on it."

"Nevertheless, it is marked quite clearly. Look behind you." He pointed at the partly-assembled statue. "Look at the shield."

A burst of wind pulled at his garment.

Edward held the lantern close. In its flickering light, Falon saw only the curious sword.

On the vault, and on the shield.

"It was his device," Edward said.

Falon pressed his fingers against it. "How can you be so certain? There are many who use weapon devices."

"This is not a weapon, Falon. It was a symbol sometimes employed by an obscure religious cult. For many centuries, in fact, it was a mark of shame. It was even said to have magic properties."

"Not a sword," said Falon.

Edward nodded. "No. They called it a cross."

Originally published in *What Might Have Been*, Vol 3, edited by Gregory Benford & Martin H. Greenberg.  
Bantam Spectra, 1991.

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