

DEATH DANCES

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Death came to Idradrud at suns' rise. She had appointments to keep. The city lay along the banks of its river, a river green as jade and thick as soup, sprinkled with garbage, rotting hulks, and slave-powered quinqueremes like floating towers. The tiered towers on the banks kept still, save in the occasional spring earthquakes, which revived religion in the city as only the plague could do otherwise. Domes and minarets and steeples stood against the Great Sun and the Sun-Star on the yellow-green sky. But closer to the earth, the slums that were the truth of Idradrud, and the cut-throat alleys which bisected them, huddled in the warming sludge and muck. Diseased-looking steps piled into the water. There were those who got their living from the river in an immemorial way. Not by plying goods or hauling sail, not by catching the slightly-poisonous fish or the now-and-then-lethal oysters, but by detaining the corpses to be found in the water, stripping them of valuables, clothes, bones, and hair even-to be sold later for wigs. This trade was carried on by boat, or sometimes it was performed by those who, holding breath a long while, swam deep down into the jade broth, down to the bottom, and searched about there in the smoking mud.

Along among the quays, there was a gaudy stretch or two. Tenements dressed with balconies, awnings, birdcages, and evil exotic flowers. Here was a narrow house with its skirt in the river, pink plaster and ornate scrolling—all battered and peeling from sun and wet. Bitza, as she gazed forth from a window, saw all those other buildings, hers and the rest, upside down in the water, one with a young woman gazing out of a window, and an eel snaking by through her hair. But she is free, thought Bitza on reflection, of her reflection. Bitza, the Harlot in the Pink House, was not beautiful; but she had learned to give the impression of enormous and indefinable beauty, and was much desired. Even lords came to her slum palace to visit her. She might have been rich, but was not entirely honest. Certain enemies of her youth had died in mysterious circumstances. But she was concerned for the poor and gave most of her fortune away in the interests of caring for them—namelessly. Once, she had been poor herself, and dreaded the idea of it. Now her fine dark hair was curled and streaked with gilt. Her large eyes were perfectly shaped, the primeval colour

of
the river, but crystal clean as the river never was. Her body was strong and graceful, honey's hue in summer.
As she was putting loops of gold through her charming ears, Bitza's maid came fleeting in.
"Madam, a messenger-runner brought this."
Bitza took the slip of parchment. It had an unfamiliar look and texture, and a strong smell of incense. The wax was black, without a seal. Bitza imagined one of the more-than-usually eccentric lords of Idradrud was about to seek her out.
(Her clients, to a man, exacerbated her.) There was one who liked to be chained and whipped by a Bitza masked like a silver eagle, and another who liked to make love while semi-drowning in a bath of wine... But Bitza broke the wax and opened the parchment, and it said: "As arranged, tonight I will be with you. Death."

In one of the blacker alleys, in an overhanging storey that seemed, with every creak of winter winds and capricious shift of spring quakes, ever more likely to fall smack into the six-foot-wide street below, Kreet was lying late abed, having kicked out his boy companion several hours before. Kreet of the dark soul and the light fingers, popularly called Golden Hands—Kreet the Thief. He had stolen monumental treasures, they said. Then been robbed of them by others, whom he had later paid by various means, without recovering the prize, or else he used the loot to bribe the city authorities to be obliging, or he had gambled the proceeds away. Then, too, despite the squalor of his lodging, he was said to own the whole alley and half the streets and crumbling edifices around.
While in the apartment of dirty, nasty rooms were there not chests full of money guarded by his ruffians, and bed-curtains sewn with rubies over a bed whose sheets were seldom changed? There were.
Kreet, the Thief with Golden Hands, was not a kind man. Swarthy of skin, foxy of face and eyes—though without a fox's good looks—his bush of long black hair was washed once a year, while his beard bathed daily in his meals. All this had become a trademark. On the back of rivals he sometimes personally tattooed these words: Kreet dislikes me. And others, discovering the phrase, tended to shun the bearer of it.
But Kreet loved no one, not the fair boys he misused in his bed, not his gang of robbers, who admired him. Not even the chests of ill-gettings. Kreet stole because he was good at stealing. He liked the thrill of taking, and the violence—Then, the skeins of jewels in his golden mitts, Kreet scowled, dissatisfied. While the violence had repercussions that were beginning to worry him.

Yet, one thing Kreet did love and like, and now he summoned it to him off the bedpost.

"Come, my tatty joy!"

And down flapped a brown chicken, and nested in his arms, crooning peaceably and

pecking scraps of grain from his hand that only last night had barbered a couple

of noses, while Kreet crooned back in perfect communion.

But there was a scratch on the door. One of Kreet's gang came sidling in.

"A messenger-runner left this at the tavern."

Kreet looked at the parchment and the black wax seal. He squinted at his robberling and instructed, "Open and recite."

The robber, who had his letters as Kreet did not, obeyed. In an incredulous and

quavering croak, therefore, he presently read out these words: "'As arranged, tonight I will be with you. Death.'"

Where the bank rose away from the river, up terraces, up a hill, a domed temple

stood, lifting its stone head clear of the slums. Between the temple's pillars,

cool shapes went drifting; and the murmur of chants came and went, continually,

and the purr of doves. The wings of these doves were clipped, for fear they should fly too far and meet the river gulls, which would tear them in pieces.

But the priests and priestesses passed in and out carelessly, protected by their

pale azure robes. The slums were superstitious. Idradrud did not rob or murder

its priesthoods.

High up in the temple, just under the dome, was a round chamber with an altar of

marble. From the altar ascended a hollow silver cup, in which there burned eternally a pastel blue flame. This flame, or Flame, was the spirit of the temple. Even in the earth-shocks, though it had faltered and smouldered, it had

not gone out. It was said to be the result of a pulse of subterranean gas, which

had breached the ground before the city's birth. Later, holy men saw in the gas—which could be made to catch bluey alight—a manifestation of the Infinite.

So the temple was built, and the gas channelled up via pipes from cellar to altar and so into the hollow cup, where the flash of flint and tinder brought it

alive once and for all.

There was always, it went without saying, a guardian for the Flame. It was the

task of a year. With every new year, a new guardian was elected. To the esoteric

creatures of the temple, this task, which shut them more or less all one year in

the round chamber and its adjacent annexe and gallery, was considered a wonderful privilege.

Sume had now tended the Flame for seven months, and had therefore seven further

months of the Idradrudian year to tend it.

White and slender as a wand, from aesthetics, incarceration, dedication, Sume wore the azure robes of her order, the sapphire rings; and her hair was bleached

and tinted faintest blue, as was the hair of all the priests and priestesses. Sume, as she glided about her duties, at prayer, feeding the doves, moving along the gallery like a ghost, Sume was no different from every other inhabitant of that place. She seemed, as they all seemed, to have no life but the expression of the temple. Yet, to such as drew close and glanced at her directly, there might come a check of surprise. For Sume's narrow, delicate face hinted a curious passion that had nothing to do with solitude or the Infinite, and her dark eyes burned in a way that did not speak of sacred fire. The less reverent who had noticed this had said, Here's one ripe for something. But they were unsure what—mischief, mayhem, or only sensuality and sexual fall. Now Sume poised before the Flame, straight and slim and upright, the Flame itself in human female guise. She had been repeating the morning orison, but as she concluded, a bell sounded outside at the annexe door. Someone wished to speak to her, or to bring her some news. Sume, who had no family but the temple, having been left an orphan on its steps, went quietly and without alarm to receive the visitor. A young novice bowed low to Sume, the Priestess of the Flame. He held out a piece of parchment sealed in black. "The High Priest sent me to you with this. A messenger-runner brought it to the porch." Sume took the parchment with a slight, astonishment. Once or twice, men of the congregation had importuned her, having seen her at her offices and become infatuate with her spirituality—or her promise of the spiritually profane. Was this another such note? It was not. It read: "As arranged, tonight I will be with you. Death."

It was now midmorning, and the two suns shone high above the city, putting gold-leaf on every crease of the river and every slate of every lurching roof. While along the spires and parapets of fine mansions and palaces, the suns unctuously poured, in dazzling bad taste Uphill, in a high-class inn on one of the nicer streets, a young army captain, raising his eyes, was promptly blinded by three golden statues positioned atop some lord's house across the way. So that, looking back at what he had been writing, he saw only their three black afterimages stuck there over his words. It was tradition among the lower circles of the upper echelons of Idradrud, that third sons enter the army. Here they soared as fame, war, cash, and influence permitted. In seasons of conflict they fought the battles of Idradrud; or, as now, in peace, they strutted, idled, or slothed away the time at home. Mhiglay, a captain of three companies—sixty men—a soldier, but also a scholar, had eschewed both barracks and family and put up

at

the inn. Poet also, he had been employed all night with that. He could not sleep, felt he would never sleep again. He had seen too much of friends who died, and enemies he did not hate yet must kill. And recently, a man who was very nearly his brother in everything but blood, had turned out to be a traitor;

and it had fallen to Mhiglay to attend the military scaffold. Plead for mercy for this man as Mhiglay had done, mercy had been omitted.

The near-brother had spat on him and died in agony, screaming. A scene often recaptured in dreams, which caused Mhiglay to turn slumber out of the room whenever possible.

Though duty-bound to be a clever and able soldier, and dutifully being all the

role demanded, it did not fit him. He had always half suspected, and now was sure. Blond of hair, handsome, and thoroughly haggard and hollow-eyed from lack

of sleep and sleep's scourge when he accepted it, he looked the poet and scholar

he surely was, and also somewhat the haunted murderer he seemed to himself to be. None would or could console him. Least of all his family of puffed uncles and irksome brothers.

No hope, no help, Mhiglay, the Captain of Three Twenties, had written on the page. No cure, for the sickness is my life.

And just then, even as the afterimages of the statues faded out of his sad, distraught, and sleepless eyes, someone rapped on the door. An inn-girl entered,

flirtatiously, (he did not see), to tell him a messenger-runner had brought something, and to hand him a leaf of parchment sealed in black.

Mhiglay opened and read the parchment. He gave a contemptuous laugh.

"As arranged, tonight I will be with you. Death."

There is a saying in Idradrud of the green river, Life will dance with some, and

some Life will refuse. Yet Death dances with every man.

When Bitza, the Harlot in the Pink House, read the message, she said, boldly, "Some kink-full suitor is playing a trick. I had better get ready."

When Kreet, the Thief with Golden Hands, read the message, he said, nervously,

"Some filth-laden foe is after my hide. I had better get ready."

But when Sume, the Priestess of the Flame, read the message, she said, stilly,

"Can this be so? Well, I am here."

And when Mhiglay, the Captain of Three Twenties, read the message, he said, coldly, "Then let her arrive. I am waiting."

It was suns' set. First the Great Sun sank down behind the western bank of the

river, in a murky glory of red, russet, and amber. The Sun-Star followed like a

lover. The sky turned to walnut brown, resembling an expanse of highly-polished

table, then went black. The stars appeared, in complex patterns, such as the Sphynx, the Lion, the Lyre. The most intricate of all was that of the Winged Woman, which stretched for a quarter of the night across most of the eastern horizon, and was easily discernible, even by a child-body, limbs, wings, hair,

drawn in blots of diamond. The air over Idradrud was thickly crusted with stars.

So many that, even lacking a moon, which it always did, night was always also very nearly bright as day, except if there should be overcast. Darkness being present then, punctually Death knocked at Bitza's door. Bitza reclined in or upon a black couch like a coffin. The room was hung with black cerements and had generally been made to imitate a tomb. Bitza herself wore a translucent shroud, and bone combs in her hair. "It is a woman," hissed Bitza's maid. Bitza raised her brows. "Very well." And so Death was shown up to the tomb-room, and Bitza looked at her with disfavour. "I do not as a rule deal with women," said Bitza. "But if you will meet my price, I will consider your desires." Death smiled. When she did so, Bitza realized she had been mistaken. "Then," she said, "it is a fact?" Death nodded.

Soon after, Death approached the door of Kreet's lodging. A hundred butcheroos stood ready with drawn knives, but Death naturally walked through the knives and came to Kreet's door, and the bars and bolts crumbled at her touch. "Kill me, would you!" yelled Kreet, standing on his unclean bed. The chicken flapped its feathers and tried to take a peck at Death, but Death said, "Hush," and the chicken went to Kreet and sat on his boot. And then Kreet himself said, after a medley of oaths and cries, "Spare me! Spare me! Or at least, you damnable fiend, spare this innocent chicken—" "The chicken," said Death, "is not inevitably my business."

Not long after, Death met Sume as she glided along the gallery of the Flame-chamber. Sume paused. "Is it you?" she asked. Death waited. Sume meekly bowed her head in assent, though her dark eyes flamed more fiercely than the Flame.

And next Death came through the door of Mhiglay's room at the inn, which door had been left open, and Mhiglay seized Death in his arms and kissed her passionately on the lips.

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As everyone understands, Death too plies a Boat along a River. Small shock then to behold the slim sable craft with its sickle of sail, going like a sombre thought between the two-banked landscape of the city and its lights, and over the lighted stars in the air, with only one lamp at the prow to let down a glistening green tail into the water. Now and then, one of the afloat tower-tiers of a quinquere is passed, at rest for the hours of night, and going up twenty-nine feet, rigging folded and oars drawn in, and slaves lying in swoon-sleep, and masters getting drunk. Or some other river thing goes by,

and perhaps hails the dark boat, getting no answer. Death herself stands for'ard, guiding the vessel, remote. There has never been, and is not now, any requirement to describe Death. Who cannot picture and has not pictured her? All know her and how she seems. But amidst the four passengers sit. Fascinating Bitza is twisting her necklaces, trying to fashion some trick. Ugly Kreet scowls, and sweats, wondering if Death is bribable. And on his shoulder the chicken broods, having refused to leave him. Fey Sume is immaculate, eyes cast down. And handsome Mhiglay, his head thrown back, is bitterly enjoying the wretched romance of it all, glad to be going away. Finally Kreet erupts. "I complain!" he shouts, and the chicken applauds. "I complain at the bloody and stenchful injustice. Who is in charge here?" No one replies, though Bitza looks at him and Sume ignores him, and Mhiglay laughs ironically and insultingly. Kreet lapses into invective. At that, "Do not offend her," cautions Bitza. And bites her manicured nails. Sume whispers, "What is life? I have had no life." Her eyes burn holes in the night. Mhiglay says, "Be thankful." At this point, however, all four perceive a new area of darkness on the dark, a sort of archway rising up out of the river, higher even than the quinqueremes, the distant towers on the banks: The entry to some chasm. It was never on the river before, this chasm, this tall black arch. And Bitza screams, and Kreet curses and grovels—and the chicken hides in his collar—and Sume again lowers her gaze, and Mhiglay sighs. And the boat of Death creeps nearer and nearer toward the massive black hump where no lights show and no stars are. Only the green tail in the water flickers before them, and against it, the remote figure of Death, who suddenly speaks. "Remember," says Death, to each and to all, "that my message to you read as arranged." (Then there is a silence, as the four in the boat consider, reject, revile, puzzle on, these words, not essentially in that order, while the black archway comes closer and fills the world and is surely about to swallow them.) "I am," Death then announces, "myself. Not necessarily what you think me." (And they are, surely, swallowed whole.)

It was from the most peculiar dream that the Harlot woke. In the dream there was a boat, which had passed around a wide dark loop inside some cavern, and come out at length on the spangled lime-jade water of Idradrud's river. At which the Harlot opened his eyes and looked about him, and found the familiar cozy-coarse splendour of his Pink House. Soon, joking off the dream, he rose, called his maid, and toyed with her in a luxuriating bath. She washed his hair, streaked it

with guilt at his somewhat coy request, and shaved him. When once he was clothed, (in elegant leathers), his eyes drawn round with kohl, and the gold rings in his ears, the Harlot took breakfast. Then he called, "Come, my tatty angel!" and a brown chicken jumped into his lap, and they clucked pleasantly to one another.

The Thief, meanwhile, had woken from a similar dream, up in a dirty flea-tip, and at once, in a cruel clear voice that was not to be denied, exclaimed that linen must instantly be changed, floors scrubbed, and an unaccountable quantity of chicken feathers removed from the hangings. Ruffians and knife-boys leapt to obey with alacrity. One crouched fawningly at the Thief's blue slippers. He asked if he was needed to read her anything. "Read?" she kicked him flying. Her pale face was flushed and her black eyes shone with relaxed malevolence. "I can read quite well for myself, you damnable ant. Was I not temple-trained?" The kicked cut-throat beat a retreat. How could he have been so aberrant? The whole slum quarter sang of her learning, yearningly.

While the Priest who guarded the Flame had been writing poetry to it all night, adrift in intellectual space. Or so it seemed he had, only once contrastingly drifting into a peculiar dream, doubtless of vast psychic import, when he could be bothered to interpret it—but he had cast it aside on waking with a rather military shrug. Now, standing over it, he regarded the sacred Flame, just immortalised in his verse, with eyes that matched the fire and blond hair which did not. Eventually, leaning forward, he blew the Flame out. "Yes," said the Priest, with gentle satisfaction. "And there you have it." And striking flint and tinder, he lit the Flame again, nodded at it, and walked from the chamber. Outside, he found a novice on duty, waiting to take up the poet-Priest's guardianship whenever he felt inclined to abscond. This often happened, as the novice would explain. This one Priest was noted for such behaviour. And for other actions. For example, exactly today, striding to the temple treasury with an idle yet undeniable salute at its sentries, he flung open the coffers. Going out on the street he began to distribute largesse to the deserving, (and sometimes, to the beautiful). "Every temple, even ours, should have its oddity, its wayward matter," the High Priestess had declared in glowing defence of the poet. "We are admired for our tolerance. Besides, his writings and verses are nonpareil." They were rather captivated, too, by his lack of guilt over anything.

And last of all, the Captainess of Three Twenties, which she already had some

plans to increase to Six Twenties before high summer, had left her inn and gone home. Home to that family of hers so rich it was ludicrous. They were somewhat in awe of her. It was not very usual to have one's daughter enlist in the armies of Idradrud, and then to become celebrated and successful there. But she had a way with men, the Captainess. Riding into battle, with her dark hair under helmet and war-plumes, her green eyes feral, and her sword-hand rock steady, she had inspired an exceptional sort of fright in many an adversary. Her kindred welcomed her this morning with uneasy open arms, almost as if they had expected someone else, and were bruised by the medals clanking on her delightful breast. (It was said, the last enemy general she had whipped across seven hills.) But now she only seemed inclined to push her brothers in the lily-pond. And there they went, splish-splash.

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Those who got their living in an immemorial way along the river of Idradrud, these had had a busy night. What a catch—gems, cutlasses, military insigniae.. and—chicken feathers? It would appear a harlot had been murdered by a mad client and pushed in the water from her balcony. It turned out a thief had been attacked by rivals and dumped there, with a hole in his back, and a little fowl clinging to his collar. It seemed a priestess had grown insane and run from her temple to suicide in the unsavoury depths. It transpired an army captain had done likewise. And yet, is there not something not quite right with the bodies the traders in death have fished from the river? Brought in by net and oar alongside the narrow boat, or raised up by the hair through panting divers bursting the surface, muddy from the river's bottom, and with shells in their beards—cadavers, such as one expects, but skins unsolid, faces washed too expressionless—"Just take the jewels, the coins and knives, the rings, the medals, and sword—Why philosophise? Why quibble? The river does that to corpses. But quick—strip them quick—before they melt away altogether and are gone." And over there in the Pink House, Kreet bangs open the door and roars at his visitor: "Late again, you dog of a lord!" And thrashes a truly grisly whip, (to loud approving cackles from somewhere), and the lord—in startled, horrified misgiving and ecstasy—flops on his face to get his money's worth—and never did he recall such enthusiasm in his treatment formerly— And along there, in an alley two feet wide, Sume; who has recently tattooed on the ankle of an enemy: Sume likes me, Sume picks the pockets of sozzled merchants as she asks them the hour, or the way to the blue temple of the Flame, to which she has no intention of going. And presently points out an exquisite boy, who blushes, at which Sume says to her loving homicides: "Bring me that

one, for later," and smiles, oh-so-softly-eyed-
And up there, in the blue temple a moment ago mentioned, Mhiglay is sitting
with
his feet on the High Priest's inlaid table, oblivious to duty, the table, and
the High Priest, writing nonpareil poetry on an orange skin, proudly and
fondly
watched on every side-
And in the topmost lower mansion of Idradrud, where gold statuary crowds the
roofs, Bitza is having a 'mock' duel with an opinionated uncle, and he is in
grave fear of his life-
And it is of no use asking what goes on. Asking what arrangement, precisely,
led
to this. Or if perhaps we are not all involved in it and simply do not
recollect, or have been, or will be...
Ask Death. There she is, down in the groves just beyond the city, where the
myrtles grow with snakes around their boughs. Death, pretty as a picture, in
between the wild white trees. Look, you can see what she does. Death dances,
with her shadow-and why should she not have one?-and all the stars in her
hair.