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The man groaned and writhed upon his sleeping mat as he fought to free himself from the dark and forbidding dream. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright. His almond eyes snapped open and he screamed a single name: "Isuda!"

Ramu, court illusionist, sank slowly back upon the mat. His heart beat as if it was a drum being pounded by a madman, and he shuddered at the memory of the awful nightmare. It had been a horrid incubus of wild visions that seared his brain with frightening realism: The terrified girl and her piercing scream of agony. Then there was the dreadful gore that spurted in sickening streams when monstrous and brutal jaws crushed her nubile form.

"It was just a nightmare," he muttered to himself as he wiped the sweat of terror from his brow. "My beloved is surely safe."

The thought brought no comfort. Evil seemed to hang in the air like a swaying corpse upon its gibbet. Ramu looked about the sparse interior of his room, which was situated in the servant quarters of the palace. The light of Grahmu's twin moons, Oonay and Sarad, spilled through the unglazed

window of his second story chamber. All was quiet. There was no sign of any danger. Yet somehow he knew something was terribly amiss. But what?

Ramu stiffened. Tramping feet sounded in the corridor. Again, dark fear beset him. The tread of warriors seemed a presage of coming doom. Instantly, he was on his feet. The conjurer jerked wide the door. He looked out.

A contingent of the palace guard marched towards him. He recognized Ashkor, leader of the squad. The man held aloft a tall, narrow cone in which grew fire-flowers. The weird bioluminescence of the crimson blooms lit the way, and cast sinister shadows on the officer's face which made his scarred visage look even grimmer.

Ramu grasped the man's arm when he drew level with the door.

"What is it?" he asked wildly. "What's wrong?"

"Disaster," replied Ashkor, gravely. "Sharjaree¹ Isuda, heir to the throne of Dasur, is missing. Vajram, the regent, has ordered a thorough search of the palace."

Ramu gasped. He'd known the girl since childhood's innocence, for his father had been the old Sharjar's² favourite harlequin—a member of the royal family, almost. But as Isuda had grown to womanhood and he to man's estate, each found their heart's desire in the other.

But the only way they could touch was with longing glances of unfulfilled desire, for the consummation of their yearning love could never be. Ramu was not of noble birth, and should the regent ever suspect his feelings for the girl ... Well; a slow and unpleasant death would cure him of his passion. The only consolation was that as a member of the Sharjaree's retinue he could at least be close to her. Now, it seemed, he might never see his heart's desire again.

¹ Princess

² King

The conjurer paled. He stood there knifed by brutal fear for Isuda. His soul seemed eclipsed by darkness blacker than the blackest night. A guard pushed him roughly aside and searched his room. But his inner turmoil was such that he hardly felt or saw the man.

"My dream was prophetic," he burst out, more to himself than the hard faced guards surrounding him. "Isuda *is* in terrible danger."

"Dream?" snapped Ashkor. "The Sharjaree is missing and you offer me a dream! Ghena, have you found anything?"

"No," was the warrior's curt reply as he exited Ramu's chamber.

"Then let us leave this fool to his dreams."

The guards departed at a swift march. Ramu staggered within his room and to the window. He leaned heavily on the sill, knuckles whitening as he gripped it fiercely, and stared out over the sleeping city. The moons graced the scene with their pellucid light, which glinted off gilded domes, spires and marble towers, and highlighted the tall fumis palms that lined Dasur's broad avenues.

It was a wondrous sight, but one to which the conjurer was blind. His eyes were drawn instead to the Temple of the Dragon. The ancient and crumbling ruin lay some distance from the palace. It brooded in the darkness—as black and repulsive as clotted blood.

Like all Dasurans, the illusionist knew the building well. It was a massive cube of onyx stone, one carved with snaking, crawling arabesques whose twisting forms disturbed the mind with visceral fears when looked upon.

Again, dread premonition, like a venomous serpent, slithered through his vitals. Somehow, with a certainty that defied logical explanation, he realized the woman he deeply loved was trapped within that evil and mouldering ruin. Savage fear sprang upon Ramu. It raked him with claws as hard as diamond and as cold as Northern ice.

His mind whirled in utter panic. What should he do? Should he approach the regent and demand the guards search the place? No, his pleas would be dismissed, for what evidence could he offer but a dream. He would be treated with the same contempt Ashkor had expressed.

Ramu fought for calm. With a mighty effort he reigned in his wild emotions. Something monstrous was afoot—a growing darkness like the coming of a monsoon storm. Only he could save his love, and knew he must act quickly before it was too late.

Ramu crouched in the shadows of a spreading lothon tree, one of many that had grown about the ruin with the passing centuries. He gazed determinedly upon the mighty wall that enclosed the accursed temple. No entrance pierced the barrier, for the impressive portal that once gave egress to the structure had been walled up with massive stones in ancient times.

The conjurer, however, was undeterred. As a boy he had climbed the very tree he hunkered near. It had been a dare by older lads to approach this evil place and look within the enclosure of the forbidden god. He had succeeded then. He would succeed again.

Pushing aside all thoughts of danger, Ramu quickly scrambled up the lothon tree, his manly thews and supple body gaining its height with youthful ease. Then, like a cat, he carefully crept across one mighty branch whose twisted limb lay on a level with the wall. The narrow bridge sagged beneath his weight as he gained upon its extremity, and the sweat of fear now lay heavily upon his brow.

The branch creaked warningly. Ramu froze. He held his breath in terrible expectation of the fatal snap he thought would come. Giddiness threatened, and the ground seemed a

thousand feet below the trembling limb upon which he strove to balance.

The moment passed, and the limb stilled. A vision of Isuda gave him courage, and he inched forward by slow degrees. At last he judged he could go no further without peril to his life and the failure of his mission. But ten feet still separated the youth from his goal—a taunting nearness, yet seemingly unbridgeable.

He knew what he had to do. Carefully, he began to bounce upon the limb with bended knees, keen ears listening in expectation of a warning crack. Then, like a diver upon a springboard, he leapt outward upon the upward swing, and his well knit form arched across the dark abyss.

His clawing fingers grasped the wall. His body slammed against hard stone. Pain, like serrated knives pierced his straining limbs. It threatened to loose his tenuous hold upon the edge. A tortured groan escaped his lips as he slowly hauled his sweating body to safety upon the barrier's upper plane.

For a time he lay in restful immobility, dark eyes scanning the temple gardens, now a tangled riot that was wild with the neglect of ages. The tropic verdure extended to the walls of the sinister building, and sent forth its tendrils to intimately cloak the ancient stone in lush webs of greenery.

Ramu shuddered at the sight. He knew the Priesthood of the Dragon had ruled Dasur a thousand years ago. Dark and bloody rites had been practiced here in honour of foul Addak, their beastly god. But then from the Western Isles Pharis the Liberator had come. He had roused the people against their cruel oppressors—the wicked priests—and had killed them all in a fierce and bloody revolution.

The Islander had then assumed the title of Sharjar by popular demand. It was he who had decreed the temple be sealed and left standing as a reminder of iniquity, and the need for unyielding vigilance to guard against evil's vile insidiousness.

Again, dark premonition bestirred the man to action. Rousing his aching limbs, Ramu slowly stood and carefully walked upon the wall until he came upon a soaring fumis palm that rose with stately grace from the lesser growths. He allowed himself a sight smile. The tree had grown since his childhood, as he knew it would have, and was now high enough for him to grasp. In urgent haste he shinned down its scaly bole to the loamy soil.

Ramu paused for a moment to catch his breath. His eyes scanned the dark and sinister maze of tangled verdure, and his heart pounded with a strange mixture of excitement and trepidation. All was quiet. Nothing stirred. Yet there was danger here. The conjurer moved forward with silent cautiousness.

Suddenly, rough hands seized him from behind. A brawny arm was flung about his throat. Ramu tensed the muscles of his neck, and slammed an elbow into his unseen assailant's ribs. Bones cracked. The man staggered and fell away.

Shadowy figures leapt at him from the press of greenery, clawing hands extended. One foe fell beneath Ramu's hammering fist. Another screamed when the conjurer's foot struck him in the groin. The battle raged. Bodies tumbled to the ground—a swirling nightmare of twisting, leaping forms but briefly glimpsed.

Yet disaster struck—a well aimed blow crashed against his skull, and the world plunged into spinning oblivion.

The cell door creaked open, startlingly loud in the shadowed silence. Robed figures entered. Their faces were hidden by demonic masks of porcelain, and their cloaking vestments were of a sinister crimson hue—as red as the blood their sick minds hungered for.

They approached the body. One priest kicked it viciously. "Up, you scum," he snarled.

The body lay as still as the corpse it appeared to be. The enraged cleric lashed out again. There was no response.

The man's companion knelt, holding high his torch of fire-flowers. He felt for a pulse, and then cursed in a most unholy manner.

"Sunmun, you fool," raged the furious priest "You struck too hard. See the blood upon his head? He's dead, and now we can't question him."

"His clothes," replied Sunmun as he squatted by the body, "prove he is from the palace." His sinister afterthought was as chilling as the frozen waste of Zor: "Perhaps the Shar-jaree can enlighten us."

"Still you lust for torture," scowled Jasa as he turned angrily upon his brother. "The girl must be kept pure for the ceremony. Stay here and guard the corpse while I inform the Pundoo³ of his fate."

Sunmun mumbled to himself as his companion left. He turned his back upon the body at his feet, and became engrossed in thoughts of the gory ritual soon to come. The gloating man was oblivious to the slow and cautious opening of glittering eyes; ignorant of the cat-like rise of the body, and unaware of its stealthy tread. The first hint of danger came when Ramu's brawny arm slipped quietly about his throat in a crushing stranglehold.

The benighted hierophant struggled wildly, but to no avail. Ramu forced the cleric to the floor. The priest's face turned blue beneath his mask as he sagged upon the stones. The conjurer gradually eased the pressure of his constricting hold, and Sunmun sobbed air into his tortured lungs as the wild brush of fear painted vivid images upon his whirling mind.

Was he now the prisoner of some fiendish ghoul, an

³ High Priest

animated corpse? The priest trembled with terror at that horrid thought, for he knew these ruins hid dark secrets, long forgotten.

Sunmun writhed in utter fear. He twisted like a serpent in a desperate bid to free himself. Ramu increased the pressure about his neck. "Lie still," he ordered. "Lie still or die!"

Sunmun's protective incantation was choked to a gurgling whisper.

But it was not black magic that Ramu used, merely the illusions of his conjuring craft. With self-hypnosis he had induced a trance-like state that had slowed his breathing to almost nothing, and rendered him insensible to pain. And the fragment of masonry he had pressed beneath his armpit had slowed the blood through the limb, thus causing his pulse to die away.

The conjurer smiled grimly to himself as he secured a better grip upon his foe, for he knew superstition leaves men vulnerable to the trickery of others, and now sought to use this weakness to full advantage.

"I am a nargarus in human form," hissed Ramu as he eased the pressure. "An evil spirit, an eater of the souls of men. Lead me to the Sharjaree at once. Refuse and I'll consume you with my fiery essence."

"I obey," croaked the man in utter terror. "Have mercy. Have ..."

Again, Ramu choked the priest. "Quiet, fool." He softly growled as he eased his grip so his captive could breathe again. "Lead on, or you'll suffer worse than this."

Although Ramu had the upper hand he knew he must be very careful for the danger was immense. His head and ribs ached now that he was no longer in a trance, and his pain reminded him the Sharjaree could expect no mercy from these wicked men.

They left the cell, and slowly walked up the dusty corridor, the way illuminated by pots of fire-flowers. The priest's

throat was still in Ramu's vicious grip and the youth's eyes darted here and there, taking in the gloomy scene. Clearly, he was within the temple; the cell-lined way being the ancient holding pens for victims of the god.

The shades of the ancient dead seemed to stir his imagination—the shifting shadows became their phantom forms, and the sighing wind blowing through the corridor their voices. He shuddered at what they seemed to whisper to him—the horrors of foul Addak's reign of terror.

Ramu went cold as frightening images fluttered across his troubled mind. Isuda in the clutches of these fiendish cultists! He was but one man armed with simple tricks against the fanatics of a barbaric faith. Before, his craft was a mere amusement for the young Sharjaree, and now he must employ it to save her life, for being neither noble nor warrior all weapons were forbidden to him.

The weak kneed priest pointed feebly. Ramu eased his grip a little. "This cell," gasped the man.

Ramu gazed upon the portal, its massive lock, thick with verdigris. Was that soft sound the weeping of the frightened girl? Eagerly, he peered through the grating of the heavy door, his hope tempered by fear of what he might behold.

The cell was narrow and filthy. Luminous fungi, in thick profusion, grew upon the cold grey walls. Their sickly greenish light disclosed the doleful scene: A girl of eighteen summers lay within the cell. Her hands were bound behind her back; her slender throat encircled by a heavy collar. It leashed her like an animal to the heartless stone.

In piteous lament she knelt. Long hair, like spun midnight, veiled her tear stained face and her full breasts that spilt through the gaping rent in her delicate robe. Softly, the grim faced youth called her name:

"Isuda?"

The girl looked up. Her eyes, large and expressive, were shadowed by fear. Her full lips that once curved in

beauteous smiles now trembled. The oval of her face—begrimed. But even so, neither dirt nor adversity could extinguish the beauty that was Isuda's.

Ramu's face hardened. His finger, as rigid as a steel rod, jabbed a point on his prisoner's spine. The conjurer's blow disrupted nerve impulses from the priest's brain to his vital organs. Sunmun stiffened. His eyes bulged and foam formed at the corners of his mouth. Ramu lowered his corpse to the floor.

Xyan, the magician's father, had taught him well, for he had been an assassin in far Yanche before fleeing to Dasar. But Ramu took no pleasure in what he had to do. He knew with Isuda's life at stake he had to kill the cleric lest the man escape and bring his brothers down upon them.

Quickly, Ramu searched the corpse and found a ring of keys. Heart pounding, he tried one in the lock. There was a soft click. Elated, he thrust wide the door, and stepped within the vile cell. Isuda tensed at first. Then, recognition dawned, and she threw herself within the circle of his arms the moment he freed her from her bonds.

Ramu held her close, stroked her hair. Isuda's body shook with heaving sobs of vast relief as she hugged him fiercely. The press of her voluptuous form against his own, the stirring of his loins despite the peril they were in: All this warned him of his madness, the danger of his passions. Gently, he eased her free of his embrace.

"Sharjaree," softly spoke the man. "We must quickly..."

"Ah, a touching scene," spoke a guttural, mocking voice from behind.

The girl stiffened. Ramu spun about and saw before him the frightening figure of a man in silhouette. The Pundoo was a sinister apparition robed in scarlet and his horrid mask was the essence of utter diabolism.

Instantly, the youth attacked his foe. It was a flurry of rapid blows—hands and feet darting in strange patterns. An

intricate dance of deadly gracefulness; both figures enmeshed therein.

Isuda watched in breathless tension as the battle raged within the confines of the narrow cell. The conjurer saw an opening. He broke through his foe's defence, and shattered the Pundoo's mask to fragments with the heel of his palm.

Ramu gasped. The man's face was now revealed in all its shocking lines—the narrow planes of Vajram, regent to Isuda, confronted him. The man laughed, struck out with a savage kick. Ramu, distracted by the appalling realization of this dark conspiracy, failed to parry his swift attack. The blow struck him in the groin. He collapsed in moaning agony.

Isuda screamed like a Valkyrie. She leapt upon the regent with the all the ferocity of a protective tigress. Vajram went down beneath the fierceness of her unexpected lunge. Her fingers clawed at his eyes. He screamed and tried to hit her. The girl caught his hand. She bit savagely. The regent howled.

Other priests swarmed within the cell. They fell upon Ramu and the cursing girl. Both were hauled brutally to their feet. Vajram staggered up. His bleeding countenance was terrible to look upon. He could not touch the girl, for she was an offering to his god. Instead, he struck Ramu across the face.

"Infidel!" he cried, his visage aglow with rage and frightening zeal. "Think you to deprive Addak of his sacrifice? Well, tonight the god shall have at least one *other* to dine upon."

Vajram turned to his acolytes: "The Hour of the Dragon is upon us. To the altar with the both of them."

The beastly idol of foul Addak lay sprawled upon its dais. Its crocodilian form was delineated by the pastel rays of the twin moons. Pellucid light glittered from the cold hardness of its ruby eyes, its gilded body and its hinged jaws that

hung horribly agape. Needle spikes, glinting sinisterly, lined the idol's dark palate, and towards this mouth of doom was carried the fiercely struggling girl.

Ramu, who had been chained by one wrist to a granite pillar, was again the master of his pain. He saw, with utter horror, Isuda being bound spreadeagle to the idol's lower jaw. He wanted to tear wildly at his bonds like a savage beast. He fought the urge. His only chance to save the girl would be lost if he drew attention to himself.

The Sharjaree cursed Vajram as he tore away her garments. Ramu clenched his jaw to stop himself raging at the man—the Pundoo—whose twisted mind had become a cesspool of unnatural passions as his dark eyes roved across Isuda's nubile form.

"I have won," he thickly said. "You and your filthy lover will die between Addak's mighty jaws. Then all Dasur shall be mine to do with as I please!"

The girl, though helpless, struck back with telling words.

"I pity you, Vajram," she cried. You think yourself victorious. But I foresee your life will be a barren waste of bitter years. As a tyrant you bear the seeds of your own destruction, for you will always be surrounded by false friends who plot behind your back. Ramu and I know what it is to love, and that is something more precious than a crown. It is a sacred thing that neither you nor your horrid god can ever sully."

The regent gasped, for the truth struck deeper than a plunging blade. Then he hardened in cruel denial.

"Let the ceremony commence," he cried defiantly. "And may the potent offering of this royal virgin's blood move the god to bless our enterprise."

Despite her bravery Isuda moaned in fear and struggled wildly as she called upon her pantheon. But the gods were silent and remote—like the cold stars her frightened, imploring eyes now beheld.

The acolytes stepped forward and lit two mighty cressets that flanked the horrid statue. The oil flared and added its lurid light to the frightful scene as the cultists began their sonorous chant to dark Addak.

The conjurer saw the chance he had been desperately waiting for. Absorbed in their evil rite, none noticed him remove the large capsule from a secret pocket in his sleeve. Quickly, the youth shoved it between two links furthest from him, then nicked the wax coating with his fingernail, and slipped behind the massive column.

The cresset's blazing flames leapt higher. The heat expanded air within their hollow stands actuating mechanisms hidden beneath the temple floor. The idol's jaw began a slow relentless rise, as did Isuda's screams as the cruel spikes drew near her heaving breasts, her trembling loins.

Ramu, sick with wild fear, watched the awful scene in utter helplessness. Had he erred in the capsule's formula? Then, from the strange tablet between the links arose a wisp of smoke. An explosion shook the temple. Its flame and thunder shattered the iron chain. Whining metal fragments cut smoking paths through the dusky air.

The priests started, were thrown into confusion by the thunderous blast. Ramu rushed forward, his sundered chain swinging in a deadly arc. One man fell beneath the savage blow; others scattered before his wild rush as the monster's jaws closed upon the struggling, screaming girl.

With a burst of frenzied speed Ramu gained the idol, a despairing cry upon his lips as he made a frantic leap. With both hands he caught the rising jaw, and threw his weight upon it. The spikes halted mere inches of Isuda's trembling flesh, and then the jowl began to sag beneath his weight.

"Stop him, you fools," cried Vajram. "He's profaning our sacred rite."

The Pundoo's order cracked with whip-like force. Ramu turned. He saw priests charging forward under the

lash of Vajram's driving words. Quickly, he squeezed the assassin's ring he wore. A small blade sprang from it at his touch. With this he slashed the bonds about Isuda's wrists.

"Hurry", warned the girl. "They are almost here."

Ramu dashed forward, and sawed the ropes upon her ankles he could not otherwise access. The idol's jaw, without his weight, began its fatal rise. Again, Isuda screamed as the deadly points drew near; the murderous priests now but yards away. Frenziedly, Ramu hacked through the Sharjaree's final bonds.

Isuda slid free and tumbled to the ground as the idol's monstrous jaws clashed shut. One priest hurled himself at Ramu with savage violence as she struck the floor. Isuda gasped in fear. As her beloved wrestled with the man other foes rushed towards them in an overwhelming tide.

The girl leapt to her feet. Her only concern was for the man she loved. She dashed towards one blazing cresset and, with the strength of grim determination, overturned its bowl of flaming oil. The fiery liquid splashed upon the charging priests and caught them in its flood of leaping flames. Men screamed in sickening agony. They staggered about, their charring forms wreathed in all consuming fire.

Vajram looked on in utter disbelief, all his plans undone. The regent snatched a dagger from his robe. He charged the youth who still struggled with the maddened priest. Isuda cried a desperate warning:

"Ramu! Behind you."

The glittering blade swung down in a savage arc. With a surge of strength Ramu twisted and turned the one he fought into the Pundoo's attack. The man stiffened with a grunt as the regent's way dagger knifed him in the back.

Ramu, with a mighty heave, flung the corpse against his enemy. Vajram staggered back. The youth swung his chain and its iron links struck his foe across the eyes. The Pundoo tottered. Lancing agony tore a horrid scream from his throat

as he fell into the pool of burning oil. Flames engulfed him and his piercing cry shattered the night with its tortured resonance.

The conjurer turned his back upon the horrid scene, shaken by the sight of Vajram's death. He saw Isuda kneeling upon the floor, retching. Though she had come to hate the man she, too, wasn't so callous as to be unaffected by his sickening end.

Quickly, Ramu approached the girl and saw with vast relief that she was safe. Then, at Isuda's request, he gathered her shapely form within his comforting arms and swiftly departed Addak's dark abode.

Silently, the secret door swung wide, and Ramu stepped within the apartments of Isuda's former regent, the girl still cradled in his arms. It was the Sharjaree who had guided the conjurer through this hidden way, narrating to him Vajram's treachery as they passed along its gloomy length.

"He wished to resurrect worship of the dragon," she concluded. "And being next in line, would have also gained the throne by killing me."

Carefully, the youth laid Isuda upon an ornate sleeping mat, averting his eyes from her nudity, now fully disclosed by the soft light of fire-flowers growing in ornate vessels spaced about the room.

"I had best summon the court physician and your ministers," he quickly said, for the luxurious apartment brought home to him with sudden force the sad reminder he was not of royal blood.

Isuda placed her hand gently upon his arm. "I'm not badly hurt. Stay with me awhile. There is no hurry—for all the conspirators are dead—, and after such a terrifying ordeal

it's companionship, not physic, that I need." Then, mischievously: "Or have I become so ugly in your eyes that you are eager to depart and will not look at me?"

"You are teasing me," he replied, sadly. "You know when I look upon you I am pierced through by desire. Your slightest touch inflames my passions ... I love you more than mere words can express. But you are a star forever beyond my reach."

"I tease you only so that I may hear your pleasing words," said the girl softly as she gently took his hand and placed it in the warm valley between her breasts. "Feel my heart. Does it not beat with the same fierce passion as your own? Our bond of love was the compass that led you to me when I was imprisoned."

Isuda warmly smiled. "It matters little to me that I am soon to be Sharjara⁴, for above all things, Ramu, I am a woman. With Vajram dead there is no barrier to our love. My first decree is that we shall be wed."

Ramu turned his head and gazed upon her, awash with joyous wonder at this marvellous news. The girl gave him an impish grin and struck a pose that was tastefully erotic. It was an invitation he was unable to resist.

⁴ Queen