

Forsaken
by Chris Rogers

All seven towers of the temple were burning as Vhal Kitra swung off his Collector and landed on the steps. The temple guard was in disarray in the courtyard below and on the walls above - his men were routing the isolated pockets of defense. *Good.* Kitra ripped his twin swords out of the scabbards at his hips and strode forward through the ruined iron doors into the temple's sanctum. The walls were thick, of Durani origin, and it would take his golem hours to tear open a hole large enough to fit through; he would have to find the Abbess on foot.

Inside, it was quiet. Aromatic smoke rose from censers in sconces. The main temple chamber opened up into large space supported by thick stone columns. The only light came from further in, near the altar. Some supplicants scurried out a side door, hoping to hide deeper in the temple complex. Nearby, a frightened guard hid in the shadows, but Kitra did not bother to stop for him. His men would be following him into the temple in a moment or two, long before that one worked up the courage to attack. Up ahead he could see the gathered holy folk near the altar, the few stalwarts, standing resolute in front of a sculpture of their Ancient One. He flexed his hands on the grips of his swords - but he did not hurry, enjoying the sound of his boots echoing against the stone. This was showmanship. This was part of the persona: The Forsaken Five-Hundred, the blight of Eretsu, unbeaten in the field and unrivalled for their cruelty. They were expecting a monster, so he gave them one; it would all go quicker that way in the end.

The sculpture was really something remarkable. It rose out of large wide pool, and as Kitra came closer he realized it was the pool itself that was providing the dim light in the chamber, a spectral white glow rising up through the mist. The sculpture was clearly Urugal. Only its head and one bared shoulder remained, yet it was at least as tall as three men. A woman with sunken cheeks and eyes, but she carried a look of such regal pity, that for a heartbeat Kitra felt as though the goddess might be pitying him. He laughed a little at that.

Save your pity for your supplicants, old one.

"Come no further. You have committed a great evil this day!" called out one of the monks.

Kitra did not stop. "Great evil," he said, "Is how I fill my coffers."

Kitra looked them over. There were ten of them, three men, seven women- all wrapped in white robes like burial shrouds. The youngest was a young girl, maybe fifteen years. She was frantically praying her sutras, moving her hands over her prayer beads in quick succession. The oldest was a man who looked as if he had seen sixty years; he was the one that had had the audacity to tell Kitra to stop. Old, but still straight-backed and clear-eyed.

Religious wars were a bleak business. Very few companies would risk the curses and sorceries the temples flung at one another. But the Forsaken Five-Hundred were a measure of last resort

for everyone involved, clients and members alike. And the Gudanna priest *had* paid them an obscene sum of gold to ferret out the Abbess.

At the altar Kitra addressed the monk who had spoken to him, "Tell me, old man, where is the Abbess?"

The man did not answer. Holy folk were always so eager to become martyrs. So Kitra swung his blade with an almost lazy flair, catching the old man just above his collar bone. The old monk spat and gurgled as he fell to the floor, his hands reaching up to his throat as his robe turned red. Kitra walked over to the next monk, a young acolyte, and looked him over. Perhaps he would be the one to break. Kitra cleaned his blade on the young man's robes, watching him. The prayers of the girl were becoming feverish.

"The Abbess." Kitra said.

The young monk tried to hold his gaze. Sweat poured down his brow. For just a moment his eyes flicked sideways. Kitra followed that quick gaze, there was some riddle here, but he didn't have the time to unravel it. He brought his blade to the acolyte's chest. The praying girl was practically yelling her prayers now, a spew of the Bone Tongue that Kitra couldn't understand. Perhaps she would be next, just so he could conduct his business in peace and quiet.

"I am not," he poked the tip of his blade into the man's flesh, and blood began to well, "a patient man. I do not like to be kept waiting."

"Yet wait you shall!" said the praying girl, her voice full of anguish.

Kitra looked over to her. A glowing fog poured out of her mouth when she spoke, "Vhal Kitra of the Forsaken Five Hundred!" Underneath her voice he could hear a thousand screams of torment. When she spoke, they screamed.

"More like the Forsaken Three Hundred and Fifty at the moment, give or take- but we're always looking for new recruits." Kitra brought his blades up, circling her, suddenly understanding. "A bit young for an Abbess, aren't you?" He could hear his men streaming into the temple. A quick clash of blades and the cries of death- that would be the hiding guard working up his courage to attack. His men were here; he had the Abbess at sword point. It was over. But the girl-

"We are the thirty-eighth incarnation of the Abbess Nimrukti, and you have trespassed!"

Her eyes were white fire. Kitra was frozen by their incandescence. The amount of mana being used in the spell was like nothing he had ever seen or felt, but that wasn't what stopped him. It was her eyes. They were innocent and yet weary. *Nimala. They remind me of...* Dreamlike, she blinked, a long languorous slide of her eyelids down over the twin suns of her eyes. When her eyes shut light seemed to drain out of the world, shadows sweeping in to cover all of Eretsu. And

when she re-opened them Kitra shook himself from his daze, suddenly recalling the deadly judgement being cast upon him.

Then many things happened at once. As he brought his blades up for the killing strike the girl retched and a white fire sprayed out of her mouth on to the temple floor. It swept outwards in a sudden conflagration and where it caught Kitra he began to burn. It was all over him, in his hair, across his arms and chest. He couldn't see his own feet for the tide of white flame that passed around his legs. He was burning everywhere, consumed by fire. He turned, seeing the flames sweep outwards and catching his men as it travelled across the temple and out the door.

"There are two types of warriors that fight sorcerers," the old bit of battlefield wisdom went, "Those that strike first... and the dead." Dimly, he heard his swords clatter to the floor. Hot pain lanced across his skin and then a numb nothingness blanketed him. Then, just as suddenly, it ended. He turned back to the girl just in time to see her wiping her mouth on her robe primly as he fell first to his knees and then collapsed. His vision darkened, and she became a white flame herself, flickering, as she prodded at him with her slippered foot.

"Wait you shall... until the time our Lady has a use for such as you, Defiler."

He burned. And he dreamt those eyes, over and over. They floated in front of him in the dark, passing harsh judgement on him, in a flat desert without feature. And when he awoke he was drowning.

His ears hurt, as if he had dove too deep into a lake. Before he understood what was happening he was swallowing great gulps of water. Frantic, he began to kick for the surface only to push into a rock wall. He was disoriented, *which way is up?* Panic began to well up from his chest, but he forced it away. Instead he blew the last of the air out of his mouth and followed the bubbles up toward the surface. His legs burned, but he could feel water bearing him up now. He fought the instinct to breathe, his lungs sucking in even though his mouth stayed shut. *Just a little more.*

He surfaced, gasping, spitting and coughing, but sucking in the air. After he regained his breath he took in his surroundings. He was in the temple, floating in the pool. The statue was looking down on him, still pitying. This time it did not strike him as funny. Somehow he had fallen into the temple pool and been forgotten. That hardly seemed possible, yet Kitra had seen enough battle to know that strange chance and pure luck could be just as useful as a good plan. *He could still escape.* He turned away from the statue to swim, exhausted, to the pool's edge. The temple was dark, and since the pool gave off the only light in the chamber Kitra could see very little. The only sounds he could hear was the echoing splash of the water as he pulled himself up onto the temple floor.

How am I still alive? He was sure he had been badly burned at least. He looked over his hands, expecting to see the pink and black flesh mottled with wet and heavy blisters- if not white bone- but his hands looked whole. He tried to stand but he was too weak. Kitra reached back for one of his swords and found that his sword belt was gone. In fact all his gear was gone. He was naked except for a sopping wet linen shroud. There wasn't much he could have done with a sword- he doubted he could even lift it- but naked and confused *with* a sword would be quite a bit better than naked and confused *without* a sword.

It was only then that he noticed the people in the shadows, standing just outside the eerie glow of the pool. There were, perhaps, a hundred of them; it was difficult to tell. Monks, nuns, and temple guards, they all stood watching him- still as stone. It looked, strangely, as if he had interrupted a ceremony.

And then he saw the eyes. *She* was there, *she* had been waiting for him, only now she was flanked by a large compliment of temple guards. They watched Kitra hatefully, long spears at the ready. Something was wrong about her. *Taller perhaps? Or perhaps breathing fire had ruined her?* Anger began to replace confusion.

"Abbess", he said through clenched teeth, the old rage came up, he could feel his thudding pulse in his forehead, across the backs of his eyes, "We have unfinished business you and I." When the anger was like this it was difficult to keep control- most of him didn't want to keep control.

"We do. Mark this man, my brothers and sisters. This is the Defiler that raided and sacked our temple."

"*Attempted* to raid and sack at least." Kitra showed them all his teeth in what he hoped was a fearsome display. *She could push me over with her thumb right now.* "And kill your little child Abbess in the bargain."

"Child?" She pulled back her hood revealing not a teenager but an older woman, perhaps one that had seen forty-five years. *The girl's mother?* Kitra looked at her. No it was her, but she had aged in the past past few moments. *A side effect of the spell?*

"Are we so much changed?" a hint of conspiracy in her voice, "We are still the thirty-eighth incarnation of the Abbess Nimrukti. You, Vhal Kitra, have been our prisoner for these last twenty-seven years. Kept in the prison of your flesh until this day when, bathed in our Lady's sacred pool, you returned to yourself."

Kitra struggled to understand, "Twenty-seven years?" He remembered the white fire, could swear he still felt it on his arms and head. *Could she do that? Could anyone?* He crawled to pool's edge. As far as he could tell in the wobbling reflection in the water, he hadn't aged at all. He looked exactly as he remembered. The temple, however, showed no sign of a recent battle. The body of old monk was gone, with all the blood. "What about my men?" he said.

“We shall take you to them.” the abbess said, “Guards, help the Defiler to his feet.”

“ No!” Kitra held out his arm. “I don’t need the help of your dogs. I’ll stand on my own.”

In the end, however, Kitra *did* need the guards not only to help him up but to carry him down into the recesses of the temple. One stood on each side, holding his arms over their shoulders as his feet slid uselessly behind them. Down they went, flight after flight of stairs. The ornate temple carvings gave way to plain stone walls, and the plain stone walls gave way to rough-cut rock braced with dusty timbers.

As they travelled downward the Abbess spoke, “The Ancient One Urugal Iseza Ukutu- or, the Savage Star, as she is known more vulgarly- ascended from this very spot. Now we humble few tend her memory and work what favors we can.”

“The Urugal were once a proud and mighty people. Where others feared death and ran from it we embraced it. Where others sought the pleasures of the flesh we abjured them in favor of true knowledge. The flesh is impermanent, a dressing, but the bones endure. We knew this, but we have forgotten. You have forgotten, Vhal Kitra. And now we are a diminished people, scraping and scrabbling about for the leavings of the table. We slaughter each other mindlessly and gather small coins to spend on wine.”

I could use some wine, right about now. This Abbess certainly enjoys the sound of her own voice. Kitra said nothing. He watched, wondering if there was some way to complete his contract and collect payment. His feet scraped and slipped among the steps. Down they went.

“Yet lately our dreams have been troubled. A message, half promise and half warning- like a coin with its two faces- has been sent to us.”

“We see a pyre burning, burning so hot that all the world the is reduced to ash. And there is the skeleton of a small bird that rises from that pyre, beautiful and pure, cleansed by the fire. Here the dream diverges, sometimes the bird grows and its mighty pinions sweep the world clean until roosts atop the highest peaks of Eretsu. Then a great voice, the voice of our Lady, calls out, “Behold the Deliverer”. Yet other times, most times, the bird is brought down by a hundred arrows and it falls to the earth, vanquished. Those dreams leave us sobbing in anguish.”

They continued in silence for a few moments down a long corridor.

“Your men.”

The guards dropped him like a sack of grain, and Kitra managed to slouch against a wall of natural rock. Catacombs, with recesses three high, stretched off into the gloom. In each recess there was a body wrapped in a shroud similar to his own, from head to toe.

“All dead?” He didn’t feel grief exactly, but-

“Look closer, Defiler.”

The Abbess waited while Kitra examined them. All the bodies were breathing, a slow rise and fall of their chests, so gradual that Kitra needed to watch for closely for ten of his own breaths to see it. Dust and cobwebs had gathered over them, the type of grime that took years to produce. They looked, in fact, as if they had been interred decades ago.

“What is this?” he asked.

“They are trapped,” the Abbess answered, “This is the imprisonment that our Lady demands. Death is a reward, yet here is death without death. Their spirits are caught between realms. It was the punishment laid on your head Vhal Kitra, and it is where your body has spent the last three decades while your spirit strained for the farthest shores.”

He pushed off the wall to stand. The effort of it made him dizzy. “How many? How many are down here?”

“Three hundred and fifty- give or take.” She turned to look at Kitra, “Sadly, a few of our guards forgot their vows in the moments after our spell took effect and slaughtered a small number of your mercenaries in revenge. Good men, but susceptible to the passions of the flesh after all.”

It was early evening. A warm desert breeze swept across the steps and a few stars dotted the sky away from the setting sun. *Has it really been twenty-seven years? Have I really been trapped here by these magi all that time?* When he looked at the sky he could not be sure, it seemed the same. Yet for some reason when he looked into the Abbess’s eyes he did not doubt it. This, then, was the first he had tasted of open air in nearly three decades. It tasted good.

Kitra had been surprised when acolytes brought him his own gear, washed and mended to wear. Byrnie, bracers and greaves, his belts and boots, everything- except his weapons. He had been even more surprised when the Abbess brought him here, to the temple gates. Guards still surrounded him, and trying to cross the northern reaches of the Ugra Maru on foot was near impossible. *Were they going to free him? Why?*

Kitra stood next to the Abbess and her guards. They could call him evil, but anyone sitting on a tomb full of men trapped between death and life should check their own scales.

The Abbess watched the Mother moon rise, "We find ourselves in a most difficult position."

Ah. Kitra raised an eyebrow. As a mercenary, particularly one known for being willing to take unsavory jobs, he recognized a negotiation's opening bid.

"The Deliverer is beset by danger on all sides. Yet we are not capable helping on our own."

"Why not just do that trick with the hellfire? Seemed to do the job for me and my band."

The Abbess turned to him, "You have no conception of what it cost us to cast that spell. The effort nearly killed us, and it was years before we- /- was able to work even mild favors." She turned away again, to the moon, "And, even more to the point of our difficulty, our power quickly wanes beyond the walls. Our Lady blessed this spot, it is here that she ascended and here that her power rules absolute. If the Deliverer could be brought here, they would be safe."

So you're powerless any place else? That is good to know.

Part of him wanted to make her say it, make her ask for help. Yet the Abbess had a way of talking around the subject with all her prophecies, "You need *me* to fetch the little bird back here?" On the desert Kitra could still make out the sand being swept off the tops of the dunes.

"Yes, we need a man who can- *navigate*- the dangers of the world with your cunning and guile. Someone with a talent for survival. Our people our scattered, scavenging in Durani Slums, indentured to the upstart Gudanna, or else driven to the wild edges of the world in order to maintain their freedom. Death surrounds the Deliverer on all sides, and if death comes too early to the Deliverer then I fear for our people. Find and bring the Deliverer to us, that we may protect them and guide them in the ways of the Urugal."

"Sounds like dangerous work. Where is this little bird?"

"That we cannot say."

"She? He? What does your promised savior look like?"

"*Our* savior, for you are Urugal as well. I will not appeal to your nobler instincts," she said in a tone that called their existence into doubt, "but you need this savior more than most Vhal Kitra, though you do not know it. Perhaps the Deliverer can forgive you your many many sins."

"You didn't answer my question. You don't know what the Deliverer looks like?"

"No."

“So all you want me to do is find this Deliverer, even though you have no idea what they look like and no idea where they might be, and bring them back here?”

“Yes. We will provide a guide that is... sensitive to the spirits.”

“Sounds helpful, but the world is a big place. I’ll need my men.”

“No. Your men will remain here as a security against your conduct.”

“So, me and your guide alone against the powers Eretsu.” Kitra smiled. “And what are you offering me?”

“Your freedom.”

“That’s a good start.” Kitra said.

“And your men’s freedom.”

“And two-hundred gold talents.”

She narrowed her eyes, but hesitated only a moment before nodding her head.

Should have asked for more.

“Durani,” he said, to make up for it, “I don’t want some half-smelted Zikia peat gold.”

The Abbess waved her hand as if such considerations were too petty for debate.

“What would stop me from looking up my old employer and seeing if his offer still stands for your head?”

The guards tensed and lowered their spears. Kitra smirked, but he kept his eyes on the Abbess.

“The Gudanna Priest, Sukraya? Sadly, he went mad a number of years ago, dogged by spirits no one else could see. He gouged his own eyes out eventually. A terrible affliction. You can still find him begging on the steps of his Temple... though I don’t think he will be able to honor his side of your bargain even if you could honor yours.” A hint of white fire danced in her eyes.

“And if I refuse to take your offer?” Kitra.

“We will return you to the Catacombs, seal the tomb and there you will remain until the unmaking of the world. It would be better if we were to kill you where you stand, in defiance of our Lady’s precepts.”

Kitra could feel the guards step closer. Too close. The hafts of their spears were well within his reach. He could kill her, he was sure. Perhaps even live to make his escape. But if his employer was now a mad beggar what was the point? Just how much might change in twenty-seven years? He thought back to the Gudanna Priest's chambers. He was a venal man, not half as holy as the Abbess here, but he hadn't seemed the type to experience spiritual visions. The Abbess, he thought, had been busy.

"I'll do it. I'll find your Deliverer-"

"*Our* Deliverer," the Abbess insisted.

"*Your* Deliverer- and bring them back here. In exchange you will pay me two-hundred gold talents and free my men."

It was more difficult to let the two-hundred talents go than his men. They *were* barbarous monsters, if he looked on them with an outsider's eyes. The whole world was most likely better off with them sleeping forever underneath a temple in the middle of the desert. Katu Anaste, for example, with his habit of setting surrendered prisoners aflame... Kitra had no intent of ever returning here. He would play the part until he was well away and then he would either abandon or kill the guide. He would start over. In fact, he no longer had to be Vhal Kitra, fearsome assassin and mercenary king. He could be a laborer or a watchman, if he wanted. *Why not?*

So Kitra stood in the formal pose of agreement, head bowed and his palms up and held in front of his face.

When he raised his head the Abbess stood in front of him. She had the same look of pity as her Goddess. "Now... your guide."

The Abbess breathed gently into her hand and wisps of smoke wreathed her fingers. Kitra backed away and felt the tip of a spear in his back, insistent. Then she touched her hand to his chest and the smoke poured into him. And with it came laughter, a braying, mocking laughter.

Kitra stumbled backward, the guards were putting up their spears now and watching him with idle curiosity. The laughter continued but when Kitra turned to see where it was coming from he saw nothing. Wisps of white smoke trailed his arms as he looked around- the desert, the guards, the Abbess- nothing had changed. *Who is laughing?*

"Well," said the laughing voice, "Who is this fine, strapping monster?" He felt pinching all over his body- his arms, his legs, he felt hands caress his chest, fingers ran through his hair. "Yes, what a virile beast we have here. My!" The peals of mocking laughter continued in Kitra's head.

"Abbess!" Kitra turned on her, snarling, "What have you done to me?"

Then he felt the laughing voice picking at his memory and...

"What is *this*?" said the voice, as if it had discovered some delightful trinket in the bazaar.

He was THERE again, on the ramparts, looking down at the endless fires of the Gudanna host. Nimala was watching him with his innocent eyes, tears welling. "Your word, Kitra. Give me your word. If you will swear to it..."

"NO!" Kitra roared. He felt the voice shrink inside. Strength flooded into him. He reached out to the nearest guard, and in his rage it was a simple thing to strip the guard of his spear, as if the guard had been offering it to him. He smashed the guard's teeth in with the butt of the weapon and then, as he spun, sliced open the arm of another. Both crumpled, bleeding. Kitra focused on the Abbess.

Yet before Kitra take another step he stopped. He was still clenching the spear so hard it might shatter. His feet were still dug in, ready to drive the spear forward. In his heart he was still charging, yet no matter how hard he strained he could not move. He was paralyzed in that exact spot.

The Abbess slowly stepped out of the path of the spear. "Magdina? Show yourself please."

And like that a great white spectral fire leached out of his body and floated in front of him. He felt it pour out from inside of him, as if in a sudden sweat. The shape resolved and he saw the spirit, an older woman. Her hair was flowing all around her as if she was underwater. Her eyes were pure white without iris or pupil, but she was smirking and held her head at a saucy angle. And all of her looked aflame, parts of her peeling off and floating away before growing back like tongues of fire. She made a mocking bow, "Well handsome, shall we have a little quest together?"

"Vhal Kitra, Magdina is the guide that we have promised. She was the eleventh incarnation of ourselves. A lifetime that was somewhat marred by scandal-" The spirit made a show of looking embarrassed before grinning lasciviously. "Yet her sensitivities have only grown more powerful as a spirit. She will be able to find the Deliverer. And she will help you honor our arrangement."

Kitra managed a step forward, he turned his spear toward the Abbess again. He strained against the paralysis. "End. This. Devilry." Each word was a trial, like tying a newly learned knot for the first time.

At this Magdina cocked her head and then she clapped her withered hands. When she clapped Kitra felt his heart slow. "Set down the spear, sweetie," called the spirit. Kitra took another step forward. In his head he heard: *Impressive! I've never seen such a will before! But you will never survive long enough to drive the point home.* He could barely feel the beat of his own heart, faint. *Lub*, his blood was slowing, little black stars were appearing in his vision. His feet felt rooted to

the ground. *Set it down. She will let you die, and start over with another. And we're going to have so much fun on our little adventure!* Kitra could see the Abbess only in the center of his vision now. He dropped the spear, the Abbess had won.

Instantly his heart started back up again and the weight of death lifted. His vision and breath began to return.

The Abbess looked at the spear on the ground, "We have made preparations for your journey. This is your opportunity to earn a new name. Succeed in this task and you will be called Blessed or Prophet. Your life before will wash away like dirt and filth. Fail and you will always remain covered in the shame you smeared yourself with. May our Lady guide you."

"My, but she does have a way with words," cackled Magdina's voice inside his head.

Kitra could only seethe.

Acolytes were everywhere now, called by some unseen signal. Some were tending to the wounded guards. Some were dragging Kitra's old Corpse Collector out of the gate. It was too well bound to Kitra's will for any other to fly it in battle but the young monks were managing to shamble it out in a lurching walk. Another brought his swords in their scabbards.

Finally, an acolyte brought the Abbess a neatly folded packet of cloth. "Our gift to you. This is the Shroud of Garta Dima. It is one of the most honored relics of our temple. It is imbued with a glamor. In the moonlight its wearer will appear as one long dead to those who can be fooled by such things."

Kitra snatched the cloth out of the Abbess' hands. Relics were powerful, and not easily turned down. Slinging his sword belt over his shoulder he reached out and touched his golem. When the dual awareness of the golem came to him it felt like home. The golem knelt low and he clambered into his seat on its back.

"You will find provisions, as well as sizeable purse, already on your mount."

For a moment Kitra considered destroying them all with his golem. It would take only a single sweep of its claws to lay everyone before him low. Then he heard the laughter inside him, Magdina's voice bubbling up, "Ah ah ah, my little monster, I would have to stop your heart forever if you pulled such a nasty trick."

He wheeled his golem around to face the empty desert. Its large wings extended and began to beat, blowing sand all over the holy folk below. He was in a black rage. The Abbess called up, "All of our hopes travel with you. Find the Deliverer, Vhal Kitra."

“I will.” he growled. Though whether he would kill the Deliverer himself out of spite or return them to this accursed place for the reward, even he could not say. It was the anger that all that knew him feared. He turned his flying Collector toward the the blood red light of the Warrior Moon. Twenty-seven years. Where would he even begin? Now the wind was rushing by, and he felt ready to crack open the bones of the world and drink its marrow.

He felt light arms wrapping around his waist as if someone behind him was holding on to him for balance. “By the by,” called out the laughing voice inside of him, “call me Mags, Magdina is too formal for our arrangement don’t you think?”