

Marrow Crows

by Chris Tihor

Under different circumstances this could be quite a lovely night, Izvari considered as she stood in the open air and watched the clouds pass over the moon. *If only for a few small trifles were different*. The wind could be a little less intent on pulling her tent away, for one thing, and the dust a little less insistent on blowing into her eyes. And she could definitely do without the none too distant moans and wails of the spirits of long-dead Libir in the air, if not for her own peace of mind, then for the peace of mind of the Marrow Crows, the mercenary company she recently found herself captaining. Even now they rested uneasy in the hastily erected camp behind her. They had two things to be uneasy about: their closeness to haunted Libir, and the sudden, miraculous disappearance of their quarry.

These past few days they had been in close pursuit of the infamous mercenary band known as the Wild's Reckoning. Led by the disgraced but formidable Zikia chieftain Alit Rudan, the Wild's Reckoning were focused on the acquisition of wealth and wreaking of vengeance upon those whom they felt had wronged the natural world. This appeared to include those who would simply live in it, as the Reckoning had no compunction against raiding villages without provocation. Izvari and the company had come across the still smouldering burned-out shells of homesteads in their pursuit of the other band. Thinking of it now, she could again taste the bile that rose in her throat, witnessing such senseless destruction, of the death of those who had little defense against the strength of the mercenaries' golems. Then, as now, she wished to pit the might of the Marrow Crows against that murderous crew.

And they had come so close! She felt her hands clench into fists in frustration. Under her command, they had cautiously maneuvered their golems into position to launch a two-pronged attack, but before she was able to give the order, their apparently oblivious quarry faded into the surrounding forest as though they had never been there. Izvari had heard tales of the Zikia before and their deep, perhaps supernatural connection to the natural world, but this was the first she had seen of it herself. If she hadn't witnessed it with her own eyes, she wouldn't have believed something the size of a golem could disappear so completely in a matter of moments.

This sudden turnaround had shaken the resolve of her team, and they withdrew with mutterings about witchcraft and dark sorcery.

Izvari had never considered the Crows to be a particularly superstitious lot, but now she had reason to reassess that assumption. All of them had been on edge since they arrived in the area, and she'd observed the brothers giving the silhouetted ruins of Libir dark sidelong looks. The youngest member, Raza Taghar, had been jumping at shadows almost constantly, and Izvari had sent him to tend to the golems after his last nervous reaction tipped over the stewpot. Raza Uzmi, who was already on the moody side, seemed to get more irritable with each passing moment. This was not the best of times for her crew.

This bad turn was particularly unfortunate because things had been looking up of late after a shaky start. When Izvari had first been appointed captain of the Marrow Crows by the enigmatic Urugal merchant, Raza Osa bin Beleem, the mercenaries had appeared willing to accept her. This was all part of Raza Osa's scheme to sneak her out of the capital city of the Gudanna Dominion during the chaos following the assassination of her adopted father, the Great Khan. It didn't hurt that the Crows were all Raza Osa's sons, but once they were outside the gates of Kutastha and out from under the watchful eye of their father, the Crows seemed to become indifferent to her leadership. The trip north to join with other mercenary bands in the fight against the Durani invasion became tiresome as each decision she made was questioned — in particular by Raza Uzmi, her second-in-command and, unfortunately, her biggest critic. All this came to a halt, though, a few days ago when they encountered the Gudanna force near the Glades of Kuccha.

It was ironic, Izvari mused with a wry smile, that they'd headed in that direction at all. It was in one of her moments of capitulation to Raza Uzmi, when at his insistence, they took a more roundabout route away from Two Rock to avoid the crowds of other mercenary bands on their way to war. The hunting would be better, he claimed, and they could replenish their food stores as they went. Unfortunately, their quiet trek was interrupted after a couple of days by the sudden appearance of a sizable Gudanna force. Surrounded and outnumbered, Izvari vividly recalled the fear in her heart as she dismounted from her soot-black Corpse Collector to exchange words with the opposing captain. He was a young officer wearing finery tarnished with many months of travail in the field. His face reflected this hardship in lines of concern and

indications of too little sleep, but behind this his grey eyes gleamed with a sharpness of wit. After climbing down from his own golem, those eyes regarded Izvari with equal measures of curiosity and wariness.

“I am Hala Varani, captain of this company. Who are you and what is your purpose here?”

“I am called Ksudra-Aindri” said Izvari bowing expansively, “And these are my Marrow Crows. As for our purpose, we are on our way to lend our aid to the Dominion in their struggles against the Durani upstarts.”

“You are some distance from the conflict, Ksudra-Aindri. The Durani border is leagues away to the Northeast. If I were of a suspicious mind, I may think I had come across a company of spies for the enemy.”

“Times being what they are, it is wise to be suspicious,” Izvari replied, hoping her voice didn’t betray her nervousness, “but let me assure you our allegiance lies with the Dominion. Sadly, we have found ourselves short of funds, and so we have taken the less-travelled routes in hopes that fortune will smile on us and provide some bounty that we could collect to refill our coffers.”

Captain Varani stood silent a moment, but still held Izvari in his penetrating gaze. She felt her skin itch as though his look had a physical substance, and he was trying to burn through her disguise by sheer force of will. Just as she became certain he was going to reject her story and order her taken prisoner or worse, the captain turned to his troops and signalled for them to stand down. Turning back to Izvari, he smiled wearily.

“Fortune has smiled on you, Ksudra-Aindri, perhaps on us both. It so happens there is a rogue company of mercenaries in the area that we are responsible for dispatching. They are known as the Wild’s Reckoning, and their leader, Alit Rudan, is both clever and dangerous. I have found my own resources stretched in maintaining my current duties and would welcome a band such as yours to take on this task on my behalf. Come, join us at our camp and we can work out the details.”

After she had turned that potentially deadly situation into a profitable one, Izvari had noticed her companions had become more accepting of her leadership. Even Raza Uzmi had acceded grudgingly that she'd done well. Unfortunately the goodwill she had won had steadily eroded in the days they remained within reach of the eldritch influence of Libir. As if in reply to her thought, a bone-chilling shriek sounded from the general vicinity of the haunted city. She regarded the broken shape of that ruined place eerily glowing on the horizon and once more thought of her father, the Great Khan.

He had told her once of his journey there, how after hearing his mother's tales of the secrets hidden below, he felt a compulsion to go there and uncover those secrets himself. She had initially been excited to find herself here in the same place Jahnu Khan had discovered the Arcanum Gudanna: the art of crafting golems from soil and blood, and the key to his victory in establishing the Dominion. Yet after experiencing the horror of the ghost city firsthand, even from a distance, her excitement had turned to dread. Gradually even that dread faded, though, replaced instead by an admiration of her father for his boldness in facing such a place head-on in his quest for knowledge and power. Strangely, being near Libir now seemed to strengthen her own resolve to achieve her ends. She inhaled the night air, filling her lungs with that sense of strength, and turned back toward the camp.

When she entered the command tent, Izvari could tell the brothers inside had been in the midst of discussion. By the slight look of guilt on Raza Guadi's face, and the note of defiance in Raza Uzmi's bearing, she could tell it wasn't going to be a discussion that pleased her. She shrugged off her cloak and draped it over a chair, and poured herself a goblet of water to clear the sand and dust from her throat. Then, sitting at the table, she sighed and addressed Raza Uzmi, who had remained silent.

"All right then. Let's have it, my friend."

"We have been discussing the situation, and we believe we should leave immediately."

You mean you believe we should leave, thought Izvari to herself, but aloud she said "I see. But what about the contract we have entered into with Captain Varani?"

“The contract has been fulfilled,” said Uzmi simply. “We are meant to have removed the threat from the area, and we have done so. Upon seeing our superior force, the cowards have fled. We will not see them again any time soon.”

“I’m not so certain, Uzmi. They may indeed have left, yet we haven’t been able to find any solid evidence they’re really gone. Is this not so?”

“Of course we haven’t been able to find evidence of that. We haven’t been able to find evidence of anything at all! Either these villains are more slippery than even the blood eels of the Libirian groves, or they are no longer here. I humbly suggest the latter.”

“That is the problem. Without evidence, we can only guess. Would you risk more villages and innocent lives on a guess?”

“Pah! I’m happy to lend a hand when the situation presents itself, but I will not dally in strange lands on the off chance a fiend will arrive to slaughter babies,” said Raza Uzmi, striking the table with the flat of his palm. “I wish to end this nonsense, return home to Urugal lands, and, in turn, return you to your father.”

Raza Uzmi then paused and looked up at Izvari with an odd expression that she couldn’t read. “Would you have this errand keep you from returning to the Sunu homelands?” he went on. “Would you needlessly delay your part in returning your family, your people, to honor and greatness?”

Izvari paused and considered this for the first time. Perhaps Raza Uzmi had a valid point. She realized she felt no hurry to return to her birth father, the man who was so willing to give her up for political gain. While she’d quickly grown to love her adopted father and the pleasures of the palace, at the time she was sent away, there was no knowing for certain what situation she was bound for. She could have been sentenced to a life of slavery for all her father knew. She felt an old anger and hurt welling up, but she pushed it back down before it could cloud her judgement. She looked at Raza Uzmi and his silent brothers as they watched her expression, awaiting a response.

“In the morning, we will go south to the Great Waste and comb the desert for signs of Alit Rudan and his band of scoundrels,” Izvari announced. “If we find nothing, then we will return to the Sunu lands and my father. But if we do find something, we will return to the Sunu lands with a full purse and a tale of valor to make our return all the sweeter.”

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The Marrow Crows were up, packed, and ready to go particularly early the next day, whether more motivated by the prospect of leaving Libir behind or returning to their ancestral lands, none could say. Izvari herself was keenly focused on this final attempt to run the Wild’s Reckoning to ground, though she was also uncertain why this suddenly was so important to her. Ever since the night of the Great Khan’s assassination and her flight from the palace, she had felt torn between two worlds: the world of the Dominion’s court, and the world of the Urugal tribes. When she applied the traditional layer of ashes to her skin each morning, she wondered who this person was who she saw reflected in the mirror, this Ksudra-Aindri. Yet as the days rolled past, she’d felt less like this was a person she was portraying, and more like Ksudra was emerging fully formed from somewhere under her own skin. Now she realized that was the origin of this feeling: the thrill of the hunt, the anticipation of battle — all came from her taking on the persona of the Little Crow. The Izvari of the palace would never have connected with something so raw and visceral. She had to admit she rather liked the change.

Izvari was drawn out of her reverie by the sight of the approaching Great Waste. It had been a long time since she’d last been here, so she had only memory to rely on, but seeing the vast desert stretching out before her made her vague memory pale in comparison. The sheer size of it was humbling, with wave upon wave of reddish, sandy dunes rolling across its expanse. It looked like some kind of primordial creature lying in wait, seemingly immobile, but waiting for the right moment to pounce on and consume the unwary. There was something a bit off about the sight of it, though, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Raza Zogyal, riding nearby, must have seen her brow furrow in confusion. He waved to get her attention and pointed toward what Izvari took to be a line of raised dunes in the distance.

“What is it, Zogyal? What about those dunes?” she said

“Not dunes,” he replied, “a storm. It is a fitful sandstorm, and it’s headed our way.”

Before Izvari could digest this news, she saw a flurry of motion out of the corner of her eye. She turned to see Raza Taghar upon his Horned Blight, hurriedly returning from a scouting patrol. In his haste to cross the dunes, he kicked up a trail of red sand into the air. Breathless, he stopped in front of Izvari’s Corpse Collector.

“The Reckoning! They are here! I have found them.”

“Are you certain?” asked Raza Uzmi, drawing his Plague Bringer closer to better hear the conversation. “I have no patience for another false alarm.”

“I am certain, brother! I swear it on our mother’s breath. They are making camp in a valley to the southeast of here.”

“Did they spot you, Taghar?” asked Izvari with gravity. To be so close and have them escape again would be unbearable.

“No, Reaper! I’m sure they didn’t.”

Izvari looked around at her company in turn, checking their faces to see if the spark of battle she felt had kindled in them as well. When she got to Raza Uzmi, he exhaled sharply.

“You can’t be serious. You heard Zogyal. A sandstorm is even now coming to crash on our heads!”

“I have never been more serious, Raza Uzmi. This will be our only chance to face our quarry. Sandstorm or not, prepare yourselves for battle, and remember the plan we discussed.”

Izvari was taking no chances this time. She painstakingly maneuvered her forces to encircle the Zikia renegades with the greatest stealth. Fortunately the whipping winds and flying sands of the approaching storm helped cover any signs of their presence. Regardless, the

members of the Wild's Reckoning were too preoccupied setting up their shelter to notice them. However, the Reckoning's skill as seasoned warriors became evident when Izvari finally signalled the attack, and her Urugal golems moved to engage: the company instantly dropped what they were doing and leapt to their golems. Even so, Izvari saw two of their number fall in her force's first strike. Almost directly afterward, the sandstorm swept over them, and it became nearly impossible to see anything at all.

Izvari found herself in a chaotic dance of violence, noise, and blinding sand. One moment she was kicked by a Bramblehorn, the next she found it speared on the gigantic horn that served as one of Mandible's arms. The sound of bodies slamming into each other was strangely magnified in the swirling winds, while the sound of her own voice was pulled away from her throat. She couldn't find her company in the midst of it all, only catching the odd glimpse of golem limb or head before it was swallowed once more by the storm. She decided to seek a better vantage point, and rose into the treacherous air on the Collector's bat-like wings. Oddly, the buffeting winds appeared to have little effect on her golem's flight, and she wondered what enchantments could have made this possible. Although she couldn't make out many details, she could divine the forms of the combatants more clearly from the air as dense struggling masses. Marking their positions, she swooped down to the closest one and charged the golems there.

She caught a momentary glimpse of Raza Taghar's Horned Blight furiously trying to fend off two Thornbeasts before she slammed into the side of one of them, using Mandible's claws and momentum to tear it away from her outmatched comrade and drag it further into the center of the circle of melee. She traded blows with her opponent for a few moments: sharpened bones cutting into thick, ropey vines, barbed thorns scraping against protective ribs. Then Izvari quickly withdrew, stepping aside and barely avoiding the worst of a cloud of deadly thorns blasted at her from every surface of the Thornbeast. Its rider was so intent on her that he didn't notice Raza Taghar and his charging golem, fresh from dispatching the other Thornbeast. Izvari heard the wet crunch of impact and rose once more into the swirling air, leaving Raza Taghar to his task.

In this way she continued the fight, hovering over the battle and dropping in to assist her companions as needed. Nowhere was her assistance not welcome. The Marrow Crows may

have had the advantage of surprise, but the battle was still hard-fought. A few of the brothers were forced to retreat and stagger from the field with their broken golems, but each time this happened, the remaining brothers' determination flared, and they redoubled their efforts. Gradually, the circle of combatants grew tighter, with the golems of the Wild's Reckoning soon fighting nearly back to back.

It was time. Izvari disengaged and vanished from sight into the blowing sands, only to reappear in the air directly above the clustered enemy, hauling a heavy burden that threatened to pull her from the sky. Just when it appeared her golem would be dragged to earth by its cargo, she released it, dropping Raza Zogyal and his Carapace Brute into the fray as he launched a frenzied attack of massive spinning fists before the golem even landed. The combined assault of the Marrow Crows surrounding them and the wildly whirling golem in their midst was too much for the Wild's Reckoning to withstand, and the tide quickly turned against them.

Izvari watched with satisfaction as her team quickly cleaned up the remaining opponents, but her satisfaction was short-lived. She felt the limbs of her golem suddenly entangled by a multitude of vines, and she was violently yanked out of the air and dashed against the rock face that made up one side of the valley in which they fought. The impact knocked the breath out of her, and before she could act, her golem was impaled by an eruption of meter-long thorns bursting from the sandy ground. One of them pierced the fleshy part of her shoulder, and she screamed in pain and fury as her attacker advanced through the shifting sands and came into view. She recognized the Reckoning captain's Wildwood Dryad, its telltale black-painted arcane designs still discernible despite the considerable damage sustained during the fight. A moment later it was close enough that she could see clearly its master, the disgraced Zikia chieftain himself, Alit Rudan. Whatever helmet or mask he might have worn had been knocked off in the battle, revealing bright green eyes shining with fury and madness, and a mouth pulled wide in a rictus of a grin to match.

"You dare! You dare, you filthy Urugal vermin, to attack me and interrupt my mission!" Alit spat at Izvari. "With vile dead mockeries of life, no less. If you love the dead so much, prepare to join them!"

Alit raised the Dryad's reaping blade, notched and stained, but still deadly enough to deliver the killing blow. Izvari felt as though time slowed down. *Is this what it's like before you die?* she wondered.

The thought of death lit a fire in her chest. She would not go quietly. *Strike and recoil*, her father taught her, but here there was nowhere to recoil to. She would have to devise her own strategy. She unfurled her golem's wings and beat them against the desert ground, fanning the sand directly into Alit's eyes. It didn't stop the Dryad's blade coming down, but it was enough to throw off his aim. She raised her own golem's arm, and was able to deflect the strike further at the cost of a deep gouge and a damaged wing. At the same moment, she thrust her other arm, the one that ended in the horn, directly towards Rudan. *Distract, deflect, strike*, she thought, smiling grimly. *A technique fit for a crow*. The last thing she saw before her vision swam with darkness was the light draining away from those mad green eyes.

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Izvari was sitting on her golem when the envoy arrived. She had been doing what she could to repair the damage done during the recent battle. It was good to work with her hands, and it gave her a moment of peace, even though the exertion made her healing shoulder ache. The Marrow Crows had spent a number of days like this, repairing their golems and themselves at a camp they made in the valley of their victory. The other Crows respectfully left her to herself during these times, so it was a surprise to see Raza Uzmi approaching her, smiling with his hideously sharpened teeth, and leading a unfamiliar robed man.

"Many pardons, O Captain, but this traveller has asked to speak to you by name," said Raza Uzmi. "It seems he knows all about us. He refuses to tell me anything more."

"It is true," said the robed figure, "I must speak to you, Ksudra-Aindri, leader of the Marrow Crows. My master bade me to do so."

"He may be a spy," warned Raza Uzmi, almost hopefully.

“I would hear what he has to say, spy or no,” said Izvari as she descended lightly from her golem, “although I am very curious how he knows who we are and where to find us in the middle of the Great Waste. But first, perhaps, your name?”

“I am called Yanum Genta,” he said, bowing, “and I claim no special talents of my own. I am merely a humble envoy of my master, the prophet Ausin Tal, who told me where to find you. It has taken me these past seven days to do so.”

“Seven days? Are we meant to believe that...” Raza Uzmi began, but stopped at a sign from Izvari.

“Indeed? One would need to be quite the prophet to know where a battle would occur when even the combatants did not. What does your master wish of me?”

“Merely to meet with you, and discuss events of import that may be of interest to you. That is all that I was told.”

“I see,” said Izvari, staring out over the dunes for a moment. “Tell your master I must respectfully decline for now. I believe fate will guide my feet in another direction, a way I have avoided for too long now.” Izvari returned her attention to the envoy. “I’m sure your master understands.”

Yanum Genta simply nodded and turned back in the direction he’d come. Raza Uzmi stepped closer toward Izvari and looked at her askance.

“It’s time to go, my friend,” said Izvari with a sigh. “I think it is finally time to reacquaint myself with Bijin of Clan Sunu. It is time to meet my father.”