

*Lord
Ghul
&
the
Princes*®

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This is an original shorty story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers

New York

2007

No one escapes from the clutches of Avrum Ghul!"

Barin of Byssinnia looked down at the scrawny fingers that scabbled at the bronzed flesh of his thickly muscled thigh. An old beggar man, his twisted body wrapped in a filthy rag, drew back from the scowling barbarian and crouched against a wall, shaking his empty alms bowl at the towering figure that glared down at him.

"Do you speak to me, old man?" growled Barin, his voice a deep rumble that seemed to shake the wall behind the ancient man. Around them, the bustling Street of the Silver Salamanders surged and roared and clattered.

"Aye," cackled the old beggar, his face a mass of seeping sores, his body covered in so many scars that it came near to turning the stomach of even so hardened a fighter as Barin, who had seen-and been the cause of-far worse in his day. "I see in the depths of my bowl that you will soon meet the great sorcerer Avrum Ghul. Be warned. Be warned!" He shook the empty bowl with a meaningful air, apparently waiting for it to be filled in recompense for his dire prediction.

Barin kicked the old man away more gently than was his wont, for indeed he was on the way to meet a man called Avrum Ghul. *How could the old beggar have known,* the barbarian pondered as he threaded his way through the merchants and soldiers, pimps and prostitutes, priests and nobles, beggars and slaves that thronged the crowded street. Did such news travel so fast in this strange outlandish city of Koresh L'dar?

Koresh L'dar, the Golden City, it was called by some.

"Bah!" murmured Barin to himself as he strode through the throngs that swirled about him, "golden city indeed! Why, 'tis only another stinking town on the shores of the Middle Sea. These southrons think themselves better than those of us from the north, all they did was but throw up a building or two of mud brick and gather a dozens priests together to wring coins from the gullible. I shall meet with this Ghul and take his money, then off to the cold north reaches where a man can be a man."

This last comment was in direct response to a pair of silk-dressed noblemen who were sauntering by him; the leanest one took in Barin's ruik-furred vest, leather breeches and coarse thick-soled boots, and snickered surreptitiously to his companion. The

sword that hung at Barin's waist prevented more audible comments, but he could hear laughter behind him and a muttered 'smelly barbarian' that set his blood to boiling.

But no. He had no time to teach these southrons a lesson. He needed gold, and the meeting with Avrum Ghul had a promising sound to it.

Gold Barin would have, if sword could take it or might of arm procure it.

Barin took many twists and turns through the streets of Koresh L'dar, muttering to himself as he saw landmarks and ticked them off in his mind. A man who had survived the frozen wastes of Medron Caladra and had fought his way clear of the steaming jungles that wandered south of the Middle Sea. Barin could not be stopped by the labyrinthine streets of a mere city. Still, from time to time as he stopped to puzzle out his way, he cursed the soldier who had approached him last evening in the shabby tavern that was all Barin's flat purse could afford. The soldier made Barin an offer to fill that same purse to the brim with gold, if he would but protect a special gift from Lord Avrum Ghul to a rival city leader.

"It will be an easy task," the soldier, his one eye glittering in the smoky lantern light, promised. "I would do it myself, but," he tapped the leather patch that hid one orb, "I lost this in a fight not a week gone, and Avrum Ghul wants a whole man to guard his gift to Glip T'onio of Zeelon. You look just the sort that Ghul prefers."

If this soldier was the sort of guard that Ghul preferred, Barin thought as he eyed the burly man, then I will open his eyes and show him what a real warrior looks like. And he had listened with care to the directions that the soldier had given to the house of Ghul, though the ale that they had both swilled-at the soldier's cost-had prevented Barin from asking exactly what gift he would be expected to guard...

It was with a glad heart that Barin at last took the final turn around a corner and saw before him the high stone wall, lined across the top with grinning stone heads, which the soldier had told him of. The wall stretched all along one side of the street, its

smooth and shining expanse broken only by a single wooden door. Beside the door hung a plaque that gleamed with the luster of gold. Idly, as he walked towards the door as if stalking some great beast, Barin wondered what kept thieves from snatching so valuable-looking a door sign. The street was empty for as far as he could see, and there was no gatekeeper or guard stationed anywhere.

The next instant and Barin knew why the golden plaque was untouched-though little good it did him. A strange malaise overtook him, clouding his vision and muddling his mind, and his mighty legs became wobbly and weak. Just before his huge form toppled towards the dusty street, he could make out the door before him creaking open onto inner darkness, and a pale hand making arcane gestures...

"So you are the barbarian who wishes to guard my gift to the Doge of Zeelon?" murmured a soft voice in Barin's right ear.

The Byssinnian shook his shaggy head and looked about in wonderment. An instant before-or had it been longer?-he had been walking towards a wooden doorway set in a stone wall, his usual instincts alert and fully functioning. The next moment-or was it the next?-he found himself lying atop soft cushions, their silken coverings soothing to the bare skin of his thickly muscled arms. Above him hung a pierced metal lantern; the light shining from within it was brighter than the common candlelight, and the many piercings through strange patterns on the ceiling and walls. Barin lay there for an instant as he gathered his stolen wits, noting that the metal of the lantern gleamed like gold against a ceiling that glittered from some shining stones inset in its obsidian expanse. Were those jewels, he wondered as he sat upright to see who had spoken.

A form lingered at his side, sinuous within darkness. A form-for if it be man or woman he could not at this juncture decide-draped in inky blackness from head to toe.

"Are you Avrum Ghul?" growled Barin of Byssinnia. **"If you are, speak it like a man and do not jest with me, sorcerer, for I have no patience with such tricks as your shifty kind produce."**

The form drew back a trifle and a slender white hand rose from within the folds

that draped it, drawing back a cloud of darkness from its face. Within the onyx there now gleamed a face as white and slender as the hand, with a long haughty upper lip drawn back in an impish grin.

"Indeed, you are the very man I need," said this grinning apparition. "I have a most valuable gift to send to the Doge of Zeelon and I must have-"

"Aye, aye, I know," interrupted Barin as he sat up on his soft couch, his head whirling dizzily. "You have need of a guard for this gift. A strange way to obtain one, casting a spell to make me pass out in the street. But I will overlook it, if the pay is high enough. What is this gift, a chest full of gold? A bag of rubies? A necklace of pearls?"

A whinnying giggle came from the creature upon whose gender Barin was still undecided. "No indeed, sirrah. A gift for my counterpart in Zeelon must needs be far more worthy than mere gold or jewels. No, my gift is...this!"

The figure of Avrum Ghul-whether male or female, it mattered not, decided Barin, for he was suddenly most anxious to get himself gone from that eerie, obsidian roofed room-reached out a slender pale hand and struck a musical note upon a small golden gong that hung at the head of the couch where the huge barbarian rested. The single note danced out through the dimness, almost as if it were some living thing, dying away as it reached the silken-shod walls. But at once, just in front of the now-sitting Barin, a fold of silk twitched aside to disclose an inky opening, through which pranced on their two rear feet a pair of large brown rats dressed in tiny scarlet vests and crimson leather boots, with slender swords like needled rapiers at their sides.

"There, barbarian, that is the gift I send to Glip T'onio of Zeelon," whispered the faint high voice of Avrum Ghul. "Two of the Seventeen."

The two rats stepped with careful precision towards the sorcerer and the reclining Barin, who felt a wave of superstitious awe sweep through him at the sight of two animals behaving like men. To distract himself from the uncanny sight, he asked, "The Seventeen, sorcerer? What or who is that?"

A gasping giggle came from between the thin white lips of Ghul. "The Seventeen, oh ignorant barbarian, are the rulers of each sort of animal kind. Be they rat or horse, dragon or serpent, roc or roach, wolf or wombat, each race of animals has a group of

seventeen that rules over them and that has demon-like skills and more wisdom than many a man. I, Avrum Ghul, have captured five of the rat Seventeen, and with their capture I now rule over all rats in this city. Two I send to my compatriot in Zeelon, so that he may have in his city the same power that I wield in mine."

Barin felt his head spinning as he watched the two furry rats stalk solemnly towards him, to stop at the foot of his couch. The one on his right snarled a ratty snarl and shook a tiny rat fist at him, though the other made a most elegant bow.

The huge barbarian could not help himself. He let out a roar of laughter. The booming laughs rolled across the dim room, shaking the silken hangings with the sound of mirth.

An angry chittering arose from the rats. Avrum Ghul was silent, patiently awaiting the sound to stop.

At last Barin was able to control himself. He rose on legs like tree trunks, towering over Ghul, and a wide grin still remained on his sun-darkened visage.

"Rats, Master Sorcerer?" sneered Barin of Byssinnia. "Rats? You need not a swordsman like myself, but a zookeeper or a stable boy. Either would know more about such vermin than I."

"Vermin, say you?" asked Ghul, with no trace of anger, though the rats chattered as if they understood each word the barbarian uttered. "Nay, for what has access to all houses, from the richest to the poorest, save rats? Who can cause a mighty ship to sink, or nibble away at the walls of a fortress until they tumble down, or eat all the stored provender so that a great city may die of hunger, save rats alone?"

The two brown representatives of this mighty species, each on its hind legs no taller than the top of Barin's boots, nodded as Ghul spoke-for all the world, thought the barbarian, as if they understood each word. "Well, in that you are correct, sorcerer," the barbarian agreed as the thoughts of his empty purse and soon to be growling belly overcame his mirth. "They are indeed noble creatures, and these two not the worst of that brethren I have seen in my wanderings. When do we leave upon our journey?"

"You accept this burden?" asked Ghul, and Barin could have sworn that he heard disbelief in that thin, wavery voice. "You will accompany these Two to Zeelon?"

"Of a surety," said Barin. "I am a man of my word, as are all of us from Byssinnia, and I will take your pets to Zeelon. For a price, of course."

"Of course, of course," echoed Ghul as he-she?-gazed lovingly at the two furry creatures that stood so regal and calm at the foot of Barin's couch. "You will leave upon the morrow. Until then, may I offer you the hospitality of the house of Avrum Ghul, to rest you for your journey? Wine to warm your belly and a slave girl or three to warm your flesh?"

"Aye," said Barin as he looked down at the gift to Glip T'onio of Zeelon. The sorcerer was mad, it was apparent, but there was no need to behave foolishly, not when he was so short of coin that he had considered selling his sword. "I have a great need of both, ere I take these two gentlerats upon their journey."

The next morning dawned bright and fair-as most mornings did, here on the shores of the Middle Sea. *Ah, for the blowing storms of the North, thought Barin, the crisp chill wind that whittled the skin off your face. And the winters, of course, were even more delightful.*

Barin of Byssinnia had need of some sharp cold winds to the face this morning. He had dined and drunk far too well the previous evening at his host's house, and the three Ardathan slave girls had slaked even his great appetites. Today he was more than a little weak in the knees from his ordeal, and would have liked a day or two to rest from his evening of rest.

But the mincing figure of Avrum Ghul had awakened him at the first light of dawn, prizing a reluctant barbarian eyelid up with a slender white fingertip. "Come, Master Barin, your duty awaits. 'Tis a far ride to Zeelon, and your charges are anxious to be away." Ghul had then pranced away, his-her?-inky robes swirling.

Barin had let out a great yawn, tumbled a slave girl from either arm and a leg, then rose and stretched mightily. Seizing a leftover chicken carcass in passing-a man

must break his fast, no matter what sorcerers or intelligent rats awaited-he strode out of his sleeping room, down a short hallway and into an open courtyard.

There he saw a fine roan, harnessed in red leather and all gaudy with ribbons and flowers.

"I'll not ride such a beast," he grumbled to himself, just as a huge black stallion was brought to stand beside it, and Barin noticed that the roan had no saddle. Instead, a strange contraption of steel and leather sat atop its broad back, strapped and harnessed carefully, a cage-if cage it could be called, with its front open-that had a tiny umbrella of red satin stretched across it.

"The beasts are to ride, I see, in their own tiny howdah," muttered Barin as he stalked towards the two horses. Just then, from a doorway across the courtyard, Avrum Ghul appeared and started towards Barin; on either side of the sorcerer, pacing him step for step-Ghul taking tiny mincing steps, to be sure-came the two brown rats. For their journey this morning, Barin noted with some amusement, they were arrayed in emerald-studded vests and high boots of green leather.

"Here is my gift for Glip T'onio," said Avrum Ghul, reaching down and with infinite precision placing first one, then the other rat in the contraption on the roan's back. "Have a care, swordsman, that they arrive safely. You will be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams for this task. This, indeed, is but a tiny taste of your payment." Ghul tossed something towards the barbarian.

Barin snatched from the air a heavy leather purse that jingled reassuringly, stuffed it into his belt and nodded at the sorcerer. He wondered at the sudden chittering from the two rats, now above his own head on the back of the roan horse. It sounded to his ringing ears-too much wine, and one too many slave girls, he thought ruefully-almost as if they laughed at him.

Barin swung himself into the black stallion's saddle and called down to the black-draped Ghul, "Never fear. The beasties will reach Zeelon before the week is out, or I'm a southroner."

Barin reached down to seize the roan's halter, but Avrum Ghul called up, "No need, barbarian. The horse is trained to follow you. Do you lead the way and it will not

leave your side."

Hmm, thought Barin as he felt the strength of the huge black beneath him, and eyed the trained roan that indeed fell in beside him and his mount as they walked toward the gates of the courtyard. *These horses must be worth a great deal themselves, and this bag at my belly is comfortably fat. Perchance the man-or woman, to be sure--is mad, but the gold will go far to make up for that.*

A small man dressed in rags and a slave collar drew open the heavy wooden gate of the courtyard and Barin urged his mount through, followed by the rat-ridden roan. Outside, where the barbarian had expected to see the same dusty silent street of the day before, he was surprised instead to find a wide passageway lined with fruit trees. He reached out to seize a ripe plum from a heavy laden tree, and took a bite from it before tossing it to his furry traveling companions; one caught it in a paw and they both seemed to chitter their thanks. At the end of the passageway was another wooden gate, with another slave to open it.

Beyond this second gate was indeed the street where Barin had been overcome the day before, lined on one side by the long wall with grinning heads atop. But the street that had been deserted the day before was now thronged with townsfolk-not moving about their business but clustered, mumbling and cursing, just outside the wide wooden doorway with the gold-hued plaque beside it.

"There! There are the filthy creatures!"

"Look you, they ride like men!"

"But take care, they have a guardian! See, his arms are as big about as my leg!"

"A barbarian, by the Seven Gods!"

Some of those gathered bore torches, Barin noted as he laid a warning hand on his sword hilt, but others held rocks and staves and there was even the glitter of steel in spots.

"Make way!" boomed Barin. "Make way!"

But the crowd had no intention of making way. Instead they surged forward in a thick mass, preventing the two horses from moving at all.

Barin drew his sword, a long sweep of steel as wide as his hand. He lay it across his lap, the sun glinting merrily off its sharp edge. "Come, good townspeople. Let us about our business."

"Aye, the business of destroying us!" shouted one stood far enough back to wave a fist threateningly. "You take those creatures to raise an army of their kind, so that they can come on us and take our city to rule!"

Barin's great booming laugh rolled out over the crowd like a juggernaut. "Ho, you fear a rat army then, do you? You are as mad as Avrum Ghul!"

"Avrum Ghul?"

"He speaks of Lord Ghul?"

"What do you know of the Lord of Koresh L'dar, barbarian?"

The brown rats on the back of the jittery roan set to chattering. Barin spared them a glance, saw that they had drawn their own tiny rapiers as he had his sword.

"Why, it was he who set me this task. Would you go against your lord's wishes?" he asked reasonably, though his hand never left the hilt of his sword.

"Pah, you ignorant cold-lander!" shouted a sturdy man in brown leggings who held a stave. "Lord Ghul lies this day, as he had for the last dozen, upon his sickbed in his great house in the hills. You come from the house of Finia Carazin, who plots to take over both Koresh L'dar and Zeelon when his lordship breathes his last. Now give us those evil creatures and we will let you live."

Barin thought over this pertinent bit of information as he eyed the crowd. Only a fool knows no fear, and he was greatly outnumbered. Still, he had taken on a task, no matter from whom, and his northern sense of honor would not allow him to give it up without better cause than this.

"No matter," said Barin, shaking his shaggy head. "I have promised to do this thing and it will be done. Now stand aside else you'll all get a taste of my steel."

An uneasy murmur was his only reply. Barin's hand tightened about the hilt of his sword and he could feel the berserker rage growing within him.

But a chattering arose, and not from the two brown rats that occupied the roan

just to Barin's rear. No, this was a roar, a very deluge of chittering, and the townsfolk began to look about them uneasily.

Barin heard one of the brown rats that sat calmly a'horseback make one sharp high sound, and the broad thoroughfare erupted in a swirling mass of tiny brown, black and white bodies.

A man screamed. Another. And another. High piercing screams that echoed through the street. Men fell to their knees from the weight of tiny writhing bodies that leaped atop them. Others dropped to the ground, rats worrying their ears and scratching for their eyes. One man, covered in a pelt of tiny bodies, ran screaming full into a stone wall, to fall unconscious to the dusty cobblestones. Barin watched as his furry covering deserted him for livelier prey. Another man, blood streaming from thousands of gashes and tears, snatched desperately at tiny wriggling forms, jerking them away and flinging them from him. As each fell free, two more attached themselves to his weakening form.

Barin, dazed in disbelief, watched the carnage behind him for a long moment until a high tinny voice called, "Ride, barbarian."

Freed from his mazement, Barin reached over and seized the skittish roan's halter, kicked his black stallion, and rode through and across the struggling mass of dying men. Not one rat paid either of the steeds the slightest attention.

Well, Barin thought to himself as the two horses reached the end of the street, it seems the story of the Seventeen was true, regardless of who told it to me. The barbarian spared one last glance behind him at the destruction in the street, looked over at his calm traveling companions-they were engaged in grooming splatters of blood from their shiny brown fur and their emerald-studded vests-and shook his head.

Southroners. Who could trust their trickery? Yet who expected anything else from them?

He kicked his horse and rode down the deserted street, the two rat princes on the roan at his side.

Doubtless it will be an interesting trip to Zeelon, thought Barin of Byssinnia.

The End

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