

*Black  
Shores*©

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This is an original short story and has  
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**Blood sprayed Haled as his axe crashed into the other man's face. More sprayed him when he jerked it free. The man fell twitching to the deck of the ship, bones protruding from the place his nose should have been. Haled grinned, tasting the blood on his teeth, on his tongue. This was living.**

**Lightning cracked overhead, lancing through the dark night, and the top of the mast exploded. The man in the crow's nest burst into flames and pitched headlong to the deck. Sorcery, Haled thought, stepping around the smoking wreck of a body. He had expected as much. This was the necromancer Vragst's island, after all.**

**"Kill that wizard, damn you!" he roared.**

**His galley the *Night's Kiss* had rammed the starboard side of Vragst's flagship the Gomordin, and now the flagship's defenders were battling in disarray up and down the length of it. Haled's men swarmed the smaller vessel, swinging swords and axes. Defenders and reavers alike fell in bloody chunks to the reeling, rain-spattered deck while thunder boomed and somewhere a vile sorcerer brought his necromancy against Haled's reavers.**

**"Find Vragst! Kill him!" Haled shouted, and his men leapt to obey.**

**Haled himself leapt onto the deck of the flagship, nearly slipping in the entrails of a sailor. Just then a big, bearded man wielding a notched scimitar lunged at him, blade flashing at Haled's head. Haled knocked the stroke aside with his axe, feeling the shudder of the impact course up his arms. His blow tore the scimitar loose of the man's fingers, but the bearded man merely grimaced. He balled his hands into big, scarred fists-swinging them.**

**Haled laughed as a fist crashed against his scaled armor. The bearded man cursed and stumbled back. He tripped over a body and sprawled backward across the deck. Haled, grinning ear to ear, stepped forward, raised his axe, savoring the fear in his enemy's eyes, and brought his weapon down, right into the belly of the man. It took another stroke to finish him.**

**By then Haled's men had whelmed the Gomordin, and looking about him into the storm-tossed night he saw that his other ships had fared just as well. He had led his**

Reaver fleet against this bedeviled island, and its forces had fallen, just as he'd expected. Vragst depended on fear to keep his foes at bay, but Haled knew no fear. Not of gods, not of men, and not of magic.

Thunder shook the ship. Suddenly there came screams of pain. Haled saw smoke drift up from the direction of the captain's cabin. With a snarl, he bounded toward it, just in time to see a sight he would never forget. His own men were flaming and crumpling to the deck, almost seeming to melt, their skin sloughing off them, as a tall stout man with tattoos covering his face emerged from the captain's cabin. Smoke rose up from the man's mouth, and he spoke strange, arcane words Haled had never heard before.

This was him, Haled knew. This was Vragst.

Another wave of Reavers rushed the necromancer, but Vragst's eyes ablaze, his voice thundered strange incantations, and the men burst into flame, one seeming exploded from within; the survivors fell back, stunned and horrified.

But not *Haled*.

He'd come upon Vragst from the side, but when Vragst turned to face the gang of Reavers he'd left his back exposed. Haled stole upon him swiftly. Vragst hadn't seen him. Still, Haled felt a crackle in the air as he approached the fell being, felt his hair stand on end, as if the sorcerer gave off some weird energy. '*No matter*', Haled thought. '*Vragst is just a man-magic or no magic*'.

And so he did not hesitate, even as his own men flamed and melted, their flesh running in steaming puddles across the rain- and blood-soaked deck. He did not hesitate, but crashed his axe down, right into Vragst's skull. He felt his arms shiver, heard the crack of bone breaking. Then he felt a wave of heat rush up his arm from the contact. His axe head melted, and the shaft burst into flame!

Shocked, Haled stumbled backward, tripped on a body.

He sprawled back further.

He looked up to see Vragst above him, tattooed skull split, leaking blood and brains and melted metal, silhouetted by lightning and storm clouds, actually *turn and stare at him*-directly at him, even as smoke wreathed up from his mouth.

Then Haled's men fell on the sorcerer from behind. Swords flashed, and the sorcerer's right arm fell off at the elbow, then the left at the shoulder; then his legs. His head toppled to the deck and rolled right up to where Haled lay, and damned if Vragst's eyes *still* didn't stare directly into his!

"Bah!" Haled said, and kicked the head away. It bounced and rolled, then vanished overboard.

Trying to resist a shudder, Haled clambered to his feet and surveyed Vragst's body.

"Feed it to the sharks," he said, and his men complied, tossing the pieces overboard, one by one, though they did not touch the pieces with bare flesh but rather dragged the pieces away by the clothing. Only when Vragst was safely disposed of, every bit of him, did Haled allow himself to relax. He lit a pipe and leaned against the railing, and his men cheered him and plundered the ship.

"Well done, captain," said Janx, his first mate, a tall, square-headed bald man whose nose had been cut off in some battle years ago. Consequently he spoke in a strange, whistling manner. His teeth were all silver, and what with his metal teeth and his skeletal visage, his was a face of horror. Nonetheless, he was Haled's strong right arm, and Haled was glad of him.

"Aye," Haled grunted, tasting the tobacco in his mouth. He always liked a good smoke after a battle.

"Went just like you said," Janx continued, fingering a gold necklace about his thick neck that he must have looted from the ship. "Strike them in the dead of night, when they're worshipping their evil god, you said. Take 'em unawares. Worked like a dream, too, and now the wizard's isle is ours." He grinned wickedly. "And so are 'is women."

Haled allowed himself a smile at that. "Yes, twill be a fine night, indeed. Better drop anchor and lower the boats. This lagoon's too full o' reefs for my liking, and we don't know the way."

"Aye, captain. Will do. I'll send out the word to the other ships, as well."

And so it was. The men extricated the *Night's Kiss* from its lethal embrace with

Vragst's flagship, set fire to it, and Haled led them in a toast. He raised a mug as the Gomordin burned and sank, and all the other broken vessels in the harbor were fired as well. Some of the defending ships had been taken without being wrecked-those ships Haled would add to his fleet. He already boasted twenty-seven galleys, but he always needed more. Reaving was a dangerous business, and costly. He would either lose ships in battle or else need to sell a ship in exchange for provisions-or, frequently, money for bribes.

Shortly the boats were lowered. Haled in the foremost one, his Reaver boarding party of hundreds navigated their way through the burning, sinking wrecks; then through the razor-sharp reefs of the harbor. All around them pitched the high rocky peaks of the isle, and the wind howled and shrieked hellishly. Bodies floated in the harbor, bobbing like driftwood, and their faces flickered by the light of the storm, almost seeming to show life. Here and there shark fins broke the black surface of the water, but there were too many bodies and too few sharks. In some places Haled felt he could walk across the dead from one burning hulk to another. And all the while the dead bobbed and moved and swayed. He wasn't sure if it was the rain, or the wind, but he had to resist a shudder, though he had seen such sights before. There was something on the air here, on the wind-some oily, malignant taint . . .

At last they reached the labyrinthine docks of the harbor, and he gratefully climbed onto the pier.

"Be ready for anything," he told his men. "Vragst will have left some defenders behind, and who knows what sort they be."

The pirates nodded grimly, their hands twisting on the hafts of their axes and the handles of their swords. Some carried hammers, some knives. Some were white of skin, others black, or dusky. They were men from all over the world, scoundrels and cut-throats and thieves, men who would be hanged anywhere else. But with Haled-they had sanctuary.

They had purpose.

**The harbor was surrounded on all sides by almost sheer cliffs, and Haled had to find the stairs hewn into the rock before he could lead his men up to the stone buildings high above. Arrows rained down upon them as they made the ascent, but Haled had prepared for that and ordered all his men to bring shields, which they now raised overhead and blocked the down-sweeping shafts.**

**At the top of the narrow and winding stairs they found the archers, and swordsmen too, just as Haled had predicted. These were the runts, however, smaller and weaker and younger than those Vragst had taken on the ships with him. They fell quickly, and blood ran across the stones.**

**All around Haled rose great stone buildings of the wizard's isle, and looming over all was the castle, jagged and black, its thick towers thrusting into the night like the gnarled tentacles of some great kraken.**

**Haled led his men on, from one house to the next, and what followed was *rape, ruin, plunder* and *sport* such as he had seen a thousand times. The women of the isle screamed, the men laughed, and houses were set ablaze! But not too many were destroyed; Haled, for his own purposes, ordered most spared, the women too.**

**"We may be here awhile," he hinted, "best to have houses and women when needed."**

**Indeed, when he at last sacked Vragst's keep, he found it a worthy castle indeed. Stout and ancient, the wizard had occupied it for many years—some said hundreds, even thousands, although surely that was an exaggeration. At any rate, it was finer by far than the castle Haled currently commanded in Fairisle.**

**And so, as he and his men ate in the feasting hall that night, with thunder shaking the rafters and lightning splitting the sky, with the wizard's women naked and crying, served the Reavers food from the larders and refilled their jewel-encrusted goblets with thick red wine. Haled unsteadily rose from his high-backed seat at the head of the table, the seat where Vragst would have sat, and said, "Men, I have a toast! To our new home, here on Ungrastan." He raised his goblet and drank deep.**

**His men did not. They glanced at each other nervously, looks of shock and fear on their faces.**

"Our new home, sir?" asked Janx, his voice whistling in his nose-less face. "What do you mean, Cap'n?"

Haled gestured at the thick walls and high windows all about them, at the beautiful chandelier hanging overhead, at the handsomely-wrought braziers of dragons and mermen. "That wizard lived well here, so he did, and I mean to live just as well. And why not? This isle is higher and easier to defend than Fairisle, its houses sturdier, its castle more *befitting* the great Lord of the Crimson Fleet!" He grabbed the wrist of a naked woman and jerked her to him. She yelped, and he patted her on the bare behind. "And who can deny that the necromancer had excellent taste in women?" Indeed, all the women were lovely, almost uncannily so. Vragst must have had agents throughout the realms, selecting only the fairest maidens to be taken-though whether bought or stolen, Haled neither knew nor cared.

His men chuckled a bit at that, and many nodded and made side-toasts of their own, indicating the wenches that waited on them. Even Janx flashed his silver teeth. But then doubt stole upon his hideous face, and he said, "You're right, captain. This place is a marvel, and we can hold it a damn sight better than Vragst did. We're vet'ran fighters, and we have a greater fleet besides. But . . ." He swallowed nervously, and glanced about him, as if the very walls might reach out and bite him. "It is a wizard's house, my lord, and who knows what haunts plague it?"

Haled waved his hand dismissively. "Haunts scare me not. I split that fool's head myself, and he bled and died just like any man." He remembered Vragst's eyes staring into him, even after the head was severed, and he winced. *'He is dead'*, he thought. *'Dead and devoured by sharks by now, if the sharks will touch him'*.

Janx held his captain's gaze for a moment, but at last the first mate relented. He seemed to sag. "As you say, captain."

Just then, thunder shook the room, a deep bass rumble that Haled felt in his bones. The rafters groaned. A window cracked. Glass exploded inward! The men glanced about worriedly, and the girls shrieked and huddled fearfully. The chandelier swayed overhead. The men edged back, away from the table, fearing the chandelier might fall. Only Haled sat his seat and refused to budge.

**"Cursed," someone said. "This place is cursed."**

**But Haled did not fear the dead. Sure, this place was unnatural, and at first it would resist him. But he would conquer it, subdue it, and make it his, just like he had many ships and towns over the years, and many women too. Just like he would conquer this woman tonight.**

**He still had her wrist, and as he drew her to him she writhed and wept, and he smiled and said, "Show me the wizard's chambers."**

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**Screams woke him.**

**He shot up from bed, wrenching the sheets off the girl who lay naked beside him. She started and cried out, but he ignored her.**

**He bounded from bed, threw on his breeches, grabbed his sword, and quit the wizard's chambers, though he had to stumble about a bit to do it. The chambers were labyrinthine and filled with fantastic machines and experiments seemingly in progress—living heads in jars, strange hybrid creatures chained to the walls, vials of glowing liquid. But at last he was out. The screams were louder here.**

**They issued from somewhere below. Everything was below. Vragst's quarters occupied the highest floors of the highest tower of the keep. The stairs that led from them were narrow and spiraled, so it was with careful steps that Haled made his way down them. His sword was steady in his hand.**

**At last he came upon a hallway with a series of rooms reserved for Vragst's personal slaves—all occupied by Haled's men now, of course, and the women they had taken to bed. A group of Reavers, either naked or in their night clothes, were crowded at the doorway to one of the rooms, and it was to this that Haled went. Inside were the cramped bedchambers of the wizard's wenches.**

**Two dead Reavers lay upon the beds, their middles ripped open and their entrails**

tossed about the room. Looks of terror locked their faces. Fresh blood dripped from the walls. The chamber smelled of offal from the dead men's ruptured guts.

"What's the meaning of this?" Haled thundered, striding into the room and staring down at the corpses. The stench was powerful, but he had smelled it many times before.

"Don't know, my lord," whistled Janx, coming up behind him. "Just heard the screaming myself."

"Who screamed?"

Janx pointed to the two naked women cowering in the corner of the room. They had obviously been the dead men's playthings. Now they were pale and shaking, and tears hovered at their eyes.

Haled stepped toward them, and they shrank back, clutching a sheet between them to cover their nakedness.

"D-don't hurt us, s-sir," stammered one, doe-eyed and voluptuous, her golden hair cascading over her shoulders.

"I may, I may not. It depends on what happened." He narrowed his eyes at them, letting their fear build. "What *did* happen?"

They glanced nervously at each other. The dark-haired one said, "We was sleeping, m-my lord. Your m-men had had their fun with us, and they were dozing, too. All of a sudden I felt something, a chill-a coldness. I started awake, and I saw . . . . saw . . ." She trembled and shuddered and could not go on.

"What?" Haled demanded. "What did you see?"

But the girl shook her head and wept and would not continue.

The other girl answered, before Haled could grow angry. "I saw it, too, s-sir. A shadow, it was. Huge & cold. *Cold*, good sir. I could feel it giving off this chill. Well, it came through the doorway, and it was huge, and I could see its eyes burning where its head should be, and I screamed, and the men awoke. One reached for his sword, the other his axe, but the shadow was too fast. It leapt upon them, eyes burning, and reached out with hideous shadow-claws. It had long, gangly limbs, and horrid claws. The men, they beat at it, but their blows passed right through it. But it could touch

them, sir, *yes it could*. It reached out and tore the first one open, just gutted him, like you see there, sir. And then it turned its eyes on the second one, and he like to have froze, my lord. I don't know if t'was fear paralyzed him, or some witchery, but he stood stock-still as the thing fell over him and tore him open."

"And why didn't it tear you little things open as well, then?" Haled growled.

The girl swallowed nervously and cast her gaze down, to the fresh bloodstains on the floor. She was too nervous to answer. The other one put an arm around her shoulders.

"Don't know why it spared us, my lord," the dark-haired one said, though there was a furtive look in her eyes that Haled did not trust. "But I saw it too. It slew them, then it hunched over them and . . ."

"And *what?*"

She swallowed. "It . . . it *gorged on their blood*, good sir. So help me, it *fed* on them. Their blood spurted, and it feasted on it, and it swelled, grew larger. And the cold it was giving off, it got colder. Myra and I, we screamed and screamed, but the thing just ignored us. Then, all of a sudden, we heard footsteps in the hall, your men a-comin', and the thing it just melted right back into the shadows and was gone."

She put her head up against the other girl's, and there they huddled, shaking, spattered in blood and smelling of fear and sex.

Haled sighed. "Very well," he said.

"What shall we do, captain?" Janx asked.

Frowning, Haled strode back and forth, surveying the bodies and the room, trying to ignore the stench of torn bowels. At last he quit the room, and the sailors around him gave back. It was then, as he was mulling on it, hand cradling his bearded chin, eyes lowered, that he noticed it.

"Look," he said. The others looked to where he pointed.

"Bloodstains!" Janx gasped.

"Yes," mused Haled, "and they go on . . ." He strode forward, following the trail of spattered blood to the stairwell. The spatters of blood trailed downward.

Haled grinned, and he gripped the sword tighter in his hairy fist. "Well," he said,

**"let us see where the shadow goes. It may be able to butcher sleeping men caught unawares, but a host of armed killers?" He laughed. "Come, men!" he roared. "We've got a ghost to kill!"**

**So saying, he charged down the stairs, and his men followed. They were nervous and hesitant at first, but Janx taunted them and bullied them, and they came on, nervously, looking all about them.**

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**They stormed down through the castle, as thunder crashed against the walls, and waves boomed along the rocky shore below. Wind howled through the towers and clawed at the walls, but Haled ignored it. Nevertheless, even he felt the hairs on the nape of his neck stand up at the thought of the mysterious shadow that had slain two of his men and gorged on their blood.**

**Blood he was even then following down the twisted stairs-of the necromancer's tower.**

**And that shadow . . . could it truly be the wizard himself come for revenge? Haled had seen many inexplicable things in his career as a pirate, and he did not doubt that some spirits could linger after their bodies' demise. But to linger and to feast on the living were different things entirely.**

**And so when he came into the feasting hall once again and saw a pair of swords crossed upon the wall, he stopped trailing the blood for a moment and went to them. The swords were heavy and sharp, their blades slightly curved so as to be able to jerk them from a body all the more easily, and strange black jewels were set in their hilts. It was those jewels that gave Haled pause. He had heard of wizards enchanting their weapons with unearthly gems, giving their weapons power to inflict wounds on things mortal and otherwise.**

Haled, ever a pragmatist cast his own sword aside and snatched up one of the wizard's. He didn't know if these swords were enchanted or not, but it seemed likely, and if it gave him an edge over the bloodthirsty shadow, then why not?

He grinned, satisfied with himself, and whispered, "*You picked the wrong man to haunt, wizard!*"

And, grinning fiendishly, eager for the hunt to come, he renewed leading his men after the trail of blood. Thunder shook the halls, but it was no louder than Haled's laughter. It had been quite a while since he had faced a worthy foe, and he would enjoy this.

Down and down he followed the trail, down into the dark bowels of the fortress, down past the kitchens, the cellars, the dungeons, down past strange cells with thick metal doors behind which shambling noises and strange clicks and grunts could be heard-down into the fetid blackness below the wizard's keep, into the very mountain itself! Here the walls dripped with moisture, and Haled shivered in the chill air. The very rock seemed to radiate coldness.

At last he passed through a grand, elaborately wrought archway and into a wide, pentagonal hallway, with recesses and sarcophagi lining the walls. He passed a grand mausoleum with spikes protruding from it, passed a statue of a man with three heads on his shoulders and three more gripped by their hair in his hands, passed a squat, queer-shaped mound whose base was heaped with fresh bones and blood all a-swarm with flies.

"This is an ill place," Janx said, stabbing his torch forward. He illuminated a corner where a spider was making a web with red, glistening thread.

Haled grunted. "I did not need you to tell me *that*."

"What is this place, captain?"

Haled shrugged. "The catacombs of Vragst's clan, I reckon. No more. These are just bones and shadows, my friend. Have no fear."

"It is shadows we're looking for, captain."

"I've not forgotten. Now be silent. We must have our wits about us."

They moved forward, the host of pirates at their backs. Pirates are a superstitious lot, and Haled had to bark them into silence lest they continue their inane prattle about

ghosts and ghouls. *'Ghosts and ghouls there may be'*, thought Haled, *'but they could be dealt with like any other!'*

At last the drops of red gave out, or at least Haled could no longer find them. It was dark here, and the torches created as many shadows as they dispelled. As well, there were many side-passages, some straight and wide, some narrow and twisty. Their quarry could have gone anywhere.

"Search all about," Haled ordered, dispatching men to comb the side-tunnels, group by group. Then he selected half a dozen men and said, "We go forward."

And so they did, onward down those black halls, as coldness and death pressed in from all sides. The sarcophagi ended, and another staircase began, leading down into unknown depths. For some reason, gooseflesh stood up on Haled's arm when he beheld that staircase, and the hair prickled once more on the nape of his neck.

"Mayhaps we should go no further," Janx said. "Likely our prey's up here anyways. There's no more blood."

Haled shrugged. "It could have stopped dripping. At any rate, we've got men searching up here. We needs go down." And in the back of his mind, something was calling him, darkly, seductively, a feminine whisper in his mind. *Come, good captain*, it said. *Come. Come and see . . .*

And so he firmed his jaw and marched down those stairs, stairs cut high and steep, as if not made for human legs or human feet. Indeed the hall was composed of huge cyclopean blocks, blocks seemingly too big for mortal men to move and place, especially here, in the heart of a mountain, far from a quarry, far from the mainland. Haled shrugged it off and kept going, down and down into the wet cold darkness.

At last the stairs ended and another hallway began. This was squat, its floor and sides forming an octagonal shape, and the whole was composed of those black, cyclopean blocks. It smelled of fungus and slime, and . . . something else. Seaweed? Sulfur? Haled could not place it.

He glanced back. Janx's square-jawed, skeletal, silver-toothed face looked wan and sweaty, and he blinked continually. They had fought many battles together, and

Haled had never seen him so nervous.

Janx saw his scrutiny and said, "I fear no man, captain, no man save yourself but the thought of coming to grips with sorcery, with a shadow, something I cannot even touch . . . how can I fight something I cannot touch?" He shook his head in exasperation and had to visibly repress a shudder.

Haled grinned wolfishly. "I'm a match for any *shadow*," he promised. He shook his jewel-enchanted sword. "And any haunt'll have a time coming to grips with *me*, an' that's a fact. Just you wait and see."

Still grinning, Haled turned and led the way on. The hall stretched on, terminating at last in a high octagonal archway covered in cryptic runes and carvings of fabulous and terrible beasts, things like krakens with the heads of rams and men with the heads of fish. Haled felt a chill wash him as he stepped under that archway, and he had to blink the sweat out of his eyes as he beheld what lay beyond!

It was a temple, a temple to some black god. Its walls and pillars were ebon, and even more so was the great black slab that dominated the room. A slab with chains and manacles sprouting from it with fresh red stains covering its top trickling down the sides

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Haled, grinding his teeth-had to look away. There was something horribly evil here. Janx and the Reavers cursed at his back.

But, strangely, something drew Haled's gaze back to the slab, and that whisper he'd heard in his mind returned. '*Welcome, captain. Welcome to the Altar of Ysstrai*'.

One of his men screamed.

Haled spun about to see something monstrous! A great shadow, huge-ten feet tall or more; a many-limbed insectoid, with a dozen blazing red eyes, looming over the men, blocking the entrance.

The closest Reaver leapt at it, axe flashing. The axe head passed harmlessly through the apparition. The shadow stretched out two of its long, multi-jointed limbs and seized the man, lifted him clear of the ground, tearing him apart in a shower of blood! The blood sprayed the pirates, sprayed the walls-even sprayed Haled so much that he could taste the coppery saltiness on his tongue.

Two of the sailors fell back, screaming. Two more lunged forward, swords striking deep into the shadow. Again its riot of limbs stretched out. One claw-tipped arm tore a sailor open from his crotch to his gullet, and guts fell out and pooled at his feet. The other Reaver was lifted up over the thing's head, then something like a mouth opened, a mouth bristling with sharp, shadowy teeth and writhing tongues, and the Reaver disappeared down its gullet, *screaming* all the way.

By then Haled had recovered his wits. Snarling hideously, he sprang forward, enchanted blade leading the way. He slashed the shadow across where its abdomen would be.

And the shadow . . . the shadow *screamed*. The sound filled the chamber, filled it to bursting, and two of the men dropped their weapons and clamped their hands over their ears.

Haled turned to wink at Janx, then rushed forward again and stabbed the shadow again, then again. A strange ember awoke in the dark jewel that adorned the hilt of his sword, and the jewel blazed with unnatural life!

But the shadow was no fool, nor was it weak. It struck out, smashing a claw across Haled's chest and sending the captain flying across the room. He struck something hard, sparks filled his vision, and then all he saw was blackness. When his vision cleared, he was slumped at the base of a pillar, his head ringing.

The shadow-thing still loomed in the archway, and five mutilated bodies were strewn around it. Only Janx remained-tall, proud Janx, wind whistling through his nose hole as he roared out his defiance, silver teeth gleaming by the light of the torches guttering on the floor. He was smashing at the shadow with his great hammer, and the shadow was laughing-*laughing*-a terrible, *gurgling* sound that filled Haled with dread and hate.

Then, tired of playing with its new toy, the creature shot out its claws and seized Janx by wrists and ankles. His hammer went spinning to the blood-spattered floor.

The shadow hauled him up from the ground, and then, to Haled's horror, it began pulling him apart. Janx screamed. Haled's blood ran cold. The *thing* laughed. Janx cried out in agony. The sound of tearing gristle and bone and flesh filled the chamber.

Haled, still reeling-climbed to his feet. He clutched up the enchanted sword and staggered forward, but he was dizzy, and he swayed as he walked.

"Release him!" he roared.

*Too late.*

For it was just at that moment that the thing ripped off Janx's arms and legs in four showers of blood. Even as Janx's torso fell to the floor, another claw caught it and shoved it past the monster's obscene lips.

A veil of red swam before Haled's eyes as rage consumed him. Staggering forward, he stabbed at the monster, again and again, but it dodged and wove, eluding his every strike. But, strangely, it did not move to destroy him as it had the others.

Indeed, it spoke, and the voice was the same as that soft, seductive voice he'd heard in his head before.

*'Still your rage',* it said, without moving its lips. *'Still your rage, good captain, for I would not be your foe'.*

Despite himself, Haled felt a wave of peace wash across him, and he lowered his sword, still weaving on his feet.

"Who are you?" he demanded, though inside he thought he already knew. "You are not Vragst." It hadn't been the wizard's ghost haunting him, after all.

Again, he heard laughter, but this time it was silky and ladylike.

The thing turned to black mist, and its twelve eyes vanished. Then, bizarrely, the misty shadow-stuff coalesced into the form of a beautiful & shapely woman; still made of shadow, but of normal size, though tall for a woman, just a few inches shy of Haled's height, with two eyes instead of twelve. She seemed to shimmer and swirl, and he had no doubt that if he moved to touch her, his hand would pass right through her-if she wanted; it was quite obvious she could be corporeal enough when she desired. At any rate, she was beautiful, with full lips and large fiery eyes, voluptuous and utterly naked.

She smiled wryly and said, "You are well met, good captain. I hope you do not mind that I have a grievance against you."

"Grievance?" He blinked his eyes at her, aware he must appear slow-witted. His mind still reeled, and sparks still danced at the edges of his sight. "How so?"

**"Why, you slew my lover, did you not-my lover and my chief worshipper, my High Priest, the great and powerful Vragst."**

**Haled stared at her blankly. Then, abruptly, it all became clear to him, and he threw back his head and laughed. "So, *you're* the god then are you? I had heard he worshipped some awful demon-thing. If I had known you were so lovely, I might not have held it against him. When I heard the bells tolling across the sea, I knew he was at worship, and seeing those fresh bloodstains on your altar, Lady Ysstrai, I suppose he was at that . . ."**

**She glided forward and caressed his cheek, and damned if he didn't feel soft, velvety fingers upon his skin. "Yes," she said, and there was a trace of sadness in her voice, but also longing. "I was most annoyed with you. And mark me-it is a serious offense to slay my worshippers, especially my High Priests and Priestesses. I honor my High Priests well. Surely you saw their tombs above."**

**"So it wasn't Vragst's kin after all . . ."**

**"No. They were his predecessors in my service. And now I must have a tomb built for him, if his remains can be found. Mayhap you can help with that."**

**Haled scowled and stepped back, away from her. He raised his sword warily. "Why should I help you, goddess or no? You're a villain, and foul one, too."**

**She rolled her shapely shoulders and glided forward, breasts jutting out, so round, so soft. She exuded a smell, he noticed, fragrant and sensual. "You are not without sin yourself, good captain. But that is precisely why you appeal to me. I need men like you, men who do not shrink from blood and death. Vragst was like you once, and like you he deposed the one before him." Again she ran her fingers over him, this time through his hair.**

**He stared into her fiery eyes, her beautiful, fiery eyes, shining out from that shadowy face, and he knew feelings he had not felt since a boy . . .**

**He tried to shake it off. "You mean to say you want me . . . as your new High Priest?" He tried to laugh.**

**She pressed herself against him, and he could feel her breasts against his chest. "I would hope that would not displease you."**

"Well, no . . ." Her nipples were hard.

She smiled. "Perhaps you noticed the girls above, the girls good Vragst imported from around the world?"

"Yes . . ."

"Well, they are no mere playthings, good captain. They are vessels . . . vessels for me."

Ah. He had known there was something unusual about them, some reason for their extraordinary perfection. "You possess them . . . but why?" Of course, even as he said it, he realized the answer, and he had to chuckle, sincerely this time.

"Yes," she said, seeing that he guessed the truth of it. "I warmed Vragst's furs on many occasions-and in a different shape every time. I gave him wealth, and power, and importance, and love. And-immortality."

Just then, Haled heard screams. Loud, *terrifying* screams that drifting down through the halls of the fortress! They were coming from the catacombs, he knew.

"*My men . . .*" He moved to push past her, but she blocked his path, again and again. "Let me pass!" he roared. "My men are in trouble!"

"No. Your men are dead. Even now my former High Priests and Priestesses rise up and devour them. Then they shall descend here, to my temple, and we will feast and dance and make merry, as my servants have done since time immemorial. We will gorge on blood, then rut and play in the shadows of the mountain, while harpists fill my temple with music, and the storm rages above! And you, if you agree to serve me, and to love me, and to dredge Vragst's bones up from the deep, so that he may join in our games, you may join in too."

She smiled, and once more she pressed her slender shadow-self against him.

For a moment, his fist tensed on the handle of his sword, and he almost ran it through her perfect body, confident that it could wound her, perhaps kill her. But then she pressed her lips to his, and her exotic smell filled his mind.

'*Power*', he heard in his head. '*Power. Immortality. The love of a goddess*'.

Without another thought, he dropped his sword and grabbed her about the waist, and there they kissed, among the bodies of his Reavers, as the screams of the others

echoed down the halls.

Outside, thunder crashed and waves *boomed* against the shore.

At last they parted. "You could be of even greater service to me than Vragst, dear captain," she purred. "You command a great fleet, and lately I have had dreams of conquest."

"With your help-there will be altars to *me* on every island in the seven seas!!!!"

**THE END**

**B**