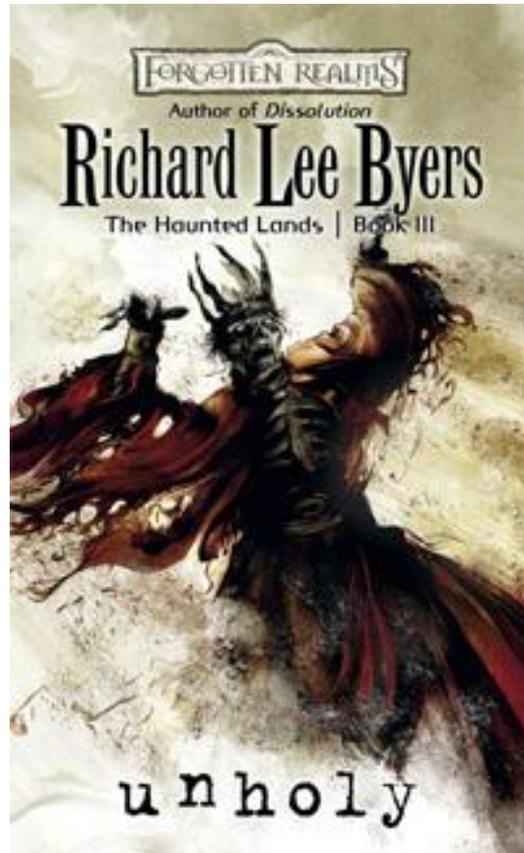


Serpentsong

By Richard Lee Byers



The song was sibilant and shrill, yet somehow beautiful, and its beauty bound Bareris and his comrades like a chain. They shuffled helplessly along in single file with the lizardfolk, tails lashing, scales catching glints of moonlight, stalking along to either side.

The ground grew soft and mucky. The air smelled of fecundity and rot, and treetops masked the stars. The reptilian warriors halted, but the song drove the captives on into black water. Wading in front of Bareris, Storik advanced until his head slipped beneath the surface.

Bareris had to do as the music commanded, but fortunately, it didn't forbid him to help the dwarf. He quickened his pace, groped in the water, and found Storik's burly shoulders. He heaved his companion's upper body into the air and carried him onward.

The prisoners clambered out of the sluggish flow onto a little island. The singer stopped singing and simply stared at them. Bareris assumed the creature had hatched from a lizardfolk egg, but it differed from its fellows. It stood erect instead of hunching forward, its head was wedge-shaped, more snake than lizard, and its scales grew in intricate patterns of light and dark.

It grunted to the common lizardfolk, and they all turned and slunk away into the shadows.

"I don't understand," said Thersos, keeping his voice low. His ears were ragged and bloody where a lizardman had ripped the silver rings out. "Did they truly just wander off without tying us up or posting a guard?"

Storik squinted and turned his head, peering. Born to a sunless existence underground, a dwarf could see almost as well as night as by day. "As far as I can tell," he said.

"Then let's get out of here." Thersos stepped back into the water.

"Wait," said Eurid. Of them all, the small man looked the least disheveled. Perhaps it was because as a Broken One, a monk sworn to the martyr god Ilmater, he dressed in a simple robe and skullcap. It had been obvious even to the lizardfolk that he wasn't carrying weapons, a purse, ornaments, or anything else worth stealing, and so they hadn't bothered to pull and paw at him with their rough, clawed hands.

"Wait?" said Thersos. "For what? For that thing to come back and sing the wits out of our heads again? I don't think so." He took another sloshing step and then the water boiled around him.

He screamed and reeled. He flailed an arm, and Bareris saw the writhing water snakes hanging from it, their jaws clamped into his flesh.

Bareris and Eurid lunged forward and stretched out their hands. If they could haul Thersos out of the water, perhaps he could still be saved. But he was just out of reach, and they couldn't go in after them. The reptilian shaman's song had calmed the serpents, allowing the captives to wade across the channel safely, but free of its influence, they'd swarm on anyone who entered their native element.

Thersos splashed down face first. The current carried his body, still crawling with snakes, farther away.

Bareris sighed and turned to find Gorstag glaring at him. "This is your fault," the spearman growled.

The accusation made Bareris's guts twist. Yes, he thought, yes, it is.

Bareris knew he was singing well, and accompanying himself just as artfully on his scratched, chipped secondhand lute, and in fact, some passersby paused to listen. But no one dropped a coin in the dented tin cup at his feet. Some folk even jeered, or spat on the worn cobbles of the teeming marketplace.

Bareris's appearance was to blame, for his lanky frame, shaved scalp and eyebrows, fair complexion, and tattoos marked him as a young man out of Thay. And as he'd discovered, Chessentans didn't like Thayans. They might covet his country's enchanted trade goods, they might grovel to Red Wizards and their retinues to buy their wares, earn a bit of their gold, or out of fear of their displeasure, but a Thayan vagabond in a patched cloak and threadbare jerkin elicited only hostility.

With a sigh, Bareris picked up the cup, slung the lute over his shoulder, and tramped onward through the bustling port city that was Soorenar. He tried to comfort himself with the reflection that he didn't want to be a street-corner entertainer anyway. He was a true bard, even if mostly self-taught, even if only beginning to develop his gifts, and the magic that lived in music was his to command. He meant to use it and his skill with the broadsword riding at his hip to do great deeds and make his fortune.

But the thought provided little solace. It didn't ease the hollow ache in his belly. It only reminded him that so far, the citizens of Soorenar had proved as disinclined to employ him as a man-at-arms or spellcaster as they were to pay for the pleasure afforded by his songs.

Yet even so, for want of a better destination, he drifted back to the bustling courtyard of the Horn and Falcon, a tavern catering to mercenaries and those seeking to hire them. The aroma of roasting meat and the sight of dozens of men wolfing down their midday meals were torture to a hungry man.

To escape them, he tried to focus instead on the contest unfolding in the middle of the round, fenced yard. Each stripped to the waist, a huge man and a small one were wrestling. The giant rushed forward, arms outstretched to grab.

The little man shifted backward, caught his opponent by the wrist, and spun him off balance. The big man reeled into two of the spectators, knocking one of them down. Someone laughed, and the giant snarled and charged the other wrestler once again.

The small man waited until his adversary was almost on top of him, then twisted out of the way and tripped him. The big wrestler fell to his knees. Bareris couldn't see precisely what happened after that, the little man moved too quickly, but the fellow wound up behind his opponent, arms twining around his bulk, hands pressing down on the back of his neck.

The big man thrashed, but couldn't break free. "All right!" he gasped. "You win."

His adversary instantly released him then offered a hand to help him up. He murmured something that twisted the giant's scowl into a grudging smile. Meanwhile, those who'd bet on the big man paid the fellow who'd taken their wagers. The latter was a mercenary with a scar on his chin and several silver hoops in each ear.

All that coin, Bareris thought, won so quickly. He wondered if anyone would care to take him on in a bout with cudgels, singlesticks, or the like, wondered too what would happen if he wagered on himself, lost, and then had to admit he didn't have any money to make good on the bets. He doubted he'd enjoy the consequences.

A dwarf with a beard like a black hedge in dire need of trimming strode out of the tavern. The man with the rings in his ears held up a coin. "Storik!" he called. "Eurid won. There's money for wine and women too."

"Good," Storik said, but it was plain he was eager to talk of other things. "I've found us a job if we want it. Everybody, gather round."

Eight men did as the dwarf had bade them. All but Eurid carried weapons and wore pieces of armor that marked them as warriors. Idly curious and envious too, Bareris loitered to eavesdrop and learn what sort of opportunity had come their way.

"Apparently there's a band of lizardfolk," said Storik, "raiding on the southern shore of the Akanamere."

A spearman, whose grizzled hair dangled in three long braids, shrugged. "Nothing new in that."

"No," Storik agreed, "and ordinarily, the locals would chase the reptiles back into the swamps themselves. But these particular lizardmen have gotten their claws on some magic. One of them sings, and people run mad with fear, or lose the will to fight. The farmers can't get their produce to market, and their factor is offering five hundred in gold to anyone who can fix the problem."

The man with the earrings grinned. "That would be us."

Eurid pulled on a short, plain gray robe, then tied it with a sash. "I hope so. Someone should help those people. But it's worth considering that we don't have any magic, not since Esvele decided to marry and settle down."

"That's what concerns me," Storik said. "That, and the fact that the factor hired another company of sellswords before us, and those lads disappeared without a trace."

His heart thumping, Bareris said, "Excuse me. I couldn't help overhearing, and perhaps I can be of help."

They all turned in his direction. Eurid gave him an inquisitive smile. The others glowered. "Go away, boy," the gray-haired spearman said.

"My name is Bareris Anskuld. I'm a bard. I've been hoping to join a company like yours, and my magic can protect you from the lizardfolk's."

The spearman spat. "We don't need the help of a Thayan."

"That," said Eurid, "remains to be seen. Goodman Anskuld, can you demonstrate your talents?"

"Of course." Bareris fixed his gaze on the spearman's face and sang a couplet sweet and soft as a lullaby. The mercenary's eyelids drooped. The lance slipped from slack fingers. He fell backward, and Eurid caught him to keep him from hitting the ground. The spearman snored.

"Just shake him and he'll wake up," said Bareris, and Eurid proceeded to do so. "Have I proven myself?"

The warrior with the earrings shrugged. "I'm no sorcerer, but I've heard it isn't all that hard to charm a man to sleep."

"What did you want me to do? Knock down the tavern?" Bareris waved a hand at the men gnawing rolls and slurping stew on the benches. "Turn all these fellows into donkeys?"

"Can you?"

"No. But I suspect your friend Esvele couldn't, either. The fact of the matter is, you mean to fight a creature that works magic through song, I've shown you I'm a genuine bard, and if there's one thing bards are good for, it's countering musical enchantments."

"That's what I've always heard." Eurid gave Storik an inquiring look.

The dwarf frowned, pondering, then said, "Very well. He can come. If he does his part, he'll have his fair share of the profits, and we'll consider keeping him around."

Eurid stretched out his hand to Bareris. "Welcome to the Black Badger Company."

Like any bard, Bareris possessed a keen memory, and had no trouble learning and retaining the names of his newfound comrades: Thersos wore the hoops in his ears. The spearman with the gray braids was Gorstag. Phaelric wearied his friends with an inexhaustible store of rambling, pointless reminiscences about his family, Evendur loved throwing dice, the plump youth with foul breath was Orixes, and so forth. Unfortunately, the bard had scant opportunity to employ the information, for, as the band hiked the highway that ran south from Soorenar, no one except Eurid was much inclined to talk to him. He tried not to let it rankle, but it did anyway. And so he found himself in a foul humor as, on the third evening out, he gathered dry broken branches from trees, ripping them free as though lashing out at his frustrations.

Eurid emerged from deeper in the grove with an armload of freshly filled water bottles. "Collecting the firewood, I see."

"Yes," Bareris growled, "for all the good it does."

Eurid smiled. "I imagine it will serve to cook our supper and keep us warm through the night."

"I didn't mean . . . never mind."

"As you wish, but if something's troubling you, it might help to talk about it."

"I don't see how." But then the words burst forth anyway. "I do my share of the camp chores, I try to be pleasant, and still, no one but you wants anything to do with me. Are all Chessentans so envious? You don't need to be. I'm a pauper."

Eurid eyed him quizzically. " 'Envious'?"

Bareris hesitated. "Yes. Because I hail from the greatest realm in Faerun. But as you can see, none of the wealth and glory filtered down to me. That's why I had to leave, to seek my fortune elsewhere."

"My friend, you misunderstand. By and large, people aren't jealous of Thayans. They simply despise you."

"Truly? Why?"

"Your practice of slavery. Your predilection for malevolent gods and the darker sorts of wizardry. Your dogged attempts to conquer your neighbors."

Bareris shook his head. The gods were the gods, entities transcending mortal judgment, and the ways of Thay were simply the ways of Thay, practices necessary to build and maintain a mighty empire. It had never occurred to him that the inhabitants of lesser lands might view them with disdain.

"The zulkirs haven't tried to conquer Aglarond or Rashemen in a while. Not since they started building the trade enclaves," Bareris said.

"A few years of peace can't unmake the distrust instilled by generations of aggression."

"Well, maybe, but even so, I'm neither a priest nor a Red Wizard. I don't offer to the Black Hand, and I've never sent an army to attack anybody. I'm just a fellow trying to make his way in the world, and I wish the others could see me that way."

"If that's what you want then let me offer a suggestion. Stop shaving your head."

Bareris frowned. "Are you serious?"

"Gorstag and the others won't automatically be reminded of Thay every time they so much as glance at you, and surely it will be less bother to abandon the habit, especially while we're on the trail."

"I suppose, but you don't understand. In Thay, it's the aristocrats who scrupulously remove the hair from their heads, and even though my family lost its land and money long ago, I'm still of Mulan blood."

"So for your kin, keeping up appearances has always been particularly important, because the habits of gentility are all you have left."

Bareris hesitated. "I guess you could put it that way."

"You must please yourself. But you should understand that your hairless pate doesn't inspire the same respect here that it might at home. To the contrary."

"Be that as it may, I'm not ashamed of my homeland, and I don't want to behave as if I were."

"Which does you credit. Still, the Weeping God teaches us to differentiate between the vital and the trivial, the essential and the superficial, to defend the former but compromise or yield graciously where only the latter is concerned. Perhaps, if you consider, you'll decide you can take pride in your heritage and grow some eyebrows too."

Bareris's lips quirked into a smile. "Well, maybe."

The haversack lay ready to hand on the ground, but Bareris couldn't see the lute concealed inside. Did the instrument still rest in such a way that he could snatch it forth as swiftly as a swordsman could draw a blade?

He started to reach for the bag to check, then caught himself. Now that the Black Badger Company had arrived in the area where the attacks had occurred, they were supposed to look like a band of

defenseless, unsuspecting travelers encamped for the night, not a company of well-armed warriors tense with the anticipation of trouble.

Sitting cross-legged on the other side of the fire, Gorstag grinned at his fidgeting. "Nervous?"

Back in Thay, an aristocrat would be loath to admit such a thing, especially to a commoner. Bareris reminded himself that, just as he'd decided to stop shaving his head, so too had he resolved to purge his manner of every trace of aristocratic haughtiness, and the change was working to his advantage. His comrades hadn't fully accepted him yet, but their attitude was unquestionably more cordial than before.

"Somewhat," he admitted. "I grew up in the worst part of Bezantur. I've been in fights before, a few of them deadly serious. But this waiting, using ourselves as bait, is different."

"Don't worry," said Orixes through a mouthful of toasted bread, cheese, and onion, "as long as you can do your part, it'll all be fine. We've killed giants in our time. Well, one giant, anyway."

"The lizardfolk are here," Storik murmured, "coming in from the west." Trying not to be obvious about it, he, with his dark-adapted eyes, had been keeping watch on the blackness beyond the firelight. "Slinking closer. Spreading out to surround us. Wait for my word. Wait. Wait. Now!"

The warriors leaped to their feet. Cast off cumbersome mantles to reveal the weapons and armor hidden beneath. Perhaps the display startled the lizardfolk or even daunted them, but the Black Badger Company had lured them in too close to turn and withdraw unscathed. A confrontation of some sort was inescapable.

Orixes's crossbow clacked, discharging its bolt. A lizardman screeched. Bareris pulled the lute from the bag, and then, somewhere in the darkness, the raiders' bard hissed the first notes of its inhuman song.

The men of the Black Badger Company stumbled to a halt. Their weapons drooped in their hands. No more quarrels or arrows flew.

Bareris felt the same numbing passivity creeping over him, but he refused to succumb. He struck a chord from the strings of the lute and sang.

The shaman's melody was a cage; Bareris's countersong, an effort to break the bars apart, to spoil the enchantment implicit in the music by turning the notes to dissonance and making the rhythm stumble. But he soon perceived that the defense wasn't working. The shaman's spell wailed on, steady as before, somehow impervious to his efforts at disruption. His companions stood dazed and unresisting, and he found it more and more difficult to pluck the strings or force out the next note despite the dullness smothering his intent.

No, he insisted to himself, I won't let this happen. Then his instrument slipped from his deadened hands, and the raiders, who hadn't needed to throw a single javelin or strike a single blow to win their victory, advanced and stripped their captives of their belongings.

If anything, the mercenaries' prospects seemed even more dismal after the sun rose over the swamp, because then they could see just what an unnatural abundance of serpents infested the water, held there, no doubt, by the shaman's magic.

Storik peered at a stump on the other side of the channel. Someone had hewn crude glyphs in the bark and heaped human skulls around the bottom. Rusty stains ran down the sides. "That's an altar. They mean to sacrifice us."

"I thought they were just going to eat us," Bareris said. "It's nice to know they caught us for a more exalted purpose."

No one laughed. Indeed, everyone but Eurid glared at him. "You must feel right at home," Gorstag said. "You Thayans practice human sacrifice too, don't you? I wouldn't be surprised if you and the lizards worship the same filthy demons."

So much for the fragile camaraderie Bareris and his companions had established over the course of their journey. "I just hoped that a joke. . . ." he began, then realized it was pointless to continue.

Eurid looked about the cramped confines of the island, just a bump of mud and weeds sticking up out of the channel. "There's no log to serve as a makeshift boat, and though I'm accounted a good jumper, I can't jump all the way to the other shore." He turned to Bareris. "Unless you know a song to make me stronger?"

"Unfortunately, no," Bareris said.

"Then perhaps you can grow wings on our backs, or charm all the serpents in the water to sleep."

"No," Bareris said, "I'm sorry."

"You hear that?" Gorstag said. "He's useless, we're all going to die because he lied to us about his abilities, but it's all right. Because he's sorry."

"I don't like it either," Storik said, "but we have more important things to do than bicker. Until we figure out a way to escape, we need to devise a way to take drinking water out of the channel without getting bitten by the snakes. We also need to scour the ground for anything—and I do mean anything—we can eat."

"When you say 'we,' " Gorstag said, "I assume you mean the actual members of our company."

The dwarf hesitated. Scowled as if he didn't entirely like the proposal. But then he said, "Yes. Seeing as how there won't be enough to go around."

"No," Eurid said. "I understand you're the leader, Storik, and ordinarily, I would never flout your orders. But we can't let one of our number starve. It goes against Ilmater's every precept."

"The way I see it," Gorstag said, "it's only fair."

Eurid kept his gaze on Storik. "Bareris saved you from drowning. He also remains our one hope of neutralizing the lizardman's magic, and for that he'll need his strength."

"Nonsense," Gorstag said. "He's already shown he can't handle the job."

"Have you never failed at anything on a first attempt," asked the monk, "and then succeeded on a second?"

"All right," Storik said, "for the time being, the Thayan will have his share like everyone else. Now let's get busy and find out if there's even any food to divvy up."

Bearing weapons and scraps of ill-fitting armor plundered from their prisoners past and present, the lizardfolk raiders stalked out of the trees not long after moonrise. The shaman's air of authority and the deference of the ordinary lizardfolk were obvious even to human eyes.

Bareris wondered what the singer was. Perhaps the product of a mating between one of the lizardfolk and some other manner or creature.

"Stand ready," said Storik.

"To do what?" Orixes asked.

"To jump on any chance that presents itself," said the dwarf.

He was right, they should all be prepared, but even so, Bareris knew that the responsibility for saving the company rested on him. His pulse ticked in his neck, he took a steadying breath, and then the shaman began to sing.

As before, Bareris could scarcely help recognizing the eerie beauty and hidden intricacies of the melody. In any other circumstance, he could have lost himself in the song for time without end. But he needed to destroy it, not savor it, and so he smashed at it with his own voice. His fingers twitched, seeking to pluck the strings of the lute the marauders had taken from him.

It was the same as before. No matter how furiously he hammered away, his efforts couldn't shake the creature's flawless articulation of its spell or twist the burgeoning magic into uselessness. Meanwhile, lethargy sucked at him like quicksand. His limbs grew heavy, and his tongue, thick, until finally it was just too much effort to sing another note.

Phaelric trudged into the water and waded to the other side. He laid himself across the top of the stump, and a lizardman gripped each of his outstretched limbs.

The shaman stopped singing. Perhaps it didn't want enchantment to dull Phaelric's agony or the horror of his companions. Phaelric thrashed, but couldn't break free of his captors' grips.

Though the lizardfolk carried weapons, the shaman offered to his patron deity with tooth and claw. Phaelric shrieked for what seemed a long time. After he stopped, and the god had presumably taken all it wanted from him, the lizardfolk raiders ate what remained.

The island was too small for actual isolation, but Bareris separated himself from his companions as best he could. He assumed they'd prefer it that way.

But Eurid came and sat beside him. "How are you?" asked the monk.

"Alive," Bareris said, "which puts me ahead of Thersos and Phaelric. Ahead of where I deserve to be. You should have agreed to let me starve."

"It's not a sin to try your best and fail."

"Is it a sin to claim you can do something, be proved wrong, and have people who counted on you die in consequence?"

"I'm still hopeful you'll succeed next time."

"I don't see how. The creature's magic is too strong. I pound and tear at it with every bit of force I can muster, but I can't break it apart."

"I can't advise a bard how best to use his powers. That's a problem only you can solve. But I do believe you can find a way to prevail, because you were able to lift Storik's head above the water."

"So what?"

"I saw him go under, but I couldn't stir a finger to help him. None of the rest of us could. It proves the lizardman's charm has less power over you."

"That doesn't mean I can dissolve it. Besides, what if I could? Have you thought it through? I couldn't free us without likewise rousing the snakes in the water, and then we'd be trapped on this island the same as before."

"That will still be better than having our willpower leached away. It will be the first step toward freedom."

Bareris shook his head. "I don't know where you come by this faith you have in me."

"I cleave to hope because despair is useless. No, worse than useless, poisonous, and you must resist it as well. Put aside guilt and fear and think of what you love most, your best reason for surviving this ugliness and continuing your life."

Bareris felt something twist inside his chest. "That's Tammith. My sweetheart in Bezantur. She's as poor as I am, and I vowed I'd come home rich and give her as splendid a life as she deserves."

"Then you have multiple promises to keep."

"Curse it, do you think I haven't tried to find an answer? I've wracked my brains . . . but I'll keep trying."

Eurid gripped his shoulder. "That's all anyone can ask. Just be wary while you're doing it."

"What do you mean?"

"Our friends are angry, grief-stricken, and frightened. It would be a pity if they took those feelings out on you before you work out a way to save them."

It was no doubt good advice, but whatever the danger, Bareris had to sleep sometime. He woke from a foul dream to a flare of pain in his head. Disoriented, he realized in a muddled sort of way that someone must have hit him.

Hands grabbed him and heaved him to his feet. Someone stuffed a scrap of cloth in his mouth. It tasted of sweat. His attackers, mere shadows in the darkness, dragged him toward the water while the rest of the company snored on oblivious.

"You're done, Thayan," Gorstag whispered into his left ear. "No more sharing our food, and no letting us down. Eurid won't suspect what we did, or even if he does, he won't be able to prove it. You

slipped and fell into the water. Or else you gave yourself to the snakes on purpose, because you felt ashamed of bringing us all to ruin."

Fear knifed through Bareris's confusion, energizing him, but perhaps it was already too late. His captors had already manhandled him almost to the water's edge. He tried to spit out the makeshift gag so he could use his magic, but it didn't come all the way out. He jerked and twisted but couldn't pull his arms free.

He raised his right foot, kicked backward, and his heel cracked into someone's kneecap. The shock loosened that man's grip, allowing him to wrench his right arm free. Spinning as best he could, he punched Gorstag twice in the face.

Gorstag faltered, and Bareris jerked his other arm free. But the frantic, flailing violence cost him his balance, and he almost stumbled backward into the water before he recovered it.

Now that he'd turned to face them, he could see he had three opponents: Gorstag, Orixes, and Evendur. The mercenaries spread out to flank him.

It was a mistake. It gave him time to rip the gag from his mouth and sing a quick arpeggio.

The mercenaries froze. The magic would only hold them for an instant, but the sound of his voice should also serve to rouse the folk who were sleeping.

Shaking off their momentary confusion, the would-be murderers lunged forward. Eurid sprang in from the side and gave Evendur what looked like a gentle slap on the back. The warrior toppled face first into the mud. Bareris and Gorstag grappled, each straining to shove the other backward. Meanwhile, Orixes charged Eurid from behind. Somehow perceiving the threat, the Broken One pivoted, caught the pudgy youth by one outstretched arm, and threw him over his hip to slam down on the ground.

Then Storik bellowed, "Stop!" The combatants froze.

"I'd like nothing better than to stop," Eurid said, "provided our comrades are willing to listen to reason."

"You're the one who's unreasonable," Orixes said, clambering back to his feet. "The Thayan brought us to this pass, and he deserves to be punished. He certainly does not deserve a share of our rations. But you want to treat him as if he were one of us. You're even willing to fight your true friends to protect him. Why? What does it even matter? Even if we don't toss him to the snakes, the lizardmen are going to kill us all in the end."

"It matters," Eurid said. "A man should always choose kindness and mercy over vengefulness and malice."

Orixes responded with an obscenity, balled his fists, and moved to circle around Eurid to come at Bareris again. The monk shifted to continue blocking the way. His hands were open to grab, to take any aggressive action Orixes chose to make and turn it to his own purposes. Bareris suddenly had a sense that there was something in that mode of fighting, something in the monk's entire yielding, pliant approach to living, that he might be able to turn to good account, if only he could figure out what it was.

Gorstag cautiously released his hold on Bareris, the better, evidently, to participate in the discussion. "I want justice, Storik. I want us to kill this fraudulent bard ourselves and deny the lizards the pleasure. Orixes is right, it doesn't really matter anyway, it's the last bit of satisfaction any of us is ever likely to get, and once the whoreson is gone, the rest of us won't have any reason to quarrel."

Storik frowned. "I'll admit, we've done harsher things with less reason."

"Give me one more chance to save us all," Bareris said.

Gorstag snorted. "You've had your chances."

"But I just this moment hit on an idea and I think it might make a difference. We'll find out when the lizardfolk come back. Meanwhile, I won't eat any more food, and if I fail again, I'll throw myself to the serpents and save you the trouble."

Eurid said, "It seems a fair proposal to me."

Grunting and hissing to one another, the lizardfolk came out of the night, and Bareris sought to swallow away the dryness in his mouth. He was keenly aware that one way or another, he might be living out the final moments of his life, but did his best to thrust such thoughts aside. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

The reptilian shaman sang and so did he, but not in the same way as before. On previous occasions, the strange loveliness of the creature's melody had pulled at him, stirring the thirst for music that was an essential part of his nature. Now he gave himself over to the fascination, seeking not to mar the song but to enhance it. To offer artful counterpoint in place of mangled rhythm, and harmony instead of discord.

As a result, the song became a richer, deeper thing than before, and a creation that came to belong as much to him as it did to the mottled creature on the opposite shore. As such, it had no power to drain his will, and his thoughts remained as focused as before.

So far, so good, but now he had to switch roles with the reptile and oblige his counterpart to follow where he led, without ruining the music and the magic. He sang in such a way that the song's structure allowed only certain logical responses, until the cumulative effect of the progression was to place him in control and assign the shaman to the subordinate role. He then began shifting the foci of the enchantment.

The shaman could arrest the process. It need only signal one of its minions to put a javelin through Bareris, or simply stop singing. But it did neither. Perhaps this new version of its song held it too enthralled to realize what was happening, or maybe it did understand but still couldn't bear to stop. For their duet was a sort of communion, and thought it, Bareris now discerned that the reptile possessed the soul of a bard no less than did he. Which meant they belonged to music every bit as much as it belonged to them.

He waded into the cool, black water, and the mercenaries, no longer numbed into helplessness, followed. The stupefied snakes suffered them to pass unmolested. Nor did the lizardmen throw javelins or loose arrows to hold them back, for now they were the folk who stood entranced.

They remained so until Bareris clambered up onto the bank before them. Then, rousing at last, the shaman ended the song with a screech that ripped the enchantment apart. Roaring and hissing in

their turn, the common lizardmen scrambled to assume their fighting stances and point their weapons at the prisoners.

The mercenaries hurled themselves forward. Battered like madmen with sticks and stones. Storik avoided an axe stroke by springing inside the arc of the swing, then rammed the end of his club into his opponent's belly. Eurid positioned himself in front of a lizardman, inviting a spear thrust. When it came, he caught the shaft of the lance, spun it out of the reptile's grasp, shouted Gorstag's name, and tossed it to him.

The shaman drew its sword, scuttled behind the altar stump, no doubt for the protection it afforded, then sang. It had other spells to cast, spells unquestionably capable of overwhelming seven humans and a dwarf.

Shadow seethed in the air above the altar, coalescing into a coherent form. Green eyes burned from the murk.

Then Bareris chanted words of negation, and the conjured creature dissolved. He followed up by throwing the stone in his right hand. He missed the shaman's eye but snapped one of its fangs.

The shaman snarled, then sang. The skulls heaped at the foot of the bloodstained stump shivered, rattling against one another, and floated up into the air. Their empty orbits oriented on Bareris. Their jaws gnashed.

He sang the counterspell he'd employed moments before. This time it didn't work. The cloud of skulls floated toward him, slowly for now, but accelerating.

Retreating before them, he struggled to think. If he couldn't break the enchantment, what could he do? End it by ending the enchanter? No, because the skulls were in the way, and even had it been otherwise, the shaman had a sword, and he, only his one remaining rock.

His only hope was to do what he'd done before, what Eurid had taught him to do. Accept the attack, flow with it, then turn it to his advantage.

He didn't know a song that would do what he wanted. He had to extemporize. In the scant moments remaining, he reminded his assailants that they were the remains of men, not lizardfolk, reminded them too of how they'd met their ends. Rejoiced with them in their resurrection, because now they could taste the bloody joy of revenge.

The skulls swarmed on him like mosquitoes. One plunged its teeth into his forearm, and he gasped and stiffened at the pain.

But then they whirled away from him and shot back at the shaman. They attacked it from every side, biting, tearing away chunks of flesh, and the reptile fell down behind the stump flailing and shrieking.

Bareris darted forward. When he was halfway to the makeshift altar, the shaman's screams cut off abruptly, and when it came back into view, he saw that it had stopped moving. The skulls scattered atop and around it were once again inert, with only the blood smeared on their jaws to hint at their former animation.

Bareris pried the reptile's sword from its death grip, turned back around toward to survey the rest of the battle, and discerned that his companions, fighting ferociously, scarcely needed any more of his

help. Indeed, the surviving raiders, perhaps demoralized by the death of their shaman, broke and fled before he could maneuver into position to strike a blow.

Some of the mercenaries started to give chase. "Let them go!" Storik barked. "They know the swamp better than we do, and running after them through the brambles and quicksand is a bad idea. We've accomplished what the farmers hired us to do, and spilled enough blood to pay the lizards back for Thersos and Phaelric."

Chest heaving, spear bloody halfway down the shaft, Gorstag looked at Bareris for a long time. Finally he found the words he wanted to say, or the resolve to say them. "I was wrong about you, lad. You are a true bard, and your magic did get us off the island. I saw what you did with the flying skulls, too. That was a good trick."

"It was luck," Bareris said. "I'm not sure how I did it, and I wouldn't bet a shaved copper that I could do it again."

"That's all right," Storik said. "A mercenary band needs lucky men as much or more than any other kind."

It took Bareris a moment to realize Storik had just offered him a permanent place in the company. Then he grinned like a fool, and Eurid smiled to see it.