

OF ANCIENT SWORDS AND EVIL MIST

by

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Ships, three-masted vessels of war, swiftly slicing through the waves as they head out on yet another adventure, their mighty sails dove white and billowing in the breeze. Ah, the open sea; the piercing cry of a gull, the biting taste of the salt air and another chance for a Sulcarman to loosen his blade and flex the talent of a good sword arm.

Pain, searing hot, like an all-consuming fire that shoots throughout the body and bursts into the brain with a multitude of colors.

Ah, women; those beautiful, well-endowed wenches that inhabit the various waterfront inns and bars in all those ports of call. What talents they possess, to make a lonely seaman completely forget about all that ails him, providing he has the money of course. Those soft rounded shoulders, their full bosoms, the smell of perfume and . . . Pain again, this time even sharper than before, strong enough to end all dreams, replacing them instead with the harshness of reality.

Jobec opened his eyes very slowly, his lids at first refusing to yield, as though they had somehow been glued together. Gone were the peaceful visions of mighty ships and even mightier women, to be replaced with a close-up

view of sand. Sand and something that must have truly crawled out of a nightmare. A creature that was all claws, legs, eyes, and evil intentions.

With a startled cry, Jobec pushed his massive frame up into a sitting position, his head spinning violently with the sudden effort on his part. From his new viewpoint, the blue-shelled crab didn't appear nearly as ferocious as it had at eye level. Actually, the little beach crawler was quite content to remain where it was, happily chewing on something it held in its claws. With a revulsion that caused him to retch, Jobec realized exactly what it was that the hungry crab was so busily eating.

If anything, his head was now somewhat clearer after dumping the salt-water contents of his stomach on the sand. Rising a little unsteadily to his feet, Jobec watched with amusement as three more of the shelled predators scurried back out of his way. "Ho my lads, breakfast time, is it?" he said with a laugh, his voice booming out against the quiet serenity of the beach. "Or is it lunch? Either way, you'll be getting no more of ol' Jobec Stardith to munch on, mind you."

Lunch, his stomach rumbled at the mere thought of it. How long had it been since he had eaten last? But even more pressing than that was his overpowering thirst, already his throat felt as if it were rapidly closing upon itself.

Brushing as much sand as he could from his clothing and body, he shaded his eyes to scan the vast horizon of blue, searching for any sign of the ship he had been on, or the ones that sailed with it. But, unfortunately, no such sight met his eyes. Had they all perished in the storm? Ah, what a storm it had been, the likes of which would rival many a good bard song.

They had been returning from a raiding mission in the northernmost section of the country of Alizon. Five warships, riding low in the water, their bellies loaded with

plundered loot. Jobec was the captain of the Red Dawn and under him was a rough and tumble crew of Sulcarmen, along with a few Falconers who had hired on as marines. It was a loyal and fierce crew, one that would make any captain of the sea proud.

Ordinarily, the families of the Sulcarmen would have ridden on board, turning each of the ships into a floating village. But this time the men had decided it best to leave their loved ones behind, since they would be raiding too far to the north for it to be safe.

A good thing that they had too, for the devils of Alizon had almost crept up on them by surprise. It was only through superior naval and fighting skills that they had managed to crush the enemy assault, turning it instead into a victory for the Sulcar ships. That victory hadn't come easily, though, the decks had run red with blood and many a good man went down under enemy steel during the vicious infighting that occurred.

It was on the return trip home, however, when their battle luck had seemed to fail them. This time it was their own ally, the sea, that had attacked them with a storm, the likes of which Jobec hadn't seen in his thirty-six years at sea.

First they had done the natural thing and tried to outrun it, but failed as the weight of the captured goods they were carrying slowed them down. Then they were left with only one possible option, to tie everything down and ride the squall out.

Hitting them full force, the wind had screamed and howled like a wounded werewolf caught in a woodman's trap. With the wind came the waves, the size of which threatened to capsize the ship at any moment.

It was during one of these waves that a piece of the rigging had snapped free of the aft mast. Swinging down, it had caught Jobec between the shoulder blades, tearing him from where he clung to the stern of the ship. He was

carried over and away from the hull of the ship, his cry for help being drowned out by the howling of the storm. That he had managed to survive a watery death was amazing, but had any of the others? Again he searched the horizon, but no sign of a ship or any debris could be seen, nothing but water.

Water, once more he felt his throat tighten at the thought. Something had to be done to answer that awful thirst, but where?

Facing inland, he searched for something to set his bearings on. This tiny section of the coast was unfamiliar to him, but then again, rarely did they set sail this far north into Alizon territory, except on raiding missions. That he was now in hostile territory Jobec had little doubt, which only added to his already growing list of problems.

The beach itself was surrounded on three sides by rocky white cliffs that rose straight up to a height of about fifty feet, forming a natural cove. But to his left he noticed what appeared to be a small path or perhaps a game trail that ran at an angle, leading up through the cliffs. "Very well . . ." Jobec said aloud, ". . . that way it is.

"Sorry I can't stay to join you, my little friends, but I must be going now," he said to the small group of crabs that were still sitting there intently watching him. "Remind me when I return, to tell you the story about the two redheaded sisters of Kars. Ah, now that is an adventure story!"

With a hearty laugh, he started off in the direction of the trail, pausing just long enough before leaving the beach to spit over his shoulder for luck. For luck he would truly have need of, seeing how he lacked food and water or any weapon with which to defend himself, if the need arose.

The climb up the cliff was harder than he had anticipated, and by the time Jobec had made it to the top he was sweating and panting for air. Trails and paths weren't for him. Ah, what he wouldn't give for the feel of a rolling ship

once again beneath his feet.

Before him now stretched a vast open field of grassland that ended at the base of some rolling foothills, barely visible in the distance. Oddly enough, the path he had been following didn't lead in that direction, instead it veered sharply to the left, heading through a rather dense section of woods that bordered on the field. Now Jobec didn't think too highly of venturing along on that shadowy trail that cut through the forest, but neither did he of being caught unarmed and out in the open by the Hounds of Alizon—those vicious white dogs that were trained to hunt men. So the woods it was, maybe there he would find some water and a few edible plants to fill a rapidly shrinking belly.

One thing that struck him as a little odd, as he made his way down that twisting path, was the complete silence that seemed to hang in the air. Not once had he heard so much as a single cry of a bird or the rustling movements of a woodland creature. Even the buzzing and biting flies that so often annoyed one while in the woods seemed to be absent today. As he continued, the silence grew even more disturbing and he often caught himself glancing back over his shoulder as though he expected to see someone or something dogging his trail.

The path itself had grown somewhat wider. Upon closer investigation Jobec discovered that he trod upon gray blocks of stone that lay hidden under the fallen vegetation of the forest. So the path was made by someone of intelligence rather than animals, even though all signs pointed to the fact that it was no longer used regularly by whomever made it.

It was quite late in the afternoon before Jobec chanced upon water, but it was not so much the small stream that caught his attention, as what lay directly on the other side of it.

At one time it might have served as an assembly hall of

some kind, so great was its size. The structure appeared to be made from the same gray blocks that formed the path. A roof, barely visible under the vines that grew upon it, still sheltered the back section of the building, while the front part had long since crumbled into decay, exposing the massive pillars that had at one time supported it. Running along the side of the building, just beneath the overhang of the roof, were carved images of men, animals, and creatures Jobec couldn't identify, their features eroded by time and the elements. For what purpose and by whom this structure had been built, he couldn't be certain. But that it was very ancient there was little doubt.

The silence that had accompanied Jobec throughout the day seemed to hang heaviest in and about this building. It was as though it gave off a feeling of sadness, sorrow, or perhaps dread.

Jobec's thirst had been quenched by the cold running waters of the stream, but his hunger still remained, growing stronger with every passing moment. But it was something that he would have to live with a little while longer, as already the sun was sinking low in the western sky, casting strange shadows everywhere. It would be best to seek shelter for the night, as it was common knowledge that the darkness belonged to the predators who hunted the woods. Ah, but what he wouldn't give for so much as a single piece of tasteless journey bread. His stomach rumbled at the thought.

Crossing the stream, he headed up the last of the path, which ended at the front of the building. With a little extra caution, he climbed the three steps that were there, walking past the first row of the massive pillars. Jobec paused briefly to try to read the runes that were carved on the pillars, but their meaning and origin were unknown to him. The feeling of dread he felt was so strong now that it was almost a physical blow. Moving carefully amidst the rubble, he proceeded toward the still erect section in the

back, his eyes gradually adjusting to the gloom.

It was there, much to his horror, that he discovered what might have been part of the reason for the feeling that he picked out of the air.

Before him sat eight massive tables, each apparently carved from a single block of grayish-blue stone. They were arranged end to end, four tables to a row. Scattered on, beside, and beneath the tables were numerous skeletons of fighting men, still wearing the now rusting armor and chain mail they had died in. At one time comrades-in-arms had toasted cups in this hall, as was evident by the numerous goblets and drinking vessels scattered about. But a battle had interrupted that celebration and many had been killed.

"Earth take that which is of earth. Water accept that of water. And that which is now freed, let it be free to follow the high path," Jobec said aloud, following the burial oath that is custom to many a fighting man. He doubted seriously that the words had ever been said before over those that lay here.

Moving among the dead, Jobec began to realize that there was something very wrong with his original theory about what had happened in this place. Although all those in the building had been armed fighting men, nowhere could he see any evidence that a fight had taken place. Not one skull had been cleaved or any weapon drawn. It was as though the enemy had been able to descend upon these poor souls completely by surprise.

What kind of enemy had it been, to come so upon this dwelling and take all those inside totally unaware? At least fifty armed men had perished here. If only the dead could speak, then maybe he might know an answer to the riddle that lay before him.

Jobec failed to recognize any of the crests on the rusting shields and helmets as any he had ever seen or heard legend of. So ancient must this race have been.

It was during his investigation that he chanced upon a sword partially hidden upon one of the tables, covered over with eons and eons of dust. The weapon was smaller and much lighter than those carried by the Sulcarmen, the blade being forged from an unknown bluish metal, with a handle that appeared to be somehow made from a solid piece of precious red stone, polished smooth. Although the scabbard had long since crumbled with rot, nowhere were there any nicks, pits, or other signs of age upon the sword itself. Catching the dim light in the room, the handle and blade seemed to glisten with fire. This indeed was a fine weapon for a Sulcar captain!

Grasping the handle tightly, Jobec bowed to the skeleton that lay next to it, raising the sword in salute. "I thank you, noble sir, for such a fine weapon. You may rest assured that it shall only be used bravely and with honor." Having now obtained water and that with which to arm himself, that left only food. But that was a problem that he would have to live with until the morning.

In the back of the building Jobec discovered a wooden ladder, still sturdy, that led up to a small, open attic. Possibly at one time it had been used as a storeroom for supplies, but for now it would serve nicely as a place to rest. He hadn't exactly relished the thought of sleeping on the first floor with the dead. Sitting back against a far wall, he watched as the shadows in the room below lengthened and grew dark.

It was more of a mental warning than any actual sound that awoke Jobec from a sound sleep. Remaining perfectly still, he listened intently as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness about him. Sweat ran down his bearded face as his heart began to beat faster. With what? Fear, yes that was it, the very air around him carried a feeling of it.

Straining his eyes to cut through the darkness, he could see nothing wrong, or could he? It wasn't anything definite,

but didn't the shadows appear to be moving and growing somewhat darker? No, not shadows—shadow! It had just moved into the front of the room on the first floor, spreading out gradually as it did. This was not the shadow of a man, animal of prey, or for that matter, any living creature he knew of. As a fog it appeared, but one that blocked out the background as it moved slowly among the dead.

Fear, again a warning, so strong now that it was like a scream. Jobec clutched the hilt of the sword even tighter, his knuckles turning white. To face a man in battle was one thing, but this.

“You cannot defeat it, brave warrior.” Words, spoken words that he heard, but not with his ears, with his mind. Startled, he looked about, but there was no one to be seen. Then, before him an area of the attic began to lighten noticeably. Within the light a form was beginning to appear, to take on shape. Whatever was appearing there in that glow meant him no harm, he was certain of that, although he was unsure exactly how he knew that. “You have nothing to fear from me, fighting man.” Once again the words danced in his head.

Before him now stood a woman, small of frame, long hair the color of a spider's web tumbled down about her shoulders. She was clothed in a glistening tunic of silver and blue, closely fitting her body, leaving bare her arms and legs. About a delicate neck hung a string of blue jewels that matched those in the bracelets she wore. She was thin of face with a pointed chin and slanting eyes that appeared to shine in the darkness much as would those of a cat.

“Who are you?” Jobec asked slowly, forming the words in his mind.

“I am not one of your world, Jobec Stardith” the reply came.

“You know my name?” he asked, surprised.

“This and other things can I pick from your thoughts.”

"Then the advantage is all yours, my dear lady, unless you would be so kind as to tell me your name."

"In my time I was called Salith."

"Your time?"

"One that has long since past."

"I don't understand . . ." Jobec protested, shaking his blond head slowly, ". . . I can see you—you are here now."

"Only an image, I assure you."

"But, if this is indeed true, why then do you come?"

"To deliver a warning to someone who is good of heart."

"A warning?" he asked, his eyebrows raising.

"Can you not feel it, oh man of the sea? Your very presence in this forbidden place has upset the balance of age-old powers. It has awakened things which have long since slept, things that should not have been awakened."

Jobec turned, looking out across the room below. That growing mist was coming closer now, darker, blocking out the view of the room behind it.

"Hurry!" Her voice was sharp in his mind. "There is not much time left, you must flee now, while you can."

"Flee?" Jobec thought, amused. "My dear lady, you underestimate me. I have never been one to retreat from a battle, not as long as I am still able to swing a sword or draw a breath."

"A battle yes . . ." she said, ". . . but it is not merely armed men that you face here tonight. Rather it is something that is very ancient and very evil, something that was accidentally released by those who dabbled in magical powers they knew not how to control. Think you that you can stop something that all those who lay below could not? Look, warrior!" she cried, pointing to the darkness below.

Jobec did, and what he saw there made his skin crawl. Before him, he still saw a room where the shadows deepened, but superimposed over that he also saw an image of a room as it once had been. A room well lit with flickering torches and alive with the bodies and voices of

hearty fighting men. Then something out of the very blackness of evil itself had entered that room, to descend upon those brave men and suck away the life force in each of them. This shapeless mass of foulness had fed on the very souls of that wretched company, cursing them to an everlasting eternity of suffering and unrest. Jobec's vision blurred and once again he found himself looking at a darkened room, long since devoid of any life.

"Dear lady . . ." he thought, his fear racing to overcome him, ". . . is this then the very thing that comes tonight?"

"Not tonight, now, this minute, and for you!"

"Why for me?"

"Because your life is what draws it, much as the scent of blood does a hunting beast."

"And there is no way to fight this thing?"

"None that you know of, Jobec Stardith. Your only chance is to escape while you still can."

"But surely it will give chase."

"It cannot. This building is a place of power—of evil power in which the thing is trapped. It cannot go outside these walls," she said.

The shadow had now reached the base of the ladder and was slowly making its way up toward them. Jobec could feel the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise in terror.

"Come . . ." she cried, ". . . there is no more time!"

He was on his feet instantly, springing across the small room after the fleeing figure of the girl. Already the shadow had reached the top of the ladder and was pouring into the attic. At the other end of the room Salith knelt by what appeared to be nothing more than a bare wall.

"There was once a window here, though it has been covered over with rocks. Use your strength to open it, warrior!"

One glance over his shoulder at that growing mass of blackness reaching out for them was all it took for Jobec to summon the strength of several men. With a mighty swing,

he sent the sword crashing against the spot she had pointed to. Sparks flew as steel and stone met, but still the barrier remained. "Sul!" he shouted, yelling the battle cry of the Sulcarmen, as the blade once more arced through the air to crash against the wall, scattering rocks out into the night. The opening now lay clear, but there was no time to waste, they must act quickly. Already he could feel that evil mist closing its grip about them. A sickly sweet smell of death and decay filled the air.

"Climb down and hurry!" Salith cried, pointing to a thick vine that hung just to the outside of the opening.

"You first," Jobec argued.

"This is not the time nor the place for gallantry, man of the sea. You face things here you do not understand," she said.

"Maybe so, but what I do understand is that I will not flee and leave an unarmed woman, illusion or otherwise, behind to face whatever manner of thing that it is we face. Now go!" he ordered.

"Brave, foolish man," she said with a smile, before she disappeared through the opening.

Thrusting the red-hilted sword into a strap of his tunic, Jobec squeezed his massive shoulders through the small opening, leaving behind a layer of skin in the process. He was most of the way out when something grabbed hold of his legs, slowly dragging him back inside. Instantly the fear rose in him as he screamed aloud, kicking and struggling with all his might to tear himself free from the viselike grasp. There was a strain, then a pop as he found himself falling end over end, through the air.

He lay slightly dazed at the base of the building, but luckily the ground was soft and he was not seriously hurt in the fall. It was then that he heard a loud scream from above that turned the blood in his veins to ice water and sent him running as fast as he could away from the building, not even realizing at the time that he was barefoot. Whatever

manner of evil had been in that building, it obviously wasn't satisfied with just the moldy leather boots of a Sulcarman.

Pulling up short at a tree, his heart about to explode, he thought of the girl, Salith. Where was she; for that matter, where was he? Surely he had run so hard without any direction that he was now completely lost.

"Fear not my brave warrior, for Salith is still with you." The words cut into his thoughts.

"But where?" he thought.

"Here, just follow the light."

Up ahead, he saw a strange bluish glow that bobbed and weaved among the trees, appearing much as the light of a candle when blown by a soft summer breeze. Jobec raced to catch up with it, ignoring the pain of going barefoot over stubble and thorns. On through the night he chased after that glow, but no matter how fast he went or how hard he tried, he could not close the distance between himself and the elusive light.

Through brush and thickets and around trees he continued to run, until at last, totally exhausted, he could go no more. Sitting down with his back braced against a tree, he closed his eyes for a moment to rest.

Voices, real voices and those of men, coming closer. Jobec awoke instantly, his hand reaching out for the hilt of the sword that lay beside him. It was broad daylight now, the brightness of the sun hurting his eyes. Although certain that when he had closed his eyes to rest his back had been firmly planted against the trunk of a tree, he now found that he was once again lying on the warm sand of a beach. Not only was he now in the open, he was fully exposed to whomever was coming up behind him.

Ah, but Jobec Stardith would not be one to go down without a fight, and surely his would not be the only blood that would flow freely today. Jumping quickly to his feet,

he spun around, prepared to match cold steel with those who were upon him.

"Ho, Jobec, you old sea dog. It is good to see that you still live and are as anxious for a fight as ever."

Surprise overwhelmed him. Instead of facing a scouting party of armed Alizon soldiers as he expected, he now fronted six Sulcar blood brothers and cup comrades from his own ship. Nor could he mistake the graceful lines of the war vessel that sat anchored in the distance as being anything other than the Red Dawn.

"Ho, Captain, you look as though you've seen a ghost. Does the sight of a fellow Sulcarman disturb you so?" the tall muscular man leading the party of six asked.

"Disturb? No, Haylor, that it doesn't. But puzzle it does. I thought surely that the ship and all those on board had been lost," Jobec replied.

"Nay, it will take more than just a little wind and rain to defeat the crew of the Red Dawn. If only I could say as much of her captain."

His remark had been said in humor and good spirit, with no ill feelings meant, as well Jobec knew, for he and Haylor had been blood brothers since the time they were both old enough to use a sword. Many an adventure the two men had shared and many a good time. But, even as the men hugged each other in an embrace of companionship, Jobec's mind whirled as he tried desperately to put together all the pieces of the previous night. This was definitely not the same beach where he had washed ashore after the storm, but how did he get here? More so, how in the world did they find him here?

"What troubles you, brother?" Haylor asked, concerned, reading the expression on the other man's face.

"I was just wondering about how I happened to get to this particular beach, and how you happened to find me here."

"As for how you got here, I wouldn't know . . ." Haylor

answered, “. . . but the finding of you took some doing. We were about to call off the search and give you up for dead, when we happened to spot your signal fire.”

“Fire? But I didn’t light any fire.”

“Maybe not, but somebody did,” Haylor said, pointing.

He was right; there on the beach, a little over forty feet away, were signs of where a fire had burned, though it was not much more than a smoldering pit of ashes now. The sand around the fire was still wet, and in it Jobec could see numerous bare footprints. They were small and slim, like those made by a child, or perhaps a woman of small frame. Lying just beyond the fire was a scarf made of a shimmery silver and blue material. Jobec stooped down to carefully pick it up.

“It appears that our captain has had an adventure of his own since the other night,” Haylor said with a grin, his gaze going from the scarf to the red-handled sword in Jobec’s tunic and finally resting on the captain’s bootless, cut, and bruised feet.

“That I have had, brother Haylor.”

“Maybe then, there shall be a tale that will be told.”

“Aye, and it is such a tale as you have never heard before,” Jobec replied.

“Better then than the tale of yours about the two redheaded sisters from Kars?”

“Much better, my friend,” Jobec said with a laugh.

“This tale I must hear.”

“And that you shall, provided that I will only have to tell it to you over a hearty meal and a good bottle of wine.”

“Ho, Jobec, you have just made yourself a deal.”

As both men walked back down the beach to join the others who already awaited them in the skiff, Jobec paused to face back toward the woods. “Salith,” he whispered aloud, forming the words clearly in his mind. But no answer came. Could it be then that she was indeed nothing more than an illusion, as she had claimed. Maybe so, but

surely illusions didn't leave footprints in the sand, and wasn't the piece of material that he now held in his hand real enough?

Jobec carefully tucked the scarf inside his tunic as he turned and walked toward the water. Yes, it would be good to regain once again the ship and the life he loved at sea, but he knew that he would one day soon return to this deserted little section of the coastline, to once more walk that shadowy trail that led through the woods. For there were still certain questions that had been left unanswered and a thank-you that had been left unsaid.

* * *

Afterword

Through the gifted writing of Andre Norton, I've spent so much time in Witch World that I often feel a little guilty about not having to pay taxes or file for official residency there.

It was during one of my more recent trips that Jobec the Sulcarman, captain of the Red Dawn, told me the tale that you have just read. At first I doubted the authenticity of the story, thinking that it had come from all the mugs of ale we drank that night. But when Jobec showed me the red-hilted sword and the scarf of shimmering silver and blue material, I no longer had any doubts to the truth of it. The last I heard, he had set sail with the intention of returning to that mysterious stretch of woods, with its winding path and dark secrets. I truly hope that he finds what he is looking for—somehow I think he will.

—JAMES R. HEIDBRINK