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A Slaying in Smoke

A FALCHION & FASHION
TALE BY
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About *Worlds Without Master*

“One Winter’s Due” first appeared *Worlds Without Master*, Volume 1, Issue 3 along with:

- ◆ “In Taruve: the Merchant Train” another tale of Jakko Orange and his “niece” Tam-tam by D. Vincent Baker.
- ◆ Illustrations by Steven Austion, Jeremy Duncan, Ed Heil, Storn Cook, and Chris L. Kimball.
- ◆ More “Oh, the Beating Drum!” from Bryant Paul Johnson.
- ◆ And *Swords Without Master*, a sword & sorcery roleplaying game by Epidiah Ravachol.

Worlds Without Master is an adventure fiction and gaming ezine featuring sword and sorcery short fiction and games from Epidiah Ravachol and many others. An ezine that will grow in size and content as its Patron Horde grows in number. You can lend your swordarm to the cause or purchase the entire first issue by going to www.WorldsWithoutMaster.com.

A Slaying in Smoke

By Epidiah Ravachol

Muaphet Raum strolled through the streets arm in arm with that toad-throated entity thought by scholars to be an ill-favored god of ages lost and considered by sorcerous meddlers to be a well-feared demon of some means. His bulbous eyes and swaying saunter painted a humorous picture at which few beyond Muaphet dared to laugh. Theirs was a sketchy alliance, but one that had been to the greater benefit of each. Though few should ever learn the name of this ranine alien, Muaphet was permitted to call him, affectionately, Vey Thon.

It was only here, in the City of Fire and Coin, where they could carry on as such and not incite riot. Here, among the brightly colored spires and the bazaars stocked from all corners of the world, this selcouth scene was mere spectacle. Muaphet dressed only in his purple omophor decorated with a sole green seven-pointed star, and Vey Thon naked but for a cape of bronze scales that chattered as he undulated.

But in the neighborhoods they now strolled, in the opulent, gleaming shadows of the citadel of the Shining Lord, Muaphet and Vey Thon were considered, perhaps scandalously, overdressed. For it had been the fashion for some months now among the wealthier denizens of the City of Opportunity to dress themselves solely in smoke. The merely rich adorned themselves in brass crowns that radiated rods like flower petals from their heads. At rod's end hung censers on various lengths of gold and silver chains. Each censer fumed in rich colors and

heavy scents that obfuscated the body and stung the eyes. The obscenely decadent would forego even these heavy crowns and attend themselves with slaves trained to ply patterns into the smoke with their breath.

And this is how Lanhorawhani approached them. First, a cavalcade of tall, hairless men trailed giant reams of crimson and gold cloth into the market square covering every entrance to guard against errant breeze creeping along street and alleyway. Then, a flurry of young women dressed in gossamer and armed with giant fans to chase away any lingering smoke of lesser designs. When their billowing gowns settled and all witnesses were stilled by awe, the first tendrils of ochre smoke rolled into the market, coaxed along by the gentle breath of three children. They were in turn followed by three men who held in their pained hands glowing braziers, one producing a gray-green cloud and the scent of toasted jasmine, one belching a thick and heavy sulfur, and one producing garish sparks popping into puffs of deep blue that faded into the gray of a winter sky. Two artists and their assistants silently and skillfully urged these fumes along carefully chosen paths with breath and fan to weave them into intricate, ephemeral patterns that covered the long, narrow body of Lanhorawhani.

He approached Muaphet and Vey Thon in slow, deliberate silence. His eyes were bloodshot and tears ran dark trails over his soot-stained cheeks, but these were the natural byproducts of his fashion and no indication of his mood, which was that of a controlled fear.

“You are the Raum?” The question cut a wake through his smoky shroud.

"I am," Muaphet replied, nodding his head respectfully.

"I am a man haunted—"

Vey Thon unleashed a deep-throated guffaw that left Lanhorawhani's frail frame naked and his fumists frantic in their efforts to re-weave his costume.

"I do not speak with the dead," said Muaphet, stepping between Vey Thon and Lanhorawhani. "And neither should you. They have nothing to say that you desire to hear, and can only further entangle you with the inevitable."

"I believe they have already spoken to me and it is the inevitable I wish to concern you with."

There was no plea in Lanhorawhani's red eyes or his stern voice. He was unused to requesting things. Muaphet had learned long ago that such men were dangerous. So it was here that he parted ways with Vey Thon, who croaked an affectionate farewell and pursued his interests elsewhere in the City, as Muaphet consented to accompany Lanhorawhani to his spire but made no promise of resolution.

It took the whole of the afternoon to reach the home of Lanhorawhani, which was built upon the ancient ruins of the old city at the foot of the hill that led up to the Shining Lord's citadel. Every step taken, every breath, was choreographed to preserve the ever-shifting beauty of his garb. So as to leave the air around them as little disturbed as possible, there was a strict taboo on speaking and Muaphet had to keep a good ten paces of distance between them. What time he could not occupy with conversation, he occupied with observation. It was true that Lanhorawhani was a man haunted. The signs were individually subtle, but myriad throughout the afternoon. Folds blown into

the crimson and gold banners, fading billows in the gossamer dresses, and patterns appearing in the smoke that clung to him—faces, grotesqueries and runes. Something erudite and malignant had an interest in Lanhorawhani. Muaphet was relieved to know that Vey Thon, at least, was elsewhere.

Jewelers and stoneworkers were ushered from Lanhorawhani's receiving hall as they approached. There, among ursine idols of the goddess Axlohi half-carved from jade and alabaster, Lanhorawhani finally bid Muaphet to speak.

As it often does, faith followed fashion. The lachrymations of Axlohi's devotees were said to cleanse their souls of their sins. An endeavor in which Muaphet saw some merit, for he knew that Axlohi drew her dead back through the centuries to be with her from the moment of her cult's birth. All that were delivered unto her would begin their suffering at the dawn of history and continue to suffer until the last sins of her disciples had disappeared from the world. For the smoke-stung upper class of the City, there was clear appeal in a deity for whom tears were a badge of piety.

"What is it that you are hoping I can do for you?"

"There are sorceries availed to me," Lanhorawhani said, inviting Muaphet to sit upon one of the many splendid pillows cast about the room.

"I have no doubt," Muaphet said, lounging, but remaining alert.

"There are magi in my employ," Lanhorawhani said as he sat nearby, his slaves placing around him new braziers cast in the likeness of Aloxhi vomiting a sweet and obscuring blue and yellow smoke from ceramic snouts. "As well as prophets and

servitors from realms unnamable. I have an entire menagerie of beasts from a world you can only see in the summer sky just after dusk.”

“I hope that someday you may allow me to peruse such a collection.”

The thuribles set, Lanhorawhani’s slaves exited to prepare a repast. “Tell me then, Raum, why I should come to you with my troubles.”

Muaphet searched Lanhorawhani’s bloodshot eyes. “You do not like the answer your prophets and magi have given you.”

A silence grew as Lanhorawhani let the smoke swallow him whole before speaking from within. “Do you know this answer?”

“My guess is that you are doomed.”

“Yes.” The voice grew weak, as if it too was made of smoke, and seemed to come from not a single mouth, but from the whole cloud that now filled half the room. “This very evening, when a certain star can be seen from atop my own tower.”

“Lanhorawhani.” As Muaphet spoke the name, he recognized the pattern of Lanhorawhani’s face thrice as large in the growing smoke—a face that now seemed to be pleading with him. “We are all doomed. You are just blessed with the hour and the place.”

“Blessed!?”

The outburst scattered the larger face that had been forming in the smoke, replacing a pleading continence with a smaller, tangible one of tear-stained rage.

A moment later Lanhorawhani’s composure returned and the smoke crawled back across his face as the slaves returned with warmed wine, bowls of figs soaked in chili oils, and plates

of nutmeats skillfully arranged in elaborate mosaics.

Muaphet took his time sampling the figs and sucking the oils from his fingers before answering, "I will look upon the signs, but I am doubtful that I will find a different answer there."

"Readers more literate than you have looked upon the signs. Forgive me, but that is not why I have sought you out. I need an advocate. One to represent me and my interests upon this tower tonight."

"I do not speak with the dead."

Among the dishes laid before Lanhorawhani there was a tiny bell which he then rang. "I am not often refused."

"Then I am pleased to offer you this unique experience before you should perish," Muaphet said, rising to his feet and preparing for movement from within the smoke.

"Please, do not leave before I have thanked you with the least glimpse of my menagerie."

Eddies of smoke poured through opening doors and light from beyond limned a pair of large silhouettes. Muaphet offered a low, mocking bow to Lanhorawhani. "Let it be said that you are a gracious host, even in these final hours."

Lanhorawhani's guards were, like Muaphet, tall and bald. Were it not for his odd manner of dress, the three of them could have been mistaken for brothers. Indeed, these two probably were brothers, one left-handed and the other right to match some symmetry of fashion Lanhorawhani was entertaining when he hired them. Each wore a broad sword on the opposite hip and kept Muaphet far enough away to allow time to draw should he lunge. But they were not a show of force, as Lanhorawhani was too well-informed to employ such a tactic against Muaphet.

They were a declaration of intent. Lanhorawhani had a greater threat to reveal. Muaphet wished to discover its nature before choosing his method of escape.

Together with Lanhorawhani and his smoke-slaves, they proceeded further into the tower, descending rather than rising. Beneath the first floor was the cellar and larder, well-stocked, but cleared of any servants before their arrival. Therein the two guards pulled away two giant flagstones to reveal a spiral staircase carved into the rock beneath. Oil lamps were already burning along the damp, otherwise unadorned stone walls. Eventually hand-carved rock opened up to a natural cavern, iridescent in the lamplight. The air, where not polluted by Lanhorawhani's garments, was hoary and damp.

"These," Lanhorawhani whispered with notable reverence, "are the primordial caves the very first citizens of the City fled to in times of war or disaster."

"Or worship," Muaphet added, noting a bear skull encased in limestone high up on a rocky shelf. "What have you been up to here, Lanhorawhani?"

"It was not your reputation that led me to you, Raum." Lanhorawhani and his slaves continued further into the cavern, which was now only lit by the dark orange glow of his braziers. "It was here, in this cavern, where I first discovered the portents."

There in the ember dark, Lanhorawhani's procession halted and none so much as coughed.

"How is the air down here?"

"Old," Muaphet replied. "Old and smoky."

"Hmm, yes. Old and smoky. And still. Very, very still."

There lingered his smoke and his words, until, with

startling movement, he dashed one of the braziers from a slave's hands and scattered its coals across the cavern floor. In the dark, this sudden light and the sparkling echoes it sent across the opalescent rock proved contrast enough to reveal the signs that troubled Lanhorawhani.

There on the ground, built by centuries of drippings, was a great heptagram relief in the limestone. Alongside it, in language startlingly clear for an omen, was Lanhorawhani's doom written in the same relief. The day and the hour.

"These are not carved, Raum. They formed here, as stalagmites, over the centuries. And they are as they would be, were they scripted by my own hand."

In the fading light, Muaphet knelt and traced his fingers along the cold, damp heptagram—a great heptagram like that adorning his own raiment. "This was not my doing."

"I believe it a warning. And though that seven-pointed star could mean many things, I see it as no coincidence that today, the day foretold to be my last by this very formation, is also the day that you arrived in the City of Fire and Coin."

"I have been to the City many times before and will likely return many times again," Muaphet said, standing back up. "I would not look for meaning in my wanderings, Lanhorawhani. Especially not with the precious time you have left. Now, I will hold you to your promise of a glimpse at your menagerie, but then I must be on my way so you can prepare for what is to come."

"Yes. Let us not delay a moment more."

Slowly the procession returned from the dark to the lamplit stairs and up into the tower proper. There they crept along

another, more ornate, spiral staircase that wound around an impossible waterfall cascading through the very center of the spire. A long and tedious climb through floor after floor of lavish furnishings, until they reached the penultimate floor—a place as blue as the sky just before dawn.

Vey Thon lay unconscious upon the azure tiles, his scaled cape draped over his voluminous body. Around his head, incense slowly burned with mild, fungal smell. Two robed women were busily painting sigils upon the floor around him and tying his digits together with strands of their hair. They were the only ones in the room that did not look up from the slumbering god when Lanhorawhani, Muaphet and their escorts entered.

“It is my will that should I perish, my tower and all that is within it should perish with me. Including your pet.”

“This is no pet, Lanhorawhani,” Muaphet hissed, turning close to Lanhorawhani so that only he could hear. “You do not know what you have done. Should he awaken like this, his rage—”

“All the more reason to prevent such an outcome,” Lanhorawhani said. The old man loomed from his smoke and met Muaphet’s stare.

So this was his threat. To enrage Vey Thon. To unleash such a malevolent force upon the City. To feed countless lives to a god that once was.

“I am a man of many sins,” Lanhorawhani said, his weeping eyes unblinking, “I will not flinch to add this to the litany.”

A wisp of smoke tumbled before Lanhorawhani’s whispers and brushed against Muaphet’s lips. With a slow, deliberate breath, the Raum drew it in to save it for later. “This would

dwarf the litany. Lanhorawhani, I would speak with you alone.”

Lanhorawhani assented and his slaves scurried off to retrieve an elaborate crown of censers for him to wear in the absence of his fumists. Once properly fitted and cloaked in a pungent orange smoke, Lanhorawhani and Muaphet ascended to the observatory atop the tower. Above them was the dome of the night sky and below a sea of lights flickered across the City of Fire and Coin. This was a rare view and one Muaphet savored. Even Lanhorawhani, who had ready access to it, stood in brief awe. But the wind easily tore away his fragile garments, leaving him chill, naked and impatient.

“Do you know why you came to me with your troubles?” Muaphet asked.

“The message in stone. It is one that I have left myself. Or will leave myself. A hint that you are the key to my surviving this night,” Lanhorawhani said, as the two of them watched the horizon for a certain star. “I do not understand how or why it works, but the outcome is clear. I will pass by whatever doom creeps towards me this night, so that I may live long enough to find a way to leave myself the message in the heptagram.”

“You will die here this night. You will return to the ancestral den of Axlohi where you and your fellow devotees shall begin serving your shared perdition, suffering for one another’s sins until the echoes of the last of your sins fade from this realm.”

“I know the tenets of my faith.”

“Do you?” Muaphet turned his full rage on the frail man but he could not cow him. “Should you in your petty spite provoke what slumbers beneath us? Should you cast it upon this crowded city huddled beneath you? How loud and for how far,

how long would your sins echo then?"

"Fail to preserve me this night and we shall find out."

"Lanhorawhani, in the centuries of suffering before you, you will learn regret. Your shade will cower in the dark, still cave buried beneath us. There you will find that your tears can calcify, like drops from a stalactite. With this sole means of communicating you will slowly build a message over the years. A message designed to lure you into the very arms of your doom moments before you commit the one sin that will outlast all other sins committed by those who weep in Axlohi's name.

"I will grant you this last chance. Turn from this path. Have your servants return Vey Thon to where they found him, unbound and unharmed. Then sleep the rest of this night away so that it may fade from the memory as a dream."

Lanhorawhani pointed to a glimmer on the eastern horizon, "There is my star, Raum. I will not be denied! Deliver me!"

Muaphet slipped one arm around Lanhorawhani's throat while pressing the other heavily into the back of his neck. Swiftly, like a candle being snuffed, consciousness fled the old man and his frail body went limp. Muaphet removed the crown from his head and cast the body out to plummet into the City below.

He placed the crown of censers upon his own brow. Allowing the smoke to obscure him, Muaphet slowly descended back into the tower. Once he returned to the blue room, he called upon the smoky whispers he stole from Lanhorawhani when they stood above Vey Thon moments before, and parsed them out in curt commands. Unbind Vey Thon. Carry the slumberer, along with several dozen amphorae that recently held wine, to a nearby caravanserai. Leave and await him back at the tower.

Should he not return in three days, they were to enjoy his wealth as best they could.

That morning, Vey Thon awoke among the empty jugs as Muaphet dowsed him with trough water.

“Are you hungover, my friend? You made quite a night of it last night.”

Vey Thon could only muster a pitiful croak in reply.

The Realms

You do not take up sword and spell to tag along with someone else's adventure. You do it to change the course of your destiny. To mold the world to your wants and desires.

Listed below are the stories, games, articles, and miscellanies in this issue that represent worlds available for you to craft your own adventures in. If you should so desire, you may take the characters, settings, and situations from any of these, create something new, and submit it to *Worlds Without Master*.

By default, any submission to *Worlds Without Master* is not be part of any shared world. Creators have the usual controls over their creative properties. The following options exist only for creators who expressly want to take part in this endeavor.

Additionally, the following agreements exist solely between the creators and *Worlds Without Master*, and do not govern the creators' rights in regards to any other publication.

The Free & Chaotic Realms

Anyone may submit material using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work as if it were their own as long as they also agree to make their work part of this Free & Chaotic Realms. This is as open as it gets, with the only curation being the *Worlds Without Master* submission process.

The Curated Realms

Material submitted using the characters, settings, situations

and any other part of this body of work will be sent to the original creator or the creator's designated curator for approval before being accepted by *Worlds Without Master*. If accepted, this new material is bound to that particular curated realm.

Other Shared Realms

Groups of creators who wish to find their own agreement on how to share their worlds are welcome to do so however they wish.

Edicts

Creators are welcome to make up a list of rules other creators must follow while using their works. These rules are set in stone. *Worlds Without Master* will not accept any work that appears to violate an applicable edict that is not also created by the original creator.

More about the realms policy can be found at:
www.Dig1000Holes.com/words/realms

"A Slaying in Smoke," belongs to the realms curated by Epidiah Ravachol. Their edicts may be found at:

www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts