

*AMONG THEM A GRIM BARGAIN IS STRUCK*

"We—my holy sisters and I," Zadeshkem explained, "have divined the secret that has protected Alikornophis for age upon age. Those five centuries ago, a certain man set foot in the great city—a man like no other. His name was Hinuthoss, a mortal who was begot of the union twixt an earth-born woman and a spirit of storm.

"He stood upon the shore and sang a potent charm that called up a child of the ocean deeps. A dweller of the darkest reaches of the unplumbed sea, it crept forth from its unimaginable den to the surface, where it has remained, drowsing and stuporous, able only to keep the city from harm.

"To ensure the child could never truly awaken, Hinuthoss took a talisman called the Breathing Stone—a key, if you will, to freeing the sea child—and set sail to a small isle. There he hid the Breathing Stone and created eternal wardens which he set to guard against its removal.

"The name of this isle has at last become known to us. It is a barren stretch of rock called Yeddel-Paa."

I raised an eyebrow, the meaning of all this finally becoming clear to me.

"And you want me to retrieve this talisman for you?" I asked.

"Indeed," Menalkoric replied from where he sat, idly stroking his black beard. "With the Breathing Stone, we can awaken the child and take it back with us, that Gan-Beshar need never fear attack from sea raiders again."

"And what are you willing to pay, were I to attempt this venture? My crew will embark upon such a voyage only if a sizable reward awaits them at the journey's end."

"Once the charm of Hinuthoss is broken and the sea child within our power, Alikornophis will lay helpless at your feet," Zadeshkem spoke up with mounting hope. "Its solders have never been called upon to defend its walls. They are lax and unskilled. Your crew may pillage the city until nothing remains but a despairing shell—the wealth of centuries, yours for the taking."

"What say you now, Master Haifdoren?" queried Menalkoric. I took hold of the stone blade from the Lord of Gan-Beshar, who relinquished it