

The Merchant's Legacy

By Andrew Warwick

A Tale of the Wanderer

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It was, Nhaqosa had decided, the stares that were getting to him the most. Each village, each town, each tiny settlement they had passed through, it was always the same; always the stares. Blacksmiths laid aside hammers to come take a look, farmers tightened grips on scythes and pitchforks, merchants shut up shops, while children hid behind their parents and the common folk fled.

Some were merely curious, many were hostile; but all, regardless of intent, openly stared.

His hand twitched involuntarily to the wolf's head pendant that hung around his throat, a simple pendant carved of red wood resting against his white furred hide. Simple as it was, it was still a relic of home and it called to him, beckoning him to follow. There was only the faintest trace there, barely a tingle that sparked across the fingers as he touched it, a strange urge that drew him on, a lifeline pointing the way home. That path lay far away though, along a road that had led through many villages and towns upon this alien world, and would undoubtedly lead through many such more before the journey was at last done. A world in which neither the wolf nor the dog existed.

He shifted his vast weight on cloven hooves, resting hands on the handle of the heavy stone-headed maul that rested upon the barren earth in the midst of the village square that they had found themselves in.

A small gathering was congregating, and once more with it there came the inevitable stares. He returned them, tail lashing behind him and ears twitching. For those that knew him well, despite a face that may as well have been an expressionless mask reflecting none of his emotions, they were a sure sign of growing irritation.

Oh, he knew the reasons behind the stares and looks. He was as alien to this world as it was to him.

His like had never been seen here before, and would likely not be seen again. He was a giant bull-headed man, hide gleaming white in the brilliant sunlight, sweeping razor sharp horns crowning a broad head. In a world beset by monsters, the suspicions were understandably, yet that did not in any way lessen the irritation that they provoked.

A tough looking man, dark eyed and narrow of face, came across the square from the gathering of villagers. A sword was slung over his back and he wore a jacket of dark leather into which metal studs had been set.

"Kwaza," he said respectfully to Nhaqosa. The man, Abasan, had once been a gladiator who had fought alongside Nhaqosa, first in the fighting pits and then in the bloody revolt that had seen their escape, a revolt provoked by a knight by the name of Elad. Ever since, Abasan and around two dozen of his fellow former gladiators had followed Nhaqosa as they traversed the brutalised world. Out of all those they had come across, it was only they who no longer stared, for which Nhaqosa was ever thankful.

There was something else, though, that lurked in the way they looked at him, a look that was just as profoundly unsettling in some ways.

"Do they know anything?" Nhaqosa asked, his voice a sonorous rumble.

Abasan shook his head in response to the question. "No, at least not that I could find out. Perhaps Niati will have better luck than me."

Nhaqosa's laugh was deep and earthy. "She has a way about her, that girl."

"I was speaking with her recently," Abasan noted, all serious in expression and pitch.

"Oh?"

Abasan ignored the pointed question barely hidden in the tone of Nhaqosa's response. "She does not truly believe."

"And you do, my friend?"

"Yes, Kwaza. How could I not?"

Nhaqosa sighed, perhaps a touch sorrowfully, and tossed his head. Too many of them seemed to possess a blind faith in him. "For myself I hope, but can not say that I truly believe. The path is long and the way home fraught with difficulties and obstacles. I chase at the vague, not anything substantial. In any case, even if I should find the place, I am a simple warrior and not a shaper of the mists. I would not even know how to make the crossing."

"We will find a way," Abasan told him loyally.

"She thinks we should have gone with Elad?"

"Yes."

"She is not the only one."

"That way ends in fire."

The gaze with which Nhaqosa fixed on Abasan was one both puzzled and thoughtful. The man's statement had been a curious one, coming as it did out of nowhere. "In fire?"

"Yes."

"Elad is a Knight of the Ardent Flame. His way always ends with fire."

Abasan's face scowled up, taking on an aspect of concerned concentration as he sought for the words to explain what he meant. Finally he simply shrugged. "That is not what I meant. I am not sure even if I know what I meant. I just get this...feeling...at times, thoughts of a coming fire and Elad lies at the heart of it."

Nhaqosa seemed about to reply, but before he could Niati walked across the square to join with the man and the Minotaur.

Nhaqosa had always thought of her as a girl-child, for, compared to the others and especially compared to himself, she was a small and slender thing. Even though in the fighting pits she had more than proved herself, and had become something of a crowd favourite, it was a notion he could not shake. Dark of skin and hair and eye, her striking looks and exceptional grace had made her stand out within the pits. The fights, though, had marred that beauty to a degree, yet such was her exoticness she could still attract attention almost as readily as he did.

She had seldom spoken of her past, though Nhaqosa had been able to piece together fragments from the few comments she let slip and from rumours that swirled around her. She had been a court dancer once, for one of the Muatra princes who dwelt in the far south, chosen at a young age for the role for both her looks and skills. The exact reason for her fall from grace was one she never spoke of and one Nhaqosa could never discover, but it had involved some form of court intrigue that had seen her family disgraced and condemned to the pits to die. Out of all her family, only she still lived, her training as a court dancer having stood her in good stead.

"Kwaza," she greeted Nhaqosa rather formally, her face as serious as it ever was. She seldom laughed anymore, or even smiled.

"Any news Niati?"

"I was able to get a hint or two," she replied. "They are scared and do not want to risk trouble, but from what I could gather those we are after were seen heading to the north-east, towards hill country. It is wild there, a good place to hide out in and raid from."

Nhaqosa gave an amused snort, nostrils flaring. "It was more than Abasan could find."

"He doesn't threaten them enough, I find," she responded coolly. "I think he is going soft."

"Could still take you," Abasan replied, narrow face split by a broad grin.

"Children, children," Nhaqosa rumbled, "You can play your games later."

"Apologies Kwaza," Niati replied contritely. Nhaqosa, no matter how hard he tried, could not figure out the girl fully. She was fiercely independent, yet still followed his commands without hesitation, though not with the near blind obedience of Abasan. It was completely at odds with how she saw and treated the others.

Nhaqosa raised his voice and called in the others who had been waiting around. "Gather around. Niati has found us our bandits and it is time to move on again." That brought a few jeers and cheers and the exchange of coins between various parties. Nhaqosa smiled to himself at it; oft times they would bet on near anything for entertainment.

Shouldering packs and weapons, the former gladiators started to depart. Horses were far too rare, and far too expensive for their means, so they walked wherever they went. They were a grim, foreboding looking lot, battle scarred and hard of face, drawn from all the mix of nations and peoples of the old Empire, with skin from the darkest black to palest white and all the shades that lay between. Niati was not the only woman amongst them either.

They had, these two dozen survivors, become Nhaqosa's family in this world, like brothers and sisters, sons and daughters to him. They had begun, upon the departure with Elad, with more, but eight had already fallen, eight members of the family. The world that lay beyond the fighting pit was just as hard and treacherous, and to make their way as they journeyed across it they had had to fall back on the old skills they had learnt in the pit. Sell swords and mercenaries they had become, but always Nhaqosa made sure that any commissions they accepted were as just and honourable as could be in this dishonourable world. Most had tossed aside such principles and bandits infested the lands; it was these that they mostly fought, guarding merchants or defending simple villages that were preyed upon by the ruthless.

Their march out of the village was accompanied by stares, the simple, common folk glad to be seeing them depart without incident. Even whilst lending aid bands of heavily armed warriors were seldom welcomed.

The fields they passed through that lay around the village had been made dry by a long, hot summer, the crops withering under the blazing heat. The harvest ahead was destined to be a poor one. Ahead, lying shimmering blue against a hazy horizon, were the hills for which they were making, low and rolling, but dominating the flat lands around. The sky was cloudless, a burning washed out blue that promised days of little relief, whilst the air hung still and heavy, not a breath of breeze touching it. Insects sung all around in the stifling heat that bore down like a blanket upon them.

Nhaqosa clutched again at the amulet around his neck as they walked on, ignoring the heat, feeling for that faint tingle it provided, sensing for directions. As best he could figure it, the destination that lead to the bandits lair was roughly along the course that the amulet lead, or near enough to not be put out too far by it.

They walked on through the long hours of the day, seeing little but for a few wary farmers who moved off at their approach, and the odd bird that drifted high above on the summer's heat.

In the course of their walk, Nhaqosa found himself alongside Niati. They formed a somewhat incongruous sight, the small and slender woman who barely made half the height of the burly Minotaur she stood alongside of.

"How are you faring, Niati?" he enquired.

"You need not concern yourself with me so much," she responded a little aloofly.

"I concern myself with all of you," he slowly pointed out.

"Yes, you do," she said and then laughed, reaching out to rest a hand on his arm. Beneath the soft hide that her fingers brushed, his arms were like unyielding iron. "You should let others share that burden, Kwaza," she continued, before adding, "Except for Abasan."

Nhaqosa's ears twitched as he caught the echoes within those words of a slightly bitter resentment.

"You wish he would concern himself with another?" he enquired in slow, gentle tones.

"What? No, no!" Niati's eyes had widened slightly, before they hardened again as she tried to mask the expression that had flittered across her features.

"Niati," he said patiently, pointedly.

She walked on in silence for some time before giving a sigh and a shake of her head. "It is difficult for me," she told Nhaqosa.

"It is not easy for any of us."

"Before all this I was a *Parahaj* dancer in the courts of Prince Satayim. Such things were forbidden for we had to stay pure for the dance." She gave half a smile. "Some didn't. Then came the horrors of the pit and to survive I closed my heart to any emotion at all. I had to become hard. Now I am free again, and a good, decent man barely notices me, such is his devotion to you."

"I would not be so sure," Nhaqosa rumbled gently. "But perhaps I could have words with him for you."

"Don't you dare," Niati told him. "I would have to hurt you if you did."

Nhaqosa laughed. "Very well, but do not be surprised at the way things may turn out."

Night was upon them well before the hills were reached. Beside a tiny stream that barely trickled across the plains in a much broader creek-bed they set up camp. Dried and cracked mud and smooth worn stones marked where it had once flowed much stronger and deeper, but, like the rest of the countryside, it had suffered from the prolonged drought.

The trees that huddled alongside the stream were dried and wilting, with leaves of greyish green and bark dangling from the trunks in long strips. They were part of a small forest that spread back up along the creek towards the hills they had set out for.

A small fire was built and lit and a pot was soon hung above it, a stew of dried meats and vegetables bubbling away within it. Hard travel bread was broken apart and across it was spread even harder butter. A simple meal, but better than many they had had in the past.

Darkness fell and most settled down for sleep around the fire. Nhaqosa and another, a scrawny man with a badly scarred face named Katako, remained awake, tending to the fire and watching for any danger than may approach during the dark of night.

"Tell me Kwaza," Katako said quietly, poking at the fire with a stick sending sparks bursting upwards,

"Where you come from, are there any fighting pits?"

"Not in the lands of my people," Nhaqosa told him, "Nor those we live alongside of either. Perhaps beyond them there may be, but I have not heard of any."

"What did you do then?"

"I was a worker of stone, like many of my people. We are approached by many peoples across many lands such was our skill with stone."

"Will you return to that then when you return?"

"Perhaps, if we return."

Katako paused, shaking his head and prodding at the fire again, provoking a fresh outbreak of sparks.

"All I know is how to fight, as a gladiator first and now a mercenary. Is there a place in your world for the likes of me?" There was almost a pleading edge to the question, but within it a deep resignation that that sentiment was little more than wishful thinking.

"There will be, I promise," Nhaqosa assured the man.

Katako still looked doubtful. "When you speak of home, you always make it sound so peaceful, so restful. Hardly the place for the likes of me."

"That, I fear, was just simple longing speaking, painting from desire for home rather than true memories.

There are dangers a plenty still, and always a need for a strong arm, even if simply as a merchant caravan guard. For many long years my people have lived and worked and fought alongside the Maedari nations, a proud and noble people. Once, in the dreaming past, they were a nation but their king died and their nation fell apart, not unlike your Empire. Another nation, Chelos, rose in its place, but there is still turmoil and many wild and untamed lands. A strong sword arm is always welcome."

Katako nodded as he listened, seemingly satisfied, but then he suddenly stood, picking up the axe that had sat at his side. He held up a hand motioning for silence, peering intently into the dark of night before pointing upstream. Nhaqosa hefted his stone maul, staring off in the direction that Katako had indicated. His ears twitched as he strained to hear, seeking for that which had alerted Katako.

Initially there was nothing beyond the crackle of the fire and slow and steady breathing of those sleeping about, but then his questing ears caught the faintest of sounds of something, the clatter of stones sliding across one another, followed by a soft skittering hiss.

Light from the fire reflected back from clusters of multi-faceted eyes, gleaming in the dark like burning jewels that scattered colour in a myriad of hues. At first it was just the eyes that could be seen, all aglow, but then the creatures themselves emerged into the glow of the firelight. They appeared something akin to giant spiders, tall as a man, but a moment of study showed that, initial impressions aside, they were not truly spiders. They skittered forward on eight legs, each leg bearing sharp razor spines along them, and their bodies were covered in chitinous armour that appeared in the dark to be of mottled oranges and reds in colour. More of the spines bedecked their bodies, and above their bulbous clusters of eyes were spiralled horns.

Nhaqosa let out a bellow that shattered the still of night, charging at the first spider-beast, his cloven feet hammering into the ground as he ran. All about the camp slumbering bodies were shocked into wakefulness by the startling cry, hands groping for nearby weapons instinctively.

The heavy stone maul in Nhaqosa's hands screamed in a great arc through the air, slamming with brutal force into the bloated head of the first of the grotesque spider-beasts. The blow reduced the head of the beast to a pulp, dark ichor spraying forth as it ruptured.

Strange squeals echoed from amongst the trees around and more spider-beasts came scampering in on their spindly, spined legs. One reared up and spat at Nhaqosa, a spray of webs flickering through the air to coat his body. As they impacted across his body he felt them sting and burn at his flesh and begin to harden around him. With a loud roar he strained against the congealing bonds, veins standing forth and iron hard muscles cording. For a human the webs, perhaps, would have been too much to burst, but the strength of the giant Minotaur was prodigious and the webs reluctantly snapped and parted under the effort.

The camp had descended into a rolling, unexpected melee, some engaged in combat, swords and spears and axes singing in the air, while others struggled against the webs spat forth by the beasts. Even rudely awakened and shrugging off the vestiges of sleep, they had reacted with instincts honed in the brutal school of learning that the fighting pits had been.

Nhaqosa viciously kicked aside the twitching spider corpse that lay before him and stomped forward, searching for further of the beasts to slay. Nearby, someone lay upon the ground, struggling against webs that had brought them low. A spider-beast was stalking towards the bundle, fangs twitching and moist with foul poisons, expectation high for a ready meal. Nhaqosa leapt forward, crashing a double handed blow from his maul into the spider-beast's back, forcing it to the ground. The beast squealed and thrashed from the vicious blow that had landed upon it, trying to scramble away, but Nhaqosa pressed on, hammering it twice more before its broken body ceased twitching, laying in a pool of fetid ichor. Nhaqosa looked around the camp, eyes searching for further threats but the danger had been dealt with. The spider-beasts either lay dead or were fleeing. A few of the group were down, wrapped in the clinging webs that the beasts had spat upon them, and others were already hacking at the webs with knives to free them. The skin where it had touched had been left raw and red, burnt by the web itself. Nhaqosa looked down at his own arms and the marks upon them. It still stung, though it was fading and he fought the urge that came upon him to scratch at it.

"Kwaza!" Abasan's call was rather concerned from where he knelt beside a figure that lay upon the ground, curled up tightly, body shaking. Nhaqosa's strides were quick as he moved across to join them. It was Katako.

"He was bitten," Abasan explained to Nhaqosa, showing him the man's arm. Two puncture marks were visible upon it, the flesh around it already swollen and red.

"It will need leeching, quickly," Nhaqosa rumbled. "We need to hold him down." Nhaqosa rested his

hands upon the man and, joined by others, held him down while Abasan drew a dagger. With a deft cut, he sliced across the wound. Blood and worse poured forth from the cut, a pungent smelling liquid that brought water to the eyes from its fumes. Abasan leant down and sucked at the wound then spat away a mouthful of blood. He repeated the process again before breaking out in a spluttering cough, face twisting into a grimace. A waterskin was passed to him and he rinsed out his mouth, spitting away the water.

"Hopefully we got to it in time," Nhaqosa rumbled. "The rest will be up to him." They bandaged the wound tightly and then laid the wounded man beside the fire, throwing a blanket over him.

The bodies of the spider-beasts were dragged well away from the camp and the stream, piled high and left to rot. Nhaqosa doubted even the most desperate of scavengers would make a feast on their bodies.

"What were those things?" Nhaqosa asked Abasan as they tended to Katako, making him as comfortable as they could, the man shivering and sweating in a drowsy sleep. Elsewhere in the camp the others were returning to their rest.

"I do not know," Abasan replied. "I have never seen their likes before, nor heard of such things, but these days there are many such strange beasts new to the world, monsters vicious in nature and cruel in intent."

"And as the more they appear, the more people think that I am likewise a danger," Nhaqosa noted.

"It is not true, Kwaza," Abasan objected strongly, offended by the very suggestion.

"That is because you know me, my friend. When I walk into a village that has not heard of me, they simply see a dangerous looking beast. To them I am simply another monster. How did you first react upon seeing me?"

Abasan lowered his head, a haunted look coming across his face. "I at first thought you were a beast as well."

The arrival of morning saw Katako's condition improved, though he still remained weak from the ordeal.

"I am fine, Kwaza," he reassured the concerned Nhaqosa. "I can manage. Besides which we can not afford a delay."

Nhaqosa nodded in agreement, though he did not look completely convinced by Katako's protestations.

"Very well, but we will split your gear amongst the others to carry."

They broke their fast with a quick meal, washed down with fresh running water. Water skins refilled, they headed out, once more making for the hills, travelling through the dry forest that bounded the slow flowing stream.

Despite his best endeavours, or perhaps because of them, Katako soon was displaying signs of tiring. He sweated profusely, despite there still being a hint of cool in the early morning, his hair soon plastered to his head from the damp and clothes moist. His face was showing very pale and the strain of the effort was etched upon his features.

He pressed on doggedly, step by step, but as the morning wore on and the full heat of the day began to bear down on them once more, he fell further and further behind.

"This is not working," Abasan told Nhaqosa as the pair paused to wait for Katako to catch up, the ill man grimly following their trail.

"I know, but what can we do?" Nhaqosa rumbled. "We can not leave him behind, yet he was correct in that we can not afford to delay."

"He saved my life at Halkhur, Kwaza. That is not easily forgotten and makes it all the more harder. We may have to return for him."

"No," Nhaqosa replied in steely tones. "There is another option. Malkut," he called out, motioning one of the other men over, the largest and strongest after himself. "I need you to carry this for me." Carefully he handed over his heavy stone-headed maul.

Malkut, a burly dark haired man took it with profound respect. "I will, Kwaza." He shifted his weight feeling for the balance and grip of the weapon and then shook his head in wonder, face splitting into a lopsided grin. "I do not know how you can use this."

Nhaqosa laughed as he turned to Katako. The man, just caught up, was leaning against a tree, breathing

heavily. "My friend, you are still too weak and not yet recovered from the poison. You must let me carry you."

"No Kwaza," Katako objected. "I can do this." He straighten up, took a step back and then seemed to sag and buckle at the knees. Only Nhaqosa's quick response in grabbing hold of his arm prevented him from collapsing to the ground.

"You can barely stand, my friend." Despite Katako's feeble efforts to stop him, Nhaqosa gathered up the shattered man in his arms. "There is no shame in letting a friend carry you in times of need."

"I rather think that when people say that they do not actually mean it," Katako tiredly noted.

"In this case we shall go with the literal expression," Nhaqosa said and started out walking towards the hills.

For the rest of the day they pressed on beneath the shade of the trees, the tireless Nhaqosa carrying the weakened Katako without complaint or pause in his pace. Even though their long association with him had long accustomed the former gladiators to the sheer strength of the giant Minotaur, the display they beheld left even them in awe of his efforts.

By the time that evening came around though, even he was showing some strain from the burden and gratefully set Katako down when they made a halt. The man had drifted in and out of consciousness during the journey, body struggling as it fought against the poisons that had seeped into his system.

"How is he doing?" Abasan asked as Katako sank down onto the ground in a drowsing sleep, muttering something unintelligible.

"I think he will recover," Nhaqosa replied hopefully, though tinged with a touch of uncertainty, "But he will be unwell for some time to come when that eventuates."

"Niati went off ahead with Lakach," Abasan told him. "They report that the bandit's lair is close at hand."

"Good. Let us see to them and then we can get Katako properly settled and give him time to recover."

Lakach was a small, wiry man with a drooping red moustache of which he was immensely and eccentrically proud. What he had been before Nhaqosa rescued him from the pits was not entirely known. He had claimed to have been a simple poacher, but Nhaqosa had some doubts about that, and some suspicions of what he had truly been. Whatever it had been, he had proved adept at scouting, able to move stealthily ahead unseen and unheard to locate trouble, or end it with crossbow or knife.

"They have a camp up ahead, boss," he reported in his typical laid-back manner. "Built around a cave entrance." With his knife he drew a rough map in the dirt. "Got a dozen or so roughly built huts here in the clearing about the cave entrance, which is over here. At a guess I'd say they could house half a dozen each. Wasn't able to get a close view of the cave, not without giving myself away, so I can't be certain as to what exactly the purpose it fulfils is."

"How many guards."

Lakach frowned and brushed at his moustache. "Only saw a couple, sitting out front of the cave before a fire. It was unnaturally quite if you ask me."

Nhaqosa gave a low grunt. "Best if I have a look at the place. Abasan, stay here with the rest. I'm going to take a look with Niati and Lakach."

The trio moved forward amongst the trees, Lakach flitting like a ghost and even Nhaqosa, despite his bulk and size, moving with remarkable silence. Lakach lead them to a spot on the edge of the clearing the bandit lair stood in, from where, shrouded by brush and scrubs, they could peer in unseen.

It lay much as Lakach had described, a collection of a dozen poorly built log huts, spread around a cave entrance that was set into the side of a cliff face. The cliff face rose up and disappeared into choking growth above. A fire burned brightly, illuminating the entrance to the cave, and around it were sprawled three men, passing a stoneware jug amongst each other. They were a coarse looking group, wearing hides and leathers and with their weapons lying alongside him, seemingly apathetic about any danger.

Nhaqosa took his time to study the details of the camp carefully before nodding to himself. He gestured to the other two and they slipped away, unnoticed, heading back to rejoin the others.

"There do not appear to be many of them there," he reported once they were gathered together to plan their actions. "My guess is that most are away for the moment, with only a few remaining behind to tend to the camp. I may be wrong, so we go in fast and quick. Lakach, you take three others and move your way around to the right flank, to the slight rise we saw. I want you to take out the guards at the fire and then support us from there if needed."

Lakach nodded, grinned and patted the crossbow he carried. "Not a sound boss, don't you worry."

"Once they are dealt with, we will have one person to check each hut for any that may be in them. You all know what to do in that eventuality," he added ominously. "Those remaining will be with me. If any problems appear we will deal with them. I need someone to stay behind and look after Katako. We'll send for you when it is done. Oliat? Good." He looked around at the small group, fixing his gaze on each, one by one. "We all know what needs doing here, so let us be safe about it. No larking about, no taking risks."

There were murmurs of assent. Then, checking weapons and armour, they were off, leaving Oliat behind with Katako.

The band spread out along the perimeter of the clearing amongst the eaves of the trees, moving as quietly as they could, their weapons at hand. Nhaqosa had stationed himself with Lakach and the three others he had chosen to accompany him; two of them with crossbows and the third equipped with a short bow. "Now," he said softly. The crossbows were raised and sighted, taking careful aim at the bandits. Fingers curled around triggers and then pulled. There was the sound of a dull thunk as the crossbows shot, and the whistles of the bolts cutting through the air. Against stationary targets that were within close range none of the shots were difficult. All three bolts struck home, throwing the bandits slumping to the ground with barely more than a rasped gurgle.

Nhaqosa surged forward, running low to the ground, maul in his hands. As he emerged into the clearing, the others began to run in from all around, making not a sound as they went. Some made for the huts, while a few raced to join Nhaqosa near the burning fire.

All was seemingly going well as the fighters slipped into the huts until, startlingly, a sudden loud shout echoed from within the cave, the alert raised. From it came a boiling mass of men, screaming as they ran. Nhaqosa reacted in an instant, charging at the lead bandit with his own roared challenge, his great maul arcing through the air as it was swung with all of his considerable strength.

It took the first bandit fair in the face, his skull crumpling under the impact as if it was little more than an egg shell, and his head snapped back in a spray of blood and shattered teeth. Feet went out from beneath him as the blow shockingly interrupted his forward momentum and he flipped through the air before landing face down upon the earth.

The reaction of Nhaqosa and brutality of his blow momentarily stunned the bandits into inaction.

Nhaqosa slowly raised his gore-stained maul before him and opened his maw in an ear rending bellow. Men flinched in the face of the roar and inched backwards almost instinctively. Sensing an opportunity, the gladiators with Nhaqosa swarmed forwards, eager to engage.

The fight was short and brutal, but Nhaqosa found that there was a disturbing poetry to it. The gladiators had been taught to kill well, and that they did, but more than that they had been taught to entertain as they killed; the flashy blow, the mocking word, the elaborate tumble, all but part of the show.

Nhaqosa watched as Niati walked unhurriedly towards her opponent, slender blade down at her side, leaving herself open. The bandit, unable to resist, seized the opportunity and ran charging at her, but in the instant as he swung, Niati stepped lightly aside and spun, allowing the man's momentum to carry him past. She pirouetted as he went by, driving her blade through the back of the man's neck, the tip emerging from the front of his throat in a bloody spray.

Another, Alyan, the oldest of the band, was taunting his opponent, jeering at the man as he swung wildly, mocking his efforts. Each swing came more and more erratically from the enraged bandit until finally Alyan stepped in, and with vicious precision, drove his twin blades home.

Nhaqosa had known some of the fighters in the pits had revelled in prolonging the agony of their opponents, killing a man slowly, cut by cut until they were reduced to a weeping, bloodied mess.

Nhaqosa would have none of that, not while he led. They were to kill clean and quick as best as possible, and they did, yet they were still not above the show, even if they no longer killed for the entertainment of others.

The bandits, so used to ambush and preying upon the weak and defenceless, stood little chance against the hardened warriors of Nhaqosa's band, and the explosion of channelled violence was over of a matter of moments, the bandits dispatched almost before they could consider the circumstances in which they had found themselves. Nhaqosa looked around the clearing with concern, checking on his people, but, beyond a few minor cuts, all had emerged unharmed.

There had only been about a dozen of the bandits within the camp, and all the huts had proved to be unoccupied. The band they tracked was larger than that, the whereabouts of the rest remaining something of a mystery. Nhaqosa growled and shook his head, berating himself for not having thought to have one of the bandits captured to question.

"What now, boss?" Lakach asked, running his hands over one of the dead bandits, searching for any valuables that the man may have carried. He slid a ring off a finger, held it up to examine it, before slipping it into a pocket.

"We do not know where the bandits are," Nhaqosa told them, "But we do know where they will be."

"Where, boss?"

"Here."

Lakach grinned through his red moustache. "That makes sense. So we wait for them here?"

"Yes. Lakach, go and find Oliat and help bring Katakao in." He pointed to three others. "You remove these bodies. The rest are with me. We will see what the cave holds."

They eased their way into the cave cautiously, weapons ready for any trouble. Torches flickered from within, casting dancing light about.

There were no more bandits to be found, only the spoils of their degradations. There were boxes and crates and sacks piled high all about, spare weapons, benches, and tables upon which sat stoneware jugs as well as coins and stones and dice. The fighters spread out through the cave, searching through the piled loot.

"Take only what we can carry," Nhaqosa rumbled. "Food preferably, and anything that is light and easy to carry."

"Hello?" A feeble voice sounded from further back, in the darkened parts of the cave, from behind a wall of crates. Nhaqosa raised his maul and strode towards it, pushing around the crates. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light at the back of the cave he saw a man in tattered dark robes, bound tight with ropes. His dark hair was greying and he looked ill-treated, face bruised and dried blood upon a split lip. Nhaqosa lowered his maul and knelt alongside the man. Drawing a knife, he began to cut the ropes that bound the captive. Surprising, Nhaqosa noticed no fright or surprise from the man as he looked up at him.

"Can I have some water?" he asked weakly. Nhaqosa motioned to one of the others who had started to gather around and the man moved off hastily to arrange it.

"I am Kythias, merchant by trade," the man offered by way of introduction.

"Nhaqosa."

The man slowly nodded, closing his eyes and resting his head back against the wall of the cave as he massaged his freed wrists.

"If you don't mind me saying, Kythias," Nhaqosa started saying, "You do not appear overly troubled by my appearance."

"After the ordeal I have suffered through, friend Nhaqosa, you are a most welcome sight to behold, no matter how extraordinary your appearance may be."

"What happened?"

"Bandits ambushed the caravan I was a part of and those that were not initially slain were taken captive and dragged to this place. I, alas, am the last of those left alive. They were after information and slew us, one by one, for not bestowing it upon them."

A jug of water was brought forward and pushed into Kythias' hands. The man took it gratefully, drinking deeply from the jug.

"What was the nature of this information?" Nhaqosa asked; face alight with curiosity about Kythias and the situation he was in.

"There was something of great importance that had to be moved in the uttermost secrecy to keep it safe. Beyond that I am afraid that I can tell you no more."

Nhaqosa nodded at that, his expressions thoughtfully. "That is understandable. Do you happen to know where the rest of these bandits went? This was not their full number."

"I heard them talk of a village called Talhos, not far from here, upon which they were planning to descend. Be careful, friend Nhaqosa. I never saw their leader, but I heard him speak and heard others speak of him. There was something dangerous and most unnatural about him."

Nhaqosa chuckled, a deep and rumbling sound. "That, I think, would be how many would describe me." "Dangerously, certainly," Kythias told him. "Unnatural? I would think not."

The answer was not what Nhaqosa had expected and nor were Kythias' reactions towards him. He appeared not the least bit curious as to his appearance or even what he was, almost as if he already knew. Nhaqosa dismissed that as an impossibility, but it left no other explanations.

"What will you do now?" he asked slowly.

"I will have to try and start again, to recoup my losses if possible. It is getting much harder these days though, since the untimely demise of the Empire. Merchants are seldom needed anymore. If you will allow, I shall accompany you for the present until such time as I can reach somewhere more civilised."

"We can see you safe where you wish to go," Nhaqosa promised him.

Oliat and Lakach had returned with the ailing Katako, bringing him into the cave. The man was unconscious once more, shivering and sweating badly and Nhaqosa could see that he was losing the battle with the poison.

"What is the problem with your man?" Kythias asked when he saw Katako.

"Poisoned," Nhaqosa told him. "We were attacked by some spider-beasts last night and he was bitten."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," Kythias offered. "I have some small knowledge of herbs and the like that may be of help."

Nhaqosa grunted thoughtfully as he nodded his head. "We would be in your debt if you were able to do something."

Kythias gave him a quiet smile. "It was you that released me from captivity. If I can repay you in anyway, I shall. This can be a start."

Kythias rummaged around amongst the supplies of the camp, searching through the crates and sacks, bringing forth various roots and stems, bulbs and berries, both fresh and dried.

He spread them out before the fire and began to brew a small pot of water upon it, setting to work on the herbs. Some were crushed or ground up fine and dropped into the boiling water to seep and bubble away. Others he ground up together in a bowl until they had been turned into a pungent poultice. Taking some cloth, he spread the sticky mass across it.

Satisfied, he moved to Katako's side, removing the bandage that had been placed upon the wound the previous day. A foul aroma came from the wound as it was uncovered, the flesh around the cut now blackened and signs of decay obviously spreading. Kythias frowned as he examined the wound, fingers probing it. Katako groaned in his uneasy sleep at the touch.

"This is bad," Kythias observed in worried tones. "Much longer and it would be beyond even my skills. As it is now, there is no certainty."

"Just do what you can," Nhaqosa told him.

Kythias placed the fresh bandage with its poultice upon it on the wound and bound it down tightly.

Katako gave a sharp cry at the pressure.

"Easy now," Kythias said softly, resting a hand lightly upon Katako's brow. The man settled back down and Kythias returned to work, finished the bandaging.

"Bring the brew," he ordered. Nhaqosa stomped over to the fire and removed the pot. There was a sharp smell rising from it, slightly bitter.

Kythias leant his head over it once Nhaqosa returned with the pot, waving steam into his nostrils.

"Good," he pronounced. "We will have him take some of it and then all we can do is wait until morning and see how well it has worked."

The following morning saw an improvement in Katako's condition. Colour had returned to his wan face and the swelling seemed to have eased from his arm, though he was still weak and tired. Kythias nodded to himself as he checked Katako over, feeling his forehead and smelling at the wound before making him drink the remainder of the brew he had made the previous evening.

Katako sniffed dubiously at it, face screwing up in distaste. "Smells a little bitter," he complained.

"Drink it," Nhaqosa ordered him.

Reluctantly he tossed it back then shook his head, sticking out his tongue and squeezing his eyes tight shut. "That is the worst thing I have ever tasted," he complained.

Kythias smiled at the reaction. "Better. I think we can assume that the worst has passed."

"Is he able to travel?" Nhaqosa asked.

"He should be able to, as long as he does not exert himself. No heavy loads, no fighting."

"Good. We must move on, get to this Talhos as soon as we can."

"Why are you so eager to find them so quickly?" Kythias enquired, studying Nhaqosa with a thoughtful look.

"They destroyed an entire village," Nhaqosa replied, sounding both disgusted and outraged. "Some where made slaves, or worse, the rest callously murdered. Men, women, children, it made no difference. I fear the same will happen at Talhos. If there is any chance to stop it then I will take it."

"You seek revenge for the dead." Kythias' statement sounded almost accusatory to Nhaqosa's ear and he felt a moment's irritation at it.

"Justice," Nhaqosa replied calmly. "Once, or so I am told, in the days of the Empire, such things as this would have been unthinkable. But the Legions and the Knights of the Empire are no more, and who now is left to defend the weak and poor and seek justice for them upon those who would prey upon their defencelessness?"

"So you seek to repay blood in kind?"

Nhaqosa's ears twitched and tail slashed at the air behind him as he tried to push down the anger that Kythias' comment had aroused. After saving him from a terrible fate, the man could suggest such things? He stared sternly at the man. "Not in kind, no. I do not slay children or the weak, not do I rob and torture them for my own perverted enjoyment. If the strong will not stand up to defend the weak, then who will?"

Kythias pondered Nhaqosa's words before giving a soft sigh and shaking his head a touch sadly. "I wish it did not have to be so, friend Nhaqosa. In the old days the course that you chart would not have been tolerated but those days have passed into memory as you have said. I fear that such times will not return either until more think as you do, but when they do, where shall be the place for the likes of you?"

"I take no joy in what I do," Nhaqosa told him. "I only wish to return home, but until such time as I make it I shall endeavour to do what good I can in this world."

Through the morning they pushed on down from the bandits lair, the land about them broken hill and forest country, dry and wilting under the summer onslaught.

Nhaqosa kept a close eye on Katako as they walked. Not only did he seem much improved, he appeared to be regaining strength even as they walked. Whatever it had been that Kythias had done, it had worked beyond Nhaqosa's wildest hopes.

Towards mid morning, the land fell away beneath them and the view opened out onto the broad, dusty plains that lay below them. A small village, little more than a cluster of rude houses near a shallow stream, lay nearby, a pillar of smoke rising from outside of it. A large fire burned, though what it was that was afire they could not tell at the distance.

As they moved down from the hills towards the village, the fuel of the fire became apparent to them; a tangle mass of blackened bodies. Nhaqosa hoped that they had been dead before they had been consigned to the flames. The sickly sweet smell of burning flesh grew strong and the looks of the band grew hard and vengeful.

Nhaqosa growled at the sight, anger coursing through his veins, a deep seated fury that needed release.

"This is what you object to us stopping?" he said to Kythias in accusatory tones.

"This saddens me," Kythias replied, face etched with sorrow. "It saddens me that such things occur and that you must burden your heart with vengeance."

Nhaqosa snorted and shook his horn-tipped head. "If it is a burden then I will gladly bear it for the sake of these slaughtered innocents." He spoke up louder. "All right people, we are going in. I want no risks, no chances, no showing off. Those we face are killers of the vilest sort. There is to be no quarter."

Even as the others nodded in grim agreement, Kythias was looking shocked at Nhaqosa's pronouncement. "You would simply kill them all with no chance to surrender?"

Nhaqosa fixed him with a steady, steely-eyed gaze. "What would you have us do with them? There are no authorities for us to hand them over to for punishment anymore, and if we were to release them, what then? They would simply continue on as they have in the past. I am sorry if this offends your sensibilities, but it is the only way." He hefted up his heavy stone-headed maul and marched steadily forward, great cloven hooves pounding upon the ground. "Someone needs to do what is right."

They entered into the village, passing the fire where the blackened corpses of the dead smouldered, their limbs tangled together in grotesque sculptures. Features were burnt beyond recognition so that none could tell men from women, young from old, only the small forms of children standing out.

More than one of the hardened gladiators was moist eyed as they passed, but in those self same eyes was grim anger, reflecting the determination that burned within to visit vengeance on the perpetrators of such a horrific crime.

The village itself seemed deserted, not a sound coming from within it, dead, like those who burnt on the fire. Nhaqosa motioned for the others to halt at the edge of the village, looking around, nostrils flaring and ears twitching with concern.

"I shall call if I need you."

"You can't go alone, Kwaza," Abasan said, objecting to the idea.

"I will be fine, Abasan," Nhaqosa told him before flicking a glance to Kythias. "Besides, they apparently need to be offered a choice." Shouldering his maul, Nhaqosa strode purposely forward, heading into the heart of the village.

"Your ideas will be the death of him," Abasan stated pointedly to Kythias.

Kythias shook his head, face pursed as he pondered the actions of the giant Minotaur. "I think not."

The village was not completely empty. In the centre of the village, in the commons where the grass was brown around a well, a couple of unkempt men sat at a rough-hewn table, a jug of some liquid between them. Their talk ended at Nhaqosa's appearance and they stood in surprise, hands going to weapons. "I would speak to whoever is in charge," Nhaqosa sternly pronounced in the tones of one who would brook no dissent.

One nodded nervously, darting into the building they had been seated in front of, a building of stone that was vaguely statelier than the crude wooden hovels that formed the rest of the village. The second stood staring at Nhaqosa with an almost frightened look.

Nhaqosa planted the head of his maul upon the ground, folding his hands on the handle and waited.

Occasionally his tail slashed or ear twitched, driving away an errant fly, but beyond that he was unmoving as a statue.

The wait lasted for some time, the only sound to be heard the buzzing of flies, before finally a number of men emerged from the building, with them one clad all in dark robes, his hood pulled up over his head so that his features were hidden within.

The robed figure walked to the fore, passing the other bandits who tentatively hung back from Nhaqosa. He looked at Nhaqosa from within the depths of his hood, studying the Minotaur until at last, his curiosity

satisfied, he spoke.

"What manner of beast are you?" it asked, and at those words Nhaqosa knew that what stood before him was no man. There was a sibilant rasp to its voice, a sound of echoes within echoes that set off a disturbing resonance through his body and brought an uneasy chill to his flesh.

Nhaqosa stared back at the hooded creature, then slowly shifted the grip on his maul and raised it back to his shoulder. "I am Nhaqosa," he announced in a deep and rumbling voice. "Kwaza of the Stonemaul tribe, and I am here to announce an end to your deeds."

There was silence at the statement, broken by a mocking laugh which emanated from the hooded creature. It was joined by that of the bandits, their laughter sounding forced.

"You come to end my works?" the hooded one asked. Slowly it raised its hands, Nhaqosa noticing the pallid grey of its skin and the long sharp nails upon them. It took a hold of the hood of its robes and pulled it back. The head that had been hidden within was gaunt and hairless and of a type of creature that Nhaqosa had never laid eyes on before, but heard many dark rumours of. It had no nose nor ears, its skin the same hue of grey as its hands, and its eyes were unnaturally large and pools of blackness, no other colour contained within. It parted dark lips to reveal sharp, needle-like teeth. "None can stop me," it announced, gesturing towards Nhaqosa with a clawed hand, "For I am not of this world."

Nhaqosa felt a heavy chill run through his limbs, weighed down as if beneath the burden of a thousand years, the maul heavy on his shoulder, knees almost giving way beneath him.

Nhaqosa growled, trying to ignore the lethargy that had taken a hold of him and slowly stepped forward. "Neither am I," he replied with ominous foreboding.

On the features of one so inhuman it was hard to read expressions but, if anything, it showed shock at Nhaqosa's words and actions and even fear in its black eyes.

"Kill it," it hissed, backing away from Nhaqosa, gesticulating for the bandits behind him to attack the Minotaur.

The first, braver than most, ran screaming at Nhaqosa, holding a rusty axe high. The weight upon his limbs gone, Nhaqosa swung the maul down and vented forth an almighty roar of pure rage. The blow slammed into the man's side, shattering ribs under the impact and driving the shards deep into his internal organs. The chest caved in and the body was flung aside like a broken doll.

Nhaqosa slowly raised the bloodied maul and pointed at the grey-skinned creature. A droplet of blood formed and slowly detached, splashing to the dusty ground. "I come for you."

"Get him, get him," the creature screamed, a hysterical note to its voice. "Get him!" Nhaqosa began a deliberate, slow stalking walk and the bandits scattered aside rather than risk venturing into the reach of his terrible maul, leaving the creature alone to face him. It scrambled back further, around behind the table, seeking to put it between itself and the enraged Minotaur that came for it.

Nhaqosa brought the maul swinging down again and the table shattered into splinters under the force of the blow. He kicked aside the wreckage and continued his advance. The creature grabbed a hold of a bandit who stood nearby and pushed him bodily into the path of Nhaqosa. The Minotaur contemptuously batted the man aside with his maul, throwing the man to the ground to where a pool of blood began to spread outwards from his ruined body.

Suddenly, from behind, a man yelled a challenge and rushed at Nhaqosa with a levelled spear. Nhaqosa half turned to meet the oncoming attack, but, as he did, the grey-skinned creature darted forward to grasp at his left arm, clawed fingers digging deeply into the white hide so that blood showed crimson upon it.

Nhaqosa let out a roar of frustration and anger at the touch, feeling his strength seep from his arms, accompanied by an echoing mocking laughter from the hairless creature. The weight of the great maul in his hands became too much to support and it dropped from his grip to land clattering upon the ground. The spearman was upon him, aiming to drive the spear home. He barely had the strength left to grasp at the spear shaft as it was thrust at him, snapping it like a twig. He followed up by punching the bandit full in the face. The man staggered back, dazed and bleeding from a battered nose and crushed lip, yet still standing from a blow that would normally have felled him.

The other bandits, sensing that Nhaqosa was now vulnerable, began to close in, vicious smiles creasing their lips.

Nhaqosa tossed back his head and called out with as much strength as he could muster. "Now!" He reached down with his right hand and grabbed the wrist of the grey creature. Clenching his teeth and straining muscles fair to burst he tried to pull free the clawed hand that was dug deep into his flesh. From beyond the square, called in by Nhaqosa's yell, came the escaped gladiators, spilling into viewing, charging forward with weapons to hand. A crossbow bolt split the air and one bandit, poised ready to drive a sword into Nhaqosa's exposed broad back, went down as he was transfixed through the neck, gurgling blood as he fell.

The bandits turned to face the fresh threat, leaving Nhaqosa to the unholy mercies of their dark master. Screaming insults they charged at the oncoming gladiators. The singing and clash of blades rang out as the two groups collided with a vicious impact, cries and screams echoing about as blows struck home. Nhaqosa's band was trying to hack a bloody path through the bandits to reach his side, while the bandits fought back with a reckless fanaticism, sensing in this fight that no quarter was to be expected or given. "Kwaza!" Abasan screamed in wild fury, "Kwaza!" He disembowelled one foe, blade viciously ripping him open to spill forth intestines. The main desperately tried to hold them in as he staggered away, his high-pitched anguished squeal loud above even the sounds of battle. Another man was punched in the face with the hilt of his sword as Abasan desperately tried to reach Nhaqosa.

Ears ringing with the pounding of his blood, Nhaqosa barely heard him, or the din of the fight. The nails dug into his flesh were slowly being torn loose. The grey creature raised his other hand and about it dark eldritch mists began to coalesce, a black mass of foul energies through which swirls and sparks of deep purple flashed. He raised it and drove the mass into Nhaqosa's chest and the Minotaur screamed as pain unlike any he had experienced before hammered his body.

Before him everything blurred and darkened, bright points of light swirling in his vision. His heart was pounding erratically and sweat poured forth from his body. Knees began to buckle under the agony tearing him apart.

In desperation he did the one thing he could. Screaming incoherently he brought his head up and then drove it down, his broad forehead slamming with every last ounce of strength he could muster straight into the face of the monster that was forcing him downwards with its dark powers.

The grip on him was torn free as the monster staggered back from the blow, stunned by the resilience and ferocity of the enraged minotaur as much as by the attack itself. Nhaqosa slowly rose back up to his full height, towering over the creature. He slammed a brutal kick at the creature, knee shattering under the impact of the strike. The creature fell over, shrieking and writhing as it clutched at the ruined knee. Nhaqosa purposely strode forward to stand above the grey-hued creature, staring down at it with resolute purpose. "Your foul deeds end here," the Minotaur announced.

A cloven hoof was raised high and then stomped down with brutal precision. The creature's skull shattered beneath it.

Walking back over to where his maul lay, Nhaqosa picked it up and turned back to the fight that had raged in the square, but it had ended. The bodies of the bandits lay strewn all around, though they were not alone. A cluster of his band had gathered around the fallen form of one of their own. Nhaqosa hurried over to join them.

It was Alyan, lying in Lakach's arms, his eyes staring up at the sky lifelessly.

"What happened?"

"He was stabbed from behind," Abasan told Nhaqosa, voice tight with emotion. "I am sorry Kwaza."

Nhaqosa rested a heavy hand gently on Abasan's shoulder. "You are not to blame Abasan. His death lies squarely on my shoulders. Burn that thing," he said, pointing to the hairless monster, "And the others with him. We will bury Alyan properly."

Kythias had not approached Nhaqosa as the group buried Alyan, allowing them their privacy to grieve their fallen companion. As they departed the freshly dug grave, Kythias had sought the Minotaur out.

"I am sorry for your loss."

"He was a good man," Nhaqosa told him, "And he fought bravely in the face of evil. How can man die better?"

"What was it that you laid on his grave?" In the aftermath of the burial, he had seen Nhaqosa remove an item from a pouch he carried and place it in the earth.

"I have sent him a companion to guide his feet home," Nhaqosa replied, touching at a small pouch at his side. Within were simple stone carvings in the likeness of a wolf, one for each member of the band, should the need for them arise.

"You have them for all of your people, but not yourself," Kythias observed with uncanny insight. Nhaqosa could not fathom how the man could have known it, but it was true.

"It is so. One can not carve one for themselves."

"And if you die in this place without one for yourself?"

"Then there will be no companion to guide my feet home and I shall be lost to my people until the end of all time."

Kythias looked up at Nhaqosa with an expression of both profound sorrow and awe. "You would risk that and all it entails by placing yourself in harms way for a world not your own and for people who do not truly trust or respect you?"

"I can do no other. A man once showed me a better way, and I must follow in his steps."

Kythias slowly shook his head, still trying to adjust to the magnitude of what Nhaqosa had said. "Friend Nhaqosa, though I may not have approved of your methods, I can not fault your convictions, nor your willingness to sacrifice all that you are. You have given me much to think about. I must be making my leave now, but before I go, I wish for you to know that I will not forget this and that I will leave a legacy for you."

"A legacy?" Nhaqosa asked, studying the merchant with obvious curiosity. "What exactly?"

Kythias smiled enigmatically in reply. "You shall see in time, friend Nhaqosa."

It was a simple village, like so many others they had seen, blurring one into another. The mob of former gladiators had made their way into it, dusty and weary from a long march, and once more the people had gathered to watch, to stare, whispering low amongst each other and pointing.

There was something different in their expression though, something Nhaqosa had not encountered before. Not fear, or shock but something that approached awed respect.

Their whispers grew in intensity and Nhaqosa caught one word repeated over and over, a word he did not know.

"What it is they are saying Abasan?"

"*Yahalat Tamar*, Kwaza."

"And what does that mean?"

"The Noble White Bull, Kwaza. They have been expecting us, expecting you." There was awe in Abasan's words. "They have been told that you are one who vanquishes evil."

Nhaqosa laughed deeply, the sound rumbling through the village.

"Thank you Kythias," he said softly as he started to walk to greet those that had come to see him. Then, from far beyond the village, came a sound alien to the world, though of profoundest importance to Nhaqosa. The howl of a wolf echoed out in the wilds, a howl of respect.

Nhaqosa laughed and, despite everything, all was well with the world again.

PURE ESCAPISM