

Coliseum Morpheuon:
Anthology of Dreams

Edited by David Paul

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Editor's Dedication

To Dave, Kevin, Bob and Rod for encouraging my weirdness
when I was young.

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Introduction

by David Paul

"But I cannot forget that, at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and, attentively considering those cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming."

MEDITATION I: OF THE THINGS OF WHICH WE MAY DOUBT -- René Descartes

Many rise from sleep unaware of having dreamt. Some notice their fleeting dream images vanishing like the last wisps of fog burning away in the morning sun. Others wake slowly, marveling in some emotionally charged otherworld, only slowly giving way to the insistent, persistent solidity and consistency of the waking world. Dreams have fascinated people forever, their mysteries and messages engaging and compelling. People have speculated about the meanings of dreams for as long as they've had them. Everyone, from peasant to king, has sought the advice of those who could interpret the meanings of our nightly stories. For most, the waking world's continuity and stability contrasts sharply against the ephemeral and disjointed nature of the dream world. But, consider for a moment an alternative...

Most expect that, while they're dreaming, there remains a waking world into which they will return when they awaken. They expect that this waking world will be essentially the one they left when they fell asleep, and that it is the world inhabited by their friends and enemies the world over. Similarly, most expect that, while they're awake, there is no

dreaming world currently inhabited by others. There is a sense that the world of dreams, unlike the waking world, is private, idiosyncratic, personal. What if that's not true? What if, just as the waking world remains while you're asleep, the dreaming world remains while you're awake? What if it's inhabited by all manner of beings going about their business? What if some of them are aware of your absence while you're awake? What if you and I and others could meet in that space, while we sleep? Which of our minds shapes its contents? Who determines the larger rules of that world?

Contained in the pages of this anthology are many different interpretations of what it might mean for a world of dreams to be real. There are similarities: every story takes place in the Plane of Dreams, near the Coliseum Morpheuon, on the Brightdocks, or somewhere similar; characters from the Coliseum Morpheuon campaign setting have cameo appearances; and many of the emotional themes of the setting ooze out from behind the words (treachery, loss, abandonment, but also hope, redemption, and friendship).

As Jonathan McAnulty described in the introduction to the *Coliseum Morpheuon*, there are very clearly elements of Lewis Carroll and H. P. Lovecraft in this setting and in these stories. But, there's more. The characters and settings in people's dreams can evoke sensations other than irreverence, absurdity, or nightmare. Consider how you'd react finding yourself suddenly in one of the many fantastic landscapes of Dr. Seuss, chatting up its denizens, and exploring the physics of such a place. Further, who wouldn't want to be a fly on the wall at some smoky tavern where Ferengi and Hutts argue about the value of someone's dreams? Just like in dreams, there is a sense in which anything can happen here.

There are many ways you might use this collection of stories. Most simply, there is entertainment through good storytelling. But, if you're a player lucky enough to have a GM running a Coliseum Morpheuon setting, or you're the GM running such a campaign, these tales can serve as mines for finding veins of silver and gold. Perhaps the descriptions of individuals or places will excite your imagination and encourage you to explore areas of the setting that have so far been outside your consideration. Maybe you'll have a new sense of the Tarnished Souk, maybe now you actually want to have a run in with men of Leng, or, perhaps, on your next trip out to sea, you'll happen upon a strangely garbed man walking across the sea's surface and you'll note with some concern that the water seems solid wherever he walks, but only for just long enough for him to continue walking. Is your ship going his way? Should it?

Living Legend

by Jonathan McAnulty

“I never back down, I never run, and I never leave them alive,” boasted Tarl Dron, hero of a thousand battles and master of the Stolen Blade. His listeners, a tavern full of soldiers, fishermen, dockhands and assorted riff-raff, roared their approval. The serving girl at his feet giggled demurely and reached forth to refill his cup.

He grinned at her as he lifted the rice wine to his lips and swallowed it down. “Ah, that hits the spot. Many’s the time I faced death and wished for a quick swallow of courage. Now then, where was I...? Ah that’s right. The crazed Administrator’s skeletal legion was vanquished, and there I was, facing the ghoulish man himself. I was bleeding from a hundred wounds and he was offering to let me live if I but flee. But as I said, I never back down and though I was weary, I had the gods on my side and a stout blade in my hand. I closed in with him to do battle...,” Tarl paused and took measure of his audience. To a man they were leaning forward in anxious anticipation of the tale’s climax, though they had heard the story before. Tarl, relishing the moment, could not help but feel pleased. This was what he lived for: a captive audience and free food and drink.

Tarl continued, his voice rising dramatically, “The Administrator of the Ebon Halls was old, a husk of a man, but his frame was held together by dark magics. I struck him once and my sword bounced away. I struck again and it bounced away again. I could not injure him. He waved his hand, a flick, and I sailed away into the air, striking hard the wall of his palace. He waved his hand a second time and I

struck the opposite wall. It cracked from the impact. No doubt a lesser man would have cracked too. But I still had my wits. I remembered then the oil the old witch had given me after I had slain her three pets. Pulling it from my belt, I poured it on my blade. It smelled foul but I did not care. As soon as it touched my blade I leapt to my feet. A bolt of eldritch energy flew at me and I rolled underneath it as I charged forward. With a loud cry I plunged my sword into the old necromancer's chest. It slid in easily and he screamed in agony. I had won. Or so I thought. It was then that he burst into flames. He and all his house. His final magic! There were flames on every side of me. Flames at the doors and at the windows. The stone walls themselves began to burn from the hellish flames. I could see no way out. Was this the end? Having vanquished the necromancer and all his evil, were the gods to let me perish in this way? I thought not. For the old wizard had forgotten that there was a way out from his death trap. He had forgotten his pool. The very pool he had mocked me with just two hours earlier! Taking a mighty breath I leaped into it as the flaming ceiling crashed down behind me. The pool was fed by a stream from the mountains, a stream which fed into the pool through a large pipe just visible from the surface. The flames were so fierce that I dared not rise from the water to take a breath; nevertheless, I valiantly swam against the stream. The going was hard and I felt my strength diminishing. The greatest warrior can yet drown. Water is an unforgiving foe. But then I saw light and swam all the harder, with sure, measured strokes until at last I burst forth into the open air, safe and at long last free of the accursed palace. I climbed from the water and sat upon the ground in a grove of bamboo and watched the

whole place burn. After five days of pure hell it was a pleasant sight.”

Once more, his audience roared their approval, and, basking in the glory, Tarl sat down upon the floor, motioning to the serving girl to once more refill his cup. As she did so, the innkeeper made his way to the table, a platter of food in his hands, “Compliments of the house, good sir.”

“You are too kind,” said Tarl politely, but he motioned for the platter to be placed on the table in front of him. With an appetite born of lengthy story-telling, he began to eat merrily, relishing every bite. So involved was he in the endeavor he did not notice the woman who sat at the table beside him until she spoke.

“That was quite a story; did you really slay a thousand skeletal warriors all by yourself?”

Tarl looked over and hastily wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. The woman was quite striking, beautiful even. Though she sat upon the floor, she was obviously tall. Her kimono was of the best silk, wonderfully dyed and elegantly embroidered. The pins holding her dark hair were gold. The only thing out of place on all her person was the two dolls tied to her waist. There was a sly smile on her face as she repeated the question.

Tarl rubbed his tongue against the inside of his cheek and grinned. “It may have been only five or six hundred,” he answered with good humor, “After the first hundred one loses count.”

She laughed at his answer. It was a deep laugh, matching her strong voice.

“Do you always exaggerate when you tell tales about yourself?”

“Of course,” he answered truthfully, still grinning broadly, “Don't all men?”

“I don't know all men.”

“We are incorrigible liars all, whatever our work. The fisherman tells of great fish. The swordsman of great battles. It is expected of a man, that when he tells a tale, he makes it interesting. It must, of course, have a kernel of truth, but what matters is that it is a tale men want to hear. No one would be entertained by a tale of catching a minnow, and likewise the cold nights spent in the field, waiting for the enemy, or the bad food one eats when on a campaign, these are not fun to hear of.”

“Is it so important that men listen to your stories?”

“Indeed it is. Very important!” Tarl said with mock seriousness, “You must understand my position, Many a soldier returns from battle, earning only a night or two of revelry for his bravery. But a teller of tales, tales told well, he is feasted richly every night. Men value stories as much as heroics, for without the stories, the heroics are soon forgotten and the heroes pass into obscurity. I do not wish to pass into obscurity so easily and if I do not share my exploits, who will? Besides which, I enjoy eating.”

She nodded her head approvingly, “You have done well then. And your tales are quite popular. They reach out to the heavens themselves, to the very ears of the gods. All men know of Tarl Dron. You have lived quite a life.”

“It has had its moments,” said Tarl, with false humility.

“I like you,” she said and she motioned to the serving girl next to Tarl, “You girl, get us some better wine and I will have a platter of meat.” She placed a small gold bar on the table before her with a casualness that, more than her attire, spoke volumes of her wealth. The girl gasped at the sight of

so much money and, snatching it up, she rose quickly to her feet, bowed respectfully and then hurried to comply.

The woman's face lost its humor and she was suddenly all business, "I come with an invitation for you, Tarl Dron, from my master, who dearly wishes to meet you. He has heard much about you, and he proposes a wager. He will arrange three sets of foes, and, if you can best all three, he will give you your weight in gems and gold and send forth a thousand bards to sing songs of your valor."

Tarl was caught off guard and found himself laughing. "That is quite a boast. Who is this master of yours? The Sultan of the Scorched Sands? The Emperor of the Twelve Legions? Have my stories reached the ears of the very kings of the earth?"

"Do not scoff," said the woman severely, "He is greater than any mortal potentate. Did I not say your tales had reached the very gods? My master rules a realm not of this world and yet one which you have visited often. He is the Master of Dreaming and the Khan of Nightmares. And he delights in battle as much as any man. He has heard of your prowess but scarcely dares believe it and so sets you a challenge."

Tarl knew not what to say and so he stammered, "And what of these challenges? Of what nature would they be?"

She laughed then, her humor returning, "Surely nothing more dangerous than yourself. You have my word on that. My master wishes for sport, nothing more. He desires, I believe, to recreate the events of the Ebon Halls, one of your most popular battles, and the very tale you were just telling."

The servant girl returned then, accompanied by five others, all bearing platters of rich food.

The woman rose, “I am not hungry after all. Tarl here may have what he will, and any he wishes to share with. Tarl, I shall await an answer from you. Choose by tonight, before the moon reaches its zenith. I shall know if you call me. I am the Queen of Thistles.” With a sardonic smile and a curt bow, she turned and strode quickly and purposefully out the door, leaving Tarl feeling somewhat bewildered.

Though Tarl had a good mind to discount the woman and her offer, he could not. He found himself dwelling upon the idea of the proffered contest. Though he was boastful, prone to exaggeration, and an incorrigible liar, he had not lived to tell a thousand tales without a certain level of skill and wit. He had faced death often enough in truth and never for a prize such as was offered to him now. If this Khan could indeed gift him with his own weight in gold and gems, Tarl could purchase his own estate and hang up his sword. And with a thousand bards singing his songs and telling his tales, there would be no need for him to continue that work. His story would live on forever. It was, Tarl realized, all that he had ever dreamed of. But there was a certain something about that woman that Tarl did not trust. She was both less and more than she seemed. Tarl possessed no arcane sight, but he had been around magic enough to know its feel, and the woman, Tarl had realized belatedly, reeked of it. Though if she was who she claimed to be, perhaps that was to be expected.

One last adventure, he decided. One final set of battles. He knew himself well enough to know he would regret not having tested the truth of the strange offer. Thus determined,

he made a brief visit to an old woman he knew and then returned to the inn to wait.

The sun set. The moon began to climb into the sky. Tarl sat cross-legged upon his pallet in his room, the Stolen Blade upon his lap. He could not help but wonder if he was being foolish. At last he called out, "I accept, oh Queen of Thistles."

And everything changed.

He stood for a moment upon the shore of a mad sea, sword in hand, pack upon his back. The landscape around him roiled, a maelstrom of confusing images. He was in the midst of a forest of writhing trees. The trees melted away and he was alone in a desert, with rain falling up from the sand. The land fell and then heaved. The sand turned to rock, a lone cliff against which the waves crashed below. The sky was a kaleidoscope of blacks and reds across which a pale moon raced. The waters of the ocean before him churned and boiled. It was a picture of hell.

And then it all changed again.

It felt to him as if he were flying. Or perhaps he was only dreaming that he flew. The feeling lasted only a moment, yet it was a moment which encompassed hours, days, months and years. He went on and on through black night as the stars danced to an unheard, yet maddening cacophony of flutes and drums.

He screamed, and then, as quickly as it had begun, the moment ended and it all changed a final time.

He stood before a great gate in the midst of a city. Voices called out, advertising wares. Throngs of people pushed against each other, jostling, yelling, cursing, laughing. Above, a fractured moon hung in the sky. Beyond the gate was a building, all splendor and light, like some great shell filled with fire. There was, he perceived, a great stadium in the midst of the building, a ring of seats around what must surely be a massive arena.

“Greetings Tarl Dron,” said a familiar voice. It was she who had invited him, the Queen of Thistles. She strode through the midst of the gate, an imposing figure. Where before she had been merely tall, now she towered: a veritable giantess. Behind her cowered two other figures. They had the appearance of ancient, withered, slaving crones, though they stood two heads taller than Tarl himself. Tarl's eyes went, unbidden, to the two puppets at the waist of the Queen. Heedless of his discomfort, the Queen of Thistles intoned, “Welcome to the Coliseum Morpheuon, the greatest arena in all of Dream.”

“Am I dreaming then?” asked Tarl in wonder.

“Dreaming or awake, it matters not. What you see and what you will see is as real as you are, the manifestation of the desires of uncounted dreamers. Here the fantasies of men take on life and legends are born nightly. Here a man can craft a tale that will outlive him by a hundred lives. Here the flesh becomes the dream and the dream becomes flesh. Here

the storyteller and dreamer is king! Enter and accept the hospitality of my master.”

She beckoned toward the shining building behind her, and, with just a moment's hesitation, Tarl accepted the invitation in full.

Tarl spent four days enjoying the hospitality of the Khan of Nightmares. He dined as never before, and strange, unspeaking slaves, slaves who walked in a seemingly perpetual stupor, attended to his every need, conjuring forth from the very air whatever his heart desired. The rooms of the Coliseum were lavish amalgamations of marble, silk, and gold. Fountains flowed in every room, some with water, some with wine, some with fire. Tarl found himself in the midst of a strange company. The Coliseum housed many souls. Some were warriors, some were gamblers, some were merely patrons of the games. Some were human, most were not. Creatures of air mingled with beings made of earth or fire. Winged angels and horned devils alike partook of the Khan's hospitality. Despite their many differences, they all were in some way connected with the arena and the Khan.

Tarl wondered at first to be among such an illustrious company. He thought to entertain them with tales of his own exploits, only to find that his tales were already well known. To his surprise he discovered that he was indeed a legend in the land of dreams. Many of the warriors greeted him as if they were old friends. Some afterwards looked at him strangely as if he were not quite what they expected. Nevertheless, they each assured him that they looked forward to seeing him compete upon the floor of the Khan's Chimeric

Amphitheater. Their confidence buoyed his spirits and Tarl found himself actually looking forward to the contest. He spent his free time dreaming of the ways in which he would spend his gold. He thought of servants, fine clothes, beautiful handmaids, wondrous meals and hours spent listening to other men telling his tales. Thus he daydreamed and thus the four days flew by unnaturally fast.

The summons was brought by the Queen of Thistles. Behind her, her two crone companions gibbered and glared, their faces garishly decorated in the style of a common geisha.

“Prepare yourself warrior, you are to compete in two hours. A room beside the arena has been prepared for you.”

The preparation room was less ornate than the rest of the Coliseum. A single fountain bubbled on one of the nondescript walls, the water feeding down into a utilitarian bath. The only other features in the room were the stone benches along two of the other walls and the two large wooden doors. One led back out to the halls of the Coliseum, the other to the arena floor of the Chimeric Amphitheater.

Tarl bathed and then dressed himself for battle. He put his hair in a top-knot and donned his armor, beginning with the leg guards and working his way up to his bronze lamellar breastplate and lacquered shoulder pads. He anointed his sword, the Stolen Blade, with sacred oils, using a polishing rag and then dabbed his eyes with a salve of seeing. Both oil and salve had been purchased from the old woman, a priestess,

before entering the realm of dreams. He donned his kabuto helmet and slid his arms into the sleeve armor. Finally, he slipped his socked feet into his sandals. Thus arranged, he began to relax his muscles and clear his mind. Slowly and carefully he moved his sword through a routine of fluid cuts and graceful strikes.

The Stolen Blade was a long, single-edged blade with a slight curvature. Its grip was lacquered bamboo, wrapped with cord and its guard and pommel were bronze. It was a good sword and Tarl had used it in many battles. His familiarity with it was total. Sword and warrior moved as one. As Tarl progressed through his routine, he began moving more quickly, the blade becoming a blur of steel through the air. Twice Tarl stopped and adjusted one of the straps of his armor before continuing with his warm-ups. Once he paused to retie a string on his leggings, after a knot came undone. He moved through his practice routine thrice, and then, feeling he was as prepared as he could be, he sat upon one of the benches, wondering what challenges he would face.

Though night had fully fallen, and the stars twinkled high above, there was no darkness upon the floor of the Chimeric Amphitheater as Tarl strode out onto its surface. Light seemed to radiate from the very walls, though they did not, in any sense, glow, illuminating every particle of the dirt floor in stark detail.

Tarl looked around at the majestic seats encircling the arena floor. Nearly every seat was filled and the occupants were shouting out at him, jeers and cheers mingled into a single lusty noise of exultation and exuberance. Far above the

other seats, floating in the sky with no visible means of support, was an ornate porch-like enclosure, within which stood the Khan of Nightmares and his entourage. Tarl's breath caught as he beheld the Khan, for though he could see the form of the genial man he had glimpsed more than once during the preceding four days, superimposed upon the image was another, more hideous figure: a demonic and bestial entity. So too with the Queen of Thistles. Tarl beheld both her seeming shape and another shape, one more like the two crones that accompanied her than unlike. The salve of sight the old woman had given him, he realized, was the cause of his double vision. He wondered, though, that he should have so easily agreed to participate in any event hosted by such creatures as these.

Before he had time to consider the matter further, the Khan spoke, his rich baritone voice resonating beautifully throughout the entire amphitheater, "Greetings one and all. This evening brings a true master of the blade to our unworthy house! Tarl Dron has agreed to fight for our pleasure, recreating his exploits in the Ebon Halls for our amusement and entertainment. We have deemed it fitting that he face each of the dangers of that dread place in a public display of his prowess! Have no doubt that tonight Tarl Dron shall triumph before us all!"

As he spoke, Tarl sensed a subtle change in the air around him, a charge like static before a summer storm. Basalt and granite stone erupted from the sandy soil like strange flowers, grass and trees sprang into being here and there, and Tarl found himself suddenly standing in the midst of a vast columned garden. He recognized it at once as the courtyard of the Ebon Halls, a place he had thought long destroyed, yet now created in exacting detail before his very

eyes. Stranger yet was the optical perspective of the arena. Around him the land stretched to the edge of his vision and yet he could still see the seats of the Coliseum not far from him. It was a strange, disjointed sight, and his head swayed for a moment as his eyes and brain adjusted.

Almost as soon as he had regained his equilibrium, the ground moved, opening up as bony claws stretched upwards. The dead were arising. This was not how the skeletal warriors had come at him in the waking world, but perhaps the monstrous Khan was given to dramatics.

“Let the fight begin!” boomed the voice of the Khan, but Tarl needed no encouragement. Already he was attacking the newly created undead. His blade cut easily through bones to his left and then to his right and he leaped forward, the Stolen Blade a flashing arc of steel. A dozen skeletons fell to the ground before they ever had a chance to fully stand upon two feet. Briefly Tarl wondered if the Khan truly meant to summon a thousand such foes for him. Perhaps, he thought, he shouldn't have quite inflated the numbers so brazenly.

More and more skeletons poured forth from the soil and Tarl found himself hard pressed on every side. As he fended off rusted swords, bony fingers and ancient teeth, cutting down the skeletal warriors one after another, the crowd roared in delight.

The Black Administrator of the Ebon Halls was exactly as Tarl remembered him, a withered husk of a man, more flesh than blood, dressed in robes of ornate red silk. The Khan, if it was truly he who had conjured forth the necromancer, had done his research well.

Following the fight with the skeletons, Tarl had been granted only a short reprieve, just enough to catch his breath and wipe his sword. It had, thankfully, been somewhat less than a full thousand of the bony foes, but it had still been more than Tarl had fought in the real Ebon Halls. True, this time he had the advantage of armor and a better sword than he had possessed then, but he was somewhat surprised he had been able to defeat so many. At times it had seemed almost as if the skeletons had allowed him an easy victory. Tarl didn't know whether the Administrator would be so easily defeated. He thought not, though he knew if he could land a blow, his sword would do its job well enough.

"We meet again!" laughed the Administrator and he conjured forth a ball of fire which rolled across the floor at Tarl. The crowd yelled to see it, almost as if they hoped it would strike him. Tarl resolved not to give them the satisfaction. He dived over the flaming sphere, rolled across the floor and was on his feet in a moment. With a growl, Tarl rushed at the ancient wizard. But as he swung, the necromancer disappeared and the Stolen Blade sliced only air. Behind him, Tarl could hear the ball of fire coming once more toward him, snapping and crackling with arcane energy.

"I'm not so easy to catch," said the Administrator, from the other side of the room.

"Neither am I," said Tarl as he dived to the right. As the flaming sphere crashed into a pillar and then reversed course once more, Tarl added, "I hope." The spectators cheered once more as Tarl ran to where he espied the withered spellcaster. Almost too late, he realized, that the figure he perceived was only an illusion, a decoy. Fortunately, the salve of sight within his eyes was still working. The real necromancer was standing near the pool, invisible, his hands

moving in a complex pattern as he cast another spell. Tarl dove left and rolled into a charge. The Administrator showed some surprise at having been spotted and his spell faltered. Tarl paused in mid charge and, drawing forth every bit of strength he had, leapt backwards in a full somersault. There was silence for a moment in the arena as all watching held their breath to see such a display of athletic prowess. Tarl could see the flaming sphere beneath him, could feel its heat as it rolled across the very ground he had just been standing on. The flaming ball of fire struck the wizard. Tarl landed hard on his feet just as the flames exploded. He threw up his arm protectively as the fire washed over him. Though the blast knocked him backwards and the heat seared his skin, it did little actual damage, thanks to his armor and quick reflexes. The Administrator of the Ebon Halls had not been so spared. His silk robes were aflame and he screamed in pain.

Tarl leapt forward and drove his blade into the necromancer's chest. The Stolen Blade slid in easily. For the second time, Tarl Dron had vanquished the ancient lich.

“You have done well,” said the Khan, sounding pleased, “Indeed you are almost as good as your legend would lead us to believe.” There was an amused quality to the Khan's inflection. “You have faced the thousand skeletal warriors and have cut down the dread necromantic Administrator. There remains just one more challenge and then Tarl Dron shall walk from here, laden with gold.”

Tarl stood, his chest heaving, his brow dripping with sweat, his armor smoking slightly in more than one place. He

was just glad that the halls had not indeed burst into flames as they had done in the waking world. He was not as young as he once was and he was not sure he could have made the passage through the water. He wondered what new deviltry the Khan had planned but found it strangely reassuring to hear the Khan assume he was going to be the victor of the next match.

“It is,” intoned the Khan, “undeniably true that the dread Administrator was not the most fearsome creature in the Ebon Halls. For if he had been, he would have triumphed. It stands to reason then that the most dangerous of foes one could have met in the Ebon Halls was Tarl Dron himself!” The crowd cheered and laughed.

Tarl's weary ears perked a little as he caught that last bit and he stood just a little straighter.

“Therefore, I have scoured the Plane of Dreams to bring you this evening's final event. Tarl Dron shall fight... Tarl Dron. This is indeed the realm where myth becomes reality and legends are born in truth!”

For a moment Tarl was not sure he had heard properly. And then a new foe strode into the halls. Tarl gaped, for the figure before him was none other than himself. Nor was it an illusion. The other was in every detail like unto him, and just as real. Though, as Tarl surveyed his doppelganger, he realized that his dream self stood just a little taller, his shoulders were just a little broader and he moved with just a little more grace. Understanding came slowly but surely. This was not his double. This was the double of the Tarl who lived in the stories. Stories in which the truth was stretched just a bit for effect. Stories in which he overcame odds that would have done him in, had he truly faced them.

Tarl understood then that he could not win this fight. Though, he realized with grim amusement, the Khan was correct in saying that he could not lose this fight either.

“Greetings, brother,” said Tarl, with a wry smile. He removed his helmet and absently rubbed a spot on the back of his head, relieving an itch.

“And to you,” said the other, with a mannerism that was disconcertingly familiar.

Tarl paused a moment before asking, “I don’t suppose you would consider us not fighting? Just turn our backs on this pile of gold we’ve been offered.”

“I never back down from a challenge, as you well know,” was the reply.

“Well I never run,” said Tarl with a sigh and he placed his helmet back atop his head, “Looks like we shall have to do this then, or we’ll never live it down.”

“Unfortunately for you, I also never leave them alive,” said the double, and there was a slight suggestion of regret in the voice as he said this.

“I suspected as much.”

The two raised their swords in a salute.

“Begin!” commanded the Khan with a laugh. The two hesitated only for a moment and then rushed at each other with twin battle-cries. Their blades met with a shower of sparks and the battle was joined.

And so it was that Tarl Dron, hero of a thousand battles and master of the Stolen Blade, did meet his doom upon the Slumbering Sea, in the City of the Coliseum, on the floor of the Chimeric Amphitheater, at the hands of his own Living Legend, much to the amusement of the Khan of Nightmares.

Focus

by Tim Hitchcock

The Sparring Room

For a moment, all went silent. Time slowed into staggering seconds, and the barking mouths of the other gladiators crowded around the sparring ring, hung open like lifeless statues. Ergasin lashed out, his kick striking like the coiled snap of a scorpion's tail. The crack of his opponent's neck was deafening. Then like angry waters shattering a damn, the rush of sound flooded the room. Then came the mob. Half a dozen seasoned fighters piled into the ring, striking from all sides, beating him to the ground as they lashed him with thick leather restraints. He offered no resistance, even when his skull cracked into the hard stone floor dusted only with a layer of straw. In the arena, it would have been a softer fall, sand, earth, or perhaps some other stranger substance conjured by the arena-masters to keep the masses entertained. But here in the stalls, the keepers laid only straw to soak up the blood and, theoretically, there wasn't supposed to be blood.

Ergasin kept his eyes closed and lay still listening to the chaos around him, waiting to hear the verdict. A hush stole over the crowd and someone new entered the room. He could hear the straw crunch beneath the footsteps and perhaps robes or a gown dragging behind. Then a man's voice unfamiliar to him spoke, his tone dry and hollow, his inflection matter of fact.

“His neck is broken....”