

The River of Flames
Part 1
by Stephen D. Sullivan

Jolum the Fish wiped the sweat from his forehead and gazed upriver at the fires burning in the distance. The conflagration thrust orange and yellow fingers above the wooded hilltops -- fiery hands groping toward the pre-dawn sky. Gouts of gray and black smoke, visible only near the flames, billowed up, blotting out the stars. *Phantoms of a town's destruction*, Jolum thought. *Another village gone.*

He turned his eyes away from the fire, but reflections of the flames danced atop the river's surface, staining the Roa Sein red.

"It's almost beautiful, isn't it?" Kiani Riverstone said quietly. She joined Jolum at the rail of the small scouting ship and smiled at her Iron Lung commander.

Kiani was a lovely young woman; both Riverstone sisters were. She was well-muscled, tan, and attractive -- even in the dim, pre-dawn light. Her short-cropped dusty hair nicely complimented her blue-green eyes and flashing smile.

Jolum didn't much care about such things, though. What mattered to him was that Kiani had sinews of iron and a will to match. She was also one hell of a fighter. The Riverstone sisters were among the best of Jolum's Iron Lung brigade, the Atlantis Guild's elite fighting force. Jolum felt glad to have her at his side.

"The flames might be beautiful," he replied, "if we didn't know the trouble lurking beneath them."

Kia nodded. "Aye." She turned away from the distant fires and scanned the darkened woods and Xandressan hills on either side of the river. A long, slow breath escaped her lips. "I can almost hear the screams," she said. "We were lucky to get downriver without being spotted."

"*Anyone* will be lucky to get downriver from now on," Jolum said. "The Shyft control everything to the north past the Red Fens." He clutched the rail as though he were strangling some unseen enemy; his knuckles turned white. "The worst part is, we never saw them coming."

Kiani put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't blame yourself," she said. "We did our best to warn Atlantis. We sacrificed lives just to get this far."

An image of a young Iron Lunger and an underwater golem, Barbuk and Horseshoe -- now both dead, flashed through Jolum's mind. "It's not enough," he replied. The reflected flames danced menacingly in his pale blue eyes. "I'd have sacrificed every one of us to prevent this invasion. I fear the worst is yet to come."

Kiani leaned on the rail and gazed at the crimson water. "Aye," she whispered. "I wish we had better tidings to bring downriver. Windwillow won't be happy."

Jolum stood back from the rail and straightened up. The muscles of his jaw tightened, accentuating the angles of his tanned face. In the reflected light, he looked almost like the stern statue of an Atlantean deity. “Windwillow and her villagers will have to cope. They don’t have any choice.”

“She hasn’t been too pleased with the corps since her nephew got wounded,” Kia said. “I’m sorry that Bri and I didn’t take better care of him.”

“Shorepiper never should have been on that expedition,” Jolum replied. “I only let him come along to placate Windwillow in the first place.”

“He’s a good kid....”

“Good kid doesn’t enter into it. I shouldn’t have let him come. If I’d put my foot down he’d never have gotten hurt. Then we wouldn’t be in this tricky political situation.”

“I’ve heard Cormorant say, ‘All life is politics,’” Kiani said.

The Iron Lung commander’s pale eyes narrowed. “She *would* say that. ... And maybe she’s right. I don’t have the belly for it, though. I’m just a warrior, and I’ve got a job to do. The Shyft are coming and Windwillow’s town has to be made ready, otherwise....”

A chill morning wind drifted in from the north, carrying the smell of smoke to the scouting ship’s passengers.

Kiani Riverstone and Jolum the Fish turned away from the distant flames and gazed downriver toward their destination. In their minds, they felt flames behind them, licking at their heels.

“I am not pleased, captain Jolum,” Windwillow said. “Not pleased at all.” Her dark brown eyes flashed as she strode up the dock toward the battered scouting ship. She shook an old carved staff at the Iron Lung leader. The antique was a *Speaking Stick*, handed down across the generations to this short, dark-skinned, feisty Xandressan. It denoted Windwillow’s power within the village of Crocswallow and the lands surrounding it.

With Windwillow came a handful of other village elders: merchants, priests, and retired warriors, most of them. The rest of the council trailed behind Windwillow, signifying her place as “First Among Equals.” The villagers tending the scouting ship backed out of Windwillow’s way and bowed as the aging merchant and her retinue approached.

“Elder Windwillow,” Jolum said with forced politeness, “it is not my job to either please or displease you.” He stepped from the ship onto the aging wooden dock. “My responsibility is to relay the facts, and make sure that a dozen major towns along the Roa Sein -- including this

village -- are ready to handle them.” Jolum knew, though, that Windwillow had probably already heard everything he meant to tell her.

Since dawn, swift-moving village canoes had visited Jolum’s scout ship as it sailed downriver. The ship’s crew, volunteer Xandressan fishermen mostly, had eagerly relayed the grim tidings; the Shyft were on the march, burning everything that stood in their way. By the time Jolum docked, word had undoubtedly already been relayed to the council of elders. Jolum silently cursed the lack of resources that forced him to use non-corps transportation.

“The Shyft are moving south,” Jolum said. “Every day they burn a new village and pillage the lands between that town and the next. Your people must prepare, or Crocswallow will fall as surely as the rest. My crew and I will help you defend yourselves until reinforcements arrive.”

The merchant woman’s eyes narrowed skeptically and she spoke in clipped tones. “You are a harbinger of ill news, Lunger,” she said. “You are a shoreraven that returns with only weeds and empty shells in its beak. First, you billet your corpsmen here, though our village can barely feed its own. Then you requisition a ship, only to lose it to Bek and his army of trogs. Then you send my beloved nephew, Shorepiper, back to me -- death hanging like a blood bat over his young face. After that, you bring your own wounded to our village for care while you return north to “scout” your enemy. Now you tell us that war is coming and we must prepare to die defending our town. It was an ill wind that brought you here, captain.”

Jolum’s jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Another of the elders, a man of Delphanian descent named Nibor, stepped forward. He was tall and patrician, with a long beard and graying hair. His purple silk tunic glistened in the sunlight. “How do we know what the Shyft want?” Nibor asked. “Perhaps it is not us they seek, but this man and his crew. Maybe if we were to rid ourselves of the Atlanteans, the monsters and their Mage Spawn would leave us alone. Our village was peaceful until *you* came!” He scowled and shook his bony fist at Jolum.

Kiani stuck her head over the scout ship’s rail and glowered at the crowd below. “You frightened eels!” she called. “You mudsulkers!” The younger Riverstone sister slung her packed equipment and provisions overboard onto the dock. Her gear fell with a heavy thump that made the old planking shudder.

Kia hopped off the ship, landed lightly beside the pack, and picked it up as though it were weightless. She sneered at the Crocswallow elders. “The corps is all that stands between you and ruin, but you’re all too blubber-headed to see it!”

“Kiani, that’s enough,” Jolum said. He shot her a glance that brooked no argument.

“Your underling should learn to hold her tongue,” Windwillow said, “or someone may cut it out for her.”

A crowd had begun to gather around the group as news of the ship’s arrival spread through the village. Nervous murmurs from Crocswallow’s residents filled the humid morning air.

Jolum ignored a trickle of sweat running down his brow and gazed at the elders. “What preparations have you made while I was gone?”

“We have discussed the issue,” Windwillow replied, “and we remain unsure if *any* preparations are necessary, beyond our usual guards. Our treaty with the Atlantis Guild...”

“Is only good if the Guild can be reached,” Jolum said, cutting her off. “Have the runners we sent to the capital returned yet?”

“No.”

“Then we have no guarantee that help is on the way. If you intend to stay here, you *must* take steps. You must reinforce the wooden palisades surrounding the town. Your people must arm themselves and practice for combat.” Jolum paused and stared into Windwillow’s dark eyes. “I’ll work up a training schedule with my squad. We’ll begin immediately.”

“And if our people do not *wish* to train?” Nibor asked.

“Then they’ll die,” Kiani said matter-of-factly, “and your village will be burned to the ground.”

Jolum nodded a quick bow to Windwillow and turned to leave; Kia did the same. The worried murmur in the crowd surrounding them built as the Iron Lung leader and the younger Riverstone sister walked down the docks toward the village. People moved quickly out of their path as the Lungers passed. Parents scooped wayward children out of the muddy streets and hid them inside the village’s adobe and thatch buildings.

“Those mud-huts won’t protect them,” Kiani said in a low voice.

“I know,” Jolum replied. “But they’re a proud people. They don’t like outsiders and they don’t like being told what to do. I hope your sister and Pretar are feeling better. We’re going to need every hand we can muster.”

“Do you really think the Guild is sending reinforcements?”

A frown knitted Jolum’s tanned brow. “Who can tell,” he said. “Its been too long since we’ve heard from them -- and I expected the runners would have come back by now. It may be that the Guild has more pressing matters to attend to.”

“More pressing than the Shyft invading the western reaches?” Kia asked, incredulous.

“Yes.”

She bit her lower lip. “Let’s hope not.”

The two Iron Lungers moved quickly through the buzzing village to the quarters Jolum had commandeered for his troops. He’d tried to be considerate of the locals in choosing the location,

but only a large building could accommodate his crew and equipment. In the end, Windwillow and the elders had reluctantly approved his choice.

The merchant they'd put out, Borrswain, had been less generous. Though he owned another manor home overlooking the farms outside the village, he prowled the requisitioned compound every day, making sure the "invaders" didn't take advantage of his "hospitality." Jolum wasn't worried about such things. Iron Lungers who stole or looted were dealt with harshly by the corps. Few such rascals managed to pass the Lungers' rigorous initiations and training. The commander had high confidence that every member of his crew adhered to corps standards.

Despite this, Jolum was not surprised to see Borrswain and a large band of his merchant allies gathered outside the compound, arguing with Jolum's lieutenant, Cormorant.

Though they were both Xandressans, the contrast between the merchant and the Iron Lung sub-commander could hardly have been greater. Cormorant stood tall and proud, nearly as tall as Jolum himself. Her dark brown skin glistened in the morning light, showing off her impressive musculature. She had short-cropped black hair and ebony eyes. A simple, white, one-piece wrap -- favored for swimming by her people -- draped her attractive frame. A red gold anklet adorned one of her legs. Two bone handled knives -- symbols of the Iron Lung Corps -- hung from her slender waist.

Borrswain was a bit shorter than Cormorant, and at least twice her weight. His hair, eye, and skin-tone were similar to hers, but his carriage was completely different. Clearly, Borrswain had lived a life of ease, where Cormorant favored a rigorous, athletic regimen. He wore an intricately patterned silk dashiki; many golden bracelets hung at his wrists. Despite his colorful and flabby appearance, his eyes had a piercing, razor-like quality. Borrswain didn't blink as he gazed into Cormorant's eyes.

Cormorant stood with her hands propped on her hips as she listened to the merchant. It seemed to Jolum, as he approached, that she wasn't listening very hard.

"Where are our ships?" Borrswain asked. "Nothing has come downriver in three days!"

"We cannot live without shipping! Our town will die," put in another merchant.

"We warned you against sending lightly-armed boats up river," Cormorant said evenly. "And we sent runners to warn your trading partners, too."

"But none of those runners have returned," complained a woman.

"The Atlantis Guild is supposed to protect us," Borrswain said. "Why else are you here -- occupying my house? What about your guarantees of free trade and safe traffic upon the river?"

"When you're at war, nothing is guaranteed," Jolum said, interrupting. The crowd turned to face him as he and Kia walked up to the compound. A faint smile flashed across Cormorant's face. A nervous murmur went up within the group of merchants.

“The Shyft have taken everything to the north,” Jolum continued. “If you want to save what you have, you need to prepare to defend this village.”

“Yes, yes,” Borrswain said impatiently, “so your sub-commander has said. But we are *merchants* not warriors.”

“Then you’d better turn tail, evacuate, and lose everything you covet,” Kia put in.

Borrswain scowled at the young woman and the rest of the merchants grumbled discontentedly. “We’re no cowards,” he finally said.

Jolum nodded slowly. “If you want to save Crocswallow, you’ll have to hold out until reinforcements come. Organize the rest of the villagers. My people and I will have a training schedule set up by noon.”

Borrswain looked from Jolum, to Cormorant, to Kiani Riverstone. In all three sets of eyes he saw the steely determination of the Iron Lung Corps. “Very well,” the merchant said. “We shall speak to Windwillow about this.”

He and the other merchants turned and walked across the dusty square toward Windwillow’s home.

Jolum shook his head. “They have no idea what’s coming.”

“Do you?” Cormorant asked.

He nodded grimly. “More Shyft than Kiani and I, put together, have ever seen before. If help from the Guild doesn’t show up, this town is doomed.”

“Was there any sign of reinforcements?”

Both Jolum and Kia shook their heads. “Only for the Shyft,” Kiani replied, smiling bitterly.

Jolum clenched his fist and leaned against the compound’s door post. “This kind of thing is out of my depth,” he said, gazing out over the settlement. “I’m a squad leader -- not a general. I’m good at killing. Damn good. Born, bred, and trained to it. But defending a city....”

Cormorant smiled predatorily. “Then let me handle it,” she said. “I’ll whip this motley pod of merchant-spawn into shape and get them all swimming together. They’ll be singing the praises of the corps before tonight’s high tide.”

“There’s no tide this far up the river,” Kiani noted.

Cormorant frowned at her, but Jolum laughed. “Maybe I’ll give you your chance, Cormorant,” he said. “Let’s go inside and discuss it.”

A sleeping area to billet Jolum's crew had been set up in the wide courtyard beyond the outer door. The court was sheltered by an overhanging roof that remained open in the middle to admit light and rain to nourish the home's central garden. Borrswain's grand dining room had been turned into a makeshift hospital to tend the Iron Lungers who had been wounded previously. Despite Borrswain's fears, the only other rooms in the house the corps used were the privy and the kitchen.

Jolum said hello to the four Lungers in the courtyard, then adjourned to the infirmary. Two of his most experienced people, Pretar the Navigator and Kia's sister, Brina, were there recovering from wounds suffered in their last battle. As Jolum entered, both were sitting on their cots, chatting with a young Xandressan, who sat perched on another bed.

Jolum hadn't seen Shorepiper recently, but he recognized Windwillow's teenage nephew immediately. Piper was tall and very slender, with only a slight touch of beard on his smooth brown face. As the commander entered, Piper held out his wrist so that the Iron Lungers' medic could take his pulse.

Piper smiled Jolum. "Welcome home, Captain," he said.

"What are you doing here, Shorepiper?" Jolum asked, looking first at Cormorant -- who shrugged, then at the medic and finally the boy himself.

"He still wants to be a Lunger, if you can believe it," Brina put in. She was taller and broader in build than her sister, Kia, though similar in appearance. Jolum noticed Bri had lost some of her tan during her convalescence; he hoped her muscle tone hadn't suffered much.

"My fevers are almost gone now," Shorepiper said. He spoke enthusiastically, though his brown skin looked pale and sweaty.

Kiani tousled Piper's short black hair. "You may have survived trog poison, but you've still got a long way to go, kid."

"But I'm brave," the young Xandressan countered. "And I work hard."

"It takes more than that to join the corps," Pretar said. A fit of wet coughing seized him, and he turned away.

"Join the corps when you've grown a bit, boy," Cormorant advised. "For now, run back to your aunt. If she catches you with us, she'll probably kick us all out of town."

"And that would be the end of Crocswallow," Kia noted.

Shorepiper opened his mouth to say something, but the look on Cormorant's face cut him short. He swallowed hard and said, "Yes, ma'am." Piper rose and, with a final longing glance, left the room.

"His heart's in the right place," Pretar said after he'd gone.

“Aye,” Jolum said. “Cormorant’s right, though. He’s still too young and wet behind the ears for the corps.” He looked appraisingly at his old ally. “What’s the matter with you? You were nearly mended when Kia and I headed upriver.”

“Food poisoning,” the medic announced. “He should be better in a few days.”

“You shouldn’t have tried to eat another trog,” Kia quipped.

Jolum cursed. “Get yourself well,” he ordered. “We’ll need every hand if we’re going to save this village.”

“Aye, captain,” Pretar replied.

“How are you, Brina?” Jolum asked.

“Ship shape, captain,” the elder Riverstone sister said. She rose and stretched. “A little rusty, maybe, but ready to put on the armor.”

“Good.”

“The town has been pretty nervous lately,” Brina said, “especially since you and Kia left.”

“This morning’s news didn’t help any,” Pretar added. “Fishermen in canoes brought the bad tidings just after dawn.” He winced and rubbed his belly.

“Like shoreravens flying before a storm,” noted Cormorant.

“What about the reinforcements?” Brina asked.

“Not coming,” Kia replied. “Not that we saw.”

The elder Riverstone sister and Pretar cursed simultaneously.

“We need to prepare to defend this town,” Jolum said, “strengthen the wooden palisade and train the people -- and we need to do it fast. Cormorant, since you volunteered to whip them into shape, I’ll leave the training up to you.”

The Xandressan diver’s dark eyes flashed and she smiled. “Aye, captain. They’ll be ready when you need them.” She paused and cocked her head, thinking. “But have you considered taking the fighting to the Shyft? It’s the last thing they’d ever expect. A pre-emptive strike would...”

“Just get all of us killed,” Jolum said. “There are too many of them and too few of us. Raw militia are no substitute for trained corpsmen or Atlantean reinforcements. Unless the Guild bolsters our numbers, we’re better off making a stand here. Now, let’s finalize our plans and get working.”

Jolum, Cormorant, and the rest of the Iron Lungers quickly drew up strategies and initiated them. Well before noon, Cormorant had masses of villagers assembled in the town square for combat training. The group was unruly and ill-equipped -- possessing only farming and fishing implements to fight with -- but Cormorant didn't mind.

It seemed plain to Jolum that she relished the command opportunity, even if her troops were a motley bunch of conscripts.

While Cormorant trained the villagers, Jolum, the Riverstone sisters, and the rest of the Iron Lung Brigade recruited "volunteers" to help bolster the village defenses.

A large palisade of logs, sharpened to points at the top, ran around Crocswallow. In theory, the wall would protect the town from its enemies; in practice, though, the Atlantis Guild's control of the area had made the locals complacent. Many stretches of the wall were in terrible repair, and other sections were missing altogether.

Jolum found the riverfront defenses particularly shabby. "Heavy defenses on the wharves slow trade!" Nibor angrily countered. "It's to our advantage to load and unload ships quickly."

"Until the Shyft's grip on the river is broken," Jolum said, "there won't be any ships to unload." He and the other Lungers made the riverfront a priority. Even using the strength of their two remaining Submersible Golems, though, the construction and repairs went slowly.

Windwillow tolerated the corpsmen's "interference" with barely-hidden indignation. Often, Jolum spotted her whispering to Nibor or one of the other elders.

"Do you think she's plotting something?" Brina asked.

"If she is," Jolum replied, "it better be how to help our side once the Shyft get here."

As night approached, Cormorant's irregulars still looked like farmers and fishermen, and the rest had made only scant progress on the village defenses.

"These people have grown fat on the river," Kiani said, spitting.

Against their healers' orders, Pretar and Shorepiper both lent a hand. Near sunset, though, the old Delphanian collapsed -- overwhelmed by his illness. Piper and one of the other corpsmen helped Pretar back to the infirmary. Piper, looking pale and sweaty, stayed there as well.

Windwillow took the opportunity to confront Jolum. "So this is how you take care of my village?" she said, anger flashing in her brown eyes.

"You can't forge steel out of tin," Jolum replied, fighting hard to keep his temper. "Crocswallow's defenses have gone to sea, and it will take time to put them ship shape. Your nephew, at least, seems to appreciate that."

“My nephew would be well if not for you city folk,” Windwillow shot back.

Jolum gritted his teeth. “Your nephew would be well if you hadn’t insisted on sending him along on a military operation.”

“If you had not lost my ship...!”

“If I hadn’t done what I did, many more ships would have been lost,” Jolum snapped, “and the Shyft would be at your docks already. You may not like us, Elder Windwillow, but the corps is all that stands between you and disaster right now. You need to make a choice, either support us, or get the hell out of our way.” He glowered at the older woman.

Windwillow glowered back. Something in her eyes, though, told Jolum that his words had struck home. “I’m just trying to save *your* town,” he added.

Slowly, the Xandressan elder nodded. “Aye,” she said. “Perhaps you are, captain.”

“If we work together,” Jolum said calmly, “we might just stand a chance.”

“I will do what I can, captain,” Windwillow replied. “It seems that our goals in this are not so different after all.” She extended her leathery hand and clasped Jolum’s wrist -- Atlantean style. He did the same to her.

“A ship! A ship is coming in!” The happy cry echoed through the town and villagers stopped their work and ran toward the docks.

A smile cracked Windwillow’s weathered face. “The first in over three days,” she said. “It is a good sign, Atlantean. The gods favor our alliance.”

Jolum nodded, but his pale blue eyes remained fixed on the vessel floating downriver in the semi-darkness. She was a fat-bellied reed-built merchantman from upriver, beyond the Red Fens. Her sides showed scorching and other signs of battle. She listed to starboard slightly as she limped slowly toward the wharf. Her water line and sluggish movements made it clear she carried a full hold. The Xandressan dockworkers babbled enthusiastically at the prospect of resuming trade and rushed to secure her with ropes.

“Wait!” Jolum cried. “Something’s wrong!”

The excited villagers paid no attention. They crowded the docks and readied the unloading hoists.

“The Atlantean’s right!” Windwillow called. “Listen to him!”

The townsfolk, though, were listening to neither their elder nor the Iron Lung leader. Eagerly, they surged toward the shore, waiting for the battered ship to come in.

Jolum cursed and ran forward, whistling for his crewmen and his Submersible Golems. Windwillow, proving surprisingly spry for her age, ran along with him.

“If that’s a merchant ship,” Jolum hissed, “where is the crew?”

The elder shouted another warning, just as the ship’s fat side bumped the dock. As it did, the hatches sprang open, and a hoard of Shyft burst forth.

“Bek!” Jolum snarled, spotting the lizard-like trog leader among the attackers.

With Bek came two more trogs and an assortment of snake-like creatures. Jolum recognized monstrous, gray-armored crypt worms, and spike-skinned thorn crawlers -- each towering taller than a man. One serpentine monster leapt from the deck into the panicking crowd below.

As the Iron Lung leader ran to help the Xandressans, a thought flashed through his mind: *The hold of that fat ship was filled with death!*

The villagers tried to run, but the Shyft gave no quarter. A dozen Xandressans died in the first moments of the attack. The terrified crowd surged away from the docks, preventing Jolum from reaching the enemy. Glancing left and right, the Iron Lung captain saw the rest of his crew similarly hindered.

Cormorant was trying to rally her new conscripts, but most of them had already turned tail and fled before the onslaught. Brina and Kiani Riverstone were pushing forward, through the crowd. Deadly intent flashed in the sisters’ blue-green eyes. The rest of Jolum’s corpsmen, including Fiddler and Hermit, his two remaining golems, were also converging on the battle as quickly as they could.

Jolum wondered if they were already too late to save Crocswallow.

Windwillow pushed through the crowd at Jolum’s side. She spoke in a loud, authoritative voice, trying to calm her people. But the panic the monsters were causing proved too great; no one listened to her.

On the docks, a Thorn Crawler seized Nibor in its terrible jaws. The monster hoisted the cantankerous elder into the air. Nibor’s screams pierced the twilight sky. Effortlessly, the crawler snapped the Delphanian’s back and tossed him to the ground.

“Nibor!” Windwillow cried. She rushed toward where her doomed friend had fallen.

“Elder, no!” Jolum called. Already, the crowd impeding the monsters’ advance had thinned. Only Jolum and his crew now stood between the streets of Crocswallow and the invading Shyft.

Windwillow knelt at Nibor’s side and felt for his pulse. She didn’t notice the serpentine shapes creeping toward her through the darkness.

“He’s dead! Windwillow! Leave him!” Jolum shouted. If she heard, though, she paid no attention.

The Iron Lung captain drew his long, bone-handled knife, cursing that his armor and trident were still in the corps' commandeered villa.

A crypt worm rose up between him and the Xandressan elder. Jolum ducked under the monster's initial strike. He spun and sliced the thing's armored carapace with his knife. The creature whirled, clouting him with its immense body. Jolum flew backward, landing hard in the dusty earth. The shaft of a spear dropped by one of Cormorant's recruits stuck him in the back. Jolum grunted in pain, but grabbed the weapon.

The crypt worm lunged, its massive mouth thrown wide. Jolum rose to his feet and, with all his might, hurled the spear into the creature's maw.

The weapon stabbed through the soft back of the worm's throat, pierced the carapace behind, and impaled the monster's brain. The worm thrashed wildly, trying to kill the Iron Lung leader, even as it died.

Jolum stepped deftly aside. "Windwillow!" he called frantically.

As she looked up from Nibor's body, the creatures struck at her.

There were four of them, moving together as if they were of one mind. Their dark green carapaces made them hard to see in the deepening twilight, though their red and yellow eyes shone in the darkness. Jolum recognized them as throttle worms.

Windwillow screamed as the throttle worms thrust their carapaced heads toward her. Their mandibles snapped with a terrible, clicking staccato.

The elder scooted backward, butt first, across the sandy street. Her movement put her just out of the monsters' reach. Jolum knew that she couldn't avoid them for long.

Sprinting forward, he interposed himself between the worms and the Xandressan leader.

The throttle worms changed targets and attacked Jolum. They twined around his limbs like serpents while the Iron Lung leader hacked at them with his bone-handled knife.

Again and again they struck with their dripping mandibles. Jolum parried their attacks where he could, and struck back with vicious cuts from his knife. Again he stabbed at them, and again, and again.

In less than a minute, all four worms lay dead at his feet.

Jolum stood in the dark, dusty street, panting, sweating, bleeding from a half-dozen wounds. He saw Windwillow standing nearby, safe, fighting a very sensible urge to flee.

The sounds of battle swirled around him and pounded in his head like the raging surf. He heard the dying wails of Xandressan villagers, the rallying cries of his Iron Lung troops, the whistles commanding his submersible golems, the jubilant croaks of Bek and his trog companions.

Jolum blinked back the sweat, but his eyelids rebounded far too slowly.

Why was the world spinning?

Why did his wounds burn so?

Why were his limbs so slow to respond?

Jolum turned to face the battle once more. He took a step forward, going to help his comrades.

Then he fell face first into the dust and the world went black.

The River of Flames

Part 2

by Stephen D. Sullivan

Jolum the Fish felt hot -- blazing, burning hot. Fire surrounded him, and smoke clogged his lungs. The world seemed to be ablaze and, at the center of the chaos, rose Atlantis. The city's tall towers burned brightly, shooting orange flames into the lightning-dappled sky. Atlantean defenders perished in droves, falling like dead leaves from atop the city walls.

The Shyft scooped up the bodies of their victims and paraded them around the battlefield. The trog leader Bek danced amid the crowd, wearing an Atlantean's skin. Beside him rode a lizard-like creature on the back of a huge serpent. The creature hoisted a long spear high into the air. A body hung from the end of the lance. Though the corpse was headless, it seemed eerily familiar to the Iron Lung leader.

As Jolum watched in horror, the lizard-man fed the body to the Shyft's bloated matriarch, *Pexapatia Mar*. The Shyft queen gulped down the corpse like a frog swallowing a cricket. She smiled and licked the blood from her toothy maw.

Jolum screamed and rushed toward the city gates, hoping to aid those who had not yet been killed. Masses of Shyft surrounded him, cutting him off from burning Atlantis. Mutated worms, abhorrent insects, croaking trogs, and monstrous serpents danced in circles around the Iron Lung leader. Every time he stepped forward, his enemies cut him off, taunting and jabbing him with weapons, laughing and snapping at him with venomous fangs.

Again they stabbed him, and again and again. Their poison burned in Jolum's veins. He sliced at them with his bone handled knife, but -- at the last instant -- they always darted away.

Blood ran from Jolum's body like sweat. His skin charred and his hair scorched away. He screamed with pain, screamed until he had no breath left.

The world spun around him, a typhoon of evil laughter and torment.

Then he collapsed and darkness closed in.

For a long time, Jolum lay in the black void, unable to move.

He felt nothing. Not his wounds. Not his body. Not even the ground he lay upon.

So this was death.

Old dead friends dropped by to visit. All of them looked terrible. The injuries that had killed them were still fresh: awful gouges in their skulls, leaking stab-wounds in their sides, bones poking through bleeding and gangrenous skin. Their spilled guts stank of blood and offal.

None of Jolum's visitors had anything encouraging to say. "I knew you'd end up like me," Barbuk said. He was a young Lunger who had died during Jolum's last mission. "We were always alike -- impulsive, heroic, brave. That's what got us killed, you know. The corps was our life, and look what it got us. Dead!"

"The corps *is* my life," Jolum replied.

"Not any more, old man," Barbuk said. He turned, and disappeared back into the darkness.

Many more came to pay their respects. Jolum's heart nearly burst when he saw Brina and Kiani Riverstone among them. "Why weren't you there?" the sister's asked. "We needed you!"

"I tried," Jolum said, fighting back tears. "I tried. But I had to save the old woman."

"And look what it cost you," Brina said, a single tear rolling down her pale and bloody cheek.

"Goodbye, Jolum," Kiani added. The sisters turned, and vanished just as quickly as they'd come.

"They never *were* any good," said a voice. "Even though I know they were your favorites." Out of the shadows stepped Cormorant, her ebony skin glistening in the darkness. She looked proud, haughty, and as powerful as he'd ever seen her.

"Are you... *dead*?" Jolum asked.

"No, captain," she replied. "I'm not dead. I just thought I'd drop in and see how you were doing. My new friends are treating me so much better than you did."

"What new friends?" A cold chill ran down Jolum's spine, though he remained unsure that he actually had a spine.

"*Queen Pexapatia*," Cormorant said. "She's waiting for you. Would you like to see her?"

"No."

Cormorant smiled, showing a row of pointed teeth. "Too bad. Here she comes!"

The Xandressan Iron Lung sub-commander squinted in concentration and the top of her head began to bulge. Her body bloated and her ebony skin turned a sickly green color. The simple shift covering her flesh burst as her reptilian body swelled to enormous size. Cormorant's black hair fell out, to be replaced by pulsating brain tissue. Horns sprouted from her skull and a third eye appeared in the middle of her forehead. Her delicate fingers and toes turned into thick, dagger-like talons.

Pexapatia Mar opened her huge maw and grinned. Slime fell from her razor-sharp fangs.

"Welcome... Jolum the Fish...!" she hissed.

The Shyft Matriarch lunged forward, engulfing Jolum in one bite. The Iron Lung captain drew his bone-handled knife and slashed at her. Again, and again, and again.

It did no good. The blackness inside the Shyft monster didn't cut, it didn't yield. Smothering, sweaty, darkness clung all around him.

“Captain...!”

Someone calling?

“Captain Jolum...!”

One of the dead? Someone he'd failed? Someone the Shyft matriarch had already eaten?

“...Jolum...!”

A light now, gray and distant, along with the voice.

And another sound, a pounding, surging noise.

“Captain... don't fight...!”

Light rushing toward him. Sound building. Screaming. The blood pounding in his ears.

Jolum slashed with his knife, trying in vain to resist as the deadly, white light engulfed him.

“Captain, don't fight us!”

“You're going to be all right.”

Jolum blinked. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. The reed thatch overhead was not *his* ceiling; this was *not* his home. Sweat dripped into his aching eyes and he blinked again. “Where... am I?” His voice sounded like sandpaper on barnacles.

“Crocsallow,” came the reply. “The Iron Lung compound. The infirmary.” A voice he almost recognized.

He shook his head and his skull pounded. “Crocsallow's... destroyed.”

“Nearly was, they say.” A gruff voice from earlier. “Course, I wasn't there to see it, any more than you were.” Pretar. One of Jolum's troops. They *weren't* all dead!

Jolum sat up suddenly. The cool arm of a Xandressan healer held him back.

“Easy Captain Jolum,” the smooth voice of Windwillow said from nearby. “The worm poison is still in your system.”

“Pretar,” Jolum said, addressing his corpsman, “the others -- Cormorant, Brina, Kiani... Are they... dead?”

“Not last we knew, captain,” came the gruff reply. Jolum forced his eyes to focus on the battle-scarred Delphanian. Pretar looked better than the last time Jolum had seen him. Apparently, he’d recovered from both his food poisoning and their previous encounter with Bek’s trogs.

“How do you feel?” Jolum asked.

“Ready to fight, if that’s what you mean,” Pretar replied.

Jolum nodded, which made his head ache. “Good,” he said. Sweat covered his whole body and he felt as though his guts were on fire. “What happened to the Shyft?”

“The people rallied and beat them off,” Windwillow said, “spurred on by your troops. Your Cormorant is quite a leader. She carried on after you fell. I never should have doubted your people, captain.”

“There’s something else you need to tell the captain, too, aunt Willow.”

Jolum turned to the sound of the new voice and saw Shorepiper, the young Xandressan, sitting on a cot nearby. Like Pretar, he too had apparently recovered from his previous maladies. Piper looked encouragingly at Windwillow.

The elder Xandressan took a deep breath and sighed it out. “My nephew is right.” She looked directly at Jolum’s eyes. “Thank you, captain... for saving my life.”

“Just doing my job,” Jolum replied. He tried to stand, but his strength failed him; he slumped back onto the cot. “So... Cormorant defeated the Shyft...!”

“We were lucky, from what I hear,” Pretar said. “Some squabble between Bek and the other Shyft -- the bug-like ones that weren’t trogs. Cormorant exploited a weakness in their line.”

“Good,” Jolum said, closing his eyes. “Where is she? I need to congratulate her.”

“She’s... not here, captain.”

“Not here?” Jolum asked, puzzled. “Oh. The city defenses. They still weren’t ready when the attack came. How are the repairs coming?”

“She’s not at the city defenses, captain Jolum,” Shorepiper said.

Jolum opened his eyes again. “Well, if she’s not at the defenses, and she’s not dead, where in hell is she?”

“She decided to strike back against the Shyft,” Windwillow replied. “She hopes to break them before they can regroup and attack us again.”

Despite the ache in his head, Jolum sat up once more. “She what...?” His mind swam. “Did reinforcements arrive?”

“No, captain,” Pretar replied.

Jolum swore.

A commotion from outside drew their attention to the door. The immense form of Borrswain, the home’s true owner, appeared in the doorway. His dark skin looked ashen in the infirmary’s dim light. His robes were stained and dirty, and his left arm was bandaged in a sling. He looked frightened and his deep voice trembled as he spoke.

“Forgive the intrusion, Elder Windwillow,” he said. “One of our runners has just returned from the north. A huge army of Shyft is moving this way.”

Everyone in the room but Jolum and Pretar gasped. “They probably intend to link up with Bek’s group,” the aging navigator said. Jolum nodded grimly.

Windwillow rose. “Then the time has come to evacuate Crocswallow. We cannot withstand another assault. We must take what we can and head downriver, toward the mouth of the Roa Sein. Perhaps there we will find refuge.”

“I agree,” Jolum said. “But we can’t hang Cormorant and the others out to dry. I’ll need some volunteers, as many as you can spare. With luck, we can save them from the Shyft before they’re caught between the two armies.”

“But the Cormorant woman already took all our conscripts with her,” Borrswain replied. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a faded kerchief.

“I’ll go,” said Shorepiper. “It’s the least we can do after Jolum saved your life, aunt Windwillow.” He locked eyes with the older woman and the elder Xandressan slowly nodded.

“I will talk to the villagers,” Windwillow said, “find more to go with you. Promise me, though, that you will not fall into another Shyft trap.”

Jolum heaved himself up off the bed. His head still pounded and his limbs felt like jelly. “I’ve no intention of dying today,” he said.

“We’ll rescue our comrades and get the hell out,” Pretar added. “No sense getting killed for a lost cause.” He looked around at the Xandressans and, realizing they were about to forfeit their homes, added, “Since you’re abandoning the town anyway, I mean.” He rubbed his stubbly graying head. “No offense.”

“None taken, warrior,” Windwillow replied. She put her weathered hand on Shorepiper’s shoulder. “May the gods of wind and river be with you,” she said, holding out her staff of office.

Shorepiper kissed the sacred “Speaking Stick,” and replied, “May the gods of sun and rain be with you.”

“Be careful,” Windwillow added.

“I will, aunt Willow,” he replied.

“I’ll gather what troops I can to help you,” Windwillow said. She and Borrswain left the room.

Jolum gritted his teeth, fighting the lingering pain and nausea. “Let’s get going,” he said to Pretar. “Help me into my armor.”

Few of the remaining Xandressans mustered the courage to assist Jolum, Pretar, and Shorepiper on their mission. Those that joined in were largely too old to worry about dying, or young enough to be hot-headed and full of fascination about war. Cormorant had wisely left both groups behind. Jolum couldn’t be so choosy.

*I wish, Jolum thought, that she’d been wise enough **not** to march out after the Shyft.*

They left Crocswallow the following morning. A hot, humid dawn portended the sweltering weather that lay ahead. Fleeing refugees, heading south, crowded the docks as Jolum’s party set out. Borrswain had generously donated his oldest cargo ship to speed the rescue party on their voyage, as well as a skeleton crew to man the ship. The crew appeared nervous, but Jolum judged they had enough bravery to fight in a pinch.

The few reports they’d had indicated that the Shyft were encamped a day’s sail upriver.

“We can reach them before sunset if we push this motley bunch of sailors’ sons,” Pretar said. “I still know a few of this river’s tricks.”

Jolum clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m counting on you. Have the kid help out where he can.”

“Aye, captain,” Pretar said. He went to recruit Shorepiper’s assistance.

Since his makeshift crew lacked any proper weapons training, Jolum requisitioned all the oil, torches, and straw that he could. Fire, he knew, could be a powerful tool against the Shyft’s darkness.

They lifted anchor without any fanfare. The villagers of Crocswallow were too busy packing their belongings and sailing downriver to take much notice of the old, reed cargo ship as it lumbered past the docks and into the river channel beyond.

Borrswain's sailors worked diligently under Pretar's direction. A fortuitous southerly wind aided their cause, and saved their arms considerable rowing. "We'll need that strength for fighting later," Jolum told the rest.

The Iron Lung captain could not help but worry about the battle to come. Would they arrive too late? Did his friends and allies already lie dead amid the Xandressan hills? He remembered the reflections of flame upon the water that he'd seen a few nights before and the nightmares of his delirium. Was scorched earth the best they could hope to achieve against this enemy?

All too soon, they spotted black smudges of smoke upon the horizon. They knew that the smaller, closer fires would be Bek and his allies. The further, larger billows belonged to the advancing Shyft army. Soon the two dark clouds would join, and Cormorant and her crew would be slaughtered. Jolum hoped that his lieutenant would notice the omens hanging in the sky.

"She's a smart one," Pretar assured Jolum. "She'll figure it out and turn back."

"She's impulsive too, though," Jolum replied. "She never should have marched out after Bek's army. The combination of Bek's trogs with the snake-like Shyft should have told her that worse things were on the way. Bek has never led the slithering ones before."

Pretar leaned on the rail, looking grim. "Aye. Perhaps." As the sun dipped toward the horizon, the sounds of battle drifted to them over the water. Jolum equipped each of his irregulars with a spear, a torch, and two flasks of oil to set diversionary fires. "Our outrunners will spread oil soaked straw outside the Shyft lines," he explained. "We'll use the fires to help our people and cover our escape. If you get cut off, make your way to the river and head downstream as fast as you can. Does everyone understand?"

Pretar, Shorepiper, the Xandressan sailors, and the rest of the irregulars all nodded.

"Good," Jolum said. "Kill as many of the Shyft as you can, but remember, our main goal is to rescue Cormorant's troops. Don't get killed if you can help it."

The recruits laughed nervously; Pretar and Shorepiper didn't.

Jolum had sent a Xandressan diver ahead of them, to scout out the situation. She returned now, climbing over the bow of the fat reed boat, and said, "The fighting is terrible. The enemy hold the hill, and Cormorant's group cannot dislodge them. More creatures are coming from the north. Soon, our warriors will be trapped."

"Then we've arrived just in time," Jolum said. "What about the riverfront? Can Cormorant retreat?"

"No," the diver said. "The Shyft," and here, she shuddered as if remembering something terrible, "have cut our army off. But the enemy's back is turned. They do not expect an attack from the water."

“Good,” Jolum said. “Let’s make them think that we’re Atlantean reinforcements. Light fires all around; the smoke will hide our numbers -- just be sure not to block our retreat to the river. It’s our only way home”

Again, the others nodded.

“May the gods of land and sea be with us then,” Jolum said.

They pulled the cargo ship as close as they could to the shore. The grass-covered riverbank rose up steeply, hiding the fighting from their view. An overturned fisherman’s longboat lay on the banks. It didn’t appear damaged, though its former owner’s skeletal hand poked out from beneath.

A sailor hopped ashore and tethered Borrswain’s ship to a stout bush. Jolum and his troops clambered over the side and moved quickly through the shallows. They hiked silently up the shore, torches and weapons clutched tightly in their hands, flasks of oil hanging at their hips.

Jolum and Pretar paused a moment to lock down their Iron Lung helmets. The techno-magical armor hummed slightly as it powered up.

“Save the troops and then beat a hasty retreat home,” Jolum whispered, his voice distorted slightly by the armor’s magic. “When I give the signal, everyone charge at once. We’ll break their lines and then leave. With luck, we can surprise them enough to escape.”

“Remember,” Pretar added, “don’t cut us off, and don’t get killed.”

“All right,” Jolum hissed, “let’s go!” He pressed a hidden stud on his trident and the weapon lengthened and crackled with deadly energy. He charged uphill, an Atlantis Guild war cry on his lips; Pretar and Shorepiper followed with the Xandressans right behind.

Ahead, the Shyft poured downhill in an endless wave, crashing into Cormorant’s battered group. Crypt worms, thorn crawlers, throttle worms, trogs, and all manner of Mage Spawn fought under Bek’s command.

Bek leaped and capered among his enemies, smashing their heads and reveling in their blood. Xandressan volunteers died in droves. Bek barked orders to the slithering ones. They attacked and did the trog leader’s bidding, but not quickly or expertly.

Bek has bitten off more than he can chew, Jolum thought. He’s out of his depth with a unit this large. Hope flared up within the Iron Lung leader’s armor-clad chest.

“Scatter and start those fires!” he called to the Xandressans bringing up the rear. “Pretar, Piper, help me break that flank.” He pointed at a group of crypt worms ahead and charged, trident first.

The two Lungers and the Xandressan youth crashed into the worms’ exposed backsides. Trident and spear plunged deep into wormflesh. The worms squealed with surprise and pain. Jolum and

his comrades stabbed them again. The Crypt worms quickly slithered away as fires began to spring up around the enemy forces.

Ahead, Jolum spotted Cormorant, the Riverstone sisters, and two other Iron Lungers fighting back to back against a pack of trogs and a thorn crawler. One of the Lungers went down, but at the same time, Brina and Kiani skewered one of the trogs.

Bek cracked his stone axe against the helmet of Cormorant's armor. She staggered back, and the trog chief came in on her, his lizard-like mouth dripping poisonous ooze.

Fiddler and Hermit, Jolum's Submersible Golems, fought Shyft nearby. Being automatons, the golems were unaware of Cormorant's peril. Jolum punched some studs on his armor and sent out a high-pitched whistle, giving commands that only the golems could understand.

As one, the golems turned and fired a speargun volley at Bek. The trog leader ducked, but one of the spears traced a long gash along his left arm. Bek staggered back, blood oozing from the wound. He retreated into the milling crowd of Shyft warriors and disappeared. A group of throttle worms swarmed forward to take his place.

Cormorant staggered to her feet; the Riverstone sisters kept the other trogs off her. She glanced in Jolum's direction and the captain swore that he could see her smile, even beneath her Iron Lung helmet.

"Now!" Jolum cried, the techno-magic of his armor amplifying his voice so that all could hear. "NOW!"

All at once, his torch-wielding irregulars sprang into the fray.

Jolum skewered a nearby throttle worm and rushed to the top of a small knoll. With fires burning at his back, he held his trident out before him. It crackled with techno-magical energy. "I am Jolum the Fish, leader of the Iron Lungs! Flee and no more Shyft need die this day!"

The Shyft howled their defiance, but milled around uncertainly, surprised by the sudden appearance of Jolum's forces. In the back of the throng, Bek motioned for his confused troops to attack.

"Bek, you sorry sack of dung!" Jolum called. "Too scared to fight on your own? I challenge you!" As he shouted, his armor sent out a series of coded whistles that commanded his Iron Lungers to conduct a strategic retreat, while the golems covered their positions.

From their answering whistles, Jolum knew that the Riverstone sisters, Cormorant, and the rest understood his message. Jolum prayed his bluff would stall the Shyft long enough that his people could escape.

Bek lapped the blood from his wounded arm. His red eyes burned with hatred. "Kill him!" the frog-like monster croaked. Bek's worm-like allies threw off their confusion and charged toward Jolum.

Behind his bronze helmet, the leader of the Iron Lungs smiled. He backed up as the Bek's thralls came, leading them toward the riverbank. As the Shyft worms charged him, Jolum saw Cormorant's people regrouping, and retreating south -- back toward Crocswallow. He'd lost track of Pretar and Shorepiper in the melee, but hoped they would escape, too.

The monsters thundered forward, shrieks of anger and outrage bellowing from their inhuman mouths. Jolum backed into the water near where Borrswain's fat merchant ship lay anchored. He cut loose the tether and stabbed a nearby throttle worm, then climbed aboard.

"Cowardly kettlefish!" Bek bellowed after him. "Drown in your own blood, you will!" He commanded his minions forward, through the shallow waters and up the ship's sides. Jolum set the tiller to take them deeper into the water, then retreated toward the main hatch. The crypt worms, thorn crawlers, and throttle worms followed.

Glancing back, Jolum saw Bek loping toward the water's edge. Hatred still burned in the trog leader's eyes, but he seemed reluctant to follow the Lunger aboard ship.

A thorn crawler lunged forward, striking at Jolum's head. The Iron Lung leader ducked and the monster crashed into the mast. Jolum retreated down the cargo hatch.

A crypt worm thundered down the steep stairs after him. The walkway shattered under the worm's weight and it landed awkwardly on the reed flooring. Two throttle worms dropped down beside it, hissing and spitting. Venom oozed from their pores as they advanced. Behind came a thorn crawler and another crypt worm.

Jolum kept backing up, through the straw and hay his forces hadn't used during their attack. There was plenty of oil left in the cargo hold, too. They didn't have enough people to carry all of it. Again, Jolum smiled.

As the worms wriggled forward over the dilapidated reed floor, the Iron Lunger smashed a hanging lantern with his trident. Oil from the lamp spilled out onto the straw. The flame from the lantern's wick soon set everything alight.

Bek's minions shrieked and backed away. Their huge size impeded their movement within the ship's cramped hold. They scrambled all over each other trying to get back to the exit hatch.

Standing just beyond the flames, Jolum summoned his trident's energy and smashed a hole in the boat's reed bulkhead. The burning vessel rapidly began filling with water. The worms writhed and shrieked, caught between deadly fire and drowning water. Turning, the Iron Lung captain dived out of the breach and into the Roa Sein's dark waters.

He surfaced forty yards away from the burning ship and watched as it sank toward a watery grave, taking its evil cargo with it.

The ship had drifted downriver during the fight, away from the main battle. The riverbank hid the fray from Jolum, though the sounds of combat had died away. Peering through the encroaching darkness, Jolum saw a figure racing downshore toward him.

“Jolum!” called a voice he recognized as Cormorant’s, despite the filtering of her Iron Lung. “I thought you might need some help.”

Jolum almost laughed, but suddenly a shadowy form rose up out of the water behind his lieutenant. Before Jolum could shout a warning, a reptilian arm grabbed Cormorant from behind and wrenched her helmet full around.

The Xandressan Lunger yelped and staggered forward, her limbs loose, like a marionette with cut strings. She splashed into the river and lay motionless in the dark waters.

“Cormorant!” Jolum gasped.

“Too late for her, kettlefish,” hissed a familiar voice. For a moment, a fire onshore flared, revealing the reptilian face of Bek. The amphibian smiled as he crouched over Cormorant’s floating body.

Jolum surged through the water toward his sub-commander, but she was still yards away. Even if she had survived the wrenching of her neck, Jolum knew Bek wouldn’t let her live much longer.

Bek slashed his huge claws across Cormorant’s back, laughing as he attacked the helpless woman. The trog’s talons shredded her armor and the flesh beneath. Cormorant’s blood spilled into the dark waters of the Roa Sein. Bek stooped and lapped up the blood, savoring its taste. He raised his talons for another blow.

Jolum reeled back and hurled his trident with all his might. Bek ducked aside at the last instant, and weapon glanced off his scaly head. It pierced one red eye as it passed, though, and trog commander howled in rage and pain. Jolum splashed across the distance separating them and drew his long knife.

Bek clawed at Jolum, scraping his talons across the captain’s techno-magic face plate. The Iron Lunger ignored the blow and stabbed at his enemy. Bek retrieved an ax from his belt and parried the blow.

The amphibian counterattacked, smashing the ax’s stone blade into Jolum’s helmet. The helmet’s face plate cracked, and Jolum staggered back, his head spinning. Bek laughed. “Dying time, kettlefish!”

Bek surged forward. Jolum got his knife up, and slashed the monster across the wrist as the trog came in. Bek’s hand jerked open and he dropped his ax into the water, but he kept coming. “Don’t need weapons to finish you!”

The trog barreled into Jolum, forcing the Iron Lung commander under the river surface. Water seeped through the cracks in Jolum’s faceplate; his helmet began to fill. Jolum sputtered and coughed, blowing the liquid away from his face, gasping for breath.

Bek wrapped his arms around Jolum, pinning the Lunger's arms. Blood and poison saliva dripped from the trog's teeth and splattered on Jolum's half-submerged face plate. "Die now!" Bek croaked.

Mustering all his strength, Jolum twisted his right arm free and plunged his bone-handled knife into the belly of the beast.

Bek bellowed in anguish and bit down on Jolum's shoulder. The trog's sharp teeth pierced armor and penetrated the flesh of Jolum's deltoid.

Jolum winced and held his breath as the water in his helmet bubbled over his nose. He drove his knife deeper, twisting as he pushed, seeking the amphibian's vital organs.

Bek's remaining eye went wide. He reeled back, trying to pull away, releasing his crushing grip. He slashed his claws frantically over Jolum's body. The trog's talons sliced armor and shredded the Atlantean's tanned skin. The blood of man and Mage Spawn stained the night dark waters of the Roa Sein.

Nausea and dizziness threatened to overwhelm the Iron Lung leader. Spots flashed behind his eyes. Trog poison burned in his veins. His lungs ached for air.

Gritting his teeth, Jolum thrust upward. He felt the trog's breastbone shatter under his attack. He pushed forward, struggling to his feet once more. Jolum surfaced and the water began leaking out of his helmet -- far too slowly.

Impaled on Jolum's knife, Bek fought back. The trog writhed and twisted, slashing Jolum again and again.

Jolum fell on the monster, putting all his armor's weight behind the blow. Something inside Bek's chest snapped. Jolum's blade lurched forward, piercing the Mage Spawn's heart. Black blood spurted from Bek's mouth. His tongue lolled out and a great stream of poison spittle rolled off his teeth. The trog leader stood in the river for a moment, a look of surprise frozen on his hideous face.

Then Bek fell backward into the water, dead.

Jolum pressed a stud on his armor and his helmet slid open. The water spilled out and he gasped for breath. He collapsed to his knees, the world spinning around him. For a moment, the roaring of fire and the cries of monsters filled his ears. In his mind, he saw the spires of Atlantis burning. The cries of dying comrades echoed in his skull.

Something bumped into him. He opened his eyes as Cormorant's body floated past. Her Iron Lung armor protected her from drowning, but the gods only knew what damage Bek had inflicted. Perhaps she was already dead.

Barely aware of what he did, Jolum took a line from his armor and tied it to Cormorant's iron lung, keeping her from drifting off. Half conscious, he retrieved his trident. Then he reeled Cormorant in, clutching her close to his side.

Jolum stood motionless in the river, holding Cormorant's body, water lapping up against his flanks, fire reflecting off his bronze armor, his mind reeling.

"Captain Jolum! Captain Jolum!"

Jolum looked up and saw Shorepiper drifting downriver in a longboat. It was the boat they'd spotted on shore when they landed earlier.

Fighting back pain and nausea, Jolum swam out to the small craft, dragging Cormorant's body with him. With Piper's help, he heaved her over the side, then crawled in himself.

For a long time, Jolum lay there, the blood pounding in his ears, the darkness threatening to overwhelm him.

"Captain?" Piper called. "Captain Jolum...?"

Jolum roused himself. Above his head, black clouds blotted out portions of the starry sky. He couldn't tell how long he'd been semi-conscious. Bek's poison still burned in him, though it seemed less acute. "Is Cormorant...?" Jolum asked Piper.

"She'll live," Shorepiper replied. "Though treating either of you through this armor is really beyond my skill. I put some scupperweed on your shoulder. It's supposed to be good for poison. It looks like a trog tried to take your shoulder off."

Jolum fought down the urge to retch and sat up. "That would be Bek," he said. "The... *late* Bek." He took a deep breath to force the flashing lights out of his skull. "Let me help... with Cormorant."

Jolum removed Cormorant's helmet and armor. Together, he and the Xandressan youngster worked to tend the lieutenant's injuries. Then Jolum removed his own armor and the two of them bandaged the captain's wounds as best they could.

When they'd finished, Jolum asked, "What about the others? The Riverstone sisters and Pretar...?"

The young Xandressan blew out a long breath before answering. Though he didn't seem injured, clearly the day's events had taken their toll on the youngster. "Pretar's wounded, but the girls are okay. They all got away. I saw them escape before we got separated. The Shyft cut me off, so I went back for the boat."

Jolum leaned back against the gunwale. "I'm glad they made it, he said.

"Is it true," Shorepiper asked cautiously, "that you killed Bek?"

“Yes, thank the gods,” Jolum replied. His eyelids felt very heavy. So did the rest of his body.

Cormorant’s ebony eyes flickered open. “Why do you... always get the... best jobs?” she gasped. She smiled and blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth.

Despite his weariness, Jolum almost laughed. “Just lucky, I guess.”

She chuckled and coughed up some more blood.

“Take it easy soldier,” Jolum said. “Save your strength. We may... need it.”

Cormorant nodded weakly. Then, seeing his wounds said, “You should have... left me....”

“And lose my lieutenant?” Jolum replied, smiling wanly. “Besides, no one gets left behind. Not this time.”

Cormorant smiled back.

They drifted downstream all night. As dawn approached, they passed what was left of Crocswallow.

Shorepiper clenched his jaw tight and sniffed back a tear as he watched the flames licking into the indigo sky. The town lay in ruins, ravaged by the Shyft after they’d left. Thankfully, they saw no bodies lying in the streets. The villagers, it seemed, had escaped.

Reflections of fire shimmered off the water, painting the faces of the weary mariners orange and red, like Xandressan war masks.

Jolum the Fish wiped the blood and sweat from his forehead and gazed downriver. His wounds burned with an intensity matching the fire in his eyes. His forces had won the battle today, but there was no doubt in his mind that they were losing the war.

Cormorant spoke, her voice trembling with emotion. “Behind us... only ruins. But what lies ahead?”

“Salvation?” asked Shorepiper, his young eyes, brimming with hope.

“Perhaps,” Jolum said. “Or at least, the chance to fight another day.”

The End

Origins Award-winning novelist Stephen D. Sullivan has a basement full of projects that he's worked on over the last twenty-plus years. The stacks include *Dungeons & Dragons*, *The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horrors* comic, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Dragonlance*, *Speed Racer*, *Chill*, *Darkwing Duck*, *The Twilight Empire*(tm), and many, many others. He wrote three of the original seven L5R samurai fantasy novels: *The Scorpion*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Lion* -- the last of which garnered him a nice trophy (the Origins Award for Best Game-Related Novel, 2001) to add to his clutter. Steve's newest book is *Dragonlance Crossroads: The Dragon Isles* (a 2002 Origins Award nominee). He's also the mastermind behind the long-running *Twilight Empire*(tm) comic strip, now being re-serialized in Campaign magazine and the new 1492 comic in *Games Unplugged*. In his spare time, he ghost-writes children's detective books and compiles proposals for new projects. When not buried under the weight of all that paper, Steve continues to write for books, magazines, comics, and games. He still does the occasional bit of artwork, too. More information on what's new in Steve's cellar can be found at: www.sdsullivan.com -and- www.alliterates.com.