

The River of Blood
Part 1
by Stephen D. Sullivan

“Come on—talk! Tell me what I need to know!”

Blood dripped into Jolum’s eyes. He shook his head, filling the air with a halo of crimson droplets. The humid atmosphere clung to the Atlantean’s lean body, making him sweat. The tepid Red Fens mud clutched his thighs, making it nearly impossible for him to move his feet. His arms burned with fatigue and his lungs ached. Clearly, fighting without his iron lung armor on this mission had been a mistake.

“Speak up! I can’t hear you!”

Jolum twisted his trident. The trog on the end of it croaked with pain; more of the frog-man’s guts spilled out into the festering swamp.

“Closer . . .” the Shyft monster hissed.

“If you think I’m coming within spitting range, you’re even dumber than you look,” Jolum snarled. “Tell me what I want to know and I’ll grant you a quick death.” He wrenched the trident again; the trog howled.

“I . . . speak! I speak!” it croaked.

“Quickly, then!”

“There is . . . a back . . . door,” the trog said. Blood bubbled from its lips as it spoke.

“We know that,” Jolum hissed. “But how do we find it?” He poked the trident in just a little farther.

“The coral trail!” the trog gasped. “From the divide . . . it leads along . . . the river bottom to . . . the entryway.”

“I heard trogs screaming about escaping to the coral trail during the raid,” said Shorepiper. “The stragglers were headed upriver, toward the fork at Zendasi Bend.” The dark-skinned teenager smiled grimly. “None of them made it,” he added. The Xandressian was the youngest of Jolum’s crew. As such, he tended to stick very close to his commanders. Piper hovered next to Cormorant, Jolum’s lieutenant, who stood behind Jolum, watching his interrogation techniques—or perhaps waiting for him to make a mistake.

“The trog scum is telling the truth,” Cormorant said, “or as close to the truth as these creatures can manage.” She had scholarship medals in intelligence-gathering at the academy, and she seldom missed the opportunity to flaunt her superiority to Jolum in this, or any other, matter.

Jolum tolerated her small insubordinations because he valued her as a team member more than he minded her jibes.

Shorepiper looked at the Xandressian woman with a mixture of respect and awe. He couldn't imagine how Cormorant could know if the trog was lying.

The iron lung leader ignored his lieutenant's grandstanding. His battle instincts told him the same thing. He would stake his field experience against her training any day. "I concur," Jolum said to her. Then, to the trog, he added, "Thank you. You can die now."

Jolum drove his techno-magical trident deeper into the trog's flabby belly and gave the weapon a final twist. The trog's red eyes went wide and its bloated tongue rolled from its mouth. The monster's breath rattled out in one long, final gasp.

Cormorant smiled.

Jolum wrenched out the trident and flicked his wrist, flinging the gore from the end of the weapon. He pulled his feet out of the mud and turned to the rest of his crew to check their progress.

The battle against the trog encampment had been brief and bloody—a classic Iron Lung Corps tactical battle. Jolum had pulled it off with less than half his usual complement of lungers—no mean feat. He'd also gained victory without his troopers wearing their usual iron lung armor. This raid had called for more swiftness and stealth than the bronze techno-magical suits offered on land. Jolum might have felt proud of their accomplishments if the situation weren't so grave.

He surveyed his band of iron lungers and local irregulars. The Riverstone sisters, Brina and Kiani, were laughing and joking as usual. It took a lot to rattle them, and they truly enjoyed combat. They crouched next to the river, washing the trog blood from their tanned bodies and short-cropped hair. Jolum knew they'd be ready for the next battle.

Pretar the Navigator had been wounded, again, but nothing so grave as to keep him from fighting. The nasty-looking slice across his thigh didn't dampen the big Delphanan's spirits; it was just another in the road map of scars tracing the surface of his leathery skin. He wore the marks proudly, like medals; the rest of Jolum's troop had come to see them that way as well. Pretar cleaned his trident and called playful insults to the Riverstone sisters. They shouted back sarcastic encouragement.

Jolum's submersible golems had sustained only minor damage during the battle. The automatons stood patiently waiting for their next orders. Jolum wished he had more of them, but he'd lost several during the campaign. Of the original six that had come to the Red Fens with him, only Fiddler, Hermit, and Blue remained.

Jessa, an Atlantean lunger new to the brigade, seemed to have survived the raid unscathed, but that didn't stop their lead medic, Narvik, from checking her over carefully. The doctor had adopted a fatherly posture toward the young warrior. The two other medics in Narvik's crew were busy attending to the remainder of Jolum's motley brigade.

Jolum's Xandressian irregulars hadn't fared as well as the captain's Corps-trained troops. The lungers tried to protect the conscripts as best they could, but the natives of the Roa Sein lacked the experience of Jolum's crew. Even Shorepiper had nearly gotten himself killed the first time he joined an iron lung operation.

These river people, as proud and determined as any folk Jolum had ever met, weren't used to fighting Shyft monsters. Several volunteers had died early in this raid against the savage trogs. Many of the wounded suffered from severe trog poisoning. Jolum knew that several of those would die despite his corpsmen's best medical efforts.

Every human death hardened Jolum's heart and resolve. The Shyft and their allies needed to be stopped, no matter the cost. Something big was about to happen, and Jolum didn't have time to wait for Atlantean reinforcements. Those reinforcements might not be coming anyway. He hadn't heard anything from headquarters in months. So there was no sense waiting for relief that might never come.

"Suit up!" Jolum called to his people. "You Xandressians . . . the Atlantis Guild thanks you for your hard work, dedication, and sacrifice—but this is as far as you can go. From here on out, the mission is Corps work."

"Return to your homes," Cormorant added. "Fortify your defenses. If the gods are willing and we are successful, you may never need the precautions you take. But remember the lessons you've learned in these past weeks: Even in times of peace, you must remain strong and vigilant."

"I'll send two of our medics back with you," Jolum said. "They'll tend the wounded and save those they can."

He sent the younger medics, including Narvik's daughter, with the villagers, and kept the most experienced, including Narvik, with his team.

"Once we've won," Jolum said, wishing he felt as confident as he was trying to sound, "we'll return and help you rebuild. Under the stewardship of the Guild, this area will prosper once more."

Shorepiper raised his fist to the irregulars in a traditional Xandressian salute. "Our people will rise from the ashes of despair," he said, brimming with youthful enthusiasm. "Never again will the Shyft dare to invade the human territories of the Roa Sein!"

The Xandressians cheered Shorepiper's speech—but Jolum doubted the truth of his young corpsman's words. The captain knew that the Shyft's grip on the river and the Red Fens might never be broken completely. Even if the Atlantis Guild destroyed the Shyft leaders and command structure, Jolum doubted they could ever drive the monsters from every hiding place along the riverbanks.

The captain and his iron lungers began slogging through the swamp to the shore of the great Roa Sein. They made final preparations and adjusted their armor as they went. "Look at 'Piper," Kiani joked. "Less than a month in his iron and already he thinks he's the people's leader."

She smiled at Shorepiper and he blushed. Men tended to do that around the Riverstones. The sisters were buff, beautiful, ultracompetent, and whip smart. Jolum felt glad that, unlike Cormorant, they had no ambitions toward leadership. He shook his head and chuckled to himself as the blond sisters intercepted 'Piper.

“Don’t let my little sister get to you,” Brina said to the teenager. “She’s always been glad to finish in the middle of the school.”

Kiani laughed. “Right beside *you*, oldster! Here, 'Piper, let me help you with that helmet.” She assisted Shorepiper in adjusting the metal headpiece of his iron lung armor. Securing the helmet was one of the more difficult fittings to master, and 'Piper hadn’t gotten the hang of it yet. “Mess up that helmet seal and we’ll discover if you’re more fish than Jolum!” Kia said. Her blue-green eyes flashed from the teenager to the iron lung captain.

“Check your own seals while you’re at it,” Jolum reminded her. “I wouldn’t want you to miss any system checks while you’re bantering with the recruits.”

Kiani laughed again. Brina, 'Piper, and even Pretar joined in. Cormorant frowned at Jolum. “Is now the time for this . . . levity?” she asked.

“Would you rather that we all went grimly to our deaths?” Jolum asked in return. “Enjoy life, Cormorant. You never know when it may end.”

“Especially in the Corps,” added Brina.

A displeased Cormorant said, “Systems checked and ready to go, captain.”

“Good,” Jolum replied. “Review the rest of the troops and report to me when we’re ready to dive.”

“Aye, captain.”

Ten minutes later, Cormorant gave Jolum the thumbs up. Jolum ordered his troopers into the water, a series of coded whistles commanding his three submersible golems to follow. Jolum dived into the murky water and swam out toward the center channel.

The techno-magical lights on his iron lung clicked on, illuminating their way. The lungers made their way upriver, toward the fork the dying trog had indicated. As they drew near, Shorepiper pointed to a whitish tree-like branch and said, “Coral-*ulp*.” His magically amplified voice echoed through the water, but he still hadn’t gotten the hang of using the system.

Jolum and the others nodded, taking the meaning of his garbled message. Coral didn’t grow naturally in the Roa Sein. Clearly, this specimen had been placed there to guide the less-than-brilliant trogs to a “hidden” submarine entrance. Jolum had to admit that an untrained eye probably never would have noticed the Shyft’s “trail markers.” To the lungers, though, the coral stuck out like an urchin amid clamshells.

They followed the trail of coral branches to a thick patch of submerged weeds on the river's western bank. Parting the whip-like fronds, they found a tunnel descending through the riverbank and under the swamp.

"Do we . . . go down?" Piper asked uncertainly.

"What else?" Cormorant replied. Before Jolum could order the submersible golems to scout ahead, she swam into the tunnel. Jolum fought down a twinge of anger at his lieutenant's impulsiveness, and then motioned the others inside.

For more than half an hour they swam through the murky darkness, sometimes descending, sometimes ascending, always twisting and turning. Jolum's years of tunnel-diving experience gave him a pretty good idea of where they were relative to the land. Knowing their location would do them little good, though; they were a long way from help should they need it.

After a nearly interminable swim, they arced up into a soggy cavern above the waterline. Long, wet roots dangled from the cave's ceiling, and bones and other debris littered the cave's muddy floor.

"The Shyft really need to hire a housekeeper," Brina quipped.

"We could mop the floor with them for a start," Kiani suggested.

"In this muck, that wouldn't do much good," Pretar noted.

"Keep it down," Jolum said. "There could be Shyft lurking in the tunnel just ahead for all we know." With a few gestures and a series of whistles, he ordered the golems to check out the passage leading from the cave.

Jolum suppressed a shudder. This small cavern reminded him of the trog lair they'd discovered at the beginning of the campaign. The corps hadn't known, then, that the Shyft had secretly positioned themselves to invade the lands surrounding the Roa Sein. Many people, both iron lungers and their allies, had died since that first invasion.

Through it all, Jolum had received no word from Atlantis. That was what worried him most—the total lack of communication. After all their slogging through these dismal swamps, he and his people might be fighting for a cause that had already been lost. Still, any battle could turn the tide of war. Perhaps a win here would help the Atlantis' cause—even if he and his crew didn't know it. Jolum hoped so.

The three golems returned unscathed a few minutes later. Their whistles and clicks told Jolum that the passage was clear for hundreds of yards ahead.

The iron lung captain turned to his senior medic. "Narvik," he said, "you, Jessa, and Shorepiper will form our rear guard. I'll expect you to tend to the wounded and keep our avenues of retreat open."

Narvik and Jessa nodded. They had been the backbone of his support crew since the battle of Crocswallow, and Jolum knew he could count on them now. “Can’t I be up front, captain?” Shorepiper asked.

Cormorant cuffed him on the back of his helmet. “Learn to do what you’re told, minnow,” Jolum’s lieutenant said. “The Corps is not about questioning—it’s about doing your duty.”

“Take it easy, Cormorant,” Jolum said. “He’s only a field recruit. He’ll learn, given time.”

“If he doesn’t die first,” she replied. “Which is what will happen if he doesn’t follow orders.”

“Cormorant’s an expert on following orders,” Kiani said sardonically.

“Pipe down,” Jolum replied. “We’re in enemy territory here. Cormorant, take point along with Blue. Brina and I will follow, and then Kia and the other two golems. Then the rest. Everyone understand?”

“Aye, captain,” the troopers chorused. The golems whistled their comprehension.

“If you get separated, fall back to this cavern—or the river if this point is held by the enemy,” Jolum continued. “I’m counting on all of you to come out of this alive. Fight to the death only if you’re protecting your comrades or Atlantis.

“All right,” Jolum said. “Let’s get going. With luck, we can catch the Shyft sleeping.” He motioned Cormorant and Blue forward, and then followed.

Slogging through the passageway went slowly. The mud that started at their ankles quickly built to their shins and then their knees. The systems of their iron lung armor kept them relatively comfortable, but moving took considerable exertion. As they traveled, they dimmed their mage-lamps and let their eyes adjust to the darkness, hoping to take their enemies unaware.

After an hour and three-quarters, Shorepiper whispered a question, fatigue flecking his voice: “How much longer?”

“As long as it takes,” Jessa answered from behind him.

Jolum hoped Jessa felt as strong as she sounded. He worried a bit about the younger, less tested members of his crew. True, they’d been through a lot in the preceding weeks—but sometimes fire melted steel, rather than tempered it. Jolum didn’t think either Jessa or Shorepiper would crack. Unfortunately, there was no way to tell until a crisis arose.

As they walked, the mud in the tunnels continued to rise.

“Soon we’ll be swimming in this muck,” Cormorant complained.

Suddenly, the mud-caked walls around them burst inward. “Cave collapse!” Pretar called.

“No!” Jolum shouted. “Ambush!”

More than a dozen trogs, crypt worms, and other Shyft monsters burst from the tunnel walls around them.

Jolum pressed the hidden stud on his techno-magical trident. The weapon lengthened and hummed with arcane power. He stabbed it at the mud-covered trog lunging at him.

The trident pierced the trog’s flabby flesh just below its breastbone—a killing blow, though the trog was too thick-headed to know it. The monster swung its stone axe at Jolum’s head twice before dying. Jolum evaded the cuts, and then pushed the dead monster off his weapon. The iron lung leader turned to help his fellows, but had to duck back as a crypt worm emerging from the wall tried to swallow him whole.

The crypt worm rocketed forward, teeth gnashing in its gaping maw. Jolum dodged left, throwing himself against the soggy tunnel wall and sinking in part way. The worm shot past, just out of reach of Jolum’s trident. It wheeled as Jolum pulled himself free of the sodden earth.

The Atlantean captain ducked the monster’s next lunge. As the worm passed overhead, Jolum stabbed up with his trident. Techno-magical energy crackled as the weapon pierced creature’s leathery hide. The trident’s tines passed through the crypt worm’s brain and out the other side, pinning the creature’s head to the root-clogged ceiling.

As the worm died, it flailed blindly with its tail, catching Jolum across his armored chest. The iron lung leader lost his grip on his trident and crashed to the muck-strewn floor. Mud sprayed across his face plate, momentarily blinding him.

Though he was blinded, the armor kept relaying sounds and other information to Jolum. He heard Cormorant, the Riverstone sisters, and the rest struggling against their own assailants. He heard the crunch of Atlantean weapons stabbing through Shyft carapace, and the grunts of his own people being wounded.

As he wiped the mud from his helmet, Jolum heard another sound, too—a slithering, hissing sound echoing through his helmet. His years of experience told him something was right behind him. He threw himself flat on the sodden tunnel floor.

Something huge passed overhead. Its scaly belly scraped over the back of Jolum’s armor. Something clanked against the iron lung captain’s left shoulder. The impact pressed Jolum further down into the mud, but didn’t harm him; his armor turned away the wound. A Shyft curse echoed through the boggy tunnel.

Jolum rose, cleared his face plate, and retrieved his trident from the dead worm; he readied himself as the new menace came at him again.

The first thing he saw was the creature’s huge fangs; the second, a massively coiled body. This was some kind of monstrous snake. The iron lung leader stepped out of the way of the serpent’s

snapping jaws. The snake's fangs brushed across his breastplate, making a hideous scraping sound.

Almost too late, the Atlantean captain noticed a second creature astride the serpent's back. Jolum lurched backward against the soggy tunnel wall, barely avoiding the blow meant to take his head off.

The creature riding the serpent cursed again, and it wheeled the monster around for another attack. The rider looked like a cross between a reptile and a man. His face had a long, slightly pointed snout. Green scales covered his skin. Sharp-taloned hands gripped his spiked war club. Bronze armor covered much of his body.

The snake rider hissed directions to the other Shyft as he prepared to attack the iron lung leader once more.

Recognition flashed through Jolum's mind. He'd heard of this creature in iron lung briefing. It was a "Slithering Moi," a Shyft field commander. Intelligence on Moi painted him as crafty adversary, capable of controlling large numbers of Shyft—especially those that crawled or burrowed.

At Moi's command, a trog broke away from fighting Jolum's people and lumbered toward the Atlantean leader. From the opposite direction, a thorn crawler shot past Slithering Moi and his mount. The huge, segmented insectoid skittered through the mud to attack Jolum as well.

Jolum didn't relish fighting the crawler in the confined space of the muddy passageway, so he wheeled and charged the trog. The move caught the creature off guard. It swung at Jolum, but its blow was awkward and poorly timed. The Atlantean batted aside the trog's stone axe and grabbed the amphibian by the throat.

With a sudden twist, Jolum threw his enemy right into the path of the oncoming thorn crawler. Surprised, the segmented worm lashed out instinctively with its hideous mandibles. The pincers fastened around the trog's midsection with a spine-rending "crack!" The trog squealed and fell limp in the thorn crawler's maw.

Jolum lunged forward, aiming for the vital spot between the Shyft monster's brow ridges. The thorn crawler twisted away at the last instant, and Jolum's attack merely slashed across the creature's compound eyes. The orbs burst like overripe melons, spraying foul-smelling goo onto the iron lung captain's armor.

The crawler shrieked in pain and confusion. Jolum tried for another killing blow, hoping to block the progress of the thorn crawler's fellows with its body and give the iron lungers some breathing room.

The creature whipped sideways, blindly evading his trident and smashing Jolum into a soggy tunnel wall. Jolum pulled himself out of the roots and mud, but the sound of his escape alerted the crawler to his location. It dived at him head first, powerful jaws gnashing.

Pinned against the wall, Jolum thrust his trident into the thorn crawler's deadly maw. The weapon crackled with energy as Jolum pushed it through the roof of the monster's mouth and into its brain.

The creature crashed heavily into the wall, nearly pinning Jolum beneath it. Slithering Moi screamed with rage.

Jolum the Fish pulled himself out from under the crawler's body and cursed. He hadn't done the job. The huge corpse partially blocked the tunnel, but not enough to keep Moi and the rest of the Shyft from attacking.

The level of slippery mud filling the underground passage began rising rapidly. As Jolum looked for the source, he noticed that Moi and the Shyft seemed just as puzzled about the murky liquid as he. The mud rose to his thighs, then to his waist. Jolum heard his troops shouting in surprise behind him.

Before the Atlantean could do anything, the tunnel collapsed around him.

Mud, earth, and water swirled everywhere, playing havoc with his suit's sensors. Heavy rocks slammed into Jolum's bronze armor, denting it. He heard something that sounded like screaming amid the rush of murky liquid.

Jolum struggled to keep his footing. Falling down could mean being buried under tons of mud and debris. Remembering his training, he walked forward, into the flow, trying to reach the source of the surge and escape.

A wall of water crashed down on him and he fell onto his face. He jammed his armored hands into the cavern floor, digging in with his fingers and holding on for dear life.

Long moments later, the torrent passed and Jolum found himself surrounded by blackness.

Slowly, the iron lung captain pulled himself out of the mud. At his command, the mage-lamp crystals set into his armor flickered on, revealing the tunnel beyond. Ahead of Jolum, a hundred Shyft eyes gleamed and glittered in the darkness.

The iron lung captain gripped his trident and prepared to die fighting.

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Retreat was impossible. The cave-in had both trapped the Atlantean captain and cut him off from his troops. Whether Cormorant and the rest had been crushed by the collapse or were, even now, dying at the claws of the Shyft, Jolum had no way of knowing. His armor magnified his senses, especially under water, but Jolum still couldn't see through stone and earth.

His fellows would try to reach him, assuming they lived. But unless they arrived quickly, Jolum doubted he'd be alive to meet them.

Ahead, the eerie eyes of the Shyft glittered in the semidarkness. As the monsters recovered from the cave-in, their own natural illumination brightened once more. Dim blue, red, and yellowish lights—reminding Jolum of the coloring of deep-sea fish—played along the lengths of their hideous bodies. They were dozens, perhaps hundreds, strong. Their numbers receded back into the darkness and out of sight.

In the midst of the pack rode Slithering Moi. He fastidiously brushed the dirt and mud off his bronze armor. His green, scaly lips drew back in a wicked parody of a smile.

Moi pointed his spiked club at the trapped Atlantean. “This is the end of Jolum the Fish!”

Jolum braced himself and turned up the power on his trident.

Moi rode toward him, flanked by two tunnel worms. As the trio approached Jolum, the snake-rider let the worms pull ahead slightly.

Behind his bronze helmet, Jolum smiled. Moi had inadvertently revealed his weakness to the iron lung captain. Jolum hoped to capitalize on his discovery—though he harbored no illusions about escaping this mess alive.

The lunger ducked between the worms as they struck at him. The monsters crossed each other, passing over Jolum's head, and he gutted one as it went by. The fatally wounded creature's innards splashed over the eyes of the other worm, momentarily blinding it. The blind one thundered into the side of the passage, which collapsed atop its squirming body. Jolum knew that wouldn't kill the worm, but it would keep the monster busy while he made his play for Slithering Moi.

The Shyft leader reined his snake to one side, trying to dodge as Jolum attacked. Jolum laughed as he stabbed at Moi's exposed flank. As the Atlantean suspected, this Shyft leader wanted to *seem* brave, but Moi preferred to let others do his fighting.

Jolum's trident gouged the side of Moi's serpentine mount, cutting into the Shyft's right leg. Moi shrieked with pain. Jolum twisted for another stab, but Moi's snake proved quicker than the lunger had guessed. Like lightning, it whirled and smashed him in the chest with its tail.

The blow staggered Jolum, and he fell right into the path of Slithering Moi's spiked club.

Whooping with rage, Moi smashed the club down on Jolum's techno-magical helmet. A spike shattered one of the helm's crystal viewports, lodging itself inside.

Jolum shut his eyes shut to avoid being blinded by the shards, cursing his overconfidence.

Moi yanked out the club, tearing a gaping hole in the helmet. Jolum choked on the sudden rush of dank, foul air, but he kept his wits focused. As Moi turned to hit him again, Jolum lunged forward and stabbed the serpent master in the thigh.

Slithering Moi reeled, falling from the saddle and landing in the mud. Jolum slogged forward to finish off the Shyft, but as he did something heavy smashed down on the back of his helmet. Lights burst before Jolum's eyes, and he toppled into the muck.

As he fell, he managed to turn and keep his face above the sludge. The wounded Moi backed away and a huge trog lunged forward.

"This is for Bek," the trog growled. He had no weapon, but he needed none, wrapping his enormous hands around Jolum's exposed neck. Before the lunger could bring his trident around, the trog shoved him beneath the thick mud.

The putrid loam sloshed into Jolum's helmet, quickly filling it. Sludge got into Jolum's nose, eyes, and mouth. The Atlantean flailed with his trident, trying to stab the trog holding him.

Another trog leapt forward and smashed the weapon out of Jolum's hand. The trident sailed through the air, sank into the mud, and disappeared several yards away.

"Argh! Human scum cut me!" the first trog cried. He waved his bloodied paws in the air. Before Jolum could wriggle free, though, the trog plunged his talons back into the mud once more.

"Grab his arms! Hold him still!" bellowed the second. He and the first amphibian wrestled with Jolum, trying to pin his arms and legs.

A third and then a fourth trog came to aid them. They tried to smash Jolum with their clubs, but he was too deeply submerged, and the mud deflected their blows.

"Just hold him down!" Slithering Moi called. "Keep him under until he dies!" The Shyft leader smiled and bandaged his and his steed's wounds as Jolum struggled futilely.

The trogs held Jolum under the surging mud until he stopped moving. They continued to hold him for five minutes more. Finally, the rising sludge forced them back, up the tunnel away from their prey; even trogs could not breathe mud.

Slithering Moi's gloating laughter echoed down the passage as the Shyft ambush party made for home, leaving behind the sodden grave of Jolum the Fish.

Brina Riverstone blinked the sweat out of her eyes and pulled her sister's prostrate body up a rise in the tunnel floor and out of the mud. With the bone-handled knife in her other hand, she parried the deadly blow of a trog's axe.

Bri slid the knife down the ax handle and severed the fingers of the trog attacking her. The monster pulled back. Bri quickly flipped the knife in her hand and gutted the amphibian with her backswing.

The ground atop the small rise was a bit less soggy, and she laid Kiani gently on the dirt. The tunnel was wider here and more suited to fighting. That would give the advantage to their more numerous enemies. Bri knew she could not stay with her sister if she hoped to save her.

Kiani's helmet had been smashed. Thick globs of blood covered the younger Riverstone sister's pretty face. The rest of Kia's iron lung seemed relatively intact; Kiani still held her trident tightly in her armored hands. Whatever had felled her had happened quickly. Brina hadn't seen the blow that downed her sister; she'd been too busy fighting for her own life.

Bri's trident had been snapped by a combined attack of trogs and thorn crawlers. Fortunately, she'd been able to draw her bone-handled knife in time to fend them off. The knife was standard issue for the Iron Lung Corps—a tradition that, more than once, had saved a trooper's life. Today was one of those occasions. In close combat, there was no better weapon than a lunger knife.

Since they were outnumbered, though, Brina would have preferred a trident's longer range and reach. She'd fought free of her attackers to rescue Kia, but new ones now spotted her. Kia might be dead, Bri couldn't tell. She glanced at the trident that Kiani gripped tightly. Brina knew her only chance to defend her sister and win the day lay in using that weapon.

As the Shyft came at her, Bri stooped, sheathed her knife, and pried the trident loose from Kia's stiff fingers. Something snapped in the younger girl's hand, and Brina whispered, "Sorry" before rising to fight once more.

She stepped away from her sister's body to meet the incoming attack. A tunnel worm snapped at her helmet, but Bri put her borrowed trident through its face. Simultaneously, she kicked an onrushing trog in the gut. The amphibian flew back into a sodden wall and its weapon slipped from its hand. Before it could recover, Brina stabbed the trident through its chest. Another enemy down, but so many more to go.

Escape seemed out of the question. The ambushers had waited until the whole patrol was in the "killing zone." Surrounded, there'd been nothing to do but fight. Jolum and Cormorant had carried the battle forward, while Narvik, Jessa, and Shorepiper fought to free the rear.

That left the Riverstone sisters and Pretar caught in the middle. None of them minded; the three veteran lungers liked being in the thick of things.

The Shyft attack had been vicious, and only the lungers' training kept them from being quickly overwhelmed. Fortunately, the tight confines of the muddy tunnel hindered the Shyft as much as the Atlantean warriors. Many trogs, thorn crawlers, and tunnel worms soon lay dead in the muck. But the iron lungers had also lost much.

Narvik was dead. Jessa lay slumped against a tunnel wall, her helmet smashed and her right arm hanging by a thread. Brina doubted she'd make it; the young lunger looked pale and distant—going into shock, no doubt. Since she hadn't seen Kiani fall, Bri couldn't be certain how badly her sister had been hurt. Both younger girls were out of action—at least for this fight.

Pretar, bleeding from a dozen wounds, was helping Cormorant hold the front line. That front ended at the collapsed wall that had cut them off from Jolum and the rest of the Shyft. Cormorant had barely avoided being crushed in the landslide. The submersible golem known as Fiddler lay partially trapped under the rubble. Bri doubted the golem had been badly hurt, but they didn't have time to dig it out. Fortunately, even pinned, Fiddler could still fire spear bolts with deadly accuracy.

Another golem, Hermit, fought beside Pretar and Cormorant. Hermit's body cavity had been crushed—it was leaking vital fluids—but it kept killing Shyft. Its movements were slowing, though, and Bri knew it wouldn't be fighting much longer.

Losing Jolum was a terrible blow, but the collapse had also isolated the iron lungers from the body of the Shyft ambushers. This gave them at least some chance to survive.

To the rear, only a handful of tunnel worms and trogs remained. But those few Shyft might still overwhelm the inexperienced Shorepiper and Blue, the golem who fought beside him.

All of this flashed through Brina Riverstone's mind in an instant as she stood above the prone body of her wounded sister. Bri reached a quick conclusion: Cormorant and Pretar could hold their own; Shorepiper needed her.

Bri kicked aside the body of the dead tunnel worm and stabbed the flank of the thorn crawler attacking Shorepiper. The gigantic Shyft insect turned in surprise, and 'Piper rammed his spear through the monster's lower jaw and into its brain. Because he was a field recruit, 'Piper hadn't been properly trained in the trident. Fortunately, his Xandressian upbringing had made him handy with both spear and staff.

Shorepiper wasn't an experienced lunger, though. That rawness showed in the next instant, as a tunnel worm lunged and fastened onto his spear arm. It pinned 'Piper's shoulder to the wall and ground his armored limb with its sharp, rasp-like teeth. 'Piper screamed.

Another worm attacked Bri, preventing her from reaching the boy. Cut off, she whistled a command to Blue. The submersible golem pivoted at the waist and fired a speargun volley into the body of the worm attacking Shorepiper. 'Piper pulled free from the monster's mouth, his right arm a bloody mess. With his left hand, he retrieved the stone-bladed knife from his boot and

stabbed it through the worm's eye. 'Piper hadn't yet earned the bone-handled knife of the corps; fortunately, Jolum had insisted the youngster bring a back-up weapon.

Jolum! As she slew the worm facing her, Brina wondered whether their leader was dead or alive. And, if alive, how long could he hold out against the mass of Shyft beyond that wall?

The thought nearly cost Bri her life, as a thorn crawler lunged at her head. Brina ducked to one side as the monster's mandibles ripped into her left shoulder.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she stabbed at the thing's neck with her trident. The crawler dodged, coiled its chitinous body around her, and squeezed.

Brina tried to extract her trident for another stab, but the weapon caught in the monster's carapace; she couldn't free it. The coils closed more tightly around her. Bri felt something in her armor snap as one of the techno-magical protections failed. Sudden pressure crushed in against her ribs and chest. Every breath became agony.

She reached for her bone-handled knife, but fumbled away the mud-slick handle. The dagger plopped into the sludge, just out of reach. Bri screamed, as much from frustration as pain. She yanked uselessly at the trident. Her head spun, and the world tipped toward darkness.

She started to fall when, suddenly, the lights came back on. Her chest ached, but she could breathe again. For a moment, she wondered if she might be dead. If so, paradise was a stinky, painful place. She fought to clear her head and found her face half buried in the mud.

"Brina, are you all right?" Shorepiper called from above her.

Bri nodded and staggered to her feet. She looked around for her knife or Kia's trident. The thorn crawler lay dead beside her, Shorepiper's spear protruding from its side.

"It's all right," 'Piper said, pulling his spear out of the monster. "The battle is over. We've *won!*"

It took a few moments for his words to sink in. Brina looked around. All the Shyft in the tunnel lay dead. 'Piper, Cormorant, Pretar, and two golems remained standing. But all the survivors looked like hell.

'Piper's armor had been shredded, especially the casing around his right arm that hung there, pale and bloody. Seeing Brina's concerned glance, 'Piper said, "I'll be okay."

Brina nodded and looked toward Pretar. Blood streamed down the old Delphanan's muscular body. Without a doubt, he'd have more scars to add to his already impressive collection. He smiled, though, and Brina knew he'd survive.

Cormorant looked even worse. Her armor had been shredded almost to nothing. Like Pretar, she was covered in blood, and there was a nasty-looking hole in her side, just below her rib cage. Her dark eyes still gleamed with fierce determination. She nodded to Brina as she fashioned a

makeshift bandage out of her remaining garments. “Dig that golem out, would you?” she rasped. “We’ll need its help getting out of here.”

Brina nodded and whistled a series of commands to the other golems. Though badly battered, both Blue and Hermit tottered to the edge of the collapse and began freeing Fiddler. Bri went to her sister’s body and felt for a pulse.

“Thank Tezla!” she whispered.

Pretar kneeled down next to her and handed her some bandages and Atlantean medicine. “I salvaged them from Narvik’s equipment,” the Delphanan said.

“So he’s really . . . ?” Bri asked.

“Yeah,” Pretar replied. “He’s gone. Damn shame. Just when we needed him most. We might still save Jessa, if not her arm. I’ll work on her, see what I can do.”

Pretar went to Jessa as Bri tended her sister’s visible wounds. Cormorant and ’Piper each bandaged themselves.

’Piper suddenly stood and his eyes went wide with realization. “Where’s Jolum?” he asked.

“Dead in the collapse or beyond our help,” Cormorant replied. “We need to get out of here. There may be more Shyft on the way.”

“But we can’t just *leave* him,” ’Piper said.

“We can’t do anything else,” Cormorant said. “He’s beyond our help. This mission is a failure. The best we can do is get the wounded . . . to safety.” She staggered and leaned against one wall for support.

“Cormorant’s right, minnow,” Pretar said. “The tunnel’s blocked, the back door to the Shyft lairs closed. No way to continue. Best we can do is fight another day. It’s what Jolum would want.”

Shorepiper tied off the last of his bandages, went to the collapse, and started digging with his hands. “Come on!” he said to the golems. “We can dig through this!” The golems began to comply—even Fiddler, whose legs had been mostly crushed in the landslide.

“Belay that!” Cormorant said. “We . . . ” Her knees buckled and she pitched face first into the mud.

“Damn!” Pretar said, racing to her side. He looked at Brina. “We need to get Cormorant out of here or she’s a goner. The others, too.”

Brina nodded. “I can’t just abandon Jolum, though,” she said. “Take Hermit and Blue. Have them carry Kiani and Jessa. We’ve done all we can for them. They need proper medical attention as badly as Cormorant. Do you feel up to carrying her?”

“If we strip off the rest of her armor, yeah,” Pretar replied. “She’s practically skin and bones. Shouldn’t be much to carry.”

“Good,” Bri said. “Piper, you go along and help Pretar and the others get back to base.”

“But, what about the water?” Piper asked. “Our armor is shredded, and Kia’s helmet is smashed.”

“The tunnel entrance isn’t that deep,” Brina said. “All you need is your helmets. We can rig them to get everyone to the surface. Kia can take Narvik’s helm.” She paused and drew a deep breath. “He doesn’t need it any longer.”

“Cormorant’s helmet’s shot, too,” Pretar said grimly. “Not surprised, given the damage she took.”

Shorepiper paled. “We’re one short. “We’ll have to leave someone behind.”

“The Corps doesn’t leave *anyone* behind,” Brina said. She reached up and unfastened the seals at her collar. “Cormorant can use this,” she said, handing Shorepiper her helmet.

“But . . . what are *you* going to do?” Piper asked.

“Fiddler and I are going to keep digging,” the elder Riverstone sister replied. “Fiddler’s legs are bad; it’d only slow you down anyway. Either we’ll find Jolum’s body or we’ll rescue him.”

“But if you run into more water . . .” Shorepiper began, but Pretar put his hand on the teenager’s shoulder and silenced him.

The Delphanan nodded at the elder Riverstone sister. “Don’t get yourself killed,” he said.

Bri smiled grimly. “Only if it’ll help save Atlantis.”

Eerie stillness filled the remains of the collapsed tunnel. Howling joyfully, the victorious Shyft had retreated to their distant lair. Slithering Moi’s boasts of killing Jolum the Fish had long since echoed into silence. The oppressive darkness closed in over the deep sludge once more.

The mud in the tunnel kept rising, fed by hidden underground streams seeping through the root-clogged earth. Nothing disturbed the bloodstained surface of the murk. Only the dead remained.

After what seemed like ages, a bubble rose from the depths. It drifted up through the mud and hissed to the surface, bursting with a faint popping sound.

Another followed it. Then another.

The mud surged upward until its surface bulged, like a leathery egg not yet ready to crack. The shape beneath kept pushing, finally breaking its earthy bonds and forcing its way into the dank tunnel air. Mud dripped down from the object in great, rolling clods, revealing the battered form beneath. Almost silently, Jolum the Fish rose from his muddy grave.

He wiped the putrid sludge from his face. His pale blue eyes shone in the light from the crystals set into his iron lung armor. The Atlantean surveyed the tunnel and saw no enemies remaining—just as he had planned.

Jolum almost laughed. Being dead had been easy, far easier than trying to fight a hundred Shyft.

As leader of an iron lung battalion, Jolum the Fish could hold his breath for a very, very long time—much longer than Slithering Moi and the Shyft could have guessed. The captain smothering in the mud would have been merely a fluke. Something like that might happen to a young iron lung, but not to Jolum the Fish.

Strangulation at the hands of the big trog had been a far more urgent threat. Jolum had needed to get the trog's talons off his throat quickly. Slashing the monster's arms with his bone-handled knife had been the easiest way to get the trog to let go. He'd considered severing the monster's wrists. Tezla knew that he wanted to. But doing so could have brought more Shyft into the fray. They might have smothered Jolum through sheer weight of numbers.

Far better to play dead and then wait until they'd gone.

His plan worked perfectly.

Jolum put his ear to the collapsed wall and heard the distant sounds of digging and human voices. His troops had survived—at least some of them. Jolum couldn't afford to wait until they dug him out.

The fate of the Roa Sein, the Red Fens, and perhaps Atlantis itself hung on his actions.

The Shyft thought him dead. They'd left his body in the mud, exposing their flanks to him.

What intelligence he'd gleaned from the Xandressian locals hinted that the Shyft were on the verge of something big—a power shift that would shake the land to its very core. Jolum might prevent that *if* he could reach the Shyft meeting place in time.

Unfortunately, he would have to do it alone.

He walked up the tunnel, shining the light from his suit's glow crystals across the muddy floor. The illumination revealed a very clear set of tracks. He smiled. Slithering Moi would take him right where he wanted to go.

Jolum removed the shattered remains of his helmet; it would hinder his sight more than it would protect him now. A sensor crystal in his armored wrist quickly led him to his trident. The weapon was hardy, forged with the best Atlantean techno-magic and handed down to Corps captains

through the ages. Jolum's fight with the Shyft hadn't damaged it at all. Not wanting to lose his bone-handled knife in the mud, he'd resheathed the dagger after slashing the trog. That weapon, too, was ready for combat.

The iron lung leader whispered a prayer for his comrades' safety, and then trudged up the tunnel toward the Shyft lair.

Jolum moved as swiftly as he dared, keeping an eye out for Shyft sentries or other ambushes. He found none. Apparently, Moi and the Shyft commanders felt confident of the iron lung brigade's demise. Jolum vowed to make them rue that conceit.

The tunnels grew wider and somewhat drier as he went. Jolum chuckled to himself. The Shyft would doubtless be surprised to see him. Is this how the dead looked when a necromancer raised them? Covered head to toe with earth?

He killed two sleepy trog sentries at the tunnel's exit. The iron lung captain drew his knife across their throats before either one uttered a sound. Their lives leaked out as silently as their dark blood.

Beyond the slain sentries, the passageway debouched into the side of a huge chamber. The cavern was mostly belowground, though it stood open to the air at the apex. Fog-clotted sunlight shone through the hole in the roof. Roots and huge boulders suffused the cave's walls, and dangling moss clung to its sides.

Shyft of all sizes and shapes filled the chamber. They danced and writhed, shouting their glee at the death of their enemies and of the anticipated deaths to come. More than once, Jolum heard his own name listed among those slain. Slithering Moi shouted the loudest, taking credit for Jolum's destruction.

Moi sat perched on his serpentine mount to Jolum's left, 30 feet below the tunnel exit. The Shyft commander occupied a place of honor before the throne of a creature Jolum had glimpsed only once before, not counting his nightmares.

Pexapatia Mar adjusted her huge bulk atop a throne made entirely of human bones. She was a hideous, flabby thing—a cross between a lizard and a human, but easily three times the size of a normal person. The skin atop her monstrous head throbbed and flashed with faint lights, revealing the workings of her huge, bloated brain. Two twisted horns spouted from the top of her massive skull. Razor-sharp fangs lined her enormous mouth. All three of her red eyes—one glaring out from the middle of her forehead—burned with preternatural intelligence.

In one of her three-taloned hands she held a glowing scepter. Sinuous reptiles and amphibians of all descriptions twined up the scepter's golden length. The scepter terminated in a large, blood-red jewel. The carved lizards and snakes embraced the jewel lovingly in their claws and fanged mouths. In her other claw, Pexapatia held a cup made from a human skull. She grinned evilly as she drank blood from the cup and surveyed the great throng writhing before her. Moi seemed bent on gaining her attention, but the Shyft matriarch paid him little heed. Her black mind was bent on other things.

Slowly, her muscles straining to lift her great weight, the queen of the monsters rose to her feet. She moved to the front of the stone platform and held the scepter out before her. Her subjects ceased their gyrations. A hush of anticipation fell over the cavern.

Suddenly, the air filled with a great, rushing wind. Glowing, insubstantial forms flitted past, as a veritable tidal wave of magical energy surged through the cavern. The fine hairs on the back of Jolum's neck stood as he braced himself against the enchanted gale. He wasn't sure what was happening, but it was far worse than anything he had expected.

Pexapatia cackled with glee. She crushed the skull cup in her talons and held the scepter out before her. Human blood dripped down her scaly arm. The scepter began to glow.

"The time is now!" the Shyft matriarch shrieked. "The Solonavi have loosed the magic, and the land is ours for the taking!"

Bolts of electricity flew from the scepter and the air sizzled with arcane power. The assembled Shyft squealed and hissed with pleasure. The matriarch's red eyes glowed with delight.

Jolum fought down the fear rising in his gut and concentrated. Clearly, the Shyft's plan had reached its final stages. Another few moments, and he might have been too late.

"Cut off the head, and the eel will die," was an old iron lung saying. Jolum intended to put that homily to the test.

Quickly and cautiously, he sneaked around the ledge of the cavern, getting as close to the Shyft matriarch as he could. He crept to a spot above and behind her, within a half-dozen yards. Then, as Pexapatia Mar stirred up her followers, he rose up and leapt at the back of her pulsating skull.

Jolum pressed the hidden stud on his trident, suffusing it with crackling techno-magical energy.

At the last instant, Pexapatia sensed his presence and turned. She was too large to dodge aside and avoid his blow; for a moment, Jolum thought he might kill her.

Eldritch power arced from the red gem atop the Shyft matriarch's scepter. Wild energy flashed out, buffeting Jolum and turning him aside from his intended killing blow. Jolum tucked into a roll, letting his iron lung armor cushion the fall. A resounding clank filled the cavern as he hit the stone platform supporting Pexapatia's throne.

The Shyft matriarch turned on her congregation, her eyes blazing with anger. "Fools!" she hissed. "How could you let this human penetrate our inner chambers?"

Her subjects, especially Slithering Moi, cowered away from her.

The iron lung leader rose to his feet. "I am no ordinary human," he shouted. "I am Jolum the Undying! Your people could not kill me, despite their best efforts." He glanced at Moi here, and spotted the Shyft commander slinking away through the crowd. Then he turned back to the

matriarch. “Nor can you slay me, Pexapatia Mar. I defy you! I will dance on the bony shells of your hive long after you are dust!”

The Shyft matriarch roared in rage. Crimson, blue, and yellow energy sparked from her scepter. Her immense brain throbbed blood red. She blasted forth her hatred in great gouts of malevolent force.

Jolum held out his trident and braced himself. He knew the weapon could deflect some spells; he hoped it would be enough against the terrible Shyft queen.

The blast hit.

The iron lung leader’s skin felt as though it were on fire. Malignant Shyft energies coursed around the outside of his armor. The crystal displays in the armored rim below his chin glowed bright red, then white—as though they might shatter at any instant.

But they did not shatter.

And Jolum did not die.

The Shyft in the audience chamber gasped.

Slowly, Jolum forced himself forward, pushing into the magical assault as though he were wading through an oncoming wave. *Always move toward the source.* That was the iron lung maxim when fighting rushing waters; the same applied to spells, it seemed.

Jolum’s short-cropped blond hair stood on end. So did the hair on the back of his neck and his arms. His skin tingled with painful electricity. He felt hot all over, even to his eyeballs. Deadly Shyft energies crackled around his techno-magical weapon. Amazingly, the trident’s enchantment proved equal to it, much to Jolem's surprise.

Sensing a change in the battle, Jolum lunged forward, stabbing his trident at the Shyft matriarch’s bloated belly. Pexapatia ceased her magical assault just in time to ward off Jolum’s blow. She batted the trident aside with the scepter while clawing at Jolum’s face with her other hand.

The iron lung captain dodged the brunt of her assault, but the Shyft’s long fingernails traced two lines across his left cheek. The scratches burned like fire.

The matriarch reared back, trying to gut Jolum with her immense rear talons. The iron lung captain dropped to the ground and swept his trident at the Shyft’s pivot foot.

The weapon sparked and glowed as it hit. The matriarch’s skin sizzled where the trident made contact, and Pexapatia toppled onto her back. She writhed like a pinned bug, screaming hideously. Jolum regained his feet and leaped at her, aiming his weapon at her heart.

Pexapatia’s scepter glowed and she blasted him again. The surge buffeted Jolum like a great wind and sent him flying through the air. He landed hard, skidding to the edge of the raised platform

and nearly falling into the roiling mass of Shyft below. The monsters clawed at the iron lung captain, but he scrambled back up onto the stone, out of reach.

As he rose to his feet, Jolum felt the power of Pexapatia Mar's presence. The Shyft matriarch's hatred burned into his mind. Visions of death and carnage filled Jolum's head. He saw his friends dying, their flesh flayed from their bones before being fed to the Shyft's ravenous hordes. He saw himself, drawn and quartered, paraded before the burning walls of Atlantis. He saw the great city crumble, the skulls of its citizens piled into pyramids a mile high.

Jolum squeezed his eyes shut, trying to chase away the visions, but they persisted. This was *not* real! It was a Shyft trick.

The iron lung captain opened his eyes just in time. Pexapatia Mar streaked forward with a speed belying her enormous bulk. Hatred of all things human burned in her three eyes, and hot saliva sprayed from her gaping jaws.

Her claws raked across Jolum's chest, shredding his armor. He brought up his trident barely in time to fend off her second assault. Jolum counterattacked, but the Shyft matriarch caught his trident in her foretalons. She pressed the weapon against her scepter, trying to destroy the trident with the magic of the scepter.

"Fleshy meat," the Shyft queen hissed. "I will suck the marrow from your bones!"

Jolum tried to wrest the trident free, but her strength proved too great. Her eyes glowed green and a terrible pressure built within his skull. He felt as though he were at the bottom of the sea without his iron lung. It seemed his brain must burst at any moment. He tried to force the tines of the trident up, into Pexapatia Mar's terrible eyes.

She twisted the weapon away, threatening to yank it from his grasp. The clamor of the Shyft built to a thundering roar within the cavern. The Shyft hooted and cheered, urging their leader on. "Death to Jolum!" many cried. "Death to Atlantis!"

Jolum stopped resisting and let go of his trident. Before the startled matriarch could react, he drew his bone-handled knife and stabbed it deep into Pexapatia Mar's flabby gut. He drew the blade across the length of her belly and yanked it out the other side. Gore and black blood sprayed through the air.

A look of terrible shock and disbelief drew over the matriarch's monstrous face. The cheers of the Shyft in the chamber turned to shocked gasps.

Pexapatia fell to her knees, her guts spilling out onto the platform. She gripped her scepter with both hands and it flared to life. Jolum snatched up his trident as it fell from her other claw. As she turned the staff against him, he swung his trident against the artifact with all his might.

The Shyft queen's scepter shattered, filling the cavern with blazing white light. Pexapatia gaped in terrified awe.

Jolum leaped forward, plunging his trident deep into her brain.

The Shyft's huge bulk toppled backward, twitching hideously as she hit the stone. A sound like lightning shook the platform, and a shudder seemed to run through the entire swampy cavern.

Jolum stabbed his trident into her again. Again and again, until nothing remained of the Shyft matriarch's head but red pulp. He withdrew his trident one final time, and stood triumphantly over the flabby corpse. Gore dripped from the weapon's sizzling tines.

Turning to the assembly, Jolum cried, "Who's next?!"

The gathered Shyft stood slack, their slime-filled jaws hanging open.

His every muscle burning, Jolum slowly raised his trident above his head. As he did, the weapon began to glow as though it were filled with molten gold. Higher and higher he raised it. The weapon shone almost as brightly as the sun. As it reached its apex, lightning flashed from the forked spear's tines, causing Jolum to almost drop it in surprise.

The ten Shyft nearest to Jolum fell dead, their flesh turned to dust. Their charred skeletons clattered to the cavern's floor.

In an instant, the cavern filled with the frightened wails of the assembled monsters. The stone platform shook with the thunder of their fleeing footsteps. The terrified creatures bolted to the cave's numerous exits and quickly disappeared.

Jolum collapsed to his knees. His trident slumped to his side; it no longer glowed.

The iron lung captain's head still pounded from the matriarch's mental assault. Nausea threatened to overwhelm him. After long minutes mastering himself, he rose to his feet once more.

He seized three burning braziers from the side of the platform and dumped their contents onto the matriarch's body. Pexapatia Mar burned like the great mass of blubber that she was. Huge gouts of black, oily smoke wafted into the humid afternoon sky.

Jolum crouched by the fire, watching until nothing remained of his enemy but ashes.

A sound, faint but distinct, found his ears. Jolum rose, ready to fight once more despite the ache that filled every fiber of his being.

The concerned face of Brina Riverstone appeared on the ledge above him. Beside her stood Hermit, the submersible golem. Both looked dirty and damaged, but Jolum's heart swelled to see them alive.

Brina and the golem made their way down to where Jolum stood.

He clapped Bri on the shoulders and nodded. "The others?" he asked.

“Mostly alive,” Brina replied. “At least, they were when we left them—except for Narvik. We sent the rest back to base for medical attention.”

Jolum closed his eyes at the news of Narvik’s fate, but then he finally nodded. “Good.”

“You look like you could use a medic yourself,” Brina said, glancing at Jolum’s wounds.

“Later,” he said. “For now, let’s just get the hell out of here.”

After clearing the tunnels and slogging across the Red Fens for half a day, they reached the Roa Sein.

Jolum gazed across the wide river than ran red with the last rays of sunset.

“A river of blood,” Brina said, mirroring his thoughts. “All that blood, all that sacrifice. I hope it’s been worth it.”

“We may not have destroyed the Shyft,” Jolum replied, “but we’ve decapitated them. Pexapatia Mar and her followers won’t plague Atlantis—or the Roa Sein—any more.”

Brina Riverstone put her hand on Jolum’s shoulder and smiled.

From the riverbank, only a short swim downriver separated them from the safety of the iron lung base camp. Jolum, Brina, and Fiddler made it in record time.

When they arrived, they found the rest of their troop waiting for them. The iron lung medics Jolum left behind had saved Kiani, Cormorant, and Jessa’s lives. The three women were in no shape to greet their wayward comrades, so Jolum and Brina visited them in the camp’s makeshift infirmary.

Jolum gazed at his wounded troopers, immensely proud of all of them.

“Sorry about the fingers,” Brina said to her sister.

Kiani was the only conscious one of the three. “That’s all right,” Kia replied, “I have another set.” She smiled weakly. “I can fight left handed for a while.”

“The fighting’s over,” Jolum said. “At least for now.”

Shorepiper and Pretar had patched up nicely; neither seemed at all bothered by his wounds. The two of them concocted an impromptu celebration with the Xandressians as soon as Jolum, Bri, and Fiddler returned. The battle was over and—thanks to the river gods and the grace of Tezla—they had won. What better reason to throw a party?

Brina happily accepted their invitation, but Jolum declined, preferring instead to retire to his chambers. Exhaustion claimed him. Not even the sounds of celebration could keep him awake.

That night, Jolum the Fish slept more deeply than he'd ever slept before.

For once, no nightmares disturbed his dreams.

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.