

The River of Death
Part 1
by Stephen D. Sullivan

“So, do you think I could be good at this?” Shorepiper asked. He stuck his long sculling pole into the muck of the river bottom and strained mightily to push the barge forward. He looked hopefully at the Riverstone sisters.

Brina and Kiani Riverstone glanced at each other, their blue-green eyes flashing mischievously. They, too, dug their poles into the mud and pushed, but the sisters were having far more success than Shorepiper was. Their tanned muscles and short-cropped dusty hair glistened with sweat as they propelled the Xandressian barge through the marshy shallows. The Roa Sein was a mighty river--and swift-running in most places--but it still had its difficult spots. This was one of those, and it was giving Shorepiper considerably more trouble than it was giving the women, or the fourth crewmember on the barge.

The sisters smiled at Shorepiper, showing rows of straight, white teeth. For a moment, hope at what the women *might* say flashed across the youngster’s smooth, dark face.

“No,” they chimed in unison. Then they laughed--a clear, musical sound echoing over the river.

“No hope at all, I’m afraid,” Kia said. “Sorry.”

“It’s a very tough job,” Bri put in consolingly. “Not everyone is cut out for it.”

Shorepiper’s face fell. “But I could *do* it. Really! I’ll build up my muscles--work on my swimming--strap a knife to my leg . . .”

“These knives have to be *earned*,” Brina said, indicating the bone-handled knife at her calf. The weapon made Bri and her sister seem slightly dangerous, even as the brief cut of their shifts made them look alluring. The contradiction caused Shorepiper’s head to swim.

“Give it up, squirt,” Pretar the Navigator called. He was even more muscular and tanned than the Riverstone sisters--if nowhere near as lovely. Though he was a Delphana, his skin was almost as dark as Shorepiper’s. Iron-gray streaks flecked his dark hair and the rough stubble on his chin. A network of scars, looking like a vast river map, traced the surface of his body. Clearly, he had spent many hard years working the waterways. “Our life isn’t for you,” he added. “You should stick with your family business. Now get back to your pole. We’re drifting to starboard.”

“I *could* be one of you,” Shorepiper fumed. “You’ll see. I’m not like the salt and other low-value cargo you’re transporting. I can *help* you. I’m *not* just baggage.”

“Piper,” Kia said, addressing the youngster by his nickname, “you’re a nice kid. But the only reason we took you along on this expedition is because your aunt owns this barge.”

“If she hadn’t insisted on ‘protecting’ her investment, you’d be safe at home, squirt,” Pretar agreed. “And that’s the way *all* of us would prefer it.”

Shorepiper almost replied, and then thought better of it. Instead, he redoubled his efforts to move the barge.

Slowly, the Xandressian barge moved out of the reed-clogged shallows and toward the open water at the center of the river. Pretar put down his pole and moved to the tiller at the back of the craft. The ship was long and wide with a shallow draft--built for carrying cargo, not for speed or maneuverability. Wooden boxes and large, sealed pottery jars were lashed to its deck. Most were filled with goods for trade downstream. As Pretar guided the vessel, Shorepiper took a break from poling to check on their merchandise, even though he didn’t think the goods very worthwhile.

“Stay alert now,” Bri said. “The trouble usually starts just after ships clear these shallows.”

“Should I raise the sail?” Shorepiper asked.

“No,” Kia replied. “If there’s trouble, it will only get in the way.”

Ahead, the Roa Sein picked up speed again as it wound through the rolling hills and lush grasslands south of the Red Fens. Bri and Kia abandoned their poles as well, in favor of side-mounted oars to help steer the ship. They glanced briefly at each other, their jaws stiff with determination. Pretar looked around warily as Shorepiper went to the bow of the ship and peered downriver.

“I don’t see anything,” the youngster said. “Maybe nothing is going to happen. Maybe we’re safe on this trip.”

No sooner had the words left his lips, than the barge shook violently. A huge wave of water burst over the low, port-side gunwale. The women and Pretar weathered the disturbance easily enough, but Shorepiper had to grab onto a line from the mast to avoid being swept overboard.

A second wave washed over Shorepiper, and he shook his head to clear the water from his eyes. When his vision cleared, the sight that greeted him made his blood run cold.

Three monsters crouched on the deck where the wave had hit. Two were huge, crawfish-like beasts with reddish-brown armor; massive, clawed hands; and insect-like maws lined with sharp teeth. They moved awkwardly, like lumbering hippos, and clicked and chattered to each other. A mythical name from childhood sprang into Shorepiper’s head: “Shelled Ones.”

The third creature was different. It was large as well, though not so huge as the Shelled Ones. Green scales and knobby protuberances covered its muscular body. The monster’s head was lizard-like, with sharp teeth and glistening red eyes. A crude bone necklace ringed its thick neck. In its powerful hand was a crude stone axe. The beast cackled maliciously, and greenish saliva dripped from its wide mouth.

As Shorepiper watched in horror, a second lizard-like creature crawled over the side of the ship and joined the other invaders.

“Trog!” Kia called.

“*And Shelled Ones?*” Pretar asked, incredulous. “I honestly didn’t believe it.”

“Start believing and *fight!*” Bri ordered. She and her sister swung their oars at the intruders while Pretar picked up his sculling pole.

Shorepiper went for his pole as well, but the towering form of a Shelled One cut him off. The creature swung its pincer-like hand at the youth’s head.

Piper ducked out of the way just in time, and the blow struck the ship’s mast. The massive timber splintered where the claw hit it. Shorepiper froze momentarily, too scared to move, as the Shelled One came at him again.

The deadly claws lashed out, but Piper recovered enough of his wits to dodge around behind the mast at the last instant. The Shelled One crashed full-force into the timber, and a huge cracking sound resounded over the deck.

Dazed, the Shelled One backed away. Shorepiper retrieved his sculling pole. As he did, the mast broke in half and toppled onto the Shelled One, knocking the surprised monster overboard.

Mustering his courage, Piper turned toward one of the scaly lizard-men. Pretar was using his pole like a spear, trying to keep the other Trog away from the Xandressian youngster.

“Careful with the Trogs!” Brina called. “Their poison can seep into your skin, even through clothing!” She and Kia were using their oars to push another Shelled One toward the side.

“P-poison?” Shorepiper gulped.

The Trog nearest him broke into a wicked smile, showing its cruel, sharp teeth. “Die time, boy!” the creature croaked.

Shorepiper backed up, but quickly ran into the cargo boxes. He held his scullpole before him like a pitchfork. The weapon shook in his hands. The Trog, which seemed more powerful and cunning than its companion, chuckled.

The Riverstone sisters suddenly changed their tactics. As the Shelled One they were fighting smashed their oars with its claws, they both suddenly rushed the creature.

Lancing what remained of their weapons into the vulnerable joints between the Shelled One’s arms and body, they both gave a great heave. The monster stumbled awkwardly, falling backward into the Trog that had been stalking Shorepiper.

The Trog and its shelled ally toppled to the deck. “Awg! Gettoff!” the Trog croaked. For a moment, the invaders were little more than an awkward tangle of limbs. Bri and Kia shot each other a quick smile. Shorepiper swiftly edged his way around the cargo, placing the boxes and huge pots between him and the monsters.

Pretar thrust his sculling pole into the mouth of the Trog facing him. The beast yelped and staggered back. Pretar laughed, pulled back his weapon, and clouted the Trog hard in the belly. “Get off the boat while you can, squirt,” he called to Shorepiper. “This is no place for inex . . .”

Pretar was cut off as an unnoticed Shelled One crept up over the side of the barge, grabbed him in one of its huge pincers, and squeezed. The serrations on the monster’s claw cut into the older man’s leathery skin.

“Pretar!” Shorepiper yelled, racing to help the navigator.

“Dammit, Piper!” Bri called. “Do as Pretar said!” As she spoke, the Trog and Shelled One near her rose once more. Brina Riverstone grabbed a sculling pole from the deck.

If Shorepiper heard her, he didn’t obey. Instead, he rushed toward where Pretar stood trapped between the two monsters. The Trog that had been fighting the older man turned toward the youngster as he came.

Shorepiper threw himself at the Trog, burying his head in its gut. The two of them tumbled across the deck and over the side.

“Kid overboard!” Bri shouted, staying just beyond the reach of the Trog attacking her. The creature burbled and hissed as it lunged at the elder Riverstone sister. Bri jabbed at it with her pole.

“Pretty, pretty!” the Trog chuckled.

Standing amidships, Kia grabbed one of the smaller jugs and heaved it at the Shelled One holding Pretar. Though wracked with pain, Pretar had just enough wits left to duck. The pot smashed against the crustacean’s head. The salt inside spilled out, blinding the creature.

The Shelled One roared and staggered backward, dropping Pretar as it went.

Kia smiled and turned to help her sister. Suddenly, the ship shook, and water started surging up around her feet.

“They’ve *holed* the barge!” she called. “There must be more of them underwater!”

“Time to call it a loss, I think,” Bri replied. “We’ve fought on their terms; now let’s see how they fight on ours.” She drew her bone-handled knife from the sheath on her leg.

“No sense getting killed over *this* cargo,” Kia agreed. She drew her knife as well. “Dying high and dry is *not* part of this assignment.”

As one, the Riverstone sisters turned from their attackers and dove over the side of the rapidly sinking ship.

Kia resurfaced quickly, and helped Pretar swim away from the barge. Though he was barely conscious, his years of experience in the water allowed him to stay afloat. An underwater Trog reached for them, but Kia stabbed its hand and the creature swam away. She and Pretar headed back toward the reeds.

Already, water covered most of the ship's platform. The Trogs and the Shelled Ones prowled the deck, looking for more opponents. The monstrous pirates seemed uninterested in the people already in the water. Kiani almost felt disappointed.

As she and Pretar reached the shallows, Brina surfaced next to them. She had Shorepiper in tow--though the young man was unconscious and looked gravely ill. "Trog poison," Bri explained.

"Brave, but foolish," Kia said. "Maybe he *does* have the guts to join us after all."

"The amphibians bother you much?" Bri asked.

"I had to stick one, but no, not much," Kia said. "They're lucky they didn't tangle with us in the water."

Brina almost smiled. "They may yet."

In the middle of the river, the Xandressian barge sank out of sight. Only a few bubbles marked its passing. The Riverstone sisters scanned the water for their enemies, but saw no signs of the marauding Trogs or Shelled Ones.

"Think they'll come up after us?" Kia asked.

Brina shook her head. "Not according to the briefing. They've never chased ships' crews before. Besides, they've other things on their tiny minds."

She and Kiani pulled their wounded friends to the riverbank, and then tended to Pretar's injuries.

"We should have brought something for Trog poison," Kia said.

Bri shrugged. "We couldn't be sure the rumors were true. Trogs and Shelled Ones working together--it's not very likely."

"No, not very likely at all," said a metallic voice from the reeds.

They looked and saw a bronze helmet emerging from the water nearby.

"It's about time you got here," Kia said.

Jolum the Fish walked to the riverbank and removed his watertight helm. His iron-lung armor looked ungainly on land, but he moved with a fluid grace that belied the metal suit's great bulk. He was tall and thin, with an angular face, short-cropped blond hair, and pale blue eyes. He gazed at the wounded men.

"How are they?" he asked.

"Pretar's beat up, but he'll live," Brina replied. "The boy I'm not so sure about."

"Trog poison," Kiani added.

Jolum frowned. He punched a series of studs on his aquatic armor, pursed his lips, and let out a high-pitched whistle.

A few moments later, another iron-lung warrior emerged from the deep. She removed her helmet, revealing a dark-brown face and tight-cropped black hair. She joined Jolum and the others near the shore.

"Cormorant," Jolum said to her, "I'll need you to take the wounded upstream. Get them treatment."

Cormorant's ebony eyes narrowed. "Why me?"

"As my lieutenant, you're best suited to explaining things to the boy's elders," he replied. "Besides, you're a Xandressian, same as them."

Cormorant nodded, and Jolum turned back to the Riverstone sisters. "What did you find out about the pirates?"

"At least two Trogs and three Shelled Ones," Brina said.

"At least," Kiani agreed. "Probably more."

Jolum nodded. "That matches what we could see from underwater."

"From a discreet distance," Cormorant added.

"Discreet enough not to give away the plan," Jolum reminded her. "Don't worry. We were close enough to lend a hand if needed."

"We know," Bri and Kia said in unison. They glanced from the leader of their patrol to the wounded Pretar and Shorepiper. Their blue-green eyes grew steely. "We think one of the Trogs was *Bek*," Bri said.

"Our iron-lung intelligence network surmised as much," Cormorant said. "Bek is certainly bold enough to have attacked a series of ships in the last month. His working with non-Trogs is strange, though."

“We’ll find out what’s behind it soon enough,” Jolum said.

“Is the tracker we put in the cargo working?” Kia asked.

“After the effort our mages spent developing it, it had *better* be working,” Jolum said. He checked a small crystal embedded in the wrist of his armor. Atlantis Guild specialists had attached it specifically for this mission. The crystal shone with a vague blue light, changing to white as Jolum turned his wrist slightly. He nodded at the Riverstone sisters. “They’ve taken the bait. The crystal will lead us right to them.”

As he spoke, the water behind them stirred, and another metallic figure emerged from the river. The shape of its armor was humanoid, but the joints didn’t seem to bend in quite the right places. In fact, though bulky, the creature was entirely too slender to house an iron-lung warrior inside it. In its blocky hands, it held two empty iron-lung suits.

The Riverstone sisters went to the creature and took their armor from it.

“Thanks, Fiddler,” Kia said.

The submersible golem nodded.

“That was the *last* boat Bek and his pirates will ever take,” Brina said as she suited up.

“The last people they’ll injure, too,” Kiani added, checking her armor’s seals.

Jolum the Fish nodded grimly at the sisters. “Let’s go kick some shell.”

“Good luck,” Cormorant said. “Don’t get killed.”

“We won’t,” Jolum replied. “Take good care of those two. And make sure Shorepiper’s aunt doesn’t blame the corps for his injury.”

“She wanted him to come along in the first place,” Cormorant noted.

“And now he’s hurt. Make sure his aunt knows it wasn’t our fault. She’s a local *power*. We don’t want to piss her off if we can help it.”

“Aye, Captain,” Cormorant replied.

Jolum and the Riverstone sisters put on their helmets and submerged. The golem known as Fiddler went with them.

They were met underwater by another iron-lung trooper, a young, dark-haired man called Barbuk. Two more submersible golems emerged from concealment to join the group. Following Jolum’s lead, the seven of them moved quickly toward the remains of the sunken barge.

“They stripped all the valuables,” Jolum said, surveying the wreckage. Through the magic of his submersible armor, his metal-tinged voice reached all those nearby. “Not that any of it was truly valuable.”

“The salt came in handy,” Kiani said.

Jolum checked the crystal at his wrist, moving it in a circle until it glowed white instead of blue, showing the direction of the tracker they’d planted in the ship’s cargo.

After relaying the bearing to the others, Jolum swam into the lead; the rest of his troop falling in behind. They moved swiftly and easily through the water, the enchantment that powered their iron lungs making the armor seem no more bulky than a bathing suit.

“Sorry the kid got hurt,” Brina said as they swam.

“We tried to keep him out of harm’s way, but--” Kia added.

“He knew about the pirates,” Jolum replied stoically. “He took his chances.”

“Just like the rest of us,” Barbuk said.

The marauders’ trail led deep into the river, through jungles of weeds and past the remains of forests submerged many years ago when the Roa Sein changed its course. The water around them was murky and green. Small, curious fishes darted past, just out of reach. Occasionally, they spotted a giant catfish or some other large predator. The big animals swam quickly out of the patrol’s way.

Three quarters of an hour after they submerged, Jolum’s troop came to a sheer submarine wall. The stony cliff stretched from the surface above into the depths below.

“I know this area,” Barbuk said. “We’re in a small canyon. There are cliffs topside.”

“Perfect place for a lair,” Bri noted.

“Agreed,” said Jolum. “Stay alert. Bek’s marauders can’t be far ahead of us--and they may have posted guards. Fiddler, Hermit, Horseshoe, spread out--flanking maneuver three.”

The golems nodded acknowledgement and swam away from the group in a trident-like formation.

“A lunger’s best friend,” noted Kia.

Jolum laughed.

The patrol moved cautiously down the canyon wall, following the tracer’s signal. At the base, they discovered a sunken galley leaning against the cliff face. Brown weeds, like writhing clumps of eels, clung to the ship’s rotten planking. A gaping hole in the side of the hull was clearly the cause of the galley’s demise.

Jolum checked the tracker and then motioned to the breach. The others followed, settling gently on the riverbed outside the wreck. Jolum pressed some studs on his armor and sent out a series of whistles, recalling the golems.

“Stay by the entrance,” he told Hermit. “Don’t let anyone but us in or out.” The golem nodded its understanding.

Jolum the Fish took a deep breath of magically filtered air. Behind his bronze helmet, he smiled.

“Okay,” he said. “It’s time to repay Bek for what he did to Pretar and the boy.”

The River of Death
Part 2
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Brina Riverstone's pretty lips drew into a thin, ruthless line. "Like the captain said," she hissed, "let's go kick some shell."

Kiani, her younger sister, nodded grimly and adjusted her grip on her trident.

"I'll take point," Jolum the Fish said to the rest of his troop.

Hermit took up a position next to the breach in the hull of the sunken ship. The two remaining golems and the three iron lungers fell into formation behind their leader. A quick check of the hole in the side of the ship revealed no guards lying in ambush for them.

"What, no welcoming committee?" Barbuk asked.

"Bek and his Shelled Ones are used to preying on helpless merchant barges--not Iron Lung decoy ships," Brina said.

"There's a hole in the back of the galley," Jolum called to the others. "I think it leads into the cliff."

"So this is just their front hall," Kia noted wryly. "Nice place."

"Cut the chatter," Jolum said, leading them up the passageway into the cliff face. "The enemy could be right around the next corner."

The Trog known as Bek smashed open another pot with his scaly fist and examined the contents. It looked like sand. Sticking his fingers into it, he discovered it tasted like sand, too. Sand, salt, lamp oil, a bit of grain, some sour-tasting wine . . .

This was strange cargo for a Xandressian barge to carry. This ship had not been nearly as rich as the ones they'd taken before. Bek was *not* pleased, and he knew his mistress would be even *less* pleased.

The marauder smashed another pot and more sand leaked out. Beneath the sand, though, something glittered--something crystalline. Perhaps something magical! That would make this dismal haul worth it!

Bek felt the tingling presence of his mistress in the deep recesses of his mind. He glanced from the dry cavern, where he and his raiders had taken their loot, toward the concealed exit that led up through the cliff face to their mistress' antechamber.

She had given him much, this reptilian creature who was both so similar to and so unlike her. Her help in planning had brought Bek and his crew many victims (though none today) and much treasure. Perhaps he would keep this sparkling trinket for himself, though.

Perhaps it would make Bek stronger--perhaps as strong as *she*.

Bek ignored the burning sensation at the base of his brain and focused his bulging red eyes on the glowing tracer crystal.

Blessed with a good sense of direction, Barbuk had taken the lead as they searched the winding maze of half-submerged tunnels behind the wrecked ship. Now, as the patrol prepared to enter Bek's cavernous lair, he fell back and joined the others behind a corner in the passageway. "Three Trogs, four Shelled Ones," the dark-haired iron lunger hissed.

"Fish soup!" Kia whispered, grinning behind her helmet. She hefted her trident impatiently.

"Take them fast and hard," Jolum said. "Kill Bek if you have to. Better a dead Trog and more work for the intelligence corps than a belly-up lunger."

The other iron lungers nodded their agreement and made final adjustments to their armor and weapons.

"On two," Jolum whispered. "One . . . two!"

The four lungers and two golems charged around the corner, with Jolum in the lead. As they passed the threshold, a Shelled One stepped out from beside the door and attacked Fiddler. The monstrous crustacean wrapped its armored claws around both of the golem's metal arms.

"*Five* Shelled Ones!" Kia said.

"Tentacles!" Bri cursed, as she raised her trident and attacked the nearest Shelled One.

"Let the golems handle the Trogs!" Jolum said. "We don't want their poison seeping into our armor. I'll take Bek."

"Gotta get Fiddler free of this crab first!" Kia said. She ducked around the entangled golem and drove the point of her trident into the Shelled One's exposed underarm. Simultaneously, the golem known as Horseshoe shot a harpoon into the same Shelled One's eye. The spear whisked over Kia's head, barely missing her--but she only smiled.

The Shelled One shrieked and tore itself away from Fiddler, but part of the golem stayed in the crustacean's claws. Fiddler didn't seem to mind the loss. He backed away and joined Horseshoe. Kia shifted her trident to her left hand, drew her long knife, and closed with the wounded Shelled One.

Fiddler and Horseshoe turned on Bek's two Trog allies, but one of the Trogs had already closed with Barbuk, making a clean shot impossible. Barbuk jabbed with his trident, trying to stay out of the way of the Trog's poisonous secretions. The creature came at him, saliva dripping from its toothy maw, its stone axe a blur of motion.

The golems trained their weapons on the remaining Trog and began firing harpoons into the monster's scaly body.

As Jolum ran toward Bek, the iron-lung captain pressed a hidden stud on his trident. The weapon lengthened, and magical energy surged through it. Before he could reach the Trog leader, though, three Shelled Ones lumbered into his path, blocking his advance. Brina rushed to his side as Jolum ran his trident through the abdomen of the first crustacean. The creature collapsed to the floor of the cavern, dead.

One of the remaining two seized Jolum's arm as he pulled the trident out of the dead Shelled One's carcass. Brina stabbed Jolum's attacker in the chest. As she did, the second monster's claw got under her guard and sliced her armor, cutting a long gash across her back.

Jolum pulled Bri out of the way, and brandished his trident between her and the two Shelled Ones. As he did, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bek creeping toward Barbuk.

"Look out!" Jolum yelled.

Before Barbuk could react, the Trog leader leapt upon him. Bek clamped his great maw around Barbuk's trident arm. At the same time, the Trog boss smashed his stone axe into the iron lunger's helmet. Barbuk staggered and went down. The two Trogs pounced on him.

Jolum cursed and tried to go to Barbuk, but the Shelled One Bri had wounded slashed its claw across his thigh. The sudden pain brought the iron lung leader up short. Bri was still reeling from the wound in her back and Jolum realized that if he left her now, both she and Barbuk would surely be killed.

"Help Barbuk!" Jolum called, whistling a quick order to his golems.

"Fight hand to hand!" Kia added. She was death-dancing with the fifth Shelled One, having finished off the one by the entryway.

Fiddler and Horseshoe left the unconscious Trog they had been pummeling and moved toward where Bek and his fellow Trog stood hacking at Barbuk. The young iron lunger wasn't moving. Most of the blood covering the Trogs' scaly hides was not their own.

The golems rushed them, ramming their metal bodies into the humanoid reptiles. Bek and his fellow fell away from the prostrate body of Barbuk. The golems slashed at the Troggs with the sharp blades housed in their forearms. Their magical programming still set on the order not to kill Bek, they concentrated most of their attacks on the other amphibian.

Bek fell back before the golems' furious assault. He looked around the chamber, his crafty mind sizing up the situation. One iron lung lay bleeding on the floor. Another stood uneasily on her feet, fighting wounded against a Shelled One. One golem had been damaged as well. The other golem and the remaining two humans remained nearly unscathed.

As Bek watched, Jolum's long trident pierced another Shelled One. Two more of the crustaceans already lay dead. The remaining two would be killed in short order, Bek surmised. Nor would the Trogg protecting Bek from the golems last much longer.

Though he had little grasp of numbers, Bek could see the odds had turned against him. This cavern, and all the accumulated treasure still in it, would be lost. Bek might be killed, too--*if* he remained here and fought the iron lungers.

Staying would do him no good, though. Nor would it help his mistress. If he died, who would protect her? Who would warn her about this unexpected attack?

Bek's lizard-like mind reached a decision.

Brina slumped to the floor, bleeding, gasping for breath inside her metal helmet.

"Are you? . . . Jolum began to ask.

"I'll live," she replied. "I think."

Fury welled up in the iron lung leader and he plunged his trident straight through the chest of the last Shelled One facing them. The beast gurgled, swung its huge claws weakly at him one final time, and then died.

Jolum kicked the armored corpse off the end of his trident. Glancing around quickly, he saw that Barbuk wasn't moving. Kiani held the last remaining Shelled One at bay. The creature bled from a dozen wounds; the younger Riverstone sister sported only a handful of scratches. Kia moved in to finish off the wounded crustacean.

Nearby, Fiddler slumped to the floor. One of the golem's arms had been severed at the elbow, and it was leaking vital magical oils. As Fiddler went down, Horseshoe stepped back and fired a spear through the remaining Trog's eye. The reptilian monster fell dead.

Jolum's heart soared. No opponents remained standing. They had won!

Then Brina gasped, "Look!" She pointed to an opening in the cavern wall that Jolum hadn't seen before--a secret exit.

Jolum cursed as Bek stepped through the wall. The aperture closed behind the Trog leader.

The captain of the iron lungers raced forward and got his fingers in the gap of the secret door, just before it snapped shut. He strained, but his muscles weren't adequate to open the panel.

Kia joined him, adding her grip to his own. She was covered in blood, but very of it little belonged to her. At a whistle from the iron-lung leader, Horseshoe came to aid them as well. Slowly, the three of them pried open the secret exit.

"Stay here. Tend to the wounded," Jolum ordered Kiani. "Horseshoe and I will go after Bek."

Kia nodded, and the iron-lung leader and the golem ran up the tunnel in pursuit of the escaping Trog.

They soon reached another cavern, nearly as large as the first. It was piled with loot and barrels of fishy-smelling foodstuffs. A strange, throne-like chair occupied one corner of the room. Both the throne and rest of the chamber were empty of combatants.

Another tunnel exit led from the far side of the room.

Brina sat propped against one of the walls. Her wounds had been bandaged and, though she looked like death warmed over, she smiled at her sister.

"Bek? . . ." she asked.

"He escaped through a secret panel," Kiani replied. "Jolum and Horseshoe have gone after him. Don't worry. They'll get that pile of fish putty."

Bri nodded wanly. "The other raiders?"

"We got 'em all," Kia said. "I checked with Hermit. No one escaped out the front. No one new came in, either. That's the end of them." Water dripped from Kiani's armor, attesting her recent visit to their golem sentinel at the underwater entrance to the pirates' lair.

“And Barbuk?” Bri asked.

Kia shook her head and motioned to a spot by the door. She and Fiddler had laid the young iron lunger out in traditional corps funerary posture, with his trident clasped atop his breast.

“At least . . . we stopped the piracy,” Brina gasped. “Though I don’t much . . . like the price.” She leaned back heavily against the wall. A solitary tear formed at the edge of her left eye.

Kia’s jaw tightened. “Hey, we won this battle, sis,” she finally said. “The Trog river raids are finished. And, look--they left us an informant.”

At her signal, Fiddler dragged a bound Trog out of the shadows and into to the center of the room. The lizardman didn’t look in much better shape than the one-armed golem. Its feral eyes darted around the chamber.

Kia smiled and a cruel light danced across her blue-green eyes.

“So,” she said coldly, “where do you think your friend Bek might be hiding out? Are there any more of you beasts in this lair?” She prodded the Trog with her trident.

“Never tell!” the wounded Trog croaked. Before either the sisters or Fiddler realized what was happening, it lunged forward, impaling itself on Kia’s weapon.

Kia frowned and pulled her trident out of the corpse. “Fish flop,” she said. “The boss won’t be too happy about this.”

“You can . . . never take Trogs alive,” Brina said.

“This was a pretty tricky plan for Trogs,” Kiani said. She ran her battle-weary fingers through her hair. “I hope Jolum catches Bek so that we can find out who put them up to it.”

Bri nodded, then winced in pain. “The captain will get him,” she said.

Jolum stopped at the corner of the passage and put up one hand. Horseshoe immediately halted at the signal, pulling up right behind his commander.

The leader of the iron-lung patrol took a moment to get his bearings. He didn’t have the head for mazes that Barbuk had, but was still pretty good with battle navigation. The Technomantic enhancements in his armor made him even better.

It wasn’t his gadgets that made Jolum pause at the corner, though; it was his instincts. The fine, blond hairs on the back of his neck tingled. Jolum had learned to trust that feeling, so he stopped and listened.

“Do you hear that?” he whispered to the golem.

Horseshoe’s mechanical senses were not as acute as a human’s, but it nodded in agreement.

The noise was strange--not something Jolum had anticipated. He had hoped to hear the flapping of Bek’s frog-like feet on the rough stone of the tunnel floor. He had expected to hear the Trog’s raspy breathing, exhausted from the long chase.

The sounds that came to Jolum’s ears, though, were none of these.

Instead, he heard a strange hissing, like the whispers of a pit full of snakes. There was a rumble too, like cascades of distant thunder. Jolum couldn’t place the sounds, but the hair on the back of his neck stood stiffer as he approached the corner and the noise grew louder.

At the turn, a pungent scent assaulted his nostrils. “Do you smell that?” he asked. But, of course, the golem could not smell. Horseshoe shrugged. The tunnel smelled like rotting fish and dry leaves. Jolum buckled up his helmet to ward of the stench and moved cautiously forward.

Even inside the bronze armor he could still hear the noise building. It was like a rushing waterfall now, making the metal of his iron lung vibrate.

The passage opened up ahead, and Jolum saw sickly, yellowish-green light beyond. A thousand questions sprang to mind, but he beat them down and kept moving. No sense speculating; soon he would know. Horseshoe followed silently behind him.

Beyond the tunnel lay a huge cavern. The rough passage entered the chamber high on one side, and near the rear. Directly ahead of them lay a steep, rocky slope down to the cave floor. The cavern was immense; twenty galleys could have easily fit inside. It wasn’t the size of the room, though, that made Jolum’s blood run cold.

The cavern was filled to overflowing with monsters: Shelled Ones, Trogs, Mage Spawn of nearly every shape and size, and--worst of all--hideous, abominable Shyft. The creatures murmured and croaked and hissed, crammed elbow to elbow in the vast underground space. All of them stood transfixed, gazing at the far end of the chamber.

There, on a raised calcite platform, sat an immense, distorted throne made of broken stalagmites. An abominable, bloated creature reclined in the tall chair. The thing was lizard-like, with mottled green scales and yellow claws. Razor-sharp teeth lined its huge maw. Two twisted horns sprouted from either side of its bulbous head, and the top of its skull was covered with bony, multicolored protrusions. The head pulsed in time with the noise filling the cave, and the spines atop the skull glowed with arcane power. The creature’s yellowish eyes glowed with malevolence; a third eye gazed out from the middle of its bony forehead.

The Shyft Matriarch, for Jolum realized that’s what the creature was, hissed softly and spoke to the assembled multitude.

“Ssoon, my loves!” it said. “Our time is nearly come. We shall sweep from our concealment, a mighty army, and wrest the Red Fens--and all the lands surrounding--from our enemies. Nothing shall stand in our way. Not magic. Not human. Not nature itself. We are unstoppable!”

At this, the assembled horde bellowed with delight. The cavern thundered with the noise; the walls and floor shook. Jolum felt his stomach clench like a fist. He wanted to turn away, but he stood at the end of the tunnel, transfixed by the awful sight.

As he watched, he saw a figure skid down the rocky slope and push its way through the crowd. He realized almost too late who that figure was--Bek!

Jolum gauged the range between them, and realized that not even the golem could make the shot. Slaying Bek would do any good at this point, anyway. Either he betrayed them, or they betrayed themselves by killing him; either way, they were undone.

The iron-lung leader turned, just as Bek shouted, “Pexapatia Mar! Great one! We are discovered!” The Trog’s croaking voice filled the chamber, and all eyes turned to him--all save the yellow orbs of the Shyft Matriarch.

The monster queen’s eyes blazed past the assembled throng and found Jolum on the far side of the cavern. The iron lunger felt the creature’s gaze lance into him; he felt the burn of her hatred in his brain.

He turned and ran. Horseshoe followed.

They moved quickly through the narrow passages, hardly daring to look back. They could hear the roar of the maddened crowd, thundering behind them.

They had virtually *no* chance of escape.

Jolum gazed back at Horseshoe, following faithfully behind him. The iron lung leader set his jaw and whistled a command. “Protect!” he said.

The golem nodded at Jolum. Instantly, Horseshoe stopped and turned back to face the enemy. Magical servo motors within his metal frame whirred as his weapons systems activated and clicked into place. In battle mode, Horseshoe was large enough to block the tunnel, at least for a while.

“Sorry, Horseshoe,” Jolum whispered.

The golem did not reply, but instead fired a speargun volley into the oncoming hoard.

Jolum turned away and ran even faster.

His heart was pounding in his ears by the time he reached Bek’s lair once more. The iron-lung captain put his shoulder to the secret door and heaved it open. Quickly, he entered the room and

shoved the door shut behind him. His breath came in ragged gasps, and sweat pooled within the crevices of his Technomantic armor.

Kiani, Fiddler, and Brina looked up as he reentered the chamber.

“Where’s Horseshoe?” Bri asked blearily. She looked only partially conscious.

“Buying us time,” Jolum growled. “The Shyft have assembled an army! Bek and his crew were part of it. We have to get out, *now*. We have to warn Atlantis before the invasion comes.”

“Tentacles!” Kiani swore.

“Get Brina’s helmet on her,” Jolum ordered. “Fiddler can carry her, even with one arm. We’ll transfer her to Hermit once we reach the underwater exit.”

“What about Barbuk’s body?” Kia asked.

“We have to leave it,” Jolum said. “We can’t take anything that might slow us down.”

“Fish paste! C’mon, Bri.”

Kiani fastened the helmet onto her sister’s head as Fiddler gently picked up the wounded woman.

The quartet moved quickly into the winding passage that led back to the river.

“If anyone falls, the others keep going,” Jolum said. “We *must* get this message to the city. We need to warn them, before it’s too late.”

The Riverstone sisters and the golem nodded their understanding. They ran until they reached the water, and then swam for all they were worth. With Hermit’s help towing the half-conscious Brina, they moved swiftly. The sunken galley and submarine cliff-face rapidly disappeared behind them.

Even as they swam away from the wreckage, though, Jolum the Fish knew it was *already* too late. Most of the Atlantean army was away fighting in Khamsin to the north. Regional defenses around the Red Fens were light as a result--far too light to fend off the army he had seen.

The Red Fens were lost already. Still, Jolum had to keep going. He had to try to warn his leaders.

The leader of the iron lungs cursed silently. They were all so secure in their plans that none of them had seen this coming. None had even suspected--not the iron-lung corps, not the Atlantean military planners, not the mages--none of them. Now there was nothing any of them could do. The Roa Sein would run red with human blood.

As he swam, Jolum hoped and prayed that--at least--they would be able to stop the Shyft advance before it reached the gates of Atlantis herself.

He vowed that they would. Even if he and all his crew had to die defending her, Atlantis would live on.

Jolum the Fish squared his jaw and swam forward into the darkness.

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.