

The Journey Book of Ventronus of Koth

Episode Zero

Ventronus becomes personal healer to guard captain of Nicodemus of Palatia in Corinth. Ventronus seeks access to the Palatine Library.

Arik takes service as a guard of the library. During his shift a riot of philosophers, led by one Erasmus, gains access to the repository. Reading from an ancient scroll, Erasmus disappears.

Interlude. To avoid punishment from Nicodemus, Arik takes caravan guard service with one Ibrim Shoul, the book merchant, thereby escaping Palatia. After the intrusion into the library, Nicodemus closes it indefinitely, so Ventronus takes up service as a scholar with Ibrim.

Episode One: Servants of the Charnel God

Based on "The Charnel God," by Clark Ashton Smith

Six months later

After a night of revelry in The Hand of Glory, an inn in Zhubal, which is a fortified village in the Stygian desert, the PCs find themselves abandoned (so that he can avoid paying them in full) by Ibrim Shoul.

The PCs witness a corpse being borne away by the priests of Mordiggian. The husband of the deceased woman claims that his wife is not dead, but only afflicted by a sleeping sickness. The inhabitants of Zhulba seem reluctant even to listen to him.

The PCs sort of determine to help Phariom (as the young noble is called—his wife is Elaith). Ventronus encourages Phariom to pay a street urchin to guide the party to the temple of Mordiggian, which resides in the heart of the labyrinthine town. The beggar tries to escape into a narrow alley, in which Arik encounters brigands armed with Ghanata knives. He slays two of them. The third is handed over to the guard, to face the satrap's justice. The PCs are awarded a bounty.

The PCs wait for the priests of Mordiggian to collect the bodies of the ruffians; the PCs follow the squad bearing the covered bier to the temple. It is late afternoon, and the long tunnel entrance into the squat, square structure is impenetrably dark.

The PCs pass two side passages before detecting a faint blue glow far ahead of them. Approaching this, they enter a large chamber, the roof supported by pillars from which, on curved iron stems, blue flames burn with a quality that serves only to reveal the dozen or so corpses, of all ages and social classes, laid out on a long, low stone table in the center of the chamber.

Phariom quickly finds the body of his beloved. As he does, three robed characters enter from the same way in which the PCs entered. Their concern seems to be with another beautiful woman, who seems to be dead. They gather her and leave—as stone on stone grates from a chamber corner and the robed bodies of priests approach the table.

The priests push back Phariom and make, with Elaith, their way whence they came. After a tussle, Phariom and Arik are able to leap through the secret opening in the far wall just as it slides shut, barring Ventronus on the chamber side.

In complete darkness, Arik and Ventronus proceed down a narrow staircase to a cavern lit by burning blue gases. The priests are revealed as humanoid jackals, or ghouls, and Elaith awakes, screaming, as one sinks its fangs into one of her ankles.

Meanwhile, in the chamber above, a dark form rises out from underneath the table. In the shape of a gargantuan black snake, it squeezes out of the chamber in the direction in which went the three other figures in the temple.

Below, Phariom and Arik are able to snatch Elaith away from the cult of Mordiggian. With the creatures on their heels, they flee, taking time only to shut the secret doors behind them. In the chamber above, while screams emit from the area in which the other three characters retired, Ventronus breaks the top door mechanism to provide themselves with more time for their escape.

Carousing

The PCs agree to accompany Phariom to Luxur, wherein he has kin. Therein they find the city in the midst of revels—the Skin-Shedding of Set—a time of rebirth, resolutions, and fertility. While Phariom goes off, alone, to navigate various back channels to get in touch with the nobility in town, Elaith craves a night within the festival, and she compels the PCs to serve as her guard.

In the midst of the revels, her beauty captures the attention of Rimsin, a cousin of Phariom's, who currently is out in disguise as a commoner. Phariom returns to the PCs at the height of the Snake Dance, in which Elaith and Rimsin both are participating, a rite of rebirth and sensuality, in which the participants' clothes are shed throughout a striptease. Phariom finds Elaith and

Rimsin sinuously entangled. Enraged with jealousy, Phariom is about to slay Rimsin, when he recognizes the face of his own cousin.

Rimsin soon helps Phariom secure a footing in Luxur, through which Phariom develops a river enterprise. This leads the PCs to boarding a trade trireme.

Episode Two: The Satisfaction of the Sea-Witch

Based on “The Sea-Witch,” by Nictzin Dyalhis

Six months later

Part One

The PCs, surviving a wreck at sea, swim into a bay in the midst of the Shattering Shoals. This semi-legendary expanse is sometimes called the Serpentine Shoals, because of the way the surface beneath the waves seems to undulate and shift position, and by the way tracts of narrow lands are ridged like the spines of a snake, and because, perhaps, the area is known for sightings of a great Sea Serpent that the PCs later learn dwells in a tidal cave beneath the ruins of a lighthouse.

A company of islanders, of mixed age and gender, is assembled on the beach of the bay. But the sightseers seem less interested in the emerging PCs than they are in watching the far waves of the ocean. In time, a beautiful, resplendent, naked woman rises from the water. Hoards of jewels, on gold and silver chains, adorn her neck and arms. All these she drops at the feet of the island chieftain—save one armband—before donning a woolen robe that a child brings her. The PCs later recognize the riches she gathered from the ocean floor as trade goods that had been aboard their now-ruined trireme.

The PCs are welcomed into the center of a hilltop village to the hall of Ul-vas, the island chieftain, and of Heldra, the woman of the sea. Though the old man Ul-vas and the nubile woman Heldra both occupy this house, it slowly becomes clear to the PCs that the two are not “together.” In fact, each keeps personal chambers, in the structure, opposite the other. Preparations are made for a feast, in honor of the newly-stranded PCs, who are told that escape from the island is impossible. While this is occurring, each PC independently learns that beneath the ruined lighthouse is a “god,” a sea serpent, and, since both PCs have been found useful (one a healer and one of might) in the eyes of the community, one of the village’s own, Heldra’s handmaid Talmat, is to be adorned with the dragon’s share plunged from the deep and sacrificed to it by a throw from the lighthouse promontory to the cave opening to the sea.

Ventronus learns this by leaving the hall to tend to a wounded elderly woman. He later gives her a ring of serpentine design, one he found on the shore during his approach to the island, and convinces her to agree, with it as a sign, that she be sacrificed instead of Talmat as the Serpent's Chosen.

Arik learns about the serpent and the sacrifice when Heldra summons him to a private audience in a hidden chamber beneath a standing stone. Here she secures Arik's promise to aid her in obtaining revenge over the Argosean captain Comnenus, who shortly shall be wrecked on the island—Heldra's sea-goddess Ran has said so. Comnenus, about a year ago, imprisoned Heldra, attempting to possess her, after he slew her brothers by poisoning their water stores after sending them to sea in pursuit of pirates. Ran aided in Heldra's escape, and she provided Heldra with powers tied to her armbands, only one of which she currently possesses.

Preparing for the sacrifice that night, the villagers become increasingly drunk and numb on arak and music. During this time, Ventronus and Arik determine to reach the ruined lighthouse in search of the serpent.

Ventronus baits it with a goat thrown into the sea. Moments after devouring the animal, the serpent crashes into the land, ascending the promontory, after the PCs, enraged and offended by their meager offering. In the melee the serpent is wounded and retreats.

During the upheaval resulting from the serpent's assault on the land and on the PCs, a vault was upset. Beneath it, the PCs recover a secret door leading to a narrow chasm that descends into the hill. During the descent, Arik steps into a trap, losing the armor on his lower right leg. At the bottom, the PCs discover a watery chamber full of ships' treasure and—the serpent!

In the ensuing battle, the PCs (mostly Arik) succeed in slaying the beast. When they return, to a shocked and uncertain populace, the PCs are hailed as god-slayers and liberators. Heldra is angry, however. The death of the serpent undoubtedly has reduced the powers of the Earth concentrated in its lair. These were energies she was to tap to effect her planned revenge, which involves separating Comnenus's soul from his body so that her deceased brothers might torment him forever in their northern Hel.

Part Two

In the morning, Heldra heads to the beach, with Arik and Ventronus, to summon a storm at sea.

Shortly after the storm rages and abates, a lifeboat—bearing Comnenus in mail, a sergeant likewise in mail, and ten sailors—grounds on the beach. Heldra commands the capture of Comnenus, the slaughter of the others. But it doesn't go well for the PCs. Just when it looks like

it's going to go worst for the adventurers, Heldra casts a love charm on Comnenus; he commands his men to stand down.

Arik accompanies Heldra, Comnenus, and the sergeant to the longhouse atop the island, while Ventronus proceeds to the ruined lighthouse, convincing the old woman and Heldra's handmaiden to accompany him. In the longhouse, the sergeant grows increasingly suspicious of Comnenus's behavior towards Heldra, until he summons his lord apace to discuss his concern.

When Comnenus returns, the spell is broken. Heldra casts sand in the captain's eyes and flees, while Arik crosses swords with the sergeant—to the death. After proving himself the victor, Arik runs to Heldra's aid, who is pantherishly defending herself with a knife. Outmatched, Comnenus flees, but, finding his sergeant slain, allows himself to be subdued.

Meanwhile, Ventronus effects passage across the ruined causeway with wreckage from Comnenus's ship. He discovers also a captain's log in a shattered desk. His companions, spooked by the clearly haunted and unsettled graveyard, go back with instructions to bring villagers, and Ventronus descends to the Serpent's Lair to fill baskets with treasure.

Accosted by ghosts below, Ventronus swears to burn an offering to them on the ruins of the lighthouse above, to put their souls to rest. He climbs again, with treasure, to fulfill this promise.

Shortly after this, Heldra and Arik bring Comnenus to the lair to ensorcel Comnenus's soul from his body. The ritual draws hungry ghosts, which Arik fends away. The souls of Heldra's brothers arrive, on a ghostly longboat, and bear off Comnenus's soul.

Above, the souls of the dead walk into Ventronus's pyre. They disperse into ash and find peace. The blaze also summons a nearby trade vessel from Argos.

The PCs accompany Comnenus's now-idiot body back to Argos. On the journey, Arik looks over the gunwale of the ship to sea Heldra riding the waves, then she vanishes beneath them.

Carousing

In Argos, the PCs ingratiate themselves with the court, despite the natural suspicions arising from the nobles therein. The PCs are questioned and cross-examined for a period of days, allowed out into the city or (in Ventronus's case) into the libraries only with a close guard.

At first it is difficult for Arik to locate a healer—all of them are booked out into the approaching week. But, at one such door, a man passing by stops in surprise and approaches Arik. This man is Gorthos, claiming to recognize Arik and know his House, speaking in fluent Nemedian. When he learns of Arik's plight, he leads him down twisting, labyrinthine streets to an unexceptional

door. On the other side is darkness and sweet smoke. When Arik departs with Gorthos, he feels “more than healed,” heading right into the taverns for revels that last till morning light. During this time, apparently, he agreed to serve with Gorthos on a trade expedition north to the Black River.

Ventronus happened to open, within a secret room in the royal libraries, a tome about lycanthropy. When he wakes—from dreams of wolves and blood—hours later, he is in the stocks. When finally released, he is told that madmen—apparently Ventronus foamed at the mouth and tried to “rend” and bite anyone who was nearby—are not allowed to roam free within the city limits and must either leave straightaway or be sent to the reservation. In the docks, he finds Arik readying for an expedition to Fort Defiance on the Black River, and he remembers that the Picts are rumored to have mastered all knowledge concerning skin-changing and lycanthropy.