

A close-up, macro photograph of a snake's scales. The scales are arranged in a regular, overlapping pattern and are illuminated from above, creating a strong contrast between the bright, glowing highlights and the deep shadows. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones of orange, red, and yellow, with a dark, almost black background in the shadows.

Otheris  
and the  
Serpents of Qhudrus

Richard Shekari

# Otheris and the Serpents of Qhudrus

By Richard Shekari

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# **DEDICATION**

To Felix Ikani.

# THE GREAT WITCH OF MOUGHDUG

“Let go of me Otheris!” cried the old witch in her black cloak as she struggled to free her neck from his grip, he kept walking and didn’t care to look back as he dragged her down the village, “Let me go!” she barely choked struggling with mucus all over her face and his hand. Other than her creaky old voice, only the chirping of the crickets and the hooting of the owls could be heard. Otheris uttered no words as he tugged her.

“Please Otheris son of Delial, have mercy and free me,” she pleaded, “I shall not come near thy household again!” still struggling for air to breathe.

“You shall be free. I have no plans of taking your life oh great witch of Moughdug. You should know that by now, the village folk need to see you in your true form,” replied Otheris.

“I beg of you. Heed my words son of Delial; neither I nor my prentice shall fly near thy domain from hence. Spare me,” she entreated.

The village was as mute as a graveyard. They passed some houses and arrived at a place that seemed to look like the market place, with his fingers still clenched to her wrinkled neck. Otheris threw his sword on the ground as he approached a big bell hung to a barren old tree at the centre of the village.

“Otheris No! No Otheris!” she cried out.

Otheris picked a mallet that was kept on top of the big bell and struck it three times, and the old witch turned in dismay as a dreadful horror usurped her senses.

“Why do you worry? The village folk said that the oracle had foretold your fall in the hands of the one who is pure in heart,” he said, “not that I am an ardent follower of such ridiculous asinine way of thinking, I am just fed up with your vileness!”

“Your tongue reeks of pride son of Delial! No one is burning anyone tonight, you’ll see!” she vaunted.

The village folk began to light up their lamps and their voices were heard. The witch didn’t want them to see her as she was, and for every time Otheris banged the big old bell more lamps would be lit and more chatters heard.

“You have really put up a good fight,” he threw the mallet on the ground. “I’ve got to admit, you’ve got skills even the serpents of Qhudrus lack,” he said smiling as he lifted her up above his head with his left hand, leaving her legs dangling in the air, “for years no one believed me” he heaved a deep sigh, “but today....the truth shall come out!”

The old witch managed to turn around to see if anyone was coming, she then stared down into his eyes and made few attempts to kick him with her legs but he lowered her down hard.

“You fool,” she grumbled, “no one burns tonight! You hear me son of Delial? No one!” she bit his left hand almost ripping a lump off of it.

Otheris screamed but didn’t let go of the witch.

“Mark my words son of Delial; I shall bring dusk on you gullible lad!” bragged the witch.

Otheris quickly released his left grip and squeezed her neck harder with his right hand.

“*Shiek mukth quevieth!*” chanted the old witch as she shape shifted, and began to shrink right before his very eyes.

“You beldam! You bit me!” He cried out. Otheris was astonished seeing that she could shape shift into a smaller being.

She again locked her powerful teeth to his thenal and the excruciating pain sent Otheris to his knees.

“I rule this filthy lands you and these wretched people call home and all of Qhudrus as well, and there is nothing you can do about it boy!” boasted the witch as she shrank small enough in order to escape his grip. Otheris still refused to let her go, he wanted to make sure her true identity was exposed to the villagers.

The villagers started to come out as they headed toward the old tree.

“You fool! Today you shall know why they call me the great witch of Moughdug!” she maniacally bragged, opened her mouth wide once more and went for his flesh.

“To hell with it!” Otheris said as he opened his mouth and swallowed her head.

“No!” shrieked the old witch, but it was too late; Otheris had ran his teeth through the tissues around the bones in her neck, he felt the sound of her flesh ruptured as his incisors pieced through her bones ripping her head off with one bite.

Otheris fell to the ground and spat the head out, he could not bear the unpleasant taste of blood in his mouth and began to puke still holding to her miniature body in his hand. Otheris then fell to the ground panting, and as he lay facing the full moon, the villagers arrived.

“What now son of Delial?” asked one of the villagers.

Otheris lifted his head to look at them, spat again then rested his head on the ground.

“Have you come to parade your folly again Otheris!” said another who was holding a torch.

Otheris stood up, “Here!” He suspired as he raised his right hand up for the village folk to see what he held, Behold! The great witch of Moughdug! I have caught her and brought her to you my brothers, to see, and to know that I lied not to anyone!”

The village folk began to laugh at him, Otheris then threw the headless miniature body of the witch at the one holding the torch.

“You must be mad!” said the one holding the torch as he jumped off. The village folk gathered around to see it as Otheris stood up in search for the head. Astounded by what their eyes beheld, they all left their jaws open.

“This can’t be true!” said the one holding the torch, baffled as he lowered the torch down to shine light on the body. Otheris found the head then threw it near the miniature body, as it landed, the villagers moved a few steps back quickly.

“You have to take this to the third palace! We have to alert the king! Otheris! Otheris?” said one of the villagers who looked around but sighted Otheris walking home, wiping his mouth with his garment.

## **OTHERIS**

“Otheris! Otheris!” a woman voiced out, “wake up Otheris!”

“Oh come on, can’t a man just have a good rest in this house?” he grumbled.

“Yes he can! Of course he can...if he sleeps like normal people do and not go about hunting crones and fays every night. Get up!” commanded the woman.

“Alright! Alright! I am up already,” he said as he stretched, “what’s for breakfast? I am hungry!”

“Of course you are! But first, the king has sent for you, the guards are outside!” she said.

“I have to eat something! I don’t want to die of hunger, and I know you won’t be happy if your precious Otheris dies either!” joked Otheris as he yawned.

“Well, I promise you by the time you get back son I’d have your favourite meal on the table! Now go before the villagers have another reason to start spreading silly rumours about you again dear!” she pleaded.

“Okay aunt Zeenah!” he said as he stood up and walked out of his room, “off I go!”

Otheris met the guards outside and tried to keep up with them as they walked to the third palace, but he was too weak so he spoke to one of the guards to please run fast and have food be made ready for him at the palace.

On their arrival, he met most of the village folk standing and some men seated near the king.

“Aha! Otheris! You have earned a place amongst men, my friend. Here!” said the king to Otheris as he pointed his finger at the seat next to him.

Otheris walked through the crowds, “I am hungry my liege!” he said.

“Oh no,” exclaimed the king, “if the great village of Moughdug lacked no food, it would be an insult for its king to have half of what it owned in the storehouse my friend,” he laughed, “what would you like to eat?” asked the king as he smiled gleefully at Otheris.

“Anything with bread would be fine your majesty!” replied Otheris.

“I like you!” said the king, “Ha-ha! Bring him the finest of the wines and make sure the finest of the soup and meat is brought along with the loaf.” ordered the king as he tapped Otheris, “You know, when I was your age my father taught me a lot of things. He even taught me how to woo a woman my friend,” he laughed, “my father, before he died advised me to try and make every village under my rule look like the capital, and do you know what I did?” he smiled, “well, I built a palace in all the seven villages, just like this one! This way I can spend time with my people and understand them better and of course, this requires I spend about a year or so in every village I visit,” he tapped Otheris on the shoulder, “now, you! I see that you have hidden gifts which will be of benefit to

these villages, and my entire kingdom as a whole,” he lowered his hand and pulled out a small crown from underneath his throne and said, “could you believe I have crowns like this one under all my thrones, in all the seven villages under this kingdom? With all that I have known and with all the wives and concubines I have, my friend, not a single male child!?” he simpered, “however, I believe I need not worry anymore,” as he returned the crown where he pulled it from.

Three maids walked in with trays.

“Ah! You! Bring the table here!” ordered the king as one of the guards quickly brought a small table and kept it before the king and Otheris. The maids placed some bread, a bowl of soup, roasted turkey and a jar filled with wine on the table.

“Today you eat with your king! Today this kingdom celebrates and honours you Otheris son of Delial! Eat!” said the king as he pushed the table in front of Otheris, “I shall soon organise a feast in your honour my friend!”

Otheris cut a piece of bread from the loaf and dipped into the soup before him and then he swallowed it.

“Ha-Ha! I can see you are a man of action my friend! I like you!” added the king, “Okay! Everybody out!” he

clapped, “Karim, you stay!” pointed at one of the well-built men among his guards.

“I like his beard!” referred Otheris to the one called Karim as he turned to the king, “I really would love to have a beard like that!”

“It’s easy Otheris, grow it!” answered the king laughing.

The guards, the maids and all the men walked out silently leaving only Otheris and the king.

“I will not waste your time my friend. We both know how precious time is, don’t we? Now, you have proven wrong all the village folk after all these years and you have gladdened my heart. But I am not happy about a few things; one, I don’t like the way these witches wrapped their chains around the feet of these young men in my kingdom, amongst other things! Otheris, I need to ask you for a favour, just one!” the king said, “You look like a young man who has got too much to do! Ah! Too little time!”

Otheris cut more from the loaf and dipped it in the soup nodding his head as he ate.

“There is also a rumour long dispersed in the kingdom which appears tangible; they say that my loins lack the seeds to yield a male child...which also, typically means I would

not have any heir. I want it to remain a rumour!” he stood to his feet and began to walk gently, “you know, the oracle said that there lies a finical hag and serpents that are working against my throne,” he stopped, “however, the oracle made it clear months back that this hag’s identity would never be known and that if or when known and killed along with the serpents, then I can bear even many sons!” the king turned to Otheris, “I do not expect you to understand the importance of this thing-of you not only capturing the great witch of Moughdug but delivering her headless body! It’s also very important to deliver to me the heads of all the serpents...of Qhudrus, for anytime these serpents feed destinies are stolen Otheris, serpents do not chomp their meal they swallow it whole so when you encounter them do not only bruise them, decapitate them all even when they appear to you in dreams!”

Otheris sipped some wine and went for more bread, “Mmm!” expressed Otheris as he nodded.

“A quarter of my gold and silver all for you if you can locate these serpents and bring to me their heads!” said the king.

Otheris swallowed the bread in his mouth and grinned, “I’ll need something more palpable!”

“You can carry the oracle along with you on your journey; the best guide and protection together with seven of my best men!” said the king, “in the end you’d find out that my offer is more staggering than any reward a man in this kingdom could ever gain.” The king returned to his throne, “Question is, do you have what it takes to earn it?”

“When I return I shall tell you how I ensnared the great witch of Moughdug! I have all the luck I need to slay the serpents of Qhudrus!” said Otheris.

“You will need more than just luck when you encounter the serpents of Qhudrus,” said a tender voice, “for they are more cunning and malignant than the great witch of Moughdug...who begot them!”

Otheris quaffed his wine and turned to see the one who spoke.

“Such pleasing sight!” said Otheris as he stood to his feet amazed by her looks, “I feel intoxicated by your beauty my lady. I am Otheris, son of...!”

“I know who you are son of Delial, I’ve longed to see you ever since you first appeared in my dream!” she said, “You’ll need more than just yourself on this journey. Your skills are no match for the serpents of Qhudrus, so I suggest you take

with you seventy men, for the ones who hold Qhudrus in bondage bore many more of their kind, and they boast of spifflicating the dreams of many a more men than you could ever imagine!”

“The soothing sight of your beauty would not allow my ears serve their purpose correctly my lady, and you are?” asked Otheris.

“You haven’t met the Oracle before, hmm?” inquired the king.

“The Oracle?” asked Otheris smiling, “this is the...I mean...she’s the-Oracle?” He emphasised.

“Uh huh!” replied the king, “Thakina shall go with you on this journey, and when you come face to face with the serpents of Qhudrus she would be more than useful to you!”

“Well, in that case I will do it for half of what you have promised me if she’d marry me on our return!” Otheris said.

“Your words, so strong...like a huge block of ice under the desert sun at midday Otheris!” she said.

Otheris sneezed, “Well, trust me I am...”

“Bless you! Now, can we focus on what we are all here for? Lady and gentleman!?” interrupted the king as he spread

his arms, “alright! Good! Now where was I? Oh yes! If you bring me their heads I shall offer you what I have promised.”

“What do I get for killing the great witch?” asked Otheris.

“Nothing! Besides, you ate from the king’s table that should be enough!” she joked.

“Two great men are conversing, you don’t mind, do you?” said Otheris.

“My big farm on the northern side of Avigia, the former capital,” replied the king.

“This is not happening!?” she protested.

“I want the garden on the western side of this village, my aunt loves fruits!” Otheris injected.

“No! Father you cannot give him that! My favourite fish pond is in the middle of that garden!” she shouted.

“You don’t have to break my eardrums Thakina!” the king said, “calm down love!”

Otheris bent and held the turkey on the table then pulled off a leg and took a bite, “The Oracle is your daughter?” he asked in amazement, “okay fine, you know what? I don’t want the garden anymore I have changed my mind.”

“Changed? Your mind?” the king responded, “So you will do it for free?”

“Well, Yes! Sort of, but on the condition that she will be my bride when I slay the serpents of Qhudrus! Deal?” he said, as he kept the meat back on the table stretching his right hand to the king.

“Hmm! Well, it seems you’ve left me with no choice,” said the king as he shook Otheris’ hand, “deal!”

“Father, seriously?” she shouted, “you forced me to work at the temple like that isn’t enough punishment, now this!?”

“He’s a good boy...I guess,” the king replied.

“Who would want to marry a boy?” she said.

“Well, I meant to say a man!” responded the king as he turned to Otheris, “okay agreed! You can have my daughter’s hand in marriage...and the western garden! Because you...deserve it! And you shall find that I, King Ikaneziah, is very generous!” he stretched his right hand to Otheris once more, “Just bring me their heads,” whispered the king, “all of them!”

“Give me seven of your best men! We set to Qhudrus at dawn tomorrow!” Otheris said.

“Seven? I advise you take seventy. Besides, you look like a man with too much pride whose fall is inevitable!” said Thakina.

“Done! They shall await you by the palace gates earlier than that!” answered the king as he turned to Karim,  
“Assemble six of your best men!”

“Try and wear something light, the temperature is well, not suitable for thick clothes...princess!” Otheris teased.

“Don’t you ever call me princess!” she said as she walked away.

“Don’t worry, she behaves like that whenever she feels cared for!” said the king as he winked, “You know what I mean?”

## **DEVOURER**

“Otheris! Help me!” screamed a familiar voice in the dark. He woke up from his sleep and stood up as he looked around.

“Otheris! Help me, they want to kill me! Please help me!” the voice cried out again.

*Mother? Is that you?* He wondered as he hurriedly made his way out of the room.

Otheris got out, it was already midnight and he did not carry the lamp with him for the moon gave him enough light he needed to see where he was headed. “Who’s there?” he said as he moved around the small compound but did not see anyone nor hear anything, so he turned to return to his room then stumbled on something and as he was about to fall, a huge snake the size of his thigh aimed for his neck but he instinctively acted fast as his two hands sprang into action grabbing the snake by its neck.

One thing that baffled Otheris as he struggled with the snake was that as huge as the snake appeared, it was standing on its tail like a tree. The snake opened its mouth wide trying to take a chunk off Otheris’ neck, Otheris knew he was in great danger and without any second thought he went straight for the snake’s neck and bit a chunk off. The snake hissed and swayed violently then threw itself on the ground and quickly crawled out of the compound. Otheris ran back to his room, as he wondered whether what just happened was real or just a dream, he lay down and dozed off.

“Otheris! Please do not let them kill me!” the familiar voice screamed again. This time he was sure he’d heard that voice before but he could not put a face to it, so he stood up

and walked out again to see if he could trace her location but he got attacked by the same snake again. Instead of biting the snake Otheris forced his fingers into the wound he inflicted on it earlier, injuring it the more, the snake ran away yet again.

Otheris went back to bed but before closing his eyes he heard another scream, “This can’t be happening!” he said as he grabbed a sword from underneath his bed then walked out and as he stepped out of the door, he realised that he walked pass a dark figure but before he could turn, something cold touched him on the neck. He could not move, Otheris was frozen.

The dark figure moved from where it stood and hovered like a thick dark smoke in human form, Otheris began to follow as though parented by the dark figure. He could not talk nor do anything apart from just hopelessly follow the smoke. Otheris could not tell what it was; it had no face and no definite shape. Otheris tried to open his mouth to call for help but couldn’t. His heart pounded, he then remembered something he should have done, and he thought of a name and spoke it from within his heart. He could hear the name resound in his mind and heart, even though his lips were still glued together. As Otheris continued to repeatedly call out

that name in his heart, three men came out of nowhere in the bushes and attacked the dark figure, they touched Otheris and he regained control of his body.

“Go home!” said one of the men.

Otheris could not tell from their faces if he had seen them before but he turned as instructed and started to walk home, he then heard a horrible sound from behind him fast approaching and as he looked back, the dark figure hit him to the ground.

“No!” Otheris shouted as he woke up from sleep. He had a nightmare.

“It was just a dream!” he exhaled, then covered his face with his two hands and laid his head back on the headrest.

After a little rest and a little thought, Otheris got off the bed and dressed up for his journey to Qhudrus. He took his sword and knelt down, said a little prayer then went up to his aunt’s door to knock.

“I am here! Your breakfast is ready, I also prepared some food for you to carry along!” she said standing behind him, “I heard you scream...another bad dream I guess?”

“Yes!” he answered, “more of an attack!”

“Is it about your parents again my dear?” she asked.

“No aunt Zeenah! It’s uh...umm! Nothing to bother!” he said as he kissed her on the forehead then went to eat his breakfast, “I couldn’t kill it...again!”

“You couldn’t kill what dear?” she asked.

“The snake that attacked me in my dream, this is the fourth time it appeared!” he responded.

“Don’t sweat yourself child, the good thing is, you seem to be favoured by the one you prayed to! There’s a reason He allows such a so many things to happen to us all. You just have to learn one thing,” she placed a plate of food on the table, “maybe next time you get attacked, do not defend yourself as though the power comes from you!” she whispered as she smiled.

“I’m getting tired of all these night attacks and battles!” said Otheris as he sipped his tea from a cup.

“You have such a great task ahead of you Otheris, I can sense that in you, but perseverance is the key and you must be very careful son!” she moved the lamp from her front to the centre of the table, “and about those dreams; it’s evident that you’ve always come out victorious in all you’ve faced so far. You see, a man can either have the roots of his soul grow downward into the dark or upward into the light; every soul

bears its own kind of fruit depending on the source of its essence, because each is being fed distinctively!" she paused, "It is important child, for you to know which ground you dip the roots of your soul in, for when the time for harvest is nigh, the light would only pick that which is rooted in its marrow!" Zeenah turned to him, "When last did you flip through the pages of the book I gave you?"

Otheris cleared his throat, "Well, you know I've been busy lately aunt Zeenah!" He scratched his head, "Besides, some of the writings are not really clear because some of the pages are stained with..."

"Blood!" She interjected with a feeble smile, "Have I ever told you how I got the book Otheris?"

"Yes! You told me your husband gave it to you before he passed away?" he answered.

"Well, yes but not exactly in that manner!" she replied, "Anyways, many years ago when your cousin Jaharial was only three years old, his father and four of his friends went hunting in the nearby mountains and that evening they came across a stranger in a carriage who was badly injured, so they rendered help to him and as the men were treating his wounds, my husband's friends discovered some silver and gold in a

wooden box hidden beneath the seat of the carriage,” she smiled, “that’s where the trouble started; they all got greedy and lost their senses and wanted to steal what they had stumbled upon, but my husband disagreed. So the men attacked my husband and the stranger then ran away with the wooden box,” she sighed, “as my husband made an attempt to go after his friends, the stranger called him back and told him to let them go!”

Otheris stopped eating then opened his mouth to talk, Zeenah shook her head, “I’ve told you several times to always allow a lady talk, your job is to listen, listen and...”

“Listen!” chorused Otheris.

Zeenah smiled, “We prefer if you men would just, you know...”

“Listen!” they both spoke in unison.

Otheris placed his right elbow on the table and buried the right side of his face in his palm, “I-am-all-ears!” he smiled.

Zeenah chortled, “Anyways, after my husband returned to the stranger, the man handed a book to my husband and told him it was worth more than what the men have taken, then he gave up the ghost!”

“It’s a very powerful book, and that’s a really deplorable and tragic story,” said Otheris.

Zeenah nodded, “Yes, it is! But the story didn’t end there; my husband decided to return home that night, but, he encountered his friends waiting for him on his way back. Thinking what he held was another big bar of gold or probably fearing he may expose them, they confronted him and one of the men stabbed him in the stomach.”

Otheris felt soaked in sadness, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”

Zeenah smiled, “Well, after that, they threw the book on his body and fled the scene, however, on that fateful night the men packed their belongings and their families and left Moughdug. My husband was a very strong man, he got up and crawled his way home, dragged himself to the door that night,” she said, “he used the book to cover his wounds...that’s why I’m finding it hard to flip through those pages myself! He died the next morning in my arms with his hand clenched to a book he never got to read!” She bent her head down.

Otheris moved his hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder, “I lack words to say! You’re a strong woman!”

“I do not need sympathy now son! You see, that is why your cousin ran away from home,” she suspired, “I made the biggest mistake the day Jaharial turned twenty three; I told him how his fathered was killed!” She sobbed.

“Jaharial? He’s gone after them?” Otheris asked.

Zeenah nodded, “He said he’d avenge his father! I cried and begged him but he wouldn’t listen! Now I haven’t seen him in months! I can’t afford to lose the two of them, no! I shouldn’t! This is not fair!”

*Jaharial left for a great adventure without me, and I thought he went to Guiheq to learn the merchant trade,* Otheris thought.

That morning, Otheris comforted his aunt and assured her he would go seek his cousin when he returned from his mission. He made a few jokes to make her laugh and they hugged each other.

“Did I tell you?” he asked.

“What?” she inquired.

“The king...he promised to give me his daughter’s hand in marriage on my return!” he said excitedly.

“You mean one of the king’s daughters?” she said.

“The most beautiful one among them...um, Thakina!”  
said Otheris, “yeah that’s her name!”

“Hmm!” exclaimed Zeenah, “The Oracle? Is that so?”

“Yeah!” he sighed, “plus the king’s western garden! All mine when I return?”

“The one with the fish pond?” she asked.

“Yes! That one!” he answered.

“Hmmm!” she sat opposite him, “I hope you know that the king could kill his own brother over that garden. As a matter of fact, the rightful owner of that garden was killed by...”

“I am not his brother, and we had a deal okay! I don’t want to hear what happened with whom, when or where! Got to go!” he said as he stood up, kissed her forehead again and walked out, “just don’t forget to pray for me!”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” she said.

Otheris walked back in and picked a small bag kept on the wooden table, “That garden is yours on my return aunt Zeenah! All of it.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you’d carry the book along with you on this journey Otheris!?” Zeenah yelled.

“No need, I have memorised some part of it, I’d reflect on the ones in my head! Thanks for the food!”

“Okay! I shall pray for you and when you’re faced with fire, remember son, there’s a fire that burns all fires!” she said.

## **THE ROAD TO QHURUS**

“I thought they would have some slaves drive you in some royal chariot or carry you on a litter my princess!” Otheris gagged.

“You can call me Thakina, and I am not your princess!” she answered. Thakina led the way on her black horse as Otheris and the rest of the men trotted along behind her, “by the way, if I am ever going to marry anyone from Moughdug, it certainly won’t be you!”

“Oh! I am falling in love with you every step of the way...princess!” he said, “the more I hear your voice the deeper the ship that carries my heart sinks! I am not a proud man! I am just a boy who happens to be in love with the most

beautiful girl in the world!” winked from his own horse, “Pride? Hmm!” he turned, “Look at Karim on that horse,” as he pointed at the huge warrior among the seven men traveling with them, “now that is a man who’s got pride written all over him! I heard you slain thousands when you served under the former king, Karim!”

“I have slain more than a thousand,” said Karim as he drew his sword from its fully decorated scabbard, “in battle, to me a thousand men are like a woman’s heart! Already stolen without even thinking of wooing!” answered Karim, “that is why king Ikaneziah gave me this beauty as a gift!” lifted his sword up high for the rest to see, they all cheered.

“You’re all unbelievable!” said Thakina as she neck reined her horse to push Otheris away from her side, “imbeciles!” She whipped her horse leaving the men behind.

“Easy princess, don’t talk to your knight in shining armour like that!” joked one of the men as they laughed.

“She’s mine boys! You know that, so beat it!” Otheris said.

Otheris, Thakina and the seven men journeyed through the hot desert sand and ran out of drinking water but were lucky to come across a beautiful orchard. Otheris tried hard to get Thakina’s attention but she stubbornly ignored all his efforts.

“The king has more than thirty beautiful daughters, I do not know why you waste your effort picking the arrogant one Otheris!” shouted one of the men as they mounted their horses to continue their journey.

“Just in case you’re blind my brother, it is called love!” Otheris replied.

“Yeah! Brothers, Otheris is right! He is in love...because he is blind!” said another laughing hysterically.

“Half-wits!” said Otheris as he dashed his horse, Karim stood next to his horse admiring his sword.

Otheris rode away and caught up with Thakina, “Hey princess!”

“Ugh!” she exclaimed, “I’ve told you several times stop calling me that!”

“Oh I am sorry! I thought girls like it when a boy calls them princess,” he japed.

“Well, I don’t deal with boys and I am not a girl...I am a lady!” she shouted, “and so should be treated like one...by a real man that is but, as you can see my friend, you’re a boy so I understand!” she teased.

“Whoa there! How many times are you going to talk about the boy-girl thing? I am a twenty six year old male and that makes

me a man!” he said, “Look at these? See?” raised his arm and showed her his biceps to impress her.

“Yes you are...a man who still lives with his aunt!” she mocked, “You think you’ll win a woman’s heart acting like that?”

“Hey! When we get back I am going to own a beautiful garden, the best of all the gardens in the kingdom for that matter and I heard it has got a beautiful fish pond in the middle of it!” he said, “and the good Lord has bestowed me with a beautiful woman!”

“My father will never give you that garden, trust me! Even if you slay the devil himself!” she said, “By the way, why would you choose something like that? Of all the things a man would ask a king, you chose a garden!? Gosh you’re way more boyish than I thought!”

“Well, I did swap it with the most precious thing in the world, didn’t I? Still the generous king offered to give me both the garden and his beautiful daughter’s hand in marriage when I return?” he giggled, “So who’s wiser now?”

“Stop fooling yourself, I am not beautiful. You haven’t seen my sisters yet, have you?” Thakina said, “And stop telling me you gave it all up simply because I am beautiful!”

“I’d give up the world itself just for you!” he replied.

“Only a foolish boy would do that, do you know what a real man would do?” she asked.

“Oh here we go again!” he injected.

“A real man would go for the world so the girls would rush for him!” she added.

“Well, I don’t want to be a man then, I want to remain a boy...who loves you!” he blew a kiss in the air for her but she acted as though she caught it then bent towards her horse’s mouth and fed it the symbolic kiss, then drew her hand from the horse’s mouth to its tail and threw it off like the horse just dropped some dung.

“What? You did not just do that princess,” he said.

“Aargh!” she exclaimed.

“Ha-Ha! You’re so going to make a fun companion, and a great mother too!” Otheris winked.

“I hate it when you wink! I hate it when you address me as a princess! Stop it already!” she said, “why are you so annoying?”

“Only on one condition!” he answered.

“Which is?” she asked.

“If you will sing for me on the day of our wedding?” he teased.

“I am dead! Yep, I am definitely dead!” she replied, “Do you even know why I came along with you on this journey?”

“Well, maybe your father wants you to go see the world and probably expects that you’d learn a lot about life and maybe meet the man of your dreams!” he joked.

“There is no such thing as the man of my dreams but you may be right; father did want me to go out and interact more but then...you and my father had already struck a deal so if his problem was for me to get a partner he would’ve told me to just stay home and wait for you to come back, then we marry, don’t you think?” she replied.

“Aah! So she does like me!” he said.

“You’re pathetic!” said Thakina.

Otheris started to whistle a sweet song.

“What song is that? You got the tunes wrong!” she added.

“Then teach me!” he replied.

“I won’t whistle, I’ll sing it so move your horse from my view and listen to a professional sing,” prided Thakina, and as she opened her mouth to sing, Karim and the others galloped through.

“I think we should rest beneath the mountains and camp there for the night!” Karim insisted.

“Unbelievable! This is so not fair! I can’t believe this!” Otheris deplored.

“What did I do?” Karim asked, “I was only trying to save your life! You should thank me!” he stared at Thakina.

“Save my life? Ugh!” Otheris emphasised life, “On this journey, I am the one doing the saving!”

“Did you hear that boys?” said Karim, “our young-wanna-be hero here thinks he will save the day when this all ends!” the men laughed.

“Not only is he going to save the day, he’s taking home your swords along with the heads of the serpents of Qhudrus...boys!” said Thakina as she flogged her horse leaving the men with nothing but dust.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Princess!” mocked one of the men, “very funny!”

“Let’s not forget boys! Thakina here is the all mighty Oracle! Oracles have foresight, right?” said Otheris. The men didn’t find it funny as they stared at him.

Otheris walked his horse passed the men, “I thought so!”

“This woman I don’t like the way she talks!” said one of the men.

“She’s a princess, that’s how they talk Zuka!” Karim responded.

“Well, I don’t like princesses! And this Otheris I say we cut off his head after we are done with the serpents of Qhudrus and fabricate a story of how he died heroically!” Zuka added.

“The princess will tell the king!” said another.

“Who says her body must return home with its heart still beating?” Zuka suggested.

“That’ll do boys! Let’s not waste our time scheming on silly things! Don’t you just love the drama and entertainment they put up? Imagine how boring this trip would be if these love birds weren’t with us!” said Karim.

“You think she loves him?” asked Zuka.

“She likes him alright!” answered Karim, “let’s go make a camp for the night men!” he moved his horse in front of the men and turned, “by the way, this talks about cutting heads and taking a lifeless body home!” he cleared his throat, “let it die here and now, unless you want to choose a new leader but if you still trust me to lead this mission I say no one should even dare to think about what my ears just heard! We’re on

this journey for one thing, and that is to help the young man here bring back the heads of the serpents of Qhudrus to King Ikaneziah!” Karim turned to look at where Otheris was headed, “I don’t know how he intend to do, but ours is to follow the orders of the king!”

“I’m starving!” said Zuka.

Karim led the men and by the time the seven of them got beneath the mountains, it was sun down. Thakina and Otheris had gathered some sticks to set up a fire.

The men got a nice spot and tied their horses to the trees in order to rest for the night. Zuka and two of the men went up the mountain.

“We should be at the gates of Qhudrus by dawn!” said Thakina.

“I heard there’s a shortcut up these mountains!” Otheris responded.

“Well, it’s best we go through the gates. It’ll be less suspicious, we don’t want any of the serpents alerted before we even make any move, do we?” she said, “let me see your sword!” as she turned to Otheris.

“My sword?” Otheris asked posing like a warrior.

“Yes! Your sword, might I have a look at it?” she said.

“Why not! Here!” as he handed it to her.

“Hmm! I kind of like it,” she drew her own sword, “let’s see!”

Thakina threw his sword back at him and as soon as he grabbed it, she charged towards him faster than he’d think; Otheris used his sword to protect himself, and as their swords clanked, half of Otheris’s sword went flying in the air.

“What the hell!? What was that all about?” Otheris asked, holding to his broken sword while lying with his back to the ground panting.

“I thought as much!” she stretched her hand and lifted him up.

“Here! Take this, you may find it more useful than that cucumber you carried!” as she handed her sword to him.

“Hmm!” he exclaimed, “light and sharp! Where did you get this baby from?”

“Forged in the mountains of Ghunakog by the legendary Jheet of Sunthai himself,” she replied.

“Jheet of Sunthai? The great blacksmith from the east who got killed by his apprentice with a wooden sword?” he laughed, “I heard the story!”

“Did you? Well, probably contrary to what you must have heard; after killing his arch enemy Zugthak, the leader of his rivalled tribe, whom Jheet believed ordered the killing of his

entire clan. Jheet fled up the mountains of Ghunakog. The rivalled clan known as the Oaturans made several attempts to kill Jheet but failed. Well, actually his skin was impenetrable to metal...that was wield by any man. He one day welcomed a young orphaned girl into his house up the mountains, and after some years she discovered his secret. Well, actually he spilled the beans after he got drunk one night.”

“Wait, are you saying...” Otheris interrupted.

“Why don’t you let me finish? Well, he let his guard down and told her his deepest kept secret of secrets. So, she killed him in his sleep...with a wooden sword!” Thakina sighed, “The girl Jheet welcomed into his home was actually Zugthak’s daughter!”

“Hmm! Sounds like good bedtime story for children!”

“Whatever, but if you deny this occurrence then the story of you killing the great witch of Moughdug is but a fairy tale as well. I am hungry!” she responded.

“Ha! You wish!” exclaimed Otheris, “I’ve got something in my small bag, my aunt prepared some...”

“Go get it already!”

“Okay! Okay!” Otheris put the new sword into his sheath, left Thakina and moved to his horse as Karim walked towards her.

“You should call your men back, this place is not a place to wander!” said Thakina.

“They’ll be fine Princess Thakina!” Karim answered.

“How many times do we have to go through this Karim?” she said in a soft voice.

“Forgive me Princess Thakina! It is my duty to protect you!” he replied, “This is how I am able to put the food on the table.”

“Doesn’t serving me also mean you should have respect for my words?” she asked.

“Yes it does Princess Thakina! But my services to you require I constantly remind my heart and my sword whom I live to protect and serve!” he answered, “Is the young man an eyesore?”

“No! He’s just too stubborn, just like my father. Once I am away from my father’s sight it’d please my heart if you’d all stop calling me princess!” she said, “I know what the hearts of your men emit, this mission is a failure without Otheris so you must protect him as much as you so passionately-desire to shield me from harm.” she said.

“Your wish is my command princess Thakina!” answered Karim as he bowed.

“Where we’re headed is no place for men who put their trust in swords Karim! Your men may need a special kind of knowledge if they intend to face and defeat this particular enemy!”

Karim smiled, “We have faced men who terrorised great kings, encountered and have killed lions so fierce the jungle...”

“These are not lions, they are no ordinary animal Karim! Your swords cannot save you from their deception! They do not devour the flesh of men, they raven destinies!” she said, “my father just wants you to protect us along the way, when we reach the gates of Qhudrus you must stay back and let us go in alone and if we return then you escort us back to Moughdug!”

“My instruction is to protect you with my life and I cannot perform my duty with you out of sight princess Thakina. The king did not utter such thing to me. He said I should protect you with my life and bring you back home without a scratch!” he replied.

“Do not rub my face with songs from the lips of my father!” she shouted, “if you follow what my father told you then you would not go home alive. If you want to return home to your

wife and children you must listen to me and do as I say!” said Thakina.

Karim lowered his head, “But princess...”

“There is no but Karim! If you allow that to have a comfortable spot in this journey it is your sword that shall return home, and not you on that horse! If you have never honoured my words, I beg of you to make sure you stay outside the gates of Qhudrus!” she added.

Karim nodded, “And what is this special knowledge you speak of?”

“I do not know of this knowledge, but I know one who does! And I believe it’d help us all not only in this journey but the ones we’d take after this,” she said as she turned and looked at Otheris coming back with something in his hand.

“The son of Delial?” asked Karim, “they say no good thing would ever come out of the house of Delial!”

“Yes indeed...they thought wrong,” said Thakina as she turned her face towards the fire, “just don’t go through the gates of Qhudrus!”

“Hey beautiful, look what I have got for us!” Otheris panted as he knelt before the fire with some fruits, smoked fish and loaves.

“Yeah!” said Zuka, “Look what we’ve got princess!” he threw a slaughtered sheep next to the fire.

“A sheep? Are you crazy?” said Otheris.

“Yes! It’s just one sheep it’s not like we captured and killed a whole herd! Besides, when a sheep strays away from the herd and the shepherd did not notice it in time to come looking for it...finders, keepers!” he laughed.

“A good shepherd would leave his ninety nine in order to search for the one that’s lost!” said Otheris.

“Well, in that case, we’d steal one and hide it, and as the so-called good shepherd goes looking for the lost sheep, we’d come steal the ninety nine, right boys?” Hollered Zuka as the rest of the men exhorted.

“I can’t believe I’m stuck with a bunch of saps!” uttered Thakina.

Karim drew his sword, “Who’s there?” as he sensed some movement in the woods.

The rest of them became mute and those that were seated stood to their feet and drew their swords too.

“Show yourself?” he said as he stepped forward.

“We mean no harm!” replied a sweet untoughened voice as two young beautiful ladies appeared and walked toward them.

“Stop right there!” commanded Karim as he took some steps further, “who are you and what do you seek?”

“I am Emerald and this is my sister Golden!” said one of the ladies.

“Emerald and Golden...what brought you two out at this time of the night?” Karim asked.

“Our father sent us to look for his lost sheep!” said the one referred as Golden.

“Lost sheep?” Karim asked, “There’s no lost sheep here!”

“Well, it’s cold out here and we’ve been searching for hours, can we come sit by the fire, please?” said Emerald.

“Sure!” Karim turned to the men, “Why not? Please come!”

“You don’t need fire to get warm my lady! I am here,” said Zuka soaked in the thick pool of his pride. The rest of the men cheered.

Emerald held her sister’s hand and led her near the fire where Otheris and Thakina were standing. As the women made their way through, their beauty beamed as the fire shone on them and stole the hearts of the six men.

“Whao! I feel like drowning in my own saliva!” said one of the men.

“Ewww!” Thakina exclaimed.

“Hi! I am Emerald and this is my sister Golden,” Emerald said as they both squat to get warm around the fire.

Otheris knelt as Thakina squatted next to him, “Yeah I heard your names when you first introduced yourselves!”

“So what’s your name?” Golden interjected with her eyes gazed at Otheris.

“He’s taken!” Thakina interrupted.

“Taken? What kind of name is that?” responded Emerald.

“I meant to say, he’s mine!” Thakina replied, “Yes! Taken! Get it?”

“Oh! I am sorry, he doesn’t look entangled to me!” said Emerald as she stood up and moved closer to Otheris, “I love your eyes!”

“The rest of the men look strong and well built, your hauteur will find unmerited affection in their sight! Like I said; this one is taken!” Thakina protested as she left where she was and stood between Otheris and Emerald.

“In my village we have tons of young men just like him!” replied Emerald.

“Well, staying away from this one shouldn’t be a problem for you then!” replied Thakina.

“Hey! Hey! Ladies, come on! No one fights over an unripe apple hanging on the tree when lots of well ripen ones are scattered on the ground, my sweet loves!” said Zuka as he approached the fire, “Fakal! Bring the wine and let’s make a merry out of the night!”

“Yeah!” the rest of the men cheered again.

The men brought wine they carried along on their horses and made merry of the evening as proposed by Zuka. While Otheris, Thakina and Karim sat not far from the fire enjoying the amusement, six of the men got drunk and danced around the fire singing battle songs and laughing hard at one another as the two strangers danced seductively.

“I love my life!” Zuka voiced out, “things are getting better and better by the day from where I’m standing boys!” as he pranced and staggered.

“I don’t like them! I don’t trust them!” said Thakina.

“Ah! You’re just a little jealous!” Otheris said.

“No I am not! Jealous?” she replied as she reclined her head on a headrest and drape herself with a blanket turning herself away from Otheris.

“Don’t touch me!” she said as Otheris made an attempt to say something, “good night.”

“Good night!”

Karim, Otheris and Thakina slept off before midnight while the rest of the men along with the two strangers enjoyed the evening.

## **THE SERPENTS OF QHŪDRŪS**

“Otheris! Otheris!” someone called in the dark, “wake up son!” said the voice louder.

Otheris woke up but saw Karim and four of the men aiming their swords at him.

“Where is Thakina?” he asked, “What have you done to her?”

“I am here, I am okay!” she said, “don’t move!”

“What?” asked Otheris, a bit frightened.

“Don’t move Otheris! We’re thinking of the best thing to do, whatever you do...don’t move!” said Karim.

“I don’t understand?” said Otheris as he looked at his feet carefully then sighted a big black snake curled itself around his right ankle.

“Where are the rest of the men? Otheris asked with apprehension, “and please...what is that?”

“Mekel and Pelinias? They are dead! And that’s a big snake curled up on your right ankle.” Zuka replied, “We believe that those two damn women killed them...somehow, after we all gave in to slumber!”

“It was a very stupid thing to do!” uttered one of the men.

“Yes, a very stupid thing to do!” added Zuka as he shook his head.

Otheris was sweating, “I’m dreaming, right guys?” he turned to Thakina.

“No!” They all chorused.

Otheris did not bother to listen to what they were saying and he saw how scared they all were. He looked around and sighted a small rock, then cautiously dragged his body towards the rock with the snake still curled to his ankle.

“No! No!” they cried out as they slowly follow him.

Otheris picked the rock and smashed the head of the snake but it refused to let go, instead it curled itself tighter around

Otheris' ankle. Otheris then raised the rock higher and aimed its head again not minding his own leg, the snake quickly loosen its grip on Otheris as Karim ran forth and cut off its head.

Thakina rushed to Otheris to make sure he was not hurt, "Are you okay?" as she checked his ankle.

"Yes! I am fine!" he replied.

"Hmm! So much for the one who'd slay the serpents of Qhudrus!" said Zuka, "well, all the horses are dead too! All killed!"

While they wondered what just transpired, they heard a sound in the woods as though something large was making its way through and so kept their guard up, and as they gathered in one place forming a circle, a wild wind blew its way through and swept them all off their feet. A huge golden-scaled serpent made its way and stood tall before them with its head spread like that of a mad cobra. Otheris quickly moved backwards in search of a weapon good enough to attack the serpent but could not find, he then saw his sword lying on the ground near the ashes from the fire and made an attempt to pick it, unknown to him a huge serpent same colour as the earth was lying close to it. The serpent expelled venom from

its fangs and aimed directly at Otheris' eyes, Otheris used his left hand and covered his eyes as fast as his eyelids could.

The serpent continued to disgorge its venoms until it drenched Otheris' entire clothes as though his entire body was immersed in a slimed substance. He realised that the closer he moved towards the sword the more venom the serpent spewed.

While its attention was on Otheris, the serpent sensed Karim approaching from behind so it turned fast and like lightning struck Karim on the chest, his sword fell off his hand on one side, his body on the other.

Otheris lowered his hand and went straight for his sword, picked it and attacked the serpent but his attempt was futile.

Thakina got scared and turned to flee, the serpent hit her with its tail sending her into the air as it charged towards her, she fainted on landing as six more huge serpents came and surrounded her. The serpents began hissing and a great dark smoke arose and swallowed Thakina and all the serpents away into the woods.

“No! No! Thakina!” yelled Otheris as the men ran after the smoke but it disappeared leaving an evil laughter that echoed through the surroundings.

“I thought princess Thakina is supposed to use her powers to repel these blood suckers!” said Otheris.

“She’s only a dreamer! She dream dreams and the king mistook her for an oracle,” said Zuka, “and now it is your power that we are yet to see young Otheris!”

“I do not have any powers!” Otheris answered, “I only have faith in someone, that’s all!”

“You’ve got lucky Otheris, that serpent wanted to blind you,” said Fakal.

“Faith? Hmm!” exclaimed Zuka, “You should have put your faith into good use when they appeared and not land us in this fate. Faith! We’ll see about that! Let’s go save your princess Otheris, they couldn’t have gone far!”

“Let me check on Karim!” said Fakal as he turned to move.

“He’s dead! Let’s forge ahead before we lose their trail!” Zuka yelled.

The men walked through the woods that same night and arrived at an old house up on the mountain that looked haunted; the house looked like it stood the test of time through centuries. They approached carefully and broke their way in through its mighty doors, and because it had no light in it,

they lit their way with torches. Thick cobwebs were everywhere, it seemed no one had lived there in a long while. The men looked around carefully and with great caution. The wooden stair cases cracked and squeaked as they go up searching for signs of life in there. The entire house was old and cold, and it felt as though it watches them through its many hidden eyes on the walls.

“Thakina!” whispered Otheris.

“I don’t like this place!” Fakal said, he drew a second sword as they walked gently up the stairs.

They pushed themselves deep into the creepy old house but could not find the serpents nor anyone, instead, they came across cages made of steel filled with many starved children; when the children saw them they all stood up stretching their hands, “Help us!” the children said in a weak voice, they all looked sapless.

Otheris approached one of the cages, bent on his knees and looked around for a way to open the cage as the little girl stared at him.

“Please give me water to drink!” said the little girl.

Otheris tried to open the locks.

“You can’t open it without the keys!” she said.

“Where are the keys? Who has them?” he asked looking into the girl’s eyes as the rest of the children gathered behind her, all looking weak and feeble.

“With the witch down below!” the children responded.

“With the witch down below?” he asked.

The children shook their heads.

“What’s your name little one?” he asked.

“Aaricia!” answered the little girl.

“Lovely name!” he smiled, “I’ll get you out of here! All of you!”

“Otheris! Come on we’re running out time. Let’s go, we can come for them later!” suggested Zuka, Otheris stood to his feet.

“Please don’t leave us Mister! Mister please stay with us!” the children cried.

Saddened by the unpleasant situation, Otheris exhaled audibly and said, “I’ll be back for you! I promise! Just stay quiet okay?” he ran his hand through the little girl’s dusty hair, “stay strong, I’ll be back!”

“Come back with food and water! We are all hungry!” said Aaricia.

“We’ll bring something better than that Aaricia, we’ll bring freedom!” he answered. The children smiled and some in tears as they felt a glimpse of hope.

“Otheris!” Zuka yelled.

The men planned to split in order to comb the old house and after a long otiose hunt they all came down and gathered in what appeared to be the living room.

“I don’t think they are here!” said Zuka.

The men saw old paintings dating more than a century old, Otheris approached one of the big paintings hung on the wall above the fire place, “I know this face!” he raised his torch higher revealing what appeared to be the portrait of the great witch of Moughdug.

“Who is it then?” Zuka asked as he admired his beards in a dusty mirror on the wall, “Hmm I think my beard would soon look like Karim’s! Maybe even longer, and finer!”

They heard a horrible laughter from the rooms upstairs that echoed throughout the creepy-old house, all went on alert and drew their swords pressing their backs against each other, then something began to roll downstairs like a crystal ball. It bounced its way down the big old wooden staircase, emitting

smoke as it landed on the floor. The men watched it roll to the centre of the room.

“What’s this?” asked Zuka as he lowered his torch down walking towards the crystal ball. There seemed to be something shiny in the crystal, it glittered and dimmed continuously, Zuka turned away from the crystal ball and looked up the stairs.

“I think we should stick together!” said Fakal, “come and see what’s inside the crystal!”

The men stared down at the crystal ball as their reflections stared back at them, they saw something like a golden scaled serpent raising its head in the crystal ball. Unknown to them, it was the reflection of what was hanging on the big chandelier above their heads.

“Yes! You should!” hissed the golden scaled serpent as the crystal ball shattered to pieces breaking the floor beneath their feet, exposing what appeared to be a big conical opening about fifteen feet in diameter. The golden scaled serpent dropped itself upon them as they all slid along into the hole and down below into a cavern; the men screamed and yelled as they fell, then plunged into a slimy pool filled with human

skulls and bones. The golden scaled serpent disappeared under the slimy pool.

The men got out of the slimy pool and laid on the rocks, and as they panted, they heard a sound, then looked around the cave and saw an old woman seated naked on a big rock humming a song.

Otheris left the others and walked a little closer to see her face, he saw her gently sponge-bathing something between her thighs so he stopped and wondered whether he should go ahead or not, the old woman then turned; the sight of her sent chills down his spine.

“Otheris! Son of Delial...I told you no one would burn me that night, didn't I?” she said as the cave shook a bit over the sound of her laughter.

“Melnourat!?” he said in shock, gazing at the golden necklace around her neck ornamented with many keys.

“Otheris!” shouted Thakina.

The men sighted Thakina lying on the ground with her hands tied together across on the other side, surrounded by twelve Serpents.

“Aww! Isn't this romantic? Hey Princess...your knight in shining armour is here to save you!” the witch mocked,

“while the world burns and needs saving, you young lads rushed in like fools to come save just one...lady in distress!?” She laughed, “Oh! Otheris my hero, you’ve come to save me!” mimicked in Thakina’s voice.

“Melnourat? The great witch of Moughdug?” Zuka asked.

“Yes! Oh Yes! It is I, in the flesh you sons of wretched whores!” she managed to stand on her shaky feet stark naked with a huge black serpent hanging in between her thighs.

“Whoa! Whoa!” Zuka screamed as they all took some steps backward.

“How come?” asked Otheris, “I killed you! I cut your head off!”

“Yes you did Otheris, indeed you had killed that body...and saved me from that old sacking bag that fateful night!” she uttered with such great pride, “you see, the body is just a vessel, son of Delial, you can channel the substance anywhere anytime, and you did to me a great favour that night!” she mocked, “how do I look now, huh?” laughed and raised her hands up like a peacock’s tail, as the black serpent between her thighs made a fierce hissing sound.

“It’s impossible!” said Otheris.

“Yes! Yes! Oh yes! It is...impossible son of Delial! But considering the fact that you have whom you worship and we have whom we bow to as well! Ha! Ha! Ha!” bragged the witch, “You see, you did destroy a body that night. Oh yes, but then it is only a body, as long as I am willing to serve and sacrifice as much to darkness the blood it seeks then having another body is as easy as milking a lactating cow! When you take this path son of Delial, you’d find that even the dark lord provides for his own!”

The black serpent between her thighs swung its head up with half of its body still stuck inside of her. The sight terrified the men, they began to look around for a way out.

“The only way out is up gents,” said the witch, “there is no escaping this Otheris! There-is-no escaping Melnourat the great witch of Moughdug...tonight!” she yelled, “You and these poor devils have had your fill of self-glorification and the gates of Hades await your ill-scented souls...all you wretched beings, I shall devour you!” she prided herself on being the most vicious of them all, “after that fateful night I knew that old wilt of a king would gather the grunts to come hunting for my offspring so I await his army yet he sent you-imbeciles and as I waited patiently, I smelled the essence of

Delial. That foolish king directed his best warriors and you Otheris right into my snare!”

The serpent that hung between her thighs raised its head and hissed at Otheris.

“Your time has come Otheris! I had told you once and will tell you again...no one shall burn me tonight! I shall devour you and once done with you and this worthless daughter of your king, my babies and I will walk through your little villages and wipe out all your people!” added the old witch, “come out my babies!” Thousands of snakes of many colours began to make their way slowly out of rocks that surrounded them, and from the pool behind the men “you think you know me. Well, you’re dead wrong!”

Zuka signalled Otheris to take on the old witch as he and the rest of the two men quickly sprang into action to attack the twelve serpents of Qhudrus.

“Such pitiful waste of bootless effort, don’t you think Otheris?” said the old witch, “your lives have come face to face with the portal that leads to its doom!”

Otheris raised his sword, “Hey you listen to me old witch, you let Thakina go and we...I mean I’ll let you live to see the sunrise!” a bit frightened.

The old witch laughed so hard then took two giant steps forward as the cave shook, “Show me what you’ve got Otheris son of Delial!” turned to the thirteen serpents, “Kill them all my babies! Kill them all!”

A fierce fight broke out between the serpents and the men, after a long and fierce battle, Zuka was able to free Thakina and she ran to Otheris.

“What do we do?” Thakina asked Otheris.

“What can you do?” yelled the great witch of Moughdug, she took another step down as the black serpent protruded more of its body out of her, as it struggled to have a taste of Otheris’ blood while it tried to forcefully exit her fragile vessel.

The twelve serpents killed three of the men, they also ganged up against Zuka and devoured him.

“I don’t want to die like this my love!” said Thakina.

Otheris’ eyes got wider, “Did you just? Wait, does this mean you’ve agreed to marry me?”

“Shut up and think of a way out of here, silly!” she shouted,

“How can I marry you when I am dead? Or are you going to run your sweet lips and tell me you’d still marry me even when I’m dead!?”

The serpents began to advance toward them as the old witch took another heavy step, the snakes continued to make their way out of the surrounding rocks moving swiftly and advancing toward Otheris and Thakina.

“We shall not die tonight!” said Otheris as he closed his eyes. Thakina watched his lips moved as though he was enchanting. “What are you doing?” she asked, “what do you think you’re doing? We’re about to be ingested and you’re what? Praying? Seriously Otheris?”

Otheris used his hand and covered her mouth, “I am trying to concentrate here! Do you mind?”

“Oh! Otheris listen to the princess and just beg for mercy!” said witch, “he prays every time he’s afraid princess but tonight, prayer saves no one from the great witch of Moughdug!” She laughed wickedly and advanced towards them as the golden coloured serpent emerged from the slimy pool.

Otheris turned to Thakina and looked into her beautiful eyes, “Can you trust me?”

“I-I-I do!” she stammered.

“You do?” he reacted with a lift of his eyebrow, “wait, this feels like a wedding!”

“Yea...yes I can! I do trust you! God!” she shouted,  
“Otheris!”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “Then close your eyes! Hold me tight and don’t let go no matter what!”

“Okay!” she said as she held him with her eyes close, “What now?”

“Just hush!” He said.

The snakes parented by the serpents gathered and placed Otheris and Thakina in the centre, the old witch laughed and boasted manically. Chanting as she emphasised her name.

Otheris then put his sword back into its sheath and as he continued to pray, something like a ball of fire surrounded them and began to burn the snakes close to them.

“Impossible!” cried the witch as the black serpent hanging between her thighs made a swift attempt to strike Otheris but the fiery force field protected them.

On seeing that they are being shielded by a fiery force field, Thakina could not believe her eyes, “Teach me Otheris! Please teach me!” she said softly without hesitation.

Otheris opened his eyes, “I told you to keep those beautiful eyes close!” he sighed, smiled and whispered something into her ears.

“That’s it?” she asked.

Otheris nodded smiling, “Yeah! That’s all you need! But you must have no doubt, not even a drop of it.”

The witch and all the serpents watched from where they stood as Otheris talked to Thakina and she seemed to repeat every word he said.

“What are you reciting!?” yelled the witch, “Get them!”

The serpents turned and looked at the witch.

“Go after them!” added the witch, but the serpents moved back as Thakina closed her eyes and uttered something, then another ball of fire formed inside the one Otheris commanded and there were two force fields made of fire protecting them each.

Thakina looked a bit excited and reacted like a little girl as she stepped out of the first fiery force field created by Otheris.

Otheris then turned and faced the witch and the serpents, the fiery force field continued to expand as it incinerate the snakes.

“My babies! No! My babies!” cried the witch.

Otheris drew his sword, jumped up and cut off the head of the black serpent that hung between the witch’s thighs and as he landed right in front of the old witch, he pieced his sword

through her heart, the fiery force field burnt her as the witch sank to her knees then the fire grew with such strong explosion and consumed all the serpents.

The only thing that stood in the cave was Thakina and Otheris, even the slimy pool dried up and all the skulls burnt.

“Look for the necklace!” said Otheris as the fiery force field subsided.

Thakina ran up and started searching for the necklace the witch wore; she found the necklace buried in ashes exactly where the witch stood with the keys tied to it as Otheris looked for a way out of the cave but could not find any.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“We wait!” he responded.

Thakina smiled, walked to him and immersed herself in his arms.

“Woman, this is no time for hugs! I am trying to find us a way out!” he said.

“Hmm! Stop acting like you wouldn’t kill for a hug from me” she replied lost in his eyes.

“Princess Thakina can you hear me?” yelled a voice through the hole from above.

“Karim? Is that you?” she answered, “Yes! Oh my God yes we can hear you! It’s Karim”

“Can you throw us a rope down here Karim!” said Otheris!

“Yes on one condition!” echoed Karim’s voice.

“What’s that?” Otheris and Thakina asked in unison.

“You’ll name your first child after me!?” shouted Karim.

“What if it’s a girl?” Otheris asked.

“Then uh! Then we spell my name backwards and name her that!” said Karim, he managed to swing down on a thick rope and suspended himself as he held firm his sword with his left hand looking down the cave.

“What happened here?” he asked while hanging from the rope.

“I don’t think that’s important for now, how the hell did you survive that?” asked Otheris.

Karim beat his chest hard with his left hand, “The armour never fails my brother! One of the king’s best gift to his humble servant...a sword-proof vest he got as a gift from Jheet of Sunthai!”

“How many gifts has the king given you Karim?” asked Otheris.

“When you get close to the king, you’d find that he is very generous!” Answered Karim.

“Generous Indeed!” protested Otheris, “I just hope when we get back you won’t tell me that the garden promised to me was offered to you as well!”

Thakina shook her head as Otheris held her by the waist and dragged her back into his arms again.

“Take it easy handsome! I hope you’d be as good of a father to our babies as you are a good talker!” she said looking into his eyes.

“Our babies!?” he responded excitedly, “I wonder what you are going to teach them!”

Thakina blushed, “You of all people should know...I will spend my time teaching them the power behind the name you whispered into my ears!”

“A name? I can’t recall ever mentioning any name!” he joked.

“Jesus!” she blushed, “You sweet rescuer!” she pinched Otheris and they kissed passionately.

“The king is so not-going to be happy with you, you know!”

Said Karim as he hung from the rope, “If I remember correctly, he specifically ordered you to bring their heads, not to... incinerate them all to oblivion!”

They all laughed!

###

Hi, thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review?

Thanks!

Richard Shekari.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Richard Shekari is a novelist, lyricist, singer, and a poet from Abuja, Nigeria. He is a Humanitarian Officer with the National Emergency Management Agency, Nigeria. An alumnus of the Federal University of Technology, Architecture department (ATBU) Bauchi, Nigeria.

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