



ILLUSTRATION BY RANDY BROECKER

ROAD OF BONES

By VIOLETTE MALAN

DHULYN Wolfshead had just turned the last vera tile in the Sleeping God pattern face up when an old man entered the tavern, wrapped up for cold though the day would be considered warm even by those who were not Red Horsemen from the icy south. Hands and wrists showed he'd been a big man before age had leaned him down, though his stoop and his rounded shoulders were better explained by his blue Scholar's tunic than his years.

The old man's eyes searched over all of the tavern's sparsely occupied tables before settling on her. His face brightened, but Dhulyn would not have called it a smile. He crossed the room to her table, stopped short of it, touched the Library crest on the left side of his tunic and inclined his head in a bow. Dhulyn touched her forehead in return.

"I am Horgath, Scholar of Rhonat Library," he said, his voice unexpectedly deep and vibrant. "May I join you?" When she gestured her assent he pushed back his brown hood, pulled out the stool opposite her and sat with the slow care of the aged. He cast a closer look at the pattern of vera tiles and raised his brows in obvious recognition.

"Are you Marked?" she asked him. "You appear to see more here than a game of tiles." Dhulyn knew a Finder who had become a Scholar, but the Seer's Mark was rare outside of her own tribe.

"As it happens," he said, looking up. "I have another source for my knowledge." With one liver-spotted hand he pushed up his left sleeve enough for Dhulyn to see the complex pattern of black tattooing, blurred and faded now, that covered his arm. He must have seen Dhulyn's eyes narrow, because he continued to speak. "Yes, I was once a mage – still am, I suppose, as like the Mark it never leaves you. But these are old." For a moment his eyes focussed on something far away, and his expression grew almost puzzled. "I hardly remember that life, it feels as though it happened to someone else. Then I see the tattoos and I'm reminded." He shook himself and straightened, smiling. "I left that life while still a young man and joined a Library. It transpired that it was the knowledge I loved, not the power."

Dhulyn smiled her wolf's smile, the small scar pulling back on her upper lip, but unlike everyone else she had ever known, Horgath did not react at all. Interesting. Perhaps his eyesight was poor. "I too have spent time in a Library," she said aloud. She and Parno had passed Rhonat on their way into town. She might be willing to overlook his past as a mage, if he were truly a Scholar now. "Have you need then of Mercenary Brothers?"

"Brothers?"

Dhulyn tapped her temple, where the blue and green tattoo of her Mercenary's badge reached to above her ears. "I am Dhulyn Wolfshead," she said. "Called the Scholar and schooled by Dorian the Black. I fight with my Brother, Parno Lionsmane, called the Chanter, schooled by Nerysa of Tourin. This line of black tattooing shows we are Partnered."

"Ah, I didn't know that. I've made no special study of the Mercenary Brotherhood, though I am now in need of the kind of aid the two of you can give me." His smile slowly faded.

Straightening, Dhulyn collected the vera tiles and restored them to their battered box. "You have still to tell me what it is you need."

The old man lifted his coarse linen satchel from the floor and set it on the table, loosening the braided ties that held it shut. He pulled out a bundle the length of Dhulyn's forearm, wrapped in time-softened leather. His hands, the knuckles swollen, shook as he folded back the wrapping. Finally he revealed a narrow wooden box, the hinges and clasp of silver formed into the shape of leaves and engraved with writing Dhulyn did not recognize.

Horgath tapped the hinge closest to him. "We breached a wall to build a new addition to the library and found this mortared into a cavity. I recognized it immediately. The casket contains an artefact stolen some years before you were born, from a temple in Genjar, and it is vital for me to see it returned while I still live. I'm too old to go alone, and none can be spared to go with me. When the youngster who helps in the kitchens told me there was a Mercenary Brother in town, I knew my opportunity had come." He lifted the lid.

Dhulyn tilted her head. For a moment she did not speak. "My Partner must see this."

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"So the old man used to be a mage?" Parno pulled on his right boot and stood to stamp in the heel.

"According to him, and to the tattoos on his arms." The Wolfshead leaned her shoulders against the wall, watching him dress.

"A bone flute's not that unusual." Parno slipped a throwing star into the top of each boot. "Even one as elaborate as you describe." When Dhulyn did not respond he looked up at her. "It's a flute, my soul. Sure it's made out of some valuable ivory or what have you. The old guy stole it himself, probably, and now that he's close to death he feels the need to make reparation – and speaking of which, did he mention how and what he's going to pay us?" Usually Dhulyn took good care that the fees were clear – and occasionally collected in advance. This time she hesitated. "We *are* getting paid?"

"He has a book –"

"Oh my soul, we're going to be paid with a book?" He closed his eyes and fought to keep the smile from his lips. "And what's my share?"

"It's old, it's valuable, a copy he made himself of a rare manuscript. We can easily sell it for more than our usual fee."

"Once you've finished reading it, you mean." She gave him the smile she saved only for him. "It's too bad we can't keep the flute. That's rare enough to be valuable as well."

"Flutes made from human bone may not be as valuable as you think."

Parno paused in the act of securing his extra sword belt. "Human bone? Are you sure? No offense," he added, as her blood-red brows raised. "Well. That makes things interesting. Did you also know there's no city where he says this Genjar is?"

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“WE’VE guarded caravans that moved more quickly,” Parno said, using the breathless whisper of the night-watch voice. The old man riding between them might be napping in the saddle, and he might not. They’d had one or two run-ins with mages before.

"He's old. His bones are fragile. He can only travel so quickly, even on the steadiest horse I could find him."

Though they continued to travel slowly, and both took care that the old man did no more than was necessary, Horgath began to tire more easily, speak more slowly, and show a tendency to fall asleep almost before his eyes could close. One evening when they were perhaps half way to their goal, in an effort to keep the old man awake Dhulynd asked Horgath to speak of his life as a Scholar.

"You have studied so many things in your time," she said. "Surely you must know stories we have never heard."

"Surely, surely. But first I've a funny story about an elderly colleague of mine. It was when I first became a Scholar, this old fellow needed to sell his mule..."

They laughed as the story reached its somewhat inevitable conclusion, stopping when Horgath turned to Dhulynd and with a soft smile said, "I'm so sorry my dear, who are you?"

Dhulynd's own smile never left her face, but Parno felt his heart sink. The man was old, right enough, but until this moment he'd shown no signs of illness. Dhulynd delicately took Horgath's left hand between both of hers.

"I am Dhulynd Wolfshead, Scholar Horgath, and this is my Brother, Parno Lionsmane. We take you to Genjar, to return an artifact robbed from a temple."

"Yes." The old man's voice gained in strength and he patted Dhulynd with his free hand. "Yes, that's right. I left Rhonat Library to bring the bone back."

Ask him, ask him, Parno thought, fighting the need to interrupt.

"Tell me again of the bone," Dhulynd said.

Parno released his breath as quietly as if he was on watch. *The "again" is a nice touch.* If Horgath's behaviour meant what he thought... With some folk the mind failed first, not the body. If a Healer were available, and your family had the fees, a great deal could be done. But the sufferer would eventually reach the point where even the best Healers could do no more.

"You'll not know this my dear," Horgath began, "but when a mage goes bad it happens so slowly, so subtly. By the time it's discovered it's often too late to save him – and it's usually a him you know, no one knows why. No, by then he can only be destroyed." Horgath fell to nodding, as though he had said all he meant to say.

"And this is what you did?"

"Oh, not I alone. There were five of us, working together, though only four at the end – three, eventually, since I left that life. We, we removed his power – it's a complicated and painful procedure, for all parties. Then we cut him to pieces, and burned the pieces. But the bones you know, the bones don't burn." He frowned, casting sharp glances around him before continuing. "Where...?"

"Right here, Horgath." Parno pulled the satchel containing the bone flute in its wooden case closer to the fire and set the old man's hand on it.

"It's dangerous my dears, dangerous and unlucky. It's got to –" his sudden grip on Parno's arm was surprisingly strong. "It has got to go back." His hand dropped away. "To be safe."

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PARNO waited until Horgath had fallen asleep before asking, "Can we rely on anything he said? *Is this flute part of a dead mage?*"

"It's a human bone, we know that much is so." Dhulynd sorted her bedroll out of her pack and spread it next to the fire. "What is it ails him? You seem to recognize it."

"I do. I saw it in my mother's great aunt. The Healer called it the Sunset Malady, both because it strikes at the twilight of a person's life, and because the symptoms seem to worsen at the closing of the day. Most people are Healed, but occasionally a person becomes so old that Healing no longer works."

"We wouldn't find such a malady among the Brotherhood." She sat back on her heels. "Most of us don't live long enough to die of something that strikes in old age."

Parno glanced down at the old man and straightened his blanket. "Which is a lucky thing, it seems to me."

"I won't argue." Dhulynd drew up her shoulders. A Brother who could not remember who or where she was, nor why she was there, was a liability the Brotherhood could not allow. A person who could not remember being a Mercenary Brother was one no longer. It would be a kindness to receive the final sword.

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THE following evening's incident was still more disturbing. Parno had unpacked the pot for brewing gange and skewers enough to cook the three pigeons Dhulynd had shot that day, while his Partner finished assembling the sticks and grasses she'd gathered for their cook fire. Horgath lowered himself to the ground at her side. He watched her a few moments, a frown of concentration on his face. She picked up her sparker, but before she could use it Horgath rubbed the tips of his left fingers against his thumb, flicked his fingers at the pile of sticks, and shied away as they caught.