



ILLUSTRATION BY SAMUEL DILLON

THE GUARDIAN OF NALSIR-FEL

By ADRIAN SIMMONS

FOR an enormous man wearing a dress, Penkatel could balance on a chair with an incongruous amount of dexterity. He shrieked a set of girlish wails, hiking up his skirts to show his dark hairy legs and hopped foot to foot. Meanwhile, Ahzlamin flounced in his plainer servant's dress, swinging his broom at stuffed mice and knocking them across the dusty square, some even into the delighted crowd.

The audience in Izem's square roared with laughter, the adults so hard that some bent double, the children shrieked with delight.

"Oh, my lady!" Ahzlamin piped, "Oh! Oh! OH!" And it was harder than it looked, to pipe louder than a drunken prostitute, *and* waggle his veil just so such that the braided tip of his beard would wiggle visibly, *and* flick the stuffed mice. The audience threw the mice back, and the bit had taken on a life of its own. And that meant applause, and *that* meant a showering of gifts and payment!

A wild-haired man on the edge of the crowd began screaming, "The days of the counting are nigh! The fury of Ghunwalid will descend upon this city! Upon fornicators, rebellious slaves, disrespectful children—"

Ahzlamin swore silently. You couldn't get five people together in a square of the city of Nalsir-fel without some dirty bare-foot prophet elbowing in on it. The gods-mad would drive away the crowd, meaning less payment for their performance.

Children could be cruel, which was why Ahzlamin and Penkatel paid them in sweets and trinkets to throw rocks and rotten fruit at prophets and hecklers alike. It was almost a part of the act at this point! But little Ilhann, ringleader of their urchin gang, was not to be found in Izem's square that morning and the rest of the kids were lost without her.

Without their twelve-year-old enforcer, Ahzlamin would have to do his own dirty work. So be it; innovation was the soul of street performance, after all. Snatching up one of the mice, he yelped and dropped it onto his cleavage. As the crowd laughed, he shimmied, digging most unladylike at his chest. Ahzlamin covered the distance to the raving prophet and kned him right in the balls, ending the admonitions in a wowl and smattering of applause.

Ahzlamin worked his way back to Penkatel for the final pratfall. The large man wheeled his arms crazily and toppled off the chair on top of Ahzlamin and both fell to the ground in a great mess of men dressed as women and flailed there for a moment while the applause grew. They stood and bowed, and with a flourish whipped off their veils to hold them out for offerings and gifts.

"Come again tomorrow!" Penkatel urged, his great black face slick with sweat, the massive amber wheels in his earlobes wobbling in the light.

Penkatel, unlike most Holminas, who were angular and sharp as if they'd been carved from wood, was a man of curves and roundness. A man who did not look out of place squatting by a campfire or being carried on a litter. A natural actor. "Come again and see the final act of Princess Toy-Hawk!"

"More laughs!" Ahzlamin said into the smiling faces. Ahzlamin was tall and had the angular face common for a Kofik and had a braided chin-beard. He had to be careful that he not spook the very people he wanted to pay. What a haul! Dried dates, fresh carrots, a small roll of undyed lowland cotton, and even a loaf of bread. "More action! See the Princess Toy-Hawk duel with the irascible Whazir Khulmis!"

"My daughter!" shouted a woman, one of the Kewllern wrapped head to toe in brown as if the presence of color offended her gods.

"My daughter!" she wailed, as only Kewllern women could, fists against her temples, face to the sky. "My little Ilhann?"

They had never seen Ilhann's mother, and this was the exact wrong circumstance! As if she had bathed in the dung of camels, Ahzlamin saw the crowd, with their money yet to give, moving away from her.

"Come tomorrow!" he urged, nodding and smiling to those who gave coppers.

"My little Ilhann!" she yelled. The woman came close enough that he could make out the sharp tang of the ground olasiq root that was the basis of that lifeless brown dye.

She grabbed at his arm, "Oh, Ahzlamin, you look after her! Have you seen her?"

'Look after her' was not how he would describe it. She ran off hecklers and sometimes he and Penkatel had drafted Ilhann to do the work of collecting the payment—people were much more generous with their gift and payment with children.

He wrapped his veil around the take and put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "She wasn't here today."

He looked around quickly, just to see if the girl might have wandered into the square. Ilhann stuck out, what with the bright green comb in her hair—a gaudily painted trinket that Penkatel had given her for her collection efforts, an old prop from their production of "The Stuttering Queen of Kalamal."

He saw no sign of her. Still, Ahzlamin knew Ilhann to be smart, and the city of Nalsir-fel was safe enough, even in these troubled times. In a moment he was trying to figure out a way to ease over to a pair of wealthy spice merchants. He really needed to get to them before Ilhann's mother or any of the growing number of beggars drove them off.

"Yes, yes," he said, patting her hand. "I will look. We will look for her and ask after her."

"You will? Oh, please help me find my little Ilhann!"

"Yes," he said, stepping away, "yes, on my honor I will."

And he left her to pursue the merchants.

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“THAT spice merchant gave us a Janihan silver coin,” Ahzlamin said, holding it up.

The two men, the black Holminas, and the taller brown Kofik, made their way back to the Weaver's Quarter. Penkatel looked at the coin, wry humor animating his thick features. "We should do a play about the uprising. About Prince Lashback. Maybe make a horse costume—"

"Keep your voice down," Ahzlamin snapped. "That history has not been written yet. Let a court poet stick his neck out for it, not us, talented though we are."

"Nothing so grand as that," Penkatel said, "just something quick and fun for the people. We don't even have to mention 'Lashback', we could—"

"And until we know how he is going to jump this slave rebellion business, we could end up swinging from a noose in Izem's square. Or beat up by Boss Guuleed and his thugs."

Speculation and rumor were upon every tongue—the wonder that a rabble of escaped slaves and an up-country band of nomads were blunting the full might of the empire; and the wondering of where the city of Nalsir-fel would stand in it all. The slave trade was strong here, not to mention the outlying plantations, but Prince Lashback had been a slave in his wild youth, and how he felt about it was an endless source of rumor. Guuleed, the head of the city's slaver organization, had already been flexing his muscle and any tongue that dared support the rebels might well be cut out in the night.

"Besides," Ahzlamin said, stroking his braided beard, "we should stick to comedy. In these troubled times the people need that."

"Oh yes, yes," Penkatel said, shaking his head so that his jowls shook and his pendulous earrings swung. "Yes, you are right. But we need to remain topical."

"Topical is a —"

Ahzlamin's word's froze, for around the smooth turn of the street they beheld the fine horses servants and slaves of Boss Guuleed himself. There must have been more than a dozen people and half a dozen horses. Guuleed and his retainers all but shouted their wealth, with fine silks and the gleam of silver and gold.

"Speak a djinn's name," Penkatel whispered, "and he will drop from the sky upon you."

Silence swelled out from around the merchant prince and his van. For a moment Ahzlamin considered turning down another

street, but he was a free man. While they had been talking of the slave rebellion, they had not picked a side and surely Guuleed wouldn't send his men to beat them up in broad daylight even if they had. It was the way of the city of Nalsir-fel that such things were done in the night.

Still, he and Penkatel grew as silent as everyone else as they approached, and by happy luck it was Boss Guuleed's group that turned with a clatter of hooves toward Zemil's square.

"You see?" Ahzlamin whispered fiercely. "Do you see? A wise man wants nothing to do with these things. Let Guuleed and the abolitionists murder each other in the night, each faction hoping to impress or intimidate Prince Lashback. The likes of us should not get involved."

"Oh, I see," Penkatel said, in a tone that told Ahzlamin that his friend had already worked out the play in his head. "And, from what I hear, may the all the gods protect the man who tries to intimidate the Prince of Nalsir-fel."

The dust of Guuleed's passing fell and din of the street rose again as they progressed. From the crowd a foreign man with pale skin and hair the color of wheat approached. "You are Penkatel and Ahzlamin?" he asked, and before either of them could answer he continued, "My lady, the great and serene Cowlanati Palisani would like to hire you for a great *soiree* where she will introduce herself to this city."

"Yes!" they both answered, forgetting the great affairs of the land, and each hoping the other knew what a "*soiree*" was.

"Ah, ah!" the man said, like he was going to sneeze. "Excellent! So excellent! Come, she is here."

The man motioned them to follow, and the Kofik and the Hominas turned into the Alley of Six Horses. Among the people of Nalsir-fel stood more of the pale outlanders: a woman barefaced and bare headed with her greying hair in a thick braid that hung over her shoulder like a sunning snake. She was dressed richly, if strangely, with a fine fur mantle held with a wide gold clasp bearing the sign of a great star. With the lady and the messenger were two guardsmen who wore armor of chain and their tabards bore the same star-symbol.

It was odd that a noble who had a messenger would be in the street to personally haggle with her entertainers, but they were outlanders, and the Alley of Six Horses was wide and bright, so...

The woman smiled a tight smile. "Tomorrow, when you perform in the square of Izem, there will be a man, a trader in furs with a scarlet and yellow turban watching. You will approach him in your foolishness, and stab him with this." She produced a long thin needle of bone.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Ahzlamin said, feeling like he was arguing with one of the gods-touched.

"We are not murderers!" Penkatel joined.

She ignored them. "The merest prick will be fatal within a day. If you do this you will be richly rewarded."

The messenger drew forth a bag of jingling coins. He pulled several out, letting the dusty sunlight gleam off their golden faces.

The hair on the nape of Ahzlamin's neck pricked at the unreality of the situation. That here an unveiled woman plotted murder with them in broad daylight and around them passed the good people of Nalsir-fel, completely unaware.