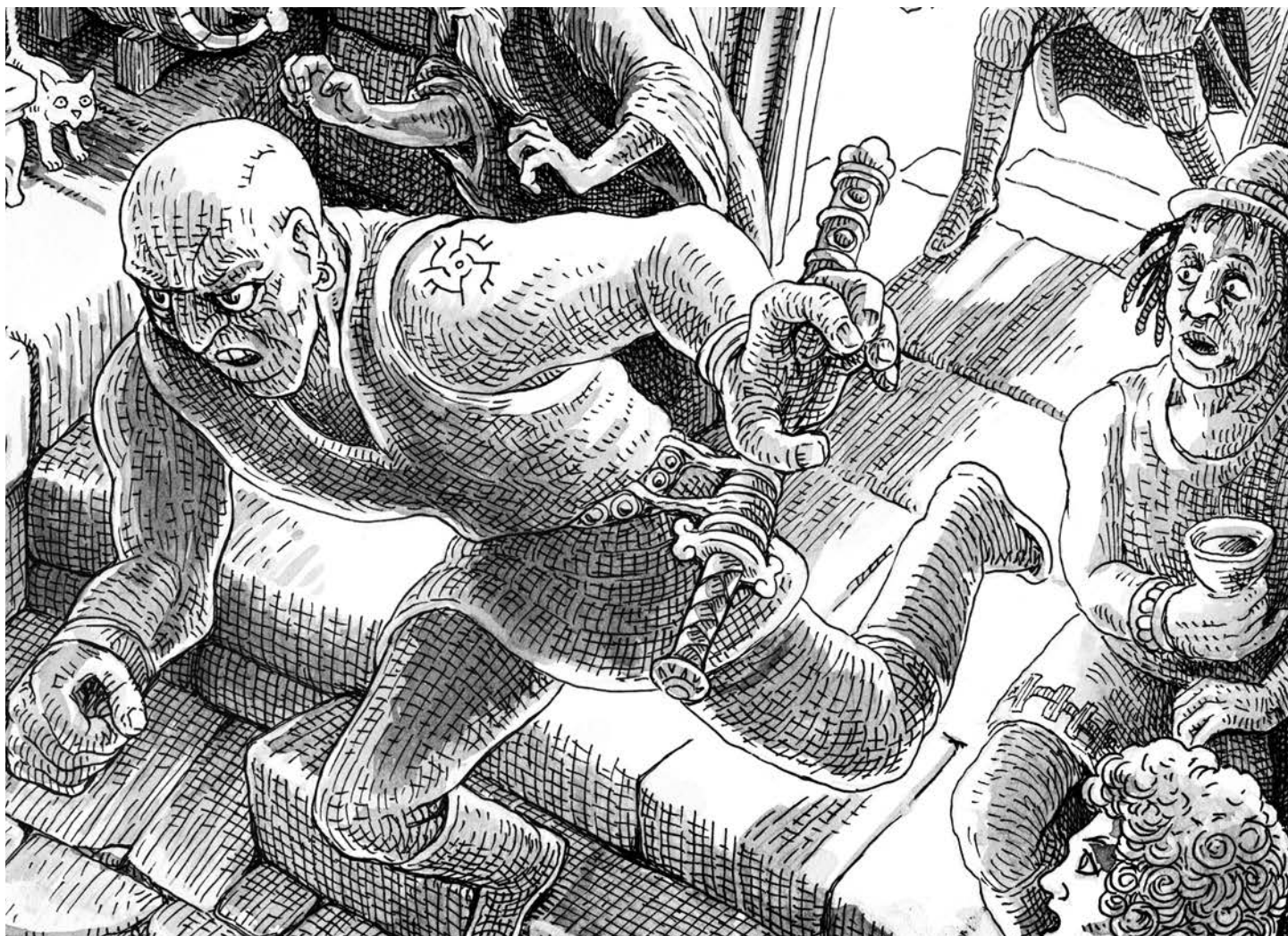






# VISION NECKLACE



## A Tale of the King's Blade

By **JOHN C. HOCKING**

Illustration by **STEFAN POAG**

**B**ENHUS went up the marble stairs, rubbing his eyes in the pre-dawn gloom. There was a small fountain burbling peacefully between him and the mansion's doors and the sight of it, a great luxury in these times of near drought, made him slow his pace and gather his thoughts.



He'd been awakened at what he deemed an ungodly early hour, this opinion reinforced by how late he'd finally found his bed. He'd taken the message relayed by the royal courier at his door, then dressed hastily and been driven in a fine coach to the home of Lady Bethelanne Thale, his overseer and connection to the king.

Benhus, only recently a plain soldier of the Legion, trailed a hand in the fountain, fought a yawn of eye-watering intensity, and tried to take the measure of things. Lady Thale usually appeared at his home, often at extraordinarily awkward moments, carrying instructions for him to perform some task for the king. These ranged from simple errands to challenges that threatened life and limb, so he was never certain what might be asked of him.

This was the first time he had been summoned to her home. The mansion, set on open grounds scattered with well-tended shrubs, was enclosed by a fieldstone wall with a gate that had proved both untended and unlocked.

A breeze, blessedly cool in advance of the day's certain heat, further tousled his sandy and unbarbered hair. He slapped at his tangled mane and lamented his appearance. He belatedly noted he was wearing the same loose grey shirt and set of leather breeches that he'd worn for the past several days, as well as his oldest pair of sandals, scuffed and dirty veterans of his time in the legion. Haste and drowsiness had combined to ensure he would be even less presentable than usual on the occasion of his first visit to the home of his steward.

At least he'd strapped on his short sword and lucky white dagger. He touched at the small pouch fixed to his sword belt and cursed softly. It was empty of coin, holding only a nobleman's comfort. The little wand was a simple illuminator, helpfully throwing sunlight should he find himself in darkness. Benhus had a vague memory of showing off with the thing for a pair of serving wenches at some point during the previous evening. Not long ago an apprentice wizard had examined it and told him the wand held 12 charges. He wondered how many he'd wasted and felt foolish. He considered that the courier had departed with the coach and that he was without money for a ride home and felt worse.

No lights shone in the manse before him. Had some mistake been made? Was he going to awaken Lady Thale and do so looking and feeling like he'd just been thrown out of a tavern? He shrugged and spat. Nothing to do but see what awaited him.

The doors opened easily on an unlit antechamber, high-ceilinged and with a doorway standing open across the polished floor. A tall man stood against the wall to his left, almost invisible in the shadows. Benhus lowered into a crouch and touched hand to hilt before recognizing him.

"It's Mace, Master Benhus," came a low voice. "Milady awaits you within."

Benhus had met Lady Thale's manservant and bodyguard only once, at a crowded social function he had attended only because he was expected to and had yearned to escape the brief time he was there. But there was no mistaking Mace, a supposedly pureblood Southron almost as tall as Benhus, clad in dun riding clothes with his black hair tied back in a long queue. He wore a broad belt over his left shoulder and across his breast. Benhus could see the gleam of the dark discs affixed to it and recognized them as rarely seen Southron weapons of black obsidian.

Mace's grin was palely visible in the dimness. Benhus nodded curtly and didn't smile back.

The next room was round, furnished by a large table surrounded by chairs. The ceiling was lofty, and a square skylight framed a spray of stars just beginning to fade with the coming of day.

He squinted and, across the room, a dim opening was revealed to be the base of a flight of stairs. A figure there beckoned to him.

"Greetings, Benhus. Come this way." He recognized Bethelanne Thale's voice, a smooth contralto that carried an easy assumption of obedience.

He followed her up the stairs, down a short hallway and caught up with her in a large bedchamber with a broad bank of heavily curtained windows. As he watched she tugged the curtains aside and, when the early dawn provided little illumination, produced a small lantern and held it aloft.

Lady Thale, clad in elegant if somewhat rumpled purple-bordered robes, gestured at the floor beside the wide, luxuriously appointed bed.

A man lay there on his left side and Benhus knelt beside him. Short, but with the hard, square build of a fighter, the man wore a black, close-fitting shirt and breeches. His dark hair was grey at the temples. He might have been asleep save for the razor-edged disc of volcanic glass imbedded in the back of his skull.

"Mace's work?" asked Benhus.

"Of course," said Lady Thale

"Yes."

The second answer brought his first cognizance that the Lady's manservant had accompanied him into the room.

"He and one other entered my home a few hours ago," she said. "They awakened me and this one asked questions at sword-point. They were very quiet and quite skilled in their invasion of my home, but Mace intervened."

"The other escaped, to my shame," rumbled Mace.

Benhus saw that the dead man's waist was encircled by a sash with the ends tied off and tucked in at the sides. He considered that such a sash was often worn by soldiers, weapons-men and those who wished to resemble them.

"Can we get his shirt off?"

The request sounded somewhat foolish to Benhus the instant it escaped his lips, but he was gratified when Mace immediately knelt beside him, seized a handful of fabric in each fist and, with little apparent effort, tore the body's shirt up the back. Sun bronzed skin and an old sword scar across the ribs seemed to affirm the man's status as a veteran fighter. Benhus pulled the remains of the shirt from the right shoulder to reveal a crude tattoo. Faded ink depicted a short sword cleaving a buckler almost in half.

Benhus stood.

"What have you learned?" asked Lady Thale drily.

"The tattoo is sign of one of the training halls used by soldiers, duelists and most anyone trying to better their fighting skills. There are many such and most have devoted trainers and followers who mark themselves with this kind of symbol."

"Hmm. The fact that the man had such a tattoo doesn't connect his place of training to his invasion of my home."

"No, but this kind of work might be hired out in such a place."

"Do you recognize the symbol?"

"Yes," said Benhus, "though that's no great feat. I did some training there."

He looked to Lady Bethelanne Thale, whose profile was now lit by the slow-rising sun. An old woman to his eyes, but not overmuch weighted by her years. Her long grey hair was tied back, and she held her thin body rigidly straight.

"What did they want with you?" asked Benhus.

"They were inquiring as to the whereabouts of a piece of jewelry I owned some time ago. More than 15 years gone I incurred the wrath of a prominent noblewoman, not unjustly I'm sad to say. She made me the gift of a poison necklace."

"Poison necklace?" Benhus said before he could stop himself. It seemed odd to imagine envenomed jewelry.

"Yes." Lady Thale smiled ruefully. "I did not realize I had provoked such hatred. When you put it on, and it is so very beautiful, such a slim and delicate strand of glittering pinpoints, that few could put it aside without placing it about their neck. Once you put it on it begins to kill you. Slowly, with creeping malaise and illnesses that multiply and cluster for months until you are little better than a living corpse."

Benhus frowned impatiently, opened his mouth to speak.

"Ah, but if you take it off," she went on, as if anticipating his words, "it kills you immediately and with a great deal of pain. The agony of simply lifting it from your skin might make you lose consciousness. It is a rare enough weapon that only a few instances of its use are known even back unto the time of Janarax, but in most accounts on record the victim tore off the necklace simply to end their torment."

"So, you had the good sense not to put it on," said Benhus, trying to push the story along.

"Not so," said Lady Thale. "I put it on as soon as I took it out of its handsome box."

Benhus could think of no response to that.

"I knew immediately I had made a potentially fatal mistake, but I also knew an extraordinary healer. Julara Shalidandros, a prodigy of the medical arts who was then but little older than you, Benhus. I called upon her, promised extravagant payment and my best recommendation to the royal court, may the gods forgive me. She studied on it and, in a ceremony that took two nights, removed the poison necklace from my throat."

"So these sneak thieves came to you seeking the necklace?"

"Yes, they were convinced that I still had it. More to the point, they sought knowledge of how I managed to survive it."

"Did you keep the necklace? Why do they not call upon this healer, Julara Shalidandros?"

"I haven't seen the necklace since before Julara removed it. And nobody has seen her since she was taken into the King's court on my recommendation. I — I told them that much."

Lady Thale fell silent for a moment before continuing in a voice tainted by bitterness. "I don't know the full story, but the King took an interest in Julara and she spurned him. Those who saw her last said her face had been scarred. She disappeared shortly thereafter. As you are doubtless aware, our King Numar is unaccustomed to having his will thwarted. After the great service she did for me I delivered her to disfigurement and death."

The sun was peering over the horizon and ruddy golden light streamed in the window. Benhus saw the rouge on Lady Thale's cheeks, how it stood out against the pallor of her face. She

seemed fragile, perhaps ill, and it occurred to Benhus that he had never seen her looking otherwise.

"I intended to send you to the King with a request for assistance," she spoke again, her voice now calm and businesslike, "but I believe I'll send Mace instead. Do you think you might learn anything if you visited this training hall?"

"The Cleft Buckler," said Benhus. "I'm known there and should be able to speak to some old acquaintances. It's a place to start."

"Excellent," said Lady Thale.

"Tread carefully," said Mace. "These men were skilled. The second one did not escape me by chance."

Benhus nodded and started for the door, then drew to a halt and turned back to face Lady Thale. He steeled himself — this was awkward but necessary.

"Milady, I — I find myself short of funds."

The noblewoman smiled and raised her eyebrows, which had the odd effect of making Benhus's face grow hot and his tongue grow thick.

"It's true," he added hastily. "I have never been paid since I entered the King's service. I have good credit at the taverns and baths and inherited the funds Thratos left in his home but lately I'm down to a few silvers and I cannot..."

While he stammered these words Lady Thale walked to a low end-table, pulled open a drawer, withdrew something heavy and, with an unladylike grunt of effort, tossed it toward him. A dark cylinder a little longer than an open hand struck his breast solidly before dropping into his hands. It was a stack of coins sealed in a sleeve of fine cloth.

"I've been meaning to give that to you for some time," she said.

After muttering his thanks Benhus made his way out of the house, pausing beside the fountain to examine his bounty. He had to tear the stitching loose at one end of the sealed cylinder, then gasped when he saw it held nothing but gold crowns. He'd never had even one of the thick coins before. Each might pay the full wages of a soldier for several months. His happily fulfilled greed made him exult only a moment before he felt a sudden and unfamiliar vulnerability; one did not walk around the city carrying this kind of money. And even if this many crowns could possibly be crammed into his belt pouch it would have been so heavy and hung so low as to look ridiculous. Tying up the open end of the sleeve, Benhus thrust the coins into the waist of his breeches and tightened his belt over them. It was uncomfortable but the only way he had to conceal the unexpected windfall. He muttered a curse. It seemed that even good fortune could be a burden.

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**B**ENHUS found himself a table beside the raised platform he recalled once served as a setting for boxing matches and, long after hours, unsanctioned duels. It was a little hard to believe it had served those purposes now. The tavern was down the street from The Cleft Buckler and a year or two back, when Benhus was a regular patron, had been at best a canteen for those training in arms and, at worst, a dangerous dive where violence was common and expected. Today it looked quite different.