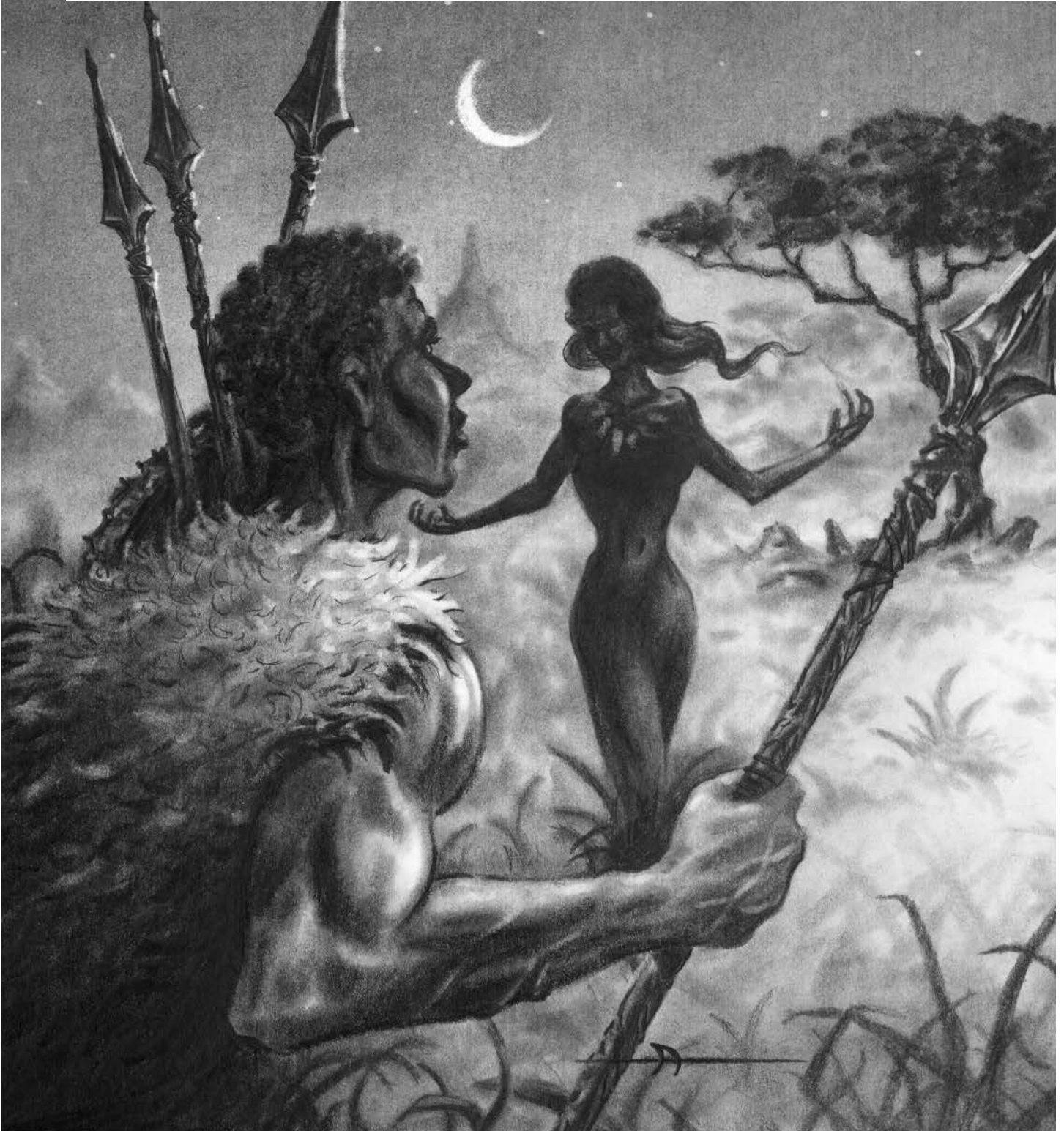
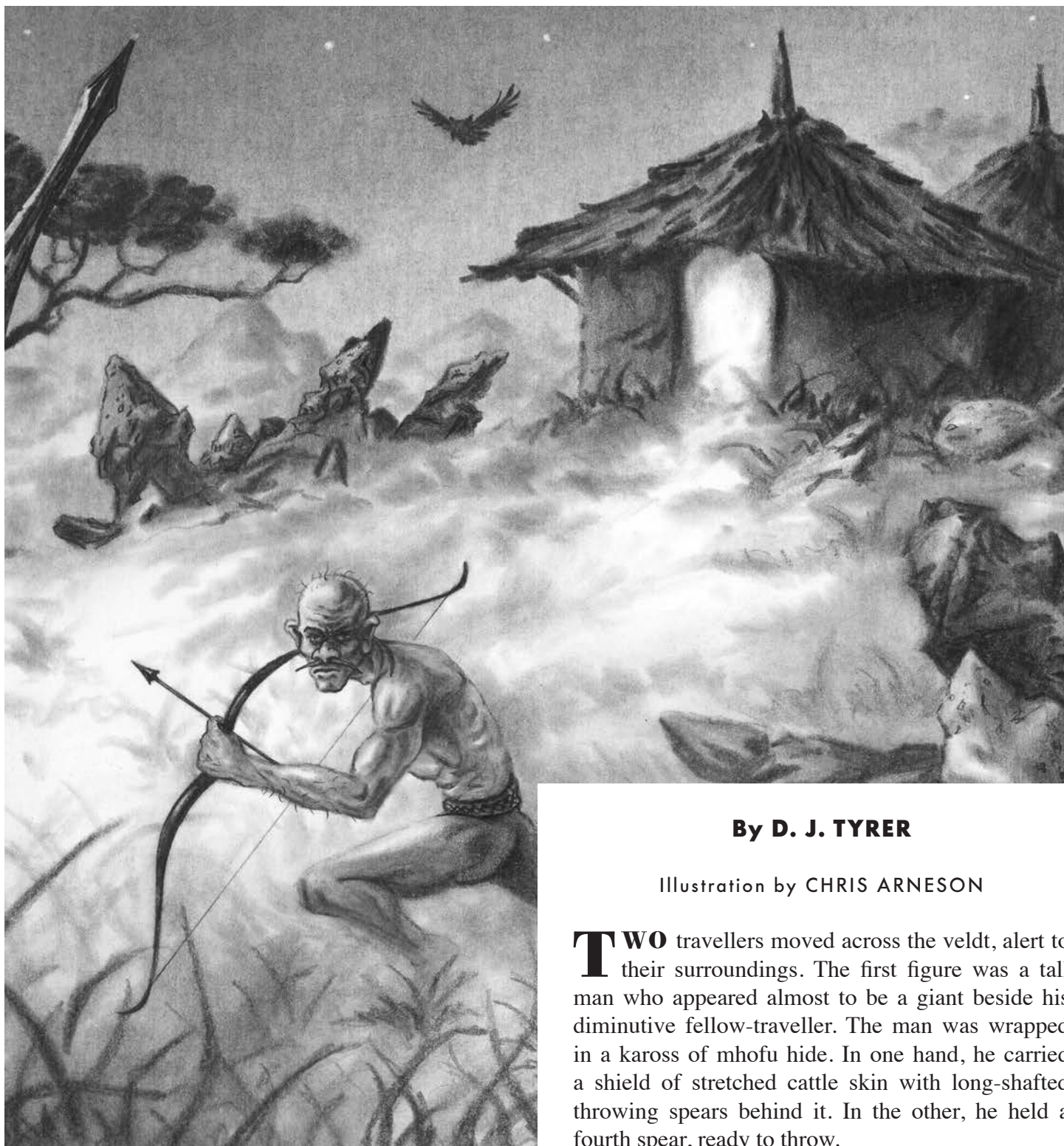


DEATH STALK



S THE NIGHT



By D. J. TYRER

Illustration by CHRIS ARNESON

TWO travellers moved across the veldt, alert to their surroundings. The first figure was a tall man who appeared almost to be a giant beside his diminutive fellow-traveller. The man was wrapped in a kaross of mhofu hide. In one hand, he carried a shield of stretched cattle skin with long-shafted throwing spears behind it. In the other, he held a fourth spear, ready to throw.

The other man was short and hunched himself down so that he seemed barely half the height of his companion. He was completely naked, save for the narrow belt tied about his waist and a porcupine quill through his nose, and carried a bow with an arrow ready at the string. His skin was a lighter colour than that of his companion and crinkled and weathered in a way that made him look like an old man, although he moved with the vigour of youth. There was no beard upon his chin and the hair of his head was sparse and wiry.

"I see nothing but gazelle," said the short man, "and, a skulking jackal."

"Nor I," his companion agreed.

"Whatever it was we sensed stalking us last night," the short man continued, "it shuns the light of the sun, like an owl."

"So, not a man, but a beast?"

The little man grinned a bright-white smile. "A coward."

The big man shrugged. "That we will learn tonight. Unless we find a better place to shelter than crouched about a campfire."

There was little Ini-ndoga feared, yet the sensation of being stalked in the night had unnerved him. How he knew, he couldn't say, but he was certain the unseen creature was more than some mere lion or hyena, something he could slay easily with his spear.

No, it was something far, far worse.

The small man paused and jabbed at the horizon with his bow.

"Look — is that a musha or a danga?"

Ini-ndoga thrust his spear into the earth and, then, shielded his eyes with his hand to look where his friend was pointing.

In the distance, he could see the curve of a thorny fence, the edge of an enclosure.

"No smoke, no cattle egrets, no movement." He lowered his hand. "If it is one, it is empty. Still, it's the first sign of people we've seen in some time. Let's take a look."

It was all very well living a life unfettered by others, but, at times, even the most-resourceful man wished for sadza and conversation.

The light was dimming as they neared the enclosure.

"I can see smoke beyond it," the small man said.

"But, could we reach it before nightfall? We don't want to wander in the darkness with that... thing out there. No, we should make camp here and proceed on with the dawn."

"Yes, but what is 'here'?" the little man asked.

"It looks like a burial ground," said Ini-ndoga.

Through the tangle of thorny branches, they could see boulders and piles of smaller stones.

"Each of those is a grave," he said. "They pile the rocks upon them so that scavengers cannot dig them up."

The little man shrugged. "When my people die, we leave them for the scavengers. When the life is gone, what is the body's worth?"

"Unlike you, my kind revere their ancestors."

"Always, you people look to past and future, forgetting the now."

Ini-ndoga started to laugh, then fell silent.

At the entrance to the burial ground, two men lay dead upon the earth in a pool of drying blood. Beetles crawled across the stain and flies buzzed about the bodies, crawling inside their mouths and noses and the ragged gashes torn into their throats.

"Taken by surprise," he said, kneeling beside the bodies. Their spears were scattered on the ground.

"Seized from behind," the little man said, studying them. "They never heard the approach of death. This one began to turn, so... only one attacker, most likely. But, the wounds are ragged. Fangs or claws, I think, not a knife."

Ini-ndoga stood. "What could do this?"

The little man spat. "Whatever has been stalking us, I think."

The big man shivered, but told himself it was just the dying of the light.

"They were guarding this place," he said. "The fence and stones should have been enough, but..."

He paused, then said, "Help me move this."

The thorn-bush barricade that blocked the entrance was askew, but not enough to easily pass through. Although an animal couldn't easily shift it, together they moved it out of the way.

"Look," said the little man, "one of those piles is cast aside."

The heavy rocks had been tossed about like a child might scatter pebbles and the earth below had been torn up to expose the leg of a corpse.

Kneeling beside it, the little man observed, "The big toe is missing. There is flesh discarded there, but the bone is gone."

"Muti of some kind," said Ini-ndoga; "for some wicked purpose." He looked about. "Evil is abroad. Evil that comes in the night."

Night was very nearly upon them.

"Too late to seek safety elsewhere," said the little man. "We must camp here."

Ini-ndoga sighed. "It is an ill-omened place, but you are right, we have no choice. Come, we must put the barricade back, then light a fire."

"Is it worth it?" The little man said as they heaved it back into place. "Whatever attacked them came from within the enclosure."

"Not from a grave, though, it seems."

"But, the thorns couldn't keep it out."

"Maybe not, but those men were unaware, and we shall have a fire. If it can leap with ease over the barrier, that is one thing, but, if it must climb, we may have a chance."

Taking some dry branches from the fence, they got a fire going and sat beside it, sharing some dried meat.

"Is it out there?" Ini-ndoga asked.

"The night is quiet," said his companion. "It is out there, watching. But, it draws no nearer."

He checked his bow and arrow. "It is wary."

Ini-ndoga ran his hand over the sheath of the knife that hung from a thong about his neck.

"It better had be. I will watch for the first half of the night," he glanced about at the thorn fence and hoped it and their small and lonely fire would hold it at bay, "and, you will watch for the second half."

His companion had scraped a shallow furrow in the dry earth, not unlike a grave, in which to settle himself and was soon asleep.

As the flames danced, the night shadows shifted about the burial ground as if they were living things and Ini-ndoga wondered whether the movement concealed a predator.

But, none pounced, and he slept in his turn and woke to the kiss of the rising sun upon his brow.

. . .

THEY covered the distance to the musha of a dozen huts in short order.

Nervous men with spears watched their approach. Although nearly as tall as Ini-ndoga, the men seemed cowed.

"Who are you?" one called.

"My name is Ini-ndoga," he called back.

"I Alone"? A strange name, especially for one who is *not* alone."

"And, yet, it is the one I bear."

The man nodded at his short companion, wrinkling his nose.

"And, the Mandionerepi?"

"I call him Mbeva, for he is so small. The name he calls himself is filled with the sounds of a click beetle."

"What is your business here?" asked the second guard, his tone more aggressive.

"We are but weary travellers seeking somewhere to rest," Ini-ndoga told him.

"Strangers are not welcome here," said the first guard. "Besides," he added with a sigh, "this is not a place you would wish to stay."

"And, why is that?"

"A curse has fallen upon us."

Ini-ndoga looked over his shoulder.

"That burial ground, it is yours?"

"It is where our ancestors are buried."

"The guards are dead," he told them. "Something killed them and defiled a grave."

The second guard began to lower his spear as if he would attack Ini-ndoga, but the first stayed his hand.

"They bear the news, not the guilt."

The guard snorted, but relaxed.

"Something was stalking us in the night," Ini-ndoga said.

"Evil rules the night here, now," the first guard said. "It walks unseen, then chooses a victim and takes their life."

"What does?"

"We don't know."

Mbeva coughed. "I have heard of such things. There are those to the south of here who call it —" He made a series of clicking sounds. "It is the evil that walks the night."

He smacked his lips and grinned.

"That is why the toe bone was taken! The nightwalkers take bones for their muti. Toe bones are the most potent of all, they say."

"The burial was recent," said Ini-ndoga. "Who?"

"Our chief," said the first guard.

Mbeva let out a sharp breath.

"I have heard of this. Now that it has taken the bone, it has power here. Not just silent, but unseen by those who dwell here — unless it wishes itself to be seen."

He sucked on his lip. "It is master here, now."

The first guard groaned. "Then, we can do nothing?"

Ini-ndoga and Mbeva exchanged a glance.

"We don't dwell here," said the tall warrior. "Perhaps we can help?"

The guards looked at each other and the first one grinned.

"You must speak to our chief..."

. . .

THEY were taken to the entrance of the hut of the chief, where he sat upon a low stool, a despairing look upon his face. They squatted before him and explained about the desecration of his father's grave and how it had empowered the evil that threatened his people.

"You must help us," the young man said. "We have cattle in our danga. Ten cattle and this," he held out a blade carved from ivory and covered with images of animals and trees, "if you will rid us of this evil."

"Very well."

"And, of course," added the chief, "you shall enjoy our hospitality."

He waved to his wives. "Bring them food."

They were brought bowls of sadza and a stew of goat meat.

Kneading the sadza into a scoop in their palms, they dipped their hands into the stew and fished out chunks of meat.

"How do we slay it?" Ini-ndoga asked his friend.

Mbeva shrugged. "That I do not know. Poison, perhaps," he nodded at his arrows, which he had laid out before him, "or, maybe force of arms."

Ini-ndoga scooped up some more sadza and stew, but it no longer held much taste for him. Give him something he could fight and he was a happy man, but uncertainty... Uncertainty could sap the will of the strongest man.

"Tonight, we find out," he said.

. . .

GUARDS were posted at the entrance to the musha and one outside each hut. Ini-ndoga and Mbeva patrolled within the barrier of thorns.

There was the screech of an owl and the shriek of a baboon, but otherwise, the night was silent save for the sounds of the men.

Moonlight cast an ivory glow over the musha, but nothing moved, not even a bat nor a spider.

"It is like all life is fled," Ini-ndoga said, softly.

Mbeva grinned up at him, but said nothing.

Even if the nightwalker moved too quietly for him to hear, Ini-ndoga was certain that the keen ears of his companion would catch the sound, or that Mbeva's keen eyes would spot the slightest movement.

But, the night passed without any sign of the horror and the sun rose, driving the shadows away.

Mbeva yawned, widely.

There was a sudden scream from one of the huts and they ran to it.

A woman crouched over the body of a man, one of the guards who had greeted them the morning before. There was a look of bliss upon his face, but his throat had been torn out as if a leopard had borne down upon him.

"I heard nothing," the woman sobbed. "Nothing."

Ini-ndoga cursed. Though they were not of this clan, it seemed that the dark muti of the nightwalker had allowed it to slip past them, nonetheless.

"Truly," Mbeva breathed, "it rules in this place."