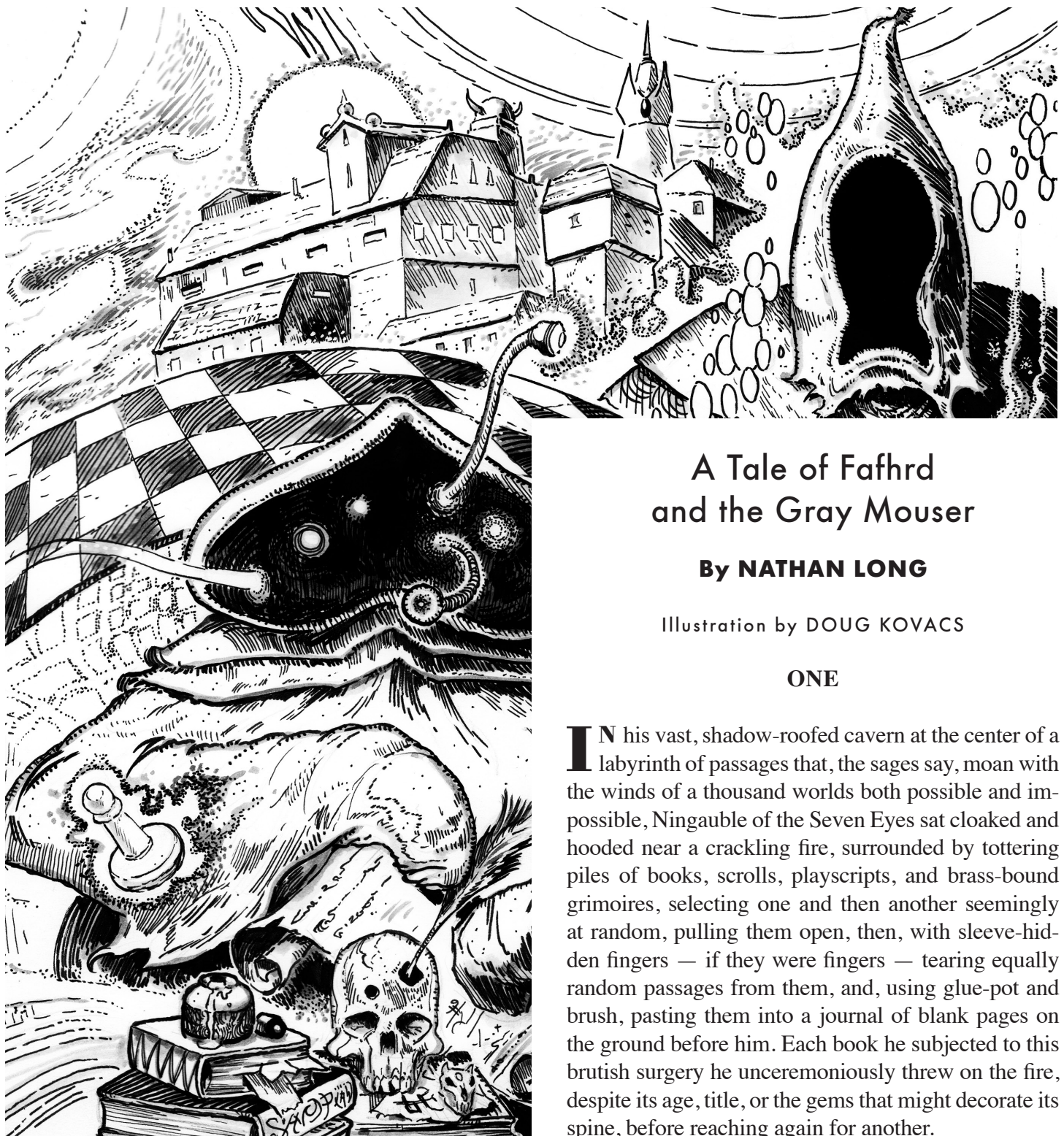


# PAWNS





# GAMBIT



## A Tale of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser

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### ONE

**I**N his vast, shadow-roofed cavern at the center of a labyrinth of passages that, the sages say, moan with the winds of a thousand worlds both possible and impossible, Ningauble of the Seven Eyes sat cloaked and hooded near a crackling fire, surrounded by tottering piles of books, scrolls, playscripts, and brass-bound grimoires, selecting one and then another seemingly at random, pulling them open, then, with sleeve-hidden fingers — if they were fingers — tearing equally random passages from them, and, using glue-pot and brush, pasting them into a journal of blank pages on the ground before him. Each book he subjected to this brutish surgery he unceremoniously threw on the fire, despite its age, title, or the gems that might decorate its spine, before reaching again for another.

It was just as he was fitting a last scrap of parchment to his current page before flipping to the next that he glanced at the text written upon it and saw these words.

"... none more heroic than the mouser, who slayeth not but to ..."

With a weary sigh, he turned the scrap over and searched about him for a quill. "I thought we'd resolved this nonsense."

Plucking at last a pen from a trepanned skull, he dipped it in a jade inkwell and wrote on the scrap's back in a loose and over-embellished script.

*Esteemed Sheelba, it is a debate you cannot hope to win. Fafhrd, my dutiful and doting son, is thrice the hero your mendacious cutpurse could ever be. Leave off, before you lose face — if that is even possible in your case.*

*Your devoted colleague, Ningauble*

A flap of a sleeve, and a tiny bat flitted to him, then allowed him to fix the rolled-up scrap to its leg. It flitted off again, and Ningauble reached for another book. The first page he turned to started with the line, "... strength of arms does not a hero make, no more than does a ready smile. A true hero is he for whom villainy is first instinct, but who rises above to ..."

"Well, really," said Ningauble. "Do they think I have nothing better to do than argue settled questions?"

He tore the passage out of the book, then wrote in the margin with one hidden extremity as he summoned a second bat with another.

*And when has your lascivious assassin ever risen above, o eyeless one? I'll wager even his loftiest-seeming exploits were secretly for his own gain.*

*Your ever-patient friend, Ningauble*

The next book he opened after dismissing the bat was a folio of plays. A line in the middle of the page caught his eye.

BENUCCIO — "A wager, brother? Done! Your hand on it."

With a grunt of annoyance he tore out the page entire, and began to scribble on the obverse in angry strokes.

*Very well, dearest Sheelba. If you insist, a wager. I shall wager that my stalwart barbarian will perform more acts of heroism in the next three days than your pernicious pickpocket, even if he performs only one! But we must establish some rules. First, we must find unbiased observers to monitor and report back truthfully the actions of the contestants. Second, we must not bend events to provide artificial opportunities for heroism, and third, we must on no account contact or in any other way attempt to goad our proteges toward goodness. Their actions, heroic or not, must be their own. Agreed?*

*Your servant in all, Ningauble*

Before he could even affix this last missive to the leg of a third bat, a rogue wind whipped up the fire, and a fragment of a burning book flew from the flames and landed, smoldering, on his prodigious, robe-girt belly. It read only,

"... yes ..."

## TWO

**M**OUSER winced as light from a scarlet Ilthmar dawn stabbed through a hole in the curtain that covered the only window in his squalid room. With a grunt he rolled over

and found himself chest to back with the sheet-shrouded form of last night's bed companion — whose name, for the moment, escaped him. The curve of her hip 'neath its cover reminded him of their previous pleasures and he smiled.

"Good morning, er ... darling," he said, stroking her shoulder. "I wouldn't want you to exert yourself at so early an hour, but if you were to stay at that precise angle, I could do all the ..."

His companion sat up and turned toward him, head still hooded in the sheet, but the space 'neath the cloth where her face should have been was empty. Not just empty, but utterly black — a stygian void into which no light penetrated.

Mouser jerked back as if stung, his heart hammering. "Wh ... wha ...?"

"Desist your yammering, fool," came a voice like a golem gargling ground glass. "There is little time."

Mouser's gorge began to rise. "Sh-sh-sheelba? Did we ...?"

"Listen!"

The form in the sheet assumed a familiar cross-legged position and faced him across the width of the bed — a far too narrow space, Mouser thought. He wanted to be yards away from this apparition — leagues!

"A nemesis comes for you," the faceless horror rasped. "A being of pure vengeance, created from the spirits of all you ever wronged. For you to have a hope of defeating it, you must do good deeds, and quickly, for the closer your balance sheet is to even, the weaker this nemesis will be."

"Nemesis?" asked Mouser, still bewildered. "Balance sheet?"

"We both know you will never reach the positive side of the ledger," the voice continued. "But anything that lessens your debt of dishonor will help you in the fight that is to come."

Mouser frowned. "Is this a dream? This is a dream, isn't it?"

"Of course it's a dream. How else could I reach you in time? And listen, when you wake, you must tell your idiot counterpart none of it. Were he to know, all would be lost!"

"What? Why?" Mouser asked. "Why would all be lost?"

The sheet settled to the bed, empty. A last grating utterance echoed in Mouser's ears, as if from far away.

"Say nothing, do you hear? Nothing!"

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**F**AFHRD ran through snow deeper than his boot tops, panting through a scarf that was wrapped 'round the bottom half of his face. A fire glowed beyond the black trunks of winter trees, and a scream came from the same direction, faint and thin, muffled by falling flakes.

"Mara!" he cried.

He stumbled on hidden roots. His cloak caught on clawed branches. The fire seemed to recede before him, always behind another skein of trees, as the shrieks grew more and more desperate.

Finally, suddenly, he was closer. The fire was just around the bole of a last pine. He slipped sideways as he rounded it, nearly losing his footing, then recovered and reached for the hilt of his longsword.

"Mara?"



"Greetings, my gentle son," said a towering figure sat by the fire. It was paunchy and hooded, and its outlines, under its cloak, appeared human only at first glance.

Fafhrd looked around for the source of the screams. The figure was alone. "Where is Mara?"

"Oh, my child," said Ningauble, for it was none other. "You are fortunate I found you when I did, as the end of that dream would not have pleased you in the least. Terribly depressing. Truly."

"Dream?" asked Fafhrd.

"Of course a dream. How else to swiftly bring you a message of glad tidings? Have you recovered yourself enough to hear it?"

"What happened to Mara?"

Ningauble sighed. "Perhaps I should have sent a bat after all. No. Sheelba might have intercepted ..." He coughed and started again. "Listen, o joy of my heart. I visit to say that I have heard rumor from the higher planes that you are nearing that exalted level of nobility which would allow you to enter the heaven of heroes once you slip this mortal coil. Just a few more deeds of suitable valor, and your place in that rarified paradise is assured."

Fafhrd stopped looking behind trees. "I ... I'm going to die?"

"Of course you are, my son," said Ningauble. "That is what mortals do. But 'tis where you go afterwards that counts, and, as I say, you are just a few good deeds away from going to finest eternity a mortal could hope to attain. Thus ..."

"You want me to do ... good deeds."

"Ah, excellent. It begins to penetrate at last. Yes. I want you, for the sake of your everlasting soul, to do as many good deeds as you can."

Fafhrd frowned. "Have I ever done bad deeds?"

Ningauble paused. "Let us say that the morality of some of your deeds, particularly those done in conjunction with that devious counterpart of yours, could be open to question." He raised a sleeved hand — or perhaps tentacle. "And that reminds me! Do not, on any account, tell that little ne'er do well a word of this. Any attempt at good deeds which included him would be bound to fail. And were he to know the heaven that awaits you should you succeed, he would be sure to ruin your chances just so he could have company in the hell of villains when he dies."

The fire began to fade before Fafhrd's eyes, and Ningauble's dark bulk to blend into the shadows of the trees.

"Awake now, my son, and do good," the wizard's voice echoed. "Your afterlife depends on it."

### THREE

**M**OUSER woke retching, his throat parched. He fumbled about in the litter of crockery and cups that surrounded his pallet for something with something still in it. A jug sloshed. He downed it in one glug, then coughed and made a face. It hadn't been good wine to begin with. A few days on his floor had failed to improve it.

"S-surely naught but a nightmare," he said, wiping his mouth. "A horror brought on by last night's excesses. Sheelba in a bed sheet? A nemesis made of all the souls I've wronged? Ridiculous. Wait until I tell Faf."

He pushed to his feet and looked around for his clothes. After sneaking out of Lankmar with their tails between their legs due to a less-than-successful attempt to rob the sorcerer's guild there, he and Fafhrd had ended up in Ilthmar, city of the Rat God, trying to right the sinking ship of their finances by getting back to the basics — burglary, brigandage, and bodyguard work. Much to their relief, the jobs were coming in and the coins stacking up, but to keep outlay at an absolute minimum, they were squatting in a long-abandoned school for scribes, which had fallen on hard times during a period of infighting within the Ilthmarian civil service.

Mouser quite liked the room he had chosen. It had been the scroll room of the school, walled with crisscrossed shelves — empty alas — where rolled parchments had been kept. It almost made him want to make the place a permanent home. He could fill it with scrolls and rare books, put in a reading couch, some oil lamps, cover the floor with rugs instead of bottles and half-eaten meals.

The thought reminded him that he was hungry, and he pulled on his hose, breeks, and mouse-skin doublet, strapped on Cat's Claw and Scalpel, and started up narrow steps to the main classroom, which he and Fafhrd had been using as a common area.

He found Fafhrd there, seated at the proctor's desk and staring into a mug of small beer, a plate of cut fruit and black Ilthmarian bread untasted beside him.

"Bit of a morning head, old friend?" asked Mouser.

Fafhrd looked up, his eyes far away. "I've just had the strangest dream."

"H-have you?" Mouser stuttered. "How odd. So have I."

Fafhrd's eyes focused. "Hmmm. What was yours, then?"

Mouser opened his mouth to tell him, then recalled Sheelba's last command of, "Say nothing!" Of course, if it had only been a dream, what matter if he told Fafhrd or not? But if it hadn't? If Mouser's chances of defeating Sheelba's nemesis were ruined because he couldn't keep his mouth shut? Best to stay mum just to be on the safe side. Besides, who liked to listen to other people's dreams, anyway?

"Alas," he said at last. "It fades now. I can remember no more than vague feelings of dread. And yours?"

Fafhrd frowned, then shook his head and took a slice of fruit from his plate. "Mine fades too. Forget it. What of tonight's business?"

Mouser glanced at the red light slanting though the school room's tall, narrow windows. It was sunset, a bit past their normal rising time, and there was much to do. He sat across from Fafhrd and pulled the plate of bread and fruit to the middle of the desk, then took a slice.

"The collector is to meet us under the harbor bridge at midnight, so we must have the sword in hand by then. Unfortunately, the sisters' last round through the wards is only an hour before, so we've but brief time to get in, get out, and get across the city."