

Noyesamek

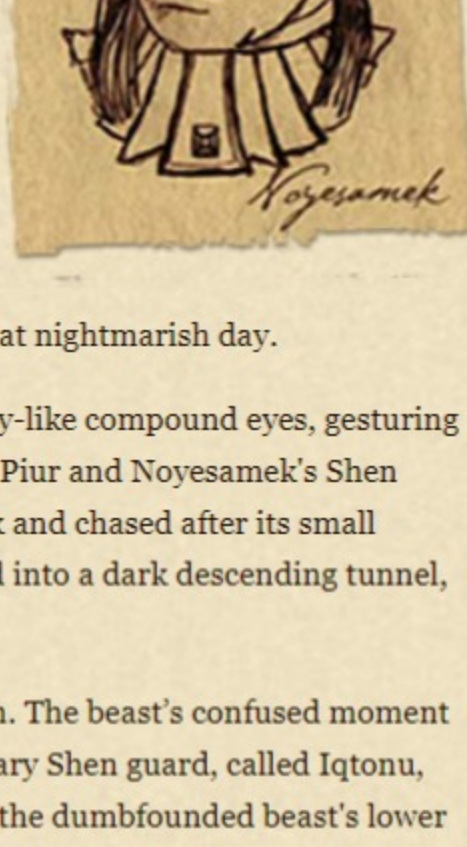
by Andrew Hinnebusch. Editor/co-author Richard Becker

Part One

It was an unusually hot day in Jakalla. Not even the slight cooling breeze from the Deeps of Chanayaga gave comfort to the inhabitants of the opulent city. Noyesamek brooded in his study, a windowless room with a single door from his main quarters. A single low marble table and several seating daises were the only furniture in the chamber. Noyesamek sighed.

He had milled over an ancient map, scribed onto stone, which he had found on his last adventure into the underworld – but had received no formal training at his temple on how to read such a stone. Compounding his exasperation was the fact that his cousin, Piur Migur, had reprimanded and insulted Noyesamek in front of the clan superiors for supposedly endangering the adventure party. They had always favored the arrogant youth over Noyesamek, and loved him for his fine features, lithe but heroic body, and his sharp, haughty tongue.

Piur had told their clan elders a fable about how Noyesamek had, during the heat of a battle, fled into deep into the catacombs for some unknown reason and left his slaves and cousin to fend for themselves against a strange and horrible insectoid beast. Little had Piur known – nor would he ever know – that Noyesamek had actually saved the adventuring party that nightmarish day.



During the conflict, Noyesamek had noticed a small, furry creature with ruby-like compound eyes, gesturing like a Liviyanu puppeteer towards a lumbering bulk of a beast against which Piur and Noyesamek's Shen guard barely held their ground. Noyesamek had disengaged the beast's flank and chased after its small master. When the little thing noticed Noyesamek's charge, it turned and fled into a dark descending tunnel, breaking its Otherplanar hold upon the insectoid monster.

As this occurred, the lumbering beast hesitated, with a look of disorientation. The beast's confused moment gave the humans it was easily besting the opening they needed. The mercenary Shen guard, called Iqtonu, pounced on the opportunity and arced his blade in a powerful stroke across the dumbfounded beast's lower right leg, severing it completely from its torso. Azure blood steamed on the flagstones of the chamber floor. Cousin Piur, not one to miss an opportunity or an opponent's weakness, drove his chlen-hide blade up into the creature's lower mandible until the sword-tip burst through the roof of its skull.

The beast collapsed with a thunderous crash. Piur and the Shen barely sidestepped its crushing weight; one of Noyesamek's newest slave – Humul Jjas, a former fighter from the Hirilakte arena – was not so dexterous or fortunate. The man was pinned gasping for breath under the stinking, oozing corpse of the beast for what seemed an eternity while the Shen bodyguard and the other slaves struggled to free him and save his life. When he was finally freed, the man was in great pain from several broken ribs and a broken leg. Noticing his cousin's absence, Piur called out for Noyesamek, but he had been gone for several kiren.

Noyesamek chased the swiftly scuttling little creature deep into the Tsuru'um. The chase lasted some time and Noyesamek was beginning to panic with the fear that he might become lost in this underworld deathtrap. Finally, with the use of an Eye found on a previous adventure, the sorcerer froze the small biped in its tracks, locking it into a temporal stasis. It was covered in a sleek fur, and had a sharp, horny beak. Catching his breath and taking his bearings, Noyesamek drew his jeweled dagger and placed it at the creature's throat, then touched the jeweled button on the Eye again.

Returning to animation, the creature would have run its own neck across the razor edge of the dagger had Noyesamek not instantly grabbed it by its scruff. It screeched and hissed in horror of its predicament, finally calmed – a little – when Noyesamek pressed the dagger under its chin, drawing a small trickle of reddish blood. It spoke in an unintelligible language, and as the air palpably chilled, Noyesamek's head began to spin, he knew that it sought to cast a spell!

The sorcerer began murmuring a counterspell, simultaneously pressing the blade with slightly more pressure, and then the creature whimpered and went limp Noyesamek was puzzled at first, but soon realized that he

had not killed the little imp but that apparently the pain was too much for it. He stuffed a rag into its bill and bound its furred but childlike hands and feet, then searched its person and found a scrap of cloth with an ancient script upon it and the mapstone. At a loss for any other way to carry the creature, Noyesamek popped it into a large sack and laboriously retraced his steps to the rest of the party. Luck prevailed and Noyesamek

found his way back to the area the fight had occurred in. The beast was already being recycled by a myriad of strange little rodents and some large and colorful spiders, his traveling companions were not there. After some time he finally returned to the huge guarded gates to his clan house from the underworld. He found and activated the stoned which would let the guards on the other side of the gate know that someone wished to enter. From the murderhole above him he saw one of the clanhouse guards.

"Who is it there?" asked the gruff older voice of Numur, the head guard of the clan house.

"It is I, Noyesamek Hi Zhalukalel. Have my cousin and traveling comanions returned?"

"Aye they have", he responded and then called out to the gate guards, "Open the gates!"

The anger Noyesamek had felt in the clan-dining hall had passed now. Let Piur play hero for the elders, there were better things for a wise and clever sorcerer of Ksarul to do. He sat staring at the mapstone and the reference scrolls and felt sweat trickle, itching, down his back like lines of Dri-ants: it was hotter in his study than anywhere in the clanhouse except perhaps the ovens of the kitchens. He let out another loud sigh, mopped his brow, and put the stone down. There was a gentle rap-a-tap at his study door. He reached his hand into the Otherworld and the chamber door unlocked with an audible "clack". His new wife entered, followed by slaves bearing two fresh cups of spiced chumetl and assorted jars of savory foods. He smiled gently; this day would not be so exasperating after all.

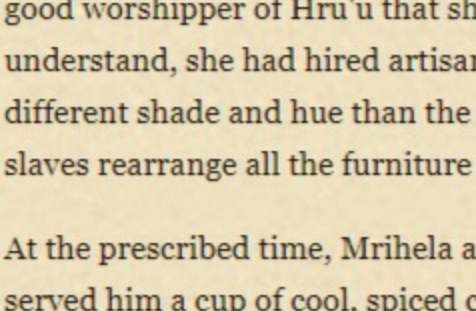
As for the creature captured in the underworld Noyesamek had heavy metal shackles riveted to its hands and feet. This would keep the little beast from magicing and would make escape all the more difficult.

Part Two

Noyesamek's day did indeed improve: it was only necessary to discipline Mwaharuk once for speaking out of order. Noyesamek was far too lax with his personal slaves; when he reprimanded his inferiors, he felt he should better them by enlightening them upon their personal faults. Lengthy lectures on duties and proper behavior, followed by a bit of corporal punishment, were the worst that any of his slaves encountered for their foibles. After all, was it not the duty of the wise to teach the ignorant their duties and protocols? Dismissing the slaves, who bore away the emptied chumetl cups and dining bowls, Noyesamek and his wife Mrihela retired to their bedchamber to rest and engage in those pastimes common to newlyweds in any land. After their private time was finished, two clan-slaves trained in working fatigue from the flesh were summoned to massage away any remaining vestiges of Noyesamek's stress.

As a member of the Jade Diadem clan, he enjoyed many such physical pleasures. He paid his respects to the holidays of the voluptuous and bateuous Dlamelish, Goddess of Delights, but the Weaver of Destiny had devoted his Spirit-Soul to the most powerful of the gods, the Doomed Prince of the Blue Room, Mighty Ksarul.

Aside from his wife, most of his clan mates were not aware of his fanatical devotion to Ksarul -- only one of his many cousins even knew he attended regular services at that temple, discovering him only because of a chance encounter during his own regular attendance. Had his cousin not overheard Noyesamek's name whispered and then gone to watch his masked and robbed coreligionist go to confer secretly with a priest in a smiling mask and a Kulthui'ik robe in a darkened passageway, he might never have known.



It was odd that any Temple-member's given name would be used within its walls, and thus, Noyesamek's cousin believed him to be in some trouble with the temple of Ksarul. Instead, it was only heartbeats later that Noyesamek's own voice was heard! The priest of Ksarul gave masked Noyesamek furtive instructions, which were whispered and hard to discern. The three things that Noyesamek's cousin could overhear were a time, place and person. "Tonight at midnight..." and "deep beneath the temple of the consort of the Goddess of motherhood and fertility..." " ...a prisoner, a worshiper of Dlamelish..." was being held. As Noyesamek's cousin was on the verge of learning more, a heavy hand slapped down hard on his shoulder. He turned and strained his eyes to focus on the skillfully camouflaged guard, cloaked entirely in black, who had been hidden in a dark recess. Wordlessly, Noyesamek's

cousin was escorted away to an obscure region of the Temple of Ksarul.

At the Clan-house, Mrihela kept visitors and friends away from her husband while he slept a drugged sleep through the heat of the day. She knew her beloved would go out again that night to carry out instructions from his superiors within the temple; and even as she cared for his resting form, she plotted to surprise him - good worshipper of Hru'u that she was. For no reason anyone but a worshiper of the Lord of Chaos could understand, she had hired artisans to come into their bedchamber and paint each of the floor stones a slightly different shade and hue than the stones had been before Noyesamek had fallen asleep. Mrihela had also had slaves rearrange all the furniture and had trim her husband's hair slightly while Noyesamek snored soundly.

At the prescribed time, Mrihela awoke him with an appropriate drug. He awoke refreshed and rested, she served him a cup of cool, spiced chumetl and he sipped it slowly as his body adjusted to wakefulness. "Are my slaves and Iqtonu ready?" he asked.

She nodded an affirmative reply. "Yes, my sweet Lord Husband, knower of all that is arcane and secret," she couldn't help but giggle. For his part, Noyesamek found it endearing that she still retained her girlish air. She seemed very young for her age, which by no means odd -- Mrihela was only a year older than himself, though it was unusual that neither of them had been wed even once before their 30th year. The match had been a political one, yes, but it was also strangely appropriate... and they had been blessed with the good fortune that they actually got on well and had fallen in love with one another. He was only baffled by his marriage when he thought hard on it. Had she been handpicked for him, or he for her? But what did it matter? They were truly in love.

After his chumetl he was dressed by a clan dresser, Tu'ualim, and became irritated as the slave groomed his hair. Something didn't seem right. Was it the light coming into the room at the wrong angle? Was it this uncomfortable dais? The floor seemed wrong, but how could it be? He decided it must be a new side effect of the sleep powder he had taken earlier. All would be well when he had returned from his mission, assuming he survived it. He shivered at the thought at going into the underworld again.

Arriving at the series of well-guarded chambers, which led to into the Tsuru'um underworld, he was greeted as haughtily as ever by his swaggering cousin, Piur Migur. He was also somewhat aggravated to note unwanted additions to the party gathered to carry out the rescue. One was a fighting companion of Piur's, a large and oafish captain of the Jakalli city guard, Golmesh hiJulkadaq. The other was a priest of Avanthé, one Zagar hiBurrusa. "I regret my coreligionists' abduction of the Lady Akhede of Clan Sunburst," said the priest after a brief greeting. "It seems that an error has been made by over-zealous priestesses of Dilinala. I have been sent to help correct this unfortunate mistake." Distrust and anger arose in Noyesamek, though he did his best to mask it from the others. This was not difficult, as Golmesh, the slaves and the mercenary Shen Iqtonu all had focused their attention on Piur's displaying of his newest fighting technique... and all listened intently as he endlessly described its endless application in the Hirilakte Arena. Finally, it was all Noyesamek could do to acknowledge the priest of Avanthé and accept his presence for the moment.

For who knew what might transpire in the Tsuru'um?

"Open the gate," Noyesamek barked at the warriors stationed in the gate chamber. The burly men who were there to guard against any unwelcome visitors from the underworld begrudgingly tore themselves from Piur's diatribe on combat principles to open the complex lock on the huge gates. The gate, hydraulically driven by an inrush of the dark waters of the Missuma river slowly opened toward the group. As they opened, a voluminous blast of cool and less-humid air plucked shivers from the spines of those who were about to enter the darkness below Jakalla. Though not strong enough even to blow over an empty basket, it bore with it a nameless foreboding. The musty odor and the noisy working of gears -- and the churning of river-water ramageless through ceramic pipes and leathern pumps -- silenced even Piur as they gazed out into the darkness beyond their torchlight.

Noyesamek was pleased by the sobering effect upon their gathering. The small group of rescuers moved aside from the huge, intricately carved stone gates to avoid being crushed. Noyesamek knew he would never become accustomed to this, even with his daily passage through the portal into the underworld to attend rituals in the temple of Ksarul.

All stood silently listening. The gate stood opened and quiet, but sounds echoed up from the depths of the under-city. Mwaharuk went pale and mumbled prayers to a variety of gods. The silence was finally broken by Piur who resumed praising himself and lauding his own skill in the art of combat: "...you must realize that while any of you can learn to fight, you will never achieve the skill which I have attained. Take my last fight within the arena, against the Tu'lik'ur beasts, for example. Although the beasts each had three weapons at their disposal, and even though I was outnumbered four to one, I came away without a scratch! La! What a fight! It is skill and muscle and intellect blessed by Karakan himself that graces my fighting!"

Noyesamek arched an eyebrow.

"Cousin, we must go, time is quickly running out."

Part Three

As the small group entered the Tsuru'um Shamek a poor cousin of Piur and Noyesamek's came running up from behind still pulling on a piece of chlen hide armor to protect his brawny chest. "I am sorry cousins for my lateness, I was occupied with the resolution of business matters." His left arm had a small fresh wound upon it bandaged and bloody. No one thought to ask about it though. It was assumed that Shamek was probably in another of his infamous duels over his debts from gambling. "I must admit," Shamek noted, "I have seen a teller and she says I am in for a great change! Good fortune this trip my cousins. She has a great reputation for accuracy. She told me specifically that I would have a positive change in station and occupation. Perhaps we will find riches as a side reward on this trip"

Shamek seemed cheerful to be entering the underworld.

Noyesamek retorted, " Cousin, tellers have a flaw. Oft times they tell you what you want to hear so that you return for promises of fortune and happiness... It's good for their business but not for yours... I tell you this, more than not, men die horrid deaths in these catacombs daily. We will be fortunate to leave with all company present."

Piur Laughed, "La, cousin you fret too much. With our companions and I at the lead victory will be swift and the maiden will be rescued!"

Noyesamek said nothing in response as he turned his back on the 15-year-old Tsolyanu, Piur looked like the aspect of Karakan in this lighting, yes indeed the ideal warrior. Iqtonu stepped ahead of his master and lead the way into the underworld. Noyesamek felt a chill run up his spine and dread filled his heart. Somehow he knew this sojourn into the deep would be different. He actually hoped that he and his boisterous cousins would return in one piece. He did not yet long to travel to the far paradises of Belkanu. The fear must have been evident on his face for the Priest Zagar approached him and offered unwanted solace, "Noyesamek, you need not fear all will be well. I will make certain that no harm comes to us when we get to the temple."

"I wonder", answered Noyesamek

"And as for the trip to the temple we have your cousin, the captain of the city guard and your notably large Sh'en to protect us."

Noyesamek laughed under his breath and almost choked. "I think you would share my fears if you had seen what I had in the Tsuru'um"

The tired looking young priest expression changed from one of considerate consolation to that of bemusement, "I am sure the tales of what lies beneath our great metropolis are exaggerated."

Noyesamek grinned, "I suppose the tales may be slightly exaggerated..." he laughed again.

At a point in their travels the Priest Zagar took the lead and directed the group with the use of a map supplied to him by his preceptor. Shamek joined the Priest at the head of the group. The first kiren was uneventful and the group began to feel as if they would be fortunate indeed in the speed and assured success of their endeavor. Piur who had over heard the exchange between Noyesamek and Zagar earlier began to tease Noyesamek for his "old man" fears.

Scouting ahead of the group some 10 feet, Zagar and Shamek froze in their tracks. Iqtonu hissed and the rest of the party stopped and all became quiet and began to look around. Piur confidently griped his chlen hide poleax and strode ahead to Shamek. "What is it cousin? Why do you stop"

Shamek had something wet, green-gray and viscous that had apparently dripped onto his forehead and cheek from above him. Shamek slowly looked up. They were in a great multi-arched and columned hall. Their torchlight carried only so far into the darkness showing row after row of seemingly endless columns. The intricately carved alabaster ceiling was some 40' above them. Shamek's eyes grew wide with terror. Everyone looked up. Mwaharuk shrieked and collapsed in maddened fear.

From the ceiling a huge coiled worm struck out towards Shamek, Piur and Zagar. Its mouth could easily engulf the three of them whole. Piur's grip upon his poleax relaxed as he acted lightning quick, pushing the Priest out of the way and into a nearby column head first knocking the priest out. The poleax froze in place and time, standing straight up as the monstrous thing fell upon it mouth first. Shamek tried to leap and roll out of the rapidly descending pet of lord Sarku but was unsuccessful. The beast's mouth hit the floor and caught Shamek's leg under its terrible weight. The sound of Shamek's leg breaking and the sucking sound of the worm trying to release itself from the vacuum of its own kiss upon the floor were sickening. Surprisingly Shamek stayed conscious and only yelped out in pain slightly. Iqtonu and Golmesh suddenly felt the air go chilly and dry, but only Iqtonu ignored this, knowing full well what his employer was capable of. The Sh'en darted forward full force without hesitation and seized upon the slow movements of this behemoth night crawler to burry his jagged blade deep within its side. The creature undulated and quivered in silent pain but was far from through.

Yellow ichor spurted from around the wound created by Iqtonu smattering him from chin to knee. Shamek holding his leg tried to pull away but the sharp pain from the break in his leg argued with him and won, convincing him to take some other action. He grabbed his chlen hide short sword and began to hack away at the head of the creature in hopes of driving it off of his maimed and mangled leg.

Piur, not one to be left out of a battle acrobatically leaped up and away from the now unconscious Zagar, unsheathing his rare steel long sword. The sword was a gift from the head of the clan house of the Jade Diadem in Jakalla and Piur only used it on special occasions. Piur, like Iqtonu, buried his blade deep into the side of the creature but added a circular motion to the hilt of the blade causing more injury to the giant worm and invariably more pain...

The worm unstuck itself from the floor and began to pull itself up and away from the stinging little bronze skinned humans. At first Shamek thought he would finally be able to pull away from this underworld nightmare but was horrified further by the fact that the saliva was sticky and sufficiently strong enough to lift him with the beast. Another snapping sound came from his leg. The pain was unbearable and he lost consciousness. Golmesh snapped out of the confusion and fear caused by the monsters ambush and realized that Noyesamek was speaking softly under his breath in some arcane tongue. Noyesamek seemed to grow taller and more menacing; the air about him warped and became increasingly colder and darker. He took several steps away from the sorcerer mouth agape in surprise and fear. Some sorcery was commonplace in Tsolyanu but what he was witnessing in the visage of Noyesamek was almost as fear invoking as the giant monster ahead of him.

Iqtonu pulled his traditional Sh'en blade from the beast and backed up and away from the creature. Piur on the other hand holding his blade on one hand so that he could use it as a handhold to pull himself up with the beast as it retreated. Holding on with one hand he pulled out a "mercy" dagger from its scabbard and began to plunge it into the side of the worm again and again.

Suddenly the air sparked with the cracking sound of electricity as a black light-engulfing javelin appeared from the air in front of Noyesamek. It moved at a blurring speed and pierced the worm traveling through it. Yellow lumpy ichor fountained forth from the gaping maw of the titan worm and it became limp. With its tail end still stuck to the ceiling its head crashed upon the floor. Shamek's limp body flopped free of the mouth and Piur was thrown skidding to a stop near where Zagar was coming to. The smell of the beasts innards filled the immense hall Golmesh became ill, vomiting upon his boots. Mwaharuk continued to scream in terror with his eyes tightly sealed shut.

Noyesamek stood still for some time, gazing trance-like off into the darkness. Iqtonu approached his master and his master's slave and cupped Mwaharuk's mouth. "Sssilence astupid beast. Silence or I slit your throat." Mwaharuk became instantly quiet as tears streamed from his eyes. Iqtonu unhanded the slave and backhanded him for good measure. Noyesamek stood still. Piur pulled himself up, walked over to the worm and pulled his prized sword from the beast. Its metal was now much cleaner than it was before it was plunged into the creature. "Damn, my poleax is devoured!" he laughed.

Zagar sat up, propping himself against the very pillar which his head had the misfortune of meeting. His hand was touching gingerly around the spot that was now swollen and bloody. He squinted each time he touched it.

Golmesh recovered his stature and walked over to Zagar and Piur. "Your cousin..." he breathed out weakly. "I saw him for what he really is..." The Once proud captain of the Jakalli guard was pale and enfeebled by the entire incident. Piur slapped him on the back and laughed.

"Ohe you did not know? I thought everyone knew that my cousin was a mighty hedge wizard! La!", Piur ambled over to his cousin waving his hand in front of Noyesamek's eyes.

"I am no hedge wizard", Noyesamek exhaled and shook his head slightly bringing his palm to his forehead and closing his eyes for a moment. "I simply know a few tricks"

"La, my cousin thinks us all dullards!"

Noyesamek laughed a saccharin laugh and went to check on his neglected cousin Shamek. Shamek's breathing was staggered and his body was shivering. "Mwaharuk! Bring me my medicine chest and give me your cloak." Mwaharuk still visibly shaken obeyed his master without hesitation and trotted over to him with the medicine chest and his cloak.

Noyesamek set the broken leg and then wrapped his cousin in the cloak. He took out a small tincture of ointment and dabbed a small amount upon Shamek's tongue. Shamek's eyes fluttered open immediately. "The beast is dead?" he said with almost a whisper.

"Yes, killed, look there. Now lay still, this will cause you great pain." Noyesamek's eyes widened as he focused upon the broken leg and once again the air became chilled with other planar power. Although the onlookers felt a chill Shamek could only feel increasing pain in the area of his break. His mind begged for

unconsciousness but stayed alert to the ever-increasing heat at the break in the leg. Shamek could feel the joints at his kneecap and hip grind together as the muscles in his thigh tightened almost snapping from power pulsing through it. He began to cry out in pain but Mwaharuk stuffed a cloth soaked in D'lel fruit wine into Shamek's mouth. It only took a few sivel but it felt like several kiren to the injured man. The air returned to normal and Noyesamek fell back from his crouched position to a seated position on the cold marble floor. He looked tired and older than he did moments before.

Sweating from the heat of the healing magic, Shamek noticed that all pain was now gone. He spat out the cloth and sat up. He was cautious at first only flexing his leg at the knee but after noting no pain he gradually worked his way up to standing upon the once broken leg.

The captain of the Jakalli guard looked sidelong at Noyesamek, "No Piur, I never knew."

Noyesamek looked at Golmesh and smiled a wry smile, "I simply know a few tricks..."

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