

## **The Princess of Asharrad**

**by Simon Magnus Thibodeau**

In the Kingdom of Asharrad, rising from the depths of dark canyons, there stood a magnificent tower. All built of marble, it was, shimmering high and bright in the dry desert heat. Although wondrously beautiful, the walls of the tower were rough and uneven, and its jagged masonry leered out over the sands in many places. Jewels of every type imaginable were encrusted into those stones. Some nights, the wind would concentrate all of its strength and assault the tower, which seemed to sway and groan as though it might collapse into dust at any moment. Some said the tower was even more compelling in these moments.

As beautiful as that glorious tower was, more beautiful still was what was kept on top of it. The Princess of Asharrad lived at the top floor, and there she remained in both the blistering day and the chilling night. Often, she would stand on the balcony and look over the Kingdom, and the people could see her from all across the land. She had long hair the colour of wet earth, skin like sweetest almonds, and eyes as dark as the bottom of the sea. When she moved, gazelles covered their eyes in shame for their gracelessness and the sun wept to know it could never be so radiant.

There was not a man in all Asharrad who did not crave her attentions, but she never left the tower, and so none could court her. Nor could they ask her father for her hand, for she was a Princess only in name, and had existed in eternal youthfulness above the land for far longer than Kings had ever ruled it. The legend claimed that any man who could climb to the top of her tower and convince her to take his hand would be hers, and she would forfeit her immortality for a life with him.

Many tried to win her hand. Kings and merchant princes, fine craftsmen and heroic soldiers, eldritch wizards and inspiring poets, all tried, and all failed. The fortunate ones never even made it to the tower's base: They were either slain or turned away by terrifying monsters and grave perils in the canyons. Others arrived and simply stayed at the tower's base forever, too humbled to make the ascent. A few climbed, pulling themselves up the walls of the tower (which had no staircase), until they

perched upon its rim. But the Princess of Asharrad would not give up her immortality for just anybody, and as her suitors looked directly into those fathomless blue eyes, the legend said, she would wordlessly deny their pursuit, and, grief-stricken, they would fall from the tower and topple to their doom.

Basha Hedd was a servant in the employ of a moderately wealthy government official. His job was to serve as courier, delivering letters and packages to his master's friends, allies, and rivals. He was not the fastest courier in the city in which he lived, but he was not the slowest, either, and his master rarely complained. Each day, as he delivered his packages, he would look at the tower in the distance and see the Princess gazing back. Never at him, perhaps, though some small part of him sometimes wondered if those deep eyes had ever glanced over his perspiring brow, but it brightened his day to see such beauty. He always had a smile on his face, except for some days when she did not look, and he felt anxiety well up in his heart like a fly trapped in a web.

One day, when she did not look out from her balcony, and his heart trembled beneath his chest, he realized that he was afraid. Afraid that some suitor had climbed to the top of the tower and he would never see her again. It was foolish, of course. Five men had left from the city this year, and none had returned. One of them, the son of the City's governor, had fallen from the balcony just a few short months ago. The citizens had begun to mourn the moment they spotted him climbing.

Yet, foolish as it was, Basha Hedd knew he had no choice. He would climb the tower. When he finished delivering his packages, he returned to his master's mansion, where the portly old man rested upon pillows of velvet, and informed him that today would be his last day of service, because he was going to win the hand of the Princess.

“Silly boy,” his master said. “You cannot win the hand of the Princess! She has turned away every man who has loved her for hundreds of years!”

“Maybe she will accept me,” Basha replied.

“Why?” said the master. “Those men are great, and you are small. She has turned away strong and

powerful soldiers, and you have never seen war.”

“No,” Basha admit. “But I have run back and forth across this city delivering your mail, and I have never once faltered.”

“Oh, my poor dear boy,” the master laughed even harder. “She has turned away wealthy merchants who brought with them chests of gold and jewels from every corner of the desert, but you are just a courier!”

“That is true,” Basha said. “But you have been kind and generous with your payments, master, and I have enough to buy bread to eat and a bed to sleep on.”

“You delude yourself, boy!” the master chortled, beginning to grow concerned that his courier truly was about to leave for the tower. “Men wearing the finest silk have attempted the journey, and even they were not deemed worthy!”

“My clothes are plain” Basha said. “But they are sufficient for me, and I am comfortable in them. I will go to the tower, and I will offer the Princess my hand.”

At this, the master burst into tears. “Boy, please,” he wailed. “Do not go! If you go, you will face the bitter sting of contempt in your last moments in the living world. You have served me well for many years. If you promise not to go to the tower, I will adopt you as my son, and you will inherit all of my wealth when I die.”

Basha took pause at this for a moment, because the master had always been kind to him, and this was the greatest kindness he could possibly offer. But Basha shook his head, his heart aching to see the master weep.

“I am sorry, master,” Basha said. “For you have always been kind to me. But I am going to go the tower to offer the Princess my hand. If she does not choose me, and I fall to my death, it will be a better fate than always wondering whether I would have had a chance.”

And with that he left his master's house, left the city, and entered the canyons below the tower. He brought nothing with him, for he knew supplies would only bog him down or distract him. He

walked between the sheer stone valleys for several hours. Crows circled overhead. As the sun descended behind the walls, shrouding Basha in darkness, the crows began to caw at him.

“Go to sleep, Basha,” the crows said, dark shadows in an orange sky. “Night time is coming, and the Princess will still be there tomorrow.”

Basha ignored them and kept hiking over the uneven boulders covering the canyon's underbelly. His feet began to ache, pebbles skulking against the bottoms of his bare feet. The crows flapped their feathers when they saw how he limped, and called again.

“Go to sleep, Basha,” the crows said. “You are tired, and you want to be fresh for the Princess.”

Basha got onto all fours, keeping his head down so that he could not see the hungry red eyes of the vile birds. His hands and knees soon grew blistered, the ground grew ever more rugged and treacherous. But their voices squawked on his ears.

“Go to sleep, Basha,” the crows said. “You have brought no water, and your voice will be too dry to speak to the Princess if you keep going.”

Basha struggled forward, pulling himself along now on his belly, exhaustion overtaking him. For a moment, sleep seduced him, and he rolled onto his back. There were no stars. There was no moon. All Basha could see was blackness, and the eyes of the crows, glaring red specks dancing all around him. His breath felt short, as if he were carrying a great weight. He felt his eyelids slide shut, and, though he thought it might not be so bad to rest, he forced them open.

The glistening black beak of a crow perched upon his chest streaked toward his eye. He caught it with his palm, wrapping his fingers around the bird's head and crying out in pain as he leaped to his feet. The crows squealed in rage, flapping madly in arcs around the courier. Basha broke into a run, his ankles scraping hard stone in every agonizing moment. The crow in his hand thrashed madly, digging its claws into his wrist. The crows in the air streaked around Basha in tight circles, their beaks darting out to prick him.

“Let him go!” they wailed desperately on every jab. “Let him go! Let him go!”

Basha, terrified of what the dark fowl would do him if he no longer had their kin in his hand, kept running. Blood gushed from his hand and wrist, streaming between his captive's haggard tendons. He ran, not knowing whether he was going in the right direction, the crows nipping at his hair and legs. They begged him to let their brother go, and he, gasping through pain and shortness of breath, begged them to do the same for him. The beak in his hand broke through the other side and howled to be released, its voice wet with Basha's blood. He could feel how it had drained him, even as it grew stronger, and he stumbled, almost giving himself over to doom. But then, just up ahead, he spotted a flickering light, as though from a flame, and with renewed vigour charged for it. His fingers trembled with pain, threatening to release their grip, but Basha grit his teeth and held on, knowing that the moment this crow escaped him, the others would tear him to shreds.

“Stop! Stop!” the squeals of the crows turned into a crescendo when they saw how close Basha's escape was. “You must not see the Princess! We will not let you!”

They grew more aggressive, almost suicidal in their assault. Sharp, torturous stabs covered his shoulders and back. One of them struck his calf, driving him forward into the dirt just inches from the carved entrance of a stone tunnel, the source of the light. The crow pulled itself from his hand and jerked back into the air. Basha shot out his other hand and grabbed it by its emaciated legs, arcing it around as he pulled himself back to his feet. Its beak connected with another crow's belly, releasing the hot crimson inside. The birds shrieked in rage and sorrow. A hundred deadly knives gathered together and flew directly at Basha's chest. He stumbled backward, captive flailing in agony, and tripped, landing on his back inside the tunnel. A sheer stone door fell shut before his eyes, a dozen thuds echoing from the other side in short order.

A single torch flickered against a wall here, illuminating Basha and his crow in its wavering glow. The crow, now more red than black, sputtered, wheezed, and then died of exhaustion in Basha's hand. For a moment, Basha felt pity for the miserable creature, thin and wasted as it was, but then he looked at his mangled hand, raw and bloody, and turned away. When he did, his wounds already started

to feel better, though all would leave scars, and some would ache softly for the rest of his life.

The torch came off the wall easily, and he used it to guide his way down the tunnel. It was long, seemingly endless, and sturdy. It took him a long time to get to the end, which opened into a small room containing only a table, a bed, and an old man in a wooden chair. On the far side there was a wooden door with a golden lock, the key to which was fastened around the old man's throat.

“Why are you here?” the old man croaked, and Basha could see he was sickly. He was bent over the table, scraggly white hairs poking from his jaw, large purple bags dragging down his eyes. His clothes, grey rags, hung from wasted limbs, though his belly was plump.

“I am here to offer the Princess my hand,” Basha said. The old man recoiled at the sound of Basha's voice.

“Why do you want to see her?” the old man said, his voice trembling.

“Because I am in love with her.”

“So you say,” the old man bristled. “But why do you think that?”

“Every day, I look up at the tower and see her there,” Basha said. “And everyday she looks more beautiful than the last.”

“Lust is not the same as love, boy,” the old man said. “Go back home.”

“No,” Basha said. “It's more than that. When I see her on the balcony, I see a woman who loves the world around her enough to look upon it every day, even though she has an eternity to experience it. But when she does not go out on the balcony, I wonder what sadness has taken her from the world she loves, and it hurts my heart to think about her sorrow.”

“How very empathic of you,” the old man said. “Go back home.”

“I do not want to go back home,” Basha said. “I want to go see the Princess, because every day I look upon her and I feel nothing but longing.”

The old man sighed.

“What you are feeling, boy,” the old man said. “Is a little infatuation. Nothing more. It would be better

for you to go back home, because if you climb the tower, she will send you plummeting to your death.”

“What if she does not?”

“She will.”

“Then,” Basha said. “I will plummet to my death. It is worth it just to see her up close just one time.”

“What if she does accept you,” the old man said. “And she finds out, only after she gives up her immortality, that she has made a mistake? That a mortal life among the peasants is not worth eternal life? Will you truly do that to the Princess? Can you put her through that pain?”

Basha paused for a moment to consider.

“If she accepts me,” he said at last. “It is her own choice. I cannot force her to accept me. I can only offer myself to her.”

“And what if,” the old man said. “The Princess is nothing like you imagine her to be? What if she is somehow flawed in a way you cannot stand? What if you find her scent unappealing? What if she you find that you hate her?”

“I won't,” Basha whispered.

“But how can you be sure?” the old man pressed. “How can you be sure that you won't tire of her, and end her eternal life all for your own selfishness?”

Basha was silent for a long time, his brow furrowed in thought. Then, he straightened himself up and looked the old man in the eyes.

“That is a risk I will have to take.”

“Very well then,” the old man said, pulling the key from around his neck. “Go down the hallway in this door and stand before the gate. The Princess's tower is on the other side. You must wait for the gate to open, but you must not look away from it or close your eyes, save to blink. If you avert your eyes for any reason, you will be turned to ice. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Basha said. The old man opened the door, and Basha continued on his way.

The old man was true to his word. At the end of the hallway there was a very large chamber

with a high domed ceiling and a double row of stone pillars leading to the far side. It was dark here, and frightfully cold, and as Basha walked between the stone pillars – all of them painted in beautiful, yet faded, colours – a breeze caused his torch to flicker out. Basha began to notice shapes in the gloom – frozen faces looking back at him, twisted in eternal horror. The chill began to work its way insidiously into his bones, licking the wounds on his back and hand.

At the far side of the chamber, at the top of a short flight of steps, was a large, ornate gateway, geometric shapes exquisitely carved into its surface. Although frost and icicles hung from every other surface, the gateway glistened with damp, water streaming down from it like tears. Basha stopped at the base of the steps, his feet spreading the puddle which had formed there, and looked up at the gateway.

There was a noise behind him, a sort of rasping. Basha almost looked back, but then he remembered what the old man had told him and kept his eyes firm on the door. It began to slowly creak open, a sliver of light forming vertically at its centre. The rasping continued, intensified.

“I am coming for you, Basha Hedd,” it rasped. “I am coming to swallow you up.”

Basha stared at the door.

“I am going to sink my teeth into your flesh,” it rasped on. “And you will remain down here in the cold with me forever more.”

Basha stared at the door.

“Come join the others, Basha Hedd,” it rasped in his ear. “It is not so cold. Thinking of the Princess can keep you warm.”

Basha stared at the door.

The door was open even wider now, yet not so wide that Basha thought he could easily slip through it yet. It was opening so slowly, it was agonizing. His feet felt wet, and he realized that the water level was rising around his ankles. Something brushed past him in the water, sending a tingle crawling up his leg to stick in his throat. He repressed the urge to look down.

“Basha Hedd, shield your eyes,” it rasped. The light extinguished the shadows in the chamber, hurting Basha's eyes. He kept them open, steeling himself to its glare. The rasper brushed him again, this time sliding up against his body and curling otherworldly arms around his waist. His legs went numb.

“Please, Basha Hedd,” it rasped. “Stay here with me. The Princess will not like you anyway. It is colder in death than it is in this room.”

The door was all the way open now, so Basha stepped forward. His foot would not move. The water had turned to ice, freezing him to the floor. Not looking down, refusing to look down, he pulled on his leg, struggling to get free. The rasper drifted up his back and settled into his scars, sending sharp stings through Basha's flesh. Basha's voice caught in his throat in a noiseless scream of exertion, never closing his eyes, never looking away from the blinding bright light up ahead. The ice cracked beneath him and one foot broke free. Needles inched up from his toes when they reunited with the air. He fell to his elbows, still staring into the light, as he dragged himself forward, pulling his other leg from the icy tomb. The rasper slithered its glacial, spectral fingers up his arm to his mangled hand, burrowing into the lacerations. Basha's leg broke free of the ice, and he crawled forward, into the warmth, into the outside, where soft, hot desert sand awaited him. The rasper slipped off of him and retreated back into its chamber.

Daybreak was overpowering. It took several minutes for Basha's eyes to adapt to the outside world again. When they did, he saw that he was at the base of the tower. That beautiful tower, with its beautiful treasure kept on top. He could barely see its summit from here, high as it was.

He looked around him and saw that the sand was littered with bones of those who had come before him. Half-buried rib cages, skulls, and appendages, bleached by the sun, jut out of the dust in grotesque angles. Upon most, the remnants of fine linens and impressive jewellery hung limply, swaying with the gentle morning breeze. Jewels, carvings, and gold coins beyond number lay scattered amongst the bones, countless unwanted gifts meant for the Princess.

There was a tiny wooden door nestled into the side of the tower. This opened now, and a man

stepped out. He was as young as Basha was, though more finely dressed, with a suit of glittering chainmail, a regal velvet tunic, a pair of thick leather gloves, and a jewelled sword buckled to his belt. He looked Basha up and down and then smiled.

“You have come a long way, friend,” the man said. “Come inside and dine with us.”

“Who are you?” Basha asked.

“We are the Princess's Guardians,” the man replied. “Those who choose to stay on the bottom of the tower are granted eternal life in return for our service to her. We can never die a natural death while in the shadow of her tower.”

“Excuse me for saying so, sir,” Basha said. “But I do not understand how you can stand to stay down here, when the Princess, so beautiful, is so close. Are you not ever tempted to climb the tower and offer your hand?”

Sadness welled in the man's eyes.

“We all came here once with the intention of offering our hand, friend,” the man said. “But we did not want to die, and we know we almost certainly would if we climbed. Especially after spending so long in the shadow of this tower. We have no life left to us but the protection of this tower, and thus nothing to offer the Princess. We all love her, me most of all, but we are content to preserve her beauty for an eternity. She never speaks to us, or comes down to see us, but sometimes we can feel her gratitude. That is enough. If you come inside with me, you can be one of us, live in happiness forever.”

“It may be enough for you,” Basha said. “To live at the bottom of this tower for all of eternity, but it is not good enough for me. I do not want to spend the rest of time wondering what would have happened if I had climbed. I do not want to take the risk that the Princess might have accepted me, had I only been brave enough to meet her. To do so would be worse than death. An eternity inside the tower with you, if you will forgive my rudeness, sir, would be like being in hell.”

The man nodded, seeming to understand. For a moment, he turned back to the door from where he came, and Basha thought he was going to leave. But he paused, turned, and looked Basha up and

down again.

“Can I convince you otherwise, friend?” he said, a hint of malice to his tone. “I would hate to see you throw your life away. The Princess has rejected countless fine men, as she would have surely rejected all of us in this tower.”

“I am sorry,” Basha said. “I would sooner die than wonder.”

“I am sorry, too, friend,” the old man replied, lurching towards the courier. “I cannot let you make the climb. If you steal our Princess from us, we will lose our immortality. We will lose her gratitude. We will lose the way she looks on top of the tower.”

He drew his sword and staggered forward, seeming to sway with each step. Basha quickly darted away as the man swung the blade toward him. The guardian chased him among the bones of the crestfallen, and Basha ducked and weaved past blows which barely missed him. The man's movements were stiff, as though he had not moved in a very long time, and Basha could easily outrun him, but there was nowhere to go. Even if there was, he would not have abandoned his quest. He was defenseless, unarmed and with a mangled hand. Basha was no match for the guardian.

Dodging backwards, he tripped on a jilted poet's thigh bone and fell to the sand. The guardian stood above him and raised his sword. Basha could see a mix of sorrow and relief on his face. Basha reached out with his good hand and grabbed the first thing his hands came to – a rib, severed by its owner's fall. He swung it in front of his face and the swordsman's blade carved its way halfway through it. Basha twisted the bone as he stood up, turning the guardian's wrist aside with surprising ease.

Then the wrist popped off, the glove flapping uselessly away as white vermin crawled from within. The guardian, tears streaming from his face, fell forward, his knee snapping and revealing more wriggling maggots. He tried to soften his fall with his other hand, and it too curled back and released a horde of nauseating crawlers. The man, now covered in the writhing, squirming insects, looked up at Basha as if to apologize, and began to sputter and choke as they crawled into his mouth. Basha looked at his own mangled hand, and then back at the dying man at his feet.

“I am sorry,” Basha said. “I understand why you tried to do it.”

Then he turned to the tower, gripped the rough stone, and began to climb.

The rocks were cold to the touch, and they numbed Basha's fingers as he climbed. The jewels, though beautiful, were jagged, and they scratched Basha's body as he pulled himself up the masonry. His injured hand slowed him down, refusing to work the way he wanted it to, and forcing himself to pull himself up precariously by the forearm. About a quarter of the way up, the wind started to pick up, tugging at Basha, urging him off the side. He pressed himself harder against the tower's wall and kept going.

When Basha was halfway up, people from all around Asharrad began to notice. He could feel each pair of eyes settle on his tiny form. Farmers stopped tilling. Blacksmiths stopped hammering steel. Couriers stopped delivering mail. All to watch Basha Hedd climb the magnificent marble tower. Somewhere in the city, a government official looked out his window and began to weep.

Basha's back tingled. The sun beat down on him. Sweat poured down his body, running into his eyes, making the stones slippery. His hands, both the mangled and the whole, began to seep blood. Yet, for all the heat, the breeze continued to push against him.

Three quarters of the way up the tower, Basha's good hand curled around a jewel and it broke free from the tower's wall, spiralling fifty feet into the sand below. Basha swayed above it for one harrowing moment, the only thing between him and the open air a freshly scarred forearm. Then he felt his fingers grip onto another stone, and he continued his ascent, bones aching, muscles tearing, cuts on his back weeping.

Then he was at the top, crawling onto the railing of the balcony he had observed so many times throughout his life, and there she was. More beautiful up close than she was from far away. The sun danced on her hair, brown and gold and glorious. Her scent came to him, and it was like warm bread on a winter's night. Her skin, that sweet almond skin, glowed in the midday sun.

She moved towards him, and those eyes, those deep, blue, endless eyes, glimmered expectantly.

Basha knew what must come next. Draped over the balcony, holding himself up with one arm, never averting his gaze from her eternal eyes, Basha Hedd extended his mangled hand to the Princess of Asharrad.