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The Thief of Sepharveim

Written by
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Illustration by Lance Wolf



WORMWOOD

and the **Five Fingers of Glory**

a prose/audio anthology from Habit Forming Films.

www.wormwoodshow.com



{Fig. 1} ex., "Hand of Glory"

Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery is an audio podcast production of Habit Forming Films, LLC.

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Wormwood and the Five Fingers of Glory

An Audio & Prose Anthology for

Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery

The Hand of Glory remains one of the strange artifacts at the dark heart of the many mysteries of Wormwood. An occult object of great curiosity, The Hand has crept into the very center of the chaotic maelstrom of murder and magic in Wormwood, California. The Hand's true origin has never been revealed. Until now.

“The Five Fingers of Glory” is a new anthology kicking off third season of the critically acclaimed and award-winning audio drama podcast, *Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery*.

The anthology series charts the path of the fabled Hand of Glory through history, from its creation in 700 BC to its arrival in present-day Wormwood. Inspired by the works of writers such as Robert E. Howard, Bram Stoker, Dashiell Hammett and Richard Matheson, three Wormwood writers have taken up the task of revealing the storied history of the Hand of Glory from the dusty streets of ancient Assyria to a haunted Sicilian Monastery to the shadowy backstreets of Chinatown and beyond.



At this word, the man laughed. "You presume to know me, Dugdammé of Cimmeria, and yet it is you who stand ready to draw blood?"

The Thief of Sepharvaim

by

David Accampo

(with acknowledgment to the works of Robert E. Howard)

I. Stranger from the North

The strange rider, his scarlet cloak rippling in the gentle breeze, steadied his stallion as he slowly traversed the bustle of the merchants and street folk teeming along the dusty streets of Sepharvaim. The small city, nestled along the banks of the great Euphrates River, seemed poorer than many of the small towns south of the Assyrian king's grip, but the ornate temple, glittering in the distance like a jewel, hinted at hidden, fabled treasures.

The horse's powerful hooves tapped a steady rhythm and then stopped as the horseman pulled tight the reins amidst the crowded streets. Eyes veiled by his scarlet hood, the man invisibly groped at his surroundings, searching for the pulse of this strange town as he had learned to do in his many travels. Instead, he felt an all too familiar tug, and with the briefest shrug, the rider's calloused fingers snatched out like a serpent and grasped the reedy arm of his would-be pickpocket, a young boy whose slender fingers had already managed to snake their way into the rider's coin purse.

The young thief whimpered and cried out. Quickly a young woman rushed to his side and pulled the boy away, hiding him behind her body. Her dark eyes glittered and she hissed at the rider, who yanked too hard on the reins of his steed, causing the beast to rear up slightly. The rider's hood fell away, revealing pale skin and a thick tangle of raven locks to match the shade of his horse. The stir sent curious street urchins scattering, whispering and questioning the presence of this outsider, so clearly from the North. Women clutched children closer to their dresses as the rider passed, but none barred his way -- until Ramman dared to do so. Palm resting lightly on the hilt of his wickedly curving *sapara*, the bronze-skinned giant stepped directly in front of the rider.

"Ho! Stranger!" shouted Ramman. "How enter you this fine city and immediately besiege its fair citizens?"

The rider grimaced and eyed him coldly. His eyes were vein blue. Ramman did not like the look of this stranger. He had seen men such as this; the mercenaries known as *Khumri*, vicious soldiers who had assisted King Sargon the Second in his conquests. Ramman knew these men to be both vicious and merciless in conquest, and feared what the arrival of such a man meant for Sepharvaim.

The man was silent as he considered Ramman's words. When he finally answered, his voice was a low growl, "Is it the habit of your fair citizens to rob their guests rather than welcome them?"

"Our guests usually declare their business upon arrival, stranger. What business do you have in Sepharvaim?"

"My business is none of yours, *Akkadian*," barked the rider.

Ramman's fingers tightened on the hilt of his weapon. "Oh no, friend, I am a

royal guardsman of the High Priest of Adramelech, and it is my sworn duty to protect Sepharvaim from those who seek to harm its people."

"Then you have no problems with me, guardsman," said the man, "for I seek to harm none save those who stand in my path."

"Sadly, I know your kind, Khumri," said Ramman, "and I cannot believe your claim."

At this word, the man laughed. "You presume to know me, Dugdamme of Cimmeria, and yet it is you who stand ready to draw blood?"

"Should I buy you a drink instead?" asked Ramman.

"I'll tell you this, guardsman," said Dugdamme, "if you stay your hand from the hilt of your sword, I'll buy the drinks. Unless a Khumri's bounty is no good here in your desert village."

With a slight smirk, Dugdamme reached back to retrieve his coin purse. He fumbled as he realized the purse was gone. *The woman*, he muttered to himself, recalling the dark glittering eyes, the brief hint of her curves beneath woolen garments. He etched the image in his mind - he was not one to forget a thief of her caliber.

Seeing Dugdamme's distress, Ramman lowered his hand from his weapon and began to laugh heartily. "I suppose the wine is on me today, Cimmerian."

II. The Great Book Town

"You have the frame of a soldier, I'll give you that," said Ramman, wiping purple wine from his lips with a dusty hand, "But you have the eye of a thief."

"Is that the punishment for thieves in this city, friend? To drink with the captain of the Army?" Dugdamme laughed as he stamped his goblet on the table.

"Laugh as you will, but I've noticed the care with which you drink, only from sealed bottles. Only from that which you pour yourself," said Ramman.

"One can never be too careful when his drinks are paid for," laughed the Cimmerian, "I've traveled far and wide, Ramman. And I've learned to survive is to expect the worst in men. Any drink might be your last."

"And if this was to be your last drink, Dugdamme? Would that be a fitting end to your adventures?"

Dugdamme hissed, "Well, if this is to be my last drink, I'll have you know it tastes like a camel's piss."

Ramman roared with laughter, "You've quite the experience with a camel's piss, I'll wager, northlander! Everyone knows the barbarians have not the sophisticated tongue of Adramelech's chosen."

"Adramelech, eh?" questioned the Cimmerian. "Is that the God you serve in this forsaken shanty town?"

"It is."

"And does your god force you into a vow of poverty? Is that why the captain

of the guard chooses to drink cheap wine with a suspected thief?"

"Ah," answered Ramman, "Your question has two answers. Firstly, there is no better way to keep your eyes upon a thief than to keep him drunk at your table. Secondly, Sepharvaim is a very special place.

We don't hold our treasure in leather pouches slung from our belts."

"Oh no?" said the Cimmerian with the raise of a thick black brow.

"Our treasure holds no interest for a common thief."

"I'm hardly a common thief."

"We shall see, my friend."

"What is your great treasure, then, that is not gold and is of no interest to a thief?"

"Books."

"Books?"

"Our great lord Adramelech commanded us to big a great treasure trove of knowledge. A library of the greatest writings ever scrawled to parchment."

"Bah," said Dugdamme. "Scratchings on parchment never put food on the table like a good sword arm."

"Some days I'm inclined to agree with you, northlander," replied the guard, his wide face darkening slightly.

"And in exchange for protecting this paper treasure, you are given what?" asked Dugdamme.

"We are given our lives, to live as we please. We are given safety and protection."

"I've seen the quality of life your city affords. Starving boys and meddlesome women picking the pockets of strangers. I'll take my chances with my blade."

"I suspected you might, Dugdamme." The men laughed at one another as they continued to drain their goblets well into the night.

III. The Alleys of Sepharvaim

The broad-shouldered Cimmerian slunk quietly along the dark streets of Sepharvaim, staying close to the shadows to avoid notice. In the daylight, the city teemed with life, but the nights were different. Having emerged stumbling from the tavern, Ramman had directed Dugdamme to an inn where he might find lodging. Confident that Ramman was out of sight, Dugdamme quickly shook off the warm alcoholic haze and pulled his cloak tightly around him. Avoiding the dim light of the braziers, the warrior slipped catlike into the streets once more.

He was, after all, no common thief. Dugdamme was a thief of the highest order.

It's true that thievery was not a noble profession, nor one that Dugdamme had sought. But in between years of battle, he found it a necessary skill to survive in foreign lands where mere strength alone would not suffice.

Two armored guards marched past Dugdamme, their polished iron glinting in the dim light. As he pressed against the smooth terra-cotta wall the avoid detec-

tion, he felt a familiar presence, nearly invisible in the darkness beside him. As the guards passed, Dugdamme whipped around, his powerful hands wrapping tightly around the figure next to him. He instantly felt the soft features, the svelte curves he had consigned to memory mere hours ago. In response, the woman bit down on the fleshy part of his palm, her sharp white teeth drawing blood as the warrior winced but did not relent.

"By the gods that did hurt, woman," grunted the solemn-faced warrior, "I'm going to release my hand from your mouth and give you a fair chance to explain, but be forewarned - I'll snap your neck in an instant if I don't like what I hear."

With that, he released the woman, who spat a gob of his crimson blood on the dirty ground.

"Leave this place, Northerner," she said, grimacing. Her anger and ferocity reminded him of the strong women of the northern steppes.

"But I've only just arrived," chuckled Dugdamme eyeing the woman, "and there are so many beautiful sights to see."

"There is only death here," said the woman.

"And a thief who owes me a coin purse, as I recall," growled Dugdamme, pulling the woman close to him. "Though perhaps we can come to an arrangement of sorts..."

The warrior trailed off, observing as the woman's body went slack in his thick arms. She lowered her head, sobbing.

"Iyari," she cried quietly, "they've taken him."

Dugdamme's mind flashed to the thin boy who had tried to rob him in the

afternoon. "The boy?" he asked.

"My son," whimpered the woman, throwing herself into Dugdamme's broad frame. If this was an act, it was a convincing one.

"What is your name, woman?"

"Yafa," replied the woman, wiping her eyes and straightening her posture.

"And who has taken your son?"

"The priests. The high priests of Adramelech. The children... they offer the children to Adramelech to appease and honor him."

"A god who feasts upon the blood of children? What madness!" retorted Dugdamme.

"Please, sir. I will return your coins to you. I will... do anything you wish. But my son... can you help me to save my son?"

"You would go against your own god? Is that not heresy?"

"I thought..." Yafa stammered, tripping over her words, "I had thought I could serve my Lord. But... the love of mother and son... I cannot serve a master who would come between this most sacred bond."

"My own mother was killed on the day I was born," said Dugdamme, coldly gazing into the empty streets of Sepharvaim.

"Then you won't help me," Yafa replied, more statement than question.

"On the contrary," replied Dugdamme, flashing with a wolfish grin, "Heresy is my specialty."

He did not tell Yafa of his own quest or of the sacred treasure he believed lay hidden in the great library of Sepharvaim.

IV. The Temple of Adramelech

Sliding from the shadowy columns of the Temple of Adramelech, Dugdamme's dagger sliced out in two quick motions, cutting the throats of two of the temple guards. They dropped in a quiet clank of iron armor, dark blood pooling from their twitching bodies.

"Come," whispered Dugdamme, stepping over the guards and motioning to Yafa. She stepped out carefully, handing a torch which had been ensconced on the wall to Dugdamme. Quietly, the two figures crept into the looming shadows of the great palatial hall of the Temple of Adramelech. Truly, all the wealth of Sepharvaim, both knowledge and precious stones were found here. Ornate serpents twined about great columns, painted in gold and crusted in jewels. Dugdamme noted the precious gems set in the eyes of each serpent glimmering in the torchlight. Just one of those eyes, rubies and emeralds the size of a man's head, would grant a man his heart's desire. And yet, this God held sway over its citizens, keeping them wrapped in dirty bandages, while the temple shone immaculate and bright.

Soldier, mercenary, assassin, and thief - Dugdamme played many roles in his life. Raider of Anatolia. Silent assassin of the Pharaoh Shabaka of Egypt. Ally to the second King Sargon of Assyria in his campaign against Urartu. Burglar in the great gardens of Babylonia, Deposer of Marduk-apla-iddina in Assyria's seizure

of Babylon. These acts had served to lessen Dugdamme's thirst for blood and conquest. However, despite his weariness, the warrior could not return to his people. Until now. Here in Sepharvaim's Great Library, Dugdamme could smell the stale air trapped in the hallowed walls, the rich perfume of forbidden knowledge that offered his chance for redemption. It was just as Marduk had described to him when bartering for his life in the desert after Assyria had overrun Babylon. At the point of his sword, outside of the great halls of Babylon, Marduk begged for his life in exchange for sacred knowledge. As Dugdamme pressed his blade under the black scruff of Marduk's beard, the thin, brown-skinned man had described the scrolls of ancient wisdom, of arcane knowledge that would return the power of the Ancient Ones to those who could decipher the texts. With them, Cimmeria might build a great golden city as spoken of by the eldest of elders, cities that existed in the time before time, when giants and monsters walked among men. The Cimmerian envisioned a golden city where no one need die, like his mother. Like his wife and their daughter.

Yafa paused, tensing in darkness.

"What is it?" asked Dugdamme.

"Footsteps. Do you hear?"

"There!" hissed Dugdamme. He grabbed Yafa and pulled her behind the great columns. The Cimmerian quickly doused his torch and the two plunged into darkness. Slowly a sliver of orange light appeared.

Holding Yafa close, Dugdamme stepped forward, quietly following the light. The two followed the light down a winding corridor. The smooth walls echoed with the jingle of metal and the soft slap of sandals on smooth tile.

After a short time, the faint sliver of light became an orange flame in the shape of a door. Dugdamme realized there was a room ahead, lit by torchlight. He began to hear the murmur of tongues, chanting in a tongue unknown to the warrior. Dugdamme crouched down to get a better view.

At the center of a ring of torchlight was an lavish altar. Upon it was bound the boy, Iyari, stripped to a loincloth. Symbols had been painted in blood upon his chest. The boy struggled limply against his bonds.

Several temple guards stood about the altar, their iron helms and breastplates gleaming in the soft glow. Between them emerged a tall, gaunt man of grim visage. His dress was far more ornate than the guards. He was draped in fine robes of fringed wool and linen, embroidered with colorful patterns of blue, red, green and purple. Precious gemstones adorned the fabrics, affixed with gold and leather. His dark blue headdress rose steeply from his lined forehead, ordained with colorful feathers and stones. The priest stepped in front of the boy and began to chant. Dugdamme could not make out the words save one: *Adra-melech. Adra-melech. Adra-melech.*

Yafa gasped. Dugdamme turned to her and brought his face close. He whispered to her, "Stay. I will fetch the boy." Yafa nodded silently then thrust out, grabbed the Cimmerian to her, and kissed him deeply on the lips. She pushed him back. Dugdamme turned away from her and readied for battle.

In a fluid motion, Dugdamme sprang into action, leaping from the shadowed doorway and into the sacrificial chamber as he drew his broadsword, whipping it from its scabbard in a whirling arc. He spun across the room as the blade sliced through the exposed neck of the guard closest to him, spraying gore across the chamber. Still in motion, the blade clanged off of the peaked iron helm of a

second guard, but Dugdamme merely reversed his trajectory, spinning backwards while retrieving a sharp dagger from his tunic. With a flick of his powerful wrist, the long knife shot across the chamber and plunged deep into the robed thigh of the third guard, who fell to his knees as a dark river of blood poured from him.

Preternaturally alert in the throes of battle, Dugdamme sensed the hiss on the air before he heard the faint pluck of a bowstring. He pivoted, his huge arm wrapping around the guard with the dented helmet, spun the man around and exposed him to the iron-tipped arrows of an unseen archer somewhere above them. Dropping the body of the guard, Dugdamme grabbed the man's spear and hurled it upward, then turned to face his next opponent, even as the spear hit its mark, and the archer's body fell to the floor with a thud and clatter.

His blade stopped inches from Yafa's ear.

The girl's mouth was agape, unable to take in air. From behind her stepped the massive figure of Ramman, the captain of the temple guard.

"Well met, Dugdamme," said Ramman with a sneer.

"You strike me as an honorable man," growled Dugdamme. "Let the woman and her son go."

"You strike me as a thief," said the captain of the guard, "Which as you'll recall is what I suspected of you from our first meeting. You've done nothing to earn my trust."

"If you seek trust, let the woman go," repeated Dugdamme.

"Drop your blade, Khumri. Now."

As the captain of the guard spoke, Dugdamme noticed the echo of his words seem to grow, reverberating through the chamber. The firelight of the torches began to dance in his vision.

"You'll drop it soon enough, I suppose," said Ramman, "Once the poison takes effect."

Poison, thought Dugdamme. He had been so careful with his drink. *What then?* His eyes widened as he realized his folly.

"Yafa," he gasped, "The kiss..."

"You don't trust any man, but you still fall prey to the treachery of a woman, as all men do," said Ramman.

The woman stepped away from Ramman. She looked at Dugdamme with wide eyes. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Do not apologize, woman," said Ramman. "You've served your master well."

"I may take Iyari? I keep my son?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes, as we arranged. Your son is free to live another day."

Dugdamme fell to his knees. He scarcely noticed as his blade, so familiar in his hand, became a foreign object and clattered on the floor.

"Thief and heretic," rasped the grim-faced high priest, stepping before Dugdamme as the warrior's vision blurred. Everything seemed at once too close and too far away. "You have been called into the service of him who known as Baal Adramelech, Elder God of Sepharvaim. You have passed the tests of strength and cunning as demanded by the God himself. And now, you will face his glorious visage."

The room spun in a blur of color as the robed priest stepped to the side. The air seemed to grow warmer around him. Shadows lengthened as the torches became mere pinholes of light. Dugdamme heard an alien clack upon the tiles of the chamber, and suddenly he realized a great presence was upon him, warm foul breath thickening the air around him. A long, clawed hand reached out and roughly grabbed Dugdamme's slackened jaw, twisting his head.

Dugdamme squinted at the light, and became aware of black torso of a massive creature, the light behind him blotted out by a fanned array of colorful feathers. It was at once beautiful and horrible. The creature's head, the elongated shape of a mule, peered down at him. Its black nostrils issued forth tendrils of smoke as it snorted and snarled.

The creature spoke, and its voice was unlike anything Dugdamme had ever heard. It was the sound of a thousand wolves howling along the northern steppes. He missed his home.

"He will do," croaked the creature.

Rough hands gripped Dugdamme's arms and shoulders, and a thick rope was fastened around his neck and pulled tight. Dugdamme tried to struggle, but his muscles seemed unable to respond. The rope about his neck tightened and the warrior's body was yanked upward, his drugged limbs flailing helplessly as he was raised above the floor, above the altar. He gasped as the cold iron of a spear pierced his side.

"Do not damage the hands," growled the inhuman creature. "I have a need of his hands. Ramman... once the body dies, you will cleanly remove the hands and present them to me."

“Yes, lord,” murmured the captain of the guard and drew his curved blade from its sheath.

Unable to struggle, unable to breathe, the once-powerful warrior called Dugdamme gave himself over to his fate. The edges of his vision had gone white, and he closed his eyes. The sounds faded from his ears as the roar of his blood took over. He began to dream then, a quiet dream of his home in Cimmeria, a brisk wind gently stinging his bare skin as he trudged calmly along the coast of the dark sea. He saw his brothers, hunting on horseback along the steppes, laughing as they flung their bronze-tipped spears. He came to a hill upon which he spied a female figure, her long hair flowing wildly as it escaped her fluttering cloak. He recognized his wife, as she turned, her silhouette burnt in the red sunset, her white smile broad and welcoming. Dancing around her skirts was their young daughter, turning and spinning in the wild grass, her soft young flesh pale and pure. He ran to them and scooped them both up in his arms, spinning them around, exclaiming that he had finally, finally returned home.

About this Story: A Word from the Author

When we set ourselves the challenge of writing prose short stories to reveal the history of the Hand of Glory, I knew the first story would be tough to write. We had fit together the mythology of the Hand, and I knew that the tale of the original owner of the Hand must be very special. I had always known he would be a thief and warrior with a rich history, but it wasn't until we researched certain details of our mythological backstory (specifically that of Adramelech), that the hero began to take shape. To tie in with the demon Adramelech, I knew the Hand would belong to a man in approximately 700 BC. And in that era, it seemed only appropriate to look to Robert E. Howard for influence.

Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) was a pulp author in the late 1920's and early 1930's. His most famous creation was, of course, Conan -- a barbarian from the mythic land of Cimmeria. It's worth noting here that Howard set his tales in a mythical era after the fall of Atlantis and before the rise of ancient civilizations. This place is known as Hyboria, and it afforded Howard a lot of room for creativity. His settings seem to resemble those of the historical Iron Age, but his Cimmeria is not the real Cimmeria.

Still, his works and his style seemed uncannily appropriate. Howard wrote tales of savage warriors, evil priests, dark gods... it seemed to fit so well with what we had set up with Wormwood. He seemed a fitting predecessor for our modern pulp-tinged detective.

And thus I strove with this piece to write a Conan-like character, not set in Hyboria, but set in 700 BC. There was a real Cimmeria, a real Assyria, and a real Sepharvaim. I've taken liberties, of course, but I've tried to do what I could to blend Howard's richly descriptive action adventure into a historical tapestry that matched the mythology that we've tapped into with Wormwood.

Of course, it couldn't end well for poor Dugdamme, but I really grew to like my own homage to Conan, and I did reveal that his tale is ripe with adventures. Perhaps one day we can delve into his life a bit more.

-- David Accampo

Los Angeles, July 2009



Robert E. Howard (1906-1936)



“On this the traveller got up, pulled out of his pocket a dead man’s hand, fitted a candle to it, lighted the candle, and passed hand and candle several times before the servant girl’s face...”

Rhys, Ernest, ed. (1859–1946). *The Haunters and the Haunted*. 1921.

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The Hand of Glory...

In occult lore, the Hand was cut from the corpse of a hanged thief and coated in virgin wax and the dead man's tallow. It is said to open any door. But how did the Hand of Glory come to have its fate entwined with the mysteries at the heart of Wormwood?

Discover the secrets of this arcane appendage once attached to occult detective Doctor Xander Crowe as we present: *Wormwood and the Five Fingers of Glory*; five thrilling tales of mystery and suspense that span the ages!

