

## *Katarina Vanth* The Middle Kingdom

by Tony Graham

She stood on the high wall of the sea fortress and looked out over the bay. The pastry was sweet. She tried to concentrate on it and avoid all other thoughts. The breeze was pleasant. Three hundred feet below, the harbor was packed with ships, wagons and people. Trade, the life blood of the Middle Kingdom, continued.

South across the Inner Sea, beyond sight even on the clearest day, was the Imperial City. She had spent half her youth there, playing in the myriad gardens with her cousins and other children of the Noble Houses.

Eyes closed, she exerted her Will, reaching out for some touch of the isle that was the Imperial City. It remained a blank space, a void upon the sea. The Imperial City was lost. The Emperor was lost. Order was lost. The center could no longer hold. Even now, with her senses cast far, she could feel barriers cracking. Laws and structure that had held the other worlds at bay were cracking. Other...things were seeking entrance to Gallidon.

One such barrier was cracking below her. Something was coming through. It was why she had been dispatched. The first such expedition she had been chosen to lead in decades. Her family's need, the need of the people, had forced her to leave solitude behind.

She could no longer avoid her thoughts. Opening her eyes, she glanced down at the pastry in her hand. She tore it into pieces for the gulls, dusting her hands of the crumbs.

Katarina Vanth took a last minute for the clean, fresh breeze off the bay, then turned and went down from the high wall into the courtyard.

A score of men-at-arms awaited her, quieted at her approach. Without a word, they followed her into the keep, down the great stair, past the dungeons, to the doorway of the





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catacombs.

The fortress above had stood for centuries. All that time, the catacombs had collected the dead; nobles, administrators, heroes. Standing at the door, Katarina could feel a disturbance. Something, not living but not wholly dead, had stepped through the Veil, the barrier between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. She was House Vanth, guardians of the Veil. Katarina gathered her Will.

The doors to the catacombs opened easily. The dank, fetid smell was foul beyond reason. Darkness lay beyond, defying the light of the torches carried by her men-at-arms. She could feel their fear as they stood behind her. And she could sense the hunger of that which lurked within the darkness.

Katarina raised her left arm. Piercing bright light, as if she held a fragment of the sun, pulsed from her hand, splitting the darkness within the catacombs.

“I am Vanth, defender of the Veil, guardian of the dead. You have no place here.”

Something stirred in the darkness. Shapes shambled into the light...



Illustration *Beyond the Veil* by Andy Underwood.

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