

# VULDATHOON

BY GORDON LARKIN

The skies above and about Vuldathoon were red as blood. Even the stones and bricks of which the castle is hewn, are streaked and smeared with crimson. The rocks upon which it stands and the seas that surround it; all are scarlet and flaming. No longer does the sun shine golden in an ocean of blue, nor shall it do so until the people of Vuldathoon reach upwards with their hearts. When they have built towers so tall that they might lean from the topmost windows and wipe the stains from the skies then, mayhap, Vuldathoon will shine again and the people sing.

The story of Vuldathoon is thus:

A narrow isthmus lay, like a pointing finger, gesturing into the sea of Perlume and upon a rocky platform at its tip there rose a glorious castle. In the sunlight its domes and towers shone as with an aura of holiness and its spires sang glad songs with the gulls of Perlume. At night, the castle's form was painted in moonlight and its long reflection lay, in ripple, out across the sea to the horizon. The shores were golden as the sun and the sands soft as a breeze; the skies above Perlume were jewelled with the whitest gulls and never came the greyness of a shadow there.

It was a place of tranquility. It was an edifice of great beauty. It was Vuldathoon.

The people of Vuldathoon were greatly pleased with their lot and were dutiful in their thanks and worship of Guinala.

Guinala, too, was greatly pleased, for it is rare that a god's creation is as he plans.

But doubt and uncertainty came to Vuldathoon one morning, carried by the tides of Perlume.

It was dawn.

The sun smiled a welcome on the rim of the misty seas that idly licked the castle's toes. Seagulls floated in wide circles on the thin but crisp morning air and there were no sounds but the gentle music of the waves and a soft, resonant hum that told of the castle sleeping.

At the very tip of the isthmus, in a shallow bay where the water kissed the sands, there bobbed the black shape that caused grief to Vuldathoon.

Early risers who saw the shape, intrigued, sped down to the shore line to investigate - a little fear in each of their hearts.

It took three to drag the sodden lump from the water and it left an ugly scar in the golden sand. They heaved it over and discovered it to be the body of a man, but a man unlike any they had known before. His skin was tinted pale green and his hair, though all clotted with weeds, was long and mauve. At first they were all afraid, each too unsure of himself to suggest anything... but the body itself solved their doubts.

It moved.

Slowly, a dripping, weed-hung arm raised itself from the tattered mass; a dull eye opened and a weak voice whispered,

"Help me."

And the people of Vuldathoon, being a goodly folk, unselfish and just, forgot their fears and carried him back to their castle.



The stranger had been close to Death's yawning mouth but Valdathorn pulled him back to life. They fed him with food and wine from their own tables and clothed him with robes from their closets. He grew strong quickly and was soon able to offer his thanks but he was downhearted because he could not express the depths of his gratitude.

"It is our joy," the people said. "To see you now, in life when once so close to death, is a great pleasure for us. Your thanks are unnecessary."

The man bowed humbly.

He told them that his name was Ystil and that he had been shipwrecked after sailing for many years from his native land, far, far beyond Perlune.

"All my companions, my friends," he said, more to himself. "All must have perished in the storm. I have nothing - nothing to repay your kindness. I am sorry."

Now, Despair and Sorrow were unwelcome in Vuldathoom, so an old man of the castle suggested to Ystil, "Stranger, you are from distant lands, unheard of here. Mayhap you can tell us tales thereof for we of Vuldathoom rarely see strangers and are ignorant of the ways of the world."

And Ystil smiled, for here was something that he could give to the kind folk of Vuldathoom. Knowledge.

For many weeks he told them tales and many they were. A mariner, he had seen many lands and his stories were rich in wonder. He told them of different people, of different climes, of different seas and different skies.

And he told them of different gods.

As the months fell away Ystil began to yearn for his own shores and his own kind. Each day he would stand on the spot where he was washed ashore and greet the sunrise, staring with wide and tearful eyes out to the flat horizon and his thoughts would go out to those he had loved.

One morning, as Ystil wept upon the shore, he was observed from a high and shining balcony in the white castle. Two priests of Guinala, those who led the worshippings, watched him with troubled hearts.

Without turning his head from the figure at the water's edge, one said,

"The time has come Culmon. It must be solved. The fear which is upon us all must be faced."

The other nodded, "You speak the truth, Jarith. The people's hearts have been heavy these past months and their consciences troubled. These tales the mariner has told, of other gods ...! " Culmon shuddered and turned to the other with wide eyes. "There are OTHER gods, Jarith!"

Jarith nodded and gripped the medallion of his office muttering a prayer to Guinala.

After a long silence Jarith said, "The stranger has indeed spoken of other gods; of Kunigor and Hivarna, or Dallian, Nimuran and Diyha and others. Guinala knows all and sees all, He will doubt our faith now that we have learned of other gods. He might even desert us now that we need him so."

He looked again at the figure of Ystil who was now returning to the castle, his head hung low.

"We must prove our faith. We must show Guinala that He is the only god, that there are none greater than He."

"But how, Jarith?" said Culmon. "New and bigger temples? Longer prayers? How?"

"Such as you suggest are not strong enough indications of our faith. Guinala will not easily be convinced. We must make an emphatic gesture so that there can be no doubt at all in his mind. We must make Him an offering. We must give Him a life."

Culmon nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on Ystil as he climbed the white steps from the shore to the castle. And as he watched he suddenly felt the claws of anger sinking into his chest. This man, this alien, whom they had plucked from the very jaws of death and cared for, had turned their own god, Guinala against them that now they had to prove their faith.

Almost to himself, Culmon muttered, "He must be punished. The source of our troubles will also be our salvation." And Jarith agreed and so did the entire priesthood who, too, had been beset with grave doubts.

And Ystil, the pale green mariner who had not chosen to be cast up on the sands of Vuldathoom, was sacrificed with much pomp and ceremony.

The people prayed hard that day as they watched the mariner's crimson blood stain the altar stones and run in scarlet streams down marble gulleys.

"There is only one god," they prayed, "Accept this gift as a mark of our faith, Guinala, who is OUR god."

So Ystil perished and with his life departed his sorrow.

When Guinala, who is one god and all gods, realised what had happened in Vuldathoom he wept as only a god may weep. And he raged for the people of Vuldathoom had shown how shallow their faith truly was and hypocrisy can kill a god.

He sundered the isthmus with a might bolt and Vuldathoom became an island that drifted in the lonliest of oceans. The gulls left Perlume and the people found they no longer cared to sing or laugh. But still Guinala's wrath was unquenched.

He streaked the once white and shining walls of the castle in bloody crimson and he smeared the skies above with scarlet, crying out in a mighty thunder, "Vuldathoom must know that God is Love."

The people wept and prayed hard for mercy, but the wrath of a god is not easily stilled and He would not heed them.

So Vuldathoom was punished and their faith remains unproven, though the towers ever reach higher. Perhaps, soon, the people will be able to reach out and cleanse their skies.

Only Guinala knows.

