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Bardic Runes VIII

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Bardic Runes VIII

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Gratias Agimus

This is another issue to which Jennifer Clarke Wilkes contributed computerization and design. We are grateful to all who contributed prose of such high quality.

Many thanks to Mai Nguyen, Owen Oulton and Ken Roberts, who along with Jennifer have made this issue so visually appealing.

Henry McLaughlin again rendered much appreciated help proofreading most of the text.

The high quality reproductive work of Laser Zone is most gratefully appreciated.

Many thanks to all who aided in the wide geographical diffusion of the seventh issue.

As ever, I am tremendously grateful for the constant support of my wife, Cathy Woodgold.

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The Readers' Choice

Readers of #7 chose:

Usher of the Falling House by Dennis Valdrón

as the best of that issue.

Readers are invited to write to the editorial address (see last page) and cast their ballot. The winner will be announced in the following issue.

Heart Stone

Arran Caza

Tabeth woke as a twig snapped in the undergrowth. Cool forest smells filled the night. She peered over the edge of her blanket toward the sound. What she saw nearly made her cry out.

The three-quarter moon was just sinking into the dark, leafy sea of trees. Silhouetted against that drowning white light was her brother, seated cross-legged, facing away from the clearing. Looming over him was a wolf large enough to be mistaken for a pony. But there was no mistaking the moonlight glinting off its long teeth. Tabeth came fully awake. Faster than she could have thought of it, she reached for the worn handle of her boot knife.

"Lyn! Drop!"

Targeting feral red eyes, Tabeth threw the stiletto.

Hearing her cry, Lynhum turned. His eyes widened as the moonlight flashed on the hurtling blade. Without a pause, Lynhum rose fluidly to his knees. His left hand ruffled the furry neck of the big wolf while his right reached out. He caught the knife in midair, stopping it and tossing it toward the forest edge.

Tabeth gasped. It sounded loud in the silence of the clearing. The wolf crouched slightly with its tail curled in, but made no sound. Lynhum was equally quiet, despite having just caught five inches of surgically sharp stiletto.

"He be with me, Tabeth Meqpi," whispered Lynhum.

Her brother turned to the wolf without looking back. He'd used her full name deliberately. Feeling it the only wise action, Tabeth sat down to wait. She hated the way he talked to animals, almost as if he preferred them to people.

Before long, Lynhum returned. He sat beside her comfortably. If he was upset, Tabeth couldn't see it. But when could she?

"Lyn...I'm sorry. I didn't -- "

Her brother raised a hand, stopping her. On his face was that maddeningly serene smile of his. "No malice, no harm, no regret," he recited.

Tabeth nearly punched him in his sanctimonious little face. Somehow she resisted, and Lynhum at last told her the secret of their quest. Tomorrow they would arrive at the manor house they sought.

Afterward, Tabeth almost wished he hadn't told her. And she definitely wished she was still safely within the borders of her homeland, the Canton Freeholds. It was such a small thing when it started...

* * *

Rowdy, drunken laughter rang across the tavern. Tabeth looked around and sighed at what she saw.

She caught glimpses of her older brother, Lynhum Meqpi. His height of three and three-quarter feet made him a tall Quillan, but left him dwarfed by the five Humans standing around him. His curly brown hair and slight build were typical of the little folk, but his eyes suggested a difference. There was still laughter in them, but mixed with it was a knowledge, an experience, uncommon in a young Quillan.

Thinking of his age, Tabeth felt warm pride for her brother. At forty, he was still very young, and already a sheriff. That was the difference in his face. Even more than the sheriff's traditional brown-green cloak, his eyes marked him as one of the Quillan's defenders.

No one gained the sheriffs' powers without paying a price. Like all her people, Tabeth dearly loved Tamara, the Quillan's patron goddess. But, as a goddess of Balance, Tamara granted nothing for free. Each sheriff carried some special burden in return for his gifts. In Lynhum's case, Tamara had taken the letter 's' from him. Lynhum said it. Tabeth even thought he might hear it himself. But no one else did. Others only heard a little silence.

And, as usual, he was being tormented about it. Her brother's apparently easy grin didn't fool her. The Humans were obviously taunting him. Why were the big louts always so boorish?

"Oh well," she muttered. Standing, Tabeth excused herself from the table with a small smile. Still muttering, she marched toward the confrontation.

Without comment, she stepped into the centre of the group. She turned to the largest of the five. Before he had really noticed her, Tabeth laced her fingers and struck him a two-handed blow to the crotch.

The man exhaled explosively. Eyes bulging, he doubled forward. Reaching up, Tabeth grabbed his beard and used his own momentum to send him face first into the nearest table. The impact shattered teeth and wood.

Striding after her foe, Tabeth grabbed a stonework pitcher from a nearby table. Without ceremony, she brought it down on the head of the dazed man. There was a satisfying thud and he fell senseless.

Tabeth took a moment to admire the unharmed pitcher. "Ugly or not, those gnomes can make a jug."

A crash behind her brought Tabeth around. Her eyes widened for an instant. The other four Humans were scattered about the floor, unconscious. Lynhum stood amongst them, glowering at her.

"Good. Guess we taught them a little civility, huh?" crowed Tabeth.

Lynhum closed his eyes, sighing. Tabeth hated her brother's patronizing routine, especially when she'd just done him a favour.

"We were talking trade. The Human' were going to import Randuin brandy to the Freehold'." He paused, gesturing at his victims. "But they reacted badly when you neutered their leader."

The next day Lynhum made the Big Announcement.

"I can't believe you're dragging me into this!" hollered Tabeth.

"I am bound to maintain order at all time'," replied her brother. Tabeth found his attitude of self-assured composure irritating.

"I don't give a damn what you're bound to, and order can go visit all thirteen Hells, for all I care. What was in your head? Going to the town council and asking for punishment? It was only a bar brawl!" Tabeth's hands waved about as she yelled. "No one gets punished for having a little fun."

"I felt it my duty to atone. The council decreed what we are to do."

"We? I don't feel a need to atone." She closed her eyes and took a loud breath. "You haven't even told me what the council said."

"I cannot."

"You're asking me to leave the Canton for goddess knows where, to do something you won't describe -- all to apologize for something I don't particularly regret?"

Lynhum said nothing.

"I think you're abusing my family loyalty." She shook her head. "This has to stop," said Tabeth disgustedly. "I can't spend my entire life taking care of you."

* * *

"It's impressive enough," sniffed Tabeth, "but I expected something more sinister from a major demon." She appraised the fenced grounds of the manor house.

Lynhum nodded absently, but made no comment.

The manor was large, almost sprawling. Two smaller wings flanked a three-storey rectangular centre. The walls were of solid black stone. Carved gargoyles and other gruesome figures lurked about the roof and lawn. The whole building conveyed a feeling of brooding suspicion.

Turning back to her brother, Tabeth waved a finger at him. "Don't think you're excused for not telling me what we were after. I don't believe your story about the demon's magic 'prying it from my mind'. I can keep a secret as well as anyone, particularly you."

Lynhum again said nothing.

Content with her warning, Tabeth turned back to the demon's abode. The perimeter fence crouched in the thick of the forest. In some places there was no more than two feet between tree cover and the edge of the property. There was no evidence of attempts to hold the wilderness back. However, the fence's profuse barbs were obviously meant to hold trespassers back.

"I don't see anything. The lawn's big, but too open to hide anything."

"No guard and no dog," agreed Lynhum.

The only sound was the dull rasp of the breeze in the higher leaves. Tabeth heard none of the little noises typical of a forest.

"Well, let's not question our fortune too closely. Leaving the grounds unguarded just shows our foe is as dumb as a goblin. All the better for us."

"Dumb or very confident," said Lynhum quietly.

Tabeth blew into cupped hands. "We should start -- the sun's setting."

She approached the fence's single, heavy iron gate. The lock, meant for taller users, was conveniently at Quillan eye level. Tabeth squinted into it.

"It's not Human-made," she said, staring into the keyhole. The bore's a funny size. I'll need a --"

Tabeth stopped as she felt something touch her shoulder. Looking back, she saw Lynhum holding a small lockpick out to her. It was exactly the size she'd been about to mention.

Without moving, Tabeth glared around at her brother. He didn't even have the decency to gloat. He just stood there, composed and patient.

"Doesn't it get tiring?"

"Tiring?" asked Lynhum uncertainly.

"Being perfect all the time." Tabeth took the pick, ignoring his skeptical look.

The lock was very quickly open.

Tabeth took a last look around the grim porch. With a little breath, she slipped noiselessly through a ground floor window.

Deep, mouldy carpet drowned the sound of her landing. The setting sun's light cast long shadows, magnifying the apparent size of an already large dining room. Tabeth headed directly across the room, glancing all about her. Without breaking her pace, she stooped under the majestic banquet table.

Reaching the only door in the room, she paused to listen. There was no sound. She drew a small stone from a pouch secured in her vest. With a flick of her wrist, Tabeth sent it out the open window.

Seconds later, Lynhum rolled over the sill. He landed in a crouch with only the faintest of sounds. Tabeth smiled proudly as her brother crossed the room. Despite turning in circles to watch all sides, he made no sound. Tabeth decided there might be hope for him after all, foolish sheriff or not.

Tabeth snorted at the door in front of her. Stealthy creeping was fine; so was a good search. But it was only fun for so long. Nine rooms searched, and nothing found. Tabeth was starting to wonder about relying on a wolf for information. Confirming her brother's position, she grasped the handle of the next door.

"What in the Hells -- ?"

The smell from the room made Tabeth gag. It reminded her of the time one of her teachers, Pleiades, had been conjuring demons. She thought of week-old eggs on a warm day.

Tabeth bowled backward under a sudden slimy weight. Landing on her back, she found

herself staring into a mouthful of rotted teeth. The fetid maw belonged to an ugly, grey creature, about the size and shape of a big tomcat. It sat on her chest, stinking, snarling and oozing. Its mouth gaped impossibly wide and moved toward her.

With a flat hand blow to its head, Tabeth knocked the demon squealing away. She rolled to her feet in time to see another leaping. It barrelled into her, sinking its fangs into the leather guard on her upraised arm. Tabeth drew her dagger.

"Little bugger," she grunted, cutting it off her arm. "Probably don't even rate a Name."

Looking up, Tabeth croaked brokenly. The hallway was swarming with little grey obscenities. Lynhum's swords flashed among the creatures surrounding him. Tabeth shouted a warning about the demon behind her brother. Immediately after, one crash-landed on her head and neck. Tabeth lost consciousness.

"So that's what the legendary Heart Stones look like," said Tabeth to no one.

Each Quillan village had one. The Heart Stones were the secret soul of her race. She didn't understand its nature or its power, but gazing into the Stone, Tabeth felt its importance.

"Wow," she whispered.

The Quillan were the only known race in history never to have suffered a time of servitude. Fiercely independent, the little folk had always chosen destruction before surrender. Tabeth saw that defiant spirit reflected in the wild, throbbing glow of the Stone. That it was here, in these hands, was wrong. Tabeth fought tears of loss and frustration.

"Come on," she grunted, struggling against the ropes binding her.

Tabeth scowled at the demon's back as it moved between her and the Heart Stone. Having seen the Stone, she no longer doubted the importance of their quest. Her only doubt was about their ability to complete it.

The demon looked vaguely like a male Human. Its hooves and coarse, black fur resembled pants and boots. But it was far too big to be a man. The creature's massive back was almost as wide as Tabeth was tall. Muscles rippled and bunched across it as the demon cast its spells upon the Stone.

Tabeth wasn't a spell-caster. She'd travelled widely, even studied under mages and scholars. But she didn't know enough to understand what was being done. Despite that, Tabeth had no doubt of the creature's evil intent. From the moment she'd seen the demon, Tabeth had known she would do anything to stop it.

"Great thought – but what do I do about it?"

Unfortunately, she couldn't think of anything. When she'd passed out, her brother was buried under those foul little beasts. He wasn't with her in the demon's spell room, so she had to assume she was on her own. Tabeth took a deep breath, struggling to delay her grief. It was what Lynhum would have wanted.

So far, the demon hadn't been any help at all. Tabeth was no demonologist, but she would have expected a powerful demon to have a large ego. She'd been trying to get it talking since she woke. But nothing, from the terrified damsel routine to the awestruck simpleton, had drawn a response.

Tabeth could work free of the ropes with an hour's work. But she doubted she had the hour to spare. The demon's activity had been steadily increasing. An ebony nimbus of energy crackled around the table where the Heart Stone sat. Tabeth's hair tingled with the force gathering in the room, and there was a thick burning smell. The climax was obviously fast approaching.

She was making another futile try for her boot knife when the door crashed resoundingly in. Lynhum leapt into the spell room, paired swords drawn. He'd lost his cloak, and bled slowly from several cuts. Otherwise he looked fit. Tabeth's pulse quickened. With them reunited, anything was possible.

Lynhum's green eyes scanned the room. He focussed on the demon and its diabolical chanting. With a circular motion of his wrist and elbow, Lynhum threw one sword at the demon. The sword was an awkward projectile, but struck with enough force to elicit a grunt.

"Halt thy defilement, demon!" ordered Lynhum, striding forward.

The huge demon turned slowly from its profane work. Muscles bulged as it flexed hands larger than Lynhum's head.

Meanwhile, the spell was assuming a life of its own. As the demon scowled a horrible smile, the energy twisted and hissed. Etherial light wreathed the table. Demented shadows leapt on the walls.

Lynhum struck a measured blow to test his opponent. He had drawn a long parrying dagger to replace the thrown sword, and was barely quick enough with it to block a strike from the demon's clawed hand. Lynhum skipped backward, realizing he lost in both reach and speed.

"Come, fiend! Prepare to return to the Hell from which you came."

As the demon moved forward, Tabeth realized three facts. First, the cut from the thrown sword had already stopped bleeding and was nearly healed. Second, Lynhum would go on yelling to keep the creature's attention away from his sister. And lastly, she understood that Lynhum couldn't win this fight.

"Admit defeat, ghoul!" demanded Lynhum, narrowly avoiding losing his head. Arcane energy leapt and crackled crazily about the room.

Tabeth shook her head in frustration. There had to be a solution. There always was. Tabeth had been in one or another kind of trouble for thirty-five years, and she always found an answer.

Despite his bold cry of "Yield, black-heart!", Lynhum wasn't even holding his own. Tabeth gasped as her brother fell to one knee.

"You will never win, 'coundrel!" shouted Lynhum, the death blow racing toward him.

The demon's hand hesitated. In an instant the attack resumed, but it was enough for Lynhum's dodge to save him. The creature's claws took the sleeve of his shirt and a good chunk of his right arm, but left the sheriff's life.

Tabeth cocked her head. She'd seen the pause. "That wasn't demonic mercy," she commented, not expecting anyone to hear or answer. "And I have trouble believing it's divine intervention.... Unless --"

Suddenly, her eyes widened. "Bless you, Tamara, you sneaky wench!"

Tabeth looked back to the battle. The Heart Stone sat on the table, the eye of a chaotic mystical hurricane. On the other side of the table, her brother was recovering from a hasty roll. Blood flowed steadily from his arm and forehead. The demon was leaping forward, pursuing its victim.

"Lyn! You've found its True Name." Tabeth yelled so loudly her throat hurt. But she had to beat the spell's noise.

"Lyn, there's power in names! Its True Name is Cowndrel. Use it!"

At that instant, her brother was scampering between the demon's legs to dive under the table. He landed heavily. Tabeth didn't know if he had heard. She hoped he had the sense to act.

The demon swung a powerful arm and then knocked the table aside. Unperturbed, the Heart Stone hung in the air where it had been. Its feral light cast the demon's features in hideous relief. As Lynhum lay panting, the creature collected itself for the death blow.

Tabeth struggled, but could do nothing. As the demon's prisoner, she could have no power over it. She could only watch as the claws began to descend.

"Cowndrel, by the power of thy name, I command thee, halt." Lynhum didn't shout, but his voice cut through the noise.

With an echoing shriek, the demon stopped where it was. Its eyes burned, but it took no action.

"Return whence you came, Cowndrel."

With a flash of light and the smell of old eggs, the demon vanished.

Lynhum wobbled to his feet. He spared the time to nod over his shoulder at his sister. Then he took a two-handed grip on his sword. He drew it back like a club and faced the writhing Heart Stone.

"Lyn!" yelled Tabeth over the noise of the spell. "That's not a good -- "

Swinging with all his might, Lynhum batted the Heart Stone out of the spell's centre.

For an instant there was complete silence. Then thunder rocked the room. Colours of which a rainbow might dream erupted from the walls. Tabeth felt herself thrown against the back wall. Her brother crashed into her hard enough to make her gasp.

Then it was over. Brother and sister lay in a heap on the floor. Against another wall the Heart Stone lay, glowing merrily. Unlike the bruised Quillan, it was unmarked.

"Oh, brilliant!" muttered Tabeth as her brother rolled off of her. "You can't just come along and abort a major spell like that."

Lynhum's eyes twinkled as he looked directly at his sister. "Do you find it tiring?"

"What?" she asked, startled.

"Knowing everything all the time."

Only the ropes stopped Tabeth from kicking him.

Tabeth finished with the last of Lynhum's bandages. She stood and stretched her back. Looking around the blasted room, her gaze came to rest on the Heart Stone. It nestled in a soft cloth on her brother's travelling pack.

"What do you think the spell was for?" she asked.

Lynhum shrugged. Smiling broadly, he said, "Whatever wrong it make', I'll probably volunteer to right it."

Tabeth laughed and nodded. "Yeah. You're daft enough to get yourself another damned quest. And then we'll need to save the world again."

Hide the Goddess

Mark Rich

"Come on, Oldie," the girl named Frenitte said to her.

The boy, more shy, only nodded.

"Tell us something," said Frenitte. "A good story. We *know* you haven't told us *everything*."

Dyse, known among the children as Oldie, shook her head. "You tell *me*, first."

"What?" said Frenitte.

"Tell me why you came here in such a hurry."

The boy, named Yokine, flushed. "That *girl*," he blurted. "She *said* -- "

"What did she say?" said Dyse, quietly, smiling.

"You aren't supposed to tell," Frenitte said to Yokine.

Yokine frowned but spoke anyway. "That girl said you were a *fake* and she was going to come here and *prove* it. She said you tell silly lies, and that *she* can *tell*. She says she can *always* tell the *truth* when she hears it!"

Dyse laughed. "And you came to see if she can do what she says, and prove me a fake? But I'm afraid she's not here. And you've run all this way. Well, I suppose I'd better tell you a story, so you have something for your efforts. You'll just have to use your own judgement. Now, have I told you of Attaribi, the city of a thousand gods? The city built on a slab over the valley of the Upti River? I haven't? Well, this is what happened -- "

* * *

I was travelling to Attaribi when I encountered an ancient man, who was walking in the opposite direction along the dusty road. He wore a dark robe and carried a staff.

"Are you going to the city of a thousand gods?" he said.

"To Attaribi, yes."

"Don't go there! Turn around now! If you go, you risk your life!" His voice sounded like the rubbing of rough branches.

"I've been looking forward to seeing the Avenue of Temples," I said, "and the mighty Boulevard of Burials, where the remains of the earthly manifestations of a thousand gods find their rest. Surely I'm safe enough, going just to see these, and to drink in the sight of the city hanging over the Upti. I hear it's a wonderful sight."

The man shook his head fiercely. "You won't be safe. The two gods are going to make the city fall into the valley!"

"What do you mean, the two gods?" I said, pulling on the sleeves of my grey robe and

leaning forward on my own walking stick. "I thought there were thousands."

"Thousands of gods, yes," he said, with a look of disgust. "But they're -- " He spat. " -- *nothing*. Only two have power. Two of them! The goddess Laepe, who is of the air. And the god Chloss, of the earth." The man tapped his left shoulder with his right hand. "It's that goddess's fault. She refuses to let the Eye of Vision, which she has held for the last four years, fall back into the hands of Chloss. They exchange the Eye each four years. But this time, no!"

"It's all very interesting," I said, starting to feel impatient to be on my way again. I hoped to reach the city by nightfall. "But why is this so dangerous to me?"

"Because, good woman," he said, "the city of Attaribi hovers over the precipice only by their grace. It's through their agreement that the fabled city sits high over the valley without risk of tumbling and shattering the temples and killing the many thousands who live there. Now, Chloss swears to rescind his half of the bargain and pull down the city. If he isn't given the Eye of Vision, he regards the agreement as broken!"

"I see," I said. "And there isn't any way they'll settle this, and let people go about their business?"

The old man laughed. It sounded like coughing, and as humourless. "Good woman, from your bearing and your simple clothes I judge you to be trained in an art, probably in the way of the sword. You know as well as I do how much the gods care if mere humans are swept away in their disagreements."

To that I said nothing. We wished each other luck on our respective journeys, and went our ways. I kept on for Attaribi, undeterred by the bitter old man's words.

As the old man had perceived, I had gone through training in the sword. Not just the sword, however, but the inner spirit as well. Among the temples I had visited during my training was one dedicated to Laepe, the goddess of air he had mentioned. At her temple, I had participated in the mysteries and learned some useful teachings.

Among those, I remembered a few: "If a goddess acts perversely," said the teaching, "look then to her attendants, and learn their frailty." And again: "Do you wear your goddess on your sleeve? Do you wear her? Do you wear her when the weather turns foul or stays fair, do you wear her like a gem upon a chain?" The words had a pleasant music.

I reached the city before evening fell, and immediately set about ascertaining the truth of the old man's words. The city wore her gayest. An air of frantic revelry hovered over the streets, which filled with costumed adherents to every sect imaginable on earth. At first it felt exhilarating. Then I remembered the mood of revellers in the gaolyards of that cruel city, Trixtallbar, who go on a fine drunken spree with the approval of the wardens. They party with abandon, for they know that half of them would be executed in the morning, soused or not. They prefer to go sodden to the axe, and drunken to oblivion.

These celebrants radiated some of that madness. They looked around sharply, eyes gleaming, their faces painted and their hands covered in silky gloves. Their tight smiles and darting glances spoke of pleasure-seeking -- yet also of desperation, as if such pleasure-seeking were running in short supply, and the hourglass were losing its sand.

Some of the men wore black tunics, and tended to slap their left shoulders in greeting each other -- adherents to Chloss, I learned. Many women, and a fair number of men, wore multicoloured costumes and bore somewhere on themselves -- sometimes on their clothing, sometimes on a decorative band, or on a ribbon or a belt or even on a placard -- fragments of Laepe's famous saying: "Do you wear your goddess -- ?" Many of these adherents also wore light-patches, made from the glowing ends of night-beetles, in the centre of their foreheads.

I noticed a parting in the crowd. People did not move away from whoever was coming through -- they simply turned away, as if a magical force compelled them to look elsewhere. Nothing compelled me to look away, however, and I saw a perfectly ordinary-looking young man walking down the avenue, with the strangest headpiece. He wore a solemn face, and a plain, grey robe. He went through the crowd to stand by a wall, from which vantage point he gazed over the revellers. No one looked at him.

Except me. The more I watched, the more I noticed how the eyes of the crowd would pass near him, above him, below him, and past him. They never seemed to see him. He had achieved a rare state of invisibility.

I walked up and stood beside him against the wall, as if I, too, wanted nothing more than to stand aside and watch the festival. His strange hat turned out to be a dark bottle, which he held balanced atop his head.

After a moment, I cleared my throat.

"Excuse me," I said. "I couldn't help but notice that you aren't in a very festive mood."

"Ah," he said. "So you see me."

"Indeed."

"Then may I guess you're from outside the city? Not an adherent to one of the major gods?"

I had already learned that while each of the thousands of gods had their adherents, almost all the gods had to share their adherents with Chloss and Laepe. A worshipper at the minor shrine of Cutantippi, the goddess of weaving, for instance, would likely also worship at one of Laepe's shrines, if not at the huge central place of worship on the Avenue of Temples itself.

"No," I said.

"And not of Hoocha?"

I'd never heard of such a god. I shook my head.

"I adhere to Hoocha, and no other," he said, as if that explained all.

Since he appeared ready to let it rest there, I had to encourage him to speak more. "What

about that bottle on your head?"

"Ah," he said, turning to meet my eyes with practised steadiness, so that the bottle had no chance to totter. "Then you truly are a stranger. Hoocha is among the oldest of gods, though not among the most prominent, these days." He gestured to the crowd in a dismissive way. "I am doing my three-day penance for Hoocha. Hoocha is the god of the Upti, the river far below us. I carry water from the river on my head, without spilling, for three days of each year. Unfortunately, this year it happens to fall during the days of festivals for Chloss and Laepe. Walking around the town is more hazardous."

"I noticed everyone averting their eyes. Is Hoocha so hated?"

"Hoocha is so revered. They don't even know it themselves. But the thousand gods know. This city sits perched high above the Upti -- so high that people forget it's down there. The gods, however, don't forget. They force their adherents to avert their eyes as a sign of respect, during the time of an adherent's penance."

"But it means you can't join in the revelry."

The man shrugged.

"So tell me," I said, "is it true that Chloss is going to pull Attaribi down from its perch above the river? I heard that there's a disagreement about some gem."

"Yes," he said. "Tonight. At midnight. Chloss so promises."

"But aren't you worried?" I said.

His eyes turned upward. "This water will rejoin Upti."

"And you'll be crushed! Doesn't that bother you?"

"There is that aspect of things," he said.

For the first time I saw a brief shimmer of fear in his eyes.

* * *

"Don't you know it's futile?" the disciple of Hoocha said to me as we walked down the crowded Avenue of Temples. I had learned his name to be Mikkel. People's eyes averted as we moved past, making me feel as though I, too, had become invisible.

"Why?" I said. "Why should I stand by while a whole city collapses? If Chloss will stand by and let the whole city fall, and if Laepe will do the same, why shouldn't someone else help? It goes against my grain to see a whole city of people die!"

"You must worship a complex goddess," he said.

"I don't worship anybody."

"Ah," he said in a disbelieving manner. "Still, it's futile."

"Why?"

"Because the Eye of Vision is lodged in the forehead of the statue of Laepe, and none but an adherent of Laepe can touch her statue unscathed. She will destroy all others who dare defile her."

"I'll have to take that risk."

"You're insane, then," he said.

"That may be."

"Do you mind if I watch?"

"Not at all."

I carried my walking stick, which served as a battle-stick in instances where I could ethically cause no physical harm to an opponent. I could hardly draw a sword against a faithful adherent to a misguided god, who thought she was doing the right thing. My stick, however, I could certainly raise.

We entered her temple without difficulty, although several large women stood without, gazing over those entering with a critical eye, and clutching battle-sticks of their own. They turned away several men dressed in Chloss-adherent garb.

Inside, Mikkell pointed to the statue of Laepe. He hardly needed to. She stood at the centre of the huge room, elevated slightly on a platform. Though of no more than human height, she had grandeur and presence: the statue, of gold, stood in a commanding pose counterbalanced by the expression of her face, faintly smiling, which spoke of peace and calm control. I had seen other Laepe icons, but none half as effective.

To boost her effectiveness, in the centre of her forehead shone a magnificent, green-tinted gem whose facets glittered in the shimmering torchlight and filtered sunlight of the temple interior. The gem formed the focal point of the entire chamber. If it appeared equally as magnificent to gods -- or, more likely, even more magnificent, upon whatever elevated plane they inhabited -- then I could understand why Laepe yearned to keep it beyond the agreed time, and why Chloss desired to have it delivered at the prearranged time. It shone with such glister and effulgence that my eyes could hardly leave it.

Close by, a group of Laepe adherents chanted the motions of the clock, to proudly underline the approach of midnight, which they insisted would be the moment when Laepe would show her supreme power in holding up Attaribi against the pulling force of Chloss.

Around the statue of Laepe herself, a set of heavies stood with battle-sticks, ready to defend it. The six of them had arranged themselves symmetrically.

I could not hope to defeat six and get past them to the statue -- but if three would stay on the other side, to keep guarding that front, I might only have to deal with three of them at a time.

The time-chanters continued, their voices rising slightly in pitch. Little time remained before midnight. In half an hour -- and now less than half an hour -- the agreement would be broken and the struggle between Chloss, pulling down, and Laepe, holding up, would begin.

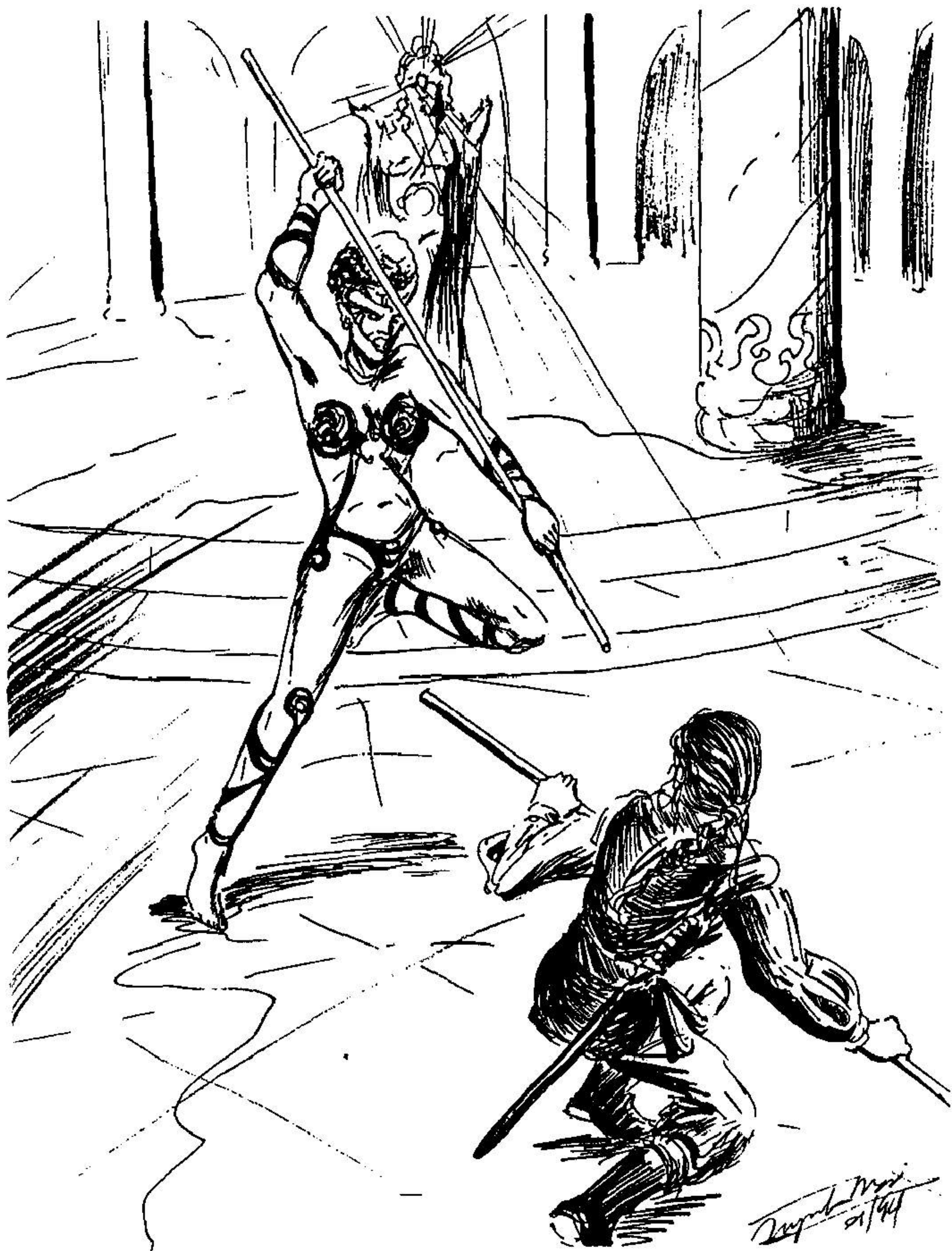
Attaribi could hardly risk finding out how strong Laepe was. I banged my walking stick against the floor of the temple and leapt at the nearest guard. Caught off guard for a moment, she hesitated long enough that I slammed one end of my stick on her arm, with a stroke that must have stung to the bone beneath her biceps. Whipping back the other end, I brought the other end up to slap her fighting stick out of her hands. She found her grip, however, and blocked the blow. Meanwhile two of her fellows closed around me, all equally large women. I adopted the stance of one-against-three, and pulled loose with my left hand the entire weight of my sword, locked in its sheath. The sheath formed a club I could use with no qualms, so long as the sword itself did not break free.

I entered the fighting trance, in which my entire body awakens to the fight. I cannot remember everything of the fight, for in one-against-three poise the mind surrenders its place at the top of the bodily hierarchy. These guards proved good with their fighting sticks -- but having been chosen for weight and strength, they failed in the area of speed. Within moments two backed away, one clutching her head for a moment before blacking out. Two other guards from the far side of the monument joined them. On their side they moved with the energy and fire of righteous anger that I, a grey-clothed wanderer, would attempt to move against their goddess. That anger fought against them at the same time, for it made them strike awkward and thoughtless blows, easily blocked and easily turned against them. Two more fell away. I faced two only, now. Within minutes I would be past them, and able to leap onto the dais holding the statue of Laepe.

The remaining two fought with energy. I pushed forward, forcing them nearer the statue, which compelled them to fight closer to each other. Their movements growing constricted, I let down guard for the split second that would draw them into my trap, and delivered the two-in-one swing of my walking stick that knocked both their heads in quick succession. They toppled like dolls. I tensed my legs to leap over their fallen bodies for the dais --

When *she* yelled and leapt between me and the statue. I thought for a moment she stood on the elevated stand -- but then I saw that she stood at natural height, several heads above me -- and clutched a fighting stick longer than any I had ever seen. She brought it down in a crashing blow toward my head. Such was my alarm at the suddenness of her appearance that I could only use a straight, flat block of her blow, with my stick above my head, and felt the force of the attack rattle down through my skeleton. I eased to one side in a quick motion, shifting into the one-against-one mode, warily snapping my sheathed sword again to my belt, since I would need every ounce of skill in wielding my walking stick. Our sticks clattered against each other. I had met a master. Tall as she was, she moved with the grace of the panther and stood, when she chose, with the solidity of the tree. I had every respect for her abilities. I made her respect mine.

But I could move no closer to the goddess than before. I heard the time-chanters pass the fifteen-minute mark before midnight, then the ten-minute. If I fought more furiously, I would



create openings my opponent could hardly fail to notice. If I put more strength behind my blows I would tire too rapidly, which again my opponent would turn to her advantage. The chanters announced the five-minute mark. I could move no closer. Four minutes now remained before midnight, before the broken agreement led to a broken Attaribi and the broken city crumbled and plunged into the steep valley of the Upti --

A huge uproar shook the temple. People cried out -- *the Eye of Vision has vanished!* -- and the attention of my tall opponent broke for a split second -- just long enough that I could nip her stick aside and give her a quick shock to the side of her head, in her temple -- enough to throw her off guard and out of commission for the handful of heartbeats I needed to beat a retreat, guarding my departure with warily-poised walking stick while still swift of foot, sliding between people and disappearing out the front door amidst the confusion caused by --

It sunk into me then. Someone had managed it. While I had been fighting the tall guardian, someone had stolen the Eye of Vision. I heard the voices around me: *I was staring at the goddess herself -- how can I say it? -- one moment the Eye of Vision was there, shining from her forehead -- and the next -- it was gone! -- it was a miracle! -- how can it be anything but a miracle! -- it just disappeared!*

In the street I saw the head-held, dark bottle of Upti water moving rapidly down the street. I ran to catch up. Mikkel flashed a smile at me. I saw where we were headed. The shrine of Chloss, on the Avenue of Temples! As we ran, he opened his clenched hands just enough to let a single gleaming facet look out.

"How did you -- ?" I managed.

"I walked up and took it!"

"No one saw you?"

"Of course not!"

I had no time to ask more. The ground shook. Mikkel managed to keep his feet -- and his bottle atop his head -- and rushed into the shrine of Chloss. Inside, people were milling in the excitement of the last minute before midnight, when Chloss would show his hand. A priest stood before the bulky ebony statue of Chloss himself, an impressively moody piece, with his hands outstretched, intoning the virtues of Chloss and benevolence of Chloss and might of Chloss and omnipotence of Chloss --

Mikkel popped the gem into one of the priest's hands just as he was making the Gesture of Chloss, slapping his right shoulder.

To all the world it appeared as if he had pulled the radiant gem from his shoulder. I nearly laughed, seeing the wide-eyed startlement with which he greeted the appearance of the gem. He cried out in alarm.

He collected himself enough -- even despite the increased shaking of the ground as the clocks struck midnight -- to turn to the statue of Chloss and slap the gem into place.

The temple chamber suddenly seemed brighter by the light of a dozen torches.

And if the city had been swept up in its own revelry *before* midnight --

Afterwards, the revelry became a veritable deluge that must have swirled and flooded the streets and even overflowed the edges of the vast ledge that held Attaribi, and dripped down into the Upti's flowing waters as they rushed along the valley far below.

The city shook again with Chloss's might as I followed Mikkel out of the shrine of Chloss. I saw him tripping, trying to go down the stairs while the stairs moved beneath his feet. He was losing his precious bottle of Upti water. His head, as he tried to keep his balance, went one direction while the bottle flew off the other.

Dropping my walking stick, I reached out. The bottle danced out of reach for a moment --

I leaned forward, lost my own balance, and tumbled down the stairs after Mikkel, missing the bottle altogether.

When I stood up, feeling my bruises from the stone steps, I saw where the bottle had landed.

Flat on Mikkel's stomach where he lay on the pavement on his back. He clutched his middle in pain. Liquid leaked out its constricted neck. I snatched it up before more could spill.

"Tell me, Mikkel," I said when he recovered. "How did you do it? You said that no one but one of Laepe's adherents could touch her." An idea flashed on me. "Does that mean that actually *you* are --"

He held a finger to his lips. "Hush!" He fished a piece of paper out of his pocket. It read, "Do you wear your goddess on your sleeve? Do you wear her? Do you wear her when the weather turns foul or stays fair, do you wear her like a gem upon a chain?" Then it continued, to finish the quotation, "Or do you hide her like a true believer, beneath your heart, beneath your art, as your most vital part? Show her, and others will react; hide her, and *act*."

I folded the piece of paper and returned it to his pocket.

"So what other secrets are you hiding, oh religious adherent who worships only Hoocha?"

It turned out the bottle that he had held atop his head, which I had bruised myself to save, contained not even a drop of Upti water.

It contained the finest wine.

As I said, the revelries *after* midnight....

* * *

Contented with the tale, Frenitte and Yokine took the cakes that Dyse had baked for them, and went down the trail into town.

Dyse entered her house again, then returned to the porch with another cake. She put it on a mat, and called out.

"All right," she said. "You can come out now."

The girl emerged from beneath the large rock in the garden.

"You knew I was here?" the girl said, a little breathlessly. Her eyes had a frightened look.

"Of course," Dyse said. "And I know why you were there. So, what's your decision? Do I speak truth to these other children, or do I lie?"

"Oh," she said, coming hesitantly nearer. Her eyes moved down to the cake on the mat. Her legs moved more quickly then. "You tell the truth. You tell the truth to them. I'm sorry I said anything to them! What do I do now?"

She sat beside Dyse on the porch and picked up the cake. Crumbs fell into the palm of her hand. She licked them up, and finally smiled. Then her worried expression returned. "They'll *laugh* at me now. Oh, Oldie, what do I do now? You tell them the truth -- and now they'll make fun of me because you do! I was so *sure* you couldn't be -- they told me your stories, and I *knew* you were lying -- but when I hear one from your mouth, I *know* equally well that they're true!"

Dyse smiled. She pulled a second cake from her robe, and added to the first in the girl's hand.

"Don't tell them," Dyse said.

"What?"

"You have the knowledge -- "

"But they'll *laugh*."

"You have the knowledge," Dyse said. "Now -- *hide* it."

"I shouldn't tell them the truth?"

Dyse tried to say nothing, to let the girl see the answer for herself. Then, giving in, she said, "How will they know the difference? And does it matter?"

After the girl had followed her friends on the trail to the village, Dyse gathered herself up, stood staring over the wooded valley, and ran an old saying through her head:

Do you wear your goddess on your sleeve? Do you wear her? Do you wear her when the weather turns foul or stays fair, do you wear her like a gem upon a chain? Or do you hide her like a true believer, beneath your heart, beneath your art, as your most vital part? Show her, and others will react; hide her, and act. Hide the goddess! Hide the goddess!

The Dancer

Derek Edwards

Garok sweltered in his metal armour and furs beneath the hot Sengi sun. He wiped his grimy hand across his sopping wet brow, flicking away drops of water. He slapped his shaggy charger's rump with the flat of his broadsword and spat harsh, Northern oaths. The lathering destrier whickered and blew angrily, bucking and leaping in protest. The horse wasn't built for the South. It couldn't go faster without rest and water.

Garok muttered vile oaths. He left his war-torn home far to the North, crossed the Great Sea and left his wives and children behind him to get to Sengi. He was on a quest to find the Sengi goddess called the Dancer. She was fabled to control men's hearts and the very elements themselves with her magical dance. Garok doubted she was more than another tribal witch.

Garok caught sight of the little Sengi valley at the foot of what passed for a mountain in the South. He snorted derisively. The Sengi wouldn't call the grassy hill a mountain if they saw the towering Northern mountains, he thought. Golden braids flying, he spurred his horse forward. The big stud's heavy hooves tore up the knee-high grasses, kicking up clods of dirt and turf.

As he crested the valley's lip he saw the Sengi village. Reining in his horse, he spat in disgust at the little cluster of adobe-thatched huts ringing a village centre. The crude homes would never withstand a Northern winter or seige. He could conquer the village single-handedly.

The Sengi were small and their oak-coloured skins wouldn't turn his blade. He couldn't discern any warriors among the crowd. And there were no effective weapons within easy reach. The Sengi were gathered around a circle of kindling, entertaining each other with songs and stories.

Garok charged into the village, brandishing his sword. "Where is the Dancer?" He roared.

The Sengi blinked back at him. They whispered musically and reverently, fondling his furs and golden hair. Garok tossed them away in disgust by their waist-length hair.

Bare-breasted women clamoured around him, offering him foolish-looking strings of flowers. They caressed his hot steel breastplate and ran their fingers through his thick fur clothes. His battle-mount snorted and reared. His hooves flashed out at the crowd as he reared and bit.

He seized a woman by her ebony tresses and put his sword to her throat. He searched the crowd, looking for someone wearing whatever passed for a crown in Sengi. The villagers may not have spoken any of the trade languages, but he suspected that the leader did. Someone had to know how to communicate with the civilized world for them to remain unconquered so long.

Hands pawed him. He shrugged them off. "Where is your leader?" he demanded.

The response was a garble of unintelligible musical syllables.

"Your leader," he repeated, pointing to his head and mimicking placing a crown upon his brow. "Your leader!"

The Sengi voices rose musically. "Majeekah!" they proclaimed.

Magic? He grunted angrily and repeated his crude imitation. The fools thought he was a magician? "Your leader!" he roared harshly.

A pretty, nymphlike lass grabbed him by the arm and pulled him along behind her.

She led him to a plain adobe cottage identical to all the others. The foolish village wench was probably taking him to her bed. Garok tried to pull away. There would be plenty of time for play later. He had to find the village's chieftain. He had to find the Dancer.

He ducked his head as he stepped inside the adobe hut. There was no furniture, just a mat of interwoven blades of grass on the floor. A mature woman sat on the mat. She had elaborate garlands of wild flowers braided into her hair.

She was as tall and strapping as a Northern woman. She had strong eyes and held her head majestically high. The Sengi woman shouldn't intimidate him. He was a man and no Southern woman could ever intimidate a Northern berserker. But somehow she did.

"Greetings, Garok," she said. Her hypnotic voice was tiered. Soprano, alto, and contralto spoke all at once. How had she known who he was? How had she spoken to him in his own tongue?

"I am Majeekah," she replied. "The Queen. I can hear your thoughts. Great warrior, I know the vital mission your chief has entrusted to you."

Garok began to grow irritable. "You know who I seek?"

"The Dancer," Majeekah said simply, but her voice made the words dramatic.

"Where is she?" Garok demanded. His hand itched for the sharkskin hilt of his broadsword.

"She will descend when the night covers us. You may see her then."

"I'll see her now," Garok snorted derisively.

"No." The imperative was irresistible.

"Tonight," Garok agreed.

"Sit, please," Majeekah sang. She made a wide sweep of her arm, indicating the mat. "Tell me why you have come from so far away."

"You can read my mind," Garok said angrily.

"But you don't like it," she replied. "The rhythm of your thoughts is harsh and angry. You prefer that I speak to you aloud."

"How did you learn my tongue?" He didn't like women who were more intelligent than he.

"I know many tongues," Majeekah said. "I am the Sengi's seer. I must be able to communicate with the outside world to bring my people more songs and stories."

"Introduce me to the Dancer and I'll tell you my story."

Majeekah's eyes twinkled. Was she laughing at him? He'd decapitate her. "Is yours an interesting tale?"

"I've travelled hundreds of miles from the North to get here."

"Tell."

Garok recounted the tale of his treacherous voyage through the mountain passes, the month-long trip across the Great Sea, and his ride through the Sengi plain. He told her about the mission his chieftain had entrusted to him and told her about the unending civil war his tribe faced.

Majeekah listened raptly. She leaned close to him, her eyes closed as she concentrated on him. As he paused for breath, she asked him all manner of questions about his chieftain and his horse. She asked to see his sword. She rubbed it and sniffed the steel. She pestered him with questions until he was sure she could think of no more.

"Thank you," she said, rising. "It is time."

"Will the Dancer come back with me?"

Majeekah's eyes twinkled. "The Dancer cannot help you."

Garok's eyes darkened and twisted with rage. His face was a mix of blatant shock and outrage. "She must!" he roared. "My people will destroy each other without her help."

Majeekah nodded coolly. "Your people will destroy each other."

Garok blinked back at her, stunned. He grabbed his broadsword's wirebound hilt and half-drew his blade before Majeekah's powerful stare froze his arm in mid-draw.

"Perhaps you will understand when you see the Dancer. Follow me."

* * *

The Sengi gathered around a blazing bonfire. The ebony sky sparkled with stars as bright as bleached bones. Majeekah sat closest to the dancing flames, her musicians behind her. Garok stood outside the circle, grunting in distaste at the savage ceremony. He stared up at the grassy mountain, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Dancer.

Majeekah gestured for her musicians to begin. They beat a peaceful rhythm on their deer-skin drums. The rhythm was too lazy and slow. It didn't edify him like his tribe's pounding war

drums urging him on to fight, faster and harder, until he crushed his enemy and severed his head.

Majeekah sang, summoning the Dancer in lilting melodies. Garok looked up to the mountain. The Dancer dwelled somewhere there. He would have to find it.

A black figure flashed through the night and landed in the centre of the circle of flame. Garok stared at her intently. He could only see her silhouette. She was tall, lithe, her limbs long and sculpted.

His eyebrow raised. The Dancer's silhouette merged with Majeekah's voice. The Sengi fell into a trance as the Dancer became the music and song. They stared at her blankly. Garok caught fire. His blood boiled. He had to have this woman. She was the most desirable woman he had ever seen. She undulated slowly before him, blurring his vision as if she were under water. She twisted to and fro, summoning him with gyrating hips and thrashing waist.

The Dancer made him forget his wives. Even his mission. He had to have her. Slowly, he advanced towards the fiery ring, holding his naked sword before him.

Majeekah glanced at him. Her eyes sparkled, but she didn't move. Garok strode past her. The wall of flame burnt his beard and braids. He was about to plunge through the fire when the Dancer stopped. The flame receded. The Dancer gazed at him. Her eyes were as white as virgin snow. He stepped forward.

The Dancer vanished.

Roaring in outrage, Garok beat his hamfists against his chest.

"Dancer!" he bellowed. "Come back!"

"You are not worthy," Majeekah said. Garok started. He hadn't heard the Sengi Queen's approach. She could have stuck a dagger in his back. He was getting careless.

He grabbed her by the wrist. "Where is the Dancer?"

Majeekah stared at him. "The Dancer is not for you."

Garok lifted his sword and threatened to smite her. No sorceress' tricks would deter him.

"She dwells at the peak."

Garok shoved her aside. He pointed his blade at her. "I am taking the Dancer," he said.

Majeekah stood back, framed by the dying flames. She bowed her head. The Sengi were still in their trance. Majeekah sat down beside them and sang again. Garok didn't listen to the song. He untethered his horse and beat it with his blade until it galloped for the mountains.

* * *

The mountain proved too treacherous for his battle-steed. Garok dismounted and led his charger on foot. The horse protested every step as the Northern barbarian dragged him to the summit.

Pushing through a tangle of trees, Garok stumbled into a clearing. There was a small fire flickering in the centre. The Dancer sat by the flame, illuminated by its incandescence.

She seemed different than before. He wasn't overwhelmed by the surge of desire he felt for her earlier.

"Majeekah told me you would come," the Dancer said, placing her hands perilously close to the flame. "You need my help."

Garok snarled. "I saw the power you have over the Sengi. You can bring peace to my tribe."

The Dancer stood. She was as tall as he was. That surprised him. She closed her eyes. "I will help as best I can. I will go with you."

"Fool!" Majeekah's voice boomed in the air. "You cannot help them! You cannot help them!"

The Dancer stood defiantly, staring up at the sky. "I can help them," she said. "I will help them!"

Garok beamed. His chieftain would make him a lieutenant for succeeding in his quest.

* * *

Garok paraded his prize before the gathered Northern barbarians. The divided tribe had their drums set up and their swords by their sides. The Dancer sat in the middle of a circle of flame. Crossbowmen had her covered. If she tried anything they'd pierce her with their bolts.

"Dance as you did in Sengi, witch woman," Garok hissed. "Bring us peace. Dance!"

He took his seat next to his chieftain on the hard ground. The sky was clear and beautiful. Perfect fighting weather.

The chieftain, a burly red-bearded man, signalled for the music to begin. They began to beat out hard, triumphant rhythms on their drums. They played their victory song.

The Dancer jerked as the rhythm struck her. Her arms slashed out like swords. Her legs thrust like spears. She was trapped in the war drum's beat.

The barbarians beat their drums faster to the familiar war rhythms. They sang their fierce battle songs. The Dancer succumbed to the music's overwhelming power. She spun faster and faster, her limbs slashing and cutting. Her eyes glowed red as she pirouetted and leapt. She

transformed into something hideous, a banshee, a succubus from the depths of Hel. Horns sprouted from her forehead. Her teeth became fangs, her fingers claws, as she shrieked and ripped at the air. She was a slave to the song's spirit.

The sky darkened. Fierce banshee storms swept from the north, howling and screaming, pelting snow at the barbarian tribes.

Bloodlust overwhelmed Garok. He reached for his sword and glared at his beloved chieftain. He saw only an enemy, a devil as hideous as the Dancer had become. Berserk, Garok charged, screaming fierce battle cries. He severed his chieftain's head with one blow and sent it sailing.

The other barbarians grabbed up their weapons too, and hacked and slashed each other to quivering hunks of red meat.

The black sky above cracked with thunder and lightning. Heavy snow pounded the earth and the wind pummelled the Northern tribe.

* * *

The Dancer lay still among the carnage. The circle of fire had burned itself out. She wept uncontrollably, trapped in the circle of twisted, mangled bodies. She had never experienced such violent music. It rent her heart. She looked down at Garok's sword-hacked body. His guts spilled over the fresh white snow in a big, red puddle.

She stood up, still staring at the dead swordsman. She would never dance for strangers again. Never.

The air around her shimmered as she vanished from the North forever, leaving the warriors' mutilated bodies behind her.

Bloodstone

Glenn DeTurk

"By the Three!" Jarna swore as her slashing longsword glanced harmlessly off the black dragon's thick scales once again. "I'm going to kill that son-of-a-Demon wizard when we get back!"

"If we get back," Ingo corrected her. The twelve-foot-tall Endimian Giant whacked the dragon's knobby, wedge-shaped head with his staff. The tremendous blow shook the dragon's feathery mane, but had no further effect.

"Always the optimist!" Jarna snarled. She glanced up at her partner of the last seven years. Blood flowed from three deep gouges on his neck where he had been raked by the dragon's claws. Ingo looked as exhausted as she felt.

Jarna was hot, tired, thirsty, hungry -- every muscle ached. They had been fighting for nearly two hours, and they were no closer now to defeating the dragon than when they began. This wasn't how it was supposed to go -- it was supposed to be easy. The wizard Syngfax had hired them to recover the Bloodstone -- a red fist-sized gem that was some kind of talisman -- from the dragon's lair. The Bloodstone had been stolen from him, Syngfax said, by an ordinary, run-of-the-mill green dragon.

"My apprentice Zinthe will go with you," Syngfax had told them in his oily voice. "Not that you'll need her, of course, but just in case -- you know how dragons can be."

Jarna *did* know about dragons. Even green dragons possessed some of the magic of the dreamsong. "Are you sure Zinthe is capable?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," Syngfax answered quickly.

That had been a bald-faced lie. Jarna cursed herself twice -- once for not seeing through the lie immediately, and a second time for not turning back the moment she found out that Zinthe was fresh out of the academy.

"I'd go with you myself," Syngfax had gone on easily, "but I'm too busy with more important matters."

Too busy! Jarna thought. *I should have known when a wizard says he's "too busy" to go with you, he means it's too dangerous!...*

"Look out!" Ingo cried, rousing Jarna from her thoughts. At the last possible second, Jarna ducked under the dragon's flailing tail. The double-spiked tip whistled past her ear.

That was close! Jarna thought. *My concentration is slipping.* That was how dragon magic worked. Dragons used their dreamsong to induce daydreams. Then, when your attention was gone,....

Jarna tossed back her tangled auburn hair and shook her head in an effort to clear out the cobwebs. Then she looked up. The old black bull dragon looming over her was magnificent. His thorny black scales flared as he breathed, glistening with an oily green, blue and purple sheen in the torchlight. Sharp, bony spikes bristled along his backbone, from his backward-curving horns to the tip of his thick, powerful tail.

Jarna had never seen a black dragon before today -- until today, she had thought they existed only in legend. She had seen greens, of course, and a few yellows, and even fewer reds. But she had never seen a blue, much less a black -- in these days dragons simply didn't live that long.

Again Jarna felt the tug of the dreamsong. And as she fought to resist it, her eyes were drawn irresistibly back to the dazzling red gem on the floor under the dragon. The Bloodstone blazed in the murky gloom, glittering with its own inner fire.

"What does it do?" Jarna had asked Syngfax without much interest.

Syngfax mumbled something about the Bloodstone being a "source of power."

"If you say so," Jarna agreed with a bored nod. "I really don't care what it is -- as long as we get paid."

But now, standing here face to face with the black dragon who was protecting the Bloodstone as if it were more valuable than life itself, Jarna *did* care what the Bloodstone was. First and foremost, she cared because her life and Ingo's were at stake. The old black was by far the most powerful dreamer she had ever felt, and she knew they would be lucky to escape alive. *Does the Bloodstone have anything to do with the power of his dreamsong?* she wondered.

Jarna found herself caring what the Bloodstone was for another reason -- a reason that brought back feelings Jarna thought she had outgrown. *What could the Bloodstone possibly be, she wondered, to make it worth the life of such a beautiful and powerful creature as the old black?*

Jarna was surprised that she would even ask such a question -- and yet part of her was not so surprised. *There was a time when I fought for more than just money,* Jarna remembered. *A time when I was guided by a sense of right and wrong.*

What happened? Jarna asked herself. But she already knew the answer: over the years, black and white choices became muddled shades of grey, and somewhere along the way she gave up trying to make them.

Jarna pulled herself free from her sticky web of thoughts and squinted up, trying to focus on the dragon. Trailing wisps of smoke from his nostrils, the dragon's yellow-fanged head swayed hypnotically on his long curving neck; his slitted red eyes glowed like hot coals, tracing arcs through the gloom. As Jarna watched the curls of smoke drift away into the darkness, her thoughts drifted away with them....

"When I save three thousand cronins, I'm getting out of this business," Jarna had told Ingo last night by their campfire. "I'm going to buy a tavern in Tellhorn or Hasa -- one of those peaceful northern towns -- and settle down."

Ingo only laughed at her. "And I suppose you're going to take up knitting too?"

"No, this time I really mean it!" Jarna insisted. "When Syngfax pays us for this job, I'll have over fifteen hundred and forty cronins."

Ingo laughed again -- a deep, rumbling belly laugh that shook the ground. "You mean that you actually managed to save forty cronins from the last job?"

Jarna had shut up. Saving money *was* a problem. Half the time she didn't get paid -- either because the object of her quest was not to be found, or because the pathetic wizard she was working for skipped town before she could deliver the worthless piece of junk she had risked her life to recover. When she did get paid, her gambling and drinking debts ate up most of the profit. The remainder flowed through her fingers like water, or (to be more accurate) down her throat like ale...

The dragon's head suddenly lashed out toward Jarna, snapping her back from her thoughts. In one well-oiled motion, Jarna nimbly sidestepped the glistening yellow fangs and thrust her blade up into one of the dragon's slitted eyes.

At the last second, the dragon dodged to the right, and Jarna's sword was turned by the thick bony ridge that protected the eye socket. Jarna swore under her breath, knowing that she would not get many such chances.

Just then, Ingo cried out: "He's going to fire!"

The acrid, swamp-rot odour of methane filled the cavern as Jarna sprinted after Ingo back toward the tunnel through which they had come. As the deadly furnace blast of yellow dragonfire roared behind them, they dove into the mouth of the tunnel and crawled away from the blistering heat and licking flames.

When the dragonfire finally sputtered and went out, Jarna and Ingo were left alone in darkness.

"What now?" Ingo asked. "We can't fight the old black without a wizard – he's the most powerful dreamer I've ever felt."

"Aye," Jarna agreed. "But if we don't bring back the Bloodstone, we don't get paid."

"If we die, we don't get paid either," Ingo grumbled.

Before Jarna could respond, a wan witchlight sprang up around them. There, huddled against the wall of the tunnel, was the apprentice, Zinthe.

Jarna rose to her full six-foot height and put her hands on her hips. "Come here," she ordered.

The skinny little apprentice wizard, lost in the voluminous depths of an oversized robe, stood with her head bowed in shame before the tall, muscular, battle-hardened warrior. Jarna pushed back Zinthe's cowl and studied her.

Zinthe had small delicate features that, Jarna thought, might in time be attractive. Her pasty white skin was marred by acne, but that too time could cure. Less certain was whether Zinthe would outgrow the nervous self-doubt betrayed by her trembling chin and by a nervous twitching around her eyes.

She's so young, Jarna thought. *Will she be of any use?* Jarna would have thought the girl hopeless except for the intelligence that sparkled in her alert dark eyes.

"I'm sorry I ran away," Zinthe stammered, staring at the ground. "I was afraid."

"Never mind," Jarna told her. She raised Zinthe's chin until their eyes met. "Only fools are not afraid. It's how we act in the face of fear that matters."

Just then, Ingo raised his hand. "Listen!"

At first, Jarna heard nothing. Then, at the edges of hearing, she heard the distant, bloodthirsty squeals of Dembats echoing down through the stone tunnels and caverns.

"What is it?" Zinthe asked.

"Dembats – vampire Demon bats with eight-foot wingspans," Ingo explained with a grimace. "Lovely creatures."

"Now that the Dembats have smelled blood, nothing will keep them away," Jarna added, as if thinking out loud.

Then Jarna's tone became firm. "We can't stay here -- we wouldn't stand a chance in this narrow tunnel. We'll have to take our chances with the dragon."

"Aye," Ingo agreed. "He won't be able to fire again for at least ten minutes. And out there we'll at least have some room to manoeuvre."

Jarna turned to Zinthe. "Can you protect us from the dreamsong?"

Zinthe took a deep breath. "I can try -- it seems I don't have much choice."

"Good girl," Jarna said. She noticed that Zinthe's chin had stopped trembling.

Jarna, Ingo and Zinthe slipped out of the tunnel and crossed the cavern. The torches they had discarded before flickered fitfully on the damp floor. Stalactites and stalagmites gleamed like wet fangs in the uncertain light -- their weird shadows jerking and jittering around the cavern.

The dragon, curled up in the dark recess in which they had first found him, did not move as they approached. Finally, as they stood before him, the old black wearily lifted his head to study them. Cradled between his forepaws was the throbbing red Bloodstone.

Jarna stared at the stone for several seconds, transfixed by the pulsating red light which seemed to fill her mind. When she tore her eyes away and shifted her gaze to meet the dragon's, Jarna shivered; for behind his slitted red eyes there was a strange, calculating intelligence. Then Jarna saw something else in the dragon's eyes -- a deep overwhelming sorrow -- and for a brief moment she felt sorry for the beast.

With every passing moment, the Dembats' greedy screeches grew louder -- more insistent -- closer. Now Jarna could hear the low flutter of their leathery wings.

"Let's take him now," Jarna shouted, "before the Dembats arrive!"

But it was already too late. For just then, with an explosive chuffing sound, the Dembats flittered out of an opening high on the side of the cavern. To make matters worse, Jarna began to feel the tug of the dreamsong. Unbidden thoughts swirled in her mind, sucking her down.

At that moment, Zinthe stepped forward and raised her hands. The fog in Jarna's mind cleared. Looking up, she saw the dragon's eyes widen in surprise.

As she walked across the cavern behind Jarna and Ingo, Zinthe began to feel the dreamsong probing and prodding her mind, stimulating thoughts and memories. Sensing that Jarna and Ingo were not yet affected, Zinthe made no attempt to block the dreamsong. Instead, she used her training to isolate those thoughts induced by the dreamsong and block them out.

Two memories were so powerful that they spilled over momentarily into consciousness. For one proud moment, she stood once more with the council of wizards as one of the twelve chosen initiates. Then, as she repressed that memory, Zinthe found herself at her mother's freshly-covered grave. The terrible aching loss that she had felt then swept through her again like a chill wind.

Clenching her teeth in determination, Zinthe blocked out that memory too. It was then that she realized that Jarna and Ingo were falling under the spell of the dreamsong. Stepping forward and raising her hands, Zinthe created a barrier, blocking the dreamsong from them.

Zinthe was totally unprepared for what happened next. As the strands of the dreamsong aimed at Jarna and Ingo were severed, a backwash of their thoughts and dreams flooded from their minds directly into hers.

Because her willpower was already stretched to capacity maintaining the barrier against the dreamsong, Zinthe was unable to block out those thoughts as she had her own. Jarna and Ingo's innermost hopes, ambitions, regrets and desires -- every shade, every nuance, every subtlety that made them who they were -- streamed into her in one unfiltered blast. Their memories became hers.

The blood Jarna and Ingo had spilled was spilled again by Zinthe's hand; she suffered their pain; she shared their joy and friendship. In an instant, Zinthe knew them better than she had ever known anyone -- knew them almost as well as she knew herself. Jarna and Ingo became a part of her, or rather, she became partly them.

Zinthe struggled to maintain the barrier against the dreamsong while the unexpected rush of thoughts and memories blasted her mind. Somehow, the barrier held.

Jarna's mind cleared when Zinthe intercepted the dreamsong. She glanced inquiringly at Ingo. When the Giant nodded back that he was ready, Jarna gathered herself and leapt into the "pocket" -- the sweet spot close enough to the dragon that he could not flame her without scorching himself, and close enough that he could not bring his tail into play, yet far enough away to be out of range of fang and claw.

Without the distraction of the dreamsong dulling her reflexes, Jarna wielded her sword with a skill and precision wrought from twenty years of hand-to-hand combat. Her flashing sword sliced the webbing between the dragon's claws, making the old black howl in pain and rage. She flicked open a cut on the dragon's nostril, and his thick black blood began to drip and foam and spatter. As she fought, Jarna looked for an opening to strike at the spard -- the triangular spot just above the breastbone where the dragon's scales were soft enough for a sword to penetrate.

As always, Ingo stood behind Jarna, fending off the dragon's fangs and claws with his staff, giving her time to react if the dragon manoeuvred his tail into play. Now, with the chittering Dembats overhead, Ingo also watched her back.

Jarna heard a dull thud, followed by a squeal. She glanced back in time to see a crushed Dembat plummet to the ground a few feet behind her.

"Thanks, Ingo!" Jarna shouted. "I owe you one!"

"I'm -- just -- looking -- out -- for -- my -- own -- interests," Ingo grunted, punctuating each word with a blow to the dragon's head, which had swooped down toward them.



Jarna pitched in, hacking at the dragon's neck with her sword until he finally retracted his head. "Your own interests?" she asked, breathing hard.

Ingo smiled. "If I let you die, who will repay the money you owe me?"

Before she could respond, a sudden movement caught the corner of Jarna's eye. She looked up. The fluttering Dembats were converging on Zinthe.

The next few seconds seemed to move in slow motion. Pointing up at the Dembats, Jarna sprinted toward Ingo. Ingo dropped his staff, bent down, and cupped his hands. Without breaking stride, Jarna ran into Ingo's hands and leapt.

Propelled by her leap and by the strength of Ingo's boost, Jarna hurtled through the air like a missile. Holding her sword in front of her, she skewered one Dembat near the apex of her flight. Then, twisting in mid-air, Jarna landed on her feet and tumbled to cushion her fall.

As she rolled to her feet, Jarna's blade was already arcing upward. In one motion, she sliced down through the neck of a second Dembat and then twisted her blade up, gutting a third. Before she could extricate her blade, yet another Dembat dove toward her. Jarna knew she would not be able to kill it in time.

As the furry Dembat's ripping claws reached out for Jarna's face, red lightning suddenly flashed from Zinthe's hand, striking the Dembat in the chest. The screaming Dembat burst into flames; its charred and blackened husk tumbled to the ground at Jarna's feet.

As she turned to thank Zinthe, Jarna felt the full strength of the dreamsong begin to rush back. Then Zinthe's brow knotted in concentration, and the dreamsong was gone again. Jarna's mind cleared just in time to pull Zinthe out of the way of the dragon's lashing tail.

Ingo was fighting for his life when Jarna rejoined him. In one continuous flurry of blows, his deft and lightning-quick staff smacked away the dragon's tearing claws, gnashing teeth, and whipping tail.

Drenched in sweat, puffing hard, Ingo said: "He'll be able to fire again soon. Let's finish him while we can!"

Jarna nodded grimly and leapt back into battle.

The dragon fought valiantly. But in the end, without the dreamsong distracting Jarna and Ingo, he was overmatched. As the great dragon began to tire, Jarna's flashing blade opened more and more cuts, and his thick black ichor began to pool at her feet. Once more, Jarna felt sorry for the old beast.

When the dragon began to breathe fire, Ingo was ready. At the first whiff of methane, Ingo rammed his staff into the dragon's left nostril and twisted with all his strength up and to the right.

The dragonfire gushed out of the dragon's right nostril, harmlessly blasting the roof of the cavern.

Jarna seized the chance. Jumping up, she plunged her sword deep into the soft flesh of the spard. The dragon roared in pain -- a long, wailing cry of anguish that rattled the ground. Jarna felt the great dragon quiver beneath her sword as she grasped the hilt with both hands and prepared to drive the blade down into the dragon's heart.

Suddenly, Zinthe shouted: "No, wait!"

Jarna hesitated. There was something about Zinthe's voice that was different. It had an assurance -- a command -- that had not been there before.

The dragon's neck twisted; its head swung down. *In another moment it will be too late*, Jarna thought. *I must kill the dragon now, or be killed myself.* Her muscles tensed, but still she hesitated.

The dragon's head stopped three feet from Jarna. He looked at her with sad eyes, already beginning to cloud over, and somehow she knew that she had nothing more to fear.

Then, in her mind, the dragon spoke: *I am Xygen, last of the black dragons. Who are you, dragonslayer?*

"I am Jarna," she replied out loud.

For a long moment, dragon and dragonslayer looked at each other with mutual respect and admiration. Then, with a great effort, Xygen lifted his head and looked at Ingo and Zinthe.

Who are you? Xygen asked, his surprisingly gentle voice filling their minds as well as Jarna's.

"I am Ingo from Endime," the Giant answered.

"And I am Zinthe, wizard's apprentice."

Xygen made a low, gurgling cough. But in their minds he laughed. *From this day forward you are no longer an apprentice, Zinthe -- you are a wizard!*

Jarna looked at Zinthe and was surprised at what she saw. There was strength in Zinthe's firm jaw; courage and power in her clear, steady eyes -- it was almost as if Zinthe had aged ten years in as many minutes.

Xygen coughed again. This time, dark blood frothed from his mouth. *I grow weary*, he said, his voice fading to a whisper in their minds. *Zinthe, tell them...*

Jarna heard no more. Zinthe appeared to listen for a moment longer. Then she turned to Jarna and Ingo. "Xygen has a final request: he wishes to take us into his dreamsong."

"It might be a trick," Ingo suggested, though the look on the Giant's face revealed that he believed no such thing.

"It's not a trick," Zinthe said. "Before we take the Bloodstone, Xygen wants to show us what it is."

Jarna looked up into the dragon's eyes. She saw that the old black would not beg -- he was as proud in defeat as he had been in life. Jarna glanced questioningly at Ingo, and Ingo nodded.

"Very well," Jarna agreed.

Kneeling down, Zinthe placed her hands on the Bloodstone, which was once again cradled in the dragon's claws. "Come," she said to Jarna and Ingo. "Place your hands around mine."

They did as Zinthe asked. Then suddenly, without warning, a blinding red light burst from the stone. Jarna's eyes snapped shut reflexively, but the dazzling red brilliance continued to explode in her skull. For a moment she seemed to be plunging toward the light. Then, in one heart-stopping instant, her mind twisted and she was hurtling away from it. Jarna felt a wind rushing against her face, and she opened her eyes.

Jarna gasped -- her mind reeled -- she was flying high over the earth! She closed her eyes, but the wind still rushed against her face. And now there was another strange sensation -- Jarna could feel the flex and pull of powerful wing muscles.

As Jarna cracked open her eyes, she realized that she *was* Xygen, or at least she was in his body -- seeing with his eyes -- feeling his thoughts. Part of her knew that this was only a memory -- that she was still standing in the cavern and Xygen was dying before her -- but it was so real....

As her initial fear subsided, Jarna gradually surrendered herself to the dreamsong. She was not the old black Xygen; she was a young green Xygen, full of life, bursting with healthy sexuality. Looking down now, with the eyes of a dragon accustomed to flight, Jarna appreciated the spreading panorama of snow-capped mountains and green valleys below her. Then, on a whim, she stiffened her wings and swooped down with breath-taking speed into a lush river valley, skimming the surface of the glassy silver river.

In the wink of an eye, the dreamsong changed. Now Jarna/Xygen was a mature red dragon, healthy and strong, winging over a dark blue lake flecked with whitecaps. There was a fine, sharp hunger in her belly, made all the finer and sharper by the taste of the freshly-killed deer held firmly between her jaws.

Banking into a turn, Jarna/Xygen landed with a rush of wings on a wide ledge, high on the face of a cliff. Waiting there, in the mouth of a cave, was Xygen's mate, the brilliant yellow dragon Xera. Xygen placed the carcass of the deer at Xera's feet and then lovingly nuzzled up against her, drinking in her warm, sweet, musky scent.

Xera made a soft, satisfied cooing sound. Attracted by the sound, Xygen and Xera's three

hatchlings poked their heads out of the cave. Then, smelling dinner, the pale-green hatchlings tumbled awkwardly out onto the ledge amid a chorus of hungry squawks and squeals.

The dreamsong changed again. Now Jarna/Xygen was a blue dragon, with a full belly, sitting on the same ledge. Xera, now a deep wine colour as she made the change from red to blue, was curled up beside Xygen, their tails intertwined. Older now, lazier, Xygen was content to soak up the warm sun and watch the younger green, red and yellow dragons play and feed and breed.

Then the dreamsong faded away, and Jarna was once more back in the cavern. There was a hollow, empty ache in her heart, as if the best part of her had just been torn away. By the looks on Ingo and Zinthe's faces, they had experienced the same visions, and they felt the loss just as keenly.

Xygen wheezed once and collapsed in a heap to the floor of the cavern. The glowing red embers of his eyes slowly faded and then went dark. But on Xygen's dark lips, Jarna thought she saw something that resembled a smile.

The Bloodstone trickled out from between Xygen's forepaws as the great dragon spasmed in one final death rattle. Then Xygen fell still, never to move again.

Ingo picked up the sparkling gem with a careful reverence. "Xygen's whole life is in here."

"Aye," Zinthe said. "The Bloodstone contains his life and much more."

"More?" Jarna asked.

"The Bloodstone contains the collected memories of everyone and everything that Xygen has ever sung his dreamsong to," Zinthe replied. "At an early age, Xygen recognized the value of life and found a way to preserve it."

For a long moment no one spoke while they all stared into the mesmerizing red depths of the stone in Ingo's hand. Then, in a hushed whisper, Ingo asked: "Why does Syngfax want the Bloodstone?"

Zinthe considered for a moment before she replied. "To a wizard, knowledge is power. The memories of the wizards Xygen fought would yield immense power to Syngfax."

As Zinthe finished speaking, thick black smoke began to pour from the dragon's eyes, and then he burst into flames. Jarna had seen this spontaneous combustion dozens of times before. But green dragons only smouldered. The old black blazed with a white-hot fire, and in a few seconds Xygen was reduced to a pile of charred embers.

As Ingo and Jarna entered Syngfax's chambers, Jarna noticed that the old feeble wizard who had hired them no longer looked so old or feeble. His beady black eyes studied them carefully as they approached.

Ingo removed the Bloodstone from the pouch at his side and held it up.

Syngfax's eyes riveted on the blazing gem. "You've brought it!" he rasped.

"Isn't that what you hired us to do?" Jarna asked drily.

"Yes, of course," Syngfax replied. He grabbed for the stone.

Ingo lifted the Bloodstone up out of the wizard's reach.

"Did you have trouble?" Syngfax asked, suddenly suspicious.

Jarna's green eyes glittered dangerously. "You mean the black dragon?"

"Black?" Syngfax feigned surprise. "I thought he was green."

Zinthe stepped out of the shadows. "And you thought we were fools," she said. Her eyes were steady and clear, her voice even.

Syngfax spun to face his apprentice. Then, as if seeing the change in her, he took a step back. "You will all be well paid for the stone," Syngfax said with a forced smile. "And I will recommend to the academy that you, Zinthe, be made a full wizard immediately."

Zinthe laughed. "That's already been taken care of – and by a higher authority than the academy."

"Higher authority?" Syngfax sputtered.

"By the black dragon we killed to get this Bloodstone," Zinthe replied, her voice turning hard. Ingo placed the Bloodstone in her left hand.

Syngfax's eyes narrowed. "Give it to me!" he hissed. The wizard's gnarled hands swept out from under his black robe. Coloured sparks flashed from his fingertips and weird mists swirled around him.

Before Syngfax could unleash his magic, a ball of blinding blue light exploded from Zinthe's upraised right hand. As the crackling blue sphere enveloped Syngfax, the sparks of magic on his fingertips sputtered and failed, and the mists around him dissipated. Syngfax's eyes widened in fear; his hands fell to his side in defeat. And when Zinthe waved her hand and recalled the blue magic, Syngfax turned on his heels and fled without looking back.

"Two thousand nine hundred, two thousand nine hundred and fifty, three thousand." Jarna finished counting out her stack of fifty-cronin gold pieces beside the stack she had already counted for Ingo.

"There," she said with a satisfied sigh. "That takes care of what Syngfax owes us, plus fifteen hundred cronins each as a bonus for – what shall we call it?"

"How about 'undisclosed hazards?'" Ingo suggested.

Jarna smiled. "I like that -- as a bonus for facing undisclosed hazards."

Jarna turned to Zinthe. "The rest of Syngfax's money is yours if you want it. The way he left, I doubt he'll return."

Zinthe laughed. "I was a little hard on him. The magic I learned from the memories stored in the Bloodstone is amazingly powerful."

Ingo finished scooping his coins into his purse and looked up. "You weren't hard enough on the lying son-of-a-Demon, if you ask me," he said. "We might have been killed."

Zinthe handed the Bloodstone to Jarna. "This belongs to you."

Jarna started to protest. Then she saw the resolve in Zinthe's steady, clear eyes, and she accepted the stone.

"What will you do now?" Zinthe asked her.

Ingo laughed. "She's going to buy a tavern and settle down," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Jarna laughed with him. "But first," she said, pausing to lick her lips, "I have a terrible thirst -- I'll bet I can outdrink a Giant!"

"I'll take that wager," Ingo said eagerly.

Jarna's eyes dropped to the gleaming bloodstone in her hand. "And then," she went on, "I'm going to look for a certain dragon. I have something that belongs to her."

Ingo's mouth fell open. "Xera?" he asked, when he finally found his voice. "Xygen's mate?" When Jarna nodded, Ingo grinned so broadly that she thought his face would break.

Zinthe stepped forward. "Do you mind if I come with you?"

Jarna looked at her. The frightened little girl who had run away at the first sign of trouble was gone. In her place stood a strong, confident woman.

Jarna placed her hand on Zinthe's shoulder and said: "We wouldn't go without you!"

Ingo gave a whoop of delight, snatched up Jarna in one arm and Zinthe in the other, and walked out the door.

Waiting for Gorgo

Dennis Valdrón

The blacksmith's hammer gleamed in the fierce midday sun. Its final swing buried the seventh nail deep in the living rock, chaining the last of the condemned men to their fate.

Around them the hard-eyed men of the King's personal guard stood and watched. They neither approved nor disapproved; they were soldiers and they did their job. To each of the chained men they left a day's provisions and such weapons as they chose. Then when the smith had finished packing his tools, they mounted their horses and rode off into the east.

"He'll be here soon," said the last of the horsemen. "Good luck."

They looked at each other, these seven condemned men.

"Well, here's another fine mess," said the fat one.

The largest of them swore as he grabbed a war axe and began hacking away at the chain that bound him to the canyon's wall. This was Ardaxe, who had been a professional hero and had been condemned to death for mislaying the honour of a no-longer-virginal princess.

The canyon rang with the frenzied clang of metal on metal. The others watched him apathetically.

"Ruining a fine edge there," commented one of the Rogue brothers.

"Yep," replied the other brother.

"Perhaps we can get free before he comes," said the shortest and shiftiest of the lot. Blane had been the second-best pickpocket in the realm; his misfortune was that he tried harder. He spoke to Buky Truthteller, acknowledged to have been the cleverest man in the Kingdom, sentenced to death for giving the King a migraine.

From the west came the trumpeting of a war horn.

"I doubt it," answered Buky.

* * *

It had come to pass that the Emperor Mondal of the renowned Brone Empire had conceived a passion to build a tower to heaven. Heaven of course lay a good way off, and the edifice was less than half completed before he had exhausted his treasury.

Now a thing like this would have stopped a normal man. But Mondal was a man unlike other men, a hero as out of ages past, and not to be deterred by so trifling an obstacle. He resolved to war upon the other kingdoms of the world, stripping them of their wealth and enslaving their people. The tower commenced to grow again.

Now, as things happened, Mondal trampled almost every nation in the known world but one. So enthusiastically did Mondal pursue his project that he did what plague and famine could not in reversing the progress of civilization in the world. The one exception was the tiny Kingdom of Dumaund which lay at the eastern edges of the civilized world. Neither prosperous nor mighty, it was obscure even to its neighbours; its trade was negligible, having but one gateway to civilization, a single tortuous canyon that gave passage through the Sheetrock Mountains.

So there came a time when Mondal, having still not completed his tower, and having looted almost every single kingdom in the world, turned his eyes to the east....

* * *

Now, as it happens, Dumaund in the east was well aware of Mondal's quest to reach heaven, which some applauded and others considered a senseless waste of good building stone. They were aware as well of the activities he carried on to support his project, and it is safe to say that the disapproval was universal.

That Mondal might someday come for them, they did not for a moment imagine. The people of Dumaund were tranquil in the notion that disasters were what happened to other people.

Thus it came as a great and very public shock to the nation when a spy (Dumaund had always believed in keeping a prudent eye on its neighbours) came tearing through the stifling heat and swirling dust. He galloped through the Capital's gates without so much as a by-your-leave and literally up to the steps of the palace before the horse died of exhaustion.

Bloody and broken, the spy staggered past startled palace guards and burst upon the King in the middle of his court. In an unforgivable breach of etiquette, he blurted out his story and promptly died of his wounds.

Mondal was coming, and he was only a day away.

* * *

The King, of course, panicked, and the nation followed suit. Mondal was coming.

The King's generals were by and large a more laconic group. True, Mondal had never lost, but it seemed reasonable to assume he had to do it sometime, and this was as good a time as any. They were confident of their ability, in an abstract way, to defend the Kingdom. The trouble was that a day or less was simply not enough time to properly prepare a defence. Perhaps the King, as one ruler to another, could ask Mondal to wait a day?

The King briefly contemplated making this request of a man who had raged up and down the civilized world like a mad dog, in a quest to build a tower to a place he had already sent

thousands of his enemies.

He panicked again.

Well, said the generals, perhaps he could be delayed. It was pointed out that there was only one entrance to the Kingdom and, while it could not be blocked, there were points here and there where a handful of men might hold a vastly superior force for a day or so. There would be no question of supplying or rescuing such a force and their ultimate death would be as horrifying as it was certain, but it might save the Kingdom.

Out went the call. Nobody answered.

It is not to be said that the people of Dumaund are any less brave or heroic than the people of other nations. In fact, they come off quite well on that score. But the task called for far more than mere heroism: in fact, it called for stupidity of the highest order.

Faced with less than twenty-four hours to live, the people of the Kingdom decided that there were far more important things to do than prematurely give it up facing a horde of bloodthirsty maniacs in the middle of nowhere. It has been written that during that night in the Kingdom, more people found God or lost their virginity than any other day in the Kingdom's history, before or since.

The King, having no volunteers, selected seven condemned criminals. To ensure that they would not run away, which he certainly would have done in their position, he commanded that they be chained to the canyon.

The people were disappointed by this news, as there is nothing like a good public execution to take your mind off your problems. But war called for sacrifices, and they bore it well.

There was little likelihood of the convicts surrendering and granting easy passage. It was well known that if there was anything Mondal hated more than enemies, it was cowards. Much of the devastation that Mondal had wrought could be attributed to the fact that at some point or other while he was pummelling them, his foes would try to surrender and really make him mad.

Which brings us back to our reluctant heroes.

* * *

The scouting party burst into view. As their horses reared in surprise, they briefly assessed the situation and then retreated back to the main army.

Ardaxe, sweating and strained, had given up trying to chop through the chain, but otherwise their attitudes were unchanged.

"Maybe we should surrender in exchange for a quick painless death," Blane wondered out loud.

"Perhaps I can get us out of this," said Buky.

The others looked at him with a flicker of hope.

"But to do so, you must all drop your weapons and not speak except as I give you leave."

* * *

Thus it was that when Mondal, riding a pure white charger at the head of his host, came upon the convicts, they were sitting in the sand, weapons of all sorts scattered about them, their heads hanging.

"Who are you?" boomed Mondal, who had been expecting more spirited resistance.

"We are dead men," answered Buky, looking up.

"How perceptive," snarled Mondal as he drew his sword and advanced on them.

"Who are you?" Buky asked, without apparent enthusiasm.

This stopped Mondal for a moment; he could not imagine anyone not having heard of him. He certainly could not fathom what these men might be doing chained to the grey rock of the canyon, if not for some purpose meant to frustrate him.

"I am Mondal the Destroyer, Ravager of Nations, Despoiler of Kings, Mondal the Great, Mondal the Fearless, Mondal who shall one day walk into heaven and sit with the gods, Mondal who has come to destroy your land and bend your wealth and people to my quest." This was said with some enthusiasm and, truth be told, went on for quite a long time. Although he would never admit it, Mondal loved the sound of it all, and introduced himself at every opportunity.

"That's interesting," said Buky, without apparent enthusiasm.

Mondal had received many different responses over the years. But indifference was a new, and intolerable, one. He cantered his charger forward and raised his sword for a blow to send the insulting fool's head rolling from his shoulders.

That was when he made his fatal mistake.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Buky, just as he was about to cleave his head.

"We're waiting for Gorgo," Buky replied, and shuddered.

It was that fateful shudder that stopped the death blow. That put Mondal on the road to ruin. He could still have recovered, could still have taken a mighty swing and then rode with his army over the bodies. He could have taken the Kingdom unprepared, and crushed and looted it. He could have done all these things.

But instead he asked the question.

"Who's Gorgo?" he asked.

And was lost.

"Gorgo," Buky answered, "is the giant monster that terrorizes our land. He is fond of human flesh, so we are chained out here as sacrifices to the beast."

Now Mondal was no more stupid than the next man. He knew very well that there were monsters, and that many of them prized human flesh. Why, he had slain a few dragons himself in his day. But this seemed a bit much.

"All seven of you?" he asked incredulously.

"A light snack," explained Buky, who seemed the only one willing to talk. The others were in a thorough funk over their fate.

Mondal hemmed and hawed suspiciously. He wanted to pluck the Kingdom like a ripe fruit.

"What's all these weapons then?"

"It's a tradition: our families bring them to us so we can kill ourselves before the beast devours us."

"All these weapons? It looks like you have enough to fight an army here."

"Well, of course we are not the first to be sacrificed to the monster." Buky stood up affably. "Each fallen weapon represents a noble sacrifice. Each tells a story."

Buky grabbed Mondal and pointed. "See that great broadsword there...it belonged to Omab, the Mighty. Of his own free will he came here to slay Gorgo. But the sight of the monster so terrified him that he cut off his head."

"He cut off his own head," repeated Mondal in wonder. Buky seemed absolutely sincere, but it was too much to grant.

"It is said that he waited until he could smell the fetid breath of the creature, watch the drool dripping from that cavernous mouth, before he finally did it."

"It looks nicked, and its edge seems blunted," Mondal said with what remained of his critical faculties.

"That's because Omab was wearing an iron collar. They say it took him two or three strokes to cut off his head," replied Buky glibly.

Mondal searched his face, looking for any hint of falsehood. Buky figured it was time to move along. He picked up a small knife.

"This," he announced, "is the knife of Bittindon the famous carpenter. In the face of the beast he whittled himself to death."

"Well then, where are the bodies?" Mondal asked.

Buky shrugged laconically. "Gorgo leaves nothing but the weapons behind. We think he spits them out."

Mondal could scarcely credit this; all the monsters he had ever heard of had been messy eaters. Truth to tell, his own table manners were far from the best, but he hadn't thought of any connection.

"That's all he leaves behind? I don't believe it."

"Gorgo is quite voracious. Did you see smooth areas on the canyon walls as you came in?"



Mondal replied that he had. He had never heard of water erosion.

"That," Buky assured him, "is where Gorgo espied something, perhaps a small lizard, perhaps a scorpion, perhaps merely a hanging lichen, and licked it off with his rasping tongue. Gorgo's hunger knows no bounds."

It was at this point that Mondal noticed that the canyon walls in this area were almost universally smooth. In spite of himself he was getting nervous. It was time to attack.

"Rot this," he boomed. "I'm here and I have my army with me. I'll slay this beast and be on my way."

To his surprise, Buky embraced him and then, shaking his fist in the air, sang out.

"Three cheers for great...err, what was your name again? --" (the Emperor gave it) "-- Mondal! Three cheers for Mondal the Mighty! He has come to free us from the beast."

The other prisoners showed animation for the first time as they got to their feet and cheered loudly.

Buky embraced Mondal again, and then fell to his knees. He kissed Mondal's feet and looked up, tears brimming in his eyes.

"Oh, I should have known you were a hero like those out of legend. Why, you are the spitting image of the great hero King Lakadan (though not so tall or broad), who went out to slay the monster with a thousand horsemen and five against a thousand pikemen."

Mondal did a quick calculation. That was a force fully two-thirds larger than his own.

"How did he fare?" Mondal asked.

"Magnificently! Why, for a full month Gorgo was spitting out weapons and hardly ate anyone. I'm certain that you will do even better. After all, Gorgo has gotten older," Buky paused thoughtfully. "And bigger, much bigger as well. But more importantly, older."

"Mmm," hummed Mondal. "Just how big is this Gorgo?"

"Ahh," said Buky. "That is a good question, for none that get a good look at Gorgo live to tell of it. It is my considered opinion that he is probably smaller than a medium-sized mountain."

"You just said he eats small lizards," Mondal accused.

"As a man eats sesame seeds," Buky replied.

But Mondal's skepticism had returned.

"People have visited Dumaund for hundreds of years. How is it that nobody else has reported this monster?"

"We keep it a secret, of course. Otherwise no one would come here, and for many years visitors have helped us feed this monster." Buky shrugged eloquently and continued. "But what of it? You are on your way to slay the beast; I'm sure you must be quite eager. Don't mind us, just go on through. We'll wait here."

This was almost too much for Mondal.

"Are you saying you sacrifice visiting foreigners to the beast?" Mondal was not particularly outraged; it was the sort of thing he would have done himself.

"Some. Others Gorgo finds for himself."

"Wouldn't your neighbours notice that people weren't coming back?"

"Well, of course we don't sacrifice them all. Why, for each foreigner sacrificed, a second and even a third are well treated and allowed to go their way, to lure more foreigners back. It worked quite well."

Buky sighed. "But now all that is over. You are here to slay the monster." He looked up at Mondal. "A word of advice. Gorgo's hearing and scent are extremely keen; if you wish to sneak up on him you must do so quietly."

"My spies didn't report this monster," Mondal said petulantly. There was still doubt in his mind, but if in fact there was such a monster he was going to have his intelligence chief executed.

"Have all of them returned to you?" Buky asked.

Mondal suddenly realized, with a sinking certainty, that three had not.

Now in truth, the first of these spies had slipped on a patch of scented oil while exiting the public bath with very important information. He was buried with full honours and had many powerful and important personages as mourners.

The second agent had taken the gold which he was to use for bribery and entered Madame Livonia's House of a Thousand Illicit Pleasures (cynics said it was only seven hundred or so, but that is neither here nor there) and had not at this date exited. In fact, at the moment Mondal was speaking in the dust of the canyon, the spy was taking advantage of some extraordinary "end of the world" sales.

The third had, through no fault of his own, become completely lost, and now wandered far beyond the boundaries of the known world. He was about to embark on a terrific series of adventures, which unfortunately are not the subject of this story.

Mondal knew none of these things, of course. What he did know was that before him lay a ravenous and seemingly invulnerable monster and behind him lay his beloved tower, still not completed and crying out for his attention.

Without a word, Mondal mounted his charger and trotted back the way he came. His mighty army followed him.

"Wait! Wait! Where are you going?" shouted Buky. "The monster is the other way!"

Mondal ignored him, except to pick up his pace a bit.

"Come back! Please come back!" screamed Buky. Around him his chained companions were rising in a chorus, yelling for the army to return and slay the monster.

Or at least feed it.

"I lied," yelled Buky. "There is no monster. Really. We were chained here to stop your

progress. Please, won't you come back?"

If Mondal heard this, it only added paranoid fire to his delusions. He spurred his horse onward. As the shouting of the men grew louder the whole army broke into a dead run, lest the noise attract Gorgo prematurely.

Slowly their calls faded as they watched the dust settle behind the fleeing army. Buky licked his lips.

"I told them the truth at the end," he said.

* * *

It has been written that Mondal returned home to Brone to continue work on his tower. His subjects finally tired of him, and assisted him in arriving at heaven in a more conventional manner than he had planned on. However, as he had always believed that the ends justified the means, it could not be said that he had been wronged.

The people of Brone, without Mondal to drive them on, lapsed into a friendly and contented tranquillity, and civilization eventually returned to the known world. The unfinished tower became a major tourist attraction. Many said that from its top they could just make out Mondal in heaven, being pursued by legions of his victims.

The Kingdom of Dumaund waited three full days for the attack that never came. Finally they investigated and found no trace of an invading army. They concluded that it had all been an elaborate hoax. The rest of their history is one of peace and prosperity, though sometimes they did stop to wonder why no one ever came to visit anymore.

Of the seven who were chained and waiting, only a few broken metal links were found. Nothing more is written.

Ran's Daughters

Frida Westford

"Cat!"

Alfdis Cat and Thord Greyhair, her second-in-command, jumped up and turned toward the speaker. The sail they were inspecting fell in a heap. She'd recognized Ulf Sveinsson's voice and the sneer in it when he used her nickname. Now she saw that the Danish trader and his friend, Sigfast the Swede, stood on the jetty in silk tunics and fur hats looking down at her.

"We have a proposition for you, captain." Sigfast's tone was as insulting as Ulf's.

Thord remained silent at Alfdis' side, sword in hand. Bard and Kari, her foster brothers, had stopped smearing a final layer of pitch on *Springer's* hull and were moving to Alfdis' other side, gripping axes. Eirik and Orn, the two remaining members of the crew, were away on errands.

"I'm listening," Alfdis said evenly. She had little choice, though these men had a bad reputation in Hedeby. Even easygoing Thord didn't like them.

"We've heard you're looking for a cargo. We need a reliable ship." Ulf was at least coming straight to the point. "We need a small item to be fetched from the east. If you can sail now...."

"We might make it back before the first winter storm wrecks us," she finished for him. "You have ships of your own, larger ships that might have a better chance in bad weather."

"My ships have not yet returned, and we need only a small ship for a small cargo. We were told you have a sound ship and a good crew. But, if you fear Aegir and Ran, we can find a sailor who isn't as shy of the water as a cat."

"Yet a sailor who does not fear the sea gods is a fool," said Sigfast, "unless, of course, her ship bears one who is in their friendship."

"Sigfast will go along so you need not fear," laughed Ulf.

"I may consider your offer when you've named a price," said Alfdis, "but we won't need your help with the sea gods, Aegir and Ran." *And they and their friends are no friends of mine.* She glimpsed fear in the eyes of her foster brothers at the suggestion of shipping out with the Swede. Sigfast was said to be "knowing" of some nasty magic.

She liked the idea no better than they did. *Springer* was surely chosen because her Norwegian crew came to the Danish king's big market of Hedeby with no cargo. They arrived too late in the summer to find anyone to go shares with them and had no means to buy trade goods. Their thorough but unsuccessful search for partners left them all frustrated and restless. Whatever

these men wanted, they were looking for a crew that was desperate -- and a young, inexperienced captain.

Sigfast's expression was unreadable. "The offer is twenty marks of silver, but it will have to include passage for me. Otherwise there is no deal."

"I think your offer is an insult." Thord broke his silence. His hand had never strayed from his sword hilt.

"That would have to be for a very short trip," Alfdís countered. She had to suppress a grin. Thord was impressively large and strong and she found that useful in such dealings.

"The journey is not many days into the Baltic Sea," Ulf assured them, "and with Sigfast to guide you it will be quicker and less dangerous. You do not know the East Way, but Sigfast has been to the island of Rugen where you'll be going."

So it was Rugen and its market town, Ralsvik, simple enough -- too easy for so much money. "We'll consider your proposition. We can leave quickly enough if we choose, but we don't need a guide." Alfdís turned back to the sail.

"Choose before morning, Captain Cat, but Sigfast must go with you." With that, Ulf and the Swede were gone. The creaking of their steps on the jetty's boards faded none too soon for the Norwegians.

"We have two bad choices," observed Thord. "Either we stay here until Aki Vigotsson tires of us, or runs out of food" -- he looked significantly at Bard and Kari -- "or we make this voyage with an evil travelling companion in strange waters at an unchancy time of year."

"I don't see that we really have a choice," said Alfdís. "Aki's been a generous host for my father's sake, but he can't keep us much longer. We have no other way of getting on here. There aren't enough of us to be successful at raiding, even if we wanted to try it. And I don't think any of us wants to split up the crew. We'll talk to Aki when Orn and Eirik get back."

The wait was an uneasy one. Bard and Kari, usually cheerful, grumbled as they worked; Thord said nothing more. Alfdís missed the reassuring presence of her father. Gunnar had been lost at sea with his big cargo ship, *Seagull*, and eight other men including the father of Bard and Kari. Poets would say they had gone to the arms of Ran's daughters. Alfdís had been left alone with the little coastal trading vessel, *Springer* -- and her five companions. *All of us are kinless*, she thought, *except for each other*.

She'd learned from her mother in the market at Kaupang in Norway to drive a shrewd bargain. Her father had shown her something of the care and handling of ships. But responsibility for the lives and prosperity of *Springer's* crew, that was new to her. They would not have got this

far, she knew, without the guidance of Thord and Eirik. They were old crewmen of Gunnar's and could have gone with other ships. She was more than grateful for their loyalty and for Thord's tactful, patient teaching.

"I'd much rather keep you here over the winter than see you make such a risky venture," Aki said when they had explained the situation to him, huddled in conference by his hearth. Aki had little liking for his fellow merchant, Ulf, and less for the Swede. "Sigfast is as untrustworthy as he is skilled in magic." It was true enough that it would be difficult and dangerous to sail the Baltic Sea without a guide who knew it and the peoples who lived along the coast. But it was ominous that they would make no deal if the Swede did not go on the voyage. The payment was too generous. "It smells," Aki concluded.

The Norwegians asked about their destination. Aki described Rugen as a big island off the land of the Obotorites, only a few days' sail unless conditions were bad. It had a large fjord that led inland to the harbour at Ralsvik. On the northeast tip of the island, at a place called Arkona, there was a big temple to the god Svantovit. "That is a place to avoid at all costs," he said. "The people of Rugen don't allow strangers there. They keep a large troop of fighting men to defend the god's treasures and his sacred white horse."

"You've been very generous," Alfdis said, "and you've given us sound advice and good information about the East Way. I think it's time we tried our luck. We want to pay for our keep this winter, and I won't have it said that I or my men are shy of the water or afraid of the likes of Sigfast." The others agreed.

At Aki's suggestion, they would insist that fifteen marks be paid now and left with Aki. The remaining five would be paid on their return. Orn was sent to inform Ulf and Sigfast and soon returned with the money. The ease with which Ulf agreed did not make the Norwegians or their host feel any easier.

Springer was ready; her crew had had most of the summer to work on her. They had done some tasks several times in their enforced idleness. Aki provided supplies for the voyage, which Alfdis and her crew stowed under the loose fore- and afterdecks of the little open ship. The Swede strode up wearing a rough wool tunic and trousers like those of the Norwegians. He had an axe stuck in his belt, and squinted in the early morning light. He handed a leather rucksack to Thord, who tossed it into the ship. They pushed *Springer* into the water, stepped her mast, rowed out of the harbour and set sail.

The three-day journey was uneventful. Alfdis kept a close eye on their progress, and on Sigfast. Kari and Bard, who had not as yet travelled much, were curious about everything. They

were disappointed that they could see so little in the mist. They sailed out of sight of land much of the way, using a lead line to keep to a depth of five fathoms. That was the track that would take them straight to Rugen.

Alfdis wasn't overly concerned about the trip out, though she disliked sailing at night. The weather remained moderate. Aegir and Ran, it seemed, were in a good mood. The little their guide said about the island agreed with what Aki had told them. But Sigfast told them nothing new.

In the middle of the fourth day they sighted Rugen. The Swede steered them into the fjord a short distance and then told them to furl the sail and row for the shore to their left.

"I don't see Ralsvik," said Alfdis. Her men were moving to surround Sigfast.

Sigfast faced them all, axe in hand, and grinned. "I never told you that I was going to the market place," he said. "I'm the one taking the risks. I'll leave at sunset and be gone for several hours. You have only to wait for me. Keep out of sight, and don't build a fire." In the end, though they liked it little, they beached the ship. Sigfast headed inland at dusk.

Thord stared after him. "You don't suppose his business is at that temple?"

"We should have asked fifty marks for this," growled Eirik.

Bard, Kari and Orn were trying hard not to look nervous. Alfdis felt no more confident than they. She and Thord kept everyone on watch. No one thought of sleeping.

In the middle of the night, the Norwegians heard hoofbeats and the shouts of many people headed their way. Then a man on a big white horse galloped to the edge of the beach. The rider jumped off his mount and slapped it so that it ran away. They realized that it was Sigfast. His pursuers turned after the horse and did not come down to the water. Alfdis and her crew could see the light of their torches and hear them yelling in a strange language.

"Move out now, you sluggards!" hissed the Swede as he began to shove *Springer's* stern. There was no time for questions. The others ran to help him push the ship into the water, and everyone scrambled to get in. They rowed hard out into the fjord and towards the sea.

They reached the mouth of the fjord at first light and began to breathe easier. Then they heard shouts and saw that fast boats rowed by well-armed islanders were following them. It would not be long before *Springer* was overtaken. Orn climbed up to unfurl the sail. It caught what little dawn breeze there was, and *Springer* gained some way. Sigfast, Thord, Kari and Orn still sweated at the oars. Eirik stayed at the tiller while Alfdis and Orn handled the lines.

A man in the closest of the pursuing ships yelled at them. Though Alfdis could not understand much of what he was saying, she could make out "thieves" and "blasphemers". She handed the ropes to Orn and went aft to confront Sigfast. "Whatever you were up to in their

temple, you've put us all in danger. If you've stolen something from their god, give it back, now!"

Sigfast made no response. He kept his legs between Alfdís and the rucksack at his feet as he continued to row. "Hold oars!" she shouted to the others as she grabbed for the pack. Sigfast swept her aside with the handle of his oar. She skidded across the deck.

Thord jumped from his seat and was grappling with the Swede by the time Alfdís had come to a stop against the opposite side. Sigfast slipped as the ship pitched.

"The pack was lighter when we set out," Thord said as he caught it up. "Done some trading? Let's see what you have in here." Sigfast would have leapt at him, but by this time Bard and Kari were there and had him pinned and disarmed.

"No!" yelled Alfdís. "Whatever is in there, it's not our business. It's probably forbidden for us to see or handle it." Thord stopped trying to untie the bag and threw it to her.

She ran to the stern, held the rucksack aloft, and called to the men in the nearest boat. "It's in here! I'll throw it to you. You can have him too!" She gestured at Sigfast. The boat was almost close enough now. She hurled the pack as hard as she could. The man who had been yelling at them stretched out and caught it.

Meanwhile, Sigfast had broken free from the men holding him. "Fools," he boomed, "they won't settle for that. But I can stop them." He pulled a piece of bone out of his tunic and threw it into the sea. Alfdís thought there were runes on it, but in the grey early light she could not be sure. He began to chant, all the while struggling with remarkable strength against the three who were trying to subdue him. As he chanted, a wind began to rise, filling *Springer's* sail.

The pursuing boats, not under sail, fell behind. The men in them began throwing spears. They were clearly not satisfied with the return of whatever Sigfast had taken.

It appeared that there was something to the Swede's boast of friendship with the sea gods. At least he seemed able to call up a wind. Alfdís could feel, and hear, it rising to become a squall. She yelled to Bard and Kari to man oars. "Help Eirik keep her stern to the waves or we may lose the ship!"

Thord struggled alone with Sigfast, who was fighting like a berserker as he kept on chanting above the keening wind. The sudden storm now threatened to engulf *Springer*. If a big wave hit her broadside, she could be swamped. Eirik was clinging grimly to the tiller. Alfdís wondered how long the mast and sail would hold. The sky turned green-black. The sea grew wild with unpredictable, choppy waves unlike the swell of the open ocean.

Could Sigfast control what he had unleashed? He must be gambling that *Springer* could survive heavy seas the shallower local craft could not. She knew what the price would be if he

succeeded. Ran and Aegir would accept only one kind of offering. *I will not give them any of those they have left to me*, she vowed grimly.

All the island ships, except the closest one, began to row hard for the safety of the inlet. The last pursuer dove into troughs to rise again on the crests of waves along with *Springer*. They had stopped throwing spears. *They're waiting to see us go down*, Alfdís thought. But she and Orn had all they could do to handle the sail, sodden wool slapping them in the shifting gusts.

Sigfast tired at last, perhaps as much from his spell as from fighting. Thord had a knife at his throat and looked ready to use it. "Wait!" cried Alfdís. She called Kari from his oar to help Orn battle with the sail and worked her way aft to stand over the spitting, cursing Swede.

"If you kill me," he snarled, "my friends will avenge me. You won't find a good welcome either when you come to Aegir's hall."

"They won't get any of my men if I can help it, no matter what you promised them. Stop this storm and I'll let you live."

"You can give them one of you or you can all go. There's no other way to end the storm." Sigfast seemed calm now, sure of himself.

Alfdís steadied herself and got a grip on one of Sigfast's arms, leaving Thord to control the other. Thord nodded; he knew what she intended. "Since you are so sure of a good welcome there, you can go to Aegir's hall. Bear my greetings to him and his wife Ran, and to Gunnar my father. Now!" She and Thord pushed. Sigfast grabbed at the light rail fastened to the uppermost plank of the hull, but it broke and he tumbled overboard.

His curses could be heard over the storm for what seemed a long time. Alfdís saw in the wild waves the pale green hair and white arms of the daughters of Ran. They were caressing the sorcerer as they pulled him down.

The wind abated as suddenly as it had come up. Now Alfdís looked to her ship. Mast and sail were intact. They could sail home, and be glad they had demanded that the fifteen marks be paid in advance. She and Thord would never be certain what words the Swede had hurled at them as he went down. Yet Alfdís knew that, for her, Sigfast would howl in every storm, and no sea-faring would seem safe.

Mountain Djinn

James S. Dorr

"There are many kinds of djinn," the old woman said. Her voice was reedy, almost flute-like, Ulbar thought, yet surprisingly strong in the thin mountain air. "There are, for instance, the djinn of the waters -- the rivers and lakes. And those of the oceans, whose realm extends beyond where the keenest eye can see."

"I think, instead of djinn, there should be perhaps one less old woman," Akhan muttered. Ulbar glared at the man to his right, a grizzled veteran of the wars, his mustachios gleaming ice-white in the fire's glow.

"I think, perhaps, you have come to love killing," Ulbar replied, his voice, too, in a whisper. "Too much, even, for a soldier who *should* do the things he is called on to do for love of the Khan. Nevertheless, there'll be killing tomorrow if what we think we have seen proves true. If the pass below us is, indeed, the route through the mountains our army seeks."

"The old woman, still, is one of those we have come to conquer. Is she not, Ulbar?"

"She is that, Akhan. Yet we'll hear her story, if only for the sake of the boy."

"Thank you, *melazim*," the woman said. He looked at where the old woman squatted across the fire, the book on her lap bound in dun-coloured sheepskin. Next to her sat the boy-soldier, Chela, the third of the men who had climbed the mountain to find her, alone, her cloak flung open in spite of the cold.

"Continue," he said, wondering now. How had she known to address him by rank, in an army whose men were best known by their faces?

"I had just told of the djinn of the oceans," the woman said. "They give their protection to what is theirs, as do all the djinn, yet are sometimes willing to extend it to worthy sailors. These djinn love not pirates, nor do the djinn of the valleys love brigands."

"What about soldiers like us?" Chela asked, his voice even higher than the woman's. "Do djinn protect soldiers?"

"Some of you are soldiers, yes," the woman replied. "And djinn love who they love. But I wish to tell you about the djinn who dwell in the mountains. The ones who surround you as you sit here. These djinn care not for trespassers."

"I've heard enough of this," Akhan said. "This woman would fill our heads with nonsense. You know as well as I do, Ulbar. There are no djinn."

"There are things even I do not know," Ulbar said. "And Chela is young -- his mind is still open." He thought of the army camped below, awaiting word of what Chela had spotted just before darkness. Of the end of the pass, and its opening out to a broad, lush valley filled with cattle and fields of wheat. Of Chela himself, on his first campaign before he had even sprouted a beard, and how he had volunteered to join Ulbar and Akhan as scouts, his keen boy's eyes yet unjailed by murder.

"Continue on," Ulbar finally said. "Perhaps, as you say, Akhan, this is all nonsense. Yet, even in nonsense, can one not still learn?"

"You are wise, *sharif melazim*," the woman said. Her voice seemed louder than it had first been. "And yet your companion claims there are no djinn, while, if you would simply look about you, you might see their faces."

Ulbar looked, and the others looked with him, as the woman's voice droned on. To the east they looked, beyond the pass, to where the full moon gleamed on a jumbled, snow-covered ridge. Beyond the ridge, they saw four tall peaks, higher than the peak they had ascended.

"These are the first of the pillars of heaven," the old woman said. She glanced down to her book and, licking a finger, she turned its page. "If you were to travel the spine of the ridge, you would see it divide, then grow wider and higher. In time you would come to a place some call the Roof of the World."

"I've heard that spoken of," Chela whispered. "Is that where the djinn live?" The first of the four pillars seemed to waver, even as they continued to look, and Ulbar could hear, despite the moon's brightness, what sounded as if it were distant thunder.

The woman nodded. "The greatest of them -- yes, they live there." The woman's voice rose, still flute-like in tone, but skirling louder as if in answer to what Ulbar heard. "And yet, as I said before," she went on, "there are lesser djinn who dwell all around us."

"And are there lady djinn?" Chela asked, his voice louder too, to compete with the thunder which seemed to be nearer. "Or are they all men, like the men of our army?"

"Both men and women djinn, yes," she said. The moon still shone, but her eyes sparked fire, as if by the reflection of lightning.

"Enough!" Akhan shouted. He jumped to his feet, his knife in his hand. "I would silence this woman."

Ulbar rose too. "It is too late," he said, placing his hand on Akhan's wrist. "I think her story has already ended."

The woman nodded. She clapped her book shut with the sound of granite splitting asunder, then rose up herself, wrapping her cloak around Chela's body as well as her own. Beyond, on the ridge, the snow rose to meet her, joining in whirlwinds with the mountains that boomed ever nearer.

Ulbar prayed, to what gods he knew not.

He heard Akhan's scream.

And, in the morning, he stood alone with the body of Akhan. Below, he could see the rock-strewn pass where what was left of the army lay shattered. He climbed down to meet it -- to help lead it back.

To the land it had come from.

Thorval's Morning Run

D. Sandy Nielsen

The flocks of mist were herding themselves gracefully over the chill morning waters of the fjord, occasionally stopping to graze while making their way deeper into the mountainous inlet, trying to avoid the ever-nearing rays of the sun which would shepherd away their flock till the following morn.

"Push us off, we have to hurry before it gets lighter out," Thorval cried, low and hoarse.

Beach gravel grumbled under Odd's large feet as he pushed off the small boat with its valuable cargo of Loki's delight. Thorval felt the prow of the boat lift smartly into the air as Odd entered the stern in a graceful leap. The slight ship levelled out and carved a scar across the surface of the mist-carpeted fjord that healed quickly behind their wake as Odd took to the oars. Two preternatural heads skimmed across the top of the ethereal grey herd, searching through the lace curtains of mist for previously-spotted landmarks.

"There, the crooked pine," Thorval whispered. Odd's long red hair flayed around as he looked to the direction of Thorval's pointed finger. "We can beach there on the rocks and you can get ready for your walk."

Even though he was born before the seer's given time, and underweight compared to the normal births in the village, Odd was quick to make up for lost time. His mother often complained to the other women of sore teats and how Odd was sucking her dry, always crying for more, of how the great cow of creation, Authulma herself, could not satisfy Odd's ever-increasing appetite. Odd pursued his nourishment in a vengeful fashion, as if to make up for the cheating he had received for being thrust into the world far too early. Though Odd's appetite was tremendous, his nature was as gentle as a doe, never wishing harm or malice towards any of his companions, while still being the biggest of any of his contemporaries in the village. Quite often while he was growing up with the children of his own age, other older children would try their hand at bullying the others, only to be stopped quickly by Odd's always timely interventions.

One day, when Odd had still not quite reached his teens and was busy wrestling with a group of older boys, a crew from a visiting longship happened by. The members of the crew stopped to watch the lads indulge themselves in their youthful sport, observing how Odd managed to defeat all his opponents.

"If that lad over there, the red-headed one who was surely sired by the loins of Thor himself, ever wants to go a-viking with a stalwart crew, he will be welcome with us," Thorval stated, a tone of admiration trickling through his voice.

"I'm sure that he would be honoured, once he comes of age," replied the boy's father factually.

"Comes of age?" Thorval questioned. "That tall oak of a lad winning against the others?"

"An oak perhaps, but not yet a tree, not even branched out into leaf," his father replied, laughter echoing gently in his chest cavity, "still only in bud."

"If then, when he comes of age, and any ship can hold him, the offer will still stand." The boys finished with their sport as Thorval spoke. "Do you hear that? We shall be passing through these waters again, and if at that time you are ready for the world, though the world may not be ready for you, you may elect to join our expedition, Odd Bud." And the nickname given that day stuck like pitch to the underside of a ship's strakes, and so had Odd Bud when his time came.

Thorval bent over the already oversized feet of Odd Bud and secured the leather straps firm as possible around his toes and ankles to the carefully carved, wide wooden planks that would serve as Odd's boots on his march across the soft silt that lay exposed for a short stretch of beach before transforming back into the naturally rounded stone.

"You're all ready." Thorval raised himself, his eyes looking up into those of Odd Bud. "And remember..."

"...remember to stop and put all my weight on each foot so as to let my shoe sink as deep as possible before moving on," Odd finished the sentence. Odd lifted one long, heavy-muscled leg high into the air to clear the heel, leaned forward and set his first impression into the silty sand at the edge of the rock, his other shoe balanced in mid-air beside him, to add full pressure into the ground. Extending his other leg wide and forward, he repeated the procedure.

"Best damn troll prints I have ever seen," stated Thorval in a jestful tone.

"Only damn troll footprints you ever saw," Odd replied, head turned back to see the efforts of his work, a smirk crossing his youthful features.

Thorval choked off a laugh. "See you on the other side." Thorval hurried down to the boat. Water up to his ankles, he leaned over the side and groaned with effort as he lifted out the battered remains of a wooden dragon head that appeared to have been ripped off at the neck. Struggling his burden up the beach, feet slipping against the water-polished rocks, he carefully set the head against a large log to look as if it had washed up on shore, eyes staring into nothingness, signalling total despair, the white splinters of the torn wood easily visible from mid-fjord. He then scrambled back down to the boat, turned around to examine his effort and, satisfied, turned back and pushed the boat back out into the grey-blanketed waters and manned the oars.

Thorval reached the other end of the silted beach, while Odd Bud was still trudging his way across, and dragged the boat as far up the stone as his strength would allow. From the boat, Thorval took a large, coarse-woven sack that protruded with numerous bumps and edges. Throwing it over one shoulder, he carried it up to the large lone boulder towards which Odd was



slowly making his way. Lowering his weight onto one knee and hip, he grunted and swung his arms, stepped up onto a knee-height rock with the same motion of his swing, and raised himself up while heaving the sack up onto the relatively flat top that was level with his chin from his position on the smaller stepping stone. Returning to the boat, he continued unloading his cargo, moving it to the top of the rock. Both arms stretched under the weight of two large wooden buckets with split-lidded tops, Thorval grimaced. Left at the base of the boulder, he repeated his one-man bucket brigade five more times, till a total of ten buckets rested by the foot of the stepping stone.

Odd Bud was standing in front of the boulder with his legs spread in the soft silt that the glacier-deposited rock bordered, and shifted his weight back and forth from leg to leg, his back to Thorval's activities. He then shuffled around a little in the sand bordering the rock, to make an impression of a troll backing up to lean against the rock, and then proceeded in his previous direction till coming to stony shore once more. Carrying on his long wide stride across the rounded stone until he assumed his false wooden feet were free enough of any accumulated silt, he bent over to his feet and undid the straps that held the troll feet in place. Once undone, he picked them carefully up off the ground and returned them to the boat before going to aid Thorval.

Thorval had managed three buckets to the top of the boulder when Odd Bud came striding up. Working on his fourth, Thorval stood on the step-stone, bent over at the waist, lifted at the handle of the bucket till it was high enough to get his free hand under it, and lifted it carefully onto the granite platform, painfully cautious not to spill any of its contents.

"Hop on up there and I'll lift the rest up to you," Odd Bud said amiably as Thorval lowered his hands back down from the resting container. "Let me give you a hand up." Odd gripped him with both hands under his armpits, lifting Thorval bodily, till he could gain easy purchase on hands and knees upon the flat surface.

"I should have waited for you to give me a hand before starting to lift these up. This is so much easier," Thorval said, taking the last bucket from Odd's grip. "Better jump up here and give me a hand with this."

Odd Bud cleared the top of the rock from a standing position on the step-stone. Alighting beside Thorval, he dragged the large sack to the edge of the boulder. His banana-sized fingers fumbled with the knot that held the bag secure, finally allowing Thorval to undo it for him with a few easy twists. Leaning the open end over the edge of the boulder, they allowed the contents to spill over the inverted side down to the sand below, right between where Odd had placed his wide-spread troll prints. A mixture of bones, both animal and human, spilled from the opening: a collection of bones that had been gathered over the past few months from various spots, and then all gouged with a toothed adze to give the impression of large teeth gnawing at them, and then broken down to the appropriate size by the same adze as if having been crushed between powerful jaws.

Several other items were mixed in with the larger bones, such as the complete skeletons of rats, squirrels, badgers, beavers, etc.; items such as wood chips, an old metal gauntlet, a battered war helmet, part of a rusted shield, a knife hilt, a wooden brooch, ivory shavings, and anything else that had been available.

Next came the buckets. Thorval passed the first one to Odd, who swivelled the halved lid on its end over onto itself, made a face of disgust and tilted the bucket on its end to slop out the contents on the bones below. Out of the bucket poured a wretched mixture of excrement that consisted primarily of human feces, but also of sheep droppings, cow chips, dog dung, and horse manure. Thorval stood, hand over mouth, as Odd spilled out the bucket's contents in a slow pour, taking his hand away only to pass Odd another container of the crap.

When all ten buckets were emptied, the two companions trundled them back into the boat and began their final part of the plan. Thorval stood straining in the boat as he lifted the gargantuan mallet over the side and placed it on Odd's muscle-padded shoulder. Odd gripped the thick crude handle in front of his shoulders, while the heavier stump-headed end lay behind him, then creaked his tiring legs up the rocky incline to a naturally-formed stone seat that jutted out from the cliffside. Thorval followed behind Odd with a large leather glove slung over his backside. Odd lowered the tree-hammer down to the base of the rock chair, handle upwards as if in a position of readiness, while Thorval flung the glove, which they had both constructed some time before, over the apparent granite armrest above the mallet's handle, then positioned it for easy visibility from where they had left their droppings.

Present task complete, Thorval and Odd Bud returned to the shore, where they washed off their accumulated grime, still fully clothed. Then, hopping into the now-floating boat, they rowed deeper into the fjord. A mile down they veered into a shallow stream, and both leapt out and pulled the boat the rest of the way up until they could fully hide it from any prying eyes.

Backtracking down through the edge of the wood that ran a strip between the fjord and the mountainous cliff, they reached the spot where they had just been by boat, and settled in behind a stand of scruffy evergreens and rocky outcroppings to await the arrival of their expected guests.

"Thorval, wake up," Odd croaked, his lips an inch away from Thorval's exposed ear, while his heavy hand that encased all of Thorval's shoulder shook him to alertness. "I see a sail coming to us from seawards." His crooked finger pointed.

"Rogner!" cried the lookout from the prow of the raven-headed ship. "I see something there on the shore." He pointed, arm extended out in the direction of his gaze, the other arm looped around the neck of the carved raven head for support. "It appears to be a smashed dragon head."

"Heave to," Rogner grumbled, as he walked between the rows of his fully-armed warriors to the front where the lookout still stood. "Let's investigate this before we go any further."

The men took oars and eased the ship as close to the bank as could be allowed. Then, hand easily grasping the hilt of his still-sheathed sword, Rogner was the first to leap over the strakes, landing knee-deep into the receding wake of the ship. Ten of his elite warriors followed after him, the rest remaining on board to guard the ship. A triangular procession marched up the rocky incline, Rogner Ragnet at the lead, till they reached the discarded dragon head that lay against the stump.

"It looks as if it was ripped right off the ship itself by a sea serpent of some sort," commented one of the men gazing down at the head.

"Look at the way the neck has been splintered, as if it was twisted right around," commented another.

"It certainly wasn't done out at sea, even if it had smashed into the rocks," added another.

Rogner leaned over and, reaching down, pulled the head over onto its side and let out a gasp. "Those marks look like the grip of an enormous hand. A hand with long claws on the ends of its fingers."

Thorval stifled a laugh deep under his breath as he watched from his vantage point and listened to the raider's comments. He himself had made those impressions with the rounded end of a smith's hammer, using the pointed end to give the impression of claws.

"Rogner!" shouted another warrior from beside the sanded beach. "Tracks."

Rogner and the others sprinted over to where the man stood, and all drew their swords in unison as they stared down into the impressions in the sand. Gargantuan footprints made their ugly way across the silt-strewn sand, as if left behind from a lumbering gait, the claws digging and scratching haphazardly at the surface of the strand. Rogner and his men, swords drawn, scanned the area around them, then slowly followed the tracks up the beach. Rogner took the lead again with sword held out in front of him, his eyes fastened to the tracks while his men, following, inspected the surrounding countryside with scrutinizing eyes.

Thorval stood slightly hunched over Odd Bud's kneeling body, while they both watched in fascination the performance they had construed unfold before their eyes.

"Ragnarok!" Rogner exclaimed. "Troll shit!" The men huddled close around Rogner's back to look at it, grimacing and making noises of disgust. Rogner continued, "Look at the bones in there. Men, as well as elk, bear, and others. There, there's a helmet, and look there, there is a..."

"Arrgh!" came a cry of pain from the cluster of men. Rogner spun around on his heels, taking a crouching, ready-for-action position, sword in hand. "What is it? Are we being attacked?" His eyes surveyed the land.

"It's that damn Einer. He stabbed me in the leg with the point of his sword," Yngve growled, as blood welled from the wound at the backside of his knee and flowed down his calf. "Watch where you're walking with that damn thing stuck out in front of you."

In a blur of motion, Thorval flung himself forward, fastening both hands around Odd Bud's mouth while locking both legs around his chest. Odd Bud fell to his side in violent shudders, taking the glued figure of Thorval, clamped securely to his back, down with him. Thorval held tight for the sake of both their lives until Odd's aching spasms of laughter had completely subsided and it was safe to release him once more.

"I knew that the town we were set to raid was called Trollsholm," Rogner said, incredulity creeping through his voice, "and that this inlet was called Troll's Gate, but I never imagined that..."

"Rogner!" one of the men cried in an easily audible, yet harsh whisper. "Look."

They had discovered the gigantic stone chair, with the titan's mallet and gargantuan glove that accompanied it. Slowly, as a whole, they began to back their way down the strand. Upon reaching rocky ground once more, they turned around and broke into a scrambled run towards their waiting ship and baffled crewmates.

"To the oars, men. Hurry!" Rogner Ragnet commanded as he clambered over the side of the longship, sword still in hand, the rest of his elite troop fumbling over beside him. "We sail towards the sea. The Norns have decreed it is not our fate to go raiding today. Our fate lies elsewhere."

Thorval glanced over at Odd Bud. Odd still bit down hard on his own forearm to prevent himself from laughing out loud. Thorval glanced back down the fjord and watched the raven-headed ship sail out of sight, while listening to Rogner shout commands to row harder. Thorval felt satisfied that the village of Trollsholm would not have to worry about being raided for a long time, not once the people of the surrounding areas found out that the terrible Rogner Ragnet, Scourge of the Seas, had been frightened off by trolls. For that matter, Rogner would probably have to take his raiding expeditions over the waters to where he was not known. His own embarrassment would prevent him from further raiding up and down the coast of the North Way.

Thorval was left with the remainder of the work. He had to drag Odd Bud to where they had the boat cached. Then he had to row to where they had staged their fiasco, bring back the glove, then drag the mallet back to the boat, for it was too heavy for him to carry on his shoulder. Then he had to stop again and get the dragon head back into the boat, and finally row all the way back to camp. All this time Odd Bud lay in the bottom of the boat, between the empty slop pails, letting peals of laughter echo up and down the length of the fjord. This uncontrollable mirth, though, was just one of the things that made him the original Odd Bud.

Runic Bards

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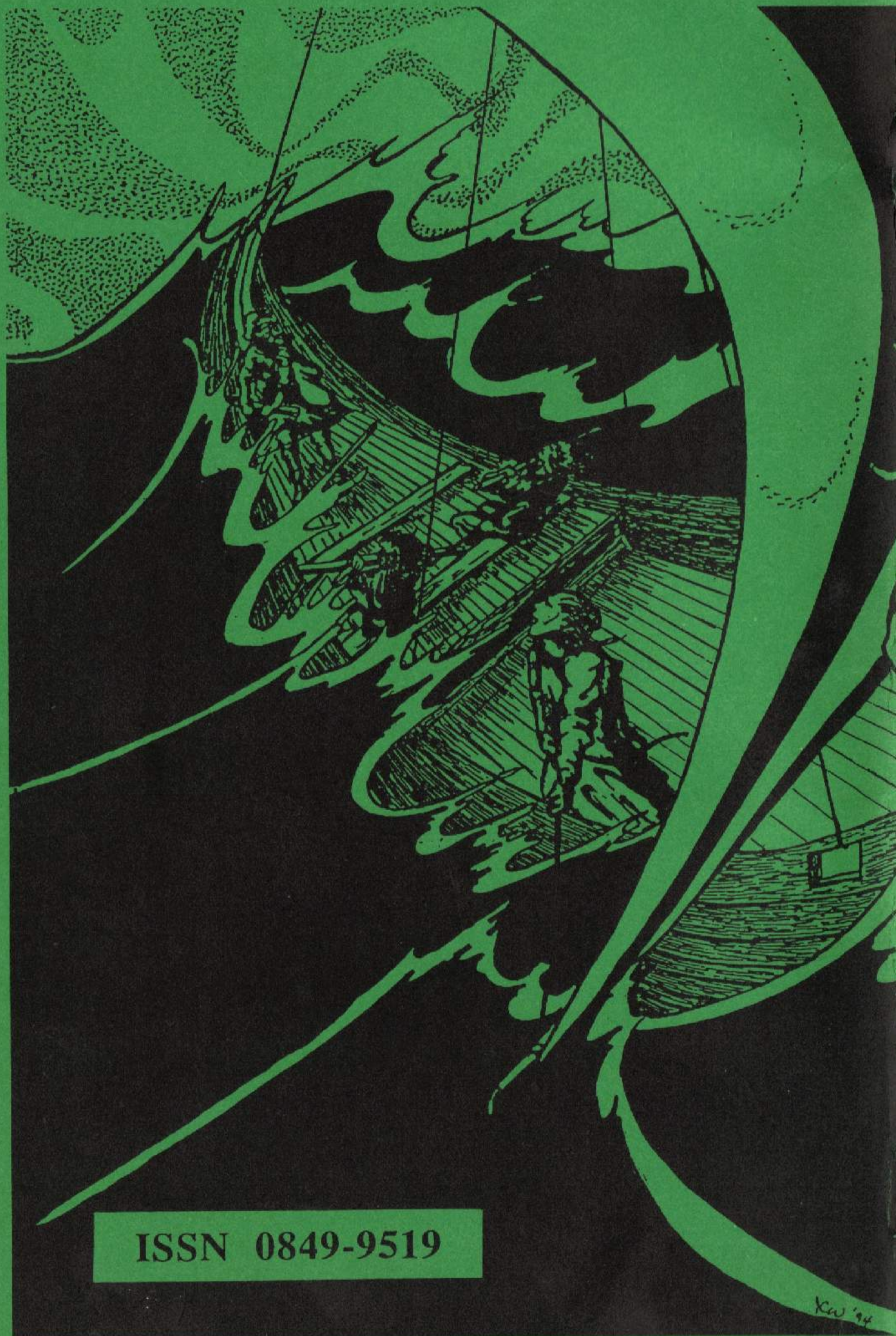
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