



# *Shield Maiden*

*by Marc H. Wyman*

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*A Gushémal Story*

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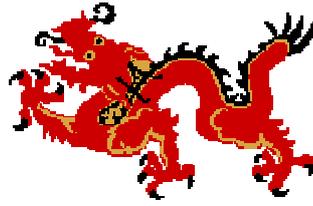
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Death was a topic that Cornell rarely thought about. To him, it was just another battle, another monster to be fought one distant day. In his travels he had met many people who were terrified of death. People who took precautions of the most bizarre sort; hiding in mazes through which Death's messengers might not find their way. One rich lordling in a province of Kraznyczar had hired an elf who was supposed to bring the merchant back to life after death.

Cornell had tried to explain to him how ridiculous this prospect was. Elves themselves could be resurrected – one of the reasons why they were such fearsome warriors –, but humans would never be affected by one of these spells. Not even one such as the lordling who may have had an elf or two in his ancestry, judging by the blueish tinge of his fingertips. Then again, it might have been ink.

One of these days, Cornell might travel back to Kraznyczar to find out whether the lordling had recognized his folly.

Provided, of course, that he did not have to start worry about death today first.

The corpse of his horse lay some four yards away from him, his belongings scattered over the desert sand in the rough direction that Cornell had been thrown. The crossbow was half buried in the ground, the saddlebag, split along its seams, a little closer. A slight tumble down the dune that had broken his flight, and he could grab the leathercase with his throwing daggers.

Which would not be particularly helpful against the hulking shadow huddling on the horse's body, a broad mass remotely like a frog – if said frog had about the height of a man and was considerably wider, covered with a yellow-ockre crust of sand and spittle that no longer perfectly disguised the creature's leathery skin beneath, the powerful legs drawn close to the body, the tiny arms that tried to counterbalance the massive jaws digging deep into the horse's carcass. Blood spurted freely, washing off the spit-and-sand mélange, drenching into the yellow sand.

Right now, the crustmaw was occupied with Cornell's steed, tearing off whole chunks and swallowing them right away. The head was already gone, as were two legs, and the remainder would probably not take the creature very long.

At which time Cornell would become a nice second course, just to round out the meal.

He scanned the ground more closely now, continuing the search for his sword. It had been in his sheath during the ride, but when the crustmaw had lunged at them, the blade had fallen out. Where had it gone?

There was his diary, the valuable pages fluttering in the desert wind. Half buried lay the dragonrod from Modayre, valuable beyond imagination, rendered useless now. Oh, yes, if it were still functional, the crustmaw would be fried in an instant's motion and firing... *Keep looking*, he admonished himself. There was his waterbag, the cork sprung from the top, liquid seeping into the

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darkening sand. The crossbow seemed to mock him, sticking out of the sand, two of the bolts right next to it, as if they had been laid out for loading.

“Where is it?!” Cornell coughed – and suddenly froze. The crustmaw stopped in mid-crunch, raised its bloody head, and the dark disks of its eyes locked onto the Cayaborean warrior on the dune. Another tasty morsel, the creature’s tiny brain registered. For a moment, the muscles of its legs tensed, readying for the leap that would bring it on top of Cornell. He felt his own body slacken, wondering how long his arms might keep those jaws from closing around him.

Then the crustmaw dropped its head and continued to crunch the bones of its current meal.

And Cornell noticed something in the air over them. Flying just low enough to be seen in the rich blue, there was a light brown speck circling. More than a speck, he knew right away, with the wide wings attached to the elongated serpentine body. Desert dragon!

It was just gliding over the desert, looking for the day’s catch. Staying on its present course, Cornell guessed, it would pass him and the crustmaw by some three hundred yards. Too far... if it wasn’t attracted...

Carefully he stretched his hands, began to crawl or rather sink down the dune, a few inches at a time. The crustmaw continued its meal, the dragon slowly continued its approach, looking ever more like a strange sort of bat with its leathery wings. Cornell had little time to appreciate the beauty of the dragon, keeping track of its motions and guessing the moment when he would have to hurry.

A little more, just a little.

He’d made it to the bottom of the dune, past his saddlebag. A quick glance upward showed that the crustmaw had nearly finished the horse. Only a bite or two of the massive jaws remained, and Cornell saw the dark eyes staring more and more in his direction. But the creature took its time, hopefully long enough for the warrior to set his plan into motion.

He breathed deeply, ignored the stench invading his nose, then reached out for the crossbow and one of the bolts. No fast movements, he told himself, nothing to make the crustmaw cut loose any sooner. He loaded the bolt into the groove, methodically wound the string back with the wheel set at the side. The bolt slid further and further backward, the string grew tauter and tauter, enough to propel its projectile a long distance.

Just a little more.

He was close enough to hear the crustmaw’s stomach grumble, even as the last remains of the horse found their way into the insatiable belly. Bones were still crunching, a single hoof stuck out between the teeth.

Time.

Cornell whirled about, sighted the desert dragon and raised the crossbow at the same time. Barely had he pointed the weapon that he already pulled the trigger, loosening the bolt – as he threw himself at the dune, dropped the crossbow. Frantically he dived into the sandy flank, digging in swimming motions into the dune.

The crustmaw had had enough of the constant distractions during its meal, and it readied itself for the leap onto its dessert. But the sand raised by the morsel proved further distraction, and the

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crustmaw had no desire to swallow a mawful of sand if it missed its jump. At least a little bit of meat should be included. Still, it was experienced enough to know that there was little need to hurry. These two-legged morsels had no patience. None, anyway, like a crustmaw that could lie in hiding for days without moving a single muscle.

Slowly the creature lumbered across the few feet that separated it from its intended prey.

By now Cornell had managed to embed his head and chest into the dune – and wondered about the wisdom of his decision as the sand covered his face, destroying any hope of drawing another breath. A few seconds worth of air were still trapped in his lungs. Cornell clung to them, fervently hoping that...

Suddenly the dune came down around him, sand entombed him – the shock and added pressure forcing the air from his lungs. A casket of sand grains.

Fear drove his arms, pushing him sideward, clawing through the sand, digging, hoping, digging. The crustmaw was completely forgotten, only the dark, hot tomb counted, the grave he needed to escape. His lungs burned, aching for air. He'd ever wonder how he could keep going, how his legs continued their shove, how his hands pushed aside sand – but finally he reached air. Hot, musky air reeking of dead horse – but air it was that he pumped happily into his lungs, thinking the pain would burst him.

It had been no more than half a minute since he had jumped into the dune. It had been enough to dramatically change the scene around him, and Cornell was suddenly grateful that no more than his head was visible.

The crustmaw lay on its head some twenty yards next to him, bloody tracks torn into its flanks. The jaws were still working, weakly attempting to push the creature back onto its feet. It was no use, the Cayaborean understood as he saw the leathery speck gliding noiselessly closer. Desert dragons didn't care at all for the layer of sand and spittle that crustmaws caked onto their skin. Rather than ignore this tasty prey, they picked up a crustmaw and dropped it from the air, effectively shaking off the crust. And then...

The dragon's claws alighted on the crustmaw's jaws, tearing another set of gashes. The crustmaw could no longer pounce, just barely move its jaws. Cornell supposed that the fall had broken its back, or had that been when the dragon had first picked up the creature and carried it through the dune, entombing the warrior in the process?

It didn't matter, he decided, while the dragon proceeded to feed. At least it wasn't quite as noisy as the crustmaw had been.



A week later Cornell sat at the table of an inn at the edge of the Elfadil desert, cherishing the mug of Albinavian ale in front of him. The inn wasn't particularly big, nor did it look very much like the inns he was used to from the southerly parts of the world. Instead of wooden timbers, tent poles were rammed into the ground, beige lengths of cloth separated the cool interior from the arid drafts of air outside. Three large tables were set out on the wooden base of the tent, doubling as protection against surfacing daggerrays; a counter and bar were set up at the closest end of the tent, looking remarkably similar to the usual inn furniture. As did the innkeeper, a ruggish looking knightdwarf who cleaned glasses, calmly sitting on the counter he had imported from the more civilized regions of Gushémal.

An opinion that surely was shared only by the people sitting at the tables, not by those who used the empty part of the wooden base. Sandmen had laid out their blankets, laid on them and chatted in their sing-song language while they drank the transparent, tasteless spirits they so much favored.

*Give me an ale any day*, Cornell thought gratefully and took another swig from his glass.

"So, go on," the large man opposite him growled, leaning his arm on the handle of his giant battleaxe. "The dragon chomped down on some crustmaw, but you didn't have a horse."

"And no water," a tiny voice piped from under the table. "You're forgetting the best part, Gabe! No water!"

Cornell frowned, looked quizzically at the large barbarian who shrugged and leaned over to pull a small humanoid creature from under the table. All in all, it measured some three feet, wrapped in a tight-fitting yellow shirt with tan breeches below. The creature's limbs were longer and thinner than a human's of comparative size would be, appearing just a bit spidery. The tiny rucksack looked very much like an extension of the flattened body, fitting perfectly into the small of its back. Rounding out the strange appearance was a large head with curly red hair, an inquisitively cut face with large, blue eyes that stared at Cornell with innocent gaiety. "Hello, sir! My name's Flink, glad to meet you! Now how did..."

"An alreu?!" Cornell glared at his old friend, ignoring the creature completely. "You of all people are running around with an alreu?"

"Well, it's a very convenient—" Flink started to say but Gabe quietly put his large right hand over the alreu's mouth. "Later," the barbarian said, glaring meaningfully at the small creature. "Understood?"

There was little to be seen of Flink's head. Fortunately, there was still enough to see him nod.

"Now," Gabe turned back to Cornell as he let go of the alreu, "how *did* you survive?"

Beside them, Flink rubbed his mouth vigorously, sent a venomous glare towards the barbarian's hands as if they were responsible rather than the barbarian himself — then the alreu forgot completely about the incident and settled down on the table with crossed legs, eagerly looking for Cornell to finish his story.

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The warrior sighed. “There isn’t much to tell. The dragon ate the crustmaw, then it flew off, back to its oasis. Desert dragons never stray too far from one. Certainly they return straight home after a kill, so I marked its direction and waited for nightfall. The dragon slept, and I could refill my waterbag from the oasis water. I left right afterwards, put as much distance between me and the dragon, and –“

Cornell frowned again, watching in surprise as the alreu nonchalantly reached out for his mug of ale and drank a swig. “Very good, sir,” Flink commented when he put the mug down. “Thank you for inviting me! And splendid of you to wait for me to drink before continuing your tale!”

“Yes...” Cornell muttered, reaping a suspiciously bright smile from Gabe at his discomfort. “Anyway,” he shook his head, “I traveled at night. At day I fashioned a shade from my saddle. There were a few bowlers for food and...” He noticed the wondering glances and sighed. “All right, bowlers are plants. They consist of a large bowl with some sort of membrane over it that traps water, and the water contains lots of small animals, like – a cold broth, I guess. It tastes awful, but it’s nourishing.

“And after four days, I met the caravan that brought me here. You see, there isn’t much to the tale at all.”

Gabe nodded slowly, satisfied by the explanations. Flink on the other hand weighed his head side to side. “Uh, sir, you don’t – by any coincidence – have some of those bowlers left? I’d really like to give that a try. Cold broth, well, I’m sure that somebody with my expertise for words could make a better description than that, no offense to you, dear sir, but –“

“Flink,” Gabe said in a friendly voice that in no way suited the glare of his eyes, “why don’t you ask the innkeeper about these bowlers? He lives here, while Cornell is just a visitor like us.”

“Right! Oh, Gabe, you always have these terrific ideas!”

An instant later, the alreu had vanished from the table and sped across the tent to pester the innkeeper. Meanwhile Cornell leaned forward and raised an eyebrow. “I told my story, Gabe,” he said with a wide grin. “No more excuses. What are you doing with an alreu?”

Gabe sighed. He’d grown a thin beard since Cornell had seen him last the year before. It didn’t fit the barbarian’s craggy face very well, the light blond layer on his pronounced chin. The hair was a bit shaggier, too, and now as Gabe leaned forward to fetch something from his bag, Cornell noticed a new scar on his temple. No sword or axe had scratched his head, it looked more like a whip. Why, Cornell wondered, would Gabe try to hide it? The big man usually was very proud of his scars.

A new mystery opened up to him when the barbarian threw a metal band on the table. It was broken, the joint at the front torn apart by an axe, Cornell guessed. The joint itself had been forged together, with an oval piece in which red, rune-like markings had been painted.

“Saltek’s brood?!” Cornell exclaimed. “The slavers caught you?”

Gabe shrugged. “In a tavern. I had too much beer, got into a fight with an obnoxious dwarf, then the other patrons wanted some sport as well. All I remember is that everything went dark, and the next day I wore the band, and Saltek was ferrying me towards Freeport. You do know Freeport?”

“I’ve heard of it. A harbor town on the Arrufat peninsula, non-aligned with any nation, right?”

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“Better call it a nest of smugglers and pirates. Dishonorable. Fortunately I saw very little of it, for Saltek never brought me there.” A broad grin burst onto his lips, and his hand unconsciously stroked the handle of his axe. Cornell needed no more explanation. The brood was well known across Gushémal, a band of dismal companions of all races that travelled across the length of the continent and mostly plied their trade as slavers, occasionally branching out into robbery, looting and pillaging. Villagers hid whenever they heard of Saltek’s brood approaching, and would-be heroes everywhere tried to make a name for themselves by stopping the brood. So far, none had succeeded.

But Gabe would never call himself a hero. A good honorable barbarian warrior, certainly, but never a hero. A streak of pragmatism ran through him that had been born in the harsh winters in his southern home. He enjoyed battle a lot, went out looking when no fighters came by with his name on their blades – but take up a hopeless battle for no particular reason? No, that Gabe would never do.

Cornell could easily see Gabe as the single warrior defending a village from the brood, though, fighting until his last breath or until the last foe had fallen.

“So, you managed to escape,” Cornell stated. “And the alreu was a slave, too, right?”

“No, not exactly,” Gabe shook his head. He gathered the slave band back into his bag, cast a glance across the inn to the counter where Flink was hopping wildly about the floor, demonstrating impressive agility. The knightdwarf on the counter had stopped polishing his glasses, watched the alreu with a deep frown furrowing his forehead. “He was a pet,” Gabe said in a low voice, sure the alreu could not hear him. “Flink thinks they liked him as a companion, and he also thinks they wanted to help him. One night I overheard what Saltek actually had in mind for him. Or rather, one of the ratpeople in his brood.”

“Ahhh,” Cornell muttered, understanding dawning on him. “The cookpot.”

The barbarian nodded grimly. Together they glanced back to the counter. The alreu had stopped his antics, had climbed onto the counter and sat opposite the innkeeper, listening intently as the five foot tall knightdwarf yelled at him to drop the glasses he was playing with. Promptly Flink did as he was told. The glasses crashed onto the counter, splintering into millions of sparkling shards.

“Sometimes I wonder, though...” Gabe grunted as he got up to fetch Flink and pay for the incident.



The innkeeper glowered after Gabe and Flink, seriously enough to make one wonder whether the next round of drinks would be spiked with a bit of spittle. The alreu, of course, was completely

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unperturbed, had already forgotten about the yelling and was looking for a new source of fun. Gabe shrugged, then he hauled Flink effortlessly onto the table. “Keep in sight,” he warned.

“Why? Gabe, I won’t get lost, not like last time, trust –”

“Stay!” the barbarian hollered, drawing the attention of a few of the sandmen near the entrance. The darkskinned locals grinned and chuckled, pointing at the odd assortment of southrons. One in particular was amused, a young assistant merchant named Zhivahad. He had been the one to find Cornell stumbling through the desert, pointing a lance fashioned from a daggerray’s horns at the starving Cayaborean. Afterwards he had listened with great enthusiasm to the tale of Cornell’s encounter with the crustmaw, building a sense of respect that now had seemed to crumbled away.

A pity, Cornell thought. Zhivahad had shown some promise in the way he handled his lance, his practice shots had been dead on target. The slightly barbed tip of the weapon would be deadly to a number of opponents. But there was that youthful swiftness of his moods, the overbearing attitude towards older fighters none of whom, he was clearly sure, could ever best him. If Zhivahad survived to grow out of this attitude, he might become a good man to have on one’s side.

“Any competition to look out for?” Gabe muttered.

Cornell blinked, became aware that he had been staring at the sandman too obviously. “Don’t be silly, I was just... Wait a minute! Competition for *what?* Are you trying to drag me into another kind of mess?”

“Well, I didn’t call you here just to quaff a couple of ales!” Gabe replied, raising his mug and staring at it intently for a moment. “Though it’s not a bad way to spend an evening, mind you.”

A frown spread over Cornell’s forehead, furrowing it deeply. “Don’t avoid the topic. What are you after?”

“Can I tell?” Flink jumped up, cast a hopeful glance at Gabe – his hopes instantly squashed by the merciless glare of the big barbarian. “Fine,” he mumbled and sat down again, “you go ahead and have all the fun.”

“I intend to,” Gabe nodded. Aware of Cornell’s growing impatience, he quickly continued, “There’s a legend around here. Maybe one of your sandmen friends told you about it. The Shield Maiden’s Bane. The story goes that there once were two nations warring against each other across the Elfadil desert, situated just north and south of the barbell handle. Both lands were coming close to a collapse, exhausted from the war efforts, when the king of the northern country decided to call for peace. The southrons were suspicious, but he asked for the hand of their beautiful princess in marriage. The treaty was negotiated for a year, then the princess was sent on her way north to seal their new-found pact.”

“Let me guess,” Cornell interrupted sourly, “she never reached her destination. The northern vizier sent a party of warriors, or perhaps a monster, to kill the princess. The southlanders believed everything had been a ploy of the northern king, and they revived the war which eventually destroyed both countries. Hardly a trace remains of them now, except the legend. Right?”

Gabe’s eyebrows rose slightly in surprise. The alreu on the table was less restrained. “Goodness gracious, sir, can you read thoughts? That’s magnificent, sir, absolutely wonderful! Can you teach it

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to me? It must be good to read other people's thoughts, so that I can know right away how to help them and how to –“

“Does he ever stop?” Cornell muttered to Gabe while Flink continued chattering for a few moments.

“Rarely.” By now Flink had noticed that Cornell wasn't paying him any attention, frowned then started to pout. Gabe sighed, pulled a broken amulet from under his vest and handed it to the alreu. “Why don't you try to fix this one? That fall near Obrosvek must have damaged it.”

“Sure thing, Gabe! It'll be good as new!” The alreu beamed, dug in his knapsack for minuscule tools. Twenty seconds later he was completely engrossed in his task and forgot entirely about the conversation around him.

Cornell's sour mien had barely eased during the exchange. Now he spoke his mind. “This isn't exactly the most original of legends, Gabe. We've stumbled across several dozens of similar tales in our travels, and their sole purpose usually was to explain why several groups of travelers vanished or died at one specific point. Maybe a grasstrap or two in the area that people didn't know about. Maybe a group of bandits. Poof – the locals make up a legend. So,” he paused to fold his hands on the table, “what makes you think this is any different?”

Gabe shook his head impatiently. “Because it *is* different! Look, I know how many of these tales turned out to be hogwash. Here I have proof, believe me. Alright, listen, Cornell. What I do know is that there's a place about two days' ride from here, a dome-shaped building, where at least two caravans have been ambushed by monstrous creatures. The governor of Obrosvek – that's one of the trader cities down south in Tonomat – sent out a patrol to destroy the creatures and reclaim the goods that the caravans carried. They failed.

“Flink and I found one of the survivors, drinking himself into a stupor at a bar. He told us the entire story, as much as he knew. There wasn't much of a mind left in the poor sap, but he was scared to death of that place. I am confident that those ambushes have taken place.”

The barbarian finished by nodding assertively and leaning back in his seat.

In response, Cornell's frown deepened. Monstrous creatures, that was a description one encountered rather often when traveling in little explored regions. By its nature the Elfadil desert easily fit that definition, so the tale of the patrol's survivor seemed rather credible. Which left another question. “So, what are you after? The honor of vanquishing those creatures, or the treasure the caravans have left behind?”

A wide grin spread over Gabe's face. “Is there a difference?”

*Leave it to a barbarian to sort out philosophical questions with a waraxe.* Cornell spread his arms. “I get the picture. Now, the real question is, why should I help you in this... endeavor?”

The grin on his friend's face grew devious. “Oh, I'd been thinking of appealing to your honor. Clearing a traffic lane, securing it for future travelers, but then I thought: Why bother? The fact is, I am going to that dome to take on the creatures. Judging by the tales, they are sure to be quite a handful for me, even with my trusty *breyell*.” He slapped his axe. “And you can't let me ride into probable death without lending your sword to my side, can you, Cornell?”

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“I hate you,” the Cayaborean warrior grunted. Obviously he had spent just a little too much time in the company of the big barbarian – and once again, he realized how misleading the term ‘barbarian’ truly was.

At that point a cheerful shout escaped Flink’s lips, and the alreu leaped inbetween their line of sight, holding up a globular object to Gabe’s eyes. “There, I fixed it! See, perfect? Like it never broke at all.”

“Sure, thanks,” Gabe muttered distractedly, reached out for his amulet – and stopped, his eyes widening. Before, it had been a flat bronze disk with chiseled in inscriptions, bent and battered, a deep tear in one side. What Flink was holding out to him now, was silvery, with just a slip of bronze peeking out at the top, like a diadem on an intricately sculpted globe that fitted perfectly together – yet still seemed to have been fashioned from several source objects. Of special prominence was a plaque right below the diadem top, its oval edges a serpent twisted around itself, the relief of a roaring bear in front of a waterfall displayed inbetween.

Gabe finally took what used to be his amulet and showed it so that Cornell could see the plaque. The warrior swallowed involuntarily. “That’s a knightdwarf clan’s insignia. Flink,” he turned to the alreu with a forcibly friendly voice, “this wasn’t in the amulet before, right?”

The alreu looked down contritely. “Not... really,” Flink said slowly. “But it looks so much better now, doesn’t it? I mean, I found it back on the counter, and I just knew that there’d be a great use for it soon.” His contrition had lasted roughly five seconds, then his eyes had quickly slipped upward, beaming brightly at the humans, certain of their approval.

Instead of properly thanking the alreu for his ingenuity, the two shared a glance, then Cornell said, “Let’s leave. Quickly.”

Gabe could not agree more.



Two days later Cornell was still seething over the high price he had had to pay Zhivahad for the new horse. One hundred gold pieces! One hundred! Back home in Cayaboré he could have bought a battlehardened charger for the same price, including a good chain armor on the horse. And what had he gotten here? A miserable, emaciated mare that would drop dead from heatstroke if someone were to put real armor on it.

Very well, he had to admit that the mare put on good speed in the desert. It easily kept up with Gabe’s dappled stallion, a fine horse that looked to be of Tonomai stock, and the yellowish pony that

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served as Flink's mount. The pony was least burdened of all the horses, for the alreu rode without a saddle or any luggage save the knapsack on his back. Though he obviously enjoyed being bounced up and down constantly, he just as clearly had not fully learned how to ride. His hold on the beast's back was precarious enough that he might slip off any second. Somehow he had managed to hang on this far, yet that piece of luck couldn't last much longer, Cornell was sure.

"Gotta be around here somewhere," Gabe called from his horse, ranging a little ahead of the group. His shaggy mane flew in the air, trailing his head as wildly as did the mane of his stallion.

He had a point. The dunes were occasionally dotted with lichen, as well as the sandpurple topping sand heaps. While the latter might as well be found in the very center of the Elfadil, the former was proof they were getting closer to the desert's edge, closer to natural water sources. Bowler plants gathered in a longer stretch of even sand, their membraned blueish tops pointed at the sun.

There was even a distant scent of water in Cornell's nose. A river sprang from a minor mountain chain south of the Elfadil, growing stronger and stronger until it became the mighty Cheselain. On the other hand, maybe he was just deluding himself. The Cheselain's waters should be quite too far off.

Gabe suddenly reined in his horse and held up his hand. "What's the matter?" Flink eagerly called out, leaping up to stand on his horse for a better view of what was ahead. "I can't see anything good, Gabe!" he promptly shouted disappointedly. "Shouldn't there be some monsters, or something?"

Neither the barbarian nor the warrior paid the alreu's chagrin any heed while Cornell joined his friend at the top. Ahead of them, the dunes stopped flowing as freely as they had before. Like the waves of a sea rolling onto the shore, they evened out, lapping softly at what once had been a good sized building surrounded by a plaza of marble. The marble was cracked, had lost its sheen a long time ago to the grind of sand washing over it. The building had also suffered. It was indeed dome-shaped, with a blocky rectangular base of mansized stones. Little damage had been done to the base, except for paint having been scratched off. Gaps tore through the dome, though, gashes of stones that were smashed from their positions, exposing the inside of the building.

Familiar unease tingled Cornell's spine. Whatever this place had once been, it certainly had not been built for the desert. It looked like a temple or a palace – a minor one, given its size – that would have better suited a Tonomai city. Obrosvek, for instance. Had there once been a town here, one that the desert claimed centuries ago?

"No sign of the caravans," Gabe muttered. "Should be scattered all around here."

Cornell nodded, frowning. "Maybe the patrol was wrong, and it was bandits who took the caravans. Buried the wagons, took the loot off with them."

"Thieving bastards." The barbarian looked grimly at the dome, not at all aware that he had been planning to steal the loot himself. "Could be they shoved the goods into the building, be they monsters or thieves." Fire returned to his eyes. "Let's take a look, shan't we?"

Cornell shrugged. "We've come this far..." He didn't like to admit it, but a share of the blonde man's fire was burning in his heart as well. Life on the edge of poverty was fine for monks or seeker

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elves. The Cayaborean was neither. Besides, after Zhivahad's lightening of his purse, he really could use a few more gold coins.

Slowly they picked up their pace again, both fighters carefully scanning the plaza and the building for any sign of foes appearing. Flink, of course, only focused on the dome, curiosity burning in his bulging eyes. When they reached the entrance of the blocky base, a square metal door, he was frustrated yet again. No creatures had shown their ugly hides, and the alreu wondered why he had suffered through the boring last two days. Well, maybe the inside of the dome would offer something interesting, he thought to himself and bounced off the pony, racing to the large door to inspect it for an opening. It was clearly too heavy for his slim body, yet...

"Flink!" Cornell shouted in exasperation when the alreu suddenly vanished through a tiny crack at the door's hinges. He didn't bother to look at Gabe, slid down his steed and paused barely long enough to hobble the horse to a pole near the entrance, unsheathe his sword and head for the metal plates.

Moments later Gabe was by his side, his waraxe *bwyell* solidly fused to the barbarian's paws. "Push," Cornell muttered who had already put his weight against the door. To no avail, thus far, but when Gabe added the strength of his thick sinews, it gradually creaked open. Both men tightened the grip on their weapons, then they bounded into the dome – and stopped.

"Yahooooo!"

Flink cried out happily as he slid down a pile of silk drapes, arranged against a crumbled pillar in the reversed bowl interior. The warriors stared incredulously around, not least at the alreu who did a series of joyous flic-flacs amidst rows of half-broken crates before he started to climb back on top of the drapes.

Fragments of the roof lay all about the floor which probably was a mosaic, as well as could be judged through the layers of dust and debris. More than that, there was a plentitude of other objects that had nothing to do with the defragmentation of the dome. Wooden crates, some opened and their contents spilled negligently: jewels, gold, other valuables; weapons and armor, arranged artfully on the remainders of pillars to look as if their owners had placed them there, waiting to pick them up again. Which seemed rather unlikely, considering the bones and skulls scattered across the entire circular floor. Many were smashed to splinters, white chips dotting the brownish-yellowish ground.

"Well," Gabe sighed and managed to sound at the same time frustrated as pleased, "looks like we've found the treasure. Let's gather as much as we can load on the horses. Flink!"

The bellow reached the alreu just as he had reached the ground a third time since the two men's arrival. "Isn't this marvelous?!" he yelled, stroking one of the silk drapes. "Softer than my mother's *seidenkissen!*"

"Stop that," Gabe muttered irritably. "Gather as much treasure as you can and get it to the horses."

The alreu's eyes lit up. "Sure!" he cried, then started scanning the ground for the most sparkling and pretty objects he could find. Gabe mumbled something incoherently while he stepped across to a pile of jewels.

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While the two of them started gathering their loot, Cornell held back and indifferently pushed the nearest handful of coins into his belt pouch. There was a smell in the hall, more than just ancient dust and sand mixed with bone. Mouldy was the closest he could describe it – and a half open dome in the desert was not a place where mould could flourish.

He couldn't tell where the smell came from, not from the entrance. Slowly he wandered forward, through one of the meandering paths between the mounds of treasure chaotically strewn around. Closer to the center, there was an especially large pile, made up mostly of cloth like the silk piles Flink had so enjoyed a bit earlier.

Yes, the smell was stronger here, Cornell thought and tightened the grip on his sword. He could use a shield about now, but... there was one right in front of him, at the base of the central mound. Larger than a buckler, it looked to be made of dark, polished elfwood, stronger than steel, the hardest material one could find on Gushémal. The boss at its center was metal, bronze apparently, decoration more than anything else – and as far as decoration went, it had suffered all that one could expect from the soft metal. Scratched and dented, the inscriptions once chiseled into the surface were unreadable today. It didn't diminish the value of the shield, that after all came from the elfwood.

The shield was ancient. More than a millenium had passed, the sages of Cayaboré told, since bronze was used for weapons. And it was beautiful. The sheen of the polished wood reflected in Cornell's eyes, drawing him on, tempting him to pick the shield up and strap it to his arm.

"Hey, sir, those are mine!" The tiny figure of the alreu darted past him toward the pile of silk, toppled the shield in its haste as it started to climb the mound for another slide.

Cornell blinked, disconcerted. He'd been looking for the source of the mouldy smell, hadn't he? Now this pile was where it probably came from. "Flink," he hollered, "can you smell something?"

His first answer was a roll of silk clashing down to the ground, then he saw the alreu leaping to a more secure position on the mound, holding on to a horn that looked like the wicked lance of a shaggy unicorn. One more trophy the caravans had carried, Cornell thought and readied himself to yell again – when the horn began to rise.

Flink didn't notice at first, too glad he was not to have fallen a rather uncomfortable route to the ground. He dangled on the horn, turned himself around to peer at Cornell and smiled as he saw the Cayaborean storm up the silken mound with his sword drawn. "I go first, sir!" he yelled imperatively, relishing the prospect of the next slide.

Then warm, musty air rushed at his back, and he twisted around for a glance. Wolflike fangs glistened a foot away from his face, behind them a maw of absolute darkness. "Phew, what a breath," he complained, then angled for a better look at the fangs, completely ignorant of the danger.

"Flink!" Gabe roared twenty yards off, when he saw the central mound suddenly disintegrate, silk and jewels and coins exploding in a colorful rain, brushing off Cornell like a fly – and in its place, a giant creature rose, with a squat, doglike torso resting on six broad, long legs. Thin, yellowish fur covered the body, changing to dark bare skin at the neck – no, necks.

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Seven wolfheads, each as large as a pony reared up from the squat body, attached to long, sinuous necks. Each head bore a long, slightly curved horn at its forehead, between two vicious, slitted eyes and above a wide maw rich in teeth.

Gabe wasted about half a second being shocked and gaping at the appearance, then his waraxe flew through the air, aiming for the head to whose horn Flink clung. *Bwyell* spun about itself once, twice, then its halfmoon blade dug into the side of the head, ten inches beside the right eye. A scream issued from the wolfmaw, the head shook in pain – and Flink let go, whooping wildly during his fall.

On the ground, Cornell had been half buried by silk. He'd just made it out of the soft trap when the alreu landed on his back, pressing the air from his lungs. "This is great, sir! Now that's what I call a *real* monster!"

Angrily Cornell shoved the alreu out of his way, rolled on his back, raised his sword – just in time to see a row of teeth aiming for him. He twisted aside, rammed the blade upward, straight into the creature's jaw – as furry, booted feet jumped mercilessly close over him. "Ryelneyd!"

Gabe recovered *bwyell* in mid-air, using the stuck war axe to swing himself onto the back of the head, straddling the bucking skull with his legs. *Bwyell* hammered down, drawing a deep gash into the head, blood spurting out. The creature roared – and another head darted around, aiming for the barbarian.

Fifteen feet below, Cornell ripped a dagger from his belt, let it fly at the attacking head. He didn't have the chance to see whether his aim was true, as a third head snapped at him, forcing him to roll out of the way, straight into Flink. The alreu toppled on him, a mess of more arms and legs than he should have possessed.

"Fresh food! The large one belongs to Beavral!" a voice roared, foreign and twisted.

A second, similarly distorted, joined, crying, "Kill me! Kill me, please!"

"My eye! My eye!"

"Shut up and eat him, Phindar!"

"Why won't you kill me? Please! Please kill me!"

There was a chorus of voices echoing in the hall, voices that came straight from the maws of the creature, each head speaking in a different tone, each snapping wildly about.

Cornell stared. There was Gabe, still on top of one head, whirling his war axe about to keep other heads away, three of them performing a macabre dance about him. The head he was sitting on was thrashing wildly, dark blood covering its skin, its motions growing weaker by the second. The eye of one of them had a dagger impaled – Cornell's! And the heads were shouting.

"I didn't know monsters could speak," Flink marveled calmly. "Do you have any idea where they learned meantongue, sir?"

"Dammit, that thing's killing us! Can you fight?" Cornell snapped at him.

The words took the alreu aback. "Fight? Why? Do I have to?"

"Yes!"

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Flink shrugged, pulled the backpack around and started to search its contents. Cornell would have loved to squeeze the manling's neck right about now. Unfortunately, other necks – and the attached heads – called for his attention, as two of the remaining three shot down at him.

The warrior rolled aside, slashing his blade blindly topward. No resistance met the sword, no score, only...

"Yes, that's it! Kill me!"

"Shut up, Nev, bloody Cayaborean coward!"

"Shut up yourself, Beavral. Here, warrior, slay me!"

Cornell came back to his feet, sweat covering his forehead, his breath still coming easily. One of the heads darted forward – Cornell ducked, cut at the jaw, rammed his left elbow into the neck. Then he leaped aside – or tried to, as the second head smashed into his ribs. The Cayaborean warrior suddenly found himself flying through the air, pain exploding in his side.

He ducked for the landing, rolled out, came to his knees. Already he had to raise his sword again, both heads rushing at him again. "Will you finally kill me?!" the left one cried – and its jaws raced down towards Cornell's leg.

Cornell dropped backwards again, trying to roll over his back onto his feet. His side detonated in pain again, aided by the fangs of the right head cutting skin, barely missing a real bite. Cornell collapsed, immediately scrambling forward, clawing out of the way of the heads.

Instead of an attack he heard an inhuman scream, followed by a crashing sound and a whining voice yelling, "Why him? Beavral *liked* this! Kill *me*, manling!"

"I'm trying, just a minute," Flink muttered. "Hey, let me reload!"

Breath laboring into his lungs, Cornell raised his head and saw the alreu hopping out of the way of the remaining head, cradling a strange contraption in his arms. Close by, another head lay on the ground, its top bloodied and frayed and – boiling? The Cayaborean had little time to wonder. The second head was still after Flink. Miraculously the alreu stayed out of the way of the snapping jaws, and the head – Nev? – still cried out to be killed.

"Then hold still!" Flink complained.

Cornell swallowed, grabbed his sword tighter, pushed his arms down to get up – and slipped on something round beneath him. The shield! Not one to argue with fortune, the warrior strapped it on.

As he got on his feet, he felt almost fresh again, the pain in his side dulled by adrenaline. "Here, I'll kill you," he yelled.

The head spun around, cried happily and charged the warrior with its fangs.

Cornell blocked the jaws with the shield, stabbed around it and met resistance. The head recoiled, yelling in pain and glee. Once more, it charged down, but this time it came sidewise. *To throw me again!* Different tactics, he decided, and ran towards the approaching head, leaping at the very last second to fly over the head. His sword stabbed down, while his shield – sliced through the horn.

The Cayaborean turned in midair, yet before his feet touched the ground again, a final roar issued from the head, then it fell down. *The horn!* Cornell didn't understand why the horn could be so important, but he was happy to use any advantage he could find.

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“Oh, and I was just ready to kill him,” Flink mumbled, standing a few feet behind the Cayaborean.

Cornell glanced backwards and saw that the alreu had his contraption pointed forward. It had a tubular point, almost like a blowgun, the rest completely alien to Cornell’s eyes. “Kill one of the others!” he yelled.

“Sure!” The alreu’s eyes lit up. He raised the contraption, aimed it at one of the remaining heads of the monster, then he pulled a trigger, and a blue ball was propelled from the tube. Cornell’s gaze followed it as best as he could, the ball arcing up towards the four heads still in the air. None of the heads noticed the missile, not until it splashed down on one of them and burst. Blue liquid poured out – and smoke rose from the skin. The creature yelled, thrashed about wildly.

To no avail.

Cornell was dumbfounded as he saw the head suddenly drop like a dead weight, the acid eating through the skull, boiling it.

The remaining three heads, fortunately, were equally stunned. And that gave Cornell a moment to look for Gabe. He must have killed the head he was riding, counting the surviving skulls. Perhaps closest to... one of the heads was a still figure on the ground, garbed in fur that was splashed deep red with blood. A muscle twitched in Cornell’s neck.

“Flink, reload and fire as soon as you’re ready,” he said calmly. Hefting his shield closer, he ran forward and cried the name of Gabe’s tribe, “Ryelneyd!”

With that he launched himself at the first head darting to meet him, smashed the shield into the fangs, stabbed his sword in the side and swung himself upward, copying Gabe’s maneuver. His seat was a lot more precarious than he had expected, the creature’s skin slick and moist. There was no way for him to recapture his sword, too much did he need it as a foothold. Only his shield remained, and that he had to smash instantly at the next head. Holding it slanted, the shield cut through the fangs like butter, and the head recoiled in surprise.

“Behind you!”

The head beneath him bucked upward. Cornell lost his seat, found himself flying once more – and behind him the third head was racing forward. His best bet, he knew and slashed with the shield for the horn while reaching for it.

The razor’s edge of the shield cut off a piece of the horn, Cornell’s right hand grabbed the rest, held on tight. The head plummeted beneath him. Cornell stayed on, the fall softened by the skull.

Blood pumping wildly in his veins, the warrior looked up. Two remaining. One was trying to shake Cornell’s sword loose, the other was coming for him. “Flink!” Cornell hollered. “Shoot it!”

No response.

And no more time.

The Cayaborean loosened the straps of the shield, pushed them into his hand – then threw the shield towards the head. It spun in the air, the bronze boss blinking. The head stopped for a moment, confused by the sight. The jaws gaped open as if the creature was wondering about the meaning. Before it could decipher the truth, the shield’s edge hit its aim, spinning through the horn as easily as if it wasn’t there.

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“That’s it! You’re doing it, shield bearer!”

Not Flink’s voice, Cornell suddenly realized, and it was the same voice – female! – that had warned him before of the third head. But that only left...

The single surviving skull scraped its side against the wall. The blade stuck too tightly, magically protected against being broken off, even by the head’s enormous strength, and the skull shook itself in frustration. “Bah! What’s the use?” it muttered before it turned towards Cornell.

The Cayaborean was helpless. No weapons left, no protection, just agility. Of which there was little left, after pushing his body to the edge and beyond.

“You don’t have much time, shield bearer,” the head told him, its voice definitely female, and so human the very sounds cut into Cornell’s marrow. “I cannot hold down the monster’s hunger very long. Get the shield and cut off my horn.”

It was still speaking as the head lowered itself to the ground, turning the horn into easy reach from the ground. Cornell obeyed the wishes quickly, not even wondering about the strange scene. The elfwood shield had lodged itself into a pillar, cutting through half the stone’s width. It took the warrior some effort to pull it free, but free it came.

“Hurry, shield bearer,” the head’s voice spurned him on, and Cornell hastened to the creature. The head was quivering by now, the jaws snapping blindly, interrupting the voice every other word. “The... monster...”

Cornell slashed his shield through the horn.

The head sighed, then lay still, as did the squat body behind it.

The fight was over.

And Cornell felt as if he would keel over in a second. But he couldn’t. Not yet. He wasn’t sure what happened to his companions. He forced air into his lungs, walked around the head and looked to the spot where he had seen the fallen Gabe.

Who was sitting up and waving weakly at Cornell.

Flink grinned. “Sir, that was marvelous! As I was just saying to Gabe here, and you know, I really thought he was dead when I saw him, because of all the blood, but it was just the monster’s and not his own. At least not much, I mean, and I bandaged his wound because that is what my mother told me to do when people are... What’s wrong, sir?” The mirth vanished suddenly from the alreu’s voice, replaced by curiosity.

Cornell was laughing heartily, no matter how his ribs hurt. The world had suddenly turned out to be a very bright place after all. Everything was all right.

At least until a voice said, in all too familiar tones, “I’m still alive! Blast it, I wanted to be killed! Can’t this stupid warrior get *anything* right?!”

“Nev, you bloody idiot, keep your trap shut! Do you want to go on killing people?”

Both voices were familiar, although they had lost the slurring tones of the monster. Now where could they be coming from, Cornell wondered, feeling his mind cloud up.

“Why should I?!” Nev kept on complaining. “You’re that famous great shield maiden Halla Valfrey, so you’re supposed to like this. But I’m not! I’m just a simple accountant and –“

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A third voice cut in, the one that had screamed about its eye before, “And I used to be the merchant who hired you, Nev, before the monster gobbled up the two of us. So I’m *ordering* you to *like* this!”

“Listen to Phindar,” the female voice said again, and two words leaped into Cornell’s consciousness. “Shield maiden”, Nev had said... Were the voices coming from his shield?! “The years inside the monster are over! The four of us are in the shield now, and we have a chance to get our lives back, with the help of the shield bearer! What’s your name, by the way, honored shield bearer?”

Yes! The voices were in his shield! Now that he paid attention to it, he could even feel a slight quiver run through the elfwood with every word of the voices. And the bronze boss... It had been dented before, yet now it gleamed in perfection, the runes as readable as if a smith had chiseled them in only a few minutes earlier.

“Shield bearer! I am speaking to you!” the female shouted to get his attention before continuing in humble, though insistent tones, “I wish to know your name. I am Halla Valfrey, shield maiden of Keroull. Pray tell, what are you called?”

“Er,” Cornell stuttered.

“His name’s Cornell!” Flink shouted from a few feet away, clearly unconcerned with talking to a shield. “Gabe told me he’s from Cayaboré, I don’t know his last name, but how did you get into that shield? And what is it with the monster? Did you –“

Obviously, Cornell decided finally, shutting out the voice of the alreu, this was a dream. And if it was a dream, he should be asleep. For an instant, he stopped, wondering about the logic of this thought. Good enough, he found and fell forward, already unconscious before he hit the ground.

THE END

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