



Warrior Eternal

by Marc H. Wyman

© Chris Bogues

A Gushémal Story

Other Tales
From the World of Gushéal

- Call of the Dragon, Parts I & II
- Ruins and Hopes
- Shield Maiden
- Childhood of a Fighter
- The Pledge
- Rock of Discontent

Visit our site on the web to read these tales:

<http://www.gushemal.com/stories.htm>

Also read the Travellers' Tales in the World!

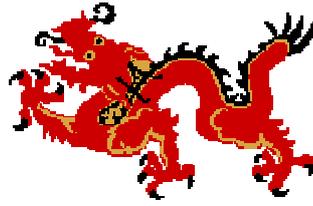
Download from the following site:

<http://www.gushemal.com/si/download.htm!>

© 2001 by T.I.P. Entertainment

This text may be freely distributed, provided the copyright notice and the names of the authors are included (or alternatively, the integrity of the text has not been altered).

If you have any comments about this story, please send an e-mail to marc@gushemal.com. We always look forward to hearing from you! (If so indicated, your comments may be published on the website.)



“What are they doing?” Cornell of Cayaboré whispered to his barbarian companion Gabe. Both were lying low on the cusp of a hill, looking down its flank, thorny bushes hiding the men from the sight of the group of people in the valley below.

The people were Tonomai, olive-skinned men in wide clothes that flared in the wind. Some women were among them, priestesses to the One God, recognizable by the red robes with gold embroidery and the silver tiaras on their heads. The men were warriors, wearing scimitars and light leather armor over their sand-colored shirts and blue half-skirts.

All in all, Cornell counted twenty-six warriors ringed irregularly around the four priestesses. Two more fighters were standing close to the clerics, watching them closely. The commanders, Cornell supposed, judging by the ornately decorated shoulder pads they wore. Next to them stood a circular stone altar, about three feet high and four in diameter, with something that looked strangely like shackles on the flat top.

“I’m guessing,” Gabe muttered and pointed to the outer side of the ring where a tent stood, “ritual sacrifice.”

A fifth priestess now emerged from the tent, dragging a tiny, spindly creature behind her. The manling was about three feet tall, its ockre hair pointing into every direction, and its bright eyes wide with amazement and fear. Its hands were tied with straps of leather, but that precaution seemed not to be necessary – wounds bled at the ankles of the creature, cuts that made walking so difficult the priestess practically carried it.

“An alreu,” Cornell nodded grimly. He quickly looked behind him, down the other side of the hill where Flink was watching the horses. The manling of their own party didn’t look too happy as he was apparently telling the mare Cornell rode. He’d be a lot less happy if he knew what was going on in the valley – worse, he’d be running straight into the pile of Tonomai to save his racemate.

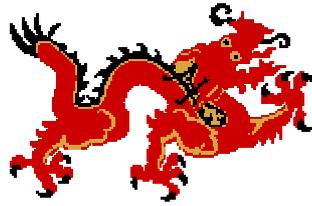
The fifth priestess heaved the alreu onto the altar. The other four clerics gathered around the stone, clasping each other’s hands to form a ring. The priestess in the center calmly attached the shackles to the manling.

“Twenty-eight warriors, five clerics,” Cornell said. “What do you think?”

Gabe drew his large axe of dwarven make from his back. “*Bwyell* and me’ll take the warriors, you the priestesses.”

The Cayaborean drew a face, but before he could say anything, a female voice issued from the large buckler on his left arm, “I will help, shield bearer. My edge is sharper than a sword, it shall cut through the Tonomai if you throw me.”

“Worth a try,” Cornell grunted and nodded to Gabe. “Let’s go.”



The priestess at the altar brandished a dagger, one foot long, its ivory handle carved exquisitely with minute details depicting scenes of religious worship. All eyes of the Tonomai were on her as she raised the dagger, cried, “Lord, hear me, oh One True God! Take this offering, and –“

Her words were cut off rather rudely when a spinning disk of elfwood flew right through her throat. The cleric’s eyes bulged over, life retained for the briefest of moment before her head tumbled off her body which followed a scant moment later. The elfwood shield bounced off the altar, an inch away from the screaming alreu sacrifice, impossibly still at full speed as it rushed one of the warrior commanders and sliced through his chest before he had a chance to understand what was happening.

“Way to go, Halla!” a male voice sounded from the shield while it skewered another warrior on its way back to Cornell.

The Cayaborean and Gabe were running down the hill, their weapons at the ready. The shield headed for Cornell who easily snatched it from the air, his left arm gliding through the holding straps instantaneously.

“Now, shield bearer,” the female shield voice said, “let us begin the havoc.”

She needed have said no more for already the two warriors were meeting the first Tonomai. Cornell struck down one surprised enemy, while Gabe happily shouted a warcry and let his axe hew one Tonomai’s head off. The look of surprise was still imprinted in the man’s eyes, as the skull spun off into the sandy ground.

“Attack!” a Tonomai screamed unnecessarily.

Cornell’s next foe had already drawn his scimitar, blocked the blow, while his neighbors to both sides hurled their own blades against the Cayaborean. Cornell smashed his shield sideways into the first blade, the elfwood’s edge cleaving the scimitar in twine, while the warrior’s sword parried the second Tonomai’s attack. It barely trembled under the blow, a magical sword that Sylasa had given him two months earlier.

Cornell kicked forward, swiped the legs out from under his original opponent. The first neighboring Tonomai cursed, seeing his sword broken. On the other side, the Tonomai slashed with renewed fury – only to find the grinning Cayaborean duck and stab his sword right into his foe’s chest. “Worked for an elf, works for you,” he spat. Then Cornell leaped backwards as more of the warriors were pouring his way.

And froze in shock when he saw the air suddenly solidify around the Tonomai he had just been fighting. A block of diamond encased them, sparkling, resplendent and deadly.

“The clerics!” the male voice shouted from the shield. “It’s one of their spells!”

“I’m outta here,” another voice from the shield announced.

And Cornell stared as the remaining Tonomai suddenly halted their attack. The raised scimitars seemed to be frozen in the air as the warriors looked wildly about as if they could no longer see their opponent.

“Can’t see me, can’t hurt me,” the second shield voice said proudly, followed quickly by the female voice of Halla Valfrey, “Shield bearer, Nev made us invisible! The coward thinks he’ll get away like that! Use it, fast, shield bearer!”

Never one to pass up a chance, Cornell ran forward and sliced at the next best Tonomai. The fighter clearly did not see the blow coming, made no defensive move – his leather armor was pierced like butter when the blade descended into the flesh beneath. The others cried in alarm – but Cornell cast a glance towards the priestesses and saw one of them raising her hands in his direction.

He also saw that another of the clerics was standing next to the alreu, with the high priestess’s dagger in her hands, ready to continue the ritual.

Self-defense came first, so Cornell dived sideways – just in time to avoid the diamond block that formed right behind him, encasing both the Tonomai he had just killed and a hapless fighter next to him.

“Demon! Demon!” a Tonomai cried – and was cut down by Gabe’s axe.

“You all right, Cornell?!” the barbarian shouted into the thin air.

Standing next to him, the Cayaborean muttered, “I’m fine, get on with it!”

Happily Gabe did as asked, rushing headlong into the next Tonomai warriors. Cornell eyed the altar – three of the clerics formed a makeshift circle, the fourth was ready to kill their alreu sacrifice. Blue light gleamed around them, flickering discharges dancing around the fourth priestess.

Cornell ran towards the altar, barreling one Tonomai warrior aside with the shield – then ducked automatically when he saw one of the clerics look his way. Not a second too soon, as a flash of lightning burned right over his scalp.

“Damn!” Halla cried from the shield. “The clerics can see us!”

Indeed the other priestesses in the ring saw Cornell rushing them, dissolved the ring in moments and raised their hands to cast their spells. The Cayaborean threw himself to the ground, cursed, and rolled aside while discharges of magic heated up the air right over him. “Halla, can you get them?!”

“I will,” the female voice said calmly.

And Cornell raised his upper body just enough that he could swing the shield. It flew easily from his arm, spun madly about, flying on an apparently erratical course as it cut down the first priestess, bounced crazily from the stone altar to assail the other Tonomai commander. The women were distracted – understandably -, which allowed Cornell to rush up from the ground and stab his sword at another of the priestesses. She yelped in baffled pain, fell, and the Cayaborean held out his arm just in time for the shield to slip its straps on again.

Only two priestesses remaining.

That was Cornell's thoughts as he was about to leap forward. At that very moment one of the priestesses let go another spell. Fiery air tore into the Cayaborean's side, searing through his right arm. The sword fell from his hand, he dropped to his knees, and instinctively he tried to clasp his damaged arm with his left. But the shield was still attached to it, the elfwood contacting immediately the injured part.

He didn't know what happened. One moment flames of pain rushed up through his arm, the next he felt strength returned, his whole body as healthy as if he hadn't gone into battle at all.

As surprised as he was, the priestesses were stunned when they saw their opponent simply rise, pick up his blade and renew his attack. Both fell quickly, unable to release another spell.

Cornell stood over their bodies, a frown deeply carved into his face.

"So much for the Tonomai," the first male shield voice spat. "Running like hares, they are."

That they were, Cornell saw. Some fifteen warriors had survived the carnage, fled down the valley. A few yards from the Cayaborean, Gabe stood, *bwyell* raised high over his head. "What are you doing?" he shouted after the Tonomai. "The fight isn't over yet, by Keshmire. Come back here!"

"Gabe, let them," Cornell said and walked over to the altar. The shackled alreu stared at him in a mixture of fright and curiosity. "It's all right," Cornell said, "nobody's going to hurt you now."

"*Ich bin frei?*" the alreu asked in his people's language.

"You're –" Cornell started, then realized that the creature might not understand his words.

He needn't have worried for a tiny voice piped from behind, "*Ihr seid gerettet, werter Freund! Es gibt keine Gefahr mehr!*" Flink, their own alreu, hurried to the altar, climbed on top of the stone and began unclasping the shackles. Not without glancing accusingly at Cornell, "Well, sir, why didn't you tell me there was going to be a fight? Very impolite, sir, now, really!"

"I'll remember next time," Cornell said.

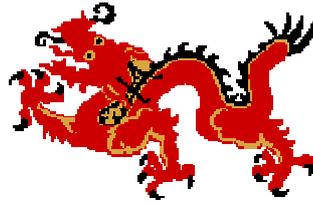
"I very much hope so, sir. And the same goes to you, Gabe!" Flink pointed a finger at the approaching barbarian. "I'll know better than to stay with the horses when you say you just want to look over a hill! My goodness, all this experience wasted because you didn't tell me!"

"Sorry," Gabe said, more to silence the alreu than out of real contrition. "What's the little one's name, anyway?"

Flink cocked his head, glanced back at the second alreu. "*Wertes Freund, mögt Ihr mir mitteilen, wie Euer Name lautet?*"

"*Ich heiße –*", the manling began to answer, then reconsidered. In halting meantongue he said, "My name is Geschwind, from Kleineheimat at the coast. I thank you worthy *krieger* for saving my life."

"Glad to be of service," Cornell grinned. In the distance a trumpet sounded. The Cayaborean frowned. "Sounds like there are more Tonomai around. We'd better get our horses and leave."



Geschwind and Flink shared the latter's pony as the party continued its ride. The two were talking animatedly in their language, while neither minded the pony's bridle very much. Instead the horse had decided to follow the steeds of the two warriors, which worked out to the same end.

"We're being followed," Gabe announced, paying scant attention to the road, his eyes instead swerving every few moments across the hilly area around them.

"I've seen them," Cornell nodded, pointing a finger to the southeast. "Glints of metal, about a mile away. I saw them between the hills. They're riding parallel to us. Question is, why don't they attack?"

Gabe shrugged. "The Tonomai have learned to fear *brwyell*, as well they should."

"Well, we *have* been carving them up fiercely." Cornell shook his head, glanced down towards the shield. "What other powers do you have stored in there, Halla?"

He had found the elfwood buckler in a deserted temple on the edge of the Elfadil Desert, fighting a holnesh – a multi-headed creature each of whose heads maintained the soul of a sapient being it had consumed. The souls could speak, but their actions were controlled by the monster. Some of them Cornell had freed with the aid of the shield – now, though, those were caught in the elfwood. There was Phindar, a merchant and Decalleigh priest; Nev, a cowardly accountant, from Cayaboré of all places. And also Halla Valfrey, the so-called shield maiden. Supposedly the buckler had belonged to her a long time ago – she had probably spent decades in the holnesh, rather than the year-and-a-half that the other two had been trapped there.

Halla answered, "For each soul alive in the elfwood, it provides a power akin to the soul. Thus Nev has managed to render you invisible, and Phindar has healed your arm when it was burned by the spell. I am capable of controlling the flight of the shield to some extent. That is all we can assist your duty with, shield bearer."

"Sounds *very* nice," Gabe laughed. "Hey, Cornell, if you tire of that buckler, I could use it."

"*No!*" Halla shouted, the shield quivering with the force of her voice. "It is the shield bearer who carries us."

Phindar added, "Don't try to dissuade her, Halla's pretty stubborn."

They rode on for a while. Now and then they caught sight of more glints of metal around them. A scouting party, Cornell decided. No more than four Tonomai. More than that had survived, and there had been the trumpet calls in the distance. A host of Tonomai warriors might be in the area. About to ambush them? Or wait for them at the nearest city?

"Maybe we should skirt Obrosvek," he said. "The people there might already have been informed by *magiscribe*, so we could be facing an unpleasant reception there."

“Absolutely not!” Gabe shouted. “Look, we got all the loot from the temple with us! I want good clean money so we can ride faster. Or are you afraid of the Tonomai, with *that* shield?!”

“Shouldn’t worry about it,” Phindar agreed. “The Tonomai do not know the secret of *magiscribe*.”

Cornell grumbled, “Which only leaves that army of Tonomai to worry about.”

“Not to mention that they are rogues without any outside help. The authorities of Tonomat have forbidden any demon summoning fifteen years ago.”

“*What?*” Cornell, Gabe and Halla yelled in unison.

“Oh,” Phindar muttered, and one could just picture him blinking. “You didn’t know the ritual was about calling a demon? Sorry, I thought that was obvious. Why, the ritual ring of clerics and the dagger should have given it away. After all, the Tonomai don’t generally use intelligent sacrifices. Even though one could debate whether alreu are –“

Halla cut him off abruptly, “What else do you know about the ritual? Could they repeat it?”

“Well, the clerics are all dead. Unless there are others, and they find another sacrifice... Not likely, no.”

“Good,” Cornell huffed in relief. And then another thought hit him, “Phindar, you called them rogues. Any more information you got stored up?”

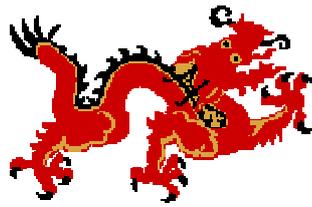
The shield quivered for a moment silently, then the merchant’s voice returned, “Just rumors, and all of them are a bit outdated. I *have* been away for a *little* bit, y’know, with the holnesh and all that. But back when I ran caravans along here, there was a group of people – might call them revolutionaries, if you want – who were pretty angry about Tonomat shrinking all the time. Look, a couple of centuries ago it seemed as if the empire was about to swallow up all of Gushémal, extend the rule of the One God all over the world. And what happened since? They not only lost most of the Arrufat Peninsula, their holdings this side of Shane’s Sea have been growing smaller all the time. Why, even Leahcim fell to an assault of holy warriors under the direct command of the Divine Speaker a hundred and thirty years ago! Leahcim is a holy city of their religion, y’know? Didn’t do much to improve morale around here.

“So these rogues, they decided that their government doesn’t know squat about fighting. Probably right, they are. The rulers have grown fat and complacent, none of that religious zeal of the early days remaining. Rogues got it in spades, trust me. What’s my guess is that they were trying to summon a demon to lead their army. Something like that, anyway.”

Cornell frowned. “And we stopped that ritual. If you’re right, Phindar, these rogues should be all over us, not watching calmly from afar.”

Phindar made a spitting sound. “Sorry, son, mind-reading is none of my strengths. I’m a Decalleigh priest, I heal, that’s all.”

“Uhm, excuse me,” a tiny voice asked from behind, so timid that it took Cornell a moment to recognize Flink. “If you can heal, would you please look after Geschwind? I think he’s taken ill or something.”



Geschwind's face was pale, his eyes looked misted over, unable to focus on anything around him. Geschwind was trembling, incoherent words escaping his lips. Some were meantongue, most of them in the alreu's own language.

They had found a glade to rest, only a short ride from where Flink had first informed them. Palm trees surrounded a small pond. Cornell had scooped up some of the water to splash it onto the alreu, but it had proved little help. At least the horses enjoyed the opportunity to get a drink of water, and some shade to hide from the sun.

Gabe had climbed one of the trees to keep a look-out for the Tonomai. It was amazing how easily a man of nearly seven feet managed to reach the top – and almost frightening to imagine standing below him if he should fall off.

“Can you heal him, dear priest, can you heal him?!” Flink cried, standing in front of Cornell and talking to the shield as if it was a real person.

“I can give it a try,” Phindar said gently, conjuring up the vision of a kindly old priest with a grey beard. “Shield bearer, please put the shield on the alreu. When in contact, I can seek out what disease has befallen our little friend.”

Cornell softly pushed Flink aside, knelt down by the side of Geschwind and did as he was asked.

The very instant the shield touched the ailing alreu, Geschwind's eyes suddenly flew open, darted maniacally about; his upper body tried to rear up against the buckler on his chest, his arms flailing. Foam bubbled up between his lips, a cry issued, *“Schreit ‘Verheerung’ und lasst frei die Hunde des Krieges!”*

“Get me off! Get me off! Get me off!” the shield yelled, along with three other voices howling in sudden pain.

Quickly Cornell tore the buckler away, saw in amazement how Geschwind dropped back, his eyes fell shut and all signs of the sudden movement vanished. “What happened?”

Flink raced to the side of Geschwind, cautiously stroked his feverish brow, shaking his head desperately. “What is wrong with you, dear friend? Why do you say these mad things? There are no dogs of war!”

“We're doomed! Oh, sweet Maidoyú, are we doomed!” the coward Nev cried from the shield, and Cornell felt a slight tug on every hair of his body.

“Turn us visible again, Nev,” Halla said firmly. “The pain is gone, there is no danger.”

“No danger?! Didn't you just feel that?! Like boiling oil, that's what it was!”

Cornell cried in exasperation, “What happened?! Phindar?!”

The shield fell silent for a moment, and when it spoke it was the calm, resolute voice of Halla Valfrey instead of the cleric, “He doesn’t answer, shield bearer. I can feel he is still with us in the shield, but there is no response. The disease of the alreu must have been too strong for him.”

“Yeah, right,” Nev commented acidly, and Cornell hated himself for agreeing. The hairs on his neck stood up, a chill ran down his spine. Something was going on with the alreu, something that was more than an ordinary disease.

“Gabe! We’re moving on!” he called, then heaved Geschwind carefully onto his own horse. The mare whined unhappily at having to leave the nice shady place so quickly – and Flink tugged urgently at Cornell’s pants. “Sir, can’t we try something else? Poor Geschwind, we need to help him, there has to be something we can do, a potion, a salve, a tea, something! There’s always something that can cure illness, that was my mother always said. – Oh, actually it was more like ‘One day I won’t know how to cure everything that you carry in here’, but that doesn’t translate too well, so –“

The Cayaborean dropped his hand heavily on Flink’s shoulder. “We’ll be hurrying to get to Obrosvek. There might be a priest who knows what’s going on here. All right?”

“You think a Tonomai knows how to cure my dear friend?!” the alreu shouted gladly. “Let’s ride, quickly!” He screamed the last words as he already bounded on top of his pony, resumed his traditionally precarious hold and slapped his steed to start walking.

“I hope they can cure him,” Cornell muttered and glanced at the shivering tiny form draped over the horse before him. “Or else...”



The land rushed by at a maddening speed as the party strained their horses to gallop for hours. The hills around them grew taller, rockier – the first outriders of the Alquibrian Mountains, around which the Cheselain river flowed. The river’s water provided enough sustenance for more lively plants to grow, more than the thorny bushes that had been steady companions in the days before. Groves of trees grew in secluded spots, grass formed a green carpet that the hooves of the horses rushed over.

As nightfall approached, Cornell realized they could not go on much longer. His own mare – the ridiculously thin creature a sandman had sold him in the desert – was covered by foamy sweat. She still managed to gallop at the speed he demanded of her, but she might keel over any minute, he thought.

And Geschwind looked as if he might join the horse moments later. The alreu was mumbling constantly, shivering as if he were freezing to death, his face so pale it seemed blue.

The Cayaborean scanned the surroundings carefully for a possible campsite. He was sure the Tonomai were still after them, though he hadn't caught sight of them again. If they had given up on shadowing the party on a parallel course, all they'd have to do was follow the tracks they were leaving.

Provided, of course, that they would continue pursuing the party at night. But Cornell guessed that they were quite fanatical – people like that rarely let themselves be distracted by minor details such as darkness or killing their horses.

None of the places he saw looked ideal, none easy to defend, none that offered a good line of sight. Eventually he raised his hand exasperatedly and called the others to halt. "We've got to camp down," he explained.

"But, sir!" Flink cried. "We need to bring Geschwind to Obrosvek, that's what you said!"

Gabe stood in his saddle, using his extended height to look around. "That looks decent over there," he said and pointed towards a grove of trees which grew before the rockface of a hill. The hill wasn't very high, but it might provide some limited cover. The other sides sloped up gently, at varying angles. No defense there, Cornell thought, but if they camped between the trees, that might do the trick. Better than camping in the open, anyway, he decided gloomily.



Flink slept badly that night. The blankets he had piled on himself – as he usually did, whether the climate was warm or cold – didn't seem to be able to hold off the cold. And Geschwind, lying a foot aside from him, kept tossing and turning, murmuring every now and then something as fiercely mad as the line about the dogs of war. Flink was worried about the other alreu. Nightmares haunted his dreams, memories of his past intertwined with his present-day companions – nothing to ensure a good night's sleep, to be sure.

Finally screams woke him up, and the alreu jumped right out from under his blankets. "Back for more?!" Gabe cried. "Get a taste of *bwyell*, fools!" – "Quit screaming and start fighting!" Cornell's voice answered a little further, overlaid by the noise of blades *clanging* on each other, warcries from the Tonomai, grunts and yells of agony.

"But it's dark!" Flink complained, squinting at the scene around him. All he could see were shadows, barely lit by the waning moon above. "Couldn't you have waited till morning, so I could see what's going on?!"

"Don't worry," Geschwind said slowly, his words slurred by the unaccustomed meantongue. "You will see enough, little one."

“You’re up again?!” Flink yelled and flung himself down towards the other alreu. He barely could make out his race-mate in the twilight, only saw that Geschwind was obviously sitting up, and his eyes... Well, now wasn’t that strange? His eyes weren’t supposed to glow, were they? Flink was pretty sure none of the people back home at Tieferbau ever looked like that, but on the other hand, different folks always had different manners, hadn’t they? “Everything’s going to be all right, isn’t it, dear friend? *Helfen wir meinen Freunden jetzt?*”

Geschwind coughed. Had he gotten up? Flink wondered. He seemed quite a bit taller than he had a moment ago. “No,” the second alreu said, his voice dropping more into *basso profundo* with every syllable. “None will help your friends.”

“But... they’re fighting! Dear friend, the evil men have returned, and –“

“Ruhig, kleiner Mann!” Geschwind said, his voice cutting through the night like thunder.

Baffled, Flink fell silent – and realized that there was no more noise of fighting. He turned his head and saw amazedly how Cornell and Gabe stood silently among the Tonomai warriors. His friends still had their weapons raised, but they weren’t moving. Not one bit! But the Tonomai, they were falling to their knees, looking towards Flink and Geschwind, starting a low chant that quickly rose in crescendo.

“Why can I see it all so clearly?” Flink wondered.

“Because I wish light,” the voice next to him said. Suddenly he wasn’t quite so sure it was Geschwind’s voice – after all, an alreu wasn’t supposed to speak as if he were ten feet tall, and his mouth were made of some thorny, rocky substance. On the other hand, Flink thought, that was a pretty apt description of what Geschwind now looked like. Not counting the black interlocking scales, the long talons on each of the four hands, the papery-thin wings folded onto his back. And that marvelous pendant he wore on a chain! Made of gold or platinum or some such metal, an octagonal, dark haematite jewel set at the center, lustrously reflecting light.

“Do you feel fear now, manling?” Geschwind said, focusing his green-glowing eyes onto the alreu, the sharp, barbed thorns around his mouth quivering.

“Should I?”

What had been Geschwind tossed its head back, let go a wave of laughter that felt as if a hurricane was approaching.

“Yes, you should be afraid,” the calm voice of Halla Valfrey said from the shield on Cornell’s arm. “That is a demon who has possessed your friend. From the Arye Abyss, I believe.”

The creature’s laughter ended abruptly, its glowing eyes racing down to glance at the buckler. **“Be glad that you are encased in elfwood, or I would consume your soul right away.”**

Confused, Flink looked from the shield to the demon. “But... you’re Geschwind, aren’t you?”

“I am Thennisgar,” the creature announced, raising one of its arms. **“The one you know is no more, little man. Thennisgar has taken his place. And Thennisgar shall rule!”**

The Tonomai chant grew into a sudden frenzy, the warriors jumped up, raised their weapons and started dancing madly. *Not a pretty sight*, Flink decided and cocked his head. *A little more rhythm, a lot more practice, and they might have something. Someone should help them with that...*

Halla coughed. “Does the mighty warrior know that these Tonomai are rogues without any influence on the nation?”

“It does not matter. Thennisgar will shatter all enemies. All will bow their heads to Thennisgar – or they won’t have any heads left. Which brings me to the matter of you and these two fools.” The demon stepped forward, pushing Flink aside with surprising gentleness, and stood before Gabe and Cornell to observe them intently.

“Please don’t hurt them, Thane – Thenn –“ Flink cried, choking on the difficult name. “Please stay good, please!”

The demon’s head jerked around, slowly, like an avalanche building up speed. The eyes glowed in the night, despite the strange, sourceless light as visible as two green fires. **“Stay good?”** Thennisgar repeated, measuring the words carefully. Its lips twisted into a grin. **“I will not hurt any of them, little man, if you say so. Instead, let us play a game. How would you like that?”**

“Well, *I* love games,” Flink said and hopped towards the demon who had to angle its head impossibly to observe the tiny alreu. “But, you know, Gabe doesn’t really, and Cornell... I don’t know why, but he’s never happy with any of the games I suggest. What are you thinking of?”

“Something very amusing. Now... where should we stage it? There has to be a challenge to it, some excitement, something to please the masses.” Thennisgar chuckled. **“Or just the two of us, manling. Ahh, I have it. Just two miles from here, to the east. And in the morning, our game will begin.”**

Flink frowned at his two friends. “Are you sure they’ll like it?”

“Absolutely not,” Halla assured, seconded by Nev’s fearful voice shouting pleas of mercy.

“They will. Very much so,” the demon said and smiled.



The sun’s light crept onto the land slowly, encumbered by masses of dark clouds that had gathered in the sky overnight. A grayish mist seemed to shorten the sight, alter the landscape to be less of the pleasing hilly area the party had been crossing the day before. Now it was overcast by long shadows, the trees and bushes twisted into baleful echoes of themselves.

The Tonomai warriors had set up tents in a half circle around the place where the demon stood, towering over both the small army of rogues and Flink. Neither Cornell nor Gabe were anywhere in sight, only their horses – still laden with their gear – were corralled with the Tonomai horses.

The two warriors had come over here with the rest, walking like marionettes pulled by an overly hasty puppeteer. Flink had been running circles around them, trying to elicit any response – without

success. After reaching the place they had stood like wax-faced statues while the camp was set up. Then Thennisgar had looked at them deeply, and both walked off in opposite directions.

Now Flink was sitting despondently on a rock, toying listlessly with a few items from his knapsack. “Does the game start soon?” he asked.

Thennisgar observed how the Tonomai arranged a set of three round mirrors before it, each a foot in diameter, on a steel stand about as tall as Flink himself was. **“Soon,”** the demon said and nodded its followers away. It raised its right lower arm, waved in complicated motions across each of the mirrors – and images appeared on them, the central one showing the very place where they stood, the other two displaying places as twisted and wasted as this was. And Flink suddenly perked up when he noticed Cornell in one mirror and Gabe in the other, still as statues – but he could see them! **“Good,”** the demon commented, **“the mirrors are still properly aligned. Solid magical engineering should always be able to survive centuries.”**

“Are they that old?” Flink asked, curiously watching each of the outer mirrors in turn, trying to discern where his friends were, exactly.

“Centuries? Millenia they have lasted on this world, manling. Ever since I first walked this ground. Fortunately for the Tonomai they have brought them along.”

“Why fortunately?”

The demon grinned mercilessly. **“Do not worry about them. The game is about to begin.”**

Its talons scratched a symbol into the empty air. Life flared in the waxen statues of Cornell and Gabe on the mirrors, angry, wrathful stares. “I will kill you, savage!” Cornell cried, hastily drew his sword, arranged his shield and set off through the hilly landscape. Gabe yelled the name of his tribe, set out as well.

Flink stared emptily, his jaw dropping. “But... Thennisgar, they are friends! Why would they try to – kill each other? This is *not* fun.”

The demon scratched its thorny jaw carefully. **“You’re right,”** it conceded after a moment. **“There’s no motivation for this fight. It’s just silly and boring ... Well, we can’t have that, now can we, little friend?”**

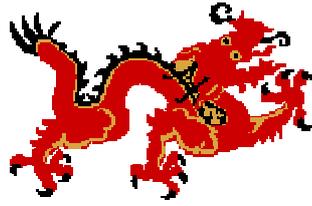
Its upper hands gestured slightly, tiny symbols that seemed to be drawn into the air and fly off through the mirrors. None of the warriors stopped running – if anything their efforts became more intense, more driven.

“Motivation,” the demon nodded happily to itself. **“Now there’s everything we need!”**

“My friends!” Flink yelled, turned to the demon and hammered his fists against the scaly legs. “This isn’t a game! Stop it, this isn’t fun! Please!”

Thennisgar showed no reaction at all.

The alreu stopped hammering after a while, wiped the first tears from his face – then he suddenly darted away, racing through the hills. One of the Tonomai ran forward to catch him, but froze when he saw the demon’s satisfied smile and holding gesture. **“Oh, yes,”** it said, **“I forgot about the comic relief. That was still missing.”**



“Where are you hiding, damn barbarian?!” Cornell shouted as he ran up a hill for better vision. Thorny bushes clawed at his legs. He ignored their tiny pricks, focused on his one great task.

“This is an illusion!” Halla Valfrey said urgently from her vantage point on Cornell’s left arm. “The demon made you believe that –“

“The only demon is the savage that murdered my sister!”

“Shield bearer!” Halla yelled. “Your sister is at home in Cayaboré! She is safe!”

Nev muttered, “We’re gonna be splashed by the imbecile barbarian, I just know it, I just know it...”

“Shield bearer, listen to me!” Halla insisted, but Cornell only scanned the nightmarish surroundings for a sign of Gabe. The mists were everywhere, barely hiding the next hills, twisting them into sights straight from the abyss. “Gabe is your friend! You fought together, and –“

“And then he betrayed me,” Cornell answered coldly. “I left him alone with my sister. Trusted him. I should have known that savages can never be trusted. He raped my sister and murdered her in cold blood. Is that the way of a friend, shield maiden?!”

She didn’t answer, and Cornell triumphantly raised his sword. “This is for you, murderer!” he cried, just having caught sight of the fur-garbed barbarian heading his way.

Some three hundred yards away, rushing through a heavily overgrown valley, Gabe stopped. His blue eyes flared, and *bwyell* shot up over his head. “For honor and glory,” he shouted, then the glare in his eyes turned to furnace-like heat. “For *Caeryl*! Die, despoiler!”

“Don’t fight...” Halla whispered as the two combatants ran towards each other, their weapons drawn and bloodlust pounding in their heads.

Cornell never heard any of the words from the shield, all his attention torn towards the figure of Gabe advancing towards him. His mind was filled with thoughts of vengeance, only a bare minimum, the basest of instincts pondering how best to approach the fight. Gabe was a skilled fighter, he knew that, but the hulking savage relied too much on his strength and the swings of his axe. *Stay quick, stay agile, block the blows with your sword. It’s magical, remember that. Try to cut off bwyell’s handle!*

Neither of the warriors noticed a small person running across the hills towards them, a knapsack bouncing wildly on its back. Neither heard the person shouting their names, pleading them to stop, tears welling up in its eyes, flowing across its cheeks and smothering half the words.

Halla suddenly cried, “Shield bearer! Throw me! As you did with the Tonomai, I will take out the barbarian!”

A grin flashed across Cornell’s face. “Come to your senses, after all?” he muttered, beaming a victorious glare towards the barbarian as he swung his left arm backwards to gain force.

“Yes,” Halla’s voice calmly stated when Cornell powered his arm forward with all the strength his muscles could provide. The shield easily flew from the straps, spun through the air towards the barbarian. Cornell hollered, “Take that, murderous bastard!”

The final word was smothered by disappointed anger as the shield veered off its course. Rather than head towards Gabe’s head, it flung itself at a nearly right angle towards the alreu approaching them. “Catch me!” Halla yelled. “Flink!”

Cornell jumped furiously after his buckler. “Traitor!” he cried, slashing the air uselessly. “I will hack you to pieces!”

“Deal with *bwyell* first, despoiler!” Gabe cried, almost upon the Cayaborean.

Only at the latest moment did Cornell regain enough presence of mind to block the ferocious assault of the axe. “Die,” he coldly said and rammed his knee into the barbarian.

Gabe leaped backwards, licked his lips and grinned. “You first.”



“Catch me! Flink!”

The alreu never would remember much more than the words suddenly burning through his terror and tears. He must have managed to stop just in time, reach up his hands to grasp the holding straps on the inside of the buckler. How else would he have been flung more than twenty feet across the ground, until the shield half embedded itself into a grotesque rock?

Flink unfolded himself, suppressed the urge to rub the painful spots on his body, and looked over to his friends. Cornell and Gabe were smashing their weapons against each other, hurling insults, parrying each move and dancing about. If it hadn’t been so much in earnest, it might have been a magnificent spectacle. A dance of death, elegantly performed by two masters of the arts.

As it was, all it did was increase the flow of tears running over the alreu’s cheeks. “Nooooo, this is all wrong...” he cried. “It’s supposed to be just a game, they mustn’t... *Cornell! Gabe! Don’t fight!*”

“They won’t listen,” Halla said. “If you want to help them, the only way is to kill the demon.”

Flink wiped tears from his face, so meaningless a gesture with the unimpeded flow. “I don’t... kill,” he muttered helplessly.

Halla coughed. “You did not seem to have any problems against the other heads of the holnesh.”

“That was... different...”

“How?!” Halla yelled. “Flink, two good men are about to slaughter each other. Two friends! You’re their *only* hope!”

The alreu spun about, faced the buckler. “I *don’t* kill *alreus!*” Madness burned in his eyes, a sight that would have caused Gabe or Cornell to halt, even fully grasped in the demon’s hypnosis.

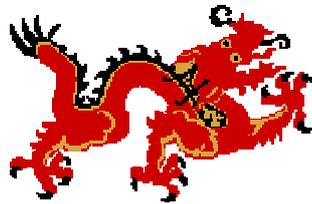
Halla fell silent for a moment, equally stunned, then she said, “Flink, it’s a demon, not an alreu.”

“It’s Geschwind!” he yelled. “I don’t care what he looks like! I *know* that’s Geschwind, and I’m not going to kill an alreu! Not...”

Behind them, only a few hundred yards away, Cornell scored a hit, slicing up Gabe’s left arm with his sword. The barbarian bellowed, segued his injury with a strike of his own that nearly tore the Cayaborean’s blade from his hands.

“Flink,” Halla said slowly, “do you wish your friends to die?”

The alreu stared at the shield angrily. His face distorted, seeming far less of the curious, innocent creature everyone saw. Something different, something entirely unlike alreus crept into his face. Having made his decision Flink grabbed the shield’s straps, carefully staying away from the razor-sharp edge.



“**How curious,**” Thennisgar commented with a smile. The central mirror now showed Flink picking up the shield, while the outer two mirrors displayed two differing angles of the battle between Cornell and Gabe. “**There seems to be a bit more excitement to my little friend than I had thought.**”

“Uhhh, sire,” a Tonomai warrior asked, carefully standing in front of the demon. His exquisite shoulder pads denoted him a commander of some sort – not that Thennisgar cared. “Would you not be interested in hearing about the current state of the nation? We have to make plans on how to subjugate Tonomat to our rightful course. The One God’s faith needs to be carried back into the heathen worlds!”

“**Really?**”

The Tonomai commander nodded earnestly, feeling the saliva in his mouth drying up as he forced his eyes to stay focused on the scaly head far above him. “It is what we called you for, sire. You are to lead our armies, to conquer the worlds for the One God – praised be the One Without A Name! That is your purpose, not to watch these infidels.”

Thennisgar nodded slowly. Then its lower right hand swiped out, the talons severing the commander’s head neatly from its body. The talons grasped the head, fed them to the demon’s maw. “**Sorry, my boy,**” Thennisgar addressed the decapitated body, “**I have my own plans. Does anyone else disagree?**”

None of the Tonomai spoke up. That wasn’t really a surprise, considering that their blood had just run cold and not few of them were wondering about the wisdom of their leaders in summoning a demon.

Thennisgar didn't care. It plopped down onto its legs, watched the mirrors with obvious joy while it tore off pieces of the commander's body and devoured them negligently. **"This is really getting good now."**



"Flink, listen to me!" Halla yelled. "I have to tell you how to fight the demon!"

The alreu ignored the shield he was carrying on his back, both arms firmly clasped to the straps. His feet were pounding over the sandy hills, evading the bushes with ease, his eyes still filled with tears – and resolve.

Nev muttered, "Great to be ignored all day, right, Halla? Wonderful choice you made with this damn creature. We're still gonna die."

Air was brushing past them, hot, spiced with the scents of the Cheselain river. Flink's heart was burning, as fiery as the air.

He scrambled up one hill, down its flank, up another – so fast that one might have thought he should have long been lost. But then the camp suddenly appeared in sight, with Thennisgar looking expectantly towards them.

"Bloody hell!" Nev shrieked. "All those years in the godsdamn holnesh, and now gobbled up by a demon!"

"Shut *up!*" Halla's voice was calm, yet it carried an air of danger. "Flink! *Listen!*"

The alreu suddenly scampered to a stop, eye-to-eye with Thennisgar. The demon was smiling, just rising from its tiny repaste. Beyond, the Tonomai warriors had gathered, wondering whether they should bother to attack the little creature.

"Flink?" Halla asked.

"I know." His voice was strangely calm, devoid of any of the nervous skittishness it usually had. "I know how to do this."

"My little friend!" Thennisgar shouted. Its voice carried so easily across the distance between them, the demon might as well have whispered. **"You're playing the game, too! This is marvelous!"**

Flink breathed heavily. His hands again swiped tears off his brow – this time uselessly for none were on his face, only drops of sweat. "Marvelous," he repeated, anguish choking his words. "Forgive me, my dear Geschwind."

A moment later he started running again. One of the Tonomai warriors walked forward, scimitar drawn, to cut down the creature before it ever got close to the demon. Thennisgar laughed, waved its hand lightly – and a ball of fire engulfed the Tonomai, reduced him to ashes in mere seconds. His

fellows instantly withdrew a couple of yards from the demon, some three or four already running for their horses and the easy escape.

“That’s it!” Thennisgar grinned. **“None of my friends will believe this tale! Come on, manling, fight me!”**

A hundred yards separated the alreu from the demon. Eighty. Seventy. At about fifty yards, Flink grunted under his breath, “Halla, take flight!”

And the shield obeyed. One second Flink had been on the ground, his feet stomping madly, his hands holding the buckler over his head – the next second, his feet found no earth to stomp, and his hands fought madly to stay clasped to the straps.

Shield and alreu sailed over the ground, gaining height with every passing second. The landscape washed by Flink’s sight, and he couldn’t help but letting go an excited cry, “Whooooooooo-eyyyyyy!”

Thennisgar frowned, watching the approaching shield. **“Sorry, manling, but I regenerate from every wound.”** The demon readied its paws to grasp Flink when he and the shield would hit. After all, even if the buckler’s sharp edge would cut through Thennisgar’s chest, the demon could still fight.

The shield didn’t just hit the chest. Flink had actually aimed at something, and Halla steered the elfwood disc’s flight right.

The edge burrowed into the chain holding the haematite pendant around Thennisgar’s chest. Links of the chain went flying, the steel scattered into tiny pieces, as the frown in the demon’s face deepened. Shield and alreu connected with the massive ten-foot-frame. Flink bounced off the scaly hide, lost his hold onto the straps and fell to the ground. The buckler continued its flight, sliced through the chain, through the body, out into the open air.

The haematite pendant fell to the floor.

The shield turned in mid-air. Elfwood glinting in the misty air, it spun back towards Flink, quickly losing height and skittering to a halt near the alreu.

Thennisgar stared. The glow in its eyes diminished. **“This is... impossible...”**

A shiver ran through the demon. It screamed in pain, for the merest of a second. Then the shiver stopped, and the demon fell forward. The heavy body crashed into the ground, sent a cloud of sandy ground billowing up, hiding it from sight.

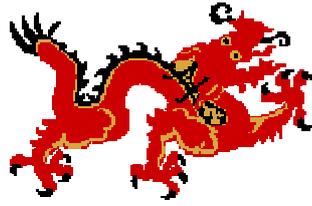
“You did it!” Halla shouted.

“The Gods’ day off, or what’s this?” Nev commented drily.

Flink rubbed his eyes furiously, trying to see what was happening. The cloud collapsed. There must be the demon’s corpse, dead and –

All there was to be seen was the diminutive figure of an alreu, a gaping wound in his chest, bleeding profusely with the final pumps of the heart. The eyes stared emptily into the sky, but a smile of relief gleamed on his lips.

“Geschwind...” Flink breathed. “No... Not... *again*...”



“What in Keshmire’s name...?” Gabe shouted consternatedly as his axe was about to ram into Cornell’s unprotected side. At the very last moment he twisted his arm aside, burying *bwyell* into the ground. Sand flew up, merrily scattering over the Cayaborean’s bloody face.

“My... sister...?” Cornell muttered, all rage vanished from his mind in an instant.

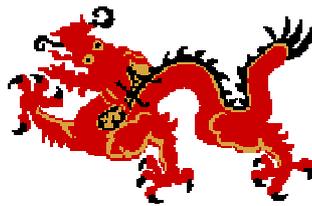
Gabe slowly retrieved his axe, staring with a furrowed brow at his friend. “I thought you had raped and murdered my wife!” he exclaimed.

On the ground, blade twisted from his hand, Cornell sat up, rubbed his forehead. “A minute ago I was convinced that’s what you had done to my sister.” A thought hit him, and the fire of rage was lit anew in his eyes. “The demon! In all the Gods’ names, by the Great Dragon Ruling Cayaboré – Gabe, the demon made us hate each other!”

“Oh,” the barbarian grunted, unconsciously testing *bwyell*’s edge for any damage. “Let’s hate and kill *him*.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Cornell agreed, retrieved his sword – and panted as he got to his feet. A gash in his right leg opened again, spurting blood. “Just as soon as I can bandage this.”

Gabe muttered in agreement, tore a strip from the shirt he wore under his fur jacket and proceeded to assist his friend. His own wounds in his arm acted up only a few instants later, so that his shirt turned into yet another tourniquet.



Flink’s hand was about to touch Geschwind’s pasty face, trying to close his gaping eyes. An inch from the dry, cold skin his hand shied away, darted back to his side. “What have I done? *Oh, ihr Götter, vergeb mir!*”

“It’s not over yet,” Halla Valfrey cautioned. “The Tonomai.”

Uncaring Flink looked up and saw the rogue warriors slowly approaching. Some were lagging behind, wondering how a simple alreu could have possibly destroyed a powerful demon; most of the others had decided to vent their frustrated rage on so easy a target.

There wasn’t much left in Flink to disagree. He had murdered another fellow alreu. Oh, yes, in the process he had destroyed a demon, but...

The first row of Tonomai was close enough to swing their scimitars, when abruptly the alreu rose – and rose and rose! Flink seemed to be eight feet tall, his tiny frame swelled to muscular size, his face bearing all the signs of nobility, when a voice left his mouth and said, “*Begone, foolish ones. This is my order.*”

Scimitars dropped in dismay, clattered onto the ground. Fear grasped the faces of all the Tonomai, and the proud warriors started running, never looking back.

If they had done so, it might have given them a change of mind, for Flink – back at his ordinary three feet of size – looked in wonderment down at himself. “Did I... did I just say that?”

The buckler, a minute distance from the alreu, quivered. Little more happened for a moment until Halla’s voice sounded, “Ana? Ana, was that you?”

And another voice, so long absent, chimed in when Phindar sighed in relief. The Decalleigh priest said, “Looks that way, Halla, doesn’t it? Oh, sweet Vanquisher of Disease, it feels good to be back! My, I’d never have thought that an *alreu* could defeat a *demon*. By the Gods, Flink, you’re one of the heroes!”

“Was I just... tall?!” Flink whispered.

Phindar chuckled. “No, that was just an illusion. Dear Ana in here made you look like a noble warrior, that’s what she does.”

“Ana?”

“What?” Phindar exclaimed. “You’ve forgotten that there were *four* heads of the holnesh your friend the shield-bearer cut off? Ana’s a bit shy, but she’s in here, too. Oh, come on, girl, talk to our hero!”

No response came.

Flink stared emptily at the shield for a long while, then his eyes raised and focused on the far edge of the hills where two men came running – if the lumbering pace their wounded bodies allowed could be called running.

But Flink smiled, utter happiness replacing all dire thoughts in his mind. The alreu was on his feet in a second, rushing towards the two men immediately. “Sirs! Gabe, Cornell! Have I got a story to tell you! I killed a demon! Single-handedly! Except that my friends in the shield helped, but they were great, really wonderful! You’ve got to listen to this!”

It would forever remain a mystery how any creature could talk so much while running at full speed. Obviously, it has never been a problem for any alreu in history, particularly not Flink.



“Am I stuck with this horse forever?” Cornell muttered as he mounted the mare he had bought in the Elfadil Desert. The creature seemed little troubled by its encounter with a demon, and – surprisingly – all the saddle bags were unlooted. But it was still that emaciated, ignoble horse that Cornell detested seriously. “Couldn’t the Tonomai have stolen this one? Theirs are a fair sight better!”

Gabe was too busy prying the last jewels off the scimitars the Tonomai had dropped to answer. In his mind, far too few of the silly warriors had sprung for jewel enhancements of their swords. Most had simple wooden handles, worth next to nothing. Hadn’t those idiots *any* regard for the good guys who vanquished them and wanted to profiteer from that?

“Anyone still with me?” Cornell asked the empty air.

“Well, now,” Phindar said from the shield, “this was quite a good show, lads. If you don’t mind my saying so, that reminds me of the time my caravan stumbled across that lair of bandits down in the Hierkana Badlands. Pretty bad area, that, and those bandits –“

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Cornell muttered. “Flink, get back on your horse, and let’s get going. I really, *really* want to get to a decent town and get a *bath*!”

The alreu didn’t answer. He was standing over the tomb where they had buried Geschwind’s mangled body, a tiny mound of ground that would quickly be claimed by the wind and the plants. One of the tentpoles was rammed into the ground, scratched into it the name of the fallen alreu – a single reminder that would hardly last very long.

“Vergebt mir, teuerster Freund,” Flink whispered. *“Ich schwor einen Eid, daß es nie wieder geschieht. Ich habe versagt, und Ihr musstet den Preis zahlen. Bitte vergebt mir.”*

“What was that?” Cornell muttered.

“Nothing.” Flink shook his head, casting the evil thoughts from his mind, then walked over to his pony. “I’m ready to ride! Are we going to see some more monsters along the way?”

Cornell cursed. “I sure hope not! Gabe, are you coming, or have you forgotten any more gemstones?”

After the barbarian had finally stripped all the blades of their valuables and loaded the latter into his saddlebags, he mounted and the party left the area.

The tents of the Tonomai remained, as well as the three mirrors that Thennisgar had set up, and the lonely tomb of an alreu who had lost his life in a battle he had not even known about.

THE END
