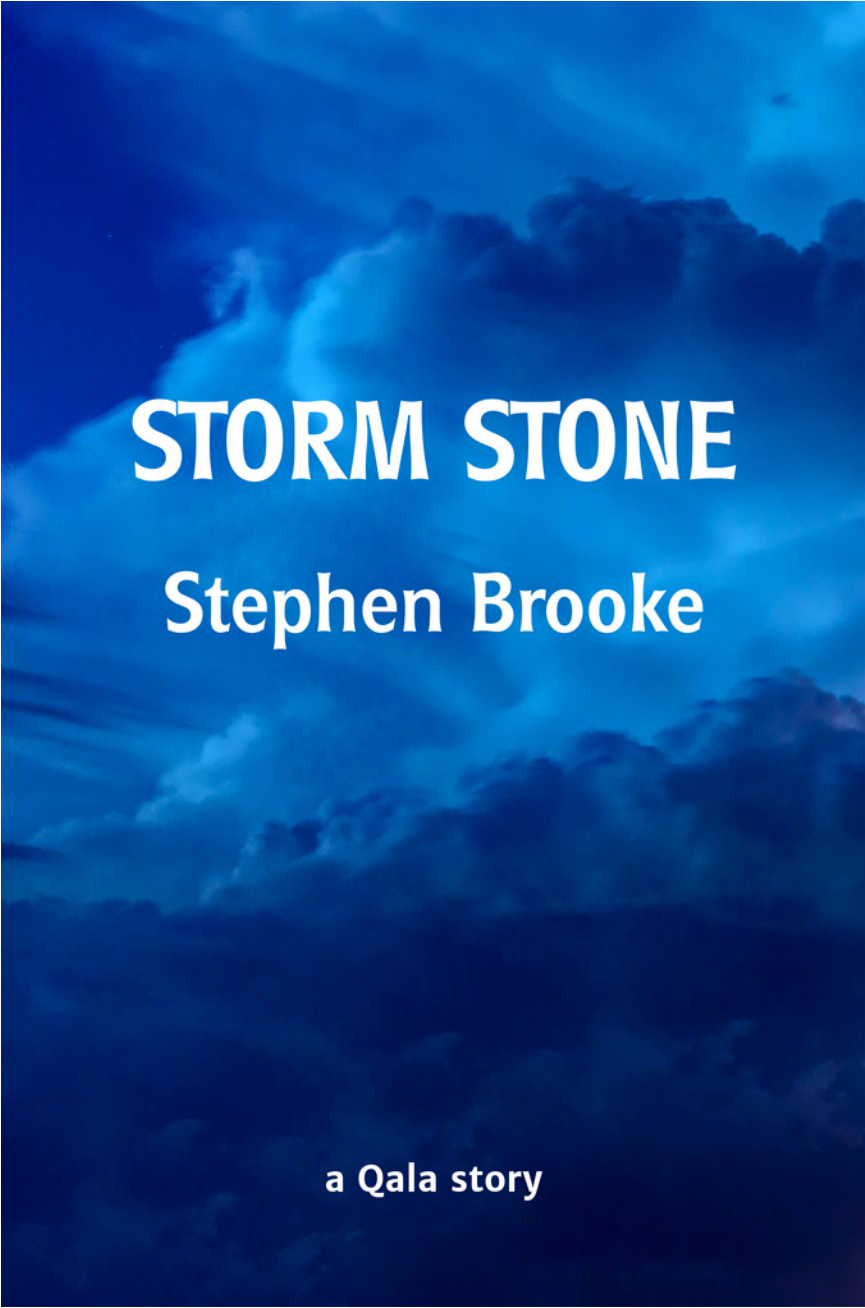




STORM STONE

Stephen Brooke

a Qala story

STORM STONE



STEPHEN BROOKE

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arachispress.com

I. The Fox Went Out

A WINTER NIGHT. SNOW lay on the thatched roofs, still crisply white in the moonlight, gray and sodden in the shadowed alley Tes traversed. She had grown up in a cold city by the sea but it hadn't snowed there. Not like this.

She peered again at the ascending crescent, the blocky log houses silhouetted by its wan light, and said a silent little prayer to Grandmother Moon. How long had it been since she'd even thought of the ancient goddess? The Grandmother had been a deity of her childhood, friend to the little girl she once was.

Not so big now! she reminded herself, the slightest of smiles crossing her face. Here was the place. She lightly rapped. The sound of a bar being lifted could be heard through the plank door.

A bearded head appeared, looked both ways down the alley before motioning for her to enter. The man opened the way only wide enough for her to slip through. Two more sat at a rude plank table, one a head taller than the other. A small fire, flickering on a rough stone hearth, provided the only light.

"This little thing they send us?" rumbled a deep yet harshly nasal voice. The taller figure rose to its feet. Not a man, she could tell. A troll. A big mountain troll, grayish of skin and large of nose, with a great black beard hanging to its belt. That belt encircled an ample gut.

Tes decided to be polite. It rarely cost anything. "Honor to you and your ancestors," she said. Trolls were big on ancestors.

"And yours," he replied. "My people you know?"

"I used to see them when they visited the markets of Famod. A very long time ago." She had been but twelve when she escaped the sack of that port.

There might have been a smile beneath the shaggy beard. "Long for you. Maybe not for a troll."

And not really for her. Tes was yet a young woman. "They do not venture so far south these days."

"Rarely hear we news from the tribes across the sea. They would avoid the wars of men, I think."

"Always a path of wisdom," spoke the man still seated at the table. "Yet we choose to walk into danger."

"Climb, mostly," the troll corrected him. "I am G'rab, of the tribe of Nax."

"Tes. Second to the captain of *Horg's Hound*."

"Who is Horg?"

"No one is certain," she admitted. "The name goes way back with the Pirate Brotherhood."

The troll laughed outright at that. "A sisterhood too, it seems. This is Oasse," he told her, dropping onto his stool.

"The wizard. And Ildin, aren't you?"

"Some name me wizard." The man was willing to admit to that and nothing more.

She took a seat opposite him. "Do you know the one named Nanos?"

"Dxukur's flunky? I know of him." The man squinted from beneath lowered brows. Perhaps suspicion, maybe just curiosity. "He's not involved in this, is he?"

"I met him as a child. Wondered what had become of him." Those were the memories of another life. Best she forget them.

The third man, he who had admitted her, did not join their conference. Arranging this meeting might well have been his only task, and he was wisely avoiding knowing anything more. He sat by the door, seemingly unconcerned.

Still, that did not mean he wouldn't report to someone later.

"We must be able to bargain for the bauble," Oasse went on. "You carry gold?"

"Freshly minted Imperials with Sorgom's ugly face on them. They are nearby." Her eyes went to the troll. "Are you to be both guide and guard?"

"Another of my tribe will join us on the way. Can you use that sword on your hip?"

Oasse snickered before she could frame an appropriate answer.

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“The girl has a reputation, friend troll. Even you would do well not to cross her.”

“I may know someone like her already,” the big fellow mused and seemed to smile at some private jest. “But this one may not know the ways of mountain and snow. Furs and provisions you will need, even if Spring is in the air!”

Tes hadn’t noticed any sign of it. “Attended to earlier this day,” she reported. “What I didn’t bring with me to this hole in the ice.”

G’rab only nodded to this. Her affairs were not his affairs. “Be ready to leave at dawn. We meet on the road east out of town. Better we not be seen all leaving together.”

“Best we not be seen at all,” the wizard mumbled.

“I am sure,” Tes told him, “it is too late for that.”

II. A Moonlight Stroll

USKAR THEY NAMED this little port, tucked away on the eastern shores of the Gulf of Arolin. Near the northern end of that body of water, too, where the river Jeg disgorged its icy waters. Tes had known other towns by the same name; it meant nothing more than 'home.'

Home mostly to fishermen. The deep yet relatively protected waters of the long gulf made it a major fishery. She doubted not some boats were out even now, seeking catches by the light of the crescent moon. That stood near overhead now.

Her own boat was her destination. Tes yet kept to the shadows, as much as she was able. The wizard spoke truly about being best not seen. Here and there, dim light leaked from around a shuttered window. Was that a snatch of song she heard before the night carried it away from her, carried it into the darkness? Tes peered cautiously up and down the empty, narrow street with its overhanging upper stories. This would be a good time and place to cross over. She would not be so exposed again on her way toward the harbor.

Tes looked up at the cloudless, star-filled sky. This would have been a good time to cover your face, Grandmother, she whispered, before stepping into the open street. One step only. At once, she whirled around, alerted, perhaps, by the slightest of sounds or maybe no more than an intuition.

Just soon enough it was to elude the blade thrown her direction. Sword in hand, she scanned the dark for an assailant. None appeared. Whoever was responsible had melted into the inky night. Tes backed across the street, barely pausing to scoop up the knife that had whistled past her ear. On reaching the buildings on the far side, she stopped to peruse it. A common enough throwing-knife, utilitarian in every way. Good balance, she thought, weighing it in her hand before tucking it into her belt and moving on.

As expected, there were rivals on this mission. They might serve

anyone. Tes wasn't absolutely sure whom she served herself. The captain of *Horg's Hound* had sent her but she suspected it was not on the orders of the Pirate King. It had seemed healthier not to question him.

None but fishermen did she see as she continued to the docks and her boat, a sleek little single-master of Baxac build, contrasting with the clumsy, rounded skiffs Uskar's fishermen had tied up around her. Someone poked his head up to spy who approached.

"Besak! Where are the others?"

"Gone to the tavern, Tes. Exen told me to stay and guard the boat."

"The fishermen here don't see a need." And Exen was taking too much on himself. "It's damnably cold to be out of doors. Come along to the tavern with me."

Qodo would follow Exen, whatever he decided to do, and both would override the younger Besak. Three men she had sailed with to this port, all Muram, as was she, though the pirate galleys oft had mixed crews. Somewhere down near the mouth of the Gulf lurked *Horg's Hound* and Captain Kusu, awaiting their return.

Not a one of those were the men's real names, their birth names. They had taken — or been given — others when they began the life of piracy. Nor had Tes been her name, once.

The tavern lay nearby, a place frequented by mariners. They entered quickly, slamming the heavy door behind them to not allow too much warm air to escape. That warm air was welcome. A fire roared in a great open hearth, and the smell of what cooked there mingled with that of fish and fishermen.

Exen and Qodo sat with whores and mugs of beer at an oaken table, its surface scarred from years of idlers' knives, and dark with grease. "You'd best be spending your own coins," stated Tes as she took a seat across from them. Besak slid in about halfway between. He was a cautious one. A sensible one. Tes made her mind up about something at that moment.

"Besak will accompany me in the morning. You two can stay

here if you wish or work your way back down the coast. Just be certain to return in three weeks time."

The pair gave each other furtive glances. "Why the boy?" growled Exen.

"I can't see you two climbing mountains." Neither was a slim man, though Exen carried muscles where Qodo tended to fat.

More importantly, Tes did not completely trust the man Kusu had named her second for this mission. She looked at the woman hanging on Qodo. "Do something useful, wench, and fetch your master."

The woman did not hesitate to follow her order. She recognizes who is in charge, thought Tes. A smart whore will learn that sort of thing.

Yet here she was in this grimy backwater with a man like Qodo. Tes shook her head. Give her the clean open sea!

A dark shambling fellow came up, twisting a dirty rag and wearing a dirtier apron. He gave her a once over and decided politeness was the proper choice. "You need something, m'lady?"

"This place is an inn as well as a tavern?" He nodded. "Then I require a room." She looked over her minions. "As to where my party might choose to sleep is their affair, but if they want a room I'll pay for that too. One room, mind you," she told the three pirates.

"Yes, m'lady," the man mumbled. "Um, I'll have it prepared. Would you like some supper while you wait?"

"Have it sent up." She rose. "You three need to come up with me and discuss business right now. Girl," she spoke to the whore hovering behind the tavern-keeper, "show us the way."

No sooner were they behind doors in an upstairs room than Tes said, "It is time to pull all the gold together. And it had better all be here." Each man had carried a money-belt filled with Imperials and sewn into his clothing.

The caches were cut out of their concealment and passed over. "Good work, boys," she said. "You and I will have to carry this weight up some steep ways, Besak. Are you up to it?"

The youngster only nodded. He thinks he can outdo me, Tes told herself, and half-smiled.

“Can’t y’get a donkey or sumthin’?” asked Qodo.

“Only if you volunteer,” she replied, to Exen’s guffaws.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said to his companions. “We’ll find a nice tame woman for you, Besak. Don’t want to wear you out before you go mountain climbing.”

The same woman who had showed her to her room brought up stew and black bread and beer a few minutes later. Tes considered telling her to stay. It was lonely in this dark room, shuttered against the winter. But she was always alone, really, wasn’t she?

Better to rest. Better to sleep.

III. Travel With Trolls

“THE RIVER IS too wild to ascend,” the troll informed them. “We will cross the mountains to find a big lake in a high valley. My people have names for both but they would mean nothing to you.”

He and the wizard had awaited them beside the road, well before the dawn. Tes was a little miffed they had made it earlier than her. Maybe she should blame Besak for being sluggish this morn; he rather obviously had not slept as much as he should.

G’rab and Oasse paid him no attention, not even inquiring as to his name. They seemed in a hurry to move on. So was Tes; she made no complaints.

The road rose only gradually here, winding into the hills. Forest stood on either side, dark conifers reaching toward a cloudless sky. The morning fogs of the Gulf of Arolin lay behind and beneath them.

“We’re dressed too heavily,” complained Besak.

“You’ll need your furs soon enough, little pirates,” the troll said. “And wish you’d brought more, I’d wager.”

Maybe so, thought Tes, but she would never let herself admit to it. “I’ve heard your people do not feel the cold.”

“Not so much as you, maybe, but freeze we can! The high mountains are no place for either troll or man to long stay. Hmm.” G’rab looked about. “Here we stay a little,” he announced, dropping his pack to the needle-covered ground and sitting himself down a moment later.

The wizard followed his example, asking no questions. Tes had plenty enough of them but held them in. A break was welcome, regardless of the reason.

Little more than a minute later, a dark, bulky form emerged from the shadows of the pines. A bear? Her hand went without conscious thought to the hilt of her curved sword.

No, another troll, Tes realized, as the figure moved into the light.

As G'rab had said there would be. It was not as large their guide, and beardless. A troll-woman.

"My sister G'has," G'rab informed them. "She does not have much Muram."

"Enough," grunted G'has.

"Enough to insult you, anyway," said her brother. "And curse profusely in the doing of it."

"Frug you, G'rab. Bosox mug!" She surveyed the group of travelers with her pale greenish eyes. Cat eye green, was the thought that came to Tes's mind. They settled on Tes.

"Woman pirate?"

G'rab answered with something in Trollish and both snickered. "Muram talk use us," said the troll-woman. "Learn more G'has how."

"Unless you need to keep secrets from us," noted Oasse.

"Never!" protested G'rab before both trolls burst into raucous laughter. He rose and stated, "Time to move on. Much we must travel yet today."

"To snow travel must!"

"Aren't we already in the snow?" asked Besak.

G'has looked around at the deep white drifts with a sort of contempt. "*Real* snow."

They trudged on, the way seeming to rise more steeply with each mile. But they did stop to rest from time to time, and to eat. The trolls, Tes decided, did not necessarily have the stamina of humans. Too heavy, maybe, and definitely unwilling to miss any meals.

Near dark it was when they stood before a cave.

"A troll cave," announced G'rab. "A place my people use to rest on their journeys."

"Bear chase out," his sister added.

Tes asked, "What if it comes back?"

"You growl at. Scare!"

"Very well. I'll do my best to protect you."

G'rab snickered but G'has seemed more bemused than amused.

Legend had such caves — troll holes — as filthy and noisome, but

it seemed clean enough to the woman. But cold! She felt it best not to complain.

The trolls, Tes suspected, had the advantage here. Their thick bodies were suited to the climate. Did some god shape them so? Or should she believe the scholars of Tesra who claimed creatures themselves changed over the generations to suit their place in the world?

She'd heard their side. If she ran into a god some day she'd ask his.

"Fire?" asked G'rab. He peered from the cave's mouth. "Too dark almost to gather wood."

"Tomorrow wood none," his sister answered.

"True enough. Above the timberline we'll be."

The troll-woman turned her eyes to Tes and her companion. "Pirate man G'has warm keep? Or little pirate girl belong?"

Besak had a look of panic about him. "None of that, sister-mine," G'rab admonished her. "Business now. Fun later, maybe,".

G'has didn't really appear that disappointed. Maybe she was only playing a joke. Still, Tes wondered about the body beneath those furs. The breasts were large. That she could tell. Not much else.

And despite that nose, G'has was not so bad to look at. Certainly not hideous, as trolls were oft described by marketplace storytellers.

"Why don't you go look for wood with G'rab?" she asked Besak. He seemed grateful for a chance to escape.

"Not yours, huh?" grunted G'has, once the two males went out into the dusk.

"Not my type."

"Type?" The troll shrugged. She might not have understood what Tes meant. Tes wasn't sure what she'd meant herself.

She did know she had no interest in the young pirate. He probably recognized that, though one could never be certain with men. Oh, with anyone, really.

The pine branches brought back to the cave burnt brightly for only a short while. They weren't the sort of wood to fuel an all-night fire.

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No matter. It lasted a while and helped fill the space with warmth. And they did keep each other warm the remainder of the night.

IV. A Pirate Among the Peaks

“THE HIGH MOUNTAINS lie further east,” the troll told her. “We travel not that far. There will be a pass and then we descend a river valley to the lake.”

Their destination. Not all that far. Tes was happy they did not have to cross G’rab’s high mountains. This supposedly lower ridge presented challenge enough.

More for Besak than her. The pirate may never have climbed anything higher than a flight of stairs. As herself, he was a Mur of one of the coastal towns. Maybe naught but the child of fisher-folk. He’d never said anything of his earlier days.

Tes had been up mountains before, in Scola, when little more than a girl, in the southern deserts later. There might be other mountains out there for the climbing, someday. They rose high along the coasts of Lorj, the great isle where the pirates had their refuges. Aye, and on other islands that lay in the southern waters, tropical islands of jungle and fiery peaks. The wizards of Tul Sunac had their mountain walls, too, beyond the inland seas the Tesrans once sailed – and ruled.

It would be good to see such things, once. Even better to retire someday to a nice villa on a flat piece of land. Maybe by a river; that would be water enough for her. Many pirates spoke of such dreams and maybe a few made them reality.

They trudged toward G’rab’s promised pass. Trees grew fewer, until only a few gnarled pines rose from among the rocks. Ravens perched here and there on some, fixing their sharp eyes on the travelers and making raucous comments in their raven language.

Or so it seemed to Tes. What was that? A white raven? She started to point it out to her companions but it flew away, its form disappearing against the backdrop of the snow.

As she strained to make it out, another, different white form did move against the snow. A bear? And there was another. Large and

manlike, they seemed. "G'rab," she hissed. "There are creatures of some sort around us."

"Oh? Ah, indeed it is so. Good eyes you have, Pirate." He did not allow any of his movements to reveal his knowledge they were being stalked. "March on as if all is the same," he told the others, "but be ready to fight. There are at least three snow-ogres out there."

"More," spoke his sister.

"That is likely."

Tes could not estimate the size of the creatures. She feared they would move closer so she could! The snow-ogres appeared to carry clubs only. No, stone axes they were.

"I've heard of this race," whispered Oasse. "Never did I think I'd meet any."

"Or lunch become," snickered G'has.

"The snow is thin here," their leader said. "It is as good a place as any to make a stand."

An open, rocky spot it was, with the snow drifted deeper to either side. Yes, a good place to defend. Tes dropped her pack and drew her sword, a blade of medium length and subtly curved in the Tesran fashion. She had learned to fence with such a sword, trained with it in the academy of Jarcom, the best sword-master in the ancient city.

The ogres charged at once. They were large, though not so bulky as the trolls, and naked, save for a covering of shaggy white fur. That fur might make them look larger than they were.

Beside her, Besak and Oasse held their own weapons. A common short Muram gladius for the pirate, the wizard's blade no longer but more slender. Could Oasse use magic to defend them? She knew there were tricks sorcerers used.

G'has charged the approaching snow-ogres, swinging a heavy sword. They scattered on their broad fur-covered feet. Built-in snowshoes, thought Tes. She made a short sortie herself. Why let the troll have all the fun?

It might have been she didn't seem so intimidating but one ogre

held its ground, swinging its heavy ax as she closed the distance. Tes ducked it easily and drove her blade into the creature's torso. From position one, just as she had been taught a decade ago!

The ogre backed away, howling. She doubted she'd done much real damage, and stepped back among her companions.

Both groups regrouped. "A stalemate?" mumbled Oasse.

"The ogres can wait," stated G'rab. "We can't."

"Attack, Brother?" asked G'has. "Kill ogres all me and pirate-girl!"

"They can dodge us, Sister."

"You, maybe," Tes told him. The snow-ogres were large and did not seem particularly nimble, but they moved faster than these trolls.

"True," admitted G'rab. "They are unlikely to mass again for an attack. Not until night maybe." He emitted a rumbling chuckle. "And more might join them by then."

"So we march."

The troll nodded. "G'has, take the lead. Rear guard Tes and I will be. You two," he told Besak and Oasse, "keep to the middle and try to stay alive."

They shouldered their packs and started forward once more. "Beyond the pass I think not they will follow us," G'rab confided.

Tes would rather the ogres not follow them at all. "How far to this pass?"

"We were little more than an hour from it when we stopped. Now we will move more slowly, I fear." He looked to the path before them. "Already in it we are, in truth. This valley carries us to the notch in the mountains." He pointed it out with a gauntleted hand.

A shadow crossed their intended path. Another raven? Tes could see nothing when she looked up.

"What — what —" G'has called back to them and then, frustrated at not finding the right words, broke into a torrent of trollish.

"My sister was trying to ask why the snow-ogres attacked,"

G'rab explained. "Usually safe is this road." He gave that a second thought. "Not for the lone traveler, maybe."

"But we make a reasonably formidable group," said Oasse. "Hmm." He regarded the ogres paralleling them at some distance. "Rather far but I'll give it a try."

An uplifted hand. Something fell among the ogres, startling them perhaps but doing no apparent harm.

"From a volcano?" asked Tes.

He answered with a thin smile. "You've seen magic before. Ah, but then you know Nanos. Other wizards, too, I would think."

"I've run into a few."

Oasse only nodded. "They are keeping themselves too distant for me to be effective. I can bring ash but I can't direct it to fall on them."

"Strength save," ordered G'has. "Wizard stuff hard work!"

Tes knew that. How did the troll? "They're working themselves up for a sortie, aren't they?"

The snow-ogres had formed two lines, one on either side of them, and these were moving closer. One or another would dart in from time to time, brandishing its weapon, and then back off. Sooner or later, one would strike out in earnest.

Or several would, hitting and running to keep their quarry confused. They were a quiet bunch on the whole. Surely they were capable of speech, weren't they?

Not so quiet were the ravens. These had gathered again. The black birds seemed interested only in watching the fight, not having any part in it. Black save for one. There was the white raven again.

Here it came! A snow-ogre leaped toward Besak. He hacked at it with his short heavy blade. Neither inflicted damage.

Would that I had my bow, thought Tes. I'd make short work of those shaggy sods. She'd be sure to carry it next time, if a next time were in her stars.

Now the ogres were jogging along just beyond the range of their swords, feinting now and again. Four or five on each side. Too

many really, weren't there? She readied herself to leap to her own attack.

Oasse beat her. At closer range he was more effective, hurtling some liquid at their enemies and hurtling himself behind it. One snow-ogre tripped backward, screaming and pawing at its eyes. The wizard's blade protruded from the chest of another.

She followed behind, swinging her sword. That would at least give Oasse time to retrieve his own. Troll war-cries erupted behind her. The encounter was over in mere seconds, and both sides withdrew to bunch up and peer at each other.

Besak lay bleeding out his lifeblood, crimson staining the clean white snow. Tes needed only a glance to know he would never get up. She went to crouch beside him.

"Leave," said G'has.

"She needs the gold he carries, Sister," came G'rab's voice. That Tes retrieved as quickly as she could. Nothing else Besak carried did she need.

A stone axe had laid open his chest. Dead already. "You cross another sea now, shipmate," she whispered, before rising.

There were dead or wounded among the snow-ogres too. Would they again press the attack?

A shadow, the sound of wings. The white raven lit on Besak's body, and issued a harsh call.

A subdued muttering rose from the group of ogres. Then, as one, they turned and shuffled away, until their white became one with the white of the snow.

V. The White Raven

THE RAVEN REMAINED with them as they crossed the divide and began their descent, sometimes visible, sometime disappearing. At least it hadn't remained to feast on Besak's body.

But surely something else would, if only the ravens of an ordinary color. Tes hoped the ogres wouldn't come back for her comrade.

It was mid-afternoon when their guide announced, "We should find a place to lay up. No troll caves on this stretch of road, I am sorry to say."

"It doesn't feel as cold," remarked Oasse.

"Sheltered. A little."

If people lived here, it had better be. "Has our white bird gone for good?" she asked. "I haven't seen it for an hour or more."

"Good riddance," growled G'rab. "It is not a suitable color. No such bird is found in troll legends nor in those of the folk who live here."

"Not among the Ildin, either," said Oasse.

Tes added nothing but she did remember ravens in stories of Orgum and other Muram gods. She did not think any were white but it had been a very long time since she'd heard most.

"The snow-ogres seemed to take it as an omen," she said.

"It did spook them," admitted the big troll. "We could camp in the shelter of that cliff."

G'has gave the spot an unenthusiastic look but made no comment.

Oasse asked, "What sort of people live here?"

"Just humans," said G'rab. "You all look much alike to me."

"Sheep raise," added his sister. "Some trolls borrow!"

"I am afraid we have a bit of a bad reputation among these people."

"Not too bad, I hope. One seems to be coming up the road."

The approaching form was enveloped in a robe of white fur.

White, too, were beard and long hair, and he bore a heavy staff. Tes thought him elderly at first, and then not.

"Greetings, travelers," he called, in a voice that echoed and reechoed from the valley walls. "Do you plan to bed here among the rocks? Come along to my house."

"Is it far, sir?" asked Oasse.

"Only a few hundred yards off the road. Most do not know it lies there, and I prefer that. I am Asmero, hermit and priest." He gave them a quick bow of his head, little more than a nod.

"What say you, troll?" asked the wizard.

"I say Tes makes such decisions. I am a guide only. She leads."

"But you may advise," she told him.

"House good sound!" felt G'has.

"It does," agreed her brother.

"Very well. We accept your hospitality, priest." They fell in behind the man as he began to stride off down a pathway. Tes hurried a little to catch up with him. "Priest of what gods?"

"Those of our people."

Well, he did look Muram. More Muram than her, to be honest. About as Muram as one *could* look, with high cheekbones, a fold to his eyelids. The eyes were as black as the hair was white.

"I would not expect one of us to dwell here."

"Yet here you are, as well. Tell me of your journey."

Why not? No need to speak of the reasons they traveled but the four of them had soon told Asmero their story.

"Luck was with you when the you encountered the snow-ogres," spoke the priest. "Bad luck to meet them, good luck to escape them."

"Like life in general," murmured Tes.

"Indeed," he replied, in tones nearly as subdued.

"Are snow-ogres really ogres, sir?" asked Oasse. "I have heard claims they are naught but apes. And I have met ogres in the south. They are quite different."

"Yet true ogres they are, beings of Faerie. Perhaps an early offshoot of their family tree, perhaps a form that became adapted

to the high frozen wastes.” The hermit paused but a moment before adding, “They are the people of Ular, but I think they served another when they attacked you.”

Tes knew of the god Ular, Lord of the North Wind, who rode on Orgum’s shoulder in the form of a raven. She had never heard of it being white, though.

“Here is my home.” It was more hut than house, all of rough stone. Narrow windows were shuttered against the cold, and a column of smoke rose from a chimney. “It is not roomy but I think I can fit even a pair of trolls inside.”

“Snug as a troll hole,” Tes said on entering. “We can spread our bed rolls before your fire?” It felt good just to stand before it at the moment.

“That you can. First, a meal. No, no, leave your food in your packs. I’ve plenty enough.”

How a lonely hermit had so much ready supper for them, they did not ask. They simply enjoyed the venison stew he ladled out for them.

The priest had laid aside his furs for a simple long tunic, also of white and unbelted. A sprig of holly adorned one shoulder.

“I can name your gods, man of the south,” he said to Oasse. “Banat and Kamat and even your god of evil, though I see you serve none of them now.” This was acknowledged with but a glum nod from the Ildin wizard. “And trolls consider all gods unworthy. They are great atheists, you know,” he said as an aside to Tes, “even when gods stand right before them.”

The trolls only smirked, recognizing the truth in what he said.

“What of you, Tes? You are of the Mura. Do you follow any patron?”

“I know little of the gods, Asmero. I had a silly devotion to Grandmother Moon when I was a girl. Then — then I traveled and saw many wonders and many temples to many gods.” Maybe she had become like the trolls, when it came to gods.

“Yet the Grandmother remains a goddess worthy of our devotion. The people of the wide valley below us know the moon as

Tasthu. To us, she is Atar. Grandmother Moon. They are different names for the same moon, yet also two completely different goddesses. Two of the infinite goddesses existing in infinite worlds."

Tes knew this sort of talk. Wizards used it, and claimed to go seeking through all those worlds for things they desired.

"But you have met gods, haven't you?" asked Asmero.

She nodded. "Great Bear, and other of the Old Gods."

"Their worshipers are related to some of those who live here. The folk who dwelt in these lands before Mura and Ildin and Sharshites wandered in. Know you the story of creation, when Grandmother Moon first knew herself?"

"I suppose I heard it long ago."

"Then let me give it to you now. It is very short.

"Before all other things," Asmero began, "Moon floated in the void. She did not know other things existed. She did not even know she existed.

"Then in the darkness she spied a light, distant, and, seeing it, understood many new things. She learned of here and there, of one and another, of time and distance, as she moved toward that fire.

"What are you? she asked it, but it did not know.

"I shall name you Sun.

"Sun, the light said. That is good. And who are you?

"I shall call myself Moon, she told him, and was pleased with the name.

"We need other things to name, said Sun, but none could be so beautiful as you.

"So they made Orgum, the Sky, who is their son. And other lights scattered in the void saw this from afar and gathered around Orgum. These are the stars.

"Orgum became enamored of one star and took her to wife. This is Mozem, the Earth, and she dwells ever in the House of Orgum. The Four Winds are their children and they, too, wed stars."

G'has had a puzzled look. "Story real?"

"It's a metaphor, silly," said her brother.

She tried out the unknown word. "Medafour."

The two went on for some time in troll-talk, as G'rab attempted to explain. They might still have been at it when Tes wrapped herself in her blanket and fell asleep.

VI. *The Shadows of the Mountains*

“PERHAPS I SHALL see you on your way back,” said the priest.

“It is to be hoped,” Tes answered. To be hoped that they made their way back. All of them, even Oasse. He was abrasive but she had no particular dislike for the wizard.

They were not far down the road when the wizard spoke. “I have thought upon this and that we heard from the priest,” he said. “If the snow-ogres are indeed of the fay, then they have wizardly powers. Every one of them.”

“So I have heard,” agreed G’rab.

“Then a wizard might well have spoken to them from afar and set them upon us.”

Entirely possible, thought Tes. “We knew we had competitors. A wizard among them is not surprising.”

“Or leading them.”

“How did you learn of this prize in the first place?” Her understanding of what they sought was still nebulous, at best. A valuable gem that might also be an aid to sorcery. And green. It was green.

“A wizard spoke to me of what he possessed. Not a very good wizard; more a prophet and half-mad at that. But I recognized what others had not. It’s down there.” He nodded toward the valley below, still dark with the shadows of the high mountains beyond it. “I had no hope of retrieving it myself so I sought allies.”

Whoever was financing their little expedition. Tes had known her own captain was only someone’s tool in this.

It was likely the Pirate King knew nothing of it.

“Enemy who?” wondered G’has. “Say wizard you.”

“I would have to guess. They might even serve the Rift.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” muttered Tes. “I’ve had my dealings with the sorcerers of Tul Sunac.”

“You spoke of Nanos before.” The wizard had made it a simple statement, not a question.

Yet Tes chose to answer. “Nanos was a suitor of my — ah, I guess

one could call her a governess.” She wasn’t about to mention the woman had also been a sorceress. “He was in Tesra then on a diplomatic mission.”

“Spying, more likely,” the wizard spat out.

“To be sure. Even as a little girl I could recognize that. I was being trained as a spy myself. But there is more profit in piracy.”

“So you left Tesra. It is said it was once the greatest of all cities.”

“No more. It nears a decade since I sailed away.” She might have sighed before smiling. “But I kept it with me in my chosen name.” Tes stopped to scan the misted hills before them, each a stair step deeper into a broad forested valley. “We seek a river now.”

“Not to be seen from here,” said G’rab. “The river winds north before turning back on itself to flow to the Gulf of Arolin.”

“As the Jeg. I’ve seen charts.”

“Even so. We saved much distance by crossing the mountains.”

Nor was most of the Jeg navigable. “There is much distance yet to travel.”

“But not upward. The highest point of our journey lay near the coast.”

“Days,” interjected G’has. “Three, Brother?”

“To the river. More to the lake.”

There continued to be a road of sorts. A trail. The pass through which they came must see regular traffic. Despite snow-ogres.

Snow, too. Notably less of it lay on the ground here. Tes could almost believe G’rab’s promised spring was coming. More likely, it was just more sheltered here from the great winter storms that blew across the northern seas and into Muradon.

This land was neither Muradon nor Arolin, though the emperor claimed it. More important places called for Sorgom’s attention and armies. Furs and other luxury items came across the mountains, and even goods smuggled from the Siphic headwaters.

One day they wended downward, and then another. Not one person did they meet. Tes remarked on this to the trolls. “Oh, the hunters of the forests watch us from time to time,” G’rab told her. “For each I have glimpsed I’ve probably missed two.”

"Three," said his sister.

"Humans, like me?"

"For the most part. The sort our hermit mentioned. Trolls would come out and greet us. And elves we would never see, if any are in this part of the world. You ask not of those, but of travelers. Only fools would be crossing the mountains so early."

"That I can believe."

G'has said, "Fools and trolls."

"I am not sure there is a difference. We may meet trolls on this road."

"Fools too," G'has snickered.

"They won't be, um, a danger, will they?" wondered Oasse.

"Our people are well-behaved. The wild trolls beyond the mountains would put you on a spit for their supper."

G'has said something in a sing-song voice and then giggled. Her brother smiled. "My sister quotes an old song that says trolls will eat anything, including each other. Written by a human, it is said, but we appreciate a good ditty."

"Song of little trolls," commented G'has.

"Yes, not mountain trolls. They can be a bad bunch."

"When hungry!" added his sister.

"And I am afraid they always are."

"I am more concerned that our competitors are behind us. Perhaps trying to catch up."

"Might it not be the other way around?" asked Oasse. He attempted nonchalance but she could see the idea upset him.

"They made an attempt on my life in Uskar."

G'rab considered this briefly before nodding. "You might have mentioned this sooner. No matter. It may be they know not all you do, wizard, and seek to follow us to this prize."

"Why would they seek to kill Tes, then?"

How obtuse of the fellow. "For my gold, though I carried but a quarter of the total."

"And you have all the knowledge," added G'rab. "Our pirates were but an impediment."

“A good thing for them then,” said Oasse, “that their snow-ogres did not slay me. Everyone would have to go home.”

Tes suspected more than one of them thought that might be a good idea.

VII. The Mirror of the Moon

MALE AND FEMALE were the party of trolls they encountered that afternoon. Both were large and thick of body. Tess did not think the troll-women aged well. The males seemed to start out ugly. Neither group advanced further but made camp right there.

Most of the talk around the fire that night was in the troll-tongue, G'rab occasionally explaining some point in an aside to the pair of humans. "I spoke of our encounter with the white raven. Some claim to have heard tales of it but none have seen the bird themselves."

"I am not sure it is natural," stated Oasse.

Tes looked him askance. "I thought wizards claimed all things were natural."

"Ha, I forget you know my kind. It was a sloppy way of putting it. Not natural to this world, perhaps I should say. I but conjecture, of course."

"But there may be something of the gods about it?"

"One god or another. That too would be conjecture."

"You know of gods?" asked G'rab.

"Once I served the gods of my people, as a priest of Banat." It would be impolite for Tes to inquire why he no longer did. All the more so as a pirate who no longer wore her own given name.

They were silent for a minute or two, as the trolls jabbered on around them. "Ravens are known in the tales of my people," Tes said at last. "We should have asked Asmero about it."

"I am not sure he was natural either. I felt powers I can not name."

G'rab turned to them on hearing his words. "A wizard like you?"

Oasse only shrugged. "That might be." He did not sound convinced of it.

The following morning, the two groups set forth on their opposite ways, the trolls disappearing into the fog as they climbed toward the mountains.

"I told them there might be unfriendly men following us," G'rab informed the humans. "They said they would say hello to them."

The trees around them in the valleys were shifting from conifers to deciduous, still leafless in this season, and dripping on the travelers as they moved through the mists. "We should reach the river before day's end," the troll told them. "It we follow down to the great lake. The Mirror of the Moon they name it here."

"And our wizard and our jewels wait there?" asked Tes. She asked neither man nor troll directly, but put the question into the air.

"The lake G'rab would know better than me. The one to whom I spoke from afar told me only that he dwelt near it."

"And I know nothing of this wizard we seek," said G'rab. "Can you speak to him now? We grow close."

Tes might have smiled at his words. "Distance means nothing," Oasse informed him. "We could be on opposite sides of the world."

"And look edge over?" wondered G'has. "Like would!"

Tes and Oasse glanced at each other but neither wished to take the time to explain the shape of the world. The troll-woman could live her life ignorant of it and be none the less happy.

"I hesitate to speak to the man," said Oasse. "Others more powerful than I might listen in. I believe that is how they learned of the stone in the first place."

G'has frowned at him from beneath her heavy brows. "Good wizard not?"

"Competent enough. This Agos we seek is not well trained at all and perhaps not completely, um, in control of his faculties."

G'rab digested this. "Wait then until we reach the Mirror." With that, the troll trudged on.

They did reach the river before dark and, furthermore, saw no signs of any following them. "Cold!" warned G'has when they stood beside the tumbling water. "Little Tes freeze."

"I'll not try swimming then." That could wait until she returned to one of the those southern isles with their sunlit beaches and sun-

kissed women. Tes wasn't quite sure why she was here in this land of snow and frigid winds.

Simple ambition? Yes, she desired to rise higher in her chosen profession, to captain her own galley. To gather the wealth of the nations to her — but to what end? Too often, it all seemed pointless. Life itself seemed pointless. At those times, she was all too prone to lash out at those around her. Tes had learned to recognize this, to attempt to rein in her moods, but was not always successful.

"We can board a raft a little further down," G'rab informed them. "All the way to the lake we need not walk."

The next day they did so, with Tes paying no more than a few pennies for the ride downriver. And the day after, the wide Mirror of the Moon lay before them.

"Bigger than I expected," she told the trolls. Miles long, miles enough she could not spy the far end. Villages lined its shores, none large. There was open land around the water, with sheep grazing on the relatively gentle slopes. And to the east, to their right, rose the high distant mountains, the very backbone of the great range that divided empires and might as well divide worlds.

Yet smugglers came over it, from what she had heard. Where there's a profit, there's a way.

"The largest town is at the far end," G'rab informed them, "where the river flows out again. This raft won't take us that far."

That would be the place to seek. Asking questions as they traveled toward it, to be sure. Tes peered in what she thought was the proper direction. "Can we walk that far with what is left of the day?"

"We might need to continue into the night. But it is good weather."

Good? At least it wasn't snowing. In fact, the sky was quite clear. They disembarked and began walking. And as they walked, the sky grew dark and Grandmother Moon, grown fuller as they had traveled, rose and turned the lake to silver.

VIII. *Wind-Wise*

“HAVING BROUGHT YOU here, our contract is fulfilled on both ends,” declared G’rab. “We have our promised pay to guide you here. That is enough.”

Tes had just paid him off.

The troll drained his tankard of beer. His fourth? “For my sister, I think it was more a matter of doing something interesting.”

“Adventure go! Good word adventure, huh? Adventure, adventure.” She savored it for a moment more before grinning. “But little pirate like. Not some much wizard maybe.”

Oasse answered her jibe with a tolerant smile. He wasn’t such a bad sort. Which did not mean Tes trusted him.

“So we will remain a day or two to make certain all is well. Friends we name you now.”

“More adventure maybe have.”

“But you will not guide us back across the mountains,” said Tes.

“There should be no need.”

No, there shouldn’t. They knew the path. As for whatever adversaries they had, they could be dealt with before ever joining the journey back to Uskar. The friendly trolls they had encountered might already have done that job for them.

She doubted that. But at least they had probably slowed them down.

A man, tall, pale of face but dark of hair, stepped into the tavern. “You are they who have come for our shaman,” he stated, taking a stool. The bear skin cloak around his shoulders he let slip to the plank floor.

“You represent the council?” asked Oasse.

“I do. Agos is, of course, free to leave us anytime he wishes, though we might miss the old fool. It is for our green stone we insist on compensation.”

“It is of little use to you without the wizard.”

"And the wizard is little use to you without the stone. We know you aren't here for him."

"But are entirely willing to help him. He did reach out to me, after all."

The stranger nodded solemnly. "Wind-Wise we have named him, for he can look into the green gem and predict what weather comes. But we are aware Agos has other uses. His ability to speak at a distance. We could have arranged none of this without it."

"Assuming he didn't garble the messages too much."

The agreed upon price, in particular, thought Tes. "We should see both man and gem before proceeding," she said.

Their visitor looked at Tes as if he were noticing her for the first time and then questioningly toward Oasse.

"The woman is in charge of the funds," said the wizard, "which means she is in charge of everything."

"I have heard of Muram women and their independence," He fairly obviously did not approve of what he had heard. "I am Borz, and speak for the town council. Come."

The man rose without further word, pulling his cloak around him. They followed him into the street of frozen mud. In an hour or two it would not be frozen, but sucking at the feet of any who tried to navigate it.

The architecture here was similar to that of Muradon, blocky log houses, heavy wooden palisades around the town. Tes had seen no such buildings in the Muram lands in which she had grown up, across the Greater Sea. The Mur might have learned it of people such as these.

Just as those older cities had been built upon the heritage of Tesra. "We keep the gem locked away," Borz told them, "bringing it out only when we wish to use the shaman's talents."

"Which do we go to see at the moment?" asked Oasse.

"Wind-Wise first. Here." The man turned abruptly to the right. "We provide the old man with a home and a woman to take care of him."

A home of sorts. A small cabin, one story, built of the typical

logs. As good as that of Asmero in the mountains, maybe, and likely to be easier to heat than that pile of stones. These people needn't take care of him at all. Rude though the place might be, they went up in Tes's estimation.

"He has chafed at being here. That is one reason we raise no objections to Agos going away with you," said Borz, before pounding on the door.

A muffled voice answered something. "Just making sure they were awake," said their guide, pushing the door open.

One room. One small fireplace. Stone, though. That added some substance to the place. A woman in long skirts bent over the modest blaze, heating something in a copper pan. Seated on a narrow bed along one wall was an elderly man.

"Here at last, eh?" He practically leaped to his feet. Old Agos might be, but definitely not infirm. Tes had worried about getting someone frail back to the boat.

Though, to be sure, the stone was what mattered most. As far as she could make out – she felt woefully ignorant about much of this mission.

"They are, Wind-Wise," spoke Borz. "You know the wizard already, I understand, even if you have never stood in the same room."

"Greetings, brother." His eyes swept across the pair of trolls, eliciting more a look of curiosity than of surprise, before settling on Tes. "Ah, Muram. It is good to see one of my own people."

"This is Tes," said Oasse. "She serves those who sent me here."

"To take the stone away. It needs to go."

"You as well, sir," she replied.

"I don't matter. It shouldn't be here in the north." He leaned in as if confiding a secret to her. "Much less in the mountains. It longs to return to the south. Aye, and to the sea."

"Then why is here?"

Agos shrugged. "I know not. It was here when I arrived and I recognized I had the ability to use it." He glanced toward Borz. "So I have for these people. I became their shaman."

"Your presence was ever welcome, Wind-Wise."

"But the time comes to move on." The old man seemed to forget the others were there for a moment. "As have I all my life, wandering the villages of the north, reading futures and making small magics."

"Never trained as a wizard, then," noted Oasse.

"Only by local seers and shamans. One taught me to speak from afar."

"We shall leave you to your breakfast now, shaman," said Borz, "and come back later when it grows warmer. A good day to you." He nodded toward the woman, who had remained silent through all. "And to you."

"You too, sir," she called after him, as they slipped out into the sunshine. How bright it was here in the mountains on a cloudless day!

"The stone is kept in the council hall." He pointed toward the tallest structure on the street. Not the largest; there were some low, sprawling buildings that were likely to be barns or warehouses. "We shall look it over after lunch. It and your gold."

With that, they parted ways. "I assumed he would bring up the gold eventually," said Tes.

G'has asked, "But care not much maybe?"

"No, not a man of greed, Sister," G'rab said. "But happy enough to take the gold for his town."

Tes agreed. "What think you of this Agos?"

"He seems healthy but a bit addled — not just his age but the toll of practicing sorcery," answered Oasse.

"Born with a gift of second-sight," G'rab mused.

"You know of such?"

"We have our troll wizards. They are not so common as among humans."

"And rare there." He gave Tes a sidelong look before continuing. "Save in the Rift and in Tesra."

"So I understand," she said.

IX. The Green Stone

"I KNEW AT once what it was when I saw it through the eyes of Agos. Indeed, I did, and I felt it was destiny that I should be the one to discover it." Oasse shook his head. "But that is unimportant at the moment.

"It is more an aid to prophecy than to feats of magic, though it can certainly be turned to those. Even to evil."

Tes noted the misgivings in his voice. "But not readily so?"

"I think not. It embodies existence, rather than the void. It and its siblings."

This was the first any had heard of 'siblings.' "Stones more?" asked G'has.

"According to legend. Long separated and none know where they are now."

"We know where one is," declared Tes, rising from the table, "and we can go look at it."

"Best to take possession now," advised G'rab, "and be off at dawn."

"Back the way we came? Is it possible to return by the river?" Oasse asked. "I am told the distance is near equal."

"And I understand many stretches of the river are impassible," said Tes, "but a road runs along its length."

Said G'rab, "Not a very good one and not nearly so easy to walk as that by which you came. Yet some trade does go that way."

"Up down road go," added his sister. "Round round too!"

"Yes. The actual distance is somewhat greater when one counts its twists and dips. For portages the path is used as much as for travel."

Tess nodded. "So the way we came is the best route, except for the passage over the mountains. Which is fairly short." She did not bother to add the obvious — that the presence of Agos would slow them whatever route was taken.

The four emerged into the street. Tes immediately set off toward

the council hall, leaving the others to follow. Approaching the structure she could see it was a blockhouse, a place of defense. Did these people have enemies?

Everyone has enemies, she told herself. Even those who dwell in remote and idyllic valleys, who gaze on the beauty of the Mirror of the Moon each day. Hmm, the lake must freeze in the deepest of winter. Not so much of a mirror then.

No matter. She stood at the hall's tall double-doors.

G'rab stated, "We will not enter. This business is between humans."

His sister smirked at him. "Brother trolls welcome not mean."

"There is that," he admitted.

As outsiders? Those like G'rab might just be who these townsmen defended themselves against. None guarded the door so she entered, Oasse following.

Half a dozen townsmen awaited them. No women? That seemed a poor way to run things.

Borz gave them a greeting. "This is the council," he announced. "Some here know not the language of the Mura, but I can speak for all."

"Good enough." Tes threw her money belt onto a broad table. "Let's see the merchandise."

One of the men came forward with a casket, and opened it for her perusal. She found it surprising the gem was set into the base of a cup crafted of silvery metal. Tes recognized it as platinum and worth nearly as much as the gold she carried. The council needn't know that.

The stone itself was a bit less than the size of a hen's egg. It shone a deep, luminous green. She saw no reason to doubt its authenticity.

"Storm Stone we sometimes name it, for Agos sees bad weather more clearly than good."

"It would seem more useful for that, unless one were planning picnics." She pushed the belt forward. "Count and we shall be done."

Count Borz did, quickly and to his satisfaction. "The Storm Stone is yours."

Tes handed the casket to Oasse, not that she would let him carry it on their way home. "Might I ask how it came here?"

"The spoils of a battle with bandits, some years back. Whence they got it, we've no idea. It sat here with other trinkets and might in time have been sent off to sell somewhere, had not Wind-Wise recognized its powers."

"And the wizard blabbed to others about it." Tes smiled. "Or we might never have shown up to purchase it."

"Sailor you are, no? I can see its usefulness to you."

So could Tes. A pirate might do much with such a talisman in his possession. Or hers. Perhaps she should learn more about what Oasse's backers intended before handing it over.

A minute later she and the wizard stood in the sunlight.

G'rab greeted them with, "Your competitors seem to be here."

"Skulk!"

"Yes, they do. Four or five of them." The troll snickered. "They look like they might have been in a fight."

Tes decided it might be best not to wait until dawn to get away.

X. An Unwelcome Wizard

TES SET DOWN her tankard of black beer. "We could take the stone and leave the old man. It would allow us to move more swiftly."

"Prophecy is a special gift," Oasse admitted, "but another could learn to use the bauble, with practice." A pause to gather another thought. "Better this council never know that fact."

"I doubt they really care that much. I do feel some obligation to this Agos, having made him promises."

Good gold in exchange for an old man and stone no one knew how to use would continue to seem a fine bargain to the councilmen. No reason to make them think otherwise.

The trolls sat with them, drank with them, but did not join the conversation. Tes remained uncertain whether they might help them back across the mountains. Or even assist them with enemies right here.

"Our newcomers will start nothing here," she said.

G'rab added his thoughts — or a thought — for the first time this evening. "A quick grab and a run might be ignored by those who dwell in this town."

"They aren't going to run very fast with Agos in tow."

"Ah, but their wizard will know he is not so important," Oasse pointed out. "Whoever he is or comes from."

"Her." G'has belched before adding, "Wizard woman."

"And four minions in tow," said her brother. "Men all."

"Different look."

Oasse chuckled. "I thought we all look the same."

"The woman is very dark, but with hair of straw," G'rab told them. "She stands out."

"A Tesran," breathed Tes. "Or one from the Rift."

"I would think so," Oasse said. "Dxukur would love to get his hands on one of the jewels of the elements."

That name jogged something in Tes's memory, tales she had heard — and even read — as an adolescent in Tesra. "It is one of the

stones that Torut coveted? The ones ultimately used to destroy him?"

"So I believe. They disappeared from all records after that."

"Toroot who?" wondered the troll-woman.

"Torut ruled the sorcerers of Tul Sunac centuries ago. Now Dxukur reigns as Wizard-Lord."

"We need to resurrect the wizard Im to combat him!" jested Tes. Both he and Torut were the stuff of stories to her.

"Surely dead years ago. Maybe centuries. But one can never be sure with sorcerers."

True. Some were exceedingly long lived. Tes had met such. "Including when they might show up," she said, nodding toward the door.

A dark woman had entered, accompanied by one man. A stocky man, coppery of skin and sparse of beard. Surely Muram.

As she was as surely not. Yes, of or related to the people of Tesra. The woman took a seat wordlessly, her man remaining standing behind her.

"You join us at last," said Tes.

"We ran into some rather abusive trolls." She gave the two seated at the table a sidelong glance. "They threw things at us and tried to spook my men but Bus here held them and we passed without much damage."

"How unfortunate," commented G'rab. "That you escaped, I mean."

Tes had to restrain herself from snickering at the henchman's name. A nickname, as surely as any a pirate wore, and meaning a male sexual organ. Usually applied as an insult.

"I am Kosha. Rather would I bargain than fight. Three times the gold you just paid can I offer."

It was a good thing they got to the council first. "Kosha is a Muram name," she commented.

"To travel in Muram lands. I am neither the first nor the last to rename themselves."

Indeed not. What could she do with that much gold and another

name herself? Tes could see herself leaving the pirate life behind and comfortably settling somewhere. "Your offer tempts me, Kosha."

But not enough to make her change course. Tes intended to rise high in her profession, to captain her own ship. There would ultimately be far more gold coming her way in that career.

Kosha rose. "Tell me your decision by dawn. I and my men shall await your answer." With that, she made her way out, Bus following.

When they were gone, Tes said, "Obviously, we need to be on our way well before dawn."

"With go!" stated G'has.

Her brother sighed. "So it seems."

"Then first we must gather up Agos," Oasse reminded them. "With none seeing us."

"They will watch his house," G'rab said. "I would."

"So would I." Tes considered that fact a moment. "An opportunity to remove at least one of them."

Each of her companions reacted differently. The wizard seemed shocked by the cold-blooded suggestion. G'rab regarded her impassively from beneath shaggy, lowered brows.

G'has looked eager to get at it. Too eager. "Oasse and I shall go to the old man," she decided. "We are less likely to alarm him."

"You alarm *me*, Tes," said Oasse.

"And this Kosha alarms me. I sense she is a far more potent and far more dangerous sorcerer than you. Now, what I need you to do is go openly to the shaman's lodging."

Oasse gulped. "By myself."

"Never fear. I shall be near. You two," she addressed the trolls, "may get into what mischief you will. And – when we leave let it be separately, so none know we travel together."

G'rab only nodded to this. "Another tankard of beer is mischief enough for the moment."

Minutes later, Oasse walked out of the inn's doors and into the street. At the same time, Tes dropped into the darkness behind the structure, and made her way through a maze of outbuildings.

Whoever guarded the house of Agos, she felt certain, would not interfere with the one seemingly harmless man who had come to fetch him. He would remain hidden, most likely.

But not from her.

XI. A Snowball's Chance

"I DID NOT expect you to be so ruthless," whispered Oasse.

"She's a Mur," Agos informed him. "You southerners are soft."

"Kosha would do the same to any one of us. I think Bus would enjoy it." She hadn't enjoyed leaving a man behind in the night and the snow, his throat cut. It was part of the business.

The two wizards had openly returned to the tavern and then slipped out the back to rendezvous with Tes, packs on their backs. The Storm Stone and its cup were safely ensconced in her own. The trolls would make a show of leaving in a few hours, well before the dawn deadline Kosha had given them. She would think, it was to be hoped, that they were parting ways.

At least think so for a while. The immediate goal was to put miles between them and the town. "Is that snow falling?"

Oasse looked up, not that there was any point in it. Large snowflakes were drifting down all around them. "I know nothing of the ways of snow," he admitted. He gave Agos a look. "And I doubt there would be any point in letting our Wind-Wise take a look in the stone."

"None," agreed Tes. "This could cover our tracks, which makes this a good time to get off the road."

The two men followed her into the trees without objection, but Oasse asked, "Don't we have to follow that road? We can hardly hide forever."

"It might confuse our pursuers. They might even become the pursued. And," she added, "the plan was to stop eventually and wait for the trolls to catch up."

"We still don't have the chance of a snowball in summer," complained Agos. "I guess they wouldn't kill me, though. Carry me off to whatever gods-forsaken place they come from."

"I doubt they care about you, old man," said Oasse. "Kosha only wants the stone."

"Dxukur only wants the stone," Tes corrected him.

"Dxukur? What kind of trouble have you gotten me into?" Agos looked genuinely frightened.

"It appears to me we're getting you out of trouble. Once we have attended to that, I'll take you with me to the tropical south and neither of us need look upon this miserable snow again."

"It would be nice to be warm," admitted Agos. "Will there be women?"

The apparently incredulous Ildin asked, "You have need of a woman?"

"Someone needs cook for me," he replied with a straight face but a wink for Tes.

"I am sure arrangements can be made. A slave or two."

Oasse spat into the snow. "You damnable Mura and your slavery."

Tes was only mildly surprised. She had heard such sentiments before, sometime from captives she had sold into bondage. "It is the way of my people. Someone must serve, after all."

"And you pirates feed the empire's hunger for ever more slaves."

"The founder of the empire was himself a pirate," she pointed out. "One who set up a base across the sea from the Old Kingdoms, drawing more and more men to him there."

"Would your empire had never existed. The day comes it will fall, as have all nations before it."

"Undoubtedly. In the mean time, I must make a living. Hush now, someone comes."

G'has and G'rab it proved to be, trudging along the pathway. Tes waved to catch their attention. G'rab but nodded to acknowledge her, continuing on his way. Oasse seemed ready to call after them.

"Stay, man," she ordered. "The trolls seek to confuse any who follow. They will turn back to us." If the trolls knew anything worthwhile, it was moving through the snow and the wilderness. There she must trust them.

But, as large and intimidating as they were, they might not match up well against trained fighting men. Tes felt sure those trolls who

had met their adversaries on the road recognized that fact and therefor chose only to harass rather than attack.

Agos, of course, was useless in a battle, and Oasse not much better, unless he fight as a sorcerer.

She looked up the road. Surely enough, a little further along the pair turned off and plunged into the woods on the far side. They could only wait for them to make their way back.

Kosha's four followers had become three yesterday. A little more even! Aside from two relatively harmless wizards, Tes and two trolls would face them. Yes, they would face them before this ended. Kosha was the unknown factor here. She had no idea of the sorceress's abilities.

And so she would not underestimate her.

"You are as noisy as the elephants of the Baxa," she told the trolls when they had worked their way around to her.

"Your ears are keener than most," commented Oasse. "I heard nothing."

Nor, almost certainly, had those they waited for. What when they came? Attempt an ambush? Had she a bow, she could take out one, maybe two. Kosha, ideally, one of them. It would be far more risky to attack with sword and knife.

No, she would not attempt it at all here on the road. Night could be another matter. Where were the others, anyway? Tes had expected swifter pursuit than this. Kosha would believe it was only the two wizards and her, making a run for it.

She *should* believe it. Again Tes reminded herself not to underestimate the sorceress.

At last. And yes, they were hurrying. One man pointed to the road and jabbered something she couldn't make out at this distance. Their tracks, maybe. The snowfall had not been as heavy as Tes would have preferred. Kosha, seemingly impatient, ordered them to move on. Tes watched them disappear up the road.

"We could," she told her little band, "swiftly return to the town and go down the river. This wizardess would be unlikely to catch up."

"But she would reach Uskar first by this road and could await you there," G'rab pointed out. "Perhaps with more men."

"I have more men, too," said Tes. Not that they were worth much. "Very well. We follow behind her."

"Attack?" asked G'has.

"I think so. Falling on them in their camp this night might be our best chance. They will be tired if they keep up that pace." They might not even post a sentry.

These minions of Tul Sunac had tried to kill her twice on the way here. They did kill her companion, if not directly. And Tes had slain one of theirs. That they wouldn't forget. She had not the least qualm about murdering them in their sleep, if the opportunity arose.

"Let's go," she said, rising from her hiding place. "We follow." But not too quickly; they would catch their enemy in time.

XII. Prophets and Losses

"THE SENTRY IS nodding." Tes began to creep forward, knife in hand.

Oasse? Why was he crawling toward her? She had ordered him to stay back.

"There are wards," the wizard hissed. "Magic. They will give yon sorceress warning."

So much for stealth then. The alternative was to rush the camp. "How much closer can I get?"

"You are almost within her perimeter." And still a good distance from her intended target. She would never reach him before an alarm went up.

The knife returned to its scabbard. This was going to be sword-work. Tes slipped back a little and motioned the trolls to her.

"So we charge the camp," said G'rab, on hearing her news.

"Or slip away and await a better opportunity."

"A better one I doubt we'll find." He turned to Oasse. "Have you magics you can use?"

The wizard was hesitant. "I might pull in some concealing fogs. That could hinder us as much as yon fighters."

"What you could do," spoke Tes, "is engage with this Kosha so she does not use her powers against us."

"She is stronger than me." There was no hesitation to that statement. Chances were he feared the sorceress.

Undoubtedly stronger than Agos, as well, or at least better trained. Nor could the two combine their strength; Tes knew that much of magic. "You need only distract her a moment while we deal with her men."

He nodded slowly. "I shall try."

"Good man. Let's do this. G'has, head for the sentry. G'rab and I will each pick a sleeper. Go!"

Tes knew she was faster on her feet than the trolls. Her hope was

to reach the sorceress and dispatch her before a defense could be raised. But which of those blanket-wrapped figures was Kosha?

“Awake!” came a shout. “Up! Up!” It seemed Kosha’s alarms had alerted her. Tes found herself facing two swords, and a third — that of the sorceress — right behind them. She wisely did not charge in any further, but stood facing them off by the flickering light of the campfire.

Both trolls were at her side in moments. They carried long, straight swords, which they wielded two-handed. Blood could be seen on that of G’has. The sentry’s she assumed; if the man were still alive, they would not have turned their backs on him.

Oasse came up behind her. “I could not force my way in for more than a few seconds,” he said.

Kosha laughed. “And you fled lest I blast your mind from you.”

“That I did. I will not challenge you in such a battle, woman.”

“You were there long enough for me to see what you wish to do with the stone. You have no more intention of handing it to the pirates than I do. You want it for your god.”

Oasse did not deny it. “I owe a debt to the priesthood I abandoned in my youth. It should be restored to the priests of Banat.” He stared at the woman, seemingly sorting something out in his mind. “But you want the stone yourself, don’t you? I saw your mind as you saw mine.”

Bus glared at his mistress. “I was warned by Nanos you might turn traitor,” he snarled.

“And he would like to get his hands on this gem himself so he might challenge Dxukur.”

G’has burst into loud, raucous laughter. “Everyone want!”

“Except us,” noted her brother.

Bus suddenly sprang forward, slashing at the troll-woman. She backed away with a gash on her arm, bleeding profusely. The same color as human blood, came to Tes’s mind for no particular reason. The distraction was for but a moment. She engaged with the man, even as G’rab swung at the sorceress.

Kosha backed away and the other swordsman moved in to

engage the troll. Tes got one glimpse of Oasse attempting to aid G'has, before Bus took all her attention. He was strong and he was competent, though he had not her skills.

"Heeyuh!" shouted G'rab as he took a great looping swing and removed his opponent's head.

Bus stepped back, breaking off their duel, and looked beyond her. Cautiously, Tes slipped aside a bit and took a peek. Kosha had a knife to Oasse's chest. There could be but one reason for that — she sought the stone they carried.

She resisted the urge to go to them, instead renewing the attack on Kosha's henchman. A thrust missed her. Close. The one she returned was closer; through Bus's heart, in fact.

Where was G'rab? Kneeling by his sister and Oasse. And the sorceress? She must have gone into the woods, the hiding place of Agos and their packs. Tes pursued.

The old wizard had proven himself wise by running away. Kosha was rummaging through the bags. She rose with the Storm Stone in one hand. "You are fortunate," she stated, "that I have not learned to use this powerful object. In time." She set it down. "We need not fight. My offer of gold remains. For that matter, you could do well to be in the service of the Rift, rather than a ragged pirate. This, too, I offer."

"To serve some mad sorcerer when I might be my own mistress? Never." She strode forward, curved sword in hand.

"A weapon of Tesra," remarked her opponent. "Too good a blade for the miserable Muram street urchin you were born." She drew her own straight, slender weapon.

Tes recognized quickly that Kosha was as well schooled as she — but in a very different school. She was all point, in and out, thrust and parry, where the Mur had learned much of slashing. Not that her schooling had neglected the point! She was quicker than Kosha but had less reach; as many of her blood, the sorceress was relatively tall and slender. When young, Tes had sometimes made fun of her Tesran friends' skinny legs, as children will. She had muscular thighs and calves herself.

And more strength that this woman, despite being smaller. She must watch that she not wear herself out while Kosha deflected her attacks. Or maybe she *should* wear herself out.

Tes began to gasp for air. Not ostentatiously, just enough to give the impression she was tiring. He feet moved a little slower. Oh, that smug look on the woman's face. Let her think she has an opening.

From the second position, thrusting upward, she skewered Kosha as she drove in with her blade. "You can come out now, Agos," she called. She gathered up the packs and the two returned to the camp.

She dumped them besides those of the slain, then stooped to give those a quick looking over. Yes, there was some of the gold Kosha said she carried. Tes went to check on her companions.

G'rab was binding up the arm of his sister. "The Ildin will not survive," he said, nodding toward Oasse.

No, he would not. A froth of blood was on his lips.

"Let me see the stone — before I go," he asked. She nodded and brought it to him.

The wizard gazed into the green gem. "It should go back to my people. A new prophetess might even be found. There has been a line of them, extending millennia into the past — sometimes broken, but always restored."

"They serve the stone?"

"The stone serves them. Stones, I should say, for there were four of them. One for each element. Or the four winds — " His voice quavered, grew weaker. "Now the winds shall blow me back — to Banat. To home."

"Perhaps it will go home someday, wizard," she said, rising from his still body. "For now it goes with me. G'rab?"

The troll had approached, G'has leaning against him. "My sister is injured. I will take her home."

"Of course, my friend. Take some of the gold the sorceress carried."

The troll gave it a somewhat disinterested look before grabbing a handful and stuffing it into his purse. "Come, G'has."

"Fight again someday," she said.

The two disappeared down the road.

XIII. Passage

“So JUST YOU and I go back through the pass,” she told Agos.

“To warm lands and warm women,” he said. “You promised.”

“I look forward to being there myself.”

The old wizard cocked his head at her. “Is there a warm woman waiting for you?”

“I fear not.” She chuckled and told him, “I can see why you are considered a wise shaman.”

“Shoot, girl. I have eyes in my head. Not so good anymore, maybe!”

So far, the old man was holding up well as they went up and down the hills. Better than her, perhaps, carrying the gold. It was quite a bit of gold and decidedly heavy. More than what the sorceress had claimed to possess. The high pass lay yet ahead but Tes hoped she could complete the round trip to Uskar in less than the three weeks she had optimistically promised her crew.

Warmer weather prevailed than when they had traveled the other way, only days ago. Tes could believe in spring now. The snow-capped mountains loomed closer each day. Would the snow-ogres again be a threat? She knew now that Kosha had set them on her party, making some promise of reward. But two travelers would be vulnerable and tempting prey for the creatures.

They were high up when she came to a halt. “The hut of Asmero is near. If he will grant us hospitality tonight, we can attempt to cross through the pass tomorrow.”

The way, she remembered. But when they reached the little stone house, it was cold and empty. “It looks as if none have lived her for years,” commented Agos, surveying the crude interior. “Do we stay anyway?”

It was probably as good a place as any to spend the night. The hermit, wherever he might be, would surely not mind.

“Well, I’ll be,” said Agos, staring out across the snow-covered scape. “A messenger of the gods.”

Tes went to his side. The white raven sat among the branches of an evergreen. It called once, and flew away, only to alight a bit further along the path.

"A messenger," she repeated. "I think the message is to follow him."

"Into the night?"

Tes looked up. "We have all the stars to light the way. And Grandmother Moon will sail among them soon."

So they climbed to the pass, with only the silent stars above and the raven appearing from time to time before them. Once, Tes thought she might have seen white figures loom in the distance, but they disappeared again into the dark.

Alone. The voice of the void called to her as oft it had before. Come, forget and find peace. She could sit down here in the snow, in this high place, and let the world go its way.

Why bother? All she had known was loss. Her family, her home, friends. Oasse had followed all the others into oblivion, still hoping for the future. Tes could not find it in her to do that.

Agos grasped her arm. "Don't walk with despair, girl," he rasped. "I'm here beside you, and look who else is joining us." He turned and pointed to the moon rising behind them. "She will journey with us to the morn."

She couldn't help but laugh. "Welcome, Grandmother," Tes called, raising a hand in greeting.

The two traveled on by the lunar light. They did not again glimpse the white raven, as they began the steep descent toward the Gulf of Arolin.

Soon, they were among the thick forest of conifers. The snow yet lay thick here, and a cold wind blew off the water. But the sea was her home; she welcomed its familiar scent.

"I must first see if my boat and crew are here," Tes told Agos on entering Uskar. "The docks."

There lay the craft, tied up as when she had last seen it. Maybe Exen and Qodo had never left, but spent the three weeks holed up,

drinking and whoring. It didn't matter. She would not even bother to ask when she found them.

They most certainly would be engaged in those activities now. The old wizard followed her without question. Maybe he wondered when they would set sail for the paradise she had promised him.

"Where are my men?" she asked on setting foot in the tavern. A girl pointed to the ceiling. With whores already, this early in the day? Or maybe still sleeping off last night.

"Fetch them," she ordered, taking a seat. "Beer for two, innkeeper."

"You'll need to be quicker than that when I give orders at sea," Tes told her crew when they appeared. "We sail before nightfall."

The pair gave Agos no more than a glance, nor did they question the absence of Besak. Said Exen, "You have it? Captain Kusu said we should make sure we got a look and to keep it safe-like."

Tes had known Exen was the captain's spy, the man to look after his interests. "You'll see it soon enough. Not in this place."

The pirate recognized the wisdom in that. "Let's get our gear," he told Qodo. Half an hour later they were at the boat, preparing to sail.

It would be best, Tes realized, to let the men get a quick look at the Storm Stone. Curiosity assuaged, they might give her no more trouble for the next couple days. They gazed at it without comprehension of what it truly was nor its purpose. Just a pricey jewel and goblet to them.

So she gave some explanation. Best they be a bit awed. "This stone is a powerful object of magic," Tes stated. "And the old man is a powerful wizard. Only he knows how to use it so you'd best take care of him."

Qodo but nodded and returned to his work. Exen stared at the gem, flexing the corded muscles of his ape-like arms.

Tes was almost amused. "You'd like to be the one to carry it back yourself and receive Kusu's reward. Qodo!" The fat pirate looked up from the rope he was coiling. "Remember who was elected Second and who may someday be Captain."

His eyes shifted to Exen and back to Tes, weighing the both of them. “Aye, Tes. I’m your man.”

“Good. Then let’s be away from this stinking hole.”

XIV. Captains and Kings

HORG'S HOUND LAY in the lee of a rocky point near the mouth of the Gulf of Arolin. Many such points and snug little harbors were to be found along the rugged coast of the Muradon peninsula. Tes steered her craft alongside and clambered aboard.

Kusu awaited her on deck. "Come to my cabin," came his curt order. Had Tes any doubts before of her proper course of action, they disappeared at that moment.

"The crew should see this," she called out, and drew forth the stone of prophecy. "I retrieved this from beyond the mountains, but for whom?"

There were murmurs as Kusu scowled at her. "You question your captain's orders?"

"You intend to turn our prize over to the Empire and pocket the reward," she accused. "Maybe even angle for a place in some noble's service and leave your crew with nothing."

Tes suspected this was indeed the truth, not that it mattered. The crew only need believe it. From their muttering, she was certain some did.

It didn't hurt that Kusu was far from loved by his crew. "I've learned of this stone's powers," she continued, "and say it should be turned over to the King, for the benefit of all."

Someone cried out, "What of our benefit?"

"I've a bag of gold to share. Thrice what I carried into the mountains." In fact, Kosha had carried even more than that. Tes could surely hang onto a little of it for expenses. Or future bribes.

"Whose money did Tes carry?" arose a voice.

"Why haven't we heard of it?" asked another.

Tes had worked this out to her satisfaction. "I will tell you a story," she announced. "There was a wizard who learned of a valuable talisman hidden in the mountains." She held up the cup for all to see. "There had been no chance of him retrieving it on his own so he had needed allies. Those he found in Muradon, whether

nobles acting on their own or on behalf of the imperial court. Kusu was in their secret pay, working behind the Pirate King's back."

Oasse, of course, had intended to betray them at the first opportunity.

"Is this true, Captain?" someone called out.

The man became defensive. "It needed to be kept secret. I would have shared the reward with you, as our charter calls for."

"A reward of which none knew," said Tes.

The crew's complaints grew louder. One called out, "We can vote you down. That's the law."

"Tes as captain!"

"With the king's approval," someone added. There were sounds of agreement.

Kusu recognized he had lost. "It is also the law that I and my challenger can duel, if both are willing. What say you, woman?"

He might or might not believe he could best her but it was his only chance of saving face. There was little future for a pirate cast out by his own. Tes answered by drawing her sword.

She was merciful and skewered him at once. Cheers began to arise but she held up a hand to halt them. "He was our captain and a brave enough man. We will bury him with honor." With that she strode away to take possession of his cabin.

Oh, the Pirate King would approve of this change of captains. All the more so when she presented him with Agos and his Storm Stone. Sedac would recognize the advantages of possessing them.

And Tes would have her own ship and nowhere to go but up.

Afterword

This novella is set some years after the teenage Qala leaves the city of Tesra. She is on her way to becoming Queen of Pirates.

One can read of Qala's earlier life in *The City and the Sword*, and later events in *The Eyes of the Wind* (which also involves the 'Storm Stone') and in the Crocodile Chronicles novels. All available from Arachis Press.

Stephen Brooke