



The Pledge

by Marc H. Wyman

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A Gushémal Story

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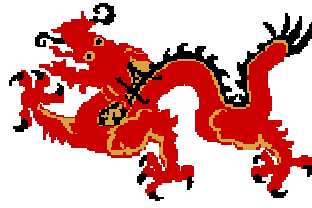
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Two weeks ago...

“A special price for you, Master Wizard!” The Tonomai merchant’s swarthy face broke out in a smarmy grin. “Only forty *aryel*, that’s a bargain!”

Barandas the Magnificent, self-styled, doubtfully weighed the small, triangular item in his hand. Its golden sheen caught the light of the sun, sparkling beautifully and enhancing the inscriptions snaking along its sides. “I’m not sure if it’s that much of a bargain. This isn’t even real gold, it’s been enchanted by a cleric,” he muttered.

“But you like it!” the Tonomai beamed. “It drew you from all the stalls in the market to my humble booth, and I –“ His smile suddenly deteriorated into crestfallen dismay. “I offered you such a marvelous bargain! A magical object, a – how do you say in your tongue? – an appliance. For many decades it has been in the collection of a wise wizard of our land, until he fell on hard times and had to sell it. Who knows what miracles are kept within it? Master Wizard, you *must* have it!”

Barandas chuckled. “Oh, sure, and all your friends in the other stalls would say the same thing about *their* appliances.” Negligently he dropped the item back on the display table. “Maybe some of theirs will be *really* to my liking.”

For a moment it seemed as if the merchant would just accept and wait for better clientele, then he nodded, smiling once more. “Can you read the inscription? It is an old tongue, that was spoken by the most distant ancestors of mine, but I can tell you what it says.”

“And what does it say?” Barandas answered offhandedly, as if he couldn’t wait to move on to another stall.

The Tonomai raised the item, squinted at the symbols, then he said in ominous tones, “*Whosoever shall find my secret, shall unleash the powers of the beast. His shall be the strength of the dragon, the speed of the tiger, the agility of the weasel; all shall belong to he who knows me.* Well, Master Wizard, what say you?”

“I say,” the wizard shrugged, “that you’re lying. The writing is Keroullian, from the land that now is Rek’atrednu, and it’s a simple riddle.”

“Oh,” the merchant grinned, the smarminess suddenly wiped from his face. “Half an *aryel*?”

Barandas shrugged, dug in a pocket of his robe and withdrew a few bronze coins. “Now *that* sounds like a bargain,” he said as he handed over the money and received the item.

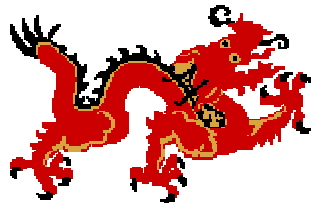
“A pleasure to do business with you, Master Wizard.”

“Likewise,” Barandas nodded and began to saunter out of the market, looking to all the world as if there was nothing on his mind but enjoying the warm day. Once the rustle and bustle was behind him, though, he hastened into a shadowed alleyway.

In his right hand he still held the triangular item. With his left, he produced another object, gleaming gold, that seemed almost identical to the first. A grin spread on his face as he pushed the two items closer – and suddenly they snapped together, forming a single object. And the tingle that Barandas had felt since the first moment he had touched either of the objects grew stronger.

He slowly turned about. After completing one revolution, he looked toward the southeast. In that direction, the tingle had been the most powerful.

“Well, my dear merchant,” the wizard grinned, “you have no idea how close you were with your so-called ‘translation’. *Powers of the beast...* And they shall all be mine!”



Today...

“You’re very impolite, Master Cornell,” the alreu Flink piped and cast a most accusing look at the warrior seated across from him on a pile of blankets. If one listened closely, one might actually imagine muffled words coming from beneath the pile.

Cornell of Cayaboré shrugged and leaned against the wall behind him, hands folded behind his head. “It’s quiet,” was all the explanation he was willing to give.

“Oh, and I suppose you just gag everyone that you meet when you want quiet! You haven’t done that to Gabe, and you most certainly have not gagged me!”

“What a tempting idea,” the Cayaborean said, looking dangerously at the small, spindly creature.

The alreu rolled his large eyes meaningfully. “Oh, you don’t mean that,” he waved the thought away. “And my friends really cannot help themselves. My goodness, sir, just imagine if you had spent *years* trapped inside a monstrous beast, *being* that beast and killing and murdering everyone who happens to pass by and just wants a good, nice conversation! That’s so awful, so *schrecklich*, and my friends just need to talk!”

“Your friends,” Cornell muttered, “are getting on my nerves. Why don’t you try carrying the shield for a while?”

Flink looked aghast. “Sir, it is *your* shield! You saved them from the beast, when you sucked them into the shield! I would *never* presume to take your place, much as I would enjoy talking to them!”

“Yeah, of course you wouldn’t,” Cornell grumbled and returned to staring at the slightly overcast sky of Tonomat. Below the pile of blankets, the noises from the shield were getting louder, three

voices crying out for the cover to be drawn from them. And if he did, all he'd hear would be a shower of complaints about being in the dark for that long. The Gods alone knew how the poor souls could *see* anything, ensorcelled into an elfwood shield as they were. But they could see, and what was worse, they could speak.

All the way from the ancient temple at the edge of the Elfadil Desert to this small town somewhere in the Tonomai Empire, they had rarely taken a pause in talking to him. Nev, the former accountant, who clearly never liked anything; Phindar, one time caravan leader and priest of Decalleigh, who always had one more anecdote to tell, no matter how annoyingly similar it was to the previous ones. And then there was Halla Valfrey, the Shield Maiden from Keroull.

Cornell still didn't know what exactly a shield maiden was, or what the connection with the elfwood shield was. Which was probably part of the reason why he liked Halla. *She* had not told him her entire life story, in fact she had been quiet most of the time while Nev and Phindar had been going on about this and that and this and that and...

Well, there had to be an end to this endless chatter, hadn't there? Impolite or not, after more than three weeks he deserved a break!

"Marvelous news, Cornell, Flink!" a baritone voice interrupted the Cayaborean's thoughts, and when he looked up he saw a giant of a man looming over him, garbed in leather that was much too warm for the local temperatures – which hardly fazed him at all. A large battle-axe was on his back, the blade peeking through the shaggy blond mane of hair. "I found us something to do!"

"Gabe," Cornell shielded his eyes from the sun as he looked at his barbarian friend, "you were supposed to buy provisions for the rest of our journey. We agreed to travel straight to Cayaboré, didn't we?"

The barbarian shrugged. "The cave's on the way, so I thought you wouldn't mind."

"Which cave?!" Cornell shouted.

"My goodness, sir," Flink chimed in, "is something wrong? You are only loud if there is danger about, aren't you and – Oh, dear! Are there monsters? Where? Can I see them?!"

The Cayaborean held up his hand, glanced at the alreu, and for a wonder, the little creature fell quiet, staring at the hand with utter intrigue. "Gabe," Cornell said slowly, forcing his voice to be level, "what cave are you talking about? And what is it that you have found for us to *do*?"

"A task of honor and acclaim!" the barbarian said proudly. "We will travel south to a deep and dangerous cave that is guarded by sorcery and magic, and we will break through the barriers as the first mortals to ever do so! No sorcerous guard can stand against the might of *breyell*, not when combined with the force of the great Cornell of Cayaboré!"

"Uh-huh."

Gabe apparently didn't register the dubious glance of the Cayaborean as he pointed over his shoulder down the road. "I met a wizard who told me of this cave, and he will accompany us. He's watching the provisions I bought right now."

Suddenly Cornell shot up and grasped the barbarian's right arm. "You left a stranger with our provisions?! Not with the *money*, too?!"

Gabe shrugged once more and patted the axe on his back. “The wizard knows what *bwyell* will do to him if he crosses us.”

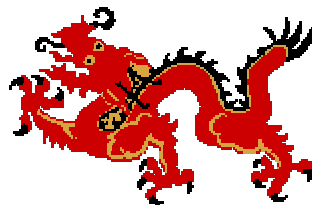
The barbarian’s assurance did little to ease Cornell’s mind. Quickly he threw away the blankets and reached for the buckler-style shield below. He didn’t even notice the angry comments of the spirits inside the elfwood as he strapped it on and hurried down the road in the direction Gabe had pointed out. Did that madman ever learn that some people thought they were faster than his damned axe? ‘*Bwyell* will teach him never to do that again,’ oh, yeah, right!

The roads were full of people, Tonomai going about their business, wearing wide hats casting blissful shadows on their faces, and Cornell roughly shouldered them out of the way, until he finally saw a wagon with two drawhorses in front of it. On the seat sat a robed figure, a slim man of some twenty-five years with a narrow face that managed to look at the same time openly friendly as it maintained a weasely quality.

“See,” Gabe puffed as he pulled up aside from Cornell, “the wizard knows that *bwyell* would take his head off if he had stolen our property!”

Cornell sighed, a sneer on his face. “Not that he’d be losing a vital part of his anatomy.” Louder, he said, “You must have forgotten how to drive a wagon, right? Or is there any other reason why you haven’t left town already?”

The robed figure turned around, beaming widely when he saw the Cayaborean, then Barandas said, “Well, now, I’m happy to see you, too, old friend.”



“Oh,” Gabe said, disappointed, “you know each other.”

The wizard laughed. Cornell was much less inclined to mirth as he drew a grimace and muttered, “Longer than I care to remember. Why is it that I keep running into you, Barandas?”

“Probably your good fortune,” the wizard answered and pointed towards the load of the wagon. “Let’s get this somewhere safe, and we can talk about the little trip I have planned for us. Then we... Uhh, Cornell, would you mind telling me what *that* is?”

“Why, sir,” Flink said cheerfully, loaded down heavily by the blankets with which Cornell had muffled the shield, “I am an *alreu*! May the gods bless you, am I the first one of my species you meet? You must have so many questions about me! Just ask, please ask, I will –“

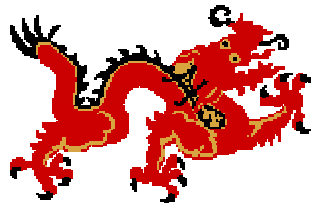
“You’ve *gotta* be kidding,” Barandas moaned. “Cornell, don’t tell me you’re running around with a bloody *alreu*?! By the tides of magic, I don’t watch you for a few days, and you get one of the manlings?”

Cornell sighed heavily as he climbed onto the seat, slamming the elfwood shield into the back of the wagon. Small cries of protest issued, which the Cayaborean happily ignored. “Far as I recall,” he muttered to the wizard, “you made pretty good use of that alreu idol a while back, didn’t you? Barandas the Magnanimous, wasn’t it?”

“Magnificent!” the wizard cried – and grunted unhappily when he saw the satisfied face of Cornell.

“My mistake,” the Cayaborean said, enjoying every word. “You’d never be generous, of course.”

Flink and Gabe climbed on board the wagon, found spaces for themselves between the loads of provisions, and the barbarian cast a sorry glance at the two men on the seat. “Must have missed something here,” he muttered, then he resigned to listening to Flink as the alreu began enthusiastically going through the provisions and listing heartily all the things he found.



“And stay out!”

Angrily Barandas slammed the door shut after pushing Flink out of the small room for the third time. For a moment, the alreu’s complaining voice could be heard through the wood of the door, then he seemed to fall silent. In all probability, Cornell thought, he had just turned to Gabe or the shield for some new line of thought.

“All right,” Cornell said and sighed heavily, “what are you after this time? Money or magic? I don’t suppose there is a maiden in the cave that needs rescuing by a heroic wizard?”

Barandas rolled his eyes. “I’m getting the feeling you’re not really happy to see me.”

“I’m ecstatic. Now spit it out.”

The wizard rolled his eyes again and sat down on a stool next to a workbench. They were in a tiny adjunct to a stable, the room containing no more than the stool, the workbench and a pile of horseshoes. A few minutes earlier Cornell had sold the mare he had bought from the sandmen in the Elfadil desert, for ninety-five silver *aryel*. Then he had asked the stable owner for a private room, and to his surprise the Tonomai had readily agreed. He seemed to be overly busy with moving the emaciated desert horse into his stable to care about the other wishes of his customer – a good sign, Cornell had hoped since he was planning to buy a good horse here. A real horse, fit for a Cayaborean warrior.

But first there was the business of Barandas to deal with.

“So, which is it? Magic or money?”

Barandas shrugged. “Magic. I got a map from a merchant that shows the way to the cave. Supposedly, a powerful wizard used to live there until he fell on hard times and left. Don’t ask me

what exactly happened, I don't know. But the merchant told me that the wizard had to leave some of his stuff behind. Might be something good."

Now it was Cornell's turn to roll his eyes. "Oh, great, another quest for a mysterious place. Just what I need now. What's the danger? Burrower dragonflies? A spell that incinerates all who enter? Or a holnesh? Believe me, I don't need another one."

"*Another* one?!" Barandas perked up at the mention, raised an eyebrow, obviously waiting for further explanation – but got none. Finally he shook his head, grunted something inaudible, then said, "All right, here's what I know. There are three lines of defense at the cave. The first is an illusion spell that hides the entrance to the cave. No problem there, I know how that works and can disable it. The secondary defense is a door with a spell on it that turns all who open it into stone."

"Who did you have in mind for the petrification? Me?"

Barandas shook his head vigorously. "Goodness gracious, don't you have any trust in me?! You're my *friend!*" Indignated he stared at Cornell, then he shrugged and said, "I've been thinking about the alreu."

Clearly the wizard was waiting for an angry explosion from the Cayaborean – but Cornell nodded solemnly. "Not a bad idea, that one."

"Don't go off like a –" Barandas started, caught himself after a moment and squinted at Cornell. "You're not serious, are you?"

The Cayaborean's grin sparkled evilly. For a moment one might have thought that he would have gladly cast the alreu into an abyss and followed up with a load of boiling oil, just to make sure. Then the evil look dissipated and was replaced by a gladsome questioning visage. "What have you got to undo the petrification?"

"Bloody Cayaborean –" Barandas stopped himself, pulled a small flask from a pocket of his robe and thrust it to his friend. "Pour it over the stone alreu right after the spell has taken effect. He'll barely know what happened to him. And, seriously, it had better be the alreu. The manlings are pretty good at opening locked doors. As for the third line, there are two statues in front of the entrance of the wizard's abode. A riddle activates them to move aside, so you can happily stride inside and pick up the goods."

"Sounds like you got everything covered," Cornell nodded, pondering the wizard's words carefully. "Why did you want to get Gabe to accompany you?"

"Oh, did I?" Barandas smiled.

Cornell was baffled, looking at the quiet contentment of the wizard – then the pieces started falling into place. "You *knew* that he's with me?"

"Tides of magic, Cornell, you're pretty slow," Barandas teased. "Remember the *magiscribe* message in Chazevo? Your barbarian friend's name was written clearly on it, so I only had to keep an ear out for him to find you. Now can we forget about the savage? Why don't you tell him to hunt a stag so we can feast after the cave?"

"I don't think Gabe wants to stay outside," Cornell commented with a grin.

Barandas grunted, "Dump him! We don't need the brute. The alreu's of use, so fine, he can stay."

“Really? And you’re going to tell him?” Cornell asked, thought for a moment, then said, “Gabe usually swings his axe from the right, to lop off the head. If you duck at the right moment, maybe you can run fast enough.”

“You seriously want to take the savage along?”

Cornell raised an eyebrow. “Nobody called you to join *our* party. I know it is hard for you to understand but the world doesn’t revolve around Barandas the Magnetic.”

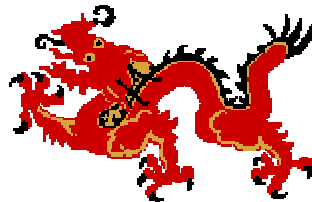
“Magnificent!” the wizard shot back automatically.

They stared at each other. Finally, Barandas snarled, “All right, if you want to, we’ll take your savage along. What about you, are *you* in, or aren’t you?”

Cornell rose, shrugged and headed for the door. “Gabe’s going to that cave whether I say yes or no. And since it’s liable to be dangerous for Flink and him, I’m coming, too.” He opened the door.

“And what about me?” Barandas. “It could get dangerous for me as well!”

The Cayaborean smiled brightly at the wizard, then he walked out.



Finally there was a good piece of horse flesh under him, Cornell rejoiced as they were riding towards the cave. Twenty-five *torkyn* the brown stallion had cost him, but it had been worth every gold coin. The horse was a powerhouse, rippling muscles, and its love for gallop had been obvious from the first moment the Cayaborean had laid eyes on it. Stormwind was the name he chose for the horse, and as soon as the party had left the city wall, the stallion had proved the name to be very apt. Cornell had been forced to use all his strength to keep Stormwind from bounding ahead, eating up the dirt road across the hilly, grassy land.

A few miles to the east the mighty Cheselain river flowed, supplying this part of the Tonomai land with plentiful water to support several farms – not to mention that there were bushes and trees growing everywhere. One couldn’t call this place lush, not when one was used to the rich nature of the milder climates. For Tonomat, it was a beautiful oasis.

“Any of you have an opinion on this?” Cornell asked the elfwood shield fastened to his saddle.

“We’re going to die,” the voice of the cowardly Nev answered. “The magical traps in that stinking cave are going to kill us.”

Phindar, former caravan head and priest of Decalleigh, muttered, “Well, all this reminds me of a trip my friends and I took some twenty years ago. Or, wait, wasn’t that twenty-five? Time passes so quickly...”

Calmly the only female voice from the shield interrupted Phindar, “So, shield bearer, is that what you expected?”

“Yes,” Cornell nodded with a tired grin, “everybody going through the same familiar motions.” He cast a glance over his shoulder to Barandas driving the wagon. The wizard’s eyes were glued to the shield rather than the road, greed glistening. “No way,” Cornell told him. “I’m not going to give you the chance to inspect this magical item. While we’re on that topic, what happened to that magical ring I gave you half a year ago? You just wanted to take a brief look at it, then return it, right?”

“Uhhh...” Barandas quickly dug in his robe, produced a map sketched on papyrus and waved it, saying, “Just a mile or two left, at best! We’ll have to turn at the next crossing.”

The Cayaborean grinned self-satisfied and returned his gaze forward. At least half an hour would pass before Barandas would start eyeing the shield again, maybe a few moments more. And perhaps the buckler might stay quiet as well.

He wasn’t *that* lucky, Cornell soon discovered, for Phindar breathed deeply and then started to recount the story he had scarcely begun a little earlier. And the Cayaborean’s head slumped forward, resigned to another long, *long* hour. Maybe, he thought after a moment, it wouldn’t be that bad for Barandas to take that close look at the shield he so desired. After all, then Cornell wouldn’t see the buckler again for a few years at least...

“... took out three of ‘em clawvoles back then,” Phindar was saying. “Well, I was a tad younger of course. Had a lot more muscles to my frame, bit like Gabe, y’know? Hah, women were flocking after me like moths with a candle about! The temple elders kept getting their robes in a knot, seeing what I was doing! But back to the story, and to that lair we’d found...”

No, Cornell thought resignedly, I couldn’t hand these poor souls over to Barandas. Who knows what the idiot might do to them?

After an hour of uneventful riding – and one detour when they found their path blocked by a lake that clearly hadn’t been on the wizard’s map –, Barandas announced, “This is it, we’re here.”

“Thank the gods!” Flink exclaimed, slipped from his pony and rushed behind some shrubbery to take care of highly personal business.

“You should have thought of that earlier!” Gabe chuckled.

The party dismounted and started to look around. The rockface ahead of them was impressive. It seemed a strange sight, to see something close to a mountain rise from a hilly landscape, none of the mounds of earth higher than some eighty feet. What was ahead of them towered at least five hundred feet over them, growing like a spike into the air – like a giant’s tooth, thrown loose in a battle and embedded in the earth. Alder and cedar trees were plentiful enough to form a semblance of a forest, receding from the increasingly rocky ground at the foot of the mountain where bushes grew.

Except for one clearing where the earth had obviously been burned by a fire not too long ago. Chipped, white pieces lay scattered on the ground, half buried by wind, rain and mud. More identifiable pieces were under the shrubbery, the bones of pigs, cattle and sheep.

Gabe picked up one of the bones and frowned. “Toothmarks,” he said. “What kind of a party was this? Don’t these Tonomai know how to contain their cooking fires?”

“Perhaps the feast before the summer solstice,” Phindar pondered from the buckler. “In the Tonomai belief, their One God came to Gushémal a month before the solstice and spent four weeks spreading his belief. I keep forgetting the name of that feast, but the Tonomai faithful celebrate the coming of the One God, and on solstice day, they celebrate his departure, having left his word behind.”

While the others were discussing Tonomai religion – and Flink emerged from the bushes with a relieved look on his face –, Barandas slowly wandered along the foot of the mountain, one hand stuck in a pocket of his robe. There was no unusual feature in the rock, just plain gray stone, some of which covered by moss, a few niches filled with earth that sustained grass and shrubbery.

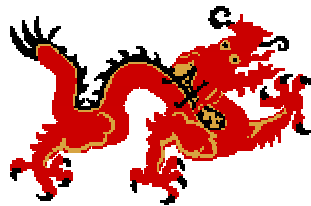
Then Barandas’ face lit up and he pointed with his free hand toward a spot on the mountain. “I’ve found the cave!”

“Really?” Gabe wondered and shook his head. “There’s only rock.”

“It’s an illusion, stupid!” the wizard exclaimed and walked straight into the mountain. And disappeared in what seemed an ordinary boulder.

Cornell drew a face. “That about settles it, I guess.” He checked the hold of the buckler on his left arm, hefted his sword in his right hand and followed Barandas into the mountain.

Flink hurried after him, afraid he’d miss out on any of the fun, while Gabe removed his axe from his back and glanced at the metal blade. “Well, *bruyell*, time for a little more honor and glory, isn’t it?”



“I can’t see anything!” Flink complained.

Utter darkness surrounded the party. Not the tiniest beam of light pierced the large pretend-boulder before the mouth of the cave. Sounds issued from far away, along what might be a maze of tunnels – small sounds, like rats scurrying around.

Barandas chuckled while making some noise of his own, rummaging in the many pockets of his robe.

“Get to it,” Cornell muttered.

“Get to what?” Gabe asked, doing some rummaging of his own. “I have a firelighter here somewhere... Keshmire, I should have thought of it earlier...”

The wizard let go a cheer for himself – then a ray of light cut through the darkness, emanating from a slim, exquisite bracer on Barandas’ left hand. “Forget about your firelighter, barbarian,” he scoffed. “This is better. Cornell, I have one for you, as well.” With a triumphant gesture he threw an identical bracer to the Cayaborean. Deftly, Cornell caught it and slipped it onto his hand.

Instantaneously another beam lit at the top of the bracer, shaped like a fountain well. “Barandas the Magnificent delivers once again.”

“That’s beautiful!” the alreu exclaimed, dancing around Cornell’s hand to get the best of views of the bracer. “Can I have one like that, can I?”

Barandas snarled, “No!”

“This is enough, I’d say,” Cornell nodded heavily and slowly waved the bracer’s light about to see where they were.

What his and Barandas’ light revealed was a simple cave, devoid of any moss or lichen that one commonly might expect – after all, no sunlight ever reached this place –, crassly cut walls that gave way to three dark openings in the back of the cave.

Flink scampered around as far as the light reached, quickly took in all he could see, then he sighed and folded his arms before his chest. “Well, it’s still boring! Weren’t there supposed to be some monsters?”

“Or a magically protected door?” Cornell asked, raising an eyebrow at Barandas.

The wizard was unfazed. He stuck one hand into his pocket again, turned a bit to the left, then the right, and finally he pointed towards one of the openings, small and ragged-edged. “That one ought to get us to the door.”

“Then let’s get going!” Gabe exclaimed, bowed slightly forward to avoid smashing his head into the low ceiling and started for the tunnel.

The bracers revealed a sharply twisting corridor, the walls dark with deposits of coal. A sharp smell of mould wafting through it. Things had rotted in here. Maybe hapless tomb raiders who weren’t able to penetrate the second line of defense, the door with the petrification spell on it, and then hadn’t found their way out.

A rather unpleasant thought which Cornell quickly banished to the furthest edges of his mind.

Then their light lost itself in a giant opening in the left side of the corridor, shining into a wide tunnel gaping into the corridor they were traveling in. Its walls looked very smooth, glittering faintly in the bracers’ illumination.

“Wow, that looks like diamonds!” Flink exclaimed, rushing forward to examine the walls closely.

Gabe’s eyes widened. “Diamonds?” Only one step behind the alreu, the barbarian took his own turn of inspection – and sighed after a moment. “The entire wall is made of diamond! Or something like it, anyway,” he shouted exasperatedly. “How am I supposed to get it loose?!”

“Oh, Gabe, this is beautiful,” Flink said, running his hand along the smooth wall. Some grooves were torn into the surface, deep and sharp – sharp enough for the alreu to suddenly yelp and retract his bloodied hand. He sucked on the wound, then forgot about the pain to look at the grooves more intently. Helpfully Cornell shined his bracer in the alreu’s direction. “Oh, sirs, this is intriguing! This looks like talon marks! There might be monsters here after all! Wonderful!”

“Wonderful,” Cornell echoed with his lips tightening. “Barandas?”

The wizard shrugged, a frown implanted on his forehead. “I haven’t heard about any creatures down here. The innkeeper only mentioned the wizard’s traps.”

“Innkeeper?” the Cayaborean asked with sudden interest. “Hadn’t you bought the map from a merchant?”

“Which –“

At that point Flink had suddenly lost interest in the apparent diamond walls and ran down their own tunnel – which widened quite a bit from this point onward –, vanishing from the sharp beam of the bracers. Cornell cursed, swung his arm around and followed the alreu. A minute later he had caught up with the fast little creature, the bracer illuminating a pile of broken, strangely gray wood that Flink was kneeling over, cautiously touching pieces of it.

“You know,” he commented, not at all noticing Cornell’s run after him, “this is stone. I would have said it’s wood, and it looks like there’s once been a door here, but it really is rock. Wow, sir, do you suppose someone took the time to carve stone to look like a wooden door? Goodness, that’s terrific!”

A shiver ran down the Cayaborean’s spine. This had been the second line of defense Barandas had mentioned. And now it was broken apart, smashed, and the petrification spell had turned the remains of the door into stone. Something powerful must have blasted the door, powerful enough to withstand any of the magical protection.

Whatever it was, it might still be down here.

For a tiny moment Cornell wished that the dragon rod in his saddlebag was still working. With the lightning-spewing weapon on his arm, he would have felt a little safer.

On the other hand, he fought to reassure himself, he had a magical sword and shield. With the powers inherent in the buckler, created by the three souls encased in the elfwood, he shouldn’t have to worry.

He still did.

“Gold?!” the barbarian’s voice shattered his line of thoughts as Gabe stomped down the corridor and pounced on a small heap of glittering metal. Quickly he wiped off dust, then Gabe’s hands closed around a few baubles, two figurines and a necklace.

In equal excitement Flink cried joyously, rushed to the barbarian’s side to inspect the baubles as well – though his eagerness had more to do with sheer joy at seeing something new than Gabe’s internal counting of money.

“Stop it!” Cornell shouted. “There’s still something dangerous down here!”

From the shield Phindar commented interestedly, “That looks like figurines of a Tonomai saint, y’know? The maiden that accompanied the One God during his journey on the world; if it’s the work of a master, it could fetch a nice sum of gold *torkyn* on the market.”

“Can you tell what it’s worth?” Gabe asked, holding one of the figurines toward the shield.

Cornell tore the buckler away from the figurine, cried, “Will you *finally* stop this? *All* of you?!”

While the Cayaborean found himself exposed to several sets of disappointed glances (at least one – Phindar’s – imagined), Barandas had continued to explore the tunnel beyond the broken door. The rocky corridor took a slight turn, drifting a bit downward and to the right. The wizard followed it carefully, shining his bracer’s light over every crevice, just in case he missed something important

(valuable or dangerous, both were of equal interest). Then he paused for a moment as the tunnel took a sharp turn to the left, opening into a considerably larger cavern.

Barandas frowned, leaned against the wall and peered carefully around the edge.

It was by this time that Cornell had managed to dissuade his comrades from searching every part of the corridor for more valuables and focused his light down the corridor. Just in time, as it turned out, to see Barandas duck quickly back from the opening, slam his back against the tunnel's wall and stare pale-faced back at the party.

"Bloody tides of magic," he whispered, continuing slowly and urgently, "Folks, I think I know what destroyed the door. Just be *quiet!*"

Cornell walked up to the wizard, leaned into the opening – ignoring Barandas' warning gestures – , and saw that the wizard had a point.

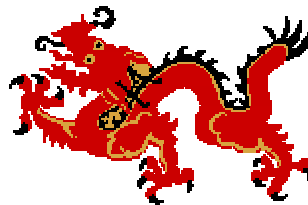
The cavern beyond was indeed very large. It had to be, considering the tons of green-scaled flesh that were rolled up in its center, a majestic and frightening head resting fast asleep on top of the coils, hot, damp air breathing out the nose slits on top of a very, *very* large maw with three-foot-long incisors raking over the lips.

An emperor dragon.

An old one, to boot.

"We're cooked!" cowardly Nev muttered in the buckler.

For once Cornell couldn't disagree with him.



"Let's get out of here," Cornell whispered to his friends, grasping Flink by the shoulders. The alreu had just been about to scamper through the Cayaborean's legs to rush into the cavern; now he had to make do with staring open-jawed at the giant dragon, mewling, "Oooooooooohhhhhh..."

Gabe shook his head, unhappily weighing *breyell* in one hand, one of the gold figurines in the other. "Emperor dragons have hoards, don't they?"

"They aren't much good," Halla Valfrey said softly from the buckler on Cornell's arm, "if you have been fried and eaten."

"Point taken," the barbarian assented and growled deep in his throat. "So much for your treasure, wizard."

Barandas had recovered enough from his shock to peer around the edge of the tunnel again, one hand in his pocket. "It's still there, just where it's supposed to be. I can sense it."

"Can you?" Cornell wondered, eyebrow raised – then in lightning motion his hand raced out to snatch the wizard's fingers from his pocket. Along with the fingers, a gleaming, glittering object

appeared that looked like the base of a pyramid, the top piece missing. “Well?” Cornell asked, clenching down on the wizard’s wrist. “You knew exactly what you were after, didn’t you? Not just some generic treasure, right?”

“And what if that were true?”

The question caught Cornell by surprise. Actually, it didn’t seem to change the situation much, now did it? After all, Barandas surely hadn’t known about the emperor dragon. The wizard was many things – a thief, a lecher, a pain in the neck –, but he always looked out for his own safety. Which was seriously compromised by the presence of said dragon.

Why then the charade? Why not say it straight?

“It’s evil, is that it?” The question was a shot in the dark, hoping to shake Barandas into a credible answer.

An answer he got. Sort of. “That is debatable,” Barandas shrugged. “Just because the Appliance of Beastly Control was created by Krysto Pharlee before he became a brastok doesn’t mean it *has* to be evil.”

“Pharlee?!” Cornell repeated, working hard to keep his voice low. “The necromancer king of Rek’atrednu? Are you out of your mind? Everything the undead creature touches becomes evil – he murdered thousands of Cayaboreans personally!”

“See?” Barandas sighed. “That’s why I didn’t tell you. You’re always so unreasonable.”

A cough issued from the shield, followed by Halla’s quizzical voice, “Forgive me for asking, but in my day there was a Krysto Pharlee at the court of my homeland, Keroull. He was the king’s head wizard, my – a well-respected man.” For the first time that Cornell had carried the shield, Halla’s voice was shaking, well suppressed but still discernible. “It couldn’t possibly be the same man, of course?”

“Keroull...” Cornell whispered. “The land that was taken over by the undead seventy years ago.”

Phindar said, “Led by that Pharlee wizard, as I recall from my studies at the temple. And he used to be the head wizard, for a couple of decades before he made himself king. Halla, I’m afraid that the person you knew is now sitting on the throne of what was your homeland, ruling over all kinds of evil.”

“I understand,” Halla said, her words underlaced with pain.

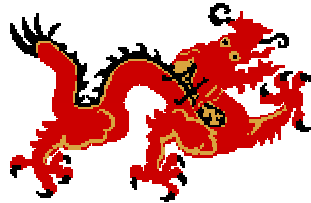
A growling yawn interrupted them, the temperature in the tunnel shooting up a few degrees. Every head swiveled around, except for Flink’s who was still watching the dragon. “Goodness gracious, sirs, look at those teeth! They are even bigger than the holnesh’s! Why, Gabe, they are taller than you are!”

The mighty head of the dragon slowly raised from the coils of its tail. Taloned forefeet slowly rose to its eyes, rubbed them much like a human would after waking up. The creature yawned again, hot air escaping from its gaping maw, then it blinked, the head swiveling towards the entrance of the cavern. “Breakfast time!” the dragon announced gladly, its words uncomfortably easy to understand, considering the strange maw. “I so *love* good food. Mmmh, humans are tasty...”

“I’m an *alreu!*” Flink yelled indignantly.

His cry broke the stunned silence of the party. Both Cornell and Gabe instantaneously reached out for Flink, grabbed his tiny body, then they ran with fast steps back up the tunnel – several steps behind Barandas.

The dragon yawned once more, stretched its mighty body. The coils of its long tail unfurled, its end slapping several times against the walls of the cavern with enough force to shake debris loose from the ceiling. “Not again!” it complained peevishly, “I don’t *like* running. You will *so* pay for this!”



The fireblast shot through the tunnel with a sickening sound. Darkness was burned out by flames that rushed into every crevice, lighting the coal in the walls with incredible heat, cracking it. For an entire minute, flames ruled the tunnel, before they finally sputtered out. The walls gleamed in the afterglow, their rough, dark surface turned to a much harder substance. If polished it would sparkle like diamond.

“Oh, *hu*-mans!” the dragon’s voice echoed merrily. “Are you still alive?”

“*Don’t answer!*” Gabe and Cornell simultaneously advised the alreu who had just opened his mouth.

They had barely made it to the opening of the second tunnel, clambered inside the diamond walls and hung on for dear life to the grooves in the walls. Grooves that had been cut by the dragon’s claws, so sharp they could pierce diamond. None dared wonder what those talons could do to human flesh. Or alreu flesh, for that matter.

Stomping sounds came from further down the corridor. The dragon was coming.

Cornell craned his head to stare up the second tunnel, carefully angling his bracer to illuminate it. The shaft went up at a sixty degree angle, its walls as clear diamond as they were at the mouth. There were more grooves along the way, sharp-edged. (Which brought Cornell to remember the pain in his fingers that were clamped around two of those edges. If the claws of the dragon hadn’t roughed up the edges, they would have simply cut through the Cayaborean’s fingers.) “We might get up through here.”

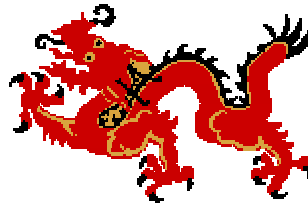
“Are you mad?” Barandas cried back, hanging four feet above Cornell’s head. “That climb’ll slice us into pieces! Besides, the dragon’s gonna blast us in here like moths!”

The wizard was right. It would take too long to clamber up the shaft, giving the emperor dragon more than enough time to stomp to the second tunnel’s mouth and breathe his blast inside.

Unless someone gave the dragon something to play with.

“Tear off strips of your clothes and wrap them around your hands, then climb out of here,” Cornell calmly told his friends.

Gabe, right beside Cornell, growled, “What about the dragon?”
“I’ll keep him busy,” the Cayaborean said and let go of the grooves.



The ground burned under his feet as Cornell landed in the lower tunnel. Hot air assailed his lungs, flamed into them. He steadied himself with the shield, pushing against the wall. The souls in the elfwood screamed in pain, but down the tunnel...

“My breakfast!” the dragon shouted, pushing its wide body torturously through the passage. Rock flaked off the ceiling, sprayed over its thick, green hide, painting it a dusty gray. “I thought... you... were burned...” it yelled, laboring over every word.

Make that a very old dragon, Cornell re-adjusted his appraisal of the creature. “And would you have anything to eat then?” he hollered back.

The dragon stopped, huffed a squirt of fire that blew more arid air at Cornell. “Never... thought... about that...”

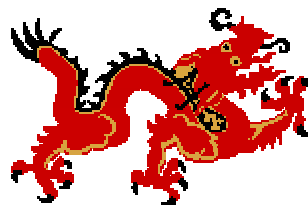
“Flame me, and you’ll go hungry again!”

The dragon blinked. “I need food!”

“Then try to catch me!”

Cornell turned and ran along the tunnel, into the smaller shaft. In his mind he already felt the quick, murderous blast of fire washing over him, turning him into a crisp.

The dragon didn’t move for a moment. It raised one paw to scratch its chin, then shook its head furiously. “I’m hungry,” it decided and started stomping again. The small passage ahead was too narrow for its girth – but when the dragon barrelled into the rock, the stone gave and burst apart under the assault.



“Are they going to die?” Flink asked, clambering from one groove to the next easily. “Cornell, Halla, Phindar, Nev, Ana?”

Above Barandas snorted, fully concentrated on reaching the next fissure.

Below the alreu, laboring the hardest, was the large barbarian, his face red from the effort. “Cornell’s giving... his life for us!” he squeezed between clenched teeth.

“It wasn’t much of a life anyway,” Barandas muttered angrily.

Gabe stopped in his climb, breathed deeply and looked up the slope towards the light emanating from the wizard’s bracer. His face was as hard as the diamond around them as he said, “For those words you will die, wizard.”

“Why, I didn’t know you cared,” Barandas shot back. “Cornell’s been my friend for a good while longer than he’s known you, savage! He’s *happy* dying for us, believe me!”

“I will cut off your limbs one at a time,” Gabe promised.

“Bloody savage!”

“You brought us here!”

“So what?!”

All had stopped their climb by now, the two humans shouting at each other while Flink craned his head first downward, then upward to watch both of them, while tears were welling up in his eyes. “*Sirs!*” he cried desperately. “Master wizard, please, can’t you help my friends, please? You’re magnificent, so please, use your magical powers!”

Gabe added dangerously, “Yes, wizard, do that!”

“Against an emperor dragon?!” Barandas snarled and suddenly he was scampering up the wall at renewed speed. His mind was empty, pain hollowing it into a giant cave. Despite his words, he wished there was some way he could help Cornell. The Cayaborean *was* his friend, and if it had made any sense, Barandas might give his life to save Cornell’s. He’d proven that in Chazevo, hadn’t he? But against an emperor dragon? With the miserable reservoir of spells he had? Ludicrous!

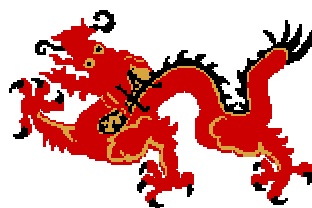
He didn’t even have any appliances left in his pockets that might help. Four of the pieces he’d taken from Tangrain’s mansion in Chazevo had turned out utterly useless, at least as far as he’d found out; only the Keroullian item made sense. And the gauntlet of resurrection? Not that it would have helped much against the dragon, but he didn’t even have that one left. He had resolved to wear it constantly, thinking that this would put everyone else in awe of his wizardly power – not to mention that it couldn’t be stolen from him. Well, he’d forgotten the need to sleep.

So all he had were the Keroullian appliances – which didn’t work without the third piece that was in the chamber behind the dragon’s sleeping cavern.

A cavern that was now empty.

The combined appliances that gave control over beasts to the wizard wielding it.

“I hate you, Cornell!” Barandas yelled – then started climbing down, crying furiously, “Don’t kill me, savage, let the bloody dragon take care of that!”



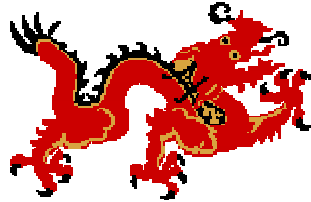
Flink scrambled out of the wizard's way at the very last moment, staring baffled after him. "Does that mean Barandas is giving his life for us as well?"

"I'll be damned if I let myself be upstaged by a wizard," Gabe muttered, staring down the gaping hole below where the single dart of light was dancing through the darkness. "Flink, get out of here!" The barbarian tried to recall how straight the shaft was, could he run down? Without the light there was little chance of finding the right crevices quickly enough.

"Whatever," he decided, let go of the grooves and started running/falling down. "For honor and gloryyyyyyyyy!"

The alreu hung onto the wall, sulking. "Yes, right, Gabe, have all the fun yourself." Actually Flink was rather good at sulking – but there was a *dragon* down there!

An instant later he was on his way to join his friends.



"Where *are* you, human?!" the dragon yelled furiously, drawing in breath to fire a blast through the tunnel.

Cornell cursed at the shield, "Turn me visible again, Nev! Now!"

"Did you see what those talons do to the rock?!" the coward cried. "They'll splinter the shield – and me!"

"You'll be burned in a second if you don't make us visible!" Cornell shouted, seconded quickly by Halla and Phindar in the shield.

The Cayaborean ran further up the slope of the narrower shaft, knowing fully well that he could not hope to escape the emperor dragon's blast. His bracer's light revealed far too many signs of diamond in the wall that hadn't been there on the party's trek down – the remains of the dragon's first firebreath.

"Ahhh, *there* you are," the dragon huffed, clearly relieved when it finally caught sight of the Cayaborean again – relief that turned to distrustful anger as he realized that Cornell was far away. "Cheater! Not *running* again!"

Cornell stopped, breathed deeply, rested his wrists for a moment on his knees and looked back down the tunnel. The emperor had broken open fifty or sixty yards worth of narrow shaft into a wide passage, and the rest seemed to be little trouble.

Although, Cornell wondered, the entire shaft seemed to be vibrating a good deal more than before. The rock wasn't only flaking off right around the dragon but also further along the corridor, even as far away as the Cayaborean was standing. And with every move the emperor made, it got worse.

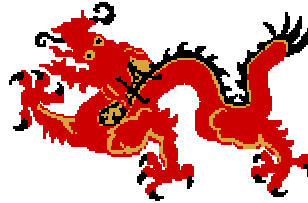
“I think,” Phindar said intrigued, “that this tunnel may be collapsing.”

He was proven right when the dragon’s stomping feet tore a gap into the floor beneath them. The emperor didn’t notice, continued barrelling up the shaft, cursing the swindler of a human who made it run like a young pup.

Cornell crouched down, rolling himself into a ball, with the buckler on top.

“Hey, the ceiling will fall on *me!*” Nev cried.

A second later it did.



The rumble of rocks, screams, wrathful bellows and a barbarian’s wacry shuddered through the wide passage leading to the dragon’s sleeping cavern. Barandas ignored them as he thundered across the rubble, partially turned to diamond – that would be very easy to pick up if one had the time –, into the cavern.

It was large, larger than it had seemed with the sleeping emperor inside. Part of the cavern looked constructed, tall-tale caidwarven pillars carved from rock in the sides, some beams still intact on the ceiling. Many more pillars and beams had been inside here once, which were then smashed by the dragon who wanted a clear place to lay down in. What would have far more fascinated the wizard at any other time was the pile of gold, platinum, silver, gemstones that the dragon had been sleeping on. The fables about an emperor’s hoard were true, after all.

“Damn you, Cornell!” Barandas shouted as he smashed his way through the pile, sent all those precious items flying, as he made his way to the other side of the cavern.

There he stopped, staring in amazed relief at the two giant stone statues that seemed to be placed there for no reason at all. If one didn’t know that they hid a door, a careless adventurer might have just ignored them.

Eight feet tall each of the statues was, faintly humanoid, but with long talons on each of its long, barrel-thick arms. The heads were thick and heavy, with prolonged snouts that had giant, sharp fangs hanging out from them. Barandas had no idea whether they were fashioned after any real creatures, and honestly he didn’t care. He knew there had to be a riddle that would open the device, make the warriors step aside and allow entrance into the room beyond. Where was it?

He stepped up to the statues, cautiously watching both for any sign of life leaping into them – and telling them to destroy the lowly wizard in front of them.

None occurred. Unfortunately, neither did any voice from beyond recount the riddle, as Barandas had hoped.

“Wow, they look a bit like Thennisgar, you know?” a tiny voice piped behind him.

Barandas whirled about, his eyes widening as he saw the alreu standing on top of a pile of gold coins. Flink's large blue eyes took in the surrounding with complete awe, but they focused on the two statues with a bit of recognition.

"Thennisgar? Who's that?" Barandas asked testily.

The alreu shrugged. "Oh, just a demon I met a few weeks ago." His face lit up. "And *I* killed him! Really, it's a great story, and my friends in the shield were –" Flink stared contritely the other way out of the cavern from where more noise of destruction and mayhem was heard. "Shouldn't I go help them?" he asked timidly.

"Whatever," Barandas answered, turned back to the statues. "There's got to be a bloody riddle here someplace!"

"You mean like the writing over the statues?" Flink asked innocently.

The wizard coughed, turned his gaze up – and cursed when he saw that the blasted little creature was right. Keroullian letters were carved into the stone, smoothed out by time (and probably the dragon's wear and tear) so they were barely recognizable.

Barely, but Barandas still could make them out. "*Twisted and turned am I,*" he read, "*as my alternate eye spies so much, like the krill that – pardon my dearth of letters – has no arse. Say my name, and the path shall be opened.*"

"What's a krill?" Flink asked, scratching his shock of red hair.

Barandas frowned. "It's a kind of fish in the southern seas, at least by what I've heard."

"Fish don't have real behinds, do they?"

"*Twisted and turned am I,*" Barandas repeated, ignoring the pesky alreu. "That means it's a play on words... A play on words is *following*. The alternate eye... Hah, that means 'me'! The alternate form of the word 'I'!"

Flink tried to twist his head around to look at his own behind, failing miserably – and feeling miserable for failing. "If fish have no arse, then what's the point of the riddle? That stupid writer of the riddle needn't have worried that he doesn't know enough letters..."

"No," Barandas screamed, happiness suffusing his face. "That's another pun! It means that a letter of the *word* 'krill' is wrong! The true word has no r's! That means the answer is..." His face fell as he put the two words together. Once more his eyes took in the giant stone statues and their uncomfortably lethal appearance. "Uh, Flink, you wouldn't happen to know any ventriloquism?"

"Vetri- what?"

Barandas sighed unhappily, seeing all the hope of reaching the vaunted magical item (and rescuing Cornell) evaporate. "It means casting your voice so it seems someone else is speaking," he grumbled.

One of the statues responded in the alreu's voice, "You mean like this?"

The wizard nearly doubled over, stared at first the statue then the diminutive creature on the pile of rocks. Before Flink could comment on the strange look on Barandas' face, the wizard tore out a piece of paper, scribbled on it with a pencil and thrust it towards the alreu. "Make one of the statues say *this!* And don't you say it yourself, under *any* circumstances!"

Flink shrugged, took the shred of paper and tried to decipher the hasty words. Then he snorted, “Well, it doesn’t sound like fun if *I* say it, you know?”

Exasperatedly Barandas hollered, “Make one of the *statues* say it!” And as a second thought, “*That* will be fun!”

The alreu’s eyes glazed over with the prospect of joy ahead, he took a deep breath, then the left statue audibly said – in a surprisingly deep voice – the answer of the riddle.

“Kill. Me.”

A shiver ran through both the statues, dust spraying off their rocky hides. A glow awoke in their eyes, green and deadly. Waves seemed to run through the stone, rippling and leaving live flesh in their wake.

Flink observed with growing excitement. “Now they *really* look like Thennisgar! Only smaller and with just two arms!” he exclaimed.

The left statue glowered at Barandas menacingly, took a step forward. Its talons rose, just enough to claw into the wizard – and then the right statue’s arms slashed out to tear a deep gap into the left one’s side. The latter turned in bafflement, still stunned when the right one slashed off an arm at the elbow.

Bafflement turned to anger, and an instant later both statues tore into one another with talons and fangs, slicing each other to pieces.

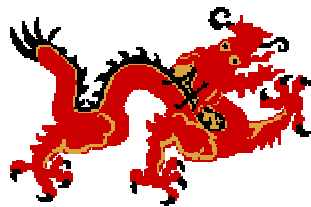
And turned back to stone as the life vanished from both sets of glowing eyes. Rubble fell to the floor, barely identifiable as the statues that had been before.

Behind them, the opening to the other room was easily seen. Illumination sprang up from inside, lighting a rectangular space that looked clearly of dwarven make, including a pedestal with caidwarven runes hammered into its sides.

On the pedestal, on a black silk cushion, a small triangular item gleamed in golden sheen.

“Hah!” Barandas grinned. He ran inside, snatched the item from the pedestal, fetched the other two pieces from his robe – and they too snapped together easily, magically attracted.

Kristo Pharlee’s Appliance of Beastly Control was together once more.



Cornell shook dust and rubble from himself, feeling aches pound in every inch of his body. From the shield, still strapped to his left arm, he heard Phindar curse as the Decalleigh priest’s magical powers were working overtime to close all the wounds in the Cayaborean, reviving him back to fighting strength.

He rose, irately shaking off the last of the debris, and looked about. The tunnel hadn't so much collapsed as it had given way to another cavern below, one that was big enough to comfortably house both Cornell – and the emperor dragon, ten yards away from him, fighting madly to get rid of the rubble that had landed on its scaly hide.

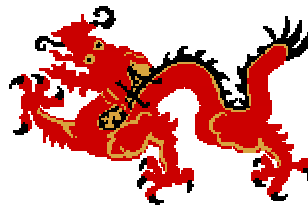
Flinging a ton of rock aside with its head, the emperor reared up, yelling in rage, *“You’re destroying my home, human!”*

“Pretty tough breakfast, isn't it?” Cornell huffed, picking his sword from the rubble and rushing towards the dragon's legs. The creature still hadn't fully recovered from the shock, so he had a clear option to slice at the forefoot – and Cornell never ignored any option.

The dragon screamed as the magical sword laced through its foot, cleaving open the skin and spraying a torrent of green goo over the Cayaborean.

Cornell leaped over the talons, alongside the dragon's large body, holding out his shield so the elfwood's razor-sharp edge could cut into more of the body.

“We're still cooked,” Nev commented fatalistically, when Cornell neatly rolled off the debris-laden ground, came to another stand – and faced the head of the maddened emperor dragon, very much including the horrid open maw and its steam of hot, nearly flaming air.

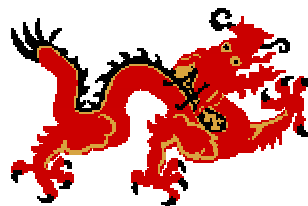


“Stop the fight, dragon!” Barandas screamed, holding the magical appliance tightly in his hands as he ran through the tunnel. There was still furious noise ahead, still a battle going on.

But he had Pharlee's item! It gave its wielder full control over any beast in the area, just one – but, by the Tides of Magic, the dragon was pretty darn big, so there shouldn't be any choice, right?!

“Bloody dragon!” He channeled all his magical energy into the item, trying to fire it up to working speed. Maybe that was all it needed, maybe it needed a little more power, after decades or centuries of disuse...

“Stop the fight!”



Bwyell off his back, firmly held in both the barbarian's hands, Gabe barrelled down the corridor. The noise and dust ahead clouded all his senses, but he knew that Cornell and the dragon were up

front. Finally, *bwyell* would eat some dragon flesh, and there would be more honor and glory to Gabe's name!

Honestly, those thoughts weren't quite at the forefront of the barbarian's mind. It wasn't even his friend at peril that concerned him most. All that Gabe's mind conjured up were visions of his elven wife Caeryl, back home in Robhovard, surrounded by the tribes of the savages – Ryelneyd, Araysal, Weyshick, Mantrac, Ymarg -, her petite face distorted in fear, her father Toriel and brother Le'hare with their bows strung tight, arrows notched. And Gabe appearing out of nowhere, accompanied by an army that would waste the tribes, free his wife and family, free them to live in peace. He saw images of himself, back as a simple farmer, plowing his land, and teaching his children – his *children* – how to live properly, and tell tales of his exploits in the world.

But first, there was the dragon to contend with.

Its thrashing had carved a new cavern out of the rock. He stopped for a brief moment at the lip of the fresh abyss, staring down, fighting to get an overview. On the far side he saw Cornell, attacking and slashing. On the near side, all he saw was a mass of dragon, the coils of its tail winding and unwinding constantly in pure rage, shaking free new debris from the freshly formed walls.

A smile covered Gabe's bearded chin.

Bwyell held in both arms, leading the plunge, he jumped onto the coils, smashed the axe into the scaled hide, and took pleasure in the scream issuing up front.

He had no footing, could only hope to keep moving to stay on the dragon, but instinct took over and balanced Gabe just enough to keep running along the widening tail, *bwyell* flung left and right, chipping off pieces of dragon scale to fly into the dusty air.

More screams came from the head of the dragon. Gabe barely noticed the fanged jaws raising into the air, turning, come screaming towards him. He flung himself against the body of the dragon, sharp scales biting through the furs he wore – the head in vain shooting past him. But *bwyell* twisted in his hands, almost as if a creature in its own right, slamming its sharp blade deep into the throat of the emperor dragon.

Green blood spewed, covered Gabe's eyes.

A barbarian needed no eyes, a tiny part of his mind decided, and pushed *bwyell* deeper into the gap the axe had opened. The head still had impetus, flew past – and carried the barbarian with it. More blood fell, the dragon shook its head in agony, trying to shake off the tiny speck of a human clinging to it.

Not a chance, Gabe's instincts screamed. Perhaps his voice did so as well, the barbarian had no way of knowing. All he knew was that he had to hold tight, that *bwyell* needed to go deeper in. Somehow he found new footing – perhaps on the walls of the cave -, enough to give him a push to dive into the dragon's throat, *bwyell's* sharp edge cutting tendons, blood vessels, and spine.

The emperor thrashed.

Gabe felt little of it, by now completely ensconced in the dragon's own flesh. All he thought of was pushing *bwyell* deeper in, deeper in, *deeper!*

After an eternity he slowly came to realize that the thrashing had ended.

And that his mouth was filling with dragon blood.

Finally terror grasped him, and with renewed fury he hewed his axe about him, making *breyell* carve a way out of the dragon meat. It seemed to take at least as long as his initial fight had, but finally – by Keshmire! – his head broke free and breathed air, clean, fresh air that invigorated him.

The barbarian fought a little more, tore his body free of the emperor dragon's throat – and only now he truly realized that the beast was dead. No movement in the majestic body, none in the head, none *anywhere!*

Gabe raised a warcry in triumph, planting his foot across the slaughtered dragon's hide. "Honor and glory!" he yelled. "They are mine!"

A sad and wasted voice answered from the lip of the cavern, "But not Cornell's."

Gabe looked up, saw Barandas the wizard sitting on the edge, his legs dangling over, a gleaming golden object in his hand – and tears in his eyes.

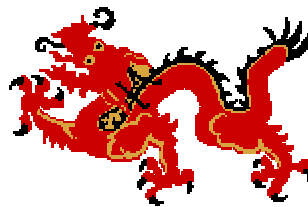
Instinct told him to look the other way, towards where he had last seen Cornell.

And what Gabe saw was a body sprawled across the rock, the chest ripped apart by a dragon's claw. Blood had already stopped to flow, drenched as it had the corpse, its clothes and the stony ground around.

The elfwood shield was still strapped to the dead man's arm, and if one strained one's ears, one could hear sobbing issuing from it.

Breyell fell from Gabe's hands. The barbarian felt tears of his own well up in his eyes, as he slowly sank to his knees, staring at the body in the cave.

"My friend," he whispered, then threw back his head and cried, "*Cooooor-nellllll!*"



"Bloody Cayaborean," Barandas muttered under tears. "Why do I keep doing this to you? You bloody, despicably honest idiot, you're the only friend I have, and this is the blasted second time you died – because of me!"

A corner of his mind became aware of a diminutive figure standing next to him, and anger washed over him. "Get out of my way, Flink," he muttered.

From across the cave, standing next to the dragon's carcass, Flink raised his eyebrows and waved merrily. "I'm over here, master wizard! I'm not in your way, surely I'm not!"

The words barely breached Barandas' grief – just enough to tell him that the diminutive figure couldn't possibly be the alreu. And that left nobody in their party, which –

Barandas shot from his dangling seat, pulled a dagger from his robe and faced... a female songdwarf, clad in the finest of silk that moved with every breath the venerable woman took. She bore no weapons, only a harp slung over her back.

“My name is A’alsys,” she said softly. “You have summoned me.”

“I didn’t,” Barandas disagreed, clutching Pharlee’s appliance in his left hand.

The amhran acharadh smiled, her face so beautiful it touched even the wizard’s soul. “Yes, you did. When you forced your magic into the appliance. It wasn’t made by this Pharlee you are thinking of, it is even more ancient than that evil brastok. He only carved his runes into the sides, believing he might twist its force to his liking.” She shook her head. “How foolish you simple mortals are, to be swayed by short-sighted greed.”

“So the appliance is worthless,” Barandas snarled. He glanced at the golden item in his hand, cursed, and cast it down the cavern. A small cloud of dust was raised, settled on the pyramid, covered it so perfectly that no casual glance would ever reveal it.

The amhran sighed. “Oh, how short-sighted you are as well.” She turned away from the wizard, looked down into the cavern. Gabe and Flink were kneeling by the side of Cornell. The barbarian closed the Cayaborean’s eyes, tried to cover the gaping wound with the shreds of Cornell’s shirt, while Flink was scampering up and down as if he couldn’t believe that his friend was truly dead.

“Hero,” she whispered.

Barandas scowled. “Dead hero, you mean. By the gods, I wish I still had the gauntlet!”

A’alsys raised an exquisite eyebrow. “You care for the fallen?”

“Only for him,” the wizard answered. “He’s my *friend*.”

The dwarf graced him with a smile of such allure it nearly stopped the wizard’s heart. (And brought a sense of fear to his mind that now he was starting to get interested in a female *dwarf*!) “Then you have a better sense of reality than I thought. For Cornell of Cayaboré is important in history, far more than you simpletons might understand.”

Barandas furrowed his brow. “Excuse me, A’alsys, but he’s dead. How could he ever be important?”

She smiled, gestured with her hand and...

... Barandas found himself standing on the ground of the cave, next to Gabe and Flink. The dead dragon was lying belly-up before them – hadn’t it been the other way around a moment earlier? The wizard blinked, tried to clear the mist from his head, then realized that the amhran acharadh was still there.

A’alsys was smiling at him and the others, gracefully, elegant. “The man who gave his life to save you is needed. It is for his sake that the magical appliances were spread around the world. If it weren’t for Kristo Pharlee and the dragon, all the tests and examinations would have been in place to ensure that only the right person could pass them.” She sighed. “You ought to thank all the gods of our world that Cornell was still brought here, for it is the Cayaborean who is needed at the end of time.”

“What do you mean by that?” Flink cried. “I mean, time is eternal, that’s what my mother always said. I think so, at least. *Die Zeit steht nie still, Junge, also werde endlich erwachsen*, that’s what she kept telling me!”

“The end of time is near,” the amhran nodded. “You will know when it is upon you. By that time, Cornell will be needed to right the wrongs, and to ensure that Gushémal may continue. It hinges on him whether the world may live, or whether it will fall. And for that he needs to be alive.”

“He’s dead,” Gabe said coldly. “I don’t care about what you say, but it’s for naught if you cannot bring him back now.”

A’alsys grinned joyously. “Oh, you’re a feisty one, little barbarian. I *like* you.” Her grin evaporated in a moment, replaced by dire earnesty. “I have the power to retrieve him from the land of the dead once. I will do so under one circumstance, one circumstance alone.

“Each of you in attendance here will have to swear an oath. An oath that Cornell will be *alive* at the end of time. No matter what travails you have to undergo, no matter what foes stand against you, Cornell of Cayaboré shall *live*. Do you understand? Do you swear to this?”

Gabe grinned, shook his mane of hair. “By Keshmire, if it gets Cornell back now, I’ll happily swear.”

“Me, too!” Flink cried. “Oh, I really wouldn’t like to see the sir stay dead, you know?”

From the shield, Halla gravely asserted, “All I can do, to ensure that the shield bearer remains alive. For the task of rescuing the world, for my gratitude to he who freed me from the holnesh.”

Phindar added, “He’s a good one, you’ve got that right, madam. And healing’s my devotion, anyway, so here goes my oath. Nev?”

The coward in the shield stayed silent for a moment, then muttered, “Do you have any idea what kind of trouble this is calling for?”

“Yes,” Halla, Phindar and Gabe said heavily.

“Oh, by the gods! All right, I’ll swear, fine, now satisfied?”

Nobody paid any further attention to Nev but their heads craned towards Barandas who was scowling at the songdwarf, not at all convinced that he should bind his soul to an oath this powerful.

But before any could reproach the wizard, a fourth voice issued from the shield, sweet, petite, saying, “By my home, I swear that the hero Cornell of Cayaboré shall be protected.”

A’alsys nodded in satisfaction, nodded at Barandas. “Your word is missing, wizard. You do understand that the end of time means *your* end as well?”

The wizard folded his arms before his chest. Sweat was trickling down his back, it took all his effort to maintain a calm façade. Finally it broke down, and he shouted, “Fine! Fine! I’m swearing!”

“Good,” A’alsys said – and suddenly everyone in attendance felt a *twang* in their very souls, as if a tie was knotted that would bind them to the oath more fervently than any other could. “Cornell must never know about this oath. Remember it, for otherwise you will sever the pact. Now for the hero’s return,” she said and waved her hands gracefully about.

Light flickered in the air, sparkling first around only the amhran acharadh who was singing a tiny tune that seemed to infuriate the light. Sparkles sprang to the carcass of the dragon, clove its chest with a sound so easy that it was sickening. Green gore spilled out, the innards of the creature visible.

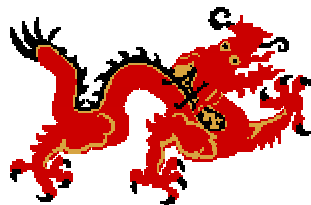
A'alsys reached out with her hand, balled it into a fist, slowly drew it back – and from the dragon's body the heart ripped out, hovered in mid-air.

The party gasped, seeing the gargantuan heart free of fleshly surroundings. Another gasp soon followed when the heart began to pump anew, contract and release powerfully.

“This is for the fallen warrior, to replace his destroyed heart,” the songdwarf said calmly and tightened her fist. The heart, in response, shrunk, never ceasing its pounding, never shrinking in the force it displayed. After a brief moment it was as small as a human heart – not that any could have mistaken the green object for anything human.

A'alsys turned around towards Cornell. The heart followed her hands' movement, hovering over the Cayaborean's ruined chest. Slowly it dropped, squeezing into the body. With a sucking, disgusting sound, guts flew from the chest, replaced by the dragon's innards as they sank into the chest. The party saw how blood vessels, how the body closed around the dragon's heart, how it incorporated the foreign component – and became whole once more.

“It was an ancient dragon,” A'alsys commented, “but its heart will power this small body more than any human heart has ever done before. Behold the one you have all sworn fealty to, the one to whom your oath belongs, behold *Cornell the Dragon-Hearted!*”



Cornell wanted to curse at the pain ravaging his body, but his mouth was too dry. He'd just been fighting the dragon, there had been the talons clawing towards him – but now he actually felt rather good. Pretty strong, all things considered.

Good enough to take on the world, he thought and flung open his eyes, grasped automatically for his sword to continue the fight.

Fighting seemed rather unnecessary when he saw around him all his friends, looking in consternation – and not a small bit of relief – at him. Beyond he saw the dragon, who was quite dead and not appearing to be much of a danger to anyone.

“Did I miss something?” he wondered. Flink – always the first to seize the opportunity to talk – quickly opened his mouth, ready to spout something – but was silenced by a ghostly voice that wafted through the cavern, “*Remember the pact.*”

Cornell wasn't sure if he really heard that – somehow his mind was still quite fuzzy, displaying strange images of a peaceful place that felt very much beyond –, but there was Gabe's hand shooting

out from the barbarian's side and clasp firmly over the alreu's mouth. "Oh, not much," the barbarian said nonchalantly. "I killed the dragon, and the... uh, Phindar healed your wounds. You were unconscious for a while there."

Halla seconded from the shield on his arm, "We were worried about you, but now you're back, and all is going to be fine."

"Fine?" Cornell asked, testing his muscles. Was he wrong, or did they seem to be quite a bit stronger than they had seemed before? Why, there was a kind of power coursing through him that he had never before experienced.

Probably just the adrenaline, he assured himself. After all, this was the first time he had gone up against an emperor dragon – and survived!

Cornell blinked, wiped his bloodied brow. (*Bloodied? Oh, the wounds that Phindar had healed. Right.*) and rose slowly. "Well," he said, "if the dragon's dead, then... Is there a hoard or something in here?"

Flink bit ferociously on the barbarian's hand. Gabe yelped, withdrew his fingers in shock, allowing the alreu the time to yell, "Oh, boy, sir, is there a hoard! It's marvelous! All that gold, and those jewels, they are magnificent. You really have to take a look at them, they are *so* beautiful!"

"Sounds pretty good," Cornell assented, wondering why none of his avaricious friends – that is, Gabe and Barandas – seemed as taken with the thought as he or Flink. "Why don't we see how much of it we can load onto our horses?"

"Uhm, right," Barandas nodded slowly. "The loot."

"The loot," Gabe repeated, carefully mouthing each syllable, then brightening into a smile. "The *loot!* Hey, wizard, do you have a bag of infinite holding, or something like that under your robes?"

"I thought you wanted to kill me?" Barandas asked.

The barbarian shrugged. "Answer me first, all right?"

The two went on bickering for a while. Flink came to Cornell, aided him to get up and steady himself. From the shield, Halla asked, "How do you feel, shield bearer?"

"Very good," he reassured her. "Good enough that I don't want those two fools stealing my part of the valuables. Come along, Flink, let's see that we get our share before they've finished discussing the matter."

"Oh, certainly, sir!" Flink cried. "You know, I'd like to keep some pieces of the statues that killed each other in the cavern. *I* made them do that, you know? Don't listen to Master Wizard if he says otherwise, it was me! Really, honestly!"

"Sure," Cornell said and began to climb over the dragon's carcass.

Somehow life was starting to look really good. Well, a good bit better than it had yesterday. All he had to do was convince his idiot friends to accompany him to Cayaboré – without any more silly detours. Then he could deliver the dragon rod from Chazevo, broken as it was, and maybe, finally he could get some quality time with his family. Not to mention Tempest, his horse dragon who was surely making life a hell for everyone who tried to ride her with her master far abroad.

Cornell smiled when he imagined the looks on his friends' faces when they would find out just who he was back home.

“You know,” Flink was saying, “my knapsack is a tad magical, too. Maybe we could put some of the gold in there, and when you need it, I’ll just pull it out for you, sir. You *really* deserve a lot of the goods, you know, sir?”

“Right, Flink,” Cornell nodded.

Actually, life seemed pretty darn good right now.

THE END
