



The Quest

Outside the tavern the wild night stormed. The rain had continued for three days, and tonight had become a downpour. Immense gray clouds crowded the black skies; lightning danced and flashed, brightening the shadowed lands where moon and starlight could not. The many small rivers of the southern fields of Koth were swelling and threatening to flood, while on the few muddy roads that crisscrossed the terrain wagons had bogged down; horses and their tenders were wading ankle deep in the mud.

But inside the lonely tavern situated along a high road somewhere between town and field, men and women drank and caroused and cursed the storm. The place was filled with travelers who had accumulated over the past three days. But though they were crowded, they were for the most part happy wayfarers, for Izak the hostel keeper always made sure to have plenty of reserves of food and drink the year round. And so tonight, while the world outside drowned in a springtime flood, the motley crew in Isak's place were noisily festive.

Amid the lively press, battle-scarred mercenaries from various lands rubbed elbow and flank with mailed Kothian soldiers. Only a scattering of civilians were present: a pair of merchants, an unfortunate noblewoman and her maids who were forced to share the table with several unkempt and too-friendly young wenches. All present were being subjected to the lugubrious whinings of a lute-strumming rhapsodist in rags, a young Nemedian unable to find board and room in any lord's castle-and small wonder, given that the dogs at the fireside, baying for scraps, came across more tunefully than he.

One man bellowed gruffly for more beer; another called to a serving wench to come and avail herself of his lap; while yet a third yelled at the strumming Nemedian, obscenely but good-naturedly instructing him where he might more advantageously place his lute.

"And when you've done that, here's a copper-go cure your voice with a tankard of ale!" The rogue glanced over the crowd, grinned loutishly, then turned to a tall young man standing against the great fireplace. "Hey-you, too, lad-drink up and put some cheer into that sour face of yours."

The young man, Alias, ignored the comment. He was handsome, and rather well-dressed in fine mail, a satin tunic, and embroidered cloak. Up till now he had been fighting a losing battle for the attention of the crowd. Having arrived only a short time ago, his hair and clothing were still damp, but even such a rain as the one outside had not been able to cool the ardor of his speech. For Alias was asking for recruits; asking these warm, cozy, comfortably drunken men-soldiers for the most part-to hoist sword rather than cup and fight in the dwindling ranks of his usurped Lord Olin.

"Alias!" someone else called out to him. "We've listened patiently and you've had your say. Now, take the good advice you've been given-calm down and join us at the ale jack. No man here intends to enlist for a fight on a night like this!"

"Are you all cowards, then?" Alias retorted; he hoped for an angry response to that, but got only derisive hoots.

"What-do you think Lord Olin can't pay for the use of your swords? You men are soldiers; are you all so wealthy that you can refuse employment because of a night's bad weather?"

"You're only working yourself into an ill temper, Allas. Sit down and drink up!"

The youth gestured with impatience. "You disgust me -sitting here swilling like hogs when you could be earning gold and treasure. Not two days distant Lord Olin is waiting in his camp, ready to buy swords to replenish his ranks. Will you not aid him in his attempt to regain his lands, to oust the foul sorcerer who has despoiled his city?"

"Sorcerer, you say?" called a lean-faced warrior from a far corner. "Young man, are you asking us to heft steel against sorcery?"

More faces turned in the youth's direction and the rowdy turmoil of the tavern lessened somewhat. Alias sighed heavily and lifted his hands, gratified that for the first time tonight he was gaining some unity of attention.

"Aye, it's true, I'll admit it," he said. "Wait-hear me out. A wizard has in truth captured Lord Olin's-!" But his voice was drowned in a rising clamor of hoots, catcalls, and ugly demands that he either take his place tableside or outside in the rain. Alias fumed.

"I'm offering you gold!" he stormed. "Are you so afraid at the mere mention of-?"

But it was no use. Alias angrily grabbed a brew from one of the full platters being carried by a scurrying serving wench, feeling a need to cool his dry throat.

"That'll be a copper, lad," called Izak from behind the bar.

Alias dug into his purse and irritably threw the coin across the counter.

The bellows and cheers and arguments clamored again, louder than ever. Under pain of death, the Nemedian lutist had at last ceased his attempts at song and had taken up the leg of a fowl at a table; the plump serving wench accepted her invitation to the lap of a rogue, who bounced her till she spilled a tankard of beer down her front, whereupon he offered to dry her. Alias finished his brew, continuing to stand. He was warm and dry now, his throat refreshed, but though the glow of the ale had somewhat diminished his disgust and irritation, he was still far from relaxed. Finally, he set down his cup and with renewed energy, took up his cause once more.

"Men-men! Won't even one of you join my Lord Olin in his need? The way is not far, and there is rich reward-"

His voice was drowned out yet again, this time by the sudden opening of the tavern door. Wind and rain blew in with fierce abruptness, dampening and chilling the room. Voices cried out harshly, demanding that the intruder get quickly inside and shut out the storm. The newcomer, dressed from top to toe in a dripping gray cloak, slammed shut the door and stomped water from wet boots.

"Come in, come in, I beg you," cried the portly Izak from behind his bar. "Take a seat by the fire, I'll bring you ale. Will you have some beef or fowl?"

Half the faces in the tavern had turned in the direction of the newcomer, to measure him up and decide if he were worthy to join their bawdy company. "A bit thin, perhaps,"

remarked a sharp-nosed fellow; "Aye, but carries himself like a soldier," opined his fat companion around a mouthful of pheasant.

But to Izak's offer the stranger answered: "Aye. Beef and ale, and bring it quickly."

It was no soldier's voice.

Now the gray cloak came off in a bold arc, spraying water droplets, and beneath it was revealed-a woman. She was tall and fair-skinned with a head of long, tousled, flame-red hair-and she was armored. A longsword swung in the scabbard at her side, a knife at her hip. She wore a brief vest and skirt of silvery scale-mail that covered her breasts and hung from her waist, but left her limbs and midriff bare-good armor, but too little of it for practicality and evidently worn less for protection than as a symbol of her untamed spirit. The raucous noises in the tavern dropped and faded to silence.

The flame-haired woman of armor and sword draped her cloak on one arm, took the stairs down into the tavern, and pushed through the press to an empty chair near the fireside. All eyes followed her. And as she sat down, Allas immediately took up his theme again, taking advantage of the surprised silence:

"Again I implore you ...17

But the eyes staring in his direction were not looking at him, but rather at the newcomer, who now stretched her limbs before the crackling flames of Izak's stone hearth.

"Are you men cowards?" Allas railed. "Surely you must-"
Izak came by and shook his head stiffly at Allas. "Enough," he muttered warningly.
"Don't try them further." The good hostel keeper then turned to his latest guest and set a steaming plate of beef and a cool cup of ale before her, taking his time to admire her splendid figure. She suddenly looked up at him with piercing sapphire eyes.

"How much?"

"Uh-five Kothian minars, in all. Have you traveled far?"

"A week on the road, the last three days of it in this rainy hell. Thanks for your fire, I'm chilled to the bone! Have you any rooms left?"

"Alas, no." Izak's gaze continued to linger. "But there are the stables . . ."

"The stables, then. Is there someone to tend to my mount? It's as tired as I, and it stumbled in a rut." "Not hurt, I hope."

"Not seriously, but it needs rest and fodder."

"My son will tend to it. Izak!" he called, and a youth appeared from a back 'room. "Tend to the horse outside."

"It's a dappled roan," said the woman.

"The dappled roan. Quickly, quickly!"

Izak the younger cursed under his breath, pulled on a cloak, and headed out into the storm.

"Is there anything else, then?"

"This is fine. But you can bring more ale." "Surely," said Izak. With a puckish grin and squinting eyes, he made his way back to the counter, and when he returned he remarked, very thoughtfully: "That was -uh-five minars, in all."

The red-haired woman grinned sidewise and produced it from her pouch.

The noise in the tavern had commenced again. But now the irrepressible Alias, despite the recent warning of the innkeeper, renewed his pleading.

"Soldiers, again I implore you! My Lord Olin will pay you gold-and, moreover, he will lead you to untold treasure. What more can I offer?"

The red-haired woman, who was spearing a slice of meat with her dagger, paused and looked up at Alias. "What are you talking about, boy?"

Instantly, Alias turned to her and explained. "My Lord Olin is fighting to regain his kingdom of Suthad. His army is sorely depleted, and he has sent me and others to recruit as many swords as we can. The rogues in this house"-Alias raised his voice-"are braggarts and windbags, it seems, but not at all the soldiers they claim to be."

"I'll prove that false, if you'd like-with or without steel!" growled one of the guests, but Alias ignored him. "How did it come about," said the red-haired woman, "that your Lord Olin lost his city? Are there wars in southern Koth? I had not heard-"

"Tell her about the sorcerer, Alias!" rasped a harsh voice from the other side of the room. "That'll win her over."

Rough laughter followed the soldier's interruption. But the woman did not seem overly concerned. "Sorcery?"

"Aye, lady." Alias swallowed tensely. "As I was about to explain, a wizard named Asroth has taken Suthad. In spite of a stout defense, Lord Olin and what remains of his army were forced to abandon the city. That was but eight days past. And now we need troops-"

"You need mercenaries-aye. Good luck, then. These seem a loutish lot." Her eyes sparkled as if at a jest. Alias took hope. "I see that you carry a sword by you," he said. "Are you a soldier, then?"

"I have fought as one. Tell me, Alias-do you find it unseemly for a woman to live by the sword as these rogues do?"

"Did I imply so? If I did, pardon me. Anyone who straps on the sword and wears it openly will soon be tested to prove their mettle. I trust you've proven it if you've come this far with that blade on your hip. My Lord Olin asked me to recruit soldiers-and if you're a soldier, no matter the cut of your figure, then I ask you to fight in a just cause." The woman grinned anew, appreciating Alias's frankness. She bit into another chunk of hot beef and savored it as she ruminated over the young man's petition.

"May I ask your name?" said Alias. "I must admit, I am just a bit surprised to find so comely a woman in rough swordsman's garb."

"Sonja," she replied, washing down the good beef with a deep draught of ale. She smiled thoughtfully. "Red Sonja, late of Hyrkania, where steel grows like wheat and the women are a match for the men."

"Will you join my Lord Olin's army, Red Sonja?" Sonja pondered the matter, and Alias waited nervously for her response, hoping that if he could gain just this flame-haired woman for a recruit others might be shamed into following her example.

"Your lord is paying in good gold?"

"Aye, fairly and generously. He has gold with him,

and the city treasury awaits him in the palace when Suthad is recaptured."

"Has he a strong crew?"

"In numbers, far less right now than he needs. But if you mean in courage, then I think every man we own is worth thrice in mettle any in this room.

Sonja smiled again; young Atlas would not cease his attempts to shame these rogues into action.

"Yet I must remind you frankly," he went on, "that we fight against a strange sorcery. Our army was routed by demon soldiers of the wizard's conjuring."

Sonja shrugged and swallowed the last of her ale, then told Atlas: "A foe can always be met, no matter what his weapon." She slammed down her cup, called for more. "Then you'll join us?"

"For gold-aye, Atlas. I've heard that Olin's an honest enough ruler, and my purse is low."

Atlas had heard what he wanted; he had his recruit! Instantly, he turned and faced the crowd.

"Hie, you dogs!" he bawled out heartily. "I've gained a sword for Olin's company. You rogues ought to be shamed for cravens to hear it. Red Sonja of Hyrkania will join Lord Olin in his fight! Now, what others here will stand and show courage?"

Atlas paused, fired with enthusiasm and rather proud of himself. He glimpsed Sonja smiling again, as at a private joke. Yet no one else rushed forward eager to lend his sword. Atlas scowled at the disinterested or grinning faces before him.

"You cloddish dolts! What's wrong with you?"

A few nearby bravos chuckled and cheered. Then the plump serving wench rose from her soldier's lap and swaggered through the press, head poised defiantly, hands on broad hips. When she reached Sonja's table she thrust back her shoulders provocatively and parted her lips in a deliberate smirk.

"Well, look here!" she called to her friends across the room. "Is this a man or a woman with whom Atlas has begun his army? I thought 'twas a man, for I see a man's sword, but here's also a bosom to make Ishtar's maidens blush-"

Sonja colored and tensed. "Hold on here, girl-!" "

-and though she's dressed in armor, I think the armor's poorly joined-"

"Wench, you'd do better to serve more and sip less-" "-poorly joined-as is the sword to the sex!" Sonja stood up, face nearly as red in anger as her hair. "My sword's my armor, tavern scum," she rejoined hotly, "and I'll wager it's faster and sharper than your tongue!"

The soldiers cheered, hoping now to watch a cat fight. "Do you hear her?" laughed the buxom wench shrilly, turning about to face her audience, hands still on hips. "Our red-hair can't tell the difference between-"

She got no further, for in that instant Sonja's patience snapped and she planted her muddy boot vigorously on the broadest part of the serving wench's bottom. The girl shrieked and went tumbling, head over heels, across the tavern floor amid the dirt and mud and spilled ale.

Instantly the hall erupted into activity as dozens of sturdies rose up to applaud and whistle and cheer for more. Sonja growled a curse at them, but then shared a grin with Atlas as she turned back to her table. Izak, behind the counter, howled to the crowd to calm themselves, fearful that his carefully tended tavern might be ruined in a melee.

But only one man showed real anger-the wench's boyfriend, who had gained his feet with the rest, and who now smashed his empty drinking cup to the boards and roared, "You can't treat her like that, slut!"

Sonja eyed the man narrowly; he was obviously half drunk. The tavern grew silent as the crowd quieted in anticipation.

"Get up!" the man roared to the sobbing, cursing wench. He grabbed her by her long hair and yanked her, whining, to her feet. "Get up and move back. I'll show you how we treat women who think they're men!"

He stomped across the tavern toward Sonja, hand moving for his sword. There was a wild scurry as the crowd pressed out of the way, knocking over chairs, spilling cups, and shoving aside tables to make room for swordplay. Sonja stood her ground calmly.

"Soldier," she said quietly, "my quarrel's not with you. Let's settle it peacefully. Don't draw that sword." "Scared, eh?" The man roared with laughter. "I see you're wearing a sword. You'd better know how to use it!"

"No need for that," Sonja told him, still calm but resting her fingers on her sword's pommel. "Take a seat and have another cup. We will talk it over and not spill blood-"

"Bare steel, bitch!" howled the man, whipping out his blade.

Allas bent close to Sonja. "He's drunk, or he wouldn't mean it. Stand back-I'll take him."

Sonja shoved Allas away, at the same time drawing her own blade. "Stand back yourself, lad. I'll show you the temper of the steel Olin's hired."

"Ha-she gets it out of the sheath!" laughed the soldier coarsely. "Now, can you play with it, lass? Or is it too heavy for you?"

He moved closer, carelessly, seeming more amused now than wrathful, and poked his sword at Sonja contemptuously.

Like striking lightning, Sonja parried his blade, whipped it aside, hacked it down to the floor-then ripped open the fellow's tunic-Three strokes in one motion.

Gasps went up from the collected rogues in the hall. The drunken soldier snarled, swayed and caught his balance, then howled savagely: "So you can handle it, can you? Then I'm done playing games with you!"

"Tarim's blood!" Sonja swore at him, her anger finally showing. "Put up that sword and-"

Too late-the inspired hero was angry, ready to kill for shame and drunken honor. He moved in quickly, steel lancing in for a disemboweling thrust.

Sonja darted to one side, parried and feinted, matching two strokes for every one of her adversary's. This only served to anger the man further; his blood was up, his face gleamed with sweat, and he seemed to be sobering quickly. Suddenly he charged, and Sonja, a sword-length away in the cramped tavern, defended herself in earnest.

Steel clashed as the combatants circled. Voices called out excitedly from the crowd but Sonja ignored them; she could not afford any distractions. Damn this drunken dog! Must she kill him over such a trifle as a few curses? She would avoid it if possible

His next move changed her mind. She was backed against a table when the man grabbed a chair and flung it at her. Ducking, she missed her chance to parry his next lunge and only her supple quickness saved her from having her side sliced open. Just in time she caught the next swing of his blade on her own. But now the rogue, frenzied with shame that a woman might best him at swords, rushed in with a mighty roar and swung at her head.

Sonja cursed and parried with all her strength. This was in earnest now, and she'd had enough-the fighting instinct had taken hold of her.

Suddenly the drunk found himself forced back by a whirlwind rush of strokes that he could barely fend off. He cursed furiously as Sonja backed him up to a wall. Steel sparked. She slapped his sword point to the floor. For an instant she held him there, his sword locked beneath hers.

"Mitra!" she swore. "Are you done now, you drunken pig? Give it up!"

She stared into his glaring eyes; his face was gaunt and haunted, his hair and moustache dripping with sweat, his forehead and cheeks glossy. He bared his teeth in a strained grimace, then panted: "I-give it up-woman"

Sonja relaxed, stepped back quickly, and watched the man for any hint of treachery. Cheers and whistles went up from the crowd. Sonja waited, then turned to move back to her table-And the rogue's sword slashed at her back.

Sonja whirled and thrust her point into the soldier's chest, pulled back, then into the belly and into the throat and back-within a heartbeat. The rogue's sword clattered on the wooden boards; he coughed once, bubblingly; then slowly he bent and crumpled to the floor; his body, sliding down the wall, left a smeared bloody stain.

"Gods!" Allas breathed hoarsely, his the only voice in the room. "You're as good a swordsman as I!"

Sonja fought back a hysterical laugh. She let the remark go by as, breathing hard, she faced the crowd in the tavern, eyeing every face and looking for challengers.

There was none. The rogues who had watched the fight showed no inclination to mock the flame-haired woman for carrying a sword on her hip. Some few even applauded.

Slowly Sonja returned to her seat, lifted her ale cup, and finding it empty, cursed and called to Izak for more. The taverner instantly obeyed her request, then backed off. He did not linger as before, and if he momentarily had had it in mind to ask her to make good any damages, he apparently had reconsidered it.

Allas, regaining his composure, turned once again to his audience, intending to make as much as he could of the fact that this Red Sonja of Hyrkania was a member of Lord Olin's mercenary army. But before he could speak a huge man strode forward, stout but muscled, sporting a thick blond beard and looking more like a village patriarch than a master of steel. He beamed a cheery smile as he faced Sonja with a disarming sparkle in his eyes.

"That was a fine display, soldier!" he said, laughing gustily. "By Mitra, I never thought I'd live to see a woman fight as well as a man! I'm proud of you."

"Oh?" Sonja eyed him carefully. "I trust you didn't lose a friend to my fine swordplay."

"What? That swine? I don't know him. But you've shamed me, Red Sonja of Hyrkania, into taking up sword beside you. I was heading for Argos with no mind for local wars, but now I think it'd be a deal more pleasurable to fight alongside such a sword as yours."

"I'm flattered," Sonja replied, not sounding at all flattered by the bearish rogue's advance. She swallowed the last of her ale.

Allas gripped the man's arm with enthusiasm. "Do you mean you're joining up with Olin?"

"Hell, why not? My name's Som, and I fight with two swords. Will that kill the devils and sorcerers for you?"

"Aye!" Allas turned to the crowd and cried out: "Now, who else will join? Come ahead-step forward!" But he found it was no longer necessary to plead. The sight of battle seemed to have swayed a sort of balance, seemed to have been just the thing to coax these ruffians into Olin's mercenary ranks. Allas gained two dozen swords that night-most of the men who had been in the tavern during the three-day rain.

He thanked Sonja a thousand times. And after the last man had called out his name and Allas had written it down and rolled up his thin parchment, the youth tore open his purse and threw the last of his coppers across the counter to Izak.

"Buy her ale!" he cried out, laughing. "Buy her all the ale she wants!" Then he turned to where Sonja sat at the table, the center of the gathered ring of freshly hired mercenaries. "By Mitra," he swore, his excitement getting the better of him, "you're beautiful!"

Sonja nodded to him in silent thanks and tilted her cup, unconcerned about his comments on her beauty and swordsmanship, and wondering a bit as to why fate had used her to coax these brawling louts into fighting Olin's war.

The rainstorm had stopped by morning.

One by one the mercenaries, after squaring their accounts with Izak and the tavern wenches, left the inn and made their way to the stables to tend their horses. Mists yet clung in the air and the low fields beyond the sloppy road were drenched, swampy pools. But early sunlight lit the air, and the trees and grasses were dewed with streamers of brilliant droplets that shone like gems. Birds chirruped from the sparse woods, and Izak's dogs frolicked and splashed in the yard. The mercenaries, mounting up, yawned and stretched, then trotted over to form a staggered line before the hostel.

Allas and Sonja were the last to mount. They thanked Izak for his patience and generosity, but the taverner seemed less eager to listen to their small talk than to see them ride at last from his premises.

Allas took the lead of his assorted crew and Sonja paced her horse beside his; behind, the ruffians they had gathered were jesting and laughing and sharing reminiscences of the various table wenches in good Izak's employ. The mists cleared away and the sun beat down more strongly as they made their way along the muddy road.

As they topped a hill Allas stole a final glance back toward the tavern. He saw two small figures behind the building carrying something between them that appeared heavy and awkward, and guessed it to be the corpse of the drunkard Red Sonja had slain the night before.

Allas looked over at her. The swordswoman had not put on her gray cloak this morning, but had tucked it behind her saddle, and now rode in only her silvery mail. The bright morning sun glinted brightly on the scales and made her smooth, tanned flesh seem to glow with vibrant health. Allas watched her. Her long, touseled hair, now more brightly orange-red in the daylight than it had seemed last night under the dim torch glow, fell wildly down her shoulders and back. She held her head high, eyes watching levelly ahead, her total attitude one of composed vigilance. She held her mount's reins easily but firmly in gloved hands as they rode over the crest and down the gentle slope.

Sonja sensed Allas looking at her. She faced him, regarded him without a smile, but her eyes seemed to say that she accepted him in an open spirit of honest companionship.

"They're burying that rogue you slew last night," he commented tonelessly.

Sonja shrugged. "He made an error," she replied in the same even tone of voice. "He misjudged me. Too many have done that in the past, and no doubt it will happen again." She looked at Allas and the corners of her mouth rose in the faintest trace of a smile. Then she looked again to the treacherous road and leaned her horse away from a rut. And so the company continued east under the new day, riding to war.