



East of Zamora Sonja rode, beyond the border fort that had been the command of the late Captain Vos. The land dipped low and wide and flat, with waving grasses. To the east were the deep forests and dark rivers and cool highlands that Sonja remembered from her girlhood-beyond the kingdom of Turan and the Sea of Vilayet. But here, where she rode, was a limbo between the Hyrkanian lands and the western world. It was a naked land-not quite a desert, perhaps, but worth nearly as little to anyone passing through. At midday, despite a sun, the skies above this steppeland were gray and hazy, as bleak as the land itself.

Red Sonja rode alone through the Sparse bunch-grass and the stunted thorn trees, and she rode quickly, the only figure of life out on the still, vacant expanse—a tall woman on a roan, both worn from three days of relentless travel. She wore a short, sleeveless tunic of scale-mail armor, light but protective enough for this clime, though inadequate for heavy battle. At her hip hung a longsword—as heavy and dutiful a weapon as any warrior's. Other than her mail, boots and doeskin gloves, she wore naught; her limbs were bared to the warming sun, and her fiery red hair streamed loose in the breezes. She held her horse's reins securely, urging it on without desperation.

She swivelled in her saddle and looked behind, watching for signs of pursuit. Far away sat the low hills she had passed over this morning; she could not discern upon their gentle slopes any sign of the rogues who followed her. Yet that meant nothing. They might be hidden in a dip or a valley; they might be far closer than she imagined, despite the lead she had managed at the outset.

"Fools! Dogs?" she muttered to herself. "Give chase to me, Keldum, and by Erlik, I'll gut you and every Zamoran in your-!"

Suddenly, far behind her, Sonja spied kites and vultures gathering, ringing in a lowering wheel—small black dots hovering, far away against the gray clouds of the north.

Over what? A victim of Keldum's temper, left to rot? Refuse from his last camp?

Most likely. Sonja had encountered no other signs of life out here in three days.

But she saw nothing else. She faced south again, studied the low, harsh terrain and sighed heavily at the sight of endless steppe, somber skies and dull sun. How much longer could she subsist on thorn apples and roots? Mitra! What evil star had guided her since her birth? What vindictive fate had chosen to force upon her homeless wanderings since her girlhood? And now—how fast and how far must she flee to be safe from this latest mischance that Fate had laid on her shoulders?

Captain Vos had been a pig—a sorry example for an officer in command of a border fort on some far-flung frontier. Chance had led Sonja—already worn and road-weary—to Vos' fort. Vos had been intrigued by Red Sonja's sword and scale-mail, but more by the way her flame-colored hair and woman's build complemented her warrior's garb, and he had sought to take liberties. Vos—balding, porcine, temperamental as a rich man's spoiled brat, eager to squash the ambitions of underlings like Lieutenant Keldum. Aye, he had doubtless deserved his death—but she had not slain him.

Keldum, she felt certain, had slain him. Keldum—proud, vain, ambitious, no doubt, for Vos' captaincy. And, like Vos, he had followed her every move with burning eyes.

She sighed, prodding on her mount. The sun was sinking toward the west, and Sonja felt her energy dropping with it. She came upon a small, shallow pond; the water in it was old and turning stagnant, but it nourished her weary mount. At the top of a small hill

in the brown, wind-blown sea of dry grass, Sonja looked back for Keldum and his troops-and spotted them. She guessed that she was a half day's journey ahead.

But if she had spotted Keldum and his men, then surely they had spied her as well.

The sun died slowly, losing itself in the thin branches of silhouetted scrub trees to the west. Purple and gray shadows began slowly to fill up the hollows like dark waters pooling across the land. Sonja saw the low moon, waxing toward full, grow visible amid the deepening gray and purple of the eastern sky, along with a sprinkling of stars.

But there were no other travelers-no herdsmen or riders, no caravans or mounted troops. Upon all the vast face of the steppeland, where the timeless wind of the earth blew, there was no one save Sonja herself and the pursuers behind. She wondered at that, more than casually. These were inhospitable lands, to be sure, yet adequate for grazing and bounded on the west and east by Zamora and Khauran, Turan and Shem-important nations of strength and arms and wealth. Why, therefore, no hint-not a trace-of caravans or mounted bands of nomads?

Strange, indeed, thought Sonja.

She looked behind again, in the dying light of the day, but could no longer see Keldum and his troops against slope or grassland. The air was becoming chilly.

Tired, she pressed on. Her roan, she knew, was nearly exhausted. It would not do to push the animal beyond its limits. She felt the labored breathing of its lathered sides, the ribs working strongly between her thighs, the head drooping on the tired neck. Not far ahead appeared a grove-a small cluster of short thorn trees and berry bushes atop a hillock. Little protection, truly, but good for rest, and the hillock would afford a vantage position.

Dismounting, Sonja led her horse up the slope. Day had nearly vanished; the moon shone pale and clear, and she saw well enough by its light to make her way briskly.

"Easy, now," she whispered to her mount, coaxing it, stroking its muzzle. "We'll rest here a while, eat a bit and-"

Then, gaining the top of the hillock, Sonja saw lights through the thin curtain of trees.

Lights, in the south. "Erlík! "

They were stationary lights, many of them, betraying but dimly the walls and towers of some habitation of man. A small city, perhaps, but-here? In the midst of this wasteland?

A city, where she had seen no sign of rider nor army nor caravan for over three days?

Sonja led her horse to a berry bush, tied it, stretched her weary muscles and combed her hair back with her hands. She turned to the north again and looked down into the low, broad plain that had taken her three days to cross.

She had suspected all along that the terrain here gradually sloped upwards; now, from atop this hillock, Sonja saw that the land farther south dipped as well, but more sharply—a shallow bowl in the midst of the steppeland, small but effectively hemmed in by hill and mountain and outcropping. There was even a low mountain range to the west.

A small, hidden valley with a lighted city in its center. "Erlík's tears!" Sonja muttered. The night cooled about her, a chill breeze touched her, and for a moment she shivered.

Her horse coughed in its exhaustion. Sonja held its reins again and stroked its neck.

"Just a bit farther, then, " she said, soothing her mount, "and we'll have a home for the night. An inhabited city. Surely, whoever's down there can spare some straw and water and bread. . . ."

As if for luck, or out of habit, Red Sonja lightly touched her sword pommel, reminding herself of it, before gathering up her horse's reins once more and leading it down the south side of the hillock.

How faraway the city lay, she could only guess. Its lights, however, were not greatly obscured or misted by long distance; and although no sounds carried to her through the still night, Sonja thought she would reach the gates soon.

At the foot of the hillock, she mounted her roan again and slapped it ahead, feeling a surge of new vitality from the animal. And so Red Sonja rode down into the valley, away from the grove and her distant pursuers, towards the lights of the strange city, while the white moon shone low in the wind-breathing skies.

Captain Keldum was a large man-tall, heavily muscled, stern-visaged, a warrior and a son of warriors. He was also a man of violent passion and iron will—and tonight his temper was as dark as the sky beyond the pale moon, and growing darker.

He sat on his steed staring south, across plains dimmed by the fallen night, spying no sign of the renegade Hyrkanian woman.

"She rides fast, " said Gevem, his second-in-command. "Was it necessary to pursue her so far, and with this large a force? Perhaps we should let her—"

"Fools! " Keldum snarled. His anger caused Gevem and the other soldiers near him to look away. "Did you think Mitra would lead her into our hands? Did you think the sun would help us to track her? A woman." Keldum's eyes hardened as the possibility of failure grew in his mind. Then, suddenly, he laughed. "That Hyrkanian she-devil has

made fools of all of you-and left Captain Vos' death unavenged, unless we return with her. "

Two hundred soldiers sat silent on horseback. scratching their beards or spitting off to the side. But none dared answer him in his unpredictable mood-not even Gevem, his righthand man.

Keldum's agitation subsided; he shot a stern glance at Gevem, and Gevem coughed uneasily and nodded toward the south.

"We spotted her just as the sun went down, Captain. If we follow the stars, we'll have her before the moon sets-with luck. "

"Aye, if she camps, Gevem-and if our horses don't give out first, and if these sons of dogs could make better time under moonlight than sunlight. How much longer do you think our mounts can carry us without rest? Red Sonja would like it if we ran ourselves to death, by Anu! "

Gevem sighed heavily and eyed the horizon.

"No, Gevem, no," Keldum growled decisively. "We make camp. Here. " He slapped his hands together and called out to his troops: "Dismount, and bivouac. We'll take up the search in the morning. " Then he swung down from his horse and turned to Gevem. "We'll divide ranks. I'll take half the troop to the southeast before dawn, you take the others due south. We'll find the witch. She may circle east to head back toward her homeland, and I'm not going to allow that. "

"Understood, Captain. " Gevem nodded, slapped his chest, and dismounted with a tired groan. Keldum nodded shortly, led his horse to a stump and took down his bedroll, preparing himself for the night some distance away from the men of his command.

The moon rose high. The Zamorans arranged themselves in a circle in the dry grass, but did not build the fires that might give away their location. They ate their rations cold, washing them down with water or tepid wine. Some passed the time with small talk; others, barely able to move, made to sleep.

Gevem strolled among the men and wondered why his commanding officer found it so necessary to catch the Hyrkanian; avenging Vos' death could not mean all that much to Keldum. With a weary sigh he sat himself under a scrub bush, fumbled with the cork of a wineskin-and heard the approach of one of the soldiers.

A lean, craggy-visaged man with a tattoo on his forehead came over to Gevem and sat beside him in the moonlight. "Keldum makes you angry with his temper?" he whispered. "He makes you wonder why he chases the flame haired woman? Aye, I know-Keldum's tongue is a whip, and his temper like a serpent-quick to strike, never apologetic. "

Gevem shrugged warily. The man was Peth, one of many mercenaries who had drifted into the patrol service, probably to collect a few months' pay and drift on. But Gevem had overheard some of the men's small talk about Peth.

"Keldum seems certain that the Hyrkanian woman murdered Captain Vos," Peth went on in an under-tone. "Yes, he's certain, " Gevem retorted irritably. "He saw it happen."

It was a habit of Peth's to toy with bits of bone that he carried in a leather pouch, in the same manner that other men jangle loose coins or priests play with their gilt chains. He now took them from his pouch and rattled them hollowly in one hand, saying to Gevem; "Do you think this woman, Red Sonja, truly slew Captain Vos?"

Disturbed in spite of himself, and not wanting this conversation to be overheard, Gevem replied in a low voice: "She certainly had the motive, Peth. " He took a swig from his wineskin, then stared up at the high, clear moon. "Now, begone."

Peth rattled his bones, making no move to leave. Gevem chewed his lip.

"All right, then, " he muttered, looking away from Peth. "Do you not think she killed Vos?"

Peth shuffled his bones a last time, then dropped them to the ground. He bent and squinted at them as they gleamed in the pale moon's light.

"No," he said starkly.

Gevem looked at the soldier, snorted. "The bones tell you that? "

Peth retrieved the objects. Uneasily, Gevem noted that they were the size and shape of human finger-bones. "Who did slay Vos, then?" he asked belligerently. Peth closed the bones in his palm, shuffled them. "Keldum had the motive as well. "

Again the bones dropped to the grass, spilled in a scattered pattern. "Keldum, " Peth whispered in his Shemitish accent. "Once more, Keldum. . . . "

Gevem drew in a breath. "For the captaincy of the fort?" Clutching up the white fragments, Peth snickered and nodded thoughtfully. "Aye-partly. But brave men have done stranger things when taunted by flame-red hair-" "Gevem! "

Keldum's voice, from behind. Gevem stood up, turned, faced his commander.

"Wasting time with this outlander scoundrel?"

There was such scorn in Keldum's voice that Gevem immediately despised Peth-and himself. Had he been played for a fool? Keldum had always trusted him. . . . "Get your sleep, Gevem. " "Aye, Captain. . . . "

Gevem went off, heart racing, worrying that Keldum might have overheard, that he might think Peth stayed where he was, unperturbed by Keldum's sudden appearance.

"Still reading moon-signs and broken bones, ey, Peth?" Keldum remarked coldly.

"I read the future. I read men's lives. Learn to trust things other than yourself, Captain Keldum. "

Keldum snorted with scorn. "And shall I trust you, Peth?" he asked.

Peth shrugged. He shuffled the bones in his hand, dropped them.

"What did you tell Gevem, Peth?"

"I told him the truth-and the truth is always a question. I told him what the bones said. "

"And what is that?"

Peth looked more closely at the bones. "That one of you would reach the Hyrkanian on the morrow."

"One of us?"

Still he looked at the bones. "Aye-though I know not which. "

Keldum's sneer carried in his voice. "What do your bones tell you now, Peth?"

"They say that this is a strange land. The moon here is almost a living thing. Death is here, and strong spirits, and magic. Sorcery-evil-death. . . . '

"Death? "

Peth knelt to the ground. Gathering up his bits of bone, he rose and stared up at the white, flat moon. The bones rattled in his hand.

"Death?" Keldum repeated, impatiently.

Peth nodded. He shook the bones, dropped them to the ground-gasped.

Keldum uttered a curse, stalked ahead and stomped down, held his foot there upon the bones, squashing them into the earth.

Peth looked up, eyes wide.

"Are you going to answer me?" Keldum demanded. His face was dark, shadowed with nighttime and with wrath. Peth rose, facing Keldum squarely; his fists shivered at his sides, and for a moment the seer argued with the soldier within him.

"Answer you?" he retorted in an uneasy whisper. "Me? An outlander scoundrel? A thrower of bones?"

Keldum glared in anger-then suddenly laughed harshly. "Aye. And I'm the greater scoundrel, for taking you seriously even for a moment. "

He stepped back. Peth bent cautiously, retrieved his bones, then arose and hurried away to rejoin the other soldiers.

Keldum watched him go, still laughing to calm himself. Further anger would do no good. He was tired, resentful, frustrated-but, by Anu, no fool of a Shemite mercenary and his magic-bones would get under his skin. Stretching, Keldum made to return to his bedroll.

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And noticed the slight breeze that stirred the grass. Keldum glanced about uneasily. The land seemed luminous and strange in the way it lay, vast and silent, under the moon's pale light.

Then he spat into the grass and walked on, deciding to do a circuit of the camp before turning in.

They had sacrificed young women outside the walls of the city. Sonja saw them as she approached-tied to posts in the earth, the blood that streaked their bodies dark in the moonlight. The roan snorted at the blood-smell and tried to shy away. Sonja did not dismount, but veered close enough to study the victims.

Half a dozen young women, naked, with long hair, their legs and arms bound, their white flesh gashed with whips or blades. Freshly dead. Sonja felt revulsion, not only from the violence but because the victims had so obviously been slain by their own people, probably in some religious or magical ceremony. She looked away, muttering a curse.

The city walls were not far beyond. Most of the lights she had seen earlier were now obscured by those walls. There was no life outside, and only a few torches burned far up on the battlements. Sonja cantered closer; looking up, she saw soldiers patrolling on the barricades.

They were watching her, and now cried out: "Who goes there?"

"I am a traveler," Sonja shot back, reining her roan to a standstill. "I've ridden three days, and am in need of food and rest. My horse needs care. Will you let me in?"

"A woman, yet dressed in warrior's garb, " a soldier said. "Will you let me in?"

A few faces disappeared from the battlements; after a long pause, the small gates before Sonja creaked open, just wide enough to allow her entrance. She dismounted, led her roan through the archway.

A line of soldiers stood watching her as she came in. Quickly the gate was drawn shut again, and the beam bolt driven home. One of the soldiers-by his armor and badges, apparently the officer in charge-approached Red Sonja. Two others walked behind him, lighting the courtyard of the gate with torchlight.

"What is your name, outlander?"

"I am called Red Sonja. I am Hyrkanian. "

"You are a woman dressed as a warrior. Is this a disguise? "

"I am a warrior."

Some of the men chortled. Despite her tiredness, Sonja shot them hard glances.

"Have you lost your way, to come here?" asked the officer.

"No. I'm tired, my horse is near to exhaustion. I ask only a place to rest, some food and water for myself and my mount, some information. In the morning, I'll be on my way. "

The officer, a handsome man in his decorated armor, stepped closer to Sonja; he fingered his beard as if in puzzlement, then told her: "This is a small city. We receive few visitors, and are shut off from the outside world save for one caravan that comes up from the south each year. We can accommodate you-there is no problem there-but in the morning, it may be best to present you to Hefei, who rules us. "

"I will gladly meet Lord Hefei," Sonja answered, a bit curtly, "if we may be done with this. My horse and I-" "Hefei is a woman."

"A woman? Lady Hefei, then. But at the moment, my need is food and rest for my mount and myself."

"There is a stable nearby, " the officer told her. "Come. " He motioned, and one of the men near him handed over his torch; the others who had collected there began to disperse. Sonja followed the soldier's lead, guiding her horse after her. "What is your name?" Sonja asked him.

"Sobut. You speak Zamoran well, woman, for a Hyrkanian. "

"I have spent many years out of my homeland, wandering. "

"And you are a warrior?"

Sonja nodded. Sobut said nothing more for the moment, but led the way quietly towards a stone stable-house far across the court. Sonja could feel the wind building coolly,

then dying, trapped within the walls of this city. The officer's torch flickered, whipped and made a flapping noise, then went still again.

"Does your city have a name, Sobut?"

"Aye-Elkad. " He chuckled. "Did you think it might not? "

"It's so . . . isolated. " Sonja looked around, wondering. The city seemed old and somewhat uncared for. The people apparently spoke Zamoran-at least, Sobut did-but the feel of the place was somehow alien. It was dead-shut off. Sonja had the impression that, as small as the city appeared to be, its population had probably dwindled. How many lived here? Why did they live here?

They came to the stables; Sonja led her roan to the stone trough where it drank, then to a rack of hay where it began to munch. Finally she sat down wearily on a bench. Sobut placed his torch in a wall sconce near the stable door, then turned to look at the woman closely.

"It grows late," he said, nodding to the moon, which was now high.

"Aye. May I sleep the night in the stable, with my horse?" "If you wish. Otherwise, you could sleep with-" "The stable will suffice, " she interrupted, not looking at him.

"As you wish. I'll bring you some bread and jerky from the soldiers' stores. "

Yet Sobut did not go. Sonja began to feel uncomfortable, sitting there. This whole city seemed strange and unreal. It was not like the border fort she had left, dangerous as that place had been, nor was it a city like any she had visited in her travels. She felt something-uncanny?-in the air.

She looked up at Sobut. He was a large man, his face dark-shadowed, darkened still more by his beard and moustaches and somber eyes. Yet it was not he who made her uneasy.

She said to him: "Those women-outside the wall-were they sacrifices?"

"Aye," Sobut replied. "Do they offend you, Hyrkanian?"

"Offend?" Sonja scowled. "That's a mild word! Why do you people find it necessary to tie women to posts and whip them till they bleed to death?"

Sobut scowled in his turn. "The land here is strange, " he said. "The very wind and soil here are strange. It all belongs to the Earth-folk. The people here believe they must appease the Earth-folk regularly, or-"

"The Earth-folk?" Sonja repeated-disdainful, uncertain.

"-or the curse will destroy them. So we make periodic sacrifices. Soon the moon will demand more sacrifices. Always the sacrifices increase. " He looked to Sonja's roan. "That is how we live. Shall we go now into the stables?"

Sonja nodded and stood up. Sobut drew close to her. "You find our ways strange, " he said, "but I find it stranger to see a woman such as you traveling alone, with only a horse and sword for companions. "

Sonja looked into his eyes. "Do you?"

"Aye. A woman warrior-with hair of flame." Strange city, Sonja thought. Strange wind, strange moon-but this one. . . . Not so strange. . . .

Sobut lifted his hand, as if about to finger a lock of Sonja's hair. His expression was one of somber curiosity.

Sonja stepped back a half-pace, and in the space of a breath her sword rasped free of its scabbard.

It was a curt, startling demonstration. Sobut fell back. So swiftly had Sonja reacted, with such spectacular precision, that Sobut had automatically stepped back, startled. He lifted both hands in a mild gesture of conciliation.

"Pardon me," he muttered. "But-your hair of flame. . . . Tell me-did you ride here from the north?" "Aye-but what of it?" Sonja retorted. "I don't care how strange a land this is, Sobut. I thank you for your hospitality, but let it end there. I am very tired, and my temper is shorter than usual." She replaced her blade. "I want only to rest - and in the morning, to help myself to some food. I can pay. But I'll tell you-I sleep lightly."

Sobut chuckled. "The line is drawn, Red Sonja. Trouble yourself no more. But you must admit-it is rather bizarre to find a lone woman warrior riding into this city in the middle of the night-a woman with a horse and a sword and flame-red hair. "

Sonja scowled in puzzlement. "Surely not so bizarre, Sobut, as killing six women for no good reason. Now, please show me into the stables, before my patience comes to an end."

He chuckled again, lifted the torch from its bracket and showed her the way; Sonja took up her horse's reins and followed.

Outside the walls their thoughts wafted on the wind-not human, not earth, not air, not water nor flame, yet alive and sentient

We wait-we hunger! Does the moon wax toward the time? Where is the call from the one who will bring us the sacrifice?

With many voices in one, the Earth-folk speak silently, from the darkness of their netherworld.

Waiting. . . .