

# Desperate Barbarians

By Verna McKinnon

Thora's heart drummed in her chest, her sword slashing to its wild rhythm. Oily, hot sweat streamed down her face and body; the juices salty in her parched mouth. At the far corner of the temple ruins, the old sorcerer huddled in terror. Before her, raged a demon of hell-burned flesh.

"And people wonder why I'm so cranky," she mused breathlessly.

The demon's viciousness tolled on her strength. Staggering with exhaustion for a heartbeat, she barely escaped the sharp teeth of the seven-foot devil. "Bite me! I don't think so!" she countered. Thora inflicted multiple wounds, judging by the black, viscous blood that oozed from its crimson scales; yet the abomination continued to battle with ferocious intensity under the bright moon.

"I could use some help, sorcerer!" she shouted. "Can't you send it back to Hell?"

The mage merely glanced up briefly in fear, shivered mutely, and then returned to his fetal position.

Lethal, foot-long curved claws raked her leather vest. Rivulets of warm blood flowed. "Someone needs a manicure," she wheezed in pain. Forcing the demon back with a hard kick, her barbarian heart rallied. "Oh, die already!" Thora panted.

The demon casually licked a claw dripping with her blood. The arrogance angered her, fueling heart-pumping adrenaline and cording her muscles into steel. Thrusting the blade deep into the demon's throat, she took great satisfaction in twisting the blade before extracting it. A gruesome spray splattered her with black blood, but it did not die.

"What does it take to kill this thing?" she cried.

Suddenly, a spear pierced its head; the exiting point ravaged a fiery eye, splattering gore and blood. The demon howled in shocked rage, crumbled to its knees and crashed to earth. Dead.

Standing behind the fallen hell-creature, still holding the long spear in her tiny hands, was her diminutive sister, Rela. "Can we go now?" she asked impatiently.

"I told you to stay out of this!" Thora scolded her, exasperated by the ease of her kill.

Rela yanked the spear from the monster's head, grinned and replied lightly, "Why

thank you! It was my pleasure to save my sister from certain death.”

“I was wearing it down,” Thora pouted. “Mother would whip my backside if you got hurt, and you know it! This isn’t a fighting quest you’re on.”

“I was getting bored,” replied Rela. She examined the gore-coated point of her spear, grimaced, and tossed it to the ground. “Too disgusting.” She daintily stepped around the carcass. “I’m not cleaning that up. I’ll just make another spear.”

“Wasteful wench,” Thora teased. “Speaking of clean, we should burn the demon, just in case,” she added wearily.

“It was stinky enough alive.” Rela retrieved her satchel, her long auburn braid swinging with her bouncy steps. “Oh, clean the blood off before it burns; you know demon blood is bad for the skin. Use my salve. It really trashed your clothes. You should keep spares--or fight naked.”

Thora scrutinized her shredded, bloodstained outfit and shrugged. “Who ever said being a barbarian was easy? The scratches burn like crazy, though. I’m going to need a lot of ale to compensate for the pain. A barrel should do!”

“You deserve it, Sis.”

Thora sighed at her sixteen-year-old sister, unscathed and clean, who had just defeated the beast with a single blow. She did not know whether to hug her or kill her.

The sorcerer’s blubbering disrupted her thoughts-and grinded on her nerves. “Why doesn’t he shut up?” she said impatiently. “Why don’t they ever use sorcery to call anything nice, like bunnies or puppies? Why is it--”

“Thora, look out!”

She spun around to discover the beast rising from its blood sea. Grasping the torn flesh of its skull with one gnarled hand, it towered over Thora in rage.

A strange, masculine war cry startled Thora. Out of nowhere, a young man jumped in front of her and shoved her out of the way. He was clad only in a dark loincloth and high-strapped sandals.

Thora fumed, picking herself up from the ground, she yelled, “You moron, I--”

“Let me handle this woman!” he commanded. He confronted the hellish monster with a brave, grizzled gaze. Fearlessly, he leapt for it, and swung his large, double-bladed axe at the demon’s neck-and missed.

Despite multiple hackings, the demon was quite spry.

The stranger's face paled with panic...right before the monster threw him across the floor, where he landed on his back like a well-muscled turtle.

Tired of being upstaged, she ignored the lurking demon, shouting, "Hey you, village idiot! Any other bright ideas?"

"Cut off the head!" he interrupted, wincing painfully. "Now would be good."

Thora turned and nearly bumped into the beast. Rela dove for the axe, but Thora pushed her away, scolding her, "Don't you dare touch that demon!"

"You never let me slay anything," Rela shouted.

The demon lunged for Thora. Avoiding its death grip, she somersaulted over its head and landed behind it with deft grace; with a cruel grin, she swiftly decapitated the demon with one stroke. Foul, smelly blood gushed from the body; the head rolled across the stones to a slow stop between the knees of the dazed stranger. She restrained a smile when he yelped like a frightened dog when its mangled head touched his knee. She wiped her sword clean and sheathed it proudly. Picking up the stranger's axe, she marched over to the stunned stranger, kicked the demon head away, and stood over him with his own axe at his throat. "Who are you?" she sternly asked.

Shaggy dark hair falling over his blue eyes, he replied shakily, "My name is Cruac! Please, I mean no harm. I was rescuing you."

She slowly lowered the axe. "It looks like I am *your* rescuer." She noticed his bare back suffered some nasty scrapes from skidding across the stone floor. Resisting feelings of sympathy, she continued to scowl while he slowly got to his feet. She advised seriously, "There is a reason for armor in a modern world of stone temples and steel blades. Common sense, you know. Did the gods forget to bestow any on you? Do you always enter a fight uninvited? Don't you know it's rude?"

"I'm sorry, but that demon had regenerative powers," he cut in. "There wasn't time to tell you. Only two things keep it from coming back to life, burning it to ashes or decapitation. I would recommend both, actually. May I explain my presence?"

Thora stepped back, "I'm waiting."

"I'm a barbarian from one of the eastern tribes. I'm looking for fellow companions to travel with for a time. I heard of you, Thora, and your deeds of valor. I learned you were in this kingdom and sought you out."

"That's the worst pick-up line I ever heard," scoffed Rela, tiptoeing around the

pools of demon blood.

Thora merely shrugged, "I've never heard of you, though." She deftly used the tip of the axe to move his head left to right, studying his face. "You don't even have a beard. Baby soft cheeks and an unscarred body are poor examples of warrior status. Barbarians have scars and beards. Well, I don't have a beard, because I am a woman at arms. Most men fear me, you know."

"With good reason," he agreed vigorously.

"The title of barbarian is not given; one earns it through battles and deeds. You have never spilled blood, either of man or beast, have you?"

He shrugged sheepishly and implored to Rela, "Is she always like this?"

"She's usually a lot more volatile. You picked a good day to tick her off," Rela answered with a smile, standing next to her tall, angry sister. "She may even let you live."

"I was only trying to help," he begged.

"Well don't! We are on a journey. I don't have time to baby sit." She dropped the axe at his feet and walked away, hoping her exhaustion did not show.

Rela used the tainted spear to pick up the head and drop it by the body for cremation. Pouring oil over the carcass, holding her nose, she complained, "The stench is revolting. Is your life always this messy?"

"It won't smell pretty when it burns either, so buck up. There is always trouble somewhere. A true barbarian knows the quiet ride to the next town is always delayed by a crisis of the sword," she answered solemnly, cleaning her wounds with a rag.

She checked on the old mage who was still petrified with fear.

Frightened eyes flickered up at her, "Sorry," he stammered.

Like that makes it all fluffy and good? Magic is dangerous. Plain and simple. She noticed the stranger poking about in the magic circle. "Hey, stay away from there. It's not safe!" she warned.

"Actually," he replied calmly, "the magic is gone now. You need to do a lot of ritual for this sort of thing." He picked up one of the rune stones from the circle. "I think this is all a big mistake. The sorcerer wasn't trying to raise demons."

"That's right!" sobbed the sorcerer. "I would never call demons. I'm a good

sorcerer.”

“What were you trying to do?” asked Thora.

“Bring a beautiful woman to be my companion.” The old man burst into tears again. “I was lonely.”

“Well, we are very pretty when not covered in demon guts.” Rela added. “Maybe he called us?”

“Can’t you go to a tavern like a normal man?” added Thora in disgust.

“The circle he drew wasn’t to call demons, but this old temple floor is,” Cruac pointed out, tracing the ancient stones with deep elaborate carvings with his fingers. “At one time it must have been a temple for demon worshippers. That explains why it’s in ruins. They banned demon worship ages ago. The sorcerer’s rose crystals are key ingredients to a love spell of any sort; however, the runes cut into the floor stones are not so nice. All the ancient runic symbols refer to some rather nasty demon guardians. I think it fed on the magic, using it to activate an ancient spell, like an old booby trap, to call up a demon sentinel.”

The old sorcerer’s eyes widened, and he slowly wiped away the dead leaves and dust from the floor, and nodded, “Heavens, boy, you are right! I didn’t see the old runic symbols in the floor; filth and overgrowth concealed it. If I had I would never have done my ritual here.”

“You know a lot for a wandering fool,” Thora observed suspiciously. “How do you know so much about magic?”

“When I was a boy, I helped care for an old wizard. He told me stories. I listened. He was very old and sick, but his mind was sharp. It is bad luck to mistreat a wizard. A woman of the Sanan Tribes should know this.”

“You know nothing of my people. Take the old magician home, if you want to be useful. We are leaving.” She tried not to look at the handsome youth, or his rippling muscular body burned brown by the sun. His eyes were very blue. She turned away to avoid further discussion.

Rela tugged at her ripped sleeve, “Um, Thora, I think we have a problem.”

Thora looked up to see more than two dozen soldiers surrounding them on all sides, swords drawn. They bore the insignia of the royal house on their shields.

“Where were you guys when I was getting demon slapped?” Thora accused.

A broad-shouldered man wearing black armor with gold trim and a rich silk cloak

strode forward arrogantly. “I had to be sure of your worth, barbarian. I am Captain Bramen. The royal jewel of Tumara, Queen Alatheia, commands your presence at the palace. Do not give us any trouble, Barbarians.”

Tired and annoyed, Thora wearily agreed, “Fine. At least make yourselves useful and cremate the demon. I’m tired of slaying it.”

At the palace of ivory stone, Bramen led them through several corridors, until they arrived, not at the throne room, but a sumptuous bath chamber.

“Captain, I never bathe with strangers, not unless it’s after the third battle. What kind of barbarian do you think I am?” Thora asked coyly.

He ignored her humor, but the bathing chamber was a treat. A huge sunken bath of green marble steamed with hot water. Lotus flowers floated on top, giving off a delicate fragrance.

“Purify yourselves. I will return in an hour,” he commanded. He left the chamber with a sweep of his expensive cloak.

“Did he just wrinkle his nose at us?” Thora asked, hands on her hips.

“What a rude man. Can we slay him?” Rela asked.

“No, not yet, but we can have a real bath.” Enthused, Thora peeled off her mangled clothes.

After they stripped and entered the comfort of warm, scented water, Thora felt the heat ease knotted, sore muscles. The three long scratches across her middle were not attractive, but would soon heal. She bathed them carefully. The soap smelled of jasmine and soothed her irritated mood quite nicely.

“You need to wear something else before the queen, you know,” Rela commented while soaping her sister’s back. “Your clothes are tattered bits of bloodstained rags.”

“I have nothing else.”

“I’ll loan you my spare clothes.”

“They won’t fit,” she sighed, “but you’re right, my clothes are trashed.” Sadly, not even her shirt was salvageable. She liked that shirt, too. Darn demon.

“You could go naked,” she suggested with a grin.

“Very funny, little sister.”

After the luxurious bath and shampoo, they dried off with thick cotton towels so soft Thora was tempted to stash them in her bag. Thora did have to settle for Rela’s spare clothes. It was very embarrassing, as she was a good foot taller than Rela. Of course, her shirt did not fit at all. She could not even get it over her head. The leather vest was so small it barely covered her breasts. She had to lace it extra tight to close it, pushing her bosom higher than normal. The woven short skirt that fell above Rela’s knees barely touched Thora’s thighs. At least she managed to salvage her boots, which repelled stains thanks to a special wax her mother made for the family shoes.

Captain Bramen did not say a word when he saw Thora’s skimpy outfit, he merely raised an eyebrow and motioned for them to follow.

“I have never met a Queen,” Rela whispered. “What should I do-bow or curtsy?”

“Barbarians never curtsy, so bow with dignity like a proper barbarian,” Thora replied. “If you had taken the veil at the temple, you would not be meeting a queen, now,” she added. “See how much fun you can have?”

“My goal is to become a priestess,” Rela insisted.

“Not over some worthless boy who broke your heart. My heart has been broken too, and I have not taken the veil.”

Rela laughed, “And your romantic life has been so great since! Ronan isn’t crying any tears over you either.”

“I can’t believe you said his name!” hissed Thora.

“Sorry,” she apologized softly.

“Be silent,” the Captain warned.

The two sisters sneered at him behind his back.

The immense double doors opened to a large, airy throne room of opulent beauty. Blue marble pillars held aloft an ornate gold-leafed ceiling. On a rich throne of gold sat Queen Alatheia, a composed woman of mature, yet striking beauty. She smiled warmly when they entered. Her flaxen hair, barely touched by gray, flowed in soft waves beneath a slim golden crown. Her slim figure was firm and unmarred by age or childbirth, laced tightly in a gown of purple silk with long sleeves. Thora saw beyond the soft beauty of the woman. Here was a Queen with a backbone of iron

that brooked no nonsense.

“Thank you, Captain,” the Queen said, “you may leave us.”

“But Your Majesty!” he protested. “They are simple barbarians!”

“Patience, there are some things women must discuss in private. Wait for us in the hall. We will send for you soon, Bramen. Now go.” A wave of her slender, jeweled hand shooed him away.

Thora liked her already.

Queen Alatheia rose from the throne, “Would you like refreshments? We can discuss my quest for you over some hot food and cool drinks. You must be hungry after slaying a demon. Captain Bramen was very impressed.”

“I was not very impressed with him.”

Rela elbowed her ribs, but Thora saw no point in lying.

To her surprise, Queen Alatheia laughed, “I would feel the same, Thora. He should have assisted you. A demon is a threat to my kingdom.”

She gracefully led them to a table laden with food. A baked chicken steamed golden, and a joint of hearty beef on a platter with roasted potatoes and carrots floated in a river of gravy, fresh-baked breads sweetly scented the air, making Thora’s stomach growl. Other delicacies of fruits and sweets tempted her as well. Oh, was that butter?

At the queen’s indulgent nod, Thora began heaping food on her plate, trying to remember to use the utensils and not her fingers. Rela did the same, taking great interest in the platter of little pink-iced cakes.

Queen Alatheia draped a linen napkin across her lap, and said, “My reasons are logical for needing a woman warrior. My son, Prince Taselm, is now of age and ready to take the throne. I have acted as Regent since his father died. He was always a good, loving boy. He was a devout son, a brilliant student, a fine warrior, a true prince, until a month ago. His servants complained he talked to himself, he refused food and drink, closeted himself alone for days, refusing to see anyone. The list goes on. I feared madness, but it is worse than that.”

“A woman?” guessed Thora, biting into a drumstick.

“Worse than a woman. A witch.”



Thora stopped chewing. Witches. Why did it have to be witches?

Darn it.

Alatheia nodded, "She calls herself, Zharisa, the Black Rose. She has stolen my son. He thinks he is in love with her, so he ran away to be with her. I know foul sorcery is making him do these things. Her beauty is dangerous. A willowy figure with the curves of a goddess, face of ivory perfection, black hair falling to her knees, red lips, and all the rest. No matter, she is a slut spoiling my plans. The warriors I have sent to rescue my son have failed. Some have even stayed behind to worship Zharisa, the Black Rose. Men are helpless against her dark sorcery. An army of them failed to bring my son home. The witch's lair is hidden in the great caves at the foot of Skull Mountain across the borders of Tumara."

"Skull Mountain? A dangerous place. Legends say monsters roam the caverns and sleep on a bed of human bones," Relia said between mouthfuls. "Sounds like fun."

Alatheia grinned, "Yes, and adding to my woes is a mysterious demon lord the witch works with. Women warriors are my only hope and barbarians are even better. Your quest is to bring him back to me alive, kill the witch and her demon companion, and save Tumara. If you cannot restore my son, he will forfeit the throne if not crowned in seven days. I hate these ancient laws. I would be galled to see my country fall victim to invasion and civil war. The nearest heir is his cousin, Kozel, who is an imbecile. As a mother and a queen, I ask your help, barbarians. Succeed and I will reward you with a casket of jewels so large you could become queens of your own kingdoms!"

"I will gladly do as you ask," Thora answered, "but first I must ask one favor."

"Name it."

"New garments. I can't slay anyone in this outfit. I'd be too embarrassed."

"They're my clothes," Relia explained. "Her own are demon wipes now."

"I might expose myself with one good sword swing in this scrap of material."

"Hey, it looks cute on me!" Relia reminded her, stuffing another little cake in her mouth.

"One would hate to see you humiliated," Alatheia agreed. "The correct ensemble is important for any woman. A woman with your magnificent figure could stop an army without lifting a sword. Have you ever considered fighting naked?"

"I suggested that," Relia nodded.

“True,” answered Thora without blushing, “but I always try to fight fair.”

The next morning, Thora and Rela journeyed to the great mountain to capture a runaway prince. They left Tumara better than when they entered it. They had ample supplies, a map to the wicked witch’s mountain, new saddles for their horses, and best of all...new clothes!

The low-necked, high-collared white silk shirt’s rich weave caressed her skin, and the new rust-hued leather vest fitted perfectly to her body. New trousers made of sturdy cloth in a light camel shade clung to her sleek legs like a second skin. Butter-soft leather gloves warmed her hands. A new black leather belt with her daggers firmly arranged hovered around her waist, knee-high brown suede boots and her trusty sword sheathed over her back completed her outfit. The earthy shades complimented her long copper hair and leaf green eyes. The queen’s generosity extended to her sister, who also received a new set of clothes; though Thora wished she had chosen a more practical set of clothes. The bare-midriff revealed her youthful taut tummy, but left her vulnerable. The light golden brown leather top, flared woven skirt and wide belt around her hips did look adorable.

Barbarians are not supposed to be adorable, though, she thought in frustration.

“Do you think the witch will be difficult to slay?” asked Rela, riding at an easy pace and enjoying the forest scenery.

“She has magic. That makes her dangerous. I have a sword. That makes her dead.”

“You’re so elemental,” Rela sighed. “I know why Mother really wanted me to go on this journey. I know Thordd is getting married to that pasty-faced whore he left me for.”

“He wasn’t worthy of you. Thordd was an idiot with muscles.”

“An idiot I loved. He’ll be sorry, when he has a huge ale-gut and she grows a beard.”

“That does sound nasty. I’m impressed by your vehemence.”

“Have you ever met her family? The women all get furry as monkeys by the time they start to bear babies. Well, he and his ugly monkey-wife can go climb a tree and rot.”

“At least you know he was not one and why. Ronan was not so easy. I thought we were happy. He wanted to be an adventurer. He didn’t even think to ask me to go; he left me behind with a badly spelled goodbye note. Well, I will not be one of

those forgotten women, Rela, and neither should you. The temple is full of plain virgins to pray to the gods. A good barbarian woman is hard to find. At least think about it. It is a family tradition, you know, to carry a sword.”

Rela nodded, “Ok, I will consider it, though handling a sword gives me calluses. It’s too bad we didn’t get to know that new barbarian, Cruac. He seemed very nice and sweet.”

Thora laughed, “Not a good trait in our breed.”

“Admit that you at least found him handsome,” she insisted. “He liked you.”

“He can be a god for all I care, but his sword is never getting past my shield,” Thora insisted.

“Gross.”

“This journey is to help you, Rela. Not play matchmaker for me.”

We could have at least loaned him our salve. He did help us.”

“Well, I will grant him a little credit for the demon kill.”

“Thank you. How’s the itching?”

“Wretched.”

“I’ll get out the salve.”

They reached the foot of Skull Mountain in three days. It was going to be a tight trip. Rescue reluctant, stupid prince, kill evil witch and demon lord, race to the coronation, and save the kingdom of Tumara.

Gray mist hovered around the mountain of doom. “It *does* look like a skull,” Rela observed. “At least it’s sunny.”

Thora looked up and agreed, “It’s a good day to slay,” she said, taking some meat and bread from the supplies.

Rela happily broke her fast with a piece of cake.

“You can’t fight on that kind of breakfast!” she scolded.

“But I like them,” she insisted. “The icing is yummy.”

“Don’t complain to me when you get a belly ache,” Thora sighed, studying the map.

Suddenly, a wave of thunder ripped the sky, upsetting the horses and Thora’s concentration. Rela calmed their mounts, holding onto their reigns tightly.

Ghostly green mist formed before them under the darkening sky, transforming into a tall woman with black hair falling to her knees. Her lush bosom barely concealed in a flimsy halter of beaded crimson silk, a jeweled girdle hung loosely on sensual hips, and a flimsy black chiffon skirt did not conceal long legs in laced sandals. Exotic dark blue eyes heavily lined in kohl stared at Thora with scorn.

Scarlet lips challenged, “Be gone, fools! I am Zharisa, the Black Rose of the East. Skull Mountain is my kingdom. Enter and die, unless you choose to worship me!”

Thora unsheathed her sword and aimed it at the apparition’s neck. “Show your true self, witch, and I will demonstrate the solid steel I worship is stronger than your wispy magic!”

“You seek death eagerly, barbarians! No one survives Skull Mountain.” Another roar of thunder and lightning broke the sky.

“She’s trying to use witchcraft to frighten us,” Rela quipped. “How original!”

“I don’t frighten so easily!” Thora spat. “Hey Zhasi, cast any good curses today?”

“It’s Zharisa,” she cried. “The Black Rose of the East!”

“Fancy name for a hack enchantress!” Thora retorted. “And could you dress any sluttier?”

“You dare to defy me or my royal garments!”

A familiar voice boomed, “Be gone, foul witch!”

“Oh, no,” Thora moaned. “Not again.”

She turned around and saw Cruac running toward them, waving his battle-axe like a flag. At least he now wore sturdy dark trousers and boots. He topped that off with a ring mail jerkin over his large, muscled body. Bracers of leather and metal cuffed his massive arms. A cord of black leather decorated with long jagged teeth hung around his thick bull neck.

He reached their position and Thora grabbed him by the collar and pointed her

sword at his throat. “Why are you here?” she dangerously inquired.

“I can help!” he insisted. “I understand magic, remember?”

“Don’t move or speak,” she commanded. “Let me handle this.”

“But I--”

“Ah-ah-ah, not one word!” she warned. Cruac obeyed, but he scowled fiercely.

“Why don’t we discuss your death in person, Zhasi?” Thora taunted.

“It’s Zharisa, you stupid barbarian! I will show no mercy! All of you will suffer my wrath!” cursed the dark-haired witch. “Enter and die!”

“Prepare to meet my blade, Black Rose. I will soon claim your black heart as the trophy of my victory.”

The image of Zharisa faded, and with it the gray and red threatening sky.

“Oh, that was good,” approved Rela. “You have such a bardic way with words.”

“Yes, excellent syntax,” agreed Cruac.

“I like the new duds,” Rela said.

“Thanks,” he smiled. “May I move now?”

“Say please,” Rela teased.

“You may not only move, you may go,” ordered Thora. “This is our quest.”

“I can help you fight the witch and that demon that serves her,” replied Cruac stubbornly. “I’m not interested in your bounty. The dark sorceress knows you’re here, too. You don’t exactly have the element of surprise.”

“He has a point,” Rela agreed. “We could use an extra person to guard our backs. We have no idea what horrors roam in those caves.”

“My sister is not experienced in battle, so please disregard her suggestions!”

“My sword is at your disposal for free. Take it or leave it, but I am going with you into Skull Mountain.”

“You’re so stubborn!” she replied, staring directly into his deep blue eyes. “You

can't even listen to reason!"

"I could say the same thing about you," he answered, so close they were nose to nose.

"Ok, now that you have marked your territory, let's go witch hunting," Rela cried, pushing the two warriors apart. "We have a prince to rescue!"

"Fine," Thora stated and marched uphill toward the dreaded mountain.

"Fine," he retorted, lifting his battle-axe to follow her.

"I'll just make sure the horses are tethered," Rela shouted at them, "in case you forgot! I'll get the supplies too!"

"Fine!" the two barbarians bellowed back. They continued their competitive march toward the mountain. The three barbarians hesitated briefly when they arrived at a cave entrance. It was hard to miss. A massive, black hole of doom decorated with yellowed skulls of ancient tragedy. The musk of evil was strong here. Thora's body tensed, knowing she would not only fight horrible beasts, but magic as well.

She lit a torch using flint and steel. "I'll take the lead. Rela, you stay behind me. Cruac, guard our backs." Thora commanded firmly, unsheathing her trusty sword.

Sword in one hand, torch in the other, she quietly entered the mouth of hell.

Inside, carefully treading over ancient bones in mossy passageways, she realized a barbarian with allergies could be vulnerable. "The mold is nasty in here!" she whispered, stifling a sneeze.

Using their swords to clear away the webs clogging the passageways, they tried to walk softly, difficult since bones littered the ground. They went down three tunnels and turned back until at last they found signs of human habitation. Torches in iron sconces now lit the walls. They were close to finding the witch's lair. They put out their torches when a low rumbling of voices alerted them.

"They sound human," Rela whispered.

They all withdrew further into the shadows to watch several men, wearing palace uniforms. Scruffy and dirty, they all had dazed, stupid looks on their faces as they extolled the joys of serving Zharisa. In the torchlight, Thora could see their eyes had a milky white glaze. Evidence of foul witchcraft.

"She let me kiss her feet yesterday, but then the Demon Lord shooed me away."

“You’re so lucky!”

Their conversation rambled on in similar, incoherent adoration of the witch. They disappeared down the passageway.

“Those must be the soldiers from the palace.” Thora whispered. “Alathea said some had fallen under her spell. Let’s follow them.”

Hoping they would lead Thora to the evil her fingers itched to destroy, she tracked their path with stealth, following them down into the bowels of the mountain.

Her sister and the annoying one followed. The corridors of rock and earth, paved with bones, sloped deeper now into a mysterious underworld. Smooth, stone floors now replaced the bones. Fire burned the cold out of the air. The dim torch-lit halls became brighter with the red light of hell as they descended, until they came to the entrance of an enormous chamber. High on a landing next to winding stairs leading down further into the pits of doom, she hid in the shadows, signaling her companions to do the same.

She studied the enemy and environment. The chamber was thousands of feet high and wide. In the walls were carved large archways leading into other areas of the cavern. In the center of the vast room, a fire burned high in a stone pit. Several men in ragged uniforms stood guard. At the far left of the chamber, Thora saw a large golden throne. On that throne sat Zharisa.

The witch’s supine body lounged shamelessly upon silken cushions. At her feet curled a massive black panther. Her glossy hair fell over one shoulder like a waterfall of night. Standing next to her, in a red-hooded cloak, was the Demon Lord, his charcoal flesh and crimson eyes surveying his realm of darkness.

Zharisa snapped her fingers and a young man approached from the shadows of the hall. His clothes were rich and the face noble. The Prince!

Prince Taselm still lived, though controlled by her witchy power. He sat at her feet dangerously close to the slumbering cat, and gazed up at her with loving eyes.

Her prey before her, Thora decided how to approach. The men were victims of her sorcery. She would try not to hurt them too much. The witch and her demon had to die. That equation solved, she felt much better. Then an overpowering attack of sneezing overcame her. She cursed molds and fungus in her embarrassment.

The demon lord raised a clawed hand to the shadowed cliff where they huddled, and threw back his hood, revealing a monstrous face of cruel savagery. “Intruders! Get them!” he ordered, deep voicing echoing.

“Well, so much for the surprise attack,” she sniffled.

Rela extended her slim sword with fearless courage. Good. A barbarian should never show fear. Pride filled Thora’s warrior heart for her baby sister. She wanted to hug her...after she killed the demon and witch first, of course. Cruac’s axe glistened in the torchlight, blue eyes hot with battle lust.

Sweet anticipation tingled along her supple spine. She raised her sword with a defiant grin. “Come and get me!” she invited hotly with a sniffle.

The witch rose from her opulent throne. “We have been expecting you,” she laughed.

“Take them down!” cried the Demon Lord. “Don’t let them near the Prince.”

Thora leapt into the fray enthusiastically, her battle cry filling the vast cave. She did her best to immobilize the attacking guards. They would wake up with throbbing heads, but at least they would be alive. Rela and Cruac fought beside her, cutting a path of bodies toward the wicked pair that must fall to her sword of justice.

The smell of sweat mixed with the hot fires of the pit. She overcame each warrior swiftly. Their dazed obedience was nothing to her frenzied love of battle.

The witch’s panther sleepily opened its golden eyes, disturbed by the noise of combat, flicked its tail, and then went back to sleep.

Zharisa raised naked arms, strange words of magic spilling from crimson lips.

Thora’s sword flew out of her hands--literally. Rela and Cruac suffered the same fate as sorcery stole their weapons. Suddenly, her whole body stiffened in mid-kick. She couldn’t move! Thora’s eyes managed to glance at her companions. They all suffered the same fate of sorcery.

Zharisa, jeweled hand resting on her hip, “I win,” she said lightly. She stepped down from her throne, “There is nothing like a good teleport spell to remove nasty sharp objects; and you can’t move because your bodies are magically frozen. It won’t kill you. It will just humiliate you.”

Thora struggled, breathless and sweaty in her motionless body. Cursed magic!

“You have won nothing!” Thora cried. At least she could still speak. She would die cursing the witch if that was to be her only weapon.

The Demon Lord laughed deeply, striding over to her side on hooved feet. The hideous stamp of evil on his reddish-black face was more imposing when he



grinned.

He caressed the witch's slim waist, standing over her like a shadow of death, he whispered, "Well done, my love. You shall have your reward tonight in my bed."

"Oh, gross," gagged Rela.

"Kill them," commanded the demon lord casually.

"But, my lord!" gasped the witch, jerking away from his embrace.

The demon lord summoned two of the minions, "Take off her barbarian head. Use her sword to do it. Add a little insult to the death. Then kill the other two the same way."

"Afraid to kill me yourself, devil?" Thora taunted.

"Nonsense," he replied. "This is a new satin cloak."

One of the milky-eyed warriors picked up her sword and the other forced her stiff body to the stone floor. Rela swore with brutal crudeness. Cruac had a strange expression of concentration. Thora's long braid was swept aside by rough hands, baring her neck for the death stroke.

"My lord, you promised!" cried the witch.

"Shut up, you stupid cow!" he gruffly said, pushing her away. "Keep your place, witch, else you will be without that pretty head."

Cruac began to mumble under his breath in a strange language. Suddenly, the sword flew out of her executioner's hands. All of the ensorcelled warriors fell to the ground unconscious. The witch and her minion stared wide-eyed at the reversal of power.

"What trickery is this!" raged the Demon Lord, grabbing the witch by the hair and throwing her to the ground.

"It wasn't me, my lord!" she wept

"It was me," answered Cruac calmly.

"You, a barbarian casting sorcery?" the witch gasped.

"It's a gift," he quipped, and extending his left hand, the battle-axe flew to his grip. "And I'm no longer frozen," he added, "None of us are!"

Thora straightened, enjoying the fluid flexibility of her body again. She gazed at Cruac in shock. "What did you do?"

"I used magic," he stammered.

"But that means--"

"Yes, I'm not a real warrior. I'm a... wizard."

"That is not allowed!" bellowed the Demon Lord.

"Shut up!" Thora yelled at the Demon Lord, then turned back to Cruac and angrily asked, "Why did you lie to me?"

"Because I was ashamed!" he cried. "I come from a proud line of barbarians. We conquer and tread wild lands in sandaled feet with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. When I was a boy, the local shaman discovered I had magical ability. After that, they never allowed me to fight with wooden swords or battle like a proper young barbarian. They sent me to a wizard academy instead. I read scrolls and made potions. My family never invited me to weddings or family reunions. I couldn't bear the shame. I cast off my magical robes, built up my weak body with brutal exercise, and decided to become a true barbarian. I even changed my name. My real name is Kerwin. How dumb is that? Kerwin the Barbarian? But I have failed even at this."

"Your name is Kerwin!" exclaimed Thora.

"Excuse me," Rela interjected, "But we have other problems right now."

"Please, you promised no one would be harmed!" wept the witch.

"I lied!"

The Demon Lord picked up a sword, "I will kill them myself!"

"Wait," cried the witch, standing before the imposing demon. "You said we would--"

"Shut up, you stupid cow!" he ordered.

"I told you never to call me that!" she stamped her foot in fury.

Thora took advantage of the bantering to pick up a stray sword and go after the witch. Her large blue-eyes widened in shock as Thora tackled her.

The Demon Lord raised his sword, but Cruac (or Kerwin?) deftly jumped to the side

and rolled. He swung at the Demon Lord with his lethal battle-axe. Rela grabbed a stray sword and aided him in the fight against the Demon Lord.

The witch began to whimper, but Thora had no pity. Prepared to cut out the witch's foul heart, she lifted her sword to strike.

"Help me, my lord," she begged.

"I don't need you, witch," he replied with cruel finality.

The witch cried out in shock, "How dare you abandon me, you little toad!" and a wave of her hand sent a flow of magic so strong it knocked Thora off the witch. The ripple of magic passed over the men, who awoke now, groggy and confused; even more enlightening, was the effect it had on the Demon Lord.

The veil of illusion ripped from him, his real form was a squat, balding man with beady eyes and a piggish nose. Confused and embarrassed, he dropped his sword and tried to run. Kerwin grabbed him by the collar and threw him to the floor.

The Prince, wavering a bit but more sentient, looked at him and said, "Cousin Kozel, is that you?"

Zharisa picked herself up and furiously marched over to the little man, beating on his bald little head with her fists, "Kozi, you rotten ball of dung! You promised no one would get hurt! You said all we had to do was wait; and then you would marry me after you had the crown! Well, I quit! You couldn't pay me enough to live in this moldy cave anymore. I'm going home to Mother!"

Thora stared in disbelief, "You were going to marry him?"

"Well, a witch can't be too choosy," she sobbed. "I'm twenty-two now, and I still have no husband. Most men are afraid of me. How could you know what it's like?"

"Oh, I think I do," Thora laughed.

The deep voice of the "demon" now was whiny and strident. "You stupid witch! My plan nearly worked! I could have been King of Tumara! You ruined it!"

"Like I care?" she snapped. She looked at the trio of heroes with kohl-smudged eyes, "I'm not bad. I just wanted a husband," she sniffed. Zharisa summoned the enormous panther, "Fluffy, come on. We're going home."

The sleek, powerful feline stretched and padded after his mistress, who stormed out of the cave with hips swaying in sensual anger.

Several men followed her eagerly, despite no longer being enslaved, offering their

protection on her way home.

Some women do not need witchcraft to enchant men.

The piggy little man, the Prince's imbecile cousin, nearly tricked his way into getting a crown on his greasy little head.

Prince Taselm said darkly, "You traitorous little toad! Just wait until Mother hears about this! I should kill you now!"

"Your Highness, please," Thora broke in, "We have very little time to return to your home for the coronation. We can truss him up and take him along for the trial later."

"Yes, you are right," he replied, composed now. "I must return and lead the people. Goodness, but my tunic is disagreeably soiled. I can't be seen in this."

"Nobility!" scoffed Rela and rolled her eyes.

They tied up a whimpering Kozel, and the dazed warriors almost fell over themselves offering to assist Rela. She smiled broadly, giving them orders.

Thora looked at Kerwin sitting on the stone steps in despair. She sat next to him. "You fought well," she said quietly, "Kerwin is a good name, much better than Cruac."

"You're just saying that to be nice."

"Barbarians are never nice. You fought well and used your wizardry to save us. Thank you," Thora said sincerely.

"But I know you hate magic."

"I don't hate you. Where did you come up with a name like Cruac?"

"In a book of myths. I thought it sounded more impressive."

"Well, let me impress you with this," she whispered and kissed him deeply on the mouth.

He returned her embrace, and when their lips finally parted, he smiled. "You are every inch the barbarian, Thora."

"So are you," she replied. "After we return the Prince and collect our reward, I think we have a quest of our own to discuss."

“Yes, we do,” he agreed.

“Will you two get a room,” Rela quipped and smiled, “You know, I guess all women have man trouble. Maybe I won’t join the priestess ranks. Being a barbarian is more fun.”

“Yes it is,” Thora agreed, sheathing her sword, “especially when you have someone to slay with.”

The End

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