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## ISHKILIATH

### Field and Fen and Mortal Men



*In mountain caves the bat-winged worm, a thousand époques old,  
With furnace breath and jewelled hide lies coiled around his gold,  
While on the ocean's gleaming foam a giant shell unfurls.  
Behold! A mermaid sleeps within, more marvellous than pearls.*

*With passion warm as dragonfire, with benthic mystery,  
They kindle mortalkind's desire—the silkies of the sea.*

OLD SONG OF TAMHANIA



THE piquancy of the salt sea and the pungent aroma of seaweed cast up on the rocks stung the wind. Straggling atop and down the cliffs, sheltered by hardy firs and rowans, the village of Appleton Thorn was protected on the landward side by a semicircular fence. This was no ordinary fence, but a mighty fortified palisade of oak and ash, studded and barbed and bound with iron. Eleven feet high it stood, overlooked by small watch-houses built in the treetops just inside the perimeter.

'There is an East Gate and a West Gate,' said the urisk, leading the three travellers to the left. 'The heathery coast road runs frae the West Gate. The road to the east leads tae the rigs and the corries of the Churrachan, the sykie risks, the heigh gowan banks and the foggie braes. No gate has ever been made

in the southern wa' o' the Fence. There's nae road rising to the glaury choille-rais.'

'We ken only the Common Tongue,' said Tahquil. 'Make plain your meaning, pritheer sir.'

'Och, I'm forgettin'. *Rigs* are what ye might call fields, a *sykie risk*'s a marshland, a curragh. *Banks* and *braes*, them's slopes and dales to ye. I must mind my tongue—things hae changed since last I spoke wi' your kind.' He sighed. 'And as to the rest—there's no road up Creech Hill to the forest because naeboddy frae the village goes there and most things that come frae out o' Arda's shades are no' welcome among Men.'

'I see no Mooring Mast either. Why do they choose to dwell in such a remote and forsaken place,' asked Caitri, 'and so close to Khazathdaur?'

'The forefathers of the villagers lived here in greater numbers once,' replied the urisk. 'As years went by and things o' unseelie ilk pushed deeper into these regions, many o' the villagers departed. Those who remained did so because this is their land, or mayhap because of the Thorn.'

Tahquil's heart hung static over a beat.

'What Thorn?' she said quickly.

'The Noble Thorn, they title it—a lone tree growing in the Errechd, at the heart of the village. 'Tis said it is the only one of its kind. It puts forth flooers only once a year, at middle-night on Little-sun Eve. At that season, sailors sometimes come in their boats up the firth to see it.'

Merely a thorn bush. Tahquil felt deflated, though what she had been hoping for, she could not pin down.

The travellers arrived at the Fence and followed it around to the West Gate without being hailed from the lookout posts in the trees. Only a rumour of conversation emanated dimly from the village precincts.

'Tomorrow's Flench Ridings Eve,' remarked the urisk. 'They're likely all clatterin' at the tavern this night, singin' cuttie-muns.'

The gate was as tall as the Fence, a grille of wood and steel bars.

'Here I'll leave ye,' said the urisk. 'The haunts o' Men are dear to me but I walk them in my own way.'

'Oh, but shall we see you again?' stammered Viviana.

'Aye, if ye wish it.' The urisk seemed shyly pleased.

'Farewell,' they said.

He bowed and trotted away through the darkness into a stand of feathery peppercorns.

Caitri turned suddenly and looked over her shoulder, back towards the forest. 'I thought I heard footsteps following,' she said.

Tahquil took a deep breath and shouted towards the gate, 'Hallo! Please let us in—we are benighted wayfarers seeking hospitality!'

This announcement was greeted by sudden tumult on the other side of the gate. It sounded like someone heavily armed, falling out of a tree. This cacophony was followed by a subdued cursing and a clanking of metal.

'Who goes there?' a man's voice eventually yelled.

'Three wayfarers seeking hospitality,' repeated Tahquil.

'Stand back nine yards from the gate!' came the order.

They obeyed. From a wooden boxlike affair nesting above the Fence in the fork of a tree, a figure wearing a brightly polished open helmet surveyed them. This figure exchanged remarks with a party on the ground near the tree's foot, then a large nose appeared through the bars of the gate.

'Advance and be recognised!'

Forward now they stepped again. They could hear the guard in the tree saying, 'Certain, are ye?' and the guard on the ground mumbling unintelligibly.

'Are ye wights of eldritch?' challenged Big Nose, peering through the gate.

'No. We are mortal damsels.'

'All of ye?'

'Yes.'

A further raucous clangour ensued; a laborious unbolting, unlatching, unchaining and unlocking up and down the length of the mighty gate. With one last crunch, a small portal in the gate swung open. Big Nose's head popped around it and he

jerked his chin in the direction of his shoulder, a gesture the travellers interpreted as permission to enter.

‘Look lively, then,’ he said. ‘Can’t leave the door open all night.’

Ducking their heads under the low lintel, the visitors entered.

Big Nose quickly shut the postern after them, securing it again with much fuss. Meanwhile, Bright Helm hurried down his ladder, which was missing a few rungs, and stood looking at the newcomers with undisguised awe.

Both the gate-guards were clad in loose-fitting tunics belted at the middle, taltry hoods with camails and cross-gartered breeches tucked into boots. Over this they wore half-armor; thick leather tassets and epauliers. One had on a worn leather brigandine decorated with bright studs where metal plates were riveted to the interior; the other sported a mail hauberk of antique design. Thick and brown, their hair straggled to their shoulders. They were armed with falchions, broadswords and halberds, and a thorn tree sigil was emblazoned on their gear.

At their backs, some forty paces off, stood an ivy-covered tavern—it was from here that the sounds of conversation had issued. Tangerine lamplight glowed from its leaded casements. The sign over the door bore a painted image of a thorn tree, black-boughed and spiky.

The mouths of the guards hung open. Tahquil shifted uncomfortably under their stares, until one man elbowed the other in the ribs and they recovered their composure. Their eyes slid briefly over Tahquil’s companions but kept rolling back to her like ball bearings to a lodestone.

Bright Helm cleared his throat.

‘Well I’ll be jiggered,’ he said, scratching his ear. ‘I never seen the like. Three young maids a-traipsing over the countryside on their own—well I never. I suppose you heard the Forest Horn a-blowing.’

‘You’ll be here for Flench Ridings,’ surmised Big Nose, ‘and the Bawming of the Thorn on the morrow, with Burning the

Boatman. You'll have come up the coast road, off a ship. Will you be staying for the other Summer celebrations?

'Regrettably, no,' replied Tahquil without depriving him of his assumptions. 'We are but travelling through.'

'Ah.' Bright Helm tapped the side of his nose with a stubby finger and winked knowingly, in the manner of one who is privy to knowledge so common it need not be questioned further. Tahquil guessed he had no idea why three damsels might be 'travelling through', but presumed that everyone else did, and was loath to reveal his ignorance.

'Are rooms available at the inn?' she inquired.

'Most assuredly, mistress!'

Bright Helm flew along the path ahead of them, to be the first to announce the Arrival of Strangers. Big Nose stolidly brought up the rear with the air of a seasoned campaigner who would not allow Unexpected Visitors to interfere with Duty.

'Burning the Boatman?' Caitri whispered nervously in Tahquil's ear. 'Are these folk so barbaric?'

'I think not,' Tahquil replied. 'I suspect it is a title for some less excessive custom.'

The uproar triggered by Bright Helm's advance warning instantly broke off when Tahquil and her companions entered the yellow torchlight of the tavern's common room.

Dirty, stained and ragged the travellers appeared, this being partly self-inflicted for purposes of disguise and partly imposed by the exigencies of travel. Before them, the room presented a motionless tableau: drinkers poised with tankards upraised, folk sitting, standing, immobilised in the act of turning around, jaws dangling loosely, eyes protruding.

All at once Tahquil felt very weary and wished they had not entered there.

'What's amiss, lads? Ain't ye ever seen a *miss* before?'

The pun-maker, a doughty man, sun-browned, stood with his thumbs hooked through his belt. In contrast to the snuff-brown locks of the other patrons, his silky mane of hair was a soft shade of grey, streaked with silver as though it had

aged before its time, for his face was that of a young man of perhaps eight-and-twenty Winters.

Laughing but shamefaced, the patrons buried their noses in their beer. The hum of talk and the clatter of tavern business resumed. Now covertly, the customers observed the three visitors, squinting sideways, as the urisk had augured.

The doughty man nodded affably.

‘Wassail and welcome to Appleton Thorn by Grey Glass Firth,’ he said with a cheerful grin. ‘I hight Arrowsmith, Master of the Village and Lord of the Hundred. Will you sup this night?’

‘That is indeed our wish, sir. Gramercie.’

While Arrowsmith called for meat and drink, places were found for the newcomers. After guardedly introducing themselves as ‘Mistress Mellyn’, ‘Mistress Wellesley’ and ‘Mistress Lendoon’, they sat down, unnerved by the excess of attention. It was not long before every customer at the inn had found a reason to gather around their table. Big Nose, his post forgotten, was saying authoritatively, ‘They have come for Flench Ridings and the Bawming of the Thorn. They have come up the coast road, off a ship.’

Everyone contributed.

‘We don’t get many ships these days—I reckon only two or three a year.’

‘And after that storm, the terrible one when the sky went all black for days and the waves came up big, right to the cliff tops like never was seen before, well, we ain’t seen a single ship since.’

‘Give us tidings—what news from the world?’

‘The Royal Island of Tamhania has been destroyed by unseelie forces,’ the visitors replied. ‘Its downfall was the centre of the storm. Meanwhile the armies of the King-Emperor amass in the east. Skirmishes and small engagements have been fought, but as yet no great battle, when last we heard.’

By the time the taverner’s wife planted heaped platters on the table, the audience was packed tightly around. Arrowsmith waved them away.

‘Allow our guests to dine in peace, gentlefolk. Give them room to lift their elbows! You, Wimblesworthy and Ironmonger, are you not on guard at the West Gate tonight? Hasten back to your post. Bowyer, give us a song by the chimney.’

Sheepishly, Big Nose and Bright Helm hurried out. Enthused at being called upon to entertain the guests, Bowyer stepped up on a three-legged stool, tidied his jerkin, puffed out his chest, waited for the talk to subside and began to sing:

‘All was hushed in the Mountain Hall as the Jester told his tale  
But outside in the bitter cold a voice began to wail.  
The Jester told of the Great High Road that goes forever on,  
Winding by the greenwood trees and past the Ring of Stone.

‘Through the rocky mountain gate, along the jagged ridge  
Past the dark well of the fire, across the iron bridge.  
And who would travel this long road with lamp and staff in hand?  
’Tis Jack the soldier seeking for the Door to the Lost Land.

‘Three coins within his pocket and a raven on his shoulder.  
The rival’s sword hangs at his side—the South Wind’s blowing colder.  
And when at last he reached Road’s End, ’twas at the eleventh hour.  
The storm raged in the darkling sky ahint the blackened tower.

‘And who art thou,’ the Watchman cried, ‘that knocketh at my door?  
For now that thou hast raised thy hand thy fate is sealed for sure.’  
The soldier raised his sword on high—a rune was writ thereon.  
The thunderstorm fled swift away, and a bright star shone.’

When Bowyer finished, everyone applauded and called for another. The words ‘. . . *seeking for the Door to the Lost Land*’ unsettled Tahquil, but in the noisy tavern there was no opportunity to ponder them further. Bowyer had a second ditty well under way when, without warning, the door crashed open. Wimblesworthy rushed in exhibiting a frightened look and asked for the loan of a crossbow—

‘To shoot a Shock which hangs upon the West Gate!’

‘A Shock, is it?’ cried the inn patrons. ‘That’s what comes of leaving the gate unattended!’

They all poured out of the Thorn Tree, following Wimblesworthy to the gate. Out of curiosity Tahquil joined them, Arrowsmith striding close at her side.

A thing with a donkey’s head and a smooth velvet hide hung on the wooden middle rung of the grille. Beyond it hung the dark, with which it seemed to merge. Holding aloft their blazing torches, the onlookers stood in a semicircle regarding this phenomenon from a few yards away.

‘What *is* a Shock exactly?’ asked Bowyer, frowning at the apparition.

Nobody knew. They could only say that things like that were called Shocks.

‘Why don’t ye use yer falchion?’ suggested someone.

‘*You* use yer falchion!’ said Wimblesworthy aggrievedly. ‘You get close to it then!’

‘You’re such a maukin, Wimblesworthy,’ said a drinker who had carried his tankard out with him and still had it in his hand. ‘You’d be frightened of a chicken. What’s the use of having a whey-blood like him on guard, Arrowsmith?’

‘I’ll show you *maukin!*’ growled Wimblesworthy. ‘I’ll sneak up and grab it and take it to the inn to get a good look at it. Then you’ll find out what a Shock is!’

‘Aye, go on Wimblesworthy,’ they all encouraged, since there was little entertainment to be had from a Shock that did nothing but hang on a gate. ‘Do it!’

Emboldened by the support of his companions, Big Nose crept forward. As he seized the thing, it turned suddenly around, snapped at his hand and vanished.

Wimblesworthy bellowed. He jiggled about, cradling his hand to his chest. His friends ran to his aid, lifting him bodily and carrying him back to the inn with all speed. Arrowsmith ordered that the gate guard be relieved and doubled.

The last of the crowd trailed back to the Thorn Tree.

‘What a night!’ said Ironmonger, shaking his helmeted head in wonderment. ‘First Strangers, then a Shock. Well I never. What next?’

‘What next indeed?’ cried Arrowsmith. ‘With all these goings-on it would be safer for these three young ladies to stay in a well-protected house such as my own. My good sisters shall see that they are comfortable. What say ye, Mistress Mellyn?’

Tahquil noticed some of the men nudging each other.

‘It would not be meet,’ she demurred. ‘Gramercie, sir.’

‘Meet? I myself shall sleep in the stable, if ’tis propriety you are thinking of. You shall share the house with my sisters and no one else.’

‘Except of course *tomorrow night*,’ said one of the men significantly.

Arrowsmith stood as if a sudden thought had struck him.

‘Aye, tomorrow night. Well, we shall take that as it comes. I insist that you accept my offer of hospitality – after all, it would be less costly for you.’

In her turn, a sudden thought struck Tahquil. How much money did she and her companions carry? Did they have enough even to pay for the food they had eaten that evening?

‘Well, sir, if your sisters agree—’

‘Of course they shall agree!’ laughed the village’s Master. ‘Now we shall fetch your companions from the inn and wend home forthwith!’

At the Thorn Tree Inn, the wounded man sat with his hand plunged in a flagon of beer while the taverner’s wife mopped his brow.

‘Let’s see what’s to be done,’ said the wife.

Bravely, Wimblesworthy lifted his damaged extremity. Beer, mixed with blood, dripped down his sleeve gaily, like red feathers.

‘Ah, look at that!’ admired the inn patrons. ‘He’ll bear the scar of that bite on his thumb for the rest of his life, no doubt.’

Discovering that he lived yet and furthermore was branded with a badge of courage, the hero managed a watery smile.

‘Who’s a maukin now, Cooper?’ he sniffed.

No sooner had Tahquil, Viviana and Caitri stepped out of the inn door accompanied by Arrowsmith and several others, than one of the new gate guards strode up to them wearing a puzzled look.

'Finoderee's at the West Gate, Master Arrowsmith,' he reported. 'Says he's got summat for these misses here.'

'A busy night at the gate.' The Master of the Village turned to his protégées. 'Can this be?'

'Yes,' replied Tahquil. 'It is possible.'

They returned again to the West Gate. Through the bars, Finoderee held up a muddy, dripping object in his huge paw.

'I did it!' he said triumphantly. 'Though 'tis only a drop. Had to put a bit of clay-mud in the holes first. It wants mending, ye know.'

Viviana grabbed the silver spike-leaf strainer.

'Don't spill the water,' warned the wight.

'Well done,' said Tahquil. 'We now have all we require. Goodnight.'

Finoderee did not leave the gate. He stood nodding at Caitri. Tahquil noticed that the men were laughing silently.

'You gave Finoderee a little sieve to bring water?' Arrowsmith exclaimed. 'Best jest I've heard since last Peppercorn Rent!'

'Hallo, Master Arrowsmith,' said Finoderee. 'I'll be mowing your alder-meadow tonight.'

'Aye, and I'm sure I don't know what I'd do without your help,' said Arrowsmith.

'I am the hardest worker you've ever seen, ain't I?' said Finoderee.

'Surely,' agreed the Master. 'Well, you'd better be getting to that meadow now. The night's wearing on and cock-crow's not long away.'

'I don't mind cock-crow. I'll toss the hay to the fading moon or the star of morning and care not a whit for the rooster's alarm.'

'Finoderee is the wonder and no mistake,' eulogised the men.

Satisfied, the brawny wight loped off.

After the exciting events of the evening, the travellers spent a restful night at Arrowsmith's house, an oak-timbered building with a thatched roof, high gables, low side walls and mullioned windows. His sisters, Betony and Sorrel, welcomed them as he had guaranteed; he had sent a message on ahead and they had bade the servant air extra featherbeds in preparation. Their brother slept in the stable, keeping his promise.

As usual the Langothe would not permit sleep to come easily to Tahquil. While she lay in her bed looking through the window at the moon-sheen of the night sky she was reminded of the colour of Thorn's eyes.