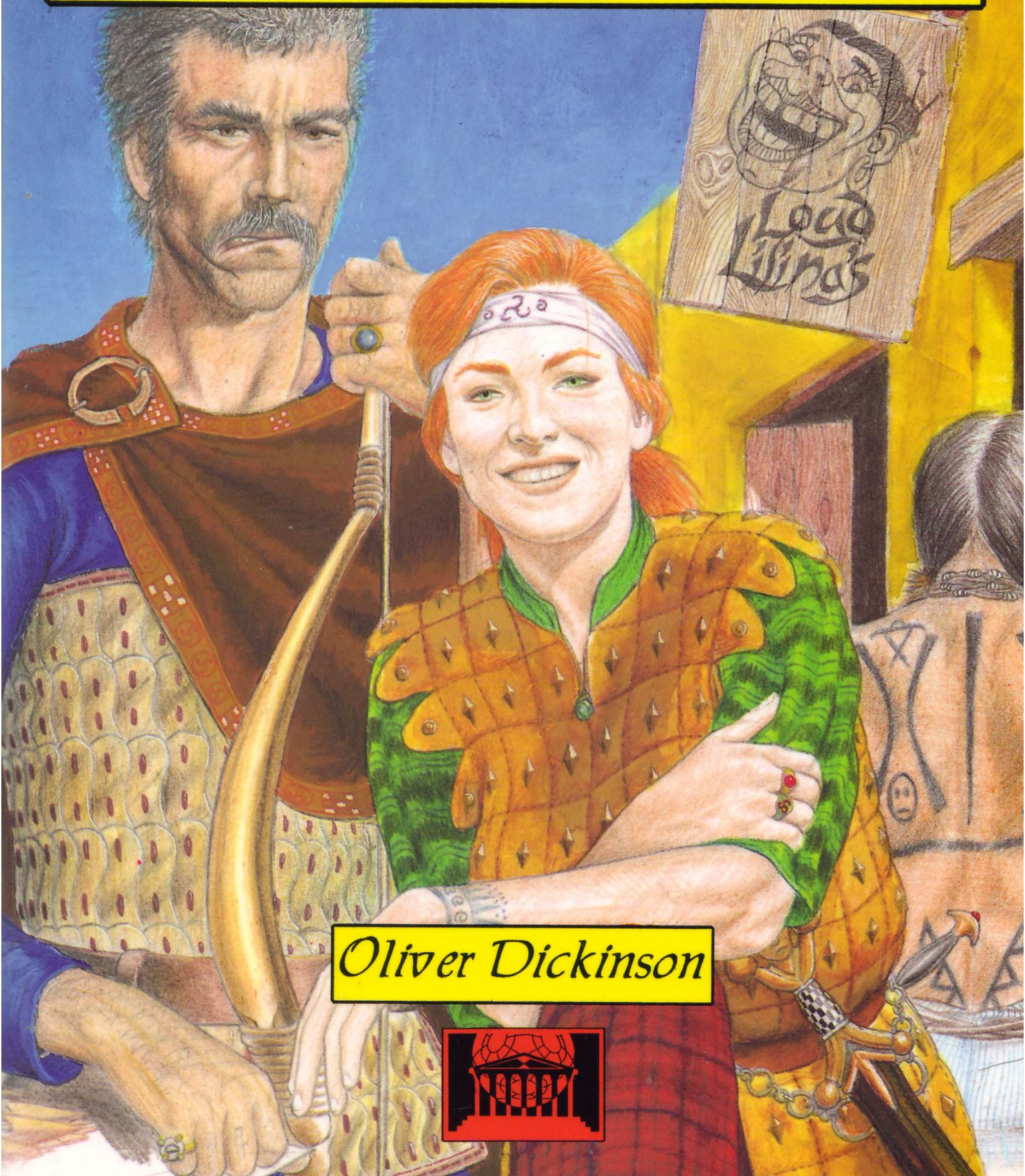


The Collected

GRISELDA



Oliver Dickinson



The Collected Griselda

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Reaching Moon Megacorp

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Oliver and Me

By Greg Stafford

One of the best parts of being in roleplaying is the people I meet. Often someone who was, at first, just another player turns out to be a fascinating person, and perhaps (if we are lucky) even a friend. Oliver Dickinson is one of those people.

Oliver and I have never sat down and played a game together. Our friendship has been more slow and refined, in a genteel sort of way, at first. Over a long distance, the game began when Oliver somehow got a copy of RuneQuest and was intrigued enough to generate some characters. After reading about Pavis and the Big Rubble he liked the setting enough that he began to play the characters, albeit in solo play.

Sometime about then he began writing about the characters' adventures which he had created. Well, I have seen lots of game write-ups which have never had another eye cast upon them since then. This one had two things more: entertainment and luck.

There is a great difference between writing prose fiction and narrating game adventures. A whole lot of bad "game fiction" is out there polluting the market because it is not well written fiction. Oliver did not fall into that trap and instead adopted a narrative form which is, in case you did not recognise it, a Damon Runyon pastiche. It is well written and entertaining to read.

And he was lucky. I cannot list the places where Oliver's material was published, but who can ever truly describe the circumstances which allowed White Dwarf magazine to publish RuneQuest fiction? Oliver began by correctly writing to me to ask about using Glorantha as the setting for his fiction. He also said something about mythology. I made some flippant remarks about Mycenaean mythology. Oliver replied with some statement of

fact or other, and I quarreled my position for some time. Eventually, I discovered that Oliver was really a scholar who actually knew what he was talking about. But I didn't hold it against him.

Oliver's day job is, in fact, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Durham. He is one of the senior staff members, and has chaired his department. His magnum opus is about to be published: a book on the Aegean Bronze Age (that is, "mainland, islands, and Crete"). It should be out in '93. Its title is entirely and appropriately academic: *The Aegean Bronze Age*. He once mentioned that he might have preferred Sex and Violence in the Bronze Age, or even Matriarchy and Militarism, perhaps to attract the New Age market. Or maybe the gamers.

I always liked the way that Oliver picked up on small clues and used them in his stories. That was how I got the chance to manipulate Griselda, and use long-distance gamemastering.

For instance, from an early Wyrms Footnotes he picked out that Pikat Yaraboom had a weakness for red-headed women. Griselda then got a reputation for being the big brute's friend, as published in "Griselda gets her Men". I was pleased, and entertained. And prompted to tweak a player character, in a gamemaster way. I was working on Trollpak, and entered the same information about Pikat Yaraboom as had appeared in Wym's Footnotes, but added that he liked red-headed women "to eat". I never said anything to Oliver, and wondered if he would ever see the note.

The response was "A Tasty Morsel", in which this touchy problem is politely addressed. It made me laugh.

I think that one of the appeals of these Griselda stories is that we all recognize our own RuneQuest Characters in Griselda and Wolfhelm, and their colourful opponents, and ourselves in Olaf Dickin's-son, the narrator. After all, where would you and I really be in that dingy corner of glorious Glorantha? I have enjoyed the Griselda stories, and endorse them as presenting a legitimate view of Glorantha. I am glad to honour the author in this publication.

November 6, 1992

Greg Stafford

INTRODUCTION

About the Stories

I had always wanted to try my hand at imitating the style of Damon Runyon's marvellous Broadway stories, and one day I got the inspiration of using it for a tale set in Pavis, which from what I knew of it then (1981) could provide the kind of rough, semi-criminal background suitable for Runyon-style stories. As they say, the rest is history: one story led to another, and now here I am ten years later with a sizeable series to my name (they have got longer in recent years, a result of not having to comply with editorial restraints). I did not intend them to be so much oriented around Griselda, but she has taken over; when I tried writing *Serious Money* without her it simply wouldn't work. I guess we are stuck with one another. Though a major aim has been to entertain, I did also intend to show how I thought things could work in Pavis at this level, and how adventurers might behave, and to point a moral here and there.

I have used as much of the Runyon language as is appropriate to the setting, but have incorporated American expressions from other sources that I liked, and sometimes tried my hand at other styles; I drew on George V. Higgins' early novels to produce the monologue *Good Advice*, while *Griselda the Hero??* and *Devils Play* are more "old West" style. The *Irishisms of Shamus Gets a Case* got in because I was enjoying very much *The Best of Myles*, by Myles na Gopaleen (Flann O'Brien), when I wrote it. The texts have been revised somewhat here, to fit known Pavis facts or simply make the meaning clearer.

Redfox, of *Worlds Apart*, is the heroine of a 20-issue British comic of that name of which I was a fan, originated and drawn by Fox and written with various collaborators, last and best Chris Bell. The story was not written in time for an anthology of stories to be set in the Redfox universe, but appears here by kind permission of Fox.

The setting

Not all the readers of these stories may know of the fantasy universe of Glorantha in which they are set, and which was the original setting for the great and famous FRP game of RuneQuest. The world has an extremely rich and complex mythology and history, of which only the most relevant points are mentioned here; buy the RuneQuest packs to learn more! It has a predominantly “ancient world” rather than mediaeval culture, and magic of various forms is very widespread.

Pavis is a medium city by ancient standards, with a population of several thousands, many of whom are transient adventurers who contribute greatly to its rough, frontier town atmosphere. These are drawn by tales of treasure in The Rubble, the name generally given to the massive ruins of the ancient city of Pavis, against one wall of which the modern city was founded as recently as 1550. The Rubble is infested with dangerous creatures and outlaw groups, but several portions are occupied by various races, of whom the Trolls are most notable (see further below), and a remnant of the ancient city survives. The ancient city took its name from its founder, who is still worshipped as the city god by the surviving descendants of the ancient inhabitants and many of the new citizens, but his power is purely local. It is the only major settlement in the plains of Prax, an otherwise desolate region that provides just enough pasture for the livestock of the nomadic tribes of the area, who take their names from the animals they herd and ride (Sables and Llamas are mentioned in the stories, but there are several others of varying importance). Caravans cross the northern parts of these plains to reach Pavis, which is also situated on a north-south river along which a thin population is strung out in several minor settlements.

The city’s new rulers are from the Lunar Empire, founded by the Red Goddess, now the Red Moon, but the conquest of Pavis only took place in 1610, and is very much resented by many sections of the community, who originate from the settled lands to the north-west conquered earlier by the Lunar Empire (which include most of the territories known collectively as Dragon Pass, especially Sartar, Griselda’s home country). The Lunar government is attempting to enforce law and order, with some success, and to control the activities of adventurers; but it has no effective control over the Rubble, although movement in and out of it is monitored and patrols are sent in fairly regularly.

The Peoples

Apart from the races of human being, there are many non-human intelligent races in Glorantha; several are mentioned in the stories, and have representative populations in Pavis or the Rubble. The most important are the Trolls, who completed the ruin of ancient Pavis after the nomad tribes had done a lot of damage. These are a rather gross race tied to the element of Darkness. An ancient curse on them means that the majority of their offspring are the stunted and inferior Trollkin, whom they treat as a slave race. They have the capacity to eat virtually anything, and generally do; but their habit of treating every other form of sentient life as food makes it hard to sympathise with them as their tragic history deserves. Gods of theirs who are mentioned are Zorak Zoran, the war and death god, and Xiola Umbar, a goddess of healing and compassion; their society is dominated by the females, but like many other features of their complex culture this is not well known among humans.

Also important among the races of the Rubble are the Broos, generally humanoid in form with animal heads (often goat, deer or similar), who are tied to Chaos, as are the rarely mentioned Scorpionmen, Ogres (human in appearance but cannibalistic), Dragonsnails, and Gorps (lumps of acidic protoplasm); Chaos can also produce all kinds of monstrosities (see Wolfhead's Story). Broos are totally immune to disease (but often carriers of it) and to poison, treat all creatures, including each other, appallingly, and are generally bad news.

Religions

Chaos entered Glorantha because of the disputes between its many groups of gods (most of which are tied to the elements of darkness, earth, water, light, and air), and although it was eventually defeated it has not been eradicated; its influence shows up in many ways, especially mutated races and individuals and the cults of vile gods like Cacodemon who survived the defeat. The old gods of Glorantha all agreed on a compromise to defeat Chaos, but the Red Goddess has been able to ignore this, and her links with Chaos are the chief reason for the suspicion and downright hostility felt for the Lunars by the followers of other gods. Most hostile are Orlanth, chief of the pantheon worshipped in Sartar and many other "barbarian" regions, who is a favourite god of adventurers in his aspect of Orlanth Adventurous, and Storm Bull, a local wind god of Prax whose small cult is made up of Chaos-hating berserkers. Other important gods referred to in the stories are Humakt, god of war, honour, and death, and Lhankor Mhy, the god of scholars, whose followers, generally referred to as Sages, maintain a kind of

research institute in Pavis, and divide into factions reflecting their origins. Yelmalio is a light god, son of the Sun and patron of one of the groups making up the population of the modern city of Pavis.

Those who rise high in the service of their gods are called Rune Lords (whose duties particularly involve fighting for the cult) and Rune Priests; these can acquire many special powers of magic, but simpler forms of magic, less trustworthy because casting the spells depends on the user's native Power, are widely available (hence there is no separate class of magic-user, as in many fantasy worlds, but most cults can only teach their followers certain spells). Knowledge of spells can be stored in items (matrices) and extra Power in crystals; Griselda has two of the former and one of the latter.

The currency

Ten copper clacks make one silver Lunar; twenty silver Lunars make one gold wheel.

Other notes

The game of mumblety-peg, first referred to in *Shamus Gets a Case*, may be unfamiliar to many (if anyone has seen Polanski's film *The Knife* they will recognise it). Basically, it is as Shamus describes it, but he does not explain that you start from the space between thumb and first finger and jump to the space between each pair of fingers in turn and then back again, trying to do this faster and faster without cutting yourself.

The context should make slang terms clear, but just in case, I will state that a dip is a pickpocket, and tops are loaded dice



LUCKY EDDI



It comes on a nice warm morning in Earth Season, and I am standing outside the Temple of the Air Gods, thinking of not much except how to raise some scratch to bet on the next Trollball game. The reason I am standing there is because this is a place that many adventurers are bound to stop at on their way to the Rubble, and if they are lucky, on their way back also, and on such occasions I may be able to make a touch. If they are going in, I offer to pray for them for a few clacks, and while everyone in this man's town knows that a prayer from me is about as much use as a Mostali crossbow *, there are always new adventurers, and every now and then one throws me a few clacks for luck, to pray to Orlanth Adventurous, or maybe Humakt or Storm Bull. Of course, I do not actually go and pray for them, because I know nobody is going to check up. For either they do not come back, or if they do they make a nice score and cannot be bothered over a few clacks, or they have other things to worry about, such as broken arms.

I look out for those who come back also, and try to figure out who makes a nice score, for such persons are often soft touches, and I hope to get to them before they feel the bite too often and become disillusioned with the whole experience. And I wish to say that I do not do too badly, at that, for I

* *A Mostali crossbow will self-destruct in the hands of a non-Mostali.*

always ask them for their story first, and as everyone knows adventurers dearly love to tell their story – in fact, the chances are that the only time they are not telling their story is when they are doing more adventuring. At the least they may stake me to a drink, and while I am by no means a guy who has to have his drink, I will not say no if a drink comes along, and someone else is paying.

I must hear ten thousand stories in my time, and I sometimes figure I will open an advice bureau for adventurers and make a mint, but then I remember that they are likely to come asking when I am trying to catch up on my sleep, and so I drop the idea. Many of the stories are interesting, and even instructive, and sometimes there is a good laugh in them, such as when a guy fumbles so much he takes off his own leg instead of a Troll's, but of course I do not laugh unless the story-teller thinks it funny also.

As I am standing there, who do I see but Lucky Eddi. I know Eddi from around and about Pavis for many years, in fact, I know him from before he gets called Lucky. The reason he has this name is because he makes his living guiding adventurers in the Rubble, and it is really remarkable how he always comes back with a whole skin, particularly since at first he is the only one who does come back. But this begins to cause gossip which hurts Eddi's business, so parties start coming back sometimes, and they may even have something to show for the trip besides cuts and bruises, though in such cases nobody is able to find out what happens to them afterwards, as they seem to disappear. But adventurers are always coming and going in Pavis, so few people give this much thought.

Anyhow, Eddi goes along with his business, and it is rumoured he does fairly well at it, for adventurers are a clack a dozen in Pavis, and Eddi is very good at picking parties who will make it worth his while, and will trust him, and at avoiding parties who look to be too tough or too smart. He has plenty of sense and keeps moving around, so nobody will know where to find him and his dough, especially his dough, though some persons try. But unpleasant things seem to happen to such persons, and it is generally believed that Eddi has very good connections on both sides of the Walls. He certainly keeps in with the hard guys on this side. While it is nothing that Big Nygg nods to him, because he will nod to anyone when he is feeling good, I once see Wolfhead do so, and anyone will tell you this is practically phenomenal. For Wolfhead is such a guy as never seems to be feeling good, but is extra-mean, and he generally looks right through you, and will tread on your toes if you do not get out of his way.

3 *Griselda*

I do not see Eddi for quite some time before this morning, in fact I hear that he finally decides to retire, but it seems he is still in the same old business, for he has a doll with him who has *adventurer* written all over her. Now, personally, I strongly disapprove of dolls being adventurers, because no doll adventurer stakes me to anything in all the years I am in Pavis. But I am very careful never to voice such sentiments, for the chances are any doll adventurer will knock you bow-legged if you say such things, and I hear some will do so if they suspect you are even thinking them. So I step up and smile very politely at her. When I get a good look at her, I wonder how she figures to be an adventurer, unless she is going to charm anything she meets to death, for while she looks as pretty a doll as ever I see, she stands about as high as a stunted Trollkin and does not look as if she can deliver a punch that will go through paper. She packs a cute little sword, and carries a very new-looking spear, and a shield that does not have one dent in it, and I judge that she has a fair bit of dough behind her, for all her armour is shiny new ringmail. The only funny thing is, she wears a traveller's hat with such a broad brim that you cannot see her eyes properly. But she smiles back at me very pleasant, and so does Eddi when I ask him how he is doing.

"I cannot complain," he says. "In fact, I am really retired, but I come out of retirement to do this one job."

"I hear of Master Eddi as one of the most experienced guides to the Rubble of all time," says the doll, "and I have to have a good guide, to find my ancestor's treasure."

I can see that she is a gabby doll, and will tell me the whole proposition in a moment, but Eddi shushes her and says you never know who may be listening. And indeed, who comes around the corner just then but Wolfhead, but he walks through us all as he loves to do, paying nobody any mind, and goes on his way. The doll looks after him and asks who he is.

"That is one of the worst guys in this whole town," says Eddi. "But do not worry, miss, because you are safe with me; he will not bother us."

Of course, this is nothing but a falsehood, as the way I hear it, Wolfhead will bother anybody if he sees a way to make a profit by it, up to a Zorak Zoran Death Lord. But the doll seems to believe Eddi, and smiles up at him, and he smiles back in such a way that I commence to wonder if he does not finally fall for a doll after all these years. Then she says she must go and do some praying to Orlanth Adventurous, and I take the chance to ask Eddi about the proposition.

"It is really remarkable," says Eddi. "I do not have to do a thing. She seeks me out and is wild to have me, because of my great reputation"

"What is this treasure?" I ask.

"She has a chart," says Eddi, "and it is not one of Treasure Trove Hurbi's, either. It seems her ancestor caches some stuff long ago. I may even look into it if I get a chance."

"Then you do not figure on going for it?" I say.

Eddi laughs and shakes his head. "Do you think I am getting dumb? No, she tells me all about her family, and I figure they will pay a nice ransom to get her back in one piece. It is a pity, because she is really very cute, but business is business. My partners and I can always use a little more."

Well, this is really quite indiscreet of Eddi, to be letting out details of his business to me in the street, and I figure this doll must have him a little dizzy, after all, but just then she comes back, and off they go towards the Rubble, and I think no more about it.

A whole lot of time goes by and I do not make a touch, even when I move near the People's Gate, which is the main way into the Rubble for adventurers, and finally I am figuring on giving up for the day and trying the grog-shops, when I see two persons coming through the gate from the Rubble, and I recognise one of these as the doll from her hat, which makes her look like a walking mushroom. Now this is strange, to be sure, but not half so strange as who is with her, for it is by no means Eddi, but Wolfhead. I am so surprised that I step right up to them and say, "Where is Eddi?"

Then the doll takes off her hat and looks me slap in the eye, and I see that she has a pair of very blue eyes, but the expression in them makes me go cold all over. "Eddi will not be back," she says. "We make quite sure of that, after we find out where he keeps his dough."

"You mean you leave him helpless in the Rubble, when all you want is his dough?" I say, somewhat horrified. "At least you can bring him back alive. What does he ever do to you?"

"He takes my brother Rory into the Rubble and does not bring him back," the doll says. "My brother Rory is an honest sap, and will trust anybody, but I love him just the same. Of course, I cannot do it without Wolfie here." And she smiles up at Wolfhead, though I will just as soon have a snake smile at me, personally.

Wolfhead says, "It turns out that Griselda is my long-lost cousin, and so is her brother, though of course I do not know it then, or I will make Eddi hard to catch. I never have a cousin before, that I know of, but kinsfolk must stick together, no matter what."

It seems he gets a great bang out of having a cousin, for I never see him like this before.

"So Eddi's luck finally runs out," I say.

"No," says Wolfhead. "He gets lucky again at the end there. I do him a favour and finish him off. Perhaps I am getting soft-hearted."

Then he and the doll laugh very heartily and go off arm in arm. Wolfhead is carrying what looks like a pretty heavy sack, but I know there will be no sense in trying to touch him, for he is a very hard-hearted guy indeed, whatever he says.

A note about the narrator: Olaf Dickin's-son is well known throughout the Oldtown, Downtown and Riverside districts of Pavis as a gossip and con-man. He always has a story to tell. He is particularly well-versed about Griselda's many hustles, making a fetish of chronicling that lethel lady and spinning yarns of her to anyone who will listen.



GRISELDA GETS HER MEN



I am sitting in Loud Lilina's one night with Treasure Trove Hurbi, talking of this and that, when who comes in but Griselda. This is not long after she and Wolfhead finish Lucky Eddi's run of luck, and if I am them I will be keeping quiet about it, for Eddi is thought to have important associates who may not care to hear of his bad luck. But the story is all over town, and I consider it very unwise of Griselda to be wandering around on her own without Wolfhead to look out for her, for she may be smart, but she does not look able to cope with the rough stuff. Yet here she is, wearing her little sword but without any other protection, and looking as if she has a few drinks on board as well. She glances all around the joint, and when she sees me she comes over, saying in a loud voice, "Why, if it is not the guy who knows Lucky Eddi! Say, I wonder where Eddi is now, what is left of him? I do not figure even a Rubble Runner will be able to stomach him, but maybe I am wrong; maybe they really will eat anything."

Then she laughs very heartily, although I do not think this so funny, at that. I cannot think of anything to say, but I do not have to, because two large guys get up and approach Griselda, going one to each side. Anyone can see that these are guys who have experience, and they are looking extremely hostile. One says,

"We do not care to hear Eddi spoken of that way."

Now at this I get ready to go under the table, which I figure the safest place on such occasions, but I see Griselda smile just a little, and she looks from one to the other and says, "Well, gentlemen, if you do not like it you can do the other thing." And since they are commencing to do the other thing, pulling clubs and daggers and so forth, I make my dive, but I barely hit the floor before the two guys do also, and anyone can see they are goners, and the whole joint becomes very quiet. As I am getting up again Griselda starts for the door, and Loud Lilina begins to yell at her about the mess she makes of her nice clean floor. But Griselda turns at the door and looks at her, and Lilina becomes very quiet, indeed; in fact, I never know her so quiet, and the chances are it is the first time she is so quiet since she pops into the world.

When things settle down a bit, Treasure Trove Hurbi tells me that Griselda has her sword out and into one guy quick as a wink, and she turns so fast that he is still wondering what happens to his stomach when she carves up the other guy. So everyone can see that Griselda is plenty able to take care of herself, with or without Wolfhead, and she gets some respect around town. The story gets about that in fact she sets the whole thing up, and is aiming to get these guys because they are fingered to her as associates of Eddi's, and furthermore that she is after all of Eddi's associates. Some begin to offer to bet money that she will not get any more, because Eddi's associates are also able to take care of themselves, and moreover they are now forewarned, and know her, but she does not know them. Yet she is seen about Pavis day by day, and the odds against her begin to shorten.

Now it comes on a time when the Sables have some races outside Pavis, for the Sables stand good with the Lunars who are running Pavis now, and can come and go as they please. Most of Pavis goes out to watch these races, and maybe bet on them, and you can see many notable figures there. As I am standing watching a race and keeping close to a couple of Lunar officers, because I figure there will be little trouble near them, I see Griselda again, a little way off, in a pretty neat outfit and without a weapon in sight. A guy comes close to her, who is wearing a long cloak and does not look anything special, but she turns and says something to him. All of a sudden the guy is making movements in his cloak, but she moves so fast you can barely see it and plants a short knife that she palms from somewhere in his throat.

Now this is most disturbing for the Lunar officers, because, though they know that this kind of thing happens in Pavis from time to time, they do not wish to have it happen where they can see it, as they will have to

investigate. So they go over to ask her a few questions, and I listen in. She states that she suspects the guy, and a Detect Enemy spell shows him up, and if she cannot protect herself against someone who is aiming to kill her there is no justice in Pavis. Well, of course there is not, or anyway not much, but the Lunar officers cannot admit this, and when the guy's cloak is pulled back, sure enough, he has a dagger out and there is poison on it as well. I remember that he looks surprised, though not so surprised as the guys in Lilina's. So the Lunar officers just warn Griselda that they have their eye on her and let her go.

Well, after this you cannot get any reasonable odds on whether Griselda will do it again, but she becomes a favourite to handle almost anybody, though you can get any price you like on whether someone will get her, and anybody will take your money with great pleasure. It turns out that this guy is a candidate for the Black Fangs, and quite fancied too, but the Black Fangs figure it is none of their business, and some say that they are even thinking of inviting Griselda to join, and will certainly not take a contract on her and ruin such a fine sporting event. Since she is known to speak to me, some guys even ask me if I have any inside dope on what she will do next, and I only wish I have, at that, for it almost seems like finding money in the street. For a while any stray corpse that turns up in Pavis is credited to Griselda, but she always denies it, and it does not figure, for these are ordinary adventurers and crooks, and plain bums, and not the high-class heavies who will be laying for her now, if any are. But nothing happens for a week, and people begin to say that Griselda has that old Praxian sign on Eddi's associates, and they scarcely dast to poke their noses out, for it is generally agreed that Griselda is pure poison, and if you hit her you will likely break your arm.

Now, all this does not make Griselda any more popular with the public at large. In fact, most citizens play the chill for her, because they find it unnerving that such a small doll should have so little difficulty knocking them off and show no sign of letting it bother her at all; and moreover they do not wish to wind up innocent bystanders killed in the cross-fire, as is apt to happen at scenes of violence, and such a scene is a sure thing around Griselda sooner or later, and sooner rather than later. If she cares that so few people will give her a tumble, Griselda does not let it show, but I judge that she may be a little lonesome, at that, for she will talk to anyone, and this includes Trolls. Few people around Pavis care to have much truck with Trolls, for it is well known that they have many nasty habits, and will eat you as soon as look at you, and the best you are likely to get out of them is a

punch on the snoot. But Griselda seems to know their language much better than any self-respecting human has a right to do, and it is almost as if she seeks them out, and they are reported to show much interest in her.

Many criticise her for this and say no good will come of it, and that is how it turns out, but not for Griselda. One evening a bunch of four Trollkin come into Lilina's and approach Griselda's table with cheery cries, and before Lilina can yell at them to get out, for she tries to bar non-humans, they all of a sudden pull weapons and surround Griselda with obvious hostile intent. Now these are no ordinary Trollkin, for they do not act dumb the way Trollkin are apt to do, but handle their weapons as if they know how to use them, and it surely looks as if Griselda is up against it this time. But before the Trollkin can connect Griselda simply vanishes, and she must move very fast, because the next thing anyone knows there she is at the door, and one of the Trollkin is all out of breath, because he has a dart in his windpipe. Then she is gone and the Trollkin run after her, but it is judged from the cries of woe that are heard that they do not have much luck. In fact, Griselda returns a while later, and though she is panting a bit and covered with dust she seems none the worse. At once there is much excited questioning, for a lot of money is riding on whether she tops her previous best. But she just holds up two fingers while she is finishing her drink, and says, "I wing a third, but he and the last run off; too bad." Then she walks out, not forgetting to collect her dart on the way, and Lilina has some more cleaning up to do.

Well, after this the odds on Griselda are phenomenal, in fact they are practically out of sight, and some are ready to back her to outlast anything short of an army, though others insist that she has no really classy opposition as yet. So it is a great surprise to all when it is reported that she is seen going into the Rubble with Trolls, for those who go into the Rubble with Trolls rarely come back. Moreover, these are reported to be extra-tough Trolls, such as will give even Wolfhead pause for thought, but what is strangest of all is that they do not seem to have the arm on her, but are reported to be chatting back and forth, though she is all kitted out in full armour. Then a few days go by, and nothing is heard of her, and people begin going around saying no run of luck lasts for ever, and she is a gone goose. But personally I will not believe this, and so I am not surprised when she shows up again, looking like a cat that swallows a very tasty bird, in the company of some very important-looking Trolls. In fact there is a whole delegation in attendance when they come to People's Gate, and they seem to part on good terms.

Now it may be because I always give her a hello, for fear she will hold it against me if I do not, or because she is just bound and determined to tell

somebody, but she comes over to where I am propping up a wall and takes me to the nearest bar and gives me the whole story over a drink.

"I finish my business," she says. "I run down Eddi's major associate in the Rubble, who finances these attempts on my life, and I figure I now do enough for my brother's memory. It is simple, really. I work out that Eddi's associates in the Rubble are likely to be Trolls, for they run most of everything there, but I need a connection to get me in and perhaps give me a little help. As it happens, I am acquainted with a very important Troll far away from here – do you ever hear of Pikat Yaraboom*?" I nod that I do, and it does not take too much to figure out why he likes Griselda, for I believe I forget to mention before that she has hair as red as an Earth Season sunset, and everyone knows that Pikat Yaraboom likes red-headed women, though no one knows why. He is indeed a high shot among the Trolls, and my respect for Griselda goes up again, that she knows him.

"Well," she says, "Pikat Yaraboom has contacts in the Rubble and gives me messages for them, and finally I connect up with Trolls that know them. You may hear that I go off with some tough Trolls, but these are to protect me, for a deal is set up. I am to have a fair fight with Snargan Varsh, Eddi's associate, and this okayed by none other than Javis Gan himself; he has some time for humans, and moreover Pikat Yaraboom tells him that I am a tasty morsel, and if I lose what do I care if they eat me? We all swear oaths that no one is going to break, not even one of those Zorak Zorani, so all I have to do is win the fight, and I am home free.

"This Snargan Varsh is by no means a soft touch, but a big Dark Troll, and he has brains, but like everyone else he thinks I will be a push-over because I am small and not too strong. I have to swear that I will not use attacking magic, or throw stuff, or go invisible, which I cannot do anyway as I use up that spell, though I do not tell them that, so you can see I am giving him plenty of the best of it, and some Trolls are offering 2 to 1 and even 3 to

**Pikat Yaraboom is called Lord of the Hand of Death. He is a son of Bina Binag (a troll heroine from the Blue Moon Plateau) and the underworld spirit Lord Lurker in Shadows. He has a power, small at first though he trained it quickly, to stun, maim, kill, or rob whoever he lays his left hand on. He is also a terribly powerful shaman, called Hell Lord by his enemies, for he can summon his father's servents at will. He has animal familiars from beyond the world of known man. He hates all elves, dwarfs, cults of light and their worshippers and canines, bestial or lycanthropic. He also has an odd affection for dragonewts and red-headed women.*

1 against me, but I am not allowed to put a bet on myself, as they do not feel sure of a pay-off if I lose.

“I do have an edge on him when it comes to getting in first, and he uses a mace which is most impressive to look at, but I can see that it has weak spots and will not be so good to parry with. I get in some jabs with my spear and parry most of his blows, and presently he is getting tired; I judge that he eats too well and does not train enough. Anyway, he drops his guard and gives me a chance to stick the spear in deep, and while it does not kill him it slows him down, and then I hack away at his mace with my sword until it snaps. I am taking some punishment, and have to do some Healing, which gives him time to pull the spear out, but in the excitement he drops it, and then I lure him into grappling with me and stick my sword in his throat.”

“Well, Griselda,” I say, “that is all very interesting, and most impressive, but tell me why you are so long getting back.”

“Oh,” she says, “that is because, first, I take some time to recover, as I am not in very good shape by the end, and then I am invited to a victory feast, and this takes some time to prepare. Troll feasts last a long time, as you may know, but they do me a very great honour and I am bound to stick it out. Besides, they can say what they like about Trolls, but some of them surely can cook” – and here she gives that smile of hers which makes my hair stand on end – “Snargan Varsh and his Trollkin taste delicious.”



SHAMUS GETS A CASE



It is really quite surprising how many persons there are in Pavis who wish to have a reputation for being tough. Of course, there are certain advantages to having a reputation for being tough, such as that other persons will treat you with respect, and listen to you when you wish to gab, and maybe buy you drinks, and this is all very good for the old pride, but getting such a reputation is likely to involve a considerable amount of risk. Some persons run risks because they have to, such as soldiers, or members of tough cults, or persons who aim to make themselves rich by means that are not legitimate, and if these do well they tend to accumulate a reputation for being tough without making any special effort. Then, of course, there are adventurers, who in my view are crazy, one and all, because they seem to enjoy taking risks, and these too, if they survive, are likely to get a reputation for being tough. There is no other good way to do it, though plenty of persons think they know one. Such persons hang weapons all over themselves, and go around talking tough, and acting tough, and they clearly hope to impress everyone else into believing they are tough, but sooner or later someone will refuse to be impressed, and then such persons generally wind up the wrong end of something painful. So this is not reckoned to be a smart way to behave in Pavis, where there are so many persons who actually are tough, even if they do not always look it.

Now among those who have this reputation, or are trying to get it, are

many dolls, and while you may figure this is no way for a doll to behave, and such dolls must have no other opportunities in life, this is by no means the case. For though they include big hefty dolls such as may seem natural mates for Cave Trolls, many of them are fairly easy on the eye, and it is hard to understand why they will bother with adventuring, or belonging to some cult which sends them out on tough assignments, when they can have a home, and a husband, and little children running about, and all this and that. But this is a subject on which few of them are ready to be questioned; in fact, the chances are they will bust you one in the snoot if you suggest that this is not a traditional way of life for good-looking dolls, and as I do not care to be busted in the snoot I never find out why they do it. Indeed, I long ago give up wondering about it, as I have plenty of more important things to figure out, such as who will win the next Trollball game. But many guys are fascinated by tough dolls, and find them very romantic, though personally I will prefer my romance without the sharp stuff around. But this does not seem to bother such guys, and plenty will do some pitching to these dolls, and as long as they do not mention husbands and children and suchlike they may do all right, for tough dolls are also interested in romance now and then.

Far and away the most successful of such guys is one by the name of Sweet-Talking Shamus, but then he has a lot going for him.

He is tall and well-built, and has blue eyes, and curly black hair, and shiny white teeth that he is always flashing, in fact he is as handsome as any guy has a right to be, and as you will guess from his name he has a great line in talk, though his talk sometimes sounds a bit funny, as he comes from way away from Pavis. He is always to be seen in the company of some tough doll, and while it may not be true, as some malicious characters insist, that he is never sincere in what he says to them, but makes his living this way, it is certainly true that they are dolls who are successful in their chosen career, and have a fair bit of dough, and always they are staking him to meals and drinks, and sharing their accommodation with him. Indeed, if they do not do this, it is hard to see how Shamus will make out, as he is generally broke. But he is well-liked by many, and quite handy with his fists, so few will bad-mouth him, and certainly the tough dolls never seem to complain that they are not getting value for money.

One time Shamus's current doll takes off, as his dolls are apt to do, to go on a mission or adventuring or something, and what does he do but take it into his head to make a play for Griselda. There is some criticism of Shamus for this, not for his taste, since Griselda is certainly a looker, but for

his sense. For while Griselda loosens up somewhat after she gets through avenging her brother, and can be good company when she is in the mood, most guys continue to treat her with some reserve, because her reputation for being tough, and her way of looking at people, are apt to make the average guy nervous, and moreover nobody can figure out what she will do next, and what her angle is. Furthermore, Wolfhead is believed to think very highly of her, and nobody but a rank sucker will think of cutting in on Wolfhead. But Shamus just goes right ahead, and Wolfhead does not seem to object to his presence around Griselda, so the odds on his getting somewhere shorten somewhat, but not by so very much, at that, because Griselda does not seem to take much notice of him, except to include him in a round of drinks now and then. Now Shamus is by no means accustomed to such treatment, but he is no quitter, and so he hangs in there and steps up the pressure. He gets to where Griselda will talk to him, and smile at him, and even let him kiss her hand every once in a while, but she makes it plain that she takes it all in fun.

Well, if I am Shamus I will drop the whole thing and mark it up to experience, but he does not do this. Instead, he becomes really stuck on Griselda, and begins to look pale, and go off his feed, and lose sleep, and all that. In fact he gets so stuck on her that he becomes very boring, for he can scarcely talk of anything else, and his talk is by no means interesting but very repetitive, being concerned with what a fine doll Griselda is, and how he cannot live without her, and so forth. At this time there is much speculation about Griselda in Pavis, and you can hear all kinds of stories about her past, but Shamus will take violent exception to anything that he considers critical of her, and since anything that will cause some holy person just to raise an eyebrow in mild reproof will be considered critical by Shamus, this covers just about anything you can say about Griselda. It gets to where no one dares to mention her name without looking round for Shamus, and it is all very tedious.

Now I will say this for Griselda, that she shows no signs of encouraging him. In fact, she starts trying to play the chill for him, but he is very difficult to shake off and she seldom manages to get away for long. I come upon her one day in a little dive where I never see her before, because the liquor there is the next best thing to a low potency acid, and I only go there myself because the owner is my cousin, and will give me credit when my resources are low. She looks up very fast when I come in, but seems to relax when she sees it is only me, and offers me a drink. Naturally I will not refuse such an offer, even if it is my cousin's booze, and it turns out to be quite

drinkable, as when Griselda comes in he dares not offer her his usual poison, but gets out some stuff I never know he has. It seems that Griselda is not on her first drink, or even her second, but she just sits there looking at nothing, and I do not speak, as she may not wish to be disturbed.

Finally she turns to me and says, "You know this guy Shamus?" and I admit that I do, somewhat.

"Well, maybe you can tell me what ails him," she says. "I know his game; I see that type before. Can he not see that I am not interested? I am beginning to get very sick of it. I do not want to have to kill the guy, only what does it take to shake him off?"

"Well, Griselda," I say, "it is plain that you do not perceive that he has a bad case of love for you, and such persons may not notice, or care, that the object of their affections is not interested, or so I hear."

At this she looks at me very piercingly. "This is straight stuff?" she says. "He really has a case?" I nod, and she seems to slump. "That is even worse. It will be seven years' bad luck if I even injure him. Well, it is no use asking you what to do, because I hear you are such a guy as will not get heated up over a doll if you are freezing to death. If only Shamus is like that!"

I ignore this crack, and decide to take a chance and offer her advice, for Griselda is certainly a doll that you will rather have friendly towards you than not. "What I do not see, Griselda," I say politely, "is why you cannot think of some way of frightening him off without doing him any damage. I always hear that dolls are good at getting rid of guys they do not want, even if they are not as smart as you."

At this I get the old look again for a moment, and then a glint comes into her eye and she claps me on the back just as I am taking a drink to relieve the tension. While I am choking she says, "Good thinking. Here, keep the flask," and she is off out the door before I can say thanks.

I am not there when it happens, but it seems that the same night Griselda announces that she needs some action and suggests to Shamus that he accompany her. Those who view the scene say that Shamus is out of his seat so fast that he nearly collides with her and starts the action sooner than anticipated, but he gets himself under control, though he is closer to her than a dead-heat as they go out. Nothing is seen of them for the rest of the evening, and along towards midnight one and all in Lilina's are speculating freely, when in comes Shamus. He is walking very slow, and he seems a little

mussed up here and there, and his expression is very strange to behold, indeed. He gets to a table, and sits down as if his legs will not hold up any longer, and we all gather round with great interest and offer him a drink, which he accepts. After a pull he looks up at us and says hoarsely, "Do you know what I am going to tell you?" which is the way he starts half his talk, and personally I think it is a dumb thing to say, because how will we know before he tells us? But we are all used to it, and just say no.

"That Griselda is a most extraordinary woman," he goes on, and then it seems like he cannot get out another word, but he just sits there shaking his head.

"Is she hot stuff, Shamus?" someone asks, and his face goes even stranger. He says, "Listen till I tell you," which is another bit of his odd talk, and we listen.

"When we go out," he begins, "I ask Griselda if she is aiming to take in some high-class spot, but she says she is not really dressed for it, and besides, she wants something a bit livelier, and before I know it she is leading me down into the really rough end of town. I figure it best to go along with her on this, although this is not an area where I will look for enjoyment myself, and I become slightly nervous when I see that she is heading for Rowdy Djoh Lo's, because it is well known that you can lose your life most any night in Rowdy Djoh Lo's, and the company is by no means select. In fact, I ask Griselda if she really wishes to go there, and she looks at me in great surprise and asks why not. I say it is a joint that is considered a little rough, and she just smiles and says, 'Surely you are not scared?' Naturally, I am not scared, simply cautious, but I can see that she will not believe me if I say so, so in we go.

"There is a big dirty guy leaning against one side of the door, who at first shows no inclination to move aside and give us room to get by easily, but when we are close he does a double-take and then steps aside very fast and gives Griselda a big smile, and she marches straight in. When we get in, I feel even more uneasy, for everyone looks up at us, and there are people there who I know of that I actually do not wish to meet anywhere. There are Wulf the Warg, and Carver Donan, and Snakefang, and many other such hard cases, and I can see that this is no place for a peace-loving guy like me. I figure we will be about as welcome as a hungry Dragon Snail, but some nod, and some smile, and one group calls to Griselda with great enthusiasm. I am hoping she will not go, as this group are the worst-looking guys of the lot, but she gives them a big hello and walks straight over, so I have to tag along.

I do not care for the way they look at me, and I feel very thankful that after Griselda introduces me they ignore me completely.

“Snakefang heads this group, and they are playing mumblety-peg, which is a game I learn he is very fond of. It is this game where you spread your fingers out on a table and jump a knife-point to and fro between them faster and faster, and you must do it without touching a finger even slightly or you are out. It is said that sometimes Snakefang puts a little poison on the knife-point to make it more interesting, but it is all in fun. Money is being wagered on this game, and nothing will do Griselda but she must join in, though she does inspect the knife first, which everyone finds very amusing. At first I can scarcely drink for fear she will injure one of her pretty little fingers, but she never misses, and wins a few Lunars, though some are faster than she is, and I am beginning to relax when Snakefang suggests I try the game.

“I explain that I am no hand with a knife, and Griselda looks at me very disappointed, and someone is heard to mutter that I am yellow, more like. She fires up at this, before I can say anything, and says of course I am not yellow, and to prove it she will play mumblety-peg between my fingers and make the fastest time yet, though I never let her do this before. Well, naturally I have to agree to this, in fact I am not given any choice, and this proposition attracts much interest, and everyone gathers round. She gets a few bets in, and then she really goes to work until I will not believe I have a drop of sweat left, and I get no pleasure out of her holding my hand in place at all, but finally she stops, without even scratching me, and there is much cheering, and everyone pays off, and Snakefang says I am a game guy, all right, and have another drink. Griselda says just one, as we must be going on, and I am surely glad to hear that. They say come back soon when we leave, and Griselda says she will, but I say to myself that I will not be along, for I commence to wonder if she is not too high-spirited for me.

“I hope that we will now go back uptown, but Griselda says she must visit her Trollkin pals that she does not see in a long time. I say something about it being late, but she says nonsense, it is early for Trolls, and I am a fine one to be thinking of running out on her, so I have to stay. When we get there I almost wish I am back in Rowdy Djoh Lo’s, for almost everyone there is Trollkin, except the guy who runs it, and I can barely see to drink my liquor, though maybe this is just as well, as I am probably better off not knowing what dies in it. But Griselda seems perfectly happy with the joint, and it is plain she is very popular among the Trollkin, and soon everyone is telling Dark Troll jokes and one and all are having a good time except me,

for though she translates a joke for me every now and then I do not find them so very funny. But just as she is telling a really long and complicated-sounding joke, who walk into the joint but two big Dark Trolls!"

At this point Shamus pauses to refresh himself, and it is clear that the memory is by no means pleasant. "Does she stop at once? She does not, but carries on in a loud voice which makes quite sure that she can be heard, as everyone else quietens down, and when she reaches the punchline she laughs like anything, though none of the rest do, and most are edging away from her. Well, the Dark Trolls look all burned up at the joke, and they start for us. I am swearing to myself that if I get out of this alive I will never associate with anyone but Healers, but Griselda just leans back against the bar, with that little sword that she carries everywhere along one thigh, and smiles at the Trolls. It stops one of them in his tracks, and he grabs the other by the arm and says something that I think has Griselda's name in it. Does that other Troll keep coming?"

Shamus looks round at us all, but of course we do not know, and beg him to tell us. He shakes his head. "He does not, and for my money he is a sound judge. He just sort of leers and says to Griselda in Pavic, 'Javis Gan will have my head if I do anything to you,' and she replies that Javis Gan tells her that joke personally, and then everyone has a good laugh, including the Dark Trolls, and she offers them a drink. They get to chattering away in Darktongue again, and I am edging towards the door, as I figure that I have enough of Griselda to last me a long, long time, and that I will be safer anywhere else than where she is. But she turns to me just as I think I can make a break, and says, 'You are not going? Why, surely you will set up the drinks for my friends.' Well, this is the last straw, and I am out of there and halfway up the hill in nothing flat, and if I never see Griselda again it will be soon enough.

"Gentlemen and ladies," he says, looking round at us very serious, and pounding the table for emphasis, "Griselda may be very beautiful – and she may be very brave – and she can hold her own in any company you care to mention – but," and here he begins to shout, "for your healths' sake stay away from her, because do you know what I am going to tell you, she is the most dangerous woman to be around in the whole of Pavis!"



A TASTY MORSEL

*Dedicated, with great respect,
to the authors of Trollpak.*



Personally, I always consider it smart to take a good look around you, or be facing the door, when you are speaking of someone else, in case that someone else may appear unexpectedly and take exception to what you are saying. Which is what this blowhard who is holding forth on Trolls in Loud Lilina's neglects to do, for he is leaning back on a chair, so that his topknot hangs over the edge, and he is by no means looking at the door, but at us, to see how impressed we are. For to hear him tell it, he knows more about Trolls, or Uz as he calls them, than they do. He is a big guy and he is clearly very proud of his topknot, which he is always running a hand over, and I judge he may be from the Llama Riders originally, since they favour long topknots. Anyway, he is speaking of real high shots among the Trolls that he knows of, and he mentions Pikat Yaraboom, and someone else says that Griselda knows him. He asks who is this Griselda, and when we describe her he laughs very loud.

"A red-head!" he cries. "Why, the only use Pikat Yaraboom has for such is to eat them! It is my guess that this Griselda does not know him any more than she knows Zorak Zoran."

Well, it is most unfortunate for the guy that Griselda is entering just then. She certainly moves fast, and before anyone can draw breath there is a

whoosh and a snick, and she has her sword in one hand and his topknot in the other. She tosses it on the table in front of him and says, "Mind your manners!"

The guy goes all red and starts grabbing for his own sword, yelling, "But it is true! He does eat them!"

"That much is true," says Griselda, ducking under his swing and putting her sword-point to his throat, "and that is why I do not kill you," and she grins at him. There is no pleasantness in the grin, and the guy gives a kind of shudder, and drops back in his chair with all the fight gone out of him; he just says, sounding puzzled, "Then how come he does not eat you?"

Griselda contemplates him for a moment as she sheathes her sword, and says, "Buy me a drink, and I will tell you."

Well, the guy is at the counter spilling clacks all over the place as he pays for the drink, and someone else politely offers Griselda his seat, and we all gather round, for this promises to be such a story as is seldom heard in Lilina's. Even Lilina is there bending an ear, for this is a slack time of day for her. Griselda takes a good swallow of her drink, and begins to speak.

"When I am younger," she says, "I am not dumb the way some dolls are, but I take risks. It is because I take risks that I wind up in the hands of Trolls, but I am better off than the guys I travel with, for I know something of Trolls. My father says to me and my brothers, 'You need never meet Mostali if you do not go underground, or Aldryami if you stay out of their forests, or Dragonewts if you keep clear of their cities, but there are Trolls everywhere, so get to know something about them if you wish to improve your chances of survival.' I figure he knows what he is speaking of, for he adventures quite some in his youth, so I pay him what I can afford to learn some Darktongue, and what he knows about Troll customs, for my old dad seldom does anything for nothing.

"And so, when the party I am with is jumped one night by Trolls, I know what to do. I huddle down to dodge the slingstones as best I can, and I take out this piece of meat which I carry for just this purpose, and I throw it out and call in Darktongue, 'Come and eat, and let us talk!' This impresses the Trolls enough that they spare my life, and in fact they do not lay a finger on me, except that one touches my hair and says something to the others which I fail to catch. I am still a prisoner, with a rope round my neck, but this is better than being dead like the others. After the Trolls finish going through my camp, we head across country, and after they stop at a Troll village and

leave a lot of stuff some take me on. I do plenty of walking in the next few days, and it is a good thing that the days are sunny and the Trolls take cover during them, so that I get some rest, or I will probably croak. As it is, I am not in very good shape when we get wherever we are headed, but I will not let a Troll carry me, for I am determined to show that we are not weak the way they like to think humans are.

“I can tell that we are visiting some very important Troll from the way that those bringing me behave, so I keep bent as they do, and when I am brought into his presence I lie flat, as my father tells me to do, until I am told to get up. One of those bringing me makes a speech in which he offers me as a present, and while he does so I sneak a peek at Pikat Yaraboom, for this is who the important Troll is. He is surely unusual even for a Troll, for he has this great big left paw, and his eyes seem very odd and faraway, and when he smiles I can see that all his teeth are sharp. He seems quite pleased, and one of his aides addresses me in good Tradetalk and tells me that I am now belonging to him and will be well-treated if I behave myself. I thank him in my best Darktongue, and I can see that this goes down quite well with the Trolls.

“I stay with them for weeks and get to talking Darktongue much better and learn much more about Trolls, and all the while I do not have to do any work and am offered all I can eat of good human food, though of course none of it is hot as Trolls are very leery of fire. The Trollkin looking after me seem eager to press food on me, and I find myself getting somewhat plump in places, so I start taking some exercise. For some reason this interests many of the Trolls no little, and they encourage me to show what I can do and even pit me against their tougher Trollkin, and since, though I say it myself, I am better than a raw hand at fighting and such even then, I do well and make quite an impression, and even Pikat Yaraboom comes to watch occasionally. In fact, the Trolls seem to treat me the way you will a cute puppy or even a smart-talking slave, and I know enough to play along with this.

“Naturally, I am not at all popular with the tougher Trollkin, in fact they give me plenty of the back of their necks, but the ordinary workers seem all pleased-up at my defeating the tougher ones, because these just naturally love to push the rest around. Any Troll will tell you that just about all Trollkin are dumb and useless, but I am here to say that plenty are not so dumb as they act, but they figure it best to appear that way, for Trolls are apt to kill Trollkin who act too smart. I get to know some Trollkin quite well, and they will chat with me when they have the time, which is not often, and treat

me very friendly. Well, one day I happen to comment to one of these friends that Trollkin have hard life, to be sure, and I am glad I am not one, and she looks at me a little strangely.

“ ‘For now, yes’, she says, ‘but you may prefer to be an Enlo soon, for life is better than death. Even we know that.’

“ ‘You are saying I am to die?’ I say, somewhat horrified. ‘What do I do wrong?’

“ ‘Why, nothing,’ she says. ‘But it will be Dark Season soon, and that is when the great lord has his feast.’

“ ‘He will eat me?’ I say. She rolls her eyes and looks all around, and then says, almost in a whisper, ‘You mean they do not tell you? Why else do you suppose they feed you so well? The lord thinks you copperheads are extra good to eat. But never say I am the one to tell you, or they will eat me too, before my time,’ and off she goes in a great hurry.

“This gives me plenty to think about, all right, and for sure I am in a very tough spot. We are deep in Troll country, so that even if I can escape from the camp the chances of getting clear away are a zillion to one. The only plan I think of is to edge Pikat Yaraboom into guaranteeing my life some way, and I do plenty of studying on that theme, and stop taking exercise, and make as if I am going off my food. Naturally the Trollkin who are looking after me are greatly perturbed, though they do not try to force-feed me, and by and by the news must get to Pikat Yaraboom himself, for I am summoned to his presence.

“It is the first night of Dark Season, and all the Trolls are celebrating, but it is not his special feast yet. He asks through his aide why I am not eating, and I say that I am not feeling too good and may be sickening for something. They all seem alarmed, and he calls his best priestess of Xiola Umbar, who as you may know is their goddess of healing and comfort, to look me over. She states that as far as she can tell I am in good condition; so he has the best human food brought, and I make like I am tempted to eat, and pretty soon I am acting cheerful, and they all seem relieved and the party takes off again. The Trolls are passing around big mugs of liquids of all kinds, and getting quite a charge from them by what I can see, and finally I ask to try one.

“This causes much merriment, and Pikat Yaraboom so far forgets himself as to speak to me direct. ‘Why, little copperhead,’ he says, ‘these drinks are fine for Trolls, but no human can take them!’

“Here is my chance, so I say very clearly, in Darktongue, ‘I bet my life I can drink three and live through it.’

“This causes silence to fall, and some of them look rather uncomfortable, as if they realise that I know what will happen to me if I cannot save myself. Then the Xiola Umbar priestess says, ‘Give her the chance,’ and others make sounds of agreement. Pikat Yaraboom looks thoughtful, and finally he says to one of his aides, ‘Tell her she has a bet, but she cannot bet her life, or her freedom, or a trip out of here.’ Now this may seem a setback, but I am prepared for it and say I will choose my prize later, if I win. This is a kind of Troll contest, and the rules are that I get to choose a drink, and then someone else does, and finally Pikat Yaraboom does. I must drink a good mug of each, and none can be beer, which they drink and is just like our beer, and I can use Healing or be Healed if I am knocked out, as long as I am still alive.

“So, first I choose a drink which they seem to like: it is brown and thick, with lumps in it, and the smell reminds me very strongly of a pisshouse, but I get it down, though the first taste needs an effort, and nothing seems to happen. After this there is some discussion, and I figure they are not wised-up on how their drinks affect us. One of his aides gets to pick, and chooses a pretty liquid, which is dark purple with blue bubbles, and tastes as good as it looks, but when I finish, it is like a flaming dagger hits right through my vitals and I am knocked flat, which gets plenty of laughs. It takes me two goes of all the Healing I know to get me up again, and still my stomach is sending out regular distress signals, but I cannot afford to use up too much power and let it go. I also have to take off my pants, which are soiled, and this gets more laughs, but I do not care as now I only have one to go.

“Pikat Yaraboom studies quite some before he picks it, and the Trolls seem to think he picks a lily. I have to say it is the worst I ever see, for it looks and smells like what gets cleaned off the floor after a real eat-it-up and spew-it-out feast. I cannot help showing distaste, and the Trolls howl with laughter, and start tossing around encouraging remarks like, ‘This one will do the trick,’ and ‘Are you sure you do not want to stop?’ But I say to myself, it is now or never, and so I take a deep pull. This is not so rough as you will expect, and in five more swallows I finish the mug, though the last two especially take a bit of keeping down, and when I am done I am still standing. They all watch intently, but nothing seems to happen, and finally to break the silence I ask for some beer, to take the taste away. Then most of them laugh like crazy, and some cheer, but Pikat Yaraboom is not laughing,

and he fixes his odd eyes on me and asks what I want.

"I take a deep breath, for this is where I find out whether it is all worth it, and I say that I wish him to guarantee that I will keep the use of all my senses, no matter what. There is dead silence, and Pikat Yaraboom keeps those odd eyes on me and opens his mouth a little, and it is all I can do to look back. Finally, he grates out, 'I can still chop off your legs, and maybe I will, for cheating me of the rest of you.'

"The Xiola Umbar priestess looks ready to butt in, so quickly I play my last card, and say, 'I do not mind losing a little bit here and there, but I hope that just this once you will be satisfied with an appetiser.'

"He says nothing while you can count six, and then he lets out the biggest bellow of laughter I ever hear, and slaps his thigh, and all the rest join in, even the priestess and those Trollkin who are present. Then he wipes his eyes, and says, still talking to me direct, 'Copperhead, it will be a crime to kill you off, when there are so many dummies who will do just as well. You shall have your wish, but tell me how you learn what I intend, and I will not touch a finger of you, I swear by my father's name!'"

At this point Griselda pauses to refresh herself, and she grins at us hanging on her words. Finally, Lilina says, "Well – do you do it?"

Griselda shakes her head. "That is one thing I do that I am proud of; I refuse to tell. None of them understand this, not even the Trollkin, but I believe they honour me for it. Even Pikat Yaraboom may be impressed, for he takes very little advantage of my offer, and soon after he has me escorted back to human territory and passes the word that I am his friend."

"What do you mean, takes very little advantage of your offer?" says the guy who once has a topknot.

Griselda smiles a little. "It is nothing really; I am just short of a little padding here and there. It is all very carefully done; that Xiola Umbar priestess surely knows her stuff. He says he has no wish for fingers or toes, because there is no meat on them. So you see, when he gives Jarvis Gan the word that I am a tasty morsel, he knows what he is talking about."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I cannot resist including, to point up the conclusion, the alternative title suggested by Greg Stafford, A Nice Piece of Ass



ALL IN THE FAMILY



Now it comes on Dark Season, and Pavis starts filling up. Some of the army gets in from the plains, and late caravans arrive, and adventurers and such come in from all over to take shelter from the weather, and there are plenty of strange faces everywhere you look. The dives are jumping with all the new business, and it takes regulars twice as long to get served, but there are opportunities to make a few Lunars, if you have any wits about you, so nobody is complaining too much except the authorities, as they try to keep track of all the newcomers. Of course, anyone will tell them that this is a complete waste of time, for few of the newcomers will be around long. For either they will run out of dough and move to Badside, or they will go chasing some crazy scheme in the Rubble, or they will lose a serious argument, or they will break the law some way and be shown the gate or maybe executed. But the authorities are bound and determined to keep track of everyone, because this is just naturally the way authorities are, and so there are patrols everywhere asking to see licences and so forth, but they do not bother me, for I believe in avoiding heat at all times and do not do anything which the authorities will feel bound to ask questions about for years.

It is not far into Dark Season when Griselda goes into the Rubble with Trolls and comes back in one piece, which is considered quite a feat in many

quarters. She stays in Pavis, and is seen frequently around Loud Lilina's, which she seems to favour over other dives where you may expect to find adventurers, and we all get used to her presence, for she does not seem to wish to do anything but sit and talk and have a drink or two and maybe get up a crap game or some other betting proposition, like most of the people I know in Pavis. For all I know she finds this relaxing after her exertions, but she never relaxes so far as to leave her sword off, and nobody ever tries to kid her, or touch her for a loan, or sell her a line, more than once, for then she turns on that stare of hers and the air gets very cold, even for Dark Season.

Well, one day she is sitting at a table speaking to various citizens, when this guy passes her on the way to the bar. Suddenly he stops and gives her a great whack on between the shoulder-blades and cries, "What ho, Grizzie! Long time no see." We are all edging away, expecting to see mayhem break out any moment, but she just turns about, grinning, and says, "Why, hello, Ferdie! What is bringing you here?"

The guy goes all serious. "I hear our brother goes under around here, and I aim to do something about it. Do you hear this too?"

Griselda grins even more, and says, "Ferdie, I get here weeks ago, and I just finish doing everything about it that needs doing. One of these days you will be late for your own funeral."

"If that is what it takes to keep living, I will," says Ferdie. "Now I am here, you may as well buy me a drink and tell me about it."

It turns out that this Ferdie, whose full name is Ferdinand, is her baby brother, and while he does not seem in Griselda's class he looks to have a fair bit of experience. He is a small wiry guy, much darker complected than she is, and has eyes that are forever switching about, taking everything in, and long slim fingers that I judge may get inside many a pouch in their day; in fact, I never see someone who looks more as if he will try lifting whatever is not nailed down. He and Griselda seem to think fairly well of each other, and she even loans him dough when he mentions that he is not holding very much, and moreover she does this in such a way as makes it clear that she will be very surprised if she gets it back.

The following morning Griselda is showing Ferdie around Pavis, and I am enjoying the sun up against the wall of the Trade Temple when they come to take in the big temples in Founder's Market. Just as they are passing the Air Temple there is a flicking noise, and a throwing dagger is sticking out of the ground between them. I wish to say that I seldom see a quicker

piece of work than they put on then, for they are back to back with weapons out in a moment. But there is nothing to be seen except a doll in the doorway of the Air Temple, who is laughing fit to bust.

"I ought to know it will be you, Belladonna," cries Griselda in seeming disgust. "What wind blows you here?" and Ferdie voices similar sentiments as they put up their weapons and go over to meet her, but it is plain that in fact they are quite tickled to see the doll, who is tall and limber with a long bony face and a pleasant enough expression, though she looks at me quite sternly when I wander over to listen in.

"Who is this jerk?" she says, but Griselda says, "Oh, he does not mean anything. Tell us why you are here, Bella."

The doll looks solemn. "I hear Rory meets with misfortune here," she says, "and as I am in Pairing Stone I figure I will come over and investigate, though if I am knowing they are so down on Orlanthi here and that I will have to pay just to get in, I may think twice about the proposition. I am a bit low on dough just now."

Griselda seems to sigh a little, and says, "That is OK, Bella; I will stake you. As for Rory, I take care of that a while ago."

"You must tell me about it," says Belladonna, and since I know this story very well by now I leave them there.

That afternoon there is word of a caravan coming in, and I go along to the gate to watch, and just as I get there Griselda and Ferdie and Belladonna amble up. Most of the caravan comes through, and then we hear this racket, and it is some old guy yelling that he never pays anything to enter Pavis in the old days and it is a scandalous imposition. Griselda closes her eyes for a moment and says, "Oh no," then marches off to the gate, and the others follow. There is this big old guy wearing pretty fair armour and carrying a great big sword over one shoulder, waving his fist at the clerk, and the guards are looking nervous.

Belladonna cries, "Father!" and Ferdie says, sounding very exasperated, "You are supposed to be retired, uncle Brand!", and they move in to calm him down and edge him off while Griselda squares the clerk and the guards. They get him to sign his form, and as he comes away he is saying to Griselda, "Well, your father allows he is too old to be travelling at this time of year, and maybe he is right, at that, but I feel something must be done for the sake of our family honour, and I am glad to see that you youngsters feel the same way. Do you get a line on Roderick's killers yet?"

"Uncle Brand," says Griselda, very patient, "I settle this matter already, and the best thing you can do is head back home; I am surprised aunt Gunnvara lets you come."

"Humph," he says. "I will go when I am good and ready. So you settle it, eh? I hope that means what it ought to mean."

"You can bet on it," says Griselda, rather sharp, and their eyes meet, and I see that though his are grey, they have that same look that Griselda can put on, and though it is a sunny day I feel very cold all of a sudden. Belladonna and Ferdie are also looking fierce, and for a moment it is like I am looking at a bunch of wolves, at least, and I get to wondering if Griselda's family are all ogres or werewolves in disguise. Then uncle Brand laughs a little, and says, "Do you make anything along the way? My purse will blow away in a high wind, there is so little in it; expenses are going up terribly since I am last in these parts."

Griselda groans and casts her eyes to heaven, while the other laugh. "Trust Grizzie for that," says Ferdie, "she is always holding something."

"Well, let us get somewhere I can sit down and rest my old bones, and cut the dust out of my throat," says uncle Brand. "I wonder if any of the dives I am knowing once are still operating?"

Well, this is quite a situation, to be sure, with one after another of Griselda's relatives coming out of the woodwork, and some of the guys are wishing to bet on whether any more will show, but it seems the supply dries up. It is widely felt that this is just as well, for if they are all like her uncle Brand, whose full name turns out to be Herubrand, Pavis will be stood on its head. He insist on touring the Pavis grog-shops, one and all, and is most indignant when he hears of the curfew, and nothing will do him but to go on down to Rowdy Djoh Lo's in Riverside, where the watch never go if they can help it, and Griselda goes with him, but Ferdie and Belladonna go to bed.

When they are in Rowdy Djoh Lo's it seems that uncle Brand causes Snakefang grave social embarrassment by remembering him when he is so high, which unsettles him so that uncle Brand is able to beat him at mumblety-peg, but this is nothing to what a bunch of the local street gang, the Dolphins, are suffering. They come upon Griselda and her uncle as they are heading home, finally, and they are not recognising Griselda, but just see an old man and a doll, and they figure that here is some easy game to hassle, as street gangs love to do on their own patch. Well, uncle Brand only has a cudgel with him, and Griselda goes easy with her little slicer, but it is

reliably reported that the Dolphins who meet up with them are now retired, and furthermore that they will jump a foot to a foot and a half any way you like if Griselda or her uncle are mentioned in their presence, though none of them are hurt so very bad, at that. But it seems that uncle Brand no longer has much staying power, for he spends the next day in bed complaining of the booze they serve nowadays, and this is surely a relief to Griselda, who is all tuckered out from walking him around the town.

Now at this time the town is quiet as far as nefarious activities are concerned, for with patrols all over many hard guys judge it best to keep their heads well down, and they hole up in Riverside or Badside or even the Rubble, and Wolfhead is among those who do this, so he does not get to meet any more of his relatives. But not long after Griselda's relatives come to town it seems like a wave of crime is hitting Pavis, what with purses disappearing, and break-ins, and a little quiet mugging of rich guys' servants out late on errands, and though no harm is done and none of the scores are very large, the citizens start howling for protection. Now Constable Jorjar can put two and two together as well as anybody, and he starts eying Ferdie and Belladonna and even old uncle Brand with suspicion, because somehow he gets the feeling that these are characters worth watching. This may be on general principles, because they are Griselda's relatives – though Griselda is keeping her nose clean, and is always in the public eye – or it may be that he latches onto some of the rumours that are going around, such as that Ferdie is the well-known dip called Furtive Ferdie, or that Belladonna is sometimes called Blindfold Bella because she can open most any ordinary lock blindfolded, or he may dig up something about uncle Brand's activities in Pavis when he is younger. Anyway, there are soon plenty of the watch keeping an eye on Griselda and the rest, and not being too coy about it either.

Well, all at once there is no more crime, or at least not much, and Griselda's relatives are all on view with her, or anyway following some harmless pursuit such as eating or drinking or sleeping or pricing goods in the honest parts of town, and the authorities cannot catch them out on a thing, but they do not relax their vigilance much, figuring that it is only a matter of time. Sure enough, one night all three are eating with Griselda at Geo's, where all are members in good standing, and then her relatives go off in different directions and at different times, making like they are attempting to avoid notice. This causes much excitement in law-enforcement circles, and almost all the watch take out after them, and extra forces are thrown into the pursuit. But it seems that they go up and down, and round and round, until

those trailing them are plumb worn out, and they do not do a thing, except that Belladonna marches into the Air Temple and does some loud praying to Orlanth, and uncle Brand raises quite a beef in Bob's Bisonburgers because he claims he finds a bit of bridle in his burger. But what comes as a great surprise is that while all this activity is going on, some daredevils knock over a big warehouse, which has no outside cover at this time because of all the excitement, but only a few inside men, who get bopped on the head. Most of them never know what hits them, and they certainly can give no information on the miscreants, for these are masked and covered up, and it is all a great mystery. It is reported that some of the regular heavy lifters are peeved at this trespassing on their preserves, so it does not seem that the perpetrators are from an established mob, and there is even a whisper that they are Trolls out of the Rubble, but few will believe this.

Now the authorities find it difficult to believe that Griselda's relatives have nothing to do with this, and so they are hauled in for a little light grilling, and their lodgings are searched, but nothing can be found amiss. So they are politely asked to favour Pavis with their absence, preferably for ever, and out they have to go. I will not care to be going out onto the plains during Dark Season myself, but this does not seem to bother them, and in fact they seem to be in fine fettle. Griselda bids them a fond farewell, and then she returns to Lilina's and settles into her usual chair with a big sigh of relief. "Relatives!" she says. "You are glad to see them come, but even gladder to see them go." There are eyebrows lifted at such an attitude, but it is speculated by some that Griselda feels her relatives are causing too much heat around town when she wishes for peace and quiet, and this seems to be confirmed by further comments of hers during the day, in which she refers to being plumb worn out chasing after her uncle and trying to keep him out of trouble, and fed up with staking the whole bunch.

Once the evening sets in the night-watch, who are all Trollkin, take over, and to the surprise of one and all two of them drop in at Lilina's and have words with Griselda, which sound rather brusque. Of course, they are speaking in Darktongue, which most of us cannot make head or tail of, but one guy at the back of the room sits up, and this is the guy whose topknot Griselda once removes for doubting her word, and is called Topknot by one and all for this reason. He knows some Darktongue, and clearly understands what is being said, and when the Trollkin depart he bursts out, "Can this be true? Do you truly fink on your relatives?"

Now at this there is dead silence throughout the joint. Griselda turns round to look at him, and Topknot is edging back, looking as horrified at

what pops out of his mouth as everyone else, but she just shrugs and says coolly, "Sure I do, but you hear what is said. Constable Jorjar is not pleased that my tip-off turns out a frost, and refuses to pay what I am promised, so I am out of pocket, and moreover I must now watch my step or I may wind up in the slammer. Constable Jorjar cannot get it out of his head that we are implicated in the warehouse job somehow."

We all digest this, and then someone asks, "How are you out of pocket?"

"Why, because I give as much as I am expecting in reward to my relatives," says Griselda. "You do not think I will fink on them without telling them, surely? It gives them a bit of a stake, together with anything they may accumulate here."

Well, there is much scratching of heads at this, and no one can figure out what in the seven hells Griselda is up to, and she must perceive this, because she begins laughing like anything. Finally Lilina speaks up, and says, "Do not keep us all guessing, Griselda, but cough up, or maybe the word will get around that you are a fink, and without explanation."

Griselda narrows her eyes a little at this, but for once she is on weak ground, and she knows it, for nobody has any use for finks except the authorities, and even they seem to despise them although they make use of them.

"OK, OK," she says, looking resigned and spreading her hands, "but this positively must not get to the wrong ears, or I am in bad trouble, and I will remind you that I have a number of friends around here who may not get pleasure from the thought that I am in bad trouble." Of course, we all know that this is very true, what with Wolfhead and his gang, and Snakehead and his boys down at Rowdy Djoh Lo's, and Churchar the Quick and his band of Trollkin runaways, who are on good terms with Griselda, and maybe Javis Gan and other Trolls in the Rubble, and who knows what all else, so we all swear blind not to let the story get to the wrong ears, and I advise you to do the same.

"It all comes of uncle Brand showing up," she says. "He is quite a rascal when he is younger, and coming out of retirement is bringing back old memories for him. He feels the authorities do not treat him with sufficient respect, and aims to get even. So he puts Ferdie and Bella up to a few little escapades, not that they are needing much encouragement, and I am nearly going crazy, because I know that it is only a matter of time before they are

nailed, and I do not wish to see them nailed. Uncle Brand cannot see that things are a lot tighter now in Pavis, under the Lunars, and he is determined to continue whatever I say.

“So to save them from themselves I tell Constable Jorjar that if an eye is kept on my relatives it may lead to something big, and they have to pull their horns in. But I have my own plan, and make contacts with I will not say who, and suggest that they make use of any opportunities that may occur while the watch are chasing around after my relatives. This suggestion is pleasing to my contacts, and they promise a percentage if all goes well, and I bring my relatives in on it, though considering what they cost me in dough and lost sleep I will be justified in keeping it all. Of course Constable Jorjar thinks my relatives are involved in the warehouse job and hopes to find incriminating evidence, but there is nothing to be found, for the pay-off is not organised that way. But it is just like old times for uncle Brand to be hauled in for questioning over a big job, and it sets him up wonderfully, while Ferdie and Bella do not mind, as they figure they will come out ahead and have confidence in my assurances. It all comes out like I figure, for you can still get a pretty fair shake from the Pavis judge in this town, whatever the Lunars feel about it, and leaving town means nothing to them.”

“But are you not worried for the safety of your relatives, out in the wilds in Dark Season?” asks Topknot.

Griselda grins. “I will be a lot more worried for the health of anything that they meet that tries to mess with them, unless it is a hungry giant,” she says. “We are trained to take care of ourselves in the family. It is just tough that my brother Rory is a slow learner.”



THE GREAT CHART CAPER



If there is one thing of which there is no shortage in Pavis, it is charts. In fact, I will guarantee that of any three characters you may meet in the street, man, woman, or Troll, one will have a chart, and at least half of these will give you a very interesting story of how this is a clue to some great treasure hidden in the Rubble or thereabouts. Some will be adventurers who aim to go for the treasure themselves, and are looking to raise a stake, but others will be offering to sell you the chart at a very reasonable price, and it is a sure thing that more dough gets made by selling charts than by following them. Now some unscrupulous characters will sell you charts that they cook up over a mug of ale, and you will be lucky if you only lose your time following them, for such persons have a way of insuring themselves against disappointed customers by showing routes into some very tough spots. But it is a surprising fact that many who deal in charts believe in them, even when it should be obvious to anyone of normal intelligence that they are by no means accurate. Of course, the way I see it, adventurers do not have normal intelligence, or they will not be adventurers, and many of those who hang around adventurers and sell them charts and such are really frustrated adventurers themselves, and dearly love to talk about going after treasure, as long as they do not have to do it.

Treasure Trove Hurbi is just such a guy. I know Hurbi since we grow

up in Badside together, and always he is hustling some chart. Now Hurbi is by no means dumb, in fact, he knows as much about charts as anyone in this town, and can spot a truly phoney one in a moment. But he is somewhat daffy about charts, and will spend all he has on them if he thinks they are straight goods, and will put in days studying them. He is always buying off adventurers and prospectors and such, who are selling their charts to make ends meet, and always selling them himself to stay alive. I wish to say that no one can sell a chart better than Hurbi, for he always gets carried away while talking the chart up, so that every one is a red-hot certainty to set an adventurer up for life, and when they turn out as cold as the Frozen Wastes, as they generally do, no one is more surprised and sad than Hurbi, for he can really make himself believe in his charts. Sometimes a chart pays off, though never for very much, and then Hurbi gets a little stake, for he will generally take part of his price as a percentage of the pay-off, but he always spends it right away on the next chart, so he is never holding much dough.

Now Hurbi is quite careful about who he sells charts to, however much he believes in them, because some people can be very touchy about getting wrong information, and he tries to size up his prospects before opening business. So I am very surprised to see him talking with Griselda one night in Loud Lilina's, and it is about nothing but a chart, for there it is on the table between them. I am surprised because Hurbi knows as well as I do that Griselda is a doll you must not monkey with in any respect, or she will likely carve your ears off, and also because I figure her for one smart doll, who will have no truck with such things as charts. Yet there she is, listening to Hurbi and nodding a lot, like any other prospect of his when he starts going good, and once or twice she even smiles. Finally she gives him some dough and pockets the chart, and then goes out very carefully indeed, looking all about as if she expects to be jumped at any moment and keeping her hand on her sword at all times.

When she is gone I step over to Hurbi and say "Every man knows his own business best, Hurbi, but are you not getting in over your head, selling a chart to Griselda?"

"But I do not sell her a chart," he says. "She wants my professional opinion on this chart she has, and pays me for it, though I am glad to do it just to see the chart. It is really a lily, and I am surprised she does nothing about it before, for she has it some time."

Now this sounds somewhat familiar to me, so I say, "Hurbi, is this the same chart she shows Lucky Eddi?"

"How will I know?" he replies. "I never see that one. It may well be, but what of it? I remember you telling me that he is quite impressed with it."

"Hurbi," I say to him, very patient, "that chart is part of the plan for setting Eddi up. If this is the same chart, it is likely as phoney as a friendly Broo."

"No," he says, "it cannot be phoney. I will stake my professional reputation on it. It fits in with a lot of stuff I pick up in my career. She is one lucky doll, however she comes by it, for I judge that the treasure it points to will be worth a king's ransom, if she handles it right."

Now Hurbi is speaking quite loudly by this time, and at these words many ears prick up around Lilina's, and before you can say Orlanth Adventurous, Hurbi is surrounded by adventurer types offering him drinks and even money in their wish to know more. But Hurbi puts them all off.

"It will be unethical to spread any more details about," he says, "and besides, Griselda may not like it."

At this, a big tough doll who just gets into town as a caravan guard, and seems a natural Storm Bull type, what with drinking ale by the cask and belching freely, and smelling high enough to be noticed even in Lilina's, laughs and says, "I cannot see much to that little snip."

Just for a moment there is silence, as everyone looks at the door, and then we all start to fill this doll in on the details of Griselda's career, as known to the public, and when we get through the doll has nothing much to say, and seems rather thoughtful.

Well, the story is all over town before nightfall, and you can take your pick which version you wish to believe, for there are plenty of details that Hurbi never mentions, such as that the treasure is a cache of Truestones. It is really quite surprising how fast everyone seems to be talking about nothing else but the chart, and what Griselda will do with it, and so forth. Now when a story gets as well known as this, it is bound to come to the ears of high shots of all sorts, in the government and the temples and the Rubble and even the tribes, and it is generally reckoned that Griselda will have to move very carefully, for when very large sums are involved even high shots who are supposed to be strictly legitimate can lose their scruples. And indeed, Griselda is hardly seen after this, and pretty soon she and Wolfhead and his men drop out of sight altogether. Some figure that they go for the treasure, but there are plenty of other stories. You can hear that Griselda gets patriotic about the home of her ancestors and donates the chart to the temple of Pavis,

which sounds about as likely as that she decides to train as a Healer, while others say that she sells it for a very nice price to Jarvis Gan, or a queen of the Sables, or any one of half a hundred others. There is even a story that a Lunar in the government, whose name is Halicon or some such, and who is by all accounts a most obnoxious young creep, calls in Griselda and makes her an offer she cannot refuse, which is to pin several raps on her unless she hands the chart over. Nobody knows which story is true, and if Hurbi knows anything he is not telling. In fact, it gets difficult to find Hurbi, too, though there are reports that he is seen with all kinds of important characters. One day I do run into him, and he is acting most busy indeed. I ask him if he is not getting involved in something dangerous, but he just smiles.

“Do not worry about me,” he says. “I have my friends. If all goes well I may even be able to leave this town, at least, for I am getting sick of living on the edge all the time.”

And though I press him for details he will say no more, but heads off into the Sages’ temple.

By and by there is word of much activity, such as precedes important expeditions into the Rubble. Now such expeditions do not set off when just anyone can see them, in case curious persons will wish to follow, but it is certain that they set off, for stories start getting about, and the stories match up. For a while it seems there will be a war down there, if only half is true, for Lunars, and Orlanthi, and Humakti, and Storm Bulls, and Yelmations, and Pavis worshippers, and all the different bunches of Sages, and I do not know what all else are all reported to be after the treasure in Griselda’s chart. But it seems that the parties mostly wind up in different places, and when they meet they play it cool, for such tough characters have respect for one another and wish for no unnecessary heat, so nobody gets hurt much, but nobody comes back with any treasure. After they all get back there is plenty of heat around town, with everybody looking for Griselda and Hurbi high and low, but they are not to be found, and it is all a great mystery. Some guys who think they are smart say they know all along that something smells, and it is nothing but a plot to shake down the whole of Pavis, but I cannot believe that Hurbi will have enough brains to be party to such a plot.

Just when the excitement is beginning to die down, who come into Pavis with a bunch of Sables but Griselda, Wolfhead, and his men, and I see them come in. The Lunar guards stop them at the gate and will not let them go further. They seem most surprised at this treatment, and are beginning to utter loud complaints over such impeding of citizens about their lawful

business, when up comes this Halicon guy, looking so warm that the chances are you can light a torch from any part of him. He points straight at Griselda and yells, "That chart is a phoney, and only that I am lucky I may not be getting out safe. I will see you in jail till you rot."

"What is all this about?" says a new voice, and we see the governor himself coming down the road with a bunch of guards.

The Halicon guy looks somewhat disconcerted, and is starting to get something out when it seems like half of Pavis arrives on the scene, and this is a whole bunch of priests and such yelling for justice to the governor, and it is clear they are wishing for justice against Griselda. The governor cannot make head or tail of what is occurring, so he orders that all move to the courtyard of the Seven Mothers temple, where he will hear about the whole business. Everyone goes along, and I manage to squeeze in.

Griselda then explains to the governor that she and Wolfhead and the others are with the Sables for ten or twelve days, and know nothing of what comes off. Anyone can see the governor takes quite a shine to her, though he must know her reputation; but nobody who sees Griselda there, about knee-high to the guards and as pretty as they come, will figure her for a hard case. Anyway, he smiles at her very pleasantly and then asks the Halicon guy what his complaint is. This Halicon claims that he gets a chart off Griselda, and that it leads him and his party into great danger, and if they only come out a little frayed around the edges it is no thanks to her, and it is all a plot against a loyal servant of the Lunar Empire, to set him up with a phoney chart. Before anyone else can speak, the Storm Bull representatives roar with laughter, and one yells, "Of course the chart is phoney, Mother-lover! We have the genuine chart."

"I always know you Storm Bulls are dumb," says a Lhankor Mhy Sword Sage. "We have the true, correct chart."

And then all begin to claim that they have the real chart, and there is much confusion. Finally the governor gets quiet restored and tells Griselda to explain all these charts.

But she looks quite bewildered and says, "I cannot do this. I will be frank with you, sir. Your subordinate pressures me to hand over the chart, so I decide I will put a spoke in his wheel and have Treasure Trove Hurbi make a copy that leaves out some important detail. It is a beautiful copy, and looks quite genuine."

"Then who has the genuine chart?" asks the governor, with a stern

look at the Halicon guy, who looks ready to explode.

"Why, Hurbi must do," says Griselda. "I have him keep it because I believe no one will figure him to have such a valuable thing, and he will not dare to use it himself or cheat me by selling it."

"But we buy our chart from Hurbi!" a Storm Bull shouts, and then all start yelling the same thing. The governor finally makes out that Hurbi sells everyone a chart, claiming that this is the correct one and he is commissioned to sell it by Griselda, and is selling fake charts to others to throw them off the scent, because there is so much interest in the chart. So nothing will do the governor but to have Griselda look at all the charts and say which is genuine. But she says that all are copies which leave out something important, or even a whole lot, and seems very puzzled.

Suddenly, Wolfhead slaps his thigh and bursts out laughing. "Hurbi plays everyone for suckers," he cries, "including you, Griselda. He cooks up this scheme and goes off with the genuine chart. I never think he will have the nerve."

"He is nothing but a rascal," cries Griselda, seeming very sore, "and I am sorry that he cheats all of you, but you must see that he cheats me too, and I lose the genuine chart."

The governor says that he is satisfied this must be what happens, and when some wish to ask more questions he declares the matter closed, as far as he is concerned, and off we all go. When the story gets around everyone is half tickled to death to see all the high shots taken, and Griselda too. But I am not entirely convinced, for I do not believe Hurbi to be a guy who can cook up such a scheme and carry it out all on his own, and others say there is more to it than meets the eye, though they cannot say what more if you ask them. Nothing more is heard of Hurbi, though, and soon the town starts talking about more current matters.

Then one night I am talking to a Lunar guard who has some time for me, because I once put him onto a right good thing in a Trollball game, and he happens to remark that the governor seems much more spry these days.

"Of course," he says, "he is rid of that squirt they send from headquarters, the one who tries to shake down Griselda for her chart. We are all glad to see him go, for he is such a guy as will poison your drink for the fun of watching you writhe in agony. But the governor is forever throwing parties now, and he is certainly giving the fancy goods merchants plenty of play. Why, only the other day he buys a gold arm-ring with a red rock on it as big

as my thumb, and sends it to someone, though I never think before that he has a doll stashed away here.”

Now I will think nothing of this, if I do not remember seeing Wolfhead and Griselda going into a discreet establishment where such characters can go if they want to spend plenty of dough on a good time, and they are all dressed up in their best, and Griselda is wearing just such a ring. Of course, I do not know that there are not two such rings in Pavis, or even three, and if Griselda is the governor’s doll I am a Rune Lord, but it makes me think.

Then another night Wolfhead and Griselda drop into Lilina’s for a drink. They seem very relaxed and ready to chat with one and all, and eventually the big Storm Bull type doll, who hangs out there a lot and whose name turns out to be Hanufa, has the nerve to ask them if they have any idea where Hurbi is. I make ready to go under the table, figuring that Griselda will not care to be reminded of this matter, but she only smiles a little and shakes her head.

Now this Hanufa seems a rank sucker, and she pursues the topic. “He must make plenty from selling all those charts,” she says.

At this Wolfhead grins. “Not so much, the way I hear it. To make it all seems straight goods, he takes only part of the price in cash and asks a percentage of the loot for the rest, the way he always does. It comes naturally to him to do this, and perhaps he even gets to believing in his own charts.”

We all have a laugh at this, and then Griselda says, “It may add up to a fair sum, at that, but surest thing you know, he spends it by now on another chart.”

Everyone laughs even more, but this Hanufa seems to have great difficulty keeping her mouth shut. “But what about the genuine chart?” she says. “He has that, does he not?”

Now at this Griselda and Wolfhead look at each other, and they sigh. Then Griselda turns to Hanufa and looks her slap in the eye, and first puts her finger to her lips, then draws it across her throat, and she is smiling just a little all the time. Hanufa swallows so loud you can hear it right across the room, and she offers them a drink very fast. They accept, and the subject never comes up again, for it is clear that Wolfhead and Griselda do not want it spoken of. In fact, if you mention a certain chart, or Hurbi, in many places around town for quite some while after this, you must be ready to run very fast indeed.



HANUFA'S LITTLE SISTER



Now this doll Hanufa stands tall enough to look a Troll in the eye, and she is strong enough to give a Troll a tough time arm-wrestling, but she is also dumb enough to consider arm-wrestling a Troll, and this just about sums her up. It is conceded that she has enough brains to come in out of the rain, but in fact many are wishing that she will stay there, for it does not seem that she will get a wash any other way. It is a sure thing that when she hits town she still has on her the dust from the first day of her trip, and this is by no means the lowest layer; and what looks like some dirty old fur hanging down her back turns out to be her hair. Now it is not unknown for characters to hit Pavis in this state, but if they have any dough they will normally get cleaned up, and buy new clothes, and such. But although Hanufa is not that short of dough, she prefers to spend it on beer, and does not seem to give a cuss what anyone thinks of her appearance or aroma. She favours Loud Lilina's for her drinking, and she may be affecting Lilina's trade, for she likes gabbing and will horn in on any conversation going, which tends to drive the sensitive away. But Lilina never bars her, and the chances are this is because Hanufa drinks enough to make up for any loss of

trade she is causing. The regulars in Lilina's are unwilling to consider positive action after Hanufa demolishes some guy who makes a crack at her with a very nice body-punch; but it is agreed that the way she is going she will soon be broke, which will solve the problem.

Now you may figure that, after Griselda stops her asking questions about her chart, Hanufa will be playing the chill for her, but instead she is always hanging around when Griselda is in Lilina's. Well, Griselda keeps herself pretty clean, and it is believed that she likes those about her to do likewise, and anyone but Hanufa can see that she finds Hanufa's presence distasteful, so one and all are awaiting events with great interest. For Griselda can be very brusque when she is irritated, and it is hoped that either she will provoke Hanufa into taking a swing at her, in which case it is goodbye Hanufa, or she will frighten her off, and some betting develops on the outcome. Griselda does not let fly at once, but at first drops little hints, like sniffing, or commenting on the funny smell in here today, which all goes over Hanufa's head. So finally Griselda speaks sharply to Hanufa like this:

"Do you fall in something outside, or what? There is a smell off you that is killing the flies."

We all expect Hanufa to get really mad, but she only goes very red, and walks off fast. Everyone is starting in to call Griselda a public benefactor, but she looks at us very coldly, and so we turn away and begin to speak of other things, for it is plain that she does not want the matter discussed. She goes on sitting there without saying a word for some time, and it is all very strange. But even stranger is that Hanufa eventually comes back, and she looks so different that many of Lilina's regulars think there must be something in the beer, for all the dirt is cleaned off, and she is wearing new clothes, and her hair turns out a nice pale yellow colour, and while she is no beautiful, still, you cannot say she is a crow. Griselda smiles at her, and offers her a drink, and thereafter Hanufa keeps reasonably clean. She goes about with Griselda quite a bit, and Griselda seems to like her as much as she likes anybody, while Hanufa seems to think Griselda is the greatest thing since the Red Goddess. Anyone can see this must be pleasant for Griselda, but it is hard to figure Hanufa's angle, so one day I ask her what she sees in Griselda.

"Why," says Hanufa, "this is a strange question indeed. Do you not think Griselda is an admirable person?"

Well, I know that anything I say may get back to Griselda, so I simply suggest that she frightens most people.

"Oh, she frightens me at first," says Hanufa, "but not any more. In fact, she reminds me of my little sister."

I never hear before that Hanufa has a sister, so I ask about her, but I do not find out much, for it seems that this sister is here and there, and around and about, and that Hanufa does not see her in quite a while, and since I figure it a sure thing that no sister of Hanufa's will match Griselda I forget all about it.

Now one day Hanufa is getting a letter, and this bothers her, for she is no hand at reading, but Griselda takes her to the professional letter-writers and finds someone to read it to her. The letter is from Hanufa's sister, and it says she is coming to Pavis with the next caravan to see her. This reminds me of what Hanufa says, and I pass it around, so there is a fair crowd waiting to see Hanufa's sister, and even Wolfhead is there along with Griselda. This sister surely matches Griselda in size and looks, for she is about half Hanufa's size but ten times as pretty, though you can see a lot more of her shape than of Griselda's, for she is wearing something thin and clinging that looks most impractical to be travelling in. But in other respects it is hard to see how even Hanufa can figure her to be like Griselda, for she comes on all dumb and fluttery. She practically falls off a donkey into Hanufa's arms, and says like this in a high squealy voice:

"My dear, dear Hanufa, what dreadfully out-of-the-way places you choose to frequent! I endure a thousand tortures getting here, and I am sure my looks are ruined for ever. Now tell me, who are all these exciting-looking people?"

Well, you can practically hear Griselda's lip curl, and she tells the sister hello very gruffly when Hanufa introduces them. The sister opens her eyes wide and says how interesting to meet a real adventuress, in a tone which suggests Griselda is some kind of freak, but she behaves very different with the men, saying how pleased she is to meet them, and batting her eyelashes, and giving one and all the old come-hither, even me. She certainly has plenty of technique in that direction, and when she turns it on Wolfhead he seems to reel. Before we know what he is squiring her into one of the better class grog-shops, and dusting off a seat for her, and listening with great interest to everything she has to say, and in fact, he seems to fall for her very heavily indeed, although ordinarily he seems to want no part of dolls. Wolfhead makes it clear that he wishes no company except Hanufa, for he can hardly turn her away, so nobody else gets a chance to see much more of Hanufa's sister for a while.

Well, Wolfhead and Hanufa's sister, whose name turns out to be Felissa, see the town that night, and also the following night, and by the third night those who glimpse them say that Wolfhead looks to be feeling the strain, for this Felissa may act as if a puff of wind will blow her away, but she has plenty of stamina when it comes to seeing the town. So there is little surprise when Wolfhead shows up in Lilina's the next evening, saying that Felissa is a great doll but too expensive for him. "My dough goes so fast I cannot keep track of it," he says.

"Never mind, Wolfie," says Griselda, who is shooting craps with two of his gang in a corner. "Come and join us. At least you will know where your money is going." And as Wolfhead is very fond of craps he does so, and the game is going good when in come Hanufa and Felissa.

"Why, there you are, Wolfie," cries Felissa with great glee. "What is this you are doing?"

Wolfhead does not look too pleased to be interrupted, but he explains politely enough that it is a game of chance, and invites her to watch. She does this, with many cries of excitement, while Hanufa gabs with other citizens, being no gambler. Presently Felissa says that this game seems quite easy, and she has a little money, and can she join in? Wolfhead brightens up at this, as if he hopes to retrieve some of his investment in her, and Griselda also seems interested. Felissa starts in making some foolish bets, and when she gets the dice she craps out at once, and she is certainly not having beginners' luck. By the time the dice come round to her again, her stack is quite low, but she hits with a natural right off, which makes the others a bit more cautious about hoping to clean her out. She then makes several points before she loses, and thereafter she is betting much better, and the game heats up, but Hanufa does not seem interested, and she goes off to bed. It seems like Felissa and Griselda are going for each other, and between them Wolfhead and the rest just naturally get cleaned out, so finally it is only the two of them, though much interest is shown in side-bets, and neither can gain an advantage for long, for whatever one wins the other soon hauls right back. Now Griselda keeps looking at Felissa in a strange way, and suddenly she jumps up, whipping out her sword, and cries, "I know you! You are Flissie the Dip, and if I am any judge these are tops you ring in on us!"

But Felissa hardly bats an eyelid. She just looks Griselda straight in the eye and says, "Then how come you win as often as I do? Sure, I use tops sometimes, but only with the suckers, not with a pro like you, Griselda. It is all the luck." And suddenly we all realise that long ago she drops her foolish

style of talk, and now she sounds a real cool hand.

Griselda seems somewhat nonplussed, but she points her sword at Felissa and says, "Maybe you are not using tops, but I reckon I know why Wolfhead's dough goes so fast!" Felissa just smiles sweetly, and spreads her hands, and says, "A girl has to eat; and he gets his money's worth, does he not?"

Just for a moment there is silence, and then Griselda starts in to laugh so much she almost falls over, and everyone joins in, even Wolfhead. Finally Griselda gasps, "Well, at least you can buy us drinks after taking advantage like this, especially of poor Wolfie."

"It will be a privilege," says Felissa. "Let us go down to Rowdy Djoh Lo's and make a night of it." Now this is one of the toughest joints in town, and this idea does not appeal to anyone except Wolfhead, so off the three go arm-in-arm.

I run into Hanufa on her own the following day, and I say that now I understand why she thinks Griselda is like her sister.

"Well, now that I see them together I realise they are not so alike," says Hanufa. "I am glad they hit it off finally, though I am a little surprised, as my sister does not usually make friends when she plays dice, because she plays so well. I worry that she is out all night, as she is not strong, but now I know that she is in good hands."

Just then Wolfhead happens by, looking all tuckered out, and he gazes after Hanufa as she departs and shakes his head. "I hear she is the dumbest adventurer doll in Dragon Pass," he says. "It looks like she aims to take in Pavis too. It is just as well, for if she is like her sister we may as well retire, what with Griselda too. The last I see of them they are playing mumblety-peg with Snakefang and his crew, and if I am any judge, skinning them alive."



DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN



One time it is well on into the evening at Loud Lilina's, and Hanufa and I and a few others are engaged in singing, for Hanufa likes to sing almost as much as she likes to talk, and I am fond of a song myself. We are singing that old drinking song that goes, "And he that will this health deny, Down among the dead men let him lie!", which adventurers and mercenaries and such love to sing, and we are giving it a fine rendering when the door is flung open and someone enters, making for the bar with great determination. The door connects with Hanufa's drinking elbow, causing her to shower beer all over us and breaking up the song. Now to spill Hanufa's beer is one sure way to make her mad, and she starts yelling some most impolite things at the newcomer, who is already downing a drink at the bar. The newcomer turns round, and the joint goes quiet, for this is none other than Ragna the Wrestler.

This Ragna is quite a well-known personage around Pavis, though she is not here too often, for which most citizens are heartily thankful. There can be no doubt that, of all the tough dolls in Pavis, Ragna is the one who most likes to make a show of her toughness, and will take any opportunity to cut up rough and jerk folks around. She is a big doll who is maybe forty or so, and no one remembers her any different from the way she is now, which is

with a scarred face, and eyes that are black and cold, and a mouth that seems permanently set in a sneer, and black hair cut short, and she has a pair of large hard hands that she uses to express her bad disposition every chance she gets. It is a peculiarity of Ragna's that she loves to fight bare-hand, and the chances are she sends many an opponent to the Healers this way, and maybe kills some, for it is claimed that she can break a neck with the edge of her hand, if she hits just right. What she does for a living is a mystery, for she is not known to work at anything, and it is sometimes said that she preys on the unwary, in the Rubble or out on the plains, but you can hear such stories about half the visitors to Pavis. Anyway, most citizens do not bother their heads over Ragna, but consider her one of the unpleasant facts of life, like the government, and the Trolls, and the price of everything nowadays.

Well, Ragna looks Hanufa over and says sarcastic-like, "Do I disarrange your hair?"

Hanufa is only in town for a few weeks and knows nothing about Ragna, so she does not quieten down but comes right back at her.

"No, you disarrange my beer," she yells, which is quite smart, for Hanufa, "and I will thank you to buy me another one."

Ragna cocks her head, as if she is studying this proposition, and then says, "Tell you what: I will arm-wrestle you for it."

Now, Hanufa fancies herself at arm-wrestling and accepts at once, before we can explain how unwise this is, and they sit down at a table. Some are speculating that this time Ragna may meet her match, for Hanufa shows a good set of muscles, but the smart money all goes on Ragna. She is very cool, while Hanufa is mad clear through and wastes her strength fast, and then Ragna pushes her arm over hard and gives an extra twist, and down goes Hanufa on the floor. She is certainly suffering as Ragna stands up and gives a nasty laugh. "Down among the dead men, indeed!" she says, and walks out, and here I must explain that the dead men in the song are not actual stiffs, but the empty flasks and such on the floor.

Well, this is all very typical of Ragna, as I explain to Hanufa while she is going to the Healers to get her arm fixed, and I advise her against taking the matter further, but she does not look too receptive. "I will not be doing much with this arm for a while," she says, "but now is the time to see if I have true friends." It does not take a genius to figure out that she means to call in Griselda, and so I stick with her, for a confrontation between Griselda and Ragna will certainly be worth seeing, though I do not see where Griselda

is bound to lift a finger for Hanufa. But Griselda is not to be found uptown that night, and so we give up searching.

When I drop into Loud Lilina's early the next afternoon, there is Griselda looking all tuckered out, with her back against the wall and her feet up on a stool.

I say to her, "Do you hear that Hanufa gets all crippled up?"

"What does she do now?" she replies, sounding very bored, and I begin to explain. When I name Ragna she sits bolt upright. "Tell me about this Ragna," she says, and as I do so it is remarkable how Griselda loses all sign of tiredness. I am barely finished when she is on her feet.

"Let us look into this," she says, and when I hesitate she looks at me most impatiently. "Come on," she says, "I need you to finger this Ragna for me," and I judge it best to comply, for fingering Ragna is not without risk, but it will be even more risky to disappoint Griselda. She sets off as fast as if she gets a line on someone who owes her money, and we try all the inns and grogshops in Oldtown, but cannot get a word of Ragna, and I am already beginning to feel weary, for I seldom do so much walking, but Griselda is bound and determined to keep going. When word gets around that we are looking for Ragna the Wrestler, much interest is displayed, and before long there is quite a delegation in attendance.

We finally come upon Ragna putting on the soup in the Homar's Fish eating place in Riverside, and looking quite cheerful for once, but then anyone will tell you that the fish soup in Homar's is very nice indeed, if you can afford it. I point her out, and Griselda moves in like some wild animal stalking its prey. Ragna cannot help but notice, and she looks up and says, "Something bothering you, half-portion?"

Griselda then says, speaking loudly so that she can be heard throughout the joint, "I travel all over this land for quite a while. I spend time with Trolls, and I come upon Broo encampments and Scorpionman nests and Rubble Runner tunnels, and once I even encounter a Gorp. But I have to say, never do I see or smell such an unpleasant heap of nastiness as sits before me now. In fact," she says, "I am wondering what can give birth to such a monstrosity, but it is no good asking you, for it is a sure thing that your mother is still running after getting one look at you, and never has the chance to tell you, always assuming," she says "that she is sober enough to pick out which of her customers is responsible."

Ragna's eyes narrow during this, and her muscles tense some, but she

only says, "I guess you must be this Griselda I am hearing of here and there. Few others will have the nerve to try and force a fight on me. But I have no wish to fight at this time."

Griselda shakes her head and says, "Well, it takes a while for a yellow streak to show on some people. I guess maybe you lose your nerve. That is the way it is with old folks, I hear: they lose their nerve."

By this time all present are deriving much enjoyment from this, even the waiters, but Ragna does not let it faze her. "If you feel bound to take a hack at me, go ahead," she says. "But you will have to do it here, and my guess is that a public act of violence will be pushing your luck too far. If what I am hearing is true, Constable Jorjar will be very happy to get a charge to nail you on. So why do you not sit down and talk over whatever is in your mind?"

Well, Griselda stands for a moment, then shrugs and says, "Maybe you are right," and sits opposite Ragna, and motions me to a place between them. Ragna eyes me in a way that makes me very nervous, but says nothing, and Griselda calls for beer. The rest drift off, looking disappointed, and the joint gets back to normal. Griselda and Ragna do not speak until the beer arrives, and then just give a little nod as they drink, and I begin to feel most uneasy as the silence between them continues. But after drinking maybe half her beer Griselda brings up the matter of Hanufa, and mentions that she is a friend of hers.

"Well," says Ragna, "I do her no lasting harm, though I am entitled to, considering what she calls me. Surely you will not wish to make a really serious matter of this?"

"Maybe not," says Griselda. "You make a habit of fighting bare-hand, I understand." Ragna acknowledges this, and Griselda gets her talking on the subject. Ragna seems to warm up when discussing her exploits, and presently Griselda relates some acts of mayhem that she witnesses or perpetrates, and they start acting much more friendly towards each other. It is as if they perceive that they are kindred spirits, and I wish to state on the basis of what I hear that this is a fair description. In fact, I am greatly horrified by their stories, and the last thing I wish to do is stay and listen to them, but when I make as if to leave, Griselda tells me to give Ragna my account of her vengeance for her brother, and buys more beer.

Well, time wears on, with them continuing to get more friendly, and finally Griselda suggests that we move on to Rowdy Djoh Lo's, and Ragna

concurr with enthusiasm, as it seems she knows the joint. I can think of many people I will rather spend the evening with than Ragna and Griselda when they are drinking, but Griselda is looking at me in a certain way, so of course I say that I will be happy to accompany them.

When we arrive Snakefang and his boys are there as usual, playing mumblety-peg, and they give Griselda a big hello, and greet Ragna politely, and one or two even give me a nod, though this nod is so small it is practically invisible. It seems mumblety-peg is one game Ragna never plays, and she displays great interest, so they instruct her, while Griselda and Snakefang step aside to discuss something, though what it is I do not know, for I have more sense than to try eavesdropping on such characters. Presently Griselda joins in the game, and things hot up. She is on form, and beats them one after another, and no one will wager more than a few clacks against her. Ragna comments on this, and Snakefang is returning from wherever he goes to just then, and says, "Why, this is too much to expect, for Griselda is our all-time champion, and when she is hot that knife practically stands up and sings. Do you remember, Grizzie, how you do that exhibition on Sweet-Talking Shamus? I will never forget the poor guy's face!"

There is much laughter at this, and Ragna has to be told what happens. "Of course," says Griselda, "I have to hold his hand down. It will take more nerve than I know anyone to possess to keep a hand steady without help, when someone else is handling the knife."

Now by this time Ragna has quite a load on, and she cries out that there is nothing to it, and for Griselda to do it on her. Griselda claims that she is tired, and never does such a thing before, but Ragna is most insistent, so Griselda finally says, "All right, but I will need a new knife, for my own gets dulled with all the use."

Ragna okays this, and Snakefang offers one. Then Griselda gets going, but before she works up any real speed she stops, rubs her eyes, and asks Ragna, who is sweating a little but keeping her hand steady, if that is enough. But Ragna says it is nothing yet, and to keep going, so Griselda continues. She finally hits a fair speed, and Ragna's arm is trembling a little with the effort of keeping her hand spread, when all of a sudden Griselda misjudges and slices her by the thumb. She throws down the knife at once and acts disgusted with herself, saying that she knows she ought not to go on when she is so tired, but Ragna sucks it and says not to make such a fuss, it is only a scratch.

Just as Snakefang is saying it is the gamest thing he ever sees, Ragna

staggers and catches herself on the table.

"Are you well, Ragna?" cries Griselda. "Maybe it is reaction." Ragna shakes her head, and then looks up at Griselda, with her mouth falling open, and Griselda is smiling just a little in a way that I remember seeing before. Ragna stands for as long as you can count three and then falls flat, and Griselda leans down and says, "Now you are down among the dead men, and for good," and Snakefang leads off with the chorus, but I do not join in, for I am feeling a little queasy in my stomach.

As they are searching the body, Snakefang says to Griselda, "You give her plenty of chances to back off." Griselda shakes her head and says, "It is not in her nature." Just then, one of his boys says, "Hey, what is this?" and we see a mark shaped like a hand on Ragna's chest.

"Yes," says Griselda, "this is the very same Ragna who heads up a Cacodemon bunch, and cripples my aunt Gunnvara so badly she has to retire, though she gets to live because she gives Ragna the best wrestle she has in years. We know all about it in the family, and they will be pleased to learn that I close our account with her."

"You mean you put us in danger of having her call a Cacodemon in on us?" cries Snakefang, seeming greatly perturbed, and I can understand his alarm, for Cacodemons are the great-granddaddies of all demons, and no ordinary bunch will stand a chance against one.

But Griselda just smiles. "It is a very low risk," she says. "She is no priest or shaman, and anyway do you not know that a Cacodemon can only show up once a week, no matter what?" But Snakefang is still looking displeased, so she pats him on the hand and pulls out a fat purse. "All yours," she says, "so long as you dispose of the body," and Snakefang brightens up right away, though he shakes his head and says, "Boy, you surely take some chances."

As we are going uptown, Griselda says to me, "He is right, of course, but nothing is certain; you have to take a chance now and then. In fact, I am taking one right now, for the purse I hand Snakefang is Ragna's own, which I lift some time before. But I expect he will appreciate the joke, for he has a great sense of humour – as long as there is enough in the purse."



GOOD ADVICE



So, my friends . . . you figure on maybe going after Griselda. I can certainly understand that. I seen it, and I seen it, and now I see it again. People, they go around, and they do all right, and they make good moves, and then all of a sudden, blooey! They flip.

What you have to understand, my friends, is that this is a very serious proposition here. Dragons, and giants, and vampires – maybe you will concede that these are serious? Well, there you have it. Griselda is strictly not for amateurs. You heard how she made out, there, hunting up the guys involved in her brother's decease? That doesn't scare you, you figure to do better? Look, the word is all over town. The Fangs won't touch her; the Trolls won't touch her. You know something they don't?

So, well, of course, you can get lucky. No matter, she's harder to kill than a – walktapus, you, someone up there loves you. You think that's the end of it? Lemme tell you, my friends, when you collect that reward you better hit the ground running. Whole lotta people gonna start taking an interest in you.

First off, there's Wolfhead, always assuming you haven't encountered him already, because he and Griselda are generally like that, and they are reported to be hiding out together. Wolfhead, he thinks very highly of Griselda. She stubs her toe, he'll be out looking, who left the stone there?

And he is one very hard guy, and he has some friends who are just as hard – like Snakefang, down to Rowdy Djoh Lo's; he has some time for Griselda too. Even that Churchak and his bunch of runaway Trollkin in Riverside, who are friends of hers, could give you plenty trouble.

So, all right, you're some kind of wonder heroes, you can handle Wolfhead and them. It doesn't stop there. Next, there's her relatives. You heard how they started coming outa the woodwork, after her dumb brother went under? They'll be here in spades for Griselda. And another thing. The straight female toughies around here, initiates and Rune Lords and such, they can't admit to approving of Griselda, not after she took their cults for a coupla K apiece – but that ain't much, for gods' sake, and some of them got a sense a' humour. They won't lift a finger to help her, but plenty of them have her interests at heart, and you better believe it! Nothing pleases them better, see her make some big tough man walk very wide around her. They, I guess they feel it adds to the general respect for the female sex around Pavis, and, you listen to them, there's always scope for that.

You aren't discouraged yet, I can add some more. The word is, Griselda knows some very important Trolls here and there; I'd purely hate to find out it's true. And they also say, Griselda's liked by some clan of Sables, even pally with their queen. Could be a real experience, having a whole bunch of nomads on your tail. There's even a whisper, the Governor has some interest in her welfare. Oh, sure, you'll get your reward all right, but he might start in to ruminating about you.

Sure enough, Griselda's got enemies too. Maybe, you take her out, they'll buy you drinks; I wouldn't count on anything more'n that. You want to go looking for trouble, that's all right with me. It's a free city, or so the Governor keeps saying. Me, I'd find a less exciting way to spend the rest of my life.



WOLFHEAD'S STORY

*As told to Big Nygg,
next time he brings supplies.*



What I gotta say, old Krokkie there certainly came on like some kind of hero that day. I mean, I always knew he was, like, dependable, and we all did our bit, but his performance was truly impressive.

How it happened, we were having a noonday bite, and, you know how it is, we'd been here a while with no real hassles, I was paying more attention to my food than to keeping a good watch. But I caught a glimpse of something, leaned out some, and there's this bunch of Chaotics scuttling along like they were trying to get outa sight. Man, they were weird! One had three heads, another a whole lot of arms, a third was blown up like he had a wind inside of him – there wasn't more'n one or two looked like normal Broos, if you see what I mean. I got my head in pretty fast, you bet, and yelled to the gang. We were lucky they didn't rush the place straight off, but I guess they were looking for some handy spot, were surprised to find anyone home and had to take stock.

So we got time to arm up and take positions. I stay at the back window, Kroked's by the double doors and Fylchar over there at the door you come in by, Griselda by the front windows, and Simbal by the storeroom where the roof's part down, all flapping our ears for the least sound. I'm studying on this gang, too, and I got a hunch most weren't Broos at all,

which is a useful thing to know if you have any poison handy like we did, because you know as well as I do that Broos can laugh any poison off, but it'll work fine on other Chaotics just like on everything else. So I had Simbal fetch some out and set Griselda to dipping arrows and such, because she can work faster and neater with her hands than anyone you ever saw.

Well, they decided to try and take us – had to be the worst decision they ever made, but they couldn't know that and neither did we. First some come in at the front and fell over the tripwire, which slowed them, and when they pushed on the doors down come the bricks, which made one yell all right, but it didn't convince him. Three-Heads looks through the gap a moment, but they didn't try any more there, and there's others on Fylchar's side not getting anywhere either. Just as I'm saying we'll have to hit one or two, try to scare them off, there's some yelling which Simbal catches, being in Praxian, and it's their boss calling them together. Grizzie puts up the idea that we open one side of the double doors and shoot out, which looked good to me, but Kroked couldn't shift the door and she's having trouble with a spell, we got slowed up. Then Simbal yells, one's jumped into the storeroom, and I go over to shoot. It was nothing but a head with arms sticking out, but it was lively enough; I couldn't make my shots tell and Simbal takes a big swing with his sword and nearly overbalances when he misses. Next Griselda's yelling that they're at the windows, nearly through; they must've spotted our little traps and sprung 'em while clearing the stones. So I go to the front windows and send Krokkie to help out Simbal, and pretty soon there's one almighty crunch and back comes Krokkie patting his maul and saying, that one's done for.

Now Fylchar's at the back and we heard some going around there, but we couldn't move as they'd be in the front any moment. We were standing on chairs to get a good view through, and I spotted the blown-up one, got off a shot, while Griselda whips a dart through the other window into Lots-of-Arms's head and this discouraged 'em some. Three-Heads looks in to try some spell on Griselda, which bounced right off, but she couldn't nail him with her spear. The ones in back didn't spot our surprise under the window – looking for more stuff hung up above, I guess – and down goes one into it with a yell, but another makes it through the window. This is some kind of Broo, and Fylchar can't stop him with his sling, so in goes Krokkie again. Whack! – he takes out a leg, and whack! – he smashes in the gut, and it's bye bye, Broo.

Now I go in back to take a look out the window, and there's another Broo down in the pit, seems like the boss from his gear, and Lots-of-Arms is

heaving and straining and having no luck getting him out, and here come Three-Heads and another that's practically all one big arm running up. We got in some shots, but they haul him out and off they all go. Simbal and Griselda are covering the front windows, and Lots-of-Arms turns to scoop up one that has no limbs at all, seems like, and showers Simbal with javelins. Simbal took one or two, but got off his shot, nailed him right between the eyes, prettiest shot I ever saw, and down he goes. We ran to get the double doors open, and by the time we were out they were heading for home, all except Limbless who's yelling like for help, but they weren't stopping for him, no sir. Big-Arm is fizzing along like he's got a spell on him, and there's Three-Heads and the boss, and that's all; the poison had offed the blown-up one all right.

Well, I was thinking, I didn't want any survivors coming back with friends, so I said we had to get all we could; Kroked takes out running while Grizzie and I are loosing off, Fylchar is settling Limbless, and Simbal's healing some. We got Three-Heads down and Kroked smashed in one head, though that mighta been wasted effort, and then there's only the boss in range. I'm shooting away, and Simbal too, and finally I make one of the best shots of my entire life, clean through his right arm, which hurts him so, he has to slow down, try to get it out. I yell at Kroked to get him and in he goes, no fooling about. He has that Broo so pushed for time, he swings his shield round with his arm still hanging, aiming to parry and then heal up, I guess, but old Krokkie gets his swing past everything the Broo has and you shoulda heard him yell! Smashed up his leg, and that's it; that Broo can't have been as tough as he looked, he's off to the Spirit Plane.

Now Limbless is all that's left, and he's managed to get Fylchar all dazed like, but Griselda carves him up some and he yells for mercy, he'll tell all. Takes a while to get things sorted out, with me having to head off Kroked from searching that Broo – he can be dumb sometimes, who knows what diseases he mighta caught? – but finally we get talking to this Limbless creature. He may not have an arm or leg to call his own, but he is not short of brains, no sir: he has us pegged for runaways, even comes up finally with Griselda's name – ain't it amazing how word gets about? – and he's got information on the Rubble Chaotics that he'll trade for his life, but he doesn't let it all out, you bet. Griselda sees where we can make a deal, use this stuff to clear ourselves with the cults maybe, so we dicker a bit, settle to keep him alive till we can find out. Can't hurt to try, anyway, but it's gonna have to be soon, because we don't want any more Chaotics dropping by, no sir. I doubt we'd be so lucky another time.



DEVIL'S PLAY



Most any time you go into Lilina's you're liable to hear Hanufa yakking, being as her voice is kinda penetrating, but I have to say, I never hear her so loud and clear as this time.

"So, my friend," she is yelling, "you are thinking, must have been easy, yes? Devil's Playground is no problem, you just walk in, walk out, no worries at all? I tell you, I will not do again, not for one fistful of Wheels!" and she holds up her fist to the guy who is catching all this as if she is aiming to belt him out.

"Take it easy, Hanufa," he cries, pulling back. "You gotta admit, it's kinda hard to believe it was so dangerous, when there ain't a mark on you." Just then, who walks in but Griselda and Wolfhead and his two best boys, Kroked and Fylchar, and Hanufa turns to them.

"Well, here is people who can tell you different," she says. "Wolfhead, Griselda, please to come tell this idiot what is like in Devil's Playground. He is thinking, we must have it easy down there."

The guy looks like he wants to crawl into the woodwork as they come over, but they are looking all relaxed and meaning no harm to anyone. Wolfhead says, "Well, I can scarcely believe it myself, we get out with barely a scratch. We were luckier than I ever counted on being, personally."

"Why none of my hair is white is more than I know," says Griselda, "and that yell you gave when the zombie grabbed your leg must have scared me out of a year's growth."

"If it had been you, they'd have heard you clean to the Temple," answers Wolfhead, quite sharp. "I could feel it right through my mail, like a vice."

"No offence, Wolfie," says Griselda, patting his arm. "I doubt anyone here could have done any better."

"For why are you fooling around in the Devil's Playground, anyway?" puts in Lilina, who is listening with much interest like many of us.

Wolfhead glances at Griselda, who shrugs and says, "Can't do any harm to tell it now, and, look, there's Olaf with his tongue hanging out," and we all laugh, because for sure there is nothing that Olaf loves better than stories about her doings.

"OK," says Wolfhead. "I'll tell some of it, but you all gotta help me out, because I never did care to talk for long. Also, I could use a drink, which I seem to remember is why we come in here."

"I buy," says Hanufa, all puffed up and proud, "and I will help tell, because I see what no one else does."

"Damn right," says Kroked, and gives her a big hug, and she hugs him right back, to the amazement of all present, for we never reckon them for a number before.

"True enough," says Wolfhead, "but let's get things in their proper order, and first is a drink." So Lilina gets busy, and everyone gathers round to listen.

Wolfhead takes a good pull, and says, "I guess where it all starts is, we make a deal with the Pavis cult, which if we do something right will get us out of our hole, square us with most all the cults that matter. It's that smart priestess Broosta who deals with us on behalf of her husband, the real wise guy, ol' Fleeter Nemm himself, and can she bargain! What it comes down to, we gotta accompany this old-time priest of Sunny Boy* into tunnels under the Devil's Playground that he knows are there, and see what is to be found.

"Big Nygg, he'd been our go-between in setting up the meeting, he says, 'Well, I never sold no charts', and Krokkie here, he says that's our death warrant, but we all wanted out of the Rubble the worst way, and it's the best chance we're gonna get. So off we go with the priestess to the Temple, all but Simbal who'd snuck off somehow while we're dickering.

**Yelmalio*

They are gonna send some tough initiate with us, and they'll let us send around for friends to side us, too, but nobody had the nerve, except Hanufa."

"Well, maybe if I am not full of beer, I will think twice," says Hanufa. "But once this Pavis man gets me to understand my friends need me, I say sure, why not? But when I get there, none of you is looking very happy, and what is it you say to me, Kroked?"

Kroked scratches his head. "Something about it being Chaos-hunting, could be tough and we might not all make it," he says. "But you didn't seem to let it bother you."

"We had too much time to sit and think," says Wolfhead. "I never like that. Well, we made a fair bunch, for this same initiate, guy called Zalvur, looked pretty handy with his axe, and the old priest, he was stone blind but he handled himself well, though one of us was gonna have to look out for him. Also, I had my bit of extra help, by which I mean some poison, and we mostly put it on our weapons, since it had worked so well for us when a Chaos gang tried jumping us." He finishes his drink and says, "I never talked so much. Grizzie, you take over a while."

"Right," she says. "Well, we left the Temple early in the morning, moved along nice and quiet through the Rubble until we reached the spot we were heading for, this great big tree. The priest had to do a ritual here, and like all rituals it takes for ever, and we hang around getting bitten half to death by the insects and feeling jumpier by the minute, but finally it's over, and there's this big dark hole showing in some masonry at the bottom of the tree. He tells us to walk down, never mind the darkness, and sure enough, there are steps, but that darkness is so thick, the torches won't work till we're at the bottom, and then they are dim."

"We found ourself in a round tunnel, smooth as if it had been cut. When the priest had been there before he went east and met Broos, so we went west, since our job was to get information, first of all. Shortly we came to a wall that looked very high; but the priest could hear so well, like blind people can, that he knew there were people at the top. Since they showed no lights, they figured to be Trolls or Dwarfs. So Zalvur called out in Mostali, but that didn't raise a spark, so Wolfhead, who was taking most of the decisions, told me to try Darktongue, though the priest didn't like it."

"You shoulda heard her," says Wolfhead, chuckling. "Jabbering away like you were long-lost pals, even having yourselves a laugh."

"How anyone can laugh down there!" puts in Hanufa. "I see nothing

funny. I do not like it all in the dark and the silence, but Griselda is one very brave person and she is not afraid of Trolls or the dark or anything."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," says Griselda, cutting her off, for she never likes people running on about her when she can hear. "Anyway, I got some information. These Trolls were guarding their territory against Broos and six-legged monsters with big mouths and such. They knew of me, and the leader said maybe we'd meet, if the Chaos trash didn't eat me, and I said no chance, if Trolls couldn't do it, and that tickled them."

"So we went the other way," says Wolfhead, "back to where we started, and it was clear we had to go on, because we hadn't got much information at all. We come to a branching of the tunnel pretty soon, and the priest says, right, and after a while we come to another and he says, left, and then again, right, but after that he is just plain confused, with tunnels going off every which way. It was clear, we hadda have a system."

"It was me suggested looking for tracks," says Fylchar, real proud.

"So you did," says Wolfhead, "but we couldn't see none there, so we went back to the first fork, and here I seen human tracks and others along a different branch. We moved along there, cautious-like, until we reached a big cave with a stream and even a little bridge, which made a nice change."

"Yes," said Griselda, "but the priest remembered that this was where the torches started going really dim, and Zalvur got a bad case of the jitters and wanted to go back. But you wouldn't."

"Damn right," says Wolfhead. "We hadn't got near enough to impress ol' Fleeter Nemm, I thought, and so I said, we oughta light more torches and go on, and the priest said I was right. So we done that, and went on until I couldn't see the tracks, and we talked on what to do, because this darkness was magical, no doubt of that. Finally the priest offers to put a spell on me, which'd make me see like a cat long as there's any light at all, and would last a whole day, and I went for that. It sure made a difference, but I still went wrong on the tracks, found the human ones had split off back a piece, and the priest said if the torches weren't getting dimmer we weren't getting to the heart of things, so back we go again, follow the tracks along another fork. Then the torches started going, for sure."

"Which you didn't notice, with that spell," said Griselda, "but I would like to assure everyone here that there is nothing quite so hard on the nerves as having the light get dimmer and dimmer, when you're underground and a long way from the exit." Up till now she has been pretty chipper, in fact

they all have, but her voice is slightly strained as she finishes this. Kroked rubs his hand over his face, looking very down, and Fylchar says quietly, almost to himself, "You can practically feel that darkness," while Hanufa bangs on the bar and says, "My hand is shaking so, the torch nearly go out, and is all I can do not to turn and run when the light is finally all gone."

"When that happens, suddenly I couldn't see either," Wolfhead goes on, "and I sure could appreciate how everyone else was feeling. Well, Zalvur reckons we must be close to the magic that's making this darkness, and the priest wants to use a spell to point to it, but I showed him it was crazy to think of walking into darkness, and we wouldn't see where it was pointing, would we? So he comes up with another spell, which makes light like the sun shine off his head, so I can see just fine and the others like in twilight, and he lengthens it too, so we will have plenty of time. Then he does his spell for finding magic, and sure enough it points to a close source."

"We moved up on it quiet as we could," says Griselda, "and saw where the rock dropped away. So we agreed, Wolfhead would crawl to the edge, with the priest behind to give light. You have to admit that took nerve, though our light could have been seen by anything below, and yet we heard nothing."

"And I listened hard enough, you bet," says Wolfhead. "But nothing. Then I inched my head over the edge, but of course I couldn't see down. So Zalvur brings the priest and he puts his head over the edge, so the light can shine all ways, and holds out his magic pointer, and then I get a good view. I see a big stone in the middle, and lots of stuff stacked about in boxes and sacks, and a rope ladder hanging down, and at the bottom, wait for it, there are skeletons and what look like Trolls, which the priest's pointer is pointing at. But they don't act like they know we're there."

"Which makes them zombies," says Griselda, "and the priest figures that stone is likely to be the source of the dimming magic, and ought to be destroyed. But first we had to get this undead trash out of the way. Luckily, they had no weapons."

"I wanted to let them come up the ladder and knock them off," says Kroked, "but we decided to try a bit of slinging first on them skeletons, being as they got no armour, and haul up the ladder while we're doing it. At first we weren't doing so good, but Grizzie got going with her magic ring, knocked down two –"

"One of which was my bird," growls Wolfhead. "Then we started

popping their skulls good, and Krokkie helpfully let down the ladder for them zombies. We held one at the top, which blocked the rest, but then we learned a bit about how hard zombies are to knock out. Finally I must have cut a tendon or something, because it collapses, and then Krokkie and Hanufa rush the next over the edge and it falls on a third, knocks it off the ladder. Zalvur says we oughta throw the first one over, which by now he's smashed up so it can't move, and we got a good swing and landed it right on top of another."

"It was not at all nice to hold that zombie," says Hanufa, taking a long pull at her beer, "but is good to see them knock each other down and smash the skeletons."

"After that, there was only one zombie on its feet," says Wolfhead, "and I'm game to go in and finish it, but it grabbed me before I got off the ladder. That's when I yelled."

"Which is when Griselda is most brave," Hanufa cries, "for she jumps down to help him."

Griselda shakes her head. "Dumbest thing I've done for some time; I must have got carried away by all these brave deeds. I didn't even land well, but I rolled with it and came up, and then the zombie picks Wolfhead right up and throws him."

"Coulda been worse," says Wolfhead, "but I was very short of breath for a while there. Luckily, them zombies are not fast movers, and the others can get down and finally take the last apart, though the one we threw was still twitching some."

"Then we can finally get at the stone, which seemed like an altar," says Griselda. "Just bashing it had no effect, but it was not part of the floor, so I thought we could lift it up and throw it."

"I like that 'we'," says Wolfhead. "But she was right. Me and Zalvur and Fylchar and Hanufa picked it up and threw it at the wall, but it just chipped, and then Zalvur has a great idea, we use this rope he has and haul it up to the top, then drop it. Took a lot of heaving, but when we let it go, it smashed straight off, and everything lit up like day in there from the old priest's light spell. He could feel it was gone, said his god musta been watching out for us, but he was right pleased."

"So was I, to be able to see proper," says Hanufa. "Priest says he will commend us to his god, which is nice to say, though my people worship

Yelm himself, not this little Yelmlio, why do some people here think he is so great?"

Wolfhead waves a hand. "I got no opinion on that. Anyway, we all felt as if a cloud was off our minds, and got down to looking in the boxes and sacks. I'm not about to say all we found, but it was sure worth having –"

"Some very fine food," says Hanufa, licking her lips, "which I was glad of, because I was starved by this time."

"Yeah, you'd still be eating it," says Kroked, digging her in the ribs. Hanufa giggles, but Griselda says sharply, "So would you. You were all acting like it was over. It was me made you get moving."

"Well, Hanufa's right, it was good stuff," says Wolfhead, grinning at her. "Anyway, we picked up what we could, that we had sorted out as worth having, as we were gonna get to keep some if we'd done right, and then we started back careful and smart-like, with the priest's light working for us."

"Just as well," says Fylchar, "or I couldn'ta spotted nothing in that cave."

"Yeah, there was a little reception committee there for us," says Wolfhead, breaking in again as if he wants to tell most of the story, despite what he was saying at first. "Well, we hadda rush 'em, because someone drops her sword," and he glares at Hanufa. "I got off a good shot and knocked one down, which Zalvur chopped, but the others got away, though it turned out I'd hit another and the poison offed it. Most seemed to be these six-legged things the Trolls had mentioned, but some were, like, crossed with Broos. We knew they'd wait for us in the tunnels, so we put more poison on any weapons that we had used, and any who had 'em put up protecting spells. The priest knows these six-legged things, says they had chewed out the tunnels, they were the creatures of some Chaos god and very dangerous, which I could certainly believe! He had plenty of information on them, but it didn't make us at all happy."

"They could jump about, spit sticky stuff, poison us with biting, or magic us with their tongues," said Hanufa. "I never hear of such things before."

"And he said they stay underground and tunnel all over the world," Kroked throws in. "Which is one reason why no one who isn't some kinda hero should go down there. But we faced 'em well enough, didn't we, Hannie?"

"This is where the priest's spells really come in handy," says Wolfhead. "I could see way ahead of the light off of him, and spot where they were waiting. I told the rest what I could see, which was three monsters and one of the Broo-crosses in two passages, and said Zalvur, who was at point, should act like he was unsure. It musta fooled them, because I got a chance to nail one monster ahead of me and we were on them before the Broo-cross could yell."

"But now I see what no one else sees," cries Hanufa in great excitement. "Is one more monster in third tunnel. So I shout and face it. It sticks me up, but only my shield arm, and it miss me when it jumps. Griselda gets it with a dart," – "Poisoned", puts in Griselda – "and we are doing not too badly, except that Kroked gets stuck and Zalvur is not able to kill the Broo."

"They kept sticking us, in fact," says Wolfhead, "but all had got hit with something poisoned, and we managed to stay ahead of them until they dropped. Fylchar surprised that Broo with some coughing dust, best idea he ever had, and I stuck it deep with my spear, so it just lay down and coughed itself to death. We were all getting untangled and aiming to take trophy, when Kroked came running, saying there's more on the way."

"I heard 'em when I went to pick up my throwing axe," said Kroked. "Nasty scrabbling sound, couldn'ta been anything else."

"So we all held our breath and ran through the dust cloud, which seemed to help, keep them off," said Wolfhead. "Snakefang sells good stuff. But we couldn't go fast, because Zalvur had turned his ankle, and one got through and nearly snuck up on me in the rear. But I heard it in time, knocked it over, and that good ol' poison did its stuff. I took a claw for a trophy, and just as well."

"We got out just before the priest's light spell ended," says Griselda, "and made it back to the Temple without trouble, and there were all these priests and such waiting for us, mostly looking hostile. That claw was a good argument when one asked how they could believe anything we said. Zalvur spoke up well for us, said it was Wolfhead's shooting – and you were shooting well that day - and the priest's spells that got us in and out so easy, and Fleeter Nemm backed him and the priest for truth-tellers. They all changed their tune when we told the whole story."

"In fact, it got downright uncomfortable," says Wolfhead. "You'd think we were genuine heroes, the way Fleeter Nemm's going on, but then, we had turned up some stuff he thought would be real useful – "

"No more on that," says Griselda fast. "Let's just say we got good treatment from him and the others, and everything of the best while we were in the Temple."

"It all worked out OK," says Wolfhead. "In fact, we're real respectable now, might do some work for old daddy Pavis. But if I'd known what it was gonna be like . . ." He shakes his head, and for a moment he looks kinda odd about the eyes; so do they all, in fact, like they'd just woken from a nightmare. No one speaks, until finally Kroked says, "Going after Chaos stuff is for crazies like the Storm Bulls."

"Yeah," says Wolfhead, and looks round at us all. "Maybe, how we tell it, it sounds easy, but there's no way you can get the feel, not without going down there, which I would not advise, personally."

"In fact," says Griselda, "you can take it like the old song:

*You can bet your last clack –
and the shirt off your back –
we'll never go there again."*



CARVING UP CARVER



Very few people care to be around Storm Bulls much and I am not one of them, so when Carver Donan pops up in front of me one morning when I am laying into one of Bob's Bisonburgers and doing a little handicapping, it is not surprising that my reaction is somewhat marked. In fact, I swallow a piece the wrong way, and he gives me a great whack on the back to stop me choking, and by the time he has me up and dusted off I am feeling all shook up and am able to give him no more than a very hoarse hello.

This Carver Donan is a big, muscular guy from away down south and west, where folks are not very civilised, and because he wants more action than he can get stealing the next tribe's sheep he goes a-wandering and fetches up in Pavis. He is still a fairly young guy, but already he has quite a reputation for mayhem, and few citizens want any part of him, for he carries a great big blade that is like an overgrown butcher's knife, and he gets his nickname from what he likes to do with the blade when he gets excited, and Carver Donan can get excited very easily. He is not such a guy as is extra strong in the brains department, in fact he joins the Storm Bulls before he even reaches Pavis, and for my money joining the Storm Bulls at any time is a triple guarantee that you are dumb. But this is a point of view which I keep strictly to myself, for Storm Bulls are apt to be very touchy about such comments, and it is well known that they do not care a bent clack for the law, especially when the Lunars are administering it, and will jump you in a

moment if they feel they have cause to, and let the future take care of itself.

But Carver is all right when he is sober, and I always give him a hello, for I believe in keeping in with all such characters, and he has some time for me, because I once put him in the way of making a little dough in the fight game. In this man's town there are many guys, and dolls too, who will bet on anything down to which of two birds will fly off a roof first, and this only shows how dumb people can get, for where is the sense in betting on a bird if you know nothing of its previous performance? So naturally such persons will bet on fights, and there are also persons who love to watch fights, and so some enterprising characters see a way to make some dough by hiring fighters to put on a show in a discreet location out of town and handling bets. Usually only adventurers who are very desperate will consider this, and they rarely last long, because such fights must be serious or the public will not be interested. But Carver hangs up quite a record before he has to retire because the promoters can get no one to take him on, and moreover can make nothing by bets because Carver is the public's favourite. But Carver is not dismayed at having to retire, but just goes on with his life, doing this and that.

"Well, well, well," he says, "here you are at last. I am looking for you all over." He does not say this in such a way as to suggest that he wishes me harm, so I relax and ask what I can do for him. "You are spoken of here and there as one who knows almost as much about Griselda as she does," he says, "and I wish to find her, so tell me where she is likely to be right now."

Well, this is the kind of question I never like to answer, since I do not wish anyone to think I am putting the finger on them, but this time I have an easy way out.

"Nobody knows where Griselda is, Carver," I say. "Since she and Wolfhead do their disappearing act I must hear a hundred stories of where they are, and I know nothing to prove any one of these stories."

"Then I know more than you do," he says. "My cult gets word two nights ago from the Pavis temple, asking if we will forgive and forget being cheated over that chart in return for our money back, being as Griselda and the rest are carrying out such doughty deeds against Chaos. It seems that the Pavis temple is sponsoring them now. But we are not going to let the matter go so easy, and I am looking for them since, and especially Griselda, who figures to be the brains behind the whole scam."

"Well, Carver," I say, "this is all news to me, and I do not suppose you

want any advice, but I will give you some free, gratis, and for nothing. Try to cross the Troll Bridge, or take over the Mint, or get to the centre of the Puzzle Canal, but do not tangle with Griselda, for she makes a sucker of some very tough characters here and there and if you hit her you will likely break your arm."

"Oh phooey!" says Carver. "Who sees her do half what is claimed? No, in my book she is just a smart little doll with an exaggerated reputation, as I aim to show, and besides, I am bound and determined to avenge my cult's honour." And off he goes, and for once, though I generally like to be around when Griselda is involved in any action, I find I have no wish to follow, since either she or Carver is likely to suffer permanent damage and I am unwilling to witness this. Instead I go to Lilina's, figuring that Carver must already look in there, and tell the company that Griselda is reported back in town, and what else I hear from Carver, and this is news of interest to one and all.

It is maybe an hour later when who steps through the door but Rowdy Djoh Lo, which is most unusual, though he and Loud Lilina are believed to think well of one another at one time and only to part company over where to set up business. He is looking a little strained, and also sounds it, for he says, "Give us a mug for old times' sake, Lilli. I just close up my joint after what comes off there and step uptown to relax."

Lilina draws him a mug and says, "Rest your mind, Djoh boy. What happens that makes you so nervous?" and we all quieten down to listen.

"You all hear that Griselda is back?" he says. "Well, she drops by like she is never away, claims it is her first chance to get a drink without some kind of priest breathing down her neck. She is looking a shade thinner than last time I see her, but otherwise is in good spirits. She sets them up, and is beginning to curl our ears with some tale of fighting off a Chaos bunch at Wolfhead's hideout, when in comes Carver Donan. Now, I always think they get on all right before, but he pulls that blade, swings his shield round, and starts for her yelling. We move pretty fast, and so must she, and his blade zips through where she is sitting a moment before and demolishes a perfectly good chair. Then he starts swinging at her but he is mostly hitting air, as she is waltzing rings around him and parrying away with her little sticker, cool as anything. All the time she is muttering spells, and it is real educational to see her at work; first she goes a little blurry to look at, then there is a shine along her sword-edge, then she kind of flicks her hand at him and blasts him twice, especially in the fighting arm, which makes him yell. So he stops swinging and must aim to hold her off and heal his arm a bit, but

with all the pressure she is putting on he cannot get it done, for now she takes her sword to him. By some kind of fluke she misses the first time, though he is making all the wrong moves, but she just blinks and tries again, and this time she drops him with a nice one low in the ribs.

“‘Is that enough, you crazy guy?’ she says, and after thrashing about a bit he says, ‘OK, you win,’ and gets himself healed enough to get up. But then he says, ‘You beat me by magic, not fair fight,’ very grumpy-like.

“‘What is fair about jumping me?’ she says, still very cool, and he starts yelling about no need to warn an enemy of the Bull’s, at which Griselda seems to sigh. ‘If that is the way you feel about it’, she says, ‘I will give you a real fight, but not out of armour.’

“ ‘I can take you in armour if you lay off magic,’ says Carver, and then they get down to fixing terms, but I close up the joint, because I do not care for so much excitement this early in the day. It does not sit well with my breakfast.”

After this, word gets about fast that Griselda and Carver Donan are to have a proper duel in the fighting place out of town, and much dough begins to be laid on the result. In fact so much dough is wagered that the fight promoters start talking of claiming a percentage, but Wolfhead and Big Nygg and one or two others talk to them very earnestly about this, and it is difficult to argue with such guys, so they cannot even charge an entrance fee. Personally, I have great difficulty making up my mind where to place my dough, for there is no denying that Griselda is giving away a lot of her edge by agreeing to use no magic but Healing, since Carver knows very little magic, and he may be the toughest opponent she ever faces, and all this shows in the odds you can get. But the crowd from Lilina’s generally remains faithful to Griselda, and many others fancy her, so that you can only get six for five on Carver, and I decide to take a gamble that Griselda will win out some way.

So one fine day we all troop out to the fighting place, and it seems like half the town is there, including many persons who you will not expect to see on such an occasion. There is a whole bunch from the Pavis temple, including that smart priestess Broosta, and representatives of half a dozen other cults, even the Yelornans who seldom come out of the Rubble, and it is quite noticeable how many of these cult persons are female apart from the Yelornans, who are bound to be. There are some Sables, and some off-duty Lunar soldiers, and off in one corner there are even some Trolls all covered up against the sun. Of course, there are Storm Bulls there to side Carver,

though these are nothing special, and Wolfhead and others, including Hanufa who is not seen for some days, are with Griselda. Many of those present stand around in tight little bunches, and they can be observed to cast hostile glances at each other from time to time, but to start a fight at an occasion like this will be considered most bad-mannered, and a sign that you have no class at all, and besides few of those present come prepared for an all-out fight.

By the terms Carver and Griselda get to throw one missile at each other, and here Carver is not so lucky, for he makes a fair javelin throw which just bounces off Griselda's mail, while her puny little dart cuts through the leather which is all he has to wear and slices his carving arm. But it does not seem to slow him down, and with his first swing he gets a good lick past Griselda's shield into her leg, for her shield-work is not so good as you will expect, and she rocks a little and has to do a healing spell. She turns off a couple more but cannot get at his carving arm, which it seems she has her eye on, and then he is through again and down goes Griselda with a leg out, and there is quite a gasp all around. I am breathing a prayer for my dough and wishing I have the sense to lay off some, and there is much alarm and despondency among Lilina's customers generally, for Griselda is not looking any too good, while Carver is all puffed out with pride as he winds himself up for the big one. But he is not a very fast mover and Griselda is able to fit in a little healing and take the full force of his swing, which shows you that she is tougher than she looks. Then she is up and coming for him with a screech like nothing I ever hear. It surely makes him jump a little, for his next swing just takes the bottom off her shield, while she cuts low at his leg and then high at his carving arm, very fast, and he is completely fooled. He covers the leg, which is only nicked, and she slices up his arm quite some, so that he drops his blade, and then she steps on it. At this there is much laughter around and about, which burns Carver up, it seems; anyway, he runs straight at her, aiming to knock her over, which is not such a bad idea, at that. But now Griselda really has her luck working for her, and how she does it I will never know, but she fakes him into bouncing off her in such a way that he goes right over, at which there is a real yell, and none are yelling so loudly as those present who happen to be female, to see that great big guy downed by little Griselda. Also she must be working her brain double time, for she thinks to kick Carver's blade over to Wolfhead, who snatches it up, and then she turns on Carver, who is sitting up shaking his head, but she does not strike again.

"Now are you satisfied, you stupid bastard?" she says. "I can kill you

ten times over by now.” Anyone can see that she is more vexed than somewhat, but then she has a right to be, for Carver demonstrates that she is not unbeatable. Carver heaves himself up, clutching his arm, and says, “No way I can beat you now, Griselda, I admit; I will give you best. Now do I get my blade back?”

“Sure,” says Griselda, sounding cool again, “if you swear by your god not to attack me again.”

“Now, you know I cannot do that, Griselda,” he says, as if what she is asking is most unreasonable. “You are an enemy of the cult, for gods’ sake.”

“No oath, no blade,” says Griselda shortly. Carver seems quite nonplussed at this and looks at his pals, who come up with the idea of a truce. At this Griselda fires up. “What good is a truce to me? Must I spend my whole life dodging you crazies? We offer you your money back, do we not? I want better than this, or no deal.”

Now Carver sets his jaw, and says very grittily, “I can always get another blade.”

But Griselda looks quite unimpressed. “Carver, you do that,” she says. “But mind me. As far as I am concerned, you throw away your chance; come after me again and I will use everything I have.” The way she says this will have me fixing to leave town within the hour, but Carver just laughs and goes off with his friends.

Well, Griselda is not the only one who is dissatisfied with this conclusion, though in most other cases this is because their bets are void, since there is no kill. But I am smart enough to get a bet simply that she will come out ahead, and so I get paid off and am eager to buy her a drink. But she goes off quickly and is not seen uptown that night, maybe because she suspects the other Storm Bulls will be laying for her.

It is a day or two later that Griselda shows up in Lilina’s, and I never see her look so mad. She throws herself into her usual chair, which we leave empty just in case, and slams her sword on the table where it is ready to hand, and says nothing until she downs a good half of her drink. Then she looks around.

“How do you like this guy?” she says. “Do I not give him a good chance at me? Is it my fault he has no better armour than that dirty old leather? Yet here he is, griping about how I never fight fair, with my armour and power crystal and all. I can tell you, even without the crystal I can

outlast him, stupid dumb cluck who cannot get out of the way of his own feet!" Then she throws back the rest of her drink and broods for a bit, while none of us can think of anything helpful to say. Finally she says quietly, "I suppose I will have to fight the big lunk again, damn the luck."

"Well, Griselda," I say, hoping to cheer her up, "after all I see and hear my money goes on you, on any terms, and I am sure I speak for all present."

Griselda grins a little. "Thanks," she says, a little drily, or so it sounds to me. "You are a real pal," and off she goes.

It is not too long after this that word goes around that they arrange to fight again, and this time Carver is to be allowed some heavy-duty protection spell, since he cannot raise any good armour, and Griselda will not use her real attacking spells, and also will start the fight with her spear, which is not her best weapon, because Carver cannot get another blade like his own to fight with and must use a Lunar scimitar, which is the nearest thing. All these changes give the betting public plenty of headaches figuring out new odds, but this time Griselda is the clear favourite.

It seems like even more of the town turns out than before, though no Trolls show up this time, and the excitement is practically intense. Carver looks very determined as he makes practice swings with his scimitar, but I judge he does not have such confidence in it and that my dough is as good as in the bank. Well, as it happens I am right, but the event is so short that many are heard to murmur that they are short-changed. For Griselda turns off Carver's first swing like a pro while she is casting some spell, and though her first stab bounces off him because of his protection the second goes through everything he has and all the way into his left arm. I seldom see anyone look so surprised as Carver does then; he just stands there with his arms hanging and his mouth open, like he cannot believe this happens to him, while Griselda lets go the spear and pulls her sword. One and all are reckoning it is the Spirit Plane for Carver, but Griselda lowers her own blade after a moment and says in a most disgusted way, "Aw, hell; I cannot do it. Get it out of him."

So Carver's friends gather round, and as they are looking after him Griselda stands watching, shaking her head and seeming to be cussing to herself. Some of those present figure it is all over and begin to leave, but Griselda looks as if she is building up to blow, and so most stay to see what comes off. Sure enough, when Carver is taking notice again, Griselda cuts loose on him, in a voice that can be heard all round the fighting place, although she is by no means yelling.

"Carver," she says, "you and your dumb friends are just not in my league. Does it occur to none of you to stipulate that I do not use poison on this spear, though you must know I can get hold of it easy enough? If I do, you will be a dead duck by now, and it is very lucky for you that I decide not to take unfair advantage of your lack of brains, reckoning I can handle you without such aid. Sometimes," she says "it seems to me that most people have no more use for their brains than to stop the wind blowing straight through their skulls. Now," she says, "are you going to lay off, because this is positively your last chance? If you say no, I am not going to wait on you, but will be aiming to take you out any way I can. But instead of harassing me why do you not go and chase Chaos the way you are supposed to do? There is plenty down in the Devil's Playground to keep you occupied, take it from me, and the Pavis cult will be happy to provide you with directions."

Anyone can see these remarks about their dumbness burn the Storm Bulls up no little, although most others present clearly derive great enjoyment from them, and if looks can kill Griselda will be dogmeat. But even the Storm Bulls dast not start anything, for there are too many present who are likely to side with Griselda. Carver does not seem as annoyed as you will expect, but acts like he is thinking. First he looks at the ground, and then at the sky, and finally he says, "All right. I personally will lay off; I can see when I am jinxed. But that does not mean I will not help others."

"Then you will get just as dead as they do, if you are in range," says Griselda, and after a moment, since she evidently has nothing more to say, the Storm Bulls move off, and it is quite remarkable how relaxed everybody becomes. Quite a few of the cult people come over to congratulate Griselda on her showing, especially the females. Mostly they just say a word or two, but one of the Yelornans, who seems quite important to judge from the silver all over her gear, asks her why she does not kill Carver. "One Storm Bull less will be of general benefit," she says, "and you have reason enough."

Well, Griselda never cares to be asked why she does things, so I expect her answer to be fairly blunt, no matter how high-ranking this Yelornan is, but she just stares at her for a moment and then says, "Oh, I just remember that I buy him a drink some while before I leave town, and I am surely not going to kill him before he buys me one back," and she says this in such a way that if you do not know her well you will think she is being serious. But Wolfhead comes out with a loud guffaw at once, and plenty of others join in, and the Yelornans go off looking most offended.

Then Broosta, who is near enough to hear this, speaks up. "As good a

way of telling someone to mind their own business as I ever hear," she says. "But she is right. Like most Storm Bulls, this Carver Donan seems a most obnoxious character, and you may well have further trouble with him."

Griselda sighs. "Lady, I know it, but do you not see that if I kill him I may get in worse trouble with his cult than I am now? Besides, you are entitled to your opinion of Storm Bulls, but they have their uses, and after that little trip to the Devil's Playground that we undertake for you I can certainly appreciate them. In fact, as soon as I hear Carver is off hunting Chaos again, I will return his blade with my compliments; as long as he is hacking away at Broos and not at me, we will get along fine."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is the only story that derives in part from playing the characters: the duels are all genuine, rolled up with dice.



BAD EXAMPLE



A guy like me whose favourite occupation is hanging around comes across unusual situations now and then, but one thing I never expect to see is a swell doll from one of the Rich Hill families poke her nose into Loud Lilina's. Moreover, although this doll is all dressed up in the latest style she seems scarcely old enough to be let out on her own, and in fact she is not, for with her comes an older doll who is not so well dressed and who must be her maid or companion or some such. Well, the young doll stands there looking around as if she never sees anything like this before, and the chances are she does not, at that, and we are so surprised to see such a doll in Lilina's that the conversation, which is never too brisk at that time of the morning anyway, dies to nothing, and we all hear her ask Lilina if this is the right place to meet the renowned Griselda.

Lilina allows that Griselda may drop by at any moment and asks if the ladies will take anything while they wait. The young doll calls for a little wine, but her companion says no in such a tone as makes it clear that she has no wish to be there. In fact, she is acting most disgusted with the whole situation, and when Lilina shows them to the best seats you can practically hear her making most uncomplimentary comments, although all she does is sniff. But the young doll seems to be getting a great bang out of everything, and I hear her say to the other, "Oh, Hilda, is this not exciting?" and when Hilda replies that she prefers her excitement in cleaner surroundings, the young doll just laughs and says she has no soul.

They sit there awhile, and Sweet-Talking Shamus, who never passes up a chance to get in with rich dolls, tries to talk to them, but is frozen out most efficiently by Hilda, and anyone can see she knows what time it is. In fact, not long after this she suggests that they return home, but the young doll is most insistent that they wait for Griselda, and says besides that she is finding it most exciting, and romantic, and so forth. It is plain from her comments that she believes us all to be famous adventurers and hard cases and such, and furthermore that she has great admiration for such characters, and clearly she has a bad case of whatever it is that afflicts young characters from legitimate backgrounds now and then, and leads them to suppose that breaking the law or chasing rainbows in the Rubble are occupations worthy of much respect, and to make heroes of those who do such things. This Hilda doll is evidently meant to keep her on the straight and narrow, and points out to her that such persons are anti-social, and that if we are a typical sample it is not a paying proposition, and while this can be seen as somewhat insulting to us there is no doubt that she is right, though the young doll, whose name proves to be Viridia, takes no notice.

Just as Hilda is saying that they really ought to go, in comes Griselda, and Viridia bounces up to her at once and says, "I am Viridia Patroma and it will be a great privilege to buy you a drink. I hear so much about you and am full of admiration."

Now Griselda is such a doll as always has the dough to buy her own drinks but never refuses a free one, so she sits down with them and before long is getting her ear chewed off with talk by Viridia, so that she barely has a chance to say yes or no. Viridia has much to say on how exciting it must be to go adventuring and how life in her part of Pavis is really very dull, and I think to myself that I can stand a little dullness if I get to live in the style that she is accustomed to on Rich Hill, and from the way Hilda gives a little smile and shakes her head I judge she is thinking the same. Then Viridia starts in to ask Griselda about her career, and it seems to me that Hilda starts taking more notice of the conversation, but before very long she states firmly that they really must go, or Viridia's father will have the watch out combing Pavis for them, and this is very true, for the Patroma family carry a lot of weight in Pavis. But Viridia is plainly eager for more, and asks Griselda if they can meet again, and to my surprise Griselda says yes, and they fix on three days from then. I am surprised because ordinarily Griselda has no patience with hero-worshippers, though this is the first female one she encounters, to my knowledge.

But when they are gone she gestures to me to come over, and says, "I

want you with me when they show up again, and see if you can round up Hanufa too. This Viridia will drive me crazy if I am stuck with her for long, so you are to distract her with your tales, and Hanufa too, for she is much better at lying about her experiences than I am, and can talk the ears off a Troll anyway."

"Well, Griselda," I say, "of course, I will do what I can, but I do not understand why you are willing to see this Viridia again if she is apt to drive you crazy."

"I have my reasons," says Griselda shortly, and I leave the matter there, for Griselda does not like being questioned about what she considers her business.

So when Viridia shows up in three days' time, still with Hilda riding herd on her, there we all are, and Griselda introduces us, and before long a fine time is being had by one and all except Hilda, who sits on the edge looking proper, for though Hanufa and I may have no real wish to speak to Viridia we have nothing else to do, and besides, we seldom get the chance to taste stuff of the quality that she is paying for. By and by Griselda withdraws from the conversation, more or less, and I perceive she is trying to get talking to Hilda, and finally they are chatting quietly. But Hilda does not forget her responsibilities, and reminds Viridia when it is time to go, but she does not protest when Viridia makes another date, and though by this time I am feeling all tuckered out from trying to answer a thousand questions from Viridia, who is really surprisingly ignorant about life in general, and I will be happy if I never speak to her again, Griselda agrees and includes us all in the party, and of course Hanufa and I know better than to say no to Griselda.

So three days on they are back again, and this time Griselda does not have much to say to Viridia but seems to wish to converse with Hilda, who also seems to wish this. It is not too long before Viridia gets restless about this, and finally she leans across and says to Griselda, "Surely if you can speak to Hilda you can speak to me. Will you not tell me a story of your exploits? I wish to hear one from your own lips."

She speaks in such a way as makes it clear that she is used to getting whatever she wants and thinks Griselda is bound to do as she wishes. Surprisingly, Griselda does not seem to resent this, but starts telling a story I never hear from her before. It is all about how she gets cut off from a bunch while investigating some caves, and wanders here and there, escaping one peril after another, until she disturbs a family of Cave Trolls who start chasing her. She tries everything she knows to throw them off, but they keep

on, and finally she takes a wrong turning and winds up against a blank wall, with no place to hide and all these Trolls coming at her. She tells the story well, so that the whole joint winds up listening, and by this point she has Viridia on the edge of her seat, eyes and mouth wide open. Griselda stops to take a pull at her drink, and Viridia is so excited that she bursts out, "Whatever do you do?"

Griselda smiles sweetly, and spreads her hands, and says, "What can I do? They eat me." Well, this is one of the oldest gags in the book, and most of us are expecting it by now, and the whole joint cracks up, and I notice that Hilda is one of those who is laughing hardest. Viridia goes all red and jumps up, looking very mad, and she opens her mouth to let loose, but she catches Griselda's eye, for Griselda is not laughing but gazing at her calmly, and she must get the idea that it will be unwise to say whatever she has in mind, even if she is Viridia Patroma. So she just snaps, "Come, Hilda," and marches off.

Hilda gets to her feet, wiping her eyes, and I hear her tell Griselda thanks for the best laugh she has in years, and also I hear Griselda say to her quite low, "Do not forget what I am telling you, now." Hilda's face gets serious and she nods just a little, and then she hurries after Viridia, who starts bawling her out when they are barely through the door. It is plain that they will not be back, and this is surely a relief to most of us, for Lilina's will be nice and quiet in the mornings again.

Now a day or two later Griselda is taking her ease in Lilina's when in comes a whole bunch of the watch, headed up by Constable Jorjar himself. He asks Griselda most sternly if she knows anything of the whereabouts of one Hilda, dependant of the Patroma family.

"Why, no," says Griselda, "how will I? I barely know her, only that she comes in here a few times with Viridia Patroma. What is the beef?"

"Never mind that," says Constable Jorjar. "I guess we will have to search the place and ask you unsavoury characters a few questions, and you, Griselda, are going to come with me; I wish to look your place over."

So off Griselda has to go, while the watch go through Lilina's and ask us questions, but of course they find nothing and we can say no more than Griselda does, and they loosen up enough to tell us that Hilda disappears, and so does Viridia Patroma's jewellery box, and it is suspected in law-enforcement circles that these events are connected. In a while Griselda is back, looking none the worse, but she shakes her head in answer to all

questions and will not be drawn to speculate, so we have to drop the matter. But I notice that she is an unusually good mood for the rest of the day, buying drinks and swapping gags and generally acting very relaxed, and maybe she imbibes a little too freely. For eventually she takes me aside and says,

“You are involved in this somewhat, and I suspect you hear what I say to Hilda when we part, but you keep your lip buttoned like a sensible guy, so I owe you one, and besides, I will burst if I do not tell someone who knows the background, though this must go no further.” Naturally, I am greatly intrigued, and swear to keep it an absolute secret, so you do not hear this from me.

She takes me outside and well away from Lilina’s, and finally as we are walking along she says, “That Hilda has plenty of moxie, all right, and I judge she will make a go of it in the adventuring dodge, now she has a stake. I spot that she is dissatisfied with her present situation, running around keeping that little cat out of trouble and taking all kinds of crap from her, no doubt, so I get to talking to her about what a doll can do. Maybe I drop a few hints about the most reliable fences in this town, and mention the name of a friend or two of mine who can be trusted, though I will swear that I never suggest to her that she lifts this Viridia’s jewellery or anything else, and of course I do nothing so foolish as to offer her a hideout, though I am sure she will know where to go from one or two things I let fall.”

“That is certainly very interesting, Griselda,” I say. “Does she give you anything for your trouble?”

“Do you think I am dumb?” says Griselda. “Dolls like Viridia know their jewellery boxes inside out, and if I am caught with anything recognisable it will not look good for me. No, I take nothing from Hilda, in fact I am happy to give her a hand, for I have great sympathy for dolls with ability who are stuck in such situations. Besides, I make a little on the deal, apart from the free drinks.”

“How is that?” I say.

“Oh, easy enough,” she says. “I make a few enquiries, and discover that old man Patroma will pay well to get his daughter cured of her infatuation with adventuring. It seems I do the trick all right, for he pays off yesterday and is happy to okay me with Constable Jorjar, he is so relieved; for at first he is afraid I will set his daughter a bad example.”



HOLDING THE BABY



Personally, I have great admiration for all Healers, though I hope and trust that I will never need their professional services. I admire them because they devote their lives to tending the sick and wounded, and wish no one any harm, and live modestly, and are generally patient and polite with one and all. But they can also be very tedious on the subject of health, for, to hear them tell it, half of what normal folks like to eat is bad for you, and so is more booze than will cover the bottom of a mug, and staying up after dark, and in fact just about anything that I and guys like me are fond of. Also, they are apt to take any chance they can get to put forward propositions which few people wish to hear, such as that there is good in everyone, and all creatures deserve respect, and so forth. So when a Healer happens by with time to spare most citizens will remember that they have business elsewhere, and there is much apprehension among the regulars in Loud Lilina's when Hanufa drops by with a Healer in tow.

But it seems that this Healer is not out to reform us, or anyway not much. She is quite ready to take a drink when it is offered, and in fact she calls for a long one, and it is soon clear to one and all why she hooks up with Hanufa. For while I always figure Hanufa for a leading favourite in a gabbing championship of Pavis, and will be ready to back her as a serious contender in all-Dragon Pass competition if the odds are right, there is no doubt that this Healer, whose name is Hubba, is right up there with her. It seems that Hanufa and Hubba happen upon each other while Hanufa is

getting her arm looked at after her run-in with Ragna the Wrestler, and they hit it off right away. Furthermore, it seems that Hubba never mixes with characters such as the regulars in Lilina's before, and she finds it all very interesting, and wishes to know everyone's story, though she sometimes has problems stopping talking for long enough to listen. But this makes her popular around Lilina's, and because she is not around very often, business generally being brisk in the Healing dodge, she does not wear out her welcome quickly, as gabby types can do.

Now at this time Griselda is taking to looking very preoccupied when she is in Lilina's. She rarely takes part in any conversations, but just sits as if she is thinking hard, and nobody knows why this is, or has the nerve to ask. One day Hubba happens by when she is there, and shows interest in finding out who she is, but when she finds out she acts quite shocked.

"I never figure this Griselda I am hearing of here and there for such a sweet-faced girl," she says "She must be very unhappy inside, to live the way she does."

"Why, she never shows it," says Hanufa, "and I live in a similar way myself."

"No, my dear Hanufa," says Hubba. "You lead an adventurous life, it is true, but I have yet to hear that you have dealings with Trolls, or hang out with hard cases like Wolfhead and Snakefang, or kill people all over the place without turning a hair. It is really very sad," and she goes on in this way, although Hanufa is desperately trying to change the subject, until Griselda gets up and comes over to their table.

"So you think I lead a bad life, Healer?" she says. "Now why is that?" and she grins in a way that suggests that Hubba will be very dumb to have such thoughts.

Hubba looks a shade embarrassed at being overheard, but she does not lack moxie and comes back at Griselda with stuff about the best kind of life being to raise a family, and care for others, and all that. Griselda hears her out and then says, "Why, this is the line they sell women all over, and I guess that to you it may come easy enough, but everyone cannot be like you. Maybe I am lucky that in my family they do not have truck with such notions. Anyway," she says, "for days now I am racking my brains to think of a suitable birthday present for my friend Wolfhead, and I call that caring for others."

She laughs at this, but Hubba is not be joked out of it. "Friends are

fine," she says, "but a family is better, and I mean this not just for women but for men too. There is nothing to beat bringing up children, and I will be doing it still if my husband does not pop off quite unexpected."

Griselda shrugs. "Well, me, I can take children or leave them alone, and mostly I prefer to leave them alone."

"How can a young woman like you not want children?" cries Hubba. "It is most unnatural."

"Unnatural or not, that is the way I feel," says Griselda, and off she goes.

"She is fighting it," says Hubba, looking after her, but she has little more to say, and shortly departs also. But she is back a few days later, and what does she have with her but a baby. Now this is alarming to one and all, for it is well known that babies are nothing but trouble, because always they are yelling to be fed, or cleaned, or just for the hell of it, so it seems, and no one can get any peace around them, and so they are no price around Lilina's. But I have to admit that this baby is nice and quiet, and looks quite cute, so that our hearts are softened, and even Lilina is moved to chuck it under the chin, as Hubba explains that it is a female baby which is dumped on the Healers' doorstep some months ago, and they are bringing her up. You do not have to be extra-smart to spot that Hubba hopes to soften Griselda's heart also with this baby, and much interest develops in how she will make out. In fact, some of the boys start talking it up into a betting proposition, but they are careful to do this discreetly, for Hubba impresses us as one who will put the blast on such frivolity very good. But she is occupied in discussing babies with Hanufa, who is reminiscing about her little sister, and does not seem to notice.

Now when Griselda comes in Hanufa is taking a turn at entertaining the baby, and doing a fair job, at that, while many of the regulars are watching, for the way she waves and gurgles is by no means unpleasant. At first Griselda makes like she is ignoring the whole thing, but there is no doubt that her interest is engaged, and presently she is watching with the rest of us, and listening to Hanufa's reminiscences. Finally she speaks up and says, "Why, Hanufa, I do not see why you do not give up the adventuring dodge and settle down, or at least hire out as a nurse, which will surely be an easier way of earning your crust."

Hanufa looks at her a little sidelong and says, "I am not so sure of that. In fact, I will rather guard a caravan than mind a baby for a day, any time."

"Well, it does not look so hard to me," says Griselda.

"It is much harder than it looks," Hubba puts in. "Maybe you are wise to put away all thought of it, just as I have the sense to know that I will never make an adventurer."

"Come on," says Griselda, sounding slightly indignant, "are you meaning to suggest that I will not be able to handle a baby?"

"Bet you drinks you cannot keep her quiet until I get back from a few little errands," says Hubba, quite sharp, and Griselda realises she is suckered. She frowns a little, then sets her jaw and says, "OK; drinks all round if she is not quiet when you return."

"Give her the baby, Hanufa," says Hubba, and walks off. Hanufa passes over the baby, which Griselda takes hold of like she will come apart in her hands. But it seems that the baby does not care for this change in her circumstances and begins to squirm. So Griselda bounces her up and down as she sees Hanufa do, and the baby seems more relaxed, and so does Griselda. But this does not last for long, because the baby starts reaching for Griselda's sword hilt, and Griselda does not think this a good idea and moves her away. The baby sets up a squall and starts wriggling very determined, and in trying to keep hold of her Griselda knocks over her drink into her lap. She jumps up very fast, which causes the baby to squall even more, and now Griselda begins to look a little desperate, which is something none of us ever expect to see, and it is very difficult not to bust out laughing at the expression on her face. Maybe she senses this, for she holds the baby up to her face and says quite firmly, "Listen, I wish you to be quiet, or maybe I will make you sorry you are ever born."

But the baby is not impressed and continues to bawl. Hanufa says, "That is no way to do it, Griselda; such a young thing will not be able to understand you. Why do you not rock her and sing?"

Well, Griselda looks as if she will appreciate advice from any quarter, and starts rocking the baby so fast that her stomach must get upset, for she burps up a little something, and Griselda comes out with some more that the baby is too young to understand. She wipes her off with the edge of her tunic, and rocks again slower, but the baby is still yelling, and Griselda cries, "What shall I sing, Hannie? I do not know any songs for babies."

"Anything will do, if it is regular and not too fast," says Hanufa, who looks quite tickled to be giving Griselda advice. So Griselda rocks away, and thinks some, and finally comes up with something in her native Sartarite,

and I wish to say that while she may do all right in the chorus, as a soloist she is strictly second-rate. It appears the baby thinks so too, for she keeps on wailing as if she is trying for a record, and Griselda looks more and more distracted. Then suddenly it is as if a great idea dawns on her, and she sticks her finger in the baby's mouth, and this is a sure-fire winner. The baby quietens down, and looks most contented, and Griselda too looks happy, and gazes down at the baby as if she is a better sight than she sees for a long time, and even starts talking to her the way you often hear dolls talking to babies, though what she has to say is not as dumb-sounding as some, and finally the baby goes right off to sleep.

Well, this is quite a situation, and those who bet on Griselda resisting the baby's charms are getting ready to pay up, when who comes in but Wolfhead. It is plain he is feeling full of good cheer, in fact this must be his birthday that he is celebrating, and when he sees Griselda he calls out, "Hi there, Grizzie! How is everything?" Griselda turns round and says, "Hush, you big lunk, or you will wake the baby!" at which Wolfhead looks quite taken aback. "Baby?" he says. "What baby?" and looks closer. Then suddenly he gives a great laugh and claps his hands together. "I never expect to see the day," he cries. "Are you thinking of changing your career, Grizzie? Well, I will certainly bet on you to keep babies in order," and he goes on with further stuff that he clearly finds very funny, about how maybe she will settle down, and who with, and he is laughing a lot, although Griselda is showing signs of irritation that will be evident to a six-year old, and no one else is laughing. Finally he wipes his eyes, and says, "Well, if this is your birthday present to me it is not a bad one; I get the best laugh I have in years," and just then Hubba returns.

"So you do," says Griselda quietly as she gets up, still holding the baby, which sleeps through all this. "I am happy to be giving you some pleasure. But in fact, as Hubba here will tell you, babies are a great pleasure too, and they certainly give you a different view of what is important in life and are excellent for exercising the brain and training the patience. So here is the best thing I can give you on your birthday, Wolfhead, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I do," and she hands him the baby and is out through the door before you can blink, and for once Hanufa acts smart and is hard on her heels.

Wolfhead nearly drops the baby, which wakes up and lets out a bawl, causing others still present to start leaving, while Hubba begins to instruct Wolfhead on how to hold a baby. I decide to leave also, for I know that if I stay I am just naturally bound to laugh, and I know also that Wolfhead will

not care for this. Outside I find Griselda leaning against the wall and smiling in a dreamy sort of way, while Hanufa beside her is near doubled up with laughing, but when they see me they straighten up some.

"Well," says Griselda, "I learn a new skill today: I now know something about quietening crying babies. I guess Wolfhead may learn too, if Hubba keeps at him. It surely serves him right for making game of me, even if he is a bit irresponsible from celebrating his birthday. But, after all, it is just as well that he happens along."

"How is that, Griselda?" I say.

"Why, otherwise, I may be in danger of taking this baby stuff seriously," she replies. "But this does not go if Hubba hears it, mind, or she will be claiming she really wins, after all, and I have no wish to have her going around Pavis saying this to all and sundry."

But in fact Hubba does not return, nor does she send money to pay her bet, and later I hear that what she goes around Pavis saying is that anyone who will hand over a baby to a guy smelling of drink as badly as Wolfhead does is plainly a lost cause.



THIS LOVE BUSINESS



If you hang around Loud Lilina's for any length of time, you will get a chance to meet with a wide range of interesting characters. You can meet prospectors, and Rubble Rangers, and crap-shooters, and serious drinkers, and agents for all kinds of causes, and more adventurers with daffy notions than you can shake a stick at, but you will rarely see an entertainer, and why this is nobody knows. Some say that no entertainer is going to get heard over the racket in there, especially when Loud Lilina is laying into someone who wishes credit, while others maintain that the customers' habit of throwing mugs at acts they do not like will be trying to the nerves of sensitive artists, but I figure it is because Loud Lilina will wish a cut of any proceeds, for very little comes for free around her joint, even floor space. So the customers generally provide their own entertainment if they wish for some, and Lilina does not yet think up a way to charge them for it.

Now one fine evening when there are still few in the joint, a guy I never see before slides in, and it is clear at a glance that he is an entertainer, because he carries a dinky little lute with him. He looks over the floor, and strikes a pose on a patch that is not too dirty, and cries, "Hearken to the lay of Litennor the Tuneful." Then he starts in on some stuff about everlasting love and all that. But the customers in Lilina's are not great fans of love ditties, preferring songs with a bit more zing, and pretty soon Old Gil, who is a most interesting character and is often pointed out to strangers because he lasts in Pavis for as long as he does, which is maybe twenty years, heaves

his mug at this Litennor. But this is not his first mug, or even his second, and so he misses by a wide margin. Now Hanufa, who always gets into Lilina's nice and early to get a start on her beer drinking, is watching this Litennor with interest, and she seems to resent mugs being thrown at him, for she swings her left arm backhand and knocks Old Gil halfway down the room.

"Give the guy a chance," she yells, and watches Old Gil for a moment to see if he is wishing to take the matter up. But Old Gil has no such intention, which is one reason why he lasts such a very long time in Pavis, and so she turns back to this Litennor. "Sing some more, handsome," she says, "No one else is going to bother you." And Sweet-Talking Shamus, who is in a sentimental mood because his latest doll heads off into the wilds on a quest, says, "Sure, and I like a love song now and then, and I will put in with Hanufa on this."

So we all have to listen politely, for no one is going to argue with characters who are as handy with their fists as Hanufa and Shamus.

The guy does not sing too badly, at that, if you like love songs, but where Hanufa gets this handsome stuff I do not know, for in my judgement he is not such a guy as will turn the head of many dolls. He is long and thin, with a pale worn-looking face, and washed-out blue eyes, and limp hair the colour of straw, and a scraggy little beard, and he is by no means young, but Hanufa is regarding him as if he is Derenx the Handsome at least. She applauds every song very loudly, and gives us dirty looks if we do not show some enthusiasm, and Litennor will have to be very dumb not to perceive that she takes quite a shine to him, and few guys are that dumb. In fact, she must fall plumb through to the basement, for when he stops for a rest and she offers him a drink, he asks for wine, which is an expensive drink anywhere in Pavis, and Hanufa does not blink, but orders up the best in the house. Then she engages him in earnest conversation, but what she says I do not know, because she gives me a very dirty look when I try to listen in.

Well, you may figure that this Litennor owes Hanufa plenty of much-obliges, at least, but he acts off-hand to her and scarcely says a word, though he smiles now and then. But Hanufa is so fond of gabbing that she does not seem to notice and continues to regard him with admiration. Then suddenly he clutches his brow, and cries, "Alas! I forget to take a collection. How shall I get a bed tonight?" and more bewailing of his sad fate in a manner that is most revolting in a grown man, even if he is an entertainer. But Hanufa tells him not to worry and takes the hat around, and no one dast to refuse to offer something except Shamus, who shows her an empty purse and winks, and

she grins back and lets it go. But since none of us has more than a few clacks to rub together, she does not collect much, and so she says to Litennor, "Listen, this dump is no place for one of your talents; let us go elsewhere." We all expect Loud Lilina to get mad at this, or at least demand a cut of the take, and are hoping to see fur fly, but she makes no move, maybe because she does not wish to antagonise such a good customer as Hanufa.

But as it turns out she loses her custom anyway for a time, for we hear later that Litennor claims we have no soul and that he will not return, and while this is a great relief to us, who never claim to have any soul and will not know what to do with it if we do have some, it is surely a blow to Hanufa, who rates Lilina's beer most highly. But to show you how daffy she is about the guy, she gives up coming to Lilina's to go about with him, and in the following days we hear various reports of them being thrown out of this joint or that, for she is forever urging him to display his talents, and while it seems that he often makes some excuse she keeps pressing him, and he has to sing a few times to keep her sweet. So they get the bum's rush from some joints, and are politely but persuasively asked to leave others that are more high-class, and the watch generally move them on when they offer street performances. Litennor seems to take all this better than you will expect, but it is all very wearing for Hanufa. For though she is no sucker in a fight the same can be said for many others around and about, and when she objects to criticisms of Litennor she sometimes winds up receiving more than she dishes out. But she sticks with him, and undoubtedly this is a severe case of love as far as she is concerned.

Now at this time Griselda is not seen about much, but one day she pops into Lilina's and says to me, "Do you have a name for this specimen that Hanufa is consorting with, and how does it come about?" She seems to be displaying some excitement and so I give her all the information I have, and by the time I am done she is looking most disgusted, but she only says, "Him!" and goes marching out again. Since this looks promising to me I attempt to follow discreetly, but she must have eyes in the back of her head, for she whirls round when I am a whole block away and tells me to get lost. Naturally I do this, and so I will never learn what comes off if I do not happen to see Sweet-Talking Shamus drinking with Hanufa two or three days later. They are both looking as if they are in quite a fight, with black eyes and bruises and such, but they seem quite pleased with life and with each other. This cause some speculation at Lilina's, but no one has any information to explain it, and we are expressing annoyance at our ignorance and surprise at this state of affairs when in comes Griselda, and she is

looking pleased in her way. When she hears what we are talking about she brings her drink over and sits down. "I can explain how this comes about," she says, "for it is my doing, really, but it is going to require some mention of this love business, so if anyone feels that this is likely to make them ill, they better leave." But we are all wild to know and press her to continue.

So Griselda leans back and takes a swig and starts off, "It is maybe twelve years ago, when my cousin Belladonna is still young and impressionable, and I am even younger and just beginning to learn my way around. This Litennor blows into Alone, our home town, and he is quite a handsome guy then, and not bad as a singer, and Belladonna falls for him at first sight. But his is not a classy act, so he cannot get in the good joints, and he is not popular with the public in the joints where he can get employment. So Belladonna and I constitute ourselves his management and protection, and because Bella packs a pretty neat punch even then and furthermore, because we belong to a family that has a lot of influence in Alone at all levels of society, we are able to ensure that he gets a hearing. We can do nothing about his takings, of course, because our family will not countenance our trying any sort of shakedown on the audience, for they do not wish any heat to develop with the local law, when things are running so smoothly, and besides, such behaviour has no class at all.

"Well, you will have to be blind not to see that Belladonna has a case over Litennor. In fact, I seldom see a worse case in my career, and if only some sorcerer can work out a way to tap what she is putting into it, he will be able to heat a whole town. The worst of it is, she can never work up the nerve to say anything sensible to him about it when they are together, but just looks at him and gasps, even though I give them plenty of privacy. In those days I think this love business is for the birds, and there are times when I think so still, but I want Belladonna to have what she wants, for I kind of hero-worship her in those days. But this Litennor does not behave as if he has any idea of how Bella is feeling.

"For a while I give him the benefit of the doubt, but I watch them from a discreet distance, and I begin to notice how he is very careful about moving his hand before she can accidental-like bring hers into contact with it, and always manages to produce some distraction when she looks as if she is working up the nerve to speak of her sentiments. Finally I become convinced that he is stringing her along, because of course she is providing most of his support out of her allowance, but to be sure I bring my brother Ferdy in on it, because Ferdy is all wised up over this love business even then, while my elder brother Rory acts as if he does not know what the word means. He

agrees with my analysis of the situation, and we decide that something will have to be done. It is no good just telling Bella, because she already gets an earful from her parents, and my parents, and also our aunt Elfrida, all saying that this Litennor is no good to her, and if anyone will know it is our aunt Elfrida, who sees plenty of men in her line of work as a highly respected priestess of Uleria*; but Belladonna displays great stubbornness over her attachment. So we go to our aunt Elfrida, and cook up a scheme to have one of her best initiates dress up like some rich dame and try and put the come-hither on Litennor, for we reckon he will go where the money and the looks are.

“Well, the initiate does her bit beautifully, but even when she suggests Litennor come up and see her some time she gets no reaction, and so she reports that she feels that she is wasting effort, and also that Belladonna is giving her looks that make her fear for her health, and furthermore that she is suffering great anguish from listening to all the glop that he is singing. Now our aunt Elfrida is one very wise bird, and she suggests that the initiate make a real play for Litennor and get her hands on him, and Ferdy and I are to make sure that Belladonna will not do her harm.

“So at the next performance the initiate rushes up to him immediately after he gets through with his last number, before Bella can even get her legs out from under the table, and cries, ‘The singing is fine, lover, but now what about some action?’ and throws her arms around him and starts applying some hearty kisses. He starts yelling and struggling, and Belladonna gets past us and hauls her off, yelling ‘Unhand my man!’, and it looks to me as if the initiate is very glad to let go. Then Bella starts in trying to calm him down, and puts her hand on his arm; but he rears away, crying, ‘Get your hands off me, both of you! I just cannot stand being mauled!’, and he grabs up his lute and takes it on the lam. Well, Belladonna realises from this that he is not for her, and maybe not for any doll, come to that, but it breaks her heart anyway. While I stay there with her to explain, Ferdy rounds up some of the gang that we hang out with and they chase Litennor clear out of town, pegging rocks at him, and none of the family comes across him again until now.”

Then she takes a long pull at her drink and it does not appear that she is going to say any more, so I say, “It is a most affecting tale, Griselda, but you do not explain how come Hanufa is now drinking with Sweet-Talking

* *Uleria is the Gloranthan goddess of love in all its forms, and her devotees include the leading prostitutes of Pavis.*

Shamus and why they are both looking bunged up, but happy about it?"

"Oh, that," she says. "Well, obviously I figure that Litennor is up to his old game with Hanufa, getting himself supported without giving any return, but I do not wish to make any wrong moves, for after all the guy may change. So I get Hanufa talking about him while he is resting in her room one day, and it seems the poor dear puts so much effort into his art that he needs plenty of rest and quiet, and she cannot expect too much of him but is happy to have his company when he is out and about, and I have half a mind to leave her to it for being such a sucker. But then again, I feel maybe I will settle this Litennor's hash once and for all, since I do not approve of his way of going on and he gets off very lightly for what he does to Bella, when you think about it. So I cook up a variant of our old scheme, but this time I bring in Sweet-Talking Shamus for a little dough. He is to insult Litennor all around and show him up for the coward that I judge him to be, or else pound the stuffing out of him if he shows fight, and I go along to square Hanufa.

"Well, we come upon them in the Reed Inn, where they can still get a hearing because the dead-beats there do not care to challenge Hanufa, and I must say Shamus puts on a first-class performance. He marches up to Litennor, crying, 'Do you know what it is, that is a crime against the human ear you are perpetrating, and I cannot stand it any more', and more of this nature, and when Hanufa rises to intervene he pushes her back into her seat, telling her to stay out of this.

" 'I aim to prove', he says, 'that this guy cares so little for his chosen art that he will let me insult it,' and here he grabs Litennor's lute and smashes it on the chair, amid cries of approval from the patrons of the Reed Inn, 'and furthermore,' he says, 'that he is yellow clear through, and what else will you expect of a fellow that lets a woman do his fighting for him?'

"Well, Litennor looks as if he wishes to ignore the whole thing, but Hanufa hauls him up, crying, 'Come on, you cannot let this go. Let us settle this big lunk,' and she pushes Litennor towards Shamus with one hand while stepping aside to take a poke at him with the other. But Shamus swings at Litennor, and while it is not the best he can do it is a fair punch, which knocks Litennor right into the path of Hanufa's swing, just as if he plans it that way. Believe it or not, they manage to bat him to and fro between them a time or two more, while the public goes wild with enthusiasm, until he collapses, and then they start in on each other in earnest, because by this time Hanufa is blind mad and Shamus is also

slightly heated, since one of Hanufa's swings reaches his left ear. I step over just as Litennor is hauling himself to his knees and advise him to favour Pavis with his absence, and once he gets a good look at me it is amazing how fast he is able to move. But nobody is taking any notice of him, for Shamus and Hanufa are putting on as fine an exhibition of fisticuffs as you will ever wish to see, and in fact they are demolishing half the joint. But nobody seems to care, because they are making more room for the spectators this way. Finally Shamus holds back on his swing and says, 'The jerk runs out on you, Hanufa. What are we fighting for?'

" 'Who cares about him?' cries Hanufa. 'Let us fight for the fun of it', and she pops in a fast one over his guard. 'Damn right!' he replies, popping one back, and so they carry on a bit longer until Hanufa holds up her fists and says, 'What about a beer instead?' and Shamus voices complete approval of this suggestion. I offer to buy one, since in a way I am responsible for the fight, and we go along to the Hoplite's Home, since there is really nothing of the Reed Inn's bar left, and I explain to Hanufa all about this Litennor and that she is well rid of him. Hanufa agrees on this, and furthermore says that she is much obliged to me, as she has the best fight in ages, and she proceeds to top this by having what I suspect must be one of her best drinks in ages too, though I leave them to it after an hour or two. And there you are: when two characters find that they have so much in common, maybe this is love."



SERIOUS MONEY



One hot afternoon I am taking my ease in Loud Lilina's and thinking about Swifty, and in a little while I will explain why, but first I must tell you about Swifty, for at one time he is really quite a prominent character in Pavis, and many citizens consider it a great loss to the community when he departs. Now, Swifty is so called because he is a very rapid guy in every way, shape, manner, and form. In fact, he does the finest impression of a guy in two different places at once that you will ever see, which is partly because of all the legwork he puts into his activities, but mostly because he fears that if he stays in one spot for too long someone may catch up with him – and at all times there are likely to be persons wishing to catch up with Swifty who he does not wish to have catch up with him, in case it is injurious to his health. For Swifty is a hustler, and always he is promoting persons into laying out their dough in ways which prove to be unwise, and also expensive, and furthermore he is an expert at telling the tale, and he even has experience at the old shakedown, which it is most impolite to call blackmail, and in fact, for any dodge that requires nothing but a fast brain and tongue, Swifty is your man.

Now you may think that such a guy will not last long in Pavis, where are so many guys, and dolls too, who are ready to resort to violence if they are sore at somebody. But Swifty is very good at rounding himself up with persons who wish him harm, if he can get them talking, and he displays remarkable skill at the quick getaway if he cannot. Then he must lie low, of

course, but he is also very good at this, being what the story tellers love to call a master of disguise. Indeed, it is generally agreed that the way that Swifty can make himself look like somebody else is practically uncanny, and very few people can tell you what he really looks like, except that he is short and constantly on the move, and when I am not seeing him often I tend to forget his looks myself.

But one of the most remarkable things about Swifty is the amount of work that he puts into his scams, whatever kind of score is involved, and they are really works of art, and many citizens will tell you that he is a Trickster at heart. Also, they are often very comical, except to his marks, and this is of benefit to him, for it causes many who have unfinished business with him to forgive and forget, because a good laugh is not so easy to come by in this man's town. Moreover, Swifty has plenty of sense and is never too greedy, for a mark who loses all may become quite obsessed with getting even, and keep on a con artist's tail for so long that it completely hampers business and becomes a great nuisance.

But it is because of one of his most comical scams that Swifty finally has to leave Pavis. This scam is known to one and all as Broos Anonymous, and is the most famous thing that Swifty ever pulls off, although only old-times, such as in Pavis for more than a year or two, will be familiar with the story. It all begins when Swifty starts going around among charitable and well-intentioned persons, especially those who are not too bright, and he is promoting the idea that there are Broos out there who repent of their sins and wish to be cured of their evil ways, and they deserve encouragement and support. Now, even charitable and well-intentioned persons who are not too bright are not such suckers as to swallow such a proposition without evidence, but Swifty claims that he can produce such Broos and will show them off in conditions of great secrecy, so that the Storm Bull cult does not get to hear of it. For the Storm Bulls are quite unwilling to listen to reason when it comes to Broos, but will hold fast to the proposition that the only good Broo is a dead Broo. So Swifty arranges meetings well out of town to view his Broos, and they are most convincing indeed, so he works up quite a bit of support. In fact, he even interests one or two Sages, who are willing to pay good dough to talk to Broos and learn of their ways, because Sages just naturally love to collect such useless information.

Finally, the grand inaugural meeting of the society to reclaim Broos is announced, but no Broos show up, and neither does Swifty, and all the funds collected to support these repentant Broos are also missing. In fact, these Broos turn out to be a bunch of Tricksters down on their luck, who are hired

by Swifty, although Tricksters will be happy to pull such a stunt for nothing because that is the way they are. There are glum faces around town when this comes out, but most citizens laugh themselves sick, including the Storm Bulls, who go about saying it is a good lesson to anyone who will believe that Chaos can change its nature. But they start to sing a different tune when it is learned that Swifty includes Healers among his marks, for all the straight cults are very down on wronging Healers in any way. Indeed, Swifty becomes quite unpopular with the cults when this gets about, but the main reason for his departure is that some of his marks have a little influence, while others are willing to lay out more dough on getting him nailed, so that if he stays around Pavis he will be in quite a spot, what with law officers and bounty hunters and cult glory-seekers all turning the town upside down looking for him. So he clears out of Pavis altogether with his customary speed, and nothing is heard of him for so long that many believe him dead, and most do not care a bent clack, for after all they have other things to worry about, such as paying the rent.

Now the reason I come to be thinking of Swifty is that all of a sudden a guy takes to infesting Lilina's, who is Swifty's meat if ever I see it. He wishes to be thought of as a great adventurer, and is forever boasting of his exploits, and the loot he wins, and the knowledge he acquires, but it is plain to one and all that he is just a rich guy playing at it, for always he is wearing fine clothes and carrying good weapons, and he has plenty to spend, which is most unusual for adventurers around Pavis. His name is Avidius Tiro, which is a Lunar kind of name, and, to hear him tell it, he stands good with the Lunars, for he loves to speak of dining with the Governor and other high-ups. In fact, it is hard to see why he chooses Lilina's rather than some joint with more tone to do his bragging in, but he may figure that his bluff will be called in Gimpy's, where they have more of the real thing when it comes to adventurers, and furthermore he is getting a break, because Griselda is hardly ever in Lilina's at this time. For Griselda will express open scorn and disbelief very readily, if she feels this is called for, and has very little time for such blowhards as Avidius, but no one else cares to take anything up with him, for he acts as if he knows how to handle his fancy weapons well enough for any of us.

While I am regretting Swifty's absence, the door crashes open and in rushes Topknot. He fetches up against the bar in record time, closely followed by a tough-looking doll and a little guy who looks to be nobody much, neither of whom I recollect seeing before, and he is yelling, "Drinks on the house! We hit it!"

Naturally, there is quite a rush to the bar, but Lilina folds her arms in the way she has when she is going to be very hard to convince. "Show me the colour of your money," she says. "I hear this drinks-on-me tune before."

"We are not trying to pull anything, Lilina," says Topknot, somewhat indignant. "We clean up, for a fact; see here!" And he opens his pack and pulls out a pouch from which he spills necklaces and rings and suchlike onto the bar, all glinting most prettily indeed. There is much whistling and exclamation, but Lilina still does not seem too impressed. "How am I supposed to know what this is worth?" she growls. "It may be junk got up to look like the real thing, for all I know."

"Aw, come on," says Topknot. "I seem to remember you taking stuff for drinks before, and I think you know more about it than you are suggesting."

"All right, all right," says Lilina, "I will take this," and she points to a hefty-looking bracelet all set with stones. But now the doll speaks up and says, "Hey, that is going to be worth more than a round of drinks, if I am any judge."

"And who are you," says Lilina, rounding on her, "and how do I know I can trust your judgement? You may be in with Topknot to con me," which is a most impolite thing to say, but then Lilina is famous for saying impolite things.

But the doll stays cool, and even smiles a little. "I am Elsa from Adari," she says, "and I have no interest in trying to con you out of a few drinks for other people; I am after serious money. Now I may not be an expert, but my parents are jewellers, so I know a fair bit about such stuff, and to prove it I will even give you an estimate on those earrings you wear, which are very nice but cannot cost you more than ten Lunars, tops."

Lilina goes red at this and looks ready to blast, but this Elsa continues to look at her coolly, and finally she seems to deflate, and says, "OK, go ahead and pick me out something that will cover a round, before some of these characters up and die on me."

So Elsa pulls out a small string of purple stones that she says is worth maybe twenty Lunars, if you are selling, and Lilina agrees to take it at this value and starts serving, which is surely a great relief to one and all. Elsa and Topknot and the little guy, who is known to them as Brains, take their drinks to a table and spread out their haul, and most of those present, including Avidius, gather round to watch. Elsa does most of the valuing, but she calls

in Brains on many items and he surely displays expert knowledge, such as when he identifies one piece as a leftover from the old days when Pavis is a great city, before the nomads bust everything up. But this is only a small item, and the rest is mostly low-value stuff, and Topknot begins to look sorrowful as he realises that his big haul is not so big after all, although there is enough to keep them for a season or two if they are not aiming to room in some high-class place, like Jareen's round the corner. Finally there is only one piece left, and this like nothing whatsoever, for it is just a pendant of dull red rock with no shape to it, hanging on a chain of grey metal that may be lead.

"Well," says Elsa, "I never see anything like this before, for sure, and I do not know what it is doing with the rest, when it is not even pretty, but I guess it may be some curio."

But Brains seems quite excited. "Then I am smarter than you, Elsa," he says. "For I may be wrong, but if I am guessing and have just one guess, I will say that this may be a piece of Truestone."

Now at this we all lean in to have a closer look, for though we all hear of how magical Truestone is, and also how valuable, none of us ever see it before. Topknot picks it up and squints at it, but then he drops it with a laugh.

"You are telling me that this lump is a piece of the famous magical Truestone?" he cries. "This has to be a gag, and you do it well: you really have me going there for a moment. But everyone knows that fake Truestone is one of the oldest cons in Pavis, and seeing that this is with cheap stuff, that is what I will take it for, at best. In fact, I see fake Truestones that look better."

Now Avidius decides to horn in, for he too is looking excited. "Not so fast," he says. "This does indeed look like a genuine piece that I once see, and everyone knows that Truestone does not look like much anyway. But there is an easy way to find out: take it to the Sages for an authentication."

"Mister," says Topknot, "if we can afford to pay the fees the Sages charge, why will we be adventuring? Besides, it will not be wise for us to let on that we have something that may be magical, for it comes out of the Rubble in what you may call an unorthodox way. If it is genuine and the Lunars get to hear of it, we are dead ducks."

"Well then," says Avidius, "why not let me take it to the Sages for you and pay the fee, for I can handle any problems with the government. Of

course, I will be entitled to a fee for this service, and to repay my costs: I think ten percent of the value will be reasonable. Indeed, I can even cast you a magic-finding spell that will show whether it is worth bothering with at all, but for that I will have to charge extra."

"I have no wish to mistrust you," says Topknot, though the chances are that he is absolutely brimming with mistrust, "but it will take more than your word to persuade me into letting you go off with something that may be Truestone, though I appreciate your offers."

Just then the door opens again and in walks Griselda. She is looking fairly cheerful and gives us all a big hello. "What is coming off?" she asks. "Is someone demonstrating a trick?"

Topknot explains the whole deal to her, and introduces Elsa and Brains as his associates, while Avidius introduces himself and expresses pleasure at meeting a living legend, which causes Griselda's eyes to narrow for a moment. She peers at the piece and says, "Well, I know Truestone can be red, so it is not impossible. But see here, if you are having problems making a deal, how about this? I will accompany Avidius to the Sages and make sure he does not pull anything. Of course, I will expect a little something for my trouble."

Topknot groans. "It figures you will try to horn in on this, Griselda, but that seems fair."

"Not to me," cries Brains. "She will be watching him, but who will be watching her?"

Everyone is quite startled, to see this little guy coming on so strong, and Griselda glares at him and says, "Do you have the nerve to suggest that I will try a heist?" while Avidius says very huffily, "I can look after myself." But Brains seems quite unaffected by Griselda's glare.

"You have quite a reputation here and there," he says, "and we have no more reason to trust your word than Avidius's. Where serious money is involved, people can easily lose such scruples as they may possess."

Griselda keeps up her glare for a second, and then she relaxes and laughs. "You must have plenty of moxie, to talk to me like that, but of course you are right, and I can see where you get your monicker of Brains. OK, why do you not come along to see fair play, and Avidius and I will leave our weapons here as proof of good faith."

"Hey!" cries Avidius. "How do I know you will not both jump me? I

have no reason to trust any of you."

Well, it looks as if this one will run for a while, but now Elsa intervenes. "Let us all keep calm," she says. "I see a way to protect everyone's interest," and she proceeds to outline a most complicated plan that I cannot make head or tail of, but the upshot of it is, Avidius is first to use his spell on the item, to see if it is magical. So he gets out a pointed stone on a string and mutters over it, and right away the stone points at the pendant, so it figures to be magical some way, and everyone starts getting excited. Then Griselda takes a nice belt ornament for her fee, and the rest goes back into Topknot's pouch, but this is handed over to Avidius, who gives a fistful of nice golden Wheels from a money belt in exchange, and later I learn that this is in case the item turns out magical but dangerous or cursed or unusable, as magical items are apt to be more often than you will imagine. Then Brains picks up the pendant and off he goes with Griselda and Avidius, who leave their weapons on the bar. But no sooner are they on their way than Topknot and Elsa look at each other grinning.

"Here is to serious money!" says Elsa, and they clink their mugs and down the rest of their drinks, and are off out the door with exceptional speed, and it seems to me that Topknot is chuckling. Naturally, this causes the whole bar to speculate no little and quite some, but although it is clear that something shifty is going on, no one can figure it out.

It is not long before Avidius and the others return, and we know this because we can hear Avidius howling even through the door. When he comes in, he is looking completely stunned and is crying, "Worthless! I cannot understand what goes wrong with my spell!" and then he stops dead in his tracks when he sees that Topknot and Elsa are no longer with us. "Where do they go?" he says, and when it is explained to him that they leave hurriedly, he acts like an idea strikes him all of a sudden, and pulls out the pouch, which now proves to have in it, not the stuff we see before, but pebbles and strap-ends and suchlike trash.

"Cheated!" he yells, and he rounds on Brains and grabs him by the shirt front. "You are part of this," he cries, "and maybe I will take what I lose out of your hide," and he has him nearly off the floor and looks about to bean him.

"I know nothing of this," cries Brains. "Can you not see that I am cheated too? I get no share of the dough you give them, and I doubt I ever will. I do not work with either before, but am new to this town, as anyone here can testify."

Avidius seems to be half-convinced, but he continues to look most unhappy and does not let brains go. Now Griselda, who is acting very calm during this, speaks up. "All is not lost, Avidus," she says in a soothing tone. "Sure, this is no Truestone, but it may still be valuable, and I am surprised that Topknot does not spot it, seeing as he claims to be a top-notch expert on Trolls."

"How do you mean?" says Avidius, letting Brains drop.

"Well," says Griselda, "this looks very like an amulet I once see round the neck of a real high-up Troll priestess, and if you think about it, this chain is probably lead, and that is the Trolls' sacred metal."

"Then how come the Sage can get no result from it?" says Avidius.

"There can be many explanations," says Griselda. "Maybe you should think, how far do you trust a Sage? Does he make the spell go wrong, for his own ends? You are a guy with experience, I can see, and you must know that such people are not always honest when items of rarity and value are involved."

Anyone can see that Avidius gets quite a bang out of Griselda treating him as on her level like this, and he says he will try his spell again, and sure enough, there goes the pointer, and he sighs with relief. "It must be as you state," he says. "That Sage is trying something on. But what is to be done? I never have dealings with Trolls myself, and am not ready to start now."

"No problem," says Griselda, "I have the contacts. But I will have to charge you: it is no easy matter dealing with Trolls, even when they know you, and I must spend a bit to meet anyone important. Naturally, I will want a percentage of any price, also, for my tip-off."

Avidius pulls a face. "I am already let in for a considerable loss," he says sourly. "Is this thing likely to be worth serious money, and how will they pay off anyway?"

"Why, with other goods, like what they may take in loot," says Griselda. "The Rubble Trolls have many opportunities. As for value, I will guess that you may double your outlay, for such amulets are surely rare."

Avidius is obviously getting ready to agree, but now Brains snatches the pendant and says, "What about my end? So far I am cut out completely, yet this is all I have left of what I risk my life for, as much as those two crossers."

Avidius rubs his chin, and says, "I do not wish to be hard, but I now have a considerable investment in this item, and it is my spell that identifies it as magical. How about fifty to you and to Griselda, and if it is truly valuable you shall each have five percent?"

Brains does not look overjoyed at this offer, but he allows that it is the best deal he can get, and hands over the pendant. Griselda sets a time for a meet-up in two days, and Avidius produces more cash for them, complaining of how this caper is eating up his savings. But he is there, looking eager, in two days' time, along with all the rest of us and others too, since the story gets about and generates no little interest. When Griselda steps in the whole joint goes quiet, but she is looking by no means cheerful, in fact she is looking weary and most discouraged. She tosses the pendant down in front of Avidius and says, "It means nothing to them," in a disgusted sort of voice.

"How can this be?" cries Avidius in astonishment.

"I do not know," says Griselda. "All I know is that they want no part of it, and I am too tuckered out to start discussing the point. I am up all night, and part of last night too, talking with Trolls, so I reckon I earn my fee, and that is the last I want to hear of it." and before Avidius can say aye, yes, or no she is gone again.

"More money down the drain!" cries Avidius, and he sweeps up the pendant as if to smash it to the floor, but Brains grabs his arm.

"Hold on," he says. "I have a theory about this. Give me the pendant so that I can check it out, and if I am right I will split with you, right down the middle."

Avidius shrugs. "What do I have to lose?" he says, and hands it over. Brains says that he will be back that evening, and off he goes very fast. There is much speculation about his angle, and in the evening everyone is back and bets are being freely offered on the true nature of the pendant, while Lilina is going about looking very cheerful and saying that she may buy it herself as a good luck piece, because of all the extra business it brings her. When Brains finally enters, the contrast with how Griselda is looking on the previous occasion is really quite marked, for he has a smile all over his face and a spring in his step. He says loudly, "It turns out as I figure; get me a drink and I will tell all."

So Avidius orders up a drink, and Brains sits down and pulls out the pendant. "The explanation is quite simple," he says. "It is not the rock that is magical, but the chain; doubtless the Sage focusses on the rock, and for all I

know the Trolls do too, and so they do not spot this. But the priest who checks this out for me identifies this chain as a matrix for that spell which bounces magic right back at persons who are throwing it at you, as long as your own power is strong enough; see the mark on it here," and he turns over the chain to show some odd squiggle.

Avidius peers, and then grins from ear to ear. "Now that is a really useful item," he says. "I will buy your share for two hundred."

"I believe you make a slip," says Brains, also grinning slightly. "Surely what you mean to say is two thousand."

Avidius gives a hollow kind of laugh. "I cannot raise that much in ready cash now," he says, "but at a pinch I can run to five hundred."

Brains shakes his head. "We better sell it and split the proceeds," he says. "I believe I know where to go," and he starts to get up. But Avidius cries, "Wait! I can scrape up about a thousand if you will take goods, but that is my absolute limit, I swear by all the gods of adventurers."

Brains stands there for a moment as if he is considering, and then he nods and says, "I cannot stand to see a man suffer," and they clap hands on the deal. Avidius cleans out his money belt, and throws in his jewellery and a stone-studded dagger, in fact he just about strips himself down, but he goes off with the pendant looking as pleased as if it is really a Truestone. Brains scoops up all this stuff, and then he turns to us and winks.

"I better be on my way," he says, "before people start looking for me. But there it is: you need foresight as well as superior brain power where serious money is involved," and he slips out before anyone can think up a good question to ask. Old Gil looks towards me and clears his throat, as if he is about to say something but is uncertain about it, but he does not get it out before Topknot and Elsa come in hastily, looking very hot and bothered.

"Where is Brains?" cries Topknot. "That chiseller is putting one over on us, I believe." "How so?" says Lilina.

"Why, that jewellery that we hook Avidius with is hired," he says, "and with our money, although it is Brains's idea. It costs a lot more than Avidius gives us. We have to hide out while Brains finishes with Avidius, as he has some plan for getting more out of him, and he will see to returning the jewellery for our dough, but we get tired of waiting, and are just after discovering that he leaves his lodgings and they have no idea where he goes."

Before he can say any more Griselda also comes in. "Does anyone here see Brains?" she says. "I am expecting to meet up with him."

"For what, Griselda?" says Elsa in a nasty kind of way. "Are you in this cross on us?"

"What cross?" says Griselda. "You get yours in the first part, do you not? We cannot work the rest if you are around. I set up Avidius with a story about it being a Troll item, but that is just a come-on for the real con that it is a matrix, and I wish to see Brains to split the proceeds with him."

Then everyone begins talking at once, trying to explain different parts of the deal, and Griselda is looking from one to another, trying to make sense of it all, and suddenly she whirls and makes for the door, and Topknot and Elsa are quick to follow. Most of us follow also, to see what they are doing, and they are heading into Farmers' Quarter, so we keep going after them. But we are hardly started before Avidius comes panting up, yelling that the matrix is a dud and where is Brains? I explain to him that this is what Griselda and the rest aim to find out, and he joins in, and we reach People's Square a bit behind the others, but in time to see Brains crossing it at considerable speed, with Griselda only a few steps behind and the rest nowhere. But at the gate into the Rubble is a whole bunch of guards, headed up by Constable Jorjar himself, and they let Brains through, but of course Griselda has to stop. When we catch up with them, she is asking why she cannot go through the gate, at least, for she has urgent business with Brains, and Constable Jorjar is grinning and shaking his head slowly.

"It is lucky for you that you do not have your little sticker out, Griselda," he says, "or I will be bound to take action, but as it is I think I can overlook your evident wish to do him harm. But we cannot let you get at him, for he is a benefactor of the Empire and must be protected."

"Benefactor?" cries Avidius. "Why, he is nothing but a common swindler."

"Strong words, says constable Jorjar, "but you may be entitled to use such language, for all that I know. He certainly plays straight with us: we get a Reflection matrix at a very fair price, when you consider how rare such items are."

Avidius looks as if he will burst into tears. "Does it by any chance resemble this?" he says, holding out the pendant.

"Why, yes," says Constable Jorjar, peering at it and frowning a little.

"In fact, I will say that they look identical. So he sells you a dud one, eh?" Avidius groans, but says nothing more and stands there looking at his feet.

"I know that there are two, and he keeps switching them," says Griselda in a thoughtful sort of way, "but I never suspect that one is genuine. He tells me that he has some kind of spell cast on it to make it seem magical. It sounds very plausible at the time."

"That is him, all right," says Topknot bitterly. "When you think about it, he puts all sorts of stuff over on us, and we accept it."

Avidius groans even louder. "So you all take me, one after the other," he says, glaring most fiercely at Topknot and Elsa and Griselda. "Well, I will not forget this, you may be sure, but I am not one to yell for the law in such matters, and I take some consolation from knowing that you all get taken too, even the famous Griselda." Then he turns and trudges off, moving as if he has boots full of lead. But Griselda takes no notice of him; she is looking after where Brains goes and shaking her head slightly.

"You know, that guy is really good," she says. "I wonder what his right name is; it seems to me I ought to hear of him before."

"Why, as to that," says Constable Jorjar, who is listening to all this with much interest, "I do not know his real name, but I understand that he is once widely known in these parts as Swifty."



THE HERO BIT



Now of course, as everyone knows, in Pavis there are many adventurers, both young and old, and always these are meeting each other in temples and eating-houses and dives and such, and when you have guys and dolls meeting each other all the time, you are apt to have cases of love breaking out. If you are a sentimental kind of person you may feel that all the hand-holding and loving looks and kissing that ensue are most touching to behold, while if you are not the chances are you will find them quite revolting. But many persons display an interest in such matters, and I for one do not mind the odd case of love happening around me, and will even lend a sympathetic ear to persons who wish to tell me of their undying love for other persons, so long as they keep the drinks coming and I am not expected to do anything about it. Indeed, dough is often laid on the possibility of a case of love developing and how long it will last and so forth, but I wish to state that I want no part of such action. For the way I see it, anything involving the emotions of guys and dolls is a most uncertain proposition, indeed, and not worth a serious betting guy's attention.

But I will concede that there is one sure thing in matters of love, which is that Griselda will not be one of those involved, for Griselda seems to have no interest at all in matters of love. I tell you before of how Sweet-Talking Shamus falls for her but she remains unmoved, although Shamus is a guy whose attentions will be welcomed by many dolls, and there are other cases of guys doing some serious pitching to Griselda who have plenty going for

them, such as youth, and good looks, and dough in their pouches. But Griselda freezes them all off, just like she does to any enterprising doll who attempts to find out if she is interested in her own sex, and finally it is acknowledged throughout Pavis and all around that although Griselda will act friendly when she is in the mood she can never be persuaded to go further, and while many consider this strange behaviour in such a looking doll it is accepted as one of the many unexplained mysteries of life.

Now one day when there is quite a crowd in Loud Lilina's, and Griselda is among those present, though she has her back to the wall and is looking half-asleep, Old Gil comes in looking all excited and says like this, "Say, who do you think is coming to Pavis? Batulco the Great, no less." At this Griselda sits bolt upright and says sharply, "Do you say Batulco the Great?" and many others stop talking and turn round to hear, and such reactions are not surprising, for Batulco the Great is renowned as one of the most famous adventurer hero types ever. Old Gil looks all pleased up at the attention he is getting, and says, "The man himself. He is already at Bullford, and word comes ahead of him. I guess he aims to take on the Puzzle Canal or find Balastor's Axe or something."

"Why, I am hearing about him when I am just a little kid," says Griselda. "Can he really be active still?"

"No reason why not," says Old Gil. "The way I hear it, he becomes famous when he is still quite young. Why, I hear of him getting in and out of the Machine Ruins all of fifteen years ago. Personally, I rate that as his best performance ever."

"How about his stealing the Demon Crown, from deep in Dorastor?" says Sweet-Talking Shamus, and Hanufa puts in, "I think it is his recovering the Sky Goblet from a dragon's hoard," while Topknot claims that Batulco once finds a Darkness Box and gets proclaimed a troll-friend for ever because he turns it in to the Castle of Lead. As they are mentioning these items, Griselda is turning from one to the other with her face as full of interest, as if she is still a little kid. When she gets a chance to speak she says, "Once I glimpse him in my home town of Alone, maybe ten years ago, and he is always kind of a hero of mine. To think of him coming here!" and she seems to go off into a dream while the discussion continues. This is such strange behaviour for her that it will make anyone speculate, and I commence to wonder if he is the great lost love of her life, but I dast not ask her for fear she will turn right back into the old Griselda, who can freeze a salamander with a glance if she is feeling displeased.

Personally, I have very little interest in these adventurer hero types, as none of them can be bothered with guys like me, and I am willing to bet that only half of what is said about him is true, if that, and doubt whether he will live up to his advance billing. But it is just as well that I lay no bet of this nature, for I will certainly be very scared for my dough when Batulco the Great shows up, because he looks everything they say of him; in fact, he looks as if he steps straight out of one of the old stories. He is a big tall guy, with shoulders like a bull and ripply muscles all over, as everyone can see because he is not wearing much of anything above the waist, and he has hair the colour of ripe corn down to his shoulders, and sky-blue eyes, and when he smiles you can see fine white teeth, and many a doll sighs deeply when she gazes upon him. There is a raft of other guys with him, some of whom are clearly servants and donkey-drivers and such, but others look like guys of much experience, to judge from their gear and way of handling themselves; but none of these are anything much to look at, in fact most are downright hard on the eyes, and nobody gives them a second glance.

Well, Batulco and his mob settle into some place in Oldtown that they can get cheap, because it seems they do not have any too much dough, and for the same reason they do their serious drinking in cheap joints like Loud Lilina's after they give the high-class watering-holes a complimentary play. This is fine for the ordinary guys and dolls who wish to see something of Batulco and maybe even talk to him, and it will certainly make things a lot easier for Griselda if she wishes to meet up with him, for she favours the cheap joints also, because, as she once tells me, the atmosphere is apt to be less chilly in them. She is right there when Batulco first drops by Lilina's, but though she is well placed among his circle of admirers he does not give her much of a tumble. Anyone can see that she is somewhat disappointed by such treatment, and when it happens again she leaves with an expression on her face that I recognise, for it is the look she has when she means business.

Now it may be that, as some are heard to suggest, Loud Lilina offers Batulco special rates because of all the extra business he brings in, but he and his guys take to visiting steadily, and after a night or two Griselda shows up again, and she really makes quite an entrance. Up to this time she is dressing the way she usually does, which is in a pretty plain tunic with well-worn leathers on top and not much jewellery or anything, and though she is clean and tidy she will not catch your eye at a glance. But now she is wearing a dress that reveals a quite remarkable amount of her shape, in fact if it is not for some necklaces very little of her chest will be covered at all, and she has on earrings, and bracelets, and armlets, and I do not know what all else, and

her hair is all done up in a fancy way with big jewelled pins stuck through it, and the only reminder of her usual style is that she still packs her little sword, although she is holding it loose, having nowhere to hang it without spoiling the effect. It is obvious to anyone who is not blind that she intends to make an impression upon Batulco, but to show you how smart she is, she does not join those around him, but gives me a big hello and comes over to where I am sitting. This is some distance away, as I reckon I hear all the stuff about Batulco that I want to hear, and furthermore most of his guys are scarcely what you may call fastidious about keeping clean, and their combined effect is more powerful than I care for, personally.

Griselda makes such a production of this that many turn our way, which makes me most uncomfortable as I do not care to be the centre of attention, but her ploy works, for it is not long before one of Batulco's guys comes over and states that Batulco wishes to buy her a drink. So she graciously condescends to join them and seems to hit it off at once, and there can be no doubt that Batulco is most interested in her, and when they leave she goes with them. She is often seen in their company thereafter, and it seems clear that she and Batulco are developing a severe case of love for each other, and everyone starts going around saying how about this, and you never can tell, and offering and taking bets on the likely progress of this affair. But the smart betters notice that they are never together without at least one of Batulco's guys along, and some speculate that these do not wish this attachment to develop, which is strange when you consider what an asset Griselda's talents will be to their band and how she seems to get along with them O.K.

Well, things go on like this for a while, and then all of a sudden Batulco and his guys are nowhere around, and neither is Griselda. Reliable word comes out of the Rubble that they are seen in there, but Griselda is not with them, and yet she continues absent from all her usual haunts, and it is all a great mystery. Now I smell a good story in this, and after I do some thinking I decide to look up my cousin Wiglaf, who has a tiny dive on the edge of Riverside, for once before when she is not to be found I come across her there. When I approach I see the door is closed, but I figure this boosts the chances that I am right, for Wiglaf certainly cannot afford to turn away any customers, so I knock and call out to him, and after a while he opens up.

Sure enough, there is Griselda at a table, all slumped over a big mug of booze, and I never see her look so bad. Her hair is all over the place, and her eyes look like they have big dark circles round them, and she has wine stains all round her mouth. But when she eyes me I feel like I am being nailed to

the door, so I can see that it is still the old Griselda in there.

“So, you want the story?” she says, just like that. “Well, come on over, and Wiglaf, you get him a mug and then fan yourself out of here, because no one else must hear what I am about to relate. If I find you listening,” and here she does a quick flick of her hand and a dagger appears in it, for I omit to mention that she is back in her old gear. Wiglaf goes kind of green and vanishes, and then Griselda nails me again with her eyes and points the dagger too. “Mark this,” she says. “I am telling you this story only because it will ease my mind, and it is strictly not for public consumption at this time. I guess you do not care about Batulco’s reputation one way or the other, but as you will see this is not a story to pass around, if only because no one else will believe it, and I have no wish to get into a lot of arguments over it.”

“Are you saying that he is a fraud?” I ask.

“Wait a minute,” she says. “I am telling this story, and I will do it my way. You will no doubt be observing in past days that I find Batulco a very attractive guy, and I have every reason to believe he feels similarly towards me, but we have this problem that it is impossible to shake all his guys, for at least one is always closer to us than a dead heat. I can see that Batulco finds this as frustrating as I do, and since he will not tell them to get lost I come up with a plan, which is to have Snakefang provide me with something slow-acting that I can slip into their drinks, and I do this at Rowdy Djoh Lo’s where I can get cooperation in fixing their drinks. I work out already that they have a kind of rota, so the last guy to get it will be the one who should be up with us, and hence no suspicions will be aroused.

“It all works out like I figure, and in a while, back at his place, Batulco and I are surrounded by a lot of guys who are really snoring quite loud, and at last we have a chance to get snug. Well,” and here she pauses, and though the light in Wiglaf’s place is really rather dim I have a strong impression that there is more colour in her cheeks than usual, “I do not aim to go into that side of things, but when we come up for air I take the opportunity to ask him about some of his most famous exploits, because when these are spoken of, in Lilina’s or wherever, his guys do a lot of the talking, and I am itching to have his own account. Well, his answers will seem all right to you, maybe, but they are a little short on detail, and though I am under the influence of both love and liquor I start to get the feeling that they lack that certain something that a first-hand account of a daring deed will give you. So after a while I work up to asking him if maybe some of these stories are touched up for public consumption, or just plain stories, for I know how unwilling the

public can be to accept reality when asking for tales of glory.

“Well, at this his face goes right down. ‘No, they are true, in essence,’ he says, ‘But I only ...’ and then he busts out crying. Naturally I put my arm around him and ask what the trouble is, but before he can answer I perceive that we are being watched, and it is by two of the guys who I always figure for his servants, only now one has a very nasty-looking crossbow pointed directly at me as if he knows how to use it. The other looks around at our company, who are still snoring to beat the band, and shakes his head.

“ ‘I guess you drug them,’ he says. ‘Well, sister, I certainly hate to do this to such a looking doll, but we cannot have any secrets getting out. Move away from her, Batulco.’

“ ‘Hold on,’ I cry, as I do a quick roll to get out of the line of fire, ‘I am not after any secrets,’ and Batulco jumps in front of me and cries, ‘Leave her alone. We are in love, and that is why she asks me,’ and I will always consider that he shows that there is some hero in him by doing this.

“The guy who speaks before rubs his chin. ‘Maybe that will put a different slant on the matter,’ he says. ‘If you are in love enough to keep a secret, you can come in with us, for we can certainly use someone like you.’

“ ‘What am I coming in on?’ I say, for my head is still not working at its right speed. So he motions us to sit down and lets me in on their secret, and it is this. Batulco is their front man, because he looks the part of a great adventurer hero, and while he is fair at fighting and such it is these guys with him who are the real experts and pull off all the trickiest stuff. So of course they have to keep tabs on him to make sure that he does not get asked about something he is supposed to do that he does not know enough about, and also that he does not spill the beans to some companion in a relaxed mood or break down, the way he does with me.”

“Why do they need such a guy at all?” I ask. “Surely they will want the credit for their great deeds themselves.”

“You ask too many questions,” says Griselda snappily. “I am coming to that. They need a front man because the public wants to believe in heroes, and moreover in heroes that look like Batulco, or dolls similarly, and not the muggolas that they are more often than not. And what the public wants matters,” she continues, “because they will get more cooperation, and credit, and so forth if they have such a guy fronting them. These are smart guys, in their way, and they are willing to pass up a little glory, so long as they can share out the profits, and after all they know who really pulls off the

amazing feats. If one of them fouls up, as is bound to happen from time to time, well, Batulco is clear, and he does not have to be replaced. But of course all this pretence is very hard on Batulco, and in fact he is by no means the first Batulco they have, because others crack under the strain one way and another."

"What happens to them?" I ask.

Griselda smiles just a trifle. "Well, if they are smart they accept a pay-off and swear a very serious oath that they will keep the secret. But sometimes they are not smart, like one who wishes a greater share of the take or he will tell all, and then," she shrugs, "they get taken care of. These guys are very keen to protect their secret, as you will perceive from their readiness to off me. But it is impossible to keep the lid on such a secret for ever; already they have to stay away from some parts because rumours are taking hold, and this is one reason why they come out this way."

"So why are you not with them, if you know the secret and you love him?" I ask, and I realise before I finish speaking that this is the wrong thing to say. Griselda just looks at me for a moment, in a way that I cannot describe except to say that I am quite unable to move, and then she ups and stabs her dagger into the table so close to my hand that I feel the wind of it and drop my mug, and in fact in jumping away I fall right off my stool.

"That is one question too many," she says, leaning forward and looking at me most earnestly, "but I will overlook it, for it gives me a chance to let out what I am feeling." Then she heaves the dagger out with some effort, for it is in quite deep, and sheathes it. "They let me go," she continues, as I get up and dust myself off, "because I help them work out how to get off the hook with this Batulco caper, and I cannot believe they do not contemplate this before, but I guess they feel that they invest a lot of effort in building up his publicity and all, and do not wish to start over. Anyway, shortly you will hear that Batulco goes down against overwhelming odds fighting Chaos monsters in the Rubble to save the lives of his pals, and I make them promise not to waste him but to get him out disguised some way, and off they will go to start the business again somewhere with a different front man, or maybe a doll, as dolls are better actors, anyway, and the right one will not start hankering for love in her life the way Batulco does. As for why I am not with them," and here she breaks off to take a big pull at her drink, "in fact they make me the offer to front for them, and he can be along in disguise, and all that. But I have no wish to front for anybody, particularly not if I have to dress in the ridiculous way I use to

snag Batulco in the first place, and I cannot love him once I know he is nothing but a front, and anyway, can you imagine spending the best years of your life with that bunch of uncouth jerks?"



WORLDS APART



It is not a subject to which I generally give much thought, but I am willing to lay plenty of eight to five that few of the dolls who frequent Loud Lilina's will score very high for looks. Of course, this does not go if Griselda is there, but ordinarily they are not such dolls as will cause many guys to get excited about them, though if it comes to that Lilina's male customers will rarely let themselves get excited over any doll. For it is a sure thing that a doll can be brought to appreciate a guy's feelings about her a whole lot better if he spends a little dough on her, and Lilina's male customers are seldom in a position to do this. Furthermore, the chances are that this is well known among adventurer dolls and such in Pavis, so that any who are looking for some action are apt to try such joints as Gimpy's or Jareen's, and those who are seen about Lilina's are generally tough dolls like Hanufa, or Elsa from Adari, who like to go where the booze is cheap but still drinkable.

So when Griselda walks through the door with another doll in tow who is a real knockout it causes no little stir, and some of those present are even observed to sniff at their mugs as if they suspect there is something in them besides beer. For this doll is really something to see. She stands two or three fingers higher than Griselda, and has a mass of hair the colour of ripe corn which frames a very nice face, indeed, showing green eyes with plenty of sparkle, and her shape is marvellous to behold, as everybody can see. For she has very little on below the waist but a pair of knee-high boots, and what

she is wearing on her top half does not go very far towards covering this either, so that a really remarkable amount of her shape is on show. Contemplating these features seems to cause many a guy to be suddenly noticing that it seems very hot in there, and in fact I get to feeling a trifle warm myself.

"Bring out your best, Lilina," cries Griselda merrily. "Nothing but the best will do for Redfox." Then she looks about and spots me at a table off to one side, the way I like to be, and comes over. Before I know it she and this Redfox are sitting down, and so also is Kroked, who must come in after them although I do not notice him in the excitement.

"Olaf, may I present Redfox?" says Griselda to me, still sounding very cheerful. "Now, Red, you mind what you say in this man's hearing, because he will surely remember every word, and before you can say Orlanth Adventurous it will be all over town, with plenty that you do not say for added flavour," and she laughs like anything. This Redfox laughs a little too, but to my eyes she is looking somewhat dazed, and does not seem to be taking much in. Then the drinks arrive, and Griselda slaps Redfox's down before her and engages her in earnest conversation, and because I see Kroked looking at me I decide to give him some attention, though I will dearly love to hear what Griselda is saying to Redfox.

"Maybe you are wondering what comes off?" says Kroked, and I admit that this will interest me no little.

"I never see anything like it," he says, shaking his head. "You may say what you like, but some funny things are going on these days. How it happens, we are out in the Rubble for reasons that I will not discuss except to say that everything is above board and we have the blessing of Old Daddy Pavis himself. There is the boss, and Griselda, and Hanufa, and me. We are going along nice and quiet, though the boss is getting irritated because we happen on nothing to make it worth our while to be there, and he does not care to be in the Rubble unless he has more to show for it than the price of a few drinks, which is what we stand to make from the Pavis temple for our time.

"Suddenly we are hearing this strange noise in a building off to one side, and you know as well as I do that you cannot ignore strange noises in the Rubble. So we fan out in front of the building, and are ready for anything when out steps this doll, gazing about her as if everything she sees is new, and this kind of throws us. I mean, here is this doll out in the middle of the Rubble, wearing not much more than will cover one of Hanufa's fists, and

carrying nothing to defend herself with that we can see except a couple of knives tucked into her boots. 'Oh Griff!' she says. 'What is happening to me now?'

"'Griff?' says the boss. 'What is this Griff? Watch it, all of you, this may be some kind of Chaotic. We better throw her down and see if she has a Chaos mark on her.'"

"Where is Wolfhead, anyway?" I ask.

"I am coming to that," says Kroked, somewhat testily. "Anyway, we start forward, and the doll makes a rush to one side, but the boss reaches out and grabs her. Well, it happens too fast for me to see, but somehow he goes right over her arm and winds up against a wall with quite a thump.

"'Listen,' cries the doll. 'I am no enemy of yours; I do not even know what I am doing here. A moment ago I am in the woods, and where in Hel am I now? Are you magicians?'

"Now Griselda is studying this doll, and she says, 'Lay off her; I have a hunch she may be on the level. Do you hear a noise just now?' she asks the doll, who shakes her head and says, 'No, I just leave my horse for a moment to look into a ruin, and I seem to walk through to here between one step and another.'

"Well, this seems as doubtful a story as I ever hear, and Hanufa thinks so too; in fact, she growls to me, 'Dressed like that, she figures to be a sorceress, for who else will be so dumb as to wear no armour, or even much clothes?' But Griselda does not seem to be bothered. 'Where is this ruin?' she asks, as if she is really interested in knowing. The doll shrugs. 'I do not know precisely; I am on my way to Mulhaarn when I see it.' Griselda looks at the rest of us. 'You ever hear of Mulhaarn?' she asks, and we all shake our heads. 'Neither do I,' says she. 'You must come a long way, sister, or else you are a good liar.' At this the doll seems to get mad. 'Hel's teeth,' she says, 'it is bad enough being dumped somewhere I know nothing of, without having everyone suspect me. I cannot explain it, but there has to be magic involved. Maybe it is done through mirrors; my sister can get about over long distances that way. All I can say is, stuff like this is always happening to me.' 'Okay', says Griselda, 'let us assume that you are the victim of circumstances. Well, we have a job to do, and you better stay with us; this is no place to be wandering around alone.' 'Where is it anyway?' says the doll, but when Griselda explains she just shakes her head and says she never hears of it.

"The boss is back on his feet again by now, holding his wrist and looking at the doll in a rather hostile way. 'That is some fancy throw you do, miss,' he says, and then reels off his healing spell. The doll looks at him pop-eyed. 'Do you do magic that easily here?' 'Why,' says Griselda in surprise, 'do you not do any magic?' The doll shakes her head. 'Only wizards and their apprentices use magic where I come from, though we have magic objects.' She shudders. 'I once - but you do not want to know my life story now. Let us get on with this job of yours. I am Redfox, by the way.'"

Kroked shakes his head. "She is hard to make out, this Redfox, but it seems to be all true that she has no idea where she is, for she displays such ignorance that I am willing to believe her home is way out on the edge somewhere.

"Anyway, there is nothing the matter with her when it comes to moxie, for what happens but we get jumped by a bunch of Broos a bit further along. These are nothing special, in fact if I am any judge they are low down even for Broos, but they come running right at us, full of determination, and it seems that it is the sight of Redfox in particular that spurs them on, for they are very evidently excited by this. Later she claims that she never sees such creatures before, but if this is so she does not let it faze her, for she has one knife out and across a broo's throat in a trice, and her moves are so good that the others cannot lay a paw on her. In fact, they swiftly veer away from her and are aiming to grab Griselda instead, it seems like, and we all have our hands full for the moment and cannot help, but this Redfox just piles in, hamstringing one and drops her cloak over another's head, and that is it: they start heading for home, those that can still make it.

"As you can imagine, Griselda is very grateful to her, and is quick to advise her on dumping her cloak and trying to clean off her knife; and here is another odd thing about her, for her knives are both fine-looking iron, and she seems really surprised when we tell her how rare and valuable such things are around here. Hanufa shakes her head, and I can tell she still suspects Redfox of being a sorceress, but I do not care what she is, personally, as long as she can fight good.

"Well, that is about it. We finish the job, and the boss is talking with the Pavis guys now, and Hanufa is I do not know where."

Just then in comes Wolfhead, but he does not sit down with us but motions with his head at Kroked, who goes off with him. So now I have a chance to listen to the conversation of Griselda and Redfox, but it is not very interesting, to be frank, for this Redfox has very little to say, and what

Griselda is talking about I hear more than once before. In fact, Griselda seems to be giving her the history of her life, and Redfox is listening as if she is trying to take it all in but finding it hard going. Griselda does not appear to notice this, but she does eventually pick up on the fact that most of the guys in Lilina's are unable to keep their eyes off Redfox.

"Come," she says. "Let us go and get you some new clothes."

"I will not say no to a new cloak," says Redfox, and off they go, and as I do not care to follow, having no interest in dolls' clothing, I am not a party to what happens next, but hear it from others. It seems that while they are pricing cloaks some big tough guy who is new in town starts coming on very heavy to Redfox, and before Griselda can intervene Redfox first tells him politely to get lost, and then when he persists disposes of him less politely with one of the best demonstrations of the old one-two ever seen in this man's town. So the word gets about pretty fast that Griselda's new friend is worthy of some respect, despite the way she dresses.

In the next day or two, Griselda and Redfox are seen about together frequently, and Redfox loosens up and gets talking to people, but she is no easier to make out than before. For sometimes she will talk as if she knows her way about Dragon Pass, and comes from somewhere around, but more often she will speak of places and people that no one ever hears of, and relate tales that are very hard to believe, what with guys riding giant slugs, and her getting taken over by a demon because of a magic ring that can turn into a sword, and all this and that, and Topknot, who is by no means as dumb as he looks, comments that she seems to go strange like this when anyone calls her by name. Many are ready to speculate that it is all part of an act, but others say that she must be a very good actress if this is so, and have a very fine imagination, and Loud Lilina says that she never sees the like of the coins that she carries, and it is all very strange.

It is the general opinion that Griselda and Redfox are hitting it off well, in fact some say they are two of a kind, but I am not so sure of this. For from time to time Griselda will tell stories from her past that Redfox does not appear to care for, to judge from her expression, while Griselda is often having occasion to glance at Redfox in mild exasperation. For wherever they go there are persons who are eager to make Redfox's closer acquaintance, and while Redfox is very ready to discourage such would-be suitors, if they get too fresh, in a variety of ways that are all very direct, such as an elbow in the ribs or a quick jolt to the jaw, she does not seem willing to avoid attracting such attention by adopting a less revealing dress style. For

although all the old-timers in Pavis know that Griselda has little interest in attracting male attention, a new crop of adventurers is hitting Pavis as the caravans come through, and no matter how many they shake off there are always more who seem to think Redfox's style of dress is a come-on from her if not from both of them. This is plainly somewhat irritating to Griselda, and once or twice I hear her comment to Redfox that her style of dress is attracting these types, but Redfox does not seem to care.

Well, I am not with them all the time, and I am not keeping count when I am, but it must be after about the dozenth time that they have to shake someone that there happens what is a sure thing to happen sooner or later, and this is that Griselda blows her top. On this occasion it is not even a male, but a female adventurer who is new in town. She is a great big hefty doll, who makes it quite clear that she has no time for males of any sort, but when she perceives Griselda and Redfox she evidently approves of them. In fact, she goes up to them as they are at the bar in Lilina's getting their drinks, and throws her arms around their shoulders, and says, "Hey, sweethearts, how about bringing your drinks to my table? I am sure we have lots in common." Redfox just slides out from under her arm and says, "No, thanks," quite politely, but Griselda displays some indignation at being handled in this way and tells her to get lost. Now this adventurer doll has several drinks on board, and so she is not ready to change her mind fast about anything. "No need to get excited," she says. "I just feel like a little sympathetic company, that is all, and your friend seems a good sport, or why is she dressed like that?"

Now Griselda seems to take great umbrage at this, and she whips out her little sword and holds it in front of the adventurer doll's nose. "I will cut off that nose of yours if you do not stop poking it in," she says. "Favour us with your absence," and then she mutters and turns her hand towards the doll, which must be throwing a spell, because the doll jumps as if she is stung and then backs away hastily, clutching her arm and saying, "All right, all right," and she departs from Lilina's in haste. Redfox looks slightly shocked at this, and says, "There is no need to get so tough about it, Griselda; she is only trying to be friendly."

"That kind of friendliness I can do without," says Griselda, as she sheathes her sword. Then they take their drinks, but neither has much to say, and after downing them they leave, at Griselda's suggestion, for she says that she wishes to talk with Redfox privately. I follow after them discreetly, and since it is night I am able to get close enough to hear without their noticing me. Griselda is saying, "I am thinking, maybe I am a bit rough on

that doll. I can see her point: people are bound to go on drawing the wrong conclusions if you go about dressed like that. Seriously, Red, it is beginning to wear me down."

"I am comfortable with the way I dress, Griselda," says Redfox, "and I will be grateful if you let it alone. Sooner or later people will get the message, and I prefer to handle them my own way. Let us leave it like that."

Now Griselda evidently becomes a little heated. "I cannot leave it like that!" she cries. "It is not just that I am sick of having these slobs pestering us. I think you are making yourself seem like something which you are not by going about dressed like one of Uleria's finest, and it is embarrassing me."

Well, this seems to hit Redfox right where she lives, all right, and she tenses up and stares at Griselda without being able to produce a comeback right away. Then she gives a dry little laugh, and says, "So I am behaving like something I am not, am I? Well, what about you, the toughest doll in Pavis, who has to use magic to chase off a harmless drunk?"

"I do not know about harmless," replies Griselda, "and anyway, how is someone small like me going to cope with all these big hulking types, without trying to even the odds a bit?"

"I am not that taller than you, and I manage," says Redfox sharply. "All this fooling with magic is unnatural, and shows lack of confidence in yourself."

"Well, I am not about to learn fisticuffs just to humour your prejudice about magic, even if you offer to teach me," says Griselda lightly, as if she is trying to make a joke of it. "I long ago learn that you either have to scare them off or get serious about damaging them."

"So I gather from your delightful stories," says Redfox, who is talking like she is saving all this up for a long time. "Well, if you are embarrassed about being seen with me, how do you think I feel? How do you suppose I like thinking of people saying, 'I wonder who that is with Griselda? I wonder if she is a hard case and killer like her; she does not look it, but then neither does Griselda.'"

Well, this gets Griselda going, all right. "Do not come all righteous over me," she snaps. "How do you get this chart to the Temple of Pthud, if it comes to that, and do you not send off this lookalike of yours to who knows what grisly fate?"

This stops Redfox, but only for a moment, for now she really has the bit between her teeth. "Who knows, indeed?" she says. "You certainly do not. You know very little about my life, whereas I know far more than I wish to about your career of crime and slaughter."

Now it is Griselda's turn to seem winded, but finally she draws a deep breath and says, quite quietly, "I know I owe you one, Redfox, what with saving my skin and all, but you are treading on dangerous ground, talking like this to me."

Now, I can tell that Griselda is close to turning herself loose, and I hunch down in a corner to be out of harm's way, but Redfox just puts her hands on her hips and laughs. "What are you going to do, kill me?" she says. "Or are you just trying to scare me off? Well, get this: I am not scared." Then she raises her hands and yells up at the sky, "Oh Griff, what do I do to get dumped here? Do you set this up for some kind of joke?"

Then something happens which I know you will not believe, but it happens all the same. A voice comes from nowhere, really loud, which says, "What? Oh, there you are. Hang on a sec - there, that should do it," and before Griselda can say aye, yes, or no, Redfox vanishes, just like that.

This is so strange that I stand up to look at the sky, as if I will see something, and Griselda is bound to spot that I am listening in, but at first she just looks at where Redfox is standing a moment before, with her mouth open. Then she shakes her head as if to clear it, and says to me, "Well, I guess maybe she is a sorceress or some such after all, and her pet demon gets her away. It is just as well, for she is pushing me to where I will have to fight her, and I do not really wish to do this."

"Why is that, Griselda?" I ask.

Griselda shakes her head again, and sighs. "Well, for one thing, I may not altogether like her style, but I admire her nerve. And there it is: what really bothers me is that I am not sure I will win."



GRISELDA

THE HERO ??



You know one thing I like about Griselda? She don't do no grand-standin'. There's plenty in this man's town, dress real flash, put on a show most every time they enter a bar, so's ever'body'll know, they're someone. Not her. She wears them ol' leathers most times, talks quiet, never draws attention to herself 'cept when it's downright necessary.

Of course, you'll say, she don't need to do any a' that, not with the rep she has. Sure enough, more crap gets talked about her than is left behind when one a' them nomad clans goes by. That Olaf, now, he practically makes his entire living, tellin' stories about her. But there's just as much talk about a hunnert others, and, you dig down, like as not you'll find there's not so much to it. Griselda is the real thing.

Like for instance, you can hear, she took out a Zorak Zoran Death Lord, no less, getting revenge for her brother. Now I happen to know that is quite simply untrue. Way she tells it, was just some plain ol' ordinary Troll. But you tell me how many a' these blowhards around here would have the nerve to walk in among all them scary trolls, without no backup, and fight a plain ol' ordinary b-i-g tough Dark Troll? Come to that, how many would go a-huntin' Ragna the Wrestler, and cook up a scheme to down her in one afternoon? And what do we hear now, she slugs it out toe to toe with Carver Donan, and beats him three times outa three! She coulda killed him easy enough, but I guess she musta been feelin' soft-hearted. Pity, that; I was bettin' on a kill.

So she uses magic; so what? That takes brains, and whoever said you couldn't use brains when someone's tryin' to chop you? So she's lucky; maybe someone up there is lookin' out for her now and then. Wouldn't be the first time, and I can see where such a someone just might like her style. You throw a drink or two into some a' them serious upright types that work for the temples, they're liable to say the same thing: they like her style. After all, they got no real beef against her; way I see it, she ain't done serious harm to anyone that didn't deserve it.

So she's got good friends. You show me one a' these wonder heroes that ain't got friends watchin' out for them. Nobody gets up there without a whole lotta help from others, I bet. Which you may think I'm stretchin' it some, mentionin' Griselda in the same breath with them real hero types. But I gotta hunch she may surprise us all yet. I reckon, she's got the makin's.



RED HOT



Even a rank sucker will not bet against the chance of its being hot in Fire Season, and at the time I speak of it is certainly hot. In fact, it is very hot, indeed. It is so hot that nobody is wearing any more than they can help, and one and all go around saying what they will do for a nice cold drink, and those who can offer such drinks figure to be doing very nicely. I hear some citizens even try to work up a little betting action on whether the sun is shining hot enough to cook food, and places where there is any shade are much sought after, unless of course they are in the neighbourhood of guard posts. For the army and the watch have to keep wearing much of their gear, and they are bound to be suffering keenly, and when such persons are suffering they are apt to take it out on anyone in reach that they disapprove of. But as I am known to many in the army and the watch as a guy who can come up with good stories and even a nice betting tip now and then, I can generally take my ease in the shade of the guard posts if I wish it, and I often do, for it is a good place to be if you want to keep an eye on what is going on.

Now it comes on the latest in a series of hot days that lasts so long most citizens lose track, and I am by the Old Gate, half asleep, when I hear voices inside the post, and since one of these voices is that of a doll who sounds to be talking very tough I rouse a bit and consider taking notice. But before I can work myself into getting up, one of the guards puts his head round the side and says, "Hey, Olaf, come listen to this. There is a doll here who states that it is her purpose to run Griselda into her hole." Well, this

gets me up, all right, and I step in quite briskly, and there is this doll pacing up and down as if she cannot stand still, and arguing with the clerk, who evidently does not consider that her stated purpose for entering Pavis, which one and all are bound to give, is right and proper.

"I am being honest, am I not?" she is saying. "I make no attempt to deceive. Why, the way I hear it, half of this town will consider it a sight for sore eyes, to see Griselda taken down a peg, and where is your problem, mister scribbler?"

"I cannot write down such stuff," he says. "But you give me an idea; I will enter you as coming to see the sights, and you better accept that, miss, or maybe I will write you down as a potential troublemaker."

The doll shakes her head and gives a funny kind of laugh. "All right, all right," she says. "That is not a bad gag; write it down like that. Now, where will I find Griselda?" and she stops pacing, and stands facing us with her hands on her hips. So I get a clear view of her, and this is surely one of the strangest-looking doll adventurers I ever see. She is short, and fairly skinny, and nothing much to look at, but you will hardly fail to notice her, for she has her hair all shaved off bar a bit on the top, which is dyed blood-red and stiffened up like flames coming out her head, and she has a black ring through her nose. What gear she is wearing is black also, but this is not much, being mainly a pair of very short breeches and a cover for her top half which is tight enough to indicate that there is very little to cover, in fact, and straps and belts going here and there, with her gear hanging from them. Her arms are bare apart from studded bracers, and they show good muscles and enough scars to suggest that she has plenty of experience, but what makes me inclined to take her seriously is the look in her eyes, which are grey, for it is hard to explain why, but they give me the feeling that she is ready for anything.

None of us feels called upon to answer her enquiry, for everyone in this man's town knows that it is not wise to be passing around information of this nature, and especially when it relates to someone like Griselda, whom even the guards are wary of, because the rumour persists that she has influence with the Governor. They do not bother to say anything at all, and the clerk hems and haws and says it is not his business to provide such information. Then the doll fixes on me.

"You seem like a knowing guy," she says. "Let me have this information and I may even pay you," and she laughs again. I do not care for the sound of her laugh or for the way she looks at me, but before I can decide

what to say, the guard commander chips in.

"See here," he says, "you may be a heller where you come from, but Griselda handles tougher persons than you look to be without raising a sweat, and I will give you some good advice free, which is to stay away from her. Moreover, I get this feeling that you are planning to disturb the peace, and we are bound to take a poor view of this, especially in this heat."

The doll cocks her head at him. "Why," she says, "anyone will think I aim to do Griselda some permanent harm, but such is by no means my intention. I simply aim to prove that she has an inflated reputation, and I am better than she is, any day of the week."

"That is what Carver Donan says, so I hear," says another guard. "Maybe you better talk to him about reputations."

"Oh, no guy is going to manage it," says the doll, very off hand. "It will take a doll like me to put a head on Griselda."

It is strange how the way she is talking seems to irritate everyone there, and makes them determined to show her what a tough proposition Griselda is, for now the clerk speaks up. "She is capable of handling women too," he says, "if the story about Ragna the Wrestler is true."

Up to now, this doll is behaving very cool, but at this she changes amazingly. She swings fast on the clerk, and seems about to strike him, but holds herself back in time and snarls at him, "Never mention that name to me."

The clerk backs off, looking half-scared to death, but now the guard commander steps in. "OK, that does it," he says. "We put up with your foolery long enough. Go and look for Griselda in Loud Lilina's, and she can carve you into cutlets for all I care, so long as it is out of our sight, and Olaf, you see she gets there and does not go wandering off and bothering folks."

Well, I can think of many things I will rather do than take this crazy doll to Lilina's, but I figure that I am bound to be going there anyway to see what comes off, and besides, I know better than to say no to a guard commander. So I motion to the doll to follow me, and off we go down Parade Way. I am trying to keep in the shade and move inconspicuously, hoping that no one I know will notice us, but that is not her idea at all, for she is coming along as if she is in a parade, in fact she is capering about, and clapping her hands together, and now and then she whoops and calls stuff like, "Griselda, here I come! Red hot and ready!" Naturally, this attracts some

attention, and by the time we are into Founders Market there are already persons following us, despite the heat, and when we make the turn into Sword Street there is quite a bunch in attendance, and more are coming as the word is going round that this doll is after Griselda. Some even try to ask her why, and wherefore, and so forth, but she takes no notice.

When we reach Lilina's the doll looks up at the sign, and laughs in her crazy way, and then she jumps up and grabs it as easy as you please and swings on it, which shows that she is certainly very limber, but after one swing the sign comes away with her. This causes some cheering, which brings out many of Lilina's customers, but Griselda is not among them.

"You got Griselda in there?" cries the doll, waving the sign about, and when no one replies at once, she positively yells, "I say, you got Griselda in there? Are you all deaf?"

Now among those who come out is Elsa from Adari, and this comment seems to irritate her, for she pushes to the front and says, "See here, if you do not stop making so much noise I will feel compelled to do something about it. Griselda is not here, so leave us in peace."

The doll cocks her head at her. "I do not come here aiming to tangle with anyone but Griselda," she says, "But if you insist on horning in I will not consider myself responsible for the consequences," and she suddenly takes a swing at Elsa. Now, Elsa has much experience, and she ducks the swing easily, but somehow this makes her duck into the doll's other fist, and this knocks her right off her feet. I seldom see a prettier punch delivered, and anyone can see that this doll knows her stuff when it comes to the old rough and tumble. One and all step back a bit as Elsa sits up, expecting mayhem to break out, but she does not seem to wish to take the matter further, or even to feel particularly hostile towards the doll.

"You pack a nice punch," she says in a surprised tone.

"And you have a hard chin," says the doll, shaking her hand about. "No hard feelings? Some other time I will be ready to give you a proper fight, but just now I wish to keep myself fresh for Griselda."

"So I see," says Elsa. "Well, she may happen by at any time, so why do you not come inside out of this heat, and maybe take something to cut the dust from your throat like a sensible person?"

The doll grins, and nods yes to this. "This seems like a good idea," she says, "and in fact, if you can tell me of Griselda, I will set them up."

"That depends on what you want to know," says Elsa as they go in, "and on who wants to know, as well," and I realise that in all this time I do not hear the doll's name. But all she says is, "I go by the name of Red Hot, and that is how I feel, red hot and ready to cut Griselda down to size."

"Is that so?" says Elsa as they fetch up at the bar. "You are not the first to try, you know," and then she catches sight of me and gives me one of her best glares. I am already backing off when Red Hot notices and turns around. "Ah, the guy who brings me here," she says. "If you like running errands, why do you not fetch me Griselda for five clacks?" and she laughs most unpleasantly. I can see that if I hang around anywhere near her she may come out with worse, and so I depart from the premises to find some shade nearby that is not fully populated, because I do not wish to miss any more of this than I can help.

Well, nothing happens for a while except for people going in or out of Lilina's, and then all of a sudden out come Elsa and Red Hot and just about everybody else in the place except Lilina, it seems like, and all start heading off down the street. So I fall in, and ask Old Gil what is coming off.

"Someone arrives with word that Griselda is down at Homar's Fish," he says. "So naturally Red Hot is going to look her up."

Now this is a great coincidence, to be sure, for it is in Homar's Fish that Griselda catches up with Ragna the Wrestler, and it really seems like a sign, but of what I cannot be sure. It is something of a walk to Homar's Fish, and Elsa and Red Hot are setting quite a pace, so that many are complaining no little by the time we arrive. Sure enough, Griselda is in there with Wolfhead and some of his boys, putting on the soup and looking very relaxed, which is the way the soup they do in Homar's Fish is bound to make you feel. But when she sees us coming she certainly takes notice. In fact, when Red Hot reaches the table, Griselda has her eyes fixed on her and does not wait for her to say anything, but asks, "Something I can do for you?" in a sharp sort of way.

"Why, yes," says Red Hot. "Red Hot is the name I go by, and red hot is what I am, to show that I am better than you at anything you care to name."

Griselda yawns in her face. "Your name means nothing to me," she says.

"Does it have to?" says Red Hot. "Come on, Griselda, show me your best. Back off and I will name you a faker all over Dragon Pass."

At this, Wolfhead growls, "I do not see why you have to accommodate every fresh punk that feels like challenging you, Grizzie. Want us to run her off?"

But Griselda shakes her head at him. "This is the first time anyone comes on at me like this in quite a while," she says. "It is like old times." Then she looks Red Hot over. "So you think you can beat me?"

"Try me," says Red Hot.

"I aim to," says Griselda. "This is some contest of skill, I take it? Because if you have anything more in mind, we better go somewhere out of town; I cannot afford to have the local law take any more interest in me than they do already."

Red Hot laughs. "If you are trying to scare me off, forget it. Maybe you have everyone around here sweating with your tough doll act, but it will take more than that to worry me. As for the contest, it is not your scalp I am after but your reputation."

Now, ever since she arrives in Pavis Griselda is hardly ever addressed like this, and I judge that it is getting to her slightly, for her cheeks are redder than usual, but all she says is, "Well, perhaps you will at least do me the courtesy of waiting till I finish," and she picks up her spoon again. But Red Hot whips out a knife so fast you will scarcely have time to blink, and plunges it into the table right by Griselda's bowl, snarling, "I mean now." Evidently this startles Griselda somewhat, for she drops her spoon. She looks up at Red Hot leaning over her, still holding the knife, and everyone seems to hold their breath, even Wolfhead. Then she says, "You know you are laying yourself open to me gutting you?"

Red Hot grins like a curly wolf, and does not move a muscle. "I can be planting that knife just as easily in your throat, if I wish."

Griselda goes on looking for a moment, and then shakes her head. "You certainly come on strong," she says. "Very well, let us go to Rowdy Djoh Lo's, where it is most unlikely that we will be interrupted by the watch or other such busybodies." She speaks as if nothing unusual is occurring, but Wolfhead and Kroked exchange a look, and so do others, and it seems to me that they are all thinking what I am thinking, which is that we just see Griselda back off.

"I do not know this place," says Red Hot, "but evidently you do. Can I be sure of getting a fair shake?"

Griselda smiles a little, as if she scores a point. "Do not be worried," she says. "You have my word," and off we all go. Rowdy Djoh Lo's is only a step down the way from Homar's Fish, and when we get there the joint is closed, for it is still afternoon, but Rowdy Djoh Lo opens up quickly enough when he is informed that a contest of skill is planned between Griselda and a challenger, and pretty soon some of his regulars like Snakefang must get the word, for they commence showing up. In fact, before long it seems like half the hard cases and tough adventurers in Pavis are present, for such persons are always keen to watch contests of skill, and maybe bet on them.

Well, once they get started, they try all sorts of things, like pulling and throwing at a target at speed, or while moving, and hitting a mark accurately with a sword from a fast draw, and mumblety-peg, and all the time Red Hot is right up alongside Griselda, and sometimes even better, for though Griselda can always get something out faster she is not always so accurate. It certainly looks as if Griselda encounters her match in such skills, and she can be observed to be glancing at Red Hot with increasing respect. In fact, Red Hot is suggesting each type of contest, and after all these she says, "It is time for a tougher test. Let us take turns in making a real fast hack at the other, which must be parried with the sword without striking back."

"This gives a big advantage to the one with first strike," says Griselda.

"We can roll for it," says Red Hot casually, and Griselda agrees, though it seems to me that she is not too keen on this idea, and when she rolls the higher number on the dice she seems to tense up, though Red Hot does not seem at all bothered. They pull swords and Griselda circles Red Hot for a while, until suddenly she steps one way but strikes the other, very fast. I will expect this to be a winner in any fight, but Red Hot not only stops it but turns it off in such a way that Griselda nearly loses her balance. Red Hot lets her straighten up, looking quite pleased with herself, but Griselda slaps her sword back into its sheath crisply and says, "I will never top that. I give you best."

"You are ducking out?" says Red Hot, as if amazed, and she is not the only one, for gasps are heard all around.

"Look," says Griselda, very serious. "The way this is going, one of us will wind up doing fatal injury to the other. But you say you do not wish to kill me, and I surely do not wish to kill you. I see no point," she says, "when all that rides on it is who can be fastest in a set-up like this. That does not matter; what matters is whether you can hack it out there," she says, jerking her thumb in the direction of the Rubble. "Probably you can; you are red hot,

all right, and you are welcome to say that you beat me, if that is what you want." With this she turns away, and when Red Hot cries, "You cannot walk out on me like this," she just says, "Watch me," without looking back, and heads off. Everyone gives way before her, and even when she is gone no one seems ready to speak, while Red Hot stares after her in a sort of daze, until Elsa gives a loud hurrah and claps her on the shoulder. Then there is much crowding around Red Hot, and cries of admiration, and Snakefang offers her the freedom of the house, all of which seems to pleasure her no little, and it looks as if something of a party will develop. But I decide to leave, for the liquor in Rowdy Djoh Lo's is no bargain at any time, and especially if I have to buy it myself, and although it is still early evening I head off to my room, because I have some thinking to do, and I find this so wearing after the excitement of the day that I turn in quite early, for me.

Well, the next day the story is all over town, and because I am known to be among those present, and also to accompany Red Hot to Lilina's in the first place, my account of everything is much in demand, and my opinion is frequently canvassed. I decide the previous night to be very discreet in what I say, for it may get back to the ears of either Griselda or Red Hot, and neither is a person who I wish to have mad at me, ever. So I state that Red Hot is a most striking character, and puts up a very fine performance, and also that Griselda does her best, or so it seems to me, and I report her reasons for refusing to continue, and will not be drawn on whether I think she chickens out, for this is a subject on which I personally am unable to make up my mind.

But plenty of others who are there, or hear about it, are not so prudent, and are willing to state openly that she loses her nerve when faced with really serious opposition, and among these are some of Carver Donan's Storm Bull pals, although I notice that Carver himself has nothing much to say on the topic, which may be because he considers that he is already providing Griselda with serious opposition, when they have their duels. But Red Hot becomes something of a favourite with the Storm Bulls, and this seems to be what she is aiming at, for she has plenty in common with them, to judge from her behaviour around town. In fact, it seems that it is her life's ambition to be accepted as an initiate, but that the cult leaders require some good Chaos-fighting experience, which she is aiming to get in the Rubble, when a good opportunity presents itself. But in the days that follow she is mostly about town, and she is widely welcomed, for she likes to hang around drinking and gabbing, and has many tales to relate of her activities around Dragon Pass.

Many say that she is easier to get along with than Griselda, but I cannot see this, for Red Hot is certainly a doll to give plenty of room to, because she behaves in such a manner that no one can tell what she is going to do next. When she takes offence at remarks, which she can do very easily, she will not reply in kind, like Griselda, or even belt out those who offend her, like Hanufa, but will maybe throw her drink over them, or trip them so they fall, or tread on their toes, or do something else unusual, and she will do likewise if all of a sudden she decides that she does not like someone's face, or the style of their gear, or the topic of their conversation, and in all such matters her standards are very exacting. So overall her behaviour appears quite strange, indeed some are heard to describe it as bizarre, but this does not prevent her from being a favourite with many of the customers in Loud Lilina's and other dives.

Now during this time Griselda is by no means hiding out, but comes and goes quietly, as if nothing unusual happens, and no one dares to suggest otherwise in her presence. For the first time some blowhard adventurer claims that she must lose her nerve where she can hear it, she calls him on it right away, and asks if he wishes to try her out, and the blowhard departs rather hastily. So the matter is not discussed as much as you will expect, and some even get to saying that maybe Griselda has a point, at that, and there is no sense in risking life and limb when she already proves all that she needs to prove. Nobody knows what Red Hot thinks, for she does not say, but I perceive that she does not care to have Griselda around much, and makes like she is ignoring her, whereas Griselda takes some interest in what Red Hot is saying or doing. I know this because Griselda will often sit with me, and she will sometime pass comments to me on Red Hot's behaviour. In fact, we take to discussing Red Hot, for plainly Griselda is finding her as strange as I do, and one morning I find myself describing Red Hot's behaviour when she first arrives in Pavis, which is not a story I tell unless I am sure that it will not get back to Red Hot. But Griselda displays considerable interest, and she presses for details of everything Red Hot says as I am going along, and when I am done she nods her head and says "Ah", in a way that indicates that she sees something which I am not seeing. But she says no more, so finally I ask, "Why do you say 'Ah' like that, Griselda?"

Griselda grins at me. "Well now," she says. "Maybe this is something I ought to keep to myself, for it is nothing but a hunch; but does it never occur to you that Red Hot resembles somebody I have dealings with once?"

Now, I am indeed having a feeling when I first see Red Hot that there is something familiar about her, but for all the thinking I do I cannot place it.

But when Griselda says this, all at once it is like a torch lights in my brain, but just as I am about to speak Griselda reaches over and lays a finger across my lips.

"Let us sit on this one a while," she says. "It may come in handy." Then both of us are distracted, for there is some commotion at the bar, which is where Red Hot likes to be, mostly, and when we turn to look, there she is doing a little dance on and around a guy on the floor, who evidently does something to displease her. It is quite a comical sight, with her red locks of hair wagging, and her thin limbs going this way and that, but of course I know better than to laugh where she will hear me. But Griselda does not seem to care a cuss about this, for she gives a whoop and claps her hands.

"What is this, Red Hot, some kind of war dance you learn in a primitive land?" she cries. "Is there a tune that goes with it?"

At this Red Hot stops what she is doing and turns round slowly to Griselda, and the whole joint goes quiet. If I am on the receiving end of the look she gives Griselda I will be packing my bags, but of course Griselda is not scared of looks; she just leans back on the table and smiles at Red Hot, in a way that I recognise very well.

"See here, Griselda," says Red Hot. "I do not care for that kind of talk. Remember, I make no attempt to push my advantage over you, so be grateful, and do not provoke me."

"Oh, I am grateful, all right," says Griselda. "I have many a good laugh out of you, which I will not get if we force our contest to a conclusion."

Now Red Hot fires right up. "Then maybe we better push it to a conclusion now," she snarls.

"Right," says Griselda lightly. "You want to set a time some way ahead, so the gang can get some bets down?"

Evidently Red Hot is not expecting Griselda to take her up like this, and for a moment she seems startled. But then she snaps "OK, but it is your funeral. This time I will not be holding back anything. Let us make it an hour or so off sundown, at the fighting place outside town."

"You mean you are holding back before?" says Griselda. "Tut, tut. That is not my impression. But, anyhow, I will see you there. Come, Olaf," and she marches out, with me hurrying after her.

We are barely outside when I can see that Griselda is trying hard not

to laugh. "I have her puzzled, for sure," she says, grinning sidelong at me. "She cannot think what I am up to. Now why I call you out is because I want you to lay money on for me, for if I am known to be betting much on myself some people will smell a rat and the odds will shorten."

"You think you can take her?" I ask, feeling doubt in my own mind, because after all I see Red Hot wrong-foot her very slickly.

"I am betting on it," says Griselda. "Here, take this," and she hands over her money pouch.

Well, once the news gets around town the excitement is practically intense, and some citizens start heading out at once, to be sure of a good viewpoint. But I have no wish to be standing around in the sun, though to be sure it is not as hot as it is when Red Hot first comes to town, in fact it cools right down and is even somewhat cloudy. So I wait, and join a bunch of Lilina's clients when they set out. At the gate we meet up with Griselda, who is heading out with Wolfhead and his boys, and they give me a nod and a wink, as if they have confidence in the outcome.

When we get there, the crowd is almost as big as for Griselda's duels with Carver Donan, though there are no Trolls and few high shots from the cults. It is to be a sword duel pure and simple, without magic of any kind, and Griselda is all armoured up, but Red Hot is wearing very little protection, though plainly this is worrying some of her backers. This has some effect on the odds, but I still get eight to five for the dough that Griselda gives me, and after much thought I put some on too, for I think to myself that I see Griselda come through tough opposition before.

Red Hot says she wishes to fight until one goes down, and Griselda says she will accept this, as long as that ends it and there is no hitting at the one on the ground. Red Hot sneers a little, and one of her Storm Bull backers yells it will make no difference, for Red Hot will not need more than one blow, but this does not seem to bother Griselda. When both state they are ready, a Storm Bull gives the word and off they go. It is one of the toughest fights to watch that I ever see, for they circle a lot, and then one or both will move very fast indeed, but they will pull back again, and it is only the sight of blood here and there that shows that any hit lands. It is without doubt a contest of skill and science, as I can tell from the appreciative murmurs and comments by those who look to be connoisseurs of sword-play, but for us ordinary folks it is a mite dull.

Griselda does not try the trick she uses before, obviously, but otherwise she is doing all right, and seems very cool, and those who take bets against her are not looking too happy. But Red Hot seems to be aiming to live up to her name, for her face is getting red, and she is beginning to yell now and then, and even call Griselda names. This does not shake Griselda either, but Red Hot is beginning to push in on her, and Griselda finds it harder to pull away after Red Hot slices her in the left thigh, as she is limping somewhat, and I am commencing to feel that my dough is at risk after all, while Red Hot's supporters are urging her on. But the next time Red Hot comes in, Griselda holds the blow very close to her body, instead of turning it off some way, and while they are this close she says something to Red Hot, which no one can hear because there is too much noise. But whatever it is it seems to stir Red Hot up no little, for she yells something back; then Griselda says something else, which really seems to shake Red Hot, for she almost staggers, and while she is off balance Griselda swings her sword round and cuts her right behind the knee, and down goes Red Hot. Everything is getting quiet while this is going on, as people can see they are speaking and wish to hear, and now the silence is total.

Griselda points her sword at Red Hot as she lies on the ground, and says calmly, "Now you see what a good thing it is that I make that stipulation. The way I see it, we are now even, and I have no interest in making any trouble for you, so long as you make none for me. Do I make myself clear?"

Red Hot chokes out yes, and Griselda nods. "That is showing sense," she says. "You still have it to your credit that you beat me once, and when you get more experience, who knows, maybe you will be better than me. But you still have a bit to learn yet; fighting without armour makes a good show, but when you come down to it, it is dumb. Remember, no one stays red hot for ever."

Then she backs off, and her friends move up to side her, in case any of the Storm Bulls feel like taking this up, but they only wish to see to Red Hot. After the bets get paid off everyone starts moving back to town, and Griselda surely has a bigger following than when she starts out. Wolfhead suggests going to Rowdy Djoh Lo's for a little celebration, and Griselda insists that I come along when I step up to hand over her winnings, and she seems in such a good mood that I think to myself that for once it will be relaxing to be around her in that place, and so I join them. Well, it is a long night, and the following day I have such a noggin on me that I am wishing I beg off, even though it does not cost me anything. But my head is not so thick that I do not remember finally getting around to asking Griselda what it is she says to Red

Hot, while she and I happen to be at a table on our own, as the others are engaged in a very noisy bout of arm-wrestling.

“Oh, that,” she says, grinning. “You remember what we are speaking of when this blows up? Well, I say it may come in handy, and I am right. I can see that if I do not do something she may outlast me by sheer stamina, so I remark on her great resemblance to Ragna the Wrestler. In fact, I ask if they are related, and she denies it strongly, which for me is confirmation. So then I wonder aloud what her Storm Bull friends will think about this resemblance, and that shakes her into letting me get one past her guard.”

“But she cannot be Chaotic herself,” I say, “or some Storm Bull will surely recognise it.”

“Sure,” says Griselda, “but the Storm Bulls may not like the connection anyway. You know, I bet she comes here to show me up just because I am responsible for Ragna’s decease, but of course she cannot say so, for she wishes to be a great Chaos-fighter.”

“Is that not a bit of a dirty trick, then?” I say.

“Look,” says Griselda earnestly, “if I really need to win, I will use any edge I can get. That other time I do not need to win, though she surely does; I recognise it in her, for I see that type a fair bit when I am adventuring around Dragon Pass.”

Now this causes me to think quite hard, and this takes time because the old brain does not seem to be working so fast. Finally I say, “Then do you let her win, that other time?”

Griselda smiles just a little. “You will never know, will you?”



HAPPY ANNIVERSARY



It is known to one and all in this man's town that I am a guy who has no wish for heat at any time, in fact I will even walk a mile to avoid it, so what I am doing entering the Rubble with Griselda and Wolfhead certainly requires some explanation.

It all begins one day when I am trying to explain to Loud Lilina that I cannot buy a drink, because things are very terrible with me at this time, and I scarcely have two clacks to rub against each other, but I am hoping that she will let an old-established customer use her place to do a little quiet thinking about how to raise a stake. Lilina is being most unsympathetic about it, when you consider that there is hardly anyone else in the joint and so she can scarcely complain that I am taking up space that a drinking person can be using; but just when it looks as if she really is about to throw me out, in comes Griselda, and she gives us both a big hello. This is certainly a relief to me, for this is not long after all that business with Swifty, and I am fearing that she may be peeved at me for not recognising him and tipping her off, and moreover Loud Lilina has to leave off bawling me out to draw Griselda her usual.

Griselda asks me what is the trouble, for she will have to be deaf, and blind also, not to notice that Lilina is somewhat peeved. So I explain that I am severely troubled with the shorts as regarding dough, and she looks sympathetic and offers me a drink, which I accept with great pleasure. We go to sit at her usual table, and raise our glasses to each other, and then she

says, "You know, it may be that I can help you out with this situation, if you care to take on a little job, and it will not involve any real work or anything illegal, in fact you may gain credit for it with the Pavis temple, no less."

Naturally, this interests me no little, and I ask what she has in mind.

"Well," she says, "it is not common knowledge, but Wolfhead and I and a few others are doing patrols now and then in the Rubble for the Pavis temple. The idea is, we are to keep an eye out for trouble around the Real City and make it a slightly safer place for folks to live. It is by no means a difficult task, for we already do some cleaning up and word seems to be getting around, and it pays pretty well. Why do you not come along with us? The priests will not object to one more."

Now of all the propositions ever made to me, this must be the daffiest, and I look at her closely to check that she is not funning me, and when I perceive that she seems to be serious I say quite firmly that I have no interest whatever in risking my skin in the Rubble. But she just laughs. "I hear you are in there once," she says, and this is true enough, when I am young and heedless, "and surely you have no fear of coming to harm, with me and Wolfhead and Kroked and Hanufa and some tough Pavis initiates along? Why, it will be just an afternoon stroll, and where can a guy pick up ten Lunars or maybe more for doing practically nothing these days?"

Now when she mentions this sum I become very thoughtful, for such an amount will come in very handy with the old overhead. To encourage me further, she says that I will be provided with gear, and will not be expected to do anything special except bulk out the numbers, and the upshot of it is, I agree. As soon as I do so she gets up to leave and tells me to meet them at the Temple that afternoon, and I spend the rest of that morning thinking what a sap I am, to let myself in for this, but I decide to turn up just the same, which shows you what a very big sap I am, indeed. I am provided with a spear, and shield, and stiff leather armour, which is what I carry in the days of my youth, although it all seems to get much heavier since then, and one and all say that I certainly look the part. But as it turns out, no Pavis initiates can be spared, and Kroked has a hangover and Hanufa is sick, or maybe it is the other way around, so there is only Wolfhead there, besides me and Griselda. Naturally I am very perturbed that our party is so small, and wish to back out, but Griselda offers to get my pay boosted to fifteen Lunars for this one job, and says we will not swing out so far, and she and Wolfhead look ready to deal with anything that comes up, and so I allow myself to be persuaded.

We go through the Temple and head on down towards Manside, and at first I am feeling that this is not so bad, after all, for nothing jumps up and tries to eat us right away and there are other people all around. But when we start to move into the edge of Manside, we enter an area of old empty ruins, and it is all very quiet, but I perceive that the others are looking all about, so I start to do so too, not that I know what to be looking for. Suddenly Wolfhead whistles, and they both turn to look in one direction with missiles at the ready, but after a moment he says, "Just some small animal, I guess," and they move on again. Next Griselda does something similar, but again it is a false alarm, and after this they seem to relax some.

But I do not relax, for I cannot shake off a feeling that we are being watched, and eventually I am sure that I glimpse something peeking out of a window. I try to draw their attention to it, but my first attempt to speak comes out as a croak, and by the time I can explain there is no sign of whatever-it-is, and they say I must be imagining things. Not very long after, I will swear that I hear a low laugh, but they claim to hear nothing, and Wolfhead says, "This is always a quiet stretch."

Well, there are not many occasions when I will wish to be proved wrong about anything, and especially not by Wolfhead, but I certainly am hoping to be when we hear a noise like a howl, from some distance away. Wolfhead and Griselda become very alert, and we get into single file with me between Wolfhead and Griselda, and advance very cautiously. Then there is a growling and scuffling noise from another side, and Wolfhead has us flatten ourselves against a wall, and then dash across a little space to another wall, and so forth, and before each time we strain our eyes and ears for anything. Shortly I am panting so much that I scarcely have breath to pray to Pavis and beg his pardon for failing to attend services and offer him at least half my dough if we get out safe, and I am attending so much to this that I do not realise at first that Wolfhead runs us into a blind alley, just as more noises are heard, which sound nearer.

"This is it," says Wolfhead. "At least we will have a clear view when whatever-it-is comes into the alley. Olaf, you just hold tight and back Griselda."

He has his bow trained, and Griselda is ready to cast some spell, and there am I between them with my spear levelled as best I can, although the point seems to be shaking more than somewhat, and still praying to Pavis for all I am worth. We seem to stand there quite some time, and finally Wolfhead says, "It may be that those noises are nothing to do with us, after

all. Well, someone should get along to the end there and take a look around,” and to my horror I see that his eyes are resting on me. “Olaf,” he says, “I know you do not sign up for this, but in such a situation it makes best sense for you to go up there, with both of us able to cover you, while you cannot help to cover one of us. Just sneak along, as quiet as you can, and flap your ears, and if you stay out in the middle, Griselda or I will have a good chance to nail anything that tries to jump you.”

At this everything that helps with talking seems to fail on me, for I find myself quite unable to utter a word. While I am still trying to clear the jam, Griselda says, “To help out, I can put a spell on you that will make you harder to see to hit, or a Movefast one if you prefer. What is more, for this he gets to claim a bonus, do you not think, Wolfie?”

“You bet,” says Wolfhead, grinning at me quite pleasant, or so it seems. “We will pitch it strong to the priests, that this is beyond the call of duty and you should get double money.”

Well, I keep working away at trying to say something, but all that comes out is a grunt, which they clearly take for agreement, because Griselda whips out some item and prepares to put a spell on me at once, while Wolfhead continues keeping watch to the front. “I think the Movefast may be more useful,” she says. “If anything at all bothers you, you can just hightail it back here, and nothing will be able to catch you, I guarantee.”

After one try at it I finally manage to get out an OK, for by now I realise that there is no way out, and anyway there are no more noises, so maybe Wolfhead. So when Griselda is finished with her spell I set out, moving as quietly as I know how, until I get over halfway along the alley, and it is not until then that I hear anything. But this is from behind me, and it sounds most peculiar, so I sneak a look back, to discover that this noise is Wolfhead and Griselda trying not to laugh. When they see my face they seem to collapse against each other, and Wolfhead lets out a real bellow, while Griselda fairly shrieks, and I perceive that I am suckered. Naturally, I feel extremely peeved at being set up for such mockery, though of course I dast not say so, and I can think of nothing to do, but just stand there. In fact, they seem to get their laugh over quickly, and finally Griselda wipes her eyes and says, “I do not remember when I last laugh so much. In case you are wondering, Olaf, this is to pay you out for letting that Swifty put one over on me.”

“But, Griselda,” I protest, “I do not realise it is Swifty until the last moment.”

She is starting to say something, but then Wolfhead calls out, "Hey, what is keeping you, Kroked? The game is over, do you not hear us laughing?"

Then another voice says, "No, the game is not over yet," and at the end of the alley there step into view four characters, among whom I recognise Kroked, but he has no weapons and looks somewhat mussed up. I do not know who the others are, and evidently neither does Wolfhead, for he growls, "Who are you?" and lines up his bow on one.

"Oh, nobody much," says one man, who is standing mostly behind Kroked. "Just friends of Lucky Eddi, who you may remember meets with misfortune at your hands about a year ago. No tricks now, or your friend gets it first."

"You are sure of that?" says Griselda, who is hefting one of her darts.

"I think they may be," says another voice, and who is this but Red Hot, and she comes into view on the ruins of a collapsed house to one side of the alley, and has her sword up against the neck of Hanufa, whose hands are tied in front of her. "At least, this one will be gone."

Griselda squints up at her. "I never figure you for this kind of play, Red Hot," she says, "or to see you hanging about with low-lives. Even the Storm Bulls are better than this trash."

Red Hot laughs her nasty laugh. "You are trying to get me riled again, but it will not work this time. Well, boys, how are we going to play this?"

Wolfhead does a little laugh himself, which sounds just as nasty. "You figure you have us cold, eh? Well, I suggest that this here is like the old Praxian stand-off: you may get our friends, but we will surely get two of you, with a little help from what we apply to our weapons earlier, and then the odds do not look so good for taking us, do they?"

Now at this the guys holding Kroked seem to become somewhat thoughtful, for they cannot all find cover behind him, and none has much armour. But this is little consolation to me, out there in the middle among them all, and if I am feeling unhappy before, I am now in the depths of misery, for though I know that Wolfhead and Griselda are good with their weapons I have no confidence that they will not hit me by mistake, and the guys with Kroked are looking at me with very hostile expressions, in fact one has a bow lined up on me. But then Red Hot speaks up loudly. "He is bluffing," she cries, "do not be worried. That guy in the middle is Olaf the

story-teller, and will not harm a baby. Do not bother with him, but let him go, and then you will have a clear sight of them. Olaf, you come out now, or Hanufa gets it at once, but stick around, and you will be able to tell the story of how we finally bottle up the redoubtable Wolfhead and Griselda.”

The guys holding Kroked agree to this, and I dast do nothing else but step out, wishing my legs are steadier, and it seems the longest walk of my life to the end of the alley. But I get past them, and walk on a few steps, and then suddenly I let out a howl, and fall over, and drop my spear, and all in all I make quite a lot of noise. Considerable commotion breaks out behind me, and being a cautious person by nature I make for the nearest cover, and Griselda’s spell certainly comes in handy.

Well, by the time I am able to take a look, all I can see is that the guys who are holding Kroked before are heading into the distance, and Kroked and Hanufa are with Wolfhead and Griselda, so I figure it is safe to return. As I approach, Wolfhead positively smiles at me, and Kroked gives me a victory sign. Griselda is busy cutting Hanufa’s bonds, but they look over and grin at me too.

“What happens to Red Hot?” I ask.

Hanufa holds up a fist. “She turns her head to the noise,” she says, “and I give her a good belt with my tied hands, just as Griselda’s dart sticks her in the stomach. She is still out cold; I make sure of that.”

“It is not the best throw I ever make,” says Griselda, “but it is something for her to remember me by, and even though the poison does not kill her it will give her a nasty stomach ache, which will maybe teach her to wear armour where she needs it.”

“You give them quite a surprise,” says Wolfhead, “and Kroked is able to get free, while I wing one, but I guess the poison does not kill him either. Now let us move on; I have no wish to linger here, in case anything is attracted to the noise.”

“Hang on,” says Griselda, and she and Hanufa climb up to where Red Hot is lying, and they return with Hanufa holding Red Hot’s sword and Griselda clipping her dart back to her belt.

“Do you finish her?” says Wolfhead, but Griselda shakes her head. “Never let it be said that we do not give her a chance,” she says. “But she better wake up soon, if she does not wish to make the acquaintance of anything nasty.”

We set out again, and now I am in the middle, protected by the rest, for Kroked is carrying my spear, as his own gear is lost some way back and Wolfhead will by no means go back and look for it. Kroked does not seem put out by this, but grins at me, and says, "That is a dandy distraction you come up with," and the others agree. "Yes," says Wolfhead. "You show great presence of mind and maybe save all our skins, and I will get you a big bonus if I have to hold Fleeter Nemm upside down and shake it out of him. Say, Grizzie," he goes on, "do you mark what that guy says? Unless I miss my guess, this is the very day we settle your account with Lucky Eddi."

Griselda turns up her eyes in thought, and then says, "Why, so it is. Well, happy anniversary, Wolfie, and the drinks are on me."

"Happy anniversary," he replies, and they all laugh, and start chattering away, and none of them think to ask how I think of letting out such a howl. This is just as well, for the truth is that the howl I let out is one of pure despair, for it suddenly pops into my head that the chances are I will be all on my own in one of the most dangerous places in the world, and without any clear idea of where I am in it, and that even if I do make it back to Pavis in one piece no one will ever believe me and I will never get paid. On top of everything that I already go through this is just too much, and I give vent to all the anguish that I am feeling in a cry of grief, which startles me quite as much as anyone else, causing me to trip over my own spear. As I keep thinking about it, I recognise that it will be bad policy to tell the truth, for Wolfhead may reconsider his offer of a bonus, and anyway it will be no bad thing to have such characters as him and Griselda feeling that they are beholden to me, and I may get plenty of respect around Pavis through having them as friends.

So as we draw close to the Temple I am feeling very cheerful, especially at the prospect of being paid, and I join in the conversation readily, when suddenly Hanufa says, "Boy, I am certainly looking forward to a few beers at Lilina's and a chance to tell this exciting tale!" and at this all my good cheer departs with considerable speed. For I perceive that once Hanufa starts yakking the story will be all over Pavis, with plenty of added detail that is by no means true, and I will attract much attention, which is the last thing that I want. In fact, I recognise that this little escapade may have all kinds of undesirable consequences, and as we go through the Temple gates I am wishing very heartily that I do not enter Loud Lilina's at all that day.

Griselda:

A Brief Biography

Griselda was born on Wildday, Movement Week, Sea Season of 1592, in the Sartarite town of Alone. Her family did originally come from Pavis, and she is indeed Wolfhead's long-lost, but very remote cousin. As will be evident from various sources, her family are as near to professional criminals as makes no difference, and her father is a big wheel in what underworld Alone has; the family are Orlanthi, so she is an initiate of Ernalda's cult as well as, secretly, of Lanbril's, and will often attend Orlanthi ceremonies. She has done a five years' apprenticeship in the Thieves Guild (1607-12), and then adventured around Dragon Pass (the action of *A Tasty Morsel* takes place in late 1613). In that time she became a member of Geo's cult and made many connections (through one, she obtained the one-use Invisibility spell used in *Griselda Gets Her Men*).

Hearing of her brother Roderick's death, she came to Pavis in Earth Season 1616. The early stories fall in between that time and Fire Season 1617, when the truth about the Great Chart Caper, which actually took place in Sea Season, came out; all of those involving Hanufa must fall after the Great Chart Caper, but in only some will it be clear that they take place after the gang have redeemed themselves and got back (see *Devil's Play*; *The Hero Bit* falls in Earth season 1617). They are now legitimate, in that they work for the Pavis Cult sometimes (jobs aimed at making the rubble a bit safer for humans, but nothing spectacular).

If Griselda has any ulterior motive for being in Pavis, it has not become clear yet.

Griselda Song 1

(Tune: My Zelda)

CHORUS: Griselda ... Griselda ...
Griselda, if you cross her,
She'll carve your ears off.

Griselda, she isn't very tall,
But she scares them one and all.
Griselda, if you cross her,
She'll carve your ears off.

CHORUS as before.

Griselda, she doesn't pack much punch,
But she had a troll for lunch.
Griselda, etc. as before, then CHORUS as before,
and continue same way.

Griselda and Wolfhead too,
They could even scare a Broo.

She made Carver Donan groan,
When she fought him on her own.

Never make Griselda frown,
Or she's bound to take you down.

Never make Griselda cry,
Or she'll surely make you die.

(Endlessly extendable; make up further verses if you wish)

Griselda Song 2

(Tune: The Linden Tree/The Mayor of Bayswater)

If you go to Pavis,
The best advice I have is,
Steer clear of Griselda
If you value your skin.
She may look a stunner,
But she's fierce as a Rubble Runner,
And she'll have no compunction
About doing you in.

They don't come much smarter,
And she fights like a little tartar,
Steer clear of Griselda
If you value your skin.
She may look a stunner,
But she's fierce as a Rubble Runner,
And she'll have no compunction
About doing you in.

Don't ever try to cheat her
Or see if you can beat her,
(Steer clear, etc. to end of verse)

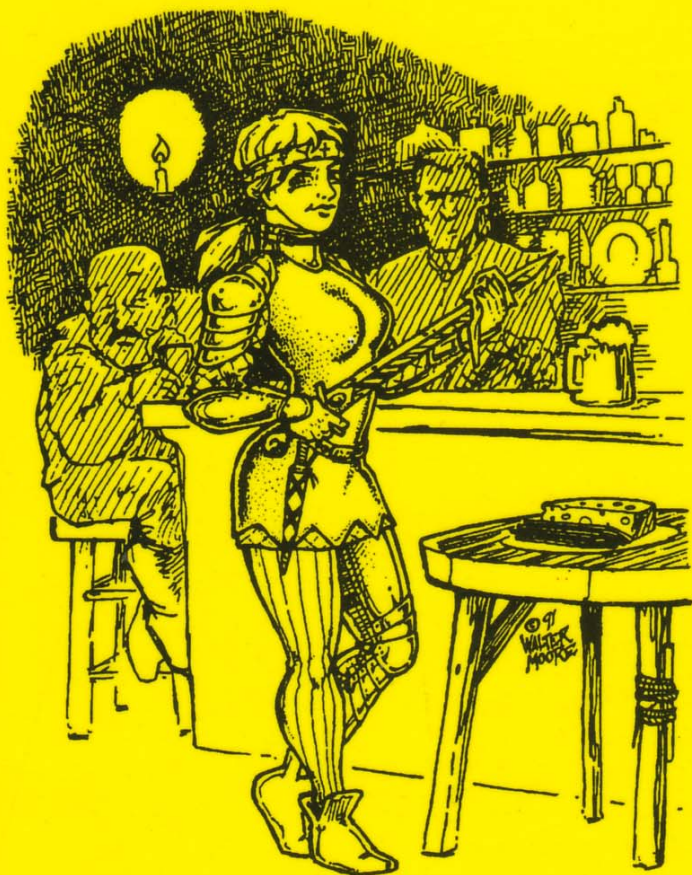
If you don't do as I've telled yer,
And make trouble for Griselda,
Your life will not be worth a
Single solitary pin;
(She may look a stunner, etc. to
end of verse.)

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GRISELDA



It takes skill, courage, and a whole lot of luck to survive in Glorantha, and nowhere more so than in the frontier town of Pavis – unless, of course, you have brains, beauty and a wickedly sharp sword. Unless you're Griselda.

Oliver Dickinson brings Greg Stafford's magical world of Glorantha to life in these 20 stories in the life of Pavis' most notorious adventurer, Troll-friend, duellist, and sweet faced innocent – the collected Griselda!

Well written and entertaining to read. I have enjoyed the Griselda stories. A legitimate view of Glorantha!

Greg Stafford



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