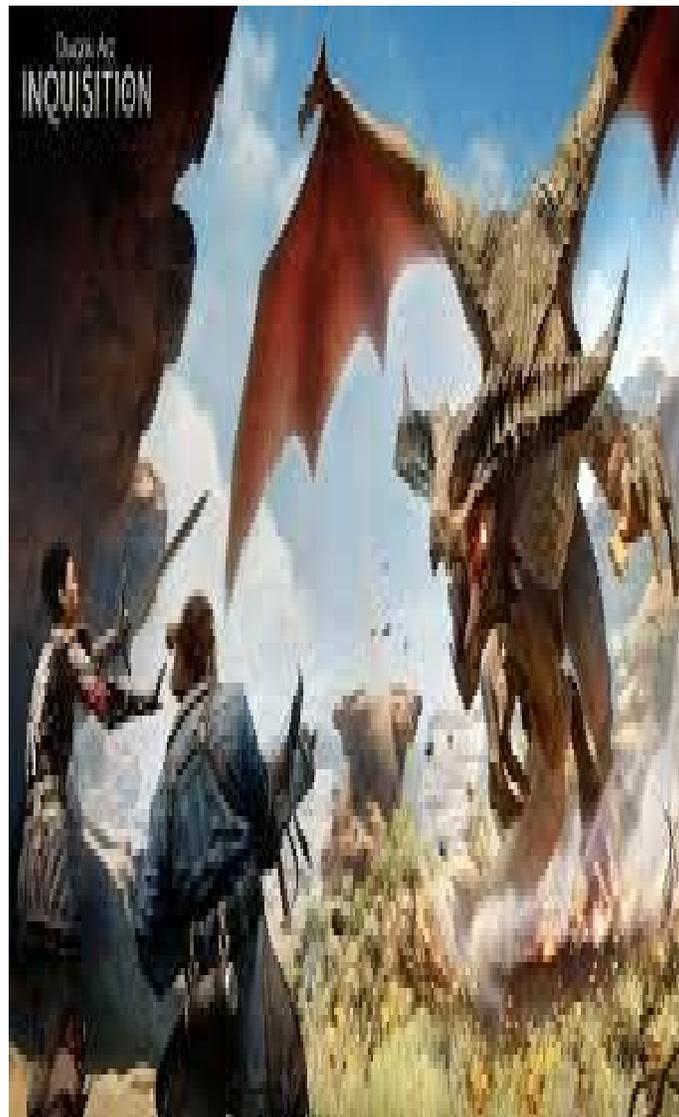


THE PDF DRAGON



#4

Edited by John Thiel. An efanazines exclusive available only here and contactable via kinethiel@comcast.net

Contributers and LocCers welcome. A 9th Fandom Zine. Published every so often.



Buy you a tiger's eye stone and unleash your personal powers.

Here it is April and a very cold day it is this 4th day of it. Friday and Saturday there were tempests with winds going in all different directions and now there's a cold snap that's just like wintry weather though not cold enough to freeze water. My indoor heating system is working like a charm, though my outdoor heating system doesn't seem to work. So it's up to the sun whether it wishes to heat or cool. I'll tell you, either extreme is not good enough to suit the Love Generation,

and most days these days don't strike just the right climate conditions to suit lovers of the great outdoors. Too many skeeters and sitch too. But that's life.

AND NOW THE ZINES

Where I comment on some that other editors have wrought

ASKANCE 36: Awesome cover; I thought it was Tut's Curse as it showed in the listing but not sure who it might be, seeing it enlarged.# The first time I saw the term "D'Oh!", Gordon Van Gelder was saying it in the F&SF Forum (the old Nightshade one).# "How to Dishonor a Guest of Honor" shows much dissatisfaction with the SF convention described, which contributes a lot to the realism of the report; most convention reports I've seen honor the hotel and enjoy the pizza. But Oshiro certainly has a case.# I'd say the rest of the issue speaks for itself, but so did Oshiro's report.

OPUNTIA 337: This shows a lot of changes from the old Opuntia I used to read but maintains a highly consistent and recognizable style and a lot of regularity with its subject matter. I could appreciate the photo of Bucky Beaver.

AURORAN LIGHTS 18: Preserving an SF tradition through awards in a novel approach; hope it's successful.

SCIENCE FICTION/SAN FRANCISCO: I have some relatives living in San Francisco; maybe I'll send them for a visit some day.

COUNTERCLOCK: This has a familiar approach of expertise in going through SF data while being at a remove from its center.

THE DITTO MASTER: This has an unusually fannish spirit.

HOW COMETH THE “WAR FRONT”?

The “Eye of the Tiger” is now looked upon with some suspicion; it may not be the sensible war everyone has visualized, with named and known objectives. Yet it is the fiercest battle ever fought, and draws fighters who wish to know the ultimate and come to terms with finality, following the road of extremes. The know-nothings and the atomic age warriors are the contestants. The battle has become rather humdrum, with everybody in a state of suffering invulnerability. The interventionists have been fully destroyed by the Shiloh element striving to regain their living space, and the modern facilities have been forced to return to their functions. It’s possible to go in there and stand around for awhile, but still not possible to get to the entrance to the area, which is blockaded by most everything. The ultimate aim of what may be considered the well-intentioned contestants is for it to be possible to go to various places which cannot offer a good claim for keeping people out, presenting themselves as they do as regular city territory. The tiger’s eye now turns to space, to the fields of the limitless as has always been the claim of the sky. Can this be the achievement which is being sought, to enter the fields of the unfettered? The know-nothings suspect that this is indeed the objective. It is much like what has generally always been so, yet up to now it has only been a thought. In this matter they are thinking in harmony with the avant-garde, which they have been thinking of as something they may have to do. It seems they have met this movement and it is not likely to go away. Of course it is taken to be the evil in the battle between good and evil. The good is, as ever, less definable. Of course the Shilohans are the potentially unfettered, who have been kept in chains for obvious reasons, but when their own territory is invaded the imprisonment loses its sensibility.

Those wondering if they can join this game may learn that watching it is being in it. Is it “The Battle That Will Never End” or “The War That Will End All Wars”? It seemingly is a little of both, but has the attraction of being the Only Game In Town. What led up to it everybody knows-- it seems the Name of the Game is “Whatever”.

Parable of Temptation



By Taral Wayne

It's a conundrum as old as Mankind. Why are we here? From all evidence, we exist just to work from cradle to grave and then disappear from the World as pointlessly as we arrived. Yet although people have been asking themselves this question since the beginning of Time, it didn't stop one young man named Ephraim from asking it again while he labored over his hoe.

“Father?” he asked, allowing the hoe to rest in the dry earth.

The older man looked up from his own work nearby, his eyebrows forming a quizzical expression. One didn't stop work just to answer foolish questions, not even those posed by an only son, spoiled since Zephorreh's wife died in childbirth. Especially one didn't stop work for a son who conceived altogether *too many* questions in a day that is already too short for the many things that must be

done.

“What is it this time?”

The young man said, “It’s about all this work we do.”

“We’ve been over that before,” said his father. “If we don’t work, we don’t eat. Those weeds won’t remove themselves.” The question answered to the older man’s satisfaction, Zephorreh returned to whetting the blade of a scythe,

“That’s not the question!”

“You have too many questions. What have I told you about asking questions?”

“Well...that I have been told everything I need to know, and not to ask about the things I *don’t* need to know. But this *is* something I need to know!”

“Then I suppose you had better ask, and be done with it,” said the older man, resigned to a son who thought too much.

Ephraim creased his brows in thought for a moment, then began to explain what had been running through his mind.

“We are put here by God, are we not? And he gave us Needs. We need Food, Drink, Shelter, Wives, the Benediction of the Grape and the Bliss of Smoke to take our minds off our worries.”

“That is correct,” said Zephorreh. “I see nothing there to encourage your idle mind to unnecessary speculation.”

“I understand all that. What I do not understand is why God also gives us the Devil, who comes around to tempt us with easy money, tasty food that makes us fat and unhealthy, strong drink that confuses the mind and sensual women with

diseases, and...well...all the things in the World we want most, really, but seemingly can't have if we stay on the straight and narrow. Why do we have Temptation?"

The older man lowered his whetstone. "I think you've lost me. We work for what we must have. We can't have those things unless we work. What we gain through the Devil we don't need and should not want, for they are corrupt. What is your point?"

"The point is," said the son, "that we *do* want wealth, lascivious women, intoxicating drink, and all the rest of it! We cannot help ourselves, and is it not *God* who gave us these appetites?"

Zephorreh was stunned. The words came out of his son's mouth, but what on Earth did they mean—that it is *God* who tempts us, *not* the Devil?

"Go back to work, my son. This thinking will lead to no good." He began to whet his scythe again.

"But you don't *see*, father! God tells us not to want things that He says are not good for us, and He then drives us to want them all the more! Then, when we succumb to the very Temptations *He* put before us, we are punished! How is this right? What can the Devil do that would be worse?"

The dull impact of the scythe falling on the hard-packed earth was the only sound that broke the silence that followed. Then...

"My son...My son..." Zephorreh had no idea what he should say to undo the blasphemies that had fallen from Ephraim's lips. Then, the learning he had from *his* father came to his mind.

“God did not give us Needs simply to trick us into Temptation! It is our own fault that we must live by the sweat of our brows. In the Beginning of the World, Man and Woman had it easy. We plucked fruit from the trees and drank from the springs. The weather was warm all year round, and the forest gave us shelter from the rain. Man and Woman wanted nothing and had all they needed.”

Ephraim frowned at this story. He had heard it before, from his father, from the other elders and from the preachers who came around on mule back now and then, and who expected to be fed and given a good bed, though little enough work *they* did...

“But Father, if this was so, why did God change a perfect state of affairs?”

“That was the Devil’s doing!” Zephorreh snapped. “*He* put the idea in the first Men’s minds to disobey their Lord, and the Lord punished them! That was the first Temptation, and it was not God’s doing!”

To their surprise, a third voice spoke, seemingly from nowhere. “Sorry, elderly sir, but I beg to differ!”

They spun around as one, and saw a man who surely hadn’t been there a moment earlier. He was tall, elegant, wore a neat beard on his pointed chin, looked down a long, aquiline nose with eyes like two black olives, and—yes—displayed the tips of two gilded horns in his black hair, just above elongated ears. He was undeniably ruddy, but handsome nonetheless.

I *am* Satan, yes. I overheard your conversation, *and* the aspersions cast upon my character, and could not resist the urge to explain my side of the story!”

The older man's mouth hung open. His hand mindlessly traced familiar gestures over his heart that were supposed to protect him from Sin. In fact, they were as meaningless as worm tracks in the dust.

"Um...how do you do?" said Ephraim. "It is true that you overheard Father talking about you. He blames *you* for the lot we live."

"False!" hissed Satan. For a brief second his anger showed, then he was cool and debonair again. "Why blame me for what I am, when supposedly God created me for the express purpose of obstructing his plans and subverting Man's affections? I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't! Moreover, I don't do this with malice. It is my belief that Mankind is able to be responsible for himself and make his own decisions, not play the eternal child for an insecure, paternalistic, demanding All-Father.

"Don't listen to him, my son!" shouted the older man.

"That's what He says, isn't it?" Satan replied to Zephorreh's outburst. "Don't question Him, don't think about His laws, and most of all never show the least curiosity about what *I* have to say. Unlike the All-Father, I don't demand that you follow orders. I can't even promise to give infallible advice. But just by *listening to me* you make your first step toward adult independence, and that's precisely what He doesn't want."

The older man was blanched and nervously wringing the haft of his scythe, as though he were throttling it to stop the flow of words.

Satan grew more cheerful as he continued. "So the All-Father threw Mankind out of Paradise, eh? Yes, he did! He gave you Hunger and Thirst and made it so you worked hard all your lives to slake them. And then? If, at the end of your

lives, you are *too* successful at satisfying the Needs *He* created in you, He gives you to *me*, for punishment. How is that for fair?"

"It isn't!" blurted young Ephriam, throwing down his hoe. "If *that* is fair, then nothing is fair!"

"Then you say God isn't fair?" asked the Devil in a quiet voice.

"If God is fair, everything is fair!" responded the young man. "How did it come to be that God made our existence so? Did the first men and women commit some horrible crime that deserved unlimited misery visited on the race of Man until the last generation?"

The Devil smiled; then after a thoughtful pause he said, "Yes, they did. It was the same crime that *I* committed, ages before Mankind was even conceived. The crime I committed was to ask God the question, 'Why?' I wanted to know what He knew and the reasons He did what He did, and for that impertinence he punished me. I was immortal as He, though, and not even He could bind me with Needs. He marked me all the same. Who do you think gave me these?" He nodded his head forward to better show the stubby, gilded horns.

"I was cast from my Place in Heaven, then made to dwell in humbler surroundings—to say the least—and forced to look after God's Dirty Business. It goes without saying that He gives me the difficult souls, those who are brutes and monsters and cannot live with their fellow beings. My job is to point out their shortcomings, you might say...after their own fashion. It does no good, of course, because it is too late for them to apply the lessons I teach them. But that is not *my* fault. I only *serve* in hell. *God* made it.

“And blessed be his name for doing so!” shouted the old man. “For there the wicked and disobedient will burn forever!”

“Oh, really, sir!” said the Devil. “Hell *is* a little more nuanced than *that!* Fire and brimstone are reserved exclusively to those who have earned the privilege of You Know Who’s personal enmity. I’d as soon chuck that type in a hole and be done with them. There are more interesting beings to deal with. Your son there, for instance...” Satan nodded toward Ephraim.

“The All-Father also gives me those who ask too many inconvenient questions, and thereby have no place at His side. That was the crime Mankind committed, too—the hideous, blasphemous, unforgivable affront to His Almightyness that brought the curse of Hard Work on your species for all Eternity. Some benighted soul asked Him ‘Why’ something-or-other. It really didn’t matter *what*. It was the principle of the thing that raised His ire. Your curiosity and your occasional display of spine are intolerable to Him. He hates spine.”

Ephraim saw the interest in the Devil’s eyes and shrank back. He stepped on the blade of the fallen hoe with his heel, and the wooden shaft sprang up smartly to smack the back of his head. A word that his father was not accustomed to hearing spat from his mouth. Then, collecting his wits, Ephraim began to protest. None of what he just heard made sense in light of what he had always been told, and he bloody well wanted to know more.

“That’s the spirit!” said the Devil, laughing. “You have questions forming in your mind. I wish I could answer them now, but I’ve already said as much and more than is allowed. Surely I’ll be seeing you later, though—and not long from

now, if I read the signs correctly. I look forward to satisfying your curiosity.” With that, the Devil bowed and vanished.

The two men—the older and the younger—stared for many minutes at the spot where the Devil had stood, occasionally exchanging glances. Ephraim’s eyes spoke of confusion, betrayal and defiance; Zephorreh’s eyes of certainty, outrage and fear. The older man finally spoke.

“You will not listen to what the Foul One has said. It is all lies.”

“What *part* is a lie?” questioned his son. “Does the Devil make us work for a living? Did he punish Man for being curious? Is it not so that God made Hell? I remember being told the Devil was cast into it. Is God not all-powerful, all-knowing? If so, surely there is nothing the Devil can do without God’s knowledge, or can do against God’s will. There is much more to all this than meets the eye, and I want to know!”

“To want to know is the Greatest Need of all, and the one Need that is not meant to be satisfied, *ever!* It is so said, and will be so done!”

Ephraim snorted in derision. “No, Father. It will not be done. I will satisfy my Need to Know. I’ve had enough of hardscrabble farming and a peasant’s fare. You have brought me up to be a God-fearing man...and look where it has got me. Callouses on my hands and rags on my back, and nothing to look forward to except that it will be so for the rest of my life. I will go to the City, look for a better way to live and learn everything I can about the meaning of things. Why should I not?”

With that, he kicked the hated hoe into a ditch and strode away. His father watched Ephraim dwindle as he returned to the small, dark hut they shared. A

minute later, his son emerged and returned with a sack on a pole over his shoulder.

“Good-bye, Father. There’ll be only one mouth to feed now, so you should manage. I’ll write, if I learn how. But, come to think of it, you never learned to read, did you?”

With that, he turned his back on the older man and began his journey to Knowledge.

An inarticulate sound burst from Zephorreh’s throat. He moved after his son, following him too quietly to be heard. The light of the setting sun on the horizon glittered redly on the blade of his scythe as he raised it over Ephraim’s head—as though the steel were already blooded. “The Lord will Reward me!” he said to himself, over and over. Nor for a moment did he doubt it.



Helping Hand



By Jack Bailey

Ivan plodded steadily along the loosely-worn path towards the next village. He had been on this rut-strewn, meandering trail for most of the morning, and his internal clock was telling him that it was almost time for lunch. He had hoped to reach the village by mid-day and tell the people there a story in return for a meal. The life of a wandering storyteller was often like that, living from meal to meal on the tales of adventure and news of the southern lands that you could manage

to remember from day to day. Ivan had been at this type of life for several years now, and enjoyed meeting the people in the outlying villages and entertaining them with his stories. Occasionally Ivan himself would get involved in an adventure, but he did not encourage the practice. "Knights and servants of the court of the king of men are much better suited to such things," he often told himself.

With no food filling out the folds in his sparse leather bag of possessions, Ivan kept plodding along in the hopes that he would encounter the next village within the hour. He'd been to this particular one many months before, Farmer's End, he thought that it was called. "Nice enough people," he told himself, "although a bit leery of strangers, as most of these border towns near the mountains are. Gave me a good plate of mutton for dinner, though. So they weren't all that bad." He grew hungry remembering the mutton steak just as he crossed a little rise in the road, and saw the outline of the small village off in the distance.

Immediately he knew that something was wrong. Wisps of smoke rose in small lines from several of the homes that made up the village, and

even from his far distance, Ivan could see bodies lying in the street.

“What have the gods brought here?” he said aloud as he quickened his step towards the distant village. As he hurried along the path, all fatigue left his body, and he could hear his heart pumping faster. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears as he reached the houses that rimmed the village.

The first of these houses was burned nearly to the ground, and Ivan could make out only parts of two walls that were left standing. Many of the other houses that he hurried past were in the same condition, and he felt fearful. As he made his way up the narrow lane, he was forced to step over bodies. Ahead of him, in the center square of the village, a group of survivors were gathered in hushed conversation. Ivan could see that they numbered about ten men, each dark from smoke, and some with blood on their clothes. He recalled the square where the men stood. It had been in that very spot a few months before that he had gathered the people of the village to hear some of his stories. Now there were few left to listen.

The small band of men in the square looked suspiciously on Ivan as he approached. Some had

makeshift weapons that they held out to challenge him, but most just watched closely as he walked up to greet them.

“What has happened in this place?” Ivan said as he reached the ragtag band of men. He could tell now, from this closer vantage point, that many of these men were close to death. Several wore makeshift bandages to cover wounds. Only a couple of men in the group appeared to be unharmed.

“Who are you?” said one of these men in a challenging voice. He took a step towards Ivan as he talked, with a battered old sword drawn in front of him. “You aren’t from this village.”

Ivan took a step back, not wanting to provoke any kind of confrontation. “Hold up there, good fellow, I am the storyteller Ivan. I have passed this way before and was returning now hoping to entertain the village with some of my tales of adventure in exchange for some food and hospitality. I mean no offense.”

An older man, who was sitting on the ground, lurched his head up and gave Ivan a close inspection. The man had a gash to his forehead and spoke in a halting voice.

“Why, it is the storyteller Ivan. I remember his face well. He was here during the planting season, and told us stories of King Daniel and his court far south of here. I remember that they brought joy to my old heart. I am sorry that we are in no mood to hear them again.”

Ivan felt some relief at being recognized, but his spirit fell with the man’s words.

“I ask again what has happened here? Were you attacked by a dragon? Elves? Is there anything that I can do?”

The first man dropped his sword to the ground, and then sat down himself. “I am sorry that I greeted you thus, but we do not know who to trust any more. My name is Treyan, a farmer, and now I too remember you, storyteller. I am afraid that the story of what happened here is not a pleasant one. Last night we were attacked by a group of men who rode out of the north. They rode through town at midnight carrying torches and swinging their swords at whoever dared to oppose them. They burned our village, as you can see, and took many of our women and livestock. Those who remain behind were left for dead.”

Ivan’s face fell in shock and disbelief. “What type of man would do this to one of his own kind? I

have heard of parties of elves coming south to raid villages here over the mountains, but this...this is impossible.”

The elder man who had recognized Ivan looked up again. “We have heard rumors for weeks now that a small band of outlaws has been hiding out in the mountains north of here. They usually prey on the traders that travel the mountains between the lands of men and the lands of the elves away to the north. We think it was these men who destroyed our village.”

Ivan sank to the ground and tried to take it all in. He, too, had heard rumors in the south about shipments through the mountains that had been robbed. He had paid them little mind at the time, but now, sitting here in this burned-out village, he was forced to believe that the rumors must be true. “But attacked by a group of men.” He mulled this over in his mind. “Dwarves, dragons, elves, all inhabited parts of the mountains. I just assumed that it must be one of those groups attacking the trade routes.”

The elder man knocked Ivan out of his contemplation.

“We were discussing putting together a rescue party to trail those thieves when you came along.

Even though this is not your fight, you are young and strong and we could use your help. We are small in number and stand little chance against this foe. But we must try to recover our wives and daughters and our livestock. Without them, our village is truly dead.”

The depth of feeling in the man’s voice was obvious, and Ivan felt himself wavering between good sense and heroism. After all, this truly was not his fight. He could still feel the scars from previous adventures, and did not know if he wanted to add to them now.

“On the other hand, this ragtag and battered group of men could use all the help they can find,” he told himself. By way of being noncommittal, he said aloud, “I am without a sword and not very good in a fight.”

The younger man spread his arms and spoke. “Look around you. Do we appear to be warriors? Farmers is what we are, and always have been. But we must get on their trail as soon as we can. We have managed to scrape together some weapons, and would gladly give you a sword if you agree to help in our cause. We have little food, but share it.”

“So be it,” Ivan said with a sigh, hoping he would live to regret this decision.

The elderly man was left behind in the village, as was another too wounded to travel. Ivan and eight other men left on the trail of the thieves after more preparation, and the packing of what rations could be mustered. Since all of the horses that had been owned by the villagers were stolen, the men were forced to go out on foot. Despite that, the trail they were following was well-marked, and the men made good time.

“Since they also took our cows and goats and everything else that they could get their thieving hands on, they are not moving very fast,” Treyan observed after they had been on the trail for an hour. The grass along the path looked freshly trodden. “We should be able to catch up to them in a matter of hours.”

Ivan thought about this, and wondered if these were to be the last hours he was to spend alive. “If they are,” he thought, “I have had a good life, and what better way to end it than trying to do something that is right.”

In addition to the small dagger that Ivan always carried slung on his belt, he had been given a sword by the villagers, as well as a long bow and a quiver of arrows. Each man in the small group was outfitted in a similar fashion, having grabbed what weapons they could as they left the remains of the village. Ivan shuddered at the thought of what he had seen there, burned houses, dead bodies, the few stragglers that had been left behind. Seeing that had been enough to convince him to go along on this crusade. "Such cruelty cannot go unpunished," he thought. "If it does, others will take it up and the world will fall into a dark time indeed."

The crude path that the men followed wound its way steadily north toward the great mountain range that divided the lands of the elves from those of men. Ivan had been in the mountains only a handful of times in his twenty-four years, and could remember little but barren rocks and scattered dwellings that lined up loosely along the rough trade routes that could be found there. He had never encountered trouble there himself, but by all accounts the thieves attacking the trade routes were a recent development. He hoped that, if successful, this rescue mission would help to put an end to the thieves in the mountains forever.

The party that they were looking for numbered about fifteen men, Treyan had told Ivan, and would be escorting an assortment of livestock and about twenty women from the village. "They'll be moving slowly," Treyan said, "because none of the women are on horseback. With any luck we will catch them before they re-enter the mountains."

The sun was well on its way toward evening when Ivan and the band had their first sight of the party they sought. They were still at a great distance, but appeared to be stopped for the night and setting up camp. The thieves were still a fair distance from the base of the mountains, so they would have nowhere to retreat to, Ivan thought. In a sense, they were trapped there on the plain, and vulnerable to attack from all sides.

"They will not be expecting an attack," Ivan said to Treyan, as the group pulled to a stop and gathered around to plot their strategy. "They do not appear to have any guards looking back over their shoulders. If we split up and attack from every side, then we stand a good chance to keep them off balance and defeat them before they even know what hit them."

Despite some muffled grunts, everyone seemed to think Ivan's plan to be a sound one. Quickly it

was agreed who was to go to which side of the camp. Ivan and Treyan agreed to circle around to the far side and attack from there. Once all was settled, the men dispersed to assume their positions. Ivan and Treyan moved to the far side of the camp with relative ease through the dense grasses of the plain. Along the way, Ivan was able to see the layout of the camp that they were about to attack. A makeshift pen held the animals, and the two men were posted around it. The women were huddled together on the side closest to Ivan and Treyan's new position, and four men stood around them. The bulk of them men sat around a large campfire, roasting meat and laughing loudly.

As they sat and took the scene in, Treyan whispered to Ivan, "My wife is down there, as is every animal that we own. If not for that I would not be here. I admire your courage in agreeing to come with us. I do not know if I would have been able to make the same decision if I were you. You must be used to this sort of thing."

Ivan let out a little chuckle in spite of himself. "This? I do not think that anyone gets used to this type of thing. I just saw people in need and I wanted to help. Such brutality as what came to your village cannot go unpunished. I have helped

others, and I hope to be able to go on helping people after this is done.”

Treyan held his sword out in front of him as the pair lay on the ground taking everything in. “Have you ever killed anyone before? I’m not so sure that I will be able. I’ve slaughtered cattle, but never anything like this.”

“I am not proud of many things that have happened in my life, but what’s done is done, and what lies ahead still lies ahead,” Ivan whispered back. “Just remember as we go into this fight that those men are trying to kill you, and if you do not fight then you will never see your wife again. We did not come all this way for you to back down now. Remember what is left of your village, and your people. Do you want other villages to suffer the same fate?” Treyan nodded, and they were silent.

The attack began on the side of the camp near the makeshift livestock pen. As Ivan watched, one of the guards by the pen was struck by an arrow in the back. He fell screaming as his companion was also struck. They were both on the ground as the men gathered around the fire and began to grab their weapons.

“There’s no turning back now,” Ivan said as he pushed himself up off the ground and readied his own bow. The men posted around the gathered women were rushing off to help their fallen companions, as Ivan let fly one of his arrows. It struck the nearest of the men, square in the back, and Ivan saw the man’s hands reaching desperately trying to snatch at it. Ivan let another arrow fly, and the man fell to the ground, writhing in pain, screaming. Now the other three closest to Ivan began to charge their position. He quickly let fly another arrow, and it struck one of the advancing men in the throat. He fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. Before he could let another arrow go, the two thieves were on him.

Ivan tossed the bow quickly to the ground and brought his sword up in a defensive position, just as one of the men reached him. The thief was larger than Ivan and older, and swung his sword wildly, knocking him off balance and back to the ground. Ivan kept his sword held up above him with his right hand, blocking off blows as he reached to his waist with his left hand and pulled out the small dagger. Just as the thief was taking a back swing with his sword, Ivan brought his left hand quickly up and buried the dagger in the man’s gut. The man screamed and fell forward.

Ivan rolled quickly out of the way, and left the man on the ground squirming in death. With sword in hand, Ivan quickly rushed to Treyan's aid. His newfound friend was down in a crouch, sword held up in a feeble attempt to parry off the blows of the larger attacker. The thief brought his sword down quickly, and the clang of steel on steel as Treyan blocked the blows rang in Ivan's ears. As he neared, Ivan drew his own sword back and then swung it forward with all his might into the side of the thief attacking Treyan. The man had not seen Ivan's approach, and the sword buried in until it hit the man's spine, and Ivan pulled it back quickly. The man fell to the ground, screaming loudly for a moment, and then was silent. Ivan reached down his hand for Treyan, who was wide-eyed in shock and terror. Ivan hauled the farmer back to his feet. "Thank you," he whispered as Ivan steadied him. "I thought that I might die."

"The fight isn't over yet," Ivan said, turning back to the camp, where the battle yet raged. "We must help your friends if we are to claim the day."

As they passed the huddling group of women, Ivan saw, out of the corner of his eye, Treyan stop and take one of the ladies in his arms. Ivan smiled in spite of the circumstances, knowing now that

his decision to join the fight had been a just one. Seeing the farmer embrace his wife was almost reward enough for the storyteller, but before he could take much comfort in these thoughts, a sharp movement near the edge of the camp caught his eye and he ran off after it. A short man dressed in flowing brown robes was running into the deep grass away from the fight, which was quickly turning in favor of the villagers. With sword in hand, Ivan urged his legs over the lumpy terrain in pursuit of the man. He had a considerable head start, but in a matter of moments due to the longer strides of the storyteller, the two men were running nearly neck and neck across the field. Not wanting to waste any time, Ivan dived forward with a lunge just as he reached the fleeing man and knocked him to the ground. The pair fell with a loud thud, and the pain of striking the ground momentarily knocked the air out of Ivan. The smaller man tried to climb back to his feet beside him.

“Not so fast,” Ivan said with a gasp, grabbing at the robes. “You can’t leave yet.”

The man turned on him quickly and much to the storyteller’s surprise he found himself to be looking into the eyes of an elf. With the hood of the

robe down around his shoulders, the pointed ears and angular features of the elf were dimly visible in the waning light. The elf snarled at Ivan and drove his fist into the side of the storyteller's face. Ivan's head went back against the ground with a sharp knock, and he could feel a heaviness begin to work through the base of his skull. He feared for a moment that he would pass out, but just as the darkness of unconsciousness was about to claim him, the sudden movement of the elf springing to his feet brought him back to full consciousness. Scrambling quickly to his feet, Ivan picked up the sword and yelled, "Stop, or I will be forced to kill you!"

The elf stopped about ten yards from Ivan and turned back to face him. Despite the intensity of the situation, the elf began to laugh. "You and your kind could not possibly kill me," he said in a calm and confident-sounding voice. "Just look at the way I was able to find some of your kind to help me in ransacking the village. It is so easy to find a man who will sell out his neighbor for a bag of gold. You could not possibly hope ever to kill me with allies such as these. You must always watch your back." And so saying, he brought up his hands in the quick movement of a spell-conjurer. Before Ivan knew what had happened, a ball of

pure blue flame burst from the elf's hand and consumed his sword. The storyteller fell to the ground from the heat generated by the ball of flame. The sword lay beside him glowing a deep red, too hot yet to be touched. Ivan rubbed his hands together to make sure that they were still functional, and found that his fingertips felt like they had been placed into frozen water. They were numb, but otherwise unharmed. Rubbing his hands together to restore the circulation, he saw the elf turn to run into the night. Before he had time to consider his next move, Ivan reached to the dagger he kept on his belt and brought it up in his stinging hand. With a deft motion that was more instinct than planned, he let the dagger fly into the gathering darkness. A sound came like an axe-stroke biting into a tree, and then came a muffled cry. Ivan was on his feet in a matter of seconds, in a dead run after the elf. He found him some fifteen yards from where he had been struck by the blue flame. The elf was face down, the dagger stuck in the middle of his back. Blood poured from the wound and down over the elf into the dust on the ground beside him.

“It is true,” Ivan said to no one in particular as he looked down upon the elf, “that some men will sell out their kind for a purse of gold. But I am not

such a man. Nor are the men from the village that you and your hired mercenaries attacked. We fight for what we believe in, and that is greater than any gold you could offer.” So saying, he turned and headed back towards the battle that still raged in the camp of the thieves. He paused only to pick up his sword before rejoining the fracas, where he found that the rest of the men from the village seemed to be holding their own against the band of thieves. Ivan rushed in with sword drawn and quickly stabbed two of the bandits before any of them realized that another sword had joined the fight. Ivan continued to slash wildly for several minutes at any man that he did not recognize from the village, and in a matter of minutes the battle was won. Ten of the thieves lay dead in the makeshift camp, and four of the villagers were wounded, yet remained on their feet. The few remaining thieves quickly turned and fled towards the mountains, when they saw the way that the tide had turned. When they were all gone, the women of the village were reunited with the men in wild celebration.

Ivan smiled and was happy, even though no woman rushed up to give him a kiss. He looked at the blood on his sword and began to bring his breath back under control. Treyan called after the

thieves had fled, "Ivan, come here, come here." Ivan turned to see the farmer motioning towards him, his arm around a beautiful auburn-haired woman. Treyan was speaking as he gestured. "Ivan, this is my wife Linda. And Linda, this is the storyteller Ivan. Without him I would not be standing here. He saved my life."

She smiled at him. "As you have saved mine. And the rest of the villages'."

For once, Ivan did not know what to say.

The celebration that night in the village was jubilant, yet somewhat subdued at the loss of so many neighbors and friends. Ivan ate well, and drank much and accepted the thanks of all that came to him. He even told a few stories as the party began to wind down in the morning, and people were in the mood to hear about other troubles far away from their own. The next afternoon, after a well-deserved sleep, Ivan decided to pack up and head out again, despite the protests of everyone in the village.

"I must keep to my feet, and always seek out the next village," he explained to Treyan as he packed his few meager things into his leather

pouch. "If I linger too long in one place, then my stories and my news grows old, and a storyteller with no stories to tell goes hungry."

Treyan gave him a quick hug and said, "But I hope you know that you will always have a home and a place by the hearth here. We will gladly open our doors to you and give you whatever food or rest you need."

Ivan nodded and smiled. "I will remember that, and I am sure that I will pass this way again. Once I have more stories to tell of the lands away south. Until then, always remember that you are men of honor. I will see you again, I am certain."

Treyan nodded in understanding. "Until then, we in this village will have our own story to tell about you and your great deeds. Take care, and may you find the tales of adventure that you are looking for."

On his way out of town, Ivan mulled this last thought over.

"So far," he decided, "finding tales of adventure has not been a problem."



And until the next issue comes to mind and makes its appearance, I bid ye's a fond
farewell.

Oort Cloud Productions