

THE MARKET OF MENDESARCH

by Peter Schaap

Sandar the Collector was dead – and that was putting it mildly. His gnawed and bloody bones lay scattered across the meadow, which stuck out of the cave like a broad tongue strewn with flowers. Korrem left his saddle-wolf and wooden cart at the edge of the meadow and searched the cave, inside and out, but the Ring of Sight was nowhere to be found. The gnome was bitterly disappointed. To be sure, he was spared the tiresome and dubious business of bargaining, but it meant that he still had a cartload of saucepans, platters and copper kettles which were of no use to him.

‘By Amrach!’ Korrem growled into his beard, frustrated and shocked. ‘What now?’ But the stalwart Ram God choose the lengthy silence at which he felt himself at ease for as long as the dwarfs could remember. In his search for Branka, his eldest daughter, Korrem was left to his own devices. Shortly before the winter, Branka had set off for the hanging city of Alzahan, but she had never reached her destination.

Nobody knew where she was. Not even the town wizards would, or could, provide any clue as to her whereabouts. The only valuable lead had come from Divaudar, wearer of the magic hand-aspect. But this tip had been both indirect and expensive. The magic copper had cost Korrem every last telling, and now it was nothing more than a burden. It was trade metal, which could not be left behind or given away without bringing its owner bad luck. And Korrem Trotfoot had more than enough of that already. But he was not a gnome who lost faith at the first problem to come along. He had promised his beloved gnome wife, Mondive, that he would not return without their daughter, or at least not without some certainty about her fate. And a Trotfoot kept his word.

He stood at the entrance to the cave, pensively looking out at the meadow. Then he lowered the leather flap and searched, once again, through Sandar’s abode and storehouse. This time, though, he was not interested in the jade ring. What he sought was not quite clear to him. He hoped he would know it when he came across it: some reason for the massacre, some justification for him to continue his quest. Then he found the map, in a chest full of odd knickknacks.

Divaudar had warned him – at no extra charge –

about this wild country of Ilidoeis. The large peninsula was generally avoided, and for good reason. Korrem, however, could not afford to be squeamish. He had his sword, ax, obedient she-wolf and staghorn flute, and he was (he hoped) a sensible enough gnome to survive in this wilderness, but the carnage outside made him less certain of the outcome.

There were many mysterious blank spaces on the map, circled in blue or red. The map was also lacking in detail, but Korrem could still recognize the boundary formed by the Saldan River, the forest he had traversed, and the winding path that had taken him over the mountains and through the wide pass, only a few hours from here: all executed in simple, indifferent penstrokes. Most of the paths on the map seemed to lead to a straight line that ended at a particularly large blank space. Korrem twisted his neck to decipher the letters that had been scribbled, in an almost illegible scrawl, along the blue circle around the space: Mendesarch! He rolled up the map, tucked it under his woollen jacket next to the flute, and walked out into the open air.

Doeia stepped obediently along the straight narrow dike. Korrem sat in the box of the two-wheeled cart. Behind him, his wares clattered in the desolate silence of the landscape that extended, to the left and to the right, as far as the growing mist on the horizon. The sedge, reed, wild cotton and groves of shrubbery were typical of this region near the northern coast of Ilidoeis. Here and there, Korrem saw a birch or a hazel, and the only sign of habitation was an occasional wooden windmill. Sails of stretched, transparent skin moved slowly through the summer air. Far off in the distance were a few specks which refused to come closer, no matter how hard Korrem spurred his wolf.

All at once, the silence marked by the rattling of wheels was broken by a feeble moaning sound, which gradually gained in strength.

‘Whoa!’ cried the gnome when he had arrived at a clump of bushes, and moments later he found himself staring down at a female creature, who eyed him fearfully from among the prickly branches. It was a nymph, a type unknown to him; perhaps a reed elf, or something of the kind. Her long, straw-colored hair

was tangled and caught in the stubborn shrubbery, and she was clearly unable to free herself.

Korrem, who intensely disliked all spirits of nature, decided to continue on his way, but then quickly changed his mind. Perhaps natural spirits were highly influential in this area. He'd better remain on good terms with them. On the other hand, this could be a trap. The gnome pondered the matter carefully, then jumped off the cart and offered his assistance. This proved more difficult than he had expected. Although the nymph's hair was straight, and slippery as soap, it took him at least an hour to disentangle it, strand by strand. The nymph was silent throughout, except for a single cry of pain. Every so often a cart would pass by on its way to Mendesarch, pulled by a donkey or some other two-legged creature. Holding the reins and staring sullenly ahead were local inhabitants, elves, and once even a raw meat-eater. Not one of them offered him help, or even glanced in his direction.

At last the nymph was free. She dropped gratefully to her knees, kissed his muddied feet and cried, 'Thank-you, Sir, oh thank-you for your kindness! I owe you my life. You saved my eternity from the stranglebroom bush.'

'All right, all right,' muttered Korrem, rather embarrassed. He was too much of a loner to be able to appreciate such attention. Yet he had to admit, she was an exquisite creature, and her large violet eyes were enchanting – all the more reason to be on his guard, he decided.

'Take me with you, Sir, I beg you. I am exhausted by my struggle with the stranglebroom. Take me with you to Mendesarch. I must be there before the market opens.'

'I suppose that would be all right,' Korrem answered, sullenly rubbing his round nose and red beard streaked with grey. 'I'm headed in that direction. A market, eh? That might be just the place to sell my wares.'

'Hurry, then!' the nymph urged.

'Why? It's still early in the morning. We've got plenty of time.'

'Not in Mendesarch, Sir,' she replied, springing nimbly onto the cart like a leaf tossed upward by the wind. 'Come, gnome. Hurry!'

Muttering under his breath, Korrem climbed up beside her. He clicked his tongue and Doiea set the cartwheels in motion. The gnome felt ill at ease next to the yellow-haired creature, who belonged to a species that was not generally to be trusted.

'What's your name?' he asked, to break the silence. The nymph, staring fixedly into the distance, answered him with an unpronounceable elfin name. Korrem asked no further questions, and for the rest of the way along the dike they didn't exchange a word. At last, a walled town loomed up out of the mist.

Mendesarch stood on an elevation in the ground which had once been an island, until the lake around it had been reclaimed. The massive walls were equipped with overhanging watchtowers, whose sharp spires were made of heavy iron plates.

No sooner had the cart rattled under the gateway, when the nymph with the unpronounceable name leapt from the box, saying, 'Thank-you, Sir, for the ride.' Then she disappeared down the wide street that led from the dike into the town.

'Hey, wait!' The gnome tried to stop her, but it was too late. 'Humph, I suppose gratitude is too much to ask from one of her kind,' he grumbled and, furious, he steered Doiea past the town guard.

'Get going, gnome. You're holding up traffic,' snarled the gatekeeper, who was dressed in brown and green and sitting at the top of a stone staircase.

Korrem turned around and saw that the man was grossly exaggerating. There was nobody behind him.

'Where can I sell this merchandise?' he asked unconcernedly.

'You have to go to the placement agency first. No trade without a license. The agency is just down the road, on the left-hand side. The blue house. Now would you please move along? I'm very busy.' He then leaned against the railing and began to pick his nose. Korrem tugged at his beard in greeting and continued on down the busy street.

He soon reached the placement agency, a two-story building painted with vertical blue stripes. A long line had formed before a blue plank of wood which served as the front door. Last in line was the unpronounceable nymph. Korrem parked his wolf and cart and went to stand behind her.

'Hello,' he said.

The nymph nodded, but remained silent. One by one, those waiting on line were allowed into the building, and after a while they came out again.

'Next!' A narrow face appeared briefly in the doorway. It was the nymph's turn. She raced inside and the door closed. Moments later, she came out holding a slab of colored slate, and then disappeared without looking back at the gnome. Korrem waited, but this time the door stayed closed longer than it had for those who had gone before him. Filled with impatience, the gnome tapped his booted feet against the ground and plucked at his beard. When he felt that he had waited long enough, he stepped forward and pounded on the wood. After two more attempts to make his presence known, the narrow face finally reappeared in the crack of the barely opened door. It was a man.

'May I help you?' he asked.

'Is this the placement agency for the market?'

'It is indeed,' the man replied, and began to close the door.

'Hey!' Korrem shouted. The door opened again, but only slightly.

'Was there anything else you wanted to know? Quickly please. My wife expects me home for supper.'

'If you don't mind,' snapped the gnome, 'I would like a place at the market so I can get rid of these wares.'

'You're too late, my good gnome. The last place went to the nymph before you.'

'But –'

'I'm terribly sorry. Why don't you come back next year? If you arrive somewhat earlier in the morning, you may have more luck.' The door was slammed in Korrem's face. The gnome stared in astonishment at the blue plank of wood. He wanted to knock again, but decided against it. Standing on tiptoe, he searched the shuffling masses for a glimpse of the unpronounceable nymph, but she seemed to have been swallowed up by the crowd.

'By the crooked horns!' snarled the gnome, and banged his fist against his largest copper pot. 'That's the last time I give a ride to a miserable elf!'

He had no choice but to go to the market without a license. There was always the chance that someone might be willing to give him their license, or that someone might get sick, so that a place would become available. Whatever it took, he had to rid himself of Divaudar's copperwork now – not next year! He could travel better, and faster, if he rode on Doeia's back, the way he usually did. The market was distributed over three squares, in order to accommodate the crowds with the least amount of difficulty. Most of the stalls stood along the oldest house-hills at the northern side, and almost all of them had wooden verandas whose roofs were supported by square columns made of baked clay stone and painted in many hues. The colors of the visibly placed slabs corresponded to those of the slate tickets distributed by the placement agency.

Since he didn't have a license yet, Korrem decided to look around. He left his cart and wolf in a quiet alley. Before long, he was absorbed in the sights of the market, despite the fact that he usually felt uncomfortable in a crowd. After his solitariness, his strongest characteristic was his insatiable curiosity. One of the stalls was manned by wild mountain-dwellers – probably raw meat-eaters – who were trying to sell flint tools: axes, scrapers, knives, combs, and spades. No one seemed very interested in their wares. On the contrary. The wildmen, clothed in human scalps and skins, were avoided, with the exception of a few elves who were extremely interested in tools of all sorts, especially in the oldest ones.

Several verandas further was a stall selling cube-shaped nuts from Danylion, a town which boasted an oasis edged with obelisk palm-trees. Farther down, fen-elves were selling wreathes of spun sundew-sugar

and candied whirligig beetles. Next to them was a stall displaying fossilized toehorns and mouthprints from the Bahoo's, an extinct, armless race of people that was thought to have lived way down south. A small crowd had gathered, obstructing Korrem's view of a slight, yellowish woman being practically crushed by a drunken mountain-dweller. She had apparently sold him the use of her frail body. The crowd cheered them on. This spectacle roused the gnome's curiosity, but his small stature was a disadvantage. He was about to continue his stroll along the cobblestones, when suddenly, his eye fell on five jade rings, laid out on a velvet cloth amidst exotic jewelry and assorted oddities of eastern origin.

The rings were all priced with small slabs of slate, and even though there was no noticeable difference in quality, the cost of the rings ranged from twenty copper tellings to eight gold ones. Could any one of these rings be the Ring of Sight, stolen from the corpse of Sandar the Magician? Korrem peered out from under his cap at the merchant, an unsavory character with oily blond hair, pale yellow eyes, and a beard full of lice. There was a rusty meat-cleaver thrust in his belt, and he had scars on both cheeks, arms, and the back of his right hand. On a chain at his side lay a monstrous, muzzled glutton. When the man looked at Korrem, the gnome quickly shifted his attention to the rings. He felt the merchant's eyes on the crown of his head as he bent forward. Suddenly he noticed, on one of the rings, a small red stain near the silver... in which the precious stone was mounted. He looked again, and saw that somebody had tried to scour off the bloodstain – with only partial success. Surely this was proof. The ring, with the exception of one other, was the most expensive one there, and cost no less than seven gold and fifty silver tellings. With no chance of selling his wares, Korrem was as poor as a sewer rat. But perhaps the merchant would be willing to make an exchange? His suggestion was met with a roar of laughter.

'What would I want with kettles and platters? Magic, you say? Ha! You must think I'm pretty stupid, gnome. Everybody knows that Mendesarch is a sanctuary; magic doesn't work here.'

So much for that possibility, thought Korrem. But all of a sudden, he had an idea.

The sun was already quite low above the houses along the western edge of the largest square, and the market would soon be closing. Korrem began to worry. He took out his flute and played all the tunes he could think of from 'the World', the name given to his birthplace by gnomes living in the north of that region. Many of the tunes, such as 'Let Them Go and Burn the Bubbles' and 'Swine in the Box Bed' were long-standing hits, but the people around here weren't

too generous. Even so, his music had earned him six and a half gold tellings which, under the circumstances, was a miracle. He scurried hopefully back to the stall with his earnings, but the merchant indignantly refused his offer, 'Seven and a half gold tellings, gnome, and not a copper klinge less.'

Korrem played until his lips were raw. The sun sank lower and lower. Telling by telling, his earnings grew, but not quickly enough. When he returned for the second time, he had seven gold tellings and two silver ones. The merchant was unyielding. Once again, Korrem sped back to his street corner, and played 'Barefoot in the Blueberries' and 'Puffing on the Peat Pipe'.

The first merchants were already leaving. To his surprise, his earnings began to grow at a furious rate. At one point, he stopped playing halfway through a polka, snatched up his money and rushed to the stall where the jade rings were being sold. The sun touched the rooftops; only a few minutes to go! Panting, the gnome leaned over the velvet cloth.

There were four rings left.

'By the whorl of the horns!' shouted Korrem, 'What happened to the second most expensive ring?'

'I sold it, of course,' mumbled the merchant, feeding his glutton a live rat.

'You sold it? To whom?'

'To her, less than a minute ago.' He pointed casually to a female figure, just disappearing from view. It was the nymph. Korrem pushed frantically through the crowd until he had caught up with her. With a wrench of her thin arm, he stopped her from running any further. A green ring dangled from her pointed left ear.

'You bought the ring,' he said, breathing heavily.

'So what?' she replied, turning away from him. 'I paid for it.'

'So what?! I had my heart set on buying that ring! It's of the greatest importance to me. I've been working for it all day long!'

'What do you think I've been doing?' she asked mockingly. 'But it was worth it. I've got what I was after – the Ring of Sight.'

Korrem was shocked at her words. 'You *knew* about the ring?'

'Of course. And I knew you were coming. I had to outwit you; you were my only rival. At first I couldn't tell which of the five rings it was, since magic doesn't work here – this is a sanctuary – but you solved that problem for me, too.'

Korrem was dumfounded. It really had been a trap, back there in the stranglebroom bush. A trap to sidetrack him.

'Don't take it so hard, dwarf,' laughed the nymph. 'Perhaps this is your lucky day after all. Didn't you say you had copper kettles to sell?'

Korrem growled an unintelligible reply.

The nymph took this as a confirmation, and continued, 'I'll buy it all for... say... thirteen copper tellings. I've had a *great* day.'

'Thirteen tellings? But this copper is magic!'

'I'm no fool, gnome. This is a sanctuary, and...'

'I know, I know,' he interrupted, 'Magic doesn't work here.' But he preferred to be on the safe side. 'All right. I'm no real merchant, and this stuff is more trouble to me than it's worth. One silver telling for the whole load – the wagon's free.'

Peevish as an old bear, he unhitched Doeia. The nymph dropped the coin into his hand and went to stand in front of the wagon. She tossed back her head and shook with laughter. Korrem sat down dejectedly on the wooden footpath, next to a wine-colored pillar, and rested his chin on his fists. Suddenly he leapt to his feet. All was not yet lost; perhaps everything had gone exactly the way it was supposed to have gone. Yes... the more he thought about it, the more confident he felt that this was the case.

Somewhat relieved, he climbed onto Doeia's back and led the animal towards the city gates. By now, the streets of Mendesarch were practically emptied of visitors. One or two still lingered outside the overcrowded taverns, where the day's gain would be converted into the night's loss. Without a moment's hesitation, Korrem rode under the gateway and was soon back on the dike path, which was now enveloped in mist. Ghostly arms flailed about in the haze. Plodding along ahead of him was the unpronounceable nymph. As he passed her, she implored him, 'Help me, Sir! This burden is too heavy for a fragile creature like myself!'

Korrem turned around and shouted, 'Stop whining! I've already helped you once, you treacherous bog-sprite!'

There was a furious screech, and a copper kettle sailed past Korrem's cap. The gnome smiled. He was still smiling, when he heard a cry of dismay coming from behind him. Slowly, he turned around.

The nymph with the unpronounceable name had stumbled over a saucepan that had fallen off the pile. She had landed in a stranglebroom bush, and her long straw-colored hair was now hopelessly tangled in the branches.

Korrem brought Doeia to a halt and jumped onto the dike. Then he walked back to the nymph and wrenched the jade ring from her ear. Ignoring her cries of pain he stuck the ring, in one fierce, ruthless motion, through his own ear. The pain was intense, but brief. Concentrating on his ear, he suddenly saw the place where his daughter could be found.

Here magic *did* work.

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