

Counsel of the Beast

Tarok tensed as he approached the smoldering marks at the mouth of the valley. The broad trail still smoked with the beast's acrid emissions. The beast had come this way, without doubt, carrying the village girl in its slimy claws. The heat from the tracks indicated it had been but moments before, and there was no other way out from the valley. Tarok's well-muscled arm clenched his sword, hot to the touch in the afternoon sun. The ending would be here, whatever the gods chose.

"Mr. Tarok." A short, balding man climbed out of the valley, dressed in the neat tunic and brown breeches of a city merchant. With both hands, he held a flat leather bag in front of him by the handle. "I'd like to speak with you. I'm Zllisdatrak's attorney."

Tarok hefted the blade threateningly, not knowing what magick tricks this beast might have sent forth. "You're who's what?"

"Zllisdatrak. The non-human being you are pursuing so recklessly. I am his attorney."

"You serve the beast?" Tarok drew back his hand for a killing stroke.

"No need for that, no need at all. I will not harm you, I am only here to protect my client's rights."

The man seemed so innocuous Tarok couldn't bring himself to slay him. Yet he was wary of bewitchment, even as he felt compelled to listen. He had heard rumors throughout his travels lately of these "attorneys." And those rumors hinted that the sorcerers from Kelliche, whose powerful spells challenged the very fabric of time, had something to do with their inception.

"Your client?" he demanded.

"That's right, I have offered my services to Zllisdatrak, and he has accepted. I must ask why you are pursuing him."

"He has captured a young maiden from the village of Ardukkán! I have followed him for days to rescue

her." Tarok let his sword rest on the dusty, barren ground. "Now let me pass."

"First off, Mr. Tarok, I think you're being presumptuous about this alleged maiden. I don't believe there is any proof of her chastity. For all we know she could be stepping behind the farrier's shop with half the yeoman from the village, couldn't she?"

"I ... I don't know," said Tarok. He really didn't have any guarantees about this, did he? Here he was, expecting a kiss, and perhaps more from the dashing young woman of 20 summers. But how did he know she wasn't the village trollop? He felt momentary resentment at her before he remembered his task.

"That does not matter! The beast has captured her, dragged her off from the village, screaming. She was clutched in its claws as it slid away on its long, acrid trunk! I am here to save her, upon order of the village council, and for my own honor."

"Tch, tch, tch," Zllisdatrak's attorney shook his head. "Mr. Tarok, this is pure conjecture, spun from whole cloth. How do you know she did not consent to being dragged off, and that her screams were not of excitement and glee? How do you know they were not practicing for some local theater group? Your claims are quite incredible."

"Enough!" said Tarok, still confused, but tired of this mind-bending witchery. He pushed the man out of his way with his free hand and moved into the valley.

"AHHHHHH!" screamed the man behind him. Tarok wheeled to see him clutching his neck. "You barbarian oaf! You injured me! The pain is such ... I may never recover from this. Trying to ease this pain will require trips to clerics, sages, apothecaries. You will pay for this!"

Tarok held his sword ready at the threat. The man shook his head, "Not like that; I will sue you."

"You will do no such thing!" Tarok lowered his sword defensively. "I seek only the pleasure of maidens!"

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The man shook his head and looked to the sky. "It is like dealing with an animal." He returned his glare to Tarok. "Sue! I will call you before a court, and make you account for what you have done."

"I have done nothing wrong! No village council or city wise-one would pass judgment against me! You are siding with the beast!"

"Non-human being, please. Now, your tone sounds a bit defensive to me—"

Tarok was not listening but striding down into the valley. He had no more time for this foolishness, as the maiden, or whatever she was, was subject to the whims of the beast, or whatever it was. Tarok growled, all the man's ramblings twisting his mind.

As he reached the floor of the valley he could see the creature. Its purple, segmented bulk roiled in the afternoon sun, shining greasily. Two spindly arms protruded straight up from the bulk, ending in razor-sharp claws. At one end of the creature's body, four black beady eyes and a round, teeth-lined maw turned toward his pursuer. Tarok offered a screaming battle cry and charged toward the creature.

Ever percipient, Tarok tried to catch sight of the woman, and he saw she was no longer held in the beast's claws. In fact, she was standing to the side of the valley. Tarok drew up short, as he saw that rather than screaming in abject terror, she was talking with another man, who was holding a small bag similar to the attorney. She shifted her torn white shift to calmly point out bruises, scrapes and cuts to the man next to her, who nodded eagerly as he probed at them. Given her gorgeous face, her stunning figure and the glimmer in her brown eyes, he would have assumed she was a maiden, at least from experience.

"Mr. Tarok," called Zllisdatrak's attorney, out of breath as he caught up with Tarok. "Now, as I was saying, your tone sounded a bit defensive. I think we know that even if my client is completely in the right here,

this could all be worked out best with a global settlement."

"Run!" shouted Tarok, gazing over at the woman and trying to ignore the attorney. She did not follow his direction, but rather walked over to him, the second man behind her.

"I'm Vaslak," said this man, offering a hand. "I'm Miss Travina's attorney."

"Again?" bellowed Tarok, looking from Travina, to Vaslak, and back at the glimmering hulk of Zllisdatrak. He had fought overwhelming odds before, but never quite like this.

Confused, he turned to face the monstrous beast. "Surrender, you demon beast! I will not hesitate to cut your throat to rescue this fair ... er ... maiden!"

"Now, now." Zllisdatrak's attorney tapped him on the shoulder. "You cannot threaten him like that. It is completely in abeyance of his rights, which, by the way, you have not yet read to him."

"Rights?" Tarok spun to face the small man.

Zllisdatrak shrugged. "I'm simply enforcing his rights. Now, I know what you're going to say, that you're a private citizen, and that you don't need to read him any rights. But I understand you are working under orders from the village council, with the police power of a quasi-governmental officer. Given the link between



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that authority and the custody under which you are attempting to place my client, you are subject to the rules that include reading my client his rights.”

Tarok slid the sword back into the sheath so he could scratch the roots of his long blond hair with both hands. He picked off a flea crawling on his scalp and tossed it to the ground. “Will the dragon let her go?” asked Tarok.

“We may be amenable to such a solution, if you would agree to settle your claims.”

Tarok again made a defensive gesture to his loin-cloth. “No, no,” said Zllisdatrak’s attorney. “You have to agree not to pursue my client further. You have to agree to hold him harmless from all claims, known and unknown, in your individual capacity, and both civilly and criminally as an agent of the village council, and the greater kingdom of Phloredd, and to hold your heirs, assigns and successors in interest to the same pact.”

Tarok winced and pulled another flea from his hair.

“I have to let the beast go?” The attorney nodded. “Why?”

“Well, of course, this will be a simultaneous global settlement,” smiled Zllisdatrak’s attorney. “My client will release you and the village from all his colorable claims, which include your police brutality, and violation of his civil rights, and discrimination against him due to his non-human being status. And believe me, we have a clear case of intentional discrimination with the number of special epithet’s you’ve hurled, ‘beast’ being the primary offender. Other claims we will release will include your trespass and conversion of the jagged

claw you’re holding in your pouch, not to mention the intentional infliction of emotional distress.” He consulted a parchment he’d pulled from his bag, and perused it for a moment. “Oh, yes. My client will also agree not to devour the lady Travina and you.”

“Let’s wait a moment here,” said Vaslak, stepping forward. “The lady Travina wants to be party to any settlement negotiations; after all, she has claims against Mr. Zllisdatrak and Mr. Tarok. She has serious injuries and will not give up rights to recover for those injuries. If there’s any release of liability to be done, we want in on it.”

“Claims against me?” Tarok was getting an uneasy understanding of the strange words they bantered back and forth.

“Of course,” Vaslak produced his own piece of parchment from his own bag. “You obviously had a duty vested in you to rescue Ms. Travina, by virtue of your contract with the village council. We feel you were negligent in the execution of that duty, which allowed her to be battered and assaulted by Mr. Zllisdatrak. Given that such harm was quite foreseeable, you are clearly liable.”

“There has been no finding that my client battered or assaulted anyone, so I wish you would not assume facts that have not been proven.” Zllisdatrak’s attorney looked through his own bag.

“Quite right, I apologize, but there is at least a colorable claim against your client, you must concede.”

“Perhaps,” Zllisdatrak’s attorney gave up his search through the bag. “But I do apologize for being hasty. You would, of course, be granted notice of our impending settlement, and offered the right to participate.”

Tarok stared into the eyes of the beast. Zllisdatrak looked back at him and shrugged sinuously with empathy.

“Mr. Tarok,” said Zllisdatrak’s attorney. “I want to confirm that you are unrepresented by counsel, and that you are willing to waive your right to counsel to independently draft this agreement.” Tarok growled noncommittally, and walked to the shade of the canyon and sat down, jabbing his

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sword into the arid earth angrily. The sharp rocks and dry sand only irritated his mood.

“Is that a yes?” asked Zllisdatrak’s attorney.

“I certainly think that implies acquiescence, and stops him from challenging this agreement in any way.”

“I agree; now, about this release of liability, I think that a mutual release should be significant consideration ...”

Tarok remembered when he had sought the treasure on the island of Barylasha, which was guarded by the Sea Callers, hideous women on the beach who repelled travelers when they came anywhere near. Those voices had combined the scrape of steel on slate with the guttural death cry of a Verdunian mammoth. Tarok had reached the island by covering his ears with thick cloth and ignoring the cacophony.

Tarok reached up and pressed his hands against his ears harder than he ever had on Barylasha. Travina smiled at him, shaking her head and stirring the luxuriant crown of brown hair that danced above her torn dress. Ignoring the discussions of the two attorneys, she walked to where he was sitting and sat down next to him.

“Hello,” she smiled, her breath swelling her bosom nicely. “I can’t thank you enough for rescuing me,” she gently lay her smooth hand against the sun-hardened skin of Tarok, his muscles like corded steel beneath her touch. His cold blue eyes contrasted with the shimmering heat of his tan face, as he smiled back at her, taking her breath away. She absently brushed her dirty fingertips across her soft lips, drawing a deep breath.

“And in the event that this incident is ever turned into a play, or a song by a minstrel or bard, you agree we shall divide the royalties three ways?” asked Zllisdatrak’s attorney, still engaged with Vaslak in their discussion over the settlement agreement.

“Quite right, but should any treasure of any sort, not belonging to any of the parties hereto, be discovered in the resulting exodus from this valley, that shall be kept only by the party who finds it.”

“That should be acceptable. And each party to pay their own attorney’s fees and costs in this matter.”

“Agreed. I think this will work out quite nicely.

Let’s go tell our clients,” said Vaslak, reaching out to shake the other attorney’s hand. “Mr. Tarok, Mr. Zllisdatrak, Ms. Travina, would you all please gather round.”

With a weary groan Tarok took his eyes away from the shapely maiden blushing before him and stood up. He and Travina walked to the two attorneys, while Zllisdatrak slithered toward them, his track smoking with heat in his wake.

“Now,” said Vaslak, “we won’t bore you with the legal technicalities, but let us say there has been a complete, global and unequivocal release between the parties.”

“We are done?” asked Tarok.

“Well, not quite,” said the beast’s attorney. “There is the matter of our attorneys’ fees. Mr. Zllisdatrak, you owe me 25 gold pieces.”

The beast cried, a strange combination of cavernous roar and high-pitched screech, and his spindly limbs twitched wildly, flashing in the sunlight. “Yes, 25 gold pieces,” said his attorney resolutely. “You agreed you wanted me to act as counsel, and I charge 20 gold pieces an hour. I had to prepare this settlement agreement, sign it on your behalf, wait for Mr. Tarok to arrive, discuss your case with him, hold a conference with Mr. Vaslak. I can itemize the bill for you if you desire, but you still owe me 25 gold pieces.”

The beast roared again, but this time with a sense of resignation.

“And, I might add,” said Vaslak, “Ms. Travina, your bill is 20 gold pieces.”

“What?” she said. “You approached me. You came screaming after us as the beast passed by your village, tossing me the rock with this piece of parchment tied to it.” She withdrew the small rectangle from her dress, which was lightly inked with Mr. Vaslak’s name.

“Ah, that reminds me,” said Vaslak, withdrawing a similar piece of parchment and handing it to Tarok, who looked at it in confusion. “If you ever need my services, Mr. Tarok. Now, Ms. Travina, 20 gold pieces.”

“But you’ve done nothing,” she said. “Tarok rescued me!”

“But we have done all the legal work.”

“What work?” asked Travina. “Nothing is different since I met you, except I am free by Tarok’s bravery.”

“Ah, but you are released from all liability. All the joint liability that has been accrued in this incident is settled, released and eliminated. You may now live your life free from the fear of litigation ... from this experience. I will tell you what, though: Make it 18 pieces.”

Zllisdatrak roared its strange cry again. “I cannot control his rates,” responded the beast’s attorney with a sniff. “If he chooses to cut his fees, that does not require me to do likewise.” The towering beast roared even louder, a sharper keen to his wail, and moved his salivating mouth a few feet away from his attorney. The attorney winced at the powerful fragrance of earth, goat

and tree wafting from his mouth. “Well, I see your point. And to be honest, I’m not sure about the enforceability of our agreement if you proceed to devour Ms. Travina or her attorney. For the sake of good client relations, I will cut my rate to 18 gold pieces, as well.”

Zllisdatrak reared higher, but his roar was quieter, as his claws dug into his own body, and from some gelatinous interior storage compartment, he withdrew a handful of shimmering gold coins. It threw them at its attorney’s feet, who eagerly scooped them up.

“Now,” said Vaslak, turning towards Travina, who was looking up at the beast with horror. “That rate doesn’t include any future services, such as the representation with Mr. Tarok.”

“What?” said Tarok. “I thought things were ... settled.” The language tasted alien in his mouth.

“Oh, they are for this incident,” said Mr. Vaslak. “But it looked like Ms. Travina was expressing interest in your conjugal possibilities.” Tarok grinned broadly, placing his hands on his hips and thrusting his pelvis forward.

“Yes, well something to that effect. And given that kind of interest, I would recommend to my client that she have a prenuptial contract—or a cohabitation contract, depending on the social mores of your particular village.”

“You can’t be too careful, I know it’s all honey and roses now, but two summers from now you don’t want to be arguing over who gets the sword and who gets the scabbard now, do you? And my client would be entitled to a community property interest in all the treasure you capture, all of the dragon and beast hides you procure ... no offense, Mr. Zllisdatrak.” The beast above growled softly and made a dismissive gesture. “As well as anything else earned during the marriage. And I would emphasize that Phloredd does recognize common-law marriages for maidens and warriors who are holding themselves out as husband and wife.”

Tarok and Travina looked at each other warily. The smoldering heat that had risen from their mutual stare dissipated, as they took a step back from each other. ▀

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