

## TO THE BEAST

By: C.J. Henderson

Andra moved forward cautiously through the trees. Covered head to toe by her cloak she continued on, shielding her pale, northland skin from the sun. The cloak's hood hid her thick blonde hair, as well as shading her thinly angular face and crystal blue eyes, two other features which marked her as a Lomonian.

As a witch.

Skirting through the endless brush, she watched and listened for any sign of the gargor. Their duel was well into its second day, but she had yet to find a trace of him. Nearing a gradual incline of moss-greened stone, she stopped to examine the ground. What could possibly have been the remains of a footprint stared up at her from the edge of the gradually sloping shale.

Kneeling next to the rocks Andra placed her hand on the track, closing her eyes--concentrating--asking when the print had been made. In her mind's eye she saw the sun cross the sky backwards over and over.

Old, she thought. Too old to be of any help to me even if that thing did leave it.

Perhaps the gargor had come to the valley early to scout for ambush sites, hiding places, whathaveyou. It was possible, she knew. But, whatever the case, the print was old and useless to her now. Frustrated, the young witch broke off her concentration.

She lay back wearily against the rocks, giving up her search temporarily for the first time since their duel had begun. Quite simply, she needed rest. At midnight the day preceding she had entered the Northern end of the valley; the gargor had entered from the south. They now had to remain until one of them surrendered or was slain by the other.

Andra closed her eyes, aching to both rest and think. She had gambled that the gargor would march straight into the interior, wanting to begin fighting immediately. She had gone straight to meet him. She had lost.

"Filthy rotten lizard," she grumbled. "Most likely still asleep, curled up in a tree somewhere a dozen miles from here. Now he's fresh and rested and ready for battle, and I'm exhausted. Out there laughing at me, aren't you? Miserable gargor."

Andra, She Who Would Be, Daughter to the Mother to All, held back a snuffle. Admitting she had made a mistake, she decided to correct it before anymore time was lost. Stretching out in the nearby brush she curled into a comfortable position, whispering to the ground as she did so. At her command, vines untangled, grass grew quickly, and the sweeping plants above her lowered their leaves, all helping to hide her small form as she slept. She fell asleep without fear, knowing the plants would awaken her if the gargor came near.

Round one had gone to the beast.

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The afternoon sun warmed Grakar's scales. He had been awake for several hours. Patiently he sat cross-legged, watching for movement. The witch, he knew, would be expecting Grakar to hunt her.

To the Shade with her, he thought. Damn Lomonians think they know us; think to stop us--hold us back as they would the humans. Well, gargors are not so easily outguessed, little princess. Nor are we easily killed.

The powerful reptilian flexed his shoulder muscles slightly, stretching their skin tight across his back. Again his mind reviewed his plan. He would let the witch come to him. He would not leave his ledge until he spotted her. He would do no hunting, build no fire, make no sounds--these were things that would help the Lomonian.

He would not do them.

For over four hundred years each successive Gargor clan had hoped to recover Hotor's talisman. As a bauble it was worthless, nothing but blue quartz and badly worked lead. As a political totem, however, it held great power. The gargor nation had been splintered thousands of years in the past by the Lomonians. One of the concessions given to the witches by Hotor, the gargor king, was his medallion of state. Over the centuries many clans had tried to regain the talisman. Thieves had been sent to Lomonian. Renegade witches had been bribed; clans had gathered together into armies. None had ever returned from the north.

But Grakar would not fail. Heskar, his father, had planned too well. As the gargor thought on his father's manipulations, a

fat dragonfly flitted past his eyes. Although his mouth moistened instantly, eager to betray his hunger, he held back his tongue. Instead the massive lizard reached for the sack next to him from which he pulled forth a strip of dried beef.

"Chew it," he ordered himself. "Chew it slow; wet it with your own juices. Save your water; conserve. Conserve rations; conserve strength, conserve nerves. You've set your traps. You will lure the witch. She will come to you eventually, and then she will die. Hotor's Talisman shall come to the Kar clan."

The dragonfly landed on the gargar's snout. Yellow eyes stared at the insect until it satisfied itself that there was nothing for it there. As it flew away, Grakar smiled.

"You will be proud of me, father."

Round two had gone to the beast.

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Sleeping beneath the protection of her plants, Andra dreamed of the last meeting between her mother and the head of the Kar clan. She found herself back again in the massive meeting chamber of the Lomonians. High in the frozen northlands, still mostly unexplored by gargar or human, her race dwelled quietly, ignoring the gelid cold and the winds which carried it. She remembered Heskar, his sneering address to her mother. It had bordered on insult, but only slightly. No comment had been made; it was not the time.

"Great Charri, Mother to all," he had mocked, "You Who Are, Charri of Lomonian, all Gargoria bids you long life."

"You are far from home, Heskar. Why have you come to the North to all this cold which you do not enjoy?"

The gargor had stood granite still, quietly staring at the Queen Mother of the witches. Nearly seven feet tall, the lizard had then bent its powerful frame in an impossibly graceful bow. Andra shuddered slightly at the memory. Heskar was nothing more than tight muscles and heavy bone covered in scales and bristles and menace. His pale green eyes stared out from below the hood he wore. Wrapped in cured animal skins, he stank of death, a towering pillar of living destruction, waiting to explode.

"I am here," he had answered calmly, "for what is mine."

"The talisman is not yours. It is Hotor's."

"Hotor is dead," smiled Heskar.

"He gave it to us," countered Charri.

"He gave it to the dead. You, nor any here, was born then. Lomonía has held our soul long enough. It shall be returned."

The gargor's words curled slightly into a snarl. Andra stood by her mother, taking in the debate that followed. Decades earlier the gargor's demands would not be taken seriously. Any one or two clans attacking Lomonía would have posed a tiny threat, but times had changed. Heskar had planned for years, playing on Gargoria's national pride, manipulating clan after clan into joining the outcry for the talisman's return.

"We wish no quarrel with your people, Heskar." You are not so easily beaten now through direct combat. We would look for easier ways to maneuver you.

"Nor we with you, Mother to All." I am power now--I can mobilize all Gargoria. Even if you would stop us all, your losses would be staggering.

"Surely there must be some way this matter can be resolved between us as civilized peoples. We are not humans after all."

There was an almost imperceptible wince in the room. The human race was Lomonía's fault, an off-branching of the witches many thousands of years in the past. Magicks were almost unknown to them now. On this point Heskár had thrown them into a discussion without implying insult. Charri had smiled; the gargor had grinned. Andra simply watched, fascinated.

Their debate had continued throughout the day; planned approaches had been used, reviewed and discarded. Tradition demanded such actions, but it had been apparent to both Charri and Heskár in the first hour of their talk what would be agreed to--a duel was unavoidable. By the second hour, Andra realized it also. After that, she had merely waited for the combatants to be named.

The announcement came long after the princess's patience had run out. She had long since removed herself to a corner of the great hall, annoyed at the lengthy court procedure. Finally, however, all was agreed upon. Which valley, which day, which hour, all the rules--all of it. The combatants could take any weapons with them, use anything they found. They could take in supplies or live off the valley. It was a contest to the death, or surrender.

"And who will our combatants be, Heskár?"

"Two of equal rank. Two with reason to fight. Two bound to try their best. Two who have most to lose." I would name you and I, but that's what you want, isn't it? I shall let you name them. We both know who will be named.

"There are many of equal rank amongst our peoples," Charri started. But only two will be named. Of course it will be the children. It is always the children. "But outside of ourselves who could we name to fit all of your qualities? I could suggest, for instance, your Heskara and my Andra, but it would be so ridiculous ..."

"Agreed. My warrior son against your child? Not a fair contest at all. She is too young, too undisciplined, too arrogant ..." Disagree with me, witch. Give me the girl.

"Andra? My daughter ...?" Do you mean it, Heskara? Are you trying to draw me in, or truly exclude her? Do you know as much as I think you do, or not?

Or more?

Suddenly the dream ended. Andra awoke, but did not move. Clearing her senses, she sent tendrils of awareness out in every direction, touching the grass and shrubs and every animal around her for fifty paces. She could feel no other presence. Rising slowly, she disengaged herself from the plants that had shielded her with great care. Then, satisfied that nothing large was moving in the area around her, the young witch proceeded further south into the valley.

Night had already fallen, meaning she had slept for many hours. Now that it was dark, cooler, the gargar would be seeking

shelter. He would not stay out in the colder night air. She cast questions ahead of herself as she walked. Allowing herself to seep into the surrounding terrain Andra joined almost completely with it, searching for her opponent. She had no luck. He had rested against none of the trees she could reach, trod on none of the grass, been seen by no beast. The witch combed the air for the death screams of victims. Hundreds had died in the valley that afternoon, but none of them at Grakar's hands.

A sudden thought abruptly changed Andra's direction. She drifted noiselessly through the brush, coming to a stream that fed the valley. She stepped into it, ignoring its freezing chill--an easy task for any Lomonian. Standing still, eyes closed, she hunted for miles down the silent water for those interruptions in its flow where something or someone had stolen from it that day. Fox, bird, trellig, bear, racker, mole, badger--animals of every sort she had ever known had dipped the river that day, but no gargors.

Dismayed, Andra crossed the stream with strong, easy strokes. She grabbed playfully at a passing trout, her mind drifting for the moment backward to childhood games. She stopped suddenly, however, her abruptness startling the fish.

"Undisciplined am I? Arrogant? I'll show ..." Andra forced herself to stop. Turning back to her original destination, she continued on toward the opposite shore.

"I am disciplined. The gargor is only a warrior, a killer of flesh. In many ways he is no better than a human. And yet, he is out there, waiting for me ... winning."

Perhaps I have been arrogant, she thought. Maybe it isn't so impossible for a "mere" gargor to give a lomonian trouble. Even a princess of the line.

Pulling herself up on the opposite bank, Andra began to put together the facts she had, including those she had resisted.

It was always to be a duel, she told herself. They knew it. Mother knew it. Grakar knew he would be chosen. Did mother know I would be her choice? Did she know it would be Grakar and I in this valley from the beginning? Did Heskari?

Andra was reluctant to think the gargorian could manipulate her mother. But, if Charri had not been manipulated, had known about the duel, that Andra would go, then why was she not prepared? Charri had known for months Heskari was going to force the issue of Hotor's Talisman which meant either the Queen Ruler of Lomonian, Charri, She Who Is, had been used, out-manuvered by a gargor, or she had sent her own daughter into a fight for her life unprepared.

Am I supposed to lose, the girl wondered. Are the gargors supposed to recover their foul totem?

"Doesn't anyone care what happens to me?"

No sound came that could answer her question. If the gargors were meant to have their talisman back, it could have simply been handed to them--could it not? No, something was happening which Andra did not understand. She realized, however, that her present situation was no time to find her way through the past. Only the future held any validity for her at that point--a future in which she had to defeat a cunning warrior, or die herself.

"I am sitting next to a stream to which I can talk which tells me nothing. I have sat long enough for my dress to dry, for all of me to dry. My opponent is waiting. To keep him waiting longer would be rude."

With new resolve, Andra rose and began to make her way through the forest which began scarcely three feet from the river bank.

Round three went to the witch.

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Several hours before the next dawn Andra found herself another resting place. She napped there until the sun broke over the mountains to wake her. She came awake quickly, fully alert almost instantly. Immediately she began sniffing the air around her for a trace of her foe. Still there was nothing. She contemplated taking animal form, but decided against it. Fish could be speared; birds brought down with an arrow. No animal she could transform into could best a gargor in combat. Better to allow real birds to be her eyes, and to scout for real beasts to be her strength. She had been keeping track of several large animals in the valley.

There was a racker, one of the great northern cats, nearby; she had kept track of its whereabouts. She had also been gently herding both a wolf pack and a bear in a Southerly direction. If she needed them, they would come to her aid. The problem of keeping track of them while searching for Heskar was a difficult one, but Andra felt more comfortable knowing she had allies, even if they themselves were not yet aware of their alliance.

What made her less comfortable were the growing clouds above. A storm would change the air, curtailing her ability to stay in contact with her surroundings until she could readjust. Storms were difficult things for young witches to control. Nature's more violent secrets were the last to be revealed. Andra had little knowledge of the rhythms of rain or lightning, sleet or thunder, as of yet.

Gargor shamans can predict the weather, she reminded herself. Could they have picked this time as part of their plan?

"They might," she whispered. "Being able to control the weather, we have never cared to predict it. Did you plan this well, Heskar?"

Andra frowned, trying to unweave the pattern of political machinations which had brought her to the valley. Her major stumbling block lay in one question: of what use was Hotor's Talisman to Heskar? Even if the trinket could unite all the tribes of Gargoria, still he could not challenge Lomonía. There might be a great conflict, and many witches would die. But in the end, Lomonía would continue, and Gargoria would not.

It made no sense she could fathom.

Suddenly, however, Andra's attention was stolen by a piercing scream. It was the pitiful cry of a rabbit, somewhere up ahead. She moved toward it cautiously, although to do so tore at her soul. The faint cries only one such as herself could hear were heart rending. She could feel the creature's rapid heart beat, hear the blood pounding in its ears. Calling to it, she received strange impressions. The rabbit was caught, trapped,

pinned down, but there was no enemy. No creature either menaced it or even seemed to be aware of it.

Andra continued to move quietly--cautiously. Parting the last brush between herself and a clearing, she saw the rabbit dangling by one of its hind legs caught in a hand-made grass rope. The creature strained, jerking and kicking, tumbling and gyrating in every direction, but could not free itself. The princess bit at her lip. There was nothing she could do.

The trap is Grakar's. He wants me to reveal myself.

She dared not move forward. The gargor might return before she could release the animal. If he knew his trap had been sprung, he might already be on his way. She had to leave; the snared animal was doomed. But, something had to be done.

Scream little hopper, thought Grakar, watching the swinging beast from his ledge. Call the child out of the wood. Bring her to me. Patience is not my brightest cloak and I would see an end to all this waiting.

The gargor scanned the clearing, searching the trees beyond, waiting.

"Come little witch ... Hotor would join his people and I would drain a frosted mug of ..." Grakar's words broke off abruptly as he watched a wolf suddenly dive from the trees and clamp its jaws around the helpless rabbit. The hunter swung with his prey for a brief moment, then fell to the ground as the grass rope broke, the already dead bait still tight in its jaws.

The gargor scanned the area. He spotted no trace of Andra. His eyes narrowed as his balled fist struck against the rock

ledge upon which he was perched. Other wolves approached the clearing as well, but the one Andra had called snarled them all away, sharing his prize with only his mate.

Round four went to the witch.

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Grakar stared upward into the darkening sky as the first drops of rain began to fall. Extending his hand, he felt at the drizzle, gauging exactly what type of storm was to follow.

Warm, he thought, but not so much that it will stay such. This one will grow cold. This one will mire the valley.

Thunder rumbled overhead in agreement, slamming its way through the premature darkness. Jagged tines of lightning pronged their way across the sky, some few slashing downward, flaming trees out on the far plain.

Grakar turned from the storm, retreating into a small recess in the cliff wall behind him. His cloak already drenched, he removed it quickly, trading it for a water-repellent wrap stored with his other supplies. Once again, the wisdom of his father's plan unfolded for him. It did not matter that he had brought hundreds of pounds of supplies with him; he had not travelled long enough for it to be a burden. No, he had entered the valley and made his way only a few miles to the spot his father's scouts had picked. There he had set up camp, and there he had waited. Now, however, it was time to begin the hunt.

"This weather will not befriend our princess," he chuckled as he buckled his sword to his side. "For the time of the storm few of her powers will help her."

Looking over his other weapons, the gargor ignored his bow, knowing the limitations this heavy a storm would pose to arrows. Stooping, he picked his daggers instead. The first blade he secured inside his left boot, the second in his belt, humming as he did so. Grakar found the rain's tapping comforting--invigorating. He knew as long as it held, the witch's main defensive abilities would be useless. Standing straight, the gargor took his pike from its place against the recessed wall and headed out into the storm.

"I know you're out there somewhere, little witch. Somewhere close. If I am wrong, of course, the storm will muddy my passing and you will still not be able to find me. But if I am correct..." Grakar savored the thought for a moment, thin lips curling at the thought of Andra's lifeless body, "then this shall all soon be over."

The gargor moved down the cliffside with slow, sure motions. He was not worried over being spotted by his opponent. The sky had inked over completely. No moon was showing, and the lightning had moved far to the west. Coming near the foot of the cliff, Grakar leapt forward holding his pike over his head with both hands. He landed with a short, heavy thud. Instinctively he headed for the forest, knowing his foe would seek shelter within its pines. Nothing so tall it would draw lightning, but still fresh smelling and dry underneath.

"If she's nearby, and I'm certain she is, then she'll be in the grove near the slate falls."

Grakar headed in that direction, his grin widening. Ignoring the trickles inching their way beneath his collar, he rotated his pike once, twice, thrice in his hands and enjoyed the feel of it.

Round five had gone to the beast.

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Andra sat beneath a large pine listening to the rain. The trees grew so close together where she had sought shelter that hardly any rain could squeeze through the tightly locked branches. All about her rested the pack of Bloodsmile. Only females, of course, rested near the young witch, the males having stationed themselves at defensive points throughout the grove. Out of the darkness, Bloodsmile approached Andra. He pawed the ground in patterns, adding appropriate growls from time to time, letting the lomonian know that none of his pack had seen the gargar.

"Bloodsmile is my friend; I thank him for his kind protection."

It was not what she said, but what she made understood through sound and gesture. The wolf nodded its head low to the ground, and then dropped its mouth open in canine good humor. It was a pure moment, and Andra enjoyed it.

The ancient pacts between witch and beast still held. Dogs man had stolen, but the wolves were lomonian forever.

The princess lifted her hand to say more, when her gesture was halted by a howl that pierced the grove over the drowning force of the storm. It was Mauler, the Scarmaker, brother to Bloodsmile. All the wolves strained to the sound. A similar

barking came, then once more, followed by a silence sudden and horrible.

Bloodsmile moved forward three paces, ears up, lip curled, eyes closed. The great ears strained, all concentration thrown into understanding what the pack's outermost scout was telling them.

\*That was a challenge.\*

\*What's he found?\*

The next howl told them all. The snarls and barks and every other noise they heard after that was combat. Andra pushed her senses through the grove, line-of-sight moving from bird to mouse to dragonfly, racing to reach Mauler, to join with him, enter his mind, see through his eyes. All around her, the great wolf's threats and curses vibrated through the trees telling of a combat impressive but cruelly one-sided. The barks were replied to only with the pound of the storm--and silence.

And of a sudden, the silence was shattered along with time as hearts broke and souls wept. Great Mauler, the Scarmaker, disappeared from the night sounds, suddenly and completely. That he was dead was fact--Andra could feel the hole in the forest the size of the old warrior's spirit.

\*We have found your enemy\*

\*He has found us\*

Bloodsmile reflected for a moment, then made her to understand, \*No matter. Go with Nightrunner--he can lead you safely further back beneath the trees. We shall deal with the lizard\*

Andra growled in acknowledgement. Bloodsmile was already gone. Listening to, feeling, watching the pack move off, the witch departed in the other direction with the cub, Nightrunner. Settling back far into the grove, the pair listened to the struggle in the distance. Something moved through the wolves with speed, thrashing, spearing, breaking them by ones and twos. Andra held the cub tightly to keep it from shaking.

Then suddenly, all was quiet save for the patter of the constant rain. Both Andra and Nightrunner strained their hearing, but all that came to them was the sound of water trickling through the tightly packed branches. Finally, however, a faint scraping revealed itself to them. Nightrunner began to growl, but Andra wrapped her fingers around the cub's muzzle as she began making her way further back through the trees.

The princess knew it was Grakar approaching. She moved softly, leaping from one bare patch to the next. She had only gone a few hundred yards, however, when a shadow-hidden pool of rainwater sent her crashing to the floor of the grove. The gargor knew her position instantly. As the young witch struggled to her feet, she realized Nightrunner was gone. Before she could call to him, pitiful pup-growls came from the distance.

Andra heard the chuckle, then the thud.

The witch screamed and ran away into the darkness.

Round six had gone to the beast.

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Although the gargor had picked up Andra's trail relatively quickly, the witch was steadily outdistancing him. His battle

with the pack had gifted him with a number of wounds--several painful--one serious. Moving in a limping run, Grakar cursed;

"Come back, filth. Face me. Fight me!"

Andra continued to run. Something in the gargor's voice did not ring true. Yes, the creature did want her to face him, was confident she could not stand against it in combat. But, there was something more.

It's not that it simply wants me to turn and face it, she realized. There's something about the direction in which I'm traveling it does not like.

The thought gave the witch renewed energy. Looking forward just as a shaft of lightning broke the sky, she saw a cliff wall that gave her ideas. She knew Grakar was injured. If he were not, he would have surely caught up to her by then. Injured, he would not be able to climb. If she could but reach one of the ledges, she told herself, she would certainly be able to find some kind of advantage.

Andra felt broken branches and sharp stones slicing her feet open through her water-logged boots, but she did not care. The princess made her way wildly across the expanse, desperate to reach the cliffs. A roaring shriek from behind her let her know Grakar had seen her, that he shared her notions on the advantages of height. Smiling, she threw herself against the rock cliff and begged it to reveal its handholds to her.

As she crawled up the face of the granite wall, Andra gave off calling for the bear and the racker she knew were in the area. They had not responded and she needed all her concentration

focused on reaching the ledge ahead of her. Behind her she could hear the gargor just beginning his ascent. Eyes closed, hope flooding her mind, the young witch strained her left arm to its utmost, stretching her muscles, pushing, grasping--

The ledge!

The thought fired her mind as her fingers found the hold she was looking for. With an agonizing swell she flooded her body with a rush of energy, putting all her reserves into pulling herself up onto the outcropping. As she did, she discovered the reason for the gargor's incessant cursing. She had found his hiding place--his supplies.

His extra weapons. Two hunting knives. A sturdy length of quite strong rope. A bow with a full compliment of arrows.

A giddiness she could not control flooded the girl. The bow she understood. Had used such a thing. It had range. She could attack from a distance. Safety.

"Surrender, witch," Grakar screamed from below. "All you need do is return to us Hotor's Talisman. Take back your life. You have no right to anything else. Surrender!"

And then, the racker appeared. Stepping down silently from the topmost reaches of the ledge, the massive forest cat growled with menace at Andra's enemy. The gargor had lost his sword to the wolves, but he still had his pike. He brought it up as the racker leapt. Thick oak rang against the cat's skull. The racker tumbled aside, hitting the ground hard.

"Surrender," Grakar called again. Then, suddenly, the cat was on him, dragging him back down to the base of the cliff.

Above them, not willing to leave her fate to the racker's ability, Andra struggled with the gargor's bow in the rain. The weight of the great weapon defied her, refusing to bend as she tried again and again to loop the second end of its string. Skin tore from her fingers, blood dribbled down her hands, feeding the weapon.

"Great mother of all," the girl screamed, "give me this one thing!" The bow string's loop slipped into place just as the death cry of the racker echoed upward through the rain.

"Nice try." Grakar let his broken pike slip from his grasp. "But not nice enough."

Panting, bleeding from a dozen spots, the gargor started back toward the cliff. Hand over hand he forced his way upward, ignoring the pain of his various gashes. His blood was flowing, but with just a bit more effort he could reach the witch and end their contest.

Healing can wait, he mused.

Then, all thought fled Grakar's mind as Andra appeared on the ledge above, his bow in her hands. Before he could react she began to bend the bow back, her arrow aimed directly at his chest. Unable to retreat, unable to reach any protective cover before she could fire, he chose instead to pull his last remaining dagger from his boot. Andra's bloodied fingers, unable to hold the powerful bow string any longer, released their missile. She peered through the darkness and the rain, watched the arrow strike, stick in her enemy's chest. She watched Grakar's hand falter, almost dropping his last weapon. Almost.

Hurriedly she grabbed up another arrow. With more skill than she would have believed she possessed, she notched it and began to pull back the mighty bow once more. The effort tore at the muscles in both her arms, her shoulders. The gargar raised its arm, poised to throw. Thunder crashed as he hurled his blade, even as the girl released her arrow. What effect his dagger might have had, however, he did not get to see. He had begun tumbling back down the sopping cliffside even as the dagger left his fingers.

Round seven went to the witch.

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"How?" Andra awoke slowly--groggily--confused at first. "How did I get home?"

Images flashed in her mind: the racker, the ledge, firing the arrows, Grakar's blade in the air, striking her. The princess's hand instinctively went to her side, but she found a bandage instead of a wound.

"Daughter, you must be calm." Queen Charri sat in an oversized chair near her daughter's bed.

"But, I don't remember any ... how, how did I get home?"

"Grakar brought you."

"What? But I slew him."

"No," the Queen smiled politely. "You did not. Your shafts barely pierced his armor. He fell because he slipped on the rocks. He climbed back to the ledge where you were, removed his blade from your side, stemmed the flow of blood."

Andra fell back into her pillows as her mother explained how the gargor had cleaned her wounds and bound them, then his own. How he had cared for her while the rains continued, and when they were finished, how he had brought her home.

He had not killed her. The princess absorbed the notion that she had not been worth the killing. The gargor had won. Hotor's Talisman was on its way back to Gargoria. Andra apologized for her failure, her sorrow immeasurable. Her mother's attempts to console her were futile. The princess knew she had doomed Lomonian. Once the gargor clans had been united, they would swarm north and all would be lost. Her heart filled with a rare pity, the queen whispered;

"No, they will not." When Andra's blinking eyes signalled a lack of comprehension, the queen continued. "Heskar needed Hotor's bauble to unite his people. This will take years. When he is done, however, it is not us upon whom his intentions will be turned. There would be no profit which one such as Heskar could understand in that."

And then, Andra understood everything. Lomonians did not prize gold or gems. The witches were powerful enemies and made poor slaves. Heskar would not lead his legions against the witches. No, he would lead them against those who had what he wanted--those Lomonians feared far more than they did the gargors--

"The humans. You want the gargors and the humans to fight, to destroy one another."

"Of course, my child," cooed Charri. "If we could have just handed the gargors their toy, we would have. But that would have

been an insult to them, 'take your toy, we do not fear you.' They might have begun a hideous war just out of pride. If we did not return it, they might have begun the same war."

The queen looked down at her daughter, seeming so fragile in her bandages, so pale from loss of blood. It would have been so, so inconvenient if the girl had died. It was true she had been a tool. And, as Heskar and Charri had imagined, one that played her part as they needed it to be played. Grakar had shown great political savvy himself, not slaying the princess.

Andra turned away from her mother, staring at the far wall. The queen assumed she understood. Such a thought, that one had been used, that they were not in control of their destiny, was always hard to entertain. Charri left quietly to give her daughter time to reflect.

She did not first dry the girl's tears. Indeed, the notion that there might be tears to dry did not even cross her mind. Instead her thoughts turned to other matters of state that needed her attention. The final round had gone to the beast.

But she had won the war.

It was all that mattered.