

A Matter of Blood

7200 words approx

By Martin Owton

Martin.Owton@virgin.net

The first thing Aron noticed was that the man was young; scarcely older than Aron himself. The second thing he noticed was that the man was a mess; someone had beaten him thoroughly, breaking his nose and splitting his lips. His eyes were swollen shut, the flesh purple around them. Someone had splinted his broken right arm, bound up the shattered fingers on both hands and plugged the stab wound in his side with clean linen. He lay back on the pallet, his breath rattling harshly between his ruined lips; he would live but would carry the scars to his grave.

Aron turned questioningly to Simeon.

“I couldn't just leave him there, not after what that bastard did to him.” The boy threw his arms wide in a gesture of frustration. Aron liked Simeon, liked his openness and enthusiasm. Yet he knew that Simeon's idealism would have had him taking on the perpetrator of this violence if the watch had not arrived when they did. The boy was an able pupil, but at sixteen not yet full grown and could easily have got himself a similar beating or worse.

“You shouldn't have been down there anyway. Don't you know how dangerous the taverns in the Swamp are?” Aron said.

“You live down there,” Simeon replied.

“I am not a merchant's son with a coat that cost more than a docker earns in a six-month. Besides, I can look after myself. What is the point of me teaching you to

look after yourself if you're going to put your neck in a noose the first chance you get?"

"I got out alive. Anyway this isn't about me. Will you listen to his story?"

Simeon gestured to the injured man.

"Very well," said Aron. "For the price of breakfast."

“My name is Roger de Beaune,” the young man said, his words distorted by his injured mouth. “I come from Fox Hollow, a small village five days walk from here. A year ago I was happy. I worked my father's farm and I was walking out with the most beautiful girl in the village. Then Seranna fell pregnant, and my father insisted that I put her aside. Her father threw her out of their house and I was powerless to stop her leaving the village.”

“Was the child yours?” asked Aron before he took a bite out of a warm bread roll.

“Certainly. I was all ready to make the arrangements with the priest, but father just exploded when I told him and wouldn't hear of any wedding. He thought she wasn't good enough for me. He was a hard man.” Roger swallowed noisily. Aron took another bite of his roll and waited for him to continue. “So she left and I couldn't do anything. That was last spring.”

“And now you're in Oxport.”

“My father died at New Year. The farm's mine now, so I came to find Seranna.”

“You found her?”

“I found her in that tavern, last evening. I was going to take her away, but then he came.” Roger seemed to shudder at the memory.

“You realise what kind of women frequent The Sailor's Ease?”

“I know what she has been driven to, if that's what you mean. That doesn't matter to me. I love her and I want to take her back to Fox Hollow, and she wants to go with me.”

“You're sure she wants to go with you?” Aron asked as he speared a sausage with his knife.

“Yes certain. She wept in my arms and begged me to take her away. We were leaving when he stopped us.”

“I can imagine. And what was your part in this?” Aron turned to Simeon.

“I was there with a friend,” replied Simeon defensively. “I saw the fight, if that's what you could call it. Roger didn't stand a chance. He stuck a knife in him and then kept kicking him until the watch arrived. I couldn't leave him there, so I brought him here.”

‘It didn't occur to you that a tavern frequented by whores might also employ someone to keep order and protect its assets?’ Aron directed his question to Roger, but it was Simeon who spoke.

“How do you mean assets?”

“Do you suppose that the women just happen to frequent that tavern? Who feeds and shelters them? Who provides their fine gowns?” Aron jabbed the air in front of Simeon with his knife.

“You mean the tavern keeper?” said Simeon.

“Yes. Or someone who has an arrangement with him. And the bully is there to prevent the customers fighting and to make sure no-one forgets to pay.”

“I suppose I should have realised she couldn't just walk out.” Roger sounded as if he was weeping, but the state of his face made it impossible to tell. “How am I going to get her out of there now?”

“The usual way is to buy her,” Aron said as he polished his plate with a crust of bread. He didn't know whether to curse Roger for his stupidity or praise his naïve courage.

“I don't have much money. How much would it cost?”

“Depends on how much she earns. She's young, is she pretty?”

“Prettiest girl in the parish back home.”

“Expensive then, twenty, maybe twenty five gold crowns.”

“I couldn't sell my farm for that,” cried Roger in dismay.

“So we need to find another way to get Seranna out.” Simeon's voice was filled with excitement at the prospect of the adventure. “So I thought of you. After all, you're the finest swordsman in the city.”

“What was the first lesson I taught you about the blade?” Aron looked hard at Simeon, knowing where the conversation was leading.

“Never draw it unless you are prepared to kill with it.”

“Correct. Now I teach the blade to the sons of gentlemen so that they can keep out of trouble. I hire out as a bodyguard to prevent bloodshed. I do not kill people for money, do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly. Maybe I'll just take the mangy Saxish dog myself.” Simeon stuck his chin out and tried to look dangerous.

“Maybe next year.” Aron snorted derisively. “How do you know he's Saxish? Saxe is a long way away. I'll wager you've never met a Saxish clansman in your life.”

“You can't mistake that accent. I may not be able to place yours, but I know Saxish when I hear it; my father trades down there and mimics them. He's very good at voices.”

“No doubt,” said Aron, suddenly preoccupied with the thought of a Saxish fighter. *Probably nothing to do with what had happened, but Saxe is a very long way away.* “Tell me about your clansman. How old? How tall? Slim or heavy, dark or light, right or left handed?”

“Er -- large, heavy-shouldered, dark, hair in a ponytail, mid-thirties,” said Simeon.

“Left-handed, I think,” added Roger from the bed.

“Hmm.” Aron stood up and made to leave. “Nothing will be done until Roger is mended. I will think on it.”

Aron did think on it; indeed he thought about little else for most of the day. The girl's story was common enough; probably half the girls at the Sailor's Ease could tell something similar. That could have been Aron's mother's story but for one person; his father. He'd stood by her and now Roger wants to do the same. The thought of his father brought him back to the Clansman. *If he was one of the betrayers of Darien then I will kill him and if it aids the girl's escape then so much the better.*

His heart leapt at the prospect of the fight but he drew himself back. *But I have to be sure, it's just possible that he's guilty of nothing more than being Saxish. And what will I do if that's the case? I'll cross that river when I come to it.*

It seemed to him that he had two choices: the first was to ask the clansman as subtly as possible, but that carried a real risk of starting the fight immediately, and then getting the girl away could be impossible. There was another way though.

Nearly every city and certainly every seaport in the world has an area like the Swamp. An area where most things are cheap: housing, drink, sexual pleasures and life. So it was in the Swamp; so called because it was built on land (almost) recovered from a swamp, rather than because of the creatures who lived there. Aron lived in a tiny rented room in the Swamp; it was all he could afford if he was going to eat as well. Teaching swordsmanship to merchants' sons wasn't that lucrative. In the months he'd been in Oxport, Aron had got to know a bit about the area. Not a lot, you'd need to have been born there to be trusted enough to know a lot; but Aron knew where to find most of the services the Swamp specialised in. In a gloomy room in a house behind a bakery in the centre of the Swamp, Aron drank herbal tea with an old woman, his stomach tight with nervous tension.

"I need to find out something. A secret a man may be hiding." Aron spoke cautiously. He knew the woman by reputation, but had never dealt with her.

"Not a girl then. I thought it would be a girl. It usually is with likely young lads like you. Still things can be found out, hidden secrets dug up, for a price." The woman's eyes twinkled at Aron across the table. "What do you need to know?"

"There is a man in the city. I need to know if he was at a certain place and took part in a certain act."

"You're a cautious one aren't you, my lad. Give me your hand and look into my eyes." Aron did as he was asked, his other hand curled around the knife he wore

in his sleeve. The old woman's small hand was surprisingly warm as it gripped his. She stared deep into Aron's eyes for three breaths and then her eyes lost focus. After a long moment she gasped and her grip tightened convulsively. Then her focus returned and she released Aron's hand.

“You're a killer my lad aren't you, but your heart's clean. You should have told me before I read you.” The woman reached for the teapot. Her hand shook as she poured another cup of tea. “I'll need something to read from, something of his. The closer it's been to him the better. Hair's good. I can get a good reading with hair. I can manage with fingernails if I must.” Her voice betrayed a nervousness that had not been there before.

“How much?” The knot in Aron's stomach unwound.

“Ten pieces of silver. Oh, you meant how much hair?”

“I meant both,” Aron said evenly.

“Just a few strands, so long as it's got a root.”

Aron finished his tea and stood up. “I'll be back.”

Aron next saw Simeon two days later for his lesson. Aron pushed the lad harder than usual during the two hours, to reinforce the lesson that Simeon was not ready for a real fight. Afterwards they sat in the shade and drank small beer.

“So have you thought about it?” gasped Simeon, out of breath from his exertions. “Roger's getting stronger day by day.”

“I'm glad to hear Roger is recovering,” said Aron, who was sweating only slightly. “I'm still thinking about it. Have you thought about it? Do you know who runs the Sailor's Ease? Do you know how much trouble he can cause you? Are you prepared for the consequences if we go through with this? You could have to flee the city. What's your father's view?”

“My father supports my action in this. He just doesn't want me to get hurt. He trusts you to look after me.” The lad's dark eyes flashed defiantly.

“Thanks a lot. And what about the rest? Do you know if there are any more Clansmen in the city?”

“I hadn't thought about that.”

“I have. That's why I'm still thinking, particularly about the Clansmen. Ask your father to find out, he must have the contacts.”

Indeed Aron was still thinking and still gathering intelligence, torn between his lust for vengeance and the caution that his instructors had instilled into him. One thing certainly favoured them; the landlord of the Sailor's Ease was a notorious drunkard who owed money all over the city. It was unlikely that anyone would rush to his aid in the event of his losing an asset such as Seranna. As days passed and Roger recovered, Aron could no longer put off the decision. Oxport was an unlovely city, and his own circumstances were not particularly favourable. He could easily move on. Almost without making the decision, he'd arrived at the conclusion that it all depended on the girl. If she wanted to be free then he would help her.

The Sailor's Ease was a two-storey building with windows set in the steeply sloping much-repaired roof; the walls bowed, the roofline sagged dramatically and weeds grew in the gutters. Aron walked up the street towards the tavern, avoiding the larger puddles, taking in the evening scene. There were quite a few people about; none looked prosperously dressed, indeed some were truly in rags, and all had a wary and suspicious cast to them. The clientele of the tavern were similarly shifty, from what could be seen of them by the light of a few candle lanterns and the fire. There were at least two games of dice proceeding in two of the corners. A group of sailors, living up to the tavern's name, caroused in a third corner with a number of girls who seemed more gaudily attired than anyone else.

Aron sat in one of the many dark corners and almost instantly a potboy was at his side asking what he wanted to drink. Aron ordered a mug of ale and looked around. Beside the stairs a large swarthy man in a leather waistcoat, his black hair

caught in a ponytail, sat and cleaned his nails with a dagger. Unmistakably a Saxishman.

“My name's Seranna -- would you like to buy me a drink?” The voice had a soft country burr to it. Aron turned to see a dark-haired girl smiling at him, only the smile didn't reach her eyes which remained dull and lifeless. He could see how she had once been pretty before she got so thin.

“Seranna. That's a nice name - - why don't you sit down?” Aron tried to make his voice warm and welcoming. The girl's eyes didn't change.

“I know somewhere we could go that's quieter.” Her voice did not convey the enthusiasm that her words implied.

“That sounds fine to me,” said Aron, keeping his voice low.

“Ten silver pieces.” There was no invitation in her voice this time. Aron reached into his pouch. The price was about what he had expected; enough to rent his room for a month. Seranna walked towards the stairs, the Saxishman looked up at her, caught her gesture and stood up blocking Aron's path. Aron held out the money, the Saxishman took the coins and bit each one in test. The coins passed and he stood aside glaring hard at Aron in silent warning. Aron avoided meeting his eyes and followed Seranna up the narrow stairs, along a corridor and into a room that was almost completely filled by the bed that she sat down on. Aron sat down beside her trying to ignore the powerful stink of stale sweat from the mattress.

“What happened to the baby?” That certainly got Seranna's attention. Real expression entered her pretty face for the first time and she jumped as if Aron had slapped her.

“She died.” The heartbreak in her throat. “How did you know? Who are you?”

“Roger told me.”

“Is he -- ?” Choked off sobs destroyed whatever else she was going to say.

“He's alive if that's what you want to know.” Aron kept his voice low. “He's with a friend of mine.”

“Why are you here? Who are you?”

“I need to know something, something important. Do you want to get away from here?”

“Gods, of course I want to get away. Now stop playing games and tell me who you are.” Anger replaced the tears.

“Listen carefully. This needs to be done right if we're to get you away.” Aron spoke for a few minutes telling her what he needed for the witch's reading and then made Seranna repeat his instructions back to him.

“Right. I'll see you in three days then.” Aron stood up to leave. A brief moment of disappointment flickered through the girl's eyes as he opened the door.

“Three days then,” she said quietly.

“You got something for me to read then?” The old woman's dark eyes glittered in her lined face. Aron passed the small package to her and returned to his herbal tea. The package gave under her fingers as if filled with jelly. Nimbly she undid the cloth wrapping and examined the contents. “That'll do fine. What do you want to know?”

“Nearly five years ago the Earldom of Darien was overrun and possessed by the Duke of Caldon. There were Saxish mercenaries in the fortress of Darien. They betrayed their employer, the Earl, and opened the gates to the Duke's army. The Earl and his garrison were put to the sword.” Aron's voice was low with all the emotion squeezed out of it. “My father amongst them.”

“Aah my lad, now I place you. I thought I recognised the accent. So you want to know if this one was there.” Her eyes glittered in the gloom. Aron nodded to her. “You go and sit next door and I'll have an answer in a while.”

Aron sat in the small kitchen his nostrils assailed by the smell of fresh bread emanating from the bakery next door. He had no idea how long the process would take so he did not dare leave the room to buy something to eat. Instead he sat and thought about the immediate future, his concentration broken by the demands of his stomach. He fervently hoped that the Clansman had been one of the betrayers, that he

could justify killing him to release poor pretty Seranna from that stinking room and send her back to her village. It would give an extra edge to his revenge.

Hours passed and the sun was westering before the door opened and the old woman appeared. She fixed Aron with a gaze that was slightly out of focus. "He was there -. I hope you get the girl out." Then the door closed, leaving Aron alone.

"Tonight, gods I can't believe it. I'll be ready. What do you want me to do?" said Roger. The flesh around his eyes was still slightly puffy and yellow; his fingers worked but had lost much of their former strength, and the wound in his side was healing well.

"All you need to do is to get him out of his lair and I'll take care of the rest. Simeon are the horses your father promised going to appear?"

"Yes, yes of course. What time do you need them?" The lad's words fell over each other in his excitement.

"An hour before the city gates close. Pack more than enough supplies for the ride to Fox Hollow. You may be pursued and end up a long way off your road. I'll try to minimise pursuit but I can't promise. And don't forget some clothes for the girl. She can't ride far in what she'll be wearing."

"Are you sure you can handle this?" The new voice cut across their conversation. Aron turned. Simeon's father stood in the doorway.

"Sure enough," Aron replied calmly.

"I have a number of caravan guards standing idle just at the moment if you need a little help."

"I suppose that it would be no harm if they were to drink in the Sailor's Ease this evening, but please remind them that this is a matter of blood."

"I wondered why you're doing this," Simeon's father said quietly

“Darien.” Aron spoke the single word and was silent for a moment. “And why do you not forbid this?”

The older man did not answer immediately. “I knew a girl once and I didn't know anyone like you then.”

Aron, Roger and Simeon walked, leading the horses down the hill from the prosperous areas of Oxport towards the Swamp. No-one spoke as they walked through the evening, the lanterns haloed as the mist rose from the wetlands beyond the city wall. Simeon and Roger halted the horses around the corner from The Sailor's Ease. As Aron kept walking towards the tavern, he gave one tug of adjustment to the mail shirt beneath his tunic and stepped through the door. The taproom was only half full with the usual clientele, plus a group of six tough-looking men who sat quietly not drinking much from the table full of mugs before them. Seranna stood beside the stairs next to the Saxishman. She looked up as Aron walked into the room and broke into a broad smile, her eyes unnaturally wide in her face. At that moment Aron knew he was doing the right thing. He nodded once to her as his gaze swept over the Clansman beside her; if the man recognised Aron he gave no hint of it. Aron turned and strode out into the night back to Roger and Simeon, his nerves wound tight.

“Go just inside, she's waiting and she'll come to you. Don't delay. There's nothing I can do if you don't get her outside. Right, on your way.”

“I won't see you after if this works. How can I thank you?” said Roger, his voice shaking.

“Call your son Aron, now go.”

Roger walked slowly towards the Sailor's Ease. Aron eased his sword in its scabbard and tried to focus his mind as Roger disappeared through the door. A few breaths only passed before Roger reappeared half dragging Seranna. They were only five paces clear of the door when the guard emerged bellowing guttural oaths, a naked

blade in his left hand. Aron smiled with relief, drew his own blade and stepped forward to block the Clansman's path as Roger and Seranna ran past towards the horses Simeon held. The Clansman slid to a halt as Aron levelled his sword at the man's throat.

“Get out of the way peasant.” The man's accent twisted the words into almost unrecognisable shapes. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“Darren.” Aron spoke clearly, his eyes not shifting from his opponent. The clansman's eyes widened with surprise and recognition. The witch had been right. “I see you remember. I want you to know what you're dying for.”

The clansman swore an oath in reply and swung a blow at Aron who blocked it firmly and flicked out a riposte that left a trickle of blood running down his opponent's face. There was no need to hurry; it would buy the fugitives more time and the man didn't deserve to die quickly. There was no reason to believe that the Darren garrison had died quickly.

The clansman was really quite a competent swordsman. He didn't overextend on his thrusts and parried firmly, he never put all his strength into a move and so retained his balance. It wasn't enough though. Aron was always a touch faster in his moves, always a shade ahead in anticipation, and the Saxishman was bleeding from half a dozen wounds after five minutes. He was good enough to know he was overmatched, and desperation entered his bladework as he began to tire; desperation seeking an opening against the odds. No opening came. A crowd gathered, partisan cheers began to ring out, with roars of encouragement and appreciation at every move. Wagers were offered and accepted. This was a far better duel than the Swamp normally offered.

Aron emptied his mind, just as he had been taught, of all except his opponent. Nothing mattered, nothing intruded. The Clansman started to slow, his counters slightly late, the co-ordination a little ragged as sweat dripped down his face and his breathing laboured. It was time for the kill. Aron began to increase the tempo, moving onto the offensive, pushing his man back waiting for the mistake. The mistake came

and Aron killed him. It was that simple. The Clansman was a fraction of a second slow in blocking a thrust to his stomach and Aron's blade skewered him. He gasped in pain, clasping his hands over his abdomen where dark blood was beginning to soak through his jerkin. Aron tugged his blade free, blood gushed, a blank dark stare entered the man's eyes. He died in the mud gurgling and spitting curses. Aron put away his own sword, picked up the dead man's blade and walked away, the crowd parting to let him through.

Aron kept walking up the hill, away from the swamp, a fierce glow of satisfaction burning within him.. "That's one more of the traitors has paid the price father," he said softly then muttered prayers to the soldiers' god, one in thanks for his own survival and a second to honour his father's shade. Later he would seek out a shrine and light a candle to offer more thanks; he offered no prayers for the dead clansman.

A servant, eyes full of questions, opened the door of Simeon's house to him and showed him into a sitting room. Aron sat before the fire, closed his eyes and tried to let all the tension drain from him, washing him clean of the experience. Ten minutes passed before Simeon returned. He rushed into the sitting room and flung his arms around Aron declaring "You were magnificent, absolutely faultless. I've never seen anything like it."

"You shouldn't have been there. You were to return here directly they were away in case things went wrong." Aron was too tired to be truly angry. Things hadn't gone wrong and he knew that he would have stayed to watch the outcome if he'd been in Simeon's shoes. "Just fetch me a drink will you, a good strong one."

A drink was fetched and Aron contented himself with staring into the depths of the fire as Simeon prattled on until the door opened and Simeon's father stepped into the room, extending his right hand. Aron reached out his own hand, the older man gripped it firmly. "Very impressive young man. My caravan guards say you're an excellent swordsman."

Aron didn't know what to say so he said "Thank you."

“I think it might be a good idea if you were to stay beneath my roof for a few days, just until the dust settles.”

Aron accepted gratefully. This was more than he'd hoped for. The solid walls of merchant's villa offered much better shelter than he would find in the swamp and the clansman may have had more friends than he'd counted. He wondered about the girl Simeon's father had referred to and guessed that the story had ended badly.

So Aron took up temporary residence in a fine house in the best district of Oxport and Simeon found his time filled with extra lessons. Nothing is for nothing, after all. During this time the merchant's intelligence network provided two pieces of information; firstly a message arrived from Fox Hollow concerning the return of two young people, secondly four Saxish riders passed into the city through the east gate. Aron was pleased by the first piece, though he wondered for a moment how Seranna would settle back in to life in her quiet village and greatly interested by the second. He thought it most unlikely their arrival was a coincidence, blood feuds being a central part of Saxish life, and pressed the merchant to find out all he could of their doings. *It's nigh certain they too were betrayers of Darien*, he thought with a smile. *And I don't have to scour the High Kingdom for them.* The next few weeks promised to be more of a challenge than tutoring the pampered sons of Oxport.

Life passed quietly for the next five days with no news of the Saxishmen and, as the uneventful days slipped by, an unease grew within Aron that all was not well, like the dark finger of cloud hanging on the horizon that presages a summer storm. He started seeing movements out of the corner of his eye that resolved into nothing when he turned his head. Dark shadows crept across the floor as he lay in his bed and he took to sleeping with a lit candle by his bedside and a knife under the pillow. None of this disturbed him as much as the constant feeling that some malevolent being was watching him; a feeling he was quite unable to dispel.

Aron was three steps down the stairs when it happened. He felt a firm shove between the shoulder blades and then he was falling. He managed to break the fall partially by rolling, but he still hit the ground with a solid thump that drove the breath from his body and left his ears ringing. He had heard no-one behind him and there was certainly no-one to be seen on the stairs. Servants hurried to aid him having heard the tumble and soon Aron was the centre of attention being offered poultices for his bruises and a glass of spirit for the shock. Aron took the spirit but it did little to calm his nerves; the feeling of malevolent presence was stronger than ever.

Aron took much more notice of his surroundings from then on. Never before superstitious he developed a sharp aversion to walking under ladders or anywhere near loads on hoists; stairs took much longer to negotiate than his previous three steps at a time and nothing on earth would get him close to the edge of a drop. It was difficult continuing teaching his classes which had expanded with an influx of new pupils. Pleading damage from his fall, he no longer sparred, but watched as the pupils faced each other.

It is impossible to remove yourself from all sources of peril if you are going to continue some semblance of normal life so the menace persisted. Aron's heightened awareness and sharp reactions in the street saved him from a fall of roof tiles. Four times horses shied and kicked close beside him, and each time he managed to step aside. His nerves, however, suffered and, acutely aware of every tiny sound in the night, he barely slept. Every situation presented a threat, there was in truth nowhere safe. He felt angry and humiliated in equal measure by his vulnerability and at times wondered if he was going mad. Reluctantly he was driven to the conclusion that he had no other option and went down into the Swamp to the house behind a bakery.

“Ah, the young killer from Darien. I didn't think to see you again - what brings you to my door?” The dark eyes twinkled at Aron through the quarter-open door.

“I have a problem. Something is stalking me.” He spoke, quietly looking directly into her eyes.

“So kill him.”

“Something not someone. That makes it your area of speciality.” He glanced nervously over his shoulder, the alleyway was empty.

“Something you can't handle, hey. So you'd better come in.” The door swung fully open, filling Aron with relief. He had brought all the coin he possessed to try to persuade her and if she had refused him then he did not know what he would have done.

The old woman gestured to a chair and bent over the kettle that bubbled on the fire. Aron sat down as the woman poured tea. For the first time in many days he was not conscious of the menacing presence and it felt like stepping out into the sunshine after a week of rain.

“So, you killed the man I read for you. Well he deserved it, and you got the girl out. That puts you on the right side as far as I'm concerned, and I know your heart is clean. Now tell me your problem.” The old woman bustled around the room before she settled in her chair beside the fire. Aron recounted the sequence of events as clearly as he could remember it; the menacing presence, the shove downstairs and the other events that had nearly brought harm to him. When he had finished the woman looked hard at him, pursed her lips then stared into the fire, several breaths passed before she spoke.

“I think I have heard of something like this, though I have never dealt with it. I think I should enter the spirit world and have a look around.”

“Is this dangerous for you?”

“I think not. I think this is an enemy that threatens only you.” The woman reached into a box beside her chair and drew out a small bag. She shook some of the contents into the kettle, swirled the mixture around for a dozen breaths and then poured the murky fluid into a cup. Blowing on it to cool it for a moment she then drank the contents in one draught. She pulled a face. “Never got used to the taste of that and it doesn't improve with age.” She sat back in the chair. “This will take a little while. Just make yourself comfortable, but keep silent.”

Aron watched as she settled herself, eyes closed, hands folded in her lap, her breathing deliberately regular. Nothing happened for a long time. Aron wondered if she had merely drifted off to sleep then she started from the chair, unfocused eyes wide open.

“I have found him. He is outside now waiting for you.” Her breathing was ragged as if she had been running.

“Who?”

“The one you killed. The Saxish warrior. His spirit lurks only a few paces from us. The wards I have set about this house keep him out, but he knows you are here so he waits.”

“How can this be?”

“His shade has been recalled to this world by a magician. I have heard of it being done, but I can't do it. It is an Eastern trick. I don't know of any in Oxport who would know how to do it.”

Aron thought immediately of the four Saxish riders. “Four Saxishmen passed into the city a week or so back. Few come so far west. It is most likely they are from the same mercenary band,” he said. “They will have come to avenge him.”

“Then one of them may be a wizard. It would not require one of great power because the warrior's spirit burns for vengeance, but you have a bad enemy.”

“I know next to nothing of magic. How do I fight this spirit?”

“In this world I do not know. There are magicians of greater power and learning than I in other cities. I can tell you where to find them, but they are many weeks journey away. I don't think you would escape the spirit's vengeance that long.”

“What about this Saxish wizard?”

“He would know the banishing of it, but if he has summoned it he is not your friend.”

“If I kill him?”

“The spirit is like a hound unleashed to hunt you down. The wizard knows nothing of its location or progress, it will return to him only when you are slain. Slay the wizard and the spirit will still follow you.”

“Is there nothing I can do?”

“You could enter the spirit world to face it. If you kill it there it can no longer be summoned to harm you here.”

“What can I fight it with there? What powers does it have?”

“Nothing more than you bring with you from this world. You may walk in the spirit world as you are or as you were, but nothing more.”

“How do you mean?” This was important. Aron strained on her every word as his mind raced through the possibilities facing him.

“The blind may see again, the lame walk. The warrior who lost a limb in life is whole again, but that is all. You will not be a finger's width taller. The mind remembers how you were in your prime, but it cannot make you more.”

“So I have no sword, no armour, no weapons to fight with.”

“Only your body, your skills and your courage.”

“And if I lose?”

“Then you are dead, both in the spirit world and here.”

Aron sat in thought, his stomach a tight knot of fear. He did not doubt his own courage, but his every instinct counselled against going into a fight without knowing what he faced. However, the days since he had killed the clansman had been an intolerable nightmare and he agreed with the old woman about his prospects of escaping the spirit's vengeance for much longer. He really had no choice at all.

“It is the only road open to me. If I can't rid myself of this spirit in this world then I must in the next.”

“Drink this then, swallow it all. I will be waiting and I'll lead you into the spirit world.” The old woman passed Aron a mug full of the murky fluid from her kettle. Aron sniffed at it, it might have come straight from a puddle in the street outside. He drew a long breath and then poured the contents of the mug straight down

his throat. The taste was worse than the smell and Aron nearly threw the stuff straight back up. With a physical effort he swallowed then cursed in disgust. The woman held out another mug filled with clean water, Aron drained it, but the foul taste still persisted. Aron closed his eyes and sat back in the chair; his stomach churned from the brew, and his mind raced over what lay before him as he remembered all manner of childhood stories of spirits and phantoms. Gradually he managed to find calm as he focused on what he had to do and with a brief surge of vertigo he felt the potion begin to work. He opened his eyes, the room seemed to be filling with mist. He stood up and a hand reached out to take his. He looked around, at his side stood a beautiful young girl, her hand was as soft as rose petals.

“It is me, truly as I was.” Her voice sang softly in his ears. “Come with me.” Aron stepped into the mist, his hand in hers. Beyond the mist the room was the same as in the earthly world yet less substantial. He did not feel in any way different and yet the witch was so clearly changed that he could not deny the reality of the experience. He stood in wonder at the thought that he stood in the abode of the gods and spirits. *Is my father out there somewhere?*

“Your enemy waits beyond the door. Are you ready?” The witch’s words recalled Aron to his task. He looked about. He held no weapon. He reached for a stool and his hand passed through it. So no weapons then, hand to hand only. He took a deep breath, wiped the sweat from his hands on his shirt and stepped towards the door.

“I’m ready.”

“He was standing to the right of the door about five paces distant.” Her soft voice whispered then she opened the door. Aron stepped briskly through the door looking to his right. The Saxishman stood before him, looking somewhat slimmer than the man Aron had killed, his eyes started open in surprise. Aron moved directly into the attack; pivoting on his right foot he spun and swung a kick at the man's ribs taking him unawares. Aron's foot sank into the warrior's side and he fell to one knee.

Aron recovered his balance, but so did his opponent. They stood and faced each other; the surprise fading from the Saxishman's eyes to be replaced by a purposeful hatred. He bunched his shoulders and advanced on Aron, hands held low. Aron danced sideways on the balls of his feet; speed was his only advantage here, the Saxishman was heavier and stronger. Aron felt the knot of fear tighten in his stomach; this was a man in prime fighting condition. The clansman rushed forward. Aron slipped sideways, but took a glancing blow that spun him off balance. A kick followed up that thudded into Aron's leg just above the knee. Aron half fell, but righted himself to face the next attack. The warrior surged in and, at the last moment, dodged to the right, the same way as Aron dodged. He swept his arms around Aron and pulled him close to crush him in a bear hug. The powerful arms enveloped Aron pinning his left arm uselessly between their bodies. As the blood began to roar in his ears, Aron knew he had only seconds to do something. With his free hand he sought out the man's face buried as it was in Aron's chest; he found the nose and pushed two fingers up the nostrils and lifting his wrist forced the man's head up. The Saxishman snarled like a wounded dog but raised his head, loosening his grip, allowing Aron to free his left hand. Aron continued to push his head back and then struck savagely with his free hand at the man's unprotected throat. The warrior collapsed gurgling and choking. Aron stepped clear and then struck him behind the right ear with his elbow. Moving in behind the prostrate figure Aron wrapped his right arm around his neck and then, using his legs to push, wrenched his head upwards and twisted sideways in the same motion. There was a loud crack and the Saxishman stopped moving.

Aron stepped back from the body gasping for breath and another pair of arms encircled him. These arms, however, were considerably softer as were the lips that pressed themselves to his. Aron sank gratefully into the girl's grasp and let her do her will.

“So my hero. What will you do now?” The eyes were the same, but the face was aged by about forty hard years. Aron looked about him. He was back in the chair in the old woman's room. His ribs ached and his right leg didn't move freely when he tried to stand. “I don't know. I'll need to think.”

“Don't take too long, there's still a wizard out there who bears you no good will. I don't know how powerful he is, and I don't want you drawing him to me.”

“I have to go. How can I thank you?”

“I think you already did.” Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “Of course you could try again before you go.”

The End