## The Old Scale Game

## Tad Williams

“Flee or be broiled to crackling! Those are your only choices!” The monster rustled in the depths of the cave. Its voice was loud because it was large, and dry because centuries of breathing deadly fire had roughened its throat.

“Neither, if you please.” The man in armor waited as patiently as he could, hoping he was far enough back from the entrance that he would not actually broil if the tenor of conversation failed to improve. “I wish to discuss a proposition.”

“A what?” The outrage was unfeigned. “I had heard that there were knights abroad in this miserable modern age who practiced such perversities, but I never dreamed I should ever suffer such a foul offer myself! Prepare to be radiantly heated, young fool!”

“I am not remotely young, and I don’t think I’m a fool either,” the knight said. “And it’s not that kind of proposition. Ye gods, fellow, I haven’t even seen you yet, not to mention the smell of you is not pleasing, at least to a human being.”

When the dragon spoke after a longish silence, there was perhaps a touch of hurt feelings in its voice. “Ah. Not that kind of proposition.” Another pause. “How do I know that when I come out you will not attempt to slay me?”

“If I felt sure I could slay you, I wouldn’t be here talking. I give you my word as a knight that you are safe from me as long as you offer me no harm.”

“Hmmmph.” That noise, accompanied by a puff of steam, was followed shortly by the sound of something long and scaly dragging itself over stone as the dragon emerged from the cave. The knight noted that, although the great worm had clearly seen better days, his scales dingy and nicked, his color decidedly less than robust, he was still quite big enough and probably quite hot enough to keep negotiation more appealing than attack.

“I am Guldhogg,” declared the worm, each word echoing sonorously across the hillside. “Why do you seek me? Have you grown tired of living?”

“Tired of starving, to be quite frank, and even recreational drinking is beginning to lose its charms.” The knight made a courtly bow. “My name is Sir Blivet of no fixed address, until recently a retired (and impoverished) dragon slayer. This was not a happy state of affairs—in fact, I had recently begun to consider a serious return to strong drink—but lately it’s worsened. I’ve been dragged out of retirement by the people of Handselmansby in order to destroy you—they offered me a rather interesting sum...”

The dragon reared to nearly the height of the treetops. “You coward! You have foresworn yourself!” He made a rumbling noise, and a cloud of fire belched from his jaws, but before the stream of flame had gone more than a few feet Guldhogg began to cough. The fire flickered and died. A puff of steam, more wisp than cloud, floated up into the morning sky. “Just a m-m-moment,” the dragon said. “Give me a chance to c-c-catch my breath, f-foul knight.” He had stopped coughing, but had begun hiccoughing instead. At each explosion another steampuff spun lazily into the air. “Honestly, I will broil you very...” Hiccough. “I will...” Hiccough. “Broil you very thoroughly...” Again, a hiccough.

“Noble Guldhogg, most vintage of worms, spare me this tosh.” Sir Blivet sat down on the ground. He had not even drawn his sword. “The people of Handselmansby may not know you are old and unwell, but I do. You could no more broil me than you could earn a cardinal’s red hat from the pontiff of Rome.”

“Knight of a dog!” The dragon drew himself up once more. “Hmmmph. I mean: Dog of a knight! Perhaps I do have a bit of a problem with my flame just now, but I can still destroy you! Have I not my claws and teeth, or at least most of them? Can I not fly, with a fair tailwind and occasional stops for rest? Do not think me so easily defeated, insulting and unkind human person.”

“I agree, mighty Guldhogg. You are still a formidable foe, even in your age and infirmity.”

“Yes! Yes, I am!” The dragon leaned forward, his great yellow eyes narrowing. When he spoke, he sounded a bit worried. “Am I really such a laughingstock? The time was once when Guldhogg’s name was enough to set women screaming and children crying.”

“And it still is,” said Sir Blivet. “The...falloff in your skills is not widely known. In fact, the only reason it’s known to me is because I did a little investigation as I was trying to think of some way I could avoid fighting you. Because...” Blivet removed his helmet, revealing hair and beard that, although it could have been called salt-and-pepper, contained far more salt than pepper. Furthermore, although the hair on his head might once have covered a large territory, it had now largely conceded the front and top of the knight’s scalp and was retreating rather hurriedly toward the back of his head. “As you can see—and which contributes not a little to the unhappy state of my own affairs—I am not so young myself.”

Guldhogg squinted. “By my great scaly ancestors, you aren’t, are you?”

“No. I really didn’t want anything to do with this whole thing, but poverty makes powerful arguments.”

The beast shook his long head. “So despite what the advancing years have done to you, Sir Knight, you decided to attack a poor old dragon. For shame, sir. For shame.”

“Oh, for the love of my good Lord Jesu!” The man in the tarnished suit of armor shook his head in irritation. “Don’t you listen? I just said I don’t want to fight you. In fact, I would like to offer a bargain—a mutually beneficial bargain, at that. Will you pay proper attention?”

Guldhogg’s eyes narrowed again, but this time it seemed to be in careful thought instead of suspicion. At last the great worm nodded.

“I will listen, Sir Knight.”

“Call me Sir Blivet. Or even just Blivet. After all, we’re going to be working together.”

The wealthy burghers of Handselmansby, an up-and-coming market town whose Chamber of Commerce had aspirations to make it another Shoebury, or even a Thetford, threw a small celebration for Blivet at the Rump and Hock Inn, with a no-host mead bar and finger foods.

“Handselmansby is grateful for your courage and prowess, good sir knight,” said the mayor as he handed over the promised bag of gold. “But if you destroyed the terrible worm Guldhogg, where is its carcass?”

“Ah,” said Blivet. “Yes. You see, although my last blow was a mortal one, the fell beast had just enough strength to fly away, leaking blood and fire in what I promise you was a very unsurvivable sort of way.”

As the knight reached the five-mile post on the road out of Handselmansby a large shadow dropped from the sky and landed with an awkward thump beside him. It took Guldhogg a few moments to catch his breath before he could speak—he clearly hadn’t done much flying in recent years. “So it went well? They gave you the money?”

“Yes. And I have already divided it in half.” Blivet showed him the sacks and offered him one. “Here is your share.”

Guldhogg spilled some gold into his immense clawed forepaw. “Lovely. I haven’t had any of this shiny stuff for a bit. Not quite enough to lie on top of, of course, but better than nothing.” He sighed. “The only problem is, of course, now I’ve got nowhere to keep it. Having been driven out of the Greater Handselmansby Area, I mean. Where my cave was.”

Sir Blivet nodded. “I agree, that is unfortunate, but I’m certain you can find a new home somewhere else in the greater Danelaw. In fact, I’ll need to find a new place myself, because otherwise once the news of my successful dragon slaying spreads I’ll have people banging on my door every week with new quests. I doubt I shall be so lucky again in finding a reasonable partner, and I no longer have any interest in real anti-monster combat—those days are far, far behind me. To be honest I want only to find a small but regular source of income so I can settle down and enjoy my golden years. Maybe I’d even take a wife...”

Guldhogg looked a bit hurt. “You seek a new and reasonable partner, Sir Blivet? I would like to think of myself as more than just reasonable—in fact, I flatter myself that I gave more than was even bargained for. Did I not spout fire most impressively above the treetops so the townsfolk could see how fierce was our battle? Did I not bellow and roar until the welkin itself shook as if it were fevered? And now I am without a home and, except for this gold, just as in want of an income as you are.”

“I’ve never really known what a welkin is, so I’ll take your word on that part,” Blivet said politely. “But otherwise you are completely correct, honorable Guldhogg: you were a more than amenable opponent, and should we ever find ourselves in a position to do something like this again...”

After a long silent interval had passed, the dragon cleared his throat, loosing a tiny, hot cumulus. “You seem to have stopped in mid-sentence. Did you forget what you were going to say?”

“No. Come along with me for a while,” says Blivet, climbing up into his saddle. “I have just had an idea I would like to discuss with you, but I would prefer we were not observed here together, counting the people of Handselmansby’s money.”

Over the next few years, East Anglia and the Danelaw were beset with a terrible rash of dragonings. Although no citizens were killed, a great deal of property loss occurred, especially the theft of sheep and other edible creatures. The famous dragonslayer Sir Blivet found himself in constant demand from Benfleet all the way up to Torksey and beyond. Even the King of York asked Blivet to intervene when a particularly unpleasant monster (called the Wheezing Worm by the frightened townsfolk) took up residence in Kirkham Gorge. The veteran dragon-foe was able to drive the creature out again in only a matter of days, and was rewarded handsomely by the king for it, at which point the knight modestly quit York again.

Oddly, as these new boom years for monster hunting continued, they did not seem to benefit other dragonslayers quite as much as they did Sir Blivet. When Percy of Pevensey and Gwydion Big-Axe came searching for the beasts who were causing so much unhappiness in the East Midlands, they could find scarcely a trace, despite Sir Blivet’s willingness to tell them exactly where to look. The two great western wormhunters rode away disappointed, as did many others. Only Blivet seemed able to locate the beasts, and soon he could scarcely rid one area of its wormish scourge before being called to help another dragon-troubled populace, often quite close by. It seemed the dragon peril was spreading, and the knight spent far more time on his horse than under a roof.

“To be honest, Guldhogg, my friend,” Blivet admitted to the dragon one day in their forest camp, “I’m getting a bit tired of this whole dodge.” They were taking a break, having just finished adding their latest fees to a pile of chests and caskets so heavy with coin they now needed a horse-drawn wagon just to haul it all from town to town and vale to vale. “Not that it hasn’t been fun.”

Guldhogg nodded as he nibbled on a side of mutton. “I know what you mean, Bliv, old man. I wonder if we don’t need to expand our territory a bit. I swear I’m seeing the same peasants over and over.”

“Well, one peasant does look much like another,” Blivet explained. “Especially when they’re pointing up at one and screaming. They’re like foot soldiers that way.”

“It’s not just that. I think some of them recognized me during the last job. A family that must have moved here from Barrowby—you remember Barrowby, don’t you?”

“Where you stole the chancellor’s horse out of his stable and left the bones on his roof?”

“That’s the place. Anyway, when I flew over the town here yesterday, spouting fire and bellowing, I heard this fellow originally from Barrowby shout, ‘I’ve seen that bloody dragon before!’ Quite rude, really.”

“Indeed.” Blivet stared at his pile of gold where it sat on the wagon. He frowned, considering. “So you recommend pastures new?”

“Seems like a good idea. Don’t want to push our luck.”

But Blivet was tugging at his beard, still troubled. “Yes, but as I was saying, Guldhogg, it goes further than that for me. I’m a bit weary of all this tramping around. The idea of moving on to the south, or out to the West Midlands...well, to be honest, I think I’d rather have some peace and stability—maybe even find a nice woman my age and settle down. We’ve made almost enough money. One more job should secure both our financial futures.” He paused. “In fact, I believe I can even see a way we might fulfill both tasks at once—a last top-up of our bank accounts as well as a permanent residence for both of us! How is that for dispatching several birds with one projectile?”

“A home for both of us? I’m touched, Blivet. But how?”

“The thing is, although you are by far the most profitable of them, you’re not the only beast who has been making things difcult for folk around here. This is Tenth Century England, after all—a few years ago I could scarcely stand up and stretch without nudging a wyvern or a griffin or somesuch. They’ve all gotten a bit scarcer now, but there are still a good few other monsters scattered around the island.”

“Of course,” says Guldhogg. “I know that. It’s one of the reasons people don’t seem surprised when I keep turning up in new places pretending to be a different dragon than the last time. Honestly, Blivet, you sound as though you’re unhappy there are still a few of us left.”

The knight leaned close, although there was nobody in sight for miles across the windswept heath. “Just a few miles down the road, near Fiskhaven by the coast, dwells a terrible ogre by the name of Ljotunir.”

“What a strange name!” said Guldhogg.

“Yes, well, the point is, he’s apparently a nasty fellow who’s got the town of Fiskhaven all upset. I’m told it’s a lovely place, clean sea air, several very nice beachfront castles going for rock-bottom prices since the collapse of the dried herring market. And Ljotunir is tough but not invincible. He’s about twelve feet tall and quite strong, of course, but not fireproof...if you see where I’m going.”

“No,” said Guldhogg a bit sourly. “No, Bliv, my dear old bodkin, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Simple enough, Guld, my reptilian chum. We can’t settle down because everywhere we go, I make a big show of driving you away or even killing you. That means you can’t very well hang around with me afterward. But if we can drive away this ogre together...well, we’ll be paid handsomely again, but this time you won’t have done any harm, so we’ll both be able to stay on in Fiskhaven. We can buy a castle and land, settle down, and enjoy the fruits of our partnership—” he gestured to the heavily laden wagon, “—in peace and quiet, and even more importantly in one place, as befits individuals of our mature and sensible years. No more tramping.”

“And what am I supposed to eat?” asked Guldhogg. “After all, it is devouring the local livestock that usually makes me dracona non grata in the first place.” The great worm suddenly grew fretful. “You don’t really think my presence is noxious, do you, Blivvy? I mean, we’ve known each other a while now. You can speak sooth.”

“You are lovely company,” the knight said firmly. “Only the shortsighted, the dragon-bigoted, or the just plain rude would suggest otherwise. But you didn’t let me finish describing my plan, which includes provision for your sustenance. We have money, Guldy. Once the ogre has been dispatched, we will settle in Fiskhaven and become farmers! We’ll buy sheep and raise them. You may eat as many as you need, as long as you leave the little ones to grow up into bigger ones—then there will always be more sheep to eat. That’s how farming works, you know.”

“Really? That’s marvelous!” Guldhogg shook his great scaly head. “What will they think of next?”

The battle with the terrible ogre Ljotunir raged for days, ending at last in the hills high above Fiskhaven, so that the whole of the vale rang with the sounds of combat. When it was over and Sir Blivet was about to go down to the town and collect his ogre-slaying money, he noticed that Guldhogg looked preoccupied, even sad.

“What’s wrong, dear old chum?”

“It’s the ogre. He’s so miserable!” Guldhogg nodded toward Ljotunir, who was sitting against the trunk of an oak tree, making loud snuffling sounds.

Blivet took off his heavy helmet and walked across the clearing to where Ljotunir sat—the tree was leaning alarmingly from the weight.

The monster’s cheeks were indeed wet with tears. “What ails you, good sir ogre?” Sir Blivet asked. “Are you regretting having settled for a one-quarter share? You understand that the risk of this business is ours, don’t you? And that we have built up our reputation over several years? But perhaps instead you are mourning your lost reputation as an unbeatable and fearsome giant?”

“It’s not that, and it’s not the money.” Ljotunir sniffed and wiped his face with a kerchief the size of a tablecloth. (In fact, it was a tablecloth.) “It’s...well, I don’t really have any place to go anymore. I agreed to this because I didn’t want to fight. Frankly, I haven’t been myself the last century—I have the cruelest sort of aches and pains in my joints from this seaside air, Sir Knight, and the noise of the wind keeps me from sleeping most nights—but I’m still very fond of the place. Where will I go now? How will I live?” Alarmingly, the giant burst into tears again, his sobs shaking a nest full of bewildered young squirrels out of the leaning oak and onto the ground.

“Here now,” Blivet soothed him. “Surely your share of the reward money will be more than enough to purchase you a lovely stone hut in the wilderness somewhere. Perhaps you should move farther north—I hear that the arctic air of the Orkneys is lovely and dry, which should be easier on your infirmity.”

“Dry, yes, but cold enough to freeze the berries off a basilisk!” said the ogre cheerlessly. “That would play hob with my joints, now wouldn’t it?” Again his chest heaved.

“Oh, look at the poor fellow!” Guldhogg said, coming up. “He’s so sad! His little face is all scrunched up! Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Blivet examined the sobbing giant, whose “little face” was the size of the knight’s war-shield. At last Blivet sighed, turned to the dragon, and said, “I may have a solution. But first I’ll need that cask of ale.”

“Really?” asked Guldhogg, who was interested to see what odd human thing Blivet would do next. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Drink it,” the knight said. “Most of it, anyway.”

Sir Blivet had just realized that if he wanted to make his friend Guldhogg happy, they were going to have to let the now-homeless ogre join them—which meant that, once again, they would be moving on in the morning.

It didn’t seem too bad at first. Ljotunir’s presence meant that Guldhogg could take the occasional week off from menacing townsfolk, leaving that strenuous chore to the Ljotunir, and that they could even go back to some localities they had already scourged of dragons (well, one dragon, anyway), but which would now need their help with ogre infestations. But Blivet himself was not getting any days off, and they were doing a great deal of tramping from county to county.

Guldhogg couldn’t help noticing that the knight drank a great deal of ale every night before falling asleep now, or that his conversation, quite expansive only a few weeks earlier, was now reduced mostly to, “Forsooth, whatever.”

And things were getting worse.

News of the confidence game that Blivet and Guldhogg were running in the middle of England had begun to spread around the island—not among the townsfolk who were its targets but within the nation’s large community of fabulous, mythical, and semi-imaginary animals. These creatures could not help noticing that two very large members of their kind, a dragon and an ogre, had found a way not only to survive, but also to thrive. As word of this breakthrough got around, Blivet and his friends soon found that everywhere they went they were getting business propositions from various haunts and horrors down on their luck or otherwise in need of a change.

“I know it will be a bit hard on us, Blivet old friend,” said Guldhogg. “But I can’t help it—I know how these creatures feel. It’s been a long, bad time for mythical monsters, and it’s only going to get worse when the Renaissance shows up in a few hundred years.”

“But we can’t use all of them,” Blivet protested. “What right-thinking town council is going to hire a knight to slay a couple of cobbler’s elves?”

“We can find work for them. Say, look at your boots, Blivvy. Wouldn’t you like to have those re-soled?”

Blivet sighed. “Pass me that ale, will you?”

Before the year had passed, Blivet and Guldhogg had added to their enterprise (mostly at the dragon’s urging) a cockatrice, a pair of hippogriffs who were passionately in love with each other and had decided to run away from their hippogrifc families, plus an expanding retinue of shellycoats, lubber men, bargests, and suchlike other semi-mythical folk. What had once been a compact, convenient man-and-dragon partnership was becoming a sort of strange covert parade traveling from county to county across the center of England.

Guldhogg had hoped the added numbers would make their business easier, because they could now revisit places they had already saved several more times (and not only from ogres or chimeras, but also from less-feared but still unpleasant fates, like a long and painful season of being harried by bogbears). Any gain in income, however, had been offset by the need to keep their gigantic, semi-mythical menagerie hidden, on the move, and—most importantly—fed as they crossed back and forth across the English midlands.

The biggest problem, of course, was that Blivet himself had simply grown weary of marching from town to town, pretending to kill things. He may also have been slightly depressed to find that instead of revering him as a noble dragonslayer, his countrymen now viewed him as little more than a jumped-up exterminator, chasing shellycoats and leprechauns away as if they were so many rats.

Guldhogg couldn’t help noticing that Blivet was going through a great deal of ale, and that he was becoming less and less interested in keeping the now massive operation hidden. The movement of their troop from city to city was threatening to become more parade than stealthy exercise. Already a few humans had joined their train, giving the whole thing more of a feeling of a holiday fair than a serious moneymaking enterprise. Even a dragon could see that it was only a matter of time until some of the townsfolk realized just how badly they had been cozened.

And Guldhogg wasn’t the only one who could see what was coming: Blivet had begun buying his ale in bulk.

The irony, not lost on Guldhogg, was that they could probably have made more money selling the local people tickets to see all the strange animals—they were all happy enough to dump considerable sums at ragged local fairs—but Blivet and the dragon had to work from dawn until long after midnight each day just getting their charges fed and keeping them moving; any greater degree of organization would have been impossible.

Then a narrowly averted tragedy in Smethwick, when a family of werewolves left the troop to hunt for supper and ran into a children’s crusade, finally made it clear to Guldhogg that things had to change. (The near-catastrophe just seemed to make Blivet even more thirsty.)

The dragon recognized that his knightly friend was at a serious crossroads, probably one more septic basilisk bite away from leaving the now-sprawling enterprise behind in search of a calmer life. Guldhogg was an old dragon, and although he was long past his own mating days, he also recognized his friend had a need for nurturing companionship of the sort that even a vast army of bogbears, ogres, and camelopards could not provide.

Two of the newest members of the troop were articulate ravens, raucous, sly, and clever. In exchange for a few shiny articles out of Guldhogg’s now large collection, they agreed to undertake some work for him, hunting the highways and byways of Late Dark Ages Britain for a situation that met the dragon’s specifications.

One day, while the troop was camped by the River Derwent to water the selkies, the ravens returned with the news Guldhogg had been waiting for.

“Haunted Forest?” Blivet looked doubtfully at the sign (and perhaps slightly unsteadily, since he had already been into the ale that morning). Even from the outskirts, the forest the sign announced looked likely to breed nightmares. The trees of the wood grew extremely close together, and they were also extremely large and old, casting such deep shadows that it was almost hard to believe there was turf beneath them. The location beneath lowering mountains was stone silent, and the air of the little valley, far from civilization but close to a major thoroughfare, was dreadful enough to put even the basilisks off their breakfasts (truly not an easy thing to do). “Looks nasty. What monster lurks in here?” the knight asked. “And even if it might be of use to our venture, why should I go look for it instead of you or Ljotunir or one of the other large creatures? I haven’t fought anything dangerous for real in years.”

“Yes, but you are the best judge of monstrous character,” Guldhogg said soothingly. “We all admire your judgment. We also agree your ideas are the finest and most useful.”

Blivet gave him a skeptical look. “Really?”

“Oh, absolutely. Especially when you’re not drinking too much.”

The knight scowled. “You haven’t answered my question. What monster lurks in this unhallowed place?” He shivered a little in the chilly wind that seemed to whistle out of the forest itself rather than from anywhere else.

“Some kind of she-creature,” said Guldhogg offhandedly. “I couldn’t say for certain.”

“And how can anyone care about this she-creature, out in the middle of nowhere?” Blivet looked around. “Honestly, Guldhogg, who would pay to have it dispatched? There isn’t a town within twenty furlongs of this place.” In truth, to Blivet, the dragon seemed a bit nervous. “Are you sure this is the right forest?”

“Oh, absolutely. And there are excellent reasons for you to go in there,” said Guldhogg firmly. “Absolutely, there are. I’ll explain it all later, Blivvy. Go on, now. I’ll be right here, listening. Call if you need me.”

Sir Blivet gave the dragon a last dubious look, then banged down the visor of his helmet, took his lance in his arm, and spurred forward into the trees, perhaps thinking that the sooner he could get this over with, the sooner he could get back to the companionability of an ale-cask, which required no monster-bearding as a price of friendship.

The forest was just as dire inside as it appeared from the outside, shadowed and silent, with the webs of huge but not presently visible spiders swaying in the breeze. Sir Blivet felt as if eyes were watching him at every step, and he had just about decided that he was going to return to the camp and declare the she-beast unfindable when someone called him.

“Sir Knight?”

He turned, his stomach suddenly sour with unease. A robed figure stepped from the shadows and out onto the deer track his horse had been following. “Who are you?” he asked, trying to remember the boldly fearless tone he had been able to summon easily in his younger days, before he knew any better. “Are you in need of assistance?”

“I could be,” the stranger said. “Are you Sir Guldhogg?”

“Sir Gul...” Blivet shook his head in confusion. “No. Guldhogg is a friend of mine, but...” He peered at the shrouded figure, but it was hard to make out much of the face in the hood. “I am in fact Sir Blivet, semi-fabled dragonslayer. Who are you?”

“I am the She-Creature of Haunted Forest.” The newcomer threw back her hood, revealing herself to be a quite attractive short-haired woman of mature years, slender of neck and discerning of eye.

“You are the she-creature?”

“Well, I’m really more of a witch.” She gave an embarrassed laugh. “But when I first moved here several years ago, I spread the rumor of a dangerous and deadly beast in these woods so that I would be left alone. People have a tendency to get obsessed with witches, and before you know it they’re looking you over for third nipples and hunting for kindling—you know what I mean. But I’m afraid I did the job a bit too well.” She shrugged and indicated the dark forest. “Everybody moved out. Even the people in the nearby towns all migrated in fear. So here I am.”

“So here you are.” Blivet knew it wasn’t the most sensible thing to say, but he was a bit taken aback by the unexpected fairness of the she creature’s face, and her modest but sensible speech. “But why, exactly?”

“Because I live here.” She gave him a look that suggested she did not think highly of his intellect.

“No, I mean, why am I here?” Blivet was beginning to wish he’d waited until later in the day before starting on the ale. “No, that’s not right either. What I mean is, why did you and...and Sir Guldhogg arrange this meeting?”

“Ah. Fair question.” She smiled. “Who do you think a witch’s customers are, Sir Blivet? People. You want them to fear you, to be impressed by you, but you don’t want them to actually leave, because then who is one going to make love potions for? Whose sick calves and sick babies is one going to cure? For whom is one going to tell the future with cartomancy or tea leaves?”

“Ah, I see what you mean about that, I suppose. But this meeting...”

“Guldhogg opened the negotiations by raven. A good idea, since the local lord abandoned the place along with the peasants and the forest-folk, which means I haven’t been getting a lot of mail in the old way.”

“Oh, I see,” said Blivet, who was now convinced he didn’t see anything at all. “Opened negotiations.”

“Mr. Hogg told me that you and he and the rest of your...guild? Organization? Anyway, that your lot had been offered a tidy sum of money to come and dispatch the She-Creature of Haunted Forest, and that he felt honor-bound to let me know you were on your way. So I wrote back to him and offered him a business proposition, instead.”

Ah. Now it all made a bit more sense, Blivet decided. “Business. Yes. So, have you a lot of gold?”

She laughed again. Blivet couldn’t help noticing she was actually rather pretty—in a serious, mature sort of way—and even prettier when she was amused. “Ye gods, no!” said the witch. “I haven’t a ha’penny. How would I, with all of my customers gone to Rutland County and points south? No, I haven’t got any money at all. Walk with me now, and let’s talk about this.”

Blivet dismounted, although he couldn’t quite see the sense of it. Still, he found himself willing to spend more time in the company of this attractive woman. She had a personality that wasn’t what he would have expected from a witch. “But if you haven’t any money, what are we going to talk about? I mean, business-wise?”

Now it was her turn to shake her head. “Silly man. As if gold was the only valuable thing in the world. My name is Hecate, by the way. Named after the goddess.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mistress Hecate.”

“I don’t have a cent—but I am the owner of this forest by fee simple. I did a favor for the local lord—cured his daughter of the pox—so when he moved out (well, fled, really) he gave it to me, mostly to keep me from undoing his daughter’s cure, I suspect.” She cleared her throat.

“Which means I am, as is sometimes said, cash-poor but land-rich, handsome Sir Blivet, and I would like to offer you and Sir Guldhogg a mutually beneficial alliance.”

It took them a year and a surprisingly large fraction of their savings to build a fence around the forest, which although not large was still a forest. Workers had to be trucked in by wagon for all the jobs that couldn’t be performed by redcaps and hunkypunks. Then they needed another year for clearing and building, with the result that the Dark Ages had almost ended by the day the grand opening finally arrived.

“I still don’t think it’s fair,” the dragon was saying in a sullen tone. “After all, it was my idea. I led you to each other. I arranged it all, more or less. And you’re still going to call it Blivetland?”

“Don’t sulk, Guldhogg,” said Hecate. “You haven’t seen the surprise yet.”

“He’s always that way,” said Sir Blivet. “He doesn’t drink, either.”

“And neither should you,” said Guldhogg, still grumpy.

“Don’t be mean, Guldy,” the witch said. “My Blivvy’s been very abstemious lately.”

“Too bloody busy to be anything else,” the knight agreed. “Do you know how much work it was just setting up the concession stands and teaching boggarts to count?”

“Well, it was either that or putting them on display, and you know what they did when we tried that. We can’t have them flinging boggart dung at the paying customers, can we?”

“Well, I think it’s time for us to get out and meet the public,” Blivet said. “Come on, Guldhogg. I’ve got something to show you.”

Considering how deserted this entire stretch of the north had been only a couple of short years ago, it was quite impressive to see the crowds lined up hundreds deep all along the great fence, waiting to enter through the massive front gate. The dragon was all for letting them in immediately—“Money is burning a hole in their pockets, Blivet!”—but the knight forbade it until a last chore had been done.

“Just pull this rope,” he told the dragon. “Go on, old chum, take it in your mouth and yank.”

Guldhogg, who had been gazing with keen regret at the carved wooden sign over the gate, the one that read “Blivetland,” shrugged his wings and pulled on the rope. An even larger sign, this one painted on canvas, rolled down to hang in plain view of the entire assembly.

“Oh,” said Guldhogg, sounding quite overcome. “Oh, is that...is that really...?”

“Yes, silly, it’s you,” said Hecate, elbowing him in his substantial, scale-covered ribs. “Well, except we’re calling you ‘Guldy Hogg,’ because it sounds friendlier.” She and Blivet and Guldhogg looked up at the gigantic sign rippling in the spring breeze, with its huge and colorful painted representation of Guldhogg himself, face stretched in a friendly grin. “It’s everywhere, you know,” she said.

“What is?”

“Your picture, silly. You’re the ofcial mascot of Blivetland. We have Guldy Hogg souvenir tunics, tea towels—even hats!” She took one of the latter from behind her back and handed it to Sir Blivet, who put it on with only the smallest show of reluctance. The protruding nostrils of the dragon face on the hat looked almost like the round ears of some bizarre rodent. “It’s a wonderful likeness, Guldy!” cried Hecate. “So handsome!”

As Guldhogg stared at his own face perched atop his friend’s head, the gates of Blivetland opened and the first crowd of paying customers pushed their way in, hurrying forward into the forest to see Griffin Island and Nessie’s Cove and ride on Guldy Hogg’s Wild Wing Ride, which consisted of large tubs whirling around on ropes, the whole thing powered by Ljotunir the ogre spinning a sizeable potter’s wheel assembly with his strong and astoundingly ugly feet. Excited people seemed already to have filled every festive corner of the forest, and the vendors were already selling small beer and goblin goodies hand over fist.

The sound of money clinking into Blivetland’s coffers put the three founders in a very benign mood.

“Isn’t this better than tramping around the country?” asked Hecate. “We stay here and the country comes to us!”

“But I thought I was going to be allowed to retire,” growled Sir Blivet. “Instead, you will work me into my quickly approaching grave.”

“Nonsense. You and Guldy only have to put on two brief shows a day—well, three on Saturdays—and he’s the one who has to do all the costume changes, pretending to be all the other dragons you slew.”

“They were all him anyway!” the knight protested.

“Well, everyone loves to see the two of you. It wouldn’t be the Merriest Place on Ye Olde Earth if you pair weren’t pretending to try to kill each other at one and four every afternoon.” She leaned over and kissed Blivet’s whiskery cheek. “And just think—no more traveling!”

After that, Guldhogg decided he wanted to try a funnel cake, so they set off toward the Faerie Food Courte together—the knight, his lady, and his best friend. The sounds of fable being turned into coin rose all around them, a seemingly basic exchange but with an additional dividend of happiness to all parties. Even in the tenth century, that made for a pretty good state of affairs.