

It's always the Goldest Right Before Dawn

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Brett@Paufler.net
www.Paufler.net

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It's always the Goldest Right Before Dawn

I acquired this at an estate sale -- some boutique shop leprechaun jeweler who finally passed on. I am told it has historical value -- some social worth, if you will.

I am impressed, sir! Your sources are good. I hung the strand in the window not ten minutes ago.

Yes, I agree, sir. It is one of a kind. Pure elvin craftsmanship, I am told.

No, sir. Please, put away your gold.

Yes. Yes. It is for sale, sir. Or that is to say, it will be for sale, but first we must come to an accord.

We must come to an agreement, sir.

Please, sir. You rush. Now is not the time to bargain.

It is not a matter of gold, sir.

Nor is it a matter of doubling or tripling your offer, sir. Gold is not the issue.

Time, sir. May I have a moment of your time, sir?

Truthfully, sir. What is the hurry? What are a few moments

for those such as we? For those of us blessed to live for eons?

All I ask is for a few moments, sir. Please, lend me your ears.

Please, sir, patience. Once again, it is not a question of the heft of the bag. You could bring forth a parade of carts full to the brim with gold, and as tempted as I might be, I would not be at liberty to accept.

The time, sir, is not yet ripe. Besides in your haste, sir, you have only informed me that the strand is worth far more than you have already offered, perhaps even more than I would have asked. Clearly the only way we may ever hope to settle upon a fair price is if you to allow me the leisure of...

Thank you, sir, I shall. I shall name my price, but not yet.

I am not at liberty to do so, sir. Not until both of us know that I know the provenance of the piece -- it's history, if you will -- and it's worth.

I am sorry, sir.

I have been commissioned, sir.

No, I am sorry, sir. It cannot be avoided.

Yes, sir.

Of course, sir.

I assure you, I will endeavor to keep the flapping of my lips to a minimum, sir.

If you would be so kind as to allow me to continue, sir.

Thank you, sir. Perhaps... Ah, I see your second is already on top of it. And the shades. Can't be too careful. Excellent thinking.

And you trust him, sir?

Completely, sir?

With your life, sir? Well, that is a rare honor indeed.

Of course, sir. I apologize. Need I remind you that I myself am under the protection of the Guild -- and of both custom and honor?

Once again, sir, forgive me. A thousand apologies. Shall I humble myself further for my insolence? Or would you prefer that

I get on with it?

As you wish, sir. Shall we start with the basics?

My apologies, sir. It was meant as a rhetorical question. I did not intend to imply any ignorance on your part. It is one of the problems inherent in conversing in a second language. Let me make it up to you somehow. May I offer you a chair? Some wine? A drink? A bite to eat?

Very well, sir, I shall simply begin. The strand is of elvin origin -- in design and workmanship...

I apologize, sir. I have been in the human realms for far too long. It is a fine piece of elvin-craft. I judge it to be a solid tenth-weight, but after factoring in for intricacy of design and lightness of being, even without the enchantment it would be worth hundreds.

Please, sir! Patience. Now is not the time. Besides, there is the enchantment. It is an authentic elvin hair-strand of house... unknown.

Please, sir. If you will indulge me... of house unknown. Did you know that a seer -- a true seer, one more gifted than I -- could read the strand back through dozens upon hundreds of layers?

But of course you knew that, sir. I must remember to whom I am speaking. But even though a true seer could read the strand back through time immemorial, my meager sight only allows me to see that which was written in the last cycle. When you get down to it, that's probably why I was chosen for this commission. That, and my good luck for having locating my shop in this town so many years ago. But personally, I like to think it, also, had something to do with my rugged good looks, charming personality...

Sir -- and I see now that I use the term loosely -- this is the commission. No price will be named, no offer of gold accepted, until I have told the story from beginning to end and the girl's grievances have seen the light of day.

I don't know, sir. Believe it or not, it is what the humans say.

I suppose bits of their speech have rubbed off onto me.

Yes, sir, exactly -- like dirt or grime. But back to business, shall I point out the runes as we come to them? Or do you have the sight?

I apologize, sir. No slight was intended.

Yes, sir, of course.

Forgive me, sir. I shall point them out as we come to them, the better that you might follow along.

As you see, sir, the first rune is a number: 187. It is a curious start, don't you think, sir? Truthfully, I know little of these things, but aren't the tales woven into these strands supposed to start with something poetic and airy like FLOWERS IN BLOOM, AUTUMN IN THE AIR, or SNOW FALLING SILENTLY ON DESPAIR?

Well, to me it is an odd start, sir. But whatever. Now, as I read this rune, I like to picture the family -- the mother, the father, and the girl child -- having breakfast...

The gold is good, sir, but you can only stretch it so thin.

It means, there are not as many details as one might like and one must improvise the rest. But as I was saying before you cut me off, sir...

I will own up to it, sir. I like telling a good tale, and a good tale I shall tell, so there is no sense fighting it. Have a stool. Have a drink. If you grow hungry, say the word. But no price shall be named until the truth hiding in the gold is told.

Picture her then, sir, sitting down to breakfast. Perhaps you can place the scene easily: a fancy resort -- the best on the hill -- and the family gathered around the table for a great morning feast. But it is not the scene of domestic bliss and tranquility that one might hope or expect. sir. Nay, storm clouds were rising...

I believe it is metaphorical, sir, that revolt and unrest were in the air.

No, sir. The strand is not that detailed, but I do have other sources of information...

As a mother instructs a child, it is not unrealistic to suppose

that I -- as one who has obtained the strand by peaceful and lawful means -- have not also engaged in a correspondence...

And I have asked around, sir.

This I cannot say, sir.

The exact quote...

Oh yes, I have the quote on the highest of authorities, sir.

But once you have heard what I have to say on the matter, perhaps you would care to enlighten me to the contrary?

As I surmised, sir. Then you will simply have to accept what the girl has to say. After hours of getting nowhere and going nowhere, the girl finally declared in frustration, "A few days to myself, after 187 years of obediently doing as I was told, is that too much to ask for?" Just a few days to herself, sir, it doesn't really sound like too much, now? Does it, sir? I have a son, you know...

Yes, you must listen to this, sir. I can understand how... how a father might feel. Really, I can. In a few short decades, my son will begin to trade in gold. He can hardly wait. But he does not know. He does not know that silver is not gold. They are none the same, but he does not know -- not really. He has not the experience, so how could he know? And by the same token, sir, how could she have known that which she had never had the opportunity to learn?

Sir. Please. I believe her house...

Yes, sir, as remains -- and will remain -- unnamed. I believe her house has had some contact with humans. If my sources are to be trusted -- and I believe that they are -- some of the girl's playmates are already dead and gone.

Yes, sir. Perhaps if her house had avoided all contact, things would have worked out differently -- for the better. But what is done is done.

Actually, it is a dwarven saying, sir.

Yes, I agree, sir, quite redundant. But the pertinent point remains; for the girl, 187 years of age seemed quite old indeed.

Perhaps we should save such a debate for later, sir, and for now merely accept the statement as an adequate reflection of the

girl's feelings at the moment -- however ill-informed they may have been.

The next major rune is NOT ONE GOLD, sir.

There are a double-score-odd major runes, sir, and thousands of minors...

Yes, it was agreed, sir. Which is to say, I was commissioned to go over the major runes, and to replace the minors with flavor -- to translate as it were. I would be happy to go over every rune if that is your desire, sir?

An excellent decision, sir. NOT ONE GOLD...

Yes, sir. Of course, sir.

Undoubtedly, sir.

Understood. As you say, sir, I am sure the rune was intended to be taken literally and not to be misconstrued -- as so often is the case -- as a sign that the... gentleman in question -- the father, that is -- was thought of by his own flesh and blood as a skinflint, a cheapskate, or a miser. But then, it is always possible the gentleman in question was descended of leprechaun stock.

I am sorry, sir.

No, sir. It was not my intent to insult.

A thousand pardons, sir. The girl, her father...

Of course us leprechauns...

I'm sorry, sir. If I may? It was not my intent to infer that you, that she...

As you say, sir. Perhaps I should simply move on.

The daughter, sir, the girl had asked for a little gold -- a stipend, an allowance. But the father denied her request, saying that she should have planned ahead -- as proof that she was old enough to be on her own and that this request of hers was not the result of some childish whim, or as the human's would say, a thing that was done on the spur of the moment.

Yes, I agree, sir. Rather clever of them. Now, despite her father's coarseness...

I believe it is accurate, sir... considering.

If I may continue, sir?

Understood, sir.

Despite the father's coarseness...

It is what she says, sir.

As you would have it, sir.

It is at this juncture, sir, that the mother gives the child a GIFT, a PRICELESS TREASURE. She refers, of course, to this very hair-strand that I hold. But then, things would be very amiss, indeed, if that were not the case. No comment, sir? Very well. I must confess a desire to stall. The next revelation is not very... um, complementary towards the daughter, towards the girl, sir. It does not speak highly of her. As is traditional, early in the weave the strand's provenance is denoted and the matriarchal line is honored as far back as the weaver can remember.

It is not merely an artistic function, sir. Rather, it serves a practical purpose, for it renews the gold and refreshes the weave. But the girl only goes back three generations to her mother's mother's mother. It is a quandary of sorts as to why she chose to do this as there is no break in the house... or at least, none of which I am aware. I trust none that you know of, sir?

Of course, sir. One would need to know the specific house in question to answer such a question. Unfortunately, that information is not available at this time.

Yes, sir.

Of course, sir.

I misspoke, sir.

I should have said that the knowledge of the house goes with the sale, sir. I am old. My mind is not what it used to be. Alas, even if I wished to remember such a thing, I am sure all particulars of the strand -- its weaver, its house, and even its buyer -- shall drift from my memory before the night is out.

True, sir. I shall, of course, retain small residual bits and pieces. But the truth, which the words convey, is real enough. When we are done -- assuming we have come to an understanding, an agreement, and an accord -- there is no spell, nor coin, nor offer

of reward that will ever cause me to consider these things again.

I am a leprechaun, sir. I have given my word... more than once now. I should hope that would be enough.

Let us continue, sir. This moment -- this brief, cursory, almost token recollection of the matriarchal line -- does not speak highly of the child. And although it would be easy enough to skip this slight, I highlight it here and now, sir, so that you may be convinced that the rest of what I relate is unbiased and true.

Yes, sir. That, too, is part of my commission.

Yes, sir, the truth.

Of course, sir, as I see it, as I understand it.

If you wish to press the point, sir, I shall not argue. We all have our biases.

And some truths are more easily seen than others, sir. As a for instance, in this particular case the mother would appear to disagree with the father as to the child's readiness to go off on her own, for as she presents the strand to her daughter, the mother says, "This strand was always to be for you when you were old enough... and now, you are old enough."

To be sure, sir, quotes are difficult to weave -- more time consuming, I imagine, than anything else. But the girl seems to be partial to them as she utilizes them more frequently than is typically the case in these strands.

Yes, sir, I believe the quote was intended to be exact. Why do you ask? Do you have reason to question the veracity of the words in question?

Of course, sir. I understand. You can appreciate that I share your same sentiments... of idle curiosity.

No, sir. As I said before, with any luck all memory of these... particulars will soon pass -- and with them any questions or concerns -- except, of course, for a short record of the transaction.

It is Guild custom to maintain records of all sales, sir, should I ever need proof that I upheld my end of any given bargain... but details of the house and whatnot need not be recorded. In short, with a bit of luck, before the night is out, I too shall soon be

FREE... AT LAST from these concerns; which is not, uncoincidentally, the next rune that the girl uses.

Oh yes, sir. Quite unequivocally, FREE... AT LAST.

Yes, sir. As a slave turned free, as an indentured servant at the end of their time, as a prisoner on parole, as a captive released after armistice: FREE... AT LAST.

I do not believe that was the intent, sir. There was no abuse, no hardship, nor serious complaint of which I am aware. You know how it is with youth these days, sir. Her emotions were talking, nothing more. She was 187, after all. I can only imagine she'd spent one or two of them anxiously awaiting this moment.

No, sir. If I was not clear, let me reiterate. I do not believe a break with her relations was ever a part of her agenda. It is clear she intended to meet with her family for breakfast the next day. In fact, she was looking forward to it. Her father had promised her some financial support -- some gold, sir -- at that juncture. And truthfully, as he had always been kind, generous, and supportive, she had not saved for this day. In fact, she was quite taken by surprise at his refusal for coin... and as such, in dire financial straights.

Dire straights, sir? In rough waters, uncharted territory. In foreign, hostile, and unfamiliar lands without friends or fortune.

Yes, sir, you are correct: all the better to live her dream. It is uncanny, but her father says nearly the same thing the next day...

Undoubtedly, sir, an obvious reaction. What any father might say in similar circumstances.

If I may continue, sir? The next major section starts with the rune: SKIING ALONE

Chronologically, by thematic elements, sir, as is usually the case in these strands.

You are a keen one, sir. I have not forgotten the details of every strand I ever read, nor the secrets to be found in every ring, bracelet, or charm that I have ever sold. A leprechaun's memory is selective -- based on the needs of the moment and the deal at hand.

Asked to forget, and we can... if the price is right. It is why we are so often used as messengers. But to be honest, that is a demeaning profession -- looked down upon among our kind as something akin to working in a brothel.

Oh, no, sir! I must be more careful. Rest assured, there is nothing of the sort to come.

Nothing, sir. Nothing.

Couches, beds, sleeping arrangements...

Sir! I assure you, it is mere logistics. Do not fret. There is not sense jumping ahead. We shall get to it...

That I do not know, sir.

The strand does not say, sir.

Nor did she say, sir. And if I may, I did not ask.

If I may continue, sir?

She was bored, sir. She had come to ski, but then she had hoped for more. And after being granted her freedom...

If but for the day, sir. Having been given her freedom, she had hoped for more.

I do not know, sir. Fun, perhaps. You know how some things are: you desire a thing, an outcome -- like a good match for one's daughter, sir. And then, when the day is finally at hand...

Has finally arrived, sir.

Clearly I speak in generalities, sir. What father would not desire a good match for their daughter?

So you see my point, sir?

At first she was bored, sir, but then comes EXCITEMENT and RESCUE followed quickly by INJURED PRIDE. Three major runes in rapid succession, sir. It is when she meets the love interest of the strand for the first time...

The word love is mine, sir. She mentions it nowhere.

That is a good saying, sir. We will get to it in a moment, for she, herself, uses those words quite often. How seldom the apple... Forgive me, sir, you are quite correct. Since the girl uses the word love nowhere, I shall not use the word either -- certainly not in this

scene, not at this moment. For if I were to search for a word to fit the moment at hand, hate might be a better choice. The insolence of the... creature. Here she was, of House... Royal, and to be touched! Touched!

Oh yes, sir, and with gloved hands no less as if she were carrying some contagion. The insolence of the beast.

You comprehend her feelings quite well, sir. She even slanders him on purpose at this juncture by calling him an ICE TROLL -- stony and cold. Can you see him? Towering over her as she lies fallen in the snow, trapped by her bindings, clumsy in her skis, and then he appears: red eyes sullen behind a mask, like a skeletal warlord's. Oh, there is no love here, sir. She is seeing red -- overcome with rage. But likely, the lad was laughing.

You take objection to the boy's laughing, sir?

Oh. Oh. I see, sir.

Um, it was just an unexpected insistence, sir.

Or rather, a point of fact, sir.

No. No, sir. Just unexpected. Let me regroup for a moment. The troll, the wretched accursed creature that he is?

Yes, this monstrosity, this defilement, this abhorrence, this affront to Nature itself was laughing? Yes, that is how it was. The girl had fallen, crossed her skis, and he... the troll had come, but rather than help, he stood there laughing. She was infuriated. Being laughed at by... a representative of her host, a representative of the resort, laughing at her, and most decidedly not helping her, not bending to the task at hand, not humbling himself, nor showing respect as he should. And only when his mirth was satisfied did he finally ask, "Can I help you?" Not may. Not what is proper. Not taking it upon himself, but forcing her to ask, to beg, to plead. If looks could kill...

Oh, I assure you, sir, in that moment her sentiments matched your own to a tee, to the letter, that is to say, without variance. Everything about him, she detested. His stupid wolf hat. His guttural cant. His leering eyes...

I may have taken too many liberties, sir. That last part was

my own. I added it for color, to set the mood. Knowing what wretched, uncouth beasts these snow trolls are, it seemed only fitting.

No, sir. I am sorry. I cannot help you there. I do not know of his homeland.

Ah, but, sir. Perhaps, he... comes from the land of ice and snow from the midnight sun where the hot springs blow. Na, na, naah-na! Na, na, naah-na!

I'm sorry, sir. I thought we could use a bit of levity to lighten the moment.

It is a human chant, sir.

Mean, sir? I have no idea, but its name is the "Immigrant Song."

Perhaps, sir. Perhaps, subconsciously. But if that was his goal, part of his agenda, you cannot fault him for that. Many a leprechaun would trade all of their gold, but for the chance to enter the Realms.

Unfortunately, sir, it is not an offer I can accept at the present.

Nor in conjunction, sir.

Perhaps you would be so kind...

Yes, sir, of course.

Just a few items and we can move on, sir, mere bookkeeping, as it were. The troll's hat was wild and screaming, all the rage.

I detest them too, sir, but it helps to denote his rebellious and, not to mention, reckless character.

Personally, sir, I would have thought it a reference to a Wolf Brigade, by one name or another, but I am aware of no such relevant entity.

Yes, sir. I have checked. Nothing relevant. Sometimes a hat is just a hat.

No, sir. The saying is, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

I don't know, sir. I think the dwarves nailed it best with it is what it is.

You've got that right, sir. The point is, the troll, and it is easy

to see him as a troll here -- snorting, unkempt, probably hadn't bathed in weeks...

Yes, you are correct, sir. More likely months...

If ever. And his disrespect, sir, his profound, his profane disrespect: how could he not note her rank? Her house? Her standing?

Her lift ticket, sir, pinned to her jacket for all to see: front of the line, first class, charge it to the room, no questions asked... Now, there's an aspect you may be able to shed some light on, sir. Were there any... extraneous charges?

Of course, sir. How would you know? My mistake. Still, for all of his faults and shortcomings, I like the troll in this moment.

His open defiance, sir. His rebellious spirit. His arrogance. I can almost see him striking a surrealistic pose, as he arches his back and laughs towards the heavens, "You are nothing here. This is my mountain!" While the poor terrified girl scampers to get her skis back on -- no thanks to the ski patrol, I might add -- and flustered, reeling, still off balance, she heads down the slope long before she is ready merely so she can be done with the troll, while the foul, uncouth, unkempt beast calls after the girl's retreating form, taking the opportunity to add insult to injury, "Let me know if you need any more help in the future! If you do, don't hesitate to ask!" And this is the girl's first impression of the troll, sir, frozen in time for all to see.

No. Why would she have started weaving at this juncture, sir? She hated the brute.

I can feel it, sir. The gold doesn't lie.

Hated, detested: she was likely trying to figure out how to get the insolent reptile fired.

Yes, or worse, sir. Elvin justice can be harsh.

I did use the word justice, sir. As in, his just desserts.

Ah, you do see, sir, you do understand how the human mind works.

The relevance, sir, is that at this moment of their first

meeting, the girl is taking great pains to show how detestable and loathsome she found the troll to be.

Yes, sir, of course. Were it but to last. Were it but to last. But then, it did, sir, for awhile, all the way through their second meeting, in fact.

Yes, sir. You see, the girl had originally desired her freedom so that she might join unfettered and without restraint in the community of the lodge: what the locals call APRÈS SKI. Unfortunately, her first experience of this was as an OUTSIDER -- hardly what she had hoped for.

Après Ski, sir? It is to be taken literally, sir, as after skiing, and nothing more. It is seen by many in the community as an integral part of the ski experience -- to some it is even more important than actually going down the slopes. It is no coincidence that I do a thriving business during the day. Not everyone is into speed sports. There are ski widows and the like...

You know, sir, if I may be so bold, I have sometimes found it simply easier to assume that they are all poets.

Yes, sir, like some hackneyed bard repeating the same sorry phrases over and over, as if all the song was a chorus and the story understood and assumed.

If that is your desire, perhaps we should continue then, sir?

She entered the lodge, sir, tired, exhausted, and alone -- not to mention a little annoyed with the so called "help," which the lodge had chosen to employ. But then, being angry is no way to endear oneself to new acquaintances... especially among the humans. You have not doubt seen them, sir -- their easy way, the way they dance about without rhyme or reason, a drink in their hand, a smile on their face, as they talk to someone they have never met before as if they were conversing with some long lost friend whom they just simply adore.

Nor I, sir, nor I. But it is their way. And you can imagine how lost the girl must have felt to confront such a scene as she stood all alone, just outside the warmth of the fire's glow, just

outside the circle, perhaps with a warm cup of hot chocolate in hands as a welcoming gesture, perhaps two -- watching and waiting. It can be a problem, sir, waiting for that personal invitation, that which is your due in a society that does not recognize your due, looks down on your due... or perhaps even worse, holds that everyone is equal and therefore equal in their due.

Of course, it's not true, sir!

But they believe it, sir. And there by the fire, the information her lift ticket displayed would only have hindered her cause: all that privilege, all that rank. In a society of equals... well, let's just say, don't believe what they say about the Brotherhood of the Mountain.

That all are equal and welcome, sir, or so they claim, but all are not. You see, although I have not personally been to the fire she describes, I have experienced the circle with which she was confronted. And for our kind, it can be a very foreign affair. I think the best way to describe it would be as a sort of reverse meritocracy with those who are least able running the show.

Yes, or the least desirable, sir.

Ah, yes. You comprehend it well, sir. This was the troll's domain: his circle, his fire, his hearth, and his home. The least -- everywhere else -- were of the highest rank here...

The Rule of the Fist, sir. In these civilized times, does not the Rule of the Fist favor those who have nothing to lose? If one is completely devoid of honor, respect, glory, or fortune, what danger can there be of losing it? For one cannot lose, what one has never found.

Yes, sir. I believe that the foregoing accurately reflected the troll's condition, his prospects, and his lot in life... at that particular juncture, sir.

Don't ask me, sir. She is not my daughter. Perhaps, she desired to see how the other half lived... or perhaps, she had listened to too many bardic tales. Isolated, pampered, and alone: you know how those rich girls can be. And ultimately, it is

unlikely she had an accurate concept of the harsh realities she was confronting. But, no matter...

No matter, sir. There was one among them, who understood the girl's plight -- privileged as she was -- and took pity upon the girl.

In this situation, sir, pity is the correct word. How long would the girl have stood there if she had not been welcomed by a friend? Or, as she says, FRIENDSHIP WELCOMED. The friend, let us call this other girl her friend, though I think we both know who she is and that her life has been made miserable in the interim. And why, sir? Because she was a FRIEND to the girl of the strand in a time of isolation, confusion, and need.

You speak strongly, sir, as might an interested party. Then, let me speak strongly as well, sir. Make no bones about it...

I do not know, sir. Perhaps it refers to the uncertainty inherent in casting skeletal runes? Or if you will excuse the euphemism, perhaps it refers to unjustly "dispatching" a messenger merely because one does not like the message he carries and thereafter reducing him to bones? Or as perhaps may be more fitting, it is easy enough to see two orcs fighting over a bone never once considering that there is no meat to the matter...

Enough, sir!

Make no bones about it, sir! Figure it out on your own! These are part of the mysteries she found... No! That she finds so intriguing. And the fact -- which cannot be denied -- is that her friend has been treated ill for her efforts! Very ill indeed, sir! And, for what, may I ask? Being kind? Being thoughtful? Being noble of heart?

I know, what I said, sir!

Make no bones about it! This IS my commission! And if you want the strand, you will listen... sir.

Outside the circle, helpless and confused, the girl weighed her options. She could run away and leave with her tail between her legs... in disgrace, sir. Or she could continue to wait

unnoticed... unnoticed, sir. Beneath the notice of. Unworthy of notice. And from this moment of helplessness, of hopelessness, the friend comes to her rescue -- simply and easily, sir, with style and grace. For, she asks the girl for a favor.

Yes, incredulous, sir. The friend to-be asks the girl for a favor: some help with sewing on a button, repairing a tear, straightening a zipper on her jacket, or some such trifling thing. Such a thoughtful gesture. Such a kind gesture. She did not need to do this. Have you seen the friend's handiwork, sir? Of course, you have. Her needlework has won awards... even in the Realms. She has gone on tours, you know. Perhaps inviting her...

I am sorry, sir. No, that is not part of my commission. I have overstepped my bounds. I apologize, sir. Securing preference for the friend is not part of my commission. Though immunity...

Strange, bad, ill luck has befallen this friend as of late, sir. And the girl thinks, nay, she knows... Well, I think you comprehend, sir.

As you wish, sir. Even though the fiend...

I agree, sir. It is a bit... bulky. But it would be unjust to use one name, and not use them all.

Of course, sir, anonymity is best. So let us see, where was I? Ah, yes. Even though the friend had come to the girl's rescue, the girl was still cautious...

Of course, sir. Cautious, ever vigilant -- rebellious to be sure -- but in the end, the girl was a product of the Realms. And as it should be, she was wary of this... interloper?

I thought you might like the designation, sir. The girl was understandably cautious. But the friend -- quite reasonably -- pointed out, "How can I repay you a favor if there is no favor for me to repay?"

Had I not made that clear, sir? But certainly you must know, the friend had studied in the Realms.

I know not which house, sir. I do not believe the house in question is or was, in any way, associated with the girl's.

The point is, sir, that the friend knew the way -- the customs

-- and quickly formed an ALLIANCE with the girl.

What else can a favor repaid with a favor be called, sir?

Perhaps the girl was not as cynical as you appear to be, sir. Having accepted the friend's offer to mend her clothes -- a task which one could only view as demeaning if they were not indeed to be friends -- the girl was quite prepared to trust her new friend: completely and totally. And in this atmosphere of openness, while the girl worked the needle, the pair of them talked... of what, I do not know. Girl talk, I suppose.

You would know as well as I, sir. There can be no doubt the Realms were mentioned, heritage and houses discussed.

How else would they know where and how they stood in relation to the other, sir? You would not have the one thinking the other was accustomed to acting as a seamstress when she may have just as likely been a full blooded princess -- heir to the throne? Nor can I imagine you would have the other thinking the one was a gifted courtesan, celebrated throughout the lands, when in actuality she had simply been a brief guest in a small house on the edge of obscurity? Nothing more than a tourist really, a traveler.

Of course not, sir. Now, what was that clever saying you mentioned a while back? Ah, yes. Now I remember. "Do not talk of things which you do not know." Such a popular elvin saying, it even has it's own a rune, which just so happens to be woven into the strand at this very juncture. The friend must have pushed too far, probed too deep, and asked too much.

No. I do not think that is the case, sir. The friend is labeled as being a member of the fair folk. If we both did not know she was human, perhaps I would try to throw off the trail and hint that the friend was a half-breed... or fey'an. By the old usage, that would be technically true, would it not, sir? But this would obscure the honor that the friend has been given, because even as a human she is designated as FAIR.

It means, sir, that one must take these little... irregularities, these trifling faux pas, which humans are so prone to make, with a grain of salt.

I imagine, sir, it makes things all the more palatable. But if I may continue?

When the mending was done, you will not be surprised to learn that the friend immediately repaid her debt and invited the girl into the circle, right next to the fire -- a place of honor, sir -- and not uncoincidentally a place next to the troll, which is to say, a place next to the HERO.

Yes, sir, they are her words.

Yes, sir, HERO.

Well, I warned you of its coming, sir.

Of course, sir, a hero is a relative thing. I imagine there is many a goblin hero named Grog...

I must remind you, sir, it was not I who labeled the troll a hero, but if we were to be fair...

Yes, sir, fair. If we were to be fair, we might acknowledge that among his own kind, he is indeed a hero.

Without a doubt, sir. Having captured the heart of an elvin princess...

I misspoke, sir. But then to those of the horde, is not every elvin maiden a princess?

You take affront, sir. A thousand apologies. I did not intend to imply that you are intimately familiar with the ways of the horde...

Or that a mere maiden could in any way be considered the equal of a princess. It is my mistake, sir. A thousand more apologies. Please have the generosity to overlook my many linguistic shortcomings...

And fumbling attempts at humility, sir. But if I may be so bold as to make an observation to which I hope we both can agree? Having nothing to lose and everything to gain, the troll was at the bottom of the heap, and therefore in the reverse meritocracy which ruled this hearth, he was the uncrowned king.

You must remember, sir, he had been working at the resort for years, and all the while this fire had been as his own.

Oh, I am sure he had a room elsewhere, sir, but having a room and living there are two different things. Perhaps much like having and holding a thing, sir... such as a hair-strand.

As you wish, sir. The troll is described here once again as cold and hard -- like the stone chimney, which surrounded the fire. There was no danger of his flesh succumbing to the heat, nor could the roaring blaze ever hope to warm his heart -- an allusion to the complete lack of any fiery passions on both parties' parts, I imagine. Which is to say, she felt he was impervious to any feeling or emotion. And in return, the girl hated the troll with all of her heart... with her very being, with all of her life and breath, with a contempt that arose from the very bowels of her soul. I think you will agree, sir, her emotions ran quite deep, considering she had only met the creature a single time before.

Well put, sir. I must agree. Many a creature I have learned to hate without ever meeting them, but whether this, in fact, does me justice, I know not. But let us move on. As you may have gathered, the friend -- the human whose jacket the girl mended -- was also a friend of the troll. And after winding through the crowd, the friend formally introduced the girl to the troll. I believe it would be standard elvin convention to mention any debt at this juncture, and no doubt the friend was regaling the troll with exciting tales of needlecraft and sewing daring do...

Sarcasm, sir. I had thought by the context it would be obvious.

It is my own addition, sir, my own elaboration. I am sure the friend was all decorum when she formally declared her recently acquired debt.

Well now, that is a good question, sir. Was the troll indebted to the girl, as well? By the terms of proper and courtly etiquette, I would have to assume that he was. But in his own mind, there was not a chance of this. I believe his exact words upon hearing the friend's explanation of the arrangement -- and as recorded for all posterity -- were, "Next you'll be telling me she braided your hair." Clearly he was -- and perhaps still is -- not one to acknowledge

debts of honor, sir.

Oh, but she is truly a friend here, sir, for she shuts the troll down.

You show a morbid flight of fancy, sir. No, nothing of the sort. The friend merely told the troll, no doubt in an offhand manner, “Do not talk of things of which you do not know.” You know, now that I come to think of it, I can’t help but wonder if that isn’t just an easy rune to weave. I mean alone in the woods, you elves don’t really go on like that? “Good morning, dear.” “Do not talk of things...

Just a joke, sir.

Yes. Yes. Of course, sir. I shall endeavor to remember that I am not funny... except for perhaps to look at?

Very well, sir. But you cannot say I did not try.

Touché, sir.

Oh, no, sir. I appreciate your lightness, and should you be of the mind, I heartily welcome more of the same. Now, let me see. Where were we? Ah, yes. The troll was not up on all these courtly niceties, and so he merely grumbled, “No sense in opening my mouth at all.” And then, I believe, he simply grabbed the mug of chocolate out of the girl’s hand and turned away.

Well, that had been her intent, sir, to bring a gift, an offering. And troll or not...

Would you expect less of a hordling, sir? Of course, I, personally, am curious as to the exact number of mugs involved.

She is not very clear, sir. In some instances she uses the plural, in others the singular, and in still others the sharing of a cup is mentioned... or at least implied.

I must agree with you there, sir. The reading of runes is hardly an exacting science and certainly not a venue in which one is expected to obsess over grammar... though it would be strange to mention that he grabbed the mug.

Ah, yes. To express her abhorrence at the troll’s rudeness...

And then, drinking of the same cup, must refer to the girl and her friend. Certainly there can be no harm in that, sir?

Especially when one considers that the next rune indicates they were all SLEEPING AS ONE.

Sir, I am only reading that which has been woven. Perhaps, you should tell me what it means. ‘They fell into a slumber, SLEEPING AS ONE, as the setting sun illuminated the blazing peak of the summit like some glorious bonfire slowly turning the embers of the sky into ash.’

Once again, sir, I am impressed. Obviously, to see the majesty surrounding her, she couldn’t possibly have been asleep. It was nothing more than poetic license. And although those around her slept piled together like rats, she alone sat stoic among them.

Or to the side, sir, separate and alone -- sipping on a fresh, new, antiseptically clean cup of cocoa as she considered the majestic view before her. It is quite elegant this way, sir, and offers the additional benefit that one need not wonder if she shared his bed...

The couch, sir. Or whether she slept at his feet like a dog too tired and exhausted to care?

I apologize, sir. I was just saying...

Trying to say, sir, how we need not wonder at these things, for you have set them straight. And later on when she awakens?

Brilliant, sir, brilliant! Like snapping out of a reverie, pulled backed to her senses, and forced to confront once more the horrors before her, which one can only assume represented a complete and total affront to her sensibilities?

I thought you might approve, sir.

Oh wait, there is but one small problem with this... this interpretation, sir.

When it was time to return to the slopes, sir, the girl was the last to awaken; for very soon after the friend had invited her into the safety of the hearth, the girl had succumbed to a deep and complete sleep.

No, sir. Not in the morning, nor late at night, but fairly soon

after nightfall.

I believe they were waiting for the crowds to disperse, sir.

For a bit of NIGHT SKIING, sir. Or A MIDNIGHT RAID, as she says.

As I said, sir, at night there are not as many guests on the slopes. One need not wait as long in line for the lifts. And although this would not have been a concern for all, it would not have escaped the notice of any with the sight -- the troll, the girl, and any others -- that this is, also, when the slopes most look like the Realms. It truly is otherworldly, sir.

Yes, sir. And let's not forget the troll's night vision. It was his hour, his time. He would be at home and have the advantage. But before we can get to all this, we must return to the girl as she awakens: the others having suited up are already filing out the doors.

Not everyone, sir. There are groups, and then there are groups within those groups. There had been those who went to sleep early -- took a nap as it were -- and then most certainly, there were those who had not yet retired for the evening and were still... um, talking. For, relatively speaking, it was still early.

It was the first quarter of the night, sir. If you'll remember... or if, um... It was a full moon, sir. And although she only makes small mention of it, she would easily have been able to track the passage of time by the moon's flight across the heavens. But we are getting ahead of ourselves in all of this, for she is not outside yet, under the moon or on the slopes. For as I was saying, she was slow in getting her gear back on -- perhaps being the only one who truly needed to get dressed.

Or perhaps more reasonably, sir, being the only one of the group not expecting to be awakened at this time...

No matter the explanation, sir, the friend once again shows her honor and waits for the girl.

I don't think dragging her along is a realistic description of the situation, sir.

No one would have bothered to drag the girl along, sir. If the

girl had desired, she could have easily rolled over and gone back to sleep.

Yes, sir, or continued her contemplation of the mountain. But she wanted to accompany them -- to be part of the group. And let's face it, doesn't a bit of night skiing sound like fun?

Well actually, sir, no. Not to me either. But then, I've never been one for speed sports.

Well, sir, that cuts to the quick.

It is a saying, sir, perhaps a bit of a pun.

If you would allow me but two words without interruption, sir.

Undoubtedly, sir, far more than two. But considering how dumbfounded humans appear to be when I count out their change, it is clear numbers do not come easily to them. Two or ten: it is all the same.

Really, sir, if I may continue?

In all fairness to the lodge, sir, and because the girl mentions it repeatedly, I should make clear that the troll was on his own time that night and as such he was no longer wearing the colors of the house.

His ski patrol uniform, sir, his identification. He was not official. Rather, he was off the record, and so on. In short, he was his own... troll.

Not a defense, sir. Certainly the lodge is liable for whomever they chose to employ. But then, what reasonable traveler needs to be warned about the wayward city guard and his infamous libido?

I apologize, sir. I was expecting you to jump in there so much, I simply stopped talking. But you're not going to take the bait, are you, sir?

It's an allusion to fishing, sir... but let us continue. The girl tells of her midnight ride: the skiing, the exhilaration of being out in the open air, and the speed, sir.

Oh, yes. The speed, sir. FAST is the rune she uses, likening her compatriots to a troupe of twirling dervishes.

Yes, sir, they all stayed together at first. They took the same

lift... well, stood in the same line. I have seen this happen before, sir. But as it may be several minutes, if not more, between the arrival at the top of the first chair and the last, rarely do these groups stay together for long. And then of course, having waited for the girl, the troll and her friend, would be the last in line... Oh but I say, sir, here's a nice bit of color. The girl covers the visceral sensation of skiing abundantly in this section and she likens the activity to rolling down a moss covered hill, sliding through leaves, and tubing down rapids. Do you do that last in the Realms, sir?

Curiosity, sir.

Yes, sir, both of the Realms and how the reference effects the overall tone of the strand. I would presume the rationale for including so many playful runes in this section is to make the story more compelling, more enjoyable for the non-centuried in years to come. It may come to pass that she is not as shortsighted as some believe, sir.

Of course, sir.

You are correct, sir.

No one asked me, sir.

HOT/COLD, sir.

No, sir.

No, sir. Snow trolls are not especially suited for the clime, nor do they prefer it.

Hearsay, sir, and the girl's numerous mentions in the weave of his more than adequate clothing... and later as the troll warms himself by the fire. But if I may be so bold as to continue, sir, the present rune of HOT/COLD is intended to refer to the girl's feelings, her emotions.

And the sensations of the flesh, sir, as they skied through the first quarter of the night and well into the second. It would be long enough for her hands to grow cold and her feet to grow numb, but her heart...

But her heart grew warm, sir.

No, sir. It had nothing to do with the quality of her clothing. I'm sure her mittens and overcoat were of the finest construction...

Finest elvin construction, sir.

Why must everything be an insult, sir? I like to believe I own some of the finest elvin mountaineering equipment available, anywhere. And believe it or not, there have been times when I have grown cold, sir.

Cold, sir! Very cold! But the view of the valley floor from the peak is amazingly refreshing. To stare into the eye of an approaching blizzard, face to face, mano-a-mano with the elements, hands numb, feet nearly frozen, and the very act of breathing painful as I feel my lungs slowly crystallize with every breath: there is nothing else like it, sir. But what is most odd, sir, through this experience, during this experience, because of this experience, my heart stays amazingly warm. And there is a sensation: a spiritual presence -- almost magical and mystical -- that is very intense. In truth, I often feel as though I have reached a state of communion with the mountain. You could almost say, I was in touch with the PULSE OF THE PEAK.

I snowshoe, sir, and do a bit of mountaineering as well, but I am no dwarf.

You can only mean that as a compliment, sir. But speaking of dwarfs, I need a drink. I know I offered you one earlier, sir, but we are just at the halfway mark.

Give or take, sir. Will join me?

In these parts, they tend to drink a pale ale, sir. But for the most, it is horrid stuff. And although I would be thrilled to offer you some fine elvin wine, it is the darndest thing: the valley has been dry of the stuff for a year now, almost as if an offense had been made against... a house. Not that we were flush with the stuff before, mind you. But it could be had, here and there, at the lodge, and the high-end restaurants. But now, it's simply gone.

Merely idle chitchat, sir, filling the airwaves, as it were. Ah, here is the keg I've been looking for.

Not rye, sir, rum. A bit of the local flavor mixed with a touch of the old: lilikoi. I grow it myself in the summer months.

Oh yes, sir, blasted hot. I'll just leave the cask out, and your second can help himself as he likes? Good. Good. And as to a toast?

I knew you'd find the middle ground, sir. Hear. Hear. To the speedy completion of my tale... and the end of my commission.

Ah! Now where was I? In touch with THE MOUNTAIN HOME, sir, she could feel it breathe and hear it sing.

She calls it a near spiritual experience, sir, religious and magistical.

A simple compound rune, sir. Perhaps created to highlight the girl's feeling of wonder.

Or as you say, sir, to highlight the fact that she hadn't gotten enough sleep... or to underscore how exhausted she must have felt. It really is a tiring climb to the summit.

Oh, no, not literally the summit, sir, but what passes for the summit in these parts. They went to the PUB AT THE PEAK -- a bar a few thousand feet shy of top, a nice enough place in and of itself. I've been there, you know?

Oh no, not skiing, sir. As I've mentioned, I'm more of a snowshoer. It's a hard climb, but well worth the exertion. And by the time you get there, you really build up an appetite.

For the food at the Pub at the Peak, of course, sir. But if a bit of mountaineering doesn't sound like fun, one can always take the lift, and follow the gully as it turns around the bend. I trust your agents know the way, sir.

Just a guess, sir. Certainly if not before, then you must know of the locale by now. I can't imagine you've left a single stone unturned...

Yes, sir.

Of course, sir.

That would be disrespectful, sir. What I meant to say was, if it was worth looking into, I'm sure that it has been. And no doubt the Pub at the Peak would fit the bill, fit the description, sir.

Next, sir?

Well, sir, she describes the pub. Sort of silly to go into it if you've been there. The smoke... I find the smoke hard on my eyes, sir. And the music: I like to think of myself as progressive, but dwarves simply do not have the first clue about music.

The place would have been inhospitable to the girl, sir. The smoke, the noise, the pressing crowd -- of humans, no less, and of the lowest sort. No doubt, you can imagine the girl's discomposure upon entering the pub for the first time. Without going into the details, let us simply say that off the beaten track as it is, no one attempts to enforce even the most basic customs of dress and decorum. And then, there is the rancid smell of smoked flesh which fills the air. It would have been a horrific affront to the girl's sensibilities, sir.

Oh yes, sir, the Dwarf is famous -- or infamous, if you prefer -- for his smoked meats. They are quite tasty if you're into that sort of thing.

A thousand apologies, sir. I meant to say, that if a person -- a human, a dwarf, a troll -- if another were into that sort of thing...

Yes, sir, or a Leprechaun. I am a flesh eater. I will not deny it.

Fiddlesticks.

Fiddlesticks, sir. Lying does not suit you. You are not that... principled.

Well then, you will need to rethink your principles once again. The girl was willing to deal with me. And who knows who else in her travels?

Sir, I think you jump to conclusions...

Sir, though your feet stay on the ground, I think you jump, you leap, you come to erroneous conclusions.

Sir, consorting -- of any type -- has never been considered a crime.

Sir, would you truly have me speak of that which I do not know?

Then as I was saying, sir, the girl sets the scene: the debauchery, the smoke, the flesh, the pulsating pit of humanity, the

presumed pestilence, the affront to the senses, and the noise as the troll shed his... outer garments and her human friend did the same.

She doesn't say, sir. It can hardly be important. Of importance is the fact that the girl suddenly finds herself alone, her companions having scurried off.

Abandoned is not a word I would use, sir. She did not wish to be a third wheel...

A shadow, an attachment, a liability... a lady in waiting, sir. She did not wish to get in the way, and as it was clear the two of them wished to dance -- to party, as it were -- she let them. They were not her wards. And then, after they had departed, and seeing that her choices were limited -- going outside, shedding her clothes and wading into the hot tub, or joining the press on the dance floor -- she chose the most reasonable course of action.

The most reasonable in her eyes, sir. Going down the slope might have made a lot more sense, but from all appearances she never considered it, so she did the next best thing, and that was to take a seat at the bar.

Sir, it will be a long night indeed, if you are not liberal enough to allow for differences of opinion as to what the best course of action may have been.

Upon sitting down at the bar, the girl met the Dwarf, sir, the proprietor of the establishment. Interestingly, she introduces him with the rune: A KIND WORD. It's a wonderful rune, don't you think, sir? A KIND WORD, I do not imagine this particular rune is used very often these days.

Yes, sir, you are correct. The troll was described as a HERO and now the Dwarf is being denoted by his kindness.

Yes, sir, undoubtedly, delirious. By the time she finally began to weave the strand, the girl had not slept for days, nor was she operating on a full night's rest even at this juncture. It would explain why she did not think to leave, wait outside, or return to her parents. And rather instead, thought it best to put her last silver, or copper, or whatever it was that she had in her purse onto the bar as she plead poverty and implored of the Dwarf to "Be

kind.”

Perhaps she simply desired to stay, sir, wanted a drink, and didn't wish to consume the filth which dwarves call stout. Or perhaps, she deemed it best to avoid a confrontation -- being in the Dwarf's domain, and all -- and decided to cede dominance to the Dwarf right from the start.

Well, sir. I am sure I don't know the right words. But one thing is clear, she and the Dwarf hit it off, for no sooner has she woven A KIND WORD into her strand, then she goes on to call the Dwarf a MAN OF HONOR. Tell me, sir, would that be because there is no DWARF OF HONOR rune?

Yes, sir, I suppose you are correct. If one had the inclination, one could always construct an honorable dwarf rune by weaving two runes together. But then, calling him a dwarf who by some mysterious coincidence also happened to be a man of honor doesn't really have the same ring to it, now does it?

Yes, sir. It is undoubtedly a matter of esthetics. Either way, sir, I am confident the Dwarf would be happy to note the honorific.

If I may continue, sir?

There can be no doubt that the Dwarf saw the advantage in doing as the girl bid in “Being kind.” And so, without hesitation, he refused her gold.

Yes, or her copper at this point, sir, much easier to do, I would think, and gave the girl a free drink: a drink on the house as they call it.

I imagine that Yellow Raisin Ale that he makes, sir. It's sort of a bastardized, overly sweet Ice Vine, though tasty enough. Better than the stout, I'll give you that.

They hit it off, sir. She calls him an UNEXPECTED ALLY next, which is really quite the praise. Three major runes in rapid succession to introduce a minor character, you'd almost think this strand was about the Dwarf.

Would it really make any difference if it was, sir?

Perhaps it would be best if we were to simply move on, sir?

The girl weaves in a few lines of conversation next. Who knows what is said before or after? I suppose the surrounding dialogue would be made up impromptu at the time of the telling. A clever storyteller would lead up to the lines and tell them as a joke, no doubt. But I confess to not being so clever. So I will simply say that at some point in the conversation, the girl asks of the Dwarf, "Are you sure you're a dwarf?" To which, the Dwarf sanguinely replies, "Are you sure you're an Elf?"

I do not believe it was intended meanly, sir. Truly, if he were ill disposed towards the girl, that might have been a good time for the Dwarf push meat her way.

As I have mentioned, sir, it is not just ale that could double as paint remover which they serve at the pub, but meat, as well. And by this time, the girl hadn't eaten a decent meal for half a day or more. Oh, and I can assure you, sir, the smoked shank, the juicy beef brisket, the ribs so tender and flaky, and lamb kabobs that fall to pieces in your mouth...

I see your nose curl, sir. But then, you are not so hungry; starving or exhausted; perhaps a little drunk; or on a personal journey of discovery and self-exploration.

But surely, sir, after having declared their friendship, it would have only been a matter of politeness, a matter of propriety, for the Dwarf to share a hind quarter of the most savory...

Then perhaps, sir, it was only after he had given her a heaping plate of basted beast -- free of charge, no less -- that the girl had inquired of the Dwarf, "Are you sure you're a dwarf?" To which he could have only responded after watching her eat the plate clean, "Are you sure you're an Elf?" And then, as the glasses clinked, the girl's plate was refilled with more of the same.

This girl seems very open minded, sir, a renegade, non-conformist, before her time.

Or past her time. How very true, sir, how very true. One could almost say she was willing to betray the memory of her people? But then, one could say that these days about many who belong to the younger generation.

Imply, sir. Nothing, really. Perhaps I am merely showing how the events might have transpired had the Dwarf not been a MAN OF HONOR, you know, even though he was a dwarf.

Next, sir?

The SUNRISE ON THE MOUNT, sir? Have you ever seen the dawn from the summit?

It is a glorious sight, sir. Standing there, with 300-400 humans -- the Dwarf does pack them in -- all drunk and delirious, and satiated to a degree, but still hungry for more...

Yes, gluttons if you wish, sir. And the sunrise in all its glory, in all its majesty: it really cannot be expressed. If in truth you have never seen it, sir, I would be honored sometime if you would be my guest.

True enough, sir, we do not know whether we are to end as friends, not yet. Curious, though, that the girl -- that one such as she -- should have the knack of binding strangers to herself in a snap.

<Snap!> In a snap, sir. Instantaneously, without effort, as if by magic.

But, sir, she is discriminating. Of the hundreds and thousands who were at the lodge that weekend, she only weaves three into the strand, into her story, and into her family lineage as friends.

I am starting to understand how the troll must have felt, sir. You and your do not speak of this and do not speak of that...

Well this I know, sir, without question. After saying her fare-thee-wells, she skied down the mountain alone, rushing past the arriving buses, the early morning skiers, and the excitement that another run down the mountain would have held, to be with her own family for breakfast -- as had been requested of her, just like the dutiful little daughter that she had always been.

BREAKFAST, TALKING POLITIC, & UNDER THE WHITE FLAG OF TRUCE, sir. She is rather formal at this point.

One can only presume...

Come, sir. Some things are reasonable to presume. It is so hard to believe that she was looking forward to the meeting with her, heretofore, loving parents? To tell them of her adventure? To share with them the magic of the marvels she had seen?

Yes, sir, and to acquire a bit of gold. Of course, in matters such as these, it is the elvin way to go slow, to beat around the bush, and to meander along slowly.

Rather than getting down to it, sir, they shot the breeze, but it was already stone cold dead, and the breeze would not blow.

You are correct, sir. But personally, I believe it is far more informative to consider what was not discussed than what was, for this is what she herself mentions. She talks of absence. When a family of tourists meets for breakfast, sir, what do you imagine they typically discuss?

The strangeness of the locale, sir, and how it differs from the place one calls home, wherever that might be. Not to mention, the wonders to be enjoyed and the attractions to be seen. But oddly, the girl takes great pains to point out that there was no mention of any of this. They did not discuss the quaintly decorated pancake house where the best waffles in all the known worlds could be had. Nor was any mention made of the new spa at the foot of the hill, nor the secluded garden full of ice sculptures -- always a personal favorite of mine.

Oh yes, sir. She lists them all... well, it is in shorthand, sir, it is in code. You know how runes are, but if one were to know the real -- what is being referenced -- then the runes are clear enough. And to all of this, she simply adds a negative. Instead of 'We talked of this over breakfast,' she simply notes that there was 'No talk of this over breakfast'; no talk of the spiritual enrichment classes, of which the resort was so proud; no talk of the hip restaurant, newly relocated to a yurt in the vale; no talk of how quaint it was that all of the benches throughout town were made of recycled skis -- as if the utilization of these few made the smallest dent in the dump at the outskirts of town -- nor was there any talk

of the shopping, the galleries, the theaters, the discussions, the lectures, or any of the other amusements as are always available throughout town.

Quite right, sir, I am not a booster and the town is not paying my commission, so let me simply reiterate that the girl specifically notes that nothing of importance (and perhaps nothing at all) was discussed, described, mentioned, or fawned over during the meal. Nothing was exalted or glorified as having been taken to the EST.

Formally, sir, it is the most extreme item of its class. As in, the happy-est, the warm-est, or the gold-est. I suppose it may mean something else to the locals, but I always took the term at face value.

For its gold weight, sir, without taking any other factors such as its construction or provenance into account.

As you say, sir, perhaps the world would be a better place if all things were valued in such a way, but certainly such a practice would impact my livelihood significantly.

On this point, sir, I shall beg to differ. But really, sir, wouldn't our time be better spent concentrating on the strand?

The point, sir, is that there was, obviously, much to discuss, but in the end precious little actually was.

True, sir, perhaps she did not listen carefully enough. Or as is equally as likely, her mind was on other things. After all, her primary aim at this juncture was not so much to pass the time with her parents, who she could talk with at leisure when they all returned to the Realms, but to claim the gold which had been promised to her as quickly as possible and be on her way. No doubt, she was anxious to return to the mountain, the troll, and her human friend, not to mention the rest of her newfound acquaintances.

Yes, sir. And for her insolence, her obstinacy, and her hurry -- or as you say, 'for her lack of tact' -- she was rewarded with a SINGLE GOLD COIN. If you ask me, sir, it was not much of an improvement from the day before. But perhaps the more important item to note at this juncture is that the rune in question is often

utilized as a sort of backhanded insult -- akin to pressing a copper into an innkeeper's palm, so that there should be no misunderstanding about how one feels about the service they have received during their stay... or as the case may be, the lack thereof.

True, I will grant you that, sir. The rune is also used to denote someone who has wisely honored a contract to the letter of the law. But all the same, I believe it is safe to assume, the girl had expected a little more generosity from her father.

A very good point, sir, but the story is not about me, and neither the girl nor her father is a Leprechaun. The point is, when the time finally came, when it was finally acceptable for the girl to ask for some gold, for that which has been freely promised, she is given a SINGLE GOLD COIN, and this, sir, is at least literally, if not figuratively, true.

A single gold is not much in these times, sir, in a town such as this. Not much at all. For even without the patronage of certain houses, the town continues to find itself in the midst of a veritable gold rush.

They come in more flavors than one might imagine, sir. How do you think I came to be a merchant in the first place?

Right, sir.

Of course, sir.

You are not interested in my personal history, and the story has proved to be quite long enough already without more asides. Very well then, sir. In no uncertain terms, the girl was expecting more gold -- much more

Yes, it is undeniable. Cash poor, alone, unable to buy herself an alliance: all these things, all the better to live her dream. But then, she saw matters a little differently, sir.

Things are what they are, sir.

Actually, from the dwarves, sir. I find the sentiment to be very practical and down to earth -- if self evident and slightly redundant. But let us continue. The girl was clearly unhappy -- displeased, if you will -- with her bounty, for there can be no doubt of her father's intent.

Let me be more explicit then, sir. There is no doubt about it on this side of the table. The point of view held by the commission, which I represent, is that the SINGLE GOLD COIN was an intentional slight consciously delivered as both a reprimand and a reminder that the girl had not yet come into maturity and continued to be dependent.

I speak on her authority, sir.

There is really nothing else to say about it, sir. What has been done has been done...

Your ear is improving, sir. You are correct. Once again, the dwarves. Speaking of the dwarves, although her own business -- her own affairs -- had not gone as she had hoped or desired, the girl had always intended to put in a GOOD WORD for the Dwarf. I believe the rune has a special significance amongst the elves, but you will forgive me for not being able to wrap my mind completely around the concept. Nonetheless, I believe it has to do with diplomacy, goodwill, and the transfer of an alliance -- the alliance as previously mentioned between the girl and the Dwarf. I am happy to report that the father did not let his personal feelings get in the way of making a good deal.

Yes, sir. I suppose a good deal is in the eyes of the beholder, but we must assume that at the time, the father saw the advantage in it to himself.

Well now, that is a good point, sir. I had never considered that the girl's father might enter into a bad deal merely for the sake of his daughter's honor. If that is indeed the case, it does shed a different light on his character. I can only hope his opinion on such matters has not changed substantially in the interim.

We are not there yet, sir. But I believe the price is fair. Of course, I stand to profit, so my view may be colored.

I might see gold, sir. I might see the gold at the end of the rainbow, and this might render other -- less lucrative -- hues and outcomes substantially harder for me to see. But let us return to the strand. Or rather, let us consider what the strand never mentions.

It is part of the commission, sir. As you may know, the Dwarf -- that is to say the Pub at the Peak -- suddenly, immediately, and without delay...

Yes, in a snap, sir. Excellent. When next we hear of the Dwarf, he will be stocking the finest of elvin wines -- the absolute finest, sir, beyond comparison or equal. I had the occasion to taste the vintage that first month, sir, and it was a joy, an absolute blessing. But then, when the initial shipment ran out, there was no more to come. His supply ran dry. Perhaps there were unforeseen circumstances, sir?

Or a betrayal, sir. Though you do not say it aloud, I can see it in your eyes. But rest assured, there was no betrayal on the Dwarf's part. He is, as they say, rock solid. After all, I have it on what I will have to take as the highest of authorities that he is a MAN OF HONOR -- no small compliment, that, for a dwarf.

We come to another clump of runes here, sir: WIND IN YOUR FACE, DOLDRUMS, BACK TO REALITY, & SEA OF GNATS. I don't think she could decide. Whatever the case, she had lost the morning and gained little for her time.

I like to think she already had the love and respect of her family, sir. It was not something to be gained. After all, was that not already hers by right of birth, sir?

As you wish, sir. In a nutshell, she skied.

The heart of the matter, sir, that you so ardently wish for me to get. For the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, the girl skied. And seeing as how it was a holiday weekend...

Oh, not by the elvin calendar, sir, nor by mine, or even a dwarf's, but to the locals it was a holiday. And as such, humans crowded the slopes.

Not as such, sir. I can only assume that either most humans do not observe the ways of old or that a drop of fun, a dash of levity, and a healthy sprinkling of recreation and sport is seen by many as the appropriate way to honor the traditions of the past.

Then, sir, perhaps it is most fortunate that the girl did not set

her sights on a human.

True, sir. I had not considered that. It would be easier to wait out; but then also, I think, it would be harder to live down.

Then, once again, sir, we have found common ground. I am delighted!

The gist, the heart of the matter, sir, is that the lifts were crowded; the lines bogged down to a crawl and then a standstill. As you can imagine, with so little time, and so much of it perceived as being wasted, tempers were short among the humans. This, of course, would have been compounded by the day-trippers trying to get their hundred worth in a mere six hours -- a basic impossibility, sir, unless one is fortunate enough that they no longer have the desire, inclination, or perhaps even the ability to count all of their gold. But like the rest, the girl had come to ski, so she waited in line and hoped to meet up with her friends before the end of the day.

No, sir. Not since she had left them at dawn for the meeting with her parents at breakfast. She spent the entire day alone: slowly growing tired, angry, and annoyed like the rest of them. When she'd finally had enough and was exhausted from the search, she returned to the fire. It was there that she finally found them and the elusive WARMTH OF THE FAMILY HEARTH.

Oh yes, sir, the WARMTH OF THE FAMILY HEARTH writ bold in a rune all its own. Around the fire she had found her friends, all of them, all of them that is, save for the one she was truly looking for at this point -- the Troll, her heart's desire.

I do not know what changed or when this change took place, sir, nor does she say.

The girl says, sir, that she longed to meet the troll again.

Perhaps he was the most interesting creature about, sir. Perhaps, having spent the day apart, she came to realize how much she enjoyed his company, not to mention, his straightforward ways.

Very well, sir, without stretching it out or filling the moment with color...

With things of which I do not and cannot possibly know, sir.

Being tired and finding herself within the warmth and comfort of the hearth once more, the girl quickly fell asleep. And forgive me, sir, but I cannot help but mention that if a leprechaun had twisted the strand and woven the runes, I am sure the next line would find the troll coming to the girl in her dreams.

Of course, sir, a leprechaun did not weave the strand. And undoubtedly, such a scandalous insinuation would not make a fitting memoir. Thus, after a quick uneventful nap and upon being awakened by a bit of laughter in the lodge, the girl and her friend passed the time having a FRIENDLY CONVERSATION. Have you ever had a sleepover, sir?

At the girl's age or perhaps a few decades younger, sir, did you ever have a friend spend the night?

You must forgive me, sir, but I do not consider such a thing a habit of the hordlings. They never sleep apart, so the special significance, which a sleepover holds, would be lost on them.

Sir, among humans... among leprechauns...

Sir, I remember my nephew fondly. When we were both wee lads, on occasion he would spend the night at my house, and by candlelight we would stack coppers, count them out, and make pretend trades. Ah, the delights of youth.

It was as such with the girl, sir, in her own way. It is easy for me to picture the girl asking her friend, "Are you sleeping? Are you tired? I can't sleep." And of course after awhile, neither could the friend, so the two of them began to talk.

Precious little, sir. The girl does not bother to weave the words verbatim at this juncture. And as they were both of the Realms -- or schooled in the ways of the Realm -- both of them would be apt to say very much, but reveal very little.

I shall take that as a compliment, sir.

The gist of the conversation...

Yes, sir, the heart of the discussion revolved around the friend explaining the troll's situation to the girl.

Why, that he worked for the lodge, of course. But as you know, humans view employment differently than we do, sir, so the

friend would have understood the need to explain what this meant and what it entailed -- the relatively benign terms of his servitude and so forth. And perhaps more importantly -- and yes, I think this would be much more important to the girl -- the friend explained her own relationship with the troll to the girl: that she and the troll were merely friends, due to her time in the lands. You can imagine how long such a conversation would take, sir, as the questions were asked indirectly and answers were darted around and implied. But at some point, the question could not be asked casually, and so the girl asked directly, "What do you know of the troll?" And the answer, in the truest sense, could only be, "Nothing." Have you ever discovered anything meaningful, sir?

True, sir. This is not your commission. But please understand, I do tell you all that I know.

Yes, sir, which in this particular case is nothing. I know not where the troll hails from, the place he calls home, or the hearth of his ancestors. And the friend could not have told the girl any more, or anything that you or I do not already know: that he worked at the lodge, that he had worked there for years, both in summer and in winter, throughout the seasons, and that she -- the friend -- trusted him -- and that she was happy to share his bed.

By all accounts, sir, the friend knows her place and behaves accordingly.

We cannot all be born high. And if you'll excuse me for saying so... sir, I believe condemning the friend, for merely being what she is, is short sighted.

If there is no honor in serving a master, sir, then why serve at all?

Pray, sir, do not answer. There is but one honorable answer and that is that the servant is honored and therefore honorable in their service. What more could one such as the friend, or even myself, ever hope for?

Of course, sir. I was saying how the friend was happy to share the troll's bed. From there, the discussion turned towards... matters of the flesh.

The troll is described in a positive light, sir: strong arms, piercing eyes, a gentle sense of justice...

By troll standards I imagine, sir. We need not go into the details. Having gotten this far, having captured the girl's interest for a year...

A twelfth month, sir. After such a time, there can be no doubt concerning the troll's charm and his ability to conduct himself among society.

Could the girl be content with the troll if that were not the case, sir? Or for that matter, could any elf be content with the company of any another if that were not the case?

Of course not, sir. Nor is it reasonable to suppose that the girl would have sought out the troll's company a second time -- gone to the one place in the entire town where the troll was sure to return -- if the troll had not shown himself to possess that certain something right from the start.

Sir. Surely you do not suggest that the girl had not thrown off all that she was in a single night!

I do not know, sir.

I am hardly the one to ask, sir, for I did not know the girl before. But rather than turning the conversation towards matters such as these, I think it is reasonable to concede that the troll -- although a troll -- was not without his merits.

By troll standards, sir, if no other.

He was nice, polite, soft spoken, and handsome, sir, at least for a troll. And then, let us not forget that he offers something that few others -- even among elvin kind -- could claim.

Protection, sir, on both sides of the divide. Those who would openly challenge a snow troll are few and far between.

That is most certainly true, sir. The well advertised bounty on the troll's head has obviously changed the situation somewhat. And undoubtedly, it is one of the many reasons why I must continue my commission.

Whether the protection the troll offered was real or perceived,

required or not, it is clear that the girl felt that she was UNDER THE PROTECTION OF the troll, sir.

Oh yes, sir. She weaves it right in. And then, when the troll finally arrives, they all sleep together for awhile... though I am certain that if one were to look at the strand closely enough and in the right light, one would quickly realize that she had merely been sloppy in her weave and had instead meant to imply that she had stayed awake, separate, and aloof -- as is the elvin way.

She had not slept for an entire day, sir, going on two.

I cannot help what she chooses to reveal, sir.

It is the way of these things, sir, piled together like rats.

Yes, I am sure the troll felt right at home, sir. But if we were to cast a critical eye at this juncture, I would think it more important to focus on the exact sleeping arrangements. Did they all sleep together on the couch like vermin? He on the floor? Or perhaps even, she on the floor? I mean, it is sort of a mental quandary. It does seem unlikely that he would give up his place of honor.

Yes, it may have been the proper thing...

You seem quite certain, sir.

Yes, of course, sir. Very unlikely. Very unlikely. So, we can assume...

My mistake, sir. We can know that they did not share a bed... or a couch. So then, there is only the question of who got the floor.

Understood, sir, there is no question about it. I apologize for having misspoken. He got the floor. How could one react, but with anger and indignation if she had slept on the floor?

No, I assure you, sir, I am not trying to insinuate anything. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it, as they say.

My mind is clear on it, sir. She got the couch. He got the floor... and even that was too good for him -- the vile wretched beast.

But then...

It is just a small item of concern, sir.

Well, sir. Since she slept on his couch -- in his place of honor

by his hearth -- and he took what many barbarians would see as her rightful place on the floor, would she not then be beholden to him for allowing her to save face? And then, would her house not be beholden to him as well, sir?

Of course, sir.

We do not know these things...

And yes, of course, sir. There are countless confounding variables.

No, the strand holds no further guidance, sir. She slept. He slept...

There you are. He did not stand guard over her as would have been good and proper. I knew that if we put our minds to it, we could twist the story around until we found a way for the troll -- grievous, wretched, fell creature that he is -- to somehow be in the wrong. Sir.

NIGHT IS DAY, sir. She refers to DANCING LIGHTS. That's a holiday sign, is it not, sir? Gra'gl Mass? The Winter Solstice?

The resorts like to do things right, sir. Colored lights filling the trees, flood lights illuminating the slopes. And then, there is the other rune she uses: EPIC SNOW. What does that mean? A blizzard?

Pardon me, sir. I was being rhetorical. I am fairly well certain, it is a reference to the dwarven saying, "Make every day an epic day." Words to live by if I ever did hear them, sir. SKI/SKY is next...

Yes, I guess I am moving along quickly, sir.

No, no. Not really. Nothing to hide, sir. Just what more is there to say? Although, I do wonder about that last one...

SKI/SKY, sir. Is it an error? A miss-braid?

No one is perfect, sir. Or if that does not sit well with you, it is not hard to imagine that the girl had simply gotten sick and tired of weaving ski at this point and upon seeing a pun, took it -- you know, as a bit of playing around with the weave. Of course, there

is always the possibility that she meant the rune to be taken literally. I wonder...

You are correct, sir, rhetorical -- more or less. But here is a question that is not. Have you ever seen the Northern Lights, sir?

Forgive me, sir. Silly question. Of course you have. Between the resort lights and the ongoing show in the heavens, the ambience would have been wonderful as the two... the three of them skied and danced under the stars. At this juncture, it easy for me to picture the girl watching the troll as he does a fanciful flip over some low obstacle set in the snow just for that purpose. Have you ever watched the youngsters at play on the slopes, sir?

'No Fear,' that is what they say, sir. Flipping this way and that, they have names for the stunts, for the maneuvers that they perform... as do the doctors and nurses in the local emergency room.

Morbid humor to be sure, sir. But I suppose, after you've seen your hundredth broken bone, or tenth spinal injury...

Scare you, sir? No, that was not my intent.

Simply an aside, sir, an awareness that skiing can be dangerous.

No, sir. I have no knowledge of any calamity which may have befallen the troll.

Oh, the girl, sir? Yes, of course...

Or rather, no, sir. Outside of the obvious, no tragedy has befallen the girl...

Her choice of companion, sir. I thought we were on the same page... that we saw eye-to-eye on the matter of the girl's unfortunate choice in companions, sir.

Have I not expressed my feelings on this, sir? I apologize. Let me be frank...

Forthright and honest, sir. I would be scandalized if either of my sons were to become seriously involved with a human, a troll... or even an elf, sir. Your race is not the only one which suffers from excessive pride.

As is to be expected, sir. As I said, on this we see eye-to-eye.

But she is not my daughter, and I have no qualms about admitting the reality of the situation. In my mind's eye I have absolutely no trouble seeing the girl as she must have been, watching the troll -- and a snow troll at that -- as he did flips and jumps and other feats of snow sport daring-do for the sole purpose of impressing and amusing the girl. It must have been quite exhilarating to watch him perform. By all accounts he is quite the athlete; and seeing as how he was employed by the lodge as a guardian of the slopes, there can be no doubt as to his skill. And I would think the events that subsequently transpired would testify to his brashness, his lack of common sense, and his willingness to court danger. In short, I'm sure he put on quite a show for the girl. And the girl, cognizant of the danger and spurned on by the feelings rising within her...

This I do not know, sir, but I have every reason to believe the troll taught her... a few tricks.

Oh, nothing to be concerned about... I would hope. Well, it has been a year, so at this point one never knows. These things have a way of progressing. It all starts innocently enough on the bunny slopes; but before you know it, you're searching far and wide for the trails marked by those beckoning black diamonds.

Like I said, sir, I do not know. But I do know when I acquired the strand...

When, sir, when. When I acquired the strand...

I am sorry, sir, I cannot say. But rest assured, at the time the girl was in a good humor -- whole of body and of mind.

I did not test her or give her an exam, sir. Let us assume these things. And let us further assume that on that first night, at least, she did not attempt to tackle anything more onerous than a mogul...

It is a small bump in the snow, sir, but you may be on the right track. An obstacle so small it is almost symbolic. And although she does not mention it...

Please, sir, not that old saw again. She does not mention a lot of things...

Fine, have it your way, sir. She mentions snow men and snow angels...

No, sir. I would have thought the same, but it is the men that stand.

I did not name them, sir.

I do not believe the intent was claim superiority to the angels, sir. It is merely a name.

Yes, they are an arrogant race, sir. They make elves seem like a race of self-effacing monks, humble to the core. Shall I continue, sir?

Thank you, sir. More important than what she mentions is what she does not...

It is implied, sir.

By the context, sir.

The strand was woven for a reason, sir. If I may?

You will note that the girl does not relate any incidents of stress or conflict between her and the troll, sir. There is no mention of a snowball fight -- a pastime of which the humans seem so fond. Nor is there any mention of any competition, sir, no race, nor sport.

It indicates a willingness, an ability, and a desire to get along peaceable and in harmony, sir. That has always been a condition for entering the Realms, sir, has it not?

Clearly an unsettling remark, sir, ill timed on my part. The moment to consider such things has not yet arrived. And as they must have pushed such unpleasant thoughts from their minds back then on the slopes, so too, let us push such thoughts from our minds at this time and move on without worry or concern for the future.

Yes, sir, of course. Such things are, undoubtedly, easier said than done, but let us move on, nonetheless. The girl, the troll, and the friend composed a trio of happiness, a trio of harmony and delight. Somewhere along the way -- perhaps long ago -- they had split off from the larger group. And alone -- or nearly so -- they skied through the heavily forested back-trails until the moon was

high in the sky. At which point, they return to the Dwarf's pub for a REUNION of sorts with the stout little fellow. And although only a day had passed, when they showed up on that second night, the Dwarf was serving the finest of elvin wines: the ones I was telling you about earlier, sir.

Yes, sir. She says so right here in the strand, sir.

Here, sir. Here...

I'm sorry, sir.

I did not mean to imply, sir...

My mistake, sir.

It will not happen again, sir.

While you are reviewing that stretch of the strand, sir, might I be so bold as to point out that the delivery of the wine was of great personal importance to the girl.

The fact that she had repaid a friend, sir.

Or rather as you say, sir, that the girl's house had repaid a friend on her behalf. Of course, that in itself merely confirms all the more concretely...

It is a type of mortar, sir.

The reference is to the solidity of the material, sir, that it holds up and stands the test of time. But as I was saying, more important than any other consideration, the presence of the wine at the Dwarf's indicates that as of this juncture -- or as of breakfast that morning -- the girl was still in her father's good graces.

No comment, sir? Very well, then let us continue. All around, drinks were again on the house.

His house, sir, the Dwarf's house. Although I believe the first drink -- the first toast -- was dedicated to the girl and her house. That was most kind, thoughtful, and politically prudent of the Dwarf, wouldn't you agree, sir?

Yes, sir. But be that as it may, I am sure the toast was made in good faith. She would undoubtedly remark on the matter if that were not the case.

Oh, stop being ridiculous, sir. She has been more than fair. Listen to yourself. If your father's fathers could only hear you

now. The Dwarf has always been honorable, sir. You only discredit yourself with these wild allegations and ill-willed assumptions.

No, sir! If I were you, this is the point where I would be reminding you not to speak of things about which you did not know!

Please, sir. My mind is not as it should be. Pray, before continuing, a drink to clear the slate.

Dwarven, I would imagine, sir. It brings to mind the sweeping away of rubble after a cave in or similar mining catastrophe and the setting of things right before starting anew.

A capital idea, sir. And if this jug should go dry, remember, I can always find more.

Ah! Now that, that hits the spot. To new beginnings, what do you say, sir?

More or less, sir.

Up on the peak, night became day, sir.

They stepped out of the Dwarf's cave to watch a GOLDEN SUNRISE. Oh, and I like this next part, sir. She uses a play on words here: the gift of a new day. Some in the valley would interpret this as being of the present: that it symbolizes a spiritual awakening and a willingness -- if not the ability -- to see things in a new way, which is to say, more clearly, sir.

Yes, that is true, sir. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in days. She was quite likely drunk and she was at altitude. All the same, A NEW DAY was born, and what better way to celebrate such a thing than by drinking. Oh, I'm sorry, sir. A slip of the tongue, Freudian thing...

I don't know, sir, some philosopher. Rest assured, I meant to say skiing. The girl went skiing, whereas I will confess, it is I who desires another drink. While I am pouring, sir, may I offer to fill your glass?

If I will be quick about it? I couldn't agree more, sir. I believe she was of a similar mind. I sense she was going for a

pattern in her weave, a steady rhythm, but she really has nothing to say in this section, nothing new, nothing worthy of note. The trio went skiing again, and the girl had an urgent desire to ‘Make it an Epic Day’ and ‘Keep it Real,’ but the crowds never let up, sir. And for her, the day never really began, as if the sunrise was the highpoint -- the zenith, if you will -- of the day.

Some days are like that, sir. The day -- Sunday, I believe it was -- was simply a blur: a rush of snow and a blizzard of meaningless activity. Did you like that, sir? I came up with that on my own just then, a blizzard of meaningless activity?

Well, I rather thought...

Of course, sir. I will move on. Who knows why the morning was not all that it could be? Perhaps the exhaustion...

Yes, sir. Perhaps it was a hangover. Perhaps it was the inevitability of life never living up completely to one’s hopes and dreams. Whatever the case, A NEW DAY quickly turned into the END OF DAYS when early in the afternoon, the friend had to leave.

Yes, well, that is all fine and good, sir, but she continues to call the other a “friend” even after being “deserted” by her and “left alone to fend for herself against the troll,” so perhaps it is best to let the girl judge these things...

I’m sorry, sir. I was so certain you were going to call into question the girl’s judgment that I suppose I simply stopped talking to allow you the opportunity.

Of course, sir, I understand. The girl’s compromised mental state goes without saying at this point. No doubt, this condition was further aggrieved when she learned that her friend had to leave, for she truly considered her new acquaintance a FRIEND as though a life-bond had been created and only the concerns of the world now forced them apart.

There is mention of the friend having a long trip ahead of her, sir. And my personal guess would be that to make it back to school in time for Monday’s classes... but, no. I forgot about the Holidays, sir. No doubt, she was obliged to return to her own

hearth and make observances.

What the observances constitute, I cannot say, sir.

No, sir. I really haven't a clue, but I know they often travel hither and thither in eager anticipation.

Curious? Of course I am curious, sir. But what am I to do? Ask them what they do behind closed doors? Ask them how they choose to enjoy the warmth of their family hearth? It would be unheard of, sir. I could not bring myself to inquire about such a thing. I could not pry into another's privacy that way.

Perhaps you forget, sir. I never sought this commission. It came looking for me. Though I admit, if I had known it was there for the taking...

You flatter me needlessly, sir. I am not that clever... nor for that matter is the friend. Simple, straightforward -- as is the tradition among humans -- the friend merely handed the girl her card. If you are interested, sir, I have a stack over there. Help yourself. But I see you are familiar with the tradition, and therefore must have gotten hold of several of the friend's cards, already. Certainly you must know then, that while it is possible for a one to enchant them, there is nothing magical about either my cards or the friend's. Both are free for the taking... or for the leaving. They contain no hidden obligation or agenda.

They are simply a way of staying in touch, sir, for the humans are a forgetful lot. Do you realize I pay... advertising, they call it. I pay to remind them that I am still in business... as if I was going somewhere, as if I might have been run out of town in the interim, or gone bankrupt. To think! And then, there are so many of them, sir.

Oh, in this we are in agreement, sir. Like rats... or bunnies. I prefer to think of the humans as bunnies. Rabbits are so much softer and cuter, and if I may be so brazen as to bare my fangs for a moment, more appetizing. I do so love conducting business with the humans. The margins are quite lush... but then, that is neither here nor there, sir.

It means that it is not relevant, sir.

Yes, sir, I would have to agree. But to be fair, with all of your questions, sir, you have played your part in spurring me on and leading me astray.

Oh, no, sir. Nothing of the sort. I have very much enjoyed our chat.

Why yes, sir, almost. But then you must know, there is still a bit to go, so if I may refocus our attention?

While the friend was departing and presenting the girl with her card, sir, she was merely offering the continuation of her friendship. Nothing was being asked for. Nothing was expected to be gained.

Well, sir, it certainly seems a bit unreasonable to me to try to find fault with a friend for benefiting from a friendship. It would be like harboring a grudge against a merchant merely because he was willing to turn a coin or two when the opportunity presented itself. You wouldn't harbor a grudge against an honest merchant, now would you, sir?

You, good sir, are perhaps the only one in all the Realms who would believe that I could force you to part with a coin with which you did not desire to part.

If that is the way you feel... sir, perhaps we should call the police!

Then let us not be making false accusations! I am an honest leprechaun employed in the discharge of an honorable commission. You need not like it! You need only honor it... Sir! Now, where is that blasted jug!

Excuse me, sir. Now, where was I?

Yes, of course, sir. As is clearly indicated on the strand in numerous ways, the girl believes that the offer of friendship, as proffered by the human girl, was offered from the heart and that material gain or mercenary intent was never its motive.

No, sir. I make no such claim for myself. Would you believe any leprechaun who would make such a claim -- under these or any conditions?

Yes, sir. I must agree, such a thing seems extraordinarily unlikely. So, if I may?

The curious custom with the calling cards stood out enough that the girl felt the need to quote the friend's words exactly, "Now, my card. I do not wish to obligate, but to honor," and I believe that says it all, sir. Before the child...

The girl, sir. Before the girl had time to consider the consequences, the friend was gone. But happily, the REGRET, which the sudden loss of her friend brought about...

Regret about everything which would necessarily remain unsaid and undone because of the friend's departure, sir. But as I was saying, this sorrow -- this sadness which her friend's leaving understandably brought about -- was quickly overcome by the girl's JOY and ELATION at the prospect of being left alone with the troll.

Oh yes, sir, most definitely. She says, "Oh, joy. Oh, happy day."

It has a vaguely human feel to it, sir.

I would think it would speak for itself, sir. "Oh, joy. Oh, happy day." Such as you yourself might say upon the completion of my commission.

Excellent, sir! I am always pleased when we can find the middle ground and reach an understanding, a meeting of the minds, as it were.

Well, sir, the girl reports next on how briefly her elation lasted. For as soon as the friend departed, the troll announced that he had to return to his duties at the lodge. Sir, this was sad news, indeed.

Yes, sir. I suppose it does depend on your point of view; but there can be no doubt that this was indeed the girl's point of view. The rest of the day, as she says, was WASTED.

Oh, to be sure, sir, it would have been spent skiing. But without either the friend or the troll to accompany her, it could not be the same. And if I might point out, sir, despite a burning desire to do otherwise, the troll did not shirk his duties in order to be with

the girl.

I admire your consistency in your interpretation, sir. Since the girl tells the story, and as neither of us has spoken to the troll to gain an understanding of his feelings in the matter, it is indeed possible that the attachment was all hers.

Yes, sir, and perhaps still is.

No. The commission was not his idea, sir.

I am certain of it, sir. It was too clever, too ingenious.

Yes, sir.

Of course, sir.

My reasoning has not been compromised to that extent, sir. In the end, he is still a snow troll.

One can like and even respect a being, sir, and still be cognizant of their shortcomings. I would trust him -- the troll, sir -- with my last copper, but to allow him to negotiate a deal on my behalf? I do not think so.

I imagine, sir, that either he recognizes his shortcomings or that it would be a small matter for one of sufficiently superior intellect -- perhaps a one such as yourself, sir -- to educate him.

Truly, sir. I do not believe that we disagree on this point, or that in the end, that it matters for our current purposes. If I may continue?

We have already discussed the fine thermals which the elves make, sir. No doubt, the girl had been provided with the very best, but all the same a coldness overcame her.

I must confess to baiting you, sir.

Yes, fishing again. You are very fast, sir. It took me years to appreciate these nuances. Yet all the same and despite the thermals -- the best that money could buy, I trust -- a coldness had overcome the girl's heart, sir. She was cold inside.

Oh, yes, sir. Quite explicitly, sir. EMPTY, COLD, & ALONE, the emptiness, the hollow ache in her heart: it was worse than before. Thankfully, her parents were true to their word and were not keeping tabs on her.

Not scrying or using clairvoyant devices, sir. I can only assume from her wording that this was part of the implicit understanding she had reached with her parents -- part of what it would mean to be free for the weekend. I am proud of... I am proud of her parents, sir, for honoring the spirit of the agreement.

Yes, sir, some agreements are harder to uphold than others. It has happened more than once, sir, that upon completing a sale I have immediately realized I could have charged double or triple the price.

From the look in the customer's eye, sir, or the speed in which they reached for their gold... or the fact that I hadn't enough gold in the till to make change for the kind of coin they offered.

It would be inappropriate to change one's price, sir.

Not just rude, sir, but unethical, as well. Until a deal is struck most anything goes. But once an agreement is reached... the Guild does not look kindly on double dealing, sir. We have our reputation to uphold.

Of course, sir. My apologies. I do seem to be afflicted with a never ending desire to go off on tangents this evening. Perhaps it is due in part to the charming nature of my company, sir.

Of course, sir. The girl speaks next of searching for that which she has lost. And finally, when it is apparent that no amount of searching will reveal where the troll has hidden, she retreats to the company of the Dwarf, his fire, and his ale.

She says ale, sir. Perhaps it is foreshadowing for the dry spell to come... but then, no. How would she know?

Dry spell, sir? Formally it refers to a drought or a lack of rain, but it can mean the absence of nearly anything -- especially if one has come to expect it or take it for granted.

Oh, no, sir! These are my words, not the Dwarf's. I have no reason to believe he ever came to expect anything beyond what he had a right to expect.

Sadly, sir, and let me say this with the most sincerest form of heartfelt grief that any leprechaun has ever known, I did not broker that particular deal, so there is absolutely no way I would know.

The NIGHT CAME ALIVE, sir. Or if you prefer -- and I think that you might -- darkness literally FELL!!!

She watched the sun go down at the Dwarfs, sir, at the entrance to the pub. And then, it was to be one last run down the slopes before she met her parents at the “End of the Day” and as they had agreed.

She does not claim that, sir. The girl was merely stating her intent, her expectation at that particular moment. But as it is with mice and men...

The best laid plans, sir.

Or if I could trouble you with a saying of the trolls, sir?

Very little beyond this one saying, sir.

The saying goes, sir. If you want to make Rag’norvitch laugh, tell him your plans.

Yes, sir. Witty and practical, I would say. Not as shallow and empty as one would have guessed. And in truth, now that I think on it, this may have contributed some to the initial appeal of the troll: that he was not as crude and barbaric as one might have supposed.

Of course, sir, that would still leave plenty of room for improvement. Nonetheless, it is at this moment, when her time is at an end, that the troll finally arrives and greets her warmly, like a long lost friend... for lack of a better word, sir.

The girl is, of course, elated at this turn of events, sir. And it is here that one final run becomes two and then three.

Yes, sir. He was a decidedly bad influence on her. She, herself, admits that it was at this juncture that she chose to reevaluate what the “End of the Day” was intended to mean -- or at least under the circumstances, could mean -- and so decided to consider the day over at midnight, as is often the case.

Sir, please. I agree that it was bad judgment on the girl’s part, but I do not believe her intent was to throw the agreement to the wind.

To let it scatter, fall apart, decay, and rend asunder. But pray,

sir, do not tell me that the interpretation the girl chose to adopt is unheard of in treaties or contracts.

If that is settled then, sir?

As well as it can be, sir, of course. Then moving on, it is at this point that she chooses to use a rune to make a metaphor.

Please, sir. How does one know when a bard intends to make a metaphor? One simply knows... and, sir, I know.

She uses a jump off a ski ramp as a metaphor, sir. Hand in hand as the dawn breaks... No, that isn't right. As the moon rises then? No, the timing is still off. What then has arisen? Frankly, I do not know. No doubt it is part of the metaphor I was not intended to understand. In short, sir, together they make a LEAP OF FAITH, whatever that might mean. I don't suppose you would care to enlighten me, sir?

No, I didn't think so, sir. No matter. It is here that the girl claims to weave the strand, set her heart, and stake her claim. But even with elvin gloves, her hands would have been too cold; and then, the gloves themselves would have only served to get in the way. At best, she would have been forced to content herself with weaving a token rune or two, something that she could have easily undone or worked in as the preamble to something greater, perhaps as nothing more than the story of a first kiss or the memory of a bygone day, of holding hands with a rogue unknown, back in a time of innocence, long before she knew what love was about. In short, if things had worked out differently, sir, the girl could have utilized the runes she chose to weave at this juncture as the opening lines in a far different, far greater love story.

Well, it could have been, sir. It might have been, sir. I mean, if one were to be critical and deconstruct the strand from an artistic standpoint, this last rune -- the presumed climax of her story -- is fairly anticlimactic.

Well, she has already slept with the lad, sir...

At least figuratively, sir. And seeing as on the previous evening, she had already taken a "jump" with the lad -- whatever that is supposed to mean...

Sir, I make no such allusion.

No, sir. Nor do I believe that is what she intended.

By her absence of any “playful” runes, sir.

Whereas before, on the previous night, sir, she was content to go on about snow men and snow angels...

Correct, sir, the men stand, while the angels lie at their feet.

We have been over this, sir.

The point is, sir, they are not mentioned at this juncture.

True, sir. The strand as a whole is fairly devoid of details, barren, if you will.

Seriously, sir, if you take the strand as the literal truth, the only time she buys anything the entire weekend is when it is part of a business deal: by way of gaining entry to the troll’s hearth and later at Dwarf’s pub. Tell me, sir, what type girl -- elvin or otherwise -- is that? Are we to believe that the girl spent an entire weekend alone, as she chose, and never once went shopping for a memento or trinket? I don’t believe it, sir.

Fine, have it your way, sir. I did not mean to call the girl’s integrity into question. I like the girl. I mean, she’s a little too romantically inclined, to be sure; but other than that, she’d make a fine leprechaun.

Oh, come now, sir. Saying that one would be happy to welcome another into their family or delighted to regard them as one of their own is hardly an insult. Even the vilest of goblin tribes would undoubtedly be delighted to call... Oh, you would just take it the wrong way. It does not drag one down into the muck to be admired, no matter how unworthy the one doing the actual admiring may be.

Thank you, sir. I did not feel as though I was being unreasonable. And as to the girl and the troll? If you ask me, they probably just stood at the top of a ski ramp -- holding hands, perhaps -- as they gazed down in resignation at the valley floor far below: one seeing the resort they called home and the other the beckoning call of their house. Both of them seeing something different; but then, both of them wishing they saw it slightly closer

to how they thought the other must. And it is here, sir, that she undoubtedly wove those first few token runes into the strand -- as would be traditional. And if the troll were extremely lucky, the girl might have given him a quick peck on the cheek -- for luck, for his understanding, for the sake of tradition -- and then she was off: back to her family and her friends, back to her house, her hearth, and her home.

We are near the end of the strand now, sir. The denouement, I believe it is called. Technically, the weave ends with the jump, the metaphor of the dawn, and seeing the light of a new day... filled with life, mystery, and adventure. But the gold has more to say, sir.

Yes, sir, I speak of my commission and the reason you were not... that is to say, the reason the strand was not returned to the family directly. No doubt, there are countless within the girl's house, who could have read the strand... infinitely better than I. But there is the gold underneath, and the things than an elf would not nor could not say.

But I will, sir. Rest assured, I will. With its ferocious wind and icy snow, the mountain may have been cold, but it was nothing compared to what awaited the girl when she returned to her own hearth. COLD, HARD...

She was late, sir. There is no doubt of that, but what are a few minutes? A few hours? For those such as we?

The fact is, sir, the girl goes back to her own expecting to find the warmth and comfort she had left behind, but she found only accusation, wrath, and anger. Over a disagreement concerning time, sir. Or then, perhaps there was something more to it?

Let me recap, sir. It was cold on the mountain. How could the girl weave more than a rune or two into the strand? But tradition would dictate that she must at least start. And upon her return, you can bet that whatever she had chosen to weave would be the first thing her mother would notice, attend to, and read. With any luck, everything about the girl's weekend would be

revealed. There can be no doubt her parents anxiously awaited the news. Had she made contact with a new house? Set up an alliance? Or perhaps even better, opened new doorways for trade?

Yes, sir, perhaps. Undoubtedly, I speak from a merchant's heart, with a merchant's concerns. Forgive me. Still the fact remains, her parents would hardly notice her as she walked through the door. Their attention would be riveted to whatever runes she had chosen to weave into the strand.

Yes. SNOW TROLL, sir. Smile when you say that...

Sorry, sir, just a bit of the humanesque washing through. It was just the one rune, the relationships ill defined... nay, undefined, for how could it be?

Come now, sir. "Heartfelt companions" is as obscure as they come. I have seen strands...

Strands, sir. I am in the business. I know my way around a piece of gold, and I have seen strands where the first rune is so dark and occluded, so crisscrossed and overwritten that it is a wonder its owner ever settled down.

Sir, whether a thing, a "scar" as you say, is a badge of shame or a mark of honor is in the eye of the beholder.

I think we may assume, sir, that the girl and her parents did not see eye to eye on the "appropriateness" of the rune.

What rune would you have had her weave, sir? Would you have her mention her friend? A human! And a girl! Just past a tenth of her age! The scandal! What sort of signal would that have sent to prospective suitors? Or the Dwarf? Now that would have been a good choice, sir. I can hear her explaining that one. "Yes, for my first rune, I chose..." What, sir? COWARDLY DWARF? DWARF NOT QUITE AS BAD AS THE OTHERS? Or my personal favorite a DWARF UNLIKE ANY OTHER; sort of makes him sound like a mutant half-breed mongrel. I say, you've got to see this dwarf...

Do not start, sir. I am not finished. Perhaps you would have preferred the girl choosing the MOUNTAIN: COLD and UNFEELING. Or I know, let us forget sentients and forces of

nature altogether and let her first rune be of skiing and the EXHILARATION OF SPORT. That would certainly send the proper message to prospective suitors: a girl so loveless and without feeling that her first day -- Her first day, mind you! Her first adventure! -- was not even marked by the company of another.

The location was not her choice, sir! The gift was not of her asking!

A day, sir! A weekend! Or have you forgotten?

Some time to herself!

For Gra'gl's sake, ELF! Did you not go skipping merrily through the woods a time or two by yourself before you reached your first quarter?

It is not different, sir! It is exactly the same!

Well, one thing is clear... sir. The anger you now exhibit is the anger she met upon her return. Can you blame her for not staying? For not feeling welcome? For feeling betrayed by her house and her hearth? So merely wishing to return to the company of friends, sir, she left.

Yes. Yes, I am, sir. My commission is now released.

My price? But no... It is best not to negotiate in anger, sir. Perhaps we should pause for a moment and reflect.

Shall we wet our whistles again, sir?

I like to mix it up, sir. I believe it's Fey'an... or Fairy. I'm not entirely sure which. But regardless of its origin, sir, I invite you to one final drink before we seal the deal.

Of course, sir, to a fair deal... for all. I must confess though. I find it all a little confusing...

No, no. The strand, sir, its gold weight. Let us leave the rest behind. It fades from my memory even now. I have no need to remember... any of it. But the strand, sir. Consider it. It weighs... hardly a copper...

Poetry, sir. Not a price. You and I both know the story -- alone -- is worth hundreds if not thousands; and then, to an interested or perhaps even hostile buyer...

I do not mean to threaten, sir. I simply wish for you to comprehend the reasonableness of the girl's offer.

Yes, sir, the price. This is what it comes down to, but first I must warn you: if you wish to purchase the strand with gold, you will need to buy it at auction, and considering the house and its position, I would think the strand would go for a good ten, twenty, perhaps even a full hundred ton-weight in gold, sir.

Yes, ton-weight, sir. But that is only if one can get the word out, if only the right people are made aware of the auction. Unfortunately, time is short. I have but the week. And I have not yet even posted a single flier.

As you may recall, sir, you arrived -- almost within minutes -- of my hanging the item in the window. Almost as if you had known I would be doing so, even before I. But no matter, tomorrow I will go to the printer and arrange for the fliers; and by the end of next, the strand will surely sell.

Oh, but it will, sir, it will... whatever the price. The opening bid is to be a mere silver -- a partial reserve for its gold weight. Of course, it will go for much more, but my patroness desires that the auction attract as many... interested parties as possible.

Of course, sir. As I have just done with you now, and to some extent, as the prospective bidder desires.

No. No. Lord no, sir. But then, there is reading the gold; and then, there is reading the gold.

To determine the strand's true worth, sir, some indication of the depth of the gold -- its memory -- will need to be determined. And if a prospective buyer should desire to light a brazier or chant a charm, as long as no lasting damage is done to the piece, what can be the harm in allowing that, sir?

Now, now, sir. There is no need to get excited.

The girl has a kindly heart, sir. And there is a proviso. Seeing as how the strand is a family heirloom and all, tracing the matriarchal line through the centuries...

As you wish, sir. I will be brief. The love birds have flown the coop for a full twelfth-month, now. Evading capture, running

free, living large, hiding low...

Yes, low, sir. But if the father were to agree to a stasis, an accord, a continuation of the same for but a single year more -- a mere trifling of time in the grand scheme of things -- for the couple to continue their "engagement" in peace, allowing them free reign to explore each other's house without fear or harassment.

I understand you anger, sir.

I must compliment you, sir. Your hand is quick. Your training has served you well. But pray, put the weapon away. There is nothing you can hope to gain.

Take the strand, sir. Steal it... if you will, if you must. I will make no move to prevent you. I will sound no alarm nor give chase.

Why would I, sir? I am not a suicidal fool. I am well aware that I could not possibly hope to stop you... should you become intent on disgracing the honor of your House. Do you think your theft...

Yes, sir, your theft -- or if you press the point much further, your murder -- would hardly go unnoticed by the Guild. And of course, there is no need to threaten you with war, sir.

I shall repeat myself, sir, for it sounds as if I have been misunderstood. There is no need to threaten you with war. Pray, sir, take a moment to examine the countenance of your second. See how he hesitates. See how he is lost. Consider, sir, that when the truth comes to light of such a murder, of such a theft, or even such a trifling thing as foul play, who would fight for such a house then, sir? Who would deal with such a house then, sir? Who would trade with such a house then, sir? Truthfully, sir. Who would stay in such a house? Or align themselves with such a house? For in truth, sir, there would no longer be a house.

No, sir. You have no choice. You know it. I know it. Even your second knows it. Look to your heart, sir. Pray, you should be delighted in the cunning of your... in the cunning of the girl, sir. It would seem that she has painted you into a corner from which you cannot hope to escape.

I don't know, sir. It is just a saying they have. Perhaps the paint is supposed to be magical, sir, or as I have always liked to believe, perhaps the pigment is mixed with gold.

<<< THE END >>>

It's always the Goldest Right Before Dawn

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