

COLD COMFORT

By John Morressy

TRAVEL, ESPECIALLY IN wintertime, was not one of Kedrigern's delights. But when an old and faithful client begs for help, a wizard cannot resist. And when the client is Vosconu the Openhanded, travel is sure to be rewarded with prompt and generous payment. Thus it was that Kedrigern departed from his home on Silent Thunder Mountain in the midst of a cold snap, and returned a month later, in the thick of a snowstorm, to find his wife and house-troll gone.

The house was in perfect condition, tidy and orderly, not so much as a dish out of place. There had been no struggle. A careful search revealed no note, nothing missing, and no sign of an intruder. They were simply gone, utterly gone, without a trace.

The first thing Kedrigern did after getting over his initial surprise was to lay a fire. The house was frigid with more than usual cold. Clearly, it had been unoccupied since shortly after his departure. He could only be grateful that the doors and windows had been shut. When the fire had caught, and warmth had begun to seep slowly from the fireplace, he drew up a chair, put his feet on the hob, and tried to reason out what might have happened.

No one had burst in and carried them off. There was no sign of forced entry. Besides, Spot would have put up a fight and Princess would have used her magic to resist. So that was out as a possibility.

She might have received an urgent summons, and departed instantly with Spot for protection and company. In such a case, she would have packed a few items of clothing — a cloak, at the very least — and left a note. But nothing was missing from her closets. And who would summon her so, and with such urgency that she would depart forthwith, and not await Kedrigern's return? That, too, seemed an unlikely explanation.

What remained was magic. Enchantment. Wizardry. A spell, charm, cantrip, incantation, conjuration, or some such thing, and of a very high quality. That was a distinct possibility. The more Kedrigern thought about it, the more likely it seemed.

He roused himself, drew out the medallion that hung around his neck, and raised it to his eye. Peering through the Aperture of True Vision, he surveyed the room, sweeping it quickly at first, then more slowly, and finally studying it inch by inch.

On the floor near the doorway he found the first trace of magic, faint but unmistakable. With great effort he was able to trace a path of footsteps from the outside door into the great room. Someone magical had entered, quite openly from the look of the steps, and been received in this very room. This, presumably, was

the person who had carried, or led, his wife and house-troll off to parts unknown.

The residue of the footsteps was so slight and faint that Kedrigern could learn nothing more from them without assistance. He went at once to his workroom, still as cold as a tomb, took three enormous volumes from the shelves, and hurried back to the warmth of the hearth. There he settled to begin his search.

His first resource was the much-thumbed *Spells for Every Occasion*. Under the rubric of Summonings he found the spell entitled “To Summon Up An Unidentified Essence, Either Dead, Distant, Or Sleeping, For Informational Purposes.” Preparation for this one took time, but it was a good dependable spell. He set to work at once.

By the time the ring was drawn and the candles lit and placed in proper position, the room was pleasantly warm. Rubbing his hands briskly together, Kedrigern cleared his throat and began to recite the spell. When he was done, he waited, his eyes fixed on the center of the ring, where the figure he had summoned would soon manifest itself. But nothing appeared. He waited, his patience ebbing, and at last a deep hollow voice intoned, “The essence you seek is not available for summoning.”

This was most unusual. “Then tell me the name of this essence,” said the wizard.

“I cannot reveal that information.”

Kedrigern bit his lip and took a deep breath. It did not do to shout at spirits, however trying their ways. “All right, then, show me a likeness.”

“I cannot reveal that information, either.”

“Well, reveal something! I want to know who came into my house and carried off my wife and house-troll, and I worked this spell to find out. So far you’ve been no help at all.”

After a very long pause, the voice said, “This spell has been blocked. I suggest you try another.”

“Who blocked it?”

“I cannot reveal that information.”

With an exasperated growl, Kedrigern blew out the candles. Muttering under his breath, he returned to his speller, leafed through the pages, and came to the section *Identifications*, which contained a single spell. He groaned. Any spell of such a general nature was sure to involve a tedious and confusing menu of options. But

there was no avoiding it. Identification of the footprints would narrow his search considerably. Should have begun with this one, he told himself peevishly as he redrew the ring and set up the requisite twelve candles in facing pairs.

This time the response was quicker. A voice higher than the first, flat and impersonal, said, “Thank you for using Identifications. If you wish identification of a person, blow out the first candle on your left. If you wish identification of an animal, blow out the second candle on your left. If you wish identification of an inanimate object —”

The voice stopped abruptly as Kedrigern blew out the third candle on his left. After a brief pause, a different voice said, “Welcome to Identification of an Inanimate Object. If the object you wish identified is smaller than a cauldron, blow out the first candle on your right. If it is larger than a cauldron but smaller than —”

Kedrigern blew out the proper candle, sighed, and waited. A nasal voice said, “Please name the object you wish identified.”

“The magical footprints within the circle.”

“One moment, please.”

After a long delay followed by anxious background whispering, the same voice, now petulant, said, “Please stand by. We have encountered difficulties.”

“What sort of difficulties.?”

“The footsteps are those of an ancient crone, but they appear to have been made by a frost giant.”

Kedrigern thought for a moment, then said, “Maybe the frost giant was a shapechanger. Some of them are, you know.”

A long pause, then the nasal voice said, “That is possible.”

“It’s more than possible, it’s very likely. This house was colder than it’s ever been. Frost giants have that effect, even when they’re in another shape.”

“If you are satisfied with the identification, we will terminate the search.”

Kedrigern was not at all satisfied. But he did not expect to learn anything more, and so he muttered, “Yes, yes, go ahead, terminate.” The room was still once more.

A frost giant was a bad person to encounter, especially when he was also a shapechanger. Frost giants had all sorts of nasty magic, and they lived in terrible

places full of snow and ice and unrelenting wind that somehow managed to be always blowing in one's face. That was the limit of Kedrigern's knowledge on the subject, and the available literature was skimpy. But if a frost giant had carried off Princess and Spot, there was nothing for it but to head north and prepare for a battle of magics. Someone was going to pay for this, and pay dearly.

He dug out his warmest cloak, gloves, and boots, and the Cap of Comfort given him by a grateful client many decades ago and seldom used. It was a tiny skullcap, no bigger than the palm of his hand, which conferred a comfortable climate on the wearer in any weather. Unaccustomed to wearing headgear, he seldom used it. Now it might come in handy.

As he packed food for the journey, he remembered, to his relief and delight, that Bess the Wood-witch had once studied runes with a skald from the remote north. Her hovel was not far away, and it was on the road north. A visit to her was certain to be rewarding and informative.

He set out on the following morning, astride Unnamed, his great black steed, the silver-horned, silver-hoofed, fiery of eye and breath. He considered it the ideal mount for an encounter with a frost giant. The snow had stopped and the wind during the night had cleared most of the road. The horse had no difficulty breaking through the infrequent drifts.

A league from Bess's hovel, the ground was clear and the trees bare of snow. The air was pungent, and grew steadily more pungent as he neared her dwelling. When Kedrigern dismounted, his eyes watering, Unnamed exhaled twin jets of flame from his nostrils. They blazed a lurid blue in the highly fortified air.

"It will be a short visit, my friend," said the wizard, patting his neck. "If I stay more than a few minutes, we'll both pass out."

He headed directly for a small outbuilding, from which clouds of steam were escaping. He knew the cause. Bess was cooking up a batch of the brew she used for professional purposes. He pushed open the door and staggered back from a powerful blast of hot and potent steam.

"Keddie, love, what a grand surprise!" she cackled at sight of him. Her voice was muffled by the cloth wrapped around the lower portion of her face. "Here, now, cover your mouth and your nose and let's step outside where we can breathe."

Coughing and gasping, blinking helplessly, he put both gloved hands over his mouth and nose and backed into the open. When he had recovered, he said, "I need help, Bess. Princess is gone."

"She never left you! I don't believe you! You two were close as —"

“No, no, Bess. She and Spot were carried off by a frost giant.”

“Oh. Ah.” Bess wrinkled her leathery brow in thought, then said, “Was it about a month ago, Keddie?”

“It was. Did you see anything, Bess?”

“I didn’t see anything, but I remember feeling an awful chill pass over the countryside one night just about then. I mentioned it to my familiar. ‘Feels to me like that miserable frost giant is passing through,’ I said. Those were my very words.”

“Then I must know all you can tell me about frost giants.”

“There’s only one left. His name is Harmr, and he lives in a stormcastle up north in Rirnegard, on the frozen sea. He’s a bad lot, Keddie. Old Gnurri told me about him.”

“Did he tell you how to deal with him?”

“Not exactly. But he taught me lots of runes and charms and secrets and all. Come inside the hovel and I’ll tell you all I know.”

The air was much more breathable inside Bess’s tumble-down hovel, and Kedrigern seated himself comfortably while she related all she knew of Harmr and the lore of frost giants and their ways, their powers and potency and their weakness. “They can cause you a lot of trouble with their runes and charms, but the one thing that will protect you is the spell against camel bites. It works beautifully against frost giants. Do you know it?”

Kedrigern brightened and sat forward. “As a matter of fact, I just used it! An old client of mine has been given a camel, and he’s terrified of being bitten. I’m just back from putting the bite-protection spell on him.”

“Well, that will keep you safe from Harmr’s magic. But he’s a clever one, Keddie. If he finds that his magic doesn’t work, he’ll try trickery. And Harmr is full of tricks.”

“I’ll be on the lookout.”

“One thing more: do you have anything of Princess’s with you? Harmr usually works a charm for forgetfulness on the people he carries off, and only a familiar possession can counter it.”

“I packed a nice warm cloak of hers, and boots, and a pair of mittens. And a few trinkets she likes.”

“Very sensible. She’ll need them. And take this for yourself,” the wood-witch said, handing him a slender crystal vial. “It ought to be a great help. It’s the pure potion. Oldest recipe in the world, that is.”

Kedrigern took the vial. It was about the size of his index finger and contained perhaps two spoonfuls of milky liquid. He gave Bess a smile of professional approval. “It’s warm. It’s wonderfully warm.”

“Keep it close to you, and you won’t feel the cold no matter how much of it Harmr turns against you. It’ll keep your horse warm, too, as long as you’re near him. But whatever you do, don’t drink it.”

“Powerful, is it?”

“What you’ve got there is enough to melt Harmr and his castle and half the icebergs in the northern seas, and turn everything in sight into something else. Don’t be careless with it. Consider it a last resort.”

“I will, Bess. And thanks from all three of us.”

“Glad to help you, Keddie. I owe you a lot, after all the trouble I caused you”

“That’s all in the past,” said Kedrigern.

“That reminds me,” said Bess, “I’ll be making up a batch of Old Fenny Snake, now that I’m done with my base.”

He gave a little involuntary shudder at the remembered effects on a quiet gathering of Old Fenny Snake, Bess’s private all-purpose mixture for social uses. “You’re quite busy these days.”

“Oh, Old Fenny Snake is no trouble at all. Just a drop of what’s in that vial added to seventy-nine gallons of nice pure spring water, and I’ve got all I need for years to come.”

Kedrigern tucked the vial securely in his belt and rose carefully. “No wonder this will keep me and my horse warm. I only hope we don’t boil away.”

“You will if you spill it,” said Bess. “Have a lovely trip?”

The journey northward, while not what anyone could describe as lovely, was at least swift and uneventful, as free of delays and complications as it was of life and growing things. Nine days later Kedrigern arrived at the foot of the ice-covered mountain known as Rimegard. At its top rose something dark and massive, vaguely like a castle, constantly shifting in shape and form. It was all of whirling snow, sleet, slush, hail, and ice enshrouded in a violent tumble of gloomy clouds, and was

undoubtedly Skutherheim, the storm-castle of the frost giant Harmr.

Pausing only long enough to protect himself with the camel-bite spell, Kedrigern urged his mount on. The great black stallion made his sure-footed way over the icy path up the slope, over the causeway, through the gaping gates and into Harmr's stronghold. Icy winds buffeted man and beast, curtains of sleet and needles of hail struck at them, but they rode on unperturbed, through doors of rune-carven ice and into the great hall, down its frosty length to the foot of the throne on which a large individual sat in chill solitude, surrounded by wuthering, blustering whirls of sleet and snow. Here Kedrigern halted, but did not dismount. He drew back his hood and looked into the expressionless face of the one seated on the throne: pale-skinned, blue-haired, icy-eyed, clad in glittering silver mail over which was flung a cloak of frost.

"I've come for my wife and troll," Kedrigern said. "I want them back, and I want them now."

"And who are you, who come so boldly to Skutherheim.?"

"I am the Wizard — the very impatient wizard — Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain."

"You don't look like much of a wizard."

"You're not much of a giant."

"Fool! I am at home, relaxed. When I wish to be, I am tall as a mountain. I cross seas with a single step."

"I don't much care if you can grow big enough to stick the world in your ear. Just hand over Princess and Spot. When you've done that, we can discuss compensation for the annoyance you've caused."

Harmr sneered down on him. "A wizard. You think that you will cast a spell and take what you like from my stronghold."

"If you're stupid enough to make it necessary, that's just what I'll do."

"I have runes and charms of power to shrivel you up like a frozen leaf. I need only speak —"

"You've been trying to work your runes and charms since I crossed the causeway, and they haven't done any good. Give it up, Harmr. Your runes are old fashioned and your charms are feeble against my magic. Don't try shapechanging, either. I've got spells to deal with that. Just get down to business."

Winds howled and sheets of snow rose and fell in great swirls as Harmr cried, “I am Harmr, last and greatest of the frost giants, greatgrandson of Aurgelmir, grandson of Thrudgelmir, son of Bergelmir! I merit your respect and gratitude, wizard, not your insolence. Know that I honor lowly mortals by bringing them to my castle. I give them unchanging perfection!”

“Maybe they don’t want it.”

Harmr’s voice dropped to a low confiding croon. “But what if they do? You know not what words passed between your wife and troll and me. Are you so certain that they wish to return to the changing world of mortals, that place of fleeting shadows where nothing endures? Reflect on it, wizard. Your wife is the loveliest of women now, but time will steal her beauty. Only in Skutherheim will she be eternally young, eternally beautiful, frozen forever in the perfection of her beauty. You will say you love her —”

“I do.”

“Then why would you condemn her to age and decay and death? And your troll, so faithful now, will grow ever more like its kind as the centuries pass. It will become violent and wicked, an enemy of mankind, and you will be forced to take drastic measures.”

“I think Spot will turn out well. It’s had a good upbringing.”

“And what of you, good wizard?” Harmr said, leaning forward, his pale eyes softening into a look of genuine concern. “You, too, are prey to time. Your spells will weaken, your memory fail as the centuries pass.”

“That’s life, Harmr.”

With a triumphant gesture, the frost-giant said, “My point exactly: that is life! But I can offer something better. Think, wizard. I can reunite you with your wife and your troll, preserve her forever young and beautiful, keep the troll loyal and obedient, and you forever at the peak of your powers — powers far greater than my own, I do acknowledge — and give you the companionship of the greatest and finest and most perfect of creatures as companions.”

Watch out for tricks, Kedrigern reminded himself. This one’s as smooth as a polished apple. Must be related to Loki somewhere along the paternal line. With Loki, it might be the maternal line, as well. Or both. Those shapechangers are shifty. Listen to him, but be careful.

“Who are these perfect companions? I don’t see anybody here.”

“I will take you to them,” said Harmr, rising. “Come with me.”

“I didn’t come for a tour. I came for my wife and troll.”

“Are you afraid? Surely a wizard so powerful fears nothing from a frost giant whose magic is feeble and outmoded.”

Kedrigern pondered the offer. He did not trust the giant one bit, but he saw little risk. The camel-bite spell had shielded him against all Harmr’s efforts so far, and the vial of Bess’s brew had kept him and his stallion comfortably warm. He had not had to use the Cap of Comfort. The danger seemed minimal, and he might see something interesting. “Lead on. I’ll stay on my horse, if you don’t mind,” he said.

Astride his black horse, Kedrigern was at eye-level with the giant. They chatted companionably as they proceeded along the frozen corridors and up a long staircase of ice blocks. Harmr commented several times on the horse’s sure-footedness.

“An excellent steed, wizard. The very perfection of horses. What is his name?”

“I did not presume to name him. When he desires a name, he’ll let me know.”

“Oh, if he were mine, I would find him a proper name. But that, alas, will never be,” said Harmr with a cold sigh.

At the top of the staircase stood a high pair of smooth bluish-white doors. A word from the giant and they squealed slowly open on icy hinges to reveal a spacious hall. The ceiling was so high it could not be seen through the clouds that swirled and tumbled overhead. The walls, where they were visible through mist and blowing snow, were lined with what appeared to be windows. Harmr led the way to one and gestured grandly.

“Behold your wife, wizard. Does she not look serene, and as beautiful as ever? Does not your troll appear contented?” he said.

“It’s good for you that they do. Now get them out of there.”

“In a moment. Allow me first to show you some of my choicest specimens,” said Harmr, leading the way around the chamber. Through succeeding windows Kedrigern saw women of astonishing beauty, men of heroic bearing, and heaps of treasure. Some of the men and women were of races and colors the wizard had never seen, or even known to exist, and were dressed in exotic apparel; but each was undeniably perfect of its kind. The treasures were dazzling in their variety, opulence, and abundance.

“I also have a splendid dragon, and palaces of most interesting design, if you

would care —”

“Maybe later, Harmr,” said the wizard. “First let’s go back and set Princess free and decide how you’ll make all this up to her. And me. And Spot.”

They paused before the window — actually a flawlessly clear sheet of ice thick as a man’s outstretched arms — and studied Princess for a time. She was dressed in a gleaming white cloak trimmed with soft white fur, interwoven with silver threads and set with tiny diamonds. A necklace of diamonds glittered around her neck, and diamond bracelets adorned her wrists. Diamond rings shone on her fingers and diamonds gleamed on her white slippers. She did indeed appear to be at perfect repose, reclining on a comfortable couch, one hand draped casually along the back of the couch and the other resting on Spot’s head in an affectionate gesture. Spot, too, seemed content, but it was hard to tell with a troll.

“Where did she get that cloak and the slippers? And all those diamonds? I don’t recognize any of that.”

“They were my present to her.”

“The old crone’s present, you mean.”

“I should have known that such a great wizard would uncover my stratagem,” said Harmr with a courteous bow. “Yes, I came to her as a kindly aged woman bearing gifts from an old acquaintance. I find that women are much more willing to admit such a one than to speak with a frost giant.”

“So Princess tried them on, and stepped outside to see the diamonds in the sunlight, and you whisked her off.”

Harmr took a step back, looking hurt. “You do me an injustice, wizard. There was no whisking. I am no abductor. You may ask the lady herself.”

At a murmured phrase and a gesture of his hands, the window first clouded, then turned to a white vapor that drifted upward and dissipated. Kedrigern rode into the chamber, which was quite sizable, and quickly dismounted. He took Princess in his arms. She stirred slightly. Her skin was cold, but her color was good, her breath was regular, and she did not shiver. In joy at finding her, and relief at her apparent good health, he momentarily forgot about his host. But at a hissing and crackling from behind him, he turned and saw the window of ice once more in place. Outside, Harmr was laughing.

“Thank you for adding two more items to my collection, wizard,” he said with a wicked smile. “You are under an older charm than any you know or can counter, encased in cold older than the world. You will not escape, nor will your magic keep you warm forever. But be of good cheer. I will not separate you from your wife.

You will be together forever. Enjoy your reunion.”

Harmr stayed for a time to gloat, but when Kedrigern did not react to his taunts, the frost giant lost interest. When he had left, with much triumphant laughter, Kedrigern took stock of the situation. Bess’s brew was still keeping him comfortable, but now that he had dismounted, his horse was showing a coating of rime. He quickly remounted.

The brew would last for some time. When it showed signs of weakening, he had the Cap of Comfort to fall back on, so there was no immediate danger of freezing. He had time for the calm reasoning such a situation required. The main problems were first of all freeing Princess and Spot from whatever enchantment Harmr had placed on them, and then getting out of this place.

First things first. He tried five basic warming spells on Princess, one after the other, to absolutely no effect. This was more serious than he had anticipated. Harmr had done something more than simply cast a spell, or charm, or read some chilly runes over her. He studied Princess closely, looking for some sign. His horse pawed impatiently at the icy floor of the chamber, and Kedrigern patted his neck to reassure him.

He remembered then Bess’s reference to a forgetfulness spell. Even if he could awaken Princess, would she remember anything? He reached inside his cloak and drew out the bundle in which he had packed one of Princess’s favorite cloaks, of bright red lined with golden wool. Not only was it comfortable, it was warm — ideally suited to these conditions and much more becoming, he thought, than what she now was wearing. That cold white, and those frigid diamonds, simply did not suit her. She looked best in the colors of summer and autumn. How the old crone had induced her to wear such an unsuitable outfit ...

He gave a little happy cry, and a laugh, and jumped down from the saddle. Surely the outfit itself was the key. Cloak and jewels had enchanted Princess, and the magic flowed through her to affect Spot. Chuckling to himself, he quickly unfastened the diamonds and the robe and pulled off the frost-colored slippers. Dressing Princess in her bright red robe and fur-lined boots and mittens, he fastened a golden necklace set with garnets around her neck, drew gold bracelets over both her wrists, and set a slender golden coronet on her brow. He took the Cap of Comfort from his shirt and placed it neatly within the circlet of the coronet. Then he stepped back and tried the awakening spell once again.

She stirred. She blinked. She raised a hand to rub her forehead. She looked up and saw Kedrigern beaming down on her, and in a moment they were in a close embrace, interrupted only by Spot’s tentative, chilly, “Yah?”

“Keddie, where are we? How did I get here?” she asked, looking around her in bewilderment. “Why am I wearing...? Did you...? How could you manage...?”

“Well, I know you like that cloak. And I thought you’d need warm boots and mittens. And the necklace and bracelets go so well with them”

She gave a tug here and there, smiled, smoothed out a wrinkle, and said, “You’d make a very good maid. Thank you. But what happened? How did I get here? The last thing I remember is chatting with a sweet old woman who brought me a lovely new outfit from a sorceress friend of yours. Do you remember Ulurel?”

“I do indeed, and she was a good friend. Unfortunately, the sweet old lady was not. She was a frost giant in disguise.”

“It was a brilliant disguise. She was only four feet tall.”

“The frost giant is also a shapechanger. And a collector of perfect specimens.”

Princess pondered that for a moment, then said, “And we have been collected.”

“Yes, along with others. And now that you’re yourself again, all we have to do is get out of this place.”

“A hot spell?”

“That may not be necessary.” Kedrigern reached into his belt and carefully drew out the vial given him by Bess. Removing the cap, he blew the emergent vapor in the direction of the window. At once the surface clouded. It quickly grew moist, then began to run, and within a minute had melted completely.

“What is that?” Princess asked in a hushed voice.

“It’s Bess’s brew, pure and uncut, just as it comes from the cauldron. It kept us warm all the way here.”

“It’s more powerful than anything Harmr’s got.”

“Considerably. It should have all these windows melted in very short order. And then we’ll see about Harmr.”

Kedrigern set the open vial on a mound in the center of the hall. Within minutes the windows had begun to melt, and in no more than a quarter of an hour all the specimens in Harmr’s collection were free. By this time the water was ankle-deep, and the walls showed signs of mushiness. A thick mist was settling over the hall, threatening to obscure all vision in a very short time. Kedrigern took up the vial, stoppered it securely, and tucked it in his belt. The excited chatter of the

liberated captives and the noise of dripping, sloshing water made for considerable commotion. Raising his hands, the wizard said in a loud voice, “Listen, everyone! We are all prisoners in the castle of a frost giant. If you’ll do as I say —”

“Who are you?” demanded a large man in a shirt of ring-mail and a pair of hairy trousers. He wore a horned helmet and carried a double-edged ax. His wooden shield was bound with iron straps and painted in bright colors.

“Yes, who are you?” said a tall, black warrior. His shield was long and narrow, covered with the skin of some unknown beast, and his spear extended a foot above the top of his plumed headdress.

“I am the one who freed you from those cold cages. And if you cooperate, I’ll see to it that you all get back to where you came from.”

“What if this is a trick? I’ve been tricked once —” a man in rich robes began, but was silenced by a small slender woman, pale as ivory, dressed all in gold. In a voice accustomed to command, she said, “Silence! This man is our hope of returning to our empires, and he must be obeyed!” With a bow to the wizard, she said, “Instruct us, wise one.”

“Thank you,” said Kedrigern, returning the bow. “The first thing to do is get out of here before we drown under all this melting ice.”

“How shall we do that?” a bejeweled lady asked.

“The same way we got out of our showcases.”

Drawing the vial from his belt, he started for the far end of the hall. Loud sloshing and a sudden outcry at his back made him turn, and he saw a great golden-green dragon arching its neck and switching its tail, causing waves of chilly water to curl across the hall as it approached them.

“Dragon! Fire-drake! Great worm! Let us slay the monster!” cried the Viking in the horned helmet, raising his ax.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” Kedrigern commanded. “Lower that ax. The dragon is a prisoner, same as we are. If we start quarreling among ourselves we may never get out of here.” Turning to the dragon, he said, “You’ll have to behave yourself, too, if you — Fingard! How did you get here?”

“Fingard was fooled by frost giant’s flummery,
Talk of treasure-horde, free for the taking,
Heaps of gold, gleaming goblets, all unguarded
In frozen fastness. Foolish Fingard
Fell for fable, followed freely,”

rumbled the dragon. He looked about in some embarrassment, then lowered his great spear-shaped head and added,

“Wizard again is good to Fingard,
Decent to dragon despite dumb decision.
Fingard appreciates, awaits instructions,
Happy to help get hostages home.”

“Friend of yours?” asked the Viking, looking perplexed.

“I removed an arrow from his claw some years ago. He’s behaved very well ever since.” Turning to the dragon, Kedrigern said, “That’s the spirit, Fingard. And I expect the same cooperation from everyone here. Now, about the doors”

He started toward them once again. When he was a dozen paces away, they suddenly burst open and Harmr appeared in the opening, filling it completely. He no longer looked fully human. He had swollen to giant size and added some repellent and fearsome features: tusks curled upward and downward from his elongated mouth; his head was flattened and broadened, his brow a great bony ridge topped by bristling horns; talons sprang from his fingertips and toes, and spurs from his heels. He roared in rage, foaming unattractively at the mouth, and thrust up his arms so his talons rent the clouds. Then he stooped until his elbows touched the floor of the hall and his great ugly head was level with Kedrigern’s. He pointed one glittering talon at the wizard.

“You! You have done this! You have stolen my collection of fine things and ruined my palace with your cheap mortal magic! But now I wield the ancient runes of Ymir and the first ones, a power that nothing you do or say can withstand! ‘Frost will freeze you, ice will seize you, icicle’s dart will pierce your heart, rivers of sleet will chill your feet, hands like stones will —’”

Without warning, his hand shot out and closed on Kedrigern. Startled, the wizard dropped the vial. It would have done him little good had he retained it; Harmr held his arms and legs in an adamantine grip, and pressed his great thumb hard against Kedrigern’s mouth, silencing him. Unable to speak a spell or work magic with a gesture, he was helpless. Harmr rose to his full height, held his arm out the better to inspect his prisoner, and laughed very unpleasantly as he concluded the charm: “‘ — Crush your bones.’ I will slowly squeeze you to jelly. And when that is done, I will see to my collection.”

The cold of Harmr’s grip began to penetrate Kedrigern’s bones even before the giant began to squeeze. The wizard’s efforts to free himself were fruitless; he could not move so much as a finger, or open his mouth to groan. Harmr was laughing heartily, savoring his enemy’s plight.

Through the thick clouds that filled these upper regions Kedrigern caught a glimpse of a dark form soaring up through the mist behind the giant's back. Swift as a hawk's flight Fingard circled Harmr's head, and as he passed before his face, Princess, kneeling on the dragon's back, threw something with a perfect sidearm pitch into Harmr's open mouth and sped on, spiraling down to safety.

The squeezing stopped. Harmr dropped the wizard and clutched at his throat. Before Kedrigern could stop chattering and shuddering sufficiently to work a soft landing spell, Fingard caught him with a claw and Princess at once set the Cap of Comfort on his head, saying, "You need this more than I do."

At once a comfortable warmth — not too much, not too little spread throughout Kedrigern's body, soothing his aching bones. "Well done, my dear, whatever you did," he said.

"I threw the vial into his big mouth. I didn't think he'd like that very much."

"Fast and brilliant thinking. My thanks."

"Don't mention it," Princess said, taking his hand to help him aboard.

By the time they touched down, an alteration was apparent in the frost giant. His tusks and horns and talons had shrunk, and so had he. He laid a hand on his chest and another on his belly and groaned. "Warm. Hot!" he said, shrinking rapidly.

"It's going to get a lot warmer, Harmr. But maybe I can do something about that with my cheap mortal magic. First you must agree to reparations for all these people, and this dragon, and then talk about getting them home."

"Never! Never! Never!" cried Harmr, now down to about three times human size. Then he dropped to his knees, clutched his belly, and cried, "Yes, yes, yes! Now, now, now!"

"Very well. When you've shrunk down to our size, I'll put a retaining spell around the vial. A temporary one."

The woman in gold tapped him sharply on the shoulder. "Would it not be salutary, wise one, to let him suffer for a time?"

"A good long time," someone else said, and murmurs of agreement came from all around.

Kedrigern shook his head. "No doubt he deserves it, but the water is rising. It's very chilly in here, and some of us are not dressed for the occasion. I think it's in the best interest of all concerned if we arrange our departure as quickly as

possible.”

There was a brief silence, then a grudging chorus of assent. When Harmr, both hands wrapped around his belly, face contorted, howling in pain, was just at eye level, Kedrigern spoke the words of a spell that enclosed the vial within a bubble of magic. Harmr stopped groaning. A look of relief transfigured his sharp features. He gave a long sigh, and after drawing several deep breaths, said, “Oh, thank you, wizard. That’s much better.”

“Good. Now we can discuss compensation for all the inconvenience you’ve caused and arrange transportation to our various homes. As a shapechanger, you ought to be able to turn yourself into something big enough and fast enough to manage that promptly.”

“What if he tries to trick us? I’ve been tricked once —” the richly dressed man started to complain, but Kedrigern cut him off.

“If our host tries any tricks at all, the spell will release the contents of the vial and he will go up in a puff of steam. Do you understand, Harmr?”

“Perfectly,” said the chastened giant.

“All that remains is to divide up your treasure, and then we can be on our way.”

Harmr turned even paler. “My treasure? All of it?”

“A small price to pay for what you’ve done to us,” said Princess. Ominous noises from those assembled around her, and fists shaken in Harmr’s direction, quickly silenced his complaints.

“Yes, of course. Going-away presents,” he said, and led the way to the chambers where his treasure lay heaped in a gleaming wet pile.

Distribution took surprisingly little time. With few exceptions, Harmr’s former prisoners, while vindictive, were not greedy. A pocketful of rubies here, a sack of gold coins there, and they were satisfied to be on their way. Except for the wave-patterned sword and towering shield seized by the Viking, bulky items aroused little interest. And, too, they were in a hurry. The storm-castle had by this time come to resemble a slush-shanty. Icy water was sloshing about nearly knee-deep.

Once outside, Harmr obligingly transformed himself into a gigantic eagle. With grateful farewells to Kedrigern and Princess, the freed captives climbed to his broad back, settled snugly in among the feathers, and waved merrily as Harmr lifted off to revisit a variety of destinations.

“That turned out well,” Kedrigern said as Harmr diminished swiftly to a speck in the distance.

“I think you should have been harder on him,” Princess said.

“He’s lost his castle, his collection, and most of his treasure, my dear. And the vial of witch’s brew in his belly will force him to behave whether he wants to or not. He may even do some good in future days.”

Princess gave him a long look. “I seem to recall that you once referred to me as `soft-hearted.’”

“I’m not being soft-hearted. Harmr is the last frost giant left in the world. I’d hate to be responsible for the extinction of a species.”

Princess gave a little sniff of disbelief, but said nothing.

“Fingard fares forth now, fast in flight
To far horizon, happily heading homeward.
Would wizard and wife and others with them
Like lift with their loot, avoiding some labor?
Saves sloppy slogging through snow and slush,”

said a deep rumbling voice close behind them.

“Well, we appreciate the offer, Fingard, but” Kedrigern began, failing silent as he turned and saw Spot seated atop the dragon’s neck and the great black stallion standing close beside his head. The horse nuzzled Fingard’s scaly jowl and let out a whinny of pleasure and a happy snort of fire from his nostrils.

“You all seem to be getting on nicely together,” said Kedrigern. “Spot gets along with everyone, but I had some doubts about the way my horse might react to a dragon.”

“Tiny trolls no trouble to anyone,
And all fire-breathers are friends from far back.
Come, companions, climb aboard quickly.
Fingard misses family fiercely
And worthy work awaits wise wizard.”

They boarded at once. Fingard unfurled his great wings with the sound of a thunderclap and hurtled forward and upward, out of the snow and slush, into the cloudless blue sky, heading for Silent Thunder Mountain.

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By John Morressy

Take heart, o winter-weary readers! (Those of you in the Southern Hemisphere can disregard these comments, or save them for six months, as you see fit.) Kedrigern's latest adventure is apt to warm the cockles of your heart, or at least make you feel like you've got no reason to complain about needing w shovel again. You think you've got problems? Read on...