CORONACH OF THE BELL

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THERE is a spruce, a skeleton, that stands above a forest in a mountain valley, and from its tip, a bell hangs hig lone, moaning in the wind.

There is a pass into that valley, but the sides are sharp and jagged-torn and twisted, blackened granite. O means death.

Once a clan lived there, when the spruce was quick with resin and fields of maize filled half the valley. There v pass between the mountains then, for a granite bridge once joined them. But that bridge was hollow, gutted out by ad pick, honeycombed into a home for Manninglore.

Manninglore, bald and bearded, hunchbacked, stunted, muscle-bound, stooping from his years of toil.

Manninglore, born old.

The wrinkles of birth never left his face; hair never grew upon his scalp. "Changeling!" the children called him. not dare protest, for his bandy legs could scarcely run and his bulging arms were much too slow for fighting.

So, of course, his bald pate became the target for their mocking slaps-blows which, as Manninglore learned q he could but endure. The lesson of his childhood was patience; the companion of his youth was solitude.

So, when he was old enough for numbering among the grown men of the clan, and his beard (already white) he set the village at his back and climbed up to the granite bridge between the mountains. Behind a grove of trees he him out a cave, hiding his door from village eyes. There, in the leaf-broken sunlight of the cave mouth, Manninglo cross-legged and opened his soul to the totem of his clan, the Wind.

They grew old, the men and women who had been young with Manninglore. Old and wrinkled, stooped and g they looked up to the mountainside with envy-envy, now, and longing; for those who rose before the dawn saw Manni up high upon the granite bridge, leaning on his staff in sunlight, though the village of the clan still lay in shadow. His bear long, his shoulders stooped-but in all else, he had not changed.

"He is a sorcerer," said some. "He has dark knowledge."

"No," said most. "How could he age, who was ancient at his birth?"

Yet Manninglore had aged, though not in body. The whole of the bridge was hollow now, filled with crucibl books, with heaps of ore and precious earths. At the back, away from the valley, stood the bellows, anvil, and heart smithy. At the front, two windows, too small to be seen by the clan, looked out toward the village.

When Manninglore's generation were long in their graves, their children's children, old in their turn, looked mountain with a curse, for Manninglore stood hale as ever, on the bridge of sunrise.

"Our grandfathers are dust," they muttered, "yet Manninglore lives."

"All that mountain is his home. We will die in huts of mud."

"What have we done with our lives?" they wondered. "We, and our grandfathers before us? Yet how much mo Manninglore gleaned!"

"He has knowledge, dark knowledge to lengthen his life. But will he give of it?"

Then, in their envy and their shame, they would have gone to the mountain and put Manninglore to death, ha dared- but the span of his powers was hidden, their limits unknown. So they kept to their village in fear and curs mountain.

Then their anger fermented into bitterness and hatred. They cried to their totem for a sorcerer that they might burn. Thus, from their guilt and self-pity, Demouach was born.

The clan gathered round the central fire, muttering, quiet in the night.

Then Demouach was hopping round the flame-pit, grinning and chirping-Demouach, the height of a knee, leather, hairless, with the form and the face of a man, but with parchment between his arms and sides and legs, and where a man should have feet. Wordless, with only chirpings or wailings- Demouach, imbecile.

One long moment the clan crouched staring, silent. Then howling broke out, with drumming of feet and brand the fire whirling at the monster.

Demouach flew, screaming in terror and pain. Still coals struck him; the clan, gleeful, followed.

But they turned away, cursing in fear, when Demouach fell onto the mountainside.

Manninglore, bent over alembics and crucibles, heard the wail at his threshold, stumped bandy-legged entryway, hauled back the door.

Burning leather, cries of torture, smoldering parchment writhed in the light from the doorway.

The next generation knew Manninglore chiefly from Demouach, ever about his master's business, sailin the valley with a leathern sack in his claws, fetching the raw stuffs of magic. Legend had hidden Manninglore's from them. He was their sage, who always had dwelled on the mountain; only this could they know of him. forefathers sinned against him," they said, "but in his mercy, Manninglore spared them." So they lived in awe of the l awe and reverence. "Be diligent," they told their children. "Be steadfast," they told their youth. "Care well for your chi they told those new-come to parentage. 'Be industrious, tenacious, generous, loving, and the child of children's children may be like to Manninglore."

But the sage in his mountain knew nothing of their reverence.

High in his granite hall, he thought of wood and stone and metal only, and hearkened to none but the totem clan, the Wind.

"Go," he said, putting a leathern pouch in Demouach's claws, and fetch me clay from the bank of the river, an from old hives, for I would hear my totem speak in words."

He took the clay when Demouach returned and squared it into a block, a cubit on each side.

Looking up at Demouach, he frowned. "Be still!"

For Demouach danced, hopping from foot to foot on the window ledge, keening like the birds of dusk.

"Be still!" said Manninglore again, but Demouach sprang from the ledge, catching Manninglore's sleeve horny lips, pulling the sage to the window.

Manninglore looked down, down to the village of the clan of Mannin under the noonday sun.

The people wandered thin and haggard, stumbling as they went.

"They starve," said Manninglore. "What is that to me?"

Demouach wailed, dancing on the ledge.

"Their cornfields lie in darkness," said the wizard. "The stalks are pale and flaccid, for they lie in the shadow forest pines even at noon. But that is not my care."

Demouach cried in short, lamenting calls, hopping from one foot to the other as though the window ledge b beneath his claws.

"They revere the forest excessively," said Manninglore. "They will not fell a tree, not even to let the s in upon their crops. They are fools. But their folly is not mine."

Then Demouach chittered, scolding.

The wizard's visage hardened; the ends of his mustache drew down. "Only pain they gave me, Demouach. days of my youth they mocked me, striking me when my face was turned away, then running, for I could not follow. built my home and gathered knowledge, never asking aid of them. I owe them nothing."

Still Demouach lamented.

"You also, Demouach, have suffered at their hands. They have burned you, Demouach, and hunted you, and you. And would you aid them, now?"

Then Demouach howled, flapping from the ledge to beat his wings about the wizard's head till he raised his arm shield and stumbled from the window. "Peace!" he bellowed over Demouach's cries. "Peace, Demouach! I shall heal t shall pull down the pines and give them light! Only give me peace, good Demouach, that I may work!"

Then he filled a pouch with seeds and gave it to Demouach. "Scatter these over the forest," he said, "and oak a shall spring up 'mongst the giant pines, to bring them down."

Caroling, Demouach gripped the pouch in his claws and tumbled through the window.

"Demouach, hold!" cried Manninglore, and the messenger hovered.

"Spare one spruce," the wizard called, "for I would not have the dark beauty of that tree lost, forev irrevocably, to the clan of Mannin."

Demouach bobbed his head, then turned to soar away in swirling song. He sped out over the village, over the to the forest.

There he tilted the pouch, spilling out the seeds, spiraling in to the center of the forest till the pouch was empty.

When the sun rose again, the pines had fallen. In their place, but half their height, stood oak and ash, full-grown

The clan of Mannin stood and stared and marveled, and their corn was green by sunset.

"The wizard has saved us," they murmured, and blessed the name of Manninglore.

But deep in the forest stood one sapling spruce.

Manninglore in his granite hall carved a deep bowl in a cube of day. He widened the lip, flaring, and carved the of his clan and its totem, "Mannin-Wind," into the side. Then he made a mold of it in ways that only wizards know, a that could hold the heat that would char an enchanter in an instant. At last he kindled coke in his forge and fanned it hot a crucible with copper and tin and swung it over the flames; he donned enchanted garb and helm to protect him from th and, when the metal flowed, with gauntlets took up tongs and chains to tilt the crucible and pour the fiery sludge in mold, then left the chamber.

For days he let it stand until he was sure it held a killing heat no longer, then broke away the inner bowl, flinched the heat it still gave off-no longer enough to slay, but enough to make a wizard gasp. At last, he filled its form with froz and crystallized water, and looking in, saw the stars roll past in majesty.

"Now the Wind will speak to me in words," said Manninglore. He broke away the outer clay, chilled and clean metal there, then satisfied that it was no warmer than was he himself, he set it on a tripod, wet his finger on his tongu stroked its lip in circles.

A deep tone rose from the bell, then formed itself into words: *"What would you know?"*

"Wind!" cried Manninglore. "Only spirit that I venerate!"

He turned, arms swinging in a circle. "I have hollowed out a mountain for a home. I have filled one wall with bo lore. Tell me, spirit, for I must know-are these things worthy?"

"No," the spirit answered.

Manninglore turned in a temper and took up his pick. Children in the valley grew old and died while Manninglo into the bowels of the mountain. Then Manninglore called again to the spirit of the Wind and cried, "A mountain of gold I amassed! Wealth beyond a world of kings! Tell me, spirit-is it worthy?"

"No," the spirit answered.

Manninglore swore and stamped away. Folk howled in birth, shouted loud in the joy of youth, groaned in the la maturity, then coughed in death while the wizard labored and his messenger passed in weary flight again and again abo world. Then, high in his hall, Manninglore called upon his totem: "Ten thousand books have flowed from my quill! There secret of wood or stone or metal that I do not know! Tell me, spirit-is this worthy?"

And, *"No,"* the spirit answered.

"Then is nothing worthy!" cried Manninglore. "Mountains, houses, wealth, and tomes-are none of these worthy?"

"None," the spirit answered.

"Why?" the wizard stormed.

"Wizard," intoned the spirit, *"look to the valley."*

Slowly, Manninglore turned to the window. He saw the fields barren, his clan staggering, emaciated.

"They die," said Manninglore. "What is that to me?"

"Sage," droned the spirit, *"who will read your books?"* Manninglore stood frozen.

"Miser," mourned the spirit, *"whom shall you pay?"* Manninglore's eyes showed white around the rim.

"Builder," the spirit tolled, *"who shall dwell in your halls?"*

In the hour before dawn, when all the world was still, the clan of Mannin shot trembling from their beds a earth beneath them shook with thunder. Rushing from their doors, they saw a great notch torn between the mountains

"The ridge is gone," they whispered; and, "The wizard of Mannin is no more! Who shall aid us now?"

Then Manninglore stepped into the village, a pack of magics on his back, a bronze beaker in the crook of his el Demouach upon his twisted shoulder.

He paced through the village that day, gaze probing the folk of the clan, tagging each person and allotting each category, for Manninglore had studied Humanity once, long before, had wrought through the gear-meshing strivings, the escapements of mores, to the tightly-coiled spring of the cravings. Then, when he knew why Man and Woman did what did and when they would do it, he had given over the study as ephemeral, and therefore unworthy.

Now, though, as he measured the paths with his stride, his eyes sought through flesh and marrow to the souls and round them all shrunken, dwindled to gibbering, skeletal monkeys, atrophied. And Manninglore marveled tha

dwindling had come to pass within his gaze, but without his notice.

They were dying, all about him, the folk of his clan, those in their prime. The elders still mumbled and move some sign of life, with jerkings and tics, and youths still walked, limbs responding slowly, as though they their way through some dark and viscous fluid. But the men and women in the fullness of their days sprawled doorways, muscles sodden, bones sagging. Here an old one gave his woman-grown daughter water to drink; there nearly grown crooned her parents to their final slumber. Of babes and little children there were none.

Yet kindness was here, and love, in the pitiful efforts of the old and young to ease the slow, sinking dea maturity.

Manninglore saw, and shame grew within him.

"O Spirit!" he cried to the Wind, "totem of Mannin! Hear the tale of a life come to naught. My cry has been only me!' for I labored only to say, 'I have built, I have crafted, I shall always endure in my works!' while here in the valle have cried only, "For thee! All for thee!"

"It is true," chimed the spirit, *"yet but half the truth. They have cried, 'All for thee, my child, that you someday be like Manninglore!' Wizard, you have served them in your selfishness; you have given them a ma their striving, and thus have brought them out of greed to giving."*

"Yet how little to give!" cried the sage; but Demouach crooned upon his shoulder.

So they came to the fields, the beaker, the hermit, and the bat-wing. There they looked upon the maize standing in buff ser-ried ranks, tasseled heads nodding to make the wind whisper.

Manninglore scowled; words growled low in his throat. "There is corn in the field, there is grain in the bin, th gruel in the pot. Yet the strength has gone from their bodies. How is this?"

"Go among the people," answered the spirit, *"and ask."*

There in the village, a man lay flaccid by the door of a cottage. A palsied hand, blue-veined and wrinkled, lif head; its mate | held a cup to his lips. The man gulped at the porridge, then lolled his head back. The old hand lowere gently to the earth. "I fed him once from my breast," its owner said, vein pulsing slowly in the stalk of her throat. "He t then . . . but my breasts are long dry now, and fallen."

And she turned away to her mortar.

"You have fed him," said Manninglore. "Why then does he fail?"

"Watch," she said then; and "See," and touched the kernels of maize with the pestle. They fell apart into powder

"Dust," she said, lifting her hand. Flour strewed on the wind and was gone. "There is no substance to it. The k have form, but no weight. They are empty."

She turned; the eyes of the man had glazed over. Sighing, she closed the lids gently.

"He was your son," the wizard murmured. "I had twelve sons," she replied. "Six remain. I had sixteen daughters. Only two still walk."

Her face was thin and shrunken to the skull. But the eyes still were large, the hair a cascade of foam down her Manning-lore's throat tightened; he put his hand out to her. She did not feel his touch.

Manninglore ordered the corn mown, the stalks plowed under. Then he kindled fire and brewed magic powd broadcast it over the fields and planted the maize.

And the old woman moved through the village, tending her children, for the young now were dying.

The corn grew green and tall-but the kernels were small, and crumbled to powder as the husks were stripped o

It was plowed under, and the wizard brewed waters of power from the saps of trees, then planted the maize.

And the old woman knelt by her last dying daughter. Breath stilled; the old woman stayed by her in silence a Then, stretching out her quivering hand, she closed the eyes of her child. She sighed, and fell limp in the dust.

Manninglore cradled her head in the crook of his arm, holding a steaming cup to her lips. The old eyes o slowly. "I loved you, wizard," she whispered. "I saw you at dawn on the moun-taintop, and I loved you. I could content with any man, because my love was you. I bore a child to every man of my generation, twenty-eight children, o each year I could bear, because of my love for you. No other man would I have; I lived therefore in shame and in scor still I love you."

Then her head fell back as her eyes rolled up, and the slow rise and fall of the flattened breasts ceased.

He closed her eyes, pressed her hair to his cheek. "She loved me-I, hunchback and cripple, who swore no v could look upon me without revulsion. I ruined her life, and she loved me. I gave her nothing, yet for all of her days, she me."

He looked up to the old folk crowding about him, bodies of wire and paper under the fiery sun. "Are all the dead?" he asked, and they nodded.

He tallied the walking mummies about him and muttered, "These at least shall not die."

Then Manninglore brewed fierce magic, a potion of earth and water long simmered with berries of virtue and of creatures dead a hundred thousand years and more. Into the fire beneath he cast powders that flamed in strange col that the broth would breathe the powers of their vapors as it drew into itself the flames below and the air above. Lo watched it churn and roil while stars drifted across the sky and the sun rose like a grim coal where once his ridge had Then he set it aside an hour and, when it had cooled, held the beaker in his hands, frowning down upon it, consider length what he had wrought and what he meant to do, for he knew the potion's power, knew how long it would kee alive, knew why it would need to-and thereby knew its cost. At last he stood, squaring his shoulders, set the beaker lips, and drank the entire brew.

Then did Manninglore strip off all his garb and walk out over the fields, each step a mighty labor, for as the su higher and heat beat down, red drops began to spring from every pore-and the wizard measured the fields with his tr that day, stooping forward to water the earth with his blood.

But when he leaned, drained, on the trunk of an oak, the blood still stood, thick and heavy, over the furrows. It to sink into the earth through all that long night, and the sun, in the morning, baked it to glaze.

"Now, spirit, how is this?" sighed the wizard. "I have given the blood of my life, but the earth not take it."

"You have waited too long," mourned the spirit. *"Sage, your blood has grown thick with th ages. It will not yield to the earth."*

Then Manninglore slumped to his knees and leaned to strike, rolling full length in the dust. The old folk of th saw the fall of their sage and, moaning, slipped one by one to measure their lengths on the clay under the glare of the su

The afternoon light burned red through his eyelids; the last labored breathing ceased near him. Only the ru Demouach's wings by his shoulder, and the calling Wind over the lip of the beaker, were left him.

Then, slowly, the red of the light slipped from his sight. A cool breeze touched his cheek. Forcing his eyelids Manninglore saw the tip of a spruce standing between his face and the sun.

And there in the shadow, by Manninglore's elbow, a shoot of green corn speared through the glaze.

"Too late," the sage muttered. "Too late." Then he rose up on his elbow screaming, his free, shaking arm pointin at the spruce. "Go, Demouach! And hang this sounding bell to the top of that tree, that men may know there was once a here!"

And Demouach leaped into air with the beaker, bound it to the top spike of the spruce with a ribbon of corn Crying, then, he swooped to the side of his master and friend.

But the wizard's eyelids were closed, sunken in, the skin of his face become ashen, the last fate-spiting expired.

Then Demouach swirled into the air with one last screaming wail, and ceased.

The forest has reclaimed the valley, filling it from hill to hill, but high above the restless green of hickory an towers the skeleton of a spruce, bleak against the annealed sky. From its scaling, brittle tip there hangs a bell, a bell of b without a clapper, alien in the wind's demesne. And the cataracting gale exacts a tribute from it, a tribute paid in mo groaning lament caught from the mouth of the bell and flung out over the forest, to break agains mountains and be funneled down into the mountain pass.

There, in the notch between the peaks, the dirge collects again, feeding in upon itself, slapping into the baffled g and rebounding, rolling in its torment till it echoes up into a banshee wail, an eternal keening coronach, despair.

And far below, a patch of forest floor is bare, fused into obsidian. At its center stands a mummified cornstalk, wrapped around a hollow core, sole testament to the clan of Mannin.