

# Hallah Iron-Thighs & the Change of Life

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The Jamplit Mountains between Alowey and Damery were tall and forbidding, infested with nasty hulking bandits who hardly ever changed their socks or wrote home to their mothers. Gerta and I had done in eighteen already that morning, which wasn't even a record for a single day.

For the first time in our long partnership though, I hadn't kept up my end of the fighting. My mail was tight across the back and under my arms, making me much slower on the downswing. The score so far was Gerta, twelve; Hallah, six. I was in a seething, foul mood.

"It's just the Change of Life, Hallah." My sister-in-arms, Gerta, a good ten years younger, gazed blithely ahead at the winding mountain trail. She flicked a gnat off her wrist. "That's why it's best to die young. It happens to all of us eventually if we don't get our skulls smashed in glorious battle at an early age."

"Not to Hallah Iron-Thighs, eldest daughter of Marulla Big-Fist, it doesn't!" My bay mare, Corpsemaker, missed a step on the rock-strewn trail and I had to grab the saddle for support.

"So, when we get to Damery, we'll stop in at Benito's Hammer-and-Go and let his armorer add a few rings. It just means there's more of you to—"

I drew my sword with a great ringing hiss, irritated all the more at the way my mail pinched at the slightest move. "If you say it means there's just more of me to love, I'll slit you from nose to belly button!"

Our client, Perchis Dal, an anemic-looking hymnal merchant from far-off Brezia, cringed, then gazed longingly down into the green river valley below. His white donkey, resigned to his none-too-steady weight, merely bobbed its head and snorted. Not wanting to be left out, the three gray donkeys following behind laden with boxes of hymnals did the same.

Gerta tossed her head and her golden braids flew in the breeze. "What I was going to say is that there is more of you to *aim* at now, and so less chance of taking a mortal blow."

"Oh. That's okay, then." My brow furrowed. "I think."

I stared sourly at Gerta's perfect profile and firm figure. The serving lad, down at the Disappointed Sheep Tavern, had been making eyes at her last night, while I had only attracted the attentions of a smelly, no-good, toothless goat herder. I'd had to threaten to disembowel the latter in order to keep the idiot from hovering behind my back the whole evening.

"You always get crabby when you're too long in the saddle," Gerta said.

Overhead, a red-tailed hawk creeded and dove through the crystalline mountain air. I considered skewering it with an arrow for being so cheerful, then turned around in my saddle to glare at Gerta. "Are you implying that I'm getting *soft*?"

The hymnal merchant flinched, then kneed his donkey and trotted ahead of us around the next bend in the trail.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," I called after him. "This pass is dangerous. You never know when you're going to run into a bunch of low-down, dirty, skulking ban—"

"And just who are you calling `dirty' there, ducks?" a familiar male voice called down from the rocks above. "Actually, I'm thinking the two of you could do with a bit of spit and polish your own selves."

"Lomo, you skunk!" Corpsemaker's hooves clattered as I pulled her up.

"That's Lomo, King of the Bandits, to you," he said haughtily.

I leaped out of the saddle, my sword Esmeralda in hand. "I thought I split your thieving head open the last time you waylaid us!"

"That," he said loftily from his unseen perch, "was merely a clever ruse on my part."

"Rats and eels, I hate it when they won't stay dead!" Gerta joined me, her sword at the ready, head craning to check out the odds. "Hallah, you must be losing your touch." She stared up at the rugged gray cliff above us and shaded her eyes against the sun. "How many are there?"

A handful of small rocks cascaded down the cliff face and we lurched back, dangerously close to the

edge of the sheer path. "Too many," I said, counting the visible tops of heads.

"Good!" As always, Gerta's blue eyes were joyously savage. "There is less glory in a fair fight!"

"Yeah, yeah." I tied up Corsemaker's reins and slapped her rump, urging the mare back the way we'd come. Gerta's gray gelding Slasher and the three pack donkeys followed. "I'll sneak back and climb up that depression just before the last bend. You guard his prissiness. I think he's cowering over there in those rocks."

"I'm not cowering!" Dal's voice rang out from around the turn. "I'm praying!"

"Praying?" Lomo called down the cliff side. His voice quivered with eagerness. "Is he a *priest*?"

"No!" I said crossly.

"But I have something to confess!"

"He's not a priest!" I reached for my bow.

He leaned closer to the edge and I could see his shock of dishevelled red hair decorated with pigeon feathers. "Are you sure?"

Now bandits, being depraved brutes, are often keen on priests, and they're never the least particular about what kind. They like the odd bit of prayer, when they can get it, just in case it might tip the scales in their favor someday, and they're absolutely potty about confession. Like kings and politicians, they have this peculiar notion they can do anything they want, as long as they're real sorry afterwards. "He's not a priest—he's just a stupid hymnal salesman!" I yelled back, trying to get a clear shot.

"Really?" Several more interested scruffy heads popped over the side of the cliff. "Does he know 'Nearer My Isis to Thee'?"

The merchant scurried back around the cliff on hands and knees, his face red as a throttled pig. I nudged his quivering body with my foot. "Well?"

He shook his head so hard, his flabby neck skin wobbled back and forth.

"No," I said, "he doesn't, so you might as well come down and have your heads properly lopped off while the light is still good."

"Yes!" Gerta chimed in with enthusiasm. "What fun is shedding blood if we can't see it?"

"How about `Onward, Pagan Soldiers'?" a different voice asked. "My mum used to sing that one over my cradle."

I cocked an eyebrow at Dal. He looked uncertain.

"Can you hum a few bars?" Gerta asked.

"Damnation!" I said, completely out of patience. "This isn't a sodding tea party, you know! Come down and fight!"

"Don't get huffy there, ducks," Lomo called down amiably. "I'll get around to killing you in a minute."

"You wish!" Cocky bastard! Now I remembered why I'd split his head open the first time. I motioned to Gerta to guard Dal, then sheathed Esmeralda and ran back down the trail to a slope that looked climbable. I found a fingerhold in the gray granite, and then a toehold, and set to work.

"What about `The Old Rugged Rune'?" I heard Lomo ask. "That's always a real crowd-pleaser."

A few knobby roots protruded from the sheer cliff face here and there, and I used them when I could for handholds. My mail shirt strained across my chest as I climbed, so tight I couldn't get enough air.

Lomo's red-haired head appeared above me. He grinned. "What's the matter, ducks? Having a spot of trouble?"

"Just wait until I get my hands on you!" I wheezed, wishing I could stop long enough to loosen my mail. "I'll kill you so dead this time—"

"Oh, you always say that." He wagged a finger at me. "My goodness, have you put on a bit of weight? Maybe it's time you checked in at the Old Amazons' Home."

"You—are—" I said with great effort. Black dots were parading behind my eyes. "—a—dead—man!"

"You really should have sent Gerta, if you wanted some climbing done," he said reprovingly. "*She's* still in top trim, anyone can see that. While you, well—" He leaned over the side of the cliff. "My goodness, is that a gray hair?"

I lurched upwards, the black dots behind my eyes having gone volcano red. The next handhold in the rock crumbled beneath my weight and I made a frantic grab at a nearby root. It held for a second, then tore loose. I fell backwards, the useless thing still in my hand, Lomo's laughter ringing in my ears.

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"I don't know what you want with that stupid root," Gerta was saying from the other side of the universe. "It doesn't look the least bit appetizing and it stinks."

Wasn't I dead? Anyone who hurt this much ought to be dead. I groaned and thought about opening my eyes. Not today, though. Maybe next week, or next year.

"They took everything," she said dejectedly. "Bashed me on the head with a rock the size of a castle, then stole Dal, his hymnals, *and* our swords. I can't even find the horses. We'll never live this down, once word gets around. That must be why they didn't bother to cut our throats. We'll be a laughingstock for ten kingdoms."

I heard singing somewhere above us, echoing against the mountain side. Bad singing. Excruciatingly bad singing.

"`On a hill faraway,' " off-key voices were screeching, "`stood an old rugged rune—' "

I wondered if maybe I could pry open my eyes just long enough to find the side of the cliff and roll over the edge to make this torture stop. Unfortunately my eyes did open and the daylight seemed to explode inside my head, reminiscent of that time Gerta and I had drunk a whole month's profits in two hours.

I clutched my skull and decided even death would not help. Pain of this magnitude would no doubt follow me all the way to the Underworld. "How—long?" I croaked. My breath was a white cloud in the rapidly cooling air. I shivered and sat up.

Gerta squinted up at the sky. "It's almost dark." She had a black eye and a knot on the side of her head the size of a roc's egg.

Hours, then. "Damnation!" I leaned forward and pressed my aching head to my knees.

The breeze shifted and the singing faded until I could no longer make out the words, at which point thinking became marginally possible. "I'm going to rip Lomo's toenails off and use them to dig out his liver!" I said hoarsely.

"That's the spirit," Gerta said weakly.

For some reason, my mail seemed even tighter than before, though that could have been because I now had a bruise on my back matching each and every ring. Every breath was an exercise in additional pain.

The wind shifted again and I heard enthusiastic strains of " `Come, come, come to the pyre in the *wild* wood! Oh, come to the pyre in the *dell*! "

I pulled myself up against the rapidly chilling rock of the cliff. "Follow those voices!"

Gerta nodded soberly and we staggered off in what seemed the right direction. The trail twisted around the mountain like a drunken dragon, now rising, now descending. The voices that drew us on caterwauled like demented choirboys and as we drew near I made out the third verse of "Zeus Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen!"

"They are having entirely too much fun," Gerta whispered.

"Yeah." I sat back on my heels and tried to catch my breath. I ran a finger under the constricting collar of my mail. "Can mail shrink?"

"You're probably just adding muscle," she said soothingly, though I could see by her dubious expression she didn't mean it. "You've been so active lately."

"Right." It was full dark now and we could see the orange glow of a fire up on the cliffs above. The frost-ridden wind gusted down the cliffs and cut straight through me. I rubbed my hands together for warmth, then reached for Esmeralda. My chilled fingers closed on an empty scabbard. The thought of Lomo's dirty hands touching my lovely custom-made hilt with the exquisite embossed elephant's head made me see purple and puce.

"Sermon! Sermon!" the bandits were chanting. "We want a sermon!"

"But I'm not a priest!" Perchis Dal said abjectly. "I keep telling you that."

"Give us a sermon, my fine potted plant," Lomo said, "or we'll pluck out your nose hairs one at a time."

Gerta and I eased up the slope. Shadows cast in the firelight shifted on the rim as figures moved about and the stench of scorched donkey meat hung strongly in the air. "Dearly b-beloved," Dal said uncertainly, "y-you should always be good and—and—"

"Not fond of your nose hairs, are you?" Lomo said conversationally.

"andrynottobebad!"

"Get to the confessing part!" someone cried. "That's our favorite!"

"S-some of you might have been a little bit bad," Dal continued reluctantly.

Someone sniffled, then broke into howling sobs.

"But if you confess to the almighties—"

"Which one?" Lomo demanded over a chorus of wails.

"How in the blazes should I know?" Dal's voice was aggrieved. "I keep telling you oafs that I'm not—"

There was the sound of a scuffle, then a shocked squawk. "Which almighty?" Lomo repeated.

"Any of them!" Dal squeaked in a voice at least two octaves higher than before. "I'm sure it's their very great pleasure to attend to whatever you fine gentlemen care to say!"

Gerta's hand slipped and she slid half a body length back down the slope. Above, I heard a familiar whicker—Corpsemaker! She must have gotten my scent. No doubt, the bandits had Gerta's Slasher too. Once we lopped off their mangy, lice-ridden heads, we'd recover our mounts and swords, and then deliver Dal and his hymnals to Damery as promised.

I tried to quicken my pace, but my mail was absolutely strangling me. Despite the impending battle, I realized I should have taken it off when I had the chance. I was gasping for air as I cleared the final foot of cliff.

A boulder shielded me from their view, but around it, a few yards off, I could make out at least thirty bandits. As always, they were a moth-eaten, vicious-looking lot. One, dressed in a dozen ragged castoffs, was kneeling before the hymnal merchant, who was holding his abused nose with both hands. Lomo stood with his back to us, surveying the scene.

"Great Isis, I'm really, really sorry!" the bandit, a scruffy, bald-headed rogue, wailed.

"A-about what?" Dal spoke through his hands, his face pale as watered cream.

"About killing that self-satisfied, stuck-up prig of a prime minister from Mazor last week and stealing all his gold."

"And you w-won't do it again?" Dal prompted.

The bandit wiped his eyes. "Well, of course, I'll do it again. Are you crazy?"



"Next!" Lomo called.

Gerta's head eased up over the side of the cliff and she crept up beside me, panting. "Now what?" she whispered, belly-down in the dirt. "Shall we charge them one at a time or together?"

My mail tightened another notch. This time, I actually felt it contract. My hand flew to the first buckle on the side seam.

"I could kill them all myself," Gerta said, "but it seems unsporting not to let you in on the fun."

Another sinner was brought before the hymnal merchant in the wavering circle of firelight. "A-and you?" Dal quavered.

This bandit was a withered old coot who looked vaguely familiar for some reason. Had I perhaps done a poor job of killing him at some point too like Lomo? "I ain't sorry about a bloomin' thing!" he declared.

Lomo cuffed him into the ashes at the edge of the fire. "You wanted to confess. Now get on with it!"

"My—mail!" I wheezed at Gerta, fingers wrenching vainly at the buckle. "Get it off!"

Her eyes widened. "Now?"

The bandit picked himself up and brushed at the new smudges on his ragged trousers. "Well, I suppose I could say I'm sorry about impersonating a goatherd last night so I could sprinkle your magic shrinking potion on Hallah Iron-Thighs' mail."

"That was very wicked of you!" Lomo said and then the two of them guffawed.

I recognized him now, as the scene before me was being rapidly blotted out by swirling darkness of impending unconsciousness due to lack of air. He was the smelly lout who kept hovering behind my back at the tavern. Magic, I thought weakly. Lomo had used one of his bandits to magick me, the rotten bastard! I could feel my veins bulging, my face turning purple. My fingers wrenched at the buckle, but it must have been jammed in the fall I'd taken earlier and wouldn't give.

"Hallah, they're going to hear you!" Gerta whispered disapprovingly.

"Yes, ducks." Lomo walked around the boulder. "You really should be more careful."

"Don't worry, Hallah!" Gerta sprang to her feet. "I'll save a few for you to kill!"

The first buckle finally gave and my mail popped open down to the second buckle, giving me a bit more room to breathe, though not nearly enough.

Gerta charged, but her balance was off, courtesy no doubt of the lump on her head. Lomo thrust out his foot, then turned to me as she went down like a poleaxed buffalo. "What about you, ducks? Is there something you'd like to confess before we throw you into that convenient bottomless crevice over there? It's best to go out with a clean conscience, you know."

With a creak, the second buckle opened. I gulped air into my straining lungs. Gerta was sprawled on the ground at Perchis Dal's feet, a new lump on her head beside the earlier one, making a matched set. I was outnumbered thirty to one. Lomo had my horse and my sword. Even my trusty mail, veteran of years of fighting, had let me down. Maybe this *was* the Change of Life after all and I'd worked too long at this exhausting, dangerous business. Maybe it was time to hang up my—

"Can I go now?" Dal ducked his head. "You can keep the donkeys and hymnals."

Lomo whirled and shoved him to the ground beside Gerta's limp form. "Get on with the confessions!"

Dal's head hit Gerta's scabbard with a sharp crack. His eyes fluttered, then he sagged like a windless sail. The bandits surged forward, aghast. "Lomo, you killed our priest!" one of them cried. "Now, how are we going to confess?"

My fingers wrenched desperately at the last buckle and finally with a squeak, it gave. My mail split open along the side seam and I drew in a blessed full breath.

"You promised us hymns and sermons and confession!" A hulking brute seized Lomo's shirt and hauled him up onto his toes. "Otherwise, we'd never have followed you. Now, we've finally caught something at

least close to a priest, after all these months, and you bash his blinkin' head in. I think we need us a new king!"

A chorus of assent went up on all sides. Lomo looked decidedly nervous.

"First, though," the tall brute said, "throw that meddling Iron-Thighs broad down the crevice. We was doing fine until she showed up!"

"Yeah!" They advanced on me, a reeking, unkempt mob, unsatisfied repentance blazing in their eyes.

I raised my chin, remembering whose daughter I was. No bunch of priest-deprived bandits was going to take me down! A true warrior is never without resources. If they wanted a sermon—

"Brethren!" I cried. "We find ourselves brought together by fate tonight, out here, underneath these brilliant and, I can assure you, all-seeing stars!"

They paused, slack-jawed.

"Some of you have not always led, shall we say, admirable lives," I said with as much authority as I could muster. "Of that I think we can be certain."

One of the worthless band whimpers.

"Down on your knees, dogs!" I crossed my arms and looked uncompromising. "It's time to make amends!"

Three of the closest knelt. "Wait a minute!" Lomo cried, still hanging by his shirt from the brute's fist. "She's not a priest!"

"You never take presents to your mothers, do you?" I tapped my foot.

Two more dropped to their knees. Their eyes looked suspiciously red. "This is stupid," Lomo broke in.

"Don't lis—"

His captor rammed him facefirst to the ground, then knelt, folding his hands piously. Lomo sprawled limply and barely breathing in the fire's dancing shadows.

"You slurp your soup and eat with your mouths open! You curse and burp and never ever share!"

Five more knelt, openly sobbing.

Gerta stirred. I put my foot in the middle of her back to hold her in place. "Raise your eyes to the stars and confess all the nasty, dirty, rotten things you've ever done!"

The holdouts knelt along with the rest of my congregation and commenced airing their dirty laundry. It was a loud and most enthusiastic list. I eased my foot off Gerta's back. "Get up!" I whispered urgently. "We have to go!"

Her hand twitched.

"Now would be a real good time!" I said.

The confessing faltered and the bandits' feral eyes once again glittered at me in the firelight. I whirled back to them. "Do you call those sins?" I cried. "By all the powers above, you are a pathetic bunch! I thought you were men! My *grandmother* has committed worse crimes than that!"

They raised their eyes and went back to it with a vengeance. I shuddered at the transgressions mentioned; by all accounts, they had been a very naughty lot.

Gerta groaned, then hitched herself away from the fire, one agonizingly slow bit at a time. I reached down and slipped a hand through Dal's belt and dragged him out of the light. "Find the horses," I told Gerta. "I'll collect our swords."

She nodded groggily and lurched off into the darkness. I put my hands on my hips and strode through the crowd. One of the appropriated hymnals lay open close to the fire and I picked it up and examined the inside cover. Oh, ho! I thought. If we ever got back to the lowlands, both King Mytchell the Extremely

Picky of Damery and King Bentley the Culinary of Alowey would find *this* very interesting! I shoved the volume into my belt.

Then I recognized Gerta's sword, Gut-Spiller, on the hip of a rugged blond fellow. "Slackers!" I cried. "Put your backs into it!" I whacked the yellow-headed thief across the shoulders and sent him reeling, at the same time deftly filching the sword. My nose wrinkled as I turned away. By his pungent odor, he apparently hadn't bathed since birth.

"Do you think confession works if you mumble?" I said. "I can't *hear* you!" The noise level climbed another notch. "Straighten up, you lily-livered wuss!" I told another. "You look like a leaking sack of feed!" I spotted my sword, thrust through Lomo's belt. He was lying across it. Damnation! I worked my way around the babbling throng until I was looming over him. "Fall on your faces, worms! Beg forgiveness of the almighties!"

Most of them did, but several, including Lomo's attacker, hesitated. "What we got to do that for?" he asked, as all around him confessions were shouted into the dirt. "I never heard of no priest saying `Fall on your face!'"

I could fight him, of course, but then I'd have to take on all thirty of them, not a practical choice at the moment. "Say," I said, dropping my voice into a honeyed lower register and leaning closer. "You are a *big* one, aren't you? I could go for a fine full-sized fellow like you."

The light in his eyes changed from petulance to vanity. He flexed his bicep and winked. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I murmured throatily, then turned sideways and gave him a sharp elbow on the point of his jaw. He toppled like a felled hundred-year oak. "That's the spirit, brother!" I cried, then glared at the remaining two bandits. They hurriedly buried their faces in the dirt.

Keeping an eye on my parishioners, I rolled Lomo's unconscious body over, freed Esmeralda from his worn belt, then glanced around for Gerta. She signalled me from the other side of the camp. Fortunately, she'd found the strength to hoist the hymnal merchant over Slasher's saddle like a deer carcass. The confessions were growing ever more hoarse and insignificant. The bandits were now down to episodes of dog kicking and flower trampling; we were almost out of time.

"All right," I said, "enough confessing. It's time for a rousing chorus of—of—" I searched for an appropriate song.

"What about `Oh Come All Ye Druids'?" one tear-stained bandit suggested timorously. "I always find that so uplifting."

"Splendid!" I hauled the newly confessed miscreant to his feet. "I'm appointing you choirmaster. Lead on!"

As off-key strains of the chosen song violated the clear mountain night air, I vaulted into Corpsemaker's saddle. Gerta mounted Slasher behind the merchant's body, then we gave the horses their heads so they could pick their way down the winding rock-strewn trail in the darkness.

Behind us, the abysmal singing went on for a long, long time.

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"I thought you two were supposed to be the best!" Dal said the next day, as we began our descent into the kingdom of Damery. His swollen nose was still beet-red and he talked thickly as though he had a cold. "You lost all my stock and didn't kill a single bandit!"

I pulled out the battered hymnal I'd picked up the night before and opened the cover. I squinted, then held it out to him. "Funny, I don't see an Alowey tax stamp anywhere in this book." I pressed the volume to my chest. "Merchant Dal, have you perhaps been dealing with those renegade cut-rate monks down beyond the Brimford frontier? You know, the ones who don't believe in lawful taxes?"

"Of course not!" Dal averted his bloodshot eyes.

"That's good," I said. "Because we all know how King Mytchell the Extremely Picky feels about tax evaders running goods across his border. I believe the last twenty or so were boiled in apple vinegar and then fed to the royal swine."

Dal flushed and stared down at his knotted fingers. "You know, I've been thinking of emigrating across the channel to Doria. The weather is so much better there and the population is known for having perfect pitch, just the place for a hymnal salesman to get ahead."

"Really?" I said. According to Gerta, who'd been born across the channel, Doria was so far north, they thought summer was when it sleeted instead of snowed. "That does sound like a pleasant change."

"What about our fee?" Gerta asked glumly. Golden wisps of hair had escaped her braids, her black eye

was swollen shut, and she didn't look nearly as valiant as usual. "No doubt you want a refund."

I leafed through the illicit hymnal, then hummed a few bars of that old standard, "Cairn of Ages, Cleft for Me."

"Keep your fee!" Dal squeaked. "You earned it! I wouldn't dream of asking for a refund!" He swallowed hard. "Can I, um, have my hymnal back?"

"Yeah." I tossed it to him. "I suppose it does have a certain sentimental value."

Dal tore the pages out as we rode and threw them surreptitiously along the trail behind us, but otherwise kept blessedly quiet for the rest of the journey.

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Two nights later, we dumped Dal off at the infamous Inn of the Second Wart at the foot of the mountain and then ate freshly roasted piglet out underneath the dazzling sweep of stars.

"Surprising that someone would be so careless about marking their stock," Gerta was saying. "Are you sure that pig wasn't marked?"

Not after I whacked its ears off, I thought. "Not a mark anywhere," I said. I wiped pork grease off my hands, then picked up my poor magicked mail. It was now so small, it fit in the palm of my hand, no bigger than a doll's shirt and shrinking ever more quickly as time went by. At this rate, it would be flea-sized by morning. "I will have to order new mail when we get to town, but at least it won't be because I'm getting old."

Gerta turned over on her back and stared up at the sky. "I'm afraid you are in for a change, though. Surely you've heard that, once you've been magicked, you're much more sensitive to spells and potions and such."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "That's just an old wives' tale."

"No, I swear it's true," Gerta said earnestly. "It happened to my cousin, Ernelda. This lovesick dolt in the next village bought a cheap spell and cast it on her. As soon as the wedding was over and she regained her senses, she beat him to a pulp, but now she can't even pass one of those stupid street magicians without feeling obliged to turn cartwheels and sing charming little ditties."

"Gee," I said, "something to look forward to."

"Well," Gerta said as her blue eyes sagged shut, "it did turn out to be a nice source of extra income. People are always throwing coins at her feet these days. I expect you'll get used to it."

And that, I reflected, was the most depressing prospect of all.