

Hallah Iron-Thighs and the Five Unseemly Sorrows

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It was a miserable, sultry day down in the valleys of deepest Findlebrot. What passed for streets, all two of them, were choked with pink dust, pink apparently being the color of choice for most everything in that part of the world. Gerta, and I, Hallah Iron-Thighs, sworn sisters-in-arms, had just escorted a herd of attack goats across the mountains from Allowey. They had been ordered as Queen Maegard the Meek's wedding present to her daughter, the illustrious Princess Merrydot. For once, the bandits infesting the passes had been fairly scarce. We hadn't been forced to kill more than a dozen, hardly a decent workout for my sword, Esmeralda.

In the distance, the Findlebrotian palace rose before us. It had the unfortunate appearance of being sculpted from icing, then left out in the sun to melt. In keeping with the local color scheme, it was constructed of the most nauseating of pink stone. The turrets were covered with a rounded stucco that dripped with flourishes and curlicues, hardly a warrior's dream for defense. The crenellations were nonexistent. A two-year-old with a battle-ax could have taken it.

Gerta scowled. "I hate this place."

"You can't hate it," I said. My bay mare, Corpsemaker, wagged her ears in agreement. "We just got here. It takes at least half a day to properly loathe a country."

"Well, I hate its smell anyway," she said.

I couldn't argue with that. Findlebrot did have a most peculiar odor, oversweet and noxious as though a perfume caravan had fallen off a mountain and smashed all the bottles in a heap.

"And look at that." She gestured at the pink castle. "It makes me embarrassed just to be close to that eyesore."

"I don't care what it looks like as long as their gold is yellow," I said testily. I flicked my whip at an errant attack goat that was taking aim at a local dog. It had been my decision to accept the Findlebrot run this go-round, though it was very unpopular among our sisters-in-arms. Everyone who came back from Findlebrot went on for days afterward about the locals and their ridiculous official list of "Unseemly

Sorrows," any and all of which could be committed without even trying. At the moment, though, our purses were emptier than my favorite serving lad's promises and so we were here.

We escorted the goats and their trainer through the castle portcullis without encountering challenge. Once inside, the smell of perfume grew even stronger. My eyes began to water.

The castle guard, if one can dignify a bunch of sissies tricked up in red dancing outfits trimmed in gold braid with that designation, surrounded us belatedly. Gerta swore under her breath as she gazed down at their beardless pink faces. The head sissy, swathed in ribbons and medals, stepped forward and muttered something about "uncivilized heathens." He fumbled for a hanky and held it to his nose.

My saddle creaked as I leaned toward him. The pasty-faced little turd didn't even top my mare's withers and he reeked strongly of roses. "What was that?" I asked. "I'm afraid my partner, Gerta, here, didn't quite hear you, and her so touchy and all about being left out of the flow of conversation."

Gerta smiled wolfishly and drew her dagger.

He flinched and stepped back. "I said, 'Halt where you stand. Creatures dressed in such a brazen, Unseemly fashion cannot be allowed to offend our liege's eyes!' "

Here we go, I thought and shook my head.

Gerta swung a bare leg over her saddle and leaped to the ground to tower over him. "Who are you calling Unseemly, bucko?"

He averted his gaze from her ample cleavage, located conveniently for his perusal before his nose, and turned an innovative shade of red, somewhere between Ripe Tomato and flat-out Fire. "Findlebrot is a highly moral country," he said stiffly. "Our women are admired far and wide for being the most comely, the most demure, the most delicate and refined. We tolerate none of the Five Unseemly Sorrows anywhere within our borders, but certainly not here at court."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. It was much the same in half the new kingdoms we traveled to, these days. The whole world was turning into the most frightful bunch of stuffed shirts. "Just pay up and we'll be on our way."

He flushed further, tending now toward a deep, true Puce, an unusual achievement for one of his pallid coloring. Perspiration beaded up on his chubby neck. "We are experiencing a bit of a problem with the royal cash flow."

I crossed my arms. "That's what they all say."

"This time, however, it is true," he said. "Three times, our most gracious Princess Merrydot has been betrothed, and three times her intended has been kidnapped by a vicious dragon who lives up beyond the highest pass. King Merwick sent gold to ransom them all, but though the gold disappeared, none of the princes has ever been released. The royal treasury, is, shall we say, destitute."

"Don't give us that rot," Gerta said. "There are no dragons." She raised her chin proudly. "My valiant foremothers across the channel killed them all!"

"On the contrary," he said, "the vile beast is often seen frolicking up in the mountains after dark—flames shooting everywhere. Word of it is keeping trade out, exports in. No one pays us visits of state anymore. The situation is becoming quite desperate." He gave us an appraising look. "Despite your shocking propensity for vulgarity, you two do look as though you might be competent with those swords. I don't suppose—"

"Forget it," I said, waving a fist in negation. "Even if there were any left, we don't do dragons. Send your own men up there."

"That is out of the question," he said haughtily. "Every member of our guard is of noble birth. If they went after the princes, they could very well be killed!"

"I'll just bet." I slid down Corpsemaker's bay side. "Now, about our fee—"

"You will have to wait," he said. "What little is left in the treasury is reserved for essentials such as wrapping paper and ribbon, not to mention satin and taffeta, silver wedding goblets, and those cunning little bundles of rice to throw at the reception. In fact, the royal wedding shower takes place in just a few hours. You cannot imagine how expensive wedding frippery is these days, and of course each time the wedding falls through, we have to resupply. Princess Merrydot, being of a sensitive nature, cannot endure the sight of implements intended for canceled nuptials."

He flicked a bit of dust off his red sleeve. "It will be necessary for you to apply for your fee next year, after the princess is wed, unless—" he waggled his eyebrows invitingly "—you would care to waive it

altogether as a sign of good will?"

I drew Esmeralda from her scabbard with a singing hiss. Gerta moved to my side, her sword also drawn.

He paled. "This is a civilized country. Hooliganism will get you nowhere." He snapped his fingers and a hundred more sissies tricked out in gold braid flooded into the courtyard.

Gerta bounded forward, sword raised. "Death to you all!" she shouted, her blue eyes joyously savage. "Hallah, stand back! I wish to kill the first fifty myself!"

I shook my head. Glorious death in combat is still all the rage across the channel where Gerta was born, but my mother, Marulla Big-Fist, raised her ten daughters to be nobody's fool. "Now wait just a blamed feint-and-parry minute," I said.

My partner's eyes blazed with anger. "Where is your pride? No one cheats Gerta Dershnitzel and gets away with it!"

"Hold!" A tiny figure, covered from head to toe in layers of pink lace, drifted toward us across the courtyard. Her skin possessed that classic upper-class pallor and she smelled fiercely of violets. "We would speak with these Unseemly creatures."

"Your Majesty, no!" The head guard fell to his knees, clearly horrified at the prospect.

The princess, for that was who she had to be, stamped her dainty slipper-clad foot. "And why not, Major Duero?"

"J-just look at them!" he sputtered. "They are coarse, vulgar, rude, tall, completely immodest, nay, even—" he lowered his voice "*—bold!* Altogether Unseemly in every way! You must not sully your royal ears by discoursing with such!"

"Really?" She tapped a manicured finger against her lovely chin. "Perhaps even bold enough to rescue our fiancé?"

"Which one?" Gerta asked loudly, then snorted.

"The lack of a royal bridegroom is a great national tragedy," Major Duero said. "I will thank you not to make light of it."

"Why, all of them, of course," Princess Merrydot said.

Gerta slapped her knee and doubled over with the effort not to laugh. "Won't that make it a bit hard to honor your obligations, there being three of them?"

"Besides that," I said, giving Gerta a hard look, "what makes you think any of them are still alive? I mean, dragons—not that I'm admitting there is such a thing—are not known for the quality of their mercy."

"Well . . ." The princess stared at her demurely folded hands. "We know poor Prince Tristin is alive, as well as Prince Adelbert, because—" Her face went pink as the finest Findlebrotian dust. "We recognize their voices every night when the flames appear and the screaming starts."

"You did a bit of screaming together before they disappeared then?" I asked conversationally. "Auditioning the little rascals, perhaps?"

She stiffened. "They shouted—a little. We only listened." She picked an imaginary bit of lint off her lace overdress. "Obviously, We cannot discuss such a sensitive matter of state here. Meet Us down the road at the Inn of the Five Unseemly Sorrows in a hour."

I frowned. "I smell a ploy to get us out of the castle without collecting our lawful fee."

She shook her head. "We swear upon our sacred honor, this is nothing of the sort." She glanced around. "The Inn—in one hour." Then she walked back across the courtyard, head up, chin set, hardly more than an inch of exposed skin showing.

Major Duero gave us a withering glare. "Now you've gone and upset her, and just before her bridal shower! We'll have to play hours of those odious bridal shower games to cheer her up."

Gerta and I mounted and left without offering our condolences.

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The Inn of the Five Unseemly Sorrows had a warped wooden door that stood open. I grasped the hilt of my sword, Esmeralda, and stuck my nose inside. The room was stuffy and reeked of cabbage and about-to-turn pork. A skinny serving girl looked up from the oak table she was scrubbing without enthusiasm, gave me a horrified look and darted behind a ragged curtain.

Gerta pushed past me and pounded her fist on the table. "Ale!"

The curtain quivered, but no ale appeared.

Gerta, never the shrinking violet, jerked the curtain aside and dragged the poor girl out by the wrist. "We've been on the trail for weeks and we want ale!"

"But I-I can't!" The serving girl hung her head.

I disengaged the poor girl's arm before Gerta broke it. "Why not? We can pay."

She sniffled. "Didn't you read the sign?"

"Read?" Gerta grinned savagely. "Who can read?"

I swiveled my head. "What sign?"

The girl pointed with a trembling finger. "Outside—it says 'No Skirts—No Service.' "

Gerta's mouth dropped open. She reared back and drew her sword with a great rasp of steel against steel.

"Are you crazy? Don't say the S-word!" I snatched the girl out of range. "It makes Gerta really cranky!"

She backed against the wall. "But it's the First of the Five Unseemly Sorrows—An Immodest Woman."

She glanced fearfully toward the back room. "My master would stripe me good and proper if I ever served anyone dressed like—"

I covered her mouth before she incited Gerta to full-out murder. "Just bring us some ale, and we'll say no more about this little misunderstanding." I produced a silver piece and waved it beneath her nose. Her gray eyes blinked twice before she snatched it out of my hand.

An hour later, several taciturn patrons had come in and then ducked back out again, apparently unwilling to share the inn with the Unseemly likes of us. The ale tasted like the vats had been used to soak rutabagas, but I was just reaching that wonderful muzzy state a bit southeast of mellow. Gerta was considerably further down the same road. My boots were propped up on the plank table and I was scratching that insistent midback itch beneath my hauberk with the hilt of my dagger, when the princess entered the inn.

"Oh—my," she said unsteadily when she saw us.

Gerta balanced her chair back on two legs and pared her nails with her dagger. "If you have something to say, spit it out."

"It's just that—" She swallowed hard, then straightened her spine. "You are showing your legs so freely, both of you. I've never seen such a blatant display of the Second of the Five Unseemly Sorrows—a Vulgar Woman."

Gerta's chair slammed down on the floor just as her dagger bit into the table.

The princess flinched.

"I'm beginning to think all this so-called Unseemly stuff everyone keeps talking about only involves women." Gerta leaned across the table, palms down, and glared. "Tell me that I'm wrong."

"That would be untrue," she said primly. "We recognize Five Unseemly Sorrows in all." Princess Merrydot ticked them off on her fingers. "An Immodest Woman, a Vulgar Woman, a Bold Woman, a Rude Woman, and a Tall Woman."

"How—interesting."

I've seen grown men faint at the sight of that particularly feral gleam in Gerta's eye, but to her credit, the princess pulled out the bench opposite Gerta and sat down. "I am in desperate need of having at least one of my fiancés rescued, and none of my father's guard are willing to go after them. My bridal shower is this afternoon, the wedding is tomorrow, and there simply isn't a bridegroom in sight. Then I saw you two and . . ."

I motioned to Gerta to hold her tongue. "And?"

"And you're so big," she blurted, then rushed on at the sight of our grim expressions. "Or should I say *tall*, taller than any of the men in our guard. You see, one must be related to our family to serve in the royal guard and Pap is quite—" She hesitated, looked around, then whispered, "Untall."

"Lot of that going around," Gerta muttered darkly and returned her attention to the dregs of the dreadful ale.

I held my tankard out for the little barmaid to refill. "So what—exactly—makes you think a dragon is involved?"

"The bones," she said. "They're all gnawed and strewn along the trail up to its lair, not to mention the fearful amount of screaming most nights, and sometimes up on the horizon, one can see fire licking straight up into the sky."

"Sounds like a bunch of snot-nosed kids playing a prank to me," Gerta said drowsily and pillowed her head on her arms. "You got one of those Unseemly things for that?"

She raised her chin. "I believe Prince Tristin, he of the lovely green eyes, and Prince Adelbert, who has the most exquisite cheekbones, are both still alive. I fear poor Prince Rumkin, my third fiance, is dead, because I never hear his voice. That might be for the best, however, as he was rather unremarkable. At any rate, if you can rescue any or all of them, I—" She hesitated, clearly conflicted, then forced herself to finish. "I will see that you are invited to the wedding!"

"Gee," I said, "just what I've been longing for. I'll break out my best knife sheathe and polish up my mail."

Gerta looked up blearily from the table. "You'll have to come up with serious gold if you want us to stir

from this inn, sweetcheeks."

Two bright spots of red danced in Merrydot's ivory cheeks, making her look almost human. "That's Her Royal Princess, the Most Illustrious Merrydot, Keeper of the Sacred Cutlery and the Back Staircase, to you!"

"Whatever," I said. "Okay, here's the deal. Gerta and I will ride up and have a quick look-see, but you have to guarantee double our original fee, whether we find any bits of fiancé lying about or not."

Merrydot bit her lip. "Very well, but you must hurry! The wedding is tomorrow. After that, I have but two days left before my sixteenth birthday when I become an official old maid and therefore unworthy to marry and continue the family line."

"Whoa," I said. "We can't have that."

Gerta just snored.

* * *

After the princess left, I hauled Gerta outside to dunk her head in the horse tank. She rubbed her eyes blearily, then stared at me, dripping scummy green water. "Wha—?"

"Wake up," I said. "We're off to see the dragon."

"There are no dragons," she said. "My foremothers—"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I know the litany. Mount up."

As dusk fell, we took the only road up into the south pass and found it curiously abandoned. This time of year, there should have been trade caravans arriving one after the other, not to mention messengers, perhaps even a young blade out to court a likely lady. A warning prickle ran up my spine.

Gerta rode with her head sunk on her chest. "I don't feel so good," she said thickly. "I think someone punched a hole in my head, when I wasn't looking, and let all the thoughts out."

"I think maybe you're right," I said. "Stay away from rutabaga ale after this. It doesn't agree with you."

"Yeah." She thumped her heels against her gray gelding's ribs and rode on in silence.

An hour later, we were climbing one switchback after another and were about midway up the side of the mountain when I glimpsed a bright gleam playing along the rocky peak. "What's that?"

Gerta shook her head, then groaned at the excessive movement.

The gleam waxed and waned, waxed again. I stood up in my stirrups. "It looks like flames."

"I don't want to know," Gerta said. She pressed her hands to her aching temples. "Let's bed down here and then tell the princess tomorrow that we couldn't find anything. We can collect our fee and she'll never know the difference."

"That would be Unseemly," I said in my best royal imitation. "Besides, if there really is a dragon up there, don't you want to kill it? I mean, it is a tradition in your family."

"A glorious one," she agreed dully. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Thanks for sharing," I said.

Half an hour later, we heard sounds echoing down from the rocks. They started low, just a few groans and whimpers, then rose in pitch, ending with a final maniacal scream.

Gerta reined in her gray gelding. "Dragons don't torture their prey," she said. "At least, not in any of the tales my family used to tell. Sometimes they eat you, but that only takes one bite, maybe two. They're not dainty."

"And the meal wouldn't go on night after night," I said. My curiosity was roused. "Three princes would last no more than three days. After that, the dragon would have to hunt."

We found a scrubby pine and tied our horses, then climbed the rest of the way on foot. Esmeralda was comfortingly heavy on my back, but Gerta carried her sword already drawn. The noises continued, but in a different pitch, lower. Tristin or Adelbert, I wondered, or even the unlamented Rumkin?

The sounds were coming from a large cave lit from within. "—you can chain me up like *this!*" a male voice was saying enthusiastically. Metal links rattled. "And then like this and this! Very fetching, don't you think?"

"Go home," said a weary voice that sounded like a cross between a vulture and a camel. "I have told you over and over—I am a vegetarian. I have no desire to eat any of you wretchedly scrawny humans, no matter how crazy you are or how much you deserve it."

"I shall be the Harem Boy, staked out for sacrifice by a Cruel Eunuch. You can be the dragon," the first voice continued eagerly. "You can drop down from the sky and have your way—"

"I am a dragon," the vulture/camel voice broke in petulantly.

"All the better!" the human cried. "Chain me to the wall here. Just a few links—please! You know you want to!"

Gerta and I gave each other a startled look. Was this one of the missing princes, or an insane goatherd escaped from being locked down in his family's root cellar? I slipped a dagger between my teeth and motioned for Gerta to follow me up the slope.

Inside the cave, shadows danced upon the wall, distorted and huge. A large bonfire was burning just a few feet away. A dusky pink dragon, about the size of a mastiff, sat turning a spit full of squash and eggplant.

Gerta shuddered. "By the gods, I hate zucchini!"

"Shut up!" I whispered, craning my head for a better look.

"If you don't want to play Harem Boy, then how about—"

"Oh, give it a rest!" another voice, also male, broke in. "If he doesn't want to play, I'll chain you up again myself."

"You are both vile, despicable knaves!" a third voice put in, full of ringing overtones. "Though I will not live to bask in poor sweet Merrydot's presence again, I thank all the powers that ever were she will not be exposed to your depravity."

"Put a sock in it, Rum-Punch!" the other two said in unison. Someone giggled. There was the sound of a brief scuffle.

Stranger and stranger. I slid my back along the rough wall, Gerta at my heels. Fifty feet beyond the dragon, three figures moved in the shadows and light gleamed off a quantity of metal. A pile of treasure caskets lay nearby.

"Besides, you've already had your turn, Bertie," the voice continued. "I want to play Cabin Boy, the victim of desperate Pirates. You can be the Pirate King and lash me to the mast!"

The dragon sighed, then tested a winter squash with an extended claw.

I straightened up, stepped into the light, and cleared my throat. All four figures froze, the three humans, and the dragon as well. "Princes Tristin, Adelbert, and Rumkin, I presume?"

"Thank goodness you've come!" the diminutive dragon said. "I thought these three were going to eat me out of house and home."

A handsome young man darted forward, hair brown as mahogany, eyes green as the first leaves of spring. "Mind your tongue, dragon. No one asked your opinion!"

The dragon removed a steaming eggplant from the spit. "You will take them away, won't you?" it said to me plaintively.

I hefted Esmeralda. "You will permit it?"

The dragon rolled its golden eyes. "I will positively dance for joy. Name your price, old thing. I'd pay all I

have to be rid of them!"

"You weren't torturing them?"

"They were torturing me!" it said.

"But, then, what are all these chains for?" I asked.

"They're left over from the cave's last tenant, my maternal aunt," the dragon said. "In her day, they were the latest in dragon chic, but now that clanky stuff is so passe. I'm trying for nice clean lines, you know, a much more modern look."

"No!" the young man cried, rushing forward to throw himself on his knees. "Don't make us go back! You don't know what it's like down there! *This* is Unseemly and *that* and *that*! Nothing I do is right and they keep making me memorize lists of rules. Nobody in all of Findlebrot knows how to have fun! Would you believe—" He lowered his voice. "They don't even play Hide-the-Thimble there? The princess looked positively shocked when I suggested we retire to her bedroom to get acquainted. Everyone is so proper and serious and—"

I turned to Gerta. "He does have a point."

Firelight glinted off her blonde braids as she nodded.

"And you?" I gestured to the second figure with Esmeralda. "Back there in the shadows. Come out where I can see you."

A second young man shuffled forward, shorter than the first, as fair as the other was brown, and owner of the exquisite cheekbones which Merrydot had mentioned. He was swathed in chains and very little else.

"Nice outfit," Gerta said.

He blushed. "My father made me come to Findlebrot," he said petulantly. "I didn't want to. Everyone down there is a sodding bore!"

"Mmmnph!" someone said from the deepest shadows. "Mmmmmphhhh!"

"What's that?" I said.

"Oh, that's just Rum-Punch," the first prince said. "He can't talk very well at the moment. He has a sock in his mouth."

I scowled. "Well, take it out!"

Upon his release, a red-faced Prince Rumkin hastened forward. He was shorter than the other two, rounder of face, with soft myopic gray eyes. "Arrest these two wretches!" he cried. "They are traitors to my beloved Merrydot! When they saw I would not be coaxed into running away, as they both had, they knocked me on the head and kidnapped me. They wished to stop Findlebrot's alliance to my father's kingdom, even though either one of them could have wed Merrydot themselves and prevented it."

"Bummer," I said.

"You don't know what I've suffered." He glared at them. "Having to watch their sordid little games night after night, while poor Merrydot was doomed to pass her sixteenth birthday unwed and die an old maid."

"There, there," Gerta said awkwardly, because there seemed nothing else useful to say.

"Gosh," I said, "what to do, what to do?" I stared off into space helpfully. "The lovely Merrydot must have her prince, and soon, but she only needs one." Adelbert and Tristin hung their heads. The dragon munched thoughtfully on a roasted zucchini.

"Wait!" cried Gerta. "I am getting an idea!" She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Give me a minute!"

I sagged back against the wall of the cave and studied the hilt of my sword. Could use a good polishing, I thought. I rubbed the embossed elephant's trunk with the hem of my tunic.

"We'll only take back one of the princes for the wedding!" Gerta looked at us all triumphantly. "The other two will return to their own kingdoms—but how will we ever pick which one?"

"Gee," I said, "that is a problem."

"I will go home," Prince Adelbert said abjectly, "if you're sure it's really necessary."

"And I." Prince Tristin hung his head. "But I'd rather just stay up here and go on having fun, if it's all the same."

"No can do, sonny boy," I said. "This noisy male bonding stuff is creeping out the rest of the kingdom. All the jumping around the fire, howling at the moon, and chaining each other up has got to go. Otherwise, the royal guard is going to find its nerve one of these days and come up here to check things out."

"How true," the pint-sized dragon said. "And I long to have my nice peaceful cave back to myself again. How will I ever summon the energy to grow to a properly terrifying size with all this racket?"

"As for you, Prince Rumkin," I said, "I'm afraid you will have to keep the details of this unfortunate experience secret."

He threw his pudgy chest out. "And why, pray, would I do that?"

"Because, your highness, if you keep quiet," I said, "Gerta and I will tell everyone you had just worked free of your bonds, slain the dragon, and rescued the other two princes seconds before we arrived. We'll return the gold to the king and you'll be a hero."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we will tell everyone that you were tied up like a sausage by choice, playing nasty macho party games with your two lunatic soul mates here, while poor Merrydot languished in the valley below, doomed to go to her grave a virgin."

He paled. "But that would be a damnable lie!"

"So it would," I said affably, "and, for the record, Gerta and I are quite good at lying. We've had lots of practice."

He ran spread fingers through his sandy hair. "But it all sounds so—dishonorable, so downright unseemly."

Gerta nodded sagely. "He's just the man to help rule Findlebrot," she said in a stage whisper.

"So, Prince Rumkin," I said, "what will it be?"

Prince Tristin dropped to his knees. "Rum-Punch, play the hero, please! My father would kill me if he ever found out what I'd been up to. He frowns on the whole concept of harem boys. He'd marry me to someone even worse than Merrydot in a second!"

"Me too," said Adelbert. "I promise we'll back you up every step of the way, have songs sung in your honor, make feasts in your name." His lower lip quivered.

"And there's always the chance that Merrydot will chose one of these scoundrels over you," I said, "all things being equal."

Rumkin scuffed his boot in the pink dust. "Oh, all right," he said in a low voice.

"Say, old things, on your way out," the dragon said, "could you dump those ridiculous chains down the nearest ravine? I can't look at them another second. They're so incredibly tacky."

* * *

Prince Rumkin and Princess Merrydot were married scant hours before she turned sixteen and exceeded her expiration date. Princes Tristin and Adelbert hung out at the castle long enough to back up Rumkin's story, then set off for home, shoulders slumped. Fortunately, no one in Findlebrot ever realized they were pining for one more round of the Whipping Boy and the King instead of marital bliss with the luscious Merrydot.

The weird screaming up on the mountain, the ominous fires, and clanking of chains ended. No more gnawed bones were strewn along the high trails and there were no more royal abductions, although I later

heard reports of an excessive amount of broiled squash rinds littering the heights.

True to her word, the princess paid Gerta and me handsomely, though the bulk of our fee came to us in the form of surplus wedding gifts. I suppose we'll eventually find a use for the silver candle-snuffers and jewel-encrusted toilet paper cutters. It's the thought that counts, as they say.

The most elegant reward for our exploits, though, Merrydot kept secret until her wedding reception, where she announced to one and all that henceforth only Four Unseemly Sorrows would be recognized throughout the kingdom.

That's why, in Findlebrot, it is no longer a sin to be Tall.