

Roger Zelazny. The Monster and the Maiden

A great unrest was among the people, for the time of decision was again at hand. The Elders voted upon the candidates and the sacrifice was affirmed over the objections of Ryllik, the oldest.

"It is wrong to capitulate thus," he argued.

But they did not answer him, and the young virgin was taken to the grotto of smokes and fed the leaves of drowsiness.

Ryllik watched with disapproval.

"It should not be so," he stated. "It is wrong."

"It has always been so," said the others, "in the spring of the year, and in the fall. It has always been so." And they cast worried glances down the trail to where the sun was pouring morning upon the world.

The god was already traveling through the great-leafed forest.

"Let us go now," they said.

"Did you ever think of staying? Of watching to see what the monster god does?" asked Ryllik bitterly.

"Enough of your blasphemies! Come along!"

Ryllik followed them.

"We grow fewer every year," he said. "One day we shall no longer have any sacrifices left to offer."

"Then that day we die," said the others.

"So why prolong it?" he asked. "Let us fight them--now, before we are no more!"

But the others shook their heads, a summary of that resignation Ryllik had watched grow as the centuries passed. They all respected Ryllik's age, but they did not approve of his thoughts. They cast one last look back, just as the sun caught the clanking god upon his gilt-caparisoned mount, his death-lance slung at his side. Within the place where the smokes were born the maiden thrashed her tail from side to side, rolling wild eyes beneath her youthful browplates. She sensed the divine presence and began to bellow.

They turned away and lumbered across the plains.

As they neared the forest Ryllik paused and raised a scaly forelimb,

groping after a thought. Finally, he spoke.

"I seem to have memory," said he, "of a time when things were different."

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