

WIZARD TROUBLE

by Paul Collins

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Gilbon the dragon was the last of his kind. His black and grey mottled hide testified to a great age; his once sharp teeth were now blunted instruments with which he ground his greens; his silvery wings were now somewhat tarnished since he hadn't used them much for eons; his once taut body had run to fat. He had two broken and blackened horns that vaguely resembled the spinal mounds that ran the length of his back. Tall as a stone hut and twice as long, he might at first glance seem a formidable foe.

He stretched languorously beneath a towering singsong tree. Its funnel fronds whistled myriad tunes as a gentle breeze combed their hair-thin antennae.

The dragon heaved a sigh of contentment. Retirement wasn't all that bad, he mused. Water gurgled from an underground stream to his left, and the heat from the rising sun warmed his thick hide that, in old age, sometimes seized on him in bouts of cold weather.

Brightly colored birds cavorted in the branches above his head and at that moment he truly believed himself to be in dragon heaven.

Gilbon allowed his heavy lidded eyes to close. While he snoozed he fantasised of better times - when, in his youth, he had traipsed about the world challenging knights, kidnapping maidens in distress, and acquiring himself the title of King Dragon.

Of course, he admitted as his sleepy head began to droop, he was too old for all that gallivanting hero stuff now. He'd been forced to assault the Dark Lord Perdurabo's Tower a short while ago, to rescue a kidnapped youth who had slept for two hundred years. Never, but never, again did he expect to put himself under such duress.

Then something nudged him.

With a start, the aged dragon opened his rheumy eyes. In a flurry of movement, he sat up onto his hind legs.

"I say," he grumbled, "watch what you're doing with that toothpick!" He ducked another jab from a lance.

Beneath Gilbon stood a young knight. Whoever she was, her assortment of armor was rusty and ill-fitting. "What on earth do you think you're playing at!" demanded Gilbon. A faint waft of vapour spat from his nostrils.

"I'm a knight and I've been sent forth to slay you!" the knight cried through a face grill.

"A girl knight?" Gilbon scoffed. "Sorriest excuse for a knight I've ever seen! The couters on your arms are over large, and your pauldron's too small for your shoulders. In fact, your entire assemblage seems to be made up from bits and pieces," he said. "Even your steed's accoutered the same: his chamfrain's too

wide for his head, and the crinet's too long for his neck; the petrel's hanging slackly around his chest, the flanchard's too tight around his - NOW STOP THAT!" he roared as the knight lunged forward. Gilbon swayed to one side to avoid the battered tip.

Having missed her target, the young knight staggered to remain upright. Then, with a crash of metal, she fell in a heap. Her armored visor rolled across the ground like a kicked bucket.

Gilbon lifted one ponderous foot and smashed the knight's lance to kindling. "You're making a thorough nuisance of yourself, girl, and dragons must have their peace, you know." Defenseless, the knight scrambled for the nearest boulder and hid behind it.

Gilbon sighed heavily. "Come out from there," he called irritably.

"I'd die first!" the knight said defiantly.

"That can be arranged!" Gilbon threatened. He took several deep breaths and heaved out from the pit of his stomach. A black, scorching flame leapt forth and charred the boulder black.

"Your position is untenable!" Gilbon challenged her. "Your horse has fled, you're unarmed and you face a superior foe. Prepare to die!" he bluffed.

"I surrender!" the knight wailed.

Looking despondent, the young girl came out from behind the boulder. She held her hands high in the air.

"What's your name?" Gilbon demanded.

"Jackie," she said.

"Gilbon," said Gilbon. "Now what's all this about? I can't have my snooze being interrupted every time a foolish knight needs to prove her womanhood!"

"You wouldn't understand," Jackie said.

"Try me," Gilbon goaded cunningly.

Jackie swallowed hard. "You won't like it."

"I've still got both barrels loaded," Gilbon threatened. To emphasize his threat, he pushed two tendrils of flame from his seared nostrils.

"Voices have told me that only the brain of a dragon can save my father from his ailment."

Gilbon opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. "Leave my brain out of it!" he ordered.

Jackie felt as good as cooked already. She raised her hands higher.

"I've never heard such poppycock in all my born natural!" Gilbon said. "A dragon's brain you say?"

"That's what the Voice told me," Jackie admitted despondently.

"Well I never," Gilbon said, stunned. "Let me tell you something, Jackie my girl. Your Voice is out of touch with reality. It - "

Suddenly silence swept the glade. Gilbon craned his bullneck and looked about. The birds had taken flight; the cascading water that usually gurgled its way south did so quietly; the singsong tree only whispered maudlin tunes. It was as though a death sentence had been placed upon them.

It made Gilbon feel chilled somehow. And whenever dragons feel chilled, they move on. Which is just what Gilbon suggested they do.

"I'll take you to see a wizard friend of mine. Perhaps he'll be of friendly disposition to assist you."

Gilbon shook his head with mirth. "A dragon brain!" he chuckled. "Whatever next?"

Deep within a limestone mountain the wizard Shantele clenched his teeth with anger. The obese magician took a deep breath to calm his taut nerves, but it helped not. "Can't you do anything right?" he growled at his apprentice. He watched dust motes crawl lazily through the air. "I gave you the simplest of jobs and you even botched that!"

Winston croaked in bewilderment. "I did wash the floor, Master. Look, the floor's still wet!"

"Then what's all this dust?" Shantele flapped his hand in frustration.

"It's clean dust!" Winston countered.

Shantele sneezed heavily. "I give in!"

"You mustn't work yourself up," Winston said earnestly.

"It's useless!" the aged wizard grumbled. "I'm tired of the constant struggle! Tired of all things magical. "When I retire," Shantele continued, "you shall become it. Master of the Manor, local doctor to ailing creatures such as trolls, ghouls, peasants and all manner of unthinkable things."

"Oh," Winston said, then lapsed into abrupt silence, his eyes wide and solemn. He fingered the metallic talisman that hung from his neck.

"Is that all you can say?" Shantele blurted. "Oh?"

"W-e-l-l," Winston said slowly.

"Hmph! Let me tell you, it's a passion akin to being a god, I shouldn't wonder - give or take a little responsibility."

Winston swallowed hard. "A god?"

"Indeed!" the wizard told him. "But before you attain this heady height, you must prove your mettle. The time is nigh, Winston. The time is nigh!"

The aged wizard fossicked around his gloomy cavern. "I need an army and I need it now! I told you to find me a knight, and you turn up a girl not yet weaned from her mother's -"

A faint voice from near the mouth of the cave interrupted the wizard's tirade.

"Visitors!" Shantele made the word sound like bad weather.

"I'll see who it is," Winston said, relieved.

"I'm out," Shantele snapped. "Hunting dragons or something like that - anything to make them go away whilst I try to remedy this mess you've gotten us into."

Winston smiled sickly when he saw Gilbon. The dragon's huge frame blocked all light from outside.

Beside Gilbon stood a young girl in a lobster outfit. Winston's smile faded.

"Well," Gilbon said, "lost your manners or something? Haven't you ever seen a girl in stovepiping? And it's cold out here, don't you know. Speak up man!"

"The master's out hunting dragons," Winston said. He wished he were someplace else.

"Probably looking for me," Gilbon said, goodnaturedly. But then his eyes narrowed and suspicion stole over his face.

Shantele groaned as a preternatural cold wind swept in from the darkening cliff. Of all the chelas he could have employed, he had chosen Winston. Damn the boy's mother! He'd been positively coaxed into apprenticing Winston. The young fool had the knack of saying and doing everything wrong!

"Shut that confounded door!" Shantele screeched maniacally. "Can't you tell a stalking wind when you see one?"

Winston winced. He hurriedly beckoned the pair in and slammed the great oaken door shut. He grimaced as a hissing noise fled under the door.

Shantele rolled his eyes when he saw Gilbon and the knight. "Gilbon, you old rascal," he said jovially enough; yet he directed a withering glare at Winston.

"This is Jackie," Gilbon said.

Shantele scrutinized the girl. Rather a pretty thing, he thought: blue antelope eyes and upturned nose dominating a round face cropped with ragged coal-black hair. There was a certain fierce quality about her that was usually attributed to fanatics. She wasn't exactly what he'd expected, but... a girl driven by desperation could work wonders, he mentally concluded.

"As I was saying," Gilbon said, annoyed at Shantele's overt observation of his guest, "Jackie's got this minor problem." And he went on to explain about Jackie's father being ill and some spooky Voice that talked utter nonsense.

"So if you can throw a get well spell over Jackie's father," Gilbon said innocently, "we'll be on our way."

"Throw a spell over Jackie's father?" Shantele cried theatrically. "What do you think this is, 'Make A Wish'?"

Gilbon's jaw dropped. "That's very uncharitable, Shanny! I know! The Wizards' Guild is after you again," he genuinely commiserated. "After all you did for them against that Perdurabo and his hordes!"

"They'll hound me to the very ends of the earth I shouldn't wonder!" Shantele complained. "Such is their

desire to see me ruined!"

"Ruined?" Gilbon gasped. "No!"

"It appears the wretches believe I have some powerful new weapon at my disposal and even as we speak plans are underway to stamp me underfoot!"

"You do look a little pale," Gilbon sympathized.

Suddenly the wizard swiped at the air and clapped his hands three times consecutively. There was a loud bang, followed by a sudden silence.

"A loose spell," Shantele said as though to prove the point. "The Wizards' Guild send them my way every now and then hoping to catch me napping."

"Well perhaps we'd best be off," Gilbon said a little too hurriedly.

"Gilbon could huff and puff and scorch the Wizards' Guild," Jackie suggested naively.

Shantele raised an eyebrow. "Huff and puff, yes - but scorch?" he smiled coldly.

"We must be off!" Gilbon said emphatically. He fixed Jackie with an icy stare as he trundled to the door.

"But what about my father's cure?" Jackie said querulously. She stood her ground with stolid determination.

"Heavens above," Shantele muttered. "Stand aside, young woman. Winston, assist if you will!"

In the flickering candle-light, Jackie watched the mage and his chela sprinkle scented herbs from leaden coffers, read occult symbols from dried parchment, tinker with thingummyjigs and thingummybobs.

All the while Gilbon kept an eye out for loose spells; he didn't have the faintest idea what they looked like, although suspected they came from under doors.

At length, Shantele cried, "Aha! Just the thing for your father. You realize of course," he said shrewdly, facing Jackie, "that the Voice requires the brain for other, more arcane purposes? I mean, your father's ailment is no doubt induced by the Voice as a means to obtain a brain?"

"No," Jackie said slowly. "I didn't know that."

"The ways of Voices are many and varied," Shantele pontificated. "And must be obeyed!" he added, ushering Jackie to the door, where Gilbon was waiting impatiently. "Simply give this dragon brain - or rather, imitation brain - "

"I say," Gilbon interrupted. He shuffled forward and squinted down his snout. "The Voice'll never believe that's a dragon brain. It's far too small!"

"Oh?" Shantele observed Gilbon's head and then compared it with the jar's contents.

"You can be so callous," Gilbon said caustically. "Come, Jackie. We must away. Darkness gathers!"

Jackie stopped at the doorway. "If there's anything I can do to repay the favour Master Wizard..." she said.

Shantele beamed at the thought. "Indeed, indeed!"

"See you, Shanny!"

"Yes, yes," Shantele said and slammed the door shut. He turned to Winston and a wicked gleam shone from his eyes. "I do believe I've created the maggot that will eat the worm!"

"So the knight I found is going to work out?" Winston asked.

"With much fine tuning, mayhap, mayhap!" the wizard sang as he bustled off to the back of his ornate cave, whereupon he commenced work amidst gales of laughter.

Outside, deep inside the encroaching night, Gilbon and Jackie wove their way down the perilous gravel track.

"Did you hear that?" Jackie asked, full of awe.

"I do believe it was Shanny having a laugh," he said nervously.

The moon had traveled right across the sky by the time Jackie and Gilbon reached a thatch cottage squatting on a lonely hillside.

"I say," Gilbon said uncomfortably. "It looks terribly deserted. Somewhat like a picked bone, don't you think?"

"DAD?" Jackie screamed and ran up the craggy slope.

"Wait up, Jackie!" Gilbon called after her and with great pounding strides he tore after the girl.

Gilbon reared up short of the cottage. A tiny whirlwind was gathering in the doorway. It whizzed and hissed furiously as it gathered force. Then arrowswift it fled the homestead and zoomed past Gilbon.

The dragon ducked and cursed. He timidly poked his snout into the narrow doorway. "Jackie? he called. "What on earth was that?"

"The Voice," Jackie said despondently.

"Voices aren't real!" Gilbon snorted.

"That one is," Jackie said gloomily.

"I don't see your father anywhere," Gilbon said.

"The Voice snatched the brain and said Dad recovered and fled into the bush. He could be anywhere!" she despaired.

"Oh," Gilbon said. "Well let's go find him, girl." He draped a fatherly paw across her heaving shoulder. "I think we'd better go now. There's something about this place that I don't like." He looked about nervously. "Something... supernatural," he added with a shiver.

Shantele pulled back from his scrying glass and smiled. "All coming along perfectly," he gloated, rubbing his podgy hands.

Winston eyed the jar next to Shantele's workbench. "But why did you give Jackie the sheep brain if you wanted your sprite to get it back?"

"Winston, Winston, Winston," Shantele said in a tired voice. "I worry about you, I really do. There was nothing the matter with Jackie's father that a simple ill-lock spell didn't fix. Common enough spell really. Used mostly by the Wizards' Guild to keep the peasants down. The brain was merely a prop, which is the basis of all conjuring tricks!" He thumbed his temples in contemplation. "Now that Jackie and Gilbon are adventuring in pursuit of Jackie's father, I may well have provided the ball impetus to roll!"

"I see," Winston said slowly. But he didn't. Not at all.

West of Gallah Flats, there stretched the vast desert tract known to most as the Barrenlands. Traversing its bleak undulating scape, were two wind-blown vehicles.

The land schooner cut across the coarse sand leaving in its wake a plume of red, broiling dust.

Not too far distant, a slower moving catamaran was the object of their pursuit. "Prepare to grapple!" screamed a solid pirate by the name of Jute.

His companions, Hyiat and Bonnie, scuttled about the schooner in readiness to board their prey.

However, so busy were they in their eagerness to plunder, none witnessed a shadow appear where no natural shadow could possibly exist.

The darkness grew despite the overhead sun that cast other shadows away. Cat-like, the shadow-thing reached forth and touched both Hyiat and Jute on their temples.

Wondrous delights betook each of the pirates.

Jute, having often complained about the low returns from their pirating, suddenly saw himself a king and bejeweled in all manner of gems. He'd had his fill of plundering the impoverished desert nomads. He craved the more bountiful caravans that plied the inland tracts and mountains.

Hyiat, the smaller of the pirates, was easily swayed also. Long had he given up his childhood dreams of commanding a fleet of land schooners and being the scourge of all the Barrenlands. He now saw himself a man of leisure, being waited on hand and foot by countless slaves.

The shadow then leapt panther-like for Bonnie's temple but shrank back as though confronted by a darker, more potent force.

This darker force however was in part Bonnie's complete happiness at being a desert pirate. Not for her any other life than that which she had carved for herself.

The shadow hesitated with indecision. It probed the woman's defenses with expert thrusts of dark ether,

yet no matter how it pushed and cajoled, its jabs shot wide of their mark like blind sword thrusts. Something protected its intended victim. With disgust it winked out of existence.

So it was with utter disbelief that Bonnie witnessed her two companions suddenly drop their grappling hooks and attend the sails that dramatically altered their direction.

Bonnie watched their prey veer off and smothered a profanity when a cheer erupted from the fleeing catamaran. She clasped Jute by the arm as he bustled past her on the quarterdeck. "What do you think the pair of you are doing, Jute-boy?"

Jute's glazed eyes darkened for a moment. "Something we should have done a long time ago," he said firmly.

The wind-driven vessel was making swift time toward the pencil line of green vegetation known as 'shore' to the desert dwelling pirates.

"Land ahoy!" bellowed Jute. The wind blew his auburn mane far behind his head so that it trailed like a scarf. Battle scarred and weary, Jute saw the encroaching vegetation as a blessing in disguise.

Bonnie shadowed him as he climbed up from the catwalk to the forecastle. Braced against the rail, she watched the bush as they sped toward it. "So why this sudden change of heart, Jute-boy?" she demanded again in her broad accent. She looked aft to the quarterdeck where their other companion, Hyiat, was pulling hard on the tiller. "What plan has your besotted brain concocted this time?" she wondered.

Jute shrugged his broad shoulders. His tanned face creased in a scowl. "A sudden urge to stand on my two feet without having to balance myself all the time," he said doubtfully. "Who knows what the gods decree?"

After a moment's pause, Bonnie pursed her lips. "Much the same as Hyiat's reply," she said curiously. She left the brooding giant and retired to the poop where their life's belongings were stashed. True, she had to admit, their lives abroad the desert had been fraught with danger for little gain. Their meager returns from their latest sojourn across the Barrenlands had yielded them little more than a food supply and a handful of copper. But desert piracy was a way of life. She had no great desire to change her ways simply on a hunch from the gods!

The Whispering Ghost, for such was their vessel's name, trundled to a halt against a sandbar. Its infrastructure heaved loudly before springing several boards. It lurched to one side, and canted creakingly as its chassis collapsed.

The pirates tottered about like bowled tenpins.

"Praise the gods," Jute said, and crossed himself. "If we'd been Out There," he added, nodding toward the brazen horizon, "we'd have perished."

"Is that what you think?" Bonnie snapped, jumping down to examine the damage. It was as bad as she'd feared. "If we'd been Out There, this wouldn't have happened, you great big clod."

"But it did," Hyiat said behind her. He cinched his scabbard tightly about his waist. The wind ruffled his silken shirt as he pulled on his sleeveless leather vest. "The gods work in mysterious ways," he said absently. "Farewell, girl," he said, blowing a kiss to the forsaken Whispering Ghost.

The trio gathered their belongings and entered the jungle with Bonnie cleaving a way through the dense foliage.

The forest was full of sweet scents and brilliant colors at this time of year. There were climbers that stroked the runnelled bark of trees and decorative blossoms hanging in profusion from the tallest branches.

They hadn't been hacking through the jungle long before Bonnie put a finger to her mouth for silence. Jute and Hyiat withdrew their broadswords carefully.

Gilbon and Jackie would have walked straight past the pirates had Bonnie not stepped out in front of them and cried, "Hold!"

"Ohmigod!" Gilbon exclaimed.

Jackie's face blanched when Jute and Hyiat moved out from the bushes and stood to either side of

Bonnie.

"As luck would have it," Jute began, "we've waylaid the remnants of a traveling circus."

Bonnie shook her head. "Jute, you can have the dragon. No doubt you'll fetch a few coppers for him as a curiosity piece." She glared at Hyiat. "You can have the maiden's tinware."

"What would I do with that?" Hyiat asked.

"You'd sell it to the idiot who would buy a dragon."

Gilbon reared at this last comment. "I'll have you know you're showing your ignorance! Cease this nonsense or I'll broil the three of you!"

Bonnie arched her eyebrows. "Broil us?" she said slowly. "An old has-been like you?" She indicated her companions and smiled. "I'll have the big one rare and the small one well done."

"Such impertinence!" Gilbon fumed. He flapped his massive wings and flared his nostrils. Smoldering fumes oozed from his nose. He stamped his heavy feet so the very ground thundered.

But the three pirates were not swayed.

Exhausted after his demonstration of dragonly anger, Gilbon let his wings crash to his flanks; with a surprised look on his face, he fell back to his haunches and groaned inwardly.

Bonnie brushed wafting debris aside with a bandanna. "Prickly fellow," she commented and promptly sneezed.

"Never mind all that," Hyiat said. He advanced upon Jackie with his broadsword poised menacingly.

Jackie crouched in a defensive stance.

"Treasure!" Gilbon croaked the word. "Plenty of it... for the man - or woman! - who finds Jackie's father."

Jute rested a hand on Hyiat's shoulder. "There's treasure everywhere for the taking, dragon," Jute said.

"And take you shall," Gilbon advised, warming to a plan. "But first, we must find the girl's father. The gods look favorably upon those who give aid in such matters."

"Not mine," Bonnie said.

"Nor mine," Jute growled.

"Mine neither," Hyiat added.

"Some gods do," Gilbon said, and quickly added, "but don't ask me which ones."

"We're wasting time," Bonnie said. She rested her hand upon the pommel of her sword as though wondering whether to draw it or not. "Slay them or leave them. Make up your mind, Jute."

"A dragon's treasure," Hyiat said, who now restrained Jute from advancing further. "Is the maiden's father ensorcelled?"

"Ensorcelled?" Gilbon rocked with mirth. "I should say not. He's just lost his memory and wandered off someplace, as mortals do. Gone walkabout," he said simply. "Pure and simple."

Jackie took a step forward then. She held before her the remains of her lance. "And I'm definitely not a maiden."

"You look like one," Hyiat observed, yet stood back from the lethally pointed lance. "Anyway, upon locating the... knight's father, you'll reward us for our troubles?"

"And there's no magic involved?" Jute pressed Gilbon.

"I don't believe you're even contemplating helping Fangs here find the kid's missing father," Bonnie said incredulously. "What is it with you two anyway?"

Jute grinned wolfishly. "The trouble with you, Bonnie lass, is that you lack compassion."

"Can't you see how distraught the girl is?" Hyiat added righteously.

Bonnie glanced at the disheveled Jackie. "Yeah," she admitted, "she looks a right mess."

"It's settled then," Jute decided. "Bonnie, you go point, I'll flank and, Hyiat, you follow up the rear."

"I say," Gilbon said. "It's ever so kind -"

"Just get going," Bonnie said tightly. "I don't believe this!"

A quick spark suddenly blazed like a nova within Shantele's firelit cave. The sizzling ball coalesced with

white heat then simmered as a portal materialized. From beyond its mirage-like frame walked Shantele. In awe, Winston could only gape wide-mouthed. He knew his master had been beyond the mortal realm to that shadowy world where time stood still compared with 'real' time.

Outside the sorcerer's cave, the wind became a banshee screech that lashed the mountain face. Such was the wind's force, several candles spluttered out. Shadows darkened and a chill stole at Shantele's back. The mage quickly reached up and, as though pulling curtains across a window, he hurriedly closed the portal.

"Argh, but time displacement drains me so!" he complained as he slumped into his ermine throne.

"Surely you must be one of the All Greats!" Winston fawned.

"One' of the All Greats?" Shantele said, fixing his apprentice with a dreadful stare. "I am the All Great!"

"How goes your plan, Master?" Winston hurried on.

Shantele pursed his thin lips. "As well as could be expected with what tools we have, lad," he said at length. "To put it another way, two out of three ain't bad. The accursed woman was protected. But by whom or what?" he pondered darkly.

"Therefore we need further assistance. Someone with magic?" He waited patiently for Winston to pick up on his theme.

"The Wizards' Guild would rather curse their own gods than - "

"Someone not associated with the damnable Guild," Shantele said testily.

"I can't think - "

"That's your problem, Winston!" Shantele fumed. "How about your mother? And her mother." He held his finger up sternly. "Both potent witches, lad! Fine women!"

"But they wouldn't help you unless I - "

"Exactly!" Shantele said. "Unless you were in danger!" He directed a finger at Winston and uttered a quick incantation in a foreign tongue.

Winston had but a moment to complain before a rich tapestried carpet swept beneath his feet. He fell flat on his back.

Shantele wheezed loudly. "But my, this is taxing work. I wonder why I bother sometimes." He stepped onto the carpet and clicked his fingers.

Not far distant, in the bustling township of Gallah Flats, two women who preached modest earth magic trembled with sudden knowledge. They questioned not its substance, nor its source, yet both women knew they had been called by higher, more arcane powers.

"Gran?" called the youngest of the two.

"Aye," the aged adept said. She wiped her hands on an apron. "'Tis the wizard again."

"Up to his old tricks I'll warrant," Molly told her mother.

Through squinting eyes Gran scanned the western horizon. It was a molten cauldron of pinks, mauves and reds. "It's Winston," she said, and touched her forehead.

The pair then clasped one another's hands and a transformation took place. Their human forms shrank and from arms sprouted vast wings like sails, from feet came talons shaped like grappling hooks and mouths molded into beaks like curved scimitars. No ordinary crows these, then.

They took flight the moment they had shed their mortal personae.

Winston's stomach turned over slowly and his face blanched. Heights had never been his strong point, and air travel particularly had its own awful effects upon him.

As though sensing Winston's discomfort, Shantele said, "Not long now, lad. In fact, here we go - I've spotted our quarry!"

Shantele muttered a rune and the carpet took a nose-dive. As it sped downward, it became a whirling tornado, spinning violently in ever-increasing circles until it was revolving so rapidly that it actually

resembled a force of nature. So fast did it spin that it sliced through anything in its path, creating havoc in its wake.

Then, in mid air, and seemingly with a mind all its own, it angled down across the Beagle River and came to a skidding halt.

Having accomplished its master's whim, the carpet's frayed edges unwound and lay in a tangled heap at their feet.

Winston staggered from the mound of wool, and toppled to the ground. There he stayed until the world stopped spinning.

Shantele cocked an inquisitive eye. In sudden realization, he said, "Winston, you poor soul! I forgot to stabilize you!"

Winston watched all four Shanteles spin before his eyes. He smiled a lop-sided grin.

"Should have known it would be you," Gilbon said suspiciously.

The others rumbled dissension, for in fact, they had been mightily frightened when the wizard had landed in their midst.

"At your service," Shantele said and bowed most royally. He then turned to the three armed pirates.

"You can put your weapons away," he said mockingly. "They'll do you no good."

"A fat wizard and his apprentice," Bonnie said dubiously.

"Enough of that!" Shantele said darkly.

But before another word could be exchanged, a more menacing voice entered the arena:

"You-um all surrender!"

They turned as one and saw on the other bank the largest ghoul any of them had ever seen. The ghastly creature was a head taller than Jute, but was not quite so bulky, yet big strapping arms and thick thighs made him look horrific to behold. The parts of his body that were not armored and grossly painted with lurid colors were pale and hairless. His gaunt and aggressive face sat upon well defined shoulders.

The ghoul's plump mouth twitched several times as though trying to force more words out, but in the end he simply grunted.

"Let me handle this," Shantele said. "Ghouls are categorically so stupid that you can talk your way around them, and this one looks more gullible than most."

Shantele strode casually over to the bubbling river. "My dear good ghoul, it is indeed a beautiful river that etches the scenery behind your magnificent body. Ah, don't move a muscle while I stamp clear in my mind's eye this wondrous picture so that I might immortalize you on canvas..."

"You-um not move closer!" the ghoul said with stilted fervor. More ghouls emerged from the undergrowth.

Shantele had no intention of getting wet. He smiled broadly. "Do you know that the Beagle River goes down fifteen fathoms on a regular cycle, and that rumor has it that certain gods drink from it, thus emptying it - so therefore the cycle continues. Fascinating stuff, isn't it?"

The ghoul twisted its ugly face as though downwind from a foul-smelling sewer.

"Yes, I thought you'd find that particularly interesting," Shantele said, edging away from the riverbank.

"Well, must be on our way!" he said and quickened his pace.

The ghoul raised his spear - a vicious looking thing with barbs twined around the point.

Then suddenly the water at the ghoul's feet shrank back a little as though a tide were pulling it away. The blood-red river shrank down with alarming speed until it resembled a minor tributary.

A loud Burp! thundered from somewhere down the river and Shantele wasted no time in joining the others. "A god taking a sip," he explained.

The ghouls at this point began yelling out war cries and hefting their cudgels, spears and wicked axes.

"I say," Gilbon said, "shall I dispatch the horrid creatures or shall we stand in queue?"

More ghouls surged from the forest. Amassed there on the muddy banks of the river stood some thirty ghouls. They were edging themselves on, and making a great fuss about it.

Hyiat withdrew his broadsword. He glanced at Jute and Bonnie. "When in doubt, do the unexpected," he

said for all three of them.

They ran helter-skelter toward the gesturing ghouls.

The head ghoul was taken back by the pirates' charge. He hesitantly raised his hand and threw it forward, indicating his army to meet the opposition.

They clashed mid-stream.

"I say," Gilbon said, feeling panic rise from the pit of his stomach. "Can't you do something, Shanny?"

But Shantele and Winston were having difficulties of their own. A shimmering force-field of blue light had encapsulated them, and despite their valiant efforts to shred the unnatural force, it held them firm.

"Stand back, Jackie!" Gilbon roared. "I'll show these - wuh?"

A swishing noise zapped past Gilbon's ear, and as the hiss diminished, a barbed tail flicked its razor-sharp point which flayed a deep gash into Gilbon's hide. "Yipes!" he yelped.

"Take to the air!" Jackie warned. "You'll never make cover!"

"I hate flying!" Gilbon groaned. He heaved himself skyward. Airborne, he caught sight of his adversary. It was a mammoth stingray; its wings spanned a good slice of sky and blocked out a considerable slab of daylight.

The stingray added a quick burst of energy, rose, then spiraled so that it now faced its prey. With its mouth gaping wide it swooped in for the kill.

Gilbon gunned his wings but it was useless. Panic, more than ability, moved him.

The stingray swished past the floundering dragon, missing him by a good hairsbreadth for it had expected the dragon to move a lot quicker. It veered away but within seconds its marauding black shape was detaching itself from sinister clouds and was again diving for Gilbon.

Anger welled up in Jackie. She watched the two colossal figures merge into one as they collided in mid air. Impotent rage filled her. She watched the hapless wizard and his apprentice conjuring counter spells, and down there in the blood-bath she could see Jute, Hyiat and Bonnie hacking their way through the berserker ghouls. Tears welled up in her horrified eyes as she saw Bonnie fall.

With a scream of rage she rushed down into the melee. Two crows hovered cautiously above the raging battle. To the human ear they were squawking at one another, but to more supernaturally-attuned ears they were conversing.

"The magic is strong," the youngest of the crows warned. Its companion, an old wizened crow, indicated they should land quickly.

The two black specks landed unsteadily as a black power flux strained to drag them from the sky. No sooner had the birds returned to their former selves, Mollie ran to Winston's side.

"Winston!" she cried. She had seen the wraith-like capsules at work in her youth. They sapped a victim's strength the more they resisted its power, and the less they resisted the more it took over their body.

"Hold hands, mother," Mollie said urgently. "We'll need everything we have left to free the boy!"

United, a shimmering life force sprang from Mollie's fingertips. Five tendrils of feather-fine energy probed Winston's opaque prison. They curled about it as though caressing its surface, then with cat-like tenacity, they squeezed around it until it bulged and buckled.

Like a burst balloon it snapped with a loud bang. Winston was lifted off the ground with its force. He shook his head to clear it and realized with a start where he was. Groggily he saw his mother and grandmother sinking to the ground and knew it was they who had freed him, but in doing so had drained themselves.

"The others," Mollie said through parched lips.

Winston tore his gaze away from his master who right now was fighting a losing battle with his prison. He could see the others being driven backwards by sheer numbers. And in the sky, he saw Gilbon and a massive bird of prey grappling one another as they strove to maintain altitude.

"Quickly!" Mollie said before finally slumping unconscious.

Winston felt old. His skin had become flaccid in those few minutes he had been battling the prison. But summoning all his strength he lifted his head, wove his fingers in the air, and directed a spell toward

Jackie and the pirates. He repeated the procedure and flung his arm toward Gilbon who was suddenly plummeting to earth.

Winston heaved once, twice, and a searing flash exploded from his fingertips. He jerked as though he had received a shock and collapsed into a coma. As he slid down into sleep he snapped one final burst of power toward Shantele.

Jute and Hyiat suddenly found their strength doubled. Jute felt the crawling pain of an old wound grind its way into him, then suddenly it faded to a pin-prick, giving him full use of his sword arm. Other parts of his anatomy responded to the magical therapy and he felt young again - the strongest he had been in decades!

Hyiat too, although bloodied from many gashes to both his arms and torso, suddenly felt refreshed. The stings he had received merely invigorated him, and in fact reminded him of when he had lost his beloved to the army of Brugg the Ogre. He growled angrily and lopped off the head of the nearest ghoulish.

Jackie suddenly discovered a well of energy she never knew existed. It rose up in her like a volcano and erupted with the fire-power of a dozen warriors. She blocked a hurtling ax, twisted it from a ghoulish tight grip and ran him through with her lance.

Bonnie had floated free of the melee. Left for dead, her body had become snagged by tree roots. She woke from unconsciousness and coughed up water. She heaved for several seconds as she strove to gain breath. Her eyesight cleared at the sound of the pitched battle.

She shook her head free of mud and with a maniacal cry sprang to her companions' aid.

Thus smitten with magical power, the four drove back the ghouls until they were well clear of the river.

That same unfathomable light had shot skywards, circled the falling Gilbon, who immediately felt a surge of adrenaline. He could see clearer than he had for years, and his wings felt invigoratingly alive.

The stingray had now gauged the dragon's reflexes to be dismally slow. It came daringly close with not a care in the world for it would sting this dragon to death at its leisure with careless flicks of its tail.

Effortlessly, Gilbon did a somersault in the air. "Argh!" he let out, and a "Whoops!" as he tested his new found ability.

Somewhere deep within their citadel, the Wizards' Guild became aware of other, unexpected power.

Their concentration faltered and suddenly the stingray's mind became its own. It screeched its anguish and swerved away for it knew it had been possessed.

Fire that had long since been dormant in Gilbon's nostrils, lashed out and slid over the fleeing stingray.

The latter promptly jerked its barbed tail to avoid the heat.

Gilbon rocketed after his prey.

The black shape swerved away, caught an updraft, then disappeared over a small island. Gilbon thought he heard a terrific splash, but the chase was on him and he pushed the thought away.

"I have you now!" Gilbon crowed triumphantly. He kept the stingray's course, caught a similar updraft, hedge-clipped the island then banked down emulating the stingray's descent.

And like the stingray, Gilbon crashed into a rock face.

Bonnie dispatched a ghoulish and in a moment of lucidity, realized there was only one left.

Jute now confronted Omph the Horrible. The latter wiped his bloodied lips and smirked as he hefted a huge club. The latter he promptly dropped and fled into the dense scrub.

The three pirates charged forward but came to an abrupt halt when they heard Jackie scream a warning.

They whirled recklessly, now fully accustomed to their renewed strength, but in that moment, old aches and pains exploded in their bodies.

"Slowly," Bonnie cautioned. She indicated the far bank.

A lone horseman sat astride a magnificent black horse. The latter flared its nostrils and snorted. That single figure drove something like fear in the five as they struggled up the muddy bank.

Jute and Hyiat drew their swords. "Ho, Jute," Hyiat said with mock bravo. "A solitary foe to join in battle."

"We need our youth back, Winston-boy," Bonnie demanded. She knelt beside him. Then something

intangible flowed between them. The others stood back mesmerized by a crackling flame that formed two thirds of a circle.

Winston shook his head slowly. A frond of green light snuck out from their united fingertips and attached itself to the waning light surrounding Shantele. It sliced a hole in the oscillating sphere and the bubble split open like a sliced melon.

Unfamiliar with such power, Bonnie pulled back in fright. She looked skyward but apart from a few foreboding black clouds, it was empty.

"I'm bewitched!" she gasped. She pulled at an amulet and ripped it from around her neck. "That accursed piece of metal I won from you at two-up!" Bonnie accused Jute. She threw it to the ground and the mortals stepped back hurriedly.

At that moment Shantele burst from his prison. The opaque shell dispersed like so much mist before a wind.

"Master!" Winston cried and crawled groggily beneath the sorcerer's shoulder to lend support.

"Enough of that!" Shantele said, a little disconcerted. Then his eyes fastened on the shark-grey metal amulet that Bonnie had discarded.

"There's evil afoot!" Bonnie warned. "We have no time for - "

Shantele gestured for silence. "Two pieces of a puzzle..." he mused. He looked at Winston's amulet.

Already he could feel the power emanating from the amulets.

"FATHER!" Jackie screamed and all but Shantele looked up.

The horseman came forward then.

Jackie ran out to meet him. She flung herself at the man who hefted her up into the saddle and the pair of them clung to one another.

The sound of crashing foliage made them all spin about. Then Gilbon's huge frame lumbered into the clearing. "There you guys are," Gilbon said. "I say, Shanny, that wasn't half a good spell you concocted. Any more where that came from?"

"So you survived, you old buzzard," Shantele said with restrained relief.

"Whatever happened, old bean?" Gilbon asked. "One minute the stingray wanted my blood, the next it wanted no part of it."

"The same went for us," Bonnie put in. "The last ghouls lost heart. The gods can drink their blood when next they sip the Beagle River."

"Well put, if ill advised," Shantele said quickly. "I should imagine the Guild could only maintain such an extensive drain on their power for so long. Then, one by one, members of the Guild collapsed through sheer exhaustion. Thus their power base collapsed."

Shantele ran a gnarled hand through his hair. "Be all that as it may, I'm yet to fathom the Guild's interest - "

"Then let us be of assistance," Mollie said. She and Gran stepped forward.

"Good ladies!" Shantele said, delivering a brilliant recovery. "I should have known we had assistance in our little fray."

Mollie smiled thinly. "'Tis more the amulet segments that gave assistance," Mollie said. "When the two parts become whole, their power is most potent. When the third part is found, you shall have within your power all that was Lord Cabal's."

"Cabal, history's most potent sorcerer..." Shantele managed to look perplexed. "Indeed?" He pocketed Bonnie's amulet within the dark folds of his cloak. "Then there is much to be done! It's time Winston and I took our leave. Come on lad," he said, beckoning the apprentice.

"Take care," Mollie said ominously.

The wizard and his apprentice gathered up the mound of magic-impregnated wool from their carpet and hurried off into the scrub.

Mollie and Gran seemingly vanished within a heart beat. One minute they were standing there, the next, both waved their black velvet cloaks and seemed to blend into nothingness.

"I say," Gilbon said.

"You've said enough," Jute growled. "Where are we, you fat lizard?"

"How come we're here?" Hyiat wondered.

"It's good to see you've become your old selves," Bonnie said. "It's off to the Barrenlands we be! But first - where's the treasure?"

"Aye," Jute said. He withdrew his sword and advanced on Gilbon. "We've delivered our end of the bargain. Now where's your end?"

"Here," Jackie said from behind them.

They turned slowly. Jackie threw each of them a leather purse. Her father stood beside her. "It's enough recompense for finding a girl's father," he said.

The pirates weighed the purses in their hands and the odds against bargaining for more.

"It's suitable," Bonnie agreed. "Hyiat-boy?"

"It'll be enough to re-deck Whispering Ghost," Hyiat asserted.

"And enough to take us far away from witches, wizards and dragons," Jute put in. "This accursed forest harbors all three in vast quantities!"

"I say," Gilbon began, but the pirates sheathed their swords and daring him to say another word, took their leave.

Jackie went over to Gilbon then and flung her arms partially around his stomach. "Come adventuring with us," she pleaded, looking up into the dragon's watery eyes.

"Not likely!" Gilbon said. "I'm retired I tell you. I crave the melodic whisperings of the singsong tree, the rippling waters of mountain spring water - all that sort of stuff.

"And long may you enjoy your retirement," Jackie's father said. "Come on, Jackie. We'll need to make camp for the night. And it's best that we put as much distance between us and this place as possible."

Gilbon watched Jackie and her father blend with the scrub. He sat there a while contemplating his earlier aerial aerobics and the temptation to fly home came upon him.

Nonetheless, his withered wings had not the power to get him airborne, so he began his weary journey home on foot.

Elsewhere, the Wizards' Guild met in solemn conference.

The damnable wizard Shantele had somehow routed their army of ghouls and obtained the second segment to the world's most powerful amulet.

Storm clouds gathered over the wizard's mountain residence and spoke in thunderous tones.

Shantele pensively tugged at his beard. To Winston he said, "The clouds reflect my various moods, you know."

To which Winston said nothing of import; for it is rumored he was miles away, seeking the third segment of Lord Cabal's amulet...