

# Princess Injera Versus the Spanakopita of Doom

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She woke on the beach. The cool surf still licked her toes, and the relentless afternoon sun beat down. Her ebon skin itched with a miserable combination of sea salt and sand and sunburn. Though too weak to rise, she managed to lift a dark-skinned hand and brush back the matted lock of curls that covered her face and blocked her vision. Even that small effort caused her pain. She ached all over.

A fat crab stared her in the eye, mere inches from her face. With one menacing claw upraised, it scuttled sideways a few steps and stopped again to regard her from another angle, as if wondering if she were edible.

In that regard, she had the advantage, for she knew it was, and she was famished. Hunger overcame her fatigue. She lashed out with her right fist, smashing downward, cracking the crab's shell with her first blow. It squealed and tried to back away on its broken legs. Springing to her hands and knees, she smashed it again. Then seizing the still-wriggling creature, she twisted and ripped the shattered claw, dug her well-manicured fingers into the pieces of the shell, and split it completely open.

As she sucked out the raw white meat and savored its sweetness, the juices of the creature's innards streamed over her parched lips and down her chin. She was too hungry to be delicate. In no time at all she licked the shell clean and started on the still-twitching crab legs. "What I wouldn't give for some melted butter!" she said to herself between bites, "with some ginger, parsley, atjar, raisins, almonds, and peppers, and an oven to bake you in, and a nice wine to wash you down!"

However, the raw crab refreshed her and replenished her strength. Rising to her feet, she looked around. The piece of ship's wreckage to which she'd clung through the night and upon which she'd floated ashore lay on the beach just a few paces away. Her armor was still securely bound to one of the boards with her belt, but as she trudged toward it she cursed.

The scabbard on the belt was empty. Her favorite cutlass was gone, lost on the bottom of the sea. She kicked at the sand in disgust, then put it out of her mind. Without that lucky bit of flotsam, she'd be at the bottom of the sea with her weapon.

Leaving her sandals on the beach, she waded back into the sea to rinse the sand from her garments and the tangles from her curls. As she did so she scanned the watery horizon and gazed up and down the shimmering shoreline for any trace of her ship, its wreckage, or any survivors from her crew, but she saw nothing. She was stranded, alone, and far from African shores.

Still things weren't all bad. She wasn't cut or bruised. Nothing was broken. She ran her hands over the softly clinging leopard-skin furs she wore, gingerly exploring the swells of her breasts, the curves of her hips. In fact, she admitted to herself, for a ship-wrecked castaway she looked good! She drew a deep breath and tossed her wet black mane. As she stretched, she imagined she heard the throbbing drums of her homeland.

*Boom, tee-dee boom! Tee-dee boom! Tee-dee boom!*

A voice spoke from the shore behind her. "The jungle cat that sacrificed itself to make that outfit did mankind a wonderful service, Injera."

She whirled, splashing water, one hand automatically going to her left hip for the cutlass that wasn't there. Bending quickly, she scooped up the only weapon available—a handful of sandy mud. She held it ready.

Near the water's edge a man grinned at her from astride the bare back of a dun mare. His skin was pale, lightly olive-colored, smooth. A finely trimmed beard emphasized the chiseled line of his jaw, and a

slight breeze brushed through the straight locks of his dark hair. He wore a plain white chiton over one shoulder and a broad leather belt to hold it in place. His leather sandals were expensively made.

"Princess Injera," she shot back with a defiant lift of her head, "of the Gojjam people . . ."

The man interrupted with a sharp laugh. "Princess? You underrate yourself! You're the dread pirate, Injera, queen of the raider ship *Yeshimbra Assa*." He threw one leg over his horse's head and dropped to the sand. "You see I know you, my fiery little pepper. For days I've tasted the flavor of you as your ship sailed near. I've inhaled your essence and your aroma."

Injera raised one arm uncertainly and sniffed her pit. Then she glared and prepared to launch the handful of mud. "Take that back!" she warned. "I don't have any aroma! And who the hell do you think you are?"

That maddening grin spread wider upon his face, revealing perfect teeth. With one hand he clung to the reins of his horse's bridle. In the other he carried a coiled leather lash. "Just a figure of speech, my sweet potato," he said. "No offense intended. My name is Gyro."

It was Injera's turn to laugh. "Hero?" She ran a dubious eye over his not-unappetizing form. "Maybe you're overrating yourself? You don't even have a sword!"

"*Yee-row*," he repeated, correcting her pronunciation. "And long pointy things have never held much attraction for me, at least not metal ones." He raised the whip and winked at her through the coils. "I'm rather good with this, though."

Injera's gaze narrowed. Was he threatening her? She lifted her head higher still and thrust out her leopard-spotted chest. She didn't take well to threats, and his puny leather lash didn't frighten her. To show that she wasn't afraid of him she rinsed the mud from her hand and waded back toward the shore.

"Look, I'm perfectly willing to beat the nutty stuffing out of you if you try to hit me with that," she told him, "but I'm hot and tired and thirsty. So why not just point me toward the nearest village? It must be supertime somewhere."

Gyro pushed at a piece of crab shell with his toe. "Still hungry?" He dropped the reins of his mount and shooed the animal a few paces up the beach. "Safer for her," he laughed as he turned back to Injera. "I'll bet you could eat a horse."

Injera snarled and clenched her fists. If this stranger intended to give her trouble, she'd accommodate him. She could outfight and outwrestle any man she'd ever met, and this one, pretty as he was, didn't look like much of a challenge.

However, now that he'd mentioned it, the dun mare did look pretty tasty. A bit on the lean side, perhaps, but a girl had to watch her figure. That still left the problem of drink. She licked her lips and wondered what kind of wine went best with horsemeat.

A nasty grin turned up the corners of her lips. *Equine, of course.*

Gyro took a step back and raised a hand to forestall her advance. "She's much too stringy," he said, as if he'd read Injera's mind. "Why not let me whip you up something more to your taste!"

The whip uncoiled as he swung it above his head. Injera flung up her hands and jumped back out of range, then watched, gape-jawed. The leather seemed to glow and shimmer, to throw off streamers of color, sparks of radiance. Suddenly the air split with a sharp crack and a flash of light.

A clean white tablecloth lay spread over the sand at Injera's feet, and upon it was a platter of *doro wat*, which was roast chicken served in red pepper sauce. Rich aromas of onion, fenugreek, nutmeg, and cardamon hung over it like a steamy cloud. Scattered around the chicken were seasoned, hard-cooked eggs, steamed lentils, and collard greens.

A second steaming platter held beef *tibs* and raw beef *kitfo* with shallots and chilies and yams. Still a third platter held stuffed whole honeycomb tripe with spiced rice and turmeric sauce. And fish *imojo*!

Along the edges of the tablecloth were smaller bowls with *dabo kolo* biscuits, *chiko* cakes, and lamb *alechas*. And at the center of it all were two tall bottles of the honey wine called *tej*!

Draping the whip over his right forearm, Gyro bowed from the waist and made a sweeping gesture. "Wands are so ordinary," he said with that ever-present grin. "Can I cook, or can I cook?"

"All my favorites!" Injera exclaimed, her mouth watering as she clapped her hands in delight. Half intoxicated by the smells, she threw herself down on her knees and seized a saucy chicken leg. She glanced around for the beer she liked best. It wasn't there. "But you forgot the *talla*."

"Be grateful!" Gyro chuckled. "You don't serve *talla* with such a complexity of flavors."

"Whatever you say," Injera agreed as she devoured the chicken leg and cast the bone away. She shoved her fingers into the spicy beef *tibs* and raised a mouthful to her lips. "I owe you anything you want for all this!" she sputtered as she chewed. "It's delicious! Wonderful! However you pronounce your name you're certainly my hero now!" She stuffed an egg into her mouth and shot an inviting look at her provider. "Please, won't you join me?"

He smiled as he watched her eat. "I prefer Greek."

Injera shrugged and gave her full attention to her meal. She didn't question where the food came from. It was real enough. It filled her stomach and pleased her tongue, and the *tej* wine tasted better than any she'd drunk in her own homeland. Gyro was a sorcerer, more skilled certainly than the *shamans* of Gojjam, but she knew the type, and she knew also that sooner or later, like all sorcerers, he'd ask some price.

For now, though, she was enjoying the best meal of her life on a beautiful beach, beside a blue ocean under a gloriously brilliant sunset with a handsome man at her side. It was almost romantic, and she forgot about her lost ship and crew, her cutlass somewhere at the bottom of the sea, and the coastal city she had sacked and burned the day before. One by one, she emptied the platters and the bowls, and one of the bottles of honey wine, and she tossed them into the water where the tide deposited them on the beach again.

Mindful of the sorcerer's price, Injera saved one bottle of *tej*. As the sky grew darker and the first stars began to appear, she smoothed the tablecloth and stretched out upon it in seductive fashion. With one hand she loosened a strap of her leopard-skin halter. Then she gazed up at Gyro and extended the same hand.

Her voice turned throaty. "Now make me *your* banquet!" she said with a wink. "Even Greek, if you prefer that."

Gyro stood looking out to sea with folded arms. The coiled whip hung from a loop on his belt, and the rising sea breeze stirred the folds of the brief chiton he wore, giving her an interesting view from where she lay. His bare thighs and shoulders, nicely muscled, awoke a different appetite in Injera. He turned toward her, and of course he smiled.

"You must be joking," he said. "I wouldn't have thought you had such a sense of humor!"

Injera bristled and sat up. "It's the traditional way a woman repays a man for a lavish dinner!" she snapped. Her eyes narrowed with warning. "You don't want to go against tradition, do you?"

Gyro shrugged and moved a step away. "That may be the tradition among the Ethiopes, Your Highness," he said with more than a hint of mockery. "But this is Hellas, called Greece by some, and we do things differently." He whistled for his horse, and the dun mare walked across the sand to his side. "There is something you can do for me, however."

Injera sat up and crossed her legs, and her gaze turned wary. The handsome sorcerer before her suddenly seemed too handsome, his arrival too opportune. What was he really doing here on this isolated stretch of beach? Why his ostentatious display of magic if not to impress her? Not that she objected to that, for the food had completely restored her strength. Yet there was an unsettling tone in his voice that she hadn't noticed before.

"The trouble on the *Yeshimbra Assa* began with a fire," she said suspiciously, "in the galley."

"You were leagues from the coast, but I smelled the spicy *metin shuro* stew your cook was preparing," Gyro acknowledged. "I caused it to flame up and spill over the deck."

Injera couldn't hide her shock and outrage. Gyro grinned. "What? You expected windstorms? Giant waves? All that unimaginative fairy-tale stuff?"

"You burned my ship!" she cried.

Gyro gave her a scolding look. "Nonsense! I've never burned anything! I have a reputation!" He looked thoughtful for a moment, then inclined his head, and that annoying grin returned. "Let's say that I grilled it, or given the fat on some of your crew, that I braised it."

Injera sprang upward like a cat, and her hands closed around Gyro's throat. They both fell back struggling on the sand. "Then I'm only kneading your doughy little neck!" she shouted, her face close to his as she straddled his chest. "I'm only tenderizing your scrawny windpipe!" She banged his head on the ground as she squeezed the breath out of him. "Now who's cooking?"

The dun mare, docile until now, gave an angry whinny, charged, and struck Injera with a powerful toss of its head. The blow sent her tumbling. Unharmred, she rolled to her feet with wiry grace and spun to face the sorcerer again, but the horse stood between them, its eyes blazing.

Gyro took the mare's reins in one hand, and after a moment of standoff, he offered them to Injera. "If you help me, Princess, I'm prepared to send you home again. As your reward, I'll obtain a new ship for you, better than your last one, and a new crew."

Injera spoke through clenched teeth. She didn't really care about her crew. Pirates and privateers were cheap meat. But the *Yeshimbra Assa* had been a good ship, and no Greek vessel would ever adequately replace it. "What do you want of me?" she demanded.

"Like myself, you have a reputation," he answered. "Your daring and fighting skills are renowned and feared along the coasts of many nations." He looked her up and down from the far side of his horse, then winked again. "And I might add, so is your beauty, although personally, I think you should eat more. You're much too thin."

Injera glowered. "So much butter. You'll spoil the soup with that kind of flattery."

"A pinch of sugar, a pinch of salt," Gyro replied in an off-handed manner as he stroked the mare along the withers. "I appreciate a full-bodied flavor,"

She didn't like the sound of that, nor did she care for the way he looked at her sometimes as if she were a tidbit or a piece of dessert. Her distrust for him grew with every word he uttered. However her curiosity grew with it, for as he'd said, she had a reputation. What could be worth so much that he would risk her displeasure?

Gyro anticipated her question. "Not far inland from here you'll find a structure. A temple, actually. On an altar in one of the chambers lies a box, ornately carved and locked with locks on the three unhinged sides."

"A bread box?" Injera interrupted, flashing her own sarcastic grin. She turned serious again "What's inside it, and what's the catch? Why don't you just go get it yourself?"

"The contents are unimportant and without value to anyone but me," he answered with such crispness that Injera knew he was lying. "The catch, as you say, is that it's guarded day and night by a society of hideous creatures that call themselves . . ." He hesitated, trembling, and for a moment he seemed almost unable to speak. " . . . the *Spanakopita of Doom*."

Injera looked from Gyro's face to the coiled whip hanging from the loop on his wide leather belt. The sorcerer seemed to have no other weapons, and she wondered if it possessed abilities beyond those that he'd demonstrated. It reminded her that she had no weapon of her own.

"I'm not equipped for such a caper," she said, making a gesture with her empty hands. "Thanks to you, my sword lies rusting at the bottom of the sea."

"You have courage and resourcefulness," he informed her. "I'm sure you'll be able to provide for yourself." His apparent fear gone, he once again gave her that hungry, up-and-down look, and when he licked his lips with the pink tip of his tongue, it made her skin crawl. "Remember," he added, "if the risk is great, so is the reward—a new crew and a new ship to resume your journey homeward."

Injera considered her options. She could just walk away, head up or down the beach until she came to a village, and forget this dubious encounter. She owed Gyro nothing. She'd offered to pay for her meal in the manner she knew best, and he'd declined.

Still, she was an adventurer at heart. The same impulse that impelled her to leave the soft life with

her royal parents in Gojjam and trade the crown of a princess for the title of raider-queen compelled her now to accept Gyro's challenge. Curiosity was a powerful force.

Greed, even more so. She thought about the box Gyro desired. Not for a moment did she believe his declaration that it contained nothing of importance. She envisioned jewels, pearls, perhaps gold. The holds of the *Yeshimbra Assa* had brimmed with treasure, and it all lay at the bottom of the sea now. Her dark brows knitted together as she relished the idea of taking Gyro's treasure from him as he had taken hers.

"A new ship and a crew," she repeated, but it would never do to let Gyro dictate all the terms to her. She was a princess, after all. "The box you desire will be yours, but only that. I keep anything else I carry back. And when I return I'll be hungry, so you'll provide me with one more meal as grand as the one I just consumed."

"You show a lot of crust trying to haggle with me," Gyro said. He nodded with new appreciation as he touched the whip on his belt and stroked it lightly with his fingertips. "I accept your terms." He offered the mare's reins once more. "Take my horse. She knows the way."

But Injera wasn't ready to leave until she'd retrieved her armor. While Gyro watched, she adjusted the straps of her sandals and then fastened her greaves into place on her shins. Next, she strapped bracers on each of her forearms. "Don't just stand there," she told Gyro as she held out her breastplate. "Help me with this!"

"Never was a piece of metal so aptly named," he said as he took the breastplate and fitted it on her body. Injera gave a quick shudder while he fumbled with the straps and buckles for the leather padding inside the breastplate was still wet and cold. "You look positively Greek!" he added, stepping away when he was done.

"So did the man I took it from," she answered sharply. She picked up the belt with the empty scabbard, scowled at it, then tossed it aside. As ready as she could be, she grabbed a handful of the dun mare's mane and swung up astride its back and wrapped the reins around one hand. With her other, she pointed to the tablecloth on the sand. The remaining bottle of *tej* still lay there. "Give me that," she demanded. When Gyro complied, she pulled out the cork with her teeth, put the bottle to her lips, and upended it. She gulped loudly, making a show of her drinking skill, then with a casual flip of her arm, tossed the empty vessel into the waves.

"All right, horse," she said as she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "Earn your oats." She beat her heels on the dun mare's flanks, and the animal took off across the beach at a gentle canter and headed inland.

Even in the dark of night the horse knew its way. Injera had no choice but to trust the mare, so she observed the sky and the landscape as well as she could perceive it. Black, jagged mountains loomed in the east. The sharp peaks pricked a star-flecked and cloudless sky. She noted familiar constellations and tried to approximate her location. The *Yeshimbra Assa* had gone down in the Ionian Sea off the coast of the Peloponnesos. She guessed she was somewhere south of Patras, but how far south she couldn't tell.

With the sand and the sea far behind, the ground turned rocky. Her bare thighs began to chafe. Her leopard-skin costume wasn't really suited for riding, and she wondered how Gyro in his chiton managed it. But she ignored the discomfort and focused her thoughts again on the contents of Gyro's mysterious box. Fantasies of treasure filled her head, rings for her fingers, necklaces for her ebon throat, diamonds and emeralds for her earlobes!

Gyro was a coward! Too weak and too afraid to do his own thieving, he was sending a woman to do it for him. Whatever the treasure, why should she share anything with him?

The landscape changed again. The mare carried her into low foothills and along grassy slopes. Olive trees grew wild and twisted. Injera lifted her nose to the breeze. A subtle mixture of scents—lemon balm, fennel and dill—filled the air. As she descended into a valley, she detected faint whiffs of still other odors, fragrances she could not identify, but which made her mouth water.

*Damn!* she thought as she ran her tongue over her lips. *This riding is hard work! I'm hungry*

*again!*

In the black of night Injera still could see no discernible path, but up the far side of the valley the mare unerringly carried her. It didn't matter how Injera tugged the reins; it knew its own way, and whether by magic or nature, Injera couldn't guess. She knew, however, that they were near their destination when the mare reached the top of the hill and stopped.

Injera stretched as she looked around. There was nothing at the top of the hill but grass and wildflowers. She snapped the reins, urging the mare forward, but it refused to move. She drummed her heels on its flanks with the same result. She cursed the stubborn beast in a variety of languages. The mare flicked its tail and lashed her bare back once, but otherwise remained still.

Then, almost by accident, Injera saw what the mare wanted her to see. As she raised her hand to slap the horse's neck, from the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of a strange structure, not on the hilltop where she found herself, but on the next, higher hilltop.

It sat nestled in the very shadow of the mountains. Even in daylight, Injera guessed, it would be nearly invisible. Only a trick of starlight and the mare's steadfast and unyielding gaze had revealed it to her. Again she snapped the reins and drummed her heels, but the mare would go no farther.

Injera dropped to the ground, nearly stumbling as her feet touched the grass. Her legs were half-numbed from the long ride. She rubbed her thighs, sure that they were raw and that it would take a week of milk-bathing to soothe them. Almost as irritating, her breastplate slipped down, and the damp leather padding dragged her leopard-skin top with it. She cursed Gyro for not getting all the snaps and buckles fastened properly and readjusted everything herself.

"If you're not waiting when I get back," she grouched at the mare, "I'll skewer your stringy carcass."

Wishing for her cutlass, or any weapon, she started down the hill and up the next one. She could no longer see the structure. Darkness had swallowed it again, but she knew well enough where to find it.

Gyro had called it a temple. If so, she wondered to what god. She achieved the summit of the hill to find herself upon a small plateau. A large copper moon just rising into the sky shone through a gap in the mountains. Its peculiar light illuminated an elaborate colonnade supporting an entablature like none she'd ever seen. Careful to remain in shadow, she stole closer.

The frieze above the entablature was decorated, not with scenes of battle or deeds of glory as were so many Greek temples, nor with images of their gods and goddesses. Instead, Injera noted a procession of scenes from a common kitchen: a figure making bread, another leaning over a cookfire, a fowl roasting on a spit, a woman wiping her hands in an apron.

*I don't know if I need a cutlass or a spoon,* she thought to herself as she crept forward.

A cascade of steps led upward to the entrance. The colonnade and the entablature were little more than a facade. The actual temple extended cavelike deep into the mountain against which it was set. As she stood on the threshold, the smells of lemon balm, dill, and fennel swirled around her. The smells of nutmeg and cumin were just as strong. For a moment she thought she would sneeze and give herself away, but pinching her nose shut, she ventured inside.

A red, flickering light deep within the cave drew her forward. She moved soundlessly, alert for any danger, testing each footstep before putting her full weight upon it, wary of traps. She couldn't see a ceiling, nor any walls to left or right, yet the space was as warm as an oven!

She glanced nervously behind her. Beyond the open entrance the rising moon poured its oily light on the hillside. Licking her lips, she turned toward the flickering light at the back of the cave again.

A small voice inside her head warned her, *Don't go toward the light.*

*Small voice,* she answered silently, *shut the hell up.* She'd come for a box full of jewels, and she wasn't leaving without it.

But where were the dreaded *Spanakopita*, the fierce warrior guardians of the box, that Gyro so feared? She'd seen no sentries outside the temple, nor at the entrance. What if they'd abandoned this place and taken the box with them? Yet there was the fireglow ahead, so someone was home.

With catlike stealth she crept forward. She'd never been in a cave before, and the darkness

impressed her. Nor was she quite convinced she actually was in a cave. The floors were smooth, and no dampness tainted the air, only warmth and the heady aroma of exotic spices.

Abruptly, the walls closed in. Injera's heart pounded. Putting a hand out before her, she felt the warm stone and found reassurance. The walls were not moving, as she had first thought. She had only reached the far side of a round chamber. She stood at the beginning of a long tunnel, no natural formation, at the end of which burned the firelight she'd been moving toward.

Her stomach rumbled. All the yummy smells were increasing her hunger. She tried to keep her mind on the task at hand, but food fantasies and the promise of her next meal stole through her thoughts. She licked her lips and tasted the salt of her own sweat. When she reached the end of the tunnel, Injera gave a loud gasp. Her gaze roamed around another large chamber, but unlike the outer chamber this one was richly furnished. A huge hearth stood at one end, and in it burned the fire that had guided her. A heavy black cauldron hanging above the flames steamed and bubbled. From this cauldron issued the many herb-and-spice odors that filled the temple and drifted on the night beyond even into the hills and valleys.

Marble tiles made the floor, each polished to such a sheen that she could see her image multiplied dozens of times. She hesitated, barely recognizing her reflection. In the red, dancing fireglow she looked wild and feral, not a princess at all. Her frown disappeared, though, as she turned her gaze toward the dining table that occupied the center of the room. Upon a tablecloth of fine Athenian lace lay plates and bowls and cups seemingly of glittering gold!

Injera dashed across the floor and seized a plate. Indeed, it was gold! She quickly took stock. Thirteen full place settings artfully embossed, with napkins of red silk and utensils of silver! And jewel-encrusted oil lamps at either end of the table! Injera felt like shouting. She was rich once more!

Then her gaze fell upon a box at the center of the table. Among all the splendor and wealth it would have been easy to overlook for it was plain wood, no longer than her forearm and no deeper than the width of her hand, unadorned but for the iron bands and three thumb-sized iron locks.

She eyed the box uncertainly. She'd envisioned something larger—a cask, perhaps, or something more distinguished. Still, it might make a lady's jewelry box. Or—and this was a troubling thought—maybe Gyro had spoken truthfully when he said it contained nothing of value.

There was only one way to find out. Injera rubbed a hand absently over her growling tummy, then leaned across the table and picked up the box. It wasn't particularly heavy. She held it close to her ear and shook it. Nothing rattled inside. Frowning, she studied the rough wood and the old locks, and picked up a table knife. Maybe she could pry it open.

At the far side of the room, the fire in the hearth flared, and the cauldron began to bubble noisily. Clouds of steam roiled into the air. Potent fumes of scallions and leeks suddenly stung Injera's eyes. Waves of heat seared her skin. Clutching the box to her breast, she stumbled back and knocked over a goblet. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

At the burning center of the hearth fire amid the hottest flames, a shape appeared and pointed an accusing finger. An angry voice boomed through the room. "Let any hungry soul come to our table and eat!" A second shape appeared behind the first, then a third and a fourth. "But whosoever would steal from us must die!"

For a moment, Injera's courage deserted her, and she screamed as the shapes walked out of the flames. More than four! Six! Ten! Twelve! One for each place setting at the table—plus a guest! Gyro had called them hideous. It was no exaggeration! They were tall with thin, lanky arms and legs and dark featureless faces, and their skin—if truly it was skin—gleamed with the cooked green color of spinach!

With arms outreaching, they advanced toward her, spreading around the room to block her escape. Injera gave another short scream. She grabbed a plate and flung it at the nearest figure. The metal edge stuck in its chest with a wet sound but no visible effect.

Injera shot a desperate glance toward the tunnel as a long arm reached for her. Steam poured off the creature's flesh, and she could feel the heat radiating from it. She barely ducked in time to avoid its grasping, claw-shaped hands. Flinging herself back against the table, she kicked out with both bare feet

and sent the monster reeling into one of its companions. A green smear marked the floor where they fell, but both rose again unharmed.

With little room to run, Injera leaped upon the table. With the box in her left hand she grabbed a knife in her right. The *Spanakopita* ringed the table. An arm reached for her from the left side, and she batted it away with the box. A hand closed on her right ankle. She cried out at its steaming touch, bent, and slashed with the knife. The hand went flying and struck the floor like a spoonful of collard greens.

"I'll never be able to eat my vegetables again!" Injera muttered under her breath as she watched a new hand instantly take form at the end of the wounded creature's arm.

A strange rasping chant began to rise on the air as the creatures pressed around her. *Spanakopita! Spanakopita! Spanakopita!* Injera wasn't sure if it came from the monsters or from some other source. It sounded like hundreds of voices all whispering, hissing, demanding in terrible unison. She tried to shut it out as she shoved a spoon into a featureless face, slammed a bowl over a head that squished flat and reformed, drove a table knife through a lipless mouth.

She threw plates, cups, silverware, and still the monsters reached for her. One of them started to climb upon the table with her. With all her strength she swung the flat box, knocking its head sideways. Again and again she beat the creature, all the while kicking at hands that tried to seize her legs and ankles, until it toppled off. And still it got back up.

With an enraged cry, she flung the box at the stubborn monster.

Eyes stinging, choking on the spices that filled the air, Injera bent down and grabbed the tablecloth. The few dishes and pieces of silverware still on the table went flying as she straightened again. With a desperate effort, she swept the lace around her head and flung it. It spread like a net as she let it go and ensnared a trio of monsters at the end of the table. It wouldn't hold them long, but it gave her the only opening in the fight. Heart hammering, she ran the length of the board, somersaulted over their heads, and landed in a crouch on the floor.

"Hah!" She paused long enough to spit on the polished marble tile and to shove her breastplate back into place, for the straps had slipped again. Then she dashed for the tunnel. But three steps into it, she tripped and fell flat on her face. Cursing, wide-eyed with fear that the monsters had caught her, she sprang up again and looked back. Gyro's box lay at her feet! So did a gold table knife!

She wasn't going to leave empty-handed, after all!

As the monsters shambled after her, Injera scooped up her treasures and ran as fast as she could through the tunnel, through the warm outer chamber, and into the night. On the steps beneath the colonnade she paused to gulp deep, ragged breaths and look back over her shoulder. She couldn't see the monsters behind her!

Her right big toe throbbed, but she wasn't taking any more chances. Wincing with every step, she ran down the slope and up the next. By the time she made it to the summit of the hill where the dun mare waited, she was hopping and hobbling, but she wanted still more distance between herself and that damnable temple.

The mare accommodated her. Once she was astride its back with the box under her arm it took off at a mad gallop.

\* \* \*

"You got it!" Gyro hadn't left his place on the beach. He leaped up excitedly from where he'd been sitting on the white tablecloth. A half-finished sandcastle stood nearby. "You actually did it! I knew you were the woman for the job!" He thrust out a hand even before she dismounted. "Give it to me!"

Dazed and aching from her frantic return, Injera tossed the box down to him. "Whatever's inside that thing damned well better be worth it," she warned. "I'm starved, and I've been through hell, and every bone in my body aches, and my thighs are completely raw!" She slid down from the dun mare's back and winced in pain. "And I've broken my toe!"

"But you beat the *Spanakopita of Doom!*" Gyro cried as he turned the box over and over in his hands. His eyes gleamed, and he trembled with anticipation. Nervously, he fumbled inside his belt, drew



out a key, and held it up to the moonlight. "You have no idea how many heroes . . ."—he pronounced the word very carefully for her benefit—" . . . I've tricked, I mean, sent to that temple for the contents of this box."

Injera clenched one fist as she hobbled closer for a better look. Her other fist closed on the gold table knife she wore behind her back in the waistband of her leopard skins. If there really was anything of value inside that box, she intended to share in it. "Where'd you get the key?" she asked suspiciously. "And what were those monsters?"

Gyro shrugged, as he inserted the key into the second lock. "Every cook experiments," he answered. "They were an experiment that went wrong. I think I got some ingredients mixed up."

Injera grabbed a handful of his hair and jerked his head back sharply. "You made those things?" She flung him onto his back, disgusted.

Gyro scrambled to recover the key he'd dropped, then flashed her a brief smile. "I wanted a perfect kitchen," he explained as he inserted the key and popped open the second lock. "A place where every man could come and eat his fill. Of course, a perfect kitchen requires a perfectly trained staff!"

"They turned on you and drove you out." Her eyes lit up suddenly. "You tried to take something." She pointed to the box as he opened the third lock. "You tried to take that!"

"My recipes!" he shouted with a laugh as he threw open the lid.

Injera stared with disbelieving eyes. "It's—it's a cookbook!"

Gyro shot her an offended look, and his eyes burned with an angry fire. "Not just any cookbook, you stupid woman!" He clutched the book to his heart. "This is the cookbook of the gods. You can't imagine what I can whip up with this!"

Injera drew her knife. "You're mad!" she shouted. "I should . . .!"

Gyro ignored her and opened the book, thumbed through its first few pages, then stopped. The fire in his eyes died suddenly as a powerful odor of dill and fennel and nutmeg rose from the pages. Too late, he tried to slam the book shut, but a dark, wetly green hand thrust up from between the covers and clamped with ferocious strength around his throat.

Horrified, Injera fell back on the sand and crawled away, unable to take her eyes from Gyro's face or the too-familiar hand that choked the life from him. The sorcerer gurgled and gasped, and his eyes rolled up inside his head, and then his tongue lolled. When he was finally dead, the hand released him and withdrew into the book again.

The wind made an eerie sound as it rustled briefly through the pages. *Spanakopita! Spanakopita! Spanakopita!* Then, of their own accord, the covers closed.

After a while, as the moon began its westward descent, Injera got to her feet. Regaining her courage, she flung book and box as far into the sea as she could and sat for a long time thinking and staring at her gold knife, and eventually she made a fire. She was still hungry. Immensely so. When she couldn't make the whip work, she flung it after the book and box and sat down to think some more and to stare into her fire, and slowly she smiled.

Gyro had promised her a good meal.

By dawn, he had delivered.

And as for his dun mare? It was truly done—well done. Like Gyro.

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