

Zinder

TANITH LEE

Here's a strange and lyrical story about an Ugly Duckling who turns out to be very much more than just a swan . . .

Tanith Lee is one of the best-known and most prolific of modern fantasists, with more than a hundred books to her credit, including (among many others) The Birthgrave, Drinking Sapphire Wine, Biting the Sun, Night's Master, The Storm Lord, Sung in Shadow, Volkhavaar, Anackire, Night's Sorceries, The Black Unicorn, Days of Grass, The Blood of Roses, Vivia, Reigning Cats and Dogs, When the Lights Go Out, Elephantasm, The Gods Are Thirsty, Cast a Bright Shadow, Here in Cold Hell, Faces Under Water, White As Snow, Mortal Suns, Death of the Day, and Piratica: Being a Daring Tale of a Singular Girl's Adventure Upon the High Seas, and the collections Red As Blood, Tamastara, The Gorgon, Dreams of Dark and Light, Nightshades, and Forests of the Night. Her short story "The Gorgon" won her a World Fantasy Award in 1983, and her short story "Elle Est Trois (La Mort)" won her another World Fantasy Award in 1984. Her most recent books are Metallic Love and a sequel to Piratica called Piratica II: Return to Parrot Island. Soon to be published is another new novel, No Flame But Mine. She lives in the south of England.

* * * *

A

clod of earth, hard, ugly, and brown, flew through the air. It went high enough that it caught the sinking rays of the large hot sun, and for a moment it gleamed too, the clod, become a smooth shape of purest gold, spangled with rubies. Then the light left it. It was only a chunk of common earth as it smacked home on the thing it had been thrown at.

The thing, hit on the head, lost its balance at the impact of the blow, and fell.

The young men standing in the village street doubled over, grunting and hooting with laughter.

An old woman, hobbling by with her goat led on a string, mouthed curses at the louts under her breath.

“Cheer up, Granny! It’s only Quacker we’ve knocked down.”

“God sees all,” said Granny. “You’ll fry in Hell.”

The young men frowned, slightly scared by the mention of the furious and vengeful God in the village church, whose Eye, apparently, was everywhere. But the old woman had already padded off. She cared nothing for any of them, and certainly not for Quacker. And anyway, Quacker was al-ready hauling himself up on to his short, bloated legs. He hadn’t been hurt.

“Look at it!” said the son of the village’s overseer. (“It” meant Quacker.) They looked. Though they had seen Quacker often enough before.

Quacker was aged about fifteen or sixteen. Who could be sure? Either way, the age of a man. He was the son of a loose woman despised by everyone, even the men who occasionally liked to get drunk with her. Quacker, however, had never been human. Anyone could see *that*. Even as a baby, it had been revoltingly obvious that he wasn’t, and the overseer, and other important men of the village, had been for having him smothered at once— or, since winter was coming on, left on a hill for hungry wolves. For some reason, this wasn’t done. No one could really say why not. Though they be-lieved by now, one and all, that it was due to their sentimental kindness and godliness that they had spared the life of this misshapen idiot who, as he grew and began to talk, sounded more like a duck than even the village ducks did.

Quacker’s head was round and too big. Thin hair was plastered over it in dark greasy streaks. His eyes, also too big, bulged, pale and cloudy. He had a nose and mouth and teeth. That was all you could say for them. The rest of his body was a sort of fat, almost formless, mass, out of which stuck two short fat arms with hands that were too small, and two trunklike bowed legs with feet that were, like head and eyes, also too big.

He was dressed, more or less, as all the males were in the village, ex-cept that he had no knife in his belt for hunting or cutting up food.

He didn’t seem upset at being knocked over. He never did seem upset, not even that time early last winter, when two or three witty jokers had thrown him in the duck pond, on which ice was already forming. Quacker,

rather than freeze or drown—which was probably what had been wanted—simply bobbed up to the surface, cracked the thinner ice with his horrible head, and somehow lurched to the shore. Here he got out and shambled away.

The young men had grown tired of watching Quacker, so they rambled off to the tavern.

By now the sun was on the very edge of the fields, turning their late-summer richness to the same wonderful gold and scarlet.

In this light, Quacker also took himself up the street, and next over a low wall, into a little crowd of woodland. His mother's hovel lay there, just outside the village.

It was a grim sight, sagging walls and broken roof, the patch of garden, where some might have grown beans and onions, all spiked with rank bristly weeds, and dominated by a dead fruit tree.

Quacker paused a moment at the door, hearing his mother singing in her dull voice a miserable song of lost love. He could hear too the pot of Life-Water clinking in her hand against the cup, once, twice, an interval, and then again, and again.

The sky beyond the dark wood had flushed to deep blood and purple.

“Zinder?” called the mother quaveringly, “is that you?”

“Yes, Mother,” said Quacker—or actually Zinder, for *Zinder* was his given name. The noise he made could have been mistaken for quacking, but the woman had got used to it, it seemed, and knew what he said.

So she cursed him. “May the sky fall on you, you filthy beast. Why *is* it you? I hope and hope every day that you’ll lose yourself—or break your neck—or a bear will eat you—and you never *will* come back! But there you are again. Hurry and get in then. I expect a visit from the Great Hunter. If he sees *you*, he’ll be off—can’t stand to look at you, no more than can I! What a life I might have had if it hadn’t been for *you*.”

The Great Hunter was one of the village's most important men, as his nickname suggested. It was really quite unlikely he would be stopping by, but you never knew.

Quacker entered the hovel and lurched to his hidden place behind the stove.

An old piece of wolfskin hung down here, and logs were piled up. At all hours, thick shadow fell there, beyond the glimmer of the stove, or any sun-shine that might show in the doorway or the one window. Once Quacker— Zinder—was inside the “cave” the skin and the logs made, providing he kept completely still and quiet, no one else need ever know he was there at all.

There was nothing to eat. She had forgotten, as she usually did, to place a crust or bit of rind for him on the floor, by the dirty, flea-filled mat that was his bed.

A large yellow candle was available to give light in the main part of the hovel. But not much of that light either ever crept into Zinder’s bedroom. He had no means to make light for himself. Nor was there anything in the “cave” to amuse him. He had no possessions, unless you counted the mat.

He seated himself quietly on the ground.

Outside, in the outer world of the hovel, the village, the earth, all after-glow had vanished. Cool blueness came, then violet, then gray, then black. Through a tiny chink in the logs, Zinder could see a blink of silver stars flowering in the sky.

Tonight, Mother didn’t light the candle, not even to welcome the hoped-for Great Hunter. She drank and sighed, sighed and drank, and sang her angry sad songs. Until at last she fell asleep, snoring too with an angry sad sound. Zinder lay down then on the mat.

And as he did, he laughed.

* * * *

THE whole village, apart from the men up the track in the tavern, and the odd wakeful baby, is asleep soon after moonrise.

But this is always when Zinder properly wakes up.

He looks forward to it, though even the days here are quite interesting to him, as he goes roaming about and seeing what needs to be done. The assaults, and the tricks the villagers play on him, let alone their curses, don’t upset him. Not even those of his mother. They don’t hurt, they run off him

like water—off the back of a duck. You can't hurt Zinder.

But night is the best time of all.

First, very gently—and with the skill of much practice, since he has consciously done this from four years of age—Zinder carefully extracts himself from his own outer body.

If anyone could see—no one does or ever has—it would look as if his ghost or *soul* has risen straight up out of his chest. Zinder then stands up-right on the Zinder who still lies down, with cloudy eyes shut and mouth curved in a smile. The second Zinder is a man of sixteen. He is tall, strong, and slim of build. His hair, black as night, pours back from his face and cascades like a waterfall over his shoulders to his waist. He has a strong face also, and his eyes are a somber and serious blue. He wears the finest clothes, dusk color and moon-and-night color, like the rest of him.

Stepping off his outer Zinder-shell, he bends down and gives it a friendly caress, brushing the thin hair from its forehead. (At once the bruise the flung clod had made begins to disappear. It was healing fast any-way, he has simply hurried the repair along.) Then Zinder walks out into the room, where his mother lies snoring in her chair with her mouth open.

He smooths her face with one finger, painstakingly removing some of the stress and nastiness, as if he were washing it away with a cloth. She sighs in her sleep and stops snoring, breathing now more easily. Then he taps the empty Life-Water pot with his knuckles. It refills at once with clean water— but this water is magic. Though it tastes of alcohol and brings cheerfulness, it causes no harm to whoever drinks it. After that, Zinder opens the cup-board and stares in at the unfilled space until a small loaf appears, a slab of cheese, and a slice of meat. He closes the cupboard.

Going out of the door, he looks around and sees that the vicious weeds in the garden are beginning secretly to change, as he has commanded them to do. Berries are starting to appear under the spiny leaves. The dead apple tree is also coming back to life.

Just then a wild rabbit runs out of the trees and pauses at the edge of the garden, startled, gazing up at Zinder. Zinder whistles softly. The rabbit bolts right over to him and, with complete confidence, lets him pick it up. He smooths its fur, rather as he had smoothed his mother's face. This time he is giving it protection from the night and the predatory things of the night. The rabbit's fur is dusty gray, smelling of mushrooms and long grass.

After the rabbit bounds away again, Zinder goes up on the roof of the hovel. He doesn't climb up there, of course. He flies. The wings that spring from his back are black like his hair, but have the velvety, barbed feathers of a giant crow. They flap slowly, rhythmically, behind him, as he sits on the roof, shifting, by thought, broken tiles and matted straw, until generally everything is better than it was—though not so much better that anyone will suspect something uncanny has been at work. The very last thing his poor, useless, silly mother needs is to be accused of witchcraft.

She isn't in any fit state now to receive a visit from the Great Hunter, which is a real pity, because from up here, Zinder can clearly see the man going home with his catches and kills, along the path between the fields. Zinder sends him a thought, however, just a mild one . . . Maybe the Hunter would like to call tomorrow? Zinder knows it will cheer his mother up and do neither of them any harm. The only true reason the Hunter ever does visit is because he vaguely scents something magic all over the hovel. Without understanding that he does, the Hunter has come to believe that the *mother* is, in some inexplicable way, magical. And so he thinks that perhaps he loves her, just a bit. Besides, the spelled Life-Water does him good. There's nothing so nice at the tavern, he knows that.

The moon tonight is lovely, round, and ivory white. But it isn't yet time to travel on into the higher sky. This is Zinder's village, and he still has a few things to do here.

First he flies lightly over to the house of the old woman with the goat. When they trudged by this evening, he could see the goat wasn't too well, and the woman depends on the goat for milk, also on its shed hair, which she combs off, spins, and weaves into blankets.

She is asleep indoors. He sends a shaft of healing in through the smoke hole of the stovepipe, to deal with her bad back. The goat meanwhile is standing outside drearily, looking at the moon with its slot-pupiled eyes. Zinder dives down out of the moon, and the goat bleats in alarm, but the next minute Zinder's spell covers the goat like a cool, firm, drenching wave. The slot eyes fix, then the goat begins to feel better than it has for some time. Zinder, studying it watchfully, sees it seem to light up softly inside. That's done then. Fine.

He mends and rearranges the other things he needs to quite swiftly. The fields, checked by him every few nights, are blooming and will give this year an especially lavish harvest. The well needs unblocking—again—but that only takes two seconds. The baby with the cough is better. The woman with rheumatism, and the man with the itch, are recovering and need no

further help. (The woodcutter's son, who severed his finger last month, still hasn't realized that it is growing back as good as new. The idea Zinder sent into his mind, which was to pray for such a miracle, will cover the event nicely and make the little priest in the church happy too.)

As Zinder finally drifts away from the village, still flying low, he sees three or four of his clod-slinging tormentors gathered outside the tavern. Unlike the life-giving Life-Water Zinder can supply by magic at home, the stuff in the tavern is both unpleasant and gut-rotting, and also causes aggression. The young men are getting ready for a fight.

They can't see Zinder hovering over their heads, only about ten feet up in the air and in the full blaze of the moonlight. No human ever does see him unless he allows it, but animals do. The wolf and fox, the bear, even the guard dogs of men, are always lifting their heads to watch him go by.

Zinder observes the fight, which is too blundering and clumsy to cause much injury.

But these youths are the ones who attack him the most. Now surely is the time for revenge—what will Zinder, the unknown magician, do?

He laughs, silent, and casts a bolt like lightning at them, which knocks all four over on their backs. None of them is harmed or bruised. They feel, landing, as if they fell on deep feather mattresses. The blow itself has in fact made them feel wonderful, far more effectively than the alcohol. They lie there, looking up at Zinder (whom they can't see) and the moon and the sparkles of the stars. He sends new ideas among them.

"It's a beautiful night," says one. "I could make up a song ..."

"Too beautiful to fight," says one. "I could woo a girl ..."

"I wish I hadn't stolen that coin, perhaps I'll pay it back ..." says one.

"I wish I had a bed as soft as this," says the last.

Zinder flies away and heads up, up into the enormous open dome of the night.

An owl passes below him, white-winged as if floating on two sails, its face like a cat's with two golden eyes.

He flies towards the north, the young man, on his own black wings. A

city is there, something the village talks about disbelievingly, as if it can't possibly be real.

Below, fields and forests, hills and gullies pass. Far, far off, a wall of impressive mountains rises, and marches north where Zinder flies, its dim sugary tops moon-outlined. There is a wide, smooth-flowing river, on which the moon paints Zinder's shadow. (For he has one. This second body of his isn't a ghost, but made of flesh, just like the outer body he wears in the village.) A salmon leaps in the river, eager to catch some of the sorcerous shadow in its mouth. Even fish know, apparently, that Zinder is good news.

The city gradually begins to pay out its own light across a long plain, where blond grain grows thick. A road leads cityward, and on the road, even by night, traffic moves—carts and wagons, riders, patrols of city soldiers, and the carriages of the rich.

Then the city seems to stand up from the plain as the mountains had done. It too shows a circle of high walls—high as the mountain wall they seem. They have towers on them like sharp teeth, but the towers are pierced, like the eyes of needles, by fierce threads of light. On the great gateways, torches flare. While inside, where the massive buildings are, everything looks like black paper or lace held up in front of candleflames, because of the thousands of lit doors and windows.

At the very center of the city is a high hill, and here perches the fortress-palace. So much of it is tiled or gilded, and its windows and doors are so large, that it seems to be made entirely of fire.

Zinder flies slow and steady in over the city, over its traffic and its people, its sentry towers, churches, houses and gardens, over a night market roped in a necklace of lamps.

Yet the flight is often interrupted.

Seeing something, or *sensing* it, Zinder now and then swoops down. He breaks the ladder of a murderous-looking robber in an alleyway, catches the man, and drops him in a puddle of very good beer. He picks up a fallen child, heals its grazes. He makes a slow pot boil and one that boils too fast calm down. A man beating a dog he pushes flat, and stands on him, so that the man howls in terror at this unseen weight pinning him to the ground, while the dog runs to safety. He holds the hand of someone who is dying, whispering hope into their ears. The journey across the city, which need only take him a clutch of minutes, lasts two hours and more.

One ultimate special treat he allows himself. An old man is praying in a small church under the palace hill. His fingers are crippled to claws from rheumatism. Shifty as any thief, Zinder slides through a window, grips the hands of the old man in gloves of cool warmth, and heals him sharp as a smack. And this time, Zinder allows his patient to glimpse the hint of the shadow of one black wing. Perfect. Listen to him! The old man believes he has been cured by an angel.

But by now, is Zinder late? Oh, no.

The city, and the palace particularly, are the exact opposite of a village that wakes at sunrise and falls asleep when the sun goes down. The palace gets up regularly at noon and is awake all night long. Night is day. Dawn is sunset.

Soaring, Zinder wings in over the gilded roofs, which have carved on them statues of strange birds and animals. These seem to be able to see him too—a couple of carved stone heads creakily turn to watch him go by.

Then there is a balcony. Zinder glances down.

A princess, with hair white as the barley grain on the plain outside, is leaning her head on her jeweled hand, gazing at the moon. “Will the wiz-ard never return to us?” she asks. “We miss him so.”

She uses the word *wizard* which, here, means *wise man*. She hasn’t seen him though. He hasn’t allowed her to.

Zinder turns away and flies to a huge bright open window, and straight through into a golden hall.

* * * *

THE scene is spectacular—like a dream, in its own way, except he has of-ten come here or to other such palaces. So Zinder isn’t unused to these gleaming glammers. There are vast candlebranches of gold, the hundreds of clean white candles burning in them with such clear flames they are like crystal butterflies. There are silver fretworks over walls hung with red silk, and floors of icy marble.

The King and his nobles feast.

Gigantic trays of beaten gold continually come in, on which balance gigantic roasts dressed with smaller roasts, fruit, and vegetables. Parades

come and go of silver jugs of red wine and alabaster jugs of pink wine, and jugs made from transparent quartz, holding white wine so pure that it is *green*. On the tables, draped in white cloths dripping crimson tassels, sit castles built of ice and sugar.

The feasters themselves are dressed in garments so thickly embroidered with colored silk and pearls that they are like armor—the men and women can only move very slowly and stiffly.

What a noise! Music and shouting, small dogs yapping, and, in gold cages, birds that talk and sing.

Unseen, Zinder lands deftly in the middle of the room. He spreads his wings to their widest.

Then he appears.

Worse noise—uproar—knives and metal plates falling with a series of clanks, a jade jug worth millions of coins dropped and shattering.

After which, utter *silence*.

In the silence, Zinder gently speaks.

“Good evening.”

He can speak like a king himself. He has always known how. No one ever had to teach him, just as, when in his own village, nobody had to teach him how to quack.

But once he *has* spoken (and mentally reached out to mend the jade jug with a thought), the uproar all-round starts again. Nobles come struggling up in their stiff clothes to clap him on the back or wring his hands, the ladies touch the edges of his crow-velvet wings. The King himself leaves the table and comes over to Zinder. The King and Zinder bow lightly to each other: equals.

“How may I assist you?” Zinder politely asks.

“We need nothing, sir, I assure you. My sick chief cook has recovered, thanks to your powers—and behold the feast! The trees that wouldn’t fruit in my cherry orchard have all gone mad, and cherries big as apples are ex-ploding from them!”

The King, so far, has never asked Zinder to do anything he would have to refuse. In other cities, it has quite often been different. Many kings, having seen Zinder's magical powers, promise fortunes to him—as if he couldn't conjure fortunes for himself if he wanted—in return for his help in wars or invasions. Mainly, they want particularly disgusting types of war machines or weapons to be invented for them, mentioning things that breathe unquenchable fire or shake the ground like earthquakes. Such interviews are no fun. Zinder always refuses, won't give an inch. Sometimes then the kings get angry, one or two even order their guards to seize and punish Zinder. The results of this kind of order, though perhaps amusing—men spinning about with their swords turned into fresh loaves of bread, that sort of thing—never end in Zinder's capture. The kings sulk. Only once did Zinder offer any help in a war. He built up the walls of a town so high, and made the gates so strong, that they were impassable. And he formed a dragon that chased the enemy away, but it breathed nonflammable flame, and there were no casualties. Dragon, high walls, and impenetrable gates melted into air once the threat was removed.

Zinder and the King walk about the hall, while everyone else claps and smiles. And Zinder becomes aware that the King is about to ask him for something impossible after all.

“Between ourselves,” says the King, “my daughter—” Zinder says nothing.

They reach the semiprivacy of a huge open window. The city lies below, scattered over the night like splinters of broken golden jade.

“Should you consider becoming my son-in-law,” says the King, “I could extend, to a remarkable mage like yourself—”

Zinder breaks in quietly. “I'm sorry.”

“You've received a better offer?”

“Not at all.”

Zinder is far too tactful to tell the King how many offers of royal marriage *have* come his way.

* * * *

AT that moment, having learned from her maid that the Wizard Zinder is in

the dining room, the princess herself rushes—rather slowly, due to her clothes—into the room. Her jewelry flashes on her as if she had run in out of a rain of stars.

Halfway along the hall, she recalls that she is a princess. Then she walks incredibly slowly. Reaching Zinder, she is pale as her pale hair, and then pink as the wine in the alabaster jugs.

“Why were you away so long? Months have dragged by since I—we— saw you.”

“I have a lot to do,” Zinder says.

He smiles at her kindly, though he is sorry to smile, in a way, because he knows this makes her like him more. Every night he is somewhere, another city, or a town, or a little village like his own. Zinder is genuinely busy by night, polishing up the world, making it, where he can, better. And where he can't, comforting it.

But the princess is in love with him.

He leans to her ear and whispers, “Forget me. I'll send you another to love. He will be handsome, rich, and far more suitable than I.”

“But you are handsome,” murmurs the princess, dreamily, forgetting everything else. “You are rich in magic.”

“The one I'll send to you will be rich in the way of a king. And much more handsome. Trust me.”

The spell takes hold. She sighs. Two tears drop out of her eyes, heavy as glass beads, and stain the edge of her dress. But the stain quickly vanishes in the heat of the room.

As for the rest of the people there, they haven't seen any of this. Instead, they saw seventeen swans with silver feathers and turquoise crowns fly in at the windows and circle round, singing of joy and wealth to come.

It is true he will send her a prince. Already, on a journey to the East, Zinder has located just the right man. So into his brain Zinder has blown a powder of thoughts about a blond princess—exactly as he has also blown into *her* blond thoughts the idea of a young leopard of a prince. The swans finish their song. Unicorns enter and conduct a warlike fight that ends in

honorable truce. Zinder sits down at the King's right, and eats his first meal of the day or night.

After the unicorns fly off, white geese appear and become a troupe of maidens clothed in golden tissue, who dance. Dance over, they spread goose wings and also fly off into the night. Last, the moon sails to the window to cries and gasps of fear from the feasters in the hall. But the moon is shown to be a round white ship with gossamer sails, and she fires a silver cannon into the room that showers everyone with ribbons and sweets. Then the moon too fades. All this has allowed Zinder to finish his meal. The princess too has cheered up. Zinder magics a blue rose onto her plate. When next he has time to visit this city, she will be happily engaged to the leopard prince.

The huge palace clock, made to look like an ebony turtle, strikes one in the morning, then two, three, four.

Zinder changes half the candleflames into butterflies, which glitter off into the dark.

In the half-light, he leaves the King and his court as suddenly as he came, disappearing before their very eyes, as always, and as they expect him to.

The real moon is down.

But from so high up, Zinder can soon see the tails of the clouds. They are catching a faint early sheen from the hidden waking of the sun.

He must go fast now, homewards.

The mighty city swims far behind, the forests unfurl below, full of leap-ing deer, wolves slinking like last moonbeams, brown summer ermine that play squeaking along the banks of streams narrow, from up here, as slow-worms.

Quickly, noting a splash of red, Zinder descends to puff out a burning hut with a single breath. A cruel hunter, who greedily always takes more hares than he needs for the pot, Zinder fills with a dream of the hunter's own wife, now herself a hare. (She is grieving over the hunter, also a hare, whom someone has killed in a trap.). A widow sobbing by a grave among the trees, Zinder whispers to consolingly. He puts a handful of money in her pocket and a sprig of something that will grow into a bush of flowers. Their perfume, once she makes them into scent, may well bring her a for-tune.

But dawn is impatiently pushing up the heavy lid of the sky.

Here the morning comes, trying to outrace him.

Zinder sprints for the village.

Before the first eyes open there, he must be back inside his village shell.

He makes it with a single heartbeat to spare, sinking down, sinking in. Ready now to face another interesting day as Quacker.

Zinder-Quacker never asks himself why any of this happens, or how he does it. Why he *does* do it is obvious enough. He loves pleasure, and he loves power. And it is sheer pleasure to him, the greatest pleasure of all, to do what he does, shifting the earth a little on her axis. Anyone can make a world suffer and cry. It requires no imagination. Child's play, and no challenge at all. But to fix the broken jugs of despair, unkindness, illness, and ill fortune—this takes a creative mind. The power of it is staggering: to rock life, take it by surprise. Besides, to Zinder, it is endlessly interesting.

Even so, how *can* he do it? What is he, this being, coiled up inside the outer case of Quacker?

He doesn't know. Can't be bothered to try to find out. It was always there in him. Even when he lay in the cradle—that mound of baby the villagers had loathed and wanted to feed to wolves. Yes, even then he would fly out of himself by night, circling in the air, no larger than a moth, invisible, pushing roof tiles together, tickling mice to make them safe. Laughing to himself. At four, when reason came and he began to think in words, then he knew that he did this. That was all. He simply knew. With practice his skill has grown, which isn't unusual surely, where someone is in a truly well-liked job, for which they have a talent.

For now, he sleeps a moment. A moment is all Zinder needs, or Quacker.

And then a coral strand of sunrise, as it normally does, needles through the cave of logs, and fills his shut eyes like two spoons, so they open.

Now, it is Quacker. But Quacker, by day, also knows happiness—and is never afraid. Without considering, just as he never considers the ins and

outs of it all when he is Zinder, Quacker grasps that nothing, in the end, can wreck him or deflect him from what he is. For Quacker is Zinder, and Zin-der is Quacker. The answer is the riddle, the riddle is the answer.

Even as he sat up, as always, Quacker laughed.

That morning, two of the young men from the village, on their way to the fields with sore heads, one worrying about a coin he stole, and one longing for a feather bed, cornered Quacker at the edge of the woods.

They pushed him over and kicked him.

One heard the snap, he thought, of a bone.

“Let’s drive the foul monster out! Bad luck it is! It’s better off dead.”

Quacker lay on the tree roots, not hurt, for he could feel the broken leg mending totally in seconds.

The brave youths didn’t know. They bent down over him, swearing and snarling. Would they kill him? Would it work?

An awful growl rang out.

Had a black bear charged out of the woods?

Jumping back, the attackers saw no bear. It was the Great Hunter, standing there instead with his knives and his bow, and a scowl on his face fit to pare potatoes.

“Get off him, you scum! Or I’ll do for the pair of you myself!”

When the two youths had fled, grumbling that the old fool must have gone sweet on Quacker’s loose mother, the Hunter himself came over and lifted Quacker to his feet.

“Thank you kindly,” said Quacker, with the grace of a king.

For the first time the Great Hunter understood, *heard* Quacker. Embarrassed, astonished, he instinctively almost bowed. “You’re welcome,” mut-tered the Great Hunter.

* * * *