

and of the three great, arched bridges that spanned the Ar to make it one city instead of two. With no experience of the wide world, Gareth could not even guess if the merchants' houses, as the traders claimed, were covered with gold and staffed by bejewelled servants, or if the number of storytellers in the market was always greater than the number of listeners. In his fantasy, Gareth stood in the middle of three such storytellers, all vying for his attention with tales of heroes, dragons, and demons.

A distant sheep 'bahhed' and Gareth came back to his unheroic reality and the pile of stones. It took three well-placed missiles to guide the latest woolly adventurer back to the flock. With the truant returned, Gareth settled down again to his dream of wealthy cities—until the next ewe strayed and 'bahhed' him back to his life. The rest of the long day teetered between daydream and dull reality.

The breeze on the hill finally turned, signalling the approach of evening. Gareth kept one eye on the cabin, looking for his mother to wave him down for the day. Sitting hunched beside the boulder, he slowly released his dreams and concentrated on reality. As the fantastic images faded, he knew in his heart that he was not destined for an exciting life. He was no hero from his mother's Northern songs. His hands were callused from wielding a shovel, not a dragon-killing spear. His clothes were hand-me-downs and hung loosely, giving him a scarecrow look. No, he did not seem designed for adventure, and, if he were honest with himself, he would have to say that his life would likely be spent in these lonely hills, farming and working until he died, perhaps of boredom.

Now, as the sun slid past the brow of the hill, turning bright day into sudden twilight, Gareth climbed the boulder again to look for his mother or brothers to wave him down for supper. No one appeared and Gareth finally decided to get the flock headed downhill before it became too dark to see. The sheep were uncharacteristically nervous as they neared their pen. Every other day they trotted happily into the corral, knowing that Gareth would mix their ration of grain with some expensive, tasty salt to keep them healthy. Now they milled and crowded from one side of the enclosure to the other, calling to him in plaintive voices.

Inside the cowshed, their milk cow, Saliat, lowed just as nervously. She pranced and pushed against him so urgently that Gareth bent to check her udder, but his mother had already milked her dry. The frightened beast then laid her big, soft head in the crook of his arm and rolled her eyes. "Shhhh, shhhh girl, shhhh," Gareth said to calm her, but she kept butting into him until he had to leave the poor thing uncomfortable, still moaning and staring in her stall. A shiver ran up his back as he walked to the cabin; every animal on the farm was at the point of panic. The chickens buzzed like feathered bees from roost to roost in their coop. The two sows and their piglets backed into a corner of the sty and bared their teeth at Gareth as he walked by. The dog, a skinny mongrel with only three legs that his father kept, "just for the bark," whimpered and hid under the steps that led to the farmhouse door.

Gareth slipped inside and felt the heat on the left side of his face from a roaring fire in the hearth. His father, who ordinarily wouldn't waste a twig more than was necessary for cooking or heating, especially on a warm summer night, was just pushing in another log. He levered it with the poker between hearth's stone teeth and glared at Gareth.

"You're late—as usual. Help your mother." He poked the log furiously and Gareth saw sweat beading on his forehead and upper lip.

Garet looked to his mother, but she didn't acknowledge him. She seemed unaware that he had even entered the house. Twisting a washcloth between two white-knuckled fists, she stared out into the twilight beyond the open door.

The dog yelped. Gitel and Galit clattered into the house as if they were being chased by all the people they had ever offended. Galit slammed the door behind him and threw the latch. The cabin fell into shadow; the one small window, covered with a thinly scraped sheep hide, let in barely enough light to show his mother's twisting, wringing hands. The fire only confused his sight with its dancing patterns of light and shadow. Without a word, his father took down the winter lamp from the mantle and lit it.

Garet was dumbstruck. No one, especially someone as stingy as his father, wasted lamp oil. Every winter they were treated to lectures about how the expensive oil must be traded all the way from the dry lands south of the Midland Plains, its price increasing with each mile travelled. And yet with twilight still brightening the sky, the winter lamp blazed on the mantle! He shivered, despite the heat of the fire. This was so strange; what was happening to them? Only Allie seemed immune to whatever fit had gripped his family and was now jumping under his own skin. Tied to her chair and fixing the door with her usual savage glare, she held a wooden spoon ready in her hand.

His mother finally stirred herself to put the food on the table, and they all sat in silence. The dinner was a fine one, for late summer was a rare time of plenty. It consisted of a stewed hen, who had ceased to lay eggs thus sealing its fate, new potatoes, and greens that his mother grew in the farm's kitchen garden. But the dinner had no taste for Garet. He could barely force any food past his chattering teeth. The muscles of his shoulder knotted under a nameless dread. His brothers jumped at every clink of a fork against a plate. In desperation, he tried to break the mood by daring to talk directly to his father.

"Father, the sheep are gaining weight." There was no response, and he tried again. "Will we take the yarn to Three Roads to sell this year?" This was more than he usually said to his father in a week, and to ask such a foolish question— after all where else would they take the yarn—usually meant a clout to the ear. But any response, even a slap, would be better than this stretching silence.

His father slowly turned to face him, but his eyes were as wide and staring as the cow's. Garet felt his stomach knot. Then the dog yipped and shrieked right outside the door. Garet jumped back, turning his chair over. The only other person who moved was Allia, who twisted her head to look at him, as he backed up to the cabin wall, crowding the pots hanging on their hooks.

The door latch started to rise, pushed up by a long, curved blade slid between the door and the jamb. The latch cleared its hook, and the door opened a crack. The thin blade was joined by three others, and Garet saw that they were not knives; they were a set of claws, attached to a bony, mottled arm. That arm now slid through the crack and felt along the wall. The door opened wider and a head out of a nightmare followed. It was narrow and ridged. Bony crests ran from a sloped forehead to the flattened crown. Instead of a nose, it thrust forward a leathery beak. Two black eyes, showing neither whites nor pupils, peered into the room. The mouth opened to reveal a narrow tongue flicking in a bed of needle teeth.

The creature pulled itself inside, and now Garet saw blood on its beak and tufts of fur and feathers stuck to its spidery hands. It was skeleton-thin and moved quickly,

sometimes like a child on two gangly legs, sometimes on all fours, like some freakish hunting cat. The small part of Gareth's mind that could still think knew what it must be: a demon! A demon where it had no right to be. This was the Midlands. Here all were safe from both the demons of the South and the dragons of the North. But the demon ignored the impossibility of its presence and climbed onto the crowded table, skittering over the dishes.

A low moaning filled the room, and Gareth's horror increased. The man Gareth had thought he feared more than anyone or anything else in the world could only whimper as the creature walked his table. His two brothers sat as rigidly as their father. As the demon passed the twins, the sharp smell of urine bit the air. The demon sniffed at it, seemed to grin, and continued towards Gareth's grey-faced parents. Its thin arm slowly lifted and reached, almost delicately, towards his father's clenched face.

"Nnn—Nnnn, Nnnno...", his mother seemed to push out the syllable by sheer force of will. Her head jerked from side to side.

The creature paused, as if surprised at this discourtesy, and the curved claws changed their course from the man's face to the woman's. A hot anger erupted in Gareth's belly, warming him and loosening his muscles. He began to burn with an incredible rage: anger at the creature for threatening his mother, anger at his father and brothers for doing nothing, and anger at himself for his fear of the thing. That last anger was the strongest. It fought with the horror that came off the demon like a foul wind. He hated this fear, and all the others of his life. He saw his terror of the demon as being no different from his fear of his father, his brothers, and his bleak future. A battle raged inside him, as if every fear he had ever felt filled his chest, and the anger boiled up to meet it.

The curved knives were an inch from his mother's eyes when Allia yelled. The demon paused. Though small, his sister could shake the roof when she wished. She brought her spoon squarely down on the creature's other hand. She was no amateur at this, and the spoon hit a knuckle. The thing gave a piercing shriek. The raised claws now twisted to slash at the child.

Gareth moved without knowing it, without knowing that he could. His forgotten hand had been on a copper pot, heavy as a paving stone, and he grabbed the handle and flung it at the creature. It was more effective than he could have hoped. The heavy bottom of the pot brushed past the spindly arm and smashed into the side of the vicious beak. Gareth heard a crack—he didn't know whether the pot's handle or the thing's head was broken—and the demon was flung between his two brothers into the hearth's crackling fire. His body now free, Gareth scrambled over the table after the beast. He had no weapon or skill, so he did what he could. As the creature tried to crawl out of the flames that were consuming it, he used the long poker to shove it back in and hold it tight against the blazing logs until its hideous, whistling shrieks stopped.