

THE STONE THING

Out of the dark places; out of the howling mists; out of the lands without sun; out of Ghonorea came tall Catharz, with the moody sword Oakslayer in his right hand, the cursed spear Bloodlicker in his left hand, the evil bow Deathsinger on his back together with his quiver of fearful rune-fletched arrows, Heartseeker, Goregreedy, Soulsnatcher, Orphanmaker, Eyeblinder, Sorrowsower, Beanslicer, and several others.

Where his right eye should have been there was a jewel of slumbering scarlet whose colour sometimes shifted to smouldering blue, and in the place of his left eye was a many-faceted crystal, which pulsed as if possessed of independent life. Where Catharz had once had a right hand, now a thing of iron, wood and carved amethyst sat upon his stump; nine-fingered, alien, cut by Catharz from the creature who had sliced off his own hand. Catharz' left hand was at first merely gauntleted, but when one looked further it could be observed that the gauntlet was in fact a many jointed limb of silver, gold and lapis lazuli, but as Catharz rode by, those who saw him pass remarked not on the murmuring sword in his right hand, not on the whispering spear in his left hand, not on the whining bow upon his back or the grumbling arrows in the quiver; neither did they remark on his right eye of slumbering scarlet, his left eye of pulsing crystal, his nine-fingered right hand, his shining metallic left hand; they saw only the fearful foot of Cwlwwymwn which throbbed in the stirrup at his mount's right flank.

The foot of the Aching God, Cwlwwymwn Rootripper, whose ambition upon the old and weary Earth had been to make widows of all wives; Cwlwwymwn the Striker, whose awful feet had trampled whole cities when men had first made cities; Cwlwwymwn of the Last Ones, Last of the Last Ones, who had been driven back to his island domain on the edge of the world, beyond the Western Ice, and who now came limping after Catharz screaming out for vengeance, demanding the return of his foot, sliced from his leg by Oakslayer so that Catharz might walk again and continue upon his doomladen quest, bearing weapons which were not his protection but his burden, seeking consolation for the guilt which ate at his soul since it was he who had been responsible for the death of his younger brother, Forax the Golden, for the death of his niece, Libia Gentleknee, for the living death of his cousin, Wertigo the Unbalanced, seeking the whereabouts of his lost love, Cyphila the Fair, who had been stolen from him by his arch-enemy, the wizard To'me'ko'op'r, most powerful, most evil, most lustful of all the great sorcerers of this magic-clouded world.

And there were no friends here to give aid to Catharz Godfoot. He must go alone, with shuddering terror before him and groaning guilt behind him, and Cwlwwymwn, screaming, vengeful, limping Cwlwwymwn, following always.

And Catharz rode on, rarely stopping, scarcely ever dismounting, anxious to claim his own vengeance on the sorcerer, and the foot of Cwlwymwn, Last of the Last Ones, was heavy on him, as well it might be for it was at least eighteen inches longer than his left foot and naked, for he had had to abandon his boot when he had found that it did not fit. Now Cwlwymwn possessed the boot; it was how he had known that Catharz was the mortal who had stolen his green, seventeen-clawed limb, attaching it by fearful sorcery to the flesh of his leg. Catharz' left leg was not of flesh at all, but of lacquered cork, made for him by the People of the World Beneath the Reefs, when he had aided them in their great fight against the Gods of the Lowest Sea.

The sun had stained the sky a livid crimson and had sunk below the horizon before Catharz would allow himself a brief rest and it was just before dark that he came in sight of a small stone cottage, sheltered beneath terraces of glistening limestone, where he hoped he might find food, for he was very hungry.

Knocking upon the door he called out:

"Greetings, I come in friendship, seeking hospitality, for I am called Catharz the Melancholy, who carries the curse of Cwlwymwn Rootripper upon him, who has many enemies and no friends, who slew his brother, Forax the Golden, and caused the death of Libia Gentleknee, famous for her beauty, and who seeks his lost love Cyphila the Fair, prisoner of the wizard To'me'ko'op'r, and who has a great and terrible doom upon him."

The door opened and a woman stood there. Her hair was the silver of a spiderweb in the moonlight, her eyes were the deep gold found at the centre of a beehive, her skin had the pale, blushing beauty of the tea-rose. "Welcome, stranger," said she. "Welcome to all that is left of the home of Lanoli, whose father was once the mightiest in these parts."

And, upon beholding her, Catharz forgot Cyphila the Fair, forgot that Cwlwymwn Rootripper limped after him still, forgot that he had slain his brother, his niece, and betrayed his cousin, Wertigo the Unbalanced.

"You are very beautiful, Lanoli," he said.

"Ah," said she, "that is what I have learned. But beauty such as mine can only thrive if it is seen and it has been so long since anyone came to these lands."

"Let me help your beauty thrive," he said.

Food was forgotten, guilt was forgotten, fear was forgotten as Catharz divested himself of his sword, his spear, his bow and his arrows and walked slowly into the cottage. His gait was a rolling one, for he still bore the burden

that was the foot of the Last of the Last Ones, and it took him some little time to pull it through the door, but at length he stood inside and had closed the door behind him and had taken her in his arms and had pressed his lips to hers.

"Oh, Catharz," she breathed. "Catharz!"

It was not long until they stood naked before one another. Her eyes travelled over his body and it was plain that the eyes of scarlet and crystal were lovely to her, that she admired his silver hand and his nine-fingered hand, that even the great foot of Cwlwymwn was beautiful in her sight. But then her eyes, shy until now, fell upon that which lay between his legs, and those eyes widened a little, and she blushed. Her lovely lips framed a question, but he moved forward as swiftly as he could and embraced her again.

"How?" she murmured. "How, Catharz?"

"It is a long tale and a bloody one," he whispered, "of rivalry and revenge, but suffice to say that it ended in my father, Xympwell the Cruel, taking a terrible vengeance upon me. I fled from his court into the wastes of Grxiwynn, raving mad, and it was there that the tribesmen of Velox found me and took me to the wise Man of Oorps in the mountains beyond Katatonia. He nursed me and carved that for me. It took him two years, and all through those two years I remained raving, living off dust and dew and roots, as he lived. The engravings had mystical significance, the runes contain the sum of his great wisdom, the tiny pictures show all that there is to show of physical love. Is it not beautiful? More beautiful than that which it has replaced?"

Her glance was modest; she nodded slowly.

"It is indeed, very beautiful," she agreed. And then she looked up at him and he saw that tears glistened in her eyes. "But did it have to be made of Sandstone?"

"There is little else," he explained sadly, "in the mountains beyond Katatonia."