

## Watermill

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

The crackle from the small campfire gave Uedimer little comfort. The light reflecting off the forest trees was only slightly better. Overhead, the faint rustling of branches in the breeze sparked his imagination and gave no comfort. His three comrades slept nearby. They did not comfort him. The cool early autumn air made things worse. Uedimer pulled his blanket tighter around him, fighting off the chills.

The traveler thought about waking one of the others to talk to and ease his mind. It would not be Tridnif. All he'd talk about was his sister and speculate on why she came to the forest so far from home and never returned. Uedimer was now wondering the same. When Tridnif first found out where Brissmarria went, he was eager to help his friend find her and bring her home. Now he wondered what brought the maiden out to the wilderness, so close to her wedding day.

Everyone in the village thought Brissmarria ran to the Temple so she did not have to marry, but Uedimer thought otherwise. Tridnif and Uedimer had been friends most of their lives and had known

the younger girl since she was born. The girl seemed happy about her engagement and her father was proud of the arrangement.

*No*, he thought, *Something else brought her out here.*

Uedimer peered into the darkness and listened. He was not familiar with the woods or the wilderness, neither was Rikjae. Uedimer would not wake him either. He was a village guard and had few conversational interests. There was little he could talk about. The only reason he was there was for his proficiency with a sword. None of the others having any, being farmers and milkers.

That left Gaffin. He at least was someone Uedimer could talk to and not about why they were in the forest. Gaffin was a farmer like Tridnif, but his interests went beyond planting and harvesting.

Uedimer was about to nudge the stocky short man when off to his left movement caught his attention. Well beyond the main light of the fire, he could see a figure in a pale colored gown. She approached slowly.

“Miss,” he called and rose. The figure halted and stared. At least he assumed she stared. She was too far to make out her face. “Nothing to be alarmed about. We are looking for....”

The woman turned left and began trotting away. Uedimer heard the shifting of his comrade getting up out of the bedrolls.

“Don’t run.” Uedimer yelled out. He started trotting after her, but tripped over an exposed root, falling to the soft mossy soil, his face in a fern. The milker pushed himself up to his knees. “We just want to talk to you.”

“Who are you hollering at?” Rikjae asked as he stepped up next to the fallen man, sword in one hand.

Uedimer took the other outreached hand and stood. “There’s a woman out here. She went that way.”

“Brissmarria?” Tridnif asked.

“No, I don’t think so. She was a bit shorter, with red hair, I think. It was too dark to tell for sure.”

The guard walked out to where Uedimer pointed. “I can’t find any prints, but it is really too dark to tell. We’ll have to follow the tracks in the morning.”

“I’m not waiting,” Tridnif stated and started rolling up his blankets.

Rikjae returned to the fire. “Whoever that was is obviously from around here and familiar with the forest. I didn’t hear her running, I didn’t even see her.”

“She was there,” Uedimer said.

“I believe you, but it’s no good for any of us to go trudging through the woods in the dark. Besides, I had an ominous dream last night and feel uncomfortable leaving the camp.”

“I had a similar dream,” Tridnif said. “Some man threatened us, but it’s just a dream. I’m going after my sister.”

Tridnif tied the blanket to his pack after pulling out a small oil flask. “Who knows how far she’ll be in the morning. I’m not waiting.” Finding a solid branch he ripped off the few twigs. “Gaffin, those leggings you tore the other day; give them to me.”

Gaffin was standing near the edge of the light. He had said nothing. That was one thing Uedimer liked about him. He was quiet most of the time. When he did talk, it was more interesting than most people. “Rikjae is correct, we should not be following her blindly.”

“Give me the leggings and we won’t be blind.”

“A torch won’t help much. The moonlight is not getting down to us and those roots Uedimer fell over are everywhere.”

“You can stay. I’m going.”

“We don’t even know if she knows anything about Brissmarria.”

“We won’t know if we don’t ask her.” Tridnif dropped his pack to the ground. “Fine,” he muttered, as he opened it, “I’ll use my spare tunic.”

“Don’t do that. It’s in my pack, but we should wait.”

“I’m not going to.”

“I see that.” Gaffin pulled out the torn leggings and tossed to Tridnif, who further tore it into strips. Gaffin shook his head and packed his items.

“You’re not going with him are you?,” Uedimer asked.

“We all are.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s going and we have to stay together.”

In sort order, the four were walking through the wood in the direction the woman had run, a makeshift torch in each of their hands. Only one was lit for the time being.

“Are you sure she came in this direction?” Rikjae asked. “I don’t think anyone came this way.”

“She did. I think she was small, maybe too small to leave prints.”

“I’m not a tracker,” Tridnif said, “but as soft as everything is, there should be something. There’s not even a broken twig.”

“This is where I saw her go,” Uedimer confirmed.

The group wandered on. Without the moons to help judge time, they did not know how long they had been walking when they came upon a wide stream.

“At least we know she is either that way or that,” Rikjae commented, looking up and down the stream.

“Now where?” Tridnif asked Uedimer.

“Why ask me?”

“You saw her.”

“I saw her come in this direction.”

“We’ll go downstream,” Rikjae said and headed that direction.

“Why?” Uedimer asked, following.

“I think it feeds out of the forest. If there is going to be anyone, it would be on the edge, not deeper in.”

“Then we should go up,” said Tridnif. “My sister is in the forest, not on the edge.”

“We need to find someone to talk to. We could be here for days wandering around and our food is running low. I want to talk to the locals before getting too lost in this forest.” Rikjae headed downstream with the other close behind.

It was still dark when they reach a watermill. It was old with moss on the roof. Old as it was the mechanics seem to function. The wheel turned freely with the stream. The group had gone though seven torches and had nearly depleted their oil supply.

Uedimer was glad to see the mill since it was a sign of civilization. The others stopped. And Gaffin commented, “Something about this feels familiar. It wasn’t in my dream, but it still feels that way.”

Rikjae looked at the man. “You didn’t say you had the dream,.”

“I didn’t feel comfortable about saying anything until now.” Gaffin replied

Uedimer went to the door of the small thatched cottage attached to the mill and knocked. He knocked again, louder and then again.

“One moment, one moment. Who is calling at this late hour?”

“Sorry sir,” the milker called through the door. “I’m Uedimer of Gadholmit and my friends and I...”

The door opened. “Where?”

“Gadholmit.”

“Where is that?” The torchlight revealed a rough looking middle-aged man.

“It is far from here, a small village. We were following a woman.”

“There’s no woman here. Now, go away.” The man closed the door. There was an audible latch.

Uedimer stared at the closed door, whispering, “I didn’t say she was here.” He refrained from pounding on the door.

“There’s a path over here,” Gaffin pointed out.

Uedimer went with the others to check out the rutted small road, not much larger than a path, but wide enough for carts to bring the grain and return with flour.

“Well, I guess we’ll follow it,” Rikjae announced.

Follow it they did, mostly without light. The last of the oil was gone. The four walked into a wide clearing with frosted fields, a hamlet to one side.

“I was hoping for a pub,” Gaffin grumbled. “I could do with a drink.”

“This place is too small for a pub,” Rikjae stated, equally disappointed, “and it’s too early for these people to be moving about.”

Uedimer looked east where the sky showed the first hints of morning light and then to one of the chimneys puffing out a small amount of smoke. Faint flickers of firelight danced on heavy drapes.

“There’s someone up,” the milker said. He went to the door and knocked lightly.

The door opened after a delay. A bearded man held it ajar. A woman with long locks of dark hair stood behind him.

“Excuse me, sir,” Uedimer began, “we traveled a long way in search of this man’s sister.”

“Why come here?” the man asked, but Uedimer saw a reaction on the woman’s face.

“Did you see her? Her name is Brissmarria. She’s has silky dark hair and a pointy nose, like his,” pointing to Tridnif.

“Not here. She did not come here,” the man stated.

“You know something and so does your woman.”

“No, we don’t know anything about her.”

Tridnif stepped up on the stoop. “You do know something,” he said with a raised voice. “Tell me. Where is she?”

“We don’t know. We did not see her.”

Tridnif pushed passed Uedimer, grabbing the man’s rough tunic. His patience was worn thin from travel, the cold and lack of answers to what he saw as simple questions. “You’re lying. Tell me where she is.”

Uedimer clasped his friend’s shoulder, saying, “Release him,” at the same time the woman cried out, “He doesn’t know. Neither do I.”

Tridnif did not let go. “You know something.” He pushed the man into his house, stepping in with him, not releasing his grip. “Woman, tell me what you know.”

She did not speak. The bearded man did, saying, “If your sister came to the forest, then it is too late. Go while you can.”

Uedimer and the others entered the house. Gaffin closed the door, then said, “Sir, we are not leaving until we understand what is going on and we find Brissmarria.”

“You won’t find her. She is gone if she went in the forest.”

“We were in the forest,” Uedimer said and then told Tridnif firmly, “let him go. He’s not going anywhere.” After his friend loosened his grip, the captive pulled away a couple steps. Uedimer continued. “We were at the mill up the path. We followed a woman.”

“No one wanders the forest at night,” said the man. “Its not safe.”

“Well, I saw her and she ran when she saw me.”

“You saw her?” the woman asked. Her husband gave her a sharp look.

“Yes, I did. Who is she? What is going on?”

“Nothing you should stay for. It is not safe for you. Go now. Go before trouble comes.”

“What would happen? What are you worried about?”

Tridnif spoke up. “As I told you, we are not leaving without my sister.”

“There is nothing you can do for her. If she’s in the forest, she is gone from you. If you go after her, you will not return.”

“I going after her,” Tridnif stated bluntly.

“Who is the man at the mill?” Gaffin added. “What would he know?”

“He’ll tell you nothing. Don’t go there again.”

“That was not an answer.”

“It’s the only answer I’m going to give you.”

Tridnif grabbed at the man, who ducked from reach. “Why, you…”

Uedimer leapt in between. “We are going.” Directing the statement to Tridnif more than the couple.

“No we’re not,” Tridnif replied. “Not until…”

“Yes we are,” Rikjae injected.

The guard took hold of Tridnif and together with Uedimer and Gaffin they went outside without another word to the man and woman of the house.

“Why are we going?” Tridnif asked, shaking the two hands loose.

“They are terrified,” Uedimer replied. “They are scared of something.”

“They’re scared of me and I was going to find out what they’re hiding.”

“Uedimer is correct,” Gaffin added. “They are scared and it is not you. They don’t know enough to cause them more trouble. The man at the mill on the other hand knows much more and he is definitely hiding something.”

Uedimer nodded. “We should go back there.”

“I doubt that we should, but we will.”

The way was lighter. By the time the four reached the watermill, the forest seemed bright. Brighter it may have been, but not warmer. The air was still cold.

Uedimer went to the door again. There was no answer. He tried to open it. It would not.

“Over here,” Rikjae called out from the far side of the mill. “There’s a footpath.”

Uedimer knocked once more, hard, and then walked around the mill. There was a small single log bridge notched flat on top. It led to the head of the small trail. “Not used very much, is it?”

“No, but it was used this morning, I’d say.”

Tridnif stepped on the path first and marched into the woods on the far side of the stream from the mill. The others followed. The path wound around trees, some very large. The shadows of the sunlight showed that Tridnif kept a fast pace for a good hour. Then, he stopped.

Rikjae pulled up next to him. Uedimer and Gaffin could only look over their shoulders at a stone house in the clearing. In front of the wide abode was a well-kept garden; still in it’s winter nap. In the garden was the miller, near the door. In front of him was a man, clean shaven, thin long brown well-groomed hair, wearing thick brown leggings and tunic.

Rikjae whispered. “That’s him, the man in the dream.”

I’m aware of that. Tridnif replied softly.

The man across from them. “You’ve been warned,” the man said.

“Where’s my sister?” Tridnif asked.

“You’ve been warned. You should leave.”

“I’m not leaving without my sister.”

Rikjae slid his sword out slowly. “You didn’t answer his question. Everyone seems to be avoiding it. Where is his sister?”

“That sword will only do you harm. Put it away before you get hurt.”

“You should be worried about the sword.”

“I’m not. I am worried about your health. You don’t seem to have control of yourself.”

“I’m doing fine,” Rikjae said, but Uedimer noticed that the sword arm was shaking slightly.

“Now answer the question. Where is Brissmarria?”

“Who?”

“I think you know; Tridnif’s sister.”

The man said nothing. His eyes remained locked with Rikjae. Slowly the guard’s sword raised and angled for his own throat. Uedimer reached out to catch Rikjae’s arm, but the man flicked a finger and a blow to Uedimer’s chest threw him back.

When he rose, Rikjae laid on the path, his blood soaking the soil. Tridnif was crouched over him, holding a hand over the open throat. Tridnif wanted to say something, but could not. No words would form. He knew nothing would save Rikjae. With shaking hands Tridnif picked up the blade and stood. He only got two steps when he was forced to stop.

“You’re less proficient than your friend and you saw how clumsy he was with it.”

“You killed him.”

“He did that to himself.”

“You did tha...” Tridnif’s voice choked off.

Gaffin yelled, “Stop this,” and tried running past Tridnif. The blade sliced across the leg, felling him.

Uedimer ran to stop Tridnif from driving the point through Gaffin’s chest but it was too late. The milker tackled his friend. The two rolled. Tridnif shook wildly. Uedimer held him down. What he didn’t notice was that he held him down around the neck. Another thing he was not aware of was how long he held his friend. Tridnif stopped shaking and relaxed.

The milker slumped to the ground, breathing hard.

“What did he do to you,” Uedimer asked his friend. There was no answer. He pushed back up and looked into the open eyes and saw no life. His gaze shifted to the two men in front of the house.

“I told you to leave,” the slender one said, “but you would not listen.”

“Why. All we wanted was to find his sister.”

“You were told you could not and you insisted on prying.”

Uedimer stood. He stumbled from weakness, but caught his balance. He could do nothing for his comrades or for Brissmarria. He turned back to the path and started walking.

“I can’t let you go now,” Uedimer heard from behind him. “You lost that chance.”

Uedimer’s knees gave way and connected with the soft soil. His head erupted in pain and he screamed. It seemed an eternity to the milker. The agony blinded him and he barely realized he went prone, face down. Then, suddenly the pain was gone.

“Help him up,” a feminine voice said from above him.

The pain was gone. The path was dark and there was many people standing around Uedimer. He felt a hand take hold of his arm, giving Uedimer support to stand.

“Thank you,” he said and then turned to see that man who assisted him was Tridnif. “I thought I…”

The milker saw Gaffin standing near by Brissmarria and behind them, Rikjae.

“What happened?”

“Brissmarria came here because of a dream. The sorcerer brought her here to be a sacrifice. Every year he needs a sacrifice to bring in spring and to strengthen the soil for planting.”

“Well, let’s leave before he has to do that.”

“We can’t leave,” Brissmarria said. “We’ve not been able to. All of us tried.” Her green eye had a sad look.

Uedimer looked around. There were many women staring at him amongst the trees with a few men scattered throughout. He looked up the path. The sun was down and it was darker. He looked at the house. It glowed a faint purple. That disturbed him.

“I’m leaving. We’ll start by going to the hamlet.” Uedimer walked back towards the mill.

“You can’t escape,” Brissmarria told the milker.

He ignored her. All he wanted was to get out of the forest. He began trotting and then broke into a run. The trail seemed longer going back and no matter how fast he ran he never reach the watermill.

The End