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The Prize of Banteteth

A ROGUES' TRAVELOGUE
BY
EPIDIAH RAVACHOL

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About *Worlds Without Master*

“The Prize of Banteteth” first appeared *Worlds Without Master*, Volume 1, Issue 4 along with:

- ◆ “Two Swords of Mars,” a tale of swashbuckling upon the red planet by Rose Bailey.
- ◆ Illustrations by Gary McCluskey and Jon Taylor.
- ◆ More “Oh, the Beating Drum!” from Bryant Paul Johnson.
- ◆ “See New Places, Meet Interesting People & Visit Retribution Upon Them,” a supplement supplement to *Enter the Avenger* (found in issue 1) by Rafu.
- ◆ And “Too Far West,” a full-color cover illustration by Rachel Kahn.

Worlds Without Master is an adventure fiction and gaming ezine featuring sword and sorcery short fiction and games from Epidiah Ravachol and many others. An ezine that will grow in size and content as its Patron Horde grows in number. You can lend your swordarm to the cause or purchase the entire first issue by going to www.WorldsWithoutMaster.com.

The Prize of Banteteth

By Epidiah Ravachol

The journey inland from the port of Daninuah to the crossroads of Lep could not be measured in time or distance. By punt across acrid fen; by ox through venomous, labyrinthine jungle paths; by moonlight over leopard-haunted savannah; by raft tossed upon the uncaring currents of the mighty Venreu; by goat over mountain and crag; and finally by horse-drawn sledge through sandy scrublands—the caravan masters who traveled this route counted their ventures in the loss of goods and souls.

The work paid more in pride and glory than in silver, but for fair-bearded Snorri and the well-thewed Manyara, it was a clear path from Daninuah that few would follow. After an ill-spent night that left two galleys burning in the harbor, this was a welcome course. The two signed on as guards for Master Selu Fyrmyor's caravan and departed with the rosy dawn.

They carried with them only their clothes, a couple of stolen tankards, six coins of dubious origin, two daggers, an ax, a crooked spear, and Manyara's broadsword Well-Digger.

In the fen, a squat, amphibious beast the length and width of a horse capsized several of the punts and swallowed one of the bearers before the two could bury spear and sword in its slippery flesh. Afterward, their lofty positions as guardians did not insulate them from the leech-laden duty of diving for waterlogged parcels along with the remaining bearers.

Later, Manyara fashioned the beast's ribs and hide into a large shield and Snorri succumbed to an insect-borne fever.

They dragged him upon the shield behind oxen over root and rock through the jungle paths.

Under that vicious, verdant canopy, the caravan was set upon by a score of pale and painted women and their hunting spiders. They slew two oxen and made off with all the salt they could carry before Manyara came tearing through the vines. The pursuit into the tangled undergrowth drew her far from the worn trails and, after losing sight of the nimble women and their spiders, left Manyara wandering in an indistinguishable field of green.

Snorri, crippled by fever, was left shivering on the salamander-shield. There Master Selu Fyrmyor let Snorri lie, counting him and Manyara among the tally of losses, and continued on his path toward Lep.

Upon her return, Manyara found Snorri sleeping in the coils of a monstrous constrictor, his dagger at the end of a scarlet gouge that unstitched the serpent. Jungle scavengers of feather, scale and hide feasted about him. She chased off the carrion feeders and, after failing to start a fire with the damp jungle wood, she watched over Snorri and fed him insects and raw snake.

When Snorri's fever broke, the two followed the caravan's path, seeking answers and payment from Master Selu Fyrmyor. For days they ran, through jungle and then out on the savannah where the caravan's trail was evident by the circling vultures that marked where ox carcasses had been abandoned. Despite Manyara's desires to reclaim what supplies may have been left with the fallen oxen, Snorri insisted they sweep wide of these feeding grounds and hunt their meals elsewhere. He had grown

less fond of scavengers as of late.

They lost the trail in the torrents of the Venreu. The river was wide and swollen from recent mountain storms—a foaming mélange of mud and debris—and afforded no way to reckon where Master Selu Fyrmyor's caravan had gone. But there was no returning. So Manyara felled three small trees that the pair lashed together into a makeshift raft and they surrendered to the mercies of the Venreu.

After a long struggle with the river, the raft eventually shattered in the rapids and the pair clung to Manyara's shield until they washed ashore. There they were found by a couple of the caravan's bearers who were trying to fish the Venreu. They helped Snorri and Manyara to a nearby village at the foot of a mountain pass where Master Selu Fyrmyor was negotiating a trade of his oxen for sure-footed goats. He greeted them as kin and made introductions to the village elders who grew more nervous and pliable in Manyara and Snorri's haggard but daunting presence.

Master Selu Fyrmyor, delighted by the number of goats he got in exchange for his dwindling oxen supply, welcomed Manyara and Snorri back into his employ with gifts of warm, dry furs and leathers, including long, conical fur caps—the kind favored by the local banditry—which Snorri found jaunty and Manyara found ridiculous. All other accounts, he said, would be settled upon reaching Lep.

The cargo was lashed to the goats and the caravan began the vertiginous climb through the pass, where they were harried by brigands and forced to shelter in shallow caves for several days as a spring storm raged against the mountains. But soon

the party was through to the other side, losing only one goat and two bearers, which Master Selu Fyrmyor chose not to count, considering he had recently recovered both Snorri and Manyara and could put them to similar work.

In the final leg, the caravan climbed down out of the mountains where they met another caravan bivouacked among the crags. There Manyara and Snorri were asked to stand to either side of Master Selu Fyrmyor as he sat down with the other caravan leader to discuss the trade of goods and goats for horses and sledges.

The wind, cool and moist, whipped across the waist-high grass. Something in that dance troubled Manyara. She shed the scents, sights and sounds of the haggling at her feet, and breathed in deep her further senses. The sharp timbre of a loosed bowstring sped across thrashing grasses and hid in the cacophony of the caravans. But it could not escape the keen ears of Manyara, honed to winnow out such hints of danger by years of wandering.

She slung her shield up over her head and Snorri dove for shelter behind her. Three arrows sunk into the sandy ground and a fourth into the rump of a horse, spurring it into flight. Master Selu Fyrmyor shot an accusatory glance at the other caravan leader, but she was already calling her own camp to order.

Manyara tossed her shield to Snorri. He caught it and nodded just before Manyara ran off, weaving among the spare outcrops of rock that stabbed upward like islands from the sea of grass. Her thick, powerful legs, aching from days spent in cautious descent out of the mountains, delighted in familiar movements. Her hunched, panther-like sprint—a well-practiced

thieves' gait designed to swiftly carry her strapping frame below window and eye-line—kept her hidden among the grasses as she set about the hunt.

The archers had already set to foot before the first volley had even landed. Their task was done and they had no desire to see what resulted. But they were cautious in their flight and their attempts to remain hidden hampered the speed of their retreat.

With whisper-like grace, Manyara pounced upon the slowest of them, knocking him to the ground. She rolled with the impact and flipped him over, wrapping her steely arm around his throat to hold him still and silent, hidden in the grasses. It was then that she realized she had already knocked him senseless and that he was more child than man.

She released the boy and tried to slap him into consciousness. He yet breathed, but would not respond. So she threw him over her shoulder and scrambled to catch up with the other archers. They were just beginning to realize their companion was missing when Manyara allowed her shadow to be cast upon them. The sight of this dark, massive woman rising silently out of the grasses held sway over their feet, though they desired nothing more than to run. Manyara laid the boy before the girl standing nearest her.

“You will not fling your arrows at me again.”

There were four children in all: the boy Manyara had struck and three girls. Each was wrapped in filthy, tattered silks dyed dark amber and bright purple. Each was armed with a small hunting bow. The eldest, who could not have seen more than a dozen summers, stood gape-mouthed before Manyara, tears threatening her eyes.

“Nod.”

The children nodded.

“Your friend only sleeps, but he should not be left alone on this plain. Take him to shelter and see that he is cared for.”

The three bolted. They were swift, but Manyara, swifter. She lifted the nearest from the ground as she ran and carried her back to the boy. Putting her down, Manyara spoke softly, “Is this child a companion of yours?”

The girl nodded.

“Save his life so that he may have opportunity to save yours one day.”

The girl stared into Manyara’s dark eyes and they reached an understanding. Manyara helped her pick the boy up and showed her how to drape him across her shoulders before shoing her off.

Snorri ran out to intercept Manyara as she returned.

“How went the hunt?”

“I let my quarry go. They were but children.”

Snorri laughed, “All the better! Hurry, we must catch them.”

Manyara shook her head and held her ground. “I will not deliver them into Selu Fyrmyor’s hands.”

“That is far from my intent,” Snorri said, slapping Manyara on the shoulder. “Besides, in his rage he has once more released us from his service.”

“Making payment in full this time?”

“Not yet.”

Manyara studied the gleam in Snorri’s eye with suspicion. “Come,” she said, turning toward the camp. “We will drive

him back into the tender care of the mountain bandits and pay ourselves out of whatever we can haul to the markets of Lep.”

“The most valuable of his possessions already makes its way to the markets of Lep by way of those clever children. Their archers were a diversion. They shot chaos into the camp, splitting the caravan, driving many still-burdened goats back up the mountain. I assumed the plan was to feed them to the bandits, but before I could illustrate the folly of retreat to Selu Fyrmyor, a lone child dashed through the confusion, plucked a sole parcel from the master’s own goat and fled, presumably to meet back up with his co-conspirators. This loss infuriated Selu Fyrmyor—a man we have both seen take greater loss with less fanfare.”

“What do you suspect the parcel was?”

Snorri’s moustache drew up into a great grin. “He spoke the name Banteteth.”

Manyara relieved Snorri of her shield and climbed atop one of the rocky outcrops. “They ran that way, probably toward Lep. I will join you there. And Snorri . . .”

“No harm will befall them!” he shouted as he ran off, leaving Manyara to loom upon the rock, silhouetted by the sun rising over the mountains.

Throughout the morning, Master Selu Fyrmyor made several attempts to ride out ahead of his caravan to pursue the thieves. He turned back each time he saw Manyara standing tall on the horizon, imposing herself between him and his prey. Finally, he decided to throw his trust in with numbers, and busied himself with putting his caravan back in order. Satisfied

that she had sufficiently delayed him, Manyara followed Snorri's path.

Lep rose from the scrublands into a crimson sunset. It was a giant mercantile heart beating upon the plain. The whole of the city was as a honeycomb. Each home in it was a single chamber baked out of clay that shared its neighbor's walls. At the center of the city, these chambers were piled five, six or even seven stories up. There were no doors or streets in Lep. Ladders led from the grasslands to the rooftops, from the rooftops to higher rooftops or through trapdoors into neighboring homes and from those homes to the stories below. Caravans poured spices, textiles and precious stones into the city, over the roofs, through the trapdoors and down into the homes, where they awaited someone willing to trade for them.

As Manyara climbed onto the first roof, a swarm of young men and women rushed out to offer their expert knowledge on what had recently passed over the walls into Lep. Manyara described a blonde-bearded man wearing a ridiculous hat and one woman grabbed her by the hand and led her to a roof that stood several stories above most of the city. The couple living there in the top chamber gave Manyara's guide a bundle of candles and then invited Manyara in for tea.

The room smelled richly of cinnamon and onions. Its six walls were adorned with tapestries, several from cultures yet unknown to Manyara. An old lady tended a small fire pit while her young companion arranged plush cushions for Manyara to sit on. Piled in each corner of the room were treasures of varying worth from all over the world. Among them, Manyara noticed the tankards Snorri had stolen from a galley in Daninuah.

Smoke from the cooking fires from the floors below rose through the chimney of trapdoors, making it impossible for her to see further down. And when she leaned over to try, the old woman brusquely clapped at her.

The young man smiled apologetically. "It is customary to peruse your host's inventory before dreaming of what lies below."

"I seek the man who traded those to you," Manyara replied, pointing to the tankards.

"These are fine mugs that have traveled far to join our collection. They are handsome indeed. It is easy to see why my wife would be so very fond of them. It may take quite a bit to convince her to part with them."

The old woman proffered Manyara a small wooden cup of tea and smiled.

Manyara shook her head. "I am only interested in the man who traded those to you. Is he here?"

"You are in luck. He is below you. We can swiftly settle on a fair exchange for those mugs and you will be on your way. How about that sword of yours?"

Manyara lay her hand on Well-Digger's hilt and the couple withdrew. The room swiftly became small and confining.

"If not your sword, than a fur perhaps," the young man suggested as he positioned himself between Manyara and the old woman, who began stomping on the floor in a regular pattern. Manyara raised a finger to her lips to shush the couple. Then, reaching to her belt with her sword-arm, Manyara pulled out her ridiculous conical cap and offered it to the young man.

His hands shook as he took the cap and turned it over examining it. Then he held up a single finger and nodded to the

tankards. Manyara rolled her eyes and crept to the hole leading to the next story down.

When she peered down into the smoke, she was met by the butt of a staff and a man shouting that he was closed. Ignoring him, Manyara shouted Snorri's name into the smoky depths. Consternation echoed among the unknown number of chambers between her and him.

"Manyara! I have your archers cornered in the room just below me. Have you anything left to trade?"

"No."

"What of your shield?"

"Snorri, the prize of Banteteth is valueless. Just a bauble thieves steal from one another for bragging rights."

"I know, but there is value in that! Imagine what price could be commanded for such a prize."

As they shouted back and forth, the indignation of their hosts and those living between took voice. The old woman began swinging a wooden ladle at Manyara, driving her back up to the roof, but not before Manyara bellowed for Snorri to meet her atop.

On the roof, the last wan light of the day sat heavy and blue in the sky. Across Lep, Manyara could see the glowing squares of orange and smoke that marked the entrance on every roof. One by one, the guides lit their candles and began calling out the wares they had recently seen to attract potential buyers. Their flickering lights against the coming night reminded Manyara of fireflies and the singsong of the guide's calls fell like lullabies onto Manyara's ears. Here upon this roof, beneath the first of the night's stars, the weariness of the journey ambushed her,

and Manyara came to rest, sitting against the wall of a chamber stacked even higher yet.

She burst into a deep, throaty laugh when Snorri, naked but for his conical hat and a gold and emerald bracelet, hopped out of the hole in the roof.

“I was but a room above the little thieves when I reached the end of my inventory. This,” he indicated the bracelet, “was the best I could bargain for with what meager means I had.”

“You still wear an idiot’s cap.”

Snorri smiled and sat down beside Manyara. “Yes, I am not yet ready to part with that.”

“You will need more clothes to go with it.”

“They will not remain below forever. When they surface, we can wrest the prize from them and then I shall be able to afford many silks and other fineries to drape upon my body.”

“There is no prize, Snorri. It is a myth. Years ago, in a night of drunken boasting, I told some sailors I had stolen a grand trinket from some local thieves and that I would be willing to part with it for a swift ship out of port. They wished to know more about it, so I invented the tale and paid for my passage with stone wrapped in a thong that I called the prize of Banteteth.”

Snorri fell to laughing. “If you were not damned before, may you be damned now, Manyara. I have sought this lie of yours thrice before in my wanderings and never been so close to it as now.”

“Oh, were I to be held accountable for every guileless rogue.”

“So then, why not tell me out on the plains?”

“You were too eager. And I was curious if the prize was still the same leather and stone.”

“Well,” Snorri said, standing up, “it seems that I have traded away all my possessions for a bracelet and a myth. Perhaps I can trade these for a meal and some wine.”

He peered to the city’s edge. There the silhouettes of Master Selu Fyrmyor and his remaining bearers crept onto the rooftops.

“Or perhaps I can trade them for a great deal more. How about one last hunt this evening?”

Manyara stood and handed her shield to Snorri, who called over one of the candle-bearing guides. “In a moment, I shall run through those travelers there.” He handed his bracelet to the guide. “After I do, you will sing of the prize of Banteteth along with your other wares. When they ask for it, point to me, out there on the plain.”

The guide studied the bracelet and nodded.

Manyara slipped into the darkness to await Snorri and her prey in the moonlit grasses just beyond the crossroads of Lep.

The Realms

You do not take up sword and spell to tag along with someone else's adventure. You do it to change the course of your destiny. To mold the world to your wants and desires.

Listed below are the stories, games, articles, and miscellanies in this issue that represent worlds available for you to craft your own adventures in. If you should so desire, you may take the characters, settings, and situations from any of these, create something new, and submit it to *Worlds Without Master*.

By default, any submission to *Worlds Without Master* is not be part of any shared world. Creators have the usual controls over their creative properties. The following options exist only for creators who expressly want to take part in this endeavor.

Additionally, the following agreements exist solely between the creators and *Worlds Without Master*, and do not govern the creators' rights in regards to any other publication.

The Free & Chaotic Realms

Anyone may submit material using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work as if it were their own as long as they also agree to make their work part of this Free & Chaotic Realms. This is as open as it gets, with the only curation being the *Worlds Without Master* submission process.

The Curated Realms

Material submitted using the characters, settings, situations

and any other part of this body of work will be sent to the original creator or the creator's designated curator for approval before being accepted by *Worlds Without Master*. If accepted, this new material is bound to that particular curated realm.

Other Shared Realms

Groups of creators who wish to find their own agreement on how to share their worlds are welcome to do so however they wish.

Edicts

Creators are welcome to make up a list of rules other creators must follow while using their works. These rules are set in stone. *Worlds Without Master* will not accept any work that appears to violate an applicable edict that is not also created by the original creator.

More about the realms policy can be found at:

www.Dig1000Holes.com/words/realms

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www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts