

Kohg vs. World

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Editor's Preface

I almost decided not to include this work in this compilation. As you will discover, the narrative is in a style still popular among fiction writers, which was a widely-accepted rhetorical style of the time but encourages exaggeration and guesswork to create a smooth tale. Beyond this, however, it leaves no room for an actual author. The only character present throughout is Kabeous Kohg, who has never been known to share her knowledge in any way; and even she is unconscious for parts of it.

No matter how uncertain its origins, however, the tale is generally accepted as true and so deserves inclusion.

Introduction

Somewhere there was battle. She could smell it in the air; the smell of fear, of rage, of confusion, of hurt and bleeding people. These were smells she liked, truth be told, but there was something different in war. In war, there was the smell of loss. Nobody wins a war; some people just loose more than others, that's all.

It may seem odd that she could smell a war thousands of miles away; for thousands of miles away from the war she was. Standing on a remote rocky crag, she was watching the sun set over the foothills of the Warm Ice Range. She was an especially striking woman to look upon—a bit too fit and athletic to meet the standard of beauty in vogue with the artists of her day, and anything but fashionably attired, but undeniably beautiful. Her noble pose on the crag overlooking the sunset was the sort of image illustrators dream of.

But smell the distant war she could, for no matter how striking her physique, no matter how erect her bearing, no matter how statuesque her features and wart-free her delicately modeled nostrils, there was no gainsaying that she was a witch. She would have put it differently, of course; she was *the* witch, Kabeous Kohg, the world famous bounty hunter, the undefeated, the inestimable. Might I add the proud and cocky snob? Yes, for it was so, but not without good reason; Kohg had never ever failed at anything she had attempted.

I say she had never failed at anything, but some would

argue with me. “What,” say these antagonists, “about the commission to find the medic and return him to his peers? Didn't she fail at that?” Her response to that very question, when pressed on the matter by her employers, was “there is a difference between an ongoing effort and a failure;” take it or or leave it as you like, but I think she has a point so I'll give it to her; she had never failed at anything.

Kohg vs. Malkh

Kohg turned from facing the war and the south to facing the lair of Maliutka Malkh and the north, though not without some trepidation. Kohg had no fear of war; she did not like it, true, but she was not afraid of it. She was, however, afraid of Malkh—not the paralyzing kind of fear that comes with irrationality, but the reasoned, intelligent fear of one who recognizes an equal with no love for her.

Some might be surprised such a dangerous and well-respected person as Kohg would feel fear at all. Kohg herself has said, and it bears repeating, “Only the simpleton feels no fear.” Kohg was undefeated precisely because she knew whom to fear and acted with wisdom and caution around them.

After staring into the distant north, Kohg reached to her side and drew a hitherto-invisible blade from a non-existent scabbard which hung always at her hip. She inspected it for a moment, then shrugged and extended it at arms length toward the distant center of Malkh's territory. After a moment's pause the blade shivered, showering golden sparks everywhere; then there was a burst of delightful rosemary-scented smoke and the sword shot out of sight, leaving behind a slender glowing golden thread. Kohg carefully tied one end of this thread to the crag on which she stood, and, grasping it firmly, leapt out into space, sliding along it with truly marvelous speed.

At the other end of the golden thread was the huge hollow mountain that was the primary residence of Maliutka Malkh. I have described Kabeous Kohg as being striking and statuesque, but I have no words to use when describing Malkh. Malkh, of course, is a dragon; but that

makes her sound so bestial and trite. . . .

First, let us describe Malkh's personality, for assuredly she has one. Malkh is, like Kohg, extremely confident and at ease with her power. No one seems to know how old she is, how many nations she has seen rise and fall, some through their own stupidity and others with a little direct help from her highness. Malkh has never had any trouble with knights, because any nation that lives near enough to her to provide them invariably finds it to their advantage to form a treaty with her; not only because this keeps them alive, but also because she is a very generous friend.

Malkh has a lot of hobbies. News was made a few years back about her newest hobby of golem construction and animation; however, any reasonably diligent search of the history of science will reveal that she has contributed meaningful insights to nearly every field.

But the most stunning thing about Malkh is her size. It is said that her eyeball is too large for a dozen strong men to lift and most architects cannot even imagine a room large enough to fit her body inside. Someone once claimed that there was a sea serpent longer than Malkh, so she went out and caught it, just to prove them wrong. Malkh is exceptionally vain.

Malkh, unlike Kohg, did not mind war. As long as it didn't get too out of hand and destroy the entire population, a little war was an excellent motivator for the scientific mind. However, like the world-famous bounty hunter sliding along a golden thread towards her home, there were things Malkh feared; and, ironically, Kabeous Kohg was one of them.

Malkh had been watching Kohg approach for some time. She guessed why she was coming; indeed, there had been little doubt in her mind since their last visit that Kohg would return sooner or later. She had to admit she admired that witch, puny mortal though she might be. It had been many millennia since she had seen someone as resourceful as Kohg.

Malkh sent one of her golems to escort Kohg inside. A cheep, puny golem; no need to risk an investment. Then she waited.

When Kohg got near the end of her thread she found the sword not lodged in the mountainside, as originally planned, but instead being held by a battered wooden statue of an adolescent boy. With a jerk she pulled herself up and free of the strand attached to its hilt, vaulting easily onto a ledge above and behind the statue. With the wooden stiffness of a shoddy spell, the statue turned and extended the sword, hilt first, to Kohg.

For just a moment Kohg stared at the statue, then she said, slowly in a loud, clear voice,

"Keep the sword, Maliutka. It was just a tool for getting here; I don't anticipate needing it again until I choose to leave."

For what seemed like an eternity, nothing happened. Then, with a quick, sudden motion the statue thrust the sword into its own chest and, using hands and feet equally, began scrambling up the mountainside off to the right of Kohg. Kohg rolled her eyes expressively, spat on the golem as it passed her, and then began climbing up the mountain behind it.

After a rather lengthy climb they came upon a small cave opening, into which the golem crawled without hesitation. Kohg waited until it had completely vanished from sight, then went in after it.

The cave appeared to be a ventilation shaft of some kind for Malkh's hall, extending some hundred yards into the mountain face where it opened up onto a small alcove off of the vast main chamber of the mountain. In this alcove Kohg found the golem, squatting on its haunches, as well as a comfortable armchair and a small table with fruit and baked goods on it. Directly in front of this seat, though some distance off to permit room for the intervening snout, were the huge golden eyes of Maliutka Malkh, the little empress.

Kohg did not hesitate; she settled herself comfortably in the chair, selected a particularly ripe piece of fruit from the table, and chomped away quietly, looking Malkh in the eyes the whole time.

It was Malkh who broke the silence, her deep booming voice echoing in the massive hall.

"A witch? Delicious. Didn't you learn your lesson last time you came?"

Kohg smiled, pausing for longer than was strictly necessary before replying.

"You taught so well, lizard, I hoped you could teach me a few more lessons, of my choosing."

"I don't let people choose the lessons they learn from me, Kohg."

"No? Then what if I suggest a topic and you pick the lesson."

Malkh glared at this, but said nothing, so Kohg continued.

"Been to Slodoop lately?"

"Slodoop? What would *you* know of Slodoop?"

"If I tell you, Malkh, won't I be impacting what lesson you teach me?"

Malkh let out a growl that shook the stone like a hammer on a symbol.

"What can I get out of a witch to make it worth my time?"

"What do you want?" asked Kohg, not unreasonably.

“I want to lock you up for a year without food or water for what you did last time you were here, you creep.”

Kohg bit thoughtfully into a savory roll, contemplating this idea. “How about for a week instead?”

“Never! At least a month.”

“Well... K, a month will do.”

“What? You mean you’ll actually agree to be locked up?”

“I already have, dearest, but in return you promised to teach me of Slodoop. Or is your short-term memory going in you old age?”

There was an ominous silence, then Malkh spoke in a rapid, hurried way.

“Slodoop is the bottom of the universe, the place planets go when they die. My first planet died and went there naturally, but this planet is being pulled down there by the topologists long before its time. Now TAKE HER AWAY!”

As Malkh bellowed the last sentence, out of the cave to Kohg’s rear and from some hidden ledge above the alcove’s mouth came a full dozen huge golems. Kohg offered no resistance, allowing them to take her into the depths of the cavern under the mountain and lock her up in a spacious stone cell.

Kohg vs. Smoot

The cell was entirely bare; just a smooth-walled air bubble in the rock of the mountain. It was bare, but it was not empty; lying curled in the center of the floor was the pathetic figure of a young woman.

This woman does not merit the kind of description that Kohg and Malkh merited. She was altogether an average kind of young woman, not plump but solidly built, not beautiful of features but not unpleasant to look at; perhaps she did look a bit more intelligent than normal, but it didn’t jump out at you or anything. The fact that she was in Malkh’s dungeon seemed quite out of place.

Kohg, however, did not appear confused at all. Laying back against the smoothly sloping wall, she addressed the woman in a calm, easy tone of voice.

“Hello, Samantha Smoot, didn’t expect to see you here.”

The woman awoke with a start and looked about her in confusion. Sighting Kohg, her confusion deepened.

“Master Kohg! Whatever are you doing here? Surely Malkh didn’t capture you the way she did me?”

“That depends on how she caught you, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, well that’s easy. I came here to ask her about the ruins Plug* and friends have been finding on the other

place.”

“Why ask Malkh?” Kohg asked, innocently.

“Well, I just sort of assumed, if she could teach Corky how to get there, she could also tell me about the place a bit.”

“She taught Corky?” Kohg asked, genuinely surprised and incredulous.

“Well, that’s what Corky said, but when I told Malkh that she denied it, and got mad at me when I insisted, calling me a liar and imprisoning me until I learn proper respect.”

“I hope you enjoy the place, Sam; I’ve never met a human capable of proper respect to a dragon. Having a human acknowledging their presence is demeaning, but being ignored by so menial a creature is insulting.”

“Oh, great.” Sam didn’t trust Kohg, but she also didn’t know any reason why she would lie to her. Besides, Malkh had seemed just the sort of random, capricious creature that might make such rules. “So, what do I do now?”

“That entirely depends on what you want to do.”

“Go home.”

“Then might I suggest this? If you will answer some questions for me, I will jeopardize my own escape in order to take you along. What do you say?”

Sam looked at the witch thoughtfully for a moment, then said, “Do you mind if I ask how you, the undefeatable, were defeated by Malkh and locked up here?”

“I was *not* defeated!” Kohg said in rage. “Malkh wanted me locked up; I wanted information from her. We made an agreement where we each allowed the other to get her will.”

“Questions about Plug’s place?”

Kohg didn’t answer, but it was evident to Sam that she had guessed correctly. “Then,” said she, “How about this. We each ask each other questions, round-robin. We keep going until one or the other of us refuses to answer a question. Whoever answered the last question wins. If you win, I remain where I am and you can escape on your own. If I win, you take me with you. Deal?”

“There will be no questions about personal history or how I do my stuff?”

“As long as it’s a general rule (you can’t ask me history or ‘how’s either), that sounds fine to me.”

Kohg glared at Mrs. Smoot, certain there was some trick behind this idea. She wasn’t exactly afraid of Sam, but she did respect her and knew she was too bright to make stupid decisions. Still, it sounded like a win-win situation. . . .

other minor characters; I have not included this in this compilation, for (hopefully) obvious reasons.

*In the original, an appendix was provided describing Plug and

“Let’s do it,” said Kohg. “What do you know about the ruins?”

“Just what Plug wrote to me; they are ruins of large cities, made of stone; they don’t seem to be from the same civilizations as each other based on architecture, and one of them is inhabited by turbo-pink armadillos.

“What information did Malkh tell you?”

“She told me that Slodoop is the ‘bottom of the universe’, the place planets go when they die, and her first planet went there.

“How does the imp send you letters?”

“That’s a ‘how’ question,” Sam said promptly, with a quiet smile.

“But not how *you* do things,” Kohg countered.

“Can I ask you how witches escape from Malkh’s dungeon?”

Kohg frowned, then said, “Point taken. Tell me about your political contact with the Socks.”

“He’s a man we call Sockie, a topologist you may have read about? Nice guy, pretty ignorant of everything. I’m not sure he even knows that his nation is at war, but he accepts our frap ray blasters and stuff with a polite disinterest and gives them to his firends, who use them in the war.

“Tell me enough to recognize Slodoop when I see it.”

“I think you have seen it. It’s the place you get your smord, where Tim, Tom, and Gordon are living.”

“I haven’t seen it, so that doesn’t answer my question.”

“What! Oh, come on. You can’t tell me that wasn’t what you wanted to know.”

“I don’t need to. You agreed to this game, it’s not my fault if you guessed wrong on your last move.”

Kohg glared at her for a moment, her rage ill-concealed and barely contained. This was not fair, and she resented being cheated on. Not that she had anything against cheating within the legal rules; she just preferred to be the cheater, not the cheated-against.

Sam, observing her anger, said, “Look, I can accept the answer if you want, but I don’t think you’ll feel comfortable with a win if your antagonist gave up a valid argument out of niceness.”

Suddenly, Kohg smiled. “No no, I’ll give you a full and complete answer. I’ve never seen the place, so I don’t know how to recognize it myself.

“Who all do you suspect knows how to get to Slodoop?”

Sam looked at the witch thoughtfully, then said calmly, “Sockie, Malkh, and my sister-in-law, plus some of the people whom they have trained.”

“I asked you for everyone you knew who could do it, not just three of them.”

“And I told you everyone. I know of no one else who can go there, besides those I just stated; the three teachers

and some of their pupils.”

Kohg was mad. Yet another technically-in-the-rules but thoroughly unsatisfying move. Still, she had agreed to the game. . . .

“Alright,” she said after a pause, “I guess I have to accept the answer. What is your next question?”

“I don’t have any more questions right now,” Sam said.

“Aha!” said Kohg, seeing a chance to get some of her own back at this technical nightmare of a girl. “You are refusing to ask a question and violating the rules we agreed to!”

“No,” said Sam thoughtfully, “I don’t think so. I just need some time to think up a good question to ask you. Maybe a few days, a week maybe. . . . There was no time constraint in the original rules, you’ll remember.”

“You can’t just keep me here all day, waiting for you to ask a question!”

“Oh, no, heaven forbid I keep you against your will! You can always forfeit and leave at any time, but then of course you loose, and I go with you. . . .

“But I can see that that isn’t very nice to you. No, if you are in such a hurry, I can forfeit and let you win, provided you promise to take me back to my shop on your way out.”

Kohg was truly angry now. Sam might *call* it letting Kohg win, but it certainly felt more like a loss to her. . . . Then, suddenly, she realized the silver lining. If she took Sam back to her shop, she would have to find out where the shop was, and that would mean she could—talk—to Corky.

Turning to Sam with a smile, she said,

“I’ll do it. I’ll take you to your shop if I win.”

Sam got to her feet and began pacing back and forth in an overwrought way. Finally, she threw up her hands and exclaimed, “I give up! This game is just too hard for me. You win.” Then, in a more calm voice, “I thought you might like a show. . . . Let’s go home.”

The trip out was interesting, even exciting, to the participants, but not very noteworthy. Kohg used incantations to get them out of binds when they arose, and the rest of the time they walked or jogged along. It turned out to be a pretty short trip, what with Kohg teleporting them significant portions of the way and the fact that SIGS laboratory was fairly close to the warm ice range.

The end of the journey was not so bland, however. They found the SIGS warehouse without difficulty, but getting in was not as easy; Sam had lost her key on the journey, and no one was home. The place was very well warded and protected from incantations, so Kohg found the door quite difficult to bust. When they finally did

get into the place, there was a note from Yolk waiting for them. It read,

Sis,

My wife and I have gone to visit Sockie. We may be there for a while, a month or two I guess.

Yolk

p.s. The halibut sausage was starting to smell, so I threw it out.

“Did you know about this?” Kohg demanded of Sam.

“No, I enjoyed Malkh’s hospitality for quite a long time. I suspect they decided on this trip some weeks ago.”

Kohg gave Sam a dirty look and then, without another word, turned and stalked out of the building.

Kohg vs. the Sock

It has been observed by many writers that the Socks live in a desert. “Desert” covers a wide variety of sins; anything from vast plains scattered with scrub and withered yellow bushes to bone-dry wind-sculpted canyons of vivid pink rock or unending featureless sand oceans. One thing they all share, though, is a deserted aspect; in a desert you are alone with the world, such as it is.

To Kohg, as she approached the Socks, it seemed that never was there a place less deserving the title of “desert” than the featureless miles of sand and rock surrounding Sockville. She could scarcely move without bumping into some gaggle of idiots swanking about in ugly uniforms, all eager to pick a fight with anyone not claiming undying allegiance to some bogus ideology created by the heralds to encourage their constituents.

Naturally, Kohg killed them if they annoyed her. And they all annoyed her.

Thus it was that, without noticing it, she killed the big sock himself. It was only after she had reduced him to rubble that she noticed he was the man she had been seeking; why he was outside the city she could not say, but it was imperative that he *not* be dead.

Fortunately, Kohg was a witch. Death was not a permanent arrangement with her around; there were any number of ways to bring back a fellow back from the dead. The method Kohg selected was well-suited to her purposes—easy, safe, and temporary. The hardest part was that it required the dark of night, so first she had to envelop herself in blackness. This accomplished, she summoned forth the mind of her deceased annoyer.

“Hey, why can’t I see?” cried out the spirit in Kohg’s voice, for she had summed it.

“Because it is night,” replied Kohg.

“No, no, it is not night. Not now; it is nearly noon.”

“Yes, but not here. Here it is dark as night.”

“Why? Have you charmed the sun or something? Never trust a witch, me mother always told me.”

“I have not summoned you to answer your questions. How do you get to Slodoop?”

“What do you mean, ‘summoned me?’ I was already here, I’m certain of it. I came out on my own to see if I could catch Ignatius before he got too far.”

“Ignatius Smoot?”

“Yes, that’s him; he was here to visit me last week. Or was it the week before?”

“And you really think you can just go walk out and find him two weeks after he left?”

“Oh, it’s alright. He’s a friend. He won’t mind me dropping in. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be on my journey again; the distance’s not getting any shorter while I’m talking to you.”

“You can’t go anywhere. I have summoned you back from death, and you are entirely at my mercy.”

“Mercy? Of a witch? Well, now, I might not get out much, but I know enough to know there’s no such thing.”

“I will give you plenty of mercy if you will answer a few questions.”

“Hey, is that a rabbit I see over there? Oh, no, I guess not. It’s so hard to tell in the dark. . . .”

“What *are* you talking about?”

“What, can’t you see them?”

“Look, just tell me how to get to Slodoop and quit wasting my time.”

“Slodoop? Is that some tavern or something?”

“No,” said Kohg with admirable calm, “it’s the land you visit to chat with motens and get smord and all that.”

“Nobody chats with motens. They don’t chat, period.”

“Yes, but HOW DO YOU GET THERE?” Kohg was losing her patience with Sockie’s ghost.

“Well, you just twitch like—hey, what happened to my hands?”

“You don’t have hands anymore. You’re dead.”

“What do you mean, I don’t have hands anymore?”

“You’re a ghost. You don’t have a body at all. Like I said, I summoned you back from the dead.”

There was a moment of silence while Sockie internalized this fact. “Well, I don’t know how to describe it if I don’t show you. . . .”

With a sigh, Kohg released the incantation. Immediately the darkness disappeared and once more she was standing in the noon-day sun of a sweltering sea of sand.

For those of my readers not practiced in necromancy, I should probably observe that it is relatively safe to raise a mind without its body and fairly easy to control a body without its mind, but it is quite difficult and more than

slightly dangerous to raise a body and mind together. Dead people have a nasty habit of running amok. Nevertheless, Kohg deemed it worth the effort, and after a series of incantations and preparations the Sock arose. As undead all look pretty much the same (pale and spooky, if you haven't seen one yet) I will skip over the description of the result.

"How do you get to Slodoop?" asked Kohg.

"Like this," said the monster, and Kohg disappeared.

Kohg vs. Nature

I first described Kohg on top of a stoney crag, and called her striking. I then saw her among baren mountains, inside rock caverns, at a warehouse and in a desert, and never had cause to second-guess our description. Now, for the first time, I see her in a setting that does not show her in her best light.

The problem with Kohg's appearance, and yes, I do insist it is a problem, is that she is undeniably intimidating. This did not matter much in stark and efficient surroundings, but (by the Sock's good graces) she was no longer in stark and efficient surroundings. Instead, she was standing in a singularly beautiful woodland glade. The afternoon sun danced and sparked amidst the delicate spring foliage, deep moss and small flowers carpeted the ground, the trunks of the beeches rose like silver pillars all around a gurgling brook of crystal-clear water which fell laughingly into a small, clear pool at her feet. Altogether, it was the very place for the most delicate and lovely of fairies, not for the firm, impressive fierceness of Kohg.

I use the phrase "fierceness" advisedly; Kohg was as mad as mad can be. She had not turned the Sock into a Lich merely to be punted aside by the fool when he awoke. She could feel the residuals of the spell he had unleashed upon her, and was not about to let the corpse get away with its impertinence.

Reaching out with her mind, she was just about to untangle the spell and wrench herself back to the desert when, with a smile, she realized a better strategy. Uttering a single word, she released the magic and walked away, very pleased with herself.

Unfortunately, the direction she picked to walk was obstructed by the pool of water alluded to above, and a sudden wetting, coupled with the chill spring air, brought back all the anger we first described.

I am aware that Kohg is about to appear at her worst; there is not use denying it; we are about to see her bad side. Kohg is a very proud woman; she likes to be right, to be in charge, and to win. But you cannot be right, be in charge, or win unless you have someone else there to

assert things to, boss around, or conquer.

For the present, at least, she was completely denied subservient associates.

Kohg's first battle that day was with that particularly picturesque pool. As I said, she walked into it upon realizing how to best the Sock, bringing back her anger; additionally, she walked into it thrice more in the next several hours. Right after her first wetting she lept backwards, colliding solidly with the smooth trunk of a mighty beech, and stumbled right back in again. After that she walked off into the woods, only to trip over a root two hours later and find herself lying face-down in the same pool.

In rage she detonated the root and vaporized the pool, which, of course, hurt neither the brook nor the tree. Then she cast a spell that pointed a perfectly straight path in the direction she had chosen for herself and set out into the woods again.

After several hours of travel, night began to fall. She was just trying to decide if she would rather continue through the night or wait it out when she came into a small glade and saw, before her astonished eyes, the very same pool.

Now she really lost her patience. After a muttered oath she turned the entire pool to ice and, lifting it from its bed, hurled it some little distance into the forest. This, unfortunately, left her standing in the bed of the pool, which immediately began refilling, and she once more got quite wet.

Kohg is not called undefeatable for nothing. Enraged at the impertinence of water in flowing downhill, she summoned fire and sent it snaking up the stream bed. Billows of steam filled the darkening sky as every twist and turn of the brook dried out—including a few trees it wound around. As you know, drying out trees with flame is... well, anyway, to be blunt, the stream was replaced with a forest fire.

Some forests are designed to catch fire every few decades; the trees in them are used to this, and the forest re-grows without much difficulty. Beech forests are not in this category. Beech trees grow in moist areas, and fires are rare in the extreme. Once started, however, a forest fire is a forest fire, no matter what kind of tree is burning, and even for a witch a fire of that magnitude is dangerous.

It is odd to report that, as Kohg realized what she had unintentionally started, she smiled. Fire! Fire was something Kohg liked; it was powerful, beautiful, intimidating. she was no more immune to it than anyone else, of course, but she was levelheaded and resourceful. With a few quick motions and incantations she had excavated for herself a small burrow and covered herself with several

feet of loose soil.

For perhaps an hour she lay there, listening to the roar of the flame above and magically replenishing her air supply. It was irksome, no doubt, to lay there instead of progressing on her journey, but not as bad as marching along for a full day without making a single inch of progress. Not but that she should have expected such a characteristic in a place the Sock made a habit of frequenting.

Once the flame was gone, she unburied herself and once more gave a simple incantation; this one pointed her the shortest path back to the small charred crater that was all that was left of her hated pool. She then began picking her way through the ash and debris away from the cursed spot.

As Kohg moved through the burnt remains of the forest she could not help but enjoy herself; the residuals of such obvious power, coupled with the startling resilience of those few things that survived filled her with a quiet sense of well-being. Which was good, for her journey was exceedingly frustrating in other ways. The indicator that pointed the closest way to the remains of her burrow swung about pretty freely, forcing her to continually adjust her course merely to keep from approach the place again. The night air was exceedingly chilly, and bits of ash blew up into her eyes and nose continually. If it weren't for the appreciation Kohg had for power, it is doubtful she could have stood the ordeal.

Nonetheless, Kohg walked all night long, coming out of the burnt zone into a marshy grassland just in time to see the sun rise. Between the charred remains of the forest and the wetland before her was a tall but not overly steep drop, and as the sun rose to her back Kohg made use of the altitude this bluff afforded her to survey the land below.

At first, all looked still and uninhabited, and Kohg began to wonder how she would ever find a giant in a land not only spatially warped beyond compare and completely devoid of helpful life. Then she noticed a large object skimming through the air perhaps a mile away. What exactly the object was she couldn't tell; it looked almost like the hull of some great ship; but that it was not natural she was certain, and that meant there was some intelligent power behind it. When you are lost in a strange land, little is more attractive than a sign of intelligent life.

But how was she to travel the intervening mile and make contact with this unknown intelligence? No elegant or safe solution presented itself, so Kohg determined to resort to a crude but effective tactic instead. Mustering all her power, she uttered a quick incantation and, with a deafening explosion and a mild sense of nausea, found herself falling freely some hundred yards above the once-

distant vessel.

Kohg vs. Motens

I do not profess to know what witches are made of, but I confess my doubts that it can be the mere flesh enjoyed by more ordinary persons. In the brief seconds Kohg was in the air before contacting the metallic bridge of the ship beneath her she did nothing. She did not cast any spells; she did not twist, cat-like, to land in a favorable position; she did not even open her eyes. The fact of the matter is, the distance had been greater than she had thought and she found the nausea quickly building after the teleportation until she passed out while still high in the air. Unconscious, she landed on her right shoulder blade, bounced once, and came to a rest on ship's deck without taking any apparent damage.

This was, of course, a moten ship, and I give it as my opinion that the only reason Kohg survived was the very fact that she did pass out. Motens are extremely civil and easygoing people—on their terms only. They do not take kindly to intrusion, nosiness, or displays of anger or force. However, the appearance of an unconscious witch exploding out of the sky and falling on their ship so nonplused the motens that, instead of blasting her to tiny bits (as is their wont with unwelcome visitors), they merely gathered around to give her a look.

Perhaps I should give a brief description of motens, as it is possible that my reader is somehow unaware of them. Motens are humanoid in build, a little shorter than humans on average, and so extraordinarily skinny that no human could dream of looking like one. One poet once described them as being “waspish men, made of brown threads just thick enough to remind you they really exist;” a somewhat colorful description, but apt enough. They traverse the sky in large grey metal barges trading smord for pineapples, dumping hardsmord on cities they pass, and casually destroying anyone who tries to discover anything else about them.

How long Kohg lay on their deck I cannot even guess; moments or months, I have no information on that matter at all. However, I can tell you that when she started to wake up some sixth sense, developed over years of being constantly in deadly circumstances, told her, before her mind was even awake, that she was surrounded by hostile forms. Thus, instead of rising with a yawn and a stretch, such as you or I might, she went from lying, fully asleep, on the deck of the ship to being fully awake, leaping to her feet and shouting out one of her most powerful spells more rapidly than even the motens could respond to.

Of the next several seconds I can give you few details.

The adjectives ‘fast,’ ‘loud,’ ‘bright,’ and ‘deadly’ spring to mind, but none of them begin to hint at the spectacular battle that took place. I do not believe any of the participants died, but not from lack of trying; the damage from deflected spells and dodged detonations turned the young forest below into a charred crater field, and even the ship—yes, the moten ship itself—gained a number of cracks and dents unheard-of in craft of that kind.

After only eleven seconds, this inconceivable battle ended as suddenly as it began by Kohg catapulting herself over the edge of the ship. Her departure seemed to satisfy the motens, who sent no thunderbolts screaming after her. Thus it was that Kohg became the first and only being on record to survive a conflict with motens.

Kohg vs. Kohg

However robust the stuff witches are composed of may be, it is clear that that do not enjoy the sudden stop at the end of a good fall any more than anyone else. Despite the fact that Kohg had just expended more magical energy than a more ordinary spell-caster might use in a month of continual activity, she gave one more incantation before she hit the ground, filling the crater towards which she plummeted with a thick pink foam. After falling into this peculiar pool of her own design she crawled to the edge of the crater and lay there, to exhausted to move.

It was there—lying prone, caked with ash, bruised, burnt, bloody, and completely enveloped in a gooey pink sap—that Tim, Tom, and Gordon found her several hours later. Having been attracted by the noise and light of the sunrise battle, they had left their breakfast at once and piped for four hours to reach the scene of so impressive a spectacle. After arriving in a field of fresh craters they had spent some time searching for clues of their origin. At last they were rewarded with at least some kind of clue: a crater with a small pool of pink sap in it and the all-but-dead-looking form of Kohg at its rim.

Despite appearances, however, Kohg was neither dead nor even unconscious. The instant the boys were close enough she said to them, in a quiet but distinct tone,

“Will you get me a mango.”

“What?” said Tom, who was closest.

“A mango, boy, a mango,” said Kohg with evident irritation. “Get me a mango.”

“A mango?” said Tim, confused.

“Exactly. Precisely. A mango. Go get me one.”

“From where?”

“I really don’t care,” said Kohg, wincing slightly in pain. “Hurry!”

“What she needs,” said Gordon thoughtfully, “isn’t a mango so much as it is a medic.”

“Yeah,” said Tom, “but there’s only one medic around here, and he’s much too big to ride a pipod.”

“She’s not, though,” said Gordon.

“No, but she’s much too ill.”

“I am *not* ill!” snapped Kohg, and then immediately broke out in deep, wrenching coughs which did little to help her audience believe her.

“Tim, Tom,” said Gordon (needlessly, since they were the only ones to address), “If we put the lady on my pipod, could the two of you steer it between your own and get her back to the city?”

“What about you?” asked Tim.

“I’ll wait here; I’ll be fine as long as you bring the pipod back before dark.”

“We can’t just leave you here!” objected Tom.

“Well we certainly can’t leave this invalid here either,” returned Gordon, speaking over the objections of Kohg, which were effectively drowned out by her own coughing anyway.

And so it was decided. After a bit more discussion and a lot of trouble, they finally got Kohg settled on Gordon’s pipod, which was held firmly between Tim and Tom’s as they zipped off back to the city. With a lazer slug in each hand and Tom’s cloak wrapped about his legs, Gordon sat on the edge of the crater to await their return.

By the time they reached the city Kohg had settled down enough to even be some help guiding her own pipod. She still wished to goodness the boys had just given her a mango at once! Still, they were taking her directly to her target, so she was not all that displeased with the outcome; just a little annoyed and more than a little enfeebled.

When they arrived at the city Kohg had to admit it was pretty impressive. It was huge, for one thing, and built entirely of one style and one material. There were no corners, as the buildings were rounded even where they met the streets, themselves well-flagged and neatly cambered to keep water from accumulating in them. The very emptiness of the place stood in marked opposition to its very livability.

They found the giant flagging a large open square, Plug the imp sitting in the dirt by his side.

“Hiya, boss!” called out Tom as they arrived. “Got a sick lady for ya!”

The giant turned from his work. “A lady?” said Plug. “Woah! Tom, Tim, got any mangoes?”

“Mangoes? No, why?”

But the giant did not stay to reply, instead taking off through the city at a dead run, the imp sprinting to keep

up, yelling as he went “Ho! Wait up! Hi! Wait for me! Where are you going? Slow up! Wait for me,” and so forth.

Tim turned to Tom. “Should we go get Gordon?”

“Shouldn’t we follow the giant?”

“Why? He’s just going fruit-gathering. It can wait.”

“But what about the lady?”

Tim glanced at Kohg lying prone on the ground, then lowered his voice to a whisper. “I don’t know anything about medicine, Tom, but if a medic runs away from an invalid on a flimsy excuse, might it be wise to reduce our own exposure to her a bit?”

After a moment of confusion, Tom caught on. “You mean she’s contagious?”

Tim nodded.

“Let’s go,” replied Tom.

Kohg vs. the Giant

Shortly after had Tim and Tom zipped out of sight (with Gordon’s pipod strapped to Tom’s back) when the giant returned at a dead run, a fresh mango clenched in his fist (rather harder than was good for it, I fear). Skidding to a halt by the side of Kohg he ripped a chunk of mango off the fruit and stuffed it into her mouth.

It took very little time for the fruit to have the desired effect. Within seconds Kohg was strong enough to sit up and, after she had finished eating the mango, she was quite strong and healthy again, though still well below her normal power.

About the time Kohg finished the mango Plug came running up, panting hard and muttering curses on the giant. Clambering up onto the giant’s shoulder he got his first steady look at Kohg.

“Kabeous Kohg!” he gasped in surprise. “Whatever are you doing here?”

“So you know this witch?” asked Plug, in behalf of the giant.

“Of course I do. This is Kabeous Kohg, the world-famous bounty hunter.

“Ah, of course. But we aren’t in the world anymore.

“What do you mean? It looks like a world to me.

“What are you doing here, and why did you unleash a few dozen man-years of magic into the sky this morning?” This last question was addressed by the giant to Kohg, though of course it was also part of Plug’s monologue.

“Had a little run-in with the motens, and your boys came and brought me here,” replied Kohg.

“How did you come to be in this land at all, though? Its not like a bounty hunter to abandon her land.”

Kohg smiled.

“I came for you.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have. It was like you, of course, but really, I could never make you happy.”

“What *are* you talking about?” growled Kohg.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were trying to flirt with me.”

“Flirt with you? Boy, I don’t flirt with anything. What I come for I get, and the rest I ignore completely. I have come to get you this time because I’m on commission to return you to a few friends of yours at the Med. & Mag. Soc. who took an interest in your disappearance and decided to apply to the only fail-safe way of getting stuff done there is.”

“Ah. And what is that ‘fail-safe way’, if it’s not asking to much?”

“Me.”

When the giant first hit the news stands, it was speculated whether he could laugh. The prevailing medical opinion was that laughter depends on a diaphragm, and that the giant, lungless as he was, could not engage in diaphragmic actions. I am in the position to state that these speculations were wrong, for laugh the giant did; quiet, polite chuckles, not vocalized by Plug, but clearly laughs.

Kohg, not enjoying laughter at her expense, got mad. Mustering a bit of magic to aid her, she grabbed onto the tracer she had attached to the Sock earlier and uttered a portive incantation. This did not have the desired effect, however, since the giant recognized the structure of the spell and, reaching out with his own mind, slammed the whole mess down, smashing it to smithereens around Kohg’s feet.

“Not so fast, witch,” Plug muttered in behalf of the giant. Then, knowing and fearing the power of Kohg he added “Don’t fight her, giant! Kohg always wins.”

Without a word, Kohg gathered her powers and began again. She was more careful this time, tying up her loose ends and anchoring as much of the incantation to the lich, and thus the other world, as she could. The giant, realizing the skill of the caster, began to warp and twist the spell, pulling as much into its realm of influence as he could. Perhaps Kohg could transport a giant, an imp, and herself; but could she also transport a dozen acres of stone buildings and paved streets at the same time? He was satisfied that even Kabeous Kohg, world-famous and undefeated though she was, couldn’t defy the limits of her power to that extent. He also knew that if she even slightly loosened her nets to release some of the stuff he was cramming in he would be able to grab the hole and rip his own way out.

Slowly Kohg came to realize that the giant was correct in these assumptions. As she began to pull, she felt barely

a shimmer in the landscape around her. It was as if she were trying to swim with an anvil tied to her feet. Still she pulled and she tugged until . . . the lich noticed. Both the giant and Kohg noticed its presence the moment it began to get involved, and instinctively both fought it, but to no avail. A pocket of desert sand appeared in the air above them and, with the entirety of space twisting and warping to allow it, slowly merged with the land on which they were standing until the square in the giant's new city became the border of a vast sandy desert.

Once this transformation was complete, both the lich and the witch released their holds on the magic, but the giant did not. Seizing the remains of the spell with his whole self, he continued the twisting motion that the lich had begun, warping the ground it was standing on into a little ball until, with a visual pop, it was detached from the land around it. Not satisfied there, he blasted the rest of the Lich and Kohg's magic into a propulsive shove, sending the ball of land far out away from the land on which they stood.

Unused to such magical exertion, which had been denied him for so many years, the giant sank to the ground, too weak to move. As he had been using Kohg's energy to perform this trick, she too found herself weakened and faint, and collapsed in a heap on the sands. Plug, finding himself alone in a desert with two unconscious magicians, stepped back a few feet into the shade of one of the giant's buildings and began chanting poems to himself.

Kohg vs. Boots

When Kohg recovered her senses she found herself lying alone on a sand dune, staring up at the stars, and shivering convulsively. It was apparent that the giant had decided not to revive her again, for she was so weak she found it difficult to stand, let alone cast any useful incantations.

Turning onto her stomach, Kohg began to slowly crawl toward the city, knowing that beyond it somewhere in the forest were the mangoes she craved. She had not dragged herself far, however, before she found herself surrounded by armed soldiers. From her vantage point it was painfully obvious that these were the boots, not the socks, and with a groan she pushed herself back into a sitting position and waited.

It took a bit for the boots to make a move. There were a lot of them—probably several hundred in all, thought it was hard to tell in the moonless night—and they stood with the silent discipline of a well-trained fighting force.

"Kabeous Kohg?" one of them said at last.

"Here," she replied weakly.

"Where is Ti'aa'öö-pâ Schtsienso?"

"The giant's got him in his pocket."

"Our trackers say that Schtsienso was here this evening."

All Kohg said to this was "hmm."

"Where is he now?" asked the soldier.

"Like I said, the giant pocketed him."

"There's no giant near here," said the man.

"Is there a forest near here?"

"No."

"Then what's that?" Kohg said, inclining her head toward the forest.

"You're trying to distract us," said the soldier matter-of-factly. "It won't work."

"Suit yourself. But beyond those deserted stone buildings is a forest, and in the forest (or maybe in the buildings, I don't know) is a giant."

There was a moment of private consultation between the soldier and one of his aides, then the soldier turned to the witch again.

"Why were you lying in the sand here?"

"Because I'm too weak to stand."

"*You?* Yeah, right."

"Quit rattling, barmy," said Kohg in obvious anger. "I got in a fight with a demilich and it took a lot of energy to get rid of it."

"Demilich?"

"Like a zombie with magic, but a bit more powerful than Malkh." This was an exaggeration, of course, but also a common idiom in certain circles. Apparently not the the soldier's circle, though.

"Nothing's more powerful than the dragon," protested the earnest one.

"No, not anymore," Kohg replied with a smile.

"You beat it?"

"I *am* Kabeous Kohg."

"We could beat you right now if we wanted," said the soldier, not defiantly but more thoughtfully, as if to himself.

"Even pretending that were true," Kohg said slowly, "what would it get you? One more corpse for the sands to cover, that your deed may be forgotten?"

"Could you tell us where you've placed Schtsienso?"

"See previous statement, boy. Truth doesn't change overnight."

"This is your last warning, Kabeous. Either you help us out or we'll have to kill you."

"Such pettiness!" sighed Kohg. "Surely you realize that threatening and violence only make enemies, no friends?"

"Never thought I'd hear a *bounty hunter* say that."

"Can you suggest a source that would know better?"

“Hey!” yelled a new voice, emitting from somewhere high overhead. “What’s this desert doing here?”

“Tim, did you get us lost again?”

“Uh, guys?”

“What?”

“There’s an army down there.”

“Whoa!” came a rapidly-approaching voice. “Heads below!” And, with no further warning, a young man on a pipod fell to the sands right next to Kabeous Kohg. Kohg recognized the newcomer as Gordon, who had sacrificed his own pipod to save her earlier, and decided that he would be proud to do so again. Unfortunately, she lacked the strength to take the pipod by force, so she settled for a secondary plan instead.

“Gordon!” she hissed. “Get out of here and go find me a mango.”

“A mango?”

“Gordon, are you OK?” called a voice from above.

“Yes, a mango!” replied Kohg. “Hurry or they’ll snag you!”

“Okay,” said Gordon, and with a tight spiral rose ten feet from the ground and zipped over the heads of the army.

Cries of “Net him!”, “Good toss!”, and “He’s getting away!” rose from the soldiers, but it was soon evident that the good tosses were not good enough and that Gordon had escaped capture.

“Look out Tom,” said a voice from on high, “I think the army tried to net Gordon.”

“He flew off to the north,” said Kohg as loud as she could.

“Know the recent visitor, Kohg?” asked the soldier. “Maybe think they’ll be good enough to return and save you?”

“I didn’t realize there was anything for them to save me from,” Kohg replied, “except hunger, that is. Those were the kitchen crew of the giant who took your precious Socky.”

“Kitchen crew?”

“Yeah, kitchen staff, cooks, general messenger boys. I asked them to find me some real food.”

“Feeling hungry?” asked the soldier, evidently trying to sound innocent.

“Not really, no,” replied Kohg truthfully. “I just thought that perhaps if I sent them away for a bit you could ready a few pipods in your own force and follow them to the giant after they make the delivery.”

The soldier looked at her skeptically. “You’re lying to me,” he said.

“Could be. Not about the giant though.”

“How am I to believe that?”

“Look, if I had wanted to get rid of you with a lie I would have told you that I had met the head Sock and that, in my weakened state, I had ported him a few hundred miles south where I hoped he would remain until I gained the strength to face him. Making up a story like a giant who put him in a pocket is a rather strange way to accomplish anything of personal value.”

“So what am I to believe then? You never do anything out of altruism.”

“Why not cover all your bases? Keep an eye on me, get a group ready to pursue the lads when they return, send some scouts out to search for footprints...”

The soldier didn’t respond.

“If you do send scouts, get them ready fast,” urged Kohg. “The lads should be here soon.”

Never was Kohg more correct. Even as she spoke, three pipods zipped over the army searching for their quarry. One of them, hearing Kohg’s voice, wheeled near her and dropped a juicy mango right into her lap.

“Well?” said Kohg to the soldier.

“Hurry! After them!” he yelled. As he yelled, Kohg took as large a bite of mango as she dared.

“Now, if you’ll listen to me,” said Kohg around her mango, mostly talking to keep the soldier from getting mad that she was eating, “this is what you’ll do. The giant isn’t far away, but it is in the forest, and your army doesn’t understand forest warfare. Keep the scouts circling the giant; don’t lose him, but also don’t attack him right off. He’s pretty friendly if approached; try to get a dignitary to go speak with him and find out what he’s done with the Sock.”

“Dignitary?”

“Yeah, you know. A major general, regional governor, someone who has the clout a giant expects in his audiences. I would ask him myself, but I’m not feeling my best.” As Kohg said this she finished the last bite of mango.

The next few minutes were spent with Kohg pretending to resist the idea of talking with the giant and the soldier becoming more and more convinced that such a personage really existed. Kohg also spun a spell she could use to latch onto the giant without the advance warning he had used to foil her last time.

Thus it was that, when the scouts returned with the giant himself in tow, Kohg, though surprised, was prepared. Getting close to the giant without being noticed by him was easy; the head soldier had the giant brought to her. Once the giant was in range, she triggered her spell. With such a long distance to go, there was quite the explosion in the area; Ah, well, Kohg had no love for the boots anyway. Armies are expendable, after all.

That's what war is about. She just hoped Plug would survive; she liked the imp, for some reason.

Kohg vs. *Proceedings*

This spell was not the same instantaneous portaling Kohg had used to reach the moten ship. Instead, knowing she had hundreds of miles to go, she had picked a slower spell that gave her plenty of time in transit to think. And the more she thought, the more she realized that she did not have the energy to make the whole trip. Either she would have to cut the spell halfway and end up in the middle of nowhere with an enraged giant, or she would have to drop the giant and continue without him. It was this second option, after adding a nerve-bind to her cargo, that Kohg chose.

It was with a deafening explosion Kohg appeared outside The City, creating a crater that later became the The City Pool, though that is not important to this tale. After brushing off the The City guard who came to inquire into the crater, Kohg made her way without hesitation to the headquarters of the Med. & Mag. Soc.

Per the president set in the famous *City Planners vs. Med. & Mag. Soc.*, I cannot give a description of the headquarters. All I can do is state that, after dealing with a few secretarial folk, Kohg found her way in to the executive office, where she interrupted a meeting of the executive board.

"It's the witch!" said Dr. Spanthavin, rising from his seat.

"Ah, it's you, the Gobarian," replied Kohg with a touch of disappointment in her voice. "I thought the board elections were last spring."

"So they were, but—"

"Then what are you doing here? Where is the new director of the board?"

"There is no *new* director of the board. I was reelected with ease."

"Humans," muttered Kohg to herself. "The most irrational of species. However," she continued in a more normal tone, "that is neither here nor there. I have come to collect my payment."

"You have found the giant?" asked a bald man to Dr. Spanthavin's left.

"Found and retrieved. I left him outside due to the difficulty of carrying a giant around The City."

"Is he healthy and alive?"

"Too much so for his own good."

"Where did you find him?"

"That information was not part of my contract, and will cost you extra, though he would probably tell you

himself if you asked him."

"Where did you leave him exactly?"

"Seven and a half miles north of Gött."

"What!" screamed Dr. Spanthavin, obviously angry. "You come asking for payment when your task is several *hundred* miles shy of completion?"

"Are you questioning my integrity, little man?"

Spanthavin didn't respond at once, so the bald man did instead. "We have little reason to trust you, master."

"I don't care about your trust, man! read the contract we signed. I have fulfilled it to the letter."

"Um, didn't you agree to bring the giant here?"

"Read the contract. 'I, the undersigned Master Kabeous Kohg, agree to hunt down and locate the above-described giant and return with him from his present location, unharmed if not dead upon discovery, reporting to the headquarters of the Society to collect payment upon the completion of this task.' I hunted him down and returned with him from Slodoop to this country. I have reported to you as requested. I now request my payment, as agreed upon."

"You haven't brought him back with you, though!" protested Spanthavin. "You left him behind!"

"It is my opinion as the society lawyer," chimed in another man, "that she is legally correct. You should never have signed a contract without my prior approval, but you are bound by this one nonetheless."

"Don't worry, Spanthavin," added the bald man. "I'll go retrieve the giant from Gött myself, if you really want him here."

"You actually believe she has done what she said? Come on! For two years she has been completely incommunicado; the last letter the giant gave us implied he was marching to his doom in the Boot-Sock war; and now she pops up, without warning, claims the giant is safely out of reach, and you just assume she is telling the truth? Simpleton!"

"I think," said Kohg thoughtfully, "that I will turn you into a gibbon." And she did. "Now, if you'll give me my payment I will withdraw."

The bald man was only too eager to comply, and, with the happy realization that she was once more without pending tasks, Kohg walked out out in search of better company.