



MD Jackson
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FROZEN DOOM

A New Ka Sirtago and Poet story by
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Ka Sirtago and Poet face a treacherous path through snow-covered mountains and a monstrous secret!

The chill wind bit exposed flesh. Poet gathered his fur cloak closer about himself. He regarded his companion, Sirtago, huddled on the opposite side of the small refuge they had found.

Sirtago shivered beneath his cloak, which barely covered his massive frame. His pale features, the scarred side of his face with its missing eye and misshapen tooth that resembled a tusk, looked ghastly in the wan light. “*Gwut* curse this cold,” he growled. Normally that would open a volley of curses, but the freezing air got the better of him. He fell into an uncharacteristic silence.

Poet shook his head. “*Gwut* has no dominion here,” he said through chattering teeth. “*J’k Lon* is the god of the snow and the high mountains.”

“*Gwut* piss on *J’k Lon*,” Sirtago said. “And may his steaming stream melt this cursed snow.”

They journeyed to the fabled Golden City. Fellow travellers had told of wonders to be enjoyed, firing their imaginations. Intent on sampling the fantastic riches of the city, they had made their way north.

From their last stop in Manka, they had travelled on foot for a day to the base of Mount Mank. The next day they climbed.

The snow deepened and the air froze around them. Their meagre provisions were all but spent. Had they not found the stone hut some soul had erected during a more hospitable season, Poet knew that both of them would be dead by now.

Crudely built, the hut formed a rough dome around them. The rocks were piled as best they could be. The biting wind still found its way through the cracks and whisked around the interior space like a hungry animal gnawing at bare skin.

Poet decided there was little chance the air within the shelter would get any warmer. An arrangement of stones described a rough-hewn fire pit in the centre of the hut. Poet noted no opening for smoke in the roof above. The hut's architect clearly eschewed such a notion, as it would only allow in more cold.

Poet reached around and shucked his pack off his shoulders and slipped it out from beneath his cloak. He dug out his flint and his tinder. He gathered a few meagre twigs yet unburnt among the cold ashes. He swept the floor with his hands, found a few more pieces of fuel. He added the twigs to the tinder. He pulled one of his twin daggers, each made from Trigassan steel. A few strikes of the blade on the flint ignited the duff and the small fire soon filled the hut with smoke. Poet and Sirtago ignored the smoke and crowded the fire, savouring its warmth.

After a short while, Sirtago became his usual garrulous self.

"We'll never reach the Golden City like this. We should have brought more provisions."

"It was suggested," Poet countered, avoiding his eyes.

"Aye," Sirtago agreed grimly.

Sowena, the wife of their host in Manka, had offered more provisions. Poet had mightily agreed, but Sirtago, full of bravado, had declined them. Poet suspected his deferral had more to do with Sirtago's frustrated hopes of finding his way into the lady's bed behind her husband's back. It would be like Sirtago to put up a manly front right to the last minute.

Poet did not want to tell Sirtago that their host's wife had, in fact, invited Poet to wrestle beneath her soft sheets. The few hours' pleasure was sweet, but he would trade them all now for that extra pack.

Their Mankan host, Imuran, had insisted on gifting them the cloaks that they wore. For that Poet was grateful. “The passes can get cold at night,” Imuran had said. “These will keep out most of the chill.” It was an uncharacteristically thoughtful gesture on his part. Their host had been scarcely seen during their stay. Sowena was more attentive to their needs (particularly to Poet). Imuran spent most of his time consulting scrolls and fashioning cards with cryptic symbols that Poet did not recognize.

“There would be mutton in the larder,” Sirtago mumbled, pulling Poet from his reverie. “Salty pork and ale... sugared fruits...”

Poet grunted. Raiding the palace larder was a regular transgression for Sirtago when they were both children. Poet usually made a show of trying to talk Sirtago out of it, but his youthful stomach was eager for the sweets. Sirtago, as the Ka of Trigassa -- prince and heir to the throne -- feared nothing from the palace’s servants. Only his mother, the Empress, rebuked him for it, a punishment that he took with sullen glares, but a sticky chin.

“Don’t dwell on it,” Poet countered. His belly rumbled now at the thought of the richly stocked larders of their youth. “You’ll drive yourself mad.”

“Let me drive myself mad, then. What good is sanity with an empty belly?”

“You’ll drive me mad!” Poet groaned. “Stop talking!”

“Were we back in Trigassa, we would be fed and warm,” Sirtago continued on, stubbornly. “We should have stayed one more night in Manka. Why did we leave so hastily?”

Poet grimaced. One more night in Manka had not been a realistic option. Imuran seemed to grow tired of Sirtago’s braggadocio and, more pertinently, Poet thought he suspected his wife’s infidelity. “Do you wish to be back in Trigassa?” Poet asked, trying to confound Sirtago’s line of inquiry. “Do we turn our tails and go south again?”

Sirtago scowled. “No,” he spat.

Poet knew Sirtago would not consider returning to the kingdom. The day he did, his coronation as Emperor would curtail the freedom he valued so dearly. Even, it seemed, the freedom to die of starvation and exposure.

The fire weakened to a mere flicker. Poet found no more twigs or leaves. Reluctantly, he pulled out his dagger and began cutting a strip from his cloak. The thick fur and cured hide made cutting difficult, but Poet prided himself on keeping his blades sharp. Soon, he had a longish chunk, half as long as his arm freed from the cloak. He fed it slowly into the fire.

The hide and fur burned with a powerful smell like charcoal and sulphur. The rag made more smoke than the twigs and leaves had. With only the entrance of the hut for the smoke to escape, the air was soon thick and choking. The fire flared up nicely, though, providing much needed warmth.

Poet knew that sacrificing his cloak for warmth was a foolish proposition. The cloak allowed him to keep the warmth, but with nothing else to burn there would be no warmth.

“Venison...” Sirtago said between gasping coughs. “Pickled swan livers... smoked eels...”

“Stop,” Poet protested feebly, his belly growling painfully. “We won’t survive the night if you go on like this.”

Sirtago stopped his litany of foods and his one eye fixed on Poet’s with a baleful look. “You’re right. We both can’t survive... but one of us might.”

Before either man could move the air was split with a loud echoing howl. The scream curdled Poet’s blood. It was a sound unlike any he had heard from a mortal beast.

Poet felt a chill climb his back that had nothing to do with the cold. “What are you saying?”

“You are thin and your flesh would be stringy, most like. But you would make an adequate meal.”

Poet’s hand gripped his dagger tightly. “You have driven yourself to madness.”

“I could feed your cloak to the fire,” Sirtago continued, his single eye unblinking. “It would burn hot enough to roast your flesh. I would survive...”

Poet shook his head, the dagger rattling in its sheath. “Thrust those thoughts away!”

Sirtago stood, reached beneath his cloak for his sword. Poet stood as well, his dagger in his hand, its twin in his other. He threatened his companion like

a serpent ready to strike.

Before either man could move the air was split with a loud echoing howl. The scream curdled Poet's blood. It was a sound unlike any he had heard from a mortal beast.

Sirtago's eye widened with fear. He sprang to the hut's opening, bulled his way through, drawing his blade from beneath his cloak as he did so. Poet sprang out behind him.

Outside the hut, Poet and Sirtago instinctively assumed a fighting stance, their backs to each other. The wan sunlight had vanished and now darkness enveloped them. What little light there was came only from the timid fire within the hut.

Poet's eyes tried vainly to pierce the surrounding dark. The pale stars, diffused by a mist, cast illusory shadows over the slope. The small man hunted for any sign of movement but saw nothing. Sirtago's silence told him that his eye, singular as it was, but no less sharp, likewise perceived nothing.

A screaming howl once again ripped the air. The sound began low, then rose in pitch, echoing weirdly from the mist. Poet felt icy fingers skittering up his spine.

The scream came from everywhere, but did not draw any closer. The shock of fright and rapid action heated up Poet's blood, but the cold crept beneath his cloak again.

"The fire needs tending," Poet said quietly.

Sirtago grunted his agreement. They returned to the meagre warmth of the hut. Poet did his best to coddle the fire as Sirtago crouched by the door trying vainly to pierce the gloomy darkness. The screams continued unabated.

After a long while the shrieking subsided enough to allow Poet to fall into a fitful sleep. In his dreaming state he was back in the house of Imuran. He saw a vision of his host sitting at a table beneath a single oil lamp. His quill scribbled notes on parchment as he flicked through a series of cards. Each had a symbol but Poet could not see them. He stepped closer to peer over Imuran's shoulder. He made out a single symbol, a three-sided sigil, and a circle within. Three marks, like curved legs, supported the cipher.

In his dream, Imuran became aware of Poet's presence. He turned around swiftly, fixing Poet with a fierce glare. The dream Imuran opened his mouth but no words came out, only a snuffling, grunting noise.

Poet startled awake. The snuffling, grunting noise was loud in his ears. He blinked to clear the dream from his eyes.

Poet made out Sirtago leaning against the wall beside the hut's entrance. He had succumbed to sleep. For a moment Poet thought the grunting noises were Sirtago's snores, but the grunting and snorting sounds came not from within the hut, but from without.

Something was outside, snuffling around.

Poet snatched his daggers from their hilts in a swift move. "Sirtago!" he hissed.

Sirtago stirred awake. His blade was already drawn and held loose in his sleeping hand. As he came awake his grip tightened, blade at the ready. His body tensed as he assumed a crouch ready to spring to action like a panther.

The grunting, snorting sound grew louder. Movement caught Poet's eye. Something shadowed the hut's entrance. A form moved in from the outer darkness. Poet saw something covered in dirty white fur, matted with ice. A great black hand reached out from beneath the fur, grasping its way toward the smouldering fire.

Sirtago gripped the hilt of his mighty blade in both hands. He raised it high then thrust down quickly, stabbing the interloping limb.

The beast let out a howl that split the darkness. The hairy limb quickly withdrew and Sirtago was after it like a shot.

"Sirtago, No!" Poet cried out too late. Their foe was injured; and nothing was more dangerous than a wounded beast. Sirtago knew that but his urges ran far ahead of his sense. Daggers at the ready, Poet followed his companion out of the hut.

Poet saw Sirtago's cloaked back moving ahead of him in the darkness. Sirtago's blade swung back and forth. Just at the edge of the darkness, he saw a form like that of a man standing on two legs. He scoped out no features but thought he saw a pair of antlers swinging back and forth.

The beast howled again, whether in pain or anger or both Poet knew not nor did he care. He rushed to Sirtago's side.

Sirtago's blade swung around fast. Poet ducked quickly. He heard the blade whistle its way through the frozen air above his head. "Sirtago!"

The prince whirled about, his one eye flaring, his scarred face drawn back in a rictus grin around the tusk-like tooth. "Did you see it!" he shouted.

The creature's spine-chilling screams echoed in the darkness around them.

Poet thought it came from farther away than just a minute ago, suggesting the creature was retreating.

Poet was still uncertain of what he had seen in the darkness. “Was it man or beast?” he asked.

Sirtago shook his head. “Neither. Both. I know not.”

The air split once again by the creature’s howl. It was not as loud, and to Poet’s ears, it sounded like it was coming from somewhere above the hut, further up the steep slope of the mountain. Poet was more than a little relieved at the beast’s retreat.

“We should follow it,” Sirtago insisted. “If it lives in these mountains, it will have food.”

Poet shook his head. “We’ll get lost in the darkness and freeze to death. We should stay in the shelter.”

Sirtago agreed, but reluctantly. Poet could see his companion’s desire to hunt the beast was strong, but the cold air and their renewed shivering overcame even Sirtago’s stubborn resolve.

The fire smouldered low. Reluctantly, Poet cut another strip from his cloak and fed it slowly into the fire. The fire flared anew, filling the hut with the sulphurous, choking smoke.

Poet handed Sirtago a dagger. “Cut two strips from your cloak,” he commanded.

Sirtago grimaced. He saw his friend chafe at the command, but he complied with it, albeit sullenly.

Fatigue, hunger and fear kept both companions from sleep. They crouched over the fire eagerly devouring what warmth it offered up, their weapons clutched warily in their hands.

Had they been asleep the weird echoing howl would have startled them from their slumber. As it was, they were ready in anticipation. Sirtago’s muscles tensed like steel around his blade and Poet gripped his twin daggers, poised to strike at any movement.

The screams grew louder, sounding angrier than they had before. Poet watched the entrance, ready to strike at the limb that would surely reach inside as it had done before.

But the arm never entered. Instead, the hut shook as an angry roar split the night air. Poet felt the entire structure move around him. Smaller rocks became unstuck; fell from the ceiling, one glancing off Sirtago’s shoulder.

Another scream and another blow to the hut. This time the feeble structure shook mightily. Larger rocks began falling from the roof and walls. Poet raised his arm to shield his head from the unexpected onslaught of falling rock.

Blows rained faster and faster. The hut shook and loose rocks fell one after the other. Poet chanced a glance upwards. There was a gaping hole in the hut. Through it, he could see the beast's arms beating on the structure.

A rock hit Poet on his back. Stones and dust fell, dousing what was left of the fire. The beast roared again. This time Sirtago answered with a roar of his own. His blade at the ready, he dashed out the shelter.

A cascade of rocks fell in front of Poet. He felt the structure swaying around him and made a leap through the hut's opening. He managed to roll as he did so, the hut collapsing behind him.

Cold snow fell down Poet's neck as he tumbled. He slid on the ice, but managed to find his footing. He sprang up, knives at the ready.

The beast was twice as tall as a man. It was covered in white fur that was matted with dirty ice. Its legs were like that of a stag's. Its knees bent backward as it balanced on black hooves. Its chest was like that of a man's and its long arms ended in clawed hands.

The beast's head was crowned with a rack of stag-like antlers. It had a flattened snout like a bear and a wide mouth full of sharp teeth. The mouth uttered another howling scream. The antlered thing loomed over Sirtago who swung his great blade back and forth.

Poet froze in fearful awe at the sight, but for a moment only. He dashed at the creature, his twin daggers thrust before him.

Before his blades could find their target, the beast's great arm swatted Poet away as though he were but an insect. Poet's head rang with the blow. He skidded through the snow, the air pushed from his lungs.

That was enough of a distraction though. Sirtago managed to thrust his blade into the sudden opening. The blade bit deep into the creature's side and the beast let out a shriek that curdled Poet's blood even more than any the beast had uttered before.

The beast swatted at Sirtago, bowling him over into the snow. Sirtago retained his grip on the hilt of his sword. As he fell the blade ripped out of the beast's side. Great gouts of crimson followed.

Poet's head rang like a steeple bell and his vision swam, but he saw the

beast retreating up the mountain, his hand clutching at its wounded side.

Poet dragged himself from the snow, stumbling to where Sirtago had fallen.

“*Gw’Neth’s tits!*” Sirtago cursed. He dragged himself to his feet, his one eye frantically searching for his beastly adversary.

“It’s gone,” Poet gasped, pointing to where he had last spied the beast. “It’s retreated up the mountain.”

Sirtago narrowed his eye in the direction Poet indicated. A long, echoing bellow sounded from higher up the mountain. Sirtago began trudging in its direction.

“Where are you going?” Poet asked.

“We’ve no choice now,” Sirtago growled. “There is no shelter; there’s no food. But the beast must have come from somewhere. He must eat

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something. We’ll follow and find out.”

Poet regarded the stone hut, which was now only a scattered pile of stone. He let out a breath and fell into step beside Sirtago. “The beast won’t willingly share his shelter or his food.” Poet said. “We’ll likely die.”

“We’ll certainly die otherwise,” Sirtago said. “I, for one, prefer to die with a blade in my hand and my teeth in that creature’s neck.”

Poet said nothing, only continued climbing through the snow.

The trail of blood made tracking the beast easier. The welcome return of the sun rising over the horizon gladdened Poet’s heart and strengthened his resolve to see this wretched misadventure to its end.

The sun was well on its way up the sky when they found the entrance to a

cave. The tracks and trail of blood that slithered into the cave mouth made it clear that this was the beast's lair.

The morning sun shone into the cave. Ice formed structures that looked like teeth around the entrance. They entered cautiously, their blades ready in front of them.

Poet blinked as his eyes adjusted to the gloom they found within the cave. Slivers of light reflected off the ice, illuminating the floor of the cave enough to let Poet navigate without having to feel his way. He saw something covered in fur on the ground and stopped. He caught Sirtago's eye, pointed a finger.

Sirtago approached cautiously, his blade before him. He thrust at the fur-covered form. His sword tip ripped through, revealing only bones.

Poet blinked in the faint light. There were several forms, all covered with fur. He looked closer to see that the forms were skeletons. Desiccated flesh hung from the frozen bones. The fur humps were cloaks, just like the ones that Poet and Sirtago wore on their backs.

Sirtago picked up a long bone with a bloodied hunk of flesh still attached. "There's meat on this one!" Sirtago declared.

Poet reached down, pulled a skull from below the cloak. He turned its blank eyes towards Sirtago. "This is what the beast feeds upon," he said. "Hapless travellers, like us."

Sirtago's eye widened in shock and disgust at the sight of the skull in Poet's hands. He hastily dropped the bloody bone.

A sliver of sunlight illuminated the cave wall above Sirtago's head. Poet froze at what he saw scrawled into the rock.

A single symbol was carved into the cave... a three-sided sigil, a circle within, supported by three curved legs.

Poet suddenly knew that they were not here by chance. "We were deliberately sent to our doom," he said. He looked at the skeletons strewn over the cave floor, each wearing a fur cloak. "Just like all these poor souls."

Sirtago scowled in confusion. Before he could speak, the cave echoed with a shrill howl.

The beast, its claws outstretched, leapt at Sirtago who scarcely had time to raise his blade. He fell beneath the bulk of the creature.

Poet did not hesitate. He leapt at the creature's back and thrust the twin blades into the roiling mass of fur.

The beast howled in agony and rolled around. Poet, hands still gripping the

hilts of his blades, rolled with the beast. His back hit the cave floor and the creature's weight rolled on top of him. The creature's fur was pressed into Poet's nostrils. He gagged as he breathed in the familiar odour of charcoal and sulphur.

The weight of the creature pressed the air from his lungs; the rank matted and bloodied fur blocked his nose and mouth, allowing no fresh air to replenish them. Poet felt his head swimming. He felt himself suddenly receding as if he were floating away from his body.

A sense of detachment came over him. He felt as if the disparate parts of his memory were coalescing to form a vision. He saw the creature for what it was... a slave. He saw the sorcerer, Imuran... for in his alienated state he knew now what Imuran was -- not merely a scholar, but a cartomancer --- he saw him with the beast... training it... conditioning it to attack the smell of the fur out of which he had fashioned the cloaks that he gave to unwary travellers... In his vision he saw Imuran laughing, an inhuman glint of arcane knowledge clouding his evil eyes...

...then all was black...

...then everything came rushing back. A great scream assailed his ears. His lungs gasped in the cold air, the weight lifting from his chest.

The screams echoed through the cave with a horrifying echo. His head pounded but he opened his eyes to see Sirtago locked in the beast's enraged embrace. The great claws ripped at Sirtago's cloak.

A great bellow roared from Sirtago's open mouth. His tusk-like tooth was thrust forward and naked hate burned from his one wide-open eye. The scarred side of his face was livid and red. His hands gripped the hilt of his sword tight as the blade slowly sank deep into the creature's furred chest.

Blood spat from the creature's toothy mouth and leaked from its flattened nostrils. Poet saw the great eyes roll upward, heard the howl of rage turn to a rumbling death rattle. The claws, now only able to clutch feebly at Sirtago's back, slowed their movement. The fingers stilled, the arms sliding from Sirtago to fall uselessly on the cave floor.

Sirtago's bull roar stopped, its echoes bouncing off the rocks and ice before fading to silence. His hands fiercely gripped his blade, thrust into the now lifeless corpse, as his blood rage slowly subsided. The smouldering hate in his eye faded as he slid from the creature's bloodied hide to come to rest on the cavern floor.

There were enough dried twigs and leaves gathered from the cave floor to start a new fire. Cloth torn from the clothing of the beast's previous victims fed the fire. Soon it burned hot enough to cook the flesh that Sirtago's sword managed to cut from one of the creature's legs.

Upon reflection Poet would decide that the creature's flesh tasted much like venison, but at the time he and Sirtago only cared that the meat was edible and replenished their flagging strength.

After they ate, Poet told Sirtago of what he had seen in his vision. Sirtago was skeptical of Poet's fevered imaginings, but the light from the fire revealed more symbols scrawled into the rock around the cave. Even Sirtago, whose interest in arcane scripts was minimal, recognized that he had seen the same symbols in Imuran's house.

"Had we slept through the night and continued on in the morning we would have run afoul of the creature, regardless." Poet said. "We would have stood little chance had it caught us unawares."

"Why did the creature attack us during the night, then?" Sirtago asked.

Poet considered that question. "I fed the cloak that Imuran gave us to the fire. Perhaps the smell alerted the beast to our presence. Its howls put us on guard."

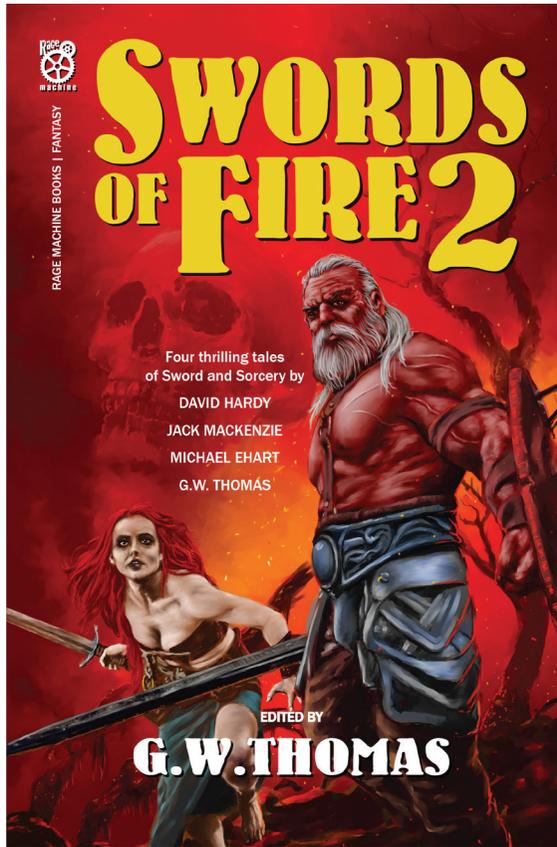
Sirtago was then determined to turn around and return to the house in Manka.

As they climbed back down the mountain, Sirtago regaled Poet with the tally of punishments he had in store for the wizard of Manka.

"And after that?" Poet asked his friend. "Do we return south to Trigassa and its well-stocked larders; or do we find another route to the Golden City?"

Sirtago shrugged. "I'll decide that once my vengeance is sated."





Swords of Fire 2 edited by G.W. Thomas

G. W. Thomas is back with four new novellas of Swords & Sorcery.

“Gladiator King” by David A. Hardy stars Cingetorix from the gladiator’s arena to the sacred groves of the King of Nemi.

“Through Dungeons Deep” by Jack Mackenzie sees the return of Sirtago and Poet as they become champions and hunt a wizard. But all is not what it seems. Best of all, Poet tells the tale this time.

“The Daughter of Lilith” continues Michael Ehart’s fantastic Ninshi series. In the days of Mesopotamia, Ninshi is haunted by deeds past and monsters present.

“The Work We Have In Hand” is set in the same world as G. W. Thomas’ Dragontongue. Follow the wizard Emerrant and his unwilling servant, Aberdin Vol, as they try to figure out where all the wizards and witches in Stormcock have gone.

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