

## TALES OF WYRE – THREAD 07 DIVERTIMENTO

*This is a copy of Sepulchrave's 'Divertimento' StoryHour at ENWorld*

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### POST 1: DIVERTIMENTO

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Posted by: **Sepulchrave II at ENWorld on 24th February 2003, 09:25 PM**

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Khenfo (KENN-foe): B., "Warrior." A member of the warrior caste. One who, by circumstance of birth, is permitted to bear the langbrand, a sword with a blade longer than a cubit. The khenfo is distinguished from the lower castes by his hair, which is braided and never cut, and by a tattoo of a sixteen-pointed star on the left cheek.

Taleitha (taa-LAY-ee-thaa): B., "Warrior-Maid." A sword-bearing female member of the warrior-aristocracy of Bairgahei. In matters of law, except with regard to the ownership of land, the taleitha is considered male.

Lossan (LOE-saan): B., "Made Free." A warrior released by his lord from the ties of kinship and family, in order to gain honour for self and clan in pursuit of perfection in the art of combat.

Druhtin (DROOH-teen): B., "Master." A khenfo who has resolved the totemic and spiritual energies which course through him and, in the eyes of his peers, achieved a degree of perfection which sets him apart from other warriors.

Kihu, Thaurn's Daughter, is all of these things.

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"NGAARRRGHH!" He screamed as her blade flashed from its scabbard and bit into each shoulder, deftly striking twice in quick succession. The crows, perched on the naked birch trees, erupted into flight, disturbed by the noise. He was tall, with a handsome face graced by a full beard. A renowned warrior. A man in the flower of his manhood, with gold, silver, good land, and many horses.

Now he staggered from his wounds. The snow eagerly soaked up his blood.

His retort was ineffectual - a powerful strike, but turned by her buckler. It sent a shockwave up her arm, but did little else.

She struck again. Once, twice. Her face was expressionless, her actions effortless and methodical. He reeled under the weight of the assault. She struck again. His expression changed from one of pain to bemusement, as her sword forced the links of his byrnie apart, and penetrated his chest. It cut through his sternum and entered his heart.

Seggur's life ended. His body collapsed onto the frozen ground.

Kihu looked sadly upon the corpse, before wiping her blade in the snow and returning it to its scabbard. She threw a purse of coins to the ground, and offered a prayer of thanks to the Swan. She called over to Hiorr, Seggur's nithan - his second in the ritual combat - and also his brother.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want this. See that his family wants for nothing."

"I am his family, you bitch," the young man retorted. Tears flooded down his face. "And you can keep your money."

Kihu let the insult pass. She bent down, picked up the purse, and turned away.

"What of his sword?" Hiorr spat.

"Keep it," Kihu said grimly, without looking back. "Do not dishonour it."

"I will kill you for what you have done today," Hiorr vowed.

The Taleitha sighed. You, and a thousand others, she thought.

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Ulf of Scir Cellod - also called Ulf the Seer and Ulf the Cunning - watched the exchange with interest from within the birch copse. He had hastened from the Laird's burh when he had heard of the auhumring - the ritual combat - muttering to himself as he'd forced his aging legs to wade through the snow around the frozen pond.

It would be just typical, he had thought as he'd staggered along, if he'd travelled for five days only to find her dead upon his arrival.

The combat had impressed him. He'd timed it - Ulf began counting the moment the woman's weapon had been drawn. Four seconds. Four seconds to slay Seggur, the chief of Laird Stromur's hearthguard - a warrior of many years experience, about whom ballads had been written, and praises sung.

Ulf muttered under his breath, and his sight reached out and perceived the truth of the rumours which were current about the Taleitha's sword, even as she cleaned it in the snow. In the Seer's mind, the weapon gleamed brightly, its patterned blade speaking of secrets long forgotten.

He watched as she walked slowly away from the body, and approached her second - a burly man with a red beard and rosy cheeks. He was grinning broadly. They spoke, and Ulf cursed as the focus of his perception had to quickly change, so that he could hear their exchange. He fingered a tiny replica of a horn, which hung from his neck.

"Good job," the man clapped Kihu on the back. "That sorted that little problem out. If you were a man, I'd treat you to a whore. As is, I'm afraid a drink must suffice. Honour has been satisfied."

"There was no honour in that farce," Kihu replied stonily.

"Bah! Don't be so grim. His position is yours, if you want it. You even get to keep the weregild."

"Seggur's wife may need it, Mirm," Kihu groaned. "The boy had no right to refuse it."

"Crap!" Mirm replied. "He had every right. He's the head of the household now. Besides, they're rich enough."

"For now," she replied. "Fortunes change quickly."

Ulf smiled as he eavesdropped on the exchange, before shambling forwards from under the cover of the trees and walking out upon the surface of the pond. The snow was slushy under his feet, and the Seer casually wondered how long it would be until the thaw began in earnest. As he passed Hiorr, lamenting over the body of his fallen brother, Ulf shot the young warrior a sympathetic smile.

Hiorr stared venomously back.

"Kihu, Thaur'n's daughter," Ulf yelled out. "I've been looking for you."

The Taleitha turned suspiciously, and her hand rested menacingly on her left breast, below the hilt of the weapon slung across her back. She arched an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"I am Ulf the Cunning. I have heard rumours of you."

Mirm guffawed. "And it's all true. Now piss off, old man, before I dig a hole in the ice and drop you into the water."

"Your friend is rude," Ulf said to Kihu, pointedly avoiding looking at Mirm.

"He is my friend," the Taleitha half-apologized, shrugging. "What do you want, Ulf?"

"The Earl of Drusdal requires your services – or, rather, I do. I am acting as his agent."

"My tenure is not ended here," she replied. "I have three months left to run, and I will probably renew. I have just killed the chief of Stromur's hearthguard, and I am eligible to take his place if the Laird consents. In fact, he will probably require it, now that Seggur is dead."

"The Earl is insistent," Ulf replied. "I have seals demanding that your contract is transferred and you are released from Stromur's service. The Laird will be suitably recompensed. The Earl is buying you out."

Kihu grimaced. The law in Thokastrond was bizarre, and she only partially understood it. And now Seggur's death was rendered utterly meaningless. She nodded.

"Very well," she sighed.

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Stromur was greatly displeased. The Laird, a grizzled and hoary man in his early fifties, was renowned for his stubbornness, tenacity, and hard bargaining. Maintaining any position of power in Thokastrond demanded those virtues, and Stromur had demonstrated them in abundance for thirty years.

The Laird sat upon a carved wooden chair, raised on a dais at one end of his long, dark mead-hall. The beams of the roof, bowed by great age, were supported by huge, carved, wooden pillars, which bore designs of trees and animals. Each representation had a name, although only a few amongst the court knew them all: the totemic and spiritual protectors of the clan, whose grace and good will had guided the fortunes of his house for two hundred years. Tendrils of smoke, issuing from the central firepit, clung momentarily to the timbers, before being drawn out through the chimney-hole, and a score of Stromur's finest warriors – his hearthguard – stood in silent vigil around the walls of the hall.

"Twenty pounds of silver," Stromur demanded plainly. "Had your request been made before the death of Seggur, I may have been inclined to accept a far lesser sum, but Kihu is now beholden to me for the death of the chief of my hearthguard." The Laird smiled coldly. It was a preposterous amount, and he knew it. He waited for the inevitable refusal and counter-offer.

"Agreed," Ulf said without batting an eyelid. "The money will be here within a month."

The Laird's reaction was one of amazement – at the quick concession - mixed with annoyance, at both the Earl's ability to meet the sum without discomfort, and a certain knowledge that he could have asked for more.

"One other thing," Ulf continued, "the Skald, Mirm. Is he tenured also?"

"Bah!" Mirm exclaimed, interrupting. "You could have asked me that yourself, you old bastard. And no, I'm not. I come and go as I please."

"Given your initial words with me, I thought it best to embarrass you at the first available opportunity," Ulf said with disarming honesty. "It redresses the balance of insults if I intimate that you are a chattel, rather than a free man. Now that we are square, perhaps I can interest you with the lure of silver?"

Stromur scowled. "Whatever business you have with the Skald, please conduct it elsewhere. Unless the Earl has any further requests to make of me, this audience is over. Kihu – you are discharged. Thank-you for your loyal service. I hope that your new master treats you as well as you deserve." The Laird's tongue dripped acid.

The Seer, Taleitha and Skald bowed, and departed.

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"I don't much like you, Ulf," Mirm said, as they sat in a nearby inn. It was rowdy, smoky, and reeked of stale ale and sweat.

"People often have that first impression of me," the Seer conceded. "Don't feel bad about it." Ulf grinned broadly at both of them. "I should tell you some things that I know about you."

Ulf spoke first to Kihu. "You are the Taleitha Kihu from Haeth Haethen in Northern Bairgahei. Your father is Thaur, brother of Kas. You are separated from the First King, Attar, by twenty-eight degrees with only two matrilineal links."

"My pedigree is well-known," Kihu smiled ironically.

"You are widely recognized as a druhtini," Ulf continued, "who has evolved a unique style, and has mastered the perfection of nadr, and has developed thrato to an uncanny degree.\*"

"Bah, this also is well-known," Mirm interrupted. "For a Seer you possess a remarkable ability to state the obvious in suitably mysterious and impressive terms."

Ulf ignored the Skald, and continued speaking to Kihu. "Your brother is called Brodd. He is eighteen years old, has a hawk called Hafoc, suffers from a slight lisp and enjoys his fish rather underdone. You were thinking about him on the journey from the burh to the inn. You remember him fondly, although it has been two years since you last saw him."

Kihu nodded. "These things are less well-known," she admitted.

"Please accept my apologies for invading your mind," Ulf said. "And believe me when I say I will never again do it without your consent."

Kihu shrugged. "I have nothing to hide," she said. "But thank-you all the same."

"Your sword is called Iarnbeort," Ulf continued. "It is made from maht.\*\* It is magical."

"Those rumours are unsubstantiated," Kihu said carefully.

"Iarnbeort was forged by the giant Rut Sokea, who dwells in the crater of Tombol Tavas in the frozen ocean north of Harland." Ulf said.

Kihu was wide-eyed. "I did not know that."

I did, Mirm thought to himself.

"It may prove relevant," Ulf said cryptically. He turned to Mirm, who swallowed nervously.

"I know what you are going to say," Mirm sighed.

"Who was your mentor?" Ulf asked.

"Odrukinn of Dimmurlond," Mirm replied.

"One of the finest," Ulf said admiringly.

"The very best!" Mirm insisted.

Kihu looked confused.

"It doesn't matter," Mirm said. "I'll explain later, if it becomes necessary."

The taleitha raised a suspicious eyebrow, but decided to let it pass. For now, at least.

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"What does the Earl of Drusdal want with me?" Kihu asked Ulf.

"I am not at liberty to discuss that," the Seer replied, "but it will be made clear in due course."

"You mentioned silver," Mirm said slyly. "How much?"

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\*There are a whole host of technical terms which I asked the players to at least acquaint themselves with before the game began, in order to maximize the RP experience. It actually worked quite well. A druhtini is a female master of the sword. Nadr ("The Viper") is the name given to the Spring Attack maneuver. Thrato ("Speed") is the scabbarded (Iaijutsu) attack.

\*\*Maht is an innately magical metal, and exceedingly rare. It is as strong as adamantine and as light as mithril – neither of which, btw, exist in the game world. Visually, it is indistinguishable from steel.