

With the Knight Male (apologies to Rudyard Kipling)

Charles Sheffield

I received the final payment this morning. To: Burmeister and Carver, Attorneys. Payable by: *Joustin' Time*.

Logically, Waldo should have signed the transfer slip. He deserves the money, far more than I do. But given his contusions, fractures, lacerations, and multiple body casts, he is in no position to sign anything. In fact, all the negotiations, arguments, offers, and counteroffers to *Joustin' Time* had perforce to come from me. But if Waldo learns anything from his experience—doubtful, given his history—my extra effort on his behalf will be well worthwhile.

I ought to have been suspicious at the outset, when Waldo drifted into my office from his next-door one, preened, and said, "Got us a client."

"That's nice. Who is he?"

"She. It's a lady, Helga Svensen."

I ought to have stopped it right there. Every man is entitled to his little weakness, but Waldo's track record with women clients has been, to put it mildly, unfortunate.

On the other hand, although the love of money is widely acknowledged to be the root of all evil, the *lack* of money isn't too good either. The legal firm of Burmeister and Carver—Waldo and me—was at the time utterly broke.

I said, "What does this Helga Svensen want us to do?"

"Nothing difficult. Seems she's a major player in the pre-Renaissance tournaments that have been so big recently. There's a royal games next week at the Paladindrome on Vesta, and she wants our help with her performance contract. She also asked me to check out one of the accessories. Wants to know if it can be shipped legally interplanet before she commits to anything."

I nodded. World-to-world tariff laws were a nightmare—or, seen from another point of view, a boon for hungry attorneys.

"What is it this time?" I said. "Bows, swords, tankards? Antique suits of armor? Jousting equipment?"

"None of them." Waldo helped himself to a handful of chocolate malt balls sitting in a jar on my desk. "Mainly, she's interested—mm—in the—mm—blagon."

"The flagons?"

"Naw." He had spoken with his mouth full, and was forced to pause and swallow before he could say, "The dragon. Apparently it's a different model from what they've been using before. I'm going to meet Helga Svensen over at Chimera Labs tomorrow morning and we're going to check it out together. Want to come?"

I did not. The mindless rush of the biolabs to create, through fancy DNA splicing, everything from centaurs to basilisks to gryphons has never made sense to me. On the other hand, there is such a thing as due diligence. If we were going to object to—or press for—import/export restrictions on a dragon, I needed to take a look at one.

"What time?" I said.

"Nine o'clock. Nine o'clock sharp."

"I'll be there."

* * *

But I wasn't. An unpleasant conversation with our landlord concerning past-due office rental delayed me and I did not reach the offices of Chimera Labs until nine-thirty. The aged derelict on duty at the desk wore a uniform as wrinkled and faded as he was. He cast one bleary-eyed look at me as I came in and said, "Mister Carver? You're expected. First room on the left. The brute's in there."

"The dragon?"

He stared at me gloomily. "Nah. The dragon's straight ahead, but you can't see it. You're to go into the room on the left."

In twenty years of legal practice I had heard Waldo called many names, but "brute" was not one of them. Puzzled, I opened the indicated door.

The voice that greeted me was not Waldo's. It was a pleasant, musical baritone, half an octave deeper than his. That was fair enough, because its owner was over two meters tall and topped Waldo by a full half-head.

She ignored my arrival and went on reading aloud. " `Article Twelve: Should a competitor fail to appear at the allocated time for his/her/its designated heat, semifinal, or final, he/she/it will lose the right to compete further in the tournament, and will in addition forfeit prior cumulative earnings and/or prize money, unless a claim of force majeure can be substantiated before an arbitration board approved by the tournament officials'—you see, it's this sort of blather that ties my head in knots—`in advance of the participation of said competitor in any tournament event.' Now what the devil does that mean?"

Waldo offered a lawyer's nod of approbation. "Nice. It means that if you don't show up for an event, you lose everything unless you can prove to them *in advance* that you couldn't possibly show up. Which is, practically speaking, impossible." He had noticed my arrival, and turned to me. "Henry, this is Helga Svensen. Helga, this is my partner, Henry Carver. Henry is an absolute master at reading the fine print of a contract. If anyone can beat the written terms by using the contract's own words, he can."

While Helga nodded down at me with what I sensed as a certain rational skepticism, I took my chance for an examination of our new client. She was more than just tall. She wore a scanty halter of Lincoln green that revealed breasts like alpine slopes, shoulders wide enough to support a world, and tattooed arms the size of my thighs. Her matching green skirt, shockingly short, ended high up on thighs as sturdy and powerful as the fabled oaks of Earth. Waldo is a substantial man and his recent dieting efforts had been a disaster, but I have to say that next to Helga Svensen he resembled a sun-starved weed.

Her mind was still on the contract. She flourished the offending document and said, "And this bit is nothing like the usual agreement. `Article Seventeen. Any bona fide member of a participating team, such representative or representatives to be termed hereinafter collectively *the contestant*, may enter into single combat with the dragon. Should the contestant slay or otherwise defeat the dragon, the contestant will win the Grand Prize; should the dragon slay the contestant, all prize money already won by the contestant will be forfeited. In the event of the simultaneous death of both dragon and contestant, the dragon will be deemed the winner.' "

"Sounds clear enough to me," Waldo said. "You kill the dragon and survive, you win big. What's wrong with that?"

"It's too generous." Helga wore her hair in long, golden plaits. They swayed about her plump pink cheeks as she shook her head. "They offer a Grand Prize at every tournament, and nobody has won one in five years—which is how long *Joustin' Time* has been in business. But the prize has never been for dragon-slaying, which isn't too hard. That's the other reason I'm here. I want a sneak preview of the dragon." She glanced at a massive left wrist seeking a nonexistent watch. "What time is it?"

"Nine-forty-five," Waldo said.

"Then he'll be there. Come on—quietly, now."

She opened a small door at the back of the room, lowered her head, and squeezed through. About to follow her into a dark and narrow corridor, I hesitated and turned to Waldo.

"Is this going to be safe? I mean, a dragon . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure we can trust Helga. Come on." He ducked through.

Was this really Waldo Burmeister, a man nervous in the presence of toy poodles and somnolent cats? I followed him, wondering about his interaction with Helga Svensen before I arrived.

I didn't wonder long because other concerns took center stage. The dark corridor ran for about fifteen meters and ended in a great, dimly-lit chamber. I couldn't see much at first, but a smell like a mixture of ammonia and sulfur made my nostrils wrinkle. I heard a whisper ahead of me, answered in Helga's soft baritone. She handed something to a dark figure who at once slipped away into the gloom.

Helga turned to me and Waldo. "Right, we're promised five minutes. Let's take a peek."

I wasn't sure I wanted to. As my eyes adjusted, a shape was coming into focus by the far wall. It was hunched and enormous, at least seven feet high and thirty feet long. I saw scaled legs like tree trunks ending in feet equipped with gleaming talons, a wrinkled body the size of an upturned rowing boat, a long, barbed tail, and a crocodile head. As I watched, two pairs of batlike wings on each side of the body moved slowly up and down in a breathing rhythm. The whole thing was absolutely terrifying.

"Strange," Helga said in a puzzled voice. "Looks just like the dragon they used in the last tournament. I killed that one myself, with a spear thrust to one of its hearts—but there was no Grand Prize offered for doing it. What game are the crooks at *Joustin' Time* playing now? I wonder if there's something in the contract that says you can't wear armor when you fight the dragon?"

She made no effort to keep her voice down and the dragon heard her. The barrel-sized head with its great jaws turned in our direction. Green eyes blinked open.

Waldo stayed at Helga's side, but I began to back away nervously.

"It's all right," Helga said. "You're quite safe, because it's chained up. You can see the fetters on each leg and around the body."

While she was still speaking, a roaring sound filled the air. Two roiling clouds of blue flame emerged from the dragon's nostrils and streaked in our direction. They narrowly missed Waldo and Helga, came close enough to me to singe my trousers, and incinerated the leather briefcase that I was holding. I dropped the smoking debris as Helga said, "So that's it!"

She sounded delighted as she went on, "It's a real first. They've talked about flame-breathing dragons in the games for years, but they never worked. The last one got the hiccups and blew itself to bits during the opening ceremonies."

"You plan to *fight* that thing?" I said, as I tried to remember what had been in my briefcase. The only thing I was sure of was a sandwich.

"Not me." Helga gave a booming laugh, reached down, and patted out the glowing remnants of my case with one enormous bare hand. "Not now that I know what it can do. I'm not crazy, you know! This time I'll just do the jousting and the hand-to-hand combat. I always do well with those."

I could believe that, even without a survey of the competition. As she bent over, sinews like ship's cables sprang into view in her arms and legs.

"But you'll see for yourself," she went on, "at the tournament. Now, I got what I came for, and I have to be going. Lots to do!" She led the way out of the dragon chamber and dumped a sheaf of papers into my hand as we reentered the front room. "Here's the contract. After what Waldo told me about you and your fine-print reading, I know you'll find a way around all the weasel-wording. See you at the royal games!"

She was gone, with a flash of bare limbs and the swirl of air that denoted the presence of a large moving mass. I turned on Waldo. "At the games? What did you tell her? What did you agree to?"

He wasn't looking at me. He was staring raptly after Helga.

"Isn't she the most gorgeous thing you ever saw in your life?" he said. "Those blue eyes, that perfect complexion. Did you see those cute dimples? On her face, too. It seems a shame to take payment for services from someone so wonderful."

Waldo's little weakness. He was smitten—again. It was time to tear up the contract, give back the fee, find a plausible excuse for non-performance, and make sure that we didn't go within a million miles of Helga Svensen and the *Joustin' Time* tournament.

Why didn't I follow my own sound instincts? Because our landlord had told me that he would wait at our office for payment and if he didn't get it he was going to crack my skull? Because when Waldo was in love, nothing in the known universe could prevent the romance from running its natural or unnatural course? Because Waldo was holding in his hand Helga's check for our services, more money than we had seen in months?

Yes, certainly. All of those.

But also because, after meeting Helga, I could see no way that anyone else in the games had a prayer of beating her. She was a shoo-in, an absolute cert. When we had paid the rent, a fair amount of Helga's fee would be left over. Back her to win at the jousting, take those winnings with reverse odds that she would *decline* to fight the dragon (there is no substitute for inside information), and watch our initial investment compound to the skies. . . .

I could see it, I could feel it, already I could taste the celebratory champagne.

As I was saying, every man has his little weakness.

* * *

Until forty years ago, Vesta was a nowhere place. Plenty of volatiles and a few hundred kilometers across, but still with surface gravity so low you could spit at escape velocity.

The gravity generators changed all that. Now Vesta, like much of the Asteroid Belt, was prime real estate. Add in the Vestans' liberal laws toward physical violence, and the Paladindrome had become one of the system's top sports venues.

Waldo, of course, wanted nothing better when we arrived at the 'drome than to seek out the divine Helga. I left him at the competitors' enclosure and set off on my own little excursion. I had called up the general plan of the Paladindrome on our trip from the Moon, and found that during the first half of the royal games the sword fighting, archery, and jousting would be the main attractions. They were all to take place on a central strip of beaten earth within the main oval of the 'drome, a straightway two hundred meters long and about fifty meters wide. All around the interior of the oval, temporary structures were being installed to support special needs. At this end of the strip were the armorers' tents, the stables, the silversmiths, the food concessions, the sideshows, and the competitors' private enclosure. I noticed that the dragon had his own awning and cage just beyond the end of the jousting strip, right next to the competitors.

I also noticed that, although occasionally goaded by employees of *Joustin' Time*, the dragon did not belch fire. It did not, in fact, do much of anything. Someone must be keeping the beast high on tranquilizers and low on methane until the second half of the games.

A deceptive practice, but it was working. Competitors strolled up, examined and occasionally poked the dragon with a mace or the blunt end of a pike, and at once went off to sign up for the great Slay-the-Dragon event.

The scene was colorful and chaotic, and it seemed likely to become more so once the tournament actually started. The competitors might be all female, but the workers and hangers-on were not. I saw a woman arguing furiously with an artificer wearing a cloth apron. As I walked by she ripped off her metal breast plate and threw it to the ground.

"Look at 'em," she screamed. "Look what it's doing to 'em. What do you think you are, a lemon squeezer? How am I supposed to fight for three days inside that thing?"

He growled back, "That's the size you told me." He reached a blackened hand toward her exposed anatomy. "If I was to hammer the metal out right here—"

"Touch that and you're dead!"

I averted my gaze and walked on. My own interests lay at the other end of the jousting strip, a part of the oval where you would find the seamier side of the tournament.

The first section I reached was home to the drinking tents. Judging from the sounds that came out of them they were already doing a thriving business. Fifty yards farther on, in the Free-For-All, I was accosted half a dozen times by beauties of every sex. I politely refused their service, including that of a woman who somehow realized that I was a lawyer and offered me "a contingency-basis go as a professional courtesy." Their advances were mildly annoying—but not nearly as irritating as what I found when I came to Bettors' Row. There I learned that shopping for odds would not be possible at the tournament. *Joustin' Time* controlled every betting station!

When you have no choice, you do what you have to. I went to one of the terminals and entered the name, *Helga Svensen*. The reply came back, *No such competitor*.

It was preposterous. I knew for a fact that she was competing in the jousting—I had seen, read, and approved her entry form. It took assistance from a cheerful lady bettor wearing a hat with the printed motto, *THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEBT*, to help me out.

"Helga Svensen," she said. "Oh, she fights in these games as the Warrior Queen. She's very good, but me, I fancy the Iron Maiden. More tricky."

I was already making a complex cascade bet for heats, semifinals, and final on the Warrior Queen, with a double on jousting and a parallel reverse bid for no dragon, so I didn't listen to her very closely. I vaguely pitied the Iron Maiden if she had to face Helga, and went on with my bet. A bet, I might add, at lousy odds. *Joustin' Time* not only controlled this part of the action, the odds that they offered guaranteed a substantial fraction of the stake for themselves. Also, to limit their possible losses they put a ceiling on bet rollover at eighty percent of winnings.

Even so, when you roll eighty percent of winnings back each time into a new stake, the total return grows fast. I made a note of the final payout and decided that Waldo and I were going to be rich. Of course, Helga had to win, but that was a foregone conclusion.

As I was receiving my bet confirmation, my neighbor nudged me. "Want to change your mind? That's the Iron Maiden over there."

Four terminals down, placing a bet of her own, stood an enormous black-haired woman. Studying her powerful frame I felt a moment of doubt. I stepped closer, made a point-by-point physical comparison from her bare toes to her braided crown, and was reassured. The Iron Maiden was big, no doubt about it; but Helga could take her.

My detailed inspection was unfortunately subject to misinterpretation. The Iron Maiden smiled down at me and clasped my arm in a powerful hand.

"You're new here, aren't you?" she said in a strong Scots accent. "You're a sweet-looking wee man. If you're interested in me you should speak up, an' we could find a private game of our own. I bet you never played 'hide the scepter.' You'd make a fine royal prince."

I made unintelligible gobbling noises, retrieved my arm, and fled to the relative safety of the wild animal show.

A wasted opportunity to play the prince, get close to Helga's top competition, learn her strengths and weaknesses, and adjust my bet accordingly?

You must be joking. It's moments like this that prove I'm not a compulsive gambler.

* * *

Joustin' Time may be run by a bunch of mercenary rogues, but one reason for their success is that they attend to details. The opening ceremony was a pageant in itself, flags flying bravely in the (artificial) breeze, heraldic trumpets blaring, false sun high in the 'drome's false blue sky, real hawthorn trees blooming all around the oval, and pipers in full regalia marching up and down. The final event of the opening was a massed parade of the competitors, four hundred brawny women kicking up the dust, strutting along clad in bright metal and little else. Had Waldo not been already in love, I think he would have died of a surfeit. As it was, he and I stood together among the spectators and agreed that even in such company Helga stood out for her size, power and vitality.

The first event was the individual sword fights. I have no taste for combat, and the sight of blood makes me weak at the knees. I took a stroll. I had to go all the way to the outer perimeter of the Paladindrome before the bloodthirsty howls and screams of the warriors behind me faded into the background. When I reached the wall it was a shock to look beyond the 'drome and see the surface of Vesta curving rapidly away, a stark and barren jumble of boulders, shadowed cliffs, and a handful of busy mining robots. The builders of the 'drome had made a wise choice when they decided that the area within would be as flat as the surface of Earth and as little like the Asteroid Belt as possible. I stood for a long time, the scenes in front of and behind me a thousand years apart.

When I returned, the tag-team sword fights were finishing and the dusty surface was being sprayed with water in preparation for the archery contests. I checked the scoreboards, keeping a wary eye open for off-the-mark practice arrows. As I had hoped and anticipated, Helga was performing magnificently. She had ripped through the heats, semifinals, and finals in short order, and stood in first place. Our winnings had already rolled over into her next event. Since Helga scorned all forms of entertainment involving no contact with the adversary, she had skipped the archery. I did the same, heading past the archers toward the tent where Helga should be preparing herself for the jousting.

At the end of the field I found the Iron Maiden in my path, grimy and sweaty and sitting cross-legged on the grass. I would have ignored her, but she was having none of that.

"Now then, my prince," she said, as I was walking past. "I've a bone to pick with you. You led me on before. You didn't tell me that you were sweet on Helga."

I had to stop at that. "Helga Svensen? I'm not sweet on her. Whatever made you think that?"

"I saw you during the parade. You hardly took your eyes off her."

"That's because I put a bet on her." I felt obliged to add, "And you're mixing me up with my partner, Waldo. He has this thing for her, he's the one who watches her all the time."

"No more than natural. She's a beautiful woman an' a very worr-thy opponent, an' she deserves a lot of respect." The Iron Maiden rose to her knees. "So you're not her feller, then. What's your name?"

"Henry. Henry Carver."

"An' I'm Flora McTavish. I think you an' me could be guid friends." She turned and leaned her body forward away from me. "For a start, would you grab my cuirass?"

"I beg your pardon?"

She pointed to a sort of leather breastplate sitting on the ground a few feet in front of her. "My cuirass. I canna quite reach it from here. Aye, and my greaves and cuish sitting next to it, if you wouldn't mind. It's time I got my things together and went over to the competitors' area."

The bits and pieces she asked for weighed a ton, and I wished that the designers of Vesta's local gravity control had cut a few corners. Flora took the armor from me one-handed and with no sign of effort. "Will ye be seeing Helga an' your friend, then?"

"I'm on my way there now."

"Then mebbe ye can give her this, as my tribute to a great competitor." She reached into her generous cleavage and pulled out a silver flask. "Pure malt whiskey, thirty-five years old an' wi' a taste to make a dead man dance."

I was more than happy to have a reason to escape. The flask went into my pocket and I was away. Flora called something about getting together later, but I paid little attention. I was looking ahead, seeking Helga's colors in among hundreds of others.

I didn't see them. What I did see was Waldo, sitting simpering outside one of the tents.

"Where's Helga?" I said as I came up to him.

He nodded toward the flap. "Inside. She's putting her armor on—and she promised that after the jousting I can help her to take it off."

"This is from one of her friends." I held out the flask of whiskey. "I'll just give it to her."

Waldo was having none of that. "I'll give it to her. You wait here."

He tapped on the cloth flap of the tent, waited about five milliseconds, and disappeared inside. I heard an exclamation, a giggle, and some whispering. About a minute later Waldo emerged.

"She says she'll have a drop now, and share any that's left with us after the jousting. She asked us to go now and make sure her horse is saddled and ready."

I couldn't tell if a horse saddle was put on backwards or perhaps even upside down, while Waldo makes me appear as an equestrian expert. But apparently Helga's word was law. We headed off together toward the stables.

"She asked who gave you the whiskey," Waldo said when we were halfway there. "But I couldn't tell her."

"I should have gone into the tent. I could have told her who it came from."

"Well, you never told me."

"You never asked."

"You still could have mentioned it."

"I didn't see any reason to." Rather than bickering indefinitely, I added, "The whiskey came from a woman called Flora."

"Never heard of her." Waldo was sulking.

"She doesn't use that name as a competitor. She fights as the Iron Maiden."

Waldo stopped in midstep. "Are you *sure* it came from the Iron Maiden?"

"Positive. She handed the flask to me herself."

"But the Iron Maiden is in second place to Helga. Didn't you see the scoreboard? They're very close, and that means they'll meet as opponents in the jousting."

We stared at each other for a fraction of a second, then set off for Helga's tent at a run.

I arrived four steps ahead of Waldo, barged in without asking, and was relieved to see the giant figure of Helga sitting over by the far wall. She leaned against a tent pole, and her armor was spread on the floor in front of her.

"It's all right," I said to Waldo as he rushed in. "She's—"

Her eyes were closed. She had not moved.

Waldo howled. "She's dead!"

"No." I could see she was breathing. "She's drugged." I picked up the flask and shook it. Half empty. "Come on, we have to wake her up."

Waldo had subsided to the floor in his relief. "No need for that. She can sleep it off."

Sometimes I wonder which universe Waldo lives in. I glanced at my watch. "In half an hour, Helga has to take part in the jousting. We have all our money on her to win."

"What about the sword fight winnings?"

"Article Twelve: Should a competitor fail to appear at the allocated time, blah-blah-blah—unless Helga fights the Iron Maiden, we lose a fortune."

"She can't fight. Look at her."

Helga was snoring peacefully, her mouth open to reveal pearly and perfect teeth.

"She has to," I said grimly. "Come on."

For the next five minutes we tried shouting, pinching, pouring cold water on her head, burning cloth under her nose. Not a twitch. After we tried and failed to lift her to her feet, so that we could walk her up and down the tent, I realized that Waldo was right. Helga couldn't fight.

We were doomed.

I paced up and down the tent myself. We had twenty minutes. Helga *had* to fight.

But Helga didn't have to *win*. All she had to do was appear. If she fought and lost, we would still have

twenty percent of our winnings, the amount they refused to let us roll over into the next bet.

I turned to Waldo. "Come on. We have to do this quickly."

"Do what?"

"Get you into Helga's armor. You have to fight in her place."

"What?!"

"You heard." I handed him the helmet. "You don't have to fight well. It's enough just to show up."

"I can't pretend I'm Helga. I look nothing like her. For heaven's sake, Henry, I have a *mustache*."

"You'll be inside her suit of armor, with a visor covering your face. There won't be an inch of you showing."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"I'm not half her size. I'd rattle around inside her armor like a pea in a can. For you, though, it won't be a bad fit."

"Henry, you've gone mad. I can't do it." He folded his arms. "I won't do it."

Twenty minutes. Fortunes have been made in twenty minutes, empires lost, cities destroyed, whole nations doomed or saved.

I sat down opposite Waldo. After five years in law school and four times that as a practicing attorney, it was time to see how much I had learned of the gentle arts of persuasion.

I began, "Think how grateful Helga will be . . ."

* * *

He didn't look bad, not bad at all.

Admittedly—I squinted into the sun—Waldo was close to two hundred meters away at the other end of the straightway, so that the finer details of the way he sat on the horse were probably lost to me. I hoped he had paid attention to my last cautionary words. "Don't say a word to *anyone*, no matter who they are. After the jousting is done, ride this way. I'll take care of the horse, you go back inside the tent and take off the armor. If anyone comes in after that, you tell them Helga needed to sleep after a hard day."

It might work. It *could* work. Waldo just had to ride the length of the field without falling off, then he would be back at the exhibit area where he had started. The competitors' tents were close by, and Helga's was near the front. He could ride the horse right up to it.

I hoped that he could see. Helga's armor had been made for her, half a head taller. Stretching up as high as he could, Waldo had been able to get one of his eyes level with a nose hole. He had complained about that quite a bit. On the other hand, what did he need to see? The horses had been trained well, and I knew from watching previous contestants that a straight path was the easiest one for the animal.

The Iron Maiden would start from close to where I stood. I wished I could see the expression on the face behind the visor. There had been no more of the "fine sweet prince" talk, and my bet was that she was scowling and wondering where her plan to nobble Helga had failed.

The blue flag was slowly being raised. When it fluttered down, the two contestants would begin to ride toward each other, first at a canter and then at a full gallop.

There was one other detail that I preferred not to think about. Each rider was armed with a lance about twenty-five feet long. Even after watching some of the other jousters, I didn't know how the cumbersome thing was supposed to be supported. I finally lashed Waldo's weapon to the saddle in one place and tucked the rounded haft between his arm and breastplate. The chance that he would hit anything with it was negligible, but at least the point could not drop too far and convert the event to the pole vault.

The chance that the Iron Maiden would damage Waldo was another matter. I had downplayed the risk, telling him that no one in the jousting had been killed. I did not mention that there had been a couple of very violent dismounts. It would only send him off on another tirade of protest.

The blue flag was starting down. That made little difference, because Waldo's horse had decided to use its own best judgment on the matter and started to canter forward a few seconds earlier.

I heard a loud curse from inside the helmet of the Iron Maiden. She dug her heels into her own horse and it whinnied and jerked forward.

The crowd became silent, the only sound the thundering hooves. It did not take a connoisseur to detect a certain difference of styles between the two contestants. The Iron Maiden sat rock-steady on her horse and the tip of her lance moved as though it was fixed to a straight line parallel to the ground.

By contrast, I could see occasional daylight between Waldo and his saddle. The end of his lance described random motion within a vertical circle twenty-five feet ahead of him. The radius of that circle increased as the horse moved from a canter to a full gallop.

I had never before realized how fast horses can run. The horses that I bet on seldom seem to manage more than an arthritic crawl toward the winning post. But Waldo and the Iron Maiden were approaching each other at an impossible speed.

They were forty meters apart—twenty—a crash of metal—they were somehow past each other, and the spectators were screaming in horror. The tip of the Iron Maiden's lance had struck Waldo squarely in the middle of his helmet, ripping it loose from the rest of his armor. As the helmet rolled away across the dirt, the headless knight galloped on.

Rode toward me. Rode straight at me. As I threw myself out of the way, convinced that the decapitated rider was about to lance Helga as she lay sleeping inside her tent, the horse at the last moment veered off. The lance leading the way, horse and burden missed the competitors' enclosure and plunged into the next one.

I couldn't see behind the awning separating the enclosures, but the noise that reached me was frightful.

* * *

It took a couple of weeks to arrange the hearing, long enough for Waldo to be out of the hospital. He claimed that he ought to come to court and present part of our arguments, but I dissuaded him on the grounds that his broken and wired jaw denied him his customary verbal clarity.

The rest of his head was intact. Unable to maintain a high enough position in Helga's suit when on horseback, he had slipped down to peer out through a slit in the neck piece. He had been untouched by the lance that removed the helmet, but the force of his final collision did considerable damage.

I expected to be alone in the court, except for the judge and the team of seven attorneys representing *Joustin' Time*. When I heard another group of people slip into the back as the proceedings began, I was too busy listening to the *Joustin' Time* claims to take notice of new arrivals.

Their list of purported offenses and damages was impressive. The lead attorney, Duncan Whiteside, a man of earnest demeanor and awkward body language, took four and a half hours to deliver it, but I could boil everything down to this:

* Messrs. Burmeister and Carver had illegally taken

part in a tournament organized by *Joustin' Time*.

* Messrs. Burmeister and Carver had by their actions forced cancellation of the jousting contest.

* Messrs. Burmeister and Carver, by killing the tournament dragon, had forced the cancellation

of the entire second half of the program.

Both compensatory and punitive damages were sought.

When Duncan Whiteside finally dribbled to a halt, Judge Solomon looked at me and said, "You may now respond to these charges."

"Thank you, Your Honor. I will be brief."

I had seen the judge's eyes rolling during the previous presentation. Hubert Solomon was a man of famously few words, and he admired the same trait in others. I figured I had five good minutes and I did not intend to go a second over.

"Your Honor," I said, "I would draw your attention to Exhibit Seven, the contract between Helga Svensen and *Joustin' Time Enterprises*."

"I have it."

"Article Nineteen, paragraph four, clause five. Let me read it aloud, since the print is awfully small. `The terms and conditions of this contract will apply *in toto* to any designated representative of the contractor.' Your honor, Burmeister and Carver are designated representatives of Helga Svensen. My colleague, Waldo Burmeister, represented Helga Svensen in the jousting tournament. I would simply make the comment that were an attorney *not* deemed to be a designated representative of a client, the entire legal profession would be irreparably damaged."

"Your point is noted. Continue."

"Burmeister and Carver, jointly and severally, had no part in the decision to cancel the jousting tournament. Therefore we cannot be regarded as responsible for such a decision."

"Noted. Continue."

"Now, as to the dragon—"

"Objection!" Naturally, from Duncan Whiteside.

Judge Solomon had an odd frown on his face as he stared at me. "Mr. Carver, this is a serious matter. I hope that you are not proposing to argue that Mr. Burmeister did not kill the dragon."

"Not at all. Your Honor, it is a central point of our argument that Mr. Burmeister's lance undeniably killed the dragon. Now let me draw your attention to Article Seventeen of the contract. Again I quote: `Any *bona fide* representative of a participating team, such representative or representatives to be termed hereinafter collectively *the contestant*, may enter into single combat with the dragon. Should the contestant slay or otherwise defeat the dragon, the contestant will win the Grand Prize.' Since Mr. Burmeister was a representative of Helga Svensen, and killed the dragon, the Grand Prize should be paid—"

"Objection!" The lead attorney for *Joustin' Time* was on his feet. "Your Honor, the dragon was *asleep* when Mr. Burmeister killed it."

"Mr. Whiteside, you must allow Mr. Carver to finish his sentences, otherwise—"

"Your Honor, the dragon-slaying part of the tournament had not even begun."

"Mr. Whiteside, you must also allow *me* to finish my sentences." Hubert Solomon was enjoying the tussle. Otherwise he would have bitten off Duncan Whiteside's head. He nodded to me. "Mr. Carver, proceed."

"Thank you. Your Honor, I have little to add. Nothing in the contract mentions the time or circumstances in which the dragon must be slain in order for a contestant to win the Grand Prize. Mr. Burmeister slew the dragon, and therefore won the Grand Prize. The amount owed to us is given in Exhibit Two."

"Very good." The judge abruptly stood up. "I now call a ten-minute recess."

He swept out. I knew where he was going—to private chambers for a good laugh.

I felt an urge to do the same. I headed for the exit, carefully avoiding the dismayed eyes of the *Joustin' Time* team. They were not complete fools. They knew they had ten minutes to agree among themselves on the terms of a mediated settlement.

Near the door I came to the group of people who had arrived late. It offered the impression of a group, but actually it was just Helga Svensen and Flora McTavish.

Together! Clad today in light, springtime armor, they sat side by side smiling at the world.

"Mr. Carver." Helga reached out and enveloped my hand in hers. "You were brilliant, totally brilliant."

"You were." Flora beamed at me. "Helga told me you'd do it, but I didn't see how. You're a genius!"

"Not really." I coughed modestly. "It's far from over, you know. And all I did was read the fine print."

"But *how* you read it!" Flora's eyes were shining. "Would you be willing to read *my* fine print?"

While I was pondering the possible implications of that question, Helga stood up. "I'm going to leave the two of you to talk. Is it too soon for me to go and see Waldo?"

I thought of my partner, splinted and swathed from head to toe. In his present condition I didn't think that even Waldo could get into too much trouble. "You can go and see him," I said, "but you won't see much of him."

"I'll tell him things are going well." She thundered out, shaking the floor with her girlish tread.

I turned to Flora. "I don't understand. She brought you here. She's *talking* to you."

"Of course she is. Helga and I are best friends."

"But you drugged her and tried to kill her!"

"Oh, nonsense. Drugged her a wee bit, aye, but that's all in the game. I knew it wasn't Helga, the minute I saw that lance wobbling about. I thought she was snoring in her tent, and somebody had tied a stuffed dummy up there on her horse."

Stuffed, perhaps, and far too frequently for someone on a perennial diet; but Waldo was no dummy.

"There's a big tournament coming up on Ceres," Flora went on. "I'd like you to be there with me."

I could not talk any longer. A buzz of activity at the front of the room announced that Judge Solomon had entered and Duncan Whiteside was already stepping toward him, an anxious expression on his face.

I ran for the steps, calling over my shoulder, "Go there, and do what?"

I *think* that Flora, behind me, said, "Read my fine print." But it sounded an awful lot like, "Be my fine prince."