



ILLUSTRATION BY PETER MULLEN

DARA'S TALE

By MARK RIGNEY

WHEN the ancient sorcerer had exhausted his supply of village children, he cast his thoughts outward and sought his way deep into the forest, to the caves and gorges where so many locals had fled with their brood, and he called on Dara, just then thirteen years of age, to bend to his will and heed his summons. Come Dara did, even though he'd found her in the sleeping hours, and she rose and left her hut and stumbled toward his tower, arriving at dawn in her torn and ruined shift, her bare arms and legs a landscape of nicks, cuts, and bruises.

"Master," she said, her voice toneless, barely her own. She held her head cocked sideways, as if listening for a tune long since lost. "I am come as you require."

Not six hours later, Dara's parents, having discovered their daughter's absence and suspecting its cause, made their own way through the wildwood forest and charged the tower door, yelling and crying in their grief, but the door had vanished, and they found only smooth, polished stone, and they went away in wonderment, forgetting with every step they took the very existence of the most precious object in their lives, their one and only child. Such was the sorcerer's power. Such was his dominion over those he chose to deflect.

But he did not reckon on skin-and-bones Dara, who had long anticipated that the sorcerer might succeed in searching her out, and had slept every night with wickweed in her ears, to both stopper sound and hold her dreams in place, and she arrived at the sorcerer's tower more mindful than he supposed. Nor did she give him any cause to doubt her, during that first quiet fortnight when she tended his ovens, prepared his meals, and swept the cobwebs from the corners. He watched her, of course, but kept his distance. "My needs run deeper," he said, staring at her with his black, luminous eyes, "and I shall take my fill soon enough."

Without precisely knowing the sorcerer's plan, she knew its outcome, for the other children of the village had been returned from the tower one by one in the year since his arrival, and while they came back sound enough of body, the light behind their eyes had dimmed. It was as if whatever vitality animated their innermost selves had been stripped away, put to other purposes.

After three weeks in her captor's employ, she dared to ask a single question. "Please, sir," she said, her eyes downcast, his chamber pot in hand, "how old *are* you?"

"Ah, girl," he replied, "I am more ancient than the tallest tree you've ever encountered. And mark me, I shall live longer yet. Longer than the hills and rivers. Longer, perhaps, than sense itself. And you, quite soon, shall help me."

But Dara did not wait to see what magics her aged captor would use to slice away her energy and essence. That night, while the sorcerer slept, she plunged a stout steel kitchen knife straight through his heart, and, in a fountain of gushing blood, ended his reign forever.

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BY and large, Dahnica Siljen approved of "Dara's Tale." Indeed, of all the stories she had access to, each one penned by hand on enormous slabs of flatbark, "Dara's Tale" was the one she returned to most often. She thought of Dara's bravery as she picked berries in the meadows; she re-lived Dara's sensible planning while mucking out the horse stalls and pulling slugs off the lettuces, a job she truly loathed. (What in the world was worse than the smell and feel of slugs?) She drifted through "Dara's Tale" at meal times, at dances, and just before sinking, in her own warm attic bed, into well-earned sleep. She adored Dara's pluck, and she reveled in the neat logic of the sorcerer's violent comeuppance. Here was a villain that had thrived on dweomers and charms, but had they been sufficient to guard him against steel, a blade driven home by a hero with right on her side and conviction to spare?

She did wonder, though, what Dara would have done had steel failed to win the day. Had Dara gone to that tower armed with a back-up plan, and if so, what was it? On that score, "Dara's Tale" remained frustratingly mute.

But that was her only serious criticism, and besides, Dahnica was Dara's age exactly, thirteen and growing like a weed. True, she was still as bony as a twig, just like her story-book hero, with not much yet to attract the older boys. She thought perhaps her hair was neither straight enough nor dark enough (her mother's hair was black and very straight), and the mole on her cheek tempted her daily to dig it out (a sharp stick would surely do), and she was quite convinced that she had the knoggiest elbows in the whole of creation. On the other hand, she considered her snub nose to be a decent feature, and she liked the authority she heard in her voice. She often wondered if Dara looked and sounded much the same — if Dara, too, had a hatred of shoes but loved a scarlet ribbon in her hair, and knew, as she herself did, how to handle her father's tough yew bow. That, the boys noticed. Her shooting was a subject of regular gossip, though she doubted that even her closest friends were aware that at the last two traveling fairs, she'd made sure, through subtle, last-minute slip-ups, to let the boys win.

Elbows and all, Dahnica spent most of her days helping her parents, Sudik and Larissa, in managing Outerpost's only inn, and then, when time allowed, soaking up knowledge from anyone who cared to offer it. The village lacked a school, but it was the custom for each adult to teach according to their particular expertise, and so Dahnica had access to the smithy, and to Bornis, who ran it. She shoed her first horse (with stern, muscular supervision) on her eleventh birthday. Likewise, she spent long hours with Rosebriar, the stout, laughing chandler, for Rosebriar had the best collection of books in the region, "Dara's Tale" included. And, of course there was Rindicar, the retired knight who polished his armor once a week without fail and displayed his best sword in the public house, in an honored spot over the hearth. Rindicar taught her the only thing she liked better than reading: sword play.

At first, he'd been reluctant. "You don't have the weight," he'd said, eying her gawkinsess, but she'd made him a berry tart every First Day for five weeks, and he relented. "Knives first," he said. "Something to suit your size. No, give me no frowns and thunderheads. Knives."

Her introductory lesson with Sir Rindicar (a title he eschewed except on feast days, when he was asked to lead toasts) had been in the summer of her tenth year, and now, three years later, she had moved through every weapon in Rindicar's arsenal, leaving out only the three heaviest: a pitted mace with an oversize head, the fat broadsword (notched by the edge of an enemy shield), and a war hammer that even its owner admitted was too huge and clumsy for actual use. Dahnica's failed attempts to lift it were a source of ongoing hilarity for both student and teacher.

Late that winter, the scurriers came, a pox not seen for two generations. At first, they came only in ones and twos, and were axed or pummeled with shovels easily enough, and their lithe, six-legged bodies were a curiosity for all ages. Their gray-and-white pelts, though thick against the cold, were bristly and course, hardly worth the trouble of skinning, and they had a foul smell, as if they'd spent their lives feasting only on offal. A nuisance, according to Elder Krehvin's official proclamation, but nothing more. Seven scurriers in a ten-day span was hardly more remarkable than a gully-washing flood come springtime.

But then, on a lean and bitter day in the Month of the Headwinds, a wave of scurriers swept out of the forest, more than could be counted, a ripple of twisting, furred motion, low to the ground and headed for the storehouses. A shout went up from the fields as the woodcutters and post-setters took to their heels. The alarm bell was rung for the first time since the stable fire, and for the next hour, it was all the villagers could do to form a human barricade around the granary and beat the scurriers back with every weapon that came to hand, from buckets to pitchforks to torches and bricks. Omnivorous and starving, the scurriers bit and clawed and spat, but it was chiefly their accumulated weight — the sheer mass of their writhing, furious charges — that threatened any real harm. In the end, the line held. The stores and seed were saved; the scurriers, numbering in the thousands, were dragged by their bushy tails to a hastily built bonfire at the edge of town. The burning went on for a day and a night, and the stink, even upwind, could not be escaped. As the flames leaped and the fat from the dead scurriers dripped and bubbled, Dahnica overheard Elder Krehvin say to Bornis, "If I didn't know better, I'd say someone was raising the damn things, and then one day, they opened the pens."

"Aye," said Bornis, "but who would farm scurriers?"

Not a half-week later, with the villagers still nursing their wounds, and word not yet back from the distant capital on what could have caused such a sudden infestation, Garellin made his appearance. He arrived in a boxy wagon piled to the skies with massive trunks and parcels, a load so heavy that it required a team of six muscular cart horses. The horses' tack was done up with red blazes and golden studs, and Garellin himself, after halting his wagon by the village well, stood up on the driver's seat, spread out his arms as if he could embrace the cosmos, and called in a booming, stentorian voice, "People of Outerpost, assemble yourselves!"

This should have been met with bemusement at best. A stranger, calling for a meeting, with sleet spitting from low, monotone clouds, and a nipping wind keeping most everyone indoors? Ridiculous. Impertinent, too. How many even heard? This, for weeks, remained a matter of conjecture, as a good many who surely weren't present later insisted that they were. Everyone wanted to claim that they were there from the beginning.

However it was called, a meeting took place, and fully three quarters of the village crammed into the common hall that night. Elder Krehvin made the introductions, but it was Garellin who steered the proceedings from start to finish. Dahnica typically watched meeting-work from the front row, her attention unwavering — "hawk-like," as Krehvin was fond of saying — but when Garellin stood atop the hay bales that served as a stage, Dahnica slipped deeper into the crowd, overcome by a sudden urge not to be noticed, not to be seen. She took up a post in the most distant possible corner, huddled into the join between two cider barrels, and kept her hands from covering her ears only with a concerted effort.

Garellin, dressed in heavy dark woolens that somehow erased his belly and made him look svelte, took in the crowd and said, "In all my travels, I have never heard a bad word said of Outerpost, or indeed, of your entire region. You have done your forbears proud, and my sole purpose in joining you here is to ensure that your legacy continues unblemished into a bright and promising future. But know this: the scurriers are abroad throughout the land this season. If, friends, we wish to survive the winter with skin on our bones and food in our bellies, we must look to our defenses."

Under the joint direction of Elder Krehvin and Garellin, the village divided itself into teams devoted to raising fortifications. The forests began giving up whole trees rather than just limbs, and around the village, up went a stockade wall. Not fool-proof, said Garellin, but a serious impediment to invaders, scurriers included. Tapped by Garellin, Rindicar came out of retirement and began drilling a volunteer militia in the market square, an exercise Dahnica and all her peers attended whenever chores allowed, and she quickly grew proficient in formations, marching, and responding in unison. To her dismay, her parents joined, too (where on earth did they find the time?), and even began signing up for sentry duty.