

Eternal Watermill

by Jeremiah Zimmerman

Crackling and warmth from the small campfire did little to comfort Uedimer. The light reflecting off the forest trees was only slightly better. Overhead, faint rustling of branches in the breeze sparked his imagination and gave no comfort. His three comrades slept nearby. They did not comfort him either. The cool early autumn air made things worse. Uedimer pulled his blanket tighter around him, fighting chills.

The traveler thought about waking one of the others to talk to and ease his mind. It would not be Tridnif. All he would talk about was his sister and speculate on why she came to the forest so far from home, never returning. Uedimer was now wondering the same. When Tridnif first found out where Brissmarria went, he was eager to help his friend bring her home. Now he wondered what brought the maiden out to the wilderness, so close to her wedding day.

Everyone in the village thought Brissmarria ran to the Temple to avoid marriage, though Uedimer thought otherwise. Tridnif and Uedimer had been friends most of their lives and had known the younger girl since she was born. The girl seemed happy about her engagement and her father was proud of the arrangement.

No, he thought, *Something else brought her out here.*

Uedimer peered into the darkness, listening. He was not familiar with the woods or the wilderness, neither was Rikjae. Uedimer would not wake him either. He was a village guard and had few conversational interests. There was little he could talk about. The only reason he was there was for his proficiency with a sword. None of the others having any, being farmers and milkers.

That left Gaffin. He at least was someone Uedimer could talk with about anything except the reason they tracked deep in the forest. Gaffin was a farmer like Tridnif, but his interests went beyond planting and harvesting.

Uedimer was about to nudge the short, stocky man when off to his left, a faint movement caught his attention. Well beyond the main light of the fire, he could see a figure in a pale colored gown. She strolled between trees, the manors seeming thoughtful.

“Miss,” he called and rose. The figure halted and stared. At least he assumed she stared. It was too far to make out her face. “Nothing to be alarmed about. We are looking for...”

The woman turned left, trotting away. Uedimer heard the shifting of his comrades, as they got up out of the bedrolls.

“Don’t run.” Uedimer yelled out. He started trotting after her, but tripped over an exposed root, falling to the soft mossy soil, his face in a fern. The milker pushed himself up to his knees. “We just want to talk to you.”

“Who are you hollering at?” Rikjae asked as he stepped up next to the fallen masle, sword in his right hand.

Uedimer took the other outreached hand and stood. “There’s a woman out here. She went that way.”

“Brissmarria?” Tridnif asked.

“No, I don’t think so. This woman was a bit shorter, with red hair, I think. It was too dark to tell for sure.”

The guard walked out to where Uedimer pointed. “I can’t find prints, but it’s too dark to see properly. We’ll have to follow the tracks in the morning.”

“I’m not waiting,” Tridnif stated and started rolling up his blankets.

Rikjae returned to the fire. “Whoever that was is obviously from around here and familiar with the forest. I didn’t hear her running, I didn’t even see her.”

“She was there,” Uedimer stated.

“I believe you, but it’s no good for any of us to go trudging through the woods in the dark. Besides, I had an ominous dream last night and feel uncomfortable leaving the camp.”

“I had a similar dream,” Tridnif reflected. “Some man threatened us, but it’s just a dream. I’m going after my sister.”

Tridnif tied the blanket to his pack after pulling out a small oil flask. “Who knows how far she’ll be in the morning. I’m not waiting.” Finding a solid branch he ripped off the few twigs. “Gaffin, those leggings you tore the other day; give them to me.”

Gaffin was standing near the edge of the light. He had said nothing. That was one thing Uedimer liked about him. He was quiet most of the time. When he did talk, it was more interesting than most people. “Rikjae is correct, we should not be following her blindly.”

“Give me the leggings and we won’t be blind.”

“A torch won’t help much. The moonlight is not getting down to us and those roots Uedimer fell over are everywhere.”

“You can stay. I’m going.”

“We don’t even know if she knows anything about Brissmarria.”

“We won’t know if we don’t ask her.” Tridnif dropped his pack to the ground. “Fine,” he muttered, as he opened it, “I’ll use my spare tunic.”

“Don’t do that. There in my pack, but we should wait.”

“I’m not going to.”

“I see that.” Gaffin pulled out the torn leggings, tossing them to Tridnif, who further tore it into strips. Gaffin shook his head and packed his items.

“You’re not going with him are you?,” Uedimer asked.

“We all are.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s going and we have to stay together.”

In sort order, the four were walking through the wood in the direction the woman had run, a makeshift torch in each of their hands. Only one was lit for the time being.

“Are you sure she came in this direction?” Rikjae asked. “I don’t think anyone came this way.”

“She did. I think she was small, maybe too small to leave prints.”

“I’m not a tracker,” Tridnif admitted, “but as soft as everything is, there should be something. There’s not even a broken twig.”

“This is where I saw her go,” Uedimer confirmed.

The group wandered on. Without the moons to help judge time, they did not know how long they had been walking when they came upon a wide stream.

“At least we know she is either that way or that,” Rikjae commented, looking up and down the stream.

“Now where?” Tridnif asked Uedimer.

“Why ask me?”

“You saw her.”

“I saw her come this direction.”

“We’ll go downstream,” Rikjae declared, heading that direction.

“Why?” Uedimer asked, following.

“I think it feeds out of the forest. If there is going to be anyone, it would be on the edge, not deeper in.”

“Then we should go up,” Tridnif advised. “My sister is in the forest, not on the edge.”

“We need to find someone to talk to. We could be here for days wondering around and our food is running low. I want to talk to locals before getting too lost in this forest.” Rikjae headed downstream with the other close behind.

It was still dark when they reached a watermill. It was old with moss on the roof. Old as it was, the mechanics seem to function. The wheel turned freely with the stream. The group had gone though seven torches and had nearly depleted their oil supply.

Uedimer was glad to see the mill, the first sign of civilization he had seen for days. The others stopped.

Gaffin commented, “Something about this feels familiar. It wasn’t in my dream, but it still feels that way.”

Rikjae looked at the man. “You didn’t say you had the dream,”

“I didn’t feel comfortable about saying anything,” Gaffin replied. With a glance to the others, “I suppose I’m still not comfortable about it.”

Not sure what to say about their shared dreams, Uedimer went to the door of the small thatched cottage attached to the mill, knocking. He knocked again, louder and then again.

“One moment, one moment. Who is calling at this late hour?”

“Sorry sir,” the milker called through the door. “I’m Uedimer of Gadholmit and my friends and I—”

The door opened. “Where?”

“Gadholmit.”

“Where is that?” The torchlight revealed a rough looking middle-aged man.

“It is far from here, a small village. We were following a woman.”

“There’s no woman here. Now, go away.” The man closed the door. There was an audible latch.

Uedimer stared at the closed door, whispering, “I didn’t say she was here.” He refrained from pounding on the door.

“There’s a path over here,” Gaffin pointed out.

Uedimer went with the others to check out the rutted small road, not much larger than a path, but wide enough for carts to bring the grain and return with flour.

“Well, I guess we’ll follow it,” Rikjae announced.

Follow it they did, mostly without light. The last of the oil was gone. The four walked into a wide clearing with frosted fields, a hamlet to one side.

“I was hoping for a pub,” Gaffin grumbled. “I could do with a drink.”

“This place is too small for a pub,” Rikjae stated, equally disappointed, “and it’s too early for these people to be moving about.”

Uedimer looked east where the sky showed the first hints of morning light, then to one of the chimneys puffing smoke. Faint flickers of firelight danced on heavy drapes.

“There’s someone up,” the milker stated in frustration. He went to the door and knocked lightly.

The door opened after a delay. A bearded man held it ajar. A woman with long locks of dark hair stood behind him.

“Excuse me, sir,” Uedimer began. “We traveled a long way in search of this man’s sister.”

“Why come here?” the man asked, but Uedimer saw a reaction on the woman’s face.

“Did you see her? Her name is Brissmarria. She has silky dark hair and a pointy nose, like his,” indicating Tridnif.

“Not here. She did not come here,” the man stated.

“You know something and so does your woman.”

“No.” Shaking his head. “We don’t know anything about her.”

Tridnif stepped up on the stoop. “You do know something,” he declared, his voice rising. “Tell me. Where is she?”

“We don’t know. We didn’t see her.”

Tridnif pushed past Uedimer, grabbing the man’s rough tunic. His patience had worn thin from travel, the cold and lack of answers to what seemed a simple questions. “You’re lying. Tell me where she is.”

Uedimer clasped his friend’s shoulder, saying, “Release him,” at the same time the woman cried out, “He doesn’t know. Neither do I.”

Tridnif didn’t let go. “You know something.” He pushed the man into the house, stepping in with him, not releasing his grip. “Woman,” he addressed the femella firmly. “Tell me what you know.”

She didn’t speak. The bearded man did though. “If your sister went into the forest, then it is too late. Go while you can.”

Uedimer and the others entered the house. Gaffin closed the door, addressing the masle resident, “Sir, we are not leaving until we understand what’s going on and we find Brissmarria.”

“You won’t find her. She is gone if she went in the forest.”

“We were in the forest,” Uedimer stated, then told Tridnif firmly, “Let him go. He’s not going anywhere.” After his friend loosened his grip, the captive backed away a couple steps. Uedimer continued. “We were at the old mill up the path. We followed a woman.”

“No one wanders the forest at night,” the man declared. “It’s not safe.”

“Well, I saw her and she ran when she saw me.”

“You all saw her?” the woman asked. Her husband gave her a sharp look.

“Who is she? What’s going on?”

“Nothing you should stay for. It’s not safe for you. Leave before trouble comes.”

“What would happen? What are you worried about?”

Tridnif took a step to the femella. “As I told you, we are not leaving without my sister.”

“There is nothing you can do for her. If she’s in the forest, she’s beyond your help. If you go after her, you will not return.”

“I’m bringing her back home,” Tridnif stated bluntly.

“Who is the man at the mill?” Gaffin added. “What would he know?”

“He’ll tell you nothing,” the resident masle stated. “Don’t go there again.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only answer I’m giving you.”

Tridnif grabbed at the man, who backed from reach. “Why, you—”

Uedimer leapt in between. “We’re going now.” The statement was directed towards Tridnif more than the residents.

“No we’re not,” Tridnif replied. “Not until—”

“Yes we are,” Rikjae injected.

The guard took hold of Tridnif and together with Uedimer and Gaffin they went outside without another word to the man and woman of the house.

“Why are we going?” Tridnif asked, shaking the two hands loose.

“They are terrified,” Uedimer replied. “They are scared of something.”

“They’re scared of me and I was going to find out what they’re hiding.”

“Uedimer is correct,” Gaffin added. “They are scared and it is not you. They don’t know enough for us to cause them more trouble. The man at the mill on the other hand knows much more and he is definitely hiding something.”

Uedimer nodded. “We should go back there.”

“I doubt that we should, but we will.”

The way was lighter. By the time the four reached the watermill, the forest seemed bright. Brighter it may have been, but not warmer. The air was still cold.

Uedimer went to the door again. There was no answer. He tried to open it. It would not budge. He began pounding.

“Over here,” Rikjae called out from the far side of the mill. “There’s a footpath.”

Uedimer knocked once more, hard, then walked around the mill. There was a small single log bridge notched flat on top. It led to the head of the small trail. “Not used much, is it?”

“No, but it was used this morning, I’d say.”

Tridnif stepped on the path first and marched into the woods on the far side of the stream. The others followed. The path wound around trees, some very large. The shadows of the sunlight showed that Tridnif kept a fast pace for a good hour. Then, he stopped.

Rikjae pulled up next to him. Uedimer and Gaffin could only look over their shoulders at a stone house in the clearing. In front of the wide abode was a well-kept garden, still in its winter nap. They could see the miller standing near the sturdy wooden door of the house. In front of him was a clean shaven man, having thin, long, well-groomed hair, wearing thick brown leggings and tunic, both a darker brown than his hair.

Rikjae whispered, "That's him, the man in the dream."

"I'm aware of that." Tridnif replied softly.

The clean shaven masle called out to the four, "You've been warned."

"Where's my sister?" Tridnif asked.

"You've been warned. You should leave."

"I'm not leaving without my sister."

Rikjae slid his sword out slowly. "You didn't answer his question. Everyone seems to be avoiding it. Where is his sister?"

"That sword will only do you harm. Put it away before you get hurt."

"You should be worried about the sword."

"I'm not. I am worried about your health. You don't seem to have control of yourself."

"I'm doing fine," Rikjae declared, though Uedimer noticed that the sword arm was shaking slightly. "Now answer the question. Where is Brissmarria?"

"Who?"

"I believe you know. She's Tridnif's sister."

The clean-shaven man did not reply. His eyes remained locked with Rikjae. Slowly the guard's sword raised, angling for his own throat. Uedimer reached out to catch Rikjae's arm, but the man at the door flicked a finger and an unseen blow to Uedimer's chest threw him back.

When he rose, Rikjae laid on the path, blood soaking the soil. Tridnif was crouched over him, holding a hand on the open throat. Tridnif wanted to say something, but could not. No words would form. He knew nothing would save Rikjae. With shaking hands Tridnif picked up the blade and stood. He only got two steps when he was forced to stop.

"You're less proficient than your friend and you saw how clumsy he was with it."

"You killed him."

"He did that to himself."

"You did th—" Tridnif's voice choked off.

Gaffin yelled, "Stop this," and tried running past Tridnif. The blade sliced across Gaffin's leg, felling him.

Uedimer ran to stop Tridnif from driving the point through Gaffin's chest, but it was too late. The milker tackled his friend. The two rolled. Tridnif shook wildly. Uedimer held him down, unaware he was holding his comrade by the neck. Another thing he was not aware of was how long he held his friend. Tridnif stopped shaking and relaxed.

The milker slumped to the ground, breathing hard.

“What did he do to you,” Uedimer asked his friend. There was no answer. He pushed back up and looked into the open eyes and saw no life. Uedimer’s gaze shifted to the two men in front of the house.

“I told you to leave,” the slender masle snapped, “but you would not listen.”

“All we wanted was to find his sister.”

“You were told you could not find her, yet you insisted on disturbing the peace here.”

Uedimer stood. He stumbled from weakness, but caught his balance. He could do nothing for his comrades or for Brissmarria. He turned back to the path and started walking.

“I can’t let you go now,” Uedimer heard from behind him. “You lost that chance.”

Uedimer’s knees gave way and connected with the soft soil. His head erupted in pain and he screamed. It seemed an eternity to the milker. The agony blinded him and he barely realized he went prone, face down. Then, suddenly the pain was gone.

“Help him up,” a feminine voice instructed from above.

The pain was still gone and the path was dark. Even in the darkness, he could see many people standing around Uedimer. He felt a hand take hold of his arm, giving Uedimer support to stand.

“Thank you,” he expressed, turning to see the man who assisted him was Tridnif. “I thought I...”

The milker saw Gaffin standing near by Brissmarria and behind them, Rikjae.

“What happened?”

“Brissmarria came here because of a dream. The sorcerer brought her here to be a sacrifice. Every year he needs a sacrifice to bring in spring and to strengthen the soil for planting.”

“Well, let’s leave before he has to do that.”

“We can’t leave,” Brissmarria stated. “We’ve not been able to. All of us tried.” Her green eyes had a sad look.

Uedimer looked around. There were many women staring at him amongst the trees with a few men scattered throughout. He looked up the path. The sun was down and it grew darker. He looked at the house. It glowed a faint purple. That disturbed him.

“I’m leaving. We’ll start by going to the hamlet.” Uedimer walked back towards the mill.

“You can’t escape,” Brissmarria told the milker.

He ignored her. All he wanted was to get out of the forest. He began trotting and then broke into a run. The trail seemed longer going back. No matter how fast he ran he never reached the watermill. He knew there were no other paths. He continued to run and run, and run, and run...

~ The End ~