

TO THE VOWS

Nedrillo cringed. The eldest of the Cottonmouth gorgons, he had scraped together what he thought was appropriate by clan law for the dowry: thirty-one fingers of tellite. His son Grisbane, the groom, had thrown in four more of his own. Now this shame, this insult from Krellfard he didn't dare return. *The whole wedding is ruined! If I were Krendiss, like Drimbelard or Wrybane or ...* he felt a touch on his elbow, and heard a hiss.

“Do sssomething! They're waiting for you. Challenge their dowry rights!” It was Sseerrindar. “This is all ceremony! Haven't you ever done one of these before?”

“No! I've never even been to one!” Nedrillo hissed back. “The Krendiss are going to ...”

“Never mind them! Come on! Insssult him! Gather your offssspring!”

Nedrillo gulped and took a breath. Raising a long finger, he bawled as loudly as he could, “Jervin, the only worms here are in your father's food! I, Nedrillo, laugh at your father's claim!” It cut the silence like a blade. The Krendiss brayed with laughter. Vessin, who had gotten his suit hitched again, drew himself up and stiffened. Jervin and Twivill stood behind his shoulders. “To me, my children!” called Nedrillo; and sons Grisbane, Felltwine and Meltbrew, and daughters Brevelik and Darjann, gathered behind him.

The Krendiss began a steady bass hooting in a slow cadence. Crocodilians, gorgons and humans formed into concentric circles, propelling Vessin and Nedrillo into the center. Sseerrindar held each one by an arm. Pelliannas the bride-to-be stood behind her father with her brothers. The women elders swayed in the far outer circle, wearing dark blue veils as heavy as shrouds. Norkis pushed forward, clapping around Vessin's shoulders a metallic cape with razor edges. Nedrillo felt a similar cape being tossed about him.

Vessin threw down the dowry bag. “Gorgon scum!” he began, clattering his cape. A cheer rose from the Dancing Turtle folk.

“Human nippletwister!” Nedrillo felt his blood come up. The Chattering Owl gorgons gave a rasping yell.

“Flatnose facelicker!” Cries of “Hey, hey!” from the humans.

“Hairbag!” Some applause and a whistle. Vessin looked annoyed.

“Eater of claws!” A general roar.

“Sharer of lice!” Much laughing. Nedrillo’s heavy locks twined and writhed as he began to enjoy Vessin’s increasingly offended look.

“Fondler of rodents!” Cheers built between insults until the Krendiss Drimbelard and Weregrand leaped forward and thrust bride and groom together with their scaly claws. Standing over the dowry bag, Grisbane seized it and handed it to Pelliannas, who stuffed it between her ample breasts and grinned. Everyone shouted, “Yaya ho!” Weregrand picked up Grai Sseerrindar by his topknot and sat him in the largest punchbowl among the grillot fish, from which place he was ordered to conduct the exchange of vows.