

## Tournament at Bergum

Kilde peered sidewise over the market cobbles. At Towe she felt always out of place: mismatched, awkward, as if she were born into the wrong era or the wrong town. Strong, self-willed, tenacious, much too recalcitrant to kowtow to any dogma or philosophy, she was a beauty, at 5' 11", with blond hair, emerald eyes and lean thews. She boasted an impressive figure, and was gifted (and cursed) with a kind of rebellious air. Second daughter to Caxis, miller from Malder township, Kilde moved with lynx-like stealth and harboured a tigerish strength. She was a capable swordstress, but was notorious for her habit of uttering the wrong thing at the wrong time, which inevitably put her at a disadvantage with prospective employers.

Liveried guards strode through the cobbled streets of the town. Tall ships stretched their sails in a kettle-shaped harbour while two tall towers dominated the market square. Smithies and bakeries lurked off to the side while the town hall, forum and haberdasheries did nothing to soothe Kilde's restless spirit.

"You should put your talents and energies toward the arts of a seamstress," advised Marthe wisely. "Or find a worthy husband. Fonny is a promising young fishmonger. He would take you—if you weren't so infernally tall."

"What of the possibility of a foreigner?" piped up Bees. She was the shipwright's daughter. "A Fintish nobleman, for example. They have money!"

"Bah!" growled Kilde with scorn. "Why would I want to be betrothed to some fuddy-duddy or a fish-head? I want to be a 'swordstress'. I cannot be tied to the peg, and if I am—I will become a vagabond—tour the countryside, discover the lands." She glanced around the square and saw nothing but conformers and several nimble people laddered on top of each other's shoulders performing amazing feats. "Perhaps even a gymnast—like those exotic persons over there."

Her peers fell into a stunned silence. They swivelled their heads, chattered incredulously. "An acrobat?"

"Yes, an acrobat!" she emphasized. "In fact—I will join their band this instant. Here sirs!" she cried importantly. "Let me have a minute of your time. I wish to join your ensemble."

The apprentice wirewalker studied Kilde for several seconds. He recommended her to Tipsten, the lead acrobat. Tipsten rubbed his chin in reflection. "Another hopeful aspirant!" He seemed favourably impressed—at least of her appearance . . .

There were twelve sly individuals, entwined in various acts of balancing with good wire and wood. They passed through hoops while delighting the crowd, performing spectacular feats of prowess in midair on tightrope. An oiled maiden balanced herself precariously atop a single fellow's muscular shoulders—on a single finger, no less! Another danced on the head of a strongman while finishing a handstand through two flaming hoops. Another indulged in a cute somersault over the moving shoulders of a Hypza wrestler; others sang merry folk songs while cartwheeling in extravagant formations.

Kilde became immediately interested in this troupe for its obvious reason of unconventionality and she gained a vantage to observe their antics. Tipsten gave her a

position. Her talent at balance proved to be more than adequate, although Kilde did rouse waves of jealousy amongst the female acrobats, owing to her quick movements and rise in Tipsten's opinion.

Kilde travelled from town to town, performing coups and exploits, including lead anchorwoman in the acrobat's human chain. It was dull work, and after a while she grew bored again. The progressions were invariably predictable: heave, pitch, and roll. The goggling spectators tired her; the jeers of ribald passer-bys were depressing. The necessary baring of skin to the lewd interests of men . . . it was all, well—many times she had to beat off the amorous aggressions of drunks and simpletons. She had travelled far and wide through the lands with a ragtag band, and had accumulated useful skills. She learned how to entertain crowds, pitch a perfect tightrope-walking or jump several feet in the air over a stretched wire and under again, before tossing one of her colleagues into the air, caught by another limber person. Kilde augmented her flexibility, boosted her upper body strength and was becoming a formidable athlete. At the bottom rung of the 'human ladder', she outdid even her peer Axus, the giant from Abraxis—who along with herself was hired by Tipsten, lead wirewalker, to support eight or more persons in motion.

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In the town of Bergum, near the Salspurg Sea, King Milo kept the province of Bayru in amicable balance. Trade was plentiful and folk were relatively peaceful; war was kept to the outer territories.

The acrobat band resided for a long stint—courtesy of the lucrative crowds and the associated events, and plenitudes of wine—a result of the excellent market and the flagstoned square perfect for performances. King Milo always seemed on edge, attending political affairs somewhere afar, yet he encouraged his regent, a certain 'Sir Faerce', to sponsor entertainment in his fiefs, including Bergum. Troubadouring, jestering, acrobating and fire-eating were rife, so long as the incumbents did not loiter or engage in vagabonding. Entertainers were required to conduct 'decent business' and attract an 'adequate' amount of tourists who would fill the coffers of the tradespeople and ultimately top up the royal tax chests.

Kilde expressed interest in improving her skills as a swordstress. The local gentry seemed to know nothing of the art, while the commoners recommended her to Janyor, somewhat of a folk hero in these parts. He was adept in matters of the sword. Also, not accessible, being branded an outlaw; however, one fine April morning, the rogue did visit Bergum's market, dressed in rags, and looking like a beggar, much less a sword master, shuffling from stall to stall.

Kilde inquired bleakly to Tuas the baker. "Him?"

"Do not be fooled by the clothing," explained Tuas quietly.

"Nor his slouching," added Joald the tailor. The part-time blacksmith added his input, "Janyor is the finest swordsman in the land—but he has been outlawed by Milo for besting the regent's nephew in a public display. The spectacle was termed 'arrogant', if I recall. Now Janyor goes in disguise. For example, he keeps a low profile, fetches his bread at the market like the commoners. Forbidden as he is to frequent the districts of Bergum, he often forgets his status and becomes whimsical, playing the fife or a battered lute with abandon, drawing attention to himself."

“Interesting,” Kilde mused. She seemed to accept the tailor’s words and not so discreetly approached the man, sizing him up.

The beggar’s eyes glittered keenly; his black hair waved in the cool breeze; his lean posture seemed uncannily supple for his dress especially when he chose to stand up straight, rather than assume the lazy pose of a derelict vagabond. Kilde was almost as tall as he and saw that he was something of a vigilant character, owing to the bright eyes and canny scrutiny.

The outlaw examined Kilde with interest. “Well, what have we here? What luck is it that brings so lovely a creature into my presence?”

Kilde ignored the declaration. “I wish to learn the arts of sword play in ways superior than I already know.”

“A fine ambition.”

Kilde motioned a thumb to the locals: “These people say that you can teach me tricks with which I am not already familiar.”

“Perhaps I can teach you more!” he suggested brazenly. “You are provident to have crossed paths with me,” he cried, wagging a sun-browned finger.

Kilde chortled. “I’ll bet.”

The outlaw was immediately taken by Kilde’s unfettered confidence and informally set up to take her on as a pupil. “It shall not be easy! Yet—” he cocked his head on a sly angle “—if you show good promise and are meant to study under a great master, then let the gods decide.”

Kilde refrained from an inappropriate comment and smiled gamely.

“Modesty is not one of my better qualities, as you see.”

“It seems I am not the first to imply this.”

On her spare time two afternoons later, Janyor took Kilde to a sacred glade deep in the soft willow pines of the Klen forest to train.

Janyor outfitted her with a fine blade of osmium wrought from the blackest ore of Mandalion, crafted in his own smith-shop that was hewn in the hollow of Mangor’s hill. Kilde kept her discipline with a characteristic precision. True to the swordsman’s claim, Janyor proved a fine handler, yet he held a certain irritating penchant for pranks, and an impishness which vexed her. For example, when she trained with an enchanted flying sod heap, he grew obscenely merry and took her deeper into the forest, bawling orders, slapping her with the back of his sword in sensitive places when she became inattentive to the sod’s lashes. The bewitched object was a hump of earth and grass stuck with bamboo shoots that lurched and thrashed past like a demon, slashing at its victim with an adept sword master’s touch. How it could perform such deeds was beyond Kilde. The abomination was quick and dirty and fast and cunning and more capable than its ungainly appearance would suggest.

“A gift from a sultry wizardess,” offered Janyor blithely. “Her name was Miezma—or something like that—an amouress of repute with whom I conducted earthy favours in return for boons, in days of my younger vigours—though that was when I was less discreet in my communions.”

Kilde acknowledged the disclosure with a brief grunt. Currently she was straining at the limits of endurance—darting, stretching, struggling to remain afoot while the swirling, sorcerous mound switched about her head with a vengeance. Her sweat-beaded muscles knotted in complaint. She flexed her limbs, sought protection from the earth-terror.

Janyor chuckled in merriment. “This little enchantment shall whip you into shape! Now! Let us up the ante. Here! Prepare to defend yourself! Mount the knoll! Tuck in those ungainly shins. They are overly vulnerable to attack, Kilde. Mound—double speed!”

The fiendish lump clambered to obey. “None of the fops at Milo’s court shall have any vantage on you, my dear girl! For those lack the privilege of such practice beast!” He expelled a sigh. “There will come a time when the tournament will be announced—to determine the best in the lands. It is for this reason that I embark on so earnest a program to train you.”

Kilde gasped, swatting as lashing shoots came dangerously close to her face and breasts. She dodged another sweep. The thing would have sent her flying had she not reacted swiftly. She lost the round, and the next and slumped down in defeat. “I don’t know if I will ever be ready, Janyor. Is it my destiny to be as good as you think?”

“Of course!” he cackled. “One day you shall be the finest swordswoman in all the lands. But first you have to work! Work! Work! You shall be my protégé! An absolute paragon—an uncontested maverick!”

Kilde scoffed at the embroidery. “I have reasons to doubt your confidence.”

Janyor shook his shaggy head; he grabbed her wrists and guided her through the most fluidic sword motions she had ever seen. Gasping, she murmured, amazed. She flung back her hair, shook off his hands and strode to the mound to engage this unbeatable hellion.

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King Milo was away in Orthorium on a campaign when the tournament was finally announced in August. Regent Faerce, a stuffy old man, and somewhat of a niggling tyrant, was bequeathed the task of keeping the tournament in order, along with maintaining the peace and well-being of Bergum. Plumes and banners festooned the bay-oak balconies above the square. Rose flowers and sea-herbs bedecked the façades; mugs of wine were distributed to all folk with lavish hand at Herald’s Court, the event’s setting.

Everywhere the Regent went, his four-foot foppish jester followed, rigged with a coxcomb plume stretched over a glossy pate, while muttering quips and philosophic anecdotes and somewhat lewd ditties.

Carters, smiths, fishmongers, chandlers and seamstresses, young and old attended this event in the bustling courtyard. Thieves and pickpockets too. Bales of hay and water troughs were arranged for the horses. The clatter of carts and squeals of hogs competed with hawker’s cries. The market was packed with an extravagant number of smells; divine and peculiar. The tournament grounds were overflowing with excess . . .

There was to be archery, knife throwing, wrestling and ale-guzzling. But most important, were the sword duels—which Kilde awaited with relish.

The rules of the contests were simple. No head or neck wounds; an unparried thrust was awarded two points to body; a strike to buttocks or limb, a single point. Any one battle would last for no more than seven minutes, after which, the judges would declare a winner.

Janyor was hidden somewhere in the milling crowd, disguised as a vagabond minstrel. The swordster played a lute, whose quality was less than sublime, forcing several

townspeople to hold their ears and shy back in discomfort. Janyor laughed, pulled out his fife, whistled out several staccato notes, somewhat indicative of a saltarello, but which was anything but. The miracle was that the outlaw did not get himself bludgeoned, or at least have his cover spoiled.

Faerce finally mounted the dais, snapped his fingers to inspire several guards to wheel out a great mechanical statue on a wooden platform with iron wheels. The object or creature, posed a remarkable threat, all grey and sapphire, outfitted with several armoured plates of strange, scalloped design. A dull crimson crown blossomed on its bulky shoulders and two visible candle flames posed for eyes, lit behind dense lenses of violet glass. It seemed Bergum's regent had prepared a little 'surprise' for the folk of Bergum. The figure stood nearly seven feet tall; a four-foot blade hung from its gleaming scabbard at its metallic waist. Two menacing circular sawblades were mounted on either epaulette, by its helm, causing the townsfolk disquiet.

"What is this monstrosity?" cried Sous, leading knight of the realm.

"My invincible, mechanical minion," announced Faerce pretentiously. He peered down from his pedestal with satisfaction to view Sous's discomfort.

"Impossible!" sputtered Sous. "You cannot posture such an aberration before me."

"I do whatever I wish," countered Faerce. "Though I appreciate your contempt and discomfit, Sir Sous. I am regent. The sapphire knight is designed by Swinster and Rouble—masters of Haas, blacksmiths and metalworkers. Any who can defeat my champion is endowed 10000 osiks on demand. Upon the vote of my guard-corp, such a new champion shall become our new king's man."

"New king's man? Indeed!" Sir Sous cried with furor. "And if he is to fail?"

"Or she!" Kilde piped up indignantly.

"If *any* challenger is to fail," intoned Faerce pompously, "then this comprises a rather unfortunate circumstance. I cannot guarantee the discretion of my champion, for it is a machine after all, a dull creation of nuts and bolts. Who knows what it will do? The aftermath of such a skirmish is unknown." (Nor did he particularly care, considering the number of gold pieces his machine would fetch for sheer spectacle alone.)

"I see," remarked Sous blandly. "I find the condition absurd."

"You are permitted to your opinions," the regent announced. "Now, step back and allow citizens to apply."

Sir Sous huffed: "I shall challenge this grim knight of yours, Regent, but only on condition that fair play be enforced, or at least observed!"

"An admirable proviso!" cried the regent. "Guards! Take down Sous's boast! '*I shall undertake to challenge this grim knight.*' Are there any other takers?"

Grumbles were tossed amongst the contenders. Kilde was ignored for the most part among qualifiers and participants.

Yet the fops had not witnessed the mechanical knight's craft nor were they prepared in their battle plans against it, thought Kilde.

The sapphire knight stepped down at last from its podium, taking macabre steps that sounded like hammer strokes on an anvil. The figure was less awkward than it appeared and no words did it speak nor gestures did it make to lord or peasant.

Faerce grinned impishly. The new toy seemed indomitable. "Be proud, Sapphire knight! Clank away. I wish to view some human combat first. Let the qualifying combats commence!"

Cheers rose.

The regent raised hands for silence. “Bring on the most stalwart contenders—the most worthy!”

Kilde and Sous stepped in line with others, as did a certain Sir Apozo, a short stocky man of no great presence. But Kilde was ignored as men of repute butted forward and were chosen for qualifying rounds. Burning with frustration, she held her tongue. Anger, as she knew it, was of no use in this forum.

Sous beat his qualifiers soundly. Now he was the only knight left in the circular battleyard, smiling in smug fashion at his competence. Kilde jogged into the light, demanding a chance to qualify.

Faerce turned grey eyes upon Kilde. “A woman! A scornful and hefty one, aren’t you? Who are you to speak to me in a fashion like a common fishwife? You are an abrasive, overweening jade, not to mention a toothsome wench, who tests my patience. Nevertheless, I shall allow you to compete, if only to humiliate you in front of this grand gathering. Guards! Make way! Bergum is a fair kingdom, but I warn you, woman—Sous is a man of irascible disposition. He shall thrash you within an inch of your life and toss you aside like a gnawed apple. Let us hope that the humbling shall constitute your last appearance in this square of combat.”

Kilde held her head proudly high. “We shall see of that, sir. I demand a chance only.”

Faerce’s exuberant jester bobbed up and down like a cork. “Ha! Pretty missus! Not only clever-tongued but insolent. How the jade waves her sword with flair! Hoo! She has the spirit of an outlaw—one named Janyor in fact. Clearly Sir Sous has met his match!”

Faerce admonished his jester with reserve. “Quiet now, Moffo! I’m sure Janyor does not wish to be insulted, nor does Sous wish to be heckled.” He clapped his hands. “On with the program! We become dull with lethargy.”

Apozo squeezed his way through. “Lord Regent—let me fight this wench. I have never drawn against a female before.”

Faerce rubbed his goatee with stately appraisal. “Well, this shall prove comical, shan’t it? Proceed.”

Apozo owned a small dragon—a bat-like milldrake—or flier. It was part of his irritating retinue. The animal was his pet minion which acted as a circus distraction more than an instrument of force. However, the creature was efficient enough: orange, fuzzy, and sporting two white-wings and three oracular eyes. Its teeth were filed, blowing only purple smoke for breath, which comprised its sole agency of menace.

Kilde instantly disliked the creature and objected to its presence. The regent only barked out a laugh. “Silence your quibbles, girl! I appreciate any innovation. The bat stays!”

Kilde masked her displeasure while Apozo nodded and addressed the regent with chivalry. “I daresay that I shall essay to be as discreet as possible with this wench.”

“I am sure you will,” put forth Faerce diplomatically. “Proceed! I am becoming again bored with these stallings.”

“As you wish.” Apozo bowed and grinningly assessed Kilde. “Well, dame, are you ready?”

Kilde gave a sardonic snort. “Ready? For what?”

Apozo twitched his lips with disapproval. “You shall see!” He appeared intimidated by the girl’s excessive height.

The two contenders squared off. Apozo was instantly riposting and gambolling about like a pompous twit. He was about to land a definite stroke on her leather-padded breast when he was knocked down in a trice, with nose thrust in the paves. Kilde's heel descended on the back of his neck. The dragon bat swooped down at Kilde, efforting to pick at her neck and redeem its bested master, but the creature was slow, and several times dove awkwardly. It was clearly more thick-headed than anything. Kilde's magical earth-training heap had prepared her well, and so she swatted it aside easily. Much to Apozo's amazement, the knight was left defeated with no course for exit. Kilde released the dandy and he brushed off his surcoat with dignity.

Next in line was Sir Sous. He strutted up to the battle line with a grinning arrogance. "You shall pay a price, dear lamb."

Kilde offered no comment. She fingered her sword, betraying a ghost of a smile. The battle began on the clash of swords. Crack! Sous's sword met hers in a spray of sparks. He proved a disquieting opponent as Kilde came to learn. She was hard pressed to curb the knight's breakneck rush. But her confidence gave her comfort that her skills would win out. She knew from prior analysis of Sous's combat that she held the advantage to beat this pretender—if she didn't waver.

Swords clanked; cries boomed about the court like cannon shot. Kilde banked a lethal arc to Sous' ribs, taking the knight in the midriff. Her earlier meekness had vanished, a ploy only—a favourite of Janyor's—and now hers.

Steel swirled. Sous, now wholly surprised, was pushed off guard. He leaped back to gain composure. Kilde charged on, earning four points on a quick three-strike succession to Sous's left exposed flank.

The court rang with cheers. The knight's defensive parries boomed ineffectually as he struggled to arrest more points against his person.

Sous realized that he had overreached; he had underestimated this woman, resulting in an embarrassing situation. Panting, he began to muster a shrewd, unheralded tactic.

He slipped out a boot, tripping Kilde as she swung around and stabbed upward into her thigh while groping at her privates surreptitiously.

"Two points for Sir Sous!" called the judge.

Sous laughed gaily.

Kilde scrambled to her feet, massaged her padded leather greaves. Foul words spurt from her lips. Her honour was at stake: "Sous stuck out a boot and fondled me! An act of dirty play!"

"Poppycock!" retorted the knight. "What do you think I am—a poor sportsman?"

Kilde was angered by the misdealing but she employed a nasty manoeuvre of her own, releasing a barrage of whirling sword strikes on his left flank, to twirl full around, kick-boxing him in the groin.

Sous doubled over in anguish. He was on the staggering defensive, whimpering loudly. All of a sudden he realized the score was 8-6—in favour of the wench.

Sous hobbled forward holding his groin and lifted a trembling hand of appeal to the judge. "Master Cayx, please! The last blow delivered was in poor taste, as you plainly can see. Now, how can you give it a full point?"

"Easy, Sous," called the judge avuncularly. "By adjusting a figure with this soft haft of chalk."

"I can see that," bawled Sous. "But was it lawful?"

Kilde objected. "Sous merely stepped into my boot while I raised it to defend one of his own kicks, which is what he did to me earlier, or was he merely trying to drain his bladder?"

"A blatant and arrant falsehood!" stormed Sous. "I sense an act of sabotage here. Must we listen to these fibs and disclaimers?"

"Cease the bickering!" commanded Faerce from his high perch. He pointed a quivering finger down at the twain. "I declare the trial void. Each of you has disobeyed the rules, and shall be granted a draw!"

There were hisses and boos from the crowd.

"Feel lucky that I do not disqualify you both on counts of childish behaviour."

Sous protested loudly: "A totally uncalled for adjudication, Regent. I contest. I was on the way to winning this match, yet you pre-empted my eminence. What is a trifling few points, easily bridged by superior tactics?"

"Silence!" called Faerce. "You are up next, Sous, and I advise you to conserve your energy and review your tactics against my champion."

The knight winced. The silent minion loitered with eerie potency and Sir Sous licked his lips. "Excellency, due to extreme injury, I must plead a pass. I am unable to contend in a match so regretfully long and must withdraw."

Kilde cawed out a guffaw and jumped down to face the knight. "Your Grace, seeing as Sir Sous is 'incapacitated', I bid that I challenge your minion." She doffed her leather cap, threw back her lustrous hair. She twirled like a ballerina—a trick which she had learned from her acrobatic training. The act won the favour of the crowd, which cat-called in amazement.

Faerce raised his eyebrows in rancour. "You? Up against my minion?"

"Most definitely!"

Faerce shrugged. "Idiocy!" He smacked his staff on the dais and sat back in his seat. "So be it! Bring on my minion!"

"Wait! I wish to experience the honour first!" cried Apozo.

Faerce reluctantly acceded to the request, for he had no love for the pompous Apozo or the warrior woman who might win some fame before she was slaughtered.

Apozo drew himself up against the sapphire knight. His mini-dragon dove in to vex the monstrosity but the burly hulk stood motionless. It quickly snatched out a steel gauntlet to crush the creature to death before tossing the orange-white mangled pieces on the flags before Apozo. An embarrassing silence ensued.

Apozo gulped. Wiping his forehead, he judiciously declined to hold first honour at the fight.

Faerce grinned between his teeth; he waved Apozo off the battle ground. "Get you gone, craven! Is there no other stout-heart who will address my champion?"

None came forth. The regent peered down chillingly upon Kilde. "So! It seems you are up next, swordstress. Do you wish to compete?"

Kilde shrugged. Feeling much daunted by the condition of her placement, she hesitated. The machine was a foot taller than she. The monster stood like a rock, unable to be read. Yet she had to fight! There was no choice. She looked to the audience and passed her eyes over Janyor who stood solemnly in the second row but with no fife on his lips. His head dipped in noiseless salute.

So! She would continue!

The machine and the swordstress faced off, squaring weapons like warriors of old. The sapphire knight stared down at her through its visor. No visible emotion touched its visage, nor any hint of human acknowledgement. The hulk offered a bleak, cold mirror of dispassion.

Kilde felt a chill run up her spine. She wondered what ticked behind the iron mask. She gave up the pursuit. Snatches of Janyor's teachings came to her. *Size up your opponent! Discover what makes your foe tick. Find weaknesses—never show yours—let down your guard only at your own peril!*"

Kilde caught a glimpse of Janyor's confiding grin. His fingers flashed in a recognizable pattern: *Parry left, duck right, knock out the bolt bucket's balance. Unnerve its stance, topple it to the ground, hit home for the jugular.*

Is that all? she thought. A smashing sword caught hers, almost flinging her off her feet. Her weapon nearly careened off into the crowd. The blow felt so strong that she sensed the sting right to her bones.

Kilde was propelled backward by the monster's enormous weight and strength before she could react as it stalked after her. Another swipe came murderously arching down like a battle axe. She jerked her arm out and was away at the last instant. A tall domed shadow loomed over her, tagging her like a falcon's claws. The monster knew no discrimination. It felt no mercy; its clinical gaze pitted her like a thousand pikes. Nor was Faerce about to interrupt the sport.

The knight's blows rained mercilessly on her blade. She suffered a terrible shock to her arms and shoulders as the blade nearly notched her sword, bent back as it was to hit her in the padded helm. Stars swam in her head. The blue-grey behemoth hazed and disappeared before her eyes. With superhuman effort, she whirled out of sight before a four-foot blade came blasting down upon her midsection.

The force would have severed her in two.

The mechanical horror clanked after her. The crowd went rigid with shock. Suddenly the crowd turned wild, screaming.

A swift figure flew silently out of the crowd. Janyor's shiny gilded blade gleamed with magical properties, materializing into his rough hands. He checked the next blow as the minion's sword lurched down almost piercing Kilde's heaving, leather-clenched chest.

The regent called out in fury: "Arrest that man! He is a despicable wolf's-head—wanted for conspiracy and scandal!" He had risen from his silk-padded cushion and was bellowing orders to the town guard. Janyor, resentful of the regent's cruelty, slashed at the machine twice, biting deep into its plated chest, prompting a furious exclamation of rasping, grinding horror from the machine.

The swordsman lifted brows and muttered comically to the crowd.

The regent's jester cried: "Will sir outlaw take Faerce's lovely knight for a bride? Beware, she is a possessed hoyden!" The dwarf danced away in a jig, hoping to divert the crowd's horror should the outlaw be gutted.

Kilde wasted no time. She swung to her feet. Grasping her sword with purpose, she halted before the moving statue. Behind the machine's ominous shadow burned an otherworldly glow. Janyor raged against the machine; Kilde thought that it would never tire. It would be of no use what she had in mind. The creature would not be cowed by mere sword blows. Janyor's killing strike, which had harmlessly bounced off its plates, had done nothing to impede its speed or advance.

Janyor broke the right glass eye and blew out the flame with a frantic gust. The beast tottered, weaved, couldn't seem to find its way forward. It dipped a finger into its left eye flame and fired the right. The eye danced with lively movements of the air, causing tremors of balefire to reach Janyor and the crowd.

Kilde saw a small square hatch outlined at the small of the machine's back. On impulse she hunched forward, struggled to pry it open with her sword tip. The monster rained blows on Janyor's dented sword and was too busy to notice the tampering. Inside the hatch, Kilde discovered a copper lever wired to a maze of gearworks and tensed springs.

She began mangling the innards with her sword. Wrenching and slashing, she ripped out components with frantic haste. No reaction came from the minion. Kilde paled. Was the thing inhabited by a demon? There was the lever, and a dial with three settings: "*Normal, Aggressive, Chaotic*". The dial was currently set to '*Normal*'.

She cranked it to '*Chaotic*'. Instantly the monster's frame jerked and convulsed; it went berserk like a mad marionette.

It began battling anyone in sight. The guards who had sprung forth to apprehend Janyor now fought for their lives. They were strewn helter-skelter by the knight's obscene assault.

The crowd fled in panic. The machine depressed a button on its upper chest. The left shield-disc released from its shoulder went surging forward like a demonic saw. Kilde jerked aside just in time as the disc went wide, slopping off an arm of an innocent bystander. The knight retrieved the disc, repositioned it on its gleaming shoulder. The crowd shrieked in horror. The machine went for the regent.

Kilde did not pause to witness the carnage. She gathered up Janyor and towed him to the edge of the square, fleeing under the entrance arch toward Balkrye castle.

Skipping over the cobbles, they tripped over stray piglets and goats in the melee. The two scrambled on past the shadow of the castle's bailey.

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A day later they were treading through the little-known forest paths far away from Bergum, heading toward the lazy sea. News came that a berserk mechanical abomination had finally been quelled by some stone catapults drawn from a nearby garrison. The regent was mutilated—as well as twenty citizens.

Although Kilde felt depressed and somewhat responsible for the bloodshed, Janyor consoled her. "It was an accident waiting to happen. If Faerce hadn't brought such a devil into a public place none of this would have happened."

"True . . . What of you now?" asked Kilde of Janyor wearily. "Your smithy and Klen forest?"

"Pah! What life do I have there?" Janyor sighed. "It is no lucrative business. Too far from the trade centres, plus I am an outlaw. Easy come, easy go. Far better to trudge free and hunted, than be in the thrall and nicety of conventional society."

Kilde was taken by Janyor's equanimity. Despite the chaos that had ensued, she was glad to be sharing a road with this outlaw.

Sensing her good opinion of him, Janyor placed his arm around her waist and proceeded into more amatory motions. "If we must get married, then I suppose we must."

Kilde buffed him aside and Janyor landed in a crumpled heap.

“It was only a joke,” Janyor protested, suddenly regretting his impulsive move.

“Let’s leave it at that then,” growled Kilde. “I am not up for having you mother-hening me all day.”

“Obviously.” Janyor picked himself up with concern. “Let us speak no more of the matter.”

The two ambled through Wild Wood at a regal pace. Despite the odd regrettable interchange, they made tolerable companions and each went on to perform exceptional deeds in the lands. Janyor opened his own sword school and became reputed for his instruction. Kilde became the first female champion to king Tysus in faraway Phrygia. She went on to inspire fighters after the spirit of her own example, and within a decade, more than a third of the regent corps of the elite Phrygian fighters were women. Mechanical substitutes and all prototypes were banned from the territories of Milo’s and Tysus’s realms after Faerce’s mutilation.

Kilde remained a heroine for years to come in the eyes of the western world . . .