



## *Rogue Sketches*

### The Setback

by Samuel Goldstein

Omnes awoke, surprised.

Sitting up, he made a futile attempt to wipe the mud from his fur vest. He winced at the pain in the back of his head, and tried to figure out how he'd arrived in his present sorry state.

Specifically, he found himself on the edge of a puddle in a muddy single-track, surrounded by a vast sloping land. To one side, scree rose gradually to meet a rocky bluff that was streaked with new grass. In the shadows of the bluff, the last snowbanks of winter melted away. To his other side, the land swept down through hills, dotted with tarns and fractured with small streams of icy runoff. Before him, the hills were scattered with huge lichen-crusting boulders that seemed as out of place as Omnes felt. Perhaps they had fallen from the sky together or else risen from the earth.


Omnes had been travelling with a group of four Northern tribesmen under the assumed identity of Tarkva, a widely-liked bastard of Thane Tark. Since it was Spring, travelling with a group was considered a good idea if you were heading west towards the River, especially if you weren't particularly enamored of the idea of becoming wolf-food. The Northern Lands are never forgiving, regardless the season.

Omnes had felt safe in impersonating Tarkva -- they were nodding acquaintances from past adventures, so Tarkva's mannerisms were almost second nature -- what's more, Omnes had overheard a conversation in Daranatown that suggested Tarkva had recently departed for Vaneth.

So, now, how had he ended up here in this muddy track? Standing, he quickly realized that his sword was gone, and his purse also missing. With a sinking feeling, Omnes checked his belt, his face only registering a brief flicker of resignation when his hand found nothing where his seax had been.

Omnes laughed to himself: no money, no weapon, a bump on the head, and no exact memory of how he'd gotten here. *Well, there's the way to start a day. At least it's likely to improve. In any case, it looks like being Tarkva is not advisable for the nonce. Who should I be today? Maybe I'll have more luck as a local.*

Omnes concentrated, wove and reweave the strands of his appearance, and became Maalmi, a tall, flaxen-haired woman in her mid-fifties. Her pale blue eyes dominated her face,





*Rogue Sketches*  
The Setback

wise eyes surrounded with creases, promising sudden smiles and plentiful laughter. She wore a simple wool dress in the local style. All she lacked was her seax -- even Omnes' great skill couldn't create cold steel from nothing.



Five hours later, with the short Spring day already turning to twilight, Omnes/Maalmi was in the common hall of the village inn, sitting by spitting fire, a cup of warm wine in her hand. Around her, a dozen villagers were spellbound as she wove a story loosely based on the Saga of Molmar. Four of her audience were also strangers in town, although not to Maalmi.

Having told this tale or its variations a thousand times, Maalmi's mind wandered as she spoke. Which of them had struck Omnes, and why? Had it been just one of them, acting alone, or were they all involved? None of Omnes' belongings were evident upon four men before her. She was quite confident that there had been no open fight -- none of them had visible injuries.

Maalmi embroidered on her tale, adding an unrequited love to Molmar's long list of tragedies. She watched her audience, noting her former companions were drinking far more wine than customary. Her confidence grew that they knew of Omnes' plight, and were likely involved.

As she came to the epic showdown between Molmar and Rigsthul, Maalmi affected a sudden stutter, and halted, as if shaken from a trance.

"Rigsthul was the lord of wolves," she said softly. "Today, on my way here, I saw an injured man, beset by wolves. I was too late to save him."

"A Northerner?" asked one villager in surprise.

"Yes."

"No need for sorrow," said one of Omnes' former companions contemptuously. "He was a traitor and a thief."

"You knew him?" asked Maalmi.

"His name was Tarkva. We left him for dead, or close enough."

"I don't understand," said Maalmi.

"I can't say I do either," said another former companion. "He had openly betrayed the Thane of Adrest. He must have known there was a price on his head. He certainly knew we are





*Rogue Sketches*  
The Setback

of Adresti, yet he brazenly joined our group in Daranatown."

"At first, we thought it was a trick or a trap. Then we thought perhaps he was a clever impostor. But to what end? After several days, we were certain. So we resolved to bring him to the Thane."

"But I saw him from afar," said Maalmi. "Alone, unarmed, struggling with wolves."

"Our companion sought to disarm him. Safely, that is. The blow was too strong, though (maybe strengthened by the memory of Tarkva's insolence, or maybe by fear). We thought he was dead. In any case, it's all the same now. We bear his arms to the Thane, and all is now equal."

"Except, perhaps, for his family," pointed out a villager.

"His arrogance brought him down. He should either have sought to make amends, or been more careful when choosing travel companions."

Indeed, thought Maalmi. More caution was indeed in order, and not just for herself.



The following morning, as they prepared for their journey, Omnes' former companions were unable to find their weapons. For two, the last clear memory was receiving their weapons back from the storyteller after she had borrowed them for juggling. There had been a long night of such entertainment, along with slight of hand tricks, and other prestidigitation.

They couldn't understand it, and the villagers were no help. The storyteller was nowhere to be found.

There was nothing for it, but to return to Adresti unarmed.



"Omnes" created by Peter Damian Muhich in [Rogue Sketches: A Challenge for Omnes \(A Prologue\)](#).

This Work set in Runes of Gallidon – [runesofgallidon.com](http://runesofgallidon.com).

Available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike](#) license.

First Published January, 2009.

