

Surgard
and
the
Bog
Monsters©

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Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. Even someone not as well-traveled as Surgard the Northerner would acknowledge such a truth. But only a man such as Surgard would know that the hardest monsters to defeat are those that, at first glance, don't appear as such.

Surgard learned this lesson in the boggy lands across the sea from his northern home. He had been instructed by the king of his gods to travel the world and seek out new tales, to keep the god in good stead with local bards. Surgard decided to start his journey by going south. He knew that the people there were much like his own, with similar beliefs, heroes, and language. He also knew that they were close to many other lands and kingdoms far different than his own. He hoped that it would give his quest a positive beginning.

Early on Surgard's hopes were well met. He heard plenty of tales, each with enough variance from those he knew, so that his god would be happy. He met merchants and warriors who had experience with the lands beyond. He even managed to acquire a charm that would allow him to learn different tongues at an instant.

Then he came to the domain of King Hralfdon and the Jytes. Actually, according to the nervous residents of the kingdom, it was the domain of the "late" King Hralfdon.

"Late?" Surgard asked the man who seemed to be the leader of the only town in the kingdom. "What do you call him late, Faldor?"

"Because the King is dead," Faldor answered. "He's late, dearly departed, gone to the Great Hall in the Sky, passed on, wound up his mortal coil, become the ex-King,..."

Surgard raised his hands. "Fine, fine. I see. What killed him?"

"That did!" someone shouted.

The citizens clustered around him turned their heads behind them, yelled, and leapt for cover. Surgard looked at what was scaring them. Standing at the edge of the tiny town was a green, reptilian beast a few heads taller than him with red eyes, sharp claws, and a mouth of pointed teeth.

"Who dares challenge Rindlug?" the monster bellowed. He faced Surgard, the only person not cowering behind something. "You!"

"Me?" Surgard asked.

"You dare to wrestle me?"

Surgard considered running for cover like everyone else. But something kept him rooted in his place. Part of the reason why was fascination, as he had never seen a creature like Rindlug before. Part of it was a sense of justice, a feeling that this creature could not go around scaring people. But mainly it was due to his suspicion. He wondered why had this creature appeared at that exact moment, and why it seemed so eager for a challenge.

"Actually, no," Surgard responded as calmly as he could. "I'd just like to know why you killed the king, that's all."

The monster threw back its head and laughed. It was a sure sign to the traveler that he was about to be annoyed by it.

"I killed the king because I could! And now, nosy stranger, I will break you like a dry branch!"

"Whatever." Surgard drew his sword.

The monster leaped at him. Surgard swung his blade. The blow knocked Rindlug to the ground, but otherwise had no effect. Surgard stabbed twice, only to see his sword deflected by the creature's scales. Rindlug laughed again, then batted Surgard towards a nearby house that was in ruins.

The impact left Surgard bruised but with nothing bleeding or broken. He staggered to his feet. So, he thought, swords do not harm this beast. I wonder what does?

Rindlug charged at him again. Surgard glanced around for something to use. One of the planks on the damaged house appeared loose. Surgard grabbed it and tore it out. He took one end in his hands, stepped just out of the monster's path, and swung.

The plank shattered, but the force of the blow sent Rindlug to the ground. Surgard took what was left of the plank and smashed it against his opponent's head. He dashed into the house to find something else. He saw a chair lying on its side. He picked it up and ran out.

Rindlug was started to stand when Surgard swung the chair at him. It was destroyed, but its end sent the monster reeling. Surgard looked around for another improvised weapon.

"Here!" one of the villagers said, tossing him a small barrel.

Surgard caught it, and glanced at it for a second. He recognized it as what the people of the region used to store the alcohol they drank at festivals. Hey, he thought, this stuff can stop a horse. I wonder if what it comes in is any more potent?

Surgard raised the barrel over his head. He jumped, hoping to bring it down on Rindlug's head. He wasn't able to leap high enough. The barrel shattered on the monster's chest, but the blow sent him backward all the same.

As Surgard was looking around for something else to break on his foe's body, Rindlug clasped his hands together and brought them down on Surgard's left shoulder. The hit sent him to the ground. Surgard responded by kicking one of Rindlug's legs. His kick brought Rindlug down.

The two opponents got up at the same time. Rindlug tried to grab for Surgard's head. Surgard ducked and thrust his right shoulder into Rindlug's belly. He managed to knock the wind out of the monster.

Before Rindlug could recover, Surgard got his right arm around the monster's left thigh, and his left arm around it's neck. Not without some effort was he able to lift Rindlug over his head. He spun his opponent around twice, then threw the beast down. Rindlug let out an loud yelp of pain.

Surgard brought his arms up and balled his hands into fists. He thought he might start punching his foe. He glanced at his fists, then at Rindlug's scales. Another idea popped into his head. He let his right arm fall while keeping his left up. He turned sideways and stuck out his left elbow. He jumped downward.

His elbow slammed into Rindlug's chest. Although the blow hurt, it clearly hurt Rindlug even more. Surgard got up and carried out the attack again, this time ramming into Rindlug's lower torso. Surgard got up a third time for another strike.

"That's enough!" a low female voice shouted.

Surgard turned in the direction of the voice. He saw another creature just like

Rindlug, only a shade taller. It had an angry expression on its face, but it wasn't looking at Surgard. It was glaring at Rindlug.

"Rindlug, you should know better than to fight with these creatures," it said as it approached the other monster.

"But Mother, I was just having a bit of fun," Rindlug said.

"Fun? You call getting beaten senseless by a puny human fun?"

"I could have beaten him."

Rindlug's mother grabbed him by one of his ears and pulled him up. "Like you did the last one? You be thankful these humans didn't descend on us! You simply cannot go around beating these humans and expect to get away with it. Sooner or later they will come after us."

Rindlug's mother turned to Surgard. "I hope my son hasn't injured you," it said to him.

Surgard could only manage to shake his head.

The creature turned to the other villagers, who by then were all out from their hiding places. "I apologize for what my son has done to you," she told them. "I promise you it will never happen again."

She turned to Rindlug. "As for you, you are going to wish that human had killed you by the time I finish punishing you. Come along!" Still holding him by the ear, she dragged Rindlug away from the village and into the nearby bog.

After a few minutes of stunned silence, Faldor approached Surgard. "It seems that you have triumphed over the beast that killed our king," he said.

"More or less, I guess," Surgard replied.

"We are in need of a new king. I offer you our crown."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Surgard had not left his homeland in search of a people to rule or a crown to wear. He was on a quest, dispatched by his god. More importantly, what he knew of the lives of kings had told him it was something to be avoided if possible. Kings always had to make hard decisions, to fight difficult battles, and had messy relationships with friends and family. Surgard wouldn't say no to a reasonable reward, but the crown of the Jytes wasn't reasonable.

"Yes." Faldor turned to his fellows. "Don't you think Surgard should be our king?" All agreed loudly, some even chanting his name.

Surgard raised his hands. "I don't want to be your king!"

"But why not?"

The question caught Surgard by surprise. He scrambled to come up with an adequate response. "Because I don't know you," was the first thing he said.

"Your people and ours are not so different," Faldor replied. "You will get to know us in time."

"Oh. Well, well, well, Faldor, I might be smart and strong, but does that mean that I would make a wise king?"

"What do we need with a wise king? It's not like it's that hard a job."

"Yes, well, that's true. But does defeating a monster make a man a king? Or does it simply make him a good warrior?"

"But shouldn't a king be a good warrior?"

"Oh, I suppose."

"So take the crown."

"But, Faldor, as you said, I am not one of your people. Now, would it be wise to hand over your crown to a foreigner?"

"Well..."

"I don't think so." Surgard took a moment to think of how he could expound on his argument. "In fact, I would say that once word got out that you made me your king, other outsiders would come here looking to become king. And before you know it, your people would no longer rule themselves. Foreigners would command your destiny. Do you seriously think that they would have your best interests in mind?"

"Well, no, but still..."

At that moment Surgard wished the ruler of his gods, Durn, would whisk him away from these desperate villagers. An instant later he thought, That's it!

He pointed a forefinger at Faldor. "I came to this land at the behest of Durn, the king of my gods. He commanded me to leave my home and explore the wider world. I am on a quest for the greatest of the gods. Should I give up that quest to accept your

crown?"

"I don't know," Faldor said.

"I do. I think I should do no such thing. We all know what happens when our gods are displeased. Being dispatched on a vital quest is a great honor. To toss aside such an honor is sure sign of foolishness."

"But what harm would it be?"

"Harm? Thunder and lightning, Faldor, that's the harm. Fire from the sky. Floods that never end. Plagues of insects, and rats, and disease. Mass panic! Deformed children! Poor festivals! More monsters!"

"Oh."

"The Jytes could be in for years, generations, an eternity of misery and suffering, all because you kept me from my quest. I think a wise man would not be so eager to bring down the wrath of the gods on his people."

"No, that would be foolish."

"Definitely."

"But we must reward you."

"Why? Didn't Rindlug's mother end our fight?"

"Yes."

"So what did I accomplish? Not that much, really. I suppose it was just bad luck that she wasn't able to stop Rindlug from killing King Hralfdon. That, or she didn't find out until later. I don't think you should reward me for being lucky."

"But we still don't have a king," Faldor insisted.

"So, choose among yourselves. You know each other. Who would you trust? Who among you is wise, and strong, has a good heart, and an ability to lead? Make that man, or woman, your king, or your queen. As for me, all I want is a good dinner, and something for my bumps and bruises. Now, am I making sense, or do I need to back up and explain something?"

"No, I suppose not," Faldor said, his voice tinged with sadness. "Well, we do have something to celebrate, so let's treat our guest to some hospitality. The task of finding a king can wait until he's gone."

And so it was that in the space of a short time Surgard was able to defeat two bog monsters. Furthermore, he didn't receive any punishment from Durn for slightly overstating what might happen should Surgard stop undertaking his quest.

Rindlug, however, was not so fortunate. But that's another story.

The End

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