

» Part One «  
Swords (& Spears & Arrows  
& Axes) & Sorcery

*Tanith Lee wrote "Northern Chess"—featuring Jaisel, a woman warrior—for Amazons!, a World Fantasy Award-winning anthology edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson and published in 1979. Another Jaisel story, "Southern Lights," appeared in Amazons II in 1982. Published during the heyday of feminist Sword and Sorcery, I think this story is one of the best examples of the sub-genre.*

## NORTHERN CHESS

Tanith Lee

SKY AND LAND had the same sallow bluish tinge, soaked in cold light from a vague white sun. It was late summer, but summer might never have come here. The few trees were bare of leaves and birds. The cindery grass-less hills rolled up and down monotonously. Their peaks gleamed dully, their dips were full of mist. It was a land for sad songs and dismal rememberings, and, when the night came, for nightmares and hallucinations.

Fifteen miles back, Jaisel's horse had died. Not for any apparent cause. It had been healthy and active when she rode from the south on it, the best the dealer had offered her, though he had tried to cheat her in the beginning. She was aiming to reach a city in the far north, on the seacoast there, but not for any particular reason. She had fallen into the casual habit of the wandering adventurer. Destination was an excuse, never a goal. And when she saw the women at their looms or in their greasy kitchens, or tangled with babies, or broken with field work, or leering out of painted masks from shadowy town doorways, Jaisel's urge to travel, to ride, to fly, to run away, increased. Generally

she was running from something in fact as well as in the metaphysical. The last city she had vacated abruptly, having killed two footpads who had jumped her in the street. One had turned out to be a lordling, who had taken up robbery and rape as a hobby. In those parts, to kill a lord, with whatever justice, meant hanging and quartering. So Jaisel departed on her new horse, aiming for a city in the north. And in between had come this bleak northern empty land where her mount collapsed slowly under her and died without warning. Where the streams tasted bitter and the weather looked as if it wished to snow in summer.

She had seen only ruins. Only a flock of grayish wild sheep materialized from mist on one hand and plunged away into mist on the other. Once she heard a raven cawing. She was footsore and growing angry—with the country, with herself, and with God. While her saddle and pack gained weight on her shoulders with every mile.

Then she reached the top of one of the endless slopes, looked over and saw something new.

Down in a pool of the yellowish-bluish mist lay a village. Primitive and melancholy it was, but alive, for smokes spiraled from roof-holes, drifting into the cloudless sky. Mournful and faint, too, there came the lowing of cattle. Beyond the warren of cots, a sinister unleafed spider web of trees. Beyond them, barely seen, transparent in mist, something some distance away, a mile perhaps—a tall piled hill, or maybe a stony building of bizarre and crooked shape . . .

Jaisel started and her eyes refocused on the closer vantage of the village and the slope below.

The fresh sound was unmistakable: jingle-jangle of bells on the bridles of war horses. The sight was exotic, also, unexpected here. Two riders on steel-blue mounts, the scarlet caparisons flaming up through the quarter-tone atmosphere like bloody blades. And the shine of mail, the blink of gems.

“Render your name!” one of the two knights shouted. She half smiled, visualizing what they would see, what they would assume, the surprise in store.

“My name is Jaisel,” she shouted back.

And heard them curse.

“What sort of a name is that, boy?”

*Boy.* Yes, and neither the first nor the only time.

She started to walk down the slope toward them.

And what they had supposed to be a boy from the top of the incline, gradually resolved itself into the surprise. Her fine flaxen hair was certainly short as a boy’s, somewhat shorter.

A great deal shorter than the curled manes of knights. Slender in her tarnished chain mail, with slender strong hands dripping with frayed frosty lace at the wrists. The white lace collar lying out over the mail with dangling drawstrings each ornamented by a black pearl. The left earlobe pierced and a gold sickle moon flickering sparks from it under the palely electric hair. The sword belt was gray leather, worn and stained. Dagger on right hip with a fancy gilt handle, thin sword on left hip, pommel burnished by much use. A girl knight with intimations of the reaver, the showman, and, (for what it was worth), the prince.

When she was close enough for the surprise to have commenced, she stopped and regarded the two mounted knights.

She appeared gravely amused, but really the joke had palled by now. She had had twelve years to get bored with it. And she was tired, and still angry with God.

“Well,” one of the knights said at last, “it takes all kinds to fill the world. But I think you’ve mistaken your road, lady.” He might mean an actual direction. He might mean her mode of living.

Jaisel kept quiet, and waited. Presently the second knight said chillily: “Do you know of this place? Understand where you are?”

“No,” she said. “It would be a courteous kindness if you told me.”

The first knight frowned. “It would be a courteous kindness to send you home to your father, your husband, and your children.”

Jaisel fixed her eyes on him. One eye was a little narrower than the other. This gave her face a mocking, witty slant.

“Then, sir,” she said, “send me. Come. I invite you.” The first knight gesticulated theatrically.

“I am Renier of Towers,” he said. “I don’t fight women.”

“You do,” she said. “You are doing it now. Not successfully.”

The second knight grinned; she had not anticipated that.

“She has you, Renier. Let her be. No girl travels alone like this one, and dressed as she is, without skills to back it. Listen, Jaisel. This land is cursed. You’ve seen, the life’s sucked out of it. The village here. Women and beasts birth monsters. The people fall sick without cause. Or with some cause. There was an alchemist who claimed possession of this region. Maudras. A necromancer, a worshipper of old unholy gods. Three castles of his scabbed the countryside between here and Towers in the west. Those three are no more—taken and razed. The final castle is here, a mile off to the northeast. If the mist would lift, you might see it. The Prince of Towers means to expunge all trace of Maudras

from the earth. We are the prince's knights, sent here to deal with the fourth castle as with the rest."

"And the castle remains untaken," said Renier. "Months we've sat here in this unwholesome plague-ridden wilderness."

"Who defends the castle?" Jaisel asked. "Maudras himself?"

"Maudras was burned in Towers a year ago," the second knight said. "His familiar, or his curse, holds the castle against God's knights." His face was pale and grim. Both knights indeed were alike in that. But Renier stretched his mouth and said to her sweetly: "Not a spot for a maid. A camp of men. A haunted castle in a blighted country. Better get home."

"I have no horse," said Jaisel levelly. "But coins to buy one."

"We've horses and to spare," said the other knight. "Dead men don't require mounts. I am called Cassant. Vault up behind me and I'll bring you to the camp."

She swung up lightly, despite the saddle and pack on her shoulders.

Renier watched her, sneering, fascinated.

As they turned the horses' heads into the lake of mist, he rode near and murmured: "Beware, lady. The women in the village are sickly and revolting. A knight's honor may be forgotten. But probably you have been raped frequently."

"Once," she said, "ten years back. I was his last pleasure. I dug his grave myself, being respectful of the dead." She met Renier's eyes again and added gently, "and when I am in the district I visit his grave and spit on it."

THE MIST was denser below than Jaisel had judged from the slope. In the village a lot was hidden, which was maybe as well. At a turning among the cots she thought she spied a forlorn hunched-over woman, leading by a tether a shadowy animal, which seemed to be a cow with two heads.

They rode between the trees and out the other side, and piecemeal the war camp of Towers evolved through the mist.

Blood-blotch red banners hung lankly; the ghosts of tents clawed with bright heraldics that penetrated the obscurity. Horses puffed breath like dragon-smoke at their pickets. A couple of Javelot-cannon emplacements, the bronze tubes sweating on their wheels, the javelins stacked by, the powder casks wrapped in sharkskin but probably damp.

At this juncture, suddenly the mist unraveled. A vista opened away from the camp for two hundred yards northeast, revealing the castle of the necromancer-chemist, Maudras.

It reared up, stark and peculiar against a tin-colored sky.

The lower portion was carved from the native rock-base of a conical hill. This rose into a plethora of walls and craning, squinnying towers, that seemed somehow like the petrification of a thing once unnaturally growing. A causeway flung itself up the hill and under an arched doormouth, barricaded by iron.

No movements were discernible on battlements or roofs. No pennant flew. The castle had an aura of the tomb. Yet not necessarily a tomb of the dead.

It was the camp that had more of the feel of a mortuary about it. From an oblique quarter emanated groanings. Where men were to be found outside the tents, they crouched listlessly over fires. Cook-pots and heaps of accouterments plainly went unattended. By a scarlet pavilion two knights sat at chess. The game was sporadic and violent and seemed likely to end in blows.

Cassant drew rein a space to the side of the scarlet pavilion, whose cloth was blazoned with three gold turrets—the insignia of Towers. A boy ran to take charge of the horse as its two riders dismounted. But Renier remained astride his horse, staring at Jaisel. Soon he announced generally, in a herald's carrying tone: "Come, gentlemen, welcome a new recruit. A peerless knight. A damsel in breeches."

All around, heads lifted. A sullen interest bloomed over the apathy of the camp: the slurred spiteful humor of men who were ill, or else under sentence of execution. They began to get up from the pallid fires and shamble closer. The fierce paused and gazed arrogantly across with extravagant oaths.

"Mistress, you're in for trouble," said Cassant ruefully. "But be fair, he warned you of it."

Jaisel shrugged. She glanced at Renier, nonchalantly posed on the steel-blue horse, right leg loose of the stirrup now and hooked across the saddle-bow. At ease, malevolently, he beamed at her. Jaisel slipped the gaudy dagger from her belt, let him catch the flash of the gilt, then tossed it at him. The little blade, with its wasp-sting point, sang through the air, singeing the hairs on his right cheek. It buried itself, where she had aimed it, in the picket post behind him. But Renier, reacting to the feint as she had intended, lunged desperately aside for the sake of his pretty face, took all his own weight on the yet-stirruped leg and off the free one, unbalanced royally, and plunged crashing to the ground. At the same instant, fully startled, the horse tried to rear. Still left-leggedly trapped in the stirrup, Renier of Towers went slithering through the hot ashes of a fire.

A hubbub resulted—delighted unfriendly mirth. The soldiers were as prepared to make sport of a boastful lord on his ears in the ash as of a helpless girl.

And the helpless girl was not quite finished. Renier was fumbling for his