

The House of Jade

or

The Harder It Gets

or

Then How About the Horsie!?

by

Randy Nikkel Schroeder



THE HOUSE OF JADE

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Wish felt a twinkle of desire.

She reined the white horse at the alley's edge and peered through a haze of trash fires. At the end of the lane a crew of young men cracked the hood of a rusty Camaro.

"Easy, Music." She stroked the horse's neck. "He is somewhere here."

She surveyed the city called the Scatterings—its rundown manors and cathedrals intertwined with mobile homes, windows hung with fascist flags and dwarvish symbols. She turned up her nose at the tattered court: overturned kegs, wire-webs of bootlegged electricity, unclothed children romping through mazed alleys. The unholy mix sickened her. Ever since Faerie magic had dwindled, the world seemed infected with impurities. The Scatterings itself crouched on the very borderlands of Faerie, and seemed to creep a little further inward every year.

"Why?" Wish tongued dust from between her teeth. "Why does Lot linger here in the haunts of men?"

Music's hooves crunched gravel as he trotted the alley. His ears twitched to death metal, nostrils to weed-smoke coiling from beneath the Camaro's hood. In the dark sky, clouds gathered for war.

"Easy," Wish repeated.

The horse paused and scraped its hooves. A young man appeared from beneath the hood, marijuana cigarette smoking between moist lips, dipstick between fingers.

"Wish!" He brushed a lank of blond hair from one eye. "Wishy. Delectable imp. So far from home?"

"How do you know my name?"

He blinked. "Wish?" He looked down to scan the tattoos across his forearm, naked pixies twined with a hungry dragon. Then his eyelids spread like blossoms, and he grinned so hard it seemed his face would splinter.

"Ah!" He clapped his hands. "Well. A common name in Faerie."

"Not so common as you think," Wish said.

"What brings you to these..." his tongue forced its way through the grin, "these spoiled Lands?"

"I seek one named Lot."

The young man grinned and stroked the dipstick, up and down. "Your boyfriend?"

"My sister's betrothed," Wish corrected.

"Ahhhh." The young man leered, and looked suddenly familiar. "Dudes. Check this. Says her name is Wish."

A whistle. Two teenage boys, both unshirted, climbed from the back seat. The raven-haired one held a fistful of wires, the blue-haired an old issue of the porn rag *Goblin Gobblers*. They laughed as soon as they saw her.

"Wish honey," said the raven-head. "Have we met?"

Wish fingered Music's mane. "I have no time to exchange pleasantries."

"None?" The blond caressed the dipstick. "Of any sort?"

"The one I seek," Wish blurted, "lingers at a dwelling called the House of Jade. Do you know it? He has something I need."

They laughed. The blond bowed, turned, swept a hand. "Right here, sweetie. At one time a strip-club called the House of Jade. Now unnamed."

Behind him, a blasted castle nested a house-trailer in its heart, propped by stilts and supported by turrets —half treehouse, half haunted mansion. Smoke coiled from a maw in the roof, leaking red light. Gargoyles leered over an iron gate and busted picket fence, eyes fixed on the clouds.

Wish swallowed. "That's the House of Jade?"

"Don't be long," the raven-head said. He, too, looked familiar. "Soon as we get this bastard engine started we can take you for a

ride."

"No." Wish jiggled the reins. "That will not be necessary. I thank you."

She entered the gate. It began to snow.

Three days earlier Wish had thundered across Goblin's Bridge and into the forest, bearing strange tidings. She handed Music's reins to her cousin Vesper and entered the bole of Great Tree.

Inside, winds hummed from hundreds of feet overhead, fresh with leafy scents. Barky walls blushed with the moon's light, dammed at the treetops and channeled rootward in a stroke of subtle Faerie engineering. Wish inhaled deeply; mid-breath she noticed splinters in the wall's corrugations—bug-chewed bark, sap running like blood.

"Lot tarries at the edge of Faerie," she blurted. "In the lands of Men. And women."

"Wish." Queen Maz of the Willow Tribe Faerie turned on her mossy sofa, smoothing crimson skirts. A pinprick of light flared behind her. "News from my sister, Queen Mithra? What of our missing kin?"

"Mithra has been silent as one dead. Much too silent for a Faerie Queen."

"You are my scout," Queen Maz snapped. "Nothing more. What do you know of Faerie Queens, and their gifts?"

Wish took a step backwards. "My Lady."

Again light flared behind the dais. Wish noticed her own sister, sitting between roots and flicking a lighter again and again.

Maz followed Wish's gaze. "Your sister Luck has not been the same since her betrothed..." The queen paused to dab the corner of her mouth with a crimson cloth. "I should have seen the signs. Lot was so restless, so... distant. I should have never sent him in search of those magic stones."

Luck sobbed.

Wish's heart flared with small unbidden hatreds, as one sometimes feels for kin. She caught herself. Such pettiness was

unbecoming in a Faerie. She loved her sister. And her sister loved Lot, gone now four seasons.

"My Lady," Wish said. "There are tidings of Lot among men and women. They say he took his leave of Queen Mithra last spring. They say he lingers at a place called the House of Jade, in The Scatterings." She took a step forward. "They say he has one of the stones. They say he has the Swan's Heart."

Maz laughed, a trickle of humor from a dry well. "And you will fetch it, no doubt."

Wish was troubled by the Queen's tone. "Your thinking on this matter is sound, my lady. With the stones together we may create a synergy to hasten a Second Coming of Magic."

The Queen looked down for a long spell. Finally she said: "You have admirable faith, Wish. But your interest in the Swan's Heart is extravagant."

Wish pondered this, and silently disagreed. Did the Swan's Heart not represent the purity of Faerie—the blood and fire? Even in despair, the Faerie were bright. It gave her hope, because it meant that renewal was always a single act of courage away.

"I will find Lot," she said. "I will bring home the Swan's Heart, then set out in search of the Crow's Eye."

"You?" The Queen laughed. "You are a scout, Wish. Your distaste for violence is well known."

Wish fingered the short sword beneath her cloak. She had never used it. "This is not a dark lord I seek. This is Lot, whom we all love."

The Queen raised an eyebrow. "Why is your hand in your cloak, dear? Perhaps your extravagance is fired by Lot himself."

"My Lady!" Wish flushed. Luck flicked the lighter, rocked back and forth.

Queen Maz flung a leg across the dais. "I have felt my own blood quicken at his touch."

She smiled. "Is there shame in this truth?"

Wish remained silent.

"Of course there is shame." The Queen traced her bare thigh

with a fingernail. "Without shame there is no allure. And we all need a little passion now that magic is dwindling. Where will you get it, Wish? Where will you get your passion?"

"I will get it by finding both stones. Which together will restore Faerie, and make it great again."

The queen laughed.

Wish bit her lip. Was she the only one, in this whole tribe, who held fast to hope? Surely a Second Coming of Magic was at hand. Lot already had one of the stones. Surely her people could yet seclude themselves from the rest of Zoar, a continent wracked with degradation and disgrace, filled with the dissolute, the deprived, the deluded—monsters, terrorists, demons, whores...

"Let me go," she said at last.

The Queen appraised her with violet eyes. "Do we really need yet another quest for a talisman?"

"Lady?"

Maz laughed, the last few drops. "Very well. Begone. I, like all Faerie, have no more power over you or anyone."

Wish bowed and turned. She did not look back as she heard the rip of crimson cloth, then the storm of Luck's tears.

The House of Jade was reached by seven stone steps. Wish climbed them carefully and pressed open the tattered screen door, then the oaken one. She stepped into darkness. Faint music played—skipping vinyl, a haunting smear of violin. Her nose tickled with dark perfumes: sweat mingled with burning leaves and sap, others she could only guess at. Myrrh, perhaps. Exotic spices. Opium.

"Shut the door." A deep, frozen rasp.

Wish peered through dark and smoke, across hanging fires. She shuddered to see they were lit spider plants dangling trailers to a floor wet with spills, strewn with poppy petals and the strange exhaust of dissolution: broken bottles, small bones, feathers. The scent of burning leaf was horrible; whoever lived here had no respect for green life.

She followed a trickle of goblin liquor to the room's edge, and gasped. There sat Lot, in a pillowed lair, flanked by two naked dwarf-boys. One held a doll's head, its glass eyes vacant.

The other seemed to have asthma; he gave her a rheumy stare, breath shredding lungs.

Lot smiled. "And this, too, has been one of the dark places on earth."

"Lot."

"Welcome." He drew breath from a hookah. "I've been waiting for you." He smiled again. His teeth were filed to points.

Wish clasped her hands. "Lot. What is all this?"

He reached to flick at a set of handcuffs dangling from a nail. "Make a wish."

She saw more now. Goblin pornography on the walls. Unfinished pizzas, cartons of Dwarvish fast-food buzzed by flies. A plucked magpie chained to a coat-rack. And in the corner, sprawled on a couch, a half-dressed goblin woman with a whip and a diamond bottle of absynthe, braid fallen and coiled on the floor.

"Lot." Wish tightened her clasp. "Dear Heaven, what has become...?"

Lot turned his gaze to the couch. "Darling? Pleasure me." He raised his chin. There was a crack, black finger of lightning. The magpie squawked. Blood trickled from Lot's lip.

"What has become?" He licked the blood, staining filed teeth. "This."

The goblin grinned and rewound her whip. The dwarf-boys tittered. The doll's eyes rolled back in its head.

Lot grinned back at the goblin. "Whatever you say of Malicia, her aim is impeccable." He turned to stare at Wish. "What news from Great Tree?"

Wish forced herself to return his gaze. "Our tribe is fallen to despair."

"And how is my love?"

"My sister is desperate for your return."

Lot leaned forward. "I'm speaking of you."

Wish stepped back, clasped and unclasped her hands. She was startled by the warmth on her cheeks and between her legs. She bit her own lip, a hit of cleansing pain. The dwarf-boy wheezed and ravaged her with his eyes.

"Wish?" Lot ran his tongue across lips again, tracing blood. The magpie began to cry.

Wish flinched. Among the faerie the magpie was a bird of ill-omen. But she hated to see any animal treated with such unvarnished cruelty. She straightened her spine and shoulders. "I've come for the Swan's Heart, Lot. You know it."

"Ahhhh." Lot leaned back and caressed the asthmatic dwarf. "Mithra's little present. Well, there is no virtue in an uncherished gift given."

"The Faerie queens themselves may lose hope," Wish said. "But I will not."

"How stirring," Lot said.

"With the Swan's Heart and Crow's Eye together, we may yet hasten a Second Coming. And all this..." She scanned the room. Her shoulders sagged. "And. All. This...."

"Lovely," Lot said. "Would you like to see my tattoo?"

"Both Mithra and Maz have agreed that the magic stones—"

"Magic stones!" Lot slapped the asthmatic dwarf. "Talismans, talismans. Can't anyone ever think of something new?"

Wish looked him in the eye. "It is not a bad thing to be rooted in tradition."

"Horseshit."

"All things are renewed."

Lot laughed. Bitterly, it seemed. "Wish. How you vex me." He began to rise, then collapsed into the pillows, where he folded his hands in his lap. The wheezy dwarf moved forward, but Lot pressed him back.

"I do..." He drew a long breath. "I do miss your sister. I miss her hands."

"I know." Wish moved forward.

"It is a foolish desire."

"No, Lot."

He looked up. "Why don't you come closer, Wish."

Wish took a step forward, caught herself. "Why?"

"I'm not going to bite."

The goblin laughed.

Wish stepped to the cushions, kept her gaze steady. The asthmatic dwarf licked his lips and reached for her. Lot pushed him back.

"May I see your rings, Wish?"

She slowly put a hand forward.

"Talismans." Lot took her fingers in his own, twisted her silver rings. "Your hands are very like your sister's." She felt vibrations at her nails, then up to elbows.

"Imagine this," Lot said. "Crack the Swan's Heart to eight peices, set a stone in each of your rings."

She felt a tingle of pleasure. The thought of the Swan's Heart, Lot's delicate twists. His finger stroked beneath both knuckles, hit the swirl of nerves at her fingertip.

She drew a quick breath. "Who has the Swan's Heart?"

"Who has the Crow's Eye?"

He brushed back to her palm. Her toes tightened in her boots.

"Wish." Lot pushed the second dwarf-boy away by the head, leaned forward. "It doesn't matter." He looked up at her. Then his gaze drooped. "All of Zoar pours through our borders, and we cannot stop it. There will be no Second Coming."

"There will." Her eyes closed.

"There will be only less and less magic. Only persistent myth, to keep the blind and weak in motion through day or year, with foolish faith in things neither seen nor certain."

She felt a slow circle at her palm, blue currents sparking to fingertips.

"Wish," he whispered. "You and I are neither blind nor foolish."

"You are wrong, Lot." She straightened. "I will prove you wrong."

"You will chase only shade." He tightened his grip on her fingers.

"Look around you: the lands are aflame with mad hopes. Raguel and the prophets have returned with their puppet show. The Zruk terrorists search for a dirty spell. The Dwarves talk of the South rising again. Some even say a goblin child has come out of the wilderness preaching new magic for all races."

"A goblin?"

"You see how ridiculous. There will be no Second Coming. There has never been any magic."

She opened her eyes. "Wrong, Lot. Wrong."

"There is only this." He grinned until his whip-wound split again, then pulled her finger to his bloodied lips.

"No!" she cried. "You mock my sister and our people." She snatched her hand away, just as the whip cracked again, and a fiery leaf fell floorward to ignite a zig-zag of goblin liquor.

"Little fairy," the goblin said, voice an icy rasp. "Are you so certain of your own purity?"

The magpie keened and flapped its de-feathered wings. Lot laughed and leaned back to fondle the dwarf-boys. "Do as you wish, Wish."

"Give me the Swan's Heart."

"I don't have it."

"I think you do."

Lot snapped his teeth together. "How will you take it, darling? Your distaste for violence is well known."

The goblin meowed.

"What was your plan?" Lot said. "Tell us, sweetheart. Were you going to march in and ask for the talisman? What have you been reading?"

Wish looked down at the river of liquor. Her eyes dizzied. She had no plan. This was no quest.

"Of course..." Lot licked blood from his lips. "One can always acquire a taste for blood. With the right teacher."

Wish did not know what to do. She spun, hands fisted, lip bitten, and strode for the door. She stopped. "What do I tell my sister?"

"Tell her I'm dead."

She slammed both doors and marched down the snowy steps. Below, the chaotic sprawl of The Scatterings choked on its own haze, juts and corners strung with freezing laundry and cheap Christmas lights. At the bottom of the stairs the young men, still shirtless, looked up from the Camaro. She recognized them suddenly.

"Dear Heaven." She grabbed Music's reins. "Morning Star?"

"Pornstar." He grinned. "New lives need new names."

She mounted, tears burning both eyes. "Nightlight. Daydream."

"Latex," they corrected. "Fellatio." They looked so much older. They were her own twin cousins, from the Tribe of Mithra.

"Your father, Spark." She swallowed. "Died last season looking for you."

They laughed. "Tell his ghost we're dead."

This was too much. Wish wiped her eyes, lashes already frozen.

"Ready to ride?" Fellatio said, grin voracious.

Wish yanked the reins. Music almost reared.

"You make a mockery!" she rasped between clenched teeth. "When we find the Swan's Heart you will be cast out. Cast out, do you hear?"

"You of little faith." Said from behind.

Wish turned. Lot stood barefoot in the snow, wrapped in a red silk kimono, the goblin woman just behind him. He pointed at the Camaro.

Wish followed his finger, tightened the reins. "Enough of your dissolute games."

"Just look," he said. "The irony may delight you."

At her gaze, Pornstar reached and wiggled the hood ornament. Then she saw: the white crystal set in tarnished metal, glinting bits of skylight like a tawdry block of costume jewelry.

She just about fell from the saddle.

"Well," Lot said. "Now you've seen it, anyway."

Her eyes renewed their tears. "How could you?"

Lot shrugged. "Makes no difference. One way or the other. Do

you want it?"

She glared.

Lot laughed. "I do not jest. The Swan's Heart is yours."

"What price?"

"You give it to me, I give it to you."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

She bowed her head, heart gushing a mingle of fear and rage. "You are my sister's betrothed." Her cheeks flushed, hot quiver between her legs. It was anger. Only anger.

"Your choice, Wish." He smiled. "A fair bargain."

She was silent.

"Is it the adultery?" Lot said. "Or the admission that nothing, finally, matters?"

She remained silent.

His lip crooked up in smile. "Then how about the horsie?"

Her hand shook on the reins.

The goblin woman reached from behind to clutch Lot's neck. He grinned fully, but the corners of his lips seemed to swim against a current of emotion. "Darling Wish," he said. "Seems you are left with two choices."

Yes, two choices. Fight or flee.

"Run little pixie." The goblin woman tightened her grip around Lot's neck. "You will learn that all roads lead finally here, to the House of Jade."

"No," Wish said.

"Run little pixie," Lot echoed. "See if you have a chance." He was already being hauled back by the goblin, her green flesh bright on snow.

Wish looked down. All three of her cousins leered at her.

"Try the car now," Pornstar pulled his fist from the cracked-open hood and winked.

"Then we ride. Front door, M'lady, or back?"

"Animals," Wish whispered.

Pornstar seized his crotch. "The more you fight, the harder it

gets." He stepped towards her.

She reined Music backward and considered her odds. Three against one, but she had the horse. The Swan's Heart would rip easily from the rusty hulk. She fingered the short sword beneath her cloak. This could yet be a quest—Faerie could yet be saved by a single courageous act, if the hero remained pure as the Swan's Heart itself.

"Look inside yourself," The goblin called from the steps, voice cracking in the cold. "Look deep, pixie."

The sun shifted from cloud. Wish glanced a dark sliver coiled at the core of the Swan's Heart. She shuddered. Her tongue flicked across her teeth, back and forth, back and forth. She grasped for the sword's handle, but sliced her palm on the blade instead. The clouds swallowed the sun and belched a sudden darkness. How easy, Wish thought. How easy to break love to exquisite splinters, the better to slit flesh from spirit. How sleek her cousins were. How their tongues might glint with her bitter tears....

Pornstar tugged the reins from below.

"Give in," he said.

"Never." Wish kicked him in the mouth and grabbed the reins, palm spattering blood.

"Music!" She kicked the horse's ribs, first time ever, then whipped him and fled west in the name of all purity, chasing the wake of dying day.

Behind her the Camaro rumbled to life.