

A dragon changeling, imprisoned by a rival, faces damage done to her in captivity as well as the knowledge that she is a changeling in a world where magic is evil. She frees herself from her captor's madness, but not before he summons the most dangerous dragon in the world.

THE RINGMAKER

by H. M. Sanders

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RINGMAKER



H. M. SANDERS

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The Ringmaker

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Chapter 2 The Sleeping Princeling

She found the stranger's body right before dusk. A heavy snow had fallen and covered the last of his horse's hoof prints. She swung off her own mount and trudged forward in the drift towards him. The snow had covered the man's form like a blanket; only a tuft of his hair and his hand showed, as if someone had tucked him in for the night.

She knelt beside the dead man and pushed the snow away from his face, and off of his shoulders. He was wedged up against a drift-covered boulder and she rolled his body over so that the corpse was on its back. What puzzled her was the skin of his face. It was a waxy gray, not the pale yellow of frozen flesh. Surely he was dead, frozen to death. It was coming on cold and colder as night fell.

Sauvir raised her head and breathed in through her nose. Cold air, naked of scent. Nothing in the freeze of the world around her to tell her what had happened to him. She felt behind his head for a wound. But there was no congealed blood about his head, so she was wrong about his mount having thrown him. He had not starved, for he showed no wasting. She pushed the powdery drifts off his torso. His right arm was wrapped around a leather bag, the glove-encased hand clutching the sack like a claw. She swept the rest of the snow off his leggings. A long man, tall, like herself. Maybe taller.

She looked around her for some sign of what had happened. Dead grasses spiked up through the snow on higher hillocks like porcupine backs, but for the most part the world was a silent white wasteland. Her mare Hantha pawed the knee-deep drifts and whinnied to the man's horse, who stood some distance away. The man's stallion approached and the two horses snuffled each other. Sauvir squinted at the sky. The horizon towards the west was a sheet of plum purple, heavy with another storm, and night coming on fast behind as well.

She pushed the snow-filled curtain of his cloak back. It was a rich man's cloak, lined with soft aviril fur. Definitely a merchant. Probably come down from that wealthy town of Mok Taswan to do some business, but with country Tundin tack on his horse? She frowned. Odd for a man of his class to be alone on a horse in the middle of winter, out on the trading route. She looked back at his face. Even in death, his

expression was that of a care-worn lord, young to be sure, but one who had listened too long to aggrieved parties. She knew that feeling well.

Her own journey would take her near Mok Taswan. It would not be too out of the way to stop briefly at the merchants' House in that trading city and hand over his effects. She sighed. She sat back up. She didn't have time for any of this, but custom died hard. The dead should not be abandoned. She needed to get off the main trading route and make the Naskatik River by nightfall, but that wouldn't happen now.

She eyed the merchant's horse. The stallion's bridle and saddle, as she had noted earlier, were like her own, Tundin and well maintained. She looked around her for signs of others, but only saw the flat line of the trading route stretching west before her, headed towards the mountain city of Mok Taswan.

She stood and sniffed the air around him again. Blast this cold. She could smell nothing. And now with the trouble of the body, Sauvir knew they would have to keep moving after dark. At least there would be moonlight. At least she had her good boots with the rabbit fur lining. And, thank Tun, there was no sign yet of what she feared most.

She knelt again and felt around the man's neck. Sometimes people wore keepsakes near their hearts. She fumbled beneath the high collar of the man's winter tunic, and fished out a thin cord and about it was a small gold ring. A dead wife? A love token? The cord snagged on an object and she leaned in to see better in the gloaming. At first, the sight of the shaft at the man's neck did not register, and then what she had forced to the back of her mind came forward all too quickly. She scrambled upright in the snow and looked around her again in the dead silence of the world. Her eyes searched the gray line of the forest far to the south but she saw no movement, no riders on the white landscape. She looked behind her, from whence she had come from the trading road. Nothing. She scanned along the ridge. No movement atop the cliffs there. Nothing east, or west, except her own tracks. Just the night sinking down onto her like a cold iron lid.

She fell down in the snow next to the man and carefully plucked the thin dart from the back of his neck, under his hair. That close to him, she took in his scent out of habit and again she went still. Near his throat, there was the hint of winter giving way to spring. She had

smelled death before, and this man was not dead. Her heart began to race. The dart was poisoned, probably with viper venom. Wraiths for sure, tracking her. But why was this man still alive?

Her breath came faster. This man was built like her, slender and tall. What if he had taken the killing dart for her? There was no time to ponder. She hunkered low and bent her knees, got her arms under his body, closed her eyes and gathered her muscles and heaved the man's dead weight out of the drift in a great burst of strength. She carried him over and the stallion stood still as she pushed the man belly-down across his saddle. She leaned against the man's cold body and wiped the fiery melting snow from her face, and waited for the spots to clear in front of her eyes. The world swam but soon righted itself. She had to get to the Naskatik, and the cover of the forest there. The man had already survived this long. She jutted her jaw. If he hung on as far as the Naskatik forest, she would take care of him then.

She mounted Hantha and left the trading route, striking out across the bleak meadow for the gray-black blur of the forest to the south. She was vexed. She could not scent the mouldering bulrushes that would tell her she was near the ravine that marked the halfway point. She could not smell the soft scent that the little brown birds left, darting through the air, that might tell her if they were annoyed, or just hungry, or flying from danger. She could not scent her own mount's fear, or the scent of a stalking hunter.

"Hah, Hantha. Hah!" The stallion plowed behind them in Hantha's wake. Sauviri could not risk a gallop because of the man, but she could urge Hantha faster through the night.

The moons' scimitar shapes rose to the east and drenched the snowy meadow around her in an underwater glow. The tree line didn't seem that far away but once she made the sloping curve of the ravine she would know better. Hantha's breath plumed around her shoulders and Sauviri kept her eyes moving in the night's ghostly fog of light.

She sought for signs of movement as she rode, for the wild wolves that roamed at night, but mostly for signs of being tracked. It could be that the wraiths had thought they had made a kill. They would have checked the body though, and seen their mistake, which explained why the man's belongings had been left. They would be close by. What had

Kittur said? “Look for the Governor’s spies, the wraiths, where no man should be. Under soil. Under water. The tops of trees, and inside the rock. Look for these killing men where you would not look for them, and you will find them. They are assassins skilled in mirage, deception, weapons you cannot see, and poisons you cannot taste.” Kittur would know. He had been a ranger once with a wraith’s skills, before age had crept in.

She came up on a dip in the crust that ran a serpentine course under the snow cover. Relief flooded her. The gully, then. Not too long until the tree line, which did seem closer but distance could trick the eye at night, in light like this. Now she thought of the man. An innocent traveler, out on the trading road, who had caught death intended for her. And who was he? At first she had thought he was Nameless, fleeing from the city of Mok Taswan for safer Tundin country, her own homeland. It was harder for the Governor to round up Nameless folk who had the mark of magic on them in the dead of winter, when roads were impassable. But he was a merchant, or merchant’s son. With Tundin heritage, perhaps?

Hantha slowed and stepped with care into the frozen mash that was the gully, but it was solid beneath them. They plowed on. The cold bit her exposed jaw and the skin under her eyes. She came up along the dark line of trees. They were weighed down under the heavy snow, like sentries sleeping beneath winter cover.

She had been kept captive by Governor Agadittur for almost a season, through early Winter and on into Day’s Leaving, at the turn of the year. Then Kittur had rescued her, plucked her from the Governor’s prison and nursed her back to health, then pushed her back into her position as Ringmaker of the Tundin as if nothing had happened. Kittur knew she needed to step back into her role. Kittur was only trying to help her, and help the Tundin people.

Thankfully there were no wolves. The horses were still calm as they plowed under the dark eaves of the snow-loaded cedars. The world was so quiet. She was exhausted, and thirsty, and stretched tight between her eyes and ears as she listened for death around her, but mostly she marveled at the mute cave that the forest had become, here, under the

snow-clotted boughs of the trees. She was thankful to be in cover, and away from the open white eye of the fields.

She had gone back to her position as Ringmaker. She had continued her work of mediating the Radthinars, the Tundin leaders, who groused and argued and scabbled for land and grain and more heads of sheep. But she found she could no longer sit and wait for the great grinding stone of politics to wear her down. What Agadittur had told her had brought chaos into her mind.

As she lay famished in his cell, Agadittur had whispered to her of his great desire, his only desire: to free the mad dragon Finauld, Finauld, who had laid waste to the mages of the world and destroyed them all. How was he to do this? He had whispered to Sauvir as she lay waiting for death to take her home. He would find the legendary flute of the mages, the instrument of destruction that was said to have brought ruin to Finauld. It's too bad," Agadittur had whispered, "that the mages paid such a high price for their own culture's destruction. Too bad that they all died before they could see the flute's creation, or watch the feared dragon be brought to bay by such a simple thing. But I know where that flute is," he whispered. Then she had felt him pondering whether to tell her. He had stood, and aimed his words down at her. "You won't live to see daylight, you and your stubbornness." He was considering; he would cast the pearl to her as one casts offal to the hogs, for by that time she knew the blunt club of his madness very well. Then she had heard the ring of his scimitar as he drew it and brandished it above her head. She had closed her eyes. Agadittur had knelt beside her once again. "Finauld's lair is where the flute rests, Sauvir. And Finauld's lair is in the Spirit City. Why won't you come with me? You and I...we're one of a kind, we can rule together, and dream the world we want into being! If I control the flute, the Flute of Smoke, that was powerful enough to deceive Finauld, we can control our world. Why do you run from what you are? Why do you refuse again and again what I offer you? Why must it come to your death?"

She had answered him. "Finauld...you are like him. You are dragon-kind. He was vulnerable...and you are vulnerable too..."

Agadittur laughed and leaned into her ear. "He was a wild dragon, not a changeling. I have my human mind. It makes me stronger than a

crazed beast. This was Finauld's downfall. This was why he was brought to bay by human magic!"

Sauvir went silent. Agadittur's hubris was such that it was a form of insanity and no words she summoned could dispute that.

Agadittur stood and paced. She remembered how hard it was, on that cold stone floor, even to draw breath, even to muster fear for the blade swinging above her. All she had felt was numb anger that she had not the strength to fight back. At the time she didn't care about Finauld or the Spirit City; oddly, she only remembered the gentle pressure of her mother's hand on the back of her head, but that could not have been right. Her mother had died, hadn't she? She remembered a slice of light through her cell's door, and the creak of Agadittur's boots, words exchanged, the rustle of hay as he moved for the door. She remembered the tang of his scent as it had changed from eagerness at her death to consternation at being interrupted, and then she had fainted, and had woken some time later in the back of a rattling cart. When she came to her senses, her Radthinar's Guard, Kittur, had been holding her hand. Kittur had waited while she healed, and he had waited for her to speak. But what could she tell him? She had had enough waiting in Agadittur's prison to last the rest of her life. And Agadittur hadn't counted on Kittur's rescue, he had not imagined she might survive her capture. Survive to remember what Agadittur had told her.

It was late. The moons crept higher and sent cold light down through the treetops. A limb snapped somewhere deep in the forest from the weight of the snow and Hantha shuddered at the sharp report. Her own heart leapt in fear. And she still had the man to deal with.

She led Hantha and the stallion deeper into the forest. Soon she found what she was looking for. Humps in the snow in the shape of a half-circle, surrounded by sturdy cedars. She gambled that the humps were large boulders that would act as protection. She forced herself to eat a little of the jerky she carried. She scooped the snow and crunched it down into liquid in her mouth. She did this until her throat and lips burned from the cold, but she was thirsty and there was more to be done.

The man had not moved. She tramped over to him and startled as a huge clump of snow slid from a branch and shushed to earth. Again,

she tucked her nose underneath the juncture of his ear and throat and took in his scent. Still alive. She sighed. She removed her winter cowl from her face and neck and wrapped it loosely about the stallion's head. She prayed that his sense of smell was as ruined as hers by the cold and the snow. She unsheathed her dagger and got her cup from her saddlebags and laid the two items side by side in a drift. She stood back and began unbuttoning her winter tunic. She peeled it off and then removed her heavy boots, then the heavy leggings. Her skin prickled hard at the freezing air but she endured it. Her mind had gone to that quiet place and she walked through the snow, plowing a path back to the semi-circle beneath the cedars. Her feet started to burn. The wind was light, and ruffled her hair. She knelt under the trees and let her mind float away.

She could feel the black wave start to move over the back of her body. The area behind her knees melted first. The flesh curdled and changed, the fine scales spread, moving up the backs of her thighs and over her buttocks.

The Ringmaker



The tearing started inside and she waited. Her heart stopped beating and then pounded to life, a deeper drum; her lungs closed and she could not breathe...her belly and guts and liver lengthened and snaked lower, longer...intense nausea, the need to void her bladder, and searing pain that crackled along her chest as her ribcage accommodated the heated furnace of a new organ...her just-formed talons scrabbled at the spreading itchy skin. Her lungs expanded back into life and she sucked in breath. And with the torque of her guts went her legs, and between the commotion inside and her leg bones grinding short, and the wings coming up out of her back fresh and wet like a chrysalis' birth, and the tail extruding obscenely, the pain rolled over her like a red tide. She whipped about on the ground, a serpent speared by magic's agony.

Finally it was over. She spread the gray wings shot through with black veins. The beast inside cried out to fly, to escape the earth. But not tonight.

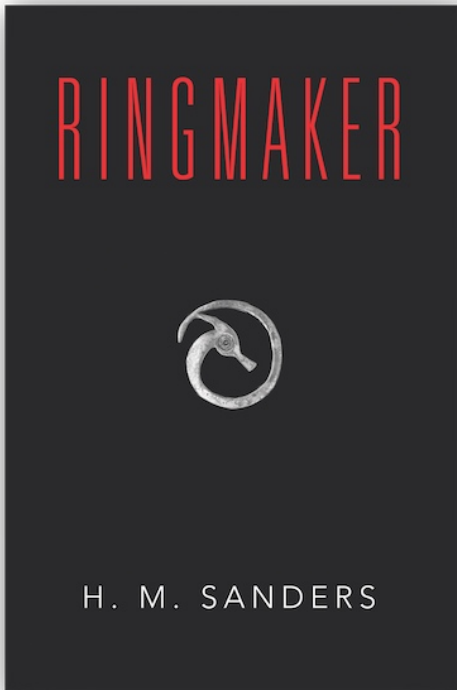
She stood and reared back and blasted the inside of the semi-circle with yellow fire. It melted through to the forest floor beneath, making a deep hole surrounded by the snow-covered rocks. She went and gathered curls of pine boughs that had come down in the heavy snow and she lined the exposed muddy ground with them. She worked that way, piling up snow, melting it with her fire, waiting for the melt to freeze, piling on more and rounding it into a dome, until at last the snow-shelter was done. Now she rested. She listened to the forest around her. She raised her head and parted her mandibles and scented the wind. Still so cold. Too cold to smell anything but frozen water, everywhere. All she heard was the snow's muffled silence around her, all she felt was the bite of cold on her muzzle and scales.

She flew a way into the forest, not too far. She found a suitable spot. She collected downed branches and mounded them into a pile and fashioned a makeshift campfire. She torched it with a single flaming blast, incinerating most of it. She flew back to the main camp. She scuttled over near the horses and found the dagger and the cup. The beast breathed hard and grasped the dagger well in her horny palm, wisps of smoke curling from her nostrils. She closed her eyes but opened them again. She brought the knife up and in a single stroke, the dragon tore at the fine scales along her left forearm. Dark blood welled,

but the scales came off, shimmering along the sharp edge of the knife. She knelt in a drift and caught her breath, and picked up a handful of snow and packed her arm with it. The snow bloomed bright red and she breathed hard. She wanted to fly, but she was too exhausted and the man too sick. She looked about her. It had started to snow again, softly, thickly, and for the first time that day she smiled. It would cover most of their tracks.

She changed back to human form and she dressed. She hauled the man's body off of his horse and slid him over into the front of the shelter. She walked the horses far away from the hump of the snow shelter, over to the false camp fire. It might fool the Governor's wraiths for a short while, for she knew that he had sent them to kill her. It might buy her enough time to change and use her weapons as a beast should the wraiths find the horses in the night. She would hear their alarm calls.

She dragged the man's cold heavy body into the makeshift shelter. She found a stone and ground the dragon's scales into a fine paste and she made the man drink the concoction, forcing his jaw open. The only sound he made to reassure her that he was alive was a choking noise as the slurry went past his windpipe. Her scales were the strongest antidote she knew of for poisoning, and with that done, fatigue began to close in on her. She snuffed the candle she had brought in with them and in the stuffy black shelter she wrapped the merchant and herself in the blankets she had taken off Hantha and fell into a dead sleep.



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