

3rd Place
High School Grades 11-12

Herra's Nation
By Logan Kilpela

A violent, frigid wind there blew across the intermittent isles of hoary snow amid a vast outreaching sea of ice. As it swept across the tundra to the coast, the only sound that broke the lifeless quiet was the fleeting chorus of muffled voices hissing among the needles of every lonesome conifer atop that desert heath. Too cold it was for snow to fall in earnest, so it drifted from the heavens a flake or several at once, as a fire on a dim night will send up sparks to the Moon. Darkness was already glowering under the shaded skirts of the pines while the golden disk of the Sun bled sanguine purple rays across the World; for a moment there wavered a brazen, liquid bulb on the horizon, hovering over the distant boundary of the frozen ocean. There, the remote grinding of berg on berg seemed as faint as if part of some silent, passing dream in the mind of a man who stood there, unmoving, above the seashore.

He was clothed in brown, the colour of his beard. There was a reddening blush on his cheeks, and a thin, glittering film below his nose. His gaze was cast out far, over the hills, looking east. There, the Sun's last glaring flames illuminated a band of figures retreating into the distance. He slowly walked on, his leather boots as stiff as wood as he dragged his feet through the powder-snow. He followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, lightly dusted with frost, and came behind them over the rolling hills to the wide unending tracts of land beyond, spreading in all directions, save far away in the East. There, mighty parading mountains bestrode the distant evening air, their lofty crowns lost, brooding, amid the low clouds. The man's quarry was already ahead of him on that even ground, out even beyond the long shadows of the hills cast by the setting Sun. There were a great many deer far away ahead of them, steadily scrounging their way under the snow toward the remote girdle of trees about the mountains.

Hobbling cautiously sideways down the last hill, careful not to let snow into his boots, the man came to the open plane. He found the snow less deep there, only an inch or several covering his ankles. He could not see the deer any longer, and only a suggestion of the mountain-peaks amid the fog. But his view of the men grew clearer; they seemed no longer out of his reach, and he walked swiftly, though not hastily, in their footprints, coming gradually closer. When he could hear their voices indistinctly, he slowed to match their steady pace, keeping his distance.

They wore clothes much like his, and their unclear words, clear and rich like bells, sounded much like his own. Suddenly, a great crescendo of noise swelled from the group. It was a song of victory and brotherhood, old and long remembered from far back in unrecorded time. But the man was startled and frightened, and flinched, falling clumsily to his knee. One of the group, who had not joined in with his fellows, turned at the sound of the man falling into snow. He shouted out at once. The prostrate man recoiled as the troupe all came round, their song quiet. They seized him, but he struggled violently. He had heard by now that their language was not like his, and their men were not his friends or kin, as perhaps he had hoped. Several of them pinned him down and at the same time conversed with the rest of their fellows, their language sounding to him like the harsh,

unintelligible chattering of crows, or the babbling intercourse of triumphant wolves.

The quietest of them abruptly made a comment. He pulled his hood off his head and began to pace around the group and their captive, who had now all gone quiet. He grew steadily more animated, pointing at the man as he did. The man had stopped struggling as they had turned from mocking to heated debate. He watched their thin, elegant faces intently as they discussed him: and so he had no warning when the tallest of them, the one who had spoken, took a dagger out of his coat.

The man acted almost without thinking. He clumsily and desperately tore his adrenal body with such force that he flung his restrainers off before they tightened their grip on him again, wrenching their arms. More of the group had drawn knives by the time he pulled himself free, and they lunged at him at once while he fled. One of the blades caught him in the back, but his coat was too thick and stiff, and the dagger stuck there. It came loose when the man pulled himself aggressively free of his assailant. But the rest of the rabble had used this time to nearly encircle their quarry. He ducked as they came down on him, and he rolled in the snow, back the way he had come. He stumbled to his feet—from rolling to sprinting in an instant—as his pursuers apprehended him. The thick cloak he wore billowed out behind him, snapping like a drum as he fled, running back west in their footprints. Breathing evenly, like a calm and determined bear, his eyes fixed only on the tract in front of him, he came to the foot of the steep hill and began to climb.

As he sped up, he turned his head for a moment. The lean, tall gang of his aggressors had stopped; they were all breathing heavily and steadily. But the man did not stop: gulping air through his mouth and nose, roaring deeply as he exhaled, he half-crawled his way up the slope. He did not stop even when he had crested the hilltop, for he had seen the spears in their hands, their points as cold and grey as their makers' eyes.

When he finally halted, rolling himself in the snow to slow down, he tumbled on his side into a thick bank of snow and ice. He lay there, looking up at the low-hanging clouds wheeling through the sky like a descending fist, its clawed fingers open to engulf the mountains. As his breathing leveled out, he rolled back up onto his knees and looked back where he had come from. The sky was now grey, and the snow a pale blue. He could not see over the hilltop, but was sure his pursuers were not behind him any more.

But he was mistaken. They sat low, just below the hilltop, peaking their heads up at him, muttering amongst themselves.

'What is he, do you think?' said the first of them.

'Teina! Keep your voiced down', hissed the second. 'Looks like a foreigner, someone from over the hills, most certainly—but perhaps further. He's a sneaky little fox, after all: came very close to catching us.'

'Oh, they're all like that', said Teina. 'They're sneaky but they're stupid. Stumpy little dwarf didn't even have a spear on him.'

The second of them, Komen, nodded, a smile on his lips. But Herra, the tallest, broke his silence and turned his deep, stony eyes away from its fixation on their quarry. 'There's a reason he only had a knife. Maybe he lost his spear: he certainly was surprised when we found him out... But he was clearly trying to pull a fast one while we were all singing—trying to knife one of us. God, what a fool! A knife?' And he snorted in amusement.

'What do we do with him, then? He might have been trying to get us back for something. Has any one of you ever gone that far, done anything to those animals?'

'They're jealous', said Teina. 'They must be. Our land is wider: more deer.'

'Maybe he was waiting to ambush us', said Komen, 'when we'd killed a deer. It's almost hard to believe that such big-headed people could make blades so dull and useless.'

'St!' Hiryo spat, clapping his hand over Komen's mouth. He lay there, poised and tense on his belly, looking ahead, eyes wide to compensate for the growing gloom.

The man had got up and was gathering up his knife and a small, beaded necklace that had been flung from him as he ran. Komen and Teina rose up slowly, as cats delicately testing the air for the moment to pounce. Hiryo ran off to their left, intending to drive the man into his comrades' awaiting spears; but the man caught sight of him as he ran and leapt so high that he had already turned his body almost wholly round by the time he came down again.

Despite his thick frame, the man was a swift runner. He kept his body low to the ground, the wind rustling in his red-brown hair. But over the sound of the wind in his hair he could hear more loudly the growing sounds of his pursuers' footsteps, their longer, skinnier legs like deer's, swift and sprinting. As they ran up behind him, he began to weave, running erratically back and forth, trying desperately to throw them off. One of them, the tallest, was soon almost within arm's reach, and the man turned to look him in the eye. And in that moment he saw something there that he had never seen on a man's face before, even on the grim, high-cheeked visages of these cold murderers: it was a look of such senseless, vehement hatred that welled up from every spring and fountain of his being that his grey eyes hardly seemed in focus so bent was their will upon their singular purpose.

And in that minute moment, the man decided what he should do. No thing had so terrified him in his life as the look in the eyes of the tallest of these men—men! Or so he had thought: for now they seemed more intent upon his destruction than any man he had ever seen, or any rearing mammoth he had ever come upon. With this in mind, he wheeled his thick, short body mid-stride and hurled the massive brunt of it into his attacker. His head was bent too low to see it as he struck the long, thin breast of his murderer, but if he had looked, he would have watched the light in those cold grey eyes flicker for a moment, and then go dark as their bearer tumbled onto his back into the snow.

Such a great corporate bellow there arose from the man's pursuers that he could begin to hear his own heart rapping at the very canals of his ears. It vanished, muffled by the snow and wind, as soon as they let it go, but no less was the horror of its release to the cowering man. He knew now that they had cause to kill him, for two of the troupe had stooped to help their fallen comrade, while the others came in such hot pursuit it seemed to melt the snow ahead of them. Their great spidery hands seized him from behind and tore him down upon his back, knocking his wind clean out.

Time seemed slower as the man watched Herra, the tallest, take his place above his head. He thought for a moment back to that morning, when he had left the cave intent upon finding a herd of deer from which to pluck a meal. And in his desperation and his jealous rage he had tried to overtake a band of what he had taken to be intruders. He saw now that they must be gods of some sort, mighty beings far beyond his comprehension or mastery: they were tall with lofty brows hid among the clouds and thin, bony cheeks like cruel ivory tusks poised to gore him. No such rich brown of hair had he ever seen among his own people, nor any eyes of this colour, like the wheeling sky by day.

Yet gods were supposed to be good, helpful creatures that only showed themselves to earthlings in their hours of direst need. Then these must be dæmons, or some depraved race of men from across the Sea—for it was rumoured that some men could swim the oceans like otters, slaughtering every clan of the man's kin they came upon. Revulsion so great welled up in the man's heart as he stared into Herra's eyes that he wrinkled his face in defiance and spat a great gob of his own gall into the wind, where it was sped away into the night-air.

Herra vomited a venomous roar that gurgled in his nose and throat like that of some mountainous, rearing mammoth, and it flew back in the face of their hostage. In his eyes, bitter and wrath, there bloomed a kernel of fear: horror grew there as Herra's band seized upon him for the last time. Such was their offended rage that their strength wholly overwhelmed each taught sinew, each clenched muscle, of that writhing form, helplessly contorted against their anger. He bellowed in frustrated dread, cowering under his up-thrown arms.

They had all dropped their spears to the ground, and were wrestling with his bearish trunks, when Herra stamped upon his insolent mouth: the man's front teeth splintered, and he howled like a wounded wolf. Now they found it much easier to contain him, he was in such a variety of pain. Hiryo and Teina bound the crippled man and hoisted his ruined form onto their shoulders. So heavy was he that Teina's cousin Midien took up his own share of the burden; and together the three walked over the crest of the hills, back the way they had come. Herra accompanied them, leading them on in the darkness, as the other eight of their band continued on their first trial, looking still for game.

'You have two hours!' called Herra to the departing men. 'I do not think you will find anything, but you must look nonetheless: we shall make an incantation in this rebel's blood for your good luck.'

And so the two groups split, the one walking out toward the distant shade of the mountains, where night was black; and the second bestriding the snow speckled with moonlight that shone through the overhanging dimness. They looked for all who might have seen them like a quiet funeral procession returning with a fallen soldier. But every now and then the form they bore would seem to jerk and struggle, only to be subdued by a blow from the man who walked at the head of their party. But none of them said anything until they had come over the last hill to look down into the wooded dell where their houses were put up. At the utmost depth of the valley, the snow was melted away by a series of fires piled high into the night, huddled figures cooking food and conversing about it.

The four men bore their load down through the spruces, looking ever forward to the orange light before them. They passed some twenty homes as they wound their way among the trees. Each dwelling was made of the tusks and ribs of mammoths, propped on their wider bases so that they met at the same point, from which long, broad mammoth-hides were hung. These tents had each a flap at their base, cut out as a door, through which the travellers might glimpse a cot or a small fire burning as they went.

As they came into the light of the four great fires burning at the bottom of that wooded hollow, the women and men about it lifted their voices in a song. They began to dance around the fires in a figure-eight, weaving and singing, their faces lifted in smiles of joy at their togetherness. Even some of the young children dotted about throughout the camp came down and clambered onto their parents' shoulders, shouting in abashed

imitations of their elders. A moment of rejoicing and forgetfulness in the midst of the bitter famine that gripped their people. Hardly had they sung a single verse when one of the women, Ultelo, who bore hers and Teina's daughter Tilki upon her shoulder, caught sight of her husband and Herra their chief. She saw the upturned face of their captive, his wide eyes glittering with fear, and knew that he was a foreigner, and that this must be some gravely serious affair.

She dropped to her knees and let Tilki down, whispering for her to go back up to their hut and leave her to daddy. Then she straightened up and came forward, her dark brown hair falling over her eyes, which had lost all the bright joy of the song. It had now died down, and in its place, a new sound arose: a great shout of fervor. For the men and women had seen and guessed the reason for their return. Soon Herra, Teina, Hiryo, and Midien stood at the centre of a clambering crowd, which begged them with ferocious, eager faces to know why they had brought this scum into the heart of their land.

'Silence! silence!' bellowed Hiryo. 'Listen! For we have brought this swine down to the fires for your judgment!' There were some cries of approval as Hiryo, Teina, and Midien forced their captive to stand, despite his weariness. He gazed ahead with terrified eyes, his knees shaking from the cold and dread. Herra stood beside him and grasped him by the brownish hair on his crown, addressing his people.

'Look at him! Look at his face and you will know you look upon the face of a dog! This is a creature with the slow wit and ruthless anger of a bear!' There were some growls of bitterness and disgust from the crowd. The people's faces, formerly ecstatic in their rejoicing, were now contorted in a fierce, accusatory loathing. 'This beast spat in my face and struck me to the ground: he laid siege upon us on the plains and tried to murder us! He did not understand the greatness of his own folly! But we shall let him discover it!' There was no more cheering, for now the rabble cried indistinctly for blood.

And Teina raised his hand, crying above the tangle of voices, 'How shall we punish him for his insolent attack?' There was a roar from the crowd, and some of them leapt forward, trying to get at the man, who stood there, immobile for his own horror. But some of the colder and wickeder villagers held them back, waiting quietly to hear the man's doom. As the people worked this out amongst themselves, Herra stepped forward almost unnoticed and whispered in Teina's ear. He nodded, and raised his hand on high again. After some moments, a tense silence fell. The man seemed to know, though he understood nothing of their words, that this was the point at which his doom would be decided.

'We will give him to the gods, and let his sacrifice be a warning and a reminder of the crime his race has done against our leader.'

There was such an outcry that the man wavered and swooned. Hiryo, who stood at his back, caught him under the arms as Midien picked his legs up. The two bore him as he struggled to the edge of the firelight. There several of the crowd were moving a great frozen stone, covered in speckles of dead lichen, into position. When the man saw this, even through his terrified stupor, he began to twist and shriek wildly. At this the crowd laughed and spat at him, saying that this was just payment. 'Look at him!' they cried. 'Look at his face! That hideous nose, like a great broad beak! And that thick, stupid forehead, like line of hills!' And they covered their mouths and made grimaces of disgust and mockery at him. Then Herra took up his spear, and Teina a long stone dagger, and five men held the man down and he writhed and shivered and began to weep.

The World seemed to move more slowly as the man looked into Herra's eyes. He towered above him like some menacing dæmon, a spear poised in his hand like a sceptre. In the moment that their eyes met, the two persons seemed briefly to relent. The look on Herra's face was not now hateful, but he seemed acutely aware of the power he held over the man, who seemed less afraid than stoic. Perhaps Herra saw it as an apologetic look that crept into the depths of those deep, ugly, foreign sockets, for he seemed to hesitate in guilt for a moment. In truth, it was a look of sorrow for ever having woken that morning, for ever having left his cot far away over the hills, that welled up in that wretch's face. And then Herra grasped the spear with his other hand and with a contorted look of fearsome hate and offended wrath drove the spearhead into the man's breast. He gave a gasp of shock and pain, and his head flew back, face to the sky. He could not breathe, and felt all sensation and awareness withering in his brain. And at this moment that Teina struck his head off with the long stone blade.

The rabble hooted and roared and stamped in delight, and danced around the fires, all their hunger and toil and troubles forgotten. They said many spells and prayers over the body, which they tossed headless on the faggots. The bonfire roared and sputtered, as if unwilling to accept this gift: and so they strewed the fire with some of their precious animal fat, the tallow sizzling to life and almost wholly consuming the lean corpse. This took some hours, and in that time the camp grew quiet as the villagers went to sleep or sat in silence and prayed that Heaven keep watch over the hunters who still had not returned.

The man's head they put on Herra's spear, so that it loomed like a gory icon over the heart of that proud nation. When the seven hunters returned, a deer slung across their shoulders, they dropped at once to their knees before it and praised their god for this token of righteousness and justice. They told Herra that they had seen several other lumbering brutes like this dead one on the road, but that these were engaged in the butchering of a mammoth, which they had frightened over a cliff with torches.

'They are clearly dangerous foes', said Limpo, a stout and logical man. 'We cannot let them invade our kingdom openly like this! We must defy them. This', he said, pointing to the man's head, 'is evidence enough of their insolence. Let's strike them dead if they come near us again. We did not have the numbers or the light tonight, but if we set out tomorrow with twenty men, we can find the scum. I'm sure they'll come back to that carcass tomorrow and days after, it's so vast.'

'There will be a ring of these hideous heads here once we have finished. And these arrogant little pigs will know that they cannot simply roam free, to and fro as they please', was Herra's answer.

And at midday on the morrow, a host of some thirty men, many of them young and eager for blood, departed from the dell and went out into the hill-country. Limpo and his hunters showed them where the carcass of the mammoth was, and they all laid hand upon it and stripped all the meat that its killers had been unable to take. And then they waited, hidden among the trees and behind the hills, for the unwitting men to return.

It was not two hours before there was a heap of ten or twelve bodies strewn about the mammoth-bones. The snow was stained with blood and Herra's men were weak with the fierce running and cutting they had done. They built a fire and roasted their lunch from the mammoth over it, talking in high spirits amongst themselves: they seemed not to give a thought to the many corpses strewn about. Not a thought, that is, until the Sun

began to sink. Then they went about to the dozen dead forms and cut each head from its thick neck; and the twelve chieftains of Herra's nation came as heroes back into their camp, where their murders and their thieving were celebrated and honored in song and dance and story for a hundred years hence.

