

The Duchy of Hriss, the southernmost province of Ondiran, has maintained a distinctive cultural identity within the Empire since early medieval times. Unfortunately, sharing a border with Esdiron has had a deleterious effect upon the duchy. The Hrissic dialect deviates markedly from the Ondiric literary standard. The religious life of the duchy, too, has been polluted by several cults of Esdiric origin. Hriss is a fertile province, however, with a milder climate than the rest of Ondiran, permitting the cultivation of a wider variety of crops. Its wines are particularly noteworthy. Tenefir, the ducal seat, is a major port that has long been a center of Ondiric trade with both Esdiron and Iniroch, not to speak of the exotic lands farther to the west.

— *The Phantom Empire: A Historical Geography of Ondiran*

“You want me to find a lost dog?” Sinta was unable to keep the incredulity out of her voice. Was she not a highly skilled sorceress? Had she not studied under one of the foremost magical minds in all Ondiran? Had she really been reduced to competing for business with Sog, Tenefir’s dim-witted municipal dog- and rat-catcher, whose duties included removing horse manure from the city streets?

Her prospective client, a fashionably plump and pampered baroness, frowned. “I’m not sure I like your tone. My sweet little Faika is a treasured member of this family, this *noble* family, and I want her found!”

Sinta swallowed her annoyance along with her pride. “Yes, of course, milady.” She had a living to make (and in all fairness, if her pet lizard, Angvar, went missing, she would certainly want him found). With a sigh, she elicited a full description of the dog, inquired after its particular habits, and established when it had last been seen. Since the animal appeared to have been fully as plump and pampered as its mistress, dividing the bulk of its time between the baroness’s lap and a plush cushion in the baroness’s bedchamber, Sinta concluded that it was more likely to have been stolen than to have strayed. Accordingly, she requested leave to interview the servants in private.

Rilde, lady’s maid to the baroness, came first, as she had the most contact with the creature. Her protestations of abiding love for “dear Faika” rang false, particularly in view of several imperfectly healed bites on her hands and wrists, so Sinta cast a discreet charm spell and invited her to explain how she really felt about the dog.

“Nasty little beast,” Rilde confided. “Gets the choicest treats from the table, and all it does in return is sleep, crap, and pee. Oh, and snap at anyone who isn’t the mistress. It does that, too.”

Sinta asked about Faika’s mysterious disappearance.

“Popped the little monster into a basket, didn’t I,” replied Rilde. “Gave it to Rosso (that’s our second footman), and he took it out and sold it to some western sailors down at the docks. They eat dogs, you know, those crazy westerners!”

After recovering Rilde’s share of the modest take, Sinta summoned Rosso, a good-looking young man from

the island kingdom of Tserenets. (She had noticed that footmen, like chambermaids, were expected to be decorative.) Sinta spoke Tseren well, so she chose to conduct the interview in that language as a confidence-building measure. Confronted with Rilde's confession, Rosso quickly folded—without recourse to magic on Sinta's part—and did his best to describe the sailors' ship for her. After prevailing upon him to turn over his share of the money, Sinta hastened down to the docks, hoping—more for the sake of her fee than from any particular feeling of benevolence toward the missing canine—that she would not be too late.



The docks reeked of brine and dead fish, as the raucous cries of a thousand squabbling gulls rent the air. Sinta quickly found several merchant vessels with female figureheads, as described by Rosso, but only one of obviously western design, with a western crew, and a name in western characters that she could not read. Learning a western language remained on the young sorceress's to-do list. Luckily, the boatswain, whom she found supervising maintenance of the ship's rigging, spoke enough Ondiric for them to communicate.

The first order of business was disabusing him of the assumption that she must be a prostitute. Respectable young women seldom came down to the docks and accosted sailors, so it was a natural—if tiresome—misconception. Sinta sighed. No, the pretty miss did not want to come aboard and earn some easy money. She was here for

another reason entirely. Had a man sold them a dog yesterday, a small dog with silver fur? He had? Did they still have said dog? They did? Excellent. Yes, she knew dogs made good eating. But had they eaten this particular dog yet? They hadn't? Well, had they butchered—that is to say, had they killed—it yet? No? Very good. She was here to buy the animal back. She exhibited her coin purse and gave the contents a jingle.

The ship's first mate had to be summoned from below decks for the negotiation that followed, as he was the one who had made the original purchase. His Ondiric may have been better than the boatswain's, but he was no less eager to persuade Sinta to come aboard, arguing that if she really wanted this dog, they could easily reach a mutually advantageous barter agreement in his cabin. Sinta, however, declined to leave the safety of the wharf and insisted upon a purely cash transaction. Disappointed, the first mate demanded double what he had paid for the creature. Sinta, who had long experience bargaining at market, scoffed and offered one quarter. The first mate clutched his ears in an interesting western expression of scandalized disbelief that Sinta had not seen before. He then made an indignant remark in his own language, prompting the other sailors to stamp their feet and begin a fierce ululation that Sinta found unnerving. Feeling a need to rebalance the negotiation, she waved one hand above her head, releasing a shower of sizzling multi-colored sparks that rose some fifteen feet in the air. The sailors' ululation came to an abrupt halt. The first mate lowered his price slightly, and Sinta raised her offer by a

correspondingly meager amount, after which the haggling continued for another quarter of an hour, without further interruptions, until the two finally settled on what both of them knew to be fair from the beginning, namely the original purchase price.



Having completed the transaction to her satisfaction, Sinta peered into the now soiled and smelly basket at the snarling ball of silver fur inside. “If it weren’t for me,” she informed Faika, “they’d soon be serving you up, perhaps in a nice garlic sauce, garnished with fresh herbs.” The dog showed no sign of being impressed, let alone grateful, and continued to display its sharp little teeth. Sinta set down the basket, recalled to mind a spell to charm animals that she had learned early in her apprenticeship, and cast it. “Do not bite,” she then commanded. “Not me and not Rilde. Much though it may pain you, you must now be a good dog.”

Faika stopped snarling and whined petulantly instead.

“I’m glad we understand one another,” Sinta said, adding irrelevantly, “also, that you’re not a fish or an arthropod.” She released the creature from its filthy basket, which she then discarded upon a nearby pile of maritime rubbish. “Now, follow me!”

Faika meekly obeyed, trailing behind Sinta, back to the baroness’s ostentatious townhouse, where a tearful reunion ensued. When the baroness nevertheless quibbled about Sinta’s fee, the sorceress felt compelled to hint that she might turn Faika into a melon if the sum previously

agreed upon were not forthcoming. While she did not actually know such a spell, she judged correctly that the baroness would not call her bluff. Annoyed at the attempt to cheat her, Sinta then yielded to an uncharacteristically malicious impulse. “I should warn you that I found Faika cavorting with a hideous spotted mongrel,” she alleged to the baroness’s horror, “so there may well be a litter of pups in a couple of months.”



“Just be glad I didn’t tell her the true story,” Sinta told Rilde as she prepared to leave. “You will find Faika more manageable now, though I can’t be sure how long my spell will last. I put a lot of power into it, but it’s also very contrary to that animal’s nature, so she will do her best to fight it. Still, when the spell does wear off, you can always bring her to me, and I’ll be happy to refresh it for a modest sum.”