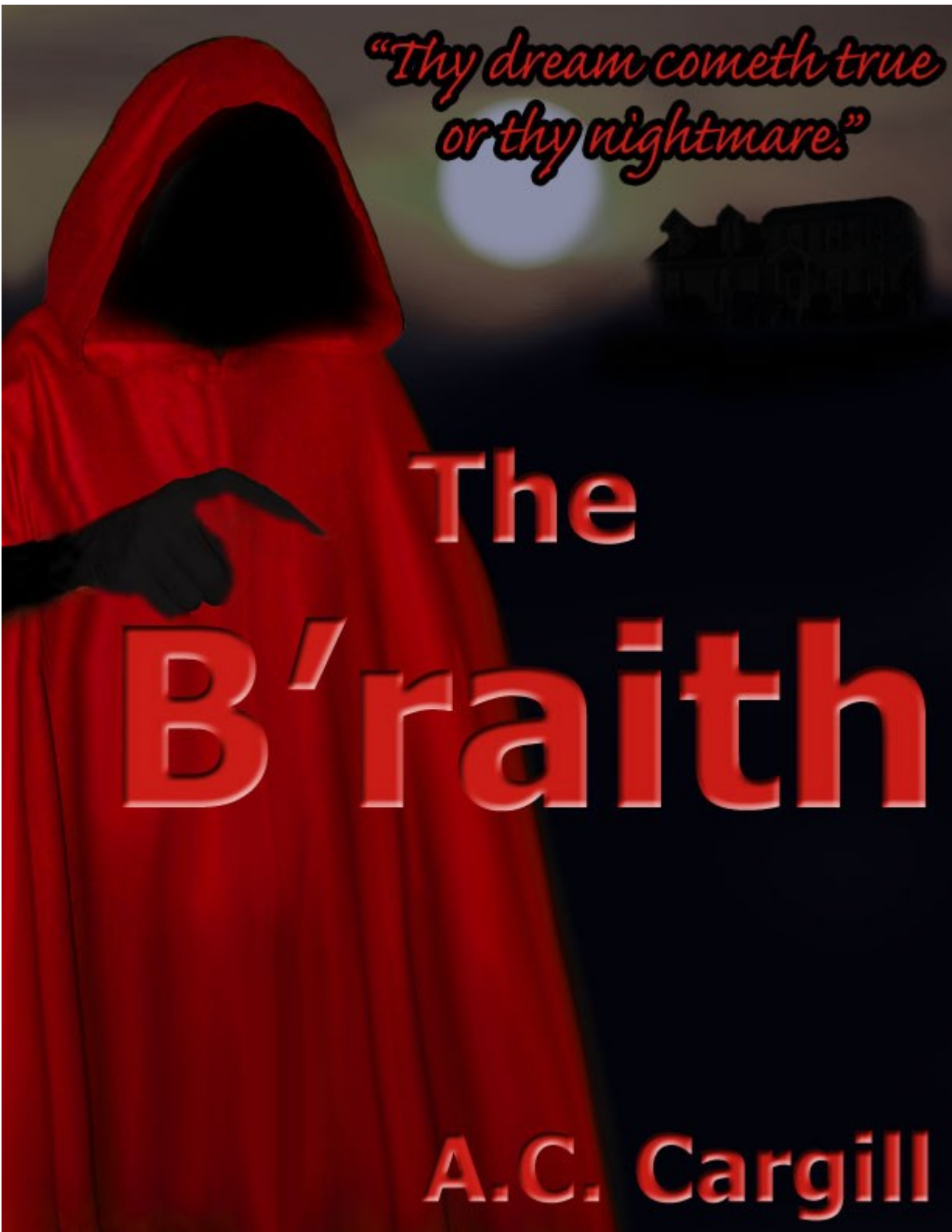


Eldritch Science



June 2023

Editorial

Eldritch Science continues its record of once or twice a year publication. For this issue we have four pieces of fiction, two poems, a front cover, and three pieces of interior art.

The short stories here were all entries in the N3F Short Story Contest. From Invention Springs Necessity by Sean Jones won First Prize. After the Siege by Clint Stevenson won Second Prize. The Candlestick Maker by Guy Lillian won Honorable Mention.

A.C. Cargill, whose tale The B'raith graces this issue, won Third Prize for Book of Memories, which appeared in the previous issue.

As a Reader reward, your Editor has published a series of SF novels, most recently the first Adara novel, *Practical Exercise*. If any of you would like a free review copy of *Practical Exercise* or any of my other novels, you have but to ask.

Eldritch Science

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Contents

Front Cover

Front Cover .. The B'raith by A.C. Cargill

Fiction

- 3 ... From Necessity Springs Invention
 by Sean Jones
 11 ... The Candlestick Maker By Guy Lillian
 18 ... The B'raith By A.C. Cargill
 30 ... After the Siege by C. W Stevenson

Poetry

- 17 ... Patent Pending by
 David C. Kopaska-Merkel and
 Kendall Evans
 29 ... G.I. Gale by Thomas E. Simmons

Art

- 11 ... Fire and Steel by Angela K. Scott
 30 ... Lady of the Lake by Angela K. Scott
 38 ... Lady Dragon by Angela K. Scott

From Necessity Springs Invention by Sean Jones

The sage Krenthellor held his torch high above the heads of the two axemen before him, mindful not to drip flaming resin on their armor or helmets, and cautious to tread softly through the corridor's bone-dust, past the cracked pelvises and femurs, and the shards of scattered skulls. The scholar breathed in the stale air wafting through the place, and the smell reminded him of a cellar. *A dry decay*, he thought, as his brand's flickering light cast the alabaster walls of the passage in pulsing throes of orange and amber.

In their softly shuffling chainmail, the warriors Waldrin and Yanfrere approached the oaken door set into an arched frame at the end of the passage. Krenthellor could hear the muted steps of the others as they trailed the lead trio.

"The lich will lie here or nowhere," said Yanfrere in his hoarse voice. *As will our rewards, be they riches or death*, thought Krenthellor.

"A lich, a ghostly abomination," Krenthellor heard Ayada's voice say from the dark corridor. "Forest-spirit-soul-king stolen from our holy grove, corrupted by arcanists and interred here by infidels."

"A sleeping skull-splitter, a marrow-render in repose, he is," said blonde Glynnys, pain-priestess, the lavender-wearing, cleric-warrior who stepped into the torchlight, her double dirks glinting golden.

"Enough religious banter," said Waldrin, the red-bearded axe-carrier. "Bring that light nearer, sage, that we may see the hasp or handle to open the portal." The pain of his gashes strained his deep voice.

"Where's a thief when you need one?" asked Glynnys, the tall priestess's deep voice nearly as low as a man's.

"You hated her," Ayada said. Krenthellor saw the arboreal medicine-woman take another step forward, saw her shining black hair, dark like his, and he saw her burnished leather armor, saw the matching suit of her war-chimpanzee.

"Perhaps we can petition kismet to open the door," said Tato-Na, diminutive fate-weaver of the band. He walked forward on bare feet, his necklace of cats' skulls clack-clacking, while axemen Waldrin and Yanfrere stepped back from the tiny, lizardskin-clothed man to make room.

"Careful of needle-traps," said Glynnys.

As the destiny-shaper gesticulated, blonde Glynnys murmured a prayer to Malene, humming, "Under stone, away from sun, holding no key, lock be undone."

Raven-tressed Ayada, likewise, invoked an incantation to her tree-god, whistling softly, eyes closed, arms extended from her sides, torso swaying as if she embodied a Sapele tree swaying in the wind.

And the door swung open. Silently.

"Gratitude to Malene," Glynnys said as the others stepped back, readying weapons.

"Not Malene. The boon of Shevanon," countered Ayada. She took a step forward but stopped short of the doorway.

"Afraid?" asked Glynnys, looking at Ayada. "Fearing pain?" She strode through the portal-way.

Will we be attacked? wondered the sage. *Attacked again?* Crossbow slung on his back and bearing the party's only light, Krenthellor followed Glynnys into the chamber. He gasped as he entered the room. A perfect half-dome, thirty strides across, white marble flawless – though cast in an orange light by the sputtering torch – centering the mausoleum, alabaster sarcophagus on a dais of grey-veined stone, gems, jewels, crowns, dazzling scepters, coins in brass and copper and silver and gold, scrolls, tomes, casks and chests, phials and vials containing liquids of rainbow hues, diadems and pendants, the odd ring, the random tiara, a riot of color and shine, treasure to shame a king's trove. Krenthellor saw tears in Glynnys's eyes.

He noticed heaps of bones and a full skeleton, partially clothed, lying atop the heap where the curving wall met the floor. *A previ-*

ous interloper? mused the sage.

Krenthellor heard the rest of the party enter, heard exclamations of disbelief as each member took in the gleam and glimmer. Under their feet, skittering pieces of precious metals tinkled like a golden waterway.

Kneeling to examine a headless pile of human bones, Waldrin asked, "Who are these fine fellows?"

Glynnys walked toward him, careful to avoid treading on beautifully wrought silver adornments, and she asked, "Did he starve?"

"Likely, Madam," said Waldrin, rising to his feet. "What agony must he have borne."

The oaken door, the sole entrance to the mausoleum, silently swung shut. Krenthellor caught the motion from the corner of his eye as his torch's flame wavered in the draft.

"The valve!" shouted Yanfrere's husky voice.

All rushed through the shifting gloom, heedlessly stomping precious treasures underfoot, clawing ineffectively at the spell-propelled door.

Silence reigned.

Ayada, leather armor and boots gleaming in the flickering light, held the head of her battle-chimp, making soothing sounds, stroking the animal's hair. "Shevanon will allay our fears."

Does she comfort the beast or herself? questioned Krenthellor.

"Malene, Malene," Glynnys wailed, "hear us, feel our suffering, sustain us, retain us, punish us as penance but preserve us."

Krenthellor turned toward Tato-Na and the tiny man drew forth a mass of treemoss, a seashell opalescent and a glass philter of quicksilver.

"Might you assist, light-bringer?" he asked.

Krenthellor stepped across heaped coins as if treading a dune.

A ululation, a hawk's cry, a cacophony of guttural gargling, these sounds issued from the fate-fashioner's throat as he mixed moss and mercury in his cowl and croaked in a voice that could have come from the bottom of a well, "Burn it."

With that, Krenthellor touched fire to the shell and saw a flash of tangerine, smelled an acrid scent as in glass-etching and he felt the heat of summer on his face. Of sounds, he heard none, for the boom was deafening and he felt dizzy, felt

himself fall, felt a stabbing pain in his back through his cloth gambeson-armor as he landed atop his crossbow.

From where the torch burned atop a pile of copper coins, Krenthellor saw scorch-marks around the doorframe, but the enchanted door stood closed. The others lay prone about the room, groaning.

Red-bearded Waldrin stood and struck at the door's frame, clanging his axe into the alabaster, but made no progress. "The stone yields not, Yan," he said.

"The door, itself, then, Wal."

"No!" screamed Ayada. "Do not even imagine harming the sacred heartwood of the Steely Oak. Such sacrilege cannot be considered."

"Tato-Na," said Yanfrere, "have you another method?"

Krenthellor saw the enchantment-forgers feel about his person as if seeking some charm or talisman with which to summon a djinn from the ether to rip the door free, a deed purportedly possible for one who followed the Scripture of the Stars.

"My energies are exhausted, away from sun and moon and constellations, bereft of cosmic luminescence."

Krenthellor turned to Tato-Na and said, "Might there lie some occult hex here in these chests or barrels, some invocation you might perform to open the door?"

"Have you any idea the risk one takes when one reads the prose-poem of another spell-scribe's ensorcellment? Half of any written incantation is an ambush, bringing death. Half of the remaining half leeches live. Of the quarter left, expect dwindling sickness or debilitating disease. Not one in a dozen scrolls is genuine. I'd not peruse any script from scroll or libram."

Krenthellor considered the words and their implication of finality. The cadre he'd recruited had risen to the challenges, he thought. A berserk chimp had equaled lumbering and clawing mummies in melee, a prayer to Malene had inspired an orating lavender-clad Glynnys to turn back specters into the gloom from which they had arisen, cabalistic vigor accumulated under the skies of the living and channeled by a barefoot dwarf of an arcanist had quelled multitudes of ghosts and

ghouls, a young and an old man with axes cleaved their way through armies of shambling skeletons.

What an end to our trek, thought Krenthellor. *Cadavers animated and ambulatory, wights and wraiths stalking crepuscular hallways, pit-traps filled with sharpened spikes, envenomed darts flung from spring-loaded devices set into crevices, howling ghosts that killed with a touch that chilled, the lich lain in his sarcophagus yet able to command the architecture of this sepulcher and its unliving inhabitants, leading us here, where we are defeated by the simple ruse of a door we cannot open.*

“We’ve not tried the torch,” said Yanfrere, interrupting the sage’s reverie. “Krenthellor, could we burn our way free?”

Krenthellor leaned three brands against the wood and ignited them with the dying embers of his pine-pitch torch, stepped back and watched as the door perpetuated no further flame.

“Amusing,” said the astral voice from behind them, the declaration setting Krenthellor’s hair on end and blanching the complexions of his companions, light- and dark-skinned alike. A grating sound emanated from the dais and Krenthellor spun around to see, horrified, that the lid of the sarcophagus had slid aside, and the fiend’s bier lay open.

“You entertain me,” came the next three words like a spade scraped across slate, like glass shattering, like death whispering an intimate proposition to sully the innocent.

“Such intrepid guests. So earnest. Unflinching.”

From the stone coffin, a gangrenous light poured forth, casting the dome in bilious green, while the lich – the non-corporeal “embodiment” of malevolent havoc – rose, floating, its form ethereal, bones quasi-transparent, bodily organs shriveled and discolored to sickening pastels yet pulsing, once-rich rags for raiment whipped as if by wind, ink-black sockets where eyes would reside, leprous patches of flesh translucent and revealing flayed musculature that conveyed the abomination aloft, their diabolical twitchings yanking the lich about the chamber, as if jerked by the emerald gleaming in his forehead, the gem the source of the omnipresent, verdant illumination, the shine inten-

sifying.

“Shall we dance?” asked the lich, the question distilled from the screams of swine at slaughter. “I will call the cotillion,” said the thrum-thrumming of a thousand mosquitoes. “A ball to end all balls,” said doom incarnate, abyssal despair made flesh. “But you lack for suitable partners,” cackled the lich as he darted. “Let me attend to such an oversight.”

From the piles of precious gems and valuable metals, there erupted into man-shapes countlessimps crafted from copper, smelted from bronze, wrought from silver, gold and platinum, aglitter in jewels that now comprised hard, sharp stones perfect for punching through armor, for cutting and piercing.

“Malene preserve us,” Krenthellor heard Glynnys shout as she drew forth her golden daggers and began to stab and slice at the cacodemons that bedeviled her, that flung blunt uppercuts, that wielded razored elbows.

Around the crypt, the fracas unfolded, Waldrin and Yanfrere chopping dozens of mineral-demons as if born to bisect eerie constructs. Tato-Na danced and wailed and swung his necklace of cats’ skulls, the feline ossature ensconced in a violet nimbus, teeth taking metallic bites, making meals of coinage, spitting rubies and sapphires.

Ayada and her simian thug worked in concert, one grappling a treasure-demon while the other tore free a limb, one upending a foe while the other dealt a chop or kick that would have destroyed a human enemy. Nor did the duo avoid harm. The milled edge of a silver twelve-pence, the obverse side of a bronze bit minted on some distant continent, the constant barrage of clanking coins took their toll and raised bruises, broke bones.

Unequipped, Krenthellor became the most imperiled, crossbow slung on his back – the weapon a single-shot missile-thrower capable of skewering or stunning exactly one foe – while he faced a half-dozen would-be assassins, surviving only because he moved faster than they, because he wove a path between chests and casks, knotting his string of pursuers.

With his fire, he fended. *They fear it,* he real-

ized, and he sprinted to where the other three torches still burned, hoping the blaze would keep the eidolons at bay. With one hand waving the pine-pitch brand, he sought to pull his arbalest over his shoulder and ready it, *without dislocating my clavicle*.

We are winning, thought the sage, seeing that perhaps a dozen enemies battled his companions, Glynnys backstabbing an adversary engaged with Ayada, Tato-Na jumping onto the back of a clanging beast that threatened a beleaguered young Waldrin while old Yanfrere cut out its legs, Ayada's chimpanzee mauling a pair of devils-made-metal, a demonic duo that had pinned Glynnys's arms behind her back and were kicking at her kidneys. *But, what of the lich*, he wondered. *We cannot live if we do not defeat him, imprisoned here or no*.

Shrieking, raising a clamor that reverberated and shook the hemispherical oubliette, the lich jinked as if he were a spastic kite tugged by a storm-god's palsied hands. "No, no, no," the freak keened. "Such an outcome I cannot abide. No, no, no, no. You shall not triumph," said the sound of ripping canvas, said the discord of tearing silk.

The first sensation that came to Krenthellor, *odd*, he thought, was the acrid scent, not the flash of light or the crash of thunder but the olfactory experience of bolts striating the air. *Next, knowing the perverse pleasure of this lich*, he thought, *will come the agony of involuntary muscle-movements, the searing shock of overclutched limbs, the utter exhaustion of forced clenching as the lightning works us like puppets*.

As the coruscation assailed his nostrils, arcs and sparks webbed the near-dark of the room, crackling bolts of galvanic anguish that made marionettes of the dungeon-delvers, seizing and releasing, cramping and convulsing until each person or ape collapsed to the floor. The stench of burnt hair, flesh, leather and cloth, the smoke from each individual's inferno suffused the air, formed a putrid fog that shaded the scene the more sinister.

The lich, Krenthellor noticed, had returned to his sarcophagus and stood, as if manifesting himself in trunk and limb, as if inviting the combatants to attack using earthly tactics. But the bones were

bizarre. Larger, thicker, too many to form a proper anatomy, the forearms divided into three, four segments, the thighbones sprouted spikes, the head split and reformed as a pair, then, a quartet, of grinning, fanged skulls, the twin orbits of each gleaming with a color among the plenitudes of gems besparkling the trove, fingers honed to dagger-points, shins sharpened to blades. Stretching to occupy the full height of the rotunda, the lich-cum-skeleton-giant bellowed, "Employ your arsenal against a solitary opponent. I dare you!"

But the party of explorers was weary, drained from the effects of the lightning, Krenthellor knew, for he was, and a halfhearted charge engaged the lich, who kicked and slapped, laughing with a curdling mirth, who stomped and flung heaving handfuls of metals at the armored and unarmored alike, who dealt punishment and dispensed injury.

"Malene be righteous." Pain-priestess Glynnys's voice was barely intelligible, straddling excruciation and ecstasy, as giant bone-hands clamped her while twin sets of incisors sliced her abdomen, staining the lavender of her brigandine armor bright crimson. "Malene judge who deserves the fate. Malene choose among us as a sacrifice."

"Malene befriend Shevanon," chanted Ayada. "Malene the Compassionate, Malene the Magnanimous, Divine Cousin of Shevanon the Enduring, hear my prayer!"

"Do you mock me?" Glynnys asked, her question coming as a sigh, her diaphragm compressed between supernatural jawbones.

Ayada said, "I mean it in earnest, for let us double the dweomer of your deity."

But the lich brought on the first fatality, kicking with a razor-honed shin, decapitating Yanfrere.

Krenthellor felt emotionally numb, finding it too easy to ignore the spurting ropes of blood that leapt from the fighter's neck. He felt shame at how detached he was, seeing the stoutest among them effortlessly eliminated.

As his mentor fell, Waldrin pounced, taking great strides across the glittering room, swinging his battleaxe two-handed, making great circles above his head. Waldrin's axe splintered and shattered into shards the tibiae and fibulae on which

the lich attempted to stand. With a clatter, the occult aberration dropped and Krenthellor thought he heard a wheeze.

Quick as the lightning the lich had thrown, Ayada and her simian co-combatant descended on the bony horror, the dark-haired woman grasping a forehead to lean back while her companion, simpatico after fighting alongside his mistress for so many years, counter-pushed at a vertebra, the partnership snapping one of the four necks, the orbs of its skull no longer shimmering in orange and aquamarine but dulling to lifeless grey. Fearsome fangs from one of three jaws took the chimpanzee at his midsection, teeth unrelenting, and Krenthellor worried for the ape's demise. But the chimp was equally unremitting and scissored the next neck while Ayada balanced on a shoulderblade and repeatedly stomp-kicked until that head lolled and its amber and amethyst eyes faded to pale diamond.

All the while, Waldrin continued to lay about him with the axe, its blade bearing no keenness, now a club. Tato-Na backtracked, running about the dome to rummage through scrolls in cases, opening them, reading the first few lines aloud in the voices of their authors, as a husky-voiced sorceresses-seductress, as a septuagenarian man with vocals as dry as deserts, as a teen boy with a stutter. More than one of the scripts crumbled into dust that caused a coughing fit, two of them fulminated fitfully, scorching Tato-Na's face and hands, and one became a viper, which Krenthellor had to impale with a crossbow bolt, accidentally lancing the fate-shaper's shoulder.

Glynnys surprised Krenthellor as she crooned and canted, adopting the forest-revering language of her religious competitor, the tall lady in lilac making mention of Ayada's Shevanon, calling forth the names of half the arboreal pantheon. To Alaytra, to Hevering, to Junoon and to Plitt, Glynnys prayed, overlaying a paean to Malene, commingling the two faiths in song, *seemingly sincere*, Krenthellor thought, *driven by desperation*.

From everywhere and nowhere, Krenthellor heard, "Let me play from a position of advantage." All the torches expired and the sole light shone from the emerald centered in the lich's brow. By the patches of smoke about the room, the sage

could trace the gaze of the lich, for a green beam shone wherever the abomination peered.

A great booming sounded, of surging surf, and rain pelted the chamber. *Rain from where?* thought Krenthellor. The deluge drove him to his knees and he heard shouts from his companions as they sought scant shelter from the storm. The water rose and waves washed coins and jewelry as if pushed by the rake of a colossal croupier. Palpable was the force of the squall.

Fresh water, thought Krenthellor. Perhaps anything saline would diminish the power of the lich, he reckoned, as salt was deemed to purify, to quell demonic influence. Floodwaters came to his chest, to his neck. The sage kept his bearings by the verdant glow that seemed stationary, *maybe tethered*, he considered, *for the lich to concentrate on the mighty maledictions he perpetrates*.

Shouts of concern resounded, compatriots checking the welfare of comrades. Above the roar of rain and pounding of waves and scuttling and scraping of fortunes awash, Krenthellor heard, "My chimpanzee cannot swim! Malene, Shevanon, be merciful!" said Ayada.

"Shevanon and Malene be compassionate," replied Glynnys. "The ape does not deserve to drown!"

"Tato-Na, can you swim?" asked Waldrin.

"I can paddle, but I'm not wearing chainmail. How fare you, armored one?"

"Marooned on an island of treasure. Do we possess any rubric to combat this plight? Even some lamplight?" asked Waldrin.

Glynnys asked, "What befalls us when the waters reach the ceiling?"

"Perish such thought," said Tato-Na.

She is correct, thought Krenthellor. *We must move in this come-to-life game of tabletop shatranj*. The adventuring sage, who'd once been conscripted as a soldier and had become a member of special forces only because he could swim, now realized, *this falls on me*.

His cloth gambeson-armor dragging him, he treated the lich's emerald lantern like a beacon, swimming as silently as he could – *not difficult in the downpour* – having no idea what he'd do when he reached the lich's platform, hoping he'd be in-

spired when he arrived. *If I had a perch, he thought, I could shoot a crossbow bolt – I could try.*

Swimming behind his enemy, the former corporal felt under the water for his belt pouch and withdrew the flask of ink, the concoction of burnt bark, red wine and animal-glue. *This will never work, he thought. But, it must. Invention springs from necessity.*

The sage unstopped the cork and poured a handful of liquid darkness. He slapped the inky hand over the emerald-beacon. His palm felt the chill, endured the freeze that brought aching pain, that locked his elbow in an icy, implacable grip, that made his shoulder rigid with the cold bite.

But, the rain stopped. He heard the thumps of his fellow adventurers, who'd been borne by water. The murk persisted but the tomb dried, desiccated as if never wetted.

A blast, a fist unapologetic in its potency, struck the sage, driving the breath from his chest, flinging him across the hemisphere, dropping him on a seashore of coins against the still-closed oak door. He fumbled in his belt-pouch for the tinderbox. His pained fingers pulled out the smoldering charcloth and he blew to fan its flame and he touched it to a torch that had been pinned against the room's portal. When the fire flared, Krenthellor could see his companions, struggling to their feet, blinking in the underground's sudden dawn, all save the chimpanzee, who lay lifeless, *inundated in the phantom deluge. Likewise, he remembered, Yanfrere, dismembered.*

"Futility," said the lich in a voice like a boot being pulled from mud, a slurping sound, sickening in the images it brought to Krenthellor's mind, of organs ripped from bodies, of hearts stomped, of brains pulped.

The sage saw the aberration-abomination wavering, drifting lazily above his sarcophagus, but the beryl shine had resumed. Waldrin stood, determined-looking, holding the head of his axe like a sickle, the haft gone. Ayada crouched over the chimp, the warriorress wracked with sobs, while Tato-Na seemed to speak to his couple of cats' skulls to reveal a plan by which to defeat the lich. Glynnys, priestess of Malene, the pain goddess but

also the compassion deity, Glynnys felt about her person, euphoric, her fingers lingering where gashes split her lilac breeches, where rents in her lavender armor oozed blood.

A fiddlestring pulled too tight, groaning ice, branches bent to breaking, said, "Surrender to me." To Krenthellor, the voice seemed to smile.

"I, for one, shall not," yelled Waldrin, charging with his impromptu weapon, black chainmail clinking as he ran, coins jingling in accompaniment.

"Nor I," said Ayada, rising, her patent leather armor glossy in the torchlight, her hands stiffened into finger-blades, her booted feet propelling her across the carpet of treasure.

Glynnys gathered her wits and said, "If you insist," and she joined the brawl, daggers drawn, the tall warrior-priestess outdistancing the other two with her long-legged strides.

Crossbowman Krenthellor readied Freyn, property of his late father, the medium-weight arbalest he favored, drawing back the bowstring with a goat's-foot lever, for he no longer had the strength to use the stirrup. He fit a blunt-tipped bolt into the weapon's groove, and he took a deep breath. Aiming toward the sarcophagus, he saw a stain where his flask of ink had left its mark.

Tiny Tato-Na stripped the meager lizardskin shawl that covered his shoulders, he picked among the scattered gems of the floor, and he filled the lizard-hide garment with rainbow-hued stones and blew into the improvised sling, his breath passing through in tendrils Krenthellor saw as lemon and cerise and mango, grape and cinnamon strands, oddly appetizing, the chromatic tentacles braiding into a ribbon that lengthened and billowed, that wended its way toward their common adversary.

No, adversaries.

Multiple lichs floated and levitated, three, four, five of them, passing through each other, splitting, coalescing, now a pair of them, now a single apparition, now six, now tripartite.

Tato-Na's bandeau wrapped one of them and constricted like a particolored python, *but is it the lich? wondered Krenthellor, or a simulacrum?* That particular phantasm, at least, was held fast and could not mingle with its brothers.

Waldrin chopped with his abbreviated axe and seemed to cleave shreds from the haunt but the phantasm of the lich meandered and merged with the others, dividing again and again, reuniting repeatedly. Glynnys contributed with her golden daggers, stab-slicing, slice-stabbing, sending scraps of ghost-flesh to the floor, gobbets of ephemeral gore to the ground, shards of beast-bone asunder. Joining her cohort, Ayada threw elbows, sent knee-strikes high into what stood for solar plexuses, whip-kicked with wicked blows, punched as if she'd never vented fury. But, unaffected, the lich-doppelgangers split and recombined.

"How long shall we play at pantomime?" asked the lich. A frog's croak.

But, Krenthellor saw, Tato-Na's ribbons wrapped and tethered two of the lich-images, the image-liches. *Is there hope?* he questioned.

"Did you think you could vanquish me?" The sound of a splitting melon.

A third lich joined his brothers in bondage. A fourth.

Tato-Na jangled his bell-bracelets and danced to some unheard rhythm. Twisting, stamping his bare feet, snorting as if a bull ready to charge and gyrating his emaciated arms, he sang silently, mouthing a tune bereft of melody.

The liches fused. Tato-Na's striped band drew tight, bound the malformed spirit-being's skeletal arms, snaked around the exposed vertebrae of the neck and constricted.

"Malene be victorious, Malene ..." Glynnys began to say.

"Shevanon will never let us perish," interrupted Ayada.

They revert to their own deities, Krenthellor noticed. While the liches merge, the faiths split.

Waldrin sliced with the axehead, pummeled with a gauntleted hand, swore epithets and oaths of revenge, pledged torture and promised reprisals for the lich's misdeeds, for killing Yanfrere and, through proxy, the thief, Jeelee, who'd been similarly beheaded by a spring-loaded scythe in an upper chamber of the catacombs.

Krenthellor crept closer, sighting along the bolt-groove of his crossbow, wishing his compatriots

would make a clear path for his missile but fearing what would happen if they relented in their attack.

And, then, the lich shrugged off the ribbon. Tato-Na collapsed and Waldrin staggered as if drunk. Ayada stood still as a statue, while Glynnys seemed to marvel at the wounds of them, as if transfixed as she cataloged the suffering and tallied the injuries.

Shouting loudly enough to address an audience of some emperor's coliseum, the ghost-ghast exclaimed, "No more," the words the sharpening of knives. "You cannot defeat me. Such a thing has been tried." With a bone-hand webbed with strands of decaying flesh, the lich indicated Yanfrere's headless corpse, pointed at the mutilated body of the leather-armored chimpanzee, gestured to the skeletons of the previously fallen adventurers.

"I will leave you presently, will leave you here. Thank you for the entertainment. As you starve, please despair. As you wither, kindly agonize. As you decline and dwindle, prithee lament and languish. But know this, for I mean this. I appreciate the vigor and vivacity you have brought to my bedchamber. The life-essences you have deposited here, the segments of your souls you have transferred to me through your sorceries, via the potency of your channeled faiths, by physical contact ungentle and passionate, these vitalities will not go to waste. They fill the well of my strength. When others visit and contribute their lives, perhaps my cistern will overflow. On that day, yon door will remain open and I will fly forth and that occasion will be a great advent. If you would be so thoughtful, as you die, please fare poorly."

Krenthellor could not believe his senses as the emerald-beaconed lich descended into his sarcophagus, as the top of that vessel groaned and slid shut, as Waldrin leapt onto the dais and tried to stop the motion of the heavy lid.

Glynnys and Waldrin pushed at the white-marble coffin-cover, their feet slipping on the smooth stone of the plinth. "Are we doomed?" she asked.

Tato-Na, Ayada and Krenthellor joined them and the kismet-melder said, "Does your faith favor free choice? Is fate foreordained?"

Glynnys said, "Set aside esoterica." She held

up three fingers, two of which were swollen and crooked, clearly broken. “We can open the casket. We can force the door. We can die.”

“Which would Malene choose?” asked Ayada.

“Back to bickering?” asked Waldrin.

Tato-Na asked, “Shall we work in concert? Press on this lid.”

The five of them pushed and failed. They stood and caught their breath in the gloom.

In the stillness, Krenthellor remembered to say to Waldrin, “My condolences, my friend, for your friend.”

“Malene will not abandon us,” said Glynnys. “There will be a way.”

“As Shevanon directs her,” said Ayada. She asked Tato-Na, “Can you find some arcane potency that might spring us?”

“If I had starlight or sunlight by which to revivify, said Tato-Na. “Sage, scholar, what would you try?”

“My answer remains as it was. A chest or a cask here will contain something of use. Or, none will.”

Tato-Na said, “Please, colleagues, help me search through this accumulation. We seek parchments and vellum. Waldrin, your demi-axe will be needed to open trunks and coffers.”

The decrepit party gathered scripts and chirography. They resorted to burning the wood of the crates and coffers they opened, giving light for Krenthellor and Tato-Na to examine the epistles and spellcraft. Ayada stood by to administer to the disasters that inflicted even more injuries on the sage and the karma-sculptor, they being flames, noxious gases, choking dust and venomous stings as if delivered by swarms of insects and arachnids. Waldrin and Glynnys found and fetched more written materials, the priestess chanting as a mantra, “Malene deliver us.”

Glynnys and Waldrin brought potions, salves, balms, philters and elixirs. Many and multihued, the liquids shone with the colors of the gemstones and jeweled pieces about the place. Half a day passed in such activities. A full day. Fatigue held dominion. Waldrin and Glynnys rested and tended wounds. The sage and the destiny-weaver read and read, triggered spell-trap after hex-mishap.

Glancing up at Tato-Na from the manuscript he read, Krenthellor said, “We know a phylactery contains the soul-spirit of the lich. We know it must lie inside the sarcophagus since it lies nowhere else in this crypt.”

“I wish we’d never entered,” said Glynnys.

“Precisely,” said Krenthellor. He held up the parchment and pointed to a column of calligraphy. “Precisely.”

Tato-Na glanced at the scrawl and nodded.

“Naturally.”

“What?” asked Ayada.

“How is your color-sense?” Krenthellor asked.

“Impeccable. Shevanon be praised.”

Krenthellor asked, “Of those potions you see before you, which would you say is ‘ivory-tinted, not as white as cream, more yellow than grey, paler than moonlight?’”

The jungle-priestess considered for a moment and lifted a phial of crystal that contained milk of an oily consistency, the vial capped by a crimson wax-seal.

“Are you willing?” asked Tato-Na, fingering one two remaining cats’ skulls.

“To do what?” she asked.

“To save us,” said Krenthellor. “By drinking the elixir.”

“What occurs if you’ve read something false? What transpires if I’ve chosen the incorrect color?”

“Would you like to pray on the matter?” asked Krenthellor.

“I must. Glynnys, Tato, will you accompany me?” She extended each hand and the adventurers who considered themselves channels to the divine formed a trio with interlocked hands, created a triangle of beliefs. They bowed their heads and each, in silence, communed, Krenthellor assumed, with what they deemed the sources of their creeds.

While the three supplicated, the scholar took a quill from his belt pouch. Having spent his ink to buy respite from one of the lich’s many assaults, the sage dipped the sharp tip in a half-congealed wound on his forearm and wrote a note on the back of the parchment he held. He rolled the scroll and tucked it into the tattered sleeve of his cloth gambeson.

“Do you know the rite?” Krenthellor asked

Tato-Na.

With a nod of his head, the wyrd-winder said, “Aya, you will be our sundial.” He raised one arm above his head and extended the other. “Like so? Waldrin, you will play the sun in this spectacle. Fetch the torch and hold it high. When I intone, you will walk widdershins and drive Aya’s shadow docile.”

Glynnys said, “That is the opposite of how a sundial casts its shade.”

“It seems you grasp what we attempt,” said Krenthellor.

Ayada drank the potion and they invoked the incantation.

#

As he stood in the corridor outside the door the adventurers believed would lead to the lich’s crypt, the sage held his torch high above the heads of the two axemen before him, careful not to drip flaming resin on their armor or helmets. Krenthellor read from the mysterious inscription he pulled from his sleeve, wondering whose hand had written it, ques-



Fire and Steel by Angela K. Scott

tioning why it was written in blood. He swallowed on a dry throat when he realized the script was his own, a missive from himself, to himself.

It read, “A blunt bolt that shatters the emerald will debilitate the monstrosity. The phylactery containing the soul of the lich lies inside his casket. An axeblade will destroy the spirit-container and end the undying sorcerer. But, you can and should reconsider undertaking such a confrontation. A wise man would walk away. What will I-you-we choose?”

“The lich will lie here or nowhere,” said axeman Yanfrere in his hoarse voice.

As will our rewards, be they riches or death, thought Krenthellor. He glanced again at the cryptic note.

“We will find a way to breach this door, to overcome what we must,” said the sage.

“Invention springs from necessity.”

The Candlestick Maker By Guy Lillian

With thanks to Inge Glass, Brigitte Hessling, and tou jours, la belle.

Verruckt? Last month they told me that my father had died. The doctors would not release me to attend the funeral. In the weeks since I have become a father myself. They will not allow my wife to bring our child to me. Verruckt? Yes. Mad.

I believe them. Will you believe me?

I was both pleased and surprised when happiness came to my brother Manfred. He was four years my junior, and though common wisdom says that families lavish the most hope and ambition on the older brother, and expend a surfeit of love and approval on the young, this truism did not bear in our father’s house. Papa adjudged his sons strictly and competitively, despite the gap in our ages, and I was never happy to hear him compare Manfred, unfavorably, to me. Yes, I did well at my studies, and Manfred was a disinterested, middling student. I performed more than adequately at games, while my brother was possessed of a consistent clumsiness. I enjoyed the company of many friends as a boy; poor Manfred was solitary. Finally, while it

was said that I was acceptable in appearance, Manfred suffered a nose of some size and protruding teeth. Worst of all, the boy seemed both to accept his ugliness and despise himself for it, for he dressed carelessly and was often so slovenly in his hygiene that he could be known by his smell in a dark room.

Manfred's surly attitude spread to color his entire life. Most German boys are expected to find a master and begin apprenticeship in a trade by thirteen or fourteen years of age. Thanks to our father's position as magistrate, I had become scribe for a local barrister, work which I enjoyed and for which I seemed suited. However, when Manfred reached the proper age, he could find no interest in any pursuit. Several craftsmen in our town, Hansdorf, yielded to our father's influence and took him on as apprentice. No connection survived a month. Each in turn, the tradesmen informed Papa that Manfred showed no interest in the work and an indifference to other employees which bordered on contempt. None could keep him.

Our gentle mother was much distressed by Manfred's attitude, and our father was disgusted. He constantly voiced angry conviction that his second son would be a lifelong Schmarotzer, a parasite living off the family. With every reversal Papa's frustration rose. I feared that he would make good his frequent threat to expel Manfred from our house.

How relieved was I when, at supper one evening, Manfred announced that he had found a position on his own. Herr Strigoï, the town's Kerzenmacher, or candlemaker, had accepted him as apprentice.

Our mother seemed alarmed by the news and voiced her worries. Herr Strigoï had worked in Hansdorf for many years – indeed, from before I was born. Never, though, had he joined town society; he almost never left his shop, where he also lived, or the foundry behind it where he created his wares. He was brusque, if not impolite, with customers, and pervasive gossip held that he supplied more than candles to the discreet – odd intoxicants, even abortifacients. Some, offended and frightened by the foul smoke escaping his chimney at all hours, whispered that the old man was in actuality

a gypsy involved in the evil arts. After all, Mama said, did we know what "Strigoï" meant in the Romany language?

"Sorcerer," Manfred laughed. "Ein Zauberer. See, mother? I have heard the same foolishness as you."

Papa scoffed. "Sorcerer, gypsy ... what matter? What better fit for such as you," he scowled at Manfred, "than such a man?" That was as close to satisfaction with Manfred as I had seen him show of late. So the matter was settled, but I saw – with some amusement – our mother cross herself.

Manfred seemed to take to the work at Strigoï's shop. Neighbors trading there reported to our parents that he was efficient in attendance to their needs and courteous. He showed enthusiasm for the craft, bringing large, antique books home from the candle shop which he avidly studied in his room. When I intruded past his closed door, I would often find him engrossed in some dusty tome, or making notations in a thick journal he had begun to keep. Upon noticing me he would close whichever volume he was reading, deal brusquely with my needs and shoo me out, no doubt returning at once to his studies. The books, I surmised, were Herr Strigoï's, though I wondered what about candlemaking would bring print to so many pages. When once I asked about the subject he studied, Manfred answered only with a request that I attend to my own business and allow him to attend to his.

I shrugged away Manfred's secrecy as merely another eccentricity. At least our family meals were no longer soured by Papa's anger at my brother, although angry he remained, mostly at the Jewish bankers in the town and the foolish lawyers, among them my master, who assailed his patience in court.

Three years passed in this relative peace. Both my employment and Manfred's proceeded smoothly, and another matter came to the fore of my life. A wonderful Fraulein, daughter of my master's partner, visited our offices and left with my heart in her pocket. Brigitte was in my eyes ideal – intelligent, beautiful, and good-hearted. She became a regular visitor and looked kindly upon me. In time she accepted my proposal, and I brought her to the family home to announce our engagement.

To my relief, Papa said nothing critical about

my bride to be. Mama, for her part, seemed delighted, and immediately instituted what she called a new family tradition. She bade Brigitte select an item from her own mother's jewelry, a welcome, she said, for the new Frau Henreid. Blushing, pleased, Brigitte chose a beautiful gold ring. I had the joy of slipping it onto her finger. "Ein Verlobungsring," I laughed – an engagement token.

Manfred seemed uncharacteristically moved. Since his employment with Strigoï he had grown more and more distant from the family, spending all his private time with his books and journal. My engagement seemed to draw him back. He grasped me, effusive with emotion. "Klaus the lucky!" he exclaimed happily. "Klaus the gesegnet! Oh to be so blessed!"

Our wedding was scheduled for a few weeks hence when Manfred broached the subject of a wedding gift. He had spoken to Herr Strigoï, and had been promised the most elegant candle in the shop as his present. "A candle?" Papa scoffed. "What sort of wedding gift is that?"

My brother tensed, but swiftly regained his smile. I was to bring Brigitte by the Kerzenladen to make her choice. We made the short trip to Herr Strigoï's shop the next day. I was relieved, as we approached, to see that the workshop's infamous chimney was not, at the time, dispensing its fetid smoke. Within, the smell of wax was diluted by scents of roses, pleasant grasses and evergreen, and the plainness of the counter by rows of ornate candles. Behind the counter stood the proprietor, Herr Strigoï, attended by my nervous brother.

I had seen Herr Strigoï in passing, of course, but his reclusiveness had kept him hidden from view for several years. Our entrance into his shop was my first sight of the old man since Manfred had begun his apprenticeship. Quite short, a slight man whose small features were crammed within a heavy beard of dirty gray, upon Manfred's introduction he afforded me a brief nod, but his gaze brightened when it settled on Brigitte. "Yes," he said, his voice deep but soft within his beard. "I see." He took Brigitte's hand in his, raised it to his lips for a heartbeat, and regarded it admiringly as he let it go. "Charmed, junge Dame. Ich leibe dein Hautfarbe."

Brigitte's smile blossomed wider for a moment

at this praise for her complexion, and she blushed. I felt a moment of puerile jealousy, and another when the old man took a lock of her golden hair between her fingers. When she looked amazed, Strigoï withdrew his hand and faced Manfred, saying merely, "Gut. Es ist möglich."

"It is possible?" Strigoï turned back to Brigitte, smiling now. He spread his arms to encompass the candles before him on the counter. "Fraulein," he said expansively, "in honor of your wedding to this lucky man, please choose any of these. I regret I can offer no better than my best work."

Brigitte and I examined the candles. They were magnificent! Not mere cylinders of wax, but beautiful columns bedecked with multiple colors and tiny, precise figures and settings – forests, castles, crucifixions, dragons, frolicking cherubs and satyrs, lifelike, delightful. As we studied each, Manfred came forth with enthused commentary. "A pillar ... imbued with the scent of immergrun ... Herr Strigoï's new process ... note the colors in this nativity ..." He spoke with pride and excitement, a pleasure to see. Brigitte was awed, and baffled over which candle to choose, but finally selected a woodland scene of green and ivory, children at play beneath delicate branches among colorful flowers. Herr Strigoï smiled again, asked Manfred to see to wrapping the gift, and with another bow to my beautiful intended, disappeared quickly out the back door. "The workshop," Manfred explained. "The vats. The kiln. They call to him at any moment and he has to go."

Our wedding was small, at the house of Brigitte's parents. We moved into an apartment in the house adjacent to my family's, and for a season, all was well. In the spring, however, Herr Strigoï vanished.

Manfred told the town officials that he had no warning, heard no word of farewell. One morning he had arrived for work to find an open, unoccupied shop. The upstairs living quarters and library – source of the many books he had studied – were empty; none of the little man's clothing or effects were missing. The bank informed the investigators that the candle shop's accounts had not been touched, negating my thought that old Strigoï had disappeared to elude debts.

Suspicion quickly formed that the candlemaker

had met with violence. Eyes turned to Manfred, but the constable could find no evidence against him. Er ist weg was the final conclusion, he is gone, and there matters rested. While the investigation progressed, and the shop was closed, Manfred endured the idle time engrossed, as always, in the old books. Before the authorities cleared his way to relight the kiln, he announced that he would be taking up residence in the candle shop and leaving the family home. Mama made an admirable appearance of regret. Papa, predictably, came forth with a coarse comment of being well shed of Manfred, but for once I saw no hurt in my brother's demeanor. Instead, he asked me to help him change the sign over the shop's door. M HENREID KERZENMACHER.

I took the opportunity to explore the house. Upstairs was a small kitchen, dining room, bedroom, and library. I found this last room astonishing: shelves of antique books floor to ceiling on three walls, naught but a straight-backed chair and a writing desk against the fourth. On the desk I noted the thick journal in which Manfred, for years, had been writing. Dare I admit I was tempted to open and read it before Manfred's call brought me away?

He called me into the bedroom, where stood a wall closet, a Wandschrank, where Herr Strigoi had hung his meagre clothing. Manfred was pulling the clothes free of hangers and shelves and piling them onto the bed. He bade me help him carry them to the kiln for burning. The workshop occupied a separate building some yards behind the main house. Manfred showed me the workshop with some pride – the large vats where wax was melted, the smaller ones where color and scent were added, the tables where molds and tools gave the finished candles their artfulness, and the kiln itself, which seemed to me dangerously old and rusted. "Herr Strigoi," Manfred said, "used animal fat to meld with the tallow. That is why this place smells so disgusting. I will change that, blend in paraffin, instead. Paraffin is made from coal and tar and is less repellant to the nose. I have stearic acid on order. It has a higher melting point than plain wax. My candles will last longer. I ... I must first use up the last of Herr Strigoi's fat."

I begged that we withdraw to the house, for

even with the old kiln unlit – by official order – the workshop was suffocating. Manfred smiled when I mentioned the awful heat. "I am working on that," he said mysteriously.

It was not long until the constables allowed Manfred to resume work. Once again we saw and smelled the foul smoke surging, day and night, from the workshop chimney.

More time went by, weeks, months. Brigitte and I were happy, my parents continued on as before. Then a winter day came when, at suppertime, my mother rushed to our apartment to call us to the family table. Manfred was there, with startling news. He had taken a wife.

Her name, he told the astonished family, was Minka. She was an orphan girl from a distant district of Germany, working in the town nearest Hansdorf when Manfred visited her employer on business. He had been instantly taken, he said, with her sweetness and simple beauty, and after several return journeys found to his joy that his affections were returned. On impulse they had wed. She would arrive at the candle shop within the week.

My brother bade all to come meet her, warning us humorously of her shyness. He begged of our mother one favor. He asked Mama to allow him to select the piece Minka would be gifted from our grandmother's jewelry. He knew exactly which item he wanted her to have – a silver necklace he had always admired. Mama, still in a state of surprise, agreed.

A date was set for the visit in the coming week, and Manfred rushed off, leaving a thunderstruck family in his wake. "What must she be like?" Mama wondered.

"To be with Manfred?" Papa sneered. "Desperate – or as big a fool as he. Only a fool could tolerate that boy! 'Candlemaker' ..." He all but spat in disgust.

Papa's attitude had not improved by the day of our visit. Our ride to the candle shop was accompanied by sarcastic suppositions about "this 'Minka.'" "If not hare-lipped or goggle-eyed, then surely she'll be plain to the point of hideous." No one argued with him; we all had similar worries.

But as we entered the shop cheer infused me. A happy bell over the door announced us. I saw

that the walls had been brightened by fresh paint. On the counter and tables about the room Herr Strigoi's artistic candles had been joined by a garden of festive roses, tulips and buttercups, vibrant with color, the wax of their constituency shimmering artificial dewdrops, glimmering in the flames. The faux garden exuded a light fragrance that filled the room without being cloying. Mostly, we were invigorated by the remarkable coolness of the air, almost as chill as outside.

"Wunderschönen!" Brigitte exclaimed. "But kuhl," Mama added.

The winter faded and no one in the family heard anything about, or from, Manfred or Minka. Spring came on, and as its weeks went by heat rose above our region of Germany – a bad, humid heat, promising a summer a cauldron of a summer. Tempers across Hansdorf were ripe, but still I was surprised when I entered my parents' home one morning and found the dining room rattling with shouts. Manfred and our father were in a furious exchange. My brother sounded desperate to the point of panic, our father angry and stubborn, as always. Our mother sat cowed at a corner of the table and Papa perched on the edge of the head chair, staring at Manfred, who stumbled about the room in agitation. He held a magazine he had shown me before, with its article on ice-making machines. He spoke urgently to Papa, trying to get the old man to look at the diagrams and text in an American magazine he held. Its lead article, he said, dealt with new methods for creating ice, and he intended to use its technology to cool his workshop and house to bearable temperatures. He indicated diagrams of mechanisms designed for such purposes. One could be constructed in the house should a source be found for energy, and he said that a water wheel in the stream behind might suffice.

"It is about refrigeration," Manfred pleaded. "cooling a home or factory in the summer. There is an inventor in Munich – he does not use ice – it tells you here – his mechanism cools through the evaporation of ether inside a drum – like beer chills in a stein. He has cooled mines, slaughterhouses, breweries ... I only need a good word, your expression of confidence – to the bankers ..."

Now Papa laughed, without humor. "Oh, so I am to go humbly to the Jew bankers and put my credit at risk, for this silly dream, for you, you and your simpleminded --"

"I can and will."

I took our parents' horse and carriage and drove with Manfred to the icehouse through vicious heat that sapped one's breath, "Cannot Minka take this heat?" My question was met with a long silence. "No," Manfred finally said. "She will ... become very ill ... without a cool house. The ice ... should help."

We reached the icehouse. I purchased two large containers of crushed ice which we loaded into the carriage. Manfred asked me to whip up the horse and hurry us to his shop. "I fear ... it's just a feeling ..." When we reached the Kerzenladen he rushed inside, leaving me to haul in the heavy tubs. I could not blame him; the shop was grotesquely hot. A few of the wax flowers on display were drooping, and one or two dropped molten color onto the floor.

"Minka!" Manfred rushed up the stairs. "Mein Gott! Too late? Too late?" A second later his shout became a scream. "Klaus! The ice! The ice!"

I struggled up the stairs with my burden. Already the ice had begun to liquefy. I all but fell into the bedroom.

Minka lay atop a coverlet, dressed in a flannel nightgown, her large blue eyes unblinking and unmoving, fixed upon the ceiling. Our grandmother's silver necklace lay skewed upon the shining pink smoothness of her throat. "Too late?" Manfred screamed again. He threw a sheet over Minka's tiny figure and began to ladle ice onto her.

"Keep doing this!" he cried and careened out of the bedroom. I obeyed. I looked with horror on Minka's motionless face. "Fever!" I thought. "Typhus?"

Manfred rushed back into the room, in his hands the thick journal he had kept in his apprenticeship. "Don't stop!" he shouted and sat quickly by Minka's head. He opened wide the huge book and flogged the pages to a specific sheet. "More ice," he croaked. He bent his head close to Minka's and, reading from the book, began whispering into her ear a verse, perhaps a prayer; I could not make out his words. I ladled the ice onto

the still figure beneath the sheet, my hands stinging from cold. Manfred finished his prayer, or verse, and stared desperately at Minka's face. He read the page anew, louder, more insistently. I still could not understand the gist.

Finally, as he finished again, Minka's body flexed beneath the sheet. She shuddered, gasped, and ever so slowly moved her gaze to Manfred's weeping face. I heard her gentle, bell-like voice utter a soft word or two. One was Schoen ... "lovely."

All tension, all strength fled Manfred's body. He collapsed. His journal slid to the floor, and his head fell to the pillow beside Minka's. I could hear him weep. I went to his side and picked up the heavy book. "I will bring in the rest of the ice," I said.

While I did so, Manfred did not move; Minka seemed peacefully asleep beneath the mound of ice spread across her. It has to be the typhus, I thought, and left the room, taking the journal. The open door to Herr Strigoi's library tempted me within.

Few of the old tomes on Strigoi's shelves had titles on their spines, and those that did were seldom in German. One I could make out – barely – read *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*. Another, thick and all but falling apart, *Necronomicon Kommentiert*. A third, *Leben und Tod: Geheimnisse der Golem*. With a guilty glance towards the silent hallway, I placed Manfred's journal on the desk, opened the volume and thumbed through the hand-wrought pages. The words and images baffled me. I recognized only a pentagram, the blasphemous five-pointed star, each angle annotated in Manfred's impossible hand. A phrase popped from the illegible mess that made me cringe: *Fleisch und Knochen Wiedergeben*. I found the page my brother had, just now, read to Minka, but could decipher only the first few terrible words: *Im Licht Satans*. I slammed the book closed and let it fall; without a glance back towards the bedroom, I fled to the family carriage and fair flogged the poor horse home.

For many days I remained shaken by what had transpired in the candle shop. My work grew slipshod, so much so that my master gave me warnings. I felt a new distance from Brigitte, though

she needed me more than ever, for she was in the family way. In her state she saw my confused gloom as a personal rejection, and some nights cried herself into sleep as I lay silent and helpless beside her, tormented by thoughts I could not relate. I considered taking my terrors to the confessional, but what could I share with the priest? A few absurd titles from Strigoi's library – *Unspeakable Cults*, *Necronomicon Commentaries*, *Life and Death: Mysteries of the Golem*. A despicable entry in Manfred's journal – "Rendering the flesh and bone" and, worse, "By Satan's light." Meaningless, mad drive! Yet they conveyed to me the depths of my poor brother's dilemma.

Spring merged into summer, and the heat grew. The iceman came to tell me that Manfred was purchasing more ice every week, on credit, but his bill would soon come due. I pledged whatever help I could give, though I knew it could not last with our child on its way. We heard nothing of either Manfred or Minka, although the candle shop remained open and smoke continued to flow from the workshop chimney. Until, one Sunday morning, Brigitte and I were at table in my parents' home, the ladies chattering happily about the child to come, Papa silent, deep into his dotage. Quite suddenly, a huge percussive shock rattled the house, alike to close thunder. I rushed outside to see an oily billow of thick smoke rising in the direction of the candle shop.

"The kiln!" I shouted. "That damnable kiln!"

I ran with neighbors towards the column of smoke and arrived just as the fire brigade began its bucket line. It was already useless to fight the blaze; the workshop was a ruin expelling clouds of grey-black smoke and tall, hellish flames. I saw that the fire had leapt to the roof of the house and that it was already smoking. As I rushed for the doorway the windows of the bottom floor blew out in a fetid cough. I pushed aside those who tried to impede me and crashed into the searing heat and the stink of wax.

Flames danced freely about me as I careened through the shop. The artistic candles, the cherubs, the satyrs, the garden of false flowers drooled to the floor in shapeless, bubbling puddles. I screamed Manfred's name. From atop the stairs I heard his reply, a sick, wordless keen.

Heavy smoke already poured from the stairs. I knew they would collapse at any moment. I rushed up to Manfred, who lay against the doorjamb, his clothes a'smolder, deep burns marring his face and hands. On his lap his journal lay open to a page he held crumpled in his fist. I shouted again his name, but his eyes did not light on me. He stared with a wide mad gaze down the hall towards the bedroom.

I staggered down the corridor through the wretched smoke. Within the library flames writhed obscenely. Huge volumes fell heavily from the collapsing shelves, exploding into shards of crisp paper as they struck the floor. I found the bedroom, fogged with heat and smoke and smell, and felt my way to the head of the bed. I saw what was there and fell to my knees.

"Not typhus!" I screamed. "Not typhus at all! Die Hexenkunst! Sorcery!"

I reached onto the smoking coverlet. Gingerly, for it burned my fingers, I freed my grandmother's silver necklace from the molten mass, fused with flannel, of pink and yellow wax.

Patent Pending
David C. Kopaska-Merkel
and Kendall Evans

When she found she was sick
she left no herb unburned,
unconsumed, unapplied
in her quest for a remedy
markets were scoured for oddities
from any world or time
that might provide a cure.

One of her symptoms
of which there were many:
Tourette's-like outbursts;
another: color changes
on her body: her fingernails
toenails, all of her lips
aureoles, body hair
and the whites of her eyes
had all turned a startling indigo.

It was difficult to identify
her multifarious ailments:

Myshogangis pleidesensis
one self-styled expert called it
mandrake root was recommended
to no discernible effect

small amounts of arsenic
made her feel yet more ill
exacerbating all her symptoms
and she developed a tolerance to
the painkillers she consumed.

A medicine mage at a street-fair booth
made no diagnosis
but prescribed six months abstinence

the quack her son found for her
said cancer, terminal
(she knew the boy meant well)
back-alley herbalists
said this, prescribed that
but no two agreed about anything.

She knew all these pontifications
were no more than the tip
of her iceberg of ill health

She shipped out on a tramp trader
doing odd jobs for room and board
entertainment, mostly, at first
learning as she went
how to do what needed done

always looking for new treatments
unknown on the home world
and she felt a little better now
maybe the subspace jumps
did it, or the food, she thought.

Her symptoms subsided
with every jump; word got around
becoming something of a celebrity
she picked up a few
speaking engagements
on the worlds they stopped at

acquired, and fired, an agent
 was interviewed on a tri-vee show
 distributed throughout
 the galactic arm
 got her own show
 bought a planet!
 Over time, she came to revel
 in shouting out obscenities
 it was part of her joyful personality

and most men found her indigo
 private parts alluring
 they told her she was sexier
 than all the other ladies
 that they knew

she was well content
 and lived happily ever after

(longevity drugs were easy to obtain
 in her income bracket).

The B'raith By A.C. Cargill

The blood-red cloak with its hood up over the figure's head was all I saw when I opened the front door of my cottage on the edge of a small village in the English countryside. The figure, its back to me, stood six feet tall yet the cloak scraped the ground. He – it – she turned slowly and faced me.

Or should I say *didn't* face me, for there was no face – just a blank blackness under that hood.

And yet I felt that this creature was *staring* at me.

An arm protruded from under the cloak. That arm – almost skeletal – was covered in a tight-fitting sleeve made of smooth, black cloth. The hand at the end of that arm was covered with a silken, tight fitting, black glove. The fingers were curled under – all but the index finger, bone thin and coming to a sharp point as if the fingernail inside that silken glove had been filed like the tip of a dagger. The first rays of the sun had appeared, giving that blood-red cloak a ghoulish glow.

The figure pointed that gloved, dagger-like finger at me and said in a voice like that of a man at

the bottom of a well calling to those above to rescue him, "Thou art my final task."

My blood ran cold, a feeling I had never experienced in my twenty-three years of life, and my head filled with every story I had ever read about the Specter of Death – usually skeletal figures armed with scythes used to harvest souls.

I slammed the door shut, a cold sweat soaking into the thick cotton bathrobe I had thrown on a few minutes earlier, jumping up from my bed, when I had heard the loud pounding on that door.

I peered out the window beside the door and saw the figure had moved away, standing – no, hovering – at the edge of my small yard, which was overgrown and neglected.

Since I had bought the cottage three years earlier, I had just lived there. The yard and its profusion of plant life hadn't mattered. Fixing cracks in the age-yellowed plaster on the interior walls seemed a waste of time. Refinishing the scuffed and stained wood floors had never even entered my mind. The dusty curtains that made me sneeze every time I opened or closed them were nothing to me. In fact, I didn't worry about all the folderal that other women my age elevated to a high priority in their lives, especially if married and/or a mother.

I was neither.

I was busy.

About six years ago, a stream of ideas had begun spewing from my brain like water from an open fire hydrant on a hot summer night in the inner city neighborhood in the U.S. where I had grown up. My busy-ness had been in typing up those ideas. Lately, though, that stream had petered to a trickle, so my busy-ness now involved trying to restart that flow.

I peered out the window again. The figure was still there, hovering with the sun's rays turning it into a silhouette.

My cottage faced east across a farmer's field. It was autumn, and the farmer had harvested the wheat crop. Rolled hay bales sat here and there, rotting in the sun and awaiting the time when cattle would feed on them. I had chosen this cottage because of that field. After the closeness and concrete and grime of that inner city neighborhood, I needed openness and things growing. That was

also my excuse for the unkempt yard with its two-foot-high growth of plants that were green but not grass. They bloomed gloriously in spring and summer and were faded now as the season slid into a wet, gray winter.

I had kept my distance from my neighbors on either side, engaging only in such exchanges as the minimum of politeness required. I shopped at the small village's only grocery and drug store (they called them food marts and chemist shops, I had soon learned), hurrying in from my car, saying only the most cursory responses to questions, finding and purchasing what I needed, and scurrying out with my laden shopping bags back to my car, trying to ignore the snatches of commentary that floated in the air behind me.

"Terribly shy."

"Haughty American."

"No, just sweet and wants to be alone."

"Shame. My son Alfred would be perfect for her."

Maybe this reticence to engage with my fellow humans had come from a determination to achieve a second success as a novelist. Or maybe it was from growing up in a place where one didn't get too close to one's neighbors.

My father had disappeared one day, his blood spread across my parents' bedroom but no sign of his body. My mother and I had managed to stay in that apartment, scraping enough money together each month to pay the rent on time. I had gotten a job after school, and my mother had begun working at the dry cleaners.

When I was in my senior year of high school, a teacher had read the first chapter of a book I was writing had asked to read more. Then that teacher and her friend in the publishing business had met with me and my mother in that apartment.

"... a very good deal for your daughter," the woman had been telling my mother.

"What do you think, Glenda?" my mother had asked me.

I had just shrugged, my mind having wandered during the woman's explanation of the contract to thoughts of my father.

"Look it over and let us know," my teacher had said.

The woman had smiled and nodded and laid

the papers on the battered secondhand coffee table. Then she and my teacher had left.

I had sat silent a moment as my mother picked up the papers and started reading them. Then she tossed them onto the coffee table.

"I wish your father was here," she had said.

"He was so good with these types of things."

Then she burst into tears.

I had signed that contract. And my book was a bestseller.

As I remembered all this, I again looked out the window by the door of my small cottage, its thatched roof looking like a hood over the stone walls. The cloaked figure hadn't moved.

"Surely a neighbor will notice him – it sounded like a 'him' – and call the police," I murmured to myself as a shiver went through me.

Then my cell phone, still lying on my bedside table, peeled out a ringtone that I had set for my friend Maxie. I had planned to visit him for the weekend at his estate, a short train ride away through the British countryside where I had settled after leaving my homeland behind. I was in search of peace and quiet and inspiration for that second hit novel that my publisher had been demanding for the past three years.

I rushed to the bedroom, grabbed the phone, and answered.

"Hi, Glenda!" came Maxie's cheery voice with his Eton accent.

We had met at a book signing in Cambridge and had gone to dinner together when the signing was done. My right hand had been cramped from holding a pen all day. My cheeks had been worn out from smiling at the same comments repeated by everyone in line (that British politeness in full force). And my ears had still been ringing from voices chatting as people had stood in line to meet the author of the latest "big thing" in modern literature.

"My full name is George John Edward Henry Charles d'Alsace, sixtieth Earl of Brayforth – oldest family in England," he had said as we had sat at a table in a posh restaurant. "People just call me Maxie."

"Hi, Maxie," I had said.

He had ordered tea for us both and then asked me, "So, other than being exhausted, how are

you?”

“Loving being here in England. My first time out of the States. In fact, I hadn’t done much traveling until this book signing tour. I was all over the U.S. and then my agent said this tour was arranged.”

“When do you leave?” he had asked gently.

I swooned at the sound of that accent. Sadly, it was his most attractive feature. He had ears that stuck straight out from the sides of his head, an overly large nose, a small chin, and heavy brows over rather dull brown eyes.

“This was the last stop,” I had told him as the waitress came with our tea.

“And then?” he had asked after ordering our dinner and waiting for the waitress leave.

“I hate the idea of going back to that apartment and my mother,” I had replied.

“Stay here – in England, I mean,” he had said, deadly earnestness on his face.

“Cambridge is too large, too busy,” I had said petulantly. “It’d be like my old neighborhood.”

“Find a nice little country cottage,” he had proffered. “I can help you look.”

“I’ve had enough of renting,” I had said. “I want to own.”

“Totally understandable,” he had said.

Then he had excused himself, standing and pulling his cell phone out of one of the back pockets of his jeans and then walking to the front of the restaurant. The waitress had come with our food and set it on the table. I thanked her and then waited patiently, full of curiosity and totally unconcerned about our food getting cold. Maxie had soon returned and sat back down, spreading his napkin on his lap.

“Tell me!” I exclaimed.

“Got plans for tomorrow?”

“Well, I’d planned a day to see the city ...”

“Want to see a cottage for sale instead?”

“Sure!”

The following day, we had taken a train from Cambridge to the station in the village on his estate. We got in his car parked there and drove to a cottage in another village. A nice, middle-aged woman had been there waiting for us.

“So happy to be of service, milord,” she had said to Maxie.

“Please, just call me Maxie,” he had replied.

“This young woman is looking for a cottage. I thought instantly of you – that you’d know what was available in the area.”

She had smiled cheerily and unlocked the front door, letting them enter first and then following. The rooms were light and airy, and the cottage faced an open field. I had fallen in love with it immediately and had moved in the next day.

“So great to hear your voice,” I said to Maxie now on my cell phone, walking quickly back to the front of the cottage.

“What’s the matter?” asked Maxie, perceiving the worry and fright in my voice.

“It’s going to sound silly.” I peered out the window beside the front door.

The cloaked figure was gone.

I sighed in relief and then said, “Never mind. Just a bit jumpy this morning.”

“See you at lunchtime then. My other guests are arriving later today.”

“Great,” I replied, ending the call.

I went to the other windows of the house and looked out. No cloaked figure. Then I ventured outside into the chill autumn air, creeping out the kitchen door and around the house, making my way through the tall plants. Nothing. I went back inside, closing the door and locking it securely but chiding myself for being foolish. “One of the villagers playing a trick,” I thought. “They must be at the village pub having a good laugh.”

I had toast and tea, quickly packed my suitcase, and walked to the train station on the north side of the village. The train arrived a few minutes after I did. Ticket in hand, I got in one of the cars and sat in a seat by the window.

Suddenly, at the end of the train car, I saw a figure in a blood-red hooded cloak go through the door to the next car. I ran to the end of the car as other passengers stared. I opened the door, stepped through and across to the other car. There was no cloaked figure. I walked to the end of that car, but the door was locked. I shrugged and returned to my seat, avoiding stares from other passengers.

At the station in the village on Maxie’s estate, he greeted me as I disembarked.

“Good trip?” he asked. Then he noticed I was shivering. “What happened?”

I could tell he was really concerned, but I just said, “Let’s have lunch. I’m starving.”

He nodded as we got into his car, but a line of worry creased that heavy brow. It lent him an air of distinction along with his confident yet friendly manner.

After lunch we settled into leather chairs before a fire in his study, I with a cup of hot tea and he with a snifter of brandy. Morning sunshine had given way to heavy clouds and a sputter of rain that was now a steady downpour.

Maxie took a sip from his snifter, then looked at me sternly and said, “Tell me.”

I told him of the strange visitor that morning and seeing it again on the train.

“Sounds like a b’raith,” he explained, “based on your description. They take the shape of something deep in your mind.”

“Little Red Riding Hood,” I whispered.

“Yes, sounds like it,” said Maxie. “Anyway, only *you* can see it.”

“What *is* a b’raith?”

“A spirit sent to earth to guard, punish, perform some service – it could be anything. And this one was obviously sent for you.”

“But to guard, punish, or – it said I was its final task.”

“Hmm, ‘task’ could be any of those three things. Probably sent by a Maker – the beings who live at the core of our planet,” explained Maxie as if to a child.

I laughed scoffingly. “Oh, come on! Everyone knows what’s at the core of the Earth – hot magma.”

“Really? Have you ever been there?”

I laughed louder, sure that Maxie was pulling my leg.

He sipped his brandy and gazed into the flames dancing in the fireplace.

“So what do I do if this b’raith thing shows up again?” I asked after sipping more hot tea and going along for now with what I was sure was a gag.

His smile vanished, and he said in a tone burgeoning with extreme seriousness, “You assign it a task, of course.”

Maxie stood and went to one of the bookshelves in the study. The books seemed to date back to the Guttenheim printing press or earlier.

Some were covered in leather and had gilt lettering. I read a few titles: *Spirits and Their Masters*, *Journey to the Netherworld*, and *The Unseen World*.

“Most of these belonged to my ancestors,” said Maxie. “They’re things we live with when our home has been in the family for generations.”

He selected a thin volume and held it reverently as if it were holy.

“Here,” he said, walking over and handing the book to me. “This will help you. It’s very old, so treat it carefully.”

I looked at the title on the cover – *B’raith, the Servants*.

“Go ahead,” urged Maxie.

I opened the book and began reading. The going was slow in part due to the archaic English text and part because it had been scribed by hand.

B’RAITH, THE SERVANTS

Translated by Hugo Sabastiana Errol Tobiah d’Alsace, First Earl of Brayforth and Lord of Estmonde Manor and all its Lands, in the Ten Hundred Thousandth Year of the Makers

We art the Makers of Worlds and the Universe. All matter ist at our command and so hath been from time beginn and wilst be until time end. We traveled far-reaching through the most vast nothingsness, with matter gatheredth into multitudes of stars and planets, but none maketh our final place, which we didst seeketh with severe earnestness. Fatigued from these travels and with knowledge that our rest musteth be secured, we grabbed matter and made a small star. Some of our kin made a small planet too near that star and burrowed deep inside it, smothered in the process. Some kin made large planets of gases and sunked below them, swallowed in their swirlings and billowings. We made this planet, call’ng it Earth. The b’raith served us to moldeth nothingness into somethingness, until we couldst planteth our seed on it. Thou art that seed. The b’raith will serve thee as thou wilst.

I stopped reading. “Surely, this is a joke – something by the Brothers Grimm or whomever.”

Maxie smiled wanly at me. “Finish the book, and then we’ll talk about it.”

I held my still hot cup of tea in both hands to warm them.

“That’s the other downside to these old places,” said Maxie, seeing me. “No central heating.”

By dinnertime several other friends he had invited for the weekend had arrived. He introduced me, and I spent time chatting with them about my bestseller.

“How does one write such things?” asked Inks, whose real name was Philip, in a very nasal tone. He had begun doing calligraphy as a child and now made a career out of it.

“In my case, I drew from life,” I explained.

“So, your father was killed by gangsters for stealing from them?” asked Inks.

“Well, no – that is, I don’t really – I mean, the police never really found—”

“The author must be allowed some license,” spoke up Maxie. “It’s called ‘fiction’.”

Everyone laughed, which relaxed the atmosphere as we all strolled from the drawing room into the dining room. The whole b’raith thing was still uppermost in my mind. I made it through the rest of the meal and hurried to my room, claiming sleepiness but really wanting to read the rest of that book. Maxie had just smiled knowingly and bid me goodnight.

I changed quickly into my pajamas and jumped into bed in the chilly room, pulling the thick comforter around me for warmth and plumping up pillows behind me so I could read by the light of the bedside lamp. I found the place where I had left off and continued.

We Makers hath madeth the b’raith to serveth us here on Earedth since we dareth not riseth from our chamber at its core, for if we dost, we shall flyeth away through the unending vastness. The b’raith performeth such tasks as we dost biddest them. But they be also thy servants, for we careth for thee as we careth for ourselves. Thou art our seed and hast flourished as we hadst hoped beyond the limits of all hope.

The b’raith wilst cometh to thee when thou hast need. They formeth as thy mind dost command, so bewarest lest they art thy nightmare instead of thy saviour. Beware, too, that the b’raith

lifespan ist not endless, that its span be long but end at that millennium’s end in which its final task be performedth.

Asketh of the b’raith what thou wilst, but heedeth that what thou wilst, wilst be. And the beingst of that thing canst not be undoneth. And thee who art the final task – the being who setteth the b’raith his final task – be doubly aware. If thou asketh a thing that ist evil, that evil shalt be thine, and thou shalt become a b’raith, serving across the millennia until thy final task be reached.

But if thou be the object of that final task and if that task be evil, thou shalt reside with us and be’est a companion. If that final task be good, the b’raith shallt cling to thee as thy servant but in human form as thy mind dost commandeth.

Therefore and for thine own goodwill and livethness, asketh for that which bringeth goodness to thee and others, for this way—

I fell asleep, drifting into dreams that were a mix of every horror movie I had ever watched, with blood-red eyes becoming the hooded cloak of the b’raith and mummies holding out their bandaged arms to drag me to the Egyptian afterlife.

I woke to a knock on the door and the maid entered with a tray bearing tea and toast. She set the tray on the bed, picked up the book that had fallen to the floor, laying it carefully on the bedside table, and then opened the curtains.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at her.

“You’re welcome, miss,” she said as she lit a fire in the grate and then left the room.

Pushing away my dreams, I looked over at the book. “It has to be a joke,” I thought.

“Nae,” a cold voice whispered from a dark corner.

I saw the figure in the blood-red cloak step into the light.

“Thou art my final task,” it said, the arm stretching out as before, that gloved, dagger-like finger pointing at me.

It moved nearer, seeming to float – yes, *float* – across the rug that lay on the ancient oaken floorboards.

I sat frozen until hearing a knock on the door.

“You decent?” came Maxie’s voice through

the thick wooden door.

“Yes, come in!” I called out.

The figure vanished back into the shadows.

Maxie entered the room and said cheerfully, “Hope you slept well. Sunny day. Thought we’d all go for a stroll.”

I smiled at him. “Sure.”

“Fine. And don’t mind Inks.”

“Don’t worry, I’m used to him by now.”

“Good.”

He saw a flash of fear in my eyes as he spoke and sat carefully on the edge of the bed.

“Saw it again?” he asked quietly.

I nodded but couldn’t speak.

“It’s getting bolder, confronting you here. Did you finish the book?”

“No, I fell asleep.”

“It’ll come to you until you give it that final task,” said Maxie simply. “I know.”

A thought suddenly flashed in my mind.

“You’ve seen one?”

Maxie nodded and said, “A couple months before your book signing tour here began. They seem protective of my family.”

He looked at me and smiled, and I smiled back.

Then he stood and said, “Not a word to the others. Get dressed and join us. Breakfast is ready in the dining room.”

He left the room, and I expected the cloaked figure to reappear. When it didn’t, I rose from bed, dressed, and went downstairs.

“Maxie says you don’t ride,” said Inks in a snarky tone, seeing me.

He turned away before I could answer and filled his plate from the serving dishes there.

I piled some food on a plate and then sat.

“Don’t mind Inks,” said a woman named Evelyn whom people called “Bets” since she liked to gamble. “He’s always been a little snot.”

Inks sneered at her and sat at the far end of the table to eat.

The other guests were already finishing their food.

Maxie sat at the head of the table as he had the night before and looked at his guests.

“Such a beautiful day,” he said to them all, “that I thought a stroll around the gardens would be good.” He looked directly at Inks. “You’re wel-

come, of course, to a gallop across the fields.”

“Yes,” twanged Inks in his nasal voice.

Several other guests said they would go riding. And Bets said she would be looking at books in the study.

After breakfast, Maxie and I were the only ones walking in the gardens. A couple of gardeners were working in the distance. The sun was shining, but the air was still chilly. I wrapped my thick wool sweater around me.

“Ever tamed your yard?” asked Maxie, strolling beside me, his hands clasped behind his back.

“No, I like it wild,” I said, “and so far no one in the village has complained.”

Maxie smiled in his charming way.

We strolled on and stopped here and there to admire, smell, and touch.

“Well, you’ve seen this b’raith three times now,” said Maxie, daring to bring up the subject as we strolled on from some shrubs. “As I said, you’ll keep seeing him until you assign him that final task.”

“He said that *I* am the final task.”

Maxie stopped walking, and I stopped.

“Yes, you’re right,” he said. “He did. Interesting. That’s very different.”

We strolled along silently as Maxie lapsed into deep thought. I studied his profile. He truly wasn’t a handsome man, but he had a handsomeness that shone from within. I realized that I liked him very much. I was just about to say so when he spoke.

“They sent him *to* you,” stated Maxie, “at the bidding of someone else. And this is his final task. Whatever he was sent to do, he must do before he can take eternal rest.”

“Oh, I see,” I said softly. “Should I ask him what the task is?”

“Definitely – the next time you see him.”

“What if it’s – I mean, what if he is here to—?” I paused. “What if it’s – well, my death?”

Saying the words felt like I was pronouncing my doom. I shook off the feeling. The words had been spoken, and I was still alive.

“Let’s hope not. That’d be evil, and the person who had ordered the b’raith to do that would become a b’raith himself.”

“Yes, I read that part.”

“Don’t worry about it for now,” said Maxie, looking at me kindly.

I nodded and as I was about to stoop to smell an autumn bloom a horse whinnied and something whizzed past the side of my head. A split-second later a man cried out as he fell to the ground off that horse, which galloped away.

Maxie and I ran toward the man lying at the edge of the gardens.

“Inks! What happened?” asked Maxie as we got closer.

“Milord!” cried out one of the gardeners. “He’s been shot!”

I looked toward the gardener and saw him helping the other gardener who was clutching his arm. Maxie saw them, too, and dialed his cell phone, speaking urgently to his housekeeper and telling her what had just happened. Then he helped Inks get up from the ground, shaken but otherwise unharmed and looking embarrassed and angry. He walked away hurriedly, going after the horse that had run off. Maxie found his cousin’s gun on the grass a few feet from where Inks had lain.

“Shouldn’t you call the police?” I asked as Maxie picked it up and pocketed it, the muzzle still smoking.

Maxie looked at me and said simply, “He’s my cousin.”

“What about the gardener?” I asked.

“He’ll be looked after,” said Maxie. “My housekeeper is quite capable.”

We continued our stroll through the gardens. When we returned to the manor house, I learned that the housekeeper had rendered first aid to the gardener, that the shot had just grazed his arm, and that the man was feeling much better and had returned to his work.

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said.

“Yes, miss, for us all,” said the housekeeper.

“Is Inks still here?” I asked her.

“In his room packing, miss,” she replied and then returned to her work.

I told Maxie I needed to change and went up to the second floor. Inks’ room was at the other end of the hall from mine. I walked to it and knocked.

Inks opened the door. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and I could see how thin and bony his arms were – just like the b’raith’s – but his fin-

gernails were bitten down to the quick, a habit I had noticed on several occasions. No matter, the silken gloves could have false tips in them, or just one for that index finger.

“Well?” he asked snidely.

“Your little tricks aren’t going to work,” I told him, my anger flaring and feeling more certain than ever that he was the culprit, trying to scare me away, worried that I would marry his cousin, have a child, and thus bump him down to second in line to inherit the estate.

I pushed past him into the room and went over to the suitcase he was packing.

“Where is it?” I demanded.

“Where’s what?” he asked, almost snarling.

“The red cloak – blood-red, as if you didn’t know.”

I saw only the usual clothes. Then I went to the armoire. There were empty hangers and the tweed jacket Inks had worn while riding.

“Did you store it somewhere in the house?” I barked at him.

I started searching the room, but no cloak.

Inks stood wide-eyed and finally said, “You’re crazy.”

I went to my room, sitting on the bed a few moments to calm myself before going back downstairs.

Maxie was in his study and called out “Come in!” as I knocked on the door softly.

“I was going to read awhile in my room,” I said.

He nodded, and I left the study, returning to my room and struggling through more of the book.

I learned at dinner that evening that Inks had left the estate a half hour after I had spoken with him.

The rest of that weekend passed pleasantly, with no sign of the b’raith, which by now I was convinced had been Inks in what seemed to me a ridiculous disguise, but I was glad when my time to return to my little cottage had come. I had finished reading the book and now traveled back home, arriving around noon, determined to face Inks-the-b’raith and demand that he stop this foolishness, assuring him that Maxie and I were just friends and that I wasn’t in the way of Inks inheriting the estate.

After reading that book I still laughed at the idea of the b'raith being some spirit. It had certainly looked very real and solid. And whether it was Inks or some spirit sent to kill me, I would deal appropriately with the situation when it arose. My own life was more precious to me than any spirit's eternal rest or any cousin's grand aspirations.

The train arrived at the station in the small village. I disembarked and walked quickly to my cottage.

My writing desk was in the front room and was furnished with a desk, a wooden desk chair, an old armchair and ottoman, and a small table and lamp beside them.

I went into the bedroom and unpacked my suitcase. Then I went to the kitchen and made a pot of tea, carrying it to that front room. I settled at the desk, turned on my laptop, and tried to think and write.

After about an hour, all I had typed was "Thou art my final task" over and over.

The teapot was empty by then, so I stood and picked it up to get a refill.

A knock on the front door stopped me.

My blood turned to ice in spite of the sunshine warming the room. I slowly set down the teapot and went to the door, not wanting to look out the window. I unlocked the door and quickly pulled it open, ready to face my doom.

"Me wife sent you this pie," said my neighbor. "It's gooseberry."

"Oh, well, gee, please thank her for me," I said, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"Come to tea sometime – four o'clock," he said congenially. "She'd really like that."

I nodded and smiled. "Yes, I will. Thanks again."

I felt guilty about being such an unfriendly neighbor. But right now, I had a bigger concern.

He walked away, and I closed the door softly.

The pie was still warm and smelled enticing.

I turned to my desk, holding the pie in one hand, and picked up the teapot with the other hand. Then I turned toward the kitchen and stopped cold, seeing that cloaked figure standing in the kitchen doorway, that finger with its dagger-like tip aimed straight at me.

"Thou art my final task," it said.

"Stop it, Inks," I said in as angry and annoyed a tone as I could muster.

"The human named Inks is at his home in the city called London," said the figure in a cold voice.

I set the pie and teapot on the ottoman and faced this creature.

"Maybe I'll just call him and see," I stated in a tone of daring.

The faceless head under the blood-red cloak hood nodded.

I went to my desk and picked up my cell phone, dialing the number Maxie had given me for his cousin with whom Maxie sometimes stayed when in London.

I listened as the phone rang.

"Hello?" came Inks' voice through the phone.

"Uh, hi, this is Glenda," I said, feeling awkward.

"What now? Are you in the building foyer? Want me to buzz you in? Going to rummage through my cupboards?"

"No – I – I just wanted to apologize," I stammered.

"Fine, you apologized," he said tersely, ending the call.

I set the phone back down slowly and carefully on the desk. Then I looked up at the figure in the cloak.

"Are you b'raith?" I asked, unable to move.

The head, covered in that hood and as faceless as ever, nodded slowly.

"Who sent you?" I asked in a whisper.

But the b'raith didn't answer.

"What is the final task?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"It dost hath two parts. The first part ist completed," said the b'raith in that cold voice.

"First part?"

The b'raith just nodded. "I hast thy life saved."

"Inks," I whispered.

The b'raith nodded.

"I hadst preventeth his attempt on thy life."

"What's the second part?" I asked, shivering slightly.

To my surprise, he pointed to my laptop and then said in a soft voice, "I wilst telleth thee my story. Thou wilst write it down and sendeth it to thy publisher as thine next novel. Thou mustest

voweth to fulfilleth this.”

The faceless creature stared at me. No eyes. But it *stared* at me. I could *feel* it.

“I promise,” I said, swallowing hard.

The b’raith nodded. He floated – yes, *floated* – just had he had in my room at Estmonde Manor – away from the doorway. I picked up the pie and teapot and slid quickly past him into the kitchen. I made another pot of tea and dished up a wedge of pie onto a plate. Then I carried teapot and plate back to my desk in the small front room, set everything down, and then sat in my desk chair. I poured a cup of tea, took a bite of pie, washed it down with the tea, and sat waiting.

The b’raith floated near me and began his tale.

“I be as old as this planet and have served the Makers since they created Earth for themselves and us to be of service to them. There be a multitude of my kin, all in service to the Makers. Our first task wast the cooling of the surface so creatures couldst surviveth on it. The first creatures the Makers bade me and my kin to placeth on that surface were what thou knowest as dinosaurs – large, clumsy beasts with brains incapable of anything beyond brutish actions. Through the passage of time, the Makers greweth fatigued of them and bade us to send a meteor to Earth to destroyeth the beasts. This hadst created a cloud of dust and debris from the impact and blocked out the sun. That onsetsed an age of tremendous cold – what thou callest an Ice Age – and thus the Makers stayed in the warmth at the center of Earth and bade us to introduce the mastadons with their thick coats of hair on the surface. Then the Makers conceived a grand idea. They wouldst create a species with a brain that couldst discerneth things, that couldst go beyond the simple actions of sustainance of their own lives ...”

The tale went on for several hours with me typing as quickly as I could manage to keep up, dealing with the archaic manner in which the b’raith spoke. When it was done, I looked it over and then sighed.

“No one will believe this,” I told the b’raith who was floating a few feet away.

“It mattereth not,” replied the b’raith. “Nor shouldst they believe. Those who know’est of me

and my kin wilst perceive the truth of it. The rest wilst see it as a brilliant work of fiction – *thy* work.”

I closed the file and turned to him.

“Tell me now who sent you,” I insisted, ready to delete the file I had just spent hours typing, my cursor hovering over the filename on the laptop screen.

“Thy father,” said the b’raith quickly, seeing my finger on the delete button. “He reside-eth with my masters now. Many human souls doth reside there.”

“This whole idea of a soul is ludicrous. We have one life.”

“Be’th thou of a mind so sure?” asked the b’raith in that cold voice I had come to know so well as I had sat listening and typing from early afternoon to the wee hours of the next morning.

“Of course!”

“I can telleth thee how he didst leaveth his body and who killed him as he toldeth it to me. Wilt thou believe’est me then?”

I sat a moment, stunned, and thinking, “Was this my father’s killer? Had he stalked me here and now wore this ridiculous disguise to get close and finish me off? Was whomever my father had angered now bent on destroying his family? If so, why now? Ten years had passed.” No, my mind concluded that this was something else – possibly something beyond explanation. My rational mind tried to reject that idea and then stopped.

“Tell me,” I insisted, my finger still hovering over the delete button. “I may believe you, but then again I may not.”

I wanted to know, having lived with that mystery for all those years, what had happened to my father.

“Save the file first to that device,” he said, pointing to a thumbdrive lying on my desk, “and handeth it to me.”

I hesitated but then complied, deciding to trust this figure that far. The gloved hand touched me slightly as I handed the thumbdrive to the b’raith. That hand was as icy cold as the voice, even through the silken fabric. I had expected it to be hot – a demon’s fiery hand.

“I hast no life within me,” said the b’raith, see-

ing the look of shock on my face, “and thus no fire inside me. But I wilst haveth anon. It groweth even now.”

His arm and hand disappeared under the cloak. “Now tell me,” I again insisted.

“Sendeth the file to thy publisher,” he insisted.

I complied. The b’raith nodded in satisfaction. Then he spoke in a different voice – a voice that was clearly my father’s. Or was that the b’raith reading my mind and presenting to me what I wanted to hear, just as it had pulled the partially formed image of Little Red Riding Hood from my brain to form the figure now before me? And it spoke in perfect modern English.

“Mr. Gobaja killed me.”

“The building superintendent? Why?” I asked, shocked.

The b’raith continued in my father’s voice.

“Greed, fear, impulse. Mr. Gobaja wasn’t a rational man. He was in our apartment when I came home earlier than expected. I caught him pocketing the few nice pieces of jewelry your mother had inherited from *her* mother. We fought. Mr. Gobaja had a switchblade that he used to defend himself from thugs in the alley when he took out the trash. He took it out and stabbed me in the gut. I bled out, still trying to get that jewelry back and spreading my blood across the room as I pursued him. Then I collapsed and became a spirit, watching as he took my body down to the furnace. Hovering nearby, yet to travel to this place, I watched as he shoved that now-useless hulk into the fiery gaping maw and burned it up. Then he burned his clothes with my blood on them and told his wife that they’d been exposed to disease and had to be destroyed.”

“My mother – she still lives there,” I gasped.

“She ist well,” said the b’raith in his cold voice. “Thy father bade one of my kin goest to her to protect her in years passed. Mr. Gobaja, though, fell victim to the thugs in the alley one evening, his switchblade be not with him. He had stopped having it on his person, thinking the police wouldst suspect him and wouldst test the blade for blood, which they wouldst surely havet founde. Mrs. Gobaja has moved away, and there is a new super.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay, so why now?” I asked again.

“It be done – a new story for thee – my story. I wanted my story told. That book lies, and that lie hast persisted through thousands of years. The author’s descendant know of this lie. One of my kin hadst cometh to him to repair it, but he hadst not believed. He had merely a request made – one that my kin had granted.”

“Request?” I asked, my curiosity overcoming my fear a moment.

“Thee.”

“Me? But wha—?” I stopped, thinking I knew the answer.

Maxie had told me that the b’raith had come to him before my book tour in England had been scheduled. The suddenness of that event now made sense. I wondered briefly why I hadn’t reasoned this out before.

“Go on,” I said softly.

“Thy father also had two goals. He had knownst thou struggled with thy attempt to bringeth forth an idea for a new work, and he hadst heardeth that thy life wast in danger. I engaged an arrangement with him – a way to achieveth both of his ends as well as mine own. A new novel for thee and thy life spared. He is not yet becometh a Maker, and thus such a bargain couldst be. My time for a final task hadst cometh. I wouldst saveth thy life, tell thee my story, prevaieth upon thee to presenteth it to thy publisher, and then be at an end.”

“That shot—,” I exclaimed, remembering the first task.

“Yea, the man called ‘Inks’ aimed for thee, but I spooked his horse.”

“Thank you,” I said, staring at that faceless head under the hood of that blood-red cloak.

“It was for thy father,” said the b’raith solemnly, “and for myself. I be no longer a slave of the Makers. I be free.”

“Slave? I thought you were a servant,” I said.

“The first truth perversion,” said the b’raith.

“What about your eternal rest?” I asked, puzzled.

“The second truth perversion,” said the b’raith. “The Makers didst not wanteth the world to knoweth that I and my kin be their slaves and became free after that final task. They couched the truth in terms of hollowness and cordiality –

‘servant’ and ‘eternal rest’.”

“Oh, I see,” I said softly. “Well, what now?”

“Now,” said the b’raith, “the tasks be complete, and so ist my slavery.”

He stood to full height, cast off the cloak which vanished before hitting the floor, and stood as a man, not skeletal, but well-muscled and in good health. He wore jeans and a casual shirt, and his face shone with happiness. It was a good face, not overly handsome, but not unhandsome. A face drawn from my own mind perhaps?

I sat and stared a moment and then laughed lightly.

“I am now corporeal and will live as a human,” said the b’raith in modern English. “You as my freer, the object of my final task, have me in your debt and your descendants after you.”

I thought back to what I had read in that book and asked, “So, you’re human now?”

“I am b’raith and will always be. Some of my abilities as b’raith – bestowed upon me and my kin by the Makers of Worlds – will be lessened, but most remain.”

“What abilities?”

He smiled at me and said, “This, for instance.”

As I watched, his outfit changed from jeans and a shirt to a tailored business suit, to hunting tweeds, and back to jeans and a shirt with a long, dark blue, wool coat and leather gloves. A pair of hiking boots appeared upon his feet.

“Simple rearrangement of atoms – the basic matter that has always existed and that the Makers have used for time untold to create a vast array of stars and planets.”

He smiled with no trace of boastfulness.

“Fascinating,” I said, unable to think of anything else.

“You must call upon me if you are ever in need,” the b’raith continued. “Just say ‘I am thy final task’ three times and I will come.”

I nodded.

“Do not forget,” he said seriously.

“I won’t,” I said, “and thank you.”

“Thanks be to your father, who gave me this opportunity.”

“You said he hasn’t yet become a Maker. Will he? And what then?”

“He will, for, unlike many human spirits who arrive in the Makers’ home, he is one with courage and determination. Many of them have become b’raith. But not he. And when he becomes a Maker, he can sway the world – prevent wars, hunger, pestilence, and all manner of ills that have plagued this seed that the Makers had spread upon this Earth.”

The b’raith’s words made me feel proud – a wonderful feeling after ten years of not knowing what had happened to my father and spilling out into my first novel the nonsense that had sprouted in my childish imagination.

That thought reminded me of the file I had just sent to my publisher.

As if reading my mind, the b’raith said, “Your publisher will like it, and the world will like it, and the great lie will be undone. Maybe, too, more of my kin will be freed from their bondage.”

I smiled at him and said, “I hope so.”

“You must not let my appearance distract you,” he said, “for you are correct in thinking that it comes from your own mind – an image formed from the books you have read about what some authors think is love. But that image is a wall around your heart. You must destroy it. There is another who loves you, who hopes you will love him, and who wants you to be with him. You recognize this and are attracted to the man inside, but you let his appearance stand in the way.”

“Maxie,” I said under my breath.

The b’raith nodded. “And do not worry about the man named ‘Inks’. He has learned his lesson. And Maxie has his cousin’s gun with his fingerprints on it. Go to Maxie now. He is the one for you.”

The b’raith seemed to be holding something back.

“What?” I asked.

“Maxie – that is, George John Edward Henry Charles d’Alsace, sixtieth Earl of Brayforth and Lord of Estmonde Manor and all its Lands – is b’raith,” stated the b’raith standing before me. “His ancestor, the first Earl of Brayforth and a b’raith, had achieved the final task. Then he had created that estate for himself and his descendants, keeping it safe from even the Great Wars and

bombs. Twenty-four-hundred years of marrying with humans has lessened the abilities but Maxie can still achieve certain things, usually small things, such as calling my kin to his aid.”

“Is Maxie fashioned after some image in my mind?” I asked.

The b’raith shook his head. “That ability is not with him. He is as you see him.”

“Okay, thanks. Where will you go now? What will you do?”

The b’raith smiled slightly. “That I do not yet know.”

“Do you have a name now?” I asked, feeling a little foolish at the question.

“Yes, I have chosen a name – simple and befitting the life I will now live, wherever and whatever that is,” he replied.

Just then there was a knock on the front door.

“He is here. I must go,” the b’raith stated simply, turning to go into the kitchen and out the back door.

“Wait! The name!” I called out.

He turned to me and said simply, “Jesuis Goodman.” Then he slipped out through the back door in the kitchen.

There was another knock on the front door, more earnest this time.

“Glenda, are you alright? It’s me, Maxie! I need to see you.”

I went to the door and opened it.

“Maxie!” I said, throwing my arms around him.

He hugged me warmly and then stepped back, his face clearly showing the surprise he felt. Then he smiled.

“I had to come and see how you were,” he said, stepping inside. “The b’raith – what if Inks sent it to kill you? The thought’s been driving me to distraction until I had to come here.”

I just laughed.

“Are you alright?” he asked, looking at me as if I were mad.

“Wonderful, fabulous!” I said. “I’ve been typing furiously since I got home yesterday.”

“You look like you haven’t slept.”

“I haven’t, but who cares about that?” I exclaimed, dancing around the room a little. “I sent it

off to my publisher. She’ll be responding soon, I know.”

“And the b’raith?” he asked as I stopped in front of him.

“Oh, that,” I said with a shy smile, “a figment of my imagination.”

I winked at him knowingly.

He winked back.

“Let’s have breakfast,” I said cheerily, “and then go visit my neighbors. They gave me a home-made pie yesterday – gooseberry. Delicious. I must thank them properly.”

Maxie smiled as I took his hand and led him into the kitchen. I filled the kettle with water and set it on a stove burner. Then I turned and kissed him.

He looked more surprised than ever, but in a very pleased way. He put his arms around me and held me tight.

When he let go, he said, “Want to be my wife and Lady Brayforth?”

“Would I have to ride a horse?” I teased him.

“Your choice,” he replied.

“Then, I would be honored,” I said, smiling happily. “By the way, I heard that a b’raith had come to you and granted your request,” I stated. “What did you ask of it?”

Maxie blushed for the first time that I had seen since we had met and said shyly, “I had asked for true love.” Then he looked at me, smiled, and said, “And I got it.”

G.I. Gale

Thomas E. Simmons

A tumult of troops entered the star all at once
Waving her jeweled limbs, the princess quieted
them and bid them sit. Each row of soldiers
acquiesced

to her, unrolling their blankets, they became
expectant

Her mouth squalled. A disturbance of clouds
marched

behind her teeth and the men became drenched
by her

technology. It was what they would clothe

themselves

in as they rocketed off to battle, each saber held aloft

After the Siege by C. W Stevenson

Garren woke in his chambers, confused, tired, still in his armor, and stinking like a latrine after three days of being covered in blood, mud, and sweat. He'd been drifting between waking and sleep for gods knows how long. The filth covered him from head to toe, and the pain in his forehead wasn't helping him regain his senses. Slowly, he lifted a hand to the wound above his left brow.

The bleeding had stopped, but the skin around it was so swollen he imagined he looked closer to some horned devil than man.

"Tarraaa," he groaned.

No response. Perhaps she'd died in the fighting. A score of others he'd called friend had.

But then that's a siege, Garren thought. It'd been his first. The siege had been sleepless days and nights, filled with a constant storm of rock, fire, and arrows raining down from the sky. He'd watched powerlessly as his comrades died in agony.

Beon had taken a stray arrow to the neck, had bled out at his feet gurgling gibberish. Hugh had fallen over the battlements as one of the assailants pulled him over the side, never to be seen again. There'd be no surviving a drop from that height and living to tell the tale. Lastly, before fading to black, Garren had watched Rodgry, the castellan's son, scream as his skin burst aflame from mage fire.

Garren sighed.

Closed off from the outside world, and completely surrounded, all of those within the walls of Long Barrow would be eating rats within the week. The fire would have driven them out by now though. He'd seen the abysmal food stores before the siege had begun. It was a wonder some of the men weren't roasting the non-spoiled bits of Long Barrow's fallen.

"Tarra!" he cried hoarse, calling her name so loud that it might wake her from the dead—if in-



Lady of the Lake by Angela K. Scott

deed she was. Then, to Garren's great relief, her face suddenly appeared in the doorway, caked in dirt, but mostly charred black from the smoke.

Tarra limped toward him, using the butt of a long ax to ease her steps. She smiled down at him.

"You're awake," she said. Grabbing a washcloth from a small table beside his bed, she soaked it in a bowl and dabbed softly at his wound. "You fought bravely."

"What of the castle?"

"Long Barrow remains. The castle will stand a few more hours at the very least."

Confused, Garren asked, "A few more hours?"

"Aye," said Tarra. "Your uncle has sent a messenger from the keep to seek out Umathor in his siege camp. He wishes to parlay."

"Fucker," Garren muttered, then took a mug filled to the brim with wine. "Is there no water?"

"Not unless you want what's left in this bowl,

but alas, I fear it might be more blood than water.”

Shrugging, Garren chugged down the contents of the mug and wiped his face with the cold metal of a chainmail sleeve. Outside the chamber window, Garren spied a few strands of pink and red as fumes of smoke rose gently skyward from below the keep. Garren found it a miracle he hadn't woken half-roasted.

Tarra dabbed the rag against his head again.

“A malice?” she asked.

Thinking, Garren wasn't sure what weapon the soldier had struck his helm with. All he could remember was the man falling from the ladder he'd climbed to reach the battlements with Garren's sword stuck through his chest.

“Aye,” he said anyways. “What happened to your leg?”

“A mage is what fucking happened. A mercenary from Jarmanna by the looks. Forced a blast that knocked me from the ramparts and flat on my ass onto the stable roof.”

“Haven't seen me a mage in a decade. Wonder what they cost him?” he was referring to Umathor of course. The son of some bastard prince with no claim to a throneless kingdom, which Garren thought would make it no kingdom after all. Nonetheless the common folk called it the Kingdom of Lucetor.

They had squired together in Patraea in their youth, had received the same training at arms, and hunted together—after beast and ladies alike. He'd once called him friend. But that was Umathor the boy, not the man. Umathor the man was currently beyond the walls of his kin, with a large enough host behind him to siege a castle three times the size of Long Barrow.

Tarra shook her head. “Whatever the cost, there's more coin to buy more. His father, sick as he may be, has enough gold sacked from his conquests to fund a proper army. Even as you slept, more banners flocked to the camp.”

Garren had seen it himself.

For weeks, he'd watched from atop Long Barrow's walls as fresh soldiers marched from each and every path leading into Umathor's camp. Wild looking men came with axes and bows from the vast spread of woodland beyond the moors. Peas-

ants in rags bearing shovels and pitchforks came from small villages looking for the chance to come away with plunder. Soldiers in chainmail and plated armor came on foot, some mounted on warhorses holding great lances, all led by some lord in service to Umathor's father, all just as eager to earn a place of honor in his growing force.

“And so, you agree my uncle has no choice but to surrender?” Garren asked, his words coming out more as a thought than a question. Besides, he knew her logic, and it was always sound. But to abandon his home to those who would crumble its ancient walls to the ground was not a choice. He'd decided he would fight until the next malice splintered his skull to pieces. As his uncle's right hand, he'd overseen the defenses of Long Barrow.

Thrice, they'd pushed the enemy back across the river to lick their wounds, but Garren knew that another frontal assault would be their end. Strong as the walls of Long Barrow may be, the number of fighting men, amount of food, water, and overall fighting spirit would dwindle into nothing soon enough. Long Barrow might as well have been their coffin.

“It is an option,” she said. Tarra was a warrior, and he knew she had no wish to lay down their arms. But a mage blast had shaken her to reason. To witness such power would make any warrior, man or woman, question exactly if what they were fighting for was worth their very lives and those within the castle.

“I will speak with him.”

“You need rest, Garren. Argoth says tha—”

“Argoth? He looks after the horses! Where is the surgeon?”

“The mage that forced me onto the stables caught the infirmary on fire. The wounded...” She paused long enough to think of what she wanted to say, despite not wanting to say it. “All burned—dead, along with the surgeon. Argoth is as close to a surgeon we possess.”

So that was the smoke, Garren surmised.

He thought he'd smelt the faint scent of roasted meat that morning. It churned his empty stomach to think it'd been the blackened bodies of their wounded.

For a long moment, they both remained silent.

People they'd known their entire lives gone in a few agonizing seconds. But, Garren thought, such was war. It was the very whore of death; for as many corpses war sought to take to the ground, its bed, it would never be enough.

Using what little strength he had, Garren pulled himself up so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed. Then, using Tarra's shoulder, they hoisted him upward.

He looked into Tarra's large hazel eyes—perhaps what could be considered her only beautiful feature, and stared into them intently, sad and tired as they were.

He then told her, "Take me to Arik."

#

"Lord Sarus, your nephew is here, he has come along with the lady Tarra Morra," the steward announced. He bowed as they entered the great hall.

Tarra nodded to the steward, a wiry man in his middle age, with still enough sinew to wield a hefty sword. "Sir Armund," and then turned to Arik Sarus. She bowed a man's bow rather than a lady's curtsy, a gesture Garren thought correct as she wore the garb of a warrior, and wore it well. "Lord Sarus."

"Captain now, aren't you?" Arik asked.

"The late captain passed along his title to me before his demise, yes."

"Then," Arik began, lowering his head in reverence in his seat beside the flaming hearth. "I shall honor his dying wish as well. I congratulate you."

Garren walked to the chair across from his uncle and sat, acknowledging neither Sir Armund and Arik.

"Garren. Sir Armund needed not to have announced you. I find I now have the nose of a hound. I caught your scent far before you walked from your chambers and into my hall."

"They say," Garren began, "a blind man's other senses tend to heighten as time goes on."

Arik laughed, allowing his toothless mouth to greet all present.

Garren found his uncle's breath foul with sour wine. Never had he known the man to be an admirer of drunkenness. He found his uncle's state rather curious.

Preparing, thought Garren.

But what for? Garren hardly had to guess.

"All too true!" Arik announced, then he reached for a pitcher. "Come nephew, drink. A toast before our family's shameful demise!"

"Must it be?" Garren asked.

The white of Arik's eyes glared at the wall beyond Garren. "Must it?" Arik repeated. "Do you possess some magic weapon? Is there some ally with a mighty host nearby to relieve us?"

"Umathor's father is as good as dead. He sits in Horizon on his deathbed. It's only a matter of time before he lies beneath the ground, and Umathor becomes king."

"Are you going to make me ask what you ramble about, boy?" Arik asked, and he gulped down more wine from the pitcher.

"Send me, uncle. Send me to parlay with him. I will remove his head from his shoulders and end this folly. The death of your men will had been for something. You would send his host home, leaderless, and without cause. They would be forced to."

More laughter erupted as Arik drunkenly misplaced the pitcher. Pieces of clay shattered across the stone floor as the last ounces of wine seeped into the cracks. Armund moved to clean the mess, but Arik stopped him.

"Leave it." Arik ordered, and his wandering white eyes went to Garren's breastplate. "If your attempt should fail, you would doom everyone, the women, the children, our remaining defenders, and yourself." Silence. "No. I will not send you. You play the hero when you fit the role as jester far better. That wound on your head has slowed your mind, I fear. Truly, you are your father's son. Just... slower of mind."

Garren stood quicker than he'd thought he could as his anger overcame the limitations of his injured body. His head was throbbing something fierce, but he was starting to guess it was due to his uncle rather than the malice. Looking down at the old man, he gazed with daggers in his eyes and a heart full of snakes.

"Bastard!" he growled. It was all he could think of saying.

"Incorrect. Your father was the bastard. Had it been a noble mother we shared than a noble father,

your father would've been a skeleton in a ditch somewhere, and you," he said pointing a finger where he imagined his nephew to be, "You... would have never existed. And I would be without an heir."

"An heir to what?" asked Garren, his voice filling the great hall. "Heir to a ruin? Heir to nothing if you surrender this castle!"

Arik only smiled, that smug, toothless grin Garren had endured for so long.

"Sir Armund!" Arik voiced out. "Ready my horse, then return to don my armor."

"Yes, my lord," and Armund turned to leave. "And captain?"

Tarra stood to attention. "My lord," she answered, but her eyes met Garren's.

"Alert the men to their battle stations. Then accompany myself, Sir Armund, and my nephew to the bridge."

Then, Garren Sarus, heir to Long Barrow, shook his head. He looked to Tarra, and then into the dancing flames of the hearth. There in the fire, Garren swore he could see all of their futures at once. Short futures if the flames told true.

"And captain?" Arik beckoned once more. "Bring a white flag."

#

Prince Umathor Damaris sat in the quiet solace of his pavilion; his thoughts filled with the next task. There were so many. After Long Barrow, there were another four keeps in their path whose lords had refused his father's claim as King of Lucetor.

Four. He spat onto the rug, narrowly missing a riding boot from being covered in saliva. As long as the lords kept resisting, his task would cost more than a fortune in gold and silver; the lives of his soldiers for one. Not to mention a steady supply of troops and supplies. Already his men looked restless enough to storm the castle without his say-so. Then what good would it be being a prince, or future king at that?

Umathor looked down at his sword, sheathed in its golden scabbard hanging by his hip. When was the last time he'd used a sword? He couldn't remember. But then that's what the soldiers were for. He would inspire the masses through policy

rather than brute force. The people would come to know him for the man he thought himself.

A good man, he hoped.

Others would disagree. The men, women, and children inside Long Barrow would disagree. He wondered how many of Long Barrow's sons and daughters had perished in the flames, or in the barrage of arrows he'd sent down upon them daily. He thought of the old, blind lord Arik Sarus, sitting in his castle and what he thought to accomplish by resisting.

Senseless.

He'd said as much in the letter to his ill father, the king.

Then, he thought of his old friend, Garren Sarus. If he still lived within those crumbling walls, he wondered what Garren thought of him now.

A monster no doubt, hellbent on absolute domination.

Or perhaps he'd be understanding. After all, war was only a means to accomplish something one couldn't accomplish with words. It was apparent now through weeks of campaign that more could be accomplished at the point of a sword than words ever could. All that mattered was who lived at the end of the day.

Suddenly, the flap of Umathor's tent flung outward and in walked the captain of his guard. The man stood at attention. "My prince, the enemy has left their gates bearing a white flag."

"Well," Umathor began, "their messenger spoke truth! Tell me, does Garren Sarus accompany his uncle?"

"He does, my prince."

So, he lives.

"Excellent," Umathor said. Dismissing the captain of his guard, he waited for the man to leave the pavilion before removing the sword from its glimmering scabbard.

The captain of his guard bowed, then backed away until he was out of the pavilion. Umathor unsheathed his sword. The metal rang as he pulled it free, humming a familiar tune in the prince's ears.

He ran his fingers across the cold steel, feeling its smoothness, then picked at the gemstones adorning the hilt. A beautiful weapon, there was

no denying it, but one parry and the blade would likely shatter.

“A sword for a king,” Umathor Damaris muttered sadly to himself.

#

As the morning brightened, Umathor rode forth with a small retinue of bannermen. Three to be exact, to match the four who rode from the gates of Long Barrow. They stopped a few dozen yards short of the bridge that separated each party. Catching a glimpse at Garren, Umathor waved an armored hand at his old companion.

Garren did not return the gesture, but there was no surprise there. After all, Umathor was taking away his home, and the lord of the castle would be put to the sword, along with its commanders. But as prince, Umathor would make clear Garren had a choice; serve his father as a loyal vassal or die a traitor to the crown. At the nonce, traitors were drawn, hung, and quartered. It was a death he wished upon no man, especially on Garren. But, also as prince, he would have no choice but to see the execution carried out if Garren refused his father’s mercy. The old man though, Lord Arik, he would gladly see hanging from the ramparts, his guts spilling out just enough to swing with a strong breeze. If Garren had been lord to begin with, Umathor had no doubt they could have worked out a truce.

Stubborn old man.

Umathor would see him dead by dusk, or he was no prince.

#

“What is happening?” Arik asked his steward.

Sir Armund glared past the morning sun rays. “The prince is waving.” And he looked toward Garren. “At your nephew, so it seems.”

“Ah,” said Arik. “Friends after so many years, so touching. I might shed a tear.”

“He is no friend of mine,” snapped Garren.

Arik patted his nephew’s back, the rings on his right hand clattering against his heir’s armor as he did so. “That’s good, that’s good. So many friends have turned into enemies in my time that I forget how they started out as friends in the first place. Allegiances are a tricky thing in my experience.”

Garren only grunted. He was sick of this blind

coward’s tongue. Looking across the field, and past the bridge at Umathor, he wondered if this might be the last morning he’d see alive. If the castle was surrendered, then all who he rode with now would be executed. Most assuredly his uncle, himself, Sir Armund, and Tarra—the newly appointed captain. Looking toward the walls, he imagined their corpses swinging high from that old dark stone. The crows would have plenty to gorge themselves on with this bunch... not that they already hadn’t been.

“Please my lord,” Garren said, attempting a more respectful approach this time around. “Let me speak with him. It will be better for all under your protection that the prince dies. Umathor will expect his killing blow to come from me the least.”

Turning his head to the heavens, as if he were looking to the gods for the words, Arik answered his heir with a long fart and laughed until a coughing fit stopped him. Then, catching his breath, Arik met the head of Garren’s horse with his blind eyes and told him, “When you are lord, you’ll know your place, boy. Now cease your begging like some commoner and hold fast.” He smiled then. “This will all be over soon.”

Sir Armund waited to pat the back of the great warhorse Lord Arik sat upon until he saw Umathor riding toward the bridge.

“Don’t,” Arik commanded. “I can hear our enemy’s steed.” Without a further word, he spurred his horse forward with a strong kick. “Yahh!”

Arik didn’t make it fifty yards before his horse was riding in the wrong direction of the bridge. Garren gestured for the poor Sir Armund to ride after him.

Men laughed mercilessly from the enemy camp at the old, blind lord making a mockery of himself and his kin as he splashed along the bank of the river. Garren could even spot the prince sporting a small grin, but to his credit, he sat patiently. Sitting tall in the saddle, with his long red hair flowing in a light breeze, garbed in the finest armor Garren might have ever seen, Umathor Damaris looked every bit a king.

No more was there a trace of the boy he’d once squired with. What he saw now was a man on a mission, one that was too important to let old

friendships stop him. Garren then found that a part of himself wished he sat beside the prince, wrought in armor of his own, forged by only the most masterful of smiths. But such wishing was fatuity. Besides, it was more likely his life would be over soon. Yet another corpse, forgotten in time as the worms would wriggle through his guts, eating everything he once was or would be. And what is that? he wondered. Heir to a man he despised. Garren fought the urge to flee from the shame of it all. Honor though—what little he had—kept him still.

While Sir Armund grabbed the reins, Garren looked on painfully as the faithful steward guided Arik's warhorse to the end of the bridge before Arik's hands swatted him away.

Galloping back, Sir Armund said nothing as he approached Garren and Tarra. Instead, he turned back around to watch the exchange, one that could determine their very lives.

#

"Arik White Eyes," said Umathor. "Not so much the horseman in your old age, are you?"

But it was no question.

"Prince... Damaris," Arik said without so much as a nod. He then pulled his horse alongside Umathor's own. "Neither was my father. Perhaps my nephew mentioned his grandfather and his unfortunate demise."

Umathor pursed his lips, wondering what Arik was playing at. "He fell. I heard tale of it."

"Aye," said Arik Sarus, and he grinned wide. "He fell. Broke his neck riding across these lands. Right over there as a matter of fact." He pointed past the bridge.

"Fascinating," said Umathor, bored of the history lesson. "But I cannot find how this relates to your predicament. Your messenger sent word of your wish to parlay. So," and Umathor relaxed his body in the saddle so that he was slouched forward. "Let us discuss the terms of surrender."

"You didn't hear me, prince."

Tilting his head, Umathor looked around, as if someone was going to send an arrow his way. "I have indeed. I have heard every word. Now," he chuckled. "The surrend—"

"Perhaps!" interjected Arik, and somewhat

loudly. "Your cripple is your hearing, as my own is my sight! Had you heard me, then you might have heard how you die..."

Umathor furrowed his brow. He was tired of this old man's nonsense. Placing his hand against the ridiculous golden scabbard, he did so loud enough for the old man to hear the steel click inside. "Oh?" he said quietly, almost a whisper between friends. "And how is tha—"

Interrupted again, Umathor's eyes went wide as the old man's dagger thrust outward. His horse whinnied, fearful at the sudden movement, and he tried to bend himself backwards to dodge but the armor covering his feet held fast in the stirrup.

"No!" he cried unmanfully.

But it was far too late.

As soon as the word escaped his throat, the dagger had embedded itself there. He coughed blood from his lips, coming out in such a thin spray that it shot out as a soft mist. Umathor grabbed his throat in a panic and began to cry tears as he tapped the hilt sticking from his neck. He would've screamed for help had he been able. A surgeon, or hells, anyone. But he found he was unable to utter a sound other than his own gurgling.

Falling from his horse, he was unaware that the old man had fallen from his own, only coming to realize it as Arik dragged himself on top of him. The wood of the bridge vibrated as hooves rumbled towards them, but Umathor knew it was too late for a savior.

Arik took hold of the dagger protruding from the prince's throat. And he stared down where he thought his eyes might be. "Surrender... my... castle?" And with that, Arik Sarus sliced the prince one way, tearing across the left part of his neck, and then, the right. Blood flowed like the river they lay across.

#

Garren and his companions had charged in unison the moment the prince and his uncle had fallen.

Freeing a hand from the reins, Garren slid free the length of his sword. Ahead he could see his uncle wiggling about on top of the prince, stabbing wildly at the prince's face. And to think only a moment ago it had belonged to the single most de-

sired bachelor in Lucetor.

Garren peered down, equally with fascination and horror at the withered old cripple who'd just murdered one of his oldest friends. Breathing heavy with adrenaline, Arik rolled off of the prince's carcass and thudded against the hard wood of the bridge.

"What have you done?" Garren asked.

It was a strange question, when he himself had suggested the prince should die in the first place. He'd just thought it ought to have been by his own hand. After all, there was some small comfort knowing a friend was near in the event of one's death, even if it was by that friend's hand.

Glaring, daggers back in his vision, Garren studied the pathetic cripple. He wanted to say something more; curse him for being a murderer, a trickster, Long Barrow's savior.

"We must flee!" Sir Armund yelled. But it was too late.

The enemy had begun to charge. In seconds they'd be on the bridge, and Garren and his companions would be captured, tortured, and their bodies tossed into the strong currents of the river.

"Go on," said Arik. "Do it." Grunting to his knees, the old lord presented Garren with his neck.

The sword came down without a second thought. It was the only choice. Hacking through the meat and bone of his own kin, the head of Arik Sarus rolled along the bridge until it came to a halt, stopping at the hooves of an armor-clad warrior's horse.

A silent breeze then awkwardly greeted them all, but with weapons raised, and tensions high, no one dared move an inch.

"Take him to your master," Garren said. "The traitor known as Arik Sarus has been executed for the death of the royal prince."

Wielding a lance, the soldier stuck its end into the head of Garren's uncle, whose eyes still gazed outward at nothing. White and lifeless, just as they'd been for decades.

Sir Armund looked ready to run the man through with his own sword, or maybe Garren. Instead, he sheathed his blade.

"Lord Sarus," said Sir Armund. "Shall we accompany you back to the keep?"

"Aye, immediately." A good idea, seeming as

the enemy they'd fought for days now stood but a few dozen yards away. Their glares pierced Garren stronger than any blade could. Looking down at his sword, his uncle's blood dripped almost rhythmically onto the bridge. He imagined he'd see that image for some time to come, in his dreams, or maybe nightmares.

"And your uncle's body?" Tarra asked. But there was no emotion in her tone. No understanding, no remorse. Would Tarra blame him for what he'd done? Garren would if he were her.

She'd pledged her service to Arik Sarus, and here he was before her, headless, while his killer held the bloody sword that slew him.

Garren sighed. Not all friends were lost through blood loss, he supposed.

Garren was about to speak when the soldier in possession of his uncle's head attached to the end of his lance spoke. "His body now belongs to the king. You'll find his head in Horizon should you ever wish to speak face to face again."

Garren nodded. "Do with it what you will. Long Barrow now belongs to his majesty."

While he lives.

If the rumors were true, it would not be for long.

#

For the next few days, Garren observed from atop the balcony connected to the lord's chambers—which he had taken for his own—as the gates of Long Barrow opened to not just the men the defender's had fought so willfully to keep out, but also healers, surgeons, and supply wagons full of grain, barrels of ale, smoked fish and the like. Garren frowned as a boy snatched an apple from a young woman's hand, but the woman's hand was quickly filled as a man from one of the wagons held out another. She took it gracefully and breathed in its sweet odor before taking a bite.

Smoke still filled the air in and around Long Barrow, though it had subsided somewhat. At least now he could see past the moors and to the edge of the heavily wooded forest beyond the Lord of Long Barrow's borders.

My borders. My land, Garren thought oddly enough.

The party of long-haired men who'd come wielding axes walked in single file across the

moors, and Garren thought, when this was all over, he'd hunt them down, every single one, and drag them from their miserable homes made up of mud and sticks. Then, he'd hang them from the very trees they lived amongst as they'd cry out in fear for mercy.

Garren smiled at the thought.

"Something funny?"

It was Tarra. She'd come wrapped in nothing but the bed sheets and furs she'd cocooned herself in the night before. Never had he bedded her, not before the siege, but in a cold, lonely tower sitting far above the corpses of friends, family, blood and smoke, it was an easy enough distraction from the harsh realities they faced.

"Mmm, something," he said distantly, then continued to look out across his land.

Behind him, he could feel Tarra's warmth as she melted into his back, wrapping her fingers hard with the calluses of sword play around his chest.

She spoke into his ear. "You killed him to further your uncle's sacrifice. You both saved everyone in this castle."

The people here won't remember it that way, Garren wanted to say, but instead took a different route.

"You're probably right. But the blood of my uncle will not dry so quickly." He hadn't been the cripple's son, adoptive son, or anything close to it, but the old man had made Garren his heir. They were blood, and Garren had removed his head. There was a sorrow he couldn't explain, but it was there, sure enough.

As if feeling his pain, Tarra clutched him tighter. "Let your grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day," she said, reciting some bard Garren thought he'd heard before in Long Barrow's great hall.

"Did you wish to bury him?" Tarra asked.

"I would have much rather buried Umathor than my uncle. The prince was a true warrior."

"Then how is it he was killed by a blind man wielding only a dagger?" asked Tarra.

Spinning around so that their eyes met, Garren told her, "My uncle had always meant for the negotiation to be an assassination. He saved us." Garren shook his head. "I could have at least du-

eled the prince and gotten the same results."

"But then your uncle would still be here, in this room, and you, dead, or serving the man who despised your very existence, only using you to further a bloodline. Umathor Damaris's life was at risk the day his father began calling himself king. Now they're all dead."

"What?" Garren asked, astonished at what he'd just heard. "The king... dead?"

"A messenger arrived in the night. The king died in Horizon a day before Umathor and your uncle, as the siege raged on. Perhaps it was the very moment the malice knocked you unconscious, or perhaps the moment the mage sent the blast that sent me flying. What matters is you are alive, and they are not. The rest is dung in a ditch."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Smiling, she stroked the bandage covering his head with a few gentle fingers. "You were tired, and there was much on your mind. I assure you, the king is just as dead as he was the night before."

"Dead," Garren muttered. He couldn't believe it. It all seemed too unreal.

"And soon, there will be a new king," and she nudged him playfully.

"There's always some fool who thinks every knee should bow each time they get up to take a piss."

"That's not you?" she asked him.

"I'd rather be the piss."

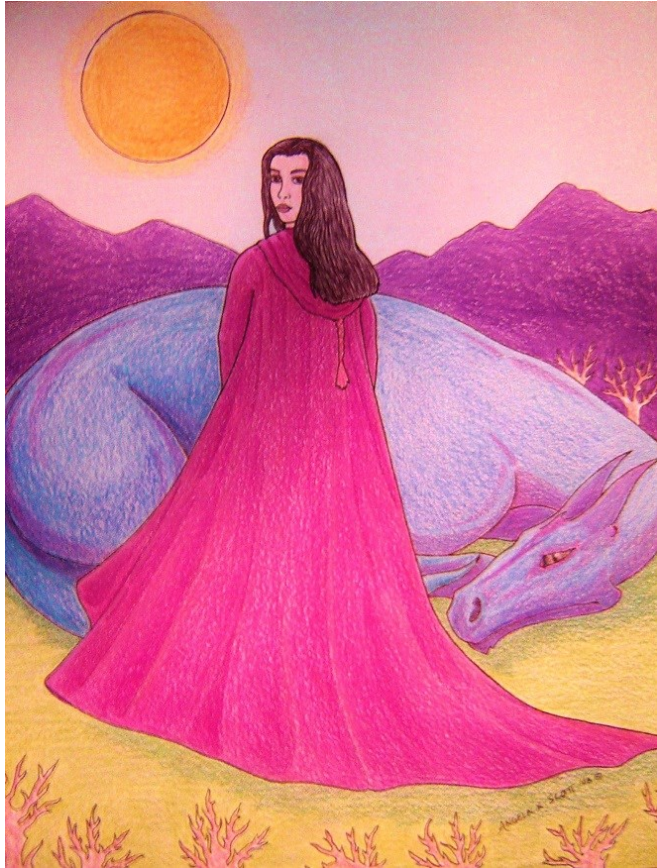
Tarra nodded at the bad joke, understanding as always, and looked out across the moors. She spotted the two-dozen or so warriors marching toward the forests beyond their land, the same men who'd arrived late to the siege of Long Barrow, when its destruction had been imminent.

"Do we have enough men?" she asked. Tarra knew exactly now what Garren had been thinking.

"We will if we pay some of the mercenaries. My uncle kept more gold than grain in this castle."

Smiling once more, Tarra turned to leave, the sheets dragging behind her, leaving Garren standing there on the balcony alone with his thoughts. Looking out into the early morning mist, across the rubble and small wisps of smoke from the siege, far out across his land at the men he was preparing to massacre, Garren laughed, sounding exactly the

same as Arik Sarus.



Lady Dragon by Angela K. Scott