

FANTASY UNBOUND



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A Scribe Cat Anthology

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When I was young, fantastical stories whisked me away when I was trapped indoors by rain or snow. They lulled me into pleasant dreams when I woke from nightmares. Fantasy stories also saved my life. They gave me hope that what may seem insurmountable could be overcome. They kept me company when I was lonely. They granted me sanctuary when I needed an escape.

I remember being told to read other books—books that would *teach* me something, people would say, books that were *worth* something.

I'd try—and I do enjoy other genres—but I always come back to fantasy. I *did* learn from fantasy stories: I learned about bravery, honesty, and friendship; I learned to be curious and not to dismiss any idea too quickly; and I learned to take a moment to myself, get lost, wander for awhile, then re-center, so I was all the better moving forward.

Fantasy stories are worth a great deal to me. They always, one way or another, brought a little magic into my life. Nowadays, despite the naysayers, fantasy has flourished in every subgenre from high fantasy to urban fantasy and everything in between. Now, we have more worlds to explore and new magic to learn. In these pages, you'll find a new world in every story.

What fate awaits a unicorn hunter when he dares to enter the beast's domain?

How can a king decide the ownership of a precious object found by two of his subjects?

Can a necromancer be the hero a little girl needs?

Will a Chosen Hero avoid their fated end?

Why would a child not remember their summer beach home fondly?

Whether you read fantasy to escape, to relax, to learn (or just on a whim), you'll find some kind of magic in *Fantasy Unbound*.

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The 350-Word Challenge

Within this anthology, you'll see stories labelled "350-Word Challenge."

They're exactly as they sound: The author wrote a story that is exactly 350 words—or as close to that word count as possible. This challenge flexes writing muscles, not just to adhere to a word count, but in telling a compelling tale as succinctly and clearly as possible. Flash fiction is also a great way to give readers a taste of an author's writing style.

Each author has contributed at least one 350-word story.

Shop at the Top of the World

A Core Lands Tale by Ian Gough

“It seemed a good idea at the time,” said Reft.

“What, opening a shop in a cave halfway up a mountain? When was that ever a good idea?” Alaria asked, accompanied by that I-told-you-so look.

Reft took offence. In the village, he was one of the top-three entrepreneurs. A tame boast considering its population totalled eighteen, and a youngling selling homemade turnip juice was number one.

“I thought with the shrine, pilgrims would pass and stop for a drink, a bite to eat, or a souvenir.”

“I doubt replicas of Henrash, Lord of Ill Omens, will prove popular among pilgrims.”

“So, you think I’ve made a mistake?”

“I think investing every coin in a shop halfway up a mountain, in an unwelcoming cave may have been a tad overzealous, yes.”

They failed to notice the arrival of a potential customer. Strange considering the arrival was seven feet tall, rippled with muscles, and possessed the head of a rather mean-looking bull.

“You open?”

Both took cover, heads poking out from beneath their makeshift counter.

The minotaur snorted with disgust. In its left hand, it brandished a dual-headed axe, while in its right it gripped the leg of a body, dragged through the snow.

“C...can I help you?” Reft doubted.

“How much is a statue?”

“Three silver pieces.”

“Bit expensive,” the minotaur leaned closer, horns close to Reft’s face.

“They’re the finest quality, plus I must account for transportation costs,” he gulped.

“Suppose.”

The minotaur lifted the decapitated body by its leg, rummaged through the pockets, until it found a coin purse.

“He—I mean, I got two silver, that enough?”

Alaria looked to Reft, transparent fear seeping from her wide eyes, pleading for her colleague to accept.

“Deal.”

“Good.”

Transaction complete, the minotaur turned to leave then paused.
“You have meat?”

Reft felt Alaria's grip tighten upon his leg.

"I've fresh lamb, if you'd like a sandwich?"

"Not me. Orcs coming, they pay well for meat."

More coin, wonderful! Perhaps the business would be a success after all.

"Thanks! Have a nice day!"

* The full version of this story can be found in *The Ballad of Hubert Wells* by Ian Gough.

The Road

by **A. R. Lachance**

“Oh, Great Chosen One...”

I had never wanted to be the Chosen One.

But then I guess they'd call it the Volunteered One if people wanted the title.

“...the ninth child of two ninth children...”

My mother and father themselves born of ninth children...our family's a bit prolific. Born in the twinkling hours before dawn of the ninth day of the ninth month, by the light of a waning gibbous moon, I was destined to be the Chosen One.

A rather peculiar set of coincidental achievements really.

“...Wielder of the Sword of Truth, blessed by the Goddess Elliya...”

The sword is a little too ornate for my tastes.

“...gifted with the Armour of Bellu...”

And the armour a bit too stiff, but I could settle with these small irritations.

“...slayer of the Ashen Hordes...”

The hours. The hours are a bit obnoxious.

“...liberator of the dwarven strongholds...”

It's why I'm sitting here, roused from very pleasant dreams, listening to a list of boorish and useless titles.

“...defender of the Golden Woods and the Elf Queen Erisadae...”

Oh yeah! I forgot about that...that was a fun weekend.

“...though you have yet to cross *The Road*...”

There it is. *The Road*. Everyone says it with such gravitas. Despite all my adventures, despite everything I’ve done for the Nine Kingdoms, everyone’s still sour about the fact that I haven’t travelled *The Road*.

The Chosen One isn’t really blessed until they take the journey down *The Road* to whatever fate awaits them.

See, no one knows what’s at the end of *The Road*.

No Chosen has ever returned.

So, you can understand why I’m less than eager to take the journey of my birthright.

“...we humbly ask you...”

Finally.

“...to rid us of the banshee queen...”

Again?

The trek up to the Nine Towers of Navanende is relatively painless. I’ve finally broken in my new saddle and Nimble—my horse—has calmed down some; he was quite the little spitfire when I got him.

It turns out some poor initiate—named Wilburr—unleashed the banshee from its holding spell. Banshees are born from fragments of someone’s soul.

“Likely her despair at leaving you, young Wilburr,” I confidently told the lad.

Secretly, I thought it was likely her despair at naming her child Wilburr. Honestly, you might as well paint the kid's future as a permanent mage-squire, living out his days at the behest of his master.

Comparatively, my parents named me Ulfhilde. Had I not been the ninth, I'm sure I would have joined the Legion.

The banshee was easily corralled and captured—using Wilburr as the lure—and I was looking forward to heading straight back home after spending the rest of the night in the best room the Nine Towers had to offer.

In the morning, the Head Mage informs me that the Monarchs have summoned me. Nimble's already groomed and ready for me. Wilburr gives me a hurried and, I expect, forced thank you.

It's a short trek from the Towers to the first gate, but I take my time, not pushing Nimble beyond a lazy lope and walking through the more scenic parts.

The capital city of Navanende is the crowning glory of all nine continents. A massive city of unequal beauty surrounded—separated—by nine walls. If the Towers don't impress you, this incredible, gleaming architecture might...or the Legion.

Every member of the Legion—in order to be named in the ranks—has bonded with one of the nine majestic beasts. The front guard is a rotating contingency of unicorn riders who stand quietly at attention from the first wall to the second. The dragon riders perch on the peaks of the walls.

The outer rings of Navanende are alternating areas of farmlands and factories leaving the inner three rings free for the people, their entertainment, and, finally, the Monarchs.

Here, the gryphon riders escort me the rest of the way. They are the elite Legion, their faces masked by ornate helmets, and they stop just outside the inner sanctum.

I dismount, trusting Nimble to the handmaidens who approach, while two more escort me beyond the doors to the throne room.

The Monarchs are poorly named—there's more than one and, by that virtue, they are not the sole ruler the word "monarch" might suggest—but that's the name they've been called for centuries.

The nine Monarchs watch me with emotionless faces. Each sit on a throne. Each was born and raised for this position.

"We are grateful for your service, Chosen One Ulfhilde, you have done so much for the nine continents," One begins.

"Your name will be remembered in the Library with many volumes dedicated to your exploits," Two continues.

"Navanende will raise a statue in your honour." Three indicates to a map on the table not far from me.

"Care you to choose its location?" Four questions.

I know I can't ask why the honour, why now, but I have a sneaking suspicion. I move to the table and place the rudimentary wooden figure of me in the third ring's equestrian park.

I used to love riding there when the academy took me in, the day I turned nine.

"Excellent choice." Five gives the barest hint of a smile and nod.

“Now there is but one task left before you.” Six shifts just slightly forward.

“You must cross *The Road*.” Seven finishes.

There it is. I have to measure my words carefully. “Thank you, Your Majesties, for your kind words and tributes, but the Chosen One would be grateful to continue watching over the nine continents until the next Chosen One is born.”

“We waited over a century for you and you have been with us longer than any other Chosen One.” Eight sniffs.

“*The Road* is the only task left that you, and you alone, must accomplish.” Nine states everything matter-of-factly but with a heavy finality.

There’s nothing more for me here.

Navanende has never looked so grey to me.

Oh sure, they’ve dolled up the street with bright-coloured streamers and just about everybody is out in their best.

It’s eerily quiet. Not even a whisper from any of the children. Just wide, appreciative eyes.

When I start walking towards the gates, cheers and adulation erupts from the crowd.

Of course, I’ve heard them cheer for executions too.

The crowd throws multicoloured flowers and powders at my feet as I pass.

The whole of Navanende is splashed with every colour I can name. But it all looks grey to me.

In the opposite direction of the road I'd taken in to Navanende, I walk through all the rings. I don't think people even come this way; they seem so out of place standing alongside the path. Cheering, wishing me well, thanking me for my service.

Why does it feel like a funerary procession?

Before I know it, I'm standing in front of the last wall.

The cheers intensify from the hordes of people at my back.

Do I glance back?

The last gate is not one often opened. It groans unhappily at the effort.

And once the gate is closed, I am alone.

The cheers are quieted. The colours gone. And I am left alone facing *The Road*.

Unintentionally, I had closed my eyes. I take a deep breath before I open them again.

Huh...it's just a road. A wide dirt path through a wild meadow leading off into the horizon. I can see a forest up ahead.

I know if I turn around, show any more hesitation, I'm liable to be taken down for treason. I can hear the dragons of the Legion breathing and the light jingle of their armour as they shift position.

I start walking.

It's not as terrifying as I thought it would be. I still have my armour and my sword, should there be anything hungry for me. I keep a jaunty pace until the mist creeps in.

Midday mist?

It makes me pay attention to my surroundings a little more. Even as I approach the forest, there are no sounds here. No birds, no bugs, no...I sniff the air—How can I smell nothing?

I scratch at the first tree nearest *The Road*, peeling the bark and bringing the piece closer. It crumbles into dust.

I stare at my hand for a moment and eye the tree warily.

Unsheathing my sword, I take a swipe...and stagger forward when the tree collapses into fine dust.

Not sure what I expected there. Some resistance at least. I compose myself.

A few more trees. More piles of dust. And then I come across something else.

Armour. The Armour of Bellu, in fact. A bit bigger than my own, but the design, the emblems, are unmistakable.

No signs of any damage except some weathering and its set down with reverence, like I'd do at home after a long day.

Still...

I keep my sword at the ready but as the forest breaks up into another valley and my arms begin protesting the strain, I lower the weapon.

Nothing has come out to eat me...but I haven't seen anything to eat either.

I glance over my shoulder. I could turn back. Make my way around Navanende and into the wilds.

The moment I shift one foot backwards, however, my whole body is thrust forward. My reflex is to call on the Light, expecting some spirit,

but there's nothing. Another test lands me flat on my face...a few feet closer to my destination.

Forward it is then.

My mind wanders with my feet.

I remember the first time I travelled by sea. I had worried over being ill the whole trip—not ever finding my sea legs—and being the laughing stock of the Nine Kingdoms. Instead, I'd found the entire journey invigorating.

Of course, then I'd landed on the third continent, battled a horde of exploding slugs, and wished this whole Chosen One thing was a bad dream.

But it wasn't.

I'd earned my armour for cleansing the third continent. So much for the blessing of Bellu.

The Sword of Truth—forged for me by Aroghan, the great smith—was the first to be anointed by the Goddess Elliya...in person. I still can't quite describe what meeting a goddess was like. I remember it being very bright, warm.

A comfortable warmth—not like the fires of the seventh continent. I had braved those magma pits and steaming culverts to find the dwarven strongholds. I had joined their ranks to battle the demons in the deep—their generations-long war—and helped them claim victory. The trust and reputation I had forged lent me their aid in defending the Golden Woods of Elf Queen Erisadae.

I'd never see any of them again. My heart sank as my feet scraped along *The Road*. No more wild, elven parties or hearty, dwarven mead—a combination that was incredible to witness.

I shudder under the clear skies above. I will never help another soul. Not with this sword I'd adventured for the materials to make or the magic I'd painstakingly learned over the years.

Above everything I had lost, one pang hit me just a little harder: I'd never said goodbye to Nimble. He had been such a good horse.

I notice the stones appearing in place of some trees until the forest is long gone and only the pillars remain. Smooth and made of some dark blue stone, I've never seen anything like it. They almost lean in the direction *The Road* is taking me.

A small, creeping thought wonders if every Chosen One before me has simply wandered forward until they've starved. Although I haven't seen any bones or any more indication that anyone else has been this way.

My wandering imagination is interrupted by a pillar steadfastly seated before me.

The end of *The Road*.

Curiosity pulls me around the stone but is grossly disappointed.

There's nothing here.

Just a circle of the same stones that dotted the landscape.

I stand in the middle to ponder this madness. I stare at the stones as if they might suddenly become sentient and tell me some great truth.

“Well?” I huff. “Anything to say for yourselves?”

Not a peep.

No sounds, no smells, nothing living in this misty land beyond civilization.

Ow...and now an itch under my armour. Fabulous.

If you've never had to wiggle your way out of plate armour, it is no easy feat.

By the time I manage to untangle myself from the last piece, I'm itchy all over.

And then shadows.

Years of training have taught my muscles to grab my sword and I raise the blade to the first thing in sight...

Dragons!

Three of them, as mighty as any of the Legion but bereft of their riders. One curls its lips and I get a glimpse of those serrated teeth longer than my forearm.

Ow! That itch was more of a twinge. A sharp stab in my—OW!

The pain forces my arm to dip—and thus my sword—just long enough for one dragon to snap up my weapon.

It breaks like a toothpick. Inconsequential to these mythical beasts.

My concentration reels. The dragons just watch. Patient.

A shrill, monotonous whistle slices through my ears.

The itching turns to burning. My whole body is on fire. Little snaps of pain twist my body into unnatural shapes.

My eyesight blurs. Each breath is getting harder.

I can't...think...

...

....

The high-pitched whistle slowly fades away...

...

...

....

The burning sensation cools...

...

....

I blink the blurriness from my eyes and suddenly see almost all the way back to Navanende. I try to regain some measure of composure, at least get my arms under me.

AH!

I flex the talons now replacing my hands.

Another itch, augh...Reflexively, I bring my back leg around to scratch the back of my head.

I stare at this paw for a moment, hanging in midair, as if it might betray me.

Still itchy, I scratch furiously behind a head that feels feathered.

I try to rise on these new legs.

This proves more difficult than before with the added weight of massive wings.

I know this creature.

They parade in Navanende's inner rings. The Elite Gryphons of the Legion.

I try to scream and instead a bird's cry echoes beyond the stones.

Calm. The sound makes me jump and I realize I am not alone.

The three dragons are still here. I'm bigger now but not as big as them. My muscles tense, my wings tuck in close to my body.

Calm. The voice...the voice is in my head. There's a pleasant cooling sensation that follows.

How? The only word that comes to mind.

One dragon croons; the other two relax. *You are the ninth child of two ninth children. Born in the twinkling hours before dawn of the ninth day of the ninth month, by the light of a waning gibbous moon. You are chosen to undergo this change and bring magic back into this world as one of its majestic beasts.*

The first speaks again: *Your armour is now your own flesh. Your sword is now your own talons. Your magic weaves itself in your own blood.*

The last dragon stares deep into my eyes: *And now you know the truth of The Road.*

Shellstry

by Mae McKinnon

It's a funny, old life. It's been, what, seventy years, and I can still smell the salt of the ocean from that day. If I close my eyes, I can feel the chill of the breeze blowing in from the sea, the spray of watery foam on craggy rocks as we played on the beach, my brother and I. And Lucy.

It wasn't a big beach (in winter it'd drown under the waves) and it was flanked on both sides by these huge, craggy cliffs that bit into the land, jutting out into the water.

You had to go down one of those long, winding paths to get to it and we weren't allowed on it by ourselves. Of course, that just meant we went every chance we got. Like when Nanny Winters had been at Daddy's brandy. She wasn't supposed to be, but we never told 'cause when she did—usually after having, as she said “put up with the madness” on the second day of arriving—by the afternoon, we were able to run around the house to our hearts' content.

This included going to the beach, too, of course. Ah, yes. I was telling you about the beach, wasn't I? Don't get uppity with me. When you get to one hundred and three, your memory will get the best of you too.

Where was I? Oh yes, the beach. That day wasn't any different than

any other day, let me tell you. No big omen in the sky, only puffy clouds, the last remnants of the storm that had blown past the night before.

It had rattled the windows, the storm had. Old Mr. Andrews had had to go around the whole house closing the storm shutters, with his pipe sticking out and muttering under his breath. We weren't supposed to understand what he said when he started muttering, Mother always insisted. His language was what you would today call—ahem—colourful.

The thing about storms was that the beach always got real exciting. You'd wander down there afterward and who knew what you might find washed up. My brother and I spent lots of afternoons like that, hunting for pirate treasure among the driftwood and bits of ocean that the sea had thrown away.

That day, the sand was still damp after the night's rain, and not nearly as fun as usual to walk on. It sucked at our shoes with a kind of "gloop, glop" at every step. Chester lost a shoe to that when he strayed too close to the waves.

Lucy didn't care. She never did. She'd chase up and down that beach, Chester screaming whenever she hit a wave and sent splashes of icy water all over his legs.

Chester was my brother. Two years my senior, he was already tiring of what he had started to call "your childish games."

That day, I didn't care.

"Look, seashells," I shouted when we'd settled down a bit. To which Chester merely grumped something, sticking both hands in his short

pockets.

How Chester wasn't excited I'll never understand. They were magnificent shells. And the further up the cove we went, the brighter and sparklier they became.

They didn't disappoint when you got closer either, like they usually do. These ones, they got bigger and bigger the closer to the far cliff wall we came. By then, each shell was as big as I was and glistening as if they'd never left the sea.

The two biggest ones were broken. The entire tops were missing, leaving the bright white-and-red shells a real mess, not to mention full of seaweed. But the third was a magnificent collection of knobs and twists and spikes.

"Must have washed up last night," I said.

"S'pose."

"Come on. Think we can bring that one home?" I jumped up and down excitedly, pointing at the shell.

"No way!"

"Please."

"No."

"Please. Please. Please. Please!!"

"NO!" Chester growled, looking grumpier by the minute as I went to try and roll the shell over.

"Give me a hand. This is awfully heavy."

"Why?"

"I'll give you my wood spirit."

This was a big sacrifice. I knew Chester had coveted the hand-

carved stock for years—ever since Uncle Charlie had brought it home from one of his travels. But Uncle Charlie had given it to me. I don't think Chester ever forgave him for that. I loved that stock, but the shell was new and exciting, and, at the time, it seemed worth it.

Chester considered the offer, a frown between his eyes, and finally shrugged. "Fine."

"Why don't you get Lucy to help you roll that?" My brother looked around, eyes narrowing. "Where IS Lucy?"

This was when we both realized we hadn't heard Lucy for some time. We finally spotted her pacing up and down the beach, quite some distance away from us.

No matter how we coaxed her, she refused to get any closer to the far end of the cove. When my brother attempted to drag her over, her feet dug into the heavy sand and she tried to bite him.

That was the end of that. Lucy knew who was the boss, and it sure wasn't Chester. I always liked that about her. She never let anyone boss her around. Even Mum and Dad had to be on their best behaviour to get her to do something she didn't want to. Or bring chocolates, you know, those expensive pralines wrapped in glimmering sheets of green-and-gold wrapping paper promising flavours of heaven.

Lucy wasn't supposed to have chocolate...any chocolate. But tempt her with one of those and you could even give her a washing down—though she'd curl her lip at you the whole time.

I felt around in my pockets, but only a few empty wrappers came up. So much for that idea.

Chester and I, we rocked that seashell until, with a sucking sound,

we managed to tip it over on the side.

Out spilled salt water, and I do mean “salt” water. It didn’t smell too pretty either, but the underside of the shell was almost alive, like an iridescent fire opal.

The two of us jumped back when a long, mottled black set of tentacles shot out of the bottom of the shell.

They wriggled about on the sand, feeling up what was around them, then, with a mighty heave, the shell righted itself.

It didn’t have any eyes, but I swear it was looking at us, because it began crawling towards us. Little suckers appeared at the front, like a myriad of tiny, squishy legs.

“Run for it!” Chester shouted.

I didn’t need any encouragement. My legs were already pumping. If only we’d paid attention to “where” we ran, things might have ended very differently. But cold terror filled our veins and our feet did the thinking for us.

Sadly, feet don’t come too well equipped in the brains department.

Before we knew it, the shell had us cornered against the east cliffside.

“DO something!” I shouted at Chester—who’d gone pure white.

There was a piece of driftwood nearby. I tried to lunge after it, but the shell must have understood, somehow. It leapt onto the piece of wood. There was a series of squelches and crunches and when the shell backed away, the wood was nowhere in sight.

Did it eat it? I don’t know. But now parts of it were glowing. The red glow pulsed along invisible tracks on the shell’s surface. It was as if it

was taunting us, saying “I’ve got you now, make no mistake.”

Things stayed like that for a while. Occasionally, we’d try to make a dash to the right and the shell would come alive with activity, herding us back to where there was no escape but the cold waters churning over the rocks falling from the cliff behind us.

I don’t know what it was waiting for. By now, it was growing dark. We were tired, hungry, and more than a little afraid.

It might seem laughable to you that we were afraid. Something like a seashell, no matter what size, couldn’t possibly be scary, you might say. But let me tell you, it was.

I remember my legs getting colder and colder until they were numb all over. I wanted nothing more than to lay down and fall asleep. Right there. On the beach.

“Oight. Don’t do that!” Chester poked me hard in the ribs.

“Aren’t you sleepy?” I asked him, rubbing at my eyes and nose.

“Sure. But you really think laying down in front of that thing is a *good* idea?”

I had to give him that. It didn’t look like the friendly sort. The shell was now pulsating slowly. Waiting.

If we’d been fish and underwater, it might have been quite alluring. What do I know? But up there, on the beach, bodies shaking, the only word for it was *revolting*.

“Lucy! Hey! Lucy!” Chester suddenly shouted.

Lucy was back. I hadn’t even noticed that she’d gone. For a moment, hope lit up inside me. It didn’t last long. She was alone. So much for a rescue party.

Clearly still not keen on getting close to the shell, Lucy bared her teeth at it from a distance.

I don't know if she was trying to intimidate the shell—maybe it was so focused on us that it didn't even notice her—for when, after having strutted back and forth, she reached out and touched it, it didn't react.

Her expression said it all though.

When the shell started moving again, I put my hands on it too. That's when I understood why Lucy was looking so disgusted. It just *felt* wrong.

“Chester. Chester, come and help us!”

“Uh oh, no way!”

“Come on, Chester. We need you!”

“I'm not touching that!”

“Come on. We can't do this on our own,” I pleaded with my brother. “It's too strong.”

Indeed, the sucker tentacles gripped tightly to the sand. So tight that even with the three of us, it took pushing with all our might, rocking the shell back and forth. Little by little, we managed to push it back out towards the water.

It was a hard struggle, and, as we got close, I just didn't have any strength left. I fell.

The shell turned. I thought that was it. Just then, a wave, a tiny trickle of water at the very edge of a wave, brushed against our feet.

The shell wriggled and began to move on its own again. This time towards the ocean.

Wave after wave came and soon the tip of the shell disappeared

under the surface.

That was the end of that.

Chester never played with us again and Lucy, well, Lucy is the same as she's always been. She's older than either of us. But sometimes I catch her watching the ocean with *that* look in her eyes.

What if there're more of them out there? What if, one day, a legion of them crawl up a beach somewhere, at some innocent little cove or sea town?

We never dared tell anyone about it. Who'd have believed us? Dad would just have punished us for "telling stories."

But sometimes I wonder if it's out there...waiting.

What Do They Taste Like?

by Kris Hawley

“What do they taste like?”

“Hmm?”

“What do they taste like?”

“They taste a little different than anything I have ever had before.”

“Do they taste like elf?”

“No, no. Elf is lean and light like eating rabbits. You can starve eating rabbit; there’s no fat on them at all.”

“Then they are like orc?”

“No, not like orc at all. Orc is gristly and salty, very salty. It’s like eating swine. You would have to drink ten ponds and a lake to get the taste of them off your tongue. I would say...they are kind of like dwarf.”

“Dwarf?”

“Dwarf is small but has meat right to the bone from all the tunnelling they do day and night.”

“I don’t like dwarf.”

“Dwarves are a little tough to chew, and you have to spit out the armoured shells...”

“They’re gritty, and the beards make it feel like you have a hair in your mouth the whole day.”

“True.”

“Still, better than rubbery troll.”

“Troll always tasted like old mushrooms to me.”

“So how do you eat them? Cooked or raw?”

“It depends. The ones in the cold, north mountains have a lot of stringy clothing and furs on them. Best to burn them to a crispy, crackly crunch.”

“Sounds good.”

“Ah, but the ones in the warm, southern islands, they dress in nothing but leaves and flowers. You can eat them raw. You should eat them raw. They are tangier from all the colourful fruit they harvest.”

“Mmm, that would be something.”

“But the best part of a human, I find, is the head. It pops in your teeth and the flavour fills your mouth. It’s very good.”

“Yes, you’ve convinced me. Don’t say another word, you’ve already put a hunger in me. Let us be off.”

The young dragon and old dragon gathered themselves up and took wing, following greasy smoke trails across the sky, back to the chimneys that had loosed them on the breeze.

Nature's Blessings

by Elizabeth-Rose Best

Muddy boots met worn carpet with no apology. Their owners, two weary rangers in reds and browns, stumbled into the shop to escape the miserable deluge outside. They did not look the sort to buy the wares sold here; what use were antiques and knick-knacks to the roaming men of the wilds?

They took off their sodden coats and draped them on the hooks in the doorway. The stormwater dripped out of the heavy fabric and onto the floor, seeping away.

I felt a roll of disapproval rumble up my throat. From my position atop a bookcase I watched them, keeping my eyes on their fidgeting hands and flitting eyes. We saw thieves often enough, each one hoping to snatch some poorly monitored prize.

But we here are not so foolish.

My family watched from high places and dark corners, unseen. Nine of us watched the shop, nine roamed the markets for more items, and the rest...the rest were safe.

One of my kin stepped up to the counter to greet the customers. She wore a hooded robe that hid much of her head, and a cotton mask across her mouth and nose. The men stared rudely, trying to look beneath the hood, but well-practiced Meelo kept them clueless. She

bowed her head meekly. “Forgive my mask, sirs, but I feel it best that my cold remain my own.” The men retreated, attempting to appear respectful, but the threat of illness worked like a charm. “How can I help you today?”

The closest man, with sunned, leathery skin and short russet hair, rummaged in a deep pocket of his trousers, finally pulling out a small purse. It was neat and simple and definitely the one my cousin Ferri lost a few weeks back. No other family bore the crest of a rampant feline with a fish in each claw.

“We have reason to believe,” the man muttered, placing the purse on the glass countertop, “that this might belong to one of yours.”

Ever professional, Meelo remained mute, merely peering at the leather pouch with shadowed eyes. After an appropriate perusal she replied, “Yes, it looks to be. Thank you for returning it. May I offer you anything in exchange for your kindness?”

The second man, with brown skin and black curls, dipped into his own pocket and, with greater ease than his fellow, pulled out something flat. Paper. Unfolding it, I saw a bundle of pages ripped gracelessly from a book, depicting images of lost family crests, including our own.

“We’re searching for any trace of the Kittaric tribe,” he muttered softly, his deep voice calmer and far less pressing than the first man’s. “The last of the Blessed Wilds, they were cats as people, thought to be lost. But perhaps not.”

Although the men could not see it, Meelo’s tail flicked and swished under her robes. For over sixteen years, we had lived in this shop

without suspicion, other than those regarding the shop's staff and their endless "illnesses." Now stood a pair with an element of knowledge. How far would it take them?

"I have heard of the Blessed families," Meelo replied politely, resorting to a common tactic for unwanted questions—counter questions. "Why would cats interest rangers like yourselves?"

The two exchanged looks. I felt my fur tickle, but I held my place, flexing my claws in and out. In. And out.

The second man spoke, replying, "Stories of the Blessed Wilds brought joy to a meagre childhood. Long I thought them pure fantasy, but recently, I have come to realize they may well have been real."

"Oh they were real," Meelo replied swiftly. I sensed she was enjoying this, though I couldn't guess why. But she was to be future queen, not I. All I could do was watch. "Until men decided otherwise. The Boarla were hunted to death. The Loupels lanced in their homes. The Fallowfells' meat considered...magical. To name but a few." She sighed. "If any of the families remained, they would hide, and they would never come out."

The first man blinked a few times. "You seem well versed on the subject."

"It is an interesting one, and a sad one." Meelo's tail slowed to a gentle side-to-side swing, like cradling a restless infant. "And many interesting books and objects come through this shop."

The first ranger traced the outline of the cat crest with his finger. "Do you stock any such books presently?" He stepped back, glancing

around the gloomy store. The rain outside mottled the streetlight, while, inside, candles flickered and spat.

The ranger did not see the eyes that watched his every move.

After a moment of thought, Meelo shook her head. “No, not at this time. The last book on the matter sold a f—”

Lightning flashed outside before a rumble of thunder followed. But one flash was enough to light up Meelo's bright eyes and soft cheeks. Surprise lifted her ears beneath her robe and rose the fur on her tail.

From the looks of surprise on their faces, it was plain that the men saw. They stepped back from the counter, the russet-haired ranger placing his hand atop his sword shaft, perhaps for comfort.

Quiet fell, except for the steady drumming of rain on glass. I—with several of my peers—slipped from my hiding place and made my presence felt about the men's boots. I rumbled, not quite a purr, not a yowl, but a deep, thoughtful noise from the pit of my belly. Ginger Perru joined Meelo at the counter while jet-black Sossa rubbed himself against me, wrapping his tail around mine.

The rangers whispered frantically to each other, a hint of fear quivering in their voices. The first ranger was the chatterbox while the second held his tongue.

“What now, Okote? Do you think they'll attack?”

“I don't think so, Cork.”

“I don't like how that grey one is looking at me. And they're getting closer, I don't like it, what if there are more like her?”

“Perhaps we should leave. We have learned too much.”

“You have,” Meelo purred, interrupting them, lifting a silver paw to tap claws on the glass top. “Don’t worry, we’re not...savages. But we can’t just let you leave. Elok, if you don't mind, you know what to do.”

My favourite words. I sat myself neatly at the feet of russet-headed Cork and smiled sweetly. I placed a paw upon his boot and said, “*Mee owsta missti yowssh a mew.*”

And he fell asleep at my touch.

When Cork and Okote recovered from my spell, they found themselves in a lush garden of grasses and fruit trees, of herbs and bubbling streams of cool water. Dazzling summer sun stretched for miles overhead in all directions, all the way to the far mountain rings that protected us. I sat beside them, changed now into my larger Kittaric form, closer to a human than a cat, garbed in robes of cool blues and sage greens. I will confess, I chuckled at their reactions.

“Where are we?” gasped Cork.

My reply was simple. “Kittaric.”

“You have magic?” Okote asked me. The two lounged against trees, nestled in their roots, hands bound loosely. Just enough to stop any unwanted actions.

“We are the Blessed Wilds.” I nodded and raised a paw, letting the light of a swift flame dance over my pads. “I’m surprised you recognize me like this. Most humans are too...unfocused to tell us apart.”

Wriggling at the bindings on his wrists, Cork snapped, “Why have you brought us here?”

“Why do you think?” I replied. “Humans and elves hunted our fellow clans to extinction, or near as. If you leave here, can we trust you to keep our lives to yourselves?” I held aloft one of the traveller’s bags. “We know you have orders to find us, and a reward for our location would be...high, I imagine?”

Cork remained quiet, while Okote drew out a long sigh. Other cats were gathering about us to listen and see, despite the best efforts of the guards nearby. Big, green eyes stared at them through the grass—little white Lamm had come to investigate.

“We were sent by the U.O.P.,” Okote said quietly. “You can see their monogram on the contract. The University of Perrondeil asked us to learn as much as we could on the Blessed Wilds. As far as we were told, it was entirely academic.”

I rumbled a purr. “Why not mention that before?”

“Learning that a school desires the knowledge, others have only offered information at a price. We do not have the money, so we make no mention of the university.”

“I see.” I encouraged Lamm closer with a flick of my head, and she slunk near, staying a true cat for comfort. Her father, grey-dappled Pao, stood a few paces away. “And what sort of information have you garnered so far?”

Again Okote spoke, for it seemed Cork was too distracted by the gathering cats to focus on my questions. “Exactly as was asked. ‘Find as many tales and songs as you can on the Wilds, for our archives.’ So far, we have only a few new documents to add to the records. They’re all in our bags, if you should care to see for yourself.”

“I see,” I said again. I flexed my tail, looping it in the cool grass. Lamm watched it for a moment before returning her attentions to the humans. “The University of Perrondeil is a wizard school, is it not?”

Okote managed a brisk nod. “Aye, for the most part. And I guess, from your skills and this place, that hungry wizards would be a problem for your kin?”

I didn’t like the way he said it. He’d found his bargaining tool—not that he needed one, we had no intention of holding the two rangers here for longer than needed. We only wanted them to see the truth of the Blessed Wilds. A people, not a novelty, not animals with fancy tricks.

The glimmer of a little victory shone in Okote’s eyes. It wasn’t an evil look, not by the longest whisker, but the light taunted me nonetheless.

And in a moment, it was gone, driven away by little Lamm as she shifted from cat to Kit right in front of them. Her summer dress in greens and whites danced in the soft tug of the warm wind, while a stuffed cat toy dangled from her arm. Slowly she reached out a paw and touched Okote’s hand, giggling a *mee hee hee*.

“No fur,” she said quietly, hiding her muzzle behind her toy. “And they smell like rain.”

“There is a storm outside,” I told her. “A big one.”

Lamm eyed the two humans over the head of her plush, and asked in a quiet voice, “Are they going to kill us?”

I remained mute, leaving the men to answer. Cork paused in his struggling, while his companion did a double-take at the little Kit.

“No,” Okote replied softly, shaking his head. “Why would we do that?”

After a moment, Lamm merely shrugged, then darted back through the grass to her father. Pao led her away but the Kit's big, green eyes would flash back at us every few steps.

In her place stepped an elderly Kittaric, an ancient male who had formerly worked the shop. He grunted and tapped at Cork's sodden boot with a wrinkled paw. Fuzzy jaw chomping and rolling, he asked, “So what do you plan for us, eh?”

Okote met his hard stare comfortably. “On our part? Nothing, but I acknowledge that we are powerless against the university.”

The old tomcat turned his attentions to me. “You brought ‘em here, now what are you going to do? They can't stay here.”

Glibly, I shrugged. “It wasn't I that wished them here, that was Princess Meelo. Whatever her intentions, we must trust them.”

“Oh, must we?”

A simple nod of my head was all it took to make the old cat grind his jaw. “Indeed, and her mother. The Queen is on her way.”

It was then that Cork leapt from the grass, struggling against his bindings, and attempted to flee across the plains. Too amused to stop him, the guards simply watched and chuckled, only striding after him as he neared a group of playing kits.

By the time Queen Effi arrived, the struggling ranger had been reseated against the tree alongside his fellow. His rain damp hair had

been loosened from its bindings and spread like a web across his face. He didn't even attempt to remove it, for some deep fear seemed to have grasped him, almost locking him out from this world of sun and cheer.

I felt a great pity for him. He had done nothing wrong, only asked questions, and here we held him in ropes and under claws. Our own reasons were too important to ignore, but that didn't mean we were careless with our captives.

When the queen finally arrived, she strode into view without a beat of fear or concern. She was not like some delicate human queen in lace and silks, she was clad in hunting attire and carried a sharp sword at her hip and a bow at her back. Her gold eyes burned from her jet-black face, tinged here and there with traces of aged and glorious silver. When she spoke, her voice carried far and freely, handsome in tone.

"Men?" She purred, a deep, satisfied purr. "We have not seen furless ones here in quite some time."

Meelo stood alongside her mother, her hood down and her grey and dapple face shining in the sunlight. "I thought you might like these ones, Mother. There is something odd about them. Do you feel it?"

Queen Effi purred again, a deep twisting *thrum* of amusement. "Of course. Not only a secret kept from us but from each other, I sense."

"A chance union, you mean?"

"Quite." Pausing, Queen Effi stepped closer and peered down at the two captives, her deep eyes twinkling in the dappling sun. "You," she pointed to Cork, "are a glimmer of hope. Do you know that?"

Cork ignored her, twisting against the ropes on his wrists.

Effi watched, her head tilted. “You can easily get free. You know you can. Just slip away and run.”

“I can’t,” Cork hissed. I barely heard him, but his voice had changed, growing sharper and colder. “Not since...”

The queen encouraged him on. “Not since...?”

Cork struggled and resisted, but Queen Effi seemed to make people talk. Everyone tells her everything, especially Meelo. Cork finally cracked, letting his pained face tilt up to hers. “No! I can’t...Not again, or...”

My gaze drifted from the struggling Cork to the calm and watchful Okote. A curiosity grew in his eyes as he watched his fellow, growing brighter and brighter with each daring thought, until a spark of understanding flashed across his face.

“...Or?” Effi asked softly.

But it was Okote who finished. “Or he will turn wild.”

I knew at once what he meant—a Blessed folk can lose their blessing and turn wild, becoming animals of instinct and hunger and fear. Curses and spells could cause it, as could guilt or grief, or anger.

Okote knew more of the Blessed folk than he wished to say, but Cork...could a man turn wild? I had never heard of such a thing. What would that become?

Cool as ever, Queen Effi kept her eyes on Cork. “Who did this to you? What was your deal?”

“A man,” Cork sniffed, eyes closed. “A man in robes and armour. He was at the university. He took me there and made me...into...”

Nodding, Okote finished for him. “Into a man.”

Falling deeper into panic and despair, Cork became unable to answer. He hid his face and trembled silently. After an appropriate pause, Queen Effi stepped aside to speak instead with Okote, while instructing me with a jab of her head—I was to see to Cork. I could see what pacts lay beneath a person's skin or fur, and thankfully most were breakable. I wasn't entirely sure what I was going to find, but a suspicion was rising in my mind like a cauldron bubbling over. Resting my paws upon Cork's wet, tattered hair, I muttered my words and checked for spells upon him, while Queen Effi spoke with Okote.

“And you, brave one,” she muttered, a grin spreading across her face, “are a sight for sore eyes. Welcome. May I call you Brother, as I once called all Loupels?”

Magic acted beneath my paws, shining into Cork's trembling skin, shining back out in patterns and words, not decorative ones, but ugly ones for binding and holding.

Okote grinned back. “You may, Sister.” I watched something rise in his expression, a relief so great he almost grew in size. “It is an honour to meet you.”

I could hardly make out the meaning beneath all the layers of magic and binding and terrible script. Cork's skin was patterned as though strewn with vines. Shaking my head I persisted, trying to glean any key command in this endless string of orders.

The talk continued. Bowing her head, Effi replied, “Likewise. We thought the wolf folk dead, long ago.”

“Families hide in the wild places,” Okote replied, his head dropping faintly as he mused. “The humans fear us, calling us werewolves.”

In the writhing mass of letters, I caught a few words: *speak, mind, lost, alone.*

“The fall of the Loupels was a terrible loss for all the Blessed folk,” Effi agreed softly, her tail swishing side to side like reeds in the breeze. For a moment, the wind took her voice, leaving her to gasp, “We thought only the Kittaric house remained.”

Obey, obey, obey. Find. Tell. Show. Reveal.

Smiling kindly, Okote said, “I wanted to find more Blessed folk. I looked...and someone noticed.” He glanced briefly to Cork, still a trembling heap. “A man at the university invited me in. Said he knew what I really was, and that he could help.” A sharp laugh, full of regret. “He bound me in this body and told me to find the rest. He bound me in words, in laws, in body, and shoved me back into the world.” His gaze grew fonder as he peered at Cork. “He did the same to Cork, it would seem. And all this time I did not recognize my kin.”

I released my paw from the head of hair. I had seen enough to understand the spell on him.

With my work now done, Meelo crouched beside me. “What of you, Cork? Which family do you come from?”

Though panic still pulled at his breath and voice, Cork managed to swallow a few gulps of air and gasp out a single word. “Vulpor.”

I heard the queen gasp too, her eyes wide. I understood why—the foxes had been the first house destroyed, their beautiful sets filled with hunting dogs, their deep homes flooded or burned.

How many other houses survived out there?

Removing the spell that bound these two was no easy feat and took many weeks to unravel. My aides helped as best as they could, and Meelo barely left my side, but at the end of one long afternoon we made a breakthrough, and cast a carefully worded spell of release on them both.

We found a quiet place in the setting sun, although it did not stay quiet for long—soon a crowd of kits gathered and gawped, eager to see other Blessed kin for themselves. Okote of House Loupel was first. I will never forget how the weary body of a human simply fell away, rippling downwards into the form of a noble, dignified wolf. His dark pelt glistened, his eyes shone, his four legs quivered.

As if too afraid to try his limbs, he stood and enjoyed the moment, closing his eyes and letting his nose lead his mind.

Watching his friend's transformation, Cork could barely believe it, his jaw almost hitting his chest. When his turn came and my paw reached out to him, he darted forward like a rocket, butting his forehead against my pads. Laughing, I cast the spell upon him, feeling him shrink and warp beneath my touch. Down he went, rippling, twisting, rising up again in his true body: a bright, shining fox.

Okote and Cork stayed with us. They could not enter the human world again, not with long muzzles and thick coats, but the Kittaric were used to a life of hiding in plain sight. The most trusted warriors were sent out to invite the families of both our new Blessed brothers, and it was just this cold, gloomy daybreak that a cloaked figure from the curiosity shop led a pack of tame foxes into the town, into the shop, and out of sight.

The Court of King Bastion

by Ian Gough

King Rodulphus Bastion leaned back upon his throne and stifled a yawn. He was meant to be holding court, yet his concentration drifted to more pleasant pastimes. It was such a beautiful day outside that he dreamed of walking in the palace gardens and could almost smell sweet honeysuckle upon the breeze. Instead, he'd spent the morning wading through the mire of his subjects' pitiful troubles and petty crimes. With yet more of them waiting in the corridor, the King wondered if there was a way to avoid the ever-growing line of trivial squabbles queuing up to be heard. Listening to others' problems could be so draining.

In fairness, he'd brought this upon himself. As a young king, he pledged to hold court on a weekly basis, giving his subjects a platform by which they could air their concerns, make pleas, or request judgement on their grievances. With a growing population, the city also became a hub for criminal activities and the people begged for his ruling. He felt it the right thing to do, as his subjects' well-being, and that of his realm, was of paramount importance. Yet, after carrying out this duty on a regular basis for the best part of thirty years, squabbles

over who owned the rights to Bessy the saddleback pig had paled into insignificance. Perhaps it was because he'd heard it all before, or, being deep into his later years, he'd tired of it all. Whatever the reason, holding court had become a tedious chore and one he'd prefer to do without.

Thankfully, a once-distant glimmer of hope grew ever closer upon the royal horizon. For next to him sat his beloved son Kastor. Soon, the Prince would reach an age where he would be able to take over the duties of the court. Handing control over to his eldest would allow for more relaxing pursuits, such as sunbathing in the gardens or being fed grapes by scantily-clad serving girls while he quaffed copious amounts of ale. Only one more year and Kastor would be old enough, allowing Bastion the choice of stepping down and relinquishing part, if not all, of his powers to reign over to his son. Until that day, he'd have to continue to suffer the constant numbness of his backside and the whinging of his people. Being a king was so overrated.

"Who's next?" he asked, waving towards the entrance in a nonchalant fashion.

The grand hall doors opened and two filth-covered peasants dressed in tattered rags were ushered inside, flanked by the castle guards. Both had the initial appearance of downtrodden farmers, ruffians, or possibly beggars, scraped up from the bowels of some dank unvisited alleyway. Both were guided into position and brought to a standstill before their King. Instead of addressing him with respect, as the royal code of behaviour suggested, they preferred to scowl with menace at each other. That is until the guards nudged them to their knees.

Accepting that reasonable amount of royal protocol had been satisfied, and was about the best he was likely to get, King Bastion motioned they be allowed to stand. Once back to their feet, one of the guards retreated a few paces, while the other held a parchment which he now unfurled. King Bastion prompted his son.

Prince Kastor sat to the right of the King. A proud, strong, young man with handsome features, he'd understandably received the best training in both combat and etiquette. With the King's advancing years, he was being schooled in the ways of court by his father and was almost prepared to take on these duties when the time came.

King Bastion had five children of which Kastor was the eldest and his favourite. It would not be long before he took up the crown, and Bastion considered him a most worthy successor.

"Why have these men been brought before the King today?" asked the Prince.

The guard cleared his throat and read along from the parchment.

"We have a report that these two men were apprehended late last night, brawling in the middle of the street, Your Highness. It was said to be a most violent affair, caused a terrible disturbance, and attracted quite a crowd, before the city watch arrived to break it up. Both were said to be under the influence of alcohol and, from what we can establish, fought as part of some sort of ongoing dispute. It is for this reason, and in order to prevent a repeat of their actions, they have been allowed to seek His Majesty's judgement."

Prince Kastor dismissed the guard.

“Consider yourselves most fortunate that you have been granted an audience with His Majesty King Bastion of Halveron. In normal circumstances, you would have been thrown straight into the castle dungeons, however, in order to prevent a repeat of your unruly behaviour, the King has agreed to hear out your dispute. You,” demanded Kastor, pointing to one of the men. “Step forward and identify yourself.”

“I am Jarrod, Your Highness,” said the man on the right. Shorter than the other—and covered in cuts and bruises—his worn features alone were never likely to win him any admirers. He had the appearance of a hard-working man. A salt of the earth type, the same rich, thick mud and earth covered his clothing.

“What is the nature of your grievance?”

After the morning so far, the King expected this to be yet another pointless dispute over who owed a chicken pie or some similar nonsense.

“This man tried to swindle me by taking my most valued possession, and I want it back!”

“That’s hog-swill, it’s mine, I found it first, and it was you that tried to cheat me out of it!” snapped the other man, his fists clenched, knuckles drained of colour. He was covered in similar abrasions to Jarrod, plus his nose jaunted off at an unnatural angle.

“And who might you be?” asked the King.

“Name’s Thrun, Your Majesty.”

“Well Thrun, I’d ask you to refrain from any further outbursts. You are speaking in the King’s court, not telling lewd jokes after quaffing

flagons of ale at a local tavern. You will get your turn,” said Prince Kastor. It was not a request.

Thrun bowed his head. “Yes, Your Highness, I apologize, Your Majesty.”

“Apology accepted,” said King Bastion, pleased with his son’s display of control, and the tavern quip was a nice touch too. “Now Jarrod, would you be so kind as to explain the details of your story, but I urge you to keep it short, I have other subjects to see.”

Jarrod smirked at Thrun’s telling off. Hand to mouth, he coughed to clear his throat before continuing.

“Yes, Your Majesty. About a couple of nights ago, Thrun and I were sharing a pint after a hard day’s work, down at the Dusky Maiden. You know the tavern with the red curtains covering the windows, down by the orchards. It’s the one with all them pretty dancing girls who don’t wear very much.”

The Prince and the King looked to each other, sharing an awkward moment.

“We are familiar with the establishment...go on.”

“You see we’d been helping out old man Sulluck repair the fence around his farm. We often do odd jobs to make a bit of extra coin and Sulluck tends to get a bit confused and often overpays.” Thrun cast him a glare and Jarrod’s cheeks glowed, realizing the error of his over share. “Anyways, after all that hard work we was parched, so we had a couple of pints and, after a few hours, decided to head off home.”

“T’was getting quite dark by then, Your Majesty,” added Thrun.

“I’m telling the story, not you.”

“I was adding in the bit you missed out. You never tell a story proper!”

“Do too!”

King Bastion sighed and shook his head. It was often the way when giving locals the opportunity to voice their concerns. They tended to get carried away at having been given a chance to address royalty. It meant they often chose to prattle on about meaningless details when he'd rather they got to the crux of the matter. Maybe it was because someone was actually listening to them, or perhaps it was an illness, a verbal infection of the poor. He'd never understood it.

“Gentlemen!” The King regained their attention. “Do get on with it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Jarrod, glaring at Thrun. “See what you've gone and done, you've upset the King. He asked me to tell the story, not you. So, shut up and let me tell it before we both get in trouble.”

Thrun sulked.

“So, as I was saying, we ended up drinking a few flagons of Fiddlers' Rustic brew—sweet nectar it is, sire, and not many bits—before we headed off for the night. It was nice and warm out, so we decided to take a slow walk through the fields on the way back to the outskirts. It meant by the time we made it back, we'd likely have sobered up a tad and might not get as much grief from our miserable, cold, uncaring, moaning, heartless, nit-picking, evil, old...”

“...lovely...”

“...beautiful wives,” continued Jarrod with an awkward grin and Thrun's assistance.

”It was then we happens to come across this abandoned cart. Just lying there it was, with a busted wheel, crates covered in a cloth still sitting in the back. We looked about to see if the owner was nearby, so perhaps we could offer help, but they was nowhere to be seen. Must have just up and left it there. Thrun said we should leave it alone, or come back in the morning and offer to fix the wheel, for a coin or two naturally. No, I says, as being the good neighbour that I am, sire, I decided it was best to make sure nothing valuable had been left onboard. A lot of thieves work about the outskirts at night. Some real cunning, mean types. Some of them are supposed to be so crafty and skilled they could steal the boots off a man’s feet while he’s still walking. So, I says, it’s not fair to leave a poor unfortunate’s belongings lying about unprotected. Let’s look around, see what’s here and if it’s valuable we can take it home for safe keeping.”

“Very generous of you,” said Kastor.

“That’s what I said,” Jarrod’s chest swelled with pride. “See Thrun I told you it was the right thing to do.”

“Did not!”

Jarrood appeared to believe that Kastor’s less-than-genuine response provided him with a royal backing. He chose, therefore, to ignore his companion’s comment, on this occasion and continue.

“So’s to cut a long story short...”

“Too late,” muttered the King.

“I gets down on my hands and knees to check the wheel fixings and low and behold I spotted it, lying underneath the cart.”

“No, you didn’t I saw it first,” snapped Thrun.

“Did not!”

“Did so, and it wasn’t just underneath the cart, it was wedged behind the wheel.”

“Was not!”

“Enough!” shouted the King, banging his fist down upon the arm of his throne. After a morning of wading through the woes of his people, the petty squabbles of these two had reached his last nerve, and picked at it like a crow tugging on a worm. It was fair to say that the end of his tether had well and truly been reached.

Both men froze and silence became the most deafening sound in the hall.

“Let us all assume,” said Bastion regaining his composure, “that for the present moment both of you discovered, whatever this item is, together.”

They nodded.

“Good, now in order to proceed, at a pace faster than a snail with a broken foot, it may be prudent for me to see the disputed item. To understand what all this fuss is about.”

Jarrold looked to Thrun who, with reluctance, rummaged about in his pocket, producing an item wrapped in ragged cloth similar to his shirt. He handed it to the approaching guard who, in turn, carried it towards the throne, under everyone’s rapt gaze.

“Bring the item to me,” said the Prince, taking it from the guard.

Unsure of what these two might be fighting over, he lifted back the folds of cloth with extreme caution. Beneath, a golden ornament sat

comfortably in his palm. It was beautiful. After perusing the item—making sure it was safe—he passed it across to his father.

The King cradled a small, ornate image of a dragon. He tested the weight. It must've been crafted from solid gold! Delicate, pointed tail and a raised right claw in a waving gesture, intricate scales, and features which were carved into a draconic smile. The finely detailed work was amazing. Bastion understood why both men would fight over such a treasured object, for it was not the first time he'd seen craftsmanship of this quality. It did enhance his initial suspicions about how these two down-and-outs came by it in the first place. Something in their story lacked truth.

“So, you're telling me that you found this outstanding item, completely abandoned underneath a damaged cart in the middle of the night, with not a single soul in sight?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Thrun, a bead of sweat had broken across his brow.

“And in finding this great, unguarded treasure, neither of you became suspicious nor thought to report your find to the city watch, in case it had, in turn, been reported stolen?”

“Ah well, I was going to, but then Thrun said that when you found something, unless the person who owned it came back or left a message on the city notice board within two days, it was safe to assume it belonged to the finder.”

“'tis the law,” added Thrun, with conviction.

“So, what you're basically telling your King is that you now own the item under the unwritten law of finders keepers?” asked the Prince.

“I suppose,” said Jarrod with a sheepish grin.

A knock at the great hall doors interrupted proceedings. Waved forward by the Prince, one of the guards answered and, after a moment’s discussion, scurried towards Prince Kastor, carrying something in his hand. After a whispered exchange, which the Prince conveyed to his father, they were ready to resume.

The King watched both Jarrod and Thrun as they appeared confused and worried in equal measure. Even more so once Kastor indicated that the guards should take positions at their backs, with primed hands resting on sword hilts. Before any further words were spoken, it was obvious from these actions, the mood in the room had taken an instant downward spiral.

“A new piece of evidence has been brought to light. This means that it is vital you answer the next few questions with the utmost honesty. I want you both to listen carefully and exercise extreme caution when providing your answer. Is that understood?”

“Y-yes,” said Jarrod.

Thrun nodded.

“Both of you have come here to claim you have a right to this ornament and both say that you found it. Are you also saying that you were unaware that the body of Master Craftsman Qi-Yang was left lying on the roadside a few feet from the cart with a dagger in his back?”

“Wh...what?”

Kastor approached both men with purpose, thrusting a dagger, handed to him by the guard, in front of them both.

“Do you recognize this?!”

“Wh...th-that’s my whittling knife!” exclaimed Thrun. “It went missing about a week ago.”

“How convenient, and I suppose it just happened to find its own way into the back of Master Qi-Yang, or are you telling me it happened by magic? Is this an enchanted blade, Mr. Thrun?! Is it also a mere coincidence that you happen to have acquired Master Qi-Yang’s most treasured possession? A possession you both say is yours by right of finders keepers!!”

“No...what—wait!”

King Bastion rubbed his thumb lightly over the surface of the golden dragon. He’d heard enough. The sight and feel of such a precious treasure, and the fact one of the most skilled master craftsmen was dead, helped him reach a decision. He raised his arm calling for silence, in an odd way imitating the position of the golden ornament he held.

“Thank you Kastor, you have done well. Jarrod. Thrun. My judgement is thus: It’s obvious to me neither of you are to be trusted. I believe both of you were involved in a plot to steal this valuable item, and, in your blade, we have direct proof that either one or both of you murdered Master Qi-Yang in cold blood. I, therefore, decree that, unless any other evidence is found to the contrary, you will be sent to the castle dungeons where you will forgo food and drink, until your executions in three days’ time. Guards take them away and feel free to torture them for their insolence in any way you see fit and for the nature of their despicable crimes. In tribute to Master Qi-Yang, I will confiscate this golden dragon for the sake of the realm.”

“But...wait...that’s not fair. It wasn’t us! We didn’t kill no one!!”

“We found it, Your Majesty, I swear!”

At the King’s gesture, the guards swarmed forward, grappling both men to the ground. They were dragged from the hall, and their screams and cries faded beyond the closing doors.

“You handled the situation well, my son, but all this distress has made me tired.”

“Are you going to be all right, Father?” The concern was evident in both Kastor’s face and words.

“Yes, of course. Please stay and continue to pass judgement over the remaining subjects’ grievances. I am going to retreat to my chambers for a little rest.”

“But I’ve never dealt with situations like this on my own before.”

“You have been with me long enough to know what is required and it will be a good test. By your actions today, you have proven to be fair and just in judgement. My son, you have my trust. I will see you later at dinner.”

“Yes, Father.”

Leaving Kastor in charge, King Bastion shuffled his way along the stone-walled corridors to his private chambers, accompanied by two of his guards. Once there, he signalled for them to wait outside and entered into a darkened room. Not the way he’d left it earlier.

Thick, velvet, red curtains had been pulled closed; the King reached out and slid one of them aside.

“Do you have to be so dramatic?” asked the King without need to turn.

“I like the dark, anyway did it work?”

“Yes, Ghalswann, if you will forgive the obvious reference, like a lucky charm.”

“You got the item you wanted?”

He turned to face the assassin, who sat with scuffed boots resting upon the table, picking dirt from beneath his fingernails with a rusty dagger. A heavy set, imposing man dressed in worn leather armour, a facial scar arced across his left cheek to the base of his bald scalp. It added to his gruff demeanour, to a face even a mother would struggle to love.

“Yes, thanks to you, and do take your feet off my furniture, I am the King after all. It’s just a shame Master Qi-Yang had to die like that. Was it necessary?” asked King Bastion, reaching for a nearby bottle of wine. He poured two glasses and offered one to Ghalswann. It was politely refused.

“I tried to convince him to part with the trinket, yet for some reason he seemed unaffected by my charms. I was left with no choice but to educate him in the ways of the assassin. I must say that I did admire his stubbornness and determination not to hand over the item. Yet despite his thick skin, in the end, he turned out to be quite the bleeder.”

“I suppose you did what you had to. I also have to hand it to you that it was a master stroke, arranging to set up those two, dumb farmers. If there had been any hint of suspicion that I was involved it would make my position as king...less stable.”

“We can’t have that,” Ghalswann agreed.

“Quite.” King Bastion took a sip of wine and savoured the taste. “Your payment is in the top drawer of the cabinet over there,” he pointed the way. “Try not to kill anyone on your way out. Oh, and by the way, how did you manage to get past the guards and into my chambers unseen?”

“A skilled craftsman never reveals his secrets,” said Ghalswann, with what might have been identified as a smile in more nefarious company. He stood, approached the cabinet, and retrieved a small bag of coin, which he weighed in his palm.

The King sighed, accepting there were things in life a man of his standing didn’t need and preferred not to know. He took another, larger gulp of wine, taking his eyes from Ghalswann for a moment.

“I trust this concludes our business?”

No answer came, only a stiff breeze and flapping fabric from the open window, where Ghalswann had chosen to make a swift exit. I guess it does, he thought and drained the remainder of his goblet. Pulling the window closed, he approached his bed.

Running his hand along the wall behind his bedpost, his fingers found a small wooden switch which he flicked upward. A click was accompanied by whirring mechanisms and the wardrobe to his left rolled forward on metal casters. Inside his secret room, King Bastion lit the lantern at its center.

It glowed with the sparkle of all of his personal treasures. Accumulated over many years, these were his prized possessions—his royal stash as it were—and the room contained some of the most sought-after pieces in the Nine Realms.

He looked to the golden dragon figurine. It was a beautiful creation; no doubt Master Qi-Yang had been a skilled craftsman. Carrying it to a shelf, King Bastion moved a couple of other pieces and placed it in position. It sat next to both a silver and copper dragon of a similar design. At last, he had the full set.

Perhaps today had been a good day after all.

A Bargain at Any Price

A Seven of Stars story by Mae McKinnon

The doorbell's welcoming jingle ended with an abrupt squawk.

Frowning lightly, the customer, who'd just stepped in from the cobbled street, turned to open and close the door several times—each time with the same result. Dismissing the idea of there being a miniature chicken stuffed inside the bells, the man's flowing, dark locks fell forward, blocking his vision, as he tried to peer into the jingling arrangement from below.

“How peculiar,” he remarked, then saw something in the corner of his eye and quickly stepped into a nearby aisle to narrowly avoid being jostled out of the way by the burly man almost jerking the door handle out of his grip.

Behind the first, three more filed into the previously quiet antiques shop. They moved as if they expected something to leap out at them from every shelf, making a beeline for the counter at the back. To the first customer, given their slightly dishevelled state, it looked as if something already had tried to take a chunk out of them.

As it was, his long robes swished with silken whispers as the tall man elegantly disappeared into yet another aisle, somehow managing to avoid getting either robes or his long hair snagged on several jewelled daggers, a gilded bird with only one leg, and an entire shelf

stuffed with dusty jars.

Dressed in colourful robes of black and purple and with not a hair out of place despite the last-minute pirouetting, he couldn't have looked more different than the new arrivals.

Of course, *he* hadn't just returned back from the wilds after having battled the elements, goblins, and what else might inhabit what most folk thought of as the less *civilized* lands. The rangers probably hadn't either, but they looked like they had. They also bore the patch of one of the less than illustrious outfits this midsized town had to offer.

He managed to hold back a disgruntled huff. Amateurs.

"Hey. Old man! We've got something for you," the ranger in front called out. "Hello! Anyone here!?"

"Chop, chop. Let's see some service here," another one chimed in, banging at the counter. "Haven't got all day."

Picking up and examining a white clay pot of a rather wide-eyed dog, the tall man kept out of sight and watched as the ranger in front, evidently their leader, waved something small and oblong about while he kept calling for the shopkeeper.

The ranger's fingers slipped. The box clattered onto the floor and the lid flew open.

“WHOOEEEEEESEEEEEWOOOEEESSQEEEE!!”

Five sets of hands flew to their ears. The wail cut through marrow and bones and brains all at once.

The first ranger, wincing, reached out and managed to snap the lid

shut. It felt like his ears were bleeding.

Attracted by the noise, a thin, fussy-looking man appeared from behind the bead curtain that led into the inner sanctum of the shop. As he did so, he stroked an equally long, thin moustache and peered at them all with dark eyes.

“No, not mad, I am. But ask I must, who let banshee out?”

The occupants of the antiques shop began appearing from behind the various curiosities they’d ducked behind, several of them with their fingers still in their ears.

The ranger at the counter had the decency to look sheepish. He picked up and shoved the wooden box towards the shopkeeper as quickly as possible.

“Here! We wanna sell this,” he said.

Picking up the box with hands worn almost translucent with time Nogiuro moved as if to open it, only to be stopped by a unison cry of “NOOO! Don’t open it!” from three rangers. The fourth ducked behind a collection of mottled grey feathers, quick as could be.

“You want to sell this, yes?” the shopkeeper asked. “For full value, must examine box. Must know what is in box if ranger want paid.”

Nogiuro watched as his potential customers turned pale. Sizing them up, they didn’t seem to have much to offer, either as a group or individually.

“No, no,” the burlier one insisted. “Just give us something for the box.”

His companions nodded.

“Anything.”

“Without opening it.”

“Definitely without opening it.”

“It’s got to be worth *something*, even if you don’t open it, right?” the lead ranger, who seemed to be doing most of the speaking, said.

“It’s old. I’m sure of it.”

“Ancient even.”

“Probably.”

The last came from the fourth in their group. He’d been the last to remove his hands from his ears and he now eyed the shopkeeper from beneath a furrowed brow, in case the man decided to open it anyway.

“Old? Hmm. Yes. That might be so,” Nogiro nodded. “What is old, please? Man old? Elf old? Mountain?”

“We found it we did. In an old ruin. Got to be from an old civilization, a nice box like that.”

“Yeah, no one in their right mind would want something like that now.”

The entire exchange earned a small smile from the shop’s only other customer. Experts in the wilds these men might be, but they weren’t traders. Had they not just shot themselves in the foot with a barbed arrow—metaphorically speaking, of course?

“What’s a banshee, anyway?”

“Beast. Screaming beast. Bad omen.”

“What? One of those is locked in there?” The horror on all their faces was plain to see.

“No, no.” The shopkeeper shook his head as he held up the box to the light. “Too big. Would not fit in box.”

“I believe it would be more correct to say that it is the scream of a banshee that is trapped in the box,” the robed customer interrupted. He stepped around the man-sized, ceramic vase he’d been examining as if he’d been there all along.

The ranger’s jaws dropped.

“Sorry your worshipness. Didn’t see you there,” the burly ranger said. “Scream of a banshee, eh? That’s got to be worth a pretty sum.”

“Just hurry up and sell the damn thing. This place gives me the creeps,” said another ranger who had just bounced off a stuffed owl.

“I give you three silvers for box.”

“What? No way. That’s got to be worth at least two gold, an ancient box like that.”

“Two silvers.”

“Two gold,” the ranger insisted. “Just look at those carvings. Such workmanship you don’t see today.”

“One silver.”

“Boron, why are his numbers going down?” One of the rangers frowned.

“They are?” the leader asked.

“Two GO—”

“One silver. We’ll take it,” the second ranger—a rather beardless, lithe figure, standing behind the leader—snatched the silver coin before they lost even more. This was going to be a bad deal no matter what. Best to take what they could and get the hell out of there.

“That’s no way to negotiate,” the burly leader was heard muttering as they left the shop.

The doorbell jingled behind them as the door closed with a final squawk and snap.

“They seem a little dishevelled to you?” the only remaining customer asked the shopkeeper. “I’m sure there is nothing in the surrounding lands that could cause such trouble, and for a four-man strong, forgive me, four-person group, nonetheless.”

“Not everyone can wander the wilds without a care in the world, Kaheiron.” Nogiro chortled.

“Being an Archmage does have *some* advantages.” Kaheiron grinned back.

“I don’t believe that’s the part that worries them.” Nogiro eyed his remaining customer. No one was *quite* sure what had happened to the last unfortunate souls that had thought to assault, rob, and eat the black dragon, but it had *sounded* most unpleasant. Of course, they’d only discovered *that* by the time it had been too late.

“Made quite the bargain there.” Kaheiron nodded towards the ornate box on the counter.

“Bah! Wouldn’t even have bought it if my grandfather hadn’t made it,” the shopkeeper huffed and let the box drop to the counter. “I’ve quite enough of these so-called treasure hunters. Going around digging up all sorts of things that should be left in the ground. Useless junk, most of it, too.”

“But not this one. Quite an ingenious man, your grandfather, as I recall. And a wonderful woodcarver.”

A mischievous grin lit up the old shopkeeper’s face. “Made it before I was born, he did. Best burglar alarm he ever had, he always said.

Always said you helped capture the scream of a banshee, too.”

“Indeed. I remember that cat. He’d wail like on death’s door at anything.

The wood is quite old though. He said he got it from an old chest someone had left behind.”

“Ancient civilizations, hah!”

“Hmm...” Kaheiron examined the box thoughtfully. “Would you be willing to part with it? For a price, of course.”

“Two gold!” The shopkeeper leapt with the words.

“Two *silver*...and I’ll throw in a spell that keeps any burglars of yours running for miles.”

“You always were a sly one, Kaheiron. Oh, well, then. Because it’s you.”

“Wrap it up for me, please.” Kaheiron’s eyes sparkled impishly. “I know *just* what to do with it.”

Beast

by Ian Gough

Scorching heat lashes my shoulders as I trudge the rolling dunes. Late afternoon sun baking through my torn clothes, lips cracked, mouth dry, with the last of my water drained from my gourd hours ago. Delirium has taken hold and I struggle to remember my past. Flashes of the cart being set upon, left for dead before finding and cradling her lifeless body. Only one true desire remains. The reason I'd charged unprepared into the desert: to hunt down and destroy the beast who killed my child.

Three days and nights I've tracked this monster. Nothing else matters anymore. I have nothing left, only hate and revenge drives me on.

I reach the crest of a dune; I see something. Wiping sweat from my eyes, I take sunken, sand-fuelled steps, but my footing is dislodged. My left leg buckles and I tumble, rolling disorientated over and over towards the object below. Coming to rest, I lie upon my back, panting with near exhaustion. Raising an arm to shield watering eyes from the dying sun, I manage to twist onto my side.

My eyes refocus and true horror strikes. It can't be. I've travelled full circle, back to the cart, the place of my daughter's death. Struggling

to my knees, I hold my head and cry out in despair. The pain is too great. I can't bear to look upon my child's mutilated body again.

I drop my hands and spy something metallic a few feet away. I scramble to rescue it from the scalding, coarse sand. The sun sinks and the rising moon takes its place. Reaching out, my hand clasps the handle of my daughter's silver hand mirror. It's then I experience blood-curdling cries resurfacing in my broken memory and flooding into me. The screams from my daughter's terror-ridden face during her death.

I pull the mirror close and gaze at my reflection. I see my twisted face in its surface. Sickening bile rises within me, and I collapse. I have to face the awful truth.

The Beast I have been hunting...is me.

In the Web Wood

by Kris Hawley

The Web Wood was like any other wood, for the most part anyway. It was a little darker green in grass and leaf with mushrooms of all kinds hiding here and there in the brush. Firs stood tall beside the redwoods, and pine nettles covered patches of the thin trail that Alma walked on.

Alma tried not to walk on the pine nettles any more than she had to. It was not because of the last time she played in the woods her mother scolded her for falling in the mud and coming home covered in dead bits of evergreen. No, that was not why at all. That had been in the spring, when everything was coming alive. Now fall was beginning and there was a cool chill in the air most days. Everything was starting to fade from green to brown to dead, but her mother said the Web Wood was stubborn, and things that lived there took a long time to die. Alma was looking at a dead thing right now. That's why she didn't want to step on the nettles. They would crunch.

"I think it's dead." she said to Whisper in a whisper. The black kitten hung in a sling around Alma's neck. She held the kitten tighter to her chest in one of her small hands. The kitten, for its part, didn't fuss too much but licked the back of its paws with its pink tongue and kept itself curled up. "It has to be dead. There's blood on it."

It was a person—heavy on the *was*—dressed in worn, dusty black leather. His back was to a tree alongside the trail; his body slumped. A wet redness splattered down the side of the man making the black leather glossy.

Alma approached slowly trying to get a better look, leaving the thin trail's hard-packed dirt. The dead man's face was pale and a little dirty with a thin scar on his chin and two more crossing above his right eye. He was thin, like a village-to-village message runner, but he had strange, yellowish hair she had never seen before and was a little bit too old to be a runner. He was old like her mother but not so old as the Mayor of Thumb. Alma considered her options, then picked up a stick. Her mother would get mad if she got her cloak stained...again.

She proceeded to poke at the body with the branch a few times before trying to lift the man's arm away to see if he had anything on his belt or if he carried a pouch.

"Buzzards and broken bones!" yelled the corpse, his light blue eyes flashing open, and he dragged himself forward on his hands to grab the stick away from Alma—who promptly screamed.

"Aw, shut it!" said the not-so-dead man, putting a finger in his ear and shying back from the high-pitched sound she made.

"You're alive!" she said after a moment. "You smell like that and you're alive!"

"What? Yes, of course I am alive." the blond-haired man leaned back then looked down at himself and the gore that painted part of his body. "Oh, the blood. It's not mine," he told her, then he fingered a deep slice in the black leather just above his hip. The man winced and

pulled out a red digit. “Well, most of it’s not mine anyway.” He stuck the bright bloody finger into his mouth and pulled it out with a popping sound. “Not a bad vintage,” he mused. His eyes turned to Alma. “So, who are you?”

Alma watched the man for a time. Blue eyes were strange, but he didn’t look dangerous. No, he kind of did look dangerous, like one of the caravan swordsmen but without the funny hat, or one of the King’s Guard but without the shiny breastplate. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t have the hard frowns and stony eyes she had seen from them. The man in black was relaxed and had a white smile like that of the lute player that her mother always scolded Auntie Dyvanna for talking to at the tavern.

“You don’t give your name to ghost men. Grandma told me that.” said Alma.

“Smart Granny.” The blue-eyed man nodded. “Ghost men take names after they lose their own. However, I have a name. I’m Faolán Eyolf, unbound man.” He shrugged. “Among other things.”

“I am,” said Alma importantly. “I am Alma Caltha Ackerley,” she leaned forward, “people call me Blossom.”

“Hello, Blossom,” said Faolán with a nod.

“And this,” she said brightly, “is Whisper!” She showed the small kitten in the sling who made a little, annoyed mew.

“Hello, Whisper,” said the man looking at the little ball of black fur she carried around her. “So...did either of you cross paths with anyone else in the woods today by any chance?”

“We saw a big, brown owl.” said Alma. “But it was sleeping.”

“Where are your parents?” Faolán said with his brow furrowed, looking past her down the trail. “You don’t live around here, do you?”

“I live in Thumb with my mother. She cleans clothes at the Green Gate Inn. My daddy died in the War of Sparks when I was tiny-tiny.” Alma held up her thumb and index finger close together.

“Thumb Village has to be nearly a half day’s ride from here. Near that stupid looking mountain.” He waved his hand to the west.

“The Broken Finger.” Alma nodded. “Yep. Me and Whisper have been walking from sun up. Well, mostly me.” She bounced on her heels.

“Blossom, this is not a safe place.” Faolán informed her as he stood. “What are you doing in the Web Wood?”

“I’m looking for the Witch of the Web Wood,” Alma told him, and, for the first time, all hint of a smile left his face.

“She’s dead. Four years ago, I think.”

“No, no.” Alma shook her head exaggeratedly. “Not the Willow Witch in shoes of crystal who danced through the City of Brass Bell,” she cupped her mouth and lowered her voice, “naked.”

“Oh?”

“I’m looking for The Lady of Patches, The Bone Shaker, who lives in a giant pumpkin and rides the starry skies on bats, Adeerea.”

“The Grimm Witch of the Web Wood,” Faolán muttered as he scratched at the stubble on his chin. “I had not thought of that. That might do.” He turned to Alma. “Your granny told you a lot of stories I take it. Old Adeerea, she’s likely long dead herself by now and chatting with the worms. Why are you looking for her?”

“Whisper is sick.” She looked down at the kitten who blinked up at her. “He ate yarn mother left out by accident. He gets into everything.” She stroked the top of Whisper’s head with a finger and the cat purred a little. “Farmer Kent says he can’t get the string out and he is too small to cut. They gave him willow tea with numb weed. He said there’s nothing he can do.” She looked up at Faolán fiercely. “I’m going to find the Witch of the Web Wood and get her to brew a potion to make Whisper better.”

Faolán didn’t say anything for a time, he just looked at the kitten she held. He was going to tell her to go home, that the woods had spooky things in them that would eat her. If he tried to stop her, Alma decided she was going to kick him. Punch him in the bloody hole in his side and run.

She bit her lip.

“That’s some tricky magic,” Faolán eventually said.

“How would you know!”

“I know,” he said, mussing up her hair. “Because I know a little magic.”

“You’re a wizard?”

“No, but I have my skills.”

“Then can you help Whisper?”

“No.” he said quietly. “Not with what I do.” He stretched. “So, I take it you’re looking for a giant pumpkin?”

“Yup. It should be at the center of the woods.”

“As it happens, I have a grandmother too. Old, ugly, ranting thing she was, but she told me a tale or two. You’re going to have to keep on

this trail a little bit more, keep going till it turns south and passes a small lake. After that, you'll come to a blue marker stone and five different trails. Hanging on a tree nearby should be a brass gauntlet. Take the trail it points down and you'll see the pumpkin before nightfall. Don't leave the trail. Don't stop anywhere for too long, okay? You have food?"

"Some."

"Well that makes you better off than me I guess." he said with a shake of his head. "Here." He handed her a brown leather pouch with a flint, steel, and dry birch bark for tinder. He had no weapon on him like a sword or a mace, but he gave her a well-worn belt knife and hung it on a cord around her neck. "Most things have eyes, kid. If it wants to hurt you...poke it in the eye. Okay?"

"Okay." She looked up at him. "Thank you, dead man. You don't smell that bad, I guess."

"It's Faolán."

"I know." She smiled up at him. "Goodbye then." She waved after she was a few steps down the trail. Whisper mewed softly and she stroked him under the chin as they went.

x-x-x

"Bye, Alma Caltha Ackerley." said Faolán, watching the young girl go. "Stay safe, Blossom." he turned and walked into the wood, stepping over fallen logs and thorny brushes.

He told himself the girl would be fine. The thin ward he placed upon her when he tussled her hair should hold for a time. Nothing should smell her as prey or linger on her too much. She was probably much

safer than he was, he assured himself. He did feel a little guilty for pointing her the wrong way. Blossom needed to be out of the Web Wood and, with luck, she would be clear of the trees and see the lights of Brass Bell City by the time the stars came out. Someone there would take care of her and get her back to her mother, where she would get a scolding for sure.

Blossom—who really hadn't yet, Faolán thought she should be called Sprout instead—did give him a good idea. The home of She who Lives in the Shadow of the Leaf, Witch of the Web Wood, Old Adeerea. There was a good chance she was long dead and gone, but he hoped that the pumpkin hadn't rotted away since the last time he was there.

He could hardly remember the last time he was there. He must have been a few years older than little Blossom, but not by many. Faolán thought he remembered the way. He had been there more than once. It was easier at night, when the windows would be all aglow with candle light, but his mother had been leading the way then. He made a note to himself that he would have to get up to her grave after this misadventure and tell her all about going back into the heart of the Web Wood.

Faolán rested a hand on a greying, rotten tree for a moment and smiled. He was headed the right way. He stepped over moss-covered stones and walked around a small swamp, deeper into the darkness between the trees.

x-x-x

Alma's feet hurt.

She had already stopped and sat three times since she met the smelly, not-dead man, so she kept walking. She thought that maybe the witch would have some magic brew for her feet, or maybe would let her fly one of her bats home after she cured Whisper. Alma was so lost in thought about how one would saddle and mount a bat—especially if it were hanging upside down—that she didn't see the four men in armour standing in the middle of the trail not fifty paces from her. She froze mid-step. They watched her. It was a long, silent moment.

"I have question," Alma piped up after a moment. "How do you pee in that?" The men looked at one another for a moment then back her way.

"It's complicated." said an armoured man with dark eyes and a black beard around his mouth. Alma approached.

"Do you rust?"

"We water the flowers like everyone else."

"And I thought flowers were supposed to smell nice." said Alma, who walked between them, continuing down the trail.

"Child, what are you doing in this cursed wood? There are evil things about this place that would snatch out your eyes or eat you whole."

"I'm looking for a blue stone." she told them and kept walking.

"The marker stone. You'll soon be there. Bear right and follow where the brass hand points. You'll hear the City of Bells before you reach it." said one man. Alma stopped.

“I would call her a half pint but she’s not more then a droplet.” said the fattest of them. “We should escort her back to the city. If not all of us, them maybe one or two.”

“We can’t,” said the dark-eyed man with the black beard. “We hunt.”

Alma turned to face them. “What do you hunt in armour?”

“Evil, lass.” said the fat one.

“A necromancer.” whispered one man with a sharp smile. “It means someone who plays with the bodies of the dead and makes them dance to their evil magics.”

“Danoof!” snapped the man with the black beard. “A Tool of the Metal God should not frighten the young so.” He walked over to Alma and bent down on an armoured knee, resting a gauntlet-clad hand on her shoulder. “Go to the city, little one, we shall keep the woods clear of foul magics.”

“You’re not King’s Guard.” It sounded like a question, but it wasn’t.

“No, child. We’re followers of the the Metal God, his Tools for carving and forging this realm into a better one. We walk the path of the Ever-Turning Gear.”

“Guess we better step up the preaching if the bumpkins still don’t know of us.” said the one called the silly name of Danoof.

“So, you...capture people who do bad things with magic?” asked Alma, who stroked Whisper as he started to fuss.

“Child, you should know by now that all magic is bad. Magic is evil. It grants one power by corrupting the natural order of things. Mankind’s power should come from metal: A woodsman’s axe, a

miner's pick, a spoon, a knife, a rake, stoves, and cart wheels are the way. Iron, copper, silver, and gold are the Metal God's blessing."

"Do we have time to preach?" said the armoured man who had not spoken yet. He was nearly bald with a grey moustache. "And to such a small congregation."

"You are right, Ringer, we should go." The metal-clad man with black beard stood and joined the others. "Go child and get to the city before darkness comes." He turned and the four men began to clank down the trail.

"What about dragons?" Alma shouted after them. "And elves? What of faeries and the Web Wood, it's magic too!"

"All the dragons are dead," Danoof called back, "and the elves can't hide from us forever!"

"Faeries fear our iron; they will be dealt with." The grey moustached man spat.

"This wood will fall to blade and saw. It has already started. Oh, it fights us, it holds strong. Nothing in this wood dies easy." the fat one added.

"It sent a tree witch against us and she died easy enough." said the black-bearded leader. "Now the trunks are felled and log after log go into the boilers of Clang Carts that spark, pushed on steel rail from here past Owl's End." He laughed as he walked. "The gears ever turn."

Alma stood there on the trail watching the metal men go till they were hidden from sight by the thick greenery.

x-x-x

Alma sat on the large, blue stone cross-legged eating almonds she had brought with her in a handkerchief. She had already fed Whisper the milky medicine that Farmer Kent had made up for him. Whisper's head had lolled for a bit after, but his pained mewing had stop, and now he rested warmly on her lap.

Things were not going the way she had thought they would. Finding a witch was hard. She should have done what they did in the *Tale of the Crooked Hat* and mixed rye meal and elder ashes into a little cake and fed it to a hound of three years. It could find a witch then. Alma tossed an almond at a mushroom. All the dogs she knew back in Thumb were too old.

The metal men had killed the Willow Witch and that was too bad, she had really liked the stories about her. They were after Faolán, and now she knew why he smelled so bad. He seemed nice, he didn't curse her to only speak in rhyme or have to walk backwards forever...but he did lie. She tossed another almond.

How was she to find the heart of the woods now? Maybe she could talk to a crow. That happened in stories. Now, she had never actually had a crow speak to her and she had tried more than once. It would be better than trying to sniff her way there by the smell of pumpkin pie. She let another almond fly.

The boiled seed struck fungus and plant matter fell away from the trunk of a nearby tree. Under the vegetation something glinted like silver. Alma set Whisper down as gently as she could to a light protesting *murr*, and she quickly went to investigate.

It was a small symbol, no bigger than a coin. It looked like a hare running on the back of a crescent moon. It shone silver and Alma scratched at it with a finger. It was hard to tell, but maybe it was glowing. She thought she knew what it was. Alma tilted her head up and looked between the branches. It was already getting dark and the moon was out, trying to push the sun from the sky.

This was a moon mark—Witchway signs—almost like the things tinkers and travelling folk carve into fence posts or some spy code made by some agents of a rival land. They would shine more strongly the brighter the moon. She didn't know what its symbol meant, but a quick look around found her another and another.

Alma gathered up her things and settled Whisper into the sling. She stood there on the trail for a moment and looked at the somewhat rusty gauntlet hanging in a tree before turning her back and walking into the bush following the tricky trail of silver glints from tree to stone to stump. She ducked under low branches and stepped over pinecones as she went.

Soon, the stars were out and the chill of night set in. Alma could see her breath faintly in the air and stopped now and then to listen to the sounds of the Web Wood. A little worry sank into her that she may be going in circles or could be lost. Her mother was going to be really mad at her for being gone for a full day. She kept walking. At dawn, it had felt like a good idea. She had many good ideas, like the time—
Alma stopped.

x-x-x

It wasn't as orange as Faolán remembered. The brightness of the pumpkin had faded and grey rot was creeping up from the base of the house-sized gourd. Many trees around the strange house were dead and the two, triangular-cut windows were shuttered tight.

Faolán dodged around the faery rings in the yard and, with two or three shoves of his shoulder, the door and rusted-red, black iron lock gave way. He entered. It was dark inside but he groped around in the blackness till he could light a number of candles. The room was bathed in a white-orange flickering glow. This place had not seen activity in ages.

The insides were what he expected, a mess of bobbles and dusty furnishings. The walls weren't what you would call fresh—they had browned some—but the place still looked solid enough for his plans. It was a place to recover, a place to work. Here, he would be undisturbed from the world's little annoyances and start on—

—there was a knock at the door.

Faolán turned a confused eye to the door, spun in a searching, bewildered circle, and then glared at the entrance with a tilted head. "Yes? Who is it?" he said in his best, old woman voice. A small hand pushed the broken door open. There was Blossom, her little girl face looking very stern and her eyes like daggers. She was clearly unimpressed with this discovery.

She walked over and into the main room of pumpkin. She kicked him in the shin. It produced little pain in Faolán but he did frown. "Where's the witch!" she demanded.

“Not here.” he told her and leaned down to be face-to-face with her. “Likely not anywhere.”

“That can’t be!” she yelled up at him. “I walked all day, and all I’ve found is a liar! That’s not fair!” She kicked him again in the same spot. He grunted. “You don’t tell the truth! Where’s the witch?” She made to kick him again but Faolán sidestepped.

“You can be bitter, Blossom, I did lie.” he told her, leaning on a dusty table and crossing his arms. “However, I’m not sorry. I knew you would be angry with me when you saw the City of Bells, but you would be safe and then could grow old being angry at me.”

“This is not how things should go!” She stomped her foot twice on the uneven, hardwood floor. Her voice grew soft and small. “He’s getting cold.”

Faolán crossed the room and looked down at the girl as she bowed her head. In the sling, the kitten lay too still. Yarn knotted in a cat’s gut was bad. Septic shock was no way to die.

He reached down to lay a hand on her shoulder but the movement of torch light from the open door brought his head around. He had just enough time to push Blossom away and dive for cover. The crossbow bolt flew in over the threshold and sunk deep in the pumpkin flesh wall. Faolán kicked the broken door closed.

“Faolán Eyolf!” came the loud voice of the Fools of the Metal Fraud. “I know you can hear me! Send out the child you’ve enthralled and surrender yourself to the judgment of the Forge Light.”

“I’d rather not!” he called out. “If it’s all the same to you.” What they would call judgment and justice would likely be a funnel in his mouth

and hot metal poured in. Faolán got to his knees and cracked a window slightly to peer out the shutter. Four men in armour, all with helms locked on, save the leader whose visor was up so her could be heard.

“You have been charged as a practitioner of the foul art of magic!”

“Guilty.” Faolán nodded to himself.

“You did disturb five graves at the cemetery of the Shoe Valley!”

“Also guilty.”

“Where you did then bind the bones of long-dead men to your will!”

“I was building a magical tower!” Faolán yelled out. “I needed some help! Do you know how long that would take alone? How big the stones are? Do you know what the masons would have charged in labour costs if I went to them? Honestly, man!”

“You stole good men’s bones!”

“They weren’t using them at the time!”

“Enough!” said one of the other Tools, his voice old and angry. “If he will not come to the Forge Light, then he will receive its blessing of steel.” He drew his sword and, a moment later, the other three did the same. The notes of ringing blades were a sound that made one’s heart beat faster.

Faolán picked up Blossom under the arms and shoved her into a mostly empty standing cabinet. “Now stay in here till the right number of people are dead.”

“What’s the right number of people.”

“More than four or less than one.” he told the girl and swung the doors shut on her.

The armoured men were marching on the pumpkin house now, slow and steady, as Faolán searched frantically for a broom. He found one and broke the brushed end off with his foot to the sound of a stiff crack. Next, he scrambled across the floor and pulled up a loose board. He acted quickly and jammed the jagged end of the broomstick into the mushy rot of the pumpkin. Faolán searched for the hollowness, the place where life once was...and filled it with his magic.

The old, wasted, black limbs of the burlled willow tree cracked and popped as if moved by a stiff wind. There was no breath of wind in the starlit woods, but the tree creaked all the same. The armoured men didn't notice at first, but its movement soon became too much to ignore. For two of their number, it was too late.

Heavy, wooden branches, thick and strong enough to hold a horse, hammered down upon them like the fists of a stone giant. The impact drove them to their knees and then into the soft mud and dirt before coming down on them again, denting and rending their steel plate.

Each downed man was drawn up by the tree in its wooden grasp, lifted eight feet into the air before being treated like children's toys and clashed together again and again till both suits of steel lay limp and still. The tree tossed the larger one; it flew in an arc through the air into a nearby swamp. The other was spiked into the dirt, head and helm driven deep.

The tree reached out to gather the other two, but the leader of the men reached into a sack on his hip and tossed a handful of salt onto the tree. The willow contorted, and Faolán felt his power pushed back, his hold on the long-dead tree numbed, but not so numb that he did not

feel the sting in his own skin when the old, angry, armoured man hacked into the bark with a number of swings of his sword.

Faolán felt the blows as if they had stuck his own flesh and he was driven out from the root of the tree and stumbled about in the pumpkin house for a moment. The purification power of salt was a pain to deal with. He knew he would have to act quickly to overcome it.

On a black walnut table, Faolán drew a circle in his own blood, let from the back of his hand with the aid of an empty, broken, glass container. In the center of his bloody scrawl, he placed the crossbow bolt he pulled with some effort from the wall. A peek out the window showed the Tools were done playing with the tree and were marching on the door again. Faolán quickly ransacked shelves and drawers, knocked containers of strange, yellow liquids and faded books on the floor. The old witch did have what he was looking for.

In the scarlet ring, he shook powdered bone of black birds and then sprinkled the hairs of a hare. He leaned down, putting his thumbs and forefingers into the wetness of the blood and drove down with his power, pushing it deep. When done, he took and held a breath, picked up the bolt, and kicked open the front door. He loosened his grip and released his breath.

The bolt flew from his hand as if shot. It hissed as it cut through the air and struck the leader's breastplate. It bounced harmlessly aside with a clang, leaving only a heavy dent in the metal. It slowed the man for a moment, but the other metal-clad man yelled angrily and rushed forward with his sword held high.

Faolán didn't have much time to react, and he reached out for the broomstick, the dead wood leapt to his hand and with it he took two steps to meet his attacker. Faolán used it like a quarterstaff; but the man's first swing nearly chopped the broomstick in half and Faolán had to slip his magic into the handle to reinforce the dry timber.

Blade met broom again and again, and Faolán nearly lost a finger more than once, but when the opportunity to close the distance presented itself, he stepped in. Faolán shoved the stick against the man's steely chest and the wood warped, moving as if it were a supple sapling again and curled, pinning the man's arms to his side and binding him hard. Faolán, in one quick movement, pulled the sword from his grip and kicked him over, toppling the soldier into the dirt.

He had to move fast, and his newly acquired blade rang out against the strike of the leader of these tin soldiers. He had been waiting for a clear chance to strike, but Faolán was skilled with a sword in hand.

Step in. Step back. Block high. Block low. Faolán had the advantage of speed of movement, but not when he managed to slip the sword through the man's guard. It would no more than chime off his armour. Faolán thought he would just have to keep fighting till the man was worn down enough to just club to death with the brass hilt. This thought was interrupted when the steel-suited leader tossed a full hand of salt into Faolán's face.

Magically, it did little. However, Faolán's eyes stung something fierce and all he saw was a watery blur. He didn't see the man cut him. A gash bled fresh in Faolán's forearm. With a violent oath, he backed

away. He would be dead in a moment if he didn't act. He blinked tears away as he summoned his power to him.

His heart beat hard, and his skin prickled as tiny bits of his flesh burst and died. The human body is capable of incredible strength when on the edge of death. Faolán felt blood vessels in his eyes burst and a well of shaky might flowed forward. It rushed inside him. He drove the sword forward with a forcefulness most people would never see, yet alone feel.

It was one, solid movement. The point of the sword struck where the bolt had in the armour but this time steel gave way. The blade passed through the man and then out the other side. The leader of this band of Tools of the Metal God staggered back with a sword in him, dropping his own; it was only a moment later that he fell to join it.

Faolán stood there shaking, knees aquiver, the rush of life and death in him passing. The body could heal itself he knew, but only so many times. He wondered how many days, weeks, or years he had just taken off his life. Did it matter that he was still alive to live them? He was pondering deep questions when the last living, metal-clad man, who somehow slipped his broomstick bondage, tackled Faolán with all of his slow, heavy might.

They both crashed back through the doorway of the giant pumpkin and to the filthy hardwood floor, where upon the Tool began raining blows down on Faolán with gauntlet fists and a wild fury.

Faolán couldn't count the number of times he was struck about the head as the process of thought became more and more hazy. When the man's breath became ragged and his energy spent, he pulled Faolán up

by the collar. “I’ll cut you to bits and burn you to ash, Necromancer. You’ll not see another life after this!” Faolán said nothing, but turned his bloody face a fraction to the left. After a moment, his attacker followed suit.

Blossom sat beside them both, her knees to her chest passively watching them from no more than a foot away. It was a long, silent moment till she raised a small hand and slid the point of her belt knife through the metal man’s visor. The reaction was instant: a lot of screaming.

The Tool of the Metal God yelled and kept yelling as he kicked himself away, steel hands clawing at where blood gushed out down the face of his helmet. Blossom rose to stand at the entrance of the pumpkin, watching him stumbling to his feet, moving with broken strides but with haste, into the woods and mists. At some point, he pulled his helmet free, casting it into the dead leaves and ran, hand clutched over his face.

She shut the door.

x-x-x

“I’ll remember, I’ll remember.” said Alma sitting in a wicker chair and pulling on her shoes.

“No, repeat it.” said the still-not-dead man.

“Alright.” She huffed. “Keep him away from salt and keep him away from silver.”

“Fire and strong sunlight too.”

“I know.” Alma nodded vigorously at him. She adjusted the small pouch around her neck. It was hard to believe that Faolán had sewed it

out of the sling she had brought. He called it a death shroud and that there was power in it. That was not the hard-to-believe thing. The hard-to-believe thing was that he could sew at all. Men sewing, that was too strange, but he did it and he did it with one of his eyes nearly swelled shut.

Alma pet Whisper who sat proudly on the dark tabletop and purred against her hand. He wasn't warm, in fact, he was kind of cold and a little tingly to the touch. Faolán had worked his magic the day after the big fight. He had done most of it while Alma was still sleeping, but she got to watch some. It was strange to think she was petting Whisper, when his little bones were held in cloth around her neck. It didn't matter that her kitten wasn't warm or that he floated through the air sometimes, she was just happy that he still liked to lick her fingers with his rough, little tongue.

"Now he will grow like a cat and he may start hunting like a cat when he's older, not that he could eat it, but keep the bag safe and nearby and he'll be like any other cat...mostly." Faolán said, shrugging the last part.

"I will!" she said placing Whisper on her shoulder. He stayed after a clawing a bit to get a good grip. He was very light.

"Okay, off with you." Faolán said and tousled her hair, messing it up good till she shooed his hand away. "You have a long walk ahead of you and a fire-breathing dragon to battle at the end."

"My mom doesn't breathe fire." She smiled but then took on a worried look. "But her words are going to hurt." She looked up at him. "But it was worth it."

“Take that to heart, Blossom.” Faolán smiled. She smiled back and walked out the door of the giant pumpkin that just looked silly in the daylight and set off to find the trail home. Whisper nibbled at her earlobe as they went. She thought it would be hard without moon marks, but she was sure she knew the way.

x-x-x

Faolán gathered things into a roughly made pack. There were a number of useful items to be found in this silly pumpkin. He pulled the last leather strap tight and looked into the darkest shadow of the room.

“How long have you been there, Grim Witch?” he asked.

“Long enough to see part of a strange story.” said the white-haired woman with red and yellow eyes. “The Web Wood whispered to me the rest.” There was a pause. “I was sorry to hear about your mother. Her dances always made me laugh.”

“I sold the crystal shoes. I did not look as fine as she in them.”

“Ha! You make me laugh, too, boy.” Adeerea chuckled. “You worked strong magics today. That was no mere shade or phantom you made manifest. You bonded a bit of your own soul to it to make it all work just so.”

“So what if I did?” He hefted the pack onto his back.

“It will take what, ten or more years for your power to fully recover?”

“Maybe.” he said. “But because of her I’m still alive and,” he shrugged, “it was worth it.”

“You make me proud, boy.” Adeerea said. They stood there for a time looking out the triangular windows at the landscape. “You know you’ve put her on a path to becoming a witch in her own right one day.”

“The Witch of Thumb? Blossom, Witch of the Green Gate?” He smiled. “Who knows what she will become, Grandmother.”

“That should make for a fine story.” Adeerea smiled. “Now out! What a wretched grandson you are! Telling people I’m dead! Breaking my broom, my door! Robbing me of my things! Out!” She kicked him in the arse with a booted foot. He smiled and walked out under the clear sky.

“Alright men, fall in line. On we go.” Faolán lead the way through the thick brush of the Web Wood while whistling, three, partly armoured skeletons with joints clicking, trailed after him. Night was starting to set in and it was a long way to the Broken Finger mountain. He thought that might be a nice place to build a tower.

Light Paws

by Elizabeth-Rose Best

Light paws are a gift from the gods, my mother would say, and it would seem she was right. Three beats past, my claws curved around my meal. Now my claws grip dumbly at a clump of moss. Where my hard-won grouse has gone, only those tricky gods know.

I glance around the glade, trying to appear merely curious. I fight my feathers smooth; no petty thief will see me spooked. Gryphons do not grow as renowned as I by being teased in broad daylight. Whatever took my grouse is probably still here, watching through the surrounding trees.

Rustling catches my ear, pulling it sideways. I drift my head with it, letting my eyes settle on a bush a few feet away. The dense spread of red flowers covering it disguises any unusual scents that may lurk within, leaving me clueless. But whatever hides there is small.

Small enough to eat, perhaps.

I rise to my feet and thrust my head into the foliage, forcing my beak through twigs and leaves. In the gloom, something darts away, but instinct reacts for me. The creature dangles from my beak before I even think of it.

But not a creature, I realize. Creatures don't wrap themselves in cloths and leather or tie their manes into odd knots. This is a child, grubby and alone, grasping the grouse in her tight, clawless fingers.

I place her on the ground, carefully, for I'm no savage. She glares at me, gripping the meal to her chest, daring herself to bolt. The golden eyes blazing through shifting silver hair send lightning into my soul—this is an elf child.

My heart skips. Elf whelps are rare, hidden behind thick walls and thicker forests. For one to be lost this far from home...Had something happened in the north?

Now is not the time for hostility. I step back and drop to my belly, crossing my foreclaws so to appear leisurely. The child relaxes, blinking, before offering the bird back to me. As silent friends, we share a meal, enjoying the evening light.

Tomorrow, we fly north.

Desperate Times

by **A. R. Lachance**

“The Ellvari are completely unknown to us. Few ever return from crossing the Western Sea and the tales they return with...” Her First Advisor trailed off, shaking his head.

“They are a myth.” Her General scoffed into another gulp of mead. He had been drinking much more of late.

But a thirty-year war would do that to any man.

“If they are a myth,” the calculated tone of her shadow emissary cooled the entire room. She didn’t continue until everyone looked at her: “There is nothing to lose in sounding the horn, but, if they are not a myth, we will gain an ally that would end this war.”

“Or an army that would raze all of Queensport to the ground.” Her First Advisor’s pleading eyes assured her that their options were all a risk he could not firmly stand behind.

Rare for his ilk.

The Queen sighed and looked out the tower window. The sky was uncommonly clear of clouds and blue as any jewel in her crown. You’d almost forget the war on all sides on a day like this.

Queensport was the last bastion of the nine kingdoms; and the seat of the Queen’s Throne that her great-great-great grandmother had forged from a piece of each kingdom under her rule.

The South had remained impartial, pledging allegiance only to protecting them from the ravages of the Plague Beyond the Canyon. The East had refused to bow and had hitherto been a disorganized mess of tribes.

That had changed.

It had all changed.

“The Plague has all but slaughtered the Southern Reaches, any survivors are at our gates, fully exposed to the Eastern Horde slowly raping and pillaging its way to our walls.”

“We’ve evacuated most of the cities and townships in their path now...”

“Now. But my sources tell me the Easterners have made a pact with the Dresen Islanders who will lend their ships to attack our shoreline, if not the port itself.”

The Queen took a deep breath amid the chattering of her council: “Enough.”

She marched further up the tower and across the sunlit bridge to the Queen’s Perch. There, her dragon waited for her. His copper scales had blackened with battle, but his eyes were young and full of fire.

“Therad...” she whispered as he crooned and rested his massive chin in her outstretched hands. She led him down the shortest of the five tower bridges to an open platform. He barely fit, but he didn’t need to go into the sheltered tower.

The Fifth Tower was open and housed a single item: Badly weathered and unused for centuries, she wasn’t even sure it would work.

“*Fueva...*” Speaking the ancient word for “fire” prompted Therad to blast the Summoning Horn in his white-hot breath. The fire never bothered her—the Queen could never be burned—but the sound it made tortured her ears. Therad made a strange whining hiss and quickly retreated, snaking his long neck in irritation.

The last echo of the horn’s call faded into the blue day and the Queen waited with bated breath. She wasn’t sure what would happen. Stories of the Ellvari were all unbelievable: It was said every Ellvari was a dragonrider and incredibly proficient with magic.

But magic was lost to the world and dragons nearly extinct. Therad, the Queen’s Own, was the last.

She sighed. It was ridiculous to hope.

Giving her dragon a piece of meat as she walked past, she began her descent.

They had a war on three fronts to plan.

...But then she heard it.

The whistling on the wind.

“Cannon fire?” she muttered and turned back to the Queen’s Perch.

She almost wept at the sight.

White scales glimmering in the early sunrise, the dragon was five times the size of Therad. His eyes held the same fire but were somehow wiser. The shape of his head was slightly different, now that she looked at it...boxier but still elegant and no doubt powerful.

Therad coiled his neck behind her, almost cowering at the sight of the bigger dragon as it landed on the ledge in front of the horn. The ground shook. It roared to the skies.

And then it spoke: “I, Shar of the First Born, present to you the Ellvari Empress, the Sky and Wind of My Wings, Her Majesty Mayari Eshan’ari Vellarn.”

As the dragon bowed its mighty head, the Empress was revealed, perched delicately on its shoulders.

The Queen could barely breathe but pushed the strangled words past her lips: “Your...your dragon speaks...”

Wrapped in layers of fabric, all she could see of the Empress was her volatile eyes—dragon’s eyes.

The white dragon regarded the Empress and then looked sideways at the Queen. “We knew the clutch we gave you, Queen Gwenyiel, would not grow to our magnificence, but surely you’ve taught them to speak.”

The Queen stuttered. She barely glanced at her court—summoned no doubt by the dragon’s roar—who joined her at the edge of the stairs.

Therad answered for her: He whimpered. The sound seemed to confuse the white dragon, who tilted his mighty head as Therad crawled closer, keeping as low to the ground as possible.

The white dragon reared back its head and ululated mournfully. “This,” the dragon whipped its hissing head back towards the Queen, “where are the others?”

The First Advisor came forward, as nobly as he could manage while shaking, and bowed; “They have...passed.”

“Useless lizards,” the General guffawed. “They fell in the first wave.”

The Empress's fiery eyes glared at the General and a powerful wind flung him back. He dangled precariously at the end of the Queen's Landing, held up by an unseen force.

"P-please!" The Queen threw herself to her knees before the dragon and its rider. "Forgive my foolish general, he is wearied by war and the tremendous losses our people have suffered."

The Empress regarded the Queen; the General staggered forward to his knees, gasping for air. The fabric-enrobed rider dismounted her dragon, floating to the ground.

Her voice was ethereal: "You are not Queen Gwentyiel."

"I am her great-great-great granddaughter, Gwendolyth."

"Then you will not mind the flame." Without further warning, the white dragon bathed them both in fire. The Empress's fabric evaporated revealing her in a glorious dress that would not burn.

The Queen was left unscathed but naked. Her First Advisor rushed to cover her with his long coat.

The Empress waited for them to collect themselves, stroking her dragon's muzzle. The Queen almost fell back to her knees to look at her. Her skin glimmered a deep bronze; her features were fine but strong; her eyes were larger than any human's; and her ears looked like butterfly wings.

She was altogether inhuman and beautiful.

"So, you are of the bloodline." The Empress sniffed and approached Therad. She extended one hand to let him sniff it. In an instant, he thrummed and rubbed against her hand. "What happened to your dragons, Queen Gwendolyth?"

“Two fell in battle; three were injured and can no longer fly. This ongoing war has been devastating on all fronts.”

“Grown outside of Ellvari lands, the injured three should still heal. I wish to see them.”

“Of course, Your Imperial Majesty,” the Queen agreed. Unwilling to show any weakness, she led the Empress down through the towers still only wearing her advisor’s coat. She did her best to hold her head high and walk with the dignity of her station.

They reached the lowest levels of the castle where the three injured dragons languidly slept.

The Empress was horrified. “They need to be in the sun.”

“The people fear them, Your Imperial Majesty,” one advisor carefully said.

“The only other space large enough would be the courtyards and people would riot,” another chuckled. “They are fine here.”

The Queen quickly silenced her advisors following the Empress’s scowl. With a graceful wave of her hand, the bricks to their left peeled away like leaves in the wind. Earth and stone moved ahead of the Empress, and the dragons, squinting and mewling, followed her out.

Basking in the sun, the dragons seemed elated...even as people screamed and ran from the sight of them.

“Your Majesty, please,” one advisor begged the Queen. She shook her head, giving him a tight-lipped glare.

The Empress held one of the injured dragon’s heads, stroking its snout. “My Queen, you must care for your dragons. The sun would

have healed their wounds in days, enabling them to fly once more. I am afraid you have ruined them.”

“My endless and heartfelt apologies, my Empress.” She hoped the personal pronoun would soften the Empress; the Ellvari, at the very least, spoke a little more openly to her.

They spoke at length about how to care for dragons—much of which the Queen had never been taught—until the First Advisor cleared his throat.

The Queen understood: “My Empress, as to the reason we have summoned you.”

“You wish us to be allies in this war.” She turned to face the Queen and her cohorts. “We will make this pact: Our dragons and riders will quell this rebellion and the plague that threatens your borders on all sides. We will furnish your army with the firesilk I wear to bolster your ranks and perhaps your people’s confidence.”

“That is...most generous...but I fear the hordes may still outnumber us, we must plan...”

The Empress raised a hand to silence her. “You must understand this pact, my Queen.”

Matching the Empress’s intense stare, the Queen waited for her to continue.

“We will take your last dragons—all of them—and leave you with full-grown, Ellvari-raised dragons for you and your generations to keep the peace in your lands.”

The Queen’s eyes widened.

“The Ellvari are kin to dragons, they will always call our lands home, and will return when they reach the twilight of their lives. They will raise their clutches here, teaching their young, so that you may always be protected.”

The Queen’s head was swimming; a draconic army would have quelled this war years ago, saving thousands of lives.

“Do you understand, my Queen?”

“Yes, my Empress.”

The pair bowed to each other.

Atop Therad, the Queen shifted uncomfortably in her armour. Beside her, on her much larger dragon, the Empress waited with all the poise of a cat.

The Queen’s General was less impressed by her. “You think one more dragon will make a difference.” he muttered darkly.

Below their perch, the Queen’s army seemed to collectively shake. The Plague had been spotted barely a few leagues away. The throng of ravenous undead moved without fatigue, devouring anything without discrimination.

“He has a point, Your Majesty,” the First Advisor whispered. The Queen knew they were right but one look at the Empress quieted her. She was so unbothered, almost apathetic.

Until the Plague crested the horizon. The Empress raised one hand. Shar raised his mighty head and roared.

The rumbling reply that followed shook the ground they stood on.

“...Where...” The First Advisor gasped as thousands of shadows descended from seemingly no where. How they had hid in plain sight—some sort of camouflage—made him shiver in terror.

They blotted out the sun.

As the undead Plague approached the front lines in their awkward ambling run, piling on top of one another, the dragons descended. Fire scorched their enemies into dust, massive wingbeats blew them back. Some dragons landed, charging and crushing bodies upon bodies.

Not a single one of the Queen’s soldiers even unsheathed their weapons.

The Plague that had swept over the Southern Reaches and devoured everything in its path was burnt away, cleansed from the face of the world, in a single day.

The eastern allegiance melted under the news of the Queen’s success...or the news of her new army. New treaties were drafted; punishments meted out; and a country-wide celebration rang in the new season.

The Empress and her army attended the festivities with all the silent and alien grace the mythical Ellvari were afforded in fairy tales.

At dawn, the Empress and her riders were gone; only the dragons chosen to stay with the Queen and her bloodline remained: All one hundred thousand of them.

x-x-x

The Empress rubbed oil on her dragon’s gleaming scales. Shar purred.

“Was it wise to leave so many of our kin with the humans?”

“We left the old and wise; they can speak for themselves and care for themselves. It was a fool’s errand to leave hatchlings in their care.”

“Had they bonded and properly cared for them...”

The Empress nodded. “It is their loss.”

“Mayari!” One of her handmaidens, fully armoured and carrying her spear, rushed in. “They’re here!”

The Empress joined her advisors on the great wall lining their kingdom.

“Your Imperial Majesty, they...they sent an emissary. They’ve bred their dragons and have come for war. They’ve offered terms of surrender...”

The Empress smiled.

Atop her copper dragon, Queen Gwenyth eyed the mist-covered wall ahead. She smiled. Her ancestors could never find the Ellvari homelands—but they didn’t have the number of dragons she did. After the Great War, her great-great grandmother had started breeding the dragons the Ellvari had left behind. Their number had tripled; every soldier in her army now rode a dragon.

The mist closer to the ocean never cleared; no ship had ever seen the massive carved structure. She had to get her army just above the clouds. The air was thin, but they’d fashioned breathing masks.

The Queen was surprised to see the silver dragon approaching; she didn’t think the Empress would deliver the Ellvari surrender herself: She could respect the other woman’s aplomb.

“Greetings, Empress Mayari.” The Queen smiled.

“Greetings, Queen...how long has it been? Was Gwendolyth your grandmother or great grandmother?”

“Great-great-grandmother,” the Queen retorted sharply.

“Did she tell you of our pact?”

“Yes. A bit short-sighted that you did not sign a treaty forbidding us to invade your lands.”

“Perhaps.” The Empress smiled calmly.

“I will have your unconditional surrender, Empress. You will be part of the Queensland now.”

“Did your great-great-grandmother tell you much of the Ellvari, my Queen?”

“Your aid in our victory against the hordes of the Great War is well established; but that does not preclude you from paying your tributes to us as the rest of the world does. Surrender now or—”

“No,” the Empress interrupted.

The Queen scoffed. “What do you mean ‘no’? You are outnumbered; you confided in Queen Gwendolyth the size of your army; my entire generation has been trained to overtake you. We have thousands more dragons than you left with us.”

The Empress smiled. “Yes, the dragons have been very prolific in your lands.”

The Queen puffed out her chest...until she recognized the look in the Ellvari’s eyes. Terror gripping her, she screamed: “*Fueva!*”

The Queen’s copper dragon coiled back its neck and unleashed a brilliant flame. They hovered around the silver dragon, bathing him and his rider in fire.

Silver claws reached out and gripped the copper dragon's arms and legs. Shar's head pushed through the flames unscathed and clamped the copper's jaws shut.

But it was the sight of the Ellvari Empress, unscathed, that rocked the Queen back in her saddle. She knew they'd have the same firesilk armour but the woman wasn't even blushing under the heat.

"No! Only the Queens of the Nine Kingdoms are impervious to dragon's fire!"

The Empress smiled. "So are dragons."

The Queen gaped. The Empress unleashed a sound that should not have been possible by her human-like features—it was echoed by her dragon—an ethereal roar.

Diving from the wall above, Ellvari dragons poured over the Queen's army. Blasting fire, melting human riders until their armour fell to the sea, the riderless dragons then turned and joined the Ellvari.

The Empress called her kin home.

The copper dragon beneath the Queen turned his sinuous neck to face her. All around her, the Queen heard the screams of her soldiers burning or being cast into the ocean below.

A buck and swipe of her copper dragon's claws sent the Queen after her army.

The wind whistled past her ears; the Queen had several heartbeats to consider her foolishness.

Dragons never turn on their own.

The Ones That Go Click

by Kris Hawley

It is a custom set as solid as any law that no man in Gravel Gate, a village on the edge of our Empire, may hunt the white elk. I hold to this, as I was young once and lived in that hazy corner of the map. Men of the Empire call them albino, but they are more than mere anomalies come from blood and seed or fate's dice roll at birth.

No.

They are marked by what shadowy divinities there might be in that snowy land. They are bearers of history and kin to mountains. A spirit beast recalls what man has long forgotten. I know this to be true.

In Gravel Gate, before it was Gravel Gate, lived the native people called the Kanuckackka. They lived in holes in the ice with birch log huts to mark them. Born grey of skin with hair like straw, they didn't have skill in the way of forging steel, so, when the Empire came two hundred years ago, it took little time for the conquest to finish. They still live there in the woods and snow, trading with the village, even paying taxes when called upon. They are few, but they are there. They learned to speak the tongue of the Empire, but few have come to know many words in their low mumbling and sharp barking language.

It was coming back from the Kanuckackka's headman's hut hole—after trading them candles for beaver pelts—when my father told my

older brother and me to hunt up meat for the evening's meal. He carried on back to Gravel Gate while we set our eyes to the snow, looking for tracks.

We wandered and night closed in quickly. If you have heard tell of strange lights in the skies past the northern mountains, you hear true, as belts of spectral green and vivid blue do dance there. Is it magic? I know not, but on a frozen pond, my brother and I saw seven elk of white fur standing there among a herd of dun, all had thick necks craned up to the sky. It took me time to see the white ones as they blended in so well with the surroundings. They scattered at the "click" of my brother levering back his crossbow, loading it.

Profanity slipped my brother's lips, but he silenced himself soon after as not all had swiftly bounded away into the snow heavy trees and darkness. The seven, white elk still stood there, stock still with their glossy black eyes on the luminous curtains above. My brother moved in, hefting his crossbow. I pleaded with him—we both knew they were not to be killed even if we knew not why—but he hushed me with a stern look.

He loosed his first bolt. It took a large buck in the shoulder with a heavy meaty sound. It didn't fall or skip off. The white elk's gaze dropped from the heavens and turned to look our way. It watched us unnervingly and it made not a sound. My brother reloaded. The next bolt felled the beast; red ran through its fur and dripped into the snow. My brother muttered something about chickens and rainstorms and loaded his crossbow yet again. The only sound on the frozen pond was that of my brother firing and loading bolts again and again. That,

followed by the crunch of snow as each fell in turn, the wind going out of them, joining the breeze blowing between trees that cracked and popped in the cold, nighttime air. A quiet night filled with quiet sounds.

Grinning, he came over to where I stood, telling me that we would not be able to skin and quarter them all tonight but would have to return with the sun. It was I who spotted him first, a Kanuckackka boy with tin bucket in hand who looked to be off to draw water. He was older than me and my brother and we hid behind a tree on the edge of the pond, both peeking out hoping he had not seen us. His eyes did not turn our way; they were locked on the red and white before him. He dropped his bucket and walked out onto the pond and up to the buck. He stood there for a time and my brother muttered a comment about the boy being a crow, going to steal the kill for himself. My brother went silent when the young man tossed off his fur cloak, leaving him bare-chested in the frosty chill.

He howled.

Like a wolf, he howled. His head bent back, arms shaking. The sharp noise cut the night and I hid behind my brother, holding him tight. Anger, mournful anger it was, not that I could put words to the feelings that sound conveyed at that age. I felt fear when the howl was answered back. He was joined and the lonesome howl became many. Then it ended and the peace of night returned.

The Kanuckackka boy went back to gazing down at the dead elk before him. My brother wished he would just go away, but this did not happen, more of this young man's kinfolk silently stepped out from the

trees, each moved to stand before one of the dead elk. Moments later, the Kanuckackka began walking in slow spirals out from where the white elk lay, their trails leaving a pattern in the snow. I did not like this and I pulled on my brother's arm to go. He gave in after some insistence and we made haste to Gravel Gate and home. Father was disappointed that we could not even find a raccoon to fill the pot and we said nothing of what we had seen on the pond or say a word of all the bolts now spent, now locked hard in frozen blood.

Three days after the slaying of the white elk, my brother returned to the pond. Snow drifts had moved in and a raven sat on the antlers of a large, dead-eyed buck. He was sour after that and didn't wish to speak of it much. This was not the last time the topic would arise, however, as things were never the same after that night.

My brother was getting wood from the pile when he dropped a log in the deep powder and bent low to retrieve it. His hand came up bloody and missing two fingers. His cries put a terror in us and the neighbours. He was taken and tended to quickly. We deduced that there must have been a sharp, wood axe laying hidden in the snow, but there was none that could be found. No axe—I looked. I never found the index or middle fingers either.

After that he had a hard time making cook fires or lighting lanterns. I thought it was his injury that led to this difficulty but, as I watched him in the days following, I saw that steel wouldn't spark for him and tinder did not hold the embers' glow. Even alchemist-made sulphur sticks refused to light and burn. I tried to talk to him about it—he called it just a trick of my mind—but I knew something was very wrong.

I felt this was confirmed later when my brother went to use the outhouse and he fell, screaming into the fluffy snow bank. He dragged himself back indoors with hands clawing at the gravel-crusting snow and the hardwood of the porch. He left a trail of red through the entrance way. The tip of his boot was gone as if set upon by a starved black bear. He was missing three of his smallest toes.

When the bleeding was staunch, we confessed about the events of the night on the pond to my father. He became so quiet. He left for a time and spoke to people throughout the village. When he returned, he had us dress and ready ourselves to travel. My brother was loaded into a sled and we made for the Kanuckackka headman's hut hole. The going was fine at first and the horse pulled well at an easy pace, but the grey sky started to drop light beads of hail and the wind licked at the drifts to swirl at our feet.

At the passing of the frozen pond, Father slowed us. The snow was disturbed and there were foul, black pools with browned blood around the edges. Tufts of white hide and pale tendons were littered here and there in the snow. We didn't linger.

We made it before dusk and my father and brother both entered to speak with the headman. I tended to the horse as they descended into the warren of tunnels and cold chambers of Frost Hollow. They were not in there long. Father had me ready things to go even before getting all the way up the ladder and out of the ice, his gestures marked with frustration. We were moving again, home to Gravel Gate. Trudging in the dark, the wind was so loud it was so hard to hear one another that we didn't speak. The weather could hold out no longer and turned on

us. Dark with a blizzard snow dimming Father's lantern light, we kept moving, slow but steady.

I was sweating and my fingers were chilled numb to the bone when the shadows came. I noticed vague shapes too late. My brother screamed and the horse panicked with wild fear that set all of us in a mad scrambling dash under the heavily falling flakes. We did make it home that night and Father yelled at me to stable the horse but my eyes held on to my brother, with blood running between his fingers as he held the side of his head. He was missing half an ear. He muttered in tears that something had leaned in from the night and bitten it off. He said he could still feel its teeth on his skin. Father dragged him inside. I untethered our horse and set to drying, warming, and getting him fed.

That night was filled with tears and we all slept together by what fire we could manage, what fire we could hold in are hearth before it went out and needed to be kindled yet again. Father rested in his favourite chair, hand not far from the handle of his woodsman's axe. The sharp, shiny, steel blade reflected the fire light. That is a comforting image that has stayed with me ever since that night.

When the sun rose, so did we. We ate a cold meal and father told me of what was discussed between him and the headman. He had gone to him to barter, bribe, or beat the man into breaking whatever curse his kin had brought down upon them. The Kanuckackka leader explained that his people had placed no bane on my brother. Father had demanded more after speaking about the ritual we had seen and described to him. That, the headman told him, was not of the craft his people practiced but an apology to the white elk and blessing, a hope

for forgiveness and protection from what was surely to follow. Spirit beasts were of the mountain, snow, and sky. They were the land made manifest and my brother had slain it, seven times over.

Word soon spread through Gravel Gate and some thought us mad or enacting some con, but many knew us better than that and remained kind and supportive. This would not last. In the night that followed, a messenger off to the capital was found bloody in the snow but alive. He was dragged back in mumbles and mutters about the snow and shadows that clicked and popped as they came for him and his wagon. He died by morning. The night after that the butcher's boy left to see the cartwright's daughter. He was never found. When the blacksmith's mother went missing, the town fell into silent, fearful worry.

The house was cold and Father was asleep with his axe on his lap when my brother woke me. He was not trying to but the noise he was making by the window was high and sharp enough to pierce into my dreams. I rose and looked out the window beside him. There in the street walked four, white elk. They were not white because of the colour of their hides, no. They were naked down to their pale bones. Most of their steps were smooth like that of a living thing, with natural grace, but others were stiff and lurching then gone with a jerk. There was a faint sound I had to strain to hear. The click of their joints. Bone on bone. It was a quiet sound, but it was all you could hear, like it got into your head if you watched them.

They moved slow, lit under a near-full moon, and passed our house one by one. The last stopped for a time, lifting its head as if to look our way with its eyeless, hollow skull. My brother flung himself back from

the window, but I could not turn from it. My fingernails dug into the rough wood of the sill. It tilted its head and, with a clicking, then left and joined the rest of its ilk.

When day came, people saw the prints in the snow. The tracks went to the home of the candlemaker, where it looked like they had circled. They must have circled many, many times. The back door of the house was open and swung free in the wind and morning light. A search of the house and town found nothing.

Panic gripped the town. A mob formed by evening and they stormed our house, pushing me over and laying my father out. They dragged my brother from our house with the blessing of the mayor and tossed him into the candlemaker's home. They nailed the doors and shutters closed and set heavy fire pokers as crossbars to keep the way shut tight.

My father argued with the town and the town argued back with rocks and stones. My brother would be kept till the matter was done with, so he could be judged, commanded the mayor, his authority in Gravel Gate as absolute as any king's. The mayor was found three days later; he had been out late to see his mistress. There was just enough of him to recognize if you held the parts close enough together.

Terror took hold and families tried to flee. The first of them came running back into town by noon that same day, the mother missing and children weeping. The way was closed. They were out there, white bone in the white snow, and they had taken another. Day nor night mattered to them; they were there.

The town fell into full chaos. There was drunkenness, murder, and weeping. People walked the streets with swords, axes, and picks, while

others hid in cellars like the worst kinds of windstorms were coming, yet the night was clear. The sky lights danced when Father and I made our move from shadow to shadow towards the candlemaker's house. We were going to free my brother. We should have known the white elk would come for him; he was the one they wanted most of all.

My father was on the porch prying at nails when the sound of clicking stilled us both. We turned. There, in the yard behind the house, white elk stood looking at us with their dark eyes. All were true elk of white fur and misty breath save one, one that clicked near me, bones grinding as it approached. I shook and tried not to look at it, so I tilted my head up to the sky. It did the same. The sky was a glow, vivid colours of green and pink, waved slowly before my eyes. I became lost in it. I don't know how much time I stood there, eyes to the sky, but when I lowered my head, it did the same.

I wasn't scared anymore, or perhaps I was but there was a stillness in me then, my fears had iced over and I spoke. I apologized. I didn't know if it could understand words in the tongue of the Empire, or any words for that matter, but I think that it could feel them, the intent they held. That is what I tell myself anyway, for it turned and stepped away from me. It travelled a short way into the night then fell bone from bone to pieces to lay in the snow. The other elk watched us, then one by one turned away, crossing the yard, slowly making for the distant treeline. We watched them go, and, once away between the tall pines, my father came over and hugged me tightly.

It wasn't a long embrace. He quickly turned his attention back to the candlemaker's door. With little care, he put his axe to the wood till

there was a splinted hole large enough to step through. The inner rooms were dark and, with torch light, we came to find my brother. His back to the wall by the cold hearth, he was drenched head to toe, with lamp oil and twenty or more alchemist fire sticks lay broken around him. He was like ice when Father touched his cheek. I let warm, wet tears run down my own cheeks.

I took the torch from my father and I laid it down. The flame took hold in a moment and the pop and crackle of burning wood, the smell of smoke, filled the room. We left. From the street, we watched the house become a blaze and others joined around us in the orange, flickering glow, not speaking. It fell in on itself sending embers high into the night and was not but blackened beams and ash by morning.

Gravel Gate calmed in a few short days and, in months, the memory faded faster than it had any right to. People began calling it a mass delusion or insanity brought on by being under the sky lights for too long or some kind of snow madness. People arrived and people left again and it became a story told in tap rooms with the details all wrong, save one thing, it is a custom set as solid as any law that no man in Gravel Gate may hunt the white elk.

Father and I left before the start of the next winter and came to live in greener lands. This was all many years ago. Now I stand before you old, my hair gone as white as the snows, but I remember. Yes, I know it all, and now you do too. You are why I have come to the capital.

You cook for the Emperor himself. He has ordered exotic beasts brought to him and for you to put them on his feast table. Stories of spiced wings of Thunder Territory gryphons; cooked, pink bird legs

from the Sabulous Expanse; and basilisk eggs from the Moss islands have reached my ears. That is not why I have come.

You have three, white elk the Emperor's huntsmen have caged and brought here to be put into a stew.

I thought I should come and tell you that which most men have forgotten, unless you would like to meet the ones that go click.

Times a-Changing

by Mae McKinnon

Bane of Indlegard. Destroyer of Worlds. The Great Destructo. Yes, it had been known by many names. Down through the centuries it had glowed and burned. It had helped some of the biggest, darkest despots of all time claw their way up from their humble beginnings to the mad monsters they'd become. It was quite proud of that.

Once, it had defeated the twelve armies of Burgamaddon with nothing more than two matchsticks, a beyond-his-expiry-date magician, and a bowl of hoppies.

But there was always a hero. A band of brothers. An alliance of the weak (which, it had learned, when banded together weren't quite so weak after all). The Dark Lord would be ousted and it had spent a few decades collecting dust.

Right now, it was humming with power. A small, white glow radiated around its round curves, visible only to those with the sight.

Therefore, it was only a question of time before someone found it and gave it a nice, new home on top of a shelf overlooking their latest experiment or, even better, placed it on top of their staff of power. The latter gave it a good vantage point and it got a chance to get out and about.

There were ways to entice a new bearer. To snare them. It could

flicker temptingly with the best of them. Find ways into people's hearts. The deepest, darkest parts of people's hearts.

Now, it could feel something reaching for it. A hand. Yes!

A little to the left. No, no, too much. Come back. Ah, that's better. Closer, come closer. Good. Good.

It was picked up. Held close to an eyeball. Examined and stuffed unceremoniously into a pocket like a common marble.

It hadn't expected that last bit.

The pocket was full of lint and two round pieces of metal that kept chafing against it. This was highly irregular. Soon after it was slammed down on a stack of weird, thin sheets of some sort.

It tried glowing.

Tried radiating power.

It even tried to entice a strange, furry creature to come pick it up and bring it away, but all that ever happened was that it got slobbered on, sat on, and, sometimes, used to play fetch.

Mr. Midnight

A Core Lands Tale by Ian Gough

Astutos came upon the three in a woodland glade camped beside a tranquil pool. A trio of creatures each more hideous than the next, bringing a blight upon an otherwise serene break in the thick wood-woven landscape. Grouped around a campfire in a forest glade surrounded by boulders, the trio sat bathed in the faint glow of dusk's fading light. Keeping a safe distance, he knelt and studied their actions.

One—wider eyed with sharp, pointed ears and nose, its skin the colour of ochre—rotated a spiked blade, cooking a plump pig skewered upon its makeshift spit. Fat dripped from the carcass and hissed into the flames, as it looked on with a ravenous hunger. Occasionally, Ochre's gaze strayed to its companions, watching them huddled around a small, wooden chest, grumbling in voices too distant to be heard.

The creatures appeared similar, each with harshly pointed features, yet the second one's scaled skin was tinged with more crimson shades while the third, the largest among them, was a deeper shade of russet. Of the three, the third was almost goblin-like, yet too large to be such, with the first signs of twisted, goat-like horns protruding from its scale-crusted scalp. Astutos sensed magic emanating from the trio and had heard tales of these foul creatures. These were far more than mere goblins. These were abominations whose nature it was to bask in the

misfortune of others—gaining joy by bringing destruction and misery wherever they travelled, intent on taking whatever they wanted at the expense of others' lives. They were elemental demons, and they needed to be stopped.

Crimson raised a gnarled hand, offering something forward, but Russet swiped it away knocking the contents from its grip, over the fire in Astutos's direction. It bumped to a rest in the grass and the flickering campfire flame illuminated it as a silver locket. With a shriek, Crimson scrambled across to retrieve its prize. Ducking in order to remain unseen, Astutos manoeuvred his way left to gain a better view of the open chest. From his leafy cover, he spied more valuables. Gemstones, goblets of silver, gold jewellery, and piles of coins, such a feast of wealth made him hunger.

Crimson returned to its original position, yelling something indistinguishable at Russet, gesturing aggressively. Not to be left out, Ochre abandoned the sizzling pig to join the debate. They seemed to be in disagreement over the chest's contents. Astutos decided that they were likely counting spoils or dividing ill-gotten gains—a delicate position in any transaction—and something he was well aware of. Astutos sensed the distrust between them.

Good, it would be useful.

Taking a few paces backward under cover of leaf and branch, Astutos removed a dagger from his belt. Blade in hand, he first used it to create tears in his clothing. Not too many, yet enough to be convincing. He'd need to come across as a victim and took a deep breath before drawing the blade across his left shoulder. He winced.

The cut, not too deep, was enough to draw a sliver of fresh blood in a trickle along his arm, soaking the fabric. Finished, he stabbed the blade into the ground, wedging the dagger between plant roots. If he was to gain what he prized, he would need to rely on his wits, not charge in armed. That would be a rash, provocative move and, while he was gifted, confronting three as yet unaware demons without knowing their strengths would be most unwise. He preferred to opt for a softer initial approach.

Astutos took a handful of loose soil to massage between his hands, before proceeding to rub some of the dirt across his clothes and his face. After repeating the process, he dusted his hands and put on a pair of brown leather gloves. Satisfied with his altered appearance, he stood prepared to undertake his ruse. Then a further thought struck. Bladeless, he would need something else to complete his plan, an item strong enough and capable of crushing when the moment arose. It would be a vital component if he was to overcome these demons. Scrambling around between tree roots, his fingers traced a rock of significant size and he dug it from the loose soil with his fingers. Yes, it would suffice. Tucking the rock within the folds of his shirt, Astutos took a deep breath and slowly stepped out from beyond the trees into the glade.

Russet was first to react at his arrival slamming the chest lid shut, almost catching Crimson's clawed fingers in the process. All three spun to face Astutos and crouched, ready to attack at the first sign of any sudden move.

He raised his hands in a friendly gesture—empty, gloved palms on display in a passive show of respect—proving he was unarmed and with

good intent. He stopped after a few paces, tree line at his back, not daring to make any sudden moves until he had gained control of the situation.

“Who are you, what are you doing here?” Crimson hissed words full of venom.

“Forgive my intrusion, my name is Mr. Midnight.” Not original he knew, but it should be enough to fool these three, of that he felt sure. “I am but a weary traveller down on his luck. I spotted your fire burning through the thicket and hoped I might request a kindness.”

“A kindness he says,” Ochre scoffed, but a swift gesture from Russet silenced it.

Astutos identified Russet to be the clear leader of the three.

“We’re busy with business. Why should we offer you any aid?”

“I apologize for disturbing your business, and the choice is, of course, yours; however, all I ask is for a few minutes to rest. My companions and I were travelling the road nearby, when we were set upon by a thief. I managed to escape, but I fear my companions were less fortunate. I only beg the opportunity to warm myself by your fire, to tend my wound, and take a moment’s respite before I continue on my way. I fear without doing so I may not survive the night.”

“Why is that our problem?” asked Russet.

Like any good fisherman hunting for a prized catch, it was time to bait the hook.

“I’m sure you have no reason to concern yourself with my suffering, yet I might be able to compensate you, if you were also prepared to share some of your delicious food.”

“What have you got that could interest us? We are beings of immense power and take what we want, when we want to. You are a pathetic human, standing before us in rags, begging for scraps.”

Ochre turned to the suckling pig and thrust its hand into the meat ripping out a chunk from its hind leg. This it stuffed into its mouth, chewing flesh while succulent juices ran down its ragged chin. It was an obvious display of ownership.

“I have this,” said Astutos.

From his pocket, Astutos produced a glittering gemstone the likes of which they had never seen. The size of a child’s fist, its core glowed with a sparkle so alluring all three leaned forward, desperate to touch it. He made sure each of them had a clear view of the ruby, turning it in the campfire light.

“This is the Eye of Sasiriis.”

“How did you get such a great prize?” asked Ochre, spitting out globs of meat as it spoke.

“I am a man of great wealth, or at least I was before the attack. I rescued it when the thief ambushed us, plus a sack of other, more precious stones which I have managed to bury in a safe place, close by.”

He could see the greed reflected in their faces. No matter how wealthy these creatures became they would always yearn for more. Astutos recognized the desire and would exploit that to the fullest. It was all too easy.

“Let us see it,” said Ochre.

“Yes, give it to us,” added Crimson.

“I will allow you take a closer look, but I must have it back afterward.”

They nodded greedily and Astutos tossed it towards six hands, which snapped at the gem like chicks’ beaks in a nest fighting over who got fed first. Ochre won the first battle and studied it with eager eyes and ravenous fingers. After a brief moment, Crimson snatched it from him before Russet called them together in a huddle. With their backs turned, Astutos strained to hear and could only surmise the path of their conversation. They would be debating how easy it would be to kill him and keep the gem, yet the thought did not instill fear, far from it. He knew these types of creatures. Driven by a lust for more, the mere mention of other stones would prevent his death, at least for now. A murmur of agreement brought them back to face him.

“Mr. Midnight, in view of your troubles, we’ve decided to be charitable. You may sit for a moment, but the price of food will cost more,” said Russet.

Astutos noted masked smugness contained within the faces of all three. They seemed pleased, as though basking in the thought that they had somehow managed to outwit him. He held out his hand and, with a tinge of reluctance, the Eye of Sasiriis was thrown back. They’d given it up too easily, revealing the true nature of their goal.

“How much will a bite of food cost?”

“We’ll barter food and rest for the Eye, plus all your other stones.” Ochre grinned, displaying pointed, meat-stained teeth.

Astutos stifled a smile. Barter was a good word, a soft collaborative partnership of a word, a word behind which they could conceal their

true intent. Yet to him they were ugly, transparent, vile creatures, edging towards a fate of his design.

“That’s a high price for a mere morsel of food, and the opportunity to recuperate by your fire. What else do you offer?”

He could see Russet had prepared for this question.

“You’re alone which makes you vulnerable to attack. Perhaps the thief will return and hunt you down, or with nightfall approaching, the beasts of the forest might take you. So, along with food, we offer our help protecting you through the night and will also guide you to safety at first light.”

This was a pivotal point in the negotiation and one Astutos had to navigate with care.

“Your offer is generous, and I am indeed at a disadvantage, but I cannot give up all of my wealth. How would I continue to live on in the standard of which I am accustomed, if I were to give away all that remained? How about I agree to give you half the stones for a meal and a night’s protection?”

“What about the Eye?” Ochre oozed greed.

“The Eye I must keep.”

A flicker within those blood-red eyes was all too evident. They would never settle for half, they wanted it all, and that played right into his hands.

“What if we choose to use our elemental powers and kill you right here taking the Eye for ourselves?” said Crimson.

“You could, but then you would never find the rest of my wealth, a prize far beyond that of the Eye. I appreciate I am in a precarious

position, one which you could take advantage of at any given moment, so with that in mind, how about if I offer you an alternative? Are you gambling creatures?”

“Why? What you got in mind?”

“You keep telling me you are creatures of great elemental power, but I have yet to witness any evidence of this. How about, for both food and your protection, I agree to give you half the bag of gemstones, and, in addition, I will give the Eye to the one who I conclude is the most powerful among you.”

This was Astutos’s opportunity to pit them against each other, to stir up distrust and keep them occupied and off-guard, unaware of the trap he had crafted. It was the chance to put his original plan into action without revealing the nature of it or what he was really after. It was full of risk, but the payoff would be worth it.

“You doubt our powers?” said Ochre, standing, pointed teeth bared, fists clenched.

“Please be calm, I meant no offense. It’s only that, how often does a man of my humble beginnings come across such might? It would be an honour to see you demonstrate even a fraction of your powers, and it would then be only right for me to offer the Eye as a prize to the strongest among you.”

Crimson placed a claw upon the arm of its companion. Ochre held its position, seething.

“Be still, I like the idea, or are you scared of taking up Mr. Midnight’s wager because you know you’ll lose?”

Ochre turned on Crimson. “Ha! You’re joking. You know I’m the strongest. If I choose, I could cause the seas to rise and wash you away with a flick of my wrist.”

“A bold boast, brother,” said Russet. “I say if Mr. Midnight will offer the Eye then let’s give him some entertainment. He can decide which one of us is the strongest, but I’ll no doubt end up winning!”

“Never, the Eye will be mine,” growled Ochre, taking a place beside the shallow pool. “Watch how I bend the very water to my will.”

Astutos smiled and took a place by the fire. He nestled the Eye in his lap, positioned it to ensure all three had a clear view of its brilliance. His silver tongue had coaxed them into a place, and he prepared to whisper the incantation. Now it was time to relish the experience, for the show he had instigated to commence.

Ochre thrust its hands into the pool, drawing a swoosh of fresh water which spurted high into the air. With controlled movements, Ochre changed its direction, sending the stream of water to soak a nearby boulder. After a deep inhale, he blew icy breath towards its target. This it did for a few moments, encasing the boulder in solid ice. Using carefully manipulated hand gesticulation, it crafted an ice sculpture which grew atop the boulder reflecting a version of its own vile image. Ochre then dismissed the remaining liquid, which trickled its way back across the ground until it merged with the pool once more.

“There, the Eye should be mine,” he said, arrogance evident.

“As impressive as that was, I cannot hand it over until your two associates have at least had ample opportunity to respond. Which of you will be next?”

Crimson stood and pushed the discontented Ochre aside. Moving to the right of the campfire, he regarded the frozen sculpture.

“Ha! Nothing more than a child’s trick compared to my power.”

Pointing to the campfire, Crimson drew out a single flame which manifested into the shape of a tiny, fire sprite. It twirled and danced across the ground, leaving smoke singed footprints in its wake, before leaping up into Crimson’s palm. Held out towards Astutos, the sprite took a bow. It was then absorbed into Crimson’s clenched fist and fired in a flaming ball at the newly formed ice sculpture. The eruption sent ice crystals in all directions and the severed ice head of Ochre’s image landed at its creator’s feet; it almost disrupted Astutos from his whispered chants. The remaining ice surrounding the boulder melted away, water seeping to the ground in a steaming puddle, which soon evaporated into nothingness. To round off its destructive display, Crimson released more fireballs, setting two trees on the edge of the glade ablaze.

Ochre, not to be outdone, drew a stream of water from the pool, soaking each tree until the fire was doused and charred timber remained. Crimson spun at this intervention with another ball of flame crackling in its hand.

“Enough! Stop this pathetic display at once! Stand over there, out of my way, and watch what real power is,” growled Russet, directing the other demon to move aside.

Russet strode out with grim determination, ready to show what it was capable of. Something about this creature caused Astutos to consider it the most dangerous of the three. A bead of sweat broke on

his forehead in anticipation of what he was about to witness. He waited for the exact moment Russet cast its magic, to murmur his incantation.

Calling forth the forces of the ground beneath their feet, Russet summoned from the soil thick tendrils of dirt and tree roots, which spiralled about the other demons' feet. Consumed in a mini ground tornado of dust, solid rods of earth and root shot up, forming prison bars that rose high above their heads. Another gesture tore the boulder from the ground with such force that it caused a tremor, shaking Astutos where he sat. Russet lifted the floating boulder, moving it sideways with grace, as if guiding a feather into position above the root-formed structure. Russet brought it to rest, laying it upon the bars, encasing the other two in an earth-made cage.

“Hey, no fair, let us out!” cried the other two demons.

Russet posed with hands on its hips in triumph then turned to Astutos.

“There, you see the result of true power. I proved what I am capable of and it's time to hand me the Eye before I lose patience with you.”

Perfect, without realization each had done all Astutos needed of them and their final moments were at hand. Blissfully unaware he'd set a trap; their blind arrogance and greed had opened a door to a place from which they were never to return. Now was the moment to reveal the truth of it.

“No,” he said, placing the Eye of Sasiriis on the ground by his feet with great care. “I've decided none of you are worthy enough to have the Eye. I have, therefore, decided to keep it and in addition I will take your chest of valuables.”

“What?! Are you insane!?” scoffed Ochre.

“You witnessed our power, yet still lie and break your wager? I’ll enjoy killing you and taking the gem for myself after all,” hissed Crimson from behind his prison bars. “Release me, brother, so that I can turn this fool into a pile of ash.”

Russet gestured towards the other two but nothing happened. He tried again with more gusto, making a motion that was supposed to pull away the makeshift bars and set them free. Again, not even a hint of movement occurred. From inside, Crimson attempted to scorch the earth but created nothing; its powers nullified. In a panic, Ochre made to summon water from the pool, attempting to draw moisture from it, also without success.

Russet turned on Astutos, claws extended ready to attack.

“What is this, what have you done to us?” it hissed.

Astutos remained calm and smiled.

“I have done nothing, but in your desperation to gain the Eye of Sasiriis you have brought this upon yourselves. You see, when you handled the gem, a piece of each of your souls was captured within it. The Eye is an extremely unique item. Combined with my incantations, it has the ability to negate magic. So, in demonstrating your command of the elements, it reacted as a magical siphon, draining you of all your powers.”

Crimson grasped the bars of its prison in disbelief, shaking them to no effect, while Ochre was angered even further. It rammed a shoulder against the earthen cage yet both remained trapped.

“That is impossible. We are elemental; we cannot be denied,” growled Russet. “Why have you dared do this to us?”

“When I arrived, I spoke of a thief who had attacked me upon the road. This I admit was a falsehood. You see I, Mr. Midnight, or Astutos if you prefer, am in fact the thief of which I spoke. Not only am I a thief of jewels and trinkets, but along with the spell contained in the Eye, I am also a thief of magic. I have been aware of your existence for weeks. Tracking you through villages where you left wastelands in your wake. You believe yourselves to be above all ‘mere mortals’ yet here, you have been outsmarted by one.”

Russet took two steps forward, hate raging within it. “Return our powers this instant or I’ll tear away your throat with my bare hands!”

“I think not,” said Astutos, producing the rock from within the folds of his shirt. “You see, much like me, the Eye is in its way also a thief. Having captured a sliver of your souls and ultimately your power, it also captured a piece of your life essence.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Astutos raising the rock, “that as I no longer have use for you, there’s nothing any of you can do to stop me.”

Russet made to lunge, but Astutos was swift, bringing the rock down with both hands, immense force smashing the Eye into a thousand splintered pieces. In the same instant, the three demons shattered like glass, their bodies littered the ground in discarded shards.

Astutos stood and breathed deeply. By his feet, the remnants of the Eye, a small pile of dust fragments, were carried away upon the breeze.

Shame you were only formed for a single use, thought Astutos, removing his gloves. Together, we could have relieved the lands from the scourge of creatures such as these for good. No matter.

Moving around the campfire, he opened the treasure chest, lifting the lid to inspect the contents. There would be enough gold, valuable trinkets, and gemstones here to sustain a comfortable lifestyle for many months to come. Satisfied, he flipped the lid shut and fastened the catch, taking it under his arm. He gave one last glance to what remained of the demons. For all the wealth they'd taken and all innocent lives they'd stolen, in that moment, Mr. Midnight was truly the greatest thief of them all.

On the Way Down

by Kris Hawley

This was not the first time that Karm woke to find himself manacled, but it was the first time he had been chained by each limb to a solid—and cold, might he add, (for he was naked)—stone-block wall. There were chalk circles drawn around him and numerous guarding runes carved into the heavy oak and iron-bound door of this dungeon cell.

Karm's touch to *The Far* was numbed, and though there was a buzz he could detect, he was muted to the music of magic he was accustomed to. So be it, he would be without his practitioner's tricks. They could block off his connection to that place of power but did they really have to beat him so? The bruises stood purple and fresh on his skin. Wait, no. They didn't beat him.... Karm hung his head, trying to remember. How was he to live this down?

The squeal of hinges and a flood of torchlight brought Karm's head back up. A man in a white cloak marked with a golden lion's head on his breast came to stand in the middle of the cell. His blue eyes passively watching Karm for a moment before, without turning away, he beckoned to the corridor. A flurry of activity happened. Two men brought a table into the room, another placed a chair behind the cloaked man; then two women set parchments, black and red ink

bottles, and a number of quills on the table in precise spots. This was followed by small, jewellery-like boxes and stubby candles that were then lit, giving the room a warm golden glow. After a long moment, the activity was over and the heavy door banged shut. The cloaked man sat.

“How do you feel?” he asked Kram as he pulled a belt knife out and sharpened a quill.

“A little chilly.” Kram said in a mild voice. “I’ve also got an itch on my left ass cheek I can’t reach. Would you mind?”

“I’d rather not.” said the cloaked man dipping his quill in black ink. Reading upside down, Kram could see the man scratch the date onto some parchment. He looked up. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

“Sure.” Kram shrugged, rattling his chains. “Most torture is not done with a quill, well, unless your torturing a lord, then it can be as painful as castration they say.” The blue-eyed man ignored Kram’s comment.

“You are Kram of White Plains; Kram, Mocking Diamond of the Obsidian Assassins; Warlock Bound to the Red Mote; Slayer of Dragon Knight Grelfon; Chieftain Blue Arrow of No Lake; and the Necromancer Plalaa, Butcher of Bloodsnow?”

“And you are Captain Colman, leader of the palace guard, three-time champion of Silver Feather Tourney, blade master under Kordecker, and hater of garlic soup. Nice to meet you again.”

“We have never met.”

“Is that so?” Kram smiled. “My mistake.” Colman’s lips twitched into a frown and he scratched a line or two of words in a fine hand on to the parchment.

“You admit freely you are Kram, worshipper of dark gods, wielder of vile magics?”

“Dark and vile are a bit harsh, don’t you think? Sure, the Red Mote is a rough old bastard, but he’s no worse than your asshole of a deity.” said Kram. “At least mine doesn’t ask for money every week.”

“Watch your tongue heretic or lose it to hot pincers at the end of this.”

“Yeah, an asshole just like that.” Kram sighed and sagged in his chains as much as they would allow. There was a long, silent moment between them as Colman scratched at the parchment.

“Many thought you were dead, assassin. It has been, what, seven years since your last confirmed kill?” Colman shifted a few sheets of parchments. “A Magistrate Gaveldar, yes?”

“I’m not dead, just retired...mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Well, every now and then, you run into someone who really needs a good killing. I normally do it free of charge...a service for the public good, you see. It’s mostly a hobby now.”

“And what part of this hobby brings you to the halls of Lion Palace in the dead of night?” asked Colman.

To this Kram was silent.

“Were you here to murder the King? The Queen? Princess Ruthanna or Wizard Blackchek?”

Again silence.

“You do know I have ways to get answers from you?”

“If your going to tickle me with that raven feather...I will piss on you.”

“The best assassin in the world,” said Colman, throwing down his quill and leaning back in his chair. “And you’re threatening me with urine.”

“I’m good, but I’m not the best.”

“Not the best!” Colman scoffed. “You killed the War Lord Tantallar with his own mace.”

“And you know about it.” said Kram flatly. “I am the world’s most famous assassin, it’s not the same thing.”

“The distinction hardly matters.”

“Oh, it matters. It matters much more than one would think.” Kram pulled his chains taught with steely chime. “The best assassin in the world has a name none know and murders in ways that none can tell. They slip like a shadow. Silent like a whisper. They would pass though bars like smoke. Latches lift for them with a look and locks bring but a laugh. The spark of a soul is smothered by them. Death is their touch.”

“I’m sure,” said Colman mildly. “I’m sure if such a person existed, they would be terrifying, but sadly, we are left with an old man chained to a wall.”

“But they do exist.” Kram’s eyes flicked over the captain’s left shoulder. “I trained them myself.”

In one smooth movement, Colman sprung to his feet, his sword drawn free and whirling, making a quick, strong, horizontal stroke behind him. The chair rocked in place but didn’t fall. His blade cut

nothing but air. Guard Captain Colman and Kram Mocking Diamond were the only two people in the chill of the dungeon cell.

Kram began to laugh.

His laughter was not cruel or harsh but warm, one of a true moment satisfaction. Short but truly enjoyed. Captain Colman did not share this reaction, he turned on the assassin with ice in his eyes and a stony expression.

“And here Blade Master Kordecker has called you the swiftest swordsman he had ever trained. I think there is some debate left on that matter.” Kram smiled.

“You think this is a game?” snapped Colman and he drove his sword down into the writing desk with a heavy *thunk* before marching around to his prisoner. He grabbed Kram by the hair and forced his head back. “Do you really think that this is a game!” Colman was nearly yelling in Kram’s face. “Your fate is in my hands, killer! I will get my questions answered. I will know who you came to murder and I will know who sent you.”

“Questions asked and answers given, Captain Swift. If only you were as sharp as your sword.” Kram smiled. Colman raised a fist and it shook in the air; his eyes blazed. The strike didn’t come and Colman released his grip on the assassin, turning away.

“I was hoping to do this without hot irons and tacks. I didn’t want to resort to the lash and handfuls of salt. My God has mercy, warlock. You will know it by the end.” He walked to the cell door and knocked. A person came and looked through the narrow-barred opening before

unlocking it with three keys. Colman hesitated on the threshold and looked back.

“A spill of goose oil on the servant’s stairs drops the darkest living warlock in the world, toes over top, down four flights of stone steps. The most famous assassin of all, on his way up to the royal apartments, brought low by Millna the maid. How many lives saved by a clumsy girl?” Colman shook his head and stepped out. “You may laugh but the joke is on you. It was told when your neck didn’t break on the landing.” Hinges squealed and the door slammed shut. Kram heard the sound of footsteps grow distant and fade away.

“No, Captain Swift,” sighed Kram. “I was on my way down, but I do see the humour in it. Don’t you, Itchy? Itchy?” The warlock backed himself up hard against the wall twice. “Itchy, wake up!”

A tattoo—two rings of sigils like frozen, black flames around a blood-red eye—began to wriggle on Kram’s left buttock. It slowly pulled and peeled free from his flesh; the ink, tinted red, formed four, thin, glossy limbs around a very nearly human, ruby-coloured eye, like an abdomen to a large spider. It left only pale, white scar tissue when it crawled away down his leg.

“No master, I was trying not to listen.” the familiar said in an annoyed tone. It had a voice devoid of lungs, throat, or a mouth. “I regularly try to ignore you when you’re naked. It’s for the best, I find. You humans always spraying fluids at each other.” The eye rotated smoothly to look up at Kram’s face while holding position in his kneecap. “Life as an all-seeing eye of the Mote has not nearly the perks

it should, well not when slapped on *your* hindquarters.” It crawled up to his chest. “In any case, what are we about today my master?”

“Freedom and justice...namely mine.” said Kram. He gestured with his chin. “The quill if you would?” Itchy the familiar bobbed once and skittered down the bound assassin to the floor and up one of the table legs. Leaving little reddish black prints as it scuttled across the piles of parchment on display, it crept over the sword embedded in the table top and to a short, eagle feather.

“Very fine penmanship.” Itchy remarked as his form shifted to that of a little, liquid man, the ruby eye balancing as the head. The familiar scooped up the writing instrument and lopped to the edge of the table, jumped off, and splatted on the uneven stones of the floor. The eye rolled a moment before rolling right back as Itchy reformed. The small creature recovered the quill and began to climb the steep cliff that was his master’s leg.

“Now just the way I taught you.” Kram urged, as he rested himself on the cold wall so Itchy could work the lock on more steady footing.

“Yes, yes.” the familiar said, fishing the quill tip around the manacle’s keyhole. “I level unto you the arcane workings that bind and break the universe...yet you think I can’t bump and twist a rusty tumbler.” The cuff snapped open and Kram pulled his hand free. He took the quill from Itchy, who clung loosely to his wrist as the assassin set about freeing his other limbs. “What must you think of me?”

“A lot actually.” said Kram, rubbing away the chill and lightly stretching. “When you’re not being a pain in my ass.”

“Yes, that joke remains as witty as ever, master.” Itchy said dryly, shifting forms, snaking his way to curl around Kram’s neck like a red-eyed medallion on a black silk string. “Those runes are going to be an issue.” His eye spun, regarding the door.

“I’ll get to it.” Karm warmed his hands for a moment above the candles before he started picking across the desk. He opened the jewellery boxes that lined one side. In each was a frosted white sphere that, with the lid removed, came to hover an inch or two above its former confines. “Isn’t that something?”

“I sense the influence of the shadowless one. Theses are holy relics of He Who Is Ever Bright.”

“Influence is too damn right.” said Karm, poking one of the orbs with a stiff finger. “This one...encourages...those near by to speak only truth.” The orb wobbled in the air. “The other two...” Kram leaned closer to exam artifacts, the notes of magic still faint to his ear in this warded room.

“Imparts vigour...likely why I was babbling on so much, and this one...hope. Ain’t that nice.” He sighed. “It’s a good setup to get someone to spill their guts. Subtle. Likely not what they were meant for, but it works.” He rubbed his chin. “I let more slip than I should have.”

“Be that as it may, master, time is slipping through the glass.”

“Right you are, Itchy.” Kram put a foot up on the table and pulled the sword free. Next, he turned to regard the door. “Do you think you could—”

“I think not. The bars are finely etched with wards as well. I could not pass.”

“Well then.” He tilted his head and sighed before setting about carving off the runes with the edge of the sword. It took only a few moments of work till he was sweating and, soon after that, he came to the conclusion that this was not going to work, or at least not in before the captain returned.

“Your best bet might be just to cut off his head when he walks through the door.”

“Hmm. Three locks.”

“All on the other side of the door.”

“Maybe I can trick someone into opening it.”

“Without the power to mimic voices, I would think not.” said the familiar, and he was right. In this cell, the near silence of being all but magicless made Kram feel hollow, like he was missing something that should be there, something akin to his own shadow.

He pushed to ignore the emptiness in and around him. He had to work the problem with what he had at hand and not spend what little time there was bemoaning what was missing. This door was solid, bound in iron and wizardry. It was locked up as tight as Kram’s nostrils when walking through the city’s worst slums. It could not be forced to open; it had to be tricked. No door had ever stopped him in the past. Not the one to the Iron Chamber of Tantallar or even the Lava Door of the Fire Elders kept him from his task. This would be no different.

As he stood there in deep contemplation of his cunning—the door opened.

Soundlessly, the hinges quiet as if freshly greased, the door swung away. Queen Annaida Ty Asadon stood with arms crossed, a mildly angry look about her. “By the bloody eye of The Mote, what was taking you so long?”

“I think it’s a concussion.” said Itchy from around Kram’s neck. “The last few steps turned his brain to soup.”

“Really?” the Queen stepped in close and ran a finger across the goose egg on Kram’s temple.

“I’m fine, Ann. The eyeball is being overly dramatic.”

“You fell.” she said, her voice returning to a tone of annoyance, and she half-heartedly stuck him in the chest. “Eighty-three times up those steps and eighty-three times down them...and now you fall.”

“You kept a count. did you?” Kram smiled and stepped out into the hall. The shadows sung to him and the torchlight hummed along. Metal around him rang off different notes and time itself hissed like running sands.

“Details. It’s why I’m better than you!” she said and then looked away, even flushing a bit. “Fell down the steps.” She shook her head.

“A servant spilled goose oil.” He raised a hand. “And some of the blame should be on you. I should not be faulted completely for being distracted about where I was going, as my focus happened to be lingering on where I had just been.” The Queen rolled her eyes.

“The King had a sore throat. The healer prescribed a rubbing of goose oil and a warm wool wrap.” She sighed. “We have been tempting fate far too long.”

“You told me he knows.”

“He knows I have a lover I see every moon or so. Not who. He knows I am a trained practitioner, and he respects that.” She crossed her arms. “I don’t ask after with whom he—”

“But you know.”

“Of course, I know!” She threw up her hands. “And he knows that I know! He just likes that I don’t ask about it.”

“And do you care?”

“No, not really.” she admitted. “He’s a good man. He had to be a good man or I would not have wed him, damn the kingdom and crown. He was my first friend and...I do love him.” She turned to Kram. “He is my King.”

“And I am just your teacher.”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly, “and no.”

“Perhaps tonight was our last night. We both lived lives long enough to know all things die.” He said and kissed her finger tips.

“From student, to partner, to master, to lover, to...nothing?” Her eyes turned sad. “After—”

Her head snapped around first and then the sound came to his ears a moment later: footsteps in the corridor. The Queen whirled around and torchlight flickered violently. All the shadows about the room rippled and bucked. They jumped and slid to her, forming a dark cloak with a half mask that hid her face. The eyes, a haze of silvery light. She had become so quick at gathering them it made him marvel.

“Only you could make me linger in a dungeon. I’ll get your things.” she muttered as she ran towards the sounds. Her steps were silent as she darted across the floor, along the wall and then upside down on the

stone ceiling. She slid and passed, unseen, above Captain Colman as he rounded corner.

To his credit, Colman gave not a blink of disbelief for what he *did* see before him. Kram Mocking Diamond walking his way naked all but for a sword over his shoulder and a grin. Colman was quick, pulling throwing knives from some hiding spot inside his white cloak—but throwing knives are showy things for pretenders.

Kram knew many would-be-assassins who had tried to make their mark with them. The time it took to learn the skill to use them...and even if you did learn, they did little real damage and were all but useless against a man in armour. Kram was not in armour and so he flicked the little blades out of the air with the tip of his sword.

“Guards!” the Captain shouted as he backpedaled, his eyes never leaving Kram. “Men-at-arms to me!” No cries answered back. Colman set his jaw. He reached out and grabbed a torch from a wall sconce and held it in a low guard. “I’ll be having my sword.” he spat.

“I plan on giving it back to you.” Kram answered, drawing nearer. Burning wood met hand-forged steel and hot embers jumped away. Colman was at a disadvantage but his technique was nearly flawless as he defended, giving ground till he made it to the stairwell. He used the environment the best he could, retreating up the steps, the higher vantage and narrow space giving him hope. The guard captain reached out to turn the tables.

Colman came down a step and pinned Kram’s sword arm to the wall. Both men struggled there for a moment till the guardsman dropped the torch. Hot flame and cinders rolled across Kram’s skin

and he jerked away with a hiss of pain. The sword came free from his hand but never hit stone. Colman swiftly snatched the hilt out of the air and turned on the man who was sweeping hot ash off his skin.

Kram saw the blade rise for a finishing stroke but then jolted. Colman's blue eyes widened as Itchy sprung down from the sword's cross guard on to his chest in a form that mocked a praying mantis, hooked limbs swaying and ruby eye spinning madly.

“Bragggahhh laagaa lagga!”

Kram didn't know if the swordsman's return cry was made of fear, surprise, or confusion—maybe all three—but Kram didn't hesitate when given the opening. He reached out and grabbed the guardsman by the collar and yanked with all his strength, shifting his weight as he did so. This sent the younger man tumbling down the stone steps with no grace at all, sword clanging loudly after him. It all ended at the bottom with a meaty sound. Colman lay sprawled out, unmoving.

Coming back down, Kram could see his familiar wriggling in the frog-like shape with four hindlegs, out from under the man. Itchy hopped on Colman's breast like a triumphant knight standing upon the horrid monster he had just defeated.

“Done, are you?” said the Queen striding up, a burlap bag in one hand, her shadow cloak gone. Kram picked up the sword at his feet.

“Just about. I may have rambled a bit in there.”

“Don't.” the Queen commanded.

“Why?”

“Many reasons! He is *my* subject after all. He is a royal guard...my guard. He was doing his job. Duty and all that. He's a good man.”

“A good man?”

“Well, he would be nicer to you if you weren’t an assassin found in the palace fifty yards from the King’s bedroom in the dead of night.” said the Queen. Kram made frustrated sounds of internal debate. “Also, Ruthanna fancies him.”

“She’s twelve!”

“Nearly thirteen. Anyway, a princess is allowed to daydream about handsome swordsmen. It’s a royal right.”

“Gahh, fine!” Kram lowered the sword point to the floor and leaned on it. He took a breath. “So, what now?”

“Now you get dressed.” She tossed him the burlap sack. “You look cold.” Her eyes darting down him for a moment, coming back up to be joined by a wicked smile. Kram grumbled only a bit when he had to loosen his britches again to allow Itchy to rejoin with him.

“Do me a favour, I told him I would give him back his sword. Put it in his bed for me, under the covers. That should keep him wary for a spell. Oh, and if you could hide garlic cloves about his room. That should confound him for days.”

“You’re a cruel man, Mocking Diamond.” remarked the Queen, but she smiled as she said it.

“So, all that is left to do is to escape unseen through a buzzing morning castle with guards on alert.” he said, looking to her. “Thus, parting ways.”

“You know,” said the Queen, looking up at him. “Some religions and strange cults say that when a thing dies its spirit will travel to a place of paradise or...the darkest pit.”

“There is a tavern called ‘The Darkest Pit.’”

“There is an inn by Tall Wall called A Place of Paradise.” she said, reaching out to hold his hands.

“It was always hard for me to slip in, it will be harder still for the Queen herself to slip out.”

“I will...have a talk with my husband. If the court ever found out, they would behead me.”

“They would try.” smirked Kram.

“I think this could work.”

“It could.” he agreed.

“Again, lingering in a dungeon.” Itchy’s voice called out, unseen.

Kram stepped back from her and bowed before moving into the stairwell, shadows folding in around him.

“There is a giant said to be causing havoc three days ride north of Cold Field.” the queen called after him quickly.

“Then let us dance in the moonlight once more.” replied the darkness with red eyes.

Starstruck

by **Elizabeth-Rose Best**

If the day had started like any other, I would have been more surprised. But from the creep of sun's first light, something felt amiss. Where was the warmth of summer in those bright rays?

Though the rest of my symphony noted nothing on the matter, there was a coldness to the air, and a thinness to the light, and none of it was wholly natural. The mountain should have hummed with heat on a day like this, but, here at the top, we sat in a tight, weak haze, just enough to make our scales blaze silver white. Even my dark brown scales flashed as ice with each step I took.

It was around noon that it finally caught the attention of the other dragons. I lounged to one side, enjoying some quiet away from the nattering hatchlings of last year's clutches. La'unn's echoing voice called to me across a lull in the sharp peaks, "The mist is slow to skulk away this morning."

Stepping down the shifting rocks, I neared him, feeling a little heat of my own grow in my face and forelimbs. La'unn was the top choice for the females my age, and my reaction to his wide wings and tall crests was instinctual. My own spine rose and brightened, flushed with blood, no matter how hard I tried to stop them. "Something is...odd." Our eyes met briefly, his bright amber set in deep red, mine cool green

surrounded by dark earth. “I hear soft voices on the wind, but they belong to no one.”

“I heard Dor’ya practicing his songs this morning,” La replied, a warmth of amusement growing in his honey eyes. “He needs the practice if he is to sing a partner.”

I wasn’t sure if this talk was a deliberate shift or a natural one. Flustered, I fidgeted, dislodging stone. A rock tumbled away down the mountainside, bouncing and crumbling as it went. La noticed nothing of it, but I watched its descent with lazy interest, in part to keep my eyes from La.

“He is such a nimble hunter, he need not woo his bride with songs,” I muttered. The rock finally stopped its journey in a well of a hundred other tumbled stones. “He can crush the rock in his bare claws.”

Looking out at the sky, La nonchalantly asked, “Do queens like yourself enjoy that kind of thing?”

Too embarrassed to reply, I shrugged my shoulders, feeling the scales scrape. Now the right wingblade itched, and I attempted to scratch it with a degree of subtlety. Unsuccessful, I twisted my head back and chomped at it, seeing the job done thoroughly.

While I was distracted, La took a rock in claw and held it tight. When he knew I was looking—*crack!* He crushed it cleanly into crumbs. I rumbled quietly without my consent, adding more glimmering honey to his already sparkling eyes. Humbly he said, “Interesting. I’d not tried before. Surely, you can do that too, Alima?”

The heat in my scales and frills grew all the more uncomfortable, and I was thankful for the cooling mist. My claws fumbled as I chose a

rock, and several more joined their fellows further down the mountainside. Finally, my claws settled on one, but as I pulled it up, I found it yielding to my touch. I held it up to examine it, finding not a rock as anticipated, but a dense knot of woven reeds and fleshy limbs, hidden under a rough woollen hide that mimicked the stone.

Beady eyes stared back at me in terror. My trembling paw went numb, as if it didn't want to feel anything more. Both this thing and I stared dumbly at each other, unable to make a sound, a move, anything.

La'unn mistook my shaking limb for effort and chuckled. "Come on, I saw you rip that tree up the other day, you're no weakling."

"I...La, it..." Words dodged out of my racing brain, leaving me speechless. Instead, I thrust the creature forward and into his view. La'unn looked, looked some more, blinked a few times, then fell silent.

"I think it's a fae," he finally concluded. While my claw held the thing aloft, La sniffed at it, wrinkling his nose. "I've only heard tales. Egg breakers. Hoard robbers." Leaning away, he quietly added, "With so many hatchlings barely roaming their nests, we can't leave it be. Just crush it or toss it down the mountainside."

At once, the fae in my grip grew alive, struggling against my claws and scales. This was no brainless creature; it understood our every word. Every action, though panicked, was considered, not irrational like prey. It yelled to me in its rasping voice but the words were unclear, high and shrill like bird call to my ears.

As I watched it, it slowed its motions and traced out some pattern with its upper paws, clawless digits forming clear shapes. After some

deliberate routine, it stopped, held its pose, let out a long, slow breath, and disappeared from my grip, leaving only mist to sift between my claws.

La'unn and I stared at where it had been. But no matter how we looked, it was certainly gone. The memory of the fae lingered on my soft pads, while echoes of its shrill voice cheeped in my mind.

“Magic,” I whispered, flexing my claws to shake away the sensation. The ghostly touch left them, but my pads still hummed with a chill from the haze. “Did it make all this mist?”

La glanced around, but his gaze always wandered back to the rocks at our feet, hunting for movement. “Then it is up to something. We should tell the others.”

Bright pinks and oranges dappled the sky as the sun retired for the night. Stars crept out one by one, while the moon arched its way up from behind the most distant mountains we could see, and even beyond that, perhaps.

The mist had dropped, clinging to the upper slopes of the mountain, shining golden in the evening light. It would be beautiful, and many of the other dragons thought it so, but the nagging question tainted it; what did that little fae want? Why come all the way up here, and into a nest of dragons no less, if you were not after a mighty prize?

And more worryingly, what *was* that prize?

Although La'unn had spoken with the other kings and I with the other queens, few took our discovery seriously. My own dam thought I

had dreamed it, and a queen my age, Rezine, thought me a liar, for why would La'unn want to spend time with me?

The question of course riled me, as was its intent, but the willful dismissal of my tale was more infuriating. We dragons live on pride and glory, yet many tales recall how small vanquishes big, weak overcomes strong...How the tiny metal spikes of man can end a foolish dragon. How magic breaks scale and bone.

So the evening was a tense one. The voices on the wind fell quiet—except for Dor'ya's rumbling efforts, but how I really wished he would hush, too—and the other dragons carried on as normal, picking things from their teeth, cleaning their scales, recalling their favourite heroic tale.

Bored, I retired to the ridge above my cave. In the warm nights of summer, I often slept up there, only using the cave when the winter winds bit through scale with its icy teeth. I enjoyed the deepening blue overhead and the sharpening points of growing stars.

Later that night, a few stars raced by and away beyond the distant mountains. I wondered where they went and how they rose up into the sky again.

Night dulled my symphony, and soon we all slept. Far below, a bear shifted through the stones on the foothills, searching for moths, and somewhere an owl hooted, its call echoing on and on in the sleepy valleys.

I had dozed off several times, always jolting awake when stone crunched or wind rushed. On my third jolt, I glanced around, noticing the mist.

It was higher now.

This wasn't too unusual, for nightly mist was a common sight on clear nights. Given the day's prior events, however, it sent spikes of dread into my heart. I opted to remain awake and would instead sleep in the daytime when more eyes could watch the mountain for me.

Silence rang like a bell. Even the wind fell eerily mute, though I felt its soft pull at my frills and wings. More stars raced by overhead, cutting lines of fire through the deep blue and black.

One star drifted too low and parted from the others. After a few wandering seconds, it plummeted, dropping like a stone off the slope. It was tiny, only visible because of the heat it traced, and it crumbled into a smaller and smaller body as it fell. Finally, it landed on the mountain opposite our own, dashing the sides with its hot bones. The remnants of its fire flared out on impact, then fell silent and still and cold. Disturbed debris chattered down the mountainside.

Over the following hours, seven more stars fell. They landed far off across the mountains, some dying silently, others fighting the inevitable with fire and noise. One bright as dragon's breath landed only three peaks over, its blazing impact booming through the still, night air. The ground shook, dislodging more loose boulders even on our slope.

Heads rose from the hunched bodies of my peers but none seemed concerned with the events. By the time they had cleared their eye films

and looked where needed, there was little to be seen. One by one, the heads lowered back to rest, leaving me alone again. The fools would sleep through anything.

Another hour passed without concern. The stars rested too, only following their standard path over the mountain. My head lulled, the mist lingered a few leaps away, and my eyes grew heavy, heavy...heavy.

I jolted awake again. Something overhead rushed, roared, whistled. I looked up into a sky just softened by the lilac kiss of dawn, to see a star charging for me in a blaze of pale fire. My heart thumped life into my half-dulled mind and launched me to my claws, readying myself to alert the others, when a rock darted from the mist below and hopped atop the ridge.

Raising its forelimbs overhead, the little fae let its cloak of wool fall to the floor. Across its back it carried a nest, some woven willow or grass, made in the shape of a hollow bowl. Shaped things of wood hung from around its belly, while a little tail like that of a monkey trailed down the backs of its thin legs.

Working more signs with its strict paws, the fae faced the star head on, thrusting out its smooth pads as the power in them grew. The light of magic bloomed in its hands, dazzling, its power singing softly. The star dropped and dropped until, with shocking finality, it struck the light of magic in a burst of flame.

Serpentine fire twirled and writhed against the tiny figure before being sucked into the fae's light. In a blink, the magic faded. It was all gone, leaving only darkness and silence to blind my senses.

Now a silhouette of black against the stars, the fae stood still, holding the star in its paws. It turned the star over, examining it, running a smooth mitt over its rough surface. It was large for the fae, buckling its knees and bowing its back, so it placed it on the ground at its feet and shrugged the woven bowl from its shoulders.

Suddenly, it must have remembered itself, for its head bounced upright with wild eyes searching the ridge. After a swift scan, the eyes darted back to me, only a few paces away.

We stared at each other. There was nothing else to be done. The fae had enough power to quiet a raging star, whatever was I to do against such skill? I kept my distance and watched, studied, as the fae did the same.

It was the first to move, placing its woven thing at its side. It flipped open the top like an egg or mouth, then heaved the stony heart of the star into its grip and placed it in the bowl of willow.

Once the top had been fastened down securely and tied with more of the fae's vine-like bindings, the fae wound its limbs between more vines coming from the woven-egg-bowl. With the star securely on its back, the little fae gave me one last look before gathering its woollen cover and darting down the rock, lost to the mist.

The following day matched the prior, with cool mist and bright skies. I slept through much of the morning, but the clamour of needy hatchlings woke me by noon. At the request of the overworked mothers, several queens and myself flew out to hunt on the slopes and peaks around our home.

I took the opportunity to visit the battle site of yesterday's biggest star.

I hoped to not draw too much interest. This chase was mine, and I did not want my fellow queens racing me to victory just before the Choosing Season began.

The powerful lift of air in my wings comforted me, while the cool rush of high winds opened my lungs and my mind, freeing my spirit. For fun, I twirled and looped, bursting through bright clouds in a spray of raindrops. The flight to the peak in question was not a lengthy one, and I hoped that taking a twisting route would remove any suspicious notions my watching kin might have.

The mountain and I eventually met. Though a thin mist covered the lower levels, I was familiar enough with the slopes to recognize the impact site at once, even from my lofty position. A jagged ring of rock had risen up to fight the star, while smaller rubble and shards had been blown away. A patch of scrubby woodland lower down the slope had taken some of the damage, leaving the outer trees to fall defeated against their brethren.

The closer I spiralled, the greater the depth of the battle pit. Burned rock disguised some of the center, but an adult dragon could have easily stood within the ring of toothy rock. If a star struck our peak, or the nesting cave...I dreaded to think. No thick scale would protect against an attack like this.

Our family chose our mountain for its safety. We endured the thin air and harsh winters so we could live without the fear of surprise. In the autumn, we sang to the stars each night, sharing our promise vows

with them. They were our small, distant comfort in long winter nights and bringers of bright joy in the creeping spring.

I descended lower, my mind racing faster than the goats I often hunted. As I slowed, I spied movement in the rocks—probably prey animals fleeing my arrival. Ignoring them, I dropped my hind legs into the crater first, then my fore, settling myself in the deepest, darkest pit of the star wound. It reeked of hot earth and something else, too, a smell I considered human. It hung about their shining silver bodies and their long, deathly claws.

The smells filled me with unease. I kept my wings open, holding them out should I need them. Turning on the spot, I studied the floor of the crater but found no notable trace of the fallen star. There were, however, sets of prints from darting feet, unlike any I had seen before.

Ah, so the fae was here, too? Or were there others, perhaps? I should remain watchful. If the fae wanted these star bones badly enough, I could not guess how protective they might be of them. I bristled, lifting my spines and flushing my frills with heat. Ignoring the floor, I studied the walls of the crater, noticing exposed roots, veins of shimmering rock, even old bones.

It was disturbing to think of the damage these stars caused. I looked overhead, but the daylight hid them. Were they preparing for an attack when we could not see them coming?

With nothing much else to do, I opted to hunt as needed and decided to return when I had more questions to ask. After one last turn in the crater, I lifted my wings high for the first flush down, turned my snout skyward, and—

A fae stood on the rim of the crater. It stared down at me with pale green eyes, unreadable. Its tattered brown hair dragged in the breeze, and its mellow earth skin looked faded in its own mists. With no fur or scales of its own, it wrapped itself in skins and grasses tangled so neatly they hung like water.

We stared each other down, reading. Sniffing, I sensed no fear from it and felt no fear in turn.

In the sky behind it, a star raced. It was faint, barely noticeable, but it zipped by nonetheless. My eyes darted to it, and the fae followed my gaze, turning its back to me. My predatory instincts demanded I leap for it but I resisted, clenching my claws into the dark, crumbling rock.

With the star gone, the fae returned its eyes to me, then rummaged in its pocket, producing a lump of shining stone. It looked to have been shaped by claw or tooth until it resembled an egg, inside which a sleeping baby dragon curled. I tilted my head, lifting my frills curiously, and this drew a thrilling sound from the fae. Good humoured. Friendly.

For a few beats, I studied the stone, touching it with my snout, sniffing it. It smelled sharp and crisp like an autumn chill but also...I couldn't place it.

When I could answer no more of my questions, the fae pointed to the sky and squeaked a few times. I tilted my head to listen but could only grasp the odd memory of a word in the bouncing echoes. Something about stars. Magic? It did odd things with its forelimbs, playing out the events as some bizarre dance, but I did not understand. The little thing sighed, stepped closer on its thin legs, and held a paw

up to my snout. A light hummed from the smooth pads, drawing me in. Slowly, the fae reached—nearer and nearer—until it hovered a scales breadth from my snout. Although I still do not understand why, I closed the gap, permitting its frail, little mitt to cup my scales.

And even though my eyes looked to our bright noon world, I saw visions of darkness. Night stretched overhead, its deep body full of twinkling points, most static, some racing. I saw a fae on the ridge top watching, gathering the fallen bones. Star in paws, it dashed back into the mist.

Light flashed. At high speed, the sun rose and set five times. During those five days and nights, more stars raced and fell, dashing the mountains. Again, the fae collected them.

The sun rose and set again, but their skies were still, and no stars fell. The flashing days and nights that followed showed only quiet to come.

Suddenly my sight jumped, taking me to a forest, bright and spring-like. I saw fae of all sorts working the star bones with detachable claws of all kinds, making more egg stone, or bird stones, or stones of creatures I had never seen before.

Another jump. The shaped stones were held softly as paws worked magic. I know little of magic but could see this was a new sort to what I had seen before.

The fae's paw left my snout, dragging me back to the bright mountains and soaring, afternoon sun. I staggered back a step, shaking my head; I understood. The stars would not fall for long, and the fae

needed to collect them. Other things would be made from the star bones, and these in turn helped the fae with their magic.

This little thing was a collector of stars, not the egg thief or assassin of talk.

Our eyes met again, briefly, but neither of us said anything. Eventually, in the dazzling noon light, the fae smiled, bowed, and stepped a few paces back. Then, with the speed of the lowland gazelles, it was gone.

I returned to my symphony with several goats in claw, as instructed. We ate, we cleaned, we rested, and all was as it should be. The days and nights of starfalls came and left as foretold, and the little fae darted up and down the misty slopes unseen by my peers. Our eyes would sometimes meet again, sharing a moment.

When the stars were gone, the fae was gone too, and I never saw it again.

Caverns Deep

A Seven of Stars story by Mae McKinnon

There was a tremble in the ground, so tiny it was barely noticeable. But it made the alarm go off. An insistent beep, beep, beep that didn't stop until an annoyed Julius slapped his thumbprint on the device.

“Yeah, yeah, you stupid thing. We HEARD you the first bloody time!” he growled.

A few of the work crew checked over their shoulders, saw the expression on their boss's face, and quickly got back to work. However, there was always someone willing to say what they were all thinking, even if they'd never, ever, admit to it—not even after a heavy night of drinking.

“Hey, Julius. You don't think there are, you know, *beasts*, down here?”

The miner who'd spoken was keeping one eye on the reader in his hand while another flickered over the walls of the cave. Large, blaring lights cut through the darkness, but they were mounted on moving vehicles and, when in motion, it gave life to a myriad of moving, living shadows.

What if there *was* something out there? Down here, there weren't any safe places to run. Not that many places to hide either.

What if it could tunnel through stone? What if it was just waiting to

grab them, one by one, and pull them into the rock, leaving nothing but a smear of red behind?

“Relax. You’ve watched too much sci-fi. Nothing down here that’s alive that isn’t a worm...Teeny, tiny, wormy microbes in the rock. You’re not scared of some teeny, tiny microbes, are you?”

“Shut up, Stanton!”

The team burst out laughing. Tensions eased. Yet their eyes were devoid of mirth altogether.

Julius patted the closest machine, as if it was an old, friendly pet that’d defend them if anything went wrong. It looked much like someone had cobbled together a miniature engine and strapped a load of instruments on top, then forgotten what he was doing and painted half of it yellow, leaving the rest of the inner workings of the machine exposed.

This was pretty much the case, actually. But it worked and that was what mattered.

“Don’t you worry, guys—”

“Ahem...”

“—and gals. If there was anything dangerous down here, old Miles here would let us know way in advance.” Julius patted the machine again. “Let’s pack it up for today. If there were any rare-earths down here, we’d have found them by now.”

This was followed by a muted cheer and the rest of the team began packing away their equipment. Not having found anything was a bit of a drag, but this had been a long operation and everyone was ready to go home.

Julius pushed the darkened goggles onto his forehead. He mopped his face with the dusty, camel-coloured scarf wrapped around his neck. No one on Casticia had ever seen a camel, other than in pictures, but designers still insisted on referring to that particular shade of beige by the name of a long-lost animal.

He sighed. Today had been going badly. Glancing over to their stocks, barely a third of the indicators on the enclosed crates on the transports were blinking green, signifying that they were full. A bad haul. He knew they should have picked another site...never mind that it was a large tunnel and cave system they'd found. Size wasn't everything...Obviously.

Bad luck, that's what it was.

"Look, mate," a heavily-gloved hand slapped him on the shoulder. "The ExGees¹ banged up this job. So much for their fancy new remote sensing station."

Julius shook his head. His second had a point. "Okay, guys. Take Five and rolling."

"Sure thing, boss."

The miners swarmed over the big machine up front, trying to coax it into activating.

"Start you useless piece of shit!" A spiked steel sole clanged against Five's hull, the echo jumping into the cavern at the impact.

Five was the biggest mobile borer they had. It was also the slowest and the most temperamental. As it roared into life, the drivers began

¹ Explorative Geophysics...no, Julius wasn't entirely sure how they worked either.

the onerous task of turning it around before they could head back out.

“Try to go *around* those monstrosities this time,” one of the miners yelled up to Five’s drivers.

“Yeah, no one here wants a stalagmite up their ass!”

Whatever the drivers yelled back was lost amongst the sounds of the rest of their equipment righting itself and beginning the trek back out of the cave system, their mechanical legs whirring and clicking.

With all the noise of men and machines, no one heard the next rumble until the claxons went off. And by then it was too late. The ground, walls, ceiling—no, the whole world—began shaking, sending stalactites crashing onto the cavern floor. Cracks appeared in solid walls as the stone was stretched and squashed until breaking point. The air filled with rock and dust and falling debris.

The miners, to a man, dove for cover.

After ten seconds of sheer terror, the world stilled. The only sounds, a few stray rocks plinking against Miles’ hull, bouncing off the cover and lodging themselves somewhere in his gears.

As the dust began to settle, the coughs began.

“Sound Off!”

Much to Julius’ surprise, a fired succession of replies told him they were indeed all there and in one piece.

As the miners began picking themselves up, it was obvious that they’d been the lucky ones. Miles was listing dangerously, one side slid halfway into the ground, while several of the smaller haulers had been knocked over, their legs waving in the air. Of Five, there was no sight. Where the big mobile borer had been, there was nothing but a dark,

gaping hole, as if a door to the underworld had opened up and swallowed it whole.

“Boss! Boss! Look!”

“Bloody hell!”

“Where did that come from?”

Julius turned from clearing the screen of his reader from the dust so that he could actually use the stupid thing. His jaw dropped.

Where, before, there had been solid rock, there was now a jagged mouth leading into...something...beyond.

“Damn. That’s one big hole,” one of the miners breathed.

“Yeah. Big enough to drive a destroyer through.”

“Idiot! It just looks like ‘cause of the light.”

Or, more accurately, because of the lack of it, Julius thought. As they trailed beams on it, the light lit up nothing but blackness. The cavern beyond was *that* large.

“Didn’t you check that wall?”

“Sure I did! Said it was miles of solid, igneous rock. Not a trace of ore or a bloody big hole. Reader must be busted.”

Since none was injured, Julius decided to get most of the crew to work on getting the machines back up and running. He sighed deeply over the loss of number Five. He just had to hope that whatever it was they’d found was worth it. He couldn’t imagine what’d be worth the loss of a good borer—they were hard to come by, even today.

While the rest of them got the operation back on its feet, Julius and a couple of the others began investigating the new cavern.

Technically, they shouldn’t. But they decided to anyway. There was

no way they were going all the way back to the base without knowing.

“We lost Five for this?” Guy swept the light from his torch over the nearest rock formations. “Doesn’t look very interesting to me.”

“What does the reader say?”

“Not much,” the third of them shook the uncooperative piece of tech. “Pretty standard so far. Wait! There should be. Yes. Over...that way!” He swung it about, trying to pinpoint the exact direction.

“There! About five hundred meters.”

“What is it?”

“No idea. Reader doesn’t say.”

“Let’s check it out.”

They settled out over the almost smooth, wavy cavern floor. Where before the rock had been almost spiky, here it was polished. Like a giant cathedral had been left under water for millennia, shaping the sharp edges of carved stone into a natural wonder.

They came upon the beginnings of a large lake to their left as they moved forward: a mirror of calm. Somewhere out of sight, a droplet plinked.

“We’re getting closer. It should be right around here.”

“Get the lights up here. I think I see something.”

Julius looked up...and then up some more.

Partially enclosed in calcite, he came to realize he was looking at a bone. A rib bone. At least he thought it was a rib bone, despite it easily being bigger than he was and then some. Even if he’d wanted to, he wouldn’t have been able to put his arms around it...*Two* men wouldn’t have been able to put their arms around it.

As he slowly came to see what they were looking at, the shape disappeared into the darkness. Parts were lost under several columns. Other portions twisted and turned around them. Here, disappearing into a cavern wall. There, poking out behind a stalagmite.

“What the—”

“By the stars of Solon. It’s a *skeleton*. It’s a bloody skeleton!” Julius exclaimed excitedly, his voice barely believing him. “You realize what this means?”

“It’s too big, boss. Got to be more than one. Got to be.”

“It’s got to be old...I mean, this place didn’t form in a hurry. It looks all...wrong.”

“What is it?”

“No clue. See if you can find the head.”

Beams of light played over the nearby part of the cavern. Somewhere, above them, there must be a ceiling, but they didn’t see it.

“This looks pretty solid,” Guy slapped a gloved hand down on a piece that might have been—might have been—the tip of a small horn in its previous life.

Something shifted, out there in the dark.

The miners looked at each other.

“I told you. Don’t. Touch. *Anything!*”

The cavern shuddered.

“Let’s get out of here!”

They began backing away, slowly. They didn’t want to disturb something else.

CRACK!!

A piece of the skeleton shattered against the rock below.

“Don’t look back. Don’t look back! Just keep running!” Julius shouted as they hightailed it out of there.

“It’s gonna EAT ME!” Bee screamed. He tried to run even faster. He’d looked back.

They managed to reach the rest of the team, sending men and machines into a frenzy. Behind them, loosened from the rock’s embrace after an eternity, stone and bone collapsed, tumbling over and over in a cloud of dust and debris.

As the dust began to settle, through it poked the largest skull they’d ever seen. The upper parts crowned by spikes of every shape and size imaginable, the lower filled with teeth—fangs—each as big as a man. The skull seemed to grin at them. A huge, malicious grin from ages past.

“Guy. Get on the horn to the research center up in Hollow Mountain. Ask for a guy called Crichter. Jeran Crichter. He’s gonna want to see this!”

Julius turned back, his eyes playing over the heavily armoured skull.

“What the hell did you find, buddy?”

“What’s so exciting about a bunch of old bones anyway?” Bee wanted to know.

“Are you kidding? Spiky here is gonna make history.”

As the mining crew retreated from the cave system, not one of them could ever have imagined just what the discovery they’d just made would mean.

Today, the world changed.

Behind them, the dragon's skull almost seemed to smile.

Grimalkin

by **A. R. Lachance**

Hooves thundered through the dead of night as they galloped headlong into the woods. The red rider leaned over her painted steed whispering magical encouragement to run faster and faster.

The angry shouts of their pursuers chased after them.

With a full moon above, eerie shadows danced in the corner of her vision, rustling in the brush made her heart skip a beat—they were close.

Stopping her horse, the red rider grabbed her bow and loosed several arrows behind her. Sharp cries confirmed she'd hit her marks and she smiled.

Hearing distant scuffles as they regrouped, she guided her mount to cut through the forest. Dodging trees and roots, he did not slow and they careened downhill, leaping through a stream, and finally reaching an oat field. Slowing her horse, the red rider slid off, wincing from her wounds, and tucked a ball of old, brown fabric among the stalks.

“Take care, Kieran. It’s up to you now.” The red rider placed her hand on the bundle and muttered a warding spell.

Dogs barking—closer now—forced the red rider to mount her steed. She rode away from the field, away from their last hope, into the darkness.

X-X-X

“Mew?” The tiny, grey kitten batted at her boot lace.

“Where’d you come from?” Vaya picked up the tabby and he bopped her nose with a soft, white paw. A glare momentarily blinded her and she looked at the leather collar’s pendant.

“Kieran? Is that your name?” She placed the kitten back down on his feet and he bounced around in a circle in front of her. Giggling, Vaya gave him a pet down his slender back and followed him as he gamboled about.

“Vaya! Have you fed the goats yet?”

Quickly spinning on her heels, Vaya obeyed her mother’s call and grabbed the bucket of sweet feed for the goats. Always energetic, the goats’ excited bleating from her food delivery followed her as she fed the rest of the animals.

Vaya was happy to see that Kieran was following her too.

“And this is Nessie,” Vaya introduced as she fed the cow.

Kieran seemed interested; his big, blue eyes were focused on her as she hauled some hay over the fence.

With the feeding done, Vaya headed back for her own breakfast.

“Vaya!” her mother shouted. “What is that? Get that out! Shoo! Shoo!” Her mother chased the grey kitten away with her broom.

“Mama, no!” Vaya tried to catch Kieran, but he had bolted out the door and vanished. She stood in the doorway; her shoulders slumped. She turned on her mother: “Why would you chase him away?”

Her mother tutted. “You know why, Vaya. The cats...the cats bring bad luck. The Dominion...they would punish you if they found you with one.”

Vaya sighed into her bowl of oatmeal. “The Dominion is a load of bull—”

“VAYA!” Her mother scolded her. “Don’t ever, *ever* speak such words aloud.”

Vaya resumed her chores after breakfast, still muttering curses to the Dominion under her breath. Saddling up her little pony, she decided to take a leisurely ride to check the fences.

At the outer boundary of their property—the far end of the cow pasture—Vaya could just see the spires of the Dominion’s capital city on the horizon. Her mother’s farm wasn’t the closest to the border and they were on the other side from the contested lands, far from any notion of war—except what news her mother brought back from her trips to the market.

Climbing atop the fence, Vaya stared hard at the city, trying to make out the red and white Dominion banner—it was all very blob-like though.

“I don’t know, Tessa,” she spoke to her pony who, at the sound of her voice, raised her head to look at her. “I know mum isn’t lying—she always looks so scared when she talks about ‘em—but...”

Tessa resumed her grazing, utterly unhelpful with the debate in Vaya’s mind. Like the blob in the distance, the Dominion itself was a blurry smudge in her opinion.

In the late afternoon, Vaya's mother went to offer the neighbour some of their harvest. Despite it only being the two of them, their little farm had been blessed with good soil. With her mother gone until the evening, Vaya decided to look around for little Kieran.

“What do cats even like?” Vaya knew about ponies, cows, goats, chickens, ducks, even rabbits when they had a couple...but cats? “Sweet feed...no. Carrots...no.”

Her stomach rumbled.

Grabbing the slices of cheese and bit of bread her mother had left her, she went out to the barn. As she settled on the milking bench to devour her lunch, a familiar meow echoed from inside the barn.

“Kieran?”

“Mew?” The grey kitten rounded the corner cautiously. On seeing Vaya, his tail and ears shot up and he pounced towards her. He sniffed at her boot where a few bread crumbs had fallen.

“Really? Bread crumbs?” Vaya watched his little tongue lap up each one. She rubbed the bit of bread, scattering some crumbs on her plate before setting it down. She giggled while watching the kitten lick the plate clean.

After several days, Vaya had managed to sneak visits to Kieran into her routine. She learned that he liked the crumbs of most pastries but favoured eggs—so Vaya started to insist on eggs for breakfast more often, taking half out to the kitten before checking the fences.

“Would you go down to the river for me today and see if you can get us some fish for dinner?” Vaya’s mother requested.

“Of course, mama!” Vaya would happily go to the creek; it meant a rare excursion beyond their oat fields. Her mother’s laughter followed her as she ran to the barn to prep Tessa.

“Mrow?” Kieran inquired as Vaya brushed down her pony.

“Hey,” Vaya whispered, “since when do you come out now? Mum might see you.”

“Mew?” he cried.

Vaya’s heart skipped a beat when her mother called to her; she grabbed Kieran and gently stuffed him in a saddle bag.

Relief flooded through her when her mother only wanted to give her a cloak.

Saddling Tessa, Vaya grabbed her fishing rod and headed out.

Halfway down the trail, almost to the end of the oat field, little Kieran popped his head out of the saddlebag. “Mew?”

Vaya nearly fell out of her saddle.

“Oh...I’m so sorry, Kieran.” She patted his head. “Well, I hope you like fishing.”

The creek was a small but talkative stream of water; Vaya always liked the sounds it made. She led Tessa downstream until she found her usual rocky outcropping. Helping Kieran out of the saddlebag, she set him down beside her.

“Here’s a trick, Kieran, we’ll use cheese as bait. I know, I know, papa used to say to use worms but...I always feel bad—this catches fish better, you’ll see!”

“Mrr?” Kieran replied. To his credit, he sat attentively and watched her cast her line.

It didn’t take long for a fish to bite. Vaya was quick: She pulled it out of the water and swiftly knocked it in the head. “Even our dinner shouldn’t suffer, Kieran,” she added somberly.

The kitten sniffed the fish and gave it an experimental lick.

“Do you like fish?” Vaya stroked him. “I’ll try to sneak you out some; we’ll have to catch a few more for mama though.”

Vaya managed to catch three fish bigger than Kieran and one almost as big as Tessa’s head. She’d just finished wrapping and tying them to Tessa’s saddle when she heard a scream.

Kieran, alert, darted into the brush on the second scream.

“Wait! Kieran...” Vaya hissed. Making sure Tessa was tied, she ran after the kitten.

She almost tripped over him, hidden in a bush, and crouched beside him. Vaya almost reprimanded him but then she saw what he was so intently staring at.

In the clearing ahead was a strange, glimmering boy. Vaya had never seen anyone with such fair skin and platinum blond hair. She realized the glittering shine came from the boy’s wings, like a dragonfly’s, sprouting from his back. He held up an arm defensively and that’s when Vaya saw his legs—they were red with blood.

A vile chuckle drew their attention to an armoured knight: The red and white emblem marked him as a knight of the Dominion. He cracked a whip, making the boy flinch, and he laughed again.

“Should’ve stayed in your hole, faery boy. We’ll win this war on all sides, but especially in our backyard.” The knight growled. He unsheathed his sword.

Before Vaya could grab him, Kieran raced out, hissing and spitting as ferociously as a small kitten could manage.

On his tippy toes, back arched, and hackles raised, he was giving it his best.

The knight laughed harder. “Well this is rich. This your guard cat? Thought we’d burned all the little fleabags alive already.”

Charging out from the bushes, Vaya cracked her fishing rod across the knight’s armour. “You leave them alone, you-you...you bully!” Vaya stood defensively over Kieran who took her lead and hissed again.

“This...this is the faery army then? Kids and kittens?” The knight chuckled. “Move aside, child, we’ll deal with you after we dispatch these two vile things.”

Vaya felt a funny tingling in her chest. All she had was her broken fishing rod in one hand, but she swung it as the knight reached for her; she shut her eyes tight.

Her whole body suddenly burned, like she was thrown in a hot bath.

She didn’t expect her makeshift weapon to connect, to crack armour, and sink into flesh.

Vaya opened her eyes to see the crackle of violet energy dissipate and stared at the wooden stake poking out of the knight's chest. He wasn't moving. She'd somehow bowled him over and sat on his belly.

Shrieking, she staggered away from the body and bumped into someone behind her. Vaya spun around and stared nose-to-nose with the faery boy. His violet eyes twinkled with tears.

"Thank you," he whispered. The sound of a horn blared in the distance and when Vaya looked back, he was gone.

Kieran purred and rubbed against her leg. Picking up the kitten, Vaya looked back at the Dominion knight. "He...he would've hurt you. He was going to kill that boy." Vaya whispered mechanically. Kieran purred louder.

Another blast of that horn—closer now.

Vaya hurried back to her pony. She rode in a haze, trying to wrap her head around what happened. She still struggled carrying a bucket of milk if it was too full; how could she have stabbed through armour with a broken stick?

"Mrrow." Kieran pawed at her from the saddlebag by her thigh. It was oddly comforting and Vaya smiled despite herself. She knew she should feel more...what was the word? Guilty? But the way the faery boy had thanked her, the shock and awe in his voice, washed away any remorse.

After all, her papa always told her to look after those smaller than her.

Vaya's mother was impressed with the fish she'd brought home so didn't scold her over much about the lost fishing rod.

"It was an old thing," her mother said, "I'll see if Mister Madoro can make you a new one next time I go to town."

Vaya did not tell her mother about the Dominion knight or the faery boy.

After that day by the creek, Kieran seemed to grow in leaps and bounds, though he stayed lanky with long legs and big ears. He also became quieter and quicker, so Vaya's mother never seemed to even catch a glimpse of him anymore.

When her mother gave her the new fishing rod, Vaya went down to the creek every other day, always under the pretense of catching fish. She would fish, of course, catching a couple for home and one for Kieran.

She kept her eyes peeled; but no Dominion soldiers or faeries showed up again.

"I've been listening more, Kieran," she told her companion as they feasted on roasted fish. "I never did before, you know? The war seemed so distant a thing."

"Mrr," Kieran responded.

"I suppose you knew all about it, did you?" Vaya laughed as he dramatically chewed a bit of fish. "The Dominion's always, as far as anyone can remember, ruled over all of the human cities. It's why we don't see much else, we're not near the border."

Vaya drew a circle for her mother's farm and a bigger circle where the big city was, drawing a line even further away. "From the main city, where mum goes to sell our crops, it's...well, I don't know how far a league is, but lots of those, to the border. That's where the war is, right now."

"Mrr-owr?" Kieran cocked his head to one side.

"The other side of the land is filled with elves and faeries and ogres and...I forget the other ones, but I overheard mum say they're all...un...un-uncivilized, magic folk."

"Mew?"

"I know. That faery boy spoke our language; apart from the wings, we didn't look that much different...well, my hair's not that pretty, but I don't think the Dominion's warring with them because of their hair."

"Mrr."

"I can't think of a reason to fight someone else for so long. You know, papa died in the war when I was littler...but it was going on when his papa's papa was my age. That's an awfully long time."

Kieran, having finished his fish, curled up in her lap, purring.

"Aww, it's okay, Kieran." She scratched his head. "I cried for papa for a long time; he always said that was okay but, eventually, you had to live better so the person who was gone wouldn't be stuck here, in this world."

Kieran continued purring.

Vaya listened to his purrs, staring into the tiny fire they had used to roast the fish. Her eyes wandered to the creek and the woods beyond.

She imagined the glimmer of faery wings between the trees, wondering why there was a war at all.

“Hello,” the whisper was gentle but Vaya still jumped out of her skin. The faery boy shrunk away. “S-sorry...”

“No, no wait!” Vaya stumbled forward but stopped short when the faery froze in place. “Are you...are you okay? Your legs...”

He nodded.

“Should you...should you be here?”

“No...” He looked ashamed. “I had to see you again.”

Vaya blinked, astonished. “Me?”

He nodded again. “You’re...you’re human, right?”

“Yes...”

“Where did you learn magic?”

Vaya gaped. “I...I didn’t?”

The boy drew closer to her, examining her: “But...with the guard, the lightning is unmistakable.”

Kieran kneaded Vaya’s thigh, purring loudly. The boy’s eyes widened.

“That’s...that’s a grimalkin!” It was his turn to gape at her.

“You’re...you’re a warden!”

Vaya shook her head. “I live on a farm with my mum; I don’t know magic or gri-gim-grim-whatevers!”

“Miss, there’s a grimalkin in your lap.”

They stared at each other; Vaya looked down at Kieran, then stared at the faery boy again.

“So...what is a grimalkin exactly?”

The faery boy pointed at Kieran.

Vaya was getting less impressed with this faery. “Yes, I’ve got that, but he looks like just a cat to me.”

“Well, they do. Grimalkins always look like cats; but they’re folk like me. Humans call us sylvans, or just faeries, but we’re all different types. I’m a proper faery, so I can fly and I can work some magic; grimalkins are even more powerful than the oldest, most well-practiced elf, but they lend their power to others. This one’s chosen you which makes you a warden.”

“And what’s a warden do, exactly?” Now thoroughly intrigued, Vaya inched a bit closer to the faery. He didn’t seem to mind and grew more confident with her attentive stare.

“Keep the balance. There used to be lots of wardens; they’d be called to fight for the oppressed and save those in need.”

“What happened to them?”

His lips tightened. “The Dominion King...he had them all killed. He’s locked away so many of us, draining folk for their magical powers, giving him an unnaturally long life.” The boy beamed at her. “But you can stop it! You’re a warden, you can stop him!”

Vaya shrank back. “I...I don’t know how.”

“But you must! It’s...it’s your duty!”

Now Vaya jumped to her feet. “No! I’m just a farm girl! I can’t...I...I’m sorry!”

Jumping onto Tessa, she rode back to the farm as fast as her pony’s legs could take them.

Tears streaming down her face, Vaya's heart raced with her mount's hoofbeats. She imagined the faery boy and so many like him being drained of life—even little Kieran! But what could she do? Whatever had happened in the woods that day was a fluke, a terrifying stroke of morbid luck.

Finally reaching the barn, Vaya dismounted and threw herself into the hay stack, weeping. The boy's face had been so full of hope...hope that she'd dashed to pieces.

How could she save everyone? How could she stop a war?

“Mew,” Kieran rubbed his soft head against her cheek.

Vaya sniffled. “How...how did you get here so fast?”

His eyes glowed violet.

Vaya barely slept that night. Every time she shut her eyes, she imagined the cruel knight laughing and cracking his whip, but he was the King, and it wasn't just one faery boy he was torturing but droves of them. All she could do was watch. All she could do was listen to their screams.

Waking in a cold sweat, utterly exhausted, she grumbled and headed downstairs to start her chores. She nearly ran back up into the loft.

“Vaya...” her mother began, “I...I know you've been playing with that cat. If you just hand him over, these men will take him and leave us alone.”

Vaya's mother always spoke in fear about the Dominion, but now her voice actually quivered with the three soldiers standing in their doorway.

"Found it, sire," a voice called from behind them. Vaya heard hissing and angry meowing. She surged forward, but one soldier easily caught her.

"Take the girl." the other said.

"No! No, you said you wouldn't harm her, please!"

"All harbourers of magical beings, magical paraphernalia, or felines shall be executed at the King's discretion."

Her mother's shouts fell on deaf ears. Vaya's heart hammered so hard, she stopped hearing her mother calling her name. Her eyes fixed on the burlap sack where Kieran was trying to swat and bite his way out.

A similar sack was thrown over her head and Vaya's stomach sank.

"Well, well, what do we have here, Lieutenant?"

Vaya was thrown down on her knees; the bag roughly pulled off her head. The man who had spoken had ugly eyes and a cruel face. He sneered down at her.

"This girl was harbouring vermin, Your Majesty." The lieutenant handed the King the burlap bag. Kieran hissed vehemently as he was pulled out by his scruff.

"Leave him alone! He's my friend. He hasn't hurt anybody!" Vaya growled.

“We lost one of our knights in the woods near this one’s farm,” the lieutenant scowled at her. “How do you explain that?”

“That was me.”

Snickers from the guards behind her made her skin itch in a funny way.

The King turned the grey tabby this way and that. “Your friend, is it? And what is your friend’s name.”

“Kieran.”

“K-Kieran?!”

But it was too late, as the King threw the feline away, his eyes were drawn to the girl—her eyes were aglow.

“No...no! We slew the last warden!” The King tore the red fabric hanging from the corner of the throne, revealing it to be a tattered cloak.

Vaya didn’t care.

First, the lieutenant was sent flying out the window followed by the two door guards. Violet lightning flashed all around them as Vaya approached the King.

“Your rule will end.” Vaya hissed. Kieran’s voice was hers. They caterwauled together. “The folk will be free.”

She loomed over the King as he shrank into his throne. There was no mercy in her glowing eyes.

“You will die.”

The author took a deep breath, cracking her fingers. Her grey tabby cat stood over her laptop begging for attention. She chuckled and

relented, stroking him from nose to tail. The news behind her droned on: This country's corrupt leaders were suppressing protests for a people's vote; that country's government was slowly suffocating the indigenous people by imposing taxes and robbing them of their lands; another was caught accepting bribes to cover up oil spills and industrial fires; on and on.

“If only it was so easy that a farm girl could overthrow a corrupt leader, eh, Keenan?”

“Mrow,” the cat replied.

A shock of electricity pulsed from the writer's hands, frying her laptop.

Her eyes glowed violet.

Wisdom's Winding Wood

by **Elizabeth-Rose Best**

Wisdom's Winding Wood holds a great secret at its center—or so it is said. One by one, adventurers and plunderers enter the maze of ancient trees and knotting roots, intent on being the first to discover the prize. None yet have found the prize, but Errod here believes he is the one to do it.

His waterproof clothes are rough; his scraps of armour battered. He has seen better days, and worse days, too, if the scars on his hands and face could tell their stories. The forest green of his eyes shines bright in the dappled sun, while his bark brown hair runs in a braided rope down his back. At his heels, a scrappy terrier, white with gingery patches. Her name is Chance.

It's a great many days' hike to get to the Winding Woods. Mountain and cave and river protect it on many sides but still they come, these hunters, searching for something they do not yet understand: knights, bandits, princes and princesses, penniless orphans, greedy lords.

At the entrance to Wisdom stands a woven gateway of roots and branches. Errod lingers in the sunlight, staring hard into the gloom

ahead as he makes his final choice. Go in and face the madness many speak of, or return home with nothing but regret and a constant, nibbling doubt? He looks to Chance, but she is all too keen to dive in and hunt the roots for mice and rabbits. Already she holds a bronze leaf in her teeth, shaking it, tossing it.

A voice on distant winds asks, "Errod?"

His head snaps up, searching his surroundings. Nothing changes, nothing moves, but again a voice asks, "Errod?"

Realization creeps like a cold dawn; it comes from within the Winding Woods. Tilting her head, Chance listens too, pushing the leaf from her grasp with her tongue.

Errod steps forward, beckoning for the little dog to follow him. "Come on, girl, I must take my Chance."

Passing through the gateway, he finds himself in a labyrinth of high trees and dense autumn leaves. All sound of the world beyond the Woods is muffled, even little Chance's barks as she dares herself to follow. She joins her master's side, her yips now clear as a bell.

And all around the voices whisper, chatter, talk. The flow is not like that of conversation, with turn-taking and polite pauses, but akin to scrolls being read aloud. Verses overlapping verses, and no one voice battled over the others for dominance.

And though the air felt still and cool to Errod's exposed face, the wide, flat leaves of the trees would shift and flap in sudden bursts, rustling noisily. The fallen leaves on the floor lay in heaps around the roots, gathered into neat bundles. Lines of scrawling verse covered their surfaces, too small to be of any use.

Errod calms Chance with a stroke to her ears before pressing on, stepping over a few high roots that curve from the path. The smell of damp earth and mushrooms fills his nose, while all light seems golden, filtering through the dry, changing leaves. Birds sing, far away, but they sound small and nervous, the kind to dart at the slightest interruption.

And always the whispering verses.

The path winds on tightly between the trees. So tightly these trees stand together that a wanderer would struggle to squeeze between. Errod runs a hand down the bark as he passes, expecting dry, cool, rough fingers, but he finds warmth. Carved into the bark in impeccable text are strings of words, numbers, symbols. Errod understands the words but not their meaning, tracing one choice with his finger—*cartography*.

Deeper in he goes, letting Chance dart ahead while the path is visible. Looking behind, the gate is lost to the foliage, while ahead is a never-ending tunnel. If he were to sleep in here, he would have to mark his direction or risk doubling back.

Trees grow heavy, drooping their branches into the path. Errod brushes them aside with the backs of his hands but one, without thinking, he touches with his palm. At his touch, the soft talk of the surrounding voice amplifies, rising to a clear dictation.

“...year 23764, the great Hericc Empire was finally overthrown in battle, the Emperor beheaded by Draigath the Bind-Breaker. With no heirs to rule—”

Errod releases his hand and all quietens. Chance pauses in her games to listen, ears high, body still. So, it was not in his mind?

...unless it was in her mind, too.

Pressing on, the path starts to twist and turn, and the long trail just walked is left behind. The air changes, growing thick and hot and stale, while the trees tighten in on all sides. Roots reach from the earth to snag at ankles and paws. With each step on a prominent root—be it Errod's or Chance's foot that makes the connection—more voices rise from the trees, ringing oddly in the humid air.

The sounds overlap, rising in volume, yet always the calm, clear voice speaks. Chance flaps her ears and yaps up into the canopies, but her forepaws on the trunks only summon more talk.

"I can see why folks go mad in here," Errod mutters as he encourages the terrier away. "After a few days of this, I suspect I shall join them."

But on he goes. It has been far too long a journey to turn back now.

"Find the beast, find the beast," he mutters to himself, recalling the weighty task given to him not two weeks past; only the unicorn can cure this sickness.

Errod thinks of his young daughter. The sickness swamped her, body and mind alike, and soon she would sink irreversibly into its depths. If a unicorn could heal her he would bring back whatever he could, be it horn, hair, blood, heart. The idea of slaying one seemed...barbaric, but it had to be done, for Elle's sake.

For a few more hours, the man presses on, already feeling his temper thin at the stops and starts of voices. He picks Chance up to spare himself from her endless padding and settles her inside his jacket. At first, she tries to wriggle free but soon gives in to sleep.

As night creeps overhead, the trees continue their talk. Errod had hoped the noise would quiet overnight, but it seemed the trees had too much to say, endlessly reciting their facts into the stagnant air. More leaves hung down in the path, increasing in volume when brushed aside. The text lining their surface grew messier, switching from neat cursive to scrawled notes. Other languages, too, seem to punctuate in both written word and spoken; sometimes a tree would speak Arcanthian or Menonese as he passed.

Or something else entirely, like distant cheers mixed with haunting whalesong.

Overhead, an owl flew by unseen, hooting coolly. Crows nested in the upper branches, but the trees remained quiet at their touch. Errod thanked every god and spirit he could think of.

When his mind and legs grew too weary to continue, he sat himself tightly into a tangle of roots, Chance curled in the bowl of his crossed legs, and tried to sleep.

After four days of endless walking, endless talking, and with dwindling supplies, Errod's mood grew foul and his patience thin. He'd shouted at Chance more often than needed, leaving her to skulk along behind him miserably.

"...genus Lagamorph Antleri, possesses some control over its common rabbit kin, and can use its—"

"...perhaps best well known for their music, fauns can be found in many woodlands across the Kataratic continent—"

“...sole purpose of devouring humans alive. Hidden in deep tide pools, the—”

Unending. Talk on talk on talk in a constant stream of noise. Though Errod sometimes caught the odd word or snippet, the majority was lost within the layers of faint, echoing sound and the sharp crunch of boots on leaves.

Soon, though, he becomes aware of an absence—Chance's footsteps do not follow his own. Turning back, he spies her in the distance, paused, staring at the ground then back up to him. She gives him one encouraging yip, then sits and waits.

She must have found something. Encouraged, Errod jogs back to join her, and she wriggles gleefully at him. Skidding to a stop a few meters away, he praises her, staring down at whatever she has found. It takes him a moment to see it, to understand it, but the sight makes him retreat with a gasp.

It is a hoofprint in the dirt but not one of a common horse. This print is huge, over five hands wide, and inches deep into the damp soil and leaves.

“It's huge,” Errod mutters, all hope draining from his voice. He looks to the sword at his hip and recalls the arrows at his back, all too small for a creature of this size.

With a shake of his head he strolls away, calling Chance to follow. Oblivious to his concerns she follows, the spring in her step renewed.

On and on they go, for two more days. There are no more signs of the great beast, but by now Errod is not truly looking. He follows the

paths blindly, letting the weaving maze of trees determine his direction.

The voices here are so knotted and overlapped, they hum like a swarm of bees, a dense fabric of noise to smother out all others. Even Chance grows weary, pawing at her ears and whining at her master.

Errod would swear on his life that the trees were moving. Creaks of wood, like a tree struck in a storm, would sing out through the chatter. When Errod searched, something moved, sweeping away out of sight.

With all that he'd seen in these woods, walking trees would not surprise him much. Not anymore. Leaves as scrolls, trees that talked, all guarded by a rumoured unicorn.

What if there was no unicorn? What if it were only a rumour, and all that lay within these trees was madness and regret?

It was too late now to turn back. A week in, a week out, but his prize might be around the next corner. Or the next. Or the next. He needed the unicorn, or Elle would die. There was no alternative. Pressing on was the only hope.

Something moves, far up on the path before him. Chance skids ahead, leaves flying up around her paws. Yipping, she encourages Errod to follow her as she disappears into the dappled darkness.

Errod breaks into a sprint to keep up, stumbling over tree roots and piles of leaves. Some bundles of leaves have formed into orderly collections, bound with sap along a sliver of the edge. These bounce along behind the running Errod until their momentum dies and they fall still.

Chance disappears from view entirely, but her eager voice carries sharply through the soft whisper of the trees. Errod chases and chases, barely noticing the widening path, the flattened roots, the deep piles of leaves. Only when he stumbles and trips does he see the great broken ring carved into the ground by a monstrous hoof—the print is fresh—and Errod's heart races.

No matter how loudly he calls, Chance does not return. Perhaps she cannot hear him. Perhaps she is too lost to the chase.

The afternoon draws on for eternity; Errod finds it unbearable without the soft noises of his companion. Still he calls for her, but the little dog is too far between the trees for his cries to reach her.

She'll come back, he tells himself.

On he trudges, his feet scraping through the top layer of leaves. Sometimes he staggers wearily, leaning against a tree for support, but at once the voices intensify and at once he pulls away, recoiling as if shocked.

On and on.

On and on.

The voices talk, but none speak to Errod.

On and on.

As night sets in, Errod chooses to continue. The notion of halting on his own fills his stomach with a knot of dread that he cannot bear.

He notices a change for the first time in days—the paths are widening. Little by little, the trees are inching apart. In one way, a great

weight rises in relief from Errod's exhausted frame, but in another, a pit of dread swallows his heart. If this is the exit, it means he did not find the unicorn.

It means there is no hope for Elle.

Wider, wider, wider. Soon the trees create an opening, walled in on all sides by dense knots of trunks and branches and sap-bound leaves. Errod staggers in, blinking in the wash of moonlight that covers him. The space seems so open after days in the tunnels of trunks that he almost falls, his head swimming.

With no trees around him Errod drops to his knees, then his hands, then his side, letting the soft leaves catch him. The distant voices fade to his ears as sleep and comfort take him.

He sleeps like he has not slept in days. And though he cannot see it or hear it in his realm of dreams, something in the glade is moving.

Sunlight prickles into Errod's eye even through his closed lid. His mind comes to; the rich smell of soil and damp vegetation fills his nose, similar tastes fill his mouth, and the far-off whisper of the trees is lost to the bright and merry song of the birds. The trill of a robin catches his attention, reminding him of home.

Groggily, he pushes himself upright. Something wriggles against his chest, whining and whimpering, wet little nose darting around his face. Chance has found her way back to him.

Her behaviour is odd. This is not her usual morning display of affection, but a pleading cling to her master. Errod places a hand on

her back, and she trembles under his touch, eyes darting, mouth drawn.

After attempting to soothe her, Errod looks around the glade for the first time. Daylight has changed it beyond recognition—clover and grass roll as a carpet of thick green, ivies crawl up trunks, a stream trickles somewhere out of sight. The sunlight is almost golden, lancing in shafts between the stretching branches of the surrounding trees.

In the middle of the glade, an ancient, gargantuan tree has lain in ruins for many a year. Grass and moss cover its dark bark, while a few lingering stems attempt to grow from the trunk, spindly twigs topped with soft leaves.

Chance still shakes. Errod does not know why. Perhaps she met something in the trees that he has yet to see.

On weary arms he pushes himself up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and the decaying leaves from his beard. The songs of the birds lift his heart a little, but Chance's frantic whines dig worry into his stomach. Slowly, he reaches for his sword...

But the sword is gone.

"There is no use for that here, Errod," a voice says. It is deep, rumbling, like an avalanche high on a mountain. Errod freezes, only his eyes drifting. "Fear not, you are as safe as you make yourself."

Like a shadow in the corner of his eye, the fallen tree begins to move. One end arches up to reveal a long head while the other rises on thick legs. A tail of straggling roots and ropes of ivy is flicked aside as the beast stands on legs like trunks. Its face is dark, swamped in a mane of grass and clover, moss and ivy. A beard of roots drips from its

chin and jaw. Patches of growth and wildflowers cover its neck, back, and sides like dapples on a pony, but its body is deep-brown bark.

And from its brow, a wand of smooth wood, black as jet and shining like a jewel.

Standing tall above Errod the creature looks down at him, its brown eyes unreadable. Each of its hooves could crush him wholly, but all it does is stand and look.

But not look, that is not correct. It *studies* him.

Dumbly, Errod stares up at it. “You are...the unicorn?”

“Yes. I am Wisdom. I gather all knowledge and hold it here.” The unicorn lowers its snout and takes in the hunter’s scent. After a moment, it continues. “You seek something of me, as all do. There is a different hunger about you, though. You don't seek riches or power but...something...important. What do you seek?”

Errod fumbles. The sheer size of the creature seems to press upon him, even though it stands a few steps away. Errod had expected a delicate, shining horse like those in stories, not a living forest. Slowly his thoughts collect and he replies, “My daughter is sick. The doctor said there is no cure, but everyone knows the legend of Wisdom. I had heard,” he swallows, “that the power of a unicorn could heal anything.”

“Not everything, no,” Wisdom replies simply. It steps forward, barely making a sound even with such hard, dark, monstrous hooves. It lowers its snout again, this time letting its muzzle rest gently upon Errod’s head. “Show me.”

Errod understands. He closes his eyes and recalls his daughter in her sickbed, her tiny frame gasping for breath, her skin laced with

rashes and sickly green bruises. The doctors stood back, their abilities useless here, while Errod's wife wept silently at the bedside.

Errod's head drops as despair takes him, breaking the contact with the unicorn. Wisdom steps back, a deep, musical hum rumbling from deep within its body. "Well done, that is enough. Yes, she has the Chittic Fever. A tough one but not the end."

Errod looks up at the beast. Sunlight has caught in its eyes, flickering warm gold and dancing greens. A cheer plays in them. He whispers, "Can she be saved?"

"I cannot make promises, but we have a chance."

Little Chance looks up at the mention of her name, but all her fight drains from her. The unicorn smiles at her before drifting a polite step back. "To save her, you will need the sap of the Cleric's Holly." As Wisdom lifts a front hoof, something grows underneath it, rising in a twist of golden light. "The nectar of the Weeping Witch." Another step, another growth. From within the gold grows a flower with dark green leaves, pale green petals, and an unusual pointed petal at the top, pitch black. "And the bulb of the Hillontina." Another plant, this one a tall, thin flower oft seen in early spring. "Mix them as I tell you, and you will have your best chance."

Following Wisdom's instructions, Errod spends the first two hours of daylight filling his empty water flasks with the remedy. It is a thick, sweet concoction that Elle will have no trouble drinking. Other instructions were given: let her rest but encourage movement and bathing. Boil her bedding every day. Let Chance stay with her.

When all was done and Errod had repeated the instructions back, Wisdom bows his great, growth-covered head. “I have another thing for you. Take this.” He pulls at a crack in his bark on his shoulder, summoning a trickle of honey coloured sap. It quickly firms to an amber crystal, which Errod picks away with a tug. “When she needs a boost, smash the amber and feed her a small piece. You will see.”

Too shocked to speak, Errod could only nod. The amber feels warm in his hands, but he knows it would cool before he ever reached home.

“And one last thing.” Wisdom’s voice seems to boom in the quiet of the glade. “I do have some power. I can send you to the glade nearest your home. You do not live far from Ferrefree Woods, correct?”

“About a mile’s walk away, sir,” Errod replies. The unicorn laughs aloud this time, a great crack as if a branch has snapped somewhere.

“No need for that, Errod,” he replies. He waits until Errod has all his supplies in hand and Chance in his jacket. When ready, Wisdom lowers his snout to them. “Good luck. Send Elle my regards.”

“Thank you,” Errod whispers, clasping the amber to his chest.

And in a blink, the Winding Woods are gone. Instead Errod finds himself in the open glade in Ferrefree, where he would often bring Elle in the summer. Blue skies soar carefree overhead, flowers sway in a warm breeze, and the clear air fills his lungs with an overwhelming energy.

The world is bright, the fear flees from the dazzling daylight, and Errod’s heart soars for the first time in weeks. He frees Chance from his jacket, turns south, and races her home.

The Last Guide

A Core Lands Tale by Ian Gough

Sure-footed, Alvar moved along the gentle incline keeping a pace beyond that of men half his age. Having trodden the well-worn trails surrounding the mountain in excess of a thousand times, walking these paths was as familiar as tracing the veins on the back of his own arthritic hands. Fresh with a hint of winter, the late autumn winds caressed cold breaths about his face as he climbed.

A respected guide for over thirty years, Alvar often escorted visitors about the lower trails, encircling the safer sections of what had become a local tourist attraction—most came to experience the stunning views. During the fair-weather months, the sight of the nine realms stretched across the horizon and bathed in the warmth of a golden sun could be breathtaking. Others were drawn to the mountain as part of their pilgrimage, on a personal mission to worship at the shrine of Keros which stood upon the eastern-facing ledge.

As the strength of summer faded, so did most of the visitors, with requests for his services dwindling to the occasional hardened worshipper or imprudent adventurer looking to test their resolve. Whatever the reason, coin aside, Alvar gained personal satisfaction from sharing his extensive knowledge and providing safe passage around one of the largest mountains in the realm.

It was only in the last few months Alvar realized a once simple task had become challenging due to the withered touch of old age. With regret he'd concluded the end of his career as a guide was drawing near and so formulated a plan to retire. With an ample amount of coin saved, his careful preparations to relocate to a calmer sanctuary were drawing closer to fruition. No longer would he suffer the cold snap of frost which bit into his joints with needle-like teeth the higher the trek. No longer would he be required to listen to nagging complaints of those he led, who possessed the will, yet lacked the physical prowess to make the climb. Alvar had earned enough coin for a certain level of comfort in his final days and could almost taste the air by the lake where he'd purchased his new home.

Strange then that he'd made a decision to go against his intentions and had agreed to one last trip. He'd succumbed to a request from the gaunt, young traveller who paid double the coin to make the climb. Although he did not resemble a typical pilgrim, this so-called initiate convinced him to walk the paths to the shrine and beyond, towards a more desolate, less frequented area. Perhaps he'd accepted because the offer was too good to refuse or simply because he yearned to feel the roughness of the mountainside under his fingertips one last time—a way of paying his last respects to the place he'd lived in the shadow of all his life. Whatever the reason, he'd consented to guiding this initiate, named Brevan, and now led the young man upward.

A sharp bite in the air reminded Alvar that winter's icy fingers were reaching out, ready to enclose the realm in its frozen grasp. The cold snap caused Alvar's legs to grumble with a dull ache, complaining

against each step as they moved closer to the shrine. He pulled his furs tighter. He'd chosen one of the longer trails due to its milder incline in case Brevan struggled due to his inexperience of the climb. Yet, looking back, the young man seemed almost unaffected, using the staff he carried as a walking support. Brevan kept a steady unfaltering pace a few strides behind, and Alvar suspected he could catch up with relative ease, should he choose to do so.

Climbing a few naturally-formed, uneven steps, they reached the shrine. Alvar paused allowing Brevan to draw level. This also bought him a few moments respite amid the first flecks of snow drifting around them. Part of him hoped the sight of a few flakes would influence Brevan to change his mind and ask to return to the comforts of ale and a hot meal in a warm lodge. Thank the Gods he'd chosen to make this trip his last.

Before them, the shrine stood exposed to the elements, near the edge of an outcrop. Carved centuries before from solid rock, it depicted Keros, the god of knowledge, standing proud and with a book, its open pages held out towards the skies. At its base lay scores of withered flowers plus a tattered chest that had seen better days. Worshippers often placed items of value within the chest, tributes in return that their prayers may be answered. Alvar was not a stout believer, yet in all his years, he never once opened the chest or tampered with the offerings with the exception of clearing away the expired remains of long-dead stems. It would have been a simple task to remove some of the trinkets for personal gain, but Alvar remained an honest man and preferred not to meddle in the affairs of gods.

He looked to Brevan.

“Do you want to pay your respects?”

“No old man, it is not necessary,” Brevan dismissed the suggestion.

“I am not one of your visiting pilgrims and prefer we continue to our destination.”

“What is our destination?”

“I shall reveal it when we are closer.”

Alvar recalled agreeing to guide Brevan along the paths, yet the man had been vague with about his reasons. It was an odd conversation which had taken place less than half a day earlier and yet had become hazy in his memory. What Alvar did remember was the promise Brevan made to reveal more information once they'd reached the shrine. Despite the excess coin, Alvar felt obliged to press that part of the agreement and preferred to know more of what he was getting into.

“If we are moving on, I insist on knowing more for both our safeties.”

“Very well, do you know of a cave formed along the higher part of the south-eastern face?” Brevan remained calm of face.

Alvar had heard of such a place. He'd been asked to take a party of adventurers there several years past but before it was discovered, they'd been driven back by a fierce storm and impassable conditions. He tried to convince them to return, but the party continued against his wishes and without his further guidance. He searched the area for weeks afterward; however, none of them ever came back. He vowed that day never to make the attempt again, yet here he was faced with a determined young man and a decision he would rather not make.

“I know of it, but if I’d been aware of your intention to go there, I would have refused. The mountain can be cruel when she wants and never in my lifetime has anyone ever managed to reach that cave. I can’t think of a good reason to risk our lives on such a dangerous journey.”

“You sound scared, old man. Yet you must have heard the legends. Have you never been tempted to complete the climb to see if they are true?”

Like many unexplored caves and inaccessible places, rumours surrounded the mountain’s higher crags and, during Alvar’s early years, flocks of treasure hunters came like vultures circling a rotting carcass. Faint whispers and forgotten texts spoke of treasures hidden deep within a twisted network of tunnels said to exist below the icy crags. With each passing year, these stories faded, becoming distant memories, yet some hardened adventurers still grasped at the faintest hope they were true. Fewer still were tempted to seek out these riches and though their number dwindled, a few still perished on the mountain.

“Stuff and nonsense, I’ve lived below this peak for more than seventy years and have never found evidence of a tunnel entrance. If you choose to continue then you’re a fool, worse than those who perform amusing tricks in the king’s court. I will not be part of such a foolish notion.”

“Yet you were swift enough to empty my coin purse when it was offered,” said Brevan, a sharpness to his tongue. “I paid for your

services and I expect you to lead me to my destination. Once we reach the cave you will be free to go about your business.”

He couldn't deny the fact he'd accepted the coin—but not for this. This was folly, and he could not agree to it.

“No, if you wish to go on you do so alone.”

“I think not. If you will not willingly fulfill the terms of our agreement, then you give me no choice but to force you to do my bidding.”

Brevan held his staff aloft then muttered a few incomprehensible words which ignited a surge of flame from its tip into the frosty air. He turned the staff towards Alvar, threatening to burn him unless the guide fulfilled his side of the bargain.

“If you kill me, you'll never find the cave,” Alvar said in defiance.

“That may be true old man, but I can inflict pain upon you beyond any you have ever experienced before. That is, unless you agree to my demands. Would you prefer to suffer, or do I get what I paid for?”

Alvar drew in a deep breath full of regret. Life could often be full of “if onlys.” If only he'd refused the request or resisted the urge to take this man's coin. If only he'd questioned their final destination, or he'd said his final goodbyes to the mountain one day earlier. If only. He knew that one constant remained true. You could not change your past, no matter how much you wished it.

“You leave me no choice,” he conceded, heading forward with a heart full of resignation towards the path beyond the shrine.

Together, they ascended a steeper incline and, once or twice, Alvar stumbled, his feet slipping on patches of loose gravel. For more than an

hour, they travelled in silence as a thin mist descended, engulfing the pair, while singular snowflakes transformed into a mild flurry. Alvar found everything about the climb a challenge and what initially seemed a good idea, felt like the biggest mistake of his life. A strong gust pushed them back and his once-sturdy limbs trembled with each aching step. Progress was difficult, yet with a determined Brevan at his back, he led onward, until another stumble brought Alvar to his knees and sent a jolt of pain throughout his body.

“We must turn back!” he yelled.

“No! I have sought the prize above all else and I will not be denied. Lead on old man, or I will inflict more agony upon you than any person has experienced in ten lifetimes.”

Teeth gritted, Alvar refused to dignify him with a response and instead scrambled upright. He pushed on, thoughts of retirement and his new home evaporating into the mist. After all these years living beneath the mountain, was he destined to perish upon it? Then he spotted something. Shielding his eyes from the ever-thickening snow, he spied a break in the mountain wall. The cave!

He looked to Brevan, pointed the way, and for the first time the young man’s face changed to a grimace of satisfaction. Driving on the last few steps, Alvar almost fell into the cave entrance, grateful to gain respite from the harsh winds and biting snow.

“You see, old man, I told you it existed.”

The words brought Alvar no comfort. Exhausted at being forced halfway up the mountain, he caught his breath and surveyed his surroundings. The cave was unremarkable, similar to dozens of others

he imagined were scattered across the lands. An empty shell of ancient rock, lifeless with stalactite fingers that reached out towards him from above. At least it provided shelter from the elements, although there was an unusual air of foreboding about the place.

“All this way for nothing!” he scoffed. “I hope you’re satisfied. We’ve discovered your precious cave so let me go as you promised.”

“Not yet. First, I must ensure this is the one.”

Brevan spoke a word unfamiliar to Alvar and his staff illuminated in a pale white glow. Using this light, he ran his hand over the stone walls, moving his fingertips across the rock formations to search for some kind of sign. On the ground, towards the back of the cave, he bent, retrieving a book which he handed to Alvar with a grin of satisfaction.

“At last, we have found the right place.”

“What this?” Unimpressed, Alvar opened the cover and flicked through page after page of nothingness. “All this way for an empty book, have you taken leave of your senses?”

“Far from it, finding that book means we are in the right place. Step forward, old man, and I will show why we are here.”

Brevan tipped his staff, pointing at a section of wall above where he’d discovered the book. He muttered a few words, tracing an oval with the staff’s light then placing its tip, with a delicate touch, at the oval’s center against the rock. To Alvar’s amazement, the wall cracked and fell inward, piece by piece, revealing a swirling mass of pulsating energy.

“This is what I came for. It is the portal to the fabled library of the underworld. Come join me and witness what you have lived beneath all these years.”

Alvar cowered at the sight. Magic such as this was not meant for his old, mortal eyes. Brevan was meddling with forces that should remain untouched, and Alvar wanted no part of it.

“I’ve kept my part of the bargain. You asked me to lead you here and I have. Now keep your promise and let me go.”

“I think not,” said Brevan, turning the staff point and threatening Alvar with it once more. “I need to be sure it is safe and I would rather risk another’s life before my own. Step into the portal, old man.”

“But I could be torn into a thousand pieces. I won’t do it!”

“You will. Either step into the portal or I will kill you where you stand!”

Alvar could see madness flicker behind the young man’s eyes. This was no empty threat. If he entered the unknown portal, he could be scattered to the four winds, yet if he refused, Brevan would burn him alive. He cursed the day he’d ever met this man. There was no choice. Moving in front of the portal, he paused to draw breath then took a leap of faith.

When his disorientation passed, Alvar blinked at a solid wooden door in front of him. It was all there was. No walls, no windows, no light, no floor beneath his feet, only the door standing without hinges or frame, alone in the black.

“Is it safe?”

The echoed voice was distant, but he recognized it as Brevan's. With his surroundings unlike anything he'd ever experienced, and only the single door amid the blackness as reference, whether it was safe remained a point of conjecture. On the other hand, Alvar felt no immediate threat.

“Yes, I guess it is.”

A spark in the darkness gave way to Brevan, who leaned upon his staff for a moment, regaining his composure. Pushing past Alvar, Brevan reached the door which had no handle, yet it swung inward as he neared. Dumbfounded, Alvar followed, and both entered a grand hall unlike anything he'd ever witnessed before.

Walls carved from solid marble stretched upward towards a ceiling so high, it was absorbed by more darkness. Golden embroidered floor tapestry stretched out before them, passing between rows and rows of bookcases. Each shelf was crafted from solid gold and the bookcases rose up on all sides to a height double that of any normal man. Thousands of them filled the hall in all directions, stretching as far as Alvar could see. Each bookcase was loaded full of leather-bound books of varying thicknesses. He leaned in closer to read some of the titles: *Rhanard Gharret 941–983*, *Lenora Heylas 1013–1077*, *Tiel Svenstavik Melsans 872–959*. These were not works of fiction but life stories of those long forgotten. Alvar shuddered, what was this place?

He followed Brevan who moved forward with purpose, sure-footed upon the golden carpet. Wherever they were, Alvar knew it was where Brevan had intended to be. This was the young man's destination from the start. Passing row after row of bookshelves, Alvar felt sure he could

hear faint whispers, words in languages he could not comprehend mixed among a few he recognized. The voices came from the books and followed Alvar, chattering for what seemed like an age. He wondered if Brevan also heard them.

Finally, the pair arrived in front of a large marble desk, behind which a tall man dressed in golden robes looked down upon them. Although human in appearance, his eyes were beast-like—resembling those of a leopard—and he showed no sign of surprise at their arrival. Instead, he offered a warm, almost hospitable, smile.

“Welcome, I am the Keeper. I have been expecting you, Brevan.”

“How do you know of my name and how did you know of my arrival?”

The Keeper’s response was not immediate as if Brevan’s questions held little importance. He seemed distracted by Alvar who’d taken a few, tentative steps forward.

“Ah Alvar, it is good to see you again old friend.”

Brevan spun, all of a sudden full of a newfound surprise and a deep distrust. He glared at Alvar. “I thought you said you had no knowledge of the cave and the mountain’s secrets. You lied to me, old man!”

“On the contrary,” said the Keeper, responding before Alvar could utter a word. “Alvar has spoken the truth. He has no recollection of being here and will have no such memories when he leaves. We choose to make it that way in order to protect our *secrets* as you call them. I am familiar with Alvar because he has guided others here before you and will bring many more in times to come. Yet we ensure that once he

leaves this hall, all memory of us is erased. It is the way of things and he accepts this as part of his role as the last guide.”

“But he is a useless, old man, close to death. What help will he be to you?”

“Don’t be fooled by appearances. Alvar is a faithful, if unaware, servant and will witness more sunrises than you can imagine before he passes from this life.”

“But I do not understand,” said Brevan, becoming frustrated. “I paid him to guide me here and you confirm he has no knowledge of this place, yet you say he has brought others before me? Explain yourself!”

There was no flinch and no negative reaction to Brevan’s raised voice, only a calm, considered answer from the Keeper.

“Like you, other adventurers have sought us out across thousands of years, from many different lands and worlds. Each come here with either a burning desire for knowledge, a lust for treasure or for power, and each pass through a portal similar to the one by which you arrived. Some manage to find their own way, while others need a guide with our consent, and, in your realm, Alvar is the last of them. He committed to us a long time past and remains faithful to our requirements.” The Keeper smiled at Alvar and he felt the warmth of it. “Now that I have addressed your concerns to a satisfactory level, tell me Brevan, what is the nature of your purpose here?”

“I came seeking the Book of Abomination.” His words were blurted, almost forced from his lips. “I wish to gain ultimate power to have control over life, death, and the creatures that dwell in the underworld. I did not come here to be tricked by an old guide and his puppeteer!”

Alvar was shocked at the response and witnessed a similar reaction etched upon Brevan's face. Perhaps the Keeper used mind control to draw out such an honest answer. However, he'd accomplished it, Brevan's true purpose had been revealed in an instant.

"It is such a shame. You see, no one can lie to me. Like so many others who came before, your true intentions are not for the expansion of knowledge but to fulfill a hateful desire for ultimate power," the Keeper's voice boomed in Alvar's ears. "The Sacred Book of Abomination is here, and although I will allow you to read any of the other texts, I cannot, and will not, allow you to take that book from this place. Only the purest will be allowed to look upon its pages and I have seen into the darkest regions of your blackened soul. The power would consume you, and you would wield it as a tool of destruction. You will not have it, Brevan!"

"Then if you will not give it to me, I will take it by force!"

Brevan raised his staff and Alvar knew his intent was to ignite the flame and turn it upon the Keeper, yet the Keeper was swift. A book materialized, airborne, it hovered in front of him and from its parted pages an ethereal hand plunged forth, passing into Brevan's chest. He bucked, dropping the staff which became brittle and splintered in pieces upon the floor. As the ghostly hand retracted, it pulled a light from within Brevan and, within seconds, he evaporated into the pages of the book, which the Keeper slammed shut. Brevan existed no more.

"What have you done?" Alvar managed.

"I have done nothing that was not already written, look."

Along the spine of the book letters formed in gold, embossed upon the outer cover told their own story. *Shaldor Brevan 1163–1191*. Alvar recoiled. There were so many questions he dared not ask, but one above all fought its way forward.

“What happens to me now?”

“There is no need for concern, my dear Alvar. Here, take this book and read from its pages,” said the Keeper, brushing dust from a thicker volume which had been resting on his desk. “You have earned the right.”

“Whose is it?” he asked, trembling fingers taking it from the Keeper’s hands.

“It is yours, the story of the last guide.”

Fear flared in the pit of Alvar’s stomach. Was this book really an account of his life? Was he about to suffer the same fate bestowed upon Brevan?

“But you told Brevan I would see many more sunrises, was that a lie?”

The Keeper chuckled. “Of course not, and you will see the sun again soon. Open the book, but I want you to read from back to front and do not stop until I command it. Do you understand?”

“Yes-yes I’ll do as you ask.”

Alvar turned to the last entry. The pages retold what he had witnessed minutes before. It spoke of Brevan’s end, the Keeper, the portal, and of the difficult journey up the mountain to the shrine. He retraced the story, becoming absorbed in his own history. Every thought, every spoken word, and every action he’d ever made in his

lifetime stretched backward across the parchment pages. As he read into his past, Alvar felt invigorated. Pages turned, time blurred, and memories relived filled his mind. After reading for what felt like an eternity, Alvar's eyelids became heavy until sleep stole over him.

X-X-X

Alvar woke in the comfort of his own home. He slid out of bed, felt the warm furs beneath his toes, and stretched. Opening his window, a chill breeze caressed his cheeks and he witnessed the first snows of the season which had settled overnight over, what would be his garden in the summer. Animal footprints tracked away from his hut and led down towards the forest far below the base of the great mountain. A creature no doubt caught out by the swiftness of winter's arrival, scampering off to find solace. He puffed out a cold breath and pulled the window shut. He made a mental note to check his food stores to ensure he had enough rations to see him through. Otherwise a trip to the village would be required before the harshest snows took hold.

He washed, dressed, and sat to a satisfying breakfast. He felt ravenous as if he hadn't eaten for a week and devoured a second helping. Afterward, he started a small, log fire and, above the fireplace, came across a note, a scribbling about a property by a lake, in what appeared to be a shaky version of his own handwriting. Before he could ponder this, a knock at the door interrupted his thought process. Dismissing the note, he tossed it into the flames and headed for the door.

Outside, a young woman dressed in fine robes beneath loosely wrapped furs smiled at him. She was dressed in appropriate fashion to

combat winter's touch, and her pale features were offset by the pink glow in her cheeks. Her face was kind, and Alvar considered her quite beautiful.

“Excuse me, young sir, but I was told to seek out an old guide who lives beneath the shadow of the mountain. I was hoping to hire him to take me up to the shrine for worship.”

Alvar returned the smile, reaching for a set of furs kept by the door, he stepped outside. Above him, the mountain loomed and he stood, silent for a moment, soaking in the glorious wonder of its snow-covered peak.

Alvar returned his gaze to the young woman and became absorbed in the beauty of her sparkling blue eyes. “I’ve not heard of any old man living around here, but I’m known as the last guide and I’d be happy to take you.”

One Shot

by A. R. Lachance

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My steed's hoofbeats pound into my chest. I match my breathing to hers until the rhythm calms my nerves.

Focus.

One arrow. One shot. I must destroy this portal.

The massive shadow looming over me in the midday heat is a stark reminder of what awaits other worlds should I fail.

The Tarkanus. A dragon frigate unlike any other. Seven beasts spliced together. All the worst armaments from all the world's technologies. It is vicious, unyielding, and has destroyed most of the known world.

It will destroy others if I fail.

I race across the plains to get in range of the portal's eye. The sparkling red gem cresting its peak, miles above me.

"It'll be like shooting a pea at the top of Mamna Peak while you're in Khursan Valley. Even with these enchantments..." Along with his doubts, the Head Mage had given me all kinds of warnings.

All teleportation magic is powered by the astral plane: It's the most stable transitive plane...but there's no telling what shattering the portal

conduit will do. The first teleportation spell imploded its creator: I race past the broken statue of Head Mage Sharishtra Venel.

As long as it takes down the Tarkanus, I'll accept my fate of implosion.

The Head Mage's voice drifts in and out of my mind, spilling distorted words: "Beforewar...time...magicastralloop..."

What was he talking about? I shake my head: Worlds are depending on me.

I find my target. I sit up, tighten my leg muscles, and draw my bow.

Nock the arrow.

Pull back.

I breathe in tandem with my horse's snorts. Her galloping strides bounce me up, down, up, down.

Up.

I let fly.

The enchanted arrow sings—but a blinding light forces my eyes shut. Magical whistling shrieks into deafening rumbles. A heavy vibration hits me in the chest. Am I falling?

All I can hear is my heartbeat.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My steed's hoofbeats pound into my chest. I match my breathing to hers until the rhythm is all I know.

Focus.

One arrow. One shot. I must destroy this portal.

Thank you for reading!

We are so grateful for you, dear reader, and the time you took to read our stories. We hope you enjoyed each tale and look forward to weaving new stories for your enjoyment in the future.

Please take a look at each author below and follow them to find their current and upcoming works.

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts!

Elizabeth-Rose Best

Elizabeth-Rose (Rosie for short) Best has always been interested in storytelling. After completing her degree in Design for Digital Media at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, fate seemed pretty content to push her down the book-writing path. Between hand-sewing custom plush toys and writing *The Naiad Chronicles*, she also works on digital art, watercolours, sculpture, and crochet. Knitting still eludes her.

Her interests include dragons, dogs, dragons, dinosaurs, chocolate, dragons, and dragons.

More by Elizabeth-Rose Best

[The Naiad Chronicles: Vision \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Naiad Chronicles: Messenger \(Book 2\)](#)

[The Naiad Chronicles: Caller \(Book 3\)](#)

[The Naiad Chronicles: Guardian \(Book 4\)](#)

Follow Elizabeth-Rose Best

Twitter: [@InukiBooks](#)

Website: <https://www.patreon.com/Artoferbest>

Ian Gough

Like so many Ian Gough has always wanted to write and has admired so many other writers in many different genres: From the fantasy writing of J. R. R. Tolkien, Brandon Sanderson, or J. K. Rowling to the comedy of Terry Pratchett or Douglas Adams and to the more macabre talents of Stephen King, all are truly amazing authors, in their own way.

Finally plucking up the courage, Ian Gough decided let his imagination dance (or trip awkwardly) across the page, dabbling in various genres before creating the fantasy/comedy world of *The Core Lands* inhabited by many weird and wonderful beings, mystical creatures, kings, queens, heroes, and a couple of door-to-door salesmen. Tales from *The Core Lands* continue to grow.

More by Ian Gough

[Lotan the Librarian](#)

Vladimir Scond: Private Investigator (Revised edition coming soon!)

[The Ballad of Hubert Wells](#)

Follow Ian Gough

Twitter: [@LotanB1](#)

Kris Hawley

Born and raised in Sudbury, Ontario, Kris Hawley has been diligently honing his skills for as long as he can remember, so whether the writing bug bit him or he bit the writing bug, we'll never know for sure.

Currently, he's focusing on short stories for a few upcoming anthologies and aims to write at least one short story of each genre. He's also begun the early stages of world building for a series of novels and continues plugging away at every NaNoWriMo.

More by Kris Hawley

[Killgoarrex](#) (short story hosted on ScribeCat.ca)

Follow Kris Hawley

Twitter: [@TrueSkorn](#)

A. R. Lachance

A. R. Lachance grew up in a tiny, frozen town too far north for most to find and whiled away her time by scribbling down tales inspired by dreams and her idle imagination. Soon, she started piecing together the world in her head and writing (slightly) more coherently.

Now, with Alice, her trusty feline sidekick, she's finishing up her debut fantasy novel...when she's not distracted by other writing adventures or used book store raids.

More by A. R. Lachance

[Looking for Group](#) (short story available free on ScribeCat.ca)

[Mother](#) (short story available free on ScribeCat.ca)

[The Gilded Pony Tales](#) (Patreon-exclusive short story collection)

Stay tuned for her upcoming fantasy novel December 2020!

Follow A. R. Lachance

Twitter: [@Scribe_Cat](#)

Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/Scribe_Cat

Website: <https://scribecat.ca>

Mae McKinnon

Haunted by an overenthusiastic Muse, Mae McKinnon alternately tries to keep up with it and swats at the dratted thing with an ethereal flyswatter (no, chocolate doesn't appease it...unfortunately). As a result, her Seven of Stars original universe is filled with characters ranging from shapeshifting dragons to daring starfighter pilots.

She also enjoys things like crafting, gaming, cosplay, dragons, cats, dragons, dinosaurs, and dragons.

Her six novels to date have stayed firmly within the realm of fantasy and science fiction and while, in some books, there might not be any dragons "on the actual page" they are certainly there in her mind.

More by Mae McKinnon

[Academia Draconia](#)

[The Damsel and the Dragon](#)

[High Fyelds: A New Beginning](#)

[High Fyelds: The Big Race](#)

[You Are a Dragon](#)

[The Soul Within](#)

Follow Mae McKinnon

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