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The Warlock and the Nis

by

Daniel Baird

She tried not to look at them—twisted and gnarled as if trying to uproot themselves from the poisoned ground and flee. The trees were hardly taller than her now, in this wild mountain forest. She brushed her thick, pale hair back out of her gray eyes and crinkled her nose against the pungent odor that seeped from the ground.

“Ellette.” Burl’s deep voice reminded her that he was waiting. She turned around to again face the mouth of the tunnel where small wisps of smoke trailed out into the dark sky. Lower down the jagged mountain, the snow had made the trek miserable, but now she would gladly welcome the biting cold instead of this unnatural air that seemed reluctant to let her breathe.

She followed into the snarling mouth of the cave. Burl had already drawn his father’s sword; it glinted harshly in the dull torchlight just as it did when at age twelve he received the sword from their father. Father had retrieved a shovel and dug in the floor of the small cottage they called home. It wasn’t buried deep. Father handed it to Burl without any comment other than to tell him it was his: the birthright. The hilt was unadorned as was the meter-long blade. Father never told where he got the sword. Father never talked much other than about the farm and the weather, but he knew a lot. She could picture him sitting at the uneven wooden table after she and Burl had gone to bed, his long lean body tired from a day out in the field, one hand hanging limply at his side, the other resting lightly on Mother. She couldn’t remember much, but she could remember Father talking about the elves and about trolls and goblins and other strange things as if they were real. Mother too had believed in them, though nobody else in the village had ever seen one. Perhaps that is why the village children always teased her.

Mother wasn’t a witch, though; Ellette had asked her the night Jip died. A child’s voice cut through her memories:

“Are you a witch?”

“No,” came the soft reply.

Her memory shifted and she remembered the pain on her cheek when Jip threw the rock at her. She was eight, yet not much smaller than she was now, and they had been teasing her for being the daughter of a witch. Burl had come running from the fields and there was a fight. Jip had been hurt pretty bad; he died a few days later. Curiously Father said it was Burl’s gift: the gift of destruction. Then he had given Burl the sword and off Burl went to become a king’s soldier

“Let’s go.” Burl headed deeper into the tunnel. It had become hot now and that made breathing even more difficult. Ellette could feel magic all about her, oppressive, full of bitterness. She had always known about magic. Her father’s stories, her mother’s songs. They had teased her for being the daughter of a witch, but her mother wasn’t an old hag. Mother was beautiful, too beautiful—and graceful. Not like a peasant at all. Pale hair, slight build, graceful hands. Her stew never burned, mice never chewed through the clothes she made, and her garden never failed to produce. Unnatural, folks said. Witchcraft, they said.

They had been traveling some time now and she realized they must be far below the ground. Burl cursed as the torch went out. He was about to light another but then they noticed the walls glowed faintly. They went on without the torch. The corridor straightened out then burst open into a cavern.

“Oh!” The exclamation escaped her. Far away she could see a pile of gold that reflected

the rainbow colors that emanated from the cavern. Colors swirled around stalactites and stalagmites, raced out to touch the hoard of gold then danced lightly back to dazzle her eyes. Far above she could see the colors playing tag around the ceiling. The ground just to her left was littered with gems: emeralds, rubies, and even a few large diamonds. The whole cavern was filled with wealth, glittering and beckoning.



“Dragon,” a voice persisted in her mind.

“Ridiculous!” she thought. “Dragons don’t exist just like trolls, nixies, goblins or any other of Father’s bedtime stories.” But then that argument could be used on the whole purpose of this journey. Warlocks weren’t supposed to exist either, yet the village head had come to Father a fortnight ago to ask him to go kill one. The warlock had been troubling this village and others in the kingdom for some time with his fearsome spells, so they said. Crops failed, women miscarried, children disappeared, men

died from too much drink—all because of the warlock. Father wouldn’t go, so Burl was sent for instead. When Burl came home, Father only said, “Take your sister, you will need her help.” Ellette shook her head to send the memories tumbling out of her mind. She quickly joined her brother in searching through the treasure for, for what?

Abruptly she saw it as it slided into view. A huge dragon, polished scales, spiked tail, and folded wings. He looked like he had come straight out of the tales the Father told to the children—even had a forked tongue. She screamed and Burl hid behind his sword. With a roar that shook them, the Dragon raised itself up and filled the cavern with flame. “Look out!” Ellette yelled. Burl attacked, but his sword only seemed to miss--impossible as that could be with such a gigantic creature. A fantastic idea came to Ellette as she tried to hide behind a silver encrusted stalagmite--the orange fire was weird, it didn’t burn, it didn’t hurt. She took a step, then two towards the puffing dragon. The dragon did not look at all fearsome now. Instead it look like a little. . . .

“No, it couldn’t be,” she thought and hurried towards it. Finally she reached down to grasp the little lizard at her feet. She missed and it scurried behind a golden pile. “So the dragon was simply an illusion made out of a lizard,” she thought. She had negated the spell. That was her gift: negation.

“Negation of what?” came the child’s voice from her memory again.

“Negation of magic,” was the soft reply. It had never made sense, but now it did. She looked around the rock for the lizard. Behind her the tip of Burl’s sword clinked as it rested to the ground. “Hah! If that is all we have to deal with. . . .” He raised his sword up and began to look with more interest in the treasure and less interest in whatever had brought them there in the first place.

A swirling bolt of brown, green, and red came whirling and caught Burl, throwing him back against the wall of the cavern. A gigantic

figure coalesced into view, clothed in glittering silks and waving a large wand with a glittering star on top. Another bolt came whizzing towards Ellette. As the bolt came towards her it slowed and stretched like something alive. When it reached her, it oozed about her, covering her with a bitter iron-in-the-mouth taste. The man stopped laughing and puzzlement broke upon his brow. The magic slithered down her body to form a pool of brown muck at her feet. The warlock suddenly laughed again and sent more magic towards Ellette, this time a thin stream of golden light. The golden light swirled and faded into dry, brown dust. The man screamed and sent a large firebolt but it turned into a swirl of autumn leaves. More spells, more negations, until piled around Ellette were pinecones, leaves, twigs, pine needles, bird feathers, broken egg shells and other odds and ends. Strange, but like the dragon the warlock too began to shrink, until he became a small shriveled man wearing tattered rags of forest green. Abruptly the stream of magic spells ended as Burl closed his hand around the doll of a man. It struggled and squirmed in his grasp.

“Don’t kill him,” she pleaded. She joined her brother and peered for a bit at the little man. The little bearded man stared back. “Gnome, no. Brownie, no. Hmm, definitely not a pixie.” Ellette thought of her father’s descriptions of little folk. “Oh I know, it is a Nis!”

Burl considered the creature. “A Nis, huh! Well, whatever you are, a lot of trouble you have caused this village, but now it is time to cease.” The Nis glared, squirmed, stuck his tongue out, muttered, went cross-eyed, squinted, closed one eye then the other, blew out his cheeks, pursed his lips and turned beet red, but with Ellette’s

cajoling he eventually gave in. When the tiny old man was calm and sitting in Burl’s palm, Ellette looked around. The colors no longer played around the cavern, for it seemed empty. The wealth had vanished like the dragon and the warlock. Yet as Ellette stood and walked around, she did find a treasure of sorts: Mrs. Donald’s missing pie pans, a rake that must belong to the Orners and even old man Yake’s wooden plow.

It took Ellette and Burl several trips to return all the things even after they cajoled others in the village to help them. Then the village settled back to its normal routine. Burl returned to his soldiering and talk of the warlock eventually died out. But the Nis—what happened to the Nis? He came to live in the barn, and Ellette—why she became the wisest in all the kingdom from all the things the Nis taught her.

Fin.

