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## Mythic Circle #15

Tina Cooper

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# The Mythic Circle #15 . Early Summer 1993

*Tina Cooper and C.I.S. Lowentrout, editors*

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**THE MYTHIC CIRCLE**

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# DVALIN'S DOOM

*by Douglas A. Rossman*

Deep within the endless labyrinth of grottoes and tunnels that ran throughout the realm of Svartalfheim, an ominous hush had fallen. The anvils where a legion of dwarvish smiths hammered out the finest metalwork in the Nine Worlds—be it rune sword or jewelled cloak-clasp—lay silent for the first time in memory. An aura of dread—and expectation—permeated the cool underworld air, for Motsognir the Mighty, ruler of the dwarves since the Nine Worlds began, lay dying... and neither of his sub-chiefs, Durin and Dvalin, had yet been proclaimed his heir. The dwarves had known no ruler save Motsognir, so most of them were both saddened at the prospect of losing one who had been like a father to his people and apprehensive about a future without him. The uncertainty about his successor only added to their concern, for neither Durin nor Dvalin was loved by all.

In the sleeping chamber of Motsognir, it was a solemn group that stood beside the dying leader's bed. His daughter, Runa, sat on the edge of the bed, holding his withered hand, his wife having long since preceded him into Hel's domain. Durin and Dvalin looked on in silence, shadows cast by the flickering candlelight highlighting the lines of concern and frustration etched in their faces. Only Motsognir's councillors disturbed the silence with their guarded whispers.

"Surely he cannot last much longer. Why won't he name his successor?"

"He must, he must. If he does not, Durin and Dvalin will be at each other's throat before his body is cold."

"Hush, hush," an incredibly old voice wheezed. "I may be dying, but there's nothing wrong with my hearing. And I'm sure Durin and Dvalin can hear you too." Motsognir's voice seemed to gain strength as he continued to speak. "I have not waited so long to name my heir in order to cause them—or you—anxiety. I would not be so cruel. No, I have waited because the choice was not a clear one, and because it was so terribly important. Remember our saying, 'Earth ways are seldom hasty, but they are almost always certain.'"

"'Was important' your majesty said, not 'is important,'" gulped Thekk, the chief councillor. "Does that mean you have reached a decision?"

"Yes, I have, old friend." And everyone leaned forward in anticipation. "But before I reveal it, there are some things I want to say to all of you. Runa, my child, help me to sit up so I can breathe more easily." And as Thekk gently raised the old chieftain to a sitting position, Motsognir's daughter propped up some pillows against which he leaned back with a sigh.

"Thank you, my dear. And you, Thekk. Now, hear me out and you will, I hope, come to understand why I have chosen as I have. Indulge an old dwarf because of the love

you bear for him... and because he is still your king!" Pride and authority rang in his voice, and his previously pallid features shone with the strength of yesteryear.

"You must remember that we dwarves are a mighty race with a proud heritage. Men do not call us the Dark Elves without reason, though they—and many of you younger dwarves—may have forgotten why. The story that the first dwarves were formed from the maggots that crawled in the giant Ymir's corpse was a wicked lie, fomented by those who wish us ill...Loki's doing as like as not. No, we came not from maggots, but from the same stock as the Light Elves." He paused for effect. "We—and they—are what we are by choice. Once there were just the elves—neither Dark nor Light—and then Njuollo Arrow-swift saved Odin from the clutches of a ravenous ice-bear. In gratitude, the Father of the Gods offered the elves their choice of two worlds: Alfheim, a wide, sunlit land, which lay hard by the gods' own realm of Asgard and was subject to their rule; and a much vaster underground kingdom he proposed to call Svartalfheim because its inhabitants would be privileged to dwell for all time in the Land of Always Night. To those who chose Svartalfheim, Odin also gave the magical mastery of metalworking—a gift denied to those who chose to remain Above, exposed to the harsh glare of sunlight beneath a sky roof so high that none could hope to touch it." Motsognir shuddered momentarily at the thought of such unlimited open spaces. "As a final gift to those who chose independence and metalworking skill, the All-father changed our forms so that we would be well suited for our new home—he shortened our stature so we could slip in and out of small tunnels, gave us owl-like eyes so we could see well in dim light, enlarged our ears so we could catch the faintest sounds, and made our noses so keen we could detect the slightest odors. Was ever a people more blessed?" The old dwarf sighed contentedly.

"Still, those who chose to stay Above seem to be content with their choice, too, or so their traders would have us believe when we meet them Above at night from time to time to exchange our metalwork for their game and hides. It is hard to imagine how that could be so, but perhaps it is because they know no better." Motsognir pondered this thought for a moment before continuing. "Yet it is good that they do not...or they might covet what we possess, and kinfolk or not, Svartalfheim is for the dwarves—and the dwarves alone! Few disturb us here, and that is the way we like it. Nobody, not even the gods, tell us what to do...and if someone wants something from us, why, they have to ask for it most politely—cap in hand, so to speak—and pay the price we demand. That is how it has always been and that is the way it always should be!" None would have known from Motsognir's ringing voice that the dwarf king was so near death as to be able to see the

dim outline of Hel's Gate. But then this burst of energy passed and he seemed to slump forward.

"Which is why I have chosen Durin as my successor," Motsognir stated quietly. "He will preserve and perpetuate our honored traditions, and thus he will insure that the dwarves remain independent and prosperous. Dvalin is a fine dwarf, too --and none can ever forget that he is the one who secured the secret of the runes for dwarfkind-- but I see him as too much the dreamer, too enchanted by change just for the sake of doing something different, to have the ultimate responsibility and authority for deciding the future of our race. Such attributes would make him a splendid advisor, but the kingship requires greater stability. I am sorry, Dvalin; I know you must be bitterly disappointed, but it was my decision to make. I can only hope you will give Durin as much support and loyalty as you have given me." Motsognir cast a concerned glance at Dvalin, who stood stiffly with his fists clenched and his lips set in a grim line, then slowly scanned the faces of the rest of the assemblage before smiling into Runa's tear-filled eyes.

"I must be going now, friends, for Hel's Gate is swinging wide to receive me. Grieve not, Runa, for when I see your dear mother I shall give her your love." With a final sigh, Motsognir's shade slipped away from among them, leaving behind it a maelstrom of seething emotions - grief and relief, triumph and rage.

"I won't have it! I tell you, Thekk, I just won't have it. Was I Motsognir's choice or wasn't I?" demanded Durin in a loud voice.

"Of course you were, your majesty," replied the chief councillor soothingly.

"Well, you would never know it the way Dvalin struts about, followed by his admirers. No, don't bother trying to deny it," Durin raised his hand as Thekk seemed about to speak. "Dvalin does have a large group of followers who were not pleased with Motsognir's choice. I suspect that even Runa would have preferred Dvalin...which is probably why she journeyed to Asgard to join the Sisterhood of Norns. That way she would not have to be disloyal to the memory of her father."

Thekk stared at his toes. "I'm afraid your majesty may be right." Then the chief councillor looked up. "But I hope your majesty knows he can count on my loyalty?"

"I have never doubted your loyalty to Motsognir or to his chosen successor, Thekk, though I must confess I am beginning to grow suspicious of nearly everyone else." Durin sighed discontentedly.

"Then your majesty is going to have to do something at once," responded Thekk. "Svartalfheim cannot have two rulers... in fact, or in appearance."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to hand the crown over to Dvalin; you can be sure of that. If Motsognir had thought him to be the best choice, he would have named Dvalin king to begin with. No, that's no answer. And trying to reason with Dvalin to gain his cooperation has proven to be utterly useless so far." Durin threw up his hands in

exasperation.

Slumping back in his throne, the dwarf king tented his fingers and pressed them against his chin. "Well, I suppose I would be within my rights to execute him for treason..."

At that declaration, a loud gasp was heard and a pretty female dwarf emerged from the tapestries behind the throne. She flung herself at the feet of the amazed king and open-mouthed councillor as she gasped out, "Oh, my brother, surely you could not be so heartless! I know you are unhappy because Dvalin is so well liked, and he won't bow and scrape to you, but I can't believe you would have him killed for that."

"Dear Brunni, if you've eavesdropped for more than just a moment you'll realize that you're judging me unfairly. Still," Durin paused with a puzzled expression on his face, "I don't understand why my own sister should be such a staunch supporter of Dvalin."

Brunni tossed her head of rich brown hair and proudly, almost defiantly, declared, "Because I love him."

Durin clapped his hands over his ears and groaned aloud. "That does it. Now he has even turned my own sister against me." He leaped up from his throne and glared at Brunni. "Listen to me, and listen well. For your sake --and because I don't relish making Dvalin a martyr-- I will spare his life. But," said Durin, raising a silencing hand to cut off his sister's cry of relief and gratitude, "he cannot remain in Svartalfheim to continue undermining my authority. Thekk, draw up the proclamation of banishment at once."

As Brunni's eyes grew wide with horror, Durin continued, "While I would like nothing better than to have Dvalin discover on his own what life without Svartalfheim will be like, I don't wish to have his followers stirring up trouble after he is gone... so all who wish to follow him into exile may leave Svartalfheim forever. I ask only that they leave their women and children here until a safe new home has been built for them." Of course, thought Durin to himself, that could well take several years, time enough --perhaps-- for Brunni to come to her senses and forget Dvalin.

Quaffing ale and swapping stories with "good old Dvalin" was one thing; leaving wife and child for several years to venture into the unknown, far from their familiar and beloved Svartalfheim, was quite another. In the end, fewer than two dozen dwarves chose to accompany Dvalin into exile.

Many a tear was shed and many a longing look was cast, the evening that Dvalin's band took leave of their loved ones and departed from their mountain home. Brunni clung desperately to Dvalin until he gently freed himself from her grasp and assumed his position at the head of the column. He had promised to send for her once the new dwarf homeland was established--its caverns hollowed and tunnels dug--but when you are young (for a dwarf) and in love, a separation of several years seems forever and such a promise is hollow comfort, indeed. Thus it was that just a few nights later a shadowy figure, wearing a hooded cloak



and carrying a backpack stuffed with food and other necessities, slipped unseen through an unguarded tunnel and—without casting so much as a single regretful backward glance—moved swiftly down the boulder-strewn slope toward Svarinshaug, the huge barrow mound Brunni knew the refugees planned to use as a way-station before continuing their journey.

So intent was the dwarf-maid on reaching Svarinshaug and her lover's arms that she failed to pay attention to all of her senses... and thus did not detect the rank odor of troll until what had appeared to be a huge boulder along the trail reached out a long, hairy arm and plucked Brunni off her feet and into the air.

"Well, well, well...and what have we here? Another of those pesky thumblings, I should think," rasped the troll's harsh voice. "Only this one hasn't gotten away from us like the others, has it? Oh, no, indeed it hasn't."

"Here, now Ogmund," snarled another large "boulder" as it detached itself from the mountainside and reached out a grasping hand for Brunni, "let me have it, won't you? It was my big toe nearly got chopped off by one of them little axes when we tried to grab us a couple thumblings down by the barrow mound last night. I guess I owe something for my toe, I do, so let me have this one." His hand fixed on Brunni's cloak and he pulled her toward him.

Ogmund glowered and tugged in the opposite direction. With a loud rip, the cloak tore into two pieces and Brunni fell to the ground with a thump. Unfortunately for the dwarf-maid, the fall stunned her long enough for Ogmund to grab her again before she could scramble away.

"See here, Kor," declared Ogmund, "if we fight over her, she might get away. Let's decide together what to do with her."

"That's a good idea, Ogmund," agreed his companion, "my sore toe was just making me greedy for revenge. What shall we do, tear her in half and eat her?"

"No-o-o," drawled Ogmund. "We just split that deer between us and I'm not the least bit hungry. Let's do something different, something that will teach the other thumblings a lesson."

"Sounds good to me," responded Kor enthusiastically, "you got an idea?"

"You know what happens to trolls who are struck by sunlight, don't you?" queried Ogmund.

"Sure do," Kor shuddered. "They turn to stone."

"Well," grinned Ogmund, "I've heard that the same thing happens to thumblings, on account of their living underground like us. Why don't we tie this one down somewhere and find out what sunlight does to her? If we put her down by the river just before dawn, won't that be a nasty little surprise for the others to find when they come there to get water tomorrow night?"

"It will be if it works," muttered Kor. "What if nothing happens to her when the sun comes up?"

"Can you imagine the wolves or the eagles letting a tasty little morsel like this stay uneaten all day? Oh, no, friend Kor, her doom is sealed any way you look at it." And Ogmund chuckled gleefully, very much pleased with himself.

Shortly before dawn, Dvalin had been wandering—bow in hand—in search of game in the alder thickets near the river when his keen ears detected what sounded like pitiful sobbing. Suspecting that it might be a ruse by those pesky trolls his band had barely escaped the other night, Dvalin approached the source of the sobs with all his senses alert. He was also mindful that dawn was rapidly approaching and that it must not find him very far from the barrow mound. Although his hooded cloak would give him some protection, he knew he dare not turn his face toward the naked sun. Although the sun's rays would not turn dwarves to stone—as it would trolls—it assuredly would render a

dwarf permanently blind, another facet of Father Odin's "gift." When the ancestral Dark Elves had agreed to forego the light of the sun, they had, indeed, relinquished it forever.

At the edge of the alder thicket, Dvalin paused. Extending thence to the river's edge was a broad meadow. In the center of the meadow, a tall sapling had been stripped of its limbs and driven as deep into the turf as a powerful pair of troll arms could manage. At the base of the crude pole, a writhing white object appeared to be the source of the sobs. Even though the sky was becoming lighter, Dvalin's curiosity drew him ever closer until, to his horror, he recognized a naked Brunni bound hand and foot to the pole in such a way that she faced eastward. A quick glance at the horizon confirmed her imminent peril from the rising sun, and Dvalin dashed across the remaining space to cut her loose and try to find some shelter in the alder thicket for both of them before it was too late.

"Oh, Dvalin, you've come, you've come," Brunni cried.

"No time to talk now," Dvalin grunted as he sawed at the heavy bindings the trolls had used. "I've got to get you out of here before the sun comes up."

One by one the cords parted, and it seemed as if victory were almost in their grasp. Then – just as the last cord fell away and Brunni was free to stumble along on her numb, chafed legs – the hunting cry of a king eagle, largest and most ferocious of the birds of prey, shattered the eastern sky and froze the hearts of the two dwarves with terror. Dvalin realized at once that they could never reach the cover of the alders before the king eagle seized one of them, yet if they stayed to fight, the rising sun would blind them both.

In almost a single motion, Dvalin whipped the hooded cloak from his shoulders and pulled it over Brunni's. Forcing her to the ground with her now hooded head turned away from the sun – and admonishing her not to move for any reason – Dvalin nocked an arrow to his bowstring. Hearing the triumphant scream of the king eagle as it started to dive toward its prey, and knowing that the bird would attack with the sun at its back, Dvalin turned to face his enemy – to gain one glimpse of it with his last sight. There it was... and coming incredibly fast! Yet the afterimage of that one last vision was burned on his brain, and when he drew back his bowstring and loosed his arrow it was as if he saw the bird still. With the arrow, Dvalin also loosed a frightful cry, "Odin-n- n-n!" But whether that cry was meant as a prayer of supplication or as a curse, none ever knew save Dvalin.

The shot was true and, although the tumbling body of the king eagle struck Dvalin and knocked him sprawling over Brunni, the bird was dead before it ever touched the ground.

Dvalin gained much honor that day... as well as the nickname Solblindi, which he was to carry the rest of his life. When night fell, he and Brunni returned to the barrow

mound where they were married at once, dwarf-style. His band remained in Svarinshaug for only a short while before moving on to the brooding mountain called Aurvanger, which sits by itself in the middle of Joru Plain. In time, after Dvalin's followers revisited Svartalfheim to reclaim their families and bring them back to Aurvanger, the tale of Brunni's rescue and Dvalin's sacrifice became common knowledge... and from that time on the sun was known among dwarvish folk as "Dvalin's Doom."

## *THE FIRST KING OF THE ISLAND*

by Erin Lale

Out of the north came a bitter wind,  
And with it long, long ships.  
Out of the north with a frosty cry,  
Pale gold sailors slipped.  
Captain Baltlaf then descried  
An island fair and green.  
Shouting "Take 'er, lads, for our golden North-  
man queen!"  
Into the northwest bay he sailed,  
set anchor in the calm, calm sea,  
And led a force of ninety men to plunder for his  
Northman queen.  
No jewels he found,  
No coinage round,  
No silks nor spice nor native crowns,  
And only the flitting of soft, soft feet  
Told him of men he would never meet.  
Undaunted still he pitched his tent  
And slept beneath the stars.  
Only the wise old Moon could guess  
He would nevermore sail afar.  
The moon has risen a thousand times, and still  
Baltlaf is here,  
For he will never be wholly gone as long as heirs  
appear.



# THE WEDDING OF BEORWINE

*by Erin Lale*

The bride of Beorwine  
Bells wore  
On kinsman's kerchief  
And kerseymere dress.  
She would fain have furs  
But father gave none,  
Nor glitter nor gold  
In gay-painted chest.

Coarse were her clothes  
But clear her eye,  
Fair her face  
As fairy's wife,  
Long her limbs  
And lithe as sprite,  
And gossips gabbed  
She was get of fey.

Beaming Beorwine  
His boat made fast,  
To land leaping  
From serpent's lair.  
From horse he helped her;  
Hair-tosser blew;  
To ship he shouldered  
The sharing crest.

Of old always  
Was Beorwine armored  
And girt with greatsword  
And glee of battle,  
But kelp-green cloth now  
Under carved box went;  
Hence nought he needed  
But knives for table.

His lands were large  
And learned was he  
In matters of money  
And the means of court;  
Only love he lacked  
In his long-held halls;  
Forward few  
What he found would know.

The wind-farer wove  
Through knotted waves  
And bride and bridegroom

Bent to watch  
The moonwright's maiden  
Melting in the brine;  
Hand met hand  
On hurrying oak.

When at last to land  
The long ship sailed  
And anchored at inlet  
To eddying stream,  
Grass all green  
And golden dew  
Saw Alfrun of Egil  
Of old the kin.

"It is beautiful," said the bride  
Of Beorwine glad.  
"I care for comelier:  
For thee." To clay they stepped,  
And from hill and heath  
The people hailed them.  
Over fallow fields  
Fast they rode.

Man and maiden  
To merry hall  
At long last  
Laughing came.  
The roof with runes  
Of right was carved,  
Bread was baking,  
Boar cooked within.

Famous, and fairly,  
The feast became,  
In days long dead,  
For deep cook-pots;  
Skill of skalds  
Was scored that night,  
'Til dawn dim  
Dripped through windows.

Blue-caped bridemakers  
Bellowed to the sky  
Their chants and charms  
For chieftan's luck.  
Came man and maiden  
To morning-glory field,

Sun's eye was open,  
Omens were good.

Soft and simply  
Spoke Beorwine:  
"Alfrun of Isernmark  
Of Egil's house,  
Fair as when first  
Fleeting I saw thee  
On hilltop high  
Above windy heath,

When young was I,  
Untested in battle,  
My heart thou heldst  
By hope of love.  
Now chieftan I am chosen;  
Change touched thee not;  
Wilt marry me,  
My lovely maid?"

A small smile  
Smote him dumb.  
"Beorwine brave,  
Thy bride am I.  
Thy kin, thy castle,  
Thy care, thy land,  
From shore to shale-hill,  
All will I share."

To wed them well,  
The wish-provers  
Sang their songs  
And seared the air  
With told tokens  
And torches six.  
Shadows shortened;  
Sunna shone.

Joined hands and jumped  
Over jolly broom  
Did Beorwine bold  
And his bride comely.  
Home to hall  
And hearth went they  
Nor rested nor rose  
'Til Mani's veil was rent.

# ARTORIUS WYVERNIS

by Amy Wolf

Leigh squinted as she rounded a grassy corner, dazzled by the brightness of another L.A. day. The sun fell on twenty red mopeds, each piloted by a tan coed; it silhouetted students in shorts and backpacks, giving them the look of Alpine climbers.

*The last semester of my last year*, Leigh thought, gulping hot, chalky water at the library fountain. By her feet, steam wafted from a small metal grate, taking the place of smog.

*Very strange*, she reflected, but then, so were most things in L.A. She moved across the campus quad, past cardboard booths hawking the merits of "STUDY ABROAD," "BEING A T.A.," and "FRATERNITY RUSH WEEK."

As her feet hit cement, she passed a series of squat white buildings devoted to math and science, thinking about the novel she planned to write: should it be about ogres, demons or trolls?

She stopped as she realized her thoughts had led her into No Man's Land: the manicured, hedge-lined lane of Fraternity Row. A spill of humanity was assembled on the ALPHA BETA GAMMA steps, moving backwards like a runaway tractor. Leigh saw a pledge in his underwear being chained to a pillar, then clouds snaking across the sky as a muscular Frat brother slammed into her.

"Sorry!" the guy said, getting down on hands and knees and grabbing for scattered books.

"Here, let me..." Leigh flopped down on the grass beside him.

"Whoa: 'Canterbury Tales,' 'The Hobbit,' and 'Mort Dard Thur,' he read from printed titles.

"That's the *Morte Darthur*."

"Are you an Epsilon?" he asked, helping her up.

Leigh wondered if she were being insulted. "What?"

He took in her long brown hair, dark eyes, and well-formed figure. "Well, you sure could be."

It took all of Leigh's self-control not to roll her eyes.

"You got a name?"

"Leigh. Leigh Holford."

"I'm Jonathan Derry. I've seen you around the library. You must be a real good student."

"Sometimes."

He brushed wavy brown hair out of his eyes. "Y'know, I've been having some problems with English. I was wondering if maybe--"

His wish went unexpressed as a fellow A.B.G., lumpy pectorals bursting out of a tank top, came up from behind, flashing two rows of teeth that reminded Leigh of the Cheshire cat.

"Go for it, Derry! Make the play, bud!"

"Shut up, Scott," Jonathan stared at the lawn, knuckles whitening where he clutched Leigh's books.

"May I?" Leigh moved forward, and he reluctantly handed them over.

"Bodacious babe, I think you do not know to whom you speak." Scott's grin became even wider. "You stand before the school recordholder in the decathlon, and state champion in the javelin. We're talkin' Olympic Man here."

Leigh looked hard at Jonathan. His embarrassment seemed to fade as he puffed out his chest. "Yeah, I plan to rack in beaucoup bucks after the Games. If that doesn't fly, I'm gonna get my MBA and make my first Mil before I'm thirty--"

"Naturally." Leigh turned to go. "Well, I have class. See ya."

"Ask the babe to the fiesta!" Scott urged his friend.

"OK, dude! Babe--I mean, Leigh--if you're not doin' anything tonight, we're havin' this party--"

"I don't go to frat parties."

"Right. See you tonight then." He and Scott exchanged an exuberant high five, striding off across the lawn.

"Jerks," said Leigh, but they were too far off to hear.

Leigh's pen glided across lined paper, capturing another of Professor Bates' lectures. She and her friend Liz exchanged a smile. Between his diminutive height and crown of white hair, the Professor looked like Albert Einstein crossed with a leprechaun.

"Soo whan sir Launcelot had lyffte up the tombe there came oute an orryble and a fyendely dragon spyttinge wyldre fyre oute of hys mowthe. Than sir Launcelotte drew his swerde and faught wyth that dragon longe, and at the laste sir Launcelot slew that dragon."

The Professor turned his back, scribbling notes on a chalkboard. Leigh's pen was about to follow suit when she heard a mild rumbling. Peering out the window, she saw four tractors chugging over earth like tanks across a battlefield.

*The new wing*, she remembered.

"An excellent question, Mr. Newcombe," the Professor was saying. "Let's digress to the matter of authorship."

Thirty notebooks rustled in unison.

"Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel may *not* be the author of the *Morte Darthur*. Some say that a Thomas Malory of Papworth St. Agnes actually wrote the book--"

"HA!"

Leigh wasn't crazy, she had heard it; it sounded like it had come from beneath her desk. Doubling over, she tried to put her ear to the floor, then saw Professor Bates staring

at her strangely.

With a blush, she straightened up, grabbing her pen in earnest.

The CSUV clock tower knelled ten solemn bells as Leigh left the library that night. She stopped in front of the water fountain, then forgot why she was there. The iron grate at her feet was barely visible; from it rose a thin gray mist, undulating like a python.

*What is going on down there?* she asked herself, edging closer. A small spurt of flame caught her eye, then burned itself out into blackness.

"Very strange," she said, taking a step back.

She was suddenly struck by an idea. Striding across the quad, she entered No Man's Land for the second time that day. A familiar figure stared blearily into a paper cup.

"Hey Liz," she called, "I want to find out what's causing that steam. You up for a trip to the boiler room?"

"Sounds like fun. But I think I'll stay here 'til I pass out."

Leigh nodded, turning to see Jonathan chugalugging two beers to the delight of his hulking friends.

*Neanderthal*, she thought, heading for the North Campus.

She walked briskly to a concrete parking structure (the one she had been assigned to for four years) taking an elevator to the "F" level. Striding across the underground expanse, she lifted a chain bolted to a sign reading "NO ENTRANCE," slipped lithely under and passed a series of boilers, all clacking away like angry magpies.

*Not much steam here*, she noted, turning down a narrow passageway whose light receded with the garage. As the machine noise dimmed, the squeak of her tennis shoes took over. *Come on*, she urged herself, *a writer needs to live, a writer needs experience...*

She fell into a pothole, feeling a wash of icy water over her calves. Leaping out, she backed directly into a solid object. With a samurai yell, Leigh wheeled to face the unknown, which faced her back, wielding a blinding, white-hot beam.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Jonathan!"

He swung his flashlight to the floor.

"Look." Leigh's voice rasped with anger. "If you think sneaking up on people is funny--"

"I didn't think it was safe to be down here alone."

"Why don't you go back to your beer?"

He said nothing, but his eyes were unwavering.

"All right, I can't stop you from following me, but I want you to stay ten paces behind."

"Like a Chinese concubine?" he mumbled. She stared at him in the half-light. Had he actually *learnt something* in college?

She seized the flashlight and he obeyed orders, hanging behind as they traversed the twisting passage. Leigh's eyes

swept a heavy door limned in granite.

"What *is* this place?"

"CSUV used to be a hospital...back in World War II," Jonathan explained. "This must've been some kind of bomb shelter."

"Oh." Leigh covered her mouth as the air became uncomfortably dense. She looked up, catching a glint of iron thirty feet up. They must be directly below the grate.

"Come on!" she urged, picking up the pace.

"Wait a minute, don't--" But Jonathan's words went unheeded, as gray wisps--not of steam, but non-acrid smoke--led her to a tall iron door, fastened shut with a rusted wheel. Pull and pry as she might, it refused to budge.

"Let me." Jonathan tried his strength against the wheel, but came away with slivers of rust staining his palms. "Maybe there's a secret password," he said, trying to sound bright.

"Maybe." Leigh seemed to be taking him seriously. "I read somewhere that iron is particularly susceptible to the charms of dwarves. Um, they're incredible smiths who supposedly dwell beneath the earth."

"Think we'll find one down here?" Jonathan asked.

"No." Leigh sounded annoyed. He seemed about to say something else. "Be quiet for a minute." She approached the door hesitantly, reciting in her best stage voice:

"Door of iron, soul of steel,  
Be moved by my cry,  
And stir the wheel."

Nothing.

"Hmm," Leigh said, "it works in all the stories." But she was determined not to give up.

"Metal that was forged in the heat of the earth,  
Tempered by magic, kindled in hearth,  
Hear the cry of the Elder Folk,  
Let fall the door,  
Like the aged oak."

It worked, sort of. She must have gotten the charms mixed up, for instead of the door giving way, the wheel turned neatly, like the combination lock of a safe. Leigh and Jonathan eased their way into a high-vaulted chamber, and nearly stepped on a sleeping dragon!

Jonathan pulled her back as they both surveyed the room. The whole place flickered with a dull-gold hue, emanating from a mountain of jewels, coins and weapons.

"A dragon hoarding his treasure," Leigh whispered. "How cliché!"

What was not cliché were seven suits of armor, each polished to a high brilliance, lining the room to the left. *It's...it's almost like a museum exhibit*, Leigh thought. All that was missing was a glass display case.

She shifted her gaze to the right, letting out a bloodcurdling scream. There, across from the dragon's head, was the skeleton of a previous victim.

The beast awoke with a start, rearing onto its hindquarters. In a moment of clear-eyed panic, Leigh saw that it had the head of a lizard, the talons of an eagle, the horns of a stag and the wings of a bat. From here, all comparisons to ordinary nature ended. The dragon sported angry spines running from its nose to the tip of its tail, complementing blue-gold scales. Leigh wasn't good at math, but she figured the creature was twenty feet long, and four feet wide across the belly.

"Here!" She shook off her paralysis, throwing Jonathan a bronze-tipped spear, and grabbing a shield and broadsword for herself.

The dragon reared up even further, belching smoke from its open mouth. Leigh saw the flames coming before they hit, ducking beneath her shield. The sword turned to ash as Jonathan joined her, hefting his spear like a javelin.

"Jonathan!" Leigh yelled, seeing the talons swipe, but there was nothing she could do; the dragon closed its grip around the struggling form, lifting him steadily, bringing him closer to waiting fangs.

Leigh leapt behind a wooden chest as the dragon spewed fire at her; saw Jonathan coolly aim for the underside of its throat.

She felt pain shoot up her arm as her elbow grazed a heavy object. Looking down, she saw she was lying on "The Winchester Manuscript," opened to a highlighted passage.

Wait a minute! her brain screamed. *Lancelot slays a dragon...the rumbling...that "Ha!" in the classroom...the lovingly preserved armor and the manuscript of the Morte Darthur...*

Leigh shot to her feet, book in hand, just as Jonathan was about to strike. "A, Launcelot!" she read, "thou were hede of al Crysten knyghtes! And thou were the curtest knyght that ever bare shelde! And thou was the mekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyes, and thou were the sternest knyght to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the reeste."

"Isn't that beautiful?" the dragon asked, wiping a tear from one hooded eye. "Malory *adored* Lancelot. And I must say--he's *my* favorite as well."

"You're... you're a fan of the *Morte Darthur*!" Leigh stammered, taking it all in. "And you've been auditing Professor Bates' class from down here!"

"Just so," the dragon nodded, putting Jonathan down gently. "But do let's make a proper introduction. I'm Artorius Wyvernus...self-named, of course."

"Are you going for your degree?" Jonathan asked, throwing away his spear.

"Dear me, no, I'm too old to be a student."

"Then you've been around since creation," Leigh said seriously.

"I should say not! I'm just a hair over four-hundred-

thirty," Artorius smoothed his ruffled spines. "You see, Dr. Dee, the Renaissance mage, once forgot to banish a spirit. He was reading a map and came to the words: 'Here be dragons.' Well, the demon decided to have some fun, and plopped *me* on top of the map. Naturally, the old boy was humiliated, and banished me to a barrow."

"But how--?"

"Don't interrupt, young man. Four hundred years later, I got so bloody *bored*, I flew to a lovely green place--Oxford, it was called. When I heard Professor Bates lecture, I knew: *Here* was something better than gold!"

"So you followed him to America."

"Quite right, young lady. *Beastly* journey, that. Have you ever ironed a cloak of invisibility?"

"Does the Professor know you're here?"

"Certainly not!" The dragon backed up in indignation. "We haven't been *introduced!*"

"But how'd you get this stuff here?" Jonathan asked, fingering a ruby.

"U.P.S."

"And the skeleton, too?" Leigh tried not to smile.

"Dear me no, that's from the Med School. Effective, isn't it?"

"Very." Leigh closed her eyes with relief. "I'm sorry we disturbed your rest. But we really should be getting back..."

"Don't go!" Artorius pleaded. "Won't you at least stay for tea?"

"We'd like to, but I'm due in at the dorm."

"Well, if you *must* go," he conceded, "why not take some of this treasure? The whole thing's become such a bloody bore and a nuisance."

"Hey, no problem!" Jonathan enthused, scooping up a handful of coins.

Leigh shot him a disapproving look. "Good night, Artorius. I'm sure we'll meet again."

"Yes, *do* stop by any time. And if you could bring Bates' new study of Malory, that would be perfectly lovely."

"Ciao, dragon!" Jonathan waved. He and Leigh exited the chamber, retracing their steps down the passageway.

"What're you gonna do with the money?" she asked. "Buy a new Porsche?"

"Look," said Jonathan. "You've got it wrong. My dad's been out of work for awhile, and I want to help if I can."

"Oh," said Leigh, quietly.

"You don't have to feel bad. I know I seem like a jerk 'cause I don't have much confidence, and I want people to like me. I guess I try too hard."

Leigh felt a flush of shame. When she had first met Jonathan, she had written him off as a Dumb Jock; it was sobering to discover he was so much more.

"I'm the dumb one," she mumbled, traipsing back to the elevator.

"Huh?"

"Nothing." She looked him over. "You know, some-

times frat guys aren't what they seem."

"Dragons, either."

And he pressed the "Up" button.

"Did you get that book he wanted?"

"No, Mrs. Stein from the library said she'd take care of it."

Leigh and Jonathan approached the iron door the next morning, but stopped at hearing a raised voice.

"I tell you, Malory of Newbold Revel was a criminal! He was arrested for robbing a monastery, insulting the Abbott, sheep-stealing, and rape! If he wrote the *Morte*, it was from inside Newgate Prison!"

"He was a *gentleman!*" Artorius bellowed.

"That's Professor Bates!" Leigh told Jonathan.

"I've no time for argument, Mr. Wyvern. Mrs. Stein said you wanted to preview my work; well, here it is."

The voices lowered to a conciliatory growl, and Leigh and Jonathan advanced gingerly. But they were blown back as Artorius let loose another bellow, snorting:

"Malory of Papworth St. Agnes! HA!"

---

(Quotations from the *Morte Darthur* excerpted from Eugene Vinaver's *Works*)

## EDITORIAL

Welcome to *The Mythic Circle* #15. It's hard to believe that we've actually published fifteen issues. Thanks to all you authors and subscribers, especially those who have stayed with us from the beginning!

We are proud to feature reappearances by some of those stalwart authors in this issue. Gwenyth Hood turns her ironic gaze on modern technology in "The Latest Model;" Doug Rossman offers a splendid retelling of Norse fable in "Dvalin's Doom" (Doug's wife Sharon did the accompanying illo); Angelee Sailor Anderson provides a sonnet, and a lyric from her novel-in-progress; Erin Lale appears with a myth in verse. Welcome back, folks! We also, as usual, offer stories and poems by promising newcomers. Try the eerie atmosphere of Lee Zumpe's "Sanctum," the suspense of Tim Waggoner's "Huntress," the horror-wrapped-in-homespun of Ivan Hughes' "Reunion." On page 17 you'll find information on the writers' workshop to be held at Mythcon 24, and more Mythcon details on the page after...

We could go on and on, and would given any excuse, but you don't really want previews. You can have the real thing. The stories and poems await. After you've read them, though, write us letters. We always love to hear from you.

Have a good summer.

Tina Cooper and C.I.S. Lowentroun



# SHORE SONG

*(How they Drew the Moon)*

*by Barbara Jarvik*

Drayley Dray came on a Thursday  
Where Lacey Lamb sang starry-eyed,  
"Tell a story now till Friday,  
While I sift stones left by the tide."

She combed for shells and bits of shiny,  
Sea horse, urchins, daughters-of-pearl,  
And in the sand flats, dark and briny,  
She bent to work where the night winds whirl.

Drayley did not sing or whistle  
But coaxed a tune from a one reed pipe,  
Like wind across a lone field thistle.  
Lacey Lamb jumped with delight.

"Delay the moon! Tempt her and hold her!  
Cause her to listen; beg her to stay!  
I cannot coax her; you look bolder,  
Help me call her, find a way!"

Drayley Dray had a black and a white shoe,  
Waistcoat wild, and bandanna wide.  
His belt was striped, his bracelets bright-new.  
He walked like crabs, from side to side.

And when he laughed it was with the clatter  
Of bric-brac swept in on the foam.  
"Get her, hold her? Does it matter?  
The moon is reckless; she's no man's home!"

"She has no eyes or pleasing faces,  
She's just a rock, and you're a fool.  
She's Nothing srewn with dreadful places,  
Stony, airless, cold and cruel!"

Like flotsam on an endless ocean  
Rushing shoreward in the night,  
Did Drayley's words, with drifting motion,  
Reach their target and alight.

Into the wind, his watch-chain swinging,  
Drayley mimicked night's sky sound,  
Poor Lacey Lamb behind ran, singing,  
Then the rising moon came 'round.

"So I am cold and not like you!"  
She hovered, glowing, in the sky.  
Her laughter fell, as real as dew,  
Frosting the trees as it went by.

Friday came. They did not dare  
believe their eyes; the moon still reigned.  
With harps of light she strung the air  
And hidden on the day, remained.

Where Drayley Dray could not believe  
Un-music fell and made him free.  
And Lacey Lamb ran through the sand  
To gather bits of melody.

And Moon, Oh Moon, she stayed on, fairer  
Than lesser ones can ever stand.  
She loves to be a lantern bearer  
And story teller above the land.

"Earth babies, gaze at me tonight.  
Is not my wardrobe wonderfully sewn?"  
Said Lady Moon, dressed in her light  
None of which she called her own.

# The Latest Model

by *Gwenyth E. Hood*

Though it was only superficial, the lesion on the three-year old's arm looked sinister. Oddly symmetrical and oval, it looked like a pinkish field of delicate needlepricks on the pudgy arm and elbow, oozing a little and forming a crust the color of lemon yogurt on the edges. The child sniffled as Sandra gently explored his injury. His cheeks were still red from bawling.

"Well, well! What happened to you, young man?" asked Sandra when she had finished.

"I fell down!" declared Michael.

"What did you fall on, Michael?"

"The wellwet wallay," said Michael.

"The wellwet wahlay?" Sandra looked questioningly at the grim-faced nanny.

"He means the carpet, Dr. Plummer," she offered. "The Velvet Valet."

"I see! A rogue Model 5. I've heard of Model 5 burns, but this is the first I've actually seen. They tend," and she gave the nanny, Peggy Terril, a questioning look, "to be treated at home."

A smile teased the corners of Peggy Terril's mouth. "Yes, Dr. Plummer, I could have treated Michael's burn at home. I brought him in for another reason. You see, Michael really hates the carpet."

"Hates it?" Sandra glanced quizzically at the three year old who had such firm views on interior decoration.

"I mean, hates it as if it were something alive."

Sandra shook her head; she did not get the drift. "Well, the burn will give no trouble anyway. It's superficial; it will heal in no time." Carefully she ran the tap water until it was lukewarm and began dressing the wound. "Do you hate the carpet, Michael?" she asked as she proceeded. When in doubt, verify.

"I do! I want to eat it up!" the child declared with passion.

The nanny grimaced. "He actually did try to eat it once, Dr. Plummer. His mouth was swollen for a week. His sister Cheryl also attacks the carpet every now and then. One time she must have been at it a good fifteen minutes before we caught her."

Michael chortled. "She looked like a mummy, she had so many bandages!"

"Was she treated here?" Sandra asked.

"No, I took care of it. They teach nannies first aid, you know. But this time I wanted to consult you. Since you are in family practice, I thought you might know about problems involving the Model 5. I mean, psychological problems."

"I see," said Sandra. The dark-haired, ruddy-cheeked

nanny had neatly laid a ticking time-bomb on Sandra's lap. Did Peggy realize that if her suspicions were correct, keeping a rogue Model 5 in a house with children might be considered a form of child abuse? Of course she knew. They taught nannies things like that.

"Well," said Sandra, "the Rogue phenomenon is very new and I don't think there have been formal studies on it. But I'll ask around and find out what my colleagues know." Then she added in a softer voice, "I was tempted to get a Model 5 myself back ten years ago when Roger and I set up housekeeping. You can't beat those jewel-tones with the velvet texture. Like fresh-mown turf, it just begs you to sink your toes into it."

Model 5 had proved to be a trap for many upwardly mobile families. It had been advertised as a lifelong investment, for its luscious jewel-tones could be readjusted in a wide variety of patterns to satisfy its owner's changing tastes. But that was not the best of it; similar features, after all, had long been available in the old Model 3, even if the velvet was not as lush. No, the Model 5's unique attraction was the glamor of the most advanced nano-engineering. Only Model 5 had that embedded meta-archetectonic layer, inorganic yet modeled on biological DNA. Only it had the carefully articulated venous strata designed to monitor every part of its surface for cleaning and self-repair. The Model 3 still had a mechanical engine unobtrusively installed below the floor, and you had to remember to set it to run at a time when it would not bother the household. During operation, the tiny hollow carpet shafts alternately vibrated and suctioned to break up the dust and stains and draw the fragments into the pores. Then, through a network of veins, the debris would be drawn into a receptacle below the floor. And you had to remember to empty the receptacle, or the suction would not work. Every now and then a vein would become clogged with an odd-sized particle, so you had to call the trouble-shooter. In addition to this, every two years or so the carpet shafts would start to lose their luster, and you had to spread a "Model 3 refurbish" fluid over it and stay off for as much as two hours while it recoated, restored and smoothed any worn or threadbare patches.

Yes, Model 3 took some maintenance, averaging about fifteen minutes a month. To be sure, most of the nuisance was remembering what needed to be done. Maintenance was finished as soon as remembered. The worst thing about the machine was its old fashioned simplicity. When all was said and done it was just a glorified vacuum cleaner.

Model 5 took care of itself. Its meta-archetectonic layer detected foreign particles which impinged upon its surfaces and sent out its microscopic bars and lathes to crush them and absorb the debris within its pores. From this residue



it took whatever it needed to repair its own structure, excreting the rest into a receptacle below the floor. In the later versions the receptacle, when filled, would call your answering machine to tell you it needed to be emptied.)

Yes, the Model 5 was hardy and enduring, like the living organisms whose structure it aped. It was likewise vulnerable. Its meta-archetectonic base was subject to mutations. And despite the Environmental Reconstruction Act (ERA) of 2031, ultraviolet light and cosmic rays were still penetrating the as-yet-unreplenished ozone layer at a morbidly high level. This, of course, worsened the problem. Furthermore, mutations in the meta-archetectonic base would quickly spread throughout the whole Model 5 because of its ongoing regenerative processes. Then the carpet would do unexpected things. The programming which checked it from attacking warm-blooded animals or smooth surfaces larger than a centimeter in diameter would be overridden.

There would have been greater outcry had the digestion process been swift or dramatic. But no; it worked in tiny increments, molecule by molecule, and damage took a while to show. Many pet owners were at first pleased when their cats and dogs developed a sudden aversion for the indoors. When holes appeared in the soles of owners' shoes, they only decided to change designers. But when they suddenly came home from a month at the seashore to discover that the legs of the baby-grand piano were an inch shorter than they should be, the secret was out.

Of course, had they been in the habit of wriggling their bare toes in the lush velvet of the carpet, they would have noticed something right away.

Troubleshooters were called and they would lock the owner out of the house for an average of four hours and then explain that the problem was fixed. Usually it was only temporarily restrained. Mutations in the meta-archetectonic structure were like dandelions on a lawn—they have deep roots and they replenish quickly. People soon resigned themselves to living with carnivorous carpets. Children were encouraged to play outdoors whenever possible and stay upright when inside. A superficial scrape or so did not seem reason enough to get rid of a carpet which cost as much as a luxury glider. The Model 5 still looked delicious, and surely the experts would crack the mutation problem soon.

But sibling rivalry and its attendant stresses was another thing the inventors of the Model 5 had not allowed for.

"Where, exactly, did you say you lived?" Sandra asked. "The Thistlegrove Center."

That was only 5 kilometers or so away. "If I learn anything today, perhaps I'll drop in on the way home. Would Michael's parents be there at any particular hour?"

"Usually. Mrs. Beck runs a boutique which she closes at five-thirty. Mr. Beck is a lawyer and his hours vary. But when he can, he joins his wife for dinner."

"Thank you. I'll come by and talk to you when I know something. I hope I will meet the Becks."

After the nanny had left with her charge, Sandra called

Dr. Lars Jensen in Psychiatry and Dr. Patricia Cox in Pediatrics and left messages with their secretaries. Then she forgot about the child with the Model 5 burn until Dr. Jensen called her at twelve-thirty.

"So, Sandy," his voice boomed cheerfully, "you want a consult? Are you about ready for lunch?"

"Yes, I take my hour now," she said.

"Come to my office. I'll show you something to turn your stomach, and then we'll go eat." He hung up the phone. Sandra snorted; Dr. Jensen used melodrama regularly as part of his ergotherapy, and it spilled over into his daily life. He was the only psychiatrist at the Thistle-down Medical Center who adhered to the new twenty-first century school which held that therapists achieved their effects by showering their patients with bursts of psychic energy. As the old-fashioned practitioners scoffed, it was a scientific way of scaring people sane. However, it drew patients and seemed to have as much success as older methods.

Sandra took the elevator to the fourth floor and found Lars Jensen crouching before his little desk. "Ah, there you are, Sandy," he said, idly twirling his blond mustache. His knees, bent double, could not quite fit beneath his desk. Surely, Sandy reflected, he had kept the undersize furnishings deliberately to enhance the impression of his massive frame on unwary patients; otherwise, in the three years he had been at the center, he could have found furniture his own size.

"So," continued Dr. Jensen, "you're wondering if long-term exposure to rogue Model 5's can cause stress disorders?"

"That's the basic idea."

"Want to try an experiment?"

"What sort of experiment, Lars?"

"I'll show you a holograph of a certain scene. My professional judgment is that if I can recover from being there in person, you can recover from seeing the holograph."

"I'm willing to test the hypothesis," said Sandra.

Lars flipped the switch of the holo projector and the image took shape in a half-meter cube upon his desk. It showed a luxurious interior with plush sofa and a wall design which looked something like interlocking horseshoes of turquoise and maroon. Personally, I prefer landscape decor, thought Sandra. The carpet was a lush acqumarine velvet, clearly Model 5. But at the center, the pure color was marred by an uneven blotch ranging from crimson to dull brown. It was blood, some fresh, some dried. At the edge of it there was a body, long-haired, round of buttock, wrapped in a loose dress, some sort of silk-polyester evening gown with glittering sequins of pale blue. It was marred with rust colored stains. The body lay face down. At least it would have lain face down if there were a face left; in profile the skull seemed too short and in a moment Sandra realized the carpet had eaten away some inches in the front. Grey brains had seeped out, mingling with partially digested hair. The fingers had been half-absorbed and both hands tapered off near the knuckles.

"I get the picture, Lars," said Sandy. "You can turn it off." He threw the switch and the holograph vanished. "But the digestion process is so slow," she protested. "How could anyone lie still that long? Did she have a seizure?"

"She took an overdose of barbiturates. But that probably wouldn't have finished her if it weren't for the Model 5. She lay unconscious until the radial artery and branches of the femoral artery were opened, and then she bled to death. Of course, the carpet went on digesting after that. It's hard to say whether that was an accident or whether she worked the rogue carpet into her calculations from the first. Now, may I ask you a question? It's part of the experiment."

"All right."

"Do you feel like eating lunch?"

"Not really, but I'd better because this is the only time of day I can fit it in."

"Right. Now tell me this: do you honestly believe it is not stressful to live with a rogue Model 5?"

"I can't expect the Becks to accept my subjective judgment."

"All human emotions are subjective, Sandy, but in many cases our subjectivities are quite similar. Do you have a gut feeling that there will be legal action against the Velvet Valet before there are too many more scenes like this one?"

"Must I really exercise the gift of prophecy as well, Lars?" asked Sandra.

"Of course, Sandy. You're in Family Practice. Family Practice includes all the general skills none of the specialties will touch."

Sandy nodded ironically. "All right, Lars. Do you have any other anecdotes to bolster my case?"

"Do you really need anecdotes, Sandy? How about logic? Take the case I have of a successful businessman who can't sleep because of recurrent fantasies that his carpet will eat him if he gives it half a chance. Once upon a time that would have been a phobia, but in this case, it was simple realism. I did point out, though, that he could easily end this stressful situation."

Sandy shrugged. "Wasn't he masochistic?"

"Ah, there's always been a double standard about masochism. We all put up with trouble to get what we want. All through history people have knowingly destroyed their health to achieve social standards. Remember the high-heeled shoes which ruined backs and ankles for more than three centuries. Then there were the anabolic steroids which increased muscle-mass in athletes while driving them to psychosis. And there's the sun-tanning craze which fueled the skin-cancer epidemic at the end of the last century. Rating glamor and status above sanity is perfectly normal. Ridiculous, of course, but normal."

"So how do I deal with it, Lars?"

"Inspire them to strive for excellence!" Before he spoke, Dr. Jensen had leaned back in his chair and self-consciously relaxed the grip of his hands on his chair-arms;

Sandra sensed that if he had followed his natural impulse, he would have leaped to his feet and pounded his fists his desk, very likely splintering it in the process. But instead he assumed a serene expression and fixed his eyes on hers. In ergotherapy it was important to send whirls of psychic energy in gentle bursts so that the patient could absorb them instead of merely being shattered.

"In Family Practice, we aren't trained to tell them how to live," said Sandra. "I can't say to them what you're saying to me."

"Of course you can't. You must use the art of diplomacy. That comes with Family Practice too," he said.

"Too bad they didn't offer me a class on it," said Sandra. They adjourned their discussion to the cafeteria. No sooner had they set their trays on a convenient table than Dr. Patricia Cox joined them. "Got your message, Sandra. I've reviewed a handful of cases for you. There's nothing we can lay just on the Model 5; there are always complicating factors. For example, there's a child on the fourth floor who won't touch anything velvety, smooth or jewel-toned because she's lived with a rogue Model 5 for a year. But her mother also tied her to the bed at nap-time. There are some children with severe disorders and delusions about carpets that are going to eat them, but their families were also going through nasty divorces. But it seems to me there's a nasty syndrome developing where chronic problems with rogue Model 5's are one factor."

"I guess I'll have to go on that," said Sandy. "It's all the information I have."

# # #

That evening, before the high fences of the Medical Center, Sandra watched the sausage-shaped shuttle lift off the ground, left side first, with a crooked wobble. It quivered in the air, then rose straight up with the action of the invisible propellers with the pores of its helium-impregnated walls. Lightly, with a rolling motion, it cleared the fence and spun on its usual route southward toward the residential centers. Awkward though they looked, these bouyant gliders rode very smoothly within and were amazingly safe. No one died in traffic accidents any more. The worst thing that happened was an occasional internal power failure which left passengers in the dark for moments or hours, and Sandra was armed against that. In her black bag she carried not only a standard battery powered flashlight but also a miniature kerosene lantern with matches. Doctors still needed low-tech lighting sometimes; you never knew.

Sandra caught the next public glider and after a ten minute ride she found herself coming down over the Thistledown Grove fences. The young ranger was in his watchtower, scanning the wilderness with his binoculars. He waved as they passed. Reintroduced wildlife was thriving in the new forests where the unneeded concrete of the ancient highways gradually dissolved into luxuriant vegetation. White-tailed deer were multiplying and there were excited whispers that moose and elk were migrating down from the north, followed by wolves and cougars. Otters,

muskrats and beavers were coming back to the rivers and lakes. It was fine sport for nature buffs to encounter them, but no one wanted them eating the roses or creating unplanned hazards on the golf courses. Hence the stun-gun on the wall behind the ranger.

In a moment the glider passed over the wall and alighted on the greensward. Sandra dismounted and found herself standing between a recreation field on the left and the housing which stood in rows on the right. The Becks, she knew, were somewhere within the handsome but standardized townhouses which gave the community its front. (More eccentric dwellings designed by nonconformists, such as the one Roger had built for the two of them, were tucked in the back.) Sandra glanced down on the paper where she had scrawled the address and let out an impatient sigh. She could not quite make out the number she had written. Did this mean a call to central data?

Four other passengers had alighted at Thistledown groves. Two were children, girls, neatly but casually dressed in tan skorts which were now favored as play-clothes. The third, a young woman in a grey skirt-suit, she immediately sized up as a nanny of the Emerson school. The fourth was not so easy to place. She was an older woman, perhaps in her sixties, with grey hair piled severely in a bun upon her head. Gold earrings and a gold-drop pendant added a touch of elegance to what was still an austere, not to say fierce, ensemble of black and white. "May I help you?" asked the older woman. The brisk tone suggested that Sandra was an obvious stranger; since the Environmental Reconstruction Act, nosy neighbors were in and everyone admitted that the crime rate was down. Sandra smiled ingratiatingly. "Do you perhaps know whether the Becks live in Townhouse 203 or 205? I'm Dr. Alexandra Plummer--"

"Oh yes!" The nanny spoke up. "Peggy said you might come. I'm Grace Phillips. I live two centers over with the Fosters, and these are Julie and Claudia Foster. And this," she said indicating the older lady, "is Louise Fortmain."

Sandra cried out in surprise. "Oh! You're the founder of the Emerson School of Domestic Education!"

Louise Fortmain's face relaxed and she actually chuckled. "You've heard of me, then? It's good not to be forgotten, though things aren't turning out the way I planned them. Nannies can only supplement parents' love. They can't replace it. They shouldn't be the only ones worried about rogue Model 5's." She caught herself. "But I run on too long. I live next door to the Becks. They're in 203 and I'm in 204. Good luck."

Thanking them quickly, Sandra approached Townhouse 203 and rang the bell. It was immediately opened by a woman with an oval face, her hair sculpted in the inexplicably fashionable high-tower style with jeweled pins. She was wearing a simple but startling chartreuse gown with gold accessories. "Good evening," said Sandra, "Is this Mrs. Beck?"

"Oh, you must be Dr. Plummer. Peggy said you would be dropping in," she said, throwing wide the door. "It's so

kind of you to be concerned about Michael." As Mrs. Beck stepped back, Sandra noticed that her shoes were gold to match the necklace and earrings. Was she wearing a transparent shoe-shield? Then Sandra remembered she had done nothing to shield her own two-year-old loafers. About time I replaced them anyway, she thought resignedly. Gingerly she stepped into the aqua-toned foyer. She fancied she felt the voracious fibers savoring her soles beneath her although consciously she knew the digestive action could not happen so fast. In the living room, the color changed to sea-green, offsetting a lime-green wall. Sandra tried briefly to decide whether she thought the combination tasteful, then gave it up. Roger was much better at these things.

On a matching sea-green couch Mr. Beck was half-reclined, his feet stretched out before him, drink in hand. "Walt, this is Dr. Sandra Plummer," said his wife.

Walt stood up. He was a large-framed man, more than six feet tall. His black hair tapered toward the back of his head. His eyes evaded hers as he reached out to shake her hand. "How good of you to come, Dr. Plummer. Michael's fine. Would you like a drink?"

"Good evening, Mr. Beck. I knew Michael's burn was not serious. No, I don't need a drink; I can't stay long."

At this Mr. Beck looked serious and put his drink on a side-table. "Well, please sit down," he said.

Sandra sank into the sofa, but Mr. Beck remained towering over her. Whew, thought Sandra, I already flunked the art of diplomacy. What can the gift of prophecy do, I wonder? With both Becks staring down at her, she began. "When Ms. Terril brought Michael, she asked me to investigate something. Did she tell you about that?" "No," said the Becks, quickly in unison.

Immediately Sandra thought she felt something move under her feet. She looked down, but nothing was obviously wrong. She should not let the Model 5 get so much on her nerves. The Becks were fidgeting and she turned to them again. "Ms. Terril feared that the long term stress of living with a rogue Model 5 might cause psychological damage. I have spoken with my colleagues and I find that there is indeed some basis for concern. My colleague in Pediatrics thinks there is a syndrome developing."

Mr. Beck snorted. "Listen, Dr. Plummer, you medical people have your viewpoint and I have mine. Mine is that I'm not going to live every moment of my life cringing in terror over every possible danger, however remote. The burns caused by the Model 5 are so superficial you hardly see them unless you look; the children have gotten worse scrapes climbing trees outside. Unless you have hard evidence that the Model 5 causes serious damage, I'm going to keep it, and furthermore, I don't want you harrassing me about it."

"Ah, yes, hard evidence." Sandra began to warm up. Though the number of malpractice suits had diminished since the Euthanasia Ruling of 2013, the old animus between doctors and lawyers had not completely died away. She folded her hands, and as she did so, her mind finally



registered something she had been noticing tangentially for some time. It was a ripple in the carpet, like an ocean wave, about an inch high and traveling toward Mr. Beck. She focused on it then and stared almost hypnotically. Only peripherally was she aware that both of the Becks had leaned away, looking at the ceiling, as if her behavior embarrassed them, like someone staring monomaniacally at a stain on a the hostess' gown at a dinner party. She spoke, and her voice sounded overloud, like the child calling attention to the Emperor's lack of clothes: Does your carpet do this often?"

"Do what?" demanded Mr. Beck.

"Wave and ripple. Like that." She pointed, but the ripple had disappeared. Mr. Beck only stared, but Mrs. Beck said brightly, "Oh, no, Dr. Plummer, not often. It's only been doing that for about a week." Mr. Beck gave her a surprised look. Perhaps, then, he had not observed it himself.

"I'd be concerned about it if I were you," said Sandra. "When I read through the Model 5 specs, I noticed that the only time the carpet is designed to make a visible motion is when it encounters an offensive smell. In that case the carpet would actually surround the offensive object and speed up its digestive process, with special attention to neutralizing odors first. Dog, cat, and parakeet messes were the target. But if that carpet is rippling for any other trigger, there's been a mutation. Perhaps it's become hypersensitive to some smell we produce. The carpet might actually attack you or one of the children and cause more damage than it's done yet."

Mr. Beck raised his voice. "Look, Dr. Plummer, I told

you I didn't want harrassment. Name your hard evidence if you have it." As he spoke, an inch-high ripple rose slowly in the carpet behind him. How could he be so oblivious to it? Deliberately, Sandy spoke in a low voice. "I see that you are laying most stress on the legal issues here, Mr. Beck. But if you'll permit me, I'd like to put the biological perspective before you."

"All right. But get on with it," said Mr. Beck. The ripple behind him began to flow toward his feet, but his eyes were locked on the ceiling.

"All right. Biologically speaking, the human brain is a marvel. It's capable of making surprisingly sound judgments, sometimes on the basis of very skimpy evidence. This is vital to our survival, because throughout our history the environment has seldom troubled to make itself as intelligible to us as human law would require. With the environment, you know, might is right and possession is nearly all of the law. So, you see, when the environment presents us with early warnings, ambiguous though they may be, there is a certain natural penalty for not judging them soundly. Human law cannot protect us from this penalty."

"Yes? And your point is?" growled Mr. Beck. Another ripple rose before him, two inches high this time.

"Well, the point, Mr. Beck, is that I think you should look down at your carpet. I think it is beginning to dislike the way our feet smell. Perhaps we are sweating too much."

Involuntarily Mr. Beck looked down and let out a startled yelp, for behind him, the carpet was subtly coming alive like the surface of a windy lake. "I think," said Sandra.

"it would be wise to evacuate the house and call the trouble-shooter to remove the carpet right away. Permanently."

But Mr. Beck was no longer interested in the biological perspective. Seeing the carnivorous ripples straining after him, Mr. Beck leaped into the air, and came down --splat-- on the unstable surface. Over he went on his face, exuding more sweat and a thin stream of nosebleed. Freshly offended, the carpet raised a three inch-high ripple-wave around him and flowed inward.

"Keep calm, Mrs. Beck," warned Sandy. "Why don't you get Peggy and the children out, and I'll do what I can for--"

But in emergency situations, fortitude is less catching than panic. Mrs. Beck screamed, "Walter! Oh no!" and raced toward him. Then as he reached for her hand from the midst of the devouring velvet, she involuntarily lurched and stumbled against the opposite wall. Walter once more fell prostrate in the writhing surface. In retaliation, a meter-wide length of carpet near the window raised itself in the air and came down on Walter like a manta-ray. He let out a terrified bellow which was quickly muffled as the tenacious membrane swallowed him.

"Oh, Walter, Walter! My God!" Mrs. Beck saturated the air with her wails.

Just then the door from the opposite hall opened and Peggy stood with a child on either side, staring at the amorphous hump before them, hardly distinguishable as a human frame, struggling with the Model 5. She let out a shriek, and the children, slower to understand, pressed against her. Acting on a desperate hunch, Sandra opened her black bag, extracted the matches and lit her kerosene lamp. Then she dropped the lit match upon the carpet.

Suddenly the Model 5 ceased its thrashing. It lay limp like a dead animal and exuded a thick misty sweat. As the match guttered and went out, Sandra set the lamp on the carpet and wedged it carefully between her feet. Meanwhile, Mr. Beck freed himself from his encasement and crawled out into daylight, like a half-developed moth from

its crystalis. His forehead and cheeks were blotched with puffy burns, and a thin stream of blood ran from his nose. His suit was noticeably pilled and frayed. Sandra reached forward and pulled his arm. "Go on out ahead of me, all of you," she said. "I must bring the lantern last." Peggy regained self-possession first and marched to the door, children in tow. Mrs. Beck seemed drawn by magnetism to join the little procession as it passed her. Sandra cautiously propelled Mr. Beck after them. He followed like a sleepwalker. Then carefully she lifted up the lantern and carried it out with them.

Outside the door they immediately encountered Louise Fortmain standing. Michael and Cheryl were already behind her chattering excitedly with the two Foster children. "It was like a giant squid!" Michael was saying.

"An amoeba!" insisted Cheryl.

"We heard screams," remarked Fortmain, looking blandly at the adults. Mr. Beck was still in a daze and Mrs. Beck was shaking too hard to speak. Sandra said, "The Model 5 isn't a rogue any more. Now it's a terrorist."

"How did you stop it? What did you do?" asked Peggy Terril. "According to the specs I read, the Model 5 has a built-in fire-protection feature which overrides all others," said Sandra. "Luckily, the mutations hadn't destroyed it. When I lit the match, all other functions ceased."

Louise Fortmain spoke. "You are all welcome to use my apartment until you settle the matter."

"Can they stay over at our house?" one of the Foster girls asked Grace. As Grace nodded, the children began to hop, skip and jump toward Townhouse 204.

"I'll serve coffee. And hot chocolate," said Louise, with a bemused smile.

But Mr. Beck followed Sandra in a half-daze like a bull being led by a ring in his nose. "Don't worry," Sandra told him comfortingly. "Model 5 burns are only superficial. They'll go away in no time."

"I'll sue the bastards," muttered Mr. Beck. "I'll sue."

## WRITERS' WORKSHOP at

### MYTHCON 24

We will host a writers' workshop at **Mythcon 24** this summer, the annual conference of the Mythopoeic Society, held July 30th - August 2nd at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) campus.

As neither Tina or Christine will be able to attend this year, the workshop will be led by *Mythic Circle's* former editor, Lynn Maudlin, with the able assistance of Gwyneth Hood, author and professor.

We will use a format similar to the *Mythic Circle* writers' workshop held at Mythcon 19 (Berkeley). Please bring 10 copies of your choice of the following: A) a short story under 8,000 words; B) a single chapter of a longer work,

"stand alone" if possible or including a *brief* synopsis, as necessary; C) a maximum of five poems.

We will have a first meeting late on Friday afternoon where we will collect work and assemble "sets" for participants to take and read at their (relative!) leisure before re-grouping on Sunday afternoon to discuss the works and critiques.

We hope to include at least one professional writer and glean their insight on the benefits and limitations of workshops, but we can't confirm names at this time (Jane Yolen and Carol Kendall are the conference Guests of Honor, and the Twin Cities are well known for their very active writing community).

Information on **Mythcon 24** is printed on the back cover; we invite your participation in the workshop and the conference. One day memberships are available.

# MYTHOPOEIC CONFERENCE XXIV



## Down the Hobbit-hole and Through the Wardrobe Fantasy in Children's Literature



JULY 30 - AUGUST 2, 1993

THE MINNEAPOLIS CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA - TWIN CITIES

GUESTS OF HONOR: JANE YOLEN & CAROL KENDALL

### CALL FOR PAPERS

Papers dealing with literary fantasy for children are invited, as well as papers on the works of the Inklings and other myth and fantasy authors and themes. Papers focusing on aspects of the works of the Guests of Honor are encouraged. Papers on Victorian fantasy, fairy tales, the use of Celtic mythology in contemporary fantasy, and contemporary writers of children's literature are also welcome.

Papers should be suitable for oral presentation with a time period of twenty to forty-five minutes, with ten to fifteen minutes for questions. Papers should generally conform to the *MLA Style Manual*. The deadline for juried papers has passed, but there is still room on the program for other papers (and other presentations) that have not gone through the juried process. Please send inquiries and proposals to Joan Verba, c/o the address below.

The Conference site affords easy access to the Children's Literature Research Collections of the U of M Libraries (including the Kerlan and Hess Collections). The CLRC is one of the three principal collections in the area of children's literature in North America. It is particularly strong in its holdings of original manuscripts and illustrations. Papers dealing with authors or illustrators whose works are represented in the CLRC would also be appropriate. The University of Minnesota Children's Literature Collections may be addressed to 109 Walter Library, 117 Pleasant St. S.E., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455. Attn: Prof. Karen Nelson Hoyle, curator.

### THE PROGRAM

Programming will begin about 1 P.M. on Friday with concurrent sessions of juried papers, panel discussions, slide presentations and other program events.

There will also be a banquet, the announcement of the Mythopoeic Awards, an art show, a masquerade, bardic circles, and various entertainments. A number of fiction writers and scholarly writers will be present.

### REGISTRATION

Postmarked before 6/1/93: \$45; Postmarked thereafter or at the door: \$50; Single Day rates \$25 (please indicate day).

### BANQUET

Sunday evening Banquet \$20

### LODGING AND MEALS

Lodging in Comstock Dormitory, including Friday dinner, Saturday breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Sunday breakfast, lunch and dinner (not including the banquet, no rebate if you decide to attend the banquet instead), and Monday breakfast and lunch. Single occupancy entire conference: \$105, Double occupancy for entire conference \$96 per person. additional for the Banquet.

Please indicate if you have a preferred roommate, whether or not you smoke, and other considerations (i.e. quiet area for rooms, special dietary needs).

Alternatives: Single occupancy \$35 per day (dinner-lunch); double occupancy \$32 per day (dinner-lunch). Indicate which days you prefer. Information is available on off-campus hotels, including the on-campus Radisson. If interested, inquire about dormitory meal tickets without residency, and additional dormitory nights before or after the conference.

**Please have your registration, banquet, and lodging and meals package paid by May 30.**

### MYTHOPOEIC CONFERENCE XXIV

Attn: Joan Verba  
P.O. Box 1363, Minnetonka, MN 55345

Phone: (612) 292-8887;

Internet: D-LENA@VM1.SPCS.UMN.EDU;

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GEnie: D. Lenander

# HUNTRESS

*by Tim Waggoner*

This was my first time at Basin Street. I make it a rule never to visit the same place twice. Not that I fear detection or capture. If I were detected it would yield little more than a headline on a cheap supermarket tabloid. And capture is a distinct impossibility. You can't hold a spirit. Not when it doesn't wish to be held.

I was more than just a spirit that night. My form was that of a woman, mid-twenties, with brunette hair which hung in bangs over my forehead and touched the back of my neck. My skin was pale, my lips red. I wore a white blouse and blue jeans. My body was long and thin—a model's body. Not the pipecleaner-limbed languidness of Europe, but rather the controlled sexuality of, if not the girl next door, the woman in the next office. The one who sells business suits by managing to make them look like teddies. It was one of my most effective guises. I thought it would work well for this night.

I was waiting alone at a table just big enough for two. The wait used to be my favorite part of the hunt, back when it was all new to me, but that was centuries ago. At first it was exciting, delirious. I walked like a god among mortals. Now, after thousands, hundreds of thousands of nights just like this one, I no longer felt like a god. I saw myself, on those few occasions that I even bothered to think about it, as a shark. And like a shark, which must swim constantly in order to extract oxygen from the water, I traveled without let. One night a bar, another a street corner, another a back alley. . . . And I gave as much thought to these places as a shark did the water it swims in. Now the waiting wasn't anything to me.

Dance music throbbed from gigantic speakers, a driving beat overlaid with electronic runs that were supposed to sound like bells. The music filled the room with a constant beat I could feel through the floor. I prefer to sit right next to a speaker and let the music fill me, but it discourages conversation, so I don't usually indulge myself. At the table next to me sat a ram-headed man dressed in a green robe. He was drinking beer through a straw and talking with a girl whose tight red leotard sported a forked tail. A horned tiara topped off her ensemble. Her companion's mask was amateurish. The hair was obviously fake and the horns were far too short to be menacing. Still, it was amusing.

A woman in a black dress, low cut and torn at the hem, with red nails and raven circles around her eyes walked past, her arms around the waist of a young man in a gargoyle mask wearing a T-shirt which read "Go to Hell." I smiled as they went by and lit a cigarette.

The bar was tended by a pair of men who bore bloody homemade scars on their faces, necks, arms—it seemed every bit of their exposed flesh was covered by sticky-red

welts. They had wrapped themselves in chains. I supposed them to be the Damned, though they were far too cheerful to be convincing.

I wondered what these costumed children would think could they meet the cold, harsh shadows they mocked. Shadows such as myself. The thought turned my smile into a grin.

A waitress came by and I ordered a glass of burgundy. As I waited for my drink, I watched the dance floor. It was filled with all manner of creatures jumping and swaying to the music. As I watched, a man who couldn't have been more than twenty-five approached me. He was wearing a charcoal gray business suit. His hair was slicked back and he wore a false goatee. It was time for it to begin and I realized with a bit of a shock that I was disappointed. In the back of my mind I was already wondering where I would be tomorrow night.

"Good evening, my dear," he said cheerfully. He thrust paper and pen at me. "Would you be interested in the deal of a lifetime?"

I took his pen and laughed. He stood patiently, a smile on his lips. I glanced over his contract. He'd done it in red ink, to resemble blood. He'd even gone to the trouble to smear it in a few places. The irony was delicious.

"Where do I sign?"

He smiled back. "At the bottom, of course." He spoke loudly to be heard over the music, but in an easy manner. Still, I could feel his nervousness. He was uncertain of himself, yet he was here. I liked that.

"Would you like to sit down so we can discuss terms?"

For a moment I thought I had been too direct. He hesitated, and I thought he would mumble some excuse and go, but then he smiled again and sat down.

"I'll think you'll find my terms very reasonable."

"I'm sure I will." The waitress brought me my drink. He insisted on paying for it and ordered himself a Michelob. I thanked him politely, then sipped my wine, waiting for him to make the next move.

"My name's Jerry."

"Mine's Lana."

"Pleased to meet you, Lana." He offered his hand. I found it a most endearing gesture. I held his hand for just a half-second too long. I tasted his flesh through mine, drank in the salty-sweetness of his skin.

The waitress returned with his beer. He took a long sip, his eyes scanning the dancers. I knew from experience he was buying time to think of what he should say next. I took the opportunity to examine him more closely. His hair was more brown than black. It would be much lighter whenever he washed out the substance he'd used to slick it

back. His face was thin. It was a face that hovered on the edge of appearing unhealthy. But that didn't bother me. Bodies are merely empty shells. It's what fills them that is important. I caught his light green eyes and in the instant I held his gaze, I bored into and down to his soul. Most people's souls are hidden, buried deep within the flesh, but his was close to the surface. It was one of the purest I'd seen in a very long time. My need screamed at me to take him right then. But I restrained myself. There would be time for that later.

The contract lay on the table between us. He rolled it up carefully and replaced it inside his jacket, slipping it into a pocket behind a small pad of drawing paper.

I smiled gently. "Are you an artist?"

He opened his mouth to deny it, then sighed. "Not really. I play around with it some, but that's about it."

I understood now why the contract had been so well done. He had a talent for this sort of thing. "Is that a sketch pad? I'd like to see it."

He looked embarrassed. "I'd really rather not."

"Please?"

He was uncomfortable, but he gave in and handed me the pad. There was only one picture, a rough pencil sketch of a woman. I realized with a start that it was me.

He was very embarrassed now. "Now you know why I didn't want to show it to you."

"But why not? It's very good." I couldn't understand why he hadn't shown it to me. Clearly he had intended to keep it to himself. But why? He was here, in his own way, for the same thing I was. Why wouldn't he make use of such an effective lure?

"I sometimes sketch when I come to places like this. Gives me something to do when I'm by myself, you know?" He spoke hurriedly to cover his embarrassment. "Besides, what with all the costumes, I thought I might come across something really interesting to draw."

"I see." I examined the sketch closely. The way the woman in the drawing held her head gave her an air of intelligence. Her lips were not the sensual fantasy I expected, but rather soft and kind. Most striking were her eyes. They were dark and tired. I looked so... human.

The music faded out then and the lights came up on the floor. Without beat or anonymity to keep them going, people wandered back to their tables or off to get a drink.

"How are all you demons out there tonight?" the DJ asked, much too loudly and cheerfully. "You all look like hell!"

There were a few answering howls and shrieks from some of the more inebriated patrons, and quite a few obscenities as well.

"We'll get right back to the dancing for all you boys and ghouls out there in just a couple of minutes."

"Jesus," Jerry said, shaking his head. "Boys and ghouls."

"First off, I want to remind you that Rock 109 will be sponsoring a sneak preview of the new movie *Hellbeast*

this Thursday at eight o'clock at the Cinema Seven. I've seen some reviews, gang, and this one's supposed to be scarrrry! Also, don't forget to vote for your favorite demon tonight. I've got the ballots, so just come on over to the booth and get them. You've still got half an hour to get your votes in. Remember, the winner of tonight's contest will take home one hundred dollars and will automatically be registered for Rock 109's trip to Hawaii. All right, enough talk. Let's get back to raising hell!" Thankfully, the music started. It wasn't long until the dance floor was filled again.

"So why didn't you come in costume?" Jerry asked. "Just not in the mood?"

I shrugged. "I couldn't think of anything."

I hadn't known about the contest beforehand. I wander at random, following my instincts. Just before the club opened, I chose my form and changed from shadow and mist into the woman Jerry saw before him. If I had known about the contest, I could have created a costume from my substance, as I did the blouse and jeans. Perhaps in my younger days such a joke would have appealed to me. Now it seemed more effort than it was worth.

"I really like your outfit," I said. "It's very clever."

"Thanks."

"Where'd you get the idea from?"

"I work at a video store, so I see a lot of movies. I love those old deal with the devil flicks. You know, the ones where Satan's always very urbane and dapper? I get a kick out of seeing the Prince of Darkness portrayed as a kind of insurance salesman."

I giggled, but this time it was only half-affected. There was no devil, not in the form Jerry mimicked. But there were myself and others of my kin. And urbane and dapper we are not.

The conversation lagged for a moment, and we took the opportunity to finish off a little more of our drinks. "Do you really want to hang around for the rest of this contest?" I asked.

He smiled. "Well, I did go to a lot of trouble to get all decked out. Took me almost ten minutes."

"I was thinking maybe we could go someplace and talk."

"What's wrong with talking right here?" His smile faded just a bit. "Look, I like you, Lana, but... not so fast, okay?"

"Sure." I forced myself to relax and give him a smile, but inside I was furious. He wasn't ready yet, and I hadn't realized it! This had never happened before. I was so upset I nearly got up and walked away. But then I realized something. This really hadn't happened before. Once again I was living the hunt, not merely going through the motions. For the first time in... no, for the first time, the outcome of an evening was in doubt for me. And it was exciting.

I nodded toward the dance floor. "Who do you think will win?"



"The contest?" He sat his empty bottle down and looked around the room. "I don't know. Maybe that guy over by the bar, the one in the purple robe."

The man Jerry pointed to was tall, almost seven feet. He wore a robe of deepest purple, embossed with stars and silver crescent moons. His mask was pale yellow, and a single spiral horn jutted from the middle of its prominent brow. One eye was a hole cut out for him to see, but the other was a rubber sculpture, torn from its socket and hanging bloodily down to the cheek.

"Why him?" I asked.

"I don't know. He just looks like a real demon, you know? I guess I think a demon should look like something scarier than you can imagine. For me, that guy comes the closest."

I nodded, wondering if Jerry would have a chance to change his mind before the night was over.

"What would you do if they were real, Jerry?"

"What, you mean if there were such things as demons and monsters?"

"No." I gestured to the dance floor. "What if *they* were real? Right now."

He thought about it for a moment. "This is probably going to sound stupid, but I would draw them. See, the reason I like to draw things is because, while I do it, I feel, I don't know, like I kind of get into what it is I draw. I understand it, on a different level than the kind of understanding you get by just thinking about something or talking to someone. As just a bunch of people in costume, they're fun to look at and sketch. But if they were really demons, I'd draw them so I could understand, really understand what it was like to be one."

"What if you didn't like what you discovered?" I glanced down at his sketch of me.

"I'm not interested in liking something when I draw it. I just want to understand it."

I smiled and fingered the edge of the paper. "And what did you learn about me from this?"

"That I wanted to come talk to you."

"Come on."

"Really. You think I came over just because you're pretty? If that was all I saw, I wouldn't have bothered."

"Beauty is unimportant to you?"

He smiled. "Not at all. It's just that there are dozens of better looking guys than me here tonight. And they were all eyeing you before I came over. Hell, most of them still are, waiting for me to strike out so they can have their shot. A girl as pretty as you are is awfully intimidating to a guy like me. I'm not exactly Mr. Universe."

"Then why did you come over?"

He picked the sketch up and looked at it. "It's hard to explain. Usually when girls pretty as you come to a place like this, they spend all their time looking around, checking out the guys, enjoying the music, whatever. But you, well, you weren't really paying attention to what was going on

around you. You were focused on what was going on inside you. Kind of brooding, I guess."

I forced a laugh. "And you find that attractive?"

He put the sketch back down with a smile. "I guess. It made you stand out in a way your beauty couldn't. What were you thinking about anyway?"

I hesitated.

"Nevermind," he said. "You were probably just thinking about work or something, and I read too much into it." He tapped his fingers on the table in time to the music.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked. The question was casual, but his eyes showed that he was afraid I would say no, certain I would give some apology, I already had a boyfriend, a fiance, maybe.

"Sure."

He grinned and I found myself grinning back. He stood, took off his jacket, and draped it over the back of his chair.

He offered me his arm in a mock-gentlemanly manner. "Madame?" There was his own anticipation, his own need, not really so different from my own, beneath the word.

"Sir." I rested my hand in the crook of his arm as he led me to the floor.

The dancers moved aside, giving us a tiny space. The walls next the sound booth were mirrored and showed the two of us in the midst of whirling and gyrating creatures. Jerry turned out to be not a bad dancer at all. I felt free to let go just a bit more, to show off a little. It had been a while since I had a chance to really cut loose on the dance floor. By this point in the evening, my escort and I have usually moved on to bigger and better things. But I was surprised to find myself actually having fun.

I found myself succumbing to the beat, losing myself in the music. The beat was in the floor, in my feet; I breathed it, tasted it, drank it in. And before me was Jerry. I began to see him, not as bone and meat, but as shifting patterns of energy, pulsating with delicious life. I couldn't stop myself any longer. I reached out and began to take him, to drain his life into myself.

Just then I caught a glimpse of our reflections out of the corner of my eye and I stopped dancing and stared. There was Jerry, slowing down as his life energy began to trickle out of his body. Around him were other dancers, most costumed, but a few wearing regular clothing. And there, right next to Jerry, was a white-faced woman standing deathly still. But I couldn't tell her apart from the other women on the dance floor. She was just another in the crowd. And for a dizzying, sick moment I asked myself, Just what am I?

But then a man in a skintight black leotard painted to resemble a skeleton whirled away from his partner and came between me and my reflection.

Jerry lost the beat for a half-second and he swayed, light-headed. I reached out to steady him. "Beer catching up to you?"

He was uncertain, confused. "I guess so."

"It'll pass. Just take it easy." My confusion had broken the connection before I could take more than a little of his life force. What had I been thinking of, trying to take him in public like that? But I hadn't been thinking. And with that, I had the answer to my earlier question. I was Hunger, and that's all I was.

The song ended and there was a brief moment before the next one, a moment filled with clinking glass and the soft buzz of conversation beyond the edge of the dance floor. The lights dimmed and a slow song came on. Some people left the floor, while others went into their partners' arms. Still others emerged from the shadows to embrace and sway to the music.

The momentary mingling of our life forces had made it far easier to sense his feelings, and I knew that he wanted to touch me, wanted me to touch him. I placed my hands lightly on his shoulders. His hands trembled slightly as they rose to my waist. I took a half-step closer to him, and he to me. The floor seemed to flow beneath us, like we were treading lightly on the surface of a cool, tranquil lake.

Jerry pulled me closer. I could not only sense his emotions, I could feel them as intensely it was as if they were my own. I didn't just know his hope and excitement; they became mine. The sudden intimacy was most. . . disturbing. I put a mild block between us. I am Hunger, I reminded myself. Nothing else.

He pulled back and looked at me. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." He wasn't very reassured, so I pulled him close once more and let my body reassure him for me.

We held each other through that song and two more. His hair was in my face and I breathed in the dizzying aroma of maleness, of cologne and sweat. My tongue darted out of its own volition and flicked across a strand of his wet hair. I relished the taste of him. The need was full on me now.

I whispered in his ear. "Could we go get some air? I'm starting to feel a little ill."

We left the dance floor and returned to our table. "I'll be fine once I get out of here."

He nodded as he slipped into his jacket. His goatee was coming off. He pulled it free and tossed it on the table. I reached for my purse, and paused as I saw the sketch lying there. I picked it up and put it in my purse. We weaved through the tables and smoke toward the exit.

Once outside, I breathed deeply. "That's much better. Thank you."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I guess it was just too much wine. What time is it?"

He checked his watch. "A little after two."

I sighed. "I was hoping we could get a bite to eat, but it's a little late for me. I should go back in and call a cab."

"You don't have to do that. I could give you a ride home."

I smiled. "I'd like that."

\* \* \* \*

We'd been driving only a few minutes when I told Jerry I was feeling sick again.

"Do you live close by?" I asked.

"About ten, twelve miles. We could be there in a few minutes. You might feel better if you could lie down for a while."

"That might be a good idea at this point."

We soon pulled into the parking lot of his apartment complex. He was on the second floor, and I allowed him to help me up the stairs.

He opened the door to his apartment and stood back to let me enter. It was a one bedroom, big enough for one, perhaps two when the occasion demanded it.

He shut and locked the door. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"A glass of water would be nice."

He went into the kitchen. I heard him open a cupboard and turn on the tap. I looked around the room and realized that what I had first taken to be framed pictures were instead Jerry's artwork. A landscape, a kitten, an old man, a skyline at night.

He came back into the room and handed me my glass of water.

"I thought you were shy about your work."

"I am. These are for me. Not too many people ever get to see them."

I smiled at the implied compliment. "I'm honored, sir." I took a sip of water.

"Let's go sit down," he offered.

I nodded and he led me to a couch. I drank a little more.

"I think I'm better now, Jerry. Thank you for taking such good care of me. You're very sweet." I leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips.

It took him by surprise. "You're feeling better, I take it."

"I'm starting to feel all right, but I'm not sure I'll make a full recovery. Unless. . ."

"Unless what?"

"Another kiss or two wouldn't hurt."

He grinned and pulled me to him. The kiss was intense and my hunger welled up. But I held myself back. Just a little longer and it would be so much better.

He undressed me slowly, clumsily. He hadn't done this that many times and his hands were unsure. His lips moved over my skin as I unbuttoned his shirt. Then I undid his belt and helped him out of his pants. We hugged, and the hunger sang within me. I could feel his own hunger calling to me.

We got down on the floor and we joined.

He was unpracticed, but what he lacked in skill he made up for in earnestness. He was a rare one—totally open and giving of himself. There would be no tearing, no rending



of body and spirit that makes a soul bland and tasteless. He was opening the doors for me, one by one, until he would be mine.

Right before I feed, my perceptions shift and instead of seeing a man's face, I always see the bright flare and pulse of his lifeforce as he builds to orgasm. But it didn't happen this time. I watched, for the first time, the face of my prey. Watched him revel in his body's sensations, saw his tender expression as he kissed my neck, my face. Saw deep into his eyes as he looked into mine.

I wondered if it had been like this before. Had all their faces shown the same emotions? Had all their feelings been... real? All night I had been thinking of Jerry as special. But what if they all had been special?

We flowed together, pulsed one against the other with building urgency. The sensations my body gave me were nothing compared to the waves of Jerry's Self which crashed into me. As he neared orgasm I dissolved the block and easily stripped away what remained of his psychic defenses.

I watched his face as his breathing quickened. His skin was flushed and I couldn't get over how alive he was. Over his shoulder, I saw one of his drawings on the wall. The one of the kitten. And I realized something. It hadn't been my lure that drew him to me. He had come over to my table because he had seen beyond my disguise. He had seen what no one else ever had. Me.

He held me tight as he came. His soul shone full and bright, and I reached deep to feed.

But for the first time I understood what it was I took from my prey. I understood Life.

And I spared him.

We rested in each other's arms for a while. After a bit he asked me, not How Was Yours or Was it Good, but "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

His brow furrowed with worry. "You're crying."

"I am?" I touched my cheek and found it wet.

"Is something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Could you just hold me some more?"

\*\*\*\*

I was gone by morning. I had reverted to my true form, little more than a bit of unseen fog, and slept as I drifted through towns and cities, across countrysides. I'm sure Jerry was hurt and puzzled by my absence when he awoke, but I couldn't stay with him. No matter how much I understood, I would never be nothing than more than a mockery of what he thought I was.

But I did leave him with something. His sketch of me.

The next night was another town, another bar. The place was seedy, the tables scarred by ancient graffiti which held the crusted black scum of years of cigarette ash and spilled beer. The body I chose that night was young and blonde. I wore a tight, thin T-shirt and shorts.

The clientele could hardly be considered sophisticated. The majority of patrons were already drunk, though it was still early, and were bellowing out the words to a song on the jukebox.

A man walked up to my table. He was thin, reedy, skin weathered by time and work. He had been handsome once, before he'd seen too much of life, but he retained enough of his former looks to approach me with confidence.

"You're new 'round here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Care to show me around?"

His smile became a grin. "I'd like that."

I stood. He offered me his arm and I took it. Later I tore the soul free from his body and devoured it whole. I had to look at his face the entire time, had to see his eyes as the life left them. I see all their faces now.

It goes on like that. Every night someplace else. But not always someone else. Sometimes I can't go through with it. And I've noticed I'm getting weaker.

What happens to a shark when it can no longer make itself eat? It soon dies, sinks to the bottom and is buried in mud, forgotten.

But one thought will make that long descent easier. I will not be forgotten. Not as long as there's a small, framed sketch on a wall somewhere.

## SKULL GRIP

*by Janet Elliott Waters*

But then,  
Athena sprang from a headache.  
This stabbing pain, like slivers of glass flints,  
could be birth pangs.  
This scraping pain, like continental glass plates,  
could be skull bones sliding  
as the unborn Athena grows to skull size  
and more.

She was fully armed when born, full grown.  
Her spear hammers the top of my head  
even now.

I can't think. She has my wisdom.  
Zeus survived the birth—  
but he was a god.

## CIRCLE WAY

*by Janet Elliott Waters*

I, Hunter, arrow cast  
I know your magic ways  
I track your secret ways  
I am your brother  
—we are together  
power and love are one.  
You are mine, end point of my arrow  
You live in me  
I am your strength  
I am Your gift.

I, Mother-healer, touch  
and you are one  
sing, and you are safe  
hold you with Her arms and hands  
feed you with Her earth warm love  
birth and suck and keep you  
in Her name.

I, Speaker, tell the roads  
tell the pathways of the journey  
tell the names, beginnings, ends  
tell the songs that capture gods  
tell the dance and throw and touch  
tell the Changes.

I, Dancer, trace the circle of the ways  
spark fire magic circles in the dust  
scout the path that all will chance  
dance the unmarked Path I make.

# HEART AND SOUL

*by Joan Cacciatore Mazza*

"What would you do if you won the lottery?" Rhonda asked Nicole across the work counter. The question had become a part of everyone's conversation, a way to make the hours of repetitive lab work more interesting.

"I would run out and buy another dog," Nicole answered.

"Dogs don't cost that much."

"I know. But since Ivy went to heaven, I can't get another dog where I live. I'd have to buy a house too."

Rhonda scowled. "Ivy didn't go there. Animals don't go to heaven. You know that."

Nicole felt the warmth rush into her cheeks. What do you know? she wanted to shout. And how dare you call my dog an animal? Instead, she said softly, "I would think that God would have heaven suit each person. Maybe it's being with a lost lover or a lost pet. It must be different for everybody."

"That's not what heaven is about," Rhonda said. "Heaven is for us to share with God, to glorify Him, not for our own earthly needs or desires." She picked up a petri plate and examined bacterial colonies.

Knowing Rhonda wasn't looking at her, Nicole stuck out her tongue, but the short conversation left her feeling tired. She cleared her throat to chase the tightness.

It had been more than a year since Ivy had died of old age. The dog had been sick and suffering for months before she died during a stay at the veterinarian. Nicole wasn't surprised when it happened. Rather, she felt grateful for having been spared the awful decision of having to put her to sleep, or, worse, coming home from work to find her dead on the bedroom rug.

Still, the void was enormous. For the first time she'd lost "someone" close to her and she wished she could get another dog, but the condominium had new rules against replacing pets. Unless she won the lottery, she couldn't afford to move and buy a house to get a dog.

Nicole peered down at the papers in front of her and tried to concentrate, but her mind was filled with thoughts and images of Ivy. She sighed.

Rhonda looked up momentarily but said nothing.

Nicole went home that day half-expecting to hear Ivy's bark of welcome from the bedroom as she turned her key in the lock, but the apartment was silent, the bedroom door open, no happy barking, just the smell of new carpeting to greet her. She went into the bedroom and gazed at the water-color portrait of Ivy, as a puppy. It hung on the wall in a modern, brass frame, a contrast to the rest of the Early American, antiques pine furniture. A crucifix hung next to the painting. Both the portrait and the crucifix were within view from the head of her bed, the first objects she

saw each day when she awoke, the last when she went to bed: the prayer and the Grantor of prayers.

Nicole heard a knock at the door and went to answer it.

It was Tom, the maintenance man, looking distressed. "Your car is parked over the line of your space. You'll have to move it or it will be towed."

"What? No one parks next to me!"

"It's still against the rules."

"OK. OK. I'll move it."

He nodded and left.

"Pain in the rear," Nicole said aloud when the door was closed and went to get her keys.

Though thirty-five, alone, and single, it seemed like other people ran her life. So much for "owning" your own property. Most of the condominium rules were simply irritations: to always wear a pool tag in the recreation area, no bicycles on the patio, roommates to be approved by the screening committee. It was all annoying, more red-tape and more garbage added to the business of everyday living.

But the "No Pets" rule was the worst affront to her.

That evening, Nicole went to bed early, still feeling weary and more lonely than usual. Ivy had been her only companion in the years since the unhappy divorce. During that time, they had slept on the bed together, Ivy curling her little body against Nicole's back, warming each other against the air-conditioning. Without the dog's company, Nicole no longer slept as well.

Before closing her eyes, Nicole could see in the semi-darkness, the outline of Ivy's portrait and asked God for a miracle.

It is past midnight and the bedroom seems darker than usual. In her sleeping mind, Nicole thinks that the security lights across the street must be out. Next to her, she can feel the furry warmth and comfort. She wraps her arms around the dog, feeling soft fur against her bare breasts, and nuzzles her nose in the dog's neck, smelling her skin. The dog, perhaps too warm, pulls away, pushing her paws against Nicole's shoulders. The dog moves to the foot of the bed to sleep, whimpering a moment against the arthritis in her hips as she lets herself down onto the covers. Then she settles down, with her head on Nicole's feet.

They each take a deep breath and sleep again.

Nicole woke up suddenly, her heart pounding, afraid that she had overslept and was late for work, but she didn't have to get up for another hour. She was wide awake, the intense, lucid dream weighing heavily upon her. The familiar smell of Ivy was still in her nostrils. She had really felt

the pads of Ivy's paws and the nails between them on her skin.

When her eyes began to fill with tears, she got up to straighten the bed, hoping that movement would distract her. Instead, she found a small clump of tangled, black fur on the new, white bedspread. Quickly, she picked it off the spread and flushed it down the toilet, afraid to believe what the evidence told her.

In the shower, she tried to wash away her thoughts.

That evening, Nicole watched television, Ivy's portrait in her peripheral vision. She'd had no alcohol with her dinner, knowing that she would sleep better without it, and she waited for her boredom with the television to bring her toward sleep. She tried not to look at the painting.

When she was awakened by the sound of a barking dog at her front door, she got up to see what was happening. Even half-awake, she recognized the bark as Ivy's and the sound appeared to be on the inside of the door.

In the hallway, Nicole switched on the light and gasped.

Ivy was at her feet, jumping and barking and running to the door, wanting to go out. Nicole knelt down and kissed her neck, drinking in the smell of her. "You're back! You're not dead! I love you; I love you! My baby-dog!" She was crying uncontrollably and thinking all the while, I have lost my mind; I have lost my mind. She stood and opened the door, and wearing only a T-shirt and panties, she followed Ivy out to the patch of grass at the end of the building and watched her as the dog squatted in her old, accustomed place. Through the darkness, she could see the outline of the dog's small frame and curly, dark fur. With Nicole's short haircut, people used to tell her they looked alike.

In a choked voice, she heard herself say, "Come on. Let's go back inside," and Ivy followed her, a younger version of her Ivy-Dog, not yet blind or sick, more like the puppy in the portrait.

Back in the bedroom, Nicole took a good look at the dog who so easily jumped up on the bed, not needing to be lifted as the dying Ivy had. Nicole hugged her and scratched her ear while the dog licked at Nicole's tearful face.

When she looked up to the wall, the portrait was blank, only white matting in the frame.

In the morning, Nicole awoke to a quiet apartment. The portrait was on the wall, no dog hair was on the bedspread or sheets. Nicole sat on the edge of the bed and wept. She knew she was having a breakdown and the thought of losing her mind made her cry harder.

Finally, when her sobs subsided, she got ready to drag herself through another day at work. Trying to hide the anguish on her face, she took the time required to apply her make-up carefully.

That day, she did her job alone and avoided making conversation or eating lunch with her co-workers, especially Rhonda. When the secretary asked her, "What's the matter, Nikki?" she just smiled and said, "Nothing."

At her parking place at home, Ray, a member of the

condominium board of directors, was waiting for her.

Parking squarely between the lines, Nicole gave a cheery "Hi, Ray!" as she got out of her car.

"I need to talk to you," he said ominously. Ray was the condo's SS officer, a harbinger of evil, searching out forbidden laundry hanging on balconies, persecuting violators.

"OK," Nicole said easily. She knew better than to say or do anything that would fuel his craziness.

"Can we talk in your apartment?" he said, more a demand than a question.

"Sure! But it's probably a mess."

"That's OK. This should be private," he added.

Since when? she wanted to ask him, but instead she nodded as she unlocked the door, feeling like a child called into the Principal's office at school.

For an instant, she had two simultaneous and opposing fears: What if Ivy was there again and Ray saw the dog? The condo association would take her to court and make her get rid of the "illegal" dog. Well, at least it would prove she wasn't crazy if others saw Ivy's ghost too.

If Ivy weren't there, however, it would be more evidence that she was imagining her dog's return. The alternatives of a law suit or psychosis seemed like a no-win dilemma.

She held her breath as she opened the door and Ray followed her into the dark and silent apartment.

Ray, oblivious to common courtesy as usual, stepped into the kitchen as Nicole turned on the light and sat down at the small table.

Not waiting to be invited, Ray pulled out the chair opposite her and sat too. Needing no encouragement, he began. "We got complaints from two of your neighbors," he said.

Nicole blinked her eyes for an answer.

"They said you have a dog again."

"What?" It was more a breath of air than a spoken word.

"Both residents, I can't say who, of course, heard a barking dog in your apartment last night." He said it triumphantly, his pleasure unbounded.

"That's ridiculous! Do you see a dog?"

"No," he answered, somewhat disconcerted for the moment by the absurdity of the circumstances. "Can I take a better look around?" he asked, still the Condo-Commander.

Nicole felt invaded and wanted to say no, but her sanity was in question too. If someone else had heard Ivy barking, then maybe she wasn't crazy. "Sure. Look around. If there was a dog here, you'd know it by now, don't you think?"

He nodded. "Yea. All the same, I have to do my job." He rose and looked around him, beginning with the kitchen floor. There were no dog toys, no pet dishes under the table where they once had been.

He moved to the living and dining rooms, both bedrooms and the bathrooms and even opened the walk-in closet and looked inside.

Her rage bubbling over, Nicole said, "If I had a dog, she would have bitten you by now!"

Ray covered his lower lip with his tongue and walked back toward the front door. "I should tell you," he said with his hand on the door handle, "one of the people who reported you said that they saw you outside late last night with a small, black dog who was loose, without a leash. You were only wearing a T-shirt. That's all."

"Cute. You can tell them, Ray, that when you came here, you found a giraffe. See if they believe you."

He just shook his head and left.

Nicole double-locked the door behind him.

Her hands shaking, she made herself a drink, and carrying it, she walked back to the bedroom and touched the glass over the portrait. "Be careful what you pray for," she said aloud.

A long time passed before she fell asleep that night. She lay awake in the semi-darkness, alternately saying the Rosary and trying to see if Ivy would come down from the picture. When she fell asleep in the middle of a Hail Mary, the Rosary beads were entwined in her fingers and she had forgotten to turn out the light.

The sound of someone rapping at the door woke her up. Ivy jumped off the bed and ran to the door. Horrified, Nicole stayed in bed and waited until Ivy came back and hopped up. Then she rested her head on Nicole's legs. Nicole put her hand lovingly on the dog's head, lay back, and squeezed her eyes shut until she slept again.

Ray was waiting again the next day and the day after, watching her, frequently lurking by her apartment door when she came in or out.

Nightly, Ivy slept with her.

When the letter came, Nicole laughed out loud. She was requested to appear in court regarding her dog. What could they do? she wondered. They couldn't make her get rid of a dog she didn't have.

Ray appeared in court with three other board members, the condo's attorney, and the two neighbors who had heard the barking. They waited but Nicole never came.

When three weeks had passed and Nicole had not been seen and her car hadn't been moved, Ray got permission to use the Association's keys to gain entry to Nicole's apartment.

The last time he'd been in a similar predicament, he'd found a woman dead, her body black, swollen and stinking after three days of decay. This time, he brought another board member with him as well as Tom, the maintenance man.

The stench of death did not greet them. The apartment was neat, immaculately clean, not even papers on the desk.

They walked through the rooms, looking into closets and the shower. Clearly, no one had been there for quite some time though the air-conditioning was still running.

None of them noticed the glass of water in the sink with the ice still in it.

In the bedroom, though, the three stopped together to look at a painting on the wall. It was a very realistic water-color of a young woman smiling broadly, and holding, in her arms, a small, black dog that was trying to lick her face.

\* \* \*

## SONNET FOR STRIDER

*(A Chocolate Labrador Retriever)*

*by Angelee Sailer Anderson*

From nose to velvet ears to proud tail-tip,  
In one hue, teddy bear-like, you're arrayed:  
Sans argument, you are (even your lip)  
The brownest thing that God has ever made.  
Your artlessness (we see you wondering now,  
'Why doodle with a poem, when we could *play*?')  
Is what we cherish best; or is it how  
You kneel (almost) between us when we pray?

No dog, we're sure, is set so large a chore  
Of ministering with tireless tongue to eyes  
Thus long bemused by tears; O surely your  
Glad faith with ours to its reward must rise,  
And our one flesh will laugh to see you stride  
More golden streets than these still at our side.

# THE TWO BRIDEGROOMS

By Angelee Sailer Anderson

There was a maid to love inclined;  
Cared not where she might linger,  
If one fair cirlet she could find  
To set around her finger.

A maid there was more fair than true,  
Unwary where she dallied;  
For oft she'd go a'wantoning through  
A deeply shadowed valley.

One dusk a pale horse riding came,  
And caught her as she tarried.  
The knight astride it staked his claim,  
Crying, "Fair maid, we'll be married."

"In linen fine I'll clothe thee, love;  
My own fair house I'll show thee--  
A roof of oak to guard above,  
An oaken floor below thee."

His lips were dark as earth and more,  
His arms white sheets to wind her,  
His fairness all she saw before,  
All virgin fears behind her.

As starlings' eggs wrapt in their nests--  
Even so warm he deemed them,  
When chill Death bared her milk-white breasts  
And kissed her fair between them.

His wedding bed was her reward,  
His name was her fair wages,  
Nameless she lay beneath the sward,  
Forgotten by the ages.

Till when dawn cleft the sky at last  
O'er that sepulchral city,  
A fairer knight came riding past,  
And on the maid took pity.

On her gravestone he fairly wrought  
A Cross to shrive and shield her,  
And scratched away Death's name of nought  
And to his own name sealed her.

Cried he, "I claim thee for my wife,  
Let none this bond dis sever,  
And in the Bridegroom's book of Life  
Thy name shine fair forever."





# A LITTLE HELP

by Joan Marie Verba

The sky was a deep blue over the green canopy of the forest, above Bronwen's head. Woven in the grasses and shrubs at her knees were the lacy mists, daintily adorning the greenery. It was said that the waters and streams, the rain and fog, were held in the power of the Enchantress of the River. Lila, the witch of the Forest of Dread, held all else. Bronwen held nothing but a walking staff in her hand. On her back was her pack; slung underneath her pack was her sheathed sword.

This was the first time Bronwen had been in the enchanted wood, though she had fought near it and escorted nobles around it. As she walked along, she looked for signs of the 23 others who had come in before her, but found none. It was especially curious that there was no news of the one sent in before her, Derek the Rogue. Derek had no scruples and would attempt any deed, no matter how bloody, to reach his goal. As much as Bronwen despised the man, she was certain he would succeed. When he had not returned, the monarchs of the realm beyond the forest had sent for her. Bronwen had slain a wyvern a few years back; the deed had become widely known. The royal couple hoped that Bronwen, at least, could get past Lila's deadly guardians.

After a time, she saw a cottage through the trees. In front of it, a girl-child of perhaps five years, dressed in a simple homespun shift with a large pocket, was chasing butterflies.

Bronwen smiled. The child reminded her of a sister of hers at that age. Bronwen had left her family as a youth to apprentice herself to a swordswoman. She loved the excitement, the adventure, the pay. But she hated the ruin, the deceptions, the hard beds and cold meals. And, as time passed, the danger grew that one day age would disable her. Just last month, a sword-sister, only a few years her senior, had been killed by a younger, faster opponent. Bronwen began saving her pay, hoping to tuck away enough while she was still a good fighter to safely retire-- maybe with a sister or brother, telling battle-stories to her young nieces and nephews, who she visited when she could.

She gripped her walking stick, intending to pass the little girl and the cottage, but her thumb found a splinter. She looked to be sure the splinter had not gone under the skin and took a knife to trim the rough spot.

"My mommy has one of those." A hand touched her staff.

Bronwen turned to see the child standing beside her. She put the knife away. "Where's your mommy?" she asked kindly.

The child shrugged. "Mommy goes away in the morning and comes back at dinner."

"What about your daddy?"

"I don't have one of them."

"You play by yourself all day while your mommy's gone?"

The child nodded.

Bronwen considered. She knew that most woodspeople were terribly poor and had to work sunup to sundown to make ends meet. But most took children with them to help. Perhaps this healthy little girl was a troublemaker or too curious. Or perhaps her mother sold sexual favors and did not want her daughter exposed to the customers.

"What's your name?"

"I'm not s'posed to tell."

Bronwen stroked the girl's long, straight black hair. "What if I call you Raven?"

The child smiled and nodded.

Bronwen bent down, hands on knees, staff balanced in the crook of her elbow. "My name is Bronwen, but you can call me Bron if you want." When she got a nod, an idea struck her. "Say, your mommy's name isn't Lila, is it?" When she got a shake of the head, she added "*Your* name isn't Lila, is it?"

Raven giggled and shook her head again.

"Do you know who Lila is?"

"Uh-uh."

"Hm." Bronwen straightened up again. "All right. You go back and play now."

"Where're you going?"

She was in no hurry; she could take a moment to entertain the child. Sitting on a stump, she said, "Let me tell you a story."

Eagerly, Raven climbed into her lap. Bronwen smiled and put her arm around her. Raven looked up to her face.

"Your nose is all crookedy."

"That's because it got hurt." It had been difficult to breathe through her nose since it had been broken. She let Raven feel the bumps. Then Bronwen began:

"Once upon a time, there was a queen and a king in a nearby realm. Both the king and the queen could do magic. Do you know what magic is?"

"Uh-huh." Raven stroked Bronwen's hands. Most children did not like the feel of her hands: they were large and rough and calloused. But Raven was not the least bit shy; she seemed fascinated.

Bronwen went on. "Because the king and queen were good and kind, their people loved them. And when they had a daughter..."

"A princess," said Raven, without taking her eyes off Bronwen's hands.

"Yes, a princess, the people loved her, too. The queen

and king taught the princess all of their magic. One day, when the princess was fourteen, another princess from another kingdom came to visit. She knew magic, too. The two princesses were playing together when they began to dare each other to do magic. They weren't supposed to do strong magic when their parents weren't around, but they did. Something went wrong, and the faraway princess made the first princess go to sleep, and she couldn't wake her up. Others who knew magic tried, but no one could break the spell. Everyone was very sad. Then one day a wise woman came to the castle and said that Lila's golden orb could wake the princess up. But no one had seen Lila for a long time. They tried to find her with magic, and couldn't. They sent messengers, but the messengers never came back. Then the king and queen offered a thousand gold coins to anyone who could find Lila and bring back the golden orb for the princess. Lots of people tried, but they never came back, either."

"They got killed," said Raven calmly.

Bronwen nodded. She should have remembered not to mince words with a child Raven's age. "Yes. Probably," she said softly. She put Raven down, took her staff in hand, and stood. "So, now I am going to find the golden orb."

"What's an orb?"

"It's a golden ball with trim on it."

"Oh."

Bronwen took a step forward. "You can go back and play now. Goodbye."

"I want to come with you."

Bronwen turned away. "No, sweetheart, it's too scary. You might get hurt."

Raven stuck out her lower lip and puffed out her chest. "I won't get hurt."

"If you go too far away, your mommy won't be able to find you when she comes home. She'll cry."

Raven swayed from side to side. "Uh-uh. Mommy always comes and finds me."

Bronwen fumbled in her pack. She took out a small carved wooden bird figurine, which she had bought in a nearby town to give to a niece of hers. She held it up to Raven. "Do you like this?"

Raven's face brightened. She reached for it.

Bronwen held it up. "I'll tell you what. We'll play a game. You close your eyes and put your hands in front of them, and I'll hide this. When you hear me whistle, you open your eyes and try to find it. If you find it, you can keep it."

Raven sat by the stump and put her hands over her face.

"Remember, no peeking until I whistle."

Raven nodded.

Bronwen crept back the way she came. When a tree hid Raven from view, she hid the bird in the roots of a nearby bush. She doubled back past Raven and sprinted on.

The forest got thicker and darker as she went. Ivy and moss wove around the trunks and branches, strangling the

light. There were no birdcalls, no signs of any animal.

She stopped several paces from a wide stream. Across the stream, across a narrow lawn, was a rock formation. Or, that is what it appeared to be at first glance. After staring at it for some time, she saw that what seemed to be a rock cliff was a retaining wall, and beyond that, a stone manor. Magic was at work to play tricks on her eyes, but such magic was seldom strong enough to deceive a sharp observer.

"I found it!" said a high, reedy voice.

Bronwen whipped the sword from the scabbard slung across her back and swung around toward the direction of the sound. Raven walked to her, holding up the bird.

Bronwen sighed and lowered her weapon. "Didn't I tell you not to follow me?"

Raven looked confused. "But I found it, Bron!" She held the figurine higher, to show off her cleverness.

Bronwen sheathed her sword. She would have to take Raven back home. A glimmer, a dim reflection, caught the corner of her eye. It was a diform—a creature clear as glass, hard as diamond. The edged claws reached out to her as the plodding feet came near.

Bronwen snatched Raven up. She felt a breeze on her face as the diform's paw swished by, missing her. Child in her arms, she splashed across the stream to the lawn. The diform loomed, menacing but impotent, on the other side. Diforms could not cross water; the power of the Enchantress of the Rivers forbade such unnatural creatures in her realm.

Bronwen put Raven down. There was no taking the child back now. The thing would follow them around the castle, waiting for them to come across again. Their only chance was to hope that once they had begged the orb from Lila, the witch would call off her guardians.

"Mean old thing!" Raven stuck out her tongue at it. She put the bird figurine in her pocket.

"Stay with me," said Bronwen, taking the child's hand. The wall of the castle was too tall and smooth to climb. They would have to walk around to find an entrance.

Beyond a corner of the castle wall, they found a mass of bloody, tattered cloth on the ground, and scattered bones, some with a little muscle still clinging to them.

"Something ate something," said Raven.

Bronwen nodded. Raven must have seen mostly-eaten animals left by predators in the forest before. Bronwen hoped the child thought it was an animal body, not a human's. But what sort of beast could gorge on a human like that?

The hunting cry of an eagle shrieked from above. Bronwen threw her head back. She drew her sword as the griffin swooped down, lion paws pounding the ground in front of her as it landed, eagle beak lunging at her, the wings' backbeat creating a wind. She hacked and dodged, using her sword as both weapon and shield. She stepped right, right, right in a semicircle to draw it away from Raven. She kept an eye on the thrusting beak and another

eye on the probing clawed feet.

"Twist its head off!" shouted Raven.

The griffin's head turned to the sound, away from Bronwen. She dropped her weapon, locked her arms around the warm downy neck, hands gripping the jaws, planted her feet firmly, and strained mightily, leaning almost until her head touched the grass. The griffin squirmed and puffed; she groaned with the strain as the head twisted around. Her feet began to slide. There was a snap. The griffin went limp; the body crashed to the ground.

"Yay!" Raven clapped her hands in appreciation.

Panting, Bronwen retrieved her sword. She sheathed it, and then drew out her walking staff from its own sling across her back. Raven picked her way among the scattered bones and cloth, hopping from one bare spot to another as if playing a game with herself. Keeping an eye out for other dangers, Bronwen hurried over to Raven. Any new guardians would have to fight her to get to the child.

They reached the front gate—a vast arch in the wall with iron doors underneath. Bronwen led Raven to a spot where the stone arch met the ground. "You stay here; I'll try the door."

"It's empty!" she protested.

"Stay here anyway," said Bronwen firmly, holding out an arm in warning.

Raven pouted, but obeyed.

Bronwen drew her sword and crept to the door. It opened with a push, hinges creaking. Now that was strange. It should not be unlocked, unless it was guarded...

A lion's head thrust itself through the entrance, followed by a goaty body and a snake's tail: chimera. Bronwen jumped back and found herself sliding into a pit that had not been there a moment ago. A huge serpent lay coiled at the bottom, body as thick as her arm.

"Bron! Bron!" piped Raven from above.

"Run!" said Bronwen, fumbling for her staff. She planted it in the soft sloped sides of the pit to stop her from slipping to the bottom. With her other hand, she thrust the sword's point at the snake's mouth.

"Bad snake! Go 'way!" yelled Raven from the hole's edge.

"Raven! Chimera! Run!" Bronwen looked the snake in the eye; the head retreated. Using the walking staff, she inched her way upward, backwards, keeping the snake in sight. She stepped out onto the lawn; the pit closed.

Bronwen turned to spot Raven. The little girl ran through the chimera and into the gateway. The swordswoman leaned on her staff and shook her head. So the chimera was a phantom, meant to drive intruders into the pit.

Bronwen went in. The castle yard was quiet, bright with flowers in a well-groomed garden. Raven darted from one plant to another, picking flowers at random, gathering a bouquet. Beyond the garden, a black horse, with saddle and halter still on, grazed on the lawn grasses. Bronwen

approached the animal cautiously. It looked up at her approach, and went right on eating its lunch. Newly-healed scratches scarred its flanks. Bronwen looked around. If it was Lila's, why would it be scratched? If it belonged to one of the 23 who made the attempt before her, where was the owner? And why would the beast guardians eat the rider and leave the horse alone? No answers—no one—was in sight. With a glance back at the child, Bronwen walked to the wooden door of the castle proper. It was ajar. Light shone in the hallways, coming through the open windows.

"Boo!"

Bronwen started, inhaling sharply. Raven giggled with delight at her trick. She held up the flowers. "See what I found?"

Bronwen looped the thong of her walking stick around her left wrist and took Raven's hand. "You stay close by me, now."

Cautiously, they stepped inside. They padded through empty halls. Lila had to be around somewhere; she saw a scrap of fresh cheese on a serving tray.

A soft noise made Bronwen swing around. A pet of Lila's? Another guardian-creature? She crept to the intersection of two corridors and peered down each. Empty. Quiet now. Perhaps it had been a mouse.

Bronwen had been in enough castles to know most conformed to a general plan. Raven in tow, they went up stone staircases and through halls until they came to huge ornate doors. Before them hung a finely woven, gauzy curtain. Bronwen poked it. It snapped back. Her knife would not cut it. Throwing her weight against it bounced her back to the opposite wall.

"I'll do it!" said Raven.

"You can't, sweetheart," said Bronwen as the child grabbed the web with her fingers. "It won't...give..." she added as Raven pulled it down.

"See?" Raven smiled triumphantly. "Let's go in!"

Bronwen looked from Raven to where the curtain had been fastened at the ceiling. Perhaps there had been a trick to it, too simple for her to see, as with the child's puzzles sold in the marketplace that adults could not solve but children could. She stepped up to the door and rapped softly. She called out in a low voice, and then more loudly. Raven shouted, "Lila!" in imitation of Bronwen, but there was no answer to that, either. Cautiously, Bronwen turned the handle and pushed the door open a crack.

It was as if someone had thrown dust in her face. She was immediately dizzy. She knelt, and put her head down until it cleared. Slowly, taking deep breaths, she got to her feet. Sleeping powder, but not a strong dose. Raven, however, was curled up on the floor, asleep, flowers sticking out from the top of her pocket.

Bronwen pushed the door all the way open. Inside, she saw a figure on the bed: a woman's corpse. Bronwen crept to the bedside. Because the lined face showed age, but the body showed no marks of violence, Bronwen guessed that Lila's heart had failed. The shriveled skin indicated she had

been dead for weeks. Taking the edge of the top sheet, she covered the form.

On the bedstand next to the body was the orb. It could not be anything else, large and jewelled and golden. She took it.

"So!"

Bronwen pivoted to see Derek there, clothes torn, face shadowed by stubble and marked with days-old wounds. He knelt on the doorstep, sleeping Raven in his lap, knife at her throat.

"I knew if I waited long enough, someone else would get through." The voice was still hoarse; he had probably been punched in the neck by one of Lila's guardians. "I got through everything but the door. I don't know how you managed that, but it doesn't matter." He nodded at Bronwen. "I want the orb. Or I will kill the little one. You know I will."

Bronwen sighed. Yes, Derek would. For years, Bronwen and others had tried to rid themselves of the scoundrel, but Derek the Rogue—or Derek the Snake—always managed to slither away from anyone who was a threat to him, either from his own side or from the enemy's.

He pushed the flat of the knife against Raven's skin. "Give me the orb," he repeated.

Bronwen's mind raced. She needed the orb for the young princess, and she wanted Raven alive. Derek might cut Raven's throat no matter what she did, and take the orb for himself to sell to the highest bidder. She had to think of a plan fast.

She took her walking stick in her left hand. Slowly, slowly, she advanced with the orb stretched out in her right hand. While his eyes—and hers—were on the orb, her left hand tilted the end of the walking staff against the heel of her boot. Unseen by Derek, the bootheel rubbed against the staff's cap.

"Close enough," he said when she was a pace away. "Now bend down and slide it to me."

With an eye on him all the time, she slid it just within his reach. As he leaned over to get it, Bronwen swung the staff over her head. The cap flew off the end. She brought the spike down under one of his ears. He rolled away from the glancing blow, grabbed the orb, and scrambled out of the room. Bronwen took only a moment to be sure that Raven, who had slid safely away when Derek moved, was unharmed, and ran after him. She had to stay with him, not only to get the orb, but so he would not double back and threaten Raven again.

She only caught glimpses of him as he turned corners in the short halls, but he made such a thumping in his escape that he was easy to track. Clumps of blood marked his trail, leaving slippery hazards on the floor.

Out the door, he made straight for the horse, rocking from side to side in an unsteady gait, brushing the ground with his free hand, clawing the dirt with his boots. Bronwen still had the unshod walking stick in her hand, determined to stop him even if she had to spear him with it.

Derek took the reins and struggled into the saddle. She raced to him, staff extended. He reached back and took out a dagger. She saw the motion and turned away in mid-stride, avoiding the blade, but the action caused her to slip and fall. Head turned back for a moment, she saw Raven at the door, a hand in her pocket.

"Stay at the door!" shouted Bronwen. She rolled and saw Derek spur the horse toward her. She could not draw her sword in time; she took her staff to stab him before he ran over her.

A brown bird flew in the horse's face. The horse shied and threw Derek from the saddle. Bronwen thrust upward as he fell; the spike went into his chest. He lay, still and bleeding, on the ground.

Bronwen got to her feet stiffly, breathing heavily. She had just barely foiled Derek's plan. Was this the first sign of age? Was she slowing?

Meanwhile, Raven ran over to the body. It was too late to shield the child from the sight of death, but there seemed to be no need. Raven waved at the corpse disapprovingly. "Bad man! Bad, bad man!" She raised an arm as if to hit the body.

"No, sweetheart," said Bronwen, taking the child's hand. "I need to find a shovel and make a hole...no, two," she added, remembering Lila.

Raven jumped up. "I wanna help!"

"I have to find a shovel first." She tired the horse to a post. She walked to the rear of the castle, looking for a shovel, but she found nothing she could use. When she got back to the courtyard, two huge pits had opened up near the gardens. Raven was standing at the lip of one, looking down. Bronwen raced to Raven's side and took her by the arm.

"Don't go too near the edge, sweetheart." She peered down, but no snake or other guardian was inside. "Why don't you get some more flowers or go play." She looked around and saw the wooden bird between them and the horse. It must have fallen from Raven's pocket. "Look, your bird is over there," said Bronwen.

While Raven went to fetch the bird, Bronwen walked to Derek's body and dragged it to the pit. She rolled it in. "Now follow me so you don't get lost," she called to Raven.

Bronwen went inside to fetch the cap of her walking stick and Lila's body; she dragged the stiff form out wrapped in the bedsheets. Raven ignored the body and made a game of touching the left wall, then the right, then the left again as they walked along. Outside, the hole she had put Derek in had disappeared; it had been smoothed over as if it had never existed. She had come upon a shovel while bringing out Lila's body; she hurriedly buried Lila before the second hole closed or another hole opened or another guardian showed up.

Derek had stuffed the golden orb in the horse's saddlebag. Bronwen tied the bag shut. As she did, she noticed that the callouses on her hands had disappeared. Had the orb's magic done that? She had held it in her hands, after all. She shrugged. Turning, she spotted Raven and gestured to the

child. "Come on, Raven, I'll give you a ride."

"Yay!" Raven ran to Bronwen.

The diform was still waiting across the stream when Bronwen and Raven rode out the gate, but they galloped by at a distance, too fast for it to catch them.

The journey back to the castle should have taken until dark, even by the most direct route, which Bronwen took. But it was still well before sunset when she announced herself at the castle gate. The power of the orb must have aided her again, Bronwen thought. She presented the golden ball to the king and queen, and received her reward. She was invited to stay, but pleaded the excuse that she had to take Raven back home, and left with the royal couple's good wishes.

The horse stopped outside the cottage as the sun was lowering beyond the trees. Bronwen slid from the saddle and lifted Raven to the ground. She walked the child to the doorstep. "Here's your home," she said.

"I don't live *here*," protested Raven.

"But...?"

Raven pointed beyond the cottage. "I live over there."

Bronwen sighed. "All right. Why don't you show me where you live?"

Bronwen took the horse by the bridle. They walked southwards. No cottage or hut was in sight. Raven must have been far from home already when Bronwen had first spotted her.

Raven stopped by a river. The surface shimmered orange. Bubbles appeared. They grew larger and larger. A hump of water formed; it grew as it meandered to the shore. It became a towering fountain, tall and beautiful with white foam. The dying sun's rays made rainbows of the spray. When it touched the sands, the water fell away, revealing a woman in a long, blue-green gown, carrying a silver staff. She had a heart-shaped face and long black hair.

"Mommy!" said Raven. She took a bouquet of fresh-looking, not crushed, flowers from her pocket.

Bronwen smiled, shaking her head at herself for not realizing it earlier.

The woman took the flowers and inserted the stems in the hollow at the end of the staff. One-handed, she swung Raven up and held her on a hip. "Have you been a good girl today?"

Raven nodded emphatically. "We went to a castle and we saw a big snake and a griffin, and a chim'ra!"

The woman looked from Raven to Bronwen and back again. "It sounds as if you had a busy day."

"Uh-huh. And Bron twisted the griffin's head off!"

"I see. Your friend must be very strong and brave."

Raven nodded. "And she had a crooked nose and gnarly hands, and I fixed them!"

Bronwen gasped. She touched her nose gingerly. It seemed to have straightened out. She could breathe through it—freely. And her hands—the callouses had disappeared because of Raven, not the orb.

The woman looked from Bronwen to Raven. "That was very nice of you."

"I helped all the time," agreed Raven.

A thought struck Bronwen; would she even have retrieved the orb, defeated Derek, without Raven's help? Maybe it *was* time to retire.

The woman kissed Raven, put her down and took her hand. "Let's go home now. Maybe your friend Bron will come with us?" She looked at Bronwen kindly, then waved with her free hand. "My castle's over there." A green translucent castle emerged from the mists in the distance.

"I'd be glad to come, my lady."

As they walked along, the woman spoke to Bronwen. "I don't like leaving my daughter alone all day, but with magic comes many responsibilities."

"Yes, my lady."

"The forest creatures can't hurt her, of course, but I'm sure it gets lonesome for her."

"I'm not lonesome," protested Raven.

"We live alone...I'm sure you know that we sorcerers tend to be leery of others."

Bronwen nodded.

"Still, I'm sure that a woman of your experience is trustworthy, and my daughter seems to like you...would you consider staying with us and keeping her company? You would be free to come and go as you please, of course."

Bronwen considered. It would save her from finding a permanent place to stay, and she could still visit her relatives. She turned back to the Enchantress. "I accept."

The woman smiled. "Your friend Bron is going to stay with us," she told the girl.

"Yay!" said Raven, and ran to Bronwen. Bronwen picked her up. The ex-swordswoman smiled as she looked into the child's face.

"I have a hundred stories to tell you," said Bronwen, "about wyverns, and castles, and princes and princesses, and all sorts of wonderful things..."

As she walked into the castle, Bronwen thought it was going to be a very pleasant retirement, indeed.

# LETTERS OF COMMENT

Dear editors,

Once again, thanks for the latest issue of *Mythic Circle*. Considering the recessionary times, and how many small press endeavors rarely make it into their teens, I'm constantly delighted that *Mythic Circle* not only survives, but appears to be thriving. Every issue has promising stories, voices that I know we'll one day see by-lined in the bookstores. Every issue also has at least one piece that could readily appear in any of the professional markets and do itself proud by appearing there.

This time around, it's heine-koene's "The House of Knowledge," a masterful (mistressful?) contemporary blend of fairy tale and Christian motifs that speaks to the reader in a voice at once timeless and relevant to the present day.

Keep up the good works and best of luck for the new year.

Charles de Lint  
Ottawa, Canada

*We'll be sure to send lala heine-koene a copy of your letter. We don't ordinarily do this, since we hope (hint, hint) that our authors will subscribe and join our continuing creative dialogue, but a letter such as this is so supportive; Ms. heine-koene must see it. TC*

Dear editors,

I received issue no. 13 (Early Summer) in June 1992, but now I wish to comment on it. I was deeply delighted as a long-time (since 1980) contributor to *Mythlore* that I am now a small part of this part of the Mythopoeic Society with the publication of my three poems in the Aliador Cycle. I hope that fans of your journal (and especially Prof. Joe Christopher and Gwenyth Hood) will comment/enjoy my poems. They will eventually inspire a series of short stories in a Tolkienesque mold.

To this end, I am enclosing a map I made some years ago on Aliador and its environs. It's a world a lot like ancient Ireland of the Tuatha-de-danaan and the strange spirits and monster-like folk that fought the wandering Celts. The map illustrates many points in the verse--and suggests many potential stories of the conflict of the Elf-folk of Aliador against the necromancy of Grimemog. It's a "War-of-Angels" (fallen and unfallen, both using their own agents or delegates) with the fate of a hidden world at stake. So I hope you can reproduce the map with my letter.

By the way, I hope you enjoyed the Tolkien Centenary. I dearly envy those who were able to visit England to attend that grand Conference at Keble College. What a feast for the imagination of storytelling, music and lecture-disputes. The likes of Rayner Unwin (no longer a publisher in his old firm, alas--the spirit of Saruman is everywhere!); T.P.

Shippey (I saw him balding with his mustache bristling on public television a year ago on "The Story of English" program series, brilliant like a Silmaril, jolly like a Hobbit); the Tolkiens, Christopher and Priscilla; and so many others, beg to be part of a documentary for American-public television. Alas, it will never be made. (*For those of our readers who are not Mythopoeic Society members, Thomas Egan refers to the Tolkien Centenary Conference held in Oxford last summer to celebrate Tolkien's 100th birthday. The Conference was jointly sponsored by the Mythopoeic Society and the (British) Tolkien Society. TC*)

Your stories and poems are all good-to-excellent. "The Healer and the Storyteller" by Joseph Kurtenbach verges on sentimentality, the maudlin pathos so much of American fiction is besodden with. I'm not against "Love," but that virtue is very hard to find in fantasy. The tale isn't bad, but it's too close to being Erich Segal's "Love Story" in another form. Sorry.

Joe Christopher used to be a correspondent of mine as I sent him my published Tolkien piece for his research on the Inklings (I hope he remembers me!) His poems are part of one long *Kulturkampf* he makes (now for some years) on the modern literary establishment. The academics (especially of the Edmund Wilson type) have been very unresponsive to Tolkien's pleas that he was *not* making another form of allegory to protest the political-social conundrums of the modern era. Tolkien enjoyed fantasy as a way to explore the "real world." His sub-creation was written *first* for himself, then for his potential readership. It makes all the difference in the world for the emotional-intellectual power of a work. So three kudos for Joe Christopher's verse!

The stories by Alex McGilverly ("Frog Prince") and Dan Perlman ("A Visit from Mom") were delightful, "cute" in the best sense of the word, showing an Aristotlean simplicity we should all cultivate. Humor is a gentle creature, slowly drawn out, not to be "belly-laughed" into existence. "The Cyclops Maid" is properly heroic, easy to follow and sympathetic in its characters. Not great reading, but good sturdy prose. The same with David Sandner's "The Witch's Eyes." A lot like the fairy tales translated by the 10th century linguist Andrew Lang. Mary Choo's poetry gives me a reborn taste of Gerard Manley Hopkins' style and techniques--although the subject matter is certainly very different.

"On the Edge" by Valerie Giusti is perhaps the best story in plotline, characterization and "power" here.

So, the best to all...*Pax vobiscum in spiritu Christi*. I hope there are some Valar watching, as they are angels, over our poor American New World (Order). I sympathize with those who celebrate Columbus *re* your poem by G. Hood in issue no. 12, *pace* Charles de Lint. He's a good writer but I don't agree with him on Columbus. The latter was *not* a

racial/religious/genocidal maniac. His sins were real, but limited. His genius was real, too....

Thomas Egan  
Woodside, New York

*It's always fun to have the concrete detail to flesh out the action of a story or poem. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of xerographic technology, we were not able to include the map. Thanks for responding to our issue! TC*

Dear editors,

I admire you for continuing with *The Mythic Circle* with everything you have on your mind! I am sorry I missed writing a LOC on the last issue, so I am hereby writing one to go along with this.

"The Magic Carpenter" by John R. Alderson is a fine story. The prose is smooth and flowing. The magical concept is convincing. The characters are well drawn, especially the patient father, Eldewin Whiteharte. But I'm guessing that Alderson wants my ideas, such as they are, for making the story publishable for professional markets. So here they are.

Alderson explains twice how Pwill died, first in Fescue's thoughts and then in Fescue's words to Dak. Wouldn't it be more effective if Pwill's death were only hinted at in Fescue's thoughts, the full story being told the first time in Fescue's words to Dak?

Although the magical concept is convincing, it is so convincing that I have a hard time believing that Fescue the wizard wouldn't have known, or at least suspected, the true risk of trying to create living beings through magic. It would be more plausible if Pwill acted in defiance of Fescue, rather than in cooperation with him.

And that is part of the reason why, though Eldewin comes through clearly, Fescue and Dak aren't quite as convincing. Dak's mixture of willful rebelliousness and affectionate loyalty needs to be depicted more strikingly.

By the way, when I shared some of these comments on-line (GENIE network), a friend pointed out that Dak was the name of an electronic catalogue company. I get their catalogue too, but didn't realize how wide their distribution was. A change of name might be in order.

In Ron Blizzard's "Iorg and the Dancing Sword," the basic gag words, but other points need to be developed. It is understandable why the magical animated swords have formed a union, but what's in it for the dragons, trolls and monsters? Who provides the treasure? And if there had been a bit more foreshadowing of the ultimate catastrophe, with Iorg utterly failing to take the hint, it would have been more effective.

The central idea in "Color it Vanity" works well, but the lengthy dispute over whether the wizard would undertake the mission in the first place, and whether the lord would pay him in the end, was less interesting, and could have been dropped without harm to the story.

Karen J. Connell's story "To Kill a Wizard," once more, had an excellent central premise; a bit more background color would help. Also the scene at the beginning where Litha kills a vagrant without hesitation or apparent provocation seems undermotivated. But I really liked the ironic situation set up with two tricksters learning each other's trade.

"Ragwort, Ragwort," was well written, but I had difficulty understanding what the leprechaun's key unlocked.

The central gag in "Naughty or Nice" is side-splitting, but I thought both the child and the cat were too mean. I would have enjoyed a more muted and subtler conflict.

That's as far as I got. Maybe I'll write more later.

I suppose I should mention that I'm bemused to have my sestina, "To Christopher Columbus," become the center of a small controversy, with the redoubtable Charles de Lint objecting to its alleged pro-Conquistador bias and the *MC* editors defending their decision to publish it. I'd be the last to deny that poetry has political implications; however, short lyrics are not the best medium for extensive development of them. If I had written a long epic poem glorifying the Conquistadors and not mentioning the shame of what they did to the indigenous American populations, then de Lint's point would be compelling. But short lyrics are intensive, not extensive. I think it is legitimate to write a short lyric expressing sympathy and admiration for a fifteenth century explorer without exhaustively cataloguing the implications of his actions. And I will stick by that opinion.

Congratulations for a fine issue, and I look forward to the next.

Gwenyth E. Hood  
Huntington, West Virginia

*Thanks, Gwenyth, for a fine, detailed letter. This is the substantive feedback our authors need to hear, since most of them do want to make that break into the professional markets. TC*

*Excellent comments on the stories, Gwyneth. Thanks. Re: "intensive" versus "extensive" - sometimes intense poetry evokes an intense response! CISL*

Dear editors,

Hi, everyone! I just have a couple of nits to pick here—I generally loved the last issue's contents, but I noticed a few minor flaws.

In "The Magic Carpenter" (which I like very much!) something bothers me about the way Fessie and Dak talk to each other, but I'm not sure what exactly.

"Iorg and the Dancing Sword"—this is a laugh riot! But—"sewage-infested pools?" It's not alive. At least, I hope it's not.

"Images"—I'm confused on one point. Is the picture of the unicorn color or black and white? Most of the clues point to black and white—she develops her own film, prints

a contact sheet, sends prints, not slides, to the publisher, and stores negatives. But on the other hand, the author refers to the photographer snapping away at a "play of shapes and colors."

O.k., I'm done nit-picking. Happy 1993 everyone!

Erin Lale  
Sonoma, California

*Personally, I rather enjoyed the "sewage-infested" image, since for me it evoked an unnerving feeling of something unthinkably slimy living in the water--very effective in the context. And the black-and-white-or-color question really didn't occur to me--I'm not sure it's important, since the story doesn't turn on it in any way, but perhaps other readers will have a different impression. TC*

*I, too, enjoyed the "sewage-infested" image. Very (eccch!) evocative. The Dak/Fessie conversation is an interesting blend of "forsoothly" and slangy language, a blend that might not work for some. I'm not a fan of "forsoothly" language, so I feel that anything that lightens it up is to the good. CISL*

Dear Editors

I was quite happy to receive issue #14...not only was it nice to see "Iorg" in print but the variety in #14 is very good. Before I forget to mention it, thanks to Tim Callahan and Lynn Maudlin, their art fit the mood of "Iorg" very nicely.

The ending of "The Magic Carpenter" was good (this was my favorite story in #14). Although Fescue's willingness to sacrifice himself for Dak may have been the climax, the story's main attraction (in my opinion) was the unexpected strength of Dak's father. It left me wondering what these two, father and son, might be up to in a few years.

"Color it Vanity" drew me in at the start but the mention of the computer ruined the mood. It seemed to be there only for novelty. What hurt the story most, however, was the seeming invincibility of Martyl. You felt he was never in danger and, what's more, he was smug about it. I'm probably too sensitive about this because I've seen many overly powerful heroes in the stories that have come to the Rambler. It destroys suspense. They never have to reach into themselves and pull out that last little bit of reserve. You never have that moment when all hangs in the balance. And...well, ahem, I'll get off my soap box now. "Vanity's" basic plot and writing were good, though I think more time could have been spent with fighting the demon and less with shaming Sir Landsworth.

Jesup in "To Kill A Wizard" intrigued me, but I found Litha and Gethin about as shallow as soap opera characters. By the end I was hoping that Litha would kill Gethin, confess the murder and then we could get on with the main attraction, Jesup. This sounds harsher than it should because the story did hold my attention. I really would like to hear more of Jesup, though.

I have mixed emotions about "Ragwort, Ragwort."

The "feel" of it, the conversation and interaction come across as authentic, but there may have been too much detail. At times it seemed to get in the way of the story. Although I was happy for Seamus at the end, he saw that his dream would come true, it was hard to shake the feeling that he was just a vehicle for a lecture on the history of Ireland.

"Fiddler of Sundown Lake" definitely held my attention. The story progressed well and I liked the conversation and interaction between the characters. My problem was Mark's sense of euphoria when I realized what the fiddle playing had done. I suppose now he understood his father's actions and that would be a relief but "euphoria"? He and his father's cheery attitude seemed unnatural to me.

I like the idea of desert unicorns presented in "Images." I only wished the story had paused a little more so it could really sink in. (Desert unicorns!) When Kelley found the colt I wanted to see the wonder in her eyes. To see her feel something. When the unicorn saved her life by clearing the pool it was also handled, in my opinion, too matter-of-factly.

"The Seminar" made a good point in an entertaining manner. It was well paced and convincing. That is, until Poe's speech as he faded out of sight. I find it hard to believe that most "scholars" would give a rat's behind what their subject thought of their studies. Other than that I liked the story.

"Naughty or Nice" was a good, "got his come-uppance" short story. My only advice would be to cut it off after Chuckie squishes Pesker's present between his fingers. The rest is not necessary and takes away from the climax.

"Bridget Skla's Dreamworld Tea" suffers from the same problems, in my opinion. I liked the story, the idea of a different "dreamworld" reality changing events in the real world. But the story meandered at the end. I think it would have been much stronger if, after the baby was born and lightning split the boulder, the story came to an abrupt end. (Like this comment.)

I'm sorry that this LOC is negative. It's easier to pick out weaknesses than strengths, especially when time is short. I can only hope that something I've said helps and that no one will be tempted to slit their wrists (or mine) because of my OPINIONS (pigheaded though they may be).

Ron Blizzard  
Weiser, Idaho

*I think such specific, concrete comments are extremely useful to our writers, although they may not always agree with them! Thanks--TC*



# REUNION

*by Ivan Hughes*

Friday, thought Redding, when she awoke. Her one Friday a month off. She guessed she'd better call about Miz Wooley. She dialed the clinic, getting Julia, the day nurse.

"Redding!" said Julia, "that lady you brought in? Old Miz Wooley? You won't believe this - she's gone! Nelda said she heard a noise in the middle of the night, and when she went to see about it, the old lady wasn't in her bed. Nelda an' th' night porter checked everywhere, but nobody's seen hide nor hair of her since."

"Did Nelda call the sheriff?"

"Of course! Him an' a deputy came and poked all around, but they didn't find anything. Nelda said the sheriff was gonna look you up today. Said you might know something. Do you, Reddin'?"

"No. I wish I'd never heard of any of this."

"Let me know if you need help, you hear?"

"Yes, I will, Julia." She hung up. She remembered how she and James Hacker had found Miz Wooley - was it just last night?

Now, bemused, she stared across the back yard through the window above her kitchen sink. Craning her neck, she could see the chicken house. She'd like to get rid of it, but, since the place wasn't hers, she had to put up with it. Its door stood ajar. She couldn't remember it being open the last time she'd looked. She hoped some old stray wasn't holed up in it, and decided to check it out.

Redding picked her way across the dew-wet grass, wishing she hadn't come out in bedroom slippers. She peered inside the chicken house. There, only partly covered by a pile of straw left from last season's yard work, was Miz Wooley! Naked and shivering, she was pitiful.

Redding took off her robe, knelt, gently brushed away the straw and wrapped the old woman in the robe. "How in the world did you get here?" she asked. Miz Wooley could only whisper, "Help me - help - please." Redding half-carried her into the house, and put her in her own bed.

"Got to get you warm, get some fluids into you and get you cleaned up a little. Then we'll go back to the clinic," said Redding.

"No, don't - not safe - please."

"We'll have to see. At the very least, the doctor's going to want to see you." Redding didn't mention the sheriff.

Redding got some warm milk down Miz Wooley, and phoned Julia to get the doctor on call to come by.

Miz Wooley slept soundly, no longer shivering. She looked so helpless. Redding wondered how she could have roamed, naked, through the countryside and found her way here.

Yesterday, on the narrow front porch of Miz Wooley's house, Redding had rapped the screen door and called,

"Miz Wooley - Miz Wooley - it's me, District Nurse! You alright, Miz Wooley?"

A reedy voice had floated from inside, "Ooh land - come on in."

In the back room, Redding had found the wispy, gray-haired woman propped up in bed by two pillows, with a quilt pulled up to her armpits. A musty, sachet odor had permeated the air.

"Any of your kin been by lately to see to you?" Redding had asked.

"Kinfolk died out years ago. Don't get many visitors, mostly just hear the trucks down yonder." Down yonder was the logging road where Redding had left the State's pickup truck.

"Did the Nurse ever come by to see you before?"

"Seems like she did, a spell back, child. But I don't remember too well no more. Years ago's more clear to me now than yesterday."

"Well, since you've been feelin' puny, I'd better check you over, OK?" After only a cursory examination, Redding had asked, "You've never been to the clinic for a checkup, have you?"

"Never. Don't want to now, either."

"Might be a good idea. Think about it, while I put up the things I brought for you."

After putting away the canned goods and soap powder she'd brought, Redding found the old woman asleep. She'd felt her forehead once more, checked her pulse, and decided to get Miz Wooley to the clinic right away. Wishing it wasn't so far to her CB radio, she'd clambered down the path by flashlight. Redding was strong for her size and had hefted plenty of patients but, alone and in the dark, carrying Miz Wooley would have been too dangerous.

At the logging road, a pulpwood truck's headlights had picked her out, and it rattled to a stop. The driver had called, "Need some help, ma'am? Oh, it's you Reddin'. What you doin' up here?"

"James Hacker!" She'd run across him several times in country stores and cafes. "Am I glad to see you! I need help gettin' old Miz Wooley to the clinic. She doesn't need to wait any longer."

"Put it thataway, guess I'll give you a hand."

The doctor's knock brought Redding back. It was Lewis. "What's this about the old woman?" he asked.

"She's here and I'm afraid if I make her go back, she'll run off again; maybe get killed or something."

After examining Miz Wooley, Dr. Lewis said, "I feel OK about leaving her here. Nothing's wrong besides her being old and having run around naked all night. But next week you won't be able to look after her nearly as well as

the clinic."

Redding's eyes stung. She thought of the clearing where Miz Wooley's house stood; the scent of pines hanging in the air. In the twilight, the tin-roofed cabin had looked just like Mamaw's old house. She could hear her mother's voice, saying "Come on, Millie! It's time to go visit Mamaw." Besides Mamaw, there hadn't been any other kin. Mamaw had lived alone until only a week before she'd died. But she'd had Mama and Millie to look in on her. How alike people had thought she, Mama and Mamaw looked; short, sharp-featured, dark red hair. People had always remarked.

Dr. Lewis's voice interrupted, "You know, she may not be competent. Might have to be committed involuntarily."

Redding hated for folks to be treated that way. But when there wasn't any family, and no money, and a person really, really couldn't take care of herself, what else could be done? Thank God Mama and Mamaw had been spared that, she thought. Daddy's life insurance money just had seen Mama through her terminal bout with cancer.

"Let's see how it goes," she said.

"Call if you need me," said Lewis, on his way out. "And, by the way, I'll let the sheriff know we've found Miz Wooley."

Dr. Lewis drove off. Redding looked at the clock. Time for lunch, and then maybe she could do some gardening.

\* \* \*

By Saturday evening, Miz Wooley was alert and sitting up in bed, able to sip bouillon.

"Miz Wooley," said Redding, "do you remember being in the hospital? A place with lots of beds?"

"They stuck something in my arm. I was afraid."

"They just wanted to help you. But I'm going to keep you right here 'til you're up and around again. Do you remember being outside, at night?"

Tears came to the old woman's eyes. "It was cold, I was lost, and so tired. I don't know where I've been."

By Sunday night, Miz Wooley was able to sit at the table. "Child, you're too good to me," she said. "Takin' in a stranger like this."

"You don't seem a stranger. And I like taking care of you. You can stay with me as long as you like." Redding thought of her mother, again. She hadn't been able to do much for her. The cancer'd been so swift! She continued, "Tomorrow I'll be back at work. Think you can manage by yourself? I wouldn't be too far away, and I can check on you by phone. Probably make it home at lunch time."

Next day, Redding came home at lunch time, bringing fast food. Miz Wooley seemed particularly fond of chicken.

While Miz Wooley continued to improve, Redding didn't press her about the events that led to her becoming a house guest. But after about two weeks, Miz Wooley began to act distracted, fidgety, even a little snappish. "Miz Wooley," Redding said, "You don't seem yourself, lately.

Maybe we ought to check you over down at the clinic."

"No! No, I ain't goin' back down there!" Miz Wooley's hands wrung nervously. "You just let me go on back up to my place. I can manage alright up there. I done it all my life and I still can." Miz Wooley began looking about, as if trying to decide which way to run.

Miz Wooley was so upset that Redding didn't even suggest that Dr. Lewis come to look her over. She didn't want a repeat of her appearing and disappearing all over the place. Not when things seemed to be working so well.

That night, Redding was roused by a strange noise. Friday night joyriders, she thought. She bet herself that tomorrow the mailbox would be down, then drifted off again.

Next morning, she found the mailbox intact, but a chewed-up chicken carcass lay nearby. Yuck! Somebody's dog'd been chicken-stealing and left the evidence in her yard! She looked for more.

There were no more chicken remnants, but the window screen from Miz Wooley's room lay in the side yard. That was the noise she'd heard, Redding thought, that screen had always been loose.

Later, at breakfast, Redding asked, "Did you hear anything last night? I thought I heard some joyriders. Then, this morning I noticed the screen had fallen out of your window. Did you hear that?"

"I don't remember, child."

Redding didn't bring up the chicken, thinking it might upset the old lady.

The next night, Redding was again awakened. Maybe Miz Wooley was sleepwalking. Out of bed and into the spare bedroom Redding slipped softly. Moonlight revealed an empty bed. The screen was in the yard again.

Redding ran from room to room, turning on lights. No sign of the old woman. She flipped on the exterior lights and ran outside. "Miz Wooley! Miz Wooley!" she called. She circled the house, but still found no sign. Oh, Lord, she thought, should I call the sheriff? She had visions of the old woman being taken away and locked up, for sure. She decided not to call now.

She ran inside; threw on clothes and raced to the pickup. Along twisty, country roads she sped, stopping often to call, "Miz Wooley! Miz Wooley!" Fighting to keep the pickup on the road, she kept an eye on the thickets and fields flashing by.

There! Redding jerked the wheel - the truck lurched sideways in gravel. No, only a deer. The headlamps blotched the swirling ground fog. After two hours at this, her judgement was clouded by fatigue. She turned towards home, fighting to keep her eyes open.

At home, she found chicken feathers scattered across the backyard. Darn! That dog was back again, on top of all this! Tired, mad, and scared, all at once, she stamped into the house. She glared at the phone, knowing she ought to call the sheriff. Then she turned towards the spare room, thinking she'd just make sure Miz Wooley really wasn't

there.

Miz Wooley sat in the bed, clutching the sheet to her chin. Chicken feathers were everywhere and blood was on her face.

Thunderstruck, Redding finally managed to croak, "My God! Did that dog attack you?" She enfolded the old woman in her arms, before realizing she was naked. Besides her bloody face and hands, Miz Wooley had cockleburrs in her hair and mud splattered all over her. Mute and glassy-eyed, the old woman let Redding lead her to the bathtub.

After the bath, Redding made Miz Wooley take a sleeping pill, drink some warm milk, and sit in the kitchen while she cleaned up. She put her to bed, muttering, "Tomorrow, you've got to tell me what happened!" Then, Redding took a sleeping pill with some warm milk herself, and flopped into bed.

\* \* \*

Redding, awakened by drumming rain, dreaded talking about last night with Miz Wooley, but made herself get up. She scuffed into the kitchen and spooned dark coffee grains into the maker, savoring the aroma. Through a window, she saw rain plastering chicken feathers to the earth. What a mess! she thought, glad it hadn't been raining last night. Redding sensed Miz Wooley behind her. Wrapped in a bathrobe, looking sheepish, she paused at the kitchen door; then asked, "Can I come in?"

"Come on over. I'm not mad, just confused and upset."

The old lady sat with her hands folded in her lap. When it was ready, Redding poured coffee. For a while they listened to the stove's clock tick minutes away. Redding stared at the dime-store sugarbowl and creamer on the table. Then she said, "Can you tell me what's happening? Please, I'll do my best to help. I don't want you to be hurt, but I've got to know what's what."

"Oh, child," sighed Miz Wooley, "did you ever hear tell about people that turn into animals?" Redding gingerly tabled her cup. She gaped at Miz Wooley. The old woman went on, "Well, whether you did or not, they's real. My family had lots of 'em. I'm the last one."

"Are you the dog?" whispered Redding.

"Ain't a dog. It's a wolf."

After a long moment, Redding murmured, "Some old folks I visit tell stories about wolves in the hills."

"Oh," said the old woman, smiling. "Them hills - my family's lived in them hills since 'way before I was born. My Great-granddaddy, he got land for servin' with General Greene."

General Greene! If it was the Greene Redding was thinking of, that was two-hundred years ago! Miz Wooley must've left out a "great" or two.

"Once there was right many of us. More'n twenty families scattered over the hills. Most with six, eight children. Only went into settlements to get things we couldn't grow or make ourselves. Them was happy times. I got married when I was just a girl. Had three big sons and two

daughters. Two sons went off to some war or other, and didn't come back. The third, he wanted to see the city. One daughter married. The second, she stayed home with me and her daddy. They're dead now. Same with all the families. One thing or another happened. They died off. I guess I'd have too, if you hadn't come along."

"You were all - able to change?" asked Redding.

"Not *able* to. Didn't have no choice. It happened to some more'n others. Ain't reg'lar or nothin'. Sometimes, you go for months, without doin' it, then it'll happen reg'lar for a spell. It takes a lot out of you. Makes you so hungry, you'll eat almost anything you come across. The more other kinds of folks was around, the more dangerous it got, though. Dogs, guns, traps. They was all bad on them that was a-changin'."

Redding hesitated, then asked, "So, you don't - hunt - people?"

"I never did. But I *am* partial to chickens."

Redding was amazed to find herself amused by that remark. She wondered why she hadn't fled, horrified. She thought of Mamaw and Mama. They were gone and she felt empty. She wanted to take care of Miz Wooley. "What am I goin' to do with you, Miz Wooley?"

"Up to you, child. You know I'd like to stay. You're just like my youngest daughter. So sweet to me, an' everything. But not really family. We was always taught others could only hate and kill you. I don't know how often I'm gonna change. It ain't always reg'lar."

"But you don't - I mean - you wouldn't -," stammered Redding.

"I am partial to chicken."

"Then can we see how it goes, you stayin' on here? No reason for me to tell anybody else, and I do so enjoy your company. We'll get our own chickens. One thing, can you tell beforehand when you're likely to - to -?"

Miz Wooley nodded.

\* \* \*

Miz Wooley changed twice more in the next few weeks. The first time, Redding noticed Miz Wooley acting differently even before the old lady let on that it was coming.

"I'm so hot, I do believe I'll be more comfortable with the windows up," she said, on her way to open them. "I'm so thirsty, I believe I'll get me some ice water." Then she sat at the open window, fanning herself with a folded newspaper. Not fifteen minutes later, she said, "Oh, heavens above, I'm gettin' chilled. Just look at that," pointing to goosebumps on her forearm. "Let me go get a sweater - and would you close the window?"

The alternation intensified until Miz Wooley was in the grip of chills and fever. "Come on, now. You need to be in bed," said Redding.

"No, no. This is how it begins. I need to get out where I can be by myself when it comes all over me."

Much as she wanted to help, Redding felt it would be profoundly intrusive to watch while Miz Wooley made the

transition. So, Redding helped her to the chicken house, and put warm blankets, a bowl of water, and two white chickens inside.

Redding really did love the old lady. She didn't want to reveal the secret. Besides, who'd believe her anyway? She was glad Miz Wooley was a tame - whatever she was. Eating live chickens was one thing, but she wasn't sure what she'd have done if Miz Wooley had been "partial" to people. At the next transition, they made the trip to the chicken house after dark, and the trip back just before dawn. No one need be the wiser.

\* \* \*

On Sunday afternoons Miz Wooley and Redding shared the weekly paper. Redding felt a part of the families she served as District Nurse. She followed births, deaths, weddings, and family reunions through word-of-mouth and the weekly's columns, written mostly by older women, that covered the tiny communities nearby.

Miz Wooley took interest in the local people, too. She even accompanied Redding to visit elderly ones who liked having someone their own age to talk to.

"Look at this," Redding said. "There's going to be a reunion of a Wollston family, two weeks from today. But the typesetter's left in a bunch of gobbledygook here at the bottom." She passed the page to Miz Wooley. "See there, down on the left?"

"Yes, child, I see it." Miz Wooley's voice sounded odd.

"You OK, Miz Wooley?"

"Just fine, dear," said the old lady, passing back the page. Redding sensed real disquiet, and didn't bring the subject up again until, next evening after supper, she said, "Some-thin's botherin' you. And I think it's that Wollston reunion. Won't you please let me help you?"

The old woman gazed at Redding. "I think they're my kinfolk. My *real* kinfolk."

"What makes you think that? Was it that funny-look- ing stuff at the bottom of the announcement?"

"It's only funny-looking if you can't read it. My Granddaddy taught me. Said it was how they wrote before they come to America."

"Can you tell me what it said?" Redding asked gently. She saw a glint of tears in the old lady's eyes.

"All who are within the circle, draw near," the old woman breathed. "Them words has always meant the family was gettin' together for some important thing."

Redding had a sinking feeling. She took a deep breath. "Do you want to go?"

Tears melted from the old woman's eyes. "Yes, I purely do."

"Will it be OK if I take you?"

"Yes. If I'm with you, you'll be alright, even if there's some of the Brotherhood there. But, like as not, most of 'em'll be like me. An' probably no one will be a-changin'. They always tried to miss someone changin'."

"The Brotherhood?"

Miz Wooley sighed. "They don't like reg'lar people. Hate 'em 'cause of how they've hunted my kind down. The Brotherhood only takes in them that likes bein' what they are. They always claimed eatin' bigger game made 'em stronger."

Queasiness touched Redding. Oh, my God, she thought. Not only was she harboring a - whatever - but she'd just volunteered to go and visit with a whole bunch of them a week from next Sunday.

\* \* \*

Early on that day, Miz Wooley and Nurse Redding donned their Sunday best and set out for the reunion. Miz Wooley's lips worked in and out; her fingertips busily rubbed one another. She and Redding had barely exchanged two words since rising. They drove in silence down the two-lane blacktop. The tires hissed in the morning dampness, scattering doves from the roadside. Redding, thinking of childhood trips down these same roads, was startled by Miz Wooley's sudden exclamation.

"There!"

In piney woods a white, clapboard church sat, between a small graveyard and a gravelled parking area. People stood before the church, exchanging greetings. As Redding parked the truck a burly, dark-haired man strode toward them.

"Good morning!" he said heartily. "I'm Fred Wollston. Welcome to Wollston's Grove! I don't believe I've met you ladies before!"

Redding opened her mouth to speak, but Miz Wooley preempted her in a surprisingly strong voice, "Good morn- ing. I know we haven't met. I'm Frances Wooley!"

"Wooley!" exclaimed the man, "I'd no idea there were any Wooleys left! So nice to have you. Who's your lovely friend?"

"Nurse Redding's been real kind to me, Mr. Wollston," said Miz Wooley. "Brought me plumb back to life, when I was nearly dead. Took me in an' cared for me when there wasn't nobody else. So I think of her as family."

"Of course, of course," he said, but with a wary eye on Redding.

Fred, taken with Miz Wooley, introduced them to practically everybody before the church service began. All seemed aware that there'd been a Wooley family, but were surprised that a member survived. They were politely unimpressed with Redding.

Everything seemed absolutely normal. The Wollstons were just like real people. Redding found herself embar- rassed to think of Miz Wooley's - what would you call it? - "race"? - as not being people. Yet her rational side told her that they weren't.

After the service, the *real* socializing of the reunion began. Behind the church, picnic tables, draped with checked cloths, were piled high with food. The scent of warm pine needles underfoot mingled with the delicious

aroma of fried chicken. Redding and Miz Wooley were dragooned by Fred to join his family to eat, at least the first plateful; then to meet others they'd missed before church, and be entreated to try "just a taste" of the other mountains of food.

Eventually, Redding found herself separated from Miz Wooley. It was warm; she was full and drowsy. She struggled to make small talk. She wondered if any of these - people - hunted bigger game while transformed. Through a dozy haze, she seemed to see the faces of the Wollstons stretching into wolfish snouts; feral eyes glowing, gazing at her unblinking. Red tongues darted over glistening teeth to lick chops. They moved toward her. She jumped from her seat, looking around fearfully. There were no wolves. Embarrassed, she apologized, "I'm so sorry! I seem to be getting drowsy. It's all that good food and this nice, warm day." She decided that enough was enough. Besides, her new shoes were beginning to hurt.

She found Miz Wooley at the center of a group of Wollston women, and waited for the right moment to say, "Miz Wooley, I'm gettin' awfully tired, aren't you? Besides, these good folks have some family business to take care of, and you and I are probably just in the way." The ladies made polite noises to the effect that they were welcome to stay as long as they liked.

But Miz Wooley said, "You're right. I'm too old for all this excitement. We *had* better go along, now." The women made Miz Wooley promise to call on them, and gave elaborate directions to their homes.

On the drive home, Miz Wooley said nothing. But Redding saw tears rolling down the old woman's cheeks.

By the next day, Miz Wooley seemed her old self, and she never mentioned the reunion again. Redding, eager to discuss it, but not wanting to upset the old lady, decided to go along .

\* \* \*

Within a week, Miz Wooley began another transformation. Usually, Redding tried to wait up until she knew that Miz Wooley had made the transition. But she fell asleep at her kitchen table, and didn't wake until dawn.

When she woke, she sat up stiffly and, still sleepy-headed, looked outside. Raining to beat the band, she thought, hoping the chicken house wasn't leaking. Maybe it would slack off while she had some coffee.

Finally, she decided it wasn't going to slacken. Under her ratty umbrella, with galoshes over her socks, she splashed across the yard. The chicken house door was ajar. Inside - no Miz Wooley. Damn! she thought, suddenly angry. Where'd that old woman gotten off to now? Then, just as suddenly, she sat down and began to cry. Don't you dare go off and leave me, old woman! she thought, don't you dare! You can't go off now, before I've had a chance to take care of you right! Not like Mama did!

After a few minutes, Redding's practical side emerged and she decided that she needed a hot shower, more coffee and something to eat, before she thought about what to do next.

Bathed and fed, Redding decided against calling the sheriff. She also figured that even a - whatever - would know to get in out of the rain. So driving around in it wouldn't really help, either.

The rain stopped after about an hour, but the skies remained cloud-choked, and the radio promised more rain after nightfall. Redding slogged to the pickup and drove slowly; spiralling away from the house. By noon, she'd seen no sign of Miz Wooley.

Reluctantly, Redding turned toward home, feeling there was nothing to do but wait and hope. Then it occurred to her that Miz Wooley might've returned to the cabin in the hills. As far as Redding knew, no one had been there since the night they'd carried Miz Wooley away.

Redding drove quickly home. She put on shoes to walk rough ground in, got her nurse's kit, flashlight, and some blankets. She made a quick dash to pick up plenty of fast-food chicken, and she was off towards the hills.

The gravelled road was rutted but passable. The dirt logging road, though, sucked at the pickup's four-wheel drive, and it took an hour to reach the path. There, Redding chocked the wheels with stones, and climbed the path. Nobody had been on it for months.

Redding pushed through thigh-high weeds around the little house. The back-room window was splintered; its wreckage sagged into the room. She peered through. No one was there. Inside, the bed was covered with mud and weeds. A wet-dog smell permeated the air. Something had slept there, but was gone now.

Redding stepped onto the porch just as rain began anew. She scuffled her gear inside. Seeing and smelling the chicken triggered her hunger. She sat and munched away, watching it rain. She didn't plan on falling asleep, but the strenuous morning and the rain's rhythm did the trick.

Twilight was fading into night when Redding awoke, and still the rain sluiced down. She fiddled a kerosene lantern alight and took it onto the porch. She sat on a folded blanket, back against the wall, peering into the night. This is how it must've been for Miz Wooley for years and years, she thought; absolutely alone, and feeling that she was the last of her kind. Redding forced herself to abandon that train of thought. Instead, she concentrated on those happy, childhood visits to Mamaw. Then, drowsy again, she made her bed on the front room floor, and drifted asleep.

Awakening to birds' morning calls, she felt stiff, sore, and damp. The air was clotted with humidity, but the rain had stopped. She stood up, stretched, and wished she had a toothbrush. One last check of the back room to make sure it was still empty and she was on her way. Driving home, she allowed herself to hope that Miz Wooley might be waiting.

\* \* \*

She wasn't. Redding carried her gear inside, and went immediately for the shower. Once clean, and with coffee in hand, she wracked her brain. What to do now? The Wollstons - dealing with the Wollstons again didn't appeal

to her, but it seemed her last option. She would not think Miz Wooley dead. She rummaged for the clipping to get their address. She called information. The number wasn't listed. Maybe they didn't have a phone. She could drive to the address and see if there was a house to go with it. Failing that, she could always go back to the little church and see if she could find someone there.

She found the lone mailbox, but it was simply a mail drop. That left the church. In a few moments she spotted it. Lowering clouds blackened the sky, but a floodlight illuminated the parking lot, and lights were on inside. She walked to the church door. As she reached for its handle, it swung open. A short man, one she didn't remember seeing at the reunion, stood in the doorway.

He eyed her; then called, "Fred! It's the woman!"

Fred Wollston stood from among a knot of men in the front pews and beckoned. "Come in, Miss Redding! Come in and sit! You must be tired after driving all the way over here!"

Redding's nerve faltered. The church scarcely seemed the same as she remembered. Rows of pews marched into shadows. The lamplight from overhead drained into the dark floor and furnishings. She wanted to bolt, but her desire to find Miz Wooley propelled her. When she reached the group of men, she did not sit. She was afraid her legs wouldn't work and that she'd never be able to get up again. "Mr. Wollston," her voice quavered a bit, then steadied, "Mr. Wollston, Miz Wooley has disappeared. I haven't seen her since night before last."

"I'm sorry. What makes you think we can help?"

She squeezed out her last drop of courage. "Mr. Wollston, I know what Miz Wooley is - what you are - and I don't care." The seated men murmured, but she pressed on. "I took her in when she was sick and dying. I love her just like she was my own kin, and I can't bear the thought that she's lying somewhere hurt or dead. I thought that maybe, since you and she are - alike - you could help me find her. Or that you already know where she is."

Wollston looked at her, then at the group of men. He said, still looking at them, "Miss Redding, you are in jeopardy. You'll only make things worse, if you insist on intruding. Your friend's not in any danger. That's the best I can do now, and I'm sorry to have to ask you to go."

Redding started to argue, but enmity, almost palpable, emanated from the group of men. "Please, if it's at all possible, ask her to call me, write me, anything. I'd like to be able to say good-bye, and to tell her what she's meant to me," she said. There was no reply. Her eyes began to sting. She forced her legs to be steady, turned, and walked out of the church. Then she ran to the truck and gunned it out of the lot, spraying gravel.

\* \* \*

A month after her visit to the Wollston's church, Redding sat in her kitchen, coffee in hand, reading the paper. It was her Friday off. A car crunched gravel in the drive and she went to the back door to see who it was. A

woman who looked to be about Redding's age got out and walked toward the house. She seemed vaguely familiar. She spoke. "Hello, Nurse Redding."

Redding's mouth was dry. "What can I do for you?" she croaked.

The woman smiled. "I've a message from your friend."

"Miz Wooley? Why couldn't she come herself?"

The woman ignored the question. "Don't worry about her, she loved you as a daughter, and she'll remember you forever."

"Can I ever see her again?" asked Redding. "Can she just write, or phone, or just - something?"

"No. I'm sorry. And you must keep your distance and your peace. Some of us have feelings towards - others - that're very strong." She handed Redding a locket. "You're supposed to have this. It was Frances Wooley's." The locket looked old. Inside was a tiny, faded watercolor of a young woman; the image of the one standing in the yard now, except for costume.

"How old is this?" whispered Redding.

"Oh, not more than a hundred and fifty years," said the woman casually. "You know, we *are* very different from you. And the Brotherhood's right, our longevity depends on our diet." She turned with finality, got into the car, and it drove away.

# Sanctum

by Lee Zumpe

One thousand years. One thousand years have swept across the sands of this earth since I tasted fresh air. One thousand years have withered in the memories of men since last I saw another's face...a thousand years have gone by since I was abandoned in this subterrestrial sanctuary. Generations of children have aged and died whilst alone I rotted physically and mentally in this eternal crypt. Empires have been born and conquered during this extended duration...a segment of time only I was cursed with the horror of living through. One thousand years, to me, may as well be eternity...and eternity may as well be hell.

My sanity is uncertain...I cannot judge my own rationale. Whether or not my sanity remained intact all these decades is irrelevant: I retain my faith. That is why I was selected for this duty above all the other priests; that is why I drank the sour-smelling, life-giving juice which only gods had drunk before. That is why I willingly walked down the narrow set of steps leaving behind the grassy knolls and blue carpeted skies, and into the dark, dank sanctum buried deep in the cold soil. Such ground is not familiar with living flesh and bone, only decaying corpses. And that is the way it should be, except in my case. I have a destiny to fulfill.

I know that I have spent much of my years in dreams...a silent, gentle slumber filled with images of the world going on above. I have invented my own histories, my own nations with leaders, wars and famines. I have developed theoretical philosophies that may have blossomed during my absence. I have created politics and religions that might rival my own...in these dreams I have seen the progress that humanity may well have made...complex devices that cater to every whim. And still, I have a destiny to fulfill.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is the year 4049 of the Masi. It is the year of the Return. All the tribes have gathered in the vast cliff-cities of North Nebberi. The men wear great cloaks of black, the women don white wraps which cling tightly to their skin. Only the priests differ: All religious officers wear red, the color of Return. Pilgrims still en route are guided by pillars of white smoke rising in the azure-blue sky and drifting ever northward.

The drone of monotone chanting can be heard across the valleys and in the deep canyons that surround North Nebberi. All the Masi partake in this highest of High Holy Days. They dance around monolithic fires, some of them fall into the blaze, and into death. They call to their gods, begging them to hold true to their ancient promise...to Return.

Feasts in honor of the gods are being prepared, sermons

being drafted and polished and practiced for the arrival...and all are in a fervent ecstasy. Priests brim with anticipation, oblivious to burden that they will face if the gods do not appear. If the gods fail them, it is the priests who shall bear the wrath of the people.

The great city of North Nebberi is built in the face of a giant cliff. Dwellings are carved out of the rock in a graceful symmetry that should have the gods envious. The cliff lunges skyward almost a mile, jutting out defiantly from an expansive, fertile valley. Architectural masterpieces range from the level of the flats to the very highest reaches of the cliff. From the farmlands in the valley, the buildings at the summit of the cliff are almost indiscernible. Across the valley, on the cliff opposite the city, the Masi have chiseled out a sign for the gods, to mark this land for the Return. The monument is a carving of Razeel, the winged goddess that brings life to the Masi tribes.

The reigning priest-king, Mastrellavicur, rests upon a seat which overlooks the valley and the monument, situated in the city about three-quarters of the way up. It is his duty to summon up the gods when the other priests agree the time has come. Presently, he is reciting verses of the Lammas H'Cad, the hymns etched in stone at the H'Cad temple. His four wives mindlessly echo his words...they do not know them as he, being deprived the opportunity to memorize them. The governing hierarchy flanks him...heads of state in charge of agricultural, economic and military concerns. They do not follow the sacred lyric. Being the ranking government officials, and less faithful than ambitious, they see contrasting repercussions of the return. More so than the legion of priests or the priest-king himself, they realize what will occur if the prophecies are false...a religion that has held a civilization captive in this cramped plain...that has held back armies from forging an empire...that has commanded a people to obey the policies of whimsical dreamers and insane dictators with visions of divinity...then, that religion will shrivel and disintegrate.

Their entire future is dependent on what happens at Moonrise on this day. For generations, they have waited. They have studied the cuneiform messages inscribed on the Great Rock Face in the H'Cad cave, and the tablets in the temples built by ancestors forgotten. Time has chipped away at the meaning of the prophecies as wind and water have eroded the cliffs for millennia. But time has not worn away the belief most Masi have in the Return.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the time looms ever nearer, I find myself shamefully unprepared. I realize that though I know...as if it was instinctive...that I have a duty to perform, I haven't the

remotest concept of what it might be, nor how I am to go about effecting it. It is as though I am to be a messiah, but I am not versed in my religion. I am a child of the gods...no, a messenger, perhaps. All these years, I now look back upon, I could have spent preparing, but I wasted them toying with idle fantasies, a concocted delirium of the world above.

In haste, I rise up off the table where I have hibernated for the ageless duration, and I look about my silent chamber for help. The priests of my age must have provided me with material that I might preach to the children of this age. But, none is to be found. My cubicle...my cell, my sanctum...is bare. Not even the comfort of dust to attest to the time I lay dormant. The floor, the ceiling, each wall and even the table is carved from or into the rock. Some corner, indiscernible, breathes light. It is a faint, yellow glow, which was sealed in with me. And there are the steps that climb upward, into a dark hollow that stretches beyond my vision.

A thousand years, I have waited...for what? Shall I ascend the stone staircase, break the bonds of the eerie crypt-incandescence, and appease myself with sunlight? And, shall I face a teeming crowd of devout zealots, conceivably hysterical with their expectations of the divine? I am not even certain what the name of my god...or gods...is. My faith is unbroken...but my memory is lost in the passage of time.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mesa is choked with travelers come to the conclusion of their sacred passage. They erect makeshift camps and cry out prayers and blessings and songs for their gods, for the Return. They trample crops, blot out fields of grass so that dots of green are scarce. And as the sun submerges in the Trachain Highlands and into the demon's Abyss which lies beyond, additional fires are lit, vying in number against the increasing volume of stars emerging above.

The priests feast on wild game killed in the canyons. Blood from the raw meat spatters on their garments, vanishing in the red fabric. They guzzle ale which transforms their mood from somber to boisterous. They express personal beliefs and interpretations, argue violently about which god will appear, and what form it will appear in. Some say Razeel will swoop down from the sky the instant the H'Cad Tomb is opened. Priest Yahmaa Pauasa, High council to the King, inflicts that Raaza Hippur, god of Rebirth, will rise from the depths of the Tomb. Others, less optimistic, entertain all with sermons on the Return of Trac, faceless worm-demon of the underworld, who they feel is destined to slither out of the H'Cad tomb, with insect-like creatures of his world following close behind, and infernal legion.

"Isn't it indeed a great tragedy, that the tribes of the Masi can unite only for this one event...in the last thousand years, not once have the warring factions come together in consultation. So many rifts that divide us...so many trivi-

alities which have grown into unconquerable chasms. At least we have our faith to hold us as brothers...if only we could extend that brotherhood over politics." The words of the musing Priest-King are not assimilated by Kara, his favorite mate. He has retired to the chamber until the time when the moon reaches into the sky, and he and all of the Masi must turn their attentions to the H'Cad Tomb. Although there is only one supreme monarch governing the Masi, there are numerous splinter tribes which frequently threaten to leave the Nebberi Domain. Many have already distanced themselves, moving into the canyons, or the far Southern Cliff region. None, thus far, have gone beyond. If they did, it is written, their religion would end, their gods dismiss them. Death would bring ageless sleep...or worse, imprisonment in the underworld.

"And still, the very element which binds us generates the deepest divisions amongst us. Our religion is our savior...and our ruin." Brave words, from a priest, even in seclusion.

Outside, the pilgrims draw towards spiritual rapture in ritual festivities...crimson cloaked priests dart about in the masses choosing representatives to witness the Return...some commit sacrifices as final tributes and offerings...bearded Sessmen of the Red Canyons strip naked, and mate wildly, barbarously, savagely tearing flesh in uncontrollable orgiastic ecstasy...others perform base acts of self-defilement, cleaving off limbs without any outward display of pain, gouging eyes on burning shafts of wood, marking symbols of worship in skin with crisscrossing blades...all in the name of faith, in the name of their gods...

The priests, having gathered an assemblage at the tomb, call on Mastrellavicur. He departs his chamber leaving Kara to herself. He offers no further words of doubt, no tokens of the regret he shared unsuccessfully with his delicate, twelve-year old mate. She had no hope of understanding the words his conscience demanded he utter...innocence and ignorance shrouded her. Innocence and ignorance shrouds them all, save the priests...they are intoxicated with their ale, as well as their faith. And Mastrellavicur is too old, now, too far down in the religious doctrines, to harbor doubt for long. The passing fears melt--albeit slower than he expected--as he strides out onto the Great Hall of Kings, which looks out across the plain. The crowd nearby the cliff-city can just make out the form high above, and they explode in noisome exclamation. From there, the realization of his presence spreads throughout the people, across the lowlands, and the cheering radiates.

The tip of the moon slid into the sky above North Nebberi.

\* \* \* \* \*

I must suspend my insecure brooding, I can no longer defer that which awaits me above. Naked, both literally and mentally, I start for the stairs and an unsteady advance. Darkness swallows me, the eerie light behind me retreats.



Chaotic images fly about my head, but my need to focus on them is diminishing. Faith has always been the guide, the medium for my actions. It shall deliver me to my fate, and I shall accept that fate.

My legs ache in protest immediately...my muscles are cramped from neglect. Still, they function, perhaps better than they should for being dormant throughout my lengthy hibernation. My preservation is as much a mystery as my future.

The steps lead directly upward, with no perceivable curves in their construction. I count as I make the ascent...and the climb slowly becomes an eternity itself. After at least five hundred steps, a yellow light trips on above me, revealing a shelf in the wall. On it, I find a red robe. I presume that the garment was left for me, that I might come into the world adorned as a priest. Further on, I find the text which I searched vainly for earlier, along with a short, barbed dagger...used in sacrificial rites I am told by my crippled memory.

The book contains abundant passages describing the religion, the people, the culture...but I haven't the time to read it now, it is not an option. I know that above, there is a race waiting for a divine sign to reaffirm their religion, and lead them into a new area...and I am to be that sign. Pieces are beginning to align themselves...memories beginning to grow lucid. I continue up the stair with intensified conviction.

From the scan retrieval cues provided by glancing at the book for an instant, I forge a vague history of myself...I remember that I am to be a prophet, that I was to wait a thousand years and reappear. The people who shall follow me are the Masi, they have developed a polytheistic religion, of which I am one of the primary deities. I am called Hippur, and I am the deity which they attribute to their rebirth.

Much continues to elude me. I cannot recall my origins, cannot summon up the faces of the priests of my own age...nor their reasoning behind interring me for a thousand years. These questions may answer themselves promptly, for I have reached an immense door which promises to open unto the outside world.

Mortality. Internally, I know that I am not divine...that I never surpassed temporality. I am deathless as any of those beyond this doorway. Yet, I survived a thousand years. What else could I be but a god...I must know, I must leave the sanctum.

The gateway is blocked by massive stone, snugly fit and lacking apparent devices to execute its removal. Certainly, I wasn't expected to remove this obstacle alone...though that would help aid my credibility as a god. I attempt to move the great weight, throw my body against it forcefully, but I do little more than hurt my arm. Leaning in close to the edge, where door meets wall...I can see hints of light and motion. Putting my ear to the crack, I distinctly hear sounds...low voices repeating monosyllabic phrases, the beating of drums, and mournful drones from primitive horns. Concerns over my reception dim, I am definitely

expected. But how do I get out.

Light detonates behind me, followed by a deafening roar and a trailing whine. As I circle toward the disturbance, I observe an object I have not viewed for far too long a time...another individual. It is a man, tall and slender, with dark skin and no hair. Across his face, masking his eyes is a black, glassy band. He looks at me with such warm recognition that it can only be regarded as sentimental. He seems familiar to me also, but I cannot correlate an identity to his face. We stand speechless for a time.

He adjourns the silence with a greeting. "Welcome, Grant. I see I barely made it in time for your Return. I'd bet you weren't expecting me."

"Expecting you?" I reply slowly. "Who are you?"

"You don't remember me? I had a feeling the sleep period might have that effect. How much do you remember?"

"Nothing much..." I managed, then, with more resolve, "I am to be a god."

"Yes, you could say that. I'd better brief you before you go out there...the Masi will have a hard time believing you like this. I've got to wake up your brain, make sure you remember the plan." As he spoke, I sank back into the sea of confusion. His goal was to guide me, but his actions were only leading to more puzzles.

"What plan do you speak of...are you one of the priests?" My eyes implored him for understanding.

"You are in bad shape. My name is Crayton, Crayton Daniels. I was your student, your disciple in your experiments. You are Dr. Grant Bramtoke. Back in our age, we pioneered the field of time travel. Do you remember? We developed the first contained warp-sphere, we were the first to successfully transverse time. No other scientists advanced to our understanding for decades after our first trip. We weren't allowed to share our information, by order of the government...is this jarring anything in your head?...The government selected our destiny for us. They decided to pick one of the lesser planets in the Gideon constellation...one with a primitive humanoid race with an easily assimilated culture...study its history, project its future, and then, infect it with a human...you. They wanted to see how they could alter the natural evolution of this planet.

"So, we froze you for a thousand years...sealed in, nothing could prematurely terminate the hibernation without destroying you. We had to put you to sleep because back when this experiment started, the amount of time to be traveled was equal to the amount of time needed to travel it. If you wanted to travel backwards or forwards for one year, it took you one year to get there. Of course, we had no way to get into the future back then, the only forward traveling we did was return trips from the past. After we left you here in Nebberi, I returned home and continued experimenting. Eventually, I discovered a way to intensify the warp sphere, so travel time is reduced excessively. I traveled here from a point about ten years after you were frozen...it has taken you the equivalent of a



thousand years to get here...it took me two days. And, again, I am beyond all of my rivals. They are just breaking through into warp-spheres back in my present-time. In fact, nobody knows about my advances...I haven't even informed the government yet. I'm afraid of what kind of mission they'd give me if they knew.

"Now, back to you. Here you are, Grant, about to encounter the Masi race. The government gave you explicit rules, which I realized would deteriorate in your mind over the flux of time. You are to become Hippur, the god of rebirth. According to the legends, the god Hippur fails to appear on the day of Return...today. The priest-king is slain, along with a number of other priests, and the religion falters, the civilization branches out of its cradle, sweeping across the planet. Two separate civilizations are destroyed during a fierce colonization period. When you assume the role of Hippur, you will terminate that history. Instead, you will—as instructed by the government—preach high morals to the Masi, prophesy the existence and ultimate union of this civilization and the others, and gradually teach them sciences. In this, it is projected that a thousand years from now, when you were frozen and placed here, this planet will be more advanced and diverse in culture, and it will be a candidate for induction in the League of Worlds."

Finally, his speech ends. Many of the statements seem reminiscent. But mostly, the words fall away, back down the stairwell, back into the void of the thousand years in which I'd been trapped. Logically, it seems plausible. Memories still linger, taunting me to recall...was this the origin of my destiny...not divinity, but science...not miracle, but technology? Did I go willingly into this thousand-

year folly?

From without, the stone door begins to move. Something is dragging it from its place. The Masi can wait no more, they demand to see their god.

I look at the man, three steps below me on the stairs. His face is that of a friend, I feel...demons often come to us in intimate forms. A slight push with my leg, and he tumbles down into the darkness, his screams drowned out by the increasing clamor rushing past the retreating stone. I am, and always have been, Hippur.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mestrellavicur welcomes me. I remain speechless for a long time, proudly observing my children. The plain below is teeming with pilgrims, those in my immediate presence appear awed. They pray to me, and study me. They have never seen a god before.

## KA

*by Dwight E. Humphries*

I fear nothing  
In this life or  
The next if I'm  
Allowed judgment to  
Become as Osiris;  
My ka existed before  
This body was born;  
It is eternal and  
Goes with me.

I do not defile myself,  
I think on my shady double  
And am led to do right;  
Harm no one, live in peace  
With family and society.

Ka is a flame  
Which purifies my body  
And innermost mind—  
It brings peace,  
The peace of the tried  
And found not wanting;  
I am kept clean by it.

Ka will go with me  
Into the Land of the Dead,  
Home at last  
In the sacred river  
Whose waters are eternal.

# LILA IST DER LETZTE VERSUCH \*

by lala heine-koene

She squats in a corner and hums  
grinding glass between her palms.  
"The panes in my windows shattered,  
I must replace them before winter:"  
*these will be for the east wing,  
these for the west  
the left-over splinters will do for the north;  
I shan't worry about the south.  
Blue is the colour of my ancestors,  
the red my marriage lot;  
the trees and grass outside will stain some green,  
the purple I shan't attempt.*  
"Do not disturb me," she calls to the bats,  
"you mustn't touch my hair,  
I pinned it tightly  
around my skull  
after the wedding night.  
Mind the gargoyle's marble eye  
that opens the passage behind  
the fireplace. I do not want strangers  
to walk in on me."

"I am almost done," she murmurs, stretching  
her tired legs, "it is time to bend  
the lead to fit the stained glass in,  
nail the doors shut and let the sun  
paint my face gold."

"Who is this man?" she asks, a shadow  
passing over her face, blinded by  
the sun. "He must be a stranger,  
his feet do not know what board  
to step on to keep it from creaking.  
My face is still pale, the sun has not  
healed the flesh on my palms. I cannot  
greet anyone. Bats, show the man out!"

"Last night he was fishing  
in the stream encircling your gardens;  
his fish jumped out of the net,  
he followed it through the passage  
under the house. He came to offer it  
to you." "I do not partake of food  
offered by strangers, he cannot

sit at my table" trying to wipe the shadow  
off her face. "Bats, show the man out!"  
"We cannot see the gargoyle's blind  
eye, how are we to open the panel?"  
the bats flying, circling her head,  
"we must wait 'til nightfall."  
"And I will wait," the stranger says.  
She hears the board creak beside her.  
"The fish needs water or it will  
die, frighten the bats. I do not want  
a dead fish in my house," shielding  
her eyes with her raw hands.  
"They are getting better," the stranger  
says, turning her palms toward  
the sun; "in a little while  
you can help to scale the fish,  
I will remove the bones," a squirming  
net touching her feet.

"Your face is now the right colour,  
let us prepare our meal." The man  
sets out across the room to ring  
the bell. "There are no servants in  
the house, they disappeared with  
the flaking mosaic. The bats are my only  
companions, keeping the rats in check."  
"They will do. Help to get the meal  
on the table." He pulls the arching  
fish out of the net, stuns it,  
chopping its head with one clean  
blow. "Bats, take the head for your  
feast; the mistress and I will do  
the rest." One by one she removes  
the scales, putting them into a blue  
china bowl. ("These will be the paillettes  
for your new gown. The bones you can  
use to keep your hair pinned neatly.")  
Soon the fish scaled and boned  
lay on the table. "Bats, start the fire  
in the fireplace!" he calls.  
They pick up a letter torn in half,  
shred it into pieces, holding them  
in their beaks under a thick chunk  
of glass, still hot from the sun.

The edges curl, a flame rises,  
they carry it, the smell of singed  
fur trailing behind them.

The fish speared on a sabre (it used  
to be her father's before he was  
married) sizzles and sputters, the fat  
dripping into the fire. Soon it is done.  
"It must cool off before we eat;  
the tip might burn your lips," he says,  
removing the sabre from the cavernous  
hearth. "You do not want me at your table,  
we shall then eat before the fire,"  
holding out to her the speared fish,  
a delicious aroma rising to her nostrils,  
"the bats are gone for the night."

"Take the fishbones out of your hair,  
they are hard to sleep on," the man  
reaches for her nape. "You mustn't  
see the length of my hair, it was not  
cut since I was a child!"  
protecting her tightly pinned plaits.  
"I will wait for the morning  
when you comb your hair," he touches  
her three-times-wound braided crown.  
"The bats will be then back  
I must give each my combed-out hair,  
these are their wages. But I will  
give you one hair if you leave now."  
Thirty-three bones quickly removed, hair  
unbraided,  
pinned neatly again. The gargoyle's  
marble eye pushed, a panel springs  
open and he is gone, the one long  
hair trailing behind him.  
"Now I can go to sleep," she murmurs,  
lying down beside the dying embers,  
closing her eyes to the swaying hair  
caught between the panel.

"The bats are back, I can hear them  
come," standing by the window,  
combing out the early mist from her  
hair, "tonight we shall gossip  
by the fire," she smiles at the sun.  
"Good morrow mistress," a pair of eyes  
upside-down, from above her window,  
between the prongs of a rake wink at her.  
"What are you doing up on my roof?"  
her raised arm immobile.  
"I am your new gardener. I just finished  
putting a garden on your roof. It was  
in great need of repairs. I am putting it  
to good use. The radishes are up,  
the string beans are doing fine,  
trailing your dormitory windows."  
"I have nothing to pay you with.  
The bats claim my combed-out hair,  
the rats and mice are in full supply  
here to quiet their hunger. What of yours?"  
"I like repairing roofs and growing things,  
it's enough for the soul and heart.  
What else would one want?"  
"Do you see that turret on the south-wing?  
I suspended there a dry gourd  
from a linen rope (which I twisted  
myself) and in it is my heart.  
It makes a good clapper for the bell  
which I pull three times a year at midnight  
to commemorate anniversaries I cannot  
remember."  
"Mistress, I saw it through the hole  
in the roof. I planted there a purple  
climbing rose. Here it is to adorn your hair."

\* Lila ist der letzte Versuch: Purple is the last attempt

*THE MYTHIC CIRCLE*

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