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# *The Five Blows*

by

Mary Johnson

In the days when the city was founded, a couple lived by the gate. Though freeborn, they were poor, and had no children. So they rejoiced when, after many years, the woman became pregnant. But when their son was born, he was small and weak, and blue about the lips, and one leg was twisted under him. Seeing him, the midwife said, "This child cannot be named." The wife went pale, but answered, "Leave the child with us for five days, and then return, and we will do whatever is needed."

"You should do it now," the midwife answered. "What will change in five days?" But a child is always named on the fifth day, so after saying this, she left. When the door closed behind her, the man and woman looked at each other in silence. Then the child whimpered. He was not strong enough to cry aloud, but his mother heard and held him to her breast. The man looked again into his wife's eyes. Then he strapped on his sword and walked out their door and through the gate.

He left the road and walked downhill, into the desert. It was early in the morning when he began walking, and he walked on till the sun set, and the moons rose and set behind him. He walked till he came to a barren plain where no plant had ever grown. As the sun stood overhead, he stopped, like one waking from a dream, and saw a man

coming toward him. The stranger was hooded, so that his face was shadowed. His clothes were a laborer's, with nothing fine about them, except for one thing. He wore a sword at his belt.

As the man watched, the stranger pulled the sword from its sheath and rushed at him. He heard himself shouting out and raised his own sword, just in time. The blades clashed above his head, and he felt a shock like lightning travel through his body to the soles of his feet. He knew then that he must fight for his life.

And fight he did, with all his strength and skill, but, no matter how he strove, he could not vanquish his opponent. The stranger met him with a skill and power that exactly matched his own. They fought until the sun was setting, when the man, exhausted, began to despair. Stopping to gasp for breath, he lowered his sword, and saw his enemy do the same. Then he thought, "Now! Seize your chance; you can defeat him now!" He lunged at his enemy and struck five blows, each of which should have killed him. But it was as if he struck at smoke. Though his sword pierced the stranger, no wound appeared. Instead, with each blow, he felt a fine, cold touch on his own body. "I am dead," he thought, "I have killed myself, and what will my wife do now?" For he realized he had fought a god.

He dropped his sword, knelt, and bowed his head. "My lord," he said, "my life is yours. Take it, if you must, but spare my wife and son." Then he waited for the death blow. But it never came. When he raised his head, night had fallen, and he was alone. He got up, turned his face to the rising moons, and began walking back to the city.

He walked as if in a daze, and could never remember any part of that journey or what sustained him on the way. But he survived, though the desert gave him neither food, nor water, nor shelter. On the third morning after his battle, he walked again through his own door.

His wife embraced him and brought him water. When he had refreshed himself, she spoke. "My husband," she said, "on the third day after you left, a strange thing happened."

"What thing?"

"I was alone with the child, who slept. Suddenly a woman appeared near his cradle, and I saw her reaching out to steal him. So I

called for help, and gripped her shoulder to pull her away. But no one came to help me. We struggled a long time, but, though I fought her with all my strength, I could not overcome her. She had a veil over her face, and, as we fought, it slipped away, and I saw that she looked at me from my own eyes. Then I realized she was a goddess. I knelt before her and said, "Kill me, but spare my husband and son."

"And then?"

"I was alone," his wife answered. "And see!" She lifted the child from his cradle and showed him to his father. His color was good and he breathed easily, as a child should. And all his limbs were straight.

This happened so long ago that no one remembers the names of that couple. But they called their child Kelest. And some say that the name means "friend," but others know it truly means "friend of the gods." For all of us must struggle with heaven, and all of us will suffer defeat. But the gods know that to fight them is to give them honor.

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