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7-15-2010

## Mythic Circle #32

Gwenyth E. Hood  
Marshall University

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### Recommended Citation

Hood, Gwenyth E. (2010) "Mythic Circle #32," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2010: Iss. 32, Article 1.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2010/iss32/1>

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## Mythic Circle #32

# Mythic Circle



2010

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Tim Callahan: Front Cover and pp. 32, 41, 49, 58 (back cover). .  
Kathy Edwards: pp. 2, 3, 6-7, 27

Editor: Gwennyth E. Hood

Editorial Associate: Daniel Baird

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# The Warlock and the Nis

by

Daniel Baird

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

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

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

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

“Are you a witch?”

“No,” came the soft reply.

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

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

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

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

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



“Dragon,” a voice persisted in her mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

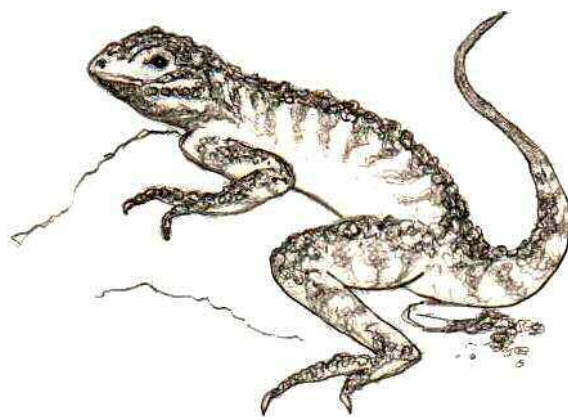
“Don’t kill him,” she pleaded. She joined her brother and peered for a bit at the little man. The little bearded man stared back. “Gnome, no. Brownie, no. Hmm, definitely not a pixie.” Ellette thought of her father’s descriptions of little folk. “Oh I know, it is a Nis!”

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

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

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

Fin.



# The Mer-tree

by

October Williams

“Oh give me legs that I might walk upon the land” –  
And here you are, your two legs rooted in my garden.  
At what price, floating your last leaves on the wind  
As on the crystal waters, do you stand  
Before me, in the last stroke of the sunlight growing numb,  
Shedding a coral necklace on the ground,  
Sighing a dumb scrape on a glowing sky  
Like one whose home is with the Mer-king’s daughters?

Beyond, the autumn in a flaming fan breaks like a wave  
Upon your silence, breaks on your empty grace:  
Your branches blow like hair.  
The clinging leaves, their edges etched in brown,  
Their gold against your face, you wear  
Like sea shells: if you listen closely, press them to your ear,  
You hear a song like wind beneath the sea –  
A song you used to know, before you lost your tongue.

It cost you dear.  
Why did you come?  
Who do you wait for, standing there?  
For what prince do you suffer, growing cold  
Without a word, without a cry?  
Is it the white cat coming down the garden,  
Wearing a coal crown –  
It comes so far, no farther, its green eyes  
Flinching softly, seeing all:  
Is it the squirrel that chatters at it,  
Sitting astride your upswept locks,  
Swirling its tail in exclamations  
Always ending in a question, “Why”?

– I know before I ask, it is not I.

You were young once; but I can see the lines upon your brow;  
Now you are old.  
And in a troubled dream, or in an ancient hope  
You grope the wind, while the last remnants of your unearthly beauty fall.



He has gone from you, and you stand abandoned  
In the garden, naked as Eve against the evening, while  
The wind keens a low lament. Has he  
In some far place, made summer for another tree?  
You gave your voice — you cannot speak — you cannot make a noise.  
And yet beneath this sobbing breath of wind, I hear you sing.  
Winter comes on apace. You know  
In all your years that winter is itself pursued.  
You have lived long enough, too long with all your unshed tears  
To doubt: You know you will again be wooed  
In Spring.

# #

## The Wind of Andrea Bocelli

by

David Sparenberg

I am as sweet as the wind of Andrea Bocelli  
I am as deep as the bottomless miracle of Shakespeare  
as solid with sublime beauty as stones of Michelangelo  
as full as the Tao of Beethoven with power to wed  
the symphonic stars of heaven with choral trees of earth

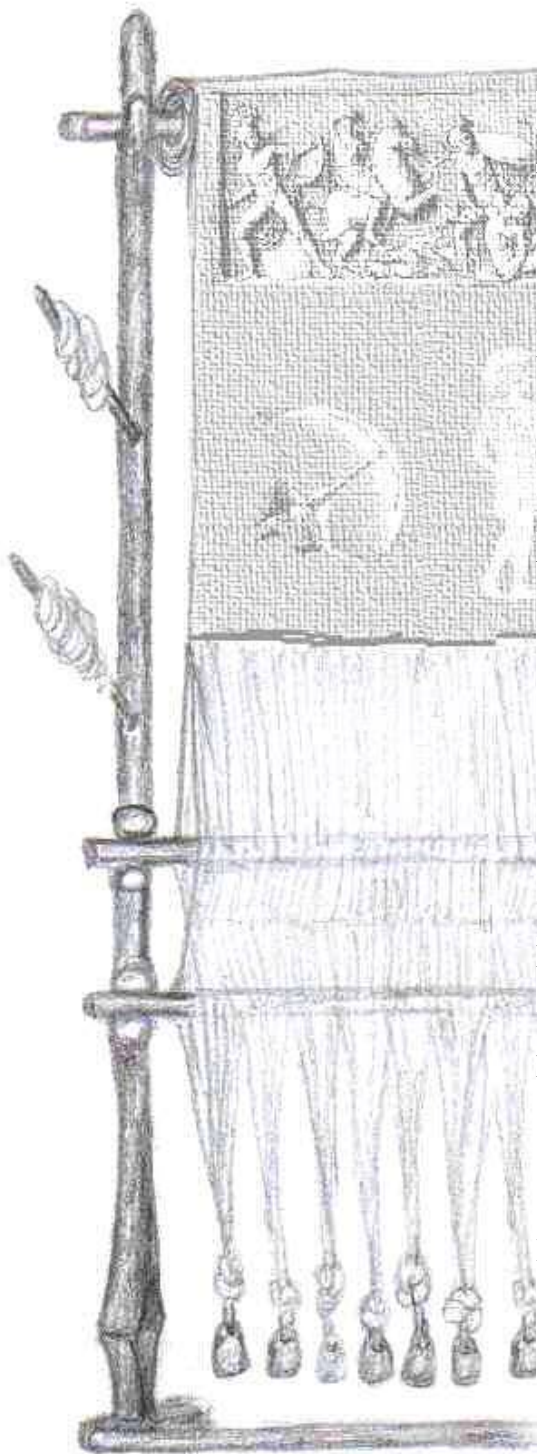
I am as small as the mustard seed of Jesus  
a parable containing the complexity of Bach  
as humble as the bird-prayers of Saint Francis  
as holy as the dancing laughter of wise and wandering Baal Shem Tov  
I am as righteous with visions as prophets Isaiah, Black Elk and  
Einstein  
as big with mandala-dreaming as Blake and Jung

I am animal, angel and human  
and I am as sweet

as the wind

of Andrea Bocelli.

# Arachne



Grey-eyed Athena didn't tell the whole story.

Young Arachne,  
Impatient with the market,  
Fingers itching for the loom,  
Bored with the weaving and selling  
Of her father's Phocis purple.  
Won't heed the morals of the poets in the shade,  
Hearing only new scenes to weave.  
Ignores the warning: make nothing perfect;  
Neglects to weave the sacred flaw into each bolt.

Arachne weaves her own songs  
In the still hot afternoon  
When everyone else is asleep.  
Her tunic slipped down to her waist,  
Young breasts slick with sweat.  
She sings to the beat of the olive-wood shuttle:  
I create thee, with the cunning of my hands,  
With the skill of my mind  
With the fertility of my soul;  
Dearer than a child, created by me alone!

Heard by fellow-weaver in shadowy roof-corner,  
Pet of proud Athena.

Maiden Arachne:  
Her eyes dream of the next work;  
Her eyes are full of tapestries.  
Weaves with her own shining hair:  
A bull's gilded horns, a swan's beak, a shower of gold.  
In the mirror over her loom,  
Above her naked shoulder in the doorway  
A maiden like herself, grey-eyed, hands of a weaver,  
Shyly offers a shuttle of box-wood.

by  
Janet Croft

Athena knows talent when she sees it.  
Teaches Arachne mysteries  
Of needle and loom and dye-pot,  
Tricks to make her thoughts spring to life,  
Secrets of her magic shuttle.

And being her father's daughter,  
Secrets of the weaving of bodies in the night.

Arachne says: Goddess, I would see your tapestries.  
"Praise me to the world and I will inspire you. But  
My art is not for mortal eyes.  
Do not presume to ask again."

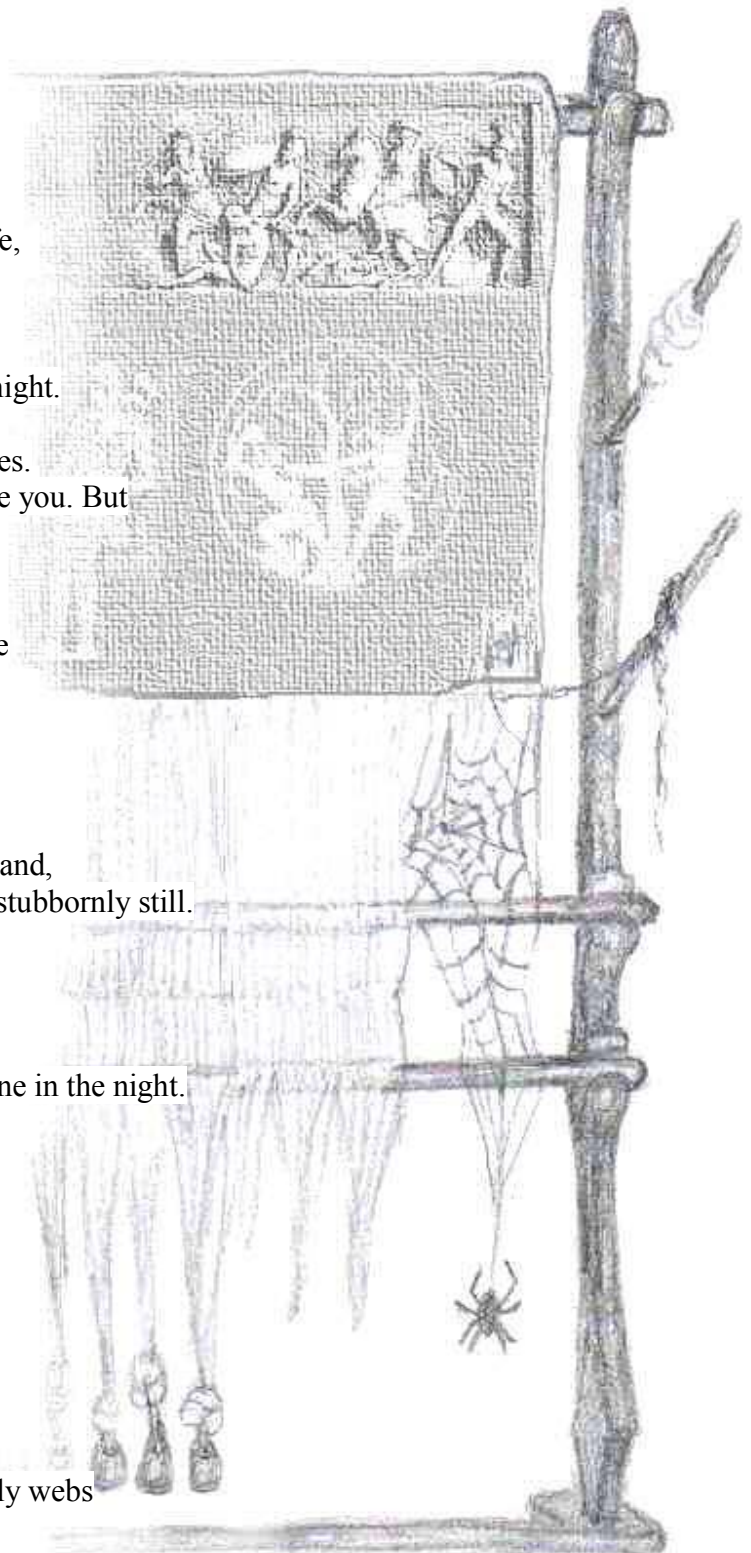
Arachne weeps, disconsolate.  
In the morning, there is only the box-wood shuttle  
where the goddess lay.

Arachne weaves,  
Watching the mirror above her work.  
Refuses the goddess's gift.  
Her olive-wood shuttle, friendly to the hand,  
Singing melancholy; but her own voice stubbornly still.

She weaves:  
Artemis and her huntresses,  
Amazon warriors, a school of girl poets,  
All with Athena's proud grey eyes.  
Yearning for the goddess, crying out alone in the night.

Athena will not come when called.  
Proud in her young strength,  
So sure in all she does.  
So needful of public praise.  
So like her father.

Bitter Arachne  
A work abandoned by her weaver  
Turns away from loom and mirror  
Creeps silent in the corners, weaving only webs  
The color of Athena's storm-grey eye



*K. Croft*

# The Rose Prince

by

Harry Steven Lazerus

Comyn bent his head down to the rose. He inhaled deeply. The sweet but delicate fragrance filled his nostrils. Comyn sighed with satisfaction.

Perfect, he thought. Perfect.

For a moment Comyn remained suspended in a state of calm bliss. It was shattered by the sound of a harsh grunt. Comyn raised his head. His father, King Finbar, stood at the entrance to the garden, glaring at him.

“Why do you waste your time with woman’s things?” King Finbar asked angrily.

Comyn sighed again. It was not with satisfaction.

King Finbar was taller and broader than his son. The king had a bushy black beard, wore a leather doublet with metal buckles, and carried a thick, heavy sword by his side. He smelled of sweat and grime.

“Ah, father,” Comyn replied dreamily. “You know why I shave my cheeks smooth, wear a soft, white toga, and make myself smell like roses. It is so that the women will flock to me like deer to the sweet-water pond, so that they will offer me their virtue the way a doting mother offers her favorite child sweets.”

“How dare you speak like that!” Comyn’s

father growled.

Comyn came closer to his father. He calmly held the king’s angry glare.

“I know you wish I were like my older brother,” Comyn said gently. “You probably wish I weren’t your son at all. But be grateful I am one of your subjects. If not for me you would be king only of a small, poor village and a few hundred impoverished peasants. You escaped that fate; you are rich and powerful.” Comyn touched his father’s arm. “Did you come to fight with me, father?”

It was the king who broke from the locked stare.

“I want your counsel,” the king said. “The Teferi have come to our kingdom. The high council has a meeting with them this afternoon. I want you there.”

“Why are they here?” Comyn asked.

“For trade,” King Finbar asked. Then, a moment later, he added, “So they say.”

“You doubt that,” Comyn responded.

The king uncharacteristically shrugged.

“I do not know,” he said. “Even if it is for trade, I still want you there.”

Comyn smiled and pointed back at his roses.

“Father, I tell you, those roses,” Comyn said, shaking his index finger at them, “those roses will make us even richer. From all the lands around us men will toil and fight to get the money to buy its perfume, so they can give it to their wives and girlfriends and bask in their appreciation.” Comyn winked at his father.

The king smiled, and for the first time Comyn realized how worried his father had been, and Comyn knew the concern was not about his flower-loving son.

#

Comyn sat on a stone bench in his garden and looked up at Gara, who towered over him. Gara stood there like a giant dog patiently awaiting the orders from his master. Gara would have been his father’s greatest warrior if he had not been crippled in a training contest as a youth.

“The Teferi have come to Finia,” Comyn explained to Gara. “They are here now in Cadhla. I want you to take some men and find out whatever you can about them. I specifically want to know if they are armed, and if so, what kind of weapons they have. Also, tell me about their horses, and if they have any armor or protection. How many are there in their party, and in particular, I want to know if there are any so fat and out of shape they would fall down if they lifted a sword or would cough themselves to death if they ran a furlong. Also find out if they’ve been asking any questions of people. Gara, I need this information soon. We have a meeting with them this afternoon, and I must know these things before that.”

“I will do as you ask, prince.”

“Thank you,” Comyn replied.

Gara nodded, turned, and limped away. Comyn noted with relief, as he always did, that despite Gara’s disability he still could move quickly.

Comyn sighed wearily.

He didn’t understand why Gara had

insisted on becoming his aide and why Gara served him so faithfully. Comyn always felt a slight sense of unease around Gara. After all, he was the reason that Gara was crippled.

#

The sun had already passed its highest point in the sky. Comyn paced back and forth in the garden. He didn’t like the intelligence Gara had brought. The group of visiting Teferi didn’t have a merchant among them; they all sounded like military men. Further, they had been asking strange questions of people: about their belief in God, about the Gillean religion and holy books, and how often the people prayed. Comyn didn’t like it at all. He also didn’t like that their horses were—

“Daddy, daddy,” a small voice called out to him.

Comyn turned and scooped up the little boy who ran to him. He held his son high in the air and shook him as the child squealed with delight.

“Renny, Renny,” the father cried in response.

Then Comyn stopped shaking his son and put him down. A serious look covered the father’s face.

“Renny, let’s say you have two gold coins and I give you another five. How many gold coins will you have?”

Renny scrunched his face as he thought.

“Father,” he said at last, “I have no gold coins, so you must give me seven.”

A smile spread over Comyn’s face.

“And so I shall,” he told his son.

Comyn looked over at Renny’s mother, who had accompanied the child. The smile disappeared from Comyn’s face.

“I want him to be a warrior, not a scholar,” Renny’s mother said. “That is what the grandson of the King of Finia should be.”

“Aurnia,” Comyn said slowly to Renny’s mother, “he will be what I want him to be, not what you want him to be.” And then,

patting Renny's head, he added, "In the end, he'll be what he wants to be."

"He'll be a bastard until you finally marry me," Aurnia insisted.

"No son of mine is a bastard," Comyn said. "And no wife of mine will be a nag. Ah, Aurnia, you used to be so beautiful when you smiled. Even now, with that scowl, you are still the most beautiful woman in Finia. Your eyes are as rich the sea viewed from the Moran Cliffs, and your skin is softer than the silk of my robes. What happened to your smile?"

"I used to smile when you took me to your bed," Aurnia replied.

"I stopped taking you to my bed when you stopped smiling and started nagging," Comyn retorted.

"You were disgracing me," Aurnia said.

"Aurnia, you came to my bed of your own free will. I never promised you anything. I never lied to you. And you and Renny are as well taken care of as if we had been married by the priest in front of the royal court."

Aurnia looked at him, her eyes pleading.

"Comyn, why do you think that of all the women you've slept with only I have borne you a child?"

"Luck?" Comyn replied sarcastically.

Aurnia flushed with anger.

"I prayed to God for an answer," she said, tears coming to her eyes. "And He told me it was because you were meant to marry me."

Comyn laughed.

"God told you? Then he told the wrong person. He should have told me."

Comyn stepped over to her. His index finger of his right hand touched her cheek and swept up a falling tear. Aurnia trembled.

Comyn put the moistened finger to his lips.

"Sweeter than payan nectar," he sighed.

Aurnia turned bright red with embarrassment. Her lips parted and she stared at him expectantly, as if hypnotized.

"Ah, Aurnia, give me a smile and I will

take you to my bed and give you a glimpse of the heaven that the sacred scriptures speak of."

Aurnia did not smile. She hardened her face into a scowl.

"No," Comyn said. "You will not smile for me. Your pride is stronger than your lust."

Comyn pointed down the path. "My brother is here. I have important affairs of state to attend."

Comyn turn and strode purposefully toward his brother. He did not look back.

#

Comyn and his brother embraced as they greeted each other. Ragnall looked like their father, same build and clothing, but he had his younger brother's smooth, shaven cheeks and he, too, smelled of roses.

"You really should marry Aurnia, little brother," Ragnall said. "She's a good woman and she loves you very much."

"Not you, too," Comyn groaned. "If she loved me so much she'd talk less and smile more. Listen, did you come to give me family advice?"

"You know why I'm here," Ragnall said.

"Yes," Comyn replied.

"Father is worried," Ragnall said.

"He has reason to be," Comyn responded somberly.

#

The main hall of King Finbar's royal residence in the capital of Cadhla displayed the Kingdom of Finia's wealth. A marble fountain stood in the center spraying sparkling water into a clear pool in which long, fat golden fish swam. Statues of men and women were scattered throughout the hall. The walls were adorned with paintings of deer, horses, beautiful women, and King Finbar's ancestors, all of whom had ruled over a kingdom much smaller and poorer than his. Members of King Finbar's court

and his Teferi guests sat in polished wood chairs covered with the finest leather.

The Teferi had thick black beards, hard faces, and cold dark eyes. Comyn noticed them staring with disgust at the paintings and statues. Have they no taste? he wondered.

Three serving maidens entered carrying trays of meat, bread, and drink. The servers wore flimsy tunics that showed their arms and legs. Comyn noticed the Teferi could not take their eyes off the girls. The Teferi chief, in particular, eyed the women hungrily. They have no manners, either, Comyn thought.

The members of King Finbar's court and the Teferi spoke to each other in Caimara, the lingua franca of the whole western part of the continent. Because of Finia's wealth, merchants and workers had flooded into the cities and towns; the merchants to trade and the workers to fill jobs in the kingdom's expanding economy. Because of so many foreigners, almost every person, from the king on down, spoke Caimara fluently.

"We wish to establish a trading outpost here in Cadhla," the Teferi chief said.

"We have an open city," King Finbar replied. "All are welcome. All we ask is that you obey our laws and that your merchants pay our taxes. For that they must submit to an audit by our officials."

The Teferi chief nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps," Comyn offered, "there should be a mutual trade agreement. You establish a trading post here, and we establish one in your capital city. Do you have a problem with that?"

The Teferi chief looked at him. Comyn knew what he was thinking. Comyn wanted to smile, but kept his face straight.

"We have no problem with that at all," the Teferi chief replied. "That is an excellent idea."

Comyn rose from his chair and walked over to the Teferi chief.

"That is an interesting sword you carry,"

Comyn said. "Would you consider it rude if I asked to see it?"

"Not all," the chief sneered, and handed Comyn his sword.

Comyn balanced it in his hand and hefted it once or twice. It was lighter and shorter than the swords King Finbar's men carried, and it was curved, not straight.

"You don't look like a warrior," the Teferi chief said.

"Me, a warrior?" Comyn laughed. "No, no, no! I concern myself with growing things. While others of my cohort were training to be warriors, I was developing the strains of wheat and rye from which we make our flour. Merchants now come from all over to buy it, for this flour makes bread sweeter and tastier than any other bread. But most of all, I was working on my roses, to develop the perfume that drives women wild. No, sir, I am no warrior." And with that Comyn sliced the air viciously with the sword he held in his hand, making blurred circles above his head.

"May I show this sword to some of our warriors?" Comyn asked, and without waiting for an answer, he walked over to his father. King Finbar took the sword briefly and handed it back to his son. Comyn went to his brother who took it and muttered under his breath so only Comyn could hear, "It is a puny thing, no match for ours."

Comyn took the sword back to its owner, who was visibly displeased.

"Sir," Comyn said to him, "my brother over there is so strong he can lift a full-grown bull over his head and throw it twenty feet away. I myself have seen him do this," Comyn lied. "And my brother carries a sword so heavy only one as strong as he can wield it to cut a man in two right down the middle. And the other knights in my father's retinue are similarly strong men with heavy swords. But not many men are this strong."

"On the other hand, sir," Comyn continued, "with a sword like yours even a

man of modest strength like myself, mounted on a horse and with a steady hand, could sever a man's head from his neck so swiftly that his head would hit the ground before he even knew he was dead."

Silence filled the hall.

"Thus have I killed many men in the service of the Lord," the Teferi chief said softly.

"Of that I have no doubt," Comyn replied. "Tell me, do you make these swords in your own country or do you get them elsewhere?"

"We have our arts," the Teferi chief answered.

"Would you sell us swords if we offered you enough in flour and gold?" Comyn asked.

"We do not sell our weapons," the chief replied.

Comyn nodded. He returned to his seat. The rest of the deliberations between the two sides continued, but Comyn was no longer paying attention. He understood the threat his people were facing and what they had to do about it.

#

The Teferi had left. King Finbar's men stood around discussing the meeting.

A short fat merchant named Ronan was in the beginning of what was obviously going to be a long speech. Comyn interrupted him.

"We must not let the Teferi leave our borders," Comyn said firmly.

"What do you mean?" King Finbar asked.

"We can imprison them, kill them, it doesn't matter, as long as we don't let them return to their home country," Comyn said to the shocked gasps of all around him. "And when we attack their party make sure we outnumber them three or four to one."

"How can you say such a thing?" his father asked, shock still in his voice.

"Listen to me, and listen well," Comyn said. "They are here for conquest, not trade. I saw the look in their chief's eyes when he

looked at our women." He paused briefly, then added, "It must be because their women are as ugly as their men."

The nervous laughter died down as soon as the priest, Alban, in a white robe and a red cap, spoke.

"This is not a laughing matter," Alban said sternly. "What you suggest goes against our law. It goes against our holy books. It goes against the word of God."

A warrior named Quaid who stood next to the king stepped forward.

"Only a coward would suggest that course," Quaid said, addressing Comyn directly. "But our warriors are brave and will defend our land nobly. What do you know about courage, Rose Prince?" Quaid said the last two words with a sneer.

Comyn smiled and walked over to Quaid.

"Maybe if you smelled like roses instead of like a goat you'd be able to get a wife."

Quaid turned red at the laughter at his expense.

Comyn stepped closer to him.

"Quaid," Comyn said, "we can insult each other back and forth all day long, but that will not advance the argument one step. A man needs air to breathe, without it he cannot live, but air alone is not enough to sustain life. Likewise, a warrior needs courage, but that is not enough to achieve victory."

Comyn took several steps back and swept the assembly with his eyes.

"I tell you," he said, his voice rising, "these Teferi are far ahead of us in the arts of war. Their weapons are clearly better than ours. Even their horses are better. They can field more men in battle; because their swords are lighter a man does not need as much training to go into combat so even their common folk can fight.

"What I suggest buys us time," Comyn continued, "but if you are unwilling to accept my counsel on that, at least let me return with the Teferi as the head of a trade



delegation. Perhaps I can learn something that will help defend us.”

Comyn waited for a response. At last his father nodded and said, “It shall be as you ask.”

#

Comyn was alone with the priest in his chambers off the main hall.

“What do you know about the religion of the Teferi?” Comyn asked. “They were questioning the people about ours.”

The priest’s long, thin face seemed to grow longer.

“Only rumors,” Alban replied. “They accept our first two holy books, but claim that the next three are lies invented by our priests and scribes. They say that their prophet Miruts gave them the third, and true, last book from God.”

“Are their beliefs and practices very different than ours?” Comyn asked.

“I do not know,” Alban replied, “though I have heard, and this, too, is rumor, that their women cover their hair and faces and hide their bodies.”

“Ah,” responded Comyn, “now I see. What else do you know about them?”

“Know,” the priest responded, “or stories that I heard, which may or may not be true?”

“Sometimes there is a kernel of truth in even the wildest stories,” Comyn said.

“No one had ever heard of the Teferi in your grandfather’s time. They lived as semi-nomads at the edge of the great desert. Then a prophet named Mirsuts arose among them. He filled them with religious fervor. The Teferi spread out from their ancestral home. They multiplied. They started trading with some and conquering others. They conquered the Keenan.”

“The Keenan?” Comyn asked. “Don’t they also live on the edge of the desert? Fierce, primitive, worshipping the sun and moon?”

“Yes,” the priest answered. “The Teferi

gave them the choice of either accepting the religion of their prophet or being put to the sword. Many chose to convert; others died rather than give up the gods of their fathers.”

“How can you force a man to believe in a religion?” Comyn asked, puzzled.

The priest threw up his hands to show that he didn’t understand either.

“What about their dealings with the peoples who follow the Gillean religion?” Comyn asked.

“The Teferi had a trade dispute with the Branduff,” Alban said. “The Branduff claim it was a made-up dispute. At any rate, the Teferi went to war with them. The Teferi conquered them easily.”

“Did the Teferi try to force them to convert?”

“No,” the priest answered. “But they levied a heavy tax on those who did not, and promised special privileges to those who did, including positions of power over the rest of the Branduff.”

“Did many convert?” Comyn asked.

“Most stayed faithful to our beliefs.” The priest sighed sadly. “But there were many who converted to obtain the benefits promised them.”

“This all sounds like more than rumors,” Comyn said. “Where did you hear all this?”

“Years ago, when you were just a little boy,” Alban replied, “a priest from the Branduff visited me. He told me about the Teferi and the conquest of his land. He went back, and I never heard from him again.”

“Didn’t you tell my father about this?” Comyn snapped.

“Of course I did,” the priest replied.

“And he did nothing? He didn’t even consider it as a possible threat?”

“He heard and probably thought it was nothing to worry about,” Alban said. “By now, he has surely forgotten.”

Comyn shook his head with disgust.

“One day, with God’s will, you will be king, Comyn.”

Comyn laughed.

"It is not God's will," Comyn said, "but the fact that the sperm that was my brother reached our mother's womb four years before the sperm that was me. That is what makes my brother the future king."

"Why are you so impious, Comyn? Why do you not marry Aurnia? Why do you sleep with all the young maidens? Everyone knows that you would be king if you would just behave properly. Even your brother would step aside for you."

Comyn rarely became angry. But now his face turned red and he shook his finger at the priest.

"My brother is a good man," he said angrily. "A better man than I. And he will be a better king than our father. He was meant to be king, not I. Ragnall will not disgrace the throne by running around with women, and by opening his mouth when it should be kept shut. He will live his life for the affairs of state. Perhaps my brain is better than his—it is better than everyone's—but his heart and soul are better than mine. And my intelligence will faithfully serve my brother the king."

"No," Comyn went on, calmly now, "my mission is not to be king. My mission is to ensure that my brother sits on our throne, and not some filthy Teferi fanatic."

The priest nodded.

"Go with God, then," he said.

Comyn smiled grimly and thought, It would have been better if God had stopped the Teferi from coming here in the first place.

#

Ragnall's strong hands grasped Comyn's upper arms.

"Let me go with you, little brother," Ragnall pleaded. "It is a dangerous journey you undertake."

"No, Ragnall," Comyn said firmly. "I may not return alive. It would not do for

father to lose both his sons."

"Are you so sure they mean us harm?" Ragnall asked.

"That was not a trade delegation," Comyn replied. "We all know that. And you saw the way they looked at our women. They will conquer us and take our beautiful women by force. Ragnall, it pains me to say this, but all of our brave knights do not stand a chance against their mounted soldiers."

"Ragnall," he went on, "if I thought they could be bought off I would recommend bribing them. So we paid tribute—no, no" he interjected, seeing the look of anguish on his brother's face, "it would still be cheaper than war. They might even make useful allies. But they cannot be bought. They have come here filled with a terrible purpose."

Comyn sighed wearily.

"We must prepare for the inevitable. We must strengthen our defenses. We must make alliances."

Comyn looked into his brother's eyes.

"Tell father we must increase the number of fighting men. Craftsmen, merchants, and peasants must all be trained and armed, each man according to his ability. Even the women must learn to defend themselves and carry arms suitable to their strength."

Ragnall's voice trembled.

"Father will never agree to that," he said.

"Ragnall, one day you will be king, not I. It is time for you to stand up to father. It is not enough to win his approval; you will have to confront him sometimes, too."

Comyn could see that Ragnall still looked hesitant.

"If it helps," Comyn said, "tell him that the advice came from me."

Ragnall looked relieved.

"One more thing, big brother," Comyn said. "If I don't come back, look after Renny for me." Then he added, almost as an afterthought, "And Aurnia, too."

Tears filled Ragnall's eyes.  
Yes, he nodded.

#

The party of the Teferi delegation and the men under Comyn traveled for four days before they finally crossed the border of Finia. It would take seven more days until they reached Bekele, the capital of the Teferi. Comyn was accompanied by Gara and twelve men whom he told the Teferi were merchants. However, only nine of them were actually merchants; the other three were military men. Comyn had not included those three for protection; he was under no illusion they would do any good if the Teferi decided to slaughter them. Rather, their role was to report on the state of the Teferi military and the defenses of Bekele. The warriors were there to serve King Finbar and Finia; the merchants were lured with the hope of someday making huge profits.

Comyn rode next to the Teferi chief, whose name was Demissie.

"That's a beautiful horse you have," Comyn said to him.

"We breed them ourselves," Demissie replied with pride.

"How long have you had them?" Comyn asked.

"The grandfathers of our grandfathers bred them. Even before that."

"And your swords?" Comyn inquired.

The Teferi chief gave him a sharp look.

"Our prophet Miruts designed them. He not only gave us our holy book, the Tesfaye, he gave us the means to spread its truth."

"How can you force a man to believe something?" Comyn asked.

"A fair enough question," Demissie replied, nodding. "Only God knows what is in a man's heart. But if a man follows the laws in our holy book, if he prays at the appointed times, if he conducts himself in the proper way, then unless he is truly evil God will show him the error of his previous

ways. More importantly, the man's sons will be raised in the true religion and they will believe."

Comyn said nothing. It was a point of view he had never considered, one that he found frightening.

"I want to ask you something," the Teferi chief said, interrupting Comyn's thoughts. "Why is there no hair on your face? Why do you smell of perfume?"

Comyn smiled and waited for their horses to take a few steps before answering, as he reminisced about the day that his brother Ragnall, after asking Comyn about his success with women, had decided to shave his own beard and cover himself with rose perfume. Not long after, Ragnall won the heart of Duversa, the most beautiful maiden in their father's kingdom.

"It delights our women," Comyn said, a half smile still on his face.

"Then delight your women," Demissie quoted, "'and I will be well pleased.'"

Comyn turned in surprise to the Teferi chief.

"You quoted from our Book of Earnan," Comyn said. "How do you know our scriptures?"

"Our scholars have translated all your holy books," Demissie replied.

"You Teferi are very advanced," Comyn said with admiration. "That you would take such trouble to learn another people's religion... You know," Comyn began, his voice eager from a new-found thought, "our peoples should make an alliance. We could learn from each other."

Demissie stopped his horse. Comyn did the same.

"The Book of Earnan is a lie," the Teferi chief spat out. "This our Prophet Mirsuts taught us in the Tesfaye. God ordained it the woman's place to serve the man."

Comyn laughed.

"I like your religion!" he said enthusiastically. "But I'm afraid our women

would never allow us to give up our faith for yours.”

The Teferi chief gave Comyn an angry glance, muttered something under his breath, and spurred his horse forward.

Comyn kept his horse still as he watched Demissie ride to the head of the caravan.

These are dangerous people, Comyn thought.

#

Bekele, the capital of the Teferi, reminded Comyn of his father’s capital, Cadhla. Though Cadhla was new—King Finbar having moved the capital of his ancestors from the sleepy, dusty village of Aghamore to the new city he built on the banks of the mighty river Avonmore—and Bekele was not, both cities had the vibrant energy of new wealth. There was building going on everywhere, and men moved about quickly, with the purposefulness of those who understood that time was money.

Men. Not women. For it was only men that Comyn saw when he entered Bekele. When the caravan had been traveling through the land of the Teferi Comyn did see women occasionally working in the fields, covered as the priest Alban had described; in Bekele they seemed to be hidden from view.

Comyn’s party decamped at a modern looking inn of stone and wood, painted red and light blue. There was a huge hall on the first floor with tables and three open kitchens; the next five floors held the lodging rooms. On either side of the inn were sleek, shiny stables where the horses and other pack animals were housed.

As Comyn crossed the hall to the stairs leading to his room, he saw Demissie talking to Gara. Comyn stopped and watched as his aide spoke to the Teferi chief.

Apart from those words necessary to successfully complete the journey, Demissie had not spoken to Comyn since the talk they had after crossing the border of Finia.

Comyn did not like the length of this conversation between Demissie and Gara, and he especially did not like the changing expressions he saw on Gara’s face.

A sense of foreboding that edged into fear filled Comyn.

#

Gara always looked Comyn straight in the eyes whenever they talked. Not this time. The prince’s aide shifted uneasily on his feet and carefully avoided Comyn’s steady gaze.

They were in Comyn’s spare but comfortable lodging room. Comyn sat on his bed; Gara stood before him.

“What did the Teferi chief ask you?” Comyn inquired.

It took several moments before Gara answered.

“He asked me if I had been a cripple from birth. He said it did not appear so.”

“What did you tell him?” Comyn questioned.

“That I had not been born so,” Gara said, regret in his voice.

“Did he ask how it happened?”

“Yes,” Gara replied.

“And what did you say?” Comyn prodded.

Gara raised his eyes and looked straight at Comyn.

“I told him that I became crippled in a training contest with the prince,” Gara said accusingly.

“Gara,” Comyn protested vehemently “you know that was an accident. I did not even want to take part in that contest.”

“That is what they told me,” Gara responded. “That is not how you fought. You were like a wild beast bred and trained for combat, not like a fifteen year old youth who only wanted to grow roses.”

Comyn turned pale.

“Gara, how can you say such a thing?” Comyn asked, though he knew there was truth in Gara’s words. It would have been bad enough to hear such a thing back home,

but here among the hostile Teferi, Gara's words induced not only guilt but fear.

"Gara, have you always felt thus?"

"No," Gara answered. And then, "Perhaps somewhere deep inside." He looked at Comyn again, and Comyn saw the Gara of old. "I do not know, Prince."

"Gara, why would I want to harm you? What could I possibly gain?"

"I don't know." Gara, the old Gara, sounded helpless and confused.

"Where did you get the idea it happened deliberately?" Comyn asked. "From the Teferi chief?"

Gara nodded.

"Did he say why I would do such a thing to you?" Comyn asked.

"I asked him," Gara replied. "He said he did not know. But he said that though you looked and smelled like a woman you are as hard as the steel in the sword Mirsuts gave to his people. And Prince, everyone in our land knows that to be true."

Comyn could feel the old Gara slipping away.

"What else did Demissie ask you?" Comyn asked.

"If I had a wife," Gara answered.

The old Gara disappeared; it was the new one, filled with anger and the desire for revenge that stood before Comyn now.

"Demissie said," Gara went on, "that if I turned to the Book of Tesfaye and its Prophet Mirsuts, if I learned to worship God in the proper way, I would not only have a wife but would become a noble."

"A noble of our land or his?" Comyn asked quickly.

"Ours."

Comyn looked at Gara. Comyn was unarmed. He had not engaged in any kind of combat since he had defeated Gara years ago. Gara himself was armed with a dagger, and though crippled, was still strong, which was probably why the Teferi chief had inferred that Gara had not been born

disabled.

There was nothing Comyn could do.

"Gara," he said, "if you wish to betray your king, your faith, and your ancestors, go ahead. I cannot stop you. But know that no one loves a traitor, and despite what Demissie tells you now, the Teferi will never trust you."

Gara said nothing. He glared at Comyn defiantly.

"Go then," Comyn ordered.

Gara turned and left without saying a word.

Comyn watched him leave with regret.

He served me well, Comyn thought. I shall not see him again.

#

Comyn sat in a high-backed chair. Across from him sat the king of Tefer, who called himself Negus Retta. Whether that was the king's name, his title, or a combination of the two, Comyn did not know. At the king's right stood Demissie. Behind the king a row of armed guards stood at attention. Behind Comyn sat the members of his own delegation, except for Gara, who had disappeared.

It was Comyn's intention to make a few opening remarks and then let the richest and most successful merchant carry on the negotiations. The important thing was for their party to remain in Bekele long enough for Comyn to learn what he could to help defend his father's kingdom.

Comyn scanned the hard faces of the guards and suddenly felt very vulnerable. All of his people were unarmed, defenseless.

The king of Tefer spoke.

"We are honored to welcome the son of King Finbar, King of the Finians. We look forward to having a long and prosperous relationship with your people."

"Greetings, Negus Retta, King of the Teferi," Comyn replied. "As my father welcomed your people, so you welcome me."

As your people made arrangements to open a trading outpost in Cadhla, we wish to make arrangements to open a trading outpost in Bekele.”

“And so it shall be,” Negus Retta replied. At this, Comyn saw a slight smile cross Demissie’s face, and Comyn’s unease grew. “However, there is one small point that must be settled first, before we go on.”

Comyn leaned forward and listened for the next words impatiently.

“Demissie tells me,” the king continued, “that you insulted our prophet and our holy book. That you mocked God.”

Comyn leaned back in the chair. At first he was so surprised he did not know how to reply, and then he recovered quickly and said:

“Sir, if I have given offense I apologize. It was completely inadvertent. I am not even aware of what I said that was improper. Remember, when people of different cultures meet, allowance must be given for ignorance of each other’s customs.”

“This is not a question of manners,” Negus Retta said. “If it were simply a matter of being impolite we would have overlooked it. This is a question of mocking God, which is against our laws and brings severe punishment.”

“How did I mock God?” Comyn asked.

“You laughed when Demissie quoted our scriptures to you.”

Comyn took a deep breath. Were they serious, he wondered, or are they seeking a pretext for a fight?

“Negus Retta, your captain, Demissie, completely misunderstood. I was not laughing at your beliefs. I was laughing with delight. I wish our law decreed that the woman serve the man.”

“Even now you mock God’s law,” Negus Retta said. “Laughter is forbidden when it comes to the holy law.”

“How can I be held accountable to your

laws when I was not even in the boundaries of Tefer when this happened?” Comyn demanded.

“God’s laws know no boundary,” Negus Retta replied.

“And you Teferi are the ones to interpret and enforce God’s laws?”

“Now you are beginning to gather wisdom to your bosom,” Negus Retta said with satisfaction.

“Are you the king or the high priest?” Comyn asked.

“The king is also the high priest,” Negus Retta answered. “Ultimate temporal power and spiritual power must be in the same hands. The holy law requires it.”

“Our law requires the opposite,” Comyn retorted.

“Your law is wrong,” the Teferi king said calmly.

“Tell me,” Comyn demanded, with some heat, “why am I called to account for insulting your religion but Demissie is not called to account for insulting mine? Not a moment before I laughed Demissie said that our Book of Earnan was a lie.”

“Oh, but it is,” said Negus Retta, in the most reasonable tone of voice. “All of the last three of your books are lies. Your scribes and priests deliberately distorted God’s word. It is only because of your ignorance that you do not know this.” The Teferi king raised a book that he held in his hand. “Can you read Caimara?” he asked.

“If it is written in the northern alphabet,” Comyn replied.

“Of course,” the king responded. “I would not give you a present written in our script.” He held the book higher. Demissie took it from his hand and walked over to Comyn.

Comyn took the proffered volume. Demissie returned to his place by the king’s side.

“Thank you,” Comyn said, not fully believing that this was a simple case of being given a present. “I had hoped to learn about

the Teferi people on this visit. And now, if we may, I would like to begin our trade negotiations. Mago, who is—”

Negus Retta raised his hand and interrupted.

“There will be no negotiations until you have read and seen the truth of the Tesfaye.”

Comyn raised his eyebrows.

“Good king,” he said, “I am most interested in your holy book. But we are here to negotiate trade, not receive religious instruction.”

The king smiled.

“Consider yourselves our guests,” he said. “We wish to make your accommodations as comfortable as possible. And if in your reading you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask Demissie, or even myself, if he cannot answer. May God guide your soul.” He waved his right hand as if dismissing them, and then abruptly got up and left the room. The guards behind him remained.

Comyn was stunned. He stood up and asked angrily, “Were you treated in this fashion when you came to Finia?”

Demissie took a step toward Comyn.

“Negus Retta has spoken,” he said, menacingly placing his hand on the sword at his side.

#

Comyn looked out the window of his room in the inn. On the road, heading east, a man led a donkey hitched to a cart filled with bolts of blue and red cloth. Heading west, two oxen pulled a heavy truck loaded with gray and brown bricks. Two men followed the truck. The road was fringed north and south with raised wooden sidewalks. Each had pedestrians moving west and east.

Comyn watched the donkey and oxen pass smoothly, and then he turned away from the window. These Teferi were more than just barbarian religious fanatics.

Still, Negus Retta violated every rule of

hospitality by holding the Finian party hostage to Comyn’s own religious conversion, though for captives, they were not being treated so badly. Comyn suspected the house arrest would end once they knew he had finished the Tesfaye, but then what? Comyn weighed his options, but did not feel certain he could predict what the Teferi would do next. He would have to be cautious.

There was a knock on the door. The politeness of the act struck Comyn as ironic, especially since it was immediately followed by the door being opened by Demissie, without waiting for Comyn’s response.

“I came under a flag of peace,” Comyn said. “Why are you doing this?”

“Prince of Finia,” Demissie responded, “if you return to your father’s kingdom as a follower of Mirsuts, acknowledging the truth of the Tesfaye, the word of God will have won a great victory. And it will happen, God willing, because He Himself gave you the idea to return with us.”

“And if I do not do these things?” Comyn asked.

“I pray that you will, but if not, we will conquer Finia and take your capital and all that is in it.” A slow smile spread across Demissie’s face, and a faraway look appeared in his eyes.

“All that is in it?” Comyn said heatedly, throwing away caution despite himself. “I saw the way you stared at our women. Do you have to go war to find a wife?”

“I already have two wives,” Demissie replied calmly, “of the Teferi people. But your women are beautiful. I would not mind taking one from your people if God does not grant you the wisdom of his truth.”

“Two wives,” Comyn said. “So, you can take up to two more.”

“Ah,” Demissie said, “you have been reading the Tesfaye.”

“Demissie, it has many of the same things as our holy books, including the books you

say are lies. Indeed, they are the same rules all men need if they are to live together peacefully, whether they are followers of Mirsuts, followers of Gillean, or the Keenan who worshipped the sun and the moon.”

Demissie gave him a sharp look.

“But there is one big difference,” Comyn went on, “Mirsuts was a warrior, and all our prophets were men of peace. The greatest of them, Aodhfin, gave his life for his people. He took on a terrible wasting disease, a painful affliction, so that none of our people would ever have to suffer from it again.”

“The Book of Aodhfin is a lie,” Demissie spat.

“Demissie, I do not know anyone who saw Aodhfin’s miracle. I do not know anyone who knows anyone who saw Aodhfin’s miracle. And even beyond that, so long ago did it happen. Perhaps you are right. What difference does it make? No one can prove the truth of any holy book or belief; yours, mine, or the sun and moon worship of the Keenan.”

Demissie’s face grew angry, his eyebrows arched, and his hand went to the hilt of his sword.

“Why do you do this to me?” Comyn asked. “Our two peoples could learn from each other. We could make both our realms better places to live.”

“Our life in this world is not the most important thing,” Demissie said slowly and thoughtfully. “If you were even a Gillean you would understand that. But you are not. You are a sarsa dengel, a heretic, a mocker of God and his holy books.” He regarded Comyn for a moment. “I was right about you,” the Teferi chief said. “It was as I told Negus Retta. A simple reading of the Tesfaye would not be enough. The truth of God’s word will have to be burned into your soul.”

Comyn shuddered, but Demissie did not see it, for he had already left the room.

#

Comyn awoke from a troubled, fitful sleep. It was the middle of the night.

Comyn paced the room nervously. He felt trapped. Whatever the Teferi had in store for him, it would not be pleasant. To make matters worse, he was having trouble formulating a coherent strategy to handle the looming threats to himself, the others with him, and his homeland.

He rubbed the stubble on his face.

He could pretend to accept their religion, go back home, and then prepare his people for the inevitable war. Strategically, the Teferi had just made things easier. While they were a greater danger than he had thought, after what they had done to him it would be a simple matter to enlist allies in the region. Making the case that the Teferi were a threat to everyone would not be difficult.

He stopped pacing and rubbed his face again.

But it might not be that simple. The Teferi were so unpredictable they might insist that a huge army accompany him back home.

He lay back down on the bed and closed his eyes.

The answer is there, he thought. Somewhere just beyond my reach.

Then he fell into a deep sleep.

#

There was no knock. The door opened. Demissie stood there accompanied by three guards. One of them was Gara, dressed in the uniform of the Teferi.

Comyn looked out the window. It was still dark.

“You will learn the power of God, his holy book, and his chosen prophet,” Demissie intoned solemnly.

Comyn looked at Gara. Gara stared back as if he had never seen Comyn before.

“What do you want?” Comyn snapped. “You have already violated every law of



hospitality. Know this, Demissie. After you left our council, I advised my father and the others to kill you and your people before you left our borders. I saw the danger you presented. And do you know what they said? ‘We will not do such a dishonorable thing.’

“I am like you, Demissie. There is evil in my soul. I was a bad Gillean, but I would make a good Teferi.”

Demissie turned red with anger. He waited several moments until he regained his composure, and said, his voice dripping with contempt:

“Let us see how willing you are to mock us when the morning comes, sarsa dengel. Come with us now. It is time.”

Comyn did not move.

“Kill me now, Demissie,” he said, “and get it over with. Kill me now so that all the nations will know the treachery of the Teferi and unite against you.”

Demissie growled something low and guttural in his own language. The two Teferi guards came swiftly at Comyn and seized his arms. Comyn allowed himself to be dragged away.

#

Comyn found himself in the center of a large stadium. He was strapped to a chair with legs so high that his feet did not touch the ground. The chair was metal and stood in the middle of a pool of water. The water covered Comyn’s legs up to his calves. Comyn was naked, except for a loin cloth wrapped around his midsection. His arms, legs, stomach and chest were bound with straps of leather inlaid with metal.

Comyn watched the blackness of the sky slowly edge into dark blue, and then into one of the most glorious sunrises he had ever seen.

Unbidden, the verses of the Book of Aodhfin came to Comyn, the ones describing how the heavens had displayed all their

beauty the morning Aodhfin was born. No one at the time had understood what it meant; it was not until after Aodhfin had given his life for the people that the significance of the sky that morning became clear.

Myths, Comyn thought to himself through gritted teeth. I face some terrible trial and I move toward madness at just the time I need a clear mind.

Comyn looked around. There was enough light now for him to see what confronted him.

A huge wheel was fixed vertically by a long axis in the center. The top of the wheel brushed against a large expanse of some kind of furry material. The whole device was supported by a wooden platform that separated it from the ground. A metal cable resting on another wooden platform snaked out from the wheel’s axis to a large metal box. The box had a lever with a handle that looked as if it were wrapped with some kind of thick canvas. The lever was in a raised position. Comyn could see that the lever could be moved down through an angle of almost 90 degrees.

Coming from that box was another metal cable supported by wooden scaffolding that brought it to the tank of water in which Comyn was held. The cable’s end plunged into the water.

Comyn examined the entire contraption with curiosity.

What’s all this for? he wondered.

As the sky grew lighter the stadium filled with people. Comyn closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. The bonds holding him were too tight, his feet were cold, and the beard now growing on his face itched him.

When Comyn opened his eyes Demissie and Negus Retta were staring at him. Gara stood next to the box with the lever.

The great wheel started to spin as men behind it turned a series of cranks. Comyn noticed with horror that sparks flew from the

top of the wheel where it rubbed the furred material.

Whatever hopeful doubts Comyn had were gone. They were going to torture him.

The stadium was full. Seated in front, where they could easily see him, were Comyn's people from Finia. Teferi guards stood all around them. Looks of anguish covered the faces of the men from Finia. Comyn gave them a weak smile.

The wheel stopped spinning.

"Do you confess," Negus Retta demanded in a booming voice, "that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn had a plan. He would give in, but not right away, lest the Teferi think that the Finians were weak and easily conquered. He would wait until he had borne more than even a strong man could take, and then he would confess to whatever they wanted. At least, that was his plan.

Comyn looked at Demissie and Negus Retta.

"Tell me," Comyn said, in as loud a voice as he could muster, "why I should confess to a religion whose adherents torture their invited guests? You don't need a religion to do that."

Comyn once more saw anger spread across Demissie's face. But Negus Retta only smiled with amusement.

"Then you will know the power of God," Negus Retta said, and with those words he signaled to Gara.

Comyn watched as Gara moved the lever down.

The lever reached its lowest point and at that very instant a terrible force entered Comyn's body, scorching every nerve in it. Comyn's body jerked wildly against the straps that held him.

Comyn had never felt such pain. He had not even known that such pain existed. It was over in a moment, but he felt as if he had endured it forever. Though his body

stopped jerking, the men of Finia continued their own groans of agony at the spectacle of their prince's suffering.

"Did you feel the power of the Lord?" Negus Retta asked in a voice that carried throughout the stadium.

It took several moments for Comyn to catch his breath and reply.

"The power of the Lord?" he asked. "In Finia, a man of genius develops new strains of grain to eat and new varieties of roses so that the woman may cover themselves in perfume. In Tefer, a man of genius develops a diabolical machine for torture. Where is God in this, Negus Retta?"

Negus Retta and Demissie looked at each other in surprise. Good, Comyn thought, I'm tougher than they expected.

"Do you confess," Negus Retta again demanded, "that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn wanted to open his mouth and hurl an ancient Finian curse at them, *May you eat dog excrement*, but no words came out. He simply stared back at his tormentors.

Negus Retta gave a signal and once again the great wheel started to turn.

Mixed with Comyn's fear at the next strike of pain was confusion about why he had not been able to utter the curse. It preoccupied him, even as he became aware that the wheel had been spinning much longer than it had the first time.

The wheel stopped. Negus Retta signaled to Gara. The lever descended.

This time it was worse, much worse. The scorching was not just in his body, but inside his head. The pain was more intense and lasted longer.

Finally it stopped.

Enough, Comyn thought. Enough. I've defended the honor of Finia.

Negus Retta stepped closer to him. There was a look of concern on the Teferi king's face.

"Did you feel the power of the Lord?"

Negus Retta, more softly this time.

Comyn nodded yes. Negus Retta looked relieved. He shouted something and guards swarmed around Comyn, releasing him from his bonds. Comyn stumbled from the pool to dry ground and toward the King of Tefer.

"You will proclaim your allegiance to the Tesfaye and Mirsuts before the people of Bekele and before your own people," Negus Retta said quietly.

Comyn nodded in assent.

"Do you confess," Negus Retta said, this time with triumph, "that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn opened his mouth. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to say yes more than anything else in the world. He took a deep breath.

Comyn's voice filled the stadium. But they were not the words he intended.

"Aodhfin lives!" he cried, to his own surprise as much as everyone else's.

Negus Retta stared open-mouthed at Comyn. Demissie snarled.

This time it was Demissie who gave the orders. Comyn was seized and again bound to the chair.

Comyn barely noticed that the wheel spun and spun without stopping. When it finally did stop and the lever descended, the fire from the wheel scorched down to his soul. His body jerked so violently that bones broke. When it was over, he could still feel the pain but could no longer feel his body.

He heard Gara scream and saw his former aide throw off the Teferi uniform and run towards him. Gara jumped into the pool and threw himself at Comyn's feet.

"Forgive me, noble prince," Gara cried.

Comyn sighed. He could only move the index finger of his right hand. He caressed one of Gara's locks with that finger.

"Forgive me, noble warrior," Comyn said, speaking with great effort. "Forgive what I did to you. I knew it would be a disgrace to the crown if I did not train and thereby lost.

I would be forced into the warrior school until I made a better accounting of myself. If I did train and did well that would prove I could become a warrior, and so I would be forced to continue on that path. Either way, I would have to become a warrior."

The effort of speaking so much while still in pain made Comyn's breathing labored. He had to stop to catch his breath.

"After much thought, I came up with a plan," Comyn continued. "Every day, for hours, I trained fiercely. I took instruction not only from the masters of the stick fighting of our contest, but from the boxers to learn how to deliver a punch between the armor. I even questioned the physicians, to learn which parts of the body were weak and could be damaged. I knew if I turned a simple contest between two youth into real combat, if I showed that giving me a weapon made me vicious and uncontrollable, my father and all his court would gasp in astonishment and then let me follow my own path.

"And I was right, dear Gara, but you paid a heavy price for my freedom. I did not intend to cripple you, but I should have realized that the ferocity of my attack would do so. Forgive me, for what I did to you and what I'm about to do, for I no longer have the strength to resist the Teferi."

Teferi guards came and dragged a weeping Gara away.

Once again Negus Retta asked the terrible question.

"Do you confess that the Tesfaye is God's one true book and Mirsuts is his prophet?"

Comyn wanted to say yes, just as he had wanted to say yes before the last terrible scourging. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out.

Comyn struggled to force himself to follow his intentions.

*Otherwise I will die, he thought, and my death will be for nothing.*

Still, he could not say the word.

*I will shake my head up and down, he thought, so they know I'm saying yes.*

A sense of relief flooded through Comyn. He began to move his head.

To Comyn's horror, his head did not move up and down. It moved left and right, several times, vigorously, signifying no.

Demissie roared with anger. He shouted for the wheel to begin turning, and called out, "I will pull the lever myself."

Comyn stared straight ahead as the wheel began to turn.

Negus Retta walked up to the edge of the pool. He looked into Comyn's eyes. Comyn did not flinch. It was Negus Retta who looked away.

The Teferi king raised his right hand.

"Enough!" he cried. "Stop!"

The wheel stopped turning.

"One more time and he will die." Negus Retta's voice trembled. "His death would be a victory for him and a defeat for us."

He looked down at Comyn.

"You will be released and sent home to Finia. Your father's kingdom no longer has anything to fear from Tefer. We will not attack you, we will not conquer you."

A hush filled the stadium. As the last of the noise died away, Comyn lost consciousness.

#

Comyn lay on the bed in his room at the inn. A Teferi physician bent over him.

"How long will I be like this?" Comyn asked. "I can't move at all."

The Teferi physician shook his head.

"I do not know," he said. "We have never seen anyone resist after the first time. You withstood three. I do not know. Perhaps you are strong and will recover." He hesitated, and then asked, "Do you have a copy of the Book of Aodhfin in Teferi, or even Caimara, perhaps?"

Comyn looked up at the physician with surprise.

"No, he replied, "but if you journey back with me to Cadhla and tend to my injuries on the way, the high priest will give one to you."

"Thank you," the physician said, nodding.

The members of Comyn's party who had come with him to Bekele entered the room. Gara was with them.

Comyn spoke.

"Tomorrow we return home," he said. "I cannot travel by horse. I will need a wagon. Some of you will go on ahead to bring word to my father, the rest will travel more slowly with me."

"You are a hero, Prince Comyn," one of the men cried. The others murmured in assent. "You saved Finia from a dangerous enemy. Your deeds will be recounted among our people forever!"

"Not just among our people," another exclaimed, "but among all the Gilleans."

Comyn laughed bitterly.

"I am no hero, my friends," Comyn said. "I am a fool." Then he closed his eyes so the others would not see his tears.

#

The wagon rumbled mercilessly over uneven ground as it carried Comyn back to Finia. Each bump caused him sharp pain, though nothing compared to the Teferi torture machine. Still, he could not sleep or rest.

Comyn remained unable to move his body except for his right index finger. He had to be fed, and his personal needs attended to, by the Teferi physician and the members of his party. It was humiliating, and not helped at all by the reverence with which his men now treated him, a reverence to which Comyn did not feel entitled.

They had traveled for days. Comyn lost count; neither did he know how close or how far he was from his father's kingdom.

There were shouts in the distance. Comyn strained to hear through the wagon's

covering.

“Ragnall, Ragnall arrives with a mounted host!” someone shouted.

Comyn raised his head. The wagon stopped and its cover taken down.

Comyn saw his brother on horseback, with, indeed, an army behind him.

As soon as Ragnall saw his stricken younger brother, he jumped off his horse and ran to Comyn.

“Little brother!” he cried, his eyes filling with tears as he embraced Comyn, “What have they done to you?” He moved away from Comyn, and said, rage in his voice, “I will gather allies and raise a huge army. We will destroy Tefer. I will have revenge for what they have done to you.”

“No, big brother, no,” Comyn insisted. “No talk of war. The king of Tefer gave me his word he will never attack us.”

Ragnall looked down at his brother, not comprehending Comyn’s response.

“Ragnall, there is so much I don’t understand any more...” Comyn’s voice trailed off. “There is so much I need to think about after what I went through... No war. Not now...”

“Comyn, you are a hero,” Ragnall said with awe. “Those who saw you say you became filled with the spirit of Aodhfin. They say you became like him. You will live forever in the memory of our people.”

“No, Ragnall, no!” Comyn cried, beginning to weep. “I am no hero, I am a fool!”

“Little brother, what are you talking about? You defended our faith. You saved Finia.”

The tears streamed down Comyn’s face.

“You do not understand,” Comyn said.

“When I wanted to say ‘yes,’ my mouth said ‘Aodhfin lives!’ When I wanted to shake my head yes, it shook no. I am not a hero; I am a weak and stupid man. I still do not know why I lost my will.” Comyn stifled a sob. “Do I look like a hero to you?” he cried. “Look at me Ragnall! Do you think I chose this? Oh, big brother, what will become of me?”

Comyn finally broke down sobbing. Ragnall hugged him once again.

Comyn’s hand clutched at Ragnall’s arm.

“Look,” Comyn exclaimed, shocked.

“Before I could only move my finger. Now I can move the whole hand. You give me strength, big brother.” And the tears came down Comyn’s face even more freely.

“Little brother, you will recover soon enough, and once again you will shave your face and chase the women. But if you so much as lay a finger on Duessa...” Ragnall playfully shook his finger in Comyn’s face.

Comyn did not smile at Ragnall’s joke.

“No, big brother,” he replied, the tears ceasing. “No more chasing women,” he said thoughtfully. “And if I recover and Aurnia will have me, I will marry her.”

Ragnall took a deep breath, surprised.

“That is truly a miracle, little brother,” Ragnall responded. “And Aurnia will have you, whether or not you recover.”

Comyn sighed.

“Take me home, brother,” Comyn said.

“Take me home.”

The End

# The Ballad of the H. M. S. *Beagle*

by

Joe R. Christopher

Tune: any standard ballad measure,  
perhaps "In Peascod Time" or "Flying Fame"

His Majesty's Ship the *Beagle* sailed,  
Three masts with canvas spread,  
Across the ocean wide and deep,  
As global purpose led.

Two hundred forty tons she carried,  
And seventy men her crew,  
To map the South American coastlines  
And many islands too.

The captain on the holy days  
Would lead the crew in prayer,  
Him asking Jove to guide them right,  
Neptune to give them care.

Then as the broad Pacific rolled,  
Its waves with breezes blown,  
That ship of ninety feet in length  
Across the depths was known.

From 'neath the waves, from waters deep,  
Cascading streamlets freely,  
Poseidon and his court arose—  
The ocean shores, their baillie.

Poseidon on his massive throne,  
His trident as his scepter,  
Beheld the ship, her sails filled full,  
Nor thought to interrupt her.

With drops of water in his beard,  
Poseidon, as he sat there,  
Full pondered on that tiny ship,  
As if he something sought there.  
The court was still, the court was quiet,  
To let their king beponder:  
They turned their eyes upon the ship,

Which with the waves did wander.

Queen Amphitrite laid her hand  
Upon Poseidon's arm,  
But did not speak, but said no word,  
That might his stillness harm.

Her own grandfather, Pontus, watched;  
Her father, Nereus, too;  
Her many sisters quietly sat  
Nor sang while breezes blew.

"Look! look!" the captain cried, "look there!  
Look starboard for the sight!  
There's Neptune blessing us this trip,  
And all his court in might."

But Darwin said, "A cloudbank low,  
A foggy mist on sea—  
No more than that my eyes behold,  
Though writhing mist it be."

"You can't behold the sacred gods?  
You cannot see them plain?  
What blindness is this failure great?  
They rise upon the main."

But Darwin said, "I train myself  
To see the physical facts—  
The gods I've lost to see the laws  
Of how the earth transacts."

"Oh, once I joined the mysteries  
And drank of Bacchus' wine;  
I ate of Ceres' holy bread—  
All that I now resign.



“The world gives all the truth there is,  
If we with skill perceive;  
I study it by day and night—  
This world I do believe.”

Meanwhile Poseidon chose to speak:  
“My brothers twain and I,  
Upon this man much interest place;  
Through him will worship die.

“These crafty apes will crown themselves,  
Nor pray to gods for aid;  
We’ll see if they pollute their world,  
And all their means abrade.

“We’ll see if they control their births,  
Or bring great famine on;

We’ll see if they withhold their bombs,  
Or fight till all be gone.

“They’re adults now, sans parent-gods;  
No punishments they dread;  
Around a million, million stars,  
Most sophonts now are dead.”

In harmony the sisters sang,  
And Triton smiled at glee;  
Perhaps the gods knew more than men,  
Beyond all earthly dree.

Poseidon raised his trident high,  
Then switched and pointed down—  
The court beneath the waves submerged,  
That court of fair renown.

## The Wisest Wizard

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Edwards writes, “In this picture I have taken images of the ‘Statue of Poseidon at Copenhagen Port,’ some Greek and Roman statuary, the Renaissance painting ‘The Triumph of Amphitrite’ by Poussin, and a photograph of clouds over the ocean to create the effect brought to mind in the poem..”

by

Joan Marie Verba

Penelope had staged the most beautiful funeral I had ever seen. In the glade, the apple trees remained in blossom, and a subtle spicy fragrance enriched the air. Bright sunlight streamed through the leaves. Birds of paradise trilled melodically. The bier carrying Penelope's body—gorgeously arrayed—floated down the aisle created by the seated mourners. Impressive trick, that: getting an article to levitate took months of preparation, and the magic could be executed by only the most powerful of wizards. Of course, Penelope had been The Wise Wizard, but even so, it must have taken years for her to set the spells and time them to work after she had taken her last breath. No doubt she had entrusted her assistant, Adele, walking behind the bier, with the word or gesture to set it all in motion.

I looked around at the spectators, wondering who would become the next Wise One. Sylvia, the obvious choice, had contracted a fever and lay abed at home, sick. Her assistant, Freya, had told Daphne and me that Sylvia had at first shunned the healing potions—which would send her into a long, deep sleep—and attempted to get out of bed twice to come to the funeral. Both times, she had collapsed on the doorstep. Freya had been spared the effort to carry her back to bed—the swordswoman was almost as old as Sylvia was—because of the numerous visitors who had come by and had given Freya a hand. (After the second fainting spell, Sylvia had yielded to Freya's pleas and sipped the medicine.) The visitors all said that they had come to see if Sylvia needed any extra care in her illness; but Daphne told me they came, rather, to see if Sylvia was shamming. Daphne assured me, after we left the wizard's cottage, that Sylvia was not shamming.

Who, then, would replace Penelope? Lola, who had only recently been shown the door by her wizard mistress after her journeyman elevation, was young, but  
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ambitious. Daphne told me Lola might make the attempt, but becoming the Wise One required a certain amount of maturity and experience that Lola had yet to achieve. The only others I could see who had both the desire and the ability to carry out the test were Metis or Urania—and of course, Daphne.

I had assisted Daphne for 17 years now. The common people think that wizards use apprentices to assist them, but in reality, the apprentices are too incompetent and hot-headed to assist until they are able to complete their journeyman tasks, and after that, they're shown the door (with great ceremony and hearty congratulations, of course, but nonetheless, they're out). No, wizards generally choose their assistants from the ranks of women-at-arms. They find us to be seasoned, reliable, and eager—most eager, because the food is good, the pay is outstanding, and the accommodations are cozy. I had not experienced the dubious pleasure of standing at a cold, dank watch post in the pre-dawn hours for quite some time.

I turned my attention back to the funeral. The bier had reached the front of the assembly and turned. Penelope lay there peacefully, dressed in her finest wizard silks (green and gold), her wrinkled face showing an aged beauty that reflected the selfless deeds she had joyfully pursued in life. I would miss her cheerful demeanor. Slowly, as I watched, body, clothes, and bier dissolved into dust that sparkled in the sun—one final brilliant touch from The Wise Wizard.

Daphne tapped my arm, her usual way of drawing my attention. "Let's go, Isabel," she said softly. I nodded and followed her. I already saw that Lola and her assistant, Radnir, had gone, as had Metis and Esme, Urania and Nyla. The others remained in the glade and gathered to talk, probably about us. Being The Wise Wizard meant having an honorable title, and possession of the ancient artifacts from the dawn of time, allowing the



owner to perform the most powerful and intricate spells known. But the ancient artifacts themselves had been bound with a spell before the dawn of time. Once the current Wise One died, they hid themselves, and no one but a wizard pure in heart could find and use them. Even then, the finding would be risky and dangerous, and not many wizards would take on the pursuit. Indeed, most found the very idea a foolish one.

“Pure in heart”—aye, that was a mouthful. I told Daphne on one occasion, when I was feeling brave, that I did not think I ever met anyone who was truly pure in heart. Daphne, who seemed not in the least insulted by my remark, explained that perfection was not required, else no mortal could take them. Rather, she said, the accumulation of selfless deeds left an imprint on the soul much as an accumulation of selfish deeds left a stain on the soul. The preponderance of selfless deeds, no matter what mortal errors one may make in life, would make a soul shine as the moon on a clear night.

Sylvia possessed such a soul. Everyone expected that once Penelope died, that Sylvia would be drawn to the ancient artifacts—and they to her—as metal to a lodestone. Still, a wizard did have to exert some effort to find the artifacts, and it was clear that Sylvia could not walk out her front door. Daphne, and apparently others, felt the artifacts too important to be left untouched until Sylvia regained her strength.

In my estimation, Daphne was the strongest candidate among the other seekers. She was honest, truthful, and caring. She trained apprentice after apprentice who left her home and honorably served the ladies and lords in their estates, making sure the babies (human and animal) were sound of health and grew strong and wise. None of Daphne’s apprentices, to our knowledge, had ever used magic for power or gain. Daphne, however, did not have the seniority, and therefore, the experience of a wizard such as Sylvia.

Metis, a skilled and precise wizard, nonetheless had the disadvantage of growing up unloved. A need to prove her worthiness

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continually drove her to accomplish great and noble deeds, but her upbringing meant her deeds lacked warmth. She could be pleasant, but her manner often seemed harsh, particularly when she was frustrated, simply because no one had ever bothered to teach her manners (and whenever anyone tried, they found themselves the objects of her frustration, and quickly gave up). Other wizards, as well as other common folk, avoided her for those reasons, making her feel more rejected and driving her further to prove that she was worthy of being included in society. I (and Daphne) had no doubt she saw becoming the Wise One as a way to finally be included and loved.

Urania, on the other hand, had become the most social of butterflies. Everyone loved to see her coming—until one of her whims took over. Then visitors could find that their ale had suddenly turned to water, or water to ale. To Urania, this was harmless buffoonery, and because of her affable manner, she easily received forgiveness. No one suspected that Urania would ever use the ancient artifacts for anything evil, but Daphne, for one, could easily see that with them, a colossal joke could turn into a colossal mess.

Without Sylvia’s brilliant integrity, the best that the others could do in the search was to check the most potent centers of magic (the wizards’ country was defined as the territory where these magical centers were found) in the hopes that the artifacts would be drawn to them, as they had in the past. Nothing was more potent in magic—and more dangerous to life and limb—than a firedrake’s lair; I quickly saw that Daphne was headed to the nearest one. I loosened my sword in its sheath. Firedrakes were notoriously hard to kill; nonetheless, over the eons, men had hunted them for sport, and now only a handful of families lived in wizards’ country. I did not wish to kill one, but I was not going to let one harm me or Daphne, either.

Daphne glanced back, seeing my gesture. “You won’t need that. I’ve set protective spells for us.”

“Just being prepared.”

Daphne stopped at the edge of a clearing—the border between the forest and the mountains. I could smell burnt twigs and leaves, as well as a faint odor of sulfur. Before us yawned a huge cave mouth. At the top of the cave, peering over the rocks, we could see Metis and Esme. To our left, again, where forest met rocks, stood Lola and Radnir. Urania and Nyla stood just beyond them.

All of us watched the firedrakes. The father, resplendent in shining orange and silver scales, used his nose to scratch at the joints where his stubby legs and wormy torso met. The mother, all silver and no orange, lovingly nosed the five offspring in her nest—imps, we called the little ones. I saw 3 males and 2 females. With their heads held high, the imps were about as tall as my shoulder; they weighed almost twice as much as I did. The nest they played in consisted of jewels and mud that the adult firedrakes had used their fiery breath to harden.

The jewels resembled opals or diamonds, but actually they were rocks or crystals, eaten and digested by the firedrakes, who ate anything—animal, vegetable, or mineral. Somehow the process of digestion imbued the stones with magic. Daphne once attempted to explain how the solids absorbed the magic that animated the firedrakes, but I was a little too fastidious to pay much attention. Daphne had magical firedrake stones, and assured me they were entirely clean from being burned by the firedrake's breath (after the firedrake deposited the droppings), and washed, just to be on the safe side, but I was reluctant to handle them, nonetheless.

The firedrake stones varied in magical power. Some had very weak power; I had seen Daphne put them in a cradle to ease a babe's tooth pains. Others had tremendous power; Daphne said the most potent could bring down a mountain, or even better, could cause an object or objects to disappear from one location and reappear at another. But those were rare and only a wizard could scry one to see how much power any of them had. Generally wizards got the stones by visiting an abandoned nest, but one hardly found any of

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those in these times. The stones Daphne or any other wizard had were few, and old.

I saw a motion to my left. Radnir held up a large melon and motioned to the imps. "Here, baby, come here, see what I've got!"

I rolled my eyes. It appeared that Lola wanted Radnir to lure an imp to her. The other imps would follow, and the parents would come to be sure the imps came to no harm. Then Lola would search the cave while the firedrakes were distracted. Again, that seemed to be the plan, but it was a bad one—even if they had magical Roc bird feathers to protect them from injury, this would not prevent a firedrake from grabbing or trapping them.

Radnir and Lola could not have anticipated what happened next. The first imp left the nest and ran straight to Radnir, amazingly fast. The other imps rushed forward at a breakneck pace, tackling not only Lola and Radnir, but Urania and Nyla as well, rolling them playfully on the ground. The parents scuttled over to supervise, trumpeting encouragement.

Daphne shook her head. "They'll live—they're well protected, but they're not going anywhere for a while." She took a drawstring bag out of her own shoulder sack and threw it to me. "Gather all the stones you can. I'm going to search the cave." She ran into the cave, kindling a handlight as she went, while I searched around the nest for anything that looked magical and clean. I had almost filled up the bag when I felt a nudge on my arm.

"One moment, I'm almost done."

"Who are you talking to?"

I looked up to see Daphne standing in front of me. Then who nudged me? I turned to find an imp cooing at me. Its breath was uncomfortably warm, and smelled of melon. Without thinking, I picked up a nearby rock and tossed it at the imp. The imp caught it with its mouth and began crunching it.

"Don't feed it!" said Daphne. "It'll follow us!"

"But...."

The damage done, she rolled a large piece of quartz in its direction to keep it there a few moments more. She touched my arm. "After

me.”

I always did exactly what Daphne said, even if it made no sense to me at the time. I learned the hard way that Daphne knew what she was doing even if I did not. And it did not make sense that Daphne was running to where the other imps were still rolling the women, apparently amused by the noises they made. We ran uncomfortably close to Father Firedrake’s legs, and into the forest. Daphne stopped next to a tree, turned, and made a motion as if throwing a rock a long distance. A tongue of fire sprouted up by the nest. The imp I had fed screamed, and the other firedrakes raced back to the nest.

“You didn’t hurt it?” I asked. One less firedrake meant even fewer firedrake stones.

“No, imps scream with excitement when they see fire.”

The other women were badly shaken and had grass and twigs and pebbles in their hair and clothes, but they were largely unhurt. After helping them to the nearest forest path, Daphne and I left them there to gather their wits again.

Once we were a safe distance from the other women, I handed Daphne my bag. “This is all I could get.”

She took it but did not open it. “I’m sure they’re fine. Any firedrake stone will have a use.”

“Did you find the ancient artifacts in the cave?”

She shook her head. “But I found a number of firedrake stones.”

“Powerful ones?”

“I won’t know that until I’m able to get home and examine them.”

“I don’t think that Urania or Lola will become The Wise One.”

“No, it will be some time before they fully recover their senses. They’re only barely capable of walking home as it is.”

“What now?”

“I’m going to check on Sylvia and then go home.”

“You’re giving up on seeking the ancient artifacts? Aren’t you afraid that Metis will get them?”

Daphne smiled. “Metis knows less than she thinks. I’ll be more useful against her if I work my magic from home, at least for now. You’ll continue the search.”

“You have great confidence in me,” I said, implying with my tone that the confidence might not be merited.

“I do,” she said with a grin.

Daphne left a small firedrake stone on Sylvia’s blanket; Sylvia had not awakened, Freya said, since we had last been there. My next task, Daphne told me before we parted, was to climb the Tower Tree. That, too, contained a magical center, and attracted Rocs, which nested in the highest branches. I stood at the base of the tree—as wide as a cottage—and considered my path upward. I could not see the top through the myriad branches and countless leaves, but I heard rustling and the cry of a Roc. If one caught me with its beak or claws, I could be its dinner. Still, with the tree so large, I could conceivably get up to the top without the Roc or I ever setting eyes on the other.

I started the climb. I would ascend about the height of a city wall, rest a few minutes, and go up again. The Roc screamed every now and again, but I knew from the sound I remained at a safe distance.

Once I was high enough to view the entire valley, I heard a heavy rustling—too heavy for a squirrel or bird of paradise, many of which I had already seen. But it was not loud enough to be a Roc, either. I craned my neck to look up. Identifying the source of the sound, I called out. “Well met, Esme. What are you doing here?”

“The same thing you’re doing here, presumably,” she called down. “I see you survived the firedrakes.”

“Quite nicely, thank you,” I said. “Daphne set magical wards to protect us.”

She nodded. “Metis determined the ancient artifacts weren’t there and we should move on.”

I refrained from asking how Metis knew that without making a search, as Daphne had. Wizards generally did not tell their assistants such secrets, and even when they did,

assistants generally would not share them with

other assistants. “Is she with you?”



“No. I need to get a Roc feather for a magic spell, and then move on.”

That told me that Metis did not think the ancient artifacts were here, either. If so, I should move on, too. But perhaps Metis was

wrong and they were here. I kept climbing. Esme did too, but went to the other side of the tree, out of my sight. I kept an eye out for Rocs, but did not see any. Eventually, I came to a hole in the tree. I knew it to be a magical

locus due to the lack of bird or squirrel droppings. The hole was large enough for me to grasp the edge with my gloved hands and pull myself inside. Cracks in the bark let in some sunlight, but I saw nothing but...Roc feathers. Drifted down from the nests and pulled in by the tree's magic, I guessed. I pulled out a handful and sat on the branch with my back to the trunk, considering. I would take them with me—since they were magical, Daphne would find a use for them. I placed them inside my vest. But should I tell Esme, to spare her a dangerous encounter with the giant bird? As I pondered this question, I looked out over the valley. Who should I see, but Metis walking along the forest path to...the enchanted pool. When I looked down to contemplate my path to the ground, I saw Esme descending beneath me. I almost laughed. Misdirected! Metis and Esme were nothing if not clever.

An unearthly screech startled me, causing me to nearly lose my balance. A Roc hovered near me, peering at me, screaming at me. Fortunately, the branches and foliage were so thick in this part of the tree that it could not reach me, though it lashed out with beak and claws, tearing at the leaves and smaller outer branches. As long as I stayed close to the trunk, I ought to make it to the ground safely. With the feathers in my jacket, it could not harm me, but it could grab me if it got close enough. Sure enough, once the Roc got too low to maintain its flight—a Roc could not fly from the ground, it had to stay in the heights—it gave up and ascended to its nest.

Even with the head start, Metis and Esme could do little at the enchanted pool before I got there. A den of snakes guarded the grottoes, and I knew neither of them could swim well. I, on the other hand, had been an expert swimmer from my youth, and practiced charming magical snakes long before I ever met Daphne. Besides, I had Roc feathers in my jacket.

Once I hit the ground and cleared the tree, I looked up just to make sure the Roc was not about to swoop down on me. But I saw it circling in the distance, apparently intent on

other prey. I turned and took the path to the pool. I did not immediately see Metis or Esme, but they could be behind any of the rock formations. They were not the objects of my search, in any case. I knelt and pounded on the ground. Soon after, a snake appeared, thick as my arm, long as I was high. It slithered to my hand. I allowed it to taste and smell my fingers with its forked tongue, then I stroked it under the jaw. Now it was my friend. I picked it up and carried it underneath the rocky overhang, and set it at the edge of the pool. It would attack anyone else who came near.

Daphne had taken me here before. Wizards often used the pool to store objects because of the snake guardians, and because the pool's own enchantments made it easy to set spells. One lingering spell allowed a swimmer's clothes to stay dry while in the pool. I counted on that as I took off my boots, stepped in the main pool, and sank. I still had to hold my breath but did not have to do that long. The first shelf was not far. I surfaced, looked, and found that empty. I drew breath again, sank, and surfaced at another location. I only put my head and arms above water. Learning on the shelf with my arms, I saw some magical objects, but ordinary ones, not the ancient artifacts. Searching further, I found two other empty areas, and three areas filled with more objects. I almost submerged again at the third area when something caught my eye. At first glance, these had appeared to be ordinary magical objects, similar to the ones in the shelves I had seen in Daphne's and every other wizard's dwelling I had ever entered: a crystal globe, a walking staff, a wooden bowl, among other items. But as I gazed at them, they seemed to take on...a glamour, a sanctity. These were the ones! I had found them! I tentatively reached for them, then drew my hand back. Should I touch them? Perhaps I should just leave them and report my find to Daphne. As I mulled over the options in my mind, the objects dissolved before my eyes.

I blinked. No! They had been there. I would have sworn it. Now they were...gone? How? This I had better report to Daphne.

I swam back to the main pool and

surfaced. As I climbed out of the water, I saw Metis sitting on a stone bench, stuffing a wooden bowl into an almost-full pouch. Esme stood beside her. I looked toward my snake friend. He coiled there still, asleep.

"Wizards are even better at charming snakes," Metis observed.

I sat on a rock, speechless.

Metis stood. "You needn't worry. I'm not going to use these to steal, or conquer territory. I just want to be recognized for my genuine abilities. Now everyone will have to agree that I'm not the worthless wretch they thought I was." She left the grotto, Esme following.

I trudged back to Daphne's cottage, wondering what I should say. To forestall explaining the painful details, I first showed Daphne the Roc feathers.

Her face brightened. "Oh, Roc feathers. I can't have too many of those." She took them and put them away, then she turned to me again. "Did you see the ancient artifacts?"

Startled, I simply said, "Yes."

She said excitedly, "You must tell me what they look like."

I shrugged. "You can probably ask Metis."

Daphne picked up a firedrake jewel and held it to the window, to the light. "Oh, she doesn't know."

"But she has them."

Daphne smiled. "She thinks she does. She knows less than she thinks."

I gasped. "Did you get them after all?" I said eagerly.

She laughed—not mocking me, but expressing joy. "No, Sylvia has them."

"Sylvia?"

"Yes, she recovered enough to claim them."

I remembered the firedrake stone that

Daphne had left on Sylvia's blanket. It must have healed her, awakened her from slumber. "But Metis has...?"

"Ordinary magical artifacts, from one of the other shelves in the grotto. Well, not so ordinary, they're rather powerful, but nothing she can't be trusted with."

I considered that. I did see more than one wooden bowl in the grotto. Metis must have taken one of those, mistaking a very potent artifact for an ancient artifact.

Daphne held up the jewel in her hand. "But what I have here has an even greater power than anything Metis gathered."

"What is it?"

"Something that I think will affect Metis for the better. She thinks that she can earn love through acts of courage, when she needs to add acts of kindness. It may change Urania, too. She will be easier to live with once she knows that she doesn't have to trick people to get their attention." She put the jewel down. "Some barriers are almost impossible to break, even with magic. But this jewel can help people understand themselves better."

I gestured to the jewels. "They can do all that."

She put down the one in her hand. "With the proper care and attention, this one can." She waved a hand over all the other accumulated jewels. "We collected quite a cache, you and I. There are some exceedingly powerful stones among these."

"You don't mind Sylvia getting the ancient artifacts?"

"Not at all." She picked up another jewel and held it to the light. "When Sylvia reaches the end of her natural life, I think we will be ready." She turned to me with a cheerful expression. Exactly how I would expect the next Wise One to act.

# The Fall of Antaeus

by

Ryder W. Miller

Antaeus lay on the ground searching for strength, but his body was now broken and wet with blood. The end was near, but he had a few minutes left to reflect before he would die. When he moved he winced in pain. He could not find the sustenance and healing power from the Earth now. His end would be soon. The crowd that had seen him wrestle with Hercules had almost dispersed, but Antaeus's wife waited there with him.

She was no longer angry as she had been for months, but also not quite sympathetic.

Antaeus adjusted his body on the ground so he could face her.

"Why did you do this to me?" he asked.

"I did not do this to you. You did this to yourself," Tinjis returned.

"You summoned him."

"No, you did by your actions. I was different. You did not speak for me."

"You were supposed to speak for me."

"I no longer wanted to."

"Did I deserve this fate?"

"You offered others less."

Antaeus turned on his back and looked at the sky.

Antaeus remembered back to a few weeks ago. Things had been going fine. His crops were thriving and everybody seemed to hold him in high esteem. They had gotten over their fear once they got to know to obey him. He was a protector of the village and the Earth. His large size was a deterrent. Most who passed by the town sought to avoid him. He had collected the skulls of those who had disobeyed. He had magical powers and was a child of the gods. The son

of Poseidon and Gaia he was, but he was especially a land lover.

Such a position gave him the authority to dictate to others. Those who defied him might lose their skulls to him. He also ruled the village in his role as a protector. There were other dangerous men in town, but Antaeus was a head taller than them. If there was ever a problem he would be contacted. Most who passed by knew that he was the protector of this village. Many avoided him and the village if possible. He was known to pick the random fight, but that had not been anytime recently. Some would say that he was a bully, and he liked to be in charge.

Antaeus had thrived as a farmer and an important person in the town. He would spend his time in the fields planting and removing the unwanted shrubs and trees. He could usually pull a bush or small tree out of the ground with his bare hands. Their field, where he had planted Olive trees and built a house, was once a wild scrubland.

He had piled up the scrub trees high one day and had a bonfire. The villagers, seeing the smoke, gathered to hear Antaeus promise that he would protect the village. It was quite the party on the windy Fall night with wine and dancing. Antaeus brought a pig for all to share.

"Why do you choose these parts?" one villager asked.

"The weather is nice, the hills are fertile, and it is not too far from the sea," he said.

"Do you expect us to eat pig? Why no fish?" one asked

"The fish are my kinsman," Antaeus

said. "I would rather eat pig or cow."

Anteus was annoyed, and those around could see it, but it was a party and he decided to shrug it off.

"You should be happy that the gods supply us with food," he said.

"And why should you decide what we eat?" asked one timidly.

"I do not decide, but this is my party and I will feed my guests as I please. If we eat all the fish of the world then we will destroy the kingdom of my father."

The man grew timid and nodded, but that was not enough for Anteus who grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Not questioning me now," he said.

The man tried to walk away, but Anteus held his arm firmly. He tried to shake his arm loose, but Anteus yanked him towards him and squeezed him in his arms.

"What are you doing?" one yelled.

"I will not be questioned," Anteus said.

"But this was supposed to be a party," said the man in Anteus's arms, who winced as he was crushed.

The assembled crowd gasped as they heard him scream.

"I will have your skull," Anteus yelled as he ripped the man's head from his body.

The crowd from the party was too shocked to walk away.

Now covered with blood, with a broken body at his feet, Anteus began to laugh. He lifted the head for all to see.

"I can protect this village, but I will be obeyed."

The crowd looked on in shock.

Pointing to his feet he continued.

"Here is a man who disobeyed me. He is not the first skull I have taken, but I will take more if necessary. I am the son of gods and I will be obeyed. I offer you protection in return."

"But what of the marauders?"

"Any man that passes this way will need contend with me. In return some of you will

need help plow and harvest my fields."

The crowd grew silent and then one said:

"Sounds fair to me."

"Enjoy the party. I will go wash up,"

Anteus announced.

The mood had dimmed, but many were hungry and they ate of the offerings made by Anteus.

Tinjis followed Anteus to the stream where he would clean himself.

"Why must you do this?" she asked.

"I am the son of the gods. I need take responsibility. The gods are blamed, but I can only help if I am obeyed. They need to know that they must fear us if they wish to be protected."

"But why don't you leave us alone. Why do you not return to the sea and be with your father?"

"What of my mother? I preferred the land to the sea. He was angered."

"You can be with both of them at the seashore."

"I must find my own way. I am no longer fully a child of the gods. I chose a less rewarding path."

"But you are taking too much responsibility."

"I am the son of gods; protecting a village is not too much for me. If I am listened to I will succeed."

"What of me? Am I not to be listened to?"

"You name the person and I will take their skull for you. I am here because of my love for you."

Tinjis smiled, but she was not completely pleased. She felt Anteus was not quite human in his certainty. He was not always from the village. He had wandered there from the ocean and made a home for her after they had fallen in love. He also was a head taller than all the others in the village, and though not widely popular his will was heeded. The people in the village did not



want to be warriors or soldiers. Anteauss made their life safer, but he had an emotional edge that was not quite normal or always predictable.

Over the years he had collected many skulls and those who passed through the area knew to fear him. He could challenge anyone who passed by to a fight, and he was strong enough to break bones with his hands if necessary.

The village had become quiet, almost to the point of seeming haunted because of him. There was no need for a freestanding army, because of him, but everybody in the village was subject to his strange moods. After a time he began wanting to collect more skulls. He thought it would be a way to get mankind to fear the gods more and if he collected enough he might someday impress his father and regain his acceptance. His father did not like that he chose to forgo the sea.

Tinjis thought something needed to change, but she remembered the stories of his childhood.

Anteauss did not fit in with the other children. From an early age everybody feared him. It did not help that he was the child of the gods and was therefore partly one himself. From outward appearances he resembled a child like any other, but there was a certain power about him and he displayed a sense of entitlement. He was stronger than the others and everybody eventually learned not to bother him.

"I will be king some day," he said to a teacher.

"What makes you think you will be ready?"

"I am of divine origin. Why do the others choose not to be friends with me?"

"You are different."

"I don't want to be. I will protect the people."

"From who? We need protection from your parents. The seas are dangerous. The land is unruly."

"I will change that."

Anteauss tried to talk with his parents about this but they were taciturn.

"So you wish to be one of them. You give up much in doing so," said Poseidon.

"I can help them," Anteauss responded.

"You can also help us. You can be an envoy between us and mankind," Gaia said.

"So I will be able to keep human form?"

"If you choose, but you will be saying no to the life of a god. You will not learn all our powers."

"They may need me," Anteauss said and he walked away to sleep.

Gaia called out to him before he left.

"As long as you are touching the ground you will have the strength you need. The Earth will give you power. You must also stay nearby or your power will recede."

Gaia comforted Poseidon.

"He is needed as a god," he said.

"He may be able to help them."

"We must make sure he does not know things. He cannot be another Prometheus."

"He will someday return. This decision will make him a person with no community. He will not be accepted as a human and he will not belong among the gods. He will try to marry and have children, but he will not belong."

"He will seek to come back, but he will need to prove himself first."

"What will you ask of him?" asked Gaia.

"I will let him decide, but they are more likely to fear him and heed what he would say."

"He will live with distinction."

"He will be able to best any man in combat."

"Yes, but there are other children of the gods. Zeus may not accept him."

"Let's not mention him often at Olympus."

They found a human mother for Anteauss and he grew up in Libya not far from the sea.

He tried to fit in, but most chose not to be friendly. He also was bigger and stronger than the other children. Most learned not to start fights with him, but he liked to wrestle and started fights with others himself. From an early age he had broken the bones of a few of his challengers.

Then, in his late teens, he met Tinjis, who seduced him with the opportunity to have a normal life. She was tall and fair. She was sometimes fearful of the boys from the village and gravitated towards Anteauss for protection. She became smitten by this large man who wished only to be like the others. He built a large farm and a house for them to share.

"Together we can be happy. Together we can have a normal life," Anteauss said to her.

"But you are not really human."

"The gods have had children with mortals before. I have grown. I have aged. I may be more human than we know. I am also an animal now."

"You will expect me to obey."

"Yes. The whole village must so I can protect you."

"From who?"

"From those who do not heed the gods. From godless people. From marauders."

"We are lucky to have a giant here. You are needed."

Though they tried, they could not have children. Anteauss spent much of his days in anger about this and grew bitter. He would rip the shrub trees out of the ground and replace them with orchards. The subject was not brought up with the other men in the village, even though they met regularly to train for combat and to harvest the fields.

Anteauss excelled as a farmer and had a deep understanding of the offerings of the earth.

"The Earth will provide for those who treat her with care. Every few years, let the fields lie fallow so they can regain their power to nurture and create life," he taught.

Anteauss liked to spend time in the fields, but they nurtured him despite his resentment because he could not as yet father a child. He also grew jealous of the other villagers who had children. He also knew that Tinjis had grown dissatisfied with him for not being able to impregnate her. He thought that maybe she would try to have a child with another.

They would need to be threatened. Maybe he had been wrong to spend his life with mortals? Maybe he could have better helped them as a god? But he knew his father would not accept him under any circumstances. Some in the area were distrustful of Poseidon and refused to live by the sea. Many would not even visit the shore for fear. These people preferred the fields and the deserts.

Anteauss made them pay for this disrespect of Poseidon. This was what he would likely need to do to regain his father's acceptance.

Word had gone around that Anteauss's village was dangerous to travel nearby. Strange stories arose about a giant that collected human skulls. Local marauders came back with tales that the land had become dangerous. They had left the area and decided to pursue their practices elsewhere.

There was speculation about the number of skulls that had been collected. The giant, who most did not have a name for, was widely known to be strong enough to rip off one's head. Anteauss would not reveal his name or his origin, but some had a suspicion that the gods were at work. Who else could have produced such a killing animal. There were some warriors that traveled that way to challenge the local champion, but they had not been heard of again. Some thought Poseidon was at work. If not obeyed by the land lovers, he would be feared.

High on the mountain, in a palace at the top, Zeus looked down into the image in a

agitated pool of water. He was intrigued, but not quite amused.

"I always knew that someday he would trouble me," he said to his wife Hera.

"We are not the only ones who want greatness," she returned irritated.

"Yes, but don't you remember what we were told of him? He wanted to help mankind. That is why he went to live with them, to be one of them. He could have really been one of us."

"We are not the only ones who change," she replied.

"But he has become such a bother. Who does he think he is?"

"He is not one of our children. He is not one of us any longer."

"But he wants to be. That is his motive."

"He is not the only one who seeks to impress us."

"Yes. This is our concern. We will need to teach them a lesson."

"Send him again if you would like," said Hera.

"Yes. His tasks will never have an end. This would be a worthy challenge."

Hera replied with only a smile. She looked forward to see Poseidon angered again.

Things seemed to have been normal until he arrived at the village with a lion's pelt hung over his shoulder. He was bigger than most of the travelers that passed by and different in a way. He seemed so much more confident than most of them. He looked very strong, but so did many who had passed by the village to challenge Anteaous and never return.

Most did not recognize him, but a few knew and whispered that he was Hercules. Now the village was really in trouble. Zeus must be annoyed, they thought. Many chose to leave town to avoid the potential contact.

"Why are you here?" one of the villagers asked the newcomer.

"I am here to challenge the giant of Libya."

"Why?"

"He has harmed many. I seek to set things right."

"Is Anteaous your enemy?"

"In a way, but more of rival. Please let him know that one has come to accept his challenge. Do not let him know who has come."

Anteaous was not fearful, having never been bested, but he had heard whispers that Hercules came to challenge him. He decided to meet him where he waited by the cross roads.

The two men sized each other up. Anteaous, the Giant of Libya was a head taller. He was not thin, but he was not as broad as Hercules. Hercules had sat at the cross roads waiting for his challenge to be answered. He has waited for hours under a tree and the sun beat down on the valley. They were both now hot with sweat.

Anteaous did not come alone. His colleagues were hushed as Anteaous made to greet the challenger. Anteaous also brought his pet bird, a trusted companion that he was proud of. A small group had gathered to watch the contest.

"Why are you here?" Anteaous asked.

"I am here to best the giant of Libya."

"Who told you of me?"

"Word has spread of your prowess. I hear the you can rip the head off of a man?"

"I have to those who would disobey me."

"Well, you won't have mine, Anteaous."

"We shall see."

"You have chosen to be one of the animals. Not all the Gods are happy with you."

"All the animals needed our help. I also seek to do the gods' bidding, but I have not heard from them for some time. I seek to serve my master Poseidon."

"He is not the one in charge," said

Hercules moving towards him.

"Yes, but like the animals, you disrespect him at your own peril. Why hurt what does not seek to offend? We have needed the animals as they now need us."

Hercules began to say something.

"Enough of this talk, yes, but I warn you that I do the will of the gods as well," said Antaeus who dropped in stance and spread his arms wide.

Hercules stepped towards him, but Antaeus was quicker and lifted Hercules off the ground and tossed him aside.

Hercules started laughing from where he fell on the floor.

"Such strength for an animal, I was not prepared."

Hercules jumped on his feet with a seriousness that the onlookers noticed. There was a gleam in his eye which was disconcerting.

One of the onlookers said to go get Tinjis, because Antaeus might need her.

"I will kill you before her if I must," said Hercules, the smile disappearing from his face.

They circled each other; then Antaeus lunged forward and they embraced in struggle.

They both sought to dominate each other with their strength, and it almost seemed like the ground trembled while they fought. Antaeus was the stronger and Hercules would step away before Antaeus could push him to the ground.

"I serve the Earth and the Sea," Antaeus said.

"You once did," said Hercules.

"Collecting skulls, what kind of honor is that."

"I and the gods will be obeyed, if not, feared."

"But there are other ways. This territory ceased to need heroes. You stopped being a hero."

"I offered them protection. The gods have rewarded us with bountiful harvests."

"Zeus is annoyed with Antaeus, and my tasks are not over. You also killed the innocent."

The two embraced again in struggle, but this time Antaeus pushed Hercules to the ground. Rather than be caught, Hercules quickly scampered away.

"You will never best me on the land. After what I have done for my father, you will probably never best me on the sea as either."

"So sure of yourself? I have never lost a battle. I serve those from the sky. People, not birds, fish or plants for me."

Hercules realized that Antaeus was stronger than him, but now he remembered that he gained his strength from the ground, from Mother Earth. Would he not be like any other mortal man if he was thrust up into the sky? Yes, now he remembered that being mentioned to him over drink before he took on this task.

This time Hercules rushed him, bending down, almost if to tackle him. Antaeus was not prepared and pushed his arms down after Hercules grabbed his waist, but he found himself lifted into the air.

"How do you like the sky?"

Now he felt Hercules' strength. Antaeus felt the air go out of him while he was being squeezed. With his legs he tried to reach the ground, but Hercules leaned his back backwards and the ground was too far away. Antaeus's arms flailed back and forward, but it did not stop Hercules who held him in a death grip.

Antaeus hips were the first to break. Antaeus was in too much pain to think and Hercules adjusted him in his arms to crush his ribs. Antaeus screamed and Hercules laughed.

Tinjis had now arrived to watch Hercules break Antaeus's limbs before dropping him to the floor.

"The ground will not serve you now," Hercules said. "You tried and you failed with all. You inspired fear, not respect. The animals have been put here for us. Not us for them."

Tinjis was surprised at the outcome. This had been their time to gain power and they failed all.

"Who sent you?" she asked Hercules.

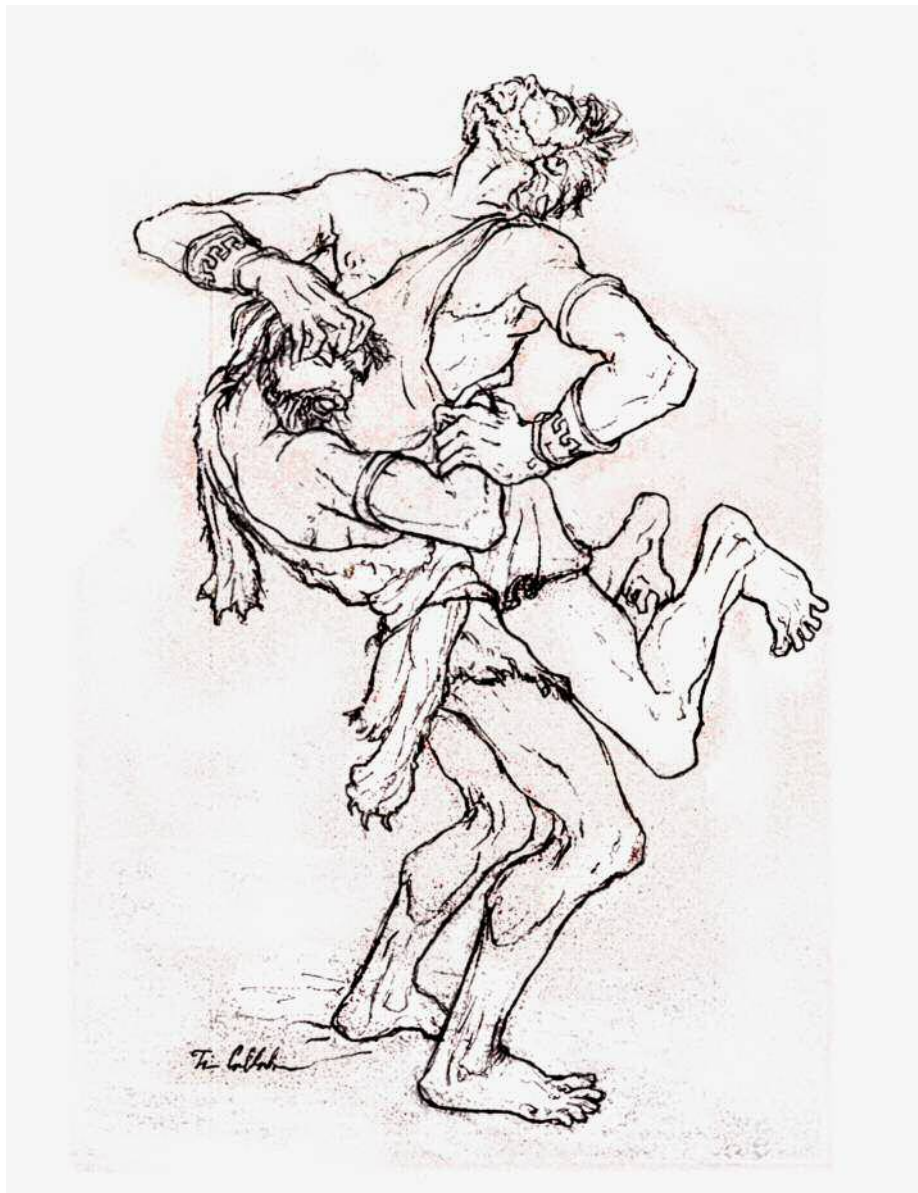
"Not the animals. You would do wisely

not to disrespect me," Hercules said to her with a shocking and awful smile.

"What of the village?" Tinjis asked.

"You will have the fish and chickens to protect you," Hercules said laughing while he walked away.

Maybe someday Antea's message of communion with all of creation would inspire others, Tinjis thought, but it might not be possible for some time.



# **The Lay of Aethernad**

by

Todd W. Swanson

Glorious are the elven lords, who live within forever:  
Glist'ning stars, with white-jeweled crowns, who sit upon the sky,  
Directing elves upon the earth, who tend the needs of trees,  
Which shape the orchards of their land, and pillars of their halls,  
Where elf-folk dwell in innocence, safe between the mountains,  
Toiling without weariness, remembrance without fading.

Yearly Winter brought the time of orchard's autumn fading;  
Even trees enchanted cannot keep their leaves forever --  
With Winter snows the valley lies in shadow of the mountains  
'Til Aethernad, the summer star, returns to southern sky,  
Arises from his winter sleep within the dwarf king's halls,  
Bids the elves who tend the earth to wake the slumb'ring trees.

Upon a time, when Aethernad decreed a rest for trees,  
When the year was growing old and verdant leaves were fading,  
Swart dwarven king now found himself full anxious in his halls --  
For fixed return of Aethernad felt set beyond forever,  
The starry jewel that lit his mines like sun come from the sky;  
So dwarves sent secret gifts to Winter's palace over mountains.

Unaware, fair Aethernad came early to the mountains,  
Behind, the giants ravaged rusting boughs of elven trees.  
The star descended marble stairs from throne upon the sky,  
Distraught that leafy earth below so soon commenced its fading;  
Return of greenest springtime seemed to lie beyond forever --  
Would Aethernad sleep fitfully within the dwarf king's halls.

So when the portal swung full closed at gate to darkened halls,  
Dwarves led the elf-prince Aethernad into their coal-black mountain,  
Where dwarf kin craved cage light of stars in iron grasp forever --  
Promised to protect the prince from storms that smothered trees;  
On golden throne, on treasure trove, sat Aethernad full fading,  
Though gathered gems did glitter with the pride of summer sky.

In night-stark time, the prince supposed the sun reclaimed the sky,  
But dwarven king had bound him fast in gloom of deepest halls;  
So withers Aethernad, spid'ry fingers ever fading,

Languid and recumbent on his seat beneath the mountain,  
Where shameless dwarves, they fashioned marble groves of marble trees,  
While white-browed elves fled far from frost and left the earth forever.

And ling'ring still is Aethernad in halls beneath the mountain,  
With pale eyes crave a glimpse of cobalt sky or verdant trees,  
While stories of forever-folk, as misty dreams, are fading.

## Matins

by

October Williams

Come, watch beside me, while  
An early light begins to filter through:  
Soundless, it splits the darkness into earth and sky,  
Divides the firmament in two:  
Far-off and faint between the spheres, a bird is calling.

The grey things quicken, and take on a greener hue:  
The veil is lifting, studded here and there with diamonds, the dew;  
The day is like a jewel in a forgotten fountain; He is near  
Who wakes the sleepers.

The fountains will be garlanded again, the world will gleam anew  
Beneath the waters. Lo: the King is here.  
His footsteps, soft and crystal clear  
Fall on the courtyard where the leaves accrue —

Come, still your weeping.  
Heaven is almost blue;  
And gentler rain than yesterday is falling.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

*The Mythic Circle* is a small annual literary magazine published by *The Mythopoeic Society*, which celebrates the work of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and other writers in the mythic tradition. (For more information about the Mythopoeic Society, contact Edith L. Crowe, Corresponding Secretary, The Mythopoeic Society, PO Box 6707, Altadena, CA 91003. E-mail: [correspondence@mythsoc.org](mailto:correspondence@mythsoc.org))

Copies of the next issue, *Mythic Circle*, #33, scheduled to appear in the summer of 2011, can be pre-ordered for \$8.00 through the Mythopoeic Society's website, <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle/preorder/>. Back issues are available at <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythic-circle/history/>.

**Submissions** and letters of comment should be sent to: Gwenyth Hood, English Department, Marshall University, Huntington WV 25701, or e-mailed to [mythiccircle@mythsoc.org](mailto:mythiccircle@mythsoc.org). Paper submissions should be double-spaced and should include a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

*The Mythic Circle* exists primarily for the benefit of writers trying to develop their craft in the Mythopoeic tradition and publishes short fiction, poetry, and artwork (mostly illustrations of stories and poems.) We have, as yet, no hard and fast length limits, but we as a small publication, we must think very well of a story more than 5000 words long to publish it. Shorter stories have a better chance. By editorial policy we favor our subscribers. We can only reward our authors

with one complimentary copy of the issue in which the accepted work appears. We do not pay any money. All rights revert to the author on publication.

## EDITORIAL

*MC* #32 has some new authors and some returners. With us for the first time, Daniel Baird presents a comic tale which subtly explores the relative value of suppression or assertion of magical talents. Harry Steven Lazerus's novelette brings us an artistic and cynical prince who is suddenly forced to defend his homeland against a fanatical enemy. Kenneth Burtness and October Williams explore mythology in everyday life, while Todd Swanson considers the long ago and far away.

Janet Croft and Joan Verba, both longtime members of the Mythopoeic Society, are publishing for the first time in *The Mythic Circle*. Janet offers us a surprising new twist on the myth of Arachne while the Joan treats the question of magical authority and succession.

Then there are our longtime contributors to *The Mythic Circle*. Joe Christopher chronicles, in poetic form, an encounter between a pioneer of modern science and the guardians of ancient religion. Dag Rossman's Scandinavian myth hits close to the modern heart. Ryder Miller mirrors modern environmental agony in the battle between Hercules and Antaeus, drawn from Greek mythology. David Sparenberg meditates poetically on the human condition.

Our illustrators add another dimension to the words. Tim Callahan generously



applies his talents to the cover and to illustrations from the four corners of the mythological universe. Kathy Edwards explores different artistic approaches to

stories and poems quite different in style and intention. We hope that there is something for every taste in this issue of *The Mythic Circle*.

## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

**Daniel D. Baird** has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Oregon specializing in East Asian literature. He enjoys reading fantasy from both Asia and Europe, being a fan of the genre since his childhood encounter with Bilbo Baggins. The short story, “The Warlock and the Nis” is based on a dream Daniel had as a youth.

**Kenneth Burtness** has been a member of Sammath Naur for 33 years. Semi-retired with more time for writing, he has just finished a short book on the Tarot and the I Ching (looking for an illustrator). He is currently working on three fantasy books: *8 Trees*, about prehistoric Hawaii; *Cantaloupe Genes*, a psychosexual look at reincarnation; and *Rox in a Box*, about the mind surviving the demise of the body.

**Bonnie Callahan** has contributed art to Mythopoeic publications for over 3 decades. She was in on the premieres of *Mythlore*, *Mythprint*, *Mythril*, and *Parma Eldalamberon*. Bonnie has worked as a background stylist in the animation industry for over 20 years, and also designs logos, posters, and cards, as well as painting art on rocks. Her illustrations have often appeared in *The Mythic Circle*, but this year she could not contribute due to other commitments.

**Tim Callahan** graduated from the Chouinard Art School with a degree in illustration. He has worked in the animation industry as a background designer and layout artist for over 20 years and has regularly contributed art for *The Mythic Circle*. He and Bonnie met while working on the infamous Bakshi production of Lord of the Rings.

**Joe R. Christopher**, a retired college teacher, minored in Latin for his B.A.--and took, in English, one course on classical mythology and four courses in classical literature in translation, along with the four courses in Latin. (He still remembers without pleasure his second-semester second-year Latin course in Vergil--there was only one other student in the class, so each got to translate for about twenty minutes per class meeting. And the other student was better at it than he was.) But his love of classical literature and mythology survived even that Vergil course. His interest in Darwin comes from other and later influences, partly a master's thesis in the Victorian period, partly a post-doctoral enjoyment of the geology sections of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. One warning about taking his presentation of classicism too idealistically: “Poseidon and Queen Cassiopeia” may be a response to the male chauvinism of a Greek myth, but one should not

consider that the Phoenicians were therefore psychologically healthier: they sacrificed some of their children to their gods, and had special sections in their graveyards for the burial of those children's bodies. *That* is not in Christopher's treatment of the myth.

**Janet Brennan Croft** is Head of Access Services at the University of Oklahoma Libraries, edits *Mythlore*, and has written extensively on Tolkien, Pratchett, and Rowling. Her poem "Arachne" marks a return to her study of classical mythology as an undergraduate (in fact she found the first draft tucked away in her college text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), and serves as a creative companion piece to her current scholarly work on the female mentoring relationship between Aphrodite and Psyche and their later incarnations from fairy tales to movies.

**Kathy Edwards**, a member of the Blue Ridge Potters Guild, lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and loves to do Fantasy art. Her web page is [KEdwardsStudio.com](http://KEdwardsStudio.com) - feel free to send me ideas for fantasy ceramics you would like to see made, since she enjoys unusual suggestions.

**Harry Steven Lazerus** was born in Brooklyn in the last century. He's lived in New York, Israel, Texas, and a work cubicle in California. Harry has degrees in physics and currently works as a software engineer in the space program but has also taught physics and astronomy at CCNY and picked apples in Kibbutz Tsuba. He has written four novels and several short stories. Two of those stories have been published in *AlienSkin Magazine* and *Anotherrealm*.

**Ryder Miller** is the editor of *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey*. He has published stories at: <http://lostsoulsmag.tripod.com/>, and articles and reviews at: *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*, *Raintaxi*, and *The Electronic Green Journal*. Miller is a freelance Environmental & Science Reporter, and Eco-critic, who has lived in San Francisco for a long time.

**Douglas "Dag" Rossman** has been retelling and, more recently, expanding upon the Norse myths and legends for the past thirty years before live audiences across the Midwest. He has two published collections of original short stories (many of which first appeared in *The Mythic Circle*) set in the Nine Worlds of Norse mythology. The most recent one, *The Dragonseeker Saga* (Skandisk, Bloomington, MN, 2009), has also been characterized as a young adult fantasy novel. The story in this current issue of *Mythic Circle* is a direct sequel to certain of the events taking place in that book.

**David Sparenberg** is a poet-playwright, Shakespearean actor, stage director, storyteller and workshop facilitator. His literary work has appeared in over 100 periodicals, journals and anthologies in nine countries and he is currently completing a final revision on his first novel, *The Dialogue Of Becoming Human*, a work containing aspects of Magic Realism, alchemy and archetypal psychology. David is currently involved with a final revision of his first novel. Anyone interested is invited to read the first two chapters at: <http://thediologueofbecominghuman.blogspot.com>.

**Todd W. Swanson** has been drawn to the mysteries of mythology since childhood. His essay on comparative religions won the Outstanding Senior Research Paper award at the Kiski School. His anthropology thesis for Carnegie Mellon University, "Deriving the Culture of Pre-Christian

Europe from Art and Artifacts,” focuses on the ‘personality’ of Teutonic mythology. Todd has continued his study of language and culture at Haskoli Islands in Reykjavik, traveling the Ring Road and visiting saga sites and other legendary places, in addition to visiting Tolkien’s Oxford homes, haunts and final resting place in England. An illustrator and professional writer based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Todd continues to draw inspiration from Tolkien and William Morris, while refining his understanding by reading Professor Tolkien’s critics and scholars, such as Humphrey Carpenter and Tom Shippey.

**Joan Marie Verba** has been a member of the Mythopoeic Society since 1975.

An experienced writer, she is the author of the nonfiction books *Voyager: Exploring the Outer Planets*, *Boldly Writing*, and *Weight Loss Success*, as well as the novels *Countdown to Action*, *Action Alert*, and *Deadly Danger*, plus numerous short stories and articles. She is a member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators.

## Dust

by

October Williams

If I could paint a picture of this room, I’d paint the fire  
In twisting shadow figures ’round the table  
A gust of wind would blow the dust  
About the broom into a woman leaning,  
Face turned toward the ground,  
Her fingers sable on the handle’s firelit gleaming:  
The homely details of the everyday  
Of people I have been among in dreaming –  
A civilization shaken in the dawn and gone away,  
Leaving a shadow people in a solid room  
Where firelight burns and flashes;  
Till dust returns to unswept dust  
About a broom, and ashes unto ashes.

# The Forgotten Wand

by

Kenneth Burtneiss

The Sorceress found it  
In the back of a drawer  
Among the discarded and forgotten,  
Her burgundy wand.

It felt light in her hand,  
She wondered if the wand still worked.  
She wondered if her hand still worked,  
It was spotted and bony and shook at times,

Used to be her fingers were long and supple  
And her hand was strong and sure  
Her wand would jump to her will  
And together they could stop the Moon

Or save a child, or throw down a devil  
But the wielding was hard, so hard  
And people never understood  
They only saw the miracle, not the sweat.



Gripping it tighter she could feel  
The magic still pulsing within the wand  
But change was a mirage, she thought.  
Life always returned to its old familiar pain.

Sadly, the old sorceress put the wand back  
Among the detritus of her life  
And with as much dignity she could muster  
Returned to the living room.

Where her recliner, her bowl of Cheetos,  
Her afghan and Oprah awaited her.

# Freedom and Slavery

by

David Sparenberg

In such a place as this; with hell all about and the air deadly with swirling demons; two fallen philosophers sit at a ruined table playing chess on a makeshift board. Because of this, or perhaps because of them, possibility once more enters the universe and the human, for the duration of a game of intelligence, is allowed to exist.

Now what would not be if the process was meaningless, the outcome controlled by absolutes, the endgame forever guaranteed? That would be the triumph of the inhuman, and our philosophers would have long since been submerged in silence and fallen prey to anonymous replacement.

Contrarily, what yet might open up if the walls fell and the demons of isolation dissolved in sunlight? And should the sterile board of poverty grow ivy in the interplay of black and white? Much like that ship in mythic time that bore the mystery of Dionysus and made dolphins out of men! And should the game pieces themselves lose the armor of their hereditary features in favor of more ancient archetypes—one sprouting the wings of an eagle, one growing the head of a lion, another that of a wolf, and another still capturing in carved majesty the hunting, sun-worshipping leap of the mighty orca?

That would be the advent of the transhuman, of which we do not yet have an adequate vocabulary to dialogue with the poetry of liberated earth or liberating angel. But of this much we can at least speculate with certainty—the certainty of something ageless thundering inside the heartbeat of something new: our philosophers might well be seduced to abandon the logic of conquest in favor of an instinctual imagination that would finally define the difference between freedom and slavery.

Human beings thought they would escape the terrors and the sublimity of nature—and the terror of nature’s greater than human beauty—so they built, in their generations, cities and became intoxicated with arrogance and greed.

Human beings thought that they would escape the ego-shattering love and body threatening fear of God. But no sooner did the death of God reach their ears than they were enslaved in the terror and the tyranny of their own. And the knowledge of human violence was global and the threat of annihilation—not so much wrath of God or judgment, but only the extravagance and folly of men—even as it appeared initially as a small storm on a distant horizon, has long since closed intimately into nightmare and is constantly covering the land.

Those who linger, as many of us do, in such a place as this; the addiction of nicotine smoke invading the lungs, the noises of madness subduing the soul; have surrendered everything to bondage and under anguished burdens come and go. Everything that is but one thing: the priceless, irascible dream of freedom. And rebellion is but an interpretation of a symbolizing language in which all is risked for the recover of all.

Beyond this, greenness is a medicine.

# The Walker in Shadows

by

Dag Rossman

Gudmund paused, panting, beside a moss-covered boulder that partially leaned over the trail up which he had been hastening for what seemed like an eternity. When he left his sod-roofed cabin in the valley that morning, the sky had been clear with just a hint of fall in the crisp air—a perfect day to make the trek up and over the rugged ridge of the Troll’s Teeth to pay a long-delayed visit to his brother Arne in Kverndal.

All had gone well until he stopped to eat the bread and cheese he had in his backpack. Knowing that he was more than half way to his destination, Gudmund decided he could afford to stretch out on a mossy bank and catch a quick nap. After all, his stomach was full and the sun was warm . . . what could possibly be the harm in it?

A man who had survived in this region to become Gudmund’s age—nearly forty—should have known better. The mountains are beautiful, ‘tis true enough, but they are also as changeable as a young maid’s fancies. Gudmund realized this the moment a sudden drop in temperature woke him from a deep slumber and pleasant dreams. The sun was nowhere to be seen, and not only were dark, lowering clouds filling the sky, but a dense mist had begun to spread along the ridge crest and flow down toward the valleys below.

Clearly it was high time for Gudmund to be on his way if he hoped to reach Kverndal before sunset. Moreover, these mountains were no place to be after dark, for many a troll called them home . . . and those fierce creatures loved nothing more than the taste

of human flesh! Gudmund started off at a brisk pace, muttering under his breath at his own carelessness, and praying the mist wouldn’t thicken so much that he couldn’t see the trail. He had traveled this way often enough to know that countless side paths branched off hither and thither, so he needed to be able to see familiar landmarks lest he stray off the right path.

Alas for Gudmund, the mist thickened to the point that all he could see of the trail was the part just a few feet in front of him. He was strongly tempted to hunker down right where he was and spend the night—cold and uncomfortable as that would be—and wait for the morning sun to disperse the mist. But then he heard a sound that chilled his blood and sent him scrambling blindly along what he hoped was still the right trail—it was the deep, hooting cries of trolls a’hunting!

Ordinarily, trolls venture out only at night for they are petrified of being struck by the sun’s rays, which are said to turn trolls to stone. But on days such as this, when the sun’s rays are blocked by mist or rain, some of the more daring trolls are emboldened to risk wandering out and about. Such were the ones that apparently had caught scent of Gudmund and were now on his trail—or so he surmised, for their hoots surely seemed to be drawing closer.

There, looming out of the mist on the trail just behind him, that huge dark shape could only be a troll! Panic seized Gudmund and he lurched ahead with no thought in his head now save to outrun and escape his pursuers. Soon he came to a fork in the trail and,



without hesitation, darted up the right-hand path, praying as he did so that his sinister followers would choose to take the other one—forgetting for the moment that the long-nosed trolls have a keen sense of smell.

The path ascended sharply, then seemed to level out—though where it was headed, Gudmund neither saw nor cared. Suddenly, a powerful hand reached out and grasped his arm in an iron grip while a soft, rasping voice whispered in his ear: “Not another step would I take on this path, my friend, unless you’re Hel-bound to spend this night in the icy embrace of Loki’s daughter. The cliff face is broken off here, and the next solid ground lies three hundred feet below. Come aside, come aside.”

Gudmund stammered his thanks to his rescuer, whom he could not see clearly because of the dense mist and the fact that the man’s face—if a man he was—was hidden by a deep hood. But even at that, Gudmund could almost have sworn that he saw two gleaming points of light deep within the hood where the man’s eyes should be. How could that be possible, thought Gudmund, I must be imagining things.

Any further speculation was cut short by a hissed exclamation from his companion: “It seems we have company. Here come three trolls. Hide yourself beneath the low overhang on the right, and don’t move no matter what happens. I’ll deal with these trolls. Quickly now!”

“He can’t have gone far,” snarled the leading troll, “the man odor is ripe in me nose. We’ll have him soon.”

“That’s quite far enough, Kraki,” rasped the hooded figure. “The man you seek is under my protection now.” So saying, he stepped fully into the trail and held up his staff forbiddingly. Its splayed, three-pronged head—carved and polished from a piece of moose antler—was suggestive of algiz, the rune of protection.

“Curse you for meddling again, Faragrim

... or whatever your real name is,” growled the troll. “Me and the boys picked up his trail first, so he’s our meat. Just because you call yourself the ‘Walker in Shadows’ don’t give you no right to spoil our hunt.”

“You know that I have every right to do so! These mountains are my home now, and I’ve told you before I will not tolerate having my human neighbors harassed or killed by trolls—or anyone else. Heed my warnings and you’ll have no trouble from me. Continue to ignore them and I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”

“Think yer somethin’, don’t you?” snarled Kraki. “Well, we’re not afraid of you or your silly-looking rune staff. We’re bigger than you and stronger than you, and there are three of us. So the way I figger it, when we get through with you there won’t be enough of you left to feed a rat. Get him, boys!”

Kraki stepped back to let his two followers lead the charge. Faragrim ducked aside from the rush of the first troll, and thrust his staff between the troll’s feet as he past. This caused the troll to lose his balance and stumble so badly that his momentum carried him—arms flailing wildly—over the edge of the cliff and onto the rocks far below.

Not pausing to see what had happened behind him, Faragrim met the second troll with a hard thrust to the gut with the blunt antler butt of his staff, the blow buckling the troll over. Before the troll could recover his breath, Faragrim struck him on the side of the head with a sweeping blow that brought the troll crashing to his knees. Then, reversing his staff, Faragrim jammed the three-pronged head into the troll’s left armpit and shoved so hard that this troll also toppled over the cliff, wailing as he fell.

When Kraki saw how easily Faragrim had disposed of his two henchmen, the troll suddenly decided he had urgent business elsewhere.

“It seems there is more than one reason to

fear a rune staff, eh, Kraki? Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh, heh, heh!" This raspy, chuckling taunt, eerily echoing through the mist, followed the troll down the trail and haunted his dreams for a long time thereafter.

\* \* \*

Lost in the dense mist capping the Troll's Teeth mountains—and still shaken by his narrow escape from a trio of hunting trolls—Gudmund was only too glad to follow his rescuer, the mysterious Faragrim, wherever he chose to lead.

"I could take you to your brother's place in Kverndal, where you said you were heading, but I fear you would find it very slow going because you cannot see well in this mist. We couldn't hope to get there before full dark and, when all the trolls are abroad, that would be tempting fate, indeed. No, I think you had better spend the night with me and complete your journey in the morning."

Gudmund expressed his gratitude for the invitation, and following closely behind the cloaked figure arrived at last at the narrow entrance to a cave high on the mountainside.

"This is where you live?" gasped Gudmund incredulously. "I thought only trolls lived in caves." The thought suddenly crossed his mind that he might just be in the company of an unusually cunning troll that had lured him to the cave for its own purposes; after all, Gudmund had never seen Faragrim unhooded.

Almost as if he could read his guest's mind, Faragrim reassured Gudmund with his raspy chuckle: "Heh, heh, heh, heh. Oh, I'm no troll—nor troll-friend either—as you have good reason to know. A cave is simply the most convenient place to stay for one such as I. Put aside your fears, my friend, and enter. Here you will be safe until the morrow."

Gudmund screwed up what remained of his courage and followed Faragrim into the cave, basically trusting in his rescuer's good

will but troubled nonetheless by his allusion to "one such as I." If one accepted Faragrim's declaration that he was no troll, what kind of being was he? The need for an answer to this question seemed to grow ever more pressing as the evening wore on.

Although Faragrim built a small fire to cook a meal for his guest, he himself did not partake of any food. Gudmund thought this strange but curbed his curiosity . . . for the moment. But, when it came time to bed down for the night, Faragrim insisted that Gudmund take the bear robe he offered and curl up on the only level surface to be seen.

"That's hardly fair," protested Gudmund. "Where will you sleep?"

"Oh, I never sleep," declared Faragrim quietly, "and heat or cold are as one to me. I keep the bear robe for use by guests such as yourself who drop by from time to time."

This was altogether too much for poor Gudmund, who blurted out: "By all the Aesir, Faragrim, what manner of man are you? You must not be human!"

"Oh, I'm a human being, my friend," Faragrim responded, "I'm just not a mortal man. I cannot be killed, for you see I am already dead."

Gudmund's jaw dropped at this statement and his eyes flicked nervously about as if he were seeking the quickest way to dodge past Faragrim and flee from the cave. The only walking dead men he had ever heard about were the draugs, and they were more dangerous than trolls!

Seeing Gudmund's unease, Faragrim sighed unhappily: "Ah, well, I can see I'm going to have to tell you a lot more of my story before you will feel safe spending the night here. You may as well sit down and make yourself comfortable, for the telling may take some time.

"Where should I begin? Well, I was born the heir to a throne in a land far to the south of here, but when I grew to manhood I slew my mother's father, the king, to avenge the

death of my own father, whom the king had cruelly mistreated for a long time and eventually had killed—even before I was born. Knowing that my grandfather’s minions and subjects would not take kindly to my kin-slaying—however justified I felt it to be—I bade farewell to my mother and set my face and feet toward the northlands to seek my future.

“After wending my way though dark, trackless forests, where I encountered countless wild beasts and even wilder men, I emerged into a more open, kindlier-seeming countryside where the people greeted a lone stranger as a friend. I was invited into their homes, given food and a bed, and urged to stay as long as I wished. This kind of hospitality was such a change from the way people had been treated in my home country—or from what I had experienced on my journey through the dark forests—that my heart warmed at once to the good folk of Oppland, which is what they called their part of Midgard.

“Needless to say, I lent a willing hand and a strong back to whatever farm chores were asked of me, but I was more willing than skilled, for as a young man I had been trained as a warrior, not a farmer. Still, my hosts were appreciative of my efforts, such as they were. When they learned more of my history, several of the elders asked if I would be willing to train and lead a small group of their young men to patrol the district with the goal of thwarting the periodic raids from wandering bands of outlaws or the occasional marauding troll. I was delighted at the prospect and agreed without hesitation.

“All went well for a time, and it seemed that an era of unparalleled peace and security had settled over Oppland. Then, disturbing rumors were heard of an especially vicious band of robbers led by a man called Hergrim Half-Troll, who by virtue of his mixed ancestry was bigger, stronger, and more

violent than any of the human flotsam that trailed in his wake. No man, woman, or child was safe when Hergrim and his band were out a-raiding. At each homestead they visited, the bandits seized the livestock and valuables, tortured and murdered the families, and burned the farm buildings to the ground. Oh, but it was wicked work, friend Gudmund, wicked!”

White-faced, Gudmund could only shake his head slowly in disbelief at the grimness of the scene playing out in his imagination.

Faragrim sighed, then resumed his narrative: “Following the trail of burned farms, it wasn’t long before my lads and I caught up with Hergrim’s marauders. We were too few in number and too inexperienced in the arts of war to risk a frontal assault, but we could—and did—harass them with arrows and cut down a few of their stragglers with our swords. When Hergrim sent back a larger body of men to engage us, we simply withdrew farther than the bandits were willing to follow—for they were reluctant to abandon the livestock they had stolen. And so the pursuit continued for several days until we came in sight of the shores of the Strandefjord. Their numbers dwindling from death and desertion, and exhausted from being unable to rest because of our relentless harassment, it was a rag-tag band of villains that followed Hergrim onto the small peninsula where we had harried them. Joined by local farmers whose homes had not yet been attacked, the pursuers now outnumbered the pursued, and of the final outcome there seemed little doubt.

“We made short work of Hergrim’s force, but the leader himself was a different matter. He was a great fighter—wicked fellow though he was—and, after several of our men had been cut down, I knew that I was the only one there who might have any hope of besting him. Just as Hergrim had some trollish ancestry, my father’s father was one of the Hill Giants . . . thus I, too, was bigger

and stronger than the average human. So it was that I called Hergrim out, and we set about trying to destroy each other with our swords. Grievously did we wound each other, and much of our lives' blood mingled on that field of battle ere I was finally able to cut off his head and put an end to his evil deeds . . . and then I collapsed beside him."

"Was that when you died?" asked Gudmund in a hushed tone.

"Not immediately, but before the sun had set that evening my mortal life was sped. Since I had died of battle wounds, my spirit fully expected that—just as in the stories—a beautiful valkyrie would come riding down out of the clouds to fetch me to Valhalla, whether body and spirit together or just my spirit was not clear to me. Anyway, that isn't what happened."

"Wh-what did happen, Faragrim?"

"Well, for some reason, my spirit remained tied to my body even as my corpse grew cold and my skin slowly turned gray and waxy. I wanted to protest, but the dead have no voice for the living . . . and there didn't seem to be anyone about on the spirit plane to whom I could complain. The good folk of Oppland were so filled with gratitude for what they called my 'noble sacrifice' that they hastily constructed an impressive gravhaug or barrow mound and, with all due ceremony, buried my body in a small chamber in its center. I had no idea what—if anything—would happen next, so my spirit withdrew into a meditative state to await developments. It was that or madness, I'm afraid."

"How terrifying," gasped Gudmund, "but something must have happened, for here you are."

"Indeed, yes, my friend, something did happen—and that is the strangest part of my tale. I don't know how much time passed in that trance-like state, but at some point I became aware of a grinding noise, as if rocks were shifting, followed shortly by a beam of

light that lit up the burial chamber. At first I thought it was grave robbers carrying a torch, but it soon became clear that the light was being cast by a full moon, and that my nocturnal visitor was a woman . . . and what a woman! Her long blonde hair shone like molten silver in the moonlight, and her voice was like the tinkling of silver bells. But there was iron in her, too, as events proved out.

"I have come to see what holds you here, Vidga. I sent one of my valkyries to bring you to Folkvang, for the spirit of a hero who has died on behalf of the helpless deserves no less, but she returned to me empty-handed, saying that something—or someone—would not let her touch you."

"I spoke to my Lady of Light, for it was Freyja herself who addressed me, and told the goddess that I had no idea what was wrong . . . but, before I could go on about my plight, another voice was heard in my barrow—another woman's voice: 'He may not know, Lady of the Vanir, but I do. In life he was a kin-slayer, and it is the nature of the *wyrd* which rules us all that such men must descend to Nastrand, to the Hall of Serpents, where they will spend eternity wading in its river of venom along with the other murderers and oath-breakers. Even you cannot defy the power of *wyrd*, Freyja . . . this man's spirit belongs in my realm, not yours.'

"If that were true, Hel, he would already be in your domain—or on his way—and you wouldn't have had to come up to Midgard to claim him,' Freyja responded calmly. 'No, it seems that something is preventing *wyrd* from being enforced in his case. Tell me, Vidga, did you, perchance, vow to avenge your father's slaying?'

"Puzzled, I responded: 'Indeed, Lady Freyja, I did just that as soon as I was old enough to take an oath.'

"Laughing in her silvery voice, Freyja declared: 'Well, there you have it, Hel. Had

Vidga failed to kill his maternal grandfather—his father’s slayer—he would have been an oath-breaker, and condemned to Nastrand. By fulfilling his vow, he became a kin-slayer, and bound to suffer the same fate. Thus Vidga was caught in the unavoidable paradox that he was doomed to fail no matter what choice he made. Such a situation disrupts the fundamental balance that governs the action of *wyrd*, and so it is that Vidga’s spirit cannot be sent down to Nastrand . . . yet neither is it free to ascend to Asgard. It seems that his spirit must remain in Midgard with his body.’

“‘So,’ hissed Hel, extending her right arm to point directly at me, ‘then—from this day forth—a draug he shall be, one of the living dead who lurk in their barrows during the light of day, only to come forth at night to terrorize any mortals they encounter. Faragrim—’Walker in Shadows’—I name him, a name that shall come to be uttered only in fear and trembling.’

“‘A cruel gift you bestow upon him, Hel,’ said Freyja sternly, ‘but while I cannot gainsay it, perhaps I can amend the harm you would wreak. A good man Vidga was in life, and a good man Faragrim shall be in death. The fear and trembling you have decreed will be that of the trolls and other enemies of humankind, for they are the ones upon whom he shall prey.’

“‘Curse your meddling, Freyja,’ snarled Hel. ‘He is mine, I tell you, and I have yet to bestow his naming gift.’ Fending off the Vanir goddess with her left arm, Hel bent over me and planted a kiss full upon my lips. Though oblivious as my body had become to cold, I could swear that Hel’s lips were like

glacial ice that had never felt the touch of the sun. Then her voice rang out: ‘Arise, Faragrim, and go forth as the draug I named you.’ But for me, frozen by her kiss, body and spirit remained asunder . . . and I could not heed her command.

“‘Oh, Hel,’ laughed Freyja, ‘know you not that your kiss can only bring death, not life?’ Then the Lady of Light bent down and gently kissed me, too, just where Hel’s lips had met mine moments before. A warm glow momentarily passed through me as my body and spirit knitted together. Freyja took me by both hands, saying: ‘Arise, my hero, and go forth to help those to whom I have pledged your protection.’ And at once I sat up.

“‘Think you’ve won him, don’t you?’ grumped Hel. ‘But you mark my words, both of you. In the end, Faragrim will come to me.’ And, turning to clamber out of the barrow, Hel took her leave.

“Freyja called after her: ‘That remains to be seen, Hel, for only time can tell. But if he does, it will be only of his own choosing.’ Then giving me a hug, she, too, departed, and I was left alone to begin my new existence and carry out the charge Freyja had laid upon me.”

Gudmund let out the breath he had been holding in. “Well, I guess that means you are safe from Hel’s wrath, doesn’t it? Why in Odin’s name would anyone choose to go to her?”

“I’m sure you are right, my friend,” mused Faragrim thoughtfully, “but I must confess there are times when I wonder, I wonder . . . .”

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