

# CORNCRAKE



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ISSUE 11

AR Duncan's  
Eagle's Flight

Eric Falden  
Nathan Hood  
AR Green  
LR Scott  
Rob Floyd  
Shieldmaiden

NESTING IN THE OAK OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

# Nathan Hood hosts The Merry Corncrakes Podcast

Treat yourself to interviews with feature authors and audiobooks of stories appearing in the Corncrake, together with sophisticated discussions on writing and story creation. Watch it now!



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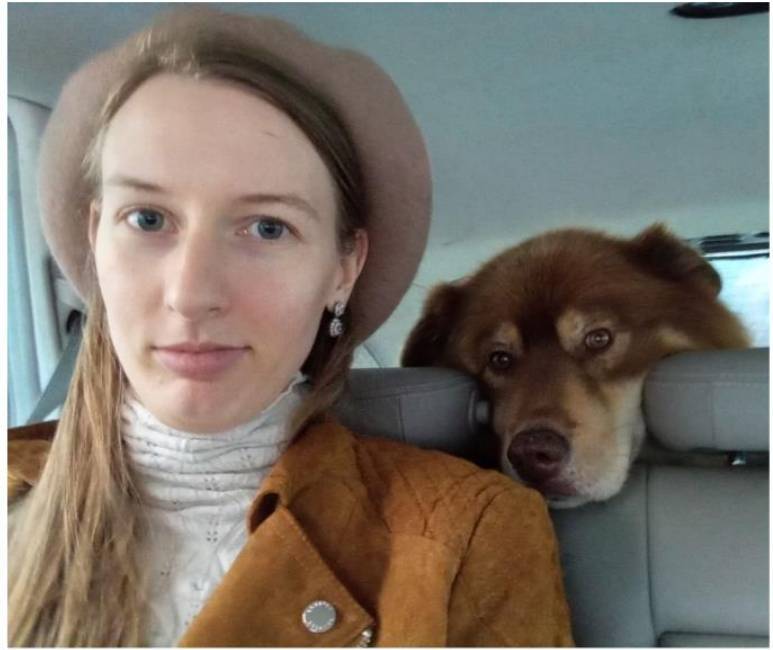
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“Not the bee upon the blossom,  
In the pride o' sunny noon;  
Not the little sporting fairy,  
All beneath the simmer moon;  
Not the poet, in the moment  
Fancy lightens in his e'e,  
Kens the pleasure, feels the rapture,  
That thy presence gi'es to me.”  
— Robert Burns

# Editor's Note



New year! New mag! Just kidding, this year the mag will possess the same goodness as the last, with some updates and additions. In order to encourage the observation of the important holidays and feasts in our country, I have added all those for January in this issue, and have included some information about the historic county of Cornwall. As Burns Night is in January, Robert Burns' *Address to a Haggis*, spoken during the dinner, is included with an introduction by Nathan Hood. The Holy Haggis of King Arthur's mountain, by your own editor, tells the tale of how the haggis came to be.

*Eagle's Flight* by AR Duncan, is set in ancient times in England, and concerns sword fights and the threat of great change. *The Dark Dreams of a King* is the first in a series by AR Green, so stick around for the next few issues to catch the whole thing. *The Encircling Cells* by Eric Falden brings to us the conflict between the peace of solitude and the sharing of the load brought about by community. *The Quokka Plants a Wee Castle* by Shieldmaiden is a fun short story of the great deeds done by that character. *The Great Black Cat of the Witching Hour* by Ben Wheeler is here to thrill us with terror, and LR Scott is back with another short story. A poem by AR Green, *Torn*, completes this bulging issue.

The art interview is with Rob Floyd, a man who has painted for many years, and his works have appeared in prestigious collections throughout the land. Finally, look out for a poem by John Keats, *Isabella, or The Pot of Basil*, with art of the scene by Millais, Waterhouse and Holman Hunt.

## Call of the Shieldmaiden

Editor-in-Chief

*toilichte a leughadh*







# Cornwall

The Flag of Cornwall, also known as Saint Piran's Flag, is the flag of Cornwall, a region in the southwest of England. The flag features a white cross on a black background, symbolizing the patron saint of tin miners, Saint Piran.

The earliest known description of the flag, referred to as the Standard of Cornwall, was written in 1838 by Davies Gilbert in his book "The Parochial History of Cornwall". The flag is attributed to Saint Piran, a 5th-century Cornish abbot. The design is also similar to the coat of arms of the Saint-Perran (or Saint-Pezran) family from Cornouaille in Brittany, recorded from the 15th century.

## Design

The flag features a vertical white cross on a black background, with no additional symbols or emblems. The white cross represents the purity of tin, while the black background represents the black ore from which tin is extracted.

Land's End is the westernmost point of mainland England, and the Lizard its southernmost. Twenty-eight miles south-west of Land's End lie the Isles of Scilly.

Both coasts provide breathtaking scenery, its granite cliffs beaten by the full force of the Atlantic. Southern Cornwall is a little more protected and has long, twisting creeks bringing the tide deep into the land, which were once ideal for smugglers. Inland are farms and moorland.

The old industries were tin mining (now practically ended after 3,000 years), fishing, and subsistence grazing on the moors.

Places of significance are: Bodmin Moor; Lands End; Lanhydrock house; Mevagissey; Merry Maidens stone circle; St Michael's Mount.

The name "Cornwall" is believed to come from the local tribal name "Cornovii," meaning "horn-people," and the Old English word "Wealas," meaning "foreigners."

Medieval castles, including Launceston Castle, Tintagel Castle, and Restormel Castle

The region is also home to many ancient settlements, including Chysauster



Ancient Village, which dates back to the Iron Age and Romano-British periods.

Cornwall's mining heritage is still visible today, with many abandoned mines, engine houses, and industrial structures dotting the landscape.

Cornwall was a separate kingdom, until about the 9th century when it joined Wessex. There have been recent efforts by Cornishmen to reassert their distinctive identity and even revive the Cornish language (similar to Welsh), which died out as a language of conversation in the 18th century.

The Prince of Wales is Duke of Cornwall

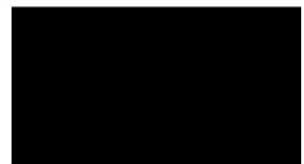
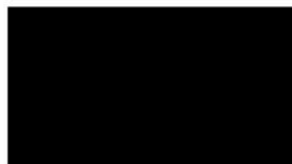
**Main Towns:** Bodmin (main town), Bude, Falmouth, Fowey, Launceston, Lostwithiel, Mousehole, Padstow, Penzance, Redruth, St Austell, St Ives, Truro, St Neots, Saltash, Tintagel.

**Rivers are** Tamar, Camel, Fal, Fowey, Truro, Kenwyn, Allen.

**Highest Point:** Brown Willy, 1,375 feet.

**Flower:** Cornish Heath

**Day:** 5th March (St Piran's Day)





# Important Dates This Month

**Epiphany**, also known as Three Kings' Day, is a Christian feast day celebrated on **January 6th**. It marks the visit of the Magi, or wise men, to the baby Jesus, and is considered the culmination of the 12 days of Christmas. In Scotland, Epiphany is sometimes referred to as "Little Christmas" and is celebrated with traditional foods such as shortbread and whisky. In Wales, Epiphany is known as "Dydd Gwyl y Rhyfel" (Day of the Epiphany) and is marked with singing and storytelling. Epiphany is a Christian feast day commemorating the visit of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the wedding at Cana.

In Western Christianity, the feast commemorates principally (but not solely) the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child, and thus Jesus Christ's physical manifestation to the Gentiles. It is sometimes called Three Kings' Day, and in some traditions celebrated as Little Christmas. Moreover, the feast of the Epiphany, in some denominations, also initiates the liturgical season of Epiphanytide.

In many Western Churches, the eve of the feast is celebrated as Twelfth Night (Epiphany Eve) on January 5. The Monday after Epiphany is known as Plough Monday.

Popular Epiphany customs include Epiphany singing, chalking the door, having one's house blessed, consuming Three Kings Cake, winter swimming, as well as attending church services. It is customary for Christians in many localities to remove their Christmas decorations on Epiphany Eve (Twelfth Night), although those in other Christian countries historically remove them on Candlemas, the conclusion of Epiphanytide. According to one seventeenth-century tradition, it is inauspicious to remove Christmas decorations before Epiphany Eve and those who do not remove them on that date have the opportunity take them down on Candlemas.

**Plough Monday** is the traditional start of the English agricultural year. Plough Monday is the **first Monday after Epiphany**, which is on 6 January. References to Plough Monday date back to the late 15th century. The day before Plough Monday is referred to as Plough Sunday, in which a ploughshare is brought into the local Christian church with prayers for the blessing of human labour, tools, as well as the land.

Ploughs were traditionally taken around by Plough Monday mummers and molly dancers in parts of Eastern England and in some places were used as a threat: if householders refused to donate to the participants their front path would be ploughed up.

The day traditionally saw the resumption of work after the Christmas period in some areas, particularly in northern England and East England. Though mostly associated with the East of England, Plough Monday celebrations are also known elsewhere in the country, for instance in Warwickshire, Worcestershire, and Cornwall. The customs observed on Plough Monday varied by region, but a common feature to a lesser or greater extent was for a plough to be hauled from house to house in a procession, collecting money. They were often accompanied by musicians, an old woman or a boy dressed as an old woman, called the "Bessy," and a man in the role of the "fool." 'Plough Pudding' is a boiled suet pudding, containing meat and onions. It is from Norfolk and is eaten on Plough Monday.

In the fifteenth century, churches lit candles called "plough lights" to bless farmworkers. Some parishes kept a plough in the church for those who did not own one, and in some parishes, the plough was paraded around the village to raise money for the church. This practice seems to have died out after the Reformation.

While religious Plough Monday celebrations were suppressed, private observances continued. The most common custom involved dragging a plough and collecting money. The Plough Monday celebrants were known by a variety of regional names, including Plough Boys, Bullocks, Lads, Jacks, Stots, and Witches. The Plough Boys usually dressed in costume, often with one or more in female clothing.

Mr. Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* (1777) by the antiquary John Brand mentions a northern English Plough Monday custom also observed in the beginning of Lent. The FOOL PLOUGH goes about: a pageant consisting of a number of sword dancers dragging a plough, with music; one, sometimes two, in very strange attire; the Bessy, in the grotesque habit of an old woman, and the Fool, almost covered with skins, a hairy cap on, and the tail of some animal hanging from his back. The office of one of these characters, in which he is very assiduous, is to go about rattling a box amongst the spectators of the dance, in which he receives their little donations.

In the Isles of Scilly, (off coast of Cornwall) locals would cross-dress and then visit their neighbours to joke about local occurrences. There would be guise dancing and considerable drinking and revelry.



**Burns Nicht**, or in Gaelic **Oidhche na Taigheise**, is a traditional Scottish celebration supper held annually on January 25th. A Burns supper is a celebration of the life and poetry of the poet Robert Burns (25 January 1759 – 21 July 1796), the author of many Scots poems.

The first supper was held in memoriam at Burns Cottage in Ayrshire by Burns's friends, on 21 July 1801, the fifth anniversary of his death. After discovering their mistake in the date of his birth it was changed, and it has been a regular occurrence ever since.

Burns suppers may be formal or informal. Both typically include haggis (celebrated by Burns in *Address to a Haggis*), Scotch whisky and the recitation of Burns's poetry. They occasionally end with dancing or a cèilidh.

Formal suppers follow a standard order.

Piping in guests: A bagpiper generally greets the guests, who gather and mix as at any informal party. At less formal gatherings, traditional Scottish music is played.

Host's welcoming speech: The host says a few words, welcoming everyone to the supper and perhaps stating the reason for it. In some regions, particularly the west coast of Scotland and Outer Hebrides, "O Flower of Scotland" is sung immediately preceding the Selkirk Grace.

All the guests are then seated and grace is said, usually using the "Selkirk Grace [sco]", a well-known thanksgiving said before meals that uses the Scots language. Although attributed to Burns, the Selkirk Grace was already known in the 17th century as the "Galloway Grace" or the "Covenanters' Grace". It came to be called the Selkirk Grace because Burns was said to have delivered it at a dinner given by the 4th Earl of Selkirk.

Selkirk Grace

Some hae meat an canna eat,  
And some wad eat that want it;  
But we hae meat, and we can eat,  
And sae the Lord be thankit.

The supper starts with the soup course. Normally a Scottish soup, such as Scotch broth, potato soup, cullen skink, or cock-a-leekie, is served.

Piping in the haggis

Everyone stands as the haggis is brought in. It is usually brought in by the cook on a large dish, generally while a bagpiper leads the way to the host's table, where the haggis is laid down. "A Man's A Man for A' That", "Robbie Burns Medley" or "The Star O' Robbie Burns" might be played. The host, or perhaps a guest, then recites the *Address to a Haggis*.

At the line *His knife see rustic Labour dight*, the speaker normally draws and sharpens a knife. At the line *An' cut you up wi' ready slicht*, he plunges it into the haggis and cuts it open from end to end. When done properly, the "ceremony" is a highlight of the evening.

At the end of the poem, a whisky toast will be proposed to the haggis, and the company will sit down to the meal. The haggis is traditionally served with mashed potatoes (tatties) and mashed swede turnip (neeps).

A dessert course, cheese courses, coffee, etc., may also be part of the meal. The courses normally use traditional Scottish recipes. For instance, dessert may be cranachan or tipsy laird (whisky trifle), followed by oatcakes and cheese, all washed down with the "water of life" (uisge beatha), Scotch whisky.

When the meal reaches the coffee stage, various speeches and toasts are given.

The main speaker gives a speech remembering some aspect of Burns's life or poetry. It may be either light-hearted or serious, and may include the recitation of a poem or a song by Burns. A toast to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns then follows.

**Address to the Lassies:** This was originally a short speech given by a male guest in thanks to the women who had prepared the meal. However, it is now much more wide-ranging and generally covers the male speaker's view on women. It is normally amusing and not offensive, particularly since it will be followed by a reply from the "lassies" concerned. The men drink a toast to the women's health.

**Reply to the Laddies:** This is occasionally (and humorously) called the "Toast to the Laddies". Like the previous toast, it is generally now quite wide-ranging. A female guest will give her views on men and reply to any specific points raised by the previous speaker. Like the previous speech, it should be amusing but not offensive. Quite often, the speakers giving this toast and the previous one will collaborate so that the two toasts complement each other.

**Works by Burns:** After the speeches there may be singing of songs by Burns (such as "Ae Fond Kiss", "Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation", and "A Man's A Man for A' That") and more poetry (such as "To a Mouse", "To a Louse", "Tam o' Shanter", "The Twa Dogs", and "Holy Willie's Prayer").

That may be done by the individual guests or by invited experts, and it goes on for as long as the guests wish. It may include other works by poets influenced by Burns, particularly poets writing in Scots.

Finally, the host will call on one of the guests to give the vote of thanks. Then, everyone is asked to stand, join hands, and sing "Auld Lang Syne" to bring the evening to an end.

# Address to a Haggis

Robert Burns with intro by Nathan Hood

At the heart of the Burns Supper ceremony is the haggis. At the apposite moment in proceedings, the oval shaped balloon filled with rich, juicy minced meat is paraded into the room. For those who can afford it, a piper plays the bagpipes, walking in front of this most humble of Scottish meals. It is marched up to the top table where it is presented. There a fellow will deliver the 'Address to the Haggis', Robert Burns's poem in praise of this familiar Scottish food. Brandishing the knife, he swishes left and right before plunging it into the bulging sack. Fresh steam rises as the rich entrails spill out onto the plate.

In Burns's day, haggis was a staple food. Made of oatmeal and the leftover parts of a sheep, the poor could afford it. Moreover, it filled stomachs, warming chilled bones in the depths of Scottish winters. Burns was a farmer who celebrated the simple things in life through the Scots tongue, whether it be the fieldmouse scurrying before the plough, the romantic tryst with a country woman, or the illusion of wealth and status in the face of honest virtue. He longed for a Scotland independent from Britain, and many of his poems draw attention to the unique martial and cultural heritage of the Scots. His poem about the haggis brings all these aspects of Burns's character together.

After the address, the haggis is served to the gathered assembly along with neeps and tatties – mashed potato and turnip. Together, they form a scrumptious meal, especially with a glass of whisky to wash it down! A great way to remember Scotland's national poet.

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,  
Great Chieftain o' the Puddin'-race!  
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,  
Painch, tripe, or thairm:  
Weel are ye wordy of a grace  
As lang's my arm.  
The groaning trencher there ye fill,  
Your hurdies like a distant hill,  
Your pin wad help to mend a mill  
In time o' need,  
While thro' your pores the dews distil  
Like amber bead.  
His knife see Rustic-labour dight,  
An' cut ye up wi' ready slight,  
Trenching your gushing entrails bright,  
Like onie ditch;  
And then, O what a glorious sight,  
Warm-reekin, rich!  
Then, horn for horn, they stretch an' strive:  
Deil tak the hindmost, on they drive,  
Till a' their weel-swallow'd kytes belyve  
Are bent like drums;  
Then auld Guidman, maist like to rive,  
Bethankit hums.  
Is there that owre his French ragout,  
Or olio that wad staw a sow,  
Or fricassee wad mak her spew  
Wi' perfect sconner,  
Looks down wi' sneering, scornfu' view  
On sic a dinner?  
Poor devil! see him owre his trash,  
As feckless as a wither'd rash,  
His spindle shank a guid whip-lash,  
His nieve a nit;  
Thro' bluidy flood or field to dash,  
O how unfit!  
But mark the Rustic, haggis-fed,  
The trembling earth resounds his tread,  
Clap in his wallee niver a blade,  
He'll make it whistle;  
An' legs, an' arms, an' heads will sned,  
Like taps o' thrissle.  
Ye Pow'rs wha mak mankind your care,  
And dish them out their bill o' fare,  
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware  
That jaups in luggies;  
But, if ye wish her gratefu' prayer,  
Give her a Haggis!

Fair is your honest happy face  
Great chieftain of the pudding race  
Above them all you take your place  
Stomach, tripe or guts  
Well are you worthy of a grace  
As long as my arm  
The groaning platter there you fill  
Your buttocks like a distant hill  
Your skewer would help to repair a mill  
In time of need  
While through your pores the juices emerge  
Like amber beads  
His knife having seen hard labour wipes  
And cuts you up with great skill  
Digging into your gushing insides bright  
Like any ditch  
And then oh what a glorious sight  
Warm steaming, rich  
Then spoon for spoon they stretch and strive  
Devil take the last man, on they drive  
Until all their well swollen bellies  
Are bent like drums  
Then, the old gent most likely to rift (burp)  
Be thanked, mumbles  
Is there that over his French Ragout  
Or olio that would sicken a pig  
Or fricassee would make her vomit  
With perfect disgust  
Looks down with a sneering scornful opinion  
On such a dinner  
Poor devil, see him over his trash  
As weak as a withered rush (reed)  
His spindle-shank a good whiplash  
His clenched fist the size of a nut.  
Through a bloody flood and battle field to dash  
Oh how unfit But take note of the strong haggis fed  
Scot  
The trembling earth resounds his tread  
Clasped in his large fist a blade  
He'll make it whistle  
And legs and arms and heads he will cut off  
Like the tops of thistles  
You powers who make mankind your care  
And dish them out their meals  
Old Scotland wants no watery food  
That splashes in dishes  
But if you wish her grateful prayer  
Give her a haggis!



# The Holy Haggis of King Arthur's Mountain

## -Shieldmaiden

Ballock McButterbean and Haggis the Bruce were clambering up King Arthurs Seat.

"Mate" puffed McButterbean "this is tough going!"

Haggis the Bruce stopped to yawn "Well at least if we have to run away we can just go downhill."

"That's hardly better! We could start rolling!"

McButterbean's eyes started from his head.

They both travelled in silence for some time, the sun peeked out at them, and the wind rustled their fur, and the long grass around them.

"Why are we running again?" asked Haggis the Bruce.

"The fairies," McButterbean hissed. "And they come out of the mountain quite near the green chapel!"

"Well, we are almost there" said Haggis the Bruce, as his little legs trotted over the grass he gazed up at the chapel. "We should pray at the ruins for protection"

McButterbean grunted in agreement and they struggled on, their little legs were not cut out for such a steep journey. They reached the green chapel and stood outside of the ruins, their little sides heaving, and then they smoothed the fur on their heads and shook any loose soil off their feet and went inside.

They knelt, as best as a haggis can kneel, and McButterbean began to pray aloud. "Great Chieftain of the haggis race, we are haunted by the fairies, who seek to take us under the earth, never to be seen again. We are but humble haggises, whomst have done no great deeds, but we ask for your protection nonetheless."

A faint rustling sounded behind them and they lept around in great fear. An old man was sitting on part of the crumbled wall.

"My good haggises" he said "fear not, I am no fairy" Haggis the Bruce let out a sigh of relief.

"Why are you young haggis up here anyway? So close to the fairies gate" the old man asked.

"We came to pay our respects," said McButterbean. "We heard the story of the great author and we marveled at his great feats of bravery. We thought we too could be brave."

"Now that we are there tho, we jump at every sound, les we are taken to the underworld" Haggis the Bruce said.

The old man smiled at them, the deep lines in his face and ancient clothes gave him an otherworldly appearance, but they felt comforted by him. "I am sure God will reward your great courage! Even Arthur felt fear at times! You will be protected from the fairies, when you are in need of help, it will come to you. Go forth in peace!"

As they left the capel, the sun slanted some rays down upon them. They felt happy and alive.

"Shall we go down the mountain the way we came up?" wondered McButterbean

"What if we go down the other way! We are protected now!" said Haggis the Bruce.

The two began to walk down past the cliff face, the fabled gateway to the underworld. The sun had stayed out and the wind was quite pleasant.

Their little haggis eyes could not quite see far enough to the Fourth of Firth, but they enjoyed the view as far as they could see it.

A faint sound caught their ears, was it the neigh of a horse?

They turned.

The cliff face was glimmering and a group of horses was moving out of it, their bridles silver and gemstone covered, as the horse came out further their rides could be seen, they dressed in airy gowns and long hair decorated with flowers.

McButterbean began to scream "fairies" he shrieked "RUN BROTHER RUN FOR YOUR LIFE"

The harsh neigh of a horse spurred them into action, and as the fairies bore down upon them they scattered, one to the right, the other left.

The mountain was steep and McButterbean was forced to run around the mountain as he ran down. Aat one stage he almost ran smack bang into Haggis the Bruce going the other way, but at the last minute he leapt, and sailed over Haggis the Bruce. On and on he ran. It was hard to tell where the fairies were as hoof beats and neighing and occasionally the ribbon of someone's robes could be heard or felt.

The running kept getting easier and at last they reached the bottom, pausing to listen. All was silent and looking around he could see nothing. A rustle in front of him made him jump, and haggis the Bruce appeared, looking worn out.

"Are they gone?" McButterbean asked.

Haggis nodded and stepped away from the mountain onto the flat path. He tipped over and fell. Lying on his back he moved his legs randomly, his paws flopping about.

McButterbean was catching his breath and idly watching his brother when he stopped short. "Haggis the Bruce, your legs are wrong! Did you break them? Two are shorter than the others!"

Haggis the Bruce bent his head up and gazed lazily at his feet, "Well, that's odd, I am not hurt."

"Let me inspect them" McButterbean took a step over to his brother and promptly fell over.

"Your legs are shorter on one side too" said Haggis the Bruce.

The two brothers lay staring at their legs, sure enough, the legs on Haggis the Bruce's right side were shorter and on mc butter bean, the left ones were short.

"Maybe that is why it was so easy to run around the mountain," McButterbean said. "If this doesn't go away we will have to live on the sides of hills and mountains and only meet on occasions."

Their legs never did go back to the right length, much to the joy of the other haggises, and all the baby haggises they had were affected in the same way, but because they had been blessed by God in the green chapel, their descendants grew many and strong, and in due course all of scotland was filled with two species of haggis, as, just like the brothers, it was very hard to meet when their legs forced them to go in opposite directions.

# Eagle's Flight

AR Duncan





A thick, cold haar had rolled in from the sea overnight, obscuring the coastline from even the piercing eyes of the eagle that soared from his roost on the grand branches of the aged oak tree and away from the coast. As the land beneath him gently sloped upwards he flew with it and before long he broke through the cloud and was met with glorious sun. Though not yet at its midday peak, its touch was still powerful and it would not be long until the lowland fog was burnt away by the flames of purity and the land below could breathe again. As the hand of the sun enveloped him, the eagle's feathers shone in their rich splendour. The feathers on his nape glowing golden. His beady eyes scanned the shrubland below missing nothing, not a hare, not a pheasant, not a mouse. The touch of the wind through the heather caused it to rustle into life and even the dancing of each purple flower was caught by the eagle's sight. The low-lying, rounded, hills rising up from the coast continued on for many more mile into the distance where they were lost to the horizon. The land was thick with heather in full bloom, a carpet of purple flowers that was fit for the king's hall. Several travellers, accompanied by a host of pack animals, were walking along the road that carved its way through the sea of purple before it descended into a lightly wooded glen. To and from the great town of Stratysca they went heading away to far off towns in far off lands with wares of many kinds to buy and sell. Those weary merchants who were coming to the end of their journeys looked down at the fog that hid the town with relief and looked at those just starting their travels with cynicism. After their business was concluded in the town each of them would return to the road again with the same naïve look as those they now spurned. Sporadically placed on the tops of hills were menhirs, stone circles, and cairns, their stark grey standing against the deep greens, purples, and browns of the land's natural clothing. Some were decorated with intricate patterns and pictures in the distinctive blue of woad. The painted figure sat still in their prisons and watched the world pass with dead eyes. All this movement and the coming and goings of man was of no interest to the eagle and his animal nature, but still nothing missed his eye.

The wind caught him, and he began to sweep gracefully to the east. Sheep, goats, and cattle had been let out to pasture on the slopes, meandering their way around the hillside. On a small hillock growing out of the sloping ground, a hare darted out of the brown underbrush into a circle of open green grass, then came to a standstill, ears twitching. This caught the eagle's attention and beginning to beat his wings, he turned towards it. On the grassy, flat top of the hillock six men were occupied themselves about a low stone circle. Inside the circle two of the young men were engaged in fencing practice. Topless, their pale bodies stood out like the menhirs that dotted the hilltops. The blue woad

decorating their skin was painted in dozens of patterns and symbols but upon of their torsos, one had the form of a horse and an the other showed an eagle. Both held a sword of dull wood in their right hand, and a shield in their left. Whenever these practise implements collided, a dry clack resounded off to the surrounding hills and one of these sudden noises startled the hare. It dashed off into the heather as quickly as it had arrived and blended into maze of plants. The eagle though had seen its prey and began to dive.

As the shadow of the eagle flew over the two duellists, it went unnoticed by them, both too intently focussed on the others moves, but one of those around the outside of the circle bore witness to it. Rising from the grass with his boy, a young man took several steps into the heather knocked an arrow, took aim, and loosed it. The arrow flew straight, and a few heartbeats later the body of an eagle hit the ground. The hare continued its panicked flight oblivious to its saviour.

Hoc returned to his seat on the grass, and beginning to pluck his catch took out a pouch to keep the good feathers. To his right, Talhearn sat with his back to the circle, staring off from the hills, whether savouring the scenery or lost in dreams of romance and heroism, it was likely not even the gods could tell. And to his left sat the brothers, Hewarch and Talisen. Both were staring intently at the fight in front of them and would occasionally lean over to mutter an inaudible comment in the other's ear, often resulting in the slight chuckle that only twins could understand. After a moment of little movement, one of the fighters made a thrust with his sword. It threaded between shield and sword and hit him square in the chest, causing a pained exclamation the man as he lost his balance and stumbled backwards, falling onto the grass.

Anaerin took a step back, relaxed, and stared down toward his beaten foe and friend. Savouring victory, he felt a cold embrace over his body as he noticed the breeze that was blowing up from sea and bringing the chill of the haar that smothered the coastline. The dye on his chest had begun to peel and his dark hair ran with sweat that flowed down over his face and dripped to the ground beneath. He took control of his breathing and as the panting began to slow he looked up to the sky and basked in the warmth of the sun's gaze. To practice their art on the top of a hill under the blue sky was to practice in the direct view of the gods, and he knew that they must be proud of him for another victory. They had blessed him to be the tallest, strongest, and fastest of all the young men, and he was the chosen of his town. His grandfather had been a great warrior, before his heroic deaths in battle, and his father too had been known as quite the fighter. Anerin was the culmination of an auspicious family line and was certain of the glorious destiny that awaited him, surpassing that of all his

ancestors. The time for reflection on his victory was cut short as a cut came directly towards his head and with that he was back into the fight.

As the dance began again, Hoc's attention turned back to his catch. His nimble fingers worked quickly and his hands did their job mechanically and with precision. If anyone had taken the time to watch him they would have noticed that he looked at anything except the fight and his catch, but the scenery and the fight were of too much interest for anyone to pay attention to a young servant. His eyes and brow tensed up as he stared down at the carcass. He deeply regretted needing to kill such a beautiful creature but his master needed more feathers. Hoc drifted off into his work for a moment until a cry from the circle, brought him back. Staring up he saw the two fighters circling one another, and after a quick misstep from Anaerin, the point of Merddin's sword passed between Anaerin's guard and planted itself firmly into his shoulder.

Hoc was glad his father was not here to witness that. Eanman had served Anaerin's father and now had promised to do the same for his son. He took that promise seriously. And even now when Anaerin, his charge, had become his master, his every waking moment was spent worrying how about the greatness that was to be forced upon him. Yet in this slice of time, sitting here watching Anaerin, Eanman convinced himself that he had failed. He had taught Anaerin every he knew about fighting but he could not bare to watch him fence. He would wince with every foot Anaerin put wrong. Each time Anaerin failed to guard himself. And moment that Anaerin let his cockiness get the better of him. Eanmund's mind was never short of conjured images of what would have happened had the fight been more than a practice. Anaerin seemed not to care though, as all young men he felt the weight of destiny too strongly.

As Anaerin fell he let out a short cry.

"It is good that Eanman was not present for that. He would be letting out curses and pleas for divine intervention".

Merddin stood over his fallen friend and a wry smile came upon his lips. Anaerin scowled back. Merddin put out his hand and grasped Anaerin's, and without a noise he was on his feet once more. The young men stood together in the centre of the ring and looked out down to the coast that was beginning to emerge from the mists. For the moment they were another pair of hilltop monoliths, placed there to please the gods, that they may bless the people of the land. After both had caught their breath, the two began to fight again and action returned to the clear hilltop. They sparred for some time before they left the ring and two other boys took their place. Until the sun was at its peak, they continued in this way.

Down the hillside the fog had lifted and their homeland lay beneath them on the small strip of land between moorland and sea. Throughout the moors ran burns that rippled with clear water and became streams that whispered to anyone that had ears to hear them. These streams came together to create the river that flowed lazily across short stretch of low lying ground to the sea. Where the two waters met, the town of Stratysca covered the edges of both, her bridges crisscrossing the river and her harbour protruding out into the rolling waves. The tracks over the land and up to the hills were full of people going about their daily duties and once the practice was done the six boys joined them and began the journey home.

After twenty minutes of silently wading through heather, the boys hit a small cart track, that would wind them down from the moor and back home. The chill breeze was gone and the day was bright and warm, and not a cloud could be seen. The fog of the morning had been completely removed under the sun's glare, and the view out and down to Stratysca was clear. The boys stopped to watch as small fishing vessels flowed in and out of the town's harbour. With colourful sails, they dotted the sea like flowers in a great meadow of blue and white, twisting as they were caught in the wind. Through this calm meadow struck a great speeding beast with two masts and uncountable oars. An animalistic ship from far across the sea heading for the harbour, its hold pregnant with men and goods both wondrous and mundane. Even now, when ships as awe-inspiring as the one below had become regular visitors to their town, the boys felt compelled to watch.

"They are here at your father's invite are they not?" Anaerin asked to Merddin.

"They are".

The men of Treowick had visited Stratysca many hundreds of time over the past decades, mostly as traders and travellers, and even as raiders once or twice, but this arrival was different. Rumours of conflict with the Meildun were all the talk in the town. Relationships had been deteriorating over the spring months and now as summer began her slow crawl across the land, moves were being made for war. Armel, Merdinn's father and king of Stratysca, had invited the foreigners over not as traders but as mercenaries a decision that had not helped to improve the relationship with Meildun.

"They should not be here. We will win our own wars without the need for their interference" Anaerin proclaimed loudly.

"Maybe, but we do not have the men fight. They have twice the men as us and if we do not accept the Seaxing support, they will. And then we will surely lose".

The men returned to silence once more as the great beast disappeared into the shadow of the harbour, her oars crashing into the still waters and setting the fishing



boats to rocking. They all got to their feet and began walking once more. Their route took them along the top of several ridges, before dipping down into a wooded glen beside the river that their town lay upon. Their journey was an uneventful trek through the moors and woodlands that they passed every day. The heather flowered as it did every summer. The pine trees lay still as they did every day. And the river ebbed and flowed as it did every moment. Not long after leaving the cover of

the forest they were surrounded by farmland and Stratysca came into their sights, her wood and earthen walls reaching out of the land and creating a brown smear across the blue sky beyond them. Atop the walls and around the gate, the men and woman went about their business. And in the river several small boats crossed back and forth carelessly. The boys continued for one last stretch and arrived home.





# The Encircling Cells

Eric Falden





Ruathen woke at midnight to ear-splitting cries. "Dread-shades," he murmured. "Hellish beasts." He tore about his room, stuffing what he needed into his pack. Then he ran. His ancient legs were slow, but shades were not overly quick.

The wraiths were dangerous, though, and they were all over. Every corridor and derelict room seemed to have its own specter of pale light and snarling fangs. Ruathen scurried through his crumbling monastery, hoping the demons wouldn't sense him; he passed through the open doorway of the belltower, groped in the dark for the rope-ladder, then climbed. It was an effort for the old man to heft himself through the trapdoor at the top. He pulled the ladder up, rung by rung, and closed the hatch.

There was total darkness, but at least he was alone now.

"Alright then," he panted. "Time to banish the fiends." He reached into his bag and removed the codex which contained the spell. It was a simple remedy: Read the Words, ring the bell, and the monsters would be expelled. "Just need to fetch my..."

Ruathen's hand kept searching the bag. It shot around like a trapped ferret. He upturned the pack: three *clinks*, a *thud*, and a *clap*. No candle, though.

"I can't Read the Words if I can't damn well see!" Ruathen cursed himself in the darkness.

Death stalked below.



Ruathen woke to find himself clutching the silver ring he'd always worn around his neck. He lay there for a few minutes, watching through the tiny window as the dawn illuminated the world. The attic was round, like the tower itself, and sat beneath the shuttered belfry. Below the floor was a hundred-span drop to the flagstones. Ruathen tried not to think about that, but the room had little distraction to offer: the coiled rope-ladder, a rotting nest in the window, a dusty stool...

At least the view was pleasant. He stood to look out the window upon the ruined monastery he called home. Its falling walls and creeping vines were captivating as ever. Surely, he could never tire of living here. The other monks had left ages ago, bringing their magic into the city to better serve the populace. Ruathen hadn't joined them. He didn't need them. He had himself.

He had always been happiest on his own. As an infant, he'd been abandoned at the abbey with nothing but the ring that still hung around his neck. Ruathen kept that ring not to remember his parents, whomever they might have been, but as a reminder of his self-sufficiency. He'd *raised* himself. He'd *taught* himself. Now he'd made

a home for himself here, keeping the forest at bay for twenty-odd years. Alone.

A shadow moved out of that forest and entered the ruins of what had once been the scriptorium. The fiend was a seething spirit with lightless eyes and lip-less maw.

Fear rose in him, sharpened by guilt. This was his fault. The monks rang the Bell-Offering every morning to keep these monsters away, but it had been years since Ruathen last did the ritual. Decades, in fact. He'd known this could happen, and he'd chosen to ignore it.

A wail from below confirmed his idiocy. He bent to look through the floorboards: he saw several twisting shapes. One floated up towards him. He jumped away. Fear clenched at his bowels, told him to run or fight; he could do neither.

He was safe—mostly. Dread-shades *could* fly, but not through barriers, temporal or otherwise.

Ruathen, meanwhile, could not delay. He had no way to meet his bodily needs—no latrine, no water, and no food. The wraiths could wait to drink his soul, but he would have three days, maybe four, before his body fell to thirst. His mouth was already dry. "No matter," he comforted himself. "I'll be out soon enough."

Ruathen took inventory of what he'd brought, all still scattered where he'd overturned his bag: a knife, useless against the demons, as Ruathen chided himself; a box of incense for the ritual; a flint and striker; and two books, a copy of *Aebba's Rubrics* and *The Codex of Protection*.

This he opened, blowing off the dust and flipping to the ritual's start. The gold decorations were as bright as he remembered, the calligraphy was a deep black except where some Words were a striking red. It even smelled the same! The redolence took Ruathen back to younger days, when the scriptorium was full and his brother monks would coo over a new tome. He'd forgotten their names. Had they forgotten his?

Ruathen went to check the bell. Opening the hatch on the low ceiling, he looked up into the belfry. The bell still had its rope and even a bit of shine ... but no clapper, and none to be found. Anxiety rose in his heart. The ritual required the bell.

A moan came from below.

He ignored it, pacing, thinking.

"That might work..." he finally said. He fetched the knife, pulled his necklace over his head, then hesitated. He'd worn this, what, sixty years? He'd lost count. *I've always been on my own*, he thought, looking at the ring's tarnished silver. *I can solve this on my own too*. He severed the cord and set it aside. The ring he put on his finger and thought it too wide and heavy. All these years, and it didn't fit.



Twenty minutes later, he'd tied the knife to the string and the string to the inside of the bell. He swung the knife against the bell and produced the tiniest *tink*.

"That will show the bastards," Ruathen chuckled.

Back to the spell. The stool became an altar. The bell-rope hung beside him. He knelt, placed the book in a puddle of light, opened it, and Read.

Ruathen's dry tongue was clumsy at first, but soon his heart lightened and his confidence grew. Ancient words rebounded off the walls and returned as from beyond the realm of mortal sight. Their whispers filled him with an excitement he'd not felt in a long while. He grew more assertive, projecting his voice.

Page after page he Read. Long-forgotten instructions came flooding back. *Do not lose focus*, his teachers had told him. *Put your emotions into the Words. Find the rhythm. Keep your voice steady. Speak from your chest.* With each piece of advice, Ruathen recalled a different era of his upbringing and the half-remembered faces of his tutors.

The ritual rolled on to its pinnacle. A heaviness came into the air, a weight pressing down on his chest, filling his mind. He felt as if he was floating on the Words, buffeted by strong winds.

Ruathen turned the page and gasped—so beautiful did this final page seem to him, leaping from the past, illuminated in deep hues of precious dye. Then the last instructions:

*Place the food on the altar, it read. Burn it with incense. Ring the bell.*

Ruathen's tongue caught. How could he forget food? Before his brothers left, he'd seen this done every day. Surely it hadn't been *that* long since he'd done this? "You senile fool!" he said aloud. "It's the Bell-*Offering* and you've brought nothing to offer!" Without food, the bell would have no power; the demons would remain.

The air grew heavier with the weight of the Words. Ruathen felt himself swaying on his knees. Despair flooded him. The hermit collapsed.



First came thirst, then soreness, then the sound of rain. Ruathen woke up fully. His throat was on fire, there were tears upon his cheeks, and his fingers hurt where he had squeezed them against the ring in his oblivion.

The rain had clouded the light; the gloom deepened as the hidden sun began to set. He'd been unconscious all day. He hadn't had a drop to drink.

Fighting sore muscles, Ruathen stretched his hands out the tiny window and cupped them. They began to fill, and he drank. The rain stopped after two handfuls. He licked the window frames. The man was sucking at the sill when a shadow appeared: a desiccated face, inches from his own.

Ruathen cried out and fell back. He scrambled crab-like to the opposite wall. A ghostly limb slithered

through the window, but the wraith could not get far. Its screech filled the room and the old man began to wail.

It felt like an hour later when the dread-shade finally retreated; it left a grief upon Ruathen for long after.



The next morning, Ruathen's stomach ached as much as his throat. After a hopeless look through the floorboards—swirling shades abounded—he knew he had to find a way to make the spell work.

He crouched in the window's light and opened *Aebba's Rubrics*. This book held no magic, but it explained the magic of its cousin. Ruathen poured over it and marveled at how much he'd forgotten. Hours went by, and he came to the final inscriptions:

*We offer this food to recognize our dependence on the Great Vocator to banish great evils. As we demand food to live, love demands sacrifice for its life. To banish hate, the spell demands our very sustenance, given in love, to bring us life.*

That was the end of the explanation. A *dead* end. No food, no spell.

"Is there no other way?" he asked the empty air. No tutor remained to answer, no master to aid him. Twenty years Ruathen had been by himself; for the first time, he felt alone.

The day passed. He wallowed in hunger and thirst. Night came again. Whispers of dead breath layered over each other and assailed him from above and below. He tried to recall when he'd last been happy. He found he had to think back a very long way indeed.



On the third morning, Ruathen still had no food, but something told him to try again.

He reset his lowly altar and Read. Where before the Words were half-forgotten and foreign, now they felt like familiar company. Again his voice grew stronger; the echoes washed over him in asynchronous chorus.

He reached the ritual's zenith, and hesitated, not knowing what to do. He stopped speaking, yet the Words kept crashing against his ears. The man could feel the ancient chorus scouring through the cell. His hands began to shake.

*The spell demands sustenance.* The thought came unbidden.

Ruathan argued back, speaking into the cacophony of his own echoes: "I can sustain myself. I always have! What need have I for others?" The man removed his ring and held it aloft as if could prove the truth of his boast.

*Love demands sacrifice.*

"What sacrifice can I give? I've no one here to love."

The Words of Power thundered through the cell, no longer in his own voice. He could hear in those echoes the monks of the old shrine, not a stone's throw from where he knelt but separated by half a lifetime. His mind saw every Bell-*Offering* he'd ever witnessed as a boy and every warm moment of fellowship he'd found in the



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wake of these ancient Words. His brother monks had always shown him love. *What had he done with it?* They had shared burdens and laughed with him. And he had let them all go. *What would he give to see them again?*

Something in Ruathen broke. Tears followed.

*What would he give?*

"I've sustained myself, and it is not enough," he sobbed. "I would give it all back—all these years—to be among friends again." He lowered his ring and placed it on the stool. His fingers pinched the incense into the circle.

A spark. A hint of smoke. Beneath the arcane weight, the ring began to vibrate and then—*crack!*—it split open. The pieces split again and again until they became like ash and wafted into the air.

*Clang!*

He whipped his head up and saw the bell swinging by its own power.

*Clang-clang! Clang!*

The tower was shaking. Dust fell from the rafters. The stool tottered. A crack appeared between the rocks on the wall, letting sunlight through. The fissure grew toward the window.

*Clang-clang!*

The noise was deafening. A wind gusted up as if the thick walls were nothing. Rocks rumbled and fell away. The window widened and light bathed the room in brilliance. Wailing and screaming came from outside.

*Clang!*

Ruathen crawled to the edge of the floor and looked out the opening. Wraiths were fleeing the sacred sounds. When they were gone, the bell stopped. The monastery was his again. Ruathen was the master of his own world.

Never before had that world seemed so puny, futile, and lonely.

❧—❧

The ringing faded. The ladder dropped. A monk—hermit no more—descended. He ate and drank, then packed a new bag and set out for the city. It was time to find his brothers again. It was time to give. To love.

He never looked back.

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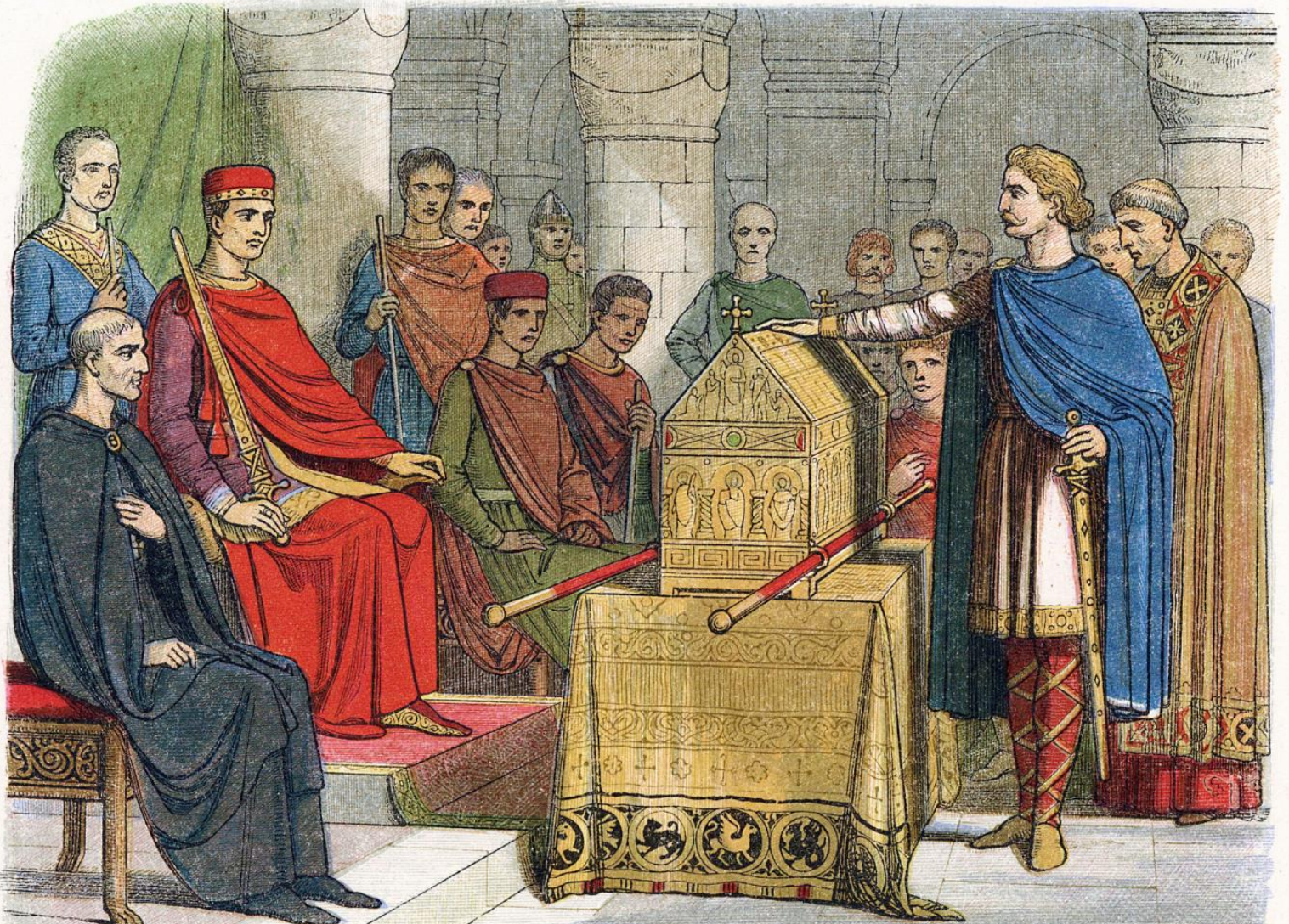


# A Song of Spring: A Sword Fit For A King

## Part 1

### The Dark Dreams of a King

AR Green



Harold II swearing oath with William of Normandy  
Photo by Photos.com on Freeimages.com



In a dimly lit hall, three men stood exchanging hushed words. King Alfric lent against the arm of his throne, both his hands rested atop the pommel of his sword.

A burly man stood before the king, his eyes flicking between his own young son and Alfric, "But my liege, no band has crossed into the borderlands and returned with anything other than tales of horror in more than two centuries!"

"Kildan old friend, I know I ask much of you but I would not ask were there any other way. Your son's hand is pledged to my daughter's. Do you think I would callously throw away the life of my daughter's betrothed, and a loyal friend, on some meaningless quest?" replied Alfric as he pushed off his throne, looking down on the two men. He struck an imposing figure standing head and shoulders over them.

"I know, but this is my only son. Were it just my own life I would not hesitate, but you ask me to risk my whole legacy," said Kildan, rubbing his brow.

"There is a far greater threat to both of our legacies if you don't take your son with you. The gods have granted me visions," said the King, slumping down into his silver throne carved by the gods' hands from a living tree.

"I have seen dark tides approaching, a black sea rising up to swallow our lands and our people. They have shown me many paths, but only one where our people win. You and your son must go into the heart of the darkness to fetch me the sword of my ancestors. The only way to stop the darkness swallowing us all is for your son to put that blade into the hands of a trueborn son of Lodric," the King said, with a hint of remorse breaking into his voice.

The King looked over Findan. He was not the strongest looking lad, the shadow of a beard was only just beginning to sprout on his youthful face. The only thing that set him apart from any other young man was the hint of steel behind his eyes.

The King smiled and spoke, "You might not like it, but your boy is made for this. He's ready for it, I can see it in his eyes."

Kildan looked his son in the eyes, he did not like it but the King was right. Kildan turned to face the King and slowly bowed his head.

"We will do what we must, my liege. How many men am I to take with me?"

"Take ten score men with you, the visions I was shown showed great struggle in the cursed lands and perhaps even some closer to home. Do not expect any part of this to be an easy journey, dark forces are moving against us but I know you will not fail me," said the King.

Kildan and his son bowed before the King, and then turned and left the dimly lit hall.

As soon as the two guards had swung the great oaken doors closed behind them, Findan spoke, "If the King thinks we are up for the challenge Father, why do you seem so unsure?"

"I know the King is a great man, with extraordinary vision beyond that of ordinary men, but there are few that have ever travelled beyond Thregar River and returned in one piece," said Kildan with pained concern furled in his brow.

"But surely if the King has seen visions, our quest will be a success! You know what they say of the visions of those descended from Lodri, they all come to pass one way or another," the young boy responded.

"Yes, I know the visions of the royal family come to pass. But I also know that they are never the full story, and tend to be light on details. For all we know, it might be our dead hands that bear the sword to the King."

"Oh... I see. I suppose the King didn't really give us too much detail on the task he would have us carry out for him now that I think about it," said Findan.

"No, the visions are usually quite vague and leave much up to interpretation. At any rate, we'd best go get some rest, we have a long journey ahead of us."

His son nodded; the two men entered the guest quarters of the palace and headed to their rooms to rest for the night.

The day broke quickly, dreams of wicked shadows that lay in the lands beyond Thregar River had disturbed Kildan's sleep. As the ruling Leodman of the lands that stretched from Seonstan Hyll to the town of Gurord, Leodman Kildan had known of many men that crossed the river Thregar. They all sought fame and fortune, the rumours of treasures lost during the fall of the great old empire had claimed many good men. Men whose names, much like the old empire, were lost to time.

In Kildan's time, only two men had ever returned alive from the accursed lands south of the river; one had been the second son of a local farmer. After several days in the borderlands, the son returned. The horse he set out on had bore him back to safety on its last legs; the wounds the poor creature had suffered had been like none any in the town had ever seen. The other had been a ranger from a hunting party that hailed from the kingdom of Sudracang, which lay to the west of the borderlands. The locals made a great deal of fuss over the party of rangers, they had told tales of journeys deep into the strange lands beyond the rivers. They had often travelled into the borderlands from the west by crossing the blackfields into Feallan Gragdorn woods.

The band of men had set off in good spirits with high hopes, this route was closer to their goal than their usual passage from the west. After several weeks with no sign of the rangers, a lone ranger returned; he would not speak a word of what happened to his party. There were whispers that their party had attempted to enter the ruins of the old empire's capital city. The ranger had brought back with him several artefacts, which he traded with the learned men of Gurord for a handsome sum of gold. He took the gold and bought himself a plot of farmland near Seonstan Hyll and has lived out a quiet life since, not breathing a word of his loss.

Kildan knew if he was to go beyond the river and face whatever horrors lurked there, he would need at least one of these men. His thoughts passed to his own son, did he truly need to take him to such dangerous lands? The King's visions had foretold of him handing over the sword, but perhaps that was after Kildan himself had retrieved it from the cursed lands? Thoughts tumbled through his mind, he knew the best place to start looking for the sword was in the old capital city, but like everyone else who dwelled near the river, he had heard the tales of what lay in wait there.

He told his squire to make ready the horses and his belongings for the journey back to Gurord. Kildan left his guest room, crossed the hallway, and loudly rapped on the door of his son's room. The door swung open to reveal Findan stood dressed and ready, with his pack neatly prepared for the journey at the foot of his bed.

"Are we breakfasting here before we set off, or is that too hopeful?" said Findan, with an eager tone in his voice.

"The King is a generous man, especially to those who he asks much of; We will breakfast here and then set off. I see you have your pack ready and, judging by that grin on your face, you'll be glad to hear I've already sent for the horses to be made ready to ride," said Kildan with a decidedly stern look upon his ageing face. It seemed to Findan that the request of the King had added a few more strands of grey to his Father's salt and pepper hair overnight, but he knew better than to pass comment.

The two set off to the grand hall of the palace. Fried meats and eggs were served and eaten quickly. It was better to set off as soon as possible so as to make way in the daylight; it was a long ride to Gurord. The journey to Treowstol, the capital of Gyldenorfia, had taken twelve days of hard marching from their home of Falocay Keep, which lay at the heart of Kildan's fiefdom. The town of Gurord was two days' ride beyond his home, assuming the weather was fair.

"Come, we'll gather the men and set off. If we're lucky we'll make it to the first waystone, and we can camp there tonight," said Kildan.

Findan nodded.

"I must go and find Cassandra to say my farewell before leaving. She is not my wife yet, but it would not be right to leave without saying goodbye."

"Make it quick, you have till I've inspected the horses and packs; I'll blow my horn when we send for the gates to be opened, and you'd best be back here sharp."

The two went their separate ways. Findan headed back to the hall to seek out his betrothed while Kildan made his way to the barracks. The Leodman gathered his men and headed to the palace stables. Findan jogged briskly back to the grand hall, his feet padded loudly on the tiled floors. As he passed the Garden of Spring he pulled the roses close to his face and breathed in deeply, the smell took him home to the wild roses that grow on the edge of the bleowoods. He carefully grabbed the stem of one of the sweeter smelling roses and drew his knife to cut it free. Finally, he came to the doorway to the grand hall and burst in. Four young men and four young women sat at the high table on the far end of the room. He hastily approached the table with his freshly cut rose in hand.

"My lady Cassandra, I feared I might not have time to say my goodbye," Findan said, trying to act casual while catching his breath.

A beautiful young woman with raven black hair that reached down to her waist, stood up from the table and said, "My good Leodson Findan, I thought you would be staying longer?"

"I had hoped so too, but it seems duty has called and I must answer. Please, take this as a parting gift to remember me." Findan held out the freshly cut rose.

Kassandra smiled knowingly, she was not fooled as to where this rose had come from.

"Thank you, I will keep it by my bedside and pray for your safety in the undertaking of your duty."

The young men at the side of the table started to giggle, Kassandra shot them a scornful look. The faint noise of a horn blowing could be heard through the open hall door. Findan bowed.

"I must be off now my lady, I thank you for keeping me in your prayers. I will eagerly await the day I get to look upon your beautiful face once more." With that, Findan turned and briskly walked out of the hall and broke into a run once he was past the doors.

Leodman Kildan was pacing at the large iron main gates of the palace. A line of hard faced men stood patiently waiting. Kildan turned and spotted his son coming running down the pathway from the palace. He nodded to the party, who all walked over to



the fencing and unhitched their horses. They began making ready to ride as Findan approached them.

"Well, at least you aren't too late. Did you get to say your farewells?" asked Kildan.

"I did, it wouldn't have been proper to leave without saying goodbye," said Findan.

"True, but we must set off now. I had your horse and pack brought here and made ready with the others; give it a quick look over and follow my lead," Kildan told his son as he climbed onto the saddle of his horse, Bruncwic.

The party mounted up and Kildan led the men out of the palace gates and into the city of Treowstol. The city bustled with activity - merchants flogging their wares, fine craftsmen whose swift hands and sharp tools glided over workpieces, and peasants going about their daily business. All made way as Kildan rode at the front of his party, leading them toward the green pastures that lay beyond the city limits. The streets were loud and noisy; Findan's eyes darted around the crowd nervously.

"What's the matter son?" asked Kildan, as he led the band through the packed mainstreet.

"Too many people, too much noise. I've never liked cities, it always feels like disorganised chaos", shouted back Findan above the din of the crowd. His Father simply laughed and rode on ahead.

After a short while, they reached the edge of the capital. The grand buildings of the old empire, carved of stone, that stood in the centre had given way to smaller wooden buildings. The men riding along chattered amongst themselves. Findan overheard one of the older guardsmen telling a younger guardsman that the city had once been home to a million men. Findan couldn't imagine it; there were only fifty men and women that manned his home. He had seen more people in this one day than he would usually see in a whole year.

Just as Findan thought about how many people he had seen that day, the party left the city proper and were now riding south along the coast road. It seemed to the Leodson that the hilly lands from Treowstol to the town of Irentun rolled on forever. The road between the town and city wound its way between hillcrests, occasionally cutting a meandering path up to a hilltop. Findan steadied his horse to take in the view.

The endless green rolling lands of Gyldenorfia's north western coast were all around as far the eye could see. Under the midday sun Kildan had decided this was as good a spot as any to rest, the party stopped and hitched up their horses. Several men reached into their packs for food and drink, while the captain of the guard began telling the story of how the hills were formed.

"It was said that these lands were carved out by one of the great battles between the Gods and Demons. The Demons took on the form of dragons and breathed down fire, scorching the lands. However hot the dragon fire burned though, it was no match for the might of the Gods," said the grizzled old warrior, gazing off at the hilltops in the distance.

"With spear, bow and arrow they slew them all. Using godly knowledge beyond that of man, they reseed the scorched lands with the bodies of their fallen foes. It is said that is how all the hills in Gyldenorfia were formed, they were all the old battlefields of the Gods. Some say the magic of the Gods still lingers in some parts, that following great forest fires the magic entangles with the embers, creating the seeds for new life."

The old warrior continued with a glint in his eye, "They say one day that the old gods and demons will reawaken to do battle anew; that the world will once more be reshaped and that all things will start over."

The warrior fell silent - lost in distant dreams of titanic beings clashing on the horizon. The other men had finished up their food and drink, and were stepping back into their saddles making ready to set off again. Findan hurriedly finished off the last bite of his bread and cheese and hopped back onto his horse. The party set off once more, riding down from the crest of the hill following the winding road into the valley below.

After some time, the sunlight began dipping down below the horizon.

"Alright men, that looks like the first waystone on that next hill over. Set up camp here for the night."

As soon as Kildan had finished giving his orders, the men jumped down from their horses and hauled down their packs. Tents quickly sprung up and campfires were made. The men ate and drank, telling tales and laughing till the darkness had spread out across the night sky. A few men took turns watching over the camp while others slept; some prayers were whispered to Lunestria in hopes of a comfortable quiet night of sleep.

When morning broke, it seemed the men's prayers had not gone unanswered. The night had been quiet and the party had managed to find a fairly level part of the hilltop, so none went rolling down the hillside during the night. Breakfast was made and eaten, then the camp was packed up. The horses were watered, and the party set off through the rolling hills once more.

"It should only be a five day ride to Irentun from here. Leodman Irenhand was kind enough to show us his good hospitality when we last passed through; I'm sure you're all looking forward to a warm bed, some hot food and good mead," said Kildan.

The rest of the journey to Irentun passed quickly. By the end of the third day, the hills had started to level out and the road straightened. As the party rode through the plains and pastures on the way to the town, they passed a few merchants heading on toward Treowstol. As the men grew closer to town, they started to pass the farmlands of Gyldfelds to the east. It was sowing season and many peasants were out in the fields with oxen and ploughs, planting crops, singing prayers, asking for a good harvest.

The party entered Irentun and made their way to Leodman Irenhand's manor, at the top of a hill to the east of the town. They had made good time; it had been six days since they left Treowstol and the weather had stayed fair, but dark clouds were beginning to creep up from the south as they arrived at Leodman Irenhand's door. The men dismounted as stable boys rushed forward to take the horses into their care. The party then made their way up the stone steps to the doors of the manor.

The door swung open and a tall wiry man with a great, bushy, ginger beard greeted them.

"Leodman Kildan, Leodson Findan - I didn't think you'd be back so soon. Did the King tire of hearing tales of your old adventures so quickly?" asked the wiry man, smirking.

Kildan laughed, "No old friend, the King had other plans, he had another of his visions. It seems dark tidings are upon us Irenhand,"

Irenhand reached out and embraced him, "The King sees far, I've heard odd tidings coming from the lands south of here. Tales of shadows that lurk in the dark parts of the woods. Did you not hear any talk of them on your journey up to the palace?"

"If the people did have any concerns, they certainly did not feel the need to share their worries with us, so I'd say this must be new since last I saw you," said Kildan, with his brow furrowed.

"Well, I offer you the comforts of my home. Make yourself welcome, if your road ahead is to be a hard one, what kind of friend would I be if I did not offer you the warmth of my hearth. Drink your fill, and eat all that you will. If you come across any such monsters between here and your home, may the gods guide your swords and spears," said Irenhand with a warm smile.

"Thank you kindly for your hospitality. We will rest here till morn, and then set off again."

"That is good. if you wait here a day more, I can offer my men to see you into your lands at the fork in the road before Ofersea. I've increased my patrols since the rumours started, the next one is due to go out in two days time. My men have yet to see anything, but if the King has been having visions it may be better to be safe than sorry."

"Thank you again old friend, perhaps we shall stay a day longer then; more company on the roads never goes amiss," said Kildan, with a nod of appreciation.

The two men hugged once more, and Irenhand signalled to a group of servants who took the packs of the group then showed them to their quarters. The night rolled around and the hall of the manor was warm, full of laughter and free-flowing drink. The hospitality of Irenhand and his people was that of legend, their Leod was always most generous to those he considered friends.

After much feasting and drinking, the party headed to their quarters to rest up. The next day passed with little event; unlike the capital, Irentun was a smaller and more relaxed town. The peasants all seemed to know one another, save the odd merchant or traveller; the more Findan thought about the capital, the more pleased he was to be moving further and further away from it.

By evening, the rain had started to come down. A light trickle at first but, as the night wore on, the rain grew heavier; it made Findan grateful for the generosity of his host. Usually when he drew closer to home he began to feel more at ease, but a sense of foreboding fell upon him as the hour of their departure neared.

The party enjoyed one last night of drinking and warmth in the well sheltered manor. When morning broke, they gathered their packs and trudged out into the cold, damp streets of Irentun. The rains had not let up during the night, and the drizzle carried on as they loaded the packs onto the horses with the help of the stablehands. As promised, the guards mustered at the town gates ready to set out on patrol. Leodman Irenhand came out, braving the rain to bid his guests farewell.

Findan watched as the two Leodmen came together to say their farewells. He noticed Leodman Irenhand whisper something into his Father's ear, as the party made ready to leave. Irenhand gave a nod to the guards in the gatehouse and the men sprang into action. Kildan led his party out of the city escorted by Irenhand's patrol.

"Good luck my old friend, and may the gods go with you!" shouted the wiry man, as the gate began closing behind the party.

The men waved farewell and then Irentun passed out of sight as they followed the road bending due south. Not long after the party had left the town, the weather took a further turn for the worse - for all it was spring, the wind and rain whipped at their cloaks and cut through them like knives of ice.

After five days of miserable riding they finally reached the fork. The group had passed many



travellers on the road - some told strange stories of giant black wolves, with eyes burning red, that had stalked them all the way from their homes in the south. Many were seeking refuge in the walled towns, as there were whispers of packs of the creatures that had devoured villages whole.

Once they reached the fork, as promised, the guards that had accompanied them from Irentun peeled off and set about on their patrol. An uneasy feeling began seeping into Kildan's men; if the weather did not let up they would still have at least five days of riding ahead of them. Kildan led the party to a small inn that sat overlooking the crossroads that lead south into his lands, and west into the town of Ofersea. The inn was cramped, and did not have the room to accommodate the whole party - it was already overflowing with many people that had fled whatever terrors lurked in the woods to the south. After talking with the innkeeper, Kildan had secured a room and beds for himself and his son. The rest of the party slept on the floor of their room, and in the main hall. A few of the men were sent out to take shifts watching over the horses.

"Desperate people will do desperate things," the captain of the guard had whispered into their ears, before sending them out.

The men had heard many dark stories by the time the grey light of morning broke in through the cramped windows. Many of the party had not slept well, the stifled crying of the womenfolk and children had kept them awake. The group set off on the road and ate their breakfast on horseback, rather than in the overcrowded inn.

The party made good time continuing to head south, the road now took them through the Bleowoods. While some of the men had remained stony faced, now as they entered the woodland, even some of the more hardened among them were beginning to feel a shift. The Bleowoods had not been this dark when they passed through them two weeks ago. Kildan could not shake the feeling of eyes watching him through the trees. Shadows lurked in the corner of his gaze, but whenever the Leodman turned to face them, there was nothing there.

Two more days of riding took them to the village of Whet. The smell of burnt timber hung in the air. The men dismounted and hitched their horses to take a closer look - the signs of struggle were all around them. A cart with a broken wheel sat in the village square with rotten fruit scattered about it; dried blood stained the side of the cart, but the rains had washed away all other evidence. Half burned houses lined the road of the village. The village was empty, not a single soul remained.

"We should leave, this is the work of something unholy," said a young guardsman, spotting an axe lodged in a door, and a bloody trail leading into the home.

"Aye, this is not the work of man or beast, this is something else," said a second man eyeing the doorway.

As he finished speaking a door swung open, violently slamming against its frame.

The men all turned and drew their weapons. A small girl emerged from the doorway, and rushed toward the men.

"They ate them all!" she wailed.

One of the men dropped his spear and scooped her up into his arms to comfort her.

"It's okay, little one. What were they?" he asked.

"They came from the woods," was all she whispered before falling silent.

"Mount up. We will return to deal with this when we have a better idea of what is going on, and with more numbers!" shouted Kildan.

The girl let out a piercing scream, and pointed to the woods by the road they came in on.

Out of the trees, a hulking black creature shaped like a wolf emerged. It let out a shriek that caused some of the men to drop their weapons in order to cover their ears.

It rushed forward toward one of the men who was still struggling to mount his horse. There was a sickening crunch as the jaws of the beast bit into the steel helm, crumpling it like paper. The lifeless corpse of the young guardsman fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Greyson, the captain of the guard, shifted his grip on his spear and charged right at the monster. It wheeled away, slipping past the tip of his spear which drove hard into the horse that had been behind the black menace. The other men had managed now to form up on Kildan. Findan frantically ran his eyes over the creature, hoping to pick out a weak spot; he watched as the beast righted itself after wheeling away, and sprung again at the grizzled old guard. Greyson managed to free his weapon in time to jam the shaft into the fiend's gaping maw. The wood splintered, and the steel head of the spear fell to the floor.

The monstrous brute rounded on the man once more, but spotted the now rapidly advancing party with Kildan leading the way. The men rode hard at the beast, which turned and made a run for the cover of the woods. As it broke off, the men launched spears toward its path; all but one failed to find their mark.

Findan's spear had crunched into the flank of the monster. Flames burst forth from the wound and the creature crumpled into the dirt. As the men

approached, the fire had spread to consume it whole. Finally the guard holding the girl had managed to calm her, having seen the dark monstrosity slain.

She opened her mouth to speak once more, but scarce more than a whisper came.

“That was only one of the little ones.”





# The Quokka Plants a Wee Castle

Shieldmaiden



**Gentle scooping sounds** could be heard coming from the top of the hill. They came to a halt and a satisfied voice cried out “There we are!”

A fat quokka stood back and looked at the little hole he had just dug. He shook a back paw to remove some soil which had settled there during his enthusiastic digging.

Stabbing his shovel into the ground nearby, he gently removed his backpack. To his delight, one of the castle seeds, eager to be planted, was poking out the top of the little leather bag. He had chosen a fox skin backpack, for no particular reason.

Gently he lifted the wee castle and set her in the hole. With swift motions he filled the earth in around the seed and tamped it down with his paws. He stood back up, brushing the soil off his paws.

She was a tiny castle, not even as tall as the grass around her. Bending forwards, the quokka laid a paw affectionately upon her roof. He made the sign of the Beowulf and said “May you have walls for the wind, and a roof for the rain. Let there be drinks beside the fireplace, laughter to cheer you, and all those you love, may they be near you.”

Standing back, the great quokka turned to look down the mountain he had just walked up, across the sea to an island crowned by a huge castle. If only this little castle could survive at least a few years, then there was hope that she would make it, and grow to the size of the big one.

He heaved a great sigh. If only men would believe! Castles grow on faith and hard work! And this wee castle needed a lot of it. It needed men to come and build their houses around it, to nurture it, and to love it.

A light rain began to fall, and the quokka’s ears twitched. “I don’t normally name a castle just yet, but” he looked down at the little thing settled into the soil, her roof beginning to dampen, “for some reason I like you. I will name you Castle Grinn.”

With one last look at his latest effort, the great quokka shouldered his shovel and marched away. He was headed further inland, with his little backpack bulging with castle seeds. As he reached the otherside of the mountain top, he cast one last look at the huge castle out on the sea.

“Magnificent!” he murmured. “May the roof above never fall in, may we below never fall out.”

As he marched down the mountain, towards a cosy village in the distance, he knitted his brow. This castle building business was no mean feat. It was a long term project and many who had enthusiasm at the start lost it along the way.

The rain was pelting down and the wind picking up as the quokka reached the village. He rushed into the pub, the wind banging the door shut behind him.

He ordered some food and carefully removed his backpack. There was a fire crackling on the hearth and he warmed his tail.

The barman brought his drink, and they got chatting. The great quokka told him of the successful planting.

“How wonderful!” said the barman. “What next?”

“Keep planting!” the quokka exclaimed “I am concerned about the aesthetics of Scotland, yet these zoning bureaucrats keep bothering me with building heights and wall thicknesses! If only we could return to the days of

the Danegeld! Give a little gold, go about your life as you wish!”

“I think we need a more independent Scotland,” said the barman, “surely there is a way to make this work without having viking descendants rule over us once more!”

“When I was a child, I cut down a tree.” The great quokka took a sip of his whisky, which left a burn in his throat. “I found an egg there. Earlier that morning, I had vanquished a huge beastly chicken I found in the backyard, and here before me was its egg! I was handed the opportunity to purge my household from the terror of birdkind forever. I stood looking at the egg and felt power; clearing out this creature’s kind would be one of the small joys in life. And yet, I stayed my hand. I raised the egg until it hatched, and then it became my best friend!”

“Where is the bird now?” asked the barman.

“I made her my secretary,” the quokka’s nose sniffed the air as the scent of steak and kidney pie wafted through the pub. “Never a more trustworthy creature have I met.”

“Ah yes! Your dinner!” the barman leapt up and hurried away to the kitchen.

“At my age the only thing I should be carrying is a whiskey glass and a cigar, yet here I am out planting



castles,” the quokka announced to the pub as the barman brought out the pie.

The meal was delicious and the quokka feasted with enthusiasm. It warmed his insides after his days of travelling in the cold and rain.

And yet, the diligent marsupial would not tarry forever in the pub. His plate clean, his glass empty, and his fat little tummy full, he shouldered his shovel and backpack and went out once more.

He made his way towards a finger of land jutting into the north sea, a delightful spot for the most magnificent of castles. To get there, the quokka had to make his way over some ground he’d traversed before. Scanning the horizon, he looked for some sort of flag. The Scottish clans who took over these castles usually had large, hand painted flags in their own tartan colours. Sometimes, when the castle was newly taken over, the owners opted for cheap and tatty mass produced emblems to adorn their keeps. But when they were tiny and peeking over the surrounding vegetation, the little castles were decorated with the merest corner of a kilt that had been trimmed off and tied to a flagpole. This marked it as claimed.

“There has to be one here,” the quokka informed the wind, his ears buffeted by a particularly strong gust.

Crunch!

The quokka looked down. Alas, he had stepped on the castle! It had not grown above the grasses, its roof was caved in, and its walls crumbled. There were no signs that tartan had ever been fixed to its flagpole.

The quokka knelt down and placed his hands upon the dead carcass of his hopes and dreams. And yet, this was not the worst he had encountered. Flashbacks flooded his mind. He had witnessed the collapse of a full gown castle. It was the hub of the local area, the centre of its trade, community, and life. Nonetheless, it had collapsed. The people had rushed off in search of themselves. They sought to escape problems from which they

within their hearts. The great quokka sighed.

After a moment of silence he rose again. Straightening his back he soldiered on.

“Why build these castles in the cold and rain when you could be running a twitter account and getting others to do the work for you?”

The voice annoyed the quokka. He stood away from the wind behind a large rock. He felt kind of fruity as

he looked over the north sea with a metal flask clasped reverently in his paws.

“You trawl around the country, out in this weather, planting castles. Why don’t you go on podcasts and farm content? It would be a better use of your time.”

The quokka cast a thunderous look to the perpetrator of these unsavoury suggestions. He had the mark of a man with a high-time preference written all over his pallid brow. Often young chaps would appear before him, interested in his work, and curious to meet him.

“I cannot build things if I am running around being an influencer,” the quokka said.

“But what about getting the views?” the man asked. He was the young, enthusiastic type of fellow that wore the latest fashions and wanted to become an eccentric.

“What are you doing out here in the wild?” The quokka asked.

“I just wanted to check things out.”

The quokka offered his shovel. “What about you start by helping me dig a hole?”

The young chap stepped back with a look of fear in his eye. “But I don’t want to get in trouble. I don’t know the zoning laws around here! What would the local council think?”

“We can move the castle if a tantrum is thrown” the quokka said. He had already decided that this young man was a fool and quite useless in all matters besides the movement of his jowls.

“You talk as if you could pick up a castle as well as a snake lifting weights!” the youth chortled.

“How can a snake lift things if it has no hands?” the quokka asked.

The young chap laughed. “You are a hoot!”

“I am a pragmatic quokka, I get shit done,” the quokka announced,

and, putting his flask away, he took up his shovel. Yet another young chap, full of life and energy, and yet no more good to the castle building project than a locust barring the path on a warm summer’s evening.

The quokka pressed forwards in his mission. “Victory is the only option,” he murmured, as he headed once more into the cold wind and left the young man behind.

# Featured Artist

## Rob Floyd

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**Tell us a little bit about yourself.** I was born in Hertfordshire but currently live in Cheshire with my wife and two sons. One way or another, I've been drawing and painting since the moment I was able to hold something to make a mark with (unfortunately for the walls in my parent's house when I was growing up!)

I attended both the University of Hertfordshire and Sunderland University receiving a BA(Hons) in Fine Art, but it was a little after this when I consciously found my subject and fully committed myself to painting:

Rather than feeling the existential angst of being alone in a meaningless universe I have always believed our lives and our world to be inherently full of meaning and that the central task, at least for myself, is to try to engage with this as fully as possible. Realising that I was, perhaps, not cut out to be a 'man of the cloth' I decided to focus my creativity on spiritual exploration and have been following that path ever since.

Kevin and the Blackbird







Abersoch Sunrise

### **What is it about oils that draws you in?**

Willem de Kooning said that flesh was the reason oil paint was invented, and I certainly feel that there is a living quality to the stuff. It's had an almost magical hold over me since the first time I came into contact with it; how it handles, the smell of it, it's texture and, well, everything about it. James Elkins in his fantastic book 'What Painting Is' relates the painter's studio to the alchemist's laboratory and this, too, is something that really resonates with me: it strikes me as simply incredible and, indeed, perhaps magical, that it is possible to turn the liquified matter of paint on a palette into something so seemingly alive and full of depth and meaning as, say, Rembrandt's self portrait as St Paul or Titian's Pieta – I have a constant (and hopefully irrational fear) that one day I will start a painting session and simply not be able to do it anymore, because painting strikes me as something far more strange and mysterious than just learning a tangible technique and getting on with it, just learning 'how to do it', so to speak: rather, I feel, a painter, especially in oils, must attempt to develop an affinity with the substance itself. This affinity is a little less quantitative and harder to put one's finger on, you might say, but, to paraphrase the recently departed Frank Auerbach, it's the greatest game imaginable trying to develop it!



## What is it that fascinates you about saints?

It strikes me that the saints, from all the major religious traditions, are the great, for want of a much better word, 'achievers' throughout history, the people who got the furthest, certainly if you are valuing and looking at it from a viewpoint of spiritual exploration, so naturally, these are people who I have inevitably turned to, have been inspired by and have tried to learn from.

Often their methods can seem rather extreme and beyond us, and the wisdom they earn and offer can also be difficult to understand, let alone emulate. I was exchanging ideas with a poet recently on the subject of St Kevin and the Blackbird as I have recently completed a canvas depicting them and he said that 'the story of St. Kevin [can be seen as] historical and yet, as with all the gestures of the saints, also mythically, imaginatively resonant.' And I really couldn't put it any better than that: this, for me, is what the saints do – rather than visions etc appearing to them, it is them, through their actions and devotions, that appear to the vision, or the higher level of reality which we are all, actually, a part of and understand on some level. And they bring something back for us; evidence of this higher, or deeper, reality and a glimpse of a path beyond the veil for us to engage with and learn from as best we can. This wisdom can often seem dense, opaque and obscure, but it is mythically and imaginatively resonant and so therefore is relevant, important and concerns us all!



Madonna and the serpent



As this is a literature magazine, can you tell us what type of things you have been reading recently?

Recently I have been reading a lot of the Orkney poet Edwin Muir as well as delving into 'Defending Ancient Springs' by Kathleen Raine (as recommended to me by my good friend John Fitzgerald who is probably the most well-read person it has ever been my good fortune to meet and whose terrific piece 'Trojan Dawn' is due to be featured in Corncrake). Hovering above all this, as he has done for the past couple of decades now, is John Moriarty (the Irish storyteller, mythographer, poet, philosopher etc. - a hard man to pin down; I feel he was willing to play the role of shaman for the contemporary West) who I constantly wrestle with, struggle to understand, and am enlightened, moved and inspired by pretty much all at the same time!

What connects all these, I think, is that they are what Blake would have called, artists of the imagination, to quote from 'Defending Ancient Springs': 'The imaginative world is outside time...For the more sublime the work of poetry and art, the more do we feel that it expresses something already and always known, something deeply familiar and intimately our own. Few feel that we could have written Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis*, or Auden's *Nones*; but Spenser's or Milton's description of Paradise... do we not feel that we ourselves already knew?'  
Inspiring and vital stuff!

St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

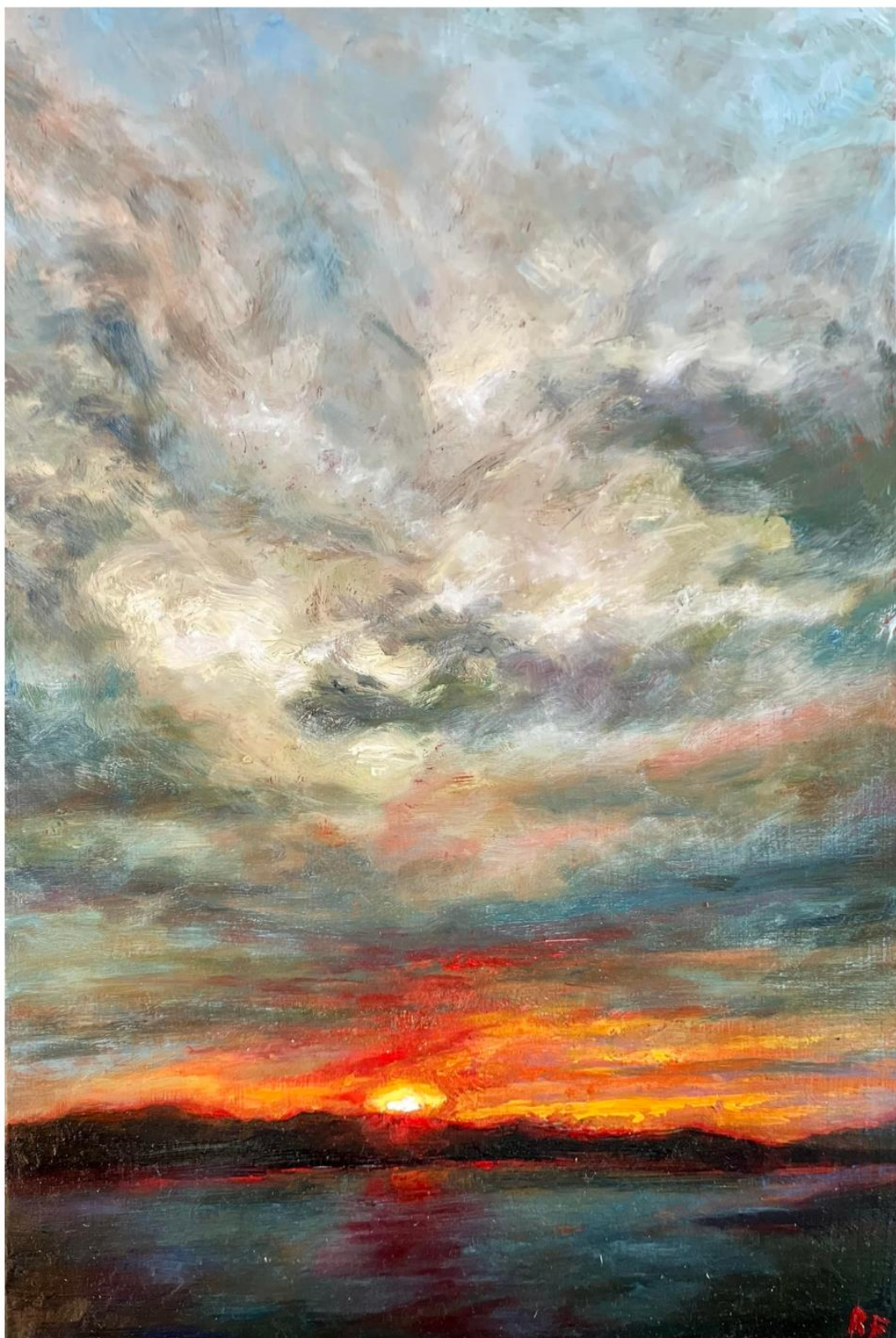




**Aside from painting, do you have any other passions?**

Disappointingly, there is not an overwhelming demand for life-sized paintings of saints, let alone wolves and blackbirds, so, like a lot of artists, I also work a part-time job. I have been tremendously lucky to have the privilege of working in a detox service in Manchester these past fifteen years and this has been, and continues to be, one of the great adventures of my life:

Work can often be very challenging and sometimes sad and upsetting, but to be accepted in to a person's recovery journey and be allowed to listen to, work with and support people as best you can is a tremendously rewarding experience, one I learn from each day and hopefully am able to pass some of that learning on. To feel that you are able to make a positive difference in people's lives and to genuinely look forward to going to work every morning is a real blessing and one that I am truly grateful for.



Absersoch Sunrise



# LR Scott's Lore



### The Cradle of Civilization.

It was a petty argument that ultimately led me to return to Earth. It began with one of my closest friends—a sharp witted and sharp tongued peer who chose a path outside of academia, yet whose intellect remained well suited for it. He leveled the accusation at me: “You study history, but no part of inner-space is older than 500 years. Most of human history is still on that miserable pebble and you’ve never even been!”

He was right. He knew he was right and he knew *I knew* he was right. Most of human history remained on Earth. Most human conflicts should have their root there.

I deliberately requested to make my landfall by way of the Delacruz Space Elevator. I had read that it was the first and oldest space elevator, still operational despite being obsolete.

I had heard salacious rumors about the people of Earth. Disunified, territorial. It was hard to imagine fighting over the same planet. They didn’t view themselves as citizens of “earth”—but citizens of their part of earth.

When I landed, I hired a guide to travel with me and help me understand what I was seeing. His name was Miguel, he said the island upon which I made landfall was called “Cuba”.

“I’ve never set foot on Earth before,” I explained.

“You are lucky to come here!” he replied enthusiastically. “You could spend a lifetime looking around and not uncover all her secrets.”

“I am a historian,” I said, “and that is just why I have come. Tell me, please! What is the history of this place? What have we missed by being absent from our homeworld?”

Miguel launched into a discourse...about Cuba.

“This island used to be ruled by a dictator,” he said. “Then president Delacruz overthrew the regime after Contact.”

“How long was it ruled by a dictator?”

“Almost 100 years!”

“Oh.” I shrugged. That didn’t seem that long.

Miguel looked at me with an offended expression. “You think, 100 years is not a long time, yes?”

I nodded, “We’ve barely been an interstellar society for 500 years, we are still at the beginnings!”

“When Cuba became a dictatorship, it had been colonized by Spain for less time than humanity has been in space.” Miguel replied. “To humanity, 500 years is no time at all. To this island, 500 years is eternity. Did you know, this continent was once called ‘the new world’? We still call it that, though you may have forgotten.”

“I don’t understand—what was new about it? Humanity was born on this planet, how could it consider anything new?”

Miguel tut-tutted softly, and put a sympathetic arm over my shoulder. “My friend—you have much to learn. History is not all lists of wars and presidents. It is a tree of life. Humanity in the stars may have it’s roots on earth, but humanity on earth has further roots too. Knowledge was not spread evenly, nor were resources. For all of human history until 500 years before contact, Cuba was populated by an indigenous people.”

“What do you mean ‘indigenous’. Aren’t you all indigenous to earth?”

Miguel laughed heartily. “You really do not understand your own species. No. I am Cubano. Across the strait are the Americano’s. Across the ocean are the Hispano’s, Anglo’s, Alemán, y Francés. Before we had ‘systems’ and ‘factions’, we had ‘Nations’.”

“So you feel no kinship with the Americano’s?”

Miguel snickered again, something about this conversation was very amusing to him. “Not much. There are many Cubans in America, America is a unique place. People move around. I don’t want to say I feel no kinship with America. But my *heritage*, ah—that is something else. That belongs to Cuba, and to Spain. What is your heritage, friend?”

“I...I grew up around Second Sol, my family can trace our lineage back three generations to one of the early colonies.”

“And where on Earth did your family come from? What brought them to Second Sol?”

“I...I don’t know. We always talk about where our family is going, and not so much where our family came from.”

“I don’t blame you, friend! Cut off from your roots, where can you look but forward? These are the sins of a young culture, on a young world, with a young history. What does it mean to you, to be a historian?”

“I study and document where humanity came from, so I can understand where humanity is, and predict where she is going.”

“How much of Earth history did you study in your education?”

“Not much before Contact.”

“My friend—you are not yet a historian. But stay here, immerse yourself in the fame and folly of Earth, you will yet understand. The story of humanity is the story of earth. Our failures on this soil will be repeated in the stars, at a grander scale. It has already happened, and will happen again, and again.”

“How do I learn this story?”

Miguel let a coy smile stretch across his face. “Tour the world with me, and I will not just teach you—I will show you.”

“Where do we go first?”

“Where can we begin but the beginning? Between two rivers in the levant lies the roots of the oldest human civilization...”



# The Great Black Cat of the Witching Hour

Ben Wheeler



**Some of the best** of the Halloween stories ever written have the devil in them. Such is one, a true story told to me by a fifth cousin I met by chance in a London pub by the name of The Pillars of Hercules some years back. He said that this happened to a third cousin of his on his mother's sister in-law's side some years ago. So, you know the source can be trusted. It begins like this:

When Corey McGraw took the pretty Margaret 'Mag' Henderson out to the Bannockburn Halloween festival, he had planned an all night event. Mag was a great girl, tall, pretty and with a great figure. He couldn't think of courting any other. He'd take her out to the festival and dinner, maybe take her to the pumpkin patch and definitely to the cemetery, where he'd scare her a bit to get her to hang on his arm. Then maybe sunrise over the moors... But then her grandfather caught her, with a face of displeasure that stretched his thin skin across his skull more frightful than any disguised ghoul.

"Yer a comin home, Granddaughter! There's a foul witch-wind, and I like not the stars! Devilry tonight, f'sure!" Corey thought him a crazy old man, but Mag adored him. He offered to escort the both of them home. Mag held onto his arm, which felt just right, but the old man kept staring at him and discomforting him. "Supposin' you'll want tah stae at the house, then? Wee'll have to tie you to the couch then! Keep the fox from the hen house!" Mag looked away, blushing, and let go of Corey's arm. Corey hated the old man!

"No, I'll be away and to my own house across the moors and through the woods." Corey felt certain the old man would do something to him while he slept, and then complain that Corey had discomforted Mag by his presence in the same house. The Parson had been extra fiery against lust and superstition the last few sermons and Mag listened carefully to him. She always bugged Corey if he skipped a service, which was often. Many times he got the entire sermon from her even as she talked his ear off.

"I dinnae take yah fer a fool! Stae the night!" A hint of horror crossed the old man's eyes. "I dinnae joke about the stars or the winds. These things move aboot openly, now that Christ is less worshipped! Stay and risk not the peril of Halloween when dread stars are high! I heard the rumor of a great black cat running about, assuredly on the devil's mischief..."

Corey waved him off, ignoring his chuntering and pleading. "I'll be fine. I know the moors and the forest like the back of my hand!" He grabbed Mag and gave her a kiss, mussing her red gold hair. "Yer too bonny and fine for me to be taken by some ugly ol' broom-riding witch!" She giggled and kissed him back.

"Oh! Me brave manny! But you mind my granpa and hide and pray if you see anything witchy or smellin' of

sulfur!" Corey clicked his tongue and gave his assurances. Soon he left her and her grandfather, one sullenly staring and the other waving. He swaggered off, leaving the lights of their home for the darkness of the foggy moors between him and his house.

The jaunt would take him the better part of two hours, but he figured that the time was well spent. "Exercise and cardio! I'm fit as a fiddle a traipsing about to see my girl! P'shaw to the Parson! Nuts to Mag's Grandpa! I'll not see a single devil or witch this night!" He declared both to himself and to the moors as he crested the first of the low hills separating his house from the house of his beloved.

The moon had filled in nicely, and was nearly bright as day despite the fog, with no lights polluting the natural shine this far into the bogs. He could see his shadow as he jogged and power walked up and down the moors. He danced a jig on the crest of one, in case Mag watched through her telescope and worried after him. Clouds and wisps of mist crossed the sky and his path alike, and he took enjoyment from boldly running through the banks of fog slipping through the night, making shapes in the corner of his eyes yet slipping away when he turned to look. The chill made him feel alive and he jumped a creek with a running leap.

"Ho! But I'm as brave and bonny as any son of Scotland, fit as a fiddle and twice the fighter of any Sassenach." And so as Corey McGraw danced up and down the Moors, he bragged and boasted, louder and louder, until he nearly shouted over and over again how brave and bold he lived. Then, he was struck by the silence.

The shadows of cloud and night had crept on him while he walked, and so his own disappeared. No amount of the moonlight seemed to better it and free his shadow from their grip. His heart fluttered a bare second and he turned.

The house Mag kept with her family could no longer be seen. No lights crested the dark hills, he could, just barely, glimpse the glint of the church steeple, with its shiny gold cross at the top. Corey almost wished he was listening to the Parson give his dry sermons. "Bah! The old man got to me!" And so he went on, whistling.

Corey looked around him. He first whistled tunelessly, before launching into some pop song he heard on the radio, then an old hymn. Yet it could not drown out the wind nor did it fill the silence with anything like comfort. The echoes slid under his music, bringing it lower in tone, and creating almost a menacing air to the sound. He stopped whistling and began to jog through the moors.

As he neared the forest, he heard a large beast slobber and lick its lips in the dark. Something heavy, like an



animal as big as a car, wheezed in and out, in his direction. Corey turned. Cresting the moor, and looking down on him with eyes of pale blue fire, an immense black dog! It had no depth or form beyond the silhouette. Only the eyes could be seen in the dog's head, at first. The next second, the mouth opened, and flame shot from it in a gout. The bark turned into a howl like a volcano erupting. Worst of all, the inferno illuminated nothing, yet the heat scorched Corey's face.

He ran for the forest with all the speed he could muster. The black dog bayed with the sound of a geyser and galloped after him at a speed no mortal hound could match. Corey dodged quick though, and even as the flames melted the heels of his boots, he jumped into the forest. He tripped on a root, falling forward onto his face. He covered his head with his hands. He did not feel the flames nor the hellish bite of some dog from the nightmares of his ancestors. He cast about him, and saw the black hound sniff at the forest before running away.

Corey cursed. "Will I prefer that monster to eat me by the end? Huh!" He stood and shook off the leaves on his jacket. "I should ha' stayed and let Mag's crazy old granpa tie me up and draw on me." He saw the black dog stand on top on one of the hills and look back. The eyes pierced him from nearly a mile distant. His heart thumped in his chest, and despite a chill breeze, he sweated in every pore from his palms to his scalp.

"Ach!" He walked deeper into the woods, back towards his home. He had not been knocked off course, but the stories his grandmother had told him came to his mind. Stories of hundred year sleeps, cursed castles, dragons, ogres and a thousand other misfortunes danced in his head. "Curse me for a fool!" And again he wished he had been tied up by Mag's grandfather. He'd take the cackling and the 'Yer not good enough fer me granddaughter!' all night long over this.

He continued on in this way, treading carefully, from tree to tree. He looked out for fairies, goblins and a thousand other monsters and threats. He avoided a fairy ring with utmost care. Sometimes he heard music in the far distance and fled the opposite way, for fear of coming across some perilous fairy feast. The moon rose, nearly to its zenith, when he heard a rustling to his right.

With the speed of desperation, Corey climbed a great oak tree quick as a wink and hid in the branches. He peeked out from the leaves, to see what nature of danger he had stumbled on, or if they knew not of his presence. A moment later, he saw that which gave him such a start.

A parade of cats, of many colours and breeds, moved by, marching in a rough order and headed by a great black tabby of such size and mass that Corey wondered if it were merely a small puma. He thought that it might be just some cats wandering around on cat business and he might leave, but then he remembered Mag's Grandfather's warning and stayed above, in the trees.

The variety of cats astounded him. Slick Siamese followed bulky Maine Coons which followed dignified Persians which passed waddling Munchkins who overtook a slow moving Scottish Fold who bullied some Himalayan cats who in turn picked on the Somali cats who had to give way before the Selkirk Rexes and so on and so on until Corey wondered at there being so many breeds of cat!

Finally, twelve cats, each a different breed representing the whole, wearing princely crowns and circlets of gem-studded gold and silver, one with a tall bishop's mitre, joined the horde of cats below. They pushed themselves to the front not without violence, and sat before the Great Black Cat, which seemed asleep, chest rising and falling, eyes closed. The yowling raised to a fever pitch. Each feline screamed and hissed as loudly as it could. The whole forest shook with their cries. The only ones not making a sound were the twelve cats with crowns, and the Great Black Cat.

The Great Black Cat seemed to wake up then magnificently raised a paw. His voice rung deep, deeper than the roar of the black dog of the moors, and he said, "Oh my subjects, I have, as promised, given you the run of the earth and interfered not with your deeds. In exchange, I requested that you come and tell me your evil works every seven years at this date and time, that I may be satisfied you are using my gifts properly."

And so the cats each began to cry out the things they had done. It was terrible to hear them call so, in human voices. Not a single one of them proclaimed a good deed. The twelve crowned cats were silent in all this. "I pushed no less than fifty cups, mugs and antique glass sundries from the shelves and table!" "I slaughtered nearly ten thousand good, holy church mice!" "I kept my human slave from meeting a man who would make her happy! She is set to die alone and I will eat her corpse!" "That's nothing! I caused an infection in a child that will lead to mental illness all his life!" "I vomited, pooped and peed on every single piece of furniture and every inch of carpet!" "I killed a hobo and ate him clean to the bone over many days." "I caused a scientist close to curing cancer to lose his work by jumping on his keyboard!" And so on and so on for so long that Corey worried that the whole night would be him in the tree listening to such horrid deeds, yet, the shadows didn't seem to move an inch during the long hours of listening to all the evil cats could do.

And then, with eyes of gleaming yellow like polished jasper, the Great Black Cat turned to the twelve crowned cats and asked them what evils they had done to satisfy him. These villainous deeds were greater than the sum of all evils before, and their actions, whether by inspiring witches as their familiars or causing trouble for world leaders through their cat-like behavior, outclassed the villainy and misery of all the rank amateurs before them.

Corey started to shudder and shake involuntarily. So many calamities over the last seven years were from these twelve arch-fiends that he could not bear to look any more.

When the last one finished, the Great Black Cat sighed. "I am satisfied! These evil works are such that I could not dream their equal!" And all the cats, even the hatted ones, preened and prided themselves. "Well, I'll dismiss you for seven years time and again. Perhaps the twelve here will be unseated next time. Aim high, my servants! I'll send the word through my 'cats paws' where we will meet again." The joke was met by hissing and meows like laughter.

The cat with the bishop's mitre said. "What of the son of Adam in the tree there? Should we fetch him down and eat him, flesh, blood, bone and soul?"

The Great Black Cat stuck out his red tongue, winking one of the baleful eyes. "I thought to keep him a snack for later, and to share among you as a reward!" The cats without crowns meowed and hissed in displeasure at being left out. Corey looked to see if there was some opportunity to jump down and run for it, but the cats surrounded the tree on all sides. He could hear scratching at the trunks. Some called to dig up the tree, others to cut it down by clawing out the wood.

Corey shivered and clutched his branch tighter as the cats went on and on about how best to serve him up. Some called for carving knives, others for a great stewpot and spices and yet others cried out over and over again, "Eat him raw! Lap his blood! Lick his organs! Gnaw his bones!" And so on until Corey nearly fainted from panic.

Desperately, searching for any way to get out, he remembered something he read in a book once, and shouted. "Oh! That you, the greatest cat I've ever seen (and I've seen cats!) are in my very presence, honor me by looking upon me... it's too much! You have given me so much to live for! I have to tell everyone of your magnificence! I have to sing about your lustrous coat! I will dream of you until my dying day! Your court is beyond the courts of King Arthur and Charlemagne and... and... Isabella and Ferdinand... COMBINED!" He flattered the Great Black Cat without ceasing. Even as he felt the tree being shaken from its roots and cats climbed the branches. Claws started to pick at his boots. The Great Black Cat licked himself for a while, then, cast his jaundiced eyes upward, thoughtfully. Corey did not like that look on him.

The Great Black Cat looked intrigued and spat out a furball in a commanding way, as a man would spit. "Now hold up, my lovelies, this is a man to listen to. He has good 'taste' in cats indeed! Sing you said? Why don't you give me a tune. The best songs ever written have me in them." The yellow eyes blinked, and examined him closely.

Corey panicked, but breathed out. He had first met Mag in choir practice, after all! "To be sure your outstanding awesomeness, sir! Lets see..." And he thought for another second, and then, in the cleanest, clearest, most excellent tone he could, he sang out to the tune of Tell me the Old, Old Story:

"Tell me about the Great Black Cat!

The unseen king a'cats,

Of the Great black cat and his gloooooorrrrryyy-"

The Great Black Cat shifted uncomfortably. "Ugh! Enough! Maybe don't sing about how amazing I am!" The Great Black Cat shifted and scratched his chin with his claw. "I suppose you could be useful." The Cat grinned at him. "Alright, I won't eat you tonight. Flattery does get you EVERYWHERE with me." The cats yowled and nyarled that Corey should be eaten, bones cracked and marrow slurped up.

The Great Black Cat jumped up suddenly and howled. "Quuuuiieetttt!" All the hair on the back stood up, and the claws and teeth extended, in the night, his form seemed more like a sabre toothed tiger than a large cat. "People have been forgetting about me for years! Now only some dumb old folks still tell my stories. Ho ho! What a shock they'll have when he tells everyone about meeting Ol' Scratch the Emperor of Cats, eh?" The cats stopped complaining.

"Now head on out, all of you except for my twelve prince of cats. You'll attend me personally on great mischief tonight!" The crowned cats nodded and stayed while the rest slipped away, some slowly at first, then faster and faster, until Corey blinked and there were only the twelve princes of cats left and the Great Black Cat himself, Ol' Scratch. "I've got a sweet date with some hot witches in a little while, so how about this. I'll let you live for tonight. There will be three wonders before midnight. If you hide in the tree, and don't make a sound, after the third one, you'll be free to go home, for the witching hour will end then, but not before. Remember! Three things! Now away! I must not be late for the Black Mass!"

With a yowl that sounded like ten thousand metal nails on a chalkboard, the Great Black Cat leaped into the shadows. Without missing a beat, the twelve princes of cats jumped after him, leaving the barest set of paw prints in the dirt, the only sign they had been there.

Corey thought to get down, not trusting in anything, cat, human or otherwise that called itself 'Ol' Scratch' and attended Black Masses. But as he reached out to steady himself against the trunk, he heard a laughter in the breeze, and cast himself into the shadows of the branches.

Not a second too soon, for on winds that smelled of blood, sulfur and concoctions and perfumes so strange Corey had no name for them, witches flew in from all corners, silhouetted against the moonlight. They rode



on brooms, vacuums, motorcycles, scooters, cars, planes which they rode on the outside, feet dangling about the pilot's cabin windows, a train carried some thirty witches in a comfortable and luxurious passenger cabin complete with tea kettles and yet more rode things so diverse and numerous that Corey could not stare at them any longer.

Then, there was a cry of delight, and with a whoosh and a sparkle three red flowing dress-clad witches descended to his hiding spot. Their hair flowed behind them, black, white and blonde in a shimmering tricolour wave. Peaked hats with wide brims, each at a different jaunty angle, blocked out the stars behind them. The first one cackled merrily, riding a broom side saddle. The second cooed comfortingly. The last moaned and gasped, casting herself about. "Ho sisters! What a catch! Let's take him for a gift to the master! What favor before him we will have!" The first declared, grinning with a smile that extended her cheeks a foot either side. Corey saw three women were fair, but each had a deformity that made them hideous, like a painting, but with tears in the canvas, marring it.

The second batted eyelashes that tickled him from three yards away, where she hovered in the night air on her mop, bucket floating a foot or two behind, and full of dirty water or blood. Her nails ran longer than the branches he tried to hide on. "No no, I can smell that he has a beloved! Let's ensorcel him so that he enters a pact with us, so we can get his first born child, and his seventh son! What power among our sisters we will have!"

The third's breasts were so exaggerated that they flapped in the wind. Her hips were so thick they easily wrapped around the shop vac she rode, which she directed by turning the nozzle this way and that as she desired. Her lips out-massed Corey's thumbs. "No, no! Dearest sisters, let us fold him like a napkin and keep him in our purse until after the ceremonies! What fun we will have!"

They laughed and giggled, before agreeing with the third sister. The First said. "Come, boy! We are blessed to know all arts forbidden to mortal women!" The Second said. "Come, boy! There are things we three can do that will open your mind to things only known by the highest Brahmins of the decadent Hindus!" The Third said. "Come, boy! Such pleasures await you as dim the holy lights of cursed Heaven!" And on and on they went.

Corey tried to keep silent, but he could take no more and shouted. "Get away from me, you witches! I'd sooner marry my girl Mag's grandfather than touch any of you! Mag's more beautiful, more virtuous and more feminine than any of you three!" Striking upon a sudden inspiration, Corey cried out. "Lord, preserve me and my love from these terrible witches!"

The first one laughed, mockingly. The second one sighed, as if disappointed with a child. The third pouted,

her lips grotesquely exaggerated. "Well that takes the fun out of it!" "Let's go, he can't be reasoned with." "Guys like you make terrible lovers! Terrible! You're terrible!" And they flew away, last in line to their dark purpose.

Corey sighed, and when he thought the coast was clear, he looked for a way down. Just as he found a likely branch, he heard a sound like the tinkling of a bell and the silver notes of a flute. He hid again, fearing some new terror.

There passed under him a procession of seven riders on horseback. Each one bore an instrument, flag or strange object Corey wondered if he could bear knowing what they were for. They were the most magnificently dressed people he had ever seen. They were adorned with gold, silver and platinum jewelry. Gems of highest quality studded every metal surface. Gold thread decorated their robes with scenes of hunts and kings and stranger things like giants, dragons and chimerae. Their horses were fine steeds and armored with barding covered with beaten and moulded gold. These beasts required no leading, and the reins of finest black leather remained slack in the hands of the riders. Every piece of their apparel and bodies shimmered in the moonlight.

Their faces were more fair than anything Corey had seen before. Mag, perfectly done up in their clothes, jewelry and makeup would seem like an ugly dog compared to those riders. Now he could hear them talk and speak, and laugh like the sounds of bells. It was so lovely to hear them speak that he would pay money to have them talk about the weather. Their motions were so graceful that he felt like his motions for pulling Mag close for a kiss were more like the motions of an ogre pressing horrid lips to his hideous ogre wife.

His heart slowed and began to beat in time with their tune. He felt that he could cast off his clothes and dance for them, but that it would be so ugly to their eyes they'd shame him, and he couldn't take that at all. He tried to turn his face away, so he wouldn't look at them. Their music entwined his mind, but before the final note of the spell, he was shocked out of their hypnotism. Whenever he looked through the corner of his eye, the faces, so fair before, changed to a ugly, pock marked and sin filled face, so twisted by evil that it made the witches from before seem to him like super models on the cover of fashion magazines. Their faces were cruel, and did not match the laughter and joy of their words and phrases. No matter what was said, their lips barely moved, and Corey wondered if they spoke at all, for now he looked on them with horror!

The lead rider, who wore as a crown, a wreath of holly, antlers, thorns and frost covered vines woven together, said to the rest. "Dearest companions, I feel as though we are being watched. Puck, do search for him, and point him out for us."

One, who had a cap like Perseus and a pair of winged sandals unique to him, said with a laugh. "Ho ho! With pleasure! See, my lord, there he is, on the branch shivering as if a lumberjack had it in his sights!"

All turned towards Corey, who tried to make himself very small against the trunk. A woman, with a greenwood spear and a clear, dark green orb with a golden statue of a newborn fawn at the core said. "My goodness! What a lucky man to see us so arrayed! He is blessed among men already to see MY beauty, but can we do more for him, my lovely cousins?"

Another woman, who alone covered her face with a mask of silver and a white metal that shone with its own light, clapped her hands. "Ooooooh can we give him the head of a donkey?! Like in the play!?" She had been ringing bells in time with the hoofbeats, to make the gold shod steps yet more pleasing.

The man beside her, who had a beard and was the one who played the flute, sighed. "Five hundred years and it's still all Shakespeare with you, Lady Mab. Lets just enchant him and send him to sleep. Mortals are all about the infinite heavens above us, I'm told. While he sleeps, let us secret him away to some far flung world a thousand years hence."

A figure of a man, who tapped on a drum of ivory and the skins of extinct beasts, said, "No no, too complicated! We'd lose him in the asteroid belt or down a black hole or something and the trick will be ruined! Let's just turn him inside out or have him lose his memories."

Several of the ladies complained at the thought of blood being sprayed everywhere by turning him inside out and the men cried: "Boring! Boring! You must do better!" And so they went about debating the merits of the donkey head against making him unable to taste cheese or switching his left and right hands. The one called Puck declared: "Switching body parts are so last century, surgeons can switch them back these days. Let's make him fall in love with a sow."

At this Corey stiffened and said. "Mag." It was barely a whisper, but it was clear all the elf lords and ladies, for that's what they were, had heard him.

They smiled and laughed, and the sound rang cruel beyond reason to hear. The ideas came fast and thick and smote Corey on the brow with their sadism. "Ah! Let's have them switch bodies!" "Ho ho! How about curdling her breast milk?" "I don't think we've turned a maiden's hair seaweed green in years!" "Remember the girl with the ducks? I think we can do better, but with geese this time..."

Corey could take it no more! Again, inspiration from the sermons of the Parson and words of Mag came flooding into his mind. "God! Lord Jesus! Please! Have mercy on me, a sinner, and protect Mag against evil! Keep us against those who would harm us!"

The Elf lords and ladies, without a sound, not even their former music, turned away and their horses disappeared into the mist that rose up from the roots of the trees. It was like they had never stopped their procession. Saying a prayer of thanksgiving, Corey returned to the business of finding his way down when he heard a slight rustle in the bushes. For a fourth time, he hid himself among the branches.

The Great Black Cat sauntered in, swaggering and happy beyond what Corey thought reasonable. "You still here, you tasty silver tongued flatterer?" The Cat meowed and the twelve evil princes of cats leaped out of the bushes in every which way. "Oh ho! I did not think my plan would work so well, or that I would be so fortunate that wonders would actually pass you by, and keep you in your hiding spot! Say, the Witching Hour is nearly over, and I'm hungry for a snack, how about you my friends?" The twelve cats meowed in agreement.

"What? You said you wouldn't eat me!" Corey couldn't believe his ears, and he was having enough trouble with his eyes already. He expected something, but not for the Great Black Cat to treat his hiding spot as some sort of larder!

The cat's eyes cast themselves aside, as if he couldn't believe Corey's outburst. "I wouldn't be much of a Prince of Lies if I didn't lie, would I?" The Great Black Cat laughed and taking a running start, leaped up, opening his maw so wide it could have eaten the tree in one bite.

Corey screamed and shouted. He threw up his hands before his face and cried. "God! Jesus Christ! Holy Ghost! Please! Protect me against the violence and evils of the devil!" The Great Black Cat laughed again, but when he bit Corey, who continued praying even as the fangs touched him, his teeth could not find purchase. His mouth began to smoke and steam, and the Great Black Cat leaped back, yowling in pain.

"Bishop Whiskers! Duke Southpaw, get him! We need to stop him praying! I cannot touch him if he is in prayer!" Yet Corey focused all his might in praying for God's protection. The two cats tackled Corey, but they leaped back, screaming and burning, their fur smouldering where they touched him. Every one of the cats tried several times and several ways of distracting him, yet they all failed.

The Great Black Cat spat and hissed, cuffing his twelve followers. He called them every evil name and promised great tortures in hell for their failure, and great presents or favors if they should succeed. Yet, not a single one could touch Corey while he prayed.

Finally, the Great Black Cat looked above, the moon had begun to move again in the sky. "Gah! Fools! Half-wits! The witching hour is over and I must away! You were lucky that He protected you here. I have eaten men who thought themselves holier than you many times! In the Colosseum, in the form of many wild animals, I

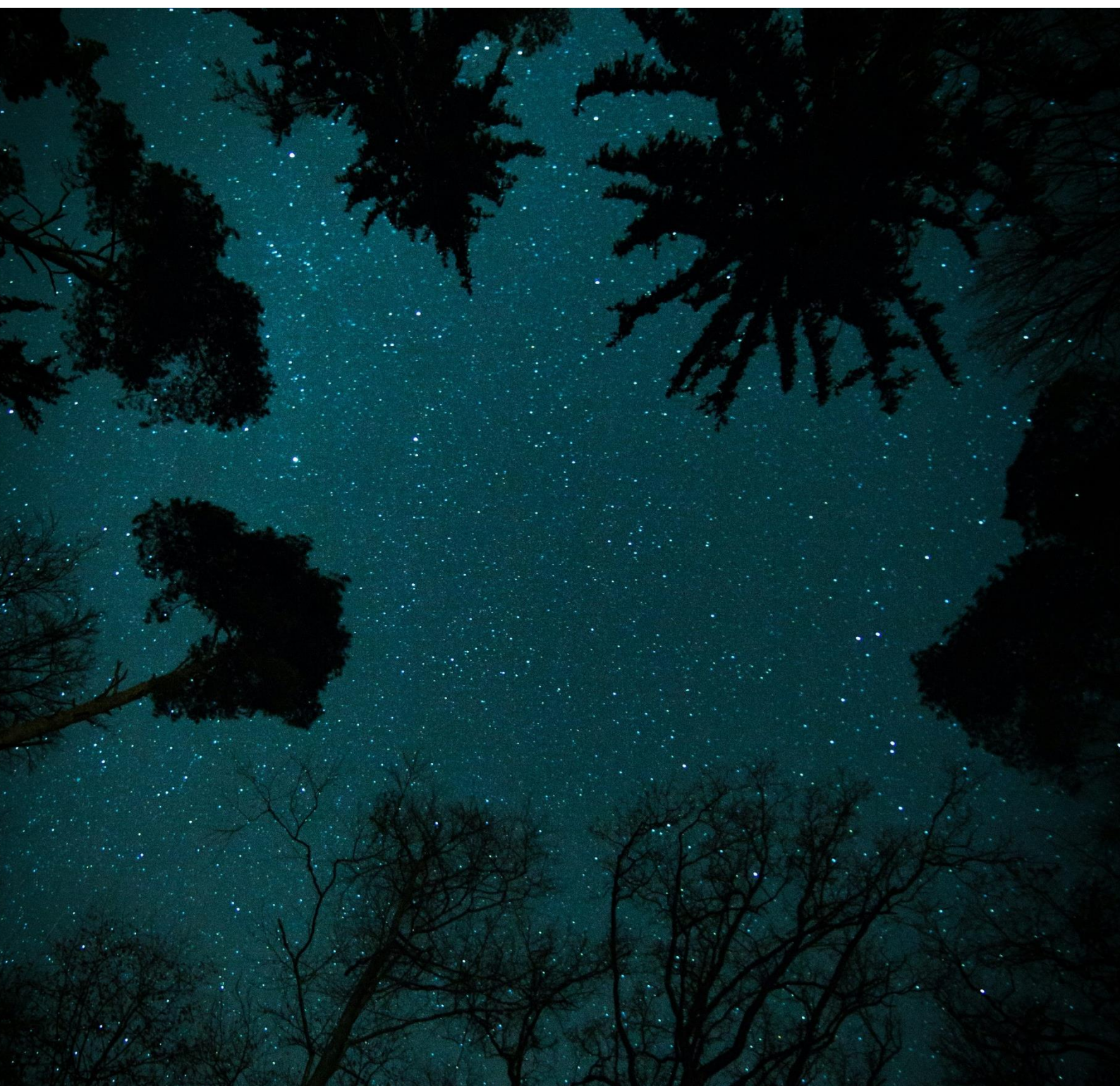


lapped Christian blood that flowed like rivers until I purposefully burst the stomach of the animal I resided in and jumped to the next! I won't forget this, and if the guard over you is ever dropped, I will do you a great evil!" And the Great Black Cat screamed and charged into the forest, and the twelve evil crowned cats with him.

Corey leaped down from his tree and ran to his house as the moon set, where he called Mag and told her all the wondrous and terrible things that happened to him. She wept and praised God that he had been preserved,

having prayed all night for him. From then on Corey respected what her old grandfather said, and the grandfather came to love Corey as a member of the family, and supported his marriage to Mag the next year.

In all that time, until the day he died, Corey never missed a Sunday service, morning and evening, nor a Wednesday prayer meeting. He said, "For fear of the devil and his evil work." And people thought he spoke of the temptation to sin, but we know the real story, don't we?





# Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil

John Keats

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!  
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!  
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell  
Without some stir of heart, some malady;  
They could not sit at meals but feel how well  
It soothed each to be the other by;  
They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep  
But to each other dream, and nightly weep.

With every morn their love grew tenderer,  
With every eve deeper and tenderer still;  
He might not in house, field, or garden stir,  
But her full shape would all his seeing fill;  
And his continual voice was pleasanter  
To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;  
Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,  
She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same.

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch,  
Before the door had given her to his eyes;  
And from her chamber-window he would catch  
Her beauty farther than the falcon spies;  
And constant as her vespers would he watch,  
Because her face was turn'd to the same skies;  
And with sick longing all the night outwear,  
To hear her morning-step upon the stair.

A whole long month of May in this sad plight  
Made their cheeks paler by the break of June:  
"To-morrow will I bow to my delight,  
To-morrow will I ask my lady's boon." —  
"O may I never see another night,  
Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not love's tune." —  
So spake they to their pillows; but, alas,  
Honeyless days and days did he let pass;

Until sweet Isabella's untouch'd cheek  
Fell sick within the rose's just domain,  
Fell thin as a young mother's, who doth seek  
By every lull to cool her infant's pain:  
"How ill she is," said he, "I may not speak,  
And yet I will, and tell my love all plain:  
If looks speak love-laws, I will drink her tears,  
And at the least 'twill startle off her cares."

So said he one fair morning, and all day  
His heart beat awfully against his side;  
And to his heart he inwardly did pray  
For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide  
Stifled his voice, and puls'd resolve away —  
Fever'd his high conceit of such a bride,  
Yet brought him to the meekness of a child:  
Alas! when passion is both meek and wild!



Isabella - John Everett Millais



So once more he had wak'd and anguished  
A dreary night of love and misery,  
If Isabel's quick eye had not been wed  
To every symbol on his forehead high;  
She saw it waxing very pale and dead,  
And straight all flush'd; so, lisped tenderly,  
"Lorenzo!" — here she ceas'd her timid quest,  
But in her tone and look he read the rest.

"O Isabella, I can half perceive  
That I may speak my grief into thine ear;  
If thou didst ever any thing believe,  
Believe how I love thee, believe how near  
My soul is to its doom: I would not grieve  
Thy hand by unwelcome pressing, would not fear  
Thine eyes by gazing; but I cannot live  
Another night, and not my passion shrive.

"Love! thou art leading me from wintry cold,  
Lady! thou ledest me to summer clime,  
And I must taste the blossoms that unfold  
In its ripe warmth this gracious morning time."  
So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,  
And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme:  
Great bliss was with them, and great happiness  
Grew, like a lusty flower in June's caress.

Parting they seem'd to tread upon the air,  
Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart  
Only to meet again more close, and share  
The inward fragrance of each other's heart.  
She, to her chamber gone, a ditty fair  
Sang, of delicious love and honey'd dart;  
He with light steps went up a western hill,  
And bade the sun farewell, and joy'd his fill.

All close they met again, before the dusk  
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,  
All close they met, all eves, before the dusk  
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil  
Close in a bower of hyacinth and musk,  
Unknown of any, free from whispering tale.  
Ah! better had it been for ever so,  
Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe.

Were they unhappy then? — It cannot be —  
Too many tears for lovers have been shed,  
Too many sighs give we to them in fee,  
Too much of pity after they are dead,  
Too many doleful stories do we see,  
Whose matter in bright gold were best be read;  
Except in such a page where Theseus' spouse  
Over the pathless waves towards him bows.

But, for the general award of love,  
The little sweet doth kill much bitterness;  
Though Dido silent is in under-grove,  
And Isabella's was a great distress,  
Though young Lorenzo in warm Indian clove  
Was not embalm'd, this truth is not the less —  
Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers,  
Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers.

With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,  
Enriched from ancestral merchandize,  
And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
In torched mines and noisy factories,  
And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
In blood from stinging whip; — with hollow eyes  
Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death  
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:  
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,  
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
Gush'd with more pride than do a wretch's tears? —  
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts  
Were of more soft ascent than lazarus stairs? —  
Why were they proud? Because red-lin'd accounts  
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years? —  
Why were they proud? again we ask aloud,  
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired  
In hungry pride and gainful cowardice,  
As two close Hebrews in that land inspired,  
Paled in and vineyarded from beggar-spies;  
The hawks of ship-mast forests — the untired  
And pannier'd mules for ducats and old lies — .  
Quick cat's-paws on the generous stray-away, —  
Great wits in Spanish, Tuscan, and Malay.

How was it these same ledger-men could spy  
Fair Isabella in her downy nest?  
How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye  
A straying from his toil? Hot Egypt's pest  
Into their vision covetous and sly!  
How could these money-bags see east and west? —  
Yet so they did — and every dealer fair  
Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.

O eloquent and famed Boccaccio!  
Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon,  
And of thy spicy myrtles as they blow,  
And of thy roses amorous of the moon,  
And of thy lilies, that do paler grow  
Now they can no more hear thy ghittern's tune,  
For venturing syllables that ill beseem  
The quiet glooms of such a piteous theme.

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the tale  
Shall move on soberly, as it is meet;  
There is no other crime, no mad assail  
To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:  
But it is done — succeed the verse or fail —  
To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet;  
To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,  
An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.







These brethren having found by many signs  
What love Lorenzo for their sister had,  
And how she lov'd him too, each unconfines  
His bitter thoughts to other, well nigh mad  
That he, the servant of their trade designs,  
Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad,  
When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees  
To some high noble and his olive-trees.

And many a jealous conference had they,  
And many times they bit their lips alone,  
Before they fix'd upon a surest way  
To make the youngster for his crime atone;  
And at the last, these men of cruel clay  
Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone;  
For they resolved in some forest dim  
To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.

So on a pleasant morning, as he leant  
Into the sun-rise, o'er the balustrade  
Of the garden-terrace, towards him they bent  
Their footing through the dews; and to him said,  
"You seem there in the quiet of content,  
Lorenzo, and we are most loth to invade  
Calm speculation; but if you are wise,  
Bestride your steed while cold is in the skies.

"To-day we purpose, ay, this hour we mount  
To spur three leagues towards the Apennine;  
Come down, we pray thee, ere the hot sun count  
His dewy rosary on the eglantine."  
Lorenzo, courteously as he was wont,  
Bow'd a fair greeting to these serpents' whine;  
And went in haste, to get in readiness,  
With belt, and spur, and bracing huntsman's dress.

And as he to the court-yard pass'd along,  
Each third step did he pause, and listen'd oft  
If he could hear his lady's matin-song,  
Or the light whisper of her footstep soft;  
And as he thus over his passion hung,  
He heard a laugh full musical aloft;  
When, looking up, he saw her features bright  
Smile through an in-door lattice, all delight.

"Love, Isabel!" said he, "I was in pain  
Lest I should miss to bid thee a good morrow:  
Ah! what if I should lose thee, when so fain  
I am to stifle all the heavy sorrow  
Of a poor three hours' absence? but we'll gain  
Out of the amorous dark what day doth borrow.  
Good bye! I'll soon be back." — "Good bye!" said she —  
And as he went she chanted merrily.

So the two brothers and their murder'd man  
Rode past fair Florence, to where Arno's stream  
Gurgles through straiten'd banks, and still doth fan  
Itself with dancing bulrush, and the bream  
Keeps head against the freshets. Sick and wan  
The brothers' faces in the ford did seem,  
Lorenzo's flush with love. — They pass'd the water  
Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.

There was Lorenzo slain and buried in,  
There in that forest did his great love cease;  
Ah! when a soul doth thus its freedom win,  
It aches in loneliness — is ill at peace  
As the break-covert blood-hounds of such sin:  
They dipp'd their swords in the water, and did tease  
Their horses homeward, with convulsed spur,  
Each richer by his being a murderer.

They told their sister how, with sudden speed,  
Lorenzo had ta'en ship for foreign lands,  
Because of some great urgency and need  
In their affairs, requiring trusty hands.  
Poor Girl! put on thy stifling widow's weed,  
And 'scape at once from Hope's accursed bands;  
To-day thou wilt not see him, nor to-morrow,  
And the next day will be a day of sorrow.

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;  
Sorely she wept until the night came on,  
And then, instead of love, O misery!  
She brooded o'er the luxury alone:  
His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,  
And to the silence made a gentle moan,  
Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,  
And on her couch low murmuring "Where? O where?"

But Selfishness, Love's cousin, held not long  
Its fiery vigil in her single breast;  
She fretted for the golden hour, and hung  
Upon the time with feverish unrest —  
Not long — for soon into her heart a throng  
Of higher occupants, a richer zest,  
Came tragic; passion not to be subdued,  
And sorrow for her love in travels rude.

In the mid days of autumn, on their eves,  
The breath of Winter comes from far away,  
And the sick west continually bereaves  
Of some gold tinge, and plays a roundelay  
Of death among the bushes and the leaves  
To make all bare before he dares to stray  
From his north cavern. So sweet Isabel  
By gradual decay from beauty fell,

Because Lorenzo came not. Oftentimes  
She ask'd her brothers, with an eye all pale,  
Striving to be itself, what dungeon climes  
Could keep him off so long? They spake a tale  
Time after time, to quiet her. Their crimes  
Came on them, like a smoke from Hinnom's vale;  
And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud,  
To see their sister in her snowy shroud.

And she had died in drowsy ignorance,  
But for a thing more deadly dark than all;  
It came like a fierce potion, drunk by chance,  
Which saves a sick man from the feather'd pall  
For some few gasping moments; like a lance,  
Waking an Indian from his cloudy hall  
With cruel pierce, and bringing him again  
Sense of the gnawing fire at heart and brain.

It was a vision. — In the drowsy gloom,  
The dull of midnight, at her couch's foot  
Lorenzo stood, and wept: the forest tomb  
Had marr'd his glossy hair which once could shoot  
Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom  
Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute  
From his lorn voice, and past his loamed ears  
Had made a miry channel for his tears.

Strange sound it was, when the pale shadow spake;  
For there was striving, in its piteous tongue,  
To speak as when on earth it was awake,  
And Isabella on its music hung:  
Languor there was in it, and tremulous shake,  
As in a palsied Druid's harp unstrung;  
And through it moan'd a ghostly under-song,  
Like hoarse night-gusts sepulchral briars among.

Its eyes, though wild, were still all dewy bright  
With love, and kept all phantom fear aloof  
From the poor girl by magic of their light,  
The while it did unthread the horrid woof  
Of the late darken'd time, — the murderous spite  
Of pride and avarice, — the dark pine roof  
In the forest, — and the sodden turfed dell,  
Where, without any word, from stabs he fell.

Saying moreover, "Isabel, my sweet!  
Red whortle-berries droop above my head,  
And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet;  
Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed  
Their leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-fold bleat  
Comes from beyond the river to my bed:  
Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,  
And it shall comfort me within the tomb.

"I am a shadow now, alas! alas!  
Upon the skirts of Human-nature dwelling  
Alone: I chant alone the holy mass,  
While little sounds of life are round me knelling,  
And glossy bees at noon do fieldward pass,  
And many a chapel bell the hour is telling,  
Paining me through: those sounds grow strange to me,  
And thou art distant in Humanity.

"I know what was, I feel full well what is,  
And I should rage, if spirits could go mad;  
Though I forget the taste of earthly bliss,  
That paleness warms my grave, as though I had  
A Seraph chosen from the bright abyss  
To be my spouse: thy paleness makes me glad;  
Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel  
A greater love through all my essence steal."

The Spirit mourn'd "Adieu!" — dissolv'd, and left  
The atom darkness in a slow turmoil;  
As when of healthful midnight sleep bereft,  
Thinking on rugged hours and fruitless toil,  
We put our eyes into a pillowy cleft,  
And see the spangly gloom froth up and boil:  
It made sad Isabella's eyelids ache,  
And in the dawn she started up awake;

"Ha! ha!" said she, "I knew not this hard life,  
I thought the worst was simple misery;  
I thought some Fate with pleasure or with strife  
Portion'd us — happy days, or else to die;  
But there is crime — a brother's bloody knife!  
Sweet Spirit, thou hast school'd my infancy:  
I'll visit thee for this, and kiss thine eyes,  
And greet thee morn and even in the skies."

When the full morning came, she had devised  
How she might secret to the forest hie;  
How she might find the clay, so dearly prized,  
And sing to it one latest lullaby;  
How her short absence might be unsurmised,  
While she the inmost of the dream would try.  
Resolv'd, she took with her an aged nurse,  
And went into that dismal forest-hearse.

See, as they creep along the river side,  
How she doth whisper to that aged Dame,  
And, after looking round the champaign wide,  
Shows her a knife. — "What feverous hectic flame  
Burns in thee, child? — What good can thee betide,  
That thou should'st smile again?" — The evening came,  
And they had found Lorenzo's earthy bed;  
The flint was there, the berries at his head.

Who hath not loiter'd in a green church-yard,  
And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,  
Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,  
To see scull, coffin'd bones, and funeral stole;  
Pitying each form that hungry Death hath marr'd,  
And filling it once more with human soul?  
Ah! this is holiday to what was felt  
When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt.

She gaz'd into the fresh-thrown mould, as though  
One glance did fully all its secrets tell;  
Clearly she saw, as other eyes would know  
Pale limbs at bottom of a crystal well;  
Upon the murderous spot she seem'd to grow,  
Like to a native lily of the dell:  
Then with her knife, all sudden, she began  
To dig more fervently than misers can.

Soon she turn'd up a soiled glove, whereon  
Her silk had play'd in purple phantasies,  
She kiss'd it with a lip more chill than stone,  
And put it in her bosom, where it dries  
And freezes utterly unto the bone  
Those dainties made to still an infant's cries:  
Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care,  
But to throw back at times her veiling hair.

That old nurse stood beside her wondering,  
Until her heart felt pity to the core  
At sight of such a dismal labouring,  
And so she kneeled, with her locks all hoar,  
And put her lean hands to the horrid thing:  
Three hours they labour'd at this travail sore;  
At last they felt the kernel of the grave,  
And Isabella did not stamp and rave.





John William Waterhouse "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil"

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?  
Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?  
O for the gentleness of old Romance,  
The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!  
Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,  
For here, in truth, it doth not well belong  
To speak: — O turn thee to the very tale,  
And taste the music of that vision pale.

With duller steel than the Persean sword  
They cut away no formless monster's head,  
But one, whose gentleness did well accord  
With death, as life. The ancient harps have said,  
Love never dies, but lives, immortal Lord:  
If Love impersonate was ever dead,  
Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.  
'Twas love; cold, — dead indeed, but not dethroned.

In anxious secrecy they took it home,  
And then the prize was all for Isabel:  
She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,  
And all around each eye's sepulchral cell  
Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam  
With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,  
She drench'd away: — and still she comb'd, and kept  
Sighing all day — and still she kiss'd, and wept.

Then in a silken scarf, — sweet with the dews  
Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,  
And divine liquids come with odorous ooze  
Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully, —  
She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose  
A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,  
And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set  
Sweet basil, which her tears kept ever wet.

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,  
And she forgot the blue above the trees,  
And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;  
She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
And the new morn she saw not: but in peace  
Hung over her sweet basil evermore,  
And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.

And so she ever fed it with thin tears,  
Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,  
So that it smelt more balmy than its peers  
Of basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew  
Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,  
From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:  
So that the jewel, safely casketed,  
Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread.

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!  
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!  
O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,  
Unknown, Lethæan, sigh to us — O sigh!  
Spirits in grief, lift up your heads, and smile;  
Lift up your heads, sweet Spirits, heavily,  
And make a pale light in your cypress glooms,  
Tinting with silver wan your marble tombs.

Moan hither, all ye syllables of woe,  
From the deep throat of sad Melpomene!  
Through bronzed lyre in tragic order go,  
And touch the strings into a mystery;  
Sound mournfully upon the winds and low;  
For simple Isabel is soon to be  
Among the dead: She withers, like a palm  
Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm.

O leave the palm to wither by itself;  
Let not quick Winter chill its dying hour! —  
It may not be — those Baalites of pelf,  
Her brethren, noted the continual shower  
From her dead eyes; and many a curious elf,  
Among her kindred, wonder'd that such dower  
Of youth and beauty should be thrown aside  
By one mark'd out to be a noble's bride.

And, furthermore, her brethren wonder'd much  
Why she sat drooping by the basil green,  
And why it flourish'd, as by magic touch;  
Greatly they wonder'd what the thing might mean:  
They could not surely give belief, that such  
A very nothing would have power to wean  
Her from her own fair youth, and pleasures gay,  
And even remembrance of her love's delay.

Therefore they watch'd a time when they might sift  
This hidden whim; and long they watch'd in vain;  
For seldom did she go to chapel-shrift,  
And seldom felt she any hunger-pain;  
And when she left, she hurried back, as swift  
As bird on wing to breast its eggs again;  
And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there  
Beside her basil, weeping through her hair.

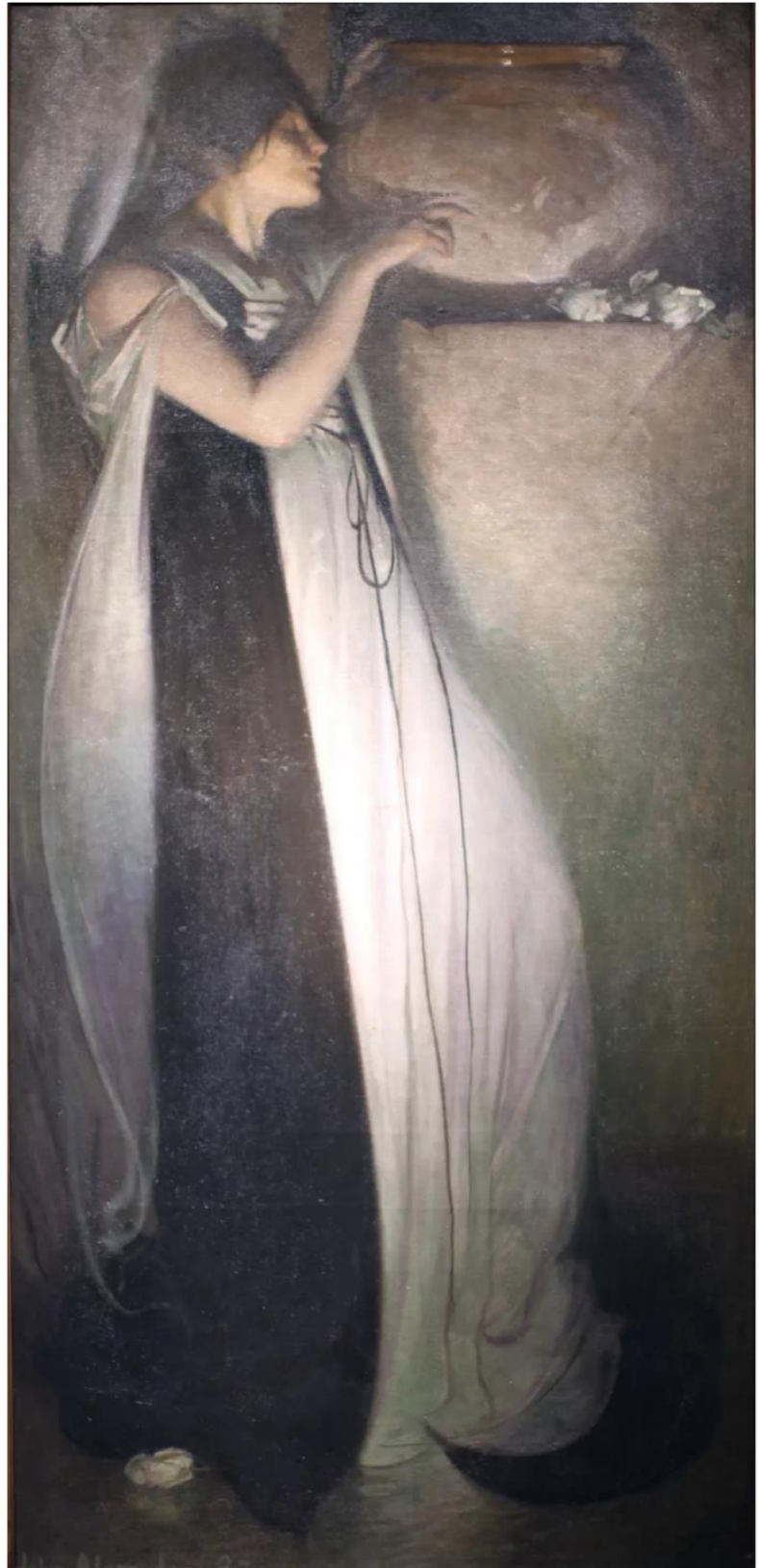
Yet they contriv'd to steal the basil-pot,  
And to examine it in secret place:  
The thing was vile with green and livid spot,  
And yet they knew it was Lorenzo's face:  
The guerdon of their murder they had got,  
And so left Florence in a moment's space,  
Never to turn again. — Away they went,  
With blood upon their heads, to banishment.

O Melancholy, turn thine eyes away!  
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!  
O Echo, Echo, on some other day,  
From isles Lethæan, sigh to us — o sigh!  
Spirits of grief, sing not you "Well-a-way!"  
For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die;  
Will die a death too lone and incomplete,  
Now they have ta'en away her basil sweet.

Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless things,  
Asking for her lost basil amorously;  
And with melodious chuckle in the strings  
Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry  
After the pilgrim in his wanderings,  
To ask him where her basil was; and why  
'Twas hid from her: "For cruel 'tis," said she,  
"To steal my basil-pot away from me."



And so she pined, and so she died forlorn,  
Imploring for her basil to the last.  
No heart was there in Florence but did mourn  
In pity of her love, so overcast.  
And a sad ditty of this story born  
From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd:  
Still is the burthen sung — "O cruelty,  
"To steal my basil-pot away from me!"



Isabella and the Pot of Basil John White Alexander

# A Dank Invitation

T. Meadows

It is a grey and drizzly Saturday morning.  
The onset of November touches your face  
and hands with cold and damp air as you  
stroll down the street gathering ingredients  
for the evenings mouth watering meal. Rain  
starts to fall as you reach the old heavy door  
of oak and glass. No need to dilly dally outside  
in this weather. You open the door, ready to  
fill you bags with mackerel and molluscs.

Chlorine, salt and iodine tickle your nostrils.  
The owner greets you with a familiar and  
calm "hello" as he sharpens a large knife. The  
strokes of the honing steel sound different  
today. They usually slide by your ears, like  
little boats carved out of bark down a bored  
brook. Now however, it is like they whisper to  
the iron floating with your red blood cells. In  
an instance they share their wishes with the  
muscles in your calves. With each stroke, the  
sound of the sharpening steel and your legs  
make you slither further into the shop. Inside  
your toes and fingers you feel warm little  
needles pushing your sense of touch to an  
invisible layer just outside the skin. Exactly  
how it is a minute after some heavy exercise.

You make a turn around a wooden shelf and  
there it is. This is what the honing steel and  
your blood cells wanted you to find. It speaks  
to you.

-We're not so different you and I. I am cut in  
half as you are cut off from the call.  
The call of the cold.  
The tap dance of nails.  
The velvet whisper of Winter.  
All your life you have pretended not to hear.  
You have denied me.  
You have denied the call.  
You have denied... yourself.  
You have donned the mask of an ant.  
Persephone recites from below.  
Chants of choice.  
Songs of selection.

You feel it now. You feel it in your toes.  
Her feet tangoing yours along the ceiling of  
Hades.  
What will you do now?  
Will you retreat back into the trot of termites.  
Or will you dance along with our lady's  
dithyramb?  
Go on! You know you want to. Do it!  
Reach in. Let your iron grasp make my neck  
your hilt.  
Darling... Let us dance.





# Torn

-AR Green

Torn in twain  
I toss and turn  
Ever must I yearn.  
Come darkest hour  
I think of power  
And oh, how I do burn.  
My decision made,  
My hand played,  
Yet I lose again.  
In darkest hour  
There is no power.  
A slave to fate;  
Beginning to end.



Love is enough: though the World be a-waning,  
And the woods have no voice but the voice of complaining,  
Though the sky be too dark for dim eyes to discover  
The gold-cups and daisies fair blooming thereunder,  
Though the hills be held shadows, and the sea a dark wonder  
And this day draw a veil over all deeds pass'd over,  
Yet their hands shall not tremble, their feet shall not falter;  
The void shall not weary, the fear shall not alter  
These lips and these eyes of the loved and the lover.

From Love is Enough by William Morris



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