

Gathering

a free magazine of dragonlance fiction





Cover art

Takhisis's Garden

Janet Jia Ee Chui

Original in greyscale, coloured (rather poorly) by sam.

You can see the original version of this picture at the magazine website. There is also a link to Janet's site, which includes many more pieces of stunning artwork.

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Introduction

from the editor (Samuel Marshall)

Welcome to 'Gathering'. I hope you'll enjoy reading the magazine.

The title refers not just to stories collected together, or consolidating amateur talent into one place, but to the international 'gathering' of the fan community. I think that's an important concept. Everybody has their own view of Krynn, and they're anxious to put that view forward. In combination, this provides the opportunity to see an old, known world with new eyes—especially as the authors here aren't constrained to the standard formula that many of TSR's books remain within.

Consequently, these stories are extremely varied.

'Feeding the Fish' is a whimsical, amusing tale of one single simple incident. Kender fans should love it.

'Brothers of the Forge', set around the time of the War of the Lance, tells an altogether darker story of a young dwarf's life.

'Lunitari Obscurum' follows more familiar themes of magic and demons, but keeps it fresh with an interesting storytelling technique.

'New Slant on Life' depicts a dragon that doesn't exactly fit in to the standard Krynnish stereotypes, which should be a nice change for anybody fed up with superpowers like Khellendros and Malys.

'Marsh Cat', my own story, continues to push my slightly dark view of the Fifth Age.

'Takhisis's Garden' is a commentary on some of the issues raised by the transition to the Fifth Age. I won't give away anything here, but trust me, the concept is pretty funny.

Finally, I should mention the excellent cover art by Janet Jia Ee Chui, which is based on Will's story. Don't blame her for the colouring—I added that in Photoshop. The original greyscale version was better, but I wanted to add a little interest to the front cover.

I edited the stories using a process of discussion. Rather than make changes to the text, I suggested alterations and areas that needed work to the authors, who would then deal with the problems themselves. I think this is a good way to proceed, but it did involve a lot of work both from myself and from the authors—I doubt most fan-fiction on the web has been through three rewrites. Hopefully this effort has paid off.

Please be sure to visit the magazine website <http://www.leafdigital.com/Gathering/> where you can find email addresses for the authors, and links to their home pages—often including more of their stories. There's other interesting stuff there, too.

I'd like to thank everybody who submitted work to this magazine, whether or not it was used, for helping make it work.

Be well, all. And enjoy the stories. --sam

Feeding the Fish

by Kaéren Anderson & Dion Cliffe

“Take that back!” wailed Vanishfast Foxtail.

Irian Starshadow swallowed hard, cleared his throat, and kicked away a tumbleweed of dust and cat hair that was cozying up to his shoe. “I...um...”

Over at a corner table of the Balifor Book and Beverage Boutique, a woman in red robes lifted her head from a leather-bound volume. She grinned expectantly as the proprietor hemmed and hawed.

“Um...I would—Ahem!—very much like to do so, young...uh...lady...”

He prided himself on his manners, which he deemed essential to success in the literary trade. But, Gilean help him, there was no polite way to say this. Only one course of action remained: to speak the truth.

“...Unfortunately, it seems to have fallen into one of your many lovely pouches,” he blurted out.

Only one thing is more terrifying than a kender running amok in a store that you have lovingly tended for most of your fifty-six years. That one thing now rose up before Irian in a blaze of indignation.

A teenage kender

Trying to make a fashion statement.

On a bad hair day.

“How dare you!” Vanishfast shrieked, the upper reaches of ‘dare’ heard only by a dog that was padding by the door at that moment. “Twice. That’s twice you’ve called me a thief. I’ve never been so insulted in all...”

Irian didn’t catch the exact number of years in which his visitor had not been so insulted. He was distracted—no, hypnotized—by streams of hair and hair-like substances. Vanishfast had a standard-issue topknot, cascading off the top of her head like the tail of a particularly large horse. Irian could see that her natural hair colour was blonde, if only because of new growth at the roots. The topknot was now blue, decorated with strands of vermilion ribbon and a brocade scarf in a hideously ugly shade of yellowish green.

The smaller topknot at her right temple appeared to have been starched with paste and fireplace soot. It jutted out from her head at a rising angle.

A third topknot, close to her left temple but hastily placed and not symmetrical with its counterpart on the right side, drooped purple for several inches before turning bright green at the very split ends.

But most distracting of all was the unicorn-horn braid that sprang from the kender’s forehead. Irian stood in awe, unable to comprehend how Vanishfast could stamp her tiny feet and rant and rave without missing a syllable as she plaited the hair before his wondering eyes.

A voice from the corner caused him to snap back to reality, or at least this version of it. “Oh, let her keep it, Irian. It’s only a rock.”

“Y..yes, Rel; but it isn’t *her* rock,” he responded.

Relthasta Mar pushed her book aside and picked up a spoon to stir her drink. It was an unnecessary, automatic gesture from her youth. She drank her tarbean tea straight, and had done so since coming to this part of Ansalon. Local honey just didn’t have the same tang. “The bottom of the pool is covered in the wretched things,” she observed, gesturing at a shallow artificial pond by the front window. “Surely you can spare just one for this dear child.”

Vanishfast stopped braiding, her face illuminated with hope.

“No,” Irian proclaimed firmly, folding his arms.

“Aww...hic!”

Again the bookseller was caught unprepared. The kender bobbed and weaved in his disbelieving sight, and he was slapped across the imagination by the concept of a drunken mouse rehearsing round dance steps on the top of a door with extremely rusty hinges. Vanishfast’s whine (and hiccup) rose through several octaves and out of Irian’s hearing range, although not before taking a parting shot at his eardrums. He winced.

“What’s so special about that particular stone, anyhow?” Rel goaded.

“It’s pretty,” said Vanishfast.

“It isn’t,” Irian denied.

“Yes, it is. It’s the prettiest one in the pond.”

“Was.”

“Oh, Irian, don’t be so pedantic.”

“You keep out of this, Rel. And stop grinning like that. It makes you look like a blasted Black Robe.”

“Black Robes don’t grin.”

“Yes, they do,” Vanishfast offered helpfully. “Otherwise, why would they bother? I mean, if you’re going to be evil on purpose, you might as well have some fun with it. I know this wizard in Sanction, and she really enjoys...”

“And *you* keep out of *this*!” Irian snarled.

“Kenderkin, however did you manage to get into Sanction?” asked the lady mage, genuinely curious.

“Oh, it’s easy,” Vanishfast effused. “You come in through... Er, no. That way got blocked when the volcano erupted. Wait, I’ll show you. I’ve got a map...”

Irian groaned and ground his teeth in frustration as his unwelcome visitor emptied her pouches onto the throw rug in the middle of the floor. Vanishfast happily sat down to inventory her possessions. Possessions? No, that wasn’t quite the right word. Despite their propensity for finding and wandering off with other people’s treasures, kender never quite managed to ‘possess’ anything. Always they played the tourist in the rented room, knowing that tomorrow someone else would take their place.

The tourist analogy explained the maps, but not

Vanishfast's determined resistance. How was Irian going to get back his stone?

Your stone? cried a voice in his head.

Irian turned suddenly to the aquarium. It contained a single fish, so there was only one party to address. "Don't fret, my dear," he soothed. "I'm sure it'll all work out in the end."

Relthasta glanced up from a map which she had unrolled on the carpet. "Irian, are you talking to that fish?" she inquired, a smirk in her voice.

"I am not 'talking' to the fish," he retorted. "I am feeding it." To make his point, he picked up a nearby container and sprinkled dried cutworms on the surface of the water. The pool's denizen, a sleek and iridescent carp, swam an angry spiral and snapped up a few crumbs as they sank.

"What do fish eat, anyway?" asked Vanishfast.

"Kender," Irian glowered.

"Do not."

"Do too—I... I mean, very small kender, and... uh... very big fish."

"How big?"

"Bigger than Splash, that's for certain." Irian glanced nervously into the water. Splash herself swam rapidly back and forth in a tight pattern, making it appear that the fish was pacing. "Of course," the bookseller went on, "we can always make the kender small enough, given a sufficiently sharp knife."

"Irian, you savage!" Rel exclaimed. "How dare you threaten this poor young girl?"

"How dare I? It's my store, first of all. Second of all..." Was that a real phrase? Too late; he was on a roll. "This 'poor young girl' is a rich young thief—"

"Wha...hic!"

"—Who took my—"

Splash whipped her tail threateningly.

"—I mean, who took Splash's stone—"

"Irian, are you mad? The fish's stone?"

"Yes, Rel, the fish's stone." Irian's voice went limp. "The stone I was supposed to guard; the one she took—" He tensed in anticipation of another supersonic squeak from the kender, and was actually disappointed when she kept silent. "—The one we've been arguing about for the past ten minutes. Give me the blasted rock, and I'll give it back to Splash, and then I'm going to close up shop and go lie down for the rest of the day because I have never had such a headache in my entire life."

"Oh! Okay."

Irian blinked. "What did you say?" he asked Vanishfast.

"The rock. You can have it back, if you want." The kender girl's collection imploded back into her pouches. Everything moved at once, topknots, hands, voice, and Irian felt a twinge of motion sickness.

"It is a really pretty rock," Vanishfast went on, "but when I picked it up it looked a lot prettier. I guess it's because it's dry now. You know, when you go to the beach

and you see all the rocks stuck in the sand under the water, so the colours are really bright and you think it's red but when you get it home..."

The listening part of Irian's brain shut down. He watched Vanishfast's hands cache the last few items from the carpet, and realized only then that he had been standing next to Splash's rock all along.

No matter—the kender, true to her word, bounced back to the artificial pond. Irian heard a satisfying *plpit!* as a small object dropped into the water.

A second later, Vanishfast let out a sound that could have been "Eep!" or "Eek!" or "Oh!" or even the dreaded "Oops!" Irian couldn't tell for sure. He had been nearly deafened by a telepathic scream of outrage. Vanishfast, backpedalling at top speed, caught her heel on the edge of the rug and landed hard on her tailbone. Splash followed, airborne and furious.

The carp landed on the rug. It grew, sprouting limbs that thickened rapidly to the girth of small trees. Small, sharp fish teeth became large, sharper reptilian fangs that clamped onto Vanishfast's left boot, hoisted her into the air, and held her there. One, two, three shakes; the kender's pouches opened under the considerable weight of their contents.

A huge brass foreclaw wrapped around Vanishfast's ankle and lifted her even higher. A second claw wiped away the vestiges of kender boot flavour, then pointed at a small blue pebble that had rolled under a chair. "Irian, dearest, would you get my self-stone, please?"

"Oh," said Vanishfast. "That rock."

"Yes, that rock. You can have the red one back. You're right—it is rather pretty when it's wet."

Vanishfast gaped at the creature that now occupied most of the Book and Beverage's retail space. "Wow!" she breathed. "I've never seen a dragon upside down before."

"I am not upside-down," sniffed Splash. "You are." She gave Vanishfast a quick, teasing shake.

A metallic clatter drew the dragon's attention to a new item on the floor, a silver spoon monogrammed with four B's in diamond formation. "I take back the apology I wasn't going to give you," Splash proclaimed in a regal but lethal voice.

Vanishfast tumbled to the rug. Splash disappeared. In the dragon's place stood a middle-aged woman with immaculate hair and impeccable taste in clothing. She favoured Rel with a smug glance, then walked a half-circle around the wizardess and pecked Irian on the cheek. "I might as well fly to Palanthas and drop off that book order. Want anything from the bakery?"



Kaéren Anderson and her daughter Dion "Darchala" Cliffe live in Winnipeg, Canada. Kaéren coordinates the computer labs at the University of Manitoba Downtown. Dion is a high school student. Because of their startling physical resemblance, Kaéren and Dion are known as the Chronologically Challenged Evil Twins.

Brothers of the Forge

by Stefan Schoberth

Little Perrin sat in the kitchen and drank a cup of hot chocolate. The weather was fair and his father Erkon Longleaf had already left to begin day's toil. He worked in fields close by the little Neidar village in the Valley of the Clouds, where Perrin lived. Only the young dwarf and his mother were at home. She was doing the dishes while he finished his breakfast. He started, once again, with his favourite subject.

"Mum, can I be a fighter? A great hero, to win back Thorbardin? Or to defend our homes from the elves' attacks? When I am old enough?"

"Nay, Perrin."

"Mum, can I be a smith then? Create magical steel weapons and armour for great hill dwarf heroes?"

"Nay, Perrin."

"But Mum, why not?"

"Be a nice little dwarf and listen to me, Perrin. You will be a farmer like your father. You will work on the fields during the day and feed the cattle in the morn and in the eve. You will provide food for your fellow dwarves."

"But I don't want to!"

"Great adventures are not for you, Perrin. When you are old enough you will find a nice sturdy girl to marry and that's all the adventure you'll need!"

A loud knock on the door interrupted their conversation. After a moment, having looked out of the window, his mother said: "Perrin, go up to your room, so I can see what business the stranger has with us."



In the evening Perrin sat in the room he shared with his older brother Paron. He hadn't seen the stranger very clearly. Although he'd leaned out through the window as far as he dared, right when he arrived at his room, he had not been fast enough. His mum had already opened the door. He'd only seen dark hair and cloak before the dwarf entered their home.

He also hadn't seen his brother or parents all day. They were always working. Perrin wanted to help, but they usually wouldn't let him. "Perrin, you are not old enough, you will ruin everything. Do not frighten the animals. Stay out of the way of the plow.

You do not know the right plants. Stay at home, while we harvest." And so on. He was quite tired of it.

A knock on his door interrupted Perrin's sulking. Surprised, and a little frightened, Perrin jumped to his feet. Nobody else was supposed to be at home. Slowly he stalked closer to the door, while his eyes searched the room for some weapon.

After the second knock, it felt like an endless time later, he opened the door to his room. A dark figure towered over him, five feet high or even taller. It was the strange cloaked visitor from this morning. He had not looked all that hulking then, seen from above as he entered the house. Hesitatingly Perrin looked up, his brothers knife hidden behind his back.

A friendly face looked down at him.

"Hello Perrin. I am Amos Blackforge. I want to ask a question of you, my son."

"Yes, mister Blackforge?"

"Perrin, are you happy here with your parents, growing up as a farmer?"

"Well, I like Mum and Dad very much. And Paron too..."

"But you do not want to be a farmer like they are? Working day and night with little reward?"

"Well, it is not so bad..."

"What would you say, if I offer to take you with me, so that you can learn how to be a master smith? After five years of apprenticeship you would own a third of my smithy. You would work for noble dwarven knights. After ten or fifteen years, you would be known all over Krynne for the excellent armour and weaponry I will teach you to produce. For I equip the bravest travellers and heroes from all over the world!"



Of course Perrin hadn't been able to resist the friendly and obviously competent dwarf. After some more convincing he had happily followed the stranger who promised him a grand future. He'd left his family behind. He often wondered if they mourned him.

He had not even left a note. Amos had convinced him not to. "It is not prudent to tell them your new whereabouts. They will surely come after you and take you back, farm-boy. You can never be a master-smith then," Amos had said. They were surely stubborn

enough to enforce what they thought was in his best interests, so Amos was probably right. He sighed. His father surely would have forbidden him to pursue this unrealistic dream. But it did not seem so unrealistic now. He would become a famous crafter. Amos Blackforge had given his word as a smith and as a dwarf. That was well worth the sacrifice for him.



Famous crafter? He stifled a cough. His career had not evolved as promised. Not yet.

Amos was very friendly, but Perrin often failed at some tasks; then Amos angrily corrected every minor error Perrin made. Ultimately it was the only way to perfection.

Twelve long years Perrin had worked at the Blackforge Smithy now. He often worked into the night and got up early in the morning, but at times he was clumsy and slow, too slow to do all the work allotted to him. Amos was obviously right. Too much of the farmer-boy still in him.

Although Amos Blackforge was a hard master and was never slow to point out faults in his work, Perrin was always grateful to him for the help and encouragement, and for the continued faith in the young dwarf's abilities. Perrin had been chosen because he'd shown some talent. The elder smith often emphasised that. It would only take a little longer to develop his potential to the fullest. Perrin wholeheartedly believed it. All his sacrifices and all the hard work would not be in vain.

Once more, Perrin sighed.



Perrin had just finished today's third sword, but there were still axes waiting. He had not yet found the time to make them. They needed to be ready by tomorrow, no later. The customers would come in the evening and all the weapons had to be ready then.

The new ore from Pax Tharkas, in the north, had been delivered late—he should have asked earlier, but he had still been busy with the breastplate. The ornaments had taken a little longer than expected. And then he'd waited for the ore—several days of anxious waiting. So he hadn't managed to finish the axes by yesterday evening, when Amos returned from a business trip. And it would be bad for business, if the customers had to wait. These were the people who

had bought nearly everything Perrin had produced the last few months.

They would also pick up the strange large swords he had just finished. If he did not spoil them. Amos was not satisfied with his work; some of the swords were not quite perfect. Serviceable, but not superior—after all, they had been done in a hurry. Perrin was not only clumsy and slow, but dense also, sometimes. Amos would have admonished the ore trader much earlier thus avoiding all of the problems. The more experienced dwarf had told him so. Wiser now, Perrin would try to avoid bad planing from now on.

He was happy about his master's openness. Amos's conversation, though it mostly centered around tavern tales or metalwork, was always interesting to Perrin, who wanted to know all it meant to be a proper smith. There was more to being a smith than the young dwarf would ever have expected.

The delay could not be helped. A last glance up at the night sky, and Perrin was off to see if the ore had molten correctly. It should already look like crude axe-heads by now. If some more jobs were finished in time, he would finally be a partner instead of an apprentice. If he was lucky he might manage to finish most of the work until noon, when his master usually awakened.

With this thought in mind Perrin did not notice the absence of two constellations. He did not know about these stars. Nor that they represented two of the long-forgotten gods, now absent from the night-sky over Krynn.



The rising sun still found him hammering away at the axe-shaped metal. But he managed to complete most of the work by midday. The finishing touch, under the master-smith's guarding eye, took him until evening. He nearly dropped from exhaustion and weariness, so that Amos had to finish the work himself.

"You can go off to sleep now, little farmer. I will meet our customers in three hours. These weapons look good, and it seems that you've improved—there are none of the flaws of the last batch. Be assured, that I know how difficult it is to work diligent and precise with little sleep. It's a shame you can't work a little faster but perhaps with more experience you'll improve. Together we made up for the delay.

"Good thing that I was there to prevent weariness

from spoiling good work. We will still make a fair smith out of you, farm-boy.”

Nodding, Perrin went off to his chamber, happy to finally get some sleep—the first in two and a half days. Once again he was thankful for his dwarven stamina as well as his master’s forgiveness. And that his room was in the same building, so he didn’t have far to go. He did not even undress, but simply dropped into bed; the oblivion of sleep immediately overcame him.



When he woke he was still tired. It was dark outside and the two moons were in the sky. The third moon, black Nuitari, shining nearly full with evil darkness, he could not see. Still dark, or dark again? He opened the window and checked. Lunitari was near full and its position indicated that sunset had been less than four hours ago.

Probably he had not slept for more than five hours. He rarely took longer, but after the exhausting work it was strange to awaken so early. He had a feeling of foreboding, but ignored it; like many dwarves he was not apt to trust his intuitions. He preferred to rely on intellect.

All the late nights must have interfered with my body’s natural rhythm, he thought. He felt rested enough that another feeling came to the fore: he was hungry. He started down the stairs towards the kitchen. The less he slept, the more hungry he felt. With the hard work in the smithy he had become much bigger. The mighty muscles in his newly-developed strong arms and broad shoulders required nourishment.

In the kitchen he had just started to gulp down some bread, when he was alerted by the sound of steps from over by the smithy. Carefully he put out the light and looked out through the window.

He saw some tall figures slowly approaching the building. Something seemed odd about them, but he was not able to place the feeling. Curious, he decided to investigate.

He lowered himself out through the wide window and crept a little closer. Growing up on a farm also had advantages. He still remembered the skills of stalking and hiding he’d acquired then, and in spite of his added bulk he managed to stalk unnoticed to a convenient hiding place behind a brush.

He saw four large people in dark cloaks approach-ing. One seemed to be a heavysset dwarf while the others were taller and looked even bulkier under their cloaks. Their faces were hidden in the darkness of their hoods.

When they were closer he recognised Master Blackforge. Amos had probably just returned from the nearby village; the other three must be customers. Perrin started to leave his hiding place and join the four, but something about the tall strangers who accompanied the master smith held him back. They didn’t seem quite natural to him. He could now hear them talking in low hissing voices.

“I hope your weapons are of high quality, as usual,” the tallest stranger said. He seemed to be the leader.

“Yes, of course. They are worth every steel you pay, I can assure you,” the dwarf heard Amos answer.

“Surely you have other smiths helping, else you could not produce so many weapons in so short a time.”

Perrin smiled happily behind his bush. The last few years he had done most of the forging. Master Amos had helped him mainly with advice and by selling the wares. He felt flustered that he could produce more than the average smith, even if it meant working long hours every day. Master Blackforge would finally be satisfied when his customers were content.

“Well, I have an apprentice, but I do most of the work myself,” Amos answered to Perrin’s astonishment. Had one of the strangers looked in his direction, he would have seen a wide eyed dwarven head above the bush.

“The boy is talented but very dumb. And he does not work very hard. He still thinks he will be my partner, but of course this will never happen. Also he doesn’t know that I sell weapons to the dark army of dragon-highlord Verminaard, for the attack on Pax Tharkas. That will stay our little secret,” Amos added, chuckling.

Perrin sat dumbfounded for several seconds, before he realised what he had just heard. He had been betrayed by the person he trusted most. Used for twelve years. Kept away from his family. He had worked day and night to please a master who now spoke ill of him. And his lovingly forged weapons would be applied to kill innocent dwarves at Pax Tharkas.

A strange calmness settled on him for a moment.

Then his mind broke. His spirit bent under the weight of twelve years of fruitless sacrifice. Never again! It would never happen again.

A terrible rage took possession of him. Growling furiously he ran towards the four silhouettes who had reached the smithy in the meantime and were discussing business at the stack with the new weapons.

He barely noticed his right hand picking up the heavy hammer from its usual place as he passed. Voicing a battle cry, he closed with the surprised creatures. His first attack was aimed at the head of the dwarf he had considered a close friend for so long. The heavy hammer smashed into Amos's head from the side and removed it permanently. So forceful was his swing, that the hammer went on and thudded into the shoulder of the cloaked figure to the right, staggering it.

The hood fell back and a lizardlike head was revealed. Perrin did not know that the face belonged to a draconian, nor did he care. His mind was too fogged to register anything aside from the rage that still possessed him.

While the three strangers recovered from their surprise and drew weapons, Perrin's hammer, on a backswing, connected with the middle draconian's neck. After a sickening crunch the corpse turned to stone, its weapon only half drawn. More out of luck than skill, Perrin avoided a vicious thrust aimed at him. But the blade of his taller opponent to the left delivered a bloody gash on his shoulder. It was one of the swords Perrin had forged himself.

He did not care much for tactics, simply swinging his heavy hammer again, his powerful muscles bulging. The lizard-creature to his right managed to raise a weapon in defence, but its strength could not compete with the force of the dwarf's bulk and the enraged power behind the swing. It was hit by its own sword and the hammer at the same time, ending its life and leaving another stone statue behind.

Perrin didn't notice that his defeated opponents had turned to stone. It was not important to him now. Rather he turned to the left to face the last of these abyssal creatures. It was the leader. Standing slightly over six feet it was two feet taller than the dwarf. It had removed its hood and now licked along the blade of the sword with a long dark tongue, leaving behind sticky green-yellow saliva.

Perrin dodged the next attack but his own swing also missed. Then the sword opened a long wound on his leg and introduced the paralysing poison into his body. Perrin's left hand instinctively moved down and closed around the sharp blade, deftly holding it. He ignored the pain. The enemy staggered, off-balance, unable to recover his weapon.

In the few moments the poison needed to subdue his mighty physique, Perrin's already poised forging tool smashed heavily into the neck and shoulder of the draconian and ended its evil life. The dark creature dissolved in a shower of acid, hitting Perrin full force and beginning to dissolve the corpse of Amos Blackforge, as well as the expensive forging equipment and the new weapons. Darkness settled around the young smith.



Perrin awakened at the well. Somehow he had managed to wash the acid off. A look in the mirror would show him later that little remained of his proud beard but a flaming red scar from the acid. It would be then, that he decided to clean the world of creatures like those he'd encountered last night. He would take a vow and later be a fighter for the forces of light. He would oppose the evil armies during the War of the Lance.

After all these years, he would visit his family and ask forgiveness. But he would never recover from his experience at the hands of the tall, black-bearded dwarf Amos Blackforge; the dwarf who had taken him in, betrayed him, and died at his hand. Long after this night of destiny, Perrin's companions would wonder why the friendly, open-hearted warrior would not trust any other dwarf.



Stefan Schoberth, born in Germany in 1974, has recently completed his diploma in physics. He currently lives in Erlangen, Germany, with his wife Christiane and his son Armin. In his spare time he learns Italian and Japanese. His interest in languages led him to develop role-playing material and fiction. "Brothers of the Forge" is his first English short story, and attempts to grant a deeper view into the mind of one of Krynn's shorter inhabitants. He would like to thank his wife for her patience and Samuel Marshall for ruthlessly editing the story.

Lunitari Obscurum

by Michael Kelly

I am Solonthas: Black Robe Wizard, half-elf, and an outcast. Or so society has judged me, though it has no right to.

It is the day before the night Nunitari eclipses Lunitari. My beloved sister, the Lady Lydiana, and I are in Jelek, a city in the foothills of Doom Range, along the road to Neraka, the former Temple of the Dark Queen's Dragon Armies and Center of Her power. My sister intends a pilgrimage there, to do her chosen Lady homage. First, however, we have more urgent business—and no visible means of succeeding in the endeavour if we miss this opportunity, at least not until the next Lunitarian eclipse.

It is Lydiana who spots them, in the open market, on a hot and detestably dry afternoon. The minotaur we immediately recognize. Good old Churash. The great oaf seems to have survived our last encounter. He is in the company of a Lady that catches my sister's ever-roving but always discerning eye. This Lady is Elven, Silvanesti by her cast and features; white golden hair, fair skin with a natural golden glow and deep violet eyes.

Most striking are her Red Robes of Wizardry. For an elf to don those robes, especially a Silvanesti, is indeed a rare and even radical event. She is young for an elf, barely out of her adolescence. It is impressive that one so young has taken and survived the Test. Fate has delivered into my hands the perfect opportunity. Of course my dear sister attributes this to the Dark Lady.

I am sure Churash will not be pleased to see us again, though my sister looks forward to such a meeting eagerly. We cannot afford the scene that might result if we approach him directly. He always did have an unpredictable temper, his only weakness a pathetic streak of compassion—that and his base stupidity.

We are moving through the crowd towards them when I spot a wandering kender, surprisingly shabby in appearance, dirt on his hands and face. Kender tend to be clean in general, whether by accident or design. It's difficult to tell with kender, and I doubt they know themselves. This one's black topknot is unkempt, off-center and surprisingly short for one of his age. His clothing seems a patchwork of various earth-toned fabrics, but sewn together with consummate skill—an almost elven weave. At

that point I realize—

I leave the comfort of Lydiana's armored arm and approach the Kender as he leaves the cart of a distracted vendor with unpaid-for fruit in hand. The chewed pieces nearly fall out of his mouth when he sees me.

"Who the brepp are you?" he asks, rather impertinently, even for a kender—it seems this "brepp" is a curse word of some sort, meaningless to most, of course.

He immediately introduces himself as One-Thumb, and begins babbling a story about how he lost his left thumb to a fellow Black Robe who was going to use it in a spell, but he passed out from blood loss before he could watch. Meaningless babble, since no Black Robe, much less any wizard, would waste their time with kender material components. The results would be far too unpredictable.

I send him as messenger to the elven Red Robe and Churash, with a proposition of mutual interest for those who "Follow the Way of the Towers." As I surmised, One-Thumb is an associate of this Lady and Churash—the skilled work evident in his clothes is that of the Red Robe. Curious, she approaches me, the minotaur and One-Thumb in tow.

I am pleased by Churash's reaction—fear. Pure, unadulterated fear. He does remember us, in that thick, stubborn brain of his. His eyes avoid mine and seek Lydiana's form eagerly—utterly predictable, the great fool. He speaks not a word of warning against us, to his credit, and to their detriment. Pity.

The elf's name is Lady Quenariel, a haughty and somewhat insecure Silvanesti noble, displaced, of course—an outcast. I put on my best elven mannerisms and she responds positively.

Once I introduce Lydiana to Quenariel, my sister immediately steps forward and begins to charm this Quenariel, flattering her shamelessly, something about "the beauty of the golden sun on a downy cloud," and complimenting the needlework on her robes—magenta trim with purple, curved runes woven in. Lydiana can hardly keep her hands off Quenariel, obviously delighted by the girl's Silvanesti beauty.

A proper Lady, Quenariel politely withdraws from my sister's fawning. But, I can tell from the

flush of red along her neck and white cheeks that she is stirred. My sister has that effect on everyone; it is why the Dark Lady has chosen her.

Lydiana greets Churash warmly, like the old lover that he is, confusing the dumb beast all the more. This attracts Quenariel's notice—perhaps jealousy?

The minotaur remains thankfully silent, except for one slip, “Is that really you, Handy?” spoken quietly to me.

The great fool. He knows I loathe that name, the name from my past, when I worked the streets as an expert thief and mere dabbler in magic, before I found the true path to power and donned the Black Robes. I'll admit that those skills of stealth have served me well from time to time, especially in the lean years immediately after the War of the Lance, but that is now forever behind me. I have sworn it.

But I digress. Suffice it to say that Quenariel becomes intrigued by my offer. Over a late afternoon repast, we discuss the night's conjunction and what must be done under its auspice. Tonight, as Nuitari eclipses Lunitari's moon, we will together activate the magical doorway into a secret cache where my Legacy awaits me. Ah, the naïve Quenariel, so eager to prove herself. Little does she realize she is but a stepping stone, to be dispensed with once her usefulness has ended. Those fools Churash and One-Thumb cannot hope to best me or my sister, so they too are doomed; such is the price to be paid for my inevitable Legacy.

I shall thoroughly enjoy watching them die for their foolishness.



It seems like all breppin' day before Quen and that Solonthas guy stop talking. I mean, at first it's real interesting—secret caves and magic and stuff—but then they switch to elven. Do you breppin' believe they tell me I'm asking too many questions? Breppin' mages. I can't understand a word they're saying after that.

Finally, they hand me a map! It leads straight up into Doom Range! They say I should lead them to this secret cave, since I can read maps so good. I used to borrow the city sewer maps for me and the G's—that's gully dwarves, to you who don't know city lingo—to use back in my home city. Sure, I'd return 'em! Really! A little more stained than when I borrowed 'em, but dirt gives a map character, y'know. Some of 'em were too messy for anybody

else to read—“uh, is that Gloopdup's handprint or a small hill outside the town square?” Those I kept. Big people get confused by that stuff. Man, those days with them G's were the best. They raised me, ya know. Taught me everything I know. I might be a kender in body, but I'm a gully dwarf at heart, and breppin' proud of it!

So, about sundown, I lead them up an old mountain road. Quen, the Big Guy and this Solonthas guy and the real pretty lady—her name is Lyddy-anna and she wears Red Dragon armor! It's so breppin' cool! So I tell her all about how a Red Dragon once bit off my thumb, during the War of the Lance—y'see my name's One-Thumb, 'cause I only got one thumb!

I try to show 'em a quicker way to the cave than what's on the map, but they won't let me. The brepps. How can following a map exactly be any fun? You miss all the interesting stuff.

It's nighttime before we get there. We can all see in the dark, even clumsy ol' Churash, though he keeps on trippin' over rocks with his big hairy feet. Probably'll do it less if he stops watching Lydia's backside and watches where the brepp he's going. But he stumbles a lot in daylight, too.

Next thing you know we see this huge door made of shiny black rock, that Quen tells me is made of “Up-city-inn” or something like that, right in the side of the mountain. It's all covered with neat letters, like those on Quen's and that Solonthas guy's robes, in the brightest red and blackest black. Quen says the moons made them glow like that.

I look up and see the Red Moon, but there's this black curve on one side of the moon that keeps getting bigger. I ask what the brepp it is and get yelled at by mean ol' Solonthas. He's got such a slithery voice, like an angry snake. So I call him a brepp! Quen tells me to watch my mouth. I try, but that's not breppin' possible, and I tell them so! And then, whaddaya know- there's my mouth, right on the side of the mountain, talkin' to me with my own words. This is amazing! So I make conversation while Quen and Solonthas say all these magic words and make weird gestures at the wall. It seems like forever, and it's getting darker. That black curve has covered over half the Red Moon by now.

Quen and Solonthas look worn out, and the door doesn't open. So Lydiana steps up behind them and puts her hands on their shoulders, and says a prayer to the Dark Lady. A weird dark shine covers her, full of lots of colors—red, black, blue, white and

green—and then shines around Quen and Solonthas. That's so neat! They seem to perk up, Solonthas more'n poor Quen. Solonthas tells Churash to push open the door. The Big Guy does it right away, like he's used to Solonthas telling him what the brepp to do. I wonder about that. But it ain't breppin' easy—Churash's big muscles are bulging. So I lend him a hand and push—lucky for him I'm around. It slides right open!

I go first, of course—to scout things out. There's this long hall, cut out of the shiny black rock of the door. The air's real stale, like it hasn't moved in centuries. I mention this to them, and Churash is sniffing the air with a funny look on his face, when the door behind us closes shut. Churash runs back and tries to push the door open again, but it won't budge. The air is getting thin, real fast.

I figure the big people will pass out soon—especially if big ol' Churry keeps pushing on that door—and I warn them. They get a little scared—I can tell. Quen's skin gets whiter and Solonthas doesn't look so good either. So I take over and lead them to the other end of the corridor, which is a dead end. We're almost out of air. I sniff the floor around the dead end and smell more stale air, meaning there's more tunnel on the other side. Me and the G's go through the old caves under the city the same way—where there was air on the other side, we could dig. I can't dig through this shiny rock, though. I'm getting brepped off, man! I want to at least see the magical treasure hidden in this secret cave before heading off to Reorx's Forge for good.

Churash is goin' crazy, pushin' on that door. Quen goes up to him to tries to calm him down. Lydiana starts praying to her Dark Lady. Solonthas says he'll kill me if I don't find a way out of this, so I tell him to brepp off. He pulls out a nasty looking black dagger, but I duck under his legs—no way I'm gonna let that brepp stab me before I get to see the magic treasure. Just then Quenariel calls me, so I run up to her. Her hand's on Churash's arm; his whole body heaving with big gasps, his eyes rolling, which is sort of interesting to watch until Quen tells me to pay attention to her. She asks me to sniff around the door for air. So I do. There is a little, but it's sealed off, too, just like the other end. I tell Quen, and her eyes light up bright purple.

“Churash, don't push! Pull on the door!” she orders him. Weak, he tries anyway. I don't understand what Quen's up to but I decide to help the Big Guy when Quen grabs me and takes me to the other end.

She tugs on Lydiana's arm along the way, interrupting her prayers. Solonthas is using his dagger to try to chip away at the shiny rock under the dead end, cursing enough to impress me. He stops, snarling at us, when we arrive. Quen just ignores him.

“Everyone, push on this end,” she orders. She's just like a queen, when she wants to be. I start pushing, so do Solonthas, Quen and Lydiana. At the top end Churash pulls on the door with all his might.

There's this big shuddering grind and the dead end moves. It's a door too! When Churry finally pulls the front door open, this one opens the same exact way. Air from outside slips in and mixes with the stale air of a room at the top of a small stairway in front of us. But the inside door starts closing again, and so does the outside one that Churry is holding. Quen makes us all put our backs against this door and yells at the Big Guy to come down here and join us. When he does, though, the inside door starts shutting real fast, even with us pushing it. Until Solonthas grabs a big chip from where he tried to dig and jams it under the door. It stops. And the other door stays open, too.

We all sit there for a few minutes, sucking in the cool night air. They make me climb up the stairs first, which is fun, if a little slippery. When I get onto the top stair, I see it. A thin black wire, about a foot high, running from wall to wall. I slip under it and check it out. Each end leads right into the wall. There's the trigger, all right, which I jam in place with some Snudgum—earth clay chewed for one whole day by one gully dwarf per handful until it's solid goo, invented under the rule of the great chewer, Snud the First. It's a great jammer-upper. The tinker gnomes tried to “pat-ent” it. Said they tried to chew it while working on other inventions to save time, but Snudgum needs a wholehearted chew, without any thinking at all, which we G's are great at, to come out just right. Plus gully dwarf spit gives it a special quality. Some of the G's would swallow it, saying it tasted good. A Snudgum chewer who never swallows is a real prize.

So I'm telling everyone as they come up beside me, each of them stepping over the wire instead of the fun way, sliding under it like I did. Except Churash, who trips right over it and into the treasure chamber, which I forgot about while telling them the Snudgum story. I hope the Snudgum holds, or I'll be going to Reorx's Forge a very flat One-Thumb!



Me am so miserable, me want to cry! First me see Handy and Lyddy again, after all these years. All me remember is how much me love Lyddy and how mean Handy were to me. Me never told Quenariel, because me were so bad then, do so many bad things—beat people, kill people, steal. She hate me if she knew. Now Handy here, Lyddy here, and me almost suffocate and now me tripped on me face and it hurt and me angry. But me no want to be angry. Me kill then, and maybe hurt One-Thumb or Quenariel. Me hate this stupid place! It full of evil!!

Evil—me smell it. It fill me nose with its stink. It everywhere. Me stand up, to show me not hurt. If me show, Handy punish me, like he do before. If me good, Lyddy reward me, make me feel so good. Quenariel need me strong, like in hall of black rock. One-Thumb laugh at me for tripping. Me don't care, dirty little Kender!

But who me supposed to make happy? Who me to help? Handy and Lyddy or Quenariel and One-Thumb? It hard to choose. Me know Liddy and Handy since me very young, but Quen so good to me. She kind and gentle, talk to me like friend. Not slave, like Handy do. But if me don't do what Handy say, he hurt me, bad, with tricks and magic me no can fight! Him so smart. Smarter than Quen—no, him meaner, sneakier, and he lies. Not Quen, she tell truth and am smart, too. She teach me to read like humans—it hard, me head hurt when me try.

Quen am tired, like she be when using all her magic. Handy not as tired, me can tell, but he hiding it. Him up to something. Him want to hurt people. He like that.

Handy find something. It am a campfire or something, in a holder made of metal. Fire burns in it. Handy got that look in his eyes, shining black. The evil in room smell worse.

One-Thumb searching room. Find nothing else. Just a room, with writing and designs all over it. Quen read writing. She worried, her face frowning. Me try to go to her, stand by her side—but Lyddy take me arm, smile up at me. Make me blood burn for her, like it always do. Her so strong, pretty and curvy in her Red Dragon armor. Me want to go with her somewhere, dark and warm and alone. Keep her to meself.

“Stay by me, Churash,” she whisper, her mouth hot on me ear. “Solonthas—Handy and I will stay with you, take care of you. We'll never leave you this time.” She press close to me. Me heart pounding. If only someone stay with me and love me forever, like

Mommy did.

Quen go up to Handy—talking to him in Elf. Me no understand. Lyddy do. She watch, hold me close. Him eyes black, him smiling like he do when he hurt me. Then me know! He going to hurt Quenariel, bad!!

Me roar to warn her, but me feel hot metal smash me head. Me see Lyddy praying to her Dark Lady when me fall! All go black but only for moment. Me head hard and strong, even hitting stone floor.

Then me nose fill with terrible smell of evil—like Lyddy's magic, but worse. Me look up and see horrible thing of magic in air above fire holder. It am monster, like me, but not from here. From other place. Evil place where evil magic monsters be. It have wolf's head, and snake head! Handy tell the monster what to do—kill Quenariel!



“Here, Abyssal Fiend, is your sacrifice, as writ in the Book of Wandal, the Obsidian Mage! A Red Robe Wizard of Elven blood to feed your hunger and reward your centuries of guardianship!”

By Lunitari, he means me! Solonthas has planned this all along—and I fell for it like a naïve young fool. Just because I wanted to prove myself to him, that I'm worthy of these Red Robes—Red Robe and Black Robe, working together under the auspice of the two-moon conjunction, for the sake of the magic, as encouraged by the Towers of High Sorcery. Only to be betrayed.

The horrid thing in the center of the room looks at Solonthas with the beady eyes of a serpent which springs out of its back, and hisses, “You are of the proper bloodline, Handal Solonthas, as is that one—” its snake eyes glance at Lydiana. “You are protected. All others are to be killed, their souls to feed me! Is that understood?”

Proper bloodline? Solonthas and Lydiana are siblings. Wandal—Handal? Father and son? If only I had my magic, but the opening of the Doorway, it drained me completely, just as the Black Robe planned, I'm sure. Why was I so blind?

“Yes! Do as thou wilt, guardian, and begone, that this Legacy shall finally be mine!” Solonthas commands, looking down at his “Legacy”—the Brazier of Abyssal Summoning according to the runes engraved upon it—with dark, greedy eyes. The wolf's head smiles at me with its huge sharp teeth. It's going to devour me! My legs are jelly beneath me, I can barely stand; it snaps at me with its

frothing jaws!

With a roar, Churash is between us, his huge sword caught in its maw. It starts pulling the sword out of the minotaur's hands. How strong is that thing? As they struggle, I manage to find my feet again. But I feel so helpless. I have no magic left to enspell the fiend, or its Black-Robed master.

"Good!" the snakehead hisses as the wolf's head tries to worry the sword from Churash's grasp, "This creature I will feed upon, gnawing its mighty muscles from its strong bones—while it still lives on to feel its pain!"

The snakehead strikes Churash's arm, quicker than the eye can follow. Poor Churash howls. My heart clenches as I realize the fiend's venom could kill him!

He roars in pain, the snake's fangs still embedded in his arm, but presses forward, bending the wolf's head back. Solonthas looks up. I think he's actually afraid, afraid of Churash's rage.

"Quen, Churash!" I hear One-Thumb's boyish voice, "get the brepp out of here, man!" I turn to see him pull a lump of putty off the wall.

"Don't you dare, you little urchin!" Lydiana curses and calls down the power of her Dark Lady. "Hold this fool Kender in your Talon, O Lady, prevent him from undoing us!"

A chromatic aura surrounds One-Thumb. "W-w-w-owwww! That's breppin' amazing!" He watches the multi-colored glow with his usual, foolhardy fascination. Thank Lunitari, the spell dissipates harmlessly. One-Thumb is disappointed. "Do it again, Lady!" he demands.

"Impossible!" Lydiana is dumbfounded. Her Dark Lady refuses to aid her. Lydiana should have remembered a kender's natural resistance to magic. Churash keeps pushing the monster back, back into Solonthas. The Black Robe is casting a spell. Churash will take the full brunt of it, and there's nothing I can do! I'm failing them both, my only friends.

One-Thumb tugs on my robe, urging me back into the obsidian tunnel. But I can't, I can't leave Churash here to die.

Shrugging, One-Thumb squats down, and tugs on the tripwire determinedly.

Churash looks back at me, his big brown eyes rolling and wild. I am a little afraid. Then he tears his sword out of the wolf's mouth, inviting it to bite him, but steps back just in time. Churash has no idea how magnificent he can be in battle.

But Solonthas' spell is about to activate. An

idea occurs to me. "Churash!" My voice sounds thin and shrill. "The Brazier! Destroy it!" The sigils in the room indicate that it is the center of power. Churash swings his sword around the guardian fiend and strikes the brazier, knocking it over.

"No! What have you done, you great oaf!" The dark elf stops his spell and tries to catch the falling brazier, but it tips onto the floor.

The floor is ablaze. The Abyssal guardian breaks off its attack and reels backwards, into the Brazier, its power diminishing. Solonthas' robes catch fire. So do Churash's fur covered legs—poor beast—but he ignores it, bearing down on Solonthas for the kill. His eyes roll, like a maddened bull.

"Churash! Forget him! We need to—" I see Lydiana, unhurt by the flames in her Red Dragonscale armor, raise a clenched fist, muttering a prayer to her Dark Lady. The minotaur is her target. "Look out!"

Churash whirls around and spots Lydiana, his eyes confused. Seeing her fist raised, he responds instinctively and lashes out at her with a massive fist. It connects with her lovely, but unprotected head and she collapses to the floor.

A terrible grinding sound comes from above—a massive obsidian block is falling onto the room, to crush us all.

One-Thumb stares up in complete fascination, broken tripwire in hand, anticipating the crushing rock with the usual Kender interest. I grab him and rush out. "Churash! Get out of here, now!"

He looks from me to Lydiana and back, eyes sad, stunned. My heart is in my throat. "Grab her, too, Churash! Now! Or you'll both die!"

He grabs her with his good arm, the other carrying his sword, but frighteningly limp at his side. The Abyssal poison. He rushes out just in time, a terrible frightening crash behind him as the huge stone crushes everything in the room, brazier, Black Robe and all. I can't help but feel a little satisfaction that Solonthas brought about his own damned end, an end he intended for me, Churash and One-Thumb.



The dark colors of the Lady swirl and grow into a deep, solid, glowing red. My eyes flicker open. The black circle of Nunitari upon bright Lunitari is gone now, the sky's red eye shining down upon me without condemnation, without mercy.

I hear a sweet, high voice. "Now the tomb will be sealed for years to come." So Quenariel survives.

"We'll have to leave her here, Churash. Maybe her Dark Lady will help her get her brother out. If he's still alive." Brother? Solonthas? I try to reach out, feel his presence, but it is distant, so distant. Have I finally lost him—all that I truly have in this dreary world—to his own dark ambition?

A familiar grunt stirs me from my own black thoughts of grief, mourning. It is Churash, mighty, soft-hearted Churash. He lays me gently down in a grassy hillock. I am weak. So weak. The Dark Lady has abandoned me. My brother, She allowed his defeat, his death—he was not worthy of Her. She wished this upon me, to feel the pain of losing the soul closest to mine in all the world, as punishment.

"Churry?" my voice is barely a whisper. Tears form in Churash's eyes. The pain along my jaw and cheek—likely his doing. Neither the grubby Kender nor lovely Elf has the strength. He was always too tender, so magnificent in his anger, in the throes of passion, so foolish and weak otherwise. "I'm so sorry. I—we—" The words escape me, for as much as the Dark Lady has gifted me with the power of Dark Love, Temptation and Control, she has also made me vulnerable to it.

I call out to Her, desperate, and take hold of the muscular, richly furred arm of Churash, his open, bleeding wound envenomed. "Dark Lady, heal brave Churash, who saved my life that I might continue in thy service." My voice is reduced to a harsh rasp, "Remove the Abyssal venom from his mighty blood. In your Dark Name, thy servant begs thee!" I feel it—Her power, returning to me.

She rewards the Minotaur for his might, triumph over a powerful enemy. The poison slips from him and into my own spirit, to punish me with its pain, its corruption. I am content with my Lady's cruel justice.

I want to make him stay with me, protect me, as he did in my younger days. His strength combined with the Dark Queen's power. There would be none to match us. But I can't, the words—I am too weak.

I cannot but watch as he turns to look up at beautiful Quenariel, her golden hair lit with crimson moonlight. She is crying scarlet tears. She knows what Churash is feeling right now, as I know what she is feeling for him, if she does not.

"Don't leave me, Churash. I need you." She rushes up to him, as he stands, embraces him. "We both do, One-Thumb and I." She look ups at him, violet eyes turned magenta beneath the moon's ambience. Oh to have her for myself! What a sweet,

delectable prize.


But it is not to be. She belongs with him, and One-Thumb. The three of them, misfits all, closer to one another than they realize, except in rare moments like this. And I am alone; my brother is dead. Her scent, like a rose-tinted flower first opening into its bloom, mixes with his heavy, dark musk. My senses, how they delight me when I am strong, how they torture me when I am weak.

"We need you, too, One-Thumb," Quenariel gracefully leans down and hugs One-Thumb. His face flushes red with embarrassment as he squirms. "All right, all right already. Stop breppin' huggin' me, ya breppin' girl!"

"And watch your language, young man," she scolds him, as mother to child. She gently tugs on his nose. "Because, if you don't, you won't get your nose back." The Kender's nose seems to appear in her soft, white palm.

"W-w-w-w-w-owww! That's my nose, man!" Quenariel stands up and holds her hand high. The Kender jumps up to reach it, laughing. "Hey, give me my nose back, Lady! Who the brepp—uh, I mean, who do you think you are, anyway?" Of course, the Kender doesn't realize, it's the Red Robe's magic, an illusion, cast like that on the wall beside the cavern earlier, to occupy the restless boy's attention. The magic of Lunitari, which has surely won this night, restored to Quenariel under her Lady's ruby gaze.

They slowly walk off. Churash spares me one final glance as he leaves. Quenariel follows his gaze, perhaps lingering upon me? Hope of that fades as sleep overcomes me, but I will see them all again—magnificent Churash and exquisite Quenariel—in my wild fevered dreams and in their most wanton nightmares. I swear this by the Dark Lady.

Her bittersweet Darkness envelops me and I sleep. 

Michael Kelly has been writing since age eleven. He has written over 500,000 words of unpublished fiction, and is working hard to reach a million. His qualifications include a B.A. in English Literature and Technical Writing and an M.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing. He currently works as an Editorial Assistant at Marvel Studios (the LA-based film and TV division of Marvel Comics).

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New Slant on Life

by Beth Long

Snow floated into the doorway as the young woman walked into the inn late that evening. Otik came over to the newcomer, stopping in startled surprise. “Thebra! We weren’t expecting you for another month!” He hugged her as she slipped back the hood of her cloak, the melting snow darkening the red of her cloak to black. He called to the kitchen, “Mira, a plate of potatoes and a mug of the finest for Thebra!”

Thebra, her brown eyes sparkling, simply shook her head and removed her cloak. “Now Otik, that isn’t necessary. Whatever’s warm and a glass of water would be enough. You should know by now that I can only pay with my stories and even then, they usually cost you more than my meal.”

Otik grunted and waved her over to a seat by the fire, trying not to grimace as he remembered what had happened the last time Thebra had visited. In these troubled times, her stories of dragons and the old gods had rubbed two of the town bullies the wrong way. Prodded to action by their buddies, as well as too much ale, they decided to ‘correct’ the slight human woman. The two had ended up in bed with various broken limbs for two months while Thebra worked in the inn to pay off the bill for the mugs and chairs the brawl had broken. After that fight, many of the mothers in Solace warned their children about her, claiming that she must be a mage or one of those Plainsmen barbarians who could fight without weapons. Through all the speculation, Thebra had kept almost silent about her profession. She would only say that she told stories and learned about Krynn by traveling. In company, she was always cheery, but at times—when she believed no one was watching—a dark mood would cover her cheerfulness like clouds over the sun. The moment anyone approached her, however, this darkness would disappear, kept at bay for the sake of others.

Shaking himself, Otik came out of his reverie and helped himself to a quick drink of water. With Thebra there tonight, he’d need to keep his wits about him.

Thebra looked about her as she finished her meal. In the ten years that had passed, the Inn still looked the same. The customers were still cheery with each other and the children playing around the Inn’s huge hearth were still as noisy as ever. The only difference seemed to be a small boy huddled near the warmth of the fire, hunched over a book, intently engrossed in its contents. Whenever the play-battle of the other children came near him, he would look up with a frown. Recognizing the type, Thebra decided to risk his fury.

“Greetings, apprentice of the Art,” she remarked. She sat by him, being careful not to cast her shadow upon his book.

The young one looked up at her in wary suspicion. “You are a mage? Those aren’t the red robes that the Council mages of Neutrality wear.”

Thebra laughed. “It’s been ages since I’ve been to a Council meeting! You’re right, these aren’t Neutral robes, but then who said I was a neutral mage? Are only those who are involved in the Art to have knowledge of it? If that were so, then the whole world would have to be mages, whether they know of magic from stories or in practice. If I were to wear the robes,” she paused in a grinning, thoughtful consideration, “they would be blue.”

The child gaped at her for a moment in complete shock. He recovered his demeanor quickly, scoffing, “There are no blue! Only white, red, and black. Only renegade mages or apprentices who haven’t yet taken the Test yet wear other colors.”

Thebra nodded. “True, but what if someone owed allegiance to all three of the gods of magic? Striped robes would look quite silly wouldn’t they?” She smiled as he tried to find a hole in her logic, but all he could come up with was, ‘Who would want to serve all three? You have to choose only one.’ She was ready to answer him but just then Otik called for the attention of all.

As the echoes of the sound of a mug banged against the bar died away, he announced, “Tonight we have a storyteller who has traveled over all Ansalon. Back once again is Thebra of Palanthas. Let’s hope that this time there will still be a mug to toast her with, when her stories are done” He joined in with chuckles from the customers who remembered her last visit. Waving at Thebra to begin, he sat back as she settled herself deeper into the warm corner, the fire sending shadows of her upraised hands flickering across the room. The awed customers watched the wall come alive with shadow images from her story.



All have heard stories of the majestic and fearsome dragons—the chromatic hues of the dragons of Takhisis and the shimmering metallics of Paladine. I tell you tonight of the dragon that belonged to both and neither. Some say that Hiddukel grew jealous of Takhisis and Paladine’s children and tried to create his own; others that the fabulous Greygem had passed over a nest of dragon eggs, changing one in a manner that no one could ever guess. However it happened, when the hatchling emerged, the attending silver dragons drew back in shock. For this hatchling was covered not only with silver scales but also the sapphire scales of the blue chromatic dragons.

Being children of Good, they fed the little innocent one, while sending for the most learned of the golden

dragons. The Elder examined the hatchling but could find nothing to explain her coloring.

All through the trials, the hatchling explored her lonely nest; her nestmates had been removed in case her strange scales were a sign of some spell or spreading disease. She gazed at everything in a kind of awed wonder and crowed excitedly at every new item that she found. Amazed, she listened to the dragons around her and mentally stared at the images that seemed to float by in her mind. Such strange beings that the 'dragons' thought had done something to her. Not all of the beings had scales but the dragons had so many pretty colors! The thin-skinned ones came in different scales on their heads called 'hair' and scales on their bodies called 'clothes.' They had so many different looks that the youngster couldn't count them all. She laughed in delight at the new images, wanting to know more. How different they were from dragons, but how fascinating!

She studied the other beings more. Three drew her attention most of all. Two had pointed 'ears' while the third did not. She decided that the nonpointed one must be a 'human,' while the other two must be an 'elf' and a 'kender.' She wasn't quite sure how she knew these things, but, like many youngsters of any species, she simply accepted it for now. The world was as it was supposed to be, and all was right with it. Tired, she rested her head on her forearms and thought more about the 'kender.' It seemed like one who smiled often and would understand the joy she felt when she looked at the world around her. But how silly it looked with all of the things it carried!

The droning of the older dragons kept mumbling in the background and the hatchling was soon lulled asleep, wandering in her dreams.

Startled, she looked up to see a pink sky all around her with nothing she recognized. Blank emptiness met her wandering eye until a grove of something her mind said were 'trees' appeared before her. As quietly as she could, she walked over to the trees. In a clearing, she saw some 'elves'—no, these didn't have those pointy ears, so they must be 'humans.' Thinking that the humans wouldn't like a young dragon in their midst, the hatchling panicked as she tried to decide what to do.

A moment later, she *knew* how to look different and was excited to try it. She tried a human form and even an elven form but those just didn't feel like her, like her dragon form felt like *her*. But the 'kender' form seemed so free that she immediately walked through the clearing toward an elder who was 'writing' in what her mind told her was a 'book.' She bowed as she had seen the dragons in the lair bow to the Elder and growled a greeting. But her ears heard a high voice say, 'Hi! Whatcha doin'?'

The elder looked up at her but his hands kept writing. "Indeed. This is the first time a dragon has ever

chosen a kender form without having a life-or-death need for it. You are the hatchling that is at stake here. Tell me, what do you see?"

Confused, but willing to do what the elder asked, she looked around the clearing. "Well, I see three humans talking. An elder in white is pointing and waving his hands in the air. The young human in black is looking angry and coughs sometimes when he runs out of breath. The female human in red looks bored but her eyes sparkle when she talks. There are also two other humans at the other end of the clearing. A different elder in white is arguing, this time with a female in black. They both keep claiming that a mistake is theirs and that the other has no right to keep it." She turned to the elder in red beside her, almost in tears. "I don't understand. What is a 'mistake?' Is that what I am?"

The elder smiled at her. "Not really. It is simply that there has never been a dragon who is both metallic and chromatic. They are not quite sure what to do, since neither wants the other to have you. Paladine, the 'other elder,' argues that since you are a silver and hatched in a silver dragon's nest, you are, essentially, a good dragon. Takhisis, the female in black, argues that since you have blue scales, you cannot possibly be a 'good' dragon. It may take the better part of a century for them to come to an agreement."

He looked around, but the hatchling had wandered off during his little explanation. She moved through the clearing, wandering absentmindedly around the symbols the first elder in white had drawn on the ground. She pressed something her mind called 'candies' into the hand of the angry young human that coughed. And as he looked at her in amazement, she winked at the female in red. Finally she came to a stop right next to Paladine and Takhisis, who hadn't even noticed her approach.

She listened to the pair until they had both temporarily ran out of breath. The little dragoness then piped up in a tiny voice, "Excuse me?" Glares from both god and goddess turned on the hatchling with such force that she immediately quivered and reverted to her dragon form. The look of greed in Takhisis's eyes made the little one shiver even more but she was warmed by the look of bright wonder in Paladine's eyes. She felt movement behind her and found that the four other humans had followed her.

Solinari in white murmured, "Fascinating." Lunitari looked over at her father Gilean in a silent communication. Nunitari simply sucked on a piece of candy and told the hatchling in a raspy voice, "I prefer lemon drops, but thank you."

Paladine's voice brought the small dragoness back to face him. "Well, if it isn't the one we were just talking about. Tell me, little one, would you like to be one of my dragons, living a life of Good instead of the Evil which eventually destroys itself?"

Takhisis hissed at him. "No fair! She will become

one of *my* dragons.” She scowled at the hatchling for a moment and then broke into a dazzling smile, with a dangerous and beautiful slither as she moved toward the dragoness. “Wouldn’t that be fun, my pet? And,” she shot a look at Paladine, “I’ll be able to protect you when this one tries to destroy you, as he does with all of my children.”

Wide-eyed with horror, the little dragon stared at the two of them, images from their conversation spinning in her mind.

“No...no...” she moaned. She backed into Gilean, whirling around and cowering before him. “Please Elder,” she pleaded, “I’m not a mistake, I don’t want to be destroyed, protect me! I don’t know what Good or Evil is, I just want to be safe!” She looked up at him with fear and hope in her eyes.

Gilean comforted her and looked calmly at Paladine and Takhisis. “She is only a child. How can she choose when she has no idea what that choice will mean except destruction by the one she does not select? It is no wonder that she does not wish to make the decision at all.”

Paladine looked a bit chagrined at this while Takhisis looked defiant. “But she *must* choose!” the goddess snarled at Gilean. “Dragons are either mine or his to command. Others must not be allowed to have such power at their disposal!”

Gilean looked thoughtful for a moment and then smiled. “She shall be my responsibility. I will see to her raising, but she will be raised in both of her heritages. When she is ready to make a decision as to what she wishes to do with her life, it will be hers and hers alone. With no pressure or threats made by either of you.” He looked at both god and goddess with fire in his eyes.

Takhisis hissed her disapproval but left in a clamor of lightning. Paladine nodded his acceptance and sighed. “Maybe we need a dragon who has no allegiance to either of us. She may help my children to become more at ease in the world outside their lairs.” He shook his head and smiled. “Little one, you chose the form of a kender well. Both you and they seem to shake the normal ways of life wherever you go. What is your name?”

The dragoness tilted her head to one side as she thought. Different names came and went in her mind but none seemed to describe how she was or felt or looked at the world. She knew that she saw everything differently from those around her, never straight on but at a slant from what was expected. Wait! Could that work? She looked up at the gods and goddess around her. “My name is Slant,” she grinned.



Thebra looked around the silent room. Throughout her story, she had watched the faces of her audience. The thought of a dragon that was neither Good nor Evil had concerned many of them—and the thought of a

kender with the powers of a dragon had caused brave men to turn pale. Most had ignored the gods of magic in her story but she had seen the child next to her blanch when she spoke of Nutari’s reaction to the little hatchling. She looked at the embers of the fire near her and realized that she had been telling the story while the logs had turned to ash. Entranced by her tale, no one had moved to build up the fire.

The child beside her nudged the storyteller. “Then what happened to Slant?”

Thebra stretched a bit and smiled. “Oh, lots of things. Gilean sent her to the Library in Palanthas to learn about Ansalon and every race on Krynn. Lunitari taught her how to fly while Solinari honed her mind with games of chess and Nunitari took her to see every corner of Krynn for herself. Gilean himself took her to Kendermore where she spent many years in the body of a kender. She grew up and became an important member of the Library. It was she who was sent to some of the most dangerous areas to obtain information for the Library’s books. Rumors said that it was she who gathered the clerics before the Cataclysm and kept the High Priest’s men from exterminating every kender from Ansalon. There are still tales of men who thought to attack a lone kender and found themselves facing a horror beyond their imagination in the shape of a very *angry* dragoness.” She winked at the boy alongside her. “Legend tells that she’s still roaming Krynn, gathering information and unsettling towns from one end of Ansalon to the other.”

The boy scowled. “But which did she choose?”

Thebra looked solemn for a moment, as if remembering. She looked him straight in the eye and said, “She never did and that was, in itself, a choice.” But the serious look left her immediately and she smiled as she said, “You don’t hear about it that often here, but in Kendermore, they tell the story of the town of Burana and the time Slant came and borrowed their anvil while the smith was in the middle of shoeing the mayor’s horse between one hoof and the next. Would you like to hear about it?”

The fire was restoked and as its light grew in the room, everyone returned their attention to the slight young woman and her stories of a dragoness determined to go her own way.



Beth Long is a recent university graduate and a chemist from Newton, IL. Working only as a hobby and to pay those pesky bills, she prefers to write fantasy, read, listen to music, and hang out with her favorite co-ed chemistry fraternity. Her other works can be obtained on the Web or by email request.

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Marsh Cat

by Samuel Marshall

Chella pulled her cloak tighter against the driving autumn rain. It made little difference; the material was almost as wet inside as out. The constant deluge had already penetrated chainmail and two layers of underclothes, stealing the warmth from her skin. Harsh, gusting winds rushed around her, making the day feel colder still, as if the weather mounted a combined assault on its victims. The young dwarf shivered.

She glanced at her taller companion. Shan's clothes were just as sodden, his dark hair just as tangled and dripping as hers, but he didn't seem quite as affected by the sky's onslaught. Despite the depressing weather his eyes still gleamed confidence, assurance that of *course* he held a solution to the current problem. Even if, at present, his problem-solving capabilities were engaged in trying to squeeze water from the small black mustache that crested his narrow lip.

"You said this area was drier than the rest of the marsh," Chella pointed out bluntly, pitching her voice to be heard over the hissing downpour. "It's about as dry as the Blood Sea, and equally cheering."

"*Underfoot* it's drier," Shan insisted, sweeping his arm round in an expansive gesture which would have sprayed even more water over the dwarf, had such a thing been possible. "Whoops, sorry. But I mean, the ground here is relatively stable, we haven't been sucked in by mud or anything—"

Chella drew a deep breath, anger building up inside. Noticing her expression, Shan paled and hurriedly continued. "Well, not seriously, I mean, we haven't faced death, though it might have been most unpleasant."

She hrmphed, slightly mollified. "At this rate we're in danger of dying from cold." That was an exaggeration; although the rain felt chill it was well above freezing here, the temperature—like the marshy ground—partially affected by Onysablet's control over her climate. They traveled the very edge of the Dragon Overlord's territory, outside the full reach of her thick, tropical swamps but near enough that previously-worthwhile villages had been abandoned for danger and loss of farming land. Several like this had dotted their route, crumbling remains of stone buildings and collapsed piles of rotting, moss-covered wood.

One of these was their destination. More than thirty years ago Shan's father had carried out an audacious theft on a powerful lord in Sithelbec, stealing a large sapphire. The gem had eventually been hidden in the

house of an unknowing tradesman, in a small village of the region. Shan's father had never retrieved it; initially he had been exiled from the area by local guards, and then the Chaos War and Second Cataclysm had made travel impossible. On his deathbed, he had given Shan the information needed to search for it at last.

"You're sure we haven't lost our way?" Chella asked again, making clear by the tone of voice that it wouldn't be *her* fault if they had. Overhead, the dreary gray sky forbade all sight of the sun or its direction.

"Absolutely," Shan said firmly. He paused, reached out a hand for the support of a tree; the ground ahead looked soft to his inexperienced eye. "Hold on, let me go first—no, okay, it's firm enough."

The dwarf looked doubtful—he had used almost exactly those words two hours ago, seconds before she'd sank waist-deep into the marsh. A properly-proportioned dwarf weighed more than a tall, skinny human, especially since she wore chainmail neck-to-toe and Shan had only light leather armor. She held an arm out ready to grab onto the tree if she needed its support, though it was a skinny, stunted thing—a young beech half-dead from the altered climate.

In the event, Shan had spoken truly and she crossed the patch without incident. "There, see?" he said easily, unsurprised by her success. "Anyway, as I was saying—of course we're not lost. We've been following the old path all the way."

Chella snorted. "Except where the ground was unsafe, where there was a lake in the way, or maybe where we just lost track of it because we can't see past ten feet in this damn rain." She brushed water from her eyes, held her hands above to shade them, and peered forwards. As she'd said, there was little to be seen. Ahead and to the left of the path—northwards, if they were still going the right direction—it was just possible to make out swaying reeds through the mist of water. That would mark the edge of a lake, which she fervently hoped would not necessitate yet another detour. In other directions the land was barren of all landmarks, a gray morass of short or knee-high grass fading into the distance, broken only by the occasional twisted tree.

"Look on the bright side," Shan began—the dwarf snorted incredulously—"if there *is* any truth in those fairy stories about a marsh cat, I hardly think it'll be abroad in this weather."

For once Chella was forced to agree. All the cats

she'd ever known—annoying, sly animals that they were—had detested the rain, preferring to curl up in front of a warm fire. Even the big cats that she'd seen or heard tell of had followed the same pattern. The marsh-cat they'd been warned about, in the last village before this blighted land, was not precisely proven to exist. None of the villagers had actually seen it except as a blur in the distance, although they all had a tale to tell. Dead or lost sheep, a traveler who'd ventured into the marshes and never returned, trampled crops—any mishap was assigned to the fabled creature.

The two companions had been constantly regaled with such stories by doom-mongering locals as they stayed for a week in the village's tiny inn, waiting for Onysabet to depart her realm. The black Dragon Overlord was a much more serious threat than a marsh-cat, real or imagined, but she was known to leave for three or four days every month or so. Nobody knew where she went—to visit another of her kind, most likely—but clearly that was the best time for expeditions into her realm or its outskirts. So Chella and Shan had waited, enduring the boredom and the villagers' half-gleeful foretellings of their sorry end. Finally this morning Sable had been sighted leaving her territory along the usual flightpath, and the two companions had immediately set out.

Grass squelched alarmingly beneath Chella's feet as they passed the lake's edge on their left, but the ground didn't give way and it seemed the lake would not interrupt their path. Through breaks in the tall reed-beds she looked over at the water, as dull and gray as the rest of the landscape, though it seethed with the constant impact of rain. The dwarf thought she could see bubbles breaking the surface in a few points; it was probably best not to know what lurked beneath. On the opposite bank, a slight swaying of rushes caught her eye. There was something, perhaps a flash of blackness slinking away... and then it was gone and Chella was left wondering whether it had been there, or simply a trick of light and wind.

"Look!" Shan exclaimed, pointing in the opposite direction away from the lake.

Chella looked. The human's excitement heralded yet another abandoned village, stone ruins gradually coming into rain-misted view on their right. Maybe, hopefully, this would be the one for which they searched, but she wasn't going to raise her hopes just yet. When they found out it matched up with the map Shan's father had drawn—*then* she'd get excited, not to mention relieved. It was nearing the end of the afternoon, and she did not want to be out on the desolate marshes at night. Especially sharing them with a large cat. Remembering her brief glimpse of

movement a moment ago, she shivered.

They left the path and made their way through the village's decayed shell, skirting rain-lashed pools of stagnant water that dotted the ground. Eventually they reached somewhere approaching the center, a point from which they could see the overall layout of buildings. Shan took out the waterproof scroll-case from his pack and huddled close to a stone wall, leaning towards it to provide shelter from the rain as he carefully extracted the map and examined it.

"This is the place," he pronounced, with mounting excitement. "The houses all match up. We're standing by the main road through the village right now."

"We're standing by the main *stream* through the village," Chella retorted accurately, shouting against a particularly fierce gust of wind. "Which building is it we want?" Most of the stone structures were still standing, except those whose foundations had been too far undermined by the rushing watercourse. The roofs had long since succumbed to the depredations of nature, but stone walls could still provide shelter against the worst of the weather, and the dwarf was anxious to get "inside".

Shan peered closely at the map, keeping it partially rolled up to protect from the rain. Finally, he replaced the parchment in its case and pointed. "I think it's that one."

"On the other side of the stream. Figures," Chella muttered.

Shan didn't hear her over the rushing water—horizontal now as well as vertical—and the wind. He leaned closer to the dwarf, though. "I just had this feeling... we're not being watched, are we?"

"You've got to be kidding," she said firmly. "No sane person would be out on a day like this, and if they were they couldn't see past their own nose." But something in her voice belied that certainty, and the human looked at her sharply. She ignored him; there was no sense in worrying him with her own imaginations from earlier. Even so, she scanned the surroundings carefully. To her relief, nobody and nothing out of the ordinary was visible. If a marsh-cat followed them... well, it could easily be hiding amongst the ample shelter provided by the ruins, or simply out of sight through the driving rain. Still, as long as they were wary, it should be no match for dwarven steel.

Then why was she worried?

Shan shrugged at her silence. "Guess it's just my imagination." Effortlessly, he jumped across the fast-flowing stream.

"Hey!" Chella shouted. "What about me?"

"Jump!"

"My legs are half as long as yours," the dwarf grumbled, but quietly. There wasn't any other way across the six-foot-wide stream, so she had no alternative. She looked down at the rushing water some way below; it was a filthy brown color, thick with mud it had torn from the earth to deepen its sheer-edged channel. The torrent looked to be several feet deep at least and very fast—perhaps powerful enough to carry her away if she slipped, though hopefully Shan could rescue her. Hopefully.

She decided not to miss the jump. First she threw her pack across to the human, and—not without a final glance around—the axe that was strapped to her back. Then she backed off several paces. Finally she charged as if into battle, and jumped at the last moment with all the power of her stubby legs.

Even so, she didn't make it. She knew as soon as she left the ground that she would fall short. Desperately she stretched forward for the lip of the opposite bank, but instead Shan grabbed onto her reaching hands, pulling her up and at least partly over. In fact, the dwarf's weight meant that she was left precariously half-on half-off the bank, with the human pulled to the ground.

She wriggled to safety and they got up, each looking gloomily at their mud-coated clothing. Chella reached up to wipe ineffectually at her face; an exercise in futility, since her hands were at least as dirty. Oh well, she thought philosophically, at least the endless rain would wash her exposed skin clean. And at least the human knew what it felt like to be so muddied now, after he'd avoided the earlier falls by virtue of his lower body-weight and lengthier pace.

"We'll find another way around when we go back," Shan said, slightly subdued. Evidently he'd assumed she would easily make the jump, not bothering to make accommodation for her shorter stature.

"I should hope so." Chella supposed she should thank him for catching her hands, but given that the fall was pretty much his fault in the first place, she didn't bother. "Let's get on with it, and out of this damn rain."

The human led the way into a building, or the remains of one. Its stone walls were still mostly intact except for some of the arches above windows which had collapsed, leaving chunks of rubble scattered across the floor. Mud coated the floor, leaving only a few specks of gray stone visible through the dirt. The building shielded them from the worst of the wind, although there was no roof and so the rain still fell unimpeded. Chella felt a little better. It would almost be possible to talk at a normal level here.

"Into the back room," Shan was saying, and the

dwarf followed him automatically. There the human leaned against a wall, holding the map-scroll close between the stone and his own body to protect it, and examined its marks. These seemed to indicate a stone in the floor, because he then put the map away and knelt on the ground, searching with his fingers.

"Help me with this?" he requested. Chella knelt down, too; a little more mud on her knees would hardly make any difference. It seemed the human was attempting to pry up a floor-stone with his fingers. After a moment's hesitation, she opened her pack to select a more appropriate tool. The mason's chisel, perhaps. She carefully wedged it into a crack and levered up the block.

Underneath was an oiled, waterproof sack. Carefully, and not without looking around to make *sure* nobody else was watching, Shan reached into the sack and took out a small rectangular wooden box. The box was in perfect condition, made of smooth varnished oak. A tiny seam around the center of the box indicated that it would unfold in half. On one of the longer sides there were four small circular keyholes in a row.

"Uh-oh."

"What is it?"

"Well," Shan said, "I'm supposed to unlock it using the third keyhole from the left."

"Will that be a problem? I thought you had the key." She'd seen it before, a tiny cylinder of metal with a handle on one end and a strange pattern of indents on the other.

"Yeah. But I don't know which way up the box goes."

The dwarf looked at it more carefully. He was right; it wasn't clear which part was the 'top' or lid, and which part was the 'bottom' or base; the box split down the middle. Keyholes would normally be in the bottom part, but that wasn't a foolproof rule and in a case like this—where presumably the other keyholes held a deadly trap, thanks to Shan's paranoid father—it was too important to chance.

"I'll go outside to take a look at the mechanism in better light," Shan said. While they worked, the sun had sunk near the horizon. Its direction was now clearly visible despite the clouds. Dull-edged shadows from the walls made the ruined building gloomy and dark, even without a roof.

Chella nodded, and the human left. She made no move herself; leaning by a wall she was sheltered from the wind, and the rain had slackened to a gentle patter on the mud. By comparison with outside, she felt refreshingly warm and dry, and didn't fancy giving up the 'comfort' so soon after a day of extended misery.

Idly she looked around the abandoned room. The

floor was flat and even, apart from the hole they had left, and the walls were firm, though their stones were lined with moss. Once, this would have made a good home for somebody. Now it was merely a decaying curiosity in desolate marshland, perhaps a good home for a toad. And all for the whim of a dragon who preferred swamp to other land.

Maybe she should be angry, but she wasn't. The thought of Onysablet aroused only fear, and relief that the creature was far away. The state of the climate, the supremacy of dragon overlords, that wasn't a cause for anger. It was just the way things were. Even though...

She didn't want to think about that, relive the experience again. But there was no choice.



Chella was a mile away from her village, downhill through the forest. The trees alternated between enormous battle-scarred oaks, and young saplings; arbitrary scatterings of fire from the skies during the Second Cataclysm had damaged the forest, but the area was relatively lightly affected and the dampness of the place had kept it from becoming a blaze. It was damp now, too, water from the morning's rain still dripping from the canopy above. The air tasted cool and fresh.

Even so, it was not a safe place, and she reminded herself to stay alert. Every dwarf large enough to hold an axe was trained to defend themselves and their village, a necessity in these troubled times when any number of desperate groups might make a raid. Away from the village and the safety of numbers, danger was more pronounced. Only last month somebody on a similar errand—Chella was gathering berries—had disappeared, never to be seen again. So the young dwarf was protected by chainmail, and a hefty battle-axe was strapped to her back, instantly at hand if trouble threatened.

But when trouble came, it was out of reach.

First, she heard a sound like pulsating wind, from above. Shocked and confused, she stared up through the branches and managed to catch a glimpse of something large and red, forcing its way rapidly through the air. The dragon! Instantly she knew she had to warn the village—they had previously given some defiance to the dragon's agents on a few occasions, and this could be retaliation. Dropping her basket, scattering blackberries across the ground, she sprinted back up the path. It was a hopeless race—short, stubby dwarven legs against gigantic dragon wings.

Second, moments later, she heard shouts of alarm. Faintly, carried by the wind, the noises of the village drifted

towards her. Their leader would be shouting orders. Her father, the village stonemason, would be struggling into his heavy plate armor as he prepared for battle.

Third, she heard the screams. They were faint, wavering, quiet from the distance. If the birds had not fallen silent with the dragon's arrival, birdsong would have covered the sound.

Then, after only a few seconds, the screams were no more and there was an ominous silence.

Grimly, Chella pounded through the forest. Despite her speed, it was several minutes before she reached the edge of the woodland and the flat, cleared area of cultivated land that surrounded the village. When she emerged from the trees, she paused. The village had been here, a small cluster of neat stone and wooden buildings on the hillside. Animal pens had enclosed the chickens and pigs. A wooden bench had sat in the shade of a tree left standing on the village edge.

Now there was a thick pall of smoke, a scattering of burnt wood and ashes, and some half-molten stone walls. Nothing was on fire, because nothing remained to burn.

Crying in pain, the dwarf continued to run, even though she was past the point of exhaustion and her breath came in ragged gasps. She ran until she reached her home on the village's main street, until she found the charred, unrecognisable corpses of her brother and both parents, almost unrecognizable apart from by their possessions—her mother's stone talisman, the misshapen armor on her father, remains of her younger brother's hand-axe.

Then she cried, and swore vengeance, and cried some more, and ran again for the sake of running, and cried until she was insensible.

Numbly, she watched the sun rise gradually from behind the eastern mountains. She was in her hidden place, a small hollow behind an outcropping of rock on the hillside, where she'd eventually ran to hide last night. You could see a long way from here, without easily being spotted from below. It was where she went to think things over when she wanted to be alone... at that thought, unbidden tears gathered in her eyes.

Annoyed, she brushed them away. Dwarves did not sit crying when there were things to be done. She pushed aside her grief and pain, hiding it deep within, and got down to the practicalities. What was she going to do?

In the brutal world of today there were many orphans and few willing to take them in. She would need to make her own way in the world, young or not. There should be room somewhere for a battle-trained dwarf

youth, even if not for a half-taught stonemason.

All this—she glanced down at the remains of the village—she would put behind her. She would not think of it again. It was from the past and no longer relevant. She would take nothing from here but what she wore.

Well, and some of her father's tools perhaps, if any had survived. They could come in useful. Hardening herself against the sights of the village, she made her way carefully down the goat-track. She entered the remains of her house, her face impassive at the sight of the human remains. Carefully she searched the workroom and found three small tools—a hammer, a chisel, an angle-square—that were relatively undamaged, shielded by chance from the ferocious heat of dragonfire. They would have to be carried in her belt, since she had no pack; she would need to remedy that soon.

She was definitely taking these for practical rather than sentimental reasons. The past was behind her now.

Even so, her hand lingered on the tools for a little longer than necessary.



After that she'd met Shan on the road, simply by chance, and he had convinced her to assist him in his task. He promised a share of the proceeds, but in truth she'd have done it simply for the cost of food and lodging along the way—after all, she had nothing in particular better to do. So they'd travelled together the long distance to New Coast.

Shan! With a start, she returned her attention to the present. It had been some minutes and she had not yet heard from him. The sun had almost set now, adding a pinkish sheen to the endless gray that suffused the marshes. It would surely be too dark to see by, she realized. Something might be wrong.

Chella was about to call out, but thought better of it. Moving as quietly as chainmail allowed, she crept towards the building's exit. Once there, she quickly checked all directions, but saw nothing—and no Shan. Stifling a rising panic, she looked about more thoroughly in the fading light. And then she noticed it. Clear drag marks, and the smeared darkness of blood, led from nearby to the stream's edge. It seemed that Shan had been silently killed, his body dumped into the fast-flowing water.

By the side of this trail hand-sized pawprints showed up clearly, edged in pink by the sun's last rays. The prints were shaped like a large cat's.

Well? Did you think Onysablet would leave her domain unguarded, for all to loot? The voice spoke inside

Chella's head, though its source was not visible. She looked around wildly until she finally saw the marsh cat, emerging from behind a building in the near distance. Barely visible in the twilight, it made a sleek four-legged silhouette, no clearer than the 'distant blur' villagers had described. With perfect grace it balanced on three paws, holding up the other towards her. She could see the bright glint of a large jewel.

"Are you going to kill me?" Chella asked simply. She was under no illusions about her prospects; the dwarf and her axe would stand an excellent fighting chance against a simple marsh-cat. But this was Onysablet's guardian, and it had just killed her traveling companion without a sound.

This was not your quest, the marsh-cat sent, lowering its paw and dipping its head in a gesture that seemed like a shrug. *You will be leaving soon.*

With that the cat disappeared, vanishing sinuously behind the shadowed building. A flash of anger engulfed Chella—the creature had killed her friend without a thought, and now she was going to let it go free?

But a now-gentle patter of rainfall added a soft counterpart to the stream's fierce rush, urging caution. The dwarf stood still in the rain, indecisive. After a few seconds the moment passed and she sighed, wandering over to the water to look down.

There was no sign of the human Shan, his clothing or possessions; everything had been washed away. There was only the deep, dark water, swirls and eddies in its flow gnawing further at the sides. Eventually, after a few hours or days of rain, the drag-marks on the soft mud bank would vanish too, and nothing would be left to mark her companion's fate.

Chella paused there for a long time, gentle rain washing mud from her hair and clothes and glittering with sunset colors. Eventually she shrugged and turned away. It was just one more emptiness, after all.

Mentally she checked what she was holding—axe... pack... nothing else—just to make sure she was ready.

After all, she would be leaving soon.



Samuel Marshall is an educational software designer in Milton Keynes, UK. He would like to thank Larris, Coffee Dragon, Liosalfar, and Targaff for their comments, which allowed him to improve the story somewhat after a dreadful first draft.

In the longer term he would like to become a published author (he'd love to work on Dragonlance, but also has his own worlds). For now, a selection of other stories is available from his website.

Takhisis's Garden

by Will Meister

It was not a particularly dreary day. Not a lovely day either. The Abyss tended to stay constant in such regards. Dark and cold, warm and bright, but mostly just gray. Gray and dull, as far as the eye could see.

The abyssal blandness churned formlessly. Dark gray clouds bubbled about, occasionally touching the ground and casting ripples of dust. But there was one place they would never reach. Ever since that last mishap with Toede's being returned to life, Takhisis had become much more careful with her favorite servants.

Therefore, they were left in the care of the short, stumpy demon, Hasfuss. He was completely submissive; a few centuries riding around with the dark queen could do that to someone. Being her faithful assistant had its, um, perks.

Or fringe benefits, you could say. One of which was being the caretaker of her 'Garden'. Not a garden in the normal sense, of course; more of a zoo or warehouse than anything else. In the protected area of the abyss, Hasfuss tended this garden, trimming and pruning. Generally keeping everything in perfect order. Not exactly the easiest job on the plane, but one he enjoyed.

Ever since Takhisis escaped from Chaos's visit, she had been brooding around, spreading her own anger at her defeat. Life in the abyss was even more unpleasant than before. At least then she could have focused her attention towards Krynn for a few decades. No longer. Now she spent most of her time lashing out at servants, causing havoc. There was a long list of recruiters from other Prime Material planes, but she constantly stood them up, canceled appointments. No amount of persuasion worked. She had to get her way, and the only world she wanted was Krynn. She had too much pride to become anything less than the ultimate in evil on a world. And no one could offer that, lest their own deities would become as angry.

So, in all, the abyss was becoming worst, though most hadn't thought it could. A depressive mood covered everyone, even the undead. Except Hasfuss. He went about his business, as usual. He knew his job, and knew how important his job was. While everyone else suffered, he pruned.



One day though, he had a visitor. This was an unusual occurrence, since he spent nearly all of his hours alone with the plants. This fellow servant of Her Majesty, a rather minor character, told Hasfuss that Takhisis finally remembered her garden and planned to pay it a visit soon. After this particular servant relayed the 'good' news, he left, leaving a panicked Hasfuss alone in the garden.

"The Queen? Coming here?" he said aloud to himself. "But the place is such a mess. I must prepare for her arrival."

So he ran about, not realizing the near perfect organization and level of cleanliness he typically kept, and began sweeping and trimming and dusting and arranging.

Accidentally, he knocked over a pot, spilling some dirt. Muttering to himself, he scooped the soil back in, and carefully readjusted the sign marked 'Verminaard'. Just in time for Her Majesty, The Dark One, Lady Takhisis—as her herald announced—to enter the garden.

Takhisis looked as lovely and evil as last Hasfuss saw her. The massive stress she had been under didn't show at all, an obvious tribute to her makeup artists.

She stopped to admire several of the plants. Hasfuss grinned internally with satisfaction that she enjoyed his work. The flowers, the leaves. All kept as full in bloom as the day he received the job.

Finally, she spoke aloud. "It is a shame we lost one to my brother during the war"

Hasfuss swallowed to calm himself before replying. "Y-yes, it is, your highness. I have left the sign in its place, in case it is ever returned." He motioned to an empty shelf and tilted the small card so she could read it without having to move. 'Raistlin', it read.

"Good, good. Though I doubt that'll ever happen." She seemed to sigh to herself, carelessly forgetting the subordinate who shared the room.

"Enough about that!" she snapped, startling Hasfuss. "Must everyone constantly remind me of my failures! I will win, and this time my plan is flawless." A smile stretched across her face, further beautifying it, and melting a small remaining piece of Hasfuss's heart.

"And the greatest thing about this," she continued, "is that Paladine and the rest of those fools can no longer interfere. Think about it, Hasfuss. The world is free for the taking."

Try as he might, Hasfuss couldn't see a loophole in the bargain with Chaos. He'd given it a bit of thought in the past, as had all the demons, due to the wondrous rewards Takhisis promised, but came up empty then and now.

Seeing confusion on her gardener's face, she paused, staring deep into his soul, checking for any sign of betrayal. Pleased with the response, she further explained her purpose for the garden visit.

"You see, I am no longer able to enter Krynn. Chaos would certainly never permit that. However, I still hold a bit of influence in the outer planes. I have arranged a little trade with the powers controlling the Mists of the Demiplane of Dread, Ravenloft. Contrary to popular belief, the mists are not completely random. Just mostly."

Takhisis walked over to a small shelf set into an alcove. She lifted the lone potted plant and read the label. 'Lord Soth'. She smiled once again. "You've done well, Hasfuss. Very well."

Hasfuss blushed and stammered a thanks to her. Ignoring him, she set the plant down and waved one arm in the air. A razor sharp dagger appeared in her hand. With a quick motion, Her Dark Majesty split Soth's plant in two. Leaving one half in the original pot, she handed the rest to her herald, who took it and exited the garden.

"There. My half of the bargain is complete. They wanted all of him, but we'll keep this between us, Hasfuss?"

Hasfuss blinked and nodded acknowledgment of her order. "But why, my queen? What can these 'mists' do for us?"

"More than you know. They are my means of entry. Or at least, that of my chosen. Now, where are the dragons?"

Hasfuss led the way through the garden, passing by dozens of similarly potted plants. One shelf was marked 'Ogre'. Another, 'Minotaur'. Several dozen different classifications in all. As they reached the deepest and darkest end of the garden, they passed by the Draconian tables, and soon reached the Dragons.

The dragons were separated according to coloring and age. They were quite beautiful plants, with small blooms of red, blue, green, black, and white. The stem consisted of a short bulbous cocoon-like husk.

The first blue flower was labeled 'Khellendros'. Takhisis gathered it and several more from all the colors. But only from the first few rows; the eldest of her dragons.

She took Hasfuss' hand and led him from the garden. As soon as they exited, their bodies teleported several hundred yards away. She removed the dragon-flowers from their pots and placed them into the abyss's ground. Instantly, they began to writhe and grow with power fed directly from the plane.

Within mere moments, they dwarfed Hasfuss and the current form of his queen. The cocoon swelled to enormous size and the petals shrank into the stem.

One hatched.

Khellendros. Skie. The great blue dragon glanced around for a minute before recognizing Takhisis standing in front of him. Hasfuss nervously glanced around at the other plants, which continued to grow. Khellendros and Takhisis conversed privately. Then the dragon launched himself into the air, his wings pumping fiercely and kicking up clouds of the abyssal dust. As the dragon began to leave a white cloud appeared, enveloping him with a sharp contrast to the abyssal gray. The mist vanished almost as quickly as it had arrived, taking the blue dragon with it.

Takhisis turned back to Hasfuss. "Those were the mists of Ravenloft. As soon as the rest of these dragons are finished absorbing energy from the ground, they will also be taken. To Krynn. Those foolish mortals won't know what to do when fully-energized and grown dragons appear in the skies." Her laughter and joy echoed throughout the entire plane.



Takhisis left, leaving Hasfuss to sit with the growing dragon-pods. Occasionally, another would split open and the dragon would leave to be picked up by those mists. After a few hours, all the dragons were gone; sent home to wreak their own special form of havoc. Hasfuss wandered amongst the withering plants. As soon as each dragon left, the cocoon crumbled into dust and the stem retracted into the abyss. Khellendros's was nearly gone already.

As much as it pained him to have his plants taken, Hasfuss felt a small amount of pride for his involvement in such a grand plan. "But still, what if I got to pick one of the

dragons?" he thought to himself. "Then I really would be a part of this."

Being a modest demon, he paused to give this idea some extra thought. On one hand, Takhisis was already overwhelmingly happy. And she was very busy. It had already taken her this long to remember he existed; it was likely to take just as long next time. On the other hand, if she was angry about it, she would probably take the garden away from his care, torture him, and eventually kill him.

"I'm already this involved. I may as well." Swallowing dryly, he wandered back to the garden. As he reached the dragons, still shaded in the semi-darkness, he faced a moment of indecision. If he chose one from the front, it might be noticed missing. He reached to the back rows of the red dragons and picked the very last one. Hasfuss tucked it away and returned to the site of the others.

He planted it, and stepped back as it burst into full bloom. It grew like the others and then stopped. It was still being fed the energy, but for some strange reason, it wouldn't hatch.



He was noticed.

Takhisis appeared before him, a hint of anger in her eyes. He fell to his knees and began apologizing quickly and repetitively. She silenced him and glanced at his experiment. "Who is this?" she asked.

"I-I'm not sure, my Queen. The last red." Hasfuss pointed at the pot laying on its side at her feet.

"Malystryx," she read aloud. "You've chosen an infant dragon!"

Hasfuss cringed visibly at her anger.

"We can't have this dragon left free here, so I'll have to send it to Krynn." Takhisis said. "You will suffer for your insubordination."

At that instant, the husk finally opened. The dragon timidly peeked out like a newborn chick. A flash of light from Takhisis's fist melted the shell around Malystryx. Malys sat up stupidly and blinked at Hasfuss and Takhisis. "Mommy?"

Before either of them could respond, the Mists swirled down into view. Hasfuss stepped away from them, fearful of their powers, but Malys didn't know any better. They covered her completely, and took the final great dragon to Krynn.

"Hasfuss," Takhisis said with a hint of venom on her tongue. "I will give you one more chance. But next time, be warned, you will suffer."

A flash of light later, and Hasfuss stood alone in the garden. He faced the entrance and noticed it was sealed. "Serves me right, I guess," he muttered to himself. With nothing better to do, he picked up his shears and went to work.



Will Meister is an Architectural Engineering student at Penn State. While his professors try their hardest to stifle his creativity, he does get occasional bursts of inspiration. A few more stories can be found on his web site. He'd like to thank his friends Jason P. and Lyrissa B. for putting up with him.