

One Bright Star to Guide Them

by John C. Wright

John C. Wright is the author of nine novels, ranging from the far-future science fiction of his “Golden Age” trilogy to the “Chronicles of Chaos” fantasy novels. Recently he has shown a knack for expanding on the work of other writers, including several stories that follow from William Hope Hodgson’s “The Night Land,” a sequel to A. E. van Vogt’s *The World of Null-A*, and most recently a story called “Guyal the Curator” that is slated to appear in an anthology in tribute to Jack Vance’s “Dying Earth.” Mr. Wright’s first *F&SF* story is a fantasy we think you’ll find to be most memorable. Enjoy.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

—I Corinth. 13.11

* * * *

1. Tommy

“I should be happy,” Thomas S. Robertson muttered to himself, fumbling for the latchkey to his Brighton flat. Perhaps he had had a pint too many at the local pub; perhaps he had too desperately tried to celebrate.

His key ring fell from an unsteady glove, bounced on the stair near his shoe, and spun away into the dried rosebushes the concierge had planted between the concrete strip of the sidewalk and the street.

Thomas Robertson sighed, and his breath was white with cold. Was it worth searching for his keys, in the dark, in the October fog, at this hour of night? Perhaps he should shout and wake the concierge. The concierge might be put out, but Thomas was soon to leave this comfortable old building anyway, and move into the stark glass boxlike high-rise in the midst of the most modern part of London. The company had arranged to move his things; the modern apartment was provided as part of his promotion.

Many of the officers of the company, ambitious men younger than he was, had slapped him on the back or shaken his hand with envy at the party this evening.

It was that envy that had finally driven him out into the foggy night, to find the old stone-and-wood public house where Irish dockworkers sometimes swapped tall tales of mermaids and of little people, of selkie and of banshee and of stern, pale kings from the fairy world.

Those tales he knew and loved; he had more reason to believe them than most people, although it was easy to forget that, now that he was grown.

Those tales were one more thing to lose, when he moved away to London.

He doffed his gloves, bent down to feel through the thorns for his key, and grunted as he bent; bending was not so easy anymore, now that he was on the wrong side of forty and losing his hair. Middle aged, if he lived to be eighty. (But last year Bridesmith from Accounts had passed away at sixty-two. Heart trouble. Middle aged for him had been thirty-one.)

A thorn scratched his ungloved hand; he pulled it back. Now he sat in the dry leaves heaped by the roadside, drained and defeated, sucking mournfully on his pricked finger. It did not even seem worth the effort to shout and wake the concierge to let him in, for if he went in-of-doors, and slept, the morning would come all the sooner.

Light came from a wrought-iron lamppost not far away. The street was empty, and here and there a lonesome tree lifted its bare and crooked twigs to the cold sky. To one side was an old Anglican Church, built nine hundred years ago, with a statue of St. George standing atop a pillar in the midst of the churchyard gardens, overlooking the street, as if standing sentry over the road.

The other way along the street loomed new construction. Squat black warehouses dominated in the nearer ground; beyond them rose faceless glass monstrosities, including Thomas's office building. He always walked that way in the morning, turning his back on the church, and leaving St. George behind him. But then St. George was always there in the evening, when he turned about again to come home.

Thomas felt a solemn, silly mood, like the seriousness of a child. He closed his eyes. "St. George," he said in a soft voice, "Help me find the key I have lost. I want to open the door to my home."

Without opening his eyes, he plunged his hand into the rosebush. Thomas's hand closed on something warm and furry, which yowled and turned and clawed him. When he yanked his hand back, the animal was riding his arm on white-hot needles of pain.

With a startled yell, Thomas shook off the yellow-eyed thing clinging to his arm. It was a black cat. The

cat spun neatly in the air and landed on its feet in Thomas's lap.

On a slim silver chain around its neck, the cat wore a silver key, intricately inscribed. The teeth of the key were large and square; the hilt was crowned with a circle inscribed about a cross, divided into equal fours.

The cat was as black as moonless midnight, with no spot of white in its fur. Its eyes were sardonic; they were yellow as gold, and the pupils were opened up wide.

Thomas was swept with a blinding joy. "Tybalt!" he cried, "It's you! You've come back! Oh, you've come back! It's been so long...."

He stood up, trying to seize and hug the black cat. The cat twisted out of his grasp, spun and landed on its feet. The chain fell off over the cat's sleek head; the key fell with a chime to the stone of the stairs, and lay, shimmering silver-white in the light from the lamppost.

"Have you forgotten how to talk?" asked Thomas. "Are you under an enchantment?"

Suddenly, he felt foolish. Perhaps he was drunk. The cat could be any black cat.

Thomas Robertson stared down at the cat. "If you're really Tybalt, the Prince of Cats, son of Carbonel, please say something," he whispered. "Say anything. Please."

The cat began to wash his paws fastidiously.

Thomas said, "Don't make me feel ridiculous. I remember you from when I was a schoolboy. There was the well behind the ruined wing of Professor Penkirk's mansion. Bombed during the war, and overgrown with moss, the black windows and spooky walls surrounded the well on three sides, and a broken angel was there. We knew it was a haunted well, we were sure. Penny and Richard and Sally and I, all of us were playing there, when we found the key. It was the well of the nine worlds, and the key opened the gateway...."

Thomas stooped and picked up the silver key. "I believe," he said. "I remember everything. Richard came back with the sword; Sally had the shard of the shattered magic glass; Penny, God rest her soul, brought back Myrrdin's book. I had this key. I lost it years ago, but here it is again. I know it. I know

you. I am not mad.”

Thomas looked overhead till he found the North Star, which was shining brightly above the clouds and fogs. For a moment, he frowned as if searching his mind for something long forgotten, something precious and lost. Then he smiled. He pointed the key at the North Star, and turned it clockwise. “Power of heaven, unchained by me, come into the carven key.”

He pointed the silver key at the cat. “Unlock, unbind, release, set free; so says he who bears the key.” He twisted it clockwise.

The black cat spoke in a voice as soft and clear as rippling water. “I am come to summon you to tourney, Tommy, to face a knight of ghosts and shadows. No weapon of mankind can cut him; and once he is called to come, no door nor gate can keep him out. Only one who knows his secret name can hope to vanquish him. He is the champion of the Lord of Final Winter, who also is called the Shadow King. He has been summoned to your world, now, and all of England is at hazard.” The black cat looked up at him with eyes as yellow and mysterious as moonlight. “The call is given. Listen: you can hear the trumpet of the Wild Huntsman. Will you go?”

“Now? Right now? In the middle of the night? Without packing a bag?”

“To fly upon the air, little Tommy, we needs must travel light. If you do not already carry all you need, nothing you can put into a bag will help you now. Can you not hear the trumpets of the wild hunt?”

Thomas cocked his head. “I hear nothing but the cry of night birds in the air,” he sadly said.

“Your belief is weak. Those who refuse to understand cannot hear, even when the Call rings out as loud as church bells. Come away; the lords of faerie summon you. The Enemy will conquer all, if none stand to oppose his might.”

“I can’t just up and leave. I have work; I have rent to pay. But, see here, you’ve picked a good time. In a week or so I’ll be ready to move; the company might give me some days off, and then I can schedule in some time to go fight the knight of shadows, and....”

Thomas straightened, blinking. Schedule in some time to fight the knight of shadows?

“Tybalt,” he said slowly. “I’m not a child anymore. It’s been thirty years since we went to Vidblain, and broke the Black Mirror of the Winter King, and restored Prince Hal to his throne at Caer Pendewen. You can’t order me around like a schoolboy. I’ll help you, yes, certainly. But this time, I must know why we’re doing what we’re doing, where we’re going, and by what plan. I can’t just go shooting off into the blue. I have a life of my own. I have a future to think about. If I just disappear in the middle of the night, I’ll be sacked, and have no future, no job, no place to stay.”

The black cat turned and slipped off down the stairs. Then the cat was in the street, and beginning to slink away, a black shadow in the night. Thomas jumped down the stairs after him, crying, “Wait! Don’t leave me! I’ll come! I’ll come!”

Pausing for nothing, Thomas ran joyfully down the street after the elusive black cat, his back to the high-rises, his face toward St. George.

It was midnight, and the church bell solemnly and slowly began to ring, filling the starlit world with echoes.

* * * *

2. Richard

It was November, and the days were dark.

“Thomas! How d’you, old man. Great to see you after all these years. Ah ... just great. I can spare you a few moments. It’s a busy world, you know. Quite busy. Sit down.”

Richard Sommerville’s office was square and large, carpeted in red, walls hung with ugly modern paintings in rich frames: mere colored blobs and jagged scrawls, without meaning or skill of execution. Bookshelves filled two walls, crowded with expensive books of the type one never reads, but leaves about to impress one’s guests. The windows were narrow and small, like archer’s slits, and through them could be seen the snow on the road outside, churned black by automobile traffic.

Richard’s face was large and square as well. Age had thinned his hair and left baggy rings around his narrowed eyes. His face had a tight, cautious look. He greeted Thomas with hearty words, but he smiled only with his lips, never with his eyes.

“You’ve been out tramping in the country, haven’t you, old man? I can tell by your gear. Not many people come into my office with knapsacks and hiking sticks, wearing stained anoraks. Or dripping snow on my things. No, not many at all. Not at all. But we always have time for old friends, don’t we? Don’t we? What can I do for you, Thomas?” Richard said, looking at his wristwatch.

Thomas was wreathed in smiles, his face eager as a child on Christmas morning. “Look.” He upended his backpack, and dumped a small black cat onto Richard’s desk, amid the neat stacks of paper, the pen set, the ticking desk clock, the telephone. The cat batted documents off the blotter, and stepped disdainfully on some others.

Richard almost rose from his seat. “What! See here, Thomas, what do you mean throwing your smelly pet all over my desk? Are you loopy?” He sounded sincerely angered and shocked.

Thomas smiled, and leaned forward. “It’s Tybalt!”

“Who?”

Thomas’s smile slowly vanished. The light in Thomas’s eyes began to die. “Why ... why ... It’s Tybalt. You must remember. That summer we found the well of the nine worlds. When I held up the key, and Penny said the rhyme she’d found in the old book of Professor Penkirk’s. One brave soul to hold the key, remember the rhyme? The rainbow came in the mist above the well, and we followed it to Vidblain, and we saw the ships of Lemmergeir sailing in the tide below the Tall White Tower of Noss. We saw the swan ships sailing from the Western Sea, from the Summer Country. You remember, Richard, you must. It was you who found the shining Sword trapped in the roots of the Cursed Black Oak in the middle of Gloomshadow Forest, where none of the Fair Folk could go. The badger’s family helped you. None of the servants of the Winter King could draw it; it burned their hands. That’s how we found out that old woman was an ice maiden in disguise. It was all just as the rhyme in Professor Penkirk’s book foretold.”

“Good old Professor Penkirk. Haven’t thought on him in years. Queer old bird, I must say. I’m not so sure I’d get along with him so well nowadays, though. Filling all our heads with notions and rubbish. Well. We were children then, I suppose. No great harm done. I suppose kooky old Penkirk’s dead by now. Nice seeing you again, though, Thomas, I must say. Now, if you could get this silly cat off my papers, I do have a frightfully important meeting at two. That’s what happens when you barge in without an appointment, you know. We can’t all just do as we like....”

“But this is Tybalt, son of Carbonel....”

“That old scrawny black cat we played with as kids? It’s been dead for years, I’m sure. Cats don’t live

so long as that, you know....”

“Richard! Listen! He’s come to call us back,” Thomas said in a low, quiet voice. “Tybalt, I mean. He carries a message from the Emperor of the Uttermost West, the King of the Summer Land. We helped them before. Don’t you remember at all? The Black Mirror of the Winter King had trapped the light from the sword. Susan shattered it with the note from the harp of Finn Finbarra, and we freed the nightingale, and followed her song to the Forever Tree, which was still green and whole under the ice. The fire from the sword melted the ice; we found the Garland Crown of good prince Hal hanging on the highest branch, just where Tybalt had said. This is Tybalt. Tybalt: say something!”

Richard stirred uneasily in his chair. He said in a tight voice; “Look here, Thomas. Those fairytale daydreams we all had were all very right and nice as children. But we’re grown now. Those were just games we played. Those ideals, you know, good triumphant over evil. Just silly children’s games. None of it could be real. If that was real, none of this would be real,” he said, gesturing abruptly toward the walls of his office, the window, the honking traffic crowding the street below. “Nothing we did as adults would mean anything. We all have to make compromises. No one can blame us. But all that was just play....”

Thomas leaned forward across the desk and grabbed Richard’s hand. “You know it was real. Why are you pretending it wasn’t?”

“I wish I could believe....,” Richard whispered.

“We don’t have to be trapped,” Thomas said, letting go of the hand and leaning back slightly. “We don’t have to live this way.”

Richard was silent, eyes cast down.

Thomas spoke with quiet urgency: “Tybalt told me the Winter King’s men have entered this world. They have Atlendor’s tarn-cape, and mortal eyes cannot see them. Tybalt brought me to the Wellspring of Wisdom in a cavern below the roots of an ash tree, where a hundred knights in armor of gold were sleeping on stone biers. He made me bathe my eyes in the spring; it burned and stung, and for a day, I thought I was blind. But when my blindness passed, I could see the fairy creatures.”

Thomas continued, “There was one, oh God! There was one of them right there in the town at Alderley Edge; a schoolteacher. She was actually one of the willow women, the daughters of the Winter King. The women are all fair and beautiful to see from the front, but are hollow and rotten from behind, like masks; they can only be discovered by someone who looks at them from every angle. I crouched outside the

window and looked into the classroom; one of the willow women was the teacher there. The parents had sent their children off to school, all trusting the teachers and not suspecting a thing. The willow woman drew the sigils and Runes of Ice upon the blackboard, and made the children chant the Worm Song to ensorcell them. She had chains made out of gossamer and was telling the children to bind themselves, so the children could not speak or think except at her command. No one but I could see the chains. I asked Tybalt how to cut them; he said they were woven out of women's beards and mountain roots and fish's breath."

"There's no such thing," said Richard, a strange look on his face.

"Exactly. That's why they couldn't be broken. You can't cut something that doesn't exist, can you? That's why we need the sword once more. The light from the sword can shatter the spell; no one can remove those chains except the children themselves; and they can't remove them till they can see them, and they can't see them without the light. Where is the Sword Reforged now, Richard? It was one of the things we took out of Vidblain. I remember you had it hidden under the boards in your grandmother's attic up until when you went away to boarding school. Where is it now?"

"I gave it to the local museum in Easterwick, the town where Penny used to live. Don't look at me that way! It was just an old rusted sword we once played with. All that rubbish about 'no ignoble hand could draw it' was just childhood silliness."

"When did you sell it?" Thomas voice was cold and severe.

"How dare you talk to me in that tone! I've half a mind to call security and have you tossed out on your ear. You've no right to judge me. No right at all. You're quite mad, you know."

"It was after you came home from when you were expelled from boarding school, wasn't it, Richard? I was away at school myself then, and you never did tell me why they kicked you out. I heard some very ugly rumors, Richard, about a girl you got in trouble...."

Richard made as if to slap him. Thomas, however, had spent six weeks on the road, or in the woods, and his body had grown more hardy and strong than most inactive men of his age. He caught Richard's hand easily, and pinned it against the desk, so that Richard was drawn forward at an awkward angle.

With his left hand, Richard grabbed Thomas's wrist, and tried to pry his grip away. There was no sound save for the hissing of their breath as the two strained silently, almost without motion.

With his other hand, Thomas brought a squeeze tube out from his breast pocket. He flicked the cap free with his thumb. The desk shivered as Richard tugged, trying to escape, but Thomas held him pinned. The tube had a narrow mouth like an eyedropper. Thomas leaned back his head and squeezed a drop of fluid, one into each eye, never letting go of Richard's right hand. Thomas shivered and blinked.

When Thomas leaned his head forward, Richard shuddered and made a hoarse noise. Thomas's pupils had dilated dramatically; the black part of his eye seemed enormous, all-seeing.

With his thumbs he forced open Richard's clenched fist. "The sword of light has burned you here. Your palm is crossed with scars."

"There's nothing wrong with my hand! Let me go!"

"You sold the sword when you found it would not allow your hand to touch it. You must wish you could banish your memory as easily."

He released Richard's hand, and rubbed his hand on his pants, as if to wipe away a stain. "I should be more surprised, if I had not seen a sight more terrible than the one I told to you. The willow maidens have been here for many years. When I walked the streets of London, I saw many people who had locked themselves in the gossamer chains. I don't know who is more pathetic; them, or you." Thomas meticulously picked up his little tube and replaced the tiny cap.

"Get out," Richard croaked. "Wait! Take me with you...."

"Come along then." Thomas stood and extended his hands. The black cat sprang into his arms, and then swarmed lithely up to Thomas's shoulder. Tybalt crouched sphinxlike and regarded Richard with unblinking eyes as cold as hammered gold.

Richard just quivered and blinked. "Get out. You're crazy. I'm a man of prominence in business. A success. Go chase your children's fantasies. They'll put you in a nuthouse. A nuthouse."

"Good-bye, Richard. And I am truly sorry."

* * * *

3. Sally

Thomas searched long for Sarah Truell. She had married a serviceman named Delacourt, changing her last name, and the Royal Navy had moved them from one post to another. New Year had come and gone, and February was approaching, before he found her.

She lived in a little row house outside the Navy yards in Dover, with the tiniest strip of garden before the front door. Her house was the only one sanded and painted, bright and cheerful, along the whole row: her house alone had Christmas lights. She had put a white birdbath, surrounded by neat flowerbeds, filled now with snow, in the center of her tiny lawn. Her neighbors had rubbish poking through the white hillocks of their yards, and an abandoned hulk of an auto was rusting, coated with icicles, in the street nearby.

Inside it was breathlessly hot. Her rooms were thronged with bookshelves and hung with many potted plants. Every table had some fragile vase or piece of bric-a-brac, small delicate statues or intricately carven music boxes, of which she had a collection. The place was crowded, as if being squeezed together by converging walls, but prim and neatly kept.

Thomas was surprised to see how old Sarah seemed, how cautious and slow her movements were. She was not yet forty, younger than Thomas, yet her hair had gone all gray, and she wore it in a bun knotted neatly on her head. She listened carefully to the story Thomas told, but was distracted several times by watching Tybalt climb among the bookshelves, afraid he would knock down a crystal piece or tiny lamp.

“What? Go out on an adventure? Like when we were children? *By star, by stone, by shining spear, I call upon the gathered hosts of light.* ... Like that? It would be charming. Those days were so sweet. But I cannot help you. Who knows what might happen if I did?”

“Richard pretended not to remember anything. He said it was a game. How can you stand idle, knowing what our dread foe is? Have you forgotten?”

“Oh, I remember everything,” she said wistfully. “I still at times recall the perfume of the flowers when they bloomed, after the Winter King and all his troops were beaten in the Battle of Glad Valley.

“The snow all vanished in a torrent of clear water, streaming down the hillsides, cleaning all the vile things left by the white wolves and trolls away, and where the knights of the Summer Land strode singing, flowers sprang up and barren trees burst suddenly to green, like a thousand springtimes rolled up in one.

The floods washed all the bad things into the sea, but any house which had hung a wreath or pine branch on its door was safe, and not even their eaves were damp.”

She continued: “I remember the feast on the fields of Caer Linden, and the tree women came out of the forests to dance, and the faerie folk danced in the air overhead, held up by the joy of their singing alone. The tables were laid with white linens, and groaned under the baskets of fruits and fair foods which all the country people brought to give thanks for the return of their Prince. The coronation was all splendor; Prince Hal was crowned with the Garland Crown, and all the flowers bloomed. The elf king, Finbarra, he danced with me, did I tell you? and drew me up high in the air, and the crystal floor of heaven rang underfoot, and I heard the stars singing their hymns in the night.”

Sarah’s eyes had filled with tears at the memory. She said, “Excuse me,” and took a pressed hankie out of her skirt pocket, and daubed at her eyes. “We never should have come back to this world. It’s so dirty. And there’s nothing you can do about any of it. Everything is so ... complicated. Over there, next to the seashell is a harp I bought in Wales. Don’t touch it! It’s very fragile. I have it to remind me of the harp of Finbarra, which I carried on our quest to the Hall of Silence, in Icelock. Do you remember how sweetly the nightingale sang, when we let her go free from her cage? And I remember how Tybalt tried to eat her at first. Poof! You nasty thing!” Now she laughed and waved her hankie at Tybalt.

Tybalt looked at her disdainfully, and began to lick the fur of his shoulder and wash.

“But I’m worried,” she whispered, eyes wide. “The police were here, asking after you. Richard phoned too, and he was angry, frantic. What have you done?”

Thomas was seated uncomfortably on a chair slightly too small for him. His arms had become muscled with the exertions of his adventures and escapes over the last two months; his face was darkened by weather and wind. He now wore a beard. He was afraid to move his arms, for fear of knocking over the bottles or blown glass *objets d’art* on the little tables to either side of him.

“We have been called to battle, once again, against our ancient foe,” Thomas said, “And to walk beneath the banners of the Sons of Light. The Champion of the Dark is here, in England, and he covets all this world for his prize. I dare not face him till his secret name is known to me. No strength of hand can overcome him; his name is written in elf-light ink in Penny’s old book. I have not found Penny’s heirs as yet, and what is written in elf-writing cannot be read except by the light of the Sword Reforged. I have found the little country museum where the sword is kept, but the agents of the Shadow were there before me.

“They cannot touch the sword, and dared not move it. But the museum-keeper’s soul has been consumed by the vampires, and a vampire has entered his flesh, and inhabits him, usurping his form and name, and spun charms around the museum.

“I attempted to enter, but the enchantments snared me on the threshold; I was dazzled and fell frothing. A man who found me took me to a hospital.

“The doctors diagnosed me as epileptic, and their medicines cured me. But some of the police are agents of the enemy, and they found my name out while I was there. I escaped by climbing down from the window; Tybalt had taught me a charm to allow me to land on my feet without hurt, no matter how high the fall.

“For several days I fled and hid. Finally I was betrayed to the police. But I was not to have a trial. The enemy transported me in an aeroplane to take me to the East, where their powers are stronger, and where they have countries whose evil rulers worship the Darkness almost openly.

“Their Champion came in to where I was chained in the hold of the aeroplane, to gloat at and to mock at me. He occupied the body of Lord Wodenhouse, the minister of the Admiralty, and wore his uniform. But there was nothing inside his body, and he had no light in his eyes.

“He boasted to torment me, telling me how my defense of England had already failed. He told me of secret meetings of the Admiralty counsel at midnight at the ruins of an ancient pre-Roman temple, and named the horrible oaths taken to apparitions in the tombs.

“In a cold, regal voice, he told about members of Parliament, those who could not be made to swear, or who made some attempt to tell of what they had seen in the tombs. He told how his night hags and wraith maidens would cling to the walls outside their windows, and sing to the sleeping men in voices only they could hear. Sometimes wives found their husband’s stiff and empty bodies in their bed the next morning. But, before any great stir could be made, the enchanted men were taken and replaced, one by one, by some stranger who looked and spoke and acted like just as they had done.

“Lord Wodenhouse said his greatest support in the halls of power were from those Lords and ministers who formerly had opposed his rise to power. These men were never seen to eat or drink in public, rarely laughed, and never smiled when they did laugh.

“*“They take their sustenance from other things,”* he told me then, *“Things men never had denied unto my kind; praise and smiles and flattery are sufficient to sustain us. But our hunger, human, our hunger never dies.”* And he promised me I should perish, after torture, on the altar he had erected to his Master.

“But I used the silver key to unlock the chains which kept me in the aeroplane’s hold. There were none of the enemy around me; the Knight of Shadows feared for his men to learn his nature. The body he inhabited was weak; easily I took him by the throat. But he was unafraid, croaking I had no weapon which could harm him, for, if his body were destroyed, he would flee into other flesh.

“I squeezed his throat until he coughed and dared him to flee the flesh he wore. The Knight of Shadows spat at and reviled me, but would not answer. By this, I knew he needed the face and form, the fame and power, of Lord Wodenhouse to do his evil work in England.

“The marines came into the cabin then, weapons ready, wearing the mark of the Evil Eye on their brows. But I flung myself from the door of the plane, and the suction whirled the enemy, screaming, out into the night sky with me. And I trusted to Tybalt’s spell, fell, and did not die. A group of Normandy farmers saw me plunge from the sky and land on my feet, unharmed, in the middle of an open field. And they seemed to understand my plight, almost as if they knew I served the Elf King; they hid me from the police, and on Christmas Eve they feasted with me.

“With their help, I was smuggled back into England. I have only now come from Dover docks.”

Sarah listened, wide-eyed. “It is too terrible. They can’t be here. It can’t happen here.”

He said, “It has grown worse even in the short time I was away in France; or perhaps they gather in cities, far away from open fields. I have the second sight; many of the men on the docks—the shore patrol, the police, the Navy men—I saw the Unseen Mark upon their foreheads, or in their palms. They have been branded with the Sign of the Evil Eye. They have sworn fealty to the Enemy; I fear Her Majesty’s government is corrupt, spell-caught, and overcome. All men and women of good will must join together to fight this foe; each of us must do our utmost.”

“I cannot help you,” Sarah said quietly. She had a look of fear and horror in her eyes.

“You must. Listen; I will tell you what we face.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“In the sewers under London I saw the filthy pool filled with vampires. They were lying, weak and helpless in the mire, chanting spells. Their crooked limbs were thin as reeds; their bellies were swollen and famished. Their songs called up to the streets above and drew a line of people down the dripping stairs.”

Sarah twisted uncomfortably in her chair. She shook her head, but did not speak. Thomas, watching her without remorse, continued his narrative:

“Tybalt made me put wax in my ears: their songs were too piteous and beautiful for men to withstand, he said. I saw it all, I tell you! Men, women, and children were filing up to the edge of the mire, and cutting their own wrists with knives or razors or with their own teeth. The vampires lay below with upturned mouths, pushing and squeezing to suck up the blood. It was ghastly! But worst of all, whenever a vampire tried to climb out of the muck, and join the humans on the sewer stairs, tried to become a human being again, the other vampires would pull him back down and bite him again, to make sure he remained a vampire.

“Tybalt told me we needed the shard of the Mirror to defeat them before they get too strong, and rise up. They are agents of the Winter King; they cannot live in fertile or green land; they cannot stand to see their own reflections; they lose all their power once they see themselves for what they are.”

“Is that all you want? The shard? Of course I still have it!” She got up and went over to a carved cabinet, from which she took a little box of cedar wood. She brought it back and held it for a moment in her lap. “I had it for a keepsake. But if you must have it....”

She unlocked and opened the cedar box. Inside was a fold of white silk; she carefully unwrapped a triangular shard of black glass. It shone and glimmered like polished black marble, a beautiful thing to behold.

“Take it and go!” she said, extending it toward him.

“Why are you afraid to come? What has made you so full of fear?”

She did not answer, but seemed to shrink in on herself, huddling.

“Is your husband one of them?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know.” She shivered. She tried to smile, but the effort was pathetic. “The good things in life, they are so weak, so fragile. Elves, the tree maidens, the little birds. What can they do to stop the onslaught of Winter?”

“Have you forgotten? The flowers drive back the winter every spring.”

“But men,” she said, “Evil people are not hobbled by sentiment; noble thoughts don’t stop them.”

“Is that all ideals mean to you? A hobble? Ideals are the source of all strength. Men cannot live without them any more than they can live without air, or bread. Even twisted men must have ideals, if only twisted ones. No, I will tell you what truly hobbled me: when I tried for so long to live without my childhood ideals. It nearly killed me. Now I walk in the path of Light. My footsteps are sure. I know no doubt. Join me in the light. Step out from the shadow.” He stood up slowly, and extended his hand toward her. The hand was tanned; the muscles and veins along the back of his hand stood out sharply.

Sally shivered and shook her head. “All noble things must fail someday. You know that.” She sniffed and shook her head again.

“Our foes have no strength at all, save what they steal from mortal men. They are shadows without substance, hollow women, vampires without blood. Without your fear to feed them, they have no strength at all.”

Sarah said nothing. There was nothing to say.

She did not reach for his hand, but looked at it the way a drowning woman might look at the hand from a lifeboat, too far away to reach, and receding.

On the street outside, Thomas tucked the shard of mirror carefully into a fold of silk and kept it in a metal cigarette case. Tybalt, purring, rubbed up against his leg.

Thomas looked down, and asked, “Do you suppose her husband might have the sign of the Evil Eye stamped on his brow?”

The cat looked up. “I know only that she has the sign of the coward branded on hers,” the soft voice purred.

* * * *

4. Penny

The churchyard of Easterwick was near the library, facing it across the town common green. The March sky was the hue of mother-of-pearl, striped white and blue with bands of cloud and clear sky, and the smothered sun shone wan. The last of the frosts were failing. New shoots could be seen through the gray winter grass, and green buds shyly showed on the naked branches of the trees. Thomas walked out from the post office, past the town hall, and over into the graveyard behind the little church. Under his arm was an oblong package, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string.

He stood looking down at a gravestone. The stone was cut with an image of a ship in full sail under a stormy sea, with a many-rayed star before its prow. The prow was shaped like a swan, with its graceful head raised toward the star.

The inscription read.

PENELOPE ANGANIM OAKWREN 1940-1987

One brave soul to hold the key
To find the charm and learn it
One bright sword to smite the Dark
One bright flame to burn it.

One note of harp to free the fire
No dark cold glass could hide him
One white ship to sail them far
And one bright star to guide them.

Tybalt was stalking through the tall grass among the gravestones. Occasionally a white moth or startled beetle would dart up, and Tybalt would hop up straight into the air, batting at the fluttering insect with his paws.

Thomas opened the package. Inside was a leather-bound volume with brass hasp and lock and hinges, embossed with the image of a sword embedded in the roots of an oak tree.

Also in the package was a letter from Penelope's nephew explaining how she had left a provision in her will that this book be given to any of her three childhood friends: himself, or Sarah Truell, or Richard Sommerville, whoever should first ask for it.

Slowly, Thomas walked over to a marble bench, which stood on little legs shaped like sphinxes. It sat at the edge of the churchyard, facing the library. A small sign hanging below the main library sign read: Easterwick Historical Museum. Downstairs basement. Elsworth Wimble, curator.

Thomas sat, and held the book on his lap, as if waiting.

The sun broke free, and the day brightened. At this, Thomas pointed the silver key at the sun, then at the padlock holding the book shut. "Tome of light, thee now I task; no truth is hid from those who ask. Unlock, release, unbind, set free; knowledge is open to he who holds the key."

The book's lock popped open with a click.

Thomas undid the hasp, opened the massive book. The pages were all blank.

Now he tilted the book so the sunlight was falling directly on the first page. The ink faded into view, huge curlicued calligraphy, intertwined with pictures and diagrams, all knotted around the margins and woven in and out of the capital letters.

Most of the pages were sea maps and star charts, of coastline and islands. Some of the coastlines were the lands of Earth; others were of worlds mystical and far, coasts unknown to mortal sailors, except, perhaps, in dreams.

There were diagrams showing the secret routes between worlds, and the star configurations showing when the gateways would open. There were illustrated diagrams of interlocking star spheres, pointing out the whirlpools and monsters lurking along the celestial rivers and Milky Way streams between the stars, with notes on the tides and enchantments showing how to escape those dangers.

This was the book Myrrdin had given to Penny to guide them safely back home. The well at Noss had been destroyed by the malice of the wolf-prince Monagarm, the lieutenant of the Fell Winter King, and the children had had no other way home. Myrrdin had given up all the secrets locked here inside, by giving them the book.

Thomas remembered how Penny had cried, clinging to the graceful neck of the ship's swan-shaped prow. The ship had driven through the final storm surrounding the Earth, but had been broken on the rocks. With tattered sails, sinking, the white ship bravely carried them through, and appeared in the fog in the deep mountain lake just ten miles north of their homes. Even so, they barely made it to the rocks of the shore, for the night was stormy and wild. They clambered ashore, lucky to have escaped with their

lives, except Penny clung to the broken prow, crying, and would not let go, even though the ship was sinking.

She would have been pulled in had not Richard and Thomas grabbed her away. The white ship sank out of sight in the water, swan prow pointed up toward the sky. Years later, Penny's husband had funded an archeological expedition to drag the bottom of the lake. They found many treasures the ancient peoples of Britain had thrown in the water, as gifts to the spirits and elves, including many coins, and fine gems. Perhaps these old people knew that this lake at times touched the other worlds, unseen. There were gold torcs and bracelets, and even a chariot inlaid with brass, driven by stallions into the water, a gift for the gods. But of the white ship there was no sign.

Thomas found writing in the margins, done in Penny's careful hand, trailing through and around the dragons and griffins, sailing ships and sceptered kings, and the star-maidens dancing in the marginalia. The message stretched across numerous pages.

The note read:

* * * *

Tommy, I read the chapters in the book which deal with things yet to be, and I saw the pictures hidden in the letters which show you as an older man sitting in a churchyard, reading this. I will be in heaven by the time you read this, looking down. Never doubt that what you do is right.

"I'm not that old," muttered Tommy, rubbing one hand across his balding head. The message continued:

* * * *

This book is written in elf-light inks, and the different letters will show at different times. The pages you can read in sunlight will tell you facts and historic lore; the spells appear by moonlight; the omens show only on cloudy days; the stories are for candlelight. The deeper secrets are harder to read. Some appear only by the light of the morning star, and are invisible at midnight, or by the light of Orion, and cannot be read during the summer. The love poems show only by the firelight of burning rose-petals, but most of them are sad.

The name you will need is on page sixty-six, and the light of the sword will show it. No one who cannot draw the blade will know it. Many times I almost forgot what we four did in Vidblain, since it was so like a dream, and so little like life. I hope you remember Vidblain, Key-bearer, even

if the Harpist is frightened and the Sword-bearer is fallen.

I was sent to guide us all across the sea to the west, in the one white ship that Winterking did not find and burn. The white swan of the prow would speak only to me, which made Richard jealous, I know. But I told you everything it revealed, to allow me to navigate the white ship. Every secret I told but this one:

I was told the path across the sea to the Summer Country. There Winter is unknown, and death never comes, and loss and sorrow have never found those bright shores. Everyone knows that path: it is taught them before birth. Be brave and just and noble, and the path will come clear to you.

The book says the Children of Light who abide in Heaven live in those palaces, not for all time, but only for their feast times, their solemnities and celebrations, or when they have been wounded with sorrow in their long war against the Dark. Even they need a time of rest and of joy. But paradise is meant to replenish the soul, not to quench it. And after their repose, the angels of war stream out again from heaven, called to many battles on many worlds, and inside the souls of so many men.

Since the time of your childhood you have rested; perhaps you have partly forgotten. But the horn-call sounds again, and the battle again is renewed. Do not blame yourself that you rested, or forgot. Do not blame Richard or Sally. They must rest longer than you, perhaps not till lifetimes have passed will they once more recall.

The greatest battles are always fought with no one beside us. But no one who walks in the light is alone.

Thomas closed the book slowly. "Thank you, Penny," he said.

* * * *

5. The Knight of Shadows

A moment before, while Thomas was reading, Tybalt had hopped gracefully up onto the bench beside Thomas, and crawled into his lap. Tybalt had sniffed the book with his pink nose and tried to step on the pages, and, in general, got in the way so Thomas could not read. Without ado, Thomas shoved the cat aside, dropping him to the grass.

Tybalt did not deign to notice this rough behavior, but stepped back and forth in a circle, whiskers twitching, nose in the air. When Thomas was done reading, Tybalt asked, “Have you learned good rede from the Navigator’s book?”

“Penny always guided us well,” Thomas said.

“What troubles you, Key-bearer?”

“You have counseled me, and I agreed, to break into the museum and to steal the Sword Reforged, thinking any theft or ill done by me was excused by my great need. But that is the tyrants’ plea, the excuse used ever by our enemy. Must I become like the enemy to battle him?”

Tybalt licked himself carefully, washing his paws, his ears, tilting his head far around to lick his shoulders and back. Finally he said, “It is no theft to claim what is one’s own.”

“Then the sword is mine?”

“It belongs to any man who claims it, and to everyone and all, for the light from the sword is abundant, and denies itself to none. But each who would take the sword must shatter it, see of what it is made, and grow wise. One who comes after shall forge it anew.”

“I don’t understand.”

The black cat yawned, whiskers twitching. “Have you no teachers on this world? It is not for me to explain.”

“We should simply try to buy the sword.”

“It is not theirs to sell. Listen: the Knight of Shadows knows too well he cannot hide the sword, not anywhere in the world. Its light is so piercing that even if he cast it to the bottom of the sea, or piled mountains over it, those men who can see that light would one day follow and discover it. No, he cannot hide it, but should he keep it locked in a museum, under glass, for men to come and look at, but not touch; he knows men will soon forget the sword was meant to be used, not admired. The men would tell

themselves the sword is no more than a bright relic fit only for the days long past. A childhood dream.”

They sat on the bench in silence as the sun slowly set. Storekeepers along the main street of Easterwick came out of their little shops, locking them, drawing down the awnings, greeting their neighbors with nods or waves. Soon the streets were empty. As dusk deepened, the wrought-iron streetlamps all lit up, casting little pools of yellow light around their feet.

In the distance, the hour chimed.

Thomas saw the librarian and the stooped figure of the museum curator come out of the main library doors together. They seemed to stand a moment, as if exchanging pleasant words before locking the library doors for the night. The librarian walked away to the left, toward the town hall. The museum curator stood a moment peering around in the gloom, hunched near the door, made vague pawing gestures in the air, and stooped to claw at the ground before the door. Thomas had the odd impression he was snuffling or sniffing, like an animal casting for a scent.

Tybalt said softly, “He sniffs for the stench of the wards he has summoned. The dark magic, when it comes, brings a stink.”

“He is looking at us.”

“Be still. He will not recognize you. You forget how blind the creatures of the enemy are made by their masters, to prevent those servants from knowing what they serve.”

The curator had straightened, and turned. Thomas, from across the green, clearly saw the Sign of the Eye branded into the curator’s withered brow. The man’s eyes seemed filmy and pale, like the eyes of a sick man, or a drunk.

As still as a stone, Thomas sat on the bench, in plain sight of his foe, and silently he prayed.

Then the curator turned and slunk away.

Thomas released a long pent sigh, stood, and walked to the center of the green. Looking left and right, he saw no one was about. He examined the sky for a moment, then pointed his silver key at the North Star, and softly said his charm.

He came near the darkened library, strode up the steps. The lightest touch of the silver key on the doorknob made the door, hinges whining, slowly open of its own accord. But Thomas did not dare step over the threshold, not yet.

Now he took the shard of black mirror from the cigarette case. Holding it carefully, he examined the reflection of the library door.

The magic of the vampires was visible in the little mirror. Thomas could see little strands of spider silk stretched back and forth across the door in a web.

“Tybalt! Do we need the sword to cut this web? I could not pass it before; it tried to consume all my thoughts.”

The cat crouched, sleek muscles tensed, whiskers still. His black tail lashed slowly back and forth. “The gossamer chains of the willow women are made of false things, a tissue woven of lies. Only the light of the sword can reveal them. But this, this is a weaker enchantment, a thing spun by vampires when they wear spider’s flesh, and expect food to fly up of its own power and feed them. It is made of their substance, which is hatred and envy, and, like them, cannot bear to see itself truly.”

With the sharp tip of the mirror, Thomas cut the strands away. The webs sagged to one side with a soft noise, like a faint, grotesque, self-pitying whine.

Then they were within. Moonlight fell through narrow windows across stacks of tall bookshelves, crowded and cramped. Thomas pulled the main door shut behind him, and cautiously walked among the high shelves, the little black cat slinking at his feet. A moment later they found the narrow stairs leading down toward the basement. At the bottom was a door with a sign reading Museum.

The door opened upon the touch of the silver key.

Inside were stone walls, with short, rectangular windows at the top, near the low roof. Upon these walls were hung a mixture of litter and of sincere archaeological artifacts. Next to a group of carven love-spoons, for example, which might have been made fifty or seventy years ago, were brass shield bosses dating back to before the bronze age. Yet also, someone had hung up displays of trashy pie tins and unexploded shells from World War II, as if these things had equal claim to display with a tapestry from the renaissance hanging next to it.

In the middle were two display cases, separated by a suit of Maximilian armor. In one case was a collection of chrome hubcaps taken from cars of the late sixties: in the other, surrounded by stone arrow-points and broken clay cups, was the Sword Reforged.

It was shorter than Thomas remembered it, but much more beautiful, with its hilt wrapped in gold and silver wire, and its pommel capped with a knob of clear crystal. The guard was straight, and made of some metal not found on Earth, brighter than gold and stronger than iron.

The sword rested in a sheath made of black reptilian leather, with the loops of a leather war-belt curled around the rings of the scabbard. Tooled into the leather of the belt were images of an ancient hero slaying a dragon. Thomas knew the scene showed the battle between Hal's forefather, Vardane the Just, and Anglachor, the leviathan of Chaos. He knew also of whose skin this scabbard had been made after that dreadful duel was concluded.

The case was dusty, unkempt. There was a spider in the glass case, and already it had begun to spin a web along the hilts of the sword.

Tybalt sniffed suspiciously around the edge of the case. Thomas touched his key to the lock of the case. Then he lifted the glass lid and reached in for the sword. He made to brush the spiderweb away; his hand was stung as if by an electric shock; Thomas, left arm numb, was flung from his feet.

From where he lay on the stone of the museum floor, he saw the spider crawl forward, unfolding into a stinking cloud of shadow. The shadow came out of the case like smoke, and rose up in the gloom. Then the shadow shrank and became solid; and there stood the form of Lord Wodenhouse, minister of the Admiralty, a straight-backed old man in a finely tailored black silk coat, tight narrow tie, white hair, pince-nez glasses.

Behind the glasses, Thomas saw the eyes were merely pools of black shadow. When the creature spoke, its mouth was black, with no tongue or teeth inside at all.

"Fool," the thing sighed softly, "We knew well you would return here for your worthless toy."

Thomas, without any pause for thought or fear, scrambled forward on his knees, reached into the case with his unhurt hand, drew the sword, and stood.

The creature stepped out of the way as Thomas pushed past him, and made no move to interfere.

Thomas came to his feet holding the sword. But the blade was dull, and no light shone from it at all. For a moment, Thomas was gladdened the sword deemed him worthy to wield it; then his spirit sagged, as he saw the blade: dark, solid, ordinary.

“Old fool,” the creature said, “The magic will not serve you. Children, armed with innocence, we perhaps have cause to fear. But you, you are too old, too worn, too wise, too filled with sin. The sword will not burn for you. Magic comes in childhood alone. Your time is far too late, old man.”

Thomas pointed the sword at the thing, and chanted, “By star, by stone, by shining spear! I call upon the Gathered Hosts of Light to banish wretched minions of fear once more into their dreadful night!”

Nothing happened, except that the creature smiled.

Tybalt said, “Thomas, by the love you bear our lady, I conjure you to heed me now. My time with you is done. Strike my head from my body; as I die, my lifeblood will ignite the sword.”

The man-shaped thing spoke in a voice like the creaking of old wood, the hissing of cold wind, “By all means, slay the beast. Become a murderer, and the burden of your sin drags you ever nearer to our grasp.”

Thomas backed away from the eyeless, smiling hulk of the cabinet minister, keeping the sword pointed at the thing. Thomas uttered in a voice of horror, “Tybalt! I can’t kill you! Not you! There would be nothing left for me, no reason ... ai!” and he cried out, because the sword began to sting his palm.

The cabinet minister drifted forward, his feet making no noise at all as he approached, and words came out of the darkness of his mouth. “The sword rejects you; you have no more the simple bravery of youth. You have done too much evil in your life to strike at us. Who are you to dare to judge us? Your life is foul, worthless, and corrupt. Surrender, use the sword on our behalf, and we will give you gold and women, prestige and power, and all the things your pathetic, failed destiny has cheated from you.”

Thomas’s palm stung with pain, but he did not let go of the sword.

Tybalt said, “They cannot use or touch that sword, nor any weapon of the world, save fear. If men did not assist them, they would be nothing.”

“But he’s right, Tybalt; the sword is burning me!” Thomas said, not daring to take his eyes off the thing.

“You are afraid,” the cat purred softly, “Strike me dead, and fear will vanish. Strike! Or I will grow into a thing that will turn upon you, rend, and slaughter you.”

The cabinet minister stepped closer. The point of the sword was touching the minister’s chest. Then, the darkness cleared from the man’s eyes. Suddenly, they were blue eyes, human eyes.

The eyes were wide, frightened, helpless, pleading. A gargling strangled noise of fear came from the man’s throat. From the black nothingness inside his mouth a haughty whisper came, “Look! The true Lord Wodenhouse. His body we inhabit; you cannot strike us, except that you kill the innocent. Once innocent blood is on your hands, you are one of us, key-bearer.”

The darkness was letting the cabinet minister see the peril he stood in, but was gagging him, and using his voice to speak. Thomas took another step back. The pain in his hand grew fierce; the sword trembled in his hand, yet still he would not release it.

Tybalt, near his feet, unsheathed claws and scraped Thomas painfully in the ankle. Thomas shouted: the little claws felt sharp as needles. The black cat said, “I grow impatient. Slay me now. This is the price the sword demands.”

Thomas prodded the cabinet minister lightly in the chest. The blue, human eyes wept with fear. The black mouth smiled.

A cold sensation swept through Thomas. He thought: I am an adult now. I’m too old to believe simple and childish notions. There must be some way to talk this problem through. We can compromise. Mature people aren’t narrow-minded, aren’t idealists.

But he felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach as he thought it.

“Let’s be reasonable,” Thomas said in a shaky voice. “We can negotiate. What are you? Why are you doing this? What are you?!”

The dark mouth sagged wide. The creature made a barking, choking noise, like a mockery of laughter, a noise of malignant hatred. “Knowledge is impossible to men; your senses lie. Prod your eyes out with your sword, blind yourself to the illusion of the world. We will enter in your bleeding eye-sockets then, and fill your soul with our dark knowledge, which can never be expressed or put in words. We will teach you stillness, futility, darkness, anguish, death.”

“Stand back!”

“Our Lord is the King of Final Winter; in his kingdom all things are the same, all are still and silent, lifeless, nameless.”

“Who are you?”

“We have no names, no souls, and therefore we cannot be harmed.”

But Tybalt said, “This is the Knight of Shadows, your final enemy. That this wretched creature has forgotten its own name does not mean it has no name. Your first ancestor, at the dawn of time, was ordained by the Light to name all beasts of the field and birds of the air. By virtue of the fact the first of man had named all nature, dominion over all the Earth was given to mankind.”

Thomas straightened. The little voice inside him, telling him how it was safe to compromise, how mature, and adult; now Thomas recognized that voice. It was the voice of the Darkness.

Fumbling with his numb hand, Thomas pulled Myrrdin’s great book out from his wide jacket pocket and let it drop to the top of the glass case next to him. With clumsy, tingling fingers he turned the pages, stealing quick glances down at the book. The book lay open at page sixty-six.

The cabinet minister swayed, and smiled, and wept from his blue eyes. But he stepped neither back nor forward, nor tried to grasp nor elude the sword holding him at bay.

“Tybalt,” said Thomas, “Tell me now why I must kill you. Why?” The pain in his hand brought tears to his eyes.

“I am a beast. A kindly beast is still a beast. I can guide, but cannot reason or explain. The time is come when you must guide yourself.”

Thomas understood. He struck down at his feet; the blade swept the cat's head off its neck; the blood fountained, red as roses in spring.

Half blinded by tears, Thomas saw the pearly light collect together from the starlight shining through the small windows, and swirl in toward the blade. The metal became a shaft of light, bright as sunlight, cool as moonlight. Silver rays, surrounded by blue-white flames, shone from the sword and filled the room.

On the page of the open book, silver letters faded into view. Thomas read the name, and understood at once the nature of his foe.

Thomas pointed the burning sword at the cabinet minister. The words written in the book came out from Thomas's mouth almost of their own accord, his voice made hollow and strained with sorrow. "Phobos, father of fear, I banish thee: Begone! With this, my instrument of light, I divide human from inhuman, true from false, substance from shadow. Wherever knowledge shines, you have no place." And the sword was surrounded with a rainbow of pale light, like the ring seen around the moon on misty nights.

The cabinet minister staggered, his head thrown back. Up from his face, in three streams, black smoke boiled from his eyes and mouth. The darkness rushed up across the ceiling, jumped to the corners of the chamber, flickered down across the walls. The cabinet minister, his eyes now blue, his teeth white, was shouting, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me! It wasn't my fault! They promised me so much, and I only gave them a little piece of me, one small part..." Then he pointed over Thomas's shoulder and screamed. The cabinet minister turned and fled up the stairs, out of the museum.

Thomas turned his head. The shadow had collected behind him, spreading from his feet, across the floor, over the display cases, and up along the tapestries and hangings of the stone wall, to loom, gigantic, across the wall and ceiling. The shadow of his own head, distorted and enlarged along the ceiling, now turned and glared mockingly down at him.

When Thomas turned to strike at it with the radiant sword, the shadow turned as swiftly, and was behind him again. He struck left; the shadow pivoted around his feet and swung right. He stabbed between his feet; the shadow was above him. He held the sword high overhead.

Luminous, wonderful, the sword shone bright with steady, silvery light, and blue sparks drifted up about the blade like fireflies.

In a pool at his feet, the shadow laughed.

“I am the knight of ghosts and shadows,” softly said the little darkness underfoot, “In my world, I was gathered into one place, and even a child could see what I was. But in this world, I am spread a little into all mankind; their sin, their fear, their foolishness feeds me. How can you dream to destroy me? You cannot even drive away the little piece of me that lives in you.”

Thomas drove the blazing blade into the floorboards. With his foot, he kicked against the flat of the blade. The magnificent blade snapped cleanly in two, and both parts flared brighter than the sun.

Thomas held the burning sword hilt high over his head. The shining shard blazed at his feet. Above and below, overhead and underfoot, the two fragments blazed. Thomas was surrounded by light, streamers and swarms of sparks were everywhere, and there was no place for any shadow to be.

The darkness dissolved with a faint and hideous high wail.

The shadow was nowhere to be seen.

Thomas flourished the broken sword hilt overhead and whooped and shouted with joy. “Beware all you wizards, and servants of sin! A knight of the Light now is here! I have driven your champion down into darkness! Who dares follow him shall share in his fate!”

But, looking up, he saw the sword he held was not whole. The light now faded slowly. The shards of shattered sword paled, grew faint, and became ordinary metal once again.

Thomas collapsed, and sat on his knees. In front of him where he knelt, there was nothing but a dead cat and a broken sword. Slowly, tears blurred his vision.

* * * *

6. The Healing Of Harms

The sword hilt dropped from weary fingers. Thomas hunched forward, head cradled in his hands, and wept.

“Tybalt,” he whispered, face hidden behind his hands, “Please get up. Oh, please.”

When, after an endless time, Thomas had no more tears to shed, he slowly raised his head. Inside him was nothing but a worthless, empty feeling. He sat with red-rimmed eyes staring at the ruined sword, the tiny, stiff, dead animal, bloodstains matting its black fur.

Nothing happened and nothing continued to happen. Thomas sat there. He felt as if he had nowhere to go, nothing to do, as if nothing would ever be worth doing again.

He began to worry. Did this mean he had to return to his life as it was before? Shoulder the gray burden of his old duties? His old employers probably would not take him back; he would have trouble getting a job anywhere. It was possible he was still being sought by the police. If so, he had no future, not anywhere. Where was he going to live?

And still he sat, unwilling to leave, but having no reason to stay. Red-gold light came slowly into the chamber to one side. At first Thomas felt a supernatural thrill of hope. But then he realized he was seeing the dawn light shining through the chamber’s cramped windows. He had been here all night.

Still he sat.

Outside, there was the ordinary noise of the little town stirring to wakefulness. He heard the rumble of the milkman’s truck; he heard a bird singing.

There was stirring overhead; someone was in the library above, moving about. Thomas realized they would soon come down and find him here. Nothing jarred his apathy; he could not leave the broken and dead remnants of his life.

Footsteps sounded very softly on the stairs, a whisper of slow, massive motion. The door opened. Larger than a panther, larger than a tiger, with wings like dark flame folded along its sleek shoulders, a supernatural creature stepped on silent paw down the stair into the room, surrounded by a golden light. It was twice the size of an Earthly lion, with a mane like gold fire, swimming and flashing around its terrible head. The wings were plumes of black and gold, shining.

White fire darted from the creature’s mouth from between fangs like lightning.

It paced forward, regal, mysterious, terrible. The creature spread its mighty wings and the room was filled with light, and there came a tremendous noise like a choir, or like the pealing of bells, the roar of trumpets.

The creature's eyes were whirlpools of gold. So fierce, so stern, so majestic was the glance of those eyes that Thomas threw himself on his face, too terrified to scream.

"Fear not," it spoke in a voice like muted thunder, and many echoes said the words again.

Thomas raised his head, but could not meet that gaze. He felt the warm stirring in the air above him, could feel the hot scented breath of the creature near the top of his head. The breath was warm and crisp, not like any breath coming from the wet lungs of a creature composed of flesh and blood. The odor of the breath reminded Thomas of the smell of bread baking in an oven, or the scent of cedar logs burning on a campfire.

A warmth from that breath stole into his body, and he felt a cold aching in his bones depart. How long that ache had been there, Thomas could not say; he had not known it was in him till he felt it go away.

The huge golden paws were before his face; in the corners of his eyes, Thomas glimpsed the flutter and spread of the great wings.

More quietly, the ringing voice inquired, "Thomas, why do you weep?"

"When I was young," Thomas said, "A black cat guided me to a magical adventure into another world. Then I grew older, and the magic was lost. Only this year did I remember my young dreams, and meet that cat again. Now he is dead, and by my own hand."

"Thomas, I have not died. Rejoice; I am risen. The Lord of the Fortunate Islands, the Emperor of the Summer Country has banished death and dying from his kingdom, and only those who flee his kingdom may encounter it. You weep over no more than my old garment, which you tore and which I discarded. Now I am come again, clothed in glory. Look up."

And he looked into those terrible eyes. He felt something within himself, as proud, as great, as noble as those eyes, and now he could endure that gaze without shrinking.

“You are Tybalt,” said Thomas in wonder. And yet one small part of him was not surprised at all, but was filled with solemn, undoubting joy, as if saying, I knew it, I knew he would come back.

“We spirits, when we are young, are sent forth to combat evils where those evils gather openly, unhidden, and even a child can see them. We must grow before we can combat hidden evils, evils disguised as good, subtle evils. In this, I deem, our race is not so different from human kind. Innocence and faith are the weapons children can bring to bear against the open evils; wisdom alone is the weapon to be employed against evils disguised.”

Thomas felt a glow of pride in his heart, but the great creature looked at him with golden eyes, and said sharply, “Why so flattered? It is no feat to grow white hairs. Why so glad? You have broken the weapon of wisdom in wielding it! And this is only the beginning of the sorrows sages know.”

Thomas felt the sting of the rebuke, but he held up the broken shards of the sword. “I am glad because I serve. But how am I to fight Wodenhouse’s men?”

“The slaves and followers of the Champion of the Dark still infest your green realm, under many guises, many names. But your time as Champion of the Light is done, for you have grown old, and the faith of a child is no longer yours. Another task is laid upon you now, and shall be yours for many a weary year.”

“What task?” asked Thomas; then he frowned, for he wished he had said instead, *I am ready*.

“Out of all the years and seasons of the world, the Dark chose this day to come forth from the Winter Country, because the Wise of this World sleeps.”

“Sleeps?”

Thomas saw a reflection of light in the surface of the broken blade in his hand. He held the hilt nearer to his eye, and looked into the silvery steel, and it was as if he saw into the surface of a still lake of water. In a small chapel nestled in a green valley, behind the tall mansion where, long ago, Thomas and his four friends had spent a summer’s afternoon, was a graveyard. Here was a headstone, and the words CEDRIC PENKIRK were written on it.

“Professor Penkirk!”

“He was your squire, for he armed you children with the heart you needed to prevail; he was your nurse, for he comforted you when you re-turned; and one thing more he was—your herald! He went before you into the land of Vidblain, into the Lost Kingdom, and told the animals and dryads of your coming. He was not permitted to strike the blow. That was the task of the Four from This World. His task was to guide, and to advise, and to open the way.”

Thomas whispered. “The Key was his! His key is what opened the Way of the Well, and let us through the Hidden Door into Vidblain. The professor left it for me to find. I had always wondered....”

“You are now the Wise. You are now what Cedric was: for he has gone into my Father’s realm, and there has other tasks I cannot describe, work of long-abiding joy. They have given him a crown and a robe of white.”

“What am I supposed to do, then? Find English schoolchildren and get them in trouble?”

“You will have many roads to walk, and many worlds under your care. There will come a child who leads a Star by the hand, whose voice can still the Lion’s rage. It is for him you carry the shards of Angurvadel, the great sword. It is a weapon none can use until he reforges it and makes it himself: such as all weapons of my Father’s Kingdom. Now, come! There is a child in a world beyond the Pleiades, considered young for his ancient and supernal race, but, compared to humans, old and wise beyond all reckoning: he is rash and eager, and will come at your word to save this green Earth and all its inhabitants from the Dark Master. In his own land, he is neither prince nor sage, but a humble blacksmith’s apprentice: yet Earth would call him magic, for his art is to forge the stars and set them in their constellations. You will find your way with the book you hold and the key you bear. Say farewell to Earth. No one world is your home hereafter, but every place the light of the stars can touch!”

The book, as if to aid him, fell open to the proper chapter. He found the diagrams in an appendix in the back of the volume, images of zones and tropics and belts of constellations, and the Latin was easy enough for him to puzzle out. He spoke the words and used the key, and a shining doorway, surrounded with stars and the music of the stars hung before him, dreamlike, terrifying, and wondrous.

“So I am the Old Wise Man in the story, now,” said Thomas, with great satisfaction. “Will I see you there? In that far world?”

“I am silent when I walk. I shall be with you, but you will see only my traces where I have passed, the print of my paw on the Earth, or the works I have done. As you grow, the trace will be clearer to your eye.”

“I still have growing yet to do?”

“As do I, as do we all. This tale will never end until all tales end in glory.”

“Shall I truly lose Earth as my home?”

The great cat said, “Hear me. Earth was never your home. Already great esteem and great reward await you in my Father’s kingdom, Thomas, for your name has been written in letters of gold in my Father’s book, and a place is set for you at his feast-table. Soon you shall join us there, and shall be given new garments to wear, clothing of woven light, pure and without stain. You will walk many worlds for many years, and the years will grow long, and your beard grow white. I shall come for you again, and shall show you the hidden pathway to my country beyond the summer stars; and you shall follow me up and away from this Earth, into glory. But beware; if you cast your gaze back across your shoulder, you may lose sight of me, and miss your path, and go astray.”

“When? When does this journey begin?”

“It is forever. You are on the pathway now.”

All his questions answered, he stepped forward then through the mystic door.

Light was everywhere.