

ON THE ROAD OF SILVER

Mark Bourne

It was shortly after Mrs. Batchett left the planetarium that she saw the fairy, the elf, and the gnome. Which was probably kismet, because by five o'clock it had already been a bad day at the planetarium.

While the final group of fourth graders was herded through the exit doors-leaving another flurry of museum programs and school handouts littering the seats and floor-Mrs. Batchett moved the star projector for that evening's feature show. When the exit door shut behind the final youngster, she dimmed the house lights to make sure the Spring constellations were in the correct part of the sky. Artificial night flooded the domed room. The familiar routine of placing Boötes and Virgo and this season's planets just so in the scaled-down sky never failed to ignite a bone-deep spark within Mrs. Batchett. Even after twenty years as a science teacher, and ten more here at Portland's Northwest Museum of Science and Technology, the planetarium sky filled her with a pleasing, serene sense of awe. The artificial sky wasn't as good as the real thing, but it would do for a daytime, all-weather stand-in. She could never tire of sharing this sense of wonder, of seeing it sparked in the minds of the children who came to the planetarium. Mrs. Batchett wheeled the stars into position, made tonight's full moon rise with the turn of the dial, checked her pointer (the bulb had been flickering lately), and brought up the lights.

Sam Peterson approached from the opposite side of the room.

"Good afternoon," Mrs. Batchett called. "Did you enjoy the show?" She tried to keep the surprise out of her voice.

He smiled. "Very much, Roberta." Then crooked a finger at her. "May I see you in my office?"

She followed her department manager upstairs.

Though he had been at NMST for only six months, Sam Peterson was the very model of a modern museum manager. His stylish suit enclosed a middle-aged athlete's body and accentuated his GQ good looks. His pristinely ordered desk had a corner-near the leather-cased, gold-embossed EverOpen™ dayplanner-dedicated to the latest magazines and journals for the 90's executive." On the wall facing the desk, four different calendars hung like prisoners in a dungeon. Framed certificates, awards, and a photo of Peterson coming in second at the city-sponsored Jog-o-thon hung in descending order of size. Nearby was a poster proclaiming The Seven Cardinal Virtues of a Great Boss, cheerily illustrated with specially researched colors designed to elicit comfort in all employees who gazed upon it. Against another wall stood the expensive sofa dedicated to the power naps taken from 1:15-2:15 P.M. daily. The air was sweetened by hidden cakes of "spring garden" air freshener. If this office was a shrine to the latest trends in corporate efficiency and appearances, Peterson was its high priest. Mrs. Batchett took the chair that might as well have been labeled Sacrificial Altar.

"Now, Mrs. Batchett-Roberta," Peterson said, sitting in his tan leather chair. "Would you like something? Cappuccino? A latte?" Charm oozed from him like yogurt through a colander.

"No thank you."

"Roberta, you've done fine work here in the planetarium. School group attendance is strong-" Even though you cut the new programs I hoped to produce, Mrs. Batchett replied silently; "-and we keep getting splendid thank you letters from the kids and their teachers. The volunteers say you've done a fine job teaching them the ropes of performing the shows. The shows teamwork, Roberta, and teamwork is important. Especially now in the museum's current fiscal reevaluation." Crisis, you mean. I don't like this. He just got out of a meeting. I can survive it.

"Roberta, I just got out of a meeting with the other senior managers. All departments are being forced to cut-themselves to the bone and find new sources of income. The Exhibits staff is scrapping their interactive evolution exhibit for a traveling show called DinoMania. I'm afraid that we too have to re-strategize our paradigms. It's my job to analyze operational priorities in regards to revenue enhancement."

Which means?

"Which means that we're forced to make some changes on our end also."

Such as cutting the Senior Managers' "Effectiveness Enhancement Retreat" at Timberline Lodge ski resort?

Peterson put on his face that said I'm Really Really Sorry To Have To Say This But. "Roberta, I'm really really sorry I have to say this, but I'm afraid we're forced to let you go. Nothing personal and it doesn't reflect on your outstanding job performance. The team simply has to cut back somewhere. Because you've been so valuable to us, you'll receive two weeks severance pay, which not all the other layoffs around the museum will be getting." He looked pleased with himself about that.

Roberta said nothing. She had expected this for weeks. Ever since the subject of, oh Lord, it first came up.

Peterson leaned toward her. His hair was as perfectly sculpted as a topiary. "You'll be glad to know that the school groups will still be coming. Don't you worry about that. Starting next week, we'll be replacing the educational programs with laser light shows. We just hired Laser Euphoria, Inc. to set up shop in the planetarium."

There it was-it. Peterson opened a slick color brochure and handed it to Mrs. Batchett. Since when do you spell "laser" with a "z," Mrs. Batchett wondered.

"They guarantee to increase our revenue by eighty percent with a gate-share contract. See? They do it all-Lazer MetalDeath, Lazer Pink Floyd, Lazer Grunge, Lazer Dead Rock Gods. Their biggest hit right now is Lazer Cowboys. It has this animated Garth Brooks that's supposed to be really something. All the major planetariums are contracting them."

One "contracts" the plague. Mrs. Batchett chewed the inside of her left cheek.

Peterson removed the brochure from her hand. "Their staff rep will be moving into your office day after tomorrow, so if you could, um..."

"Yes sir," Mrs. Batchett said. She stood and turned toward the door.

"Oh, Roberta." She pivoted toward him. "Roberta, if you please, don't mention the severance pay to anyone. Might look bad, you know." He opened a drawer in his desk. Mrs. Batchett noticed how silently the desk operated. He withdrew a slip of colored paper-board and handed it across the desk to her. He smiled warmly and his eyes by God twinkled. I believe I learned that at a seminar.

"Here," he said. "Have a free pass to the gala premiere. Lazer Yanni. I hear it's kind of like space music. You'll love it."

She took it. "Thank you," she said, then cursed herself for it. The door shut behind her on noticeably well-oiled hinges.

"mumblemumblemumbleHello dear," Prof. Lawrence Batchett said. He didn't even glance up from the stack of final exams he was grading at the dining room table. He resumed mumbling incoherently, though Mrs. Batchett heard the phrases "It's not Chaucer's 'Cantaloupe Tales!'" and "William Shakespeare did not defeat King Harold at the Battle of Hastings!" bubble up from his murmuring drone. Prof. Batchett pushed his glasses up his nose, ran a hand through hair that had not existed for ten years, and stroked his graying goatee. It was his ritual, 'signifying the urge' to commit murder most foul against yet another year's worth of Brit lit students. He had even removed his favorite tweed jacket-the one with the leather patches at the elbows-and the necktie decorated with hand-painted images from the Bayeaux Tapestry. A sign of distress.

Mrs. Batchett placed her purse and the Teddy-Bear-in-a-spacesuit a second-grade classmate had given her onto the coffee table. She studied the back of her husband's head from across the room. His hair was now reduced to a silver crescent moon that barely managed to cover the skin between one ear and the other. He frequently claimed that he liked looking the part of a distinguished Reed College English Professor, but Mrs. Batchett had once seen him in the bathroom trying on hairpieces borrowed from Dr. Stengler in the Physics Dept. He pounded

fist on the table, said something about King Arthur never meeting the Knights of Ni in the b and continued mumbling and shaking his head.

"I got laid off today," she announced. "Enhancement stratagems were datatized. Paradigms were reassessmentized. The Universe Around Us' is now Lazer BrainDamage."

Lawrence scribbled red revenge across the face of an exam. "No thank you, dear," he said into the papers. "I just had some."

Mrs. Batchett sighed. She went upstairs, changed clothes, returned downstairs wearing a broad-brimmed gardening hat, and exited through the back door.

"Titania and Oberon were not invented by Neil Gaiman!" was the last thing she heard as the door slammed shut behind her.

It had rained the night before, so the garden smelled of earth and green. Mrs. Batchett relished the feel of moist soil between her fingers and against her knees, and the sound was made when she pulled them up. The irises were doing well. So were the foxgloves. New clusters of magenta and white rhododendrons had bloomed. Nearby, a bee hummed a relaxing mantra. The world of lasers-with-a-z and Beowulf seemed far from here. With Robby and Sylvia grown and living in distant cities, these were her children now. Here was her private world, where she was in control and esteemed for her efforts.

With a satisfied hand-brushing, Mrs. Batchett looked across the yard at her other garden. Oh, damn!, she huffed and stood too quickly. Her knees complained loudly to her. After the first fifty years, some things didn't happen as easily as before.

Slugs had been in the garden again. What had once been healthy daylilies were now ragged, stripped leaves and ravished, chewed buds. The primroses and hostas were also destroyed. Narrow trails of slime laced through the remains.

"God damn it!" Mrs. Batchett did not swear often. She had laid down a new box of Conquest Slug Death (Original English Formula) just last week. She began pulling the useless stems from the slime-tainted dirt. As she yanked and tugged, she felt the tears well up in her eyes and slide down her face. She shredded a handful of stems in her hands, then sat in the dirt and let her tears cry. No one could hear her in the garden. Prof. Batchett wouldn't hear her.

Soon she was cried out, but the pent-up anger still sat like a rock in the pit of her stomach. She sat with her eyes shut and a headache pounding behind her eyes. I'll probably start menopause today, too. When at last she opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the fairy staring at her. The second thing was the lithe, ethereal elf standing on the coil of garden hose. The third was the gnome squatting on a wicker lawn chair and picking its teeth.

"Weep not, my Mistress," said the fairy, fluttering off the ground. Its voice was rich and

feminine, though its naked body was smooth "and genderless. It was no taller than the daylilies had been. Delicate, leaflike wings stroked the air soundlessly and the being lit on toe ground next to Mrs. Batchett. Its wide blue eyes were level with hers. Mrs. Batchett felt its gaze as it frowned mournfully at her. "Mistress, the mortal world has surely changed you. No longer do you bear the scars from when you spilt Fir Bolg blood onto the Plain of Pillars." Its voice had an Irish lilt. "Your face no longer glows with the wine of victory, nor your arms hoist the wizard-forged weapons engraved in gold with your true name." It smiled at her and touched her sleeve with a long, slender hand. "But all this is mere appearance, rough-hewn human glamour. We bring you a gift from those of Tir na n-Og who knew you in your life of glory."

During all this, Mrs. Batchett remained still, unflinching. Her heart pulsed in her chest, though, and she felt dizzy. Oh, great. First I hallucinate. Then I have a stroke. Or maybe I've already had the stroke and that's why I'm hallucinating: It's nice to die in the garden but only if the slugs are gone. Lawrence won't notice I'm dead until it's time to rake leaves in the fall.

The elf-she recognized the beings, though she didn't know why-strolled gracefully to her and removed her sun hat. Its fingers were cool against her forehead. Mrs. Batchett suddenly knew with crystal certainty that she wasn't hallucinating. She knew that these beings meant her no harm, that their presence in her garden was as natural as the moon in the night sky or slugs in the flower beds or the feel of a mighty bejeweled steed between your legs and a sword in your hand.

"Remember," the elf said with a voice like wind through trees. "When you cleaved the skulls of the Fomorii in the Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh. Remember how you saved my people by defeating the Roth Hugar on the icy shores of Thambulir."

Mrs. Batchett remembered, and shivered at the memory of cold seaspray against bare, flayed flesh.

The fairy sat cross-legged in the air. Wore her. "Remember," it said, "when your father Loric Orgetlann the Tireless gave you his armor and shield, created in the Oldest Times by Goibniu himself. Remember the sword, Dagda's Arm, and its power over all earthly beings."

She remembered her father. Not the car salesman from Montana, but her father before in a former life: the warrior king who loved her and taught her the warrior's arts by the time of her first bloodmoon. Her mother wasn't the schoolteacher who died from a lifetime of sucking cigarettes, but a queen of the line of Arianrod who first taught her about the stars and the quiet power of the moon.

"Remember," the elf continued, "your training by the very hand of Scathach on her warren isle. And your achievements in the ways of magic and inner arts on Emhain, the Isle of Women. Remember when you were of our kind, the Daoine Sidhe, not of this mere mortal world, and the powers granted to you at your birth. When Faerie and the Earth-realm touched one another. Before we were driven away by cross and machine. Before you left us for the love of a mortal."

warrior."

Her lover: the great, learned Ton n'Uthara, who had fought against her, then alongside her before they beaded and wedded each other on the cliffs of Scathach's isle. All the Tuatha Danaan had attended the wedding. Even Finvarra, King of Eirinn Faerie, had kissed her goodbye with a tear in his eye after the ceremony.

"Yeah," piped up the gnome who, throughout the foregoing, had been clipping his toenails. "And don't forget the time you saved my village by conking that ol' dragon Ruadnerra on his bean with your bare fist!" The gnome grabbed his knees and rocked with laughter. "And then you commanded all the birds in the land to peck off his golden scales and rain them down on him to make up for the damage that ol' fire-farter had caused! Hoo!" He fell off the wicker chair and rolled guffawing into the rhodies. The elf gave him a reprimanding stare.

She remembered it all, as if it were a recurring dream first dreamt long ago. She sat there in the garden, watching the fairy, the elf, and the gnome, and remembered a former existence as Nnagartha of the Golden Strength, a fairy warrior princess clad in dragon-hide leather and magic-fired armor. Who fought beside fellow warriors of Faerie and of Earth. Who could command the creatures of land and sky. Who forsook her faery nature for the love of a man, no other man, and had been condemned to remain in the human world after her people left for Tir na n-Og-land of joy, of everlasting youth and flowers, where hydromel flows in the riverbeds and where warriors eat and drink of fairie dishes in the companionship of their own kind.

I've been reading too many romances and fantasy novels, she mused. But her copies of Love's forceful Sword and Mistress of the Dragon's Quest ("First Book in the Dragon's Quest Trilogy") lay unopened on her nightstand, a forgotten gift ("You just gotta read 'em!") from annoying Marge Tarkelson next door.

I'm kidding myself, she realized. Because she remembered. Because the fairy, the elf, and the gnome were in her garden. Because even the gnome stared at her worshipfully while he scraped out the crevasses between his bulbous toes. She reached out her arms to her old friends. She was strong enough in the inner arts to not be embarrassed by the loose, weak flesh that hung where a warrior's muscles should have been.

"You said something about a gift," she said, taking the fairy's hand.

"Since when did Beowulf fight NanoMan?" Prof. Batchett had reached the stage where he forgot to remove the pen from his hand when he rubbed his head. So his scalp was crosshatched with thin red lines. Though the sun had set behind the hills in the west, he obviously had not budged from his chair since Mrs. Batchett had last seen him. A growing pile of red-slashed exams littered the floor beneath the dining room table. An equal-sized pile of

ungraded papers still covered her place at the table. No matter. She had other things to do. Tonight was a warrior's night! Still, thanks to two decades of marital courtesy, she turned off the overhead light for Prof. Batchett.

One-hundred-watt radiance reflected off the rune-embossed golden armor hemispheres that shielded her breasts. Shards of rainbow light danced across her mail of dragon's scales. Perhaps that was her own shimmering aura she saw in the chrome of the toaster. Her helmet in one hand, the frightful steel of Dagda's Arm in the other, Mrs. Batchett approached Prof. Batchett.

"Don't wait up for me, Lawrence," she declared. Such power in her voice! She hadn't heard that in a long time. Centuries, actually. "For tonight, for as long as the full moon gazes upon this earth, I, Nnagartha of the Golden Strength, shall strike terror once again in the hearts of evil. My people still remember me and have thus granted me this solitary reprieve from the dull shackles of the mortal world. Beware, dark denizens of the nether-realms! Stand guard, dragons and wyrms who despoil the lands of the innocent and virtuous! Take flight, ye hosts of the Unseelie Court, ye bogles and banshees and blood-devouring Leanan-Sidhe who torment those weaker than myself! This night you shall remember me who defeated you before!" With a mighty lofting of Dagda's really big Arm, she carved a neat slit into the dining room ceiling.

Prof. Batchett wrote CHAUCER, NOT DAUMER! into a margin. "That's nice, dear. Tell them I said hello."

He didn't notice the fairy and the elf following his wife out the back door. Or the gnome raiding the refrigerator and rescuing a pint of Häagen-Dazs from merely mortal consumption.

Twilight darkened into true night. The real Bootes and Virgo faded up in the sky's tranquil dome. Moonlight shone on armor and glittering dragonflesh. Mrs. Batchett felt her power strengthening. It returned to her from the moon, from the stars, from the magic of a world removed from this mundane, new world of dayplanners and Brit Lit 101. Though it would take three stout men to lift Dagda's Arm, she brandished it with ferocious grace, tracing the memories of ancient battles through the night air. From up here on the roof, the city lights of Portland glimmered like the jewels in the Castle of Ragnok Rur, where she lost her best bowmen to the bloody blade of Redcap. By the time her vengeance was through, the hideous goblin's infamous cap had been re-dyed in its own blood. Between her and the city snaked the Willamette River. Wavering moonlight blended with electric-borne sparkles across its surface. Its waters led to the Columbia a few miles to the north. And from there to the Pacific. Mrs. Batchett thirsted again for the roar of the sea and the crash of waves on rocky shores. She had been the one to tame the Aughisky, the kelpie sea-demon that had murdered hundreds before she met Nnagartha of the Golden Strength. The moon rose higher. Dagda's Arm cut through the night. Mrs. Batchett moved with a dancer's ease on the angled rooftop. Her foes did not come. Above the lights of Portland, that pair of flying glowing eyes was a jet descending toward the airport.

not a dragon seeking her out for its bloody revenge. No warrior hordes advanced from suburban Beaverton. Not a single Black Wizard hurled flaming magic death at her from the condominiums behind the marina. Mrs. Batchett wiped a tear from her cheek when she realized that the mighty Ton n'Uthara was not at her side to help her protect the people in another hour of need. Progress is boring, she snarled. There was no need for her kind in the world these days. With a stroke of her blade, she sliced the stainless steel rooster cleanly from the weather vane.

She looked to the lights near the river. Yes! There! There was a final place that needed saving. Between here and the river, standing proud along the nearest shore, was a besieged castle. It was a fortress of good that was being usurped by a dark prince who fought with cowardice, armored in data displays and meeting agendas, who hoisted false banners made of spreadsheets and revenue reports—who sought to replace the true magic of knowledge with pandering to the dull demands of the local peasantry and their ill-spent gold. She would be the citadel's rescuer. Generations of grateful searchers for truth would never forget this night.

She leapt to the ground, landing smoothly on her feet in a crouching stance. If the evil would find you, it is necessary to find the evil.

By the time the enchantment was finished, even she had to rest. She sat in the wicker garden chair and noticed the position of the moon. Nearly midnight. It had taken two hours to gather focus, her strength and to remember how to direct it through Dagda's Arm. The sword still glowed with silvery luminescence from where she had stuck it into the earth near the slug-ravaged flowers. She was satisfied. She hadn't felt such power since she helped that nattering Christian, Patrick Somethingorother, drive all the snakes from her people's land. That had been toward the end, though, just before her people left the earthly realm forever. She wondered for the first time what part, if any, the Christian's "miracle" had played in that. This time, things would be different. This miracle was all hers.

First, she heard them coming. A soft rustling among the earth and leaves. Then greater movement beneath the soil caused it to ripple like living flesh. There! In the moonlight, small glistening things were moving through the grass toward her sword. And there! Several more wet, rubbery things emerged from the earth, drawn to the force emanating from Dagda's Arm. And from out of the rhododendrons came an advancing surf of more writhing wormlike gastropods as fat and round as dismembered brown fingers. The thick trail of slime behind them glittered like liquid silver in the moon's light.

"Disgusting!" the gnome muttered, spitting out a mouthful of Häagen-Dazs Irish Cream Splendor.

Mrs. Batchett took Dagda's Arm and hoisted it skyward and toward the river. It was time to march.

The slugs came to her. Through the wealthy Eastmoreland neighborhood, she drew them away from the manicured lawns, out of the professionally-serviced gardens, and into the street in front of the stately homes. Their path was marked by a sheen of silver that glistened beneath the street lamps. She gathered more as she led them through the Reed College grounds, across the local golf course, and through the famous Crystal Springs Rhododendron Gardens. Night noises gave way to the sounds of moist slithering behind her.

At her side, the fairy, the elf, and the gnome accompanied her in awestruck silence.

By the time she took a left turn at 28th and Holgate, her army covered the width of the street and, at its center, was as high as her waist. The midnight moon added a lustrous sheen to the growing mass. Her sword lit their way, a beacon summoning them from near and far, bringing them to her by the power that once called birds to peck gold from a dragon's flesh and pushed a million snakes to a watery doom. Occasionally, a late-night traveler was forced to steer his automobile away from the invisible shield Dagda's Arm projected in front of Mrs. Batchett. A jogger, her suit aglow with reflectors, stopped stunned by the side of the road. Mrs. Batchett ignored the sound of the poor waif's retching. She felt young again and strong. She was riding this world-or at least several neighboring counties-of an old enemy. And she would use this enemy to bring vengeance on another.

As she marched, she smiled at the slimy noises that grew behind her. She would lay a road of silver through the tyrant's gates.

The sparse traffic halted on McLoughlin Boulevard. Engines died and headlights faltered at the intersection where Dagda's Arm erected its invisible wall. Mrs. Batchett marched on. The mindless mass following her spread itself across all four inbound lanes. Still it grew. Four lanes of slick mucus remained in its wake.

At McLoughlin and Clay Street she turned left. Cars were frozen at the unchanging traffic lights. She took a shortcut through the Burger King parking lot. A group of teenagers, partying on the hood of a decaying Galaxie 500, put down their beers and their joints. Three of them swore to never touch the stuff again. Four more wondered where to get more of it for tomorrow night.

Soon she reached Clay and Eastbank Avenue. From there she could hear the Willamette brushing against its shoreline. She could smell the river. Across the water, downtown Portland was alight with a million artificial stars. It would be a short path from here to the water and the destruction of the slogging mountain behind her. But not yet, not yet. The moon was low in the sky. She must act quickly, before her powers-and her true self-vanished. She turned left and

proceeded past the huge glowing sign that named the corrupted lair of her last unvanquished foe: NMST. Lights were on inside the complex. As she approached the main entrance door she licked her lips at the sound of the dragon's pulsing roar. Tonight was obviously Lazer Metalhead night.

Mrs. Batchett found her husband in the dining room, reading the morning paper. He wore the same clothes she had last seen him in. His head was a red maze of crisscrossed lines. Morning sunlight slanted through the Venetian blinds and spilled onto a tidy tower of exams on the floor. The uppermost page had Try again next year scrawled across the top. Prof. Batchett turned to the next page of the newspaper.

"Morning, dear, he said sleepily. Take an early walk? Good idea. They say it's going to be a lovely day." If he had looked up, he might have noticed what she was wearing: her gardening clothes and sun hat. The knees of her work pants were caked with day-old earth. He might have noticed how tired she looked, and how the wrinkled flesh beneath her eyes carried what he might have recognized as dark folds of regret, as if his wife had recently lost something special to her. But he didn't. He did, however, slightly nod the paper in her direction.

"You should read the front page, dear. You'd find it interesting." He made sure she got a good view of the banner headline:

SLUGS MIGRATE TO THE WILLAMETTE

SCIENTISTS BAFFLED BY SUMY SUICIDE

The article included color photos of the NMST lobby. It looked as though someone had spilled a truckload of silvery mayonnaise across the floor and ticket counters. Another headline caught her eye.

NMST ON MIGRATION ROUTE

SLUGS COULD BE ATTRACTED TO LAZER VIBRATIONS, SAY EXPERTS

Mrs. Batchett found the strength to smile. "Sounds logical. Does it say, um, if there were

witnesses?"

Prof. Batchett flipped to an inside page. "Not really. There was a, let's see, 'lazer rock s in progress-since when does one spell 'laser' with a z?-but the ticket taker was out smoking the new DinoMania exhibit. The only one who saw anything was some kid on his way to the planetarium from the men's room."

"And?"

"And he says he saw-where is it?-This cool warrior chick like off Deathbreath's latest album cover." Prof. Batchett put on the voice he used to imitate his most culturally damaged students. " 'It was really cool. Had a glowing sword and everything. There was these three little dudes with her, man, and a zillion radical slugs just squooshing behind her. Bogus pro Can't wait to see the lazer show, dude.'"

Mrs. Batchett tried to hide the worry in her voice. "Did he say anything else?"

"Only that he just Went back to the planetarium. He claims it was his third rock-and-roll hallucination. A 'head trip,' I believe is the common vernacular. By the time the show was over, the slugs were out the opposite doors, on their way to the open sea, and the lobby was unfit for human habitation. Seems quite a few of the revelers lost their Jack Daniels when they exited the planetarium. It'll take the museum a week just to clean up. They're going to create an interactive exhibit from some of that slug slime, though, to explain what happened as soon as they can think up something convincing. The city's going to be washing down the streets all day. They say the whole thing might have started in our neighborhood. Yuck."

"Were all the slugs killed?" Mrs. Batchett had to know. She also wanted to prolong what was already the longest conversation she and her husband had had in weeks.

"Almost," he said. He indicated a photo at the bottom of the page. It depicted an office. Hundreds-no, the article said thousands-of dead slugs covered the desk, dripped from the formerly tan leather chair, and blanketed every inch of floor and shelf space. A local biologist posed with the coated remains of an EverOpen™ dayplanner.

SOME SLUGS DETOUR

"They must have liked the air freshener," expert claims.

Mrs. Batchett let herself smile. It had been difficult getting them all piled onto the desk.

She placed a hand on her husband's shoulder. Silently he flipped through pages to the book review section. She felt his shoulder tighten beneath his shirt. "A comic book adaptation of Paradise Lost? That's an outrage!" He flattened the newspaper against the table top and lowered his head toward the offending article.

"I'm going out back," Mrs. Batchett sighed.

Prof. Batchett mumbled something and pounded his fist on the table.

"You cannot come with us, Mistress." The fairy wiped a tear from its eyes, then flew to where Mrs. Batchett sat in the dirt. It brushed away the larger tears it found on her cheek. "I'm sad. Your father and mother asked us to tell them about you after we've returned. King Finwold would love to have you beat him in a royal chess match again. You have friends there who miss you. We all miss you."

"But why can't I go?" New buds were already appearing on the tattered daylilies. They were in bloom now. That wasn't enough.

The elf placed a hand on her knee. "It's the law you agreed to in your former life. You married a mortal warrior. True, he was a great and powerful man, a man of learning and a friend to all in need. When our world and theirs split in twain, you chose to be with him forever. You are condemned to this mortal realm-" The elf paused and looked thoughtful for a few heartbeats. "Unless you can persuade him to accompany you to Tir na n-Og. Only then can both of you live together as you once did, as who you once were."

With strength born of frustration rather than Faerie, Mrs. Batchett tossed a handful of weeds out of the garden. "But how can I do that?" she shouted. "That was another life. He's dead and gone now." And so am I, she almost said out loud.

The fairy looked at the elf. The elf looked up at the morning sky. It seemed to be contemplating deep mysteries.

"Hoo!" The gnome was clutching his feet, rocking with laughter. "Tell her!" it said, gasping for breath between bouts of gnomish hysteria. "Go ahead! Sod the rules! You know you want to!"

"Tell me what?"

The fairy stepped toward the elf. The gnome held its breath and grinned. The elf chewed his lower lip. It glanced around, then looked Mrs. Batchett in the eyes. "When you married Torin

n'Uthara, it was for all time. Just as you are here now in this mortal form, so too does he walk the solid earth."

Mrs. Batchett felt her heart beat quickly behind her breast, and for the first time in years did not worry her. "He's alive? Now? Where?"

The gnome was unable to contain himself. He told her.

After Mrs. Batchett got over the shock, she turned her head and cupped her hands to her mouth.

"Oh, honey!" she called. "Could you come out here? I want to discuss British mythology