

***Tales for the Thrifty Barbarian: An Anthology of High Fantasy*** is swords, magic, intrigue, dragons, storms, and conflict all woven into tales of different lands. Sit at a hearth-side table in our FWI Tavern, order a mug of ale and enjoy this menu:

A pair of commoners are on the run after accidentally killing their Count . . . a lass with psionic powers must save her Duke's realm, and the peasant woman who raised her . . . a spoiled Lady and her bitter heir-protector put aside all differences when wizards and Orqs attack . . . an alchemist takes in his wraith-haunted nephew, then his wife disappears . . . an inept Elven diplomat attempts to mediate in a dragon-rights demonstration, where hunters have squared-off against environmentalists . . . three warriors defend a village against a dark beast who has summoned a foreboding storm as hunting cover . . . a wizardling is quested to recover an artifact in order to save his land from an army's onslaught.

***Tales*** is a showcase of novellas written by members of Fantasy Writers International, a group of present and future novelists gleaned from the Web's largest fantasy site, elfwood.com, by novelist Larry N. Morris.

I have few regrets when it comes to the decisions I've made in my career as a writer. A few errors in judgment, bad contracts and poor decisions, but I have always written what I love which makes the rest simply water under the bridge. One regret which will linger in my mind for somewhat longer is the decision I made not to take part in the project Larry Morris pitched to me. At the time I had too much on my plate, or so I told myself. In retrospect, it was a mistake on many levels. First, I would have gained the prestige of being associated with this talented group of writers. Second, I would have had the chance, my only chance as it turned out, to be part of Larry's dream and brainchild.

Instead of simply regretting this error, I have made it a priority to study this creation of Larry's and to offer a few words for the potential buyer. I find the work as a whole delightful, witty, and surprisingly varied in style and imagination. Seven writers, varying in age and experience but sharing the commonality of skill in the genre, turn out their talent and create a work that screams for recognition.

This is one for my bookshelf; when I am old and gray, and the book is old and dog-eared, maybe I will get over this regret.

I doubt it.

*Chris A. Jackson*

[www.jaxbooks.com](http://www.jaxbooks.com)

**TALES  
FOR THE  
THRIFTY BARBARIAN**

An Anthology of High Fantasy

Editor: Cynthia MacKinnon-Morris

The Writers' Café

<http://www.thewriterscafe.com>

Lafayette, Indiana

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## **Tales for the Thrifty Barbarian**

An Anthology of High Fantasy  
Anthologies Volume One  
From Fantasy Writers International

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# IN MEMORY OF LARRY N. MORRIS

1941-2006



My first contact with Larry Morris came in the form of a comment on my new Wyverns Library 'shelf'. He wrote: "Welcome to Elfwood! Glad to see another adult here (there are a few of us)..." I soon learned that Larry made a habit out of checking the Elfwood home page, just so he could be one of the first to extend that welcoming hand of friendship to new authors. To the younger generation, he offered gentle advice, always dedicated to encouraging rather than bruising a tender ego. To the "seasoned", he gave more specific editing tips and the benefit of his wisdom. You'll find Larry's fingerprints on the libraries of hundreds of writers, for he never visited without commenting. To writers of all ages, his reviews were never harsh, never critical. He always had something positive to say to each and every author he encountered.

We learned, by way of emails, that we only lived about an hour from each other. After a couple months of written communication, Larry began visiting me frequently. The warmth, the sweetness, the gentle humor of this man cannot be expressed in words, but I'll carry his memory, and part of his generous spirit in my heart for the rest of my life. If you visit his main page on [elfwood.com](http://elfwood.com), you'll find dozens of tributes to "the man who welcomed me to Elfwood..." When word of Larry's death reached his writer friends, the responses were overwhelming. Don't take my word for it; look for

yourself. It's worth your time. Larry was a remarkable man, and his departure from this world has left a gaping hole in the hearts of many, a bottomless pit in mine. The book you now hold in your hands is the product of Larry's passionate desire to 'tell a story'. He spoke to me often about this project, and how eager he was to get it into print. I wish he'd lived to see this, to hold the first copy in his hands and feel the texture of its bindings. That's the dream of every writer who picks up a pen and scribbles a plot on a Burger King napkin, just so they won't forget by the time they get back to the computer! It was Larry's dream, and you're looking at the reality. As you open the cover and discover the magic of his world, listen carefully. Do you hear that gentle whisper in your ear? That quiet chuckle?

I do.

Deborah Cullins Smith

April, 2006

# NO MORE TOMORROWS

For Larry N. Morris  
1941-2006  
by Deborah Cullins Smith

Graying hair, thinning in back,  
eyes as blue as a summer sky,  
a girth as hearty as the man who bore it so gracefully,  
and a warm, gentle smile,  
tender, loving, teddy-bear arms.

Meeting in the winter of our lives,  
when youth says passion is spent,  
but wisdom says there's life yet to be lived,  
when time is shorter, days passing in the blink of an eye,  
and there are fewer before us than behind us.

Days we counted and treasured,  
memories we grasped with both hands,  
knowing how fleeting such moments can be,  
how easily the moments fade if we aren't watching closely.

Nights we held each other,  
drawing new strength from some hidden reservoir,  
learning that there is life after fifty, and even sixty,  
taking a chance on vulnerability, on love,  
hoping for more tomorrows and a last shot at happiness.

Add one car, a highway, and mix in an ambulance,  
and all the tomorrows we hoped for evaporated in the middle of Texas.  
All our hopes and dreams, the heartbeat of new life and love  
screamed to a stop with the shriek of technology,  
and a doctor's pronouncement of the hands of a clock.

We thought we had time.

We thought we had plenty of tomorrows,  
'taking things slow', giving ourselves room to 'be sure',  
and suddenly the clock stopped.

Time is taken away like dandelion fluff in a strong breeze.

Somehow there is never enough time,  
time to succeed, time to love, time to learn, time to grow,  
time slips away from us so quickly, so mercilessly,  
marching inexorably toward the end of our days,  
the end of our dreams.

Teach me, my love, not to take anything for granted,  
remind me, whisper sweet words of hope,  
poke me in the ribs and chuckle in my ear,  
run your fingers through my hair once more,  
and let me know our love lives on, safely in your care.

*Larry N. Morris lives in a small town in Illinois, USA. He is a retired businessman building a second career as a fantasy and science fiction novelist. A combination of High Fantasy and Historically Based Fantasy is his primary focus. His first novel (Kingdom Ablaze) will be published before the end of 2006.*

## **How to Retain Your Honor and Still Keep All the Money**

by Larry N. Morris

**T**hey never meant to kill the count but they thought he was a bear. It *was* a bear hunt after all. And he *did* come crashing through the underbrush toward them without warning. Most folks thought he was quite bear-like anyway with his great size and big barrel chest. Always huffin' and roarin' he was, like some great wounded beast. None of that mattered now. What did matter was their need to stay on the move and remain hidden. Common folk just couldn't go about pokin' spears in the belly and chest of a noble, no matter the reason.

Clayce and Zack followed a little-used path along the eastern marge of the vast forest known as Darkwood, with Zack, the smaller of the two in the lead. It had been his idea to find and follow this path two days ago when they evaded pursuit

by the other hunters, then halted their panicked flight through the forest. When they reached the path they had turned north. They knew that here, most likely, they would only encounter an occasional woodsman or hunter.

In his mid-twenties, tall and broad-shouldered, Clayce took short strides to match those of the older gray-bearded man ahead of him. In this region, both the forest to their left and the grasslands to their right meandered over low rolling hills. The forest at hand offered a refuge to scurry like conies, should they be seen. Ol' Zack's pace slowed markedly as they trudged up another slope and Clayce spotted a large log in edge of the trees. He knew how proud Zack was when it came to keeping up with the younger men. *He'll push himself 'til he drops*, Clayce thought. "Let's have a breather," he said to the back of Zack's head, then veered off and strode to the shaded log. He didn't see Zack's grateful expression.

Clayce had known Zack all his life, although they were never close. Clayce was born in Briarhall Castle, the child of others who served the count. Zack had been there many years—had always been there as far as Clayce knew, helping in the stables and the smithy. Among his many and varied assignments, Clayce too had helped in the stables at times. That they happened to be paired on the bear hunt was only coincidence.

After sitting in silence for a time, Clayce pushed back his long black hair, took a deep breath and slowly blew it between pursed lips. "Maybe he's not dead. Could be he still lives."

Zack frowned as if considering the possibility then shook his head ruefully. His gray eyes were grim beneath shaggy white brows. "If your spear didn't pierce his heart it came fair close. My spear split his belly open, and that alone would put an end to him. You may be certain of two things my young friend. The sun rises every day—and the count is dead." After a pause, he locked onto Clayce's dark blue eyes and added, "Make that three things. Of a certainty, the count has every available man searching for us. The new count that is, young Nestor."

Clayce didn't like the sound of that. He hadn't considered just how many searchers there might be. "Nobody liked the ol' buzzard. Maybe Nestor didn't like him either."

"Might be as you say, but it makes no matter. The new count—Count Nestor—will feel the need to make a show of executing his father's murderers."

*Murderers!* The word hit Clayce like a kick in the stomach and a shiver spasmed up his spine. "It was an accident," he snarled, jumping to his feet with

clenched fists. "It's not like we killed him apurpose!"

"It is lad," Zack answered solemnly as he got to his feet. "It's *just* like that. Dead is dead and it was us what did the deed. Come, we need fare onward."

"Where do we go?"

"We go north for the nonce, but we'll need provisions soon—at the least, a bow to hunt with."

"And flint for a fire," Clayce replied, "and blankets." Clayce was tired of having no *real* food, only the roots and such they foraged in the forest. He was also tired of having no fire at night nor a blanket or cloak for warmth while they slept on the hard ground. It would be ridiculous, he knew, to mention the desire for horses.

Trudging onward in Zack's footsteps, Clayce's thoughts were mainly of life in Briarhall Castle—his life entire until just a few days ago. Everything was so simple then. He never needed to be concerned about enough to eat, nor to trouble himself about clothes to wear and a place to sleep. He had no specialized training, assigned many kinds of work.

He liked that though. There was always variety to his life, even a bit of mystery, never knowing what he might be doing from one day to the next. Not at all like the smith or the baker. Now, all of that was taken from him with the single thrust of a spear. Everything he was, everything he had, was gone because of one monumental accident. If only the count hadn't startled them like that. *Unfair!* he thought sullenly. *It's all so terribly unfair.*

In late afternoon the sun had fallen low in the west and the shadows of the forest's trees fell across their path. They had reached the crest of yet another hill when they espied a lone crofter's stead ahead in the near distance. Deciding to stop there to seek comfort and assistance, Zack had started down the incline when Clayce glanced arrear. "Ware," he cried, "riders come!"

Zack hurried back and looked with him, then grabbed Clayce by the arm. "Into the trees!"

Crouching in dense underbrush a few yards into the forest, Clayce asked, "You

think they saw us.”

“Maybe not. We are on a hilltop, but in shadow and they are not yet close. We’ll know soon enough.”

When the riders passed, Clayce could see by their livery and the sigil on their breasts that they were knights and soldiers in the service of the count—the new count now. Still, they had always served the old count, so vengeance would be strong in their hearts. After the riders passed them by, Clayce found he had been holding his breath; he had thought his dizziness was from hunger.

# THE RICOCHET EFFECT

By Emma-Jane Smith

Life is taken in a flash  
Leaving loved ones behind  
Their hearts bleeding  
Their prayers to God so needing

Like ripples in the water  
The sorrow spreads  
Like a hideous disease  
Through the sickly green seas

But God knows why  
The ripples flow so cruelly  
They are cleansed by tears  
And our salvation appears

A man's life is a ricochet  
Propelling love and kindness  
Only through his love so deep  
Can we be truly have him to keep

Then you can treasure his unique habits  
As you dwell on the memories  
Of Riverdance and comedy viewings  
And his passionate wooings

Holding his pipe at a rakish angle  
Punctuating points of thought  
His wonder of Ireland realised  
His travel plans idealized

His true vocation was that of a writer  
He put pen to paper to create worlds  
And enchanted his peers to no end  
And welcomed all as friend

Without these ricochets, these ripples  
Life would never be so wonderful  
No person would be reminisced  
Nor sweet memory could persist

So thank God for the ricochet  
And all for which it means  
Larry's memory resides in us all  
His life was made to enthrall

A man's life is a ricochet  
Propelling love and kindness  
Only through his love so deep  
Can we be truly have him to keep

April, 2006

Emma-Jane Smith

*Jamie A. Hughes is a lifelong student and teacher devoted to the study of the written word. She has earned a Master's Degree in English from the University of North Florida and plans to continue work on her Ph.D. in the near future. As an academic writer, she has been published in Peake Studies, The Journal of Evolutionary Psychology, and The Journal of Popular Culture . She currently teaches English and composition courses at Florida Community College at Jacksonville and edits for Double Dragon Publishing, an Internet-based publisher of fantasy/sci-fi novels and anthologies.*

*In addition to her studies, she is also addicted to creative writing. Her poetry, short fiction, and essays have been published in several student journals as well as Odradek, Fiction Fix, Shout them From the Mountaintops, Voicesnet, Gin Bender Poetry Review, and Faculty Shack.org. She can be contacted at [emeraldelf@gmail.com](mailto:emeraldelf@gmail.com)*

## Depth of Vision

by Jamie A. Hughes

**T**he two women whispered in the darkness of the birthing room.

"It is a blessing," said the younger.

"Nay, a curse," replied the elder, a midwife.

"Children have come to you with a caul, and you have called it fortunate. Why should it be any different for my child?"

The grizzled sage spat and took a swig from her medicinal whiskey. "A caul gives a child second sight, a connection with the spirits, but this . . . this I know not."

The young mother, still awash with sweat and pain from giving birth, cradled her child in her arms and cooed to her softly. "I do not care what this means. Her eye is shut for a reason, and the one that is open shall see all the more sharply. She will be a wise woman or an eagle-eyed scout. Mark my words, old mother."

As she said this, the youth gently stroked the swollen vein that forced her daughter's left eye to remain completely shut. The child did not cry, for there was no pain. Her open eye, however, searched her mother's face for answers to questions her mind had yet to form. Her eye was a dazzling shade of amber, like threshed wheat flying before a setting summer sun.

As if to confirm her suspicions, the young mother looked at the midwife and said, "This eye has seen the world before, and I think she has much to teach us."

Huffing loudly, as if to display her dislike of youth's arrogance, the midwife began to read the knots and messages contained in the afterbirth. After a few minutes of intense scrutiny, she turned to her patient and said, "Protect this child well girl, for she will be the only harvest of your womb. I see you will have no further need of me in the dead of the night, but I still have work to do in the here and now."

The old woman gathered the afterbirth and placed it on a blanket at the foot of the bed and turned back to her ratty, leather bag. She took out all the necessary herbs and medicines with which to anoint the child—silverweed for long life, sage for wisdom, clove for a quick wit, seven-year rose for patience, and rowan for protection from the spirits. Praying in a mix of Celtic, Latin, and guttural utterances, the old woman smeared each substance on the pulse points of the pink, burbling baby, finishing with the center of her forehead. The child seemed to calm at this point, as if the medicine woman shared the purpose of this ceremony by her knowing touch. The old woman was taken aback by the calm nature of the child, but she had seen many calm babies become hellions in her long life.

*It is a shame, she thought, to outlive the children I have helped bring into this world. May this one be different.*

After the brief ceremony, the midwife left the child in the care of her mother and carried the afterbirth to a secret spot deep within the tangled grove of trees behind the cabin. She dug a deep hole in the soft, loamy earth and placed the wet mass into the soil. All the while, she prayed, "Swan daughter, newly born, I place your essence into the earth for protection. May you always be free from suffering, may your mother raise you to know the forest and all its ways, may your gifts be a blessing to the world on which your steps will always be wise."

After the blessings and prayers, the midwife placed an intricate talisman made of bone and thread into the shape of a warrior, as a physical protector for the child. After surrounding the child's essence with wishes and good words, the seer then covered it with the loose shoveled earth and pressed it down gently with her bare feet. By burying the birth sac, she was insuring the baby's ties to the land as well as guarding her spirit against possession. No one could penetrate the soul of this child because her core was protected by the Father's divine strength.

While the "burial" was taking place, the young mother, Leloch, marveled at the life she had created from her birthing pains. This was *her* daughter—hers alone. There would be no man to hurt her or stunt her power. No harsh words would be levied against her. Leloch held her daughter's hand and said to her, "I shall call you Maistra, for you are the greatest accomplishment of my life."

Mother and daughter spent the last few minutes before sleep conversing in the muted coos and bubbles that only they could understand, and as periwinkle night gave way to the first silver fingers of dawn, the midwife returned to finish cleansing the child. Promising to return later in the day to check on the healing process, she wrapped her in dry cloths and laid her in the basket near her mother's bed. Content beyond measure, Leloch took one last look at her now sleeping child and fell into an exhausted sleep.

*Scott "Frank Creed" Morris believes that the meaning of life is existing at the intersection of one's passions and talents. He's been an aspiring author since age seven and feels that for himself, writing is that intersection. Encouraged by his 11th grade creative writing teacher, *The Last Newspaper* took first place in the U.W. Whitewater Literary Conference short-story category. Since then he grew up, found an irresistible editor and put a ring on her finger.*

*Frank is aware that a fiction writer's first priority must be to entertain, but if his rejection or acceptance by a publisher depended upon his manuscript losing its Biblical theme, he'd never be published. His beliefs are woven into the fabric of his pieces, and never preach. His intended audience has Biblical convictions, hence his pen-name: Frank Creed . . . a straightforward statement of belief. Check out his website at <http://www.frankcreed.com>*

## **Lest Ye Be Judged**

by Frank Creed

**D**eep within dank bowels of a pitch-beamed construction, two men crouch over a fire-hardened clay floor. Fire-orange silken robes heap round their tattooed and sandal-strapped ankles. Set into the cellar's lumpy ochre floor, a wide and shallow iron brazier spitters-and-flashes, agonized by poison-green flares. Shadows throw hoarse flickers across close walls. Writhing under the unholy light, crude-carved and aeons-old hieroglyphs adorn the walls, ceiling, and foot-packed floor.

The man widely known as Paragon C'tyrus, Guild Greybeard's master, crouches at the brazier's edge. Forearms aknee and fingers concave, he poses as one warming his hands. Or perhaps, as one feeling the fire's tongues for direction. His digits convulse in sporadic gestures sending the second figure, a sub-magician called Castus, scuttling obediently around the brazier. Sensing an element amiss in the spell's axis, Castus pauses to ladle a golden mixture of maple syrup and honey over a specific flame, before scampering over to the indicated corner of the round brazier. Using a hand-long sickle-shaped polearm, he nudges an fingernail's worth of crushed walnuts into the brazier.

Finally C'tyrus stands and stretches tall before sweeping a long arm in a plain and final gesticulation. Castus walks to the indicated square recessed into the east wall and knocks once.

With unnecessary haste the square comes away from the wall, thrust by some fearful but obedient servant. From behind the square a live body emerges, face down in a floor level drawer. Castus watches a young man's feet, legs, torso, and finally head, slide into the ritual room. From neck to ankle he has been bound with passionate force and in a generous quantity of cheese-cloth. Even in his state of terror, all the young man can manage is a slight wriggle, bending his waist in a swinging motion. Castus crimps the lively cadavre's ankles under his right arm and drags this Human-spell-component, face bumping across clay, to deposit him in the room's centre, right next to the brazier.

C'tyrus tilts his face toward the ceiling. His nostrils twitch, but his right hand extends death-steady in the sign of not-quite-yet. Castus has seen this signal bared for hours at a time. With a sigh, he droops back into a crouch. In a fly's buzz, the groaning and wriggling form draws his attention as the most interesting thing in the room. Pity taints not the air. This man's wife paid Castus well, requesting a magic that protects from husbandly drunken rage. That she deemed her coins soundly spent, Castus performed the antics that Shundthausende folks expect of a wizard, which include sprinkling powders over her from an array of tins, and tracing shimmering-silver lines in the air with a phoenix feather. In truth, Guildmaster C'tyrus was in need of an element for a different spell: a cruel man's essence. Bleeding this man's craving would serve both magics.

In vain pride, the sub-magician rolls-over the living corpse to admire his week-old handiwerk. Enchanting the inebriated fellow caused to pass him straight out. Dragging him back to a chosen abandoned basement, Castus had stitched shut the man's eyelids and lips with the thread-thin wire used by trappers in setting snares. Long before now both liquor and spell had worn off, yet the young man painfully persists in straining his eyelids from a morbid curiosity to know his

fate. Tongue-thick mumblings thrash insincere; these apologies coming both token and desperate.

Then, C'tyrus gestures to "make-ready." Castus rolls the man onto his side. From the belt sheath at the small of his back, the sub-magician bears a wickedly curved and serrated dagger. Inserting the single-bladed weapon beneath the mummy's cheesecloth, exactly between the shoulder-blades, he tears downward, rending gauze to tailbone. With a surgeon's finesse, the skin bears no scratch—from this slice. However, the incision inflicted a week afore, that had been painstakingly patted with sewer slime, bore a festering-feverous-pus. Taking a leaf from the pouch of ninety-nine (leaves he had so carefully picked from the trees whose walnuts were feeding the fire), Castus presses and drags it down the length of the man's spine-long wound, drawing cries both immediate and muffled. Dropping it into the fire where the Paragon shew, he takes the second leaf and presses it along the man's wound.

*A..P. Reckert is a high school senior in a sleepy Connecticut town. She wrote her first novel at just thirteen years old, but that was just the beginning. Her work has received local and online commendation, and has appeared in school literary magazines. In addition to writing, she is an avid equestrian of nine years, and her time spent away from the keyboard and schoolbooks usually finds her at the barn.*

## **The Storm**

by A. P. Reckert

**L** ightning flared in the heavens, casting a brief illumination on the town beneath the cloud cover. Thunder followed shortly, like a giant at the door. The horses hitched to a peddler's cart whinnied and shrieked. The mare half-reared in her harness, eyes white and rolling.

Nikolas rushed from his shop to secure the banners. He'd lost three in the past month, and was determined not to waste even one more copper on the sigil of his lords. Unpatriotic to run the banners down, perhaps, but certainly cheaper. And he didn't seem to be the only one with that idea. He spotted three other shopkeepers saving their own assets, no matter what Lord Carson demanded.

The wind picked up and whistled through the city streets like some wraith from the hells below, but still the air remained parched, buzzing with electricity. No rain, though. Just the lightning and the thunder. The fifth storm this month, it had to be unnatural.

The sign above his door rattled in the wind, then swayed until it slapped against the wooden wall with a sound *thump*. Nikolas rolled the banner carefully and fought his way back to his apothecary, the wind doing its best to keep him for itself.

He stumbled inside, latching the door firmly behind him. Mary poked her head into the storefront from the kitchen, a grin upon her narrow face. Her hair had come somewhat undone, with stray strands sticking out at odd angles, but Nikolas just found that rather charming. He returned the smile and laid the banners to rest upon the table before wrapping his hands about her waist and kissing her lightly on the forehead.

Mary snickered. "You're in fine health this morning."

"Aye, no thanks to the weather." He glanced at the windows, rattling just slightly in their frames. "Always the lightning, always the wind. But never any rain. I'd feel better if the heavens just opened up. The sooner it rains, the sooner this whole front can blow itself out."

Mary pulled away from him, returning to whatever it was she was cooking in the hearth. "Ah, it's just the summer. There are always storms."

"Aye, but this is the *same* storm over and over. I know those clouds."

"They're clouds, Niko." She grinned, but it faded when his face remained neutral. "Go to your books, then. Or your lab."

"I was thinking of the bed, actually." He reached for her again, but she sidestepped his advances and he shrugged. "Alone, then."

"You could use the rest."

But he did not retreat up the stairs to his personal quarters. Instead, he paced about the store, checking that all the herbs and ingredients were properly labeled—*Why wouldn't they be? I label them myself*—and nothing was out of place. Of course, everything remained precisely where he intended it, and his

rummaging did nothing to calm his nerves. On the contrary, his heart beat still faster and his fingers twitched at his side, clenching and unclenching themselves of their own accord.

Nikolas heaved a sigh just as lightning bloomed in the sky, filling the store with an eerie white light. Things returned to their normal shades of grey just about the same time as the thunder fell. The windows shook almost to the point of shattering, and Nikolas felt a shiver run down his spine and camp there.

Mary was right, he did need a bit of rest before he frightened himself into grey hairs. Thus far he'd managed to keep it a perfectly respectable shade of blond, but there was just no telling when that would give way. Best to fight it as long as possible. He smiled at Mary as he passed her in the kitchen once more, tending some sort of stew over the fire. She returned it with a nod and a pleasant half-smile, too sincere to be rightly labeled a smirk.

He kept one hand on the railing as he retreated up the stairs, fingers left bare of splinters from the wood he himself had smoothly polished. When buying this store, at first it had been nothing more than a business venture. Once it had been an inn and tavern, but that little scheme had gone broke due to several less than scrupulous decisions by the former owner. Nevertheless, the downstairs was quite spacious, and the common room had been easily converted into a storefront for his wares. Upstairs, he and Mary took the largest rooms for themselves. Of the other four bedrooms, two they converted into individual studies, and the other two they left untouched, should company ever deign to appear. It never did.

Nikolas hesitated between two doors. At his left, the study. At his right, the bedroom. Biting his lip, he took the left. His journal lay closed upon his desk, and he thumbed it open to the most recent page while taking a seat in his armchair. One gesture at the hearth and a fire sprang to life, warming his clammy skin. Rain might not have been forthcoming, but the wind could chill the bones just as easily.

He read first what he had written, fully intending to forage for his quill and ink once done. But he never made it past the third paragraph. His eyelids grew heavy and drooped, and he let the book fall to the floor.

*Ah, well . . . a little nap couldn't hurt.*

His eyesight faded to black, and his ears filled with the sound of a cackling fire. Even that faded and disappeared in but a moment.

The wind woke him, or rather, the wind's effect on the sign above his store. It crashed against the wall first with a sudden boom that only slightly pulled Nikolas from his slumber. He groaned and shifted in his chair, but another bang came from below, rousing him fully.

"Aw, hells." He yawned, and his eyes settled on the window overlooking the street and the row of trees that lined it. A moment passed before he noticed anything peculiar about the sight. The trees were quite still, not even a leaf stirring in a passing breeze. Which meant . . .

The bang from below came again, and this time Nikolas knew it for more than his creaky sign. He dashed down the stairs, straightening his hair with one hand and hoping he didn't look too disheveled.

*Brian David Smith is an Arts and Technology major in college who writes in his spare time. He often thinks the art of comedy has been lost in recent years. This often leads to him writing some rather bizarre satire, or even having some humor in even his most serious pieces. It's probably the Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett influence.*

## **The Color of Green**

by Brian David Smith

**T**here is no argument over what the world's oldest profession is, but as far as Stephen Jahn'sen was concerned, diplomacy was the second. As long as there had been two people to purchase and provide the services of the oldest profession, there had been a third to negotiate cost. In a strange way, the two jobs were incredibly similar in Stephen's mind. They both provided a common service that most thinking beings did without being paid, and both screwed people out of their money more times than not. The only real difference between the two professions was that while one was paid well for doing its job as intended, the other was paid even more for doing its job as poorly as possible. These were both occupations that Stephen secretly admired. However, as much as he might enjoy one, he wasn't entirely good at either, which

is why he was happy to find himself doing diplomatic work where he would be paid the most possible.

The job was a simple matter of resolving a social dispute between two rivaling organizations that had caused some noise in the outskirts of the city of Quendale, a very large trade city in between nations. Despite the vast number of failures that had supposedly plagued this particular case, it didn't seem like that big of a deal. Two organizations had an argument and needed a third party on behalf of the local government to make a final decision on the matter. In other words, the job could successfully be done in a few minutes, but Stephen intended to get all of the facts straight beforehand in order to milk as much work out of the job as possible. Work was scarce for the traveling adventure.

As Stephen drew closer to the part of the nearby forest where he had been instructed that the problems were taking place, he made sure to groom himself up. As a diplomat from the government, it would be of key importance to look noble and officious. Besides, diplomatic status was a great way to meet women. He slicked his hair back, buttoned up his loose but comfortable white shirt completely, and made sure to arrange the things in his travel bag neatly. While he did so, he pulled a cape out of his bags and tied it around his neck and let it billow in the wind heroically. He planned on charging forward towards the site once it came in view, and as he drew close, he would rear his horse back dramatically so it would stand on two legs and look a million feet tall. Perhaps some divine intervention might smile upon him with a dramatic lightning bolt out of the blue. The Gods always seemed to appreciate style. Although, it occurred to him that he should have hired a minstrel or an official announcer of some kind. It really would improve the effect. Still, there was no time to head back. If he was going to milk all the money he could out of this, he was going to have to let the parties argue for as long as humanly possible, and they certainly wouldn't trust him to doing his job if he wasn't punctual. He couldn't delay the people a minute more if he was going to successfully delay them for weeks.

Stephen heard the people long before he could see them. The bickering between the clusters of people near the forest's edge could be heard for miles around. As Stephen grew closer though, he couldn't tell who was with which group, but he could see that they were huddled around something large and pulsing. As he drew within half a mile of the giant amorphous mass he charged his white stallion, that he had insisted the government provide him, forward to righteously cut the metaphorical creature in two with his presence. The people slowly turned as they heard the thundering sound of his horse's gallops. Everyone turned around with frightening expectation. The new diplomat had arrived. Stephen kept his charge going as the people parted and he grew closer to

the giant, pulsing object he had seen from the distance. He got ready to rear back his horse. However, the horse reared back without any provocation, and Stephen fell on the ground with a solid thud as the object ate his horse, and politely spit out his luggage. Surely his eyes were deceiving him, and there wasn't a large ancient green dragon standing there before him. Lightning struck in the distance for effect. It was very stylish.

Thoughts started to run through Steve's mind about how this possibly could have happened to him. The job seemed perfectly harmless. Nothing seemed to indicate that a giant fifty-foot tall behemoth would be involved in negotiations or that the group involved would be loony enough to be gather around one like it was an amusing show for their pleasure. Also, the damn thing had eaten his horse and covered his luggage in dragon saliva. This was the second horse he had lost this week. This was a catastrophe. When had all this started to go wrong?

\* \* \*

Whether Stephen knew it or not, it had all gone wrong a few days prior when he thought his luck had changed for the better and he had accepted a job to help a damsel in distress from the local Hrognar's Adventurers and Mercenaries Guild, a world-wide chain that hires youthful outcasts and old senile men with axes looking for one last fling with life to do odd jobs necessary throughout the area that no sane person would want to do. While few adventurers stick with one locale in order to keep gainful employment, adventurers and mercenaries are, in part, treated like government employees no matter how temporary they may be. As such, often the payment and prestige involved with the job can be extraordinary. However, a lot of people tend to shy away from the jobs due to the extent that some areas take the word "temporary" to mean.

Stephen had taken the job under two assumptions that would ultimately prove incorrect. First of all, Stephen thought that it would be a great way to pick up a young youthful lady with his charm and good looks, and second, that he had any charm and good looks to begin with. The paper he had taken simply read that there was a damsel in distress and that all he needed to do was report to the main filing office in Quendale to get further details. He decided not to delay as he jumped onto his brown horse and rode off in the general direction of Quendale.

*Jaren Schroeder is an undergraduate student majoring in English Literature, and will be studying Literature and Creative Writing at the graduate level next year. Her current work revolves mainly around the design and development of a unique fantasy world and history, in which "Storm of Wrath" is set and the majority of her future works will take place. Jaren loves mythology, magic and the medieval era, and in her stories she strives to move through the human (and non-human) experience as she explores the possibilities of the vast and wonderful genre that is fantasy.*

## **Storm of Wrath**

by J. Schroeder

*The path of the warrior scarce few dare tread,*

*Choose you those with strength and might;*

*With the blood of the sword scarce few have bled,*

*Choose you those with will to fight;*

*The lore of the sage scarce few have read,*

*Choose you those with wisdom's sight;  
With the skill of the bow scarce few are bred,  
Choose you those with talents right.*

*Now you Guards,  
Our lives are yours.  
With strength lead us,  
With valor serve us,  
With wisdom guide us,  
With vigilance keep us.*

Calvell gazed up at the gray, turbulent clouds sweeping in over the horizon. The bright hues of the sun faded quickly over the village as the front drew nearer, and the ecstatic cheers of his fellow townspeople rang wildly in his ears. Rain was coming, and it was certainly long overdue. The crops of grain were all bone dry, and the precious water reserve had long since trickled to its last drop. The few oxen which had not perished already lowed weakly and miserably from the village's low-built barn. Even the sparse grass of the arid terrain, a particularly tough variety, had shriveled and wilted beneath their feet. Calvell knew that the storm was indeed a thing to be celebrated, but something about the ominous black mass descending upon them unnerved the man—a task not easily accomplished.

The warrior blinked. The first winds preceding the storm had just begun to rush through the town in short, angry gusts, sweeping the long dormant dust into tumultuous, stinging clouds. He looked down, brushing some of the fine particles from his light shirt. As he did so, a few strands of his blond hair fell into his eyes. He quickly snatched it aside, irritated. He would have sheared that mess long ago, if only Sarra were not so fond of it.

It seemed that much of his appearance he preserved only for the sake of that strong-willed woman, but although he complained bitterly he did not truly mind. Not that he was vain, but being tall and well-built and dressing in clean clothes was not exactly his idea of torture . . . and neither was having a wonderful woman to reward his labors to maintain his physical state. He smiled slyly, enjoying himself at her expense. Sarra would never let him say he "had" her—she was much too independent for that. At least she pretended to be. His smile softened to one of affection as an image of his fellow guard flashed through his mind.

"Calvell!"

The warrior started—the sharp voice had been unexpected, and it rudely interrupted his pleasant meditations. He turned slowly, with much the same expression of irritation that his face had borne when his hair had blown into his eyes.

The figure that approached him was bent and slight—the sort of wispy thing that seemed likely to be carried away with the next gust of wind. Calvell looked down as the smaller man drew up in front of him, clutching his heavy brown robe tightly to his chest and squinting defiantly against the stinging sand.

"Calvell!" he repeated, raising his voice more than necessary over the wind and distant thunder. "This celebration has endured long enough. Make an end of it, ere the people are drowned in the very torrents in which they rejoice!"

"You worry too much, Pothien," replied Calvell in a voice as dry as the dusty earth. "They are not fools. When the storm comes, they will retreat to their homes."

Pothien glared up through ancient eyes and shook his gray-streaked head. "Ah, but they are fools. And you are the grandest of them to think them otherwise. Their fathers were fools before them, and their children shall be fools when they are gone. They will dance and sing to their very deaths, if you let them."

The old man had clenched his withered fist before his face, and he now uncurled a single finger and directed it at Calvell to accentuate his accusation.

"For a wise man," sighed Calvell, "you speak overly much of foolishness."

Pothien stood in rage as the younger man turned and strolled off, but he kept his thin lips pressed tightly together. His thoughts alone were bitter enough to kill off half the town—he had neither the energy nor the will to express his resentment in words.

*Eugene Erno is an aspiring author who began writing a little later in life than most writers. He attended Kendall College of Art and Design in the early 90's where he studied Graphics and Illustration. He now lives in Northern Michigan with his family in a small town on Lake Michigan. Beginning his first serious writing project at age 37, he hopes to finish a trilogy of fantasy novels very soon. While fantasy is his first literary love, he also enjoys writing short stories in other genres.*

## **The Staff of Illidon**

by Eugene N. Erno

**C** had Melrow had a roving eye and a wide, dashing smile over his broad cleft chin. He was well aware of his prowess with the ladies, and had been working his charms on at least one of the scantily clad tavern wenches of The Wild Boar for the past hour or more. Across the table, his unlikely traveling companion, the fully elven Marillian Thistledown, nursed a tankard of mead and tried to ignore his advances on the flirtatious serving girls. Many there wondered what in the world she was doing, traveling with the egotistical mercenary who seemed content to overlook her ravishing beauty as if she were a mere drinking pal. While the story of how they came to be

in the company of one another is a tale for another time, suffice it to say that Chad had helped her out of a jam. Mari, as he called her, was somewhat in his debt.

"You have inquired of lodging," Mari said. A wench dropped off another round of drinks for them, making a small show of swinging her derrière near Chad's face. "What is the price?"

"It's taken care of," Chad smiled broadly, tipping the serving girl more than she deserved and earning himself a smile and a wink. He slid a small brass key to Mari and pocketed its twin. "You can have the room in front, overlooking the door. I might have company if all goes well. Don't wait up."

Mary snorted in her mead. "You'll save enough for tomorrow night's lodging as well, I hope?"

"Don't worry."

"So, you've been eyein' me gal 'ave ya?" spoke a raucous voice from behind Chad, a large hand spun him around in his seat. "Thinkin' you'll be takin' her up to the back room do ya?" The stranger's grimy face was inches from Chad's own.

"That's for her to decide, I reckon," Chad told him flippantly, standing to face the irate townsman. He probably should have taken a more mannerly approach to the situation, but he found the stranger's assuming attitude to be ingratiating. Not that the accusation was errant at all. It was a matter of principle to Chad. He knew as well, by the look in the man's eye, he wasn't getting out of this without a fight. "You require a little compensation? How's two pence sound, fella?"

Chad had stood just in time to set himself and block the man's swing, countering with one of his own that sent the local sprawling over a nearby table. That caused four rough looking men who were otherwise paying no attention to the exchange to become immediately furious at having their drinks spilled in their laps. Chad was soon backing away from a throng of angry townsmen, Mari at his side.

"You've not heard 'discretion is the better part of valor'?" she asked, assuming a fighting stance. While true this was probably not her fight, she was traveling with Chad and would likely be dragged into the mess eventually. And, she was somewhat in the mercenary's debt.

Mari quickly ducked a flying chair before hitting the first approaching opponent with a barrage of quick punches. She then grabbed him by the arm and gracefully flipped him over one shoulder onto the table where she had just been sitting. Quickly jumping, she kicked a second man in the face, knocking him backward into a third.

A bell began clanging behind the bar of the tavern as Chad laid out a second attacker. It was then that the whole room full of people came at the pair of them, evidently just on the principle that they had upset the norm. As the gaggle of locals surrounded them, Chad and Mari stood back to back, waiting for the maelstrom to roll in upon them. Weapons may have been handy at that point but they could at least take comfort in knowing the other patrons had been stripped of their own as well before entering the establishment.

The main thing that worked to their advantage was that there was very little space to move in the area with the broken tables. Their adversaries were forced to come at them one at a time. A burly man lunged at Chad to start the melee and found himself tossed aside, face first into Mari's right knee. Turning, she kneed another man in the groin. Chad sidestepped another attacker and then smashed his face into a nearby pole. Blocking a series of punches from yet another assailant, Chad then lifted him bodily and slammed him onto the bar.

So it went for several moments. Men would attack and find themselves on their faces, on their backs or on their backsides. Tankards were spilled. Chairs and tables were splintered. Ale barrels were broken open. Chad and Mari took their share of punches but dished out many more. Soon the would-be assailants became weary enough of the pair that none were in any hurry to be abused further. Instead of attacking, they began methodically backing them into a corner of the establishment away from the entranceway.

It was at that very moment that a throng of armed men rushed in through the open doorway, swords drawn, arrows nocked.

"Stand down fools!" the one in front shouted as several of his men trained arrows on Chad and Mari. "You are both under arrest!"

"On what charge?" Chad asked with a grin. "Defending ourselves?"

"Quiet!" the soldier reprimanded him. "The charge is disturbing the peace; by ordinance of the vale of Glendale, territory of Halidon! Fall out!"

Mari shot Chad a sardonic look. "I see tomorrow night's lodging won't be a problem now."

Chad and Mari were forced by point of sword and arrow then, out of The Wild Boar and down the road, into the night.