Jack McCall was ten days shy of his thirteenth birthday when he decided that he was dying. He had been having headaches for about six months without telling anyone, the headaches being accompanied by a partial loss of vision that lasted anywhere from ten to twenty minutes. He hadn’t thought much about it since it only happened once in a while, believing that it was simply the result of eyestrain. After all, there was a lot of homework assigned in the seventh grade.

But ten days before his birthday he had an attack as he was about to go out the door to school, and since he couldn’t very well ride his bike in that condition or stand around pretending that nothing was wrong, he was forced to admit the problem to his mother. His mother made an immediate appointment with Dr. Muller, the family pediatrician, for that afternoon, sat Jack down until his vision cleared, then drove him to school, asking him all the way there if he was all right and calling him “Jackie” until he thought he would scream.

She returned promptly when school let out to take him to
In the beginning, there was the wood.

It was strong wood, and old. And it grew beside a stream, by a tower all of stone.

There was warm sun, which was good. There were climbing vines, which were bad. There was wind, which was neither. It merely made leaves turn and branches sway.

There was also the lady. She was neither. She came to the tower. She turned the earth and made a garden. She cut the other trees and burned them in the tower.

But the holly tree she did not cut. The holly grew and spread its branches in the open space. And that was good.

There was summer, which was warm. There was winter, which was cold. There were birds, which were neither. They built nests and sometimes sang.
“Flee or be broiled to crackling! Those are your only choices!” The monster rustled in the depths of the cave. Its voice was loud because it was large, and dry because centuries of breathing deadly fire had roughened its throat.

“Neither, if you please.” The man in armor waited as patiently as he could, hoping he was far enough back from the entrance that he would not actually broil if the tenor of conversation failed to improve. “I wish to discuss a proposition.”

“A what?” The outrage was unfeigned. “I had heard that there were knights abroad in this miserable modern age who practiced such perversities, but I never dreamed I should ever suffer such a foul offer myself! Prepare to be radiantly heated, young fool!”

“I am not remotely young, and I don’t think I’m a fool either,” the knight said. “And it’s not that kind of proposition. Ye gods, fellow, I haven’t even seen you yet, not to mention the smell of you is not pleasing, at least to a human being.”

When the dragon spoke after a longish silence, there was perhaps a touch of hurt feelings in its voice. “Ah. Not that kind of
Once, they’d tried using sex to bring down a target. It had seemed a likely plan: throw an affair in the man’s path, guide events to a compromising situation, and momentum did the rest. That was the theory—a simple thing, not acting against the person directly, but slantwise. But it turned out it was too direct, almost an attack, touching on such vulnerable sensibilities. They’d lost Benton, who had nudged a certain woman into the path of a certain Republic Loyalist Party councilman and died because of it. He’d been so sure it would work.

Gerald had proposed trying this strategy again to discredit the RLP candidate in the next executive election. The man couldn’t be allowed to take power if Gerald’s own favored allies hoped to maintain any influence. But there was the problem of directness. His cohort considered ideas of how to subtly convince a man to ruin his life with sex. The problem remained: there were no truly subtle ways to accomplish this. They risked Benton’s fate with no guaranteed outcome. Gathering before the chalkboard in their warehouse lair, mismatched chairs drawn together, they plotted.
Chrétien L’Envers sat on a window ledge in an empty tower room in the ancestral home of the House of Drozhny. From this lofty perch in the estate of the longtime governors of the city of St. Sithonia, the Dauphin of Terre d’Ange contemplated the quality of the light, which was unlike any other he had ever seen. Such things made travel worthwhile. In the south of Caerdicca Unitas, where he and Rikard Drozhny had spent two years together at the University in Tiberium, the sun sometimes beat like a hammer upon the hard-baked earth. This light was as intense, yet vaster, far vaster; no hammer, this, but an anvil. It flattened the harsh terrain and rendered the whole of St. Sithonia, with all her crags and crevasses, oddly two-dimensional.

They said in Vralia for three months a year the sun never set.

“Angelicus?”

Chrétien turned his head, smiling at his friend’s usage of the old nickname. “Yes?”

With two glasses of wine forgotten in his hands, Rikard Drozhny stood in the doorway and blinked, struck dumb for the
Briar started awake at the clanging.

His mother was banging the porridge pot with her metal ladle, the sound echoing through the house. “Out of bed, lazeabouts!” she cried. “Breakfast is hot, and any who eat finished by sunup get an empty belly till luncheon!”

A pillow struck Briar’s head. “Open the slats, Briarpatch,” Hardey mumbled.

“Why do I always have to do it?” Briar asked.

Another pillow hit Briar on the opposite side of his head. “Cause if there’s a demon there, Hardey and I can run while it eats you!” Hale snapped. “Get goin’!”

The twins always bullied him together . . . not that it mattered. They had twelve summers, and each of them towered over him like a wood demon.

Briar stumbled out of the bed, rubbing his eyes as he felt his way to the window and turned up the slats. The sky was a reddish purple, giving just enough light for Briar to make out the lurking
Maesteri Divad Jonason gently removed the viola d’amore from its weathered sheepskin case. In the silence, he smiled wanly over the old instrument, considering. Sometimes the most important music lessons feature no music at all. Such was the case with this viola, an old friend to be sure. It served a different kind of instruction. One that came late in the training of a Lieholan, whose song had the power of intention. This instrument could only be understood when the act of making notes work together had long since been any kind of challenge. This viola made fine music, too, of course—a soft, retiring sound most pleasant in the shades of evening. But this heirloom of the Maesteri, generations old now, taught the kind of resonance often only heard inwardly while standing over a freshly dug barrow.

Behind him, the door opened, and he turned to greet his finest Lieholan student, Belamae Sento. The young man stepped into the room, his face pale, an open letter in his hand. Divad didn’t need to ask the contents of the note. In fact, it was the letter’s
“This is what it’s about,” Coach Kaplan said to Assistant Coach Tom in a throaty voice, caught somewhere between a cheer and a growl, and loud enough so that his team could hear him clearly. “This is what makes all those hours of practice worth it!” He stood at the edge of the dugout, putting him less than a dozen feet from first base, while the Panthers’ coach, similarly positioned at the end of his own dugout, was closer to third.

Kaplan’s enthusiasm was hard to deny, even for these kids, who hadn’t taken Little League very seriously, or at least hadn’t shown enough intensity to make their coach—and in many cases their parents—happy. Especially now, when the championship was on the line and neither of the teams, as so often happened in a league where pitchers hit batters nearly as often as the strike zone, had busted out into any substantial lead.

The tension in the air had mounted all through the first three innings, shifting gradually from nervousness to sheer excitement as many of the initial jitters dissipated. This was familiar. This was what they knew. And they could do it—maybe.
Daen screamed until the monster’s teeth crushed ribs against ribs. Blood poured from his lungs, a bright flower unfurling on the pavestones.

He bolted upright. A tree root scraped his back as he tried to crab backward, but his feet were entangled in his blanket. He sat still, surprised to feel moss and short grass under the heels of his hands. A soft hush surrounded him, the landscape shrouded in fog that deadened sound and confused distance, rendering trees and stones into ghostly shadows of themselves. Panting, he rubbed his face with pale fingers and blinked away the blur in his eyes. His sweat grew cold in the damp air.

Gods, what a dream! It wasn’t the first time he’d died in his dreams. Not the first time by a long stretch. The details were familiar: towers of acrid smoke and blinding flame, a tumult of screams, clashing metal, and bellowing rage. But he’d never before faced the Dahak itself, the monstrous, sentient dragon whose armies terrorized his city of Cinvat. Many priests insisted that the Dahak was a High Dragon—something far greater than the beasts Cinvat’s warriors rode into combat. True or not, the beast in this dream was
Heaven in a Wild Flower

Blake Charlton

The baby girl floated around the water pump as a small, radiant cloud of light. She illuminated the nearby ferns and made the darkness beyond her darker.

Joaquin Lopez put his bucket down. He was a tall, thin man. Early forties. Dark eyes and hair. He pressed a shaking hand to his mouth, wondered if he had the balls to gather in the girl. He looked to the sky for a heaven but saw only stars between redwood branches.

He called to Luis and Collin. When the boys came out of the cabin, he told Luis to fetch a sheet and Collin to go to town for the doctor. Collin was old enough that he turned and ran, but Luis stood staring. “Papá,” he asked, “what is it?” Now that Collin was gone, they spoke in Spanish.

“Only a baby. You looked the same. Get the sheet.”

The boy went and Lopez stepped closer. The baby didn’t seem to notice. Tendrils of her indigo light curled around a water drop forming on the pump’s spigot. The drop fattened and fell, dispersing her into a corona. She made a crackling sound, like pine
“Well, you’ve used a lot less morphine today,” the nurse said, tapping the feed with her thumbnail. “Keep this up and we’ll have you out of here by the weekend.”

“Go dancing,” Alexander joked.

“That’s the spirit, my man.”

The nurse adjusted something in the suite of machines beside the bed, and the low, chiming alert stopped for the first time in an hour. The sounds of the hospital came in to fill the void: the television in the next room, the murmur and laughter of nursing station shop talk, monitor alarms from all along the ward, someone crying.

“I’ll get you some more ice,” the nurse said, taking the Styrofoam cup from the little rolling bed table. “Be right back.”

He tried to say thank you, but it was hard to focus. His mind didn’t feel right, and his body was a catalog of pains that he didn’t want to associate with. They’d saved his toes, but in five days, he’d only glimpsed the complication of red flesh and black stitching that was his leg. The muscles of his abdomen were compromised.
Stories are sometimes born in fire, but regardless of origin they always live around fires and grow in the telling. If bellies are full and the veins pulse with a flagon or two, why then, all the better for the story. Sometimes, as a Druid, stories are expected of me. People just assume I’m a part-time bard as well.

<Atticus, tell us a tale we haven’t heard before,> Oberon said. We were taking a break from training by camping on the Mogollon Rim near Knoll Lake. After cooking fresh trout over our campfire for dinner, we were relaxing with hot cocoa and roasting marshmallows.

“You want a story?” I said aloud. My apprentice couldn’t hear my hound yet; she was still four years away from being bound to the earth and practicing magic. To be polite and include her, I sometimes spoke aloud to Oberon by way of inviting her into the conversation.

“Usually he wants snacks,” Granuaile said. “I’d go for a story, though. It’s a nice night for one.”

<Listen to the clever apprentice,> Oberon said.
They call me a monster and if it were untrue the weight of my crimes would pin me to the ground. I have maimed and I have murdered and if this mountain stood but a little higher I would cut the angels from their heaven. I care less for accusations than for the rain that soaks me, that runs down every limb. I spit both from my lips. Judgment has always left a sour taste.

“Keep moving!” And he strikes me across the shoulders. The staff is thick and polished from hard use. I imagine how he’ll look when I make him eat it. Avery, they call him.

There are five left to guard us now, twenty when they found us on the Orlanth Road. A man like the Nuban doesn’t give up easy but two against twenty are poor odds, especially when one of the two is a child. He surrendered before the Select had even drawn their horses up around us. It took me longer to reach the same decision, hampered by my pride.

“Pick it up!” The stick catches me behind the knee and I stumble, loose rocks scattering beneath my feet, rolling away down the steep path. Rope chafes at my wrists. We exchanged our weapons
“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Michael Stein said.

“Indeed,” Pax sighed. “It breaks my heart. She just has to get through it, though. They always do, eventually.”

“But look at her!” Michael Stein said. “She’s . . .” He couldn’t think of the word. “She’s . . .”

“Inconsolable?” Pax offered.

The her was Lucy, and she did indeed look inconsolable.

She lay on her bed, crying. It had been three days since the incident, but she hadn’t gotten any better. Her parents tried to soothe her. They let her miss the last few days of middle school, saying the summer would just have to begin early. They even proposed getting a new kitten.

Michael Stein had been a bit put out by that, but he had nothing to worry about. Lucy wouldn’t hear of it. The very suggestion ripped a sob of grief out of her. She refused to leave her room. She refused to take her friend’s phone calls. She wouldn’t read any of her detective books. She wouldn’t even look at the shelves with
Iris knew her mother didn’t love her, had maybe never loved her, not the way a mother is supposed to. There was something broken in Anita Banik. Maybe it happened when Iris’s father left Anita for another woman (or several) while she was hugely pregnant with twins, her stomach extruded three feet in front of her, the skin stretched taut as a balloon about to pop. Or maybe it had more to do with the complicated birth that nearly killed Anita, and had ravaged her body so that she could never have another child. Not that she seemed to want the ones she already had.

Iris and her identical twin, Ivan, had once been more than identical. They had been joined, literally, at the hip, and down the thigh as well. Conjoined twins, separated at birth. They were a cliché, but Iris didn’t care. She loved looking at the pictures of her and Ivan as newborns, before the surgery that sliced their fused flesh and removed them from one another. Iris had asked Ivan once if he ever wished the doctors had left them how they were. Nature had intended them to enter the world as one body. Maybe that’s how they should have remained.
There are windows we struggle not to look through, scattered among all the houses of our lives. Here is one: a boy slick with chilly sweat, skeleton-thin, tube-trussed, mouth opening and closing like a fish on a pier. His eyes, somewhere unfathomable; his room filling with flowers.

Perhaps he sees the great aunt at his bedside, frail and silent, fighting to keep the blanket about his chin. Perhaps he stares into delirium, into the dream from which he cannot wake: a fat man has hooked him through the gills, and laughing cheerful murder, reels in his prize. The man’s face changes minute by minute; his laugh and his absolute power do not.

You are forgiven if you doubt the next hypothesis; the author himself has been drawn to it as reluctantly as the boy to that unattractive brute. Perhaps minds cleansed of the film of rationality do sometimes sharpen. Perhaps that’s all it takes.

Consider a window in a deep stone wall. Gaping, glassless, big shutters banging in a storm. Lean inside. A cavernous room, rows of steeple-backed chairs, moonlight on a lustrous floor. Moist
The wooden rapier clattered against the sanded stones of the arena floor, its hilt coming to rest near Brie’s hand. She ceased her scrubbing to consider the weapon, hunched as she was on hands and knees, then turned her head to consider him. Her expression accused him of madness.

“Would you see me flogged?” she hissed.

“My father has an audience with the king, and won’t return before nightfall,” Kylac grinned. “Call it a birthday gift.”

A flush stole across Brie’s freckled cheeks. He’d remembered. Just as swiftly, her familiar pout returned. “And a celebration it’d be, to see your father beat you bloody.” Her gaze swept the edges of the chamber, as if expecting to find someone spying from the shadows. “Go on. I’ve work to finish.”

With emphasis, she dipped her sponge in her bucket of dirty water and resumed her scrubbing. Kylac felt his smile slip. Maybe her flush owed solely to her exertions. Or frustration at being interrupted. Or alarm at his proposal. Whatever, he felt suddenly foolish, having woefully misjudged her imagined reaction.

“I just thought...” He watched her reach her sponge blindly for
He woke and did not immediately know where he was, a thick cottony taste in his mouth, bitter, and a small stinging pain near the base of his neck and at his wrists. He was secured in wide straps crossed over his chest and thighs, and his sight was badly blurred and in black-and-white; all he saw above him was a smear of gray light. He put his hands out on instinct and met cold glass only inches away from his face. Fog spread out from his fingers. He shoved on the glass in panic, then pounded against it with his fists, bare feet kicking and toes sliding uselessly against the invisible coffin-lid, his heart thundering rapidly but it refused to yield in the slightest, and a shuddering wave of exhaustion made him fall limply back against the padding underneath.

He lay there breathing, gasping. He worked his mouth until a little moisture came into it, and he swallowed. His sight began to sharpen little by little. Faint blue outlines began to become visible on the glass above him, and nearly simultaneously, his mind began to function again. He was still in the cradle. That was the
Bao slipped into the Oneness as he sat with legs crossed, surrounded by darkness.

During his youthful studies, he had been required to seek the Oneness in the midst of a crashing storm, while being towed on a sled behind a horse, and finally while enduring the pain of a hot coal against his skin. He had once considered that training to be extreme, but life had since required him to find the Oneness during war and agony, during tempests and earthquakes. For today, for this moment, a dark quiet room would do.

The Oneness was lack of emotion. Bao took all of his feelings—all of his thoughts, all that he was—and pressed them into a single point of darkness in his mind. That darkness consumed the emotion. He felt nothing. He thought nothing. He did not sense satisfaction at this, for there could be no satisfaction in this state. He was the Oneness. That was all.

The tent flap lifted, allowing in filtered sunlight. Bao opened his eyes. There was no surprise when he saw Mintel. One could not be surprised in the Oneness.
Hadrian discovered that the most fascinating thing about plummeting in total darkness wasn’t the odd sense of euphoria instilled from the free fall or the abject terror derived from anticipating sudden death, but that he had the opportunity to contemplate both.

The drop was that far.

The four had plenty of time to scream, which they did the moment the rope had snapped. Hadrian wasn’t sure if Royce yelled. He couldn’t hear him—and doing so wasn’t in his partner’s nature—but Wilmer would have drowned him out anyway. The pig farmer was so loud that his shrieks ricocheted off the stone walls and bounced back before any of them hit the water. Whatever air they had left was driven from their lungs by the vicious slap and suffocating cold.

The impact would have hurt anyone, and Hadrian already had a broken leg. He nearly blacked out from the pain. Maybe he did, if only for an instant, but the immediate plunge into ice-cold water woke him. Just deep enough. Hadrian pushed off the bottom with his good leg and hoped he would reach air in time.
The Lorian champion was a squat fellow, practically as wide as he was tall, and apparently of some slightly different ethnic background than most of his compatriots. The Lorians were Vikings, basically, Thor types: tall, long blond hair, big chins, big chests, big beards. But this character came in at about five foot six, Eliot would have said, with a shaved head and a fat round Buddha face like a soup dumpling and a significant admixture of some Asiatic DNA.

He was stripped to the waist even though it was about forty degrees out, and his latte-colored skin was oiled all over. Or maybe he was just really sweaty.

The champion had a gut hanging over his waistband, but he was still a pretty scary-looking mofo. He had a huge saddle of muscle across his upper back, and his biceps were like thighs, practically, and there must have been some muscle in there, just by volume, even if they did look kind of chubby. And his gut wasn’t a flabby gut, exactly; even his fat looked hard. His weapon was weird-looking enough—it was a pole with a big curvy cross of sharp metal on the end—that you just knew he could do something really outstandingly dangerous with it.
The shade of Allanon did not answer Walker at once, but remained silent and unresponsive, hovering like a dark cloud over the roiling waters of the Hadeshorn, all size and blackness against the starlit sky. Steam sprayed from the lake surface in sharp geysers, as if the dead trapped below were seeking to catch anew the breath of life. The moon was down, hidden behind the peaks that cupped the valley, a wary passerby on its way toward morning. Where he knelt at the water’s edge, solitary and motionless, silence cloaked the shattered landscape.

Walker blinked away the droplets that clung to his eyelids. In the midst of ghosts that found blind release in the legendary Valley of Shale, he must remember to see clearly. It occurred to him that coming here was a mistake, that asking for help from the dead was foolish. What help they offered was forever couched in obscure references and double meanings, words that fostered confusion rather than understanding. Better to know nothing than to be misled by false interpretation. Yet whom else could he turn
When Heliwr of the Yn Saith Charles Ardall stepped from the portal into the catacombs beneath St. Peter’s Basilica, he entered a massacre from Hell.

He had seen many like it during his tenure, but none quite so gruesome.

“Unbelievable carnage,” Berrytrill whispered, the fairy flying at his ear. “This fight, the knight did not back down.”

“No, he didn’t,” Charles agreed. “Then again, Bruno Ricci wouldn’t.”

“Indeed. A tougher knight, I have not seen.”

The Heliwr nodded, looking around. No immediate danger presented itself. Instead, broken bodies littered the rock bank of the Tiber River’s underground branch, the dead spreading to the far side of the cavern. There were three dozen bodies in all. With the light of the portal highlighting the bloodied environs and the subterranean chill seeping into his bones, Charles knelt beside the first corpse he came to. The man’s chest was blasted open, his black uniform free of insignia and his slackened fingers