

THE THROME OF THE ERRIL OF SHERILL

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To Kathy and Michele and Lorene

1

The Erril of Sherill wrote a Throme. It was a deep Throme, and a dark, haunting, lovely Throme, a wild, special, sweet Throme made of the treasure of words in his deep heart. He wrote it long ago, in another world, a vaguely singing, boundariless land that did not exist within the kingdom of Magnus Thrall, King of Everywhere. The King had Cnites to come and go for him, and churttels to plant and harvest for him, but no Cnite had ever looked up into the winking morning sky and seen Sherill, and no churttel had ever looked at the rich clods of earth between his boots and seen the Erril's world. Yet the Erril, long, long ago, wrote a Throme of singular and unsurpassed beauty, somewhere in his own land called Sherill, and the dark King of Everywhere desired that Throme.

The house of the King was a tall thing of great, thick stones and high towers and tiny slits of windows that gleamed at night when the King paced his hearth stones longing for the Throme. He had a daughter who sat with him and wept and embroidered pictures of the green world beyond the walls, and listened to her father think aloud to the pale sunlight or the wisps of candle-flame.

“Who knows,” he would say, “Oh, who knows where lies the Throme, the Throme of peace, the Throme of loveliness, the dark Throme of Sherill ? I must have it. If I had it, the most precious of all precious things, my heart would be at rest in its beauty, and I could stop wanting. If I had the Throme, I could wake at mornings knowing it belonged to me, and I could be content with the simple sunrise and the silly birds.”

The King’s Damsen would lift her hands and let them fall again into her lap. “There is no such thing. There is no Throme. Everyone knows that.”

“Bah. Everyone is a fool.”

And a tear would slide down the still face of the King’s Damsen, and plop and twinkle on her hands. Her long hair was the color of pale sunlight, and her eyes were the color of long, motionless, uninterrupted nights. Somewhere beyond the dark stones was a moon-haired Cnite who loved the sad, sighing Damsen of the King.

That Cnite came one night to the house of Magnus Thrall. Damsen, who from the high window had seen the churttels come and go, and the daylight come and go, saw the Cnite ride across the fields of Everywhere and thump on the drawbridge of the house, which shut itself up at night like a grim, wordless sprite. Her sad, sighing heart gave two quick beats. Magnus Thrall, wearing a circle in the stones in front of a skinny, dancing elf of a flame, stopped.

“Who thumped across my drawbridge?”

“It is your Chief Cnite Caerles,” said Damsen, and her voice was like the low, clear ripple of water across stones.

“Ha!” said Magnus Thrall. “I know what he has come for. But he cannot have you because I need you. If you go away, I will be here alone in these dark, dank walls. I need to look at your sad face. It comforts me.”

A tear dropped onto Damsen’s needlework and winked like a jewel among the bright threads. She looked towards the door at the sound of footsteps. They came through dark halls and empty rooms and lightless winding staircases towards her, for the King had shut up his house so that he could wail and wish alone. Spiders wove tapestry on the cold grey walls, and dust gathered, motionless, on the stone floors. The footsteps stopped at the doorway, and the Cnite Caerles stood in it, looking in at the warm fire, and the King, and Damsen with her eyes like cups of sweet, dark wine. He smiled at her eyes, and they smiled back, sadly, beneath their tears.

“Go away,” Magnus Thrall said.

“I just arrived,” Caerles said reasonably. “My horse is in your disused stable. He is tired and I am tired, both of us having followed the sun and the moon to get here.”

“You are welcome,” said Damsen.

“You are not,” said Magnus Thrall. “Besides, we have no room for you.”

“I will rest content on the cold stones,” Caerles said, “and in the morning I will come and ask something of you, and then I will leave you.”

“I will give you an answer now,” said the King. “No.”

Caerles sighed. He stepped into the room. It was thick with fur beneath the foot, shining here and there with gold or silver, or dark, polished wood. Damsen’s needlework hung on the walls. New flowers, pink and gold, and midnight blue, sat in water on the table. Such things would Damsen do in Caerles’ house, bringing with her sad, lovely thoughts. He stood tall and straight before the King, his shirt of mail silvery as fish scale, his sword and his shield of three moons at his side, proper and fair from his carefully brushed moon-colored hair to his gleaming, mouse-colored boots.

“I have come for Damsen,” he said to her wet face turned towards him like a dawn-flower. “It is the time, in my loving, when I want no long, sunlit road between us, and no stone wall and closed door.”

“You will leave without her.”

“But why? You are growing a flower in the dark. You are shutting a rare stone up in a locked box.”

“Why should I give my flower to you? You will shut her away in your own stones, to weep and sew beside your hearth.”

“But I love her,” Caerles protested. Magnus Thrall folded his arms and looked into the fire. Tears of pity welled in Damsen’s eyes.

“You know nothing of wanting,” said the King. “You know nothing of the gnawing beast of wanting, the ceaseless whine of wanting. You want Damsen. My wanting is greater than yours. My wanting can make a great house empty, can make a silly world empty. I want the Throme of Sherill. Find it for me, and I will give you anything you want.”

Caerles’ mouth opened. It closed again, and then the words in his eyes came to it. “There is no such thing as the Throme of Sherill,” he whispered. “Magnus Thrall, that is unfair. The Throme is a lie left from another king, another year. There never was a Throme. There was a never a land called Sherill. There is nothing but the earth and the sky.”

Magnus Thrall whirled away from the fire. “Unfair? What is unfair about wanting? Somewhere, somewhere, Caerles, you will find the Throme. Until then, I will grow my flower in the dark.”

“You are cruel and loveless, you and your wanting.”

“I know,” Magnus Thrall whispered. “I know. The Throme is my hope. Find it for me, Caerles.”

“But it does not exist.”

“Find it for me.”

“Find it, Caerles,” said Damsen. He turned, his hands outstretched.

“But it does not exist!”

“I know. But find it, please, Caerles.”

“Is there no reason in this dark, empty house? Magnus Thrall, you are King of Everywhere. You should open your doors, open your gates, open your hands and heart to me, to Damsen, to all your Cnites, to your vessels and churtels. Put tapestries on your bare walls, flame on your cold torches. Go into the green world and be content with what beauty is Everywhere, that you cannot see when your eyes are blind with wanting. Give me Damsen. I love her.”

The dark King stood unflickering by the fire. “There is a price,” he said, “on your loving. There is a price for the taking of Damsen from my hearth to yours.”

“There should be no price!”

“Give me the Throme. Then you may have my Damsen.”

The Cnite Caerles closed his eyes and sighed. Then he went to the window where Damsen sat, the stars clustering about her hair. He took her hands and said sadly, “Will you wait for me?”

“I will,” said Damsen, and a star fell down her cheek. “But oh please, hurry.”

“I will. Though I do not know what use it is to hurry when I do not know where I am going, and when there will be nothing to find when I get there.”

“I know,” Damsen said sorrowfully. “My Caerles, you will be searching forever and I will grow old and ugly, and when you find it, you will not want me anymore.”

“Yes, I will. I will be old and ugly too, then.” He kissed her sadly, gently farewell. Then he said to Magnus Thrall, “I will find your Throme whether it exists or not. I will return with the price for her.”

“I know you will,” said Magnus Thrall. “That is why I set that price.”

And so the Cnite Caerles came to leave the King’s house by starlight, looking for the Throme of the Erril of Sherill. He stared up at the quiet stars as he

crossed the drawbridge, and they twinkled sympathetically on his upturned face.

“But it does not exist,” he mourned to them. “Does it?”

2

And so the Cnite Caerles spent the night under a tree. He hated sleeping under trees. Trees whispered at night and dropped things on his face; trees wound underground and made hard knobs of their roots that gave lump in the back and crick in the neck. Trees let the sun too early in his eyes, and the sun would not go away. But worse than the sun was the Thing, that jumped out of nowhere onto the stomach of the Cnite Caerles.

“Oog,” said Caerles and opened one eye. A child looked back at him, her hair in sweet, moist tendrils down her back, her finger in her mouth. The other eye of the Cnite Caerles opened. “Child,” he said cheerlessly, “Why are you sitting on my stomach?”

“I have lost my dagon,” said the child through her finger. Caerles looked at her motionlessly, unblinking in the sunlight.

“I, too, have lost something,” he said finally. “I have lost my true heart’s love, the well-spring of my deep heart’s laughter, because I am sent on a hopeless quest from which I will never return. But that is no reason to go and sit on someone else’s stomach.”

“I want my dagon,” said the child. She bounced up and down impatiently on the Cnite Caerles. Her eyes were blue as the tiny flowers that grew pointed like stars all around them. The Cnite reached out to still her, and she sat still, looking down at him, her eyes blue and fearless and certain as the true season’s sky.

“Who are you?” said Caerles.

“I am Elfwyth. My dagon is Dracoberus.”

“Did you call him?”

“I called and called and called. And called. Who are you?”

“I am the Cnite Caerles, and I do not think I like small girls. Perhaps Damsen will have only sons.”

Elfwyth took her finger out of her mouth. “I do not think I like you,” she said sternly. “And if you do not help me find my dagon I will bounce up and down and I will cry.”

The Cnite Caerles lifted her in his strong arms and stood up and set her on the ground, where she came barely higher than his knee. He folded his arms and

looked down at her. She folded her arms and looked back up at him. Then, sudden as a falling star, came a tear rilling from the curve of her eye down to the corner of her mouth. Another followed, and her blue eyes were flowers with hearts of rain.

“Oh, please,” she sniffed. “Oh, please find my dagon. Then I will help you look for what you have lost. Oh, please.”

“Oh, please,” Caerles said weakly. “Do not cry. If you cry I will have to help you, for the love of the tears in my sweet Damsen’s eyes.”

“Oh, please find my dagon. I am lost and sorely sad without him, for I love him, and he loves me, and I will not go home without him.”

Caerles gave a sigh sadder than the wind’s sigh on moonless nights. “Oh, child,” he said. “You are more annoying than a tripping tree root. What is a dagon?”

Elfwyth glanced up at him out of her still eyes. She sniffed. “It is a small animal. A little, little animal. And it has a little voice, and pretty eyes. You will not be afraid of it.”

“I am afraid of nothing,” Caerles said.

“And it will like you very much... if you find it while I am with you. It likes me most of all.” She took the hand of the Cnite Caerles and turned him towards the morning sun. Flowers bent gently under her bare feet. “But it will like you, too, if you speak gently to it, I think... It is my dagon, my Dracoberus, and it was a gift to me from seven—people. And then, if you find it, I will love you, too.” She smiled up at him, raising her fair face like a flower opening, and Caerles gave once more the wisp and whisper of a sigh.

“Thank you,” he said glumly, and lifted her up into his great curved saddle.

They followed the sun until noon.

At noon the sun was a soundless, rearing lion frightening their shadows into littleness, a huge, golden dragon that was never still, the coin-gold heart of a blazing flower. At noon, they stopped to drink at the ice-colored sliver of a sheer stream. Elfwyth danced with her bare feet into the heart of the stream, among the polished stones and speckled sand, and as she splashed under the full eye of noon there came a roar like the waking of seven beasts in new spring. The Cnite Caerles ran to her, and the stream water sank deep into his mouse-colored boots. He lifted the child, holding her all wet against him, and then her voice shrilled into his eye.

“Oh, my Dracoberus!”

There was a flash like the wink of lightning. A slender hound with violet eyes and fiery breath ran bellowing from the trees, and it was taller than Caerles’ horse. Caerles stared motionless at its coming, while the child Elfwyth

wriggled against him and his horse behind him reared and whimpered. Behind the hound rode seven men in seven colors, each with an eye ablaze on his breast, and a spear, ice-tipped, in his hand. Elfwyth twisted eagerly in the Cnite's arms.

"Oh, let me go—" she cried, and slithered like a fish into the water. She ran across the stream to the fiery hound and the sudden hiss of its breath over her head came at Caerles in a flood of flame. He sat down in the water. Seven men gathered at the water's edge. Seven spears formed a gleaming crescent above the Cnite's heart. Elfwyth hugged the neck of the whimpering hound. She kissed its violet eyes and turned her head.

"If you hurt the Cnite I will cry."

Caerles looked up at the still faces and fish nibbled at his fingers. He said between his teeth, "I do not like small girls."

"Go and kiss him thanks," Elfwyth said to the great, frolicking dagon.

"I do not want to be thanked," said the Cnite.

"You are afraid of my Dracoberus."

"Yes."

"You told me you were afraid of nothing!"

"Elfwyth, Elfwyth," said a man in scarlet, "it is not good for a small girl to mock a grown man. Who is this one?"

"I do not know. I found him beneath a tree and I bounced on him until he came with me to find my dagon."

The seven spears rose, flashing like birds. "We are the Seven Watchers of the child Elfwyth of the Erie Merle. We will bring you to him in thanks for his child, and you will be bedded in soft silk and washed in wine, if you but give us your name."

Caerles rose from the stream. "I am the Cnite Caerles, and I am questing for the Throme of the Erril of Sherill."

The Seven Watchers looked at one another. "It does not exist."

"I know, but I must find it. Will the Erie Merle help me? If not, I will bed myself in soft grass, having already washed."

The Seven Watchers turned their mounts. "The Erie Merle is wiser than an oak tree at twilight, wiser than the pale moon at moon rise. If he can help you, he will."

Caerles went with them, and Elfwyth rode the flaming dagon Dracoberus, and the barred gates of the Erie Merle opened without the touch of a hand to welcome them. The Erie Merle was a tall, thin wraith of bones and pale skin

and hair like the spun gossamer of spider's web. His eyes flashed like jewels, now emerald, now amber, and they smiled as the child Elfwyth came to hug his knees.

"I have found my Dracoberus!" she shouted into his rich robe. "Now you must give that Cnite the Throme of the Sherill of Erril."

"Erril of Sherill," said the Erie Merle, and his eyes as he looked up flashed blue sapphire at Caerles. His hand strayed thoughtfully among the towzled curls of Elfwyth's head. "You are my wild child, and it was your Dracoberus and your Watchers and this Cnite who found you. Now go to him and give him your hand like a true lady and bring him gently into my house."

And that she did, gently.

When they had eaten much of thin, hot slices of rare meats and golden-cruled breads and sweet wines and fruits, the Erie Merle sat back in his chair and looked first at Caerles and then at Elfwyth. Above his head was a huge, unwinking eye that the sun burnt gold, and all down the lengths of two sides of his hall lesser eyes watched, pools of violet, green, silver.

"I do not know where the Throme is," he said. "Or where it is not. I only know that it is not here." He tapped softly at the rim of his cup with the crescent moon of his curved nail, and his eyes went limpid grey. "I may have a suggestion, but it will lead to danger."

"There is a woman who weeps, waiting for me in Magnus Thrall's house," Caerles said. "I do not know that word danger."

"So." The Erie Merle's eyes winked like pure stars. "Then I suggest you look for the Throme of the Erril of Sherill at the Mirk-Well of Morg."

The Cnite Caerles stared into his emerald green eyes. He said in a voice two tones smaller, "But the Mirk-Well of Morg does not exist. It is a line in a song, a passage of a tale told to children by fire light. How can I go to a place that is not there?"

The Erie Merle looked back at him out of midnight eyes. "What better place to find a thing that does not exist?" he inquired, and Caerles sighed deeply from his heart's marrow.

"Then I will go there," he said.

The child Elfwyth bounced suddenly in her chair. "I will go with you," she cried, "and my Dracoberus will keep you from danger."

"A quest is no journey for a frail child," said the Erie Merle, and his voice was a wind's murmur in the still hall. "My child, a true lady would give thanks to a Cnite who had braved fire and water to please her. Good thanks would be to give him what he may need most."

Elfwyth looked at the Erie Merle. Her eyes grew round and heavy in the

colored light from the watching windows, and her voice grew thin and quivered. "But he is afraid of my Dracoberus."

"I do not think he would be if you lent him your dagon to protect him from the glooms and harshnesses of the Mirk-Well."

"But he has a horse."

"I have a horse," said the Cnite Caerles quickly. "And I need no thanks."

The Erie Merle turned his face to Caerles and the glow of his eyes was of sweet, wine-drenched amethyst. "Thanks must be given," he answered softly, "and who will receive them if you do not?"

The child Elfwyth sat still as a drooping flower. Then she lifted her fair head and sat straight in her straight chair. "You will ride my Dracoberus," she said staunchly. "And he will protect you. And when you are done, you will ride him back to me. I will lend him to you in thanks, because you came with me in the morning light."

The Cnite Caerles achieved a smile. "I will ride him back to you safely," he said fairly, "and for the sake of my sweet Damsen, I thank you, for the protection of your Dracoberus against whatever dangers lie in the Mirk-Well of Morg, wherever they are, if they exist."

The child Elfwyth smiled back at him. She said anxiously, "Do not forget to bring him back to me."

"Oh, child," said Caerles from his deep heart. "There is no danger of that."

3

And that is how the Cnite Caerles left the hall of the Erie Merle by morning light, riding the violet-eyed, fire-voiced dagon Dracoberus instead of his true horse. He rode towards the path of the setting sun, where all darkness began, and the sun rode above him across the sky. At night, the eyes of Dracoberus glowed like violet stars, and his breath warmed the streaming air. He ate leaves from the trees and tender flowers newly opened, and he acquired a habit of licking the Cnite's face with his great, red, fiery tongue. He moved like a wind over plowed field and meadow, and at the end of the second dusk Caerles knew they were lost.

"Though," he said reasonably as he dismounted, "I cannot be lost when I am going nowhere." And he was surprised when instead of earth beneath his foot, he felt a nothingness that continued in a dazing rush. He landed asprawl on the damp earth and found the violet stars looking at him from an unreasonable distance. "How," said the Cnite Caerles reasonably between his teeth, "can I

possibly get where I want to go when I cannot go anywhere at all?"

The dagon whimpered down to him in sadness like a child, and Caerles could hear the thump of its great tail like a heart-beat on the earth above. Then of a sudden the burning violets vanished, and the Cnite heard a light Boy's voice in a lulling croon.

"Oh, I love you, I love you, I love you..." And through his voice came the purry whine of the dagon and the thump-thump of its tail.

"Who is up there?" Caerles called. The voice was silent. A dark face peered over the edge of the earth.

"Who is down there?"

"I am the Cnite Caerles. Will you help me?"

The voice was silent again. The night was silent but for the little voices of secret things that no eye could see. The trees lifted their great black heads against the stars and the wind curled through them, sighing.

"Is this your thing up there? This beautiful purple and red and grey thing?"

"It is the dagon Dracoberus that I was riding. Am I in the Mirk-Well of Morg?"

"No. You are in my borebel pit. Are you sure you are not a borebel?"

"I am not a borebel," said Caerles. "I am the Cnite Caerles of Magnus Thrall, questing for the Damsen of the King. I am cold and dirty and sore and hungry and I do not like your borebel pit."

"Well," said the voice. "Well. I think if you were not a borebel you would not be down there. It is a pit only for borebels. There is a long-toothed, hoary-voiced, squinty-eyed borebel snuffling around my mother's house and I dug a pit to trap it. How do I know you are not a squinty-eyed borebel with a sweet voice to trick me?"

The Cnite Caerles closed his eyes. He opened them again and said patiently, "Do borebels ride dagon?"

"No. But I think you ate the Cnite who was riding this dagon, and now he belongs to no one. So I will take care of him, for he is more beautiful than anything I have ever seen and he loves me, too."

"I am not a borebel," said Caerles. "And that dagon was lent to me by the child of the Erie Merle to protect me from all danger with its swift speed and its flaming tongue, but I do not know what will protect me from a troublesome young Boy."

"Perhaps I will let you out," said the voice, "if you give me the dagon. Then I will have someone to sprawl on meadow-grass with, and explore deep caves, and dabble with in the river. If you give me the dagon, I will know you are not a

borebel, for a borebel never gives anything to anyone.”

“But I cannot give you Dracoberus because he does not belong to me.”

“Then,” said the voice cheerfully, “you must be a borebel. Do not worry about your dagon. I will love him well.”

The Cnite Caerles sat down on the damp earth of the borebel pit. “Boy,” he said wearily, “I am a Cnite on a quest for the love of a wheat-haired, wine-eyed lady who is waiting with love for me. You will have the dagon to love but who will there be to love that lady if you do not let me out of this pit?”

There was the sound above of shifting leaves. “Well.” said the voice, and again, “Well.” Then it said again cheerfully, “If you are truly a borebel, there is no lady and no love, so I will take your dagon. But do not worry. I will feed you.”

The heads of the Boy and the dagon vanished, and the Cnite Caerles was left alone with the far-away stars and the whispers of trees and the walls of earth rising around him. “Oh my Damsen,” he mourned softly to the memory of her, “will you still love a clumsy Cnite who falls into borebel pits?” And the Throme seemed as far from him as the star-worlds above.

Morning fell into the borebel pit onto Caerles’ eyes, and he looked up and found a rope of sunlight up to the bright earth. He sat up and sighed for the ache in his bent bones and the thirst in his throat and the mud on his mouse-colored boots. Then he heard the whimper and frolick of the dagon and the high, sweet whistle of the Boy swooping like a bird’s cry through the trees.

“Borebel,” he called, “I have brought your breakfast. And then the dagon and I will run as far as the world’s edge together, and shout louder than sound, and we will not come back until there is no more night. Borebel, borebel, I have brought bread and porridge and milk, oh borebel ...”

And as he called and whistled, a strange noise tangled in his whistling: a snickering, snuffling, snorting noise that came to the very edge of the borebel pit. And then of a sudden, it came down into the borebel pit, and the Cnite leaped out of its way. Across from him lay a tiny-eyed, long-toothed, bristle-hided borebel blinking its red eyes in astonishment.

“O Borebel,” Caerles breathed, for the borebel, sitting, was as high as his chin. “Move gently, or I will kill you, and I did not set out to kill borebels.”

The borebel snorted. Its eyes flamed suddenly blood-red with rage, and the Cnite drew his sword. The borebel stood up on its short-haired hind legs and the scream of its fury silenced the birds in the morning trees.

“O Borebel,” said the Boy above them, and his voice quivered like a bow-string. “Look up.”

The borebel looked up. The Boy dropped a great bowl of steaming porridge

onto its squinty-eyed face.

The borebel danced and roared and splatted the porridge out of its red eyes and its long-toothed snout. The Boy dropped the end of a rope down the pit-edge to the Cnite. The dagon Dracoberus howled at the other end. Red flame singed the borebel's hide. Then the dagon pulled with its might and Caerles slithered out of the borebel pit.

He stood free above the mournful borebel, all covered with earth and tiny twigs and the frayed ends of leaves. The Boy looked up at him, shivering in the sunlight. He was bone-thin and brown, with scarred knees and elbows and his eyes were round as twin platters on a white table.

"You are not a borebel," he whispered. The dagon licked the Cnite's face with a swoop of its tongue, then lay on his feet and thumped its tail.

"Boy," began Caerles. Then he stopped, and his anger faded away in the sigh of his breath. "No. I am not a borebel."

"I wish—I wish you had been. But I knew you were not. Are you going to be very angry?"

"You saved my life," said the Cnite, "in spite of the deep longing of your heart. I too have a deep longing for a special love. I cannot give you the dagon for a fearless-eyed child loves it, but I will give you, for your sacrifice, whatever else you may ask of me."

The Boy licked his mouth. "Then may I have—" He stopped and swallowed. "Then may I please have your sword?"

The Cnite Caerles was silent. Little winds came plucking at him, springing away like teasing children. The great dagon rolled over and scratched its back on the bracken. He drew it finally from his belt and it flowed silver in the light and tiny jewels, red and white and green, winked in its hilt.

"It is yours," he said, "because you asked it of me. But why do you want it?"

"To kill borebels bravely with, when they come snuffling in my mother's garden. And then I will not have to dig any more pits."

Caerles gave him the sword. The Boy's eyes caressed it from pommel to tip and he smiled. "It is very beautiful. But not," he sighed, "as beautiful as the dagon beside me at night. And now, if you will come, my mother will give you some breakfast. And some water to wash with..."

The Boy's mother shook the Boy for leaving the Cnite overnight in the borebel pit, and then she hugged him to her, winking and blinking, for his quick wits, and then she shook him again for his request of the sword. Then she filled a heaping bowl of porridge for the Cnite and listened to the tale of his search. Then she said,

"There is no such thing as the Mirk-Well of Morg."

“I know,” Caerles said. “But you see I must find it.”

The Boy’s mother shook her head. “Mirk-Well of Morg is a tale for old men and babies, not for great Cnites. Now, if I were you, which I am not, being simple and stout and motherly, I would look in the Floral Wold at the World’s End. Now, there is a place for a Throme of beauty. A dreamer dreamed the Floral Wold, and it appeared, somewhere beyond the sunrise. I would go there. But then I am only a poor old woman with only half my teeth, and the Throme most likely does not exist. But I would go there, to the Floral Wold, if I were a brave Cnite with a loving, weeping woman. Eat your porridge.”

The Cnite Caerles ate his porridge. Then he said, “I do not know where to go. The Erie Merle said nothing of a Floral Wold, but I cannot go to the Mirk-Well of Morg without a sword.”

“It does not exist,” said the Boy’s mother, “and it was wrong of the Boy to ask for your sword.”

“He would not give me the dagon,” the Boy argued contentedly; “I would have taken that instead.”

The Boy’s mother ticked her tongue. Then she bent down and lugged a worn chest out of a spider-woven corner. She opened the lid and it wailed with age. A glow came from the chest like the milk-white eye of a lost star. “This my mother gave me,” she said, “and her mother to her. It is the guiding light to the Floral Wold, the candle that illumines dreams.” She lifted the star from the chest. It pulsed, softly white at the end of a staff, now petaled like a flower, now pointed like crystal, and the far heart of it was ice-blue. The Boy’s eyes grew wide, twin stars from the star-wand winking in them.

“Oh, it is beautiful,” he sighed longingly, and his mother slapped his reaching hands.

“Greedy,” she said, glowering. “Be content with the pure jewels in that sword.” She gave the star to Caerles, and the longing came, too, into his voice.

“Oh, Lady,” he said softly, “I am greedy, too, for that land where this grew. If it exists, then I think I will begin to believe that the Throme exists, too, somewhere beyond the sunrise, beyond the World’s End.”

4

And so the Cnite Caerles rode towards the World’s End, with the glowing-eyed dagon bounding beneath him and the starlight of dreams ablaze at his side. And the rising sun traced a path of gold before him, and the end of the road lay in the secret heart of the Floral Wold. On the third day of his riding he came to a

norange orchard. The noranges grew full round, flaming orange and green among the warm leaves. Soft, sleepy winds drowsed through tiny specks of flowers, red, blue, yellow, white, dancing like stars across the orchard grass. The Cnite Caerles paused in the noon shadow of a tree. He picked a norange and peeled it slowly. Green and gold flies with jewelled wings hummed around him at the scent of it. The sunlight dripped from leaf to leaf and pooled upon the green grass. Caerles ate his norange, piece by piece, and the sun weighed upon his eyelids, and the jewel-flies hummed a dream from hidden places. The green world slept beyond the orchard, lulled motionless. Watching it, the Cnite's eyes grew still, and the norange grew heavy in his hand.

He fell asleep beneath the orchard tree and dreamed a dream...

A jingler came flickering across the meadowlands, one-half of him red, one-half white. The bells on his hood winked and tinkled in the lazy winds. He sang, his fingers plucking at a gold-stringed harp, his voice light and cheerful in a dolorous song:

*I loved a lady once
Beneath an orchard tree
The fine lady Gringold
And she did not love me.
I sang my love to her
And she laughed at me
Fine-fingered Gringold
Beneath a norange tree.
Wake up and listen, Cnite
Wake and listen to me
Or you will taste of sorrow
Beneath that Gringold tree.*

He came to the edge of the tree's shadow, and stopped, looking down at the blinking Cnite and the yawning dagon. "Ho, Sir Cnite. Have you seen a lovely, light-fingered lady?"

"No," said Caerles.

"Then you are fortunate," said the jingler, and sitting down, he whirled a handful of harp-sounds light as butterflies into the air. His dark brows were arched in mockery, and smiles came and went in his eyes and tugged at the corners of his mouth. "She is a wilful wicked woman, even though she is more beautiful than a redbird in flight, or a flower new-opened."

"I know a woman so beautiful," said Caerles. "She is the candle-flame in the dark room of my heart, and she loves me."

"Then you are very fortunate," said the jingler. "But no man in love with a true lady should sleep beneath this norange tree. Why are you not at her side?"

"I cannot be, until I find the deep Throme of the Erril of Sherill."

The jingler plucked three strings and sent a sad chord into the air. “Then you will never be with her, Cnite, for the Throme is a dream.”

“That may be so, but I will find it.”

“Where will you look for it?”

“In the Floral Wold, at the World’s End.”

The jingler laughed. “Then go back to sleep, Sir Cnite, and step into your dream for only then will you ever reach the World’s End.”

Caerles was silent a moment. The dagon licked idly at his hands, and watched the jingler out of quiet, violet eyes. “You may mock me,” the Cnite said at last, “as I mocked the King who sent me on this hopeless quest. But I will not yield my true love to all the world’s laughter. I will go where I must, find what I must to get that Throme, for that is the price of my loving. You also would do what you must, however impossible, to win your Gringold’s loving.”

“I do not love the Lady Gringold,” said the jingler.

“Then why are you here beneath her tree?”

The jingler turned his face away.

There came a lady into the shadow. Her hair was wound in soft gold braids to the hem of her green robe, and her green eyes were smiling, full of hidden things. The wind shook her robe and from her came the sweet, light scent of noranges. She sat down beside the Cnite Caerles and touched his hands softly with her cool, fine fingers.

“There is one man left in this wide world with the dream of love. Do not let this jeering jingler wither the flame of your dream with his windy words. Tell me of your quest and I will help you if I can.”

“I must find the Throme of the Erril of Sherill,” said Caerles. He looked into the lady’s eyes as he spoke, and suddenly there was no color in the world but the clear ice-green of them, and no sound in the world but the memory of her voice. Far away, beyond the world, he heard the jingler’s voice in mockery:

*Wake up and listen, Cnite
Wake and listen to me
Or you will taste of sorrow
Beneath that Gringold tree...*

“I have heard,” said Gringold, “of the King’s Damsen. All she does is weep.”

“Some ladies,” said the jingler, “have a heart to weep from.”

“A true love,” said Gringold, “would not send a Cnite on such an impossible quest from which he will never return. Perhaps, fair Cnite, she does not want you to return.”

“Some women,” said the jingler, “know what it is to be faithful.”

“She will have to wait a very long time. Perhaps even now the image of her moon-haired Cnite is fading, and there is some brown-haired, berry-eyed Cnite who caught her fading fancy as he passed beneath her window.” The sweet voice of the Lady Gringold purred like the wind among the tiny flowers. “Perhaps she is no longer weeping. Perhaps she already has learned to laugh from a Cnite who is there beside her, not riding down a road with no end, searching for a Throme that is an old man’s dream, a wicked King’s wanting...”

Caerles drew a sigh from the wind’s breath. He whispered, “There is a place in my heart you have hurt...”

“Some women,” said the jingler, “can touch a thing without hurting it.”

“All jinglers,” said the Lady Gringold, “are tearless and faithless and cruel.” She took her eyes suddenly away from Caerles’ face and the world came back to him, golden and drowsing in the afternoon sun. The jingler’s smiling had gone from his eyes and his voice.

“I made a song of you, more beautiful than any song, and you laughed at it,” he said. “I loved you and you mocked me, under your norange tree. And now you are holding this Cnite’s hands, and talking to him in a voice sweeter than norange-juice.” He turned away abruptly and folded his arms and stared across at the World’s End.

“I waited for you,” said Gringold, “one afternoon beneath this tree, and you did not come. And I like this Cnite and I will help him if I choose.”

“I would not trust you,” the jingler said to the sky, “if I were that Cnite. I did come, that afternoon, and you were not there.”

“I was there!”

“You were not!”

The Lady Gringold folded her lips tightly. The jingler leaned back against the tree and began to pick at his harp, and watch the wind go by.

*Fair lady
False lady
There is no other kind
Green norange
Golden norange
No other can you find.*

“Damsen is both fair and true,” Caerles said slowly. “There is no berry-eyed Cnite. That is a dream woven of empty words.”

“So is the Throme woven,” said the jingler above his harp-strings. “And so is the Floral Wold.”

“Then where shall I look?” Caerles mourned, and the dagon lifted its great

head and whined in sympathy.

“Stop looking, and go back.”

“No. The King’s wanting will still be there. I will find it.”

The Lady Gringold loosed his hands and sighed. “Cnite, you are steadfast. There was a song I heard long ago, when my tree was a slender, stirring thing, of a Throme haunting the dark, dank, Dolorous House of a dead Doleman. Go there, and you may find it.”

The jingler laughed. “What woman is worth the price of the step across that threshold?”

The Lady Gringold stood up slowly. She grew taller as she rose, so that her shadow touched the edge of the norange tree’s shadow and flowed beyond it. “Jingler.” she said gently, “it is not wise to mock too much the lady of a norange tree.”

The jingler rose, too, and flung away his harp. His bells jingled wildly at his own sudden growing. “Nor is it wise,” he said bitterly, “to keep a Noak-lord waiting beneath your tree.”

“You are not a Noak-lord! You are only a silly jingler with a capful of bad rhymes.”

“Can a jingler do this?” said the jingler, and he whirled a circle until he vanished and in his place a great, red bird bigger than the norange tree sucked the wind into its wings. The dagon rose and howled at it. The Lady Gringold laughed a spiteful note, and her hair streamed like threads of honey in the wind.

“I would rather have this moon-haired Cnite who can do nothing but dream. I will fly away with him to the World’s End and leave a Noak-lord beating at my closed gates—” And her streaming hair whirled about her, spinning into a green-gold bird with ice-green eyes that swooped, open-clawed, at the Cnite Caerles. The dagon hissed its breath of flame and the wide wings beat flame back at it. Caerles lifted his shield against the fall of the lady-bird and the golden talons closed about it, lifted him out of the shadow of the norange tree, lifted him above its branches, lifted him into the great blue of sky with the red bird blazing in pursuit.

And suddenly he dropped...

He woke to twilight beneath the norange tree, and the quiet-eyed dagon licked his face. The sun had gone from between the grass-blades. The wind lay at rest beyond the blue hills. The noranges hung winking like jewels in the still trees. He looked at them and smiled.

“I had a foolish dream,” he murmured, remembering. The dagon’s tail thumped at his voice. The Cnite rose, yawning, the star-wand shining softly at

his side, and reached for his shield. It was gone. And in the place where it had been there lay a gold-stringed harp.

5

And so the Cnite Caerles rode to find the Dolorous House of the dead Doleman, the star-wand ice-white at his side, the gold harp gleaming at his back. And as he rode through the days, the winds hummed a deep, dark Throme without words of storm and purple cloud and sharp, cold rain. The storm came at last, like a black-cloaked king with a fanfare of thunder. Rain slid beneath Caerles' shirt of mail and ran across his face like tears. The dagon's eyes glittered in the flashing lightning. He howled at the wild winds, and they screamed back, sweeping away across the wet world. Caerles stopped finally beneath a barren tree, blinking away the silver rain misting the coming night.

"Oh, dagon," he sighed, "any house will do for us tonight, a house of the living or of the dead..." He moved away from the black-limbed tree and lightning split it from top to root. In the sudden, blazing light he saw a cottage white-walled against a hill, with a single window watching the night like an eye.

The dagon's paws sank deep into the wet road in its running, and its violet eyes were the only stars in the world. It whimpered as it reached the cottage door and the hearth-flame melted warm across the window. The door opened slowly; a single eye looked out at them through a crack.

"Who is there?"

"I am the Cnite Caerles," said Caerles through the rain in his mouth. "I am cold and wet, and I beg shelter from the storm."

The voice was silent a moment. "If you are a Cnite, where is your sword and your shield? And why are you riding that—that—"

"Dagon."

"Dagon. My mother said I should never speak to swordless Cnites riding dagon."

"I am looking for the Throme of the Erril of Sherill," said Caerles. "Child—"

"I am not a child," said the voice haughtily. "I am a young damsel. My name is Ferly. Your dagon has beautiful eyes. What is that star at your side?"

"Young damsel," said the Cnite, "I am searching for the Dolorous House of the dead Doleman, in which I may find the Throme. A child would let a Cnite drown in rain beneath the night sky while she chattered, but a true lady, such as

the Damsen I love, would open her door and lead him graciously to her hearth fire.”

The door opened farther, to Ferly’s face. “Oh,” she said slowly, and her long fingers clasped together. “Do you love the King’s Damsen? Is she beautiful? Does she weep with love for you—is that why she cries? Are you questing for love of her? Why, you are all wet. Come in.” She opened the door wide and smiled graciously. The wild wind pounced like a cat across the threshold and set the hearth-flames fleeing. Caerles dismounted wearily and stepped into the house, leaving wet footprints on the stone floor. The damsel was lean and long-haired, her face flickering like an eager flame, her fingers and elbows jointed like smooth twigs. She pulled a bench in front of the fire for Caerles to sit on, and then she led the dagon into a shed beside the house. Then she sat down in front of the fire and looked at Caerles out of her quick, bright eyes.

“I know where the Dolorous House is,” she said. Caerles, lulled by the warm, dancing fire, blinked awake.

“Where is it?”

“Ride down the road on your dagon, and the road will twist and turn three times, and on the third twist there is a hill, and on the hill is the black, crumbling, rotting House of the dead Doleman. It has great towers without doors, and walls like broken teeth, and when the moon is round, then strange, colored lights shine above the House, and strange shoutings come from beyond the walls. My mother says I must never go there, or one day I will vanish and no one will hear of me, ever again. They will only hear my voice crying from the dark towers when the moon is full.” She shivered, and smiled up at the Cnite, her eyes cups of firelight. “It is very frightening. But I know a secret protection.”

“What is that?”

She paused, thinking, her head tilted like a listening bird. “It is magic,” she said softly. “And I would only give it to someone—someone on a pure quest for a wondrous love. You will have to tell me everything about your quest. And then perhaps I will help you.”

So Caerles told her of the King’s deep wanting, and of Damsen’s weeping, and of the dagon and the child Elfwyth of the Erie Merle, and of the Boy and the borebel pit, and the Lady Gringold and her norange tree. And the damsel Ferly listened closely, her mouth opened in her listening, her hands clasped upon her knees. She gave a slow, deep sigh when he had done.

“Oh, it is a marvellous quest, falling into borebel pits and being flown away by Lady-birds, all for the love of a weeping Damsen.” Her hand crept gently upon Caerles’ arm and her eyes were suddenly still and shy. “I will tell you a secret,” she said. “There is a shepherd boy across the meadow who left a

flower on a stone for me...”

The Cnite smiled. “That is a marvellous thing, too,” he said, and she smiled back.

“Yes.” She jumped up then, and wrapped a long, patched cloak about her. “And now, I will give you your protection, since you are a true Cnite. I found it one day beneath the walls of the Dolorous House. Wait.”

She opened the door and vanished suddenly into the singing, weeping winds. The Cnite Caerles rose and watched for her out of the open door. Things moved and howled beyond his eyesight, and great, invisible trees shivered and chattered like ghosts. Far away, above a black hill, tiny specks of strange-colored light flickered like the rich wings of butterflies.

Ferly returned finally, breathless, her hair knotted and wet, her hands overflowing with an old sack. She knelt on the stone floor and opened the sack. A great cloak tumbled out, made of leaves of all colors, all shapes, sewn together with a thread of vine-stem. She held it out to him.

“It will protect you from all danger. And it will make you invisible.”

Caerles took it slowly. “That is not possible.”

“It is. Everything is possible. You will go in and out of the Dolorous House and not one evil eye will see you. Put it on!”

Caerles swung it about his shoulders. It settled, rustling softly, brushing the floor. He put the cloak over his head and looked at her. Ferly giggled suddenly behind her hands.

“Oh, it is marvellous. But that silvery shirt—you must take it off, because it will not disappear and it looks funny.”

“But I will have no protection against blows from knife or sword,” Caerles protested.

“You will not need it, because no one with a knife or sword will see you. Take it off.”

Caerles pulled off his shirt of mail reluctantly, and stood unprotected in his dark doublet with three moons floating on it. He put the cloak of leaves back on and the damsel Ferly clasped her hands.

“Oh, yes! It is truly magic. Everything is magic on a quest for love. You will find your Throme. My bones feel it. And then you will go home and marry your Damsen because of my cloak of many leaves. Now you must go.”

“But it is raining,” Caerles said.

Ferly danced to the door and opened it to the starless night. Her voice hushed. “Adventure comes on nights like this, when the whole world is whispering magic. A true Cnite would not complain of a little rain.”

“That is more than a little rain,” Caerles argued, looking at it. Ferly turned to get his harp and his star-wand. She pushed them into his hands, and her eyes were dark and solemn.

“You must go now. My bones feel it. Think how wet your Damsen must be after all her weeping. You must go for her wet sake. I saw the strange lights, tonight, and I know this is the night to slip secretly into a Doleman’s House and steal his Throme.”

Caerles sighed a dreary sigh. Then he said, “Thank you most deeply for your hearth and your help. If there is one thing I may do for you—”

“Oh please,” said Ferly, and her hands were folded in petition. “Please, there is a thing. May I—may I have your beautiful silver shirt? May I leave it for a shepherd boy, on a stone?”

Caerles smiled. “Oh yes,” he said reluctantly.

The dagon mourned as it sped over the muddy road, turned through its twistings, while the trees arched across it, raging with the wind of their passing. At the third turning dark walls of stone rose on a hill against the smokey clouds, and strange wheels of color swirled above it. The road ran through the mouth of its gate.

The dagon lit a great door with the glow of its mouth. Caerles went to it softly and opened it. It cried at the opening like a wailing beast. A great hall stood silent behind it, black but for a half-eaten log on a hearth.

A candle winked suddenly on Caerles’ face. An old, hunched man with hollow eyes stared at him.

“Who are you?” His voice quivered like a loose harp-string. “What are you beneath that strange cloak?”

Caerles was still a moment. Then he pushed the hood back from his face and rubbed his eyes. “What house is this?”

“It is the House of the Lady Welman. Do you want shelter? Why did you not knock? You frightened my old heart.”

“I am the Cnite Caerles in quest of the Throme of the Erril of Sherill. I was told this is the Dolorous House of the dead Doleman.”

The old man shook his head. “I have heard tales of that House. It was said to stand here once. Some say they can still see it, and its strange lights, on nights like this, but I have never seen it... Are you hungry? Come with me, and I will give you supper and a warm fire.” He turned, and led Caerles through the still hall. “Now, the Throme I have heard of, too. I think you will find it at the Western Wellsprings, beneath the setting sun. They say that is where Sherill is.”

“They said also,” Caerles said, “that it is in the Mirk-Well of Morg, at the Floral Wold, and in the Dolorous House of the dead Doleman.”

The old man shook his head once. “No.”

“No?”

“No. It is at the Western Wellsprings. That is where the Erril wrote it.”

Caerles sighed.

6

And so the leaf-cloaked Cnite, the star-wand at his side and the harp at his back, rode the dagon with the morning winds to find the Throme at the Western Wellsprings. The storm had wept its fill and gone. Trees glittered with jewels of rain and clear puddles mirrored the moving sun. The Cnite rode slowly through the wet world, and tiny birds swooped in the air above his head and splashed in pools on the meadow-grasses. He made, in the morning world, a song for his Damsen and plucked it from the gold harp. The dagon howled with his singing, and tiny animals scurried, startled under hidden leaves. A river wound out of nowhere and danced beside him, following. It widened as it moved, and its singing voice deepened as it tumbled over the heads of mossy rocks and shimmered into spinning pools. And suddenly it swept across his path, and the Cnite halted at its bank.

“Oh, Dracoberus,” he murmured to the dagon, whose flaming tongue was lapping water, “I do not like swimming wet rivers.” And he looked up and down the bank for a shallow place to cross, but the river was wide and deep and slow. Across the river a green wood grew of round, plump trees, tall trees like closed fans, and great old trees with strong, broad limbs swooping low over the green water, and high into the clear sky. Flowers gathered at their roots, red and bright sun yellow and purple as the dagon’s eyes. And the wind, nestling among them, blew a sound across the water like sweet golden bells, and above the rippling water, high voices laughed in secret. The faint wind smelled of growing things. A thought opened like a flower in the Cnite’s heart and he smiled slowly.

“Is it there?” he whispered. “Is it there the Erril’s Throme of loveliness was written?” And he nudged the dagon forward, but it whimpered at the wide water’s edge and danced away. “Oh, dagon,” sighed the Cnite, “you have taken me this far. Can you not go a little farther, for my sake and my sweet Damsen’s?”

The dagon barked at the river, and fire hissed and spattered in it. Far across the river, flowers jangled like soft bells, and the noon sun flickered in the green

grass. The dagon barked again, but the water would not go away. Then a voice said beside them,

“I will take you across the river, Tree-Man, but there will be a price.”

Caerles looked down. A man stood beside him with a pole, his shoulders broad, knotted like tree roots. His eyes were wide and cautious. Caerles said,

“I am a Cnite. Why do you call me a Tree-Man?”

“I have never seen so many living leaves without a tree,” the young man said. “And I have never seen a Cnite without a sword or shield. And I have never seen a Cnite ride a Thing like you are riding. I will take you but I will not take That, because it will burn my boat and that is all I own.”

Caerles shook his head. “I will not go without him. He does not belong to me, and I must keep him safely and return him. What land is that, beyond the river?”

“I do not know. People go across, and they do not come back to tell me. A great King’s court lies beyond the trees, I have heard. Do you want to go there? You must pay me. I am a poor man and I have a wife and a son with no shoes.”

“What do you want of me?” Caerles said. “I will give you whatever you ask that belongs to me, for I think beyond this river lies the ending of my quest. But you must take the dagon across, too.”

“I will take him if he does not bark. I do not know if a Tree-Man has anything I will want.”

“I am a Cnite,” said Caerles, “and I can give you a promise of jewels, though I have none with me.”

“I can give you a promise of all the King’s gold,” the boatman said. “I do not want to offend a Tree-Man, but I have never seen a jewel and I do not believe in them. But there is one thing I believe in of yours.”

“Ask it of me.”

“Give me your mouse-colored boots for my son to wear.”

Caerles bent slowly and took off his boots. He gave them to the man and sat on the dagon, bare-headed, barefoot, listening to the gentle wind while the man brought his boat to them. The river spun in whorls from his dipping oars as he rowed them across, and the water was green and still and bottomless beneath them. Birds chattered from the woods ahead and flicked like jewels from branch to branch. A singing rose, soft as sunlight beyond the wind, and the Cnite smiled, and the quiet dagon licked his face. The boat thumped softly in the shallows and the boatman leaped ashore and drew them in beneath the sighing trees.

“Fare well, Cnite,” he said as Caerles stepped on the land. “There are those

who look for quest's endings, and others who are content with a pair of boots. I wish you your contentment." And he got back into the boat and shoved it away with a ripple of oar. Caerles moved forward among the flowers massed at his feet. Ahead of him the trees thinned, and a meadow grew, full of cows with silver bells. Beyond the meadow fields began, lined with new plowing, and in the distance, on a hill, sat the dark, closed stone walls of the castle of Magnus Thrall, King of Everywhere.

A sadness beat in Caerles' heart like the sudden ache of bruised bone. He sat down on a fallen tree, murmuring wordlessly of despair, and the dagon whimpered and licked his hands.

"Oh, dagon," he mourned finally, "now what shall I do? I have made a circle of my quest, and there seems no ending to it. I have failed my Damsen, for I am too weary to hope any longer. There is no Throme, and if it does exist, it is always just beyond my outstretched hand, just beyond my eyesight."

The leaves shook suddenly above him, as though they were laughing. He looked up and found a great tree full of children.

They looked down at him out of secret eyes, as they clung to smooth, strong branches. They were small, and simply dressed, and their clothes were colored like the deep hearts of flowers. The leaves rustled again, and a boy dropped to the Cnite's bare feet. His eyes were round as berries, and his hands were brown with earth.

"Why are you sad, Tree-Man?" he said, and his voice squeaked a little with fear. "Do you have a mother to tell you everything will be all right?"

"No," said Caerles, and the small boy vanished, suddenly as a bird. A girl called down to the Cnite, her hair short and curly, like a cap of sunlight.

"Climb our tree, Tree-Man, and you can see the whole world. Climb our tree, and you can see the sky, and you will not feel sad. I know. Come and sing with us."

"There is no song in me," said the Cnite.

"Then we will sing to you," a black-eyed boy said, and their sweet voices rose and drifted down the wind.

A woman came running through the trees, wiping her hands on her apron as she followed the berry-eyed child. He stopped, pointing, in front of the Cnite.

"See—the Tree-Man and his Fire-Dog."

"He is sad," the Tree-Children called down and the bright-faced woman, her hair bound in a colored kerchief, smiled a little, and edged towards the Cnite.

"The dagon will not harm you," said Caerles, and she came to stand beside him by the log.

“There is no such thing as a tree-man,” she said, and Caerles smiled.

“I am a Cnite,” he said woefully, “on a quest for the Throme of the Erril of Sherill.”

“There is no such thing,” said the mother.

“I know, but if I do not find that Throme, I may not have the one thing I want: the sad-eyed Damsen of Magnus Thrall. That is why I am sad.”

The sweet-eyed mother sat on the log beneath her child-tree. “But why are you barefoot, cloaked in leaves, with a harp at your back and a star at your side? I have seen Cnites and Cnites, but never a Cnite like you. They wear swords and shirts of metal and they ride horses, not dagon.”

“I have been on a strange quest,” said Caerles, and told her of it. The children were silent above him, their faces resting against the branches as they listened. The mother sighed when it was done.

“Oh, what a silly, wicked King to send you on such a quest, when he should have given his Damsen to you. But of course, there is one thing left to do.”

“Is there?”

“Of course. You must write the Throme of the Erril of Sherill yourself.”

7

And so the Cnite Caerles wrote a Throme, and it was a deep Throme and a dark, haunting, lovely Throme, a wild, special sweet Throme, made of the tales and dreams and happenings of his quest. He sat beneath the child-tree and wrote it, and the children played and sang and called like birds from tree to tree. They sat on the dagon’s back and scratched its ears, and they leaned against the Cnite and watched him write.

The mother brought them milk and bread beneath the tree, and the Cnite ate and drank and kept writing. The sun slipped finally behind the dark house of Magnus Thrall, and the silver-belled cows went home across the cool meadow, and the weary children slipped away one by one to sleep. The Cnite put down his feather pen.

“It is a lie,” he said.

“It is a Throme,” said the mother, “and it is time for the King to give up his Damsen so that she can learn to laugh.” She held the last waking child to her side, its face resting in her apron. Caerles smiled at the name she spoke.

“Yes.” He stood up, rolling the Throme neatly, and the dagon sprang to its feet. “I will return now, to the King’s house. One day, I will come back here

with Damsen, and then I can give you fairly the thanks for your help today.”

The mother smiled. “That will be fair thanks,” she said.

“Goodbye, Tree-Man,” said her child, yawning and its plump small hand flashed in the twilight like a star.

The Cnite Caerles rode the silent-pawed dagon over the drawbridge of Magnus Thrall’s house. The dagon followed him up the dark, winding stairs, through the empty halls, past silent rooms to the last high room where firelight flashed red beneath the closed door and a gentle, broken voice sang behind it. The Cnite opened the door. The dark-robed shadow that was Magnus Thrall stopped its pacing before the fire. The needle and needlework dropped from Damsen’s hands, and her face turned towards Caerles, pale and glistening, motionless with astonishment.

Then, suddenly, she began to laugh.

Her laughter was high and sweet and full, and the tears of it flashed like starlight in her eyes. She wiped them with her fingers and rose to touch the wordless Cnite.

“Oh, my Caerles,” she said in laughter and tears. “Oh, my Caerles, you are barefoot. Why are you dressed in leaves like a tree-man? Where is your cloak? Did you really ride this dagon instead of your horse? Oh, my fair and proper Cnite, where are your mouse-colored boots?”

“Where,” said the King, “is the Throme?”

“I have brought you the Throme,” said Caerles. “And now you must keep your promise.” He gave the King the rolled Throme, and looked into the wine-colored, laughing eyes of the King’s Damsen.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. I never knew before how much I want a barefoot, leaf-cloaked Cnite. Oh, my Caerles, how did you find the Throme? It does not exist.”

“I found it,” said Caerles, and he put his hands on her face and looked deeply into her eyes.

Behind them the dark King whispered,

“The star-wand and the golden harp, the dark well, and the house of death, the jewel-eyed wiseman and the bottomless river and the flower world at the world’s end... The Throme. It is the Throme!” His voice shouted suddenly like a trumpet. “Take Damsen for I no longer need her weeping, and my heart will no longer wail with longing for a thing which does not exist. I have the Throme! I will wake content to the sunlight and simple wind, open my doors to the chatter of birds and churttels. I will be content with the green world, with the light that fades and the singing leaves that wither so quickly, for I have the Throme of such beauty that will never fade. I will make you my Chief Cnite—”

“I already am your Chief Cnite,” said Caerles.

“I will give you fat lands and churttels to toil over them and a house more magnificent than mine for Damsen and your sons.”

“And daughters,” said Caerles.

“I will proclaim your name in every village and city as the Cnite who has done the impossible deed of finding the lost Throme of the Erril of Sherill.”

Caerles sighed. “It is a lie,” he said to the dark eyes of Damsen, and Magnus Thrall’s voice stopped shouting and quivered.

“A lie?”

“I wrote the Throme. It is the Throme of the Cnite Caerles.”

The night was silent within the Dark King’s walls and without. The King stood still as the dark wood of an unlit torch. Damsen stopped smiling. Her mouth quivered.

“You wrote this Throme?” Magnus Thrall whispered.

“Yes.”

“How did you write it?”

“Sitting under a child-tree, with paper and a feather pen.”

“But I do not need a magnificent house,” Damsen said wistfully. “I need this leaf-cloaked Cnite with a gentle voice.”

Magnus Thrall stepped closer to them, his eyes flickering with firelight, his hands clasped tight around the Throme. “But where did you find the words for it? The names and dreams and colors for it?”

“Everywhere,” said Caerles to Damsen’s eyes.

“In my land you built this Throme?”

Caerles looked at him. “There was no place else to go. So I built a lie. And now, do what you will with me, because there is no place in the world to find that Throme you wanted.”

The King of Everywhere took off his crown. He threw it against the stones and it bounced and spun and rolled into a corner. And then he took the rolled Throme of the Cnite Caerles and flung it into the fire, where little flames danced black across it.

“You lied to me!”

“I know,” whispered Caerles.

“You failed your quest.”

“I know.”

“You tried to trick me with a false Throme, to slyly take my Damsen from me.”

“But I love your Damsen,” said Caerles helplessly, and Damsen, clinging to his leaf-cloaked arm, looked up at him with dry, midnight eyes. The dark King’s shadow ran like withered ivy across the stone walls.

“There are Cnites and Cnites,” he said. “There will be other Cnites to find the great Throme, other Cnites to love Damsen, to lead her into the green world. You are not my Cnite. You are a Tree-Man, with no shield but a silly harp, and no sword but a fading star. I must have the Throme for the ease of my longing heart and I will wait for it in these dark rooms forever if I must, and my Damsen will wait here with me.”

The Tree-Man Caerles sighed beneath his leaves. He sighed again, his leaves whispering, his eyes on the fading star of his Throme. He said softly, “Then I will go back and look again, forever if I must, and Damsen, if it pleases her, will wait here for me.”

Damsen’s mouth trembled. Then she straightened beside Caerles and her mouth went straight and taut as a new bow-string. “I will not,” she said to him, and her eyes were dry as nights with a thousand stars. “I will not wither here in these stones.” She turned to Magnus Thrall. “I do not care about your Throme. I want this moon-haired, barefoot Cnite, and I will have him, Throme or no Throme. I want to walk in the singing world. I want to laugh instead of weep. You can weep here alone. I will go with him.” She turned back to Caerles and took his hands. “And you will write your Throme again for me. I have known a fair and moon-colored Cnite with a horse and shield and sword, and I know a barefoot Tree-Man with a Dagon and a star-wand, and I know which one sang a Throme to my heart to make it wake and laugh. I know, in all the worlds, there is no Throme more beautiful than the Throme of the Tree-Cnite Caerles.”

Words gathered like tears in the Tree-Cnite’s eyes. He shook his head, smiling through them. “No,” he whispered. “There is one more beautiful Throme, and that is one I will write only for you, my Damsen.”

“Bah,” said Magnus Thrall. He looked at the dark, still walls around him. He kicked the fire to make it spark. Flames leaped upward, but still the shadows clung like cob-web to the silent corners. “You will regret it. He is no longer my Chief Cnite.”

“He is mine,” said Damsen.

“He brought back dishonor and failure from his quest, and he will have no place in my favour.”

“There is no favour in you for anyone.”

“From my stone walls to his stone walls you will go.”

“No,” said the Tree-Cnite quickly. “I know a place with quiet water and wind singing through trees, where I will build a house for you with flowers at your doorstep and cows with cow-bells in your field.”

“I would like to hear a cow-bell,” said Damsen.

“And together, if it pleases you, we will grow a great tree full of children.”

His Damsen smiled. “I would like a child-tree.”

“Cow-bells,” said Magnus Thrall. “You will be sorry. You will leave him and come back and wait with me for a proper Cnite.”

“I have a proper Cnite,” said Damsen, and the Tree-Cnite lifted her onto the flower-eyed dagon. “And I will go Everywhere with him.”

“Bah,” said Magnus Thrall. The fiery breath of the dagon lit the dark, winding stones as Caerles led his Damsen into the sweet night-world of whispering grass and moonlit leaves. The King watched the fire-breath fade across the fields like a dying star. In the fire, the ashes of the Tree-Cnite’s Throme crumbled and drifted apart. The dark King stared at them and whispered in the stillness,

“Bah.”

Patricia A. McKillip was born in Salem, Oregon. Since her father was in the Air Force, she lived in various states during her childhood, and spent some time in England in a 300-year-old house. In a fit of boredom one day when she was 14, she sat down in front of a window overlooking a stately medieval church and its graveyard and produced a 30-page fairy tale. She has been writing ever since. She moved to California in 1962, where she was educated at the College of Notre Dame, Belmont and at San Jose State University. She has recently received an M.A. from San Jose State.

*The Throme of the Erril of Sherill is Miss McKillip’s second published book. The first was **The House on Parchment Street**.*

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[A 3S release—v1, html with illustrations]

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