

Thorns

by Martha Wells

Coming down the stairs to dinner, I found the governess engaged in battle with my great great grandnephew. The disgusting little boy was wrestling with the poor woman, apparently trying to thrust her over the bannister.

"An application of the birch rod would settle that, Miss," I said.

"I would dearly love to, Madame," the governess answered, breathless and more sharply than her wont. Perhaps the struggle to preserve her life -- we were on the third landing, and the stone-flagged floor of the Hall was far below -- had overcome her usual reticence. "But I've been instructed to use only modern methods of disciplining the children..."

The unruly creature's mother, my great grand-niece Electra, was hurrying up the stairs toward them, her satin skirts rustling like storm wind. She dithered near the struggle, waving her plump soft hands. "Oh, Malcolm, you mustn't treat Miss Grey so!"

I smiled grimly. Modern ideas. Such notions had succeeded in making the already over-indulged children a terror to the servants and the rest of the household. But Electra has always had a soft heart.

The boy obligingly released his governess, and with a triumphant grin stooped to seize her workbag which had fallen to the carpet. I had no doubt he meant to thrust it over the bannister in her place. I lost patience, and seized the creature by the ear. He desisted with an alarmed shriek -- I'm old, but my fingers are strong. It was an effort not to squeeze too hard. We have cousins who are maddened by the scent of a child's blood in the air, or the sight of the dew of perspiration on a downy cheek. It makes them inconvenient guests at family gatherings. Of course, one can't eat one's own great grandnephews, however deliberate the provocation.

Electra simpered and said, "Oh, dear, Malcolm, you must learn not to be naughty. Naughty boys die and are sent to Hell."

"Some more precipitously than others," I added, thinking of the deep well at the bottom of the garden. Taking my action as tacit permission to apply mild force, the governess seized the creature's other ear as I released my grip, and herded her charge up the stairs.

We continued down, Electra fluttering at my side. "Auntie, you know Malcolm is really a little dear..."

"I know nothing of the kind." Electra is a small woman, for our family, her wispy blond head reaching only to my shoulder. Her figure is plump, and requires a corset to keep its shape, and her eyes are mild and her face cherubic. An odd pair we would seem to outsiders' eyes, for I am grown thin and cadaverous with the long passage of years, and my features were always rather sharp.

"Now, Auntie..."

We reached the landing above the Hall. Below, Electra's husband, Mr. John Dearing, was personally receiving a guest, a young man in the act of handing his greatcoat to the butler.

There were no guests expected, and just before the dinner hour is not considered an appropriate time for casual calls, yet Dearing was greeting this presumptuous fellow as a prodigal son.

He was a striking figure. (The guest, I mean. Dearing is a stout bewhiskered muskrat of a man, a fit mate for Electra.) Blond curls, broad shoulders, a chiseled profile. I felt a feather of unease travel down my spine; old instincts rousing, perhaps. His garments, though somewhat the worse for travel at this rainy time of year, were of fashionable cut and fine cloth.

Frowning, Electra caught the attention of one of the footmen stationed at the bottom of the stairs, and called him up to her to ask, "Why, William, whoever is that?"

"Madame, they say it's a foreign Duke, the son of the King of Armantia."

"I see," Electra dismissed the man and looked to me, her mild dove eyes vaguely troubled. "Oh, dear. A prince."

"It has been a long time," I said. But I've dealt with such before.

"Oh, dear."

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Dinner was delayed, as the Duke's retinue were settled and he himself changed for dinner. He had brought with him only two rather rascally-appearing servants and a valet who would have looked more at home in a cavalry troop. But in this day and age royalty, especially foreign royalty, is permitted to travel at will, and without ostentation.

Through gentle prying among the servants I ascertained that Duke Carl Kohler had been in correspondence with Electra's husband, over some matter of local history to which Dearing pretended an expert knowledge. His arrival had still been unexpected, however. I liked it not. A battle at my age is not the stirring prospect that it was when I was twenty, and in the fullness of my power. I had hoped to wane here in peace, watching the remains of the family bicker and occasionally amusing myself with the requests of the local peasantry, many of whom followed the old ways and remembered my existence.

At table I made sure to be seated so I could observe our illustrious guest without the monstrous bulk of the etagere blocking my view, and listened to such talk as passed for conversation among the others present. Several of Dearing's brothers and nephews were with us tonight, and were all flattered by the Duke's condescension and intent on making perfect asses of themselves. Kohler's smile was ready and his accent was barely discernible; he had, I believe, been educated in this country. I felt our guest's eyes on me, with more frequency than quite right -- I was no longer the kind of woman young men stared at.

It wasn't until the last remove of turbot that the reason for this visit was aired. As Dearing, who fancied himself something of an amateur historian, came to the end of a tiresome monologue on the age of the parish church, Kohler leaned forward and said, "That is fascinating, but the subject that I truly wanted to consult you on was the legends concerning the Great Thorn Forest. I'm thinking of making a study of it, myself."

Electra had been consuming wine, and at this point gave vent to a most unladylike snort. As her dinner companions were compelled to come to her aid, and the attention of the table was momentarily distracted, I said, "Are you really? I would never have guessed."

He turned the dazzling smile on me, and I saw I had not imagined the wary suspicion in the depths of his blue eyes. He said, "I am, Madame. Would you be able to assuage my curiosity?"

"If I could, I daresay I wouldn't. We all know the danger of curiosity."

"And is the Great Thorn Forest very dangerous, Madame?" he pounced.

Electra had sufficiently recovered, and the others were beginning to return their attention to us. Dearing caught my eye, and for an instant his expression was appalled. I think he had actually forgotten my intimate acquaintance with the subject under discussion. Hastily, he said, "In the purely botanical sense, your Grace, the thorns are sharp, and rumored to be poisonous. I would count that dangerous."

"In the purely botanical sense," Robson, Dearing's cousin, repeated, laughing heartily. "Good one, old man." Robson was a fool, and what he thought 'botanical' meant was anyone's guess.

A few of the ladies tittered, trying to smooth over the awkward moment and Dearing smiled nervously. Kohler smiled in return, as if he appreciated the joke, but said, "My interest lays more in what is rumored to be within the forest."

"White palaces, with gates of gold?" I said. "Halls paved with marble, hung with silks, velvet, jewels? The inhabitants still present, trapped there in time and magic, men and women -- oh, yes, especially women -- caught in sleep like flies in amber?" It doesn't do to mince words with these people, or they start to imagine themselves subtle.

The others were silent. Kohler's rather wolfish eyes narrowed. "Madame seems to speak from personal experience."

I had to fold my lips over a smile. "Young man, do you believe me as old as that?"

Kohler retreated in confusion.

Dearing nodded importantly. "Yes, there's a tale of a greathouse or keep of some past age trapped within the forest by whatever witchcraft caused the thorns to appear. It's pure legend. The thorns have always been there."

Kohler said, "You must be right," and allowed Dearing to turn the subject to a famous fayre hill in the next county. This worried me more than anything. Our prince had not come to learn anything, or to pry for information. He already knew. Had he known of my presence here when he had decided to break his journey at Dearing's house?

Perhaps.

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The only other clash occurred after the gentlemen had finished their port and cigars, and joined the ladies in the drawing room. I was working on a square of embroidery, seated in a corner away from the fire. I had always preferred spinning, but one can't do it in the drawing room nowadays. I still kept a wheel in my parlor, and spun much of the finer thread we used in the house.

Kohler took a seat near me. He sat forward, a little closer than I liked; if he had done so to one of the other women in the room, I would have felt compelled to intervene. Eyes intent, he said, "Madame...But I don't think we have been properly introduced?"

"If that's so, then you shouldn't be speaking to me at all," I pointed out.

He ignored that. The aristocracy feel they can take or leave manners at will, but let some poor baronet take that attitude with them, and they stiffen up like pokers. He said, "I fear I must apologize, Madame. It

seems I insulted you at dinner." He hadn't liked being made to look a fool, and he was determined to bait me. I gazed at him from under lowered lids. "It seems you did. But if the thought of an apology frightens you, you would be ill-advised to continue on your present course."

"What course is that, Madame?" He spoke heartily, the attitude of a young man jolly along a cantankerous old lady. I disliked him, for all his blond curls and trim body; I had better princes than this, in my prime.

The other ladies were watching us, though the men in the room remained oblivious. The blood is thin now, after all these generations, and it is easy for them to forget, as Dearing had. Electra was so nervous she fluttered like a moth.

I said, "Why, whatever course a foreign noble pursues in our fair country."

"The course of justice, Madame," he said, eyeing me in a sort of grim satisfaction. "Only that."

At the end of the evening, little Master Matthew escaped from the nursery long enough to upset the tea tray on Kohler's fashionable breeches. In the ensuing confusion I rewarded the child with a sweet cake.

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I retired shortly after that, or tried to. Dearing came up briefly to apologize for allowing the dinner conversation to stray to such a sensitive area for our family. I let it pass; I don't think he truly understood Kohler's purpose in coming here, and to most of the household my exploits are only stories, not truly to be believed.

Several of my younger great grand-nieces who fancied themselves my heirs in power came to offer various plots and plans for distracting or disposing of Kohler. One was of such a risqué nature that I was quite impressed, though I reminded the child that enthusiasm was no substitute for experience and talent. After dispensing solace and censure as it was required, I sent them all away, and drew out my mirror to watch our illustrious guest.

He sat with the other men for a long time, until the lamps guttered and a servant was sent for to attend to them. They busied themselves with cards and brandy, though our Prince did not imbibe to excess, as the others did.

Finally Dearing called an end to it, and they stumbled toward the stairs. I paused to stretch; my fingers were cramped from clutching the mirror so tightly. It had been a long day, and I anticipated a long night. I had no way to know whether Kohler would wait the few hours till morning and take his leave of Dearing as if he intended nothing else, or if he would leave the house sometime after the others retired. I would simply have to watch, and wait.

There was a knock at the door of my parlor. I ignored it. The servants knew better than to disturb me and I had no wish to talk to any other member of the household. Then I heard the door ease open.

I was seated at my dressing table, in my bedchamber, and the door connecting it with my parlor stood open. I heard stealthy footsteps cross the carpet, and pause just out of my range of vision.

I smiled, and said, "Oh, do come in and get it over with."

He took that last brave step and stood framed in my bedchamber door. It was Kohler's cavalry-troop valet, clutching a stout walking stick in one sweaty paw.

I admit to disappointment. It's an insult when they send their servants to kill you. My displeasure must

have been evident. He gripped the walking stick more firmly, muttered something like, "For King and country," and rushed at me.

I whipped up my mirror and he caught sight of his own reflection. He stumbled in his headlong rush and froze, as my charm took effect. I had had ample time to prepare it as he crept across the parlor.

His eyes were stunned, then terrified as white whiskers sprouted beneath his nose and gray patches of hair appeared on his face. That face shrunk steadily, disappearing finally within his collar as his suit of clothes collapsed.

I slammed my mirror down on the dressing table and stood, stepping over the confused mouse as it struggled to free itself from the pile of clothing. I hurried from the room without bothering with hat or cloak; I was angry now, truly angry, for the first time since Kohler had arrived.

I took the servants' stairs, which were deserted at this hour, except for two gossiping downstairs maids who fled in panic at my appearance. As I pushed open the baize door I sensed something behind me, and turned just as the second of Kohler's servants was swinging one of our best silver candlesticks straight at my head. I ducked, muttering the first charm that came to mind, and the man cursed and dropped the suddenly red-hot silver.

Before I could take further action, the servant gave a choked cry and stumbled forward to collapse at my feet. Behind him stood Brooks, our head butler, armed with the other candlestick of the pair.

"Very good, Brooks," I said. Brooks has been with us a long time and knows the family history better than Dearing.

"Not at all, Madame." He stepped over the moaning body of Kohler's servant and held the door for me, snapping his fingers for the footmen gathering in the passage behind him to attend to the clutter. "Will Madame be needing the coach brought round?"

"No, thank you, Brooks, I haven't time." I hurried for the outer door. "Oh, Brooks." I paused. "There seems to be a mouse in my rooms. Better have one of the cats sent up."

"At once, Madame."

The night was dank and chill, but the moon was full and my blood was up. I could smell Kohler, the third of his servants, and horse on the night air. At the end of the graveled drive the oak tree informed me that Kohler had indeed passed this way, heading toward the forest.

Swift travel has long been one of my skills, and the moon gives me strength. I sped after him, sometimes on the muddy road, sometimes through the fields when the hedges permitted it.

The sky was gray with dawn when I reached the outskirts of the forest. I had followed in Kohler's path without difficulty, and was satisfied to see his gig standing at the edge of the trees, the young servant standing at the horse's head. This one had never attacked me, so I contented myself with a simple spell of sleep (I am, if I do say so myself, extraordinarily good with spells of sleep.). I blew it toward him on the light morning wind, and he sank to his knees, then slumped to the wet ground. The horse lowered its head to nose him curiously.

Then I moved forward to stand at the edge of the Great Thorn Forest. The tall oaks were like a great wall, impenetrable and mysterious, the gaps between them giving entrance to a green cavern of unknown depth and danger. The smell of damp leaves and decayed secrets hung in the air.

My last hope was that Kohler was not truly of royal blood. But as I pushed past the low branches, I saw

the first growth of thorns had parted for him. They parted for me too, perhaps more willingly since I had given them life, and I took the path I had not taken in years.

Finally I let the thorns close behind me, and threaded my way through what had been an extensive pleasure garden in a century gone by. Before me lay fountains buried under small mountains of moss, marble nymphs and satyrs clothed in tall grass, a sunken lake where gilded boats, empty and derelict, drifted, a waterfall grotto now dry and the domain of spiders, and overgrown mazes, clotted with heavy wild roses and brambles. I heard the humming of bees, drowsy in the morning sun, but naught else stirred.

Vines had conquered the palace even as my spells had, burying it under a green avalanche, allowing only occasional glimpses of the white stone walls, the delicate turrets and arched galleries. But the suffocating greenery had been pulled from before one of the great ironbound doors, and it stood open, a dark passage gaping beyond it.

I caught up my skirts and ran.

The high halls were shadowed, the gem-like panes of the windows darkened by grime and the outer layer of foliage. Dust thick as flour coated the massive furniture, the tarnished silver and still-warm gold. Spider webs of astonishing size stretched down from the oaken beams overhead, bracketing the hall like tattered curtains. Sleeping servants lay in piles of rags, a few courtiers slumped against the walls or stretched on the flagstones, and one woman, curled on her side in a pool of faded silk.

I could see the signs of his passing; he had stopped to peer and touch, even now.

I sped through dark marble halls, to the great winding pile of the central stair.

My power had waned somewhat with the moon's descent, and when I reached that room, that highest chamber in the tallest tower, I was badly out of breath. My hair was coming down in gray hanks and I was glad indeed that I had never bothered with the foolish modern custom of corsets.

The chamber was round with a dozen windows, looking out over the sleeping domain. One was open, the faded curtains drawn back so light fell on the bed draped with velvet and cloth of gold.

For that moment my eyes were only for her.

She was barely more than a child. In the present day she would have lingered in the nursery, learning watercolors and geography. Blond hair covered her silken pillow and her face was pale, pure, and still.

My eyes went to him, next. He had had time to do nothing else but open the window, and stared at me now in shock and angry surprise. "Not one step nearer," I said.

Kohler revealed no fear, and I suspected he felt none. He would have known little fear in his life of privilege. He glared at me impatiently, and said, "You don't smile as you look on your evil work. Can it be you feel regret?" The thorns had torn his coat and his cravat was askew, his curls tousled. I still didn't like him. He had a tendency to go red in the face, and he would probably run to fat later. No, he was not the man to melt my heart at such a juncture.

"Not regret," I said. The journey here had tired me and this place roused memories. "I was young, in the fullness of my power, and the failure to invite me to the christening was only the last and worst of the insults I suffered. Or thought I suffered. I could not have done else, being what and who I was. In a long life I've done worse, and better, since."

He shook his head in disgust. "You are cruel indeed, to look on such an innocent face, and relegate it to

eternal sleep."

"Cruel, yes. But now the cruelty is in the service of kindness. You've seen this place; you must guess its age. The time to wake her is a hundred years past. Releasing her into our world would be to relegate innocence to Hell."

He laughed. "Lies, sophistry."

I persisted, in perhaps a foolish effort to make him understand. "The King here is a King no more. He cannot even claim the land his palace stands on. It would be stripped, the riches stolen. The inhabitants would be lost, maddened by the changes around them. The servants and peasants would be cast out to starve, the nobles trotted about as curiosities. I haven't the power anymore to protect them from it, and must live with the consequences of my folly. You would expose her to that?" It was useless. They will say I have done it from jealousy, that I am an old and bitter woman and I couldn't bear to see a beautiful young girl triumph in happiness.

Let them say it.

I know the world. I began this in foolishness and a desire for vengeance, I admit, and I continued it in folly. But I ended it in sober judgement, and this was not the Prince to break my spell or warm her heart.

The gaze he turned on her had passion in it, but it was not the passion of love. I had seen the same light in young Matthew's eyes, when I gave him the sweet cake. He said, "Her, her I would take back with me, to protect and cherish..."

"And to perdition with her family, her companions, her loyal servants? She would not thank you for that, if the shock of her situation left her with the power of speech." He said nothing, staring at me angrily, and I began to suspect that his motives were even less pure than I had thought. Incredible as it seems, I felt responsible for her, as if I was her nursemaid and not her captor. Moving closer, I said, "But perhaps that would be more to your taste. A prince of your age is surely married?"

He flushed, in a blotchy and unattractive fashion. "I could hardly expect you to understand, witch." He reached into his pocket and I suddenly found myself facing a small pistol.

I blinked foolishly. Now there, stupid old woman, how many times did you tell yourself the rules had changed? My most effective method of defense was a sleep spell, but if I raised my hand to my lips to blow it towards him, he would have time to fire. The pistol's grip was fine wood; if I made the weapon hot, he would still be able to trigger it.

The curtains on the open window behind him stirred, though the air in the room remained musty and still. Delay, I thought, I must delay. I was too old to throw myself about, dodging balls or bullets or whatever it is pistols shoot at one nowadays. Whatever had possessed me to attempt to talk to the man? I said, "A sword is more customary, and more honorable."

His smile was irritatingly complacent. "I know your kind too well to rely on honor, Madame," he said.

"Then it's fortunate you don't know the rest of my family," I replied.

His expression suddenly turned fearful, and I knew he would fire his weapon. I threw myself awkwardly to the floor as the gun went off. Smoke and the stink of powder filled the room. I raised my head and saw Kohler, unconscious and crumpled helplessly on the floor. I pushed myself into an awkward sitting position, and saw the bullet had made a terrible mark on the wall behind me.

Then Electra was bending over me anxiously. Her hair was mussed and torn from her flight up to the

window, and her morning dress stained from crouching in the casement. I had seen her preparing to cast a sleep spell on Kohler, but her spells do not work quite so fast as mine. "Oh, Auntie, are you all right?"

"Of course I am," I said. I was not. I was covered in dust from the floor, and I was bruised and exhausted. Electra took my arm and I allowed her to help me up.

"You should have told me that he meant to come here, Auntie," Electra scolded. "You should never have followed him here alone. He could have killed you."

"He failed," I said. "That is all that matters." Then I ruined the solemn effect by sneezing uncontrollably.

"We'll get you right home for a nice cup of tea," Electra promised, and I admitted that it would be a welcome restorative.

She returned to Kohler's unconscious form and bent over him. "Take his other arm, Auntie?"

I looked down at his lumpy body with distaste. "What on earth for?"

"We're taking him back to the house. I'll put a bit of my special dust in his tea, and he won't remember a thing. We'll tell him he had a nasty fall from his horse, and send him off no whit the wiser." She frowned. "You didn't do anything too permanent to his servants, did you?"

"Not too." I remarked, reluctantly stooping to seize his other arm. I am hardly responsible for the vagaries of cats.

We hauled him toward the window. I had lost my gift for flight years ago, but Electra was strong enough to take all three of us. I thought Kohler deserved to stay here with the woman he meant to awaken. Not as fitting a punishment as I would have devised in my youth, but satisfying nonetheless. But Electra has a soft heart, and it is useless to argue with her.

This story first appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* in June of 1995.

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About the Author:

Martha Wells lives in College Station, Texas, with her three favorite things: her cats, her husband, and her tapes of Mystery Science Theater 3000. Ms. Wells is the author of five critically acclaimed novels: *The Element of Fire*; *City of Bones*; *The Death of the Necromancer*; *Wheel of the Infinite*; and *The Wizard Hunters*.

