

The Choice and The Trial

by Iain Lowson

Though he had sat in this spot many times before, the old traveller never wearied of it. He had often spoken of it to friends, students and others he had met. Even King Dalvanar had been told of this place, this view. From here, Ralersin, Lorekeeper to his majesty King Dalvanar the Twenty Sixth of Tatharyn, could look out across the Carlegg Mountains and be at peace.

The balcony was always cold, even at the height of Summer. Ralersin tugged at the sumptuous fabric of the blanket he had been draped in as he dozed in the simple, comfortable chair that had been here since his first visit to Eyrie many, many years earlier. He drew the blanket in closer and settled down. As ever, Ralersin's gaze turned to the greatest of the peaks of Eyrie, though not the highest.

At dawn, its wide shadow seemed to hold back the sunlight, as though to demonstrate its strength. Eventually, it would allow the warmth to flood forth, but not before every one of the Tylwyth Myndd had remembered the lesson of the Mountain of the Winged Dawn. "You are here and safe," it seemed to say, "at the sufferance of we mountains, but take nothing we have allowed you for granted, lest we snatch it back."

Now, at evening, the Mountain took on a deep golden hue. At this time, it seemed much as Ralersin felt he appeared; an old Master, dozing in the sun. Smiling at this thought, Ralersin patted at his pockets, under the blanket, until he located his pipe. This he filled and lit, sitting back to puff away the evening.

A sound at the very edge of his hearing brought the Loremaster out of his quiet reflection. He was not troubled by this interruption. Indeed, he had been half expecting it. Without looking around, he spoke out.

"Come forth, you silent stalker", he said, dropping his voice to a deeper note. "You cannot expect to surprise an old warrior such as Ralersin, Loremaster to the King of Tatharyn", he finished grandly. There were giggles from behind the heavy curtains that could mask the balcony in colder, more blustery weather. Ralersin pulled a deep, fierce frown as he stood, dramatically throwing aside the blanket. "Come out I say!", he boomed, though his back protested at the sudden movement from the comfortable chair.

More giggles, and the curtains twitched slightly. The old elf had to turn away to mask his broad smile. He chuckled to himself a moment, then spoke again.

"Hmmm", Ralersin rumbled. "Perhaps I was mistaken. It must have been the wind I heard." He looked about him with theatrical display. "Yes, I was mistaken, or my foes are more cunning even than I, sharper even than senses made keen by my centuries of adventuring. 'Tis well for me that I should not meet such foes, for surely it would be an end to me", he said, shaking his head woefully.

“I shall step over to this balcony’s edge, and contemplate how lucky I have been this day”, he intoned, to a chorus of barely stifled laughter from behind the drapes. With much ceremony, and with heavy steps, he stomped to the balcony ledge. As he reached it, the curtains were thrown aside as a group of ten or more elven children burst forth, whooping war cries, and hurled themselves at the Loremaster.

“Ah! I am undone!”, he cried, though his own laughter spoiled the effect. Now, the war cries were exchanged for demands familiar to Ralersin.

“A story, a story, tell us a story!”, was the general cry, and the children dragged the old elf back to his chair. As they reached it, the Loremaster glanced to check where the children’s nanny stood. My she’s a beauty, thought Ralersin. If only, his next thought began, but he stopped it there. No, he thought, I am content with this age, and have worked hard and cleverly to get here. No sense in wishing it away.

As he was bullied and pushed to his seat, where two of the little girls were standing with his blanket, ready to drape it over his shoulders, Ralersin smiled to the nursemaid, who smiled warmly back. Yes, thought the old elf, if only. Now sitting, fully draped, filling his pipe, he began the rest of what had become a ritual with the children of the court of the Tylwyth Myndd.

“Well, first I must have my payment”, he said, studying each of the faces in turn. “No payment, no story”, he grumped, and crossed his arms. The children laughed happily. Ralersin recognised a few, save the youngest, and noted those older ones who were now missing from the group since his last visit. This always troubled Ralersin, who believed that no-one was too old to listen to a good story, especially told by someone such as he.

In answer to his demand for payment, one of the children ran to the nanny, who produced a tall and elegant glass from somewhere just out of sight. The little boy held the glass carefully in both hands as the nanny now brought out a crystal decanter of surpassing beauty, pouring from it the wine which would keep the Loremaster’s voice in tone for the story to come.

Once the child had returned with the glass, setting it beside Ralersin’s chair, the old elf looked over his audience again.

“Well, sit down, my friends, and tell me what story I can weave from the mists of time for your delectation on this most fine and gentle evening.” The children dutifully sat.

“Tell us about a warrior”, one lad called, older than the others. He won’t be part of this audience much longer, Ralersin mused. A pair of little ladies at the front of the group tutted.

“No”, they whined as one. “Tell us about a fine and beautiful lady”, one of them said. The boy who had requested the warrior’s tale rolled his eyes and pouted. Ralersin held up his hands for silence as a war of words broke out amongst the children.

“How about,” he said, once the noise had died down, “a story about a fine and beautiful Tylwyth Myndd lady who was also one of the greatest of the warriors of Eyrie?”

This was met with cheers from some, and shushing from others. Ralersin sat back, gathering some thoughts and memories, pushing back others. It had been a while since he had last told this tale. He glanced again to the nurse. The look in her eye was knowing, and her concern was obvious. Ralersin smiled and nodded. Comforted, the nurse smiled back.

Ralersin lit his pipe, puffing on it for a few moments. The children who had sat here before knew this signal. Their attention sharpened yet further and they leaned in closer as Ralersin began to speak. His voice was soft, yet strong, and was filled with the ages he spoke of, and of those that had been before and would be again. Only the nurse, and perhaps Ralersin himself, noticed the tinge of sadness in his voice, which faded even as he spoke.

“After the Sundering they came to the mountains. A people more used to forests and grasslands, they built their homes in the lofty peaks of Carlegg. They had the help of the Dwarven race, and ever after the two peoples lived and worked together here, in the Carlegg Mountains.

“Next, they spoke with the Great Eagles of the mountains. The Eagles gave this new people two things. Now, the new mountain dwellers had eyes where none had been before, guards like no others seen before. The Eagles also gave a name to this new realm; Eyrie.

“With home and with friends, and with the Sundering complete, the people of Eyrie sought after and found that which they needed most; a name. So it was that the Tylwyth Myndd, the Elves of the Carlegg Mountains, were reborn.

“With permission from their new allies, and the blessing of Galeton, the people of Eyrie began to weave a new creature into the World. A fusion of their past and their future, the Tylwyth Myndd created great winged beasts to carry them about their realm, and to help in its defence. These creatures, though created by the Tylwyth Myndd, were not slaves to their creators, for the people of Eyrie had come to the Carlegg Mountains to escape such a fate themselves.

“Now Griffin fly free in Eyrie, and nest on the Mountain of the Winged Dawn.

“This you all know, for every child of the Tylwyth Myndd is taught it. So, now let me tell you of T’yareth Wind Rider, and of the white griffin, Etherion Yashandor, the Herald of Dawn.”

Although both had known that meeting one of ‘them’ would be a possibility, when the two finally encountered each other, the effect was to shock them both into a moment of inaction.

The goblin had been holding something, T’yareth was sure. Clinging to the sheer rock face, she peered up at the ledge some thirty feet above. Below her was an hour’s climb, or a instant’s fall, to the hard rock.

The goblin, T’yareth thought, was an ugly thing. She had heard stories of, and seen puppets purporting to look like, goblins when she was a child. Now, on the edge of womanhood, there was something almost ridiculous about the situation. Craning her neck, the elf girl looked up, trying to catch a glimpse, trying to see if the goblin represented a threat.

It reappeared, nipping forward to peer down at her. T’yareth saw a long, thin, wide-mouthed face with lurid yellow eyes set in light, muddy green skin. The creature, currently studying her with the same interest she saw in it, began to grin in a way that unnerved the young elf. As it moved further forward, T’yareth noticed its lack of clothing with a snort of disgust. The goblin was thin, sinewy and dirty, with long, dark hair hanging in greasy strands about its shoulders. On an equal footing, the goblin would have stood at most no higher than T’yareth’s shoulder.

Keeping the grin in mind, T’yareth began to look around for alternative routes either up to the ledge, or down to the ground. It dawned on her that no such path existed, and the cold of panic settled in her stomach.

The goblin, Acykig, looked down at the elf maiden with rising glee. She was obviously unarmed. Clad as she was in simple shirt, breeches and soft boots, carrying a limp and obviously empty bag across her back, she could not be concealing any significant weapon. The fact that she was pinned to the rock face far below was a further advantage. Reassured by this, the young goblin princeling shuffled closer to the edge to better study the female.

Her hair was cut close to the scalp, its colour indiscernible. Her wide green eyes, narrowed with frustration and displeasure, her thin nose and her equally thin mouth represented the classic elven features that Acykig had always been warned about.

The two hated each other on sight with the vehemence of the young.

Acykig stepped back from the edge, out of sight of the elf. He hefted his find of moments before, testing its weight and balance. Mentally, he pictured the position of the girl and gathered himself.

As soon as the nasty creature had disappeared from sight, T'yareth quickly resumed her climb, glad of the handholds cut into the rock. She hoped to close the distance to the top of the ledge as quickly as possible. It was, perhaps, the silent speed of this climb that saved her life. Certainly, when Acykig popped out of cover and threw something down at her, his surprise at finding T'yareth fully half the previous distance closer ruined his aim.

Acykig scuttled back against the mountainside in shock, his head spinning. Still, he consoled himself, there had been as satisfying cry from his enemy. She must have fallen. His courage returning, he began to root around the long narrow ledge for another trophy to take home from his Trial.

Below the ledge, hanging precariously by the fingers of her left hand, T'yareth struggled to overcome the blasts of pain from her right shoulder. She scrabbled with her feet to find purchase, the movement almost loosening her only hold on life. The surge of fear gave her focus. As she calmed her breathing, T'yareth was aware of something wedged in her pack; the object the goblin had thrown.

Seeking further calm, T'yareth alternated between prayers to the Tylwyth Myndd god, Galeton, and curses to be heaped at the door of the High Priestess, who had said the omens for her Choice were so very favourable. T'yareth gently tried to move her right arm.

The explosion of redoubled pain brought an involuntary cry and confirmed to her that the injury to her shoulder was severe. Although her assailant had disappeared, T'yareth expected that he was searching for more ammunition. Stirred on by this thought, the young elf began a slow and painful ascent.

Each moment was an agony of pain and fear. Hand and foot holds, previously thought wide and easy, became thin and treacherous. Each sound seemed to come from above her. T'yareth felt like the fatal blow from a second hurled missile would come at any instant, sending her to a lonely death on the hard ground at the bottom of this escarpment.

T'yareth prayed, through grunts of pain and effort, that the Mountain of the Winged Dawn would be kind to this daughter.

Acykig froze when he heard the first gasp. Fear struck him a blow as deadly as the one he had been convinced he had dealt the elven girl. Uncertain now was his decision to come to this mountain, Death of Elves, to seek for his trophy. However, he thought, there might still be a way to gain something more than the bones of a long dead elf. Retreating back up the path that led around from the ledge, Acykig tried to think of how best to destroy his enemy and gain rare honour in his Trial.

The sky was tinged with the hues of a golden sunset just begun. The first stars were shining in a darkening blue sky striped with thin clouds. The temperature was dropping.

Lying exhausted on the ledge, T'yareth wished her father's griffin would swoop down from the sky and carry her back to Eyrie, back to the halls of the Tylwyth Myydd. Her father would not come, though. No-one would. The empty, desolate feeling brought tears to T'yareth's eyes.

The tears did not last long. Gathering her strength and resolve, T'yareth pulled herself to the cliff wall. Angrily wiping away the tears, she cast about her. Yes, there was the promised path, no more than a meter wide, which would lead her most of the way to the nests, and the site of the Choice.

First, T'yareth had to deal as best she could with her injuries.

From the bag, she tipped the object the goblin had thrown at her. It was, as she had feared, an elven skull, picked clean by some scavenger and bleached by the elements. T'yareth mumbled a prayer and an apology to the departed before casting the skull over the ledge. After a long moment, she heard it shatter far below, the high sound echoing from the pitiless mountain. No goblin would carry it home in triumph, she thought, and the soul would know peace.

With great care and considerable pain, she tied her right arm to her body using the straps from her pack. Her neck was stiffening by the minute and she could barely lift her head to look upwards. Climbing would be almost impossible.

Teeth gritted against the pain and the growing cold, T'yareth began a wary ascent of the twisting path.

Acykig, the goblin, was experiencing problems of his own. The accursed elf must obviously be coming up the path, and he had yet to find even the most rudimentary weapon on this barren height. His irritation and growing panic made concentration difficult.

Without realising it, Acykig came abruptly to the end of the path. Suddenly, he found himself faced with a solid wall of rock. The face was pitted with hand holds cut by the elves of Eyrie. With a leering smile, the goblin saw the scratched Pedrandir symbols, that had been his occasional guides during his Trial, marked into one of the hand holds just below his eye level.

Happy to follow their guidance once again, Acykig began to climb. Not up, this time, but out and around. There were other hand holds here; goblin sized.

Some time later, T'yareth of the Tylwyth Myndd came up the path and lent against the rock face to catch her breath. Her whole upper body was now a solid block. Even moving her left arm was painful. Tilting her whole body back as far as she dared, grimacing with the pain, she looked upwards towards the nest site.

This was the highest of the sixteen that dotted the Mountain of the Winged Dawn. It was only her father's part in the hard won battle against the mercenary Seravil and his ally, a dragon of Shugaloth's brood, that had gained him the right to send his first-born here. Not even he had come here for his Choice. She was the first of her line and, she felt, the last.

As self pity sought to overwhelm her, there came a strange saviour. From high above came the cry of a griffin. As T'yareth, strangely disturbed by the urgent sound, fought her own body so she could look up again, the cry came again. It was followed by a shower of sticks and stones rattling down upon her. Pressing herself against the rock face, she waited until the hail had ceased. It seemed as though each and every piece struck her shoulder.

Immediately the hard rain had ceased, T'yareth began to climb. The hand holds were deeper here, and the elf focused herself on the rock in front of her eyes. Bracing herself with her feet, using all of her training and climbing experience, T'yareth would let go with her good hand and tremulously, slowly reach up and feel for the next anchoring point. The climb was easier than the last, during which she had had to rely from time to time on the precarious hold of her agonised right hand and arm.

Throughout the climb, the distressed and angry cry of the griffin rang in her ears. Material from the nests would bounce down from above in stinging crescendo. As she drew near the end of the climb, she could hear the beating of mighty wings.

Suddenly, her questing hand found the edge of a parapet and the end of her climb. It nearly was the end for T'yareth. As she struggled to pull herself up, over and onto the relative flat of the nest ledge, a massive griffin exploded over the edge. It flapped wings twice the size of the elf, screaming defiance as it struggled to gain height. The down draft almost plucked T'yareth from the mountain.

As T'yareth clung to the rock, the griffin wheeled in the sky, its four clawed and scaled paws seeming to tread the air. The griffin suddenly tensed, then dropped shrieking out of the sky. The gust of wind as she passed buffeted and tore at the elf. T'yareth muttered yet more prayers and dragged herself from the edge of the precipice. She lay, face down on the rock, drawing on what pitiful reserves of strength and determination she had to raise her head.

The goblin had obtained clothes and equipment from somewhere. He now had a long spear, and he was using this to hold at bay the huge female griffin. At its mother's feet, a chick lolled around, ungainly and helpless. A second chick lay dead, its blood seeping

from a spear wound in its neck. Beside it was a smashed egg. T'yareth had to look away as her stomach rebelled at the sight of the exposed foetus.

The griffin pawed and snapped at the goblin. Acykig was bleeding from several scratches caused by the broken sticks and branches that made up the periphery of the huge nest. He lunged at the griffin once more, and it flew up with an angry cry.

Acykig, who had spotted the new arrival as he watched for the griffin's return, now turned his attention to the elf, knowing that he had a few moments only before the mother returned. There was poison on the spear, and he had wounded the creature. There was some fighting to go, though, before the poison took effect.

The goblin lowered the spear at his enemy and walked across to her, skirting the edge of the ruined nest. He sensed victory. The elven female fought to stand. Hefting his weapon, he smacked her hard across her injured shoulder with the flat of the spear head. The elf screamed and fell back, dazed. Acykig laughed and began a war chant under his breath. He prodded the elf, drawing blood from her temple. He laughed again, wondering how the poison might affect her. Acykig decided not to wait and find out.

T'yareth, ultimately exhausted by her ordeal, despair robbing her of any will, fell back. As though removed from it all, she watched the goblin draw back for the killing blow. Blood trickled into one eye and she blinked. There was a blur of movement from behind her enemy. T'yareth smiled. She rolled over to lie face down on the rock. There was no pain, and she closed her eyes.

Soundlessly, the griffin dived, dipping below the level of the nest in her approach. Suddenly she appeared, as though from the mountain itself, with a cry to split the heavens. Instinctively, Acykig spun around, the spear levelled. The head buried itself deep in the breast of the griffin. The speed and weight of her attack thrust the spear back and down, lodging it on the stone.

The griffin twisted and cartwheeled over, carrying the spear with her. Acykig let go of the weapon and desperately tried to scramble clear. He was too late. As she fell, dying, the griffin struck out once more at her mortal foe. Her forepaw hooked the cloth of the goblin's shirt, snatching him back, hurling him over the edge of the cliff. Acykig's scream of anger and frustration lasted the length of his long fall to obliteration.

T'yareth saw and heard none of this. The fear, exhaustion and pain had carried her into unconsciousness.

The griffin chick found itself alone in the gathering gloom of the now silent evening. She utterly lacked any understanding of what had just occurred. At only three hours old, she had little experience of the world to draw on. All she knew was that she was hungry and cold. The body of her brother was already cooling in the mountain air. She took an

experimental peck at it. It tasted fine and she ate for a while. Feeling colder, she stopped and looked about.

Spotting the elf, who was stirring in her delirious sleep, the chick squawked for attention. When none came, the aggrieved little chick stood. Flapping downy wings, desperately fighting to co-ordinate four unfamiliar limbs, she struggled over and finally flopped down beside the unconscious woman. The chick nudged and crooned at the prone figure, sensing a comforting warmth. She pecked irritably at a bleeding hand.

T'yareth woke at this new hurt. She looked blearily up into the face of the griffin chick. Abruptly, the chick shrieked at her. T'yareth closed her eyes against the pain in her head. The scratch she had got from the spear throbbled unnaturally.

The chick nudged her again, crooning gently, pawing at the elf. All she wanted was to snuggle down. Why would this creature not make itself more accommodating?!

Eventually, and with great care, Tyareth rolled over. The chick instantly climbed onto her and snuggled into the crook of her free arm. Tentatively, the elf bent and hugged the chick as best she could. She was rewarded with a light peck and a grumbling almost-purr. After a moment the chick slept, happy to put this day behind her.

This must be the Choice, T'yareth thought to herself, her head fuzzy and thick. She examined the griffin in her arms. It was as large as a one year old child. The fur on its body was as pale as the down on the stubby wings. T'yareth absentmindedly brushed dirt and debris from the chick. It sleepily lifted its head, crooning at her. Its breath was terrible. The elf woman chuckled gently.

She lay there, drifting in and out of consciousness, closer now to death than she knew, sometimes looking out from the Mountain of the Winged Dawn to where the Tylwyth Myndd dwelt in their carved halls. She felt she could see the lights from the arched windows twinkling like the stars overhead. In one of many dreams that followed, she thought she heard her father's voice. She thought to rise to meet him, but remembered that it is foolish to stand to greet a dream

The moon had risen as she drifted in and out of sleep

It was beautiful.

“Sylfalion had come for his daughter.

“The eagles had brought him news that the Choice had been made, though both the woman of Tylwyth Myndd and the griffin of the Mountain were close to the end.

Sylfalion, General of Eyrie, brought T'yareth Wind Rider and Etherion Yashandor, the Herald of Dawn, back to us and they were healed.

“Great though her father was, T'yareth, always with Etherion, was ever greater. There are many stories told of their deeds and, though the last is bitter, they yet brings us joy and hope. This will always be so, so long as the Mountain sleeps ‘neath the stars.”

Ralersin finished his story, his eyes closed. Twilight had come upon the Mountain of the Winged Dawn, and it slept. The children did not cheer or clap as they sometimes did at the Loremaster's tales. They murmured their thanks and stood. As they shuffled off towards the corridors leading deeper into the mountain palace, one little girl stepped forward and took Ralersin's hand for a moment. At this, the old elf opened his eyes and smiled at the little girl, patting her hand.

“Go now, child”, the old elf in the comfortable chair said, his voice soft and breaking. “It must be your bed time.” To the Loremaster's surprise, the little girl stood up on her toes and kissed Ralersin on the cheek. She then scooted off after her friends. Though the nanny smiled her thanks, the old elf was not looking, so she followed after the children.

Once they had gone, Ralresin stood, the blanket falling away unnoticed, and walked to the balcony wall. He laid his hands on the cold stone and was still for a moment. Though he fought them, tears came quickly. The old elf bowed his head, letting the tears fall. His shoulders shook with gentle sobs, for T'yareth was fallen many, many years passed, and he missed her.

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