

# *Life's Values*

*by Marc H. Wyman*

*A Gushémal Story*

*With gratitude for a friend,  
And for the inspiring muse*

*Other Tales*  
*From the World of Gushémal*

- Call of the Dragon, Parts I & II
- Shield Maiden
- Warrior Eternal
- Ruins and Hopes
- The Pledge
- Childhood of a Fighter
- Rock of Discontent
- A Tale of the Gods (ongoing serial)
- The Miracle of Solstice Day
- Tangled Elves (forthcoming)
- The Pilgrims' Trial and Faith (serial, forthcoming in 2003)

*Visit our site on the web to read these tales:*

<http://www.gushemal.com/stories.htm>

*Also read the Travellers' Tales in the World!*

*Download from the following site:*

<http://www.gushemal.com/si/download.htm>

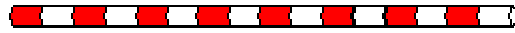
---

© 2002 by T.I.P. Entertainment

This text may be freely distributed, provided the copyright notice and the names of the authors are included (or alternatively, the integrity of the text has not been altered).

If you have any comments about this story, please send an e-mail to [marc@gushemal.com](mailto:marc@gushemal.com). We always look forward to hearing from you! (If so indicated, your comments may be published on the website.)

---



“Archer, she’s dead.”

The man seated at the desk showed no reaction. He was hunched over, staring at a piece of parchment before him, a quill clutched in one hand. His desk was set before a wide window, opening towards the ocean, surrounding the island of Milonisi. Rocky cliffs completed the lower frame of the window, the sea’s white spray foaming, the noise of the waves droning its endless, melancholy song.

Sirch closed his eyes for a moment, breathed deeply, then spoke again, “Her son sent a message by *magiscribe* this morning. She died in her sleep.”

At the desk, the man looked out the window, put the quill’s uninked end between his teeth. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, a shock of light brown hair on the head, a pair of glasses on his nose, the wrinkles of smiles furrowed in around his lips. He wore a white shirt, too large even for his blocky frame, and breeches that ended right beneath his knees.

“The funeral will be in two days,” Sirch continued. “Her son said he’d be willing to wait if you want to come. The Decirius priest can keep the body from... Everything will be fine, if... Archer?”

For a short while it seemed the man was frozen at his desk – then suddenly he threw the quill through the window, shouting angrily, “And good riddance to you, worthless bird appendage! Find yourself a breeze and get as far away from me as you can!”

Sirch frowned, folding his delicate, long fingers together. There was a slight blueish tint to the skin, proof of his elven grandfather. “Archer, did you hear a word I said? She’s dead!”

“This is garbage!” the man shouted out the window, then threw the parchment after the quill. “There! See if you can find some words on the way to the ground!” With a sudden motion, the man jumped from his seat, pausing only a moment to tug his shirt into his breeches before crossing his study quickly, past the thin figure of his servant. “I’m going into town, Sirch,” the man announced hurriedly as he headed for the door.

Hardly had he reached it that he raised an eyebrow, cast a fuming glare at the window. “Fetch that parchment I just threw out. And get dinner ready for tonight,” Archer Melt the Divine huffed, then hurried out of the door and his house.



The innkeeper of *The Traveller’s Delight* set the stein of ale before Archer, then ran his hand over his bald blue pate. “I saw your play today, your excellency. *The Merry Ladies of Sir Ffastlaf*. By the old trees, it was wonderful! I laughed so hard, the director wanted to throw me out of the house.”

“You’re easy to please,” Archer groused, then took a quick sip from the stein. “Gwerin, this beer is wonderful. The hop and barley were of the best crop, they were mixed with water from the source at Xeraell, by a master alemaker. Now their joint product is served by you, fresh from a keg of good oak, as cold as it should be. *That*, Gwerin, is wonderful.”

---

“Excuse me?” the *chara* elf asked. “I don’t quite understand...”

Archer rolled his eyes while he took a longer draught of ale. Setting the stein down, he said, “The play you saw today was directed and cast by Jaros Vancher. You can give him the best ingredients, and all he would turn out is horse’s piss. Really, Gwerin, a dwarf played by an elf? Shuffling over the stage on his knees, painted the same gray as the rocks and the steel?”

Gwerin shrugged uncertainly. “I thought that was funny. The dwarf – I mean the character – wasn’t he supposed to make one laugh?”

“Yes, but not by his appearance!” Archer retorted angrily, then quickly held up his hand and sighed irascibly. “It’s not your fault, Gwerin. You should have seen the production *Deevad Lien* put together forty years ago – now that was the play I wrote. *Ffastlaf* was played by a dwarf, and what an actor *Peyano* was! He walked proudly on the stage, every inch showed that the stage belonged to him. You thought he was seven feet tall, because –” Archer smiled softly “– he ‘played tall’. Gods, I miss *Peyano*.”

The innkeeper raised an eyebrow. “Is he dead?”

Archer shrugged. “Thirteen years ago. A stroke on stage, during *Elanios of Trebonshire*. He went out the way he wanted to, in a performance. The only taint to it is that he died half an hour before his character was supposed to. Oh, *Peyano* would have loved that. The truest death scene ever performed.”

“Anyway, your excellency,” Gwerin said and wiped the free side of the table subconsciously, “I liked today’s performance well enough. Your words shone through. Take comfort, your excellency. If the play has once been done the way you want it to, it will happen again. Nothing really comes to a close, it will all continue.”

Suddenly Archer’s eyes lit up and he jumped up from the bench, nearly throwing over his stein. “Sweet gods, Gwerin, what did you just say?!” he yelled excitedly.

“I just said that –” the confused innkeeper started to say, but Archer cut him off, “No, don’t mind that. I’ll have to – do you have paper? And a quill? I must write this down, this could be what I was looking for!”

Gwerin blinked at him, trying to find his way through the flurry of words cast towards him.

Archer rolled his eyes again and said, more slowly, “A quill and a sheet of paper, please? The back of one of your menus will suffice.” He waved towards the shelf near the inn’s entrance, where the menus were kept, in the hope that the gesture would get the elf moving. It took Gwerin far too long for Archer’s impatience to understand, but then the innkeeper rushed appreciatively to fetch the required items.

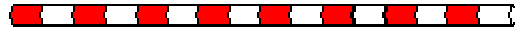
But when he returned, bearing an inkwell, a quill, and a fresh sheet of paper, all of the impatient exhilaration had evaporated from the human. Despondently Archer stared into his stein, watching the thin layer of foam. “Your excellency,” Gwerin said, “you... Do you still want these?”

“What?” Archer looked up, noticed the items, then he grimaced. “Yes, put them down. I’ll write it down, even though it’s no use now. It doesn’t fit, you know, Gwerin? No, of course, you don’t. I will explain it to you some other time, just not... today.”

---

“As you wish, your excellency,” the innkeeper nodded right away, then quickly bowed and left the table to serve his other customers.

The human drank from his stein. He took a deep breath, then pulled the paper towards him, placed the inkwell next to the paper, dipped the quill into the ink, raised it over the paper and waited for the words to come.



“Somebody *please* remind me why I put up with that idiot,” Sirch muttered, half-way down the cliff, secured by rope to a pulley system on the house. Seagulls were crying petulantly in the air above, complaining that the human (well, mostly human, three quarters, anyway) was in their territory. A fisher’s net was spread out at about the height where Sirch was now, attached to wooden stakes rammed into the cliff. From the window above, it was next to impossible to see it – one would have to lean out of the window very far, almost far enough to fall out. Which, sometimes, was a pleasant enough idea to Sirch’s mind. There were many items caught by the net, almost the entirety of which had come by the way of the window.

“Does he even wonder *how* I get his stuff back? Does he ever say, ‘Thank you, Sirch, that was well done’? No, sir, he doesn’t.” A gull raced down to course over his head and neatly deposit a special gift of its own on the man’s jacket. Sirch closed his eyes, clamped his fists around the ropes of the pulley system, and counted slowly from one to ten. Having done that, he slowly opened one fist along with his eyes, lowered himself a bit further and reached out to search the net for the sheet of paper. Meanwhile he muttered in the vague direction of the heavens, “Look, folks, he doesn’t *need* your defense. He’s quite capable of ruining a day all by his lonesome, trust me. I’ve known him for almost a century now – and do I have to remind *you* that I was included in the deal? I’m your favored, too!”

There was the sheet, moist from the waves’ spray below. Sirch quickly grabbed it and stuck it carelessly under his jacket. “I’ll have to transcribe it anyway,” he grumbled while he started to climb back to the top of the cliff, pulling on the lead rope.

A little while later he was back on safe ground, slipped the harness off and hurried inside the dry house. He took off his jacket, looked at the gull’s present, cursed, then threw the jacket into the basket next to the door, where the maid would pick it up in the next morning. Sirch shook his head, picked up the sheet of parchment, then headed up the stairs towards his own study, taking a cursory glance at the page. Most of the ink had been blurred by the moisture, but enough was legible that Sirch recognized it as the play that Archer had been working on for two months, apparently the last page. Sirch knew the handwriting well enough that he could tell, when the letters were as hurried as this, Archer was always anxious to get the writing behind him.

Yet there were seven crossed out lines at the end, even though Archer prided himself on rarely correcting his texts.

Sirch stopped and glared towards the door of Archer's study. "That's *it?* I tell you that she's dead, and all you care about is writing the last line of your bloody play? Damn you bastard, I thought you had feelings inside your thick skull!"



There was a small stage in *The Traveller's Delight*. Every evening there was a performance, sometimes a narrator or bard reciting an epic poems of times long gone, sometimes a comic who tried for amusement – never easy with a crowd as diverse as this –, but most often musicians took the stage. Music had a way of pleasing the majority, except for the occasionally jarring acts that Gwerin had booked for his inn.

Archer remembered one occasion when there had been two dwarves on stage, clanging rocks against each other and singing in gravel-deep voices. Sirch had liked it, but he had been vastly outnumbered by the other patrons of the inn – including, to Sirch's misfortune, the two ladies that had joined them that evening. Elves, after all, had a very different idea of music than dwarves did. Although, Archer mused, it was odd that Sirch's tastes rarely included elven songs.

But that evening had turned out to be enjoyable enough when the crowd first pelleted the dwarves with food and whatever else was handy, shouting loud enough to drown out the singers' voices (who, apparently, thought that this was a kind of applause and sang all the harder). Then the patrons got rowdy and tried to pull the dwarves off the stage, just so they would shut up. Sirch jumped up, running on the heads and shoulders of the crowd towards the stage to cry that these simple folk didn't understand good music, and that the dwarves should forgive them.

Very enjoyable indeed. Gwerin had to rescue not only the dwarves but Sirch as well, and –

No, not Gwerin. A frown settled on Archer's face. That had been Xiphos, Gwerin's father. More than sixty years had passed since that evening, and Xiphos was enjoying his retirement, far away from the bustling tavern.

So many years. So many memories. They flowed into each other in his mind, drifting into the further recesses of his memory. Was it worth it? Had it been a mistake to accept the deal?

A singer took the stage, a young *chara* girl, no more than fifty years old. Archer had grown accustomed to gauging the age of elves. There had been a time when he would have automatically thought this girl was sixteen, eighteen at best. So long ago.

The girl started to sing, her soft voice gently caressing the crowd into silence. It was a song of young love, the flowers of spring blossoming, and all the typical imagery. A song like so many others, but she carried the tune very well.

And Archer remembered hearing the song before, right here in *The Traveller's Delight*. Twenty-one years had passed since then. Gwerin had just taken over the tavern, but his father still checked on business every few days, much to Gwerin's discomfort. Archer remembered the scene vividly, and painfully:

*"If it weren't for the journey by boat, I would come here more often," she sighed. "Milonisi is a beautiful island."*

*"Yes," Archer answered, "it is." He stared at the stein before him, one part wondering why he hadn't ordered ale as usual, and an uncomfortable part wondering if he couldn't bear to look at Etiam and see how time had dug its traces into her face.*

*Etiam picked up her glass of white wine, sniffing at it daintily. "The vintage is very good, Arch. I really wish you would give it a try, wine is so much better than beer. There are so many varieties, and you don't have to drink it until you are drunk."*

*"If you say so."*

*"You still like to get drunk?" Etiam raised an eyebrow. "Archer, you're eighty-three years old. One would think that you had learned to act your age at some point."*

*"I don't feel my age, why should I act like it? I don't look it either."*

*"No, you don't," Etiam replied, her voice a shade darker than before. Subconsciously she raised her hand to touch her wrinkled cheek. After a moment she noticed what she was doing and quickly dropped her hand, forcing a smile to her face. "So, Arch, what have you been up to? A new play, or another book? My granddaughter loves your stories, especially those about Dalron the Weaver. She can't believe that I know you. Her grandmother must be hallucinating!" Etiam laughed – and suddenly broke off when Archer didn't join in the laughter. "What's wrong?" she asked, putting her hand on top of his.*

*Archer looked down at the gnarly old fingers on his smooth and firm hand. "Oh, nothing," he shrugged. "I was just wondering which granddaughter you're referring to. Tikara? Or Laynam?"*

*"Her name is Bendiga, Tikara is her sister. You don't really care about that, Archer. I know you too well for that. Have you forgotten how long I've known you?"*

*He didn't answer. What could he say? Which were the right words? And what did that say about a playwright who was called the Divine?*

*"Look at me," Etiam said, clasped his hand and brought it to rest on her cheek. Unwillingly Archer raised his gaze, breathing deeply as he looked at the face of the woman he loved. "Am I ugly because I am old? Is that it? Age is not unnatural, Archer. It is what must be. Answer me. Do you think I'm ugly?"*

*"You're..."*

*"I can tell when you're lying, you know that."*

*Archer's lips suddenly curled up in a grin. "You think so, do you?"*

*"I know so," Etiam said confidently. "Now answer the question."*

*He shook his head, slowly rose and walked around the table to stand before her. For a moment he looked at her, his hand still on her cheek. Then he bent forward and kissed her gently on her lips.*

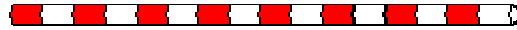
*She smiled. "That doesn't answer my question, but don't mind that, young man."*

*Archer lowered his head. "You need to know, my – my love. I wanted to grow old with you, by your side, that I could see each new wrinkle in your face. That I could hear you laugh about me when I try to yank each gray hair from my head and go bald before my time. It – it hurts to know that you have grown old without me. And that it's all my –"*

---

*"I understand."*

*She pulled his head against her chest, stroking his hair gently. A viewer who did not know better would have thought her to be his grandmother, not a woman only a few months older.*



"You're late," Sirch mumbled, barely looking over the rim of the heavy book he was reading, a tome of adventure stories. "You can choose between cold broth, cold peas, and cold ragout. And you got drunk without me."

"Sorry," Archer growled and dropped heavily into the chair nearest entrance. Sheets of paper fluttered from his coat and scattered around the foyer. "Isn't like you did any of the cooking?"

Sirch put a marker in his book, closed it and put it in his lap. "Fortunately not. It's bad enough that I have to clean up after you. Did you get an idea for the play?"

"Dozens. All worthless."

"I see. And there was nothing else on your mind?"

"Like what?!" Archer shot from his chair – regretting it right away when he had to take a very deep breath and put his hand against the wall to keep from toppling over. "Mind your own business, *servant*, understand? You ought to be grateful for every damn day that you're alive, because without me you'd be rotting away in a grave, understand?"

Sirch raised his eyebrows. "You're too drunk to pick a fight with. Repeat that tomorrow, when you're sober, and we'll see about it."

"Bloody coward," Archer muttered. He continued staring at the part-elf viciously, swaying noticeably, then he turned about and headed for the nearest room with a bed. It took him several false starts and more than one bump into a wall before he'd located a place to sleep. Then he started to snore loud enough that Sirch could hear him in the foyer. "Who's the real coward, Archer?" he asked softly and remembered a time eighty-three years earlier:

*"Call me 'servant' one more time, and I'll kick your balls off!" Sirch promised furiously.*

*"Oh, come on," Archer laughed. "It worked, didn't it? My – our – play is presented at the Ducal Theater. This is fantastic!"*

*Sirch shoved his friend. "It's crazy, that's what it is. They'll find out shortly that you're no nobleman, and that there is no Lord Melt in all the Arrufat Peninsula. We'll be lucky if they don't hang us! However did you think of this anyway?"*

*"Etiam did," Archer shrugged and leaned forward to peek through the curtain to the theater stage. An actor was proclaiming the key soliloquy. The audience was completely enthralled by his words, but not as much as Archer himself was.*

*Sirch sighed. "I should have known. That was about the only way you could actually go out and sell the play. When are you finally going to tell Etiam that you're in love with her?"*

*"What?" Archer muttered, his face quickly set to a neutral mask. "I never said anything about that, did I?"*

"No," Sirch agreed. "Neither did you ever mention that you breathe, but both are obvious. Look, it's been more than a year that you've known her. If you're not going to tell her or at least give her a sign, she'll start looking for a man sooner or later. I don't want to hear you cry about losing her. Listen to me, will you?!" The part-elf smacked Archer's arm, with a little more force than was suitable (but very rewarding for Sirch who had spent a full three weeks posing as his friend's servant, something that he never wanted to do again).

Applause issued from the theater room, after the current scene was over. Archer grinned, started to take another peak through the curtain when Sirch smacked him again. "Mark my words, you idiot. Tell her the next time you see her, understood?"

"All right, all right, I will," Archer muttered, only concentrated on the reactions of the audience. "Some day for sure."

Sirch muttered something inaudible and turned away from his friend. Then his expression suddenly froze, turned first to disgust, then quickly to servility. "Young Lord Melt," he said pointedly, "there is someone to speak to you."

"Who is it, servant?" Archer responded with the haughty voice of a nobleman.

"You're on bloody thin ice," Sirch whispered as quietly as he could, then loudly said, "A holy cleric, your lordship. If I may ask for your name, madam?" The last he directed at the woman approaching them, wearing the festive robe of a priestess of Grenage, the Goddess of Joy and Beauty – which also included a penchant for stageplays.

"I am Reggane," the woman answered with a nod. "Your master wrote this play?"

Now Archer turned around, a charming smile on his lips as he bowed deeply before the priestess. "Unfortunately that is true. It was my pen that created this plodding simulacrum of a play, and I beg forgiveness if the crudeness of my words offended you."

Reggane crooked her head to study Archer closely. "You should try performing your own plays, Lord Melt. Were you on a stage and I in a seat of the audience, I might believe your humility to be honest. Be that as it may, I wish to hire your services. The local temple of Grenage will celebrate its one-hundredt anniversary in the month of Farestun. Can you write a play worthy of the goddess until then?"

For a moment Sirch thought that his friend would continue his charade, but he quickly shed the false modesty. "If you pay me in advance, I'll write two, one tragedy and one comedy, each as good as or better than this play."

With no sign of surprise, Reggane plucked a pouch from within her robe and handed it to Archer. "One thousand gold coins, my over-confident lord. Deliver the plays to the local temple on the last day of Gloreshton. And take note that you have made a deal with the goddess... through my presence."

"Don't worry," Archer grinned, barely containing his joy until the priestess had left. "Sirch, can you believe this? We're rich! One thousand coins, and all I have to do is write two plays in four months. Somebody pinch me, this is so marvelous!"

Instead of a mere pinch, Sirch shoved him hard against the wall. "Yeah, I'm glad about the money. But do you realize that I'll have to play your servant again when we deliver the plays? And when we watch them?!"

---



“Good morning, Archer,” Sirch said cheerfully and beamed at the playwright.

“Keep your mouth shut, get me a coffee, and don’t say a word,” Archer muttered. He held up his hand to shield his eyes, as if Sirch’s beaming face was far too bright.

The part-elf grinned heartily. Loudly he said, “But of course, my good master, you will get your Tonomai drink right away, freshly brewed, just as you like it.”

“Did I mention that you should shut up?”

“Yes, you did. Why?”

Archer buried his head between his hands, muttering vile words and hoping to be shaken free by a cup of coffee very, *very* soon. Instead he sunk back into memory, eighty-three years back, to a time when he had been sitting just like this, with a hang-over the size of Robhovard.

*The luxuriously furnished room stunk of alcohol. A mug of beer had been spilled over a silk chair, ruining the fine cloth. Sheets of paper were scattered across the floor, all scribbled on, but clearly it had been some time since the last words were written, since a layer of dinner plates, empty pitchers and other odd remains covered them.*

*The door swung open, and Sirch’s voice cried out, “What in all the abysses is going on here? I take a vacation to visit my parents, and when I get back... Archer, this is a pigsty!”*

*“She’s getting married.”*

*“Who? Etiam?”*

*Archer nodded, keeping his head cradled. “To a fellow from Ibrollene. A bloody Ibrollenian! Bastard just came to town, swept her off her feet, and now that.”*

*There was the noise of the door closing, loudly, then some of the debris on the floor being kicked about. “I said that you should tell her. So, did you? No, of course not. Why would you do that? Etiam surely can read your mind, after all, that’s what women do, right?”*

*“I was about to tell her,” Archer protested weakly.*

*“Sure you were.” Sirch made some more noise, then he dropped into a chair he had just reasonably cleared.*

*Archer raised his head and focused his reddened eyes with some effort on his friend. “I’m serious. I wanted to tell her, just as soon as I got the plays finished. Look, Sirch, we’re forty miles away from Eregon, and I’ve got to maintain our façade as noblemen, right? So I’ve focused on writing, and –“*

*“When did you hear about the marriage?”*

*Archer shook his head. “Yesterday... No, the day before yesterday. She’d sent me a message that she had something urgent to discuss.”*

*“Excuse me?” Sirch blinked. “You mean, this is the result of only one and a half days? Am I glad I only play your servant.” Casually he picked up the pitcher closest to his friend and checked whether there was anything left inside. Of course Archer had been too thorough in his drinking. “Look, you’ve brought it on yourself. You won’t get any pity from me. At least,” he sighed, “since you’ve been writing all the time, you ought to be finished with the plays by now. It’s already Gloreshton.”*

---

*With a jerk Archer's head shot up. "Gloreshton? Are you sure that it isn't still Glymarion?"*

*Suspicion and dread entered Sirch's eyes as he answered, "Yes, I am sure. Deadly sure that it's the 10<sup>th</sup> of Gloreshton. What have you written?"*

*"Oh, well, a few treatises on how plays are to be written properly, and a few short tales, toying around – it really is Gloreshton?" Archer got up, massaging his temples hastily. "Great gods, I haven't even started with the plays! I thought that I still had more than a month! How am I going to write two plays in – and one of them a comedy. I can't write comedy, not now!"*

*Now it was Sirch's turn to cradle his head. "Archer, what have you done? You heard that priestess – she said we'd made a deal with her goddess. We're in big, big trouble!" He cramped his fists into his head, then looked up and said, "All right, not all's lost. She thinks we're some noble folks. So we'll just go back to being simple Archer and Sirch, and we'll deal with –"*

*"Shut up!" Archer cried, hastily digging through a pile of various eating utensils, then yelled triumphantly when he located an inkwell. "See if you can find some empty paper. And a quill!"*

*"Archer, you said yourself, there is no time for –"*

*"And you believe me?" the playwright-to-be grunted. "Get a priest to cure this hang-over, we ought to have plenty of money left for that. Oh, and find out if the priest can keep me from sleeping for a month, I don't have time for that nuisance."*



"Your coffee, your excellency," Sirch said with a bow as he put the cup over-ceremoniously on the table next to Archer.

"We did it, you know."

"What did we do, your excellency?" Sirch beamed.

Archer hurried to drink the coffee, burned his tongue, but ignored the pain as he downed the cup in quick sips. "The plays for the Grenage temple, remember?"

The part-elf's chipper attitude evaporated in seconds. "Too well," he muttered. "Whatever makes you think of that now? Oh... Right. *Etiam – A Fool's Comedy*. The one that tore the roof down at the temple." Sirch sat down on the table. "I had thought you'd gotten her out of your system with that."

"You don't forget the love of your life."

"Don't you hate clichés like that? Hrolfwald of Keroull wrote about that all the time, didn't he?"

Archer looked curiously across the room. "You're getting better at insults, Sirch."

"A master in the art taught me," Sirch half-smiled.

An evil grin took hold on the playwright's lips as he responded in an easy flood of words, "Yet it took you nigh upon a century to grasp the basic functions of the art, despite your master's best intentions, and his hard, tiring work to instruct that vapor-laden hole some would call a head."

Sirch grimaced. "You just can't stop, can you?"

There was no response for a moment. Outside, the seagulls cried their morning song, and the waves tirelessly crashed against the cliffs. The light shining through the windows was not very bright, it had to fight its way through a thick layer of clouds in the sky, sure precursors of stormy rain to come.

Finally, Archer got up from his chair, glanced remorsefully at the empty cup of coffee, then started walking across the room. "Sometimes I think that I should stop. *A wish merrily asked for, the gods might easily grant, but ward their demands, they'll leave you sore.*"



There was a balcony at the top of the house, in a spire decorated with reliefs depicting historical scenes. From a distance, as close as standing on the front porch, only the sharpest eye could discern that the slight patterns on the spire were reliefs, so softly were they engraved into the stone. On the balcony, several were easy to see, showing the conquest of Arrufat by the heathen Tonomai and the valiant effort to wrench it away from the unbelievers. Right below, there were scenes about Cayaboré's history, and so many more, along the rounded forty-yard length of the spire, telling the tale of the world in rich detail. It seemed that only the gulls could enjoy the depictions, but there was a harness secured below the balcony, much like the one Sirch had used to retrieve the sheet of parchment from the cliff. With the harness, one could descend along the spire and be inspired – a pun that Archer had always enjoyed telling.

In their first decades on Milonisi, the two of them had spent many evenings on the balcony, talking about the plays and stories, and how they should develop, how they should grow to the fruition they so richly deserve. Over time it had fallen into disuse. Sirch ventured there occasionally, sometimes wistfully remembering those happy, hopeful times; sometimes considering his own life, that matched Archer's in so many ways; sometimes armed with a broom to clean off seagull's presents.

Now Archer had returned to the balcony, sitting on its edge, his legs dangling over the side, and his arms resting on the banister as he watched the sea run against the rocky shore seventy yards below. His face was expressionless, and his eyes seemed not to see anything aside from the eternal rush of the waves. There was a small fleet of boats out on the sea, with their sails dyed in many various colors, the weekly regatta of the summertime. One very large ship trailed the racing boats at a goodly distance, filled to the brim with spectators who cheered on their favorites.

"She really is gone, isn't she, Sirch?" Archer said after a while.

Sirch frowned in surprise. He'd thought that the playwright hadn't noticed him when he came to the balcony, sitting crosslegged next to the entrance. Now he sighed, looking at his eternal enemies (the gulls) in the sky. "From this world, yes."

The playwright nodded. "A mortal man could find rejoice in that, don't you think? He could say, 'Oh, death. It is no more than a passage into the world of the Divine. She has preceded me, but it shall not take more than a few days or weeks or months before I shall meet Decirius' messenger

myself. His black hand I will joyously take, so that he guides me on to my judgement, and to the blessed reunion with her whom I love.”

“Should I write that down?” Sirch commented.

“Perhaps it’s an epitaph. Perhaps mine.”

Sirch grinned. “I doubt that. Decirius still hasn’t forgiven you for *The Old Man’s Conversation with the Messenger of Death*.”

“I could force his hand,” Archer said, staring forlorn at the cliffs below. “Slip under the banister, fall down, beat the sea with my body, let the waves thrash me and drive my soul up into the heavens.”

“Why?” Sirch asked drily.

The word stood in the air, as if the voice had painted it onto the sky. The gulls seemed to follow the curves of the letters, enhancing the question.

With the waves continuing their dour song, finally Archer said, “What is there left to look forward to? I have lost her.”

“Say her name. It’s been long enough that we only called her *she*.”

“What’s in a name?” Archer mumbled. “It’s a precious gift, a marker of the soul, but oh so easily bestowed by parents who have no idea what the child shall be in years to come. Did you know that her name means *love*? How fitting, and how inescapable.”

“Say her name.”

A seagull coursed low over the balcony, as if seeing how to deposit its special present in the most uncomfortable manner, then the bird settled on the top of the spire, gazing down with interest at the humans.

Archer sighed.

“Etiam.”

The seagull cried, then lifted off from the spire and rushed away to join its brethren in the sky.

“Sirch, did I ever mention what my mother always told me when love’s aspiration was dashed? She said that other mothers have pretty daughters as well.”

“What of it?”

“I will see the daughters become mothers themselves. I will hear them tell this to their own sons. And I will see the daughters of the daughters give life to another generation, yet I myself will remain a young man, with the desires and hopes and foolishness of youth embedded in my heart.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” Archer swiveled his head to look at Sirch. “You’re a quarter elven. You haven’t yet exceeded your ordinary life’s span. You might have been old now, a wizened one-hundred-two year old quarter-elf, but there’d still be a few years in store for you. I, on the other hand, am twice as old as most human beings in this world.”

Sirch shook his head. “But I am not an old man, Archer. I am as fixed in time as you are.”

---

“Yes, you’re right.” The playwright shook his head, studying the other man for a few moments before turning his gaze back to the ocean outside. “I caught you in the same trap that I am stuck in. A man shouldn’t do that to his friend.”

“That’s the first time in thirty years that you’ve called me your friend.”

“It is?” Archer blinked. “I thought that...” He shook his head, then withdrew his legs from the edge, turned around and sat as crosslegged as Sirch. “I am sorry. It’s been so easy to treat you as a servant, I guess, and... Have the adulations really gotten to my head that much?”

Sirch raised an eyebrow and crooked his head. “You mean, Archer Melt *the Divine? The Greatest Playwright in the Known World? He Who Turns the Coldest Hearts? The Songbird of Wordsmiths?* Do you mean something like that?”

Archer smiled, an odd moment of humbleness. “Something like that, yes. Except, what was that about a songbird? I can’t remember that one right now.”

“Peyano called you that. The dwarf actor. Most of the dwarven race have taken to calling you by that name.”

“It seems that dwarves have more taste than their rock music would allude to.”

Sirch let that comment pass. The playwright knew very well that Sirch kept magical recordings of dwarven music in his quarters and would listen to such musicians as Raubzaumby every now and then, terrorizing the seagulls with the volume of the songs.

They sat on the balcony for some while longer, looking quietly at each other. Finally Sirch broke the silence and said softly, “I am here to talk to, Archer. Whenever you need someone to talk to.”

“A friend?” the playwright responded with a gentle smile. “Thank you, Sirch. But,” he slowly got to his feet, “I don’t need any more words right now. You know what, Sirch? I’ve finally found the last line for my play. I’ll go down to my study, write it in – provided that you have kept the inkwell fresh –, and then I shall pack my bags. There should be a ship headed for Fowgelstadt today, and I can surely find a carriage afterwards.”

“You’re going to the funeral?” Sirch asked a bit surprised.

“Right,” Archer nodded. “Send a *magiscribe* to her son. I’d bet a thousand coins of gold that he’s already arranged to wait for me. He is his father’s son, no wonder that she chose the bloody Ibrollenian.” He shook his head wistfully. “It’ll be a month lost of immortality. I think I shall enjoy being a mortal man again, if only for a while, and I will say my good-bye to her. To Etiam, the woman named love.”

Archer walked by his friend, playfully kicking Sirch’s legs, then vanished into the spire.

The part-elf stayed on the balcony, wondering whether it had been his words that had brought about the change. The seagulls continued their dance, and one sent a rather special – though crude – message to the balcony, barely missing Sirch’s clothes. “All right, all right,” the part-elf muttered, “I’m happy that he’s coming to his senses. No need to push it, all right? Archer’s the megalomaniac here, not me.”

The gulls gave no sign that they had heard his words, and Sirch shook his head. He was getting old as well. Talking to birds, now, really. One of these days it could be him sitting on the balcony,

---

waxing in silly words about the meaning of life. By the Eternal Forest of his ancestors (grand-paternally), he hoped that Archer would kick him off the spire if that ever happened.

Some minutes passed, then Sirch saw Archer leaving the house, with his cloak and a small bag of change clothes slung over his back. "Have a good journey, my friend," he mumbled. "One day you'll see her again, in this world or another." Then he sighed, got up and went down to the playwright's study, to see about that last line. Certainly Archer had only scribbled it down, barely legible, and it would be up to Sirch to copy it into something that a printer could decipher.

He was stunned when he saw that the final words were written clearly, each letter perfectly drawn on the parchment. And then he shook his head with a smile when he read the words themselves. "You're a sentimental fool, Archer. I have no idea what the gods see in you."

Sirch added the parchment to the pile of already finished sheets, containing the bulk of the play, then carried them over to the magical appliance that would see the sheets' contents copied and sent out to the printer. Within a week, he guessed, theater companies all around Gushémal would pay hefty prices to get copies of the play – and then they would race for the honor to be the first troupe performing it.

He had to admit that he was rather looking forward to seeing it performed – though not under the direction of Jaros Vancher. Sirch would never admit to Archer that he shared his despise for that director – after all, they never agreed on anything, did they? –, but the man was an utter fool.

"Whatever," Sirch muttered, then retrieved the sheet with the last line, placed it back on the desk in the same spot where it had been before and left the study.

There was a single line on the sheet, devoted to the main character's last speech in the play.

*"All I have left in life is a friend. That, believe me, is a good end."*

THE END

---