

Arbeo and the Dog Knight

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In the white midwinter Wood Sir Smirl and his squire Arbeo went: the one atop his charger Rawrenock, the other holding loosely to its stirrup at his side. The tamarack in seasonal shrouds were wrapped, stiff needles gold beneath the snow concealed, and muffled were the horse's hooves upon the cobbled road.

Green they were, the green of summer, of fruiting mulberry boughs entwined upon Sir Smirl's poncho and his charger's trapper. Arbeo's overcoat as well displayed the mulberry's elfen leaves, now mitten, now many-lobed, and yet not fruiting. The band around his neck had drunk the berry's red, a squire's badge until he won his spurs. Black was his face, his mother's black a cross upon his dog-fox back, with amber eyes all full of bright alacrity.

Above him roved Sir Smirl's own wary eyes, proud blue within a wolf's midwinter coat. Tree-hilted was his sword within its scabbard on his left; and on his right, its holster tooled with hound's-tongue, was his wand. Limpid in the pale sun's light it gleamed, all silver-plated and with polished antler handled. Broad the hammer was and white its claw, its keg containing fire in repose.

Walking on the charger's right Arbeo stared at it, imagining the loud report, the acrid odor and the fleeing of the Elves. Proud Rawrenock concealed a swollen stream from him, its racing murmuring a fay mood rousing.

"Sir Smirl," he meekly said, "may I ask you a question?"

"Aye boy, speak," came Sir Smirl's answer, his eyes still roving icily the Wood.

"Why would the Elves harass the pilgrims to the Wheelhouse on the road?" he asked more boldly. "Are they so wicked? Or could it be that they know nothing of Wheelhouses at all?"

"One never knows with Elves," said Sir Smirl. "In such a wood as this it may be simply that a favorite tree was felled, or else is sick inside, or that they've tapped the black walnut for their bitter whiskey. I have known Elves to turn wicked – whole kingdoms of the Otherworld, at that – but they are those with whom we folk have the most commerce. To call the wild Elves wicked is to speak with more sense than they act, Arbeo."

"But they can turn wicked?" Arbeo pressed. "How so?"

"A wizard may enslave them, first of all," said Sir Smirl, and patted the holster on his hip, "and so a knight's wand can serve a double purpose. Most often it is this; therefore when the wizard's tower falls, the Elves grow once again benign. It has been seen from time to time, however, that an Elfric may do such a thing himself. Then the knight's peril is much greater, Arbeo, for there is nothing for it but to plunge into the Otherworld himself and set to rights the Elfdom."

"You?" Arbeo marveled.

"No, not I," said Sir Smirl, turning his nose to the air. "That is to say I have never done so; but a knight must be willing to straddle two worlds, Arbeo, without a second thought."

Then they walked on along the road, until at noon a wing of cloud obscured the sun and brought a chill. Arbeo, with deep longing, dwelt upon his master's wand, imagining himself among a throng of Elfen foes; and casting fire at the Elfric, overmastering them all. Because of this he did not mind the road or watch the trees with due suspicion. The moment caught him unawares when from the stream a gale arose, a wind that whipped Sir Smirl's green poncho and threw snow down from the trees atop his kettle helm's broad brim.

Broad Rawrenock that same wind broke for Arbeo, but in the wintry blast he left his grip upon the stirrup, for the poncho's green and purple hem his sight obscured. Brushing it away, he cried aloud, as full into his face flew with the wind a wood duck, crested with the Quetzal's green and red-rimmed eyes. Furious was its flapping, frenzied was its quacking, sharp as a spur its beak upon his face. Swiftly retorted Arbeo, so caught up in his dream of valor that he thought the duck a drake and sought to throttle it. His paws met only air, however; no sooner did he think to fight than ended was the scrape. The drake was gone; and so, he saw, was Rawrenock, Sir Smirl upon his saddle out of sight in both

directions. Spinning round and round, the squire searched in vain for summer green to find no more than spruce, listened for the clomping of the charger's hooves and heard the chuckling of the stream alone.

"Sir Smirl!" he called, and then again, yet no reply received.

He stayed there not a single hour waiting for Sir Smirl's return, for well he knew that walking in the Everwinter Wood alone was perilous. His master, if he should return, would meet him on the road or at the Wheelhouse; in the meantime, being stranded in the night without a fire was his greatest fear.

The plan seemed simple, yet it was stumped at once. For where the road had lain a moment hence now lay untrodden snow, strewn here and there with feathers and with untouched turf beneath.

"No road has ever here been laid," Arbeo marveled, "unless the wind has plucked the cobbles from the dirt and flung them far away."

The stream, still swollen, now a virgin bank did boast. Arbeo thought this much at least a blessing; and resolving bravely to follow its flow, climbed east into the wild wood away from the falling sun.

His breath came out in clouds by evening, when at last he spied the cold stream's source a bowshot off. Out from a hill it sprang, a cleft within a hill that towered toward the starry sky. All red and gold the stars were there, not so benign as ours nor yet so white. Like candle flames they flickered, or like hearth-fires roared, a thing between the greater and the lesser lights. Alive their rays fell down upon four towers, plated bronze and polished. A castle sat atop the hill, unlike the finest fortresses of folk Arbeo knew. Pennants black against the sky trailed lazily from lance-like spires. What device they might display, he could not guess; but fearing now the noises rising from the Wood more than a punishment for trespassing, he struck off for the hill.

To scale its slope on the western side was folly, he soon found out. A jackalope could not have climbed those stones. Circling, then, around its southern scarp, Arbeo left the laughing stream and found at length its eastern face. There the slope was gentle, and the road which he had lost resumed, a scaly tongue down from the castle's mouth proceeding to disappear within the Wood. The lights which crowded round the wall and thronged that road were queer, of colors manifold and almost sorcerous in depth. The sounds he thought had come up from the Wood he realized then were only echoes of the village here, a din that to the laughing stream was more akin to whiskey than to water. It stirred Arbeo's blood more than the sight of Sir Smirl's wand. He thought it music, then more aptly musics, unable to decide if they were intricate or merely clashed. The light and sound together frightened him, although he knew not why, and if it had been daylight yet he would have passed the castle by; but being night, he thought, Sir Smirl might from the castle have requested hospitality, and he himself must do the same regardless.

Onto the rising road Arbeo walked, its cobbles washed with blue and green and amaranth from hanging lamps among a web of tinsel-festooned lines. The houses there, all ancient wood and mossy turf – he thought them rabbitlike – were all adorned with ribbons. Fruiting yaupon hung in thresholds; mulling spices smoked in censers over gates. And everywhere, from the most distant stretch of road to where the castle's portcullis hung open, was revelry to beat the rowdiest wassail. He thought the folk in costume for a time, concealed by masks resembling grackles or red-gilled garfish. A mantled falcon turned a single eye upon him as he passed; a dragonfly espied him with a thousand while it nursed a steaming tankard with a squirrel's thin, gray claws.

"I've stepped into a Yule drawn out too long," the squire thought, amidst a cloud of roasting meat and burning sugar.

Poor Arbeo can be excused for thinking so, for all around him danced these revelers in circles until one fell drunken down, then at a blink another would spring in to take his place. They paid no heed, he thought with some dismay, to their prone partners; indeed, he saw them trample more than

once upon the bodies. Within the dance and just without their drummers set the pace on fair-skinned bodhrain, black wands beating blood-frothing rhythms. Flutes made fit for bird-beaks whistled, keyed by talons or stranger hands beside. Silver bells from hoops in wings rang out when beaten, full of overtones, as well as braided instruments stranger still which folk could never hope to play.

More urgently the squire sought the castle gate, ashamed at first to fear a feast, but not for long. For higher up the road the revelry grew more depraved: their dances bordered the bestial, their songs past bawdy burned Arbeo's ears. Black whiskey flowed down open throats, its bitter odor more at home on rotting forest floors where worms devour walnut hulls and turn them into stain. It filled the folk with short-lived mischief ending in a gutter crawl, while stalls on either side dispensed exotic meats and bones and brews yet more bewitching.

Folk, Arbeo thought, yet knew it false. They were no folk who frolicked here. He saw now in the thinner crowd that every beastly head could blink and bite. For some, two heads shared space upon a pair of shoulders, one a horse and one a fly, or one a rat and one a snake. One played four recorders with four paws at once. Others, just the opposite of monsters, stunned him with their fairness, with coats of opalescent white and fearsome, wild eyes. Of these the most were dogs, and these Arbeo feared the most, for they of him the most heed took. Worse than mere disdain, they looked on him with hunger, licking at their black-stained chops. Yet not a one would close with him; and he, desiring only to be free of that foul feast, climbed up toward the castle where the crowd seemed thinnest, too afraid to turn around.

No doubt to his demise, Arbeo sighed. The frigid wind had not picked up the cobbles after all, but he himself had flung into the Otherworld and to an Elfen castle. Here, if anywhere, the Elves were wicked; and whether it was a wizard or an ill-felled tree, it mattered not. He had no wand, and if Sir Smirl by some strange wonder was not challenging the Elfric in his hall, there seemed no hope for him.

"Still," he steeled himself, "Sir Smirl may yet be here. He said himself that knights must plunge into the Otherworld at need, and he may think that I have come here first, an apple in my mouth and cloves pressed in my hide by now. Even so, I may be wrong, and yet I hardly think it matters. Wand or none, a squire must earn his spurs somehow."

No sooner had Arbeo so consoled himself than he regretted his resolve. For here, beneath the shadow of the castle wall, the raucous revelry not even Elfen joy displayed. He passed by one who with perverted pleasure pried the arm out of his fellow's socket, and with cedar resin fixed it living to his chest. Others, armed with willow wands, wove spells upon a whim, each other changing into angry cocks and goading them to fight, or else to knightly chaps which hung from naked lizard legs, and once into a harness hung with bells with which the wicked Elf a folkish child to a laden wagon bound.

Indeed, Arbeo now discerned, there was a host of folkish children in the crowd; but dressed in hanging moss and rags they scrabbled on all fours upon the stones beneath their captors' feet, their throats all chafed by collars, so that grim Arbeo thought them pets until he looked into the face of one and there found speech.

Anger then Arbeo felt, and rightly guessed that these were those the Elves had claimed upon the road, the folk to whom Sir Smirl and he were sent to rescue. Aye, and so he would have acted on it, flying to the harnessed child and freeing him, though Elfen ire he incurred. He never had the chance; for down the road that very moment, flying from the yawning castle gate, a gilded and bedighted sled emerged. Upon its bench was mounted high an Elfen sighthound white as snow, his upturned snout the envy of the highest oak. Upon his silken shoulders hung a robe of golden silk brocade, displaying Trees Arbeo thought ill-fitted to his form. A downy cape was clasped about his neck, adorned with waterfowl feathers shimmering still green beneath the wild lights. His right paw held a rod as black as loam, a length of walnut heavy-grained yet unadorned; with this he beat a team of folkish children, miserable of face and tightly collared, bound to iron leashes, who together pulled like dogs the sighthound's sled.

Their chains the Elf held all together in his left and yanked them savagely, a cruel smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Arawn the Elfric!” cried a voice. “Beware! Beware! Bryn Mawr’s teeth shall snap another up!”

The warning soared above the Elfen reel, a voice Arbeo thought too fair for such a place. He looked, and found within the crowd the crier, draped in finery and pointing at the scraping sled. It was a well-bred dog, like many of the Elves, and yet without the hellish hunger in its face. Despair was there instead, and then a jolt of dread as down onto the cobbles dropped Arawn the Elfric, with Arbeo standing in between the two.

“Is this the Elfen king?” Arbeo wondered. “But he wears no crown!”

And so it was; the untrimmed ears hung unadorned. The rod he held, and the brocade, and yet no crown nor ring he wore. There was, however, something in his step which gave the squire pause as tall Arawn approached: a jingling, too familiar for coincidence, which made his blood run cold. He would have stepped aside – he knew he should, for shortly King Arawn would see his purple squire’s band where all the other Elfen thralls wore bonds; but now to him there seemed to reason, for his master surely lay within a lightless jail, or else upon the supper-board.

Arawn, however, batted not a lid at him, nor even slowed his pace. He brushed past poor Arbeo, downy cloak like that day’s drake but briefly buffeting his face; and then Arbeo saw the thing he dreaded most around the Elfric’s ankles: a pair of golden spurs belonging to a knight, their wheels of pricking teeth all red with blood. Sir Smirl’s, he realized with a thrill, were silver – may he not yet live? Yet other knights had come to challenge King Arawn, and clearly they had gone away defeated, or else had never gone away at all.

The wild reel was quiet now. Arawn up to the crier jangled, towering over the tallest Elf, and to that cowering form he bared his teeth. He did not bite, however, as Arbeo thought the warning had foretold: instead the Elfric turned his back upon the dog, and pricked it harshly with his spur upon the heart. It cried aloud as if a lance had run it through, and doubled over, and for agonizing moments King Arawn delighted to observe. But then he picked his victim up, and brushed it off, and checked its teeth to find them clenched, and grinned himself.

“Eat!” the Elfric laughed. “Go ahead and eat, Heilyn! Drink! Dance! This is a party, isn’t it? Don’t just stand in the corner and pout like that.”

And Heilyn, to Arbeo’s cold surprise, laughed in return, a beastly yap that spread throughout the crowd and sparked the reel again. Its tune so changed, the crier called for drink. A cup was put into its paw; and pouring bitter whiskey down its throat, the bleeding Heilyn laughed the louder, spinning like a top until its eyes alighted on a passing Elfen maid. It seized her with a hungry growl, and with black-stained slobber streaking down its jowls there devoured her whole, a feat of foul contortion which made poor Arbeo’s stomach turn. Heilyn laughed again – or rather gargled – and the raucous revelers in answer laughed as well.

The Elfric clapped his paws, amused; then satisfied, his sled once more did mount. He took the children’s chains into his left again, and beat them with the rod held in his right. They pulled the cruel Arawn along the road into the thicker crowds below, Arbeo never noticed after all. And he, unwilling – nay, unable – to endure that sight again, climbed on toward the castle where the Elfric for a time at least would not return.

More vicious sights he saw along that climb for which there are no names; but nearing in a while the polished towers and the castle’s mighty wall, at last Arbeo left the reveler’s behind. The music faded with the lamps to restless gray; the village homes gave way to Bryn Mawr’s outbuildings, and there Arbeo heard amidst the quiet a curious sound. A boy was weeping, if his ears did not deceive him, in among the kennels for a host of dogs. No Elf was he: for though the voice was light and fair, it was too full of flesh. At first Arbeo hesitated to approach: a single step toward the kennels kicked the

dogs into a fury. When he saw their cages closed, however, he grew more bold, and walked between the snapping jaws until he found a crying child sitting on a rotten stump. It was no boy, however: the fair voice was a whitetail maiden's, purple scarf around her head, her thin form wrapped in rags and throat constricted by an iron collar to a staple chained. Mistaken once, Arbeo for a moment thought it twice. Her body was unlike a folk's, her face too fair.

"If she is not an Elf," he said, "she has been fed on Elfen food for many years."

He noticed only then the task at which she worked: a braided wreath of naked tamarack was in her hands, while in a goblet at her side were all the golden needles it had shed. She burned her fingers sticking them back on with boiling resin, and yet no matter how she tried they would not stay affixed. They fell as fast as they were glued; the wreath its needles stubbornly refused. And so she wept, and weeping pricked Arbeo's pity.

"Good evening, my lady," he said before a bow. "Why do you weep?"

The maiden started, staring up at him in fear; then seeing that he was no Elf, held up the naked wreath and sighed. "I cannot get them to stay on," she said. "No matter what I do the needles fall, and more and more I fear that it is folly to act otherwise."

"But of course it's folly!" said Arbeo. "One can hardly force a tree to take back last year's needles. How could you think otherwise?"

"But don't you understand that it's his crown?" the maiden sobbed. "But no, how could you? I see no collar on your neck. Are you not an Elfen thrall?"

"Not yet, at least," Arbeo answered. "And you?"

The maiden nodded, fearsome discontent behind her doey eyes.

"My name is Arbeo," the squire said. "What's yours?"

"Ierfa," said the doe after a lengthy pause. "My name is Ierfa, Arawn Elfric's dog."

"You're no dog, that you should bed with speechless beasts!" protested Arbeo, his face grown hot from indignation. "You're a folkish child, and therefore free. Who were you, Ierfa, before Arawn Elfric collared you?"

The question seemed to shame her. "I have always been the Elfric's dog," she said, yet would not meet his eyes.

"It's in poor taste to say a maiden lies," Arbeo frowned, "but neither you nor I believe that."

"If ever I've been otherwise, I have no memory of it," said Ierfa.

"Then it is all the Elfen food and drink," Arbeo nodded. "I have been told that they can make a folk forget. They stole you from the road, no doubt, as they have done to all these other folk. The knight Sir Smirl, and I his squire, were set upon that road to search for missing pilgrims, and I'll be damned if Arawn Elfric holds them any longer in the Otherworld."

"You came here willingly?" she whispered, eyes grown wide and frantic.

"Well, no," Arbeo said, "not quite. But now that I am here, I cannot in good conscience leave Arawn unchallenged. My master may be here; yet if he isn't, if I am indeed alone, I'll have no choice except to...except to challenge him myself."

"But you have no wand, Arbeo!" Ierfa cried, arising from her stump; then looking puzzled, sat back down and knit her brow.

"You know, then, what a wand is," said the squire. "I thought as much."

"I don't," insisted Ierfa. "I can't tell you why I said that."

"But I can," said Arbeo. "You've been bewitched to think yourself an Elfen girl, when you are just the opposite. Perhaps you haven't been so long in Bryn Mawr as you think."

"Please," said Ierfa, "for your own sake, do not trouble with me. Your knight, if he has been here, is by no means first, and will not be the last as long as Arawn Elfric wears the golden spurs. Leave the Otherworld at once, Arbeo, if you know the way."

"I do not know the way," Arbeo shrugged. "Yet even if I did, I would not go. Have you had supper, Ierfa?"

"Aye, some hours ago," she said. "I supped at Arawn Elfric's table with the other dogs."

"Enough?" Arbeo asked.

"I am sure to get no more, in any case," she answered.

"You're still hungry, then," Arbeo said, "I thought as much."

Then reaching down into his pockets with a fumbling paw, Arbeo probed until he found the thing he sought: a stack of amaranth cakes all wrapped in dock, his only food. Afraid to sample Elfen fare, he'd saved the stuff for dire need, and here now was that need before him.

"Here," he said, "some folkish food will do you good," and pressed the cakes into her paw unwrapped.

She refused the gift at first, until with firmer paw Arbeo fed her, seeing that she ate until the cakes were gone and she was full. They smelled of soil, as amaranth is wont to do, and of a honey born of catmint from his native fields. So far from Elfen was that smell, and farther still their taste, that when the hungry Ierfa her meal finished, she felt sharper in her thoughts and less despondent than before. She eyed the braided circlet in her paws with new suspicion, saw the needles in the goblet and the worthless resin lying by and sighed again, a snort more forceful than a maiden's often is.

"I thank you that you did not call my palter out," she said, and bowed her head, "but kind Arbeo, I confess that though I did not know it at the time, I lied indeed. I think that you are right: I was not born an Elfen dog, and yet the child arising in my memory is one I do not recognize."

"How so?" Arbeo asked.

"I can recall a horse and tackle, spear and shield and sword," said Ierfa with her eyes closed. "My brother? Nay, but he is on the horse behind me, and with shield and sword protects me, and my father – if he is indeed my father – speaks to us so warmly. Yet the spell upon me still persists: for who before her brother rides into the joust, or with him splashes naked in the river? And his name – my father's name, at that – I do not know."

"What, then, do you know?" Arbeo pressed.

"I was abducted on the road – I cannot tell exactly when – by...Stars, my brains are addled," she answered. "A duck, I think, if that means anything to you."

"It means that you and I must share a doom," Arbeo said, "and that I cannot leave Bryn Mawr without you."

"Oh, Arbeo, but you must!" cried Ierfa, springing from the stump to clasp his paws. "You must, and soon!"

"Why?" Arbeo challenged her. "I haven't found Sir Smirl, and it would be a shame to leave you with the dogs."

"Yet that is what I am!" she said. "Born or not, I wear the Elfric's collar, and when he is bored of spurring on his thralls to evil deeds below he will return here to retrieve his crown. You must not be here when he does. So far he has seen fit to overlook you; but to let a folkish child wander free, uncollared, is intolerable to him."

"What will he do when he returns to find his crown still naked?" asked Arbeo.

"What he always does," she answered: "bed me in the kennels for the night amongst the dogs, and then again the next until it is repaired."

"Can I abide so heinous an injustice, I, a squire of noble blood?" Arbeo growled. "No: I cannot, and I will not. Either come away with me or let the Elfric come; he will not go away unscathed."

"Do you even have a sword?" she scoffed. "We have established that you have no wand. Pray tell, how do you plan to challenge King Arawn on my behalf?"

"I must go find Sir Smirl," Arbeo offered. "If he's in the castle, I might go and free him and return within an hour."

Just then a rattling arose, a sound of chains and heavy weights behind the castle wall. A scraping followed from the road, with ringing bells accompanying, a swift-approaching sled. "An hour will be too late," said Ierfa. "Even now the gate prepares to close; Arawn Elfric will return here, then retire. If you will not leave me be, at least use prudence: don't incite his ire against us both."

"I will return again," he said, "and free you from your chain."

"Then do it in the morning," Ierfa said more urgently, "but for now get far away or he will chain you too."

"I fear to use the road," Arbeo said, "for when I walked it there were Elves who eyed me hungrily. Is there another way down from the hill?"

"There is a narrow path upon the castle's southern side," said Ierfa, pointing past the kennels toward the wall. "The Elfric often takes it with his dogs to hunt. It is not guarded."

"Then I will go that way, fair Ierfa," said Arbeo, and bowed, "and steal a file, at least, to free you."

"You're a fool, Arbeo, yet I thank you for the food," she answered. "Go now, and keep the band around your naked neck. It may be that the Elves think you the Elfric's errand-boy, and that the band conceals your collar: don't correct them, even if hot-headed pride compels you."

And so with seconds left to spare Arbeo fled the kennels, sticking to Bryn Mawr's bronze wall until he found a pounded path which wound down through the rocks until it left the hill. Then turning to look back, his face began to burn again.

"A curse upon Bryn Mawr," he barked. "I wish I had a wand. I would have stayed with Ierfa then, and squared off with the Elfric."

But where a wand might be, Arbeo did not know; a simple file would prove a perilous heist, and that would have to wait until the Elves retired from their revelry and went to bed, or drank themselves into a stupor. Drink, in fact, was now the first thing on Arbeo's mind. He thirsted mightily; and though he trusted nothing in the Otherworld, he thought that Bryn Mawr's western stream would prove the safest bet.

Around the southern side once more he walked, wretchedly alone, until he found again the winding stream which had to wicked Bryn Mawr led him. He could have stopped right there and slaked his thirst; but wary of the waters below any castle wall, Arbeo sought the source as near as he could get it. Scrambling up the stones, he arrived winded at a wide, dark cleft, its misty mouth defended by a solitary ash tree, and ducked inside. The waxing moon, he thought, was gazing down into some lucky opening above, for silver light played fair upon the water and the walls, revealing to Arbeo's eyes a passage wide enough to walk beside the stream. He took it, careful not to trip, until he found a mossy grotto at its end. In the center was a frothing spring ringed round with uncut stones, a flight of shallow steps descending into its dancing waters. Looking up, Arbeo failed to find the aperture he thought admitted moonlight. Puzzled, he looked down again, then started; for sitting on the spring's stone rim he saw a folk he had not noticed, bathed in such a light that all the sorrow on his face was plain as day.

He was a dog, Arbeo thought, yet nothing like the well-bred Elfen dogs of Bryn Mawr. Here sat a ragged mutt, of intermingled clans uncountable, his russet fur and umber eyes as unremarkable as any Western peasant's. He was, however, much to Arbeo's surprise, in knightly poncho draped. Upon it was displayed a positively ancient pattern, simple white with scarlet crosses checkered, rimmed with ruddy fringes. His spear and shield against the stone wall leaned, the shield emblazoned with a white dog's head upon a field of red. A studded collar round its throat was leashed, held by a hand above. The spear, more marvelous, was blooming with a host of trilliums white as snow; and at his side his longsword's hilt, out from a polished sealskin scabbard, was a golden Tree.

Arbeo stood fast, stunned, for several minutes, wondering less why he was there, or even at his fine apparel, than at the sorrow weighing down his face. So deep it was, and so forlorn, that all the grief Arbeo felt himself he seemed to find within it. This alone, and nothing else, absorbed his thoughts until his thirst returned with force. He knelt and drank then, plunging his whole head into the spring, its coldness shocking clarity into his thoughts he had not realized he had left behind at Bryn Mawr. Newly conscious of his dire state, Arbeo rose and shook the water from his head; and desperate to no longer be alone, approached the forlorn knight and bowed.

"Forgive me, Sir, I should have greeted you before I drank," he said, "but never in my life was I so thirsty."

"I would have bidden you to drink before all else, in any case," he sighed, but did not rise.

"Now tell me, son, why do you look so sad?"

Arbeo balked, for he was on the very verge of asking the same question of the Knight. "Do I look sad?" he asked.

"And on the edge of tears," the Knight replied. "I saw upon your face when you walked in that you had been to Bryn Mawr. Sorrow lately clings to her, and wretched grief which you have carried with you to the spring. Not all of it, I guess, is yours. How can I help you?"

Then moved with sudden passion by his words, Arbeo knelt before his feet and clasped his paws before his face. "There's a maiden, noble Knight – a noble's daughter, by the sound of it – held captive by a wicked Elfric with his dogs beneath Bryn Mawr's bronze wall. I swore to save her, though I know not how, except to find Sir Smirl my master, whom I fear is chained within a jail – or worse – upon the hill."

At this the Knight himself was moved to sorrow deeper still, a pity so profound that poor Arbeo's heart now broke to look upon his face. "No knight has come this way today," the Knight replied, "or else I would have known it. You alone walked up the stream, and you alone into this grotto dared to venture."

"Alas," Arbeo groaned, "you bring a heavy word, though for my master's sake I am relieved to hear it. Still, you are a knight yourself, I deem? Have you a wand with which to help me free the Elfric's thralls?"

"A wand?" the Knight inquired. "I carry no such thing."

"And yet you are a knight?" Arbeo balked. "Is it not for the knights to plunge into the Otherworld at need and then ride out again? Can you not help me lead poor Ierfa out, at least?"

"Neither can I lead you from the Otherworld," the Knight confessed.

"Then I am lost," Arbeo quailed. "Sir Smirl alone, who isn't here, out from the Otherworld could lead me, and without his wand the maiden Ierfa can't be freed."

"Be not so hasty to despair," the Knight then chided him. "Would you the Elfric challenge for this Ierfa, though you bring no wand against him?"

"Aye," Arbeo said, "my oath constrains me, and my anger burns too brightly yet to bow to cowardice."

"Then I will tell you how it may be done, but only if you make a second oath," said the Knight, and leaned in close until their noses nearly touched. He smelled of incense, thought Arbeo, as if he were a halser, though no mantle hung about his shoulders.

"Only name it, Sir, and I will swear upon the Tree," the squire said, and pointed at the Knight's sword-hilt.

"Then swear upon it now before you sober up," he then declared, and pulled it from its baldric, holding it before Arbeo's breast.

The squire laid his paws upon the hilt. "I swear," he said, and waited for his orders.

"Tell me, son, what is your name?" the Knight inquired.

“Arbeo,” he answered, “Sir Arfeo’s son.”

“Do you see my ankles, Squire Arbeo?” said the Knight. “How do you deem them?”

Arbeo looked, and for the first time found them naked where their spurs should be. “You walk unshod,” he said, “as if you were disgraced.”

“Disgraced indeed, though it is not on this account I wish to send you out,” the Knight replied. “The spurs themselves are what I seek, and you shall steal them back for me.”

“Steal them?” barked Arbeo, feeling that the golden Tree had stung his paws with heat. “Steal them how? From whom?”

“You met Arawn, the so-called Elfric, did you not?” he asked. “You saw his golden spurs?”

“Indeed I did,” Arbeo said. “Do they belong to you?”

“They do, no matter what he says,” the Knight insisted with a growl. “They are enchanted, if you haven’t guessed it: any dweller in the Otherworld, once pricked with them, must do the wearer’s will. Arawn the sighthound stole them from me just before the Yuletide feast, and now cavorts about commanding Elves to do his wicked bidding in my name. If you will swear to steal them back, Arbeo, I will tell you how to save poor Ierfa.”

“Have I a choice?” Arbeo frowned. “This is an evil trick you play on me, and while my paws already grasp the golden Tree. Yet for my honor’s sake I swear it nonetheless: I will retrieve your spurs, Sir Knight, if you will help me save the girl.”

The Knight then slipped his sword into its baldric once again, and somewhat of the sorrow in his face gave way to slyness. “You must show yourself to King Arawn,” he said, “and challenge him as if your victory were sure. He will then prick you with his spurs – I warn you now that it will hurt – and think you solidly bewitched. Fear not, however: after you this grotto leave, no art of his against you will avail.”

“How can you know this?” asked Arbeo.

“All of castle Bryn Mawr Arawn Elfric may command,” he said; “yet though he wear them for a thousand years, my spurs he cannot claim himself. They still belong to me, and ever after will. On my authority you act, and my will is that you should steal them back. No Elfen wiles may gainsay that.”

“So I will let him prick me,” said Arbeo. “What, then, after that?”

“You must pretend to serve him,” said the Knight. “He will make you kneel and kiss his spurs, and you must do it. When he gives you orders, follow them, lest he perceive that something is amiss. And when he collars you, Arbeo, do not flinch, but bend your neck without a second thought.”

“Collar me!” Arbeo scoffed. “As if the rest were easier to swallow! Is it not wrong for one of noble blood to so debase himself?”

“If one wishes to outwit the Elves, Arbeo, one must be content to bare his belly like a dog at need,” the Knight replied. “If you this Ierfa wish to save, I warn you now that it will cost no less.”

“And no doubt more,” Arbeo said. “What, then, after that?”

“Arawn will make you work,” he said, “at earthen labor which the Elves are poorly suited for. Then at sundown, when the revelry again commences, he will take you with the other dogs to table and there feed you. Neither eat a bite nor drink a drop! See too that Ierfa takes no more of Elfen fare, for she will be at table with you. Hold fast until the night is old; then when the Elfric and his table slouch in stupor from their spirits, steal my spurs from off his ankles and with Ierfa steal away. Return then hither: in this grotto I will eagerly await you, and when I have donned my spurs again I swear that I will give you both whatever help I can provide.”

“It will be done, Sir Knight, if it is in my power to do so,” said Arbeo bravely. “Only tell me where and when to go, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Arawn will set out from the castle in the morning,” said the Knight, “and you must wait upon the road to meet him. As you are, however, he will hardly notice you. Take off your surcoat and your

band, Arbeo, lest he think that you have come to visit from some other Elfdom as an athel's favored slave."

"Is that how I remained unnoticed on the road?" Arbeo asked. "By a simple squire's band and surcoat?"

"It was the mulberries that did it," said the Knight, accepting first the band and then the folded coat. "They are a favorite of the Elves for how their leaves will grow so unpredictably upon a single tree. Your master knows it too, you may be sure: you owe Sir Smirl your thanks if you should ever reunite."

"He has them," said Arbeo, "and so shall you, if this plot only proves successful."

"Doubt it not!" the Knight assured. "You are a mulberry tree yourself, Arbeo, red and black upon a single branch. If any folk may from the Elfric pilfer, I would place my hope on you."

And so that morning, while the sun was still unrisen, Arbeo picked his way between the wasted revelers upon the road and climbed toward the castle gate. Shivering without his surcoat, trembling with fear he spied the portcullis again, its pointed teeth prepared to snap him up and he prepared to let them. How on earth he could unarmed a fitting challenge to the Elfric make, he failed to fathom; until like clockwork came the rattling chains and scraping sled again. The gate was open wide, and through it rode Arawn, his wretched sled-dog team belabored by his walnut rod.

At this Arbeo's face grew hot again. Forgetting his foreboding, he stood fast upon the road and stretched a single claw against the Elfric's face. "Fiendish thief!" he cried, quite swept away by wrath. "Arawn, you hound of pilgrims, you're not fit to lick your own dogs' paws! You'll let them go at once, or I shall spit your head upon a spear!"

Arbeo's anger was no act, though well he knew the words were hollow. He flinched, supposing that the sled would simply run him down, but it did not. Arawn his many leashes jerked, and inches from his face the lead thrall halted, hollow-eyed and pleading. Then the Elfric leaped down from his sled, and he was all Arbeo saw, two times as tall as he, ten times as fair and fearsome. There was no anger in his eyes, to his surprise, but only perilous amusement. Down upon Arbeo's head he stared, as if he were a woolly bear, a caterpillar waiting to be stomped upon the road.

Arbeo waited agonizing moments for Arawn's reply, unable long to meet his eyes, for in them was the same brain-boiling bewitchment in the music from the night before. His wicked grin was equally unbearable; his mouth was simply much too long, his snout stuck out grotesquely from his face.

The Elfric savored Arbeo's unease until its thrill was gone; then in response he uttered not a word, but turned as he had done the night before and kicked his leg behind him. A golden spur whipped out from under his brocade, a fawworm's barb with which he pricked Arbeo's chest. The Knight had warned that it would hurt: he had not warned how much. Arbeo fell upon the frozen stones, and gasped, and writhed, convinced a lance had run him through the heart. He saw a speck of blood, and yet no more, however. Where the spur had struck there was the slightest tear; of further harm the squire was unaware.

Quickly he recovered from this pain; and when of hurt a single pricking thorn remained, the Elfric raised him to his paws and turned his face about to stare at it.

"Just look at you!" he whistled. "Here's a fine pedigree if I ever saw one. And I didn't even have to go hunting for you. You'll make a goodly hound, if a bit spirited. Now sit, doggy, and I'll show you that I may do whatever I like with my own pets."

Arawn Elfric's voice was cool and confident, of swift submission self-assured; and yet Arbeo never felt the ironclad compulsion which the spurs were said to force. The queer, quicksilver voice was quick to leave Arbeo's ears: the Dog Knight's own commands still lingered there, incontrovertible. He

sat, then, not because the Elfric told him to, but that in giving the grotto's moping mutt his due he might do good to Ierfa and the other folkish thralls.

"Good boy!" Arawn said, and extended his right leg toward Arbeo's face. "Now kiss my spurs, doggy, and I'll harness you to the sled. I'll put you to good work today, oh yes I will! Miserable little noble's wretch."

Arbeo did as he was told, though all his gall rose up against it. He kissed one spur, and then the other, finding as he did that he could see the Dog Knight standing in the grotto, gripping his golden sword and grinning as Arbeo knelt in fealty at his feet. King Arawn was gone for but a moment, neither sight nor sound nor smell to be sensed. The squire and the Knight were all alone, with someone watching through a cleft above the grotto; and then Arbeo blinked and saw that he was to the sled now chained, an iron collar round his neck.

"Mush!" bayed the Elfric. Arbeo felt the stinging of the walnut rod, and they were off.

To many merciless works he put his dogs that day, flying to far-flung corners of his Elfdom, giving neither food nor drink – though this, at least, was to the squire a mercy. The sled weighed very little, it turned out, and King Arawn a little more than nothing; but there was labor to be done no less. For hours he made them toil in Elfen fields, with spades of bronze unearthing frost-heaved rocks and making cairns of them to mark the Elfdom's borders. Pesky trees they felled with iron axes, those Arawn called spies or harbors of suspicious birds. The trunks they left to rot, while all the boughs they gathered for the Elves' spell-weaving. By all this work and more Arbeo guessed, and rightly, that the Elves had little purchase with the earth. So light were they, so insubstantial, that for them to move a single stone was work enough for six, and so their earth-born slaves were made to do it.

He groaned beneath the yoke until his paws were bruised and bloody and he ached with hunger, diligently doing all Arawn demanded of him, yet as if he did it for the Dog Knight only. But for his collar he could have cut and run; no sway the Elfric's sibilating held on him. He stayed, however, loyal to the letter, tearing up his shirt and pants against the frozen turf. By nightfall he was clad in rags like all the rest, aching from his canings, longing as he looked among the brazen stars to be once more beneath the firmament.

The Elfric hitched Arbeo with the other thralls again; and daring not to stumble, he with them conveyed the sled back to Bryn Mawr. Three times now had Arbeo looked upon that hungry portcullis; now, at last, it claimed him. It's bronze teeth he passed in chains where he had hoped to watch Sir Smirl ride in as champion. Ranks of Elfen royalty around those sled-dogs gathered to gawk and gloat, arrayed in silk brocade, while Arawn Elfric spurred them on. The walls, within their plated shells, were stacked of white stone whole spans thick. Its vaulted halls, adorned with golden trilliums, were for a lofty lord befitting; yet the Elfric, as Arbeo soon found out, had let the livestock live therein for easy access to their meat and milk. The goats had eaten priceless rugs and runners, and what still remained was shredded by the dragging sled. Weavings on the walls, no doubt once fine, had been replaced – or else re-woven – into stranger scenes. One seemed like a gopher's hole between a pair of gnarled roots, a burrow black, unoccupied. Another was an Elfen child, fair but with a savage face and feathers hanging from his lips, who held a butchered, bleeding cock up by the legs. Still another was a spiral staircase, spinning upward to the ceiling to be lost; and after that an Elfen maiden, stunning from afar, and yet a shrieking monster seen up close.

Sprinting on all fours, Arbeo passed them by, until the Elfric with a gagging jerk upon their chains bid them to halt within a hall between two weavings of a pair of winged houses. There was laid a table twenty fathoms long, with golden vessels set upon a scarlet cloth. A host of Elves stood up as Arawn Elfric entered, each one fairer than the last and yet more frightful. At their feet Arbeo found a throng of folkish thralls all fettered. Some decanters held, all full of witches' whiskey. Others stood with trays, awaiting Arawn's word to serve. Still others served as seats already, pawstools for their

haughty Elfen highnesses; and there, beneath the Elfric's chair, was Ierfa, to a staple chained again. She had not lost her newfound folkishness, Arbeo noticed with relief, and so he hoped that she had eaten nothing since the night before when he had given her his cakes of amaranth. Still, he thought, her chain and his would prove a problem; yet with nothing else to do, he chose to trust the Dog Knight and so let the Elfric chain him with the sled-dogs on the other side.

"Why are you letting the silence drag on so long?" Arawn Elfric howled, standing on his chestnut chair. "You know I can't stand solemnity. Play! Play whatever you like. For the rest of the night I won't tolerate an empty moment or an empty cup."

The words commenced an Elfen feast more raucous than the revelers' debauchery below. A multitude of roasted meats were carried in on golden platters, carcasses with limbs tied up in compromising poses, osage oranges stuffed into their mouths. Whiskey rivers flowed at all times into goblets made of skulls, black brains imbibed by Elfen nobles boasting limbs and robes that were their fellows. The music from the first swelled high, mad dances coaxing histrionic colors from the lamps while partners spun in circles, foaming at the mouth. Those bawdy ballads burned Arbeo's ears, though he was certainly no maid. It was for Ierfa's sake he burned, and all the worse while Elfen decadents enacted every word in sight of all atop the tables. Spoiled, then, was poor Arbeo's second meeting with the maiden. Over was the greeting before it began. They could only huddle with the other thralls while all Bryn Mawr around them ate itself.

Redoubled was the stirring in Arbeo's mind that night. The music, piercing as the wind, bewitched his senses, stirring up a lust for food, a fever pounding in his ears with every bodhrain beat. Two days had passed, and still he had not eaten; he was hungry, aye, and now he slavered at the scent of steaming flesh, saliva pooling at the corners of his mouth. A dog indeed he almost felt himself, a speechless beast who longed to taste the crumbs abandoned by his captors. This, he saw, was how they fed their dogs, with bones and rinds and husks thrown down onto the floor, with dregs which dribbled down in rills. The others, mostly Elfen now themselves, fought hard for every bite; and yet Arbeo, hungry as he was, did not forget the oath that he had sworn within the grotto. Sharply stung the spur-bite still, reminding him in spite of all to spurn his belly for the maiden's sake. Still more, he stopped her too from eating, clasping fast her hands at first lest she should grasp at scraps.

"You must not eat another bite until we've quit Bryn Mawr for good," he told her, both upon their knees beneath the table before Arawn Elfric's paws.

"But please," she said, "I thirst, Arbeo. Let me drink, at least."

"There's a grotto in the hill from which a wholesome spring arises," said Arbeo. "Wait a little while, and I will take you there."

"Have you brought a file to scrape away my chain at last?" she asked.

A flimsy curtain of brocade alone still hid him from the pilfered spurs. He eyed them eagerly; but over them the Elfric bellowed like a bloodhound still, and so he bode his time. "I've brought you something better," he said. "Be patient for a single hour more and I will show you."

"A single hour in the Otherworld may last a lifetime," Ierfa sighed, "but I still owe you for the cakes. Are you not hungry? Arawn Elfric sent you to pick rocks, I deem, unless you're filthy for another reason."

"Starving," said Arbeo, "but that makes us even. I'll keep you from drinking, Ierfa, if in turn you promise to keep me from eating."

"You have my word," she said, and it was settled.

So began the longest wait in all Arbeo's life. The music never ceased; at every moment it was louder than the last, a spell contrived to stir up hunger in his every member. Squire and maiden huddled there together, keeping vigil over one another while the sled-dogs gnawed and frothed.

"I hunger," one would say; "yet wait a little while," then the other would reply.

Almost Arbeo hoped that Arawn Elfric would demand their service; then at least they might be occupied with work and so resist temptation. But while the other Elfen thralls were worked to sweat and foam, the Elfric's pets were with their master given primacy of place. They might pick rocks by day until their pawpads bled; yet here at table, each one to his staple remained chained. There was nothing for it but to persevere until the night was old, until Arbeo doubted whether they had been there for a single hour or countless days. At last, however, one by one the Elves fell down upon the table or like shadow puppets folded to the floor in stupors, drowning giddily in drink and dissolution. Flute and drum and dulcimer bowed out of the ensemble as the players parted with their wits; then last of all the Elfric fell himself asleep, to twitch his limbs and whimper for a little while in dreams of leading wild hunts, oblivious to Bryn Mawr.

Arbeo waited for the dream to die, enduring as the dog he'd deigned to be; and when the Elfric no more chased his prey he parted the brocade around his legs and saw the golden spurs around his ankles. "This may prove more useful than a file," he whispered, reassuring Ierfa though his courage quailed in truth.

A thousand doubts assailed him then: were Elves, like folk, so senseless as they slept? Would King Arawn not wake the moment he disturbed the spurs? And he would know, of course, that his new hound had fooled him, and had Sir Smirl not warned him of the perils of Elfen pride? He paused, uncertain, 'til his spur-wound pricked him with a pang and he could see the Dog Knight snarling in the grotto far below. Allowing not a moment more, Arbeo reached with trembling paws into Arawn's brocade, unbuckling both his spurs and with the utmost caution slipping them from off the slender legs.

Arawn did not awake. Castle Bryn Mawr held its breath. Arbeo feared to breathe lest he the Elves alert, but he had done it. Staring at the spurs he held, his courage soon returned redoubled. Now, he thought, the Dog Knight was beholden to his word: if they could only to the grotto make their way, they may yet leave the Otherworld alive.

The spurs were five teeth to a heel, and each as sharp and solid as a railroad spike. Arbeo spun one, and a smile crept across his face. Their collars, in the final reckoning, were not an obstacle at all. "Lie down," he said to Ierfa. She obeyed, although the floor was filthy, and to the ring which held the collar tight he plied a golden tooth with all his might. The ring was pried apart; it fell undone onto the stones, and with it leash and collar all as Ierfa rose. She marveled at Arbeo then, less like an Elfen maiden than ever; and he, emboldened, bid her do the same for him.

"Free me, Ierfa," said the squire, "and when I've freed the rest we may depart. I cannot in good conscience leave them fettered in the Otherworld."

She did so with more ease than he expected. Ring and chain and collar fell away, and yet the spurs showed not a scratch. Arbeo took them back, then with a bow to her proceeded down the whole length of the table, freeing every Elfen thrall still stapled to his sleeping master's seat. He could not bid them wait, nor tell them where to go before they fled, escaping Bryn Mawr's mouth each by himself. Yet Ierfa followed patiently beside him, showing not a hint of fear, until the feasting hall was empty of all folk except themselves.

"Sir Smirl was never here," Arbeo said, "and so I have no cause to search for him; but come, I'll take you to the grotto, where I hope some help to have for all our trouble."

Then out into the night they ran, and past the kennels, climbing down the rocky path to Bryn Mawr's southern side. Paw in paw they circled round, just as Arbeo had himself, until they met the stream. They helped each other up the steeper face and found the ash tree creaking in a frigid wind, its boughs now wrapped in rags which had not been there when Arbeo left. He led her through the cleft along the racing flow, then finally into the gleaming grotto where the Dog Knight restlessly awaited them, his tail behind his back a-wagging.

"I've brought your spurs, Sir Knight," Arbeo said, and bowed. "Indeed, without them I could not have freed myself, or Ierfa, or the other folk; and so I think that you knew well the plans you wrought, and I no longer hold your trickery against you." Then dipping down on bended knee, the squire his spurs surrendered.

"Quick are you, Arbeo, to forgive me," said the Knight, and took them. "I thank you. Now restored to me, I'll with these spurs in turn restore the mildness of the Elves. For Bryn Mawr, if you have not guessed it yet, is mine, and every Elf who dwells upon the barrow is my subject. Even miserable Arawn, whose theft has proved his treachery, whom I shall make into a speechless beast until he learns his lesson."

"I guessed it by the trilliums in the hall," Arbeo answered. "All else I beheld the Elves have spoiled, save for them."

"Naught is spoiled which cannot be restored," the Dog Knight said, "which brings us now to my end of the bargain."

"Aye," Arbeo said, "you swore your help to me, and gladly I will take it. Tell me, Lord of Bryn Mawr: do you know the way out of the Otherworld?"

"I do," he said, "but one of you is not prepared to take it yet. Can you not see that Ierfa's still bewitched?"

"It's true, Sir," Ierfa said, and bowed – to his surprise – just as Arbeo had. "I sense that something still is wrong in me; a haze obscures my memory."

"Tell her to drink, Arbeo," said the Knight, addressing him alone. "Drink long and deep, and do not quit until her thirst is quenched."

"Is Ierfa deaf to you?" Arbeo asked. "Why must I tell her?"

But the Dog Knight only growled; and cowed, Arbeo did as he was told, directing Ierfa to the spring where she knelt down and drank, and drank until she sprang upright and sighed in something firmer than her former voice.

"What's this?" she said. "My brother was not in the saddle. The lance was in my hand – but how?"

"The fog within by wholesome drink is thinned," the Dog Knight said; "all that remains now is to scrub the Elfen filth without. Tell Ierfa to undress, Arbeo, then to plunge into the spring and bathe."

"Then we must leave the grotto, you and I!" Arbeo cried. "We cannot rightly stay here while a maiden bathes."

"I must remain," the Dog Knight said. "For your part, have no fear of that: I'll send you on another errand, as a mercy to your modesty. Tell Ierfa to undress."

Arbeo did so, though his face was flushed; and all the while she doffed her dingy rags he stared hard at the grotto wall, beholding in the shifting gleam her shadow, broader than his own.

"Take this," the Dog Knight told him, dropping in his paws the naked Ierfa's shirt. "Did you take notice of the ash tree as you entered?"

"Aye, Sir," said the squire, yet did not turn around. "I saw it newly hung with strips of rag that were not there the night before."

"Make such a rag of Ierfa's shirt yourself," he ordered. "Rip it off the hem and soak it in the spring, then tie it round an ashen bough and leave it there. I will have Ierfa dressed when you return."

He did so, loath at first to leave the maiden with the Knight alone; yet as he tore the shirt apart and through the water trailed its tattered waist, he thought once more of Ierfa at the Elfric's table, how the Knight had proven faithful to his word and with his own spurs freed her, and was comforted enough to go.

Arbeo tied the dripping rag up with the rest and waited for a moment, swaying in a reckless wind much like the one which had – so long ago, it seemed – untimely taken him from Sir Smirl's side.

Down from Bryn Mawr came a din, a distant tumult as the Elves awoke to find themselves undone. Arbeo grinned, then dove again into the cleft, and came once more into the grotto where the Knight and Ierfa waited.

He thought, at least, that it was Ierfa; who else could it be? A deerfolk stood before him – this much, if no more, was sure – yet dressed no more in rags, and neither naked. Now Arbeo's band and surcoat Ierfa wore, all clad in mulberry, the very same that he had given to the Knight, and to his shock Arbeo thought it far more fitting there. No Elfen maiden Ierfa was, he saw for certain now, but something else: of noble blood – of royal, even – not unchanged by thralldom in the Otherworld, yet not diminished either.

"You've done it, haven't you?" trilled Ierfa with a princely timbre. "Just a moment hence I felt myself fall into place, as if I were a tangled weaving in the feasting hall and someone had just woven me anew."

"I did as I was bid," Arbeo answered, "though I think Arawn is bitter for it."

"Then I owe you dearly," Ierfa said, and bowed, "and will repay you if I can."

"Think not of debts until we've left the Otherworld," Arbeo said. "Sir Knight, I beg you now to lead us out."

"I told you truly when we met that I could not," the Dog Knight said. "It's you, Arbeo, who shall do the leading."

"But I do not know the way," Arbeo pressed, "and you assured me that you did."

"Truly too I tell you that I do," the Knight replied. "Take heed, Arbeo: I am not without resources. You shall have my finest charger Herla as a gift for bringing me my spurs. Ride him eastward down the road into the wood, with Ierfa clinging to your poncho at your side, and you shall see behind you moss upon the bark. Keep that moss against your back, and when the road stops short you must not fear to prick your steed with spurs to keep him on his course. So by morning you and Ierfa will escape the Otherworld, and to the Eastern Lands once more emerge."

"I thank you kindly, Sir," Arbeo said; "but I have given you your spurs, and as a squire I have no right to wear them."

"But I, as lord of Bryn Mawr, may bestow them," said the Knight, "and you through dauntless daring doubtlessly have earned them. Kneel, Arbeo!" Then he drew his sword: and though its grip was gold, its polished blade with silver moonlight shimmered so that, blinded, Arbeo shut his eyes against it. There he knighted Sir Arbeo, slapping thrice his shoulders with the naked blade, and bid him rise.

"Behold!" he said. "How does the coat of Bryn Mawr find you, Sir Arbeo?"

He rose; and opening his eyes, beheld at once that Ierfa bore the Dog Knight's shield for him, its snarling head held by a studded collar. On Arbeo's shoulders hung the Knight's own poncho, steeped in incense; in his paw he held the blooming spear, and from his baldric hung the gold and silver sword. Of these he took but little notice; for around his ankles were a pair of golden spurs, each one with five sharp teeth arranged into a star, the very same that he had won from Arawn Elflic.

"But Sir!" he cried. "You cannot paw your spurs to me; they are not yours to give away!"

Yet even as Arbeo spoke, the words fell flat. For now the Knight stood proud before him, clad in armor more archaic than the oldest tomes recorded. Iridescent scales adorned his breastplate; gemstones from no earthly mine bedecked both greaves and gauntlets. Stranger still, the flesh below his neck was now in places bare, and at a glance Arbeo knew him neither folk nor Elf. His head, still motley, sat upon a mass of purest, shining gold. The lord of Bryn Mawr dazzled him; but as Arbeo dropped his eyes, he saw a thing more dazzling still: the spurs that he had stolen from Arawn were around both their ankles, four of them, identical in every part.

"Yet they were yours to pilfer, Sir Arbeo," said the Knight, "and so I say that you have stolen knighthood from the Elves. Go boldly in the Otherworld: the spurs still work. You need no wand, the

way your masters wield them; only prick an Elf and it will do your bidding. Go in peace! My charger Herla waits for you without."

"I thank you, Sir," Arbeo said, "and will to Bryn Mawr bring such honor as I may."

"I eagerly await it," said the Knight.

Then bowing low before him, Sir Arbeo walked with Ierfa from the grotto to the cleft, and there beneath the rag-bound ash tree spied the finest charger either one had ever seen. A harlequin of red and black was he, both head and shoulders higher than Sir Smirl's own mount, of old and honored pedigree. His trapper, white as snow, shone in the waning moon; his golden pommel was to Sir Arbeo slightly warm.

Stepping then into the saddle, Sir Arbeo let his poncho's hem hang down upon his right, adjuring Ierfa cling to it so that the wind would not drive them apart. They rounded Bryn Mawr's southern slope one final time, then boldly took the eastward road into the Wood; and every Elf that met them there turned pale and fled when Sir Arbeo's jingling spurs they heard.

The trees bore frosted moss upon their eastern bark, just as the Knight had said. All night they kept it at their backs, until the Otherworld grew up to eat the road, then ever after Sir Arbeo held their course by spurring Herla to the left or right when he would start to wander. Long that night stretched on, through snow and searing cold, and yet they never stopped. In time the moon fell down, and after that they walked by Elfen starlight for an hour alone, until those trembling flames were one by one snuffed out as well.

Darkness ruled for but a moment, bowing swiftly to a blinding dawn. The world they knew returned, and Sir Arbeo marveled: for the Everwinter Wood was no more white and gray, but green, and now its frigid wind was warm and wet. Bee-balm bloomed around them; cock's-comb crowded round a newly-revealed road; overhead the branches of a mulberry drooped low with fruit.

"We've left midwinter in the Otherworld, it seems," said Sir Arbeo.

"And more than one, at that," a princely voice replied beside him.

Sir Arbeo jumped at this; and looking down, he saw still clinging to his poncho Ierfa, though a Ierfa he could hardly recognize. For though the shadow of the Otherworld still lay behind his eyes, his Elfen features no more hinted at a maiden. Ierfa was a buck, if ever Sir Arbeo had seen one: fair of limb and broad of chest, a pair of forking summer antlers tangled in the mulberries overhead.

"I thank you, Sir Arbeo, for your kindness to me in the Otherworld," he smiled. "I said I would repay you: if you please, I think I know a way."

"I'll gladly hear it," Sir Arbeo said.

"If you will take me as your squire, I'll lead you through the Wood to meet my uncle Poell on a spot called Salig Hill," said Ierfa. "There he reigns as king, and in his service I suspect a knight as noble as yourself could earn much honor."

"The mulberry is meet upon you, Ierfa!" Sir Arbeo answered. "Gladly I'll accept the help. I'd hoped to find Sir Smirl again, and so allay his fears; but I suppose it would not hurt to get our bearings first. To Salig Hill we hasten, for the glory of the Dog Knight, Lord of Bryn Mawr."