



Zanathu

An Arvelas Short Story

S. C. ESTON

Zanathu

A short story

by

S.C. Eston

Thank you for reading my story.

- Steve

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ZANATHU

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Tremors

Mentally strange and unbalanced.

Disconnected.

Crazy.

The painful words crawled under the ornate door and made their way to Zanathu's ears. They didn't belong there, but it was too late to stop them. The damage had been done, and the disrespect transformed into hurt.

Sixty and two years of age, Zanathu had been about to enter the parlour when he overheard the voices. One belonged to Ely, his youngest daughter. The other, more passionate and uncompromising, came from her nefarious husband, Dranen.

Zanathu should have been hardened to this type of comments by now. Some days, he was able to ignore the insults, go about his life, and almost forget that they all lived in the same house. His parents' house and now his house. At other times, he would lash back with loud and painful words of his own. Most he threw at Dranen, but at his age, his aim was not so good anymore and on occasion he would injure Ely.

Today he was exceptionally tired. He was not able to ignore the jabs but did not want to get into a verbal brawl.

He leaned back against the wall beside the door. To his left hung a painting. It was of Ely, sitting in long grass on the cusp of a deep canyon. She was reading a book of the Arcanes. On the horizon behind her stood a tower so tall it pierced the clouds. It was the tower of Dar Al'Kalif and the heart of the realm of Magikas.

The tower was home to Zanathu, even more than the walls around him. Vathos and he had been well respected in their day, the tall brothers, known for their work in permanent enchantments and the craft of talismans. Zanathu had happy memories of his days in the tower. They had left Dar Al'Kalif twelve years ago after deciding to return to Xil and help the village where they had grown up. Six years later, Vathos was gone. Old age had drained him of life.

Zanathu's daughters had inherited his affinity for the Arcanes . Especially Ely. So why wasn't she living in the tower? Why was she here?

It was all because of Dranen, who had snatched Ely from her dreams.

Dranen, the painter.

His mark in the bottom left corner of the painting was its only weakness. Dranen had painted Ely as she should have been . He had captured the essence of her. The book, the tower, her hands and fingers, and especially her quiet smile. Ely expanding her understanding of the Arcanes...

Dranen, unaware that as he took her from the tower, he was crushing her dreams. Unaware...or maybe it had all been an elaborate scheme.

“Has he held Karis yet?”

The muffled question came from Dranen.

The baby was six months and twelve days now.

“No,” came the weaker voice of Ely, “and he won’t. Not yet.”

“Not ever, if he doesn’t improve.”

As much as Zanathu tried to convince himself that he didn’t want to hold Karis, it didn’t work. As he put his forehead against the door, Zanathu thought that six months was a long time to be living in the same house as a grandson, never allowed to hold him.

~

At the other end of the house, Zanathu closed a door behind him and locked it. The X-shaped key was a creation of his brother. It could open all the doors in the house, and when it locked a door, only it could unlock it afterward. A nice little enchantment.

This was Vathos’s childhood room, where he had slept as a boy until they both departed for the tower of Dar Al’Kalif. Zanathu had been six then, to Vathos’s eleven. In the years before their departure, Zanathu spent many a night on the boards of this room, finding comfort in his elder brother’s company. And then, during his first years in the tower, Vathos had been his defender, constantly at his side, shielding him against mockeries and jabs. Zanathu’s learning had been slow at the start and he had lagged behind. If not for Vathos, he might have been expelled.

Vathos’s room was small and shaped like an L. There was a bed, a night table, and a basin for water. Zanathu’s daughters had convinced him it was a good idea to empty the

room of everything else. Something about helping him to move on. It hadn't worked. A greyed sheet was nailed over the single window, keeping the place in constant gloom.

The rug was still on the floor, so old it didn't cover much. Zanathu's mother had woven it.

After Vathos's death, Zanathu hadn't been able to spend nights with Tiala. Only here did he felt complete again. For a while, he had slept on the floor, on the same rug he had as a boy. Now he mostly slept in the bed.

Ely and Dranen didn't understand him and accused him of being strange. In truth, it was life that was strange, not him.

It had all become unbalanced and distorted six years ago, when Zanathu had found Vathos lifeless on this very bed. With Vathos's passing, Zanathu's attachment to the village of Xil and to the flat elongated house was completely gone. Gone was the meaning of life. Even Tiala, lawful and devoted wife that she had been, had not been able to keep him involved. Even Ely and Atila had faded from him. Even the arrival of his grandson had not awakened him.

How he missed Vathos.

Always together, learning the tricks and trades of the Arcanes, forging their way up the Synod of Magikas, growing respected, ruling Xil, and finally stepping away and retiring.

Now this place was mere bricks and planks of wood, but not home. When Tiala passed, it became even less inviting. His daughters would not believe he had loved their mother. He admitted that his brother and the magic had taken precedence more often than they should have. He had regrets.

Zanathu took a few steps and sat on the edge of the bed. The words he had heard earlier were still lingering and painful.

A filament of sunlight was forcing itself into the room, through a small hole in the sheet covering the window. Zanathu lifted his hand, started to move his index finger up and down, chanting in the dialect of Magil. He smiled as the magic amassed in him and flew through his arm, hand, and fingers. The crude curtain started to float up, opening, letting the sun in.

And then, suddenly, it flew into the room, ripped from the wall, caught in a powerful gust of wind that lifted the covers off the bed.

Zanathu instantly shut his mouth and lowered his hand, clasping it in his other hand. He was shaking violently. The surge of energy had not listened to him. He had lost control of it.

This was happening more and more.

~

Zanathu's loss of control over the magic wasn't his only growing weakness. An unwanted rage sometimes dominated him, forcing accusations out of his mouth that he didn't mean, executing actions that he didn't want to do.

It was only when he was alone that lucidity surfaced through the madness. It did so now, piling the regrets one on top of the other, forming mountains and mountains around him until there was nothing else to see.

Was Dranen right? Was Ely doing the right thing by keeping his grandson from him? Maybe. He would never hurt Karis willingly, but... He looked at the grey rag, torn off the wall and thrown to the floor by his loss of control. He had only meant to brighten the room.

He would only want to rock Karis against his chest.

Was this craziness?

And what about Atila? He couldn't be mad at her, because like her, he was starting to hate himself. The only thing he held against Atila was that by distancing herself from him, she had annihilated her bond with her sister. Both of them should have had what he and Vathos had.

How had things gone so astray? This wasn't the man he had hoped to be...the man he had been. He wasn't the brother Vathos had loved. He wasn't the husband Tiala had sworn love to. He wasn't the father Ely and Atila deserved.

He wasn't the grandfather Karis needed.

Maybe...maybe there was only one solution.

A high cliff stood by the eastern sea. Vathos and he had sat there and wondered at the vastness of the world. It seemed appropriate.

Ely could rebuild her relationship with her sister.

He could leave.

Tomorrow.

Zanathu let himself fall on the bed. He was careless, and his head missed the pillow and collided with the wooden frame. He accepted the pain and bit down a yell. Then he fought to sleep.

~

Powerful tremors pulled Zanathu from his slumber. The house cracked and dust fell from the rafters. Zanathu sat up and put a hand on his head. It was sensitive and crusted with blood. He sneezed through the cloud of dust.

The vibrations were getting weaker and fading away. His first thought was of the northern volcanoes, along the border of Pyrthis. Could it be an eruption? It was unlikely that it would reverberate this far south. An earthquake then?

Before he could speculate some more, the floor jolted with such force that he was propelled into the air. He fell on the edge of the bed, tipped over, and rolled away on the floor. He stopped in a heap.

A sudden boom followed, so loud it hurt his ears. It eased quickly but didn't go away. The world was growling. The ground was screaming.

Fear took hold of Zanathu.

This was unnatural.

A baby's cry surfaced. It was promptly cut by another powerful roar. At the same moment, one side of the floor fell away and Zanathu followed, rolling back toward the bed. The falling floor suddenly stopped, as if hitting rock bottom. Zanathu tumbled down the steep incline and collided against the side of the bed. The impact was painful. Desperately, Zanathu gripped the bed's frame, trying to stabilize himself.

Voices were mingled with screams. Zanathu was glad Dranen, Ely, and Karis were together.

Another shock shook the house, the roar it produced drowning out all other noise. It was followed by more tremors, continuous now, unrelenting and angry. The wall across from Zanathu collapsed, the joist in the ceiling breaking, the roof caving in. The ceiling fell down in a loud lamentation, hit the other side of the bed. Splinters flew as the bed was

crushed under the weight. Zanathu plunged sideways, but not before a piece of wood connected with his left temple.

A brief moment of nothingness followed. There was loud silence. No, it was not truly silence. The rumbles were there, far away. Far away and yet so menacing. Closing in.

Zanathu thought he heard knocks on the door. He couldn't be sure.

The floor...it was vibrating and dangerously unstable. Zanathu was on his back now, uncertain how he had gotten in that vulnerable position. He could see the ceiling. It was too low, too close. It would not hold.

"Get out," he tried to warn. "Do not come in," but his voice was weak and his throat dry. There was so much dust. His eyes were burning. "Leave me and get out!"

This time, his voice was stronger, and it was answered by a loud moan, coming from the deepest crevices of the earth.

Zanathu was paralysed with fear.

He had never felt so frail, so insignificant.

What was happening? Was this nightmare even real? Was he being punished in some way? The thought was ludicrous, but came nonetheless.

The earth shook with renewed force. The world started to break apart. The ground opened its hungry mouth, and the planks under Zanathu disappeared. The ceiling crumbled. The walls fissured and folded.

As he started falling, Zanathu caught a glimpse of the night sky. It appeared through dust and flying fragments. He saw the stars and the white moon. The respite was rapidly engulfed by darkness.

Things started to levitate, as did Zanathu. The floor under him close yet unreachable.

Everything floating and falling. An unending moment in stasis.

Followed by the final explosion, the firm welcome of solid ground. As the house fell around and on top of Zanathu, waves of pain flooded over him.

Debris

Zanathu awoke with the heaviness of the world pressing his old frame against damp earth and thick mud. The air was moist and heavy, hard to breathe. There was a stale and dank smell. And another evasive odour that he couldn't identify. It came from far away, rancid and repugnant.

He opened one eye and then the other. But the blackness was complete. His calm acceptance of the situation surprised him.

He didn't try to move. Not yet. A sharp pain ran up and down his left arm. His neck was falling back at a hurtful angle. His temple was burning. His right leg was enveloped by dirt and rocks, imprisoned. He felt a pressure on his chest, as of a large beam.

Zanathu tried to lift his head. It came up faster than he expected and collided with a wooden surface. Pain shot through his head and face. Reflexively, he tried to bring his left hand to his forehead but could not move it, feeling nothing below the shoulder. He tried his right hand and it moved. He blindly touched around, confirmed that one of the large joists from the ceiling was on top of him. It was surprising that it hadn't crushed him.

Battling the limited space, Zanathu brought his hand to his head. He found a bump and a gash. His neck was weak and he tried to keep his head up with his hand, but the strength didn't last.

His head fell back.

~

The cries of a baby forced his eyes open.

~

“Ely?” shouted Zanathu. “Dranen?”

Zanathu listened, hoping to hear a voice murmuring comforting words to the baby. The only sounds were the creaking and moaning of the ruins that formed his prison. And

his heart, pounding in his ears to the rhythm of his worries for his daughter, grandson, and even Dranen.

He would have to help. He knew he could help.

The magic was flowing around him, close, ready. Words of the Arcanes were already forming in his head, if not yet on his lips.

There were some risks. He was weak and injured. He couldn't move much. And the episode of the torn curtain was still fresh in his mind. The power required to move a sheet aside was significantly less than the energy he would summon to free himself from this predicament.

Too often over the past years, he had ignored his deteriorating command over the Arcanes. He had become good at convincing himself he was in control, able to cast one more spell, call the magic as he once did. His recklessness had pushed Ely toward distrust and Dranen into the arms of hate. But he was lucid now, cognisant of the danger. Moving the rubble might bring everything crashing down, which could very well crush Karis and his parents. If he was to use the Arcanes to free himself, he would have to do it with complete mastery.

If only he had a staff or a syphon. It would have helped focus the energy. But Zanathu and Vathos had forsaken such objects long ago, letting the magic flow directly through them. Since they always cast powerful spells together, the risks were lessened. They shared the burden and covered each other's mistakes, if any. Without an iris to filter the energy, a spell going astray would burn the wizard directly, from the inside out. The practise of casting without such safeguards was frowned upon by most. The brothers had liked the attention. It had put them in a category apart. A better cast of wizards, Vathos had always believed.

Zanathu had agreed, until today.

The cries of Karis came louder now. The boy sounded strong. Hopefully, he was not injured. But of Ely and Dranen, he heard nothing nothing.

"I am here, boy," he shouted. "Ely? Dranen? Can you hear me? Don't worry, boy. Do not worry."

He continued to talk to Karis a bit longer, in the hope Ely or Dranen would answer. He didn't want to wait long, but he needed to give them time to awaken, because once he called upon the magic, everything could collapse.

~

Zanathu tried to think, but he couldn't remember how many had been in the house. Ely, Karis, and Dranen. That much he knew. What time of day had it been? Late afternoon? Selena might have been in the kitchen then, preparing dinner. If closer to dusk, Iratelzal would have been in the garden. Zanathu wondered what the gnome would have seen. The house crumbling...disappearing into the ground? Was there a large hole? If so, maybe the gardener had time to flee, seek help. And there could have been others. The scribe and the maid, possibly.

What day was it?

What date?

Lying under the rubble, Zanathu couldn't remember. He couldn't remember now because he had lived in a daze. He couldn't remember because he hadn't been paying attention.

He had not cared.

He had been completely disconnected.

~

At least Atila was safe. He didn't know where she was, but nowhere close. She had made her disgust for him very clear. Clearer even was her desire for them never to speak again. She blamed him for being a bad father, a bad husband, and for not being by Tiala's side as she stopped breathing. Accusations Zanathu had always tried to convince himself were false. It had been the cowardly way out. If nothing else, Atila's departure meant she was safe.

~

The change was almost tangible as it arrived and fused with Zanathu. It was not a decision as much as an acceptance. From that point forward, Zanathu cared.

~

The wait was over. Zanathu hadn't stopped yelling to Karis that he was here, while calling for Ely and Dranen, or anyone else. His voice was weak and his throat raw. No one had replied. Even Karis was now silent.

Zanathu had been practising the Magil incantations in his mind for a while. Now they started coming out of his mouth. Each intonation, each syllable pronounced just so, exactly as learnt, exactly as it should sound. Vathos had been more composed and had better control, but Zanathu had been more gifted.

His right fingers moved with the rhythm of the words. Energy gathered and infused Zanathu. This one was a light incantation, easy to control. A practise.

A luminescence appeared somewhere in the wreckage, close by. It was formed by small floating beacons and produced a warm light, giving shape to the destruction around.

It was bad.

Worse than Zanathu had imagined.

He turned his head this way and that but couldn't see very far. Around him were pieces of the bed and the chair, planks from the floor and pieces from the wall. A hanging parcel of the rug. The rest was all rocks and mud. He had hung onto the hope that only his room had collapsed. He saw now that the destruction most likely encompassed the whole house.

Zanathu remembered the tremors and wondered once more what had happened. Maybe there was a system of caves under Xil. A dampness hung in the air, possibly from an underground river. An earthquake could have forced the ground to give way. Zanathu hoped it was an isolated incident and that the other habitations of Xil had been spared. That would also mean that help would be imminent.

A weak moan resonated.

Karis.

The time had come to get free.

~

The energy came willingly. It was everywhere and even in the stifled underground, the power of Air was strong. It started to form on top of him, flowing through his body

and out his hand. The power expanded and Zanathu's fingers began to shake. He slowed his breathing, refocused his concentration. He could not fail.

The incantation lingered for a few moments, Zanathu trying to regain control. And he did, manipulating the energy into an envelope around his body, close to his skin. It thickened, became material and pushed at the rubble. It took the form of a sphere, centred on him, extending in all directions.

The sensation was not pleasant. The power was too raw, too strong. It smoldered inside Zanathu's bones and it was hard to concentrate, to resist the temptation of giving in to the pain. Some of the energy was seeping away.

Not enough to lose control. Not yet.

Instead of wishing for Vathos's presence, Zanathu surprised himself by deciding to face the challenge head-on. As a matter of fact, he welcomed the challenge, saw it as a test. After so many years without Vathos, so many years of shutting everything and everyone out, of not living, he was finally returning to familiar ground. He was finally becoming his own person.

It made him smile.

~

The casting took a long while. The magical shield continued to swell, but always under the control of Zanathu's will.

~

Zanathu stood, his left arm numb against his side. He was old, true, but the magic knew no age. The now-complete sphere surrounded him, just as high as he was tall. It was incredibly strong.

In front of him was part of the door to his room and beside it, Malia's body protruded from the wreckage. His scribe. Zanathu wanted to touch her, put a hand on her forehead, but his shield would not allow it. He had never been particularly good to her, yet she had come for him.

He stood and turned toward where he believed Karis to be. He took a step. As he moved, the air shield followed him, as did the luminescence he had conjured. Each

movement was slow, each step deliberate. Zanathu carefully tested the debris, taking great care not to disturb the rubble more than he had to. His control of the magic was stable. Zanathu felt confident he could keep the shield for a little while longer.

Part of the ruins suspended on top of the sphere slid off and allowed Zanathu to get his first glimpse of the extent of the destruction. The fall had been a long one. Weak moonlight cascaded through an opening far above, possibly as far up as a hundred feet. The cave around him was immense. Stalactites reached down, trying to connect with growing stalagmites.

Zanathu saw where he would be able to escape the ruins. He moved in that direction and left the wreckage, glad to see the rubble settle calmly down once he was out. He let the shield dissipate and started walking along the ruins, toward where he last heard Karis's cries.

It seemed to take forever, searching, climbing, moving planks, walls, vestiges of a house with his good arm or his magic. The destruction was extensive and the home unrecognizable. These thoughts Zanathu pushed aside, concentrating on his magic, concentrating on finding his grandson.

And he finally did.

Karis lay under his small bassinet, on his back, snug against the wet ground. The infant's bed had rolled over and covered the boy, protecting him from the invading dirt and dust. The old man lifted the tiny cradle, turned it back on its feet. Karis, lying on his back, extended his arms toward him.

The gesture gave Zanathu a warm feeling. Here was his grandson, asking him to help. Yet he hesitated, remembering his daughter's words. He looked around once, but he was alone.

There was but one thing to do. He bent, and with his good hand he took the boy...he took his grandson in his arms for the first time.

~

Zanathu's search for his youngest daughter was longer and harder. After laying Karis down in his bassinet, Zanathu first tried to scan with his eyes, using the floating luminescence as the sole source of light. He could not find anything, although he knew

Ely had to be close to Karis's location. Then he used the Arcanes to move carefully selected pieces of rock and wood. That was when he stumbled upon Dranen. The man was badly damaged, his skull cracked. There was nothing to be done for him.

The sight pained Zanathu greatly. Karis didn't have a father anymore. Ely didn't have a husband anymore. As much as he had disliked the painter, Zanathu had always kept a tiny hope that one day they would accept each other, if not become friends. Zanathu redoubled his efforts to find Ely.

As the search dragged on, Zanathu kept stealing glances toward Karis. He had moved the baby and his cradle out of danger. He couldn't imagine what would happen if he were to be the only surviving adult. Would he be able to care for this child, this late in his life?

Just as Zanathu was about to give up, he saw something that made his heart stop.

A hand...sticking out from under a large pile of bricks.

It was small and delicate, and Zanathu desperately grabbed for it. He rubbed the hand and gave it a kiss. To his relief, it responded with a slight movement.

"Ely," he said, surprised by the tenderness in his voice, the love. "Can you hear me? It's your father. I am here. I am here, my sweet."

Courage and vigour returned. Zanathu deposited the hand on the ground, stood, and started to mouth words. As the energy passed through him, he directed it at the debris covering his daughter. Slowly the rocks and planks started to levitate. With precision, he moved the force forward, grabbing more of the rubble, forcing it into the air and away from his daughter's body.

As Ely started to appear, Zanathu saw that a large shard had pierced his daughter's leg through the knee. She was quite battered. The sight was difficult.

Zanathu closed his eyes momentarily, then proceeded, concentrating on the objects he was moving, not the state of his daughter.

When Ely's face finally appeared, he saw she had been hit on the side of her head. Her eyes were open, one completely red and the other unfocused.

By sheer force of will, Zanathu kept the ruins floating over his daughter. He would have to pull her out quickly, before the magic dissipated. Zanathu took a long respiration and then flew into action. He grabbed Ely with his good hand, under her armpit, and pulled hard. Ely's head fell to one side and hit the ground. Zanathu felt his telekinesis

evaporate as he pushed with his legs and jumped back. Ely fell on top of him as he toppled backward.

The ruins smashed against the ground with a powerful thunder. Movements erupted everywhere. Part of the house collapsed in the back, in an unseen corner. Dirt and rocks fell from the ceiling.

Zanathu quickly rolled Ely onto the ground, protecting her with his back, knowing he would not be able to stop any debris from crushing them, but trying anyway.

In front of him, he could see the cradle, so small, sheltered between two rocks and covered by a thick plank that had once been part of the walls of his house.

Tunnels

Ely's awakening was painful, rising gradually through daze and confusion. She heard whimpering close by. Instinctively, she tried to sit up and reach out to Karis, but a sharp pain lanced through her right leg and forced her back down. A gasp escaped her lips, which were terribly dry and crusty. She tried to open her eyes, but only one responded. Perplexed, Ely touched her face and found a bandage covering half of her head.

Around there was only darkness. Ely pushed herself up through the pain, slid sideways, and reached inside the bassinet. Karis came willingly, and she brought him to her chest and held him there for a while, trying to calm her dancing and senseless thoughts.

The ache in her leg was only equalled by the spinning in her head. She realized she was sitting on wet ground, dirt and mud that exhaled a thick earthy smell. Dampness covered her skin and hung in the air. Her good eye was starting to make out her surroundings, but her mind could only describe the sight as a nightmare.

Light, pale and distant, came from high above. Dust floated everywhere and made its way into her mouth and nostrils and lungs. Breathing was difficult. How was it possible to be in so much pain?

Karis had calmed in her arms, but even holding him was difficult. Ely kept him close anyway.

A shape started to appear in front of her, a tall elevation, some pyramidal ruins. The mountain was monstrous and its size shocked Ely, scared her. A beast. It seemed to growl, although the strange sound seemed to come from the ground, from the earth. But it was no beast.

The terrible events slithered back into her head. The tremors, the cracks forming in the walls, the ceiling caving in, the floor sliding away and disappearing. And pulling Dranen with it. His terrorized face, his hand reaching toward her. She unable to reach for it because she had Karis close.

"Dranen?" she tried, but her voice was weak. She swallowed and tried several more times.

No reply came. But someone had bandaged her. Some type of brace kept her knee in place. It had to be Dranen. It could only be Dranen, although others had been in the house.

“Father?” Ely tried next. In turn, she called out to the cook, the maid, and the scribe.

No answer came. She called to Dranen again, but each attempt took a part of her away, crumbled a part of her hope that he was safe. She tried to stand, wanting to go to the ruins and search, and help anyone in need. She just didn’t have the strength and almost dropped Karis before simply falling back in a sitting position.

She hugged Karis closer, apologized to him, kissed him on the head, rocked him, all the while fighting her rising panic. She suddenly realized that she did not even know if Karis had been injured. She palpated him from head to toe and was relieved to find him in one piece, unharmed.

Another spasm of pain forced a bark from Ely. She couldn’t think. She needed to alleviate the pain. She needed her staff. Dranen knew its importance and maybe he had salvaged it. Ely felt the ground around her, but there was only mud.

It would have been easier if the staff had been close. She would have to awaken the link. She had not used it in a long while. The magical connection she had created between the object and her son was powerful but simple. In the unlikely event that Karis was separated from her, she could activate the magic and the staff would start moving toward her son, pulling her along. Such an enchantment was common enough, but Ely had gone a step farther: the link worked both ways.

Ely touched Karis on the forehead with her thumb and chanted the words...and failed. The chaos in her head made the recitation extremely difficult. She tried again, and again. On the fourth try, she got the simple incantation right and the magic took life, albeit barely.

Creaking sounds came from the ruins, from the heart of the mountain that had been her house. Deep under, the staff was stirring, answering the call. It seemed the ruins were fighting against the magic. Their weight was immense, but the staff was unbreakable. It would endure and come out.

It did.

~

The staff didn't float to her; it slid along the cavern floor. It seemed to take an eternity, during which Ely kept Karis against her bosom, knowing it was more for her benefit than his.

When the staff was close enough, Ely grabbed it and felt a light surge of energy flow into her. It was weak, since the stick was a conduit, not a reservoir. The blue gem on its end was her iris, the eye of her magic, the cipher she needed to focus the energy into some effect.

With difficulty, Ely chanted words of healing. She didn't have the energy or the clarity of mind to do more than push the pain away. The magic came from the ground, through her staff, and enveloped her, numbing the pain, warming all the parts of her body. It also informed her of her state. She was considerably weaker than she had initially guessed. As the hurt faded under her chanting, Ely realized that most of her body had been bruised. She had broken ribs, torn tendons, and a dislocated shoulder. Her confused mind had been fighting hard to hide the true state of her body from her.

The magic flew away as quickly as it had come. Ely placed the staff on the ground with one end across her legs.

"Dranen?" she tried again. "Anyone?"

The weight of incertitude was pulling her toward despair. Karis was safe, but she couldn't be certain about Dranen, about her father, about Malia, Selena, or Zenia. She had become good friend with Zenia over the recent year. The maid had an uncanny way of making her laugh, of making light of any situation.

Some had not survived.

The ruins in front said as much.

~

As she floated between wakefulness and slumber, Ely couldn't stop looking at the immense pile of debris. It was their home. Most of it was there, in pieces and fallen on its side. It looked as if it had slid, the eastern wing coming down first. The cave was deep enough that the house had fallen suspended in emptiness for a while before crashing into the ground.

The first room to hit the floor would have been her uncle's old bedroom. The complete weight of the house was on top of her father. As much as she had come to dislike his presence, the sight in front of her was wrong. She felt regret as she remembered those moments when she had wished her father would go away. She had never truly wanted it, but somehow she felt like destiny had taken her seriously and played this strange prank on them.

How she missed Atila. She wished her sister were here now. No, that didn't make sense either. She didn't want Atila here. Her sister was safe north in Pythis.

In a moment of lucidity, it occurred to Ely to wonder what had happened.

She studied her surroundings more closely, surprised she had not done so earlier. The cave, which at first had looked natural enough, transformed as her mind analyzed it. The cavern was not natural, not at all. Some parts had possibly been formed by an ancient underground river while others had been sculpted by time. Stalagmites and stalactites, like the teeth of a gaping mouth, never closing, supported this theory. But a big part of the cave was not natural.

It had been carved, dug. The walls showed a story of long and arduous labour. There was something else. Some formations were strange, as if the walls and ceiling had been forced back, transformed in a way that left an image of violation. It had to be some kind of magic.

The most disturbing, though, was the placement of the room. It seemed to Ely that it had been strategically positioned to be exactly under their house.

The notion was terribly disturbing.

~

Karis was also having difficulties finding sleep. As she checked on him once more, Ely noticed something on the ground beside the bassinet. It was placed delicately against it. Ely extended a hand and touched it.

A frame. A painting.

She pulled it to her and turned it toward the feeble moonlight.

One of Dranen's.

It was of her, studying in front of the tower of Dar Al'Kalif.

For a moment, Ely had a hard time breathing. She could feel Dranen through the object, remembered the day when it had been painted. Instead of letting tears come, Ely simply smiled, thinking fondly of her husband.

~

Ely realized she was becoming weaker and weaker. She needed to sleep and recuperate. If she could strengthen her life force, she would possibly be able to heal herself enough to stand and walk.

Karis awoke. Ely brought him to her and fed him.

“Is anybody out there?” she called while doing so. “Dranen?” She waited, listened. The silence was aggravating. The only sounds were a light wind gallivanting through the tunnels and distant growls of the earth and the deep. “Anyone?”

She didn’t expect an answer anymore.

But where was Dranen? If he was the one who had bandaged her, he should have returned by now.

Ely felt she was missing something about her situation. Something important. The fog in her head clogged her thoughts and only became thicker as she grew weaker. The idea that the cave had been created returned. This, added to the long absence of Dranen and the absence of signs from any survivors, started to crack the calm assurance Ely had built around herself.

She had hoped for someone by now, but she couldn’t wait longer. It was her and Karis. She deposited her son back in the bassinet. Then, staff in hand, she called to the magic and drowsed the pain even more. Her eyelids grew heavy, and heavier. Ely closed her eyes, hoping she wouldn’t sleep too long.

~

Footsteps pulled her out of sleep.

Footsteps! Finally.

Feet dragged along the ground, the movement slow and coming her way.

“Dranen?” she enquired as she opened her good eye. The darkness was too thick for her to make out who was coming.

The steps got closer, but there was still no reply. Ely took Karis in her arms and turned so her body would hide him. Then, in one hand, she grabbed her staff and pointed it toward the sounds.

“Who is there?”

Outlined by the weak moonlight, a silhouette finally appeared in front of her. It was tall and terribly lean. It crouched, falling on one knee.

“Fa...father?” asked Ely.

“Yes...yes, it is I,” responded the voice in a low murmur.

Ely was stunned.

It was not Dranen.

How could it not be Dranen?

“Where...did you see Dranen?” she asked, whispering without knowing why.

Her father didn't reply.

“Father!” she insisted. “Have you seen Dranen? And what about the others? Surely, it is not only you?”

She hadn't wanted to sound so ungrateful to see him, but the words came before she could filter them.

“We can't stay here,” answered her father, either feigning he didn't hear or simply not caring. There was something different about him. Although his face was battered, he looked younger, stronger, in control. He reminded her of how he had been many years ago.

“We...can't leave,” Ely replied, shaking her head, tears forming in her eye. “Dranen...is he in there?”

The words were difficult, each syllable pounding the fact that Dranen was not the one who had freed her, the possibility that he could be gone. Breathing became difficult. Karis felt her panic and started to whine.

“Please,” said her father, “you must keep Karis silent. We do not want to be heard.”

Ely took a long breath and consoled Karis.

It was in her father's voice. The fear, the utter certainty that danger was close. Undeniable. Gone was the madness in her father's eyes, the random hurtful words, the uncaring attitude.

“I am sorry,” continued her father, reinforcing Ely’s realization that indeed, her father of old had returned. “About Dranen.” He lifted a hand to stop her from interrupting. “True, I never liked him, but it was only because he took you away from the tower, away from me, away from your dream.” The words sounded sincere and there was a vigour to them. Yet, as he talked, her father continued to keep his voice low. “I tried to free him after I found you and after I made sure you and Karis were safe. He was not breathing, already gone. But I wanted to pull him out, for you and because he deserved as much. But I couldn’t. The whole thing crumbled and I...there was nothing I could do.”

Dranen...he was gone then.

Really gone.

Eternally gone.

“Oh, Karis,” she murmured as she hugged him close.

It was a hard realization to swallow. It would take time. She didn’t have time.

Ely was grateful for her father’s patience, for his understanding that she needed silence for a few moments. Time passed. How much, Ely could not say.

“It wasn’t him,” she heard herself whisper into the silence.

“What?” asked her father. He had been keeping vigil, continuously looking right and left.

“It wasn’t him,” she repeated. “It was me. It had always been me. I wanted to leave Dar Al’Kalif. Dranen wanted me to complete my studies. I wanted to spend a few years in Xil, build a family first and complete my training later. I didn’t want to make the same mistake as...”

“As me?”

She nodded.

“You lost yourself in the Arcanes,” she continued, “and forgot about Mom. About Atila and I. There was just you, Uncle, and the Arcanes. And then Uncle was gone, and so were you.”

This seemed to take her father by surprise, although nothing she had just said was new. She had thrown the exact same words at him on several occasions in the past years. Never had he heard her. Until now.

Suddenly, a clatter came from afar. It was impossible to estimate the distance, but Ely guessed it had to be far, the sound echoing against the cave walls and ceiling. Her father's face turned pale.

He stood.

"There is no more time," he said. "I looked, Ely, I promise. I couldn't find anyone else. It is only the three of us. We have to go. And quickly now."

Monsters

To Ely's surprise, her father started chanting Arcanes words without an iris or a gem, exposing himself to the energy and its destruction. She had seen him perform this way before, although rarely and a very long time ago. He would always be careful around Atila and her, teaching them to protect themselves.

She felt the fluxes of power form from the air all around and converge through her father. This then was why he looked rejuvenated. The magic.

A disk, shining and translucent, appeared beside her, floating about a meter off the ground. Without hesitation, her father took the cradle and the painting and put them on the floating device. Then he took Karis from her hands. Ely didn't protest. She noticed he only had one good arm, but his actions were precise and unflinching. Before depositing the baby in the bassinet, her father looked at Karis and brought him close to his chest.

He hugged the boy.

Ely was anxious at first, but this man was indeed the father she had once known. Intelligent, aware, and caring. It was a sight she had lost hope of witnessing again.

He kissed Karis before placing him in the cradle.

Next, he moved close to Ely and gently took hold of her. She felt his muscles tremble and shake under the exertion. He was not strong, but he lifted her and set her beside the bassinet on the disk. She kept hold of her staff as he did so. She felt better than earlier, but not by much.

"Take this," he said, passing a pendant around her head. "A gift from me to you."

He turned and started walking, with difficulty at first, then with purpose. The disk followed a few meters behind. Ely touched the trinket hanging around her neck. Not a trinket, a key. She had seen her father use it in the house, on all the doors, but knew it also opened other doors. In Dar Al'Kalif: his study and his laboratory. Ely hid the key inside her shirt, knowing what it represented to her father. She marvelled, while at the same time wondering what could make him give it to her now.

~

As long as she could, Ely stared back at the wreckage, at what had been her house, her home. For three generations, it had been theirs.

And in that debris, somewhere, was the man she loved. This place could very well become Dranen's tomb. Ely knew she would try to return later. If at all possible.

~

"Stop!"

Her father turned toward her, slowing his walk.

"What was that noise?"

He retraced his steps and came to stand beside her. He listened.

"It was like an explosion..." Ely started but shut her mouth as the ground began to shake. It didn't last long. A powerful growl bounced through the cavern, rolling along the walls, ceiling, and floor. It was gone as quickly as it had come. Its source lay somewhere ahead.

Her father didn't hesitate and started walking in the opposite direction, going back.

"What was that?" she asked.

"They brought another one down," he whispered quickly.

"Another?"

"A house. Surely you noticed?" he asked, annoyed now, pointing at the walls with his only good hand. His other arm was tucked in his robe.

"The tunnels were shaped and created by someone," she said.

"Yes, tools and old magic. If you concentrate, you can still feel the emanations." Ely closed her eyes and opened her senses. "They created a complex network and an even more elaborate plan to destroy Xil. By the end of the night, there will be nothing left of the village."

He was correct about the magic. Ely would not have noticed it on her own, but she could feel it now. It was mixed with the energy of the world, hidden in the essence of the earth and the air. A puissance like she had never experienced before.

"What is this force? Who did this?" she asked.

Her father looked at her but didn't say a word. Fear was all over his face, all over his body. He opened his mouth, then closed it and started walking once more, at a faster pace.

They traversed the large alcove where their house had crashed and entered a small passage at the opposite side. Ely thought of Dranen. She craved his presence and allowed his image to give her strength. She extended the enchantment keeping her pain to a manageable level. She had asked her father earlier if he was in pain, if he required soothing. He refused, telling her to preserve her energy. She knew her father had no knowledge of the healing sphere of the Arcanes. But he was a master of the element of Aeros.

"Father," she said while looking at the opening in the ceiling, "leave us here. Hide us and fly out, go get help."

Her father didn't slow down, but he looked at her over his shoulder.

"I do not have enough energy left," he said. "And besides, there is no help to be found in Xil this night."

As they left their house behind, the floor of the cavern climbed for a while before dropping significantly. Her father had created a faint light, which he sent ahead in the tunnel. Corridors branched out to either side, but her father seemed to know where to go. Far away, the rush of water started to sound. A subterranean river? If so, it had to connect to the ocean. And if it did, then it might offer a possible escape route. Her father must have explored after collecting her and Karis from the rubble.

As they progressed, Ely felt the strange magic she had felt earlier grow in strength. And there was something else, another unnatural smell, alien to underground tunnels. It was an odour that reminded Ely of the library at the tower of Dar Al'Kalif, of molded scrolls and papyrus. But instead of a warm feeling, it twisted her insides.

It was the smell of old, the stench of a time of sorrow.

~

They entered a room larger than the one where their house had crashed. The air was especially putrid and hit Ely in the face like a heat wave. Karis moaned and Ely

reassured him with a touch. The tumult of the running water was louder, and Ely could make out the rushing river ahead. Light emanated from an alcove in a far and elevated corner. The luminescence was generated by moss. Ely knew about purple moss but had never seen any in its natural habitat. The sight would have been beautiful if it wasn't for the two immense tumuli that appeared ahead, one on each side of the tunnel.

Two buildings, possibly houses. It was impossible to determine what they were, the ceiling being so far up that the impact had pulverized the buildings on contact. A hill sat in the middle of Xil and the height of the ceiling suggested they were under it. There were only a few buildings on the top of the hill. One of the piles could be the Crystal Phial, a small shop of potions and elixirs owned by Avala, her dear friend Avala. Another friend, gone.

The other mount, much larger, could be Galan's Rest, the first sight visitors saw when reaching Xil. A huge inn that, some said, was as old as the tower of Dar Al'Kalif.

Her father was walking especially fast now. They were going downhill, toward the water. As they reached the edge, she noticed there was a raft on the ground, made of planks bound by nothing other than magic. Her father pushed it into the water.

"Hurry," he said. "Move onto the raft."

Ely used her staff for support and stood on her good leg. The pain lanced through her, but she bit it down. Once her father had taken the cradle, the floating disk evaporated. Her father murmured a few words to Karis before placing the bassinet on the floating raft.

There was a sudden hiss, and both Ely and her father stooped low. More hisses and Ely thought she saw projectiles hit the water's surface. Her father had his head down and was calling to the Arcanes. She saw the wind shield appear around them. She crawled forward and took a place on the raft.

"They have found us," mumbled her father. "Follow the current. It will take you outside, to the eastern sea. Then go south to the Synod. Do not go back to Xil. It is too late for Xil."

More hisses and projectiles. They hit the wind shield and bounced away. Small arrows. One came to rest on the ground close by.

"What about you?" Ely asked.

"I have to stay, give you time."

"I have lost Dranen already. Not you too."

Her father came near.

“Look,” he said as he lifted his hand and pointed. The little fluorescent globe of light that had accompanied them through the tunnels started to expand. As her father pushed the globe forward, the room was unveiled in all its terror.

The two piles of ruins reflected the light, and behind them, a third and a fourth pile were revealed. The glowing ball continued to grow, and in its brightness Ely was able to make out the broken sign of Avala’s shop. Two of the ruins were houses. And at the foot of one of the mountains, what looked like a torso, someone who had tried to crawl out or been squashed on impact.

Ely felt rage start to take the place of her pain. Who would do this?

The globe of light continued forward and walking shapes appeared. Short and bent, moving rapidly away from the light, staying in the shadows. Furry and black, kobolds of the dark. The creatures were known to Ely. Sometimes they would surface in the western hills of Xil, exclusively at night. They moved in large numbers, disorganized, looking mainly for food, anything edible to salvage and steal.

But this very moment, they were moving toward them. Arrows continued to rain down, the kobolds shooting many in the hope of eventually hitting something. None penetrated her father’s shield.

Ely looked at her father, but he encouraged her to continue looking forward.

“There,” he said, terror in his voice, “this is what you need to see. This is what you have to warn the Synod about.”

The globe was distant now and still moving away. The silhouette it revealed was huge, almost as wide as it was tall. Armoured, reflecting the light in a bronze glow. Two long arms, short legs, each massive in size. A head wearing a battle helmet, with a large gaping mouth in the shape of a V. A face, severe, reminiscent in appearance to a turtle. Indeed, on the aberration’s back was a large carapace, thick and broad. In its hands it held a gigantic two-handed sword, the blade dark and opaque.

And the smell...fetid and rotting, stronger now than ever before, burned the inside of her nostrils. Ely knew it came from the creature.

Another shape appeared behind the first one. Taller, larger. Bearing what seemed to be a battle-axe, with a blade that seemed from this distance to be as high as Ely was tall.

And a third. This last one was holding a long spear, at the end of which was hanging the remains of a cadaver...no! Not a cadaver...

The victim was moving!

He was alive, impaled. The poor man was pierced through the back, chest, and throat...

~

“What are they?” asked Ely.

“Can’t you smell it?” asked her father. “The ancient world?”

“What? No, it can’t be.”

“What other explanation can there be? Look at these monsters. Feel their power and how it disturbs the ground, the air, the world.” Ely started to tremble as the impossibility became a reality. Her father’s voice was barely audible, fighting waves of fear. “I...don’t understand it. These demons should not be here. Their age has come, and passed.”

Ely could remember but pieces of the books she had once read. Legends...they were all legends and myths. The Ravages. A war brought by the boundless desires of a tyrant known as the Nefarius. Four races under him, four races that even the dragons had not been able to oppose. One the true ogres, another winged, and a third from the sea and the earth. Of the fourth, Ely recalled nothing.

But the third were creatures said to be protected by hard shells.

“The Tho’Ras?”

Her father nodded.

Ely couldn’t believe it, even as the aberrations were walking toward her. The mere presence of these things disturbed the world. She could taste their wrongness in the odour that infested her lungs. She could feel the world fighting against their existence.

They didn’t belong in this era.

They didn’t belong in this world any longer.

Their time had been more than six thousand years ago.

~

“Go,” said her father. “And bring a warning.”

He started pushing the raft toward the water. Behind him, the wind shield was still standing, arrows hitting the surface every few seconds, bouncing away. The globe of light had faded away, the nightmare temporarily hidden in darkness, made worse by being invisible.

“Come with us,” Ely murmured.

He stopped and looked directly at her.

“If I do,” he said, “they will follow and get us. I can give you the time you need.” Tears formed in his eyes. “Ely, my sweet, you are the best of us. I love you, and Karis. And tell your sister...that I’ve always loved her too.”

He looked over his shoulder as heavy footsteps reverberated closer and closer, metal boots clacking against the floor, angry vociferations exchanged.

“Go,” he repeated and started pushing again. “You are too weak, and the raft is too small for the three of us.” It seemed he was trying to convince himself more than her.

“Come,” she asked again.

He shook his head and Ely admitted defeat. Her final gesture was to point her staff at him, murmur a few words, and transfer what energy she had left. He absorbed it. It was visible as the wind shield expanded and thickened.

“Try to escape,” she said. “I will be waiting for you. Father, I love you.”

As he launched the raft into the water, her father stood and looked at her for one more instant.

There was a half-smile on his face. No mockery. Only fondness.

~

That was the image Ely would keep of him. Old, wounded, but standing tall. She would possibly always hate him for the many errors he had made. But now she could also admire him for what he had done this day.

~

Down the river, Ely sat up on the raft and made sure the bassinet was secure. She looked briefly at the painting, a reminder of the father who had cherished the object and the husband who had crafted it.

Then, with renewed determination, staff in hand, she steered toward the eastern ocean.

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About the Author



STEVE C. ESTON grew up in the small village of Trudel, in the province of New Brunswick in Canada. He is a manager in technology services for the federal government and currently lives in Fredericton with his wife, Leigh. For behind-the-scenes info and free short stories, you can visit him at www.sceston.ca.

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