

WITCH'S QUEST



Dennis S. Thornton

"Eyes in the night." Whispered a voice. Kennis was instantly alert. He bent into a crouch, one hand on the hilt of his sword. Blue eyes searched the darkness around him. Every few yards torches flickered but He could see no one. He knew he'd heard the words unless imagined it.

"They watch you."

"Who watch's me?" He asked back. He now knew the voice was close and to his right side. From somewhere in the alley.

"The eyes, glaring with hate, they watch and wait for you Kennis."

While he talked Kennis looked deeper into the gloom of the alley. He spotted an old lady leaning against the wall of an alley and turned towards her. A cloak of green and red was wrapped around her withered frame. Grey hair hung to her hunched shoulders around her heart shaped face. Though old and wrinkled it was still a pretty face.

Her words meant little to him. To be honest he'd felt someone was watching him from the minute he entered the city gates. That was why he'd been so alert.

"So sad, such sorrow, dear boy."

"Do I know you?"

"No but I know you." She stood before him and with one wrinkled hand pulled him down. Kennis knelt and looked into her eyes. They were a Lambert green like a cat. They held him entranced. It seemed to him they were seeking deep within his soul.

"I see a mountain of bones made from those you've slain floating in a sea of blood. A wind whispers around you, the voice of thousands who accuse you of murder. Listen not to them, they lie to you."

Kennis shivered at her words. Many times before he'd had such a dream and always woke up screaming. How did she know? What kind of magic was at work?

A small sound reached Kennis's ears. The soft scuttle of feet trying not to make a sound. He leapt to his feet and spun, drawing his sword in a flash of light. It rang against another sword. A burly man stood before him while two others crowded close. They must have been waiting for the perfect opportunity to attack. Being distracted by the old women would have been perfect except that Kennis was better than most. It would take more than this to kill him.

He smiled slightly as he looked at the assassin's. He knew their type well, had been one of them, long ago. Now he was a bounty hunter of such men when he wasn't performing tasks for pay.

The burly man snarled and leapt forward his sword aimed for a thrust. Kennis stepped aside so that the blade passed by. He then grabbed the man's head with his left hand and smashed it against the alley wall. Bone crunched and blood sprayed before the man fell to the cobbles. Kennis leapt over his body and faced the other two assassins.

They fanned out so he was facing both at the same time. One on either side. It was a tactic that often worked and they were confident that it would do so again. They moved slowly around him like hungry wolves. Their eyes were cold and hard.

"Are you going to dance all night or try to earn your money? I'm hungry and getting bored."

"You killed Gierce you filthy dog, die now." The man on his right snarled savagely.

"But I bathed just before I came to the gates, in a stream near the forest. It was quite refreshing."

"What?" The man said coming to a stop. Didn't this man know he was going to die? Wasn't he afraid?

"You said I was filthy and I was just telling that I wasn't one other thing. Never let down your guard." Kennis said calmly.

His sword flashed and the man's head dropped to the ground a second before his body. It tolled and stopped with the eyes looking up at him.

The third assassin screamed and rushed at Kennis since his back was turned. Kennis felt the man moving and ducked as his sword whistled over his head. Reversing the sword he plunged it into the man's belly and cut him open to the breastbone.

"We should leave before more come. You must have dinner with me." The old woman said.

"And why is that?" Kennis asked suspiciously. He doubted the women had anything to do with this directly but he'd seen stranger.

"Because this is my fault. I knew you were coming and came to meet you. Thurtik knew this and sent those horrid men to kill you."

"Who's Thurtik and why...?"

"I'll explain at my place. You're hungry and tired I'm sure."

The old woman took a hand and moved off into the deeper gloom of the alley. Kennis could barely see anything but a few indistinguishable shapes but the old woman seemed to know where she was and where she was going. She looked straight ahead and moved more easily than one would think she could with her bent body.

Finally she stopped before a wall and pushed one of the bricks. A part of the wall slid away. She drew Kennis and the door slid back into place. He wouldn't have known it was there if he hadn't seen for himself. The place where he now stood was much the same. Small but filled with things that spoke of it being a home.

In the wall opposite of the hidden door was a fireplace with a small fire crackling. A table of thick oak sat near it and a huge black pot hung over the coals something inside simmering. On his left was a whole wall of shelves that held books, scrolls, vials of colored sands. There were odd looking rocks, chipped arrowheads and even a spear



point. On one shelf a sword and sheath was sitting in a box made of strange crystal and lined with blue and red striped fur.

"My husband's sword."

"What kind of fur is that? I've never seen anything like it?"

"A very strange beast he said was called a Nurric. He claims to have gone to the moon once and killed it there. I think he got drunk and made it to explain where he'd been. Have a seat and I'll explain what's going on."

Kennis walked over to the table and sat in a large chair. As big as he was it still had room on either side. He looked questioningly at the old woman as she sat across from him.

"My husband was a Barbarian from The Southern Jungles. A huge man who needed everything much bigger than normal. You may have heard of him."

"Your husband was Valdrik. I didn't even know he'd married."

"He was a bit older than you when we met, fell in love and got married. It was a very beautiful thing the wedding. He settled down and went out now and then on adventures but stayed here mostly."

"Then you might owe his spirit an apology."

"For what?"

"I met another fellow who claimed he went to the moon. He says it shines because the water is whiter than blue and the land a sort of grayish ash like color. He said something about strange beasts and people."

"Then he must have the fellow Valdrik got drunk with."

"And why would he tell me a story as strange as that. I don't care if he was drunk. I've been that way myself a few times."

"Come on boy. You don't really believe the moon has people on it and strange beasts. Everyone knows there's no such thing."

The old woman looked puzzled when Kennis laughed. He saw a hurt look come into her eyes and explained.

"It's been a long time since anyone called me boy, With this head of grey hairs there aren't many people left who can call me young."

At that moment they heard a small rumbling sound and laughed.

"Sounds like the boy is hungry. His tummy's rumbling" She teased. She stood and walked over to the pot. He glanced down and nodded. The stew was bubbling along. She took a wooden spoon and

began to stir the stew slowly. She wasn't sure how to approach Kennis with her request. She had no gold or anything else of value to entice him to rescue her Grandson. Maybe she could appeal to his goodness. She'd heard many stories of his kind heart and giving personality.

At that moment the fire sparked and leapt outwards. The old women screamed and ducked as some kind of thing came out of the fire. It stood on the floor looking at Kennis with fiery eyes.

"There you are. You'll not be helping the old woman, boy." The thing said with a deep penetrating voice. Kennis knew it was someone else voice he was hearing.

The thing looked like a skeleton with a huge egg shaped head. Its eyes were shaped like diamonds. The claws at the end of its hands were wreathed in flames.

Kennis stood swiftly his sword whispering from its sheath. He faced the thing while the old women huddle on the floor. She would be of little help in a fight against a magic creature. Besides, Kennis had protection against magic.

The thing aimed its clawed hands at Kennis and fireballs shout out of its hands. They swiftly engulfed him. As his body wreathed in flames the thing turned towards the old lady.

"You loose again Molina, Your grandson is mine and remain so until he's nothing but a dried husk." The thing cackled.

"It's not that easy Vorash."

"What?" The thing spun and saw Kennis standing there. His hair was singed but otherwise he was unhurt.

"I've got magic of my own. I would advise you to return her grandson before I come for you."

"Let's see your magic protect you from claws." the voice sneered.

Kennis just smiled. In thirty years of adventuring he faced many things and had yet to lose. He knew someday it would happen but felt today wasn't the day.

The thing rushed at Kennis with such speed he barely saw it move. One minute he was across the room and then next he was near Kennis. The clawed hands swung for his feet but Kennis leapt high and backwards. He landed in a crouch facing the thing. His

sword swung down but it moved aside and the blade hit the floor of the room. Sparks rose as the steel struck rock.

It didn't wait but began to swing the fiery fists at Kennis. Blows rained upon him and he barely fought back the swift blows. He twisted and turned to avoid the punches and saw an opportunity. He kicked with one foot for the things legs but it moved out of the way and one hand grabbed his tunic. It bent suddenly and sideways throwing Kennis off balance forcing him to drop his sword.

Kennis hit the floor on his right side as claws raked him. They tore through his cloak and tunic to the skin beneath. He felt them burn along his ribs and clenched his teeth against the pain. The thing dropped on top of him trying to get his throat in its fiery grasp.

Kennis realized the danger immediately and rolled over and over with the creature until they hit a wall. The thing gave a triumphant cry thinking it now had Kennis where it wanted him. Once more it reached for his throat but Kennis' grabbed each arm and twisted them away from his throat. He wasn't going to just give him. If thing wanted him dead it would have to earn it.

Gathering his knee's under him he pushed them against the belly of the thing and heaved while rolling towards his head. The thing went flying across the room and slammed into the wall with a shower of sparks. Kennis grabbed his sword and surged to his feet. The thing was just turning around when his sword sliced off its head. He quickly cut it into many pieces of charred bones.

Realizing it was finally dead he walked back over to the chair and dropped with a sigh into it. Molana stood looking with wide eyes. She'd never seen such a fierce battle. Although Valdrik had often spoken of fighting magic things and monsters she had never truly believed him until now. If this man who was much smaller than him could this then what could her husband do?

"Where do this Wizard live?"

"Let me show you." She moved her hands in a dizzying pattern and a tower began to form. Then he saw some rolling hills that gave way to the lake next to where the village he was in now rested. "About ten miles to the North. It's a white tower shaped like a mushroom. My grandson is in the top part. He was captured three months ago and is slowly being drained of his life energy. Another week or so and he'll be a dried husk. I meant to find you when you entered the city and ask for your help."

"I'll be back shortly."

"Maybe you should rest a few moments before going after him. He's still very dangerous."

"For a little bit." Kennis agreed.

Molana served up of the stew and placed it before him. She crushed some leaves of some kind of strange looking plants into a cup and poured steaming hot water over them.

"Drink this." She ordered.

Kennis took a sniff and almost gagged.

"This smells worse than the Swamps of Solkaun."

"Its medicine, it'll make you feel better. Just drink it boy."

"Yes, Grand mommy" Kennis said in his best imitation of a little boy's voice. He gulped it down in one gulp and settled back into his chair. Warmth spread over his tired body. A strange energy seemed to pulse through his veins and his fatigue cleared.

"Now bad, I tasted cinnamon and mint. I do feel better."

"May be now you'll respect your elders more." Molana chided. "Your mother would be ashamed of how you act."

"There's many things I've done she'd be ashamed of and when I see her again I'll no doubt get an ear full."

"She's dead?"

"Died of the fever when I twelve or thirteen. I'm not actually sure." Kennis said sadly.

"How can you not be sure?"? "I was kidnaped by slavers when I was twelve. Three years later I finally made it home. Everyone in my village was dead of plague or something. I've been on my own ever since."

Kennis sighed deeply. Although nearly thirty years had passed since that day it still hurt and always would.

"Sorry if I brought up bad memories." Molana apologized. Kennis just looked at the wood of the table.

Suddenly he lurched to his feet and started for the door.

"Wait. I can send you to the edge of the woods near the tower. It'll save some time."

"Whatever, let's get on with it."

Molana mumbled, pushed her hands together and moved them up and down against each other. With a screech she pulled them apart and touched Kennis with her warm hands. There was a flash

and Kennis saw he was deep in a forest of oak and cedars. A moon hung in the sky a halo of sorts around its edges. Just beyond the woods Kennis could see the tower.

He laid his right hand on the hilt of his sword and walked forward. He was ready to face the wizard one last time and save the captive child. Twice he fought against his evil and prevailed. He would finish it and end the evil once and for all.

The forest was still, no animal moved nor branch scrape. His nostrils wide Kennis could smell something on the wind but he wasn't sure what. Was it death or perhaps the evil wizard's fear? He must be thinking about his imminent death as Kennis came closer. Was he worried? Had he prepared for the eventuality?

From the darkness Kennis could hear words of magic and they sent a chill down his spine. Vorash was working one last spell. Somehow Kennis knew his magic was weakening. He could hear the desperation in the words.

The ground began to shake violently almost causing Kennis to lose his balance. He grabbed hold of a tree trunk and pulled himself close. He used it to stay on his feet. Beneath his feet he felt something move. Whatever Vorash had conjured was coming up out of the ground.

A giant hand of stone burst through the ground, bits of black soil still clinging to it. It reached for Kennis but he moved around the trunk of the tree. The hand closed around the tree and wrenched it from the ground. Kennis let go as it was thrown aside and drew his sword.

Another hand burst through the ground and the two hands flew together but Kennis had expected this move and leapt backwards a couple of feet. The two hands slammed against each other with a shock. Kennis swung down at the hands with his sword shearing half way through the two inch thick stone. His sword could cut through anything. It was one of three magical items he found on his journey home at fifteen. For the last thirty years they'd served him well.

With an explosion that sent earth everywhere a giant shape came out of the ground. It was built like a man but many times taller and built of solid stone, granite from the look of it. There was extraordinary definition to the muscles that bulged along the shoulders and arms.

"Not over doing it a bit are we? You'd better hope this thing kills me Wizard before if it don't I'll tear the tower down around your ears and cut out your heart." Kennis snarled his voice full of hate.

The stone man glared down at him from eyes twice as big as he was and it's face split into a smile that showed teeth as long as swords. The two fists were curled into balls at its side.

They stared at each other for a minute before the stone man swung his right fist for Kennis. Kennis simply moved aside. While big and strong the thing was slow. Kennis sword slashed across the wrist cutting deep. The blade sparked as it was drawn across the stone.

The left hand suddenly slammed into Kennis's side and sent him flying through the air. He hit a huge oak with a crunch and slid to the ground. He had barely hit before the fist came down at him. As big as it was it would crush him into a pulp if Kennis hadn't rolled away. The other hand barely missed but a swing foot slammed him into the back. The sound of snapping bones came to Kennis's ears as he was propelled into the air again. When he landed he lay there panting. The thing was smarter than he thought. No doubt the wizard was controlling its movements and this gave Kennis an ideal.

"Is that the best you can do? The old woman can hit me harder than that. I've seen babies with more strength." He sneered.

A snarl of rage crossed the stone man's face. Anger well up in its gem like eyes. His plan was working. Both hands thrust for him but Kennis nimbly dodged aside and laughed. They missed again and again.

"You're slower then a Collavian Sand Worm and smell worse than the medicine Molana gave me."

With a bellow of rage the Stone Man moved forward bending down to get closer to its Target. Its hands reached for Kennis while trying to kick him with his feet. These actions unbalanced the thing and it crashed to the ground which shook at its impact.

Kennis leapt up and landed on the things chest. Raising the sword he plunged it into one of the things eyes. There was a soundless scream. Once more the sword plunged and the thing withered in agony. Its hands reached for the hurting eyes. Kennis saw them coming and moved aside so that they smashed into the face instead. With powerful blows he severed the hands and began cutting into the thick neck. Stone chips flew and Kennis hewed the things head from its shoulders.

It gave on last shudder before crumbling back into the ground. Kennis found himself back on solid ground and leaned against the trunk of a tree. His breathed in short panting gasps of pain. He had at least one or two broken ribs.

After a few deep breaths to steady himself Kennis straightened up and moved towards the wizard's tower. He noticed it shimmered faintly as he came closer. A magical shield to keep out unwanted guests. It wouldn't work with Kennis though. He reached out with one hand and felt the tingle of magic. It began to flow up his arms and into the amulet he wore about his neck under his tunic. He felt it grow hot against his skin.

The tingle slowed and Kennis felt the amulet begin to cool. It caught and focused magic energies. He pointed one hand at the wall before him and spoke a word of command. The imagery well up. He felt it surging through his veins and he released it. A beam of pure energy as bright as the sun slammed into the tower.

The whole tower swayed backwards a bit. Huge bits of rock blew everywhere. Some fell in a shower around Kennis. He smiled as he gazed in the hole he'd created.

Before him was a set of stairs made of crystal which he swiftly ran up. Reached the top of the tower he came to another door but it swung up at his slightest touch. IN the center of the room Molana's Grandson hung by ropes around his wrists.

He was a shaking and his ribs showed through his pale skin. His hair was lank and covered in filth. The grey eyes were glazed as he looked at his savior. With one Swipe of his sword Kennis cut him down. He picked him up in his arms cradling him close to his chest.

"Molana, if you're watching, get me home now." He whispered tiredly.

There was a flash of light and the feeling of movement. When Kennis blinked he was back in the room. He followed her to a bed and laid the boy upon it. He stepped back and fell into the same chair he'd rested in before.

Molana pulled a shimmering blanket around the boy's thin body and sighed as she gazed down into his round face.

"Grand mommy." He whispered. "I'm free or is this dream?"

"No dream dear boy, Kennis here rescued you but for now you need to rest."

The boy sank deeper into the bed and sighed. He was now home and safe.

Molana turned and with tears in her eyes looked at Kennis. He smiled weakly at her.

"I'll never be able to repay you." She said her voice choked with emotion.

"No need to. It's what I do, what I am. I couldn't stop even if I wanted."

"I have another room with a bed in it. Why you go lay down in there and sleep."

"That sounds good. Maybe I can have some more of your healing herbal tea first though."

She made him some tea and he struggled to stay awake while she did. His eyes were almost closed when she brought it to him. After he drank it she led him to the room and he dropped into the bed for a long sleep.

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