

# THE JUDGMENT OF NEAVE

by

S. N. Lewitt

“Come and look over here, Tisia!” my little sister called.

I hung back. Amrys is always finding things, some of them better left undisturbed according to the wise women. We have not been in these Dales very long, but there are already stories of things left by those who lived here before. Indeed, it is said that they still live beyond our precincts where they practice such magic as the good Dames despise. Or so I have heard.

I had not wanted to take Amrys up to the hills. It was the kind of perfect early spring day best enjoyed alone. The sky was a cold pale blue and the first sprinkling of yellow and purple and white wildflowers dotted the high meadow. Besides, looking after the goats was enough work. My six-year-old sister requires more supervision than half the herd.

“Tisia!”

I went. Better to see what Amrys was up to than leave her alone. If she had not enough sense to stay where she belonged, at least she lacked the courage to pry too deeply into what the Old Ones left behind.

This time she stood at the edge of a flat stone set into the meadow. It was large, nearly as large as the cooking hearth at the hall, but such is not unusual here. It was plain and gray like every other great stone in the great pasture

viewed from a distance. I came closer, grateful only that Amrys seemed huddled into herself and not making any move toward the formation.

When I arrived I saw that it was not like every other flat rock around. On the surface was incised a five-pointed star, and within a pattern so complex that it made my head spin. At least it was the star, I thought, the outline showing faintly blue. That was good, or so the wise woman had said. There was no direct danger in such. Still, it was better that it remained undisturbed. We know too little about the people who inhabited this place, although there are those who say a great war was fought here and beyond. Certainly there are places where no sane person would go, into that area that many call the Waste because naught but evil bides there.

I pulled Amrys's hand and turned my back on the star rock. I am no lady of a great keep, of a fine family who has listened to the songs and heard many traveler's tales. Nor am I a wise woman or the apprentice to one, learned in the lore of healing and plants and other knowledge. I am only a shepherdess, daughter of a herdsman and a dairy-woman. Nor has my father made a match for me, although my mother says it should have been done long since. Little does she know it is because I begged my father not to pledge me to Kendrig the stable boy at the Keep or Gloswin who is a widower and older than my mother.

So, my mind on other things, I dragged Amrys from the stone. Usually she is a bidable girl once you've acknowledged what she wanted you to see, but today was different. She came along a step or two and then dug her heels into a tuft of grass. I groaned and pulled her up, still intent on this problem of choosing a husband. Perhaps it was true that my father was too fond and I too haughty. How could I explain to my mother that I had dreamed night after night of some perfect husband who was like none of the men of this Dale? My thoughts running this way, I didn't even notice that Amrys had slipped my hand until I heard the thump-thump of her running.

Then I swept around only to find the child approaching the star at a rapid pace. I ran after. There was nothing else to do. It was not that I had planned things, nor had I any intention of touching that star-graven rock. But Amrys, as always, had thwarted my plans. I caught up with her and threw my arms around her shoulders to stop her from going to that fearsome relic. She stumbled under my restraint and I went straight over, losing my balance. I was lucky at first. As I collapsed over Amrys's crying, crumpled form, I thought only to throw myself clear of her. I flew forward and pulled my head under, so that I rolled on my shoulders. At first I thought I was lucky. My shoulders had struck springy earth, so the impact was less painful than I had been prepared to face. I continued to roll. Suddenly there was hardness and pain against my upper back as momentum carried me onward.

I heard Amrys scream. I opened my eyes and sprang to my feet to search for her. My whole body ached from the fall. Around me, though, the meadow was distorted. I thought I could make out the form of my little sister beyond the haze of blue that enveloped me. Her voice faded as the blaze of light grew even more brilliant. Then I couldn't see her any longer, nor hear her terrified voice.

Perhaps if I had not been so concerned with Amrys I would have noticed more about the place where I was, about the pattern on the stone, the interplay of light and color. As it was, I felt myself drawn to the center of the stone and I fought it, going around and around, dancing in and out around the edge of the light searching for Amrys. Inexorably the Power of the place drew me inward. No matter how hard I fought, how many times I reminded myself that I was responsible for a young child, there was no way I could deny the Power that commanded me. By the time I reached the center I was exhausted from the struggle and my stomach churned thinking of my little sister and what she had seen. It was warm in the center, and the light spun around me in varied hues, gold and rose and silver and butter-rich amber intertwined with an azure as pure as

the sky in mid-autumn. Warmth and beauty coalesced around me, clung like dew at sunrise and entered me softly like the chill before dawn. Suddenly I was very weary and I lay down. The aches in my back and legs from my fall nagged restlessly. As I tried to forget them, the warmth began to leech them away slowly. I entered into the warmth as it had entered me, along with all the colors that danced around and cut me off from the high meadow. Little by little, without being aware of what I did, I fell asleep.

It was a strange sleep with many dreams. I dreamed that I was falling down a great black well. It was cold and clammy, smelling of water and promise. The colors spun through the well even more crazily than they had on the pasture, weaving and unweaving designs I could almost perceive before they dissolved and others took their place. Even in the dream, I told myself that it was only my hurts and worries about Amrys and the sheep that made me uneasy. I was glad when I awoke.

The waking was slow as the sleep had been, more clear for the absence of dreams. The darkness settled and the colors faded. I did not open my eyes. Something was different. The stone, which had been sun-warmed in the high meadow, was now cool and the air had lost the scent of new grass and wildflowers. The new smell was more like an abandoned room in the keep, with stone walls which had not been aired in a long while. No housemaid would permit anyone to enter such a chamber. I opened one eye carefully. It was dark. Not so dark as a root cellar or a well. Some shreds of wan light made their way through the high narrow windows. Dust motes played in these few rays. As I could see better, I noticed that dust lay thick on the floor where I lay. Indeed, there were no footprints or other marks to show how I had arrived in this place. I moved my hand lightly over the paved floor and felt the incisions in the smooth stone. I searched no more. I didn't want to know.

Carefully I stood and tried to walk away. This time it was as if the pattern was dead. No color blazed around me,

nothing moved or became warm, no pattern folded and danced and enveloped me. This room was dead and forgotten, all Power gone.

It was hunger that drove me to the door, which was not locked but rusted shut. I pushed with all my strength, and then fell against it and bruised my shoulder more than once before the ancient hinges gave.

The room opened onto a corridor as dust-filled as the place I had left. No footprints marred the even film on the floor. The hall was narrow and made of finely dressed stone, finer than any keep I had ever seen in the Dales. Light beckoned from a distance, and as I followed the hallway I found myself on the threshold of a vast and once-beautiful hall. Rags of tapestries still clung to the walls like spiderwebs of liquid color, now mottled with time and dirt. The high table was cunningly carved, the wooden animals that made the legs so lifelike that I expected them to move and cry out at any moment. There were four, each leg different. The one nearest me was a gryphon just unfurling its wings, the next was a lion. On the far side I made out a horse with such a noble toss of its head that I had never seen its like in life. The last was an eagle, its wings raised high in sharp fury to support the great slab of wood that rested on them. The three chairs at this board were also of wondrous work. As I came closer to inspect, I could see the darkened places where gold leaf had flaked off from glorious representations of various wildflowers and smaller summer birds. Wrought bronze candlesticks had darkened with age and lack of polishing, but the richness of the metal and fluid work proved that this place had not hosted robbers.

Filled with awe at the beauty of the castle and sadness at its silence, I forgot momentarily my hunger. It was brought swiftly to mind by a half whif of roasting meat borne through the high windows. The smell made my legs weak. I had not eaten since breakfast and had left my pack with some cheese and bread on the meadow with Amrys. I was

not sure how long I had been asleep, but it seemed from my protesting stomach that it was close to dinner time.

Still, I hesitated. Whoever was outside cooking could well be no friend of mine. I had heard of the horrors of the Waste, and there was nothing to reassure me that I was in some safe place. Still, this hall, no matter its faded luxury, gave no hope of provisions and I had to eat. Besides, whoever was out there was not promised a foe, either. The roasting smelled wonderful. Just as well, because I suddenly realized that I had no idea of where I was. Even a foe could give me useful information on how to return home. I knew that there was a great road that ran through the Dales to the Waste. Perhaps it was not far and I could follow it easily. I only hoped that Amrys had returned home safely with the sheep and goats.

So resolved, I made my way cautiously out to the courtyard. Luck was with me and the small garden was as neglected as the hall had been. Fruit trees and brambles had overgrown their pruning, so I was able to creep behind a wall of brush to observe the person I had come to meet.

From my vantage point behind the hedge I could see the young man quite clearly. He was alone, if the single horse tied to a tree was true testimony. Nor was he a brigand so far as first sight could tell. His clothes were plain but of fine fabric and good cut. He whistled as if he were unafraid of what he would find here and tended his fire and the meat roasting over it with concentration. No ill-bought gains bulged out his saddlebags unduly and his horse seemed watered and well cared for. The horse nickered and the man laughed. He went to the saddlebag and produced some fruit for the animal who ate it and then nosed him for more.

That, finally, was what decided me. It was impossible to remain distrustful of any man so pleasantly indulgent to his horse. Besides, he had taken the roast from the fire and was cutting it open. If it had smelled succulent before, now

the aroma filled the entire courtyard. My mouth watered. So I stepped from behind the bramble as softly as I could.

"So, see there, Gerres. We have some company," the man said.

I stood firm near the wall, hardly daring to move. "I am called Tisia of Grimmerdale of High Hallack. I came here by mistake, and would appreciate any aid you could offer." I admit, I eyed his dinner most longingly.

He laughed again. "Welcome, Tisia of Grimmerdale of High Hallack. It is good to meet you at last. She is the one, isn't she, Gerres? Well, perhaps you would care to join me in some supper and I could tell you why I am here and why you are maybe the person I seek. Although I had not thought it to be one of the new people, and not of Arvon. Well, stranger things have been, and in these days it is best to take what luck is offered and not question it."

I accepted his invitation and took a seat beside him near the fire. After eating my first bites of meat and bread I remembered my manners which had lay sorely forgotten in my empty stomach. "To the giver of the feast, fair thanks. For the welcome of the gate, gratitude. To the ruler of the house, fair fortune and a bright sun on morrow morn."

"Ah, and the maid is civilized as well as lovely," the gentleman said. I blushed. I am quite plain and have never pretended otherwise. "That is, I trust she is a maid and not a married woman?" he asked.

I nodded. "Sir, you already know my name and what place I call home. I have nothing to call you, nothing to call this place. Indeed, I am quite lost."

He waited until he had swallowed a mouthful of food and washed it down with a draught of water before he answered. "I am called Kaedril of the Blue Mantle Clan. You are in Arvon, which I believe is quite a distance from your home. Quite a distance, and I am curious as to how you came. This land is guarded by mountains and cliffs and beings who attack any but the most valiant."

I shrugged. "Kaedril of the Blue Mantle Clan," I repeated carefully. On close study he looked different from

the men of the Dales. His hair was a pure black that made his pale skin look almost ghostly. His features were sharper than was common among our folk, but there was no menace there. I decided to answer his question and told him of the stone in the meadow and how I had arrived. He only listened and nodded in some parts of my telling.

"Yes, I do think you are the one I came searching," he said thoughtfully. "Those old Gates, most of them are gone and others have lost their Power. Still more work only some of the time, and then only when necessary. Arvon is guarded by more than mountains, if I have seen true. So I will tell you why I am here and what I seek. And perhaps you will accept the hospitality of my clan and come back with me for a time. After all, it was the Fane of Neave which spoke, and to me at that."

"What," I demanded, "is the Fane of Neave?"

He hesitated for a moment, drew a blanket from his saddlebag, and put it around my shoulders. In truth, I had not noticed that it had become chill as the sun had disappeared from the day. I had been too intent on the food and my good fortune in meeting Kaedril that I had not bothered with such things as light and warmth. Then he built up the fire and settled down beside me.

"It is difficult to know where to start. I do not know what your people, the new people, know of Neave and the Fane of Neave, so perhaps it would be best if I started there." He took a deep breath and stared deep into the fire. "To your people, we of Arvon seem to have more magical abilities than they understand. Still, there is much we have lost. There was a war between adepts far greater than any of us today can comprehend. Some of those adepts were gods, or were so great that they might as well be gods. They did not and do not die. Some of them still sleep in hidden places. Most have passed beyond Gates into places I cannot even dream about. Neave was one of them."

"So she was a person once?" I asked, fascinated.

He sighed and shifted under his end of the blanket. "I'm



not sure. The adepts of those days were different from us, from our understanding. Perhaps they thought of her as a person. For us, it is enough that she is a goddess. The goddess of truth above all, and peace. Anyway, the story goes that she could cast a geas on those around her that they could speak only the truth. Nor could they use enchantments and illusion to deceive in her presence. She is the goddess of peace because, using her geas, she was able to secure peace between warring factions. For a time. It was already too late, or so the stories say. Then she passed through the Gate, but she left behind the Fane. Some say that it is part of her Power that resides there, that none may use illusion or enchantment or say anything except what is true. Also, none are able to fight there, or even hold enmity. It is indeed a strange place. I have been there."

He poked at the fire while I waited for him to go on. In truth, I felt something, a whisper, a ripple in the air, when he spoke of this goddess although I had never heard her name before. Kaedril seemed to shrink in on himself, thinking, I suppose, of what had happened when he had visited the shrine of this goddess.

Oh, if the good Dames could see me now. I hesitated to think of it, of what they would say. My thoughts drifted to my parents, to Amrys and the herd. I wondered if she had gotten home or if my father were up on the high meadow searching for her. Or searching for me. My mother, I knew, would wait until she was quite alone before she pulled her stool up to the hearth and cried into her shawl. I had come in early one afternoon and seen her just that way.

"You must understand that while everyone honors Neave, she is not a major goddess like Gunnora." I was startled to hear Kaedril's voice again. "Still, she has had her voteries in Arvon since she left, those she has chosen to give the gift of justice. And they can see through illusion. No matter the reason I went to the Fane, that is none of your concern. We of the Blue Mantle have always been

honored by having one of Neave's voteries in our hall to advise the clan. And so we are known as just and good lords by those in our own lands and those outside. The priestess of Neave in our house died last winter. I was sent to find the one who would take her place."

"But why do you think that it is me?" I asked, confused. "I never even heard of Neave before tonight. I had no wish to come to Arvon and every wish to go home. I want to return to my parents and my sister, and the goats and the lambs are being born soon." I could not tell him of the fear I felt. Surely he understood that he was mistaken, that there was no possibility that I was the one he sought. Still, I pressed on to make him understand, but Kaedril's mind was far away. I am not sure he even heard me.

Finally, at length he spoke. "It is not for you or for me to judge. There is always a test where the goddess reveals herself. Maybe it would be best if we thought no more on it tonight. It grows cold and late, and we should leave early tomorrow. It is a long way to Blue Mantle lands and I have only the one horse."

I looked at him and then left him. The castle would be warmer than this chill night, and I was certain that there would be sleeping quarters there. I had no wish to spend the night with this strange young man, and even less wish to travel with him come morning. One thing I have learned, though, is to make no decision in the dark of the night. When the wind is chill and shadows fall into strange shapes it is not possible to think clearly. The only help for it is to sleep and think again in the clear light of day. So thinking, I took the blanket Kaedril had given me and wandered through the castle until I found a chamber with a bed that did not fall to pieces when I lay down. There I stayed and if I dreamed I knew it not.

The next morning was bright and pleasant as one could wish. The castle was not gloomy at all, but full of light and gay spirit. It was a fine day for an adventure. Besides, in the clear light it was obvious that I had to travel with Kaedril or else lose my way completely in this strange land.

Without help I could wander endlessly, and who knew what dangers lay in this place. Kaedril had told me that there were things best left alone on the borders of Avron. If I wished to leave I would need his aid. So saying, I joined him early for a bite of hard bread.

“Can you ride?” he asked.

I laughed. I am a shepherdess and the daughter of a herdsman. Anything to do with animals I can do, unless that thing be magical and unnatural. So he mounted me on his beautiful horse and led us at a slow walk, the better to drink in the fresh scent of early spring and admire the tiny green buds swelling on the lowest branches. Kaedril began to sing heartily in a language that I did not understand. Here it was easy to forget that I was not in my native Dales, enjoying the season with some young man of my own people. Indeed, for most of the ride I honestly believed it so.

We camped that night in a traveler’s shelter, built with three sides and stacked with firewood. Kaedril had some cheese left which we toasted over the fire and ate with bread. A little we put aside for the morrow’s breakfast and then sat in companionable silence until the fire burned low.

“I’ll sit with the fire a little longer,” Kaedril told me. “Take the blanket to the back of the shelter. It should be warmer there. The spring nights are still cold.”

I did as he asked as I was very tired. Riding all day and walking are usual for me, but at night I sleep easily because of it.

When I woke the sun was already well up. Kaedril still sat before the fire in the very position I had left him in the night before. I poured out some water for washing and brought it over to him.

“Were you awake all night?” I asked. “Is there truly danger here, that you couldn’t sleep? Or wouldn’t wake me.”

He splashed the water on his face and rinsed his hands. I saw scratches down the back of his hand, deep and clotted now. The wound was not fresh, nor did it look like he had

done anything to help the healing. I am no wise woman, but some things even the most ignorant know, to wash and bandage a hurt. But Kaedril put me off.

"It is nothing," he said firmly, his face dark with anger. "Leave me be. We have a long way yet to go and the morning is not young."

One thing I know is when not to argue. This was one of those times. Although I could hardly contain my curiosity about what he had met in the night, I knew full well that I could not force an answer from him in this mood. Perhaps the loveliness of the woods that we traversed would put him in better humor and he would consent to satisfy me. Until then I was content to leave things be.

We ate as we went, Kaedril on his feet and me on his horse. I dared not even offer him to change.

Just before noon, Kaedril suddenly tugged the lead rein and led us off the path into the woods. The path had been well marked and easy to follow. After a while I saw that we were still following a path, a different and far older one than we had before. Still I said nothing. Kaedril knew this land where I was a stranger. We did not stop to eat at noon, which would have been difficult in any case as we had no provisions left.

"Where are we?" I ventured to ask.

"At the edge of Blue Mantle lands," he replied gruffly, leading still farther down the abandoned way.

As the sun traveled faster than we, it was late afternoon when I spotted the first sign of humanity I had seen since meeting Kaedril. Through the trees I could clearly smell smoke from a cooking fire. Cook fire I knew it to be by the other aromas that went with it, the smell of baking bread and soup welcome to my nose. Kaedril pulled the lead reins in the opposite direction.

"Is there a village there?" I asked.

He only grunted in reply.

"If there is a village and this is your land, surely we could stop and get a bite to eat," I said. "And even if it is

just the forester's hut, even he would have something to spare."

"We aren't going there," Kaedril said firmly.

"Maybe you aren't, but I am," I replied, slipping from the back of his mount. "I am tired and hungry, far more hungry, and I will not walk away from a meal cooking. I can smell it. You can smell it. There is no reason not to go to the village. You can try to stop me, but I have no reason to stay out in the woods with the promise of hot stew and a warm bed." So saying, I flounced my skirts smartly and marched off toward the smell.

In fact, I felt only fear and hunger. Fortunately for me, hunger usually wins or I would have gone on with Kaedril to who knows what end. I was only fortunate that he did not try to stop me, since there is no question that he could have easily done so. I may be strong and sturdy, but I am no match for a lordling trained to the sword. Not that I had any indication that Kaedril was either of those, but it seemed reasonable. He took his horse and left me in the wood alone to follow the tempting scent of dinner cooking.

It was not half an hour's walk to the village. From the stream there was a well-trod path up the bank. It was a small hamlet with perhaps eight small houses besides the headman's, where I was given a good welcome and food and a warm bed with a coverlet besides. Weary after my long trek, I accepted hospitality without questions.

The next day I woke early and helped the headman's daughter draw water. "But, Eleha," I asked her yet again, "you said that this village belongs to the Blue Mantle Clan. Kaedril is a member of that clan and he brought me here, but would not enter here himself. Can you tell me anything about him?"

She took her bucket and turned away from me, an answer quite as eloquent as any.

Their hospitality had been perfect, but as I stayed with the women of the headman's family that day, I sensed something strange. They were not at all inclined to gossip about the village, about their lords and ladies and goings

on at the keep. This I had never heard of before. In my home, no one loves any story so much as gossip and the lordlier the subjects the more enjoyable the evening. I was of a mind to leave, but it was well past noon and I didn't want to spend a night in the forest alone.

As we stood before the hearth, I kneading bread, there was a knock at the door. A small boy, perhaps only seven or eight years, stood with a heavy bucket. "Do the ladies need oil today?" he inquired.

Eleha looked to her mother, who nodded. She gave the boy a small coin and in return he filled a jar. When he left I glanced at her inquisitively, but did not ask. They had answered none of my questions so far. There was no reason to believe that they would tell me anything about the boy either.

Only this time it was different. "That's Perris," Eleha said without interest. "His mother is a widow. They don't live in the village but between this and the next. The widow owns five olive trees and presses cooking oil. With this village and the next and the keep, I suppose there are enough people willing to pay to keep them in firewood."

This was the first information I had received about the keep since I had come, albeit a very useless bit indeed. But Eleha was not disposed to continue in that vein. "Have you ever tasted fish cooked in olive oil? It is far better than water or wine or even fat for cooking."

I had to admit I had not. "I thought olives were for eating alone," I said. "Besides, aren't they very scarce and kept only for the lord and his family? In my home that is the way of things."

Eleha snorted. "Olives, scarce? They grow almost wild, though not quite. We all buy oil from Perris because he and his mother would perish if we did not. And besides, rendering oil requires a press which the widow has but we would have to build."

I turned back to the bread. Kneading dough is very good when the mind is distracted. It is hard work, so I can rid myself of anger by pounding and beating. The harder bread

is kneaded, the finer the texture. Eleha and her mother simply thought me a good and willing worker.

There was something I did not like about these women. The way Eleha spoke of Perris, as if earning an honest living were the same as begging alms, pricked at my mind. I thought of Kaedril again. Perhaps his reluctance to come into the village was not suspicious at all, but the product of such behavior. I was only a shepherdess and I did not like it. Surely the lord or heir would find such a lack of charity among his own people shameful. So I thought while the bread rose, while I punched it down again and formed the loaves and covered them to rise again.

A shout brought me from my musings about this strange land and its people. Eleha and her mother both ran from the house and I followed quickly. It seemed that everyone from the village had come to the central square. I had to stand on tiptoe and lean on Eleha's shoulder before I could see what was going on.

In the center of the crowd stood little Perris, his bucket swinging empty now from his arm, his face streaked with tears.

"I was on my way home," the boy was sobbing. "On my way from the village there is a big rock. I put my money in my bucket and put it on the rock and fell asleep. Only for a little while. And now the money is gone." The child broke into another bout of tears while the villagers showed little sympathy.

"Anyone, some stranger, could have stolen it," Eleha told me. "He wasn't really in our village at all."

"Yes, that's true," several voices echoed back.

"Well," the headman said, "we all know that Kaedril went seeking the votery of Neave. This girl"—he indicated me—"came here and said that Kaedril fetched her back. So, if she's really the votery of Neave, then she will be able to find out the truth."

The words were fair, but the tone carried a threat. There was anger in the villagers' faces, anger at me and at Perris and at Kaedril, who for all his strange actions had been a

gentleman in my presence. Anger came over me, but an anger unlike any I had ever known before. It was great and raging. I felt that I could crush all those ugly, cruel faces before me with a single blow. And yet I wanted to show them the truth and their own selves. I needed to take the twisted thing in their souls and cast it far away. I was not myself, for such a thing was not my way of thinking or being. But whatever had hold of me was stronger.

"We shall go to the rock," I heard myself saying, but the voice was not quite mine. It was stronger, more powerful and more calm, than I had ever been. Without knowing where I was heading, I strode out of the village along the path. The villagers and Perris followed me. How I knew which of the great boulders under the trees it was that Perris had slept under I do not know. There were four of them, shoulder high, inlaid with sparkling blue stones surrounded by dizzying patterns. I turned to the nearest of the four, and it seemed as if the stone were speaking, telling me what to say.

I stood and pointed at it. "Stone," I yelled in my most terrifying voice. "Stone, none of the people in this village have robbed this poor boy. There is no evidence. Besides, who would take the poor earnings of an orphan that are charity in themselves? No, stone, no one took the money. And no one passed by here. So I accuse you. I accuse you, stone, of stealing Perris's poor earnings. You should be ashamed. You should sink into the ground and become a home for the things that tunnel in the earth, not a noble thing noted as a landmark. Stone, sink. I command you."

The people of the village began to laugh. It started out small and quiet, but it rose and spread from one to another. The only person not laughing was Perris himself. I whipped around and faced them, careful to keep my face and voice angry. "And who are you to laugh at the votery of Neave? Who are you to mock the goddess with your disbelief?"

As I spoke I surveyed the stone carefully. Yes, there, just as I knew there had to be, a hollow place full of water from the last rainfall or the early dew. The plan that had been half suggested from the force that had overcome me



now took final form in my own mind. The beauty of it was so fine that I, too, wished to laugh, to congratulate the goddess on her clever, gentle means of discovering the truth.

"You all," I shouted furiously, "will pay a fine for improper behavior during an inquiry into a crime. One copper from each, here, on the stone."

Grumbling, the people lined up. Maybe they had more respect for Neave than they had showed. Most likely, they had forgot themselves during my spectacle. Now each of them filed by, dropping a coin into the hollow of the stone. The faces that passed me were often sneering or dark with disgust. I didn't acknowledge them.

Then, when nearly half of the fines had been paid, I saw what I knew I would see. "You," I said, pulling a villager out of the line. "You dared steal from a child, to take food from the mouth of a child and play the innocent? Return what was taken, and double it to pay for the pain you have caused and to remind you that there is no profit in Neave's land for such acts."

He looked as if he were ready to flee, and then he looked at me. I do not know what he saw in my face, for suddenly his own turned gray and he poured out the required coins into Perris's bucket.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Neave sees through all illusions, both those of magic and those of art," I said. "And now, if you would all be so good as to point me in the direction of the keep, I shall leave you to go home to your suppers and think on the powers that guard Arvon."

Shamefaced, the villagers retreated. When they were well out of sight, all save Perris, I laughed quite merrily. Such a haughty lady I had become. If one of my lord's daughters in the Dales had put on such airs, she would have been soundly laughed out of the hall.

Perris tugged at my hand. "How did you know, lady?" he asked.

"Can you keep a secret?"

He nodded without speaking, his eyes shining.

I pointed to the stone. "The place where I asked people to pay the fine is full of water. You said that your money was in the bucket, which meant that it was covered with oil. Oil spreads over all it touches, but it does not mix with water. It floats to the top. So I waited until a drop of oil floated up from the water. Whoever dropped that coin must be the guilty one."

He smiled. And then the form of Perris began to dissolve, becoming a glowing blue and rose and amber twined smoke. For a moment the face of Kaedril looked out and smiled, this time with real welcome before it, too, was dissolved. The column grew higher, thin and insubstantial. It formed the shape of a man, but no man as I had ever seen. His face and form were more noble than I had ever imagined for a living being, his features sharp in themselves but radiating kindness. Although this specter was great, overwhelming, inspiring to worship, I felt no fear.

"Step between the four stones, votery of Neave," he, it, the god, the Old One, said. "You have been tested and tried. Now it is time for you to join the Keepers of the Fane of Neave."

"But, but . . ." I stammered. "I didn't do anything really. I didn't use any magic or see through any illusions. I just listened and used common sense."

The being laughed so deeply that my leg bones rattled. "You saw through the illusion of innocence. That, my child, is as great a magic as any."

## AFTERWORD

*The very first book I ever bought with my own grade-school allowance was The Stars Are Ours by Andre Norton, and I have been a dedicated fan ever since. Witch World was my*

*first introduction to fantasy—I wasn't quite ready to cope with hobbits and trolls and balrogs, but I trusted Miss Norton enough to try anything with her name on it. And once having entered the Witch World, how could anyone fail to stay? Receiving Miss Norton's invitation to submit a story to this anthology has been one of the thrills of my life.*

*This particular story was suggested by a long paragraph about Neave in Year of the Unicorn, which just happens to be my favorite Witch World book. It seemed that of all those who live in this realm of magic, Neave alone counters not with stronger sorcery but by being the antithesis of sorcery. But maybe in a place where spells are commonplace and witches and shapechangers abound, the things that to us are ordinary and unremarkable are the greatest enchantments of all.*

—S. N. LEWITT