Epithalamium

Roger Zelazny

It rained that night and the old lady made tea, as was generally the case. Sipping it, there at the kitchen table, she looked back over her quiet life. Memories of childhood came to fascinate her, and she wondered again at the quietude that had followed. Though she’d inherited the house and received a small stipend from a trust fund and had traveled considerably she’d never found the right man; or vice versa. The game was about over for her now, though she’d never really been invited to play. There had been nothing of great interest or reminder save for a few visits with the man who hunted people, and the last of these had been years ago. Now…Now it was peaceful to drink her tea and listen to the rain, to reflect on the complexity of existence and one’s own useless role in most of it. She had done a lot of volunteer work, read a lot of books, remembered the wars. She’d been a nurse in both of them, though the second time had involved luck, expediency, and a need that transcended age. Well, there had been one man, back in the first war, she recalled⁠—a quiet British lieutenant named Colin. They might have been happy together, she mused, but the fields of Flanders had eaten him, along with so many others.

She moved to the other room and stoked the fire, adding a few sticks, as she meant to take a second cup of tea in the parlor.

Halfway through the cup and some old thoughts, the doorbell rang. She glanced at the clock. It was near midnight.

She rose and crossed the room, opening the door partway.

“ ’Evening, Miss Alice,” he said. “Axel J. Beangern at your service. I was wondering whether we might use it tonight.”

“Goodness! I don’t know whether it’s still working,” she said, opening the door more widely. “Come in out of the rain.”

Beangern, as always, was clad in brown leather. He wore a hunting knife on his belt, a pistol on his right hip, and he carried a shotgun in his hand.

“Why the shotgun?” she asked.

“It slows him down,” Beangern said.

With that, he pushed in his prisoner⁠—a tall, slim, dark-eyed, dark-haired fellow clad in black. He was handcuffed and he wore leg irons as well.

“Evening, Miss Alice,” he said. “It’s been a long time.”

“Indeed it has, Lucer,” she responded.

He smiled, raised his hands, and the right one incandesced.

“You cut that out, Lucer,” Beangern said to him, and the fire died.

“Just an old flame for an old flame,” Lucer said.

“You always were a flirt,” she responded, returning his smile. “Will you gentlemen have some tea?”

“Of course,” they both replied, “on a night like this. We’ll stand, though, if you don’t mind. Hate to soil your furniture.”

“Nonsense. I insist you sit,” she said.

“He is good at guarding people when they’re chained and he’s standing by them with a shotgun,” Lucer said.

“That is not the reason,” Beangern stated.

She shrugged and returned to the kitchen. Shortly, she came back with a tray bearing two cups of tea and some biscuits. Both men were now seated.

She served them, then seated herself.

“Same as usual?” she asked.

“Pretty much,” Lucer replied. “I escaped prison, came over to here, got a job, and the bounty man came after me.”

“Same as usual,” Beangern said. “He escaped from prison, injuring a lot of people on his way out, came here and organized a secret society dedicated to revolution and commenced buying weapons and training the members in their use. I caught him just in time.”

“So what happens to him now?” Alice asked.

“I take him back,” said Beangern.

“You seem the only one able to bring him back when something like this happens,” Alice said.

“True. He’s quite dangerous, but then so am I,” Beangern said.

“This is all a lie,” Lucer said. “But I haven’t yet seen the truth make any difference.”

“I’d listen,” Alice said.

“I’m sorry,” said Beangern, “but he hasn’t the time to tell you all of his lies. We must be departing soon.”

“He’s like a samurai,” Lucer said. “Terribly well-trained and true to his code⁠—whatever it is. If you tried to detain him, he might do you harm.”

“I would not,” said Beangern. “Alice is an old friend.”

“Very old,” Alice said.

“Why do you keep escaping if it always comes to this?” she asked Lucer.

“It will not. This is the last time,” Lucer replied.

“Oh, why is that?”

“Because the cycle is at an end.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Of course not. But I have eaten the Whitcomb Pie and know that it is so.”

“Whatever you say,” she said, pouring more tea for them all. “My part in your business ended long ago.”

Lucer laughed.

“Callooh! Callooh!” he said. “The story never ends.”

Beangern laughed, too.

“It will end very soon,” he said.

“In a way, callay! In a way,” the other said.

“So long as Beangern holds his fief, the world runs well,” Beangern said.

“Well, it runs,” Lucer acknowledged, “with the lunatics in charge, as you left them.”

Beangern chuckled.

“I find this vastly amusing,” he said. “And surely Alice remembers.”

“How could I not?” she said. “There were times when it terrified me.”

“And there were times when it showed you wonders such as few of your world have ever seen,” Lucer added.

“I can’t deny it. But they don’t balance.”

“What of it? It has changed considerably since your visit⁠—and tonight it shall change again.”

“From what to what?” she asked.

“It must be seen,” Beangern replied.

“At my age it no longer matters.”

“On the contrary. It means a great deal that you be present for the enactment and return. There was a reason you were tempted to visit us so long ago, Alice.”

Lucer snorted and his chains rattled. Beangern sipped his tea.

“You were brought in to be viewed by your prospective husband,” he said.

“Oh, and who might that have been?”

“The real ruler of the place.”

“I’m a little old for that part now. If someone like that wanted me, he should have done something about it a long time ago.”

“Events,” said Beangern, “rose to spoil his plans.”

“What events?”

“A small war.”

She sipped her tea.

“So you must accompany us on this special occasion.”

“Sorry. The story is ended now,” she said. “Over. Done with. You’ve come too late.”

“It is never too late,” Beangern said, “while I live. And I will not die.”

He ate a biscuit. Lucer sipped his tea.

“Will I?” Beangern suddenly asked.

“Whom are you asking?” said Lucer.

“You.”

“You fear this night,” the other replied, “that it holds your death.”

“Well, does it?”

“Even if I knew I wouldn’t tell you.”

Beangern began to raise his shotgun, glanced at Alice, and lowered it again. He ate another biscuit.

“Quite good,” he remarked.

“There is still the enactment,” Lucer stated.

“Hush now.”

“Of course. It matters not.”

“What is this enactment?” Alice asked.

“It is a ritual in which the fallen star Beangern must participate. Else will he be swept away.”

“Nonsense!” Beangern roared, spilling tea on his jacket. “I perform the rite for old times’ sake. Nothing more.”

“What rite?” Alice inquired.

“The ritual of return to the heavens from which he came,” said Lucer. “On Yuleki’s Day. His place has been vacant too long.”

“You make him sound like a god,” Alice said.

“He is, like one of the god kings of old in your world.”

“I thought that the Red King and Queen⁠—or the White,” Alice began.

“There were many lunatics in Wonderland,” Lucer responded. “Beangern sent many of them into strong exile or imprisonment and rules now himself.”

“Is that true?” Alice asked.

“The man exaggerates,” Beangern replied. “The Red King and Queen still rule. I occasionally assist.”

“And what is the part you would have me play in all this?” asked Alice.

“A small one,” Beangern replied.

“He lies,” said Lucer.

“What then?” asked Alice.

“Witness,” Beangern replied.

“I am an old lady you have confused considerably,” Alice said. “I’ll have no more of this rabbitholing and mirroring. Let us finish our tea and I’ll see you off.”

“Of course,” Beangern stated. “Come, Lucer. Drink up, and we’ll be on our way.”

The men finished their tea and Lucer took another biscuit. Both men rose then, and Beangern looked toward Alice. “Would you conduct us to the conveyance now?” he said.

“You mean the mirror?”

“Yes.”

“Come this way,” Alice said.

Rising, she led them to a flight of stairs and took them up it. Pushing back a hatch and throwing a light switch, she illuminated a low-wattage bulb, which revealed a dusty attic filled with the detritus of decades. At the room’s far end hung a mirror, its reflective surface facing the wall.

Alice halted and suddenly asked, “Why do you need it? You obviously got here without it.”

“The other way is strenuous,” Beangern replied, “and subduing this fellow takes a lot out of one. The other reason is convenience.”

“Convenience?” Alice said.

“Yes,” Beangern replied. “On the night of Yuleki in the place where the kinyon grass grows, and the Ulb who ate a Jabberwock goes forbling forth to vie, with Kibling and Dars Dadisdada, ’tis soon enough to die, Ryanda! Step through, Lucer!”

He nudged the other man with the shotgun barrel. Lucer approached the mirror and vanished.

“I’m not going back to that place,” Alice said.

Beangern laughed and stepped through the mirror. Shortly afterwards, Alice felt herself drawn toward it. She tried to resist but the effect was too strong. Step after resisting step, she was forced to advance until she stood before it and, after all these years, entered.

She stood for several moments within the reversed image of her attic. Then she turned, seeking the mirror, but could not find it. She knew then that she must depart the attic. Turning, she crossed the room, switched off the light, and descended the stair.

She made her way to the back door, opened it, and stepped outside.

It was no longer her garden. It had become a glade in the midst of sunset, two roads emerging from the trees to cross at its center. Beangern stood on the crossroad, shotgun still a-smoke. Lucer lay panting at his feet.

“Tried to escape,” Beangern said. “I expected it.”

“Is he going to be⁠—all right?” Alice asked, moving to the man’s side and kneeling, her nursing training returning in a great rush through her mind.

“Of course,” Beangern replied. “He’s healing already. Practically impervious. And stronger than an ox. Stronger than me, even. Lacks my combat training, though.”

“How do you know these things about him?” she asked.

“He used to be my servant, my man-at-arms. We came here together.”

“From where?” she said.

He pointed skyward. “Up there. I am of the fallen star they could not return.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Some metaphysical crime for which the others would never release him, should he come into their power,” Lucer moaned.

“Nonsense. ’Twas a mere difference of opinion we had,” Beangern stated.

Lucer rose slowly to his feet, hand pressed against his side. “That does smart,” he remarked.

“Tell her that you lied,” Beangern stated.

“I will not. ’Tis true.”

“I’ll blast you again.”

“Go ahead. Waste our time. Callooh.”

“Callay. She’ll see for herself this day.”

“This night, I say. Away. Let’s away.”

“By the bye, I say. A little rite to light our way.”

With that, he commenced a series of arcane hand movements. The air seemed to brighten about him as he did. Finally, he stopped and indicated that the journey was to continue.

“What was that all about?” Alice asked.

“Dars Dadisdada and Rottery Khan will be riding out tonight,” Beangern said.

“…And the Choipery Girl will circle the world on wings like a bat,” said Lucer. “The Challkers Rose will rise from the sea and bloom, and the foongli lights dance on bay and slope. A reminiscence of your Halloween, and a ritual protection against it.”

“It would seem that things have changed,” she said.

“Just the names,” said Beangern.

“More than just the names,” said Lucer.

“I would like to be returned to my home now,” said Alice.

“I am afraid that that is impossible,” said Beangern. “You are needed here.”

“Why?”

“This will become apparent later.”

“I may choose to withhold my cooperation.”

“I think not,” said Beangern, raising a small whistle which he wore on a chain about his neck. He put it to his lips and blew upon it.

A minute passed.

“I think I am going to go back,” Alice said.

“Impossible,” Beangern replied, and in the distance a low rumble rose up.

She listened for a moment, then asked, “What is that sound?”

“Motorcycles,” he replied. “Members of the royal guard⁠—the Twittikins⁠—are on their way.”

“That was an awfully quick response,” she remarked as their shapes came into view on the road ahead.

“Actually, I whistled for them before I left. This one is a new request, for later. You must recall that one can run and get nowhere, or stay in place and make progress⁠—or phone to speak with yourself yesterday.”

“Well, somewhat.”

“It has its fine points. That’s all.”

The bikers approached, drew near. When they halted before them, Beangern approached their leader, a big-bellied man with arms like tree trunks. He wore blue jeans, a black leather vest, and hordes of tattoos. His scarred face broke into a smile.

“Someone you want done for?” he asked Beangern.

“Just guarded,” Beangern said. “Miss Alice here.”

“Why, she’s just an old bag. Why’s she need guardin’?”

“Watch your language, Nik. She’s a friend of mine. But we can’t let her go until tomorrow. So hang around and keep an eye on her. She’s got an odd element of probability calls.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Funny things used to happen around her. They still could, in this place.”

The Twittikins advanced to be near her. Above them, amid the branches of a nearby tree, she thought for a moment that she spied the form of a grinning cat.

“Let’s be movin’ along now,” Beangern said.

“Where to?” asked Lucer.

“Why, the palace, of course. To get a fresh judgment pronounced against you.”

“Yes, for they do get stale, I know,” Lucer said, “like moldy bread.”

Beangern laughed. “We’ll find you some fresh words to chew over,” he said, “in a fresh cell, where mold and oxidation enter not.”

“No, for tonight is a very special night, demon star.”

“Lucer, you wrong me.”

They began walking.

“If that way be north today, we’ll be to the palace shortly after sunset,” Lucer remarked.

Alice moved nearer.

“There is something about him,” she said, “that seems even more abnormal than usual.”

“Oh, he’s certifiable material, all right,” Lucer said, “like most of us. But he’s grown too dangerous to buck. And his powers are at a peak come Yuleki.”

“And your own?” she asked. “You do seem to have a few of those yourself.”

“True,” he said. “One never knows how things will fall out in this place. Callooh!”

“Callay!” she responded, smiling. “Are we both crazy, Lucer?”

“Maybe a little,” he replied.

“What about letting the prisoners talk?” Nik hollered.

“Let them,” Beangern said. “It doesn’t matter.”

They trekked into the twilight, away from the setting sun.

“Things are a little different this time,” Lucer told Alice. “I think they want everything legal and proper.”

“What does that mean⁠—in this place?” she asked.

“He’ll get the King and Queen to say that it’s okay to send me to the mines, that you must attend the rite of Yuleki, and that Beangern’s fief remains secure.”

“That makes him the real ruler here, doesn’t it?”

“I’d say so.”

“Does that mean that he was the one who’d summoned me and observed me years ago, looking for the bride he never married?”

“Yes. I was with him at the time. Hidden, he observed all your adventures.”

“Why, for heaven’s sake?”

“To see how you responded to such unusual stresses.”

“Why that?”

“Should you come to reign here, it would be useful to know how you dealt with the environment.”

“And I failed.”

“No. There was a war here as well as in your world. It caused such things to be bypassed until too late.”

“You’re saying I should have been queen.”

“Empress.”

“…To Beangern.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“In that case, I’m glad things fell out as they did.”

“And I, also. I don’t think you’d really have liked it.”

“What now?”

“There seems to be no choice. We go through with it. I’ve a feeling I’ll have a part in this one since it’s the ending of a celestial cycle and the beginning of a new one, and spirits may mount or descend.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Natural laws in this place. If we ever have an opportunity longer than this, I’ll try to explain.”

“Why not try it now?”

“Because that bulk up ahead is the castle, and we’ll be there before very long. Suffice it to say that Beangern is a stellar spirit who fell to earth at the last major cycle. He saw that this place was a looney bin, and he took it over and set it right.”

“Why, then, do you oppose him?”

“He went too far. Now it is a matter of his whim, rather than law or principle, that rules. Perhaps he has gone truly mad. He fears that the Feast of Yuleki, the Yark Angel, may be a time when he could be drawn back to his true realm, never to return.”

“You’d think that would make him happy.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t. He likes it here. He has near fought Yuleki himself over this point.”

“This is good?”

“For everyone here there was some good at first.”

“Except me,” she said.

“Don’t say that. You are necessary.”

“For what?”

“It must have seemed different to you when you were but a girl, but your adventures then can be viewed in two different ways.”

“Oh. I stumbled into a magical kingdom and had some strange experiences. That’s how I view it. You have an alternative?”

“Yes. How do you like this one? You were the magical being that entered here. You, as observer, precipitated all the strange experiences you had.”

“That is certainly a novel way of regarding it.”

“I think you had it, and that you still might.”

“What does it mean if I do?”

“You might be able to help to expel him, this time of all times. Everything else will be poised for such a thrust.”

“You sure such a thing will work?”

“No, but if we don’t try it now it may be eons before another chance occurs. Not all of the royalists will be left. Perhaps not any.”

“Let me think about it.”

“Better think fast.”

They continued their trek to the Castle of Hearts. Beangern told the first person he saw⁠—a short, red-haired gardener⁠—to announce his arrival. The man ran off screaming, “Beangern has come! Beangern has come!”

“I find their enthusiasm touching,” Beangern remarked. “Come, let us enter. We shall hunt down their majesties.”

Beangern drove the others ahead of him now, lest Lucer free himself and lead Alice astray. He left the Twittikins to guard the gate. He located the King and Queen dressed in rags and hiding beneath the bed in a fourth-floor bedroom.

“Why do we find them so?” Alice asked.

“Guards! Protect us! Off with his head! Beangern! Beangern! Dead! Dead! Dead!” cried the emaciated Queen of Hearts and her diminutive husband.

“They have conceived some ill fancy of me,” Beangern replied, his eyes flashing fire, “and compounded it with their tendency to shirk their duties. Come now! Both of you! Out of there! There’s a royal decree in need of issuing.”

“Why us? Why us?”

“Because you’re royal. The decretals need decreting, the world it needs its words, Lord Lucer to the mines again, Beangern to his fiefdom, Alice to her Judgment Chair. Write it down! Write it down! Sign it at the bottom! Circulate the ruddy ’crete to everything alive! And save a ruddy copy for the bloody archive!”

“Scrivener! Scrivener!” cried the Queen,

“Why call only two?” asked the King. “Make it more plural.”

“ ’S, ’s,” added the Queen.

“Sounds like a tired serpent,” said the King.

“Retired servants claim pensions,” said the Queen. “What has this to do with them? And what has become of them? What? What?”

“The mines!” cried Lucer. “To save on pay. Release them, release them, release them, pray!”

“This cannot be,” said the Queen. “Who would order such?”

Lucer turned and stared at Beangern.

“You liked them overmuch,” said the man.

“Release them!”

“Not today.”

“Where are our robes royal?”

“In the laundry.”

“You sold them. You’re disloyal,” said the King.

“And the Jewels of the Crown?” asked the Queen.

“On exhibition in the town.”

“Lies! Lies! You’ve robbed us. Bring them back! Bring them back!”

“I hear the scriveners in the hall,” said Beangern. “Let us set them up, and tell them what I say.”

“I think we do not need your help. We’ll do it our own way.”

“In that case friends and favorites will be the ones to pay,” Beangern said, as he raised his whistle.

“Stop!” cried the King. “We’ll do as you say.”

“I thought you’d see the light. It must be done tonight. Now, as a matter of fact.”

He opened the door and let them in. There were four.

“You lack tact. But you hold the winning cards,” said the Queen.

“…Lucer Starborn is hereby reassigned to the mines. All other political imprisonments are reconfirmed. Axel J. Beangern is reconfirmed in the possession of his fief⁠—” Beangern said.

“That,” Lucer said, “is contingent on your sitting through the Feast of Yuleki in the chapel on your property.”

“I know that!”

“Very well. Write it down.”

“…And Alice finally present on this night of all nights of the year.”

“I know no fear!” said Beangern.

“None spoke of fear but thee.”

“This is not part of the decree!” Beangern shouted. “Add the salutatories and affirmations to what has gone before, and be damned with them!”

“Such language!” said Alice.

“He’s not at all a gentleman,” said Lucer.

“Execute the order! Return him to the pits!” cried Beangern.

“I claim my right to be present at the service,” said Lucer.

“Bring him along, then. We’ll send him from there when it’s done.”

Lucer raised his hand and squeezed one of Alice’s. “I am to be myself this night,” he said, “and likely he will not.”

“This is good?” she asked.

“Rejoice and honest be,” Lucer replied, “and we shall make it so, come St. George and Low Heaven.”

“I fear that I do not understand.”

“You will when the time’s at hand.”

“But Beangern always seemed the gentleman, and you the criminal⁠—though a very polite one.”

“He lies. You’ve seen how he deals. In fact, he also steals.”

“I believe. He does deceive.”

“Soon we will leave, for the service. Are you hungry? He would see that you are fed, if you are. Wants you strong.”

“I’ll come along without the bread. I don’t know that I care to brave a meal in this place now.”

“Why should that be bad?”

“Because everyone’s half-mad.”

“Yes, but they’re half-sane, too.”

“I’m on your side. Enough said. Callooh!”

“Callay!”

“Let’s be away!” cried Beangern.

They left the castle and the day. They traveled through the hilly lands, to the realm of Whileaway.

“Sing for me, Alice,” said Lucer, and she began “Auld Lang Syne.”

The Twittikins roared on ahead and behind, the moon dripped butter and venom, and everywhere she looked, it seemed the cat’s grin was upon her. A cool, near chill breeze swept them, and all the shadows became a blanket of black.

The moonlight sparkled on a massive block of ice to the right of the trail. They examined it as they passed, and Alice’s voice wavered as she beheld within it⁠—frozen in mid-gesture⁠—a March Hare, a Dormouse, and a demented-looking Hatter.

As they crossed the next hill she heard a great, crystal-like shattering, though no one else seemed to.

“Sing more loudly here,” Lucer said, and she did. A snuffling, chuffling, snorting followed, as of a laboring walrus climbing a slope. Again, nobody else seemed to notice.

“And at this glade you must sing with particular sweetness,” he said.

She did, and the chortling roar that near shook the darkness from the night seemed heard by everyone, from the automatic weapon fire that followed from the Twittikins. The rearmost vanished and their weapons grew still as a dark cloud swept across the road, passing over them.

“Lucer,” she whispered, seizing his biceps, “what is it you have me doing?”

“Sorry, naught but pure song, m’lady. Think, think back on all you remember from your earliest visits. If there was aught that you loved, sing to that. Remember, remember, Alice, this place as it was.”

And Alice’s old voice broke, many, many times, as she recalled and reworded old ballads and music hall songs.

“What is that caterwauling?” Beangern cried, his ears now long and silky, his mouth more full of teeth than before.

“Lady Alice would sing,” Lucer replied, “as is her right.”

Beangern growled and grew silent.

“He must allow it,” Lucer said. “You must unscathed be.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Your power is sacrosanct,” said he. “You are she who came long ago.”

“A lifetime wasn’t that far back,” she said.

“In this place time doth different flow.”

“I’ll never understand.”

“I say you will. Pray, sing on.”

And again she sang. This time, the night came alive with bird cries, cricket calls, and the rustling of leaves. Overhead, the stars shone more brightly than Alice had ever seen them glow, and the moon seemed to swell as it made its slow way zenithward.

“Confound!” Beangern cried, his trousers now split to free his jointed tail, eyes still flashing fire.

“Sing on,” said Lucer, and she did.

At last, they reached the top of a high hill, overlooking a vale splashed with moonlight like buttermilk. At their back, Alice heard noises. Beangern called a halt and regarded the prospect for a moment. He raised his right arm and extended a claw. “This is the place where music comes to die,” he said. “This is the fief of Beangern. My powers increase here.”

“…And your form seems to have shifted,” Alice said.

“Tonight ’tis unavoidable,” he said, “when the Powers descend and rise to walk the world.”

“I thought that Beangern was a god or demigod. Your form seems more demonic.”

“These terms are meaningless in this twisted place,” said he, “and as for the rest, read your Nietzsche.”

“I understand,” said she.

“So I have won, you see. I made you wait till your powers waned and drained. A draft of damp air would blow you away.”

“You’ve watched me all these years?”

“Indeed, through laughter and tears.”

“Not too much laughter.”

“Nor many tears. Sorry ’tis such a bland life you’ve led. But so it had to be.”

“All for this night?”

“All for this night.”

The crest on his backbone rose to a ridge on his head. His hoofs clattered against rocks as he shifted position.

He pointed again. “And there is the chapel, in yonder valley.”

They saw the diminutive building, all alight.

“Come,” he finally said. “Tonight is indeed the night.”

They followed him down the hillside and through the twisting ways of the valley⁠—Beangern, Alice, Lucer, the King and Queen of Hearts, the Twittikin, unassorted courtiers and nobles. The Twittikins were again diminished, in a firefight with something that had howled from behind a boulder. When they searched the area afterwards, nothing could be found.

Great numbers of dark birds passed overhead as they advanced upon the chapel, and there were rustlings within the high grasses all about them. The earth seemed to tremble on several occasions, and deadwood snapped as heavier footfalls occurred.

Lucer had hold of her arm now and she had a stick in her other hand. She leaned on both.

“Not too much farther to the chapel,” Lucer remarked. “You’ll be able to rest once we’ve arrived.”

“I’ll make it,” she said. “I must see the story through.”

“I’m sure you will. Your presence is necessary, either way,” said he. “You are she who came.”

“Win or lose? Live or dead?”

“Exactly.”

An owl dipped above them. “Who?” it asked.

“Me,” she answered.

Beangern growled, and birds fell dead from the sky. The earth shook and the wind grew stronger. At last they reached the chapel and Beangern let them in. The place was filled with candlelight, there was a low altar against the forward wall, and a circular skylight poured starshine and the glow of the rising moon down upon the pentagram drawn on the floor beneath. Against the chapel’s rear wall was a throne all of red stone, and to this Alice was led.

“Pray, rest yourself !” cried Beangern, and the ground shook as he increased in stature. He moved forward then, motioning the others to seat themselves in pews. Lucer and the King and Queen he allowed to remain near Alice. He moved then to the front of the chapel, and, looking upward, addressed some unseen presence beyond the skylight:

“You up there. This is Beangern,” he said. “I know you can hear me, tonight. All right. Tonight is the night, but I want you to know that I hold everything in the palm of my hand. You waste your time if you think that you can do much about it. I know you’ve been waiting to nail me, Yuleki, but it’s too damned late. I’ve been sucking power out of this land down the years. I’m too strong for you now. One touch more, and the world I have set up will endure forever.”

“Alice,” Lucer said softly, “I am going to break these chains now and fight him. We are of about equal strength but I will lose because his technique is better. When I appear to be going down for the third time, cry out for Yuleki to come to you. And use your name.”

“Why are you as strong as that thing he has become?” she asked.

“I forget.”

“…And why is his technique better?”

“Not sure. No matter.”

“Then why must you fight?”

“I must hold him till the moon is higher.”

“Why?”

“I don’t remember. But it will help us against him.”

“…Now, on this night of all nights of the year,” Beangern intoned, “we are gathered together in the eyes of Yuleki and anyone else who cares to look, and we will join in matrimony the master and lady of this place.”

“Lady?” Alice said. “Where is she?”

“That’s you,” Lucer answered, raising his hands and spreading them. He drew them taut and beads of perspiration broke out upon his brow. Then the chains snapped and he bent to draw upon those which held his ankles.

Beangern raised his shotgun. Alice moved to stand before Lucer.

“Damn it, lady! Get out of the way!” Beangern cried.

“No,” Alice replied. “Something’s wrong here and I want to see it right.”

“You’re going about it wrong!” he roared.

Lucer’s chains broke and he rose to his full height. Beangern sighed. “All right. We must settle this yet again,” he said.

Lucer advanced to the center of the chapel and Beangern set aside the shotgun and moved to meet him.

A flash of lightning crossed the sky as they met. Then the two were rolling about the pentagram.

The door to the chapel was opened and the figure of a White Rabbit entered. Alice thought that she heard him mutter, “Oh dear!” as he seated himself in a pew near the front. He watched the fray as the two combatants struck, their fists shattering brick, stone, or flagging when they missed each other.

Finally, she felt the rabbit’s gaze upon her. He stared for a long while before his eves widened in recognition. She nodded then.

The Rabbit rose and made his way slowly along the lefthand wall. When he came to the throne he said, “Alice.”

“How’s the Dormouse?” she asked.

“Still in the teapot. How are you?”

“Oh, time has taken its ticket for the show,” she said. “And yourself ?”

“You freed me earlier with your singing.”

“What? How?”

“You’re magic. You must know that by now. I was with the Jabberwock after you sang him loose. He’s waiting outside to eat Beangern if he can.”

The Rabbit’s eyes turned toward the combatants. “Tough pair, those two. Hard to tell which is master or man.”

“Not for me. Beangern has ceased to be a man.”

“He will always be a mere man-at-arms among the skiey hosts.”

“What are you saying? He is a fallen star⁠—a higher being whose contact with this world may have corrupted him.”

The Queen of Hearts shrieked as the combatants rolled near to her, Beangern’s horns scoring the stone at her feet. Then the combatants rolled away again.

“Lord Lucer is the fallen star,” replied the Rabbit, “who must be made this night to remember himself. Beangern was his servant, who usurped his place when the forgetfulness fell upon Lucer.”

“What?” cried Alice. “Beangern an imposter?”

“Indeed. Now that you’ve freed me, I hope to see him pass one way or the other this night.”

There came a crash as the two men struck the wall and the building shook.

“Why does Beangern outclass his boss?” Alice asked.

“A man-at-arms has special combat training, for service against the dark legions,” replied the rabbit.

It seemed that Beangern and Lucer hammered upon each other forever, as the moon rose higher and higher. Then Beangern’s blows began to appear more telling, and finally he knelt upon Lucer, and, catching hold of his head, began to bang it upon the stone floor. Seeing this, Alice cried out, “Yuleki, Yark Angel, help us now! This is Alice calling.” Then she moved toward them.

With a flash, a ball of white light appeared above the pentagram. Beangern rose and faced it, leaving a panting, bleeding figure upon the floor.

“It is not fair that you should come for me now, Yuleki!” he cried. “I am tired and cannot face you properly!”

“All the better then,” a musical voice rang out. “Transform! You lose no face by coming along with me without strife.”

Beangern glanced at Lucer. “Do you remember?” he called out.

“Remember what?” Lucer responded.

Beangern looked back at Yuleki. “I maintain my battle mode and we fight,” he said.

“Very well.”

He plunged forward. When he made contact with the bright sphere, it raised him above the ground, spun him round like a whirlwind, then slammed him down upon the stone. It drifted into a position above his chest. He attempted to raise his arms and legs and could not.

“You should have made it last longer,” he whispered, “for his sake. I have been trying to cure him for decades. I thought that this might do it. I wanted him whole, so that he could be returned.”

“My plan was otherwise.”

Beangern turned his head toward Lucer. “Master!” he cried. “Remember! Please!”

“I do, faithful servant,” came the response; and Lucer took Alice’s hand in his own. A faint glow suddenly surrounded her.

“Your job here is done,” Yuleki said to Beangern. “But his is not, though he is whole again. He will repair this land, which you sacrificed in the cause of his healing.”

“I could help him!”

“That would not be prudent. Their memories of you are bad.”

There followed a crash of thunder and both Beangern and the light were gone.

Alice felt the years fall away as her odd aura strengthened.

“What is happening?” she asked.

Lucer drew her to her feet.

“I take you back along the years to your youth, old friend,” he said. “By the way, there really should be a wedding tonight. Are you game?”

“Are you serious?”

“Indeed I am. I do want your help as well as your company. After all, you are the true goddess of this place.”

“This is too much,” she said, staring at the back of her hand as the wrinkles faded. “I’ll never understand.”

“Come with me.”

He walked to the door of the chapel and flung it open. They were all there, Humpty and the grinning Cat, the Dormouse and the Hatter, the March Hare, the Walrus and the Jabberwock. The Choipery Girl passed overhead. A great cry rose up.

“Lucer and Alice! Lucer and Alice!”

“This seems as good a place as any,” he said. “Will you have me, Alice?”

She looked out over the multitude of creatures, many still arriving. Then the Queen said, “Do it, Alice. I know we need you. Beangern’s fief is yours now, of course. Do it.”

Alice looked at Lucer, looked at the crowd, then back at Lucer.

“You’re all mad,” she said. “But so am I.”

Music fell from the skies. Looking up, she saw a small star rising through the spheres to the empyrean.

Notes

An epithalamium is a bridal song. Zelazny occasionally alluded to Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There; in this story he imagines what happens to Alice after she grew up.

Characters from Alice’s adventures appear here, with Zelazny’s additions. The style with its frequent rhymes evokes Carroll’s. Axel J. Beangern and Lucer are not from Carroll. Lucer appears to be Lucifer, the archangel cast out from heaven; here he has forgotten his true identity until near the end. Beangern is a minor devil. Demons have corrupted the Alice story. Fields of Flanders refers to the terrible WWI battle at Ypres and the soldiers buried there; it also refers to the famous poem “In Flanders Fields,” by Canadian soldier John McCrae, anguished over lost comrades buried under the poppy fields (starting the tradition of wearing poppies to honor war dead). Incandesced means that his arm glowed and warmed. Whitcomb pie refers to the poem “Our Hired Girl” by James Whitcomb Riley: the working girl’s pies attract her beau with their aroma.

Callooh Callay are nonsense words from Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky”; Zelazny also alluded to that poem in “Divine Madness.” The Queen of Hearts (a playing card) screams “off with his head!” in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland but the Red King and Queen (chess pieces) are different characters from Through the Looking-Glass.

Coined word yuleki echoes Yuletide; other words made up in Carroll’s style include Kibling and Dars Dadisdada, Rottery Khan, Choipery Girl, Challkers Rose, Twittikins, Yark Angel. Kibling might be Rudyard Kipling, Dars Dadisdada suggests Addis Ababa (the capitol of Ethiopia), and Yark Angel could be Archangel. Decretal or decree is a formal statement that has the force of law. Scrivener is a scribe. Legend says that St. George fought dragons. Caterwauling is a loud, unpleasant wailing. Sacrosanct means sacred. Nietzsche was the German philosopher who declared, “God is dead.” Empyrean is heaven.