

THE MARCH OF WINTER

by Derek Paxton

To defend against a demonic invasion Abruel Azburgah traveled to heaven. He fought beside angels and helped repel the legions of hell. But no victory comes without sacrifice. He returned to Erebus weakened by the battle and built a small temple that overlooked the Meditor sea. In the central dome of that temple he hung a small piece of the world he had traveled to, the Tear of Heaven. Then he shared his wisdom with his disciples and one winter night, overcome by pain, he died.

To this day the Tear of Heaven hangs from the central dome of the temple and because of its warmth and light the plants that surround the temple bloom even during the coldest of winters.

This was one of those winters. A winter so cold that the water between the Deadlands and Arune turned to ice and allowed unholy creatures from the Deadlands to cross.

A bell sounded in the temple. Soldiers rushed out and down the steep pass toward the beach. Tya stood at the rose ring, the point farthest from the temple that was still within the warmth of the Tear of Heaven. She could see the beach below, mirrored by a bone colored sky.

The ice stretched to the horizon. A line of fortifications was set along the beach, wooden palisades placed deep in the sand during the summer and left to settle as the sand froze around them, thick as mortar. Behind the palisade men waved torches to warn of the attack. Tya stared out across the frozen sea until she saw the line of shambling undead coming toward them. She focused on a spot near the palisade. Through her magic she could hear the soldiers shouting orders, feel the biting cold wind, then she disappeared from the temple's edge and appeared on the beach.

"Reinforcements are coming." She yelled.

Even within the embrace of furs and fire magic the cold broke through and Tya shivered. Along the beach soldiers stopped huddling around their watch fires and readied weapons for battle.

Everyone was staring out at the approaching undead army. They were a thin line of corpses and rotten flesh. Some plodded quietly forward while others leapt and barked among the line, eager for battle. The soldiers were so intent on the nearing army that they didn't notice an old woman in a gray cloak that ran out onto the beach until she was at the palisade. A soldier grabbed her as she tried to scramble up a ladder. He threw her down and began dragging her, screaming, back along the beach.

"Korin, let her go! What are you doing?" Tya shouted.

Korin let go of the old woman's cloak, but kept his spear ready.

Tya knelt close to the old woman as she picked herself up. She looked like a beggar with loose, ragged clothing. Yellow hair stuck to her face and her withered features made her look unnaturally old. As Tya helped her up she felt wizard's bracelets beneath the old woman's robes. She pulled the cloth back to reveal thick gold and jeweled rings.

“Are you a student of Litha temple?” Tya asked.

“Not for many years” she answered, “what use is power when one is still subject to death? They could not teach me immortality.”

The soldiers shouted. The undead were almost in range.

“Get back!” Tya shouted at the woman. Tya ran past the soldiers, climbed the ladder to drop on the undead side of the palisade and ran out onto the frozen Meditor Sea.

The wind was more fierce away from the protection of the shore, and it carried the stench of the undead army. Tya cursed and then sent a brilliant red beam of energy from her hands in a long arch around her. The beam had the power of entropy, of unmaking, and everything it touched was destroyed. It cut easily through the ice and left her standing at the center of a giant partial circle, with only one end open for the undead to enter.

Some went around the circle and continued toward the beach where the soldiers waited. Many couldn’t resist the wizard standing alone on the ice and shambled into the icy peninsula. As they did she turned the disintegration beam on them in short measured bursts, saving her energy. As more and more entered the peninsula the ice began to creek. When it started to crack she stopped attacking altogether and let them come for her unhindered.

More undead poured through the gap until the ice ruptured and rolled, sending all the undead in to the water below. In that instant Tya teleported back to where the soldiers prepared for the attack.

“Be ready.” She shouted as the undead came up onto the beach.

Skeletons led the assault. They were frantic, clumsy creatures and looked to have been put together by ghoulish children without any matching parts. Some had bones from animals, the wrong bones for different parts or bones that were either too large or small for their body. It made their movements unpredictable and unnatural.

The skeletons attempted to climb over the palisade without any organization. Though they didn’t fight together, it only took one to make it over and the rest would follow. They didn’t consider their attacks, instead trusting that one attack would work and they would break through. Or that eventually the living would tire.

Tya allowed the guards to fight the first few. It wasn’t until skeletons began to overwhelm them that she focused once again and the bright red ray cut through a skeleton. The rusted shield the skeleton carried was no protection and was also cut in two by the ray. In one sweep she brought the ray along the top of the palisade, removing the head of one skeleton and a pitted pelvis that was serving as a head for another.

As skeletons fell others moved in to take their place until something larger grabbed the palisade wall and tore it up out of the sand. The twisted creature was built with body parts from multiple corpses. It was a massive wall of flesh ruled by several heads, all of which yelled and commanded the creature’s attention. Tya blasted it in the chest with her disintegration ray but it kept coming.

The skeletons poured in around it. Tya shouted for the soldiers to hold their position. She knew reinforcements were coming from the temple if they could hold the beach. She saw the woman in the gray cloak throw herself into the arms of a skeleton, pleading for it to take her with it. Other soldiers

were being dragged onto the ice as well. The undead didn't kill the soldiers, they wanted to drag them back to the Deadlands where they would be added to their undead army.

Three quick blasts at separate heads and the giant zombie finally fell dead. Tya risked one look back along the path to the temple, to see how close the reinforcements were, to find a place to teleport to. But she was too slow. A skeleton dove at her, striking her on the head with an iron shod cudgel and she fell into darkness.

Tya felt moist earth between her fingers, she imagined she was in her own grave. She was in darkness but she sensed she was far away from the frozen beach. There was a frantic activity around her, the sound of creatures burrowing. The ground was recently upturned earth and it filled the air with its fragrance and the stench of rotting flesh.

"Progeny of Nemed, welcome."

Tya's fog of confusion was replaced by the overwhelming fear of the creature that hung over her. It was a great white demoness with the lower body of a massive worm and the upper body of a bloated human woman. Tormented spirits swam inside her pale, soft flesh and it was the glow of these spirits that produced the only light in this dark place. It was just enough dim radiance to allow Tya to see the queen and the occasional worker undead that wandered by her.

Tya had heard legends of the worm queen. She was Laviah, a fallen angel of Kilmorph, and the demonic commander of the undead hordes that attacked Arune. Tya tried to crawl away from the queen, but she grabbed Tya's ankle and pulled her close.

"I will not serve you!" Tya screamed, "I will not become one of your undead army!"

There was no place for Tya to teleport to, she couldn't see anything except Laviah and she needed to see a place to teleport to it. Ignoring the pounding in her head Tya focused and shot the queen with her disintegration spell.

Laviah smiled.

"I am a creature of entropy." The demoness said. "Do you think that it would harm me? But do not worry, I do not plan to turn you into a digger. You are meant for so much more."

At that Laviah pulled Tya close and violently kissed her. Tya's mind recoiled at the touch of the queen's fetid, swollen lips and she passed out again.

Tya woke in darkness. Either the queen was gone or Tya had been moved to another chamber.

Her head still hurt, but she welcomed the pain as it was evidence that she was still alive. What bothered her more was a tightness in her chest, a feeling of nausea and weight pressing down on her. She tried to throw up but her painful heaves only coughed up air.

A weak blue-white light entered the small chamber. It was the glowing top of a staff held by the woman in the gray cloak. Or what had been the woman in the gray cloak. Through she still wore the

cloak Tya could see that she had gained her immortality. Her eyes were white and lifeless, her skin was ash colored and her features were even more withered, she was undead.

“Follow” the old woman said, though it strained her to talk. Then she turned and began walking down the tunnel away from the alcove.

Rather than return to darkness Tya crept after her at the edge of the crystals light.

It was impossible to tell where they were going in the winding tunnels, though Tya sensed that they were gradually heading up. Skeletons and other undead were hard at work building onto the tunnels in hundreds of different directions. These were not the inactive dead that laid waiting for centuries for an adventurer to wander by, but eternal workers for their unholy queen. They ignored Tya as she passed.

The tunnels slowly widened and by the time Tya saw the light of the bone colored sky they were in a tunnel larger than any road in Cevedes. The pit opened to the rough frozen tundra of the Deadlands and despite the army of undead within the tunnels there was no one on the surface but Tya and her grey cloaked guide. The guide began to walk east.

Tya followed her out of the Deadlands and across the frozen sea. Her head, which had been bandaged while she was unconscious, began to feel better. But the weight on her chest and her nausea never passed. At one point Tya grew too tired and huddled on the ice to sleep. Her guide simply stood and waited for her to continue.

Nearly thirty hours later she could see the forested peaks of Arune. Tears welled up in her eyes and froze on her cheeks as each step took her closer to home.

The palisades were still on the beach, and soldiers waved torches as Tya and her guide approached. When they got close enough that the guide could sense the soldiers she became enraged and ran toward the palisade to attack. The soldiers easily cut her down. Tya simply knelt on the ice and placed her hands in the air.

“Is that Tya? Is she still alive?”

Once they recognized her, and made sure she wasn’t undead, the soldiers wrapped thick furs around her and carried her back up to the temple. Tya had entered the temple hundreds of times. She played within the forest around the temple when she was a girl. Planned one day to have children that would play here. But she had never been as happy to return as she was today.

“Tya? Can you hear me? Drink something child.”

It was Boann, one of her instructors. Tya could feel the warmth of the Tear of Heaven above her. For the first time since the undead attack she felt safe.

“I’m okay,” Tya said through cracked, dehydrated lips. She sipped at the water he offered, then laid back down on the temple floor.

Another wave of nausea went through her and she coughed up the water. She wretched up empty air and felt like her stomach was trying to push up her esophagus and out of her body.

“Tya,” she heard Boann say fearfully, “why are you glowing?”

Tya opened her robes to reveal the pale glow of tormented spirits writhing underneath her skin. Boann backed away from her. Another wave of nausea hit and she heaved violently. She felt something

pushing its way up out of her body. Pain overcame her and in a dizzying haze of screams and panic she passed out again.

When she awoke the temple was covered in blood. Corpses of wizards, priests, merchants and farmers who had come to the temple to meditate were everywhere. There were bloody paths where they had been dragged across the floor and massive reddish brown splatters on the walls where their corpses had been beaten well past death.

Whatever spirits had done this, whatever the queen had placed inside her, they were gone now. Tya was the only survivor of the attack.

It wasn't until three years later that the winter was once again cold enough to freeze the entire stretch between the Deadlands and Arune. Once again soldiers prepared to fortify the beach, and again the undead came.

Just before the attack Tya rushed out onto the beach. She wore a grey cloak, and was haggard and gaunt from years living alone in the forest. She was, to the soldiers eyes, crazed and they stopped her from rushing out onto the ice. They didn't recognize she was once a student of the temple. One grabbed her and began dragging her away from the shore, dropping her forcefully at the wooded edge of the beach.

"Stay here!" he ordered, "These undead will kill you if you get close to them."

"They won't kill us." She hissed back, "they will take us to their queen."

The soldier ignored her. But she only had to wait. When the attack began she ran back out onto the beach, climbed over the wall and jumped into the arms of one of the skeletons.

"Make me immortal!" she screamed.

Once again she passed over the frozen stretch between the Deadlands and Arune. This time she walked beside a skeleton that led her. Several others carried or dragged soldiers from the attack. Though as the soldiers died they were dropped on the ice and left behind. Only the living had value to Laviah.

Eventually they reached the pit and they were all dragged down into its deepest layers and left in the earthen alcoves until the queen was ready for them. Laviah's lair was as dark as before, and as full of activity. Skeletons endlessly burrowing filled it with the sounds of creatures scratching on the walls. Tya, calm until this point, began to feel the anxiety of her first visit return.

A few hours later a skeleton entered the alcove, grabbed her leg and began dragging her toward the queens' lair. Either Tya's eyes were more adjusted to the dark or the queen had grown more powerful because the dim radiance Tya remembered was replaced by a halo of pale unholy light that encircled the queen.

The skeleton dropped Tya in front of the queen, who picked her up.

“Progeny of Nemed, have you returned to serve me again? You have lost the grace and beauty of our first meeting. How quickly mortal strength fades.”

“Litha temple has been restored. The tragedy that happened there has been forgotten.” Tya said.

“The temple has been restored, but the pain of that moment has not passed. Not for you or for many others that still live in Arune.”

Tya didn’t answer. The queen looked at her, trying to determine her motives and enjoying the lingering anguish she felt in the broken woman.

“You may still make a suitable husk.” The queen decided. Then she brought Tya in for another horrific kiss.

Tya pulled out the Tear of Heaven, that shard that Abruel Azburgah brought back from heaven and that Laviah’s spirits left hanging in the temple after their brutal attack. Tya stabbed the queen in the chest with it. Contact with demonic flesh set the prism afire, but still Tya held on and pushed it deeper into the soft flesh. The queen screamed in horror and her bloated form thrashed. Then with a pulse of brilliant white light the Tear of Heaven exploded.

In that instant Laviah was destroyed and her massive lair collapsed into a deep sunken pit, becoming a permanent grave for everyone within it. Undead who served under the worm queen, from the eastern shore of the Deadlands to those involved in attacks on Arune became nothing but hollow corpses and scattered piles of bones.

As the undead fell the soldiers defending Arune let out a cheer. They were grateful for the reprieve, but aware that in Erebus there is no victory without sacrifice.