

The Hunting of the Lathe Worm: Part 3

By Alexander Saxton

His way lay now not forward, but back. The answers he needed would be found at Fencaster, and his journey there took him a day and a night. She haunted him most of the way; an echoing presence in the fog and woods, often unseen, but always following, following.

“Turn back and drink; you should turn back and drink.” He barely recognized her voice sometimes, when it came to him bodiless from the rains, or out of the blackness of the woods at night. It had grown guttural and cruel.

“No,” he repeated, often aloud, and often only in his mind. “There are things I have to *do*.”

She laughed at him, and when she did appear, walking on the surface of the rain, or suddenly out of thickets in the night, her visage was grotesquely changed. Now her head was fully-naked skull: elongated backwards in a spiralling snail’s shell. Growths of grasping coral blossomed on her bony hands like bishops’ rings; and when she spoke, small, horrid arthropods swarmed amongst her yellow teeth.

“*Why not? You think you can find some *absolution* here? In *this* place? *You?*”*

“No, *absolution*.”

He denied it, but in his secret heart a small voice shouted ‘*yes*’.

[*Sneering*] “*Then what; is it the Earl’s *daughter* then? Am I replaced by *pale Colwen* in your wreckage of a heart?”*

“Nothing like that,” he said again, and refused her any further answer to her taunts, even when she shrieked and hurled herself against him. For all her horror, she was only shadow-stuff, and burst against him into tatters of flotsam-scented fog.

He made good time; long months of wandering in the wild had made a woodsman out of him, and the mists had thinned. Now the damp hills with their ragged crowns of spruce and tamarack seemed not so dismal as before. The ways through Dimness Fen were not so hard. Only mist and fog made monsters of that landscape.

He came to Castle Fencaster before nightfall on the second day, as the grey world ran itself down into cool, wetland-scented purple-dark. The Ghost was still with him: reduced to a sullen presence trudging far behind. Gone were the snail-horns and coral hooks. She was her painted self again; her figure glowing saffron in the spreading dark.

Though the gate was indifferently guarded, he chose to slip over a derelict section of the curtain wall, using the easy handholds left by crumbling mortar. Then he was down amongst brown oaks and dark yews, and the sheltered bower of the hidden garden. Strangely for the time of year, the dead wisteria had begun to bloom again. He took shelter beneath them, against the light rain which had begun to fall. Their scent was like half-remembered perfume, and when he looked around him, the ghost was gone.

Before long, he drifted off to sleep, where grey waves lapped around a crest of half-drowned stonework, against a coral-coloured sky.

When he awoke, it was with a woman's hand around his neck, and a steel point resting against her thumb.

"Who are you?" Her voice was a grey whisper. When he looked up, he saw hollow eyes beneath a grey-streaked tangle of ale-coloured hair.

"Nobody." It was an honest answer.

"I saw you lurking here before. It's unwise to stalk an Earl's daughter. All I need to do to have you killed is shout." Her grip tightened around his neck. "Or I could do it myself."

He did not resist her.

"Who is she?" He asked.

"Who do you mean?" But it was clear from the sudden sharpening of her gaze, from the tremor in her voice that she knew exactly who he meant.

"The woman in your locket."

"... ..I don't know who you mean."

"Who is the Lathe Worm."

And now her eyes went wide and she took a half-step back, letting the dagger fall from slack hands. It slid, point-first into the heavy turf.

[whispering] "You've seen her?"

"No. But tell me what *you've* seen."

She studied him for a long moment, and it was plain by her face that she didn't like what she saw. A ragged mud-rimed scarecrow, with a thin black beard grown up to his eyes, and black

bruises under half his fingernails. He wouldn't have trusted himself either. But in the end she spoke, because whatever it was she had to say was burning in her chest like a held breath.

"I went out riding one night, to try and find her."

It had been in winter; a chill night on the hoar-frosted edges of the fen. She had wrapped herself against the cold in a cloak they'd once shared: rich purple, lined with umber fleece. She'd chosen it because it still smelled of her, faintly, only faintly. The moon had been full, and its touch had embroidered the frozen clouds with golden thread.

Suddenly her horse had checked its step and rolled its eyes, showing red nostrils and tossing its head. Colwen had held the creature steady, her cold hands hard upon the reins. A slow rumble was boiling from the fog, and a sound like chainmail clashed soft among the shattered reeds. She held her ground, realizing with slow terror that the rumble came from the chest of some huge beast; the clashing from its scaled hide. She felt the heart drop out of her chest: the sound was on every side of her, as the creatures' half glimpsed spines scissored in coiling layers underneath the fog, encircling her and closing in.

She realized she had stumbled into a trap: onto a causeway of chill-packed earth above the icy mire, with the Lathe Worm cutting off her entrance and her exit with its body.

Instinctively, she reached for the dagger at her hip. Its blade was long and narrow: well made to pierce a robber's heart, but far too light to breach the creature's scales.

And then she heard another sound to chill the blood that pounded in her neck: her own name spoken from the fog: "*Kkhoulwunn...*" It barely sounded like speech at all. It was a garbled, brutal sound, forced through cavities and pharyngeal jaws never intended to shape a human thought. Was it even her name at all? Or merely a pareidolia of sound: a ghost conjectured by a grieving mind?

"Khoulwunn..."

And now the moonlight filled a set of flat, reptilic eyes half-hidden in the fog and high grey grass. She cried out in horror, nearly losing her seat as the spined silhouette bunched and rose above her like a black wave that splinters trees and tramples over walls.

But at her scream, the flat and slitted golden eyes shone wide with hate and fear, and the Worm recoiled, hissing like a landslide as it flung itself backwards into the mist and glacial quag. She leaped from her horse and chased it to the Water's edge, but all that could still be seen was a ripple of the trail-spines parting dwarfish ice-floes on the surface of the marsh, and making them to slowly spin.

“The more time passes,” Colwen said. “The more certain I am that the creature said my name. And there was something else as well; a feeling I can’t make sense of; as if I was in the presence of... I know I must sound insane.”

But to Théow, her words had the iron ring of truth.

“What was her name?” He asked. “The woman you loved.”

She glanced at him with wary eyes, as if she dared not admit, or dared not speak the name aloud.

“Ideswith,” she whispered at last. “Captain of my father’s Guard.”

“She disappeared,” said Théow. “Just over a year ago. Just before the coming of the Worm.”

Colwen nodded.

“It’s no coincidence. It’s been her, Colwen. This entire time.”

Though she could not bring herself to believe what he was saying, there were tears now forming in her eyes: not ugly tears, not lovely ones, but bitter, adult tears: tears of the kind the world weeps for itself.

“*How?* How can what you’re saying be the truth?”

He told her of the Fountain in the woods.

“Those driven to despair will sometimes come across it, and find themselves compelled to drink. Any who taste its waters change: perhaps to forms of chance’s choosing; perhaps to those of fate. It offers freedom, of a kind: from pain, from fear and loss... but I doubt if it delivers on that offer, in the end.”

For a moment, she paid him the respect of suspending disbelief. One of her eyebrows lifted slightly, but that was all.

“I find I almost do believe you; and if I listened to my heart, I might... But it all sounds far too strange. And I cannot trust my heart on this; because it will believe in any tale where Ideswith is alive. So how do you know all this is true? How do you know that Ideswith drank, when you didn’t even know her name?”

“Because I’ve knelt where she knelt, and I’ve felt the water in my hands.” He was no longer looking at Colwen, but over her shoulder. “Because... I know what it’s like to lose what makes your life worth living. And because I know what it’s like to lose myself.”

As she turned to see what he was looking at, Colwen saw no rose-gold glow, no dark-haired damsel with fathoms in her eyes. Only dark trees and an avenue between them, evanescent.

[abruptly] “I won’t believe this fairy-tale of yours,” she said. “I can’t.” But as she turned back to him, he could tell from her eyes that she already did. She had lived too long on the edges of this fog to not believe in wonders lurking further in. And her heart believed him.

“I haven’t come to convince you of anything, Colwen. I’m only here to tell the truth.”

“And what about your quest? Hmm?” From the edge in her voice he could tell she was desperate to believe him, desperate not to believe him. “What about five hundred silver pieces and an Earl’s seat? Why throw them away?”

He ignored the question; *he* knew the answer, and that was enough.

“*Will you come with me,*” he said. “*Will you help me try and save her?*”

She stood paralyzed.

“She *remembers* you, Colwen. I think you’re her only chance. Come with me! I can’t save her without you.”

And as she stared at him, she felt the cold weight of the locket on her chest, the one he had returned to her, and, she saw the lines of trouble on his face, so much like the ones she ran her fingers across along each time she gazed into a mirror. She trusted him.

“*No,*” she said. But then before he could turn to go, she surrendered to her heart. “*Yes. Take me to her. Help me get her back, and anything you want is yours.*”

* * *

Through swamps and marshes, icy, thigh-deep water and chest-high rocks, through fogs, dark reeds and darker trees, they travelled now together. They kept off roads; not wanting to be caught by Sarcwide’s guards, or worse, the likes of Shaetha Bann. It was a dismal journey, but Colwen did not complain. Though seeming frail from a year of grief, she had been raised to the back-country and took well enough to it again. Indeed, the struggles of survival seemed to reawaken some vitality she had once known, and the colder it became, the less she shivered.

“Ideswith and I would come this way together,” she told him, as they mounted a cairn along the Midgstoke causeway. She was smiling, breathing lightly, with a touch of colour in her cheek. “She was raised in the country, and it was the only place we could be together alone.”

He smiled to see her lively, full-of-life.

“That’s why you came this way looking for her?”

“I was heading for Skitcheap, the village where she was born.” She nodded to the grey horizon.
“Just the other side of these hills, on the water’s edge.”

“Water?” He remembered the great swathe of grey flood where he had seen the beast’s slow ripple, had heard its anguished call. He had a feeling for the landscape now, and judged it was in the same direction. “What’s on the other side of the water?”

She closed her eyes, remembering afternoons climbing hand-in-hand over the downs with Ideswith’s laughter in her ears, under a pale warm sun.

“Nothing much. Some low hills. Some burial mounds from long ago.”

“Burial mounds... so they’d be hollow?”

She followed his thought.

“You think that’s where she made her lair?”

“It’s warm and dark and safe and close to home. It’s where I’d make my lair if I were her.”

She studied him.

“And where is home for you, Théow? Where’s your lair?”

There was none of the Ghost’s teasing or prying in the question; only an earnest, well-meant curiosity that made him feel self-conscious.

“I’ve got a little place down by the sea,” he said, and forged ahead before another question came.

As darkness fell, they didn’t risk a fire, but slept back-to-back for a little warmth. When they woke in the morning, lying face-to-face, neither felt any awkwardness at all. They were human beings alone together in a great wilderness; an easy and uncomplicated bond was forming between them.

They came upon Skitcheap midmorning. In life, it must have been a dismal town. In death, it left an ugly corpse.

A mere dozen homes huddled on a peninsula of flat grey mud. They had been thatch and daub and wattle before the coming of the Worm; now they were sticks and dirt and shards. A swaybacked fence of narrow pales had once been enough to keep out wild dogs. But now it was

wildly strewn, and clawed footprints veered from end-to-end among the ruined homes, travelling amongst the wet brown bones of goats and pigs.

And what had become of the people? Where was the shouting of children, the slow hum of folk about their tasks, the thoughtful silence of elders as they cooked the noonday meal? The land mourned for its emptiness; and in the muddy waste, Théow could not help but see the bone-strewn flats of Heartsdesire at low-tide.

They did not speak together in that place; she had no desire to voice whatever thoughts assailed her; he had no desire to hear more than he saw.

At the end of the headland, a few small boats lay overturned along the muddy shore. One had been crushed and carved by the Lathe Worm's body. The others seemed seaworthy enough.

"We'll come back and shelter in the village at nightfall," He unlimbered one of the boats from gripping mud, his voice sounding loud, profane in the stillness of the town. "I'd rather meet the Worm by day."

She didn't respond. When he glanced up at her, she was a dark shadow framed against the sky, clothes blowing, gaze distant, eyes empty with despair.

[murmuring] "And when we do find her, Théow, what then?"

"The Worm recognized you once before. Maybe she will know you again."

"And then what?" Her gaze focused on him, now sharpened by irony. "I'll cure her with a true-love's kiss?"

"*Hah.* it's worth a try..." He wasn't sure if he was joking. "But if she remembers you, maybe we can lead her back to the fountain. And if she drinks again, then maybe..."

"*If we can get her, maybe we can lead her, maybe if she drinks again...*"

[gently] "I'm as new to this as you are, Colwen. I'm making it up as I go."

"And if she *doesn't* remember me this time?" He could see the bleakness was upon her; he knew the feeling of its claws. "What if she attacks me like she attacked the people here: people she knew; people she loved?"

"Then... I'll look out for you."

"By trying to kill *her*."

He said nothing.

“And if *she* kills you?”

He said nothing, shrugged.

“Why are you *here*?” She demanded. “Why is this so *important* to you, that you’d risk your own life?”

And what could he say to that? How could he express the deep emotions flowing through him, like spring thaw through the ancient snow? How could he tell her, in her permafrost of grief, how it felt to him like a warm wind was blowing through his life at last, like his foot was set upon the firm gravel of a sunwarmed path, after so long slipping in the frozen slush? How could he say how much he longed for her to flourish, for *someone* in this grey world to flourish? She would take it the wrong way, think he meant some confession of love; but love, the way that people speak of love, was nothing close to what he felt, unless we say the warming wind feels love for maple buds unfurling at the winter’s end.

“It’s important,” was all he said.

She stared at him, sceptical, unsettled by this drifter, tramp she did not understand. And yet, despite his sullen silences, his nightmares, and sudden starts at nothings in the fog, there was something about him that she put faith in. He had tears for the tearfulness of things; his mind could stand the touch of thoughts of death. And as she weighed his heart, she seemed for a moment to see a coral-coloured presence standing at his shoulder, unreal against this land of endless grey. But it was nothing, after all: for then she blinked, and it was gone.

“Alright.” She mustered up her courage. “Let’s go. Let’s go bring her home”

And soon they were out over grey water, and banked all ‘round with fog the shade of treated bone. They had found only one paddle in the town. She used it to steer while he rowed with a plank of splintered wood.

But the water was still and light as air, and their mouldering craft slid through it like a cold wind through tamaracks at water’s edge. They skimmed through reeds and onto open water, and the water was like volcanic glass. Iron oblations moulted in its crystal depths: the gifts a long-lost nation gave their pagan Gods, now lost, now gone forever.

They paddled on in silence. The Ghost, in saffron slippers, was dancing a gavotte across the water.

“Why look at you, a natural boatsman. One might almost think you’d been to sea.”

He'd seen her dance like this in life, below the Orange boughs, her heels light. It felt good to be on speaking terms again, and he would have liked nothing better than to stand up and step out onto the water, and take her in his arms, and dance.

But he kept his eyes and mind upon the task at hand.

"Oh, I like it better when you're alone. You talk to me more, that way."

A small splash sounded in the fog. Théow flung up his hand, and Colwen drew her paddle from the water. They drifted silent, slow across the molten glass.

"Ah... another oar?" mocked the Ghost. "Or was that the sound of the Lathe-Worm's fin? Or was it only in your head? You're not exactly sane, you know."

But Théow didn't take her bait. The canoe flowed on in silence leaving the Ghost behind, her enigmatic laughter chiming over the fen.

A few moments later, the prow ground into a sandy shore. Wordless, they disembarked among fog and broken stalks, and scrambled a grey bank where the reeds gave way to blowing grass of soft and feathered grey.

"This is it," Colwen murmured. "Can you smell it? This must be the place."

The Lathe Worm's smell was on the air: chemical, fecal, close. Now she pushed past him and took the lead, following the smell until a huge darkness yawned in the fog before them. An arch: its ancient span formed by three grey slabs half-buried in the grey grass slope of a mound. The tomb exhaled a dank breeze through this mouth, and the stink of the Worm was now so strong that Théow and Colwen covered mouth-and-nose with sleeves.

The Worm's travels had left deep ruts snarled in the earth. Rusted treasures from the belly of the mound lay strewn about the entrance to the cave. Shards of bone, and bits of crumpled gilt degraded in the damp; a rusted helm of bronze decayed at Théow's gentlest touch.

But inside, the lair was empty.

"What now," Colwen whispered.

"That's a good question, there, Théow," called a voice. "What *should* we be doin' eh?"

And Shaetha Bann descended slowly from the fog. His sloped shoulders were relaxed; his big hands rested at a leather belt where iron tools hung, rust-spotted, streaked with uncleaned blood.

“Pleased to meet ya, Miss Colwen: name o’ Shaetha Bann. Though I dare say we’ll come ta know each other better soon.” He winked as two more silhouettes stepped up, crossbows easy underneath their arms; a third footstep squelched in the mud behind Colwen and Théow. Four-on-two.

“Tryin’ ta steal a march on your old friend Shaetha Bann,” the killer said, shaking his shaggy head. “Just as I was ‘feared ya might. And with us bein’ so close an’ all? It’s a shame that puts the sadness in my heart.”

Théow did his best to appear nonchalant.

“Shaetha, what a pleasant surprise.” He relaxed his body as he spoke, letting his weight drop into his legs, his hands to his left hip, ready to fight though he knew the odds were grim. “No sign of the Worm, I take it?”

“Well friend, it’s a good-news bad-news type a deal. The bad news is, we been campin here a day an a half, an haven’t seen hide nor hair of it. But the good news is, you’ve brought us something even better. Isn’t that right, Colwen?”

In response, the Earl’s daughter drew her knife, much to the amusement of Shaetha’s men. Her eyes were very wide with fear.

“You’re half-right Shaetha,” Théow said, patting the pommel of his sword. “I *have* brought you something better than the Worm.”

Shaetha laughed, though his eyes remained dark, always dark.

“That’s a bold thing to say, my friend. But the odds are bad for ya, and ya told me yerself-- ya weren’t some great swordsman. So what’s the point pretendin’? Why not slink away an’ save yerself?”

At this, Théow smiled, and it seemed some reddish light reflected in his eyes.

“I don’t have much to live for, Shaetha; everyone I ever loved is dead.”

He glanced at something over Shaetha’s shoulder, and as the killer turned to look, a reddish glow erupted from the fog, and a black silhouette arose amidst the sanguine light. She was half-rotted, coral-robed, yellow with the staining sea, her skull a coiling, iridescent nautilus, with clamouring translucent things amongst her hollow eyes and slimy teeth. At the sight of her, Shaetha yelled and Colwen screamed, and one of Shaetha’s men shot useless arrows through her fleshless form.

Like a Goddess of the sea, she raised her pearly hand, and with her gesture came a rising wave that darkened as it grew until it hit the shore and burst; and from the wave the Lathe-Worm howled forth.

Dumbstruck, Shaetha had no time to move before the creature crashed upon him.

“Colwen, run!” Théow was already in motion; pivoting to his back foot, steel arcing from his sheath to shear through the man behind him. He was over the body before its comet-streak of blood could hit the ground, its colour startling in the greyness of the world.

He could hear the Worm behind him, roaring like the risen sea that tears through walls and woods and worlds and lives, unstoppable, unstopped; he ran.

Crossbows snapped; something whispered through the fog beside his ear; something cracked against the armour of the hissing thing behind him. He heard screams and crunching flesh and his own hard-pounding heart. He slipped and staggered in the wet sand. He was back at Heartsdesire when the great waves came. He was mindless with fear; he was not himself.

He realized Colwen was not beside him.

And somehow he was able to gain control, wrenching himself about to face the waves. She was already half-vanished in the fog: Colwen, thin and pallid as a gold-leaved aspen against the coming storm. Behind her arched the Lathe-Worm’s silhouetted coils; all-dark, cathedral-like and rimmed with spines; all-dark inside the glowering fog, except for yellow eyes which shone with fear and hate.

Colwen had her palm raised out toward it, with the undefended wrist turned up, a subtle trembling in her hand. The Worm hesitated at this gesture, an oceanic rattle in its chest.

“*Khoul.... Khoull....*” It lashed its head, as if trying to clear some fog inside. “*Khoul....Wun.*”

“Yes,” she had tears in her voice. “Yes Ideswith, it’s me. Colwen.”

The creature stretched toward her, its low-slung jaw and scabrous face swimming from the fog like a nightmare; fishlike, reptile-like, but with the shadow of human features half-buried in its disfigurement.

[*Colwen*] “It’s me,” From where Théow stood, he could not see the silver tears that shone across her face. “It’s me...”

The Worm’s snout came within a handbreadth of her touch. In its alien gaze, Théow thought he saw confusion, pain, and yearning.

But then, a shadow stirred amongst the thornèd coils of the Lathe Worm's bulk, and Shaetha Bann gurgled from where his body hung impaled on the creature's spikes.

"Not seen the last of me..." And steel flashed. *"Not seen the last of Shaetha Bann."*

And a knife plunged between two plates along the Lathe Worm's flank. The creature shrieked and thrashed, and Shaetha's guts were milked from him between the grinding coils; but Colwen too was struck by the creature's lashing skull, and her body seemed to buckle at the impact, like a reed beneath the stormwind. The Worm tossed back its head and howled, its cry a hundred times louder than when Théow had heard it first above the Fen, a thousand times more anguished. And then the Beast had whirled and was gone, its huge body crashing into chill waters like a falling home. A moment later, only a wild disturbance remained upon the flood; a coil of blood, a coil of poison spreading in the wake.

Théow ran to Colwen's side, letting his sword fall to reddened sands. She was gasping and bloody, staring up at him with empty, frightened eyes. He could tell from the way she lay that her back was broken. The impact of the creature's head had crushed her ribs, and from her tattered side, the blood ran dark.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, over and over. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," but he didn't know what her apologies were for, or whom. He knelt, pressing her balled-up cloak against the rush of blood. His hands were quickly steeped. Hot tears ran down his face, and he hated himself, more than even he had ever done before, for failing her.

"No, no, I'm the one who's sorry. It's all my fault. Oh Colwen, it's all my fault."

But she didn't respond; Her eyelids fluttered and he knew that he was losing her. Perhaps the blow had cracked her heart.

"Hold on. Hold on, we'll get you help."

A wild desperation came upon him, and he glanced about for some miracle, some unseen salvation from the mist.

And he found the White Doe.

She was standing before the dark mouth of the open tomb, and the fog had grown so thick that *it was only against such darkness he could see her*. She looked unworldly; she was a creature of the mist itself, her eyes as dark as the tomb itself.

"Please; Please, you have to help her."

But after a moment's further stare; the doe was gone.

Staring *at* him? *No*. With a ragged epiphany it came to him that she had been looking *past* him. He turned with reckless hope, and as he did, the silver fog thinned, just long enough that he could see the wooded bluffs he'd stood upon the morning after he had heard the Worm's first call.

"The Fountain!"

He was already on his feet, raising the crimson wreck of Colwen's body in his arms. He had seen the Fountain's water break and remake broken bodies twice before.

"Just hold on, Colwen; a little while longer, just hold on."

But her breath was now almost too shallow to hear, and her face was growing pale as the damp grey sands.

He ran her to the boat, and laid her down on splintered timbers gently as he could. Wading waist-deep in the reeds and clinging mud, he launched, scrambling o'er the gunnels as the vessel veered on waters growing dim with night's approach. He dipped the oar and wrenched the vessel forward, striking at the water 'til his breath came raw; until his body burned despite the cold.

And still it took so long to cross the water.

As he paddled, he found that he was not alone. The Ghost had come to him again, and sat in tranquil silence on the crossbeam of the boat.

She was herself once more. Dark and lovely, the blush of life was almost in her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said, glancing down at still and rain-pricked waters. "I'm sorry you couldn't save them, Théow. That you couldn't save yourself."

"I haven't given up," was all he said.

And after a long moment looking at him, she climbed to her feet and stepped out onto the water.

"You're bearing too far North," she said. "I'll lead you by the quickest route."

And other than her guiding, coral glow, the fens grew dark; and all was silent, but for Théow's ragged breath, and Colwen's shallow breath and the distant keening of the Worm.

And still he paddled onward as the fens grew dark.