

The Burning Man

by Paul Melko

For the transgression of loving another's wife, Pettio burned for one thousand years.

The law was not that one should suffer in this way; but the woman Pettio loved was the wife of Hospidar, a wizard. He had the power to dispense justice in this way, and so he did, setting the youth aflame in the square of the mountain village of Greggit. His wife he attended to in another fashion.

Pettio found himself rooted in place in the center of the town square. The bouquet of flowers fell from his hands as his knees locked. He cried out, pitching forward, and caught himself on his hands. Since his toes and heels would not budge from the cobblestones, he could not fall, looking instead as if he were playing some game in the fields with the children, as if he pretended he was some animal from distant lands.

"What's wrong, Pettio?" his friend Tremaine asked. "Suddenly feeling cold feet?" Tremaine was a romantic cynic and had both kidded Pettio and encouraged him in his affair with Gwena. "Won't your feet obey you, friend? Do they know something your heart does not?"

"It's so, Tremaine. I can't move from this spot." Pettio pushed against the ground with his hands and managed to right himself. Tremaine gathered the fallen bouquet and handed it to him.

"Not just your feet betray you, friend," Tremaine said. "But now your head is touched with sweat and your cheeks are flushed."

"I am suddenly warm. Ahhh, Tremaine! My fingers burn!"

"Come, Pettio. Let's stop in Gill's Tavern for a drink. To cool the heart and the hands." Tremaine was certain his friend's ailment was of the mind.

Pettio set his teeth and his lips curled back. "My hands are burning, Tremaine! Burning as if too close to a flame. Fetch water!"

Tremaine took Pettio's hand in his own and was alarmed to find the fingers almost too hot to touch. Pulling, Tremaine could not move Pettio from the spot he stood in.

"Take your boots off."

Pettio unlaced his left boot, while Tremaine unlaced the other. But even though the bindings were free, Pettio's feet remained lodged within.

He stood upright and held his hands before him, staring at them accusingly. Tremaine, seeing the expression on his friend's face ran to the fountain for a bucket of water.

When he returned Pettio was slapping at his ears and head as if trying to put out a fire, and smoke was wisping up from his feet. Tremaine threw the bucket of water at his friend, thoroughly dousing him, but still Pettio patted at himself.

His voice erupted from his throat, a shrill emanation of pain. And now the townsfolk in the square turned to look at the two.

Tremaine said, "Fetch water, everyone! Pettio burns. He burns with invisible flames."

At first few of the people moved, but Pettio's pitiful cries drove them to help.

"I see no flame. Is this some sickness of the mind?" one asked.

"It is devilish magic," another said.

One person pulled water from the well, while a group filled buckets from the fountain. Bucket after bucket they threw on Pettio, but still the man screamed, still smoke wafted from his clothes. Finally his jacket and pants burst into flame, and then his hair and his boots too.

When the people realized that the fire that burned Pettio was no normal one, they ran in fear, fleeing to their homes where they bolted the doors and windows.

Only Tremaine remained, bringing bucket after bucket to cast upon his burning friend, until the heat became so fierce that he could not reach Pettio with a toss of his bucket.

And still the high-pitched keening filled the night, as Pettio was consumed, and yet not consumed, by the flame.

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"You will do this thing," Tremaine's wife said. It had stopped being a question sometime in the night.

"I must." Light slipped through the shutters and made a pattern of lines across the bed. Perhaps Mathilda had slept some of the night, but Tremaine had not. The thought of the day's task held him, and it would not let him sleep. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and pulled on his trousers.

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"But you have done so much already," Mathilda said.

"And still he suffers. And still he burns."

"Perhaps it was meant to be."

This was the argument that Mathilda always came back to. That Pettio was meant to burn; that it was his fate to be in pain forever. This Tremaine would not accept. The gods had not done this; a man had done it to another man. It was not bad luck, but the malice of one man. To see that man was Tremaine's task today.

"My bag is packed. I kissed the children good-bye last night. I have everything, but my wife's good wishes," Tremaine said.

Mathilda glanced at him, then away, her eyes brimming with tears. "You are a fool, Tremaine. Not for what you are doing. But for thinking you don't have my love and good wishes." Tremaine took her hand, and she continued, "Kiss me once then go. Do what you have to, then return to me. I'll have it no other way."

Tremaine bent and kissed his wife.

He saddled his horse then rode north along the road to Greggitt. Weeds long since had overrun the path, but Tremaine had travelled it a hundred times since he'd left the town. No one lived there now, save Pettio. None of the townsfolk could stand the screaming, the constant shrill of the burning man. Greggitt had become a desolate town, even though it was still overlooked by Hospidar's castle.

Tremaine had been the last to leave, but he too had left. Even on the edge of town, through shuttered windows, Pettio's keening reached him. Even in Junston, where he now lived and prospered as a chicken wholesaler, the sound of it reached him in dreams. In the dreams, Pettio sometimes called his name.

He had tried to douse the flames in a number of ways. Barrels of water poured across the ground, but the water was never enough. In winter, he had tried to pile snow around Pettio, but the flame was so hot that the ice melted, running off in rivulets that froze again ten feet away. He had hired three strong-backed deaf men to divert a stream into the town square. But after two weeks of back-breaking work, the stream's water boiled away as it touched Pettio's feet.

Tremaine had tried petitioning the Wizard's Guild, but to no avail. They refused to sanction one of their own. Nor could any cleric help. The prayers to gods would not free Pettio from his curse. His liege lord, the Lord of Greggitt, did not answer Tremaine's letters.

For thirty years, Tremaine had tried to douse his friend Pettio. Nothing had worked. This would be his last trip to Greggitt. After this, he could do no more.

Pettio's screaming reached him far down the valley trail. Another person might assume it was the cry of a hawk in the skies, until it failed to stop. Then that person would assume it was the wind. But on a windless day, a person might think it was some demon caught in the rocks or the trees.

But Tremaine knew the sound well: the cry of a tortured soul.

The sound grew as he neared the edge of the village. The horse began to nicker and pull, and finally Tremaine stopped and secured him to a fallen log.

He continued on foot, and before long reached the ruined smithy. The main street took a turn after that, and then another, and then the flame of Pettio's pyre was in sight.

Tremaine's step faltered for a moment and he rested his hands on his knees, breathing heavily as if from exertion, though he was not tired. Slowly he stood upright and continued.

Pettio stood, rooted in place as he had been since the day the curse had been cast, in the center of the town square. His arms were raised above his head, and his entire body was shrouded in orange-red flame. The top of the flame reached twenty feet in the air, as high as it ever had.

His back was to Tremaine, but Tremaine knew that he would be able to make out the rictus-set features of Pettio's face from the other side, the 'O' of the mouth as it screamed eternally.

He stopped twice more before reaching Pettio, though it was only a hundred yards from his first sight of him. Tremaine had made this walk a thousand times, but it was never easy. He edged around the heat of the pyre, coming to face his friend.

"Pettio!" he called. "Pettio, can you hear me?" Tremaine tried every time, but never had he been given any indication that Pettio heard him. "It's Tremaine. I've come.... I'm going to beg Hospidar to lift this spell. I'm going to plead for you, Pettio." The scream remained undiminished. "Wish me luck, my friend."

Tremaine turned, his gaze on the heights of the overlooking castle. The wizard had remained, while all the townsfolk had fled. To him, the screams must be music.

The climb was easy, though the path was covered in weeds and scrub. Finally he reached the great iron door of the gate. The knocker was

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shaped like an eagle's head. After a pause, he seized it and slammed it against the door a dozen times.

"Answer your door, Hospidar! I am here to speak to you! I am here!"

The pounding boomed, and he was suddenly frightened by his own boldness. He was foolhardy to confront a wizard in his castle. His fate would be worse than Pettio's. But before he could turn around and disappear down the path, the door slowly opened inward.

At first Tremaine thought the door had opened by itself, but then he saw a tiny man, but a foot tall, dressed in the coat and pantaloons of a butler, pulling the door open.

"I'm...." Tremaine's voice cracked and he started again. "I'm here to see Hospidar the Wizard."

The little man nodded and waved him inside. As Tremaine passed the butler, he saw that the thing was blind and dumb, its eyes and mouth sown shut with thread. It made the little man look like a rag doll come to life.

The butler shut the door and led Tremaine through a huge hall, lit with candelabras inset in the walls. Windows were covered by thick drapes and only scraps of light reached the room. The candle flames flickered as he passed them.

The little man mounted a staircase, taking each step as if it were a small cliff. Tremaine felt he should lift the butler to the top of the stairs, but he dared not do anything for fear of offending the homunculus. They climbed three flights of steps, Tremaine following slowing after the straining butler.

At the top of the third flight, the little man led him to a library at the end of a hall. Gesturing him inside, the butler disappeared into the shadows.

The library was empty and dark, covered on all sides with shelves of books. The room smelled dank as if some of the books were moldy. Tremaine stood for a moment then crossed to the small shuttered window on the far wall of the room. He reached to open the shutter, and perhaps let some clean air into the room, when a voice sounded behind him.

"Leave the window closed."

Tremaine whirled, his heart pounding.

Hospidar stood before him dressed in dark robes. His face was pale, the veins apparent under the skin giving him a blue tinge. In the dark room, it seemed as if the wizard was only a head and hands.

"What do you want? A spell, a potion? For revenge, love, profit? But I must warn you my prices are high."

The wizard didn't know why Tremaine was there, and this heartened him. Hospidar was not prescient; he was not all-powerful.

"I've come for none of those things, sir," Tremaine whispered. He coughed, cleared his throat. "I've come for mercy."

"Mercy? Mercy? I have no spells for mercy," Hospidar said, waving his hands in dismissal. "What do you really want?"

"I want you to lift the spell off of Pettio."

"Who? You want a curse removed? Go see a witch."

"Pettio is the burning man. The man you set aflame."

The wizard's eyes grew wide. "You come to beg for mercy for the man who led my wife to betrayal?" He raised his arm above his head and fire flared at the knuckles of each finger, coming together in a crackling ball of flame.

Tremaine's legs buckled and he fell back, his mind blackened with fear. He was certain he was about to be set aflame just as Pettio had been.

Hospidar advanced on him, the ball of fire growing, and Tremaine crawled away until his back touched a bookshelf. To spend eternity in the pain of fire filled him with horror, to be like Pettio....

The terror inside Tremaine fled his brain. Instead he felt guilt. The pity with which he viewed his friend was apparent to him now. Perhaps it was his fault, his goading, that had set Pettio to his doom. But he would not cower before this wizard now, when it was Pettio's last chance.

Tremaine pulled his legs beneath him and stood. He faced Hospidar, resolute.

"I am here to ask you to free Pettio from this curse. He has burned and suffered for thirty years."

The wizard, shorter than Tremaine, was taken aback by the change in demeanor of his guest. The fire at his fingertips disappeared and he stepped away.

"No. He and Gwena have not suffered enough."

"Gwena suffers too? You did the same to your wife? You are a cruel man."

Hospidar waved a dismissive hand. "I did not do the same, but she will suffer as long. And that sentence has only begun. They are cursed for a thousand years."

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Tremaine was angry. "How dare you pass sentence for two who loved? Who are you to be their judge? Do you put yourself above the gods?"

"It is punishment for betrayal." Though he shouted, Hospidar was the one who retreated.

"It is injustice. There is no punishment for love."

"Gwena was my wife. She left me, a great wizard, for a commoner, for a low man. She betrayed my trust. And I as her husband have the right to set the pain." Hospidar tapped his chest. "I am the aggrieved party."

"Do you hear his screams in the night? Do you hear the hoarseness of his throat, a throat that never closes in his pain? I do. Do you hear your wife's cries as well? Or are your ears closed to the pain that you have meted out?"

"Gwena does not scream," Hospidar said softly. "She does not move. But she hears his screams."

"End the curse, Hospidar. End the curse now."

"No," he cried, and he fled the room. "Never."

Tremaine followed him as he ran down the hall and disappeared into another stairwell. This stairwell was circular and wound upward into the heights of a castle tower. Ahead of him, the patter of Hospidar's feet drew him on.

"You must free them, Hospidar. They have paid a hundred times over."

At the top of the tower, the stair opened into a cold room with covered windows on every wall. On a bed lay Gwena, the wizard's wife. She lay with eyes open, but she did not move. Hospidar knelt at the edge of the bed, his body shuddering with sobs.

Tremaine, his breath hanging in the air, approached. Ice clung to Gwena's face and skin. Frost coated her open eyes. She was frozen.

Tremaine listened and heard, even at the height of the tower, even through the heavily draped windows, the keening of Pettio. The burning man's screams reached Gwena's ears as she lay frozen.

"I can't. I can't," whispered Hospidar.

"You must."

"I can't. I can't."

Tremaine's hand gripped Hospidar's shoulder. "You will free them."

"I've tried. But I can't free them." He stood then, and Tremaine saw that the wizard's eyes shed tears. "The spell is too strong, for I cast it in my own anger and drew from places in my soul that are closed to me now. I worked my most powerful magic that day, and this is what I have done."

He hung his head. "I have tried to break the spell, but it will not come lose."

Tremaine stood in the cold tower room, his fists balled. He nodded then, his face clouded, his throat dry. Then he turned and walked down the tower stairs, through the hall and into the sun. Its heat might have burned his face for all he knew, but the cold of the tower room would not leave him.

He walked the path down from the castle, into the town, and to the town square. He neared Pettio as close he could, so close that his face stung and his eyes teared.

"Pettio. I have failed you. You will burn for a thousand years!" His voice broke. "I'm so sorry, Pettio. I goaded you on. I did this to you." The tears evaporated from his skin. Tremaine knelt.

"I know you can't hear me, but Gwena lives too under a curse as fierce as yours. She's in the castle, in the highest tower. She hears you scream."

Tremaine stood. "I'm sorry, my friend."

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He returned just once, a year later, after the engraver had finished the marking Tremaine commissioned. The stone was a letter to Pettio, and it told him of Gwena's curse. Tremaine took it to the town square, pulled up a dozen cobbles, and placed the stone before Pettio. Perhaps it would last a thousand years.

Tremaine never returned, for the screams were too much for him, though he heard them still in his dreams.

#

On one of those rare occasions when they were allowed out of the convent, Galea and her classmates went to see the Burning Man in the town square. The catechism room, in which Galea memorized the prayers and songs with the other refugee converts, was stifling in summer, and all were glad to have a few hour's reprieve. And the Burning Man was of interest to all of them.

Bena had whispered to her in the night from the next bunk that the Man was a demon trapped by the god Josit; on three days a year: Ovon's Day, Springtide, and Demon's Eve, he was released from his spot to hunt for bad children. This story had terrified Galea for many nights, but Ovon's Day came and went with no children showing up missing, though more than one, especially bossy

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Tulla, deserved such a fate as the Burning Man might exact.

Other children said that the Man was just a statue covered in pitch and set aflame each night by the novices, and that the screaming was just wind pumped from the dungeon of Josit's Temple. Or that the Man was a wizard who had miscalculated his spells, resulting in his own fiery death.

Among her class, Galea's white hair and pale skin set her apart. Her family was from a province far north of Jositon, and had been captured by a roving band of Converters. Her father, who she could vaguely recall, had been slain immediately, but her mother and she had been sent south for formal conversion and training. Galea's mother had died on the trip, and since then Galea had been brought up in the convent next to the Temple.

They were all refugee converts, and yet Galea kept herself aloof from all of them, too wary to accept even the smallest gesture of friendship. It led to a reputation as a snob, which she hated, but she was too scared to do anything about it. She walked at the back of the small procession, Cleric Furth leading, the converts trailing.

Galea had often seen the glow of the Burning Man's pyre, and heard the scream of his aching lungs, through the window of the dormitory. But never had she been allowed near it; rarely were the converts unsupervised. Her first clear sight of it came as they turned a corner onto Center Street, edged with Temple-sanctioned vending stalls, which led to the town center.

The Burning Man's flame was the source of a plume of dark smoke, as if from a cooking fire built by someone who had never known the scarcity of wood in a northern winter. As she neared, Galea made out the curl of the flame, ten feet above the Burning Man's head. She could not clearly distinguish his facial features, except for his mouth, which remained open, exhaling a carrying moan of pain and torture.

"You, children!" cried Cleric Furth. "Away from here, now."

A clump of street boys scattered at the reproach from the cleric, and Galea saw that they carried sticks on which hung fruits and sausages. They were using the heat of the Burning Man to cook their food.

"Heretical urchins! Wait till I get you in catechism class! I'll remember you!"

The class bunched up behind the cleric, ignoring the boys, staring instead at the Burning Man. Galea, so enthralled by the sight, edged within

touching distance of her classmates, ignoring them for the moment.

"You stink," someone whispered, pushing her away. It was Tulla, the class bully. "Get away from me, you convert."

Galea couldn't understand why Tulla called her that; they all were converts.

Cleric Furth clapped his hands. "Girls. Attention. I will now tell the tale of the Burning Man.

"When the People of Josit had come from the south to this land, they found that it was good, and Josit told them to build a great city here.

"Only one among them thought that there might be better land elsewhere. He had heard stories of lands where greater gods dwelt, whose people lived lives of decadence, and he wished that from Josit as well.

"He said to the Cleric, 'Let us move on. There are better lands than these.'

"The Cleric replied, 'This land Josit has given us. This town will be called Jositon.'

"The man said, 'This land is cold in winter, hot in summer, and the rains will wash away our crops in spring.'

"'Josit will provide for us.'

"'How can Josit control the weather?'

"The Cleric was very unhappy with the man. 'You doubt the power and will of Josit. You must sing the Seventeenth Psalm, The Breadth of Josit's Will, for three weeks in the town square at sunset.'

"'I will not do this thing.' And he disobeyed the Cleric's order. Instead of singing the Psalm, he stood with people gathered around him and told them that they must follow him to a better land.

"The timid and weak of heart were swayed, and so Josit punished him. The man was set aflame for his insolence, and today he still burns.

"Remember this story, for Josit is powerful and will not allow disobedience."

The square was quiet for a moment, save for the crackle of the flame.

Then Bena asked, "How long will he burn?"

"Forever!" shouted Cleric Furth, and the girls shrunk away in fright.

Someone else said, "Will Josit not forgive him?"

"Never! The Burning Man made his choice."

Galea spoke without thinking, "It seems unfair."

The children turned at her voice, perhaps unsure of who had spoken. The Cleric glared.

"You do not see the justice of the Burning Man's penance because you are a weak convert.

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Come to my office tomorrow at dawn for additional instruction."

Galea's throat constricted. "Instruction" from Furth in private was never that. He would use the strap on her naked back, and then touch her where she did not wish to be touched.

But she could do nothing more than stare back at the priest, and fear what was to come.

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Bena had a dream of a snake encircling a mountain, crushing it to rubble, and the priests proclaimed that the snake was Josit and the mountain the Infidels, and that she had been truly confirmed into the faith. She went to live with a cobbler's family and promised that she would come and visit them, but never did.

One by one, the other girls had dreams or visions that were interpreted as signs of confirmation, and slowly the catechism class shrunk. Galea had dreams, but they were of fire and pain. Sometimes she dreamed of the Burning Man, calling her name, telling her to run.

She told Furth her dreams, hoping that they were enough to justify confirmation, but Furth always said the dreams were too vague, and Josit had no power in fire. He would beat her then, or touch her, so she stopped telling him of the dreams.

Soon the last girl had been confirmed, and Galea was alone in the long dormitory. Furth called her to his study immediately.

"You are not taking well to the teaching of Josit," he said, removing his cloak, displaying the white of his belly.

"I don't think he wants me," Galea said, not caring if this brought a slap.

"Josit wants all his children, his sheep."

"I still dream of the Burning Man. It means Josit does not want me," she said. She looked away from the naked priest, at the square of sunlight in the middle of the bookcase. "I'm wicked."

"Well, you are still useful to his flock," said Josit. "Even if you are not of his flock. Now kneel."

Galea did not yield to the hand on her shoulder. "No," Galea said, her stomach churning at her rebellion. "If Josit does not want me, then I'll leave."

"Leave? Nonsense. You are a convert. Now, do the only thing you do reasonably well."

"I won't," she said, and she turned, pulling open the huge door into the study. She dashed from the room, and behind her Furth yelled.

But he did not reach and clutch her as she expected he would. Daring a glance behind her, she saw that Furth had not emerged from the study. He was naked after all, and that gave her a few moments head start.

Galea ran through the halls, past a line of startled brothers and sisters in grey initiate smocks. She ran down the stairs from the priests' quarters to the inner gate.

The guard there did nothing to stop her from running through the courtyard. Nor did the two monks at the outer gate. They watched her with bland eyes, a vacant look that frightened her.

No one moved to stop her, and she suddenly wondered why she had not run away long before. It had never seemed possible for a failed convert.

The street she took led to the town center and there before her was the Burning Man. She stopped abruptly, her legs aching.

Through the flame, he seemed to look at her, to see her.

"I dream of you," she said. "I see you burning, I hear you scream." She held her arms out, a reflection of the Burning Man's pose, and stepped forward, letting the heat of the flame wash over her.

Galea's cheeks stung, but she took another step forward. The wind sucked at her dress, urged her to come further.

"All the others dreamed of Josit, but I dreamed of you. You who are a victim of Josit's justice. What does it mean?"

"Galea!"

She didn't hear Furth, until he placed a hand upon her shoulder.

"It's a hundred beads for you tonight, young lady!" he shouted, spinning her around. "You will pay for this."

"Why won't Josit punish me? Why won't he set me ablaze?"

"That is for heretics, not naughty little girls."

"Is it for priests who touch little girls?" she asked.

Furth stumbled back. "Come with me, you filthy child."

"No. I want Josit to punish me. I want him to set me aflame. Now." She screamed at the sky. "Rot in Hell, Josit!" For not wanting her, for not wanting her mother and father, for letting a creature like Furth exist.

Wagging a finger, Furth said, "Do not test your god, child. Or you will face the consequence."

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"Burn me now, Josit. Burn me now." She held her face to the sun for a moment, then dropped her arms. "Josit doesn't want me. So I'm leaving."

She turned and ran past the Burning Man, leaping through the curl of his flame, letting it cleanse her.

Behind her, as she ran across the square, she heard a scream. Turning she saw Furth writhing in pain, his tunic aflame. The Burning Man's hand had snagged the collar of his garment. The Burning Man had saved her.

Galea turned and ran.

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A hundred years later, the cult of Josit had disappeared, and the Burning Man was alone with his screams. Perhaps a woodsman or farmer happened upon the crumbled town, but the ghostly keening drove them away.

After another hundred years, a family of hedge magicians used the Burning Man's town square as a winter home. They cooked their food by his heat, built a shanty villa around him, and lived there a dozen years until the oldest child caught the shack aflame while he was playing with fire.

A great warrior and inventor used the Burning Man's heat to fill a hundred silk balloons. He used the balloons to found a small empire that crumbled within his lifetime.

Perhaps if somewhere had watched the flame of the Burning Man over the course of his sentence, they might have seen the flame dwindle and flicker, like a candle which had come to the end of its wick. But the Burning Man burned for a thousand years, while the people around him burned far more quickly.

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His foot slipped free from the dirt. Pettio fell and he rolled, patting the flame, covering himself with dust that sizzled and sparked.

"Is it done?" he yelled. "Is it done? Yet why do I still burn?"

Though the flame no longer rose high into the air, and though his feet were now free, the heat blazed along his arms and legs, wrapped itself around his chest, and snuggled within his seared lungs.

He stood, his muscles straining. He was free, but still he burned. Pettio stumbled, then caught himself by a sapling that had grown nearby. In his

grip, the trunk of the tree smoldered and caught fire.

He jumped away, falling against a pile of wood and rusty scrap. The wood was dry and caught flame immediately. He stood in the midst of the bonfire, shaking in anger, until the fire had consumed everything around him. He bore the anger and the pain, as he had for a thousand years, with the vision of Gwena hovering before his eyes.

He was not free of the curse. It had merely changed.

But in the night, he began to walk. Through the deserted crumbled landscape. Bits of walls of some long decayed town still stood. Behind him, a trail of burning footprints marked his path.

He avoided what he could, trees, brush that might burn. And wandered through the night.

At dawn Pettio reached a brook, a stream of clear, cool water. Without thought he stepped into it, lay himself flat, letting the water flow across his blazing body.

Relief cleansed his mind. For the first time in a thousand years, the pain ceased.

Though the water boiled in the eddies between his legs and in his armpits, it still flowed around him, bringing cessation from the flame.

He did not move for three days.

But then he saw below him the collection of dead fish near the edge of the water. The heat from his body had killed the fish, and Pettio felt sorrow.

He stood, and the pain rushed back to him. Yet he did not lay back into the water. Pettio left the stream and followed the charred steps he had left in his walk there. He returned to the town square.

But this time, through the pain and the veil of flames, he observed the landscape. Though the people had come and gone, though the town had risen and fallen, the land stayed the same.

Hills he recognized from his youth. The mountain into which the wizard Hospidar had built his castle still hung above the old town site.

The sight of it brought forth memories from a millennium before. He remembered Tremaine; he remembered his friend speaking to him through the flame.

Pettio stood in the center of the town square and looked up at the castle. Then he looked down, falling to his knees. He brushed at the sand and dirt, digging until he found the stone tablet that Tremaine had left for him.

He read it, then began to climb the broken and craggy steps to the castle.

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He clutched the castle door, hugging it, and whatever magic that had kept it intact yielded against the fire of his body. It burned for three days, but Pettio waited. He did not sleep, nor did he eat. The curse had blessed him with no distractions save the pain.

Pettio pushed upon the remains of the door and entered the castle. Everything within, the furniture, the books, the drapes, and the wall tapestries were rotted away, just piles of dust. The castle was empty and silent. Nothing else would burn there.

He found the steps to the tower and climbed them unhurriedly. One thousand years had made him a patient man, but he ran the last twenty steps.

The door was ajar.

Within, Gwen lay upon a bed of crystal. Elephantine feet of ice ran from her body to the floor. Pettio thought she might be dead, but her head turned as he entered.

"Pettio."

"I am here for you. I was delayed, my love."

She smiled, and he knelt beside her.

His hand touched hers, and the flame licked the ice, quenched.

END

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