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Part 1

Sir Severus le Brewse

I Severus at Work

[Here we learn of the prowess and character of Sir Severus le Brewse, one of King Arthur's least known but most underrated knights.]

Strong ... for ... such ... a small ... beast, thought Sir Severus le Brewse, as the Father of All Adders wrapped itself ever more tightly about him, squeezing the air from his body.

Normally, Sir Severus did not find himself in such a predicament as this one: though he was brave, he was also prudent about battles. But this snake, though poisonous as are all its brood, stretched to a mere twenty feet long, nothing that would normally take him more than moments and a few easy swings of his excellent sword, so Severus had taken no special care. He had been lured into gentleness by the unusually warm, humming Scottish day with a breeze barely rustling the heather, and had found himself admiring the snake for its age, vigor, and dignity. When Severus confronted it, this serpent did not slink off into the grass or rear up to try to frighten him; rather, recognizing Severus for the kind of foe he was, it puffed a couple of times, realized it had a life-and-death battle ahead, and, fixing Sir Severus with its old, cold, oval eye, glided toward him in a stately coil.

The beast showed such an apparent intelligence that Sir Severus was even moved to consider reasoning with it, something like: look here, you simply must move from this place and take your brood with you, since you are endangering the local settlements, and we can't have you eating any more carpenters, now can we? Severus had even dropped his guard and opened his mouth to speak, since he was a fair man by nature, but as he had done so, the hoary serpent had with stunning rapidity leaped toward him, wrapped itself around him, and begun to squeeze, not a tactic typical of a beast of such age and wisdom.

Now Sir Severus found his arms gripped tight to his sides, his blood beginning to fill up his head and his feet, his life at stake as he stood eye-to-eye with a monster that realized it might very well have gotten the better of him. The serpent seemed almost to smile.

Severus realized he had but one chance to save his life — barring the unlikely appearance of several talented bowmen from the closest village — and he knew his success would depend entirely on timing, so he bored his own gaze back into the serpent's eye, tried desperately not to faint from lack of air, and concentrated on the beast's movements.

The snake flicked its tongue once, twice, tasting the air, debating tactics, then opened wide to expose its fangs, poised, and struck.

As Severus felt the forward movement, he ducked his chin to his breastbone, allowing the snake to strike itself into the hard steel above the nose-piece of his helmet, which it did with a resounding clang.

Fighting off the stun from the snake's blow, he looked up to see the fuzzy eyes of the beast, who had never before taken a noseful of steel. Seizing the instant, Severus pushed off with his feet as hard as he could and sank his own teeth right into the serpent's throat.

After that, the fight had gone somewhat more easily, though Severus had had to shake off the nearly irresistible urge to forget what he was doing and spit out a mouthful of adder. First stunned, then hurt, then bleeding, finding himself for the first time in his life on the wrong end of a vicious bite, the serpent had begun to uncoil so as to beat a hasty if indecorous retreat. Severus extricated himself from the unwinding coils, recovered his sword, and struck at the fleeing snake. The most difficult part was chasing down the thing to kill, so that he could return to the settlement to assure the townspeople that they were safe and that they might have reasonable hope of attracting another carpenter. Ascertaining that his task was done and that that particular serpent would feed no more, Severus turned down the hill, found, after a time, Courage, his horse, and in the just gathering evening chill rode for the village.

Later, having delivered his message and recounted the battle to the modest and barely appreciative applause of the locals, having suffered a glass or two of the best local ale, and having encouraged the people to call upon him again should any other such beast trouble them, Severus felt an unusual urge to make his way once more to London. Normally he would pay the obligatory visit to court when King Arthur stayed in the North at Carlisle and would avoid the greater hurly-burly of London, but a voice in the back of his brain urged him south — such voices one often does better to deny, though we seldom can. Allowing Courage a nice rampant pose to impress the locals, he prepared to speed off, but some lingering folk interrupted his plan for an impressive exit.

"Why don't you rest a bit first?" said an old woman. "You look a wee brookit and chitterin' from the cauld. Did yoo fight tha' adder all by yoursel'?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hoo come?"

"Surely, that's simply the way it's done."

"Wouldna it be easier for twa or three knights to figh' the serpent taegither?"

"We can't do that. Each knight's quest is his own. It's a matter of duty and honor."

"Soonds daft, if you ask me."

Sir Severus capitulated, admitting that perhaps it was daft, but then no one had shown up to help anyway and, in practice as well as theory, no one is likely

to. Politely resisting some of the woman's haggis but forcing down one more draft of ale, he accepted bread, dried meat and fruit, and some apple cider from the townsfolk. A farmer gave him some oats, which he resisted trying himself, but instead gave to his horse. Then Severus took leave.

As he mounted Courage, Severus turned to some of the local Elders. "You might well prepare some of your young men, sort of train them in case one of those serpents appears again. It's rather a continuing battle, you know, against death and darkness and all that sort of thing. I could return sometime to help and test them, if you'd like. I do occasionally offer seminars. If we could just collect a number of boys and a number of serpents, we could really accomplish something here, though you must be careful of trying anything without me or some other knight to supervise, at least at first." Not a particularly rousing speech with all its qualifiers, and indeed he'd offered it half-heartedly, knowing they wouldn't follow his advice ...

"Maybe we'll start with one, and go on from there," an old man replied warily, scratching his bearded chin.

"Right, capital," Severus mumbled, just a bit disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm, but not entirely sorry to avoid any definitive responsibility. He wondered, though, if the man meant one boy or one serpent.

He rode for some time and thought about what the woman had said.

Yes, Severus agreed, sometimes expediency must dictate the method and approach to battle, but then what would be the use of one's becoming a knight and following one of his favorite pastimes: errantry, the wandering search for adventures by which he nearly defined himself? Knighthood meant more than getting the job done; it meant a way of thinking and a way of living, honor, service, self-sufficiency, detachment from the world's comforts, and, usually, suffering one of his favorite pleasures, unrequited love — Severus wasn't quite sure if requited love would be any better or not. And errantry too had its other rewards: sunshine, fresh air, and, normally, the quiet of the road with occasional adventures thrown in for variety. Often one felt glad finally to be alone and to make one's own decisions, even a knight employed by so great a king as Arthur. Right?

For instance, Severus recalled the time he had spent weeks following a rumor all the way to the backwoods of Ireland that the legendary King of Boars, Twrch Trwyth, had returned and was rambling about the countryside. Then he was especially glad to have been traveling alone. Sir Severus, the knight of all knights who best loved to battle with beasts natural or enchanted, left no path untrodden in his search, and he finally found the ancient boar napping on a lonely hillock near Galway. Being a sporting sort, Severus had waited till the boar woke — losing sleep himself in the meantime — and when the beast poked open a wary eye, spotted him, and tore off down the hill, Severus maintained

hot pursuit for nearly two weeks till he finally cornered the boar in a cave outside of Cork. By that time Twrch Trwyth simply collapsed from exhaustion; he was older now than the tireless young beast that had swum the eternal seas and left generations of young heroes stumbling in his tracks or his wake. Severus had leaped from his nearly-ruined horse's back and prepared to cut the animal's head from its body. The boar simply lay down at Severus' feet and looked at him as if to say, go ahead and kill me if you must, because I'm just too old and tired to keep up this chase anymore — I won't even fight you, so you'll get no glory out of me. At that, Severus had felt as though he had betrayed some natural trust in running the dignity out of a venerable and honorable — and very old — adversary, so he simply got back on his horse and rode away, though he did leave the beast a bowl of water before departing.

Severus regained his energy in a couple of days and never heard of the boar again, but his horse took nearly a month to forgive him. As he looked back on that adventure, he realized that, had he not been alone, any other knight would gladly have killed the boar and made his place in history and legend and earned thereby a lifetime supply of invitations to speak at banquets, and that would have been a kind of tragedy in which Severus would not wish to play a part.

Such reminiscence, accompanied by the rhythmic clapping of his horse's hooves, sent Severus into a kind of reverie of memory, and he comfortably slipped into daydreams as that excellent steed, Courage, trotted on into the gloaming, exploring his own waking dreams of good oats, prancing fillies, short, successful battles, and then more fillies and more oats. Severus thought of long summer days of riding, seeing all the beautiful sights of the world, hills and dales, tors and tarns, of apple trees full in the fall, of sleeping warm under a pile of furs when gentle snow covered the ground soft and smooth as samite, of the green shoots of spring, of cooking a simple supper under a May moon, and of his own love, Lilava. Though he feared she might be too wise and beautiful for him in fact, why should such problems interrupt a good daydream, to which he felt certainly entitled given recent successful adventures?

Thinking of Lilava, Severus recalled the tournament he had attended at her bidding in Bath on the previous summer's solstice. He had little joy in tournaments, much to the amusement of his fellow knights, such as Sir Dinadan who teased him mercilessly, but on the first day he had done his best, and Lilava had told him he sat his horse well, which he did.

Rather above average height, above average girth in the legs and shoulders, and slim in the waist, Severus, while not of the height and weight of Sir Lancelot or Sir Tristram, looked a bold figure on horseback. He had remarkably strong bones and elastic sinews, and when he felt moved, his muscles had a quickness that would have rivaled a mongoose, if anyone in those regions had known about mongooses to put him to the test. While we're at it, he had thick, almost

black hair, kept his face shaven after the Roman fashion when he could, and had iron-bright blue-gray eyes that would occasionally make an inexperienced girl swoon until she learned who he was, realized he wasn't a tournament-champion type, and felt silly for swooning over a man who fought only with monsters when so many other popular young knights were still available for flirting.

Lilava would only have urged him to attend the tournament in the absence of Lancelot — she did her best to keep them apart, to avoid their hurting each other. With the great knight absent, Severus took second place on the first day of fighting, behind only Sir Gawain, of whom he also tended to stay clear, since he was the king's nephew, and one does better not to anger the king if one wants to preserve his right to choose quests — and I have said, Severus preferred to select his quests judiciously.

On the second day he did rather better yet. Getting somewhat caught up in the melee, he actually walloped Gawain off his horse with a splendid sword-stroke, not having recognized him. Angered, Gawain refused the hand Severus offered to help him rehorse, and then he spent the rest of the afternoon chasing our hero amongst the field, until once more Severus, hearing a horse bear down on him, turned and without thinking struck Gawain to the ground again. While the queen laughed, the king didn't find quite so funny the indignities wrought upon his nephew, so once again Severus won second place, that day to Sir Bors, who, having returned alive with brilliant stories from the Grail Quest, was a great favorite of the court anytime.

That evening Severus received a far better award than the king could offer — besides of course absolute freedom in choosing adventures — a kiss on the cheek from Lilava, followed by her broad, sincere smile showing her amazing white teeth and her firm assurance that he had easily outperformed every knight on the field, including the winner.

On the third day of the tournament, caught up in the pleasure of Lilava's kiss, Severus had fought without much conviction, in fact quite perfunctorily, poking now and then at someone with the blunt end of his spear just to keep him at a safe distance, and so, not paying attention, he had nearly been thrust from his horse by a young knight whom no one even knew but who caught Severus unawares. He merely turned and congratulated the youth on a fine attack, but when the fellow, feeling he must press his advantage, refused to accept the lauds and back off, Severus circled him with some astonishing horsemanship — one must indeed praise Courage for that as well — finally grabbed him by the collar, lifted him from his horse, and calmly deposited him among the spectators far enough away that the king couldn't see his ignominy.

When the crowd started to taunt him, Severus made a few weak sword strokes here and there for form's sake, but when the day ended, he won no prize, and

Guinevere — not nearly so bad a sport as many of the old tales make her out — had to talk Arthur out of taking away Severus' prize from the day before.

When he retired from the field, Severus had thought to find Lilava again and get perhaps another kiss, since the first one had shown such promise, but he couldn't find her at all, and believe me he took his time looking. When later he gave up and rode to his tent, he found only a note from her, thanking him for his achievements on her behalf, except for those of the third day, which ended up unexceptional. She mentioned how glad she had felt to see him, hoped he felt the same, remarked on what good weather they'd been having, hoping it would continue, and wished him a nice weekend. Severus' eyes raced to the end of the letter hoping to find the closing salutation "Love," knowing it didn't necessarily mean that, but hoping for it anyway, but to his disappointment, he found only "Your sincere and devoted friend": sincere? devoted? What could one make of such words?

He stayed for the first night's party to celebrate the tournament winners. He had even managed to calm and congratulate Gawain, who had taken "First Place Overall" and thus found himself recompensed for any ill use. He had a drink or two with some of the younger knights who showed an interest in questing and errantry and monsters, and some of them who particularly loved stories even questioned him and listened for a bit, but Severus took no great pleasure in strong drink or overmuch talk of his own achievements, so he gradually drifted away to a silent corner to sit and brood over Lilava's letter, which gave him quite a deal more pleasure than all the noble company. Early the next morning he left, thanking the stewards who had tended the knights. Courage, who suffered a disdain of tournament horses, had felt as happy as his man to ride on.

Such memories filled his thoughts as he rode. Though Courage hardly took the trouble to remember the tournament at all and had his doubts about Lilava's intentions, Severus felt melancholic pleasure in the virtue a knight must surely gain from doing great deeds for unrequited love, and one could hardly have wished for a more beautiful or accomplished love, unrequited or not, than the enchanting enchantress Lilava.

And so he rode on, enjoying that aching, pleasant tension of the errant knight: joy in the presence of the beloved lady versus the solitary quiet of the road, either punctuated by occasional adventures.

II Lilava

[Here appears a brief history and background of Lilava the beautiful sorceress, of whom Severus as yet knew little.]

Lilava came from an island in the Middle-earth Sea, born to a noble family, but not a royal one. From childhood she showed a great affinity for learning, and though her culture hadn't made significant advancements in any technical sense — that is, they felt no particular eagerness to make mechanical war on their neighbors — when she had learned all her parents could teach her, they shifted her on to Heleve, the most knowledgeable woman in the village, who in time left her with the man who governed the island, who in turn took her to the wisest person on the island, whom we would call a physician or magician, depending on the translation.

From her Lilava learned such arts of healing and manipulation of natural substances as her folk had acquired and felt willing to share with one another. She also learned how to buffer events — Lilava didn't like the term magic. Of course no human can fully control or even understand how circumstances grow into eventualities, but in their proper use the powers of herbs and minerals as well as that of speech and movement plus intense focusing of thought and will and muscle can in many instances adjust, subvert, or produce outcomes. One need only understand such activities' virtues, remain hopeful, and never expect too much.

Despite her propensity for study and lack of concern over the common worries of young people, such as her physical appearance, Lilava grew into a beautiful young lady, lithe of limb with enormous dark eyes and silky, flowing, night-black hair that tumbled over her shoulders and down to the middle of her back, when she didn't take the time to tie it in a scruffy knot behind her head, which was seldom, and when she bothered to wash, which happened rather less often. Because of her concentration on her work and because of the self-protective aspects of the arts she'd learned, her folk worried little about Lilava's safety, and when a trading ship accidentally came aground on their shores not long after her entry into adulthood, Lilava departed with it, intending to seek out the distant island home of the woman who had once instructed Heleve, a representative of the Order of Enchantresses, so called to discourage the curious (but not the courageous and devoted) from disturbing them unnecessarily in their study.

She left quietly and hurriedly, as Lilava's folk always counseled travelers foreign and domestic to do, so as not to arouse the Chimaera, that worst-of-beasts, which stalked and haunted the land, falling into occasional fitful sleep that, though it produced minor earthquakes, allowed the people to breathe and grow

food to store against the times of its waking. Without anyone's daring to mention a word of it for fear the Chimaera could hear a breath on bare breeze, everyone knew that Lilava hoped to find a means to rid them of their monster. Now in some places a monster may actually increase the tourist trade, but in most places one does better without them, and a Chimaera, about which we'll learn more later, has a particularly bad effect not only on the local economy, but also on everyone's mood, since one never knows what shape it will take or what form of destruction its nasty little mind will devise. Yes, at a safe distance one may say a Chimaera has a little mind, in the sense that it expands little beyond meditating means to cause suffering; in that particular application a Chimaera has a perfect genius.

Lilava did manage a quiet and safe departure, her greatest regret being that she had to leave behind her sister Liletta, a younger and perhaps even more beautiful version of Lilava, and after long searching and many adventures she found Kirkea, a queen among enchantresses. By dropping a few names, including that of her teacher, Heleve, and by sharing a few great jokes she'd picked up in her travels, she gained admittance and proved immediately the finest student with whom Kirkea had ever worked. She'd been born with talent and had acquired considerable skill already: combine a devoted student with an expert and willing teacher and good things happen. Among the advantages of studying with a master, Lilava found that time seemed to move more slowly on Kirkea's island, and so she practiced for some years while hardly aging a day, at least externally. Learning brings with it maturity, if one blends practice with theory, though without proper care it may even bring moroseness — not a good trait for an enchantress, unless she prefers to hear the term witch hissed as she passes. While a good enchantress doesn't take name-calling seriously, a bad witch may try — usually unsuccessfully — to turn the perpetrator into a salamander or something even worse.

Eventually, having spent several happy years on Kirkea's island, Lilava achieved all that she could by means of her own and her tutor's efforts, and since a small, minimally inhabited island hasn't the need for two enchantresses, while the rest of the world, particularly folk such as Sir Severus le Brewse, can find them absolutely, well, enchanting and often useful if not necessary, she caught the eye of some fishermen sailing by, received passage, and set her aim on new studies and new opportunities. Over the next months Lilava traveled to many lands, eventually arriving in Britain, and finding the place thoroughly green and (in those days) temperate and much to her liking, she settled in to stay for a bit, despite the fact that the islands had more than their share of enchantresses. For the most part they kept to themselves, and as each turned out to have different specialties, they seldom quarreled, and when they assembled for the occasional Convention, they always reaffirmed an agreement not to impinge on one an-

other's enchantments except to save a colleague or an innocent bystander in a pinch.

Lilava troubled the other sorceresses (some folk prefer that term to enchantress, particularly those who don't like the type) only occasionally, though of course she ached to learn what she could from them, but every profession has its protocol, so she visited them only briefly and with generous but unprepossessing gifts, asked innocuous questions and spoke little of herself, so that gradually she could add to her learning the little bits of their own arts that they willingly shared. You see, Lilava had the charm of being beautiful without acting beautiful, which won her the friendliness of many folk who would have dismissed her had she behaved in any way other than to make herself appear pleasantly unassuming.

On seeing Sir Lancelot for the first time, when she went to pay her respects to King Arthur's court, she did what women always did on seeing Lancelot for the first time: swoon. She quickly realized, though, that he was hands-off, being devoted to the Queen, even after having had a good fling with the Holy Grail. She knew immediately, too, that he could hardly help her solve her own problem, which was of course to find a knight who could help her rid her land of the Chimaera. Lancelot would never again willingly leave Queen Guinevere, and he wasn't exactly a monster specialist anyway, being in one sense Severus' opposite: Lancelot was a knight of human deeds. He performed great ones, glorious ones, astonishing ones, appalling ones, in all elements except holiness beyond the pale of all the heroes of that time, but though his deeds stretched the limits of human possibilities, they were always fully human deeds. That limitation made him fabulously famous and successful and had all the women fawning over him, but it made him rather sensitive and, more importantly to our tale, immaterial to Lilava's particular needs.

Having greeted the royalty and the fellowship with solemn dignity and some disappointment on her part — she would have liked a glimpse at Galahad as well, but he had by then ascended to Heaven — she was preparing to leave when a man passing by happened absent-mindedly to help her onto her horse, placing his hand beneath her shoe and lifting her quite easily into the saddle. The gentle off-handedness of his courtesy surprised her, to say the least, and when she thanked him, he merely muttered a "Pray, don't mention it" without even missing a step. He seemed not even to realize he had assisted, but merely to have done so as a matter of course.

Something of his touch, even of his hand to the bottom of her shoe, filled Lilava with anticipation, and when she called to him, he turned toward her a pair of iron-blue, distracted-looking eyes: he was Severus, and she immediately felt he might be the man to undertake her quest.

One cannot always trust such feelings — in fact one normally does well to shake them off as no more than romantic nonsense — but Lilava was neither a romantic nor a typical human being, rather a skilled and attentive enchantress, so she took note. She took the trouble to follow him, safely out of sight, for nearly a fortnight, observing his behavior and recording his quests. Over the course of the next two years, she wove her path in and out of his, making strictly detached observations while studying several other knights as well, just in case she might find a better candidate to tackle the Chimaera. To treat matters with strict fairness, I must say though that from the moment she saw Severus and felt his touch, she was rooting for him, since she found his manner reassuring and his countenance attractive — even the most enchanting enchantresses can't always eliminate such considerations, though from a safe and supercilious distance other people may think them petty.

Based on his beauty alone or even on his peerless war record, Lilava would have tried to recruit Lancelot to the task, and her thoughts often returned to that option — who isn't somewhat dazzled by fame? — but each time her good sense prevailed and she realized he didn't fit, nor despite his successes in the Grail Quest did Bors, nor did the hot-tempered and unpredictable though thoroughly skilled Gawain, who, I have it on the authority of one fine lady, was at least as attractive as Lancelot in his way. King Arthur had in his fighting youth slain the giant of St. Michael's Mount on his way to felling a good chunk of the late and weakening Roman empire, but he had retired from questing to rule his kingdom, and Guinevere never would have permitted him to undertake a quest for so beautiful a lady as Lilava (who had by then taken up the practice of carefully scrubbing herself, though still avoiding such customs as cheek-rouge) — odd how one tends to suspect others of one's own flaw. No other knight fit the bill. Even the well-traveled Sir Urry, who had come to Arthur's court to be healed of some terrible sword wounds by the greatest knight in the world — and of course Lancelot kindly obliged him and refrained in the celebratory tournament from sending him back home with more — and who, healed, declared himself healthy and eager for the most difficult adventure anyone could think of, couldn't have done it. No, Lilava became more and more convinced that Severus must serve, and she had come to feel sure that he would willingly do so. Of late, due to his successes and the subsequent scarcity of monsters about, she had heard him moaning to himself of the limited opportunities for monster specialists in those parts.

Lilava was not the sort to shirk detailed research, and therefore she traveled Britain from sea to sea to sea to sea, then went to Ireland and did the same, and Aran, Wight, the Orkneys, the Hebrides, and anywhere else she had heard of knights vacationing. She had finally come to spend most of her time following Severus' paces, about a day's ride behind, interviewing those for whom he

performed services to assess their level of satisfaction, checking corpses where she could find them, and even questioning beasts when he spared them, to determine whether he had done so out of cowardice or mercy (always the latter).

Eventually she rode a good deal closer than a day's distance, finally upon occasion even sleeping a mere valley away and, in a few instances when they ended a day's journey far from towns, even residing amidst some tolerable tree limbs above where he slept, to observe his resting habits or just to allow herself to fall asleep to the comforting sound of his steady, relaxed breathing — a good thing for her quest that neither of them snored.

If Lilava had been absorbed in herself as much as she was in her quest, she would have realized that in the increasing number of face-to-face meetings that took place between the two of them, Severus had warmed to her greatly. While preceding their first meeting he had unfortunately fallen into distraction, having just received from Arthur an assignment he didn't like, to defend a petty duke of the populous south who had more interest in acquiring and ruining lands by overbuilding than in kindly governing the locals, he did upon leaving find his thoughts flitting back to the — charming? — girl on the horse whom he had passed on his way out (he had in fact not noticed he had helped her up). On their second meeting he had recalled her to mind with little effort, and by their third meeting he felt thoroughly comfortable with her presence, though he requested no greater liberty than to call her “milady.” Gradually they had reached the point of passing beyond the weather and the “state of the kingdom question” in their conversations, and they had enjoyed occasional picnic lunches together. Picnics were easier to hold in those days of fewer people, more public lands, and no particular reliance on hot food, difficult to get or keep when one strayed from courts or substantial homes. By the time they had shared a dozen or so conversations and even a few sandwiches (invented a good deal earlier than our histories tell us), Severus had fallen quite in love with Lilava, to the point where he dared daydream about her as he rode and would even make up ballads about her, which he would sing to Courage as they rode along — the horse remained a tolerant if not appreciative critic. For her part Lilava had done her best not to fall in love, knowing that, given the business upon which she hoped to employ Severus, she had best not get so protective of him that she couldn't allow him to fight the Chimaera once she'd got him home. One can hardly blame her for having a practical side, a trait for which men have come to value women more greatly in ages since.

The “Lancelot question” took quite another turn one summer day as the two happened to be riding along together to the south coast where reports said some sort of curious seabeast had run aground: Severus not only killed troublesome beasts, but would on occasion go out of his way to save benign ones. As Severus had dismounted to fill Lilava's water bottle at a clean little stream,

Lilava had seen in the distance — she had among her many virtues miraculous eyesight at great distances — Lancelot astride his horse and riding fully armed directly toward them. A feeling of dire dread, she could not explain why, had nearly overcome her, and she had to keep herself from fainting with fear, an unusual feeling for one not given to faintness of heart. For no reason she immediately understood, gathering her wits she urged Severus to remount quickly and follow her rapidly into a nearby wood, where she exclaimed that she had heard something that sounded to her for all the world like a bear. No one had seen a bear in that place for ages, so Severus, partly fearing and partly hoping that some terrible monster had been ravaging the local folk, sped into the woods to defend anyone who needed defending.

Even a schoolchild knows what woods mean: places of danger and adventure, one avoids them rather than seeks them out, since they nearly always indicate trouble, at least in stories of knights and ladies, but in that case the woods may have saved a tragic and early ending to our story, for Severus, with a little help from Lilava, got them lost in the trees, and when Lancelot galloped by, only the distance of a cricket pitch or two away, Severus heard the hooves, but could not make out the direction from which they came or whether or not they had any connection with the bear or another monster, so he had merely to let them go by. After a couple hours of his fruitless searching, propounded by a spell of confusion that Lilava wrought with great self-control but with the expense of much energy on her part — and not to mention some rather good acting — they found their way out into a clearing on the other side of the wood, Lilava apologizing profoundly that she must have made a mistake, perhaps induced by too much exposure to the sun or by a hidden desire to see Severus at work — who doesn't like to see how another makes a living?

Severus felt uncomfortable with her explanations, but he let that go when Lilava urged him that they should hurry south on their quest, and they did in fact arrive just in time to save an enormous fish-like creature with intelligent eyes that, having come in too far at high tide, had when the water receded got itself stuck and was suffocating. Mustering all his strength, Severus carefully rolled the beast over a couple of turns until it had gotten enough water under it to shake loose and ponderously make its way back into the current and escape. Severus took the blast of water that it shot heavenward as an expression of thanks, shrugged his shoulders to Lilava and a few of the locals who had sat watching, and calmly enough remounted his horse to ride on.

The missed encounter with Lancelot proved a greater fortune than even Lilava would have guessed. In a later meeting with the Lady of the Lake, she learned that her sister sorceress had had a vision that Lancelot and Severus must never meet in battle. Severus would never seek out such an encounter for pleasure, as some knights did, not having a natural preference for one-on-one

battle with other people, and Lancelot, having won more jousts than anyone could count, tended to avoid them as well, but fortuitous events often jerk the course of life one way or another despite our preferences. On any given day two knights might meet, decide they have had too few adventures recently, and challenge one another to fight to keep their skills sharp or just for something to do. From their discussion Lilava realized that her sudden fear had merit: the Lady of the Lake guessed that the two knights must in some way represent opposite principles. Such problems usually produce destruction for one if not both knights, should they happen to meet. One cannot always count that famous battles will end in cool-headed, sportsmanlike draws, as did those famous meetings between Lancelot and Tristram and Lancelot and Gareth; they may as well end in the death of both knights, as in the case of the brothers Balan and Balin. That day Lilava resolved to expend whatever energy she needed to preserve the man who appeared to be emerging as her knight from any such danger as a battle with Lancelot, since the occasional dragon would do well enough to keep him in shape and hone his technique.

She was struck also by the possibility that Lancelot might not kill Severus, but that the fight might end the other way round — a better end for her (though the thought of beautiful Lancelot dying pained her, too), but a disastrous one for Britain. She felt some satisfaction in recognizing that her presence there served not only her people, but Arthur's as well; by keeping the two knights from fighting, she might save Lancelot not only for himself, but for his king — and queen. While Lilava was not the sort of person to lose her focus, neither would she regret helping others if the opportunity presented itself.

And so she set about trying to preserve her knight, assure herself of the rightness of her choice, and find the right time and method to broach the topic with Severus. Meanwhile they had some good times together while decent weather lasted, and before winter came she arranged to have some villagers for whom Severus had done a small service — ridding their village of a troublesome goblin — pay him with a cloak she had woven with a special kind of wool and with a special technique and care (some would say she cast a spell on it) so that it kept the wearer particularly warm. She didn't tell him that she had made it, and the villagers kept her secret; Severus often marveled about that cape, reminding himself to try to return to that village to learn more about it, but he never had the chance or ill-luck to do so, and Lilava had many a quiet laugh over it — funny what sorts of things we'll laugh at in private. As for the goblin, it really was just a pitiful thing and had merely been lurking about, had not even eaten a single child and probably never would have. Severus shooed it out of town with a bit of show to satisfy the villagers, then helped it locate a magic cave door in a nearby valley that would lead it safely home. He even caught the goblin a coney to eat, one that had been troubling the villagers more than had the goblin by

eating all the new vegetables from their garden, thus doing the people a second service and making a friend of the goblin, at least as much as one ever can with such creatures. Severus wondered whether he got the cape for the goblin or the coney, preferring the former, that being the kinder deed and also because, not having a vegetable garden himself, he had no particular grudge against rabbitkind.

You may well wonder how Severus found the magic door; you may wonder if Lilava found it for him. Not so: he had a bit of magic about himself, though he wouldn't have recognized it as such. You will hear more about it later. While magic often has a virtue of its own — as well as its drawbacks — in this case it also contributed to Lilava's appreciation of her knight, since, though he said nothing of it, knowing nothing of it, she could sense it, and it made her feel more at home with him.

That odd expression, "at home with," may seem an ill fit with wandering folk, errant knights and itinerant sorceresses, but though the lifestyle changes, human emotions tend to remain much the same. Lilava sojourned far from home, and Severus had not had a home for many years. In such cases one seeks the feeling of home in something else: an activity, a favorite book, or the presence of a familiar and pleasant person. The latter had come to apply for both Lilava and Severus with respect to each other.

When winter fell and travel became more difficult so that "chance" meetings occurred less easily or frequently, Severus at least could enjoy his cloak, feeling warmer than he believed he had a right, though not attributing it to the right source, but Lilava realized the flaw in her joke: while she could enjoy the gift she had given Severus, because she didn't disclose its source, she had no gift from him that she could enjoy as her own in his absence. Such are the emotional travails of this world for men and women.

Lilava of course had accustomed herself to hardship, but even the hardiest of persons enjoys a present now and then, even if a simple and discreet one, particularly if it shows the just and proper affection of a friend. So Lilava spent much of the winter alone catching up on a set of old scrolls she had obtained from a retiring sorcerer in Cumbria. Often as she neared sleep she imagined what sort of present Severus would have given her had he known the cloak came from her, and she played out many sweet sorrowful exchanges in her dreams. But now we must leave poor Lilava for a time to learn more about Severus past and what made him the man he became.

III Sir Severus' Own History

[Here begins the sad account of the plucky Severus' early years.]

Perhaps now you're wondering how Severus had come to be as he was, a knight who by preference would never fight another knight, but preferred to fight only beasts.

To begin with, Severus was an orphan. He had no memory of parents, but had lived for a time with a woman he called "Grandmother," who taught him how to cook vegetables and string a bow, until she died, and then with a very old man he called "Grandfather," as far as he knew unrelated to the woman, who told him stories of beasts, battles, and holy Jesu and who in his own wobbly way showed him how to swing a trimmed-down sword, until he too died. Being forest folk, these people, relatives or not, had few connections with the wide world, and when Severus had laid them to rest, he stayed for a short time alone in the woods until their gardens were empty, partly from his efforts and partly from the rabbits', and he no longer had the heart to shoot the rabbits, since they had become the closest thing he had left to family.

Then he began to wander, bow strapped to his back, and shoes worn and barely clinging to his feet. The old man's cut-down sword seemed to shrink as Severus' own body slowly grew, until one could call it no more than a knife hanging in his belt.

Walking from wood to wood and glen to glen, Severus met folk here and there who would sometimes shoo him off, sometimes share a simple meal and a story before wishing him a good journey to wherever he was going. In exchange, if they had treated him kindly, he would rid their woods of snakes or wolves or whatever seemed to be bothering them most, though he wouldn't return to tell them or ask greater compensation. He never could figure out what to do to improve the weather, about which from his view they most obsessively complained, and one roaring-hot summer he spent several days trying to drive off a field of grasshoppers, but otherwise he felt for the most part that he had tried to repay their simple kindnesses as best he could. Occasionally folk who learned what he had done would thank him, but even they only looked at him strangely and shook their heads. Every now and then someone asked his name or where he was going.

Severus never told them his name, having a natural if to him inexplicable fear of doing so, nor did he mention that he was going nowhere in particular. He had always thought a boy should have some place to go or some sort of purpose, even if it was no more than helping a grandmother peel spuds or listening patiently to an old man's stories. But Severus knew of no relatives, could find no