

# Scriveners contest entry

a short story by Richard Bunyan

Asathen woke up. In this fact alone there was no major event, except that it happened. And that it happened would not had been noticeable except that no one present expected it to happen. And that is why it was so significant. But we are diverging.

When Asathen woke up, he immediately regretted it. He had a stinging headache, and no lack of pain anywhere else, except his left arm, where there was no feeling at all. He lay there silently for a moment, in the dark, before realising he still had his helmet on. Consequently he decided to take it off. There is a knack to taking helmets off at the best of times, but trying it when you only have feeling in one hand is near impossible. As soon as his right hand moved it was caught, and laid back down gently but firmly. The hand that had touched his was so smooth, and so soft that Asathen had no intention of letting it go to take another try at his helmet.

“He’s woken up.” A voice said quietly. Asathen could not see the source of the voice because he could not turn his head, and he could only see the pale yellow material of the tent, subtly backlit by a rising or setting sun. He could hear footstep approaching now, and then he saw the face of and heard the voice of his best friend, Ricold, looking as though he had just come in a joust, asking if he was all right.

“Do I look alright?” Was what Asathen tried to say. But he choked on something in his mouth, and only coughing was heard.

“Hey, still and quiet” Came the quiet soothing voice of Ricold “if you must communicate, small movements only.” Asathen wondered how this might be achieved. His head was held solid, it would not move at all. He could not feel his left arm, and he was still holding the soft hand in his other, and he did not think communication with two very painful legs would work, especially under bedding, so he lay still and listened.

“Presuming you want a run through of the last few days, you shall have it.” Started Ricold “You don’t really get much choice, but I want to take some of this equipment off first.” Asathen could see Ricold had a shield, a practice sword, and his staff on him

“It all started three days ago, when that large guy, what was his name? Hmmm... Vannick! Yes. It was when Vannick challenged you to a joust. He was not exactly slim or agile, and you thought you could beat him easily. So you accepted the fight, and it was scheduled for that after noon.

“We’d decided to sit and watch you, especially knowing how proud you are of your jousts, and we had bought prime seats for the show. \*We\* are Asa, Montgomery, and myself. And so, the joust began.

“You scored a massive blow with your first pass, but somehow Vannick stayed on his horse. On the second pass something went wrong. Your shield dropped off your arm as you approached him. He hit you heavily and squarely on your left shoulder, and

you were thrown to the ground. You got up, staggered, and he approached you with his sword drawn. You drew yours in reply, but from the audience you looked like you did it in a tone that suggested an easy win.

“You lined up swords with one another, and started to circle. He swung out, and you blocked it easily. You returned the blow, and he just deflected it. You both circled, almost all the way around. Then you hit him, and he retaliated, his sword solidly hitting your hip, and then again that hit your gauntlet, and again hitting your head, and again, and again. You stood up well against him, but after about six or seven shots you just collapsed.

“We immediately jumped the barrier, and came to your side. You had passed out by this point, and, even as we removed the quick, easy pieces of armour, blood started to seep from the bottom of your helmet.

“Asa went off to find a mage, and you were brought back here. You have severe bruising all over, a badly damaged left arm, and a split skull. The mage did all she could, and Asa, Montgomery and I sat here and waited.

“Talk about worrying us, that was two days ago! But we were warned it might take you a while to wake up. Your skull is still very tender, and you are bruised all over.” Asathen could feel the last one plainly, but he wanted to know something still.

“Who’s Asa?” he whispered. It was a quiet whisper, but he opened his mouth a second before, so Ricold knew it was coming.

“Maybe I should let her introduce herself?” replied Ricold.

And then Asathen heard another voice, and it was not one he recognised. It was soft, and sweet, but it was more than that. It was the kind of voice that lullaby’s are made of, and the sort that are made of silk. It was a female voice, and it was quiet. But Asathen got the idea that it was probably always like that, and it was such a nice voice that it made no difference to him. “I am Asa” was all it initially said.

The hand letting go of his, a quick shuffling of legs, then a face appeared in his vision. In Asathen’s opinion, any descriptions of this face would be inadequate. For it was a small, elven face, and was made of pure beauty. “I am Asa,” said the golden voice again, and suddenly Asathen realised it was she, the face, the hand, this Asa, that was speaking.

Asathen did not hear the rest of what Asa said. For he was listening to the voice, and looking up into her face, and nothing else mattered. It was as though the words did not exist, as though his pain did not exist, it was just the voice and the face of Asa. And then it faded. Not fast, very slowly, but it faded. And of that day Asathen remembered no more.

When Asathen re-awakened, all he could see was the tent roof. Looking at the light levels, Asathen reckoned it must be nearly mid-day. He groaned because he could not stand being so dependant like this. He expected some sort of a response from his

groan, either from Asa, Ricold, or Montgomery. But nothing happened. All was silent. He groaned again, he did not think he was up for speech. There was still no response.

Asathen thought about trying to get up, but he suspected that the helmet was tied down, and he did not wish to increase his headache by fighting against what was obviously not going to move. So he tried to make his right arm move. Slowly and painfully he managed to lift his lower right arm, then the whole arm, and get it into his vision. His wrist was bandaged, but his hand seemed not to be in too bad a condition. He felt around his helmet, and realised it was not \*his\* helmet at all. It was one of the helmets that are designed for the beginners, and had a quick release catch on it somewhere, if Asathen remembered correctly. So, he slowly felt his way across the outside of the helmet to where he thought the catch would be. He was right, and he started to try and release the catch.

“Stop that! You’ll do yourself serious harm like that!” Asa suddenly said. Asathen wondered why she had not spoken before, but when he heard several pairs of feet approaching, he suspected they had been out the tent, and just returned. “You should be lucky you did not get that open, in your condition.” She then slowly and gently returned Asathen’s arm to his side.

“You hungry old chap?” came the low boom of Montgomery’s voice. “You haven’t eaten in a few days, and you still owe me that fight you promised me” This was going back several years, but Asathen could tell Montgomery was just trying to be friendly. “Don’t try to speak, groan for yes, grunt for no”

Asathen thought about this for a minute. Yes he was hungry, but he wasn’t sure he could keep any food down, and he definitely didn’t want to throw up in front of Asa. So he grunted. Montgomery suggested a drink. He groaned. He’d only just realised how dry he felt inside, and he was relatively confident he could keep a bit of liquid down.

“Close the back of your mouth so you don’t choke,” The low rumble of Montgomery said, “and be ready to swallow” Asathen then felt the splash of some liquid being pored out, and when it was dropped in his mouth he recognised the taste of his own home whiskey. As this happened, he could also see the unmistakable face of a wizard, giving him his drink. He allowed the whiskey to moisten his mouth for a second, then swallowed. He opened his mouth for some more.

“No, no, we don’t want you either drunk or throwing up” This voice was Asa’s. “If you want any more, it will have to be water” Asathen shut his mouth. Water was fine normally, but the water at these events tended to be stored, and had an old stale taste to it. Most of the knights went to the nearest spring instead.

The whiskey had strengthened Asathen from the inside, and so he tried to speak. “Talk to me Asa, how am I?” it was only a whisper, but it was clear enough in the complete silence.

“That blow to your skull was not a normal blow,” Asa started “Vannick had an illegal, magical blade. It was cursed, and the officials think it was cursed just before the match.

“We do not think Vannick knew his sword was cursed. He holds too much honour, and too high a status to risk bringing a magical weapon to a small-scale match. We, well the officials anyway, are still not sure who cursed the blade, but they suspect it was either to harm you, or to harm Vannick.

“Anyway, when Vannick hit you over the head, one of the mages saw the sword drawing magical energy, and discharging it as it hit you. The combined force of Vannick’s strength, and the magic in the sword caused your head to split, even through your helm. Due to the magical energy of the blow, none of the mages here can heal it. The best they could do was to put a helmet on you, and seal it so nothing can get into the hole.”

Asathen knew immediately what this meant. He was going to die, and was dying because of an illegal blade in the joust. Asa must have seen this realisation on Asathen’s face, because she stopped.

“Talk to me until I die” said Asathen. “I want yours to be the last voice I hear.”

And so Asa started to talk, but not after Ricold, and Montgomery, paid their respects to Asathen, both as a man, and as a knight. They then both together gave him a prayer so he might find the happiness in death. Asathen listened, and watched. Asa talked about many things, her younger life, and her travels. After a while, Asathen shut his eyes, quite content to just listen. Asa must have taken this as him slipping away, as she next said “I followed you on your errantry quest, I persuaded those dwarves to give you the flail, I had 50 wood elves killing goblins to make sure you both got home.”

Asathen summoned the energy to make three last words “I... never... knew...” the last thing he felt was a soft kiss before all feeling left him.