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about 500 words

## The Long Sleep

By Mike Lance

In all of his memories, he'd known and loved her.

Walter sat next to their bed, where Merilee lay still. Her chest didn't rise. Arteries beneath alabaster skin didn't pulse. Gold and silver hair fanned the pillow. Matching eyelashes rested on her cheeks, as they had for days.

She told of finding him wandering a battlefield, naked, past thinking. Nursed to health, he had no recollection of the war, or before. She spoke of it no more.

Together since, she mixed daily potions, regulating his affliction.

Wars were good for the potion business. From his first consciousness, during the crusades, her potions provided livelihood. Without war, they eked out a living on love potions and his strong back. Over centuries, changes came. Pestle and kettles moved from hearth to kitchen to storefront apothecary. More recently, they bubbled in the backroom of a natural supplement store. They managed despite the FDA.

Merilee remained fresh and beautiful and he remained large and homely. They relocated frequently because friends and acquaintances expected change that couldn't be accommodated. The last move, below the carcass of Mt. St. Helens, brought them to what she called their retirement cabin.

He reached out tenderly, touching soft, flawless skin. With growing despair, he saw that his sickness progressed more rapidly. The nails on the hand touching her icy flesh had blackened and thickened, fingers stretched, scaly blue-black scabs spread down his forearm to his hand. Folds of skin grew between fingers and sagged from his arms.

Lumps growing on his chest throbbed as if about to burst. Leaning back in the chair recalled knots forming along his spine. Body aching, weary to the core, he bent forward to the bed, and laid his head across folded arms. While gazing upon her delicate beauty, his eyelids drooped closed.

Flames, flight, swords, and spears filled his dreams. Templars killed and stole his families' treasures to build their own. First, he fought, and then fled, to hide the dearest treasures in mountain caverns inaccessible to men. Memory emerged through smoke in his dream. He coughed and coughed again. The flavor of brimstone filled his nightmare.

Eyes snapped open. Curtains across the room blazed. The log wall blackened as flames leapt and licked at the ceiling.

Something struck his head as he surged up. A chair shattered behind him. He turned but no one was there. A stride to the door, but he couldn't get through. Turning back to her, his head struck a roof beam.

Dropping onto newly sprouted forelegs, he burst through the burning wall, turned, and flapped his arms. The gale raised made the fire flare, as he exhaled more. A funeral pyre for his race's savior.

She helped him hide the real treasure, and then hid him — even from himself. Dragon's eggs only hatch in the heat of dragon fire. As the last, he must tend them in their mountain sanctuaries.

With a thunderous thrust of blue-black wings, he surged skyward.

The End