

## A Small Price to Pay

By: Terrence D. McLean

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I try to force my eyes open but the weight of my eyelids are too much for me; even still I can see the brightness of the morning sun on my face. I remember back to the days when I looked up at the sun felt its warmth on my cheeks but now the cold air wins the battle. I command my body to move, but it only responds with pain. Relaxing the pain subsides but the constant dull ache remains. It has been a month since I have been able to make my body leave the confines of the bed. Despite the mass of blankets covering me I am still chilled. I can feel in my heart that the cold that has settled into my body is not that of the snow and ice that now rule the world outside, but the icy hand of death. Now, after so many years it has finally caught up to me, and I pray that it does not come too late.

A thousand years, you would think that one's memory would fade after such a long time, but for me I can still remember the day with unnatural clarity: every sound, sight and smell. I was much the same back then as I am today; long white hair to the middle of my back, my white beard is almost the same length and the cold of death filling my body. Back then, unlike now, I fought death, struggled to stay alive. Now, I am at the end of that long battle and welcome defeat.

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I leaned back and the chair creaked under my frail body. The desk before me sat on thick wooden legs and despite its age it easily held the mass of books scattered across it; some new, some I had written myself in the course of my research, and others were older than anyone could imagine. I had spent the past twenty-five years searching through them, trying to find the answer to a single question; how to stave off the coldness that was slowly creeping into me? In those

years I was forced to watch as many of my friends fell to the cold of old age, and despite all the friends I had lost I was driven forward by a single image. The one of my own wife's passing. I knew that my time was approaching, and I searched desperately for a solution, not knowing how long I had remaining; hoping desperately that I had enough time left to find my answer.

Dretchken, my best friend since I was a child, was the only one that knew what I was working on. The only one I could trust with the secret of my great research. He tried to tell me that I was a fool and that what I was trying to do was impossible. He said that death was something that not even the mages could win a battle against, but I knew he was wrong. I just needed to live long enough to find the answer, and live long enough I had.

Looking out over the books, I smiled. I was right. After twenty-five years of searching I had found my answer. I had discovered the clue only a few months ago. It was in a book deep in the archives; a book no one had read in thousands of years. It had taken me all those months to put the final pieces together. The book did not give the details about how it was done. It had only hinted at the solution, but it confirmed that it could be done, that someone had done it before.

I looked down at the page in front of me and inked the last number in my equation. I had found a way to keep the flame of life burning. My twenty-five year search had come to an end. I would live for as long as I wanted. I would have centuries to unlock secrets other mages only dreamed of. I would never again feel the cold of death that haunted me day and night. I laughed and the sound echoed through my library; now that I knew the answer, it was so simple. It should have been obvious to me years ago.

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All those years ago the answer had appeared so simple, so obvious. By channeling magic into myself, I could stave off death. I could keep my heart warm, and hold off the cold of death indefinitely. It was so easy, but in its simplicity I could not see the obvious outcome. After all that I had been taught, all I had learned in my life up to that point, and all the research I had done to find my answer, I had missed the warnings of the ancient story and the most obvious thing of all: there was a price for everything. The price I extract from the world to this day.

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Dretchken burst into my library as I had never seen him do before. He had always been a happy and gentle man, but there was no sign of that now. Anger filled his eyes as he crossed the room. We had not seen each other in over six years, and I was surprised that he was still alive. He had aged much in those years; his face was wrinkled and he had lost most of his hair. He now walked with much of his weight on his staff, but anger drove him across the room towards me. I, of course, had not aged a day in the past six years, thanks to my discovery. He stopped in front of the large desk, I just sat and looked calmly across it.

He looked down at the pages scattered across my desk, weather records for the past ten years. “So, you have noticed the change.” I did not give the pages on my desk even the slightest glance. I knew what they said; I had spent many hours going over the data. “Most of the world hasn't noticed the change. It has been so subtle, but many mages have taken notice.”

“I do not know what it is you are talking about old friend.” It was a blatant lie. I had seen the changes; it was only a matter of a couple of days and a few more degrees, nothing to be worried about.

“The weather!” He yelled at me. “I know you've noticed,” he said pounding a finger down on my desk. “I didn't know if you would have, but these prove it.” Dretchken picked the weather reports up and threw them at me.

“I have always had an interest in the weather.” I said in a calm voice. I knew he would not believe me; we had known each other far too long for him to be fooled by such an obvious lie. I had never even looked at a thermometer for most of my life. It had taken great effort for me to obtain the records without drawing attention, normally only the few mages that collected the data were ever interested in it.

“You have never been interested in the weather.” he said, still yelling. It would have bothered me coming from anyone else, but Dretchken was my best friend. You gave some allowances for friends. I looked up at him with a blank stare; I knew that my bluff was not fooling him. “You know as well as I do that the winters are longer than they were.”

“A day longer than last year,” I replied calmly, “Two days longer than ten years ago.” There was little point in feigning ignorance. He would not leave me until he said his piece and delaying would get me nowhere. I knew he had put the pieces together or he would not have come to me.

“You have to stop!” he ordered. “I know that your experiment is causing this and the council has figured it out as well.”

“If the council has figured it out, then why is it you who are here and not the Protectors of the Flame?” The Protectors were those who enforced mage law and tracked down enemies of the council. Dretchken had been one when he was younger. There was great respect in being a Protector, and that had been important to him. Now, however, he did not care what others thought of him. Dretchken had grown beyond that, which was lucky for me. When he was

younger he would have gone straight to the council. “I do not think they have figured it out yet. Besides, I have broken no laws.” It was technically true but that would not have stopped the council from sending the Protectors after me; one did not always have to break a law to have the council employ their services. They would come for me, when they found out what I had done.

Dretchken took a deep breath. “They haven't figured out that it is you, but they have figured out that the cause is a drain on the World's Heart.” The World's Heart was the source of all magic. The mages believed that it gave life to the world and everything living on it, the soul of our world. The mages worshiped the Heart of the World as a god, and in a way it was. It was what gave the mages life. Without it, they would be as powerless as the non-mages who surrounded them. “It is only a matter of time before they figure out who it is.”

“You give them too much credit,” I told him, “and me too little.” I slowly stood, staring defiantly into his eyes. I had worked too long and too hard to give it all up over a couple of days. “The only way they could find out is if someone told them.” Dretchken took a step away from the desk. He was shocked, but clear on what I was saying. I had never threatened him in all the time we had been friends. I had never threatened anyone before, but my life was at risk. “I have been looking into this extended winter issue,” I told him in a calm and clear voice, “it should level out at another day or so. It is a small price to pay.”

“You are asking the world pay so that you might live?” he asked, recovering his composure.

“It is a small price to pay.” I repeated to him sitting back down at my desk.

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Forcing my eyes open, I can see the blurred colours of my room. Slowly, the room comes into focus. I ache as I lift myself up in the bed and look around. Everything is as I had

left it, except for the dying embers in the fire. With great reluctance, I pull the covers from me and pull my warmest cloak around my shoulders and make my way to the fireplace; a few fresh logs should warm the room quickly enough. But as I stand I notice that there are no spare logs remaining. I have become accustomed to the servants bringing fresh logs in the night, and tending to my fire.

I take hold of my staff leaning next to the fire place. It creaks in the cold as I place my weight on it. Slowly I walk to the door, opening it to reveal a long hallway. The hall is cold and ice has long since formed along the walls and parts of the floor. My room is the only one in my home that I keep heated these days and I only leave it when I am forced to. The need for wood is more than enough to drive me down the icy halls of my family home. I had missed it all the years that I was in hiding.

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Dretchken had been right. The council did figure out what I had done. It had taken them close to three hundred years but they were very close. The winter months had pushed further into the spring than I had figured. More than the few days I had told my old friend, I missed him very much these days. Back then I did not realize how the passing years would change things. It started with a weakening over the years; then I could feel the coldness starting to seep back into me. I had no choice. I needed to draw more energy in order to stave off death. Two weeks, that was how much longer winter was. It was more than the council could accept as chance. I watched them as they investigated the winter issue. I watched as they inched closer to my secret. First, it was the realization that something was draining the World's Heart, then that the drain was being caused by someone and was not natural. I knew people talked about my age behind my

back. No one really knew how old I was, only that I had always been around. It was only a matter of time before they put the final pieces together.

I stood next to my best mare; one of my servants held her reigns. It pained me to leave my home. It had been in my family for thirty-six generations, more than any other mage family manor. It had been my home for almost four hundred years, but I had little choice. The council would come and demand that I stop what I was doing, an act that would result in my death. I needed more time to figure out a way of fixing the problem, there was something I had missed and I was determined to find it. I left instructions with my servants. They and their descendants would be allowed to stay in exchange for keeping the house until one of my family returned to claim it. After another few hundred years, the council will have long forgotten about me and I could return safely.

“We’ll take good care of the place, sir.” a man’s voice said. He had worked for me for ten years and had never questioned me.

I had not told him the truth about why I was leaving, but I am sure that his response would have been something close to, ‘very good Sir, enjoy your trip.’ That was what good servants were like. They never really listened to you unless you were telling them what to do. They knew that their master’s business was his own. He was a good servant and deserved a better master than me.

“I expect everything to be as I left it.” I instructed him.

“My family has served yours for fifteen generations.” His voice was proud at the statement, “We will serve your family another fifteen if they will have us.”

I said nothing in response. I knew that he would keep his word. There was no point in dragging this out. I mounted my horse and my servant handed me the reigns. I took one last look knowing that it would be a long time before I would be able to return.

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Opening the small servant's door I look out across the frozen ground to the woodshed. It had not always been a woodshed; it had once housed some of the finest horses in the world. I had sold most of them when I left, keeping only my best mare. After my return, I had kept the old stable filled with wood, but it stood almost empty now. Its aged timbers straining against the snow laden roof.

It has been three years since the last of my loyal servant's descendants had passed away. The cold, of the eternal winter I had created, was killing everything in the world. In the courtyard to my right, stood three graves hidden under a frozen blanket of snow. They were the graves of the last three people I had seen, and possibly the last three people other than myself in the world. They had ensured that the shed was kept full of wood, ensured that I was kept warm. They had put my needs ahead of their own, only to die in the frozen hell that I had created.

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The wind whipped around me, driving the snow into my face and eyes, making it difficult to see my destination. I missed my home greatly, but I could not risk returning yet. The small cottage sitting on the shores of the frozen lake in front of me was the next best thing. It was here that I had retreated when my parents died, and again when my wife passed on. It was here, looking out across the lake's water that I had decided that I would not fade away like they had; I would achieve greatness like no other mage in history.

I reached out, opened the door, and rushed into the cottage. Closing the door, I cut off the cold behind me. I had been travelling through the snow for three months, passing through one abandoned town after another. Here I would stay, continue my work and finally perfect my spell. I looked around the small one-roomed building. Everything was as I had left it; this had been my first stop after leaving my home. Along the wall to my right was a small kitchen table, a single wooden chair tucked neatly under it. The bed on the far side of the room, a comforter was stretched tightly across it. To my left, sat the large wooden desk where my research had started; cleared of everything except a quill that stood poised to write at my instruction and a bottle of ink that had likely dried out, or froze, a long time ago. But, in my haste to get out of the cold and due to fatigue, I had failed to notice the smoke rising from the cottage, the fire that burned in the fire place, and the figure that sat in the large leather chair that faced it.

“This is my place,” I said to figure in the chair, “leave now and I will overlook your trespassing.”

“My crime is nothing compared to yours.” The voice echoed in my ears. I stood in disbelief. It was Dretchken’s voice. It could not be him; he was long dead. Was the cold getting to me, was I losing my mind?

“I have committed no crime.” I replied forcing a calm tone as I hung my cloak by the door.

“We have been searching for the person responsible for the drain for more than five hundred years and now I have found you.” The figure stood and I could make out his features in the fire light. Whoever this was, it was not Dretchken. He was young, no more than sixteen. He turned to face me and I caught a glimpse of my old friend in the young man’s eyes.

“You are a little young for a Protector.” Had the mages diminished so far since I left that they would accept this child as a Protector? What chance if any did he have against a mage of my skill?

“I am not a Protector, at least not yet.” The young man’s eyes filled with determination as he spoke. “When I return, after killing you, I will be.” This was good news for me. If this young man was out to prove himself, then there was a chance that he had not told anyone where he was going or where he had expected to find me. After I dealt with him, I would be safe, but I had to determine if others would follow if he failed.

“Tell me, how is it you figured out that I am responsible for the drain?” The words hit me hard. It was the first time that I had said that I was responsible. “And how was it that you found this place?”

“I found mention of you in a long forgotten journal in my family’s archives. When I picked it up, I had no idea it contained the answer that every mage in the world is trying to find. It spoke of a spell you were researching, one my ancestor opposed. He wrote of his fear when you cast your new spell. He did not say what the spell was, but I had my guesses, and after much more research I was sure. I read through every page of his journal: growing up with you, your days at school. How he was proud to stand as your best man at your wedding. The pain he felt when you lost your wife, only for it to be increased by your obsession with your spell. It was only briefly mentioned, but when I found out about this small cottage, I knew that you would return.” Dretchken, the old fool, wrote everything in that damn journal of his, and now, it would cost his descendant his life.

He was first to cast, and with my reflexes slowed by fatigue, I was unable to counter. The spell knocked me to the floor. I tried to stand but my body refused to respond. Slowly, he

walked towards me, each footstep echoed in my head. After defeating death, how could I fall to this child? Without a word, he cast another spell. There was a bright flash and then darkness, cold filled my body.

I do not know how long I lay there in the darkness, but when I woke my connection to the World's Heart had more than tripled. The boy must have killed me, but my spell had continued to work, keeping me alive. I could feel the warmth as it seeped back into me and I could only imagine the toll it had taken on the world. I wasted no time; I quickly lit a fire and set to work. I would perfect my spell before another came looking for me. I doubted the world could survive me dying again.

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Following the short path cut through the snow, I make my way to the shed. Only one cord of logs remain. My time is running out. Even with my spell, the cold will overtake me without my fire. Slowly bending down, I carefully pick up three logs, one by one. Three logs were all I could manage at one time now. It will take more than a few trips to gather the wood I needed for the night. Many valuable hours lost from my efforts to fix my spell.

Slowly I make my way back along the path towards my house, careful not to slip. One misstep and here I will slowly freeze to death taking what little remained of the world with me. Not even the powerful mages of the council could stand against the frozen world I had created.

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The snow was deep and the road had not been travelled in years, but I pushed on. It was one week to the beginning of fall and already the snows had come. More than a hundred years had passed since I awoke from the darkness of my death. I knew that if I could perfect my spell,

I would be able to stop the drain. I had been working on the problem, but the answer was just out of my grasp. I needed my old notes, my research and the resources I could only find here. As I walked through the city and saw no signs of life. The shops were all closed and many of the buildings had collapsed under the weight of the snow. The streets were filled with snow; no footprints but my own disrupted the smooth white surface. I pushed on deeper into the city; the outer sections were for the non-mage folk, no one of importance had ever lived in these empty buildings.

I followed the main street straight to the gates of the inner city; the realm of the most powerful mages in the world. It was at the gate where I saw the first living thing in the great city, the first living thing I had seen since I awoke from the attack. A man in a long heavy fur coat stood watching me as I approached. In his right hand he held a tall wooden staff topped with a red gem; it had once shone brightly but now it was dark. It was the staff of the high mage, head of the mages' council. Doubt entered my mind for the first time, was I wrong to return?

"Hail, High Mage, Keeper of the Heart of the World." I addressed him. It was more formal than was required, but I dared not risk offending him. It was too important that he allowed me into the city and that I continued my work.

"Greetings stranger." He replied with a slight nod, which was less than appropriate given my status. "What brings you to my city?"

"I have come to reclaim my family's home. We have been away for too many generations and it is time that we return."

"They said you would return." I stood breathless. Did he know who I was? Who had said that I would return? Had Dretchken's descendant known that I would recover? "The servants of your manor have never given up their faith. They said that you would come and that

they had to keep the house ready for you.” He turned and started to walk away. I watched in silence.

He turned back towards me and spoke slowly, “I do not know why you have bothered to return, there are only a handful of us left.” He lowered his eyes to the snow before he continued. “Have you come to die with us?”

He did not wait for my response, before he continued on down the street. I did not expect that I would see the High Mage again. He walked slumped over his staff and staggered through the snow. He may be still walking the city streets, but he was already dead.

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Carefully I open the door to my room. The shadows shift along the floor and up the walls as the flames dance. Setting the last load of logs down by the fireplace, I look at the pile. It is enough to last me through the night if I am careful. In the morning, if I wake, I will not likely be able to make the trip down to the shed. This will be the last of the wood, but I hope to not need more. After months of preparation, today I will finally fix the flaw in my spell; I will stop draining the World’s Heart. I only hope that I am in time.

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I looked down on the mound of dirt, the only thing that disturbed the white of the snow-covered ground, the grave of the last of my loyal servants. Two more white mounts sat beside the grave. I was alone in the city. The mages that had remained in the city dwindled even further after my return, and within ten years, they were all gone. I was the only one that remained. I had extracted a terrible price on the world, just so that I could live, and this is what it took for me to realise it; standing alone in the cold, in the middle of a dead city. I had to face the fact that I had killed them. It was not a small price to pay, as I had told Dretchken

I walked through the empty halls of my home to my room, where a warm fire greeted me. At my desk, I slumped into the chair. Looking out over the pages and books, I picked up the book containing years old work on stopping the drain. I had abandoned this solution because I did not like where it was leading, but now I did not care, it was the solution I would use.

Instructing my quill to write; I continued the calculations that I had abandoned years ago. The answers flowed from me as if I had not taken the long break. Almost without thought, I flew through the equations; I rarely needed to reference the other tomes on my desk.

For three days, I sat at my desk without rest. For three days, I only broke from my work to throw another log on the fire. According to my calculations, if I died again before fixing the spell, it would drain the World's Heart completely as it tried to revive me.

I looked down at the page and took a deep breath. I had my answer. It was not what I had hoped, but it was the solution. It would take me years and I prayed that there was time.

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I sit in the large chair facing the fire. I close my eyes. I wonder if there are others still out there. Or, am I the only one that remains? If there are survivors, will they live long enough for the World's Heart to recover? If it still can.

I focus my thoughts, and the flow of energy comes into focus. Barely a thread compared to the torrent that once flowed to me. Carefully and slowly I force myself to sever my connection to the World's Heart, ensuring the cut is clean and complete. The small thread vanishes. Emptiness fills me as the remaining warmth drains away.

The cold of death fills me. I open my eyes, but everything is dark. I can hear the fire burning just a few feet in front of me, but I can neither see its flames nor feel its heat.

It is done. After a forgotten number of centuries, the world will finally be rid of me. I hope that my notes will find their way into the hands of the survivors so that they may learn from my mistake. I have brought the world to the brink of destruction, and quite possibly beyond. I do not expect to be forgiven for my actions; they were selfish and driven by fear. The only thing I ask is that you tell my story as a warning that some things come at too high a price.