

Love
at
First
Fight©

by Billy Wong

This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers

New York

2008

Celia leaped over the body as it fell, severed head rolling behind her in the snow. Metal scraped on metal as a spear glanced off her shield. She retaliated with a backhanded slash, and its wielder crashed down gurgling from an opened throat. Another foe rushed; her kick to the belly knocked him back. Celia sprang to meet her next two challengers, cleaving both their spears with a bearlike swipe of her sword. Before he could recover, she caved in one man's face with the rim of her shield. The other jabbed at her with his broken spear; she sidestepped and chopped down through his shoulder and torso, splitting him cleanly in half. The wreck of his corpse fell in opposite directions, rent organs steaming in the cold northern air.

A bestial war-cry shook the world as a seven-foot giant of a man barreled down the field. His warhammer whistled over Celia's head as she ducked, then stepped forward hooking her arm between his legs. With a great heave she lifted the behemoth and threw him over herself. Then she raised her booted foot and brought it down and back, crushing her stunned opponent's skull.

The man Celia had kicked regained his feet and raised his sword with trembling arms, eyes wide at the carnage inflicted upon his allies. He advanced slowly, the air silent now but for the snow crunching beneath his feet.

"You should run," Celia said. "There's no point in dying here."

"If I let you pass my master will repay me with a fate far worse than death. Come on, you fat bitch."

The man yelled and charged, drawing his sword back for a desperate blow. Celia caught his wrist, then twisted behind him and pulled him down so that his spine cracked against her knee. He stared up at her for a moment, then his eyes grew fixed and uncarving.

Celia looked around the wintry graveyard, wiping blood from her face as she surveyed the dozens of fur-clad warriors felled by her blade. *What a waste. Why can't these damn sorcerers ever just settle things in a fair fight?*

A dozen yards away, the light blue glow from the crater flared deeper as the sorcerer Vulank's voice thundered into Celia's ears. She dashed over the pit's rim, scream-

ing a banshee wail at the evil mage chanting over the kidnapped princess. Short, fat, and slightly hunchbacked, Vulank, Master of Corrupt Water Magic, turned and grinned. "Now, now, my lady Celia, what exactly is the hurry? Why in such a rush to die? Soon will the Dark Titans rise again, and sundered be all the works of man."

Aren't you a man? Stupid wizards! Celia thought as a conical blast of frigid air flew from Vulank's outstretched hand. *He's a sorcerer*, she reminded herself, *not a wizard. What's the difference again?* She covered her face, but the terrible cold easily penetrated her armor and numbed her to the bone. With a shout she pushed on, icy crystals coating her body.

Vulank cursed when he saw his spell would not stop her charge, his vulgarities transitioning smoothly into a new spell. Huge hailstones pounded down around Celia, two smashing into her upraised shield and jarring her arm. *All mages are the same, anyway. Soft weak men who fight by speaking funny cheating words, because their arms are too weak for swinging a good old fashioned length of steel.* A spray of razor-sharp icicles assailed her next; she tried to block, but several pierced her armor and she cried out. Still, she kept going. Water vapor solidified into a wall of ice as she closed on Vulank, but she shouldered through it with a loud crunch and lashed out.

Vulank dodged by leaning back and threw his hands upward. Great jaws of dense snow grew from the ground, slamming together on Celia's body. She grunted with her armor being crushed against her, but tore herself free, breaking pieces off the snowy vise.

"Don't you ever stop?" Vulank demanded, ice forming a shining sword and shield in his hands. Celia slipped on the slick he conjured beneath her feet, but blocked his downward slice and rolled up. He poked at her eyes; she parried and struck back. Torn from his hand, his thin blade spun to the ground. Celia's sword swept down towards Vulank's head, and he raised his shield. Yet her blow split the ice with its force, and continued down through his arm. His hand and half his forearm fell away, and he toppled to his knees. The snow reddened beneath him. "I-I'll kill you, woman! I'll rip your soul from you and cast it into the abyss, and you'll scream forever in hell!"

"Nope," Celia said, and cut off his head. His body froze solid as it fell, and shat-

tered upon hitting the ground.

Groaning as she pulled bloody icicles out of her arm, thigh, and side, Celia staggered to the stone slab where Princess Heather lay and slapped her lightly on the cheek. "Wake up, Princess, it's time to go. Your father's been worried sick about you, and we better not keep him waiting much longer." Lowering her voice, she mumbled beneath her breath, "Though, I wish he could've found someone to help me rescue you. Shit, are there no brave men left in Weinland anymore?"

Groggily, the fair-haired princess opened her eyes. Short, slim, and delicate of bone, Heather was Celia's physical opposite in every way. "C-Cee-lia? Where's Vulank?! Did you get him? Is he dead?"

"Oh, of course he is. You know me, how many of your kidnappers have I left alive?"

"None, Ceely. And I guess that's still the case."

Celia smiled. "Haha, was there ever a doubt? Now, let's get out of here." She slid her arms beneath Heather's shoulders and thighs and began to lift.

"No, no! Stop it, put me down!"

Shocked, Celia almost dropped the girl. "What?! Why?"

Heather looked up, eyes wide and terrified. "He put a curse on me, Ceely. Why do you think he didn't tie me up? He said that if I left the crater, I would die..."

"And how do you know he was telling the truth? How many sorcerers have you met who never told a lie?"

"He spoke true, I'm sure. He cast the same spell on a boy, and had his men throw him out of the pit to demonstrate. He froze up like a statue, he did! I'm scared..."

Celia remembered seeing that unlucky boy on the far side of the crater. Then, she had thought him a sculpture, but... "Well, don't lots of spells end when their casters die?"

"We can't risk it," Heather breathed. "I don't dare."

"What are we supposed to do, then?"

"You have to get help. There must be someone around, some town shaman who knows what to do."

Shaman. While not exactly carrying quite the same negative connotations as *sorcerer*, a shaman was hardly something Celia would find easy interaction with. All magic was more trouble than it was worth, in her eyes, and she hated that some of the ills it wrought could only be cured through more magic. Magic was an exception to the rules of the world of blood and steel she knew, and she hated it for that. She could not understand it, and sometimes that made her feel helpless. She, who should never be helpless.

"Me, talk to a fucking mage? Do I have to? I'm hardly the persuasive type."

"Yes, you have to. Don't be so stubborn, Ceely. I know you can be quite persuasive when you have to be."

"Eh, if I must, I must. But this would've never happened if you just listened to me. Why wouldn't you let me be your full-time bodyguard?"

"I can hardly bring you to every party. You never behave."

"Screw that, your noble friends don't know how to behave! Whatever happened to treating a lady with respect?"

"Oh, Ceely, let's argue over this another time. Please, just go." Celia turned away. "Wait! Here, take my crown," Heather said, placing the circlet into the warrior's hand. "Use it to prove you act on my behalf. Hurry!"

With a nod, Celia tucked the crown into her belt and limped away. ***Damn all mages! If only I could remove the stupid curse my-fucking-self, but no! Treacherous, cheating bastards! To hell with all of them! To hell with wand-waving pansies!!!***

Half an hour later, Celia found herself examining Heather's crown. The sparkling jewels, the polished gold... so pretty! Just like little Heather herself. Celia raised it slowly, experimentally, and set it upon her head, struggling a bit to get it around her swollen mane of brown locks. It was tight, not only for her hair but also the girth of her skull. She wondered how life would be if she had been born into Heather's role, if she had been raised as royalty. She would still be large, if not so athletic; it was

not just vigorous physical training that had given her her considerable bulk. If anything, she would probably be very obese, with the access to food young royals got. A young her, pigging out, and the way she would look now, after twenty-eight years of luxury... not a good image.

She reached up to remove the crown, but just then heard hoofbeats behind her and turned. A half-dozen armored men on large horses appeared around the bend of the road. Celia waited, hoping they could point her to a nearby town.

"Hello there, good sirs. I'm a traveler, and wonderi-"

"We know who you are!" said a hulking bearded warrior wearing a bearskin cowl. "Now lay your arms down and come quietly, else we remove them by force."

Celia stood calmly, scanning her would-be captors. *Hmm? More sorcerer-pawns, or someone else's lackeys?* "So what I'm wondering is, would you mind telling me who you work for?"

"Silly girl, do you take us for fools? We'll tell you, once you're securely in our grasp."

No matter, I'll beat it out of the survivors. Celia reached for her sword.

A man yelled at the back of the would-be kidnappers and they parted, a sleek stallion racing through towards her. She drew her sword in a flash and braced for the charge, but the broad-shouldered rider leaned back from her slash and grabbed onto her cloak as he passed, dragging her after him. She bunched her legs and jumped, landing on the horse behind him, and wrapped her arm around his throat. He pulled at her forearm, struggling for breath. "No, what are you doing?" he sputtered out. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

She relaxed her grip just a bit, not completely releasing the choke. The spear on his broad back pressed uncomfortably against her breast. "Not going to hurt me, huh? Just going to kidnap me, then? Leave the hurting to your 'master'? Excuse me if I'm not willing to submit to that."

His voice's pitch rose with surprise. "Wait, what? You thought I was with them? No! I am trying to save you from them!"

Celia let go, the honesty unmistakable in his voice. "I didn't need to be saved,"

she said with an annoyed scowl.

"Well, I didn't know that. You're quite a surprise, you know that? I never expected you to be so plucky--or so big. But you'll let me protect you, won't you, Princess?"

Celia gaped. "Tell me I didn't just hear that! You think *I'm* the princess?"

He pulled back on the reins, inadvertently bringing the horse to a stop, before spurring it back into a run. Celia could hear pounding hooves behind them, the enemy still in hot pursuit. He looked back at her, displaying the rugged charm of his long, strong-boned face. In features and body alike, he possessed an appealing solidity. "You mean you are not?"

She took the crown off and replaced it in her belt. "Do I really look 'fair and fine as a fresh-bloomed lily' to you?"

"Lady? I am not sure how to answer that without offending you."

"I won't be offended." She sighed. "I know how I look."

"So you're not Princess Heather. Who are you, then?"

"Heather's bodyguard. Name's Celia. And you?"

She heard the man suck in a deep breath before speaking, voice full of forced confidence. "I am Grant Alleret, Knight of Hobort and future husband of the Princess Heather."

Celia's eyebrows rose. "Future husband? I've never heard Heather talk about you."

"No, and I wouldn't expect you to. She probably doesn't even know I exist, yet. But once I rescue her from the evil sorcerer Vulank, I intend to ask for her hand in marriage."

"Marry her? What are you, a prince?"

His voice grew more subdued, seemingly with doubt. "I am not royalty, but I do carry a trace of noble blood. It is my greatest hope that she accept my proposal. Vulnerable as she is, she needs a strong husband and protector like myself."

While not a husband, Celia thought Heather already had a fine protector in her. "And what would you gain from it? Surely, you don't intend to marry her just to become her bodyguard."

"Of course not. I have always wanted to change the world, but cruel life has taught me that one man, no matter his skills, can accomplish little on his own. So indeed, I am very aware of the power offered by a union with your Princess. But I don't intend to abuse that power. I only want to create a better world, for all I can."

By now, the pursuing hoofbeats had faded away. "All that's well and good," Celia said, "but you never mentioned love. What good would all your noble intentions be to Heather, if she is stuck in a loveless marriage?"

Grant shook his head. "I would love her as any husband should his wife. Would her marriage not likely be arranged for her, if not with me?"

That was true; at least he was willing to brave great dangers to save her. Too, he seemed a good man and not poor with words. He would make an admirable spouse, though Celia could not help thinking she might be more compatible with him than meek Heather. "If you mean to rescue her from Vulank, you're just a bit late. I already killed that wicked mage."

"You did, did you? I could tell you've been through a battle. But why is Heather not with you?"

"There's a little problem. Vulank put a confining curse on her before his death, and we don't know if it's still active. So I'm on my way to find a shaman to lift it, if it is. Want to come? No, of course you do."

"Actually... I have some knowledge of curses myself. Take me to her; perhaps I could help."

Celia stared. "What, you're a *mage*? I thought you said you were a knight!"

"I, uh, am not technically a mage. I only dabbled in the study of restorative magic, to aid me on the battlefield."

Under her breath, Celia muttered, "Whatever you say... mage." So much for courting him, then.

Celia and Grant fought past the previously encountered warriors, the latter

impressing her with his use of the spear, and returned to Vulank's sacrifice pit. Upon reaching the edge, Celia saw that something was wrong. "Heather's gone!"

Grant looked around. "But where did she go? Didn't you say she couldn't leave here?"

"Yes. Well, at least I don't see her frozen body. Let's go down and have a look."

They approached the central slab. Soon, Celia could see bootprints in the snow, larger than Heather's were. "Someone must have come and taken her." Her breath quickened with alarm, and rare fear. "But what about the curse?"

"Don't worry. I doubt they would have taken her if they couldn't deal with it. She would have told them, and what could they want with a dead princess?"

"But what if they didn't believe her, or knocked her out before she could tell? I should never have left her alone. She could be--"

Grant placed a thick hand on her shoulder. "Calm down, Celia. If she was dead, wouldn't they have left her body here? Let's follow the tracks, and we'll rescue her together."

Celia nodded, hoping the world would follow his logic. "Yes. Let's go."

They followed the trail to the base of a rounded hill, dotted with trees and surrounded by thick forest. "First a pit, now a hill," Celia said. "I wonder..."

An arrow flashed through the air, straight at her throat. Slapping it away just in time, she looked up for the shooter. She saw no one. Another arrow, from a different spot. She ducked aside, still looking. This time, she glimpsed a movement behind a tree. She charged; Grant drew his spear and followed. A huge form burst from the ground in front of him, and both went down in a tangle of limbs. Distracted, Celia turned towards him--and an arrow sprouted in her arm.

"Who are you?" she shouted as she spun back to face the archer, who had moved again. Another arrow flew, clipping her side.

"I am Seirone, Master of Corrupt Air," a raspy, breathless voice replied, seeming

to change direction even as it spoke. "My brother and I welcome you to your final resting place."

The one tussling with Grant must be the Corrupt Earth master, then. Five arrows flew in rapid succession at Celia's face. Her sword waved back and forth before her, batting them aside while she dashed uphill. She drew a dagger and waited for the movement. There, behind a small pine. Her dagger flew a split-second before the arrow did, and was rewarded with a yelp of pain as she ducked the shaft. "Where is Heather?" she asked.

"She is up top. B-but you will never reach her in time!"

The thin, white-cloaked man ran farther uphill, shooting at her in mid-stride. Each arrow came from slightly farther to the left, but she dodged and deflected them as she continued her dogged chase. Firing as he went, he could not match her speed, and the gap should have shrunk. Yet wind blew hard against her, slowing her advance. One of the arrows streaking at her face made a sharp downward turn, plunging into her thigh. Celia dropped to one knee as two arrows zoomed in from opposite directions. So this was how he would use his magic.

She threw herself down, and the arrows whizzed overhead. Seirone fired again when she stood, seemingly far off course. Celia cleaved the shaft which veered to come at her from the side; the same trick would not work twice. She drew a second dagger and threw, so that it hit his next arrow in mid-air and continued into his shoulder. He fired several more times, but could not get past her defense as she bulldozed her way closer against his wind. She smiled as he drew back the bowstring, apparently unaware he had forgotten to nock an arrow.

He released, and Celia felt a dull impact against her stomach. She fell, not understanding the agony and nausea that stole her strength, and rolled herself behind a tree. As she propped herself against the trunk, she saw it materialize, protruding from her gut. Seirone had shot her with an *invisible* arrow.

Celia whimpered as she tugged at the shaft, tears overflowing her eyes. Her mouth quivered with anguish, and bloody spittle danced over her lip. Her thighs shook and spasmed as she pulled the steel head out through her shredded guts. A lump grew in her

throat at the sight of stringy red tissue hanging from the tip. The wound was fatal for sure, then.

Nonetheless, she would not die without taking her enemy down with her. She peeked out around the tree, and pulled back not a moment too soon as another arrow flew past. "How do you like your gut wound, fatty?" Seirone taunted.

She threw a dagger, but her weak arm could not propel it all the way to its target. It landed at Seirone's feet, and he laughed as she tucked herself back behind cover. Celia drew her last two daggers and listened for his approach. Gritting her teeth against unbearable pain, she dove to the side and tossed one dagger. It missed, Seirone easily ducking the high throw. Her second knife, however, caught him in the throat.

"How do *you* like your severed windpipe?" she asked, struggling upright with the help of her sword. But he did not reply, except for the weakening gurgles which preceded death.

Realizing the noise of battle still rang downhill, Celia limped towards its source. Grant and the Earth Master came into view; the former lay pinned beneath his opponent's massive bulk, his neck straining under a deadly full nelson. Celia raised her sword and chopped into the evil mage's back, severing his spine.

"Thanks," Grant said, rolling the corpse off. "Are you all right?"

"I don't... think so," she gasped, and collapsed.

"Celia! What's wrong? You're wounded..."

"Dying," she corrected. "Gutshot."

His fingers began to glow with a whitish light, and he reached towards her wound. Her heart skipped a beat, and she pushed his hand away. "What are you doing?"

"I can save you," he said with a smile. "I have magic, remember?"

"I hate magic," Celia whispered. "Will it hurt?"

"Not as much as leaving it."

"A-all right. Do it."

Grant touched her wound and she felt a soothing warmth spread into her flesh, melting away the pain. The *wrongness* inside her belly faded, replaced by a not uncomfortable heaviness. She tried to get up and found herself sprawled on the ground again,

her limbs bereft of strength. "Stay down and rest. I've healed your wound, but your body needs time to recuperate. Leave the rest to me."

Celia grasped her sword in both hands and got her legs beneath her, shoving herself up with a grunt. "I've already had to save you once, and you expect me to depend on you? Hell no! I'm going with you." She started ahead, but two steps later stumbled and nearly fell. Grant grabbed her arm; she shook him off. "Don't try to stop me."

"I wasn't going to," he said, taking her arm again. "You might not be a princess, but you're a queen."

"Say what?"

"A queen of courage and strength."

She licked her lips, not knowing what to say. "Come on."

They neared the summit, and Celia heard strange words. The lyrical chanting voice came in spurts of audible speech, as if sometimes too high for human ears. "Is that in some tongue of magic? It doesn't sound even human."

Grant shook his head. "I don't recognize it--perhaps it is in some elder language. How much would you wager, that we'll have to fight the Master of Fire next?"

"Nothing. I killed him before I even got to Vulank."

"You did? But there's someone up there--who could it be?"

The hilltop came into view, a barren contrast to the vegetated slope. Again there was a slab, Heather lying still upon it. Beyond them, she could see only a great mass of darkest shadow. Then her eyes focused on the form of the blackness, an immense winged serpent with disproportionately small clawed limbs. It sat on its haunches like a dog, and its eyes were completely white, almost beams of light radiating from the void of its being.

"What are you?" Celia asked, too tired to be afraid. "Who are you to the Four Corrupt Masters, and what do you want with Heather?"

"I know," Grant said, his voice small. "It is--"

"I am their Master," the creature answered, its voice so high it hurt. "They were masters of their elements, among humans, yes; but I am master of all magic, and it was I who trained them. Now they have fulfilled their roles, and the Dark Titans will live again."

Celia frowned. "The Dark Titans? I still don't understand. What are they, and what are you to them?"

"I am one of them, the only one still free. But now, as Heather's ancestor sealed my brothers away with his life, I will release them with her sacrifice. My brothers... the Hydra, the Chimera, the Gryphon, the Manticore, the Gorgon... we are your deepest fears, and when we walked the earth your kind cowered in deference. Now, that day has come again."

"No, you won't have Heather!" Celia raised her sword and rushed. A bubble of crackling energy shimmered into view around the Dragon and its prisoner. Celia slashed at the field, but on contact a powerful shock coursed into her body and threw her to the ground.

"I will kill you, but for slaying my students you will live a little longer, to watch helplessly as your precious Princess dies."

Celia looked at Grant. "Help! Use your magic!"

He stared grimly at the barrier and shook his head. "There is nothing I can do; it is too strong for me."

She came to her feet, screaming at him. "Grant, you can't just give up! You came this far, didn't you? What happened to saving the princess? To marrying her?"

"The spell is just too powerful. I am not even proficient in magical combat; I cannot dispel it, and you cannot help me!"

"Then just weaken it!"

"What?"

"You heard me. Even if you can't break it, just do whatever you can! Then maybe I can-" She stopped, not daring to say it.

His eyes widened in comprehension. "You're insane. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes."

He thrust open hands forward, sending a towering wave of flame crashing against the barrier, then gasped and fell to his knees. The Dragon's field flickered just a bit; closing her eyes, Celia shielded her face and threw herself forward.

A thousand acid-tipped needles seemed to pierce her as she passed through, and upon landing she was ablaze. She rolled on the ground, smothering the flames, and stood howling with rage and the pain of her horrible burns.

The Dragon gave a casual flick of its tail, knocking her down. She heard her shoulder dislocate with a *pop*, yet managed to cut into the tail when it whipped at her again. Clenching her jaw, she grabbed her injured shoulder and wrenched it back into place with ruthless strength. Now the wurm's head swung on her, its mouth gaping open. Celia ducked its blasting breath, not the flame she expected but a deathly cold which numbed her with its proximity.

She darted in, stabbing at the Dragon's chest, but a huge forelimb swept down from the right. For a moment the sword-like claws impaled her side; then she was flying. Her body collided with Heather's, knocking her off the slab, and she winced to she hear the princess' face smack against the ground. But the impact awakened Heather, and she started to stir.

"Ceely? What are you..?"

The Dragon loomed over Celia, claws poised to strike. Just as it slashed down, Heather jumped in front. "No! Leave her alone you dumb beast!"

To Celia's surprise, it stopped its attack. That was it! The beast meant to sacrifice Heather, but would only kill her under a specific set of circumstances. Suddenly, she had an idea--she only prayed the Dragon would react in time. She grabbed Heather and shoved her towards the energy bubble.

With a hiss, the Dragon cancelled the spell.

"Grant, hurry!" Celia cried. She feared he would never make it; already the Dragon had begun to conjure another barrier with a wider range. But Grant raised his spear overhead and threw, just topping the rising field, and the heavy head pierced the Dragon's eye. It reared back and screamed, clawing at the thick hardwood shaft.

Celia lunged, ramming her sword into the wyrm's groin. It staggered back and she kept pushing, driving it across the hilltop. It tripped and crashed down, thrashing wildly. She hopped up onto the sacrifice slab and leapt to the Dragon's belly, then ran up towards its chest. Its forelimbs rose on both sides, but just before they could reach her, she plunged her sword through its heart. Its body froze.

"This cannot be."

"It *is*." And she twisted the blade.

Celia rolled off the dragon's corpse, falling awkwardly to the ground. She dragged herself to her knees, only to feel a stinging slap on her cheek.

"Ceely!" Heather yelled. "You almost killed me!"

A nervous laugh escaped her mouth. "Yeah. Scared I would, too. I'm just glad it worked out."

Grant knelt at her side and held her hand. "Are you all right? You're really messed up."

"Hurts, but you can heal me."

"No, I can't. I'm all out of magic for the time being. How are you?"

"I'll live. But aren't you going to ask Heather your big question?"

Heather gave him a curious look. "Ask what?"

"No, I don't think I will. I came looking for a princess, but I met a queen."

Celia frowned. "Me? You'd rather have fat, ugly me?"

"You're a queen, Ceely?"

"No, I'm not a queen. He just likes me..."

Grant took her chin in hand and gently turned her face to meet his eyes. "Well? Will you marry me?"

Celia averted her gaze, not believing it. Of all the men who could fall in love with her, did it have to be a *mage*? Though, he did have his merits... She looked at him and grinned. "I'll think about it."

THE END

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