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# Fight to the Death

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*If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.*

*Margaret Thatcher*



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Aliana was an accomplished swordmistress who earned a living by providing protection to those who paid for her services. Her main professional failing was perhaps insufficient discrimination in her choice of clients; she could not bring herself to turn down an engagement that seemed interesting, regardless of the character of a prospective client or the shadiness of the underlying project.

That was perhaps what happened the night she was approached in Lowport's seediest tavern by a teenager dressed in the gray robes of a spellcaster's apprentice. The boy addressed Aliana earnestly: "Madam, are you Mistress Aliana Jehwa?"

Aliana broke into a doubtful grin. "I am. Who are you, and what are you doing in this den of perdition in the middle of the night instead of being at the Academy studying your runes?"

The boy seemed a bit peeved at Aliana's condescension but replied with a straight face: "My name is Palador, and I am no longer a student at the Academy. I work for Xanthus, the greatest mage who ever lived; he has promised to teach me all I'll ever need to know about magic. He asked me to hire you for a job."

Aliana felt a little embarrassed by her previous high-handedness. "I am sorry. I thought you might be a truant, taking a break from school. What does your master require, and why has he not come himself to bargain with me?"

"Xanthus lost his vision years ago and relies on me to carry out minor errands." Aliana noticed Palador was subtly paying her back for her arrogance and decided she liked the kid already.

Ignoring the barb, Aliana assumed a professional air. "What is the nature of the job for which your master requires my assistance?"

Palador's response was vague: "He wants you to accompany us on a trip to Templemire and provide protection from any dangers that may arise along the way or after arrival."

"Templemire is on the other side of the continent. It would take us a long time to get there, and much of the way is wild territory."

"We know. That is why Xanthus feels we need to have a skilled swordmaster along to protect us."



“What’s in Templemire that requires your master to go there?”

“He says that there is a treasure hidden in a mountain above the town, and claims that the treasure’s value is worth the trip. I agreed to go because I can keep learning from him along the way. For you, there would be money.”

“How much is he offering to pay me?”

“One-third of the value of the loot.”

“How does he know there is a treasure hidden in Templemire?”

“He retrieved a parchment from a slain messenger that identified the location and nature of the treasure. He insists the message is genuine and the opportunity it identifies is worth his time—and ours.”

“What happens if we get there and find nothing?”

“That’s a chance we have to take. Xanthus is a great wizard, though, and I don’t believe you would only have saddle sores as a reward for your efforts.”

Aliana reflected, many times after that conversation, that she should have turned down Xanthus’ suspicious deal on the spot. But she was having trouble getting assignments, what with being a woman in a man’s world. So she agreed to go on a wild goose chase with a blind old man and a kid, and, unsurprisingly, regretted it.



As expected, the trip to Templemire had been hard and full of perils. They had crossed swamps and gloomy forests and scaled forbidding peaks, and had been challenged at almost every turn by human and nonhuman foes, which Aliana had had to beat back or slay.

Finally, the trio led by Xanthus reached the place where the treasure was supposed to lie: the Pillar, a high mountain holding a secret chamber, towering above the capital city of Templemire.

When they arrived, in the middle of the night, the mountain appeared larger and more imposing than its actual size warranted. The mountain was made of solid granite, not amenable to being drilled through, and its hidden entrance was protected by a formidable spell. So the wizard and his acolyte Palador paused in front of the monolith, trying to figure out how they could get inside, while Aliana stood guard behind them.

Xanthus being blind, Palador had to serve as the eyes for the pair. The boy directed his magic vision at the wall, which under his gaze seemed to pulsate with a slow palpitation. In the heart of the stone there was a discoloration, a dirty orange rectangle: the door.

“I found it!” he cried.

Xanthus, who had been dozing while Palador worked, gave a start. “Found what, boy?”

“I found a reality flaw that serves to lock the entrance.”

“Are you sure? How did you find it?” asked the conjurer in disbelief.

“I just did.”



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“Show me.”

Xanthus entered Palador’s mind, which promptly went into magic sight and focused on the flaw.

° ° ° There it is. ° ° °

Xanthus agreed: ° ° ° Indeed. Very small. Now that I know where the flaw is, I can break its protection. ° ° °

Xanthus took out a silver tuning fork. He struck it against the rock, causing it to emit a hollow ring. He then moved his fingertips up the stone face until they were directly over the flaw and uttered a long note which mingled with the fork’s ringing to produce a deep resonance.

Palador’s magic vision showed the flaw growing and, as a tear in a delicate fabric, propagating throughout the structure. The transparent membrane was suddenly crisscrossed with dark lines which continued to multiply as Xanthus continued his chanting. Finally, there was an audible snap and the entire sheet collapsed, revealing an irregularly shaped object on the top right side of the door.

° ° ° That’s the actual lock ° ° ° indicated the warlock. ° ° ° We now can remove it. ° ° °

Xanthus lifted his staff, applied the tip to the lock, and shot out a sharp command. There was a very loud rumbling as a section of rock rolled back into itself and then sideways, revealing a dark gap.



Meanwhile, far off in the depths of the forest, a claw intercepted a patch of moonlight. The body of a beast the size of a horse strode out of its lair, a cave so deep under the earth that the light of sun and moon never reached it. It was a huge beast, not a stallion or a wolf or a bear, but all those things at once. It was shrouded in brownish fur, with a ridge of coarse black hair running the entire length of its body and flaring into a short bushy tail. Under the fur, powerful muscles rippled with energy.

Its mouth curled back to reveal row after row of sharp triangular teeth. It had heard the distant moan of the Pillar as it yielded to Xanthus’ magic. The creature turned its head towards the moon, and a shadowy face appeared on the moon’s surface.

The beast addressed it: “Master, the wizard Xanthus is about to enter the crypt where the Horis Egan is hidden.”

A deep voice answered: “You have failed me time and again in dealing with this spellcaster, who always manages to elude you. You must go to the mountain and retrieve the Horis Egan for me.”

The monster shifted uneasily. “But Lord, the sun will rise soon. I may not even be at the foot of the mountain when she breaks the horizon.”

The voice rumbled: “If you can’t do my bidding, Riga Thorn, I shall find someone else who will and send you back to the frozen hell from which you came.”

The beast cowered and lowered its head. “As the Master bids, the servant obeys.” With that, Riga Thorn took itself racing into the night. As it ran, the beast picked up



speed; its ghostly pace made it seem to glide across the ground. Occasionally it snarled, and every time it did a great lightning bolt crashed down on the forest, shattering trees and showering the monster with splinters.



They followed a long entrance passageway, which ultimately opened into a hall with a high vaulted ceiling. There were three entrances into the hall: the one where they stood, an arched doorway framing an iron door on the left wall, and a short staircase going down off the back wall.

“Which way?” asked Aliana impatiently.

“According to the instructions, through the passage on the back wall,” directed Xanthus.

They entered the passage, which was narrow and musty and slanted down into the bowels of the mountain. The corridor made a sharp turn and immediately emptied into a large square room, empty of furnishings or decorations except for two polished ebony doors on the left wall.

Xanthus, guided by his cane, walked up to the doors. They were closed and had no keyholes or locks, but two iron rings hung from them about five feet above the floor. The warlock took hold of the iron rings, leaned back, and pulled on them. The doors swung open noiselessly, revealing a long chamber. The end of it was walled off by a gated iron grille.

“Is this the treasure room?” inquired Aliana.

“No. This is the crypt.” Xanthus entered the chamber. The others followed him, mouths open. The warlock turned to them and spread his hands in triumph.

“It is a shrine,” continued the wizard.

“To what?”

“To the Horis Egan. The most important object in the universe.”

Behind the iron grille, three stone steps led up to a pedestal capped by a slab of basalt on which rested a golden box. Even from a distance it was easy to tell that the surface of the box was covered with rude carvings, and had an ancient air.

“There is a golden box on top of the altar,” described Palador. “Do you know what’s inside it?”

Instead of responding, the wizard tapped his way up the steps, then asked Aliana to join him, as he clutched the gold box against his chest. It was quite heavy, and he was having trouble holding onto it. Aliana helped Xanthus secure the box and placed it on the floor.

Xanthus lifted the lid, felt his way inside it, and grunted: the chest was empty.

The wizard sat down on the steps and buried his face in his hands, deep in thought. Then he got up with a start. He rushed back to the altar and began pressing his hands over its surface, first the top and then the sides, and finally the underside of the slab. He stopped for a second, and went back over the surfaces again, now in a circular motion as if polishing them with an invisible cloth.



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He beckoned Palador for help and the boy started towards him, but then Xanthus motioned him to stop.

"Here it is! Hidden away!" he exclaimed. He pressed hard at one point on the underside of the slab, and a small door at the top flipped open, revealing a rectangular cavity. Xanthus inserted his hand and emerged with an object that looked like a very large sea shell. The artifact pulsed redly, like a ruby being struck by light. Its exterior surface was convex and bumpy, while the inner one was smooth. Both surfaces were covered with thin lines in some sort of pattern that could barely be discerned. It had a grooved oval hole running through the center that appeared to be intended to serve to attach it to something else. Palador felt the wizard's presence back in his mind. Xanthus was elated.

"Where is the treasure?" asked Aliana, an edge in her voice.

"There is nothing else," replied Xanthus.

"Is that what this trip was about?" cried Aliana, exploding with disappointment. "All that talk about getting us a treasure in a hidden vault was just tripe, right? All you wanted was that piece of junk and you lied to get help so you could find it. You lied to me, and to Palador. We're not going to get rich; this quest was only for your benefit."

Palador added his voice to Aliana's: "It's true. I can read in your mind that retrieving this thing was the goal of your trip, not finding the riches you promised. You only wanted that Horis Egan."

Xanthus turned away from his companions, not answering.

Aliana raged on: "I don't care what that thing is. I'm leaving you! There is real treasure for me and my sword in Templemire below. Good-bye!" She stomped out of the crypt.



Xanthus shook his head after Aliana's departing steps and turned to Palador. "Come on, boy. We need to get out of here." They started down the narrow passageway. They advanced in utter silence, and then a deep voice called from some distance away: "Spellmonger!"

Xanthus pulled Palador up and grasped the boy's arm with new urgency. "Run after Aliana as fast as you can. She must come back to defend us."

Palador looked at the wizard with hesitation, but Xanthus gave him a shove and ordered: "Go!" The boy raced down the passageway shouting Aliana's name, and Xanthus trailed him as fast as he could.

In a few moments, Palador caught up with the sellsword. Aliana had heard his running steps and had doubled back to meet him. "What is it?" she snapped as soon as the boy showed his face.

"It's the monster that chased us before... It's here, somewhere," cried Palador.

"I know. I heard the voice too, but it seemed far away."

"Xanthus thinks it's nearby."



Aliana drew her broadsword. "You stay with Xanthus. I'll deal with the monster." She turned to leave, but Palador hung onto her arm.

"Wait! Xanthus says you are to go back to him. He'll get us out some other way."

Aliana stood for a few moments, indecisively. There were more footsteps down the corridor, and in a few moments, Xanthus could be discerned in the darkness, rushing towards them.

"We must leave this place at once!" he warned as soon as he was within earshot.

"Where to?" challenged Aliana.

"I don't know. Let's talk about it once we get out!" answered Xanthus.

Palador saw two gleaming pupils behind the swordmistress. "Watch out, Aliana, he's on your back!" he cried. There was a pounding on the earth and the corridor reverberated with the beast's approach.

Aliana turned around, lifting her broadsword. Across the entrance to the big hall stood Riga Thorn, growling. The beast was coiled like a wound spring, ready to jump at her.

Without hesitation, Aliana thrust her sword into Riga Thorn's mouth. The beast clamped down on the weapon and gave a powerful jerk that sent it, along with Aliana, tumbling back into the center of the hall.

The creature roared. The vibrations shook the hall and pried mortar from its walls. Aliana recoiled from the blast and was lost in a cloud of dust and rock particles. When it all cleared, the hall's walls and ceilings had been sandblasted to smooth stone, but Aliana was still standing.

The monster glared at the woman, wondering how she had managed to survive. Then it leapt. It was met in the air by Aliana's sword, which entered squarely under its jaw. Riga Thorn flew past Aliana. As it did, it managed to slash its opponent with its front claws, grabbing hold of her armor and tearing off the breastplate.

Xanthus had fallen back to the ground in a faint. Palador went to help him, looking back and forth from the clashing figures to the old man who lay on the floor, breathing heavily. Xanthus rested his head on Palador's shoulder and lamented: "I can't do anything to help. I've used up all my energy."

"Can't you cast a spell to stop that monster?"

"No. It is not of this world. My spells can modify the physical world around him, but are ineffective against the beast itself. And you shouldn't try, either."

"Can't you then teleport us to some other place?" implored Palador.

"No. It took my last bit of energy to shelter Aliana from that roar."

Riga Thorn charged, but was beaten back by a whirlwind of blows from Aliana's sword. Finally, the beast got hold of Aliana's forearm and threw her overhead. Aliana went flying, scraping up against the wall before skidding to a halt on the passageway floor. She got up groggily, her face torn and her armor in shambles.

Riga Thorn charged Aliana once again and buried its head in the woman's stomach. It ran with her across the hall, plowing the ground with her body, and finally slammed her against a wall. Aliana let out a rattling cough, spat out a mouthful of dark blood, shook twice, and blacked out.



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The creature turned its attention to Xanthus. "It is the end for you, old man. Thanks for getting the Horis Egan for me. Hand it over."

"You don't have anything to gain by taking this, Riga Thorn. The Horis Egan won't do you any good."

The beast laughed deeply, a cold laugh that signified the loss of all hope. "It does me no good, but my Master wants it. I serve my Master, and will get it for him."



Aliana's ears rang without stopping and her chest felt like a large open wound that hurt unbearably with every breath she drew. She was about to surrender again to the darkness, but managed to clear her head with a supreme effort. As her senses returned, she was able to hear the dialogue between the monster and Xanthus: "... All your begging won't do any good. The protection spells that served you before are gone along with your power, and so is your luck. You and your boy are going to die."

The wizard stood on wobbly legs at the rear end of the Greeting Hall, propped up by Palador, who looked like the trembling young child he was. Riga Thorn was poised barely ten feet away from him, drooling a caustic fluid and scratching the floor with its front paw. It seemed to be enjoying itself as it terrorized its victims.

Aliana looked around. She had been thrown next to the tunnel that opened into the entrance hall. She was not sure she could get up, but could probably manage to crawl through the exit and make it out of the side of the mountain while the monster was having fun with the others.

She crept slowly towards the exit passage. But what about Xanthus and the kid? They would be killed. Could she let them die to save her skin?

*Never mind, she told her conscience. That scoundrel wizard is no concern of mine. She continued to drag herself along, inch by agonizing inch. But what about Palador? He is an innocent boy. Isn't it my duty to protect him? Can I live with myself if I run away and let him be slain? She continued to crawl, and as she came to the open entrance, agony filled her soul. I cannot escape and leave my wards behind. I must stay strong. I must stand up.*

She summoned what strength she had left and, very slowly, pressing her back against the passage wall, managed to rise to her feet.



Riga Thorn turned around as it felt the slash of a sword across its neck. As it turned, the blow caught it in the head. It met no more success than Aliana's previous attacks; the slash left no mark on the monster's body.

The creature smiled. It always enjoyed a fight, and this female had spirit. It leapt at Aliana, its open mouth displaying its dagger-like teeth. Aliana stuck out her sword and punctured the beast's face right between the eyes. Riga Thorn felt a slight prick of pain, and let out a yelp.

Aliana jumped onto the beast's back as it gathered itself and began hacking wildly





at the monster, striking wherever she could. This lasted only for a few seconds, for Riga Thorn reared up and shook Aliana off onto the floor. It then spun around and bit deeply into her breast. She let out a deathly cry and went limp. Riga Thorn tossed her to the side and turned back to Xanthus.

Aliana got up again. The pain blinded her; she could feel that all her ribs had been crushed, and thought her legs might be shattered too. The monster, noticing the woman's approach, picked Aliana up by the ankle, crushing the bone in its jaws, and swung the swordmistress onto the wall. It repeated this pounding until it was certain that Aliana was dead. It opened its mouth, and a drop of corrosive saliva dropped down and charred Aliana's cheek.

Riga Thorn turned to Xanthus one last time and said its farewell: "Time to meet your fate, old man." As it did, morning light swept through the mountain entrance and entered the tunnel for the first time in millennia.

Riga Thorn cringed as daylight hit it. It howled and started to bleed from every spot where Aliana had struck. All those invisible wounds began to pour blood, which in seconds covered the beast entirely. Aliana's slice across the eyes bled the worst, and cut off Riga Thorn's vision.

The creature started to retreat blindly, seeking darkness in which to hide, but a hand grabbed it by the throat with iron grip. Riga Thorn could no longer see, but could feel Aliana's hatred rising from her dying body like a column of fire. The beast struggled, but could not get free.

Crawling on the floor, Aliana dragged Riga Thorn by the tail towards the daylight now streaming into the tunnel, and laid the creature in a bright patch. When the light touched the beast, its flesh sizzled and began to release fetid smoke. Aliana clutched her sword and pushed it with a final surge up through the chin and out the top of the monster's head.

Riga Thorn's eyes rolled back, blood and smoke pouring forth from every part of its body. It fell dead at Aliana's side. Yet she did not live to see her vanquished enemy expire.



Palador tried in vain to revive Aliana, and gave up with a hoarse cry. "She is dead... Xanthus, she is dead!!!"

The wizard sat on the floor of the passage, turning the Horis Egan over and over in his hands. "There's something wrong," he lamented aloud.

"Yes, very wrong," countered Palador. "Don't you understand? Aliana is dead!!! She died trying to protect us!!!" His voice broke and he started to cry.

Xanthus did not respond to Palador's protestations, but continued to examine the object, talking to himself. "It seems to be operating, but I can't seem to find a way to make it work!" He turned towards Palador and repeated: "We must find a way to get it to run!"

Palador let out a shrill scream. "Aliana DIED, she gave her life for US, and all you



think about is how to use that piece of junk!!!”

“It’s not junk. It is a magical device left behind by the old gods. It concentrates mystical forces and allows he who holds it to gain dominion over every small bit of the matter that makes up all things.”

“I don’t care! To me, it’s worthless. Aliana was worth a million times more, and she sacrificed her life to save us!!”

“You don’t understand. If I can get this thing to work, I may be able to rearrange the particles of Aliana’s body, reassemble it, and bring her back to life. Getting this device to work is essential for trying to resurrect her. Also, of course, the Horis Egan will help me exercise dominion over all the world.”

“What can I do to help?” inquired Palador with new interest.

“Not much right here. Go into town and get a healer. I don’t know what condition Aliana will be in when I manage to bring her back among the living.” He searched within his cloak, produced a leather bag, and threw it at the boy. “Wish me luck and hurry back.”

Palador took one last look at Aliana’s mangled corpse and started rapidly towards the valley below.

As Palador sprinted away, Xanthus turned his attention again to the Horis Egan. He had always expected to be able to make the infernal device work, but did not realize it would be a difficult task. No matter; he would have to keep trying.

It was a small mercy that Xanthus was not able to see Aliana’s broken remains, but he had studied the lore surrounding the Horis Egan and was confident that, no matter the state of her corpse, he would be able to restore Aliana to life and get her back in more or less her original condition.

Had Aliana been able to speak, she would have reassured the mage that, once she was revived, she would be eager to join whatever quest he and his young ward chose to undertake, provided there was money in it this time.

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## About the Author



at [his Wixsite](#).

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Well over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” is available [on Amazon](#) and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025. Visit him

