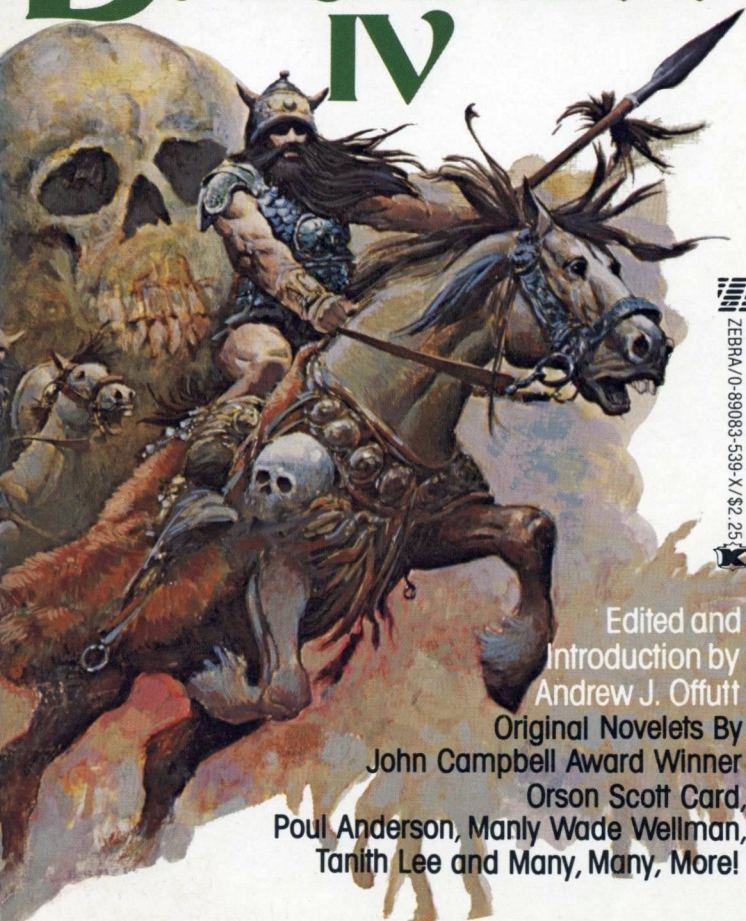



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SWORDS AGAINST DARKNESS IV

Edited and
Introduction by
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	7
MAI-KULALA	
<i>Charles R. Saunders</i>	12
AT THE SIGN OF THE BRASS BREAST	
<i>Jeff P. Swycaffer</i>	31
THE REAPING	
<i>Ardath Mayhar</i>	60
THE BALLAD OF BORRELL	
<i>Gordon Linzner</i>	73
DEUX AMOURS D'UNE SORCIÈRE	
<i>Tanith Lee</i>	94
OF PIGS AND MEN	
<i>Poul Anderson</i>	115
CRYPTICALLY YOURS	
<i>Brian Lumley</i>	124
DEDICATION: A SPECIAL WORD	
<i>the editor</i>	144
THE DARK MOTHER	
<i>Diana L. Paxson</i>	148
WOODEN CRATE OF VIOLENT DEATH	
<i>Joey Froehlich</i>	167
THE FANE OF THE GREY ROSE	
<i>Charles de Lint</i>	175
SANDMAGIC	
<i>Orson Scott Card</i>	223
THE EDGE OF THE WORLD	
<i>Manly Wade Wellman</i>	246

FOREWORD—IN TWO PARTS

Putting together the first *Swords A.D.* was fun. Editor invented it, wrote out the proposal, revised, rewrote, revised, rewrote, and his agent and the Zebra Books editor agreed in about two minutes. A contract was offered, revised, and signed. It was time to send letters of invitation to ten or fifteen writers of heroic fantasy. That involved the decision: ask whom?

Lin Carter has his anthologies, with Sprague de Camp as "member," and this editor considered them both friends. It seemed wrong; pushy, not-quite respectful, unwise, even chicken to ask them for stories. Pride was involved too. One wants to make it on one's own, without coat-tailing.

(So agent and Glenn Lord came up with an unfinished Robert E. Howard story. Well . . . it had nothing to do with any well-known REH series character . . . and who can resist, and . . . ok, so we followed tradition and coat-tailed Howard.) Poul Anderson is a friend of some years' standing, and he was asked. And . . . as usual, this pretense at editorial anonymity feels pretentious and uncomfortable. So editor now begins using his favorite word, the shortest in the language:

(I had to ask Manly Wade Wellman, whose work I had loved since childhood (mine). I didn't know him; his address was in the S.F.W.A. directory. I wrote him, and others. A few others heard, and by and by replies came, and manuscripts, including some from my agent. After what seemed 20 years—I was EXCITED!—Zebra sent some money so I could "buy" stories. After studying several others, I typed up an editor/writer story-for-anthology agreement.

(See, an editor signs a contract with publisher. Each writer signs an agreement with the editor. Fiction isn't really "sold" or "bought"; it's *leased*. Writers own what their brains create and are able later to lease them again, elsewhere. Editor decides what to pay, and how, and to whom, on what basis—and tries to keep something. Writing novels—even with three fingers—is a lot more profitable.) (Oh—and no, editors and novelists don't have cover approval.)

It's not quite as much fun, now. In compiling volumes 4 and 5, simultaneously, I read many, many manuscripts totaling over 750,000 words! Lots of people who read sf try to write it; I think *every* hf fan tries, and some of the attempts are . . . embarrassing.

I still have the sheet of paper containing 23 possible

titles for the anthology. Back then, only four years ago—it seems—ten, it would have been ridiculous and unacceptable to call it merely “Heroic Fantasy.” Things have changed—and we’ve helped, you and I. And now *we* have a coat-tailer. Great! We all get to read more *s&sf*/other-time fantasy!

Part Two: Let Darkness Not Prevail!

Writers want praise, not criticism. Peculiarly, all artists, creators, performers, and entertainers have obvious high sensitivity levels and *need* praise more than most. The reason is simple: most of us are working off childhoods that range from not so pretty good to horribly unhappy. That is psychiatric and historical fact. Call to mind that all writers wrote before their work was bought, and consider the *Why* of it. What enormous inner needs we have! What insecurities we (try to) cover by our seemingly soaring egos. How incredibly, ridiculously we are hurt, and *how* it hurts! That which must lead off the list of Sins Deserving the Worst Punishment must be the hurting of one creator/artist by another; *we know*.

During a conversation at a convention in Cincinnati, a friend named Larry Smith sort of worked his way around to a gentle criticism of *Swords A.D.* #3. (“Why do you go to so many conventions?”—“To see and talk with my friends.”)

Gently, carefully, face-to-face, smiling, unmilitantly, ready to back off, he let me know that #3 sure was *dark*. Sure, there were happy endings. Yet a brooding gloom pervades; the dark gods seem to preside over *Swords A.D.* III. A long-dead sorcerer returned to life—and prevailed. A brave and anguished man cut off his own offending hand—a most heroic act! A man lost a throne and her he loved. A heroic couple wept together because the Undead

were about to prevail . . .

Smith, with whom I once invented a ghastly new drink, was gentle, careful, unmilitant, intelligent, and not offensive. Yet the knowledge he imparted did darken my day and affect my evening's joy, because of the fragile writer's ego—and I am first a writer, a novelist: a creator. Besides . . . I knew at once that he was bloody well right. This was no "sexist" bigot mouthing jingoisms at me, or delighted smirker nit-picking the *printer-made* typo on page such-and-so. This was Larry to Andy, and he had a point. Had a point hell—he was right. (The rotten lousy Turanian swine! Probably drinks vodka and lemon soda pop! Hmp!)

Obviously, I never forgot. Our beloved hf/other-time fantasy needn't be gloomily hideous, or bloodsplashed, or downbeat. I learned what "editing a balanced issue" means. This one may not be that, really; we're a bit short on blood 'n' gore this time, and traditional barbarians, too. There are some bittersweet endings—and some beautiful gentleness, and even humor. There's even a brief masterpiece of satire—though not on heroic fantasy. This time we range from Hyborian age Africa through the middle ages through the correspondence of two wizards to—the very edge of the world!

Not only that, but volume five is already bought, compiled, in publisher's hands—and I am out of business as editor, again.

Charles Saunders seems to write lots of stories about Imaro and publishes them everywhere hf is published. That's semiprofessionally, for the most part—and one of those turned up in a Year's Best volume. This is not his first professional appearance then. Nor will it be his last (and that's a cliché, and it's true).

This Imaro tale is the one I like best. Saunders and I have an odd history; we had a sort of argument-by-mail a couple of years ago. Rather quietly, without truly arguing, each of us taught the other something. When I later met him up in Toronto, I was glad that I'd not been overly obstreperous. Charles Saunders, who is not Chuck or Charlie, is big enough to—as we say in Kentucky—go bear huntin' with a switch.

We met in a bar—where I seem to hold converse with an inordinate number of people—and liked each other and demonstrated our respect for Canadian brewers. Saunders lives in that end of America, yes. I had long since decided that I wanted to publish "Mai-Kulala"; I love the writing as much as the story, and that is important to me. Charles Saunders hopes to sell an anthology of hf stories by various writers that will feature stories set in areas seldom written of—and peopled by protagonists other than the blue-eyed blonds or Gaels. I hope he does. Over around Nyanza, with un-blond Imaro, is a good place to start.

MAI-KULALA

by Charles R. Saunders

It was a nondescript village, of unmapped location and uncertain sovereignty. By some it was considered to lie near the north shore of the Great Nyanza, the inland fresh-water sea of Nyumbani. Others held that it lay east of Ashanti, or south of Bornu; not that the matter was of particular concern to those two kingdoms.

To the inhabitants of the village, which they called Kulala, the chief point of geographical reference was neither sea nor warrior kingdom. It was the grim green rampart of the rain forest—the Ituri Kubwa, which walled off the northwest boundary of their meager lands.

Rarely did wayfarers appear in Kulala. And never

before had its insular folk encountered any the like of the stranger who was striding boldly up the dusty footpath that served as the road to Kulala. He was a tall man, tall as a giant, or even the Sky Walkers of times older than ancient. For all his height, the stranger was of massive physique, with thews that perfectly balanced power and litheness.

He was an outlander; that was obvious enough, with his horned, spired helmet of Zanjian vintage and mesh-mail cuirass that could only have been made in Azania. These were faraway mercantile lands that faced the restless waves of the Bahari Mashiriki—the Eastern Ocean. Yet the string of lion teeth about his thick neck and the *marozi*-skin girding his loins signalled the untamed; the barbaric. Predatory flame burned within his jet-black eyes, reinforcing an impression of latent menace. . . .

His umber skin was similar in shade to that of the Kulalans and most other peoples of this region of the continent. But the harsh cast of his thick-featured face differed noticeably from the softer lines prevalent here.

The sword that hung from a baldric of elephant-hide slapped rhythmically against the stranger's thigh as he came closer to the rickety palisade surrounding Kulala. At best, the protection the wooden barrier afforded was dubious.

Suddenly a pack of half-jackal curs exploded in a yapping mass from the gate of the palisade. Their intent was evident—but a single glare from the giant's eyes and a gesture of his hand toward his swordhilt sent the dogs cringing back to the safety of their masters' *kibandas*.

The stranger was not accosted again as he walked through the gate. Discreetly the dwellers of Kulala came

toward him, stopping at a respectful distance lest he draw his blade. Their darting eyes surveyed him with guarded awe. This giant was larger than the big men of the Soudanic empires and fiercer-looking than the dreaded soldiers of Ashanti. The Kulalans speculated that he was a *muaji*, a mercenary whose sword, if not his loyalty, was for hire. Their suspicions were correct.

For his part the *muaji*, whose name was Imaro, noted that the people crowding near him appeared fearful—to the extent their apathy would permit. Their worn bark-cloth garments hung from frames uncommonly gaunt. Other than the anxiety haunting their eyes, little seemed to distinguish the Kulalans from scores of other farming tribes scattered between the Ituri Kubwa and the shores of the Nyanza.

An older man, who retained a vestige of dignity beyond his hollow cheeks and apprehensive eyes, stepped closer and addressed Imaro in a curious dialect of the Dogue tongue:

"*Yambo*, Warrior. We of Kulala welcome you. Might we do something for you?"

"Food. A mount. And the way to Bornu," Imaro replied. He spoke laconically, as though Dogue were a new language for him. "For the food and the mount I can give you cowries."

"We can offer you food, and you need not part with your cowries for it," the spokesman replied. "Unfortunately, we have no mounts. We of Kulala have no use for them, and no wild herds roam nearby. As for the way to Bornu, there are two: the quickest and the best."

"What do you mean?" Imaro demanded. He was in no mood for riddles, and his scowl showed it.

"The quickest way is through the Ituri Kubwa," the

spokesman explained, sensing Imaro's impatience. "The forest yonder is but a small finger of the whole Ituri. A warrior like you could reach the borderlands of Bornu in only three days' march. Three more would bring you to the capital, Jebbel Uri. The other, longer route is the Elephant Road. It skirts the Ituri Kubwa, and will take you to Bornu in ten days' march."

"Why is the quickest way not the best?" Imaro asked.

"There are terrible dangers in the forest," the Kulalan quavered, wringing his slender hands. "Monstrous beasts . . . quicksand . . . death-dealing plants. . . . Even the Bambuti pygmies, who have always dwelt in the Ituri, avoid this area. . . ."

The memory of a Bambuti he knew brought a quick grin to Imaro's lips. Then he gazed beyond the village to the green barrier to the North, and the smile faded. An Ilyassai plainsman by birth, he did not relish spending so much time in the confines of the dense rain forest. Yet he also did not care to take a detour that could lose him several days of time. The war between Bornu and Kaneem, in which he hoped to sell his skill with a blade, might well be settled by then.

He made his decision. He would brave the Ituri Kubwa. Scornfully he dismissed the old man's warning. What did these weaponless weaklings know of an area they had neither the will nor courage to explore and conquer?

* * *

A man of the wide yellow plains south of the Great Nyanza, Imaro felt uncomfortable, *enclosed* by the multitude of trees interwoven with lianas, moss and

bright parasitic blooms. His ears were annoyed by the background noise of birds, monkeys and insects. Yet even the Ituri Kubwa seemed a better place at times than the stone towers of the walled-in jungle called civilization. Still, it was toward civilization Imaro was so laboriously beating his way.

Dusk was deepening. Imaro knew it would soon be time to seek a comfortable perch. One particular forest patriarch caught his attention. Its enormous bole appeared solid enough to withstand the battering of an elephant. His choice made, Imaro strode toward the huge tree.

A cracking of twigs caused Imaro to stiffen in alarm. His four-foot blade rasped from its sheath as the warrior made ready to meet whatever man or beast was about to confront him.

From behind the thick tree trunk a gigantic, shaggy bulk emerged. Imaro's dark eyes went wide in disbelief. Until now, the flame-eyed monstrosity facing him was only a thing of legend—now the legend stood imbued with frightful life!

In his far travels he had heard of the *nandi*—the giant bear-dog of elder times. No one had seen a *nandi* for more than two hundred rains; thus they were assumed to have passed into legend.

What swayed before Imaro was no legend. The beast's snarling canine face was framed by flopping, houndlike ears. Its bulky, bearlike form was larger than a lion's, and its mighty paws were armed with long, lethal talons that were fitting counterparts to its dripping fangs.

Thunderous growls reverberated deep in the *nandi*'s chest as it lumbered toward Imaro. The *muaji* wasted no further time wondering why he was being menaced by a

creature that shouldn't have existed. His survival depended on—

Action! Uttering the startling Ilyassai war-cry, Imaro attacked. His tactics were neither foolhardy nor suicidal. His speed was as the lightning; he could strike a damaging blow with his sword, then leap out of range to strike again. Rearing up on its hind legs, the *nandi* raised its paw to slap down the man-creature that dared to fall upon it. . . .

Suddenly a strange sound lanced through the Ituri; a sound that halted both man and beast in mid-movement. It was like the sweet, plaintive warbling of a thousand songbirds. The song lasted a long moment, during which all movement was stilled. When the ethereal melody ended, the *nandi* dropped back to all fours and ambled back into the depths of the forest. And Imaro's sword dropped from fingers gone suddenly slack.

For now he saw the singer of the song. Like a phantom, the singer had materialized from the gathering shadows.

It was a woman—no, more than a woman, just as the notes that had been shaped in her throat had been more than mere song. Imaro stood captivated, held rapt and motionless by the dreamlike vision approaching him, gliding with fluid steps across the leaf-littered ground.

Her body was innocent of clothing or ornamentation; on her such decoration would have been defilement. Her lithe form was slender and elongated, like an impala's, or the matchless figures carved in ebony by the sculptors of Dogon. Her skin was smooth and black, like the satin from which midnight is woven. Imaro's spellbound eyes wandered from long slender legs to small breasts tipped with points of obsidian, to a face that was a masterpiece of wide, full lips, flaring nose, high-planed cheekbones,

large, fathomless eyes. A cap of woolly black hair clung close to her small head, mounted on a long, graceful neck.

So impossibly beautiful was this woman of the forest that many moments passed before Imaro realized that her song was stilled. The thoughts that fled behind her pensive eyes only the woman herself knew. Her—and one Other. . . .

Not this one, she pleaded in silent mindspeech. Not this time; not this one. He is not like the others; weak, spineless creatures who hide behind puny palisades and flickering night-fires. This one is as a lion among dogs. He awakens what I thought long dead in my soul. Not this one. . . .

A sibilant, unhuman Voice slithered cold and serpent-like across the surface of her mind:

It is done.

* * *

Like a beast after a rainstorm, Imaro shook off the last lingering effects of the paralysis the song had induced. Then, being a man of action, he reached for the naked forest woman. Without effort, she eluded his grasp.

Half-angrily, the Ilyassai growled, "Who are you, woman? Who are you, that you can tame a *nandi* and leave a warrior stiff as a statue with the same song?"

The woman answered with a smile. Then she began to dance.

Her willowy body swayed as gracefully as a reed in a gentle breeze. She undulated in a way that sent desire flaming through Imaro's blood. Her feet pounded out a soft, sensuous rhythm upon the forest floor as she communicated in the most ancient language of the

peoples of Nyumbani—the language of dance, the idiom of the body . . .

Imaro responded in kind. Even the war-loving Ilyassai shared in the universal tradition of the dance. His cuirass and accoutrements suddenly seemed intolerably confining; they clinked to the ground as he ripped them from his body. He bounded to the forest woman's side and joined her in the age-old dance that was the life-beat of a continent.

Despite the bulk of his chest, shoulders and arms, there was a feline grace to Imaro's movements as he mimicked the stalk of a panther seeking prey. The woman's retreat provoked his passions to a higher pitch . . . he leaped, and gathered the forest woman in his arms.

Gently he bore her to the soft green sward. He showered hot, barbaric kisses onto her lips and shoulders and breasts. Moaning softly in the memory of pleasures almost forgotten, the forest woman circled Imaro's neck with her arms and began the oldest dance of all. . . .

Later, after night had long since fallen and their bodies lay limned by the pale glow of Mwesu the moon, Imaro asked once again:

"Who are you? Are you a spirit of the Ituri? No . . . no spirit was ever clothed in flesh like yours."

"I am called Mai-Kulala," she replied.

"Mai-Kulala . . ." Imaro repeated. "Queen of the Kulala, the people of the village. How is it that a queen can live in such isolation from her people?"

A hint of sorrow rippled briefly in Mai-Kulala's eyes.

"Let us not discuss that now, Warrior," she said. "Are there not better things to do than talk?"

Her warm, wide mouth forestalled further conversation.

* * *

A month went by in Mai-Kulala's forest domain. For Imaro the time passed swiftly, as if in a dream. Yet he also felt that he had spent a lifetime in this world of green shadows. Never before had he known the pleasure and contentment Mai-Kulala offered him. He had been a barbarian warrior, a slave, a leader of bandits, and now a *muaji*—in such an existence, joy was a thing to be sipped quickly, seldom savored. Even now he felt restless from time to time, though his resolve to seek war in Bornu and his quest for Cush were losing intensity day by day.

Despite their intimacy, Mai-Kulala remained a mystery. She was at one with the Ituri. Timid animals like the monkey, the hare and the excessively shy *dik-dik* not only failed to flee her approach; they actively sought her company and protection. And savage beasts of prey like the leopard and the hunting-ape fawned upon her like pampered palace pets.

But Imaro found it necessary to walk warily and keep his hand close to his sword-hilt, for the creatures of the Ituri did not extend to him their devotion to Mai-Kulala. He was especially alert in the presence of the intractable *nandi*, for he knew the bear-dog hated him for usurping its place in Mai-Kulala's affections. . . .

The time was approaching when Mwesu the moon would again wax in fullness. And as the days slipped by, Mai-Kulala was becoming increasingly moody and withdrawn. Though she continued to respond ardently to his lovemaking, Imaro was aware that she had taken to

glancing at him with something akin to regret in her eyes. When he questioned her, she either changed the subject or remained sorrowfully silent.

The day of Mwesu's fullness came. In the waning sunlight, Mai-Kulala seemed especially troubled, but she succeeded in masking her emotions as she fed Imaro a repast of forest fruits. A meat eater by nature, the Ilyassai had growled in annoyance when Mai-Kulala pleaded with him not to kill any of the creatures of her realm for food. He had agreed; her tear-filled eyes had accomplished what threat or command could never do. Still, Imaro was a hunter as well as a warrior; abstinence from both pursuits caused him discontent in Mai-Kulala's paradise.

In a sullen mood, Imaro consumed large quantities of Mai-Kulala's offerings, barely noticing the unfamiliar sweetish taste of it. Only when dizzy blackness closed in from the edges of his vision did he realize that the strange taste was more than unusual. But by then, realization was all he could do. . . .

Before he crumpled unconscious onto the ground, Imaro looked at Mai-Kulala and in a choking voice asked: "Why?"

She only shook her head, tears tracking silver down her black cheeks. Clenching her small fists, she raised her face skyward, a dark-casting of grief.

Not this time, she importuned once again. *Please, not this time.*

But this time her only answer was an ominous, chilling silence. Then the *change* began . . . sobbing bitterly, Mai-Kulala fled from Imaro's inert form.

* * *

When Imaro awakened, the moon had risen high in the night sky, washing the Ituri in a pale, silvery glow. Snapping instantly to full awareness, he realized that he lay in the same glade that was the scene of his first encounter with Mai-Kulala. Besides the usual nocturnal murmur of the forest, there were two other sounds. One was a low, resonant growl; the other the soft weeping of a terrified girl.

The growl issued from the throat of the *nandi*. The bear-dog's long muzzle was wrapped about the forearm of a trembling Kulala girl. Just barely nubile, she shared the strange gauntness endemic to her people. She shuddered in the grip of pure and abject terror

Yet the focus of her fear was not the *nandi*, even though its great fangs were fastened firmly upon her flesh. The beast was merely detaining her; certainly it would have devoured her long since had that been its intention. For whom—or *what*—Imaro asked himself, was the *nandi* holding her?

His instincts told him not to wait for the answer. He reached to his side; the sword was still there. His hand gripped the hilt gratefully. Mai-Kulala had, he thought, left him that much

The night shadows were split asunder by Imaro's wild cry of challenge. The *nandi* responded in kind, beast to barbarian. Freeing the Kulala girl from the grip of its jaws, the bear-dog rose to its full height, towering over Imaro. Its roar shook the leaves of the trees; it lumbered forth like a hairy juggernaut, bent on obliterating this man-thing who was stronger than most, yet still puny next to itself.

Like a great furry maul, the *nandi*'s paw hooked toward the Ilyassai's head. Imaro's sword flashed faster,

whistling in an arc that ended in a trail of blood as the *nandi*'s severed paw tumbled to the earth. The *nandi* bellowed in pain—while launching its other paw faster than Imaro thought possible. The Ilyassai twisted away from the blow, but his move was a split second too late.

Had the bear-dog's paw landed full-force, Imaro's brains would have leaked in a gray pulp from a shattered skull. The blow was only a glancing one—the warrior landed sprawling a dozen feet away. As his sword flew from his hand, Imaro struggled grimly to prevent consciousness from fleeing as well.

Roaring in rage and agony, the *nandi* charged the fallen *muaji*. Imaro looked up dizzily to see the colossal bulk of the bear-dog looming like a mountain—a mountain that would momentarily bring him death.

Only Imaro's preternatural reflexes saved him then. Desperately he pinwheeled out of the way of the *nandi*'s smashing paw. He scrambled swiftly to his feet. He bared his teeth in a grimace nearly as savage as the monster's as his pain-blurred eyes searched for his sword. When he saw it, his heart sank.

The weapon lay a good twenty feet away, its blade glinting in bright mockery in the moonlight. Between the sword and Imaro stood the ten-foot mass of the maddened bear-dog.

Again the *nandi* charged, blood gushing from the ruin of its forepaw while it shambled forward on its stumpy hind legs. Imaro retreated. Even for a man of his strength, a barehanded grapple with this beast would prove suicidally foolish. He needed another weapon—now!

Then he spotted the great log nearby. Without hesitation he rushed over to it, grasped its edges in his

hands, and heaved upward. With a sinew-straining effort, the Ilyassai raised his burden high above his head. Before the dull-witted *nandi* could realize what Imaro was about to do, the warrior hurled the heavy log straight at the head of the onrushing monster. All the thrusting power of his arms, back and legs powered the missile; it struck with a loud thud. Tottering off-balance, the *nandi* crashed heavily to the ground, where it lay momentarily stunned.

His opportunity made, Imaro rushed past the fallen beast and snatched up his sword as if it were as precious as the Queen-Jewel of Cush. In his current situation, it was. Once again he faced the *nandi*.

The bear-dog had recovered quickly, throwing the log aside as though it were only a stick. Fixing Imaro with a red-eyed glare, the *nandi* rolled to all fours. It was then that the beast's instinct betrayed it. One foot gone, it fell again, snarling in frustration as it floundered on the forest floor.

Imaro struck. Springing like a great black panther, he straddled the *nandi*'s broad back. With both hands, he drove his swordpoint cleanly through the thick fur of its neck. A sharp snap signalled severed vertebrae. The *nandi* uttered one piercing shriek, thrashed its limbs in a furious spasm, then lay still. The struggle of titans was over.

Imaro was the victor—yet his triumph rang hollow and meaningless in his aching mind. He staggered a little as he rose from where he had thrown himself to avoid the *nandi*'s death-throes. He surveyed the clearing—and cursed explosively upon discovering that the Kulala girl had not had the sense to flee while he'd distracted the monster.

Then he noticed that the girl was staring with wide, bulging eyes at something beyond the clearing. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the Ilyassai turned.

She crouched like a skulking beast at the edge of the clearing, distorted body outlined by a ghostly nimbus of moonlight. Demon-fires smouldered in her crimson eyes. Her lips pulled back in a snarl that revealed sharp, carnivorous teeth. Shaggy beast-hair blurred the lines of her lean, powerful frame. Despite the hideous misshaping of feature and form, Imaro knew that the feral thing that was even now beginning to creep forward was Mai-Kulala. . . .

Imaro positioned himself between the advancing Mai-Kulala and the sobbing girl. A low, bestial moan escaped the writhing lips of Mai-Kulala. Pain shot through Imaro's soul at the chilling contrast between that sound and the lilting music of the voice he knew.

Conflict raged inside the were-thing. She had no wish to harm Imaro; even in this bestial form, she loved him. She desired only to assuage the awful hunger within her, and only the blood of the girl Imaro unaccountably protected could do that. No, she did not want to harm the Ilyassai, who stood like an ebon monolith in Mwesu's glow. But the insistent hunger was swiftly overpowering her will, forcing her to act.

Weary though he was from the fight with the *nandi*, Imaro was still confident that he could slay Mai-Kulala if he had to. He had learned through harrowing experience that when the supernatural undertook to assume natural form, it then became vulnerable to the weapons of man. True, it would take a great deal of killing to destroy such a thing as Mai-Kulala had become, but the deed could be done. . . .

Imaro threw down his sword.

He knew he could not slay Mai-Kulala, despite the loathsome shape she now wore. Yet he could not allow her to feast on the innocent girl's blood. He himself was a killer, but he had sworn to oppose the workings of the Mashataan, the Demon Gods, and in this form Mai-Kulala could only be a thing of the Mashataan. To abandon the wretched girl to Kulala's fangs was as unacceptable as killing Mai-Kulala.

For a fleeting moment, Mai-Kulala hesitated. To reach her prey, she would have to slay Imaro, for she knew she could get past him no other way. Her lambent beast-eyes met Imaro's steady stare. Something flickered between them, then faded. She threw back her head and uttered a cry of such abysmal despair that the Ituri fell silent as its echoes died.

Then she sprang catlike into the boughs of a nearby tree. With catlike speed, she began to climb. In a searing burst of insight, Imaro realized what Mai-Kulala planned to do. And he knew that all his strength, all his prowess, would in the end prove powerless. . . .

"No!" he cried aloud, as if his shout could halt Mai-Kulala's ascent. Quickly she reached the top of the tree, which was so lofty that her figure was but a dot in the lattice of branches too light to bear a weight such as Imaro's.

Then the dot detached itself from the lattice and descended rapidly to earth, increasing in size as it hurtled downward.

"No!" Imaro cried again, his voice breaking in anguish. A sickening smack signalled Mai-Kulala's collision with the unyielding earth. She lay like a broken plaything, limbs sprawled and askew. She was dead.

With heavy footsteps, Imaro approached Mai-Kulala's

body. In death, the outlines of her bestial shape had disappeared, leaving a naked, broken human corpse. Her face, though, remained unmarked. Her expression was sad—and infinitely peaceful.

Imaro was a fierce man, hardly less so than the *nandi* he had slain. But the tenderness with which he cradled Mai-Kulala's shattered body was genuine. Raising his tortured face to the moon, the warrior voiced a terrible cry of lamentation. Then he pressed his face against Mai-Kulala's still breast and succumbed to deep, wracking, silent sobs, the first time he had done so since the day he had been taught that warriors do not weep.

When he looked up again, Imaro saw that the Kulala girl was gone. She had finally fled back to her village. Imaro swore a bleak oath, then used his sword to hack a grave from the forest floor.

* * *

The gate to Kulala burst violently asunder. Standing in the jagged opening his foot had made, Imaro presented a grim and terrible appearance. His huge, nearly-naked form was spattered with the glare of the night-fires of the village. A grim, implacable expression lay like a mask over his heavy features.

The people shrank fearfully from him as he stalked into the central square, his sword hanging like a harbinger of death from his hand. Waiting for him was the same elder he had spoken to a long, long month ago.

"You baited me into going into the forest," Imaro said.

The old man nodded.

Imaro's hand flicked out lightly, as if to remove a speck of dust from the Kulalan's cheek. A loud crack followed;

the old man fell as if he'd been hit with a knobstick. No one else moved.

Towering above the fallen man, Imaro bit out a single terse question: "Why?"

The elder's gaze did not waver from the Ilyassai's blazing stare. When he began talking, it was as though he were speaking to himself as much as Imaro.

"Not long ago, there lived among us a girl who loved the Ituri Kubwa. No one knew why; not even the mother and father she drew away from, or the young warriors whose bride-gifts she spurned. But the Ituri was still a dangerous place for her. Not all its dwellers shared her love. More than anything else, she desired to live in the forest in safety from the more dangerous beasts: the leopard and the *nandi*. Unknown to the rest of us, she sought the path of the Forbidden; the ways of the Mashataan. One dark, terrible night, she made contact with one of the Demon Gods. An unholy pact was made. The girl gained mastery over all living things in the Ituri Kubwa, and could at last live in harmony with the forest she loved.

"But the price! The Mashataan demanded something in return for its gift—at the fullness of the moon each month, the girl became a vessel for the evil of the Mashataan. She transformed into a *mwanga*, a were-thing that drinks the blood of humans. She was a creature of the Mashataan; a haunter of the forest she could not leave. For the Mashataan had decreed that she could not live outside the confines of the Ituri.

"Without the blood she craved she would have lost all the humanity left in her. So we aided her. She was still of our people, even though she rejected us. We sent sacrifices to her every full moon. When strangers came

to our land, we sent them rather than one of our own. You were such a stranger, *muaji*."

"Why did you do nothing to save her from the curse?" Imaro demanded, his tone tinged with contempt. "Are you not men? Didn't you even *try*?"

He turned away then, for with a sudden bitter pang, he realized that he himself had not tried to prevent Mai-Kulala from taking her own life.

The Kulala elder rose to his feet.

"I am a man," he said quietly. "Once I—all of us—were more than we are now. But I could do nothing to endanger Mai-Kulala's life. She was my daughter."

Imaro's contempt had already faded. In its place was empathy, and a measure of understanding. If this man loved Mai-Kulala as much as he had. . . .

He lowered the menacing point of his sword and placed a huge hand on the Kulalan's shoulder.

"She's at peace now," he said, knowing that the other knew what he meant.

Then he turned and departed the village of Kulala, setting his path once again for Bornu—this time by way of the Elephant Road.

Jeff Swycaffer—that's Sw-eye-calf-er—sent me two stories about ten minutes after I returned his NOW postcard, a fact that did not make me too happy. I soon forgot that; the stories made me happy. Both are utterly different and completely delightful. This one's a medieval story, though somehow the era and the locale seems to have been twisted. Moebiously, perhaps; certainly not morbidly. Swycaffer likes that longish period and claims a preference even for medieval music.

The two thieves he herein presents are a bit unlikely, both in size and talents. So is Jeff Swycaffer. And now meet Daran and Caroline, in the inn with the utterly damndest name!

AT THE SIGN OF THE BRASS BREAST

by Jeff P. Swycaffer

CHAPTER ONE

Muddled meetings

or

The watcher, the seer, and the unseen

They met in the Brass Breast, a bar and hostel in Genoa. The place was smoky, disorganized, and large enough for two companies of the Duke's troopers to be roomed, stabled, and fed with little discomfort. It had

happened on at least two occasions.

It was in this inn's common room that Sledge, the cruel necromancer of Lake Balaton, had transformed thirty-two customers into silver and gold chesspieces. It was in this inn's best bedroom that the Duke's eldest son had been discovered in bed with the stableboy. The place had been blessed by the Archbishop of Prague for having cured his insomnia. (The Archbishop's ale had been drugged, and so he was cured of a severe case of gold coinage as well.)

Indeed, most of the inn's popularity stemmed from the Archbishop's blessing, but not in the way that he had intended. He had been quite old and very incompetent when he laid the blessing, an invocation of great difficulty. For this reason all the best riff-raff and all the merchants, all the caravan masters and sea-captains, all the clerks, gossips, and scribes, and all of the relatives, servants, and hangers-on attached to the aforementioned; everyone that could pay the two silvers for door charge . . . all came here on any given night to see what would go wrong next.

The crashing of a tray of dishes was ignored; a serving wench falling out of her dress was commonplace (but well received); the thrashing of a careless pickpocket was not worth applause or hisses, and a fist fight between less than seven men was barely enough to provoke betting, let alone any kind of intervention from the bouncers.

Once a month, on the average, a duel erupted between two magicians, and it was this that drew the biggest crowds. Any time two sorcerers were in the common room, all customers present did their utmost to provoke them to mutual hostility. If, by luck, there *was* a challenge, a mandatory half-hour wait followed, not by

any means to allow tempers to cool off, but to allow the crowd to triple its size and place as many bets as possible. (The house took a three per cent cut and held the money.)

At midnight Daran walked into the inn. He was a travelling illusionist, juggler, mind reader, and amateur hypnotist. Being by birth a sea creature, he could also see in the dark and breathe under water, but unless one saw the gills under his arms, one would never suspect.

His juggling was only fair, and any magician of the seventh rank or lower could see through his illusions with his mind closed. For Daran to open up his act in the common room of the Brass Breast would, even at the best of times, be throwing himself to the sharks. Tonight was particularly bad, moreover, for there had just been a duel between two fifth rank magicians, the local favorite had lost, and half the pouches in the place were flat.

Daran, however, a born showman, did not immediately start his performance. Instead he sat at a table and surveyed the crowd. As he watched, an aged man with an unkempt white beard sat down next to him, introduced himself as "Williams," and launched into an impassioned account of the evening's duel.

"No sooner," said, he, "had Bannett, the Frenchman, tossed his opening insult at Giassi, our local boy, than Giassi gives old Bannett the finger. Next Giassi thumbs his nose and gives Bannett the sign of the horns with his left hand."

"Don't your magicians duel with magic?" Daran asked, but the oldster continued.

"Then while Bannett is sticking out his tongue, Giassi totally upstages him by spitting on Bannett's cloak."

"But . . ." Daran tried to interrupt; Williams kept on.

"Now Giassi is clearly ahead on points, but Bannett is older, and perhaps knows a few tricks. Sure enough, he calls out: 'Your father ran swine for the Spanish!' This is a very good move, but Giassi counters by spitting again, this time in Bannett's eye."

Daran ignored the old man and addressed one of the two others at the table. "Is this man deaf?"

"Yep," the other replied. "Deaf as a mule dropping."

"Don't your magicians duel with magic?" Daran asked again.

"Of course; right after Giassi spat in Bannett's eye, Bannett turned him into a mango."

Daran had nothing to say.

Williams was finishing up. "Took a big bite out of him, spat out the seeds, and tossed him into the stew pot."

At one o'clock in the morning, while the revelry was still at its peak, two persons entered the smoke-filled room. Through the main door strode Bannett, who paused, swirled his cloak, and fixed the crowd with a menacing stare. He had just returned from the House of the Union of Magicians, where he had registered the time and circumstances of Giassi's death. Behind him, close as a shadow and as unnoticed, floated Caroline, the original invisible flying girl and thief extraordinaire.

She had made a name for herself as a pickpocket and second story worker, and was efficiently learning the trade of lockpicking. This last skill seemed almost redundant; she was continually surprised at how many people neglected to lock their second story windows.

She was here at the inn tonight to see if she could pick a few over-ripe pouches. Although fully eight others in the room were also seeking to lift purses and slit pockets, she was the only invisible thief in town.

By two o'clock in the morning the crowd remained, although it was becoming discontented. Caroline had lifted seven gold-laden pouches with consummate skill, a good night's haul. Daran had abandoned his plans of performing, and had settled down quietly to cheat at poker with a small group of soused merchants. Bannett had become sullen with drink, and was blearily looking for trouble.

At six minutes after two, trouble walked into the room in the form of Sodno, magician fourth rank, and brother to the dead Giassi.

The crowd rallied. It had started to applaud the possible savior and deliverer from an otherwise boring anticlimax of an evening, when, ignoring all conventions, Sodno marched straight up to Bannett and bit him viciously on the nose. Bannett howled unimaginatively. Caroline wisely floated toward an exit.

Sodno screamed an incantation at the top of his lungs, and drew his hands back for a powerful magic stroke. Bannett hastily and desperately invoked his anti-magic defense, a cancellation spell of great power.

Sparks flew. The air in the room flashed crimson and became nine degrees warmer. Three people fainted. The bartender tripped over the cat. One hundred and forty pounds, six feet and one inch of beautiful female pickpocket fell five feet and four inches and landed on one very surprised and presently very unconscious illusionist, juggler, and mindreader (who had been bluffing shamelessly while holding a pair of threes.)

Daran came to startled consciousness with a sore and stiff neck, his aching head resting in Caroline's lap. They were near the mouth of a narrow alley, illuminated by a burning cresset set in the corner of a bulky building that

formed one wall of the alley.

He sat up slowly, neck joint and lower back noisily protesting, and surveyed his rescuer. He saw a tall muscular girl, young, with smooth brown skin and long foamy black hair. She was clad in a close-fitting shirt, and wore trousers cut off above the knee. From her wide belt hung eight pouches of various styles, and a long knife in a hard leather scabbard.

Caroline looked at the man she had retrieved from the trample and confusion in the bar, and saw a tall, wide-shouldered traveller, young, with black hair and an honest face. From the examination she had made of his knapsack and its contents, she knew him to be a juggler, illusionist, travelling showman, and in no great financial security.

"Thank you for getting me out," he said, eyeing his pouch hanging from her belt. "Who are you, and what happened?"

Appropriate introductions were made.

"Who won the duel?" Daran asked, seeking to gain time.

"Well, Bannett turned Sodno into a sea-slug, and then he—"

"—I don't think I want to hear about it," Daran hastily interrupted. He tried to stand up, but his legs were weak.

"Sit down and rest," Caroline said, "and I'll show you how to play poker." She produced the cards that Daran and the merchants had been using. "Here, this was yours; two threes, Jack high. The pot was fifty-four silver pieces, plus the grain merchant's ring, which I'd value at about twelve silvers. Now I just happen to have it all here . . ." She dumped the money and ring onto the

alley's pavement.

Daran was suitably impressed.

"Now," she began. "If you keep playing as you have been, you'll go broke fast. Nobody can stay lucky. Let me show you what you should have done . . ."

Daran decided to confide in her. "Caroline," he interrupted, "if you give me back my pouch, and half the pot here, I'll tell you how I play lousy poker and still stay lucky."

"It couldn't hurt," she said watchfully. "It's a deal."

"I'm a mindreader."

She looked at him a moment, then asked, "Can you tell me how many lumps I'm thinking of giving you?"

After a few minutes of experimentation she was convinced. Her quick thief's mind immediately started to dream up complicated plans for using this windfall.

"Let me walk you home . . ."

The next five weeks passed quickly, and the pair accumulated an impressive record of larceny. Caroline advanced rapidly within the brotherhood of thieves, who knew nothing of her methods, only of her successes. Daran moved into a small but clean boarding house, and gave street performances at juggling and knife throwing. On Saturday nights they went to the Brass Breast to pick pockets and cheat moderately at poker. While this was rewarding, their main income came from the odd jobs they pulled off at other times.

To caravan masters, merchants, and sea captains they sold the itineraries and cargo lists of competitors: the customers paid gladly while never dreaming that Daran was meanwhile picking their brains for equally salable information.

They intercepted the bribes between Erasmus, the

richest (and most dishonest) carpenter in town, and the housing inspector, causing a falling out between the two. Before the break came, however, they invested heavily with the second richest (and second most dishonest) carpenter in town on a profit sharing basis.

Claiming divine inspiration, Daran made a small fortune predicting which churches would display what miracles on Sunday mornings. None of the priests dared reveal him for fear of revealing the church's tricked up miracles as well. When Daran began to predict correctly which miracles would backfire, however, the fathers became firm, and he narrowly missed being run out of town.

Once for three silver bars from a healer, Caroline, invisible, flew quite high and returned with a vulture. For an hour she hovered with the captive bird of ill omen in plain sight over the residence of a rival healer.

They took up the horoscope casting-palm reading-seance performing racket, and began to prosper mightily. Daran, as a medium, would tell the customers what they wanted to know, and then predict good fortune. Caroline, skilled at purse lifting, would plant a silver piece upon the person of the customer. When the lucky beneficiary found the coin, he was certain to tell all of his friends about the marvelous prophecy. This word of mouth advertising was just reaching its peak when they dropped the racket. The primary reason for quitting was the ten per cent cut the local police demanded. Then too, the game was far too easy for the challenge-seeking pair.

They took care, during their operations, that no one was hurt, bankrupted, or given into the hands of either police or rivals. Their robberies stung, but drew no real blood. They were also very careful not to attack powerful

groups, or anyone who might conceivably hire a magician or wizard to track them down and burn them into small crisps. Nevertheless they did have some close calls, and made a number of dangerous enemies.

Thus at sunrise on a Thursday morning, the city watch pulled Daran from his bed. He was dragged ignominiously to the trebly guarded deeps of the city prison. Thrown into an extremely secure cell, he was chained tightly to the wall. He felt no fear, however, knowing that Caroline would hear of this and rescue him, whether by stealth or by bribery. He tried to rest.

Caroline woke, climbed from bed, and rinsed her face in a basin of cold water. She looked thoughtfully at herself in the mirror above her bedtable and spoke to the image. "You only like him because he's a good worker with a good gimmick. You have absolutely no romantic interest in him." She turned away from the reflected image and cursed quietly. "I never could lie to her . . ." and cried until she got hiccups.

For a thief she was very sentimental, and always cried at weddings and engagements.

By coincidence, Daran had, last night, made just the same discovery about his feelings toward her, and had immediately rushed out and stolen an engagement ring. He felt that she would like the gesture. When he returned to his home, though, he discovered that he didn't have the nerve to propose and so had, blushing and cursing, hidden it deep within his mattress.

In the prison, time passed wearily.

At noon, a guard entered with a bowl of ground meal, and announced in lofty tones, "Dinner is served." He then added brightly, "May I recommend the house wine? A sparkling alpine pinot blanc, although not properly

aged, I fear.” He produced a tin cup full of somewhat brown water.

“You are obviously smarter than an average snail,” Daran mused. “Why are you working as a prison guard if you aren’t qualified?”

The guard replied, with a friendly grin, “The mayor wanted a man of culture to be his official torturer.” He made a deep bow. “Oh by the way, I myself prepared this sumptuous repast for your delectation, using my considerable skill as a creative artist. I do hope you will enjoy it.”

In the morning the bowl and cup were still on the floor beside Daran. He ignored them. The gruel looked up at him with large round eyes and whimpered to be picked up and cuddled. Daran told it to shut up. It shut.

Caroline, meanwhile, on Thursday midmorning, flew at top speed to Daran’s home, where she intended to propose to him while holding him off the ground in a rib-crushing bear hug. She then planned to haul him off to the nearest recording clerk for a brief wedding ceremony (to be made even briefer by a small bribe.) Next she would rent or steal a horse, cart, supplies, and a small tent, and head for the wild woods where she knew of a private campsite. After that . . . well, he’d think of something.

She hurtled through his window, scarcely pausing to open it, and whistled piercingly.

Then she saw the obvious signs of the morning’s struggle, and realised what must have happened. Her hand grasped her dagger. Her bosom heaved and she literally saw red as her vision misted over with thoughts of bloody revenge; Hell hath no fury like a woman robbed.

She ran down the stairs and wrung the story from the startled and confused landlady. Rushing out into the street, she commandeered a horse, leaving a bewildered messenger sprawled in the mud. He cursed sputteringly as she spurred the horse down the street.

It took her until sundown on Saturday to prepare her assault on the prison. She left the stolen horse tied at a corner near the massive block building, and with a large bag slung over her shoulder, stalked toward the main entrance.

She stopped just out of sight of the doorway, and from her bag pulled five huge hairy tarantulas. Each of them, although dead and stuffed, presented an impressive appearance. She dabbed all forty of their legs with glue, and, straightening, disappeared. Minutes later she reappeared at the same spot, and walked calmly toward the gate guards, a silver whistle in her hand. The guards, upon seeing her, raised their pikes and suspiciously watched her approach.

"Hello good sirs," she greeted them cheerfully. "Why do you keep such horrible monsters as pets?"

"What do you mean?" asked one guard.

"Those enormous devils riding between your shoulder-blades, of course." The guards gaped at the sight of the enormous spiders clinging to their backs.

"Be careful!" she warned. "Don't touch them. If you make any sudden or violent moves they will certainly bite. They also," she raised the whistle, "will bite if they hear a certain musical pitch." The guards stood apprehensively. To add to their discomfort she described at some length the symptoms of spider bites.

"Now, if one of you will kindly call your captain . . ."

One of the sentries gingerly raised his arm and twitched

a bell rope.

Presently the captain of the prison's night watch appeared. Caroline filled him in. "... So please tell me where Daran, the juggler, is being held."

The captain hesitated, and Caroline lifted the whistle to her lips. The sentries paled further. The captain acquiesced, and gave full instructions. He added nervously, "He's been with the official torturer twice now; once briefly on Thursday, and once Friday afternoon. The third visit is due any time now."

Caroline cursed, then blew the whistle. The sentries panicked, clawing at their backs. The captain did nothing. Caroline found no difficulty in clubbing the frenzied guards into unconsciousness. Their screams had certainly been heard, which aided her plans. With the prison alerted it would be much easier for the invisible girl to slip through doors behind scurrying messengers, captains, and reinforcements.

She hastily examined the rigid form of the captain, and gently plucked a dart from his chest. The dart, blown from her whistle, had been dipped in a highly magical brew that had produced instant paralysis upon contact with his bloodstream. Unfortunately she had only been able, at great expense, to purchase enough of the tarry substance to coat one dart.

She passed through two doors easily, floating low over the heads of exiting guards. At the third door, however, two sentries were playing at dice and ignoring the commotion outside. Just beyond the door was Daran's cell block; she couldn't afford to have any attention drawn to this area. She thought deeply on how to dispose of the guards, then shrugged, and knocked their heads together as they bent over the dice.

She passed the door. Regaining visibility, she quickly found Daran.

He was resting comfortably on a straw mattress, eating heartily from a platter of lamb, and drinking deeply from a goblet of red wine. Sitting across from him, and similarly engaged in a hearty meal, was a large guard.

"Hello," Daran greeted. "I've been expecting you." Caroline gaped, dumbfounded. "Allow me," Daran continued, "to introduce the mayor's torturer, Amory." Amory grinned. Caroline stared blankly. "A very intelligent man, this Amory. I merely told him about my share of our loot hidden in my lodgings, and hinted that there was more available, and he returned with a much warmer attitude toward me." Caroline was still looking at them expressionlessly, but her breath was quickening, and her fists began to clench. "Amory," Daran spoke quickly, "did you bring what I told you was hidden in my mattress?" Amory's grin widened, and he handed Daran the engagement ring. "Now," said Daran to Amory, "watch closely and learn wisdom. Four . . . Three . . . Two . . . One . . ."

"DARAN!" Caroline exploded. "I risk my behind to rescue you, and then you . . . you . . ."

"Will you marry me, Caroline?" Daran asked, holding up the ring.

Fifteen minutes later Amory and Daran came to the top of the secret stairway, and gently set Caroline down.

"How should I have known she would faint?" Daran griped.

"That's not important," Amory consoled him; "she wasn't heavy." They gave each other the handshaking and backslapping fitting to the occasion. In parting, they arranged a time and place for appropriate exchange of bribery, information, and, if necessary, treachery.

Daran stole the nearest horse (by coincidence the same horse that Caroline had tied here earlier for a quick getaway) and draped her across its back. As they walked off he was whistling a tune. (On plague mornings the disposal crew sang to this same tune: "Bring out your dead, two coppers a head.")

The moon rose, leering, from behind a fogbank. Daran leered back.

CHAPTER TWO

Revenge and reunion

or

A night in a large house

They returned to Genoa a month later, after a pleasant honeymoon in the woods. The time had passed in the tradition of wilderness retreats everywhere; they had had a visit from a boar, Daran had been molested by a bee, and Caroline had thrust an arm into poison ivy. In the tradition of honeymoons everywhere, however, they had enjoyed themselves immensely.

They approached the main gate of the city, driving a small cart pulled by their stolen horse. They were in the midst of the large noon crowd as they neared the arch. Although the sun's heat was stifling, a slight breeze from the nearby Mediterranean served to cool sweating backs and steaming tempers. They sang bawdy songs and repeated ancient jests as they clattered over the roughly paved road, and smiled at hurrying merchants and

shouting carters.

Once past the gate they plied the narrow streets until they arrived before the Brass Breast, the inn that meant so much to them. With nearly the last of their ill-gotten gold they stabled the horse and rented a room for a week. They then retired to the bath-house to scrub the road from their hair. Afterward they locked themselves in their room and discussed plans for regaining some of their vanished wealth.

"We know," began Daran, "thanks to our well-paid informant Amory at the prison, that it was the carpenter Erasmus who paid for my arrest."

"We also know," Caroline took up, "that in his massive house, built, incidentally, of stone, he keeps his fortune of gold, silver, gems and blackmail files."

"And," Daran continued gravely, "although his house is known to be well guarded . . ."

"What better way to both score revenge and fatten our thin pouches?" Caroline finished.

They looked at each other and added in unison, "So what if it can't be done!" They laughed gently at this, and Daran stretched out a sheet of parchment. On it he sketched the outlines of Erasmus's palatial home.

That evening at ten o'clock they left the inn by a back window and disappeared into the foggy night. They crossed the streets noiselessly, twice evaded groups of street hoodlums, and hid once from the passage of the night watch. At length they were looking across a narrow street at the rear entrance to the carpenter's house.

No one was in sight when they quietly crossed the street and gingerly tested the door. It was locked and barred.

Caroline tapped Daran gently on the shoulder, pointed

up, and vanished. He knew that she was flying up to test the windows on the second and third floors. He waited.

The rattling of the chain and lock being unlatched from within gave him just enough warning to let him walk calmly past the door, as if he was merely strolling by. The door opened and a voice assaulted him.

"Ho! You! Come here."

Daran turned, touched his chest, and raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "Who, me?" he asked, with all the innocence he could muster.

A burly cook in a stained and oily apron was standing in the doorway. Behind him was a large barrel. "Yes, you. If you give me a hand dumping these slops, I'll give you two coppers. Well?"

"Why, certainly," Daran agreed, quickly seizing the opportunity to enter the house. He assumed that Caroline would be watching and sneak through the open door.

He helped the cook wrestle the slops out to the curb and dump them into the gutter, and then to carry the empty barrel back into the kitchen. The cook handed Daran two greasy copper coins, and escorted him to the door. Instead of passing through the door, however, Daran slammed it shut and whirled to face the scowling cook. He did not notice that the bar dropped into place, locking the door. Believing that Caroline was in the room, he grinned.

Staring the cook in the eye, he spoke to the empty air of the room. "Caroline, please bludgeon this bulking oaf, and then we can get to work."

The cook looked about suspiciously, then grasped from a nearby table a knife fully two feet long.

"Stop him, Caroline!" Daran shouted, his air of

assurance gone.

The cook drew the knife back for a disemboweling stroke, and snarled angrily.

Daran gaped, then rallied, and opened his mind to receive the surface thoughts of the room's occupants. "... I'm alone ..." he gasped, and narrowly dodged the cook's murderous slash.

The cook did not pause after missing with his first blow, but immediately slashed again toward Daran, who was recovering from his frantic leap. This time he dodged only by falling flat on his back on the filthy and rough floor of the kitchen.

As he watched the blade flash above his face, he realized that by reading the cook's mind he could visualize a crimson arc where the knife was about to swing. To survive he must diligently keep his body out of these blood-red curves. Thus he was able to roll quickly to his right just before the knife struck sparks from the flagstones where he had lain. While the cook recovered his balance, Daran scrambled to his feet, and immediately bent double to avoid a ghostly red curve that was quickly followed by a ghostly steel curve.

Only this unfair advantage had kept him alive this long, and soon the superior endurance of the blocky cook would allow a powerful swing to cut him in half. He dodged again.

Caroline, who had been on the other side of the building checking windows, returned to find Daran gone and the door locked. When she listened she heard the noises made by the uneven fight inside. Knowing better than to try to force the heavy door, she flew rapidly to the front door and main entrance to the house. Hastily she pulled the parchment with the houseplan from her

pocket, and pounded on the door. A sleepy page answered.

"Here!" she ordered. "Take this and ride for Rome! Hurry, there is no time to lose!" As she said this she entered the house past the dumbfounded servant, and urged him gently outward.

"Right!" he gulped, and ran out the door, which Caroline shut and locked. He ran down the street for twenty strides, then stopped and looked back in bewilderment.

"Who *was* that?" he asked himself, and ran back to hammer at the door.

Caroline, meanwhile, ran at top speed through the house toward the kitchen where Daran was in need of aid. She met no one as she passed through three rooms, but as she was opening the door to the kitchen she collideded squarely with Daran, who was running to escape the cook. The cook now had a gigantic cleaver in his left hand to balance the long knife in his right. Caroline and Daran fell down in a tangle of arms and legs, and the charging cook tripped over them to land on top. A hideous shriek rang out from somewhere in the writhing heap of confused combatants.

Caroline looked at Daran. Daran looked at Caroline. They both looked at the cook. The cook was staring whitefaced at the blood dripping down his hand from a very small cut on his forefinger. Caroline and Daran disentangled themselves hastily, ready to fight or flee. The cook fainted. Daran quickly examined his body but found no other wound.

"Weak stomached type," he said, and grinned.

They ran for the rear door, realizing that the cook's scream would certainly rouse the house's occupants and

perhaps the night watch as well. Indeed, as they opened the rear door they spied the rapid approach of fifteen well-armored soldiers carrying pikes. They quickly shut and locked the door, and ran for the other exit from the kitchen. In the doorway the cook was standing uncertainly with the cleaver in his hand. As he saw them he shook his head and raised the cleaver menacingly.

Caroline and Daran simultaneously shouted, at the top of their lungs: "BLOOD!" The cook fainted. They ran past him into the dining room.

For the next hour maids, pages, servants, butlers, guards, and armored soldiers stamped through the house searching for the pair of intruders. Confusion and curses, snarls and shouts had sounded early in the search when the soldiers from the rear street had burst the door—and tried to rescue the prostrate cook from the house guards who were hauling him to a couch. Soon thereafter, to make matters worse, a keen-eyed young night watchman spied a furtive figure, female and scantily clad, slip from Erasmus's bedroom. He cried an alarm and chased and caught her, only to be rewarded with a stunning crack on the chin from her slipper. After twenty men subdued the screaming, biting, clawing girl, Erasmus was summoned. He was forced, while squirming under his wife's gaze, to identify his mistress for the guardsmen, and to provide an alibi for her. Some of the watchmen noticed a gaze similar to Erasmus's wife's, but bestowed upon the unlucky sentry by his scowling sergeant, whereupon furtive bets were made and accepted, as to how many nights the overzealous lad would be made to stand from midnight to dawn by the graveyards and mausoleums.

At one o'clock in the morning the last of the captains

left the house. His opinion was that the two house-breakers had slipped out during the uproar at the bedchamber.

The lights were extinguished by departing servants, and the house lay silent, save for the faint creaking of its beams and joints. And the fainter screech of Erasmus's wife promising him a painful and embarrassing revenge.

The moon broke through the night fog and shone through the windows, making narrow patches of light on the floors.

In the dining room the tablecloth moved, as if in a slight breeze, and Caroline and Daran clambered out from beneath the long dinner table.

"Have they all gone?" Caroline whispered.

"I think so," Daran answered, also whispering. "Shall we be leaving?" He crept toward a darker shadow in the darkly shadowed room. "Past these curtains is a doorway—"

"*I beg your pardon!*" a strange voice spoke from the shadow. A bright sourceless light flared, then steadied to illuminate the room. The door curtains were revealed as the robes of a figure standing by the wall.

"Bannett!" cried Caroline.

"The magician!" gulped Daran.

"At your service," purred Bannett.

Daran grabbed Caroline's hand and ran for the kitchen door. Bannett smiled, and spoke four words. These words of mystical power were ancient when Atlantis sank, and it seemed to Daran that they could be pronounced only by one who had just swallowed a large hog or a small terrapin.

They reached the door, and Daran threw his weight against it. The thin ornamental panel of the interior door

should have splintered, or at least the lock should have given way, but instead he felt as if he had set his shoulder to the side of Mont St. Bernard. Not only did the door fail to open, but, as he tried to rebound and run for the windows he discovered that his shoulder was stuck fast to the door. He could not break loose. Neither could he release his grasp on Caroline's hand. He straightened his head to look at Bannett, and found to his disgust that his hair was now also glued to the door by a sorcerous attraction. Only his right hand and forearm were at all free.

Caroline, meanwhile, snatched up her dagger and threw it straight for Bannett's throat—and cursed when it refused to leave her hand.

"So," laughed Bannett. "Two flies caught in the spider's web."

He advanced toward them, but halted out of reach of the dagger in Caroline's hand. "You could easily escape the power of my adhesive spell if you only knew the secret. But, alas, such as you can hardly be expected to know of such . . ." he sneered, ". . . higher magic."

"I don't suppose we could reach some sort of understanding," Daran asked, not very hopefully. "Our lives for something in return."

"Oh, I never intended to kill you," Bannett grinned nastily. "Certainly not. For with magical alterations and adjustments to your minds, careful deletions of intellect, delicate subtractions of will, you shall make fine slaves for Erasmus. He has paid me well to undertake this task of remolding your brains, and I have never doublecrossed an employer." At the panicky look in the trapped pair's eyes he continued smoothly, ". . . Of course, if you tell me where all of your loot is hidden, I can arrange for the

process to be a bit less painful than Erasmus desired. Well?"

Daran flushed, and started to explain. "We, ah, spent—"

"Almost all of it," Caroline interrupted, "but we still have a hidden reserve." Daran turned to her, tearing out some hair (which remained stuck to the door), and realized that she was biding for time.

"For three hundred and forty golden coins, minted in Zurich," she offered, "would you consider freeing us?"

"For that," Bannett said speculatively, "I would *consider* many things. Where is it secreted?"

"Half of it," Caroline lied, "is under the loose floorboard in the attic room of the third boarding house down St. Simon court."

"If I fail to find it, I will deposit your stolen intellects in the bodies of earthworms, and feed you to the finches." He left the room by the side door.

"What . . ." Daran began, but Caroline quieted him, and thereby got her hand (and his, which was attached) stuck to his lips.

"He's just outside the door, listening," she whispered. "Can you breathe?"

He nodded.

Soon they heard Bannett leave on his wild gold chase, and the magical light that he had commanded dwindled and died as it followed him out of the house. Caroline spoke quietly.

"Did you notice how some of your hair came out when you turned your head?"

Daran grunted in response.

"Well," she continued hastily, "if I can get my knife over here and cut your hair loose, close to the door . . .

see; it worked. Now this is going to be tricky. I'm going to cut your shoulder loose."

He squealed angrily.

"If you hold still you'll only lose a little skin," she reassured him.

The sharp knife peeled his shirt and, as Caroline had predicted, only two or three layers of his arm from the door.

"He told us we could easily escape if we only knew the secret. I discovered long ago that a sharp blade was one of the best secrets a girl could carry. Hm. This might be worse, but then you've cut yourself shaving, haven't you? This won't hurt much more. Purse your lips."

The knife passed between his face and her palm, and her care was rewarded with only the slightest trickle of blood down his chin: black, not red, in the reflected moonlight.

"Now our hands . . . I'm getting better with practice. We should do this more often."

"You could cut our feet loose," Daran complained, "but every step we took would cost us another slice of skin. Have we that much to spare?"

"Nonsense!" she replied, but worriedly. "I think that we will only refasten while Bannett is present to energize the charm." She touched Daran lightly with her forefinger. It did not stick. "Just as the light faded when he left," she said with relief. "Once we're free, we're free."

Soon they were indeed free—except for the knife. It remained stuck to Caroline's right hand, as they had no way to cut it loose. They both dripped blood from their feet and left hands, and Daran from face and shoulder.

"At least," he philosophized, "we don't have to worry

if we meet the cook.”

“Do we leave now?” Caroline asked.

“And have Bannett chasing us for the rest of our lives?” Daran retorted. “No, we’ll wait here and ambush him instead.”

They slipped into the kitchen and returned with curtains, empty sacks, and a knife. Caroline delicately carved her dagger from her right hand, then helped Daran silently to stitch together two mannikins of padding. These they glued lightly to the door with a flour and water paste. She placed the knife in the hand of the figure on the left. In the dark the image was almost convincing.

“Where are all of the house’s inhabitants?” Daran asked as they finished.

“Maybe they fear to disturb Bannett at work,” Caroline hypothesized. “Maybe they don’t know that he’s ever been here. Maybe they slept through our encounter with him. Maybe he spoke a spell of slumber upon the house as he left. Am I a magician?”

“Maybe you are,” Daran suggested, “for never yet have I heard of a magician who would give the direct answer, ‘I don’t know.’ ”

“I should kick you . . .”

“No,” he suddenly was whispering very quietly, “instead kick out your foot and trip Bannett, who is about to enter rapidly.” Caroline thrust a leg past the doorway and neatly floored Bannett, who had thrown aside the curtains and burst through the door.

The magician, sprawled on the floor, snarled one word.

Caroline and Daran jumped on top of the flattened sorcerer as the two mannikins across the room burst into sparkling blue flames.

"Gag him!" Caroline ordered; their captive was rapidly overcoming his surprise. Soon he was tied hand and foot, and knee and elbow, and securely gagged. He glared at them, and it was almost too late before they noticed the hypnotic power of his piercing gaze. They shuddered themselves free of the net of mental gauze that he had begun to cast over their minds. Quickly he was blindfolded.

"Anything else?" Daran asked, hoping not. For an answer Bannett pointed a forefinger at Caroline, but she managed to duck just before a narrow red line of fiery light stabbed out from his fingertip. It burned a small hole in the wall above her head. Hastily they tied his hands, finger by finger, with stout thin cords, then wrapped the bundles in kitchen curtains and flour sacks.

"Now, Bannett, if you've finished, we will go for a tour of your employer's house," Caroline announced. "I'll have this dagger near your throat at all times, so do behave yourself. Limit your conversation to one grunt for yes, and two grunts for no. If you squeal, gargle, or groan, trying to wake the household, you'll be quickly sorry. Do you understand?"

Bannett grunted once.

"Do you know where Erasmus's treasure is hidden?" she asked. "Truthfully, now."

After a long pause Bannett gave one soft grunt.

"You will lead the way, while we follow." Daran helped her lift him onto a serving cart, and went ahead to peer about for guards. They followed the path pointed out to them by Bannett's turning head, and aided by his low grunts in response to whispered questions.

They saw no houseguards or sentries, and this seemed to surprise Bannett as much as his captors. Even the

main door was unwatched.

Soon they came to a blank wall covered by an erotic tapestry done in modest and pleasant poor taste. Behind it was a secret panel that a child could have spotted from thirty yards away. Caroline eased it open, and withdrew a small chest and a large box.

"Bannett," Daran offered, "if you swear by your family, your unholy deity, and your power, not to harm us and not to bother us in the future, I don't see why we couldn't give you a third of this treasure."

"And if you don't," Caroline promised, "I'll cut your throat and watch you bleed to death all over the carpet. Which will it be?"

Bannett grunted once. Daran carefully ungagged him. He started to speak, but stopped when he felt Caroline's dagger at his neck.

"All right," he said. "I swear by my family, by my patron divinity, and by my power immense, never to harm either of you again. Now untie me, you scum!"

Daran, grinning, untied him rapidly and helped him rub the blood back into circulation in his arms and legs.

"Well?" Bannett demanded. "What's in the chest?" Caroline lifted the lid, and they all peered intently into the empty interior.

"Robbed! Us! This isn't fair!" wailed Caroline.

"The night watchmen!" groaned Daran. "When they searched the house they must have found the chest and removed the gold, the gems . . ."

" . . . the jewelry, the rare coins," Caroline cursed. "The ivory, the jade . . ."

"My third of nothing!" Bannett roared, and limped off toward the door, blaspheming luridly.

"I wondered why there were no guards," Daran

laughed. "They must all be in the bars, getting royally soused on Erasmus's cash. At least the blackmail files are still here." Bannett merely howled in rage and slammed the door behind him. "Hm. These make good reading. Caroline! Guess what the Duke said about the Duchess. Ho!"

By now the household had awakened, and Daran was sadly forced to stop reading about the private lives of various nobles. As they left he tucked the box under his arm and took it with him.

* * *

Soon it was noted in Genoa that certain leading citizens, merchants, and peers were paying their monthly blackmail fees to new and different messengers (and that the amount of some of these payments had been increased). A few observers claimed that occasional payments would lift into the air and fly away as if under their own power.

No one ever learned where and to whom the payments went, but after five months, every one of the unfortunate (and not so innocent) victims received a letter by private messenger. Amidst wine and festivities the contents of these letters were invariably burned, and the ashes stirred.

Of equal note was the departure of Erasmus from the city, with his wife though not his mistress, and with a surprisingly small wagon load of goods and furniture.

Before that, the talk of the town had been the astounding number of night watchmen that resigned one morning, some to open small businesses, some to buy passage elsewhere, and some to drink heavily for a while

before re-enlisting.

The magician Bannett was seen leaving Genoa on the same day as Erasmus, but in the opposite direction. He was headed toward his native France, and those who saw him related that his face seemed permanently set in an expression of extreme disgust.

And finally, two or three people noticed that Daran and Caroline, previously penniless, purchased, after a month of receiving parcels and pouches from messengers, a small but truly comfortable home in the vicinity of the Brass Breast. These few people who did notice, however, were soon well paid to forget, and thus the two settled into happy obscurity. For a time, at least.

Ardath Mayhar and I met for about 40 seconds at the '78 World Fantasy Convention in Fort Worth. She's over 21 and has a novel or two coming from Doubleday—good! Maybe the first one's out by now. Surely parents who named a daughter so should have known she had to be either a character in a hf story, or write heroic fantasy. (I am Andrew Jefferson Offutt V. Maybe I was supposed to be president.)

It seems to me that there's an excellent instinct at work in "The Reaping"; it seems to me that it is told just right and at just the right length. And how clever, to use a mage's own spell and words to . . . sorry. Read the story.

THE REAPING

by Ardath Mayhar

My shadow slid ahead of me along the moisture-greased wall of the tunnel. The sickle-shaped blade in my hand winked in the dimming light, as I drew away from the last beams of daylight that straggled into the caverns. Ahead, I could hear the hollow "plop . . . plop . . . plop" of water dripping with terrible regularity, as well as less defined and more sinister sounds.

The tunnel curved gently and I found myself in darkness. Without moving, I listened more intently than ever before in my life, clenching and unclenching my chilled fingers on the hilt of my father's sword. Reaper was cool in my hand, but there was something almost

alive, responsive, in that strangely-shaped weapon. It comforted me. It had never failed my father, so long as he held it, and I assured myself that it would not fail me.

My brothers had come before me, I well knew, one by one into this terrible place. Not one had come forth again, though they had been six tall men, strong with their own strengths and armored by their anger and grief. Now only I, last and least of my people, was left to seek out my father and free him from the vengeful hands of the Sorcerer. Ashamed of my hesitation, I moved forward, softly as my quiet-shod feet would bear me.

From my pouch I drew forth the jewel that had been my mother's, left to me, the youngest and weakest of all her children, for my only heritage from her. I rubbed it between my fingers, then raised it to my lips and breathed upon it. Excited, the strange energies that lived within it began to glow. A tiny reddish light burned in my hand. In a night leavened with stars and moon, it would have been less than visible, but in the totality of blackness in which I stood it made a fair illumination.

By its light, I was able to move with more sureness, less chance of noise, and augmented speed. I felt certain that its glow-worm glimmer could not carry past any angle in the winding way to betray me to the watchers that must surely be there. Still I moved with caution, rounding projections and windings with the jewel hidden in my sleeve, my feet fumbling like gloved hands along the dust-and-pebble-strewn floor of the tunnel. All my training as a stalker of beasts came to my aid and I blessed old Truan for daring the wrath of my father and teaching me the ways of stealth in the forest. I knew that none who did not see me could know that I was moving through the Caverns Enspelled.

It was as well. I had traveled for many slow and careful breaths in darkness, rounding a fluted pillar of white stone. When I, crouching in a niche, uncovered the jewel again, it echoed its red glint from many sets of eyes that started up at knee-level and began scurrying from the clump in which I had surprised them. In the reddish glow, I saw the shapes of the beasts only dimly, as they flowed like ferrets down the tunnel toward me. But beasts held no terrors for me—and no surprises.

I met the first with a sweep of Reaper that sent its head to left and its body to right. The second launched himself at my throat, but the silver cuff on my forearm grated against his teeth and he slid down to be crushed beneath my death-trained feet. The other three grew cautious, but the command that set them there did not allow retreat. One leaped for the buttress of rock to my left, trying to take me from above, but Reaper cut him down as he climbed.

Then the two survivors rushed me and I knew why Reaper had been nicknamed "the Blessed." That ancient blade knew what must be done, as it guided my hand to a cunning that my head did not know. The two joined their companions and I looked down at the carnage with disgust. I had not been fond of slaying even the clean beasts of the forest, and these foul things were a disgust and a sickness. I piled rocks over them and smoothed the dust to wipe away their reeking blood. Then I made over the cairn one of the White Signs that my father had taught all his children, that they might never find themselves subjugated by the Sorcerer.

As I completed the simple pattern, tracing it with the jewel I held, there was a little sigh of motion at my feet, and I saw that the cairn had sunk, as though no bodies of

flesh rested beneath. With a surge of unrecognized emotion, I traced the second of the White Signs on the pillar that all but blocked the way I had come. The air of the place felt cleaner at once.

I set my face again toward the deeps of the caverns, knowing that they had long ago been enspelled by that wicked spirit that held my sick old father captive. These had been only the first and the least valued of the Sorcerer's servants.

There came a place where three passages diverged from that I traveled. None seemed to be more in use than any other; only the constant dripping and the distant slitherings and sloppings that I had already become familiar with were to be heard in any of them. I took my mother's jewel and held it high before me.

"Give me guidance, Mother. Freed of flesh, you may see truly, where I may only stumble on mortal feet into error. For the love you bore my father, guide me!" My whispered chant fluttered back from the three tunnels in sibilant echoes . . . but the jewel flared brighter by far as it approached that on the left. A voice that was no voice breathed beside my ear, "Widdershins . . ." and the word seemed to hang in the air before me.

Ah! The left-hand way. I knew then that I must spiral thus, down and down into those inimical ways. I knew also that my mother had heard and answered, and I set the White Sign at the entrance of the tunnel and entered it.

This was a smaller, smoother passage than the first I had entered, and it bore always to the left, in its windings. Above my head in the vaulted and stalactite-hung darkness, I could hear the rustlings and chitterings of bats, yet they gave me no pause, for they were old

acquaintances in the benighted forests of the upper world. There had been none in that outer place that the foul creatures guarded, and I took their presence here as a sign that I might expect to find no beasts in this one. Still, I went softly and with unlesened caution for a long, long time, using the jewel only when it seemed safe.

At last, the tunnel widened until I could see no walls about me, in the feeble light of the jewel. At my feet was a path, a narrow trail worn inches deep into the pale rubble of the cavern's floor. There were wonderful formations all about, and here I could readily understand the source of those hollow drippings, for water dropped slowly and steadily from high-point to low-point, building, fleck by fleck, the fairie shapes. I held the jewel high and stroked it with my thumb.

Before me was a tiny lake, mirror-smooth. Even in the tiny illumination I provided, I could see shadows of images reflected in its death-still surface, and I went closer and looked into the water. From its dark deeps the face of my father gazed out at me, and his eyes were sunk in despairing hollows.

I stood and moved onto the path, noiselessly hurrying toward my goal. But the chamber of the lake was very large, and many times paths branched from mine, causing me to wait for the jewel to indicate my way. At last I came to an end of the chamber . . . and it seemed to the eye that the path I followed ran into a blank wall of stone.

As I stood examining it closely, something glimmered upon the surface of the wall, and I looked up. I almost leaped for cover, for a warrior faced me from the rock. Thin, clad in leather mail, head protected by a peaked leather helm studded with iron bands, the figure was

unfamiliar to me until I saw the arc of light in its hand that was Reaper. Then I laughed low and nodded to my reflection. Its lips opened, and a voice unlike my own said, "Go back, rash youth. Only death lies before you. Go back to your own place and accept the overlordship of the Sorcerer."

As it spoke, I studied the surface of the wall, well lighted now by whatever force caused the image to appear. And there were narrow bands of shadow, step-like across the shining shape. Without waiting for it to disappear, I leaped upward and found hand- and foot-holds in the rock. In ten heartbeats, I was again in a tunnel, moving always to the left, with my jewel hidden until I could determine what watchers might be with me in the blackness.

A tumble of rubble barred my way in the end and I brought out my light to find a way through it. Hardly had I reached firm footing when there came a whistle of steel through air and I fell flat and rolled, without looking up. As I came out of the roll onto my feet, an armored figure landed before me with a clanking and clattering of metal, having leaped over the outlying arms of the rubble pile in one bound.

Being the child I was, last and not least, I had had little formal training in use of the blade. Yet anyone with six older brothers, all of whom were determined to become renowned swordsmen, would find, as I did, that training in the art comes automatically, a bit by sheer absorption and more by being commandeered as swordplay partner by one or another of the elders.

Had that not been true, I would have perished there in that dark tunnel. I had hastily stowed the jewel in my pouch, for I knew that my hands must be free. And I

knew also that my opponent, clad as he was in a jangle of chain mail and armor plate, could not move quietly. I was now used to moving softly in darkness and I edged away from the warrior, whose breath I could hear plainly in the stillness.

As Truan had taught me, I inhaled slowly, silently, held the breath for a long moment, then let it trickle inaudibly from my nose. While I listened, the armed man moved. There was a soft shush of the chain mail at his neck and I knew that he had turned his head, seeking to hear me. I gripped Reaper in my cold right hand, sent up a prayer to the gods of the White Power, leaped forward, and sliced at the point where I thought his neck might be.

There was a shower of sparks as metal met metal, and I felt Reaper hook onto something solid. With a jerk, I freed the blade. And then I was fully occupied. A slash from nowhere seared my left arm with pain as I spun away, unable to take the time for silence. In pitchy darkness, we stood flailing away, stroke for stroke. He stood to receive my blows. I, in leather protections, bent as a weed in the wind, sliding under his blade or giving with the strokes in order to lessen their impact. The leather armor that my mother had given me as her last gift was a finer turner of blades than I had dreamed it would be. Only superficial cuts penetrated to my skin, while I wielded Reaper as the weapon demanded to be used.

There came a pause for breath. My own arm was heavy and my chest burned for more air than my laboring lungs could supply. The watcher, too, was evidently in a like condition. I could hear his heavy grunts of breath even over my own. And, as I stood there gasping and bleeding, the voice again moved inside my ear.

“Make the third of the Signs!”

Without hesitation, I raised Reaper invisibly in the dark of the cavern. I began the series of arcs and spirals that make up the third White Sign of Power. As there was now no sound from my adversary, I drew out the jewel and held it high in my left hand, while I moved through the intricate process.

The armored figure didn't move. It seemed no longer to breathe. I finished the Sign and moved toward him, but he seemed not to see. He had been tall, and I reached up and raised the visor of his helm.

The fading face of my oldest brother looked at me without life or recognition—and crumbled away to dust, leaving only the glistening yellow bone within the helm. I stood, stunned, as the shape before me stood for a moment, then fell, full-length, at my feet.

I raised my hands, leaving Reaper in its sheath, and made the whole pattern of Signs—those for blessing, those for guarding, those for freeing, and those for the frustration of evil. And the air of the tunnel grew fresher, less dire. The armor at my feet settled as if into sleep. And my mother's whisper breathed at my ear, “He is free . . .”

A voice boomed out of the deeps of the tunnel, echoing weirdly among the niches and ramifications of the cavern: “Warrior, you have come far. You have slain my Guardians. But you will not reach my prisoned enemy, for he is warded by spells no man can pass. Six of his sons have fallen before these spells, and they all greater than you. Not the greatest hero of any age could break that warding. Arrogant youth, go back!”

I did not answer. My determinations had been made long before I entered the Caverns Enspelled and they were not to be turned by threats . . . or fear . . . or even

death. My father would go free.

Deep in the earth as I was, in that night which never yields to day, I moved forward. It seemed almost as if I could now see, dimly, past the tiny twinkle of light from my mother's jewel. So I went more swiftly, and less cautiously, for I felt no presence in my path. And I came to a narrowing of the tunnel, whose walls dropped with the roof to form an arched opening that was a mere hand-span taller than I and little wider.

My hair tried to rise beneath my helm, and my skin tingled and rose into goose-pimples. Force radiated from that opening, and I knew that the warding spell must be there, spun like a web of an invisible spider up and down and back and forth across that small portal. Then I pulled back my helm and let my long hair fall down my back.

"I am Elah," I cried, "daughter of Ranth, whom you have unjustly harassed and imprisoned. Sorcerer, your spell will stop any man . . . but I am a woman. Count your hours, dark spirit. I will attend to you in a little while."

I walked through the arch, and force trailed along my cheek like broken gossamers in the early morning. My jewel sparked triumphantly to light up the smoothly-hewn walls of the passage I must traverse. And there, propped stiffly into niches, were the stony figures of my five brothers. Each wore his armor. Each had his hands propped on the pommel of his sword. But around the neck of each was a black symbol hung upon a black cord, and on each face was a look of purest horror.

I unsheathed Reaper and moved along the row, cutting those cords and letting the symbols fall, to be crushed beneath my heel. When all were free of the black fetters, I made the White Sign of blessing. Immediately, the

strangely-polished flesh sank upon the bones of their faces, and the stiffness left their bodies. And again my mother's voice whispered, "Free . . ."

And now I came to the end of that tunnel, to find there a door of iron-studded oak. Through the iron grating let into the top of it at eye level, I could see a hunched old man, sitting on a stool. I crashed back the bars and loosed the iron bolts.

"Father!" I shouted, "you are free!"

He turned slowly as I entered, and the cobwebby eyes that met mine were filled with wonder. He rose as if bewildered and looked at the open door. He moved as though he were old, old, with centuries of weariness in his bones.

"Elah?" he whispered. "But where are my sons?"

I looked deep into his eyes and saw that he could bear only a bit of the truth now. The rest would wait until he had strength to endure it. I took his hand and said, "They tried to come, Father. But they could not, for only a woman could pass the spells that warded you. Now we will go home.

"But first, tell me, if you know . . . does the Sorcerer live here in the deeps, or does he keep his dwelling in the upper air?"

My father coughed fitfully. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Oh, he stays here, where he feels safe. He has no trust in anything that runs free in the sun. Only when he has corrupted all the upper world will he dare to live there."

I nodded with pleasure. Then I led Ranth from his prison cell. But I covered the jewel, and the tunnel we passed in the dark so that he would not see my brothers in their niches along the walls.

And when we had passed the archway, I turned and sealed that way with Signs of Power, taught me by my father and my mother, who always have been servants of the gods. No Sorcerer could shake or sunder them.

Out through the dark ways we went, and as I passed each point of entry I sealed it, making certain that the Sorcerer could not escape from his den. My brother's armored body still lay beside the rubble-pile, but I steered my father another way, so he would not see. I left another sign as blessing and guardian for his bones.

It was not easy to help Ranth over the stone barrier I had climbed so swiftly, but we managed at last and found ourselves in the chamber of the lake, with our backs to the wall that had reflected my image. Before we could move forward, I heard a sound behind. Turning, I saw the face of the Sorcerer glowing in the stone.

His dank hair dripped about his long thin skull like that of a drowned man. His blade-like nose was pinched and his eyes were so deeply sunk into his face that not even a glimmer showed them. Those miser's lips opened, and he cried, "Set me free!"

I laughed, and the echoes hooted and growled around the chamber like a mocking chorus of fiends. "Did you set my father free, Sorcerer?" I asked. "Did you free my brothers, even to the peace of death? Would you leave the world above free, if you were allowed to work your will there? No, Merchant of Darkness, you are imprisoned now by powers greater than any you know. You have mocked the gods until you have lost your knowledge of their reality. Now they have made me, a woman and so disregarded by you in your arrogance, their instrument to seal you into the tomb of your own making. With your short-sighted spell you left a passage for half the human

race to enter your stronghold. Now, only when the world changes will you again move from this place you have made."

He beat clawlike hands against the stone. "Free me!" he shrieked. "I cannot be bound by mortal kind!"

"Not by mortal alone," I replied. "Sit in your darkness and think, Sorcerer. If mortals cannot bind you, who has done this? And if there are truly those who weigh mortals and Sorcerers in the balance, who are they, and how can you make a truce with them?"

"You will have food for millennia of thought. Not in my lifetime nor the time of my children will you find an answer. Perhaps, in the time of the gods you may understand. Fare you well—or ill—it is nothing to me."

I turned, took my father's arm, and we went forward to find the free air of the world again.

Gordon Linzner is Sole Prop. and prop of the semiprozine Space & Time, which formed a considerable portion of Swords A.D. III. S&T has for years published stories of science fiction and fantasy by non- and semi-professionals and an occasional pro. It has also now and again featured a story about Linzner's own creation, James Blood. Blood is a vampire secret agent, kept boxed in Washington until he's needed—and the stories are serious, and I swear Linzner brings it off!

The story that follows, Gordon's first professional appearance, is not about James Blood, and is definitely serious. Gordon seems one of those who took me at my word when I told him as I have others that we'd all do well to study the prose and consider the patience and care of Theodore Sturgeon, who seems always to choose the right word. Linzner has written this one twice for me, and lord knows how many times before. It is thoroughly professional—and your perverse editor calls it just beautiful.

Manhattanite Linzner will have one in our volume five, too—which is already closed, compiled, and in publisher's hands—that is a bit ugly; and again, truly beautiful: human. Amazing how many writers of bloody heroic fantasy are not nearly so full of hostility and violence as so many writers of everything else!

THE BALLAD OF BORRELL

by Gordon Linzner

*"Jakor had her trapped in her own private lair.
His fingers clutched tightly her scarlet-hued hair.
She clawed at his face 'til he warned, 'Have a care,
Or I'll torture you, sweet, in a manner most rare.'"*

The singer was a tall, lean man, sharp featured with such fine precision that his face might have been sculpted by a stone cutter. He was not excessively handsome, but he did have the careless look of a man busy with the enjoyment of life, and this lent him a very special attractiveness. Women came easily to Rondol and, though they often left just as easily, he knew from

experience that there was always another willing wench at the next town or roadhouse.

His hands held a curious box-like contraption with a small round hole in one side. Across this opening three strings of varying lengths and thicknesses were drawn, and as he sang Rondol would pluck at one string or another. Such twangs barely qualified as melody, but they somehow blended into his song. He was sparing in his use of the instrument, saving its tones to highlight the important parts of his ballads. Such a point had now been reached and he paused significantly as the single note echoed through the roadhouse's crowded taproom.

The establishment's patrons, knowing the next stanza and eager to hear it, urged him to continue. Rondol knew his craft well. Those few seconds he held back were enough to build anticipation without invoking ugly impatience.

"I've been pierced by three arrows, you arrogant fool.

Swords have entered my body, and sharp daggers, too!

So what can you do that is different and new?"

Jakor laughed as he unveiled his long thrusting tool."

Roars of appreciative laughter rewarded Rondol, so loud they nearly drowned out the refrain that followed every other stanza. For this part he did not pause. Every man, woman, and child within earshot of the roadhouse by this time knew the words by heart.

*"The Isle of Borrell,
He'll never go there anymore;*

*The Isle of Borrell,
The home of that red-headed whore!"*

Nearly everyone in the tavern lifted his or her flagon of ale—the wine having given out an hour earlier—to join in. None lifted flagon higher nor sang more loudly than Jakor himself, from his place of honor at the very table upon which the minstrel sat. Next to the famed adventurer was his apprentice, Rayun, an auburn-haired youth with bright eyes and an infectious grin that would have won him easy acceptance even if he did not accompany the greatest hero in seven kingdoms.

Rondol sang four more stanzas and two refrains of "The Ballad of Borrell," then protested his throat was too dry to continue. This admission resulted in immediate offers of drink, and several flagons were stretched out to the minstrel. Jakor's came so close that Rondol could have inhaled the thick brown fluid through his nostrils sooner than pour it down his gullet as the gods intended man to do.

"No, my friends," the singer insisted, gently pushing away each proffered quaff. "No more tonight. I've already sung every tune I know, saving the best for last in honor of our distinguished guest."

He bowed to Jakor, who smiled and lifted his flagon again. The hero was not yet too drunk to acknowledge a compliment. Besides, the praise furnished a good excuse to bring the wrought metal vessel to his lips once more.

"You've learned your trade well, minstrel," the adventurer said at last. "I swear, this is the first time I've heard some of those verses."

The minstrel grinned and leaned toward Jakor confidentially. "After all," he said, "it's the one

adventure of yours that my audiences never fail to request. They always want to hear more of your exploits on Borrell, so more are invented all the time. Of course, the Amazon Nori always ends the tale."

A voice at the back of the taproom shouted over the din of clinking goblets and raucous laughter. "Hey, Jakor! Was she really *that* good?"

A twinkle came to the adventurer's eye. He moved his slightly ponderous weight off the rough-carved chair, bracing his bulging stomach against the table's edge in what could charitably be called a standing position.

"A gentleman does not discuss such matters in a public place—"

Cries of derision, indignation, and mock prudery arose, to be stilled quickly as the adventurer continued speaking.

"I'll say this much: she had a pair of . . ."

The discourse was halted before it began. An unholy clatter of shattering glass and metal against stone distracted the attention of all, including the speaker. Heads turned to the source of the clamor. Eyes fell upon a tall, scrawny young man.

Long orange hair, tied in a braid, hung nearly to the small of his back. His expression was sullen, defiant. If he felt any embarrassment at the disturbance he'd created, it was masked by an ominous attitude of arrogance. On the wall behind him a shelf swung loosely, dangling by its remaining peg. Half a dozen flagons and the remains of three empty bottles, representing the shelf's former occupants, lay at the man's feet.

In the midst of this evening's revelry, it was an awkward moment. The stranger had been noted earlier by most of the patrons: staying at the fringes of the crowd,

drinking little and laughing not at all. Those who paid him more than the most cursory attention felt an odd discomfort at his presence. He was a humorless, unknown quantity and looked altogether too eager to use the vicious broadsword scabbarded to his narrow leather belt.

Rayun arose from his place beside Jakor. The aging warrior was too befuddled with drink to sense the potential danger and take proper action . . . or, for that matter, even remember what he'd been about to say, which accounted for his silence. Aware of his mentor's propensity to become properly besotted at the mention of a fresh goat's skin of wine, Rayun had deliberately kept his own drinking to a minimum. He'd expected no trouble, but did not want to lose sight of the pouch of gold he and Jakor had risked their necks to earn. Consequently, the apprentice was the only person in the taproom whose mind was keen enough to deal with the situation. Drawing the crowd's attention, he pointed to a bald man of broad build who wore a soiled apron and was bearing a tired straw broom to the place of the mishap.

"Ho, keeper!" the youth cried, his bronze eyes sparkling at the jest on his lips. "'Tis a pity your woodwork is not as sturdy as your ale!"

As simply as that, the uneasy silence was broken and the bacchanalian mood restored. The joke was no longer at the expense of a sulky and unpredictable stranger, but at the quality of the roadhouse's carpentry and the establishment's owner, as safe a target as one could want. No man survived long as an innkeeper without an inordinate supply of humor and patience.

Yet the stranger had piqued Rayun's boyish curiosity, and the apprentice wanted words with him. Something

indefinable about the look in the eyes and the set of the jaw betokened an interesting history.

When Rayun had made his way through the celebrating crowd, however, the rawboned youth was gone. Only the tavern owner stood there, sweeping the last shards of glass into a small burlap sack. In reply to Rayun's questions, the baldpate shrugged and indicated the open door of the roadhouse as the clumsy fool's probable destination.

Rayun stood at that entrance for a long moment, peering through the darkness for some sign that the stranger was still about. The petulant youth might have decided to bed down in the stables, preferring equine company to human for the night. No matter. Rayun judged the man to be no more than two years older than he and knew his own immature fits of temper well enough. By morning, this hour's events would be forgotten. It was best, perhaps, to put off conversation until then.

* * *

Sunlight streamed between the slats of the shutters that covered the room's single, westward facing window, burning fiercely through Jakor's eyelids all the way to the back of his head. It increased the throbbing in his skull. His mouth felt full of mortar, as if he had eaten half of the roadhouse's wall last night . . . which he might very well have done. He was not at all sure just when he had finally passed out, whether he had climbed to his room or been carried, whether the minstrel had ever finished that marvelous song of his.

Even the memory of that cheerful melody and the

crowd's din caused flashes of pain in his weary, much abused ears. He rubbed his eyes, surprised to find them still in their sockets. Then there was that insistent banging every few minutes, which he finally narrowed down to the direction of the door to his room.

"Go away," he shouted. The volume of his own voice made him wince. "I'm dead."

"It's me. Rayun."

The aging adventurer groaned once, forced himself to sit up on the floor. Strange. He could have sworn he'd been in the bed at least once during the night.

"Come in, then, and stop that damnable drumming!"

The door creaked open. Jakor did not watch his young apprentice step into the sparsely furnished chamber, as he was hauling himself up onto the straw bed. The action proved to be a mistake. Now he could feel all the aches in his back as well as his head.

Rayun wore black woolen trousers and a pullover blouse of coarse gray cloth, the type he'd taken to wearing when his last silk blouse was sacrificed to bandage a broken leg. A sleeveless vest of apple-green kept him from blending completely into shadows. His blade and rough leather boots completed the wardrobe. He closed the door gently behind him.

"What in the seven kingdoms are you doing up and dressed at this ungodly hour of the night?" Jakor complained. He himself was draped only in the blanket he had pulled from the bedding.

"'Tis an hour past noon," Rayun told him.

"Then it's too late to get up this morning. Come back tomorrow."

The warrior rolled backward clumsily, allowing his weight and the forces of gravity to pull him, prone, to the

softness of the straw mattress. He landed with a heavy *whomp!* and groaned to justify this abuse of his body.

Rayun was not moved to indulgence this day. Although he still worshiped Jakor as a hero, the greatest in the seven kingdoms, these last few months as his companion had taught the lad the all too human side of being heroic. He was neither impressed nor dismayed by Jakor's crapulence.

"There is a wrong to be avenged. Rondol is dead."

"So am I," protested the adventurer, rolling on his side. "Go away."

Rayun grasped Jakor's broad shoulder and rolled the man over on his back again. "I am not jesting," he said firmly. "The minstrel has been slain. Dunhill found his body not ten minutes ago."

"Who the Demon Pits is Dunhill?"

"Our host. We're at Dunhill's Rest, as you may recall."

"Then why in Chaos doesn't he mind his own business?" Jakor muttered, sitting up and reaching for his trousers. When Rayun took up a cause there was no getting out of it, so Jakor resigned himself to the fact. Besides, a little walk might shake up the goblins who were using the inside of his skull as a blacksmith's shop.

"He became curious," Rayun answered slowly, "when he noticed all the dried blood in the hall outside Rondol's room."

It was the minstrel's body, all right, still dressed in the bright flame-colored shirt and tight emerald-green trousers he'd worn downstairs last night. His lank torso was unmistakable—a fortunate circumstance, as his head had been brutally separated from it. The murderer had taken a grisly souvenir.

The singer's blood thoroughly soaked the bedding on which the body lay and left an ugly trail to the door on the rough wood floor, finally thinning out in the hall. Dunhill had seen it while delivering lunch to another resident of the roadhouse.

"He must've been slain last night, right after he went upstairs," the owner said. "The party was still noisy for some time after that, enough to conceal any muffled sounds of a struggle."

"What of the men who were here last night?" asked the warrior. The buzzing in his ears seemed to be fading, for which he was extremely grateful.

"Most of them have already gone their ways, sir," replied the keeper. "Besides, who among them would slay such a talented man? He had no money to speak of. If his singing had not been so well received, perhaps . . ."

"There was one who did not enjoy it," Rayun interrupted. "That red-haired fellow, the one who broke your shelf. It seemed an accident, but I'll bet it wasn't."

The owner nodded. "That's true enough. I put all the fixings in this place myself, and Dunhill doesn't do slipshod work, if I may say so. Put a nasty dent in one of my most expensive flagons, too! I tell you, it's a bad business all around."

"Wonderful," Jakor commented, rubbing his temple. "He could be anywhere by this time!"

"I think he stuck to the road," countered Rayun. "He's a stranger, as unfamiliar with these parts as I am, and I certainly wouldn't take a chance on getting lost by guessing at shortcuts, especially if I already had several hours' head start."

"That leaves us no better off. He could've taken any turn he came across."

"Begging your pardon, sir," Dunhill interjected. "This road continues straight for a day's journey to the north, and two days' to the south. Furthermore, there's a right nasty swamp to our south and no place to go except along the road."

The adventurer grinned feebly. "Well, that narrows it down to two directions. Any other ideas?"

"I've got one," answered Rayun.

"I knew you would," sighed the warrior.

"One of the stable boys must have seen which direction he came from. If he was headed for a particular destination, it's not likely he'll turn back. And while I'm down there," he added, "I'll have our horses made ready."

"I knew you'd do that, too," muttered the adventurer as he massaged the back of his neck with one hand.

* * *

Three hours later, Jakor and Rayun neared the edge of the great swamp Dunhill had mentioned. The lad rode a young chestnut mare purchased in Marot when his original mount broke a leg. Jakor clung stubbornly to the old warhorse who'd stood him well for the past ten years. There was plenty of fight in the beast yet, he continually reminded his skeptical assistant; don't let a few missing patches of hair and an inclination toward shortness of breath fool you.

But the animal was slowing them down, and if their quarry was moving with any kind of speed at all he would be out of the swampy region and lost to the pursuers by mid-day next. The sun was low now and neither man relished the idea of riding through that muck at night.

What little sunlight remained was quickly swallowed by the dense foliage. As if by sorcery, the occasional scattered trees grew heavy with the stench of decaying leaves and stagnant water. When Jakor's steed stumbled, nearly spilling off the road into a deep sinkhole, both men agreed to make camp.

"Up before dawn," Rayun said, chewing a strip of dried beef, "and we may still catch him. If we can't travel in this stuff, neither can he."

Jakor grunted. His eyes smarted from the smoke of their fire. If it were possible to find some completely dry wood, they could do without these thick black clouds. But they were lucky to find any usable fuel. The still air and thick flora made the atmosphere even more oppressive.

With a splashing thud, an object dropped from above to land almost exactly between the two men. Jakor reached for it, lifted it to the light, and just as quickly let it drop again.

This time, Rondol's head landed face up.

"Chaos!" Rayun swore. "The lips! They—they've been sewn shut!"

"Someone wanted to make sure he'd never sing again," Jakor surmised. "I think our prey has decided to make a fight of it. We can stay and await his next move, or we can search for him."

"His next move might easily be an arrow in the back," replied the youth. His bronze eyes blazed in the reflected light of the fire. "We're better off seeking him out. The act of hunting will keep us alert for any sign of attack."

Inwardly, Jakor beamed at Rayun's expert assessment. The lad learned fast to think for himself. "My thoughts exactly," he said. "Move slowly, though. This ground is

treacherous. We'll separate and circle the camp in an increasing spiral. That way, we can keep our bearings and stay in touch every half turn."

Jakor drew his blade and moved off into the darkness on his right. Rayun copied his action, skulking in the opposite direction.

Fifteen minutes passed with agonizing slowness. The night sounds of the swamp could not cover those of the two men as they sloshed through the muck. No matter how stealthily they moved, the soft sucking of the mud at their boots seemed to echo over the entire morass.

Jakor had passed his apprentice for the sixth time when he heard a rustling from overhead. He glanced up, trying to pierce the blackness with eyes no longer capable of doing so with surety. Even in broad daylight, Jakor often depended on Rayun to identify objects at great distances.

Still, eyes turned skyward, Jakor spun slowly, alert for any movement. He had not completed three-quarters of his turn when a heavy weight crashed against his back. Thrown off-balance by the sudden jolt, the adventurer slipped and fell in the mud. He slid for about seven meters before rolling into a filthy sinkhole.

Seconds were wasted while he reoriented himself. His feet were before his face, supported by the thick mud in which he was sinking. Already it half-covered his chest and was inching up to his chin. There were no loose vines or tree roots within arm's reach, no purchase for his hands. Even his sword had been knocked from his grasp, landing well out of reach.

And at the edge of the pit stood his attacker, silently mocking him.

He forgot the taste of mud in his mouth, forgot even

the inevitability of his drowning in this loose sludge, when he saw that his ambusher was not the young man he and Rayun had thought they were pursuing. It was a woman, with long flowing hair cascading from under a wrought helmet. Her breastplate was gold, or seemed so under the dim and deceptive moonlight, and she raised a deadly broadsword in triumph. A laugh exuded from painted lips, low and ominous, but in a hysterically high pitch. The voice had the same eerie quality.

"At last, Jakor, you will pay for what you did to my mother!"

"Your mother?"

"Surely you recognize her armor, which I now wear? Or did she mean so little to you, since you mock her memory? I did not realize until last night why she bade me, on her deathbed, to search for you. Now I understand; she must be avenged. She loved you, Chaos knows why! And because of that, she suffered."

Jakor spat slime, trying to clear his throat—and his mind. None of this made any sense.

"That armor?" he repeated. "The design is vaguely familiar, what I can see of it. Come closer. Let me have a better look."

His tormentor laughed again. "I'm not that great a fool, Jakor. It would take more guile than you or any man possesses to trick me into sharing your fate. You well know that this is the armor of an Amazon!"

"An Amazon?" Then Jakor understood. "Nori's! Of course! Then you must be her . . . our daughter. You're the right age . . ."

Again the laugh, inhuman and disquieting. "A true Amazon has only one parent: a mother. You were merely a bothersome prerequisite. After you aban-

doned her, she had to flee Borrell to save my life. I had tainted her, they said. I was a disgrace to their way of life and should be destroyed."

"That's absurd." Jakor had to strain now to keep his head above the mud and continue speaking. "Every Amazon on the Isle mated with men captured from the outside. That was the only way your race could continue, generation after generation. My escape would not have . . ."

"Silence!" the armored form ordered. "You must die, to justify my life!"

Jakor's left arm was already held fast by the quagmire, and now he could no longer talk. Soon he would be unable to breathe. Too late, he regretted the time wasted in conversation with this madwoman. He should have called Rayun for aid. His mind was not as keen as it once was and he silently cursed himself for that failing. It was still possible the lad had heard them, but Jakor retained little hope. He heard no sound of Rayun approaching.

"You must die," the Amazon repeated. "NOW!"

Jakor's foe leaned suddenly forward to thrust that bloodied blade through the warrior's heart. It was a quicker, cleaner death, at least, than slow suffocation. Jakor shut his eyes against the impact of the blow.

The sword's point never touched him. When he looked again, the Amazon's body was crumpled on the soft earth. Rayun stood over it, grim and triumphant. He held aloft a fist-sized stone he'd picked up because he feared a flash of moonlight on his sword would give him away. Time spent in combat, however satisfying, would have cost Jakor his life.

The lad dropped his improvised weapon into the mire and hurried to the sinkhole's edge. There he wrapped his

left arm about a thick overhanging branch, and stretched as far as he could with his right. A meter of air still separated his fingers from Jakor's.

He cursed once, then reached back and drew his blade. He stretched forward again. The cold steel grazed the back of Jakor's right hand.

The adventurer fumbled at the flat of the blade for a chancey second, and then he had it. He winced as its edge sliced his palm, but he did not let go. A moment later the sword splashed into the mud as Jakor grasped his apprentice's hand firmly.

Rayun strained to pull at a weight normally half again as much as his own, and trebled by the power of the sucking slime. A sickening crack added to the desperate plight. The lad froze at the sound, but tightened his grip on Jakor's wrist. The hero of seven kingdoms spat out mud to speak.

"Let go, lad. That branch isn't strong enough. Let go and find another!"

There was no other, and they both knew it. Rayun shook his head and pulled again. Another crack stopped both their hearts for an instant. A thin sliver of raw wood shone in the moonlight where branch met trunk. A few centimeters were lost.

Slowly but steadily, Rayun drew his mentor from the mudhole. The branch did not give further. Once the bulk of the dragon-slayer's weight had been pulled free of the mud's sucking grip, that danger was past.

Jakor paid no heed to the slime that covered his body almost to the nostrils. The dank night air would soon chill his damp clothes, but for now the effort of his narrow escape provided warmth enough. He hauled himself into a sitting position, bracing against the very

tree Rayun had clung to.

When he could talk without gasping, Jakor said, "I owe you my life again, Rayun. It's becoming quite a habit. In truth, though, I'd thought you'd hesitate to strike a woman."

"A woman?" Rayun repeated. "She looked man enough to me from behind. Of course, it's hard to tell in these shadows."

Both turned to where their foe lay in the mud. Or, rather, had lain. The armored figure stood again, sword in hand, staring balefully at master and apprentice. The leather straps holding the breastplate in place were loosened, and Nori's offspring shrugged it off contemptuously. A hirsute, well-muscled chest was exposed; and in the full glare of the moon, the face clearly evidenced a day's growth of beard.

"The stranger from the tavern," Rayun said. "Perhaps he can't make up his mind to be man or woman."

Jakor's voice grew suddenly harsh. "See to the horses, Rayun. He may have set them loose."

"I've lost my sword, but there's a dagger in my belt."

"See to the horses!" Jakor snapped.

"But . . ."

"No backtalk. I know what I'm doing."

Rayun took a deep breath, dropped his shoulders, and trudged off in the direction of their camp. "I hope you do," he muttered.

The Amazon's son looked down into Jakor's face, and the seated man met his eyes squarely. The air was thick and heavy, muting the cries of nocturnal predators and their victims. Jakor waited for Rayun's footsteps to fade from earshot before he spoke again.

"Leave the boy out of it. Your quarrel is with me."

"You love him, do you?" The stranger's voice was calmer, less shrill, almost querulous.

"I'm fond of him, yes. And I'm responsible for him, though he rides with me of his own accord."

The carrot-haired youth pressed the hilt of his sword to his lips thoughtfully. "And he loves you as well. I watched his struggles to save you. It's very odd. He struck from behind like a coward, yet bravely risked that mire and the snapping branch."

"Chaos, man!" Jakor spat. "I'm unarmed, and exhausted. Will you kill me and be gone before he returns? He's no match for you!"

"You, too, are a very odd person. Suddenly so noble. Yet last night you drunkenly bragged about raping my mother."

"I rape *her*? It was more the other way around. Nori had a good fifteen years and two stone in weight over me in those days. I was lucky she had a sentimental streak and helped me steal a boat!"

"Do you expect me to believe she left her home for such a petty indiscretion?"

"Maybe that was part of it," Jakor answered. "But after seeing you, I know why she stayed in exile. Did she never tell you that male children on Borrell are slain at birth? Oh, she may have left in disgrace, but she stayed where she was because to return meant your death!"

The sword's point touched the ground. "By the eyes of the All-Mother . . ."

Jakor expelled a blast of air in frustration. "Are you going to kill me or not? I'm getting cold."

The Amazon's son shrugged and scabbarded his sword. "No, I suppose not," he said. "But that minstrel's song . . ."

"Heavily embellished for the sake of the story. Believe me. I was there."

"Then I suppose I shouldn't have killed him. Though I'm not sorry that I did. It wasn't a very nice song."

"Perhaps not."

The stranger sighed. "I have much to learn. My mother could only teach me Amazon ways, and it seems they'll be little help to me now. I obviously can't go to Borrell."

After a moment's hesitation, Jakor blurted out, "Join us. I'm teaching Rayun the hero business. We can both teach you."

Nori's son studied the aging, overweight, slime-covered warrior, then shook his head. "I'd rather not," he decided. "I don't quite know what to make of you and Rayun. I'd be too busy trying to deal with my feelings toward you. No, I have to seek my own way. No hard feelings, though. Maybe we'll meet again."

He gave a two-fingered Amazon salute of respect, and turned to go. The breastplate he ignored, leaving it half sunk in the mud.

"Wait!" called Jakor.

The youth looked back.

"You're my son," the adventurer continued. "And I don't even know your name."

"Nor do I." The young man grinned for the first time. "Mother knew only one masculine name, and I don't feel entitled to it any more. That's just one more thing I'll have to find for myself." And then he disappeared into the thick brush.

When Rayun returned, minutes later, he found Jakor staring absently into the darkness of the swamp. Mud still dribbled from the adventurer's chin, mingling with the

filth that clung to his chest.

"He's gone?" the apprentice asked, amazed. "You let him go?"

Jakor smiled at the naïveté of that remark. "I let him go."

"So Rondol goes unavenged?"

"You can't kill everybody, Rayun. He had his reasons for what he did. The matter is closed."

"It's not fair!"

"Very few things in life are, Rayun. And the harder you try to be fair, the more unfair things seem to become. Let it lie."

Rayun knew then that something had happened to his mentor that he himself would not understand for a long time. He placed a hand on Jakor's dripping shoulder and felt the tremor beneath his palm.

"You're shivering," Rayun observed.

"Am I?"

"You are. Let's get back to camp. The horses are still tied up, of course, but the fire was dying and I built it up. That's what you need, a warm fire and dry clothes."

They walked slowly through the mud, Jakor supporting himself partly on Rayun's shoulder. As they stepped into a cloud of warm but choking smoke at the camp's edge, Jakor spoke suddenly in a hearty tone.

"What say you, lad, to pressing farther south? Bandits are as thick as flies in those lands and you can find demons galore if you know where to look." Then, softer, almost to himself, he added, "I need to face some tangible evil, something I can feel right about running a sword through."

"Now you're talking!" Rayun exclaimed, helping his mentor to a seat by the fire. "Now you sound like Jakor

the dragon-slayer, greatest hero in the seven kingdoms."

Cheered by the thought of new adventures, Rayun hummed while he retrieved dry clothes and a blanket from Jakor's pack. The tune was a familiar one. Returning to the fire, the lad actually broke out in song, vocalizing the few words he remembered.

*"The Isle of Borrell,
He'll never go there anymore;
The Isle of Borrell,
The home of that red-headed . . ."*

"Rayun!" Jakor snapped as he reached for the bundle. "I want you to do me one more favor tonight."

"Anything!" the lad responded. "Just name it."

"Shut up."

And in a silence broken only by a frog chorus, Jakor peeled off his slime-laden jerkin.

*Tanith Lee is another writer with a writerly name—and don't try to look up that adverb. Her manuscripts come winging over from England in startling volume, and far more startling is that there's never a loser in the lot. Surely she, beginning with *The Birthgrave* and continuing through *Death's Master* and this story and another scheduled for volume five, is one of the best things to happen to fantasy/hf in decades.*

*Her "Odds Against the Gods," in *Swords Against Darkness II*, is one of my all-time favorites. Make that favourites. I think we share a perverse twist of the mind. Her very short, rather brittle story in volume three is vastly different—as is this one. It's clever, too.*

This story of Jhane is what I call an If Only story, and there are about seven If Onlies.

DEUX AMOURS D'UNE SORCIÈRE

by Tanith Lee

It was a time when Parys was new, immature and beautiful. It was a season of pinks and of blues. Turrets of blue slate pencilled on deep summer skies; roses like sugar-paste in the little walled gardens of rose brick. Pale rose wine, with blue eyes gazing across the cup. Blue dusks with a pink quarter moon. Sapphires and a girl's blush. Dawn falling into love-beds with canopies of blue velvet. Candle smoke. Flamingoes.

It was a time of love. Of a needing to be in love. Of the ground loving the feet which passed over it. The pointed towers loving the soft clouds they seemed to uphold. Flowers loving to be plucked, and the air loving to be full

of the songs which filled it. Everything was in love, loving, loved. All but one. All but Jhane.

She would stand at her window, with her light fine hair bound about her head, with pearls the colour of her own mouth glowing in it. She dressed for the season, for she was aware of such things. She dressed for it, she understood it. But she had no part in it.

Once, long ago, she had been poor. Now she had a protector, a man who had ended her poverty. This man was an old man. He did not want anything very much from her. To sit and look at her. To walk with her in the garden of the house he had given her. Sometimes he liked to caress her, but nothing more. He was gentle and courteous, foolish only in his cleaving to a woman's youth. He did not expect her to be faithful to him. He imagined she would occasionally take lovers, young men. Sometimes he hoped vaguely for a child to be born, a girl child, with clear-water skin and great clear-water eyes. Then he might bathe his spirit in a child's youth also. But Jhane did not take lovers. Her protector's position had raised her to the outer circle of the court. She saw the king's chevaliers, but she did not see them frequently, and those she did see she beheld as strangers. Sometimes handsome, sometimes not, none of them was for her. It was the age when a man might be everything together: fighter, artist, horseman, poet, musician. But a woman might be only a woman. Or, there was something else, which, in secret, she might be: a sorceress.

It was easy for a woman to become a sorceress in those days. She could slip into it, as if into silk, or a swoon. Sitting before a mirror combing her hair, the play of the lamp on hair, on comb: she could become a sorceress at such moments. Or in the tender morning, the fragrant

evening, her feet on grass, leaves flooding her ears and eyes: Then. She would find the magic in the earth, in light, in shade, so in herself. At these periods, a spell might radiate from her, like breath, and a flower would open that had been closed, a nightingale sing where there had been no nightingale. Or a hand knock on the garden's door. . . .

But while there was no necessity, such powers went unrecognised. Jhane sensed, as every woman did, the well-spring within herself, yet did not think to tap the source.

Until there was a dawn, and under the dome of rouged crystal sky, horses' hoofs on cobbles sharp as daggers flung at the window. And then, in the square beneath, where the fountain put out its whorled unicorn spike into the basin, silence; punctuated by the scrape of a cup on stone.

It was a summer of sleepless nights, all Parys sleepless for one reason or another. Jhane had read, by candle-shine, and next by the dawn which dyed the pages with madder. Now she left her book for the window, that other living book in which she might read the romance of the street.

There by the basin were two horses trimmed with bullion. A young man stooped to drink from the basin. Another was in the act of pouring over the drinker's head the water collected in a cup of beaten gold. As Jhane watched, the water encountered its target, and with a shout the drinker sprang around. The gold cup sang on the cobbles. The two men seized each other as if for combat, and then desisted, laughing. One had hair nearly as gold as the cup he had performed the anointing with. His blue garments had the tint of a noon sea and the gold

embroidery the noon sun would make on it. All of blue and gold he was, even the eyes. But it was the other that the dawn had brought Jhane to her window to see. His was a darkness left behind at sunrise—clothed in a blue so dense as to be almost black, hair like dark honey, gilded only where the light touched it. His eyes were black, and perfectly shaped, like the eyes of saints in pictures. An icon. Jhane's lover. Formed by her heart and her solitude. Who did not know she lived in the world.

She had an impulse to fling wide the casement and cry out to him. But only harlots were so free; she dared not. This she could tell from their dress, and the accoutrements of the horses, that both men were chevaliers of the king. It had happened that she had never before seen them, or, if she had, blindly, at some other season not of love.

She watched from her window as they ended the business with the fountain and mounted up again. With a quicksilver pang of her vitals she watched them ride away. To the very last, she fixed her gaze on his darker head. She thought: 'It is impossible that we should ever meet. And if we do not, how shall I bear it? I have been alone so long. But here is my life's reason. Here is my soul. And it cannot be. I must live on, without life.'

The air was altering to day-bright air and birds swam in the clouds above the towers. To look at heaven brought thoughts of God or Fate; or hope, at least.

The moment evolved.

She thought: 'If I cannot live alone, I must bring him to me. There is my only answer.'

Jhane had become a sorceress.

* * *

At the noonday of Greece, it had been the fashion to accord visual immortality to the mighty, the famous and the fair, to carve them in marble, cast them in bronze, paint them on the plains of amphorae. In the shining morning of Parys it was also the fashion, but in another mode. There were certain shops beneath wide white airy studios. Here you could see twenty or so current faces and forms upon oblongs of hemp, ovals of wood, and burning jewel-like in cameos. An idyll of a lady with a dove, or a goddess with a basket of pink grapes, these might be the king's sister, or his mistress. And here those canvases, each titled 'Portrait of a Young Man'—the chevaliers of the court, its princes of love.

Such a shop Jhane entered, veiled in blue lace. She sought him up and down the rows of the beautiful and young. She found him, as in the dawn she had, beside his friend. It might be that they were lovers, too. But at that season most trees bore the double fruit. As with the ancient gods, the statute was: Love Is, and not 'Love must be thus and so.'

Seeing a lady was in the shop, the master of the studio had come down. He bowed to Jhane and spoke to her gently of how the paint was brushed on the ivory.

"But who," said Jhane, "is this? And this?"

"You joke with me," the master said. "All Parys knows these, the young lions of the court. He who is golden haired, that is Nicolin Solat, who has come to be called Le Soleil for his goldness, much like the sun. The darker man is Bernard de Cigny. Notice, if you will, how excellently my student has caught the glint of the sapphire drop in his left ear."

"Yes," said Jhane, "I will have this one, for the glint of the sapphire pleases me."

Her protector, who poured coins into her coffers and trusted she would take a lover, now unsuspectingly paid for the picture of a lover.

She placed the simulacrum in a niche beside her bed where formerly only a holy relic had stood in a vessel of silver. By the niche hung a curtain. She drew it closed, and hid his face from the daylight.

She did not eat; she sent the dishes away untouched. The servants her protector had given her did not suppose her to be sick. Or rather, they guessed the sickness—*mal de coeur*.

The city entered the dusk like a vast ship, her towers her masts, her silken canopies her sails; floating on blueness, her candles and her fireflies lighting windows, walks and gardens. The sweet melancholy of evening drifted in a smoke, and bathed Jhane as she let down her hair at her mirror like fine warm summer rain.

A lamp burned low before the niche with the two holy things inside it. As Jhane turned toward the curtain, outside, a song spread its wings on the twilight:

Un peu d'amour, un peu de vie
—*Mais j'ai perdu mon amour*
—*Pourquoi vive?*

She smiled, for a sorceress must, on all occasions, be aware of portents. Then she drew the curtain and kneeled down, as she would do to pray.

In the cathedral of the night, bells sounded, marking the hours. The carriages came and went, the torches and processions. The moon passed over and sank under the river of sky. And all the while Jhane kept her vigil before the painted likeness, her eyes on his painted eyes, and

sometimes she murmured his name very low, . . . "Bernard . . . Bernard de Cigny . . ." For a name uttered often, in love (or hate), must eventually be heard, though spoken at the ends of the world.

And she half fancied he could sense eyes upon him, might glance about to see who called to him. And the spell wove on the loom of the night, until at length it filled the house.

Dawn came, and Jhane rose, still and chilled and sightless, to sleep a little.

But she felt her power, the seed planted in soil.

* * *

Night after night, she did this thing. When the sun lifted she slept a short time. She took meals which had no substance, water fruits and dishes of wafers and soups made from honey, whirling and frost, and slender colourless wines. When her protector visited her and saw how she had become; pale, exquisite and translucent as what she fed on, his vanity ached, but he put it aside. He invited her to stroll in the gardens of the city, and her hand on his arm was like a feather. She conversed with him and laughed, but she was not with him in fact, merely in person. Sometimes she would gaze at a particular item—sun on a piece of dark gilding, the burnish of a gem, and he would know that now she saw another's hair or eyes, his walk, the manner of his gestures. And her protector was curious to behold for himself who the young man might be. And so he resolved to bring Jhane more into the happenings of the fringe of the court, where the great came and went like meteors and the lesser great ones hovered like dragonflies.

He brought her a white greyhound with cochineal eyes. She paced with it in the gardens as if she trod on crystals, and the old man watched her. He grew ashamed, and said to her finally: "I fear, demoiselle, you are in love."

"No. You mistake me."

They paused by a tree like a fountain, while riders went by on the path. And the old man perceived how Jhane flinched toward them as each approached.

"I have assured you I shall not mind it," said the old man. "Now tell me who it is."

"It is no one, monsieur," said Jhane.

Then his curiosity seemed to him to become insupportable. He went away and let others do the work for him. He set some on, by devious means, to question her in his absence, and himself began to listen to gossip.

Women came to Jhane's house or approached her on the street or in the shady walks of the gardens, where she moved in a gown of powder blue with strawberry sleeves, with her hound on its leash.

"You are remarkable this summer, Jhane. Who is the lover that has inspired this mood in you?"

Jhane's face was a traitor, and her heart shook, wanting to unburden itself of everything. But she replied:

"You know the man who has befriended me."

"No. Not the old protector. The new."

"I entertain no one else."

"If not lover, then beloved. Who is it, Jhane, that you love?"

But Jhane was a sorceress. She comprehended she must not speak. The power in the spell was kept by secrecy, contained and made potent by her silence. And

at dawn today, her lids falling shut, she had caught a glimpse, without sight, not of the painted simulacrum of Bernard de Cigny, but of the man himself, as at that instant he must have been. A girl slept beside him, but he was not aware of her. His dark eyes were lamps in darkness. It seemed he might look straight through the insubstantial fabric of distance, locality and all the walls between, and see Jhane looking back at him. And though the picture perished, still she was reassured that the flower was taking root in the soil and putting out its leaves and buds. No, she would not speak to crack the jar and let the magic potion seep away.

But the women swarmed to her like bees to syrup and would not leave her alone. And her face, that wished so much that they should learn the truth, lost its pallor. At this, the interrogators began to name names to her, observing her carefully as they did so. And eventually a woman cried: "It is one of the king's two favourites, the young lions of the court."

Suddenly Jhane thought of what the master of the studio had described to her, and said at once: "You have discovered me. My longing is for the chevalier who resembles the sun, Nicolin le Soleil."

The women laughed and clapped their hands.

Jhane, having deceived them, permitted the game.

When the women came to her afterward it was always of Nicolin le Soleil they whispered. They informed her of how marvellously he rode and fenced, of his cunning with alchemy, with music, and whom he couched with and whom he no longer couched with. When they glanced up for Jhane's sighs or her frowns or her joy, she offered them unstintingly. Sometimes, the narrators touched upon the friend of Le Soleil, virtually

by accident.

By night now she would fall asleep at her vigil, and dream of Bernard de Cigny. She would feel a fine thread stretched between them through the myriad twinings of a labyrinth. She was certain that he had begun to follow the thread which would bring him to her. Twice she heard hoofs under her window. The second night she heard them, she rose and stared down, and he was in the square, alone, mounted on his horse, hesitating only a moment before riding on. Not suspecting she had drawn him there and would draw him there again and yet again, to her very door, and to her very self.

* * *

Spiders spun on the roses in her garden. Conscious of portents, she was disturbed and quickened by their webs which captured and retained.

Jhane's protector underwent advancement at the court. He visited Jhane and told her of a jousting and that he would take her to witness it. He held her pale hands and stared at her eyes that had changed to strange enchanted ponds and her hair like a halo about her head.

"Demoiselle, you are more lovely than ever I saw you. And now I know why and for whom, and perhaps you will see him at the jousting. Perhaps, indeed, very likely you will." And then, smiling, he shielded his brows from the sky. "Such a bright sun today," he complained. "So much sun scorching my poor ancient skull." And she realized he too believed she yearned for Nicolin le Soleil.

In the enormous meadow of the joust, the grass was hidden by blue flowers. A hundred shades of blue and cramoisi, the banners floated on the summer wind, thick

with golden lilies, snowy leopards, rampant black basilisks. And the tents to right and left were sugar plums, upended daisies, many-tiered hyacinths.

Jhane's protector had procured a place for them at the forefront of the stands, opposite, though across forty yards of turf, the royal canopy, the king and queen. But Jhane had no interest in them. She sat there, dumb and motionless as if she had been blown from glass. The bones seemed to show through her hands as she waited, and concentration, like a shadow, through her eyes.

The trumpets blew, and all the banners shifted, passing and repassing each other like figured cards shuffled in a pack.

The king's chevaliers rode out on the meadow over the blue flowers. Arms and armour dazzled; Jhane looked through fires and could not recognise the one she sought. And then, straight from the dazzle, a man came riding. Blue and gold, as the banner carried behind him. Preoccupied, she did not guess until the gasping and the laughter swelled all about her, and turned aside from the field, and found Nicolin le Soleil seated at ease in the saddle, directly before her.

Apollonian, he sat there. His expression was of interest, but not kindness. She realised too late he too might hear rumours, and meant to humiliate her in some sort before the crowd. But she met his scrutiny, for she recalled that, at its depth, the jest was really hers. And by swift beautiful degrees, his expression was transfigured. He turned slightly and bowed insultingly to her protector, and then to Jhane he said: "I have no equal here today and shall win. Lend me your favour, demoiselle, and I promise you the couronne."

All about was silence, now. Beside her, her protector

filmed the air with bitter disapproval, but Jhane could do no other than her part. She did not need to feign blushing; a thousand eager gapings had seen to that. She untied the blush-coloured ribbon from her waist and extended it without a word to Le Soleil, who accepted it, nodded, and rode away to win the tournament.

Events were not as she had reckoned. Presently she puzzled out, from casual chat and remembering Le Soleil's dismissal of the other chevaliers, that Bernard de Cigny was from court that day. Her vitality grew wizened, and the rich dyes faded on the stands and the pavilions and from the sky and from the morning itself. She did not have the soul left to her to care that her protector was pained and incensed at so immediate a discourtesy offered him. But she perpetuated her role, and when Le Soleil took the field she made herself all eyes. She held her breath when the lances shivered, and when the poniards and the halberds smote and clove she breathed fast so her heart beat strongly. Dimly she noticed that there seemed always about Le Soleil a kind of golden mist, blinding to his opponents. He made her afraid. She wondered what extra measure he would wish to add to the jest, or if crowning her the Queen of Beauty would suffice.

Finally he was the champion of the joust, and had looped the colours of twenty chevaliers on the haft of an unbroken lance.

He strode to her across the forty yards of turf now rutted and wrecked. He brought her the chaplet of roses, tinted like their name, and silver wire and pearls, and set it lightly on her hair.

"I will keep the ribbon," said Nicolin Solat. "It shall be the marker in my memory of you, Jhane la Fée."

She lowered her eyes and her protector grunted sullenly.

"Demoiselle," he said, "we are going home."

Nicolin le Soleil did not glance. He bowed to Jhane and said:

"I return you then, to your father's care."

Jhane's protector came to his feet. Coldly he said:

"I am not madame's father."

Le Soleil was contrite. "Humbly on my knee your pardon. Her grandfather then, monsieur."

Jhane felt the thunder in the air and longed only for solitude, longed for night, the low-burning lamp, the picture in the niche. Longed for Bernard de Cigny whose face, by this time, was also painted on her brain.

And in the carriage she paid small heed to her protector, or to his hands plucking at his garments restlessly. A man, foolish only in his cleaving to a woman's youth, he had not expected her to be faithful, had hoped vaguely for a clear-water child in which to bathe his spirit. But he had complacently pondered abstracts. Jhane had not taken lovers, had not borne a child. Now the reality, the public degradation, the taste of his own silliness sickly in an old man's mouth. Jealousy without a salve.

And in the streets they sang: *Mais j'ai perdu mon amour*

* * *

A sense of shame hung over Jhane. She was too glad to shut herself away, to observe night re-enter Parys with a panther's tread, night to mask the countenance, the dreams, the deeds of love.

And then swiftly, as she kneeled before the portrait, one of those bizarre sorcerous glimpses bubbled up from the well of her inner mind. Half vision, half deduction, formed by the thread she had spun between them: Bernard was at his sister's house in the north. Candles flamed and there was a celebration, for the woman had given birth that noon to a child. Yet, while the cups rang and the wine glowed in them, Jhane perceived he was impatient to be gone, back to Parys, for what reason he could not quite express. So much she beheld in a few seconds, and the dark turning of his head with the candles blood-gold on it, and the black saint's eyes.

In swirling elation she raised her lids—to torchlight on the wall, and music thrown in dancing notes, against her window.

She abandoned her vigil, unable to keep it. Lowering the lamp further, she ventured to the window. In the street below five players made their harmony. They wore the livery of Nicolin Solat.

Jhane went from the room. She summoned her porter and sent him to the door. "Be off!" she heard him shouting. "My mistress would sleep."

And—"This is no night for sleeping," one of the players answered. "Look at the stars. Do they slumber?"

She identified the tones of *Le Soleil*, with a dreadful clutching at her heart. She flung wide the casement and deliberately threw out a handful of gold. "Take my coins and leave me my privacy."

"You are too winning to be private, demoiselle," he said.

And easily he slipped by the stupefied servant and was in her house.

She met him on the stair. Alarm made her bold.

"You have joked enough," she said.

"Begun in joke, ending in earnest," replied Le Soleil. He snapped his fingers and a page ran to her and kneeled. The entire troupe seemed bursting into the house after the master and Jhane despaired. The page held up to her an open coffer. On damask, an imperishable rose wrought of mother-of-pearl and gold.

"You cannot buy me," Jhane declared, "I am not a harlot." But this was not quite the case, for her protector had bought her.

Le Soleil only regarded her, and coming up the stair he gently clasped her hand. "I thought it was for love you would have me. The jewel is but a token."

"Who spoke to you of my love?" said Jhane. "Was it I?"

"Oh," he said. "I see I have overshot the mark." He dropped her hand and turned and moved down the stair scornfully. She hated his pride, which she had hated from the beginning. He thought her a fool that she did not desire him. He thought all men forgave his transgressions, out of love, all women, too. The anointings of cold water, the insults and the mockeries—healed by his caress, his smile.

He was at the door again, this time going out.

"Be sure I shall remember you hereafter, Jhane," he said.

He left her the rose.

The house was empty.

She returned to her room above, and she wept. But the tears of a sorceress are valuable; voluptuous and purging. She dedicated her tears to the man in the picture. She drifted into sleep and dreamed of Bernard de Cigny's arrival at her house. How she would welcome him, how

he would be uncertain of himself, not cognizant of what had brought him to her, yet bound already, mind and spirit, as he had bound her from the first.

When she roused, the air was cool and soft with dawn, the scent of flowers and trees stole through the window. But no birds sang, as if all birds had died in the night. And suddenly a sound of lamenting went up far away along the streets, a stern bell tolling, and human throats crying.

Jhane was filled with fear. She gazed from her window. The pastel light was beginning in the sky and a fresher voice wailed something shrilly over and over, drawing every instant nearer as it did so. Soon a boy raced into the square beside the house.

"What is the matter?" Jhane called to him. "Stop and tell me what it is."

The boy halted wild-eyed. "Twelve footpads in a band," he shrieked. She could barely make him out. "Twelve footpads, and they were only five and a little page. Instruments of music, torches, and but two swords between them. He was coming from a woman's bed, they say. But now descending to a bed of earth, alone. Cut in pieces as if by butchers. No longer beautiful. No longer alive. He is dead, madame."

"But who is dead?" Jhane whispered.

"Nicolin Solat."

* * *

Jhane's protector came to her house an hour later.

"I have been unable to sleep," he said to her. He seemed not to see her blanched face, her stony immobility—she had not moved from the window when the boy had run away. This lack of interest in her

appearance on her protector's part need not have been surprising. He had surely been told of the death of Nicolin le Soleil. He would expect Jhane's distraction. Yet he did not attempt to console her, either, or even to exult in her loss. Presently she herself became aware that her protector was unquiet. He paced the room, and once he glanced uneasily at the curtained niche, as if he felt the painted eyes of his true rival upon him.

"Jhane," he said at last, "I have urgent business in the south. Certain estates you have heard me mention . . . I cannot be sure how long I must be away. I have left provision for you in my usual fashion."

"If it is necessary," she answered faintly. Life and observation were returning to her body. She deciphered his look now. It was of consternation and nervousness, oddly mingled with a curious satisfaction. "Monsieur—" she said.

"No questions, demoiselle," he said quickly. "I have no leisure. To reveal the secret somewhat, I think I have incurred the disfavour of the king. Adieu. Remember me sometimes in your prayers."

But—"Nicolin Solat was slain," said Jhane, "yesterday, slaughtered by twelve footpads on the street."

"Indeed? I regret that for your sake, demoiselle. For my own, I cannot."

"Had no one spoken to you of it?" she insisted.

At this he smiled, a grey, terrified, malevolent smile.

"I am old," he said, "but I have my honour. You should not have loved an upstart puppy, Jhane. Ask nothing else."

So she waited in silence till he was gone, knowing he had borne his insults ill, that he had hired twelve men, who, hunting under the unsleeping stars, had murdered,

according to the old man's instructions.

And then she thought: 'If I had not played this game, had not revealed Le Soleil, wrongly, as my lover, he would live.' And then again she thought: 'If I had not denied him, he would not have left my house.' And she recalled his brightness in the morning, his brilliance at the tournament, the touch of his hands when he set the chaplet on her head; how she had feigned love, but not loved. How she had denied him and he had died.

She wondered what she must do now. Finally, she understood. She had mimicked loving; now she must mimic lamentation.

She dressed herself in a black gown slashed with vermeil—the colour of a prince's blood. She veiled her hair and face with indigo gauze and took a sable rose in her hand—the colour of a dying coal.

All up and down the city the bells were tolling. The birds, mute, hung heavy on the air.

Twelve had killed him; he had twelve thousand mourners. The men stood like blind statues, the women wept and laid their flowers on the closed casket until it became a mountain of flowers, the most sombre of the blues and pinks, the carmines and the azures of that summer.

The priests chanted. The music towered up and pierced the roof of the sky. But the bells seemed to ring that other song: *Un peu d'amour, un peu de vie.*

The women wept on. Sorrow filled the cup and ran over. Jhane wept, too. She had wept because of Nicolin Solat before.

Weeping, she forgot to look for Bernard de Cigny.

* * *

The dregs are darker than the wine. So the summer season was drained to the dregs, darkening, intensified, mysterious.

Jhane's vigil that night was different. As her protector had done, she paced the room. The curtain remained undrawn. Yet she heard the bells marking the hours, and far off the funeral bell, a great mass which went on and on, priests replacing each other, candles burning down, orisons murmured for a man's soul. For surely, a prayer uttered often must eventually be heard, though spoken in the youth of Parys on a summer night.

After midnight, it began to rain. Even the sky it seemed, would weep. And through the rain, a noise of hoofs in the street, pausing, not resuming. And then a knocking on the door of the house.

Not a soul but Jhane was awake, or if they were, something kept them from rising. Perhaps a superstition of ghosts, a golden-haired man, patterned by blood, his clay-cold hand fumbling for the catch.

But Jhane knew. And strangely without any stirring in her, she went down and unbolted the door.

The storm streamed across the night. Under the lash of it, not noticing, his hair nearly black with rain, his black eyes like pools the rain had filled, Bernard de Cigny, close to her as life.

"Madame," he said, "you will think me mad, but something drew me to your house, as if to a church." These were the phrases she had visualised for him. Her spell had brought him to her. "I was away in the north," he said. "I had a friend who died here in my absence. Now I wander the streets like a lost child. You will think me mad."

Jhane put out her hand into the night and the rain

dashed it. He took her hand. She thought of another's touch.

"Enter my house," she said. But the words meant so little to her.

Was it that, acting to convince the world, she had convinced herself? Or was it that she had mistaken love from the first, as one recollects in error the melody of a song, setting one note in place of another?

Too late she saw how the golden thread which had bound them was broken and torn away. Bernard and Jhane, with nothing left save rain and dark, nothing left but the comfort they might transmit to each other, in the absence of happiness. But the summer was gone, and the sun had descended into earth.

Hand in hand they stood in the chill sunless night.

And still the bells rang their plaint: A little love, a little life.

And well might they answer: But I have lost my love. Why live?

Poul Anderson's work is loved by a lot of people. Poul Anderson is liked by a lot of people. He knows more than anyone who ever taught you in school, and writes about a lot of it. In the first Swords A.D. it was a story with a Scandinavian setting that was told precisely as such a tale should be told. For the third volume, I asked him to write an article discussing the errors too commonly found in the writing of hf. He did—and that article contains a score of plot and story-backgrounding ideas.

This time I got him to let me reprint something he wrote about a decade ago, in his here-and-there fan press column "Beer Mutterings." I hope he doesn't mind my saying I think it's a stroke of genius and probably the very most clever writing he has ever done.

Do be careful of the jerking of your knees, now.

OF PIGS AND MEN

by Poul Anderson

The following was written to see if I could handle the rhetorical and logical style of today's most prominent sociopolitical thinkers. After trying it, I'm afraid my preferences remain with men like Jefferson or Burke, hopelessly outmoded though these be.

Amidst the current furore over persecuted minorities and how society has got to make up to them for the troubles their ancestors endured, nobody seems to remember the one which took the worst beating of the lot. So cruelly has it been discriminated against that there isn't even a proper name for it.

Oh, its members are often called WASPS. But that

isn't simply dehumanizing, it's inaccurate, doubtless deliberately so in implementation of a calculated policy of dividing them against each other. The fact is, only a part of them are Anglo-Saxons, they were not always Protestants, and many of them still aren't. They have sometimes been called Nordics, but this again is correct for a mere fraction. I'm convinced that that term is misapplied in order to saddle them all with the racial stereotype. You know: a funny-looking person, tall, lanky, long-skulled, with a big nose and straight yellow hair and deepset washed-out eyes and easily sunburned skin and would you want your daughter to marry one? In actuality, more of them are black-haired, brown-eyed, and stocky than not. They consist of those who inhabit a certain part of the world, or whose forebears did.

That homeland covers the British Isles, the Low Countries, the Scandinavian peninsula including most of Finland, Denmark, the Baltic and North Sea littorals, and a large piece of central Europe. It's not very good country—apt to be wet and cold, with boggy or stony or heath-grown soil, gloomy forests, interminable winter nights, few mineral resources except a bit of iron and coal. That is the reason the inhabitants long remained underdeveloped and thus became easy victims of exploitation by southerners whose own good fortune ought to have made them kind and loving but didn't. In order to give this minority a name free of pejorative associations, let us form a neologism from the core area and call them People Inhabiting Germanic Settlements, or PIGS for short. I want to emphasize that this is also a loose phrase, since many Celts, Slavs, Balts, Finns, Jews, etc. are included. However, the principal languages belong to the Germanic family.

The original PIGS were peaceful reindeer hunters, drifting north when the glaciers receded if they were not refugees from warlike invaders. Once settled down, some of them took to the sea while others farmed their poor little plots of cleared land as best they might. When the Iron Age reached them the Celts were dominant throughout their territory. But the vicious aggression of Mediterranean armies, especially the Roman, reduced this brilliant culture to a set of starveling enclaves. Perforce the Teutons took over the burden of defending northern Europe.

From time immemorial, PIGS have been subject to the most callous racism. Aristotle described their children as having hair "like old men," as if its flaxen hue were a deformity. Pliny counselled against buying German slaves, declaring that they were innately too stupid to learn anything useful. While Tacitus did call them noble savages, his patronizing fantasies never touched the slave raiders or the greedy and unscrupulous merchants who dealt with those innocent tribesmen.

The first major clash occurred about 100 B.C., when Cimbrian and Teutonic immigrants, seeking a haven from famine, were brutally attacked by the Romans. Those who survived were sold into slavery. Given this kind of provocation, it is not to be wondered at that PIGS retaliated with border raids. Finally, at Teutoburger Wald, the heroic people's leader Arminius secured their frontiers against further imperialism. The utter corruption of the fascist Roman society was demonstrated when the western Empire collapsed a bare 400 years later.

At that time, with their usual charity, several organizations of PIGS did their best to help those who had so greatly abused them. Vandals went down to North

Africa, Visigoths to Iberia, Ostrogoths to Italy itself, bringing honest government and folk culture. But the Mediterranean Ethnic Neighbors (MEN) would have none of it. Instead, they forced the Latin language on the newcomers; they persecuted the Arian religion; at last Byzantines from the east and Moslems from the south came in armed hordes to crush the liberation movement.

Events developed a little more happily in the north, where the reborn imperialism was weaker. At the request of the Romano-British king Vortigern, the Jutes Hengist and Horsa brought gallant soldiers to assist him in restoring order. When he treacherously turned on them, killing Horsa, Hengist had no choice but to send for reinforcements and give peace to the country. Later English arrivals were welcomed with such joyous admiration—except by a handful of reactionaries in Wales and the Scottish highlands—that no trace of Romano-British culture remains. Similarly, the Gauls renamed their country for the Franks who had set them free.

However, the fascist MEN never stopped their plots to seize back power from the people. They began by sending glib missionaries who converted the Franks and other tribes, not to a pure Arian Christianity, but to a Catholicism directed by Rome. Next—after the Franks had saved them from the Moors—the MEN installed a puppet ruler, Charlemagne, who swept through Saxony with fire and sword, enslaving the dwellers and demolishing their sacred groves. With that example before them, what could the remaining free PIGS do except try to save their oppressed brethren? Tragically, this selfless effort of the Vikings failed, both because of missionary subversion and because a Papal stalking

horse named William (a real bastard) usurped the crown of pivotal England.

The next several centuries were an age of unrelieved misery; of paupers groaning beneath the heel of Rome, their Emperor himself having to walk barefoot through the snow; of fighting wars for the benefit of Italian shipping interests, the so-called Crusades; of struggle to keep native languages alive in the face of the Latin which had already extinguished Frankish and Gothic. In this last connection, the prejudice against PIGS is vividly illustrated by the fact that, when a new style of church architecture evolved, its detractors sneeringly labeled it "Gothic." (And we might note that in later times the same adjective was applied to forms of literature that were looked down upon.)

When the Renaissance blessed the MEN with unprecedented opulence, did they send aid to the impoverished PIGS? No. They did nothing of the sort. The Flemings, Prussians, and other wretched of the earth were left gnawing their stockfish and coughing over their peat fires. Not content with hoarding the immense profits of capitalism, the MEN brazenly tried to sell them indulgences.

But then the spirit of Freedom Now broke forth. The Protestant Reformation cast off rusty medieval shackles. This did not happen easily or at once. Think only how the Spaniards ravaged the Netherlands and sent an armada against England, consider the atrocities of Wallenstein and the martyrdom of the Huguenots, the latter not even being PIGS although expressing solidarity with them. Nevertheless, the indomitable resistance movement prevailed.

With a degree of national liberation achieved, the

PIGS naturally looked for their rightful share in the affluence that the rest of Europe was enjoying. Again they found themselves barred from opportunity. The Spanish, the Portuguese, the French denied them real estate in America and the Orient. A pitiful few PIGS managed to obtain footholds in such slum areas as New England and Virginia. They were promptly set on by ravening, murdering, scalping lynch mobs of a different race, on the transparent excuse that the latter were there first—which is to say that property rights were considered above human rights. Incredible though it seems, when the PIGS attempted penal reform in Georgia and Botany Bay, this likewise met with violence.

Of course, we must be realistic. PIGS are mortal too, and therefore prone to error. When African chiefs offered slaves for sale, PIGS were occasionally known to buy. And they fell for numerous other capitalist tricks, e.g., they purchased Manhattan Island for \$24 and a case of whiskey from some Indians who, it later turned out, had no title to it.

Meanwhile the influence of the MEN was as persistent as it was pernicious. For centuries French literature, Italian art and manners, were emulated in the north to the detriment of a true expression. Spanish courage and Arabic lovemaking (the notorious Sheikh image) are still held up to women as emblems of masculinity, regardless of the castrating effect this may have on male PIGS. When, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, northern poets sought to re-create a northern culture, they were compelled to use half-Latinized tongues and, indeed, to call their efforts by the name Romanticism!

Not having been enlightened about the true meaning of their situation, the PIGS were repeatedly duped into

fighting wars that could benefit none but the MEN. In Asia, Africa, Oceania, America they put down one non-Catholic nation after another; as viceroys and garrison troops they endured patiently the humiliation of being excluded from local fraternal groups; and what have they left now for all their toil and bloodshed? Scarcely an acre. In Europe itself, PIGS served as MEN's cat's-paws: for instance, remember Napoleon's German grenadiers, or the Gaulish Bernadotte family which to this day tyrannizes over Sweden. Sometimes they were maneuvered into battling each other to keep them weak, notably in the World Wars. (Nazism is obviously a Mediterranean invention. I have already described the ravings of those mad dogs Aristotle and Pliny; now I remind you of the Graeco-Syrian anti-Semitism commemorated in *Maccabees* and the destruction of the Temple by Romans.)

Throughout history, PIGS have been the butt of scorn. Think of the Chinese phrase "foreign devil," the Japanese "Yankee monkey," the Mexican "gringo," and imagine how you would feel if you were similarly labelled. Does anyone ever say "Blond is beautiful"? No, blondes are automatically assumed to be intellectually deficient and, except for an animal sexuality, emotionally shallow.

I could go on, but this sketch is enough. And enough is enough. I say to you, we have had it up to here. The time has come for action.

Let those of us who were born with light complexions, who speak English with a special accent, who have distinctive patterns of thought, religion, politics, professions, family structure, and taste—let us no longer cringe, let us no longer sycophantically attempt to be

what we are not—no, let us stand up and be ourselves, proudly assert that we are just as human and have just as many rights as anybody else, and demand proper compensation for the countless wrongs we have suffered.

PIGS OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR BRAINS!

Brian Lumley is most obviously one of those few remaining who love and know this language. He lives where it was born, and is careful and persnickety about it and his work, as well as conscious of style, all of which is more than fine with me. He is considerably better known for such Lovecraftian tales as "Cement Surroundings" and others than for heroic fantasy. In fact, this story isn't, technically, hf; it's set in that time period or milieu.

The story is not presented here for the first time. I read it in Charles Melvin's *Escape!*, a 1978 semiprozine of some beauty. (You find such things at conventions, in the Huckster's Room. Try one or two!) It is a story I call peculiarly intelligent—words I also apply to Carl Sherrell's totally different novel *Arcane*. I wanted it; Lumley was willing and even revised it in a bit of honing and fine-polishing that make it better.

I really like "Cryptically Yours" and can't believe you won't. Nor do I dare say anything more about it; You'll Find Out!

CRYPTICALLY YOURS

by Brian Lumley

Note:

The following letters, numbered one to eight, between Hatr-ad and Teh Atht—sorcerers of Theem'hdra, the Primal Continent at the Dawn of Time—are in the main self-explanatory. They will serve admirably to illustrate some of the many perils facing professional wizards in that bygone age, when the world was very young and magic was not merely a word in books for small children . . .

Domed Turret of Hreen Castle,
 Eleventh Day of the Season of Mists,
 Hour of the First Fluttering of Bats.

Esteemed Teh Atht—

You will doubtless recall that we were apprenticed together (along with Dhor Nen, TARTH Soquallin, Ye-namat & Druth of Thandopolis) under Imhlat the Great; also how we vied, each against the others, in aspiring to greatness in our chosen profession. Though we were mere lads then (how many, many years ago?), still I remember being impressed by your own industry. Aye, even I, Hatr-ad of Thinhla, whose peer is not known east of the Inner Isles, was *most* impressed by the sorcerous industry of Teh Atht. You were a likable lad—friendly despite the ceaseless competition & bantering & occasional bickering—for which reason I now call upon you, in the name of the comradeship we shared in Imhlat's tutelage, for assistance in a matter of extreme urgency.

Mayhap it has come to your attention that of the six apprentices mentioned above only we two & one other, TARTH Soquallin, remain alive? The others are recently fallen foul of ill-omened, indeed *evil* fates, for all three have met with strange & terrible deaths! Not only Dhor, Ye-namat & Druth, but Imhlat the Teacher, too! Even Imhlat the Great—whose gnarled old hands instructed us in our first passes, weaving weird designs of power in the air—he, too, is gone, wasted away in a grey rot that descended upon him from the moon (they say) & took him all in the space of a single night.

Now I know not your thoughts in this matter, or even if you've considered it at all, but it seems to me that

certain dark forces roam free & rapacious in Theem'hdra, & that their fell purpose is the destruction of her wizards one by one, thus plunging the entire continent into an age of darkness, when the light of sorcery will be extinguished forever! If I am correct then our lives, too, are in peril . . . for which reason I have set up every possible magickal barrier against these unknown agents of evil. This of course is the reason for my letter: to beg of you a certain rune (which I am given to believe may recently have come down to you from your long dead ancestor, Mylakhrión of Tharamoon?), that I might finalize the security of Hreen Castle.

I refer specifically to the Ninth Sathlatta, which—or so I am informed—is a protective device efficacious over all other magicks in the whole of Theem'hdra. Were it indeed your good fortune to be in possession of this spell, I would count myself ever in your debt upon safely receiving a copy of the same.

Take care, Teh Atht, & beware the nameless terror that surely lurks in Theem'hdra's shadows, threatening us all—

Yrs. for the Numberless
Rites of Lythatroll—

Hatr-ad the Adept.

In addition—

Perhaps you know the whereabouts of that inveterate wanderer, Tarth Soquallin? If so, be so good as to advise me of the same that I may also warn him of the hovering horror . . .

Hatr-ad.

Topmost Tower of Klühn,
Eighteenth Night, Hour of
Clouds Wispig across the
Full Moon . . .

High-born Hierophant, O Hatr-ad!—

Honoured was I, Teh Atht, to receive your correspondence, even though it cost me the services of a most faithful retainer—& him his life! As to how this came about: I am myself at a loss to explain it.

I can only assume that those same dark forces of which your note so eloquently warns entrapped the bat to which you doubtless entrusted the missive, replacing that messenger with the great & winged Gaunt which assaulted my apartments over Klühn in the hour before dawn of the 12th day. Mercifully I myself was not to house, & so the monster took a manservant in my stead, almost obscuring with his blood the words you so carefully inscribed in cypher upon the parchment which I later found clenched in his lifeless fingers.

Thus it would seem that your warning was indeed most timely, & I thank you for it . . . As to your request for a copy of the 9th S., please find the same enclosed. Note that, remembering well your penchant for cyphers, I have couched the rune in just such a frame—albeit a simple one—the better to amuse & entertain you, however briefly, during your leisure hours.

Alas, I have no knowledge of TARTH Soquallin's whereabouts, but be sure I myself shall now take all precautions to avoid whichever evils befell our former

colleagues, & that I remain, in eager anticipation of your next—

Yrs. for the Exorcism of Org the Awful—
Teh Atht of Klühn.

III

Hidden Vault beneath Hreen Castle;
Twenty-first Night; Hour of the
Tittering Without the Pentagram.

Brother in Blessed Sorceries, O Teh Atht—

A thousand thanks for your letter—& for the cypher-inscribed 9th S., which I shall duly translate as soon as I get five minutes to spare—both safely arrived yesterday evening in their silver cylinder affixed to the leg of a great eagle. The bird itself, alas, fell prey to an over-zealous archer in my employ, whom I shall punish fittingly. Still & all, it were not entirely the man's fault, for he had strict instructions with regard to any alien invader of my keep, & was not to know that the bird was but a messenger of your esteemed self.

It was indeed a mercy, brother, that you were away upon the advent of the Gaunt which killed your retainer, & I shudder in contemplation of what might have taken place had you been present to receive so monstrous a visitor! My condolences at the loss of a faithful servant, & my joy that you yourself were spared so terrible an ordeal. Indeed you were correct in assuming that my messenger was but a bat, & I am filled with rage at the vileness of that agency which could so readily turn dumb, harmless minion into ravenous beast!

Now to a matter of even darker import: for we two are

now the sole survivors of Imhlat's school for sorcerers, TARTH Soquallin having recently succumbed to the unknown doom! Aye, even TARTH the Hermit, gone forever from the world of men, for I have it on good authority that he is, alas, no more. It would seem that in the midst of magickal meditations he vanished from a cave—a hole in the face of a granite cliff, with no windows & only one stout door—after uttering but a single piercing scream. When finally his disciples broke down the door, they found only his wand & seven rings of gold & silver . . . those things, & a number of tiny golden nuggets which may once have filled certain of his teeth . . .

Oh, my brother, what is to be done? The very thought of the evils that surround us & the perils which daily press closer fills me with a nameless dread—or would, if I did not know that my old friend, Teh Atht, is at hand to assist me & offer his sound & unimpeachable advice in these darkest hours—

Yrs. for the Moaning Menhir,
Hatr-ad.

On afterthought—

Since I really have very little time to waste on riddles—however entertaining they may be—would you be so good as to forward with your next the key to the encyphered 9th S.?

Gratefully—
Hatr-ad.

IV

Sepulcher of Syphtar VI;
Thirty-eighth Evening;
Hour of the Unseen Howler.

Master of Mysteries, O Hatr-ad—

Confirmation of Tarth Soquallin's demise reached me almost simultaneous with your own doom-fraught epistle (I envy you your informants!), & not only his demise but those of several other sorcerers, too, though lesser known & further flung. Ikrish Sarn of Hubriss was one such, & Khrissa's Lord-High Ice-Priest another. Thus have I come down into the tomb of Syphtar VI to seek out his spirit & inquire of it, but lo—Syphtar answers not my call!

Indeed strangeness is abroad, Hatr-ad, even *great* strangeness! It would seem that some dark spell of thaumaturgic impotence is upon me, so that my sorceries are utterly without effect. Can I doubt but that the source of this new infamy is that same secret center of evil whence ooze the poisonous spells which, one by one, drag down our fellow sorcerers to dreadful doom & death? Nay, I cannot doubt it; it must surely be so.

But with regard to these measures of yours for the protection of Hreen Castle against whichever evils threaten: I may be able to offer the very ultimate in protections, beside which even the Ninth Sathlatta pales to insignificance! You were indeed correct in deducing that my ancestor Mylakhrión bequeathed to me certain of his secrets, & that these have recently come down to me across the centuries. Aye, & one of them is a rune of the greatest power, of which I would freely advise you if only I could be sure that my letter

would not be intercepted!

Obviously a spell of this magnitude must never fall into the wrong hands, for. . . .

My friend—*I have it!*

Upon a skin which I shall enclose, please peruse the characters of an unbreakable cypher to which I alone possess the key. When next you write, enclose some proof positive by which I may know that our correspondence is completely confidential & secure, & by return I shall forward the key to the cypher, thus placing the greatest of all protective runes in your hands.

Rest assured that I have already used the spell in my own defence—indeed, this very morning—wherefore I fear no evil in the length & breadth of Theem'hdra. (It dawns on me that this near-stultification of my other magicks, of which I have already made mention, must be a side-effect of the greater power, whose task is after all to dampen dangerous sorceries! This is a mere inconvenience as compared with my very life's safety, & doubtless the effect will soon wear off.)

But a warning: the only man who may break down the wall of this protection is one who understands its construction; & once this is done even the smallest spell will work against the one thus betrayed. Naturally I fear no such betrayal from my brother Hatr-ad the Illustrious, else I should not offer this information in the first instance. Be certain, too, that I have not studied the rune sufficiently to understand its reversal; & I trust you will likewise refrain from deliberately discovering the means by which the protection may be cancelled?

In all such matters I have the greatest faith in my

brother-sorcerer, Hatr-ad, & thus, in eager anticipation of your next letter, I remain—

Yrs. for Enduring Enchantments,
Teh Atht of Klühn.

On Afterthought—

With regard to the encyphered 9th S.: It seems I've lost the key! I wrote the thing down on a scrap of parchment which I've since mislaid. There are several such cyphers I use but I have neither the time nor the inclination to divulge all of them. However, this should no longer present a problem, since the new rune supercedes & is far more powerful than the 9th S. In any case, your own devices have been adequately efficacious to date, as witness (happily) your continued existence!

Sorcerously—Teh Atht.

One other matter—

My fears over the confidentiality of our correspondence are not unfounded, I assure you, & I warn you to examine such carriers as we use most carefully. The pigeon that brought me your last missive had no sooner delivered up its cylinder than it flew asunder in a thousand searing fragments! I conjecture that it had been fed pellets of some agent which, reacting with the bird's inner juices, produced this monstrous effect. Certainly the body fluids of the poor creature were become so mordant that the walls of the tower in which it exploded are now pitted & blackened most severely! Mercifully, I was not harmed, nor any retainer of mine.

Will this vileness never end?

Yrs.—Teh Atht.

Aeries of Hreen Castle;
 Nest of the Fanged Hawk;
 First Day of the Season
 of the Sun; Dawn—

Illustrious Engineer of Illusions,

Most happily I report my continued good health, despite all the spells doubtless cast against me by those unknown agencies of which every sorcerer in all Theem'hdra now goes in dread fear & loathing. Without a shadow of a doubt I owe my well-being in great part to you . . . for which reason I trust that you, too, are well & that no evil has befallen you?

Your tomb-bat messenger from Syphtar's sepulcher reached me safely, carrying its precious rune, & in the tenth day following my receipt of the same I at last translated the thing from the glyphs in which you had so cleverly encyphered it. Aye, for I am now familiar with your system, Teh Atht, & I marvel at the magnitude of a mind that could devise so mazy a cryptogram! It was not so very difficult, however, once I had broken the code that hid from my eager eyes the 9th S., for it would appear that all your codes are cast in pretty much the same mold. You may now rest easy in the knowledge that your spell shall not fall into alien hands, & that the need to supply me with a key to the code no longer exists . . .

Moreover, before I commenced the inscribing of this letter here in this high place, I made the necessary signs as the sun came up & I said the words of the rune, & lo!—now I am protected against all evils. All thanks to you, Teh Atht, who succored me in my hour of greatest need.

Meanwhile . . . I fear that the curse is still abroad, for

rumours continue to reach me from far & wide in respect of fellow sorcerers fallen foul of the horror. Thus I shall go down into Hreen Castle proper & put the finishing touches to my protections, aye, & offer up a few powerful prayers to the Gods of Old, that all my beleagured friends across the land shall know of my compassion.

Yrs. in the Discovery of Mysteries—
Hatr-ad.

VI

Chamber of Infirmary—
Third Day of the Sun—
Hour of the Tide's Turning.

Honourable Hatr-ad,

Overjoyed as I am to hear of your own continuing good health, alas, I cannot report a similar condition in myself. Indeed no, for I am the victim of several severe disorders—which by their very nature I know to be most *unnatural*! Unnecessary to go into details, but sufficient to say that I am unwell. Even unto death am I, Teh Atht, unwell . . .

Only the most powerful of unguents & nostrums keep me alive (for my spells no longer work & I am obliged to rely upon merely common cures) so that even the writing of this letter is an ordeal to one whose hands tremble & jerk in unendurable agony as his body festers & rots! If you could see me, Hatr-ad, I believe you would shriek & run from the horror I am become—and I am completely at a loss to remedy the matter of my own free will.

Thus my letter is a plea, that you put aside whatever else engages you at this time & weave your most beneficent

sorceries on my behalf—else I am done for! For without a shadow of a doubt those same fell forces of which you forewarned are upon me, & lo—I am at their mercy!

My decline commenced almost immediately upon receipt of your last—which, bat-borne & innocent in itself, was nevertheless like some harbinger of doom—and as it progresses so it accelerates. It would seem as though a combination of plagues, cancrs & contagions are upon me, & without outside help I am doomed to an hideous death even within the space of ten days, possibly less. How this can possibly be when I am protected by the Rune of Power I am again at a loss to say. The evil which is abroad in Theem'hdra is powerful indeed!

I can write no longer. The pus that seeps from my body's pores threatens to foul the vellum upon which I scrawl this final plea: that you spare no single second but come immediately to the assistance of—

Thine in Ultimate Torment,
Teh Atht . . .

VII

Hreen Castle—
Imperial Residence of:
Hatr-ad, Mightiest Magician in all Theem'hdra
—First Night of the
Full Moon; Hour of
Gleeth's Blind Smiling
on the Eastern Range.

Doom-destined Teh Atht—

Not without a modicum of remorse do I, Highborn

Hatr-ad, inscribe this final epistle—the last you shall ever read! Indeed, of all other sorcerers in Theem'hdra, you were the one I most respected; for if ever a man were sufficiently gifted to oppose me in my great ambition—of which I was often wont to boast during our apprenticeship in old Imhlat the Idiot's tutelage—then you were that man. Or so I thought . . .

Perhaps my words recall to your obviously age-enfeebled mind that ambition of mine? Aye, I'm sure they do, for oft & again I swore that one day I would make of myself the most powerful sorcerer in all the land. That day is now at hand, Teh Atht, & you above all other men have assisted me in the realization of my dream.

Now, too, it is plain to me that I ranked you o'er high among magicians, for who but a fool would give away a spell of ultimate protection?—& in so doing *rob himself of that very protection!* Aye, Teh Atht, for surely you have guessed by now that I am the origin & the source of the terror over Theem'hdra? Surely you are now aware whose spells they are that bring down the land's sorcerers in their prime, that rot you yourself in your bed, where even now you lie impotently awaiting death? Nor can that death be so very far away now; indeed, it amazes me that you survive, *if* you survive, to read this letter!

Even now I would not openly betray myself thus had not word reached me of your confinement, & of the fact that your throat has rotted so that you speak not, & that your body is so wasted that you are barely capable of the feeblest stirrings. Yet, if your very eyes are not utterly dissolved away, you will be able to read this, for I have written it in one of your own codes that no other may know of my triumph.

But what pleasure is there in an empty victory, Teh

Atht? For surely my triumph would be empty if in the end none remained to know of it? Thus I now reveal all to you, that before you die you may know of Hatr-ad's victory, of his ambition fulfilled. For surely now I am indeed the greatest sorcerer in all Theem'hdra!

My thanks, Teh Atht, for your inestimable aid in this matter, without which I might yet be sorely pressed to bring about the desired result. Now you may rest your festering eyes, my old & foolish friend, in the final sleep. Go, & find peace in the arms of Shoosh, Goddess of the Still Slumbers . . .

Yrs. for the Dream of a New Age
of Magickal Empire,
Hatr-ad the Mighty.

VIII

Room of Red Revenge;
Apartments over Klühn;
Day of Reckoning,
Hour of Truth!

O Most Misguided, Miserable Hatr-ad—

Heartless one, I fear that your odious ambitions are come to an end—& better for Theem'hdra & all her more worthy wizards were that ending not protracted. Therefore let me linger not over the matter but get to its root with all dispatch.

For you were unmasked, o murderer, long before you chose to show your true face. Nathless it was deemed only fair & just that the truth be heard from your own lips before sentence was passed. The truth is now known . . . & I have been chosen to pass sentence.

Even now I can hardly ponder the enormity of your crimes without feeling within myself a gnawing nausea, that so vile & monstrous a man could guise himself as "friend" in order to go about his death-dealing devilments!

Murderer! I say it again, & the punishment shall fit the crime . . .

As to why I bother to write this when your fate will speak volumes of its own, there are reasons. Mayhap amongst your retainers, cronies & familiars there are those who, lusting after similar lordly stations, would carry on your fiendish business in your wake? To them I, Teh Atht, address this warning—mazed in no cypher but writ in the clear, clean glyphs of Theem'hdra—that it suffice to set their feet upon more enlightened paths.

As for enlightenment: allow me now to unravel for you the more tangled threads of this skein, that you may see yourself as we see you, whose sorceries are deemed white (or at worst grey) against your black!

To begin:

Throughout all Theem'hdra I have my informants, who work under no duress but are all beholden to me in one way or another. From them, barely in advance of your first letter, I learned of the dissolution of Druth, the demise of devil-diseased Dhor, the eerie exanimation of Ye-namat, & even the terrible termination of old Imhlat the Teacher.

Now, it were perhaps no surprise had but one or even two of these old comrades gone the way of all flesh (it is not uncommon for sorcerous experiments to go sadly amiss, & the dead men were crafty sorcerers all) . . . but *four* of them?

Moreover I found it a singularly suspicious circum-

stance that Hatr-ad—who never found reason to communicate with me before, & of whom I had heard precious little of merit in the long years since our mutual apprenticeship—should be so quick off the mark to recognize the advent of malevolent powers & warn me of them.

Then, when I gave thought to all you had written, it dawned on me that indeed I had suffered certain discomforts of late; nothing serious but . . . headaches & creaking joints & bouts of dizziness now & then. Could they have been the residue of malicious spells sent against me & deflected by the protections which are ever present about my apartments?

If so, who had sent these spells & why? To my knowledge I had no dire enemies, though certain acquaintances might be trifling jealous of me. Indeed, such was my mode of life, & my days so free of troubles, that I had often thought me to relax the magickal barriers that surrounded me—it were such a bother to keep them renewed. Now I was glad I had not done so!

Then my thoughts returned to you, Hatr-ad; even to Hatr-ad, whose boasting in the Halls of Nirhath, where Imhlat the Teacher instructed us, was not forgotten but sounded suddenly loud & ominous in the ears of memory. Your boasting, & your oft-stated ambition . . .

Years by the score had gone by since then, but do ambitions such as yours ever really die?

Now Tarth Soquallin, even Tarth the Hermit, wandering wizard of the deserts & mountains, had always been a great & true friend of mine, & if it were true that some nameless terror was bent upon the destruction of Theem'hdra's sorcerers—particularly those who had studied under Imhlat—then how had Tarth fared in this

monstrous coup?

Well, he & I had long since devised a means by which I might know of his approximate whereabouts at any given moment. In a cupboard unopened for seven years, after much searching, I found the device: a pebble, not unlike a Northstone which, when dangled at the end of a thread, would always point out TARTH's direction. Discovering him to be in the West, & by the agitation of the pebble knowing him to be not too far removed, I reasoned he must be upon the Mount of the Ancients & to that region sent one of my eagles with a hastily inscribed message. (It seemed to me both easier & speedier to contact him direct than to inform you of his location that you yourself might then "warn" him of the so-called "nameless terror.")

Lo, the answer came back within a day & a night, saying that indeed he, too, had suffered minor pains & irritations, but pointing out that while he was not properly protected, as I was, nathless an evil agency would find it hard going to do him lasting harm, since he was so constantly on the move. A spell let loose to find its own way is far less potent than one directed to the known haunts of its recipient!

Furthermore, TARTH agreed to a little necessary deception. This was simply to let it be known that he was dead of strange sorceries, & to assist me in the speedy dissemination of this information by use of his disciples. Ah!—& how swiftly indeed word of TARTH's "demise" reached you, HATR-AD (whose agents were doubtless on the lookout for just such news?) & how graphic the details of his disappearance, all bar his wand & rings & his teeth of gold!

Aye, & that was the end of TARTH's aches & pains—

though this was not to be discovered for awhile—for what use to send out death-dealing spells against a man already dead? Eh, Hatr-ad?

In the meanwhile I did several things. I worked swiftly, for I did not wish to delay o'erlong in answering your letter, but in the end my plan worked well enow. First, I sent off a request to an informant of mine in Thinhla, that he employ a certain system (in the use of which I also instructed him) to detect any hurtful magickal emanations from Hreen Castle. Second, I sent further messages of warning to Ikrish Sarn of Hubriss, to Khrissa's nameless Lord-High Ice-Priest, & to many another sorcerer, advising all to quietly disengage from their normal affairs & "disappear," & also to put about soft-muted tales of doom, disease & death. Third, I answered your letter, sending you an addled version of the Ninth Sathlatta & couching it in cyphers which I knew you would eventually break—but not too soon . . .

Still & all, my suspicions were as yet unfounded, the evidence against you all circumstantial—though I did deem it strange that the unknown Agency of Doom had not yet taken you yourself, when it had already accounted for men who were by far your sorcerous superiors!—& so I refrained from taking any premature action against you. After all, why should you write to me in the first place—& possibly alert me to your own dark hand in the horror—if indeed you yourself went not in mortal fear of the nameless thing? . . . Unless you were simply seeking some other way to do away with me, since patently the initial attack had done nothing more than discomfort me. Aye, & word had come to me by then that there were certain strangers in Klühn who daily made discreet inquiries in respect of my health. (Men of

Thinhla, as it later became known!)

But then, simultaneous with your second letter, word arrived from Thinhla in respect of Hreen Castle, your own abode, & the *veritable miasma of morbid magicks emanating from it!* No protective thaumaturgies these, Hatr-ad, but lethal spells of the very blackest natures, & so at last I recognized beyond any further doubt that direful agency whose hand was set against Theem'hdra's wizards . . .

Had any such doubt remained in my mind, however, then were it most certainly removed by the mode of messenger you employed: the great Gaunt, the pyrotechnic pigeon &, with your third, my own bat whose wings I now found dusted with potent poisons. You may well have written the last in the aeries of your castle, but surely was it sent to me from some foul crypt beneath Thinhla's deepest foundations.

By then, though, I had already supplied you with Mylakhriion's most powerful protective spell & a means by which its code might be decyphered & its reversal discovered. Just so, Hatr-ad—& lo, you sent just such a vilely reversed spell against me, thus to weaken me & leave me defenceless in the face of your sly sorceries!

Well, evil one, the spell could not work against me, for contrary to what you were made to believe, I myself had not used Mylakhriion's magick! Thus your casting was most easily deflected & *turned back upon its very author!*

. . . Aye, & you are utterly defenceless, Hatr-ad, while even now those sorcerers whose doom you plotted conjure spells to send against you; & no use to try Mylakhriion's rune a second time, for it will only work once for any single person. So you see, o wretch, that there is no avenue of escape from the sentence I now

pass—which is: That you shall suffer, even unto death, all of the black magicks you yourself have used or attempted to use in your hideous reign of terror! The list is long:

From Tarth Soquallin & myself: the Skin-Cracks, Temple-Throbs & multiple Joint Seizures; from Ikrish Sarn & Khrissa's Ice-Priest: the Inverted Eyes & the dreaded Bone-Dissolve; & from many another wizard various castings of greater or lesser measure. Moreover, we have not forgotten the dead. On behalf of Imhlat, Dhor Nen, Ye-namat & Druth of Thandopolis, we send you the Green Growths, the Evaporating Membranes &, last but not least, the Grey Rot!

Sentence is passed. You are granted one full day upon receipt of this in which to put your affairs in order, but thereafter until you are no more you shall suffer, in ever-increasing doses, the aforementioned afflictions. Waste not your remaining hours in further fruitless malevolencies; spells from all quarters have been cast about you that any such emanations shall only rebound upon you.

However, I am authorized to remind you that there is one way in which you may yet cheat us all, Hatr-ad; but if you do, at least do it gloriously! The towers of Hreen Castle are high, I am told—indeed, they are almost as high as your frustrated, evil aspirations—& gravity is swifter & surer than the knife or pellet of poison . . .

The choice is yours.

Cryptically—Teh Atht.

DEDICATION

Each volume of *Swords A.D.* has introduced new writers. One who made his first professional appearance in volume III was David Madison. His Marcus and Diana, like his mind, were unusual, strange, Different; weird. David had written—on lined paper, with frequent misspellings because of his dyslexia—a number of other stories about that most unlikely pair, and others. All as odd, unconventional, empathic, and sensitive as David. I love them. I told him there'd be a place for him in every volume.

Last May in Texas David was 26. He went out one day and wrote notes to an assortment of people including me, and then he blasted a bullet through his head. I learned

that from his mother, though he'd been living with his grandparents down in Venus. I cried; I am an emotional ass. So did others, and some of us wrote some words in Chet and A.B. Clingan's semi-prozine, *The Diversifier*. Instead of kicking myself or wailing or asking the too-standard "WHY??", I said I was mad at David Madison and would chew him out good someday not a day, when we meet in somewhere not a where. He was loved and appreciated and he had talent, and he shouldn't have killed himself.

I re-vowed to publish his stories, just as I'd promised him.

A year passed. I began putting together this anthology. And I came to a crunch. One day in mid-March this volume was full, save for one story. I could publish David Madison's "Glyphs of Doom," seen by a few in *Diversifier*, honoring a promise to a dead man. Or I could publish a story by our mutual friend-by-mail, Charles Saunders, or one by Gordon Linzner of singular talent or Jeff Swycaffer who *also* writes of an unlikely male-female pair; or Joey Froehlich's epic poem. Each of them had yet a first professional sale to make. Now each has.

There is no hardening of the heart; there is only more pain. Honor a promise to the dead, or meet and help the promise of the living? More harshly: honor a promise to one who gave up and won't appreciate it ever, or encourage his compatriots who know bitterness and pain and feelings of rejection they don't deserve, and who keep trying and deserve encouragement and publication.

That *is* harsh, and I don't quite feel that way—and I am going to let it stand and take your criticism.

The practitioners of fantasy, writing and editing, don't think in terms of competition—that is, most don't; I

don't. Yet it does exist. Most of us fans buy everything that's published in *Our Field*. *That's published*. My accepting the long and particularly humanly beautiful story by Charles de Lint means not buying a shorter one from . . . someone. (Charles cut enough out of "Grey Rose" to make room here for Ardath Mayhar's story, though he didn't know then that it was so personal; he just thought I was mean.) Every high school or college course in science fiction that teaches the longdead—Mary Shelley, Wells, Verne—punishes living writers some of whom are, no way around it, honestly better. That next REH or ERB or Rider Haggard or Conan Doyle or Clark A. Smith reprint may be the reason *your* novel didn't sell. (The same goes for all the imitations of ERB and Tolkien *you* make successful.)

I don't like that—while I repeat that we do *not* think that way.

It isn't fair. In an unfair universe, I opt for fairness and living promise. Yeah, while shedding tears, again. But feeling very Right, and fair, and honorable. I look at the enormous competition to get into this volume, and I think harshly: David Madison took himself out of the competition, the strife. With love, David, dammit, I respect and honor you and the living by publishing the work of the living. And *we* dedicate this whole volume of our favorite reading, yours and ours, to you.

And one of these days I'm going to come where you are and chew you out good.

—Andy

Publisher's parties at World S.F. Conventions are held in what hotels call suites. The rooms are designed to accommodate two or three people in luxury or ten comfortably as a party. A million or two of us crowd in at publishers' parties and one has the feeling that someone could die (of heat prostration!) and no one would know it; it's impossible to fall down!

Diana Paxson and I met at a publisher's party in Phoenix before the Big Crowd hit; the hosts hadn't arrived yet. We had a good talk whose subjects were manifold and multiform. A quiet woman somewhere between 18 and 35, I reckon. Intelligent and sensible, aside from being married to Jon de Cles, who had a story in the previous volume. Then our hosts came, bearing proofs of illustrations for a book of mine, and I went pure excited kid.

I haven't seen Paxson again and hadn't read anything of hers until her agent sent "The Dark Mother." How appropriate that a woman bearing the name of the Huntress associated with the moon has written a story about a swordswoman . . . a story concerned with the moon and with women, who have throughout time proved their association with the moon!

That sounds a mite heavy and high-flown. Here's a damned good story, about the most heroic hero in this book. Thanks Diana. What else did Shanna do?

THE DARK MOTHER

by Diana L. Paxson

Shanna guided her bay mare Calur over the icy stones of the trail, her falcon Chai balancing on her wrist, and the young buck she had killed bound across the saddle in front of her. The light of the setting sun glowed like fire on her cloak against that dim waste of dark trees and drifted snow.

The deer would be a good guest-gift to the family that had found her half-frozen by a blizzard and nursed her back to health. She laughed aloud, remembering the astonishment of the cottager's young son Tomet when she came out of the house that morning, booted to the thigh and lacing up her red leather tunic over a vest of

fine gilded mail.

Her laugh was echoed by a cry.

Calur skidded and tossed her head as Shanna reined in. She heard a shout, then screaming that went on and on.

Shanna urged the mare down the trail, setting the falcon on her shoulder and drawing her sword. When she reached the valley she paused by the willow copse. Nothing moved but the smoke twining peacefully from the cottage chimney toward the pale sky. Shanna smacked Calur's smooth flank with the flat of her blade and sent her cantering toward the house.

Jered, the cottager, lay sprawled in the snow before the gaping door. Beside him his wife Margai knelt, wailing, her plump breasts quivering beneath her torn gown.

Shanna slipped from her horse and ran to them. Despite the gash on his temple, the man still breathed. She turned to Margai. The woman's eyes rolled in her head. She did not stir at Shanna's touch.

"Margai—listen to me! Did they rape you? Margai, stop shouting and tell me what happened!" She slapped the woman's tear-stained cheek.

Abruptly Margai laughed, the sound rising until Shanna slapped her again.

"Rape!" the woman hiccupped as her breath returned. "If it had only been that! But the servants of the Mother rape no one—the Goddess had their man's parts long ago. No—" Margai shook her head and her voice cracked, "they have taken my son!" She collapsed against Shanna's shoulder, weeping weakly.

Behind them Jered moaned and stirred. "... must go after them!"

His wife whirled and seized his arm. "Am I to lose you too?"

Shanna stood up. "Suppose we all go into the house before we freeze—for certain, no one is going anywhere else until you tell me what is going on!"

She helped the two cottagers inside, and Margai began to tend her husband's wounds.

After a few minutes the woman put down the sponge, holding Jered's head against her breast. "Our baby is gone . . ." she said, "and if you go after them they will kill you too. Remember Norgal Airanson? He never came back, and his wife and daughters starved in the streets of Fendor!" She sobbed and began to rock him as if he had been her child.

"My son . . ." whispered Jered, but he did not move.

"Who has taken the boy and why?" Shanna repeated. She draped her wet cloak across a chair and sat down.

"The priestesses of the Dark Mother . . ." said the man in a dead voice. "Each year they take one of our sons. They say that the Goddess must have the blood of a virgin male in expiation for the female blood spilled to renew the world. Without that, they say, no ewe or cow would give birth, the ground would bear neither fruit nor grain, nor would man's seed take root in woman's womb. It has been so since the beginning of time."

"I never heard such nonsense in all my life."

Two pairs of eyes widened as Shanna went on, "I was born on the border, in Sharteyn. Our folk were as religious as any, and seeking my brother, I have travelled through more lands and cities than I can name. In all those places the beasts multiply, food springs from the earth, and children play about the doors. And they do not sacrifice men!"

"It is true that I heard nothing of such a custom when I journeyed to Fendor . . ." said Jered slowly, "but after

all, we ourselves do not speak of it unless we must. Is it only in these highlands that the Mother demands such a sacrifice?"

Margai was staring at Shanna, hope growing in her eyes. Abruptly Shanna realized what the woman wanted her to do.

Margai had not masked her disapproval when Shanna put on her male attire. Indeed, she had helpfully advised her that a gown that emphasized Shanna's high breasts and slim waist might offset flaws like the breadth of her shoulders and her finely-muscled legs. But now the older woman's gaze was fixed on Shanna's strong hands. The glitter of Shanna's sword-hilt was reflected in Margai's eyes.

The ache in her muscles reminded her how recently she had been ill, and her stomach demanded the meat of the buck she had killed. But her memory of the buck's blood staining the snow distorted to a vision of Tomet's red blood spurting beneath the knife. And Tomet had been the one who had found her unconscious in the snow. Shanna rubbed her wrists as if the obligation had been a physical bond and sighed.

"Which way did they go?"

* * *

The last light of the short winter day had gone. Now, only the icy stars and a glimmer of waxing moon showed Shanna her road. It was an ancient way, straight and almost level. Where necessary, it had been cut through the living stone. In the dim light, mineral stains on the rock showed dark as smears of blood. The tracks of half a dozen horses were freezing into the snow drifted across

the road—Tommet's abductors had not attempted to hide their trail.

Shanna pressed the mare forward. Her cloak was wrapped closely around her against the cold. A light wind had sprung up with the darkness, and the trees that loomed to either side whispered together in the night. Calur's hoofbeats echoed too loudly. Surely someone would hear . . . there were voices on that wind . . . shapes among the trees . . .

A Temple like the one Jered had described to her would have Guardians . . . The hairs lifted on the back of Shanna's neck at the thought, and the mare, sensing her fear, shook her head and balked.

"Nay lass, be still—" Shanna said in a low voice. "It is only my foolishness and the night . . ." She glared around her and the dark shapes shrank back into silhouettes of fir and pine. The whispering died away.

She laughed shakily. "We who worship Yraine's eternal fire should not be troubled by shadows!" She set her heels to Calur's sides and they went on.

Some hours later they crested the last hill. Straight across the dim plain below, the white road ran to a mound of stone girdled by black firs and a timbered gate where torches winked like fallen stars. And, so faint that it might have been her own ears buzzing from the cold, Shanna heard the pulsing of a great gong.

Shanna reined Calur back until she found a gap in the trees. She urged the mare up the bank and onward, shielding her head against the snatching fingers of the branches, until they blundered into a clearing hidden in the wood.

There she dismounted and readied herself for the last part of the journey, binding her cloak to the saddle, but

slinging her bow and quiver across her own back. For a moment she hesitated as the mare, unbridled so that she could graze on grass pawed from beneath the snow, nuzzled at her breast. Then she patted the smooth neck a last time. Repeating her command to the horse not to stray, Shanna settled the falcon more securely on her shoulder and plunged back among the trees.

* * *

The Temple waited like a great crouched beast moaning in its sleep. Peering through the last of the forest, Shanna rubbed the welt where a swinging branch had stung her cheek. Chai shifted nervously on her shoulder and Shanna stroked her feathers reassuringly, staring across the open space where shadows moved slowly as a bank of clouds engulfed the infant moon.

The gong groaned. Shanna followed the shadows across the plain and along the palisade of trees until she found a spot where a fallen branch made it possible for someone slim and active to slip through. Within rose the walls of the Temple, and the deeper shadow of a door. Shanna stepped forward.

A shape detached itself from the darkness and she saw the shimmer of a drawn sword. Awareness tingled down Shanna's veins and her own blade whispered from its oiled sheath. There was a second shape behind the first one, a third! Silently they ran toward her.

Shanna shifted the falcon from shoulder to wrist and crouched, eyes narrowed and heart pounding. As the first man neared, she flung the bird at his face.

Her opponent reeled beneath the shock of Chai's attack, letting go his sword and flailing against the talons

that ripped his cheek. Shanna raced forward, sword poised. Her down-stroke took the next man in the shoulder before he realized she was near.

His dropped sword clanged on the stone pavement as she whirled, letting her momentum draw the blade from his body, and swung it up and out again, catching the third man's attack on the sword with a shock that rattled her back teeth.

The long hours of practice against her brother under their swordmaster's keen eye gave her instant reactions now. Agility was her main strength as a fighter; she sidestepped and bent under her opponent's guard. His blade whistled by the place where her head had been.

They were in the darkness of the doorway now. Shanna listened intently for any creak of leather or jingle of mail, or the hiss of a descending sword.

Chai screeched, and the first man, still silent, beat at the bird. The falcon could not hold him long—Shanna knew she must finish her own opponent quickly or they would combine against her. But instead of moving, Shanna grew more still, projecting her awareness into the darkness as if she could see the spark of her opponent's life.

She sensed movement, her sword swung up and she braced herself as it penetrated her enemy's oncoming body. She rocked back on her heels as the sword passed through and she felt his weight, then twisted to let the body slide by. The man settled limply to the ground. Shanna placed her foot on his chest and jerked out her sword.

Chai broke away from the first man and flapped heavily to the nearest tree. Breathing hard, Shanna ran toward the man and before he could rise to meet her,

swung her swordpoint to rest at the base of his throat. His eyes glittered in his ruined face as he felt the warm wetness of his companions' blood.

"You cannot enter—" he gasped, staring up at her. "This is the place of Her we do not name, and no man can enter there and live!" Shanna laughed suddenly and pulled off her steel cap. Loosened, the black hair which had been braided around her head cascaded down her back.

"But I am not a man . . ." she answered softly.

"You are a demon then!" the man cried. He snatched at his belt and Shanna glimpsed the gleam of steel. Instinctively she bore down on her sword. The body beneath it jerked once, quivered a few moments, then grew slack.

For several heartbeats Shanna stood very still. Then she lifted a fold of her opponent's cloak to wipe the blade of her sword and sheathed it again. The excitement was receding now and she was tired. Carefully she tied back her hair and settled her cap securely.

The door to the Temple gaped before her like the mouth of night, but she could hear drumming at its heart. She whistled a signal to Chai to remain on guard outside, and went in.

* * *

The floor of the passageway had been hollowed by the footsteps of countless years. Shanna felt her way through the warm darkness, following the sound of the drum, until she saw the sallow glow of an oil lamp set into the wall. Beyond it, a line of fitful flickerings revealed a row of doorways in the age-darkened wood.

In a temple of the Goddess, the eunuch guards would be lodged in a separate barracks. These doors must lead to the priestesses' cells, but Shanna felt no desire to open one and make sure.

The lamplight gilded the carvings on the walls. Shanna peered at a spray of blossoms whose design drew the eye towards shadows half-hiding the figure of a maiden crowned with flowers.

"Kyré . . ." Shanna said softly. "Then this is a temple of the Goddess in all Her forms. Or was once . . ." she added, remembering that though the gods may be eternal, men's visions of them changed.

The gong tolled, louder now. Shanna's nostrils flared at the cloying sweetness of the lamp smoke. Dizzy, she turned from the wall and went on. The passage opened abruptly onto a gallery that circled a great domed chamber. She crept to the balustrade of filigreed black marble.

On a floor of polished porphyry stained red as sunset, dancers stamped and swayed. Their black robes fluttered as they intertwined. Shanna tried to count them, but each time their circling trapped her gaze. She looked away.

She could not see the boy.

Beyond the ebony pillars, musicians played. Flutes piped. Above the drumming, cymbals clashed. Between the pillars, curtains of brocade quivered softly as the whirling dancers passed.

How far had the ceremony gone? Could she find Tomet before they brought him in, or must she try to wrest him from their midst? She crouched behind the balustrade, peering through a space in the carven stone.

It seemed to her the dance moved faster now. From the

dancers' bodies came a scent as strong as musk, a heavy female smell, but sweet as if they used the lamps' perfume. They whirled. In self-defense she closed her eyes. They stopped; the music halted. Then they sang.

The words were not the Empire's common tongue; their forms complex, pronunciation strange, and sung without expression, as if those who sang knew not the meaning of their song. Yet some words Shanna knew. Some phrases came to her from childhood memories of hymns, and lessons in the ancient tongue.

Kyré they sang, whose laughter brings the flowers, and bright Ytarra, whose consuming flame brings man a suppliant to woman's bed.

And Shanna, listening, felt the rising heat of torches, of the dancers, of the song. She fumbled with the lacings at her neck. The golden mail weighed heavy on her breast; her nipples tingled with remembered lust.

The priestesses swayed slowly, and their song compelled her breathing to its steady beat. Maiden, Mistress, Mother, all were praised. But last of all, the singers named Saibel . . .

And Shanna, hidden by the traceries, swayed with them, felt along her every vein the throbbing, felt the mystery of blood. They sang the truth. As she had always known, her mother's life ebbed with her childrens' birth. And helping palace women, she had seen the womb's bright gushing as the child was born. How could she then forget, when every month her own blood flowed in answer to the moon?

"For spilled blood now must blood be paid again!"

Shanna clutched at the balustrade, bruising her fingers on the carven stone. *By Yrainé's Holy Fire, she thought, in a moment I would have been singing too!*

There was a hesitation in the song. The cymbals clashed, the priestesses set up a sudden shrill and ululating cry. A door behind the pillars opened wide; four women robed in red brought in the boy.

Tommet was naked, his skin seeming very white beneath the painted designs. He looked younger than his thirteen years. Shanna could not see his eyes.

She flexed stiff muscles. The curtains masking the recess on the other side of the chamber moved with a rustle of heavy silk, and priestesses set torches to either side. In the alcove was set a dais of black stone, and on it a white altar whose top bore stains Shanna could see clearly even at this distance. Behind it loomed the image of the Dark Mother Herself—Saibel.

Shanna tore her gaze from those shadows, got to her feet and began to run along the gallery toward the stair. The pressure in the air seemed palpable, as if she were running through water. Her feet dragged.

The bronze gong boomed. The drums began again. The priestesses were whirling as if mad, tearing at their robes. Their white arms flashed. Shanna saw the sweat shine on bared breasts. "Saibel!" they cried, "Come now to us, Saibel!"

Shanna glimpsed the flash of jeweled eyes. Huge breasts hanging, the Dark Goddess loomed above the altar, poised on massive thighs. The cleft below her belly swallowed light.

*"Within the dark the seed of life is sown!
Into the dark the spark of life is flown!
What the Great Mother has brought forth in pain
At Her own will She shall take back again.
To death, or life, She is the only door . . ."*

"No!" said Shanna of Sharteyn.

Upon the dais, a priestess turned, stone knife gripped in her hand. Gold was woven into the borders of her black gown. The music faltered, but the drums continued to throb. Shanna planted her booted feet solidly on the red floor, bracing herself against the weight of their eyes. The drum beats pounded in her veins.

"Who comes here with a woman's walk and the weapons of a man?" The voice of the high priestess was cold and clear. The women in the red robes had laid the boy on the altar and were binding him.

"Have you seen the she-wolf, or the lioness?" Shanna had already strung her bow. Swiftly she snapped an arrow from her quiver and nocked it. "These are my teeth and claws."

The priestess laughed mockingly. "Would you steal the Mother's prey from Her own temple?"

Shanna shook her head, sensing a fallacy. "She has already had Her sacrifice—three things that once were men. The boy is mine." She heard with astonishment the steadiness of her reply. The sense of pressure in the air increased.

The priestess swung up her arm, the knife shining dully in her hand. Shanna drew and released in one fluid motion, and the arrow transfixed the fleshy part of the woman's forearm as the knife started down again. In the shocked silence the priestess' fingers unclasped, and the blade shattered on the polished floor.

The priestess sank against a pillar, staring at Shanna. Blood welled through the fingers clenched around the arrow in her arm.

"The Goddess is not mocked!" she hissed. "And She can curse . . ."

The dancers gave way as Shanna stalked warily towards the altar. The high priestess might threaten, but none of the others would oppose her now. She slipped her bow back over her head and drew her sword.

The perfume was heavier here. Shanna faltered as darkness lapped at her vision. Through the shadow she fancied that the jeweled eyes of the image glowed, and she remembered the sense of Presence she had sometimes felt during rituals to other gods, at home.

But she stepped forward, though the air weighed on her flesh, and there was an ache in her belly and behind her eyes. She was sweating, but she shivered suddenly, knowing that the Dark Mother was here. Her feet carried her across the floor, up the steps of the dais, until she faced the priestess across the altar stone.

"Do you believe in the Dark Mother, girl?"

Shanna stared at her. "Yes . . ." came her unwilling whisper at last. The dancers were watching, their bodies utterly still. She saw Tomet's foot from the corner of her eye, its skin as bloodless as if he were already dead.

"Do you accept the Necessity for the Goddess, and Her Power?" came the soft voice of the priestess again.

Shanna felt the totaled weariness of the long day, of her long road. How easy it would be to slip into that scented darkness. And perhaps it would be best to let the boy die, for what male could see the Goddess and ever live happy again?

Tomet stirred and she glanced down at him. His eyes held hers, as huge and uncomprehending as those of the deer she had slain. "Shanna . . ." he whispered, swallowing.

Shanna's sword trembled in her hand, flashed as it caught the light.

Words came to her, the oath she had sworn on that blade before Yrainé's holy fire. *I will not fail to hold to the truth, to deal justice to my enemies, to keep faith with my friends . . .*

Her blade fell through the cords that bound Tomet's feet.

"Shanna . . ."

In horror, Shanna realized that the boy had given the priestess her name.

"Shanna, hear me now! Before you act, count the cost of this deed. You are young and proud, and you have borne no child . . ." The woman leaned across the taut body of the boy, her black eyes blazing. "And if you cheat the Goddess now, you never will!"

"No babe will ever suck at your breast. No life will leap in your womb. You will sit barren while other women watch their children play. When the man you love seeks an heir he will go to another woman's arms, and when you yourself go into the darkness, nothing of you shall remain!" The priestess jerked the arrow from her arm.

Shanna thought of the empty chambers of her father's house and her abandoned heritage, remembered her boast that her training to battle death would but make her the braver when she came to the birth-battle that no man could dare. But she had vowed to find her brother. His children must inherit the land.

She tried to moisten dry lips. "What would I do with a babe on the road that I must go?" she said after a moment. Her blade parted the cords that held the boy's left hand.

Shanna staggered and groped for the edge of the altar as something twisted in her belly. The sword blade quivered as her body shrank from knowledge of its loss. Tomet made a stifled sound.

... and keep faith.

The breath shuddered in her throat. "I will take the living child, and spend no tears on the unborn!" Shanna gasped, and cut the final cord.

The dancers cried out. Livid, the priestess flung up her arms, blood spattering across the stone. "Saibel! Saibel!"

Three times the brazen gong boomed across the room, and the floor trembled. A discordant music tried vainly to catch the fluttering of the drums. Shanna dragged Tomet from the altar as a red darkness began to grow around the image and shadows spread downward from the great dome. The boy sobbed with the pain of returning circulation as she hauled him down the steps of the dais.

"The Goddess is not mocked!" shrieked the priestess. The circling dancers began to close in. "Saibel!" they chanted, "Saibel!"

"Yraine! I have kept your law!" The answer was torn from Shanna's throat. There was a moment of stillness, then she felt fire crisp her veins. She leaped for the torch that smoked next to the alcove. Her enemies quailed before her as she faced them with fire held high.

"By the Goddess you worship, know you not Her other forms?"

"Shanna? Your eyes . . ." Tomet whispered. His face shone with reflected light.

She scarcely saw him. The flame of her torch dazzled her, and the weight that had bound her to the earth was gone. The dancers cowered and hid their eyes as she and Tomet dashed forward, trailing golden sparks, touching curtain after curtain to flame.

When they reached the dais once more she paused, panting. The perfume in the air mingled with an acrid reek of burning wood and scorched tapestry.

"Behold the light of Yraine, Queen of the Heavenly Fire." Shanna gestured toward the blazing alcoves, their contents revealed as their curtains fell away. Flames licked the gilded pedestals and limned the images of the goddesses—Kyré with her wreath of flowers; Artamise, crowned with the crescent moon; Cera, holding up her sheaf of grain; Atené with helm and spear. But brightest was the pale figure of Yraine, the Lady of Stars.

"From Her come the passions of heart and mind, from Her the love that is a cleansing fire, from Her the Light when Darkness threatens to consume all hope!" Shanna cried.

The radiance from Yraine's shrine beat at the shadows around Saibel. Like blown sparks, the screaming dancers swirled towards the great door and forced it open. The flames roared as the fresh air reached them, and seized on the supports of the gallery.

The high priestess still clung to the altar, screaming imprecations. But when she saw Shanna she grew very still.

"You have cursed me already," Shanna said softly. "Shall I bless you now?"

"Death came with you . . . death will follow you. Though your Lady be the conqueror, my curse remains."

Shanna gestured with the torch. "Come out before the ceiling falls."

The woman shook her head. "My oath to my Mistress remains as well. I will not break it now." Before Shanna could reach her, she bowed, and stepped into the Shadow's embrace.

There was a blast of heavy sweet scent and the swirling darkness brushed Shanna's cheek like a soft wing. Every nerve twitched, and she was momentarily aware of her

own body once more. She thrust her torch at the draperies around the altar, stumbled backward, and flung it into the womb of darkness where the priestess had disappeared.

The bloodstained altar was engulfed by a wave of flame. Tomet tugged frantically at Shanna's sleeve. The main door and part of the gallery were blazing now.

Half-carrying the boy, Shanna sped up the stairs and along the gallery. She pulled Tomet into the passage as the floor began to give way. Smoke billowed after them. The boy's breath was coming in great tearing gasps. Shanna bore him swiftly to the eastern door.

Chai rose from her refuge in the fir trees as they emerged, calling hoarsely, circled twice, and darted toward the woods where Shanna had left her mare.

Tomet was shivering, naked in the cold air. Shanna stripped clothing from the smallest of the dead men. The boy balked, seeing the bodies, but after another look at Shanna's face he began to pull the clothing on.

Shanna still burned with the heat of the fire.

When Tomet was dressed Shanna led him towards the forest, carrying him when he fell. He was shaking with exhaustion by the time they reached Calur. Only then, hearing the mare's soft nicker and the falcon's anxious cry, did the chill strike Shanna. The strain of carrying the boy throbbed in her neck and shoulders, and there was a pain behind her eyes. And the ache in her womb reminded her of the price she had paid for him. She clung to the saddle-bow.

"Shanna, are you all right?" whispered Tomet. "Where are we? Are we going to go home?"

She rested her forehead against the smooth leather, breathing in the warm horse smell. She must move. If

they stayed here, cold and fatigue would claim them with an embrace that was less terrible than that of the Shadow, but just as sure.

"Yraine . . ." she whispered, but found only the remnants of her own strength. Both aspects of the Goddess had withdrawn from her now. She was herself alone, with her duty still to do.

Straining, she thrust Tomet into the saddle, pulled herself up behind him and wrapped her heavy cloak around them both. Chai tightened her talons in the thick saddle pad.

With no need for direction, the mare picked her way back to the road. When her hooves rang on stone at last, Shanna turned to look behind her.

The moon had set, and behind them the sky glowed dusky red from the fire. The remains of the Temple were hidden from view by the trees, but the shifting breeze brought just a hint of the heavy sweet smell.

Reflex jerked Shanna's heels into Calur's sides. The mare leaped forward, then settled into her steady mile-eating jog. Shanna fixed her eyes on the few stars still glittering in the east, where soon the sky would brighten above the slate-shingled roof of Tomet's home.

The boy had fallen into an exhausted sleep. She could feel his warm body against her breast and the tickle of his hair beneath her chin. Shanna tightened her grip on him, and lulled by the steady rhythm of Calur's hoofbeats, found herself humming an old cradle song.

After a moment she stopped, but then began to sing again, while the cold wind tried to dry her tears.

Joey Froehlich is a fellow Kentuckian, addresses envelopes with a paintbrush or maybe a roller, and is signally pushy and tenacious. That can be effective, when a guy will also listen—and when talent is involved. This may be the eighty millionth draft of "Wooden Crate of Violent Death."

Here's Joey Froehlich, with another way of writing a story of strife and sorcery and heroism.

**WOODEN CRATE OF
VIOLENT DEATH**
(an ancient epic)

by Joey Froehlich

A renegade, leather-faced gentleman of enchanted tales
and songs,
Raised his stone-coloured eyes toward the tongue-forked
river
Rippling like a silver garment caught beneath the wind.
The coloured veils of water shined against the shimmering
reflections
Of spearheaded flames unscathed from violet suns.
Along the river, the forests wept, their leaves falling like
tears of autumn sadness.

The seaward ship sailed through rough and savage
landscape
Like a dark, slender swan of sacred beauty.
Bearded sailors, wearing magnificent scales of polished
armour,
Sang to the smooth-faced gentleman who searched for
the opened mouth of the sea.
Their songs were rich cloaks of inspiration; the sacred
verse of pagan priests
Who lived and died in ancient hills of a land that is now
only legend.
They sang of the red sea of horror, where serpents from
darkest nightmare
Guarded the treasures of the water; forgotten gold of
dreams.
The eyes of the bearded sailors shined with still-faced
ferocity;
They had once been the heroic oystermen of a nameless
ancient race
That perished when serpents from the red sea of horror
Plagued their land with black and villainous conquest.
Only the oystermen who were working on a lake three
miles away
Survived; their boat of soft bark sailed on the evening
tide of a cold winter's day.
The fate of their cultured people was horrible music.
The massive slaughter was the inspiration of the silver-
eyed serpents,
Connoisseurs who enjoyed the fine taste of human flesh
and blood.
The serpents butchered the people of the seaside village
as if they were fat, baggy-skirted livestock.

When the oystermen returned, their rage danced with sorrow.

They left their village of empty dreams and aspirations to search for the blood of revenge.

In a city surrounded by the blackness of jungle
They met the good-natured renegade who was drinking cheap gin in a tavern.

He was a man of the curved sword; gallant and brave as a lion.

He spoke like a confident fool who had been drinking too much.

"For a price," said the renegade, "I'll chop off the heads of the serpents

Who destroy ancient races with sharp teeth that are as swift as daggers."

The oystermen cheered the man who boasted with a voice so loud

That it rang clear above the senseless babbling of a large and capricious crowd.

They bargained with the renegade like wealthy merchants who desperately needed

The cold and violent services of a man who would cut the heart of his own mother

For a nearly empty purse of little or no value.

"The serpents of conquest can only be defeated

By a disciplined artist of the dancing sword!" The renegade laughed.

When he heard the oystermen promise both ship and gold for the heads of the sinister reptiles

The renegade was eager to fight the fat-bodied sluts of the sea.

His was the greedy passion of a well-paid mercenary willing to die

For the strangers who could afford to pay an extravagant wage.

And so the river led them to the sea.

The renegade was tense, apprehensive toward battle
That would be loud with the wild thunder of violence.

Thick, gray scarves of mist drifted with wind
Along the deceptive surface of the sea turning red.
The oystermen quoted some translations from legends in
great length.

Then they interpreted the words that hid many secrets,
The "divine revelations" of the pure and holy quotes.
But the pressured renegade showed no interest in their
god-awful babbling

As he ran about on the planks of the crate-like ship.
He was a swift-footed man of the sea.

And the ship had now become like—a slow, clumsy sloth
fighting against

The rush of waves that seemed vast as mountains tipt
with snow.

And the sky had lost its morning sun of broad and
shimmering flame.

A suspense built slowly in the sensitive, unsinging brain
of the renegade

Who had dropt his thin pallid hand down to the sapphire-
hilt

Of his flat and lifeless sword of well-shaped steel.

Somewhere in that sea of brooding madness the serpents
watched

The uneasy figures who were beneath a wind-curved
mast.

The windy breath of the storm chopped up and down on
the water.

The violent motion discarded the naked hull of the ship
Into the deep and hollow mouths of iron-like waves that
coughed

Beneath the thick, loud voices echoing weirdly
In the dark-suited colours of a silent, swirly mist.
Somehow the ship kept up its fight against the sea.
The crate-like ship cracked and squeaked with bolts and
boards

That strained under the pressure of waves
Rising over them like heavy dark hammers
Pounding on the rotten wood of a barn.

The reptiles, silver warriors of the raging water,
Were letting the storm (of violent confusion)
Take its ruthless and destructive toll.

The storm, an ally of the silver warriors,
Talked with a harsh voice of thunder.

The snakes sharpened their teeth like metallic swords.
The gifted acrobats of the serpentine water (a whirling
red of deep and dangerous motion)

Shimmied toward the ship like fleet-finned pools of
minnow.

They wreathed palely along that infinite void of weirdly
colored sea.

In their hearts the fallacy of immortality resided
Like thin effusions of useless daydream.

The smirky serpents, with a wealth of dauntless courage,
Neared the ship that struggled in the violent grip of waves.

The illusive fingers of a pale wreathing mist
Were like shadow-coloured veils that hid the serpents
From the unaware men who held to the ship
With all the might of their well-structured bodies.

And those reptiles were upon them in a sudden flash of fury.
The renegade, white fear evident on his startled face,

Cursed; and the primitive sounds were loud and ghastly.
Surprised, the renegade was swinging his sword back and forth

Like a cold and awful shiny white star of destruction.
A bluish, green blood sang out from beneath the sword
As it cut its way through the wet slime of slow-witted
serpents.

The serpents were awkward when out of the water
But were even more awkward because the ship was
clashing

Through waves with a ruthless rhythm of motion.
The oystermen shuddered as a wild vigor
Swept the renegade with a song of dauntless aspiration.
He plunged like an acrobat across the deck of the ship.
His pursuit of the long bodied cut-throats,
Who were falling back in shrieking waves,
Quickened.

And the clashing rhythm of his sword
Sang upon the wine-coloured necks of fleeing serpents.
He killed the snakes with pleasure evident on his thin,
smiling face.

And the blood of the serpents was on his hands.
His sword danced a fancy ballet in that drippy sea of death.
His hair was an old grey harvest of wind-swept curls.
The renegade, myth who killed a thousand serpents,
Drank the blood of his enemies from tall silver pitchers.
There were still reptiles somewhere out in that vast red
sea.

But (somewhat like a retired scalp-hunter) he felt as if
He had killed more than enough of those sea-smelling
bastards.

The sea had smoothed into a surface of gentle waves

And the ship moved like a tired cripple; a wounded vet of battle.

The oystermen bowed before the renegade.

"You are a violent god of revenge," they cried

As the renegade washed his sword in a pan of dishwater.

"The serpents will look toward the land no more!"

They screamed within a delirium of joy.

"I told you I could do it," said the renegade,

A well-liked man who wore a wry smile of doubtless valor.

His streaked, clinched face was a soggy mess of sweat and blood.

The low waves of the sea were hills of smooth and elegant texture.

A ragged mist was a torn veil in that aftermath of ghostly vestiges.

That wooden crate of violent death would be an ancient epic in the hearts of the oystermen.

And the renegade would dance on a golden ship of dream.

Charles de Lint sent me his "Fane of the Grey Rose" a long, long time ago; not as a submission, and not begging comment. It was a gift. That ms comprised one of the most beautiful stories I've ever read—and some nice cleverness as well. I wrote to tell him so. And a year passed.

Knowing contracts were being prepared for Swords A.D. # 4 and 5, I read the Grey Rose's story again. Still beautiful; still well over my bigoted limit of 15,000 words. I sent to de Lint in Canada a challenge and an offer: crudely put, they came to: I love it still; Cut It and I'll Buy It. (Lease it, lease it.) I made some cutting suggestions. Charles—who isn't Chuck, or Charlie, and is a musician—cut it. I read it again, editing, biting my lip; some beauty had been cut out. Much remained.

At the same time, though, he was turning it into a novel. It is this volume's longest story—and not by a Big Name! (Yet.) The talent is there, the bonus of heart is there; he has better instincts than I, and he is perspicacious. Now consider. I read it again before I sent it off to the publisher, as I do all these stories. A few months later I read it again in galley proofs, proofreading as editor. I still loved it. I'll love reading the novel version, eventually.

Here's a story by one-third of the musical group Wickentree, and I think I'll just read it again now, as you do. You may have the impression by now that I sort of like this story.

THE FANE OF THE GREY ROSE

by Charles de Lint

*The fateful slumber floats and flows
About the tangle of the rose;
But lo! the fated hand and heart
To rend the slumberous curse apart!*

—William Morris

I remember well the day I first set eyes on her, the maid I named the Grey Rose for the blossom she wore in her rust-brown hair. It was the hue of twilight, as grey as the mists upon the downs, and seemed fresh-plucked, with traces of morning dew clinging to its fragile petals. It was at even-tide that she first came to Wran Cheaping,

yet that rose spoke of the morning sun to me. In my mind's eye I envisaged the first beams of light washing over briars and dew-laden blossoms. I could see tiny mists rising from petals as their moisture faded in the summer heat. That evening, though, the sun was slipping steadily westward to settle at last in the bosom of the low hills that girded the town. Yet the rose was wet with morning dew; and it was grey.

It was during the mid-summer of my twentieth year that this befell. I had taken myself from Farmer Heyre's fields, earlier than was my wont, to stand bemusedly amidst the bustle of the closing market. The chapmen were busily securing their shops against the approaching night while the husbandmen and their goodwives were loading their wagons with unsold wares, when she swept by me, her mantle rustling like wind-blown leaves.

Oak-green was the mantle. 'Neath it she wore a rust smock and a cream-white blouse. Stars seemed to glisten in her dusky eyes and there was a breath of autumn wrapped about her, filling the air with a sweet and heady scent. Though she was not tall, something about her lent her the appearance of height, and she walked with a loose, easy stride. Here she bought a sack of grains, there a handful of fresh sprouts and greens—all carried in a wicker basket upon her arm.

I longed to speak with her but was shamed at my appearance—suddenly very aware of my rough woolens and shabby cloak, of the dirt of the fields that clung to my skin. As she reached the far side of the market, I turned as if to go. In that moment she stole a glance my way, her eyes catching mine in such a way that we seemed to share a secret that only we two might partake of. She smiled and I cast my gaze to the ground, feeling a flush 'neath my

collar. When I lifted my eyes once more, she was gone.

Slowly I wandered to the stable I called my home, my thoughts on this maid of the Grey Rose. Once there, I busied myself with sweeping the floor.

When the last chore was done, I crept to my corner at the rear of the stable and drew forth a rudely-carved harp from 'neath my straw pallet. It was not the work of a skilled craftsman, for I had labouriously fashioned it myself. The supports and soundbox were cut from the back of Ralen's meat-mart. For all its looks, though, it had a pleasing tone and I could coax tunes from it to fill the long hours that I spent on my own.

That evening I tuned it while troubled of heart. The one smile from the lips of the Grey Rose had woken a discontent in me. I thought of my life in Wran Cheaping with sudden displeasure. My mother Eithne was a Harper of the old school, revered and respected until she was cast from the halls of Wistlore for wedding an outlaw from the Grassfields of Kohr. Not often was a woman taken into the Harper's Guild. So skilled had Eithne been that not only was she of the Guild, she bore high rank therein as well. Until she met Windlane—outlawed from his tribe and as wild as the Grassfields themselves.

The Guild forbade their wedding. When she set herself against them, she was banished from the hallowed Halls of Wistlore, where the Harpers have ever held sovereign with the Loremasters, Wyslings and other wizard folk. Whither they were bound when the sickness took them here in Wran Cheaping, I fear I'll never know. To the Southern Kingdoms, more likely than not, where the Guild holds no sway. I was four when the sickness took them both and orphaned me here.

I was taken in by Farmer Heyre. As soon as I turned

eight, I was set to work in the fields. Ah, but my mother's blood ran strong through my veins so that, though I laboured in fields of corn and barley, I resolved that I would one day master the minstrel craft and earn my living with the harp rather than the hoe.

When I reached my fifteenth year I left the farm to move to this stable in town. I called it my home, poor though it was. At morn and eve I would clean it to pay for my lodgings. For my toil in his fields, Farmer Heyre paid me three good coppers a week so that I might feed myself. Hidden in my pallet, in a small leather pouch, I had thirty coppers saved. With those—and my heart set a-longing for new lands and faces from that brief glimpse of the fair maid in the market place—I was determined to make my own way out into the world at summer's end. All the days of my short life I had dwelt in Wran Cheaping, whose folk had never made me feel overwelcome.

My thoughts came full circle and I thought on the maid of the Grey Rose once more. As I spoke her name to myself, a thrilling filled my heart. The one smile was all it took. Possibilities opened before my eyes. Here I was a farm labourer, nothing more. In the world beyond I could make my dreams become real. Perhaps I could make a name for myself and return to show the folk of Wran Cheaping what sort of a man I could be. Aye, and if that maid, that maid of the Grey Rose, dwelt here yet, perchance I'd go a-courting her, with a fine harp strapped to my shoulder and tales worth the telling to delight her ears.

I laughed softly at my fancies. The courage at least to try, though, had been stirred awake. So bemused, with my fingers trailing quiet melodies on my harp, I felt a weariness come over me. I played the last tune, arose to

store my harp safely in the straw, and readied my bed.

* * *

Another week passed before I had a day free from the fields. I arose early on that morn and, with my harp in a burlap sack over my shoulder, I made for the Golden Wood that lies north of Wran Cheaping on the edge of the downs. There was a load of bread and a slab of cheese in my wallet, a lightness in my heart.

The sun was bright overhead and far from the nooning when at last I reached the Wood's trembling shade. Soft-footed, I wandered 'neath the summer-rich boughs of the beech and elms. Pushing my way through stands of thin maple and silver birch, I came to the banks of a brook filled with clear, bubbling water. I cast my clothes on the cat's-tail and watercress that ridged the stream. Plunging in, I let the cool waters wash the dirt of my week's toil from me and refresh my limbs.

When I tired of the sport I clambered up the bank and caught hold of my clothes to give them a good scrubbing. Soon I was sitting in the sun, my clothes drying on a blackthorn bush anigh, while I dreamt lazily of the world outside the West Downs. Twas said that the muryan dwelt in those hills, that aelves made their homes in the dark glades deep within the Golden Wood. At least so I'd heard in the tales of the folk that once held these lands, in elder days. Folk unlike man they were, in a time before man's coming. I often thought of the folk from these tales and longed to meet an aelf or any sort of magical being.

I rose with a sigh, clad myself and fared deeper into the wood. I'd walked for perhaps two hours, full of dreams and dreamy thoughts, when I came to a dale as sweet as

ever there was. Orchids and red campions, light blue columbines and other wildflowers shimmered in the grass underfoot. A hawkfinch rose chittering before and swept into the canopy of tall oaks and elm that encompassed the dell. There were mushrooms growing in their shade. I picked a few to eat later with my bread and cheese.

When I had a pocketful, I sat down. Taking my harp from its rude sack, I tuned it. Soon I was deep into a new tune, losing myself to the wealth of harmonies I could imagine within its measure. Aye, here the tumbling breathy timbre of a flute might add a trill, there the lift and lilt of a fiddle's tone could strengthen the flow. This was for the maid of the Grey Rose, I decided, as the tune took firm hold of me. I began to hum until words came spilling from my tongue—ill-shaped perhaps by a true Harper's standard, but fair sounding to me.

I sang, then . . . and imagine my surprise when I heard another voice, low and sweet, join mine in the refrain. I stopped in mid-tune and glanced about to see that self-same maid of my new song standing by my side. She was clad in a short, white kirtle that briefly outlined the sweet shape of her form and contrasted sharply against the sun-brown of her slender limbs. I scrambled to my feet, hot with embarrassment, my harp falling to the grass with a discordant ring.

"Wh-what do you here?" I asked. I wished I hadn't spoken as I stumbled over the words.

A low chuckle escaped her throat and she favoured me with a smile. "Why, I'm picking mushrooms for my supper, Harper." She brushed a willful lock of rust hair from her brow. "That was a brave tune you were playing. How is it named?"

For a moment I thought she was mocking me. My only

thought was to flee the glen. Yet her face seemed to hold no guile and her words were so generous that I gathered my courage.

"M'lady, 'tis but a new tune that I've begun to shape today. When 'tis done, I thought to name it for you . . . for the Grey Rose."

I could feel my cheeks redden. The maid smiled again and gracefully settled herself on the sward, her slim legs tucked 'neath her kirtle.

"You honour me, Harper. Will you play it again?"

Numbly, I nodded and sat down beside her. I picked up my harp. Nervously I strummed the opening chords until, haltingly and with many false starts, I began the tune again. Though I dared not sing the half-formed words I had sung earlier, I strove to play the air as best I could. When I came to a complex sequence, I suddenly forgot my shyness for the tune took hold of me once more and I played with an assurance and confidence unknown to me, save when alone in my corner of the stable or in some secluded wood or field.

Again she hummed the air and my fingers fairly flew over the strings as her voice set my spirit all atremble. All too soon, the moment passed and the last strains of our music faded into the quickening day. She sighed.

"How are you named, Harper?"

"Cerin," I replied. Though I longed to, I dared not ask her the same. When she made no reply, I added, "I am no Harper."

She looked quizzically at me. "You've not the look of one, that's true enough. You've a husbandman's raiment and your hands are callused from work in the fields. And yet, who's to say what a Harper should look like? You've a touch as light and fresh as any I've heard." She stood

suddenly. "I've barley-bowl and mushrooms awaiting us upon my supper table. Will you come and share my meagre meal with me?"

Right gladly I agreed, my heart thumping in my breast. I gathered up my harp and wallet to follow her through the woods to her home. Her slight form slipped through the trees with an aelfin grace.

We came at last to another glade, bounded by gnarled ash trees and thickets of birch and young oaks. In its midst nestled a tiny cottage, vine-draped and built of stone, with a garden of wildflowers before it and a well to one side. As she went within to fetch us some refreshment, I stood in the sun and gazed about myself, marvelling. I had been to this glade before—aye, perhaps three months past when the spring was in the air—and though this cottage had been here true enough, it had been all in ruin and the glade itself overgrown with weeds and brush.

I puzzled over this. Yet when she came without, balancing a tray laden with two mugs of steaming tea and a platter of fresh-baked bannocks, I soon forgot the riddle, forsaking it for the victuals and her company.

That afternoon and the even that followed will ever be among my fondest memories. We dined on simple fare, 'tis true, and talked long into the night. Ah, that conversâtion in her company was better to me than all the meat and drink of a noble's table might ever be.

When first I had seen her in the market, this maid of the Grey Rose, I yearned for her as any man might yearn for a maid that warms his heart.

As the evening slipped away though, I realized we could never be lovers. There was something in her manner, some mystery, that made me aware of this. Yet

the thought did not sadden me, for here in the Golden Wood, I had met one with whom I could share my innermost thoughts without fear of ridicule. It was as if we were old friends, sundered for a time, and now come together again. I would never cease to long for her, as a man longs for a maid. I would strive to keep my yearnings to myself, though, for if I had lost a lover, I gained a speech-friend that was thrice as dear.

We sang many a song that eve, ones that I knew and strange wistful tales and airs that the maid taught to me. It was much later, after I laid my harp aside, that I asked her how long she had dwelt here and from what land she was come. She was quiet and a long silence wrapped itself about us. Glancing at the shadows playing on the walls of the cottage—born from the dim glow of the hearth fire—she said at last:

"I am from a place that is near, yet far from here. There is a geas upon me that drives me like a leaf before the wind throughout many lands, aye, and there is a shade of the dark that follows me and strives to undo all my deeds and make me its own. Long roads have I wended until, at the waxing of the Dyad Moon, I came to this wood, weary from wandering and yearning to rest for a spell. But not for long, no, not for long . . ."

Her voice trailed off and she lapsed into a thoughtful silence. I, for my part, felt a tremor of fear stir my heart at her words. I wondered again at who she might be and how she had raised this cottage from a ruin. Her dark talk of a geas and the threatening shade confused me and made me anxious for her sake. I was about to offer her my aid, for what it was worth, when she smiled suddenly and our conversation and my thoughts turned away from the puzzle to fare on to other things.

When it was well past moonrise, I rose reluctantly to begin my journey homeward. The maid accompanied me to her threshold. There she bade me a good eve.

"Will you come again, Cerin?" she asked.

I said I would readily enough.

I was very thoughtful on my return to Wran Cheaping, walking through the darkened Golden Wood. There was a mournful wind upon the West Downs, with a chill in its breath. As I bore the afterglow of the maid's company warm in my breast, and my thoughts were on her and when next I might have a free day to see her, the chill I minded not.

* * *

So passed the summer. I worked in Farmer Heyre's fields by day, dreaming of the Grey Rose, and at night I sat writing tunes for her, or adding airs to the tales she told me, sometimes setting them to rhyme. Aye, and oft I would fare to that glade in the Golden Wood to spend an eve or a day with her. At summer's end, though I had thirty-nine coppers saved, there was no wish in me to leave Wran Cheaping. The Grey Rose made my life fuller than I had deemed it possible. I would not have this joy come to an end.

There came a day, upon the edge of autumn when the countryside was filled with the glory of the leaf-fall, that my idyll came to an end. I walked from Wran Cheaping that day with a new tune at my fingers, basking in the wonder of the season. All the world seemed a-hum with the autumn. Seas of rusts and golds, browns and singing reds, swept across the Downs and the Golden Wood was so bright that I must needs almost turn my eyes from it.

Underfoot, bright melynion bloomed violet amidst the fallen leaves and nuts. The bushes hung heavy with berries; thick splashes of colour against the growing somber attire of the hedges. My heart was light and I hummed merrily to myself as I strode along. A quickening confidence had blossomed within me, along with the maturing of the barley and corn in their fields, and I harvested it more eagerly than ever the farmers might their crops. This was my gift from the Grey Rose. She sowed this sureness of spirit within me. Aye, had she not been my speech-friend, yet would I have blessed her thrice over for this.

I came at last to the glen wherein her cottage stood and paused in midstep. Although I could not define it, some subtle change had come about that went beyond the simple turning of the seasons. It was as though a malevolent shadow overhung the glade; a brooding darkness fashioned in some nether region beyond mortal kenning.

Hurriedly, I crossed the glade. When I came to the door, it stood ajar. I peered through to see the Grey Rose sitting disconsolately at her kitchen table, a half-packed journeysack set upon it before her. I stepped within.

"What betides?" I asked. My heart fell as I spoke for I knew well-enough by the looks of things that she was making ready her departure. She had spoken of it oft enough. I had taken no heed of it, deeming that the day would never truly come. She looked up at the sound of my voice and tried a brave smile.

"Ah, Cerin, I must away. Too long have I tarried here. I have a geas that is overdue in its fulfilling, aye, and a bane that will soon come a-knocking on my door. I fear I've not the strength to flee any longer."

"What do you mean?" My thoughts fled back to our first evening together and her strange speech that she was repeating now. We had not spoken of that since. "What befalls? Can I aid you?" The words spilled from me in a jumble. I tried uselessly to still the thudding of my heart.

"I fear not, kind friend," she said. She sighed and took my hand. "Sit you down, Cerin, and I will tell you the tale of my life. Aye, and the sorry end it comes to."

Her words filled me with foreboding. What did she speak of? It seemed that the time for answers to the many riddles surrounding her had come. Now, curious as I once was, I wished this time had never come.

"Have you ever heard tell of the Cradle of the Kings?" she asked.

"Aye. 'Twas a great city in the elder days, though now it lies in ruins. I've heard of it, of the bright lords that ruled there and sought the wisdoms of the world. More revered than Wistlore it was. Now naught remains but fallen towers and the shades of the dead. It lies just above the western entrance to Holme's Way, on the edge of the Perilous Mountains, and fell in some great war. 'Twas another name for it as well."

"Banlore," said the maid.

"That was it. But what has that haunt of daemons to do with you?"

"I am hand-fast to one therein that you might well name a daemon. Yarak Stone-slayer he is named. A Waster, a child of the Daketh, the Dark Gods, is what I am to wed."

I was stricken with horror at her words. As I opened my mouth to speak, she tightened her grip on my hand.

"No, list first to my tale, Cerin, ere you voice your

protests. Long ago it was that I pledged my hand to him. In return for that pledge, I gained the promise that no harm could come to the Hill Lords, those who reigned in the Trembling Lands at the end of the Elder Days. It was a cruel war that seemed to rage for longer than long is. This was its only ending, for the Hill Lords were pitiful in number by then. They would soon have fallen had we not this offer to make the Waster. I am of their kin, you see. It was my will that this be, hateful as it might prove to me.

"Then, on the eve of our wedding, Yarac sent a plague of were-riders and yargs into the Trembling Lands. They slew nigh all the Hill Lords, Yarac never deeming that I would learn of it until too late; until my power was his, my body his. Word came nevertheless. I flew from Banlore—for so was it named when Yarac wrought its ruin—and he pursued me.

"Yarac met with us, myself and the remnants of the Hill Lords—on the hills nigh the city. They were slain, but I escaped, aye, and I flee yet. Three year-turnings past, he stole my spirit's shadow and so gained a control over me. There is a hollowness within me, a weakening of my strengths, Cerin. I cannot live longer without it. I fear he is leagued with others of the Dark now, but I cannot be sure. Tonight, though, I know he will come for me and there is naught I may do to stop him from taking me."

I shook my head in bewilderment. I knew the tales of the Wasters, aye, and shuddered at their telling. I knew as well of wars in the Trembling Lands that had touched even the West Downs and the Golden Wood, yet the time of their waging was ages past. There had been no strife in these lands within living memory. That she might speak of these things as though they were yesterday . . . for that she must needs be ten score ten years herself and

this could not be. The undying dwelt only in tales . . .

My scalp prickled and I felt the cold sweat of fear upon me.

"Who are you?" I asked her, almost loath to hear her answer.

"To you," she said with a sad smile, "I would e'er be the Grey Rose."

It was no answer. I was about to say as much when she continued.

"They are all gone . . . the Hill Lords and their people, aye, and the were-beasts and their riders, the yargs and goblins . . . all gone, save for Yarac. He and I, we are the last players that remain from that ancient struggle. I would know where he gained this new strength, though, when my own is waning . . ." She shook her head slowly and fell into a brooding silence.

"I like it not . . ." I began.

She glared at me.

"And do you think I do?" Her voice was laced with bitterness. "Do you think I welcome the honouring of a broken pledge? To have that creature foul my flesh as he beds me?" Her eyes flashed fire from their dusky depths and I drew back from her. She sighed, saying in a gentler tone: "But no, Cerin. I wrong you. You should not feel the brunt of my anger. That I will save for when the Stone-slayer comes for me this eve, little good that it might do."

"I will aid you," I said. "I know not how, but I will stop him."

"Tis bravely spoken, Cerin, but better it were if you were not here when he comes. To face him could mean your death, perhaps worse."

"I will not leave."

I marvelled at my courage. Had this been the early summer, I would never have dreamed that such things might betide. Aye, or that I would be facing them! I gathered strength from the fact that this maid I loved was in need. Fearful I was, indeed, yet not so fearful that I would not try.

We sat at the table and the day slowly wore by. As the long shadows of dusk darkened the room, the Grey Rose stood from the table to light a candle. Wearily, she finished packing her journeysack by its light and the wan light that yet caught the glade without in its grasp. When she was done, she sat again, gazing out of the still open door.

It pained me to see her so, she who had always given me strength when I needed it. Even the rose in her hair seemed unwell to my eyes. Quietly I arose and closed the door, dropping an oak bar the width of my thigh across it. Returning to the table, I saw tears glistening in her eyes.

"Cerin, Cerin," she said. "I would not have you die. Flee now, I beg you. You cannot know what you will be facing. This is no tale to be told before a roaring fire, with mugs of hot tea in hand and a harp plucked softly behind the telling. There is more to the world than the ways of humankind. North of the Perilous Mountains there are wide rolling lands, hills and downs; aye, and long tracks of unbroken woods and dark moors where the old ways are not forgotten. There are aelves in those woods—as there once were in this forest—muryan in the moors, dwarves in the mountains. And where there are beings of Light, there are the minions of the Dark as well.

"Yarac Stone-slayer is real. If you bide here with me, he could slay you as easily as he can crush stone."

"That may be," I said, "but still will I stay. I am not as

the folk are here. My mother was a Harper and my father a warrior from the great Grasslands of Kohr. My kin are from those northern lands. Though I may not have the knowledge of magical power, I have yet the strength of my limbs. There may not be much meat to my frame, but the long hours I have toiled in the fields have not left me a weakling. I will face this Stone-slayer. Perhaps I will fall, but I will not flee."

The darkness had grown as we spoke. A look of despair came into the maid's eyes when she realized that my resolve was hardened, that I could not be swayed to leave. Without the cottage I could hear the wind rising, rattling a loose shutter and tearing at the autumn-dried vines. For all my brave words, I felt the cold hand of terror upon me. I prayed that my courage would not forsake me.

It was almost fully dark. The wind became like a thing alive, howling about the cottage. Nothing but an autumn storm, I thought, a common enough thing. My thoughts hovered around the maid's words of the Waster. Foreboding set my heart a-pounding as the growing storm seemed less and less natural. Soon it would be moonrise, the rise of the Blood Moon. As the wind still howled, I wondered at the ill omen of this moon's naming.

Suddenly, the Grey Rose stood—so swiftly that her chair fell with a clatter to the floor behind her.

"He calls," she said in a strained voice. "Oh, Cerin. He calls and I am afraid."

I stood beside her, striving to hear that call. All that came to my ears was the raging of the wind. She groaned and took a step toward the door. I put out a hand to stop her. No sooner had I touched the sleeve of her gown than the door burst asunder, whipping shards of wood about us. Something was there, something darker than night

that shook my very soul. The candle blew out as the wind tore into the cottage, yet I had no need of its light to see the maid moving towards the threshold where the intruder awaited her.

"No!" I cried.

Pushing her aside, I caught up my chair two-handedly and leapt at the thing, putting all my strength into that assault. The chair crashed resoundingly against the huge dark form, yet the hard wood splintered into kindling and I was flung from him to the floor, the wind screaming in my ears. A flash of lightning ripped across the heavens outside and I saw the Waster clearly silhouetted against the sudden light.

He was shaped like a man, yet stood nigh eight feet in height, towering like a monolith over me. His flesh had felt like living iron. Coals of red fire smoldered in his eyes. He picked me up from the floor with one huge hand and, as my fists struck futile blows against his massive chest, he hurled me across the room. I landed with a jarring crash. The breath was struck from me and a pain stitched through my body as though each and every one of my bones had shattered from the impact.

I sought to rise and found that I could not. Helplessly, I watched him take up the maid of the Grey Rose and turn from the threshold. Her eyes were wide with terror, her scream silent. Raging and gnashing my teeth, I managed to crawl across the litter-strewn floor. My body shrieked in agony at each movement I made. Ages seemed to pass before I reached the threshold. I glared out into the ensorcelled night. The wind whipped the trees into a frenzy. As I watched, a sheet of rain erupted from above and I could see no farther than my hand. Before it fell, though, I saw that the glen was empty. Both the maid and

her abductor were gone. Bitter tears laced my cheek as I realized my failure. I fell forward. A darkness washed over me and I knew no more.

* * *

I regained my senses just before moonset. The glen and wood beyond were as silent as a held breath. My clothing was soaked from the rain that fell upon me while I lay unconscious. I shivered with a chill and ached from a thousand bruises, though I could feel no broken bones. Cautiously, I stood and made my way from the threshold. In a corner I found the candle where it had blown from the table. I lit it with unsteady hands. Dragging a chair to the table, I slumped in it and sat dejectedly there, trying to gather my thoughts.

I awoke with a start to realize that I had slept through the remainder of the night. In the bright morning light, the stump of the candle seemed to stare at me, mocking me for my failure. Brave words they were that I spoke last eve, but only words. What had I done to aid her, and she my friend, this maid of the Grey Rose?

I must follow them. She had spoken of the Cradle of the Kings, the ruined city that was now named Banlore. To there I must go. First I needed knowledge. To defeat the Waster I must know his weaknesses, be there any; I must learn how to destroy him. There was only one I knew of that might have such knowledge stored away within her: Old Tess.

To Wran Cheaping and Old Tess I would return then, for though the townsfolk named her mad and shunned her company, she was my friend. All my tales and songs of old I had from her. The old wisdoms were hers;

learnings and knowledge that even the Wyslings in Wistlore might yearn for were locked away in her mind. She would aid me if she could.

I drew myself up from the table to hobble to the door. I leaned against the twisted remains of its frame for a moment to draw deeply into my lungs the crisp autumn air, before I made for the woodpile on the far side of the cottage. There I searched through the unchopped wood and kindling for a length of wood that might serve me for a cane. After much prying and scrabbling, I came upon a thick staff cut from a rowan tree. This I strove to break into a suitable length for my cane. Either my strength was more depleted from my encounter with the Waster than I had thought, or the wood was especially resilient. I could not break it.

I glared at it, as though my gaze might serve where my limbs could not. Then I realized that it would serve me admirably as a staff, just as it was.

Leaning heavily on the length of its white wood, I returned to Wran Cheaping and a meeting with Old Tess.

* * *

Though I fretted for each moment wasted, it was still a week before my strength returned sufficiently for me to hazard the journey to Banlore. Always my thoughts were on the Grey Rose. It grieved my heart sore that she should be in the clutches of that fiend, Yarak Stoneslayer. Yet the week served me well. My limbs soon felt as hardy as ever. Still, I turned more in my sleep than was my wont. Partly from stiffness this was, and partly from unfamiliar and dark dreams that took hold of my sleep-bemused spirit and filled it with shadowed omens.

On another clear day, with the autumn well in hand, I left Wran Cheaping once more. This time it was for good. Whether my quest went well or ill, I would not be returning. As I walked my way across the downs to the Grey Rose's cottage in the Golden Wood, my purse with its thirty-nine coppers jingled at my belt and I thought on what old Tess had told me.

"It's Heart's-sure ye must be carrying in your belt, Cerin. And when ye face him, it's a deft thrust with a dead king's sword, a sword of shadows. Ah! And how would I be knowing where ye might get such a sword? Search a barrow, lad; search a barrow! And mind ye be sure ye've the dead one's blessing, or it's more sorrow ye'll be reaping than sowing. Aye, so say the old tales . . . Heart's-sure and a dead king's sword. And was there another thing? I can't recall . . ."

I shook my head as I strode along. Riddles, always riddles. First, the maid herself. That riddle I had forsaken, for sweet was her company and I had been loath to spoil it with prying questions. Then there was the Waster, the city of ruins, of ruins, those tales of old wars . . . and now yet more riddles, these from Old Tess. Heart's-sure I knew of. It grew along the mountain slopes and I would be passing that way. But a dead king's sword! I knew of no barrows in these lands, though the downs were said to be hollowed in places and there were hills that might harbour a barrow nigh the Cradle of the Kings itself. Mayhap, if luck favoured me, I would find one along my way, and if it was not a king's barrow and there was no sword in it . . . I would have to face the Waster empty-handed. What else had she said, Old Tess? She had called me back, just as I was leaving . . .

"And, Cerin! Look for aid along yer way, and in strange

guises. Mark this rede of mine, for the lands beyond the Mountains—aye, and those Mountains themselves—are filled with queer folk, unlike us, and there's one or two might treat ye kindly. Go with caution, Cerin."

I was soon come to the cottage, planning to stop only long enough to gather my harp. I went through the maid's journeysack, setting aside the food that was spoiled. I added the fresh produce and breads that were in my own wallet. I looked around then for something of the maid's that I might bring with me as my token. By the door—having fallen from her hair as she'd struggled in the Waster's arms, no doubt—was the Grey Rose she'd always worn. It was still flourishing, though no way near as healthy as I remembered it.

It was sorcery, surely, that kept it so; a sorcery that was fading. I knew I must familiarize myself with magics, aye, and as this was the maid's, I had no fear of it. Still, I felt a strange tingle run up my spine when I took it in my hand to place it inside my tunic where it lay cool against my skin.

I took up her journeysack and shouldered it with my harp. So burdened, and with my staff in hand, I set my steps westward for the Perilous Mountains.

That night I camped in the midst of the West Downs and watched twilight settle over the gaunt hills. Silence hung heavy on the air, broken only by a lean whispering wind that was subtle as a moth's flight, aye, and gentle as its touch. The dusk poised upon the land for another moment before the deep night swept over all. Before moonrise, I fell into a dreamless sleep that lasted till the dawn.

I lay awake for a few instants, savouring my new freedom. No more toil in Farmer Heyre's fields was there

for me now, no more of any of Wran Cheaping. A thought of the Grey Rose and her plight intruded into my musing and I scrambled to my feet. To my right, the sidehills of the mountains began their clambering rise, ending at last in heights that towered and glistened in the morning sun. Along their base, my path led through the foothills until I came to Holme's Way. I resolved to make that pass before the nooning was upon me.

The sky became overcast by the time I came to the cleft that marked Holme's Way. I took shelter neath a ledge to break my fast before I essayed the pass itself. As the morning had gone by, the gorse and heather-topped hills gave way to a rough land, strewn with granite outcrops and patches of shale over which I slid at times, breaking sure falls with my staff. Finally, even that was left behind. The land was now like one solid root of the mountains. Only the hardiest weed and brush grew in the patches of soil that were clumped in rills and folds of the rock.

Rising from my meal, I took the leftward side of the pass, stepping briskly for I was trying to outdistance the growing storm that I could see gathering itself over the downs. I fared for no longer than an hour, when I heard a rumbling that I took to be thunder from the storm behind me. I paused to listen more closely. The sound came from before me, not my rear. Then it took on a clearer meaning. It was the sound of horses' hooves.

Now, no matter what Old Tess said, I looked to meet none in these lands that I might call friend. I cast my eyes about in search of a refuge. The sheer walls of the canyon met my frantic gaze, too high and steep to scale. I felt trapped until I saw an opening in the wall some three hundred paces ahead on the right side of the pass. Taking

a firm hold of harp, staff and journeysack, I sped for it, heedless of the rubble strewn in my path. I just reached the mouth of the opening—it proved to be a cave, I soon found—when I slipped on the loose rocks and fell in a tangle of limbs.

The breath was knocked from me. Still I had sense enough to gather my belongings and scramble the last few yards. Once within I turned to peer cautiously without, hoping for a view of the oncoming riders so that I might know what manner of men they might be. No sooner did I cast my gaze in the direction of the hooves' rumbling than five riders came thundering from around a turn in the pass. I saw them clear enough then.

Bright mail glittered, even in the dull light of the approaching storm. I could see they were well-weaponed, what with swords, spears and two bearing great axes. It might be wrong to judge a man by first sight—aye, it's not as if I, myself, didn't look a ruffian in my travel-stained clothes and rude equipment—yet I felt that I would not be far off my judgement in deeming these men to be outlaws, or brigands of some sort. I was congratulating myself on my good sense, when disaster struck.

You did well to hide yourself from the likes of them, manling.

To this day I can still recall my shock when that gruff voice resounded within my mind. Sick with dread, I twisted about. My eyes went wide with shock as I beheld the dim outline of the huge humped form that had so addressed me. I backed from it, only to stumble once more. This time I fell out of the opening, in plain view of the approaching riders.

I cursed myself for a blunderer, but it was too late. Already they saw me, while from the opening shuffled

the figure I had seen within, the thing that mind-spoke to me. Disbelief ran through me, for by all that is holy, it was a bear. Nigh ten feet high it stood upon its hind legs, all grizzled brown fur topped with a shock of steel-grey hair above its dark eyes. Its two immense forepaws cut the air before it as it neared me. I felt that my doom was upon me.

By my hand lay my staff. I reached for it before I stood. Slowly I backed away from the bear. Behind me, I could hear the riders pulling up. I knew not which was the worst I must face. Mayhap the riders would aid me against this beast, I thought. Yet the bear had not threatened me. What to do? One of the riders spoke mockingly as I was puzzling this out, thereby making my decision for me.

"Ho! Here's sport, indeed. A youth and a beast to feed our blades, comrades. What say you to that?"

As his companions joined him in his laughter, I turned to them, my staff raised chest-high and held loosely in my hands—much as I had seen the lads of Wran Cheaping prepare their quarterstaves for mock combat. Yet this was no play fight, and I was ill prepared for battle. With my death sure upon me, my thoughts turned to the maid of the Grey Rose. I grieved that she should have no champion now. A poor enough one I made, it's true, yet I was all she had.

Behind me, manling.

Again that voice spoke in my mind. I glanced over my shoulder to see the bear almost upon me. His blazing eyes were for the riders only. Our aggressors shifted in their saddles until one broke from the rest to charge us. The bear swept by me on all fours, rising to his full height just as the rider was nigh him. One sweep of those terrible

paws and the man was thrown from his frenzied steed, a great gash across his chest. A wail of anger was throated by the others. As one, they bore down upon us.

I can remember little of that short battle. One moment there were four riders storming towards us; in the next two more men were hurled to their deaths at our feet while the others fled, following the lead of the three empty-saddled horses. I had wielded my staff, striking one man a glancing blow. But the bear had been a whirlwind of motion, and our attackers had soon lost their lust for killing. As I watched their figures rapidly dwindling in the distance, I wondered what they had hoped to gain from a beast and a poor traveller such as I. They spoke of sport before they struck at us. If that had been their reason, I felt no guilt in having had a hand in the slaying of three of them.

I was still breathless in the afterglow of the skirmish, when the bear turned to me with his head cocked, peering thoughtfully. The silence grew uncomfortable between us. At last I drew upon my courage.

“My thanks for your aid, Master . . . ah . . . bear . . .”

My voice trailed off. I felt foolish neath his penetrating gaze. A beast that might speak—this was something that could only be in a tale! Still, in this last week or so, I had come to appreciate that the old tales held more truth than ever I thought they might.

Your thanks is accepted, manling, came his voice echoing within my mind again, though I was as much to blame for startling you. I am named Hickathrift, lately come from Wistlore, where I was given the mantle of Loremaster by William Marrow himself. And you? A Harper, by the looks of that sack, and not a rich one. Still, when has there been a rich Harper, save in the days of Minstrel Raven-dear?

Those days are long past now, I fear.

I was amazed at how swiftly I accepted this mind-speech, aye, and from a bear at that. My heart leapt when he spoke of Wistlore, and that with such familiarity. Though my mother had been cast from those halls, I held a longing to look upon them myself.

"I am named Cerin," I told him.

He shook his head thoughtfully. *The name is unfamiliar. Is it listed in the record scrolls in the Harper's Hall?*

"I'd think not. I've never been in the northlands, though my mother, and father too, were from that land. My mother was a Harper; Eithne was her name. My father was Windlane. Have you heard tell of them?"

Hickathrift thought a moment. *Aye. Their tale is writ in the lore books, though what became of them has not been recorded. Nor is it mentioned that they had a child. He shot me a piercing look. They were not well-loved at their leave-taking. Did you know of that?*

"I knew."

There must have come a look to my face that showed my displeasure with those who would send from them one of their own, solely because she had found a love that they frowned on. Aye, and had that not occurred, I might have been raised in other lands, far from Wran Cheaping. I might have been a Harper in truth, taught the old ways at my mother's knee.

I was bitter, though not towards my parents. The blame lay not with them. Should I ever reach the Halls of Wistlore, that was one matter that I longed to confront those elders with. Had my parents not been banished, they would never have died from the sickness. Still, had I not dwelt in the West Downs, would I have met with the maid of the Grey Rose? I felt the rose cool and tingly

against my skin. Aye, and my parents . . . the sickness could have taken them anywhere. It had not raged solely in Wran Cheaping.

But what of yourself? asked Hickathrift, breaking into my thoughts with his gruff mindvoice. *Are you bound for Wistlore then?*

"In time."

I told him a little of what had befallen me, dwelling longer upon the fate of the Grey Rose and the words of Old Tess than on the rest of my tale. Hickathrift was quiet while I spoke, stopping me only once or twice when my words ran ahead of themselves. Then I must backtrack to explain some matter. When the telling was done, he shook his head gravely.

I would like to meet this Old Tess of whom you speak, aye, and the maid you name the Grey Rose. The lore books are largely silent as to that war between the Stone-slayer and the Hill Lords of the Trembling Lands. To all accounts, it was a dread time. Northward, there was none who knew its ending, or the brave sacrifice of this maid. I think that I would accompany you upon this quest, if you will have my companionship.

This I had not imagined. If I could have his aid . . . ah, with his aid I might have an actual chance of success. I said as much to him. He laughed, deep and throaty.

Do not think too highly of me, Cerin, for I have not the power to stand up against a Waster. Yet I will try. And there are other things I can assist you with. You know of Heart's-sure. As to a dead king's sword . . . there is a barrow not far from the very outskirts of the Cradle of the Kings, hidden in the sidehills. I was within it and explored it to a small extent. I saw no sword within. Still, mayhap you will find something where I saw naught. I was searching for written

records. *Aye, and how are sword and bloom to be used against the Stone-slayer?*

I shrugged my shoulders. I knew not and had worried about that often.

No matter . . . for now. First we have a need to gather those things. When the time for their use is nigh, let us hope that the knowledge will become apparent. He lifted his muzzle to sniff the air. Overhead, dark clouds were gathering, roiling and scudding in a turmoil. *We have yet an hour or so ere the storm strikes. What say you that we leave this place of death and fare onwards for that hour? I passed other caves, further on up the pass. Within one of them we can spend the night and take further rede as to this coming struggle.*

We left the dead brigands as they lay, though I took a sword from one. I knew nothing of the art of swordplay, yet I felt a little more confident with such a weapon tucked into my belt. We fared on down the pass and came to the caves. Soon, I was sharing my victuals with him by a fire set just far enough back from the opening of the cave that its glow and reflection might not be seen from without. Therein, while the storm howled the night through, we slept deeply, not heeding the wind and rain.

* * *

The next morn, we arose with the sun to fare the remaining length of Holme's Way without further mishap. We stood in a jumble of strewn rock and boulders that marked the western gate of the pass. Hickathrift cast his gaze about, searching for a landmark. Once found, he led a winding way through the rough foothills. With much scrambling upon my part, we came

to the barrow where it lay half-hidden in a small gully choked with brush and thick-bladed grasses.

The dusk grows, came Hickathrift's mind-speech.

We stood before a dark opening, flanked by two weathered stones with strange runes running up and down their length. I could not read them. My knowledge was limited to what Old Tess had taught me and she stored her learning in her mind, scorning books and writing. When I asked Hickathrift as to their meaning, he shook his head.

Though the runes are familiar enough, they spell words in a tongue that I have no knowledge of. I was bound for the Trembling Lands when I came upon this place and meant to make copies of them upon my return so that the Wyslings might puzzle over them. But now—he made a motion to a narrow cleft at the side of the gully with his paw—let us take our rest there and essay this barrow on the morrow. There are spirits that inhabit barrows that 'waken when the sun sets. They do not care to be disturbed.

I shook my head at his counsel. I had tallied the days since the Grey Rose was stolen. That tally was too high.

"No," I said.

I fell to searching for a length of wood to serve me as a torch. There was nothing nigh, so I gathered an armful of the tall grass and sat down to twist their tough fibers into a serviceable torch.

"Time runs out," I said as I worked on it. "I feel that even now it might be too late. Haste is all that remains . . . a need for haste."

So be it, replied Hickathrift, obviously displeased. *On your head be it. That haste may well lead you into ruin. The counsels of the wise are specific in their warnings. If you will not heed them, you must take the risk alone. Tomorrow, I*

would have gone with you. Now I will await without to guard you from mortal foes. I will not chance a curse of the dead's.

I shrugged, though I was not feeling overly brave myself. A desperation of sorts had set itself upon my spirit, swamping my own feelings of fear—aye, and the counsels of the wise as well. This was a deed I must do. I had failed her once, my Grey Rose. I could not chance failure again, whatever the risks.

My torch was ready. I lit its end with flint and steel. When it had caught flame, I turned again to the barrow's entrance. With a dead outlaw's blade bared in my hand, in search of a dead king's sword, I entered.

Luck go with you, came Hickathrift's thoughts. Then there was silence, save for the scuff of my boots upon the stone floor and my own breathing.

Within, the passage was narrow. I soon felt cloistered, for the walls seemed to press in upon me. It was an unpleasant feeling, treading this dark confined space with only the light of a torch of twisted grasses. I glanced at my torch and saw that it was burning swiftly, perhaps too swiftly. I felt that its illumination would not last for as long as I had hoped. It flickered and burned unevenly, sending strange shadows scurrying ahead of me down that narrow passageway. I thought of returning to twist a few more. Instead, I pressed on. Ahead I could see that the passage was opening up into a large space of some sort.

When I stepped within, my torch was half-burned, lighting an empty chamber. To the left, I saw the threshold of another passage; on the floor, I could make out the prints of Hickathrift's heavy paws etched in the dust. To the opening I went, hurriedly crossing the

chamber. Soon I was in another corridor and this was a little wider. Still, my heart was thumping in my breast as I walked. The weight of the rock about me seemed to bear down with renewed strength. An oppression crept in upon me so that I glanced nervously about, with many a look over my shoulder.

When this passageway came to an end, I stood in the heart-room of the barrow. All about was a litter of broken rock, shards of what must once have been weapons and other finery. The stone slab, where the inhabitant of the barrow should have lain, was chipped and empty. Peering closer, I could see a snarl of bones by its side, the remnants of age-rotted cloth and rusted armour. My torch spluttered. I looked about for something that I might replenish my dwindling light with. In one wall was set a torch, blackened with tar. To this I touched mine of twisted grasses. The tarred wood took fire readily and the whole chamber was lit with a brighter illumination.

The minutes slipped by as I took stock of the barrow's holdings. Weapons there were, or at least the heads of axes and spears, their shafts broken and lying in a tangle. Of riches there were none. There were plenty of clay bowls and dishes shaped of stone and rough metal. Some of them were painted with colours that were now fading, though once they must have been fair.

I shook my head despairingly. Nowhere saw I a sword—nor even a dagger. Silence hung leadenly in the stuffy air. Then came a sound. I thought it was Hickathrift, come to aid me after all, until I realized that it came from the wall that faced the passageway. All my fears rose within me in an overwhelming wave. As I turned to run back to the outside and safety, a keening wail resounded throughout the chamber, freez-

ing my limbs.

As suddenly as the keening rose, it fell. Silence once more encompassed the barrow. Then a voice broke that silence, a voice so loud that the stones of the burial chamber rumbled. I covered my ears to lessen the din.

"WHAT DO YE IN MY BARROW, MORTAL?"

With shaking knees, I turned to face the owner of that voice.

"ARE YE SO WEARY OF LIFE THAT YE HAVE COME TO JOIN ME IN THESE COLD HALLS OF THE DEAD?"

No matter that the torch cast its light about the chamber. I could see nothing before me save a darkness etched against the already black shadows that shrouded that end of the barrow.

"N-no . . ." I managed at last, my throat tight with fear. I struggled to overcome my terror while I backed away from the darkness towards the threshold of the corridor behind me. "I sought but a sword. There is a geas of sorts upon me . . . the sword of a dead king I must have to fulfill it."

"A SWORD?" said that bodiless voice. I caught a hideous chuckle behind its words. **"AND WHAT WOULD YE GIVE ME IN EXCHANGE FOR A SWORD? WHAT DO YE HOLD MOST PRECIOUS IN ALL THE WORLD BEYOND THESE WALLS?"**

I was dumbfounded and stopped my backward movement to peer closer into that darkness. Was there a sword here? Would this spirit bargain with me and mayhap allow me to flee the barrow with it? I racked my mind, seeking for something that I possessed that might please this shade of the dead. There was little I had, save my harp, the brigand's sword and the clothes on my back.

Then I thought of the rose that was cool against my skin, hidden within my tunic. Loath was I to give it up, but to save the maid . . . Slowly I pulled it forth to lay it upon the burial slab.

"I have this."

The torchlight caught its petals, still damp with glistening dew. Though it was not nearly as fair as it had been, I still marvelled at its flourishing.

"WHERE GAT YE THIS?" the voice boomed with anger.

I saw the darkness move away from the wall towards me. The force of its anger tore into my mind and I staggered neath its brutal attack. Through the twisting horrors that lapped on the boundaries of my consciousness, I tried to form words to explain how the blossom came into my possession.

"WHERE GAT YE THIS?" the voice boomed again. "THIS WAS MY DAUGHTER'S OF OLD, ERE THE COMING OF YARAC WASTER, ERE THE WARRING FELL UPON US. LAST WAS I TO FALL, HERE SO CLOSE TO HIS CURSED HOLD; LAST AND TO NO AVAIL. HOW DARE YE STEAL THE GREY ROSE FROM HER AND OFFER IT TO ME? I WILL SLAY THEE, I WILL REND THEE! SPEAK, MORTAL! WHERE GAT YE HER POWER FROM HER?"

The darkness was upon me. Babbling, I told of what had befallen the maid of the Grey Rose and what I meant to do to aid her. Rapidly I spoke, my heart thumping in my breast. I was on my knees for there was no longer the strength in me to stand. I held the dead bandit's blade uselessly before me, as though I might fend off the shade's wrath with it.

The darkness lashed me. I felt an unfamiliar mind

probing my own, weighing my words for their truth. Not gentle was that unspoken questioning. The shade of the dead Hill Lord tore my memories from me. I writhed in my terror, striving to break away, to retain my sanity. Suddenly the horror fell from me and the voice of the shade resounded throughout the chamber.

“YE SPEAK THE TRUTH AND I THANK THEE FOR WHAT YE WOULD DO FOR THE CHILD OF MY FLESH. TAKE YE THE ROSE THAT YE MAY RETURN IT TO HER. I WILL GIVE THEE A SWORD, AYE, A SWORD AS NE’ER THE WORLD HAS KNOWN SINCE THE FALL OF THE LAST OF THE HILL LORDS. BATHE IT IN SMOKE, MORTAL, THE SMOKE OF HEART’S-SURE BURNING IN A FIRE OF ROWAN WOOD. BLOOD RED FLOWER AND WHITE WOOD . . . THAT IS HIS BANE. HAD I BUT KNOWN IT IN MY TIME, ’TIS HE WOULD BE LYING IN THIS THRICE-DAMNED TOMB, AND I, I WOULD BE FREE.

“GO, MORTAL. LAY HIM LOW. WITH HIS DEATH, MAYHAP I WILL KEN PEACE AT LAST. TAKE THE SWORD AND GO!”

My ears were still pounding with the volume of his voice and I lay prostrate upon the floor, when I realized that he was gone. I rose to my feet, shaking my head numbly. Looking about, I saw the rose lying on the slab. I picked it up, thrust it into my tunic and searched for the sword that the Hill Lord’s shade said he had left me. There was none to be found. Unbelieving, I looked again and again, tearing at the rubble strewn over the floor in vain. When I gave up at last, I saw it. Reflected on a wall was the shadow of a sword. With a cry of triumph, I spun about, albeit wobbly, to where the blade that cast the

shadow must be. There was nothing there.

I shook my head in bewilderment. Riddles, always riddles. Yet there must be a solution at hand, could I only find it. Then I recalled my talk with Old Tess. What had she said? Slowly, the words returned to me.

. . . a dead king's sword, a sword of shadows . . .

Uncertainly, I approached the wall and put out my hand to the hilt of the shadow-blade. It was solid beneath my fingers! Filled with wonder, I grasped it, drawing my hand back from the wall. The sword came with it. Here was magic as strong as any that the Stone-slayer might wield.

I retraced my steps to where Hickathrift awaited me outside the barrow. I bore no torch, only the shadow-blade in my hand. Yet I stumbled not and made my way without the fears that had plagued me earlier when first I strode down this passageway. When I stepped from the entrance, Hickathrift stared with disbelief at the dim outline of the sword I held.

By my ancestors, you have it! I thought you were slain when I heard those muffled sounds and a cry as though a spirit were being rent from its body.

I could not recall that scream. It must have been torn from my throat when the shade of the Hill Lord entered my mind. I told Hickathrift of what befell me within. He nodded his heavy head calmly as I spoke, though I could see excitement gleaming in his eyes.

A Hill Lord's barrow! he said when I was done. *I should have guessed it by the unfamiliar runes. Now I will do my part and search out a stand of Heart's-sure while you take some rest. But rowan wood . . . where we will find that, your guess is as good as mine. I saw none when I passed through these hills just before we met . . .*

The thought struck us both at the same time. Rowan wood . . . why, my staff was cut from the wood of a rowan. We shared a smile, the bear and I.

"So now I have a chance, indeed," I said to myself as Hickathrift padded off in search of the Heart's-sure. "I only pray that we are not already too late." The words were scarcely spoken before sleep washed over me. I welcomed its embrace with weary gratitude, the shadow-sword clasped firmly in one hand.

* * *

By mid-afternoon of the following day, we came to a rounded hillock overlooking the ruined city of Banlore—the Cradle of the Kings. We laid a fire with the broken shards of my staff of rowan, Hickathrift soon breaking it where my strength had failed before. With flint and steel I set the kindling smoldering. Hickathrift had gathered the Heart's-sure while I slept. When the fire was burning well, I dropped them one by one into its heart.

Do you see that spire, or at least what remains of one? Hickathrift pointed to the northernmost part of the city. *That was the Lord's Tower in elder days. That is where he'll be. And that is where we must go.*

The flames lapped around the Heart's-sure as I dropped them in. Smoke bellowed richly from those flames. I drew the shadow-sword from my belt and held its blade in the smoke. In awe, we watched grey runes forming upon the dark blade.

"What do they say?" I asked.

Hickathrift knew little more than I.

They are writ in the tongue of the Hill Lords. They alone would know the kenning.

I held the blade in the smoke until the Heart's-sure was gone and only coals remained of the rowan wood. When I withdrew it, I held it aloft. We gazed at it for a long while. The sun caught the runes and seemed to turn them into fire so that the whole of the blade glowed. The flames were red like the red of the Heart's-sure, their hearts white. Yet still the blade was a shadow. The paradox of dark and light bewildered me.

Caryaln, said Hickathrift; *the shadow-death. Legend has it that there remained but one. That was in the shape of a spear, though. I wonder where the Hill Lords got this blade . . .*

"Who can say?" I slipped the blade back into my belt, leaving the sword of the dead brigand lying by the fire. As we made ready to start for the ruins below, a long howl broke the still air. I looked about in surprise. "What . . . ?"

An answering cry filled the air, followed by another. *Wolves!* came Hickathrift's thought. *Yarac must have set them as guards and they have caught our scent. Swift! We must make for the city!*

I gathered up my harp and journeysack and bolted for the ruins. Hickathrift loped at my side. Howls rent the air again, many of them. They came from all sides, now. Glancing back, I saw dark forms on the hilltop. The beasts were larger than I had imagined wolves to be. They stood silhouetted against the sky with their muzzles lifted in the air. New howls were still echoing when they quit the hill to come speeding toward us.

From the right and left, more dark forms ringed us about. My heart sank. There were at least a score of the beasts in this pack. I saw no hope for us to outrun them, aye, or even outfight them. We could not make the ruins in time; this I knew. I stopped my mad flight to stand

panting. Hickathrift brought himself up short beside me.

What do you? We must make for the ruins!

"We'll not reach them in time. We must stand them off here, rather than have them pull us down from behind as we flee."

Then if they must be faced here, let it be me that faces them and you go on with our quest.

"No. We succeed or fall together."

Fool! His gruff voice roared in my mind. Think of the maid. Think of your Grey Rose.

Aye, I thought of the Grey Rose, but already the wolves were closing in. I could hear their snarls and growls as they prepared to charge. The hackles were risen along Hickathrift's back and a low warning rumble issued from his throat. The wolves came nearer, almost ringing us in. Their mottled grey pelts seemed to shift and spin in the sun, making me dizzy, accentuating my fear.

I held the shadow-sword in my fist. With a low cry, I leapt forward and swung it at the nearest beast. The wolf dodged my blow with a deft sidling movement. Its head darted for me as I stumbled off balance. I heard the snapping of its teeth too close for comfort, when a blow from Hickathrift's claws sent the creature reeling backwards, dead before it fell. They were all upon us in the next moment and we were kept busy against their insane bloodlust.

My harp and journeysack I had dropped at the beginning of this onslaught. As the wolves struck now, I backed from them and put my foot through the soundbox of my harp. It splintered neath my weight. I cried out at the sound, for poorly crafted it might have been, yet it had been my only solace through long lonely years. I returned to the fray with renewed fury.

The sheer number of them was overwhelming us. Already Hickathrift's magnificent coat was torn from dozens of cuts, for he was taking the brunt of the attack, and my sword arm was weary, so weary. The blade seemed to fight on its own, for I certainly had no skill in its use. Still, it was my arm that bore it, my muscles that ached. I soon felt as though I could scarce lift it any longer.

There came a lull in the struggle. We stood breathing heavily as the wolves regrouped for another attack. Hickathrift turned to me and mind-spoke, the force of his words stinging like a blow.

Go now. I will hold them off.

I shook my head, to say that I would not leave him. He bared his teeth.

Go! he roared.

I backed away from him, my heart filled with worry. Overriding that, though, was the thought of the Grey Rose in the clutches of Yarac Stone-slayer. Cursing, I spun and ran for the city. The wolves sent up a howl and made for me, but Hickathrift threw himself upon them. When I was at the edge of the city, I turned to see him borne down beneath their numbers. Then I ran on, in among the ruined buildings, with tears stinging my eyes. I would have vengeance, I vowed. Aye, I would revenge the death of proud Hickathrift. In the short while we were together, he had become very dear to me. First though, so that his sacrifice might not be in vain, I would deal with the one who was the cause for all my grief. Aye, Yarac would pay. The blade in my hand hummed his death dirge in my mind. A hint of gold appeared amidst the blood red of its runes.

On I sped. My thoughts twisted from anger to sorrow

as I made for the crumbling tower we had spied from the hillock outside the city. The day was beginning to fail now and a wan light pervaded the deserted streets. The buildings, all ruined as they were, cast strange shadows across my way, their darkly weathered stones brooding and filled with dim secrets.

My footsteps seemed to slow, the nearer I came to the tower. Curiously, though time passed as I fared onwards, the twilight yet wrapped these still streets, as though the night were to be held at bay indefinitely by the half-lit grey of dusk. The maid's rose grew even colder against my skin; the red runes that ran along the shadow-sword's blade glowed with a golden hue. Soon they were too bright to look upon with comfort. The sword itself tugged me in the direction of the tower. Aye, and still, though the night should be well upon the city by now, the twilight held sway.

My movements became so sluggish that I could scarce walk. It was as if I was forcing myself through water, or through the full drifts of winter. I felt tendrils of thought touch the boundaries of my mind. They were much like those of the Hill Lord's, save that they were tainted with a foulness that brought bile up into my throat and made me bolster all my inner strength to draw back from their questing.

Ever onwards I fared, yet at a slower and slower pace so that it seemed I scarce moved. The mind-touches grew stronger and more foul, washing into my brain with a steadfastness that grew ever harder to break. It became so bad that I could only win free by concentrating all of my might on forcing them from me. As those moments passed, I would find that I had not moved. Then I would set one foot labouriously before the other, and so go on.

How long that hellish journey lasted, I have no way of knowing. Throughout it all the unnatural twilight soaked the avenues of the ruined city. Mostly the city was fallen down. In places some walls still reared; in others I must clamber over the heaps of rubble that blocked my path. Ever the mind-touches battered away at my consciousness. After one, I found myself lying prostrate upon the ground when at last I forced it from me. All that kept me going was the thought of the Grey Rose trapped in the clutches of the Waster. That and Hickathrift's sacrifice, for my courage was spent and nigh fled from me.

As I reached the end of my strength, I came to the base of the tumbled structure that was all that remained of a once-proud tower in the elder days, when this had been the Cradle of the Kings. I stepped through its portal and a blast of power struck me so that I staggered back to fall to my knees, a scream of pain wresting itself from my throat. Tears blinded my eyes as I struggled to my feet and fought the evil from me. At a snail's pace, I lurched through the doorway. There I gagged as a foul stench hit my nostrils.

Within, all was dark. I crept across the debris-strewn floor, fighting the mind-power each step of the way. The shadow-sword pulled me forwards till I came to another door. I entered what I took to be another chamber, when an over-bright glare lit the inside of the tower, dispelling the utter shadow I was forcing my way through. It was a sickly ochre, as foul to my eyes as the stench was to my nose. I lifted my gaze to where a ravaged dais still stood at the far end of a long room. There they stood: the Grey Rose and her tormentor, Yarak Stone-slayer.

I moved forwards, the shadow-sword slippery in my sweating palm. The power that had pounded my mind was

gone. The silence seemed ominous, but nothing hindered my approach. They stood like images carved of stone, like the pieces of a knar board—grey queen and yarg warlord. When I stood before the dais, elation lifted my heart. Was he defeated already? Had the shadow-sword stripped him of his power? Ah, my thoughts leapt joyfully, only to be dashed in the next moment. From beside the still form of the Waster, the Grey Rose spoke. As I turned my gaze to her, I stepped back at the hate reflected in her eyes.

"Scum," she cried, her voice laced with venom. "Did you not think that if I wanted your presence, I would have bided with you? How dare you follow me here? How dare you profane this place with your farmer's body? Harper!" She laughed at the word. The sound of that laughter sent a chill of horror down my spine. "You would be a Harper, would you? Why not try your tunes on the wolves without the city? They have a need for dinner music I should think."

A rage awoke in my heart that she should speak thus of Hickathrift. I held the sword before me and stepped nearer. Standing before her, I shivered neath her withering gaze. Hell-fires burned in those once dusky eyes, eyes that had looked upon me with friendship. Against my breast, the rose was like ice. I ignored the Waster then, for I saw that all I had striven for was of no avail. There was no need of rescue. She was his willing bride.

"I loved you," I said, the words spilling from my heart. "As a man loves a maid, as a companion loves his speech-friend, I loved you. There was a fane in my heart where once you dwelled, but now its foundations crumble. All that was holy therein, is like a dead thing. I had thought . . ."

"Go!" she cried, breaking into my words. She pointed to the door. "Go, or my mate will break his patience and slay you at my command. You live now only for what was between us once. That is no more; it means nothing. Go!"

I looked on her with pity. Without a glance at her companion, I turned to go, the shadow-sword trembling in my hands. Suddenly, I whirled about to plunge it into her breast. A scream tore that chamber, a scream so fearful and filled with pain that the walls themselves began to crumble and fall in upon us. The ochre light flared to a blinding brilliance. Stark against it was the darkness of the shadow-sword buried to its hilt in the chest of Yarak Stone-slayer.

"No!" he howled. "Agh! The pain! How could you have known . . ."

There was another flare of light and the room plunged into darkness. Swiftly I sped to where the form of Yarak had first appeared to stand when I entered the chamber. Neath my questing hands I found the still body of the maid I knew as the Grey Rose.

I lifted her in my arms and bore her from the tower as it fell to pieces about us. Once outside, I saw that the night had finally come. In the star-flecked sky overhead, the proud vessel of the moon rode the heavens. When we were some distance from the tower, I laid the maid down gently upon the stones. With shaking hands, I reached into my tunic and drew forth her rose. Though she lay as one dead, I remembered that the shade of the Hill Lord had spoken of the rose as though it held some power. I only prayed that it held what was needed to revive her.

I placed the blossom upon her breast and took up her body again to bear it outside the walls of the city. From behind, there came a deafening roar as the Waster's

tower fell in upon itself, burying the monster in his death, aye, and so becoming a tomb that he did not even deserve.

* * *

The morning sun was rising over the hills. I stood nigh the ruined walls of the city once named the Cradle of the Kings, lost in thought as I had been for most of the night. A low familiar voice broke into my musing.

"Cerin?"

I turned to see the Grey Rose attempting to sit up and hastened to her side. She pushed aside my protesting hand and stood, albeit shakily. Taking a deep breath, she stretched her limbs with obvious joy.

"Ah, sweet life!" she said, smiling to me. "How did you free me, Cerin? How did you best Yarak the Waster?"

I sat down on the grass and she lowered herself by my side. I told her of all that had befallen me since that night she was taken. There was a deep silence when my telling was done. At last she spoke.

"And Yarak? How knew you that the form you slew was not mine?"

"Because," said I with a laugh, "when Yarak was berating me, I glanced at the form I thought was his and saw that it had your eyes."

She laughed with me, saying, "So much for his trickery!"

"One thing puzzles me," I said when I had caught my breath. "Why did he not slay me out of hand? Why the guile? How could I best him so easily when you have fled before him for uncounted years; when all the might of the Hill Lords could not lay him low?"

"The High Born of the Daketh fear but one thing," she said, her voice serious, "and that is the caryaln, the shadow-death. What cause had Yarac to fear anything else? Surely not you. He knew you for what you were: an innocent lad, brought up in a backward land. What could you know of the caryaln? That was his folly, that he could not measure the courage in your heart, Cerin. And when you appeared in Banlore with a caryaln in your fist—he panicked. He sought to deceive you into leaving so he could deal with you at a later date. So fall even the strongest . . ."

Silence slipped over us once more. My struggling for her sake had reawakened desires within me; the closeness of her body and the sweet heady scent that seemed ever to follow her set my pulse a-thumping.

"Who are you in truth?" I asked, suddenly breaking the silence.

She took my hand. "Look into my eyes, Cerin, if you would know me for what I am."

Hesitantly, I lifted my gaze to hers and was lost to the swirling depths locked within the dusky lights of her eyes. All the shades of grey were therein, light and dark mingled in perfect harmony. As I lowered my gaze, she whispered:

"My father was the Hill Lord whose shade you met—Wendweir an Kasaar he was named. But my mother was of the Tuathan, the eldest race. I am a spirit of the Twilight, the Dark that is Light. My name is *Meana*."

She rose with a graceful motion and lifted me to her side. There was a strength in her arms that belied her earlier helplessness. "I have another journey to make, Cerin, and I fear I must leave you once more. When Yarac held me in his power he told me of the ills that he

and his kind have brought to pass over all our lords. I must bring this knowledge to my people so that we may take rede as to how they may be stopped."

"Let me aid you. I have proved my worth."

"Aye," she said, "and thrice over. But I walk paths that you cannot, and swiftness is what is needed now. Fear not, dear friend. We will meet once more, in unlooked for places and perhaps in fairer times. You have proved true to me, Cerin, and you will always wear my thanks for what you have done. This now I will foretell: your life will be long, longer than any of your kind has ever known. In those days to come, you will be the most renowned of the Harpers. Today I name you Songweaver. For now, though, I must bid you farewell. We will meet again . . ."

As she spoke her form began to shimmer, to fade from my sight. Sadness welled in my heart at this parting. I longed for something I might say, something I might do to hold her to me. My mind remained empty and numb.

"Cerin?" came her voice from her fading form.

I looked up expectantly.

"There is one waiting for you on the hillside, aye, and a parting token from me as well. Ne'er let the fane within you die, my friend, for it would grieve me sore. Fare ever well . . ."

"Farewell," I said and she was gone.

Slowly I walked up the hillside, and then I saw him. I'd only half listened to her parting words, so filled with grief had I been.

"Hickathrift!"

I fairly flew over the remaining distance between us. He was battered and cut from so many wounds that I feared for his life. His fur was matted with dried blood.

Scarce could he lift his head at my approach. He managed a toothy grin at my worried look, and mind-spoke.

Gaze around you, Cerin. The others fared not half so well as I.

He spoke the truth. The hillside was littered with the corpses of the wolves that had attacked us. And there was something else. By Hickathrift's side was a leather bag. Eagerly I made for it and loosened the bindings, already guessing its contents from its shape.

As the leather fell away, I saw the Grey Rose's parting gift: a harp. A harp so glorious that my heart nigh stood still for its beauty. It was carved from the wood of the rowan, with decorations all along its sides that appeared to live and breathe, so skilled and true were their crafting. Its strings were of a glistening metal that I could put no name to and at its top, where the curving wood met the soundbox, was set a grey rose. Though it was carven from wood, it had the appearance of being fresh-plucked, with dew yet damp upon its petals.

I touched a string and a clear note rang forth to echo and re-echo over the hillside. With a smile, I replaced it within the leather bag—though I dearly longed to play it and do naught else. There were Hickathrift's wounds to be seen to.

Once his hurts were healed, I would fare north to Wistlore with him. There was a world to see, a long road to wend through it, and somewhere I looked to meet once more the maid of the Grey Rose. I had a song to finish before that day, a song that once I'd begun so long ago in the Golden Wood. I had a name for it as well, now. I would name it "The Fane of the Grey Rose."

I'm sure that I don't like Scott Card, who writes so well. Hateful beast, Card. Our meeting—which was by mail—was horrible and horrendous and Arawn the Dark Huntsman rode and his red-eared hounds watched us bay at each other with fangs adrip.

The dog cut me up, and in print too, before 100,000-plus people. Not only that, once I had written him in reply to his attack, he had the meanness to apologize by return mail, in manner most courageous and gentlemanly. (How to hate a person who is decent, human, gentle? Try harder!)

Not only that, the Hyrkanian swine published a story—among others—in Omni that I particularly love. Not only that, the Hyrkanian skunk is taller than I. Not only that, he's a gentleman. Not only that, the Zamoran weasel went and won the award for Best New Writer in 1978—with me right there in the audience, trying to hide my applauding. Not only that, the Zamboulán cur types just beautifully, and misspells no words, and makes no grammatical errors either. Even "Ettuie" is correct, in the following story. Which brings us to the matter at hand: one story, with eight toes, by a writer who gives damns.

No way around it: in addition to all his other offenses, the rotten rock-serpent writes just superbly well. Add to that the fact that my best-braced bigotry collapses in the face of my love of a big person (believe me, I do not mean physically) and a good story, and you have the following, by my obviously hated enemy, Scott Card. Maybe in volume 6 or so I can report to you on an hour or two I spent with Card in a bar. I hope.

(So send me another next time, if there is a next time, Scott, you scurvy scabaceous scut!)

SANDMAGIC

by Orson Scott Card

The great domes of the city of Gyree dazzled blue and red when the sun shone through a break in the clouds, and for a moment Cer Cemreet thought he saw some of the glory the uncles talked about in the latenight tales of the old days of Greet. But the capital did not look dazzling up close, Cer remembered bitterly. Now dogs ran in the streets and rats lived in the wreckage of the palace, and the King of Greet lived in New Gyree in the hills far to the north, where the armies of the enemy could not go. Yet.

The sun went back behind a cloud and the city looked dark again. A Nefyr patrol was riding briskly on the Hetterwee Road far to the north. Cer turned his gaze to

the lush grass on the hill where he sat. The clouds meant rain, but probably not here, he thought. He always thought of something else when he saw a Nefyr patrol. Yes, it was too early in Hrickan for rains to fall here. This rain would fall in the north, perhaps in the land of the King of the High Mountains, or on the vast plain of Westwold where they said horses ran free but were tame for any man to ride at need. But no rain would fall in Greet until Doonse, three weeks from now. By then the wheat would all be stored and the hay would be piled in vast ricks as tall as the hill Cer sat on.

In the old days, they said, all during Doonse the great wagons from Westwold would come and carry off the hay to last them through the snow season. But not now, Cer remembered. This year and last year and the year before the wagons had come from the south and east, two-wheeled wagons with drivers who spoke, not High Westil, but the barbarian Fyrd language. Fyrd or firt, thought Cer, and laughed, for firt was a word he could not say in front of his parents. They spoke firt.

Cer looked out over the plain again. The Nefyr patrol had turned from the highway and were on the road to the hills.

The road to the hills. Cer leaped to his feet and raced down the track leading home. A patrol heading for the hills could only mean trouble.

He stopped to rest only once, when the pain in his side was too bad to bear. But the patrol had horses, and he arrived home only to see the horses of the Nefyrre gathered at his father's gate.

Where are the uncles? Cer thought. The uncles must come.

But the uncles were not there, and Cer heard a terrible scream from inside the garden walls. He had never heard

his mother scream before, but somehow he knew it was his mother, and he ran to the gate. A Nefyr soldier seized him and called out, "Here's the boy!" in a thick accent of High Westil, so that Cer's parents could understand. Cer's mother screamed again, and now Cer saw why.

His father had been stripped naked, his arms and legs held by two tall Nefyrre. The Nefyr captain held his viciously curved short-sword, point up, pressing against Cer's father's hard-muscled stomach. As Cer and his mother watched, the sword drew blood, and the captain pushed it in to the hilt, then pulled it up to the ribs. Blood gushed. The captain had been careful not to touch the heart, and now they thrust a spear into the huge wound, and lifted it high, Cer's father dangling from the end. They lashed the spear to the gatepost, and the blood and bowels stained the gates and the walls.

For five minutes more Cer's father lived, his chest heaving in the agony of breath. He may have died of pain, but Cer did not think so, for his father was not the kind to give in to pain. He may have died of suffocation, for one lung was gone and every breath was excruciating, but Cer did not think so, for his father kept breathing to the end. It was loss of blood, Cer decided, weeks later. It was when his body was dry, when the veins collapsed, that Cer's father died.

He never uttered a sound. Cer's father would never let the Nefyrre hear him so much as sigh in pain.

Cer's mother screamed and screamed until blood came from her mouth and she fainted.

Cer stood in silence until his father died. Then when the captain, a smirk on his face, walked near Cer and looked in his face, Cer kicked him in the groin.

They cut off Cer's great toes, but like his father, Cer made no sound.

Then the Nefyrre left and the uncles came.

Uncle Forwin vomited. Uncle Erwin wept. Uncle Crune put his arm around Cer's shoulder as the servants bound his maimed feet and said, "Your father was a great, a brave man. He killed many Nefyrre, and burned many wagons. But the Nefyrre are strong."

Uncle Crune squeezed Cer's shoulder. "Your father was stronger. But he was one, and they were many."

Cer looked away.

"Will you not look at your uncle?" Uncle Crune asked.

"My father," Cer said, "did not think that he was alone."

Uncle Crune got up and walked away. Cer never saw the uncles again.

He and his mother had to leave the house and the fields, for a Nefyr farmer had been given the land to farm for the King of Nefyryd. With no money, they had to move south, across the River Greebeck into the dry lands near the desert, where no rivers flowed and so only the hardiest plants lived. They lived the winter on the charity of the desperately poor. In the summer, when the heat came, so did the Poor Plague which swept the drylands. The cure was fresh fruits, but fresh fruits came from Yffyrd and Suffyrd and only the rich could buy them, and the poor died by the thousands. Cer's mother was one of them.

They took her out on the sand to burn her body and free her spirit. As they painted her with tar (tar, at least, cost nothing, if a man had a bucket), five horsemen came to the brow of a dune to watch. At first Cer thought they were Nefyrre, but no. The poor people looked up and saluted the strangers, which Greetmen never do the enemy. These, then, were desert men, the Abadapnur nomads, who raided the rich farms of Greet during dry years, but who never harmed the poor.

We hated them, Cer thought, when we were rich. But now we are poor, and they are our friends.

His mother burned as the sun set.

Cer watched until the flames went out. The moon was high for the second time that night. Cer said a prayer to the moonlady over his mother's bones and ashes and then he turned and left.

He stopped at their hut and gathered the little food they had, and put on his father's tin ring, which the Nefyrre had thought was valueless, but which Cer knew was the sign of the Cemreet family's authority since forever ago.

Then Cer walked north.

He lived by killing rats in barns and cooking them. He lived by begging at poor farmer's doors, for the rich farmers had servants to turn away beggars. That, at least, Cer remembered, his father had never done. Beggars always had a meal at his father's house.

Cer also lived by stealing when he could hunt or beg no food. He stole handfuls of raw wheat. He stole carrots from gardens. He stole water from wells, for which he could have lost his life in this rainless season. He stole, one time, a fruit from a rich man's food wagon.

It burned his mouth, it was so cold and the acid so strong. It dribbled down his chin. As a poor man and a thief, Cer thought, I now eat a thing so dear that even my father, who was called wealthy, could never buy it.

And at last he saw the mountains in the north. He walked on, and in a week the mountains were great cliffs and steep slopes of shale. The Mitherkame, where the king of the High Mountains reigned, and Cer began to climb.

He climbed all one day and slept in a cleft of a rock. He moved slowly, for climbing in sandals was clumsy, and without his great toes Cer could not climb barefoot. The

next morning he climbed more. Though he nearly fell one time when falling would have meant crashing a mile down onto the distant plain, at last he reached the knifelike top of the Mitherkame, and heaven.

For of a sudden the stone gave way to soil. Not the pale sandy soil of the drylands, nor the red soil of Greet, but the dark black soil of the old songs from the north, the soil that could not be left alone for a day or it would sprout plants that in a week would be a forest.

And there *was* a forest, and the ground was thick with grass. Cer had seen only a few trees in his life, and they had been olive trees, short and gnarled, and fig sycamores, that were three times the height of a man. These were twenty times the height of a man and ten steps around, and the young trees shot up straight and tall so that not a sapling was as small as Cer, who for twelve years old was not considered small.

To Cer, who had known only wheat and hay and olive orchards, the forest was more magnificent than the mountain or the city or the river or the moon.

He slept under a huge tree. He was very cold that night. And in the morning he realized that in a forest he would find no farms, and where there were no farms there was no food for him. He got up and walked deeper into the forest. There were people in the High Mountains, else there would be no king, and Cer would find them. If he didn't, he would die. But at least he would not die in the realms of the Nefyrre.

He passed many bushes with edible berries, but he did not know they could be eaten so he did not eat. He passed many streams with slow stupid fish that he could have caught, but in Greet fish was never eaten, because it always carried disease, and so Cer caught no fish.

And on the third day, when he began to feel so weak from hunger that he could walk no longer, he met the treemage.

He met him because it was the coldest night yet, and at last Cer tore branches from a tree to make a fire. But the wood did not light, and when Cer looked up he saw that the trees had moved. They were coming closer, surrounding him tightly. He watched them, and they did not move as he watched, but when he turned around the ones he had not been watching were closer yet. He tried to run, but the low branches made a tight fence he could not get through. He couldn't climb, either, because the branches all stabbed downward. Bleeding from the twigs he had scraped, Cer went back to his camping place and watched as the trees at last made a solid wall around him.

And he waited. What else could he do in his wooden prison?

In the morning he heard a man singing, and he called for help.

"Oh ho," he heard a voice say in a strange accent. "Oh ho, a tree cutter and a firemaker, a branch killer and a forest hater."

"I'm none of those," Cer said. "It was cold, and I tried to build a fire only to keep warm."

"A fire, a fire," the voice said. "In this small part of the world there are no fires of wood. But that's a young voice I hear, and I doubt there's a beard beneath the words."

"I have no beard," Cer answered. "I have no weapon, except a knife too small to harm you."

"A knife? A knife that tears sap from living limbs, Redwood says. A knife that cuts twigs like soft manfingers, says Elm. A knife that stabs bark till it bleeds, says Sweet Aspen. Break your knife," said the

voice outside the trees, "and I will open your prison."

"But it's my only knife," Cer protested, "and I need it."

"You need it here like you need fog on a dark night. Break it or you'll die before these trees move again."

Cer broke his knife.

Behind him he heard a sound, and he turned to see a fat old man standing in a clear space between the trees. A moment before there had been no clear space.

"A child," said the man.

"A fat old man," said Cer, angry at being considered as young as his years.

"An illbred child at that," said the man. "But perhaps he knows no better, for from the accent of his speech I would say he comes from Greetland, and from his clothing I would say he was poor, and it's well known in Mitherwee that there are no manners in Greet."

Cer snatched up the blade of his knife and ran at the man. Somehow there were many sharp-pointed branches in the way, and his hand ran into a hard limb, knocking the blade to the ground.

"Oh, my child," said the man kindly. "There is death in your heart."

The branches were gone, and the man reached out his hands and touched Cer's face. Cer jerked away.

"And the touch of a man brings pain to you." The man sighed. "How inside out your world must be."

Cer looked at the man coldly. He could endure taunting. But was that kindness in the old man's eyes?

"You look hungry," said the old man.

Cer said nothing.

"If you care to follow me, you may. I have food for you, if you like."

Cer followed him.

They went through the forest, and Cer noticed that the old man stopped to touch many of the trees. And a few he pointedly snubbed, turning his back or taking a wider route around them. Once he stopped and spoke to a tree that had lost a large limb—recently, too, Cer thought, because the tar on the stump was still soft. “Soon there’ll be no pain at all,” the old man said to the tree. Then the old man sighed again. “Ah, yes, I know. And many a walnut in the falling season.”

Then they reached a house. If it could be called a house, Cer thought. Stones were the walls, which was common enough in Greet, but the roof was living wood—thick branches from nine tall trees, interwoven and heavily leaved, so that Cer was sure no drop of rain could ever come inside.

“You admire my roof?” the old man asked. “So tight that even in the winter, when the leaves are gone, the snow cannot come in. But *we* can,” he said, and led the way through a low door into a single room.

The old man kept up a constant chatter as he fixed breakfast: berries and cream, stewed acorns, and thick slices of cornbread. The old man named all the foods for Cer, because except for the cream it was all strange to him. But it was good, and it filled him.

“Acorn from the Oaks,” said the old man. “Walnuts from the trees of that name. And berries from the bushes, the neartrees. Corn, of course, comes from an untree, a weak plant with no wood, which dies every year.”

“The trees don’t die every year, then, even though it snows?” Cer asked, for he had heard of snow.

“Their leaves turn bright colors, and then they fall, and perhaps that’s a kind of death,” said the old man. “But in Eanan the snow melts and by Blowan there are

leaves again on all the trees.”

Cer did not believe him, but he didn't disbelieve him either. Trees were strange things.

“I never knew that trees in the High Mountains could move.”

“Oh ho,” laughed the old man. “And neither can they, except here, and other woods that a treemage tends.”

“A treemage? Is there magic then?”

“Magic. Oh ho,” the man laughed again. “Ah yes, magic, many magics, and mine is the magic of trees.”

Cer squinted. The man did not look like a man of power, and yet the trees had penned an intruder in. “You rule the trees here?”

“Rule?” the old man asked, startled. “What a thought. Indeed no. I serve them. I protect them. I give them the power in me, and they give me the power in them, and it makes us all a good deal more powerful. But rule? That just doesn't enter into magic. What a thought.”

Then the old man chattered about the doings of the silly squirrels this year, and when Cer was through eating the old man gave him a bucket and they spent the morning gathering berries. “Leave a berry on the bush for every one you pick,” the old man said. “They're for the birds in the fall and for the soil in the Kamesun, when new bushes grow.”

And so Cer, quite accidentally, began his life with the treemage, and it was as happy a time as Cer ever had in his life, except when he was a child and his mother sang to him and except for the time his father took him hunting deer in the hills of Wetfell.

And after the autumn when Cer marveled at the colors of the leaves, and after the winter when Cer tramped through the snow with the treemage to tend to ice-

splintered branches, and after the spring when Cer thinned the new plants so the forest did not become overgrown, the treemage began to think that the dark places in Cer's heart were filled with light, or at least put away where they could not be found.

He was wrong.

For as he gathered leaves for the winter's fires Cer dreamed he was gathering the bones of his enemies. And as he tramped the snow he dreamed he was marching into battle to wreak death on the Nefyrre. And as he thinned the treestarts Cer dreamed of slaying each of the uncles as his father had been slain, because none of them had stood by him in his danger.

Cer dreamed of vengeance, and his heart grew darker even as the wood was filled with the bright light of the summer sun.

One day he said to the treemage, "I want to learn magic."

The treemage smiled with hope. "You're learning it," he said, "and I'll gladly teach you more."

"I want to learn things of power."

"Ah," said the treemage, disappointed. "Ah, then, you can have no magic."

"You have power," said Cer. "I want it also."

"Oh, indeed," said the treemage. "I have the power of two legs and two arms, the power to heat tar over a peat fire to stop the sap flow from broken limbs, the power to cut off diseased branches to save the tree, the power to teach the trees how and when to protect themselves. All the rest is the power of the trees, and none of it is mine."

"But they do your bidding," said Cer.

"Because I do theirs!" the treemage said, suddenly angry. "Do you think that there is slavery in this wood? Do you think I am a king? Only men allow men to rule them. Here in

this wood there is only love, and on that love and by that love the trees and I have the magic of the wood."

Cer looked down, disappointed. The treemage misunderstood, and thought that Cer was contrite.

"Ah, my boy," said the treemage. "You haven't learned it, I see. The root of magic is love, the trunk is service. The treemages love the trees and serve them and then they share treemagic with the trees. Lightmages love the sun and make fires at night, and the fire serves them as they serve the fire. Horsemages love and serve horses, and they ride freely whither they will because of the magic in the herd. There is field magic and plain magic, and the magic of rocks and metals, songs and dances, the magic of winds and weathers. All built on love, all growing through service."

"I must have magic," said Cer.

"Must you?" asked the treemage. "Must you have magic? There are kinds of magic, then, that you might have. But I can't teach them to you."

"What are they?"

"No," said the treemage, and he wouldn't speak again.

Cer thought and thought. What magic could be demanded against anyone's will?

And at last, when he had badgered and nagged the treemage for weeks, the treemage angrily gave in. "Will you know then?" the treemage snapped. "I will tell you. There is seamagic, where the wicked sailors serve the monsters of the deep by feeding them living flesh. Would you do that?" But Cer only waited for more.

"So that appeals to you," said the treemage. "Then you will be delighted at desert magic."

And now Cer saw a magic he might use. "How is that performed?"

"I know not," said the treemage icily. "It is the blackest of the magics to men of *my* kind, though your dark heart might leap to it. There's only one magic darker."

"And what is that?" asked Cer.

"What a fool I was to take you in," said the treemage. "The wounds in your heart, you don't want them to heal; you love to pick at them and let them fester."

"What is the darkest magic?" demanded Cer.

"The darkest magic," said the treemage, "is one, thank the moon, that you can never practice. For to do it you have to love men and love the love of men more than your own life. And love is as far from you as the sea is from the mountains, as the earth is from the sky."

"The sky touches the earth," said Cer.

"Touches, but never do they meet," said the treemage.

Then the treemage handed Cer a basket, which he had just filled with bread and berries and a flagon of streamwater. "Now go."

"Go?" asked Cer.

"I hoped to cure you, but you won't have a cure. You clutch at your suffering too much to be healed."

Cer reached out his foot toward the treemage, the crusty scars still a deep red where his great toe had been.

"As well you might try to restore my foot."

"Restore?" asked the treemage. "I restore nothing. But I staunch, and heal, and I help the trees forget their lost limbs. For if they insist on rushing sap to the limb as if it were still there, they lose all their sap; they dry, they wither, they die."

Cer took the basket.

"Thank you for your kindness," said Cer. "I'm sorry that you don't understand. But just as the tree can never forgive the ax or the flame, there are those that must die

before I can truly live again."

"Get out of my wood," said the treemage. "Such darkness has no place here."

And Cer left, and in three days came to the edge of the Mitherkame, and in two days reached the bottom of the cliffs, and in a few weeks reached the desert. For he would learn desertmagic. He would serve the sand, and the sand would serve him.

On the way the soldiers of Nefyryd stopped him and searched him. When they saw that he had no great toes, they beat him and shaved off his young and scraggly beard and sent him on his way with a kick.

Cer even stopped where his father's farm had been. Now all the farms were farmed by Nefyrre, men of the south who had never owned land before. They drove him away, afraid that he might steal. So he snuck back in the night and from his father's storehouse stole meat and from his father's barn stole a chicken.

He crossed the Greebeck to the drylands and gave the meat and the chicken to the poor people there. He lived with them for a few days. And then he went out into the desert.

He wandered in the desert for a week before he ran out of food and water. He tried everything to find the desert magic. He spoke to the hot sand and the burning rocks as the treemage had spoken to the trees. But the sand was never injured and did not need a healing touch, and the rocks could not be harmed and so they needed no protection. There was no answer when Cer talked, except the wind which cast sand in his eyes. And at last Cer lay dying on the sand, his skin caked and chafed and burnt, his clothing long since tattered away into nothing, his flagon burning hot and filled with sand, his eyes blind from the whiteness of the desert.

He could neither love nor serve the desert, for the desert needed nothing from him and there was neither beauty nor kindness to love.

But he refused to die without having vengeance. Refused to die so long that he was still alive when the Abadapnu tribesmen found him. They gave him water and nursed him back to health. It took weeks, and they had to carry him on a sledge from waterhole to waterhole.

And as they traveled with their herds and their horses, the Abadapnur carried Cer farther and farther away from the Nefyrre and the land of Greet.

Cer regained his senses slowly, and learned the Abadapnu language even more slowly. But at last, as the clouds began to gather for the winter rains, Cer was one of the tribe, considered a man because he had a beard, considered wise because of the dark look on his face that remained even on those rare times when he laughed.

He never spoke of his past, though the Abadapnur knew well enough what the tin ring on his finger meant and why he had only eight toes. And they, with the perfect courtesy of the incurious, asked him nothing.

He learned their ways. He learned that starving on the desert was foolish, that dying of thirst was unnecessary. He learned how to trick the desert into yielding up life. "For," said the tribemaster, "the desert is never willing that anything should live."

Cer remembered that. The desert wanted nothing to live. And he wondered if that was a key to desert magic. Or was it merely a locked door that he could never open? How can you serve and be served by the sand that wants only your death? How could he get vengeance if he was dead? "Though I would gladly die if my dying could kill my father's killers," he said to his horse one day. The

horse hung her head, and would only walk for the rest of the day, though Cer kicked her to try to make her run.

Finally one day, impatient that he was doing nothing to achieve his revenge, Cer went to the tribemaster and asked him how one learned the magic of the sand.

"Sandmagic? You're mad," said the tribemaster. For days the tribemaster refused to look at him, let alone answer his questions, and Cer realized that here on the desert the sandmagic was hated as badly as the treemage hated it. Why? Wouldn't such power make the Abadapnur great?

Or did the tribemaster refuse to speak because the Abadapnur did not know the sandmagic?

But they knew it.

And one day the tribemaster came to Cer and told him to mount and follow.

They rode in the early morning before the sun was high, then slept in a cave in a rocky hill during the heat of the day. In the dusk they rode again, and at night they came to the city.

"Ettuie," whispered the tribemaster, and then they rode their horses to the edge of the ruins.

The sand had buried the buildings up to half their height, inside and out, and even now the breezes of evening stirred the sand and built little dunes against the walls. The buildings were made of stone, rising not to domes like the great cities of the Greetmen but to spires, tall towers that seemed to pierce the sky.

"Ikikietar," whispered the tribemaster, "Ikikiaiai re dapii. O ikikiai etetur o abadapnur, ikikiai re dapii."

"What are the 'knives'?" asked Cer. "And how could the sand kill them?"

"The knives are these towers, but they are also the stars of power."

"What power?" asked Cer eagerly.

"No power for you. Only power for the Etetur, for they were wise. They had the manmagic."

Manmagic. Was that the darkest magic spoken of by the treemage?

"Is there a magic more powerful than manmagic?" Cer asked.

"In the mountains, no," said the tribemaster. "On the well-watered plain, in the forest, on the sea, no."

"But in the desert?"

"A huu par eiti ununura," muttered the tribemaster, making the sign against death. "Only the desert power. Only the magic of the sand."

"I want to know," said Cer.

"Once," the tribemaster said, "once there was a mighty empire here. Once a great river flowed here, and rain fell, and the soil was rich and red like the soil of Greet, and a million people lived under the rule of the King of Ettue Dappa. But not all, for far to the west there lived a few who hated Ettue and the manmagic of the kings, and they forged the tool that undid this city.

"They made the wind blow from the desert. They made the rains run off the earth. By their power the river sank into the desert sand, and the fields bore no fruit, and at last the King of Ettue surrendered, and half his kingdom was given to the sandmages. To the dapinur. That western kingdom became Dapnu Dap."

"A kingdom?" said Cer, surprised. "But now the great desert bears that name."

"And once the great desert was no desert, but a land of grasses and grains like your homeland to the north. The sandmages weren't content with half a kingdom, and they used their sandmagic to make a desert of Ettue, and they

covered the lands of rebels with sand, until at last the victory of the desert was complete, and Ettue fell to the armies of Greet and Nefyryd—they were allies then—and we of Dapnu Dap became nomads, living off that tiny bit of life that even the harshest desert cannot help but yield.”

“And what of the sandmages?” asked Cer.

“We killed them.”

“All?”

“All,” said the tribemaster. “And if any man will practice sandmagic, today, we will kill him. For what happened to us we will let happen to no other people.”

Cer saw the knife in the tribemaster’s hand.

“I will have your vow,” said the tribemaster. “Swear before these stars and this sand and the ghosts of all who lived in this city that you will seek no sandmagic.”

“I swear,” said Cer, and the tribemaster put his knife away.

The next day Cer took his horse and a bow and arrows and all the food he could steal and in the heat of the day when everyone slept he went out into the desert. They followed him, but he slew two with arrows and the survivors lost his trail.

Word spread through the tribes of the Abadapnur that a would-be sandmage was loose in the desert, and all were ready to kill him if he came. But he did not come.

For he knew now how to serve the desert, and how to make the desert serve him. For the desert loved death, and hated grasses and trees and water and the things of life.

So in service of the sand Cer went to the edge of the land of the Nefyrre, east of the desert. There he fouled wells with the bodies of diseased animals. He burned fields when the wind was blowing off the desert, a dry wind that pushed the flames into the cities. He cut down

trees. He killed sheep and cattle. And when the Nefyrre patrols chased him he fled onto the desert where they could not follow.

His destruction was annoying, and impoverished many a farmer, but alone it would have done little to hurt the Nefyrre. Except that Cer felt his power over the desert growing. For he was feeding the desert the only thing it hungered for: death and dryness.

He began to speak to the sand again, not kindly, but of land to the east that the sand could cover. And the wind followed his words, whipping the sand, moving the dunes. Where he stood the wind did not touch him, but all around him the dunes moved like waves of the sea.

Moving eastward.

Moving onto the lands of the Nefyrre.

And now the hungry desert could do in a night a hundred times more than Cer could do alone with a torch or a knife. It ate olive groves in an hour. The sand borne on the wind filled houses in a night, buried cities in a week, and in only three months had driven the Nefyrre across the Greebeck and the Nefyr River, where they thought the terrible sandstorms could not follow.

But the storms followed. Cer taught the desert almost to fill the river, so that the water spread out a foot deep and miles wide, flooding some lands that had been dry, but also leaving more water surface for the sun to drink from; and before the river reached the sea it was dry, and the desert swept across into the heart of Nefyryd.

The Nefyrre had always fought with the force of arms, and cruelty was their companion in war. But against the desert they were helpless. They could not fight the sand. If Cer could have known it, he would have gloried in the fact that, untaught, he was the most powerful sandmage

who had ever lived. For hate was a greater teacher than any of the books of dark lore, and Cer lived on hate.

And on hate alone, for now he ate and drank nothing, sustaining his body through the power of the wind and the heat of the sun. He was utterly dry, and the blood no longer coursed through his veins. He lived on the energy of the storms he unleashed. And the desert eagerly fed him, because he was feeding the desert.

He followed his storms, and walked through the deserted towns of the Nefyrre. He saw the refugees rushing north and east to the high ground. He saw the corpses of those caught in the storm. And he sang at night the old songs of Greet, the war songs. He wrote his father's name with chalk on the wall of every city he destroyed. He wrote his mother's name in the sand, and where he had written her name the wind did not blow and the sand did not shift, but preserved the writing as if it had been incised on rock.

Then one day, in a lull between his storms, Cer saw a man coming toward him from the east. Abadapnu, he wondered, or Nefyrre? Either way he drew his knife, and fit the nock of an arrow on his bowstring.

But the man came with his hands extended, and he called out, "Cer Cemreet."

It had never occurred to Cer that anyone knew his name.

"Sandmage Cer Cemreet," said the man when he was close. "We have found who you are."

Cer said nothing, but only watched the man's eyes.

"I have come to tell you that your vengeance is full. Nefyryd is at its knees. We have signed a treaty with Greet and we no longer raid into Hetterwee. Driplin has seized our westernmost lands."

Cer smiled. "I care nothing for your empire."

"Then for our people. The deaths of your father and

mother have been avenged a hundred thousand times, for over two hundred thousand people have died at your hands."

Cer chuckled. "I care nothing for your people."

"Then for the soldiers who did the deed. Though they acted under orders, they have been arrested and killed, as have the men who gave them those orders, even our first general, all at the command of the King so that your vengeance will be complete. I have brought you their ears as proof of it," said the man, and he took a pouch from his waist.

"I care nothing for soldiers, nor for proof of vengeance," said Cer.

"Then what do you care for?" asked the man quietly.

"Death," said Cer.

"Then I bring you that, too," said the man, and a knife was in his hand, and he plunged the knife into Cer's breast where his heart should have been. But when the man pulled the knife out no blood followed, and Cer only smiled.

"Indeed you brought it to me," said Cer, and he stabbed the man where his father had been stabbed, and drew the knife up as it had been drawn through his father's body, except that he touched the man's heart, and he died.

As Cer watched the blood soaking into the sand, he heard in his ears his mother's screams, which he had silenced for these years. He heard her screams and now, remembering his father and his mother and himself as a child he began to cry, and he held the body of the man he had killed and rocked back and forth on the sand as the blood clotted on his clothing and his skin. His tears mixed with the blood and poured into the sand and Cer realized that this was the first time since his father's death that he had shed any tears at all.

I am not dry, thought Cer. There is water under me still for the desert to drink.

He looked at his dry hands, covered with the man's blood, and tried to scrub off the clotted blood with sand. But the blood stayed, and the sand could not clean him.

He wept again. And then he stood and faced the desert to the west, and he said, "Come."

A breeze began.

"Come," he said to the desert, "come and dry my eyes."

And the wind came up, and the sand came, and Cer Cemreet was buried in the sand, and his eyes became dry, and the last life passed from his body, and the last sandmage passed from the world.

Then came the winter rains, and the refugees of Nefyryd returned to their land. The soldiers were called home, for the wars were over, and now their weapons were the shovel and the plow. They redug the trench of the Nefyr and the Greebeck, and the river soon flowed deep again to the sea. They scattered grass seed and cleaned their houses of sand. They carried water into the ruined fields with ditches and aqueducts.

Slowly life returned to Nefyryd.

And the desert, having lost its mage, retreated quietly to its old borders, never again to seek death where there was life. Plenty of death already where nothing lived, plenty of dryness to drink where there was no water.

In a wood a little way from the crest of the Mitherkame, a treemage heard the news from a wandering tinker.

The treemage went out into the forest and spoke softly to the Elm, to the Oak, to the Redwood, to the Sweet Aspen. And when all had heard the news, the forest wept for Cer Cemreet, and each tree gave a twig to be burned in his memory, and shed sap to sink into the ground in his name.

Where else should this volume end but at the edge of the world?

Those of you who are reading your fourth volume of Swords A.D. know that Manly Wade Wellman has been in every one; that his man Kardios has. (Ah Kardios; he who kissed the Queen of Atlantis there inside the garden gate and brought doom upon that land—leaving him, the rotten, lovely, heroic, womanizing so-and-so, the only survivor!)

You may also know what Wellman darned well knows by now; in my eye he can do no wrong. I love the man and his stories and the way he tells them. We should all be blessed with the ability to write so naturally and seemingly easily. (You can't say "style" about Manlius Waidus Virbonus; he just tells stories. Did anyone else send me manuscripts with so many strikeouts, I'd be no sweeter than Tolkien's Goblin King. In Wellman's manuscripts—I just fix 'em, almost absently while I enjoy reading, marveling at how easily it flows. In here-now-where-it's-at language: man, Kardios is cooler'n anybody!)

I hope you enjoy it, too. Just flow with it, easily. And if you don't like it—don't tell me. I'll sic on you the hugest bear of a man I know. His name's Wellman . . .

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

by Manly Wade Wellman

That mighty city of Kolokoto would have seemed even mightier had it not been plastered, seven levels of it, against the lofty face of the mountain range called Fufuna; but it was fairly mighty, for all that. Its palaces, temples, shops and tenements were built of cherry or tan or gray stone, and some roofs and spires were gilded. The topmost street clung breathlessly at the top of the range. Above projected a line of jagged peaks that looked like the horned heads and shrugged shoulders of brooding guardians. Unwise to climb up there, vowed the sixty or so priests who did most of the thinking for Kolokoto's citizens. For, what if you went over the top of that peak-

studded eminence, highest reach of Fufuna which, so it was insisted, extended north and south forever and forever?

If anyone inquired, a terrifying nothingness would result. Beyond the range, things became nothingness. The world's substance ceased. Below you, if you got so high, was only space. And you'd get dizzy and fall down, forever and forever. Because, the priests declared, Kolokoto was the city that stood at the end of the world.

So none tried to go up there, having been advised to the contrary. But Kolokoto's people were interested in something else that day, something shouted over the lower market-reaches. Voices clattered the news. Other voices repeated it. So great was the stir that Iarie, the disdainfully beautiful queen of Kolokoto, in her palace on the fourth and midmost terrace of the city, heard its echo and summoned her chief and most knowledgeable advisor.

He was Mahleka, priest of the worship of the mischievous god Litoviay. The dignity of his blue-gray beard was not exactly in keeping with his scrawny face and close-set, sardonic eyes. He wore a jewel-set turban and a robe woven of the feathers of green, red and blue birds from faraway jungles.

"What's this disturbance among the people?" Iarie demanded. Any question she might put sounded like a demand, for she was as dictatorial as she was lovely, which was considerably. She wore a snug gown of flaming mesh that did the most for her exquisitely rounded figure. Her face was a rose-tinted oval, ripe of mouth, self-confident of starry eye and disdainful of nostril. Her cream-pale hair was caught in a silken net studded with

sapphires. On her slender wrists she wore bracelets worth her own ransom, did anyone ever dare hold her for ransom, and her slim, pointed feet were sheathed in golden slippers.

On either side of her ebony throne lounged a tame monster, heightening by contrast the impact of Iarie's beauty. One of these, the rather molluscoid Ospariel, was carapaced in green shell, from which peered brilliant eyes above a stir of tentacles. The other, Grob, might be a great crouching ape, if apes had branched horns and were covered with green scales the size of lily pads.

Mahleka bowed gravely. "Lady of overwhelming beauty and intellect, the people gathered to welcome Kardios the wanderer."

"Kardios," she repeated, in a voice like honey and wine mingled in equal quantities. "I've heard that name."

"Doubtless, for your knowledge is great beyond all mortal gift. Kardios is said to be the sole surviving Atlantean, and travels here and there to see what the world is. He has overthrown mighty rulers, has conquered monsters. He has even brought to an end the worship of several gods, so reports say."

"Do they, indeed? And what is Kardios doing here?"

"He sang in the lower market Square, and people applauded."

"Fetch him here."

"I've already ordered that it be done," said Mahleka. "Here he comes now."

An embroidered curtain twitched at a doorway, and two palace guards in garishly rich armor conducted someone into Iarie's presence.

Her first impression was of tall shabbiness. This

Kardios wore a sleeveless blue tunic with white points, a leopard-skin kilt, sandals that looked clumsily repaired. Around his waist was belted a long sword in a copper-studded sheath. Behind his shoulder rode a battered harp. Over one arm he carried a dark cloak worked with gold thread. His smooth-shaven face and corded arms and legs were tanned to the color of bronze. He had a straight nose, twinkling eyes, and showed fine white teeth in a smile. Travel-worn, perhaps, and more somberly clad than the usual luxurious sparks brought before her. But, she saw at once, sinewy, young and spectacularly handsome.

"Well?" she addressed him. "Your name's Kardios; you're said to be a vagabond adventurer. And you've been singing in my marketplace."

Kardios bowed with easy good manners, and smiled more broadly. "Great and exquisite queen, I did attempt a little improvisation. Your subjects were kind enough to clap their hands and ask for more."

She quartered him with her eyes. She saw how much taller he was than the two guards, how much wider in the shoulder, how mannerly and yet how confident. "And you're an Atlantean."

"I'm afflicted to say so, but I'm the only Atlantean to survive that island's destruction. You're looking at a very rare specimen, your high majesty."

Rare indeed, pondered Iarie, both for handsomeness and for impudence.

"And now you wander," she prompted.

"To see what the world holds, fair majesty."

"Well," she said, "you've come to the world's ultimate rim. Here, at Kolokoto, is the end of the way. These mountains guard it, and Kolokoto guards

the mountains."

"I hadn't thought the world was so small," said Kardios.

"Don't blaspheme, Kardios," warned Mahleka. "The great god Litoviay might hear, and be angry."

"Litoviay?" echoed Kardios. "Oh yes, he's feared here, they say. My song down yonder was of another deity. Ettaire, the bringer of love."

"Ettaire," crooned Iarie, who sometimes sacrificed in secret to that goddess. "They worship her down there. The farther up the slope this city goes, the more worship is given to others."

"You've seen the great muster of gods above Kolokoto," put in Mahleka. "They're the guardians of the world, commanded by Litoviay. They turn fools back from falling off the edge. As for Ettaire, I don't respect her power."

"Love can be more powerful than fear," observed Kardios. "That makes Ettaire a goddess of some importance."

"Love!" snorted Mahleka, who was a bachelor and a cynic.

"What was your song?" asked Iarie, who had been gazing at Kardios.

"Something I made up on the spot."

"Sing it for me."

Mahleka snorted, and retired to a corner. Kardios took his harp and skillfully tuned it. His hands, Iarie perceived, were broad in the back, lean in the fingers, eloquent of skills. He hummed to himself, struck a chord, and sang:

*Ettaire, Ettaire, sweet goddess of love,
Let your heart answer us, let your heart move.*

*All things are darkened and lost to our view—
Ettaire, Ettaire, say, what shall we do?*

"Not untuneful," nodded Iarie. "Why did you make this particular song?"

"A young couple, holding hands, asked me for a prayer."

"Love is always a tragedy," said Mahleka. "The wise man shuns it."

Kardios sang another verse:

*The mountain gods, lofty and cold as the stars,
Sit, planning their famines and curses and wars,
With faces and beards of immovable stone—
Ettaire can help us, and Ettaire alone.*

Iarie clapped her rosy palms. "Well composed, splendidly sung," she praised. "Kardios, it is evening. You shall take dinner with me."

"An honor and a delight," said Kardios, bowing.

"Mahleka, tell the slaves to serve us, and take these guardsmen with you."

Mahleka and the guards paced away obediently.

"Come sit on this stool before me, Kardios," said Iarie, "and sing that song again."

Grob blinked and Ospariel stared as Kardios took his seat and struck his harp into melody.

Dinner arrived, a procession of broths, game pies, relishes, pungent salads, sugar-dipped fruits, with goblets of many wines. Kardios asked about the god Litoviay, and Iarie said that he ruled the priests of Kolokoto, who ruled all the citizens save Iarie herself. "He's worshipped by acts of mischief," she said. "Mischief that sometimes

winds up fatally."

"An interesting religion," said Kardios, drinking from a jewel-encrusted cup. "But if it promotes mischief, why not let the people go over the range and fall into space? That would be in character."

"This just happens to be the world's end, Kardios. Nobody has dared to go over there for some years. We're a unique city. Caravans from far away bring wealth to barter for our fine weavings, the best in the world. We're happy. We make visitors happy." She surveyed him. "You, Kardios, I propose to make especially happy."

"You've already done that, most dazzling majesty."

"More is to come. You'll stay with me tonight."

Kardios was not often startled, but he almost choked on a morsel of particularly savory cheese. "Beautiful Iarie, you mean—"

"Yes, Kardios, I mean." She clapped her hands for the servants to carry away the dishes. "We'll take this flagon of wine to my sleeping quarters yonder. And we'll talk, mostly of the love-goddess Ettaire, and how best to worship her."

So saying, she held out a hand to him. When he took it, she slid the other arm behind his neck, with a smooth assurance that betokened considerable experience.

* * *

There were hours of lovemaking, during which Iarie conducted herself with a talented abandon that hardly allowed for royal dignity. At last Kardios slept. But he awoke instantly at the sound of metal-shod feet on the floor of the sleeping chamber. He quickly rolled over and

came to his feet beside the perfumed couch.

Iarie stood beside a gold-legged table on which were set a water-clock, a lapis lazuli bowl full of flowers, and Kardios's sheathed sword and belt. She was bundled to the chin in a fleecy robe, and was tidying her disordered pale hair. She smiled, rather in the manner of someone completing the victorious move in a game of chess.

Two burly men in black chain mail paced in at the door, their squat faces in their open helmets looking almost exactly alike. Each held a curved sword.

"Who are these?" asked Kardios, studying them with interested eyes.

"My two most discreet guardsmen," Iarie informed him smugly. "Safe with my secrets, for both are mute. Kardios, I'm sorry you woke. I had hoped you would die happy."

Kardios faced the two. He wore only his leopard skin kilt.

"You'd murder me so that I would not tell?" he asked Iarie, and her smile grew the more triumphant.

"How accurately you estimate the situation," she answered him sweetly. "I'm a lonely woman, and from time to time I invite a stranger to divert me overnight. Naturally I can't let such partners go and gossip about it. What would my people think?"

The two advancing men drew a little apart from each other and moved toward Kardios from right and left.

He stepped swiftly toward the one at his right, ducked under a sweeping slash of the blade, and in almost the same moment whipped a hard, skilled fist into the mailed midriff of the other. His knuckles stung, but the fellow doubled over with that fierce-driven blow. Whirling,

Kardios avoided another slash from the second man and speared his left straightaway to the flat face. As the man wavered, Kardios brought over his right to the jaw, stepped over the body as it fell, and belted the still-groggy one he had struck first. That one fell across the other. Kardios snatched up his tunic from a bench and kicked his feet into his sandals.

"You're an expert boxer, Kardios," said Iarie's happy voice.

"As good as any in Atlantis."

"My two servants will be sorry about their failure when they waken. But surely you never thought they'd be my only recourse in a problem like this."

Kardios was belting his sword over his tunic. He looked around to see where she pointed. Through another curtained doorway came lumbering the scale-plated form of Grob. Just behind him crept Ospariel on what seemed to be an infinity of dark, jointed legs.

"Finish him!" Iarie shouted to them, her voice going metallic.

She pointed to Kardios, who hopped nimbly across the fallen guardsmen. Grob, moving ahead of Ospariel, stopped short of those prone forms. Kardios slapped him heavily on the low-vaulted pate with the flat of his sword. It was a shrewd enough blow to make Grob flounder a bit, and his head lifted. Under the shallow jaw with its fierce pointed teeth showed a throat without scales, shaggy with mossy hair. Kardios slashed at it, blood came out in a fountain, and Grob was down, his long arms thrashing dreamily.

"At him, Ospariel!" screamed Iarie.

Ospariel came at a squattering run. At the front of his shell peered his brilliant eyes, groped forth his tussock of

tentacles. As he came within reach, Kardios lunged smoothly, his body sloping almost to the ground as he sped his thrust.

The sword struck like a snake in there where the eyes were. A tentacle writhed around the blade and fell severed as Kardios recovered from his lunge and freed his point. Ospariel's many legs collapsed under him and the tentacles fell limp. A flood of brownish-black fluid poured out upon the intricately patterned carpet.

"Any more, Your Majesty?" Kardios inquired of Iarie, every white tooth shining in his brown face.

She ran to the door through which the mute guardsmen had entered. She tore aside the curtain.

"Guards, guards!" she shrieked. "Come quickly! Rape, rape!"

Kardios caught up his harp and raced for yet another curtained door, praying that it led to some safety.

He found himself in a jade-walled chamber, cluttered with shelves and racks of rich dresses. The air was heavy with perfume. On the far side was a portal of gleaming red wood. He ran to it and gave it a kick. It quivered, but did not spring open.

On a carven stand beside the door, bright flowers showed in a great golden urn set with diamonds, beryls and carnelians. Kardios sheathed his sword and caught the urn in both strong hands. Behind him he heard a hubbub of voices, a clash of metal, in Iarie's sleeping chamber. With all his might he dashed the heavy urn against the panel of the door, heard the wood splinter, and hurled himself bodily through.

A helmeted sentry stood there, spear in hand, goggling.

"What—" began the sentry, but Kardios slammed the urn, upside down, over his head, completely bonneting

him. Water and flowers cascaded all over the man's armor. He uttered a strangled cry as he dropped his spear and strove to free his prisoned head. Kardios sprang past him.

He was in a long, torch-lighted hallway, with stairs at the far end. Toward those stairs he raced, with the cries of his pursuers beating at his back.

Reaching the stairs, he fairly flew up them. At the top there seemed to be sunlight. He snatched a backward look. There came a whole stream of avenging guardsmen at a run, armored, plumed, with flourished swords and spears. Kardios gained the topmost step as the foremost of the party reached the bottom. He stopped his flight and wheeled. This was as good a place as any to meet danger. Only two at a time could face him on that stairway. And he had just proved what he could do against two at a time. He twiddled his faithful sword, gift of the giant Nephol tribesmen who had forged it from star-sent metal, and thought it sang in comradely reply.

But, from the sunlit openness behind him, came more helpful voices, more metallic clashings. Other armed men were on the way there, and no doubt for what quarry. Kardios scowled as he wondered where to retreat next.

"In here," said a soft voice, seemingly from the wall beside him.

He had come out upon a sort of street, the terrace above Iarie's palace. It was lined with the doors of what seemed to be shops. The nearest door stood open, and a girl leaned out, beckoning.

With the roar of the hunt behind and before him, Kardios did not wait to question. He dived past the open door and whipped himself behind it. Before it could close,

a hoarse voice spoke at the threshold:

"You, wench—did a desperate, long-legged vagabond pass here?"

"Nobody has passed here," replied the girl levelly.

"Then he went too fast for you to see. Look—up there ahead—a troop of armed men, his accomplices!"

She closed the door. Outside rang louder shouts, and a sudden jangle of steel. The two forces had charged into each other and, inevitably, had begun to fight.

Kardios looked around the room. It was small and crowded, with a small window set high up. Its furniture included a simple cot spread with a striped coverlet, a stool, a clumsily made loom. In one corner, a few coals glowed on a small hearth. Corners and shelves were stacked with roll after roll of patterned cloth that looked both soft and sturdy of texture.

"You've saved me, whoever you are," he said to the girl. "I don't know why."

She was small and slender, with braided dark hair. Her eyes were large and brown. Her wide mouth smiled shyly. Outside, the brawl died away somewhere in the distance.

"You are Kardios, the sweet singer," she half-whispered. "Yesterday I heard you and your harp, down in the market place where I brought my fabrics to the trading center. You sang of the goddess of love, and all heard you with joy and hope."

"There seems to be little love in this city," he smiled back. "Thank you again for helping me. I'd have had a score of embarrassing attentions pressed upon me at your very doorstep. Who are you?"

"My name's Wanendi," she said, as though it were not much of a name. "Are you weary, Kardios? Hungry?"

"I left Queen Iarie's palace too suddenly for breakfast."

"I have only a poor girl's food, but if you wish—"

"Oh, I wish," Kardios assured her, feeling healthily sharp-set.

She went to a shelf and brought back an earthen jug of milk, a scrap of smoked meat. She broke a cake of coarse bread. Kardios ate eagerly, and had to speak twice before she took small bites to keep him company. Finally she produced a skin of wine that was sharp and mouth-tingling after Iarie's fine vintages, but stimulating for all that.

"You're a merciful, hospitable girl, Wanendi," he said at last. "And now I must find my way out of your city where they have such rude disapproval of stranger guests."

"Not right now; they're searching for you on the terrace. Why are they so thirsty for your blood?"

She sat on the stool, he on the cot. He described to her, plainly but with understandable modesty, his meeting with Iarie and what had followed. "I take it that thing happens from time to time," he finished, "with assassination at the end, to shield her reputation. Does this maze you, Wanendi?"

"Well, say that it does explain another darkness in the nature of Kolokoto's queen. She's a tyrant, Kardios. Kolokoto's work-people weave the finest cloth in the world, but she pays us in copper and sells the cloth for gold. Her powers are wealth and fear. Except for her priests and servants, we dwellers here live simple, nervous lives."

"How do you mean?"

What she replied would have interested him even if he

were not on the run from Iarie and wondering how he would get away. Kolokoto, said Wanendi, had been built many generations ago for the announced purpose of discouraging travellers from falling off the edge of the world. It was a manufacturing city, with a thriving trade in excellent textiles. Royalty and certain merchants got the profits. Weavers like Wanendi managed to live just short of want. Queen Iarie was the latest tyrant to uphold the law of not crossing Fufuna into nothingness, and the mischief-god Litoviay marshalled a line of stone sentinels to enforce that law.

"Doesn't anybody try to find out for himself?" asked Kardios.

"Oh, in the early days, someone went over the range and didn't come back. Someone else followed to find him, and didn't come back, either. Then the priest of Litoviay—he must have been much like our Mahleka today, arbitrary and impressive—made the law, and the ruler upheld it with armed men. I think others have climbed the range and vanished, but not in recent years."

Kardios shrugged. "Maybe they just didn't bother to come back. You don't make Kolokoto sound like the happiest home in the world. I marvel that you stay."

"We who work and weave are forbidden to go away," Wanendi told him. "We make the cloth, carry it to the merchants in the market place, and get food and shelter in exchange."

"Like slaves," growled Kardios.

"What's a slave? I don't know that word."

"You're one, whatever the word is here. It means, somebody makes you do the work and takes the profit. Now, for me to get out and away—"

A knock sounded at the door. Kardios ducked behind it

as Wanendi opened it to answer.

An authoritative voice spoke at the threshold. It proclaimed that a foreign criminal was loose in Kolokoto, had offered insolent violence to Queen Iarie, had mockingly discomfited her loyal retainers when they tried to protect her. Kardios grinned as he listened; he had killed no soldiers at that, only Grob and Ospariel. A reward was offered for information, went on the visitor, stated in terms of easier work hours and daintier foods. Kardios heard himself described in unflattering detail—tall, clad in shabby blue and worn leopard skin, fierce-faced, deceptive of behavior and lawless of intent. To all this Wanendi murmured as though in shocked wonder, and promised to report at once if she saw such a miscreant. At last she closed the door and spoke to Kardios.

"We must get you safely away," she said.

"Wanendi, you're an angel of mercy to me," he said, tugging at a finger. "Let me give you this ring. It's from the royal treasury of Nyanyanya, where once I ruled for a night and a day."

But she shook her head. "I help you for your song, for your brave spirit. But I've thought of a possible way for your escape."

She went to a stack of woven garments and chose a long, hooded cloak of light, checked brown. "Many citizens wear this sort of garment. It'll cover your blue tunic, your sword. Maybe you won't be recognized. And I'll walk out with you. They won't suspect an ordinary-looking couple."

"And then what?" asked Kardios. "Let's see, Iarie's palace was on the fourth terrace. This must be the fifth."

"If you head down to the city gates, very carefully—"

"No." Kardios shook his head. "You said nobody's allowed to leave the city. I'd be questioned and found out. I'll go up to the sixth level."

"Sixth level?" Her mouth was a round O of shocked protest. "Then there's only the seventh, where nobody ever goes except the priests, where they say strange shapes roam."

"Maybe I can be one of the strange shapes."

"And above that level, there are only the sentinel gods, protecting us from the emptiness beyond the world."

"There must be a way out somewhere. I'll take my chances."

He put on the robe and pulled the hood over his black mane. "I'm glad for this," he said. "I left my old one in Iarie's bedroom. And a traveller needs a cloak, against the sun by day and for a coverlet at night."

"That harp makes a big lump at your back," she said.

"Good, those soldiers won't be looking for a hunchback. If you insist on coming along, let's go."

She opened the door and they both stepped out.

This terracelike level of Kolokoto was smoothly cut into the massive rock of Fufuna's slope. On the side where Wanendi's quarters were, the buildings seemed to crowd above the fourth level. On the opposite side, Kardios could see above the roofs the soaring steep of the hewn bluff. People moved on the walkway, sober-faced, sober-garbed people for the most part.

"Along there ahead, there's a high stairway to the sixth level," said Wanendi. "Flights and flights, they say."

They crossed the street to where she pointed.

"All right now," she whispered. "See the arched entry? That great stairway is just inside."

But even as they reached it, half a dozen warriors in resplendent armor came swaggering out. They had massive breastplates and plumed and enamelled headpieces and fluttering red cloaks. The biggest of them, a man with tawny mustaches that spread right and left like wings, put up an arm to stop Wanendi.

"Here's a comely girl to be nursemaiding a hunch-backed cripple," he snorted. "Why coddle him, sweetheart, when here's a stout royal guardsman to notice you?"

Wanendi tried to brush by, but he caught her arm in his gauntleted hand. His companions sniggered.

"Let her go," said Kardios, and the guardsman turned his fierce mustaches around.

"I take orders only from my captains," he said. "Get on your way, hunchback, and quickly, or I'll give you something to hurry you."

Wanendi struggled, but could not free herself.

"Do you see this?" inquired Kardios, extending his big left fist under the man's nose.

"I see it, but—"

Kardios threw his right, and down went the guardsman, his armor clattering like a spilled rack of cooking pots. The cloak slipped from Kardios, and the other guardsmen all yelled at once.

Wanendi had vanished, Kardios did not know where; nor did he stop to wonder. He ran, with the others after him.

"That's the man we're looking for!"

"Kardios—catch him!"

"Cut him down!"

A spear sang past, within a handsbreadth of Kardios's shoulder. Ahead of him, he saw a building with ornate

front, its masonry studded with obtrudent designs. He ran at it, sprang high against it, caught a projection and swarmed up. The foremost of the guardsmen came below him and reached for his ankle, but Kardios sent him sprawling to the pavement with a kick. On he climbed, nimbly as a monkey, beyond reach of the others. One poised his spear for a throw at close range.

"No, take him alive," panted the leader. "Up the stairs inside, catch him as he comes through a window on the floor above."

They scuttled in at a door. Kardios scrambled swiftly on, past a window on the second floor and toward one on the third. The ornamented wall was as easy to scale as a ladder. Reaching the sill on the second floor, he hooked his hand upon it and heaved himself into a blue-walled room.

A woman stood there, young and amply symmetrical, wearing only green silk sandals and a necklace of amber beads. She held a mirror and was combing hair of an almost blinding redness.

"How romantic, coming in at the window," she warbled to Kardios. "Did you decide to accept my invitation, after all?"

Then she looked at him, with eyes that suddenly grew as big as saucers. "Who are you?" she shrieked.

Kardios answered neither of her questions. He rushed through a door into a hall with stairs. As he mounted upward, he heard the guardsmen jabbering and clanging on the floor below. Up they came after him. Running, he reflected that he had done a lot of climbing at top speed that day. He wondered, later when he had time to wonder, if it were four flights or five that he now scaled at headlong speed.

Up he went. The guardsmen, armored and not in as good condition as he, could not catch up. At last he came through an open archway upon a flat, tiled roof. It was fenced all around at a level with his belt. But there were no other roofs immediately adjoining. The closest of them lay thrice his considerable length away, with a long drop between.

The chase grew louder, and the guardsmen tumbled into view behind him, gulping for breath.

"Surrender," gurgled their chief at Kardios.

Instead, Kardios sprang to the top of the wall, and then made a great, churning leap into the air. He seemed to hang in emptiness for moments before his feet caught the coping of the roof opposite and he fell to hands and knees on the tiles. As he rose, the baffled guardsmen hurled their spears.

Again Kardios dropped low and the shafts hummed murderously over him. Rising, he grinned at the baffled men across there, and placed his brown thumb to his brown nose, then waggled his finger in salute. Away he went again, while curses roared from behind. Not one of the party dared try the leap Kardios had made.

He scrambled to another roof just beyond, and gazed upward at a tapering spire of pale stone that soared parallel to the cliff, with its narrow tip rising to the level above, the sixth level where those priests would be.

He studied the masonry of the spire. It did not give as good hand and foot holds as the wall he had climbed below, but there were some irregularities. He reached for a grasp above him and began another climb.

He had to dig his fingertips into crevices, grope with his toes for precarious holds. It was a dubious surface to cling to. After some upward progress, he could not guess

how much, the structure tapered to a narrowness he could almost clasp with his arms. It made climbing easier, but a brisk wind came up, and he fancied that he felt the spire sway like a tall pine. Too, it seemed to make a stealthy crackling sound, as though it might come to pieces under his weight. But there was no profit in going back down. Up he went. Up. Up.

"Kardios," floated down a voice from overhead.

He stared above him, and saw a bulwark of rough stone masonry, crowned with a row of upright projections. Wanendi leaned toward him.

"Here, Kardios, your cloak."

She quickly knotted a corner of it to a spikelike jut, and dropped its length down toward him. His outstretched hand caught and clamped it. He wondered if the knot would hold, if the spike of stone was sufficiently well mortared, and realized that there was only one way to find out. He swung off above the chasm and clambered up the cloak, hand over hand, until he could hoist himself over the battlement.

"I'd forgotten that I'd dropped that cloak," he wheezed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came up to help you."

Once more he took time to look around and see where he was.

The sixth level of Kolokoto was bleak, not to say primitive. Above peered down the coarse-hewn heads and shoulders of the gigantic stone guardians. There were no houses here, only a row of cavelike holes in the surface of the rock's upward sweep. Here and there a face peeped out, and not a nice face, either. Someone came walking along the uneven footway, someone Kardios recognized. It was Mahleka, in his robe of colored feathers.

"Kardios," the priest greeted him. "I'd hoped to catch up with you at a place less dubious for you than this."

"I had to run somewhere," said Kardios, hand on sword hilt.

"No violence, please. Up here, the only ones who come are priests like myself, certain creatures I might call religious associates, and—well, sacrifices."

At that, Wanendi drew closer to Kardios.

"Into which category do my companion and I fall?" Kardios asked.

Mahleka stroked his beard. "It occurs to me, Kardios, that you have possible qualities for a successful priest."

Kardios laughed, while one of those faces winked into sight again. "I've never aspired to that calling."

"It wouldn't be difficult," argued Mahleka plausibly. "A few conferences, a few suggestions—" He gestured. "The point is, Queen Iarie is favorably disposed to you just now. News of what you've done has reached her all along the way, very promptly."

"More promptly, I judge, than her servants pursued me," said Kardios, holding Wanendi's right hand in his left. "I've already reflected that I never killed any of them—only struck several of them into restful repose. I killed only two very unsightly monsters in Her Majesty's sleeping chamber."

"Please, no scandals," sighed Mahleka. "She mourns those servitors, but she's confident of replacing them. Meanwhile, she agrees that you could be a priest-councillor. Spending long private hours with her."

"Indeed?" said Kardios. "You think that's kind of her. But I've known her to change her mind drastically. I might have all this fighting and scampering to do again."

"Kardios," pleaded Mahleka, "you're in no position to

pick or choose."

"I'm doing both. Tell Iarie that I admire her beauty and enterprise and other interesting matters, but that the farther I am from her, the easier I breathe."

Mahleka sighed again, and again stroked his beard. "I don't want to fetch her that unwelcome news. Your rebuff would pain her, and I'd feel some of the pain. Better to say that I was too late to reason with you."

"Much better," said Kardios, while Wanendi quivered against him.

"I'll say that you reached this level," said Mahleka, "and were sacrificed."

Again Kardios gripped his sword-hilt. "Who will sacrifice me?" he asked. "Bring on your priests; we'll see what color they are inside."

"No," said Mahleka. "We leave those untidy tasks to the ones who dwell in these caves."

He clapped his slender hands sharply. Creatures stole out from all the holes in the rock, a dozen of them at least.

They were of a variety of baleful shapes. Some seemed reptilian. One had somewhat the look of an interestingly hideous horse. They stood on two legs, or four, or many. Thronging together, they advanced in a press. Wanendi wailed in terror beside Kardios.

"Give me room for this sport," he said to her.

He drew his sword and swiftly bundled the cape around his left arm to make a shield.

"You fool," intoned Mahleka in his beard, "these are specially bred monsters. No weapon of earthy metal can hurt them."

"I've had that warning before," said Kardios cheerfully, "but this blade was forged from metal of the stars. And if these things have the substance to hurt me, they

have substance to be hurt."

Mahleka pulled back to the very parapet. Kardios retreated several steps, Wanendi with him. He chose a point where the walkway narrowed between the drop to one side, the cave-pierced precipice to the other. No more than two creatures could come at him at once. He had become contented with odds no greater than that.

The first of the horde came on ahead of its mates. It was as disgustingly hirsute as a giant caterpillar. Of its face he could see only two slimy-yellow eyes and a naked pink nose that writhed like a trunk. Huge as a bull, it shambled on all fours. Kardios fell on guard, his swordpoint quivering. The creature rose on clumsy hind legs and extended its taloned forefeet. For a moment it towered like a rearing horse, exposing a belly patterned with fine, pearly scales.

Kardios elongated his body, thrusting and at the same time bringing his weapon upward in a powerful slash. His point entered flesh, his edge opened the whole front of the menacing monster.

The yellow eyes stared, the mouth in the shaggy face opened in a cry of agony. Down crashed the uncouth shape. Stale-looking purple liquid fountained from its wounds.

All its companions stopped short. But Kardios had leaped across the slumping form, his sword playing like a flame. The others were in a scramble of retreat, tumbling wildly over each other to get out of reach.

"You see what I mean?" shouted Kardios to Mahleka, but Mahleka, too, fled. His beard and robe fluttered. For once, he was undignified. A thing that seemed half bear, half goat, ducked into a cave, and Mahleka ducked after it, as though sure of help there.

"Come," said Kardios to Wanendi, and hurried her along the way by her arm.

"You," she said. "You frightened those frightful—"

"Most threats can be faced down. Kill one or two of a mob, and the others are apt to retreat. I hope this crowd profits by a new experience."

"But—gods?"

"Even some of them. I've disposed of several in my life, which probably proves that they were false gods. Now, to get away from here."

They had come past the point where the rocky face had caves. Overhead still rose those great shapes of stone, like knobby heads, hiked shoulders.

"Wanendi, you can move along until you're clear of those lower levels of Kolokoto," said Kardios. "Make your way down outside the town, and be careful of steep places. Get to a point outside those guarded gates. Caravans are leaving all the time; join one of them. Live in some other, better city."

"You're coming, too?"

"One service you can do abroad," said Kardios, "is tell my story of Iarie's hospitality. People will crowd to hear you, and maybe it will make some male visitors prudent."

She caught his hand. "I want to go where you go."

"I'm going up over this range," he said.

"No! Over there—"

"I'll find what's over there, if anything."

She almost wept. "I won't dare try. Kardios, the thought of falling forever—it's so horrible—"

He stroked her shoulder, and from his belt-pouch he dug a dozen golden coins.

"These will help you well on your way. You'll prosper in that other city, with your Kolokoto secrets of weaving, and your good advice about Iarie's invitations. Luck attend you, and thank you for helping me."

He kissed her. Her lips were cold. Then he watched her leave, slowly, droopingly, on toward the far end of the terrace. Finally he faced the wall and began his ascent.

It was no great ordeal, compared to his earlier scalings. At the top, he stood up between two of those colossal stone figures. Close at hand, they did not look quite so much like proud, menacing gods. Only the wind and weather had sculptured them, and roughly at that.

He took only a moment to study them. Yet again he was where he could take a moment to see what lay ahead of him.

For one thing, this was not the end of the world, was not a drop into emptiness. More world lay beyond. He was utterly surprised.

Standing on jagged rocks, he looked down on a great slope of the range to level grassland at the foot, and beyond that to the open sea. A herd of curious animals grazed at a distance, but Kardios paid them little heed. At the blue water's edge lay a dark dab that must be a boat.

He scrambled down the height, careful of where he stepped. He felt a certain weariness from all he had done. At last he came to easier footing, but it was a long trudge to the shore. He diverted himself as he walked, by picking his harpstrings and humming words. The sun had dropped well toward the ocean when he came within close quarters of that boat and its people.

The vessel was plainly but neatly made of smooth dark wood, with a considerable mainmast and a smaller foremast. Its sails were lashed snugly to the slanting yards. Four of the half dozen men carried great earthen vessels aboard, and two stood by a cooking fire. All wore haphazard flaxen garments, and were variously bearded, brown, black, yellow. One of those by the cooking fire raised a welcoming hand, and walked toward Kardios. The others bunched to

follow him.

Kardios had arrived at something like words to the tune he had made. He began to sing, and they came close to listen.

Kardios sang aloud:

*The world to roam, whatever may come;
I climb or I tread, all the world is ahead.
I've wandered the land, on every hand,
And yonder ahead is the sea.*

*Beyond that sea, something says to me,
Beyond the waters, brave sons, fair daughters,
Tall towns, sweet treasure, beyond all measure,
Are waiting to welcome me.*

They clapped their big, hard hands and whooped approval.

"That's good to hear!"

"You sound like one of us!"

The first who had gestured to him smiled.

"You needn't tell me," he said. "You're one of the very few who've had the guts and curiosity to break over the ridge from Kolokoto."

Kardios liked him at first glance. He was strongly built, with gray patches in his sepia-brown beard. His drab tunic was clasped with a black belt, to which hung a sheathed knife almost big enough for a sword. His sandal soles were of coiled rope, with heavy hempen bindings.

"Which means, you yourself broke away," said Kardios.

"Not me, but my father before me. He got sick of weaving cloth for masters, and came over Fufuna in desperation. He met fisherpeople, married a good girl, and I'm their son. Hard work's all right, friend, if you

work for yourself. My men and I do that."

"Good," said Kardios. "What's this hard work for yourself?"

"I skipper this fishing boat, and my name's Krarr. My mates have got a share of all we catch and sell. Who are you?"

"They call me Kardios. I spent one night and one day in Kolokoto, which, I must say, was a great plenty. And, to tell you the truth, I never really believed that the world came to an end here."

Krarr laughed heartily. "They made up that silly tale long ago, to keep people penned up and hard at work to make them rich. Are you hungry?"

"Extremely."

"Come have something with us."

They gathered at the fire. Krarr kicked away an overturned clay pot to reveal a hot loaf of tawny bread. He sliced it with his knife, and another man offered grilled fish on a forked twig. All of them ate happily.

"We're here because this stretch of coast has the best catch of fish anywhere," Krarr told Kardios between mouthfuls. "Just now, we were taking fresh water aboard. We'll sail with the tide at moonrise, and cross a considerable strait to sell our fish at the big port over yonder. It's called Sambarra."

Kardios had never heard of Sambarra. There were so many places he had never heard of.

"I'd like to go there with you," he said to Krarr.

The fishing captain showed all his friendly teeth in his gray-brown beard.

"All right, Kardios," he said. "Why don't you come aboard?"

THE END

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