AXOLOTL SPECIAL

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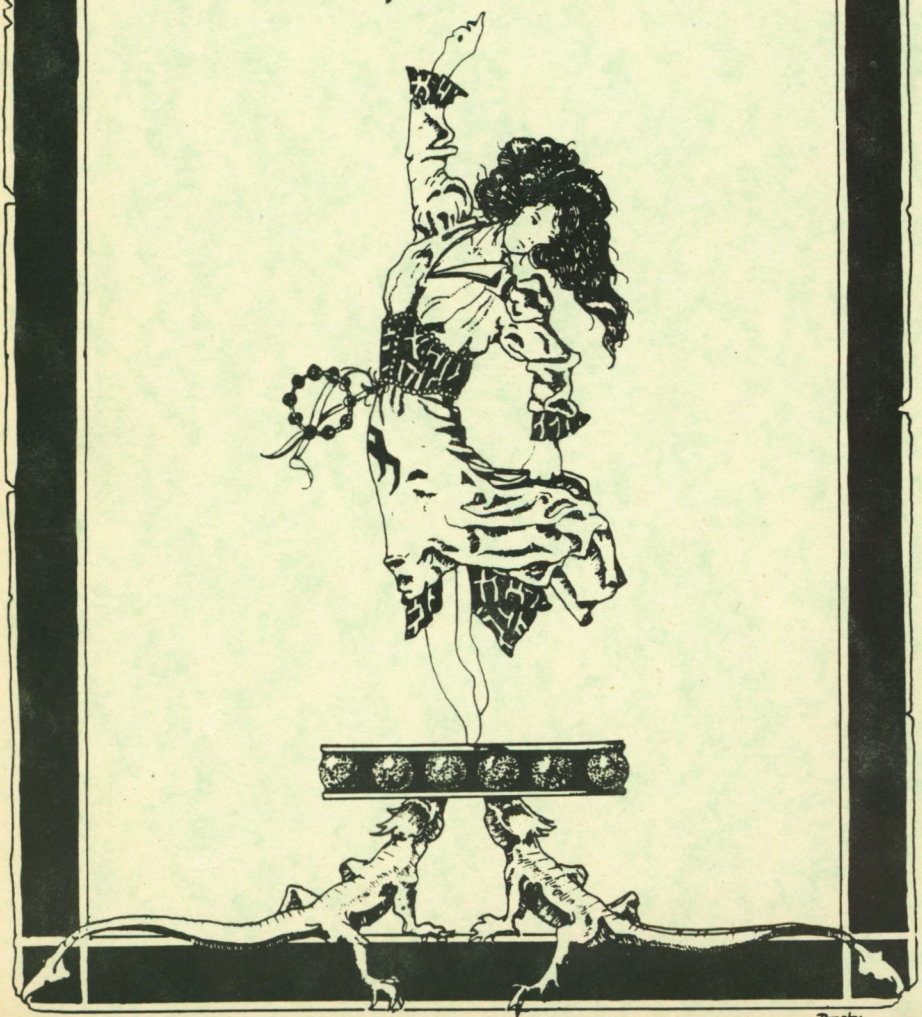

AXOLOTL

Special Number One

Edited by John C. Pelan

Aymara

Lucius Shepard

Introduction by John Kessel

The Revelations and Pursuits of Timith, Son of Timith

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

Introduction by Thomas Ligotti

Fill It With Regular

Michael Shea

Introduction by Bruce Sterling

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CONTENTS

Why Listen to Lucius?

by John Kessel

Consider the story as a date. The writer, in his opening sentence, asks the reader to spend some time with him; he promises at the very least a pleasurable experience and at the most a meaningful one. But he needs to have his prospective date listen to him long enough to give him a chance, and if the relationship is going to last beyond a single encounter that date is going to have to have seemed worthwhile. To do this the writer, from that first moment on the phone until that last lingering kiss on the doorstep, is going to have to maintain credibility.

The credibility problem the science fiction writer has that other kinds of writers have in lesser degree or different kind, is that the place he takes you to does not exist. Now many of the worlds of conventional fiction writers, from Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha to Judith Krantz's New York City, don't exist either. But the places the sf writer describes may be said to not exist in a more fundamental way than those of the realist. The story is set in the late Mesozoic, during the heat death of the universe, within the bowels of the mechanized city, aboard the space colony, on the worlds circling Aldebaran, or inside the hero's mind while he is plugged into computerized space. The

characters are the cyborg, the evolved man, the alien being, the robot, the deracinated future man, or the citizen of the galactic empire – to say nothing of the emperor himself. How can we take any of this seriously? This has been one of the habitual complaints against science fiction, and one of the habitual concerns of its practitioners has been thinking up various ways to cajole a "willing suspension of disbelief" from their readers.

To put it in plain language: all fiction is lies. But some lies are harder to swallow than others. How can an sf writer be a good liar?

He may resort to several tricks. Early writers like Shelley, Verne and Wells begin the story in the familiar world and only gradually introduce the Creature or the Nautilus or the Martians; they buttress the fantastic about with rationalization. Later writers from Huxley to Heinlein thrust us boldly into the strange world, and treat the strangeness as if it were ordinary, hoping to convince us that, because the hero doesn't make anything of the epsilon-minus elevator operator or the drugstore stripper, such changes are natural. Others distract us with breakneck action or with carefully delineated character, slipping what explanation exists into the natural breaks that occur in any good story.

What I want to talk about, however, is something that operates independently of such tricks: the authority of a writer's voice. Listen:

The stranger came early in February one wintry day, through a biting wind and a driving snow, the last snowfall of the year, over the down, walking as it seemed from Bramblehurst railway station and carrying a little black portmanteau in his thickly gloved hand. He was wrapped up from head to foot, and the brim of his soft felt hat hid every inch of his face but the shiny tip of his nose; the snow had piled itself against his shoulders and chest, and added a white crest to the burden he carried.

- H.G. Wells, The Invisible Man

Horselover Fat's nervous breakdown began the day he got the phone call from Gloria asking if he had any Nembutals. He asked her why she wanted them and she said that she intended to kill herself. She was calling everyone she knew. By now she had fifty of them, but she needed thirty or forty more, to be on the safe side.

- Philip K. Dick, Valis

It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future. The locked and rusted gate that stood before us, with wisps of river fog threading its spikes like the mountain paths, remains in my mind now as the symbol of my exile. That is why I have begun this account of it with the aftermath of our swim, in which I, the torturer's apprentice Severian, had so nearly drowned.

- Gene Wolfe, The Shadow of the Torturer

Three weeks before they wasted Tecolutla, Dantzler had his baptism of fire. The platoon was crossing a meadow at the foot of an emerald green volcano, and being a dreamy sort, he was idling along, swatting tall grasses with his rifle barrel and thinking how it might have been a first grader with crayons who had devised this elementary landscape of a perfect cone rising into a cloudless sky, when cap-pistol noises sounded on the slope. Someone screamed for the medic, and Dantzler dove into the grass, fumbling for his ampules.

I don't think you can help but hear in these openings the voice of authority. All of these stories will eventually resort to the other devices of the sf writer to create verisimilitude, but what carries you from the first sentence of any of them, long before you know the circumstances of time and place, long before you meet the invisible man or the guild of torturers, is an overwhelming sense of common reality. There is no trace of self-doubt, no hint of apology. The writer tells you the simple truth, and no matter how much your intellect may suspect he is

making it all up, your soul reacts to the veracity in his tone. The writer is a superior liar.

Which brings up to Lucius Shepard. the last of these beginnings is from Shepard's *Salvador.* I had read one other Shepard story before I picked up the April 1984 Fantasy and Science Fiction, but it was with this paragraph that I and a lot of other people realized that this Shepard was a liar we were going to have to reckon with. The trump card that Lucius Shepard has the ability to play whenever you might otherwise think he is in danger of losing the game, is the immense conviction of his voice.

It may seem that I am making much of little here, but unless you have tried yourself to write a convincing tale about people who don't exist doing things that will never happen, you can have little idea of how hard it is to maintain this tone of authority. All stories, like all lies, have thin spots that it is necessary to skate over. To do so demands more knowledge of your background, characters, situation and action than shows on the page. It is something of a slight of hand trick to pull this off, and as with stage magicians, it calls for a degree of confidence that most people find difficult to maintain. I am not one who in general tries to put barriers of mystification between artists and audiences, but I think it is true to say that in some significant ways writers are not normal: they have by temperament and training the ability to immerse themselves in a fancy that is not real. It is something they have in common with schizophrenics. The difference is that the writer must convince us that his delusion is real, and in order to do that he must keep in mind at all times that it is false. It's a balancing act that few can manage successfully for any length of time, and still fewer can do it from their first attempt.

One of the reasons why Lucius Shepard has attracted so much attention in so short a period of time, and why, I am sure, Axolotl Press has chosen him for this book, is that he seems to have been able to perform this trick from his first appearance in print. I don't know how he got to be this good this fast. As with

most "instant successes," I suspect that it has involved years of work. I do know that he has done many things before turning to fiction writing: he dropped out of the University of North Carolina, played in several rock bands, got married, had a son, got divorced, travelled extensively, and attended the Clarion science fiction writers workshop. He has obviously read a few books, both sf and non-sf. All of these things have, I suspect, contributed to the conviction we hear in his voice.

Lucius Shepard *knows* things. Most superficially he knows how to construct a story, how to move an action along by alternations of tension and release. He knows about the cadence of words. He knows how different people speak. He knows enough science to justify a plot, and for the kind of science fiction he writes this is sufficient. He knows about magic and realism and something called Magic Realism. He also knows about life in Central America, about living on the edges of society, about war and how it feels to the soldier. More important, he knows about the strange ways men and women can twist each other, and about a certain edgy sensibility that makes them capable of doing anything no matter how monstrous or ennobling, and how they somehow keep the consequences of their actions at bay long enough to allow them to act. He knows that this is both good and bad.

I suppose his ability to convince us through his voice may be considered another kind of cheap trick. A writer like Shepard can get away with a lot because of what he knows and because of the aura of veracity he carries with him. We may come back from the date dazzled by moonbeams and romantic music, only to wake up in the morning, look back over the events of the evening, and wonder that we were taken in so easily. We felt used. But the good writer – and Lucius Shepard is a good one – uses his voice to tell us things that are worth hearing. In the case of Shepard his subject is strangely parallel to his voice. He writes about the authority that comes from authenticity in human actions, about people who, caught in a world of moral ambiguities, must make choices that determine their physical,

emotional, and moral survival. Sometimes these types of survival are put in opposition to one another, and the decisions get very hard. *Aymara* is a story about individual choice in a science fiction world where choice can make the difference between alternate versions of history. A world where the consequences of action and inaction are not clear, a world whose narrator is brought to take a desperate chance.

Lucius Shepard knows about taking chances; I suspect he is a man who has taken more than a few himself. This is evident to anyone who has read *Salvador*, or *The Jaguar Hunter*, or *The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule,* or *Green Eyes*, or *R&R*, or the story you are about to read here. The knowledge that comes from taking chances informs his character and his voice, that seductive, dangerous voice that compels our belief even when we don't particularly want to believe. Listen:

My name is William Page Corson, and I am the black sheep of the Buckingham County Corsons of Virginia. How I came to earn such disrepute relates to several months I spent in Honduras during the spring and summer of 1978...

John Kessel
Raleigh, North Carolina
March 6, 1987

Aymara

by Lucius Shepard

My name is William Page Corson, and I am the black sheep of the Buckingham County Corsons of Virginia. How I came to earn such disrepute relates to several months I spent in Honduras during the spring and summer of 1978, while doing research for a novel to be based on the exploits of an American mercenary who had played a major role in regional politics. That novel was never written, partly because I was of an age (twenty-one) at which one's concentration often proves unequal to lengthy projects, but mainly due to reasons that will be made clear – or if not made clear, then at least brought somewhat into focus – in the following pages.

One day while leafing through an old book, A Honduras Adventure by William Wells, I ran across the photograph of a blandly handsome young man with blond hair and mustache, carrying a saber and wearing an ostrich plume in his hat. The caption identified him as General Lee Christmas, and the text disclosed that he had been a railroad engineer in Louisiana until 1901, when – after three consecutive days on the job – he had fallen asleep at the wheel and wrecked his train. To avoid prosecution he had fled to Honduras, there securing employment on a fruit company railroad. One year later, soldiers of the

revolution led by General Manuel Bonilla had seized his train, and rather than merely surrendering, he had showed his captors how to armor the flatcars with sheet iron; thus protected, the soldiers had gained control of the entire north coast, and for his part in the proceedings, Christmas had been awarded the rank of general.

From other sources I learned that Christmas had taken a fine house in Tegucigalpa after the successful conclusion of the revolution, and had spent most of his time hunting in Olancho, a wilderness region bordering Nicaragua. By all accounts, he had been the prototypical good ol' boy, content with the cushy lot that had befallen him; but in 1904 something must have happened to change his basic attitudes, for it had been than that he entered the employ of the United Fruit Company, becoming in effect the company enforcer. Whenever one country or another would balk at company policy, Christmas would foment a rebellion and set a more malleable government in office; through this process, United Fruit had come to dominate Central American politics, earning the sobriquet El Pulpo (The Octopus) by virtue of its grasping tactics.

These materials fired my imagination and inflamed my leftist sensibility, and I traveled to Honduras in hopes of fleshing out the story. I soon unearthed a wealth of anecdotal detail, much of it testifying to Christmas' irrational courage: he had, for instance, once blown up a building atop which he was standing to prevent the armory in contained from falling into counter-revolutionary hands. But nowhere could I discover what event had precipitated the transformation of an affable, easy-going man into a ruthless mercenary, and an understanding of Christmas' motives was, I believed, of central importance to my book. Six weeks went by, no new knowledge came to light, and I had more or less decided to create a fictive cause for Christmas' transformation, when I heard that some of the men who had fought alongside him in 1902 might still be alive on the island of Guanoja Menor.

From the window of the ancient DC-3 that conveyed me to

Guanoja, the island resembled the cover of a travel brochure, with green hills and white beaches fringed by graceful palms; but at ground level it was revealed to be the outpost of an unrelenting poverty. Derelict shacks were tucked into the folds of the hills, animal wastes fouled the beaches, and the harbors were choked with sewage. The capital, Meachem's Landing, consisted of a few dirt streets lined with weather-beaten shanties set on pilings, and beneath them lay a carpet of coconut litter and broken glass and crab shells. Black men wearing rags glared at me as I hiked in from the airport, and their hostility convinced me that even the act of walking was an insult to the lethargic temper of the place.

I checked into the Hotel Captain Henry – a ramshackle wooden building, painted pink, with a rust-scabbed roof and an electric pole lashed to its second-story balcony – and slept until nightfall. Then I set out to investigate a lead provided by the hotel's owner: he had told me of a man in his nineties, Fred Welcomes, who lived on the road to Flowers Bay and might have knowledge of Christmas. I had not gone more than a half-mile when I came upon a little graveyard confined by a fence of corroded ironwork and overgrown with weeds from which the tops of the tombstones bulged like toadstools. Many of the stones dated from the turn of the century, and realizing that the man I was soon to interview had been a contemporary of these long-dead people, I had a sense of foreboding, of standing on the verge of a supernatural threshold. Dozens of times in the years to follow, I was to have similar apprehensions, a notion that everything I did was governed by unfathomable forces; but never was it stronger than on that night. The wind was driving glowing clouds across the moon, intermittently allowing it to shine through, causing the landscape to pulse dark to bright with the rhythm of a failing circuit, and I could feel ghosts blowing about me, hear windy voices whispering words of warning.

Welcomes' shanty sat amid a banana grove, its orange-lit windows flickering like spirits in a dark water. As I drew near, its rickety shape appeared to assemble the way details are

filled in during a dream, acquiring a roof and door and pilings whenever I noticed that it seemed to lack such, until at last it stood complete, looking every bit as dilapidated as I supposed its owner to be. I hesitated before approaching, startled by a banging shutter. Glints of moonlit silver coursed along the warp of the tin roof, and the plastic curtains twitched like the eyelids of a sleeping cat. At last I climbed the steps, knocked, and a decrepit voice responded, asking who was there. I introduced myself, explained that I was interested in Lee Christmas, and – after a considerable pause – was invited to enter.

The old man was sitting in a room lit by a kerosene lantern, and on first glance he seemed a giant; even after I had more realistically estimated his height to be about six-five, his massive hands and the great width of his shoulders supported the idea that he was larger than anyone had a right to be. It may be that this impression was due to the fact that I had expected him to be shriveled with age; but though his coal-black skin was seamed and wrinkled, he was still well-muscled: I would have guessed him to be a hale man in his early seventies. He wore a white cotton shirt, gray trousers, and a baseball cap from which the emblem had been ripped. His face was solemn and long-jawed, all its features so prominent that it looked to be a mask carved of black bone; his eyes were clouded over with milky smears, and from his lack of reaction to my movements, I came to realize he was blind.

"Well, boy," he said, apparently having gauged my youth from the timbre of my voice. "What fah you want to know 'bout Lee Christmas? You want to be a warrior?"

I switched on my pocket tape recorder and glanced around. The furniture – two chairs and a table – was rough-hewn; the bed was a pallet with some clothes folded atop it. An outdated calendar hung from the door, and mounted on the wall opposite Welcomes was a small cross of black coral: in the orange flux of the lantern light, it looked like a complex incision in the boards.

I told him about my book, and when I had done he said, "I

'spect I can help you some. I were wit' Lee from the Battle of La Ceiba 'til the peace at Comayagua, and fah a while after dat."

He began to ramble on in a direction that did not interest me, and I cut in, saying, "I've heard there was no love lost between the islanders and the Spanish. Why did they join Bonilla's revolution?"

"Dat were Lee's doin'," he said. "He promise dat dis Bonilla goin' to give us our freedom, and so he have no trouble raisin' a company. And he tell us that we ain't goin' to have no difficulty wit' de Sponnish, 'cause dey can't shoot straight." He gave an amused grunt. "Nowadays dey better at shootin', lemme tell you. But in de back-time de men of de island were by far de superior marksmen, and Lee figure if he have us wit' him, den he be able to defeat the garrison at La Ceiba. Dat were a tall order. De leader of de garrison, General Carrillo, were a man wit' magic powers. He ride a white mule and carry a golden sword, and it were said no bullet can bring him down. Many of de boys were leery, but Lee gather us on the dock and make us a speech. "Boys," he say, "you done break your mothers' hearts, but you no be breakin' mine. We goin' to come down on de Sponnish like buzzards on a sick steer, and when we through, dey goin' to be showin' to the bone.' And by de time he finish, we everyone of us was spittin' fire."

As evidenced by this recall of a speech made seventy-five years before, Welcomes' memory was phenomenal, and the longer he spoke, the more fluent and vital his narrative became. Everything I had learned about Christmas – his age (twenty-seven in 1902), his short stature, his background – all that was knitted into a whole cloth, and I began to see him as he must have been: an ignorant, cocky man whose courage stemmed from a belief that his life had been ruined and so he might as well throw what remained of it away on this joke of a revolution. And yet he had not been without hope of redemption. Like many of his countrymen, he adhered to the notion that through the application of American know-how, the inferior peoples of Central America could be brought forward into

a Star-Spangled future and civilized; I believe he nurtured the hope that he could play a part in this process.

When Welcomes reached a stopping point, I took the opportunity to ask if he knew what had motivated Christmas to enter the service of United Fruit. He mulled the question over a second or two and finally answered with a single word: "Aymara."

So, Aymara, it was then I first heard your name.

Perhaps it is passionate experience that colors memory, but I recall now that the word had the sound of a charm the old man had pronounced, one that caused the wind to gust hard against the shanty, keening in the cracks, fluttering the pages of the calendar on the door as if it, too, were a creature playing with time. But it was only a name, that of a woman whom Christmas and Welcomes had met while on a hunting trip to Olancho in 1904; specifically, a trip to the site of the ruined city of Olancho Viejo, a place founded by the Spanish in 1589 and destroyed by a mysterious explosion not fifty years thereafter. Since that day, Welcomes said, the vegetation there had grown stunted and malformed, and all manner of evil legend had attached to the area, the most notable being that a beautiful woman had been seen walking in the flames that swept over the valley. Though the city had not been rebuilt, this apparition had continued to be sighted by travelers and Indians, always in the vicinity of a cave that had been blasted into the top of one of the surrounding hills by the explosion. Christmas and Welcomes had arrived at this very hilltop during a furious storm and... Well, I will let the old man's words (edited for the sake of readability) describe what happened, for it is his story, not mine, that lies at the core of these complex events.

* * *

That wind can blow, Lord, that wind can blow! Howlin', rippin' branches off the trees, and drivin' slants of gray rain. Seem like it 'bout to blow everything back to the beginnin' and

start all over with creation. Me and Lee was leadin' the horses along the rim of the valley, lookin' for shelter and fearin' for our lives, 'cause the footin' treacherous and the drop severe. And then I spot the cave. Not for a second did I think this the cave whereof the legend speak, but when I pass through the entrance, that legend come back to me. The walls, y'see, they smooth as glass, and there were a tremble in the air like you'd get from a machine runnin' close by... 'cept there ain't no sound. The horses took to snortin' and balkin', and Lee pressed hisself flat against the wall and pointed his pistol at the dark. His hair were drippin' wet, plastered to his brow, and his eyes was big and starin'. "Fred," he says, "this here ain't no natural place."

"You no have to be tellin' me," I say, and I reckon on the shiver in my voice were plain, 'cause he grins and say, "What's the matter, Fred? Ain't you got no sand?" That were Lee's way, you understand – another man's fear always be the tonic for his own.

Just then I spy a light growin' deeper in the cave. A white light, and brighter than any star. Before I could point it out to Lee, that light shooted from the dark and pass right through me with a flash of cold. Then come another light, and another yet. Each one colder and brighter than the one previous, and comin' faster and faster, 'til it 'pears the cave brightly lit and the lights they flickerin' a little. It were so damn cold that the rainwater have froze in my hair, and I were half-blinded on top of that, but I could have swore I seen somethin' inside the light. And when the cold begin to heaten up, the light to dwindle, I made out the shape of a woman... just her shape at first, then her particulars. Slim and black-haired, she were. More than pretty, with both Spanish and Indian breedin' showin' in her face. And she wearin' a garment such as I naver seen before, but what in later years I come to recognize as a jump-suit. There were blood on her mouth and a fearful expression on her face. The light gathered 'round her in a cloud and dwindle further, fadin' and shrinkin', and right when it 'bout to fade away complete, she take a step toward us and slump to the ground.

For a moment the cave were pitch-dark, with only the wind and the vexed sounds of the horses, but directly I hear a clatter and a spark flares and I see that Lee have got one of the lanterns goin'. He kneel beside the woman and make to touch her, and I tell him, "Man, I wouldn't be doin' that. She some kinda duppy."

"Horseshit!" he say. "Ain't no such thing."

"You just seen her come a'whirlin' outta nowhere," I say. "That's the duppy way."

'Bout then the woman give out with a moan and her eyelids they flutter open. When she spot Lee bendin' to her, the muscles in her face start strainin' and she try to speak, but all that come out were this creaky noise. Finally she muster her strength and say, "Lee... Lee Christmas?" Like she ain't quite sure he's who she thinks.

Lee 'pears dumbstruck by the fact she know his name and he can't say nothin'. He glance up to me, bewildered.

"It *is* you," she say. "Thank God... thank God.: And she reach out to him, clawin' at his hand. Lee flinched some, and I expected him to go a'whirling' off with her into white light. But nothin' happen.

"Who are you?" Lee asks, and the question seem to amuse her, 'cause she laugh, and the laugh turn into a fit of coughin' that bring up more blood to her lips. "Aymara," she say after the fit pass. "My name is Aymara." Her eyes look to go blank for a second or two, and then she clutch at Lee's hand, desperate-like, and say, "You have to listen to me! You have to!"

Lee look a little desperate himself. I can tell he at sea with this whole business. But he say, "Go easy, now. I'll listen." And that calm her some. She lie back, breathin' deep, eyes closed, and Lee's starin' at her, fixated. Suddenly he give himself a shake and say, "We've got to get you some doctorin'," and try to lift her. But she fend him off. "Naw," she say. "Can't no doctor help me. I'm dyin'." She open her eyes wide as if she just realize this fact. "Listen," she say. "You know where I come from?" And Lee say, No, but he's been a'wonderin'. "The future," she tell

him. "Almost a hundred years from now. And I come all that way to see you, Lee Christmas."

Wellsir, me and Lee exchange looks, and it's clear to me that he thinks whatever happened to this here lady done 'fected her brain.

"You don't believe me!" she say in a panic. "You got to!" And she hold up her wrist and show Lee her watch. "See that? You ain't got watches like that in 1904!" I peer close and see that this watch ain't got no hands, just numbers made up of dots that flicker and change as they toll off the seconds. But it don't convince me of nothin' – I figure it's just some foreign thing. She must can tell we still don't believe her, 'cause she pull out a coupla other items to make her case. I know what them items was now – a ball point pen and a calculator – but at the time they was new to me. I still ain't convinced. He bein' from the future were a hard truth to swallow, no matter the manner of her arrival in the cave. She start gettin' desperate again, beggin' Lee to believe her, and then her features they firm up and she say, "If I ain't from the future, then how come I know you been talkin' to United Fruit 'bout doin' some soldierin' for 'em?"

This were the first I hear 'bout Lee and United Fruit, and I were surprised, 'cause Lee didn't have no use for them people. "How the hell you know that?" he asks, and she say, "I told you how. It's in the history books. And that ain't all I know." She take a reelin' off a list of names that weren't familiar to me, but – from the dumbstruck expression on Lee's face – must have meant plenty to him. I recall she mention Jacob Wettstein and Andrew Colby and Machine Gun Guy Maloney, who were to become Lee's second-in-command. And then she reel off another list, this one of battles and dates. When she finish, she clutch his hand again. "You gotta 'cept their offer, Lee. If you don't, the world gonna suffer for it."

I could tell Lee have found reason to believe from what she said, but that the idea of workin' with United Fruit didn't set well with him. "Couldn't nothin' good come of that," he say.

"Them boys at the fruit company ain't got much in mind but fillin' their pockets."

"It's true," she say. "The company they villains, but sometimes you gotta do the wrong thing for to 'chieve the right result. And that's what *you* gotta do. 'Less you help 'em, 'less America takes charge down here, the world's gonna wind up in a war that might just be the end of it."

I know this strike a chord in Lee, what with him always carryin' on 'bout good ol' American ingenuity bein' the salvation of the world. But he don't say nothin'.

"You gotta trust me," she say. "Everything depends 'pon you trustin' me and doin' what I say. I come all this way, knowin' I were bound to die of it, just to tell you this, to make sure you'd do what's necessary. You think I'd do that to tell you a lie?"

"Naw," he says. "I s'pose not." But I can see he still havin' his doubts.

She sigh and look worried and then she start explainin' to us that the machine what brought her have gone haywire and set her swayin' back and forth through time like a pendulum. Back to the days of the Conquistador and into the future an equal ways. She tell us 'bout watchin' the valley explode and the old city crumblin' and finally she say, "I only have a glimpse of the future, of what's ahead of my time, and I won't lie, it were too quick for me to have much sense of it. But I have a feelin' from it, a feelin' of peace and beauty... like a perfume the world's givin' off. When I 'cepted this duty, I thought it were just to make sure things wouldn't work out worse than they has, but now I know somethin' glorious is goin' to come, somethin' you never would 'spect to come of all the bloodshed and terror of history."

It were the 'spression on her face at that moment – like she's still havin' that feelin' of peace – that's what put my doubts to rest. It weren't nothin' she coulda faked. Lee he seemed moved by it, but maybe he's stuck with thinkin' she's addled, 'cause he say, "If you from the future, you tell me some more 'bout my life."

A shudder pass through her, and for a second I think we gonna lose her then and there. But she gather herself and say, "You gonna marry a woman named Anna and have two daughters, one by her and one by another woman."

Not many knew Lee were in love with Anna Towers, the daughter of an indigo grower in Truxillo, and even less knew 'bout his illegitimate daughter. Far as I concerned, this sealed the matter, but Aymara didn't understand the weight of what she'd said and kept goin'.

"You gonna die of a fever in Puerto Cortez," she says, "in the year... "

"No!" Lee held up his hand. "I don't wanna hear that."

"Then you believe me."

"Yes," he say. "I do."

For a while there weren't no sound 'cept the keenin' of the wind from the cave mouth. Lee were downcast, studyin' the backs of his hands like he were readin' there some sorry truth, and Aymara were glum herself, like she were sad he did believe her. "Will you do it?" she asks.

Lee give a shrug. "Do I have a choice?"

"Maybe not," she tell him. "Maybe this how it have to be. One of the men who... who help send me here, he claim the course of time can't be changed. But I couldn't take the chance he were wrong." She wince and swallow hard. "Will you do it?"

"Hell," he say after mullin' it over. "Guess I ain't got no better thing to do. Might as well go soldierin' awhile."

She search his face to see if he lyin'... 'least that's how it look to me. "Swear to it," she say, takin' his hand. "Swear you'll do it."

"All right," he say. "I swear. Now you rest easy."

He try doctorin' her some, wettin' down her brow and such, but nothin' come of it. Somethin' 'bout the manner of travel, she say, have tore up her insides, and there's no fixin' 'em. It 'pear to me she just been hangin' on to drag that vow outta Lee, and now he done it, she let go and start slippin' away. Once she make a rally, and she tell us more 'bout her journey, sayin' the

strange feelin's that sweep over her come close to drivin' her mad. I think Lee's doubtin' her again, 'cause he ask another question or two 'bout the future. But it seem she answer to his satisfaction. Toward the end she take to talkin' crazy to someone who ain't there, callin' him Darlin' and sayin' how she sorry. Then she grab hold of Lee and beg him not to go back on his word.

"I won't," he say. But I think she never hear him, 'cause as he speak blood come gushin' from her mouth and she sag and look to be gazin' into nowhere.

Lee didn't hardly say nothin' for a long time, and then it's only after the storm have passed and he concerned with makin' a grave. We put her down near the verge of the old city, and once she under the earth, Lee ask me to say a little somethin' over her. So I utter up a prayer. It were strange tryin' to talk to God with the ruined tower of the cathedral loomin' above, all ivied and crumblin', like a sign that no prayers would be answered.

"What you gonna do?" I ask Lee as he saddlin' up.

He shake his head and tighten the cinch. "What would you do, Fred?"

"I guess I wouldn't want to be messin' with them fruit company boys," I say. "They takes things more serious than I likes."

"Ain't that the truth," he say. He look over to me, and it seem all the hollows in his face has deepened. "But maybe I ain't been takin' things serious enough." He worry his lip. "You really think she from the future?" He ask this like he wantin' to have me say, No.

"I think she from somewhere damn strange," I say. "The future sound 'bout as good as anything."

He scuff the ground with his heel. "Pretty woman," he say. "I guess it ain't reasonable she just throw her life away for nothin'."

I reckon he were right.

"Jesus Christ!" He smack his saddle. "I wish I could just forget alla 'bout her."

"Well, maybe you can," I tell him. "A man can forget 'bout most anything with enough time."

"I never should have say that, 'cause it provide Lee with somethin' to act contrary to, with a reason to show off his pride, and it could be that little thing I say have tripped the scales of his judgement.

"Maybe *you* can forget it," he say testily. "But not me. I ain't 'bout to forget I give my word." He swing hisself up into the saddle and set his horse prancin' with a jerk of the reins. Then he grin. "Goddamn it, Fred! Let's go! If we gotta win the world for ol' United Fruit, we better get us a move on!"

And with that, we ride up from the valley and into the wild and away from Aymara's grave, and far as I know, Lee never did take a backward glance from that day forth, so busy he were with his work of forgin' the future.

I asked questions, attempting to clarify certain points, the exact date of the encounter among other things, but of course I did not believe Welcomes. Despite his aura of folksy integrity, I knew that Guanoja was rife with storytellers, men who would stretch the truth to any dimension for a price, and I assumed Welcomes to be one of these. Yet I was intrigued by what I perceived as the pathos surrounding the story's invention. Here was the citizen of a country long oppressed by the economic policies of the United States, who – in order to earn a tip from an American tourist (I had given him twenty *lempira* upon the conclusion of his tale) – had created a fable that exonerated the United States from guilt and laid the blame for much of Central America's brutal history upon the shoulders of a mystical woman from the future. On returning to my hotel, I typed up sections of the story and seeded them throughout a longer piece that documented various of Christmas' crimes along with others committed by his successors. I entitled the piece "Aymara," and the following day I sent it off to *Mother Jones*, having no real expectations that it would see print.

But "Aymara" *was* published, as was my next piece, and the

next... And so began a journalistic career that has lasted these sixteen years.

During those years, my espousal of left-wing causes and the ensuing notoriety inspired my family to break off all connections with me (they preferred not to acknowledge that I also lent my support to populist rebellions against Soviet-sponsored regimes). I was not offended by their action; in fact, I took it for a confirmation of the rightness of my course, since – with their stock portfolios and mausoleum-like homes and born-again conservatism – they were as nasty a pack of capitalist rats as one could meet. I traveled to Argentina, South Africa, The Phillipines, to any country that offered the scenario of a superpower-backed dictatorship and masses of the oppressed, and I wired back stories that sought to undermine the Commie-hating mentality engendered by the Reagan years. I admit that my zeal was occasionally misplaced, that I was used at times by corrupt men who passed themselves off as populist leaders. And I will further admit that in some cases I was motivated less by passionate concern than by a desire to increase my own legend. I had, you see, become a media figure. My photograph was featured on the covers of national magazines concomitant with such headings as "William Corson and the New Journalism"; my books made the best-seller lists; talk shows pestered my agent. But despite the glitter, I truly cared about the causes I espoused. Perhaps I cared too much. Perhaps – like Lee Christmas – I made the mistaken assumption that my American citizenship was a guarantee of wisdom superior to that of the peoples whom I tried to help. In retrospect, I can see that the impulses that provoked my writing of "Aymara" were no less ingenuous, no more informed, than those that inspired his career; but this is an irony I do not choose to dwell upon.

In January of 1994, I returned to Guanoja. The purpose of the trip was partly for a vacation, my first in many years, and also to satisfy a nostalgic whim to visit the place where my career had begun. The years had brought little change to Meachem's Landing. True, there was now a jetport outside of town, and a

few of the shanty bars had been replaced by more pricey watering holes of concrete block; but it remained essentially the same confluence of dirt streets lined with weathered shacks and populated by raggedly dressed blacks. The most salient differences were the gaggle of lower-echelon Honduran civil servants who spent each day hunched over their typewriters on the second-story verandah of the Hotel Captain Henry; churning out reams of officialese, and the alarming number of CIA agents; cold-eyed, patently anonymous men who could be seen sitting in the bars, gazing moodily toward Nicaragua and the Red Menace. War was in the offing, its onset as inevitable as the approach of a season, and this, too, was a factor in my choice of a vacation spot. I had received word of a mysterious military installation on the Honduran mainland, and – after having nosed around Washington for several weeks – I had been invited to inspect this installation. The Pentagon apparently wanted to assure me of its harmlessness and thus prevent their benign policies from being besmirched by more of my yellow journalism.

After checking into the hotel, I walked out past the town to the weedy little graveyard, where I expected I would find a stone marking the remains of Fred Welcomes. There was, indeed, such a stone, and I was startled to learn that he had survived until 1990, dying at the age of 106. I had assumed that he could not have lived much past the date of my interview with him, and the fact that he had roused my guilt. All my good fortune was founded upon his eloquent lie, and I could have done a great deal to ease his decline. I leaned against the rusted fence, thinking that I was no better than the businessmen whose exploitative practices I had long decried, that I had mined gold from the old man's imagination and given him a pittance in return. I was made so morose that later the same night, unable to achieve peace of mind, I set out on a drunk... at least this was my intent.

Across the street from the hotel was a two-story building of white stucco with faded lettering above the door that read

Maud Price's Golden Dream. I remembered Maud from my previous trip – a fat, black woman who had kept an enormous turtle in a tin washtub and would entertain herself by feeding it chicken necks and watching it eat – and I was saddened to discover that she, too, had passed away. Her daughter was now the proprietor, and I was pleased to find that she had maintained Maud's inimitable decor. Strung across the ceiling were dozens upon dozens of man-shaped paper dolls, colored red and black, and these cast magical-looking shadows on the walls by the light of two flickering lanterns. Six wooden tables, a bar atop which rested a venerable stereo that was grinding out listless reggae, and a number of framed photographs whose glass was too flyspecked to permit easy observation of the subject matter. I ordered a beer, a Salvavida, and was preparing for a bout of drunken self-abnegation, when I noticed a young woman staring at me from the rear table. On meeting my eyes, she showed no sign of embarrassment and held her gaze steady for a long moment before turning back to the magazine she had been reading. Even in that dim light, I could see she was beautiful. Slim, long-limbed, with a honeyed complexion. Curls of black hair hung over the front of her white blouse, their shapes as elegant as the tail feathers of exotic birds. Her face... I could tell you that she had large, dark eyes and high cheekbones, that her features had an impassive Indian cast. But that does nothing more than to define her by type and illuminates her not at all. This was a woman with whom I was soon to be in love, if I was not somewhat in love with her already, and the most difficult thing in the world to describe is the face of your lover, because though it is familiar in every detail, it tends to become a mirror of your devotion, to reflect the ideals of passion, and thus is less a human face than the face of love itself.

I continued to watch her, and after a while she looked up again and smiled. There was no way I could ignore this contact. I walked over, introduced myself (in Spanish, which I assumed to be her native tongue), and asked if I could join her. "Why

not?" she replied in English, and after I had taken a seat, she pushed her magazine toward me, pointing to an inset photograph of me, one snapped some years before when I had worn a mustache. "I thought it was you," she said. "You look much more handsome clean-shaven."

Her name, she told me, was Ivie Solis. She was employed by a travel agency in La Ceiba and was on a working vacation, having arrived the day before. We talked of this and that, nothing of consequence, but the air between us seemed to crackle. Everything about her, everything she did, struck a chord within me, and I was mesmerized by her movements, entranced, as if she were a magician who might at any moment loose a flight of birds from her fingertips.

Eventually the conversation turned to my work, of which she had read the lion's share, and she told me that her favorite piece was my first, "Aymara." I expressed surprise that she had seen it – it had never been reprinted – and she explained that her parents had run a small hotel catering to American tourists, and the magazine had been left in one of the rooms. "It had the feel of being part of a puzzle," she said. "Or the answer to a riddle."

"It seems fairly straightforward to me," I said.

She tucked a curl behind her ear, a gesture I was coming to recognize as characteristic. "That's because you didn't believe the old man's story."

"And you did?"

"I didn't leap to disbelief as you did." She settled back in her chair, picking at the label of her beer bottle. "I guess I just like thinking about what motivated that woman."

"Obviously," I said, "according to the logic of the story, she came from a world worse off than this one and was hoping to initiate a course of events that would improve it."

"I thought that myself at first," she said. "But it *doesn't* fit the logic of the story. Don't you remember? She knew what would happen to Christmas. His military career, his triumphs. If she'd come from a world in which those things hadn't occurred,

she wouldn't have had knowledge of them."

"So... " I began.

"I think," she cut in, "that if she did exist, she came from this world. That she knew she would have to sacrifice herself in order to ensure that Christmas did as he did. It may be that your article was the agency that informed her of that duty."

"Even if that's the case," I said, "why would she have tried to inspire Christmas' crimes? Why wouldn't she have tried to make him effect good works? Perhaps she could have destroyed United Fruit."

"That would be the last thing she'd want. Don't you see? If her actions were politically motivated, she would understand that before real change could occur, the circumstances, the conditions of life under American rule, would have to be so oppressive that violent change would become a viable option. Revolution. She'd realize that Christmas' violences were necessary. They set the tone for American policies and licensed subsequent violence. She'd be afraid that if Christmas didn't work for United Fruit, the process of history that set the stage for revolution might be slowed down or negated. Perhaps the American stranglehold might be achieved with such subtlety that change would be forever impossible."

She spoke these words with marked intensity, and I believe I realized then that there was more to Ivie than met the eye. Her logic was the logic of terrorism, the justification of bloodshed in terms of its consciousness-raising effects. But I was so intent upon her as a woman, I scarcely noticed the implication of what she had said.

"Well," I said, "given that your scenario is accurate, it still doesn't make sense. The idea of time travel, of tinkering with the past... it's absurd. Too many paradoxes are involved. What you're supposing isn't a chain of events wherein one action predicates another. It's a loop, a metaphysical knot tied in reality, linking my article and some woman and a man years dead. There's no end, no beginning. Things don't work that way."

"They don't?" She lowered her eyes and traced a design in the moisture on the table. "It seems to me that life *is* paradox. Things occur without apparent reason between nations." She looked up at me. "Between people. Perhaps there are reasons, but they are impossible to unravel or define. And dealing with such an unreasonable quantity as time, I wouldn't expect it to be anything other than paradoxical."

We moved on to other topics, and shortly afterward we left the bar and walked along the road to Flowers Bay. A few hundred yards past the last shanty, at a point where the road meandered close to the shore and the sea lay calm beneath a sheen of starlight, visible through a labyrinthine fringe of mangrove, there I kissed her. It was the kind of kiss that holds a lifetime of promise, tentative, then growing more assured and involving as the contact surpasses all your expectations. I had thought kisses like that existed solely in the province of romance novels, and on discovering this was not so, all my cynicism was dissolved and I fell wholly in love with Ivie Solis.

I do not propose to detail our affair, the evolution of our feelings. While these things seemed to me remarkable, I doubt they were more so than the interactions of any other pair of lovers, and they are pertinent to my story only in the volatility that attached to our moments together. Despite Ivie's thesis that love – like time – was an inexplicable mystery, I sought to explain it to myself and decided that because I had never had any slack in my life, because I had never allowed myself the luxury of deep emotional involvement, I had therefore been ripe for the picking. I might, I told myself, have fallen in love with anyone. Ivie had simply been the first acceptable candidate to happen along. All I knew of her aside from her work and place of birth were a few bits and pieces: that she was twenty-seven; that she had attended the University of Miami; that – like most Hondurans – she resented the American presence in her country; that she had a passion for coconut candy and enjoyed the works of Manuel Puig. How, I wondered, could I be obsessed with someone about whose background I was almost

completely ignorant. And yet perhaps my depth of feeling was enhanced by this lack of real knowledge. Things are often most alluring when they are not quite real, when your contact with them is brief and intense, and in the light of the mind they acquire the vividity and artfulness of a dream.

We spent nearly every moment of every day in each other's company, and most of this in making love. My room, our clothing, smelled of sex, and we became such a joke to the old woman who cleaned the hotel that whenever she saw us she would let loose with gales of laughter. The only times we were apart were an hour or so each afternoon when Ivie would have to perform her function as a travel agent, securing – she said – cheap group rates from various resorts that would be offered by her firm to American skin-divers. On most of these occasions I would pace back and forth, impatient for her return. But then, ten days after we had initiated the affair, thinking I might as well make some use of the interval, I rented a car and drove to Spanish Harbor, a small town up the coast where there had lately been several outbreaks of racial violence, highly untypical for Guanoja; I was interested in determining whether or not these incidents were related to the martial atmosphere that had been gathering about the island.

By the time I arrived in the town, which differed from Meachem's Landing hardly at all, having a larger harbor and perhaps a half a dozen more streets, I was thirsty, and I stopped in a tourist restaurant for a beer. This particular restaurant, The Treasure Chest, consisted of a small room done up in pirate decor that was fronted by a cement deck where patrons sat beneath striped umbrellas. Standing at the bar, I had a clear view of the deck, and as I sipped my beer, wondering how best to pursue my subject, I spotted Ivie sitting at a table near the railing. With her was a man wearing a gray business suit. I assumed him to be a resort owner, but when he turned to signal a waiter, I recognized him by his hawkish features and fringe of salt-and-pepper beard to be Abimael Sotomayor, the leader of *Sangre y Verdad* (Blood and Truth), one of the most extreme

of Latin American terrorist groups. I had twice interviewed him and I knew his for a charismatic and scary man, a poet who excelled at torture, whose followers performed quasi-mystical blood rituals in his name prior to each engagement. The sight of him with Ivie numbed me, and I began to construct rationalizations that would explain her presence in innocent terms. But none of my rationalizations held water.

I left the restaurant and drove full-tilt back to Meachem's Landing, where I bribed the cleaning woman into admitting me to Ivie's room. It was identical to mine, with gray boards and a metal cot and a night table covered in plastic and a single window that opened onto the second-story verandah. I began by searching the closet, but found only shoes and clothing, apparel quite in keeping with her purported job. Her overnight case contained make-up, and the rest of her luggage was empty... or so it appeared. But as I hefted one of the suitcases, preparing to stow it beneath the cot, I realized it was heavier than it should have been. I laid it on the cot and before long I located the catch that opened a false bottom; inside was a machine pistol.

I sat staring at the gun. It was an emblem of Ivie's complicity with an organization so violent that even I, who sympathized with their cause, was repelled by their actions. Yet despite this, I found I loved her no less; I only feared that she did not love me, that she was using me. And, too, I feared for her: the fact that she was at the least an associate of *Sangre y Verdad* offered little hope of a happy ending for the two of us. Finally I replaced the false bottom, restored the suitcase to its original spot beneath the cot and went to my room to wait for Ivie.

That night I said nothing about the gun, rather I tested Ivie in a variety of ways, trying to learn whether or not her affections for me were fraudulent. Not only did she pass every test, but I came to understand much about her that had been puzzling me. I realized that her distracted silences, her deferential attitude concerning the future, her vague references to "responsibilities," all these were symptomatic of the difficulty

our relationship was causing her, the contrary pulls exerted by her two passions. Throughout the night, I kept thinking of horror stories I had heard about *Sangre y Verdad*, but I loved Ivie too much to judge her. How could I – a citizen of the country which had created the conditions that bred organizations like Sotomayor's – ever hope to fathom the pressures that had brought her to this pass?

For the next three days, knowing that our time together was likely to be brief, I tried to put politics from mind. Those days were nearly perfect. We swam, we danced, we rented a dory and rowed out past the reef and threw out lines and caught silkfish, satinfish, fish that gleamed iridescent red and blue and yellow, like talismans of our own brilliance. Yet despite our playfulness, our happiness, I was constantly aware that the end could not be far off.

Four days after her meeting with Sotomayor, Ivie told me she had an appointment that evening, one that might last two or three hours; her nervous manner informed me that something important was in the works. At eight o'clock she drove along the road to Flowers Bay, and I tailed her in my rented car, maintaining a discreet distance, my headlights dark. She parked by the side of the road a mile past Welcomes' shanty, and seeing this, I pulled my car into a thicket and continued on foot.

It was a moonless night, but the stars were thick, their light revealing every shadowy rut, silhouetting the palms and mangrove. Mosquitoes whined in my ear; the sound of waves on the reef came as a faint hiss. A couple of hundred feet beyond Ivie's car stood a largish shanty set among a stand of cocals. Several cars were parked out front, and two men were lounging by the door, obviously on sentry duty. Orange light flickered in the window. I eased through the brush, making my way toward the rear of the shanty, and after ascertaining that no guards were posted there, I duckwalked across a patch of open ground and flattened against the wall. I could hear many voices speaking at once, none of them intelligible. I inched along the wall to the window whose shutter was cracked open. Through

the gap I spotted Sotomayor sitting atop a table, and beside him, a thin, agitated-looking man of thirty-five or so, with prematurely gray hair. I could see none of the others, but judging by their voices, I guessed there to be at least a dozen men and women present.

With a peremptory gesture, Sotomayor signaled for quiet. "I would much have preferred to use my organization alone," he said. "But Doctor Dobler" – he acknowledged the gray-haired man with a nod – "insisted that the entire spectrum of the left be included and I had no choice but to agree. However, in the interests of security, I wish to limit participation in this operation to those in this room. And, since some of you are unknown to the rest, I suggest that we not increase our intimacy by an exchange of names. Let us choose false names. Simple ones, if you please." He smoothed back his hair, glancing around at his audience. "As I am to lead, I will take a military rank for my name." He smiled. "And as I am not overly ambitious, you may refer to me as the Sergeant." Laughter. "Perhaps if we are successful, I will receive a promotion."

Each of the men and women – there were fourteen in all – selected a name, and I heard Ivie say, "Aymara."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled to hear it, but knowing her fascination with my article, I did not think it an unexpected choice.

"Very well," said Sotomayor, all business now. "The matter under consideration is the American military project known as Longshot."

I was startled – Longshot was the code name of the installation I was soon to inspect.

"For some months," Sotomayor went on, "we have been hearing rumors concerning Longshot, none likely to inspire confidence in our neighbors to the north. We have been unable to substantiate the rumors, but this situation has changed. Doctor Dobler was until recently one of the coordinators of the project. He has come to us at great personal risk, because he believes there is terrible danger associated with Longshot, and

because, with our lack of bureaucratic impediments, he believes we may be the only ones capable of acting swiftly enough to forestall disaster. I will let him explain the rest."

Sotomayor stepped out of view, leaving the floor to Dobler, who looked terrified. Thinking what it must have taken for him to venture forth from his ivory tower and out among the bad dogs, I awarded him high marks for guts. He cleared his throat. "Project Longshot is essentially an experiment in temporal displacement... that is to say, time travel."

This sparked a babble, and Sotomayor called for quiet. I wished I could have seen Ivie's face, wanting to know if she were as stunned and frightened as I was.

"The initial test is to be conducted twenty-three days from now," said Dobler. "We have every reason to believe it will succeed, because evidence exists in the past... " He broke off, appearing confused. "There's so much to... " His eyes darted left to right. "I'm sorry, I... "

"Please be calm," advised Sotomayor. "You're among friends."

Dobler squared his shoulders. "I'm all right," he said, and drew a deep breath. "The site of the project is a hill overlooking the ruins of Olancho Viejo, a colonial city destroyed in 1623 by an explosion. I say 'explosion,' but I believe I can safely state that it was not an explosion in the typical sense of the word. For one thing, eyewitness accounts testify that while, indeed, some of the buildings were blown apart, others appeared to crumble, to collapse into powder and chunks of rotten stone, the result of being washed over by a wave of blinding white radiance. Of course these accounts were written by superstitious men – mainly priests – and are thus suspect. Some tell of a beautiful woman walking in the midst of the light, but I think we can attribute that to the Catholic propensity for seeing the Virgin in moments of stress." This elicited a few chuckles, and Dobler was braced by the response. "However, allied with readings we have taken, with other anomalies we've discovered on and near the site, it's evident that the destruction of Olancho Viejo was a direct result of our experiment. Though our target is in the

1920s, it seems that the displacement will create a kind of shockwave that will produce dire effects three-hundred-and-sixty years in the past."

"How does that affect us?" someone asked.

"I'll get to that in a minute," said Dobler. He was warming to his task, becoming the model of an enthused lecturer. "First it's important you understand that although the initial experiment will merely consist of the displacement of a few laboratory animals and some mineral specimens, plant life, and so forth, the target purpose of the project is the manipulation of the past through assassination and other means."

Expressions of outrage from the gathering.

"Wait!" said Dobler. "That's not what you should be worried about, because I don't think it's possible."

"Why not?" A woman's voice.

"I really don't think I could explain it to you," said Dobler. "The mathematics are too complex... and my conclusions, I admit, are arguable. Several of my colleagues are in complete disagreement; they believe the past *can* be altered. But I'm convinced otherwise. Time, according to my mathematical model, has a fixed shape. It is not simply a process that affects physical objects; it has its own spectrum of physical events, all on the particulate level, and it is the isolation of this spectrum that will allow us to displace objects into the past." He must have been the focus of bewildered stares, for he threw up his hands in helplessness. "The language isn't capable of conveying an accurate explanation. Suffice it to say, that in my opinion, any attempt to alter the course of history will fail, because the physical potentials of time will compensate for that alteration."

"It sounds to me," said Sotomayor, "as if you're embracing the doctrine of predestination."

"That's a rather murky analogue," said Dobler. "But, yes, I suppose I am."

"Then why are you asking us to stop something which, according to you, cannot be stopped? If evidence exists that the

experiment was carried out, we can do nothing... at least if we are to accept your logic."

"As I stated, I may be wrong in this," said Dobler. "In which case, an attack on the project might succeed. But even if time does prove to be unalterable, what is unalterable in this circumstance is the destruction of Olancho Viejo. It's possible that our experiment can be stopped, and the malleability of time will enlist some other causal agent."

"There's something I don't understand." Ivie's voice. "If you are correct about the unalterability of time, what do we have to fear?"

"For every action," said Dobler, "there must be a reaction. The action will be the experiment. One small part of the reaction can be observed in what happened three centuries ago. But my figures show that the greater part of the reaction will occur in the present. I've gone over and over the equations, and there's no error." Dobler paused, summoning thought. "I've no idea what form this end of the reaction will take. It may be similar to the explosion in 1623; it may be entirely different. We know nothing about the forces involved... except how to trigger them and how to perform a few simple tricks. But I'm sure of one thing. The reaction will affect matter on the subatomic levels and it will be on the order of a billion times more extensive than what happened in 1623. I doubt anything will survive it."

A silence ensued, broken at last by Sotomayor. "Have you shown these equations to your colleagues?"

"Of course." Dobler gave a despairing laugh. "They believe they've solved the problem by constructing a containment chamber. It's a solution comparable to wrapping a blanket around a nuclear device."

"How can we discount their opinion?" someone asked.

"Look," said Dobler, peeved. "Unless you can understand the mathematics involved, there's no way I can prove my case. I believe my colleagues are too excited about the project to accept the fact that it's potentially disastrous. But what does it mean

for me to tell you that? The best evidence I can give you is the fact that I am here, that I have in effect thrown away my career in order to warn you." He looked at the floor. "Though perhaps I can offer one further proof."

They began to bombard him with questions, most of them challenging in tone, and – concerned that the meeting might suddenly break up and my car be discovered – I slipped away from the window and headed back toward town.

It is a measure, I believe, of the foolishness of love that I was less worried about the fate of the world than about Ivie's possible involvement in the events of Welcomes' story, a story I was now hard put to disbelieve; it seemed I was operating under the assumption that if Ivie and I could work things out, everything else would fall into place around us. I drove back to the hotel, waited a while, and then, deciding that I wanted to talk to her somewhere more private, somewhere an argument – I thought one likely – would not be overheard, I left a note asking her to meet me on the far side of the island, at an abandoned construction site a short ways up the beach from St. Mark's Key – the skeleton of a large house belonging to the estate of an American who had died shortly after work had begun. This site was of special moment for Ivie and me. It was set back from the shore, hidden from prying eyes by dense growths of palms and sea grape and cashew trees, and we had made love there on several occasions. By the time I reached it, the moon had risen and the unfinished house – with its gapped walls and skewed beams and free-standing doorways – had the look of a surreal maze of silver light and shadow. Sitting inside it on the ground floor, I felt it was an apt metaphor for the labyrinthine complexity of the situation.

Until that moment, I had not brought my concentration to bear on this complexity, and now, trying to unravel the problem, I found I could not do so. The circumstances of Welcomes' story, of Dobler's, Ivie's, and my own... all this smacked of magical serendipity and was proof against logic. Time, which had

always been for me a commodity, something to be saved and expended, seemed to have been revealed as a vast fabulous presence cloaked in mystery and capable of miracles, and I had as little hope of comprehending its processes as I would those of a star winking overhead. Less, actually. I attempted to narrow my focus, to consider separate pieces of the puzzle, beginning with what Welcomes had told me. Assuming it was true, I saw how it explained much I had not previously given thought to. Christmas' courage, for instance. Knowing that he would die of a fever would have made him immune of fear in battle. All the pieces fit together with the same irrational perfection. It was only the whole, the image they comprised, that was inexplicable.

At last I gave it up and sat staring at the white combers piling in over the reef, listening to the scattery hiss of lizards running in the beach grass, watching the colored lights of the resort on St. Mark's Key flicker as palm fronds were blown across them by the salt breeze. I must have sat this way an hour before I heard a car engine; a minute later, Aymara – so I had been thinking of her – walked through the frame of the front door and sat beside me. "Let's not stay here," she said, and kissed me on the cheek. "I'd like a drink. In the moonlight her face looked to have been carved more finely, and her eyes were aswim with silvery reflections.

I could not think how to begin. Finally, settling on directness, I said, "Did you know what Dobler was going to tell you? Is that why you chose the name Aymara?"

She pulled back from me, consternation on her features. "How... " she said; and then: "You followed me. You shouldn't have done that."

"Why the hell not?" Anger over her betrayal, her subterfuge, suddenly took precedence over my concern for her. "How else am I going to keep track of who's who in the revolution these days?"

"You could have been killed," she said flatly.

"Right!" I said, refusing to let her lack of emotionality subdue

me. "God knows, Sotomayor might have had you drink my blood for a nightcap! What the hell possessed you to get involved with him?"

"I'm not involved with him!" she said, her own temper surfacing.

"You're not with *Sangre y Verdad* ?"

"No, the FDLM."

I was relieved – the FDLM was the most populist and thus the most legitimate element of the Honduran left. "You haven't answered my first question," I said. "Why did you choose that name?"

"I was thinking of you. That's all it was. But now... I don't know."

"You're going to do it, aren't you? Play out the story?" I slugged my thigh in frustration. "Jesus Christ! Sotomayor will kill you if he finds out! And Dobler, he might be a crazy! A CIA plant! Right now he's... "

"You didn't stay until the end?" she cut in.

"No."

"He's dead," she said. "He told us that if we attacked, we should destroy all the computers and records, anyone who had knowledge of the process. He said that when he was younger, he would have supported any evil whose goal was the increase of knowledge, but now he had uncovered knowledge that he couldn't control and he couldn't live with that. He said he hoped what he intended to do would prove something to us. Then he went onto the porch and shot himself."

I sat stunned, picturing that nervous little man and his moment of truth.

"I believe him," she said. "Everyone did. I doubt we would have otherwise."

"Sotomayor would have believed him no matter what," I said. "He yearns for disaster. He'd find the end of the world an erotic experience."

"I shouldn't have to explain to you what produces men like Abimael," she said stiffly. She reached behind her to – I

assumed – adjust the waistband of her skirt. "Are you going to inform on us?"

Her voice was tremulous, her expression strained, and she continued holding her hand behind her back; it was an awkward posture, and I began to suspect her reasons for maintaining it. "What have you got there?" I asked, knowing the answer.

A car passed on the beach, its headlights throwing tattered leaf shadows over the beams.

"What if I said I *was* going to inform on you?"

She lowered her eyes, sighed and brought forth a small caliber automatic; after a second she let it fall to the floor. She studied it despondently, as if it were a failed something for which she had entertained high hopes. "I'm sorry," she said. I'm... " She put her hand to her brow, covering her eyes.

The gun showed a negative black against the planking, an ugly brand marring the smooth grain. I picked it up. Its cold weight fueled my anger, and I heaved it into the shadows.

"I love you." She trailed her fingers across my arm, but I refused to speak or turn to her. "Please, believe me! It's just I don't know what to do anymore." Her voice broke, and it seemed I could smell her tears.

"It's all right." My voice was harsh, burred with anger.

We sat in silence. The crunch of waves on the reef built louder, the wind seethed in the palm crowns, and faint music from the resort added a fractured tinkling – I felt that the things of nature were losing definition, blending into a dissolute melodic rush. Finally I asked her what she intended to do, and she said, "I doubt my intentions matter. I don't think I can avoid going back."

"To 1902? Is that what you mean?" I said this helplessly, sensing the gravity of events sweeping toward us like a huge dark fist. "How can you even consider it? You heard Dobler, you know the dangers."

"I don't believe it's dangerous. Only inevitable."

I turned to her then, ready with protests, arguments. Christ,

she was beautiful! It was as if tears had washed her clean of a film, exposed a new depth of beauty. The words caught in my throat.

"Just before Dobler killed himself," she said, "I asked him what he thought time was. He'd been talking about it as a mathematical entity, but I had the idea he wasn't saying what he really felt, and I wanted to know everything he did... because I was afraid. It seemed something magical was happening, that I was being drawn into some incomprehensible scheme." She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "Dobler said that when he had begun to develop his equations, he'd had a feeling like mine. 'An apprehension of the mystical,' he called it. There was something hypnotic about the equations... they reminded him of mantras the way they affected him. The further his work progressed, the more he came to think of time – its event spectrum – as evidence of divinity. Its basic operation, its mechanics. Abimael laughed at this and asked if he was talking about God. And Dobler said that if by God he meant a stable energy system governing the actions of all matter on a sub-atomic level, then yes, that's exactly what he was talking about."

I wanted to refute this, but it was so similar to my own thoughts concerning the nature of time, I could not muster a contrary word.

"You feel it, too," she said. "Don't you?"

I took her by the shoulders. "Let's leave here. Tonight. We can hire a boat to run us over to La Ceiba, and by tomorrow... "

She put a finger to my lips, then kissed me. The kiss deepened, and from that point on I lost track of what happened. One moment we were sitting on the floor of that skeleton house, and the next – our clothes magicked away – we were lying in the grass behind the house, in a tiny clearing bordered by banana trees. The way Ivie's hair was fanned out around her head, its color merging with the dark grass, she looked to be a pale female bloom sprouting from the sandy soil, and her skin felt like the moonlight, smooth, coated with a cool emulsion. I

thought I could taste the moonlight on the tips of her breasts. She guided me between her legs, her expression grave, focused on the act, and as I entered her she arched her neck, staring up into the banana leaves, and cried, "Oh, God!" as if she saw there some enrapturing presence. But I knew to whom she was really crying out. To that sensation of heat and weakness that enveloped us, sheltered us. To that sublimation of hope and fear into a pour of pure desiring. To that strange thoughtless and self-adoring creature we became, all hip and mouth and heart. *That* was God.

Afterward as we dressed, among the sibilant noises and wind and sea, I heard a sharper noise, a click. But before I could categorize it, I put it from mind. My head was full of plans. I would knock Ivie out, drug her, carry her off to the States. I would allow the guerrillas to destroy the project, and at the last moment come swinging out of nowhere and snatch her to safety. I envisioned even more improbable heroics. Strong with love, all these plans seemed workable to me.

We walked around the side of the house, hand in hand, and I did not notice the figure standing in the shadow of a cashew tree until it spoke, saying "Aymara!" Ivie gave a shriek of alarm, and I stepped in front of her, shielding her. The figure moved forward, and I saw it was Sotomayor, his sharp features set in a grim expression, his neatly trimmed beard looking fake in the moonlight. He stopped about six feet away, training a pistol on us, and fixed Ivie with a contemptuous stare. "*Puta* !" he said. He pulled something from his pocket and flung it at our feet. A folded piece of paper with writing on it. "You should be more discreet in your correspondence," he said to me.

"Listen..., " I began.

He swung the pistol to cover my forehead. "You may have value as a hostage," he said. "But I wouldn't rely on that. I don't like being betrayed, and I'm not in the best of moods."

"I haven't betrayed you!" Ivie stepped from behind me. "You don't understand."

The muscles of Sotomayor's face worked, as if he were repressing a scream of rage.

"He's on our side," said Ivie. "You know that. He's always supported the cause."

Sotomayor smiled – a vicious, predator's smile – and leveled the pistol at her. "Did you enjoy your last fuck, bitch? I could hear you squealing down on the beach."

The muscles of his forearms bunched, preparing for the kick, and I dove for him. Too late. The pistol went off an instant before I knocked him over, the report blending with Ivie's cry, and we rolled in the grass and sand, clawing, grappling. Sotomayor was strong, but I was fighting out of sheer desperation, and he was no match for me. I tore the pistol from his grasp and brought the butt down on his temple. Brought it down a second time. He sagged, his head lolling. I crawled to where Ivie had fallen. Her legs were kicking in spasms, and when I touched her hair, I found it mired with blood. The bullet had entered through the side of her head and lodged in the brain. She must have been clinically dead already, but obeying some dumb reflex, she was trying to speak. Each time her mouth opened, blood jetted forth. She was bleeding from the eyes, the nostrils. Her entire face was slick with blood, and still her mouth kept opening and closing, making glutinous choking sounds. I wanted to touch her, to heal her with a touch, but there was so much broken, I could not decide where to lay my hands. They fluttered above her like stupid animals, and I heard myself screaming for it to stop, for her to stop. Her arms began to flop around, her hips to thrash, convulsing. A broken, bloody doll. I aimed the pistol at her chest, but could not bring myself to pull the trigger. Finally I covered her with my body, and, sobbing, held her until all movement ceased.

I came to my feet, staggered over to Sotomayor. He had not yet regained consciousness. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I pointed the pistol at him. But it did not seem sufficient that he merely die. I kneeled beside him, then straddled his chest.

A voice called out from behind me. "What goin' on dere, mon?"

Visible as shadows, two men were standing at the water's edge.

"Man killed somebody!" I answered.

"You call de police?"

"No!"

"Den I'll be goin' de Key, ax 'em to spark up dere radio!"

I waved acknowledgement, watched the men sprint away. Once they were out of sight, I pried Sotomayor's mouth open and inserted the pistol barrel. "Wake up!" I shouted. I spat in his face, slapped him. Repeated the process. His eyelids twitched, and he let out a muffled groan. "Wake up, you son of a bitch!" He gazed at me blearily, and I wiggled the pistol to make him aware of it. His eyes widened. He tried to speak, his eyebrows arching comically with the effort. I cocked the pistol, and he froze.

"I should turn you in," I said. "Let the police torture your ass. But I don't trust you to be a hero, man. Maybe you'd talk. Maybe you know something worth trading for your life."

He gurgled something unintelligible.

"Can't hear you," I said. "Sorry."

Using the pistol as a lever, I began turning his head from side to side. He tried to keep his eyes on mine. Sweat popped out on his brow, and he was having trouble swallowing.

"Here it comes," I said.

He tensed and shut his eyes.

"Just kidding," I told him. I waited a few seconds, then shouted, "Here it comes!"

He flinched.

I started sobbing again. "Did you see what you did to her, man? Did you see? You fucking son of a bitch! Did you see!" The pistol was shaking, and Sotomayor bit the barrel to keep it still.

For a minute or thereabouts I was crying so hard, I was blinded. At last I managed to gain control. I wiped away the tears. "Here it comes," I said.

He blinked.

"Here it comes."

Another blink.

"Here it fucking comes!"

His stare was mad and full of hate. But his hatred was nothing compared to mine. I was dizzy with it. The stars seemed very near, wheeling about my head. I wanted to sit astride him forever and cause him pain.

I dug the fingers of my left hand in back of his Adam's apple, forcing his jaws apart, and I battered his teeth with the barrel, breaking a couple. Blood filmed over his lower lip, trickled down into his beard. He gagged, choking on the fragments.

"Like that?" I asked him. "How about this?"

I broke his nose with the heel of my hand. Tears squeezed from his eyes, bloody saliva and mucous came from his nose. His breath made a sucking noise.

Shouts from the direction of St. Mark's Key.

I leaned close to Sotomayor, my face inches away, the blood-slimed barrel sheathed in his mouth.

"Here is comes," I whispered. "Here. It. Comes."

I know he believed me, but he was mesmerized by my proximity, by whatever he saw in my eyes, and could not look away. I screamed at him and met his terrified gaze as I fired.

Perhaps I would have been charged with murder in the States, but in Honduras, where politics and passions license all manner of violence, I was a hero.

I was a hero, and insane... for grief possessed me as powerfully as had love.

Now that Ivie was dead, it seemed only just that the others join her on the pyre. I told the police everything I knew. The island was sealed off, the guerrillas rounded up. The press acclaimed me; the President of the United States called to commend my actions; my fellow journalists besieged the Hotel Captain Henry, seeking to interview me but usually settling for interviews with the cleaning woman and the owner. I was in no mood to play the hero. I drank, I wept, I wandered. I gazed into nowhere, seeing Ivie's face. Aymara's face. In memoriam, I

accorded her that name. Brave-sounding and lyrical, it suited her. And I wished she could have died wearing that name in 1902 – that, I realized, should have been her destiny. Whenever I saw a dark-haired young woman, I would have the urge to follow her, to spy on her, to discover who her friends were, what made her laugh, what movies she liked, how she made love, thinking that knowing these details would help me regain the definition that Aymara had brought to my life. Yet even had this not been a fantasy, I could not have acted upon it. Grief had immobilized me. Grief... and guilt. It had been my meddling that had precipitated her death, hadn't it? I was a dummy moving on a track between these two emotions, stopping now and again to stare at something that had caught my eye, some curiosity that would for a moment reduce my self-awareness.

Several days after her death, the regional director of the CIA paid me a call. My visit to Project Longshot had originally been scheduled for two weeks prior to the initial test, but he now told me that since I knew about "our little secret down here," the President had authorized my presence at the test. This exclusive was to be my reward for patriotism. I accepted his invitation and came close to telling him that I would be delighted to stand at ground zero during the end of the world.

I had been too self-absorbed to give much thought to Dobler's warnings, but now I decided I wanted the world to end. What was the point in trying to save it? We had been heading toward destruction for years, and as far as I was concerned the time was ripe. A few days before I might have raised a mighty protest against the project, but my political conscience – and perhaps my moral one – had died with Aymara, and I was angry at the world, at its hollow promise and mock virtues and fallacious judgements. Anger made my grief more endurable, and I nourished it, picturing it to be a tiny golden snake with ruby eyes. A familiar. It would feed on tears, transform them into venom. It would be my secret, coiled and ready to strike. It would fit perfectly inside my heart.

On the day prior to the test, I was flown by small plane to a

military base on the mainland, and from there by helicopter to the project site, passing over the valley in which lay the ruined city of Olancho Viejo, with its creeper-hung cathedral tower sticking up like an eroded green fang. Three buildings of white concrete crowned a massive jungled hill overlooking the valley, and on the hillside facing away from the valley were other buildings – living quarters and storage rooms and sentry posts. The administrator, a middle-aged balding man named Morrel, briefed me on the test; but I cut this short, informing him that I had heard most of what he was telling me from Dobler. His only reaction was to cluck his tongue and say, "Poor fellow."

Afterward, Morrel led me downhill to the commissary and introduced me to the rest of the personnel. Ostensibly this was a joint US-Honduran project, but there were only two Hondurans among the twenty-eight scientists – an elderly man clearly past his prime, and a dark-haired young woman who tried to duck out the door when I approached. Morrel urged her forward and said, "Mister Corson, this is *Senorita* Aymara Lujan."

I was nearly too stunned to accept her handshake. She refused to meet my eyes, and her hand was trembling. I could not believe that this was mere coincidence. Though to my mind she was not as lovely as my Aymara, she was undeniably beautiful and of a type with my dead love. Slim and large-eyed, her features displaying more than a trace of Indian blood. I had a mental image of a long line of beautiful dark-haired women stretching across the country, each prepared to step forward should an accident befall her sisters.

"I'm pleased to meet you," this one said. "I've always admired your work." She glanced around in apparent alarm as if she had said something indiscreet; then, recovering her poise, she added, "Perhaps we'll have a chance to talk at dinner."

She placed an unnatural stress on these last words, making it plain that this was a message sent. "I'd like that," I said.

For the remainder of the day I was shown a variety of equipment and instrumentation to which I paid little atten-

tion. The appearance of this new Aymara undermined my anger somewhat, and Dobler's thesis concerning the unalterability of time, its capacity to compensate for change, seemed to embody the menace of prophecy. But I made no move to reveal what I suspected. This development had brought my insanity to a peak, and I was gripped by a fatalistic malaise. Who the hell was I to trifle with fate, I reasoned. And besides, it was unlikely that any action I took would have an effect. Maybe it *was* coincidence. I retreated from the problem into an almost puritanical stance, as if dealing with the matter was somehow vile, beneath me, and when the dinner hour arrived, deciding it would be best to avoid the woman, I pled weariness and retired to my quarters.

My room was a white cubicle furnished with a bed, a desk and chair, and a word processor. The window provided a view of the jungle that swept away toward Nicaragua, and I sat by it, watching sunset resolve into a slate-colored dusk, and then into a darkness figured by stars and a half-moon. With no one about to engage my interest, grief closed in around me.

A few minutes after eight o'clock, small arms fire began to crackle on the hilltop. I went to the door and peered out. Muzzle flashes were probing the darkness higher up. I had an impulse to run, but my inertia prevailed and I went back to the chair. Soon thereafter, the door opened and the woman who called herself Aymara entered. She wore a white project jumpsuit that glowed in the moonlight, and she carried an automatic rifle, which she kept at the ready but aimed at a point to my right.

Neither of us spoke for several seconds, and then I said, "What's going on?" and laughed at the banal tone that comment struck.

Another burst of fire from above.

"It's almost over," she said.

I allowed several more seconds to elapse before saying, "How did you pull it off? Security looked pretty tight."

"Most of them died at dinner." She tossed her head, shaking hair from her eyes. "Poison."

"Oh." Again I laughed. "Sorry I couldn't make it."

"I didn't want to kill you," she said with urgency. "You've... been a friend to my country. But after what you did on Guanoja... "

"What I did there was execute a murderer! An animal!"

She studied me a moment. "I believe you. Sotomayor was an evil man."

"Evil!" I made a disparaging noise. "And what force for good do you represent? The EDP? The FDLM?"

"We acted independently... I and a few friends."

Silence, then a single gunshot.

"Is that really you name? I asked. "Aymara?"

She nodded. "I've often wondered how much influence your article has had on me. On everything. Because of it, I've always felt I was involved in... "

"Something mystical, right? Magical. I know all about it."

"How could you?"

"How could I have written the article in the first place? I don't have any answers." I turned back to the window. "I suppose you're going to try to contact Christmas."

"I don't have a choice," she said defiantly. "I feel... "

"Believe me," I cut in. "I understand why. When did you decide to do this?"

"I'd been considering it for some time, but I wasn't sure. Then the news came about Sotomayor... "

"Jesus God!" I leaned forward, burying my face in my hands.

"What's wrong?"

"Get out!" I said. "Kill me, do whatever you have to... just get out of here."

"I'm not going to kill you."

I sensed her moving close, and through my fingers saw her lay some papers on the desk.

"I'm giving you a map," she said. "At the foot of the hill, next to the sentry post, there's a trail leading east. It's well-traveled, even in the dark it won't be difficult to follow. Less than a day's walk from here, you'll come to a river. You'll find villages. Boats

that'll take you to the coast."

I said nothing.

"We won't be able to go operational until dawn," she went on. "You have about ten hours. Things might not be so bad once you're out of the immediate area."

"Go away," I told her.

"I... " She faltered. "I think we... "

"What the hell do you want from me?" Angry, I spun around. But on seeing her, my anger evaporated. The moonlight seemed to have erased all distinction between her and my Aymara – she might have been my lover reborn, her spirit returned. "What do you want?" I said weakly.

"I don't know. But I do want something from you. For so long I've felt we were linked. Involved." She reached out as if to touch me, then jerked back her hand. "I don't know. Maybe I just want your blessing."

I could smell her scent of soap and perfume, sharp and clean in that musty little room, and I felt a stirring of sexual attraction. In my mind's eye I saw again that endless line of dark-haired women, and I suddenly believed that love was the scheme that had enforced our intricate union, that – truly or potentially – we were all lovers, I and a thousand Aymaras, all tuned to the same mystical pitch. I got to my feet, rested my hands on her hips. Pulled her close. Her lips grazed my cheek as she settled into the embrace. Her heart beat rapidly against my chest. Then she drew back, her face tilted up to receive a kiss. I tasted her mouth, and her warmth spread through me, melting the cold partition I had erected between myself and life. At last she pushed me away and – averting her eyes – walked to the door.

"Good-bye." She said it in Spanish – "*Adios* " – a word that translates literally as "to God."

I heard her footsteps running up the hill.

I was tempted to go after her, and to resist this temptation, not to save myself, I took her map and set out walking the trail

east. Yet as I went, my desire to survive grew stronger, and I increased my pace, beating my way through thickets and plaited vines, stumbling down rocky defiles. Had I been alone in the jungle at any other time, I would have been terrified, for the night sounds were ominous, the shadows eerie; but all my fear was focused upon those white buildings on the hilltop, and I paid no mind to the threat of jaguars and snakes. Toward dawn, I stopped in a weedy clearing bordered by ceibas and giant figs, their crowns towering high above the rest of the canopy. I was bruised, covered with scratches, exhausted, and I saw no reason to continue. I sat down, my back propped against a ceiba trunk, and watched the sky fading to gray.

I had thought brightness would fan across the heavens as with the detonation of a nuclear bomb, but this was not the case. I felt a disturbance in the air, a vibration, and then it was as if everything – trees, the earth, even my own flesh – were yielding up some brilliant white essence, blinding yet gradually growing less intense, until it seemed I was in the midst of a thick white fog through which I could just make out the phantom shapes of the jungle. Accompanying the whiteness was a bone-chilling cold; this, however, dissipated quickly, whereas it turned out that the fog lingered for hours, dwindling to a fine haze before at last becoming imperceptible. At first I was full of dread, anticipating death in one form or another; but soon I began to experience a perverse disappointment. The world had suffered a cold flash, a spot of vagueness, like the symptoms of a mild fever, and the idea that my lover had died for this made me more heartsick than ever.

I waited the better part of an hour for death to take me. Then, disconsolate, thinking I might as well push on, I glanced at my watch to estimate how much farther I had to travel, and found that not only had it stopped but that it could not be wound. Curious, I thought. As I brushed against a bush at the edge of the clearing, its leaves crumbled to dust; its twigs remained intact, but when I snapped one off, a greenish fluid welled from the cortex. I tasted it, and within seconds I felt a burst of energy

and well-being. Continuing on, I observed other changes. An intricate spiderweb whose strands I could not break, though I exerted all my strength; a whirling column of dust and light that looked to be emanating from the site of the project; and in the reflecting waters of a pond I discovered that my hair had gone pure white. Perhaps the most profound change was in the atmosphere of the jungle. Birds twittered, monkeys screeched. All as usual. Yet I sensed a vibrancy, a vitality, that had not been in evidence before.

By the time I reached the river, the fog had cleared. I walked along the bank for half an hour and came to a village of thatched huts, a miserable place littered with feces and mango rinds, hemmed in by brush and stands of bamboo. It appeared deserted, but moored to the bank, floating in the murky water, was a dilapidated boat that – except for the fact it was painted bright blue, decorated with crosses and bearded, haloed faces – might have been the twin of the scow in The African Queen. As I drew near, a man popped out of the cabin and waved. An old, old man wearing a gray robe. His hair was white and ragged, his face tanned and wrinkled, and his eyes showed as blue as the painted hull.

"Praise the Lord!" he yelled. "Where the hell you been?"

I glanced behind me to make sure he was not talking to someone else. "Hey," I said. "Where is everybody?"

"Gone. Fled. Scared to death, they were. But now they'll believe me, won't they?" He beckoned impatiently. "Hurry up! You think I got all day? Souls are wastin' for want of Jerome's good news." He tapped his chest. "That's me. Jerome."

I introduced myself.

Again he signaled his impatience. "Got all eternity to learn your name. Let's get a move on." He leaned on the railing, squinting at me. "You're the one sent, ain'tcha?"

"I don't think so."

"'Course you are!" He clasped his hands prayerfully. "And, lo, I fell asleep in the white light of the Rapture and the Lord spake, sayin', 'Jerome, there will come a man of dour counte-

nance bearin' My holy sign, and he will aid your toil and lend ballast to your joy.' Well, here you are, and here I am, and if that hair of your'n ain't a sign, I don't know what is. Come on!" He patted the railing. "Help me push 'er out into the current."

"It won't work." He cackled, delighted. "Nothin' works. Not the radio, not the generator. None of the Devil's tools. Ain't it wonderful?" He scowled. "Now come on! That's enough talk. You gonna aid my toil or not?"

"Where are you headed?"

"Down the Fundamental Stream to the Source and back again. Ain't no other place to go now the Lord is come."

"To the coast?" I insisted, not in the least taken with this looney.

"Yeah, yeah!" Jerome put his hands on his hips and regarded me with displeasure. "You gotta lighten up some, boy. Don't know as I'm gonna be needin' all this much ballast to my joy."

I have been a month on the river with Jerome, and I expect I will remain with him a while longer, for I have no desire to return to civilization until its breakdown is complete – the world, it seems, has ended, though not in the manner I would have thought. I am convinced Jerome is crazy, the victim of long solitudes and an overdose of religious tracts; yet he has no doubt I am the crazy one, and who is to say which of us is right. At every village we stop to allow him to proclaim the Rapture, the advent of the Age of Miracles... and, indeed, miracles abound. I have seen a mestizo boy call fish into his net by playing a flute; I have witnessed healings performed by a matronly Indian woman; I have watched an old German expatriate set fires with his stare. As for myself, I have acquired the gift of clairvoyance, which has permitted me to see something of the world that is aborning. Jerome attributes all this to an increase in the wattage of the Holy Spirit; whereas I believe that Project Longshot caused a waning of certain principles – especially those pertaining to anything mechanical or electrical – and a waxing of certain others – in particular

those applying to ESP and related phenomena. The two ideas are not opposed. I can easily imagine some long-dead psychic perceiving a whiteness at the end of time and assigning it Godlike significance. Yet I have no faith that a messiah will appear. It strikes me that this new world holds greater promise than the old (though perhaps the old world merely milked its promises dry), a stronger hope of survival, and a wider spectrum of possibility; but God, to my way of thinking, darts among the quarks and neutrinos, an eternal signal harrying them to order, a resource capable of being tapped by magic or by science, and it may be that love is both the seminal impulse of this signal and the ultimate distillation of this resource.

We argue these matters constantly, Jerome and I, to pass green nights along the river. But upon one point we agree. All arguments lapse before the mystery and coincidence of our lives. All systems fail, all logics prove to zero.

So, Aymara, we have worked our spell, you and I and time. Now I must seek my own salvation. Jerome tells me time heals all wounds, but can it – I wonder – heal a wound that it has caused. Though we had only a few weeks, they were the central moments of my life, and their tragic culmination, the sudden elimination of their virtues, has left me irresolute and weak. The freshness and optimism of the world has made your loss more poignant, and I am not ashamed to admit that – like the most cliched of grievers – I see your face in clouds, hear your voice in the articulations of the wind, and feel your warmth in the shafts of light piercing the canopy. Often I feel that I am breaking inside, that my heart is turning in my chest like a haywire compass, trying to fix upon some familiar pole and detecting none, and I know I will never be done with weeping.

Buck up, Jerome tells me. You can't live in the past, you gotta look to the future and be strong.

I reply that I am far less at home in the fabulous present than I am in the past. As to the future, well... I have envisioned myself walking the high country, a place of mountains and rivers without end, of snow fields and temples with bronze

doors, and I sense I am searching for something. Could it be you, Aymara? Could that white ray of science pouring from the magical green hill have somewhere resurrected you or your likeness? Perhaps I will someday find the strength to leave the river and find answers to these questions; perhaps finding that strength is an answer in itself. That hope alone sustains me. For without you, Aymara, even among miracles I am forlorn.

Introduction
by Bruce Sterling

The end of the world is a very old tradition. Yet SF in the Eighties has given this cobwebby theme a peculiarly modern twist. Some authors these days – not many, but more and more of them, – suggest that the decline and destruction of all that is hallowed and sacred might not only be possible, but, well, *necessary* – maybe even *fun.*

Modern literary apocalypse-theory dates back to 1945, when the world – somebody's world, anyway – did indeed end. When cosmic light flared over the Alamagordo desert everybody knew the World As It Was was gone for good, and stories poured from the clacking manual typewriters of the SF writers of the Forties; stories full of grand gestures, grave warnings, stern moral outrage.

But years passed, and somehow the world stubbornly refused to end. People were born knowing that the whole shebang might go at any minute; children, shadowed by that white-hot mushroom, just as they were shadowed by their glowing televisions in a million suburban dens. Yet these kids grew to adulthood, miraculously unblasted. A precious few became science fiction writers. The day came when they were sitting before their sullenly glowing word processors, still shadowed by that promise of instant destruction. A threat which had become not merely commonplace, not merely old, not merely

disgusting, but secretly and blackly *funny*.

It's not a joke that's easy to savor, but it's a joke that runs through Michael Shea's *Fill It With Regular* like a buried pipeline. The world ends in this story – somebody's world, anyway – not a world we're led to like much. It's Michael Shea's world, modern America, a place of glib foolishness and dazed consumer excess which simply and clearly *can't last.*

Yeah, so? We all know that – in a typically Sheavian phrase, it's

"A fact made banal by the facile affirmation of the heedless."

But a reading of the following story brings this niggling conviction into daylight. It's clear that Mr. Shea feels that the world that bred and bore him is, well, just not up to snuff. It won't make the grade. It's had too much too fast too long, and somehow, it's *got it coming.*

We've seen the world's end often enough in fiction to know how it's supposed to work. The shrieks, the howls, the moralistic reproaches, the colossal dignity of the crashing towers of Babylon. We might expect this approach once more, but then, we're not Michael Shea. While reading *Fill It With Regular*, you might take a note of the well-nigh total lack of conventional reaction from our central protagonists. These worthies are Ken and Dale, the classic SF duo of an artist and a scientist, two bright and determined drunks. True children of their generation, they cheerily remark "Hoo boy," as the established order goes belly-up on their TV news. Filled with secret and unholy glee, they analyze, they speculate, they chatter wittily, they wrap their feet in protective tinfoil booties while sensibly stocking up on twelvepacks and Jim Beam.

There's no wringing of hands here, no Angst, no searing moral dilemmas. This is a gooey, cheap, knockdown apocalypse, a funky and unpredictable *outrage* committed by leapin' critters from outside concensus reality. Shea's lovingly-detailed agency of mass destruction simply seeps in and eats the world out from under our feet – just as if our human dignity and moral decisions and snug social order *simply don't matter at all.*

This is not black humor, folks, but stuff that shades 'way into the crispy ultraviolet. Here Shea is not merely slaughtering sacred cows, but grinding 'em into charbroiled patties at $1.75 a pop. It's a marvelous sight, a true tingle to the sense of wonder. You just can't help but enjoy this!

Unless, that is, you're like *Ted Fennerman* or *Sheri Klugman* or *Tina Claymore* – the story's hopelessly out-of-it *normal* people. Yes! Stupid, *hated* normals, with real jobs and real marriages, salt-of-the-earth goombahs destined by cosmic justice to become doggie chow for forces beyond their ken.

Michael Shea is a very special kind of writer -the kind of guy who simply *will not flinch.* That in itself is not so special – there are plenty of these people, and some of them even run around loose. But Shea combines his fiendishly imaginative cleverness with an artist's eye. He can describe the world outside his head with the same gimlet accuracy he devotes to the technicolor visions inside.

His widely-praised novels, Nift the Lean and *In Yana,* showed Shea's ability to paint a high-fantasy canvas with the color and detail of Hieronymous Bosch. And his work in the horror genre achieves an intensity that not only prickles the reader's scalp but threatens to peel and vivisect it. Shea can do Lovecraft when he wants to, but he has something Lovecraft never managed – the recklessness to carry his imaginings out of the shuttered room and into the street. Into the howling alleys and health clubs, into bars filled with pill-popping bikers, or filling stations manned by twitching geeks whose empty, "normal" lives can't *possibly* be for real.

If you can look at the "real world" with the pitiless and hyper-intelligent gaze of a Michael Shea, you can see plenty not to like. SF thrives on this fraction of the population, people happy to plunge into a book and bid normality a cool farewell. But *Fill It With Regular* achieves more than this – it's a story that gets its own back. It's cleverly and vividly written, full of lovely turns of phrase, with an ingenious beast like a banderilla. Our world thuds and stumbles on, but this brightly-colored little

steel-sharp tuft has been deftly jabbed through its bovine hide. The world's traditional charge toward the cliff-edge is scarcely slowed, of course – but to watch Shea's banderilla fluttering there is irresistibly hilarious.

And you'll enjoy it too – if you don't mind that bright little rill and the subtle whiff of blood.

Fill It With Regular

by Michael Shea

I

It was just past 3:00 a.m. An all night gas station stood on its lonely little asphalt atoll, a delta bordered by two convergent country roads. Not far beyond this confluence, the two-lane blacktop passed under a freeway. Up there, along 101's unsleeping corridors, big semis boomed and groaned, their frequency abated at this hour, but still clocklike. Down here on ground level, however, below the imperial elevation of that viaduct, all was country darkness, country silence full of crickets. The black shapes of the roadside trees shrank and islanded the station's light between them, big, half-naked oaks, crooked against the stars.

The attendant stood by one of the pumps. His khaki jacket – with "Al" stitched in red over one pocket – was thin, but he stood relaxed, even slack-armed, in the chill air. In fact, in the absence of muscle tone from his sharp-nosed face, there was something faintly moronic.

A pair of headlights sank down the freeway off-ramp and approached. Al shifted slightly on his feet and worked his fingers. An old, dented blue Maverick sighed on worn tires up

to the pumps. The driver was a large, rather drunk-looking man. His horn-rims, one hinge sutured with black tape, sat on his nose a shade askew. Two or three of his lower teeth were missing, and his chin stubble was gray in patches. His air was cordial.

"A glad good evening to you! Just fill this puppy to the brim with regular!"

Al nodded eagerly. Still, an uncertainty entered his manner after he unholstered the gas nozzle. The drunk blinked, smacked his forehead.

"Ach! Where's my *mind* ?"

He hauled himself from the car, and an empty Rainier Ale can followed him out and tap-danced briefly on the asphalt. Dragging out his keys and moving sternwards, he unlocked his gas cap, set it on the trunk lid, and returned to his seat, all with a kind of staggery flourish.

Al filled the tank. A gush of excess foamed down the Maverick's tail, making a clean stripe across the dirty license plate. Al released the trigger. Still hesitant, but moving hopefully now, Al reholstered the nozzle. The drunk, squinting at the gauge, hoisted his hip for money – his unseen feet, shifting, raised the musical jostle of bottles. Peeling open a distorted lump of wallet, the drunk poked inside. He rummaged. He blinked. He raised a look heavenward and signed as at some relentless, long-known enemy, now plaguing him anew.

"Will you *believe* this, man? Will you fuckin' believe this? I've only got a ten here! I should have looked! I should have fuckin' looked before I told you to fill it! But hey, listen. Look here. I don't live far off. Over that way somewhere. Take this now, and I'll bring you back the other two fifty, if not tonight, then first thing in the morning."

Al was watching him with a kind of raptness. He kept nodding nervously, as if in sign of noting important information. The drunk beamed.

"You're an ace, man! An ace! Just stick that in your pocket, and before another moon rises, I'll be back with its two little

buddies! God bless!"

Looking genuinely moved, the drunk cracked another beer and sipped it as he drove off, dribbling gas at the stern. As he dipped the driveway, his gas cap tumbled off the trunk and rolled to the gutter as he accelerated away.

Al resumed his position by the regular pump. Then a thought seemed to strike him. He went into the office, and through its connecting door into the locked garage. Here the legs of a man on a mechanic's under-dolly thrust out from beneath a station wagon with its hood up. Al got some wrenches from one of the shelves along the back wall and laid them on the pavement beside the dolly.

Standing again by the pump, Al seemed less catatonic than he had. His hands were more restive, task-ready, and his lips moved faintly, as though rehearsing words. From the freeway, another pair of headlights sank toward the empty corridors of oak shadows. A big, new Cadillac slid its flawless, dark cream paint job up to the pumps.

It held a middle-aged couple, the Fennermans. They had been dining with their friends the Crosses and were in a pleasant mood. Fred Cross, who also ran a new car dealership, had let slip to Ted enough about his business to make Ted realize that his own lot had been doing pretty damn well lately by comparison. Gail Fennerman, for her part, had been deeply pleased by the enchiladas Muriel Cross had made, and no less pleased by the seven margueritas she had washed them down with. Al marched to the window as Ted rolled it down. He looked hopeful now, determined.

"Hi! Fill it with regular?" His energy bordered on the intimidating.

"Oh, no!" Ted Fennerman chuckled uneasily. "Supreme! It's supreme all the way with these babies, right?"

"Ah!" said Al, seeming crestfallen. He brightened at a thought. "Want to give me your keys?"

"Right," said Ted, separating out his gas key so that the rest hung from it, and putting it between Al's fingertips. Al marched

back, unlocked the cap, laid it on the trunk. He got the hose, which he handled now with increased panache. He began to fill the Caddy's tank.

"What a strange man," Gail Fennerman said.

"I'll say. I guess, though, that you'd have to be some kind of a loony to take a job like this in the first place. The boredom would drive a sane guy nuts."

"Teddy?"

"Yeah?"

"Isn't he filling us with regular anyway?"

"Hey! Hey! Stop that!" Ted thrust almost half himself out the window. "Cut that out!"

"Right," said Al. Even then the overflow puddled beneath the plate.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?" keened Ted. "Didn't I tell you *supreme* ? Didn't I tell you that *specifically* ?"

Hanging up the nozzle, Al gave a thoughtful nod. "You *did* say supreme specifically. Yes." He tucked the Fennermans' keys into the pocket containing the drunk's ten-dollar bill.

"Hey!" Ted half-erupted again. "Gimme back my *keys* !"

"Oh," said Al, blinking. Returning the keys, he cleared his throat. "It's o.k. if you just give me ten dollars. You can bring the rest by later tonight, or first thing in the morning."

"I don't understand you," Ted Fennerman said slowly, astonishedly. He forgot even to contest payment. "Here's my credit card."

"Oh," said Al. He inspected the card carefully, and then put it in his pocket with the ten-dollar bill.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ted sounded hushed, awed. "Give me back my god-damned credit card!"

Al – perplexed, mouth ajar – returned the card. Pocketing it, Ted Fennerman hesitated only an instant over the legal risk of leaving without paying – then he fired up the car and pulled out. Gail's head turned, she spoke, and the Caddy lurched to a stop just short of the driveway. Ted popped out. Keeping his hands on the car, as if for cover, he hurried astern of her,

replaced the gas cap, dove back inside, and slid the car up into the darkness between the star-hung trees.

Al walked to the driveway, picked the drunk's gas cap from the gutter, and gazed at it, nodding owlishly. He pocketed it and returned to the regular pump. Unholstering the nozzle, he put its tip to his mouth and triggered himself a couple of hearty gulps. Smacking his lips, he seemed to judge the savor. He went into the office and came out with a small, dark sack.

He went to one of the brass-hatched intake valves whereby the trucks fed the station's cisterns. He keyed it open, dug from the bag a handful of black dust, and dropped it in. He shut the hatch, returned the bag to the office. He resumed his post at the regular pump. Again his lips seemed to practice, voicelessly, as his eyes looked around at the country darkness environing his little wedge of light.

II

Next morning around eight, Ted Fennerman started siphoning the gas from his tank into a pair of cans from the garage. The engine had gotten detectably shuddery in just the few miles home from that miserable station. There had seemed a kind of juvenile delinquent fun in the siphoning just at first, but his first draw was too prolonged, and he got a mouthful that soured the whole thing. He cursed the oil company whose logo had crowned that station, a seeming oasis down in the shadowlands, as seen from 101, which they had crested so serenely at sixty-five. Why hadn't he kept going? It was his own fault for being so compulsive about keeping the tank full. He called his local station to send out a tow truck with some supreme.

With tepid breakfast coffee, he rinsed the fumes from his mouth. When the tow truck arrived, he recognized the kid driving it – slight and pimply, but peppy. Today, though, he was so vague and slothful in his actions that Ted took the can and poured the gas into the Caddy himself. When Ted tipped him a buck, the kid didn't seem to know what to do with it. What the

hell was happening? The Caddy thrummed and pinged all the way in to his car lot in Santa Rosa. He ground his teeth and swore as he drove. He might as well not have bothered changing the gas at all. He got to his desk around ten in a foul mood. He realized that, unmistakably, he had the beginnings of a sore throat.

It was a little after eleven when the drunk, an artist named Ken, got up. He had a good reason for getting up so early: he had to go see Dale and borrow a hundred dollars from his academic friend. Starburst Paperbacks still owed Ken six hundred on his last cover, but far be it from them to speed payment. He washed his face. He warmed up some pizza and poured a beer. He hummed between sips, waiting for the cheese to remelt. It was a nuisance having to borrow money, but afterward they could drink and bullshit and watch cable TV – Dale got all the channels.

He went out to his car around noon. He threw his traveling sketch pad – for ideas that obtruded themselves upon his drinking time – in through the passenger window and circled round the car. Feeling an odd crackliness to the asphalt underfoot, he paused, looked down – and noticed he lacked his gas cap.

"Shit!" he said.

He drove back to the gas station, trying to keep all his accelerations smooth. It hadn't seemed that cold last night, certainly not now, yet the roadway still felt faintly crisp under his tires. He pulled into the station. The garage's overhead door was now up, displaying someone on the floor dolly half under a station wagon. Al was standing near the regular pump. Ken got out.

"Hi, Al!" he cried, noting only now the red-stitched name. "Say, did I leave my gas cap here last night?"

"You sure did!"

"Ah, great! That's a relief!" There was a smiling pause. "Well," Ken prodded. "Can I have it back?"

"Why don't I get it for you? It's in the office!"

"Great idea!" Ken hung around the doorway of the garage while Al went in. Al seemed more sure of himself, much brisker today. On the other hand, Ken realized, he hadn't seen the guy under the car move very much at all.

"Ha!" he offered. "Great place for a nap, hey?" The guy didn't move or answer. Ken shrugged. Some assholes just didn't have a sense of humor. Al brought him his cap and smiled.

"Fill her up with regular for you?"

Ken laughed. "I didn't lose *that* much. Thanks anyway. So long! Inwardly he sighed, driving off – the two fifty was forgotten. He'd scrounged up only two dollars anyway, and now he could get a sixer of Buckhorn with it. He slid on down Old Redwood Highway – which stretched bright, almost silvery before him – and smiled skyward at the fresh fall sunlight.

Gail Fennerman awoke numb, feeling nibbled away around the edges, at 12:30. Before moving, like a swimmer who chooses the bit of distant coast he will strike toward, she determined two of the things she would do today. First, have a sauna at the gym. Second, have a flame-broiled patty-melt at the Fern 'n Burger. The first would atone in advance the second, for Gail equated sweating with calorie loss.

She rose. She reached the shower, her legs feeling of unequal length. In the kitchen, her protein smoothie whirled strenuously in the blender, growling aggressively. Swallowing it was an act of grim will, such as she imagined it must take to lift weights, or learn French.

Confronting her mirror to make up, she asked it sarcastically: "Do you think you can drive? See? It really makes you *look* forty-three, every day of it!" She didn't even like the smell of alcohol, but these delicious cocktails, like Bloody Marys or margueritas, were her downfall. Last night she had, self-mockingly, kept mental count of her margueritas, but, perversely, this only enhanced the pleasure of the indulgence. Ted was partly to blame – he didn't even *go* to the gym anymore, even just for the Jacuzzi. His getting so paunchy, after he'd *promised*, undermined her own resolve. Not much past two

o'clock, she locked the front door and crunched down the driveway to her Buick.

Crunched? On firm asphalt? She paused. The sun, sloping past zenith, delicately shadowed a kind of translucent fur, perhaps a quarter inch deep, covering most of the drive, with an especially thick circular patch just behind where Ted always parked the Cadillac. She scuffed at the stuff with the tow of her designer track shoe. It was crackly, but seemed to be giving rather than breaking under the prodding. She shook her head. As a SoCal girl, she had always deplored the creepy growths that northern California's lushness fostered. She fired up the Buick and turned on the Montanavi tape she had left in the deck. She sped down the silvery highway – it *was* rather glittery today, wasn't it?

At the gym the strangest thing happened. With two other women, one of whom she knew slightly, she was sitting in the sauna. Tina Claymore, who managed a boutique in Coddingtown Center, was saying to Gail:

"Boy, this dry heat can sure get to your nose and throat sometimes, can't it?"

"Yeah. Mine really feels scratchy, too. What's that on your legs, Tina?"

Both bent to inspect Tina's pallid thighs, flattened to ovoids on the sweat-dark bench. Her thighs looked dusty. A vanishingly fine, faint soot besprinkled them. Tina brushed at it, but it smeared into her sweat. "Look!" the third woman told Gail. "It's on *your* arms and legs, too!"

"Yow! And yours, too!"

For a moment the three ladies twisted and splayed themselves to present all their surfaces to the weak, sulfurous light – patting and spanking at their limbs, till all at once the scene they made struck them and they all shakily laughed and trooped out.

They were in the showers, soaping lustily, when the instructress got back to them. She pushed her twenty-old, T-shirted, upper half into the room and told them brightly:

"I was right! Rod says it's just a little soot – the gas heaters have been burning a little sooty today!"

The girl's sunny self-approval vexed Tina Claymore, to whom soapsuds gave clownishly exaggerated breasts, as though some grotesque lichen had overgrown them. "Well that's just peachy! Peachy! Why didn't you *tell* us?"

"I haven't been in the sauna today," the girl said, looking stung. "Rod just forgot, I guess. It'll wash right *off*, won't it?"

"But it still *itches*. And what about my nose and throat? They're scratchy, too!"

Gail privately agreed that her skin also felt a bit prickly, but she didn't detain herself to make an issue of it. Purposefully, she dried and dressed. It was patty-melt time and the Fern 'n Burger.

From there she called Ted at four, to see if there were any errands that needed running before things started closing. Ted didn't feel like talking. He had "a god-damned sore throat." He said he'd meet her at eight at The Cattleman's for dinner, and hung up. Just as she returned to her table, her food arrived. It was exquisite, except that the meat had an odd extra crispness and – very faint, so discreet as to be rather pleasing – a slight bitterness.

III

Dale was an entomologist out at Sonoma State. He had bought one of the little motor courts – proto-motels of thirties vintage – still to be found decaying along Old River Highway, which had been the 101 of the pre-freeway era. The office and the first two cabins were built of a piece, and this structure Dale had inhabited. By knocking out the connecting walls, he had created a single, large, living space with three bedroom cubicles, the office kitchen, and the old registration desk left standing by the office door, the only one Dale made use of.

A Charlie Musslewhite tape raunched and wailed room-fillingly. Near the entry the TV, sans sound track, beamed the

Playboy Channel, which Ken, a great lounger and sprawler, watched from the couch. He had a Buckhorn in one hand, the remote control in the other, and in his thoughts the hard truth, ever less ignoble, that they were out of beer. Dale was more of a pacer and an arm waver, and he was near the rear of the room. Here were the bookshelves and dart board, and here he liked to do much of his ranting and raving while throwing darts. A blown-up photo of an ant, pinned to a corkboard, was his target. Big and shambling though Dale was, and eruptive with his restless thoughts, time and again the patterns of six darts he threw came incredibly close to pinning all the insect's feet – Ken glanced over and checked now and then. Dale had paused in his monologue, and Ken sighed.

"So come on, man! Money me! We need some more beer – you've been pecking at that one can for the last hour."

"It was the only one I got my hands on in your whole six-pack!"

"Wait," said Ken, palm raised. There was a wet T-shirt contest on the screen, and the guy with the bucket had finally gotten to the brunette. Ken watched her get it. "So?" he resumed. "All the more reason to get some more."

"It's amazing!" Dale grinned, poking another dart into the air. It landed in the ant's upper right tarsus. "How routinely, with such minimal effort, you get money out of me! A few solicitational gestures – a bow, a tap of the antennae, a nudge to the gullet – and I disgorge a big, fat drop of my hard earned nectar. Just like *Atta texana*."

"Don't be an asshole. You *know* you have it, you *know* you'll get it back, you *know* in the meantime I'll buy beer and enchiladas with it, and you *know* you're going to lend it to me in the end!"

"That's it exactly!" Dale crowed. "I'm going to do it! And I seem to have no more power over regurgitating this sugary blob of monetary energy than the poor insect does!"

"You're a scientist, Dale! Energy is collected in nature only to be utilized, dispensed, dissipated – converted into some other

form, Beer, in this case."

Dale, not listening, smiled at his own thought:

"And I let you sap me, you see, of that sugary blob, for one reason alone, one that should make all scientists humble. Because even the smartest of them – why, even *I* – even I am no more essentially free of my nature than the lowly bugs I study!" He threw a dart, which lodged a quarter inch off the mid-right tarsal claw. Ken regarded Dale.

"I think that's just incredibly humble of you, Dale."

Dale took up his beer. He began his professional patrol of the big room, pacing comfortably, causing for Ken two regular eclipses of the TV screen as he orbited. He said:

"It's a fact! A fact made banal by the facile affirmation of the heedless! You, Kenny, though only an artist, might guess at the arrogance that can go with a little knowledge among scientists. However much as we know and can do, we mustn't swagger through the cosmos. Inevitably, some form exists that's perfectly adapted to exploit us in spite of all our technical furnishings."

Ken, musing, laughed. Dale's length of limb, the seemingly erratic emphasis of his movements, *were* antlike. "I have to buy that image, Dale. I'd like to draw you that way – as an *Atta* worker disgorging your wallet from gaping mandibles.

Dale was nodding as he paced, assenting not to Ken, but to another dawning insight of his own. "Look here, Kenny. You've always confessed that my erudition gives you graphic inspirations. So to hell with this piddling parasitism – a hundred here, a hundred there. Let's get a real mutualism going." Dale's orbital speed increased as he warmed to the idea. "I'll ape that noble scale insect so famous for her fungal parasite. I'll be industrious *Chionaspis corni*, pumping the sap of learning from my academic branch. You, of course, will be *Septobasidium*, the fungus whose spores I ingest and that sprouts from the interstices of my dorsal sclera. At first, you see, I house you, and I feed your *oeuvre* from my brimming brain. Soon, you're making real bucks in the art racket, and the tables turn. You

house *me* grandly, as the embowering fungus doth the bug! Muriel moves in, we mate and reproduce and live as your coddled tenants from then on. The analogy's not perfect, of course. *Septobasidium* sterilizes its living plant pot. It's her sisters' offspring that the fungal tenement roofs and feeds with its plumb sporangia. In our case, my *own* reproduction would be fostered by the setup – all the better for science, of course."

"I dunno, Dale, I can't quite picture this one. Me growing out of the cracks in your dorsal sclera and all. Suppose I think about it, and meanwhile you give me the fucking money so we can get some beer?"

Still smiling in the afterglow of his ironic vision, Dale tossed Ken his wallet. "Finally!" Ken said. He plucked the money and tossed the wallet back. "So let's make it a ride – take Reibli through the hills a ways. Bring the Ry Cooder tape."

Dale took the tape from the rack. "Time's a-wastin', Sonny!" he said, following Ken out the door. He paused to lock it, and turned as Ken was firing up the Maverick. Where the exhaust boiled against the drive, Dale thought he saw an odd glitter, but he was impatient to ride out and take the sun, and just got into the car.

Their windows overflowing Cooder's *Trouble*, Dale patting time on the doorsill with his jutting elbow, they roared down Redwood, up Mark West, and swung onto Reibli, which meandered along the hills just under their crests. In a pause between cuts, Ken asked:

"What's that? That crackling, hear it?"

They pulled onto the shoulder and got out. What they found shocked them. They saw it best when they squatted on the shoulder and looked at the road surface along the angle of incidence of the latening sunlight: a fine, translucent furriness perhaps a half-inch deep, all over the asphalt. It was finer, really, than the finest fur, yet its countless fibrils were made opulently distinct by the glints of diffraction their innumerable curvatures shed. The friends gaped at each other, poked and pinched the stuff.

"As far as you can see!" Ken said, the whole road!"

"It's *tough*, Kenny! The tires don't crush it! It springs back! And these little droplet formations all through it. Like sporangia. Damn if it doesn't look like some incredible mold mycelium."

"Road-eating mold?"

"What can I say? There's a mold that eats creosote, I've heard... "

"Let's keep going." They drove on, without music. Only occasionally could they see its faint flash, but the frosty noise of it was continuous, though it wove easily into the susurration of a moving car. And didn't it intensify noticeably as they dropped more trafficked streets into Santa Rosa? They tried to see if other motorists were noticing it – and then they turned onto a broad, westbound street that dropped through the center of town. Now the crush of it was louder still, its slight resistance to their tires grew palpable – and this asphalt laneway to the sinking sun was laddered with ghostly smears of rainbow no one could miss. Now cars flowing in both directions were carrying people who were pointing out the roadway to each other. Ken swung north, and pulled in at Pap's Liquors on Mendocino Avenue.

Inside, with his twelve-packs and quart of Jack Daniels on the counter between them, Ken asked the woman at the register:

"What's with this stuff on the streets? Has it been like this all day?"

"You know, for the last hour or so, *everybody's* been asking that. I couldn't tell what the heck they were talking about at first. You can really see these, like, flashes of color off it now, can't you?" She mused on her view of the street, as though it were a picture in a travel brochure, or a telecast. "Oh dear!" she cried. "There's another one!"

"Another what?"

"Poor doggie! We saw one just a little while ago, and I asked this man was in here if it could be, you know, mad, but he said

no, when they were mad they just foamed at the *mouth*. Oh dear!"

The dog, a mixed shepherd, flinched away and cantered down the sidewalk when Dale, newly amazed, went out and tried to coax the animal to hand. It was as if the dog felt some particular humiliation in its affliction – to have its all-questioning nose so strangely furred with a grayish thistledown that it could neither sneeze nor rub away.

Driving back up Redwood, Ken said, "I know it's got our attention now and all, but I'd swear it wasn't this thick an hour ago. We'd have heard it through the music."

Park right where you were, Kenny. There was something I saw under your tail pipe."

This proved to be a patch of markedly thicker and taller road-growth. "When you first came over, you idled here a little before killing your engine."

"I was listening to the last part of a cut."

Dale nodded. "So... diffusion by automotive exhaust?" Both men gazed up and down the roadways. "I'm going to make some phone calls," Dale said, "and I think I won't be the only one doing it."

"Good idea. I'll wash us out a couple of glasses."

IV

Ted Fennerman sat at his desk, his chair clicked back at its rest angle. From his window he looked across his lot, the enameled candy colors of mint-new car tops, at the sky. Its dusky blue was turning purple as gradually as Ted imagined wine must ripen in a vat, or whatever they made wine in.

When business had been good, this was always an hour Ted savored, like a liquor sipped privately. He watched the arc of 101 that wrapped the south end of his lot, watched the dinner-bound traffic's headlights coming on like stars. He pictured, individually, the day's sales, each shepherded singly from his corral of glossy stock, and frisking with their new owners out

to graze on 101's long pasture and raise the happy roar of their vitality.

Not so this evening, though business had been very good. Tonight, bone-weary and naggingly sore of throat, he couldn't taste the tang of it all. He'd told his secretary hours ago that he was out to calls; it seemed such an effort just to talk. He'd sat and fought his way through desk work, but at last ground to a halt. Lines of text had grown vague and slippery like snowed-under road; his pen lurched with a balky clutch, or lost it on the curves.

What kind of whimp was he? he asked himself bitterly. A simple god-damned sore throat, and bam – he was belly-up on the canvas. It was galling to feel too weak to strike when the iron was hot. He had promised himself that he would go in on that new franchise with Clark Mannheim if things stayed even half as good as they'd been going. Clark wasn't going to stand around waiting to be kissed forever – he'd find someone else. Ted thought of all those TV ads where tired businessmen bungled big deals for lack of the right antihistamine-and-aspirin compound – dumb, though there was a grain of truth. You feel just a little off your feed, and it could cost you some important moment.

Ted shook himself groggily, to wake his will. He snapped his chair up to its no-nonsense angle. He breathed deeply and punched Clark's number. When the receiver clicked open, he again drew breath for a hearty greeting. Clark's voice said:

"Yes?"

"Gullub!" Ted boomed. "Glarg?"

"What? Who is this?"

Ted, as shocked as Clark sounded, gaped at the phone. He clapped it back to his head and cried: "Glarg!? Gellub?!" Now fear raked his heart. He slammed the phone down, jumped up. Clicking on his washroom light, he saw his mouth loom gaping up to the mirror over the sink, as if to devour it. An eerie, pale fur thronged his throat and flourished from his gums. He moaned, watching his shaggy tongue shudder in its weedy pit,

like some hibernating monster tormented by a dream. Ted Fennerman headed for the hospital without further attempts on the phone.

When Gail, after waiting through half an hour and two pina coladas at a table at the Cattleman's, called the lot, she learned that Ted had left long before without a word to anyone. So she went back and ordered her sirloin and a third colada – a double.

The drink seemed spiritless, but it did soothe a touch of soreness in her throat – Ted's bug no doubt – and help numb a general itchiness that had persisted since the sauna. See the cycle? she asked herself. Get hung over, get lowered resistance, get sick, and then you wind up having more cocktails for relief. But she couldn't seem to care, and ordered another double when the steak came.

The restaurant seemed to promote her lassitude. Usually thronged, it was rather empty tonight; and in spite of this, it was short-staffed, too – her waitress had apologized in advance, saying they were not only lacking table help, but were short on cooks, too. Gail ate. Even with plenty of horseradish, the steak entertained her dulled palate only mildly. She finished it, though well before the last bite, she was beginning to feel almost drugged, as though she had ingested an anchor that tried to drag her head after it as it sank.

To hell with her thoughtless bastard of a husband. He'd forgotten her, gone home, was already resting. Thanks to him, she'd been stranded here to overeat and overdrink, but she'd waste no more time waiting on him. She'd get home and get off her feet. Slowly but decisively, Gail wiped her lips, rose, and walked out.

She stood in the parking lot. Out on Montgomery the mid-evening traffic looked pretty heavy. Did it sound extra screechy? More brakes and horns than usual? There! That tow truck nearly piled into that station wagon there at the light. She'd have to be very careful driving home.

"Mrs. Fennerman!" It was her waitress. The girl looked worried as well as tired. She seemed to stare a bit at Gail's face

as she said: "You forgot your coat. And the check... ?"

"Oh dear! I'm sorry! I feel so *woozy* tonight... " The girl *was* looking at her face, strangely, as they went back inside. Gail smiled self-deprecatingly at the cashier as she extended the woman her credit card. The cashier gasped, and Gail, seeing what made her do so, felt her head wobble at the shock as though lightly punched: her own forearm and hand, all silkily befurred with an exquisite lawn of pallid fine filaments a quarter inch long, like freshest, tenderest shoots of spring.

V

The windows, long gray with dawn, were turning buttery with sunrise.

"Jesus Christ!" Ken said, keying down the newscast's volume. He and Ken sat in a kind of information trance, stunned by nightlong revelations. "I feel like a kid," Ken said. "After a sugar whiteout, my brain gorged with weird images, coming out into an afternoon sun so bright it hurts. I knew – I *knew* I should've stocked up better yesterday. I mentioned it, right? And now, God rot me, I've got to drive into town before it's too late – before it's *three* inches deep."

Dale shook his head and gestured at the screen. "Didn't you see how traffic's starting to slip and slide?"

"It still looks steerable to me. There won't be much traffic on Redwood. It's now or never."

"Well, if you break down, stay off the road walking back. And get some food. Something in cans, and eatable cold. Chilli or stew.

Ken rose, scattering empty beer cans, loath to be reminded of the fungus's capacity for rooting in flesh. Shutting the door after him, he looked with hate at the drive, where the fungal mat was now a lush two inches deep. He did a lumbering ballet across it, his soles cringing from the contact, and hauled himself into the Maverick. He feared his ill-tuned engine stalling, so he idled till it was good and warm. It mortified him

that in doing this, he was feeding his world's new enemy, helplessly stoking the biological conflagration that had somehow, overnight, embraced it. The suspicion nagged him that this would be just how evolution's fallguys, the adaptively overtaken breeds, always exited the stage; by a droll, inadvertent suicide, mechanically revving up their long-sacred tricks of survival that the upstart, by some dire new ingenuity, has turned to death traps. He gunned onto Old Redwood Highway's long mycelial lawn.

It was supple. Its slick toughness made the curves tricky. At least he was rolling – his tires could have been fused with the road. It had happened to thousands of vehicles left parked overnight on heavily trafficked urban streets, which had been superabundantly seeded with exhaust-born spores. This lush crop's greedy upreach was answered by the germination of a second form of spore, the strictly wind-born kind produced by the road surface growth, and with which the treads of *all* cars that had been driven the day before were packed. By the time, two hours ago, the earliest commuters stepped out to their mounts, many found them crouched on crumbling flats that were already half digested by this devil grass growing from beneath and within. Ken, at some risk, stayed near forty, knowing his own venerable retreads must already be dying from within.

Maneuver proved little worse than on a slushy, half-snowed road, but in fact – wasn't the fungus beginning to look *wet* here and there? What was this, some new wrinkle? Should he call it in? The thought, an instant later, forced a laugh from him. Oh yes, report it! Add his jot of awe and stupefaction to the general delirium! Since TV's Tribal Eye first squinted at the streets on last night's six o'clock news, and blinking anchormen – raising uncertain voices above the rush-hour road – had affirmed the infestation, the municipal, technical and military sectors of the area had been caucusing with state authorities. They had clashed and conferenced throughout the night, all concensus eluding them. Information-pooling switchboards were quickly

formed and publicized, and the data for a sketchy etiology of the ecoplague were soon gathered. But as long as continued observation showed the roads to be drivable, all involved willingly shunned the contemplation of their clearest countermeasure – the interdiction of all public thoroughfares. So vast an arrest of circulation, assuming it could even be brought off, seemed itself a cataclysm, a mortal shock that must produce unguessed-at mayhem among the bottled masses. They flooded the media with advisories, put troops and cops on alert, and waited. And with the dawn, people started trooping out to their usual commutes, also waiting to see what would happen; as though the simple wonder of the thing had universally captured people's curiosity, the sheer scope and unity of it. A fungus, stunningly proliferative, that thrived on hydrocarbons of every kind.

Gasoline and some municipal supplies of natural gas were thought to be its initial vector, at least in California and others of the heaviest-hit states. The mechanisms of its continuing diffusion were no mystery. The fungus's omniperipheral advance, by mycelial branching, was incredibly rapid in itself, of course, through any food matrix. But with the combustion of the matrix, the mycelium it contained underwent a fusion and a heat-triggered concentration of genetic material, and resolved itself into a gust of exceedingly small and numerous spores. Hence the roadways were only the first of many zones that those first vectors had seeded, since most of a tail pipe's tillage went aloft to haunt the troposphere. *There* was the real scope of this thing, and it made Ken shiver slightly, imagining that global microsnow, that sooty seed like a gauze-fine, wide-flung shroud settling right now – softly, softly – down upon them all. What could anybody do but drive out to business as usual through this awesome newness that had been laid upon the world?

At the liquor store he called the hot line on the pay phone. The wet spots on the mold weren't news to the tired-sounding woman he got. "Enzyme puddles, they think," she said bleakly.

"Stay off the roads, especially the freeways."

"Yeah," said Ken, who could hear 101's roar a quarter mile from where he stood. He went in and got two cans of stew, two twelve-packs of Buckhorn, and a half gallon of Jim Beam. Reapproaching his car, he saw two black smears matching his tires' path, and seeming to melt into the mold even as he watched. Further provisionings must surely be made afoot, and the imbalance of his supplies bothered him. He went back in and got another half gallon of Beam.

He drove fast, as the few other cars on Redwood were doing, slewing and screeching. His tires were spongy now, taunting him with collapse. He rolled past vineyard and pasture, trailer parks and sprawled junkyard country houses. Fine fungal lawns toupeed all asphalt-shingled roofs – white lawns where antennas stood like stark, futuristic trees. Furred garden hoses lay in yards like feathered snakes in the grass. The pallid fuzz outlining window frames baffled him till he realized the monomers composing most caulks were hydrocarbons. On one porch he saw a shuddering puffball shape – just discernibly a dog, on its back, fighting to breath, its paws kneading the air. Ken's rear left tire gasped, and sagged, and started jouncing. He braked, the brakes locked, the Maverick came ass-around, crossed the shoulder, dropped its rear in a rain ditch, and blew the tire on the right.

Raging, he got out hugging his bag, hotfooted across the sporulating mat, and jumped the ditch. He landed ankle-deep in sweet, sane, earthy grass – and partly in cowpat. He roared some nouns and gerundives, found and flung an illogical rock at his car, whose front left tire sank with a wet cough. Ken broke out a beer and strode north, hurrying not to hear the last tire go. He stooped through the wire and straddled the wooden fences, and tiptoed the highway only where berry-choked streams compelled it. the space he moved through now was that magnified space into which everyone emerges from a failed car – full-scale space, toilsome and time-swallowing, where to reap one aim or object, you had to plow across acres for hours. "I

should've stocked up better," Ken muttered. He shifted his burden and cursed the weight of the stew.

Dale was where he had left him, but sitting straighter, rapt in the newscast again. "Enzyme slicks, Kenny! Like a sudden digestive *assault.*

What is it, near nine? Look there!"

"Man! That's 101 north of Novato?"

"Yup! Just where the southbound backup always starts – and I think its being rush hour's saved a lot of lives. From there on down, no one was going very fast when the fungus came on."

They watched an aerial view of confluent freeways where, at this hour, San Francisco-bound traffic routinely braked to join a creeping clog twenty miles long. Today the free-flowing traffic had come up on the clog at lower than usual speeds, though generally drivers had managed to maintain a cautious, coping flow over this invader of their path. They came in slower, but the enzyme sweat was brutally sudden in its increase, and their tires had turned greasy in their swift liquefaction. Brakes jammed fruitlessly. With seeming abandon – some with fey, balletic half turns – cars skied into the phalanxed bumpers of the idling backup.

Now the clog sat unmoving on twenty miles of flats, smoke penciling up here and there from the rivered vehicular jigsaw. South of the crazed skewing of the pileup zone, the jumbling of the derelict armada was less severe, though everywhere were sideways chromeboats with crumpled corners, ram-welded pairs of tailgating muscle-cars, and jacknifed semis pillowed on luckless imports. Diced safety glass, like a sugar spill, everywhere jeweled the prickly vigor, the pubic wetness of the mold.

The network's helicopter caught four others in its scan, two winching up wounded. The anchorman's voice-over announced his own craft's return south to base to be refurbished for rescue work. Thereafter, his shakily improvised script tended to relapse to a formula, an awed dirge:

"And of course here we're seeing 101 as it approaches San Rafael... And this of course is 101 climbing past Marin... "

Already most of the vehicles were abandoned, while the people in their tens of thousands, in four streams choppy with contrariety, trudged along both sides of the freeway's two corridors, as clotted in this progress as they had been in their cars. As an image, Ken found it very moving. As if he viewed an epochal event -mankind at last abjuring some vast, ambiguous enterprise, a millennial pilgrimage frozen in its tracks by a cataclysmic unison of doubt, and abandoned at long last, all dismounting, all returning their myriad of separate ways. Their sunblazoned fleet, while it roared, had seemed aimed, an army. It looked now like an aborted stampede.

"The shine of it! Christ!" Dale almost enthused. "It's almost *puddled* with enzymes."

"Tell me about it. Did you hear my car pull in? It's ass-in-a-ditch two miles back on four flats. Have a beer."

"And food?"

"In the bag. You know I just can't buy it, any kind of Russki gene-engineering angle. Why conquer a place so you can't get around in it once it's yours? They'd make something that went for the people primarily."

"This stuff doesn't do so bad on people," Dale said from the kitchen, plying a can opener.

"Yeah, but you've got to practically gargle or smoke spores to get it going."

Dale found a fork and came back to his chair. "It's not Russki, of course. It's off-world, obviously." He began gobbling stew. Ken nodded readily, but found he had to clear his throat.

"Right. Designed by another environment. And damn if I can imagine what kind of setup could produce... *this*."

Dale sat forking, musing. His forking slowed a beat or two, and he interlaced it with conjectures. "Biologically hot world? Teeming? Epoches of floral/faunal explosion. Organic sumps capped. With limestone by shallow seas, like here? Vast petrochemical deposits, in any case. But lots of venting to the surface. By vulcanism? Other seismic events? So plenty of tar pools, asphalt seeps, burning vents of natural gas." Dale forked

up the last muddy lump, dropped his fork in the empty can, belched, and sighed. Ken, though bleakly, had to laugh.

"Somehow, I see *you*, Dale. A titanothere of that alien Tertiary, shuffling to a flaming tar pit, munching the sludge."

"The flaming vents," added Dale composedly, "would promote the evolution of combustive sporulation, of course."

It sobered them a moment, this naming of that most frightening fungal trick. The ragged carbon microshells that their seemingly destructive birth created for the spores made them infinitely responsive to air currents, amazingly invasive and adherent once in contact with a food matrix. Was there even now a just perceptible tickle in their fall through the air? They sat feeling the noise and stir of this new day rising around them, the unimaginable bawl of mired commerce, of eighteen-wheel giants who lay half devoured by the very paths they trod.

VI

Near the close of that same day, Sheri Klugman, Gail Fennerman's younger sister, blinked away tears, turning her face for a moment to the windows and the honey-and-roses light of dusk. Roy Hummer sat with his eyes commiserately downcast. He was experienced in the resurgences of grief his clients suffered in these interviews, but he was also exceedingly tired. This was his twelfth transaction since noon – all twelve of them involving loved ones in the Fennermans' condition.

"I'm sorry," Sheri said, resettling with a sigh the burden of composure on her shoulders. "It's just this awful *suddenness* of everything... "

"Please. You have our entire sympathy. And I know it's a terrible added burden, this time limit for disposal – *disposition* of your loved ones."

"Yes... well, I guess it's lucky that we live close enough to attend... Midnight tonight does feel so... *hurried*, though."

"Yes, of course, we're terribly sorry." Watch that tone of voice,

Roy told himself. "It's certainly never been *our* way of doing things, this tactless hurry. But you can see that from a sani – a *medical* viewpoint... ?"

Grief resurged in Sheri, overflowing as plaintiveness. "Do you really think that an open-casket ceremony isn't... ?"

"No, that's quite definite, I'm afraid." Roy paused, and warned himself again. "You see, with this thing there's just nothing we can do. It's too tough to be, ah, shaved off. Even if it could be, there is a considerable, an extensive amount of *shriveling*, frankly – do you follow me?" He saw that Sheri, with the inattentiveness of sorrow, was looking out the window again. Roy felt frayed and gritty. He wanted a shower. He wanted to sleep. Sheri's eyes were full again. The woman was plainly dazed, powerless to leave alone the few futilities remaining of her sister. With the helpless iteration of bereavement she said:

"They were just both so *definite* – whenever it came up, I mean, about both wanting to be cremated – "

"No way," Roy Hummer snapped. "That's all there is to it. We're respecting the emergency ordinance 100 percent. So please just take it or leave it, Miss Klugman."

VII

"Screw the whole effort. Why struggle?" Ken asked, though he didn't stop working. It was the following afternoon. He was encasing his shoe and ankle in an aluminum foil bootie, crinkling it on sheet by sheet, securing it round the ankle with rubber bands. Dale already had his booties on. He tossed Ken a paper particle mask and stowed others, left over from his remodeling, into one of the two knapsacks lying readied on the counter.

"Hunger and thirst," he answered. "Curiosity."

"Boy. Look at that, Dale." The TV's copter-born eye scanned down over an oil tanker docked at Long Beach. The voice-over was saying:

"As you can see, the fittings of those off-load hoses are densely covered with the mold, and as I say, the samples from what's still in the tanker as well as what's now in the offshore tanks have both been tested positive for infestation. You can see, too, how these pipelines to the holding tanks in the hills are also covered. Officials have told us that this is merely a surface growth on a bituminous cover that's put on all gas pipeline to protect it from corrosion and weathering... "

"Christ!" Dale said. "What's it matter? That tanker was half off-loaded before they stopped! Three quarters of a million barrels!"

"Know what they said last night, while you were asleep?" Ken asked, booting his other foot. "Seems they inject natural gas into the ground – to force up the pressure of crude they're pumping? So it turns out a lot of this natural gas also tests positive for infestation."

"Hoo boy," Dale said quietly. The newsman was now narrating a flyby of one of the Long Beach refineries. It belonged, he said, to one of the first of the big oil companies to comply with the federal immediate shutdown order, acting within twenty four scant hours of receiving it. The furnaces beneath, and burn-off pipes above; its fractioning towers had been quenched for several hours now. Every valve and juncture in its python's nest of pipes was muffed with mold. Gaskets everywhere – however thick, sandwiched at whatever pressures – were digested to monomers to feed the alien biopolymer, and wherever gas drizzled in result, the mycelium grew in ghastly whiskers, along the undersides of pipe, in streamers trailing down to puddles, like moss dusting every secret little creek of leakage woven through the installation. And of course, as the hills and graded bluffs the storage tanks stood on were all capped with asphalt, the whole plant was environed with sweeping pastures of the pale predator.

"Think of it, Kenny." Dale still sounded subdued. "Those burn-off pipes just shut off this morning. Giant spore nozzles, pumping the atmosphere full like it was just another giant

tank."

The voice-over, having discoursed on gaskets, was saying:

"Chuck, I think, was pointing out earlier that here in L.A., the infestation layer has made airborne infestation of petroleum products in general an especially severe problem. Crated TVs still in the factory warehouses have been opened, and the insulation of their wiring found infested. And that, in fact, is why we're going to have this intermission in our telecopter report, because we're very concerned to have our copter return to base for regular checks of the fuel line. That's why you see us turning around right now, and that's why it's back to you now, Chuck."

The studio anchorman appeared, conjured by his name. "Right, Dave, and thank you. And you'll be back on the air about noon for continued coverage of the Long Beach area?"

"That's right, Chuck. I... Ah, it seems I'll have to sign off a little quicker than... the pilot says we have a sudden loss of fuel pressure that – MY GOD, THE ENGINE'S STOPPED!"

The studio men had cut back to the copter's video transmission, but the camera, being aimed out the copter's windshield, was half eclipsed by Dave's panicked profile. Some movement of the man's terror had killed the sound. He turned a blind stare, mouth moving, to the camera, then back to the view before them all. This now tilted and – shockingly – rushed upward.

The studio, with quick cannibalism, cut the video from a second copter, clearly fleeing the scene as it recorded Dave's craft smashing to fire against the mossy, gas-rilled grounds. Smoke welled up. Flame bloomed, branched and probed root-like through the jungled steel, and then the fleeing copter cut transmission and the studio anchor team was back on screen, so stunned that Chuck actually gave an astonished laugh. "That really happened!" he said.

"I mean... "

Dale and Ken put on their packs, but stood waiting till a ground crew cut in transmission from a hilltop a mile from the

refinery. There was a raving note in the reporter's voice left from the fury he had just seen. He told of the storage tanks' explosion moments before. The pair watched the black upward avalanche, the new hosts of spores storming up to mingle with their fellows under the inversion layer. Ken cracked the last beer, made room in it for bourbon, and spiked it. "So let's go," he said.

They left the TV on – an irrational, magical measure against its failure with the inevitable loss of electrical insulation – but there was relief in the firmness with which Dale shut and locked the door on its global window. They now marched – resolute, if shaky – into their local piece of the catastrophe, a share that seemed more manageable. The day was cloudless. Golden light waxed the blackish branches of the oaks and drenched the fields flanking Old Redwood Highway, while through these fields a fair number of folk trudged, townward or back. Dividing them, the translucent luxuriance of the roadway was riverlike, something that made the people on either side more separate than could the gap alone. They all walked through a country silence never known here with the freeway running so near. They looked rather dwarfed – in their unshelled littleness – by the green acres they had always zipped past. They traded calls here and there, in voices also dwarfed by the big, breeze-whispery trees. Many of them wore bandanas like silent-Western stickup men, and some wore masks like Ken's and Dale's.

Both, as they walked in their bright-booted guise, felt a touch of unmeant circus gaiety in the spectacle. Now dozens of cars, mired within a half hour of Ken's mishap, were derelict on the ermined asphalt – whimsically angled, or half in ditches, or squared off in the disarray of impact. All were richly bearded on their greased underbellies; the interiors of most, those with plastic upholstery, were lavishly robed. There was something of Mardi Gras in the long, disjointed rumba line of them.

"Floats in the Fungus Bowl Parade," Ken said. "Aborted due to lack of tires." The flanking power lines with their tufted

insulation suggested streamers, while a service station just ahead offered racks of furry tires, like festively frosted doughnuts. Dale gave a laugh that was half a groan.

"I tell you, Kenny, we're doomed! Look at those sporangia. I mean, as if the combustive spores aren't enough, we're getting this incredible ground crop in just three days! I mean, this stuff is *fast*. We either hit the bush, head for the unpaved hills, or we've had it. And you know, all the time it keeps nagging at me: how the hell did this stuff *get* here? I mean, did it just blow across space?"

"How the hell do I know? Here." Ken took the bottle from his pack and tilted some bourbon in under his mask, and Dale followed suit. "Once we pick up some more beers at Larkfield, we'll both feel better," Ken advised.

There was a crowd at Larkfield, and beer's price had gone up sharply. They proceeded with three more twelve-packs, Ken grumbling. They gingerfooted on their silver feet through the shopping center – all paved – and across Mark West Road. After that there were fields to walk on again. Lifting their masks often to swallow beer, they climbed the highway's gradual rise to an overview of 101, which swept near at this point, just above town.

The freeway's curve, the outward surge of it, acted as their TV had done, brought home afresh the continental scope of this plague, the wheels of trade and travel locked in this hoarfrost coast to coast. They paused to ply the bourbon, hundreds of captured vehicles visible from here. All the sunlight, and the beauteous diffractions of the sporangia, made them seem numinous things, crude Elder Gods overtaken by an exuberant cosmos of simpler, more vigorous beings: a tow truck, its oily boom so bearded it seemed some exotic sailbacked being; a toppled bus like a giant bug cacooned or spider-shrouded –

"Hey. Look there," Ken said. "That Rolls behind the bus? It's *idling*. Christ, you'd think the jackass could've – "

"No, there's a guy there that just leaned in and started it up! Look, there he is, moving up to that green van, see?"

"Jesus Christ! That's Al! Guy that works in a gas station up the road. What the hell's he *doing* ?"

Al's awkwardness and odd hesitations of three days ago were gone. He was a man of experience now. He grasped the van's door handle as surely as its owner might. The van yielded what he sought – the keys – for he geared it to neutral, fired it up, warmed it, and then left it idling on what remained to it of fuel.

Al surveyed the way he had come, and then the way he was headed. He looked up at the sun and seemed to come to a decision. He sat down on the step-up of a big semi's cab. He settled back with an odd completeness, so the step well and door received and propped him fully. Then he opened his shirt. Dividing his chest and stomach was a vertical red scar. Al grasped the flaps of this seam as briskly as he had his shirt, and spread open a slick chasm from which a multi-legged blackness, about a small dog's size, came nimbling down across his lap, and sprang thence to the fungal lawn. The hands that freed it fell slack as its last leg was plucked from the incision.

The thing was glossy and quick. There was much of the insect about its structure, about its scissoring, multiple mouthparts, with which it now began to gorge on the sporangia that sparkled everywhere around its stilting legs. It wandered out to graze the jeweled laneway, while slump-headed Al stared empty-eyed.

"Ah yes," Dale said in a slow, strange voice. "A biologically hot world indeed. Full of remarkable forms. You know what, Kenny? See the pickup in that guy's driveway over there? See the gun racks? Let's go borrow a rifle, or bring him over here."

"There must be thousands of them, man. All over."

"Yeah. But we can *get* this one."

This seemed to waken Ken a bit. "Right on," he said.

Jessica Amanda Salmonson: Heromaker

by Thomas Ligotti

Of all the creatures in the universe, the hero is the most vulnerable. This fact is betrayed by his very nature: being one who is eager to confront any ordeal in the course of his quest, he demonstrates his fatal innocence, his lack of immunity to evils great and small. A dose of corruption, inoculation with the poison of certain experiences, would spare him his bouts with all those Circes and cyclopes. But this, of course, is the whole point of such encounters – to break the hero down with pain and loss and fear and remorse. Only in this manner is he offered the chance to be saved from his own purity and find himself on equal terms with the rest of us: a fully vaccinated survivor of the disease of adventure, a lead-footed cripple cured of the wanderlust. But this is one chance the hero should never take. For heroes need always triumph, and therefore must remain – unsound.

And over what – essentially – does the hero triumph? Oh! The adversary has so many faces, so many agents and instruments of doom. But it really has only one name: Disillusion. In its natural form this enemy is terrible enough, slaughtering innocent ideals of friendship and love, morality and order.

These fallen comrades, however, are merely figures in the foreground of a vaster scene, the tiniest specks in an astronomical landscape. (The hero might well carry on without them, if only to avenge their deaths or perhaps to punish himself for having put his faith in such illusions) For behind the natural props of human life looms the infinite backdrop of the supernatural, which cannot shift too quickly and certainly cannot fall if the hero is to maintain his most vital quality – the will to *act.* And this impulse depends wholly on his belief in a world worth acting in, or any world at all in which he can keep a foothold, avoid losing his precious balance. But this is precisely what the adversary of Disillusion excels in destroying – the sense that a given conception of reality, of truth, has any meaning at all. Thus, episode by episode, the hero becomes entangled in sorcerous schemes that defy the scrutiny of reason; he wanders into a spectral world of mists and shadows that obey strange laws, or none at all; and finally he is threatened with the knowledge that he himself is only a puppet whose wired limbs are pulled by a mad master, if in fact they are not just rattling in the wind. "Things are not what they seem," might be the legend inscribed above the threshold of this hell. Or, in the blatant form of this apothegm that Jessica Salmonson suggests by way of her hero Timith, "Truth is nothing."

In the face of such menacing revelations, how is the hero to preserve his naive compulsion to continue? Having embarked upon a quest, he cannot see it through if he is able to see through its vacuity. And this, the greatest peril of these excursions, may now clearly be seen as their secret motive. There are any number of pretexts for the hero's journey – homesickness, father-finding, simple restlessness. (For Timith it is first the search for a specific truth, then the hunger for revenge) But however disparate their superficial objectives may be, the deepest purpose of these characters is always the same: to protect their integrity as heroes by rejecting the tainting influences of knowledge and wisdom, to refuse any scrap of

sagacity their quest may hold out to them. In brief, to sustain their status as idiots.

In one of his nicely shaded deprecations of the leading motifs of history, E.M. Cioran has described the heroes of Homer's time as "sublime dolts." An admirable physical specimen, one of matter's most accomplished forms, the true hero approaches the perfection of a *thing* : impervious to the assaults of a fully human consciousness, he takes his place among the elements and is in harmony with them. And the *truest* hero? The paradigm itself? This would have to be the simplest clod, a chunk that has come loose from the material universe and, like the mother-substance, begins hurling itself through the adventures of the void. Although this may seem a bizarre extension, it serves to illustrate the contrast between the hero and humanity proper – the later being the prevalent and enduring species, the former existing as a mere freak of the human imagination, an imperiled mutant who holds only the most primitive resemblance to ourselves.

To the extent that the hero partakes of superior tendencies – especially those of a mystic or philosophic bent – he falls short of his ideal stature. Of course, there is such a thing as the "tormented" hero, one that is impeded by consciousness in some way, stifled by questions and doubts. But such torments must be, and usually are, resolved in favor of the hero's original condition, leaving him as he was in the beginning. Otherwise he is not a hero *to type* and falls into an entirely different category. (A similar case is that of the "fallen angel," which is simply a euphemism for an altogether separate breed of being)

No, the hero is forced to remain an unevolving abstraction if he is to have any substance at all. Yet this is a task that is quite impossible in a universe where disillusionment is forever breaking things down, even heroes. Another universe is required if the hero is to exist, a haven for this parasite of our dreams and nightmares, a protective place of lies and fabrications where this stupendous weakling with no resistance to the evils of this earth may rise to his full moronic glory and stand

pathetically invincible against all enemies.

And this alternative universe, this paradise, is that of art – more precisely that of the *story,* where those of us who are dying the slow death of disillusionment often retreat. Having eaten the awful fruit of knowledge, of truth, we are forever banished from that other paradise. Nevertheless, some particle of heroes idiocy survives in us, our despair is not complete, as long as we are inventing stories, any stories, even ones in which the hero succumbs to the most severe disenchantment and reveals himself as a false hero. For the storyteller, who gives us heroes true and bogus alike, is first among the fools, the arch-monarch of the mad, and remains the primal hero from whom all others derive. As if merely for our *amusement* this creature persists in the lies of many legends and keeps us distracted from the truths that would exempt us from our miserable quest. Only when all stories have stopped dead will the heroic mania truly have died, as may be witnessed in the career of Timith, son of Timith. And yet – just as an imaginary Timith of heroic legend is reborn from the ashes of reality – the lunacy of the storyteller may at any time return: the raving continues and it seems the last tale has not yet been told. Another plot is hatched – supreme mockery! – in the slime of a new world.

–Thomas Ligotti
St. Claire Shores, 1987

The Revelations and Pursuits of Timith Son of Timith

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

Hatred Drives the Tide

Hatred drives the tide from shore
then draws it raging back
Hatred is the fire of the sun
the cold and dark of night
It lurks in the deep shadowed woodlands
It pervades the ocean depths
It lingers on the bleak black tundra
falls from mountain heights
flows in every river
blows down from the steppes
across the quietest vale
It is consummated in the savannahs
multiplied in green valleys
strengthened in the dells
spread by every gale.

It's wept by the moon
sprinkled from the stars
and stored like precious metal
in the iron hearts of men.

Without hatred the world would be
a rank and stagnant pool
No storm
no wind
no turning head
no lust, emotion, pain
Hatred is the power that moves the cosmos
With it Man shall reign.

ONE

of disillusionment, of the difficulty of becoming a man, of ships and nautical knots, and voices calling from beyond the sea.

All his young life, little Timith had been told how his father, lost at sea, had been a brave and noble seaman who in his prime had captained the flagship of the Drangon Fleet. Once that Fleet was Candoria's most powerful and beautiful armada: orange sail-blossoming ships with heads of lizards spring the way before. The Dragon Fleet had been ably led against the long, low vessels of the armies of Brinle: sinister, enemy ships that looked like black and yellow centipedes with their hundred oars slapping in time against the waves, to the boom of galley drums. Submerged, copper-pointed battering-rams were driven into the sides of the dragon galleons, below the water line, so that inrushing sea pulled many of Candoria's wondrous ships to the ocean floor. Yet for every Dragon Ship lost, a triad of foe-ships vanished beneath the waves. Timith always listened with

awe and adoration when his mother told this tale, of how his glorious sire aimed Candoria's famed armada against the Brinle fleet. The Brinlese were destroyed to a boat, and the coastal cities were saved from plundering raids; and Candoria's citizens were saved from slow deaths as galley slaves.

Little Timith's mother told him also of the time his heroic sire sailed to Death's Delta and there killed the Serpent Mother while her snakelets were still writhing in her womb. Thus those waters were saved from another millennium of serpent rule.

And with her wide-eyed son sitting on her lap, rapt by tales of his father's greatest deeds, she told him how that mighty man sought out wicked Marga, the sailor-enchanting witch. The hero returned to Port Horn in Candoria with the witch's beautiful red-haired stuck on the point of the fore-spar.

Finally she told how he had gone off into the West, seeking proof of the roundness of the world. He never returned, and never beheld his namesake and only son, born shortly after that final voyage.

When Timith son of Timith came to his fifth year of age, it was time to enroll in Manmaker school. There, for the first time, he heard tales contrary to those his mother told. His first day between classes was spent in fist fights and wrestling; his new sun-yellow blouse and best blue knickers were ruined beyond repair. He was sent to the master manmaker who thought the best way to make boys into men was by a supple whip.

Timith did not cry when his eye was bruised. Nor did he cry when his back was whipped raw. Nor when his mother scolded him for his ruined clothes. He cried only when he found himself alone in his own small bed, the night of his first day in school, remembering the filthy lies the children had invented about his father.

As time went by, he learned not to boast of his father's brave deeds, for liars had different versions of every tale. Soon he stopped telling of his father at all. If people asked, he would say that he was named after King Timith of the old reign, not the

Timith who some called The Mad Sea Captain.

In due course, he graduated from Manmaker. he was given his first steel sword as diploma of man-made. He came home less proud that the others and put the small sword away in a box. He had grown tall and, though lank, very strong; and he would sooner carry a kitchen knife than that ridiculously little blade. Instead, he went to his mother's room and took the sword and sheath from the wall where she kept it above her bed. When she asked why he should take it down and wear it on his belt, he told her, "It was my father's sword and now it is mine." And though she cried because she was selfish and would not sleep well without it above her bed as a remembrance, she fought her selfishness and did not try to make him hang it up again.

That very evening while they ate, she tried to make him talk of his graduation and the honors. But he shrugged and answered only with his yes's and no's and maybe's. He would not converse more than that. She said how her growing son was becoming the image of his sire with the same brown hair and big eyes with feathery lashes and straight nose and square chin. And she said how the sword made him look even more like his manly father. On and on she gabbled until he stood from the dinner table and smashed a fist beside his plate and asked angrily, "Am I a bastard?"

She sat with mouth frozen in mid-sentence, a boast about the senior Timith only half related. Swallowing what she was about to say nearly choked her. She closed her mouth, frowned a little, then opened it again and said, "You are the child of love and faith."

"Yours or his?" he demanded venomously.

At that she covered her face with both hands and wept into her linen table napkin, rising and running to her room too swiftly for him to ease the hurt and say that he was sorry.

In a few minutes his pride was cast off and under it was a penetrating shame. Yet he could not find the strength to tell her he loved her, or to assure her that it did not matter what was true. For the unfortunate fact was that it did matter. And

obstinately he would pretend not to love her until she confessed her many lies. Though this was cruel, it was the only way he could cope with his own inner hurt.

From the doorway to her bedroom he asked, "Which is true?" She wiped away her tears, sat upright and rigid upon her bed, and looked at the wall without answer.

"Did my father lead the Dragon Fleet into a trap that let the Brinle swine sink our ships, every one; and is that not why Candoria has no armada today?"

Though no longer young, his mother was pretty. She looked more childlike now that he had ever seen her as she defended her lover in a meek voice: "Always must one man be blamed for the mistakes of many. The fleet was lost, but so were the galleys of the Brinle host. What men of the Candorian navy survived did so through the efforts of your father."

He hardly listened to her words, for his mind was already set on believing the worst. He snapped another question at the woman on the bed-end. "And did he not bait the mother-serpent to her doom by staking men to the soil of Death's Delta so that he might slay her when, gorged and pregnant, she could not slither swiftly back into her sea lair?"

She looked down at her own feet and said even more softly, "I was not there. I do not know. Enemies will tell untruths, or stretch small truths in distorted manners. Perhaps there were mutinous men who feared the waters of the Delta, and he did sacrifice them thus, for mutiny is a crime punishable by death. I think rather that he staked down pigs, not men." She repeated almost too quietly to be heard: "I do not know."

He did not ask the other: he was hurt and striking back, but not so cruel as to remind her of the story of the sea-witch. How the elder Timith won into the witch's confidence by first winning into her bed, and swording her in two ways in one night. But there was still another question, perhaps the most important, and he asked it:

"Did he seek to prove the world was round, or was he chased off the world's end by the Kinh's galleons when at last he turned

pirate?"

Now she turned her head and looked up at her stern-lipped son. Her eyes glistened wet in candlelight. "Many were the nights your father whispered in my ear his belief that the world was round, a globe at the center of the universe. On the beach, he drew it for me in the sand, and explained it in many ways because I was stupid and could not understand. Your father was wise. If he says the world is a ball, then I believe him though I do not know how it could be. So when I hear tales of his being chased to the world's end and falling from there into the eternal abyss, I know this is not true. Perhaps," she suggested, her eyes wandering and her heart swollen with hope, "perhaps, on the far side of the world, he still lives and conquers and is praised for the greatness that is his."

* * *

While attending Manmaker, Timith had learned the prevailing theories regarding the shape and nature of the world. Yet he was forced to wonder who would know the better: a philosopher with his nose in ancient texts, repeating the concepts of those centuries dead, or a seafarer with his eye on the pinwheel of the stars and his ship upon the very sea which others said eventually came to an end.

Timith wandered aimlessly in the chill night air, feeling the sword hanging strange and heavy at his side. A shallow stream ran near his home. He found himself standing by it, without having planned to come there. He looked into the cold waters, black as the night above, cold as his heart. It ran swift and clear among and over the rocks, around a fallen log – moon and starlight leapt among the myriad miniscule waves and currents. He listened to the rushing sound, loud in the still night. But it could not drown his thinking.

Were there not three separate and scarcely related explanations for the universe? His teachers had explained and outlined each, leaving much to the students to decide. What if none of

those possibilities were true? What if this fourth, stranger description of the world as a sphere were indeed closer to reality? He shook his head, either to clear his muddledness or to deny such a strange notion.

For some while he squatted on the stream's bank, picking up stones and bits of debris to drop in the water with a small splash and a gurgle. Who had lied? he asked himself. Had his starry-eyed, worshipping mother, living in perpetual dream, been wholly inaccurate when depicting the senior Timith's bravery and goodness? Was the rest of the country, or at least those who still spoke of Timith after nearly eighteen years, entirely correct in calling the man pirate and murderer? The truth might well lie between, as most truths do. A rogue he may have been, but what man would not be, given the strength and proper wit. A murderer? If so, then Larm of the First Crusades – who slew a thousand enemies though armed only with a broken sword's hilt – was also a murderer and not the saint history made of him. A pirate? Who could say what a man would become if unjustly made an outcast.

But what kind of thinking was this? Was young Timith making excuses for the crimes of his father? No! Timith was only too willing to turn all his thinking around, and believe the man as wicked as he had once believed him good!

Only one man knew all the truth, and he was lost at sea.

Lost, or gone over the edge.

Upon his feet, Timith ran back to the house. He entered quietly, for his mother had finally fallen into troubled sleep. He removed a quill, parchment and inkwell from a top drawer and sat at the table to write a letter. He purposefully neglected to sign it with his love, his anger and willingness to deal pain for pain still fresh and fierce. He knew that when his mother found it the next morning, she would cry again, and this time she would cry for many days; and for months after that she would awaken lonely in the night and tears would spring forth anew; and for years atop years she would look from the windows and door down the paths expecting any day to see someone return-

ing from sea, not unlike she had always done.

He put the ink and quill away and left the letter on the table. Taking only his father's sword, he set off for Port Horn. He was not really sad to be leaving home, for all men must do that. But perhaps he was a bit lonely from the instant he set foot out the door. There was no spring in his walk; and with such posture he would be hunchback by the time he was old. But he was not so woebegone as he seemed, for he did have hope: hope that his father's own tongue would one day assure him that heroes and marauders are often one in the same, only seen from different views; and say that nothing is so bad or so good as people claim, and the fortune that one day smiles on a popular man may another day frown on him and make him unpopular.

Candoria had only a generation before been renowned for its sea venturers and fine ships. But too many barely won wars had cast the once magnificent Port Horn into degeneracy. It was hardly more than one gigantic, smelly, fishing village, with huge buildings of cracked and crumbling masonry instead of the shacks of ordinary fisher communities. The nets of intrigue were as tightly woven as those nets cast between the long piers and throughout the harbor. Through every tavern door Timith saw the cutthroats and thieves and honest fishers and under-employed sailors drinking their ale and exchanging their tales of better times with a wink and a half toothless smile in their stubbly whiskers. There were tall women, too, the likes of which were unknown in Timith's small town; women of an inland country where it was normal that they should bear swords. All manner of deaths were dealt quickly in the old port city, so Timith avoided all company.

The harbor was not entirely blocked with nets. Two mighty galleons could be seen with tall masts and folded sails probing the clouds. One was an old dragon ship, perhaps the last, in such disrepair that it amazed Timith how it remained afloat. The other was not quite so big but in better condition: a trade ship from far, strange Loray, furthest coastal nation. Of the two, Timith rather longed for the gigantic dragon ship, with its

grotesque head glowering, a green-bronze trident tongue protruding from the open jaw. A foolish preference, since the ship seemed liable to collapse into flotsam at any moment. But it was more likely to need hands, and since a volunteer is better than a shanghaied sailor any day, he had no trouble being accepted aboard.

At Manmaker they had overlooked teaching him to make knots. For those three days in port he thought he would go mad with the complexity of tying ropes, which was no less complicated than the methods for raising and lowering sails, which was no less difficult than remembering the names of those sails since each of sixty of them had a different title. On the one hand he was anxious to be gone, but on the other he wished they had remained a day longer so he could learn his duties. Come time to sail, they were ready to give him up as a lost cause. So they put a bucket and scrub brush in his hands and ordered him to his knees. He looked up long enough to see the tattered orange sails unfold here and there at the helmsman's call. He felt the tug of the wind pulling them away from the pier. His heart fluttered with excitement when the ship was clear of the harbor and most of the sails were unleashed so that the ship felt to be flying along the water, so fast it traveled, an orange flame skating over the sea.

If slow in learning the seaman's trade, he was only all the better as it once his duties were pat. In a week's more time – before they had arrived at the nearest of many isles along their route – he was not upon his knees on the vast deck, but high in the mainsails, vigorously working the smaller sails about the big one, allowing for every change in the wind so that they might keep a steady, straight course.

A solemn figure at his duties, he displayed neither disdain nor affection for his hard work. He merely did his job better than would most, and spent his unworking hours in solitude, staring off over the sea. The horizon never came closer even though the once grandiose, now decrepit ship tried valiantly to overtake it.

For hours he would stand, unmoving, at the prow. There, he talked to his one friend upon that ship: the carven lizard-head with its three-pronged tongue. No one thought this odd, for all knew that ships had souls the same as men. There was nothing peculiar about talking to a sentient being, especially a being responsible for the lives of fifty men and four women working atop and within her. What he said to the fierce-looking masthead no one ever learned, for it was a sin to eavesdrop on personal conversation. And if the ship ever answered, no one else ever heard so much as a lizard's hiss.

Then one night Timith awoke in the hold to the sound of people calling. Awake, he heard nothing, and was about to dismiss it as a dream. But when he rolled over to face the creaking boards, he heard it again, mingled with the sound of the ocean beating the hull. It was the sound of many people moaning and crying for help, weeping and screaming in misery. They were mostly, but not entirely, the voices of men he heard calling in the distance, calling out in a multitude of tongues, or in a senseless, babbling panic. He reached down from his upper bunk to jostle an older sailor and whispered, "Do you hear it?"

"What?" a sleepy, unshaven face grumbled.

"Men calling out."

The older man's eyes opened, suddenly alert. His ears seemed to wriggle in their attempt to hear something. Almost hysterical in his reply, he whispered, "I hear nothing!" Then he rolled over, refusing to answer Timith's further prods.

That sailor had a loose tongue and, during the morning mess, Timith heard his feasting comrades muttering among themselves, then look at him with various expressions: fear, awe, sadness. But they looked away when he matched their stares.

All during the working day, whether on deck or crawling spider-like among the ropes and masts, the men avoided him. Since he was already a loner he did not mind much or even notice at first. It began to irk him only when it became overly obvious how men would suddenly change their pace and walk another direction when he came face to face with them. He

might have been a cursing black cat they feared to have cross their paths. Some men mumbled to Lepada, God of Seamen, who was usually not called on or bothered except in times of great peril. One man even drew Circles of Enlightenment in the air when they passed each other, as if there were something about Timith which needed to be warded off an which could not be understood.

At last he had had enough of this foolishness and snatched a sailor by the throat, a sailor who had walked around the corner of the bridge. The man was bigger and probably stronger than Timith. Yet in his quivering fright the startled victim could make no move to keep the young man from pinning him to the wall.

"Speak, man!" he demanded. "Am I a curse to walk on this ship? Why does one such as I, neither warrior nor warlock, suddenly kindle fear in your craven hearts?"

The terrified seaman spoke brokenly, "You have heard The Calling, the soulful cries of men lost at sea! Only a man who is lost himself is able to hear those marooned castaways. And he is destined to come to that lonely land of lost seaman to remain. We fear you, yes; for if you are doomed to that land, then perhaps this whole ship is doomed with you. I beg you let me go!"

Timith released the simpering poltroon, watched him scamper off across the deck.

The following weeks were the same. Voices came to him every night, always louder than the night before, as if he were coming nearer and nearer to whomever they were that called with each passing day. But he spoke of it no more, for fear some of the crew would fear his presence so much that they would take him and cast him overboard. After a while the busy sailors managed to forget their fears, not knowing that the voices persisted in reaching Timith's ears. After all, it was not the Season of Great Winds, and there had been no serpents sighted in eighteen years. These were charted and well know waters. The possibility of shipwreck and disaster appeared nonexistent.

They harbored at one island after the next, following the vast curve of a submerged mountain range whose peaks poked out of the sea at varying intervals, singly or in clusters. There was trading and buying and selling of goods of all variety. Some of the islands were inhabited by backward natives who happily traded valuable mother-of-pearl for worthless glass baubles; while other islanders could boast of cities as grand as any on the mainland. The populace of these latter isles would barter long and hard for all of their many needs in exchange for the popular island spices. When the rot-plagued galleon at last arrived at the Island Uhar – the outermost isle with one of the larger ports – the men celebrated, for this meant their journey was half over. They had followed the curve of the isles to the furthest place, and from now on the isles would curve back toward the mainland.

When they sailed the next morning away from Uhar, Timith had an uneasy feeling. That night the calling voices seemed less distinct. He was heading further from his destination! Softly, awakening no one, he fell from his bunk and went to the deck. A thick night fog had surrounded the vessel, making the sea-roar sound ominous and the slapping against the hull echo weirdly. He walked to the prow, and looked at the lizard head, a wraith in the mist.

"What do you see, my ophidian friend?" he asked quietly. "Home? Can those painted eyes see through this white blanket? I think you take the others to safety. But me you steal from my goal. Tonight I bid you farewell."

The mist covered one eye for a moment, so that the masthead appeared to have closed its carven, painted orb. When the thick patch of fog passed (the eye reopening), a fat drop of moisture had condensed in the lid, and fell like a tear.

Full though the moon was, it was but a dim candle behind gauze, not lighting the deck enough that the night helmsman or lookout in the mast-nest could see what went on on the deck below. Timith hooked one of the three small longboats, and put into it a large sealskin of water, Catlike, he stole to the galley

and returned with a large crock of marmalade of citrus. As he lowered the boat, the pulleys squeaked aloud; he had to complete his task slowly lest the noise sound too different from the creaking of timbers. Finally he let himself slide down the ropes into the oared longboat and unhooked it to paddle off.

He rowed away from the ship, back the way it had come. Foe an instant he thought he could make out a lantern at the aft where a voice cried out. Fog swallowed both lantern and outcry. Timith was alone bot for the sound of his oars slicing water, the woeful drone of the sea, and the guiding voices that cried out like bells and baying hounds.

So dense was the grey fog that Timith could not see to the ends of his oars. Only the eerie wails of a multitude of distant men kept him from a circular course. In the soup-mist, strange things were made of what may have been ordinary sea noises. A dolphin leaping sounded like a huge galleon close at hand, ready to crush a small longboat under the bow, or upturn it in the wake. A shark skimming the surface was a rackety as the loops of deadly serpents. Knowing that fog played tricks with sound did not ease his worries, for Timith felt certain that this was a haunted mist and no ordinary sea weather.

They might have been only stars winking momentarily through a clearing in the moisture-laden sky; but what Timith saw looked to be a row of lights, as from the portholes of a very long and very tall ship. Without slowing his rowing efforts, Timith was watchful of the area where he thought he had seen those lights, until his mind imagined the insubstantial shape of a monstrous galley with sails hung in tatters and men dying of thirst dropping over the sides, He shook the illusion from his eyes and rowed on, the sinews of his neck pulled taut.

His arms grew numb, his gut ached from strain; yet those voices, if voices they truly were, called him ever on. Were his father lost at sea as was supposed, then surely he would be found in the Land of Lost Seamen's Souls. But what if Timith-father-of-Timith was not lost at all? Suppose the naval captain cum pirate had fled to another continent on his theoretically

round world, and stayed there to escape the misfortunes that befell him in his own land? If such were the case, then to what doom, of what avail, for what reason was Timith son of Timith fighting so hard and foolishly? Did men lost at sea and washed ashore in that land of souls ever venture forth from it and come again to the lands of the living? Probably some did, Timith reasoned, for sailors would not know of that land if some bedraggled half-drowned sailor were not once hauled aboard a savior ship with frightening tales of his journey told by way of hysterical raving.

He fell asleep over his oars with that final strengthening thought, and awoke next morning with one oar slipped from its lock, having drifted off in the night. The fog had raised and the sun was already fierce though low in the eastern sky, reflecting in the unnaturally still waters. He refused to dismay at the loss of one oar, for one would do the task though not as well. The silence of the sea was the more unsettling development.

The steady drone he had come to expect and not really notice was gone, as if the tides were stilled. There was no laughter of gulls, cry of sea hawk or eagle, nor chittering of myriad midget auks. There were only infinitesimal waves on the glassy sea, without so much as a whale or shark-fin breaking the smoothness. Not a single flying fish burst from the gleaming surface. There was only utter and total stillness. It made Timith wonder what dark shore, if any, lay ahead, and what strange passage the fog of the previous day had given him.

He ate a single handful of marmalade and licked his sticky fingers clean, carefully recapping the crock. He untied one leg of the sealskin to suck out fresh water, then resealed it with even more care than the crock. Without the banshee of lost souls to guide him, he had no landmark but the sun, and rosed into it by morning and away by afternoon.

He slept that night in the ominous silence, awoke to a day like the one before, did again the same things, and awoke again the following day to the identical monotonous routine of rowing, for days on end until it seemed no longer real, more like

waking from a dreadful nightmare only to discover he had awakened to the same nightmare.

The taste of citrus grew so horrible to think about after so many unvaried meals, he soon was eating but one handful a day if that, without consciously planning to ration. It lasted a long while, therefore. But eventually he found the crock empty, and his last meal was taken with head thrust into the container, tongue lapping in all that his hair did not mop up. His water-skin was a sorely depleted sow slothing flat in the boat, no longer the round and bulbous hog he had started with. What remained he drank sparingly. He grew weaker each day from strain, hunger, exposure. Soon, while kneeling in front of the small boat with his single oar going one way then the other, he dropped that oar, and had only enough strength to point at it dumbly as it drifted away.

With brown eyes blinking with the awfulness of his situation, Timith then fell to the bottom of the boat and untied the hind leg of the seal's skin. He drank every ounce of the remaining liquid, thinking that since all else was lost, so might this be. He lay in the heat of the cruel sun, expiring – then beneath the mockery of a grinning moon. After several such days and nights he was very near to death, his boat having taken him nowhere for there was no current of any sort.

There he lay, musing deliriously that this was, after all, the only way by which a soul could come to the land of sailors lost at sea. He was too ill and despondent either to laugh or despair. When the stillness of the sea was at last broken, his senses were so dulled he did not at first realize there was a storm.

It began with a single wave that rose behind the boat; higher, higher, until a great bolt of lightening struck the zenith of that monstrous wave. That lightning seemed to spark fury in the ocean! Rains fell at once from a sky that was a moment before clear, now black with clouds. The sea churned in gigantic whirlpools and mountainous waves. But that first mammoth wave held the little boat for itself, almost sheltering it with its hovering crest, whisking it along on a maddened course.

Timith bared his gritted teeth, wedged his feet under one seat and his arms under the other, hanging on with strength he was surprised to find remaining. It seemed he was pressed through the thunderstorm for hours, eternities, bolts striking the waves and darting between clouds, incessantly turning the dark scene white with blinding strobes. Thunder rattled his skull. One clap would barely die to a growl before another would take its place. He clenched his eyes shut and saw red each time the sparks flew from heaven. He did not move in all this while.

At last the boat struck something sharp. The bottom was shorn away. Timith opened his eyes to see razor corals all about him. His scream was drowned in brine. He lost all his senses with the sea closing in, coral predators poking venomous parrot beaks and twisting tapir snouts out of their lairs in cruel attempts to remove chunks of his tan flesh.

TWO

of two isles: one sinister in nature, one beautiful to behold; and of two beasts: one lurking in the wood, the other in the soul.

The empty crock lay shattered against a barnacle-encrusted stone, the deflated water skin beside it like a carcass of some long-dead animal washed ashore. Splinters of the fragmented boat were scattered down the crowded beach. One bit of lumber lay across the quiet figure in the wet sand. The gently incoming, frothy waves teasingly moved the corpse-like figure's arm back and forth. But no corpse was he who groaned and stirred, turned his face up from the wet, gritty sand and gaped disbelieving at the grotesque horde of people who sat gloomy-eyed all around.

For as far as his eye could see, which was to the turn of the grisly isle's curve, men sat in tatters, looking blankly out to sea, as if awaiting the return of some ship or another. They were packed like swine in a slaughterhouse, apathetic as long

addicted opium smokers. Timith stood in slow stages, with much difficulty, touching his starved belly, licking his salted, blood-encrusted lips, feeling his throbbing cranium. He staggered forth amidst those who seemed mesmerized, stepping carefully over or between legs and torsos.

They were like wakened corpses. Some lay prone on sides, back, or bellies, with arms strewn on the sand or across their eyes. They moaned to themselves as if they were constantly on the verge of expiring. Occasionally these near-sleepers would raise their heads to see Timith as he passed, or to look longingly out to sea. Then they would let their heads fall flat again, without word or new expression.

Others seemed stronger and sat up, gazing fixedly over the ocean. A few sat on rocks off the shore to escape the crowd, or to be nearer to whatever they expected would at any moment appear on the horizon. They never looked at or conversed with one another, though they occasionally grumbled if Timith accidently stepped on a hand or stumbled against a leg. A few of the very strongest tried to push him from their view of the water of he paused for breath or to look about. They spoke no more to him than to each other. They did pay him a little more attention, perhaps thinking him mad for walking around when there was no place to go. He searched their faces, but did not find the one he sought.

One man had a moulting green parrot on his shoulder, it as bleary-eyed as he. Many were bandaged with grey, filthy strips of cloth. All were either bruised or cut, some badly maimed. No one cared, not about themselves or anyone around them.

Timith eyed a figure crawling out of the sea, far down the beach: another new arrival. He crawled amidst the rest and sat up, staring back out to where he had come from, automatically falling into the order of things in this place.

There were a few women with wild, muddy hair and deepest, glowering black eyes. There was an occasional child of battered condition wedged between sailors. But mostly they were men, and most of them of middle age in appearance: average seafar-

ers.

A bright purple crab ran under one man's leg and, without thinking about it, Timith moved the leg aside and captured the ornamental crustacean. Cracking the shell with his teeth even while it pinched his fingers, he sucked noisily on the raw sweet meat within.

The man whose leg he moved spoke in a thin, dry voice of wonder – proving these living dead men had voices for more than moaning. He asked: "Do dead men suddenly grow hungry?"

"And thirsty," rasped Timith. "Is there fresh water near?"

The old sailor raised a bony are draped with rag, and pointed away from the beach. "I saw a stream in the forest when I first came. I never drank of it. It may be fresh but I do not know. Or it may not even be there anymore."

"You neither eat nor drink?" Timith grilled.

The sailor seemed to grow more ancient and weary as he looked at his questioner. Suddenly Timith was struck with the realization that this man must have sat thus for many centuries.

The wretch closed his eyes and opened them, still gazing up at the tall, narrow-framed young man. "Only the living do those things. Either you are still alive or you are an insane spirit to think yourself hungry. We have only one thirst here: that, the thirst to see a ship come and take us from this dreary land."

"Do ships never come?"

"They come," the man whispered mysteriously. Then, a bit louder, he explained: "But they are the souls of ships themselves lost at sea. Their spirits roam these devil waters; they find their way to these shores begging for crew: the spirits of orange-sailed galleons, the spirits of many-oared galleys. And we board them. But the ships, as lost as we, do not know the way to earthly waters. The storms always wreck us again in the reefs. We are washed ashore to await the next ship, to hope feebly that it will be the ship that takes us to paradise. Look!"

Again the seaman raised his mummy-like arm with rags

draping from it. When Timith saw where he pointed, he saw a gigantic galleon – bigger than the huge dragon ship he had sailed upon – hung with torn, faded sails. Though in ruin, it was a majestic sight against the nimbus that sprouted on the horizon. Timith felt his heart jump, for it was the very ship he had imagined wandering in the fog that first night he took to the sea in an oared boat!

Directly the multitudes seemed to come to life. They began to crawl into the sea like lemmings, kicking one another back and pushing one another down; moving slowly but purposely; trying to be first to reach that spectral ship.

"Help me up! Help me up!" cried the old sailor, trying to move. Timith offered no hand, but said to him, "It is no use. It is only a lost ghost ship like the rest, not your salvation." Unheeding, the old man joined the slow crawling exodus into the sea.

The beach was soon less cluttered with living corpses. Most would soon return after the strongest had become crew to that ship, and sailed off with their die-hard plan, on a voyage to nowhere.

High on the shore were men in less ruinous condition, who for some reason took no part in the hopeless quest. Perhaps they were stronger for that very reason: they did not waste themselves with nowhere ships that would only wreck them time and again. Whether they took no part because of wisdom or laziness, Timith did not try to guess; but he did spy two of them talking to one another as they sat huddled in a private group. That seemed to Timith a good sign. In their company he said, "I come seeking a seacaptain named Timith."

Though no less corpse-like, these burly men were more sinister than the pitiable kind who made their habitat nearer the water line. One of them spat, but Timith could see no place where the spittle landed. "Who asks about him?

"Timith son of Timith."

The evil-eyed talked nodded. "There is a resemblance. A close one. You will not find your father here, though once he did reside with those of us who were his crew. He is a mad captain,

your father: built a raft from bits of flotsam – fought off the desirous ones who would steal it from him to use to no avail. We, his once faithful crewmen, had followed his far enough. We trusted him no more. The raft was big enough for only one at any rate. With a square-sail made of patchwork rags, he took to that sea. Unlike the rest, he was never cast back ashore."

From the jungle beyond, there drifted a putrescence and a muffled snarl. No one paid it any heed, however. Thus Timith thought whatever beast it was, it would not venture beyond the black shade of the thick trees, else these lost souls would be less oblivious to its unseen presence.

Timith grilled further, "Where might he have gone?"

"Off the world's edge for a certainty, this time. He had strange ideas, that one. He had us believing them once. This is what he brought us to."

The men seemed to grow more and more irritable at the lad's resemblance to their ex-captain. Timith had no desire to test his swordskill against dead men he could not hope to slay. So he took himself into the forest to seek the stream the old sailor had earlier motioned toward. He found it quickly enough, and beside it some nourishing sweet berries. Eating them was somewhat a risk, as they were not of ordinary appearance, nor grown in ordinary land; but it was no more a risk than going longer without sustenance.

Not all poisons, the scholars would say, cause death; and even deadly chemicals in small quantities can alter the bodily functions to temporarily beneficial gain, though after-effects are generally assured. Almost at once Timith felt the power in the heart of those tiny fruits spreading through his veins. He felt as though he might slay armies or uproot mountains! The impermanent strength given him came to good use, for a horrific stench filled his nostrils and he raised his face from the clear pool to see a dog-headed lion. It, too, had come to drink – and found instead a man, ready for the killing.

Timith leapt to his feet and broke into a mad run – swifter than would have been possible without the berries' drug-

induced vigor – thinking that if he could outspeed the beast to the beach, the dog-lion would not pursue beyond the forest. The creature stood higher than a man at the shoulder, and lopped after its prey with graceful assurance.

He felt and smelled its warmth, fetid breath on his back; but he won the race and stood outside the rim of the forest at the top of the crowded shore.

Unfortunately he had reasoned poorly, for the dog-lion had no qualms about leaving the darkness within the trees. It might never have searched the seashore for food, for it had no love of shell fish; and not being a carrion eater, it wanted none of the packed carcasses of stranded seamen. But its nose told it this one man was a living, breathing being, unlike these half-dead mummies. Its appetite sent it hurtling from between the trees with claws bared and fanged maw wide.

Timith ducked low, unsheathing his sword. The beast passed overhead, its claws digging into unscreaming sailors where it landed. It reeled, slapped its paw back and forth to clear a path through the carrion. Timith did not wait for the path to clear, but leapt over three men and put the sword deep into one glowing red eye.

The beast gave a cry of pain midway between roar and howl, but the wound was not deep enough to be fatal, merely blinding. Its shaggy head shook wildly, blood from the eye flying in all directions. It began angrily tossing lost seamen about, biting everything ion its way. It finally collected its wits, however, and chased after the swift prey.

The prey had gained distance in that foray. Timith stepped lithely between legs and bodies, while the hunter crushed them beneath its huge paws.

Bending down but not slowing, Timith snatched up the sealskin beside the broken marmalade crock and took to the quiet waters. The dog-headed lion stopped at the shore, tested the salty sea with one foot. Blinking its gore-hung eye, it gave an awful roar of defeat.

Safely over the razor coral, Timith kicked his legs hard to

keep the weight of the sword from dragging him down, and drifted there with the sealskin held to his lips. He inflated it like a balloon, tied the hind legs together. Then he lay across this float and used both hands for oars, his feet as a rudder. He did not look back at that people-strewn shore, where hopeless souls awaited unlikely salvation. They had dared the sea and the sea had won; and that dismal beach was forevermore the home of the defeated, the pawns of the champion. Timith wondered what heaven the sea might have prepared for those who won, if anyone every really conquered the sea. But the wondered more where his father had gone, and how he could follow, and if he would die afloat upon his makeshift buoy in this nether sea.

* * *

For one day only his long arms served as oars. Then the unnatural strength invested by the strange small fruit gave way to aftereffects of nausea and extreme weakness. It was almost more than he could do to keep from rolling off the sealskin float as he jerked with spasms and made horrific grunting sounds. He would have produced vomit had there been anything in his belly to heave. In the hours ahead, the float was slowly but most assuredly losing air. Timith was too ill to blow new air into it. Bit by bit he was being lowered into the brine. Eventually there was too little buoyancy to sustain his weight and he sank without complaint into the quiescent ocean. The sword at his hip was a weight to speed him down, downward, down.

Deeper and deeper he descended into the green waters. Light from the sun far above danced about him mockingly; bubbles escaped one by one from his tortured lungs and slightly parted lips. Arms drifted uselessly from his sides. Eyes peered wide and frightened and aware. An ever-increasing pressure pushed painfully upon his chest; veins in his temples raised and pulsated and shot throbbing pangs through his skull.

On the verge of unconsciousness, he saw a huge wraith appear in the semi-transparent distance: a beast with huge fins paddling, and a snake-like neck undulating. Impossible though it seemed, Timith's fear managed to increase – for it seemed he would not black out before that plesiosaurian creature arrived to commence tearing his flesh apart.

As he gazed toward the onrushing sea-creature, it took on firmer appearance as it increased in size. The neck was indeed long, half again as long as the comparatively short body and very short stubby tail. The hind limbs were degenerate, but the forelimbs were each large enough to paddle a merchant ship. The eyes were small, round; the nostrils closed like huge lips; the mouth almost appearing to smile with long rows of ill-aligned, dagger-length teeth. It approached straight-on, its objective apparent. The neck distended toward the object sinking before it. Just as the woeful reality flickered into coma, the ship-sized beast loomed over him like a vast wall and the serpentine neck coiled and reared, then darted downward with its wide open mouth and jagged teeth... A black pit engulfed his head. He closed his eyes then, feeling pain no more, his fear snuffed like a candle, his soul prepared to pass into a new life.

When his eyes opened he found himself looking up into the delicate features of a beautiful red-haired woman. She could not be a great many years older than Timith, though certainly a few. Her slanting, laughing eyes made a gentle moon-smile. Her chin was a rounded triangle. Her silken hair framed all this loveliness in a shower of flame.

His half opened lids lowered from that angelic face to look along the curve of her flawless cream-colored flesh: a slender neck, soft rounded shoulders, nubile breasts, slender waist with flat-fronted belly. Her only garment was a short skirt of cut palm leaves. She sat upon her knees at his bedside with a bowl of steaming soup in her lap.

"So! You have decided not to die," she said in a voice that seemed to laugh and sing.

For a moment he could not make his voice work. But in the

next moment he had answered weakly, "I think you had more to do with that decision than I." For he believed himself to be in her house in the belly of the seamonster.

When she smiled, it was as though a new sun had arisen. She shook her head slowly and told him, "I have only cared for you these three days, warmed you in your chill, cooled you in your fever – and once forced you to eat. You life you owe to Kahn of the Sea, who was my father's pet and is now my friend. He must have known in his serpentine wisdom that I suffered loneliness. His hissing and splashing took me from sleep three nights ago. I ran down to the moonlit cove to see where Kahn had crawled into the shallows with you hung in his mighty jaws by your shirt collar. Ha, you dangled like a wet strand of sea fern before Kahn's high neck. You are his gift to me."

Though Timith did not notice, there was a possessive tone in the young woman's voice, an equally possessive glint in her deep green eyes as she said these things. Thinking mainly of continuing his own search for his hated father, he queried, "On what shore has your sea-friend placed me?"

His question went ignored, or avoided. She lifted a spoon of warm soup to his lips and said, "You have eaten too little in these days of delirium. You are terribly gaunt."

He sipped the liquid from the spoon, then made a sour face. "You do not cook well!" he complained.

"That may be so," she allowed. "But the bitterness is of island and sea herbs, not the result of poor cookery. Eat it all. You will grow strong." He accepted another distasteful spoonful.

Between spoons he spoke. "Tell me your name."

She answered, "Marga," putting the spoon between his lips once more.

He choked on that spoonful and slapped the ladle from her hand. Then he sat up abruptly from the soft moss-covered cot. Rising so quickly made his head swirl; but he felt surely his sudden dizziness was caused by the soup, which was in all likelihood poisoned. "Marga the sea witch!" he gasped. "But you were slain!"

He looked at her youthful beauty differently now. Her attraction to him was suddenly frightening. Covered only by a thin sheet in the warm chamber, his eyes darted quickly around the room until he saw his recently cleaned, repaired, and folded clothing beside his father's sword. Those familiar objects quenched some of his panic, for surely if the sea-witch Marga meant ruin for him, his sword would not be near, nor his clothing patched.

"Have trust," the young beauty said soothingly. "I am not a witch. Had my mother not been decapitated when I was in my fifth year, perhaps I would indeed have become learned in her craft. As it is, she passed on to me only her name and this house of stone upon one isolated isle."

"I must go!" Timith said with wild eyes. He tried to stand, but found no strength. Marga's slender hands were enough to hold him down. Her calm voice pleaded, "Do not fear me."

"But you do not know who I am!" he continued, certain she would wish for vengeance against the son of her mother's murderer.

"You spoke much in your fevered sleep," she informed. "I know you are Timith. I know you have searched for my mother's killer. Do you truly believe I could hold you responsible for your father's deed?"

His hands went to his eyes and Timith began to weep, miserably and shamefully, not caring if she thought his behavior that of a small boy. He whined his words, "My mother told me my sire killed an evil witch. A siren. A she-demon. She said the tale of how he butchered his trusting lover who slept unwary at his side. Now in the presence of that sorceress's goodly daughter, must I now admit my father was only a slayer of women?"

"Dear Timith," she whispered, placing a small hand on his leg as he sobbed. "I was a very small girl when he visited my mother. Yet I recall your father well. I loved him even as you would have, had you known him. And when he came here from the sea, my mother loved him too, despite her vow to love no

other after my own father, a powerful warlock who was killed and eaten while trying to capture and tame a sea-serpent to dwarf great Kahn. Having lost one lover, my mother would not contend the loss of another – yet for all their mutual care, your father sought to leave after only a few nights in my mother's bed. I begged him to remain, to replace my unremembered father. My mother did not beg as I, however, for she knew well enough that he valued freedom and adventure over love and family tie.

"So she cast a spell and your father was beguiled. He could not leave her. His ship's crew had collected water and hunted game during these days. Finally they were ready to sail, and they came to fetch their captain from his pleasure. But he would not go. His men saw by the glaze in his eyes that their captain had been foully enchanted; so they returned by night to steal him away. My mother, ever wary, visited upon them a spell of blind madness. They all wandered blank-minded over the isle, with no sense to eat or drink or board their ship and flee."

Tears streaked her saddened face, tears that matched those of Timith. Now, both of her hands were upon his knees. He sat unmoving on the bed's edge, looking down into her moist emerald eyes, and listened with an intensity equal to the attentiveness of long ago upon his mother's knee. She went on.

"One night I heard him pleading with my mother, begging that she give his crew back their senses so that they could up-anchor and sail from the cove. But she remained steadfast. She said she did not wish them to go, for they would only return later and try to ruin the happiness my mother and your father had found.

"Unfortunately, though my mother could not see it, your father was not happy – for he knew that he was bound not by love, but by a spell. From the windows he would watch his men grow sick and weak, and some of them died, until finally he could stand it no more. One night he crept into this room, my room, and spoke to me, saying, 'Believe me child when I tell you

that it was a joy to call you daughter. But I realize I am bound here by magic, and I fear there is only one way to break your mother's powerful ensorcellments. I ask that you not hate me, little Marga, for what I must do.' And I, not really knowing the meaning of his words, sensing only his urgency, promised never to hate him no matter what would come. Then he left me to sleep with my pleasant, unknowing dreams."

By now Timith no longer wept, but Marga wept in his place as she continued her unhappy story. "In the morning he came up from the wine cellars, drunk as I had never seen a body be. He laughed wickedly as he used the very sword you now own to lop off my mother's head. The instant of her death, the ship's crew was free of madness, and our father was no longer beguiled.

"The crew members stormed the house. When they saw what deed had been done, they cheered their captain. But he only drowned his sorrow in more wine as his men scurried off with the head of the dreaded sea-witch. They would have slain me then and there, but your father stayed them. And he left one old crewman – a senile ship's cook – to care for me. Your father then left, and I knew his sadness was not less than mine. Two years later, the old cook died, leaving me to rear myself. But I was not lonely. I had the sea birds and Kahn and other creatures for companionship. And I kept my vow. I have never hated the man who looked like you."

So saying, she put her head on Timith's lap and spoke no more. For a while he reflected while petting her soft red hair. There was a great shame within him, for he had often thought that he hated his father with passion – hated him for making his son's life miserable – while here a woman of equal or vaster misery kept a strong love kindled for the father-figure within her heart.

After these few moments of quiet searching of his own spirit, Timith drew Marga up into his arms to comfort her. They fell together upon that soft bed, though it was only large enough for one.

* * *

It seemed to Timith that Marga had at least partially exonerated his father of one of his crimes. In his mind, for the time being at least, Timith felt that if circumstances were so extenuating for one crime, then undoubtedly there were extenuations for all. So he ceased his fruitless search and thought only seldom of Candoria or his pitiable mother or of his lost sire. He remained contented upon the veritable island paradise of unknown locale. Marga bore him a flame-haired son and later a brown-haired daughter. It seemed that he could easily have lived there forever and happy, with only rare moments of melancholy. And perhaps he would live there yet, had destiny not deigned to set him a less casual path.

While they lasted, they were wondrous years, near perfect but for trivial family spats and a single tropical storm which swept down from the North and West together that one season, threatening destruction of their easy life and their lives.

Timith and Marga would go down into the cove with their two young children. There the tots became expert swimmers, and laughed to ride high on the neck of gentle Kahn of the Sea. Timith and the children would often hunt the hills for small game or to gather firewood, and perhaps feign swordplay with sticks. Or Marga would have the children with her, teaching them both the cultivation of aromatic herbs, grains, and a very few mostly useless but attractive flowers. Together on the cliffs on the opposite side of the cove, they would picnic with the sea birds. They sang songs to the delight of puffins who gathered far below and the auks gliding far above.

But the day eventually came when paradise was shattered, as completely and irretrievably as fine crystal crushed beneath stones. Timith had been hunting alone for two days in the highlands and had slain a fair-sized crocodile. Its flesh would have made many fine dinners. Its hide should have provided equally fine necessities. As he came to the final crest before home, the croc draped across his shoulders, he saw in the

distant cove a ship at anchor. His eyes followed back along the trail from the cove to his house of stone. He saw the figures of five burly seamen heading back toward their ship, laden with stolen furnishings from the house.

Timith dropped the lizard and broke into a trot, keeping from sight of the cove, arriving home to catastrophe. In the front doorway lay his small daughter who despite her youth had been violated and killed. Timith stepped over the small body, disbelieving, and saw his son upon the kitchen floor with a table knife clutched in his small fist. Apparently the young lad had tried to save his sister with that pitiful weapon and had been brutally sworded for the interruption – then, Gods witness, the dead boy had had his pants removed so that he could be violated as well.

Near madness, Timith ran wild from the cellar to the attic, from room to ransacked room, calling out Marga's name. There was no sign of her. At last he ran into the trampled gardens. There she lay face down amid flowering plants. He rushed to her aid, for she still lived. He turned her over, rested her head in his lap. She had been severely beaten and raped, perhaps repeatedly. Her face was ruined. Yet her breathing was steady. Broken lips bloody, eyes swollen closed and clack, nose crushed flat upon her face, both cheeks badly cut – Timith kissed her nonetheless, then lifted her limp, moaning body in his arms. He carried her inside to one of the beds. All the rest of the day he sat by her side, not once speaking, listening to the sound of her pain, holding her down each time she began screaming for the children, giving her her own herbs which she would only spit up with blood. At long last she fell into fitful slumber. Timith crept out into darkness, slithered like the ghost of a snake into the cove.

Three men slept on the sandy shore under blankets of seal furs. Timith crept upon them one by one and unmercifully ran his sword into their throats, with never a sound made. A small boat had been dragged ashore, but Timith did not use it. He swam to the resting ship, scaled the chain of the anchor, and

stole unseen into the hold.

The lumber creaked around him in the oppressive dark, bringing memories of days past. He felt his way to the cargo area. As his eyes adjusted to the near-lacking light, he was pleased to see the cargo consisted of lamp oil, fabrics, wood carvings, and other combustibles. The timbers had recently been waterproofed with pitch; that was all the better! As silently but swiftly as possible, Timith unraveled bolts of cloth, scattered packing materials, arranged a few things so that a large fire would spread with haste. He uncorked three casks of flammable drinking alcohol and upturned the containers so that they glug-glug-glugged over all that which he had prepared. He hefted a ceramic jug of lamp oil, his muscles straining, and carried it toward the sleeping quarters. There, he spilled the contents before the door so that none might escape.

When climbing up from the hold, he was spotted. The mate with night guard called out, "How did you get here?" Timith drew his sword in an instant; with two strokes he had broken the defense of the lighter weight scimitar and run the sailor through.

Finally he took a torch from its place on a mast and tossed it into the hold. He saw the oil and alcohol burst into a sheet of blue fire; the pitch began to sputter and burn in deeper hues. After that moment, Timith leapt from the ship and swam quickly ashore.

From the ship, whose port holes now glowed with flame, screams arose. A few frantic men, very few, escaped the fire, leaping like living torches into the sea. But Timith heard each one as he splashed panic-stricken to the shore, and sworded each man who pulled himself, burnt and blistered and black, from the water.

The greater number were burned alive, dead even before the flames burst through the deck and set the masts afire. Timith sat on the shore, hugging his knees, rocking and laughing the whole night through. The blaze lit his insane features. At long last, the ship had burnt into the sea. Black, charred wood

washed ashore in the morning tide.

Two small graves were dug beyond the gardens. Though Marga was soon in health, she was no longer the same woman either in mind or flesh. She wandered the house aimlessly, seldom speaking, never spoken to. She avoided Timith so that he would not see her scarred face, her blinded right eye, her mangled nose.

Sometimes he would watch her working half-heartedly in her gardens; and from behind, her beautiful hair flowing in a quiet breeze, he half imagined things being as before. But she would feel his gaze and look back over her shoulder. He would see her ruined face and have to turn away.

They no longer made love. They seldom communicated in any way. They visited the two graves at different times rather than side by side in mutual solace.

Most of Timith's idle time was spent on the hill's crest overlooking the oval cove; but on the final day he walked along the path to the shore and sat gazing over the sea. Once again thoughts of his father burst open like sinister black flowers. Through a corrupt line of reasoning he came to blame his father for all the evil that had happened. He felt a senseless and profound need to find the man, to kill him or be killed by him. His father must certainly have been a foul being, undeserving of life: a man who caused the death of a thousand sailors, who killed women, who abandoned a pregnant wife, and who caused his only son to befall misery upon grief upon woe.

It became his fixation, his reason for living, his desire above all else to find that man and destroy him. But there was no escape from this isle. There was a boat, yes, left from the ship Timith had destroyed. But the location of this isle was a mystery. If he were to leave it in a random direction, the land of the souls of lost seamen would be the only place at which he could arrive.

As he sat glumly pondering these matters, Marga came upon him. He did not look up or acknowledge her presence. After a

moment, she dropped a skin-scroll in his lap and said simply, "Here."

Disinterested, he took his time untying the old knot of leather string. But when he unrolled the leathern page, his eyes grew large. "Where did you find this?"

"It was your father's," she confessed. "It is a map more complete than any other, for your father had ventured further than any sailor. It will tell you where you are and where you must go – in your father's footsteps no doubt. I had hidden that map beneath stones in the garden, for fear you would find it and long once more to seek your sire. Now I give it to you gladly so that you will go. I long to live as I did before, with only Kahn and the birds as my friends. They do not care about my appearance. I was happy before with only them. I will be happy again when there is no one else."

She turned and left his side. When he went to the house to gather commodities for a voyage, she was nowhere to be found. He loaded the oared boat, and even fashioned a sail from bedding. He searched for Marga to say farewell, to say that he had known happiness with her. He even had in mind the promise of someday returning, though in his heart he knew that to say such a thing would be a lie.

He went down from the house and hill and stood on the shore, calling, "Marga!" over and over again until he was hoarse. She would not show herself and finally he gave up. He had to ride the tide out and could wait no longer. So he shoved the tiny vessel into the water and set to work at the oars. When he had cleared the cove, he raised the sail.

Marga, from her hiding place on the overlooking cliffs, saw the sail go up and billow. She watched until the boat was a speck and the speck vanished from sight, stolen by the wind.

Then she lay down with her head on the ground. She did not cry, nor make any sounds, nor blink her eyes, nor move the smallest muscle for a long, long while.

THREE

of cities and sorrows and walls within walls; of rendering the flesh in vain effort to ease the psyche.

Timith returned to Candoria not the lank youth who had left, but a towering and virile-seeming man. He moored his little boat in a fishing village, and told the first man he saw that the barnacle-crusted vessel was free for the taking. With only the map and his sword, Timith began his way inland. He hungered for the sight of his mother. There was a need in him, to caress her, to say a thing he had said too seldom during all the years she raised him: that he loved her.

When he passed through towns and burghs, his strides fleet and long, young ladies would see him from their windows and think surely he was a mighty soldier or a renowned hero home from some incredible conquest or deed. He ignored them as they called from their lofty windows or, upon occasion, tossed down roses. They were nothing but naive girls. He could never love such as they, after his years with Marga. She had been a woman above women, wholly unlike the veritable children who swooned at his passing.

At the same time, the men of those towns bolted the doors and stood behind them with swords drawn. For the look in the passer's eye was one of wrath and destruction.

Despite the hard, angry look imbedded in his otherwise handsome and strong-jawed features, Timith had a few pleasant thoughts behind those narrowed, long-lashed eyes. Soon he would be in his mother's company. She would fix for him a kingly feast, the likes of which he had not eaten inside the eight years or more since leaving home.

It was four days by foot. He made it in three, partly because a hay-filled ox cart was going toward Timith's native village, and its owner offered a ride. Farmers all along the way had been willing to give sustenance to a returning traveler; but Timith had not taken much advantage of his imposing height

and warrior's stance, refusing more than minimum meals. He anticipated the feast, and arrived home in hunger and anxiety. Outside, he took note of the house's disrepair. Ashamed, he hurried up the unweeded path.

As he had always done, he entered without knocking. He stood quietly in the dark interior of the house. He did not move for he sensed a thing to dread, and that thing was death, or death impending. He heard shallow breathing aside from his own. When he finally walked forward, the floor boards complained under his weight.

A small, weary voice cried out, "Who is there?" She would hear no reply.

Slowly the bedroom door pivoted on its hinges, creaking noisily. In the bed beyond the threshold lay a woman old beyond her years, wasted to a skeleton. A once lovely face sagged, haggard and lined, a mask of perpetual worry. That only half-recognizable woman raised her head slowly, as though it were a horrendous weight and not her head at all. Her mouth dropped open at the sight of Timith, and her eyes enlarged.

"Timith!" she gasped hoarsely, then coughed once and fell back, dying in that instant of many compounded ailments triggered to climax by a shock for which she was unprepared.

Timith rushed to her bedside too late. Too late to beg forgiveness. Too late to assure her of his love. Too late to do anything but close her gazing eyes and press his lips to hers. He wept then. And as he did so, he gave nurturance to black thoughts. He remembered all the times he had cried before, from childhood to now; he was overwhelmed with self-pity and grief. For a moment he placed the blame of her death on himself, for having left so frail a woman to fend for herself with no one to provide for her. But in his twisted method of reasoning, he quickly realized his towering frame in the doorway had not been recognized as Timith her son, but mistaken instead for Timith her lover! Thus he came to the conviction that it was his father who had brought this early death, and visited yet another misery upon his begotten and abandoned child.

Above the bedstead, upon the wall where once his father's sword had hung, Timith spied the small diploma-sword from Manmaker. He angrily tore that little sword from its hanging and heaved it across the room, where it stuck through the door. In the same moment he swore a terrible oath of vengeance for his mother and himself, and for Marga and their children, and for the men led to death at sea.

Then he left that place never to return, leaving again for the crumbling city of Port Horn. Three nights later he was seen by two men he had sailed with years before. They ran from his sight thinking they had seen a ghost, and in many ways a ghost he was.

Six small, foreign merchant ships were in the vast, neglected harbor. Timith inspected each one from the misted docks. He saw that none were built to last a voyage to the ocean's end or the world's other side, whichever was to be found by following his father's map. Yet he had sailed in things many times worse, from half-rotted dragon ship to inflated animal skin. He hailed for the captain of the likeliest ship. A mate called back, saying the captain might be found at a certain inn.

He hurried through the dark streets to that inn, and rapped upon the door, telling the old and painted matron through the peep window who he wished to speak with. He was told to wait, for the hour was late and the captain might be sleeping. The captain was roused not from slumber, but from his costly lovemaking. This so displeased him that he spat out the door-window on the intruder, refusing to listen, or even to look at the map. The little wooden window slammed shut with a clap.

On two of the other ships there was not one man with who Timith could make his needs understood; they spoke foreign tongues. At a fourth ship he was turned away as mad. At a fifth, the captain looked over the map and laughed so hard and long that Timith snatched away the leather and stormed from the captain's bridge. He came then to the sixth and least likely of the ships.

There, the cockeyed captain was intrigued. He offered Tim-

ith a small price for the map. But when Timith held the price to be passage to those map-named lands, the captain confessed he would never risk his small ship on a venture to lands which were probably mythological. The only use he had for such a map was to resell it to a scholar who often paid exorbitant prices for trivialities.

So Timith spent the remainder of that night on the dock, pouting like a child. He sat on the dock's end the next day as well, waiting for the few ships to leave and for another, perhaps more open-minded captain, to bring his ship to Horn. For weeks to come he lived by begging, and bedded in the labyrinths of alleys in the filthiest corners of the city. He became known as the strange fellow who sought out every sea captain, showing a false map and suggesting outlandish schemes. Sailors would upon occasion turn their conversations to the subject of this eccentric beggar-with-a-broadsword:

Some claimed he was one and the same with the lad who had vanished overboard more than eight years earlier, during the final voyage of the last dragon ship (which was now laid to rest). Older seamen thought the beggar bore an unnatural resemblance to an accursed naval captain-turned-pirate of twenty, perhaps thirty (no one remembered very clearly) years gone. These varied tales made it all the more difficult for Timith to obtain ship duties, let alone be convincing in his proposition – for no one would sail with a man obviously cursed and possibly sorcerous.

One day, yet another captain somberly refused Timith's hard-sell plan of looting the mythical continents depicted on his foolish roll of leather. Yet, when Timith was leaving, that captain motioned to four of his homely crew members and whispered to them: "Follow him. Kill him. Bring me the map." The four men grinned and nodded and picked their teeth with sharp dirks, then hurried down the gangplank after their departing quarry.

They were a noisy lot and Timith immediately realized he was being tailed. In the weeks at Port Horn he had learned the

labyrinthine alleys well; now he ducked into a narrow causeway which branched into many others. They followed, but he had concealed himself in a doorway. He watched three of them traipse past, then leapt out at the fourth in ambush. The first three reeled around, but saw only the fourth upon his knees, blood spurting from his gut.

It was a slow-killing wound Timith had left, of a variety he hoped one day to place upon his sire. Now the three men would be more careful, and wrathful after vowing revenge for the dying mate they left behind.

There was an odd smile on Timith's lips as he ran quietly through shadowed, narrow alleys. He heard the clamor of men in pursuit, and it pleased him. At a triple-fork in the maze of between-building causeways, Timith tore loose a bit of his tattered raiment and wedged it on a cracked, abrasive cornerstone. Thus would his followers have a clue as to which alley their prey had taken.

A high wooden door came into view. It was a door Timith had never tried to enter; but another vagrant-of-the-alleys had warned him why it was never locked. He pressed a shoulder against the huge door, opening it a single hand's length. There was a snarling sound within. Barely containing laughter, Timith hurried on down the alley.

The three found the bit of cloth, priding themselves on their trailing instinct. Soon they arrived to the cracked doorway, saying, "He entered there!" Swiftly pushing the heavy door inward, they unleashed fury upon themselves. A huge, black, growling guard animal with a long muzzle of ivory knives and wearing a spiked collar, leapt forth from darkness. Its powerful paws pressed the foremost intruder to his back; its jaws fastened to his throat. While the beast tore loose hunks of flesh and feasted, the remaining two fled in panic down the direction Timith had taken.

They came to another three-way split in the confusing network of passages, and stood between the granite buildings, breaths heavy, wondering which way their deadly prey had

gone. Then, from far down one way, the echo of an upturned garbage barrel met their ears. They ran that way, cautious, angry, afraid. Their feet carried them past where Timith had purposely made the noise.

When they were out of ear shot, a portion of the spilled garbage stirred. Timith stood from where he had buried himself. It would take the surviving seamen days – if they met no obliging vagrant who knew the way – to find their way out of the complexity of interlocking paths Timith had led them into. Meanwhile, the presumed quarry doubled back to the piers, swam to the far side of the ship to climb aboard, crept unnoticed to the bridge, and held his blade to the captain's throat, saying only, "Why!"

"Mercy!" cried the captain in his chair, the sword point at his Adams apple.

"Say why!" The point pressed harder.

"The map! The map! I wanted it, that is all! I once saw another exactly like it, belonging to a beggar more wretched than yourself, in far Loray. But when I sent men to steal it from the old man, he apparently killed them all – though it amazes me how he could have done so. I tried again, that is all. I failed. Spare me!"

Disgusted by this display of cowardice, Timith wondered if his father would snivel in a like manner. He asked in a hard tone, "Was that beggar a native of Loray?"

"Nay, only foreigners need beg. He hailed from this part of the world. I know nothing more! There is no more to tell. Please do not kill me.!"

The craven's fear-twisted face began to weep tears. Timith's heart was not touched. He had killed twice this day, with cunning pleasure. One more would make no difference. But as he began to tense his arm for a thrust through the coward's neck, something staid him.

The captain's face had changed. There appeared another face superimposed upon the one he had seen a moment before. And that face was Timith's own!

Stifling a cry, Timith wondered if it were himself cowed before the sword. He wondered if he would die, or a part of him would die, along with the whining captain.

But that face like his was older. Timith recognized it now as the man he had never really seen. Suddenly he was excited by the prospect of finally killing that person! The sword had not yet been pushed forward, but he saw vividly how his father's eyes would jerk upward. The tongue would probe forward with a huge gush of blood. The sword would come out under the nape, to one side of the bones at the back of the neck.

He arm remained frozen, salty sweat stinging his eyes. As he blinked the salt from his vision, the sight of the second face faded. All he saw was the cringing captain, eyes closed and lips mouthing a prayer to the seamen's god Lepada.

He stepped back, removing the pressure from the frightened man's throat. He whispered, "You are not my father." Then he turned to flee, running from the bridge cabin toward the pier. Before Timith could escape, the craven captain screeched from his cabin's door, "Capture him! Capture him!"

Timith leapt headlong over the side of the ship, a harpoon close behind which almost did not miss.

It was a winding highway that snaked from horizon to horizon, like a ribbon of taffy. Towns were sometimes days apart. Timith kept a steady pace from before each sun up until after every sun down. Once he wondered how he would know when he had come to Loray. He had passed through several nations and many ports-of-call, and they all looked the same after a time: decadent, decaying, deadly. The journey would have been swifter and safer by ship; but he had no money for passage, and no captain would hire on a man known to be cursed.

So afoot he trekked, knowing little of the geography. He kept to the coastal highway, wherever it was visible rather than grown over so badly that it defied discovery. Occasionally he

passed the ruins of ancient coastal cities, gutted and left like the bones of titan sea monsters. Port Horn had been old, old beyond reckoning. How to imagine the antiquity of these dead cities? Timith could not work up any awe; he merely used the antique highway and observed its few and rare wonders.

He passed through the little states of Ru and found himself in Brinle, where no man of Candoria would be spared bread. Timith took to thievery, finding begging of no use. He was not good at the draft of theft; but whenever he was caught, he willingly carved down whomsoever discovered him at crime. Once beyond Brinle, there seemed less sport in killing innocent people, for the simple farmers of Ishii and the ethereal race of Caspriqua-qui were not the hereditary enemies of patriotic Candorians.

In Ishii, they spoke a difficult tongue, so stealing was still easier than begging. By this time, however, Timith was reasonably skilled at that ancient art, rarely being discovered in the act.

One night, after many weeks and two-thirds of his journey were past, Timith sat before a camp fire gnawing at the leg of a stolen barn fowl. Dancing, crackling flames lit his hardened visage. His eyes looked over the map his father had long ago etched on leather.

He tossed the leg-bone of the filched bird into the flame, a few sparks unsettling. Then he sat still, staring at the square of skin, his thumb leaving a grease smear on a corner. Inwardly, he was mocking himself for once seeking to visit the non-existent lands shown thereon. What a jester was he! To believe idiotically that his father was in one of those lands! Had he expected his father to be, after all, heralded as a hero, as Timith's dead mother had always and truly believed? The man was a felon! No, not even that grand: he was a beggar.

Knowing his father to be a street vagrant in Loray, it became painfully comic to realize that heroism and newly discovered continents were only the deranged fancy of a craven – and of the eternally admiring woman he had left behind, who knew

nothing, nothing. For all Timith's growing, growing hatred, some part of the child had remained: something yet believed in a world shaped like a scarab's ball of dung. Somehow he still expected a kind of greatness in his father, if only criminal greatness. Humor was to be found in the dreams and quests of every human being. But Timith had no laughter, and as few remaining tears.

All he had was an ever more heavily raging hatred and contempt, an emotion that made the camp fire seem like darkness in comparison. When Timith tossed the leather onto the fire and watched it shrivel and burn, he imagined it to be a part of his father burning there. Certainly he recognized the symbolic act: the rendering of the map into ashes was the end of the dreams his own father may once have nurtured.

After a very few more days, Timith came to the Forest of Thorns. It was a place he had never seen the likes of, but recognized form descriptions. Beyond that immense briar wilderness awaited the boundaries of the oldest and furthest of so-called civilization: the outposts of Loray.

But crossing this barrier of twisted, black, leafless briars was a task some would call never possible. They grew to the height of trees in criss-crossings, snakings, entwinings and madness.

Yet, once a road had been hewn threw the thicket of immense briars: a tunnel looking to be a path for gigantic ants. It was little used, and briars were encroaching from either side and from above. Still, Timith did not slow his pace. All apprehension was steadfastly concealed.

It was a silent passage, without wind whistling through, without leaves to be rustled. No birds winged or sang; no cricket chirped. There was no scampering hare. There was only oppressive, absolute quietude.

Beyond that single peculiarity, the Forest of Thorns was more awesome than frightening. There were no monsters lurking about; there was little likelihood of a haunted manse, as might be found in forests of less remarkable appearance. Enough light filtered through the tangle of arm-thick briars to

keep a reasonably stalwart traveller from quaking with fear. But as night fell thick and dark, there was no moon and only a few stars twinkling through the twinings of the ceiling. Fear increased then – if not of the dark itself, at least of blundering into sharp thorns. There had been a warning, vaguely recalled, imparted to his ears by a fellow sailor long, long ago (it seemed long ago). In those days, Timith was constantly assailed by sailors' stories; they liked to tell tales that vilified land and glorified ocean.

It was long ago that he had heard of this forest, he could recall with clarify only that one impressive warning: "Touch not the thorns!" Touch not the thorns. There was every probability that the long, triangular, tusk-like thorns with their needle-sharp points were poisonous. In this enveloping darkness, it would be far too easy to stumble off the poorly marked road, and into the deadly, eager thicket.

He probed ahead with his sword. Every time he touched the wall of briars, he turned a little to continue slowly, cautiously until he touched the opposite wall. Progress was zig-zagged and wearing, for it was impossible to keep on a straight course in the blackness of night. He realized that he was going to have to make camp until light, much as he hated to sleep in this dismal, eerie place.

On hands and knees, he crawled around and gathered dry, brittle, and dead briars. A fire was started by striking his sword against a rock. The sparks instantly ignited the dead branches, burning them up like paper. Though the fire was pleasingly warm, and perfect at scattering fears, it was a terrible task keeping it fed with the dry briars that had fallen into the road.

He considered chopping into the green briars to get branches which would not burn too swiftly, but fretted about the thorns which his subconscious kept warning him about. It was upon that thought that he realized not one of the fallen branches he had collected was spiked. Although he had noticed this fact before nightfall, it had not until this later moment struck him as unexplainable.

He looked above him, where the shadows of briars danced in the firelight. The sight made him leap to his feet – for upon the living briars there were also no thorns! It was one thing to accept the reality of fallen branches lacking thorns, but quite another to comprehend where the thorns of living, thriving briars might have gone!

More dried limbs were thrown onto the fire, making it blaze up momentarily. In that new light, Timith saw with certainty that there were no thorns on any branch, limb, trunk – none anywhere. His eyes looked to the ground. There, he saw the thorns laying everywhere, as though they had fallen off like seeds. That seemed a logical enough explanation for a moment; except that he would have heard them fall, all at once like that, and some would have fallen upon his head from above. Then he saw a straggler, a come-lately, the last thorn to *crawl* down from the entwining branches!

Like an army of ants, or more depictively, scorpions, the thorns began to march. Their curved needle points poked before. Tiny invisible feet brought them onto the forest road, from every direction, surrounding the man who stood by the fire. He could not flee. They were all around, thickly packed and getting thicker, making no sound whatsoever, enclosing him in a perfect circle. The light of the fire, Timith realized, was all that kept the crawling thorns at bay. Aghast at his predicament, he gathered up all the dry twigs and branches about, to keep the fire alive. But the amount of fuel in his enclosure was limited and would quickly be depleted.

As the fire grew dimmer, the circle of thorns flowed nearer, shrinking in around the prey. Timith stood practically upon the last flames. The small, silent predators were nearly upon him. With sudden inspiration, Timith swung his sword over head, hacking left and right, causing a shower of green twigs and branches. One such branch he caught as it fell, and held it to the dying fire. That last coal flickered, threatened to die. Then the end of the branch flared like a torch, and the thorns closing around Timith withdrew to a more acceptable distance.

The remainder of the night was a sleepless ordeal, but Timith's fire blazed bright. Thus he was in little danger. The green branches burnt like normal wood. And there was an endless supply above his head. The mindless thorns were patient to no avail; for when the first sign of morning light struck the clouds, that troop of miniscule monsters dispersed. They found their ways back into the forest, noiselessly scaling the branches and settling in for the day in their individual places. When it was full light, the Forest of Thorns was again awesome and not so much frightening.

Emboldened by day, Timith touched his sword point to one of the thorns. It did not move. It still did not seem any different from ordinary thorns and briars, save for the unnatural size.

By midday Timith had passed through the final barrier and stood on the border of Loray. He breathed no sign of relief. It was still a week's distance to the country's major port. It was in that mysterious city on the edge of named lands where Timith expected to face his greatest fear and most deeply rooted hatred. There was no relief in surviving the forest – only a tightening of his resolve, his fists, and his gut; a narrowing of the eye and the mind. With lips pressed hard together, he set off over the first hills, blue-tinged hills. He went forth silently, as if he himself were a tiny, persistent, mindless thorn in the dark.

* * *

Among the most ancient and the largest cities of humankind must be counted Adoan in Loray, situated upon a volcanic mountain near the Gulf of Enigmas. That same city must be tallied among those metropoli of the most sinister and mystery-laden nature. Founded in a pre-dawn millennium, its architecture was akin to nothing but, perhaps, the ruins of forgotten burghs Timith passed along the coastal highway. It had been built, initially, around the crater of the live volcano. It had expanded over the ages until the entire smouldering mountain

was encased by a conical spider-web of walls laced from summit to mountain-base, thence to the Gulf.

From a distance, Adoan was an intricate marvel. The innermost wall of the city, the literal crown, had been built around the summit; it surrounded a steaming crater wherein molten demons might well reside. At intervals down the mountain's side, additional walls appeared, as each successive epoch widened the parameters of the city. Most cities were rebuilt atop the dust of others, those nearing the peak, were held in awe even by the common residents of the lower parts of Adoan: none could walk out into the light of day or volcanic glow of night without bowing once to the summit, and praying that yet another millennium would pass without major eruption. There had been eruptions, of course, though not in the current generation. As yet, however, the lava overflow had not been so terrible that the canals carved beneath each wall failed to take the mountain's spilled blood harmlessly to the sea.

At the eastern gate, where Timith arrived, there was virtually no clue that the further side of the mountain was a major port. Above the gate-entry a gargoyle grimaced at all oncomers, its eyes aglow by some sorcery, red like molten stone. He passed under this watcher unmolested. The outer perimeters of Adoan were widely accessible.

The sheer size of the crowds in market places and dens were distressing to a man raised in a small village. His vision of the greatest cities had been based largely on the deserted streets of failing Port Horn. Here, the streets were populated by all manner of races, in vast numbers. Tall, pole-slender, and androgynous people of Caspriqua-qui stood above the crowds of pedestrians. Squat, homely Brinlese occasionally appeared as buyers at the sidewalk shops. Grinning, cunning, self-effacing buyers for merchants in Ishii bartered with shrill certainty. The Lorains themselves were grey, pallid people, unassuming in one fashion, yet by another fashion always dominant, in mannerism as well as numbers. There was a subtle, barely concealed contempt for all foreigners.

Hawkers, money-changers, purse thieves, nobles, peasants, beggars, mercenaries, ox carters, soldiers, people of all colors and nationalities commingled. There were coopers, tinkers, villiars, smithies, and other various industries – their produce always, in some way, marked with the feeling of Loray, Adoan, and sinister mystery.

Although the populace of Adoan was varied, neither city nor nation could be held to be a foreign folk except on vital business or trade. Lorains were an old, pure race, proud and prejudiced. Timith did not feel hated, however: he felt non-existent. He spoke to no one as he wandered aimlessly in the busy streets; he was accosted by no one. Merchants, trollops and purse snatchers alike apparently judged him unworthy by his rags and unchallengeable by his height and carriage.

As the outer city alone was accessible to foreigners, the vastness of the area Timith needst explore in search of a foreign beggar was considerably reduced. He spent the entire day struggling through the milling horde, wishing to achieve the gulf-side of the mountain city. The beggar he sought, he expected, would prefer to beg near water – having been a naval captain, sea explorer, and finally pirate. The way was long and difficult and winding. Timith did not reach the far side of the mountain before nightfall.

By night, the multitudes of people somehow, as though by magic, vanished. Carts and barrows made way beyond the walls, toward farms and camps. Inhabitants and visitors found their ways to homes, apartments and inns. Street shops melted away into walls. Store windows and doors were shuttered and bolted. Progress through the streets was swifter without the crowd. There were no street torches to guide his path: the glowing crater at the city's top cast the only light – a soft, eerie glow.

The only men left in the streets were the homeless beggars, veritable castaways in an alien land. Timith looked over each haggard face for any resemblance to his own reflection. One old vagrant sat huddled and sleeping in a dark stairwell. Some-

thing about his posture or perhaps the sound of his snoring made Timith's heart beat aloud. He grabbed the vagrant's head by the hair and yanked his face up; but it was a face with slanted eyes and flat nose. That face muttered drowsily as Timith let the head loll forward again. He hurried onward in the direction of the sea.

A frowning quarter-moon rose. It helped light the streets wherever the glowing crater could not shine. Ahead, a hulking mercenary staggered drunkenly from a dim-lit bordello. There were three giggling beauties in the doorway behind him. They watched their customer stray on a crooked course through the street, singing a lewd song to the chiming of his knives, daggers, swords and cudgels. His armory hung a-clatter across his chest, at his hips, strapped to legs – like a hundred ox-bells. These were the many medals of as many battles: choice weapons taken from among the multitudes he had slain.

He shambled around a corner and ran into Timith, who stood equally as tall, almost as broad-shouldered. Timith stood ground. The besotted warrior bounced to the street, grumbling. He looked up at the younger man, feeling foolish and angry; and he said something that was not in the Lorain tongue nor any other Timith could recognize. Yet the meaning was clear: an oath which described masculine lovemaking and masculine murder.

Timith apologized tonelessly. "I'm sorry. I should have stepped aside when I heard you coming." He held a hand out to the sprattled fighter, but at first it was not taken.

The man spoke some more angry, garbled words. Timith shook his head, saying, "I don't know your tongue."

Cautiously, the warrior took the proffered hand. As he did so, he noted the sword and sheath at Timith's hip. It was clearly an heirloom, an ancient weapon the likes of which were not often found in modern times. He had never seen so fine a blade – for his drunken stupor saw the weapon still grander. Having never fought with or against armies of distant Candoria, the collector and the connoisseur of weaponry was intrigued. He lusted for

Timith's sword, dangling before his eyes like a carrot before a mule.

Decisions were made in that wine-befuddled mind. The swordsman stood up. But instead of releasing Timith's helpful hand, he gave the arm a surprise twist that sent Timith sprawling halfway across the street.

Timith would have called it even, and gone his way. But the mercenary cared nothing of vengeance. He only wanted to win that fine sword in honorable combat. He withdrew a sword from a sheath among many, from his left hip. For the opposite hand he snatched a dagger from the variety strapped across his chest. Timith rolled over in time to see the mercenary's sword strike sparks on the pave, close to the Candorian's face.

Timith sprung to his feet, bringing his own sword to bare in time to deflect the attacker's first terrific blow. Timith had never had the opportunity of professional warfare. He had not advanced his swordskill much beyond that taught to him years before at Manmaker. The mercenary quickly realized the skill of his opponent did not match the quality of the blade; this made him oversure of himself.

Only the drunkenness of the weighty opponent spared Timith. Timith managed only one touching blow, which struck the foe's armor of weaponry and deflected. With three perfect upward-downward-upward thrusts, the mercenary had knocked Timith's sword from hand. But when the gleeful soldier laughingly charged with bared teeth and dagger, Timith leapt aside with youthful agility. The nefarious swordsman blundered headlong into a stone wall, collapsed, lay dazed.

Regaining his sword, Timith instantly put it to the groggy warrior's chest, between cudgel and mace. Upon the pave, leaning on the wall, the better swordsman grinned idiotically. He showed no sign of fear. In resignation, the foiled fighter said, "*Se leva,* deino prle!" It was an ancient preamble spoken in many tongues, and Timith knew it. It meant: "All good lives must end."

There was something in the mercenary's simple way of living

and killing, and simpler acceptance of death, that Timith envied. Timith had killed often; perhaps as cruelly as this man – the man who now lay at his mercy, willing to die if must. But unlike the fighter, Timith killed out of hatred alone. Every time a man died at his hand, it was as if he had been killing his father. The later realization that it was not his father only frustrated him, pushed him on, made him hate the more.

This warrior on the street was certainly of low intellect – greedy, lustful. Yet in some manner, Timith felt that this simple freesword was his better. Timith lived by no code.

All this, and more, equally confusing,. passed through Timith's mind in a flash of thought. It culminated with these murmured words: "Nor are you my father!" Timith turned and fled, leaving the spared mercenary to puzzle out the reasons for not being dead.

Timith did not soon stop. There was much conflict, self-contempt and confusion still in his mind, his heart. Running seemed to pacify him, or at least keep the panic in his feet and not in his brain. Onward he fled over cobbled streets, each swift footstep falling lightly, silently. Blank, black windows and doors and shadowed side-passages seemed to stare hatefully at the one who rushed by. Blindly he fled; yet his mind would not be altogether distracted. Thoughts of the impossibility of finding his father in this gigantic city impressed upon him. Again his hatred was frustrated; and it festered.

Suddenly he came to a dead stop, his sword still in hand, the need to kill greater now than when he was attacked in the street.

His eyes turned up to see the high archway of the western gate of the city. He had come half the circumference of the outer city. Upon the steps outside, leading to the sea, he might find his father after all. A hero cum beggar. Tense with anticipation, Timith fondled the smooth pommel of his sword. Her stepped through the arch, beneath the scrutiny of another of those hideous gate-gargoyles, its eyes glowing magically.

He saw, halfway down the hundred steps to the quay, a

soundly slumbering vagrant – snoring, unwary, one arm draped over the step above, the other over the step below.

Sword gripped rigidly, the vengeful vagabond advanced upon the sleeper, the sleeper with dirty face and greasy beard. Timith's heart beat like that of a small bird. His breath came in short, swift drafts. He took each stair slowly. As he came nearer the sleeper, the old illusion came anew: there appeared upon that vagrant's face a mask, and that second face bore resemblance to Timith's own! Stifling a cry, Timith wondered again if it were himself laying upon that step, about to die at his own hand. Did he wish truly to kill his father, or himself? He raised his sword, high and high!

He froze.

Salty sweat stung his eyes. The sword had not come down. Still he saw vividly how the head would roll down the many stairs. Blood would ooze over the steps.

He had done this a hundred times before!

He groaned.

He wrenched himself from this present madness.

There was a sound. Timith looked up toward the archway and saw two Lorain soldiers clad in red, with feathered caps and curved tulwars. They descended the steps, surrounded Timith and the vagrant who only now was rising out of sleep, awakened by the clatter of armored boots. Timith's sword remained poised to kill the innocent man; but when Timith looked down again, now, clearly, he saw that it was not the face of his father nor himself. It was the face of a frightened and total stranger, drawn and pained by the ravages of ill fortune, undeserving of this unexpected horror.

How was it, Timith asked his darkened spirit, that he had spared a murderous mercenary, yet stood willing to slay this innocent man? He blinked the sweat from his vision, shook his long brown hair. Peacefully, he allowed himself to be unarmed by the two soldiers, who half-carried him back to the city entrance. They stopped beneath the gargoyle's vision. One of them made a complex salute or signal with his left hand,

standing in the red glow of those ember eyes. Did some wizard cry from beyond those orbs?

They passed beneath the archway.

Too near shock to comprehend the meaning of the noise, somewhere Timith heard the sound of jangling. As the two soldiers dragged Timith beyond the gate, the mercenary leapt from darkness. One soldier fell to the ground, with no sound but a thump. Timith was dropped to his belly and lay dumb and unconcerned upon the pave.

The second soldier had brought his curved tulwar to bare, cleaving through the ambusher's shoulder. The mercenary grunted, but did not scream. Though he dropped the sword and had lost the use of his arm under the deeply bitten shoulder, he swiftly withdrew another sword from his collection and deflected the tulwar's second slash.

For several seconds a heated two-man battle raged. The mercenary was the better fighter, somewhat sobered since Timith had first seen him. But he was seriously wounded. Blood gushed from that badly injured shoulder. The red-clad city soldier was no amateur; he was biding his time, waiting for the draining blood to remove the swordman's surprising strength.

At last there was an opening. The city soldier put a second wound, less serious, across the other's chest. The mercenary was scored between two long knives.

With the interest of an opium dreamer, Timith watched. After brief or long moments, he realized that the mercenary was repaying a debt. There was no telling why the big fighter initially tailed Timith. Perhaps only to buy ale for one who could have slain but did not. In any event, the mercenary saw the chance to return the favor, to save a stranger from the soldiers who patrolled Adoan by night.

Comprehension growing, Timith rose to his knees, removed his sword from the fallen soldier (who had confiscated it and who the mercenary had killed). He rammed it up into the spine of the man in the red uniform.

The mercenary collapsed a moment after the soldier. Timith, still weak in his knees from emotional stress, crawled to where his savior lay dying.

Even now the mercenary grinned, apparently still drunk enough to feel no pain. But he was not so drunk that he did not know he was dying.

"Se leva deino prle," he said, still with that smile.

"Se leve deino," was as much as Timith repeated.

His bloody sword sheathed, Timith rose from the death-place of a man who in better circumstances might have been his first friend. Far down the steps, the nearly murdered vagrant cowered in fear, having witnessed the fighting in the archway. He began to flee from Timith, but could not run well, and could only come to the end of the quay. He was quickly overtaken by Timith along the narrow pier.

Moments passed, Timith unspeaking, the vagrant squirming at arm's length, whining feebly. Timith did not even look at him. Instead, the Candorian looked outward over the Sea of Enigmas. Mists coalesced there; shapes formed oddly. Then, for a moment, a long neck appeared to be rising from the waters at the end of the pier.

"Kahn!" Timith whispered.

But the dragon was gone.

Had never been there.

"Do you understand me?" Timith asked the miserable man in his grip, shaking him still. "Do you speak Candorian?"

"Spare me! Spare me!" he answered with the heavy accent of a man not from Loray but from countries in the North.

"Good. You understand. Tell me of a man who either does or did at one time beg on these steps. His name may or may not be Timith now. His only possession is a map. He looks like me, but older."

The scraggly-bearded vagrant's eyes were almost as red as the eyes of the watchful gargoyle. Those eyes grew larger. He did not speak.

"Tell me if you wish to live!"

"He has no name! He used to tell wild stories of the circular nature of the world, like a hoop I think, or was it like an arc... His stories made people laugh, and pay him a coin. He was mad."

"And now he is where?"

"Gone. Taken by the soldiers."

The vagrant twisted a little in Timith's clutches, pointed a shaking finger at the mountain crest. Upon the peak sat the city's innermost walls, the crown of the whole of Adoan.

"Taken there!" he whispered fearfully. "Where they would have taken you. Only the strong are fit for sacrifice."

Timith looked up into the heights of the city, where small clouds were lit orange in the night by the glowing orifice of the mountain's crater. He saw the high walls around the summit and wondered if they were impregnable as told, or if from age they might be cracked and broken and easy to assault. Perhaps only fear kept people out.

The vagrant was quaking so hard that Timith could no longer stand his company. There was nothing more to learn from the craven. Angrily, Timith gave the beggar a heave forward into the gulf. He listened to the splashing and hollering while ascending the hundred steps to reenter the city. His breath caught when he saw, on either side of the gate, two women. They were taller than he, as tall as the lank folk of Caspriquaqui, but broader and stronger. They looked powerful, like the inland plainswomen who fought astride horses; but these were clearly Lorain women, giantesses among their own race. They were almost beautiful, though too stern and strong to attract most men. Timith stood on a step below them, looking up at their splendor, understanding that these two represented unfathomable power.

One of them held her hand straight forward, palm down: a sign of peace. Her spear was held loosely, pointed straight upward, not threatening. The other was clearly alert for Timith's treachery.

The one whose hand assured peaceful intention spoke. Her

voice was deep, soothing. She spoke Candorian; she spoke it well, though clearly she only imitated the foreign accent. She said, "Come. Come. We will take you to your father."

FOUR

of dragons and an egg; of damsels and the deep, deep well; and of kinship and monstrosities, all and many kinds.

Hardly a man was Timith son of Timith; hardly a man was he. Rather, he had become as a personification of hatred. And if gods truly pull the strings of destiny's weird tapestry, then surely Timith had become the finger of a dark and gruesome deity.

He walked between the tall, tall women as though he were a shadow, his back hunched up behind, his eyes focused evermore narrowly until it was remarkable that he could see at all. They led him through many gargoyle-guarded gates, did those giant women. They marched him upward to hell.

Through each gateway, another epoch unfolded, older architectures each stranger than the last. The sun had by now arisen, but a gloominess persisted – a darkness of the upper city itself, or of the man's small heart. Through consecutive gates and increasingly antique segments of Adoan the small procession trod. The streets became less inhabited, the buildings less habitable. Then there were no human folk at all, but an occasional haggard creature hiding under the eaves of a crumbling temple, making apish noises. Now and then, the three who strolled the bleak avenues were forced to climb over the rubble of fallen pillars or detour through once-magnificent fountains. They passed a gargantuan statue of a woman with a sword, fallen or knocked upon the street, her head broken away. In early times, held the oldest poems, women ruled the world; and Timith bethought himself that the women at his sides must be of a lineage older than remembered time.

The city became steeper. In areas, abandoned habitats were carved directly into cliff walls. Dangerous hand-holds replaced the cobbled streets and inlaid stairs, as the one woman led and the other followed Timith up inclines and between burrows. From the black interiors of the cavernous cliff-houses there issued forth murmurings and incantations; but the women revealed no concern, and Timith pretended himself to be equally jaded to the obscure or the unknown.

At the top of the cliff was a brief mesa leading to the final wall, beyond which burned the crater. The air at this height was thin, and pungent with the mountain's obscene fartings. The flat mesa was interrupted by ramshackle huts of stone, their ceilings fallen in. It was difficult to realize that eerie, magnificent Adoan had been founded by a grovelling, simple-minded mountain sect with no finer art than these poor lodges.

The women crouched, removed sheaths from the sharp points of their spears. Timith saw nothing, but his narrow eyes widened a little bit, and he scanned the mesa. Silence was broken only by the recurrent burbling beyond the final wall.

"Come out!" one of the women commanded, but there was no reply.

"Come out!" she said again, while the other took two steps forward.

They proceeded slowly. To the left, one of the ruined stone houses emitted the racket of an unsettled fragment of ceiling. The women seemed deaf to any portent aside from the gaping door into the flames. It was the last and uppermost gate, guarded by no gargoyle, by nothing at all beyond the white and pink heat. This final portal would seem the women's only purpose, and therefore Timith's since they urged him along. He remembered the warning fo a beggar, that only the fittest warranted sacrifice. Suddenly Timith was not anxious to see what might step out from the fire to the call of a mistress.

Timith stopped.

He drew his sword.

The women stepped away from him, spears' lengths to either

side. He growled at them:

"Was my father sent in there? If you threw him to the fire, if you stole from me my vengeance, I will kill you both for that bright deed!"

He leapt at one of them, his longsword slashing with insane force. As the woman he attacked knocked his weapon aside, the other at his back poked him in the shoulder blade, not deep enough to injure but enough to prick the skin. He wheeled about, snarling, and slashed again, with hot anger. Again his blow was deflected, and the woman now at his back pricked him in the buttocks. He fought with a kind of spastic valor, but they herded him toward the door. One of them was always behind him, forcing him on.

But they did not push him into the flame. When he stood a silhouette against brightness, they stopped. He felt the horrible heat at his back as he faced the women. They did not look at him; their attention was drawn elsewhere. Without compassion, without fear, they watched a shambling monstrosity limp forth from the rubble of a broken lodge. It reminded Timith of the half-glimpsed things hiding beneath the eaves of the large temples passed along the upward trek: a gibbering, ape-like thing which must once have been a man.

The thing was hairy and hunch-backed and red-eyed and ugly. It ambled to within a stone's throw of Timith, blinking its narrow eyes and cocking its whiskery face. The muscles of its jowls twitched. Timith knew absolutely that it had indeed been a man, gone mad with some obsession; and Timith felt horrifying empathy.

Timith moved toward the beast, but sheathed his sword as he went. He wept bitterly, "Father! Father!" For he recognized the beast's visage as somehow like his own. Timith held out his arms to greet the monster with something akin to love, or more correctly, need. The hunched creature reared up, revealing taloned claws which were not human hands at all. But Timith proceeded nearer, barely able to see the danger through his tears.

Before he could embrace the thing, a spear whisked over Timith's shoulder and took the monster full in the chest. It wrapped its claws around the shaft and made snuffling sounds of pain, then collapsed into a twitching death. Timith screeched a murderous curse as he turned upon the women.

"You killed him! You killed my father!"

He drew his sword again, thinking his chances better now that only one of the women was armed.

His wild attack was averted by the armed woman's spear, while the other looked on complacently. Timith was knocked off balance when the spear's haft smote his temple, and he went sprawling, The giantess put her spear to his throat and spoke evenly.

"That was not the senior Timith. What you recognized in the thing was madness, not kinship. It is true tour face becomes less like your father's and more like madness. You have become wizened beyond your years, hunch-backed and ugly. The wretches who haunt the upper sectors of Adoan are without exception mad, and those upon this mesa the maddest of all. Stand tall if you do not wish to be like them! Open your eyes before they turn red from squinting!"

She let Timith rise then, and he put his sword away. He strove to square his shoulders. He looked at her eye to eye while she continued,

"Had my companion not thrown her spear into the monster's heart, it would have rent you and left you dead, while you failed your quest. And you must not fail! We have brought you here to show you your own madness. Now you have seen the weakness of your resolve. You would have kissed your father, not killed him...but slay him you must, for he killed the Mother Serpent, the Holy Worm, and for this he will pay with his life. Hear well what I must tell you:

"My companion and I are protectors of the Fire Worms who live in the crater beyond the shining door. Across the Sea of Enigmas we once had sisters, protectors like us, but of the Sea Worms. Two years before your birth, your sire came to the land

called Death's Delta and slew the brooding Mother. Our sisters failed at the task they had inherited, and in grief and dishonor, they slew themselves.

"For years since, we have waited for one of two men whom the scryers say can kill the senior Timith, to avenge our sisters and the Worms."

"But I am a poor warrior," said Timith. "How can it be that only I and one other are capable of killing the man who is my father?"

"fate, or destiny, or by its many names, is like any good tapestry. It is not woven at random. There is a picture, and the picture is ironic. Nothing is left to chance. Nothing is achieved by skill alone. You are a better warrior than you think; but the finest warrior of our age could not defeat your father – not because he is so bold, but because it lacks amusement. Will you kill your father if we show you where?"

"If I refuse or fail? There is another? Who?"

"The scryers did not tell us. Only, you will be amused."

"I will kill my father," vowed Timith. "Show me soon where I can find him, lest this other find him first."

The woman who had thrown her spear, who could not speak to Timith, had moved toward the carcass of the mad-thing. She took hold of the spear but did not pull it out. She used it as a handle and dragged the body toward the glowing door, and only then reclaimed the spear.

"Watch," said the tall speaker.

And Timith was witness of a terrifying event.

A violent flurry of light gathered on the far side of the gate, and a leonine roar erupted. Timith moved further away, for the heat was like a furnace. He could not stand to look directly at the light, and shaded his face against the brightness and warmth. Still, he could see a little of what transpired. The roaring, swirling fire took on a shape: a wyvern with a hawk's spurred legs and talons; with scaly rump and whipping lizard's tail; with feathered, gorgeous wings; and with a head half bird, half reptile.

It stepped through the door, stretched its lake-hued, sparkling wings, and squawked horridly at heaven. The its fiery beak pecked at the corpse upon the ground, rent it into sections, swallowing the pieces one by one.

The woman who had never spoken stood so close to the creature that Timith was amazed she was not burned to ash. She was chanting something, and holding her spear toward the wyvern's face – not so much as a weapon, but as a mesmerizing stick. The wyvern watched her, listened to her, and fed.

The glow of the beast began to lessen. Its warmth began to pass. By the time the grisly meal was finished, the wyvern's scaly rear was no longer molten metal, but blue-sheened steel. Its wings, though pliable, became an even more incredible blue, like newly tempered iron. Legs and eyes were black. Beak, spurs, and talons were gold. Its teeth were clear as diamonds.

The wyvern's head turned sideways to see the chanting warrior. Its eye was huge and black. The cooled beast clucked like a friendly hen, and stepped further from the door.

"You may ride upon her back," said the giantess at Timith's side. "She will take you to Death's Delta in the ocean beyond the Sea of Enigmas. Among the isles of the delta your father lives in a well, and is fed by the daughters of the Protectors who killed themselves. The daughters have kept him alive since my companion and I sent him to them. They have kept him in anticipation of your coming, or the coming of the other."

"The beast is safe to ride," said Timith, feeling a little bit of fear, though not a large amount.

"Do not let her breathe on you, for that would mean your death. But for a while she is docile. See, she stretches out her wing, that you might climb upon her back. Go, Timith son of Timith; be your own vengeance, and ours."

He climbed onto the back of the reptilian bird, and found where his legs could be hooked behind the neck and in front of the wings without hindering the wyvern's pinion. She ran across the mesa with an ostrich's awkwardness; but that was the roughest part of the ride. In the air, the metallic wyvern was

as graceful as a falcon.

Loray become a conical spider-web beneath the span of wings. At the center of the web was a bright, molten spider with black, blinking eyes. Timith looked away from the shape of the crater, finding it uncomfortable.

The Sea of Enigmas passed below, its mists alive with monstrous specters. After an hour's flight, Timith saw a river wide as some seas, rushing into the Southern Ocean. Where the river, the ocean, and the Sea of Enigmas met there were treacherous straits and a constant froth of unpredictable eddies and currents and tows. A ship caught in that eternal tempest would be helplessly tossed and battered.

Near the horizon was a yellow patch of shallows and flat islands. As the wyvern brought him nearer, Timith saw the shallows between the isles provided a graveyard of ships of all oceans. Some of these ships were new, some very old, some petrified into coral.

Upon one island was a village. Amidst the small huts stood women pointing at the sky and shouting either in terror or delight, Timith was uncertain. The wyvern continued to the far beach and landed. She stretched out her wing so that Timith could descend.

The wyvern lingered. She stood on the ocean's edge, turning her head left and right as if expecting the Mother Serpent to rise from the waves in greeting. Timith gazed upon the shallow waters too, to see the broken masts

and mammoth bulkheads of ships run aground. It was an eerie sight, those ships, in varied states of decay or fossilization.

Among these ships was a fresh one, turned partly on its side. Like the rest, it was wrecked too badly ever to sail again, even supposing it could be moved from the shoals upon which the winds and tides and river's mighty currents had driven it.

That one ship held Timith's attention above all others because he had never seen its like before. He had been a sailor; additionally, he had once haunted a port town as might a ghost.

He thought he had seen every kind of ship made, until he saw this one.

It seemed to be made of skins stretched over a whale's rib cage, then lacquered against decay and decorated with stylized designs with looked like evil eyes. It was so light the lapping waves rocked it to and fro. Through a gaping rent in the thin wall, Timith made out something like a bladder or a heart. He fancied it must be in some way associated with the ship's mode of operation, for it lacked oarlocks or masts.

A vessel that fragile would be reduced to rubble in a short while; and its parts would be mistook for some weird beast. Then there would never be proof that such a ship existed, and even Timith would doubt his memory. Timith wondered what manner of persons had fashioned it; and he was fretful some survivor might await upon the isle.

The wyvern clucked and peered, still awaiting her desire. When the Mother Serpent did not rise in greeting, the beast became agitated. She began to bellow clouds of poisonous smoke and to scratch in the rocks and sand in an irritated manner. Too late Timith realized his danger. He turned to flee the presence of the wyvern.

Timith fled into the waves, knowing he could not outrun a wyvern's long legs on a flat island. But the creature was less afraid of water than a beast of fire should be. She waded into the shallows, pecking in his direction with her golden beak.

She squawked and splashed and kicked with her spurs; but since she was only annoyed and not hungry, her beastly aim could be outmaneuvered. Timith thought to take refuge in one of the fossilized ships, although coral would never withstand the metallic monster's kicks and diamond teeth.

Then Timith beheld a sight at once wonderful and terrible.

A sea serpent raised its long neck from behind the wreckage of a ship! At first Timith thought he was caught between a wyvern and the Mother Serpent; but that was impossible, since the Mother had been slain two decades gone.

This second beast pushed a ship aside with one gigantic

flipper – and there before Timith was great Kahn reared up on the shoal. "Kahn!" breathed Timith. Kahn rumbled angrily at the wyvern.

A battle was engaged between the beasts. Kahn wisely snaked his long neck down to avoid a poisonous breath, then caught the wyvern by her throat. Timith swam and staggered ashore, then lay upon his back witnessing the spectacle. The wyvern was leaping and squawking as best she could with Kahn's teeth at her throat; she successfully spiked him with her fearful spurs. The gouges in Kahn's sides oozed an oily redness; but he would not let go with his teeth. He maneuvered to the wyvern's rear, and held her down with one titanic flipper. Then Kahn did a thing that made Timith sit up in surprise.

The bull serpent mounted the wyvern.

A tortured mating progressed, each beast crippling the other. Timith could hardly bear to watch, yet could not turn away from the sight. It seemed that the wyvern became bloated in her breast, as though a gigantic egg was formed by the magic of Kahn's rape.

The wyvern showed no pleasure in serpent-lust. Her struggle was sincere. When the waters around the couple began to churn and boil, Timith stood upright and called to the bull serpent: "Kahn! Stop! Your lover turns to fire!" Timith imagined this to be the wyvern's last resort, possibly a suicidal gesture; but whatever the reason, it was true that she was once again becoming molten metal.

Her black eyes turned to glistening white. Her beak shined no longer gold, but crimson. The blueness of her feathers became redder than iron newly taken from the forge. Kahn had by then released his hold, and rolled off the wyvern backward, his underside charred black. Still, he thrashed less in pain than in the ecstasy of orgasm.

Then all was lost from view, for the heat of the wyvern wrought a vast cloud of steam through which Timith could not see. Timith searched his being for some iota of genuine concern, and tried to envision himself running back and forth along the

beach, crying out to Kahn. Instead, he turned his back to the swallows and looked inland, to his quest.

Upon a brief rise stood a yellow-haired woman. She, too, had watched the monsters' mating battle, and watched Timith quite as well. Seeing her, he was startled. She beckoned him, and he obeyed. But when he topped the rise, the woman had disappeared. All he could see inland were the gently swaying grasses, yellow as the woman's hair had been – a perfect place for her to hide. He could not see the village. A setting sun faced him coldly, gold upon yellow.

He looked back briefly, more in a dull sense of curiosity than from genuine interest. Kahn had saved his life, and vaguely Timith felt gratitude, for it allowed him to continue his personal intent. But he could not truly say it would sadden him to see Kahn dead. Death meant but one thing to Timith: a duty to perform.

He saw that the steam had been taken by a breeze. In the shallows the wyvern squatted, grey as ash, unmoving. She was dead. More, she was spent. Her metallic body had gone to ash, and was beginning to break into pieces like a burnt log. The waves turned the ash into sludge and carried it away. But she left something of herself: an egg, half covered by the water.

Kahn, tortured, raised his head form the shallows and trumpeted. It was a half lament for the love he had murdered, and half the heralding of his own mother reborn. That the egg meant Death's Delta would return to another millennium of serpent rule, Timith did not doubt; a new Mother Serpent would hatch from that egg. Timith did not care. That the prophets of a dozen dark religions had foreseen this day did not impress Timith son of Timith.

He walked toward the yellow sun.

* * *

The grasses swallowed him like the sea... no, not like the sea; for the sea had been a comfort to him since first leaving home.

The sea was a calming omnipresence: deadly, powerful, yet in some way comprehensible. This place of yellow grasses was far more disconcerting. Tall, slender stalks pummelled him ineffectively, whispering promises and warnings in his ear. He could not see the sun as it was setting. There was no sense of direction within the swaying, mesmerizing grasses. There were no landmarks and no trails.

He tried to use the moon to mark his way, for it was the only heavenly body to show through the hovering mist. But there was something peculiar about the sky above Death's Delta, something which distorted the very moon. The wavering orb did not seem to trace a sensible path. It misled him.

A man might be lost forever within these simple grasses. He might wander in circles unto the point of death, in search of village or shore.

As though his realization summoned aid, a breeze parted the grasses before him. A slender, yellow-haired woman was revealed. At first he thought it was the same woman he had seen before; but this one had broader features and a more dour look. She glowed with the same gauzy texture as the moon, but Timith doubted her a ghost. She motioned with a pale arm, and Timith easily obeyed. Before he reached her, however, the grasses closed.

He searched for her to no avail, and found instead a set of bones. By the remnant of shirt and the pendant depicting Nepada, Timith knew it for a sailor. At first he thought it some poor wretch like himself, lost within the grass until he starved or died of thirst. When Timith knelt beside the bones, however, he saw that the hairless skull was pierced through the temple. So the man had died by foul play.

Timith son of Timith wandered on, attempting to pace each stride evenly, to avoid a circling path. Again, there appeared a yellow-haired woman ahead of him. She beckoned mesmerically, swaying like the grass. She was neither the first nor the second woman he had seen that day, for her eyes were further apart than theirs. Timith ran toward this third woman, to find

no living soul, but only the worm-eaten corpse of a man pierced through the brain. The dead man had been bald, or shaved, or... scalped. Its clothing was not so decomposed as that upon the set of bones; but, curiously, the corpse lacked breeches.

The feminine apparitions appeared again and again, dinting his resolve to keep a straight and sturdy course. There may have been only a few; but after a while, Timith could no longer tell them apart, seeing nothing but their pale glow and flowing, yellow tresses in the night. They wove in and out of the grasses, attracting him like a dark moth to their fire. Like stalks of grass themselves, or spirits thereof, the women were soft and golden and all the same but different. He stumbled over bones and corpses of men who had come before. All of them were hairless. None retained their pants – doffed willingly, no doubt, before untimely failing. But Timith was bewitched and did not suspect his danger. He hungered for the bread of each woman's flesh. No longer did anything else impinge upon his mind.

The woman led him merrily about, appearing more and more often throughout the nighted hours. He would run this way, then he would run that... and finally he was panting and weary and heavy on his feet. When it seemed he could run no more, he was surprised to capture one of the golden women, for she did not run away. Timith clutched her shoulders hard enough to bruise. She was pliable and soft. His eyes were held by hers. His breathing was ragged and fast like that of a mad and starving beast.

For this while Timith had felt his most animalistic requirements overwhelm him. He ached to throw the yellow woman on the ground and leap violently upon her. But something at the back of his mind intervened, something that obsessed him more than any beastly urge. That thing was hatred. And the fountain he would fill with his hatred was not a woman's groin, but a father's gut.

As the horrid passion left him, for the first time Timith grasped his precarious situation. The lust of men became a weapon against men, in the able hands of the island's witches.

Something of their passive look and motion begged for domination; and many were the men who dreamed themselves commanders. Thus the beauties easily bedazzled castaways and led them the merry chase, dizzying them, raising their blood and expectations. Then they would mate with the beguiled seamen, and afterward slay them. Timith knew a name for women such as these: Sirens.

The moment was gone, the moment in which Timith had been held by the weakness of common men. Only one woman had he ever slept beside, and never since had he given a thought to the desire of the flesh. On Death's Delta, old needs were rekindled – but these feelings had grazed him far differently than they had in the arms of Marga. Desire had been distorted, as was the moon above.

This had been a devil's urge, to rape and abuse the frail, seductive creature in his hands. In him, as in so many others, there had been a contempt so old and ingrained that he could not even believe women *capable* of killing men. They were too weak, too small, too inconsequential.

After lust was vanquished, the evidence of the bones and corpses still did not change his contempt. Timith pushed the seductress away and scowled. Timith lived for hatred, not for power, not for love, either of which the act of rape might purport to be. Thus the spell woven by the sirens could never have been strong enough to hold him.

He drew his sword to slay the witch, but the grass hid her away.

He turned. Behind him stood a woman, but not the one he had held. She pointed him the way. He reeled to his left, where yet another woman stood; and she too pointed for him. To his right appeared a woman with a small, tow-headed daughter, and both of them were pointing. Then the woman whose arms his grip had bruised returned, a single finger indicating a direction. They all looked to be sisters – or half-sisters. Side by side it was clear they had each had different fathers. But the mother-genes were strongest... if anything, had been made

stronger by the manner of their mating or by ritual magic.

The one he had bruised stepped forward, and spoke in poor Candorian:

"We have waited the one we could not control. Another awaits you also. He waits... *there.*"

A funnelling breeze swirled the grass around him, and the yellow=haired women were gone. Timith ran the direction all of them had indicated. Mere yards found him in a clearing. Ill lit by early dawn was the village he had seen from astride the wyvern. In the center of the crouching village of grass huts were two wells.

* * *

The huts of brown and yellow grass sat empty. Timith did not yet trust the sirens, whose way it was to take grounded sailors to breasts and mons, only to slay the blighters as spiders kill their mates. He did not ill-judge their custom; he merely wished to avoid becoming part of the island's soil. Although their web had failed to hold him, it was due wholly to the fact that he lacked the desires and vanities of ordinary men. He was not altogether certain a yellow-haired damsel would not run screaming from a grass hut with a dagger for his ear, to fulfill tradition's second part if not the first.

So Timith satisfied himself that the village was truly deserted. He looked in several huts and saw that the women lived in austere cleanliness. Each hut contained a wicker baby crib, without exception the best-made furnishings of any household. There were baskets of various sizes, larger ones upturned and used as seats and tables. In only one hut was there anything not found also in the rest. The hut itself was the village's largest, and in it sat a loom. In the loom was a tapestry, made from the varied natural colors of seamen's locks of hair. Timith strove to be appalled, but was not. The tapestry was lovely – the work, no doubt, of the woman's queenmother and it depicted the prophecy of a wyvern and a serpent mating, the hatching of a

new Serpent Mother. The tapestry was unfinished, and told no more than this.

He left the large hut and came to the center of the well-tramped village. He stood between two wells. On approaching the first, he was turned away by the odor. In the other well was clean water, from which he drank before considering investigation of the well which stank. There was no hurry. His sire could go nowhere.

All was silent.

Although he took his time, it was not for any sense of hesitation. Perhaps he savored the last moments of his quest. Or it may have been a more tedious achievement that he had anticipated, and he was too bored for haste. But he did attend the odorous well at last, and looked into it with an almost apathetic feeling. What he beheld cured his apathy, and made him fall upon his knees at the well curb and retch until his stomach ached. And then, fascinated, he looked again.

The man below sat upon a heap of excreta and bones – human bones, though little. They were the bones of infants! The women of the isle did not keep the male children born of their murderous intercourse. Male infants had provided the foodstuff of Timith's father Timith. The final degradation! The most inhuman act of the senior Timith: he had chosen cannibalism over starvation – and worse, he cannibalized infants.

But the captivity of a once-free spirit and his last degradation had taken its toll. It was a filthy, hairy, scabrous creature sitting in that hole. And Timith cursed the daughters of Death's Delta less for their villainy than for filching his father's reason. How was that blank-eyed, mindless being to understand who was killing him, or why? Revenge would be so much less sweet, without the victim's dawning awareness.

The man looked up, his eyes white, devoid of intellect. Timith suddenly understood the agony of the man's survival. At first, he must have come close to death. Later he relented, and ate the raw flesh of newborns, with tears of guilt and prayers for forgiveness. Lastly he did not even kill them mercifully, but

ravished each screaming brat the instant it was thrown to him – a dog thrown to a lion.

Except for having forgotten how, Timith should have laughed. For the killing would be more mercy than revenge! Yet kill he would; it was his purpose. A rope hung off the side of the well, and Timith threw one end toward the captive.

"Come up," he whispered, surprised by the gentle sound he made. "Come up and I will kill you."

But the madman of the pit only stared, and did not notice the rope.

There was a sound behind Timith. He turned, his face pale and old beyond its years. He saw a man standing near him, and the man was a warrior, and the warrior was strangely colored.

"I know you," said Timith, but knew it was not possible, for in all his life he had not seen a man whose skin was red. He was used to seeing his father's face, or his own, superimposed on the faces of people he met. Therefore it did not register at first, but the ruddy man reminded Timith of himself, only younger. When it did strike him, Timith was startled beyond his own comprehension. The giantess of Loray had been right: Timith was amused. He said,

"So I am not my father's only bastard. And the strange boat wrecked in the shallows was yours, from the other side of the world."

The red man did not understand him.

"You are strange," said Timith, noting the spools in his brother's ears, the odd head-dress painted with sky and sea monsters, and the two wickedly curved weapons sheathed across his chest. "You bear a grudge like mine? Well, we have both been cheated. And I am cheated more, though I have come less far. It is worse for me because, on the threshold of my quest's fulfillment, I learn by your existence that there was truth in my father's theories – and I preferred to think him foolish.

"But what matter the world's shape? Does the place of humanity alter if we live upon a globe and not a disc? Unless it

changes our lives, what use is wisdom?

"Change everything I know to be true, and I will not care. Long ago I learned that I had been misled. Is it so strange to learn I misled even myself? I cannot be disillusioned more, nor be touched by wonder. Tell me the world ridges upon a serpent's snout! Tell me it rolls in the bottom of a dish! Tell me at the top is paradise, and on the bottom: hell. Prove the seasons change because we each one will it... Does it mean a thing, my father being right? Does it make him more a hero or less a criminal? Does it make *my* life worthwhile?"

Timith held his arms out from his sides, striking a woebegone posture. He said, "I am no part of this world, and less a part if you change it."

The red man watched Timith without expression, understanding nothing of his speech. Timith continued.

"I have lived for one thing alone. A certain – I have sought it. Now it is upon me to perform that task, to fulfill my life's ambition. But I am generous today, for I have learned that I will take no pleasure in my necessitated task. In my generosity, half-brother, I will let you kill him too. How do you propose we do it?"

Understanding none of this, the red man could not reply. But when Timith was done speaking, the red man moved swiftly. His sickles slid from their crescent moon-shaped sheaths, and he leapt forward, slicing Timith with each. Timith jumped away, bleeding from two scratches.

"You would kill me?"

The red man came again. Timith slipped away. There was no emotion on the red man's face, no sort of communication between them. Timith drew his sword to stay the murderous assault, and quickly found his sword held fast between two sickles, then twisted from his grasp. The red warrior was expert! Timith's sword was tossed into the air. It plunged into the pit where he could not hope for its retrieval.

"You are selfish, little brother! To want to kill him all by yourself!" Timith circled the stinking well to keep from being

cut again. He ran for the further well, the one with clean water, and the red man pursued. It was impossible to escape his half-brother, for the youth was far swifter. Dodging left and right and circling the well, Timith yet found himself face to face with a murderer. For the first time, Timith could read the expression on that ruddy face. Emotion had slipped past training, and those features said, "Revenge! Revenge! Revenge!"

Thus did Timith see that the young warrior from the world's far side had made the gravest error. He had mistaken Timith the Younger for Timith the Elder, and well he might, the Younger had grown so haggard and scraggly. Timith leapt backward from a sickle's slash, fell clumsily, struck his head on the well curb. He was too dazed to move.

A bestial growl saved Timith. The red man turned at the sound. The madman had climbed from the well on the rope Timith had thrown over the side, and a sword was in his hand. Though the growling made no sense to Timith, it must have been a language known to the warrior, for he listened carefully. The red man looked at young Timith on the ground, and finally understood. The red warrior walked toward the madman. Timith lay paralyzed with the fear of injustice, not yet certain he was reprieved.

Within Timith's view, twin sickles met broadsword. The madman fought well, and beat the youngster back. The red man was well trained but inexperienced. The madman fought dirtier, and better. Vaguely Timith tucked away the knowledge that, in fair battle, he could never kill his sire.

The red warrior retreated, turned unexpectedly, threw one of the sickles toward the man from the pit. The madman ducked under the spinning, angled metal. Then he rushed forward with broadsword raised. The red warrior's bizarre weapon spun in a wide circle all around the well, returning to the madman from behind. It struck the senior Timith deeply, but madness held him strong. He broke the guard of the red warrior's remaining sickle and ran him through the gut, lifting him off the ground at sword's end.

The warrior lurched off the spit. To Timith's dazed state, it appeared that the red man was falling toward the ground in slow motion. Vengeance would not slacken for the sake of mortal wounds, so the warrior hooked his sickle around the senior Timith's ankle and gave a powerful yank. The madman stumbled sideways, with one foot left behind. The red warrior' body went lax.

Timith son of Timith lay still woozy against the well curb. But when the madman from the well approached, Timith began to scramble away on all fours, then stand and flee toward high grass for refuge. The elder Timith limped horridly on his bloody, dripping, footless leg. Blood flowed down his back from the sickle wedged so deeply. Yet he came on with his broadsword, unwilling to die, unable to make peace with himself or his sons.

Timith rushed through tall grasses, pursued by his ghoulish father. The strength of him, his hatred, was fast coming undone. The very center and purpose of his identity had always been a knotted fist against which no barrier could go unbroken. With that fist, he had direction, might, reason. That fist could have changed the world! But the center of Timith son of Timith had become a beggar's open hand, and it was empty, and he was helpless. The hatred, the purpose, the reason...all of that belonged to the senior Timith now; for he was, after all, the more wonderful monster.

The world had lost its meaning for the wearied younger Timith. But like his father living in a well, Timith could not let go of his desire to live. All worth which he had ever accumulated to himself sifted through the fingers of his soul, and still he struggled to escape unmolested. He was less a man, without his hate, but more a human being. And humans, it is known, are weak and snivelling devils who bow to their masters and sell their brothers' lives for a favor or a bone.

Timith ran. Timith fell. He crawled. Wept. Timith clutched his hands together and begged for aid from Heaven or Earth or Hell. Always the sound was behind him, the panting of a madman, the step-thump, step-thump, step-thump of a foe's

ungainly progress.

The madman refused to be shaken. Timith stood again, and stumbled, and fled before the horrid being who was his sire. *That is who I might have been,* was Timith's most horrific thought; and he fled himself grown older.

He fell once more, lay gasping for breath, and waited for his father's death-blow. But no one was behind him anymore. The madman was gone, like a nightmare on waking. Timith raised himself on two hands and saw that he had come to the beach. Beyond, Great Kahn lay like a gargantuan corpse in shallow water, his head floating just below the surface. He thought Kahn surely dead, then saw bubbles escaping one by one from lip-like nostrils.

The tide had gone out, leaving the wyvern's egg on a dry shoal. Thirteen blonde women danced around it, singing a shrill song. Then, with all their strength and driftwood used as levers, they began to roll the egg toward the warm, grassy inland.

Kahn did not move. Timith said mostly to himself, "Death's Delta brought us both ill fortune, Kahn. I regret that Marga sent you to watch over me."

At that moment the madman burst out of the grass at Timith's rear. Dread was born anew. Timith took a hopeless stand. He threw sand at the limping man's scabbed face, until the dirty matted beard turned white with grit. But those insane eyes did not blink and sight was not hindered. Timith found rocks, and threw them with good aim, striking the madman's forehead. Blood striped the white face; but the senior Timith limped forth with slow persistence, the broadsword held high.

Timith knew himself doomed; but horrors were compounded when a wailing red man – made redder by his own blood which drenched him waist to toe – ran howling from the grass like a fiery devil. He snatched at the sickle sticking from the madman's back. He retrieved the weapon by pulling it through the senior Timith's spine. The madman folded in half, his legs useless, his arms still thrashing.

The red warrior danced away down the beach, laughing wildly, dripping blood, tossing his strange, bent sword and catching it on return. Perhaps that ruddy man survived the ordeal in the end; Timith never knew.

Timith waited until his father stopped thrashing, then crawled toward the mad old man. He looked into the deathly, staring face, and began to make a hysterical noise which was neither sorrow nor laughter but something hideously like both.

"I'm glad you are dead!" he screamed at last. "I am glad I saw you die!"

But the madman blinked his eyes, and the arms thrashed one last time, jabbing upward with long nails unclipped and unbitten. The senior Timith gouged out his bastard's eyes, dying finally with the brown orbs on his fingers.

Thus end the pursuits, but not the revelations, of Timith son of Timith who ventured forth from Candoria with ever growing hatred in his heart.

Soliloquies

Kahn of the Sea strove through stormy waters. Sharks and other scavengers tore at his open wounds. He was dying. But occasionally a serpent is as noble as others are cruel; in this they are much like people. Upon Kahn's shoulders, at the base of his long neck, a blind man clung desperately. Kahn raced against time, for he had little left. His gigantic flippers bore him on at tremendous speed. In three days he closed a distance which could not have been made by the fastest ships in thrice that time. By then, Timith was severely depleted, worn by the constant wind and spray. Kahn deposited the man in a cove, then left Marga's isle to die in a secret place where dragons die.

Timith lay in the wet sand, uncertain that Kahn had succeeded in his mission. Then gentle hands dragged him from the wake, and a familiar voice choked, "Timith. Timith. Timith," between the gasping sounds of sobs. Scarred lips were pressed to his, forcing air into his lungs so that finally Timith coughed

and spat water and began to breathe well. He opened his eyes so that Marga could see the torn, raw sockets.

"I can still see you," he said. "I see you as you were." He smiled grimly, weakly.

She held him near. He began to tell her of the horrors he had endured, and the horrors he created. She forgave him each atrocity, made all seem less severe. She led him up a steep path; but he was not strong enough to make it all at once, so they sat in a shady spot while he rested. For all that Timith had been through, he was yet more calm than Marga had ever known him to be; and he spoke with quieter sorts of convictions.

"There was a day when my father was proclaimed a hero," he said. "In better circumstances, it might have come to pass that I was so endorsed as well... but heroes are mere fictions, in the end. There are only people, and people are liars, and the lies grow to be legends.

"In the old epics, the heroes come home at last, with riches, with power, with secret knowledge. They live out their lives happily, comfortable in the wisdom gained from youth's exploits. I remember my mother telling me, when I was very small, when I was still naive, 'Timith, someday you will go off to war or bold adventure. A girl will wait for you by her door.' And I asked my mother then, 'Mother, after those adventures, will I not be wise? Will not the girl who waits for me be unchanged, except for being older and less fair?' Then as she often did, my mother began to cry. I knew that I had said something wrong, and tried to make amends by reciting a list of heroes who returned to wives or mothers or sisters or lovers, and were happy ever after. I almost convinced myself it was true, but did not quite believe it until this hour. For I have come home to the Isle of the Sea Witch, after many an adventure. And you have not gone from this place, and you have not changed.

"Now I know how it is that men, after quests – noble quests or quests like mine – can stand to retire with women whose experience is little, who by rights ought to be dullards. The reason is this: The men grow no wiser. Our quests have no

purpose. If we learn anything at all, we learn that we are small, and stupid, and cowardly, and vicious. We come to our humanity, if there is any left, and ask our mothers and our sisters and our lovers to help us forget that we are wicked fools."

Marga stroked his face and whiskers all this while; and though blind, he sensed her watchful, loving gaze. Never had his thoughts flowed so profound, and he had need to unburden himself of notions. Marga listened with dutiful interest as he said, "My mother is dead, and I never had a sister, and you have been my only wife or lover, dearest Marga... perhaps my only friend. So I have returned to you, blind enough to see, to live with you if you will have me. To beg of you one boon."

She helped him to his feet and led him up the remaining distance to the stone cottage. He felt the jam, smiling hugely and looking centuries old, but happy, his mind full of good memories. Marga said to him,

"Ask your boon, precious fool."

"I ask you for a song," he said. "I ask you for a verse of epic proportion and importance, which tells the tale of Timith son of Timith not as it truly was, but as legend will soon have it."

Perhaps she always knew it would come to this. She did not seem surprised. "This I will do," said Marga, her voice tragic and beautiful in the man's eternal night. She promised this: "I will sing of your glorious quests, your ribald and heroic deeds, your inventions and discoveries, your wit and mystic learning, your gross intellect, your immeasurable physical prowess... your kind heart and your love of beauty and of people. I will lie for you, blind Timith, and lie beside you as well. Soon, you will remember yourself as only brave and good, and never mind the lies, for truth is nothing anyway."

Timith let himself be taken to a narrow bed. He knew what room it was. He lie down in weariness, but would not let go of her arms. Because he was shaking, she reassured him more:

"I will teach my birds the song. They will parrot it to every corner of the world. And the name of Timith will resound through a thousand generations until you are remembered no

longer as a man, but as a god. When the dust of you has scattered on the winds and ocean floor, and the ghosts of you and I have forgotten who we were, still will your name be spoken in reverence and awe... for when a witch's daughter weaves a tale, it endures, and shapes the future to which we are antiquity. It it is a beautiful future, it will be because the tale was woven well. If it is frightful in that coming age, it will be because the lie was not big enough after all, and the mind beneath the human mind saw what was best left hidden."

She touched his eyelids closed, to conceal the sockets, to aid his rest; and it was as though she held a dead man to her bosom. He sighed with a peacefulness which would last throughout the final years. She kissed his face, and began to sing the song, while he whispered from half-slumber, "Your lies... make me... a hero."

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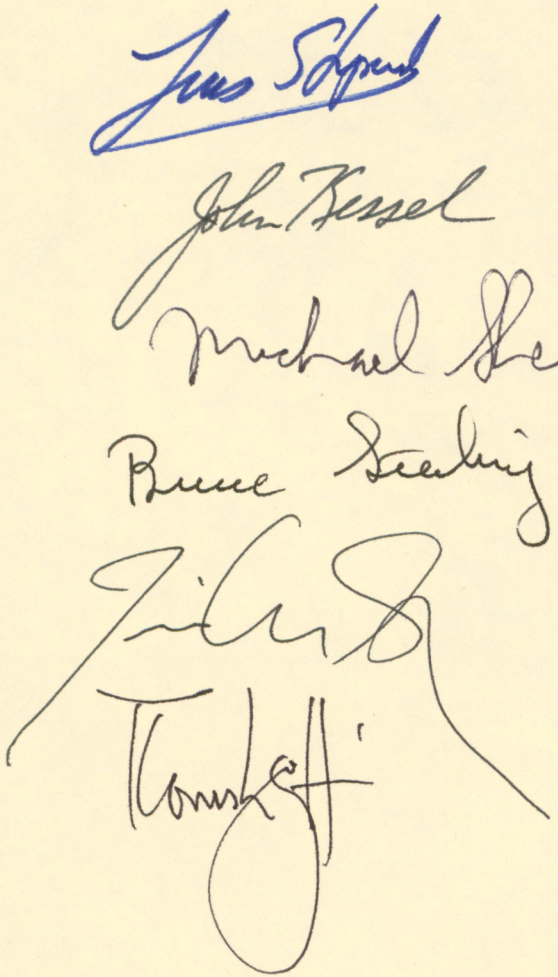

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