

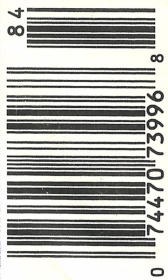
WINTER 1988

\$2.50 U.S.

# Argos<sup>®</sup>

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Larry Niven  
Janet Morris  
Jack Lovejoy



FIRST  
ISSUE



# Argos

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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Several months ago, during one of my weekly excursions along the local literary trapline, I found a magazine previously unknown to me and dedicated primarily to horror. I'm not terribly fond of horror, fiction or otherwise, but the smattering of fantasy and science fiction thrown in made it worth investigating. Now, I'm not going to mention the title of this little discovery, but I will say it is neither of North American origin nor a threat to *Omni*. To be honest, I thought it was one of the most charmingly wretched examples of established publishing I ever saw. The shop where I found this rhinestone tends to specialize in the obscure—*Bibliophobe Weekly*, *Headhunters' Gazette*, that sort of thing—yet it still seemed slightly out of place. I couldn't reach for my wallet fast enough.

Actually, it was quite entertaining and I read it from cover to cover repeatedly to assure myself that I hadn't lost my objectivity, that this treasure from halfway around the globe really was as rough as I initially thought. Don't get me wrong—disrespect is not intended, and it was three dollars well spent. In addition to its entertainment value, it convinced us the market can sustain publications other than the flashy, megabuck offerings so common today.

Publishing a magazine is obviously an expensive proposition, one which should be approached with caution, but after careful consideration we decided to take the step. Inquiries were distributed among the writing community, describing our plans and requesting submissions. Our first manuscript arrived within a week, and it was from Janet Morris! In that instant, the entire project came to life: what an exciting moment it was! The stories then began to trickle in—hardly a flood, mind you, but comfortably steady—from people whose work we have long admired. Another reassuring aspect of those first weeks were the notes of encouragement from folks who had nothing to offer at the moment, yet still took the time to respond to our inquiry. With support like that, how could we fail? It wouldn't be difficult.

Recently, a Canadian magazine had to abandon production before they could publish their first issue. It's a sad story, the kind of thing no one wants to hear about. If I understand correctly, one of their problems was a lack of submissions, something *Argos* is also experiencing despite the outstanding support we have received from established authors. It seems curious that writers with less exposure, who have eternally suffered the difficulty of break-

ing into the market, would be the slowest to respond to a call for manuscripts. Granted, *Argos* is not a household word like *Analog* or *Headhunters' Gazette*, but the call did go out, and I believe this lack of submissions from new authors could remain a problem for some time.

A second problem for the Canadians may have been their choice of venue: the pure science fiction market is mature, competitive, and ably represented in periodical form. *Argos* was established with a bias toward fantasy, and has quickly shifted even further toward that end of the spectrum, not as an opportunistic marketing ploy, but for the following reasons.

I'm one of those who suspect fantasy is actually mainstream fiction, temporarily shoved into the closet to make way for the latest fad. From pre-Homeric times, mythic/fantastic literature remained popular throughout most of recorded history, providing a sense of wonder in what must have been a fairly mundane existence. Then, thanks to Eli Whitney and his industrial revolution cronies, reality presented the wonders: we became enthralled with technology—horseless carriages, flying machines, digital stereo. Art and literature traditionally reflect social attitudes and the fervor of this new technological age was probably best exemplified by the Futurist movement of the early twentieth century. Its proponents glorified the machine, and all it represented, suggesting the industrial age would bring changes unimaginable. Correct, on all counts. However, the Futurist movement came to an abrupt, grinding halt with the onset of World War 1, when those machines so eloquently praised suddenly unleashed horrors never before seen by humankind. Literature was less affected by the subsequent Futurist backlash than the visual arts, and realist fiction soldiered on, with the progenitors of today's science fiction in tow. I love science fiction. Always have, always will. It transcends that negativism uncovered by the Futurists and generally presents a very positive view of times to come. But it is still fantasy, isn't it, mixed with technology and steeped in the rules of the machine age, extrapolating the reality of the present into the ever-distant future. Conversely, pure fantasy sidesteps physical reality and depends wholly on imagination for its definition. The known laws of physics need not apply; entire universes may be created where people ask, Einstein? Who's she?" and the only law is the whim of the author. Fantasy in any form—high, contemporary, or science—is entertainment without limits or rules, and that is what we are trying to promote in *Argos*. (Note to DLS: if this doesn't bring in a comment or two for the letters section, nothing will!)

There is a pen-and-ink drawing on the wall above the desk where this prattle is taking form. It's a copy of Frank Frazetta's illustration from the *Lord of the Rings*: Lady Arwen, kneeling weakly on the rocky ground during the Battle of Gondor, her shield crushed, looks up defiantly at the Ringwraith towering over her, his tensed muscles a microsecond away from delivering the coup de grace with a broadsword that looks like it could cleave a battleship. Except my copy shows him armed with a large

rubber chicken. It's a ludicrous image, yet somehow appropriate to everyday life. The real problems are seldom major, but trivial, petty things that just wear you down. My partner's background is in Art, while mine is English; neither gave us the clairvoyance to spot the rubber chickens in *Argos'* path. This premiere issue has therefore taken longer to produce than we anticipated, the result of minor, nonsensical irritants which will hopefully be avoided in the future. Nevertheless, we believe our first issue is a decent effort.

The Spring '88 issue of *Argos Fantasy and Science Fiction* will feature work by Janet and Chris Morris, Elizabeth Scarborough and John Brunner, along with the first installment of "The Most Interesting Things About...", a continuing column by Keith Laumer. This latter item is an unknown; in his early letters, written in his entertainingly indecipherable hand, Keith asked for free rein on his choice of topics. We agreed, of course. With *carte blanche*, his columns will always be interesting.

Future issues will bring change to *Argos* through normal evolution. As our circulation builds, page count will definitely increase, along with the quantity of stories per issue; we'll be able to offer our contributors more generous rates; perhaps even attract, dare I say it...advertisers! In the meantime, an advertisement of our own: Subscribe today!

In closing, we would like to thank those people who have been so instrumental in spreading the word of *Argos*, wholly independent of our efforts here at Penrhyn, and at no real gain to themselves. Special thanks must be given to Elizabeth Scarborough, author of the recently released *Goldcamp Vampire* (Spectra), and to the members of the Meany Tower Writers Group.

Welcome to *Argos Fantasy and Science Fiction*. We hope you like it.

-CRE

**SUBMISSIONS:** *Argos Fantasy and Science Fiction* welcomes free-lance and agented manuscripts up to 20,000 words in length. All manuscripts must be accompanied by a self addressed, stamped envelope. Submissions without sufficient return postage cannot be returned. We are seeking all types of fantasy. We do not want horror stories or technologically rigid science fiction; such material will be returned with the recommendation that you submit the manuscript to a more appropriate magazine. Manuscript guidelines may be obtained by sending a self addressed, stamped envelope to: *Argos Guidelines*, Penrhyn Publishing, P.O. Box 2109, Renton, Washington 98056.

*Several books are being held hostage inside Diane Mapes. So far, one has managed to escape and another is now trying to make a break for it. The Huntress slipped out while she was busy celebrating her 29th birthday.*

# The Huntress

*written by Diane Mapes*

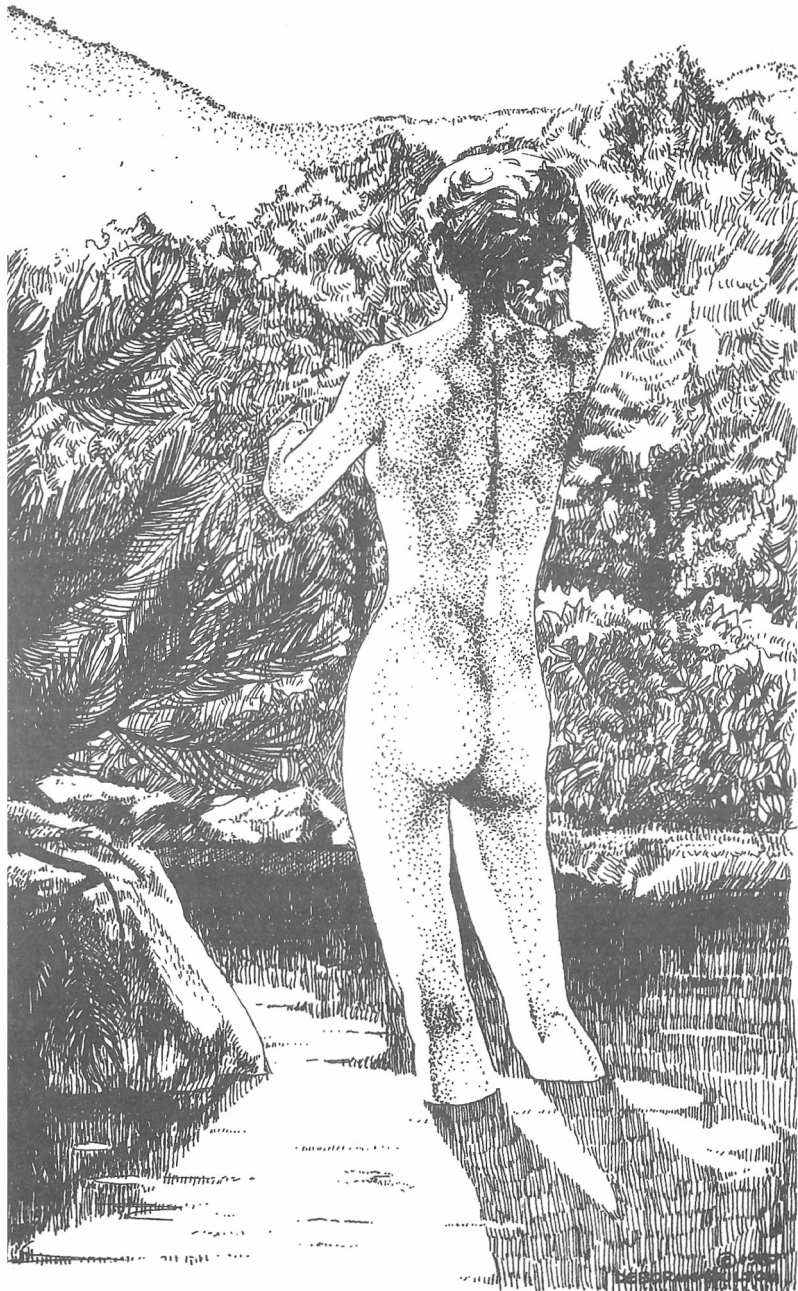
**T**HERE SHE WAS, bare-assed naked, the moonlight shining down on those precious little titties like she was some kinda goddess or something. I nearly shit my pants.

It was Diana, that cute little college trick from Arcadia Heights, the one that worked part time at the Big Lake Bait Shop, the one that me and Ralph Martinez had been slobbering over and trying to impress ever since she set foot in Cedar Valley, batting those sweet little innocent eyes and talking in that sweet little voice and running around in that sweet little white outfit that showed just enough leg to give you ideas, but not quite enough to carry 'em through without feeling a bit ashamed.

It was Diana all right. Diana of the bright red Mustang, Diana of the swim and archery team, Diana of the children's story time at the library, Diana of the hospital volunteers. She was a sight. Standing there naked by the side of that spring, water dripping off her nipples and

her blonde curly hair like thick dew, that crescent moon she always wore around her neck winking a little as the moonlight hit it. She wasn't wearing no little white shorts this time and her legs went from those dainty little girl ankles all the way up to that nice dark promising patch and I didn't feel one bit ashamed as I stepped out from behind that willow and unstrapped my rifle and set it on ground beside me. The hell with the bear Ralph said he'd seen up here, she was my game.

She didn't see me at first, I guess I was still in the shadow of the tree, but she knew she was being watched. I saw those nostrils flare and her eyes dart back and forth like some kinda watchdog. For a minute, I thought I heard a low growl coming from her direction but I knew it had to be my own hounds somewheres nearby. It was just the stillness of the night and the way echoes could bend around that old lake that made it sound like it came from her. I'd been hunting up there long enough to know the tricks old





echo played on men. Diana looked like she knew a few tricks herself.

Real quicklike, she'd dropped down on all fours and picked something off the ground. When I saw what it was, I damn near burst out laughing. The stupid kid had brought her arrows from school with her, as if her flimsy little bow and arrow could protect her from a bear or bobcat way out in these woods.

I moved out from underneath the willow and let her see me, but like I figured, she knew I was there. She didn't look one bit surprised, just real hateful. That was something I'd never seen on her face before, that hateful look. Kinda took me back for a moment and I didn't say nothing. She talked first.

"You were watching me," she said, real cold-like, not a question at all, just a statement of fact.

"You bet," I said, grinning. I was still watching her and my jeans were starting to feel a little uncomfortable, if you know what I mean. I kept waiting for her to grab for her clothes or something, but she just stood there defiant as a mother bear. That's why I figured she wanted it as much as I did. If she woulda just gone for her clothes or something, like any decent woman caught naked, then I might not of pressed it. But she didn't; she acted like she belonged out there in the middle of nowhere, naked as a jaybird. I figured she was trying to tell me something, like she wanted to play wood nymph or something. I moved closer.

"Stand your ground, man," she said real haughty-like and I got to chuckling at that. Ordering me around like she was some kinda queen and I was her servant.

"I'll stand my ground, all right," I said, coming even closer and unbuckling my belt. "But you'll be on your knees in front of me, honey."

Her eyes got real cold at that, damn near hypnotized me for a minute, then her hands reached out and she splashed a bunch of water into my face. I figured she was playing coy, so I just wiped the water out of my eyes and took another step towards her. But when I saw that arrow she was pointing at me, I knew right off she wasn't playing. Damn thing nearly caught me in the cheek.

"Why, you little bitch!" I said, grabbing at the bow. But she just jumped back and started another arrow, real calm and businesslike, like she was at one of those college competitions just shooting at a bullseye for a chance at some little gold trophy. I watched her take aim, right at my heart, I swear, her eyes just concentrating on her aim, nothing else, not the fact that she was gonna shoot down a defenseless man or that she was still standing there stark naked or nothing. She just brought that bow back and I could see her arms correcting her aim just a hair and that's when I hightailed it out of there. That arrow whizzed right by me and stuck into the willow tree about three inches. Right before I ran into the trees, cursing myself 'cause I'd left my brand new rifle back there to rust in the grass, I turned back and there she was, loading another one. And there was just a trace of a smile on her face this time, like I'd seen whenever she saw a fisherman coming back with a full catch or whenever she talked about so-and-so who just had a healthy little baby boy or baby girl with a

real easy delivery. Here I thought she was just a sweet shy kid who liked babies and happy fishermen but she was having the time of her life. Trying to kill me.

My pickup was about two miles east and that's where I headed. And somewhere between my pickup and me were my hounds. Damn spoiled mutts, I never should have let 'em run on their own, but I wasn't all that serious about actually bagging that bear tonight, I was just bored and needed to get away from the wife and her constant bitching about my never putting down the toilet seat or never putting my socks into the dirty clothes basket or never taking her nowhere. And her lousy brother was coming over to visit and show his lousy Greenpeace slides. If there's one thing I can't stand it's sitting there listening to some lousy bleeding heart liberal talk about all the poor little lost animals of the world and how big bad hunters like me are just gonna destroy 'em all. Like it's gonna make one bit of difference if I go over my deer limit every now and then or happen to accidentally shoot an eagle or two. I like hunting, it's a man's right to hunt for his food, and the dogs, they like it, too. Some nights, like tonight, I just let 'em go to see what they can scare up. Found a baby deer that way, leg stuck between two logs. Not much meat, especially after the dogs got to it, but what was there was sure tender. I just wished the damn mutts would get back to me now; I'd like to see the look on that crazy broad's face if she ran into them.

I heard something in the woods behind me and ducked down behind a couple of rotten logs. I could see her legs moving

around on the other side of them. She was wearing some kinda sandals now, soft leather sandals with strappings that went up her legs, and I could see the hem of a white tunic. I held my breath and pressed into the ground. I wasn't scared, hell no. I was just hoping she'd come around the other side of the log and I'd get a chance to jump her from behind. Once that bow and arrow were out of her hand, she'd be easy to tame.

My jeans started getting uncomfortable again, even worse, my other clothes, too, so I shut my eyes and tried to think about something else. It didn't help much. All I kept thinking about was the deer I lung-shot last season, the one I had to track for three miles. I hadn't ever felt sorry about that, I finally killed it after all, but for some reason I felt sorry for it now. I remembered its bright red blood on the ground and the way the undergrowth was all smashed and broken as it went flailing through the woods half blind and wounded and I started feeling kinda dizzy and sick, like it was little Teon Jr.'s blood or something and not some lousy deer's. My head started pounding something awful then, like there were horns growing out of it and my eyes were stinging real bad, too, from that water she'd doused me with. Must be some kinda mineral in it, sulphur or something, never can tell with those mountain springs.

After a while, I heard her pass by me. She was kinda chuckling, low and devious-like. It was a weird sound, like she just thought of a joke to play on somebody. I didn't like it. It reminded me of the way Ralph Martinez sounded when he found out his wife was seeing that

Thompson kid that he worked with at the mill, the one that lost his hand later on.

My head kept on pounding and I started feeling hot and strange, like my clothes belonged to somebody else, but I got up on all fours and watched her go off into the woods from behind that mossy log. I accidentally bumped my nose against it and the smell of dead wood and moss filled my head and made me real hungry all of a sudden. There was some beer back in the truck and some peanuts and a few pepperoni sticks but none of that sounded good. For some crazy reason, I had an urge to start nibbling on the grass next to me. That's when I decided to get the hell out of there and the hell away from that crazy broad and her bows and arrows and get back to my house as quick as possible. My wife's brother was a damn vegetarian; this grass craving bullshit was his doing, always talking about bean curd and tofu sprouts like it was some kinda substitute for red meat. When I got home, I'd kick his ass so hard he wouldn't need to ride no boat to see the whales next March.

I stumbled up from the ground and felt my way over the log towards the path that led back to the pickup. There was a weird smell in the air, something I'd never noticed before, a bad smell, dangerous. I tried whistling for the dogs, but my mouth was all dry and I couldn't make a sound. I kept stumbling along the path, thinking how funny it was that I hadn't noticed that smell or how rough the trail was coming in. It was darker, too, so dark I couldn't even see my hands in front of me and my head felt too heavy, like it was weighted down with rocks or

something. I shook my head and my hat flew off to the side of the path and landed in a bunch of nettles. I left my hat right where it landed—I could always get another one down at Big Five Sporting Goods—and kept going down the path, trying to get my balance. I couldn't walk right, not with my head feeling the way it was, and I kept tripping over the cuffs of my jeans. Pretty soon I had to pick my way down the path on all fours. This was a lot easier and after a while, I got into a steady rhythm and started jumping over the sticks and rocks in the path like I was some kinda mountain goat.

I heard something following behind me in the woods then and at first I thought it was that girl and her bow and arrow, but then I heard panting. It was the dogs, close by. But for some reason, knowing the dogs were nearby made me uneasy. I couldn't really explain it, I'd had those two dogs for longer than I'd had Mary Lou, just as soon sleep with them as her, too, but tonight there was something weird about the way they were following me at a distance, something kinda creepy about their steady panting and hurrying pace as they got closer, something that was familiar, scary and familiar. I started going down that path faster and the dogs came faster, too, and pretty soon I was scrambling down that path as fast as I could, all panic fear, knowing full well that those dogs weren't just coming to join their master, that those dogs were chasing their master, that those dogs were chasing me.

My head brushed against the branches of a tree, branches that were way over where my head should have been, but I

didn't have time to figure that one out, I just kept tearing down that trail, jumping over logs and bushes and little finger streams with those dogs racing after me, panting and whining, their feet clawing up the dirt and their jaws all poised and ready to sink into my juicy behind.

I ran faster and faster, the bad dangerous smell growing stronger in my nostrils as I approached the end of the trail, as I recognized the sounds of traffic along the highway up above me and saw the flat yellow light from the pole where I parked the pickup. It was still sitting there, looking more like some kinda man-made monster than the four-wheel drive angel I knew it to be but I didn't care what it looked like now, I tore out of the woods toward it, the hounds snapping and growling like they didn't have a clue who I was or the fact that I raised them both from pups and their mom, too, and taught them everything they knew about hunting and tracking and nursed them both through mange and skunks and catfights and porcupines. I was still on all fours, galloping towards that truck, not really caring that the gravel wasn't biting into the palms of my hands like it should have been because I was too concerned about those hounds biting into my ass but when I got about a foot away from that pickup and my head suddenly hit the side of the aluminum canopy and stuck there, like that arrow had stuck in that willow tree back in the woods, I had to stop.

That's when I saw her, Diana, standing there at the side of the woods, just standing there watching me, with that same self-satisfied smile on her face, the same smile I'd seen one time when I told

her I was the best damn hunter in the county, hell, maybe the state, the bow tucked under her arm and the quiver full of arrows strapped to her back, her hair gathered up into some kind of knot on her head and crowned with a circle of spring flowers even though it was well into fall. My hounds tore right past her, and she didn't even flinch, she just watched me, her eyes telling me that this was justice, the justice of the gods, and then the dogs hit me from behind and it was my blood I saw spilled onto the gravel next to the tires of my sweet little pickup truck, my blood, bright red blood, like the blood of that lungshot deer, spilling out and seeping into the crack between the hooves that should have been feet, my blood that glistened on the reddening teeth of the hounds as they tore at my hindquarters, and I sank to the gravel underneath them, my head impaled in the canopy by a set of antlers just like the ones I'd installed last season on the grill of that truck.

And I knew in that moment, knew the fear of the hunted, for I was the hunted and she, the huntress.

We can win this one.



National Multiple Sclerosis Society  
257 Park Ave. So., N.Y., N.Y. 10010

# The Best of the Achaeans

*written by Janet Morris*

**A**LL THAT REMAINED of my sister, when we arrived at her rented cottage by the sea, was an old pair of jeans, a pillared fisherman's sweater, and a card catalogue full of notes for her dissertation.

The Martha's Vineyard police chief was doughty, unshaven, and pitilessly blunt: "Walked into the surf, all right. Must've. Tracks down to the water, over there." He pointed with a gnarled finger, waved it like a magician's wand toward the marsh grass thatching the dunes. The sea could be heard, tsk'ing, beneath his whistling, labored breathing and the derisive shrieks of the gulls.

Looking at the old police chief, his left jowl pouched out with chewing tobacco, I was inclined to believe the sea gulls, the only eyewitnesses who could ever be called to account in the matter of Aegia's disappearance. They swooped and soared like a flock of transmogrified souls upon my right hand, never once crossing over to my ill-omened left. I thought of Diomedes' companions, all turned to birds in Italy after they followed him there from Troy. It was Diomedes whom my sister Aegia was studying, his biography she was preparing, his chronicle she was determined to elucidate at length and in so doing prove that he, as Theseus, was no mythological archetype, but a flesh and blood hero of antiquity.

That this character of Homer's—Diomedes, breaker of horses—was her obsession, did not need to be proved. The family had lived with it, uneasily, for nearly twenty years. My mother had died bemoaning it; my father, following less than a year after, had, toward the end, refused to speak of it. If retribution in the karmic sense is a cosmological truth, then my folks had had theirs, through Aegia's mantic love of this unlauded shade, to whom they had innocently introduced her—if intent to mold a child so fervid as our classicist parents posited upon us can be said to be innocent.

Oh, by the way, I'm Homer, for obvious reasons . . . Homer Aeschylus Dick, that is. My sister, Aegia Sibyl, and I, were subject to the same influences, being only a year apart in age. Why she was unstrung—as she herself would have put it—by Homerica while I, only a year her senior, was not, neither one of us will ever find out, now. I remember lying there, in our mother's room (what a treat, to lounge on that giant's bed with its green leather headboard), all those sweet nights while the sea rumbled beyond our southfacing windows as she read to us in her languid voice until sleep veiled our eyes. It must have been more than that early exposure, more than the substitution of Spenser for Seuss, of Plutarch for Farley, of Odysseus for Nancy Drew,

that drove Aegia irretrievably into the realm of Zeus. But what more it could have been—Fate, Tyche, or the Erinyes—makes me out to sound as if I believe that something other than physical reality exists. Or that I believe, even, that something other than the mundane took a hand in Aegia's disappearance.

I'll tell you one thing I don't believe, and that's this: I don't believe my sister walked into the sea, naked, *without finishing her dissertation*, of her own free will.

So I told the police chief, who spat brown juice like an oversized grasshopper and reckoned that “—without no body, no signs of struggle, you'll have a hard time making anything out of this, Mister *Dick*,” not hesitating to avail himself of the epithet my last name can become by dint of simple inflection. “Now, I tell you what you do . . .”

There followed from this animated gnarl of driftwood a number of recommendations aimed at making his own task simpler; I adopted most of them, in the cruiser, in exchange for the keys to my sister's cottage, and to the barn off in the pines.

“The dogs'll be back in the morning. Early, though. You'd be better off to sleep in town.”

“I thought you said you were satisfied that Aegia's death was a simple suicide?”

“I am,” said the chief. “But we got the dogs over here, and we've got to pay for all forty-eight hours, so since we got them, we'll use them. Summer's over, but can't have these visitors tripping over corpses. See you in the morning, Doctor.”

That was the first and last time the old reprobate ever called me by my title. I'm not a medical doctor. My degrees are in mathematics and philosophy, and my area of concentration is the philosophy of science, more exactly, chronometry, the study of time. So you see, now, how I escaped Aegia's mania? I fled to the opposite ends of the mental cosmos, to the comfy embrace of *a priori* and *a posteriori*, to Aristotle and Kant and Nietzsche and Locke. My childhood forced it on me, in a way; I learned the truth of Heraclitus's: ‘Learning of many things does not teach intelligence; if so it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras . . .’. My family, immersed in myth, imbued with the classical strictures of honor and heroism, were anachronistic to the world in which they lived, mad as hatters.

Of myself, I wanted to be able to say that I was a creature of my age, that I was a scientist, that I was a pragmatist, that I was a realist. But by defining goals for myself, I was forced to try to define my terms. “Real” is a hurdle of a word, so high and so broad and so insurmountable that as long as man is conscious he will strive to define it, and himself by it, and for that long he will remain, like Zeno's arrow, locked in place, frozen in flight, arriving and leaving and being in all interim states simultaneously. But, still, I am hacking away at my little portion of that iceberg, the phenomenological nature of time.

One good thing about my work is that I won't wake up some morning and realize that it has been completed, and thus find myself with nothing left to do. My lifetime, and my life's work, by this wise,

are made secure.

My sister, Aegia, does not seem to me tonight to have been so lucky. I am sitting here in the main room of her three room cottage, in a rush chair which, though cushioned with mildewed chintzes, could never have been comfortable, let alone sturdy or dry. The dew point is up and the sea is cold and the spray from it has ridden the wind into this flimsy summer shack so that everything, the mattress and the pillows and my clothes and the crazed wood of painted walls and floors, is covered with a moist, slick film, gritty and slightly salty. My hair is even damp with it, recoiling into ringlets that drip at the ends, letting me know I'm overdue for a haircut.

There is a fireplace, taunting me from its floor-level hearth. Only a professional outdoorsman could start a fire with damp wood on such a night. But I am clever. I take the wood into the kitchen and light the gas stove and put the wood into the oven.

When I have settled the sweating logs on the oven racks, it occurs to me that even Aegia must have brought supplies with her. The hire of the place was for a month starting Labor Day. The refrigerator yields a quart of milk and a good white wine, both lying on their sides. The milk bottle has leaked and most of the milk is pooled on the plastic vegetable bin below, but the wine is unopened. The cabinets hold only a package of breadsticks with no crunch left to them, and a tin of coffee.

Obviously, my sister had either anticipated her abruptly terminated stay, or arrived—as her lack of baggage, clothing

and books seemed to indicate—without proper preparation, I muse, making coffee. But as I wash a cup and pour the coffee, I admit that Aegia was never unprepared for anything—but never, as well, toted more than what she would need. She had been on the Vineyard for three days, and now she was gone and so was the bull.

Oh, yes. I have not told you about the bull. Well, the bull, you see, is not in the barn, so I was told. I have the bull-rental contract right here, executed and signed by both parties, the contract entered into for the inclusive dates, September 1 to October 1, from a cattle leasing company in upstate New York. Aegia signed for receipt of said bull; her signature is illegible and virtually inimitable. In the morning I am going to try to make some sense out of this matter of the bull being gone, and of my sister being gone, and of what she wanted the bull for, in the first place . . . well, I do have an idea—about the bull, anyhow. And I believe that if we find the bull, or what is left of the bull, then we will find my sister, or at least find out that has become of her. It's just like Aegia, to do this to me. I'm almost afraid to go through her card file. But after I drink the wine, I'll do it. I just hope I don't find anything about "accomplishing complete hecatombs" on Martha's Vineyard in there.

Last evening I called the cattle company, trying cannily to find out just how much that bull would cost to replace, and whether and for what amount it was insured.

When I heard the figures, I was stun-

ned. But my sister, ever thoughtful, had taken out a special short-term policy covering the bull's life with Polk Live-stock Insurance, and they in turn assured me that should enough of the bull be recovered to permit full identification, my sister (and her heirs) were fully covered. I am afraid the relief in my voice was evident, but if I am right about the bull, I am entitled to be relieved: its price was in five figures. Trust Aegia to give no less than the best. Perhaps she thought that since she could not come up with a hundred oxen, one bull worth as much would do as well.

I saw it, you see, in her card index, as I had feared I might. Such an action, from such a woman, is not unthinkable. She had scribbled on the backs of several of her index cards. One, which was labeled *Diomedes' Aristeia*, had a phone number upon the obverse, that of Polk Insurance. Beneath that was written *Aegia's Aristeia*. Now, in Homeric times, an "aristeia" was considered to be any special showing of valor by an individual; Diomedes' aristeia is the first closing of battle in the *Iliad*; my sister's, evidently, is this mystery in which I am now immersed.

I have called her service and her office, and left my number here and my number in New York, just in case. The dogs are barking at the sunrise somewhere beyond my window; I'm going out there to tromp the holly with the search team and see what can be seen.

On another of the index cards, she had written:

*In a world without gods,*

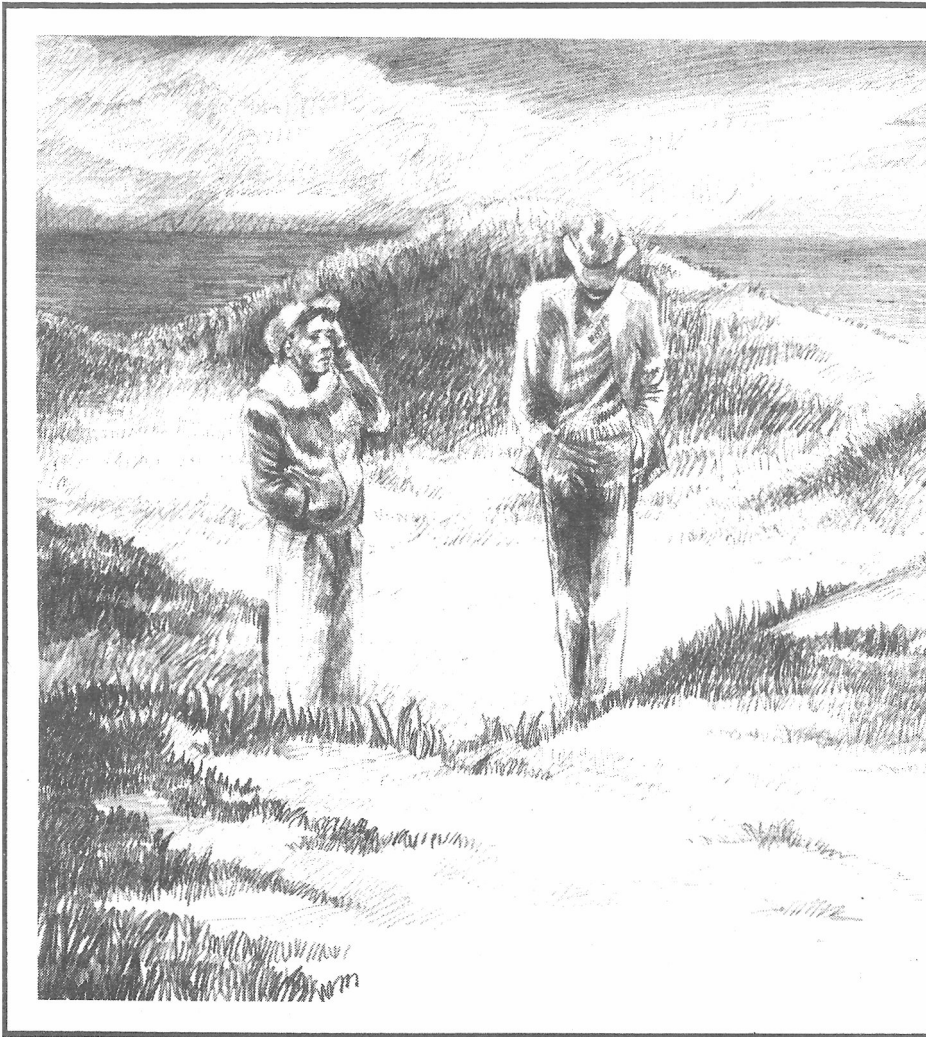
*I am alone.  
No hero climbs my tower.  
The dragon lurks, unvanquished.  
Mother, I am weary, and  
I cannot sing.*

Sappho, methinks, would not have been impressed.

All this consideration of archaic times has not left me unaffected; while I was stumbling through the ferns and weeds with the search teams, following increasingly paler flashlight beams to the sound of straining dogs and my own panting, I envisioned myself in Iliion, rather than this misplaced chunk of Africa, drifted halfway around the world. And I was, for just the tiniest instant, Odysseus, crafty, daring, resourceful and merciless, with Diomedes on their night hunt. See!" the ever watchful rational part of me hissed. "You, too, are tainted. It is genetic; you cannot avoid it."

I ignored this inner voice, not wishing to engage in nature versus nurture debates, even within myself. It is not my field. Instead, I tried to deal with my experience in terms of my own expertise. That it can be said that time exists essentially all at once as well as sequentially in an arrow of linear experience pointing always to the future, many others have apprehended, since the earliest days of physical thought. How that can be stated, mathematically—at the same time meeting the necessary conditions of relativistic geometrized time and real-time, if not quantum mechanical time—has not been formulated to my satisfaction. We have not apprehended the mystery of time: our





biological time and the perturbed space-time in which we have evolved conspire to mask time's true nature, yet. But we shall find it out; Parmenides was right: that which can be thought, can be. And I think I can find time's secret out.

I have this sinking feeling that my sis-

ter Aegia thought that she could, too. And I am almost sure that I know how she proposed to circumvent its rule, how she dared to try to slip through today's gates back into those times reason would ever deny her. And who knows what death offers up? She might be righter



than I, thinking that she could reach her shadow-hero through suicide's gates. Death is surely out of time, since it is out of ken.

A man swore, somewhere in the coming dawn, and the twelfth century taint slipped off me, so that I no longer heard

the Argives shouting softly to each other before sea-lashed Troy. Not Tydeus' son Diomedes of the great war cry, who was like Zeus in counsel, nor Odysseus, a man like a god, did I intuit around me, but holly thorns and sumac high as my head and, on a little dune bluff, a crowd

of three men in down vests and rubber thigh boots scratching their heads and looking down at something I could not see.

The dogs are not barking, I thought, as I walked sideways up the slipping sand, and my hackles rose. The sun was wrapped in pearly haze, giving the world a flat, two dimensional quality as things gave up their monochromes and consented to take color so slowly that all of nature might have been sulking.

When I reached the men I saw the dogs, lying quietly, mournfully, still-tailed on the sand, down in the hollow between two dunes. One dog looked up at me, tongue lolling out, and whined, then stretched out once again. The handler spoke a word to the dog that had moved, and then I noticed that two other men were down on their knees with a pack between them spooning something into what seemed to be narrow troughs in the ground where sand changed to sandy soil.

The three men who stood together looked at me askance. Down in the hollow I saw why. I saw the thigh bones which had been burned, wrapped in fat, and I saw that the whole carcass had been laid out and cut up according to the prescribed formula. To break the weird silence, I stepped amid the cold embers and picked out a chunk of meat dusted with sand and barley, intending to make some wry remark to them, something that would align me with them in their normalcy instead of with her, Aegia, in her dementia. But I could not think of a single thing to say. My throat grew close and tight and my jaws would not part,

and eventually, preferring anything to their silent scrutiny (Did they still have witchcraft statutes in Massachusetts?), I turned away and squatted down by the spent fire.

Then I saw the bronze head, nestled in the tall grass atop the farther dune. And I knew that head, from my youth, from a house haunted by casts of ancient statuary: it was Phidia's Lemnian Athene. And Diomedes never fought but under Athene's protection. Almost, I could hear arrows rattling in her quiver as she stepped down onto the windy plain of Ilion. I looked into her empty eyesockets and I shivered. I would not hunt for my sister further. She had done it: she had performed a sacrifice to Diomedes under the patronage of Athene, accomplishing her hecatomb to him in his capacity as a divine hero. On her cards, in the scribbles, she had noted: "heroic *or* divine honors after death *or* disappearance, according to Farnell, Hero-Cults, 289 f."

When I had read that one, I called the bull's insurance agent.

Now, I did not want to call anyone. I just wanted to go home.

I got up from that damp sand with old-man's-knees, and turned away, hot necked, from the search party, not wanting to explain, wagering that if I was careful, I would not have to . . .

I don't know how I happened to ask the men making impressions of the tracks in the sand what they thought had made them, but it seemed the next logical step, if there were any such left to take in this affair. The mix was hardening in situ, forming two long, white parallel slashes with churned pockmarks between them.

Abruptly as they began, the tracks ceased, after running for perhaps a hundred yards due east. The exact end of them was hard to estimate, running, as they seemed to, right up into the rising sun. The man who was closest to me squinted that way, into the sunrise, and answered me: "Horses. Sulky horses, something like that. 'Cept this's four horses, anyways. And nobody round here's got a sulky, far as I know. Leastwise, not one that big. Them's funny tires."

I was grateful that I was in New England, then. I would not be asked any questions by these folk, who prided privacy. Sulky horses, I suppose, and chariot horses, can be considered inter-

changeable, like arbitrary divisions in time. Chariot tires, of course, have no tread, but rims of bronze, and that gave the single local detective an uneasy night. However, the stranger (myself) was cooperative and pressed for no further investigation; the Polk Insurance Agency was content with a picture of the slaughtered bull's head, which we found intact to the tattoo on the inside of its upper lip. And I was content, knowing that my sister, Aegia, had not walked naked into the sea, her dissertation abandoned, to some watery suicide, but had stepped, rather, up into the car of Diomedes of Argos, and thence with him departed straight up into the bosom of the sun.

*"I'm not the only one who gave Eleanor more to live for than her game shows. You did, too."*

*A United Way Volunteer*

When you gave to United Way, you sent a Friendly Visitor volunteer to Eleanor.

In fact, when you gave to United Way you helped organizations throughout the community help people who need it most.

And made the life of a 94-year-old shut-in a lot less lonely.



**It brings out the best in a**

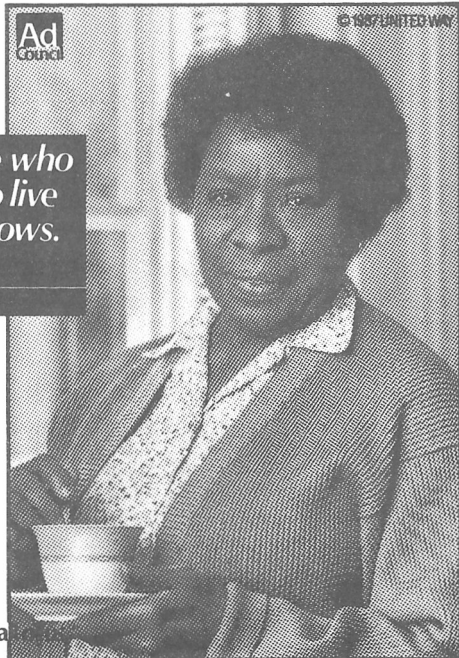


Photo by Peter Papadopolous

*Bruce Chandler Fergusson's first novel, The Shadow of His Wings, was published early in 1987 by Arbor House. He is currently completing Amala's Mace, a fantasy novel also set in the Six Kingdoms world.*

## A Beast in the Ruins

*written by Bruce Fergusson*

THE GANG OF BOYS in the square insisted that a beast prowled the ruins on the headland above the town. They dared the strange youths, Curran and Neavus, to go up and see for themselves, and bring back proof of the deed.

"It sits on the wall at nights, and howls when Cassena and Suaila are full in the sky," said one of the gang.

"Its tail hangs to the ground. Bring back some of the hair that catches in the briars, and you can join us," said another.

"Or rock from the wall, where it sharpens its claws," said a third.

Neavus scoffed at the talk of a beast, though his brother seemed more interested in taking the dare. Neavus also cared more what their father would say if they were late for the evening meal. He would be angry.

The boys pounced on his hesitation,

calling him a coward. Curran didn't like that much, and shoved the most vocal taunter into the side of the well, where Neavus and Curran had been sitting, when the boys approached. Neavus threw another to the ground, muddying the boy's clothes. That ended the scuffle for Neavus, though usually docile, was big for his age and strong.

Curran didn't quite think the family honor had been repaired. "Come on, Neavus. We'll go up there and show them."

He suspected the boys were trying to get them into some sort of trouble, since they were new in Slacere, just off the ship three days. But beast or no beast, he was eager for some adventure, and a dare was a fine excuse for seeking it out. He also felt instinctively that the sooner he and Neavus won friends, the better off they'd be, despite the shoving in the square.

Their father was to be the first master of the new school, and his temperament, even when he wasn't drinking scorch-belly, was like the freeze and thaw that cracks stone. With a father like that, they wouldn't be the most popular boys in Slacere.

Their father's temperament had also cracked their mother, who ran off with a more placid, predictable man who dealt in the Gebroanan spice trade. Curran and Neavus hadn't tasted sweet elixith or tart sinnot at the table since the day she left. Their father had punished himself by accepting a commission from King Malzeveal to educate the settlers in this hinterland of the southern Lucidor coast, two days' sail past the Isles of Sleat.

The father of the boys had scoffed at the ruins as their ship slid past the headland into the cluttered harbor. "I know something of the history of this kingdom," he told them, as they leaned over the port railings, the wind brisk, promising the excitement of landfall. "The ruins shouldn't be there. Up until a few years ago, this part of the coast was inhabited mostly by Timberlimbs, who built dwellings in the copperleaf trees and burlbright, but certainly not a fortress of stone fallen to ruin."

Lexus always talked that way to the boys, ever the teacher. He seemed angered at the puzzle of the ruins. "And where did—whoever—get the stone to build it? I know for a fact there's no quarry for a hundred miles, unless you count the burnt keeps of the Lord of the Isles." He shook his head in disgust. Curran listened to the sailors' shouting and excited chattering of favorite taverns and

brothels they planned to visit. The masts of the sturdy galliot creaked with the final burden of the voyage, which had begun two weeks before in a spring rain in Draica, the capitol of Lucidor.

"Is that part of the ruins, father?" Curran asked, pointing at a white structure rising above the grey, serrated ruins, but set back a short way from them.

"No," Lexus said, "that looks like it's timbered; it couldn't be part of the the ruins. Somebody probably lives there but I can't see why anyone would want to live so close to a reminder of decay."

It took Curran and Neavus a half hour to climb the twisting, rutted dirt lane leading from the town to the headland. Neavus sweated more than Curran, the price of being bigger and stronger. He was two years older than Curran as well. Sweat darkened the white-blond hair on Neavus' forehead. He mopped the perspiration away with the back of a meaty hand, as he and his brother stood before the arching gate of iron grill. Curving around to either side were ten foot high walls, the mandibles to the jaws and teeth of the gate.

"I'll bet they haven't been this close," Neavus muttered about the boys in the square. "And I don't see any stupid beast's tail hanging down to the briars. Or any beast. They were fooling us, Curran."

Of course they were, Curran thought. Sometimes Neavus was a little slow to catch on. "Maybe," Curran said, "but the walls are high enough to keep something in." He stuck his nose between the bars.

"Or keep something out," Neavus said, glumly. "Such as us."

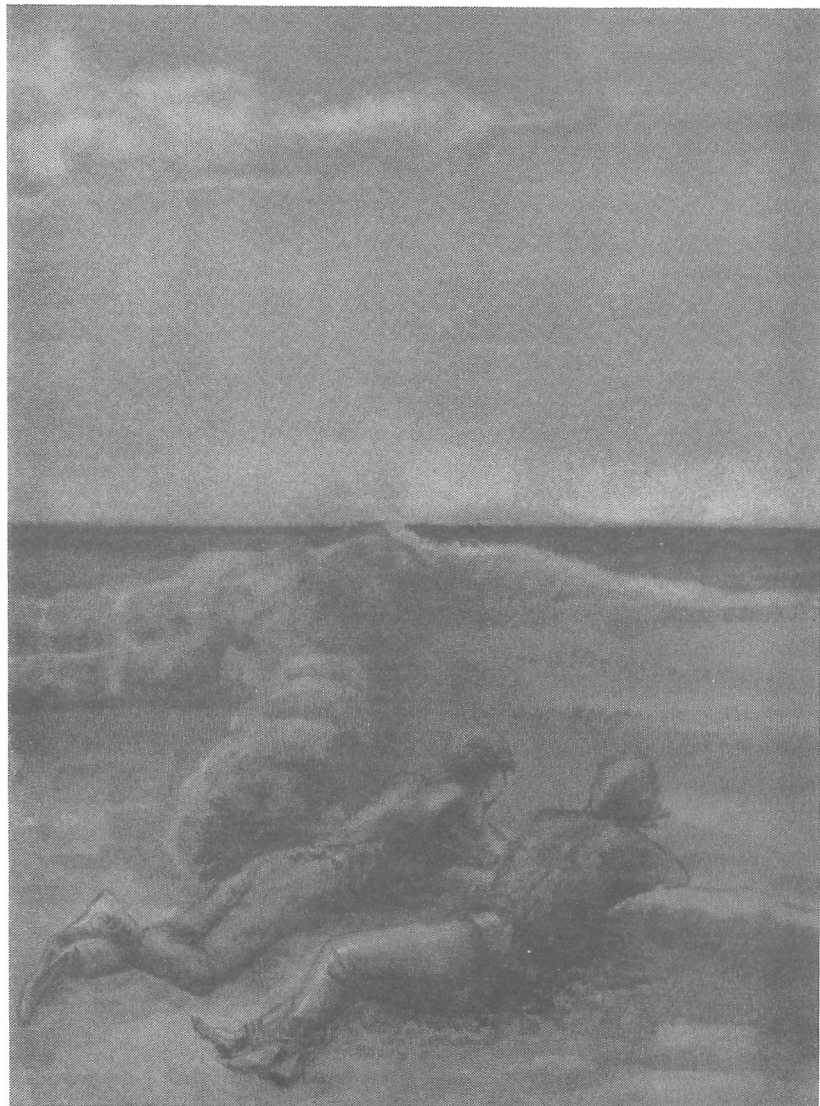
“Not us.”

“You’re not going to go in there, are you?” Neavus said.

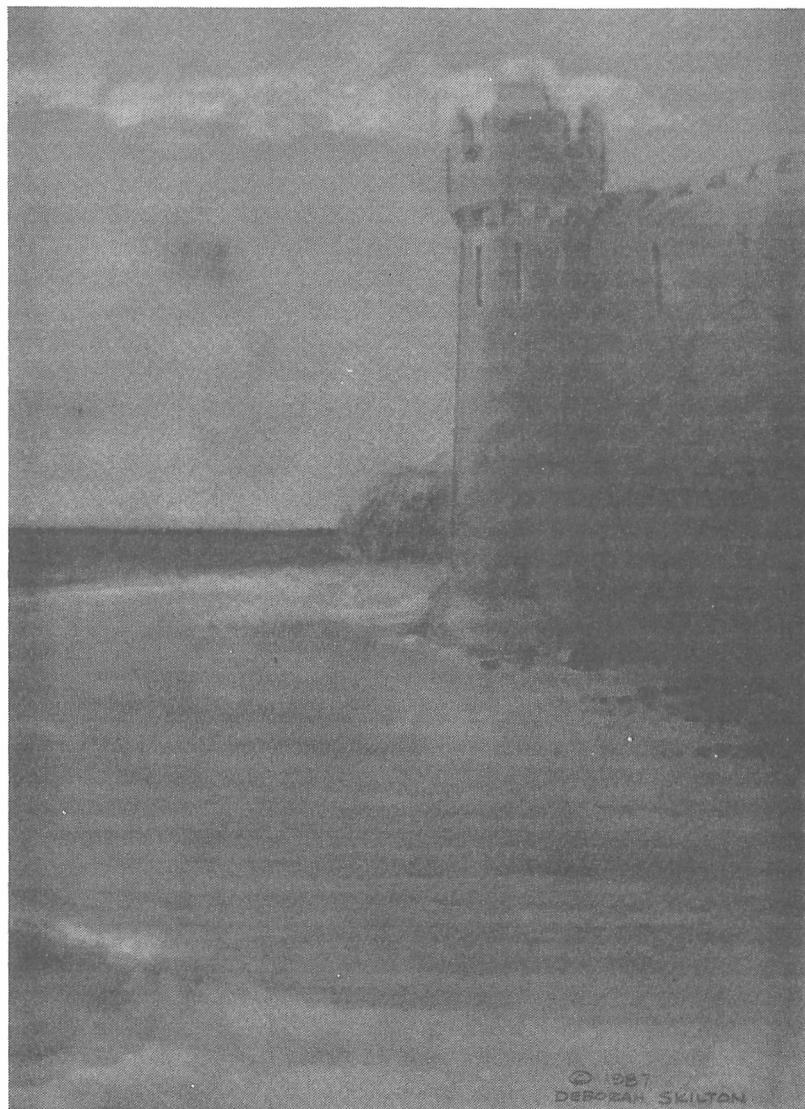
“I’m going to try,” Curran said, thinking: there didn’t have to be a beast to

have some fun.

Neavus looked disgusted, but he didn’t leave, as Curran thought he might. Being around Curran made Neavus nervous because invariably he wound up doing



things he didn't want to do, like climbing trees in a winter squall in Draica, or spying on unpleasant neighbors and pitching stones on their roof and then hiding. Neavus might have gone his own way, but Curran was his only companion, had always been. He didn't make friends easily. It was too bad he didn't smile or laugh more, because he truly was a handsome boy, with that hair. Curran had to





admit the girls looked at him first. But he was so often sour, as if plagued by the expectation of his features.

Neavus sidled up to the gate next to Curran, a reluctant poacher of adventure.

The lane continued through the gate and wound up toward the manor which, like their father said, was timbered. The white-washed house stood on a rise, with windows and storm shutters at every gable. Nearby, hangbark trees leaned their growth away from the sea and wind. The view from the manor must have spectacular but there were no chairs on the veranda, which made Curran feel the loneliness of the place. Its one round tower made him envious of the vantage points afforded by the spiraling succession of windows.

Closer to the boys, outbuildings also leaned with the wind or age, though the half-timber cottages seemed cared for. Curran saw a carriage—a phaeton no less for this raw territory. The tails of fenced-in horses twitched after flies and bluebites in the late summer heat. Curran and Neavus couldn't see much of the ruins, only the ragged tops of grey stone towers rising over the swell of land, the crenellations like broken teeth.

Curran brushed his hands on his breeches, cleaning them of flaking iron from the bars of the gate. He would have tried climbing over that barrier but feared being seen from the house, though it looked deserted enough.

"Come on," he said, cuffing Neavus' shoulder. "Let's find this beast!"

Neavus hesitated. "We should be getting back. There's no beast anyway. They were fooling us."

"You never know," Curran said, grinning. "Let's just see if we can get inside and then we'll go back. I want to see those ruins close up."

Neavus sighed but followed.

The smooth plastered wall continued for a long way, dipping down the closer they came to the end of the headland. The inlet and sea shone blue beyond. A two-masted nobby, tiny as a toy in the distance, gathered wind, outward bound. The brisk, facing wind smelled of salt.

The wall had eroded where it met the precipice. Here was the way around, exulted Curran. One misstep, though, and they'd plummet a hundred fifty feet at least to the surf below. Curran slid past first, hugging the thickness of the wall like it was his mother. Luckily, the rough inner wall—the actual wall of the ruins—was even more decayed than the outer, which shielded the entire property. Curran picked his way slowly, carefully, to freedom, though Neavus might have said entrapment. Flushed with excitement and victory at conquering the danger, Curran held out his hand for Neavus. He frowned. And Curran quickly withdrew it, realizing the insult. After hesitating, Neavus got around too, though with more difficulty.

Curran didn't expect the ruins to be so vast, yet crowded like a warren. The wall extended in a rough semi-circle and must have protected the builders' last stand. They literally had had their backs against the sea. He visualized that last, desperate struggle, felt the wave of despair the defenders must have felt when their fortifications were finally breached, the towers abandoned. There were six of these, ris-

ing at regular intervals and various heights over thick, curving ramparts. The parapets looked as if a giant sea-beast arched over the escarpment—like Curran reached over the dinner table for second helpings—and bit great chunks out of the battlements. Finding the food distasteful, the beast spit it out in heaps . . .

What a fine and wonderful place to hide! Curran thought. The ruins were at once a stage and refuge, to be seen if you wanted, or to disappear into any number of nooks and darkly inviting passageways and creases.

Yet for all the rubble, the tilting and cracked steps up to the ramparts, the ruins were cared for, like a garden. The courtyard grass was well-tended, with nary a weed that Curran could see. A gravel path led from the twin gate towers or what remained of them, to the square keep directly ahead of Neavus and Curran.

How small and ridiculously antiquated it was, Curran judged, compared to the magnificent bastion of King Malzeveal on Cross Keys Island in Draica! Yet, to the men who built it—two, maybe four hundred years before—the keep must have been the marvel of the coast. Its proximity to the sheer drop of the headland gave it wonder. The words of Curran's father on the ship, far from discouraging him, added mystery to the builders and their fate.

Curran and Neavus walked to the keep. He seemed as awed as his brother by the discovery. Curran imagined a passageway deep inside the keep, leading down to a dripping subterranean tunnel that widened to a cave just above sea

level. From there, the king, his cause lost above, escaped by gig, with a few retainers to man the oars that glinted in the moonlight . . .

There was time enough later to ferret the mysteries of the keep. Eager to take possession of all this, Curran ran to the wall facing the manor, taking the crumbling steps carelessly, two at a time. Then he slowed, nearing the ramparts, remembering that they were, after all, trespassing. In a crouch, he darted across the ten-foot thickness of the parapet, and hid behind a merlon. Peeking over the embrasure, he saw part of the broad swathe of sharp rocks and boulders deliberately strewn before the fortress to impede the approach of siege machines. On the rise above these dragons' teeth stood the manor, its single wooden tower rising above the tallest trees.

Someone stood in the highest window of that tower, looking out over his domain of ruin. Curran was sure he—or she—could see all the way into the courtyard where Neavus was. When Curran turned to signal a warning to his brother, he saw another boy coming from a long, low building—barracks?—hidden from Neavus' view.

Curran laughed, but not too loudly. So this was the beast! The frightened little son of the manor lord, or whoever he was.

The boy couldn't possibly have heard Curran, he was too far away. Or seen Curran very easily because he'd dropped to his belly. Yet the boy stopped, stared in his direction and quick as a cat, disappeared into the dark square eye of the barracks doorway.

Back on his feet, Curran looked at the manor. The figure still stood in the window. Then he left. Had he seen Neavus coming to join Curran on the ramparts? Curran imagined him wrathful or at least indignant. That alone might have been enough to send Curran flying from his perch, but then he also saw five men heading toward the causeway which divided the field of dragons' teeth, linking the upper ground with the ruins. The men carried gardening tools but they seemed more like weapons to Curran.

Like the boy, Curran fled, racing down the steps. Neavus crouched at the bottom, a runner at his mark. His blue eyes were as wide as they'd ever get. "Someone's coming, aren't they!" he accused.

"Yes!"

They ran back to their entry point, clambering over the ruins wall, squeezing around the shielding outer one. Down the hill they fled, the bracken and gorse whipping their legs. Only when they came to the road, around a curve of the slope and hidden from the gate, did they stop to catch their breath.

"That," Curran gasped, his hands on his knees, "was something!"

"But we forgot—we forgot to get proof we were there," Neavus wheezed. "They'll never believe us."

"We'll just have to go back again!" Curran said and put his arm around his brother's shoulder. His cotton doublet, like Curran's, was damp with sweat, as sure of proof of their bond as any mixing of blood.

And they did go back, many times, even after the summer ended.

Curran persuaded Neavus not to tell anyone. He wanted to share the ruins with his brother and no one else, certainly not any of the boys they'd met in the square. It was theirs and theirs alone. To the explorers went the spoils.

As always, Neavus had to be pushed into going, and tried any number of excuses not to accompany Curran, fearing the consequences of their trespassing should they be caught. Neavus was so much more responsible than his brother about many things, school work for instance. But when he did join Curran, he had as much fun. Curran was always sure of that. Neavus rarely smiled or laughed, but there were some people who could take pleasure without doing so.

The gardeners kept the ruins in good condition, weeding and scything, and replacing the gravel of the pathways washed away by rivulets of rainwater. Curran and Neavus came to know when they worked and Curran timed their visits accordingly. Hidden on the ramparts, but bolder now, the brothers would watch them approach, and when they were at the causeway, they'd retreat to the keep, just as the workmen "breached" the gate. Then, while they toiled, they became sappers or archers and on a wall, Curran and Neavus would scratch the hours that passed as if they were the days of a siege.

They pretended the boy was a beast, who they always "hunted", sometimes casually, sometimes with a stalking fervor. Sometimes they'd see him—no more than a glimpse—or they'd turn suddenly and there he'd be, ducking behind a corner or into a dark doorway. They would chase after him, but he always got

away. He knew the ruins better than they. Curran believed the boy played with them, as they did with him, cat and mouse. They never met him properly, this single, frail, black-haired member of the ruins garrison.

Curran assumed he lived in the manor and was being educated privately—and indeed casually!—for he saw no boy of his description in town, certainly not in his father's classroom.

Curran envied the boy for the love of his father in the manor. What else could such attention be called but love? He was always there for hours on end, watching his boy play. He made no move to secure his property from Curran and Neavus. Undoubtedly, he enjoyed observing the brothers play as well. Perhaps at night he chided his son for being so shy and timid with the boys from town.

Curran crept up close once, daring the manor lord's goodwill, to get a better look at him. All he saw was the man brushing a hand through his thinning black hair, with flecks of grey. The curling smoke from his pipe hid the rest of his features. Bold as Curran was in those ruins, he was never bold enough to go further and meet the man in the window. He felt something would be broken, a spell, perhaps, thrown out of balance, one that needs distance to survive.

Once, Curran and Neavus spent a night atop the keep. Their father didn't miss them. He had met a woman at the Laughing Lout, a tavern he frequented, and often went out with her for a stroll on the quay and didn't come home.

Underneath the red-orange moons of Suaila and Cassena, Curran and Neavus

huddled together drinking a flask of warm tea, sharing a single pewter cup. They listened to the surf crashing far below them. The wind picked eerie melodies among the shorn tops of the ruin towers. They watched the lights go out in the cottages and then the manor, and then the farther jewels of Slacere. They talked of what they wanted to do when they were older.

Curran spoke firmly of his intention to scorn every love that came his way, and take to the sea, to live and work in each of the Six Kingdoms and claim whatever wonders not taken. Neavus wasn't sure but Curran thought him too tired to think much of the future because he soon fell asleep as Curran talked.

He couldn't sleep. Despite the distraction of Neavus' snoring, he kept imagining what the ruins were like when they weren't ruins. What sort of man was the guard? Like Curran, he couldn't fall asleep or his lord would strike off an ear for punishment. The cruel noble was married to a woman doubly disappointed in life because her only daughter wed her father's choice of suitors—a moneyed, titled boor with a flat rump and soft hands. The woman dreamed of storm-birds large enough to take her to imagined lovers. She took her life on a height overlooking the sea and from then on, seagulls nested in the very spot she died . . .

Curran woke Neavus at dawn and they arrived back home before their father did. Curran made him angry that day in school, falling asleep twice and when awake, was unable to deliver the lessons properly. Neavus had at least a few

hours' sleep and didn't nod off. As usual, he demonstrated his flair for sums.

Later at home, Lexus was furious. After all, Curran was the son of the school master and should set an example for the others, like the studious Neavus. Lexus knew where Curran spent most of his free time, though for some reason thought Neavus rarely accompanied Curran, if ever. He punished his younger son by denigrating something he loved. He told Curran about the ruins.

"Do you know they aren't even real?," Lexus fumed. "That's right! Jerral told me and he should know; he makes enough deliveries up there. The crazy old man in the manor made his fortune in the Helveylyn trade, a tresreme mastlord he was. An old sailor down by the quays claims to have sweated for him, claims he used to carry more than timber and wine in those double holds. King Hestmion needed slaves to dig the Bullhead Canal up north, well, this mastlord got them for him. And women to keep them working if the whips wouldn't do it. You're old enough to know about the world now, Curran."

His father was, by now, angry at something else, but Curran didn't know what.

"And how did the mastlord spend the gold the King rewarded him with, as well as the grant of virgin land up there? On rocks and stone! On shipload after shipload of those rocks and stone you play in when you should be making something of yourself studying, like Neavus does. The waste sickens me! Imagine what he could have built on that headland with his wealth. Something useful or failing that,

something beautiful. But no, he builds ruins, carefully assembled ruins! And then a wall around, as if he were ashamed of what he'd done. He—"

"*You've never seen them,*" Curran shouted back. "*You're lying about all that!*" and before Lexus could grab his son to punish him for insolence, he ran out of the house, ran all the way to the ruins.

One of the gardeners saw him, yelled at him to leave. He didn't. The gardener dropped the handles of the wheel barrow and strode over to the panting youth. When he saw Curran was crying, he softened.

"Eh now, lad, whatsa matter?"

"Are the ruins real," Curran asked.

The gardener was startled, perhaps as much from the boy's demanding tone as the question itself. "Is that all ye wants to know? Is that why ye came up here?"

Curran nodded, and swiped at his eyes. The man scratched an ear with thick, blunt fingers, causing his soiled wool cap to tilt some. "Well," he said, "no, they ain't real. Not exactly. But they're a close enough copy of a place the lordie spent a lotta time in when he was younger, so I unnerstand. I thinks he picked the spot 'cause it was the site of an old Timberlimb gatherin' place. We still find pieces of bone, and pottery every now and then. Even some jewelry. We keep the place nice for the lordie 'cause they're all he's got, the ruins."

"He's got his son."

The gardeners heavy eyebrows knitted. "Son? He's got no son. Where'd ye get that idea?"

"You've never seen a boy playing

about here?"

The man shook his head. "None but ye now. The lordie lives alone, he does. Never married. Now, unless ye really wants to tell me what's botherin' ye, ye'd best get back to town. It'll be dark soon. Don't know how ye came in but ye'll leave by the gate. Come on, now."

Curran looked up at the manor tower as he followed the gardener. There he was, as always, the tresreme mastlord, gazing over his ruins. It didn't matter to him they weren't real, and he decided then that it wouldn't matter to him either.

It did to Neavus. He was not the least bit interested in finding out who the boy was they'd seen so many times in the ruins. Neavus felt he'd been tricked, made a fool. He began playing the older brother, too grown up now for "the toy", as he called the ruins. He laughed at Curran when he'd sneak off to go up there, and Curran told him he was just scared of their father.

They had a fist fight. Neavus won, bloodying his brother's nose and that seemed to vindicate his position in his eyes. Later, Curran felt it was not just his brother he'd fought but the sadness that never again would they be as close as they'd been playing in the ruins. Though Neavus had always been reluctant to go up there, he did love them as much as Curran. Curran had to believe that. Still, perhaps he'd imagined a tighter bond than there'd been. He knew how much he'd pushed Neavus toward adventure, but never realized how much his brother might have resented it.

Lexus always said how Curran would be the one to leave, because of his day-dreaming, his lack of seriousness—his list of Curran's failures was his favorite rhyme and verse. He assumed Neavus would stay and prosper and make something of himself in the growing town. It was Lexus' greatest disappointment that Neavus was the one to go away to sea.

But for the simple lack of a few smiles and laughs every now and then, Neavus might have had more friends and stayed. Curran did go away to Draica for a year but got terribly homesick and came back, much to his father's disgust. Curran realized he was not a real seeker of adventure. That bothered him for a long time but he grew to accept it. He'd heard it said the world was divided into nurturers and explorers. At least he found out which he was. Neavus was neither, even though he sailed away and didn't come back for many years.

Curran married the daughter of a blacksmith who already had enough sons to work the business so Curran became a woodwright and framed ships built for the burgeoning trade with Myrcia.

A week after his red-haired Elendera gave birth to their first child, a daughter, Lexus died drunk in a drowning accident, the fires of his constant anger finally extinguished.

Elendera and Curran had five children in ten years, so he didn't go up to the ruins much, and never after the old mastlord died. Curran pulled one of the oars of the gig that took his weighted coffin out to sea for burial. The gardeners and servants moved away. By the time the lordie died, the ruins were getting over-

grown. Curran didn't think it was the tangle of vines and weeds that hid the boy. He felt in his gut he wasn't there anymore.

Curran supported his family well enough but Neavus came back one summer's day a wealthy man, the owner of the ship that brought him in, a three-masted windwhipper, with black hull and golden sails.

He was as full of himself as the chests of gold he showed his brother. After an afternoon of hearing about his successes in four of the Six Kingdoms Curran once vowed to visit, Curran decided he didn't like his brother at all. Maybe he was envious, as Elendera gently suggested, but it was not just that, Curran insisted.

All Neavus had accumulated was wealth. He had no scars, no vices—he didn't even smoke a pipe as all ship's captains did, Curran imagined. Or drink. At least Curran did both that afternoon in *The Mare's Tail*, which used to be *The Laughing Lout*.

True, Neavus did visit a brothel once, he said, in the notorious *Bloodseye Quarter* of Sleatown, but he found the speckled Helyn courtesans disgusting. He'd been to the fabled Myrcian capitol of *CastleCliff*, built over a thundering waterfall, and visited their own version of *Draica's Thighsfire*—*The Carcass*. But he didn't tell Curran about the addictive music of the bloodsnare dens because he couldn't bear the expense of admission to the dens, and their parasitic instruments played by pale consorts. He'd seen Helyn stoneskins in a market on *FiveSpar Island*. They were buying fruit of all things. But Neavus never

found the time to go to a palaestra to see them in a gladiators' melee. He shrugged off brief glimpses of Skarrian stalkers or captured Murkmen at various fairs in *Sandsend* and *Stagfall* and other cities in *Gebroan* and *Myrcia*.

He said he'd come back to *Slacere* to settle down, to find a wife, as if one could be purchased in the market. "But first, Curran, I'm going to buy the manor on the headland. Such a view, really. I've carried it with me wherever I've gone. And I mean to have it. I can understand why that crazy old man built there. He doesn't still live there, does he? He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," Curran replied.

"Ah, Curran! We were such boys then. Such silliness we conjured in that place."

"There were good times in those ruins, Neavus, silly or not. Don't laugh at them."

"Well," he said, waving a dismissing hand weighted by rings. "I'll have to do something about those ruins, dear memories or not. I doubt my bride, whoever the lucky woman is, would prefer them to the formal gardens I have in mind. I know I wouldn't. It shouldn't pose too great of a problem to tear them down, push them over the cliff."

"Don't do that. Keep them, Neavus. You can put a garden anywhere up there. Besides, the expense of tearing them down would be great."

Neavus laughed. "I can afford that, I assure you."

Curran tried a different tack. "Don't you think your children would prefer to play in ruins rather than formal gardens?"

"Dear brother! You've never seen

formal gardens much less played in one, so how would you know. I don't understand you, Curran. It's not as if I'd be tearing down something of historical significance. They're not real. They were an eccentric mastlord's folly, nothing more. I, for one, am emphatically not eccentric."

"I can see that. But Neavus, it doesn't matter to a child if they're real or not. It didn't matter to me."

"It did to me," Neavus said. "You're still such a child, dear brother."

Two days after he bought the manor and land, Neavus hired a half dozen overseers and one hundred and fifty men with forty dray horses and wagons for the heavy hauling. They brought timber up to the headland where workmen began building huge wrecking pendulas.

There was nothing Curran could do. He pleaded with Neavus again but only succeeded in making him more obsessive about his project. Curran asked him to wait, to refurbish the decaying manor and find a wife first.

"So you'd have more time to pester me about the ruins? No luck, Curran." Another time he snapped back at Curran's persistence. "Look, I'm doing this for you as well. You've got to grow up. Do your lovely wife and children a favor, man!"

Curran would likely have hit him, if he hadn't walked away abruptly, to inspect the construction of the pendulas, which seemed to Curran to be gross, feeding insects on the manor ridge.

Neavus' preparations were like one of the assaults the brothers had imagined so often, hiding in the ruins. He had men,

he had machines, which he assembled beyond the dragons' teeth—out of the range of the defenders' reckless sortie over the causeway. And he had a strategy. The keep would be the first to go. Once its crumbled heap was carted and carried and pushed over the escarpment, the towers would go next, then the walls. Neavus figured two weeks for the entire "siege", as he laughingly called it now.

The day of the "attack", Curran rose early. He'd helped bury the old mastlord, and he meant to be present at the burial of the ruins he built. It was one of the saddest days of his life, yet he'd never seen Neavus happier. He joked with an overseer named Raklut, and patted the veined necks of the drays that pulled two of his four oak and iron pendulas over the causeway and into the ruins, which had not seen gardeners' care for so many years.

As Curran neared the keep, its choking vines wet with early morning dew, its windows and arrow loops still dark as ever, he looked back at the manor tower, hoping for some reprieve. The old man was gone. The pendula wheels creaked on. The overseers directed the positioning of the the machines on either side of the keep. The men pounded stakes to secure the wheels, their sledge blows echoing throughout the ruins. Six men attended each pendula. Scores more stood back with the horses and wagons, holding ropes and iron heaving bars—the miserably lances and broadswords of these invaders, Curran thought glumly. A few dozen sailors from Neavus' ship leaned against a stack of log rollers, which would ease the movement of the



rock sleds to the escarpment. The sleds lay about like litters for wounded.

Curran walked away slowly, to the place where he and Neavus had first entered the ruins. The briny smell and force of the wind was, if anything, stronger than he remembered.

Neavus began a circuit of the keep, to inspect it prior to the first blows of the pendulas. He passed along its seaward face, spotting something in the weeds. He bent down to pick it up and that was when Curran noticed movement high above, along the keep's battlements.

If Neavus heard the grating sound, he must have thought it a last minute adjustment of the pendula rams. He smiled, shook his head, as if remembering some foolishness. Even as the top of a merlon plummeted from the height, Curran ran toward his brother, screaming his name.

Neavus looked at him, startled, and then around, confused. The block of grey stone fell squarely on him. He didn't have time to cry out. The thudding sound—and something else paralyzed Curran. He couldn't move.

For high above, kneeling in an embrasure, was a boy with white-blond hair, with someone else behind him. The pale-haired boy didn't back away and flee. He simply vanished in a fiery light that closed in on itself to the thickness of a spear and then was gone.

Curran must have cried out because Raklut and other men rushed around the keep, jostling by him. Some turned away, sickened by the sight. Others knelt by the stone, which had crushed Neavus' body from head to waist. Only his legs stuck out and one arm. A man picked up

the pewter cup that Neavus had found in the weeds, and tossed it away with a shake of his head. The cup was undamaged, the same cup Neavus and Curran drank tea from that night they spent atop the keep. They had left it there, intending to return together.

"Don't see how that could've ripped loose like that," Raklut said.

"He was a strong boy," Curran whispered, almost inaudibly.

"What did you say?"

Curran shook his head.

It took three men to heave the merlon block off Neavus. His head was almost unrecognizable, his white-blond hair a pudding of blood and brains and crushed skull.

They found canvas and draped his body with it. They backed up a wagon and put Neavus in it, while a hundred and fifty men watched, silent or whispering.

"You're his brother, then?" Raklut said to Curran.

"Yes."

"You'll want to go back with him to town?"

"What?"

"I said . . ."

"No, I'll stay here. I'll bury him here."

"Well, what did you have us load him on the wagon for then?"

"Did I? I didn't know. I . . ."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Leave the wagon here, and a spade, will you?"

"Look, do you want us to go on with this? Might as well. It's all paid for. Maybe we should do it, before someone else gets killed."

"No."

Raklut shrugged. "Suit yourself. I guess you're in charge now. By the way, I'm sorry. He seemed a decent sort."

Curran nodded.

"He have any family?"

"Only me."

"Well, that's something, poor bastard."

Someone slid a spade into the back of the wagon. Within an hour they were all gone. Curran climbed up to one of the walls, slowly, and watched them moving down the road, like the train of a defeated enemy. Curran stayed there a long time, wiping at his eyes. Then, he went to bury his brother, with only keening gulls to keep him company, and one other person he dared not look for, not yet.

The manor and ruins passed to Curran, though Neavus had made no will, of course. Elendera thought Curran could have gotten more money for the ship, after he paid off the last of the crew. He gave most of the gold to an orphanage. Slacere was large enough now to have one. But he kept enough of the money to buy a larger home for Elendera and the children, in a better part of town, farther from the shipyard where he worked. Some people thought it odd Curran didn't move his family up to the headland where a new house could be built with all the money. Most people, including Elendera, understood that Curran wouldn't want to live where his brother had had such an unfortunate accident.

Once, Curran told his wife that he'd seen a boy on the keep a moment before Neavus was killed. He had to tell someone.

"Have you seen him around the town since?" she asked.

"No."

"Maybe you will. He should be caught and punished."

Curran wondered how his wife might explain what went on in the ruins, what was still going on. But he never asked her. It didn't matter. Perhaps it had something to do with the Timberlimbs, who the gardener said once lived there long ago. But Curran felt it was more than that. What, he didn't know.

He kept two gardeners in the cottages adjacent to the manor. Elendera merely thought the care of the grounds a memorial to Neavus. Which perhaps it was.

Curran went up there often and his wife tolerated what she considered his growing eccentricity. He once thought of bringing his children to the ruins to let them play and discover the boy for themselves. But Elendera argued against that. "The place is too dangerous. You be careful yourself, love."

There was little need for her caution because Curran never went into the ruins proper, only to the manor and its tower, where the mastlord used to gaze out for hours on end. He kept the pewter cup up there and drank tea and smoked his pipe. Finally he knew who the mastlord was looking at. But the boy Curran saw, playing in those ruins after Neavus died, was a different one. He had Curran's brown hair, a look, a stride that was familiar, though chilling. He never tired of watching him.

Sometimes he was tempted, as he was sure the lordie was, to go out and confront the boy, flush him from his hiding

place. There were still as many now as there were then. Curran didn't know what would happen if he did that, or even just call out his name, Curran's name. Perhaps he would shine for one blazing

moment, then vanish into the heavy summer air, or the porcelain air of winter.

Curran knew one thing. The boy would never play in the ruins again after Curran died.



**"HEY—WHAT IDIOT ERASED MY FILES!"**

# The King of Kings

*written by Jack Lovejoy*

*illustrated by Marjett Schille*

**U**P, BUCK!" cried little Jana. "They're scared of you!"

She clung to the back of the great dog-thing as it reared up on its hind legs, baring its dread teeth and claws, and the lumbering ape-things disappeared over the ridge, leaving behind them only a musky stench and the tracks of their big hairy feet.

But it was too late to save the scout. He had been butchered like a game animal, and all edible parts carried away. The blood scent made Buck nervous, and Jana hugged him and scratched his ears to calm him.

Although she seemed like no more than a delicate little girl of seven or eight, she was in fact older than Derek the Hunter himself. Nobody knew what her sex really was, or even if she had one. Referring to her as *she* was merely convenience.

Like many of the hundreds of men, women, and children driven forth into the wilderness of the sun, from their refuge beneath the mountains, the cataclysm which had thrown all of nature into a mutation panic had affected her own ancestors in mysterious ways. Her sixth was the keenest of all her acute senses. It warned her of the presence of any living creature, though hundreds of miles away,

giving one so little and weak a better chance to survive in a hostile world.

Strange new species arose, and old ones swerved toward extinction, and the refugees from the rebellion in Saluston found the struggle to survive grow fiercer with each passing month. Only deserts of green glass lay to the east. They had no choice but to push ever westward into the highlands.

Jana tilted her little head to one side as if listening. She sensed Derek returning from his own reconnaissance, a mile or so beyond the next ridge. Buck turned his great shaggy head and watched her. He had long since learned to rely on her senses—if not always on her judgement.

"Derek, Buck!" she whispered in his ear, guiding him in the right direction, and together they bounded up an erosion gully toward the ridge.

She found him on a promontory overlooking the valley below, and climbed stiffly down from Buck's back and made her report. He nodded resignedly. They must find another route. Even if they had discovered a serviceable road or pass, he dared not lead hundreds of men, women, and children into these mountains. He too had come upon the butchered remains of a scout.

He was tall and bronzed, with the mus-

cular grace of a predator; the scars on his naked arms and chest recorded the dangers he had faced as Saluton's only hunter, who alone braved daily the wilderness of the sun, to replenish the Community's larder. The dangers he now faced were of another kind, from another order of living creatures; even more sinister for their seeming innocence.

Ruby-red pomegranates that were the bait of man-eating plants; giant pods that trapped and digested the unwary. The valley below was the natural highway through the mountains, but with every mile its weird plant life became more insidious.

This morning they had come upon an unbroken hedge, a good twenty feet high, that stretched like a rampart from one sheer wall enclosing the valley to the other. The three gaps in the hedge were strangely like gates. Beyond each stretched a broad shaded alley of blossoms like huge fleshy red peonies, like the fabled pathway into the garden of Paradise—or blood-stained teeth in a dark maw. Their musky-sweet perfume had been hypnotic.

Too hypnotic. Derek had sensed danger, and sent out scouts to reconnoiter a safer route. But there was none. Nor dared they turn back. The swarms of monstrous bats that on some nights blackened the stars made the land behind them uninhabitable. The mysterious rampart would somehow have to be breached.

Gazing down from the promontory, the land beyond the hedge seemed oddly familiar. Was it like something he had once seen in a book? Or perhaps encount-

ered while exploring the old deserted laboratories of Saluston as a boy? It was all too neat and regular to be natural. Too verdant for this interior highland.

The brooks, flowerbeds, greenswards, fountains and plantations of trees were like a vast artificial garden. Its lanes crisscrossed in tight squarish patterns; its pools were all perfectly round or perfectly rectangular.

"Don't bother to ask," Jana anticipated him. "I've checked and rechecked. It's all very peculiar, but there seems to be only one thing alive down there, spread over the whole valley, and it's not even remotely human. Yes, yes, there's no need to point. I can see those things moving through the trees as well as you can. Those two over there by that round pool are like the bigfoot uglies Buck just scared off. But if I didn't actually see them, I wouldn't know they were there. And look how slow they move! Like they're sick or exhausted." She shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun. "I can't make them out very well from up here, the way they dodge in and out of the trees. What are they all carrying?"

"Water," said Derek. "See those two people over there at the edge of the clearing?"

"Oh, it can't be water," she cried. "Two people alone couldn't possibly lift a vat that huge...wrong again! That's water they're pouring on the roots of that fat tree all right." She shrugged. "Very, very peculiar, Derek."

He too now shielded his eyes, and gazed the length of the valley. "There seems to be another hedge, or at least some kind of barrier, at the far side of

this strange parkland. If we start at dawn tomorrow, and nothing delays us, we might just reach it before nightfall."

It was almost nightfall by the time they descended to camp. They found Gunnar shuffling up and back like an angry bear-thing, delivering orders, cuffs, and back-handers, as he gruffly tried to get the camp pitched to his own satisfaction. Meanwhile Eva, Derek's woman, was getting everybody settled down to the evening meal. Her voluptuous young body, clad in only bits of fur, glowed amber in the setting sun.

Derek caught her eye and shook his head: there was no safe detour through the mountains. Then he noticed that Gunnar had stopped blustering, and was now hovering in disgust over a man and woman, and went over to investigate.

"This will teach me to send a boy to do a man's job," Gunnar gnawed his beard in exasperation.

Those standing nearby knew it could be a painful mistake to burst out laughing when Gunnar was angry, and watched with stolid expressions while a stocky little woman scrubbed some yellow powder from the face of a man who did not look at all tempted to laugh.

"Can this chucklehead just go and spy around a bit before dark, like I ask him?" Gunnar angrily stomped his foot. "No, he has to stop and smell the posies. Give me that rag, Loma! I'll wipe his face for him!"

It took Derek several minutes to get him settled down enough for a full explanation. Gunnar's "volunteer" was supposed to have just entered one of the three gaps in the hedge, reconnoitered,

and reported back before dark. But for some reason he had stopped to smell one of the fleshy red blossoms—and caught a blast of pollen.

"Spit it right in his eye, so all he can do is sneeze and choke and come running back here in tears. No, no, he ain't hurt," Gunnar rounded on the wretched man, whose nose looked stuffy and swollen, whose eyes still ran with tears. "At least, not yet."

"Let's wait until morning before we do any more exploring," said Derek. "Now what about the cave?"

"All cleaned out and barricaded with stout timbers—just in case. So if small stuff here gives us a warning, we can get everybody safe and snug inside before a single bat gets here."

Jana indeed remained alert—her sixth sense in fact never slept, though she did herself—but tonight the monstrous bat swarms raided hundred of miles farther south.

"See what happens when you don't do what you're told," snapped Gunnar the next morning. A night's rest had improved neither his temper nor the condition of the scout who had caught a faceful of pollen.

"I ain't sick, Gunnar," his voice was strangely hollow, every word seeming to drag slower than the last. The skin all over his body was gradually assuming the grainy texture of gooseflesh. "It just feels like when you hit your funnybone, except it's all over my whole body."

Margo appeared with the store of herbal medicines she had concocted, but this was like no disease she had ever read about in her medical textbooks, although

her memory was photographic.

She really was the age Jana appeared, but her ancestors had been affected in other ways by the cataclysm. She had the avid gauntness of a starving cat-thing, and many thought her extraordinarily penetrating mind just as feline. She had read every known book back at Saluston, the thicker and more abstruse the better.

"A hypersensitization reaction of some kind," she pronounced, after examining the scout, "emanating from his imprudent inhalation of a pollinic irritant. Since the data are as yet too perfunctory for a more positive diagnosis, verification must be contingent upon the introduction of one or more subjects into the presence of the suspected contagion. The more subjects thusly introduced, the more positive our subsequent diagnosis."

"I'll pick the flowers myself, Margo, if you'll sniff them," Jana said sweetly. "You're always sniffing at things anyway."

Margo chose coldly to ignore her.

"Nobody's sniffing any more posies," said Gunnar. "Or I'll fix their noses for 'em so they don't sniff anything for a while. And you women," he bellowed to all those bustling around him, breaking camp, "watch your kids when we get to this hedge. We don't want nobody else getting a blast of pollen."

The scout insisted on walking, but all his movements were so slow and deliberate that at last Gunnar lost patience, and had him carried. He protested, in a weirdly hollow and dragged-out voice, that he hadn't been moving slower than anybody else. He also protested whenever he was carried out of the direct sun-

light. Gooseflesh now covered his entire body.

"Couldn't be any easier to walk through if it was a gate," said Gunnar, when the hundreds of refugees at last reached one of the three openings in the hedge. "Can't see a better way of getting to the other side. The thing must be twenty feet high, and about as thick. Just so nobody sniffs any posies."

"I wonder if we could avoid smelling them," said Derek.

"Precisely the point," Margo agreed. "All carnivorous plants entice their prey in some attractively subtle manner, and the facility with which any creature may interpenetrate this hedge at these three hiatuses, and these three only, should itself alert our suspicions. Recall the insidious enticements of the anthropophagous trees at the head of the valley."

"The pomegranates? Yeah, you might have something there, kid," said Gunnar. "But these branches look mighty tough and wiry. Could take us half a day to chop through 'em."

"Then we'd better get started," said Derek. "I didn't want to spend a night behind this hedge, but we can't turn back, and there's no other route westwards. We'll just have to be sure nobody touches any of the plants."

"Gimme my axe," said Gunnar, and he spat on his hands, and leveled a tremendous stroke at the base of the hedge. It was so unnaturally regular that there was no evident weak point, and its tentacle-like branches were indeed tough and wiry. But after a few chops the work suddenly became easier. "Won't take me long at this rate. Couldn't be easier if the

hedge wanted us to chop our way through. Here, you moonheads! Clear the branches away behind me, and don't let me catch none of you loafing." He began chopping through the dense tangle of branches, some wrist thick and as gnarled as ancient oak, like so much brushwood.

Margo's avid curiosity focused on the amazing speed with which every chopped branch sealed itself, like blood clotting instantly over a wound, and cut through a small branch with a knife, farther down the hedge. Instead of sealing itself off, this particular branch sprouted back toward its original shape. Suspicious, she enlisted the help of Gunnar's son Rollo.

He had already tried boyishly to help his father—until chased off as a nuisance. Now he was given the chance to work on his own, but every branch he hacked through instantly sprouted again.

"Like snake-things," he cried. "They wouldn't do that if I had my father's axe, and not this puny hatchet. He's almost through the hedge already, and hasn't been working two hours yet. It's just like a tunnel."

Gunnar emerged at last like a bear from its den, flushed and sweating and scrubby with wood chips. His job was done.

Derek, with Jana mounted on Buck's back, plunged into the freshly cut tunnel, alert for any danger on the other side. But even Jana's keen senses detected nothing ominous. She could see a number of creatures, including some that looked human, moving slowly up and down the neat lanes that crisscrossed the unnaturally verdant groves; but sight was her sole means of perception. She looked up

at Derek and shrugged.

He disappeared back into the tunnel, and returned minutes later at the head of a column of men, women, and children. Gunnar tried with all his ursine means—growling, threatening, boxing ears—to keep things moving; but it was Eva who really took effective command of the column. With quiet efficiency, she had organized it to march, and kept it marching in good order. She left the blustering to Gunnar.

Margo and Rollo alone dawdled back at the hedge.

"Look at those branches!" the latter peered in astonishment into the tunnel, now swiftly reclosing itself. "The way they slither in and out of each other, just like they were weaving a big basket. Why didn't they do that before, when my father first chopped 'em?"

Margo peered into what was left of the tunnel with the nearsighted eagerness of a cat-thing. "The roots of that question, I surmise, are in this particular context literally roots. Here, dig down near the base of the hedge—"

At that moment, a growl from Gunnar sent them both scampering after the column. He paused for a moment before following them, bewildered at the viperous manner in which the hedge was knitting itself back together. The tunnel he had worked so hard to clear had already nearly disappeared.

"Might have to chop a whole lot faster at the other side," he muttered. "If there really is another hedge there, like Derek says."

Meanwhile Derek and Jana led the column through the weirdly hushed park-



land; there were no bird or animal noises, not even the chirr of insects. Buck padded along beside them, noticing the creatures no more than if they had been so many saplings trembling in the breeze. They all followed paths in the full sunlight, detouring from the shadows.

Jana suddenly stopped, her head tilted slightly to one side as if listening. "Trouble, Derek," she said. "I've been checking on the scouts you sent out, and one of them seems to be in a bad way. But I can't find a single living thing around him."

"Here, Buck!" Derek set her on the back of the great dog-thing, and they raced off through the trees, Jana trying to point the way without being pitched on her ear.

The scout certainly was in a bad way, but there turned out to be plenty of living

things around him, and all of them hostile.

A naked girl of no more than fifteen or sixteen with strangely glassy eyes stood watching him in the middle of a clearing; the rock in her hands looked so heavy it was a wonder she could lift it. But she just stood there like a tree stump, while huge raptorial bird-things and savage bats dived down at the scout from the surrounding trees. Several of these lay on the ground, as immobile as the girl herself.

The scout was badly clawed and bitten, wrestling with a pair of monstrous bats and a huge buzzard-thing. Then all at once the girl attacked him, hefting the enormous rock over her head like a pebble.

Derek sprang between them and tried to deflect the rock, but was thrust aside.



Only a second, more determined spring saved the scout from having his brains dashed out; it took all his strength to tear the rock away from the girl. She raised her arms as if to claw him; then once more froze like a tree stump, gazing past him with glassy eyes.

Meanwhile Buck had torn to pieces everything attacking the scout. Jana tried futilely to coax the man to his feet. A monstrous bat on the ground nearby suddenly came to life again, only to have Buck bite its head off.

"Derek, behind you!" cried Jana.

The ape-thing was well over seven feet tall, like the creatures that had driven them out of the mountains yesterday; but it moved much more slowly and in fact stopped dead just as it reached the clearing. Derek leapt straight at it and plunged his sword into its heart.

Nothing happened. The ape-thing stared at him with the dead glassy eyes of a doll, and all that oozed from the wound was a sticky resinous fluid that stopped flowing almost at once. There was no trace of blood.

"And no smell either," added Jana. "Let's get out of here, Derek. I don't think these creatures...watch out!"

Derek whirled and slashed at the buzzard-thing as it dived at his head. Then he slashed at a bat which dived from the same tree.

Jana had at last coaxed the scout to his feet. He was badly shaken and bleeding from several wounds, but for a moment could do nothing but stare in horror. Then Jana saw it too.

"The bat!" she cried. "Buck bit its head off, and now it's growing a new

head. It's still alive!"

Jana clambered onto Buck's back, while Derek helped the scout limp from the clearing and together they fled through the trees. There was no pursuit.

"I came across critters like that all along the line," the scout reported, as they bathed his wounds at a forest pool. "They never once bothered me till I stepped into that clearing. Then they came at me from all sides. Tried to run for it, but they knocked me down and kept dropping on me from above so's I couldn't get up again."

"What about the other scouts, Jana?" asked Derek.

"I've already checked, and there's no trouble as far as I can tell."

Nor had they any more trouble for the rest of that day. Keeping to the shadows, avoiding beds of flowering plants and any tree that dangled vines, they reached a broad meadow Derek had spied from the promontory yesterday. Pitching camp at its very center, well out of reach of overhanging vegetation, he and Eva worked together to make the watches, pickets, and relief efficient and dependable. All approaches to the meadow were well guarded. Then they heard a woman sobbing.

"It's Loma," whispered Jana. "Her man just died, the one who got blasted by pollen. It happened just as the sun went down."

Gunnar was already bending over the body when they joined him. Even in the dismal firelight the strange graininess of the dead man's flesh was striking. "Just like those awful things that attacked the scout you sent forth, Derek," said Jana.

“Remember how grainy they all looked too? If it’s a disease, let’s hope it’s not catching.”

Margo knelt intently beside the corpse. “Let us indeed hope that we don’t get caught. I speak in the sense of apprehension, rather than contagion.”

“You mean by the bats?” Gunnar frowned at her, as usual not quite certain what she meant. “How about it, small stuff?”

Jana shook her head. “The swarm is out, but doesn’t seem to be coming this way. It never has come this far west, though individuals may have.”

“Then we got nothing to worry about,” said Gunnar. “Everything stopped moving through the trees when the sun went down. Can’t see how anything could get at us out here in this meadow anyway.”

“Except the meadow itself,” said Margo, still examining the corpse.

It was during the second watch that the pickets first realized that the entire meadow was surrounded. The hedge that had sprung up in the night was already higher than the most agile of them could leap over; by dawn not even the tallest could see over the top. Its sprouting branches entwined like sluggish vipers. Fleshy red pods began to swell along its inner face.

“Can’t blast us with that pollen if we all stay right here in the center...” Gunnar stopped pacing up and down before the campfire. “But what if it grows inward? It could have us in range in a couple of days, and then we’d all end up like that.”

He nodded toward where the dead man

lay covered with a blanket. Then he looked again. He wiped his eyes, as if he could not believe them.

“He’s alive! Look, he’s moving!”

“No,” said Jana, “he’s dead. Or if he’s alive, it’s only like all the other creatures in this valley are alive. Like a tree or a bush.”

“Then over the hedge with him!” cried Gunnar. “Here, you two, grab an arm and a leg. I’ll take the other side myself.”

The hedge now formed a perfect circle, well over six feet high and still growing, completely surrounding the meadow. Even swinging the awakening corpse in unison, with Gunnar’s ursine strength behind the heave, they were just able to fling it safely over the top.

Eva had already begun to reorganize the pickets. Arming all available men and women, and some of the larger children, she posted them around the inner face of the hedge. They lopped off each fleshy pod that appeared.

Derek explained: “The hedge doesn’t have to grow any closer. If it saturated the air with pollen, there’s no way we could avoid breathing it in.”

“Then we just got to keep them posies from growing,” said Gunnar. “Wish the hedge itself would stop growing for a while. Where’s my axe? We’d better get started, or we’ll never chop our way out.” He noticed little Jana sitting with her face in her hands. “What’s the trouble, small stuff?”

“I’ve been trying to figure out why I can’t detect all these things around us. They’re fossils. Derek, remember when we passed through that place where all the trees were made of stone? You called

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killed; the wounded suffered only bites and talon scratches. Nor was there any pursuit, as they fell back upon a clearing within a half mile of the boundary hedge.

"What now?" asked Gunnar. "Just sit here until another hedge springs up around us? I know we can't go back, but isn't there some way we could climb the valley walls?"

"They're sheer escarpments," said Derek. "It would take us days just to rig slings or rope ladders."

"No chance of them fossil things giving us that much time to do anything. They want to keep us here till we're fossils too." He tugged thoughtfully at his beard. "Looks like we'll just have to go to war. We could get hurt real bad, Derek."

He nodded resignedly. "We may be outnumbered worse than we know, by enemies we can't even kill. They just sprout new limbs or wings or heads, and come back fighting again. Eva, you've read military books. How do you win a battle against numbers like this?"

"By not fighting against numbers like this," she replied. "Sound strategy is always directed against an enemy's weakness, not his strength. If this whole valley is really just one big plant, then it must have come kind of brain or control center that directs it all. That's what we should attack."

"But what about these hundreds, maybe thousands, of other things?" protested Gunnar. "These fossils?"

"Long ago," said Eva, "many, many centuries, there was a warrior called Alexander the Great. In one of his battles, his enemy, the King of Kings, had

over a million men to his own thirty thousand soldiers. So instead of trying to fight against such overwhelming numbers, Alexander threw all his forces straight at the King of Kings, the heart and soul of the entire vast host. He fled, and his army just melted away."

"Sounds good to me," said Gunnar. "The problem is we don't know where to find our King of Kings, and there's no time to look."

"The solution should be obvious to the most casual observer," said Margo. "Wherever these fossils, as you call them, exhibit the most disinclination to vouchsafe intrusion, be sure that you will also find the approach to your King of Kings."

"The scout who was attacked," cried Jana. "The fossils wouldn't let him pass a certain clearing, but didn't bother any of the other scouts no matter where they went."

"But if we send all our forces straight at this vegetable King of Kings, like Eva says," Gunnar objected, "every fossil in the valley would try and stop us."

"Not if all but a few of us create a diversion," said Eva. "That is, keep pressure on the hedge with feints and maneuvers, until it's too late for the fossils here to defend whatever kind of organ does their thinking."

"I'm not sure it actually thinks," said Derek, as he armed himself and packed food for two days. "It seems just to respond in the same way whenever confronted with the same problem. Here, Buck! I'll send word the moment we discover anything. Where's Stinky?"

The gangly youth had extraordinarily

long legs, and a round little head, but there were few creatures with even four legs that could outrun his two. He was always happier running than working—a defensive camp was now being pitched—and gladly joined Derek, Jana and Buck in their race back through the strange parkland.

The artificial patterns of the trees and shrubbery, the brooks and forest pools, were still more evident when seen a second time. Derek pointed out landmarks by which Stinky could find his way back again, should he have to return alone.

“Don’t w-worry, I won’t g-g-get lost,” he assured them.

The pace was for him merely a comfortable trot, but after a few miles of steady running Derek and even Buck needed to rest. The pool they stopped beside was perfectly rectangular, as was the clearing around it.

“I’m getting sore from so much riding.” Jana slid from Buck’s back with a groan. “That looks like a very nice pool, Stinky. Why don’t you take a quick dip? It wouldn’t do you any harm, you know.”

He stubbornly shook his little round head. “Water m-makes you weak, and I need all my strength for r-running.”

Jana wrinkled her nose. “And the longer you run, the stronger you get—Derek, watch out!”

He drew his sword. “I see her.”

The girl’s only covering were red tresses that fell almost to her knees. She entered the clearing with a huge metal bucket, which she mechanically dipped into the pool, oblivious of any other presence. She stared unseeing until the bucket gurgled full; then hoisted it like a

teacup, and bore it slowly back into the trees.

“I don’t ever want to get in her way,” said Jana. “I’m not sure Gunnar could have lifted that bucket. Is this all the food we get?”

“For now,” said Derek, tossing Buck a goblet of meat. “We don’t know how long it’s going to take us to reach this thing, whatever it is. Find anything yet?”

“It seems a bit stronger in the direction of the clearing where the scout was attacked, but only a bit. Stinky should have no trouble finding his way back, with everything laid out so nice and neat.”

“Don’t you worry about m-me, little girl. Ain’t seen nothing yet that c-can outrun me.” He glanced complacently at Buck and Derek.

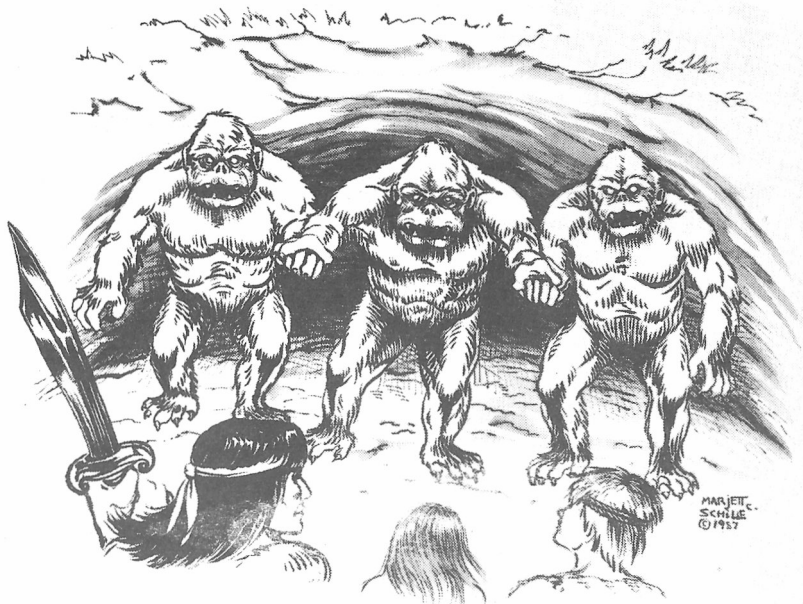
The latter sat rapt in thought, trying once more to remember whatever it was he had encountered back in Saluston, years ago, that made everything around him now seem so oddly familiar. But they could not afford to rest long, and were soon racing toward the clearing where the scout had been attacked. There seemed to be fewer of the plant fossils abroad now, and none opposed them.

“They must all be at the hedge,” cried Jana, clinging to Buck’s shaggy coat.

“Let’s hope Gunnar can keep them there.” Derek pointed to a break in the trees directly ahead. “That looks like the way to our clearing.”

Jana agreed. “That’s it, all right.”

Three huge bats and a buzzard-thing dived clumsily at them out of the trees surrounding the clearing, but were easily evaded. Beyond the trees they came upon an old weathered roadway, which led



them to what looked like an open pit. Three bigfooted ape-things stood dumbly before it like sentinels.

"They must be guarding something," said Jana. "But what?"

"You folks w-wait right here," Stinky volunteered. "If them ugly galoots yonder don't h-h-hear me, they won't know I'm there."

"They already know," said Derek, looking off through the trees. "Everything in the valley seems to be moving this way. Whatever we're after, it's down in that pit."

Before they could say anything more, Stinky shot past them. All three ape-things lunged for him at once, but he was already on his way back by then.

"Ain't no p-pit at all," he reported. "Looks like this old r-road just dips

underground."

"Derek, look!" Jana pointed. They're blocking the way."

The three ponderous ape-things joined hands in a solid cordon across the mouth of the opening. More and more fossils converged from all directions.

"No sweat there, little g-girl," said Stinky. "We can run around 'em easy, and j-jump down. Ain't but a few feet to a r-r-ramp."

"Let's move before they surround the whole pit," cried Derek. "I don't know what we'll do for light down there, though."

"Might have saw a l-light," said Stinky. "Can't be sure, 'cause I only got a quick peek."

Outflanking the cordon of ape-things, they leapt blindly into the pit, hoping

Stinky's estimate of depth was accurate. It was. The ramp they landed on was gnawed by harsh weathering, but the concrete walls looked like they had been built to withstand any force on Earth.

"Told you I saw a l-light," cried Stinky as they stumbled down an underground roadway. "Looks like it's going out, though."

"No, it's not." Derek urged them on. "It's a door closing."

He was the last to dive through the impregnable metal door that rumbled across the roadway and slammed shut like a crash of thunder. The light was a greenish glow not much brighter than Buck's eyes. He searched hurriedly for some means to secure the door. The trio of ape-things were already stumbling down the ramp after them, probably followed by every fossil in the valley. Several minutes passed before the door tried to reopen, as if whatever force moved it needed time to recharge its energy. All he could find was a length of chain, which he secured to a projection on the wall. When the door at last made a tremendous lurch, the chain held.

"I saw some people moving down there," Jana whispered.

"Real people?"

"No, only like the ones in the forest. How are we going to get out of here, Derek? They're already pounding at the door."

"And another door's starting to close! Hurry!"

This time it was a heavy vault door. Once again Derek was the last to dive through. There was no means of securing this door from the inside, and a few min-

utes later it swung open again. The pounding at the outer door was now deafening.

"Sounds like a battering ram of some kind," said Derek, as they crept down a corridor lined with glass-doored offices filled with machines.

"There's one of them!" cried Jana. "They're running away from us."

"Or taking up defensive positions," said Derek. "So whatever direction they take is exactly the one we want."

The greenish glow was now much brighter, and filled the cavernous room at the end of the corridor with a weird phosphorescence.

"It's coming from up yonder." Stinky pointed to a glass enclosed balcony. "Somebody's up there."

Row upon row of panels covered with buttons, switches, keys, and tiny glass bulbs faced a towering array of maps and projection screens; everything was clean and polished, even the military symbols on the walls. In one aisle lay baskets filled with vegetable slough, apparently abandoned by the people who had just retreated up a metal stairway to the balcony above. The greenish light grew still more vivid, and now seemed to throb with anger.

Jana had already slipped off Buck's back, and he padded after Derek toward the stairway, his hackles rising as he sensed his master gird himself for battle.

Five naked young men formed a protective cordon before the source of the throbbing phosphorescent light, an immense swollen blob of vegetable mold which covered almost the entire balcony right up to the vaulted ceiling. They were



feebly armed with only lengths of cable and broomsticks, and Derek, swinging his sword with both arms, hacked their legs out from under them.

But the phosphorescent blob was completely encased in a leathery membrane, and neither by jabbing nor slashing with his sword could Derek pierce it. He could feel its malice pulsing toward him like a living force.

Then he heard Buck growl, and whirled around. The legless creatures were pulling themselves toward him with their arms. He hacked these away and hurled the limbless torsos from the balcony. There was no doubt that this swollen vegetable blob was the control organ for the entire sinister valley. What it was or how it exercised control was not so important now as how to destroy it.

"Keep Buck with you till I get back!" he called as he bounded down the metal stairway and raced from the cavernous room.

The khaki vehicles he had spotted back along the roadway bore the same military symbols as the walls. He was familiar enough with such machines to know that their fuel was violently inflammable. He discovered a metal cannister and a flexible rubber hose in one of the offices, and a heavy metal bar for wedging into the hinges of the vault door to keep it open. The futile pounding at the outside door continued to reverberate like thunder, as he raced toward the khaki vehicles.

They were hardly rusted at all, although their rubber tires were collapsed and rotted. The first thing he checked was the compartment in front of the passenger's seat. That was where abandoned

vehicles always contained an amazing array of odds and ends. Matches! Several books, in several different colors. Then in the back of a paneled vehicle he spotted a red can with a capped nozzle. Much better for syphoning fuel. He tossed away his own cannister. As he picked up the tall red can, he discovered that it was already filled with fuel: five full gallons. Better still.

Back down the roadway and through the vault door, which was straining against the bar wedged in its hinges, trying vainly to shut. He was not sure yet how they would get out of here again—perhaps there were plans or blueprints showing another exit—but they dared not worry about anything else until Eva's King of Kings had been routed.

"Oh, Derek!" cried Jana. "I almost got bit! Those things with no arms or legs you threw down from the balcony. One of them wriggled up behind me and tried to bite my ankle!"

Two more torsos had wriggled in front of the metal stairway; their extremities were already swelling with the stumps of new limbs. Derek leaped over them and bounded up the stairs. Five gallons of fuel went a lot farther than he had imagined, and the vegetable blob was thoroughly soaked when he tossed the match.

The two torsos at the bottom of the stairs flopped up and down like mad bladders, their teeth chattering in fury. He vaulted over them just as chunks of scorched vegetable matter began exploding into the air. Jana and Stinky were already scurrying for the door, with Buck right behind them, his tail between his

legs. The blob seemed more violently inflammable than the fuel itself.

Jana stood in the flame-lit corridor with her fingers in her ears. "They're pounding at that door outside like they've all gone crazy!"

"So long as they keep pounding we're all right."

Derek improvised torches of rolled paper, and rummaged office after office in search of some kind of floorplan. The cabinets held only endless stacks of files and rectangular punched cards. Nothing that showed a route to a second exit. Then he uncovered a sheaf of schematics relating to various electrical devices, and at last realized what he had been trying so hard to remember. Years ago, in Saluston, he had come upon just such a sheaf of schematics by a row of panels like those in the now flaming room at the head of the corridor: buttons, switches, keys, and myriads of tiny glass bulbs. He even remembered the name on the schematics: SELWAY COMPUTER NC4X.

From the perspective of the mountain, all the precise lanes of trees and shrubbery, the perfectly round or perfectly rectangular pools, had seemed exactly like one of these schematics. But what was the swollen blob of vegetable mold? What possible source of power had caused its eerie phosphorescent glow? He shook himself. Abstract questions were an unaffordable luxury when every moment of every day was a struggle to survive.

"At last!" Jana took her fingers out of her ears. "They've stopped that awful pounding."

Derek threw down the sheaf of sche-

matics, and led the way out onto the underground roadway. What if they were now trying to wedge the door open? He put his ear against it, but could not hear a whisper of sound.

Jana and Stinky followed him to the door, holding aloft the last of the improvised torches. An acrid mist, thickening by the minute, now choked the air. There was no time to search for another exit.

"I've got to open this door," said Derek. "Be ready to move quickly. They're slow." His eyes were burning and he coughed. "Try to dodge past them."

The chain was pulled so tight that he had to pound at it with his fist. At last it snapped free, and the colossal door heaved open a few feet, then stopped. A solid phalanx of enemies faced them on the ramp outside, and he sprang back, sword in hand, braced for combat. But nothing moved; the entire phalanx was as immobile as a hall of statues. He plunged his sword into the chest of a towering ape-thing, and again sprang back. Still nothing.

"Follow me!" he shouted, and they wove their way up the crowded ramp, half expecting to be seized by every silent creature they passed.

Blinking at the strong sunlight, rubbing their burning eyes, they stood dazed at the head of the ramp. After all they had been through, it was uncanny to realize that it was still the same day.

"Oh, look, Derek!" Jana pointed up at the trees. "The leaves are turning brown."

The scene unfolding before them was like a nightmare of autumn. Flowers

wilted, leaves withered in front of their eyes, curled, and fell from the dying groves in a morbid brownish rain. No living thing moved through the deathly silence.

“Run, Stinky,” said Derek. “Tell Gunnar to start chopping through the hedge at once. We’re free!”

He helped Jana onto Buck’s back.

Their pace was swift, but they lagged well behind their far swifter messenger. By the time they reached the boundary hedge it was already a sickly gray. Not a single branch had sprouted across the new tunnel, and they plunged boldly through it, ready to face whatever challenges awaited them in the lands beyond.

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*David R. Silas was born and raised in Oklahoma, graduated from the University of Florida, and came within an eyeblink of an advanced degree in anthropology before turning to writing. He lives in Seattle with his possiq and cats, who alternate in providing proof-reading and criticism.*

## Dragon Time

*written by David R. Silas*

**D**UST POOFED with each tramp of his boots as Merrimor the Mage mounted the last long steps to his secret tower room.

"It's Dragon Time," he growled to the gryphon on the bookcase just inside the door. A real gryphon would never have fit inside the tower, much less the bookcase; this was a mock-gryphon, stitched together by Tench the Taxidermist. It used to be a cat and several small birds. Now it was molting.

"I bet Glaboret doesn't have a gryphon on his bookcase," Merrimor gloated, patting the mock-beast's head. "We'll teach him a lesson, won't we, my pet?"

Merrimor scratched his head and spun about on one heel, staring at the shelves lining the walls. What had he come up here for? Ah yes, the Dragon. He started for a shelf, but his long robes tangled around his legs and sent him tumbling to the floor. He sneezed he way out of the dust cloud, and pulled down the book he

wanted: Volume 2 of Flaubelin's *Incantations and Recitations*.

And there was the incantation, right between "Avail ye not of dungeon walls" and "Crick to crack the donkey's back." Merrimor never understood why Flaubelin alphabetized by the fifth word and in reverse, but then he never understood Flaubelin's fondness for frog frappé either. Flaubelin was a great man, and must have had a reason. Volume 3 was an index, which could have made things easier, but Merrimor lost that in an unfortunate incident with a fiery demiurge back when he had more hair on his scalp than on his chin.

He wiped the dust from his eyes and nose, arranged his great blue robe artistically about his paunch, and cleared his throat. In his best Voice of Doom, he began the incantation.

"Come to me, O Dragon Whitt, come to me most speedily; Come to me, O Lizard Lord, and speak to me most

readily.”

No sooner had the words left his lips than the tower shook with the rustle of mighty wings. A great scaly hand thrust through the window and groped about the room. Claws as long as Merrimor’s arms scattered books and papers everywhere.

Merrimor scampered about the small room, keeping just ahead of the sweeping claws, tripping over books and stirring up dust. He saw his chance and dived past the claws, into the corner by the window where he kept his heavy staff.

“Back, worm!” he cried, striking the armored wrist beside his face.

The hand disappeared through the window. A huge amber eye replaced it, staring at him unblinkingly.

“I might have known it was you, O Lord of Lard,” said the Dragon. “You always were quick with the staff.”

Merrimor doubled over in a fit of sneezing from the dust. Tears poured from his eyes, and he gestured weakly that he would be fine in a trice.

The Dragon sighed. He began to whistle a tune only a dragon could appreciate, and sharpened his claws on the tower wall. The moat below was clogged with rubble from Whitt’s filing when Merrimor was once more able to speak.

“You thrice befouled spawn of serpents!” he cried. “Look what you’ve done to my study! It’ll take weeks to clean up.”

The Dragon continued his manicure, casting one half-closed eye at the outraged Mage. “If you called me just to insult me, be quick about it so I can return to my virgin. I’m only halfway done and she’s most delicious.”

“Certainly not, O Prince of Wormlings.” Merrimor bowed as deeply as his belly would allow. “I have a job for you.”

Whitt sighed. “I hope you don’t want me to snatch another woman for you. The last one didn’t turn out so well, I hear.”

Merrimor colored. He was touchy on the subject of his wife, ever since she ran off with all his love philtres, his best robe, and his Japanese gardener.

“No. It’s my neighbor, Glaboret the Geat.” He pointed vaguely northwest, where he thought Glaboret’s castle lay. “He’s a most unpleasant man, and I want you to deal with him accordingly.”

“Glaboret?” the Dragon said in surprise. “I always thought him a rather nice fellow, as Geats go. Not being his neighbor, perhaps I have no idea the depths of his perfidy. I do hope this will be fun, though. It’s very difficult to find amusing things to do anymore. After a few thousand years you find you’ve done just about everything.”

“Oh, have as much fun as you want. As long as you get rid of him in a sufficiently dragony way. That’s the main thing. It’s got to be dragony. And you, as a dragon, would know more of fun-filled dragony ways than I.”

Whitt contemplated the cloudless blue sky. “You’re right,” he said in a faraway voice. “I’ll think of something.” He looked back at Merrimor. “Any particular shape you’d like me to do it in?”

Merrimor gaped, at a loss for words.

“Oh, you know. Like maybe a gyrfalcon, or a unicorn. I’ve been told I do a particularly effective Crawling Slime.”

Merrimor shuddered. “What’s wrong

with dragon-shaped?"

"Well . . . nothing, really. But a cocker spaniel, say, or a goldfish doing dragony things is so unexpected. It's a lot more fun, that's all."

"What about the terror you strike in the hearts of men just by showing up as a dragon?"

"Well, I suppose there are sacrifices. I go more for subtlety these days. How about a titmouse?"

"A what?"

"You know, a little bird." With that, the Dragon disappeared. "Like this," said a titmouse on the windowsill.

Merrimor jumped back and swallowed before answering. "No," he said slowly, "that won't do at all. I could never explain to the Mage Convention that I sent a titmouse to scourge my worst enemy. They'd laugh me right out of the Awards Banquet. I think on the whole I prefer the dragon."

"Hmph!" said the titmouse. A tongue of flame shot from its beak, scorching Merrimor's arm and setting ablaze a stack of ancient and valuable manuscripts.

"All right!" Merrimor said as he beat at the flames with the hem of his robe. "Far be it from me to tell a dragon how to run his business. Take any form you want; just rid me of this pest!"

"Oh, very well," said Whitt, a dragon once more. "I suppose something will occur to me."

It took Merrimor some minutes to control the fire. In the end he sacrificed a jug of extremely palatable wine. At length he looked up from the sodden ashes, his face a mask of remorse (though for the loss of

the books or the wine, none can say). The golden eye of the Dragon continued to regard him with interest, and not a little amusement.

"Still here, you bescaled vermin?" roared the Mage. "Begone, and have done with this juxtaposed meddler!"

"Shortly, O Grandly Bepaunched Relic," said the Dragon, winking. "I just thought to ask Your Wisdom what this malodorous neighbor of yours has done to merit such dissatisfaction."

Merrimor's face grew red and his eyes bulged. "What has he done?" A chain of snorts exploded from his nose and his hands clenched convulsively. "What has he done? Why, daily his minions invade my fields, slaughter my livestock, and have their way with the innocent daughters of my herdsmen. That's what he's done, you prying beast!"

"That's it? Hardly enough to warrant such extreme measures," said the Dragon coolly. "If you don't mind my saying so."

"He has set my fields afire on more than a single occasion."

"Even so—"

"He appropriates my ships on the high seas!"

"I didn't even know you had a port—"

"—that he stole from me in the rudest manner, I can assure you. And he regularly raids my villages to kidnap recruits for his bands of brigands."

"But still," the Dragon said affably, "you have to expect that sort of thing from neighbors. There must be something especially infamous he's done. Something really vile and low . . ."

Merrimor lowered his eyes. He shuf-

fled his feet and glanced at the winking gryphon. "He has . . ." the Mage began, his voice little above a whisper, "he has taken for himself *pears* from my own special orchard, if you must know."

"Not the Magic Orchard of Torinos the Wise!"

"The very same," nodded Merrimor gravely.

"Oh!" cried the Dragon. "Most exceedingly vile; beyond doubt most evil and villainous. And quite unneighborly, to boot! I shall certainly deal with him sternly, and at once."

Whitt snorted twice, without fire, and was gone.

Three nights later, Merrimor was jerked from a sound sleep by an appalling racket outside. He glared out the window at the Dragon, calmly pulling down an abandoned tower on the north wall of the castle.

"You there!" shouted the Mage. "Stop that blasted noise! Some of us need sleep, you know."

Whitt tossed away a granite block, crushing a nearby hovel, and sauntered over to Merrimor's bedroom window. "I was wondering," said the Dragon, squatting to bring his eyes level with the Mage's.

"Wondering what?" Merrimor snapped.

"What it would take to wake you up. I was going to start on this wall next."

"Stuff your insolence, worm." Merrimor's eyes watered from the acrid fumes leaking from the Dragon's nose. "I assume you had a reason to wake me?"

"Most assuredly so, O Artful One."

"Something to do with Glaboret, I

hope."

"Indeed yes, O Masterful Caster of Ingenious Spells." Whitt examined his horny cuticles. "He says, Glaboret says that is, that he is willing to stop raiding your herds if you will lift the plague of dissipation from his own."

"What?" Merrimor lunged forward, and had to throw his arms wide to remain on the proper side of the window. He saved himself a fall, but scraped his knuckles painfully. "You paused to chat when you should have been destroying him?" he demanded around his battered fingers.

Whitt drew himself up proudly. "It has always been my practice," he said with dignity, "to explain my actions before I incinerate someone."

"You did incinerate him, then?"

"Oh, no. I think he's perfectly justified to take your animals as long as his are cursed."

The Mage snarled and sucked his knuckles for a while. "Oh, all right. I'll remove the spell if you promise to blast him at once."

"That is most reasonable," said the Dragon. "I suggest you get some sleep, though. You look terrible."

Merrimor's rude gesture at the departing Dragon was intercepted by the low window, leaving him to hop about the room yelping, his throbbing hand cradled to his breast.

The Dragon returned the next night. Merrimor was waiting on the castle wall, heavy staff clutched in his bandaged hands.

"Rather late for a man of your years, isn't it?" the Dragon asked, alighting.





"Spare me your small talk," grumbled the Mage. "Is Glaboret a cinder or not?"

"He sends his thanks for the renewed vigor of his stock."

Merrimor closed his eyes and tightened the grip on his staff. "Is he or is he not a pile of smoking ashes?"

"Well," said Whitt, "it seems to me that as long as you instruct the creatures of the deep, the large and nasty ones that is, to harry his fishing fleet, it is only right that he replace his lost ships with yours."

"That insolent swine!"

"And he's perfectly willing to return your port if you allow his ships to use it without turning them into pyrotechnic displays."

Merrimor gnawed the end of his staff for quite some time. "All right," he said through clenched teeth. "All right. Then will you please render him a smoking heap of lifeless flesh?"

"It seems only fair." The Dragon prepared to leave. "Oh, by the way, he asked after your health. What shall I tell him?"

"*Just go!*" Merrimor screamed. He threw his staff at the nearest amber eye.

The Dragon dodged easily and watched the staff fall into the muck of the recently drained moat. It sank in an eye-blink. "That was fun," he said. "It was such a nice staff, though," he added as he flew away.

Merrimor did not leave the battlements for some time. He was unable to speak or move, unable even to wipe away the tears of exasperation forming in his eyes.

Over the next two months the Dragon came once or twice a week, always with

some excuse for Glaboret's continued existence. Merrimor took to sleeping in the afternoons. He neglected his ordinary business, dealing with minor demons and causing or curing pestilences. He allowed his brother Grimvald to assume complete control of their amulet distributorship. He forgot to attend to his ledgers, and left his gryphon uncurried.

Evenings he paced the battlements, warily watching the sky. After the Dragon left, he spent the rest of the night and the following morning in his dungeon. There he conjured many-legged beasts, which he used to devise ingenious methods of dismemberment. If the Dragon stayed away, he spent a few hours yelling at the servants, and then locked himself in his secret tower, searching through his books for a spell that would cause the Dragon's scales to fall off, or his wings to unravel.

By the end of the second month he had promised to stop killing the firstborn among Glaboret's people, to restore the fertility of Glaboret's poultry, to stop the showers of foul-smelling mud on Glaboret's castle, to remove the warts from various parts of Glaboret's body, to dehorn Glaboret's father, and to send away the rooks that followed Glaboret about, crowing insults from above. All on the condition that Whitt immediately and thoroughly remove Glaboret from this world, preferably in a very gruesome fashion.

The night after the last spell was lifted, the Dragon caught him smashing toads with his spare staff.

"What is it now?" he snapped. "Is he dead yet?"

"Well," said Whitt, "Glaboret has held to your bargain. He no longer raids, pillages, burns, or does anything whatever to your holdings. I was just wondering if you still want him smitten, now that there's no real reason for it."

"No reason for it! He still steals my pears, you moronic pest! Of course I want him smitten."

"Oh," said Whitt. He idly scratched the back of his left wing with his right foreclaw. "Glaboret claims the orchard is his, and that the pears are his as well. That makes it a land tenure case. I don't do land tenure."

Merrimor stared at the Dragon and absently scraped toad gore from the end of his staff onto the floor.

"But I summoned you," he pointed out. "You must do my bidding."

"No," corrected the Dragon. "You only intoned the first two lines. I have no obligation to you; you only said you wanted to chat. It's been fun. See you."

"Wait! You're not going to blast him?"

"You said I could take care of him in my own way. I have."

"But what about the pears?" Merrimor wailed.

Whitt coughed politely. "As it happens," he said, "Glaboret himself has a solution in mind."

Merrimor's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What is it?"

"Well, he's willing to cede the orchard itself—" Merrimor snorted, but the Dragon continued unperturbed. "—if you accept his challenge to a game of handball for the pears, winner-take-all."

Merrimor laughed. "Is that it? Doesn't that fool know I was twelve straight years

Mage Handball Champion? Retired undefeated, you know."

"Yes," sighed the Dragon. "I tried to convince him of his folly, but he insisted."

"Insisted, did he? Well, tell him I'll be happy to destroy him at handball. And deprive him of my pears at the same time." Merrimor chuckled. "Now I'll show that snot a thing or two."

The match was held on Glaboret's court, as there was no other within a week's travel on dragon-back. It did not last long. Glaboret was forty years younger than the Mage, and far more spry. Merrimor's robes kept tangling about his spindly legs, sending him sprawling. He refused to remove them, even when Glaboret begged him to. Several times Merrimor itched to cast a spell on the ball, or the wall, or on Glaboret himself. Each time he was forestalled by a warning cluck or disapproving glance from the weird-woman acting as scorekeeper. In the end Merrimor accepted defeat gracefully. He contented himself with changing the ball into a small turtle and hurling it viciously against the wall.

"Good game, old relic," boomed Glaboret. "That's a wicked serve you've got there."

Merrimor glared at him. The weird-woman clucked.

"Come," said the younger man, taking the Mage by the arm and steering him toward the refreshment table on the other side of the court. "Have a pear, on me."

Merrimor scowled at the fruit. "Can't stand the vile things," he muttered. "They give me flux."

"Oh?" said Glaboret without interest.

"Well, I shall have one."

"I should never have listened to that Dragon," Merrimor said to himself.

Glabet paused in cutting a pear and looked up. "Dragon? You must be jesting, neighbor. Dragon?" He laughed and slapped Merrimor between the shoulder blades.

"Yes, Dragon," Merrimor snapped. "The Dragon you've been wheedling these last two months."

Through bursts of laughter, Glabet opined that dragons were stuff and nonsense, and if Merrimor had seen one, perhaps he should cut back on his liquid intake, or change to a better brand. Merrimor's reply concerning the veracity and parentage of his neighbor went unsaid as a new voice spoke up, young and feminine.

"Glabby?" the voice said. "Oh, there you are. Have you been abusing that old man again? You know perfectly well he's too fat for that sort of thing."

Merrimor turned to see a young woman glide up to the table. She was about his height, slender, well-shaped, and beautiful.

"Damn!" said Glabet. "Now I've cut myself."

"I've told you not to play with knives, dear," the young woman said. "You always cut yourself. No, no, you're just making a mess of it." She patiently undid the crude bandage he was trying to apply, and neatly bound the cut. "Honestly, I just don't know about you," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Yes, dearest," said Glabet, beaming at her flame-red hair. "Oh, Merrimor," he continued, "I must thank you for send-

ing your . . . what is she, your wife's second cousin? . . . for sending her to visit these last few weeks." He put his arm around her shoulders, but she shrugged it off, still tying the bandage. "I've grown quite fond of her." Glabet blushed. "We are to be married, in fact. She has made me the happiest man alive."

Merrimor stared from him to her and back, his chin on his chest.

"Come along now, Glabby," the woman said. "The kitchen door still needs fixing, and you *did* promise."

"Anores my dearest, greatest of my desires, keeper of my heart, nothing would please me more. But I must attend to my guest. I'll be along shortly."

Anores left them, pausing to gaze at Merrimor with large amber eyes. He caught a hint of a wink as she turned and walked jauntily away.

Glabet sighed. "She's a dear girl, my friend, charming and so caring. But I have heard that people of her hair color often have a ferocious temper."

Merrimor nodded. "Of that I have no doubt."

"Ah, well," sighed Merrimor the Mage as he trudged home through the Magic Orchard. "Who am I to tell a dragon how to do dragony things? They must have their fun, after all." He chuckled and crushed a golden pear under the heel of his dusty boot.

*Michael Scanlon has lived in all four corners of the United States and travelled widely elsewhere as an "airlines brat". He has been reading science fiction for as long as he can remember, and writing it for several years. Treed is his second sale.*

## Treed

*written by Michael Scanlon*

WE WOULD have caught the stranger except for John Blacksmith's tree. He reached it just ahead of two of the Farmer boys, which was surprising, since they were the fastest runners in the village. Maybe it was because most of the village was chasing him.

The Stranger jumped and caught hold of one the branches, and swinging up to sit on top of it, kicked Seth Farmer hard enough to send him back over into his brother Sed. They both went down in the dirt, and by the time the rest of us caught up with them, the Stranger was up on a higher branch, standing crouched, leaning against the trunk and panting for breath. Sed started to climb the tree after the Stranger, but he reached around and found a dead branch, pulled it off, and hit Sed on the arm. Sed fell, and it was Seth's turn to catch his brother. The Stranger then glared down at the rest of us, one arm around the trunk of the tree and holding on to the broken branch with

the other hand.

A rock bounced off the trunk next to his head, and he ducked, nearly falling. A few people cheered at that, and a couple more rocks went up. One of them hit the Stranger in the ribs, but he didn't seem to notice. It didn't sound right, either. When I had thrown or slung rocks at dogs sniffing around too close to my sheep, they made a different sound when they'd hit. This sounded more like it was hitting something harder than flesh and bone.

The Stranger tried to duck the rocks, but we were throwing too many of them for that. I tried to hit his chest, to see if I could tell what was making the funny sound when the rocks hit. I nearly did it, but as I was getting ready to pull out my sling and use it, he jammed his club up into the branches and pulled something out of a pocket. "A gun," someone said, and everybody stepped back, most of us dropping our rocks and sticks, even though it probably didn't have any of the



little things that are supposed to shoot out of guns. Even if it did, they might not work, as many of the Old Things don't work any more. A peculiar look crossed the Stranger's face.

"I didn't want to have to show you this, but if you won't stop, I'll do more than show it. I'll fire at the next man jack of you who tries to knock me down out of here." He had a peculiar way of talking, saying some of the words differently than we do, but I could pretty much understand it. Some of the people moved back a bit further, believing that he could make the gun work. That would be an evil and therefore forbidden thing, according to the Council of Elders, al-

though I often wondered why. Some Old Things were evil, but not all of them, and I could never figure out the reason for it. I stopped asking when the teacher beat me and said that too many questions was why people in the Old Times had been so bad.

Elder Jones made his way through the crowd and approached the tree. Even he did not come too close to it, just enough to call out to the Stranger. With him was Fred Hunter, who had first discovered the Stranger in the village and started the chase after him. Fred looked very self-important, but also a little bit afraid.

"Stranger, you have committed great evils against us. You must come down

out of the tree now." Pard Jones was the speaker for the Council of Elders, and he had a deep voice that carried well the pronouncements of the Council. The Stranger's voice was thin and high pitched in comparison.

"What do you mean, evil! Listen, old man, I came into this little place quite peacefully, and with nothing more on my mind than to talk to someone, and I'm chased up into a bloody tree and stoned. If I broke some custom, I'm sorry for it, but the evil seems to be in your people chasing me before I—"

"Silence!" Elder Jones' voice boomed loud enough to echo off the furthest buildings in the village. "Evil Stranger, to enter our village is a sinful crime, for you are not one of us. We might have forgiven you that if you had left the village quickly enough, but there is a much greater evil you have done."

"What evil is that?" the Stranger responded, and I was close enough to see his eyebrows go up with the question. The Stranger's hair was lighter than his eyebrows, but longer than we wear ours, and covered by a hat of a strange shape, with a brim only on the front. His jacket was streaky green and brown, like the coats the hunters wear, but much bulkier, like a winter parka.

Elder Jones must have been shocked by this question. The Stranger surely was from a long ways away not to know the laws we have. "Why, the greatest evil of all, the wanton use of an evil Old Thing. Old Things are evil, unless we the Elders have decided otherwise, and a gun, if that is what you have, is one of the most evil."

I moved a little closer as the Stranger looked at the object in his hand, then stared down at Elder Jones. Seeing him examine the gun so intently, I glanced down at my own hand. I had dropped the rock when the others had, but I was still holding my sling.

"I'll be damned," the Stranger whispered the words, and only Elder Jones and I were near enough to hear them, I think. I heard the Elder whisper agreement, but the Stranger didn't seem to notice, but spoke to him in a louder voice.

"I won't disagree with you on that. I only carry this pistol for protection. If it is an evil thing, for me it is a necessary one. If no one throws any more rocks, I will put it away." With those words, he pushed the gun back into a pocket and smiled. Elder Jones' face remained grim, and he studied the Stranger up on the branch. He seemed deep in thought.

I looked at the Stranger, too, but I was full of questions, wondering what he was, where he came from, and why. I have seen Strangers before. When I am up in the higher meadows with my sheep, I sometimes see Strangers, and I actually spoke with some of them one summer. They are from a valley down the river, and come hunting up into our mountains sometimes. A few others from their village come to trade with us on occasion if the Elders permit it.

Two more Elders came out to the area around the tree: Elder Farmer, led by his grandsons Sed and Seth, and Elder Holcom, shuffling feebly, hanging on the shoulder of one of his grandsons. Fred Hunter noticed them, and called Elder

Jones' attention to them. He left to confer with them. I watched and waited, like everyone else, although no one listened when I tried to join in the whispered conversations about what would happen next. That was common, for I had no standing in the village. My dead mother's sin and shame reflected on me, even though I hardly remembered her, and that little bit mostly with love.

Finally, Elder Jones returned to the foot of the tree, accompanied by some of the men of the village. He looked up at the Stranger with a stern expression on his face. The Stranger looked back without much expression at all.

"Stranger, we will not stone you any more. Come down out of the tree, and do not remove your gun from your pocket again."

"Am I free to go?"

"We must decide what to do with you. Your gun must be thrown away for the evil thing it is."

The Stranger frowned. "I will keep it out of sight and leave quietly, if you don't mind."

"You must be thrown off the mountain top," cackled the Elder Holcom, smiling through his few teeth and nodding his head with fast little jerks. "You use the Old Things, oh, yes, you use them and have no fear of them. We must throw you off of the mountain top and into the river, it's the best way to get rid of evil Old Things." He giggled then, and Elder Jones fixed him with a look of awesome anger.

The Stranger looked shocked, and stood up straighter on the branch as people started to mutter and move toward the

tree. I could see the Stranger's hand move toward the pocket for the gun, but there was a noise coming out of his coat. It sounded like when John Blacksmith files on thin metal. The Stranger reached into the jacket and pulled out a thick disk of some sort on a black cord. He kept his eyes on the crowd as he spoke at the disk. A blurry voice came from inside the coat, and some of the people ran at that. I backed off to the water trough in front of John Blacksmith's forge. Then the Stranger put the disk back inside of his coat and rested a hand near the pocket with the gun.

"I have friends near here, coming in powerful machines that move, and I will leave here safely, and now. If you don't believe me, listen!"

There was silence, with only the sounds we normally heard, the winds in the aspens and the river running outside of the village. Then another sound started up. It was like one of the whistles that boys sometimes make of wood and bark, but it had a deeper sound, and was loud enough to echo off the mountains that lay close to the village on three sides. The whistling sound was followed by a boom, like thunder, but the sky had no rain clouds in it.

I would have run like the rest did then, but I slipped in the mud in front of the water trough and fell. I had gotten half-way around the trough from the tree, so when I got to my knees, I watched instead of running any further.

The Stranger dropped out of the tree and looked cautiously around, then pulled the disk out and spoke at it again.

"Mac, Sam here. The whistle did the

trick. What was the explosion?" The blurred voice spoke from inside the coat clearly enough for me to understand. Was there some little man in there, or was it one of the Old Things?

"Right-o, Sam. The noise was one of those muskets we collected last month. Can you set out now?"

"Roger. I should be out of the village in just a few minutes. I will rendezvous at the other side of the bridge or on the way back down the trail. Out." The Stranger put the Old Thing back inside the coat top and started down the deserted street, looking quickly from side to side.

I rose then and followed. I don't know why, unless it was for the curiosity I have so much of. The Elders do not favor me for it, though I mean no harm by asking questions. New things, and strange ones, draw me like the sound of the bellwether draws the rest of the flock. The Stranger was both new and strange, and I followed.

As we left the square, I caught a glimpse of motion at a window. It was Fred Hunter, with a bow up and fixing an arrow to the string, taking aim at the Stranger's back. As the bow bent, I reached into my belt pouch and pulled out one of the river pebbles I keep there. As I had done so many times before, my left hand fitted it into the cup of the sling, and my right arm whirled it around, once, twice, and then I let go. I wasn't aiming at Fred, exactly, and the stone thumped on the side of the building just above the window. He flinched, and the arrow sailed past the Stranger, landing in the street.

The Stranger spun around to face me,

pulling out the gun with a smooth and practiced motion, raising it to point at my chest. I stood, mouth open, sling dangling from my right hand, and our eyes met. For a long moment we were there like that, and my mind filled with a thousand thoughts at once. The Stranger's face was so very smooth that he had to be a boy, or very recently shaven. I had slung a stone at Fred Hunter, who hadn't beaten me as often as the others had when we were younger. He had even shown me a little of his craft of hunting when I was younger, before I learned that orphans whose mothers had laid with Strangers were meant only to be shepherds. There was sweat running down the face of the Stranger, although none came through the armpits of the oddly thick coat. I had attacked another person of the village, and saved a Stranger's life by threatening a friend. The Stranger's gun seemed so very small to be able to do all that guns were said to do. I had gone against the will of the Elders, I was sure, and did not know what would happen next. The Stranger smiled at me.

The Stranger's eyes broke from mine as we both looked to the window. The faces of Fred Hunter and Elder Jones peered out cautiously, and Fred's bow drew a line across the opening of the window. The Stranger's eyes met mine again, and a side of his mouth raised up in a brief smile.

"Thanks, mate. The name's Sam." Something moved, and the Stranger Sam brought the gun up and fired it. The noise was loud, and sharp, but only a little bit like thunder, as the Elders say it is. A



hole appeared as if by magic to the side of the window Fred Hunter was at, and the arrow he was shooting flew high into the air. Then the Stranger turned and began trotting down the street. I followed. Behind me, I could hear Elder Jones calling on the villagers to come out and smite the evil, and destroy it completely, and that I was spawn of Strangers, not to be trusted.

I caught up with the Stranger on the corner to the bridge street and he turned to face me. There was a thumping sound, and the shaft of an arrow stood out from between the Stranger's shoulder blades, knocking him forward to land on hands and knees. I slung a pebble up at the archer, one of the other hunters, and it hit him in the shoulder, knocking him back from the edge of the roof. I looked back at the Stranger Sam, expecting to see death, but he was sitting up and looking at the rooftops and windows, arrow sticking stiffly out of his back. He glanced at me.

"It's you again. Thanks for your help, but I'm all right, kid. I haven't seen an arrow yet that can go through nylon plate armor, although that one must have hit a chink and stuck." I heard more arrows coming at us, and spun around, just missing being hit by one. Another two hit the Stranger, but they bounced, with a thumping sound, and dangled from the cloth of the coat. Sam fired the gun back into the village three more times, then looked at me.

"Your best bet now, kid, is to go back into the village and tell them that I made you do it, or something. Try and keep from getting yourself into big trouble." I

didn't answer, but whipped a stone down the length of the street. "You can get back into the good graces of your bunch, can't you?" The Stranger looked at me with what might have been sadness, or pity.

"I..I don't think that I can, now," I said, looking back as another arrow flew over our heads. "My name is Sam, too," I added.

The Stranger raised an eyebrow. "Right. Well, can you manage on your own, or would you like to come with us for a bit?" Sam waved, and I looked and saw other Strangers on the far side of the bridge, dressed in the same fashion as Sam, standing among things like small houses. They were a dark green, and stood on wheels, like the Old Things called cars, but they were much larger than the cars I had seen John Blacksmith take metal from to make pots and pans.

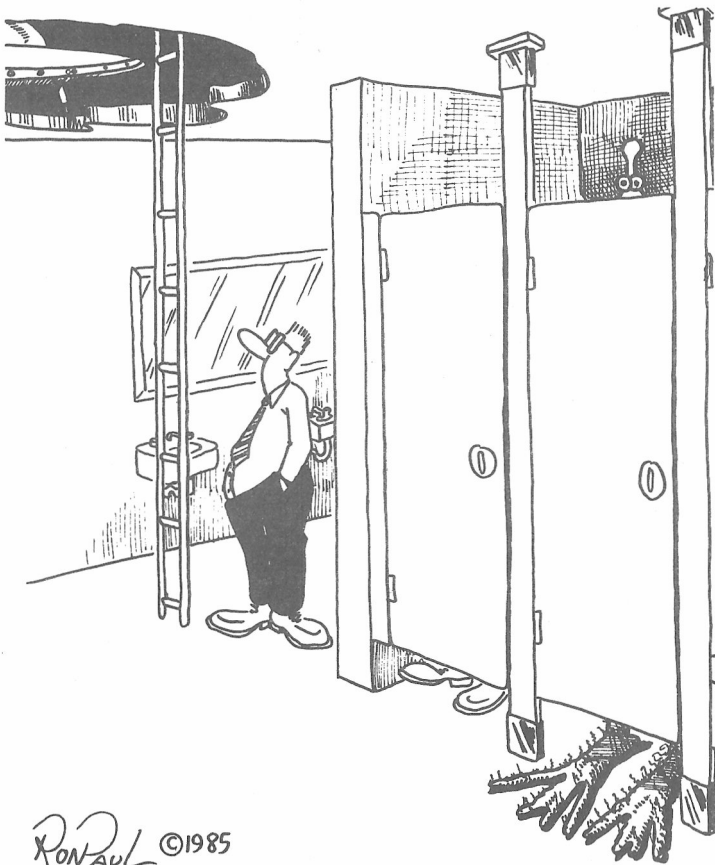
The other Strangers waved back, and we ran across the bridge to them. Sam was hugged and patted by most of them, and spoke with one called Mac, who helped pull the arrows out of Sam's coat and get him into the back of one of the cars. They all ignored me, and I was beginning to wonder what I was going to do now, when Sam's head poked out of the door at the back of the car.

"Are you still waiting around? Come on, get aboard." I ran over and climbed into the car, and one of the other Strangers closed the metal compartment. I looked at Sam, and at the other two Strangers in the little room, and then back at Sam, and smiled.

The car jerked, and started to move, with a loud sound and an odd motion, but

Sam smiled back, and as the other two Strangers looked out of the small slits on the side of the car, began to remove the coat. As it came off, Sam began scratching where it had been. Under the coat was a sweat-soaked shirt of the same dark green color as the outside of the cars, as well as a view that caused me to straighten up and bump my head on the ceiling of the compartment. Sam was not a man.

She looked up when I hit my head and yelped, and then realized why I was staring at her. She laughed so hard that she hit her own head on the ceiling and made a face. I had to laugh at that, and she joined me after a moment. She shared the joke with the others, and soon we were all laughing at Sam and Sam, Samantha and Samuel, as the car rocked and swayed out into the world of strangers.



The Tale of the Jinni and the Sisters *will appear in Susan Swartz's Arabesques, an anthology of stories set in the universe of the Thousand and One Nights. The book is due out from Avon in July of 1988.*

# The Tale of the Jinni and the Sisters

*written by Larry Niven*

*illustrated by Dresden Moss*

**T**ELL ME A STORY," said Scheherezade.

In the dark of the tent she could see the glint of his open eyes, but the King didn't stir. She would have felt that. Shahryar said, "You are much better at that than I."

Four years they'd been married; seven years she had been his mate. Three boys and a girl had been left to their nurses during this short journey to his brother's palace. But Shahryar was still a dangerous man, and he'd been wire-tight these past two days. Something had frightened him. Something he couldn't talk about.

Sometimes the danger of him excited her. Not tonight. She moved against him anyway and said, "What other diversion have we, awake in the night, with all of our entertainers left behind?"

He declined the hint. "Hah. This travelling-bed and the lumpy ground beneath—"

"—Are the reason we cannot sleep. Tomorrow night will bring us rooms in King Zaman's palace."

"Yes. Well, we left the scribes too."

"Then tell me a story you will not want studied by the scholars."

He was quiet for a time. Did he sleep?

But something burned in his mind. He'd tried to speak and then turned away, a dozen times in these two days of travel.

He said, "We never speak of the time before we met."

"No. My father knows the tale. He warned me of your . . . trouble."

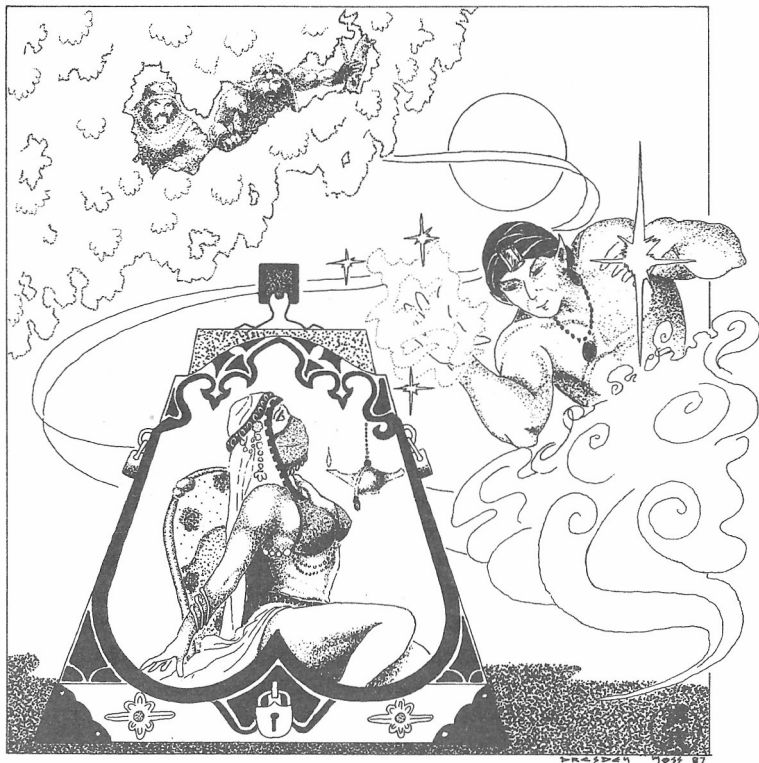
"The Wazir is a good man . . . Sometimes I think I might forgive myself for the women, and then forget. But who can forget a tale without an ending? You know so many tales, but what do you really know of the Jinni?"

"Whimsical. Powerful. Prone to extravagance. Dangerous, the ones who fought the Prophet's law. Why?"

"Ten years ago, my brother Zaman told me how he had caught his wife in adultery with a slave cook, and killed them. Then he told me he'd seen my own wife betray me. I thought of killing him, but I followed him instead, and watched, and still couldn't believe. The Wazir must have told you this much."

"Yes."

"Then we swore that we would depart and never return until we knew that someone, somewhere, had suffered a greater misfortune. We went away from our palace with no gear and no retainers.



Do you know how long we travelled?"

"Father didn't tell me that."

"He never knew. Two hours."

She laughed before she could stop herself.

"We travelled fast. Sometimes we ran to burn off our rage and sorrow. We were seven or eight leagues from my palace and into a meadow, with no dwellings in sight, and exactly one tree.

"Then a black whirlwind appeared and began to draw into itself. No monkey could have climbed faster than I, yet Zaman beat me into the tree."

"Dare I laugh?"

"It was a long time ago." But his muscles were rigid and his arms were too tight around her. "We were hidden before the Jinni became solid. That tree was the only shade anywhere. The Jinni set a crystal coffer down in the shade. There was a woman in it."

"Holes in the casket?" An experienced storyteller would have mentioned those.

"Holes? No, it was sealed like a treasure chest, with seven separate locks, but I could see her through the sides. The Jinni got it open and she came out."

"What was she like?"

"Not a girl. Twenty-two or-three years

old, and . . . lovely. Foreign. Yellow like the moon near moonset. Straight black hair. Something about her eyes. I'd need a scribe's help to describe her."

"You're doing well."

"The Jinni went in unto her. I . . . wondered what I would see of foreign practices, but she only submitted. Then the Jinni slept. We were going to be there a long time. I tried to shift my weight, and the tree shook. The woman looked up and saw us. She made us come down."

"How?"

"She swore she would wake the Afrit. We came down. She led us away from the tree, and ordered us to go in unto her." Shahryar laughed; he made himself laugh, and Scheherezade dared not. "We are kings, Zaman and I. When we desired a woman, we brought her to our beds and we took her. We are not *summoned*. We had a hard time of it—" He laughed again, painfully. "A soft time of it. We'd moved far from the tree, there was no shade, and we were deperately afraid of making noise. But Zaman succeeded in giving her what she willed, and watching them excited me . . . should I be telling it the other way around?"

"Was she good?"

"She wrung us dry. We had trouble walking away . . . running when we could. But why not? She claimed five hundred and seventy lovers taken under the nose of the Afrit!"

"Incredible." How could he not feel her tension?

"A disgraceful episode. It put the seal on my opinion of women. If even a Jinni's precautions weren't enough to

keep her for himself . . ."

Scheherezade's mind was racing. She had not thought so fast in many years; and what she chose to say was nothing.

"I was a long time losing that hatred. The Koran warns against women; I cannot blame myself too much. But sometimes I wonder. She told us that the Jinni had snatched her on her wedding night, while she was still a virgin. He keeps her beneath the sea, where no man can reach. How can he have been careless five hundred and seventy times?"

"Did you ask her age? She may have been older than she looked, by the magic of her Jinni lover."

"You're clever. I never thought of that."

"Or perhaps the Jinni set down near a caravan one night."

Shahryar laughed long and loud. After a time he said, "Tomorrow your sister will give us a better bed."

"Tonight you must sleep in this," she said. And presently he did; but the night was already turning gray.

Four years ago Zaman had returned to live in his brother's kingdom in the Banu Sasan. He had married Scheherezade's sister, Dunyazad. Now they took their turns on the throne. But Zaman had ruled Samarcand. Now the old Wazir ruled there—Scheherezade's and Dunyazad's father—but every three years or so Zaman returned to see how the kingdom progressed.

Zaman had been gone for nearly a month.

Dunyazad had been told of their coming. She arrived with a retinue almost

before they had broken camp. She seemed more reserved than was her wont. Her manner was overly formal. Cosmetics failed to hide dark shadows beneath her eyes.

By noon they had reached the palace. Dunyazad handled practical matters well, showing her sister and brother-in-law to a suite of rooms, introducing servants to add to their own sparse retinue. There was fruit and spiced meat, a pitcher of sherbet, water for washing, and enough bedding to hold a small party.

When the servants were gone, Shahryar told his wife, "We must go out tonight."

"Yes, my lord," said Scheherezade. "Where? Why?"

"I did not know how much to tell you."

"You have told me only that it was time to visit your brother's house, to see that all is in order. Well, all seems in order."

"But all is not. An accusation has been made. I must see for myself. I want you with me."

*An accusation.* If she had been standing she would have fallen, for the blood draining from her head. "I hear and obey."

"Then sleep now."

Dunyazad's dinner conversation was brittle-bright chatter interspersed with silences. Scheherezade and Shahryar retired early, pleading sleeplessness on the trip. And softly dressed themselves, departing on bare feet.

"We need to enter the harem garden," Shahryar told her. "Can you lead me in?"

"Not all harems are alike. I can enter.

You would be killed, and I might be held as a harem concubine, if we were discovered. Your rank would not save you."

"I know that, and it is just, but we must do this." Shahryar's scimitar was in his hand. "If I must kill a eunuch or two . . . well."

Scheherezade led.

The entrance was guarded by two eunuchs. Scheherezade engaged them, asking questions about the doings of the harem, until Shahryar had crept past them. Then she alleged a desire to see inside.

She found a wide corridor with a fountain in the middle. The splashing water would cover minor noises. Someone may have seen them around a corner, and recognised the king, and decided not to meddle in politics; or not. Beyond the large, ornate fountain were wide doors leading to a darkened garden, guarded by a pair of armed eunuchs. To left and right were narrower corridors which must lead into the main body of the harem.

She stood pensively beside the fountain. Shahryar was crouched below its rim. She asked quietly, "Must we enter?"

Shahryar mulled it. "Perhaps not, but we must see. Do you hear footsteps?"

"Left, the corridor."

He sprinted. She strolled the long way around the fountain, to distract the guards. But the guards were watching the garden.

Shahryar had snuffed the torch. From the dark they watched Dunyazad pass through the doors. The guards' eyes were on her.

Shahryar had found a window.



"I never wanted to spy on my sister," Scheherzade whispered. "Must we do this?"

The garden was small. Dunyazad was in plain sight, walking as if she slept. Scheherzade noticed three low bushes; she jumped when one of them moved. A small sheep, or rather a lamb, got slowly to its feet and came to investigate the faces at the window. Scheherzade fondled its ears and peeked around it.

Dunyazad stopped beneath a wide tree and called softly. "Sa'ad al-Din Saood."

A man dropped from the tree. He was big, muscular, black in the moonlight. He landed easily, softly, and took Dunyazad in his arms.

Scheherzade continued to look. The

interloper was seated on the grass; Dunyazad was in his lap; they were locked in sexual congress. The sounds she made seemed wrung from her. The man made no sound at all, until Scheherzade heard him chuckle, once. His teeth gleamed, white and regular.

Shahryar turned away. He slid slowly down the wall until he huddled at its base. He wrapped his face in his arms and sobbed.

A quick glance down the hall: the guards were facing away, standing rigidly with their scimitars before them. Their faces were immobile, but sweat set them gleaming. They could hardly avoid hearing.

Dunyazad and the interloper separated.

The man chuckled again. They talked; Dunyazad seemed to be pleading. Then the man swarmed up the tree, quickly and silently. Dunyazad sat huddled for a time. Then she stood, adjusted her clothing, and walked back inside.

"We must be out of here," Scheherezade whispered.

Shahryar nodded. He stood slowly. She had been afraid he would not move at all.

He reached the fountain in a silent sprint, and crawled backward behind its cover. Perhaps that was unneeded. The guards were looking out at the garden, now that Dunyazad couldn't see them, speaking in furious whispers. This must be agony for them, Sheherezade thought. They knew too much. How could their tale end but with a headsman's ax?

Shahryar sat limp on the pillows. His face was ashen. "It's like a recurring nightmare. How could this happen to us again? Has Allah decreed this as punishment for me and Zaman? Because once we behaved like rabid hyenas after our wives betrayed us—"

"What will you do?"

"I will not kill Dunyazad. I will not kill a woman ever again. Enough is enough!" He looked at her at last. "A woman came to me, one of your sister's harem retinue. She got past the guards somehow, came to me in the roof garden. She said that Dunyazad was betraying my brother. I should have been enraged. I wasn't. I was afraid."

Scheherezade only nodded.

"I *knew* I should kill the old woman. Lying or not, her mouth must be shut.

You agree?"

"I—"

"But I've killed too many women! So I put her in a cell and we set out for Zaman's palace. But Zaman would kill Dunyazad, I think. And the children, because they might not be legitimate. How *could* she? She must *know* what a risk she takes."

Scheherezade said, "Allah is not your enemy."

"Do I have any enemy besides my own fate?"

"I think so." For her life, Scheherezade had learned how to be tactful; but this was not a time for tact. "You must have been thinking of betrayal last night, when you told me the tale of the Jinni and the crystal casket. Well, the woman was a Jinni, too."

He stared at her. "The *woman* was a Jinni?"

"She was."

"But how can you know?"

"There were no holes in the casket. A woman would have suffocated. And, really, my lord! Five hundred and seventy lovers? And Jinni fly, don't they? Yours must have seen you and Zaman from leagues away, yet he came straight to you."

"May Allah take my soul. Now."

"Not yet, my lord. We have work before us."

"But this is terrible! I've killed more than fifty women!"

"Far more. I can count, my lord. Three years, one each night—"

"No! I tried to live without a woman. I could not. Your father can count them, for he procured them for me. Each night I



took a woman's virginity, and each morning I slew her. But not one each night!

"The first half dozen, it felt like vengeance on all the breed of women. After the sixth I would have stopped. But she was not a virgin, and the tenth and eleventh weren't either, and— I was mad, of course."

"You were made mad."

"Scheherezade, I took my revenge on women for three years, for the wrong our wives did to us and the wrong that woman did to her Jinni husband despite all of his extravagant precautions. But that was a lie, and she wasn't even a woman! —You knew?"

"It was obvious. I knew you'd suffer if I told you, but it's gone beyond that . . . Now what?"

For Shahryar had gone rigid. He said, "I *thought* I knew those grotesque syllables. My wife's lover called out his name when . . . when. 'Sa'ad al-Din Saood.' It's him. The same Jinni. Not a man. Again."

"It would seem," said Scheherezade, "that a pair of Jinni have chosen our family as exceptionally entertaining playthings. See how it fits. Zaman discovered his wife in adultery and slew both. A pair of Jinni saw. They wondered if you would do the same. One seduced your wife, which I grant must have been easy enough; the orgies sounded—well, practiced. Afterward they heard you and Zaman swear your oath. Everybody likes a good story, my heart. Everyone wants to improve it a little."

"But *why is Dunyazad—*"

"We'll have to ask."

"He threatened me," she said.

Scheherezade wondered what Shahryar would say now. *You choose dishonor over death?* But her husband only sipped his thick, sweet coffee.

"I was in my garden the evening after Zaman departed. I heard a laugh from all around me. A whirlwind snatched me into the air, flew after the caravan, circled high over my husband's tent! Then came to earth leagues ahead of the encampment. I was rigid with fear. I kept thinking, *what would my sister do?*"

"Scream."

"I screamed, I begged, I pissed myself, I vomitted into the wind. When I reached the ground I ran. The whirlwind became a man twenty feet tall. He ambled alongside me with a big crystal casket under his arm, until I collapsed with black spots before my eyes. Then he set the casket down, and unlocked it, and a woman came out."

"By Allah, it really is him, and I am not mad!" Shahryar exclaimed. "Was she slant-eyed, with yellow—"

"She was *me!* Do you know how many mirrors there are in this palace? I've been avoiding them ever since, but I can't avoid *him*. He has my image, my *self!*"

"I think I see," said Scheherezade. "Calm down, Dunyazad. Have some coffee. Try to think of it as a tale."

"They took their pleasure in every position Zaman and I have ever tried, and one that I don't think any human shapes could take. Nauseating. They didn't stop till morning. The woman grinned at me and said that they would . . . perform, she said. Perform in my harem, and then in the public square, until all the land

knew that Dunyazad is a whore. Or the, the male might take his pleasure with me for one night."

"He lied, of course," Scheherezade said.

"Of course he lied. Every night for eight nights now. I—" She stopped. Suddenly her fingernails were digging runnels down her cheeks. Scheherezade quickly snatched her hands away, and held them.

"Why do they do this?" Shahryar wondered. "My love, in all the tales about Jinni, have they ever gotten a woman with child?"

She thought. "No. Never."

"Good." He might be thinking that at least the succession was safe. "It's not for that, then. But why?"

"Power. Dunyazad, my sister, how does it feel?"

Dunyazad looked at the King.

"No secrets now!" Scheherezade snapped. "We need to know everything, to fight this thing—"

"We can't fight Jinni!"

"The fisherman did. Alladin had to fight too. So. How does it feel?"

"He makes me . . . he makes my body . . ." She couldn't go on.

"Better than a human lover?"

She nodded.

"He makes your body betray you. My husband, he drove you and your brother to a madness never seen before. Do you remember the tales of Caliph Haroun al-Rashid? The woman in the trunk?"

"Yes. The Caliph found a man who had strangled his wife, then chopped her to pieces. She was innocent, but he believed the words of a malicious slave he

had never seen before or since. The Caliph freed the man, and found him a wife from among his own courtiers! That bothered me, Scheherezade. I would never have done that. And he freed the slave, and two women who tried to murder their sister and killed her betrothed—"

"He did it to be admired for his mercy, to feel his power of life and death. So it is with the Jinni. He feels his power over all of us. Even women play games of power in their harems."

"What can we do?"

"We must learn as much as we can. Dunyazad, what do the sheep in the garden have to do with the Jinni?"

"What? Nothing. They're Persian lambs. A trader brought them as a gift. Four of them. One disappeared night before last. The Jinni said he ate it. Hooves and wool and bones and all."

"He's getting bored," Scheherezade said. "He gave you one more thing you'll have to lie about. We'll have to do something soon."

Dunyazad poured more coffee. Her hands shook but nothing spilled. "Magic rings, lamps, bottles. Sister, have you ever seen one? Are you carrying one?"

"Not I. But Jinni can be made drunk, and slain while drunk. Can you procure wine?"

"Wine!" Dunyazad laughed. "No, there's no wine in this palace. Once Zaman allowed wine to be bought for foreign visitors. Once in four years, and after the Sheik departed we poured the rest of it out. Sister, it's hopeless!"

"It's not. The Afrits don't know that I know what they are. Perhaps we can tell

them a tale.”

“What?”

“Tell them a story. What else have I to fight with? Dunyazad, you must show me through every part of the harem. My husband, you may not come. We shall return in a few hours.”

The harem was small by the standards of the day. Zaman’s peers might have sneered if they had known how empty it was.

They met a dozen servants, women and eunuchs, including a lean eunuch doctor named Saburin. There were two concubines, virgins, kept ready for visitors. “Zaman had a bad time of it,” Dunyazad said. “He still doesn’t trust any woman except me and possibly you. It means I must do all the supervising myself.”

“Shahryar’s the same way.”

She found a large room, windowless, with only one doorway, and a curtain to cover it. There were benches and tables and a small bed. Scheherezade nodded. “What is it used for?”

“If one of the women becomes ill, we put her here. The night air can be blocked off. One can fill it with poppy fumes or whatever smokes Saburin calls for. It’s away from the other quarters, in case she has something contagious.”

“Good! Perfect. Now, does the Afrit spend all of his time in the tree?”

“In daylight I see no sign of him, and the guards saw nothing when the lamb disappeared. I must go to him after dark.”

“How soon after dark? Always at the

same time?”

Dunyazad sighed. “I wait until I feel safe. But I’ve been careless, my sister. It isn’t only his threats. It’s . . . I’m coming to like it.”

“Ah.”

“He knows me inside and out! How can I—”

“Concentrate, sister. He doesn’t know when you will arrive? Have you ever come as early as sunset?”

“No, never that early. Only after pitch dark. These last two days I came early, to get it *over* with!”

“Or as late as morning?”

“No. Wait. The second night I couldn’t make myself move. I came very late. We were still together when I saw that I could tell the colors in my robe. I ran.”

“Well, we must take a risk. Now, quickly, get me workmen and paint and a brazier and a great pot of wax, and wood to make a door! He’s never been in the harem itself?”

“No, never.”

“I need the bedclothes from your chamber. Unwashed, I hope. Curtains hung *here* and *here*. And I need something else, but I’ll see to that myself.”

“I’ve thought of something.”

Scheherezade listened, then nodded. “You have a gift. See to it that they don’t use too much perfume or too little poppy smoke!”

She found her husband pacing their quarters. He smelled of exertion. “I practiced swordplay with one of the men who instruct Zaman’s sons. He had children

by three of his concubines, you know, before the curse fell on us. But time passed and you were still gone—”

“Yes. I have a plan.” She talked rapidly.

He listened, and mulled it after she had finished, and presently said, “There are *two* Jinni. You plan to attack *two* Jinni, without me?”

“You can’t enter a king’s harem, my lord.”

“And if everything goes exactly right, you might trap one?”

“We’ll ransom him. The female will have to agree. All we want is to be left alone, after all.”

“They’re known liars, Scheherezade!”

“Then you think of something!”

It was as if he held his rage wriggling in both fists. “Allah has not made me clever enough!”

“Then help! I need a seal of Solomon, with certain inscriptions. I’ve drawn a picture. I hope I remembered it right. Find a jeweler. Find the best! Have it for me by sunset.”

“You don’t understand money. I’ll send servants to hire *six* jewelers. We’ll use the best seal.”

“I will be very glad when this is over.”

The garden wasn’t large either, but it was a wonderful place, full of color and fragrance, the colors dimming with the dusk. Sounds of traffic came over the high wall: the last merchants going home. Eunuchs moved about lighting torches, while Dunyazad showed her sister around.

The pair of lambs were curious and

friendly. “In Persia they use the wool from the lambs, not the sheep. Hazad treats them like pets.” She named them. She was trying to seem bright and cheerful, but her voice was brittle.

She seemed to be avoiding the big tree in the center.

Scheherezade led her to it nonetheless. It was huge and strong; it dominated the enclosure. When Scheherezade peered up into it she saw only textured darkness.

And when she turned to her sister, Dunyazad was gaping, her hands at her throat. She wasn’t breathing.

“Sister?”

Dunyazad crumpled gracefully.

“*Guards! Help!*”

The two eunuchs came running. There was foam at the corners of Dunyazad’s mouth, and her eyes were rolled up nearly out of sight. Scheherezade wrung her hands. “Is there a place for the sick? Well inside, away from the night air?”

“Yes, O queen.”

“Take her there. Then get me cold perfumed water and the doctor.” Doctor Saburin was already running toward them. “Maybe she only needs rest. Oh, she’s looked so tired lately!”

She kept Saburin until midnight, then repeated her final instructions and sent him to his bed.

The shape under the bedclothes was quite covered up, with only black hair showing. The covers moved shallowly and rapidly; the occupant was panting.

Scheherezade sipped a sugar sherbet. Presently she set the empty goblet down and went to sit on the bed. Her hand

beneath the blanket felt the heat of neck and shoulder. She said, "I haven't been so frightened in four years."

There was only the panting, and a twitch of the quilts.

"Dunyazad is seen to be taken ill. She is carried inside. Guards describe the room. One who finds the room will find Scheherezade nursing the poor creature. I wish you could understand. Never tell a story when you can show it!"

The curtains moved back. A eunuch guard stood in the doorway. She'd seen him before: a pudgy fellow, not too bright. Scheherezade snapped, "What do you want?"

The guard grinned. Leered. "Both of you."

"What? Oh, Allah preserve me!" He was changing shape.

He was taller, leaner. His clothing distorted itself to fit. His skin darkened, his lips and nose filled out. "Your sister is mine already," he said. "I want you, too."

Scheherezade's knife was in her fist, the point at her heart. "You may have me dead."

"You know what I am?"

"A Jinni, of course. Did you cause my sister's sickness?"

"We'll just let her rest." He brushed past her. "We'll move her from the bed and—"

*"Leave her alone!"*

"You do not give me orders, Queen Scheherezade. Let me tell you what will happen if you use that knife. First, your corpse will disappear into the desert. But none will know that, because you will be

seen to leave this room. Then you will be seen to do dreadful things."

"Nonsense." Scorn and disbelief.

The Jinni was still changing. Now it was like looking into a mirror, even to the clothing. "You slight the Jinni if you doubt me," said Scheherezade's voice. "Your husband will find his wife taking her pleasure with some slave in the market at high noon."

"No slave would dare."

"The slave would be my companion."

It was one of the skills of the storyteller: Scheherezade's face showed withering contempt. "You're really not very convincing. Did you cozen my poor sister with this tale?"

"I can make my threats real, but let us have done with threats." Scheherezade moved close; she put her hands on Scheherezade's arms. Scheherezade screamed at once, and Scheherezade released her with a frown of distaste. "Don't be foolish. I've put them all to sleep." But she glanced down and saw blood on the tip of Scheherezade's knife.

Scheherezade had known the risk.

"I can be of any shape you like," the Jinni said. "Man, woman, old or young, human, slightly different or wildly different. Only name your desire."

"To see you gone. Companion? The Jinni don't have companions. How could even you tolerate the company of a Jinni?" Her arms were getting tired; she still held the knife poised above her heart.

"You are a highly opinionated fool." The woman considered. "Very well. Wait here."

The Jinni had been gone for more than a minute before Scheherezade gave vent to a shuddering sigh. And drew breath as if there were no air anywhere. And hic-coughed painfully when the curtain was thrown back.

Two Scheherezades entered, identical in every respect. "Show, don't tell. Isn't that what you were saying, storyteller? So, this is what the whole city will see tomorrow unless you grant my will," one said. "But you shall be first."

That one changed. It became the man she had seen with Dunyazad; and then it was Shahryar. Shahryar and the Scheherezade-shape moved to each other. Their hands moved beneath each other's clothing, then clothing began to fall away. Scheherezade watched as if mesmerized. The blade sagged in her hands.

Robes and undergarments and slippers faded into air as they fell away. Both Jinni seemed to have forgotten her until, just once, the woman turned to smile at her. "We take turns," she said. "Oh!" as the man entered her.

The sounds were those of Scheherezade's wedding night. Had they watched? She covered her eyes; she turned her back; she staggered from the room, retching. She heard a chuckle behind her. They need hardly fear that she would call guards to see *this!*

Now she moved in frantic haste. The new door was wide open, flat against the wall, behind a second curtain. She'd counted on help for the heavy door; she could see guards sprawled everywhere, snoring. But Dunyazad came running down the hall, struck the door and

wrestled it like an enemy.

It slammed shut. The seal of Solomon was painted across it in bright scarlet. A third curtain concealed the pot of wax on its brazier. Dunyazad picked it up in both arms. She poured wax down each side of the door, while Scheherezade stamped the best of four seals (two jewelers had been late) along the congealing wax. The sounds from inside had stopped.

They both lifted the pot and poured along the top of the door, knelt and poured along the bottom. Scheherezade stamped carefully, making each mark perfect. Without turning she asked, "Are you all right?"

"When they don't come through that door, then I'm all right! Here, I've got the nails—"

A voice boomed through the door. "Open this door at once, or suffer the agonies of the damned!"

Scheherezade ignored that. The door shuddered, and some large animal squealed in pain. Another thump, another incredulous yelp. Her belly felt like a tight fist relaxing.

"They can't touch the door. It burns them," Dunyazad realised. "It worked. I can't believe it worked!"

"Why not? It's just a big bottle like the one the fisherman found. Putting Arrow into the bed was brilliant. I was going to just cover up some pillows. He didn't smell at all—"

"We washed him half to death."

"He panted like you were really sick, and he kicked just enough."

"Oh, I wish we could get him out of there."

"The poppy will kill him, sister. Two Jinni and a dead lamb in there forever."

"She's still sleeping," Scheherezade told her husband. "I won't disturb her. She earned it."

"So did you, my warrior."

"I can't sleep. I'm still shaking."

"The harem doctor might have something."

Scheherezade seemed not to hear. "We've warned everybody. We've posted warnings on the door. Now they're building another wall outside it. Brick. The seal on each brick. Better not forget to brick the roof up too. Oh, Allah, what shall we tell Zaman?"

"I've thought about that." Shahryar sampled a sweetmeat, at leisure. "My brother is a bit in awe of you. We'll tell him part of the truth. You tricked a pair of Jinni in there and walled them up. You had your sister's help, but you never told her any more than what to do. The workmen won't know any different. I'll talk to the eunuchs who watch the garden. When Zaman comes home you'll have some tale to tell him. Something to sear the hair off his ears."

"I cherish your faith in me, my love. So it's not over yet, is it?"

"It will never be over. Zaman will build a new harem, now that there have been Jinni in it, but we can't keep everyone away forever. Suppose those *things* make promises through the door? One day they'll get loose, whatever we do . . ."

"It may not happen until we're all dead." Scheherezade was beginning to relax, finally. "A pity I can't ever tell the

tale."

"Living through it was something Allah might have spared us. All of us. All these ten years."

"Some stories are like that."

"I wouldn't have minded hearing it somehow," the King said. "As something that happened to some half-forgotten people, long ago, far away."

## A defense against cancer can be cooked up in your kitchen.

There is evidence that diet and cancer are related. Follow these modifications in your daily diet to reduce chances of getting cancer.

1. Eat more high-fiber foods such as fruits and vegetables and whole-grain cereals.
2. Include dark green and deep yellow fruits and vegetables rich in vitamins A and C.
3. Include cabbage, broccoli, brussels sprouts, kohlrabi and cauliflower.
4. Be moderate in consumption of salt-cured, smoked and nitrite-cured foods.
5. Cut down on total fat intake from animal sources and fats and oils.
6. Avoid obesity.
7. Be moderate in consumption of alcoholic beverages.

No one faces cancer alone.



*When she's fed up with her novel-in-progress, an historical (circa 1979) romance/fantasy, Holly Wade writes short stories. Fabulous Monster, her first published fiction, is offered with loving regards to Lewis Carroll, whose Alice books first introduced her to the fantastic.*

## Fabulous Monster

*written by Holly S. Wade*

**I** FEEL I'VE BEEN LIVING in the looking-glass all my life. I feel I shall never get out again.

They take good care of me here. I live in my house with the arched doorway, "Queen Alice" carved above. Hatta and Haigha carry messages for me, sometimes bringing back eggs from the sheep's shop for my tea. The White Queen and Red Queen visit often, just to make sure I haven't forgotten my lessons. And the Lion and the Unicorn always stop fighting and bring round the plum cake for me to cut and hand out.

But I'm a prisoner here. Even within my body I'm a prisoner. My mind grows, but my body is that of an eight year old.

They are keeping me for scientific reasons. They have got hold of a fabulous monster, and needs must study her until they understand her.

I wouldn't be quite so lonely if the White Knight were here. He died some time ago, having fallen under the spiked hooves of his horse. I wasn't there to help him up. I miss him, and cry for him every

day. He was the only one in the looking-glass who cared for me; I know if he had found me, he would have taken me back to the garden of talking flowers and set me free. I would have climbed back over to the other side, where Dinah and my sister and the kittens waited for me, and I would have been a regular little girl again.

Do they still wait for me, I wonder? I have been here so many years I don't know if they're even alive.

Now, here is Haigha, flailing about in his Anglo-Saxon attitudes. He brings me my ham sandwich. I haven't kept count, but I figure I have eaten probably 50,000 ham sandwiches since I've been Queen.

He hands me the sandwich and gasps out, "The Red Queen's coming down the road. Three professors are with her. Best you polish your crown." And he throws some hay at me, on the chance that I might faint at the news.

But I don't, of course. The professors come all the time. I'm almost used to them. They prod me and grill me and



look under my fingernails. They ask me why I was so fond of the White Knight, a man old enough to be my father. They ask me why I was so keen to hold the White Knight's pencil. They pull their beards and frown and analyze. It's a greater nonsense than even 'Jabberwocky.' I have come to understand 'Jabberwocky,' even in French. I will never understand the professors.

Now they come, as red in the face as the Red Queen.

"Curtsy, Alice," she says. "Mind your manners and smooth your skirt." I will never really be a Queen to her.

"These gentlemen," she continues, "have come to see you off."

"See me off?" My heart beats so quickly, I can barely stand. "You've come to take me home? Oh, please, may we go at once? I've been here so long . . ."

The professors clear their throats. They don't look at me. One fidgets like a little boy.

"Not home," the Red Queen bellows. "Off. Off. Off."

"Off with her head! Off with her head!"

The other voice, the distant, savage voice, is familiar. I haven't heard it for many years, but I know who it is.

"We have reached our verdict," the first professor says. "And we find you, Queen Alice, guilty!"

"But . . . guilty of what?" I ask, feeling rather faint.

"You are not fit for the company of other children."

"Too violent."

"Dangerous influence."

"Too sexual."

"Threat to morality."

"Pulled from the libraries, pulled from the schools."

I don't understand what they mean, but I'm afraid. They've finished studying me, and I'm afraid.

"It's for the good of our children," the second professor says. "Do try to understand. We can't allow our children to associate with a . . . a monster."

"I'm not a monster!" I cry. "I'm a child, a human child!"

They gasp at me in horror.

"Off with her head!" the Queen of Hearts shrieks in the distance. "Off with her bloody, perverted, subversive head!"

"But I'm innocent!"

"Your dreams are guilty," the third professor says. "Guilty dreams, guilty dreamer. Once we behead you, Monster, all this will disappear. It's for the good of our children."

Before I can stop them, they've seized me and bound me. They know no pity, no pity for a Fabulous Monster. Do they think that I really don't exist, that I am a fantasy, and therefore I won't feel pain or terror?

If the White Knight were still alive, he'd come for me now. He'd blaze into battle and save me, because he loved me. He knew I was no monster, but his beloved child. His innocent child. Dear God, he knew.

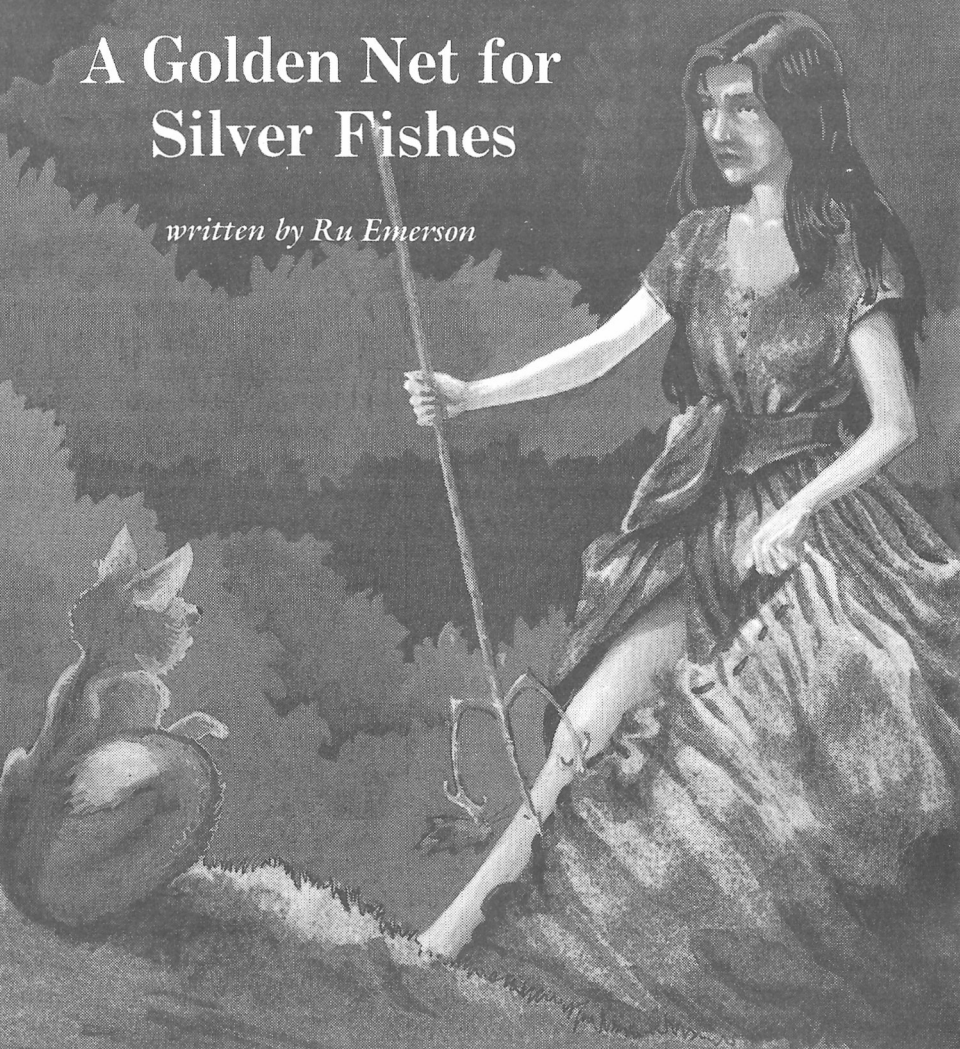
But the White Knight is dead, and the professors are dragging me to the waiting headsman, and there's no going home now.

Nor ever.

*Ace bought Ru Emerson's first book, The Princess of Flames in 1984 and has since begun publishing her Nedao trilogy. Presently working with Ace on a contract for more fantasy works, including one with a quasi-Trojan setting, Ms. Emerson is one of three women appearing in a four-novella collection with Marion Zimmer Bradley, due out in spring of 1988.*

# A Golden Net for Silver Fishes

*written by Ru Emerson*



**I**T WAS SILENT in the Old Wood, silent and dark. Beyond the thickness of trees, away from their heavy black shadow, the full moon glittered on the meadow, shone pale and blue on the roofs and fences of the village beyond it. The tiny farm town was likewise silent, windows dark, only the shift of cattle and goats locked in their sheds or the fretful cry of a baby to give away it was neither deserted nor a blue-white illusion. An owl's soft call teased at the edge of hearing, was blotted out by the incautious rustling of some frightened animal haring through a drift of leaves.

Leaves without number spread thickly from tree to tree: smooth oak-leaves piled upon the sharp-edged aspen and hawthorne, those mingling with cottony fluff and cottonwood leaves. Brown, sere leaves were a deep, crackly layer beneath the green and yellow ones downed by the storms of a week before. Fat maple leaves buried brambles, so that only the newest growth pushed through them.

The young vixen slid free of her den, a low sound deep in her throat warning the two kits to stay well within the hole until she called them. She worked forward through the tangle of thorn-brush, ears moving rapidly to catch the least sound. She'd know if the great owls were abroad; if one of the badgers was in a foul mood; if one of the bears had come down from the ledges deeper in the woods. On such a night, only they posed an immediate threat to her young; men slept in the houses, out across the shining meadow, their bows tucked behind heavy doors.

She reached the end of the bushes that protected her den, turned to growl an-

other warning as a scrabbling behind caught her attention. Two enormous red ears popped back down out of sight. *Babies. Children. No caution to them. No sense. They'll learn.*

Her own ears pricked as a rustling of a different kind took them. Something walking through the great leaf-drifts without regard to what noise it made, wading through them with long, slow steps that produced a whispery swoosh. She edged back a body length, cast a brief glance towards her burrow, saw it empty and turned back to the clearing.

It was not a true clearing, the ground beyond the tangle where she crouched. There was a little space between the trees there, though; no brush underfoot snagged at feet or tore fur or clothing; Even a tall creature could walk there. What came walking there came on two feet: human.

The vixen lay flat, scarcely breathing, but she sensed no immediate danger from this thing. It bore no weapons like men who hunted here now and again. Instead it held two odd things: in one hand, a slender, gleaming trident, with three spade-like points. In the other hand, slung across the back, was a shimmering net that glittered even in this dark place, shining with its own light and revealing the creature carrying it.

Female, by the look and smell of it. A female human in the woods alone, and at night! Truly human, she was, too: she had neither the look nor the odor of witch.

She wore a plain, dark gown that covered the upper part of her arms but bared her legs and feet, for she'd caught the stuff of the skirt up through a wide, prac-

tical girdle. Dark hair fell wild across her shoulders. She glanced around nervously—and *so should she be, to come alone to such a place*, the fox thought indignantly—and swung the bag to the ground.

A heavy load, whatever it was: awkward and nearly as much as she could carry. She bent over it, breathing deeply, her eyes closed. Sweat beaded her forehead, caught bits of dark hair and pasted them to her cheeks and brow. The fox edged forward slightly, unable to decide what the bag was, what it contained. Magic: of course it was magic. None of the woman's magic, though. And it drew her, excited her curiosity. What was it that cast its own light and what was within it to shift and shimmer so?

Magic. Not clean magic either, and she could see, all of a sudden, something of the bag and its contents. Gold mesh gave its own yellow light, casting net-shaped diamond shadows across the dead, brown leaves on which it rested. Within that golden mesh, something silver and shimmering-swift moved, first one way, then the other, across the net bag, back again. "By'r mother," the vixen whispered, and slipped her nose under a paw to hold it from trembling. Fish swam there, small, silvery fish darted back and forth swimming in water no net could hold.

As she watched, the woman straightened, clutched the bag and pulled it open, cautiously, holding the edge high, twisting a golden thread firmly around her hand. With the trident, she ruffled through the dead leaves piled deep around the bag, transferred a tall and de-

licately balanced stack of them to the bag. They drifted loose, became lustrous, shining—alive. Slender, silvery fishes swam down and away to join the others.

As she worked, the woman sang in a low voice. The fox couldn't make out the words. But she knew sorrow when she heard it, and the curiosity was suddenly more than she could bear.

She warned her kits to stay deep in the den, out of sight, while she herself slid under the last of the bramble and into the open.

"Why do you sing, woman?"

"Oh!" In her surprise, the woman nearly lost hold of the bag, and one or two small fish slopped over the edge. They slid down the mesh part way, lost their sheen and floated, dead leaves again, to the forest floor. "Who speaks?"

"Only I, Veda. Why do you take the leaves?"

"Because I must—ah, I see you now. Good greetings, Red Lady Veda. I am Brynwyn."

"Good greetings to you, sorrowful Lady Brynwyn." Veda sat back on her haunches, her gaze divided between dark woman and radiant bag. "Why do you take the leaves? They shelter and protect those too small to dare the open forest. Is your need greater than theirs?" Silence. "Or your sorrow?"

"My sorrow is such that I would take the living leaves from the branches, if it would give me back my child." Brynwyn stared at the golden bag and its swimming mass as though seeing through it.

"Many lose children," Veda replied. Her own gaze kept returning to the shining bundle; she tore it away. Magic, not a

clean kind. Such magic could bind, and her kits still needed her. "It is the way of things. We get others." The woman's loss smote at her; she had lost kits, once. She'd get others. But the pain of it—

"I'm sorry. It's not the same for me. She is—Edda is—" The woman swallowed, turned away.

"When did she die?"

"She's prisoner." Brynwyn ran a hand under her nose and sniffed loudly, rubbed her eyes hard. Her voice quavered. "And to win her free, I must fill the pool yonder with fishes."

"Ah." Suddenly it made sense, of a kind. *That* pool. Well, it was not really her business, Veda thought, she had matters of her own to tend, and the nixie Dri was no one to cross. As this human had learned. "Grant you luck in your quest, then, Lady Brynwyn."

"Thank you." The woman was bending over her bag again before the fox was out of sight. Veda took her kits out the back way. The woman's unhappy song followed them into the distance.

Brynwyn cleaned that pile of leaves to the base of the tree and all around it, and the bag was almost unbearably heavy when she swung it back onto her shoulder. Not too heavy to carry, however. The more fishes she brought to Dri's lake, the sooner the task would be done and the sooner Edda might again be here.

Fool, she whispered to herself, as she staggered through the dark trees. The bag was damp against her back. Fool, on all counts. To have cared for Brienen enough to wed him when the sign of the wasting illness was already on him. Fool,

more, to have settled all the love that had been Brienen's on their only child. But Edda was the image of Brienen, and without her life would have been dull and grey indeed after Brienen died.

Fool again, to let the child play away from her, knowing Edda had Brienen's curiosity, knowing the woods could be so unsafe. And so Dri had taken her, and when a terrified Brynwyn had come looking for the child, Dri made the bargain: fish to fill her pond in exchange for the child.

But Dri ate so many of them every day, and the pool filled so slowly. *I'll have cleared the woods of fallen leaves, all of them, before she is satisfied.*

"Edda," she whispered, and a tear slipped down her face to mingle with the silvery fishes. She swallowed, pulled open a corner of the net and began to fill it.

The second pile of leaves was not as large as the first; but it would do to finish filling the net for this night. Behind her, for a distance of a barn length, the ground was bare. Dri would scold, but there was no help for it, she was too worn to carry more and the need to see the child was an unbearable pain.

"Lady?" A burring voice near her foot slid into her thoughts, bringing her back to the moment. "Lady Brynwyn?"

"Who—is it you, by my foot?" Brynwyn crouched down, one hand outflung to keep the bag from tipping and spilling its precious, hard-sought cargo. It swayed gently with the motion of the fishes as they swam to one side, shifted, swam back. A bird no longer than her

hand hopped onto her foot and then onto her free hand. She brought it nearer her face.

It stepped onto the side of her hand, gazed at her directly. It was a nightjar: small, mottled brown, hard to see even in the daylight, well-nigh invisible here and now. Small whiskers framed the blunt beak. "I heard you speaking with Veda," he said in his soft burring voice. "I am Crooh," the R rolled generously, "and I must ask you to open the nixie's enchanted net, for my family went in with your last handful of leaves."

"Oh, no!" Brynwyn whispered aghast. The bag trembled as she pulled the opening wide, and more fish sloshed over the edge to become leaves once again halfway to the ground. Crooh flew from her hand to catch the far strings in his beak as she thrust her hand into the net: his strength wasn't enough to keep the bag from tilting but the string loosened no further. Brynwyn's arm came out wet to the elbow, a motley collection of twigs, leaves and wet birds in her hand. Crooh's mate shook indignantly, splattering them all; the chicks made unhappy little sounds. Brynwyn deposited them on the ground, brought out leaves to surround and hide them. She drew the stings snug, and Crooh fluttered anxiously down.

Brynwyn knelt. "My apologies, brown lady."

"Huh." But Crooh murmured against her ear and she subsided on her pile of now dry leaves. The chicks crept under her wings and grew silent.

"And to you, Crooh."

"You undid the fault, do not fret it." He studied her. "You are the woman

whose child the nixie holds." He didn't really need to ask. As a night flyer, he saw more of Dri than the day beasts did, knew more of her intentions than he cared to. More than even the owls did, since he was smaller and less visible—even to nixie-eyes. "She'll not let the child go," Crooh added gently. "You know that."

Brynwyn dropped heavily to the ground, one hand automatically steadying the net, and drew her knees up to her chin. "I . . . sometimes I fear it." She sighed miserably. "But she swore an oath, Dri did, that Edda would again be mine when the pond was filled with fishes."

"And how well have you done, filling that pond?" Crooh prompted quietly.

Brynwyn sighed again, let her eyes close. "She eats four parts of those I bring. I'll be worn into my grave before it's filled." Her gaze dropped to the pile of twigs, nightjar and birdlings. "I'm sorry for this, Crooh, but I have no choice. Dri may yet give me my child back. And it is the only way I can see her, my Edda, even though she isn't aware of me."

"No. Dri keeps her asleep, in a coracle woven of moonstuff."

Brynwyn's head came up and she stared at him. "How did you know that?"

"I've seen. When you pour out the fishes, the water in the pond rises with the weight of them, and the coracle sinks out of sight, beneath the water." The nightjar gazed at her, and there was sympathy in the brown eyes. "You cannot fill Dri's pond, by yourself and unaided. She's greedy, you cannot fetch

faster than she can eat." Silence. "It would take all the fallen leaves from one side of these woods to the other; it would take those still on the trees, those not yet budded, years of them and more years still. Are you so patient? Or so strong?"

"If I must be." Brynwyn's chin was set but her shoulders drooped.

"If you can be," the bird corrected her softly. "And if you do what she wants, and if somehow you should fill her pond with fishes, when the last bagful goes in, the water will overflow the coracle and the banks. The pond will become a vast lake with the tall, dead trees that were this forest in its depths. It will drown all creatures foolish enough to remain near it—and the woman who fed it. The child will by then be of an age to take up the net."

"No." It was barely a whisper, a sound Crooh sensed more than heard. The bag of fishes swayed and sloshed; Brynwyn grabbed at it and held it firm, but her hand trembled.

"That is the nixie's intention. But there is a way to thwart her. If the coracle could be borne away, the leaves scattered, the net shredded, all at once—

Brynwyn let her head fall forward onto her knees. Crooh flew up to her shoulder and perched near her ear, casting a warning glance down to his wife, who was still muttering in her damp nest. She glared back up at him but quieted once again.

"If I tried that, Crooh, and failed, she'd take Edda forever, and kill me then and there."

"You've lost already; the nixie has the bargain fully balanced to her side. Your

death waits for you, a handful of years hence. The child will have long years and hard, serving Dri before she too grows old and dies. Death for her and for you, now, instead: is that more a failure than your loss, and the child's, if you fill the pool?"

A pause. Brynwyn shook her head; her eyes were desperate. "I . . . I can't touch Dri's coracle, no one can. It's moonstuff, you can't hold that! It's like clutching at air, like building a box of water!"

"And those," Crooh said gently, a bob of his head indicating the net, "are dead leaves caught in a bag woven of rushes." Silence again. An owl hooted not far away and something bounded across the clearing, seeking the shelter of a thorn bush. "You can touch moonlight. The same as the leaves you push into that net shift against your back and leave your gown wet. You have only to see it, or to feel it, to know it." Brynwyn shook her head in silent disbelief. The spirit was gone from her once again; she scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her free hand. "Fear and grief blind you, woman, you cannot think it through in such a state. Take your net full of fishes, go see your child."

Brynwyn struggled to her feet. "You are that much right. I cannot think. I am tired and worn, and I see no way to do what you say."

"If there was a way," the bird urged. "If there was, would you spill the leaves?"

"I—if Edda—I don't know." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Crooh. I don't know."

"Go. Look upon your child. Be

ready." Crooh fluttered from her shoulder and vanished in the dark between the trees. Brynwyn stared after him, too exhausted to attempt to puzzle his meaning, too miserable to dare hope. The shifting bag was a weight against her leg, and the net rubbed her bare skin.

Middle night. Brynwyn staggered past the last trees, through the low willow brush that edged the stream, turned and followed it a distance. The meadow was ghostly, the grasses thick and soaked with dew; young frogs peeped and chirked at a distance, falling silent as she passed. The stream vanished in a bog; she turned away from it, bore right and climbed a low hill. A mirror of a pond, a circular mere, lay below her.

Brush and hedge-roses edged its north side, wild iris dipped into the water to her right; a few cattails clustered against the near bank. She stopped when her bare toes squelched into mud and water washed against her ankles. She stepped back onto firm ground, slung the bag from her shoulders. Waited.

"You are late. Do you not miss the child as much as you did?" The sibilant voice tickled her ears and the loose hair against her neck. Dri appeared as she always did, without warning, appearing to stand among the cattails and no higher than they, her skin and clothing shifting like the water behind her. Tonight she'd been gathering roses, and had twined them in her hair, in a band around her wrist.

Brynwyn kept her silence. It never did any good to argue with the creature, or to apologize, and she'd long since given

over doing either. If she'd mentioned rescuing Crooh's mate and young, the nixie would have railed at her for it. "That is a fine bag you have for me—is it full? Well, full enough, I suppose, for now." Dri faded, vanished briefly, appeared suddenly mid-pond, and with a twinkling laugh dove beneath the water.

In her place, a shining skeleton of a round-boat slowly rose until it floated motionless on the still surface. Within the half circle of moonlight coracle, a sleeping child lay on her side, one small brown hand tucked under a flushed cheek. She vanished in a haze of tears. Brynwyn wiped them away and gazed hungrily at her child.

So near! Seven steps, straight distance, would have brought them together! But as soon as she entered the pond, the coracle would sink. As it would when she poured the contents of the net into the water.

"You have looked long enough. Now." Dri's resonant whisper filled her head, coming from everywhere and nowhere. "Not yet," Brynwyn begged, but her only answer was the demanding "Now." She turned, knelt by the bag, fumbled with the knot, spending as much time as she dared, her eyes all the while on the coracle. "Now!" Dri's shout made her ears ring. She dragged the bag to the water's edge and with one last anguished look at her sleeping child, loosed the ties.

Fishes and water began to pour in a sparkling stream from the net; the pool rose, lapped at her toes. The coracle began to sink. "Now!" There was a sudden anxiety in the nixie's order, and a growing sense of *something* in the air.



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The frogs were silenced, a wind bent the iris and rustled the dry cattails. Brynwyn snatched up the cords to halt the spill and spun around, her free hand raised in defense against whatever was there.

Birds, and more birds. An enormous shadow like a solid, single thing followed them across the meadow. Owls were there: the great horned, elf owls, the rare whites. Nighthawks. Nightjars by the hundred, or so it seemed to Brynwyn, who stood and stared up into the black masses of them.

Behind her the nixie shrieked in rage, but too late: the birds swept low, seized moonlight crossbeams and bore the coracle away. The bag fell from Brynwyn's hand; with sudden determination she caught it up, dragged it away from the pond and tore it open. A handful of fishes spilled from it, a cupful of water sloshed to dry ground. *Dry ground.* There was no more mud here, no water. The nixie's pool was shrinking.

Leaves swirled high in a whirlwind gust, blew across the meadow and vanished into the night. The net went up with the last of them, turned end for end,

sailed across the pond and snagged on the rose bushes. Brynwyn ran after it.

Her sleeves ripped on thorns and blood trailed down her forearm as she fumbled for the long strings. She tugged: once, twice. The third time the ties came away in her hand. She stared at them: they were already unraveling on her palm. "Dry grass," she muttered. Brown, sere grass unwound itself and lay in shreds on the dwindling water.

She tore at the net. A pile of rushes lay at her feet; she caught them up in scratched and bleeding fingers, threw them into the wind and fled.

The pond was the size of a well and still shrinking; she could have leaped over it. There was no sign of Dri.

The wind blew a final gust, wailed across the grass and dragged Brynwyn's hair back from her face and cooled her cheeks. It fell to nothing then, gone as suddenly as it came. The meadow was silent, so silent she could hear the soft voices of nightjars, just over the hill. And among them, no louder than they, the call of a small child waking from a long nap.

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*In 1980, on my way from Melbourne Australia to Sydney, I had the window seat of three and, suffering from a cold, did not pay much attention to my seatmates at first.*

*Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a cover that looked awfully familiar. Which it should, since the man next to me was reading To Ride Pegasus. Now he was mid-thirties, wearing a Countess Mara tie, silk shirt, and well cut lightweight grey wool suit: not the type I generally see reading science fiction. So I waited until he turned the page and then joggled his arm.*

*"Hey, is that book any good?" I asked in a dubious tone.*

*"Why, yes," he replied, "but then I like all the books by this author." He introduced himself as David Ogilvie whom I knew to be the stage director of the Sydney Opera Company. We talked about opera for the rest of the trip and I quite forgot my cold!*

—from Anne McCaffrey, on the relative anonymity of science fiction writers.

# Death is an Acquired Trait

*written by Mike Resnick*

**A**S THINGS STAND now, the 2043 Kentucky Derby is going to be won by Hi Falutin, which is a pretty silly name for a horse, but by the time his career is over it won't seem any sillier than Swaps or Tim Tam or Bally Ache. He's going to win by a neck in two minutes one second flat on a fast track, and Barfly, who will finish third, will be disqualified and placed last for interfering with three other horses in the homestretch.

Exactly seven thousand one hundred and fifty-six years later, the star known as Antares will go nova.

And two million and three years after that, the first glimmerings of intelligence will be noticeable among the strange little mollusks that inhabit the tidal pools on the fourth planet of the star known as Spica.

I'd tell you my name, but you probably couldn't pronounce it and I probably wouldn't spell it the same way twice in a row—it changes a lot, you know (or maybe you don't know, which really isn't my problem anyway). I think I will tell you where I come from, though. It changes a lot too, but these days we're calling it Quiggle. Or maybe Quobble. Anyhow, it's the sixth planet circling the star you know as Betelgeuse. Or, at least,

it used to be. I don't think it's there anymore. Just as well. Seeing it would only depress me—especially the spot where I'm buried.

But now I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

Once upon a time I belonged to a race of humanoids that inhabited the sixth planet of Betelgeuse, which we used to call Proff in the old days. Also, I use the word "humanoids" only to give you a point of reference. Actually, I always thought we were more the human type, and you guys were the humanoids. But why quibble? (Say, that's not bad; I think we'll call it Quibble starting next week.)

I lived during the golden age of my planet, although we called it the mauve age since gold wasn't all that hard to come by. Huge skyscrapers covered the surface of our fair world, except where there was water, in which cases enormous bubble-domed cities floated atop the mighty seas, plying their commerce between the many majestic continents.

In a matter of a few centuries we achieved space flight, converted all our appliances and factories to sunpower, eliminated completely and forever any taint of racial prejudice, outgrew all of our superstitious old religions, and began probing the secrets of the universe in

earnest.

Unfortunately, all this took a little while to accomplish, especially the part about the secrets of the universe, and while our medical science had progressed far beyond anything you are ever going to achieve, we nonetheless aged and died, albeit at a far slower rate than any other life form in the galaxy.

Well, to cut through all the palaver, one of the secrets of the universe we sought to unlock was the secret of eternal life. We already had life spans of more than a millenium, so that seemed the next logical step.

We tried injections, and freezing, and hypnosis, and DNA surgery (yes, we could operate on DNA molecules back then), and hormone injections, but nothing seemed to work. Then one day Raxrgh Ghhoule—that's not his name any longer, but it's the one I curse all the time—came up with a solution to the problem that involved a little biochemistry, a little philosophy, a little physics, and a couple of other things that I couldn't even pronounce, let alone spell. As a result of his experiments, we became completely free of our physical shells and became creatures of pure thought. Or maybe pure energy. I was never too clear on that point, though I don't imagine that it makes any difference at this late date. And a late date it is; my body turned to dust almost eight billion years ago.

At first, we were utterly delighted with our new-found immortality. We retained our individuality, and while we could no longer see or hear or touch, we gained a whole plethora of new perceptive senses.

Of course, there were a few things that were lost forever. Like *crachhm*. You've never heard of it? Well, *crachhm* bears a strong resemblance to veal parmesan, only the spices are more subtle and the cheese is a more delightful color. Do you know what it's like to go almost eight billion years without a bite of *crachhm*?

Then there was my *krttz*. That's a plural for wife, but it means a little more, since I had four of them, one of each sex. Sex among the five of us was never all that easy or simple when we had bodies; without them, it was absolutely impossible. Not only is it difficult to get very lustful over a creature of pure energy, but they appeared just like me. Even to think of sex with them in their new form seemed sort of perverted, if you know what I mean.

Well, after a while—a few million years or so—I began to feel less cheated. After all, I didn't have the wherewithal to eat or copulate anyway, so it became an exercise of mind over matter, or mind over the memory of matter, or something like that. Most of us had these initial problems, but we finally overcame them and turned our thoughts to more important matters.

We probed backward to the dawn of the universe, saw the Primal Atom take form, and extrapolated the life and death of every star, every planet, every species of sentient and non-sentient creature, and finally saw the universe come to a total standstill, completely in the trall of entropy. Then, since the future has infinite permutations, we explored every possible future, based on every conceivable action that might be taken anywhere

in the universe.

It was fascinating when we first did it, and it's still mildly interesting now, but you must realize our dilemma: once you've done the universe, there *is* nothing else.

That's when we first began to get bored.

Oh, we fought against it. We explored parallel universes, examined an infinite number of dimensions, even probed back to the universe that existed before the Primal Atom. (It was a pretty dull one: no music, and only 23 elements.) It didn't help much; we were still bored.

So we began extrapolating entirely new universes, based at first upon logical premises, and, later, based on magic, alchemy, anything we could think of. I can remember extrapolating an entire galaxy based on the assumption that Donald Duck was God—and this was five billion years before Walt Disney was born.

But it was no use. Sooner or later, each and every one of us got bored.

I think Riliias Prannch was the first of us to suggest it, though the rest of us certainly had been toying with the notion: racial suicide. Ah, what a sweet thought, what a pleasant fancy!

I can still remember the instant that, like lemmings to the sea, we plunged into a nearby star, prepared to be sizzled to a cinder—and nothing happened, except that we found out what the inside of a star looks like.

Then old Klannenn Porbisht suggested turning off all our sensory perceptions . . . only no one knew how to do it. I mean, it wasn't as if we had eyelids we

could close or anything like that. It simply wouldn't work.

Finally, Robatt Xazzar tried to extrapolate a heaven and a hell so that we could determine how to gain admission to either. That was a failure, too.

So we turned our collective brainpower from all other aspects of existence and creation, and tried to figure out how to bring about our racial death.

We tried just about everything. We tried religion, we tried philosophy, we tried stretching ourselves so thin that we vanished, we exposed ourselves to every conceivable type of radiation. We visited planets where death was worshipped and revered, and we observed nameless ceremonies in which the living were killed and the dead were made to live again. We poured over the libraries of galaxy after galaxy, and even sought an answer amongst the quasars and the quarks.

Our conclusion, after some three billion years of trying, was that suicide, while it may well have been a consummation devoutly to be wished, was still beyond our means.

This only served to stir us on to greater efforts. Every theory, every equation, every lemma, every prayer, every mystic chant, every hypothesis was examined, explored, analyzed, inverted, and built upon. Every universe co-existing with ours in different temporal planes, different vibratory rates, and different dimensions was visited and thoroughly ransacked for a solution, but none could be found.

So we went back to our other studies, but always, just beneath the surface of our examinations, was the ever-present

desire to find a way to die. I remember that we finally got around to playing with Time, turning it inside-out and upside-down. Ostensibly these were just mental exercises, but each of us knew the real purpose of our endeavors: if we could just find a way to make Time flow backward to a point a few seconds before Raxrgh Ghhoule figured out how to free us from our mortal bodies, we might find a way to silence him and thus attain blessed oblivion.

But it was not to be. Time buckled here and there, yielded to this pressure and that, but ultimately we were forced to admit that we could not rend its fabric and return to that fateful moment.

Then one day little Plooka Pitzm—one of my own beloved *krttz*—wasn't there anymore. We were at first disbelieving, then worried, and finally hopeful. Had she actually found a way to die? It was almost too good to be true—and indeed, it wasn't true at all. We found her, at last, in the odoriferous universe of Blimm (it's made entirely of old Muenster cheese, and is three vibratory levels removed from this one), humming happily to herself. For a moment I feared that she had lost her mind, but she soon became aware of our collective presence, and explained that, as bored as she was with existence in general, she was most especially bored with our company, and no longer wished to be associated with us.

What could we do but accede to her wishes? The problem was that soon many other members of my race decided to strike out for a solitary life, and this left even less of us to work on the problem of ending our existence, solitary or

otherwise.

Then, suddenly, Pratsch Pratsch Pratsch (he certainly does like the sound of his name!) went stark staring mad. He began gibbering like an idiot, singing bawdy verses gathered from a trillion worlds, and muttering obscenities to himself, interspersing all of this with maniacal giggling.

For a time we debated whether or not to cure him, and finally concluded that he would be far happier like this than to return to our unending boredom and sanity. Well, Pratsch Pratsch Pratsch ranted and raved for almost 37 million years, when finally the madness ran its course and he became his old self again. It was then that we began to realize that even total insanity was at best a temporary oasis in this vast desert of dullness.

So that's where matters stand now. About half my race has decided to cut all ties with the remaining unit, and on any given day another tenth of us are quite mad (though, alas, only temporarily).

We still seek our demise, as a race or as individuals, but it seems less and less likely. After all, that's the problem with immortality: by definition, you are deathless.

My only pleasure now is to try to prevent other races from making the same horrible mistake we made. I think I've just saved the natives of Aldebaron XII from it, and hopefully I've hindered that chemist on Gamma Epsilon II long enough that he'll never accomplish it either.

And so here I am, talking to you. You see, there's this kid in Omaha who's got a little jerrybuilt laboratory in his base-

ment. He's got some drycell batteries there, and a few bread molds, and he seems to be on the right track. (It's not all that hard to do once you get the knack. Ask Raxrgh Ghhoule—he'll tell you)

Anyway, the kid doesn't know what he's doing, but his sister is dating a grad student from the University of Nebraska, and this student's best friend is . . .

Well, you get the picture.

There is only one past; it is fixed and immutable. But there are an infinite number of futures. In most of them the secret of immortality will be safe from you, but in some it won't be—and

believe me, it's not worth the risk.

So step in front of an oncoming train, or find some painless but lethal narcotic, or stick your head in a gas oven.

I've seen your planet form, seen it go from a molten world to a thing of gossamer beauty. I've watched your race crawl out of the water, stand erect, sprout thumbs, conquer fire, invent the wheel, harness the atom. I couldn't love you more if you were my own children. I have only one wish for you.

Death and destruction.

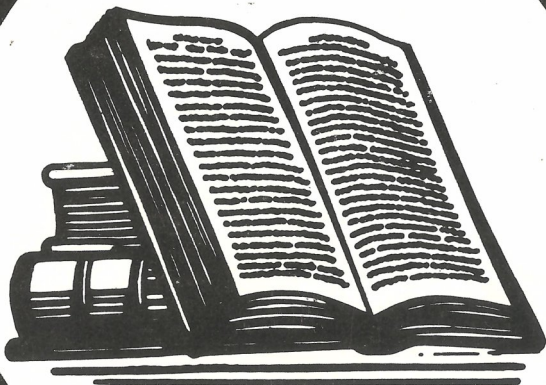
That's a father's prayer.





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