

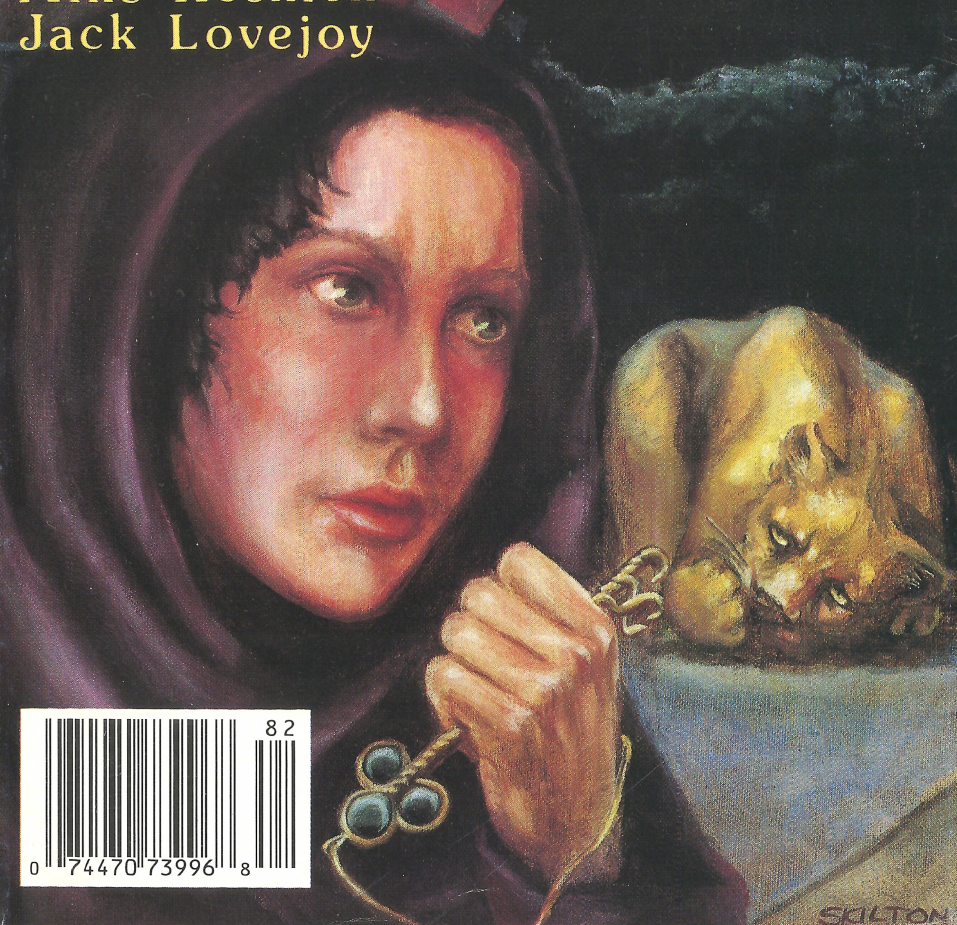
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Argos[®]

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Keith Laumer
Mike Resnick
Jack Lovejoy



SILTON

Argos

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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The Gatekeeper is the first in a series by Jack Lovejoy. The next issue of *Argos* will feature *Escape From Draconia*, the second chapter in his tale of the House of Bellanorn's struggle against the Atlan Empire and the People of the Dark Sun.

The Gatekeeper

written by Jack Lovejoy

illustrated by Susan Lovett

DISTANT THUNDER, like the growls of giant animals, rumbled out of the darkness, and ominous nightwinds lulled and sported over the foothills outside the shepherd hut as skittishly as little Baldar tumbled over his puppyish big paws inside. Both foreshadowed tremendous power and savagery. But whether the storm would break overhead, or again pass southwards over the wolf-ravaged Plains of Estracon, was something young Jonred knew no more than his sheep.

He sometimes regretted never having mastered weather lore. There were many skills he should have mastered, had his father's kingly estates not fallen to moneylenders, had his father himself not fallen beneath the shock. He was not yet a man, but neither was he still a boy.

Such turns of fortune were the stuff of all the wondrous tales told him by the old gatekeeper. Tales of valor and adventure;

tales of great battles and kingdoms lost and won; tales of strange lands and peoples, of giants and monsters and hoards of treasure; tales of beauty and evil and the reign of sorcery. The old man had a wonderful imagination.

Which reminded him that he had not visited his sickbed in nearly a week. Tomorrow, depending on the violence of the storm, or perhaps the following day, he would bargain some other shepherd into tending his flocks for a few hours. Perhaps the old man would be well enough to invent another magical tale.

These tales had done much to resign him to his own turn of fortune. He dimly remembered the martial drilling of his elder brothers, before they marched off to the wars and his elder sister married a prince beyond the sea, and how they had good-naturedly laughed at his efforts to lift their great broadswords. He had only just begun his own first lessons, when he

was cast alone and destitute into the world, and had suffered a sore head and bruises before at last silencing the mockery of a rival shepherd. Since then he had dealt many brave strokes when challenged, and four separate times driven off wolves before they could ravage a lamb or ewe—although a shepherd's staff was not the weapon he had been born to wield.

The staff now leaned against the fieldstone wall, just inside the low doorway of a hovel he had not been born to either. Enough that he had a roof over his head on a night like this, a cozy hearth-fire, and a dinner ample for even his young appetite. He held out a morsel of goat cheese, and little Baldar leapt up and snatched it with his needle-like teeth, again tumbling over his puppyish big paws. They indicated he would someday be as huge and powerful as his boarhound father; perhaps with the fleetness and cunning of his wolf mother.

Hungrily gobbling down the cheese, he came bounding and yapping and begging for more. Jonred held out another morsel, but instead of leaping to snatch it, the puppy suddenly squealed and dived headlong under the bedmat. Surprised, Jonred started to call him out, but then felt the hairs on the back of his head prickle, and slowly turned around.

Half again the size of a lion, with fangs like stabbing knives and glittering yellow eyes, the giant sabercat stood watching him with its head just inside the open doorway. He had heard of such monsters in the old man's tales, but thought they terrorized only the realms of legend. Its

fangs might have spit him like a suckling pig; its talons rip away half his face with a single swipe. Even if he could have reached his shepherd staff, it would not have saved him. Nothing would. There was nowhere to run; nowhere to hide. He was utterly trapped.

At that moment, somewhere out in the darkness, he heard a song in an unknown language; its strange haunting melody as vagrant as the nightwind; sometimes barely audible, sometimes drowned entirely by growls of thunder. The giant sabercat heard it too, and turned and padded off into the darkness. Moments later, a small hooded figure appeared in the doorway.

"Where is the dwelling of the gatekeeper, boy?" demanded a voice with a quaint accent. "No one in the city knew his whereabouts. His house is deserted, and his gate posted to another man. I was directed to you, as his friend." A remarkably delicate hand drew out a little embroidered purse. "Tell me where he is, and you shall be rewarded. Come, come, I have no time to waste."

He tried to see the stranger's face, but the hood was drawn too far forward. The diminutive stature suggested a very small man, perhaps a very young man, and the voice was certainly disguised to sound deeper than it really was. But whoever this stranger might be, pet sabercat or not, Jonred was still a son of kings, though he now wore a shepherd's tunic.

"Whether in palaces, or a hovel such as this, nothing is more sacred to my family than hospitality to strangers." He drew out the gold medallion he wore on a

chain around his neck. "The Skydragon, symbol of the House of Bellanorn."

"Skydragons are more than mere symbols, boy," the stranger examined the medallion, then regarded him with new interest. "How is it that you, who seem to be a prince of Draconia, now find yourself a common shepherd?"

"The throne was treacherously usurped when my grandfather was reported killed in the wars. My brothers Carred and Semmelred fight there even now, and my sister Anona married a prince from beyond the sea. Again and again, I have sent them word about our father's death, and the loss of our ancestral estates to moneylenders, no doubt secretly in league with the king, but years have passed and I have received no reply."

"Nor ever shall, I believe, for rumors about the faithlessness of your king have reached even my land, far to the east. Was Jelred the name of your grandfather? Yes, I have heard tales of his valor and tragic death. It is right that I apologize for offering to buy your hospitality." The bow was charming and gracious. "But now we must hasten. The gatekeeper will vouch for my own good faith, and the urgency of my mission."

Jonred returned the bow. "My services are yours to command, but his sister's cottage is nearly an hour's walk from here, and I doubt we can reach it before the storm breaks."

The stranger knelt at the hearth, and examined the way ash formed on the burning firewood. "The rain will not fall for at least another hour yet. But why has the gatekeeper removed so far from the

city? And why did no one there know his whereabouts?"

"He has fallen ill, and secretly moved to his sister's cottage to be tended, leaving a hired deputy in his place. Else the king's moneylenders might somehow have used his illness as a pretext to despoil him of his heritage, as they have done to other hereditary officials loyal to the House of Bellanorn. None dare help me, for fear of the king's wrath."

As the stranger pondered this unexpected news, a shaggy little head peeked out from under the bedmat. Encouraged, Baldar came frisking out into the open, wagging his tail.

"Wolf and boarhound?"

Jonred nodded. "The other shepherds would kill him because of his wolf blood, so I must carry him with us. Give me a moment to fetch someone to tend my flock. . . ." He hesitated.

The stranger understood at once, and crossed to the open doorway, and called softly into the darkness outside.

Again little Baldar squealed and dived under the bedmat, as the giant sabercat reappeared in the doorway and was led out of Jonred's way.

Rolling masses of clouds drew like black curtains across the full moon, and angry winds buffeted them as they crossed the bald ridge and descended into the next valley. Baldar's first whimpering and squirming gradually subsided, and he grew so familiar with the presence of the sabercat that at last he fell asleep in Jonred's arms.

"Here is money for the gatekeeper's sister," said the stranger. They could hear

muffled barking inside the cottage, as they approached through the now raging darkness, aroar with howling winds and the crackle of thunderbolts. "I see a curing shed behind the house. Please see if you can get a side of mutton and a roof of some kind for Shaytan. It is fortunate that the watchdogs have been taken inside, for the storm has made him nervous, and he would surely have slaughtered them. Once the blood madness is roused in him, he can no longer be trusted, and the gatekeeper's illness has already jeopardized my mission."

As the stranger led the giant sabercat around to the back of the timber-and-fieldstone cottage, Jonred noticed that foundations for an outer wall had been laid since his last visit here. With so many huntsmen and nobles gone off to the wars, the roads here in Draconis were becoming less and less safe; cruel robberies were now perpetrated even in broad daylight, and at night the Grell were again creeping down from their mountain lairs. No doubt the gatekeeper had warned his sister of these things, and of the rumors of women and children being carried off, of rapine and murder and deeds spoken of only in whispers.

Not even a cottage so remote from the mountains as this was safe anymore.

Furious barking answered his knock; answered in turn by the shrill scolding of an old woman. An eye squinted out at him through the peep-hole in the door; but only by shouting could he make himself understood above the racket of the watchdogs, and the crash of thunderbolts. Little Baldar began to whimper and

squirm in his arms.

He had to set him down, while hefting a side of mutton from the curing shed; but instead of diving for cover, he was now emboldened to make friends with Shaytan. No statue could have more aloofly ignored his puppyish gambols. Further emboldened by this toleration, he came trotting complacently up to share the feast, as Shaytan began tearing great goblets of meat from the carcass.

No thunderbolt out of the heavens could have descended on him faster than the sabercat's huge paw. His own four paws splayed out from under him, and minutes passed before he could even wobble dizzily off to a polite distance. It was a lesson in manners he never forgot.

Furious barking erupted once more inside the cottage, but the gatekeeper's sister Maffa, a scrawny old woman with a wart at the tip of her long nose, snatched up a broom and chased the two watchdogs into a storeroom. She tried unsuccessfully to sneak a peek at the stranger's hooded face as she led the way to her brother's bed. Her servants were also curious, but she bruskiy sent them about their business.

The stranger's prediction proved accurate, for at that moment rain began to patter down upon the thatch roof, then raged with claps of thunder in a violent deluge.

"Jonred, my boy," cried the old gatekeeper, also scrawny and long-nosed, although without a wart. "Sounds like you got here just in time. Chairs for our guests, Maffa." He too failed to sneak a peek at the stranger's hooded face.

"Now, now, my boy, this won't do, you know," he said at last. "The House of Bellanorn was famous for its courtesy to strangers, and you haven't yet introduced me to our guest."

"He doesn't know my name," the stranger doffed the hooded cloak. "It is Perlinda. I have come for the key, gatekeeper."

Jonred gaped in astonishment. It was a girl! A girl even younger than himself, with a lovely elfin face, raven tresses, and eyes of a deep jade green such as he had never seen before.

"The Mircalla!" the old man at once tried to drag himself from his sickbed; although whether to make obeisance, or to beg forgiveness for some wrongdoing was never determined, for he fell back with a groan of despair.

"Rest, gatekeeper," the girl drew her chair closer to the bed, and took both his hands in hers, as if uniting their respective life forces. "Now, what are your symptoms?"

Meekly, almost guiltily it seemed to Jonred, the old man detailed his illness. The girl in turn then detailed the ingredients for a healing decoction to his sister. Old Maffa was proud of her herb lore, but had the good sense to realize that here was a true expert.

"A beaker after each meal, and at bedtime. Your brother will be cured in three days. Alas, I cannot wait. You can fulfill your ancient duty, gatekeeper, by drawing for me a map of the paths to the mountain. Once there, I can find the Dragon Gate myself."

The old man groaned again. "Not since

my father gave me the key on his deathbed have I ever parted with it. Here it is," he said, pulling a bronze chain out from under his nightshirt. "Take it. Your eyes are all the proof I need that you are truly of the Mircalla. But as for drawing a map, well, you see. . . ." Tears began to well in his old eyes. "It's been so many years since my father showed me the way to the mountains. . . ."

Perlinda gazed sternly down at him with her jade-green eyes. "This is a very serious matter, gatekeeper."

"I can take you as far as Grellbane," Jonred blurted out. "That's over half way to the mountains. But beyond that lies Blackwood Forest—"

"Bron the Forester!" cried the old man. "He knows every path in Blackwood. You may trust him to return the key, my lady, even with your very life. He was with King Jelred when he died."

"Then he will understand the urgency of my mission," she said, as if thinking out loud. "Magic is dying from the world, before the onslaught of the People of the Dark Sun. This legendary passage alone is not in their power, for they do not know yet that it exists. By no other way can the kings of the west be alerted in time, and by no other means. This is the first mission entrusted to me by my sister, and I shall not fail."

The gatekeeper was more and more uncomfortable about lying down in her presence. "It is indeed a valiant mission you endeavor alone, my lady. But new dangers have arisen here, since your ancestors covenanted Draconia to the Bellanorn. The Grell have become more

numerous in the mountain, and bolder. It is on dark and stormy nights such as this that they creep down to raven and despoil. I have heard dark tales of their treatment of captives."

"They shall never capture me alive, gatekeeper," said Perlinda. "Nor do I go forth alone."

"She has a sabercat," cried Jonred. "Just like those in your stories. Far bigger than any lion you've ever seen, with fangs like daggers. One look, and the Grell won't stop running till they're all back in their caves. Maybe not even then."

"They must not see Shaytan, for it is he who must do the running tonight," she said enigmatically. "Though magic and beauty fight a losing cause, they must fight on until the end of the world. The rain now slackens. Soon it will pass, and come no more tonight. The key, gatekeeper."

He removed it from his neck with trembling hands, tears again welling in his old eyes. "I know that nothing I can say will excuse—"

"Rest now, and get well," she laid her delicate little hand on his forehead like a blessing. "Exercise will hasten your convalescence, and there is no better exercise than walking."

"I shall walk every path to the Dragon Gate, my lady," he vowed. "Nor shall I ever forget the way again. Jonred can show you the way to the house of Bron the Forester."

"Then let us be gone. I shall fetch Shaytan."

The growl of thunder now came at

more distant intervals, and only irregular drops pattered the thatch roof. Donning her hooded cloak, she glided out into the night.

"Then your stories were not just fairytales?" Jonred drew out his royal medallion. "Sabercats I could believe, because I've seen lions. But can Amred Bellanorn really have won the Battle of Grellbane riding a skydragon, as in the legend? Can such creatures still exist in the world?"

"That I don't know, any more than I knew until tonight that sabercats still existed. Travellers from far countries pass through my gate, and some tell me strange stories. These I've passed on to you. But if skydragons do exist, you may be sure that Perlinda and her sisters nurture and protect them. Just as with the last sabercats. Be true to her, Jonred. Though now but a mere apprentice, hardly more than a child, she will someday be a mighty sorceress. She has the eyes of the Mircalla."

"Then that story is also true?" He gazed down at the old man in wonder. "The Mircalla. The royal house where sorcerers and sorceresses reign in alternate generations. But why? You never told me that part of the story."

"True magic is bequeathed only from father to daughter, or from mother to son. Never to the same sex, or it will lose its efficacy. In the legend of Amred Bellanorn, you recall, it happened to be a mighty sorcerer who gave him the skydragon to ride into battle. But it was not an outright gift. He was granted tenure over all the land that

is now Draconia, but only in return for the hereditary service of safeguarding the passage into the west. It was then that the key to Dragon Gate was endowed with its magical powers, and my first ancestor invested with the office of gatekeeper. It must now be the sorceress generation of the Mircalla."

At that moment they were interrupted by the yipping of little Baldar; then an outburst of shrill angry cries.

Hurriedly exchanging farewells with the gatekeeper, Jonred found old Maffa chasing the clumsy puppy round and round with a broom, scolding him for the mud he had tracked on her clean floors.

"Please take care of him till I return, Maffa." He knew that for all her scolding she would never really hurt an animal.

Ragged black clouds, the last tatters of the thunderstorm, scudded across the full moon while bright skeletons of lightning could still be seen dancing upon the mountain tops miles to the west. He heard a song that was strangely like a prayer, echoing mysteriously through the night, and saw Perlinda and the giant sabercat already climbing the path to the bald ridge, and ran to overtake them.

The city gate was closed at sunset, but Jonred had a secret password from the gatekeeper, and was allowed to enter. Twice, in fact. When he discovered that Bron the Forester had not yet returned home with his load of firewood, and that his wife was already frantic with worry, Perlinda sent him back for one of Bron's garments.

"Shaytan is not a mighty tracker," she

explained, "and it has rained, but his senses are keener than ours."

For the first hour, however, they needed no senses but their own eyes. Bron hauled his firewood to market in a two-wheeled donkey cart, and they followed the parallel tracks westward through the moonlight. It was the road to Blackwood Forest.

"Hounds could find him, no matter where he went," said Jonred. "But the dog handlers might betray your presence in Draconia to the king, my lady. Does Shaytan hunt for you in your own land?"

Two saffron-yellow eyes looked up at him; the great beast knew its own name.

"We do not kill animals in my land," she said, "but are everywhere their friends. One more reason why the Mircalla have sworn eternal enmity to the People of the Dark Sun. Their foul orgies of drunkenness and gluttony continue for days at a time. Their slaughter of game continues in such wanton numbers—whole herds are stampeded over cliffs, merely for the few hides and joints of meat that can be carried away—that the greater animals are dying from the world. And along with them, those predators too huge and slow to pursue fleetier game. I raised Shaytan from a cub," the giant sabercat now looked at her, "and cannot pass through the mountains without him."

"I'll take you to the mountains myself, if we can't find Bron," said Jonred. "Somehow, some way. Though my house no longer rules the land, a service of honor is a service forever, though I first learned of the old covenant tonight."

"Well spoken, Jonred of Bellanorn. Should my mission succeed—and by all that is good, it must—the covenant that once bound our two houses together will be remembered. Would that your new king also remember his obligations, and let our messengers pass openly through the land. Whether or not he is secretly in league with the People of the Dark Sun, as is rumored, their interests would indeed be well served by a civil war here in Draconia, for its valiant sons are among the foremost of those who stand against them. Although the king himself may fear the return of such mighty warriors—until he is in a stronger position to defy them."

"He has not molested me," said Jonred.

"As a shepherd, no."

These simple words came as a revelation to him, and for some time he walked on in thoughtful silence. No, not all hostages were chained in dungeons. Nor would mere good will, even the risk of his life, get Perlinda safely through Blackwood Forest. Before his elder brothers rode off to war, they took him once to visit Grellbane, the ancient battlefield on which Amred Bellanorn founded Draconia. He remembered the way there; most clearly of all, he remembered the great skydragon monument, because it was just like the insignia on the gold medallion he had worn all his life. But the forests beyond were still an utter mystery to him. They had better find Bron the Forester—and soon.

The road faded to a mere path, then disappeared altogether. The donkey-cart

tracks ended in a donkeyless cart, with no sign of the forester. Shaytan now began to pad angrily up and back, growling and nervously twitching its tail, as he sniffed the earth.

"He smells blood," whispered Perlinda. "There has been an attack here, and recently."

"By the Grell," Jonred pointed to a splay-toed footprint. "Let him smell the forester's garment. He'll make short work of them."

"Exactly what we must not let him do," she said. "If he is injured, or if the blood madness makes him uncontrollable, I shall never pass through the mountain alive. We must first know whether the forester himself is still alive. If not. . . ."

For an instant Jonred sensed that she was only a young girl, facing a terrible ordeal. He knew of the dark things beneath the mountain, dwellers there since the beginning of time, which preyed upon the very Grell. But then she rallied:

"I shall not fail, for too much that is good in the world now depends on me. Pockets of these Grell, under local names, still exist in other remote lands, shunned and hated by all humane peoples, and I know their ways. They will not take the forester's donkey far before beginning their feast, and not turn upon the forester himself until they have first tormented him—if he is indeed still alive." She drew a globe wrapped in soft leather from beneath her cloak, but then had second thoughts. "No, I must husband the powers of the Sunstone, for there will be no other light beneath the

mountain. The moon must now show us the way. Here is a footprint...and here others."

"I'll follow them wherever they go," said Jonred. "Will you wait for me here?"

"In the abandoned farmstead we passed. I must take Shaytan away from the smell of blood."

Her prayer-song wavered softly upon the wind, fading into the darkness behind him until he could hear it only in his imagination. These days, the Grell were so secure from reprisals that they no longer bothered to disguise their tracks, and he easily followed the splay-toed footprints through the moonlight. They led straight to Grellbane.

Few merchants dared the nearby roads any more, unless part of an armed caravan; most farmsteads hereabouts had been sacked or abandoned. Denser and denser grew the foliage, until it at last blotted out the moon. He now became aware of a reddish glow directly ahead, and crept warily toward it through the trees.

He scented the Grell before he actually saw them. In fact, the first thing he saw looming in the firelight was the great skydragon monument, raised here many generations ago to commemorate victory in the Battle of Grellbane. He remembered it from his boyhood visit; although the battlefield beyond, strewn with barrows and ancient ruins, was invisible in the darkness. Dropping to his hands and knees, he peeked out of the underbrush upon a scene of horror.

The Grell, squatting on their haunches around a crude roasting pit, chomping

and slavering over gobbets of donkey flesh with grunts of animal satisfaction, seemed even more bestial than they had been described to him; like the demons of a nightmare. Thickset hairy bodies and almost no necks, with projecting faces, beetling brow ridges, massive jaws, and the receding foreheads of animals; they seemed in the reddish glow of the roasting pit more like phantoms than true human beings—which many doubted they were at all. There were eleven of them, naked except for crude necklaces of bones and claws. Their leader's necklace was also strung with gemstones and gold rings.

The rest of their plunder, in sacks crudely sewn from animal hides, was heaped at the edge of the firelight. Bron the Forester also lay there, trussed cruelly with thongs of leather; his eyes closed, his left arm stained a blackish red. Was he still alive? Several minutes passed before he at last groaned in pain.

Grimacing with mossy fangs, the Grell leader charged into the shadows and jabbed a firebrand into the wounded arm of the forester. His cry of agony delighted the Grell squatting around the roasting pit—a foretaste of torments to come—but did not long divert them from their savage gorging.

Jonred was still disgusted and appalled when he at last returned to the abandoned farmstead. In the silver moonlight, Perilinda's eyes shone more like turquoise than jade, as she listened to his report. She was not discouraged, but seemed to regret only the powers of magic her sister might now have summoned forth; powers

that she herself was only just learning to wield.

"Why not loose Shaytan upon them," suggested Jonred, "long enough to get Bron to safety?"

She shook her head. "Once Shaytan is loosed, there is safety for no one. Though even in his blood madness he would never harm me, neither could he then be trusted beneath the mountain. What are the dimensions of this skydragon monument, and how high is its pedestal?" When they had concerted their strategem, she added: "A roar from Shaytan will discourage any pursuit."

From patches of moonlight, she gathered an odd selection of roots, berries, minerals, herbs, reeds of cane, and plants Jonred had thought mere weeds. But Shaytan became more and more restless as they neared Grellbane, and at last she dared lead him no farther.

"Crush these leaves between your fingers, and hold the pulp to the forester's nose," she whispered. "Their pungence will revive him and clear his head. As for yourself, once you take your position, be patient. My preparations must overlook no detail." And she led the giant sabercat off into the darkness.

Jonred was more disgusted than ever by the gluttonous chomping and slavering of the Grell. Already greasy and dull-eyed from their relentless gorging, they seemed intent upon devouring the entire donkey at a sitting, while befouling the site of a proud monument with their offal. Gnawed bones glistened all around them in the moonlight, some unmistakably human. But for the poor donkey, it

would be Bron himself now spitted over the coals.

Twice during the next half hour or so, Jonred saw him stealthily open his eyes, then quickly shut them again before he was discovered. If he was still in pain, he had learned to suppress his groans. A brawny man with a heavy grizzled beard, it would be impossible to carry him far if he could not move under his own power. And he would have to move fast. The first Grell who spotted him trying to escape would cut his throat, or bash in his skull with a club.

More time passed, and Jonred was indeed becoming impatient—until the silence of the cave savages alerted him. Still squatting on their haunches, they had suddenly stopped eating, and were listening to something. What? Their ears had to be keener than his own, for he could hear nothing. They startled him by seeming to grow in size. Then he realized it was only their thick body hair rising like that of frightened animals.

Then his own scalp began to tingle, as he perceived the sound of giant wingbeats, eerily rising and falling as they approached closer and closer out of the night, and his eyes were drawn irresistibly toward the looming skydragon monument. The Grell were already staring up at it in awe.

Slipping back through the underbrush, he saw a weird figure, with a face painted like the fright mask of a witchmaker, and demon horns protruding above, coming closer and closer through the moonlight, screened from the Grell behind the great monument. Anxious minutes passed be-

fore he realized it was only Perlinda.

Round and round her head, at the end of a long cord, she whirled a bundle of reeds, whose rising and falling wail was now more like the cries of spirits in torment than giant wingbeats. The Grell still could not see her, and began to cringe as if a real dragon were descending on them out of the sky.

What happened next galvanized them like an electric shock. Letting the wailing reeds fly off into the darkness, Perlinda scrambled unseen up the back of the monument, leapt astride the carved sky-dragon, and raised a globe of blinding light over her head. The effect was tremendous. The Grell scrambled to their feet, howling and jibbering with fear. Her witch-like shriek so terrified them that some began to urinate on themselves.

Jonred was also galvanized into action. Slipping among the sacks of booty, he cut the thongs binding the forester, and tried to help him rise. But his wounds had stiffened, and he was weak from loss of blood, and fell back in a swoon. Crushing the leaves Perlinda had given as instructed, Jonred revived the heavy man with a whiff of their sharp aromatic pungence, and he made another effort to rise. This time he succeeded—with not an instant to spare.

No sooner had they crept into the underbrush than Jonred, glancing back, saw the chieftain with the necklace of gemstones and gold rings charge savagely out of the firelight, brandishing a knobby fire-hardened club. But there was no longer a skull to bash in with it any-

where in sight, and another witch-like shriek from atop the skydragon sent him screaming and quaking with terror among the other savages. Jonred and the forester disappeared into the night.

The blinding light also disappeared, and when Jonred's eyes at last readjusted to the dark, he was startled to find Perlinda already bending over the forester, who sat with his back against a tree. She was an apparition that would have unnerved an even less superstitious man, and with a shaking hand he held up a silver amulet, and made the sign against the Evil Eye.

Jonred noticed her suppress a smile, as she knelt and began to tend the forester's wounds, and was again reminded that she was really just a girl, younger than himself. An apprentice, not yet a mistress of sorcery.

Nonetheless her skills were wonderful, and the forester's superstitious dread resolved into a strange kind of awe, as if he at last realized who she was. An awe that led Jonred to suspect that the gatekeeper had not revealed all he knew about the Mircalla. This suspicion was confirmed when he saw Bron, a veteran of outland wars and as worldly a rogue as he had ever known, reverently kiss the hem of her garment.

Cleansed, packed with medicinal herbs, and expertly bandaged, his wounds soon ceased to trouble him. An elixir Perlinda had compounded in a flask strengthened him enough to walk, and revived his spirits.

"I know secret paths through Blackwood Forest, my lady," he said. "Paths

unknown to the Grell themselves.”

“Show me only the swiftest path, forester,” she said. “I must reach Dragon Gate before morning, else those in this land my sister distrusts may learn of my mission.”

“Never from my lips,” vowed Bron. “Many in Draconia, out of fear or ambition, have forgotten their old loyalties, but not myself. No, no, my lady, I could not accept money. I owe you my life. My service is its own reward. I pray only that I may be strong enough to perform it.”

“Well spoken, forester,” she said. “But you shall not go unrewarded, nor shall Jonred. I meant only to distract the Grell long enough for him to loose your bonds and help you escape. But such was their terror that I doubt they will come slinking back here for many nights to come. Share their hoard between yourselves. Share also the obligation of all true men to withstand evil. I am told that you have been a warrior in your day, forester. Young Jonred here must yet acquire the lore and martial training to fit him to stand beside his elder brothers, in the wars against the People of the Dark Sun. Their hordes are numberless and brutal, but our gravest peril is the Atlans who lead them. Whether these are priests of kings, or perhaps just the name of their gods, we have not yet learned. Only that they are evil and remorseless. Go on before me now; I will soon overtake you,” and she strode off into the night.

“A sabercat?” cried Bron, as Jonred explained where she had gone. “With great long fangs? Twice the size of a lion?” Nervously, he took another swig

of the elixir.

He too had heard stories of the terrible sabercats, but never actually having seen one, his fears were redoubled by his own imagination. Nor did the sight of Shaytan himself, padding toward him in the moonlight, calm his nerves.

“No more, for now,” Perlinda took back the flask, as he was again raising it to his lips. “It is a powerful elixir, and your mind must be clear to guide us safely through this forest, which seems denser even than the Marmerlost of my own land.”

She spoke to Shaytan in a strange language and clapped her hands. His night-shattering roar indeed cleared the forester’s mind, jarring both him and Jonred like a physical force. It no doubt also cleared the neighboring forest of any Grell still lurking there.

That seemed to be her strategy: not to hide, but to make the whereabouts of a nightmare apparition—she had removed only the twigs that were her ‘demon’s horns’—and a giant sabercat as evident as possible. Let the Grell, or any skulking predators, do the hiding. With her eerie songs, accompanied at intervals by tremendous roars from Shaytan, nothing delayed them but the forest itself—although without Bron’s woodcraft, they might have wandered in circles for days.

Jonred memorized every track and turning. He had always been careless about such matters, once even getting himself into a brawl by leading his sheep into the wrong pasture; but tonight’s adventure had brought home to him that awareness of his own ignorance is the



first real step toward knowledge. It had also made him aware, as never before, that he was indeed the son of many kings.

The trees were like colossal black pillars, erected here by the first gods of the planet; only spatters of moonlight filtered down through the dark canopy of leaves overhead, where the mountain winds hissed like a thousand vipers. In some places the track was tortuously steep, in others, treacherous with quicksand. Bron never faltered, although now stumbling with exhaustion, despite another healthy swig of the elixir.

"I have never heard of a Dragon Gate, my lady," he said, leaning against a tree and panting for breath. "But just ahead lies Keyhole Gorge. You can hear its waterfall from here."

"Then you have led me truly, for-ester," she said, "and in good time. False dawn now tinges the eastern sky. Soon I must go on alone."

Jonred sensed that she was frightened of the ordeal before her, an ordeal so appalling that he himself could barely imagine its terrors. Yet he was certain that nothing but death itself would ever keep her from succeeding in her mission. Shaytan also sensed her mood; his tail twitched angrily back and forth, and he startled them all by roaring without command.

"Bring tree branches," she said. "No tracks must betray our passage."

While they gathered these, she consulted an engraved plaque, which hung from a golden chain around her neck. Whether this was the guide to Dragon Gate, or to the mysterious passage be-

neath the mountain, or perhaps some enchantment affecting the gatekeeper's key, Jonred could only guess. He accompanied her and Shaytan toward the waterfall, ribboning down out of the greying light high overhead, at the blind end of the gorge. Mostly they followed the rocky outcrops, but there were unavoidable stretches of sand along the rippling stream which recorded every telltale footprint and giant pug mark. Bron remained behind to rake these smooth.

A cave opened behind the waterfall, and Shaytan was sent in to assure that it was deserted. Perlinda then followed him, leaving Jonred to grope his way after her into the dank mould-smelling blackness. Deafened by the waterfall, chilled to the bone by wraiths of mist, he had the uncanny dread that his next blind step forward would plunge him into some bottomless abyss.

Then the cave burst into light, and he saw Perlinda standing before a blank wall of rock, holding the fiery globe she called the Sunstone in her hand. Her prayer-song echoed through the cave like an incantation, as she fitted the gatekeeper's key into an almost invisible groove in the rock, and turned it three times to the left, twice to the right.

With hardly a sound, a great section of the rock wall rotated outward by some kind of pivot mechanism. But so immense was this secret door, and so cunning its operation, that Jonred knew it could not have been opened by mechanical means alone.

"Hang this key with the medallion around your neck," said Perlinda, "for it

is no less sacred, and must be returned to the gatekeeper. He seems a worthy man, and will henceforth, I'm sure, fulfill all his responsibilities under the old covenant. It is not with warnings alone that I have been sent to the western kings, but also to remind them of other covenants, trothed among our ancestors to meet other evils. The war against the People of the Dark Sun, and the mysterious Atlans who lead them, will not be decided for many years to come, perhaps not in our own lifetimes. For magic and beauty have not yet passed from the world."

She turned and faced the blackness before her, and her prayer-song was so moving and passionate that Shaytan's hair stood on end, as if he too recognized its significance, or perhaps sensed for the first time the evil lurking beneath the mountain. Then she whispered something to him, and climbed astride his back.

"Farewell, Jonred of Bellanorn. If ever I encounter your elder brothers, or hear of messengers to your sister's kingdom beyond the sea, be sure that they will know of events here in Draconia. Our houses were once allied in the struggle against evil. Who knows when we shall again join forces?"

In the gleam of the Sunstone, mounted astride the giant sabercat, she was indeed an apparition to terrify any Grell beneath the mountain. And yet, under the painted fright mask, Jonred could still discern her elfin beauty.

"Farewell, Perlinda of the Mircalla. May all that is good protect you. May the kings of the west heed your warning, and

remember their old covenants. May their bards sing your glory in the ages to come."

He watched her ride Shaytan down into the grim caverns of the mountain until the last glimmer of the Sunstone was devoured by shadows. It might be years before he learned whether she reached the kingdoms of the west alive; perhaps never. He stood wondering, as the first ghosts of dawn began to shimmer mistily through the waterfall, outlining the rock walls around him.

Then he was startled as the immense door suddenly pivoted shut, without his having touched it with the key. There were indeed powers operative here that he did not understand; just as in the world at large. But he could gain its lore; just as he could master its martial skills. Nor when his time came would he be the least in the wars against the People of the Dark Sun, and the evil Atlans who led them.

He fastened the magic key to the chain around his neck, beside the golden medallion of the House of Bellanorn. It was a moment he never forgot.

In years to come, around the watchfires of encamped armies or the banquet halls of mighty kings, when his name had become reknowned through every march-land of battle, he was often to relate the adventures of this night, and how they first awakened in him the knowledge that he was indeed the son of many kings. And the tale was always listened to with spellbound fascination. For in those same years the name Perlinda of the Mircalla was to become no less reknowned than his own.

Jay Sullivan has been a soldier, a warehouseman, an Illustrator, a Display Designer and for nearly twenty years a Police Officer until his retirement in 1987 due to injuries sustained in the line of duty. He and his wife (his in-house first reader) have been "married for most of their lives" and live near Cleveland, Ohio. They have three children and a couple of very large dogs.

The Skullys

written by Jay Sullivan

illustrated by Kim Graham

MA ALWAYS said them Skullys was funny, meaning funny-strange. But she liked for me to play with Evvie Skully, Evvie being so mannerly and all. Since the mill shut down and folks moving away, we're the onliest two kids livin' on Aldritch Mountain anyhow. I s'pose we're almost like best friends, 'cept for Evvie bein' a girl.

Didn't look like we was gonna have no school this year, 'count of Ol' Lady McKenna, who was our teacher, got to drinking Jimbo Sturgell's stump likker at the Fourth of July Picnic and Social, and fell out the back of Arlie Branch's old pickup and busted her hip. And so we didn't have no teacher. But the Valley School Board, they finally found us a new teacher somewheres and we had to go to school anyways.

It don't hardly seem fair.

The first day of school I went on up the

mountain to call for Evvie, like always. I come out of the path in front of Evvie's and sees Granpa Skully out rocking on the porch. Seems like he's always out there in that big old oaken rocker, rocking back and forth, back and forth, and him so little and shrunk up and hunched over and all, from being so old, that his feet don't never touch the porch, but he keeps rocking anyhow. When I was a little kid, I used to hope maybe he wouldn't be in that old rocker so's I could get in it and rock without my feet touchin'. But I never seen him out of it.

"Mornin', Granpa Skully," I says, real polite—was Ma to hear I weren't respectful, she'd whomp me proper.

He turns his head a mite and sees me and commences to wheezin' and gurglin' the way he does. I used to be scared he was takin' a fit, or maybe fixin' to up and die, but Evvie says that's just his way of talking and laughing, and if'n he didn't

like me, he wouldn't do it. So I grins at him and sets on the step and hollers, "Hey, Evvie, come on."

Miz Skully come to the door looking all young and pretty and shiny-blue-eyed and wearing a nice dress. Her hair's soft like Evvie's, but glossy crow's-wing black. "Good morning, Jeffy," she says. "How are you this morning?" Miz Skully always talks real proper.

I stands up and says, "Mornin', Miz Skully," and I sees Mister Skully setting at the table inside, wearin' them dark glasses and got the drapes drawed, so I calls in, "Mornin', Mister Skully."

He sort of grunts and waves. Evvie says the sun bothers his eyes real bad, which is why he wears them glasses and keeps the drapes drawed shut and mostly sleeps daytimes. I don't much see him.

"Evvie will be ready in a moment, Jeffy," Miz Skully says. "Would you like a glass of juice while you're waiting?"

"No'm, thank you. Ma had me to eat a big breakfast already."

"Well, if you change your mind, just say so."

"Thank you, ma'am." I set back down and watch Granpa rock some more. He ain't got no hair except these white eyebrows, and his face is all crinkly and wrinkly and brown, like a old shoe, from setting out in the sun all day. He sees me looking at him and he crinkles up more around the eyes and takes to wheezin'—that means he's laughing—and I takes to laughing too. I can't help it, I always feel good around Granpa Skully.

The screen door slams back against the house from Evvie running out onto the

porch. "Hey, Jeffy," she says, and I see she's got new faded grey jeans and a new Mountaineers T-shirt and new white sneakers for school. Miz Skully don't patch no clothes, and won't have Evvie in no wore-out stuff.

I get up and answer, "Hey, Evvie."

She gets behind Granpa's chair and starts rocking him faster, and he's wheezing like mad and his eyes is crinkled up almost shut. Evvie, she's laughing and pushing and that light gold ponytail of hers is swinging around all over, and them big brown eyes of hers is shining like always when she's having fun. I purely don't know how she come by blonde hair, her folks having black hair, but she looks some like her Ma anyways.

She stops pushing Granpa and leans up and kisses him on the cheek and grins at me and says, "Race you to Yoder's Crick," and jumps off'n the porch heads on into the path.

So I takes off after her—I remembers, and yells back, "Bye, Miz Skully, bye, Granpa,"—and I can see her ponytail ahead, but it's getting farther away all the time. I know there ain't no chance I can catch her. I won First Place in the foot-races at the Fourth of July Picnic this year, but only 'cause Miz Skully wouldn't let Evvie run. Said it wouldn't be fair. But I put my head down and run hard and I get to where I can see her T-shirt ahead of me, and I think maybe I'm catching her up a bit, but when I come out on the cliff above the crick, I see Evvie setting on that big rock by the split-tree bridge. I come puffing up to her and she ain't even sweated up none and I



says, "Dang it, Evvie—," and she holds up a finger and shushes me.

"Huh?" I says.

"Shhh." She's looking at something moving under a bush, and she gets up and eases toward it, reaching out her hand slow.

"Durn it, Evvie, watch out . . . don't be putting your hand in there. Could be a snake in there."

"Shhh. It isn't a snake, Jeffy."

"How do you know? Might be a old rattler."

Evvie don't hardly ever listen to me. She moves her hand in under and closes it real easy and comes out with a bird. "See? It's not a snake."

"Hunh, coulda been. Y'know, we ain't got much time left to get to school. We dasn't be late first day." Was I to be late to school first day, Ma'd whomp me real good.

"He's hurt, Jeffy. His wing's broken." She shows me how one wing's just hanging. Then she starts in to humming and stroking that bird, and real gentle, pushing that busted wing up how it's s'posed to be.

I know it ain't no use telling her to not mess with that bird. Evvie purely loves little critters and she's always picking 'em up and fixing 'em when they's hurt. I s'pose she come by it from her ma. When I was a little kid, our old cow Brownie got herself stuck in some bobwire and she was bawling and throwing herself around and she got cut something fierce. Miz Skully, she heard tell and come down the mountain. She took to talking to Brownie and gentled her while my Daddy cut that

bobwire off'n her. My Daddy was sure she'd up and die during the night, but Miz Skully stayed up with her in the barn and next morning she was mostly healed. That old Brownie, she's some mean, but she still gives more milk than any cow in the Valley. Sometimes I think if'n Miz Skully'd been there when that semi-truck come 'crost the centerline and hit my Daddy's pickup, maybe she coulda done something so's he wouldn't die. Ma says that's just wishful thinking and there ain't no use crying over spilt milk nohow.

"Evvie," I says, "come on."

She holds that bird up and shakes her hand, and it flapped its wings and flew ziggy-zag away up into the tree. "See him fly, Jeffy? Did you see?" She's smiling big and her eyes is sparkling, all happy 'cause of that bird being better.

Of a sudden I notices how pretty she is, and I thinks maybe she's the prettiest girl in school. Then I shakes my head to stop thinking stuff like that. "Yeah, Evvie, I seen him. You done good . . . now can we get going 'fore we're late?"

"Oh, Jeffy. We have lots of time and we're not going to be late."

But she gets moving and follers me 'crost the split-tree bridge and down along Old Man Yoder's West Forty. We reach the fence line and go on up over the ridge and down toward the County Road. We can hear some of the kids yelling and see a little bit of the top of the schoolhouse. We got to wait for some traffic to go by and I remember I ain't got my glove and I'll have to borry one to play ball during lunch. We run 'crost the road and down into the schoolyard and just

then first bell goes.

"See?" she says. "Told you we had time."

She heads for some of the girls and I go over by the backstop where the guys is. It don't seem like there's as many kids this year. More folks must have moved out during summer. I'm figgering and I figger there ain't but maybe twenty-one, twenty-two kids in the school, and there ain't even no third-graders this year . . . weren't but one second-grader last year and the Morgans moved.

Some of the guys is wondering about the new teacher, and Hardy Addison, his daddy's on the School Board, he's saying she nearly didn't get hired 'cause she ain't ever taught no place before, but the Board couldn't find nobody else so they hired her.

"To hear you tell it a body'd think you was the one what hired her, Hardy," says Jace Mannix. Jace, he's the biggest kid in school and he don't like Hardy much.

"I'm just telling what I heard my daddy say."

Jace snorts. "Hunhh, seems like you're always telling, don't it?"

Hardy snitched on Jace for smoking behind the backstop last year and Jace got in trouble. When he found out it was Hardy done it, he told him the onliest reason he wasn't gonna whup him right then was that Hardy was too little. But he promised Hardy did he ever get big enough he sure had a whupping coming. Didn't look to me like he'd ever get it though, Hardy being short and skinny like a runt or something.

Last bell rings then and we head for the

school. When we get inside we sort of stands around, 'cause nobody knows where they's s'posed to set, but finally Jace sets in the back row, so the other eighth-graders set there, too, and the girls does the same thing on their side. I'm in seventh this year so I set in the second last row and the little kids goes and sets in front. I'm counting heads and it come out I figgered right. There's only twenty-two kids this year.

Then the new teacher comes out from the back room and I see she's real young, 'specially next to Old Miss McKenna. Jace sets up and takes notice, her being mighty pretty, and Sue Ellen Burchett, she kinda likes Jace, she makes a face at him but he don't see it.

The new teacher writes her name, big, on the blackboard:

MISS SINGLETREE

Then she talks to us for a while, tells us how this is her first teaching job and she's real pleased to get it, 'cause she can teach all eight grades here, 'stead of just one grade, or maybe just Reading or Math.

I start to raise my hand to tell her there ain't no third grade this year, then I figger she prob'ly knows, so I don't.

When she gets done, she calls the roll and has us to stand up so's she can get our faces. Then she moves the seats around, mixes the boys and girls in together. Sue Ellen sets right aside of Jace, but I don't think he notices. Me and Evvie sets side by side. Miss Singletree passes out books and when she's done, she gives us reading assignments. While we're reading, she comes around and

talks with the kids in each grade for a couple of minutes. Seems like no time at all and of a sudden it's lunch.

On the playground Hardy was whining as usual, complaining about having too much reading for first day, and about having to sit with girls. Me, I don't mind none—I like sitting next to Evvie, being we're like best friends, and I purely loves reading, even though I ain't good at reading out loud. We starts a ball game, four to a side, and Joe Bob Quinn borrys me his glove. He's only in fourth and too little to play with us and he wanted to swing on the swings anyhow. Hardy hung around for a while but nobody picked him for their team, so he finally got mad and stamped away. Jace yelled after him, why didn't he go play jump-rope with the girls?

After lunch was like a regular school day. Miss Singletree give us some more assignments and while we was working, she called up some of the eighth-graders. I ain't paying her no mind, but then she calls Evvie up to her desk and they talks for a while. I'm watching 'em but I can't hear what they're saying and Evvie comes back and sets down a few minutes later.

She gives us some homework. Not a real lot, and I don't mind 'cause it's out of my new Social Studies book and I'm fixing to take it home anyhow. It's got lots of stuff about other countries, and history, like Columbus discovering America after them Vikings, only Miss McKenna had done told us some some guy named Brendan beat 'em all to it. Just 'fore the bell rings, Miss Singletree

stands up front of class and says how pleased she is with us and then lets us go a couple minutes early.

Me and Evvie gets our stuff and starts out the door and Miss Singletree's standing there saying good afternoon to everybody and durned if'n she ain't got all our names memorized already.

"Good afternoon, Evvie," she says, smiling. "Good afternoon, Jeffy."

"Afternoon, ma'am," I answers, right along of Evvie.

"Evvie, think about what we discussed," she says. "Be sure to talk it over with your parents."

"Yes, ma'am," says Evvie, and keeps on going out into the schoolyard.

I follers her, not saying nothing, and we cross the County Road and head up over the ridge, and I'm sort of hoping Evvie's gonna tell me what Miss Singletree had meant. We go along the fence line and past Yoder's West Forty and we're almost at the split-tree bridge and I can't stand not knowing no more. "Evvie," I says, "what'd Miss Singletree mean about talking stuff over with your folks?"

"Oh, nothing. Just some things about school."

"What kind of things?"

"Just things." She shrugs. "School things."

Getting Evvie to talk when she don't want to ain't near as easy as driving a boar hog with a feather duster. "It some kinda secret?" I asks. "'Cause I wouldn't expect you to tell no secret—less'n you want to."

She stops and looks at me. "Why do

you care, Jeffy? I talked with the teacher a bit, that's all. That's not so strange, is it?"

I shakes my head. "Nope. But all the kids she called up was eighth graders—except you. And I been thinking . . ." I stops then, not wanting to say what's getting at me. Evvie, she's watching me, got that look on like she can see through my eyes into my brain and knows ahead of time what I'm gonna say. "Well, I thought maybe—."

Her face gets soft like, and she tilts her head a bit and gets this little smile on. "You thought what, Jeffy?"

It come out in a rush and I can't stop it. "I thought maybe they was gonna skip you a grade and we wouldn't be in the same grade and you'd go to high school a year ahead of me, and, and—." Of a sudden I feel like I'm gonna cry and I can't let Evvie see me, so I push on past her and keep going up the path toward the split-tree bridge and I call back over my shoulder, ". . . it don't make no never mind to me nohow, so forget it!"

I'm almost running when I get to the bridge and I cross it and keep trotting on t'other side, not looking back. I ain't crying, but I can hear her catching up, so I sniffle fast and swipe at my eyes just in case.

"Jeffy. Jeffy, wait."

"What for?" I says and I don't slow down.

She comes up alongside of me. "Jeffy, stop a minute."

I don't answer, being naturally rock-headed and stubborn as a mule.

"Jeffy, please stop," she says, and

finally, "Jeffy! Darn it, Jeffy, stop!" and she grabs my arm and yanks, so I stop. She's got her books all tucked up under one arm and she's shaking a finger at me with t'other. "Jeffy, listen to me. They've been trying to skip me a grade since we were in second grade. My mother won't let them and, anyway, I don't want to. And that's not what Miss Singletree was talking about." She tilts her head to one side again. "Don't worry, Jeffy. I'm staying with you."

"Well, then, what was you talking about?" Like I says, rock-headed.

"I get good grades. Miss Singletree wants to give me extra work so I can get into the Honors Program in high school." Even when we was in Kinnergarden Evvie always got smile faces and such on her papers, and A's when we started getting real marks, and ribbons from Spelling Bees.

"Hey, that's good, Evvie. Uh, what's a Honors Program?"

"Oh, harder classes, like College Math, and Science classes. She says I should go to college, and she wanted to come and talk to my parents about it. I told her I wouldn't be going to college—we Skullys don't."

I thought on that some. "Hey, what do you suppose she told Jace? He ain't never had a good grade in his life."

Evvie grinned. "Jace wants to play baseball in high school and she told him if he didn't get better grades he'd be ineligible."

"What's inegible?"

"Ineligible, Jeffy. It means he has to get all C's or better."

"Oh. Okay," I says. "That all you talked about?"

Evvie sort of doesn't look right at me, and says, "Mm-mmm."

"Evvie," I says, "I don't know what them noises mean."

She scrooches up her mouth all twisty-like, and says, "Well, since we're always together, she might ask you anyway. Somebody, probably Mister Addison, told her how I heal animals—she asked me a lot of questions about it. She said she's interested in folk sorcery."

That ringed a bell and I thought about it, just standing there looking at Evvie, and of a sudden it come to me. "Hex signs. That's it. She's got to thinking about hex signs and stuff. We got one of them to home on the shed." I start laughing some. "If she's to ask me, I'm bringing her that old hex sign and telling her it's magic, gonna keep bad spirits away from the schoolhouse." I start to laughing harder, and maybe 'cause I ain't scared of Evvie getting skipped no more, I just naturally get into a laughing fit. Evvie, she starts laughing, too, never could help it when I got started, and we both got to set down on the path. I laughs till my ribs is hurting and Evvie got tears running down her face. We almost gets stopped once, then she takes to giggling and we both go on again.

I finally gets slowed down and I lays back on the ground, and a couple minutes later, Evvie finishes up, and we're just laying there sort of chuckling now and again. I notice it's getting on, and I gets up and gives her a hand and picks up her books for her. "Evvie," I says, "I got to

go now 'cause I got my chores. Sorry I ain't got time to walk you."

"That's okay," she says. "Call for me in the morning."

"Yeah," I answers and heads over toward the ravine what runs down behind our place. Just before I cuts down along it, I turn around and yell up at her, "Hey, Evvie—don't be doing none of that folk stuff, y'hear?"

She grins and waves, and I run down along the ravine.

I beat Ma home by half an hour, and got my chores mostly finished by the time she gets home. She sees how much I done and come messing up my hair and telling me how I needs a haircut, then hugs me and says how my Daddy'd be real proud of me, could he see me now. We go in the house and we talk while she's fixing supper. She wants to know how was school and did I like the new teacher and all. So I tells her about my new books and Jace might could be in-egible and Evvie maybe gonna do that Honors thing. I tells her I been studying on it and maybe I could get better marks so's I could play baseball in high school.

While we're eating, I remember about that folk stuff and tell Ma. She gets her thinking look on for a spell, then she says she ain't gonna try telling me what to do, but I should remember that the Skullys is good people and always been neighborly to us, and she don't think it's fitting to go talking on folks to a outsider.

Well, we cleans up after supper and I finish my chores. Then I get my books and do my homework while Ma does her sewing. I show her that there new Social

Studies book, how it's got all kinds of things in it, like about China, and airplanes, and deserts and such. I took care with my homework and I'm feeling proud, come time to go to bed.

I calls for Evvie in the morning and we go on to school. She don't find no critters to be messing with so we get there early. It's just like a regular old school day, except Miss Singletree's lot's nicer'n Miss McKenna ever was. I hit two homers during lunch and Jace come slapping a high five with me.

We gets writing homework, studying about what's a noun and a verb and such, and some Math homework, too, so I ask Evvie can she come down and study with me. Ma brings home two bottles of soda—guess she figgered Evvie might come—and after we gets done, we drinks the soda and Ma gives us some of them hard candies she saves. Evvie stays over a little, then heads on home 'fore dark.

Come Friday, Miss Singletree gives us a test on the book and a quiz in Math and I get a *B* on both of 'em. Ma's real proud when I shows her them papers—then I shows her where I done ripped my jeans again sliding into second. She don't even get upset, says we'll go to town tomorrow and get me a new pair, and she needs some yard goods anyhow. So I tell her I found this here hole in the chicken wire and I got a board jammed in it, but there's gonna be a old fox or maybe a skunk get in there one of these nights and we ain't gonna have no chickens. So Ma says, okay, she figgers we could afford to buy some chicken wire too.

Well, we walks on in next morning

and Ma gets her yard goods. Me, I'm looking at these here faded jeans, but Ma says they's too dear and them old regular blue jeans fades out fast enough. She gets the jeans and gives me two dollars and I go on over to Gilmore's Hardware and get the chicken wire and some nails. The price of chicken wire done went up, I guess, 'cause when Mister Gilmore figgered it, I was a bit short. But Mister Gilmore, he was in the Army with my Daddy and they was friends, so he gives me the wire and nails for two dollars and throwed in a couple pencils what says GILMORE'S HARDWARE on 'em.

I went and got Ma and we stopped at the custard stand and bought me a cone, like when we used to ride in with my Daddy. Well, I don't want Ma to have to be carrying nothing, so I got the chicken wire and nails, and Ma's yard goods and my new jeans, and I'm trying to get that ole cone et 'fore it goes melting all down my hand. Ma had to help me a bit, but it was gone pretty soon.

When we get home, I go on out and fix that wire 'round the hen house and I nailed up some loose boards on the barn and put a couple nails in the hinge on the shed door. Then Ma had me to weed some around them punkins and squashes in her little garden. She give me a sam'ich when I finished, and set down with her patterns, so I went on up to the Skully's and called for Evvie.

Granpa, he was sleeping out in his rocker, and it just rocking back and forth a little, real slow. Evvie come out and we set on the step a few minutes, then so's we didn't bother Granpa, we decides to

go on up to Mueller's Chimney. We was berry-picking back up the mountain once, getting bucketsfull of blackberries, and we found this old place, weren't nothing left but the chimney and some foundation rocks and a flat spot on the mountain. Me and Evvie, we kept it a secret for a while, till one day my Daddy asks where we's getting such good berries and I tell him about it. He laughs and says he used to play up there when he was little, but there wasn't many berries then. He says this old Mueller had done lived there a long time ago, but he up and died and he didn't have no kin and that old house just plumb rotted away till only that old chimney's left now. Well, me and Evvie always called it Mueller's Chimney from then.

Ain't no berries left this late, but we set around and make animals out the clouds, and we talk some, not about nothing, just running off. It's real peaceful up there and I purely loves being there with Evvie. I'm laying on my back and I rolls over and watches her. She's making this here flower chain outen clover and stuff, and when she finishes she puts it on her head like a crown and I wants to tell her how pretty she looks, but I don't. I gets up and starts chunking rocks at a old wasp nest up a tree, and pretty soon I hits it square and them wasps comes out mad, so we quick get on out of there. It's faster going around to the path, 'cause of the brush being so thick, so I walks her down there and cuts home along the ravine.

Sunday me and Ma goes to church. I just as soon laze around home, but Ma sets a lot of store by services. She talks

with Preacher Lowell, and Mister Hanson what she works for part time at his store, and sees all her friends—maybe that's why she likes going every week. When we gets back home I does my homework. We just got a little bit over the weekend, so I gets done fast and then I sits reading my Social Studies book.

Monday, in school, we're doing our assignments and Miss Singletree comes and gets Evvie and they set up at her desk talking till lunch. I didn't get no chance to ask Evvie what was they talking about 'cause I had to play ball, but on the way home I asks her.

"Oh—she just wanted to know how I heal things," Evvie says.

"Shucks," I says, "I coulda told her that. You just pets 'em and talks and sings and hums and such and then they's better."

She smiles and shakes her head. "Well, there's a little more to it than that, Jeffy." Then she stops and looks serious at me and says, "Do you ever think it's strange that I can heal animals?"

I want to tell her that any old thing she does is okay with me, but instead I just sort of snort. "Hunnh. Ain't so much strange as worrisome. You know how many times you near made us late for school with that there messing with critters?" I shrugs and says, "I figger you come by it from your ma, anyways. I seen her do it with Brownie when she got in that bobwire."

"Do you ever wonder why we can do it?"

"I don't guess so," I says. "Ma says everybody's got something they does bet-

ter'n anybody else—Jace pitches, and I hit, and . . . and Sue Ellen, she draws pitchers. And Hardy whines.” She grins then and she ain’t so serious no more and I feel better. “And you and your ma fix hurt critters. Don’t bother me none. I figger, if’n Brownie was to get hurt again, why, I’d just call you ‘stead of troubling your ma.”

I dig at the ground some with the toe of my sneaker, then I asks her, “How come Miss Singletree’s after you again about that stuff? She didn’t never say nothing to me, and I thought she plumb forgot about it.”

Evvie looks ‘round, sets down on a log, so I set, too. “See,” she says, “Miss Singletree’s doing this paper for college.”

“I thought she was done with college.”

“Well, she wants to go back for another degree. Anyway, she has this paper to do—I don’t remember the whole title, but part of it’s about practical applications of folk sorcery. And one of the reasons she took the teaching job here was that she thought she could work on her paper.”

“Well,” I says, “why don’t she just do it and hand it in?”

Evvie giggles. “Because when it’s all finished it might be as much as two hundred pages, and she has to do research and make notes and be sure she has all her facts right.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. And she needs my help.”

I thinks some on that. Then I gets up and tucks my books under my arm. “It’s your business, Evvie. I got no call to tell

you what to do. But I think you dast not let your ma find out. Y’know, Ma told me it weren’t fitting for me to be talking on you to a outsider—don’t seem fitting for you to be doing it neither. And how come she’s being so nosy and poking into folk’s doings?”

“I don’t mind her questions, Jeffy. She’s really very nice. And she has a lot of things wrong and I’m just helping her to get them right.”

“Like I said, ain’t none of my business. Look, it’s getting on and I got my chores. Can you come down to study tonight? Or you want me to come up?” We got Math homework again, multiplying them fractions, and they’s giving me fits with which way to turn ‘em and all.

“I’ll come down, Jeffy. But I can’t stay too late.”

I nods and turns and heads for the split-tree bridge. “Okay. Come on.” She walks on along till we gets to the ravine and I cuts down and waves like always, and she waves back and heads on up.

Evvie shows up just as we was finishing supper, and Ma says go ahead and study, she’ll get the dishes. We gets through that Math homework pretty quick—Evvie says I’m starting to learn better about how to do ‘em and what come next and which way they’s s’pose to get turned so’s you can multiply ‘em and such. When we finish up, Evvie gets her stuff together quick and says she has to get going, and heads on out and toward the path. Ain’t but a minute or two later I see her English book setting under her chair. I tells Ma and runs up toward the

path after her, figgering she maybe ain't even to the top of the ravine yet.

Well, I gets there and I ain't seen her, so I starts up the path. Couple hunnerd feet up, where it runs by the edge, I looks down and sees her just crossing the split-tree bridge, heading down. I hollers but it's loud from the crick there, so I starts running down the path. Time I gets to the bridge, she's way on, but I figger she prob'ly ain't past the fence line yet. I keeps running, looking for her, and when I gets up top the ridge, I see her crossing the County Road. I hollers again, but a old semi-truck come blowing its horn and she don't hear me. I don't finally catch her up till she's in the schoolyard.

"Hey, Evvie," I yells, and I'm puffing pretty good from running the whole way down the mountain. "Evvie, wait up."

She turns around and she got this funny look on. "Jeffy. Why are you following me?"

"Dang it, I ain't following you," I says, and I has to puff some more to get some breath. "Here." I shoves her book at her. "Y'left your English under the chair and I just brung it to you. You wasn't on the path, and I seen you crossing the bridge, so I brung it on down and here it is."

"You could have given it to me tomorrow, Jeffy." That funny look goes away and she smiles.

I shrugs and says, "I didn't know if you done your English already." I looks at the schoolhouse and Miss Singletree's standing in the door. "What you doing down here anyhow, Evvie?"

She gets that funny look again, and I

shakes my head and says, "Forget it—it don't make no never mind to me nohow. I was just making sure you got your book soon as I could."

"You ran all the way down the mountain just to give me my book?"

I shoves my hands in my pockets and scuffs at the gound some. "Yeah, well. Ma says friends is to do for when *they* needs it, not just when *you* feel like it."

"Well," she says, and she's smiling again, "we really are friends."

I nods. "Yep." I looks up at Miss Singletree again. "So you meeting her to talk about that folk stuff?" Old stubborn streak acting up again, get my teeth set into something and shut my eyes and hang on like a bulldog.

"Yes. I'm helping her with her paper. But don't tell anyone—it's a secret."

I think on it some. "Y'know, Evvie, seems like, if'n you got to keep it a secret, maybe it ain't such a good idea. If'n she got some wrong notions, maybe it's better that way. But it ain't my business, and I don't tell no secrets."

"I know," she says, smiling. "Jeffy, you know, you're my best friend."

I feel my ears getting hot. "Uh, yeah. You too, Evvie. Look, I got to get back up. I'll see you in the morning." I take off trotting toward the County Road and look back and wave, and head on up the mountain.

I don't get right to sleep that night, thinking on Evvie telling Miss Singletree stuff and her a outsider just come in to teach and nose around. But there ain't nothing I can do about it, so I punches my pillow up and tries not to think about

it none. Guess I finally fell asleep, had this here old dream about Miss Singletree stuck in some bobwire and I ain't cutting it off'n her and Evvie's upset with me, even though I keeps telling her she's my best friend. Dumb old dream.

Evvie's all perky next morning, calling Miss Singletree Joanne and saying how fast she's catching on and all, and how many pages of notes she done took already. Kind of put me off, it did. Ain't no teacher never had me to call 'em by Christian names. And Evvie chatting on about her and Joanne this and her and Joanne that, well, I didn't like it.

We get 'crost the County Road and Evvie says, "Now, don't forget—it's a secret."

"I don't care nothing about your dumb old secret, Evvie," I snaps. "I don't even wanna hear no more about it, okay?" I head on over toward the backstop where the guys is, and I don't look back when she calls after me.

Hardy's standing by the backstop, pretending he's hanging around with the guys—leastways, nobody done chased him away yet—and he says, "Hey, Jeffy. Your girlfriend's callin' ya."

So I drops my books and glove and shoves 'im one. "Hardy, I'm plumb tired of you runnin' your mouth. She ain't my girlfriend and you say it again, I'm gonna whup you." I got a fist made, and Jace grabs me 'round the shoulders with one arm.

"Hey, Jeffy," he says, sort of laughin' and keeping me in one spot, "what you wanna hit on Hardy for? Little as he is, you hit him once good and you'd prob'ly

kill 'im."

"Lemme go. He ain't much littler'n me."

"Come on, Jeffy, cool down. Ain't nothing wrong with Evvie bein' your girlfriend—Hell, prettiest girl in school, ain't she?"

Well, I can't get loose of 'im, and Hardy, he's done backed up past first base already, so I start losing my mad. "Best Sue Ellen don't hear you say that," I says.

Jace laughs and lets go. "Damn, Jeffy, you turning into a real terror, ain't you? Hittin' homers and getting B's and now you gonna whup Hardy's ass all over the dang playground." Him and the guys kid me a bit about Hardy, and then the bell rings and we go in.

I slides into my seat and Evvie looks at me with these little frown wrinkles between her eyebrows, so I leans and whispers, "Sorry, Evvie." Them wrinkles disappear and she smiles, and I feel better right away.

It went on like that for a spell, Evvie studying with me, then going to meet Miss Singletree. She told me they was near finished with what they needed for that paper, and there was just a few things to do yet. I was purely glad to hear that. I'd been feared Miz Skully'd find out Evvie weren't at my place till dark them nights, but she didn't never say nothing, only to ask how I was doing in school, and to say she was pleased when I told her I was doing good.

I was doing good 'cause of Evvie helping me. I hadn't ever figgered out them numbers before, but this year I was get-

ting 'em pretty good. And when I picked out them verbs and nouns and such, mostly I got 'em right. We had more tests and quizzes and I mostly got a C, but there was a few times I got a B. One day Miss Singletree picks me out to get up and read. Time was, I couldn't read out loud without sounding like a fool, but I just picked out Evvie and pretended I was just reading to her. Miss Singletree gave me a A.

Come this one Tuesday on the way home, I asks Evvie is she gonna help me study this evening, being we got this here big test next day.

"I can't tonight, Jeffy," she says. "But you shouldn't have any trouble. The test is all on things we've already studied."

"Hunh. Just 'cause I studied it once don't mean I knows it now," I says. "How come you can't study with me?"

"Well, I promised Joanne I'd show her something special tonight, and it's going to take quite a while—I'll have to leave home right after supper." She looks at me and tilts her head a bit, the way she does—like she knows I can't tell her no when she does it. "Will you do me a favor, Jeffy?"

"Yeah, s'pose so," I says. "What?"

"I'll have to tell Mama I'm going to your place. If she should ever ask—well, would you say I did?"

I studied on it for a spell. Then I says, "Evvie, I ain't ever knowed you to tell a lie—not to nobody, and 'specially not your ma. You sure you ain't doing nothing you shouldn't ought to?"

She got real solemn-like. "It's not that, Jeffy. It's just, well, Mama wouldn't

understand."

"Uh huh. Like my Ma didn't unnerstand when I hit the foul through the schoolhouse window last year. Whomped me good, she did. Told me if it weren't wrong, the window wouldn've got busted."

"It's not the same thing. And if you won't help me—well, you won't."

"Didn't *ever* say I wouldn't help you, Evvie. With *anything*. Just seeing you know what you're doing. Look here, if'n you lie to your ma, and she asks me, then I got to lie to her, too. And I always figgered your ma could tell if I was lying to her—like she could see inside my head." I shake my head and toe at the dirt some, and look up at her and say, "Evvie, I'll tell her whatever you say—I just hope she don't ask."

Evvie grabs me and gives me a big hug—I was too close to get away and she s'prised me some—and I thought maybe she was even gonna try and kiss me so I jerked back. "Thanks, Jeffy. I knew I could count on you."

I feel my ears getting hot and I says, "Yeah, but don't be hugging on me no more, okay? What if somebody was to see?"

She giggles and steps back. "All right, Jeffy. But I was just thanking you."

"Yeah," I says, "I know. But you could just tell me." I hurry on and get to the top of the ravine. "Well, guess I'll see you tomorrow, then," I says, and Evvie says s'long and I wave. I stop and watch her walking up the path, thinking how it felt when she was hugging me. When she goes out of sight, I turns and runs down

along the ravine.

While I'm doing my chores I'm thinking, and I figger out what to do. I tells Ma I'm going up by Evvie's to study, 'cause of us having this here big test next day, and I ain't gonna be back till late. I feel bad for lying to Ma, but I can't think of no other way to get out. When I get done helping with dishes, I gets my books and kisses Ma and heads on out. I goes up the ravine and hides my books in this here stump, just in case it gets to raining.

I was gonna go down by the schoolhouse but I don't know if'n Evvie's meeting Miss Singletree there, so I goes up closer to Skully's and hides in some bushes and pretty soon Evvie comes down the path. She goes on by and after a bit I follers her, but way back. Turns out a good thing I ain't gone to the schoolhouse, 'cause Miss Singletree's waiting for her up the path by the ridge. I wondered some how she found her way, but I guess me and Evvie walking through twice a day must have made a trail what even a city-growed teacher could foller.

They comes back up and I ducks into some old thorny bushes, dasn't even move a mite to ease them thorns. I gets scratched all over my arms and some on my face, and some even through my jeans on my legs and butt. After they's gone by I gets out, and I'm wiping at blood on my face and thinking how Ma'll wonder what did I get into, and maybe I'll tell her I fell into them old blackberry bushes in the ravine.

Evvie leads Miss Singletree up to the

split-tree bridge, and I figgered sure I was gonna bust out laughing when I seen how she was studying on getting 'crost Yoder's Crick. That bridge ain't but a old tree trunk sawed in half, and layed down with the ends swapped. Them halves ain't no bigger'n my leg—the narrow ends is some smaller—and I guess she don't think it's gonna hold her. She just stands there and Evvie comes back over. Miss Singletree, she's carrying this big old bag slung on her shoulder, and Evvie takes that and trots on 'crost the bridge. Me and Evvie, we been crossing Yoder's Crick on that bridge since we was in Kinnergarden and it don't bother us no-how. But it crosses over about fifteen feet up and the crick runs pretty fast there and I s'pose it looked scarey to Miss Singletree. Anyways, Evvie finally gets her 'crost it and they go up past the ravine and I'm wondering if maybe Evvie's taking 'er up to her place.

Then they turns off and I figger out where they's going—Mueller's Chimney. I feels funny about that, like it's a secret place what only me and Evvie knows about. I feel like maybe Evvie shouldn't be taking no outsider there. I lays pretty far back, give 'em time to get on up ahead of me. Miss Singletree ain't no problem, but Evvie got ears like a deer—was she to hear a wrong noise, she'd know right off somebody was follering.

It's most of a half mile to Mueller's Chimney this way, and there ain't really no path, just deer trails. I follers 'em till I could see the top of the chimney, then I eases around to this old log where I can

watch from behind. Miss Singletree has put her bag down and they's setting on them low foundation rocks and talking. I can't make out what's being said, but it looks like Evvie's explaining this and that to Miss Singletree, and I'm thinking that's funny 'cause it's like Evvie's the teacher now. After a bit Evvie gets up and goes 'round pulling weeds up, and Miss Singletree, she pulls a couple, too, then she grabs one and yelps and jerks her hand back, and I had to cover my mouth so's I wouldn't laugh, 'cause she grabbed one of them old spiky Injun Medicine Man plants and stuck herself good. When she gets shut of shaking her hand and sucking on her thumb, Evvie takes to fixing her. Then her and Evvie clear up a whole big space. I'm getting plumb bored just setting, but then Evvie must have told her that was enough and they set down again.

I'm starting to stiffen up, and Evvie's busy talking and looking t'other way, so I stretches some and wiggles till I got a softer spot. I must not've been quiet enough, 'cause Evvie's head snaps around of a sudden and I froze just still as a stone. Feels like she's looking right at me for a second, and she steps sideways, like to see better, and then this silly old partridge busts cover 'bout ten feet away, flapping like thunder and flying right past my head hollering, "kawit, kawit." I like to die of fright. Evvie, she looks back along the way it come from, 'cause them fool birds sometimes runs a spell 'fore they breaks. I dunno what she seen, but she goes back to whatever she was doing.

They talks some more, then Evvie gets

one of them big weeds what they pulled and plants it back, and starts stuff like she does with critters, and them plant leafs was all wilted, but they perks up and pretty soon it don't look like it was ever pulled. Then she makes this little yellow flower grow on top of it.

Miss Singletree's asking questions and scribbling away in a notebook to beat the band. Evvie takes a little bitty stone and starts it to burning, then snuffs it out without touchin' it. Then she plucks a leaf and holds it up and lets go, and it just set there, hanging in the air like a old hummin'bird. Miss Singletree, she's writing like she ain't got time t'get it all down.

Evvie set back down then, and her and Miss Singletree commence talking again. Miss Singletree's still taking notes, prob'ly writing down evry word Evvie says. I looks at the sky and see it's getting on. Sun's back 'hind the mountain-top but there ain't more'n a hour of daylight left. They ain't doing nothing but talking, so I lay on back. I kilt a couple ants what got to walking on my hand. Then I sort of play with a ladybug for a while, wishin' I'd done put on my shirt outside-in so's I'd get a new one. I dasn't say the Ladybug rhyme when I shoo her away, fearing Evvie might hear. I sneaks my head up and looks at 'em now'n again, but they's just talking, ain't nothing to me. I'm starting to wish I hadn't follered 'em, 'cause they sure ain't doing nothing worth watching. Could I have snuck away through them bushes, I prob'ly would, but Evvie'll hear me sure. I figger, if'n they ain't left come dark

they'll build a fire, and won't be able to see me good, and the crackling of the fire'll cover noise and I'll sneak away and down the mountain.

Then I think on something else—yet this year I ain't missed my homework one time. But it don't look like I'm gonna get it done tonight. And I ain't studied for that there big test, neither. I start getting mad, thinking it ain't my fault neither, it's Evvie's and Miss Singletree's fault, traipsing around up here and me follered 'em. 'Stead of being home right now, I'm scrunched down in some old buggy bushes waiting for dark. I take to moving around some, not caring no more if'n Evvie hears me. When I sticks my head up, I see her and Miss Singletree is pushing little sticks in the ground, Evvie telling Miss Singletree where to put 'em and sometimes having her to move 'em a mite, back and forth till they was just right. Then Evvie gets this jar of white stuff outen Miss Singletree's bag and starts making lines connecting the sticks. Don't make no sense, even when I sees she's making a thing like a big home plate.

When she finishes that, she starts making more lines out, and then I could see it was a big old star. She makes other things inside it, little squiggles and such, and draws a circle 'round it. Then she goes back by where the front door of the old house would've been, 'fore it fell off and rotted, and she sets to making a smaller star, with squiggles and such just like the big one. Her and Miss Singletree go 'round picking up stuff like that stone she burned and the weed with the yellow

flower and the floating leaf and Miss Singletree's bag and brings 'em all inside the little star. She has Miss Singletree to set down.

It's just about dark now and I'm stretching my eyes, trying to see what they's doing, and of a sudden, all them little sticks starts burning this yellowy, smoky fire. Miss Singletree, she's writing in her notebook again, till Evvie has her to put it away. She sticks it in her bag then and just watches. Evvie, she stands right in the center of that star and kicks off her sneakers. I don't think nothing of that, 'cause we'd mostly gone barefoot every summer anyhow, up till last year anyways. She turns 'round and says something to Miss Singletree, like maybe *stay here* 'cause she's pointing to the ground and Miss Singletree nods and points down, too, like *I know, right here*.

Evvie turns back facing that big star and undoes her ponytail and shakes her head and her hair falls down her back, soft and wavy and pale gold. Then she pulls her T-shirt on up over her head and I see she's wearing a bra. I never thought of Evvie wearing a bra and it strikes me some funny, till I realizes she's taking all her clothes off. She unbuttons her jeans and steps out of 'em, real graceful-like. Now she's just wearing panties and a bra and I can feel my face burning red. I'm thinking it ain't fair to her to be watching, it's like peeking in her window or something, but I can't look away. She reaches back and unhooks her bra and drops it, and rolls down her panties and takes 'em off and just stands there relaxed with her arms down and her eyes

closed. All the lights from them little fires is flickering on her and I almost can't breathe from looking at her and I thinks, Evvie, you're so pretty, like a little fawn almost growed up to be a doe.

Then she raises her arms and opens her eyes and starts talking loud, but I can't make out the words—like it's a foreign language. All this smoke starts from them burning sticks and makes this here big, swirly cloud in the middle of the big star, and little yellow and orange flashes start going through the smoke, and that cloud's getting bigger and bigger. I can hear a rumbly sound, like thunder the other side of the mountain, but it's coming from that old cloud.

I wrinkles up my nose, 'cause this old nasty smell like a cowboy match being struck drifts on over them bushes I'm hiding in. Evvie steps on up in that star and talks even louder, and then she calls out three, four words, and that thunder noise rumbled loud, and there was a lot more of them yellow and orange flashes, and I seen something moving in the smoke.

I'm getting scared now and I don't wanna watch, I wanna run—but I'm feared for Evvie and I got to watch and I can't run. So I'm watching and I sees this thing in the cloud, it's like a big old lumpy, warty toad, but big, bigger'n a bear or Old Man Yoder's prize bull, maybe seven, eight feet at the shoulder. It's got these teeth like a snake, all pin-pointy sharp, but a couple inches long and it's front paws got a bunch of claws on 'em, don't look like no toad foot I ever seen. It's eyes is like ugly green

stones and it's drooling yellow outen its mouth. Evvie yells something at it and it starts this here ugly tooth-grindy noise. She yells at it again and it lurches forward and stops like it run into something and makes this here screechy whine, like putting a bottle into a mill saw.

It turns a bit and starts moving around inside that star, not hopping like a toad, but walking like its feet hurt. It moves all the way around and comes right up with its face just above them fires and Evvie yells some words at it. It growls and such, but it backs off a bit and sets there making that grindy noise to itself. Evvie looks back at Miss Singletree and says something and Miss Singletree, she just sets there with her eyes near as wide open as her mouth. Evvie says something again and Miss Singletree nods quick.

Evvie turns back toward the thing and starts talking again, says a couple of them words, and the critter roars and comes up on its hind legs and lurches forward like it's gonna walk right on through them fires. Miss Singletree, she screams and scrambles back and gets to her feet, and then she like faints and falls down outside them star points. The critter'd come down t'all fours but when it sees her fall out the star, it rears back up and roars and it starts forward. Evvie jumps over so's she's straight in front of it and yells something at it and it roars some of them words back at her and keeps on coming. She runs back and stands between it and Miss Singletree, and yells at it again, and it laughs this horrible laugh and yellow drool's dripping down its chest and them eyes didn't look like stones no more, they

had these black spots for centers.

It took a couple more steps and I come up out of the bushes, not knowing if I could do anything, but I knowed Evvie needed help. I reach down and scabble around and find this rock about softball size, then I sees Evvie doing things with her hands and she yells at the critter and it bellers back and blue fire flashes out from her hands and hits it. It yowls and drops down and backs some, and she hits it again, and it yowls some more, shaking its head and flinging that yellow drool every which way. Then it starts toward her and I remember I got that rock and I throws it and it hits that critter right in the eye and it don't even howl, just swipes one of them long-clawed front paws 'crost its face and swings its head and spots me. Then Evvie makes a whole ball of that blue fire and hits the critter with it and shuffles back pawing at its head.

"Evvie," I yells, "Come on—run!"

"Jeffy, you shouldn't be here," she yells back. "Run! *Get away!*"

I run, yes I did—run right down toward her. That critter got done pawing at its head and seen me and started forward and Evvie got it again, good, and held it, and it done reared up yowling like a kicked hound, but she kept that fire on it till it backed off some.

"Jeffy, you've got to get out of here," she says, touching my arm for a second and watching that critter.

"I ain't going without you," I says, and I bend over and pick up another rock.

"I *can't* go—it'll get her."

"Then I ain't going." I look at the thing and heave the rock at it and it bounces

off.

Them black spots on its eyes opened up wider and it bellered some of them words and started forward again. Evvie makes a fireball and hits the critter and it stops, and she makes another and it backs a step, making that screechy whine and swinging its head back and forth, then it roars at us so loud I can't hear Evvie.

"What?" I yells.

"I said you run and I'll keep it here. You don't understand, Jeffy—it'll kill you. You can't hurt it with rocks," she says, sounding scared.

I can't think of nothing to say that don't sound stupid, so I don't say nothing. But I bends and finds me another rock anyhow.

The critter starts moving sideways, like it's going around us, but Evvie whips a fireball at it and turns it back, and it starts roaring again and I can't hear her and she can't hear me. She starts weaving her hands around and makes a big old bubble of blue fire around us, and I can still hear that critter roaring but it's like muffled. Evvie grabs me and hugs me and I don't care if nobody sees, I hug her back, then I remembers she ain't got no clothes on and I'm careful I don't look below her face, but she don't notice. Her face is white and her eyes is big and of a sudden I think maybe she's even more scared than me.

She grabs me by the arms and pushes me back and says, "Jeffy, listen to me. You have to get away."

"Uh uh. I ain't going 'less you do."

"Jeffy, you don't understand. I *can't* go. It's gotten loose, it's out of the pen-

tacle. There's nothing to hold it, no one but me to stop it." We can hear it yowling around the bubble and it must've hit it, 'cause the bubble like sparked and crackled and the critter roared.

"Evvie, what *is* it?"

"It's a demon—a very minor one, almost a sub-demon, and I picked it because it's not very smart. But Joanne broke the warding and when she did, it was able to get out of the pentacle, and the only way to control it now is pain, and it's very strong. And I'm getting weaker." She waved around at the bubble. "Just making this cost me a lot of power. But I've rested a little."

"Look, Evvie, just hit it with everything you got and we'll run while it's down and kicking."

"I can't leave Joanne—she trusted me. And if I use all my power, it'll get away," she says, her eyes all bright like she's gonna cry. The bubble sparks and crackles again, and I see the fire's fading in spots.

"Jeffy," she says, grabbing me again and sounding like maybe she got a idea. "Jeffy, you run down the mountain and get Mama. I'll hold it off while you go."

"I don't wanna leave you."

"And I don't—." The bubble comes apart and the critter swipes at me and I go rolling over on the ground and fetch up against a tree. I starts to get up and my left arm won't hardly hold me and I falls down again. My shirt's all ripped and I get my hand up there and it feels like somebody run a disk over my shoulder and my left arm's going all numb. I looks around and Evvie's making fireballs and

hitting the critter with 'em, but they ain't real big or bright. She gets it good with a couple, one right after the other, and she quick looks back and yells, "Go, Jeffy! *Get my Mama!*" She's working her way back over Miss Singletree, so I gets up, leaning 'gainst the tree, and I waits till she hits that critter again 'cause I got to go right past it, and when she does, I takes off running. I get past it while it's yowling, and out the clearing and into a trail. I run a couple hunderd feet and I can hear it screeching behind me and see blue flashes, till I get past them berry bushes and I got to slow down some.

I'm thinking hard, trying to remember how them trails go, and I bumps into a tree and goes down, and when I gets up I can't tell for a second which way's down the mountain, till I sees a faint blue flash and I goes again. I got to hold my shoulder now, it's hurting so, and it's making me run crookedy like I'm off-balance. I get moving pretty good, then I stub my foot into a root or something and I trip and land on that hurt shoulder and I sees sparks and everything gets all swimmy, and I got this feeling like my ears is plugged with cotton. I'm laying on my back and I can see where tree branches is against the sky and I'm thinking this is another one of them stupid dreams, then I tries moving and my shoulder says I ain't dreaming.

I makes a couple tries and finally gets up, and just then I hear that critter yowl real far away, like Evvie just done got it with some fire and that's good, so I start running again and I cover ground pretty good for a bit, till my foot don't land on

nothing, but my knee bumps and I tumble over and land in some brush. I can't hardly move for a bit, till I remembers that Evvie needs help and I claw around and grab maybe a root and start pulling myself up. It's like a cliff, and it ain't but maybe ten feet to the top, but I come near not making it. My left hand ain't working at all, and I done it one-handed. When I get to the top I'm plumb wore out but I can't take no time to rest, so I pulls myself up with a little tree. I got turned 'round and I'm feeling with my feet, trying to figger out which way, and of a sudden I know I fell into that ravine what runs to our place from the path.

I turns back up the mountain and starts running and I'm weaving back and forth, scraping up against the rocks, and there ain't but cliff t'other side. My feet don't wanna go where I wants 'em to, but I'm thinking about Evvie up there all alone fighting that critter and I keep going. Seems like it's taking too long and maybe I got past Skully's and then I sees yellow, faint through the trees, and I starts yelling, "Miz Skully—Miz Skully! Evvie needs help, she's up to Mueller's Chimney and there's this critter—", and my legs got tangled and I set down sudden, but there's this flappy noise next to me and Mister Skully grabs me and I'm on the porch just like that, and he hollers something inside, and flap-whoosh, he's gone. Miz Skully runs out and bends over me, and I tries to tell her about that critter and, just like that, she's gone too.

Then Granpa Skully sails his old rocker, *crash*, right through the screen door and stops, couple inches off'n the

porch and says, not gurgling a bit, "Are you all right, boy?"

I don't want to, but I nods yes.

He says, "Rest here, boy. I must help the child," and he starts moving.

"Wait," I hollers. "Granpa Skully, take me with you," and he drops down and snatches me up and we go. He's holding me tight and the wind's whistling past my ears and I ain't afraid. Up ahead I sees these bright blue-white flashes and I'm thinking we must be 'most to Mueller's Chimney—I hears that critter screech and I *knows* we're almost there. We drops like a stone through some branches and that clearing's lit up bright blue. I'm searching for Evvie, and I spots her curled up on the ground, Mister Skully hovering up a few feet over her. He's some bloodied up, but his eyes is glowing fire red and he's showing teeth like a catamount.

Granpa dumps me off by Evvie and sails on up aside Miz Skully. Mister Skully, he growls, "Stay behind me." He ain't taking he eyes off'n that critter.

I found a big rock to throw, need be, and went and set near Evvie. She didn't look hurt none, but her eyes was closed.

I looks up at the critter, and it's up on its hind legs roaring and belling fierce, but its face and neck is ripped up bad, and it's bleeding lots—guess Mister Skully done that.

Miz Skully reaches out a hand and Granpa grabs it and they both starts glowing blue, and little blue sparks starts shooting off'n em. That critter roars and Miz Skully points at it and fires off a ball of blue lightnin' what could blow the top

clean off'n the mountain. It hits the critter and knocks it on over backwards. It lays there twitching some, then it rolls over and starts getting up and she blasts it again, knocks it back down into where that big star shape was. It starts making that there ugly old whiney screeching, but she lambasts it good and it drops down on all fours and yowls some of them words at her and stays there, swinging its head side to side. That old yellow drool's running out its mouth and mixing with that dark blood and spraying all over.

Miz Skully lets go Granpa's hand and makes a pass in the air and says some words. Of a sudden, that star's back, burning all 'round the critter. It roars some, but it don't move and the smoke starts getting real thick in the star. Miz Skully's chanting away, and she does like Evvie done, calls out threee, four words loud—and there's a noise like a pump runned dry and the star's empty, smoke's thinning and drifting away.

Miz Skully kind of slumps to setting on the ground, and Granpa eases his rocker next to her and she leans her head 'gainst his knee a second, like she's maybe too tired to move. Mister Skully come down by Evvie—he's just plain again, work shirt and overalls and brown eyes and no catamount teeth, but there's blood soaking through his shirt and his face is bleeding some. He gets to fussing over Evvie, looking in her eyes and such, and Miz Skully gets up and hurries over. They gets her layed out straight and Miz Skully spreads Granpa's lap robe over her. Granpa, he's holding up this here

little fireball so's they can see, and I spots something moving back in the bushes. I points and Mister Skully, he goes to check and it's Miss Singletree, clutching on that big old bag of her'n.

He brings her back and has her to set down, and he goes back to helping Miz Skully with Evvie. I moves to where I can see Evvie's face and leans over a bit. But it's on the wrong side and my shoulder twinges at me and I looks at it in the light. Then everything goes all swimmy again, and Mister Skully's putting me down gentle.

I hears Miz Skully talking to Evvie a couple times, and once, real faint, I hears Evvie whisper back, and I inches my hand over and touches hers, and I feels some better then.

"Jeffy."

I looks up at Granpa Skully. "Yessir?"

"Close your eyes, boy. You'll sleep now."

"Okay, Granpa," I says, and shuts my eyes.

I wakes up and don't know where I am, but I turns my head and sees Mister Skully setting at the table, so I must be at Evvie's. I feels of my shoulder and it's sore, but it ain't chewed up no more and I figgered Miz Skully done fixed it already.

Miz Skully comes in and sets on the edge of the bed and asks me how does I feel. I tells her I'm pretty tired, and she says that's t'be 'spected. Then she tells me her and Mister Skully and Granpa's real thankful 'cause of what I done. I tells her it weren't like I was being brave or

nothing, just got stuck and had to do something. Then I asks after Evvie, and Miz Skully says she's fine, but she needs lots of rest, so I says can I see her, and Miz Skully, I could tell, she thinks I shouldn't disturb her, but she gets me up and walks me to the door and Evvie's tucked into this big old bed, her eyes shut and her hair spread out gold on the pillow.

I don't wanna get back in bed, so Miz Skully gets me to the kitchen and I sits at the table, 'crost from Mister Skully. He nods at me and grunts like always, but there's a little smile almost showing on his face. Miz Skully, she brings me cookies and milk, and I'm getting on through 'em, then I remembers Miss Singletree and asks after her.

Miz Skully says Mister Skully done took her down the mountain and talked to her a bit, time he got her home . . . says she just up and give him her paper and her notebook and stuff.

I was some feared Evvie was gonna get in trouble, so I says as how it ain't really her fault. Seem like Miz Skully, she weren't troubled by it nohow—young'un's is s'posed to learn. She just didn't care for Evvie telling Miss Singletree nothing and that's been took care of.

I finishes my milk and cookies and says I got to get on home, Ma'll be fretting 'cause I'm out this late, and Miz Skully says while I was sleeping, she done took care of that, too, and I ain't gonna get in no trouble. Well, my legs is still some shaky, so I waits a while, goes and looks in on Evvie again—she ain't moved none, but she don't look near as

pale now—and then I says I really got to go. Of a sudden I remember I ain't got no shirt 'cause of that critter ripping it.

Miz Skully, she goes in t'other room and comes back out and says, when's my birthday, and I tell her it ain't till Feb'uary, and she says well, then, this is for your last one, and give me one of them white Mountaineers T-shirts like Evvie got, brand-new. Then she messes up my hair like Ma does, but she don't kiss me, and Mister Skully walks me on down the mountain. I gets my books and turns 'round and flap-whoosh, he done it again.

I sneaks in real quiet, but Ma's asleep, so I don't wake her up. Next morning she says she's sorry she didn't wait up, but she got real tired and went to bed early. Then she told me 'bout she had this dream where Miz Skully come to visit. I tell her don't pay it no mind, I been having dumb dreams, too.

Weren't much more to it. I went on to school alone next day. Miss Singletree didn't never show up so we didn't have no test. We was kind of milling around for a spell, then Mister Addison come in and says Miss Singletree had a family 'mergency and had to leave, sent him a note and packed and gone. He says take our books on home and study and the Valley School Board gonna find us another teacher.

I heads up to see Evvie. She's some better, propped up on pillows, so I set next her on the edge of the bed and told her 'bout Miss Singletree and all. Then I told her how I felt like a sneak, follering

'em on up to Mueller's Chimney and how I was sorry I done it. She says, weren't for me, her'n Miss Singletree prob'ly be dead and that critter'd have got to roaming the mountain. No telling who might have come to harm, she says. Maybe I'm in a 'fessing up mood, 'cause I tells her how I seen her all naked in the firelight. I'm looking out the window and my ears is burning again, and I kind of whispers how I think she's beautiful. Then I thinks to ask her how come she got all naked, and she tells me that's how witches work, ain't maybe necessary for little stuff, but for a big spell like summoning a demon, she had to. Then she squeezes my hand and says it's all right, she don't mind, and smiles at me.

Miz Skully comes in and I was feared maybe she heard me but she just says Evvie got to rest now. So I says goodbye and stops on the porch and tells Granpa Skully how when I was little I always wanted to sit in his rocker, and I thanks him for taking me on up the mountain. He gives me this big old wink—then he takes to wheezing and gurgling again and I laugh and head on home.

Thursday and Friday I was busy 'round the place, and Saturday we had to go into town so I didn't get no time to see Evvie. Come Sunday at service, Preacher Lowell says the School Board done hired Miz Gilmore for the rest of the year, her having taught over to Bentonville El'mentry School. After service I goes on up to see how Evvie is.

Miz Skully comes to the door and says Evvie's taking a nap, but I should come on in. She has me to set at the table and

gives me a glass of milk and some cookies, like always. Then she sets down 'crost the table and starts asking me questions about what I seen and what I thinks and such. Durned if'n I don't go running my mouth worse'n Hardy ever done, just going on and on, and come to realise I done told her how I feels about Evvie and all. Miz Skully, she just smiles and nods and says how she understands. She takes to talking to me and I musta still been tuckered out, 'cause next thing, I've done fell asleep right at the table with my head down on my arm.

Well, I wakes up maybe a couple minutes later and 'pologizes and Miz Skully says it's all right. Then I remembers about how Miz Gilmore's going to be the new teacher and Miz Skully allows as she'll be a good one. I asks after Evvie and Miz Skully lets me look in on her—she's sleeping again and I don't get to talk to her, but that's all right long as I could see her. I'm leaving and Miz Skully says to be sure call for Evvie in the morning for school, she should be all rested up by then.

I goes on up the mountain to call for Evvie in the morning. I ain't gotta wait but maybe a minute and she comes running out on the porch like there ain't nothing ever happened. She calls goodbye to her ma and kisses Granpa and we starts walking down the path. Somewheres along there, I don't know just where, I realizes we're holding hands and I don't mind a bit. Evvie, she's humming and sort of skipping along real happy and I'm just walking aside of her, watching her, and thinking how purely pleased I

am that ain't nothing bad happened to her up at Mueller's Chimney.

We crosses the split-tree bridge and she grabs my hand t'other side and we heads along of Yoder's West Forty, and then I stops. Don't really know why, just I sees this here old orangey-black butterfly setting on a leaf, maybe got caught by a bird or something 'cause its one wing is sorta tore and ain't got much powder on it. It don't try to fly, just sets there fanning its wings.

I lets go Evvie's hand and puts my books down and careful picks it up and starts to touching that old raggedy wing and thinking 'bout how it's s'posed to be, and I'm talking to it real quiet, telling it how it's gonna be okay now, and it starts to fanning its wings faster and pretty soon that wing's fixed and it picks up and flutters away. I watch it go on up between a couple branches till I can't see it no more and I'm grinning like a fool, and that's silly, 'cause I never did care nothing for no butterflies.

I picks up my books and walks to where Evvie's waiting. She got this here little smile on and her head tilted over, the way she does, and she shakes her head slow, looking right at me. Then she leans and kisses me smack on the mouth and says, "You keep messing with those critters, Jeffy, we'll be late for school." Then she laughs and runs on down the path ahead of me.

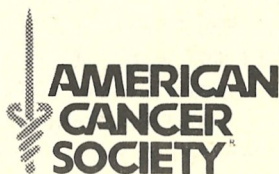
I just follers her, watching how pretty she looks and thinking how maybe Ma's right—she always says them Skullys is funny.

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FUN WITH YOUR OLD HEAD

Rummaging in your head, you'll find an amazing store of linguistic paradigms. Sometimes these can lead to error: being familiar with 'drink-drunk', 'sink-sunk', et cetera, a mechanic of my acquaintance not inexplicably extrapolated this pattern to 'crank-crunk'. "I jumped her but she never crunk." But there are other patterns which are more rewarding: consider 'bear (carry)-borne', 'shear-shorn', 'tear-torn', 'wear-worn'. Let's look for other verbs in -ear, and see what we get. How about 'hear-horn'? So a horn is 'that which is heard'. Neat, eh? Now, applying the paradigm to fear, we get 'fear-forn'. 'Forn' isn't anything, but it sounds a lot like 'foreign', and even without the permission of linguistic science, I'm pretty sure that 'foreign' means 'that which is feared', which could explain a lot of human behavior.

Incidentally, 'foreign' is a member of a large group of words descended from a common root in the remote past; 'fare', 'forth', 'forest', 'fear'—and 'forn'. Plus the Scandinavian *farlig*—dangerous. That tells us something about the experiences of our linguistic forebears, who left the Proto-Indo-European homeland (probably east of Lithuania) and plunged into the vast, dark, unknown forests of northern Germany—infested with the elves and dryads (related to 'druids' from the word for oak tree) and kobolds and trolls of Germanic myth and fairy-tale. It's quite interesting to sort through what you know without knowing it, to turn up such insights. Try it. The data are there. Yes, 'are'. 'Data' is a latin neuter plural, like 'media', so please don't say "the media is—" 'Media' is the plural of 'medium'.

In the history of English, which began as the Saxon dialect of Old German, we've had a number of ways of indicating plurality. Way back, the plural was '-r' or '-er', which is still in fashion in the closely related Scandinavian languages. In Swedish, for example, 'girl' is *flicka*; 'girls' is *flickor*. Then the style changed to '-n' or '-en'; the plural of 'shoe' and 'toe', were 'shoon' and 'toon'. We still have 'brethren' and 'oxen'. Since humans, even then, weren't perfect, they sometimes got mixed up; 'cild', pronounced 'child', was a singular; then '-er' was added to make the plural, 'childer', which can still be heard in some areas. When

'-en' came in, some people had trouble hearing 'children' as the plural of child, so they kept the '-er' and added '-en': thus 'children', a double plural. And I've heard 'childrens', a triple plural, arrived at in the same way.

All along, we've had certain nouns which remained unchanged in the plural, such as 'sheep' and 'fish', though for a while 'fishes' was in vogue. Today we still tend to use the unchanged plural when referring to game: "The hunters went out after kudu, and got two eland instead." We also sometimes hear an unchanged plural in units of distance: 'two foot', or 'ten mile', though not 'six inch'.

Then there are the 'strong' nouns which change in the middle: 'mouse-mice', 'man-men'. This pattern is not generally transferable by analogy, so two horses aren't 'hice', though a gang of fans are 'fen'.

The situation is complicated in English by the language's hospitality to words from other languages, notably Latin and Greek. Latin has three genders in its first declension: masculine nouns in -us, including stimulus, for example, with the plural in -i, 'stimuli': that -i is long, pronounced -ee; the feminine, in -a, like alumna, a female graduate, with the plural alumnae; 'ae' is pronounced 'eye'; and the neuter, in -um, including 'datum' and 'medium', mentioned above, have '-a' in the plural, which duplicates the feminine singular form but context is usually sufficient to make it clear whether we're referring to one female or two neuters. So we have plurals in English such as 'hippopatami' (much more euphonious than 'hippotamuses').

Of course, many other languages have contributed to our plethora of plurals (by the way, 'plethora' means 'a whole lot', but also carries a connotation of 'undesirable', so it's not just a fancy way to say 'a lot'). We have adopted the Hebrew words 'rabbi', 'seraph', and 'cherub', all with their plurals in '-m' usually not heard with 'rabbi', but frequently with the other two nouns cited. Then there's the French '-x', notably in 'grands prix', pronounced 'gaw pwee', approximately. The adjective 'grand' has to agree with the noun, thus the -s in 'grands prix', but it's silent, like the -x, making 'grand prix' and 'grands prix' sound the same. Who says English is illogical and badly spelled? Try French!

Back to Latin for a moment. Just to confuse first-year Latin students, the Romans used a number of declensions other than the first, one of which—the fifth, I think, if it matters—also had nouns ending in -us, including opus, onus, genus, and many others, with plurals in -era, thus 'opera', 'genera', and so on. I've noticed that almost every noun in this group has generated an English word by adding -te to the plural: operate, generate, exonerate . . . how about 'separate', which suggests, by back-formation a noun 'sepus', meaning 'individual'? So this exercise can give us insights into the original meaning of words. I haven't looked it up, but I'll bet there was such a word. 'Et cetera', pure Latin, must derive from a noun 'cetus', meaning 'other'. And 'viscera' gives us 'viscus', meaning 'innard', which is a distortion of 'inward', a euphemism for the perfectly respectable word 'gut'. Some day I must get a Latin

lexicon and see how many of my reconstructed singulars actually existed.

From Greek via French we have a whole set of words ending in ‘-is’ in the singular; these become ‘-es’ in the plural, though I’ve been unable to convince the editor of a distinguished automotive journal that ‘chassis’ is not the plural of ‘chassis’. ‘Thesis’ and ‘crisis’ are other examples of this pattern.

Many people have difficulty in believing that not all nouns ending with ‘-s’, or an ‘S’ sound (e.g. ‘maize’) are plurals. ‘Ethics’, alas, is not a plural; it’s from the Greek singular noun *ethikos*. There is no such thing as an ‘ethic’, nor a ‘politic’, nor a ‘statistic’. The word ‘pease’ was an early English singular for what we now call a ‘pea’, but it sounded plural, so by back-formation the word ‘pea’ was born. The same thing nearly happened to ‘maize’, or ‘mays’, an Indian word: for a while a few people tried to talk about ‘a may’, but that didn’t catch on. At least one stocking saleswoman referred to half of a pair of hose as a ‘hoe’. ‘Cherries’ is another example, from the French ‘cerise’, meaning ‘a cherry’, but it was heard as a plural, so the singular ‘cherry’ was supplied. You may have seen ‘Chinee’, or ‘Japanees’; these are an attempt at a singular for the plural-sounding ‘Chinese’ and ‘Japanese’.

Thus we have ‘phenomenon’ and a few other Greek singulars, with the plural in ‘-a’; yet all too frequently we read ‘a phenomena’. At this point I expect an outcry from those who imagine that such trifles are mere pedantry and don’t matter. I shall have more to say on that point another time when I’m not running out of space.

It is not only our plural paradigm which is erratically applied: in Chaucer you’ll find the form ‘raught’ (past tense of ‘reach’). That sounds pretty strange until we consider ‘teach-taught’, or ‘catch-caught’. All these patterns are there in our minds, learned in early childhood, quite unconsciously. When a little kid says “the mans runned” instead of “the men ran”, he’s being perfectly consistent, while the orthodox language isn’t.

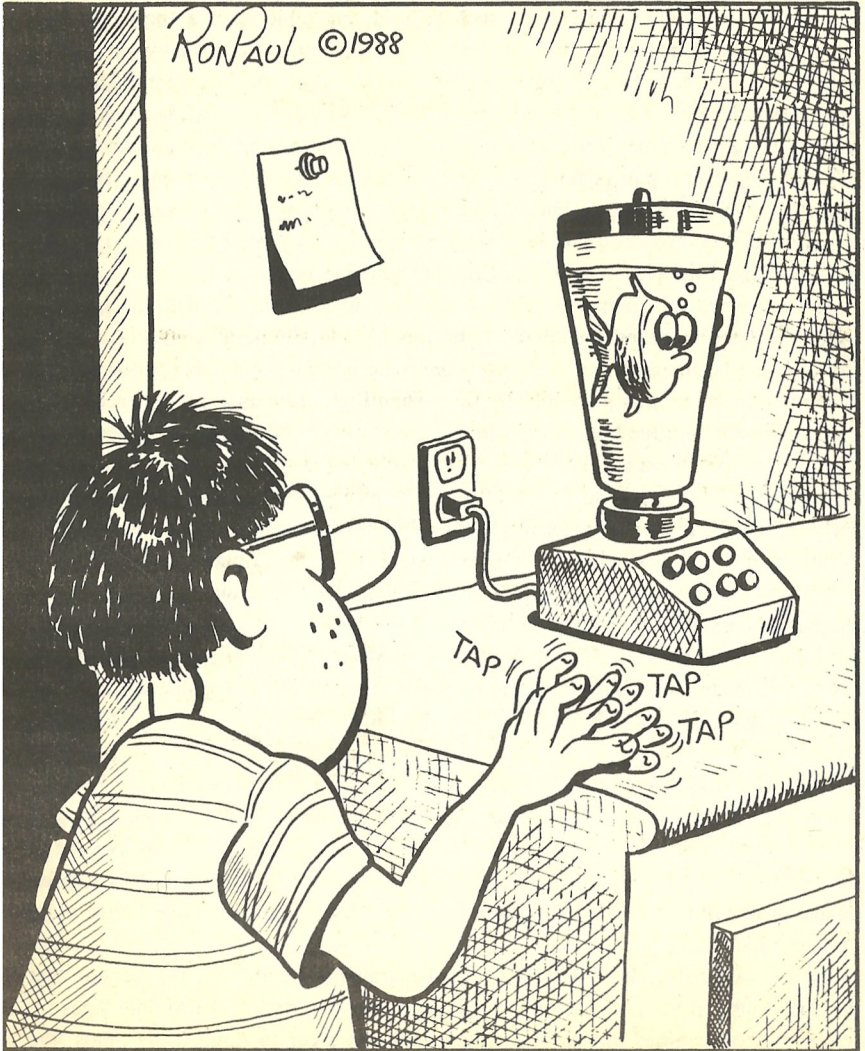
Then we have words that are plural in form though not in actuality, including, for example, ‘scissors’, ‘trousers’ and ‘glasses’. A ‘scissor’ is an attempt to rectify this, but it doesn’t sound right. I’ve never heard ‘a trouser’ or ‘a glass’, and why don’t we say ‘a pair of shirts’? A shirt is at least as plural as ‘pants’. The British consider many collective names to be plurals, thus ‘The government are...’ or ‘General Motors have. . . .’

Strangely, we have no plural for the second person in English, parallel to ‘I—we’, or ‘he—they’, so several have been improvised: ‘youse’ in New York City and environs, and ‘y’all’ in the South. Yes, Virginia, ‘y’all’ is strictly a plural. No one in the South ever addresses an individual as ‘y’all’; a fact which Hollywood has been unable or unwilling to assimilate. On that note I’ll leave y’all (I assume I have more than one reader).

By the way, before leaving the subject of plurals for the present, I’ll mention that the apostrophe in the plural is quite spurious; it was inserted in the Middle Ages by scholars who imagined that the -s of the plural was a contraction of ‘his’; thus ‘the

dog's tail' was really 'the dog his tail'. Of course, they didn't pause to wonder about the -s of 'his'; the plural -s is an ancient inflection, one of the very few left of Old English's full set. These 'scholars' are the same ones who inserted an 'S' in 'iland' and an 'L' in 'coud', as well as a 'B' in lam and plum.

As I said before, Bye, y'all.



We always enjoy hearing from Mike Resnick; his letters are enjoyable, and his stories are skillful, polished . . . and funny. The Inn of the Hairy Toad, his latest submission to Argos and his third appearance in as many issues, is entertainment at its best.

The Inn of the Hairy Toad

written by Mike Resnick

illustrated by John L. Barnes

CRETIN THE BEGGAR had just finished his nightly quart of ale at the Inn of the Hairy Toad, that gathering place of the outcasts, the misfits, and the flatulent of ancient Agabenzzar. He was swaying down the Street of Slightly Overweight Courtesans, his scrawny body veering from one dimly-lit hostelry to another, when there was a distant roll of drums, followed by a flash of lightning that struck the cobbled pavement just in front of his feet. This was followed in quick succession by a fanfare of trumpets, a clap of thunder, and the sudden appearance of an enormous, tentacled, fire-breathing monster of a greenish hue somewhere between emerald and shamrock, possessing a skin texture of reprocessed ambergris.

"Cretin the Conqueror, Abuser of the Meek, Defiler of the Fairest Flowers of Agabenzzar, Slaughterer of the Rightful

Heir to the Throne, prepare to die!"

"Oh, shit!" muttered Cretin. "Not again."

"Again?" thundered the monster, momentarily dousing his flame to aid in his articulation. "What do you mean, mortal?"

"Just a minute," said Cretin, fumbling through his coin pouch. "I've got it here somewhere, I know I do. Ahhh," he smiled, withdrawing a seven-sided coin and holding it aloft.

"What's *that* supposed to be?" asked the monster, staring at it curiously. At last he reached out a tentacle, took the coin, and ate it.

"Aren't you an incubus?" asked Cretin.

"I am a Djinn of the Fourth Order," said the monster, not without a trace of pride.

"Oh. Well. That explains it." Cretin rummaged through his pouch again and

withdrew a small opal with a star-shaped flaw.

"Arrrgh!" cried the Djinn, wincing and dripping huge gobs of saliva on the street.

"Much better," said Cretin. "I could have sworn you were an incubus, though. It must be the fangs. You're from Nesbudanchik, right?"

The Djinn nodded.

"Damn Southerner!" snorted Cretin. "Never did learn the language. You want Krotan, the Usurper King of Agabenzzar."

"Krotan?" said the Djinn, still cowering. "Are you quite sure?"

"Quite," said Cretin. "You may have noticed that your presence, while momentarily startling, was not altogether unexpected. You are the fourth one—and it's got to stop! Look at me! Just look at me!"

"I see nothing unusual," said the Djinn, scrutinizing him with a practiced eye.

"You see nothing at all! No silks, no jewels, no servants! You see Cretin the beggar. But it wasn't always thus: two years ago I was Cretin the Moneylender, who wouldn't be caught dead in so unsavory a public house as the Inn of the Hairy Toad. I even had an account at the Place of the Fatted Swine."

"What happened?" asked the Djinn, interested in spite of himself.

"Nesbudanchik happened, that's what! That illiterate charlatan with his malignant desires and his stupid accent happened."

"And the great wizard took your for-

tune?" said the Djinn.

"No!" snapped Cretin impatiently. "My *own* wizard took it for charms and spells to ward all you creatures off. I'll be in debt to him for the next thirty years, thanks to your idiot master! Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Me?" said the Djinn.

"Who else?" said Cretin. "Any chance of your going back and killing Nesbudanchik?"

"Kill the Master of Darkness?" said the Djinn, blanching a pale green.

"All right," said Cretin. "There's an alternative."

"Thank Lucifer!" said the Djinn devoutly.

"If you'll promise not to molest me, I'll put in with you and help you destroy Krotan."

"But why?" asked the Djinn. "You've never even met him."

"What difference does that make?" said Cretin. "It's the only way I'm ever going to get any peace and quiet until your master learns to enunciate properly."

"I don't know," said the Djinn thoughtfully.

"As long as I possess the mystic opal you can't kill me," said Cretin. "Now what will happen if you can't kill Krotan either?"

"The bottle!" gasped the Djinn. "He'll put me back in the bottle!"

"Right."

"I can't go back there!" said the Djinn. Suddenly he looked fearfully up at the sky. "*I'm not saying it isn't comfortable!*" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Hope he was listening," he said confidentially to Cretin. "Lucifer knows, he feeds me well, and I have all the comforts of home. But I get so . . . so *claustrophobic*, if you know what I mean."

"Then we have a deal?" said Cretin.

"We have a deal," said the Djinn. He paused for a long moment. "What do we do now?"

"Krotan has doubtlessly surrounded himself with some pretty powerful sorcerers," said Cretin, "or else he would long since have been assassinated. I think we'd better pay a visit to my own wizard for some charms and spells and the like. You don't happen to have any money with you, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Then we'll just have to depend on his generosity," said Cretin grimly.

"Most of the wizards I know would gladly make a gift of a magical device or two if by so doing they could eradicate a villain like Krotan," said the Djinn.

"You haven't met Pierpont," said Cretin.

"Pierpont?"

"My wizard. And while we're on the subject of names, what shall I call you?"

"I am Kakkab Komir Khastu, Grand Djinn of the Fourth Order."

"I'd hate to holler for help on the spur of the moment," said Cretin. "Haven't you got another name, or a nickname or something?"

The Djinn lowered his massive head in thought. "To tell the truth, I've always favored something strong and romantic, like Steeljaw."

"Steeljaw!" snorted Cretin. "What sort

of a name is that for a Djinn?"

Cretin instantly found himself fifteen feet above the ground, grasped firmly in two iron-thewed tentacles.

"What's wrong with Steeljaw?" bellowed the Djinn, flames and noxious clouds of smoke bursting forth from his gaping mouth.

"Now that I think of it, Steeljaw, there's not a thing wrong with it," said Cretin hastily. "Some of my best friends are called Steeljaw. It has a certain gossamer gaiety to it."

"Well," said Steeljaw the Djinn, setting Cretin back on the cobbled stones, "that's settled. Now let's hunt up this wizard of yours."

"He dwells in a cave on the side of a mountain overlooking the Fields of Insincere Sorrow, just beyond the River of Mild Despair," said Cretin.

"How do we get there?"

"It's half a day's march to the northwest," said Cretin. "Unless you can magically transport us there."

"I can magically transport *me* there," said Steeljaw. "*You* I'm not so sure about."

"It wouldn't work," said Cretin. "He doesn't know who you are. Turn around, please."

The Djinn did so.

"No wings, either," observed Cretin.

"I shed them seven or eight eons ago," said Steeljaw apologetically. "I got so cramped in that damn bottle. . . ."

"Then I guess we walk," said Cretin, setting out. "Perhaps it's for the best. The fresh air will do me good, and it's not a wise idea to deal with Pierpont when

you're anything less than totally sober."

And so, side by side, the two adventurers set off down the long, winding Avenue of Occasional Desire, past the Temple of Large-Bosomed Goddesses, and into the fields north of the city. Turning slightly westward, they reached the River of Mild Despair after about four hours' hard march.

Cretin waded into the shallows, and a moment later his quick, nimble hands had thrown four fish up onto the shore.

"Start a fire," he instructed the Djinn. "We'll cook the fish up and rest for a spell before we climb the mountain."

"We have more important things to do than fill our stomachs!" growled Steeljaw.

"When was the last time you ate?" asked Cretin.

"About twelve hundred years ago," said Steeljaw.

"That's a long time," observed Cretin. "And if Fortune smiles upon us in our dealings with Pierpont, we're not going to have any spare time for eating afterward. And while I implore you not to take it personally, it is my conclusion that when you starve with a twelve-foot Djinn, the Djinn starves last."

Steeljaw glared balefully at him for a moment, then shrugged and breathed onto a dead limb, thereby causing a fire of truly monumental proportions.

An hour later, well-fed and rested, Cretin and Steeljaw began the treacherous ascent of the mountain, and before too much more time had elapsed, they stood at the entrance to Pierpont's cave.

Inside was a vast accumulation of the

standard wizardly paraphernalia: bat's wings, newt's eyes, foul-smelling herbs and fouler-smelling chemicals, ancient grimoires, voodoo dolls, and an enormous caldron. On a rock outcropping was an Eternal Candle, which had been burning for the better part of ten centuries. A crystal ball, which displayed an endless parade of Ann Rutherford movies, lay ignored in a corner, right next to a broken monocle. Rats and snakes scurried hither and thither, chased about the cave by an innocuous-looking guinea pig. Covering almost all of the back wall was a magical mirror which was currently showing stock market quotations from August 3, 1957.

A wizened old man, his beard almost touching the floor, wearing a kaftan of spun copper and a pointed alchemist's hat embroidered with the symbols of the Zodiac, sat at a roll-top desk, engrossed in mathematical equations which he was scrawling with a piece of burnt straw on a dog-eared piece of parchment.

"Ahem," said Cretin.

Pierpont looked up and glared at his two visitors.

"Do you realize," he thundered, "that if we were alive 7031 years from now, I could buy Xerox at eight and a quarter?"

"Greetings, Great Wizard," said Steeljaw.

"And 23 years after that, I could sell at one hundred fourteen and put it all in eighteen percent Certificates of Deposit!"

"Sir . . ." said Cretin.

"Oh, it's an unfair world! Silicon R&D stocks are selling at four-to-one Price Earnings ratios, and everyone I know

wears fur skirts and carries broadswords! Sit down, Cretin, don't just stand there slack-jawed and who is your strange-looking companion and God what I wouldn't give for a seat on the Amex!"

"I beg your pardon," said Cretin.

"Sit down, sit down," said Pierpont irritably. "So Nesbudanchik's up to his old tricks again, eh?"

"Indeed, O great and all-powerful Pierpont," said Cretin.

"A simple Pierpont will suffice," said the wizard. "I don't suppose either of you brought along a shaker of martinis?"

"Martinis, Great One?" said Cretin.

"No, of course not," said Pierpont. He slapped at a snake that had been slithering along his desk. "Well, what'll it be this time, Cretin? Need a charm to send this creature back to the Netherworld?"

Steeljaw hissed in fear, and Cretin laid a reassuring hand on one of his tentacles. "No, Lord of the Black Arts. This creature is my ally."

"With allies like that, who needs enemies?" said Pierpont. He laughed uproariously, then scribbled the line down for future use. "So, what can I do for you and your ally?"

"We have decided to kill Krotan the Conqueror," said Cretin.

"Ah!" cried Pierpont, rubbing his hands in glee. "Murder one! Excellent!"

"Then you approve?" said Cretin.

"Of course," said Pierpont. "I was wondering how long it would take you to hit upon the idea."

"Then possibly, Great Wizard, you will freely supply us with those charms and amulets that we may need to accom-

plish our noble purpose," said Steeljaw hopefully.

"Never mistake politics for business, Djinn!" snapped Pierpont. "You will need three things to destroy Krotan. In exchange, I will extract three tributes from you."

"What will we need?" asked Cretin.

"First, you will need a spell to turn the Djinn into a human being, lest his presence give forewarning to Krotan's protectors. Second, you will need a charm to entice Krotan to the Inn of the Hairy Toad. And third, you will need a magical scimitar with which to dispatch him."

"Why the Inn of the Hairy Toad?" asked Cretin curiously. "Does your magic only work there?"

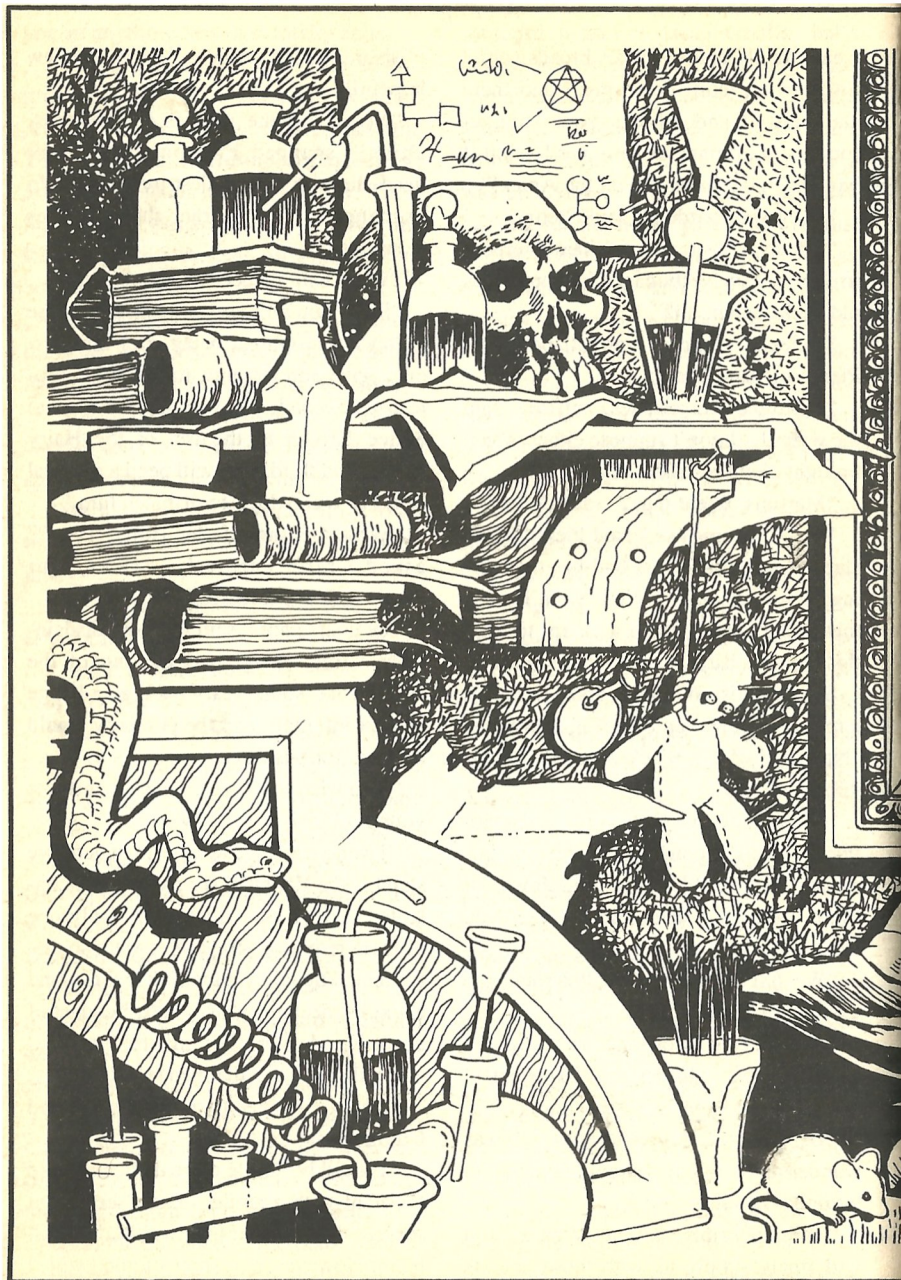
"Of course not," said Pierpont disdainfully. "But I purchased the Inn of the Hairy Toad some years back as a hedge against inflation, and the publicity would be good for business."

"And what must we do in exchange for your aid?" asked Steeljaw.

"Twenty miles due east of where we stand is the Valley of the Deeply Malcontented Ogres," said Pierpont. "Only one of them remains—the others were so discontented that they all left ages ago—and about his neck he wears a ruby pendant of unearthly design. For my first tribute, you will bring me that pendant."

"And your other two tributes?" asked Cretin warily.

"They'll be a little more difficult," said Pierpont with a smile. "Let's see if you survive this one and then we'll talk about them. However, as a show of good will, I shall make a down payment here and





now.”

And with that, he mumbled a quick spell and traced a trio of mystic signs in the air. Immediately there was a puff of smoke, and in place of the Djinn stood a huge bearded warrior, garbed in leather and furs, and carrying a sword that a normal man could barely lift.

“Steeljaw?” said Cretin tentatively.

“Aye,” rumbled a deep voice.

“How do you feel?” asked Cretin.

“Virile and vigorous,” said Steeljaw, striding around the room and trying out his muscular limbs. “Mostly virile.”

“Then I suspect we’d best get on with our quest,” suggested Cretin, heading toward the cave’s entrance. He stopped abruptly at a shriek from Pierpont, who was staring at the mirror again.

“Atlantic Richfield just split three-for-one!” screamed the old wizard. “And nobody in this Godforsaken world even knows what oil is! Begone with you! Begone!”

The two adventurers quickly took their leave of the old wizard and began walking toward the east. Steeljaw also ran, hopped, skipped and jumped, trying to get used to his powerful new body, and before too many hours had elapsed they stood on a barren hill overlooking the fabled Valley of the Deeply Malcontented Ogres. It was perhaps two miles in diameter, dissected by a number of narrow, winding streams, and totally covered by a lush, dense forest.

“Anybody home?” yelled Cretin from his vantage point above the valley.

There was no answer, nor had he really expected one. With a sigh he removed his

small, almost delicate sword from its sheath and began walking down the sloping valley wall to the forest, followed by Steeljaw, who kept casting apprehensive glances to either side and behind him.

They had gone perhaps forty paces into the forest when a hideous voice thundered out at them:

“Who is it that invades my domain?”

“Two travellers from afar,” replied Cretin, trying to determine the direction from which the voice had come. “We are weary from our wanderings and seek lodgings for the night.”

“What are you talking about, lodgings for the night?” whispered Steeljaw disgustedly.

“It was the first thing that popped into my head,” said Cretin.

“Well, it’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of!” hissed Steeljaw. “One more stunt like that and—”

He abruptly fell silent, for suddenly, standing not thirty feet distant, was the ogre. He was a good fifteen feet tall, hideously misshapen, cock-eyed, with a head of wild purple hair and teeth two inches long. About his neck was a ruby pendant.

“Outsiders may not trespass in my forest!” bellowed the ogre. “The penalty is death!”

“Right you are,” said Cretin. “I was just telling my companion here how inconsiderate we were being, coming without an invitation. A thousand pardons, my lord. We’ll be taking our leave of you now.”

The ogre roared and glared at them.

“Absolutely,” said Cretin hastily. He

pulled a small coin out of his pouch and tossed it on the ground at the ogre's feet. "For your trouble."

The ogre roared again and raced, with amazing swiftness, to a point that blocked their means of egress from the forest. He jumped up and down in a lumbering fashion, grinning evilly.

"Why, what a gorgeous pendant that is!" exclaimed Cretin, indicating the ruby object of Pierpont's desire. "I don't suppose you'd care to sell it?"

The ogre ripped a tree up by its roots and threw it clear to the other end of the forest.

"No, I didn't think so," said Cretin. "Well, then, would you consider a trade?"

"Yum!" said the ogre, licking his thick lips.

"That's a very ominous and portentous sound," said Steeljaw nervously.

"Yum!" repeated the ogre. "Fresh meat tonight!"

"How thoughtful of you," said Cretin hastily. "But we really can't stay. Could you point out the nearest road to Agabenzar?"

The ogre pulled a small tree out of the ground and, smiling, broke it in two across his chest.

"Very impressive," said Cretin, backing away slowly. "An unrivalled display of physical prowess."

"You know," said Steeljaw thoughtfully, "now that I come to think of it, it wasn't actually such a bad bottle. I mean, I had silken blankets, and I was well fed, and. . . ."

"Crunch crunch!" said the ogre, mak-

ing biting motions with his jaws.

"I've had about enough of this!" yelled Cretin. "If it's a fight you're looking for, it's a fight you'll get! Go to it, Steeljaw!"

"Me?" said Steeljaw, aghast at the thought.

"You're a Djinn, aren't you?" said Cretin.

"Not anymore I'm not," said Steeljaw.

"You mean you haven't any magical powers at all?"

"None."

"You mean I've been saying all these things and you're not a Djinn and all we've got between us for weapons is a pair of swords?"

"And our wits," said Steeljaw. "Don't forget our wits."

"Forget them? I think we've taken leave of them!" Cretin paused, examining the ogre. "What are ogres allergic to?"

"Nothing," said Steeljaw.

"I don't suppose they're especially vulnerable in the Achilles tendon, or anything like that?"

"No," said his companion glumly.

"The Sign of the Demipolytetrahedron won't fend them off?"

Steeljaw shook his head.

"I guess that leaves our wits," said Cretin with a sigh.

"Some weapon," said Steeljaw, watching the ogre as he ripped several saplings out of the ground.

Finally the ogre tired of defoliating the forest and cast his eyes once again upon the two adventurers. He spanned the gap between them with one giant stride, leaned down, and picked Cretin up in his

left hand.

"Appetizer," he announced. "Your friend is the main course." He opened his mouth wide.

"I suppose there's nothing to do but face my death like a man," said Cretin. "I want you to know that I bear you no malice. You're not responsible for your nature, and I fully understand that food is more important to an ogre than female companionship."

The ogre's mouth snapped shut, missing Cretin's head by the barest fraction of an inch.

"Explain," said the ogre.

"I personally know at least half a dozen rather large ladies who would like nothing better than to make the acquaintance of a superb physical specimen like yourself," said Cretin hurriedly, trying to ignore the rush of foul breath that whipped through his hair. "And I foolishly assumed that after all these years of solitude . . . but no, I can see you're a totally self-reliant type, so you might as well gobble me up and get it over with."

"Half a dozen?" said the ogre, sitting down heavily and loosening his grip on Cretin.

"Corpulent beyond all imagining," said Cretin. "And while I realize that you seek nothing but love and tenderness and understanding, there is the added advantage that when you tire of them, they'll make far better eating than my own undernourished self."

"It's been a long time," said the ogre, smoothing his ragged hair with his free hand.

"Understand," said Cretin, "I'm not

promising you all six of them. One or two may already have been sold into loveless marriages with puny little men who look not unlike this lout here." He gestured toward Steeljaw.

"But some of them are available?" said the ogre.

"I guarantee it."

"Plump, you say?"

"They make the moon itself look oblong," said Cretin.

"If I let you go, how do I know you'll bring them back?"

"You cut me to the quick!" said Cretin.

"If there's any doubt in your mind, maybe we'd better call the whole thing off. You can just eat me and my companion and go back to living alone, isolated from all female compassion, isolated from the tender touch of a woman, isolated from—"

"All right!" bellowed the ogre.

"Fine," said Cretin. "Now, I'll have numerous arrangements to make: I'll have to ship them here from all the far exotic climes where they reside, I'll have to feed them the whole time, I may have to pay off an occasional disgruntled lover. . . ."

"No money," said the ogre firmly.

"Oh, I have money enough of my own," said Cretin. "But I shall have to spend a considerable portion of it to bring these women back here to you. What guarantee have I that you'll still be waiting?"

"Where would I go?" said the ogre blankly.

"I don't know," said Cretin. "Where did all the other ogres go? No, I'll need

some token of good will on your part, some symbolic sign that you'll remain here."

"I have no money," said the ogre.

"A jewelled dagger, perhaps?" suggested Cretin. "Or possibly an ancient book in a rare and delicate binding?"

"Neither," was the unhappy answer.

"Then I'm afraid you'll simply have to eat me and my companion," said Cretin sadly. "I certainly don't envy you chewing on all the gristle."

"Wait!" said the ogre. "How about my pendant?"

"Now why didn't I think of that?" exclaimed Cretin. He paused. "But no, on further consideration, I think not. It's such a *small* piece. I had in mind something more substantial."

"What's the matter with my pendant?" demanded the ogre ominously. "You liked it well enough a few minutes ago."

"As a trinket, a bauble to give to an evening's casual acquaintance," said Cretin. "But as your forfeit in a solemn agreement . . . well, I just don't know."

"You'll take it," snarled the ogre, "or it's down the gullet with you!"

"You absolutely insist?"

"I do."

Cretin sighed. "Then I have no choice but to accept." He took the pendant from the ogre and tucked it in his coin pouch.

"Blondes," said the ogre.

"What about blondes?" asked Cretin.

"I like them."

"Consider it done."

"Lots of them," said the ogre.

"Then I have no time to waste, have I?" said Cretin.

He and Steeljaw left the forest unmolested. Their last glimpse of the ogre showed him to be plucking the whiskers from his chin, one by one.

"Well, nobody ever said they were smart," commented Steeljaw as they began the trek back to the wizard's cave.

"I'd guess that he is about to pass from Deeply Malcontented to Seriously Displeased," replied Cretin. "By the way, I hope you'll be of more help on our next quest."

"Can I help it if appetizers come before main courses?" snapped Steeljaw as if that settled the matter. They walked the remaining distance in silence.

Pierpont was sitting at his desk when they arrived, fuming over not being able to sell Polaroid short at eighty-three. He gestured them to sit down, waited until the mirror flashed the latest quotations on tax-exempt bonds, and then turned to them.

"Have you got the pendant?"

Cretin produced it.

"Excellent, excellent," said Pierpont, holding the piece up to the light. "I've always been partial to precious stones. Rubies, emeralds, diamonds—that's where the future is. Gold's just too damned volatile." He suddenly lost interest in the pendant and tossed it carelessly to the floor, where it startled the guinea pig just as it was about to catch one of the snakes. "Well, gentlemen, are you ready for your next assignment?"

"I suppose so," said Cretin without much enthusiasm.

"Good. For your next tribute, I require the unbroken egg of a roc." He paused.

"Oh, and you might bring a skillet and a little butter, too."

As they left the cave Steeljaw turned to Cretin. "Where do rocs keep their eggs?"

"Atop the highest mountains."

"How big are they?"

"The rocs, the eggs, or the mountains?"

"The rocs."

"Big enough to carry a man off to their nests," said Cretin.

Steeljaw considered this for a moment, then said: "Are you absolutely sure we can't kill Krotan without your wizard's help?"

"To be perfectly honest with you," replied Cretin, "I'm not totally convinced we can kill him even *with* Pierpont's help."

"Then I guess we'd better hunt up a likely mountain," said Steeljaw.

"And quickly," added Cretin. "The time element is working against us."

"In what way?"

"Even an idiot like Nesbudanchik is going to notice that you're missing sooner or later," explained Cretin patiently. "And when he does, the very first thing he's going to do is send out a few demons of various shapes and sizes to bring you back."

"Let's find that mountain!" said Steeljaw quickly.

They descended to the plain and headed toward a mountain range about 25 miles to the west, against which Pierpont's own mountain appeared to be but a small foothill. As they walked, a dark shadow passed over them and vanished an instant later. This phenomenon was

repeated twice more before Cretin looked up.

"We're in luck!" he cried, pointing toward a large bird that was circling above them.

"A roc!" exclaimed Steeljaw, drawing his broadsword.

"And a hungry one at that," nodded Cretin. "See, he's preparing to swoop down upon us. Put your sword away!"

"Why?" demanded Steeljaw.

"Because the quickest way to get to his nest is to let him carry one of us there."

"And how will we get back down?" asked Steeljaw dubiously.

"One thing at a time," said Cretin. "The first chore is getting there. You'll agree that there's no sense in both of us risking our lives?"

"What are you getting at?" demanded Steeljaw, his eyes narrowing.

"Simply that we should stand a little farther apart so he can't grab us both," The roc began diving down toward them. "Don't give it a moment's thought," said Cretin, walking to the protection of a huge tree. "I'll be standing over here sharing the danger with you every second."

Steeljaw looked up, saw the giant bird bearing down upon them, and raced toward Cretin and the tree. The movement caught the roc's attention, and a moment later Steeljaw found himself fifty feet in the air, his sword arm pinned against his side.

"Remember not to break the egg!" shouted Cretin before they were out of earshot.

The roc soared higher and higher, rid-

ing the dizzying wind currents and moving sideways to the west. After a chilling twenty minutes that left him convinced that he could happily go another twelve centuries without eating, Steeljaw looked down and saw that they were approaching an enormous nest filled to the brim with eggs, each about the size of a large man's torso. He was rudely deposited amongst them and left there as the roc flew off once again.

Gingerly he clambered over the eggs and looked over the side of the nest, uttering a little whimper as his eyes studied the earth some two miles below him. He examined the sides of the mountain for paths and found none. Hopeful that there might be unseen water below, he pushed one of the eggs over the side and whimpered again when it landed with a loud and unpleasant splat half a minute later.

"Nesbudanchik!" he hollered into the wind. "I'm ready to come home now! I momentarily lost my ethical compass, but now I see the error of my ways!" He waited for a few minutes, but nothing happened. "Nesbudanchik, you incredibly inept chowderhead, get me the hell out of here!" He seemed to hear a ghostly chuckling carried on the wind.

"Pierpont!" he screamed. "I'd be willing to swear eternal fealty to anyone who gets me out of this mess!"

He looked for a sign that his offer had been heard, but none appeared.

At least not for a moment. Then he saw the roc returning, obviously attracted by his cries. He was quite prepared to be carried back to earth and let Cretin try his own luck at getting an egg out of the nest,

but he realized at the last instant that the roc wasn't coming to transport him, but to devour him.

He ducked, and the huge beak of the giant bird broke through the inch-thick shell of one of the eggs, flooding the nest with yolk and albumen. Steeljaw struck back wildly with his broadsword, and as the battle continued, neither antagonist doing any apparent harm to the other, three more eggs broke and the slippery fluid began seeping through to the jutting rock on which the nest was perilously perched.

The roc lowered itself to the edge of the nest to get a better angle, and as it did so everything—the nest, the eggs, Steeljaw and the roc—suddenly began sliding down the mountain.

Steeljaw and the roc screamed simultaneously. The roc flew straight up into the air and hovered, and the huge warrior, half-immersed in egg yolk, grabbed onto the inner side of the nest and hung on for dear life. The nest careened from ledge to ledge and continued racing down the side of the mountain at a breakneck pace, its coating of slime almost eliminating all friction as it zigged and zagged its way ever downward.

The roc took off in hot pursuit, but was soon outdistanced. Steeljaw kept trying to stand up preparatory to jumping out, but his feet could get no traction. About ten minutes into his unlikely ride he realized that only one egg remained intact, and he immediately adjusted his position as best he could to protect it from any sudden twists and turns. In another three or four minutes he noticed that his direc-

tion had become horizontal rather than near-vertical, and in another few seconds the nest skidded to a stop.

Steeljaw got shakily to his feet, dragged himself out of the nest, and picked up the still-unbroken egg. Behind him was the mountain, before him spread a lush green field—and sitting beneath a tree not thirty yards away was Cretin, his legs crossed, contentedly munching an over-ripe apple.

“Well done, my comrade at arms!” he said between bites. “I thought you’d take at least a day or two, and possibly even a week, and yet here you are, not an hour since your somewhat abrupt departure. And not only did you accomplish our second task, but I have the feeling that you’ve invented a new sport which has an enormous profit potential, as soon as I can work out the details. Well done, indeed!”

Steeljaw choked on his words for a moment.

“I can’t believe my eyes!” he said at last. “You should be fleeing for your life and yet here you sit, feeding your face and acting as if nothing had happened!”

“I must confess that I have given serious consideration to fleeing for my life for the past twenty or thirty seconds,” said Cretin, taking another bite of the apple, “and have come to the unhappy conclusion that it wouldn’t do any good at all.”

“Ah!” said Steeljaw, glowering. “Then you admit that I’m a better man than you!”

“It’s not you I was considering fleeing from,” said Cretin. “It’s the egg’s

mother.”

“The egg’s *what*?”

“Its mother,” repeated Cretin, gesturing to the enormous roc descending upon them. “She’ll be here in another few seconds.”

“Then why don’t you draw your sword?” demanded Steeljaw as he unsheathed his own.

“She’s not mad at me. After all, *I’m* not the one who invaded her domicile and stole her egg.”

Steeljaw uttered a whine, a curse, a whimper, a snarl, and a moan in blindingly quick succession, and prepared to meet the roc’s attack. As he did so Cretin stood up, pulled his delicate sword out of its sheath, leaned back and hurled it with startling force at the roc, which gurgled once as the blade pierced its jugular and then fell to the ground, dead.

“That was some marksmanship!” said Steeljaw admiringly. “There’s more to you than meets the eye, little man.”

“Words that are repeated every night in the House of the Indelicately Inclined Maidens,” replied Cretin, walking over to the roc, placing his foot against its neck, and withdrawing his weapon.

“Make sport of me if you will,” said Steeljaw, “but I am deeply touched by the friendship that caused you to come to my aid in this dark moment of truth.”

“You know,” said Cretin thoughtfully, “I suppose it was partially friendship that prompted my actions, at that.”

“Partially?”

“Well, I certainly had no intention of carrying the egg all the way back by myself. Let’s make a sling out of woven

grasses from yonder field and be on our way.”

The two adventurers arrived back at their home base a full day later. Pierpont had switched off the mirror and was instead engaged in drawing up technical analysis graphs for the transportation industry.

“My egg!” he cried as his eyes fell upon Cretin and Steeljaw. “Better and better! Better and better! Only one tribute to go, and then you’ll be free to commit the basest and blackest of all human crimes—or at least all those not involving the S.E.C. Are you ready to see the life fade from Krotan’s bulging eyes and watch his protruding tongue turn purple as you twist his throat, pull out his intestines, and behead him?”

“All at once?” asked Steeljaw, looking slightly queasy.

“I’m speaking figuratively, of course,” said Pierpont. “In point of fact, you’ll be lucky to escape with your lives.”

“Then why in Lucifer’s name are we going off on these asinine quests for you?” demanded Steeljaw.

“Because without my help, you’d probably be killed the moment you entered the city limits,” said Pierpont, throwing a rat off one of his graphs. “But if you feel any trepidation about your dealings with me, you have only to return the roc’s egg and the ogre’s pendant and I’ll gladly transform you back into a Djinn, complete with foul breath and a poor complexion.”

“Great Wizard, my companion meant no offense,” interjected Cretin hastily. “We are yours to command. Merely lay

out our third tribute and we’ll be on our way.”

“There speaks the voice of reason,” said Pierpont. “No sense arguing now that you’ve come this far. Very well, then. For your third tribute I set you out this simple task: bring me a single fruit from the Tree of Irrelevance.”

“And where may this tree be found?” said Cretin.

“It is the tallest tree in the Forest of Unexceptional Fantasies,” said the old wizard. “Just a good stretch of the legs.”

“That all depends on whose legs you’re talking about,” said Cretin. “It’s forty miles away.”

“Penn Central declares bankruptcy and you complain to me of mild discomfort?” bellowed Pierpont. “Off with you, before I turn you into food for my pets!”

He made a quick gesture in the air and suddenly there was a brief cloudburst within the cave. Cretin and Steeljaw hastily retreated and swapped lies about their sexual exploits for the duration of the day. They walked on through the uneventful night, and daybreak found them striding through the depths of the Forest of Unexceptional Fantasies. Before long they came to an enormous fruit-bearing tree.

“Nothing to it,” said Steeljaw with a smile. He walked forward and reached for a small, ripe, pomegranate-like fruit—and a thorny branch slapped his hand.

“Damn!” said Steeljaw, holding his bleeding hand to his lips. “I knew there was a catch to it!”

“Who seeks the fruit of the Tree of





Irrelevance?" said the tree in a high, lisping voice.

"My name is Cretin the Beggar, Lord Tree," said Cretin, stepping forward. "This is my companion, known, for reasons I have not as yet been able to fathom, as Steeljaw. We are tired and hungry and would be forever grateful for a piece of your fruit."

"No doubt you would," cackled the tree. "No doubt you would. By the way, did you know that a lion can run one hundred yards in 3.18 seconds, but requires 92.3 seconds to run half a mile?"

"I must admit I didn't know," said Cretin.

"Hah! I thought not!" said the tree smugly. "Or that there is no First Cause in the set of all negative integers?"

"No, my Lord Tree," said Cretin.

"Not very bright, are you?" snickered the tree. "How about the molecular weight of hydrogen selenide?"

"How about it?" said Steeljaw.

"Eighty-one!" said the tree triumphantly. "So there!"

"Lord Tree," said Cretin, "might we possibly get back to the subject of the fruit?"

"If we must," sighed the tree. "Name a fruit beginning with the letter 'Q'."

"Must I?" said Cretin.

"Absolutely."

"I can't," he said after some thought.

"The quince!" cried the tree happily.

"What do you think of that?"

"I must confess that I am too weak from hunger to think of it at all," said Cretin, dropping to his knees and clutching his belly in a grandly theatrical ges-

ture. "If you will let me partake of but a single one of your fruits, I might then be able to converse with you on a more satisfactory level."

"Not a chance—which, incidentally, can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective."

"But why not?" said Cretin.

"Because you have not yet answered one of my questions correctly," explained the tree impatiently. "After all, fair is fair."

"You mean all we have to do is answer one of your riddles and you will give us the fruit?" said Cretin.

"Riddles? *Riddles?*" whined the tree. "These are factual questions with factual answers. I do not indulge in trickery or word games, my good man!"

"Please accept my apologies," said Cretin.

"Well, all right," sniffed the tree. "This one time."

"Thank you, Lord Tree."

"Are you ready?" asked the tree.

"Quite."

"What is the difference between a sidereal day and a solar day?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea," admitted Cretin.

"Four minutes," gloated the tree. "Name the only carbohydrate beginning with the letter 'X'."

"I can't," said Cretin with a growing sense of futility.

"Hah! Xylone. Hah!" said the tree. "Poor little man. Are you feeling sorry for yourself? Let me ask you an easy one: how many light years separate us from Proxima Centauri—which, for you infor-

mation, happens to be our nearest neighboring star?"

"I don't even know what a light year is," admitted Cretin.

"The distance light travels in a year, you ninny!" gloated the tree. "And the answer is four-point-three."

"I don't suppose you'd let me ask you a question or two?" suggested Cretin.

"Of course not," said the tree prissily. "Rules of the game, you know."

"And you always obey the rules of the game?" said Cretin.

"Always."

"Without exception?"

"Without exception," said the tree.

"I don't believe you," said Cretin with the trace of a smile on his thin lips.

"Are you calling me a liar?" demanded the tree.

"What did the Tree of Irrelevance just do, Steeljaw?" said Cretin quickly.

"It asked you if you were calling it a liar," said Steeljaw, still sucking at his wound.

"All right, Lord Tree," said Cretin. "I will now answer your last question. Yes, I am calling you a liar. Now I will thank you for your fruit!"

"Just a minute!" said the tree. "What kind of trickery is going on here?"

"You asked a question of me and I answered it," said Cretin. "You owe me one fruit."

"But even though you tricked me," said the tree, "your answer was incorrect. I am not a liar."

"Whether you are a liar or not has no relevance to the question," said Cretin. "You asked me if I was *calling* you one,

and I replied truthfully that I was. The fruit, please—or *are* you a liar?"

"But it wasn't fair!" wailed the tree.

"You made the rules," said Cretin. "I merely played by them."

He walked up to the tree and pulled a small fruit off it.

"Ouch!" said the tree.

"Sorry," said Cretin.

"You cheated," said the tree sulkily.

"I am aggrieved that you should think so," said Cretin, starting to leave the forest with Steeljaw.

"You can't leave now!" yelled the tree. "I demand a rematch!"

"Some other time!" Cretin called back.

"I'm going to hold my breath until you come back!" sobbed the tree.

Wails of outrage followed them until they reached the edge of the forest, and the two companions were more than happy to leave the threats and supplications of the tree behind them. They made a leisurely pace back toward the cave, as a result of which the fruit was slightly rancid when they turned it over to Pierpont.

"Well, well, the two heroes return successfully again!" said Pierpont when they arrived. "What happened to my fruit?"

"Don't eat it," said Cretin, tossing it to him. "A little irrelevant knowledge is a dangerous thing."

Pierpont roared with laughter, scribbled the statement down for future use, and flipped the fruit into a damp corner of the cave, where it awoke three peacefully sleeping snakes. Then he reached his hand into the air, seemed to be fiddling with something, and a moment later gave

a little yank—and came away with a jeweled scimitar. He handed it to Cretin.

“With this weapon, and with this weapon alone, may you slay Krotan the Usurper.”

“Thank you, Great Wizard,” said Cretin. “But shouldn’t you give it to Steeljaw? After all, he’s the killing expert.”

“It will only work for you,” explained Pierpont. “Besides, Steeljaw is going to be busy holding fifty or sixty of Krotan’s bodyguards at bay while you do the evil deed.”

“How many?” said Steeljaw, blinking his eyes very rapidly.

“Cheer up,” said Pierpont with a smile. “There might not be more than twenty or so.”

“But I can’t hold off even twenty warriors by myself!” protested Steeljaw.

“Of course you can,” said Pierpont. “Why do you think I turned you into a huge barbarian swordsman, rather than a little wimp like Cretin?”

“It’s not fair,” said Steeljaw petulantly.

“I could turn you back into a Djinn,” said Pierpont. “Of course, if I did that, Nesbudanchik would have no difficulty finding you, but on the other hand you would make mincemeat out of Krotan’s bodyguards.”

Steeljaw growled an obscenity and walked to the far end of the cave.

“Was there not also a charm?” said Cretin.

“So there was,” said Pierpont. “Thank you for reminding me. By the way, do you mind if I ask you a personal ques-

tion?”

“Not at all, Great and Powerful Master of the Dark Arts,” said Cretin.

“What’s a bright young man like yourself doing with a name like Cretin?”

“It puts people at their ease.”

“And simultaneously lowers their guard, eh?” cackled Pierpont. “Not a bad idea at that. Have you ever considered becoming an apprentice wizard?”

“To tell the truth, I’m really rather unfond of snakes and rats,” said Cretin. “And I know not these two gods that you alone seem to worship.”

“You mean Dow and Jones?”

Cretin nodded.

“Well,” said Pierpont, “we all pray at the temples of our choice. I used to worship at the Gate of the Succulent Virgins, but I must confess that I became indifferent to women about four thousand years ago. But perhaps recommending the mystic arts to you was a mistake. After all, who would I be able to send out for tributes?”

“Surely there are others who come to you for help,” said Cretin.

“None with such delightful regularity as yourself,” smiled Pierpont. “But enough small talk. You still need a charm to draw Krotan to the Inn of the Hairy Toad, do you not?”

“Yes, Great Wizard.”

“Then you will learn the following mystical phrase: ‘Buy when they’re friendless, sell when they’re fat.’”

“Buy when they’re friendless, sell when they’re fat?” repeated Cretin.

“Correct,” said Pierpont. “When you reach the Inn of the Hairy Toad, you will

light three candles, place them in a triangular configuration and utter that sentence."

"And then what?" asked Steeljaw from across the cave.

"Then wait for Krotan," said Pierpont. "He won't be able to keep away."

"As simple as that?" said Cretin.

"Not really. But at least it will get the wheels spinning."

"Whatever that means," said Cretin.

"And now you must leave me," said Pierpont. "*Bonne chance!*" A moment later he was studying the newest no-load mutual funds.

Cretin and Steeljaw climbed down the mountain and walked south to the city, the former slashing the air with his magical scimitar, the latter muttering unhappily about having to hold off half the army of Agabenzzar. They refreshed themselves in a cold clear stream, dined on fruits and vegetables, and reached the Inn of the Hairy Toad after nightfall.

It was a large stone tavern, with numerous small rooms and nooks hidden by beaded curtains. The wooden floor was liberally covered by old blood stains, a huge boar's head hung over the long and battered bar, and a nude girl danced on an empty table in one corner while other girls circulated from patron to patron.

The clientele seemed right at home. Some were clad in bright and expensive silks, some in the simple leather gear of the warrior, and a handful wore only animal-skin loincloths—but all were hard-living, hard-drinking men who would gladly slit one another's throats for the price of a drink. At the Inn of the

Hairy Toad, a man's shadow was seldom his own, and there was no word for virtue.

It also smelled bad.

"And Pierpont actually *owns* this place!" said Steeljaw unbelievably, as he and Cretin sat down at a table.

"I should have figured that out when I saw the price of the drinks," said Cretin, ordering two pints of ale from a hulking, one-eyed waiter.

"Well, we might as well get on with it," said Steeljaw. He rose, gathered three small candles from adjoining tables, and returned.

Cretin insisted on drinking his ale first, and both of them felt a quart of wine would steady their nerves for the battle to come, and the wine was so sweet that they then ordered more ale to quench their thirsts; but finally Cretin lit the three candles, set each eight inches from the other in an equilateral triangle, and muttered the mystic words.

And nothing happened.

"Relax," said Cretin, as Steeljaw tightened his grip around the handle of his sword. "The palace is more than a mile from here, and the spell wasn't supposed to magically transport them here. It's simply supposed to make him come to us."

"Then it could be *hours* yet!" said Steeljaw.

"Right. It seems a shame to waste the time. Shall we have some more ale?"

"Might as well," muttered Steeljaw, never taking his eyes from the door.

Forty minutes and six quarts of ale later the tavern's crowd had thinned out

somewhat. The girls had made their business and sleeping arrangements for the night, a number of the customers had crossed the street to see what was happening at the Tavern of the Thirsty Camel, and half a dozen men were now propped up against the foot of the bar, snoring peacefully.

Then the door swung open and a huge man walked in. Although Cretin had never seen him before, he knew at a glance that this was Krotan the Conqueror. The man stood almost seven feet tall, had a black shaggy mane, burning grey eyes, and a musculature that put even Steeljaw's splendid figure to shame. His body bore eighty-seven great scars, all gotten in victorious battle, and despite his expensively-woven cape and clothes, his weapons were the plain weapons of the trained fighting man.

He strode to the bar, brushing tables aside right and left with a few casual swipes of his enormous hand.

"A quart of your best ale!" he said, and the echoes of his voice caused the glass to shake in the window frames.

"Yes, Lord Krotan!" stammered the bartender, serving him immediately.

"I don't know what inspired me to come slumming," Krotan announced to the room at large. "I just felt a need to get away from the cares of state. I don't suppose anyone would like to wrestle me for the cost of a drink?" he said, looking directly at Steeljaw, who almost fainted. "I thought not," he said sadly. "What ever happened to the good old days when men were men, and a fellow could get a little exercise in a place like this?"

"Perhaps I could accommodate you," said Cretin, rising to his feet.

"You?" laughed Krotan. "Why, I use men like you to pick my teeth with!"

"Well, if you're afraid. . . ."

"No one calls Krotan the Conqueror a coward!" bellowed Krotan, drawing his sword.

"One moment," said Cretin. "Steeljaw, walk over to the door and make sure no one comes to this braggart's aid."

Steeljaw slunk to the doorway, keeping as much room between himself and Krotan as possible.

"And now, little insect," said Krotan, "come just a bit closer and I shall crush you!"

Cretin withdrew the scimitar and crossed blades with Krotan. A moment later he lunged forward and Krotan slashed him on the right forearm.

"Damn!" said Cretin. "That wasn't supposed to happen!"

"It is what you may confidently expect to happen when you cross swords with Krotan the Conqueror," laughed his antagonist.

"But this is a magical scimitar!" said Cretin, parrying another blow and backing away.

"Who gave it to you—that old charlatan Pierpont?"

"How did you know?" said Cretin, parrying yet another thrust.

"Who else would give you an inferior magic sword?" said Krotan.

"Inferior in what way?" said Cretin.

"Did he tell you that it could kill me?" asked Krotan, advancing slowly toward the retreating Cretin.

"Yes. Can't it?"

"Oh, it can kill me, all right. It can slash right through the light armor I wear, where a thousand other swords have failed to do so."

"Then what's the catch?"

"The catch, little man, is that you will have no magical assistance in delivering the death blow, and you happen to be fighting the greatest swordsman in all Agabenzzar!" He threw back his massive head and laughed. "What did it cost you?"

"An ogre's pendant, a roc's egg, and a fruit from the Tree of Irrelevance," said Cretin, thrusting his sword, only to see it parried once again.

"*You* came away with a fruit from the Tree of Irrelevance?" said Krotan.

"Yes," said Cretin, thrusting futilely again.

"Do you mind if we stop fighting and sit down together for a moment?" said Krotan, lowering his sword.

"Lead the way," said Cretin, mopping the sweat from his face and trying to catch his breath.

"The Tree of Irrelevance!" repeated Krotan, seating himself at a table.

"Right," said Cretin, sitting down opposite him.

"That's just amazing!" said Krotan. "You know, I must have spent two months with that accursed tree when I decided to become king. I never could figure out any of the answers."

"You mean you enlisted Pierpont's aid?"

"I tried," said Krotan. "The eye of the Cyclops was easy, and the tongue of the

Tree-Dwelling Watersnake took only a single afternoon. But I never could get my hands on that damned fruit, and finally I simply gave up and raised an army to take the crown by force."

"Then why is Nesbudanchik so mad at you?" asked Cretin.

"That old fraud?" demanded Krotan. "What has he to do with all this?"

Cretin told him, and Krotan began nodding his head. "Of course," said the giant swordsman at last. "I took the crown from Kalimakos, who was in league with Nesbudanchik. No wonder he wants to slay me." He paused. "The Tree of Irrelevance! I just can't get over it!"

"Nothing to it," said Cretin.

"Perhaps not for you," said Krotan. "But my sword has always been more agile than my brain."

"Come now," said Cretin, fearing that Krotan would momentarily break into tears. "I find you an excellent conversationalist."

"No, it's true," said Krotan miserably. "I'm much better at conquering kingdoms than running them. I had a conference with my Budget Manager just before I came here, and I didn't know what in Hades he was talking about. I have a stone ear for the language of diplomacy, I schedule my time poorly, I can't read the laws that my councillors write. It's all too much for me. I talk about raising an army to conquer neighboring lands, and they read treaties and draft laws at me. I kill a few irritating slaves, and they fine me for destroying government property. I am forced to give huge dinners for people I

don't even know. And as for keeping in shape—this piddling little workout with you is the first exercise I've had in weeks."

"What are you driving at, Lord Krotan?" asked Cretin.

"I'm *tired* of being king," whined Krotan. "I need to feel the sun on my back, to taste the blood of a foe as my sword lops his head off, to bed any wench I choose without worrying about statutory rape lectures."

"So?"

"How would you like to trade places with me?"

"I don't know," Cretin said dubiously. "I'm supposed to kill you, not succeed you."

"At least consider it," urged Krotan. "You'd be good at speaking to all these advisors and managing budgets and such."

"True," said Cretin.

"And there's a treasure room," added Krotan hastily. "It's sort of depleted these days, but there's still a goodly supply of precious stones left, and you could set up a more effective Taxation Bureau."

"I just don't know," said Cretin. "You'd have to promise never to try to usurp my throne."

"I wouldn't have it on a bet!" said Krotan devoutly.

"You might get tired of tearing limb from limb," said Cretin.

"Never!"

"Well, I may regret it," said Cretin. "But what the hell—it's a deal."

"Let's seal it with a drink!" exclaimed

Krotan.

"Why not? Come on over, Steeljaw. It seems you won't have the pleasure of holding King Krotan's army at bay after all. In fact, who knows—you just might end up leading them into battle."

And thus did Cretin the Beggar come unto the throne of ancient Agabazzar, accompanied by Steeljaw the Djinn, who, ever fearful of Nesbudanchik's vengeance, chose to remain in human form.

Krotan vacated the premises the next morning, taking just enough money to see him through his first week on the road. He headed north and west, in search of battle and adventure.

During his third night on the road, as he was cooking a newly-killed rabbit over a small fire, he heard a distant roll of drums, followed by a flash of lightning. This was followed in quick succession by a fanfare of trumpets, a clap of thunder, and the sudden appearance of a hideous red demon.

"Cretin the Usurper, Abuser of the Meek, Defiler of the Fairest Flowers of Agabazzar, Trader in Sorcery, You Who Sit Falsely on the Throne, prepare to die!"

"Oh, shit!" muttered Krotan, trying to remember Pierpont's latest rate sheet.

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Control Pi

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I HAD NO business being at that champagne reception. I wasn't a University luminary. I didn't have an invitation. As a matter of fact, I hadn't even walked in the door in the first place.

But there I stood, holding a skewered Vienna sausage in one hand and a glass of Mum's in the other, rubbing shoulders with the academic community's beautiful people.

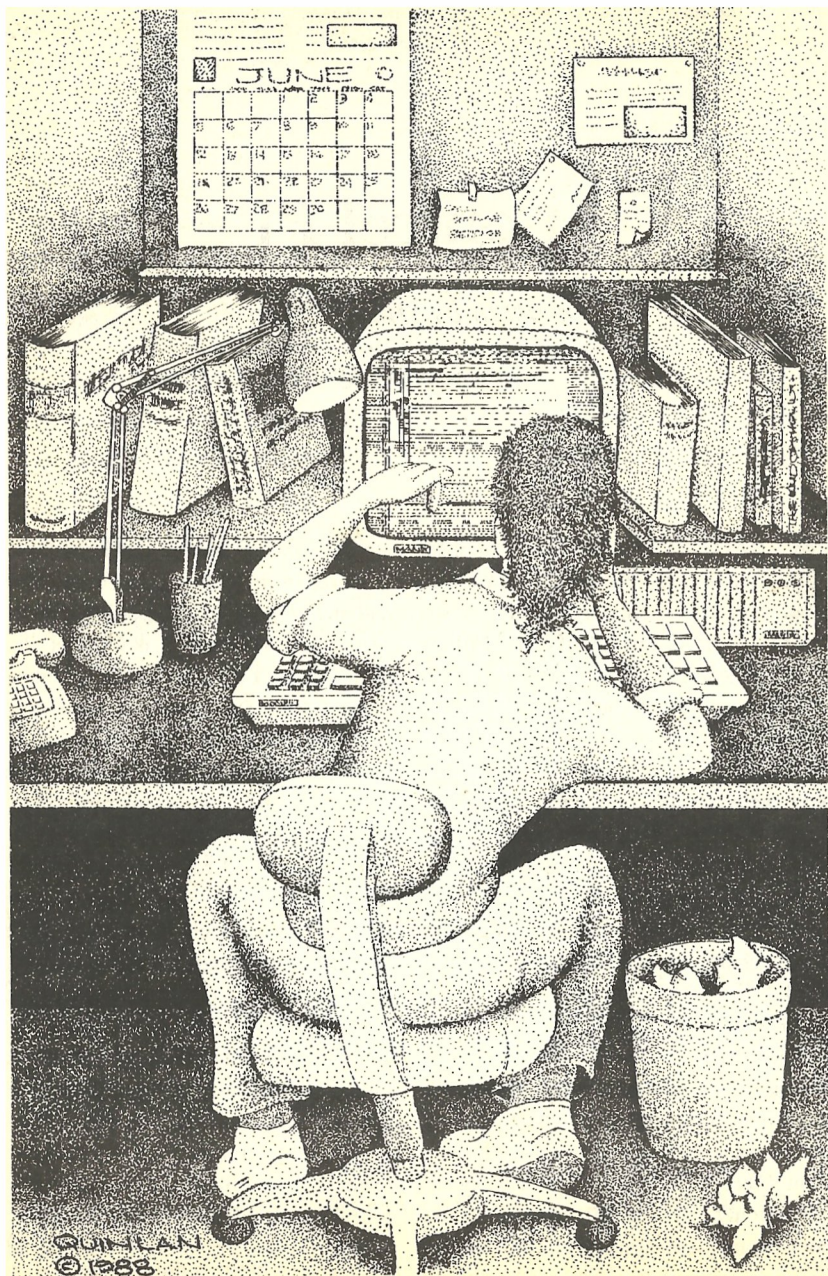
Me, a lowly typesetter, a print plant employee, at a reception for the new dean of arts and sciences. I hadn't even gotten my bachelor's degree, for crying out loud.

I looked around the room in awe. Just moments ago, I'd been dressed in jeans and Huskies T-shirt, slouched on my chair in my drab harshly-lit cubicle, typesetting an invitation to the college president's reception. And now . . . I looked down at my pale blue tafetta gown, shook my elegantly coiffured head, settled onto

a plush sofa and tried to sort it out.

Never in my fifteen years as a printer had anything like this happened. Oh, I'd seen a lot. Working at newspapers and print shops, I'd gotten used to strange things. Linotype operators who typed fifty words a minute faster three sheets to the wind than sober; rustic-minded publishers who expected me to come to work early so I could chop the wood, so I could start the fire, so I could heat the chemistry, so I could develop the phototypesetting paper, so I could put the newspaper together; Winnebago-size computers that looked more like demonic carnival rides than typesetting equipment with all these spinning loops of yellow punch tape and pulleys and wheels and trays full of toxic chemistry; combination bathroom/dark-rooms where it was often a toss-up between a ruined bladder or a ruined half-tone come deadline.

Most of that craziness I'd left behind



me when I took the typesetting job at the University. It was a union shop and the darkrooms were where they were supposed to be, and the bathrooms, likewise. And the computer equipment at this print shop was top of the line. Sleek and new and expensive. None of that clunky, cumbersome stuff from the Pliocene era, where changing the point size was a major exertion, comparable to hand cranking a Model T. On the University's terminals, changing the point size was as easy as typing CP12, or CP24, or CP172.5.

I did a lot of that, changing point size, changing typestyles, changing leading and line measure and fonts. That's what typesetting's all about. Typing up and processing information, making it look all nice and even. Justified, ragged right, wraparounds, drop caps, it didn't matter to me, I just followed the mark-up man. And with that computer of mine, even the most complicated stuff was a breeze.

I had these great programmable keys which would store up to 65 characters each so I wouldn't have to type the same words and phrases over and over again. When I typed up the commencement book, I used these keys a lot to put in the kind of degrees all the kids got. I only made a couple of mistakes; I gave a young lawyer a degree in Communications and a forestry major his doctor of medicine in surgery. But we caught them before they went to press so it wasn't too bad. It wasn't like the time my boss forgot to put the "R" in Nordstrom's shirt sale and they didn't notice until it was too late.

I've got a key called control, which is a kind of stepping stone, taking me from one place to another within the system, and two other keys called supershift and pi which lets me access all kinds of symbols and characters that aren't on a normal keyboard. With them, I can make little hands pointing to the left or right, little black telephones, stars, bullets, boxes, braces, arrows, checks, aces, clubs, hearts or diamonds, or all the letters of the Greek alphabet.

As I sat sipping my champagne on that plush baby blue sofa, I realized that that little pi key was the last thing I'd touched. I hadn't meant to hit it. I'd meant to hit control execute, but for some reason, my finger slipped, I guess, and I hit control pi. Nothing should have happened. But instead, I ended up at the reception whose invitation had been typed on my terminal's flickering green face.

The sound of tinkling champagne glasses and the pleasant murmur of privileged conversation lulled me. Standing, I sauntered over to the buffet table for another Vienna sausage. A waiter graciously filled my champagne glass while a short unctious man with no eyebrows told me bad puns about *sushi* and periodontal disease. The people around me laughed and drank and toasted "the Gerb" and I watched it all in astonished delight, and downed my own glass of bubbly.

I had another, and another, and strolled through the crowd, peering at the well-known faces and making polite chit chat, and eventually I began to wonder about work and about where I was

exactly, my other self, the one sitting in the stark little cubicle in the uncomfortable chair.

And as soon as I thought that I actually didn't want to be at the champagne reception anymore, that I actually wanted to go back to work, I was there. Sweating off the summer heat in my jeans and T-shirt, with the green computer screen grinning at me in the harsh fluorescent light and the completed invitation typed across its face. And not one second had passed.

I was slightly disquieted. And not a little tipsy. I sent the invitation off to compose, then stared unbelieving at the keyboard, at the screen, at my hands. There was a little grease from a Vienna sausage on my left hand.

I grabbed another job from the work bank, some corrections on the state's emergency manual, and left work at the end of my shift a few minutes later. I wouldn't think about what had happened. Each time it popped up in my head I would squish it back down again. Slam a mental manhole cover on it. Delete from memory, execute.

But that was on Friday and that weekend I fussed and fretted and stewed. Was I going mad? I asked myself. Could it be heat stroke? Too much stress? Had I finally developed a female problem?

I took my temperature twenty-three times and examined my tongue with a keen eye. Then I examined one keen eye with the other.

By Sunday I decided I was in perfect health, I never let my imagine run that wild, and I was curious. My eyes were a little glazed and I slept fitfully, if at all,

that night.

When I bounced into work at 7:05 Monday morning whistling, by boss gave me a queer look and told me I couldn't work any overtime. I told him I was just there early and he gave me a disgusted look and returned his face to his coffee.

I sat down at my terminal, ready to explore the world of Control Pi, but he hollered over the partition that the system wasn't up yet. I waited twenty-eight anxious minutes before I could sign on. Finally, I selected a job with minor corrections and called it up. It was a parking permit at Husky Stadium for members of the press.

I made the correction, changing the year on the pass, and hit Control Pi. Suddenly, I was caught in a crowd of bustling football fans. The crisp touch of fall was in the air and I wore a purple and gold scarf around my neck. A press badge hung from my pea coat that read Sports Editor, The NEWS. I heard the roar of the crowd inside the stadium as the announcer started to read the names of the players.

I thought again that I wanted to go back to work and I was there. Leaning back in my chair, staring at my green-eyed monster, my feet propped up nicely on a metal trashcan.

I sent the job to compose, glanced at the clock and found again no time had passed.

I picked up another job, a brochure on Woodland Park Zoo. I called up the file, didn't even bother with the corrections, and hit Control Pi.

It was spring, and I was standing in

front of the Malaysian sun bear display. A camera hung around my neck and I was wearing traditional tourist garb—velour sunsuit, floppy hat and thongs. I snapped a few shots, then wandered over to the next display, and the next. I saw the lions, the apes, the birds, spent a few chilling moments with the cockroaches, and ended up, hours later, by the elephants.

I posed with the pachyderms while an amiable Japanese man took my picture. I finished the rest of my popcorn and decided to get back to work. After all, I hadn't even punched in yet and I'd spent all day at the zoo.

And I was back. I looked at the clock, eighteen minutes of eight, and went immediately to the ladies room. I laid down on the spartan cot and thought.

In the past two work days, I had been at a no-host reception for the new dean, a football game between the Huskies and the Oklahoma Sooners and the local zoological gardens. No time had passed while I was at these places and I could come back at my own wish.

I could not explain it, but at that point I didn't even try. All I knew was that for the first time in my life I was having a great time. I had access to a world where I had no obligations, I didn't have to worry about money or work or deadlines or anything. It was fun and it was all mine. When I returned to my station, the first thing I did was check all the other terminals for control piety. To my delight, nothing happened. My machine was unique.

From there on my life changed. I

chuckled at how I used to think typesetting hospital forms was challenging. Now I could update a hospital form and find myself assisting in surgery and knowing how to do it, or singing Christmas carols with a group of kids in the children's ward. I could step into a book and be on the bow of a great whaling ship as it crested the Arctic waters or attend the symphony or ballet during lunch. I found a section on Hawaii in a brochure on upcoming business seminars and control pied my way to a two-day vacation. When I came back, my co-workers gave me odd looks wondering how I'd developed a sunburn inside a brick building with no windows.

All things seemed possible and I dreamed it would last forever. But I soon found an alarming drawback to my discovery. One day, the system crashed right as I was coming back from biking along 15th Avenue during a brochure on commuting. My teeth clicked together harshly as I landed in my chair and my hair went wild with static. I felt a cold chill run through me and my vision was blurred. Worst of all, when I glanced up at the clock, three seconds had elapsed.

When the system came back on line and I looked for the file I had been in, I couldn't find it. It was gone. I had to rekeyboard the entire brochure and my co-workers thought my close-mouthed grimness signified anger more than the fear that swept through me.

What would happen to me if I was in the system when it crashed? What if a file was deleted while I was in it? Would I be deleted? Could I be inserted later by a

knowing operator?

These were the questions that plagued me when my boss announced that the next day he was going to repack the system. They had been losing too many files lately, he said. There was some kind of bug in the system and he was going to get it out.

I groaned as I realized that the bug in the system was undoubtedly my Control Pi. And tomorrow it would be gone. I would have no more trips, no more adventure, no more fun. I would have no more life. I picked up my paycheck with a deeper scowl than usual and went home to a drab, lonely apartment. I paced the floor and debated with myself.

I could continue with my life as it had been before I discovered Control Pi, working Monday through Friday and an occasional Saturday for a bimonthly check which covered the rent and utilities, the car payment, the charge accounts, some groceries and little else, taking no risks, living a very safe, very plodding, very predictable life, waiting for my retirement to come around with the rest of the journeymen, spending my best years complaining about the hike in garbage rates and fantasizing about winning the lottery.

Or I could embrace this providential gift, throw caution to the wind, grab the brass ring on this crazy merry-go-round and find a life I really wanted. I told myself these and other cliches until my mind was made up.

Then I left the house in a flurry, ran to the bank, and attended to some necessary errands in town.

The swing shift was surprised to see me as I hurried into the print plant that evening. I signed onto my terminal and searched through the master queue for what I wanted. I finally came to it, a book on life in early southern California.

I called up the file and read passages on the enormous amount of untouched land, the abundant wildlife, and the excitement of a new age. Like the tantalizing town of Willoughby along the New York to Twilight Zone train route, the restful palm trees and sea breezes called to me.

I dreamed of a young Clark Gable, a young Cary Grant. I saw myself swimming in the Pacific Ocean, a scratchy recording of *Star Dust* playing in the background.

I gathered my purse, with its contents of vintage cash and coin, my hyphenating dictionary and my pica pole, smiled demurely at the night foreman when he walked over to ask if I planned on working or just tying up the terminal all night, and hit Control Pi one last time.



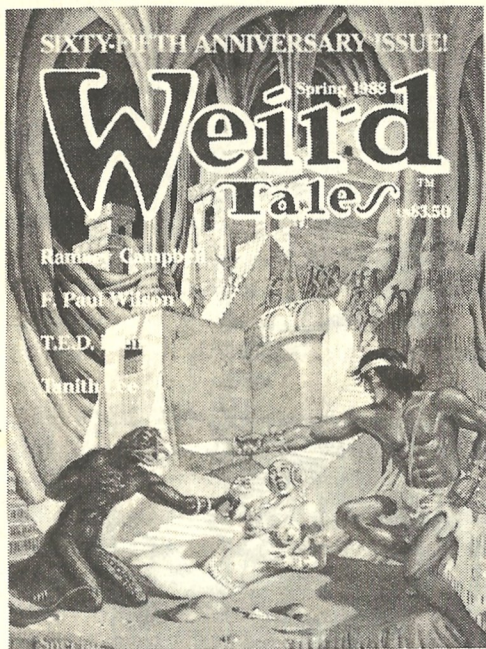
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A Report on the Q Effect

written by Keith Laumer

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IT WAS A FEW days before Christmas.

Through the barracks window, the view was of a featureless expanse of rumpled brown mud, which stretched away to merge in the distance with a curiously similar ceiling of wet, grey cloud. Only a corner of the adjacent corrugated plastic hutment violated the monotony of the trampled brown landscape.

Private Homer Johnson, AFN3753-7978, of the Special Detachment (NOWA) temporarily assigned to the Tactical School at Camp Howze, Texas, lay on his GI-blanket covered bunk and reflected on the oddly warped mentalities of those responsible for playing *Silent Night* on a carillon, recording it, and playing the result in slow drag rhythm over the camp PA system, an effect not much improved by the attempts of PFC Gates, two bunks over, to yodel *Gonna Build a Big Fence Around Texas* to his

own accompaniment.

"Hey, Johnson," Gates called, during a pause to adjust string tension on his mail order guitar, "who do you think was best, Gene Autry or Roy Rogers?"

"Montoya," Johnson replied.

"Wise guy. That rig o' yours musta scrambled yer brains," Gates snarled, eyeing the cumbersome back-pack Johnson had dumped on the adjacent unoccupied bunk.

"It ain't *my* rig," Johnson protested. "All they done is told me I'm s'pose to carry it in the exercise. How's that gonna scramble anybody's brains?"

"Beats me," the Autry fan conceded. "But the word is out: that thing is s'pose to work on yer brains some way. Didn't they tell ya that much?"

"All they said was, move up on command and follow instructions. It's got headphones, like."

Gate's stare lingered on the heavy

canvas-and-webbing pack. "What's in that, anyways?" he demanded.

"Just some kinda heavy electronic gear, is all I know," Johnson replied, bored. "It's sealed, you know. Even Major Cantwell don't have the key."

"Come on," Gates urged: "what's *really* in there? I hear it's pretty spooky."

"Well," Johnson replied in a confidential tone. "Actually, when I switch it on, I grow big leathery black wings and a long beak, and then I go invisible. . . ."

"Yeah?" Gates leaned closer.

"And then—" Johnson reached with clawing hands. "Then I go 'Arghhh!'"

As Gates recoiled with a yelp, Johnson growled again, less loudly.

"See?" he said. "It works."

"Wise guy," Gates came back. "That Red E team your Blue team's goin' up against plays rough, I hear. You could get hurt."

"I ain't worried," Johnson replied stoutly. "It's just maneuvers."

A quarter of a mile distant, in the Staff Conference Room on the top floor of Headquarters Building, five grim-faced senior officers and three expensively-tailored civilians sat facing a low dais with a six-foot repeater screen, and at one side, a control lectern where a tall, thin civilian with carefully coiffed silver-grey hair busied himself. He looked up and addressed his audience:

"For the record: this is an Ultra Top Secret briefing by the Assistant Chief, Beta Division, of the Primary Research Branch of the Non-Objective Warfare Administration. Participation beyond this

point without UTS (Special) clearance is an Imperial Offense, under Paragraph 71B and pertinent sections of the Manual. Date, the year of grace 2482 and of the Terran Empire the one hundred and tenth."

At once, one of the civilians in the audience rose and said in a loud, irascible voice:

"Look here, Binford, if this is more of that damned nonsense about holograms practicing judo on Luna, or whatever—you can forget it, as far as my Bureau is concerned. Damned foolishness." He looked around at the others for signs of agreement, met only neutral expressions, said "Hmmp!" and left the room, ignoring Binford's appeal to stay.

The speaker resumed.

"Unfortunately, due to a laxness in security which has since been corrected, certain distorted rumors have created a number of misconceptions regarding the Alpha program. However, even the admittedly somewhat farcical 'Tewk' affair, after the hubbub died, provided invaluable insights into the theoretical aspects of our procedures. As a spin-off, the so-called Q effects now being researched under Beta were first observed, then investigated, reduced to mathematic expression, and now, happily, we of Beta feel, applied. It's unfortunate that Mr. Craine felt the need to leave us so abruptly."

"He'll be back," a youngish brigadier said. "Lord Snavely will see to that."

"The purpose of this morning's briefing is, of course, to bring you up to date on our recent findings here at Project

Lothar," Binford resumed. "As you know, UTS (Special) priority has been assigned, in accordance with a recent Imperial edict, to what we here at NOWA call the Beta program. Rather than risk all on the success of the Alpha program, certain sensitive resources and personnel have been allocated to us here, in the hope of more quickly achieving a field-effective technique, though it may at first be of limited scope. This we have accomplished," he concluded without emphasis.

As he paused, there was a murmur and shifting of feet.

"Better get Craine back in here," an officer called. "Without the BOB, we won't get far."

Binford nodded and resumed.

"After the surprising developments first encountered by Alpha, it became apparent that the forces and principles with which we of NOWA are dealing are of a totally new kind, to which the classic 'Laws of Nature' do not entirely apply."

A stocky brigadier general raised a hand and without awaiting acknowledgment from the podium, said heavily, "I'm quite content to leave the theories to you technical people, Mr. Binford; what I—and I assume these other gentlemen as well—are interested in is results. Just what is it you have that can justify the massive diversion of appropriated military R&D funds from conventional armaments to your work?"

"If the general will permit me to proceed with my presentation. . . ." Binford responded awkwardly.

"Without any more unnecessary inter-

ruptions,' he means, Bill," a small, leathery, two-star general amplified in a flat tone. "Go ahead, Binford."

"Thank you, General," the speaker said, and turned to the screen, which at once flashed to a milky opalescence, then cleared to show a medium shot of infantry skirmishers moving forward aggressively through open woodland. Abruptly, a burly five-striper in the foreground threw aside his M-116, whirled, and with a yell to his squad, hurried to the rear, his men following at a dead run.

"I don't know the circumstances," the brigadier grunted, "but that son of a bitch ought to be court-martialed."

"Not so fast, Bill!" a tall, thin BG growled. "I recognise that man: that was Dumbrowski, a Double-Distinguished Master Teamleader in my Special Strike Group. There's no better non-com in the Army! I think we'd better know a bit more about the circumstances!" He glared at Binford, who nodded without apparent concern. On the screen, an eighteen-inch boulder came bounding into view from upslope, knocked down a six-inch tree and disappeared off the edge of the picture. It was followed at once by a shower of smaller rock fragments which became a tide, a full-scale avalanche which devastated the woodland, leaving only broken stumps projecting above a layer of smoking rubble. Above, on the slope, a battered half-ton crawler with yellow markings sat, unmoving.

"What the hell was *that*?" someone yelled. "How many men were lost? What idiot scheduled an exercise in the path of an avalanche?"

"No one was injured, General," Binford soothed, "yet C team was swept from the field, scoring a clear victory for the opposing D yellow."

"All right, but what's that got to do with combat tactics?"

"Yellow's D team was assigned the field-testing of our Mark I unit," Binford replied as if in explanation.

"And an avalanche came along and saved their bacon, is that it?" the angry BG demanded.

"The avalanche did not 'come along', General," Binford said carefully.

"So this mysterious Mark I of yours is a device for causing avalanches," the stocky BG said contemptuously. "I can see only a very limited use for such a gadget."

"The function of the Q-generator is hardly so limited as you suggest, sir," Binford protested mildly. "Perhaps if we proceed with the briefing. . . ."

"Under protest," the BG said and sat down.

Binford turned dials on the lectern. Now the screen cleared momentarily to resolve at once into a long shot of a flight of heavy bombers, with fighter cover, at extreme altitude, visible only by the orderly pattern of contrails slowly elongating across the sky. Abruptly the pattern dissolved into chaos as each aircraft, apparently independently, initiated evasive maneuvers, ending with a rapid dispersion of the armada in all directions—other than straight ahead, toward the target.

"What the devil's this?" a jowly lieutenant general in aerospace blue de-

manded indignantly.

"This incident, like the previous one, was recorded during the recent semi-annual maneuvers," Binford said soothingly. "Perhaps, General, you noticed the lone aircraft flying an intercept course across the squadron front immediately before its dispersal."

"Damned right I did!" the aerospace commander barked. "I wonder who the damned fool was—breaking every regulation in the book, barging in on one of my units in that fashion!"

"It was a medium-range reconnaissance craft of the opposing command," Binford explained, "carrying our Mark II unit, weighing only four hundred pounds, and thus readily air-lifted."

"What's all this pussy-footing, Binford?" the two-starrer asked quietly. "Are you suggesting that this Mark One or Two, or whatever it is, of yours was in some way responsible for the dispersing a Class One Air Strike Force?"

"Precisely, sir," Binford said coolly.

"And precisely how did it do that?"

"Never mind, General," someone said. "If it did it, we need it. Right?"

"Possibly," the major general conceded. "But how does it work? I want details."

"That concludes the taped portion of my presentation," Binford put in smoothly. "Buses are waiting to take us to Observation Station 732, where we will be able to observe directly a field exercise in which our new device will be pitted against the Red Team E, one of the finest in the army, as I'm sure you gentlemen agree."

"Better get Craine on that bus, too, Binford," said the same hard-bitten brigadier who had commented on the bureaucrat's departure.

"I'm quite sure Lord Chief of Bureau Snavelly will see to that," Binford replied. "The bureau can hardly afford to be in the position of being uninformed regarding a matter which our own chief, at NOWA, in Washington has represented to the Emperor as of first importance."

"It's no secret we're in desperate need of a breakthrough," the tall major said harshly. "We can't afford to have development of an important new weapon held up by any kind of interdepartmental friction."

"I feel sure today's field test will resolve any uncertainty," Binford said urbanely.

As the group gathered up briefcases and hats, ready to leave the room, the door opened and Craine entered, his face stiff; he turned and made ushering gestures to a tall, gangly civilian with a bad complexion and a small, bald head. He looked like a successful farmer in town to see the sights. Craine spoke up in a dramatic tone: "Gentlemen, my chief, Lord Chief of bureau Snavelly of the Bureau of the Budget."

Snavelly looked around without visible pleasure, nodded to one or two of the group, and turned to Binford.

"Craine tells me you folks are trying to make a fool of him—or me—or somebody," he said in a nasal voice. "I'm wondering why you'd bother."

Binford spoke soothingly, inviting the

senior bureaucrat to join the party to witness the exercise. Snavelly nodded, seeming mildly amused.

"I'll go, Binford," he said, "but I tell you frankly I'm doubtful you'll succeed in enlisting my support for any intangible sort of proposal such as my boy Craine describes!"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Craine left before the presentation, Lord Snavelly," Binford pointed out. "Still, the most telling portion of my demonstration is what you are about to witness."

"I don't mind telling, M'lord," the small BG put in, "if this thing is half as good as Mr. Binford claims—and as it appears to be—we need it bad."

Standing in the hot sun, Private Johnson waited patiently as the technicians fussed over him, taking readings and making adjustments. When the last of them finished, Major Cantwell came over and put a comradely hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Now, just don't be nervous, Johnson," she said kindly. "You've had all the technical briefing, and you know this thing is easy to operate. It's only a matter of getting your Alpha flowing smoothly, and then I want you to just have fun with it—I mean let your imagination go—like you were a little kid again, playing war. And you're the vanguard of an unbeatable army—imagine your armor at your back; have confidence, go forward boldly—and I'm assured by our technical people that the Mark III will do the rest. This is an important assignment, Johnson—I myself made the decision as to

how to use this new device—and we have to knock out that Red team they’ve snuck in here on our flank. Go get ‘em, Johnson!”

Deep in conversation, the party went out to board the plush ten-place VIP spinners awaiting them. It was a swift flight over treeless country to the tall steelwork tower where the bus landed and debarked its passengers. They looked down at a vacant stretch of rocky desert, identified by Binford not as a Lunar landscape, but as the Imperial Proving Grounds at Ersona.

“The Red team,” Binford explained, “is assigned the task of infiltrating Blue’s area of control so as to strike at Blue HQ from the left flank, in coordination with a frontal assault by the main body. The Red E team is in place, ready to move up, as perhaps you gentlemen can see—or perhaps not. The Blue team, with the Mark III, will oppose them.”

At first, the scene appeared utterly lifeless. Then, tiny movements here and there were revealed as men in combat camouflage deployed all across the ground in view. Abruptly, another movement attracted all eyes: a line of what the observers recognized as antique armored vehicles advancing from the broken ground to the east, primitive, yet nonetheless menacing, like an army of spear-wielding Zulus with painted shields. Slowly, relentlessly, they came closer, trailed by a dust cloud which layered out and hung like a canopy over the ground just crossed. Then they were close enough for the observers to see their blue

blazons and to read the lettering on their sides: ‘Panzer Gruppen 67’ and ‘CCCP’ and ‘US ARMY’. In the middle distance, at a point closest to the advancing machines, a Red team man got to his feet. His camouflage suit at once changed color, flickering through the spectrum until it glowed a vivid chartreuse, with the prominent rank badges of a major. The officer blew a whistle shrilly, then pointed to the sky, described three rapid circles with his extended arm and lowered it to point to the rear.

“Smart fellow,” someone commented. “He’s got sense enough to get his men out of there.” A man jumped up, his c-suit glowing day-glow orange now, and ran. Others joined him; soon a glowing neon-colored stream had formed, flowing away from the abandoned position. At point-blank range the tanks, which had not fired a shot, halted and dressed ranks, guns depressed as for direct fire.

Without a flicker, they were gone, only the drifting dust-cloud remaining for a few moments as evidence that they had existed. On the dusty plain where the tanks had been, a lone man, laden with a complicated backpack, stood as if bewildered, staring after the retreating Red team. Now games monitors, both Red and Blue, were landing around him in bright-painted spinners, to assess the action.

Excited officers and media men examined the ground, gesticulating, while others gathered around the lone man with NOWA lettered on his helmet liner. The observers on the tower watched in silence.

Then someone muttered, "What the hell?"

"I don't get it," another commented. Others stood silent, eyeing Binford.

"What you have just witnessed, gentlemen," the NOWA cicerone stated dramatically, "was the rout of Red's crack E team by a single Blue recruit!"

"What's that he's packing on his back?" one of the civilians demanded.

"That is the Mark III unit," Binford replied complacently. "We have the weight, including energy-cell, down to eighty pounds—less than that of a traditional infantry full field-pack."

"A recruit, eh?" Craine barked. "I fail to grasp the propriety of wasting the time of senior military and civilian officials with a report on the activities of a private soldier." He sat.

"Precisely my point, sir," Binford said deferentially. "The new equipment is sufficiently sophisticated that it can easily be operated by anyone at all, with no special training, so long as the unit is tuned to that individual."

"Never mind, Ed," Lord Snavelly cut in coolly. He stepped forward to confront Binford. "Just what does this machine of yours do, Mr. Binford?"

"It does what you have just witnessed, Lord Snavelly. That is to say, it routs the enemy."

"How?"

"At this point, candidly, sir, theory lags behind performance. Suffice it to say it works."

"The Bureau of the Budget will decide, Binford, what is sufficient justification for massive allocation of funds!"

"Of course, sir," Binford hastened to agree. "I meant in no way to imply—"

"Imply, hell," Snavelly snapped and rose, ostentatiously strapping up his heavy briefcase. "'I'm not interested in results, it's theories I'm after!,' to paraphrase a familiar declaration."

"That's a switch," a small, dapper officer said in a stage whisper. "I say, if it works, I want it." He looked around for agreement, met averted gazes.

"With the media having a field day, lionizing the young recruit you used for your demonstration," General Bart, of the Ministry of Defense grumped, "we've got to tell them something. Is this thing going to be funded, or not?"

"The Bureau will have to withhold a decision until further information is available," Snavelly said with an air of finality. "All this nonsense about turning over a multi-million credit experimental device to a raw recruit smacks of irresponsibility. I'll expect a complete explanation, Mr. Binford, at your earliest convenience." He looked at the watch strapped to the underside of his plump wrist. "In my office in ten minutes," he decreed, and left the room.

It was an hour later; in the deep carpeted and spacious office of the Special Liaison Office (Bureau of Budget) adjacent to that of the Commanding General, Army Tactical School, Mr. Edgar Craine, GS-19, stood beside his desk, behind which Lord Snavelly sat at ease, his eyes not on Craine, but on the crew waiting beside the massive Consolidated

Coverage camera.

"I assure you, boys," Craine said smoothly, "that there is nothing in the least supernatural about the so-called 'Q-generator', an unfortunate designation which attached itself impromptu to this new device, due to a comment made by General Sykes-Grimm, an observer at the first demonstration: 'Demned queer!' were the general's words, and 'queer effect' or 'Q-effect' it's been ever since."

"Private Johnson, over here!" he snapped. The ineffectual-looking young man in shapeless field-drab draped with electronic gear, who had been waiting nervously in the background, edged gingerly forward. He was recognizable as the lone man who had remained when the phantom tanks had vanished.

"Look at me!" the desk man ordered, as Private Johnson stood gazing about in a bewildered way. A large silver medal on a blue and white ribbon hung from his thin neck.

"What's the matter with you, Private?" The civilian almost snarled. "I want you in position, right here!" He pointed impatiently at the carpet beside his desk. Johnson gulped audibly and sidled to the indicated spot, where he stood uncertainly.

"Gosh, sir," he said nervously. "This here is the first time I ever seen one o' them talkie machines and all."

"So what, Dum-Dum?" the civilian barked. "Now you just get on the ball, Private, and try to comb some of that hayseed out of your hair! You're privileged to participate in a presentation which will be witnessed by some very

important personages. Don't they teach you people how to stand at attention any more?"

"Not with civilians . . . sir," the boy said.

"Don't let that medal they hung on you go to your head, Private! I can have you on KP for the rest of your natural life! A GS-19 outranks any buck general in the army!"

"Gosh, sir, I didn't mean . . . I mean . . ." the victim stammered.

"That will do, Private! Now get over here in front of the desk, and try not to look like a half-wit."

The door behind them opened as he spoke and a barrel-chested man in an immaculate uniform with four rows of ribbons and the four stars of a full general barged into the room.

"G-General Hardshot!" Snavely's voice faltered as he rose to his feet. Johnson had snapped to an approximation of the attitude of respectful attention which the civilian had solicited in vain. Craine left the room inobtrusively.

"I'll have no *civilian* (he made it a dirty word) abusing my troops, Snavely," the general stated in an ominous tone. "As you were, Johnson," he added. "Tell Major Cantwell I authorized two weeks TDY on full travel pay and allowances for you in your home town, starting now. Dismissed."

Johnson left the room silently.

Abruptly, Snavely was alone, leaning on his desk looking puzzled. Then he grinned. "I'll be a son of a bitch!" he murmured. "Who'd have thought the little twerp had it in him?"

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In *The Reindeer People* (Ace, May 1988, \$3.50), Northwest author Megan Lindholm returns to a theme she has explored in previous novels: the conflict between magic and reality. In this case the setting is long ago, with hunter-gatherer-herdsmen on the cusp between the Stone and Bronze age.

Tillu is a Healer, whose young son, Kerlew, is the result of a rape. Kerlew is a strange boy, to his mother and to everyone else except the shaman Carp, who sees in Kerlew the makings of a future shaman. In order to prevent Carp from further indoctrinating Kerlew into the ways of magic and mysticism and thus taking him away from her, Tillu escapes the tribe and Carp, against the wishes of Kerlew. It's not an easy choice, for once again, Tillu is at the mercy of the wild, with only her skill as a Healer as currency to buy her safety. It is a measure of her heroism that she chooses the less safe course in order to prevent her son's domination by Carp.

She eventually meets the Reindeer People, and one Heckram in particular, who is vying with another man named Joboam for dominance within his tribe.

Contrary to the novel's cover blurb, it is Kerlew, not Tillu, who is steeped in mystery and magic. The strength and uniqueness of the novel rests with the primary relationship between Tillu and her son. Tillu is, if anything, firmly grounded in the real world of this primitive time, concerned with her and her son's survival and the arts of her healing craft. These may be magic to others, but to Tillu it's a matter of herbs, poultices, experience and common sense.

Lindholm's portrayal of a hard-pressed mother—who loves her son but is still alarmed and ambivalent about his strangeness—could be a metaphor for what any parent feels about the mystery of a child's growing independence, and the inevitable distancing. Kerlew has a hard time with the basics of this age—making and keeping the household fire going, hunting. He resents his mother who he feels doesn't understand his difference, a mother who would prefer an easier, more normal path for her son.

Near the end, Kerlew calls his mother a "foolish woman". It's clear that he's come into his own as an apprentice shaman, and he enjoys the manipulation of lives through his magic. He isn't a sympathetic character and isn't meant to be. But I can't help but feel that Kerlew's transition to his ambition, which necessitates leaving his mother behind, would have had more impact if Kerlew

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had left more demonstrable love behind, sacrificed more to achieve his goal.

Lindholm takes her time with this story to help us get to know her characters better. And that's fine, for she is better than most fantasy writers in producing characters who are not one-dimensional. Tillu in particular is well drawn, with her ambivalences about her son, about men, her need to be strong in order to survive physically, and her need for love.

Still the pace of the book suffers because the novel is basically a set up for the sequel, *Wolf's Brother*, due in October of this year. There is not enough resolution of the various plot lines for my taste. But to the extent that I'll be looking forward to the sequel, Megan Lindholm has done her job well.

—Bruce Fergusson

Patricia C. Wrede and Caroline Stevermer have combined to write an epistolary fantasy, *Sorcery and Cecilia* (Ace, May 1988, \$2.95) set in England after the Napoleonic Wars, in an alternate universe in which magic works (there is a Royal College of Wizards). It is a Regency novel of manners and what this form of a "novel by letters" lacks in immediacy of action, it makes up for in voice. The correspondants, Cecilia and Kate, are chatty, witty and carry the plot well. The book is light but fun and comes with an afterword by the authors. Their discussion of how their collaboration came to be is perhaps more interesting than the work itself.

—Bruce Fergusson

Kara Dalkey's new novel *The Nightingale* (Ace, \$14.95 in hardcover) is a literate, impeccably researched, and thoroughly enchanting re-telling of Hans Christian Andersen's much beloved tale of the same name. This version is set in a magical Japan, and the nightingale of the story is Uguisu, a young woman of rare musical talent. Uguisu beguiles a jaded and heirless Emperor with her flute. However, she is also the agent of a dead ancestor's desire to gain control of Japan by being reborn as the heir to the Emperor's throne. When the Emperor asks for Uguisu's hand in marriage, she must refuse.

Dalkey succeeds at braiding the disparate themes of Japanese folk traditions with the more upbeat conventions of American popular fantasy, while respecting the plot of the original story. Dalkey has not merely refurbished an old tale, but built an entirely new story on the foundations of the previous one. There are a variety of delightful subplots, most centering around unrequited love, that give the story added depth and complexity.

The Nightingale is the last of the Ace Fairy Tale series. This series also gave us Steven R. Brust's *The Sun, The Moon, and The Stars*, and Charles DeLint's *Jack The*

Giant Killer. The Nightingale is in excellent company. Seek these books out, they are all utterly delightful and unique.

—Amy Thomson

Prime Evil (New American Library, \$18.95 in hardcover), a new horror anthology edited by Douglas E. Winter features some of the best known names in horror; Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Ramsey Campbell, to name a few. Perhaps it's the fault of the critic; horror generally leaves me lukewarm, but I didn't find much in the book worth recommending.

Several of the stories were good, my favorite being "Orange is for Anguish, Blue for Insanity" by David Morrell, about an artist who gouged his eyes out with the sharp end of a paintbrush, then committed suicide. Those critics who devote themselves to studying his work die in the same grisly manner. While the story is well told, I found the obvious parallels to Van Gogh's life detracted from its originality. I also liked Ramsey Campbell's "Next Time You'll Know Me" in which a crazy would-be writer's best ideas are being copied by other writers as soon as he thinks them up. Predictably, the protagonist goes right round the bend and starts killing people.

For those horror fans who wish to give the book a go, I also recommend Stephen King's "Night Flyer" and Clive Barker's "Coming to Grief". Unless you are a serious horror addict, I'd pass on the book. Most of the stories aren't all that new or original. A couple are downright boring. Although the book has a few choice stories, *Prime Evil* is considerably less than prime.

—Amy Thomson

Dealing with an autobiography, sometimes the review is taken as a response to the person, not the book. This is not intended to be the case here.

"I have had a horrendous history of conflict as a writer, because dishonesty is anathema to me, and I do constant battle with it, and no living person I know of matches my fanaticism about this." In *Bio of An Ogre* (Ace, \$17.95 in hardcover), Piers Anthony tells the story of his life, including some of the encounters which he refers to above.

Piers Anthony Dillingham Jacob divides his story into five sections and a set of appendixes. Each section deals with ten years of his life, from his birth in 1934 to his turning fifty in 1984. The appendixes are a mixed bag, consisting of essays by his mother and father, a school evaluation, stories, a bibliography to 1984, and his computerized responses to commonly-asked questions.

His first memories are of his birthplace, England, and of Spain. His parents were in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, part of a Quaker organization trying to feed the

needy children. Piers Anthony and his sister were brought to Spain at the end of the war, and left as World War Two was getting underway.

America was a new experience to him. He started school here, and did not do well at first. Small, and not very social, he had troubles for a number of years.

He graduated from high school in 1952 and was fortunate enough to attend Goddard College in Vermont. It was perhaps the most liberal of colleges in the nation at the time, and it fitted Piers Anthony's style. He graduated in 1956, coming away with a B.A. and a wife, a fellow student he met in his third year.

After graduation, he took several jobs to make ends meet, then was caught by the draft. His time in the Army was typically loony, all the way from being outranked as an instructor to trying to qualify with a rifle on a target loose and flapping in the breeze. He became an American citizen, and after his discharge, he and his wife settled in Florida.

He had been writing part-time for a while, without much success, but they decided he should try it full-time for a year. His wife got a job and he wrote. Output went up, and so did sales: two stories sold. It wasn't enough, so he went back to work as a teacher.

After a few years, he decided to try again as a full-time writer. This time it took. He wrote, and sold, and began to enjoy a growing success.

That's the barest sketch of Piers Anthony's story. The real interest lies in his accounts of his life, the little details which make life what it is. Several incidents in his early years affected him quite strongly. Betrayals of trust and of personal codes loom high in his memory. A cousin whom he felt close to died suddenly of cancer. His dialogue is wide-ranging: he describes his reasons for being a vegetarian to his accounts of encounters of principle between himself and organizations ranging from the United States Army to the Science Fiction Writers of America.

For an interesting look at a writer who has been appearing on the best-seller charts of late, *Bio of an Ogre* is a fascinating read.

—Michael Scanlon

The Fleet (edited by David Drake and Bill Fawcett, Ace, \$3.50) is another of that increasingly common class of fiction: the shared world story. Someone comes up with an interesting background or concept, sells a publisher and other authors, and a book is born.

I haven't read many shared-world anthologies, but I am always curious about them. If there is a danger in shared worlds, it is consistency with the "shared" part of the world. Without careful guidelines and editing, the stories might be a literary equivalent of the elephant and the blind men; a series of wildly varying conceptions of what is supposedly the same background.

We find a bit of that in *The Fleet*, but it isn't fatal to the book. In fact, one of its strengths is that some of the stories divert from the central theme of the book: the escalating conflict between the Khalia and the mostly human Alliance of Planets.

Threaded together with the thinnest of interludes, eleven stories make up Book One of *The Fleet*. They are from authors new and known, mostly familiar names.

The stories can be divided into two classes. In the first, the Khalia are onstage, and conflict is the tableau. In the second, the Khalia are part of the background for the story.

Second stage does not mean second class, however. One of the stories I enjoyed the most was "Tradition", by Bill Fawcett, set on the border of human space far distant from Khallian-raided areas. It tells of Commodore Meier, upholding traditions as the tenth generation of his family in the fleet. He's a better supply officer than combat commander, and, denied any aid in dealing with a newly-discovered hostile species, he has to make do with his strengths as a quartermaster.

Other stories using the Khallian war as a backdrop include one by Steve Perry set on a Khallian-occupied world. There the leader of the Guild With No Nest, the Assassins Guild of an avian species, faces a problem greater to him than the overlordship of the Khalia. John Brunner writes of one of the earliest contacts between humans and Khalia, one which highlights differences between the two species. "The Thirty-Nine Buttons" tells of an officer's attempt to bring a heroic captain back to active duty. It seems that the captain is active in other duties. . . .

Robert Sheckly and Poul Anderson also write stories which merely use the war as setting, rather than an integral part of the action. Sheckly's story, "Klaxon", deals with an alien invasion, but the invaders are humans planning on building a base on a world supposedly without intelligent inhabitants. Needless to say, the sentient species on the planet is upset at this invasion, and they take action.

Poul Anderson writes of what befalls soldiers physiologically adapted to a planet when budget cutbacks force their withdrawal. Faced with discharge or transfer, they miss the lands and peoples of Procrustes until a rumor of action starts to circulate. . . .

The stories centering on the human-Khalia conflict itself are good for the most part. A couple stand out from the rest.

"Pay Tribute to the Fleet", by E. Gary Gygax, is unusual in that the narrator paints the Fleet as worse villains than the Khalia. The weasels are alien, and may not know any better, he says, but the Fleet is a domestic tyranny. The battle scenes are vivid, but the story suffered, I felt, from political preaching on the part of the narrator.

Anne McCaffrey's "Duty Calls" is the story of an unlikely friendship. Two individuals have a mission on a Khalian-captured world. One of them is to meet a spy, then they both have to get back with the information. Ghra, the heroine, is not just another Hrruban, and her partner is not just another human.

The remaining stories deal with battles between humans and Khalia. Janet Morris'

"The Collaborator" tells of a Khalian raid on a planetary despotism, and is full of anger, pain, and grim irony. "Bolthole", by Judy Lynn Nye, deals with the Khalia walking into an ambush by the local defense forces, who have a certain advantage in terrain. The last story in the book, David Drake's "Rescue Mission", brings the cycle of stories to a close with a raid on the main slave pens on Target, believed to be the Khalian homeworld.

Overall, the first book of *The Fleet* is a good read. Not a great collection, but a good one. The only real problem are certain small inconsistencies with Khallian behavior. *The Fleet* is an anthology which should provide combat SF fans with enjoyable reading.

—Michael Scanlon

Ad
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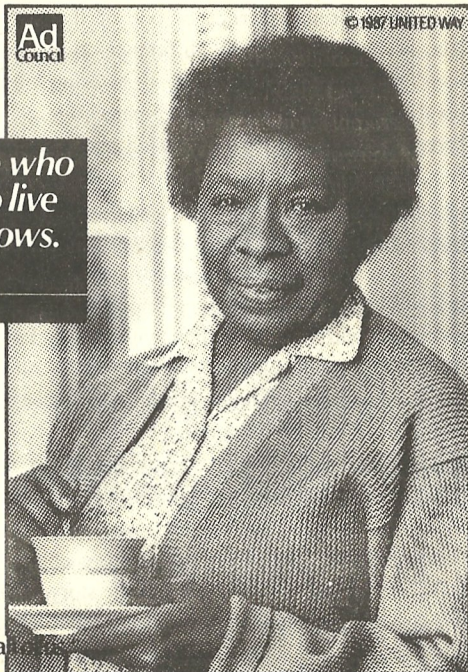


Photo by Peter Papadopolous

Greg Cox presents this tale of a mirror world, where predators of the night are scientists of the day, where animal savagery is replaced with clear reason—yet love still has the power to sweep all aside.

Fortress Memory

written by Greg Cox

illustrated by Robert Troy Jamison

THE REGENT of the undying slept all through the night, dreaming of his Treasure.

Then dawn came, and pure white sunshine entered easily through a ceiling of glass, to spread light and warmth over the prone body of the regent. The spreading glow revealed a figure who was tall and lean, clothed in flesh the color of desert sand. He lay frozen on one side of an immense bed, arms rigidly crossed atop his chest, until the sunlight touched his lidless, lifeless eyes. The pupils—dark pinpricks nearly lost amidst matching orbs of reddish pink—grew wide.

He rolled on his side and reached for his Treasure, but came away empty-handed. The other side of the bed was empty.

“Bram?” a woman called, from somewhere below. “Have you risen?”

“In a manner of speaking,” he answered, slowly lifting himself from the

bed. Thirst teased Bram. A yearning. An anticipation.

He licked his lips: dryness against dryness.

Footsteps upon the stairs, and his Treasure entered the chamber. A mortal woman, a good foot smaller than he, with short brown hair, faintly streaked with red. She was already dressed, Bram noticed, in her favorite black robe, the one with the bright emerald trimming. A crystal mug rested in her outstretched hand.

“Here,” she said. “Fresh from the pump.”

“Many thanks, Treasure.” He was always thirsty in the morning. The sun restored his energy, but it also dried him out. Bram poured the cool, clear water down his throat, past firm and toothless gums. When he was finished, he placed the mug on the floor beside the bed.

“Have you been up long?” he asked.

Treasure shrugged. "Perhaps an hour."

"This fortress must seem very lonely before sunrise. You awake and everyone else dormant."

She smiled, looking past him.

Bram winced inside. When did this start, he wondered; when did smiles steal away the sound of her voice? Silence, instead of sharing? He remembered a time when he and Treasure knew each other's feelings without speaking, but voiced them anyway. Every thought. Every wild fancy.

Too often now, when he spoke, she merely smiled.

Treasure finally met his gaze. "Did you sleep well, Bram?"

"Aye. I dreamed of you." Bram pulled her gently towards him. He stared at her face, into those incredible eyes: the deepest darkness surrounded by the purest white. His hands traveled down her back, clutching at the curves beneath her gown. Already, Bram was gasping, a reaction that shocked him, though it was always the same. Desire came so fast it made him dizzy.

She was nineteen years old. He was close to a thousand.

Yet now, holding her, he knew his life was her own creation. . . .

He had nearly died the day he first discovered Treasure. Two summers ago, when the days were hotter and dryer than they had been for, oh, at least two hundred years. Bram and another undying, a researcher from Naturalists' Study, had gone down into the swamp, a rare and risky venture for anyone from Fortress

Memory.

Green everywhere, though less dense, perhaps, because of the dryness. Ropy vines covered the ground, or hung crisscrossed before their eyes. The fronds, as wide as flags, were waist-high, at least. Chartreuse moss completely carpeted the narrow trunks of the everpresent willows, which rose from both dry land and the unseen depths of large, winding bodies of still water.

They did not speak, for fear of attracting attention, or hack new pathways through the foliage. Gestures and looks comprised the whole of communication between them. The naturalist, Hayse, led the way, frequently stopping to place a leaf, a root, or an unlucky insect into one of his wax containers, while Bram looked and listened for any sign of danger, named 'mortals.'

A tree spider, moving too slowly for its own good, caught Hayse's eye. He tapped Bram's chest and pointed, then crept towards an ancient willow at the shore of a pond. Bram waited behind, determined to be more alert than ever, now that Hayse was distracted.

They were both armed, of course, with plenty of three-inch throwing blades with soporific tips. Bram did not derive much confidence from this fact. The undying were scholars, not fighters. After a month of constant practice, in preparation for this expedition, he was still lucky if he could hit an unmoving target four out of five times. And he was supposed to be the sentry!

Something rustled in the branches above Hayse. Bram almost shouted a

warning, but stopped in time. It was hot. In theory, the mortals should be sleeping in their huts now, saving their strength for the cooler hours of night.

Unless, perhaps, they had someone watching the fortress. After all, if the mortals *never* hunted by day, they would not be the menace they were.

What if they saw us leaving Memory?

Bram wondered again why he authorized the expedition. Because Hayse wanted a first-hand look at the summer's effect on the swamp? No, he admitted to himself. He was here now, risking his own immortality, because life at Memory had become too predictable to be endured. Nothing excited him anymore. Nothing aroused strong emotions, good or bad. He felt old, and unbearably calm.

So he had come here, to the very swamp his all-too-mortal mother had escaped from so long ago, to care about something again, even if it was only survival.

Was a single thought about his mother enough to bring down the terror of her race upon them? It seemed so at that moment, as a frantic cry from Hayse suddenly broke the silence. A pale visage grinned down at the naturalist from the branches above him, and a blunt-ended club hit the vine-coated ground in front of his feet. Without thinking, Hayse jumped backwards.

"No!" Bram shouted, but it was too late. Hayse found himself at the very edge of the pond. He sank into the ground, thick mud sucking at his ankles. He tried to run, but his legs would not move.

Bram grabbed two blades off the back of his gloves, one for each hand, but could find nothing to aim them at. Above the willow's trunk, the sky congealed into an impenetrable web of vines and moss. A dozen mortals could have perched up there without him seeing them.

A rope caught Hayse by the neck, yanking him forward. He landed on his hands and knees directly below the tree. A heavy net followed the rope.

Bram looked helplessly at the tiny knives between his fingers. Cut through the net with those? They were only glorified darts! He started forward anyway. . . .

Loud, crashing sounds behind him. Bram spun around and realized he too was trapped.

Four mortals stood amongst the foliage, and two more dropped from the trees as he watched. Hunters. Three men and three women, their bodies wrapped below the neck with layer upon layer of overlapping green vines, so that they looked like animated, verdant mummies. The men carried only clubs and ropes, Bram noticed. No edged weapons, nothing that could spill blood. They were not hunting for animals, then.

The women carried snakeskin bags. And leeches.

Bram hurled a blade at the nearest male. To his surprise, it struck the hunter directly below the chin. A hit! And on exposed skin, no less! Bram struck a menacing pose with the second blade. Perhaps he could bluff his way clear.

Then his 'victim' charged forward and punched Bram in the stomach. He

doubled over, groaning, and let loose his second blade. It flew wildly over the head of one of the women. The rest of the hunters descended upon Bram, knocking him to the ground. They did not need to use a cumbersome net this time; two ropes were enough to tie his wrists and ankles together.

Bram could only lay atop the damp earth, helpless, as the mortals started work on Hayse.

The naturalist, a fixture at Memory since before Bram's birth, was stretched out on the jungle floor, with one man holding each limb. The fourth man, Bram guessed, came from the willow by the pond. A woman leaned over Hayse, holding a long, grey leech by the throat.

For a second, Bram wondered what had happened to the other female. Then Hayse started screaming.

The remaining woman held the leech up to Hayse's neck. As soon as the creature's jaws clamped onto undying flesh, she bent over and bit off the leech's tail. Blood started streaming out of the leech, and the woman inserted the creature's lower half into the neck of a snakeskin bag, then drew the bag tightly shut with a cord. Bram watched the bag slowly balloon, as the leech tried futilely to drink its fill.

More leeches, and more bags, were attached to Hayse. At his wrists, in the crook of his elbows, on his calves and thighs. Even behind his ears. Eventually, Hayse stopped thrashing, and one of the men let go of his leg. It was the hunter whose skin Bram's blade had nicked. He stared at Bram with obvious anticipation,

then borrowed a leech from the woman's supply.

Bram rocked back and forth upon the ground, but could not break free from his bonds. The hunter took a few steps towards him, then abruptly fell back against a tree. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

Not now, Bram thought bitterly. It was too late!

The hunter's face went slack. Half angry, half dazed, the man let out a mournful howl before falling face first into a bed of fronds. The rest of the hunters left Hayse to race to their companion's side. They shouted and pulled and prodded at the unconscious mortal.

And the bags on Hayse continued to swell.

A soft voice whispered in Bram's ear: "Listen to me! This is your only chance."

Bram turned his head around and looked upwards into the darkest eyes he had ever seen. It was the other mortal female.

"If I release you, will you take me with you?" She glanced briefly to the west, towards Memory. "I want to go to the Place of Old Secrets. I want to learn!"

At that moment, the world became unreal for Bram. Time had reversed itself, and this was his mother, escaping from ignorance centuries ago. But his mother was dead, and one of his people was dying.

"Hayse. . . ." Bram murmured.

"We cannot save your friend. The leeches will last longer than he. Come!"

Her fingers quickly undid the knots that bound his hands and feet. Then she

dropped a knee onto Bram's chest and asked again: "Will you take me with you? Teach me?"

"Aye," he agreed. "Of course." He felt himself yanked to his feet, and the next minute they were running through the swamp at a wild, unbelievable pace. Behind him, Bram heard startled cries and then the unmistakable sounds of pursuit: bodies smashing through the underbrush, feet splashing through the water. They kept running, hand-in-hand, he and this surprising mortal creature. She led the way, expertly finding trails where none appeared to exist, weaving through the swamp with never a hint of hesitation. How long, Bram wondered, had she been planning this?

Running behind her, tightly gripping her fingers, he placed his life and future in this woman's hands without regret. And at some point during the chase, long before the hunters lost their trail, Bram realized that he had never felt so young, so alive, in all his long life. . . .

"Wait," said Treasure, but Bram could not. He lifted her off the ground so that her eyes were above him, then tilted back his head. His neck tingled, waiting for the touch of round little teeth. . . .

She pushed away from him and dropped lightly to her feet. "Bram, you should know we don't have the time."

Another pain burst within. Not long ago, he thought, everyone in the fortress jokingly called him 'the late regent,' because he and Treasure never left their tower until the last minute—and beyond. But that was the past. He had not missed

an appointment in weeks.

"Treasure, do you still love me?"

The question clearly surprised her. "Of course I do!" Standing on her toes, she gave his ear a quick bite. "Don't look so mournful. I promise to meet you here a full hour before sunset, if possible." Treasure glanced towards the door. "The astrologers have all risen by now, and they must be waiting for my report on last night's skies."

Bram tried to show pride instead of pain. "You must be a godsend to that Study."

"Well, my people have always been very active at night."

Placing both hands upon her shoulders, Bram stared into her eyes and said slowly: "We are your people now, my Treasure."

She only smiled, then went down the stairs.

She was born Madhumalati, though everyone now called her Treasure. Everyone in Fortress Memory, that is.

But if no knowledge was ever lost in Memory, as its very name boasted, would she not still and always be Madhumalati, at least in part? The young swampmaiden was starting to think so.

The Astrologer's Study lay before her, on the other side of a wide courtyard. It was a sturdy, square building with grey-black walls. The floor of the courtyard was grey-black also, as was the protective outer wall that rose up behind the Study, and the harsh, snowless peaks beyond.

Seen from a distance, she recalled, the

fortress appeared to be erected atop a plateau, flanked by a range of jagged peaks. In fact, no plateau existed or ever had. The entire fortress was carved out of the summit of yet another mountain. She knew without looking that two more high black walls met behind her, completing the great rock triangle that cut Memory off from the world of mortals. Only Bram's tower rose higher than those walls, she knew, and even that grew out of the same hard greyness.

Madhumalati looked about her. It was still early. The courtyard was empty, except for the golem.

He stood like a statue just inside the great arched entrance to the fortress, but he was neither beautiful nor a work of art. A golem is a weapon. The ridges on his body, the muscles on his gigantic torso and limbs, were sharp enough to draw blood. Three-inch spikes protruded from the backs of his hands, making both closed fists into deadly maces. And, though his body was man-shaped, the golem's shoulders held the head of a lion, complete with fangs of stone.

The golem was carved from the mountain stone as well, but he was brown as dried blood.

Madhumalati had never seen the golem move. Even after two years among the undying, she found the very notion hard to believe. And yet, she knew, life at Memory would be impossible if not for the undying's certainty that their golem could act, if necessary. Under the arch in the wall was the only way into the fortress, but there was no gate, no bars. Only the golem stood between the undy-

ing and their enemies.

It was like living in a dream, Madhumalati thought, because she had no choice but to accept the impossible as commonplace. All of Memory was like that to her, not just the golem. The fortress had been her dream—it still was—but life here never felt *real*. For two years now, she had lived an adventure: dwelling among an inhuman race, witnessing mysterious wonders, even sharing the bed of the undying's own chieftain. She had gotten all the excitement her heart and mind had hoped for. . . .

Madhumalati fingered the sleeves of her elegant black robe, fighting back a growing sadness. Adventures are fine, she thought, but they cannot just go on and on. This dream was a good one, but would she ever wake up and get on with her life?

The walls of Memory seemed to grow higher and more eternal every day.

A sound, like boulders rolling down a hill, startled Madhumalati. At first, she glanced at the distant mountains, then realized the noise came from somewhere nearby.

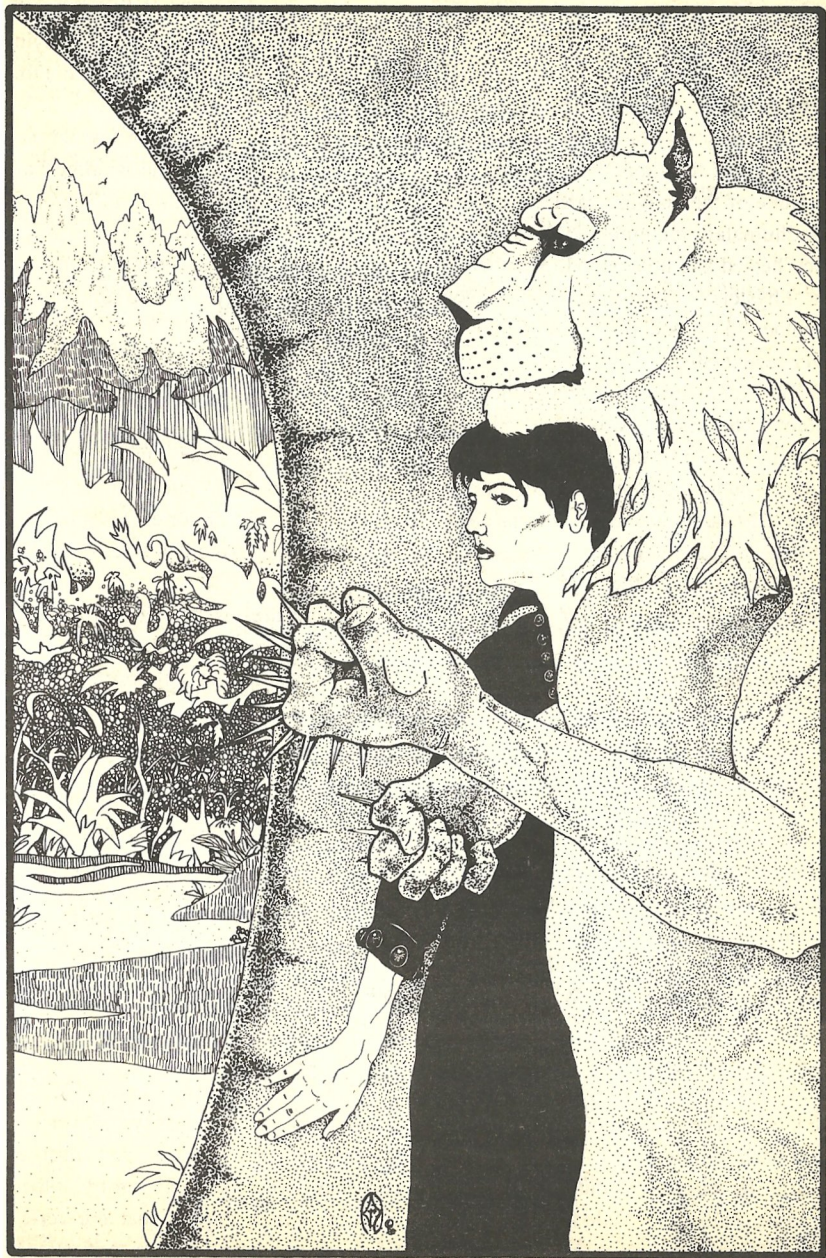
It was the golem, growling.

His pointed, cat-like ears were erect and twitching. The golem's leonine nostrils sniffed at the air. He raised his fists and walked slowly to the arch.

Madhumalati's hands fell to her sides. The golem was alive!

And he was waiting for something.

An undying woman appeared at Madhumalati's side. More undying came running from Studies all around the courtyard, drawn by the rumbling roar of the



golem. Madhumalati looked quickly for Bram, but could not find him.

Like the golem, the growing crowd kept their eyes fixed on the region just past Memory's gate. Unlike their guardian monster, they kept their distance.

None of the undying carried weapons; Madhumalati remembered how slowly they healed and understood. Members of the Physician's Study still argued about whether the blood of an adult undying ever regenerated.

The golem howled deeply, then fell silent. The enemy was here. Madhumalati looked past the monster and saw a solitary hunter, grasping a leech in each hand. The hunter came a few steps closer and she could see his face.

For a second, the world stopped. Memory disappeared. Her lips moved without a sound.

Holy Heaven's Dreams . . . it was Criss!

Come today. A breakthrough. Enormous implications.—Dion.

The note was brought to Bram shortly after Treasure left him alone in their bedchamber. As regent of Memory, he knew he should be anxious for details. What new discovery had the old alchemist bestowed upon Memory? What implications?

Bram merely blessed the biological quirk that gave the undying their bright pink eyes. The messenger had not known he'd been weeping.

Still, he must do his duty. . . .

Every ceiling in Memory lets in the sun. The walls may be darkly opaque, for

privacy's sake, but the ceilings are always clear glass or crystal. The undying like it that way, for they feed on nothing but daylight.

In this sense, then, Bram feasted well as he traveled through the winding hallways of Alchemist's Study in search of Doctor Dion. The sky above was bright white and cloudless, liberally radiating warmth and energy, but if Bram noticed, he did not look up.

Bitter odors, and occasional multi-colored flashes, escaped from various portals along the halls, proving that the alchemists were already up and at work. Bram paid them no attention. His body walked amidst laboratories; his mind was in another place, another time. . . .

Treasure dresses herself in front of a full-length mirror, the only such mirror in Memory, his mother's old mirror. She is experimenting with a length of delicate silver chain, turning it first into a necklace around her slender neck, then into a diadem atop a mass of dark brown hair. Standing directly behind her, Bram thinks she looks strikingly exotic either way. He feels again, very strongly, just how lucky he was to find her.

"Bram, why can't I see you in the mirror? I don't understand."

It is true. The silvered glass shows only Treasure.

"The explanation is metaphysical," Bram begins, "of necessity, considering the phenomenon. Simply, you must accept that nothing can exist in two places at once, which implies that our reflections are not here because they already

exist somewhere else.”

Treasure’s eyes widened. “More undying? Twins of all of you?”

Bram smiled. Like so much of Memory, this old theory was new and intriguing to Treasure. He basked in her excitement.

“Aye, but reversed, as in a mirror. Reflections, not twins. Envision a world in which the undying walk by night and sleep by day, and hunt mortals for their blood instead of the other way around.”

The young woman shuddered at the pictures her mind summoned up. She reached behind and brought Bram’s arms forward around her waist. “I’m glad I live in this world instead, with you.”

Bram had seldom felt so happy. . . .

Standing at the juncture of two intersecting halls, rocky black walls all around, he now felt only confused. What was wrong with him? Why did he keep returning to these yesterdays? In the old days with Treasure, there was never this obsession with past pleasures. The present was too full, and the future too. Everyday brought new plans, new experiences to share. They used to. . . .

Merciful light, he was doing it again!

Perhaps that’s the scariest thing, Bram thought soberly; he was already thinking of their time together in the past tense. The question then was: Were his fears based in reality, or was he over-reacting? And if not, was there anything he could do?

“Enough of this,” he snarled aloud, and practically threw himself down the left-hand corridor. He had to find Doctor

Dion.

Before he had gotten more than a few yards, a voice called out from behind.

“Bram! Regent! Stop, please. You have to come with me.”

He turned to see Fanu, an assistant historian, racing towards him. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Fanu stopped before Bram, obviously exhausted despite the generous sunlight. “The gate,” he gasped, breathing hard. “The golem. He’s fighting someone. I ran all the way here.”

Bram told the undying man to rest. “You did the right thing. I’m on my way.”

By the time he reached the courtyard outside, most of Memory seemed assembled there. Dozens of undying men and women faced the gate to the world beyond, blocking Bram’s view. He could hear the golem growling, though, and the pounding of great stone feet, both sounds louder than the whispered hubbub of his people, none of whom dared to raise their voices. Still, more than once, he thought he heard: “Where is the regent? Where?”

Was Treasure in the crowd, he wondered, or Doctor Dion? He did not have time to look.

Bram forced his way through the assembly, which yielded easily whenever he was recognized. Soon, he saw what the others had come to watch.

The golem stood directly beneath the wall’s high arch. Past him, on the one road down to the swamp, a mortal moved back and forth, trying somehow to slip by the monster in his way. The hunter paused for a moment, just beyond the

golem's reach, then darted towards the right side of the gate. The golem stepped instantly to the right as well, blocking him, and swung one mace-like fist at the invader's head. The hunter threw himself backwards just in time.

"You want me, statue?" challenged the mortal. "Come and get me!" He crouched on bended knees, ready to start running in either direction.

But the golem would not be lured from the gate. The bloodstealers of the swamp had tried decoys before, generations ago, and the golem had not forgotten. Despite his fearsome appearance, he was first a guardian, not a destroyer.

And golems always take their jobs very seriously.

"Let me by!" the mortal commanded. "Let me greet whoever rules here. We must have words!"

The golem only bared his fangs.

The mortal cursed and spat upon the ground.

Bram decided this stalemate had gone on long enough. "Golem," he said loudly, "he is only one. Watch him, but let him enter."

The golem spoke, but did not turn to look at Bram. His voice was deeper than a bull elephant's dying moan: "The gate cannot be unguarded. There are more like him. I know it."

"Stay then. Many people are ready here. One man cannot overpower us all and, thanks to you, he has lost his chance to surprise us."

The golem did not move from the gate. "A single enemy may harm many before he is stopped. The people should not face

danger; that is what I am for."

"I choose to take that risk, golem. We both have our duties to Memory, and mine is to make such decisions."

At last, the golem stepped aside. His feral visage bent low to stare at the ground. "You need one more golem," he said.

Bram was moved. He knew how much it cost the golem to make such an admission. "No. You have always been more than enough, and shall remain so forever."

Besides, he thought, he could not ask his people for another golem. Ten undying, including Memory's revered first regent, had given up their blood to make this one stone monster live. No threat was worth that sacrifice again. It would be far cheaper to just hear what the hunter had to say.

"My grandfather," he declared loudly, "was the great hunter, Rakk Lake-of-Blood. My father called himself Dorn Sea-of-Blood. I am Criss, whom Dreams name Peace-Bringer. I am new chieftain."

And an accomplished swamptribe orator, Bram decided, looking down on the hunter from the top of a series of wide stone steps. His location placed him about a head taller than Criss, who had turned the courtyard's largest community well into a platform from which to address the assembled undying.

Yes, thought the watchful regent, their visitor was unsophisticated, but effective. He knew how to project his voice, convey confidence, and strike a dramatic

pose. Criss kept his balance easily on the rim of the well's cylindrical housing, and spoke both to Bram and to the crowd of scientists, scholars, and administrators that formed a wide circle around the well.

Treasure was down there, Bram observed, easily spotted by her dark hair and child-sized proportions. No sign of Doctor Dion, though.

"Dreams speak to my eyes," Criss said. "Listen, and hear how the world can change its shape."

Young, Bram guessed, but mature by mortal standards. The man's face was lost behind a heavy black beard, as his body was hidden by greenery below, but Bram detected no sign of decaying energy. Criss was just a little older than Treasure, perhaps.

"My people grow with every season, but your number does not change. You have no children. You do not breed."

Only rarely, Bram agreed silently, and with good reason. Unless the undying blood is transfused wholly unto the next generation, the parent must inevitably outlive his offspring.

If father had chosen to keep his blood, Bram thought, he himself would be only dust and bones now. Instead Father decided to join Mother in death, leaving their son regent of a people whose memories were ancient before he was conceived. The youngest soul in Memory, and the loneliest. Until Treasure.

But what was Criss Whatever saying now . . . ?

"The blood of you fortress folk is good for many things. A small bag of your

blood can heal the sick, or prolong youth. Many bags can make the old men young again, grant endless years, or even revive the dead."

Bram nodded. Even lifeless stone could be made to move, if you used enough of the blood.

"There are many of us, and few of you, so we have had the strength to take what you could not give, the undying blood. We have hunted you since the earliest days, draining you without mercy whenever fortune brought you into our hands. We have fought and warred amongst ourselves over stolen blood, and we have driven you to spend the whole of eternity trapped within this prison you call a fortress."

True, Bram thought. Gaining immortality, we lost the world. But we have not wasted these many centuries. There is more accumulated knowledge in Memory than you mortals have ever acquired with all your freedom. An endless continuity of learning. . . .

"The spirit of our history has been the spirit of the leech!" Criss cried fervently. He lifted above his head two squirming handfuls of snakey greyness. Footlong tails twisted below his upraised fists. The crowd drew backwards, nervously extending their circles out to the very perimeter of the courtyard.

Only Treasure did not retreat from the mortal and his leeches.

"No more!" Criss shouted at Bram. He bit off the tails of both leeches, then threw them, with obvious force, down the well. "Let leeches die. Out of sight. In the dark."

“Stay then. Many people are ready here. One man cannot overpower us all and, thanks to you, he has lost his chance to surprise us.”

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Dramatic, Bram thought, but there are more where those came from.

Now Criss spoke in gentler tones: "I have seen the cherrybird, but I do not wish to fly. I have watched jellycrawlers move beneath the water, but I am happy to breathe air. In the same way, let me share this planet with the undying, but live and die as I am. The mortal life, hunting always for food and love, is enough for me, and for my tribe, and for the children that will someday follow me."

Was it just Bram's imagination, or was Criss now staring directly at Treasure? Bram tried to catch her eye, discern her reaction, but she never looked up at him. Soon, many other spectators, lulled somewhat by the growing tranquility of the hunter's manner, came forward and the crowd swallowed up Treasure, until Bram could barely see the top of her head.

For the first time, Bram wished his lover could be just a little taller.

Feeling oddly angry, and not sure why, Bram addressed their mortal visitor: "What is it exactly you want, Criss?"

"I bring a promise and a request. You, and all who dwell here, are free to go where you will, without fear of attack. My Dream shall be my people's truth."

Now all the undying gazed at Bram.

He felt them waiting for his response.

"Even if I were sure of your sincerity," Bram asked loudly, "how can one man change the ways of an entire race? Your people have always been bloodstealers."

"I am chieftain!"

"That is not enough. Mortals have fought mortals for our blood. Why should they not disobey a new chief?"

Silence followed, for the space of a dozen heartbeats, and when Criss spoke again, he seemed humbler and less deliberately oratorical.

"We live in a hot, muddy swamp," he said. "We are ignorant and often hungry or sick. Only the powerful ever really enjoy the magic of the blood. The rest of the tribe are ready for a change."

True honesty, Bram wondered, or merely a strategic pretense? "Can you not change without seeking our blessing? What brought you here today?"

"Peace will come easier," Criss stated, "if my people can taste its rewards. Come among us, share your Old Secrets, or let other mortals come to learn from you—and then return to the tribe."

In other words, Bram thought, you want our science more than our blood. Well, that was probably an improvement, assuming the mortals would stay content with that. Bram had his doubts.

"Listen to me, mortal chieftain. Your words hold promise, but we must not answer hastily. Return to your home. If we conclude it is safe, you shall see us soon enough."

Criss nodded. He jumped off the well and walked back across the courtyard to the gate. Standing in the shadow of the

golem, who stubbornly refused to take his eyes from the road outside, Criss made one last appeal: "With our strength, and your knowledge, we can create such happiness as no thinking creature has ever known. An end to killing! A new way to live!"

Scowling, Bram watched him leave. An age of peace and progress may have begun, but he did not feel particularly joyous. He had too much to think about.

Treasure, for example.

Ducayne wanted to accept the mortal's invitation. Presta agreed.

Presta *always* agreed with Ducayne.

His advisors surrounded Bram as he sat behind a desk in his library. A warm afternoon breeze blew in from the balcony at his right. The four elder undying, who preferred administration to academia, had insisted on this conference to discuss the question of Peace. As usual, Bram could guess each one's thoughts before they spoke.

"We must grasp this opportunity," Ducayne had said, "or else we betray the very purpose of Memory. How can the various Studies expand their learning locked away from the world at large? Most of the books in this library are centuries old, or compiled from sources even more antique!"

The eternal optimist, Bram thought, and happy to remain so forever. A stiff golden mane framed an unwrinkled, untroubled expression. Eons of 'castle fever' did not appear to have done Ducayne much harm.

"Yes, yes!" concurred tall, aquiline

Presta. "True science calls out for fresh observations."

Bram recalled his history: after a tempestuous, on-again, off-again affair that lasted several millennia, Ducayne and Presta had long ago stabilized as simply calm and comfortable companions. In conference, Bram regarded them as one creature, 'Ducayne-Presta.'

Teak glowered at Presta. He leaned his heavy bulk against the juncture of two granite cabinets and affected an air of weary sarcasm: "Are you insane, or only irredeemably foolish? Have you forgotten Hays? And Bradon and Theofal and all the others? We did not construct this fortress merely as an exercise in grotesque sculpture. First and foremost, the 'purpose of Memory' is to keep us alive, and safe from leeches, human or otherwise!"

Teak always opposed Presta. Bram did not know why. That bit of history had been lost to time. He wondered if even Teak remembered.

At times like this, Bram realized why his father had appointed him regent, instead of any of the original undying. None of father's contemporaries could have taken his place. None of them would have wanted to. Their old roles, their old relationships were forever fixed by then. Each had found his chosen niche. Like unmoving molecules after Heat Death, the oldest undying had achieved perfect equilibrium with each other.

Only Father was able to change himself, Bram mused, by binding his life to Mother. Even though that finally des-

troys him.

Ducayne, the unchanging advocate of change, was defending Presta. Teak chuckled sourly, and said something. Now Presta was defending Ducayne.

Rymer kept clearing his throat, looking for a chance to enter the debate. Without offending anyone, of course.

Noise, Bram thought. Just endless noise.

Where was Treasure?

Growing up, he remembered, he knew he had arrived too late. The social equilibrium was already established; there was no place for him. He was assigned a task, ruling Memory, but where were his ties to the people whose future he shaped? He was neither hated nor loved, merely obeyed. He suspected that the older undying, content with their ancient interests, were simply happy to let someone else make any *new* decisions.

Treasure was different. What they shared was just between the two of them, untouched by any of Memory's frozen patterns. He affected her, he changed her, as she affected him.

But if Treasure was able to change. . . .

Bram looked away from the quarreling advisors, towards the balcony and white sky beyond. Treasure spent more and more time on the balconies these days, especially the highest one, outside their bedroom.

Be honest, he thought. She was spending more time outside their bedroom, period.

And when she was on the balcony, looking out over the swamplands, she

could not be talked to. Bram had joined her there often lately, held her there, and she had accepted his arms. But she would not speak. Jokes, queries, and endearments were equally useless. Sighs and smiles outnumbered her words.

When he compared such moments to their first nights together. . . .

Tears burned Bram's eyes, pain that matched the sudden aching below his ribcage. Bram bent low over the desktop and groaned.

The unexpected sound brought silence to the library. A brief silence. Rymer was the first to realize that, yes, the regent was not dying. Rymer, that indecisive ex-Theologist whose sole function, as far as Bram could tell, was to act as a wild card in these conferences, just to keep Ducayne-Presta-Teak from producing total monotony.

Flipping a coin would probably serve just as well.

"I understand, regent," he began, seizing his chance at last. "A difficult decision, truly. I think we should wait, for at least one mortal lifetime. That way we will see if this Peace-Bringer is the mortal of the future, or merely a freak anomaly."

"The future depends on action today," Ducayne declared. "The seeds of peace, such as the young mortal, must be cultivated."

"He is like driftwood," Presta said, "thrown up by the sea, which may vanish with the next tide, never to wash ashore again."

"A lucky mutation," added Ducayne.

"A windfall of hope," said Presta.

"A bunch of meaningless metaphors," observed Teak. A grin spread across his wide, dark face. He clearly enjoyed this latest battle. "But if such are to be today's entertainment, might I compare the Peace-Bringer, instead, to a leech-filled pit covered over by garlands of pretty posies!"

"Hmm. Not bad," Ducayne conceded sportingly. "However. . . ."

"However nothing!" Bram snapped. His knuckles were white from gripping the arms of his chair. How could he concentrate, on the mortals or anything else, while these ancient shadows filled his world with noise? He needed time to think, alone. If Treasure were here, that would be different, but since she was . . . damn it, he was not going to waste his time with the likes of Teak!

He rose slowly and pointed towards the stairs. "Leave me," he said. "You have made your points, now go."

Ducayne raised a golden eyebrow. Presta spoke: "Bram, regent, your obvious agitation concerns me. Your father displayed similar moods."

"And he is no longer with us?" Teak responded. "How tactful."

Leave me alone, Bram thought. Their faces, their voices crowded him unbearably. He struggled to keep his voice calm. "I do not plan to bleed my life away tonight. Quiet meditation will serve quite nicely, thank you."

"Very well," said Ducayne quite cheerily. All four advisors prepared to depart. Eyes closed, Bram sank back into his chair. All he wanted was total oblivion, just for a little while.

Rymer's voice, directly in front of him: "Are you sure, sir. Shouldn't we make some sort of decision?"

"GO!" Bram growled. Pink eyes glared wildly. His lips peeled back. Bram's gums crashed together with a loud clack.

No mortal hunter ever looked so monstrous.

The golem watched the gate. Madhumalati watched the golem.

Nothing alive could enter Memory while the golem stood guard, but could anyone leave? Madhumalati suddenly realized that she did not know. If she took one step beyond the gate, past the walls of the fortress, what would the golem do? Pursue her? Raise an alarm? Madhumalati looked the spikes upon the golem's hands and wondered just how fast the monster could move.

Maybe she could outrun him.

There was still a small crowd milling about the square. The undying were in no hurry to get back to their Studies; most preferred to discuss Criss and his offer with their neighbors. New conversational material, after all, was an unexpected blessing, and lost time a meaningless concept.

If she tried to leave now, could any of these people stop her?

Madhumalati felt a little guilty even thinking this way. The undying were not her enemies. They had shared their Studies with her for two full years. And the golem, in fact, had been her protector as well.

But she didn't need protection any-

more, not from the tribe. And every moment that passed, Criss might be getting farther and farther away.

Slowly, casually, Madhumalati approached the gate. The closer she got to the golem, the sharper the angles of his body seemed. She imagined herself tripping, falling against the monster, and watching her flesh come apart in smooth, even slices. Mortal blood, without value, would spread across the stone.

The golem was directly in front of her now, just a few feet away. She would have to go around him to get through the gate.

Madhumalati looked behind her. The undying were still clustered in small groupings, vigorously debating. No one was watching her.

She stepped under the arch, alongside the golem. The head of a giant stone lion turned and looked down at her. Madhumalati searched the golem's face for some clue to her fate, but saw nothing except a carving with fangs. Dreams of Hell, he still didn't look alive to her!

The golem's eyes were fixed on her, but they were only lines cut into rock. And whether he killed her or not, they would still look the same.

Should she ease slowly past him, or run like a demon?

Stone jaws moved. "Where are you going, Treasure?"

Madhumalati jumped. She never expected the golem to speak! She'd heard that voice before, less than an hour ago, but she was not yet ready for it.

"Outside," she said, "if I can. . . . Can I?"

The golem shrugged, and Madhumalati half expected the air to bleed. "Memory is a sanctuary, not a prison."

That was good to know. Madhumalati walked with brisk confidence past the fortress gate. A strange relief, almost a light-headedness, filled her, and she took a deep breath of open, unwallied air. No matter what came next, that was good to know.

Bram was standing on the balcony outside his library when he heard someone coming up the stairs. "Treasure, is that you?"

"No," said Doctor Dion.

She was the oldest undying in all of Memory, which meant that she looked ageless. Her hair was thick and silver, her skin still smooth and tan. Only her philosophic manner, an unmistakable aura of impervious calm, hinted that this was a woman who had experienced everything, many times over. Nothing fazed her, not even eternity.

She entered the regent's library, carrying a skull-sized globe of wax. Within the wax, a clear and viscous fluid sloshed slowly about.

"I waited at the Study until I realized you would not be coming," she said. A statement, not an accusation.

Bram apologized anyway, and led the Doctor to a seat on his couch. He remained standing.

"You have brought something for me?" he asked. Doctor Dion still held carefully onto the liquid-filled globe.

"Three things," she replied. "A lecture, a weapon, and a choice. The lec-

ture, naturally, comes first."

"The regent of Memory is always a student." Bram assumed an attentive expression. "Proceed."

"It is a fact," the Doctor said, "that a certain poison, given to mice in the afternoon, kills eighty-five percent of the test animals. The same substance, administered after midnight, kills less than four percent.

"The life-process is a cyclic process. Metabolic cycles. Glandular cycles. The body has its daily, or circadian, rhythms that it follows with the devotion of a true believer. Hence, the changing potency of some poisons over the course of a twenty-five hour period. Do you understand me so far?"

Bram nodded. For an undying, dormant always between sunset and dawn, the notion of an internal clock was not hard to grasp.

"Some years ago," continued Doctor Dion, "I began working to develop my own circadian toxins, which could be set to perform lethally only at times of my selection. A difficult challenge, but not, as it turned out, an impossible one."

The fluid in the globe was perfectly placid now, like the still surface of a jungle lagoon. Doctor Dion could have been made of wax herself, so little did she move.

"That is the lecture. The weapon is here in my hands."

"One of your timed poisons, I assume."

"Aye, though the timer is actually in the victim. The chemical does not change."

Bram gazed at the globe with wary eyes. He knew without asking that Dion was not talking about mice anymore.

“And when should this particular poison be avoided?” he asked.

Her lips bent upwards slightly. “Only at night,” she said. “By day, anyone may safely drink it. The body is protected then, and the toxin quickly metabolized. After dark, however, we become vulnerable. My circadian toxin will then kill any human being, mortal or undying, homo sapiens or hemo sapiens.”

“But we undying are never awake at night,” Bram observed.

“Exactly.”

She rose from the couch and placed the globe in Bram’s hands. The wax covering felt cold and slimy.

“Here is your choice, my president. The wells of Memory are connected below the mountain to the swamps of our enemies. The same water quenches both our thirsts. And there is enough concentrated toxin in that ball to make it all very, very deadly—but only when we are physically unable to drink.”

Bram considered the possibilities. The swamptribe might learn to abstain from water during the night, but only if they guessed the secret of the poison. Most mortals would perish the first evening, and any survivors would probably shun the swamps around Memory for generations. If there were survivors at all.

How often do mortals drink water after dark? He would have to ask Treasure. No, on second thought, that was impossible. She was still one of them, sort of, as much as he hated to remember that. Be-

fore Treasure, there was Madhumalati. That was years ago, but had Madhumalati ever really died? Was it Madhumalati who smiled at him when his Treasure would not speak?

No, she could never be asked to help plan the extermination of her past. He was afraid to test her love that far, not even for the sake of Memory.

But was Memory even at risk anymore? What about the young chieftain’s offer of peace? After all this time, Doctor Dion provided the means to destroy their ancient enemies, just as those enemies abruptly declared themselves friends. One way or another, he could end that siege upon Memory, either by winning the war or accepting the truce.

He wondered—could he really trust the hunters? Should he slaughter them instead? There were significant moral issues involved here, as well as life and death realities. Bram felt overwhelmed; how could he hope to find the proper path? He did not even understand his own lover anymore!

“You may return to your Study, Doctor,” Bram said curtly. “Thank you for your efforts. For now, I will keep the poison myself.”

As soon as Doctor Dion disappeared down the stairs, Bram collapsed upon the couch. Suddenly, he was very tired. Poisons, peace, and Treasure chased each other through his mind. Hayse died again beneath the leeches. Criss Peace-Bringer emoted before the people. Treasure/Madhumalati offered him cold water instead of love.

Alone in his tower, Bram moaned in

pain. What good was immortality when everything happened at once?

He was Peace-Bringer. He had Dreamed it.

Criss had no doubts. The Living Dreams had shown him the truth, in visions from the World of Dreams, the real world. He was more than just chieftain, he was a Dreamer too. He could Dream while still awake, see truly whenever he willed. True, once he had needed to burn the undying blood, inhale the harsh incense of its smoke, in order to summon the visions, but no longer. He could Dream now without their blood.

What truer sign that the leeching might end?

Criss waded into a wide pool at the edge of the swamp, until he was waist-deep in still, warm water. The vines he wore earlier stayed behind on the shore. Criss wanted to bathe before returning to the village, and this pool, still within view of the fortress, was a gift of fortune. Criss scooped up handfuls of water and washed dried sweat off his arms and shoulders.

The Dreams could not be doubted, yes, but he still hadn't liked confronting that golem. He hoped the undying, and Madhumalati, had not seen his fear.

A wall of willows grew up at the far end of the pool. Beyond them lay the depths of the swamp and home. Criss turned though and looked back the way he came. Moss-covered earth gave way to black stone hills, and a narrow trail leading upwards to the fortress. From where Criss was standing now, the Place

of Old Secrets looked like a small altar, its walls about as high as this pool was deep. Hard to believe, he thought, that a whole tribe dwelt in that bit of scenery, but then everyday sight was always deceptive.

Only Dreams could be trusted.

Criss took a deep breath and let the remembered smell of baked blood, dry and heavy like hot tar, fill his mouth and nostrils. He imagined bending low over his crucible, letting the pungent fumes warm his chest from inside, even as they turned his stomach. With his eyes wide open, Criss Dreamed.

The fortress shimmered and expanded, eclipsing the peaks around it with its true importance. The fortress filled the horizon and its walls and tower, once dark, now glowed with an unholy radiance. First purple, as if suffused with living blood, then a brilliant red. Redder than blood spilled over pale skin, red as the most alluring apple.

Criss saw the fortress as it truly was: a lure, a trap, a dangerous temptation. In reality, it had never been anything else.

But now he Dreamed of days unborn. The walls above lightened more, the red fading to pink, the pink purifying itself until the entire fortress was white and shining. The Place of Old Secrets was shaped from freshest snow, clean white-capped artistry atop peaks that had not known ice since the time of Criss's great-grand sire.

Then the walls melted away and the tower sank into the stone. Life, trapped from time before memory, spread greenness from the top of the mountains

downwards, a flowing wave of emerald and chartreuse that raced to rejoin the swamp and the people. And riding on the crest of the wave was a woman, a small woman in a black dress. . . .

Madhumalati.

Criss started. What was *she* doing in this vision? He still dreamed of her sometimes, but never when he Dreamed. Only when he slept. Criss was confused. He blinked, and the Dream disappeared.

But 'Lati remained.

She was not riding the wave anymore, but running down the trail towards the foot of the mountain. Behind her, the fortress was again a dark, distant imposition on the landscape. The Dream was over. Criss could see now only what other men saw.

Madhumalati emerged onto the level plain between the hills and Criss's bathing pool. She spotted him and stopped running. For a moment, she seemed to consider turning back. Then she walked slowly to the water's edge.

Criss watched her approach. Madhumalati. His childhood friend and almost-lover. Almost, because she vanished before they ever got around to what once seemed inevitable. A few more weeks, a few more days; how many times in the months that followed had he wished he'd been less tardy? She never told him their time was running out.

But that was long ago. He compared her to his memories and found the woman before him surprisingly unchanged. Her hair was shorter and lighter, the ornate gown seemed completely out of place, but the face, the

walk, was pure 'Lati. Old feelings, newly warmed, brought a smile to his lips.

"Madhumalati. My friend."

She smiled back at him, but picked nervously at the base of her nails. Criss knew then she was uncomfortable.

"No one has called me that since I . . . went away."

Why call her anything else? Madhumalati fit her so perfectly, he thought. It meant Sweet Jasmine.

"To me, you must stay Mahumalati. I am too old now to learn new names."

"Really? I do not remember playing with a Peace-Bringer before. Besides," she added softly, "you do not look too old at all."

Criss regarded his own body, only half-submerged beneath the surface of the pool. "I am changed," he said. "Not a child, but a chieftain."

"Then your father must be. . . ."

"Dead," he finished for her. "A season ago. You did not hear?"

"Memory—the fortress, I mean, is not touched by the outside. What happened?"

"My father caught death from unclean water. He fell, with wounds still fresh from hunting, into a pond where carrion rotted below. Soon his limbs turned black and spongy and foul."

"But he was chieftain," Madhumalati protested. "They must have tried, er, healing him."

"The undying blood could fight the sickness or fight my father's years, not both. He died with grey hairs."

"I am sorry," she said. "Criss, I am sorry too that I could not say goodbye.

There was no time. Suddenly, I saw my chance and . . . I wished you'd come with me, truly!"

And he had dreamed of her, Criss recalled. Not Living Dreams of sacred purpose, but a man's dreams of simple pleasure. He let himself enjoy the sight of her, his once-favorite girl, and thought of stolen kisses on the floor of his father's canoe. The water about his loins grew deliciously warmer.

If only she were not garbed like an undying sorceress. . . .

"Come, 'Lati. This hole is perfect for bathing, and you have run hard, it seems. Why not join me?"

She ran a palm across her brow, then down along her bare throat onto the shadowy fabric draped over her shoulders. "My gown. . . ."

"Do you now bathe with your vines on?" he teased. "That is new, 'Lati."

She smiled, but stepped back from the pond. "I can talk to you from here, without getting soaked."

Criss shrugged, and switched strategies. "Very well, if you won't join me, we must bring our reunion ashore." Before Madhumalati could protest, he waded into the shallows between them, his uncoiled desire rising before him like some separate, aquatic animal suddenly reaching for air. Water dripped from Criss's beard and body as he stepped onto the mossy soil. Facing Madhumalati, he opened his arms to receive her.

"Maybe now," he said, "the love we began as children can finally prosper."

'Lati neither advanced nor retreated. Intriguing, Criss thought.

"Surely, you have not waited for me so all this time?" she asked.

"Damp, naked, and leech-long? No." Criss lowered his arms. "I have two mates already. She is Darsali. He is Kah. You remember them?"

She nodded.

"We need one more maiden to form our perfect square; Darsali has two men but no lovers like herself. If you returned to us. . . ." Now, Madhumalati did take a few steps backwards. "But that's mere dreaming, not Dreamed Truth. Today, my 'Lati, cannot you embrace your dear, oldest friend?"

How could she refuse? Madhumalati came into his arms, and Criss knew that his world was good and getting better. This had to be: 'Lati hugging him tightly, the sun shining on them both, and the Dream of Peace coming upon them in all its unstoppable, sacred glory. This embrace was ordained; inevitably, it stretched on and on; inevitably, both his hands slid down to caress 'Lati's rounded rear; he bent his head, eager for the inevitable taste of her ear.

She pulled away. "No," she said quickly. "Not now. It must be getting close to twilight. I have to get back to Memory. I promised Bram."

"Who?"

"One of the undying, and a friend of mine."

Only a friend? Well, Criss thought, if she does not want to claim anything else, that was good news for him. She had not refused his household, nor admitted any prior bonding of her own. Their future was full of room. He could be patient.

"Goodbye, then, for now. We will not be separated like before. When the Dream Lives, and the fortress is opened, we shall have all the time in creation."

"Yes, yes!" She stood upon her toes and kissed Criss's cheek. "Tell everyone I will see them soon!"

As he watched Madhumalati depart towards the fortress, her high spirits revealed by every eager stride, Criss recalled that the Dream was what really mattered. But if he could bring his vision to life, and regain his Sweet Jasmine too . . . ah, how could even a chieftain ask for more.

Madhumalati returned to Memory, and the regent's tower, about an hour before sunset. She found Bram in their bedchamber, standing before her mirror, staring at nothing. Her own excitement blinded her to the melancholy aspects of the scene.

"Bram!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it wonderful?"

He turned to look at her. "What do you mean?"

"The new beginning, of course! No more blood-hunting. Mortals and undying can finally stop hating each other."

"I never hated you, Treasure."

His comment caught her off guard. "I know that," she said, puzzled. "I was not talking about we two. But after all the violence between the fortress folk and my people, I can hardly believe it is truly over."

Bram glanced at an odd-looking wax globe on their bed. "If peace does come, you would be safe to go back to your old

village, wouldn't you?"

She did not like the sound of Bram's voice. His every word came slowly, as if carrying a thousand unvoiced fears.

"I don't understand, Bram. What do you mean, *if* peace comes?"

"You did not answer me. Could you return to the swamp?"

Yes, thought Madhumalati, she'd visit home again, and she might decide to stay there. Until she was sure, though, there was no point in upsetting Bram. She tried to reassure him with a smile.

His face twisted in agony.

"Bram, what is wrong? Tell me. All I see is a chance to bring our peoples together."

"It is more complicated than that, my Treasure," he said. His face assumed a less vulnerable, more pensive expression. She recognized it at once: Bram the regent. "Much more complicated."

"How? The new chieftain promised us all his protection."

"So he said," Bram agreed, "but should I place the word of a hunter over the safety of my people? Mortals will do anything to get our blood, even offer false promises of peace."

After a day charged with unexpected hopes, Madhumalati could not believe what she was hearing now.

"No, Bram, you're wrong! You can trust Criss. He is a good man and an honest man. Believe me, he has always hated the leeching and the bloodbags!"

Bram eyed her carefully. "You know him?"

"In the old days, yes." And please, Bram, she prayed, let us leave it at that.

What you don't know. . . .

"Why didn't you mention that before?"

Madhumalati took a deep breath. "That does not matter, Bram. How can I convince you? This is an incredible opportunity. For all of us."

He came closer and placed his fingers gently against her lips. His dignified, impersonal pose fell apart before her eyes. Pink eyes grew pained and wet. Bram threw his arms around her and held her body urgently.

Then he broke away, and walked over to the bed.

Madhumalati was confused. She had expected joy and passion from her lover, the regent, but now something else was happening. Desperately, she tried to turn the night around.

"Bram, love, there is still some time before sunset. Shall we celebrate, just the two of us?"

He bent over their bed and picked up the globe. She saw now that the ball was hollow, and filled with slow, transparent ripples.

"Tomorrow," he answered. "We will have many tomorrows. Tonight, however, you must do one thing for me. Drink no water. No matter how long the night stretches, no matter how thirsty you may get, do not drink until dawn."

"Why not, Bram? I wish I understood you."

"Trust me on this, Treasure. Make me this vow. Please!"

She looked up into his eyes, so brightly pink, so much older than her own, and wondered: was it the vast gap of years between them, or just the differ-

ence in their blood, that made his feelings so unclear to her? Did he even realize how closely he guarded his heart? After two years together, their bed was still the only place where she truly knew what Bram needed.

Forget immortality, my people. That was not the gift Madhumalati craved. Today she would gladly sacrifice a year of her life for a single look into one man's soul—if only someone would make her the offer.

"Very well, Bram. If it will make you happy, I shall not drink until sunrise. And no questions either."

He left the tower then, but Madhumalati felt none of the tension exit with him. Something horrible, and terribly sad, was coming. Madhumalati knew this, though she tried not to admit it.

Bram raced across the pavillion and down a series of wide stone steps. He relished the savage sound of his bare feet smacking against the steps. Let there be thunder, he thought, and explosions and screams. Loud and ugly noises to match his mood.

Damn all mortals! Damn their chieftain! Were he not the regent of a good and noble people, he would have Criss slowly tortured to death. He would string the Peace-Bringer's intestines up like holiday decorations.

Bram understood now. Criss wanted to turn Treasure back into Madhumalati; that was what his 'peace' was all about.

Bram stumbled on the bottom step and almost dropped the globe. His body was shaking. His gums were clenched tightly

together. By Blood and Light, he had never felt so angry and so hurt!

"I still love you, Treasure," he gasped. "You are home, family, and religion to me. I cherish and covet you. I want your beauty, your laughter, your company, your life. . . ."

He was babbling like a lunatic, but he couldn't help it. Life just kept getting worse and worse, with no relief in sight. He had to do *something* to make things better again.

Which meant getting rid of the village below. And Criss.

And he had to keep running. The day was almost over. Though the sky was still white, the sun could no longer be seen above the walls of Memory. Soon the sun would crash into the horizon and Bram collapse wherever he was.

He had to reach the well before dark. "All I need is one more chance, Treasure, and I know I can make you happy. I will sink my claws so deeply into your heart that you can never pull away again!"

The courtyard was nearly empty when he got there. Every other undying had found shelter for the night. Bram saw only the well and, a few yards away, the towering figure of the golem. He placed the globe containing Doctor Dion's toxin on the stone housing around the well. How ironic, Bram thought, to destroy Criss from the man's own stage.

The golem turned his head towards Bram. Doubtless, he seldom saw an undying out so late, but Memory's own monster said nothing. He was, as ever, on duty.

The light grew dimmer, but Bram

knew he had a short time left to think. He stared at the giant stone creature, and mused: if peace came between mortals and undying, the golem would become obsolete. His existence would lose all meaning.

"As would mine," Bram whispered, thinking of Treasure. He pushed the globe closer towards the edge, until it was less than an inch away from dropping into the shaft. Bram had only to press just a little bit more. . . .

He hesitated. His fingers froze. Did he really want this? Forget Treasure. Forget about her and Criss. What about Memory? He and the golem were not the only souls with something at stake here. The undying had a chance to escape the fortress. The swamptribes could still keep their lives.

Peace promised him no joy, but what of his people?

Damn, Bram thought, he should not have paused. There was no time for second thoughts!

The sky was grey now. Bram felt his energy slip away, along with his anger. In this odd twilight, the golem's brown stain seemed freshly red again, bright with the blood of dead undying. His predecessors, Bram recalled, gave up their lives for the sake of Memory. Now it was his turn.

"Forgive me, Treasure," Bram whispered.

The poison rolled towards the edge.

No! Bram tried to yank the globe back. His fingers sank into soft wax, but the globe escaped his grip and toppled over the rim. Bram reached and missed. He

heard a splash at the bottom of the well.

Bram felt numb. He'd found his sanity again, but too late. The poison, Dion's damned circadian toxin, was free. And the light was fading fast.

Lethargy invaded. Bram's arms hung limp at his sides. His knees sagged to Memory's stone floor, but he could not slip into dreaming yet. Not while he could still speak.

"Golem! Hear me!" Carved stone stepped forward. "Go down to the swamp. Tell the mortals the water is poison!"

The golem froze. "I cannot leave Memory. I must never leave Memory."

"Go!" Bram commanded. "You have to hurry, or they will die, as will our people's freedom." Light of Life, he prayed, let me convince him. There was nobody else!

"No," said the golem. "Who will guard Memory?"

In Bram's pink eyes, the pupils shrunk. The sky was one black shadow. He could barely see the well, the courtyard. Where was he? Where was Treasure? Ah, yes, in the tower. Too far away.

Just the golem. That's all there was.

"Please," Bram whispered. "Stop them. They must not drink!"

The golem growled. "Madness!" snapped the lion's jaws. He raised his mace-fist to strike Bram down.

The regent collapsed first. He fell face-first across the gate of Memory, and still his lips kept moving: "Save them, save me, save us all. . . ."

Moonlight struck Criss in the face,

waking him from Jasmine-scented dreams. Looking up, he saw Kah lifting the curtain across their door. Walls, made up of interwoven willows, framed a half-circle of night sky.

"Go back to sleep," Kah whispered. "I'm only slipping out for a taste of water."

Criss watched his mate's lean form, a Dancer's body, disappear through the door. He yawned and rolled over. Darsali, blonde and round and soft, remained deeply asleep on her side of the mat.

Kah's going let in a draft. Darsali shivered and nuzzled against Criss. He grinned, and draped an arm around her generous fleshiness. With eyes half closed, he indulged in fantasies of Madhumalati's return. How well she complemented his other two mates! As womanly as Darsali, but slender like Kah. And, with her adventuresome spirit and curiosity, what intriguing new richness might she bring to his already enthralling household?

He imagined the four of them together. . . .

An angry shout came from outside, followed by the sound of violent splashing. He heard Kah cry out in pain. Beside him, Darsali woke instantly; Criss knew his own eyes must look just as confused. And fearful.

"Criss! Someone! Hurry!" Kah called. "We are attacked!"

Not pausing to wrap herself, Darsali beat Criss to the door. She carried a club in each hand. Criss seized a long stone knife and followed. Keep yelling, he si-

lently willed Kah: rouse my hunters. Keep proving you still live!

Stacked layers of willows kept Criss's hut at least a spearlength above the swampy wetness. Ignoring the braided vines dangling beyond his entry curtain, he dropped feet first onto the ground, then spun, knife ready, to see what danger faced him.

The sight stunned him.

Truths Hidden and Revealed, he had not Dreamed *this*.

The monster from the fortress was here, and Kah was caught in its grip. A spiked fist held Kah by the wrist, and he dangled helplessly at the end of his own right arm. The Dancer's feet were almost level with Criss's chin; blood dripped from the bare soles which must have kicked the monster's edged hide.

Fresh redness stained its chest and legs.

"You shall not drink!" boomed the thing's inhuman voice.

Criss blamed the undying chieftain. Was this his answer to an offer of peace? In anger, he almost threw himself at the invader, but remembered his mate's life was at risk. He must make no mistakes.

Darsali circled the monster from a safe distance, joined by several other hunters, male and female, who came from every nearby hut, some in vines, some only armed. The monster stood just past the shore, its stone paws hidden beneath still water, as the people waded carefully through the shallows to surround Kah's captor. Criss saw courage mixed with uncertainty in their slow, cautious stalk. All had heard of the undying's terrible

guardian, but few had really seen the thing. And no one ever suspected it might come down from the mountain.

This was no Dream come true, but a living nightmare.

"Do not drink or I will stop you!" the monster warned them all. It shook Kah hard, to make its point. Kah's body jerked and he bit his lip. His eyes asked Criss: What now, my chieftain?

They all wanted to know. Darsali and the rest.

Stall, Criss thought. Hope for inspiration.

He challenged the monster: "Why have you come? Explain yourself!"

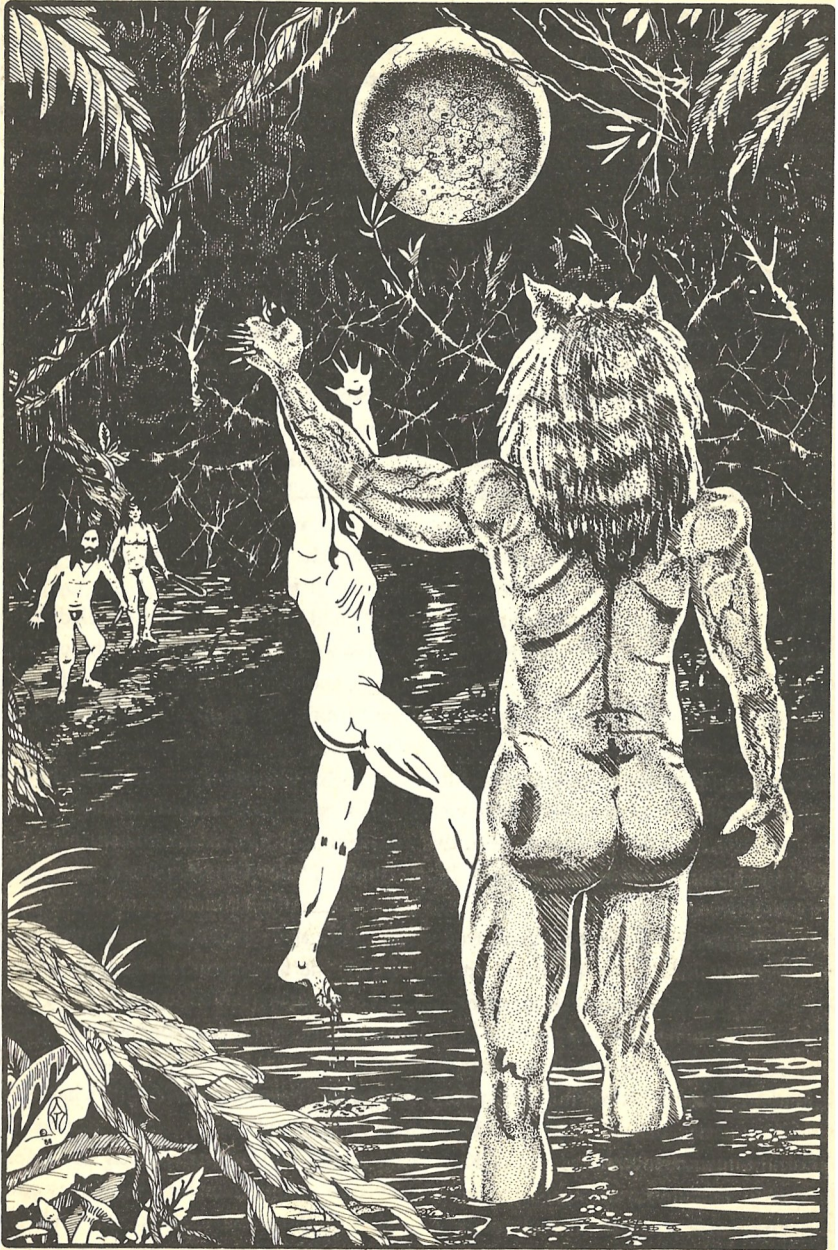
"The regent of Memory compelled me here. He says, 'Do not drink of this water. It is poison.'"

Could this be so? Criss recalled Kah's mission of thirst; might not the creature have found Kah just as his lover knelt to sip from the pond? And Kah, naturally, resisted.

Poison in the swamp, now, without warning? It made no sense, but why else would the undying leave their refuge unguarded? Unless as invitation to some elaborate trap.

Criss needed to see the Truth, which meant he must see truly. Remember hot blood baking beneath his nose, a dry and acrid odor on his tongue, and then, Dream!

The spikes on the monster's hands retracted. Rocky fangs were rounded by invisible winds. Criss stared into a feral visage and saw lifeless stone eyes come to life. At first, the eyes were wide and pink and full of pain, but then they be-



came something else: the deepest darkness surrounded by the purest white.

He knew those eyes, and trusted them.

"Beware the water!" Criss declared. "Word has come from the fortress and the word is life!"

Days later:

An unusual crowd gathered outside the arched gates of Memory. Criss was there, and Doctor Dion, and many other men and women, both mortal and undying. Ageless brown bodies mixed with vine-wrapped hunters, surrounding each other but trapping no one. The golem could not be seen anywhere.

Bram stood at the very edge of chaos, clutching a package wrapped in Treasure's favorite black-and-emerald gown. She faced him, dressed as she was when they first met, in tight green mummy wrappings. Her eyes were almost as pink as his.

"Shall I call you Madhumalati now?" he asked.

"No. Not if you don't want to." She met his eyes in silence for several slow heartbeats, then: "Please understand, Bram, I don't want to leave you."

"Then why?"

"Maybe I left my own village too soon," she said, "before I had a chance to really know what being a mortal woman was all about. I was only seventeen, Bram."

"And Criss?"

"Part of my past. Probably my future too, at least for awhile."

Bram leaned against a high stone wall. He found it hard to keep standing. Will

you ever come back to me?"

"Maybe, but not soon. How can I make that decision until I understand what I am choosing between? That's all I want: just time to go back and find out what I gave up before."

Bram stroked the soft fabric wrapping his bundle. "Suppose I went with you?"

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "No. That would not work. Not right now."

Bram saw Criss emerge from the crowd behind Treasure. He watched them from about five feet away. Waiting. Two other mortals, a tall male and chubby woman, stood behind him, eyeing Treasure curiously. Bram wanted to scream at them, set Criss's beard on fire, throw acid in his eyes, smash every bone with bloody rocks, make Criss unhappy for the rest of his miserable, mortal life. . . .

He wanted to *hurt* someone.

Instead, he placed his package in Treasure's hands. "A gift," he explained, "for both of us. Open it."

Treasure knelt on the mountain road and unfolded the gown. Inside was another hollow wax globe. Dark purple filled the inner cavity.

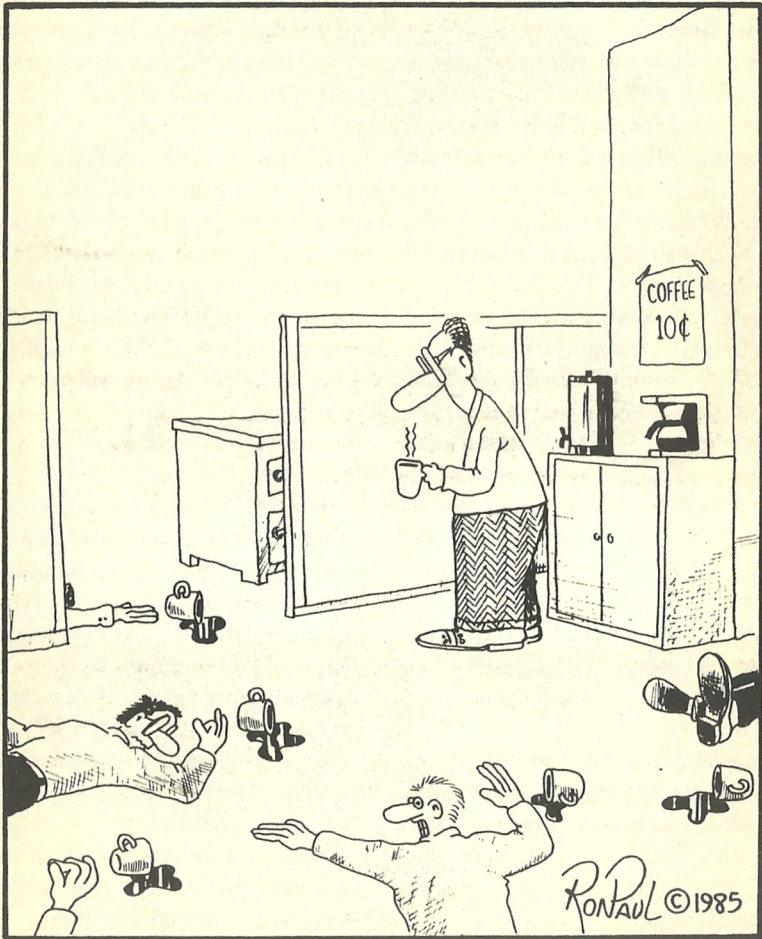
Her eyes widened with sudden understanding. "You looked so weak today, but I didn't realize . . ."

Drink it slowly over a period of years. You know how slowly our blood clots." Bram helped her off the ground, then placed his hands on her shoulders. "Here is your time, Treasure. Time enough to live a mortal life, raise mortal children if you wish, and still have time to return to

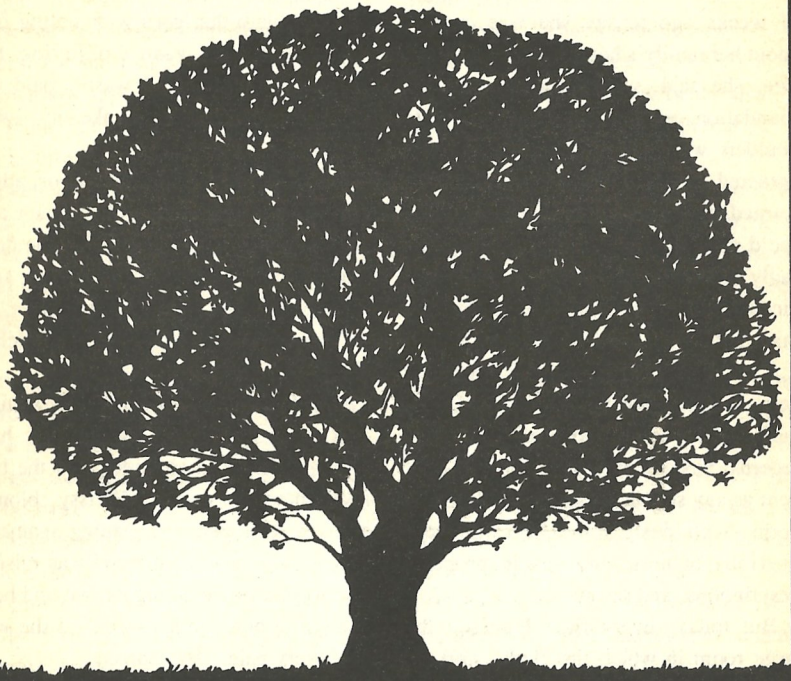
Memory. Someday.”

He treated himself to one last look at her as his enemy, the Peace-Bringer, came forward and led her away. Yes, Bram thought, the regent of Memory is

always learning. He would not have believed before that any woman could appear miserable, happy, and lovely at the same time, but somehow his Treasure pulled it off.



**SOMETHING WAS WRONG HERE . . . BUT ORVILLE
COULDN'T PUT HIS FINGER ON IT.**



The Tree

written by Thomas A. Easton

IT WAS A WARM May Friday, with the air full of apple blossoms and bay mud, and Joelle Dobson did not have her mind on what she was doing.

She had come into my office a couple of weeks ago to say she was curious about her family's house. The superstructure, she said, was fairly new but the foundation of roughly trimmed granite boulders was not. And too, she'd been bothered by folks' reactions when they learned where she lived. An old woman she'd met in church had shaken her head sadly and said, "Pity. You look like such nice people, too." No one would say anything more.

I hadn't been able to give her much help. But the town clerk had loaned her a desk and showed her how to use the town records. Since then, she had been as diligent as any scholar, spending most afternoons with dusty tomes, ferreting out previous owners, changes in property descriptions, and so on.

But today, every time I passed the large room in which the clerks worked, she was just sitting there, staring out the window. It nagged at me, and eventually I laid down my pen, pushed my paperwork aside, and left my office. I passed Bonny's desk, where she sat to guard my door, and went down the stairs. I touched Joelle's shoulder. "Something wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head, but she wasn't saying no. "Chrissy's in the hospital."

I squeezed her shoulder. "Then why don't I pay her a visit? Want to come?"

"Later on. Sam's there now."

*

I didn't take the car. It was only a mile to where Chrissy was housed, I told myself, and the walk would give me time to think, to feel the town whose Mayor I was, to bitch to myself about the cash flow problem that goes with selling fuel oil. Not that I wasn't enjoying the warmth. I was. But I wasn't paid for being Mayor. I had to make my living somehow.

Chrissy was on the second floor, adrift in odors of alcohol and clean linen and soap, with a room of her own. The door was ajar. I knocked, heard her soft "Come in," and entered. Her father, in the armchair by the window, said "Hello, Harry."

"Hi, Sam," I said. I didn't look at him. The room was dim, the curtains half drawn, and the single lamp over the bed spotlighted the patient. Chrissy, blonde and six years old, was leaning against a pillow. The head of the bed was raised. She wore a flowered nightgown and held a coloring book on her lap. And she was pale, very pale. "Hi, Chrissy."

The hospital hadn't stolen her impish grin. "Harry!" I crossed the room and shook her hand. Then I propped my backside against her bed and let her tell me about how being sick got you new toys and books and even friends. "There's a man just down the hall," she told me. "He's old, just like Grampa. He's sick too."

I said something about that's what hospitals are for, to make sick people well. She shook her head vigorously, her hair flying. "He's going to die," she said.

"But not like the cat."

"What cat?"

"The one in the yard, by Mr. Oak Tree." Her face was solemn. "Its neck was twisted." She twisted her hands together to show me what she meant. I gave her a shudder, and she grinned at me. Like most kids, she loved to have grown-ups appreciate her performances.

Then Sam spoke. "Somebody must have thrown it from a car," he said. I looked at him. His face too was solemn, a trace of upset still lingering from whenever they had found the cat. "Happened last week," he added.

I nodded and rolled my eyes toward the door to the hall. Would he tell me more before I left? He nodded back, and I returned my attention to Chrissy. We chatted for a few minutes more, I told her to get well real soon, and then we said good-bye.

Sam walked me out of the room and down the hall to the stairs. At the door, he turned to face me. "That cat isn't the only strange thing that's happened lately," he said. I rummaged in a pocket for my pipe and tobacco. I couldn't light up in the hospital, but once I was outdoors. . . .

Sam Dobson was the manager of our local bank. He wasn't particularly handsome. His eyebrows were too thick and turned under as they neared his nose. The nose itself had a dogleg from college football. His teeth were crooked, and the right side of his lower lip was thickened by a small knot of scar tissue. At five-eleven, he was a little taller than me, and he carried more weight than he should.

"Chrissy's illness?" I asked.

He raised one hand to brush at his sandy hair. "That's part of it, I suppose," he said. "She's got a rash on the front. Anemic, too. And the doctors can't figure why."

I snorted. "That's nothing new."

He shrugged. "They do say it's nothing serious. She's getting better already. But she's still having the nightmares."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Started after we found the cat. She woke up screaming it wanted her, too." He hesitated. "That's when she started losing her appetite, getting listless. And then she got the rash."

I thought that over for a minute. It didn't seem to make much sense. "Anything else?"

He shrugged again. "Noises in the dark. Tappings on the windows. Wind, you know? And there's dirt on the window sills, as if Chrissy's been climbing on them. And she's a pretty good girl. We've told her not to climb, but the dirt's still there. She doesn't even try to clean it up."

This was curious. "Footprints?"

He shook his head. I studied his face. I could see frustration in it, uncertainty. He wasn't used to mysteries. Money was more like it, numbers on paper and computer disks, rigidly controlled by the laws of arithmetic. I said something I hoped would calm him down, and then I left.

I didn't feel much like eating that night. I did feel like company, though, and there was only one place in town to find that after about eight. I headed to

Rollie's Cafe, the tavern on lower Main Street.

Rollie's was a long, dim room behind dirty plate glass. It stank of stale smoke and grease and beer. It held a bar to one side, stools, and a number of tables just big enough for elbows and glasses. Most of the tables were empty when I walked in, but one held two old friends, Howie Wyman and Andy Hanks. I headed for them.

"Evenin', Mayor," said Andy. Tall and skinny, with a road-map face, he ran the local lumberyard.

"Evenin', yourself." Howie pushed a third chair out with a foot. I took it. "Where's Emma, Howie?" I hadn't expected to find him there. Dressed in his usual checked shirt, dirty overalls, and leather boots, a felt hat shoved back on his head, he looked like a congenital bachelor. He was married, though, and Emma tried to keep a close rein on him. She wasn't too successful. He worked when he liked, helping at harvest, house-painting, and such. He preferred fishing and hunting.

"Winterport," he said. "Visitin'."

"Ayuh." When I had ordered my hamburger and beer from Rollie, the ex-boxer who ran the place, Howie said, "Where's Sarah?"

"Home." Sarah was my wife.

"Fight?"

"Ayuh." He nodded and I said, "Though I'd rather talk about something else."

The two of them looked at me expectantly. The next move was up to me. I retrieved my pipe from my pocket, stared

at it for a moment, and lit it. Then I told them what Sam Dobson had told me.

Andy shifted uneasily in his seat. Howie watched him as he told me, "That house never did have much of a reputation."

Joelle had told me as much, but I didn't know why. The Dobsons had bought the Townsend place two years before. Sam had told me one reason why they liked it was the lone oak tree in the corner of its front lawn. The tree was over a yard thick at the base, its branches arched over lawn and street alike, and it had named the street: Oak Lane. It might have been as old as the town itself.

I said something doubtful. Andy looked away before telling me, "Don't think anyone's ever had the place more'n five-six years."

"So why'd they sell?"

"Didn't, most of 'em," said Howie.

"Died?"

"Ayuh. Or they had a fire and left it to the town for taxes. Ain't nobody's had it longer'n old Tolman Carter."

"I suppose he was the first."

"Ayuh. Used to call it the Carter place."

"When was that?"

"God knows," said Andy. "Ain't been Carters in this town since my Daddy was a boy. Just as well, too."

My food came, I set down my pipe, and the talk turned to other matters. The trout season was still new, and Howie had been doing well. So had I, for that matter. Andy didn't fish, but he had a crew putting up a few houses on spec, and he had that to talk about.

By the time we were done, I was mildly looped on the beer. It would be embarrassing, I thought, to pick up a police escort on the way home, but the hell with it. We parted on the sidewalk, and I got into my car.

On the way home, I told myself that now I'd be able to give Joelle Dobson a hand.

When I reached the office Monday morning, Bonny was already there. I had hired her the year before, but only for her secretarial skills. She was easy on the eyes, tall and dark-haired, not too slim, comfortably curved. She wore her hair short and combed it to frame intelligent, sympathetic eyes. Her mouth seemed soft and luscious, and her voice was as gentle as a good white wine. Her largish nose distracted not at all.

The phone rang while I was settling at my desk. I heard Bonny get it, the murmur of her voice. I stared at the stack of paperwork waiting for me. I didn't feel much like tackling it. Maybe it would help if I went fishing?

The door swung open and I turned my head to watch Bonny enter the room. She was smiling, a cream skirt swirling around her knees. She said, "Paul Johnson. He'll be dropping around in awhile."

Paul was my lawyer, but he did a little work for the town too. There was no telling what he wanted. He might even want to go fishing, though he was more the hunter, one week a year in deer season. Dressed for that, all brown and plaid except for the orange cap, he would

sometimes say that the thick scar marring his left cheek was a reminder not to run guns anymore.

When he came in, I asked Bonny to bring coffee, and the two of us passed the time of a slow day. We said nothing very interesting until I asked him what he knew about the Dobsons.

"Well," he said. "I do some work for the bank. And Sandra and I do live just down the street from them. Know 'em pretty well, I guess."

"Ah. You hear anything about Chrissy?"

"Ayuh. She's doing a lot better. Home today, I hear. The twins'll be happy for that. They play together."

That afternoon, I stopped downstairs at the town clerk's office. Joelle Dobson was at her borrowed desk, a red-cornered, leather-bound deed register open before her. Its ink was a faded brown, so it was one of the older ones.

For all her French name, Joelle was as red-haired and green-eyed as an Irish colleen. She had the freckles, too, and fine, red lips over small, even teeth. She wore button earrings with denim slacks and shirt, and her hair curled around a face that might have been pushed off center by a gentle fist. She wasn't tall, and her waist was thicker than it might have been, but her face gave her beauty of a sort. It certainly caught the eye.

I pulled up a chair and told her the little I'd learned from Howie and Andy. She grinned at me and pointed at her notes. "I'd just got that far this morning. Old Tolman Carter, first settler, built in 1650.

Maybe he even put in that foundation. He lived there fifty years before his granddaughter inherited it. She stayed for twenty. The next one stayed twenty-five, and then the times started getting shorter."

I was intrigued. "Five years, average?"

"It's been that for almost two hundred years."

"And fires and deaths account for it."

"But why?"

"Indian curse?"

"Hah."

"How's Chrissy?"

"Fine, now. I'll pick her up and take her home as soon as I'm done here." She looked relieved.

"Then you'd better move it, eh?"

By the time I made it back to the office, I had had a thought. The town library had a town history or two. There might even be some old diaries. I stopped in Bonny's room. She said, "Coffee"? I nodded, and while she was getting it, I said, "You have enough slack in the day to do a little library work, don't you?" When she nodded as she turned away from the pot atop the bookcase, I told her what Joelle was looking for. "See what you can find?" She agreed. She could. She would. Tomorrow.

For some reason, I couldn't sit still that night. When I could stand it no longer, I went for a drive, taking the back roads that led past my favorite trout streams. I saw deer in the headlights, rabbits, and once a family of coons bumbling along beside the road. I stopped at Willett Brook. I got out and stared down at the

big pool below the bridge. The trout were rising. I picked a moth off a headlight and tossed it in. It was greeted by a splash. There were some big fish there, I told myself. I would have to come back soon with my gear.

The next evening I went for another drive, this time around the town, along the streets and alleys, past fading mansions and trim capes and unpainted wrecks and vacant lots. I was passing Wilson's Grocery, at the foot of Oak Lane, for the third time when I saw Sam Dobson. He was walking from the store toward home, carrying a paper sack. I pulled up beside him, stuck my head out the window and said, "Hey, Sam. Want a ride"?

He hefted his sack, said "Milk," and went around the car to get in.

When he was seated, I asked, "How's Chrissy?"

"She had nightmares again last night." He sighed heavily in the dark and leaned his head against the rest. "I wish. . . ."

"There's no telling what about?"

He shook his head. "Just something after her. We tried warm milk. Why we ran out."

I stopped in front of his house. There was a hedge along the walk. Over it I could see warm light spilling from the living room windows. He opened his door and said, "Want to come in awhile?"

I shook my head, but I did turn off the engine. "Not tonight, Sam. Though I'll stretch my legs with you for a second." We both got out. We stood side by side on the sidewalk. We stared up at the

house.

He pointed at the second story. "That's Chrissy's room. The corner by the tree."

I followed his finger. Her window was open a crack. A streetlight reflected off the glass. A tree branch stretched toward the window. It came so close that its final twigs actually seemed to be reaching through the crack into the room.

He said, "I'll have to prune it this summer. Comes too close to the house. Keeps us up when the wind blows."

"Ayuh. Might get Howie Wyman to do it for you."

"I might at that. I hear he's cheap."

"Does good work, too."

Wednesday morning, Bonny reported that she had found three town histories in the library. One was good; two were full of hearsay and tall tales. All three told the tale of the Townsends. John Townsend had founded the town bank in 1885. His son James took it over in 1915, bought what had been the Carter place in 1920, built a fine house on the old foundation, and lived there until 1924, when an aunt dropped in to find his wife and three sons strangled. James was out of town at the time, with a perfect alibi, but suspicion ruined him and the bank. He sold the house and left town. The new owners held the place less than three years; it burned in 1927, with no survivors.

The oldest of the histories claimed the Carter place was under a curse. There was more, too, but nothing to explain the mystery. And the mystery wasn't anything I wanted to tell the Dobsons about. Maybe later, since Bonny did say she

wasn't done yet. "The library has some old diaries," she told me. "Liz thinks one might be Tolman Carter's. She's looking for it." Liz was the librarian.

It was late afternoon when Sam called me at the office. Could I come over right away? He had something to show me. I said, "Sure," and hung up. I looked at the clock. The bank had been closed for over an hour. So he meant the house.

I didn't waste any time. Bonny's report had bothered me, and I didn't like what seemed to be happening around the Dobsons. I dropped what I was doing, told Bonny where to find me, and headed for the parking lot.

I was at the Dobsons' within minutes. I stopped the car beside the curb. There didn't seem to be anything wrong. Past the side of the house, I could see Chrissy in the back yard. The Johnson twins were with her, and they seemed to be having a fine time. Joelle and Sandra Johnson were there, too. Then a movement by the hedge, near the tree, caught my eye. Sam stood up. He waved to me. "Over here."

I got out of the car and joined him. When I got close enough to see over the hedge, I noticed Paul Johnson down on his knees. He looked at me.

"I found a squirrel this afternoon," said Sam. "Strangled, just like that cat."

"That's not all, either," said Paul. He waved a hand toward the roots of the hedge. "I started poking around in here." With one hand he raked a pile of whitish sticks toward me.

I knelt, Sam beside me. I looked closer. The whitish sticks were bones. Paul prodded at a scatter of stony lumps.

"Skulls," he said. "Two more cats. A dog. Couple woodchucks. Squirrels. Rats. Birds. God knows what else."

I reached for a fistful of moldy hedge litter. It was impossible not to. What else might be there? I dug out small bones and skulls, and then I uncovered something larger. It looked like the end of a thigh bone, but a small one. I dug some more. I pulled. It came loose. "A big one," said Sam. "Dog?"

"I hope so," I said. I stared at him. A presence loomed over us. I could feel it, feel it yearning. I glanced up at the tree. I stood and backed away. They came with me.

Paul's voice was soft as he said, "I have a chainsaw, Sam."

Sam shook his head. "I don't believe it," he said.

"I don't either, but. . . ."

"But I might move Chrissy to the other end of the house."

"You do that."

He turned to me. "The rash was back this morning. And she was pretty listless."

"Until the twins came over," said Paul.

"Right." Sam grinned. "Can't be too serious, then, can it?"

"Ayuh," I said. "Movin' her won't hurt, though."

"Sure won't."

"Might even help."

I didn't like it. Not a bit. I even called up Howie to tell him so. When I finished, he was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Might be smart to take another look. Tonight. Be right there."

A quarter of an hour later, Howie's battered pickup pulled into my drive. I met him as the engine died to a halt, said "Well?" and waited while he spat his chaw of tobacco onto the lawn. He climbed out and said, "Pretty dry. Got a drink?"

Typical. We went inside. I got out the jug and poured something for each of us. Then I said, "Thought you wanted to have a look?"

"Ayuh," he said. He took a hearty swig of his glass. "Good bourbon, Harry. No rush."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Can't rightly say."

All right. I knew Howie. He had a feeling, that was all. But I knew his feelings were to be trusted. He had an affinity for strange events, and an intuitive understanding well beyond my grasp. The closest I could come was a sometimes calm acceptance, and it had taken me years to achieve it.

So we had our drinks. We had another. I told him more of what was going on, and he told me of the banshee of Mill Hollow, probably a feeble-minded flasher a century before his time, but. . . .

In time, we made it into town and to the Dobson's. We paused on the walk long enough to get a good look at the tree. It looked like a tree, nothing more. We knocked. Sam let us in, took us out to the kitchen, and handed us beers. He and Joelle were already equipped. He raised his in my direction. "Got Chrissy into the guest room," he said. "She seemed relieved."

"Then you shouldn't have any trouble tonight," I guessed.

Howie grunted. When I looked at him, he said, "I dunno. Somethin' queer goin' on."

Sam nodded as if he hadn't smelled Howie's—and my—breath when we came in. Joelle's eyes widened. His comment hadn't helped her. She said, "What do you mean?"

Howie waved his beer in the air. "Your tree. 'Tain't what it seems. Can't be."

We chewed on that, silently, while Joelle turned pale and Sam tightened his mouth grimly.

I tried to break the silence by saying, "You should have seen the bones, Howie."

"Don't need to."

I would have asked him why, but at that moment a creaking noise intruded on our conversation. It sounded like a window being opened, gently, upstairs. Joelle started, dropped her beer can, and stood. She whispered, "Her window was shut."

Sam tried to say, "It's just the wind," but he wasn't convincing, not to any of us, not even to himself.

Joelle shivered. She said, "We've got to check," and headed for the stairs. As she passed the sink, she reached into a drawer and grabbed a heavy carving knife.

I had a sour taste in the back of my mouth. Still, I followed her. We all did, each of us careful not to step in the beer she had spilled. Up the stairs. Down the hall. Lights on. We didn't run. We moved slowly, quietly, as if unwilling to

face a truth, or like children trying not to disturb their elders.

It wasn't long before we were gathered at the closed door of Chrissy's room. Joelle was in front, her hands clenched around the handle of her raised knife. Sam eased her aside with a soft "Let me."

The door opened noiselessly. The light from the hall drifted in, augmenting the glow of Chrissy's nightlight. I could see the bed. It didn't look right. But even as I gasped, Sam was flying to his daughter. As he began to claw at the mass of blankets and—and something else—that covered the child, his wife hacked at the window sill.

I backed off, my gorge rising. Howie was staring into the room, fascinated. Chrissy's pale head was free now, but her body was still covered. With tendrils. I could make them out now. Long, twisting, branching worms, the color of twigs stripped of their bark. They pulsed. My eyes tried to follow their curves and motions. They spread out to cover the bed, diverging from a common stem. A stem that looked remarkably like a tree limb where it crossed the sill, where Joelle was chopping it in two, where blood—blood!—was leaking onto the paint. Fragments of barky dirt littered the sill.

No wonder the rash, the anemia, the nightmares, the listlessness, even the dirt they had blamed on Chrissy. But they had moved the child. How could the tree reach so far around the house? How . . . ?

There were answers, but there were no answers. Joelle finally made it through the limb. The stub snapped out the window. The tendrils lost their grip, and Sam

finally stripped the last of them from their daughter. Chrissy awoke, saw, and screamed. Her parents grabbed her, lifted her, held her between them, enfolded in four arms of safety. She quieted. Sam said, "We'll go over to Paul's."

"I'll call," I said.

"Get some liquids into her," said Howie. "Beef broth's best."

My mother would have called for chicken soup, but I said nothing. I felt embarrassed, an interloper in a very private scene. Howie and I headed downstairs, toward the phone and the kitchen.

We met again the next afternoon. Sam and Paul and Howie and I. The women and children were at the Johnsons'. Sam had Paul's chainsaw. He was going to cut the tree down.

We looked at the tree. Almost as one, we ran our eyes from ground to crown, up the fissured trunk, over the graceful branches and green leaves, and back. We spotted the stub left by last night's work. It was a long ways from the guest room window. I shuddered. Howie said, "Where do you want it to fall?"

"Across the yard," said Sam. "The hell with the hedge."

"Then. . . ." Howie showed him where to make the first cut.

"I know how to use a saw. Though it has been a while." Sam hefted the machine in his hands. I could see the marks of the file where Paul had sharpened the chain. My nose caught the bite of the gas and oil he had fed it. The cans sat on the walk.

Sam took a breath. He flipped the

switch. He grasped the cord. "Here goes," he muttered. He yanked. The saw came to life with a roar and a puff of smoke.

He approached the tree. He spread his legs, bent, and swept the saw toward his target. But he hardly scarred the bark. Even as the chain touched, the tree *shrugged*. There was no other word for it. The bark rippled as a wave passed up the trunk. The saw bucked. It twisted in Sam's hands, and before he could bring it under control again it sank into his left leg. He screamed.

The rest of us stood paralyzed while Sam's blood spurted from severed arteries. The tree was still. Sam screamed again. Howie grabbed my shoulder. "Harry, your belt!" I took it off. He knelt beside Sam and used it for a tourniquet. Then he said, "Paul, call the ambulance!"

When Sam was gone, Howie stood silent, staring at the tree once more. Finally, he said, "It'll take fire. But the house'll go too." He looked around. "Think Sam'll mind?"

Paul shook his head. I laughed, grimly.

"Then I'll fetch a load of firewood. Might as well take the saw home. Leave the gas, though."

Paul nodded, picked up his equipment, and set off down the walk. His head was bowed, his pace slow. I didn't envy him the task of telling Joelle what had happened. Though she must have heard the screams.

Howie said, "Better get humpin'," and took off. I remained for a moment more, thinking. The tree. What was it? What

the *hell* was it? A bloodsucker, a vampire, feeding on the folks in this house for centuries. A horror from the grimmest pages of the past. Yet it looked like nothing more—or less—than a tree. Brown bark and white wood and green leaves. A promise of summer shade and shelter from the rain. When my skin crawled, I turned and left as well.

I went back to the office. Bonny was there, typing, her ankles crossed beneath her desk, her fingers flying, her eyes scanning a notepad. When I came in, she looked up and told me, “Liz found Carter’s diary.” She pointed at the typewriter. “You’ll be interested.”

“Won’t help,” I said. I crossed the room to help myself to her coffee, then told her what happened.

“Aiee.” She grimaced. “Maybe it won’t help, but wait’ll I get this report done.”

I nodded and took the coffee back into my office. Old diaries. What good could they do? We had a monster on our hands. We needed the *auto-da-fé*.

I didn’t bother to turn on the lights, even though it was growing dusky outside. I sat, sipped the coffee, and ruminated. I hoped the fire would work. The saw hadn’t.

When my cup was empty, I rose to leave. As I passed Bonny, she held up the papers she had been typing. I took them, said “Thanks,” folded them once and stuck them in my jacket pocket. I ignored Bonny’s disappointed expression. There would be time enough for reading later. Right now, I wanted to see how Howie

was coming along.

When I reached the Dobson house, Howie was just beginning to unload the wood. I helped, and soon we had a pile of firewood, cut to size and split small, three feet high and two wide stretching from the tree to the front door. We piled the wood higher and wider right around the tree. The can of gas for the chainsaw we set, cap off, on the end of the woodpile nearer the door. Then we went inside and laid a fire in the fireplace. We laid it so it would roar.

Then we headed for the Johnson’s. We found Joelle there, already back from the hospital. “He’ll be all right,” she told us. “They even think they can save the leg.”

“You mind burning the house?” I hoped Paul had told her.

She shook her head wildly. “No, no! Anything! Even if it wasn’t insured!”

I had figured it was. That was why we had laid the fire. Make it look like an accident. “Then you’d better get a few things out first. Papers, pictures, silver, favorite books and toys and such. Just leave enough to convince the insurance folks.”

She agreed. She’d do it after supper. Though there wasn’t that much she couldn’t stand to lose, under the circumstances. Her husband, her child. What else mattered?

Come full dark, when the streets were quiet and the children were in bed, we went back to the house, started the fire in the fireplace, helped Joelle gather what she wanted to save, and arranged the furniture to lead the fire toward the door.

We opened windows to take advantage of a light breeze from the back of the house. Last of all, we raked the fire out onto the rug and left.

It went just as we had hoped. Within twenty minutes, flames were shooting out the front door like a dragon's breath. The gas can went up with a whoosh. The woodpile caught. The flames moved steadily toward the tree. It caught, and we all felt a sense of screaming.

When the fire department arrived, I held them off till I was sure the tree was dead. As Mayor, I could get away with that. Not for long, but long enough. It helped that they then concentrated on the house, leaving the woodpile and tree for last.

Eventually, I remembered the papers Bonny had given me. I took them out of my pocket, unfolded them, and began to read by the light of the dying fire. I didn't get far, though, before I beckoned Howie over. Together, then, we read, while Joelle and the Johnsons huddled, watching the flames.

Tolman Carter's diary, according to Bonny, was a detailed account of the man's preparations for the trip to the Colonies and of his life there, of his daily labors, his successes and failures, even the doings of the small community of the time. Of particular interest to us were two passages, one from the preparation stage. Carter had written: "Clothing, seed, tools, and provisions being laid by, I bethought me of the future and asked of myself of what I would most feel the lack far from England. The answer is England herself, and what speaks England to my

heart is her great oaks. I therefore sought that nearby grove, reputed to be sacred to our ancestors, and gathered a single acorn that I might sow it wherever I might one day make my home."

Later, Carter had written: "Planted my oak, that my children and theirs after them may enjoy the shade of England. Already it shows a goodly sprig."

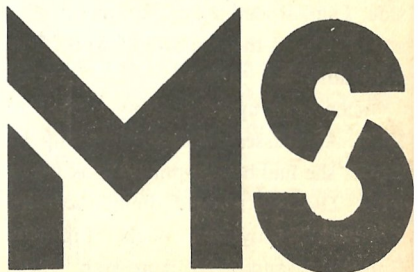
I looked at Howie. He looked at me. He nodded. "A druid oak."

I had read of the wicker cages and the fires. Had the druids sacrificed to oaks? Or to trees like this? Had the sacrifices been meant, perhaps, to keep the things quiet? To keep them from plaguing the folk around them?

My attention shifted as the roof of the house fell in with a rush of sparks and smoke. I turned my gaze to the tree. Its leaves were jewels of flame. More flames crawled along its limbs and leaped from branch to branch. Smoke and steam billowed. And from the reddened clouds, a burst of tendrils writhed toward me.

I ducked.

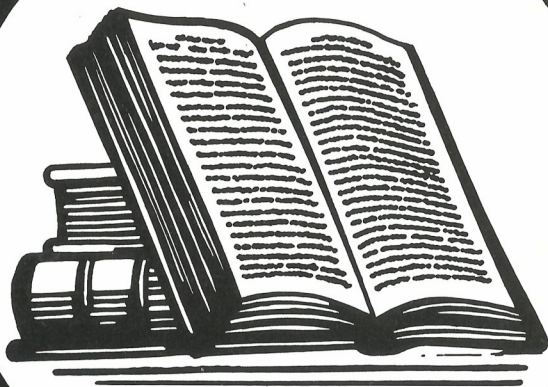
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