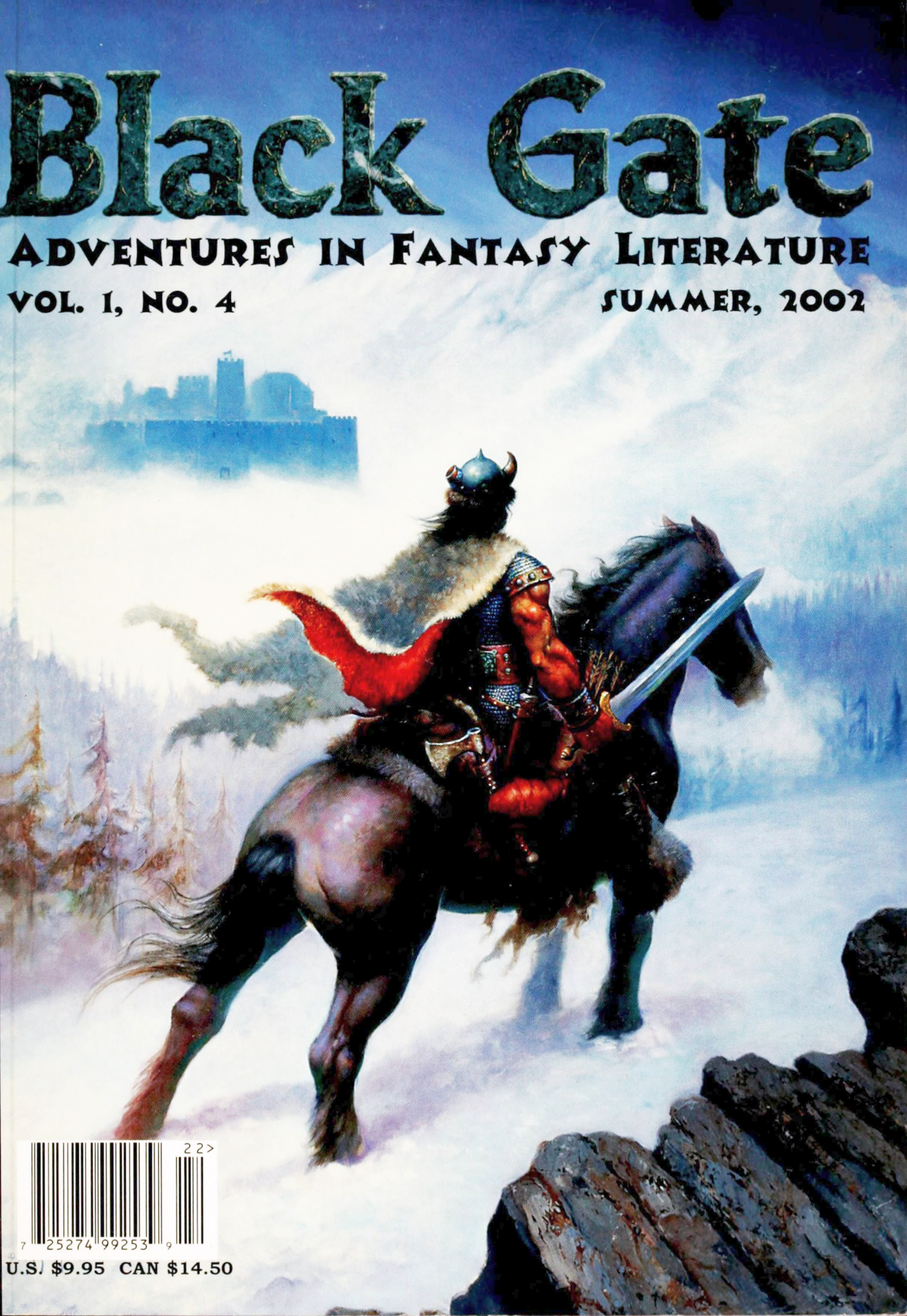
Black Gate

Adventures in Fantasy Literature

Vol. 1, No. 4 Summer, 2002



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Adventures in Fantasy Literature

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www.BlackGate.com

A Small Press Pioneer

By John O'Neill

In 1997 I was struggling to get a small science fiction website off the ground. It started small, not much more than a handful of book reviews crammed into my home directory at Cyberus Online, a small ISP run by friends in Ottawa, Canada. But Internet properties were starting to explode and I thought, with perseverance and a little originality, I could grow it into a real resource. Wayne MacLaurin and Paul Gill at Cyberus humored me and even hosted the site for free, provided I didn't make too big a nuisance of myself. I'd tried to corner a decent domain name, but even then all the really good celestial objects were already taken, and I ended up calling it ***SF Site***.

Nowadays ***SF Site*** is big business, with over 250,000 readers a month and a Hugo nomination under its belt. But back then it was just me, and occasionally my wife Alice, patiently correcting my woeful spelling and grammar. There weren't a lot of rewards, but I vividly remember that April day when we received our first batch of review copies, packed in a small box with a friendly note from Andy Heidel at Avon Books (hi Andy!). Let me tell you, getting free science fiction books was a pretty major thrill (and it still is, come to think of it).

We reviewed them promptly, sent out notices, and soon received more. Our audience began to grow, we got good word of mouth, and by early '98 our little website was well underway.

That spring I opened an envelope of books from an outfit I'd never heard of. That wasn't that unusual - we were getting nearly 100 books a month by that point, and the stable of reviewers I'd recruited to adequately cover them all had grown to 40 people, scattered all over the world. It was a full-time job just managing them, and I didn't have time to more than quickly glance over new titles as they arrived, but these new arrivals looked suspiciously like horror poetry.

Yeesh. Horror poems, and by someone I'd never heard of no less. Worse yet, they looked self-published. I tried hard to place everything with a reviewer, especially anything from the small press, but these slim volumes were looking like a serious challenge.

Fortunately, our best reviewers were more hip than me. The ever-articulate Chris Donner immediately agreed to look at the first, **What Rough Beast,** a collection of early poems which won the Fallot Literary Award. And a bit later the esteemed Rich Horton requested the second, **Satan is a Mathematician**, a volume of weird and surreal pieces which was a finalist for the 1999 Writer's Digest National Book Award.

And they loved them. I received great reviews of both - which, typical for my new role, instantly made me regret parting with them. But I took immediate note of both the author, Keith Allen Daniels, and the publisher, Anamnesis Press.

As time went by I began to hear a lot more about Daniels and Anamnesis Press.

His work was nominated for the Nebula Award, the Rhysling Award (15 times), the Pushcart Prize and the Clark Ashton Smith International Poetry Award. His collection of poems by Joe Haldeman, **Saul's Death,** even made ***SF Site***'s first annual "Best SF and Fantasy Books" list in 1998. Many of the small volumes I mailed off so casually became very expensive collector's items years later, commanding outrageous prices from online merchants. Dang it.

When I finally met Keith, at a reading of his latest collection **Shimmarie and Other Poems** at the World Fantasy Convention in 2000, I'd become tremendously impressed with his growing list of accomplishments. By now Anamnesis had nearly two dozen publications, including books by James Blish, Arthur C. Clarke, Steven Utley, and many more. Publisher/Editor/Author Keith turned out to be a great guy, extremely personable and charming, still grateful for the early attention we'd given him years ago and eager to thank me in person.

I was just as intrigued to meet Keith. Now that the ***SF Site*** was a success, I'd been itching to put together a business plan, raise some capital, and launch a small press enterprise. I wanted to know how Keith had gotten connected to Anamnesis Press, how he'd raised funding, who managed the staff, who did his distribution, everything I could learn.

And of course, he surprised me again. Although he'd been helped by a few talented folks, there was no funding, and there was no staff. Anamnesis Press was essentially just Keith Allen Daniels, ably assisted by his lovely wife Toni. His day job was as a materials engineer in the Mojave Desert, and Anamnesis was almost completely self-conceived and self-funded.

I met lots of amazing folks and formed many friendships during my tenure at ***SF Site***, but Keith was unique. He became one of the real icons of the industry for me. Keith was a true renaissance man, not just a successful businessman but a true creative talent. He was simultaneously a publisher who had unshakeable faith in his own work, an editor with a love for a fresh voice, and an author gifted with one of the finest literary voices in the field. He was a creator, in every sense of the word.

When I launched ***Black Gate*** in the fall of 2000 I was inspired by many genre innovators, old and new, from John W. Campbell's *Astounding Stories* & Farnsworth Wright's *Weird Tales* to more recent pioneers such as Andy Cox (*The Third Alternative)*, Patrick and Honna Swenson (*Talebones)*, and my friend and fellow Motorola employee David Kenzer, who published the brilliant ***Knights of the Dinner Table*** comic. But prominent in my mind also was Keith Allen Daniels, who showed me that it was possible to create a thriving small press powered by little more than love and determination.

Not long after ***BG*** hit the stands, Keith delivered on an early promise and sent me "The Ravens," a terrific poem that captured both his lyrical gift and the often-paradoxical sense of fun and irony in his work. Less than three months later, Toni contacted me to let me know that Keith had died of colon cancer on December 18th, 2001.

I wish Keith had lived to see his poem in these pages. I wish I had let him know earlier how much his example meant to me. But I'm very proud to present "The Ravens" on page 133 of this issue, and I hope you'll appreciate it as much we have.

Rest in peace, Keith. You are missed.

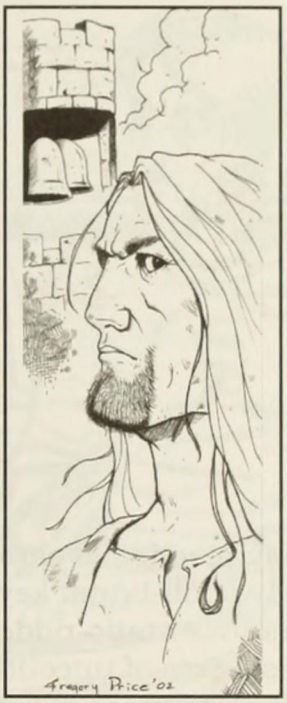
Fiction Accolades

We're pleased to report that Devon Monk's fine tale "Stitchery," from our 2nd issue, has been selected for this year's edition of **Year's Best Fantasy**, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer. Early subscribers will recall Richard Parks' "Golden Bell, Seven, & the Marquis of Zeng," from our very first issue, was selected for the same volume last year. This marks the third reprint from our first two issues, including Jeffrey Ford's "Exo-Skeleton Town," which has just appeared between hardcovers as part of his Golden Gryphon collection **The Fantasy Writer's Assistant**. Congratulations to all.

If e-mail is any indication, the most popular story in our last issue, by a wide margin, was Todd McAulty's debut effort, "The Haunting of Cold Harbour." We're happy to report that we have more fiction from Mr. McAulty in inventory, including a novella next issue. Stay tuned!

If you missed any of our early issues, a small number are still available directly from the publisher. You may order them from the website, www.blackgate.com, or use the order form at right. But don't delay, quantities are very limited.

Next Issue



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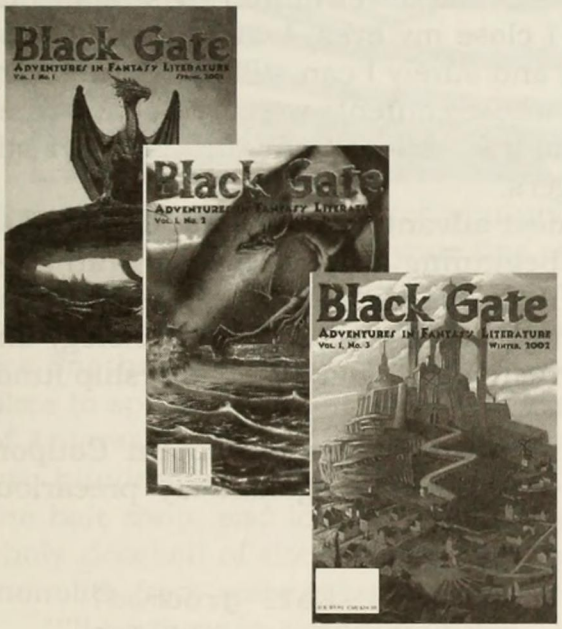

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The Loiterer In The Lobby

By Michael Kaufmann and Mark McLaughlin

In my maddened ears still echoes the clickety-clack of frenzied digits pounding away at off-brand keyboards, and the drone of vile voices muttering strange litanies over static-ridden intercoms. When I close my eyes, I can see the furtive greenish glow of uncouth computer screens, and surely I can still smell the brain-blasting bitterness of simmering coffee-pots, whose contents were fresh back when the Earth was young. Strange are the ways of the Ancient Gods, but stranger still are the memos of hell-spawned office managers.

But let me start my story at the point most advantageous to the telling of all tales of extra-dimensional horror: the beginning. My name is Nathaniel Whereabouts, and in the Summer of 200-, I moved to the city of Arkham to attend Miskatonic University, to pursue a double major in Quasi-Religious Sociology and Quantum Metaphysics. But mine was not a rich family, and my scholarship funds began to dwindle at any astonishing rate.

One especially chill October morning, while reading the Arkham Coupon-Clipper, I happened to notice an ad that promised to augment my precarious finances:

> NEED CASH? Available most evenings? Well-groomed? Professional manner? Quick typist? Computer skills? Interested in extra-dimensional devil-gods? Steady work is just a phone call away!

This was followed by a local number. Yes, I needed cash – desperately. And I was a quick typist, available most evenings, well-groomed, professional, and well-versed in all matters computer-oriented. And I thought extra-dimensional devil-gods were pretty darned interesting, too. In short, I felt I was a surefire candidate for the opportunity at hand.

My call was answered before the first ring had time to finish.

"Forbidden Works. Miss Ghoorish speaking. How may I help you?" The low murmur of her voice was like the silken burble of a moonlit stream.

I introduced myself and added, "I am currently in search of employment, for my current monetary situation is worrisome to the extreme."

"Broke, eh?" There was a faint rustling of papers. "Well, there's plenty of work out there. I run a temp agency for a rather specific line-up of clients. Come on

Illustrated by Bernie Mireault.

down to the office, we'll hitch you up."

"And how might I find your fine establishment?" I inquired.

"Directions... Well, let's see..." She cleared her throat. "North of Arkham, the rolling hills echo at sunset with the languid cries of mournful whippoorwills. Follow the Snothman Turnpike through those hills, past the barren heath of which no one likes to speak. Turn left when you espy the red gleam of Mars and the mad twinkle of Antares over a forbidden barn in which an unspeakable act was committed over two hundred and twelve years ago. Then go about a quarter of a mile, turn left at the bait shop, and look for a blue station wagon. Park next to it. Ring the melancholy doorbell of the strange dark house looming before you like an unhallowed monolith from some twisted dimension of dread."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," I whispered.

. . .

I followed her directions to the letter, and it wasn't long before I was standing before that strange dark house, ringing that melancholy doorbell. I trembled when I read the message spelled out in a disturbing curlicue typestyle on the green plastic doormat – WELCOME, YOU FOOL.

Slowly the door opened.

I found it difficult to look directly at the woman who welcomed me into the vestibule. I suspected, based on my knowledge of Quantum Metaphysics, that the personage in question was skilled in an obscure form of stealth technology. I knew that such scientific premises have been applied to supersonic aircraft – but people? Who knew? It was as though her very presence warped the infrastructure of time and space, so that a glance in her direction only resulted in a glimpse of a little cherrywood table to her immediate left. I found it impossible to determine where I had to look to actually see her.

"Come into my office," she said, and so I followed the slight creak of her footsteps into the depths of the house, past oak-framed portraits of people who must

have been her family members, because I could not see them anywhere.

We entered a room filled with bizarre curios from ungodly dollar-stores. "You look like a good kid," she said. "Clean-cut. Trim. Reserved. Love the velvet waistcoat. You should do well with my clientele."

For the next half-hour, we discussed the terms of my employment. Her visual elusiveness began to grow on me, and I soon found it rather charming – coy, almost flirtatious.

"Let's start you out with Piranha Health Foods," she purred. "Piranha – yes, a good place for you to stick your toe in the water."

. . .

Piranha Health Foods was located in an ill-famed strip mall off the Shoggoth Express. The store was part of an international chain that sold all-natural foods, homeopathic remedies, and hand-carved fetish dolls.

I began work there the next night, to help them to catch up with clerical duties after-hours. Basically, my duties included typing, bookkeeping, and preparing reports on a series of experiments being conducted in the Amazon rainforest.

My supervisor, Miss Blubb, was an obese woman with three chins, deepset green eyes, and short blonde hair highlighted a gentle sky-blue. She had an enormous belly and tree-trunk legs, yet her chubby arms and petite hands were far too small for her body, and she kept them folded tidily atop her mountainous bosom.

I had a black metal desk in a back storage room that doubled as a work area, filled with filing cabinets, bins of dried goods, and shelves of jars, bottles and boxes. Every few days, a branch office in South America would e-mail me the results of their rainforest experiments, and I would download the information, correlate various statistics, and present the results to Miss Blubb.

"These statistics related to the tikkuni vine experiments are fascinating," I said to Miss Blubb one evening. "But I am not quite sure what they are hoping to achieve in applying the toxic juice of the berries to cell samples. One would think they were trying to encourage genetic mutation..."

Miss Blubb gave me a small smile. "The ways of research are complex. One must calibrate a far-flung assortment of theorems to arrive, ultimately, at the truth."

"And what is the truth?" I whispered with nameless dread.

"How does one define truth?" she replied. "It is like trying to define 'air.'"

"But 'air' is very easy to def–"

Unfortunately, 'def–' merely provided a misspelled reference to the sort of ears my comments fell upon, for Miss Blubb had already slammed the door on her way out.

. . .

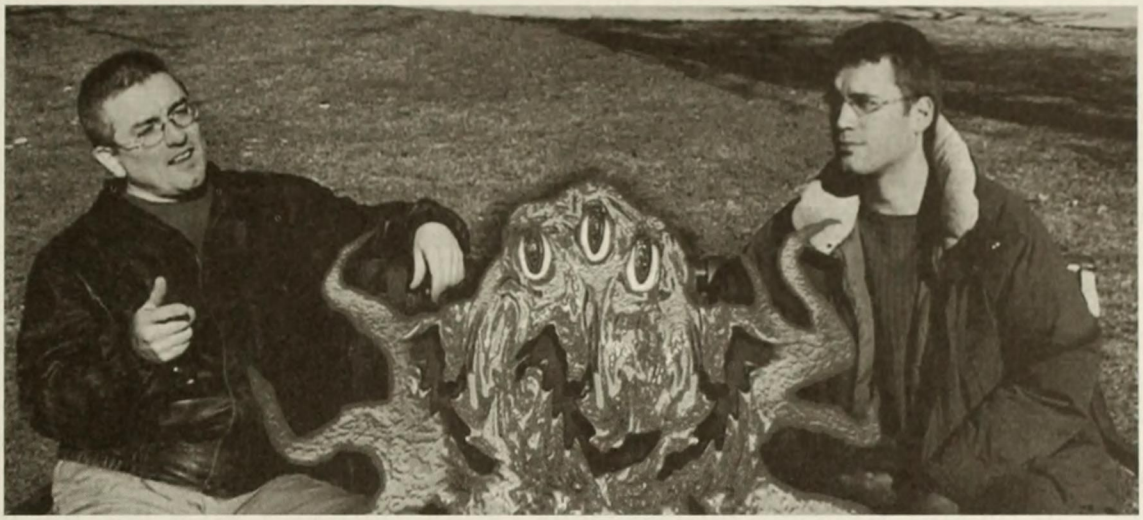
"Miss Blubb speaks very highly of you," said Miss Ghoorish, the next time I didn't see my temp service account manager. "If you like, I can also get you a few evening hours every now and then at Medusa Cosmetics."

"But I don't know anything about cosmetics," I said. "Cosmology, yes. But not cosmetics."

"You won't be handling any of the make-up," she said. "Just paperwork. Too bad you have such a good complexion – they also make flesh-tinted acne medication, and I could have arranged a discount for you. You'll be working for Miss Vreck, a dear friend of mine. Who knows, it might lead to a permanent position. Yes, if you are interested in a solid career, you should take a look at Medusa."

. . .

The corporate offices of Medusa Cosmetics were located on the thirteenth floor of a legend-shrouded bank building. They didn't sell any of their beautifying wares in those offices – there they simply stored, updated and tabulated paperwork from salons worldwide.



Mark McLaughlin and Michael Kaufmann

Mark McLaughlin's fiction and poetry has appeared in more than 300 magazines, anthologies and websites, including *Galaxy, Talebones, Gothic.Net*, **The Last Continent: New Tales of Zothique**, **Bending the Landscape**, and **The Year's Best Horror Stories**. His fiction collections include **ZOM BEE MOO VEE And Other Freaky Shows** (Fairwood Press), **I Gave At The Orifice** (Eraserhead Press), and **Shoggoth Cacciatore And Other Eldritch Entrees** (Delirium Books). He is the editor of *The Urbanite: Surreal & Lively & Bizarre.* Michael Kaufmann is currently working on a political thriller. He recently bought a house and is discovering the dubious joys of being a homeowner. Michael and Mark have several fiction collaborations, including one in the anthology **Weird Trails**.

Photo by Mark McLaughlin and Michael Kaufmann.

Miss Vreck was a bone-thin woman with large, yellow eyes and cheekbones so sharply sculpted, I feared they might break through her skin if she smiled too quickly. She wore her thick black hair piled high, and her long nails were always painted bright neon-green.

One of my duties was to assist in monitoring messages sent by e-mail regarding customer complaints. I compiled and referenced the information by several categories, including the nature of the complaint and the possible side-effects of various products.

The majority of complaints were from customers who had misused their purchases, resulting in temporary irritation. Others were obviously allergic reactions that would pass with time. But some of the complaints were of a more insidious nature. For example, what could be done for the woman whose wrinkle concealer had caused gill-flaps to open up along her jawline? And were there any pat answers for the young Goth gentleman whose use of Midnight Mystery No. 7 eyeliner had resulted in transparent eyelids that actually served as optical filters, allowing him to see people's auras?

I was worried that those cases might result in lawsuits, but Miss Vreck did not seem concerned. "Can these folks really claim damages?" she said. "Why, to my notion, both individuals were actually enhanced. Certainly neither has any cause for complaint."

. . .

And so the days and weeks passed, well into winter. Some evenings, I put in my hours at Piranha Health Foods, and others, I tended to my duties at Medusa Cosmetics. During the day, I absorbed precious knowledge as I pursued my stud-

ies in Quasi-Religious Sociology and Quantum Metaphysics.

But during that long winter of busywork and scholarly endeavor, I began to notice subtle yet disturbing parallels between my various interests and occupations.

For example, well is it known among students of Quasi-Religious Sociology that the now-extinct K'tunga people of the Amazon used to worship a sloth-limbed, potbellied, praying-mantis-headed, web-spinning deity named C'zog-Kamog. Indeed, no meeting of any group of Quasi-Religious Sociologists is complete without an in-depth discussion of the serrated stone knives used by the high-priests of C'zog-Kamog to relieve their sacrificial victims of the burden of skin, their god's favorite comestible.

Plus, rows of ancient symbols carved into the walls of a certain guano-streaked cave on the Yucatan peninsula clearly indicate that the god preferred to eat flesh that – to roughly translate an especially cryptic phrase – "grew like the beetle-swarms of the k'bongah tree." Many Quasi-Religious Sociologists believe the phrase in fact refers to skin that is experiencing rampant genetic mutation.

In the course of my studies, I also chanced upon a shocking reference in a textbook by the esteemed Dr. Emil Matapathamos, suggesting that the K'tunga people, before regular sacrifices, used to smear their imprisoned victims with the juice of tikkuni berries.

I mentioned these matters to Miss Ghoorish at one of our regular meetings.

"Well, that's all very interesting," she said, "but what does all that have to do with the cost of sprouts in Brussels?"

"Don't you see?" I said. "C'zog-Kamog enjoys eating the flesh of victims smeared with the juice of tikkuni berries. Piranha Health Foods is currently studying the chemical properties of that juice, which is roseate in color. In fact, the visual effect of that juice smeared on human flesh would not be unlike that of make-up."

"'Would not be unlike'?" she repeated. "Why didn't you just say it 'would be like'?"

"You are missing the point! Medusa Cosmetics sells make-up – and sometimes, that very make-up brings about inexplicable physical changes. Or should I say, 'mutations,' Miss Ghoorish?"

"Nonsense," she said, and she may very well have waved a hand dismissively, too. "You are raving like a talking parrot who has eaten a cracker covered with hallucinogenic mold. What utter poppycock!"

"Well then, cock your ears at the statement about to pop from my mouth!" I exclaimed. "I did a little digging ... a little rummaging around in the malodorous bottoms of certain long-forgotten filing cabinets ... and I learned this mind-reeling, little-known fact: Piranha Health Foods and Medusa Cosmetics are both owned by a corporation called SHATROCK Research. The very fact that SHATROCK is spelled in all capital letters has me aquiver with sinew-snapping terror."

"Then you scare easily. You simply must abandon this ridiculous line of inquiry. No good can come of probing so deeply down such dark, twisted passages."

I looked her straight in the supposed area of her eyes. "Be that as it may – but probe I must."

. . .

The next night, as I was compiling some statistics at Piranha Health Foods, I noticed that Miss Blubb – who usually was cloistered away in her private office – was always doing some task within a few feet of me. Had Miss Ghoorish mentioned my investigations to her?

Plus, when I went out into the lobby to get a candy bar from the snack

machine, I espied a tall, thin figure standing in the shadows between the coffee machine and an especially tall potted plant with reddish-orange carnivorous blossoms.

I saw the figure a moment after I had slipped my money into the snack machine. I quickly made my selection and retrieved my purchase from the chute. But when I turned to address the loitering stranger, he was gone. I even went over to the coffee machine, to see if the interloper had slipped further into the shadows, but the person was gone, and the plant snatched my candy bar.

But that was not the end of my problems. When next I put in my time at Medusa Cosmetics, Miss Vreck always seemed to be hovering near, her alarming yellow eyes turned upon me. When my work was done and I was passing through the lobby on the way out, I thought I saw that same tall, thin personage standing next to a cut-out display of actress Magda Poppelopika holding a jar of Skin-So-Tite Anti-Wrinkle Cream. The figure slipped into the shadows behind the display. By the time I reached the cut-out, the lurker was gone.

I gazed with dread at the picture of the skin cream jar on the display, for that evening, I had managed to sneak a look at some ingredient inventories when Miss Vreck had tip-tapped off on her nail-thin stiletto heels to visit the little girls' room. To my horror, I had ascertained from examining the ingredient sheets that Skin-So-Tite contained a high percentage of the juice of the tikkuni berry.

. . .

Peaceful is the sleep of the blissfully uninformed, in that it is unencumbered by hell-wrought portents of doom.

Mad dreams swirled through my brain that night. My somnolent cranium was filled with images of happy housewives slathering their pleasant faces with loathsome dollops of moisturizing cream, which transmogrified their mundane visages into nightmarish clusters of tentacles, polyps, eyestalks, and other assorted googlies. Then – oh, the horror! – I dreamed of a certain vile, eons-old, praying-mantis-headed abomination. This uncouth monstrosity took rapturous delight in feasting on the outlandishly mutated flesh of those poor, innocent women.

Thank the merciful heavens it was only a dream... or rather, a nightmare... or who knows? Maybe a prophetic vision. At any rate, I woke up drenched in sweat, clutching at my pillow like a lovesick cheerleader.

Moonlight was streaming through the bedroom window... but then, it was a one-room apartment, so it was also my kitchen and living room window. Outside in the yard, the wind whipped at the barren twigs of a lone catalpa tree. And beside the tree – There! Yes, there in the snow stood that strange, silent figure – that elusive messenger of doom from beyond the gateway of sanity – the Loiterer in the Lobby.

So I waved.

. . .

"You will have to forgive me for following you," the Loiterer said. "But I, too, am a seeker of ancient mysteries, and in my recent investigations of certain Arkham businesses embroiled in the ways and doings of certain extra-dimensional devil-gods, it came to my attention that you are employed by two such establishments, and so you might be privy to certain information that might be indispensible to a certain individual. Namely, me."

The Loiterer and I were in a coffee shop a few blocks from my home. The night before, when he had stood by the catalpa tree, I had gone down to meet him after waving to him, and we had then scheduled our little coffee klatch. Though to be sure, we would not be exchanging cinnamon roll recipes.

I was disconcerted by the fact that the Loiterer wore a veiled hood and black velvet gloves and would not tell me his name. The other patrons of the coffee shop seemed at ease with his eldritch presence, for as he told me before we'd ordered

our coffe, he was a regular there, and sometimes he read his poetry on Open Mike Night.

He sipped his coffee through a straw he had slipped through the veil's folds. "I take it you are familiar with SHATROCK Research?" he whispered.

"I only know that they own both Piranha Health Foods and Medusa Cosmetics," I said. "I also have darker suspicions about their nefarious workings, but such matters may not be the stuff of polite coffee conversation."

"Oh, you mean the skin-eating atrocities of C'zog-Kamog," he said with a shrug. "Sure, we can talk about that. No problem."

For the next several hours, we chatted with dread about that grotesque and abhorrent devil-god. The Loiterer revealed to me that SHATROCK Research was in fact, an international conglomerate helmed by a secret society of rich, high-power C'zog-Kamog worshippers. In fact, he confided, the initials of SHATROCK stood for a message of unbearable horrificness: So How About Trying To Resurrect Old C'zog-Kamog.

"But what does this unspeakable conglomerate hope to achieve?" I asked. "There can't be much money in worshipping ancient Amazonian abominations."

He dropped his fork – for he had been eating a piece of spinach pie (and had been doing an admirable job of navigating the fork through the veils to his hidden mouth). "Money? Ha!" He pounded the table with a velvet-gloved fist. "They care not for money. Their goal is to bring C'zog-Kamog back into this world and be his priests, and to honor him by feeding him great swathes of mutated flesh! C'zog-Kamog had dwelt on the Earth thousands of years ago, but the high-priests of a rival cult had exiled the god to another dimension. But those high-priests are long dead, and all the most evil stars are in alignment, Jupiter and Saturn are the right distance from each other, and more importantly, that big conglomerate just bought a nuclear reactor capable of generating enough energy to rip through the fabric of time and space, creating a dimensional portal big enough to allow the passage of something really big – like, say, one jumbo devil-god. In other words, the way is being prepared for the return of C'zog-Kamog!"

A pimply-faced coffee shop clerk walked up to the table. "You're going to have it keep it down, sir."

"I want to!" the Loiterer cried. "I want to keep C'zog-Kamog down! But how can I single-handedly battle an international conglomerate bent on turning civilization into a demon's all-you-can-gnaw buffet?"

Another young clerk with a problem complexion came to the table. "Sir, we're getting complaints."

"I would hope so!" the Loiterer screamed. "People should be complaining! Major companies are plotting their destruction! They are being sold make-up filled with tikkuni juice, designed to turn their flesh into mutated face-sushi for a hideous alien gourmet!"

A third clerk, whose face had more craters than the lunar surface, joined his coworkers. "Sir, I may have to call the police."

"The police won't be able to help!" the Loiterer howled. Then he grabbed me by the arm. "Come with me, Nathaniel. The shocking complexions of these three helpful young men have given me an idea..."

. . .

An hour later, the Loiterer and I were in his midnight-blue sedan, parked on top of a cliff overlooking a valley filled with glowing, humming buildings. An illuminated sign identified the property as SHATROCK Research, and block-style letters under the heading stated: Soulfully Helping All The Really Old, Coughing Kangaroos.

The cunning devils! Surely theirs was the perfect cover operation!

Suddenly I saw two women moving across a walkway between two buildings. "Look down there! Do you see those two?"

The Loiterer nodded.

"Those are my bosses, Miss Blubb and Miss Vreck. And do you not see a third individual with them?"

Again he nodded.

"That absence of a person," I said, "is Miss Ghoorish, my account manager at the temp service. How it pains me to think that she could be part of this whole sordid business. Ah, my loitering friend, would that you could not see, as I never saw, the undetectable twinkle in her eye. Assuming that she in fact has eyes as we know them." I sighed. "So tell me. Why did you call every pizza restuarant in Arkham when we stopped off at your place?"

"I told each to deliver a pizza to this cliff," he said. "The items I picked up at my house will help us defeat C'zog-Kamog once and for all."

I looked in the back seat. "A big box filled with jars of acne cream? Some old book? A peanut-butter sandwich? How are those going to help?"

"The peanut-butter sandwich is for me. That spinach pie wasn't very filling. You will see how the cream and the book will assist us in due time." He reached back and grabbed the ancient text – the Necrodermicon, or Book of Dead Skin. "The nuclear plant in the valley will provide all the power we need. And, here comes the bait!"

So saying, he pointed to a fleet of headlights coming down a snowy, moonlit road in our direction. We got out of the car. Two-dozen pizza delivery cars and trucks parked behind us. The delivery men and women climbed out of their vehicles, all very much confused. The reflected glow of the headlights made their pimply faces gleam hellishly.

"The poor creatures," the Loiterer whispered. "Their youth, combined with the oily vapors hanging in the air of their pizza parlors, have given them the complexions of a legion of doomed souls."

"Oh, they're not that bad," I said. "Well, most of them aren't, anyway."

"Young people!" the Loiterer shouted, holding out the box of acne cream. "To reward you for making tonight's delivery, I would like to give each of you a jar of this special acne cream, which is flesh-tinted, to conceal even the most stubborn blemishes."

Tearful cries of happiness could be heard as the young people rushed to claim their jars. As they blissfully rubbed on the cream, the Loiterer began to chant from the book.

"H'ja C'zog! Trojdoth sloggog m'grob'lok!" he intoned. He then turned to me and whispered, "I'm opening a dimensional gateway. Look toward the nuclear plant."

I did as he said, and gasped with shock. Glowing ribbons of vibrant energy were swirling up into the sky, where they combined in a brilliant vortex of glowing green fire.

"Pretty," I said.

"N'kraa k'baal pthogg!" the Loiterer cried. "Praggola tazogg! Fghala p'taar!"

"Now what are you doing?" I said.

"I'm telling C'zog-Kamog that there's plenty of mutated skin down here, if he's hungry."

"I don't know if I approve of your use of innocent pizza delivery people as bait. And mutating their faces isn't very nice."

"No pizza courier is perfectly innocent," he said cryptically. "Besides, their complexions are so terrible, a little mutation might help. It sure couldn't hurt." Suddenly he cried out, "Kablog! Kablog! A'kee! P'tuui!"

"Was that a protective spell from the crypts of the pre-Atlantean serpent kings?" I speculated.

"No, just clearing my throat." He then raised his hands over his head. "Rog-Sagor! P'thall segrog panaka! C'zok c'zop C'zog-Kamog!"

I noticed movement down in the valley, and saw that Miss Vreck, Miss Blubb, and a gap between them that had to be Miss Ghoorish were all leading a band of armed guards out of the power plant. Miss Blubb pointed a plump forefinger directly toward us.

"You must hurry!" I urged. "Gun-toting foot-soldiers of doom are heading this way, and bullets have no place in my scholastic endeavors – or my body, for that matter."

As reply, the Loiterer simply pointed overhead.

The energy vortex had actually drilled its way into and beyond Night's yawning chasm, revealing a darker darkness – a blacker blackness – a more abysmal abyss beyond. And from out of that rip in the eternal void peered a horrifying alien visage, in a manner similar to that of a tiny tabby kitten peeking out of the pocket of a kindly grandmother's terrycloth bathrobe. Except, of course, a lot more evil.

The enormous praying-mantis head of Czog-Kamog gazed down at the greasy-faced pizza purveyors and licked its razor-sharp mandibles with an ichor-dripping forked tongue.

Meanwhile, the armed guards had found a narrow trail leading from the valley to the top of the cliff, and were ascending rapidly, led by those three maddened mistresses of mayhem.

"Danger of dangers! Horror of horrors! Monster of monsters!" I gushed. "My friend, how are you going to stop that rampaging blasphemy from beyond the ghoul-haunted corridors of time?"

"How? How, you ask?" The Loiterer shrugged. "Like this."

With those words, he slammed the book shut. The dimensional gateway instantly whipped shut as well, cleanly snicking off the head of C'zog-Kamog.

The oversized noggin plummeted to the earth, crushing Miss Blubb, Miss Vreck and I'm assuming Miss Ghoorish, too, just as they reached the top of the trail.

"We did it!" I shouted. "Or rather, you did it and I came along for the ride!" I grabbed the Loiterer by the elbow and turned him around to shake his hand. At that moment, a stiff winter breeze caught his hood, blowing off the covering and revealing his features.

"Hey, you guys," the Loiterer shouted to the armed guards, who now had no reason to shoot at anyone. "Want some pizza?"

. . .

So now the world is safe, and I'm out of work.

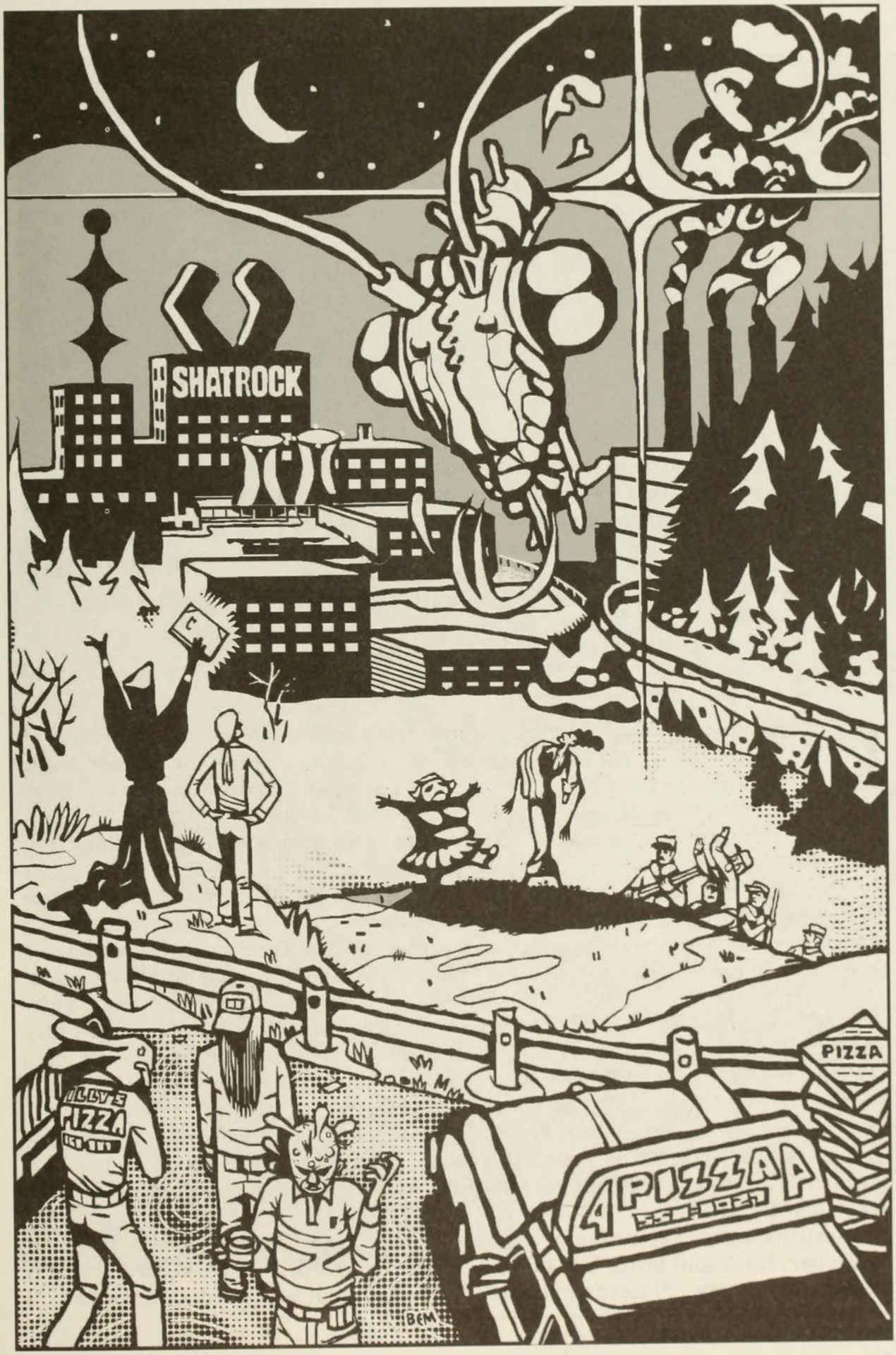
I keep searching the want ads, and the internet, too, but I haven't found anything. I don't want to participate in sleep studies being conducted at the Witch House. I don't want to tutor any twins born in Dunwich. And I don't want to model for some artist named Pickman.

But I do know this: whatever I do in life, wherever my adventures take me, I will never be able to forget the face of the Loiterer in the Lobby, revealed to me when that ill wind blew back his hood.

Apparently he had once been a user of some product of Medusa Industries, for his face was covered with grey and yellowish-brown bumps and unsavory open sores. But that was not the worst to be seen.

For back in the coffee house, the Loiterer had been eating a piece of spinach pie, and – God in heaven! – when he smiled at me on that cliff, I was utterly appalled to see that he still had small bits and strings of green plant matter lodged between his teeth, with an especially large piece of leaf stuck between his two front incisors.

Oh, and he had three eyes, too.



Michael Kaufmann and Mark McLaughlin

Stranger Ev'rywhere

By Tina L. Jens

Ain't it hard to stumble when you've got no place to fall?
Ain't it hard to stumble when you've got no place to fall?
In this whole wide world I've got no place, no place at all
I'm a stranger here
I'm a stranger ev'ry where
I would go home but, honey, I'm a stranger there

— Traditional

I was downstairs in the cellar taking inventory on the booze when I heard the massive oak door of the club slam open. I thought I heard the plaster crack on the wall where the front door hit, but that was probably just my imagination. I sighed, set my clipboard down and headed for the stairs.

There were only three people I knew who were strong enough to slam that door open on their own. The first was Preacherman, a demon from Hell, but he hadn't visited the club in over a dozen years, and he generally made his entrance at midnight during a wild thunderstorm. The second was Doctor Damage, a WWF pro wrestler from Chicago, but he and a couple other mock-bruisers were on a goodwill envoy to Japan, doing a joint exhibition with some sumo wrestlers.

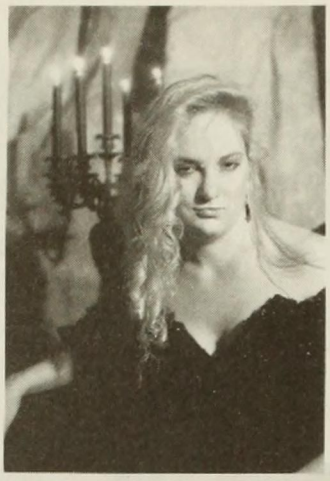
The third was Harpsicrazy. He got the moniker from the late, great, Lefty Dizz, who supposedly said after one jam session, "That boy play harp so crazy he like to burst a lung! And wouldn' that a been a mess to clean up!" Some folks just called him Harpo, like the Marx Brother, on account of him actin' crazy, whether he was playing his harmonica or not.

Harpsicrazy scared the waitresses, which meant I had to handle him. Sure enough, when I got to the top of the stairs, Harpsicrazy was alone in the bar. Jennifer had probably locked herself in the women's bathroom. Well, I couldn't really blame her.

Harpsicrazy was spinning in a quarter-circle on the barstool at the back end of the bar. Back and forth, like he was caught in a loop, or like a record stuck in a scratched groove. "I needs my bottle." The barstool squeaked as it turned. "I

Illustrated by Gabriel Morrissette

Tina L. Jens



Tina L. Jens

Tina L. Jens is a Blues fanatic who frequently visits many of the legendary Chicago clubs, including the Checkerboard Lounge, Rosa's, Kingston Mines, Buddy Guy's Legends, and Blue Chicago. But her favorite haunt is a neighborhood club right around the corner, called B.L.U.E.S., which is suspiciously similar to the Lonesome Blues Pub.

"Stranger Ev'rywhere" shares the setting of her first novel, **The Blues Ain't Nothin'**, (Design Image Group, April 02), which chronicles the supernatural adventures of the Lonesome Blues Pub. Jens is a 2-time Bram Stoker Award nominee, and the producer of the long-running live fiction series Twilight Tales. She also edits the ***Twilight Tales*** line of anthologies. Her fiction has appeared in dozens of publications. She lives in Chicago with her husband, Barry; her guinea pig, Mocha; and her Japanese fighting fish, Not Dead Yet. You can visit her web page at www.TinaJens.com.

needs my bottle." *Squeak!* "I needs my bottle." *Squeak!* He spotted me then, but that didn't stop the repetitious movement. It did add a few words to his broken-record spiel though, and that was generally a good sign. "I needs my bottle *quick*, Miss Mustang."

I spoke as gently and nonthreateningly as I could. "Why don't you tell me what's wrong, first."

"I NEEDS my BOTTLE, Miss Mustang!"

Harpsicrazy wasn't a big man, but he had unnatural strength; he could toss any of the solid-oak, double-thick, warped-to-the-point-they'd-hardly-move doors in the club open with one hand. He was only five and a half feet tall when he stood up straight – which he didn't often – but he was all leg, and they seemed to bend in the oddest places. Harpsicrazy bobbed his head as he walked and flung out his knees. He brought to mind a pink flamingo whose feathers had been battered and torn in a hurricane, and whose color had all faded away because he wasn't eating proper. But as often as not, he had half a hopeful grin on his face as he tried to fight through the gale-force storm that'd been his life. It was impossible to say how old he was; might have been twenty, might have been forty. He was old in spirit, and far too young in the head.

"I NEEDS my BOTTLE, Miss Mustang! I NEEDS it."

I could see the fear in his eyes, the fear that lurked just below the jagged scar above his right eye. The scar just below the eyebrow – I often wondered what kind of wound could leave a scar that nasty, yet leave the eye unhurt. The fear in his eyes was growing bigger, and there was a wildness flaring up just behind the fear.

As it does on anybody, a little alcohol relaxes Harpsicrazy. And too much makes him aggressive and crazy, like it does most folks. Only most folks' crazy can't compare to Harp's.

"All right, Harp," I said. "But you're starting early, and we have a deal. Just three drinks a night, right? You can't give me a hard-luck story later tonight and wheedle more out of me. And I don't want a scene, either. You got that?"

"I needs... *I got it...* my bottle. I needs... *I gotcha, sure...* my bottle NOW, Miss Mustang."

I set a shot glass in front of him. He cradled it in his hands, rolling it around from palm to palm, like a set of worry beads. I caught a whiff of Lysol in the air, as I turned to unlock the wooden cabi-

net behind the bar and pull out his private bottle. We had our ritual, even when he needed a drink at the worst moments. Especially at the worst moments. He set the glass down carefully on the bar, adjusting the positioning minutely to place it at a particular location only he knew. Then he took the bottle in both hands and slowly spun it around, peering suspiciously at the seal. He leaned forward to do this, so close that his nose almost touched the neck of the bottle and his eyes had to cross to focus.

He was peering at the black wax seal he'd put on there last time he'd been in. The black wax seal he put on every time he was in, 'cause he was afraid someone was going to poison him.

They say paranoid schizophrenics tend to have bizarre delusions, usually on a specific idea or theme. Poison was his. He thought someone was going to put arsenic in his whiskey and cyanide in his tea. He only ate cold, canned vegetables – he had to open the cans himself – and he never cooked them, for fear someone had coated his Teflon with strychnine. He even carried a bottle of Lysol with him in his coat pocket along with a rag, to meticulously clean the seat of every chair he sat on. Sometimes he cleaned every surface in sight. Hell, I'd even seen him spray Lysol on the tree out front. I counted it as a mark of trust that he hadn't poured it all over the counter in front of him. The faint odor in the air told me he'd wiped down the barstool, though.

He gave a fierce nod when he'd finished inspecting the bottle then shoved it across the counter to me. I grabbed a clean bar towel, wrapped it around the neck and twisted. I felt the wax seal break apart in my hand. I pulled the stopper out and poured an even measure into his glass. He sniffed it; then, quick as a snake, his hand darted out, he gulped the shot down and slammed the glass back down so hard I heard it crack.

"You okay, now?"

"Yup."

I heard the bathroom door creak open and I waved my hand behind my back, signaling Jennifer to stay put. This wasn't the time to introduce a new party into the conversation. "Wanna tell me what's wrong?"

"Know that cartoon where the kids play 'kick the baby'?"

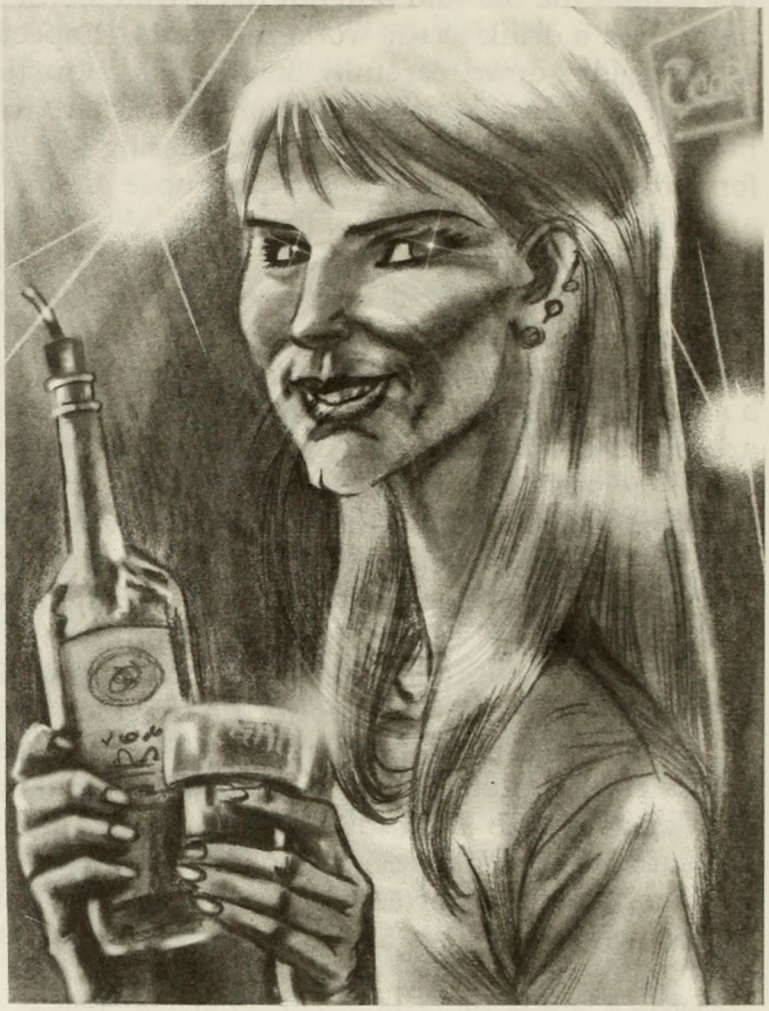
He didn't wait for my answer.

"It ain't funny. That's all I'll say... And another thing, they oughtna... And you know my daddy kicked me in the head – but he always did like to play football – reckon he's God's quarterback, now?... He was a mean man... But momma always said sometimes God needed meanness, and that the angels could be mean when they had to... So maybe it's true... Maybe he's up there kicking things still... But they oughtna laugh about it... Kick the baby's not a fun game... No sir..." Then he stared off into space.

I stood there quietly, not wanting to startle him or set him off again. I had no idea what he was talking about. But then, I didn't watch cartoons, I hadn't known his dad, and he talked crazy at least half the time... Leastways, I always assumed it was crazy.

. . .

Harpsicrazy looked around the joint carefully – he thought he knew where he was, but sometimes that got confused in his head – he'd see places from his memory, people too, that weren't really there in front of him, and he wasn't very good at telling the difference between the real and the memories... He looked around suspiciously, 'cause it was always possible that someone was trying to trick him, trap him... But it sure seemed to be the Lonesome Blues Pub, where



sometimes other folks saw people that weren't really there either, so it was okay then. And Miss Mustang, Little Miss Mustang, Mustang Sally – that song – she was named for that song that Lefty used to play. Lefty said it was a toorist song – no good Blues anymore – the Whiteys had taken all the color out of it. But then Harpsicrazy didn't see much color in anything, except when he'd "gone and gotten all excitable," as his mother used to say. Lefty didn't like playing the song – 'cept here – in Lonesome Blues, on account of Miss Mustang, her being a baby and all; it calmed her when she cried. Harp wondered if he'd seen her cry, or if it was just a memory of what Lefty had told him. He never could be sure what was true and what was just hazy stuff his brain whipped up – like whip cream! – "My brain's whip cream. Frothy, sweet. I'm so sweet!" he cackled to himself.

Miss Mustang – she had a gold tooth that glittered when she smiled – and that was a Black thing. And, because his color-vision was off, on account of the lobotomy, he wasn't sure if she was Black or White. She had long straight hair, that sometimes maybe glittered like the sun used to – and that was a White thing. But she had that gold tooth and those snake-skin boots and a true love of the Blues – and that was a Black thing... And yet, if he remembered right, and he was never sure that he did, Whiteys loved the Blues more than Blacks these days. Blacks on the stage – and sometimes Whites and Yellows – but Whites in the audience. Almost never Blacks. At least at the North Side clubs. No Blacks unless they were other performers, hoping to sit in, or come to see a friend, or audition maybe for the band. Harpsicrazy only went to the North Side clubs 'cause the buses ran more often there, and the bands were more likely to let him sit in and play harp, and sometimes they introduced him like he was someone special – was he one time? Maybe he was, one time – and then all the people, all the White people – maybe they were White – applauded and he felt like someone special, whether he was before or not. Whether he was before or not, the applause felt good. He felt special, for that brief moment before the applause died away. And special? Special meant normal. *Special meant normal.*

. . .

I watched Harpsicrazy slowly slip into a funk, his lips moving in a rush of silent conversation, as he cradled the whiskey bottle against his chest like a mis-

shapen teddy bear. The bottle was his security blanket and I could trust him with it. He'd hold it all night long, but only I could pour from it. He might beg and plead for another drink after he'd had his limit, but in all the time he'd been coming in, he'd never once tried to pour his own drink. I trusted him – that far at least. Besides, I had a club to run.

I left Harpsicrazy sitting at a prime spot at the bar. It was where the high-tipping regulars sat. But I knew he'd move when the first set started, lured by the music to the seats closest to the stage.

Business in the club was two parts regulars and one part a mix of tourists and college kids from DePaul. I coddled the regulars more than most clubs would. But the tourist business was spotty and unreliable. And because half the world didn't tip in their own country, they didn't tip in the bar, either. That made for surly waitresses and hard times. Like me, and my mama before me, I only hired women who were on their own, trying to make a mostly-honest living in a tough old world. The cops called the place Miss Mustang's Home for Wayward Girls. Me, being Miss Mustang, called it the Lonesome Blues Pub.

My mama had opened up the place back when she was still pregnant with me, after my daddy's unfortunate death. One tragedy draws another, I guess. Mama, still wearing funeral-black, had bought the fire-gutted club, remodeled it and opened it up, as the Lonesome Blues Pub. It'd been haunted when she bought it, by Jayhawk, the spirit of a musician who'd died in the fire. And tragedy drawing tragedy, ghosts had flocked to it over the years.

Tourists were drawn in by the sign on the front door that said, "THIS CLUB IS HAUNTED. IF YOU'RE AFRAID OF GHOSTS, GO AWAY!" But they usually left pretty quick when they found out the sign wasn't just an advertising gimmick. I didn't blame the tourists for leaving. The ghosts had driven Mama away too, finally. She got tired of the spooks, so it wasn't too hard for that traveling vacuum cleaner salesman to sweep her off her feet. Mama had begged me to come with them, but the Lonesome Blues was my home. The ghosts and the regulars were enough world for me.

So if you're wondering why I tolerated, maybe even indulged Harpsicrazy... well, it's not like he's the only misfit to pass through the doors of the club.

I heard the band banging on the back door, wanting to unload their equipment. At that moment I was on my knees with my hands plunged into a steaming hot bucket of Lysol and water. With suds dripping down my elbows, I didn't much care to answer the door. I hollered down the bar, "Harpsicrazy, you gonna hang out early, you gonna help. Get the door and tote for the band, okay?"

"Yes ma'am. You bet. I can carry good," Harpsicrazy assured me, with that eager-puppy bark in his voice that said he just wanted to be tolerated. It didn't take much to make Harpsicrazy happy – not yelling at him or tossing him out of the club was about all it took. I hated the world for lowering his expectations so far down he'd have to look up to see the gutter.

As he flopped by, I ducked so his legs didn't flap out and kick me. I watched to make sure he got all the locks on the door figured out right, then I gave the band a shout and went back to my scrubbing.

The boys in the band were friendly with Harpsicrazy, they razzed him the whole time he was helping them load their gear in.

"Hey Harp! You gonna blow with us tonight?" I heard Mr. Bones Jones, the keyboard player, say.

"Hell, he'll play whether we want him to or not!" Skinhead Murphy, the drummer, chortled.

"Yeah... and maybe you'll let me have a mike tonight!" Harpsicrazy said hopefully. The band laughed good-naturedly, and Harpsicrazy cackled, pleased with himself.

I had just finished mopping and was climbing to my feet when I saw a seizure start in on Harp. It was a mild one, as these things go. He shook like a willow tree in a windstorm, his arms flapping wildly, like a pelican trying to lift off. He dropped the drum case he was carrying. Skinhead gave a yell – then he realized what was going on.

In a few seconds, it was over; Harpsicrazy muttered an apology, picked up the case and, wobbly but determined, climbed the steps to the stage. All was back to normal... for now.

See, Harpsicrazy gets thunderstorms in his head. Then his brain dumps these electrical discharges that send adrenaline and fear coursing through his system. And nobody, especially not him, knew what he'd do when the fit was on him. Sometimes he just stood and shook, other times he went wild, got violent, got crazy. Those fits, combined with his tremendous strength, made him a dangerous customer. But he wasn't the most dangerous, or the most unpredictable, customer we'd ever had. And so, as long as he followed the house rules – took it easy on the alcohol, ate at least one meal a day, and went home when I told him to – I let him hang around the club. That was probably bad for business. But Lonesome Blues seemed to be the only place he really felt safe. And I knew the feeling.

. . .

Hitch up my buggy, saddle up my old black mare
Hitch up my buggy, saddle up my black mare
Goin' to find me a fair deal in this world somewhere
I'm a stranger here
I'm a stranger ev'ry where
I would go home but honey, I'm a stranger there

— Traditional

Mr. Bones Jones had kicked off a storming first set with *Hoochie Coochie Man.* I knew it was a sign of good things to come – 'cause most bands kinda coast through that first set. Place was packed, the shots were poppin', we were servin' beer so fast I couldn't keep it cold, and there didn't seem to be any ghosts lurking around tonight. Or so I thought... until I spotted Willie Dixon floating in a sitting position just above a barstool. The woman to his left had put her purse on his lap, thinking the seat was empty.

Dixon wasn't the only ghost that occasionally stopped by to catch a set. He'd been a talent scout, producer, arranger and standup bass player for Chess Records throughout the fifties and sixties. He might be dead, but that didn't mean he couldn't keep up with the scene. Who knows? Maybe he still scouts for one of the local labels. A whisper in a sleeping ear, a cold chill on the producer's spine...

He'd written dozens of Blues classics: *Little Red Rooster, Hoochie Coochie Man, Seventh Son, Spoonful, Back Door Man* and *Wang Dang Doodle.* He'd played with and produced all the great Chicago musicians: Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Koko Taylor, Little Walter, Bo Diddley, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, even Chuck Berry. The Chicago sound had the name *Willie Dixon* stamped on it.

And Dixon had a smile stamped on his face. He oughta, the band on the stand was kicking ass with one of his tunes.

I soon realized Dixon wasn't the only ghost in the club tonight. Scrunched into a corner, hanging around with the high-tipping regulars, was Big Maceo Merriweather. Big Maceo was from an earlier generation of Bluesmen; his heyday had spanned the twenties, thirties and forties. Born in Georgia, burnished in Detroit, hit the big time in Chicago; Big Maceo was a piano player, but no one had ever accused him of "tickling" the ivories. He played classic barrelhouse, double-fisted style. The man favored an eight-to-the-bar bassline and didn't need no amplification. He'd pound those keys so hard he'd break about three ivories a night. For post-war Blues, he'd done for piano what B.B. King had done for guitar: created a sound so new and striking it left its mark on every player who pulled the bench out after him.

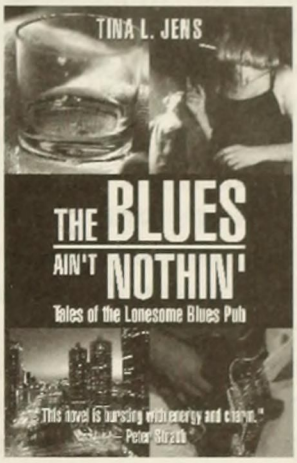
I was pleased we had such auspicious guests in the club, and even more pleased they weren't causing a ruckus. From the way the folks around them were acting, I was fairly certain no one else saw them. And that was fine by me. Ever seen a tourist try to get an autograph from a ghost? It's not a pretty sight.

I was pouring a dozen-draft round, but paused to give Mr. Bones a nod of appreciation when he called Harpsicrazy up to play the last number of the set, a bouncy rendition of *Down Home Blues.* The song was always a crowd-pleaser, 'cause even if you'd never listened to the Blues in your life, you could sing off-key right along with the next person; song only had maybe fifteen words total, and the band made sure to repeat the two whole verses about six times each. So no matter how you walked in, you walked out of there knowing one whole, genu-ine Blues song by heart. (And good luck getting the repetitious tune out of your head.)

To break the words up a bit, Mr. Bones gave each of the instruments a solo. I watched Harpsicrazy shift back and forth from one foot to the other, now shuffling, now almost hopping, in his eagerness for that moment when he got to step into the spotlight.

And when that moment came, he shone brighter than any light aimed at the stage. He took the song into double-time, sluicing out a blistering run up the scales, followed by one of those long-winded vibrato slides that resembled a train whistle and

By the Same Author



The Blues Ain't Nothin': Tales of the Lonesome Blues Pub

Somewhere on Chicago's North Side, if you look hard enough, you'll find the Lonesome Blues Pub, where the sign on the door says it all: "This club is haunted. If you're afraid of ghosts, go away." **The Blues Ain't Nothing** (Design Image Group, April 1, 2002) is an episodic novel featuring Miss Mustang, the Lonesome Blues proprietor and a woman who's seen it all, and a colorfully quirky cast of neighborhood regulars - not to mention spooks, demons, and the ghosts of Chicago Blues legends, both real and imagined. Sometimes frightening, sometimes funny, this collection reveals a deep love for and understanding of the Chicago Blues scene, both past and present. Grab a stool by the bar and prepare to be entertained. (Paperback: 208 pages; $15.95)

made you worry he might pass out from lack of air. He bent the melody around, upside down, backwards, then brought it round in a twist, right again. He mimicked each of those movements with fierce jerks of his body. His foot didn't just tap in time, it pounded on the wooden stage, the bass drum just an echo to his thumping boot. He jerked back and forth in time to the beat, bending nearly double, so fast and fierce I was afraid he'd kneecap himself and end up with a bloody nose.

"What's with him?" I heard a frat boy at the bar holler to his girlfriend.

I could relate. Harpsicrazy was having a fit – the other kind of fit – when the music took hold of him and transported him out of this miserable, mean, old world. Only the Blues did it. Fact was, we had to be careful not to put the radio on when Harp was around, 'cause any music other than the Blues would upset him. Jazz made him nervous, rock made him loud, and country made him aggressive. Classical put him to sleep – out like a light, and I didn't let anyone, drunk or otherwise, sleep on my bar. But the Blues calmed him when he was upset, soothed him when he was afraid, and transported him into another realm entirely when he was happy.

And when he was playing the Blues, in the spotlight – not just skulking around the base of the stage whispering notes into his harp and hoping neither the band nor the waitresses would make him stop – he was ecstatic. It was as close as I'd ever come to seeing someone experience a religious ecstasy. But revelations are always too good to last.

My heart felt heavy for him when the song ended; he took about five bows and climbed down off the stage. He was grinning from ear to ear from the applause and the rush and the compliments of the band, but you could see in his eyes the sadness that the moment was over too soon. Folks like Harpsicrazy ought to have more *moments* in their life.

. . .

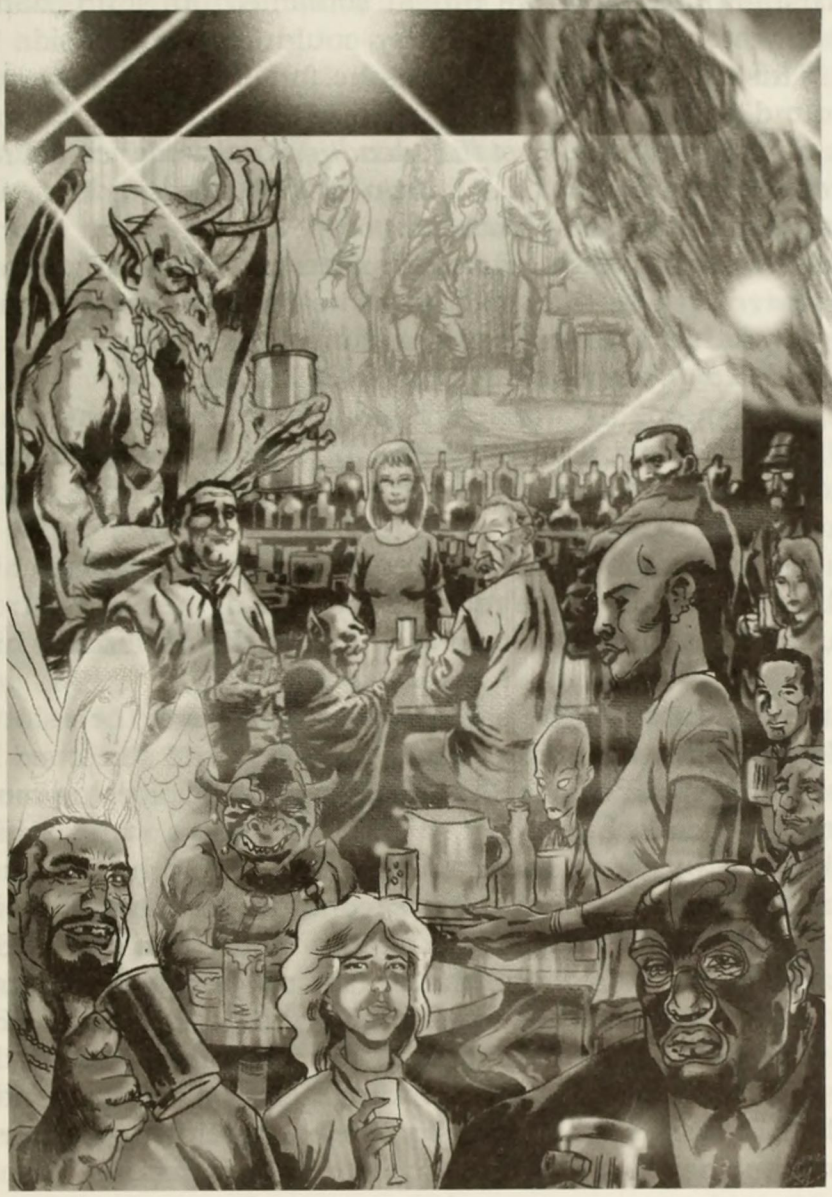
Harpsicrazy could feel his whole body *tingle.* He was so hot the sweat seemed to sizzle as it ran down his body. He snagged his bottle off the corner of the stage, where he'd stashed it for safekeeping, then let it hang loosely by his side, swinging slightly as he walked toward the bar.

He was bouncing, adding a beat to every step as he walked, he knew it made people look at him funny – maybe they looked at him funny – but maybe they wouldn't, nah, not after he'd *played*, not after he'd burned that song up! They couldn't look at him funny now. "Don't care if they do."

Nope, this was his "happy" walk, his "Ain't I some hot shit" walk. Lefty had always said he looked like a funky stork when he walked this way. "You a funky-ass stork, man," Lefty would say, then laugh – a friendly laugh – friendly, so Harpsicrazy knew it was all right and he didn't mean no harm.

"Funky-ass me," he said, swinging his bottle up to plop on the counter. He started to slip into an empty barstool, then checked himself. "What I thinking? Ain't thinkin'. Can't forget jus' 'cause I feel funky." He pulled the can of Lysol out of his pocket, sprayed the seat of the barstool down, coated it till it glistened with the wet, then whipped his rag out and swabbed the leather down. "Make it shine, mama always said, 'baby boy, baby boy, make it shine, shine like the sunshine, uh-huh.'" There was a boy watching him, bright eyes staring through the gloom, a White boy – he thought he was White – dressed like they do... The room seemed to tilt, and Harpsicrazy stumbled, trying to catch his balance.

"Dude, what's your damage? They make you play *and* clean house, too? Hope they pay you double."



There was a smile – a smirk – a maybe-not-friendly smile on the boy's face... College boy, shouldn't talk to college boys... but that was just paranoid – his mama said so. "They ain't *all* out to kill you," she'd say. College boy, just want to talk to the musician. They liked talking to the musicians... Then the bar seemed to tilt back to the way it'd been before, and he was the Funky Stork again. "We jez gonna have a conversation is all," Harpsicrazy told himself, out loud, probably shouldnta said it out loud, but they'd have themselves a talk, he and this college boy – after a drink. It was time for his drink. He pulled out the barstool so he could stand right close to the bar, wrapped his arms around his bottle and grinned expectantly at Miss Mustang. But she was serving another patron. "Didn't see me," he said. "She'll look this way in a minute."

College boy looked at his bottle, too close, no reason, no *good* reason, to be looking at Harp's own bottle, and said:

"Gotcha own bottle there man? They allow that?"

But Harp was gonna be funky. So – funky – he say, "I've had a bottle in front of me and a frontal lobotomy – and the bottle's better, I know." And then the boy, and now his friends, laughed again, but not a friendly laugh – not like Lefty's – a laugh that made him worry... Made the voices in his head start chittering.

"Poison! He's got poison on his hand, don't let him touch you, he touch you it'll sink into your skin, have you crawling on the floor and howling at the moon, then you roll over and die, maybe. Poison! He got poison in his eyes, he stare at you too long and it'll sink into your head like a laser beam, fry your brains to mush, leave you dribbling on yourself and walking like a zombie who ain't got no home. Poison! He's got poison..."

"NO!" he shouted at the voice.

Miss Mustang was rushing over now, he musta screamed out loud, hadn't meant to – he'd been talking to the voices, and they could hear him inside his head without him moving his mouth, but sometimes he forgot that when he got scared and they came 'round pestering him.

"Miss Mustang, she's no different, she's got that deadly, South American curare in a little bottle back there, she's gonna pour just a drop – it only takes a drop – into your shot glass and then she won't have to fool with you–"

Harpsicrazy could feel the sweat pouring down his face, a cold sweat, clammy and sticky, smelled like fear. Not like the good sweat he'd worked up on stage, the sweat that said he'd played hard under the lights for all the people.

"She's no different. She's no different. SHE'S NO DIFFERENT!"

Finally Miss Mustang came, looking worried, looking like she was afraid he was going to have one of his fits. Harpsicrazy wanted to reassure Miss Mustang, but he didn't like lying to her, and he didn't know if he was going to have a fit or what. "I NEEDS a drink and my COINS, Miss Mustang."

He watched as she hit the no-sale button on the cash register, heard the ching of the bell, and saw the drawer slide out. She reached into one of the change trays and pulled out two Susan B. Anthony dollar coins. She kept them there for him. For times like this.

"Thank you, Miss Mustang," he said. He bent his head sideways, then slotted a coin into each ear... Mama said he wore the coins so much they'd stretched his ears out... He listened, then breathed easy. He couldn't hear the voices no more. No more. And now a drink, to calm him down, the voices always worried him. And a drink because he'd played well, and worked up a thirst, and he was most of the way through the night, and this was just his second drink. It was just his second drink, wasn't it? Yes, Miss Mustang would tell him if it'd been more. She wouldn't let him have no more. No more. And that was good, though sometimes it hurt him so. His thirst so powerful and she wouldn't let him have no more. But that was a good thing. Tough love, Mama called it. Tough love, when Daddy called it, was something else. But Miss Mustang, tough love was not too many drinks, 'cause when he'd had too many, he got crazy-like. Sometimes got violent, that's why Daddy'd given him the lobotomy. And he didn't want another one of those procedures. No sir!

"Second drink, Miss Mustang. Pour the second one now, okay?"

Miss Mustang nodded, she still looked worried, so Harpsicrazy thanked her as politely as could be, and smiled friendly at her, then sat down on the barstool next to the college boy, not even drinking the drink before he sat down. To show Miss Mustang that he was all right. Not nervous. Not fit-like. The boy that maybe still wanted to talk to him. Maybe? He did, sure enough, 'cause he was talking right now...

"So what's with the coins, man?"

"They keeps the voices away."

"Voices? You crazy, or what?"

"Nah, I'm not crazy no more. Not since the lobotomy. Not crazy no more, just HARPsicrazy." He cackled to himself. It was a good line. A line that made people laugh... But not these people.

The boy reached across Harpsicrazy's drink. No reason for him to be reaching over a man's drink. Unless he was putting poison in. Could be putting poison in! But he was just getting a bar napkin... Leaning back with a bar napkin in his hand... But was that a ripple in his drink? Boy could have dropped something in the drink. Could have... He lifted the glass up to his eyes, peering

through the amber liquid, looking for a pill – sometimes Daddy used to drop pills in his drink – looking for a funny swirl of color, something that might show poison in his drink. But it was dark in the bar, too dark to see anything in there. And probably he was being paranoid. Probably. That's what Mama would say... And Miss Mustang was busy. She wouldn't want to fuss with pouring his drink out and getting another. And he didn't want to dump it out and waste his second drink... Not with just one more tonight. And a whole 'nother set, a whole 'nother hour, maybe more, before he went home.

The college boy was raising his own glass, saying "Cheers" and "Drink up" and "Aren't you thirsty?" And Harpsicrazy was thirsty, yes he was. So he raised his glass and clinked it with the college boy and said "Cheers" and "Here's to ya – and me, too," like Lefty used to say. And then he gulped down his drink, trying not to think about the poison what might be in there. Trying not to think at all.

Trying not to think about what the college boy meant when he whispered to his friends, "Let's see what voices he hears *now*!"

. . .

I saw the college kid lean over Harpsicrazy's drink. Saw something plop in the liquid.

I tried to get to him, to stop him from drinking it, but Jennifer and the bouncer had just brought up a couple dozen cases of beer from the cellar, and they were stacked in a mountain behind the bar, waiting to be put in the cooler. There was no quick and easy way over or around them. And the band was playing too loud for my yell to be heard at the other end of the bar. I prayed Harpsicrazy's natural, and maybe legitimate, paranoia would kick in and protect him. That he'd ask me to pour it out and pour him another drink. But he didn't. And all I could do was watch, as I tried to climb over those damn beer cases, as he drank the drink with shaking hands.

I saw the shimmering outline of Valerie Wellington sitting on top of the stack of beer cases, legs crossed and shaking her head. I heard that "Million Dollar" voice say, *"He done got himself poisoned, again. That drug gonna mess him up."* And I thought, well she should know. Her death certificate said brain aneurysm, but folks knew what caused that in a woman just thirty-one. Then her image faded away, and all hell broke loose.

. . .

It's hard to trust when the whole world treats you mean
It's hard to trust when the whole world treats you mean
I been done in by a man I never seen
I'm a stranger here
I'm a stranger ev'ry where
I would go home but, honey, I'm a stranger there

— Mustang Sally

Harpsicrazy knew he'd been poisoned when the colors came flooding back.

"Oh no! Not the rainbow! Not the rainbow!" The reds slashed across his vision like a tidal wave, and the greens oozed over his eyes, the yellows creeped in at the corners, and the purples blew in on an ill wind, with swirling fingers of silver reaching tendrils all through his sight. He looked quick at Miss Mustang, 'cause he had colors now, and he'd forgot to look last time, and sure enough, she

was White, with hair the color of sunshine, and a gold tooth gleaming in her mouth – and wasn't that just the oddest mix of Black and White you ever did see! He saw Valerie Wellington sitting on top of some beer cases, and he waved at her, 'cause it'd been a long time since he'd seen her, on account of her being dead. And he figured that was about all he was gonna be able to do before the fit hit him, and he hoped he'd remember what Miss Mustang and Miss Valerie had looked like, when it was all over.

And then the thunderstorm crashed in his mind, and he felt his muscles seize up and burn like fire, then orange flames licked across his vision. He saw a face in the flames, an evil face, face that looked like his daddy's, in a white doctor's coat, all dripping with blood. But that wasn't right, Daddy hadn't given him the lobotomy. Daddy'd been in jail at the time, jailed for killing a man with his bare hands... he hadn't been in Reno when he done it, but they'd jailed him just the same... That was when Mama had read about the lobotomies, and how they'd take the violence out of a man. And she'd looked and looked for a doctor to do it for him – "'Cause we can't afford those fancy drugs." and "If we don't do something, you're gonna end up in jail or the electric chair for sure." – Finally she'd found one that'd do it, though the other doctors had said they didn't do that sort of thing no more... He said he could do it with an icepick, clean and easy, that way they wouldn't have to saw off the top of Harpsicrazy's head – he didn't want them to saw off the top of his head, 'cause then his brains would fall out, wouldn't they? Well wouldn't they? The doctor had wrapped his fingers like a claw around the eyeball, pushed it down low in the socket, and it hurt, hurt so Harpsicrazy had moaned, but it didn't hurt like nothing compared to what came next... when that doctor had hauled back his arm with that shiny silver icepick in his hand, drove that metal spike through the top of the eye socket, right through Harpsicrazy's brain. Blood had spurted all down the doctor's coat, and was dripping down Harpsicrazy's eye, and he thought he was blind, and he thought the pain would never go away, and he felt that silver pick, slivering around *inside* his head... "Cutting the connections to the frontal lobe," the doctor said... But something had gone wrong, maybe the pick had gone crooked, or his frontal lobe had been wired differently, or something, 'cause it hadn't taken all the violence away – just pushed it down deep, in a pit, where all the colors were. And the anger and the colors all stirred about, until like a volcano, they'd get all hot and explode.

Harpsicrazy could see the fire of colors, and the doctor with his daddy's face, and that shiny silver icepick reared back in his hand, and that evil-spirit doctor laughed a hideous, wicked laugh, and swung that pick at Harpsicrazy, and he fell to his knees, howling in pain as he felt that silver hammer strike deep into his brain...

. . .

At the exact same moment Harpsicrazy screamed, all the club lights flickered off. The music played on. I scrambled for the breaker box. There was a babble of frightened voices and a high-pitched cackle. Then the lights blazed on at twice their regular strength. And Harpsicrazy was up on the bandstand.

He lifted one of the old, oversize Peavey speakers over his head; suddenly my storm-battered flamingo looked more like King Kong. He howled in a voice more beast than man, then launched the speaker into the thickest knot of the crowd, and howled again in ghastly glee as it slammed into a man's head. People scrambled, and fell in a domino heap. Harp put his back up against the tower of speakers and sent them toppling to the floor, crushing a table and a man's leg beneath.

There was a crush of bodies at the front door. People were screaming, punch-

ing and clawing to get out. Harpsicrazy bounced the bass drum down the stage steps and laughed as it bowled folks over like walking, wobbly nine-pins. My bouncer and one of his biker buddies took advantage of the narrow aisle created by the runaway drum. They rushed the stage.

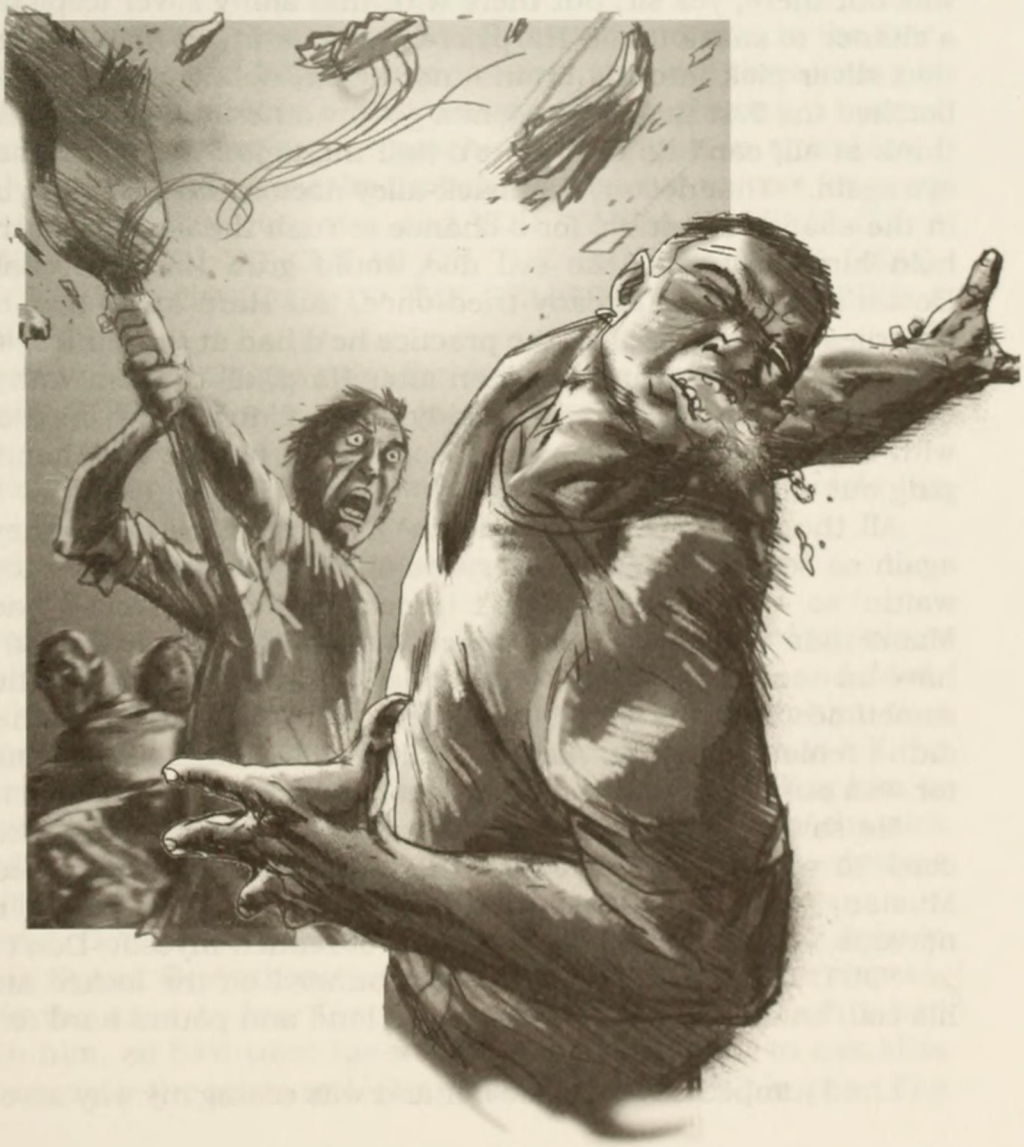
Harpsicrazy picked up a hollow-bodied Gibson guitar and swung it like Hank Aaron swinging a Louisville Slugger, aiming for the cheap seats. Bouncer took the blow full to the head. It didn't knock his noggin off, but it spun his body completely around, flinging blood and most of his teeth in a wide arc across the barroom. That was the last of the heroics.

When Harpsicrazy ran out of drums, speakers and guitars, he went after the mike stands, hurtling them like javelins through the air.

The beer cases were still in my way, and I was never going to fight my way through the crowd on the other side of the bar. So I started using the cases like stepping stones, climbing the tower of cardboard and cans, to get to the other side.

All of the sudden, Valerie's ghost appeared again, sitting on the top peak, hands on hips, and clicking her tongue. "Now girl, you been good to Harpsicrazy, and he like you. But you don't really think you gonna handle the condition his condition is in, all by your lonesome white ass, do you?"

"What do you suggest?" I asked the ghost. "I got a stampeding crowd, a bunch of injured folk and a berserker on the stage. I can't hide back here forever."



She clucked again. "Hold on to your britches. Let me get some help." Then she vanished. Again.

I ducked as a cymbal went whizzing through the air, a deadly Frisbee that could decapitate a man or cut off a hand, if you were foolish enough to try and stop it. Luckily, it hit a wooden support post, imbedding itself so deep it

nearly sheered through the pole.

I didn't have time to wait for Valerie's cavalry. As far as I knew, no one was dead yet – or at least no one was dead that had been killed tonight – but that wouldn't be true for long. I climbed on top of the bar and walked the wooden plank toward the stage, wondering all the while what I could say to Harpsicrazy to keep him from killing me.

The crowd was still thick on the other side of the bar, pushing and screaming, as if that'd get 'em out quicker. I heard wood splinter, and saw one side of the doorframe rip away from the sheer force of a hundred bodies pushing on it. The back door was standing wide open, no waiting. But you had to pass by the stage, and the madman, to get to it. So it was empty. Until Lefty Dizz walked in.

Well, he more floated than walked. He took a look at Harpsicrazy, still throwing lethal projectiles – though the stage was starting to look pretty bare – then crooked a finger at me and mouthed the word "C'mere." Least that's what I thought he mouthed. He was see-through and the shadows behind him made it kinda hard to tell.

. . .

The rage and the wrongs of the world hung like a cloud of blue smoke around Harpsicrazy, clouding his thoughts and blurring his vision. But that evil doctor was out there, yes sir, out there with that shiny silver icepick. Just waiting for a chance to sneak up on Harpsicrazy, sneak up on him and finish the job, drive that silver pick into his brain – not again, no sir, not again – fix that job he'd botched the first time. "Not gonna get my other eye, no sir, other eye's why I can think at all, can't do that more'n half the time. Not gonna put that pick in my eye again." That doctor, that back-alley doctor, was out there beyond the smoke, in the shadows waiting, for a chance to rush the stage, and the orderlies would hold him down and the evil doc would grab Harp's eyeball and... NO SIR. Doctor's goons had already tried once, but Harp knew how to handle hospital orderlies on account of all the practice he'd had at the clinics. Clinic had learned never to send less than five men after Harp, all of them with tranquilizers, but back-alley goon doctor with Daddy's face didn't know, he'd only sent two and with no tranquilizers even, and Harp could handle two, handle two while slipping out of a strait jacket.

All the folk were leavin', visitin' hour must be done, they know I escaped again so security checkin' everyone at the gate, that why they all lined up and waitin' so – Harpsicrazy didn't remember being checked back into the ward, Mama didn't like takin' him there 'cause of the money it cost, money she didn't have on account of Daddy being in jail and they still payin' the lawyers off. But sometimes the cops would take him in, into the ward – was he in the ward? He didn't remember going... and this didn't look like County – but the icepick doctor was out there, and the orderly goons had come after him...

He saw Miss Mustang walking down the hospital corridor – Miss Mustang come to see me, she ain't never done that before! – He waved at her, "Hi Miss Mustang!" She waved back, but looked all hesitant. Hospital must make her all nervous. Can't blame her, don't like 'em much myself. Don't like 'em one bit.

"OUT! WANT OUT! OUT!" He pounded on the locked and padded door of his cell, knowing he'd have to scream loud and pound hard for anybody to hear.

. . .

I had jumped down off the bar and was easing my way across the open space

in front of the stage, when Harpsicrazy waved at me. For a moment I thought maybe his fit was coming to an end, but then he started attacking the back wall of the stage, the wood already splintering. While his back was turned, I rushed past, into the foyer behind the stage, where Lefty Dizz was waiting.

Lefty looked pretty good for a guy who'd been dead seven years. His sharkskin suit was creased, there was a crisp, red satin handkerchief in his lapel pocket and his black felt fedora sat on his head at a jaunty angle. His Stratocaster was as beat up as ever; paint peeling, wood dented and chipped. It'd had some hard use from his upside-down, left-handed playing. And from the fact that he often played it one-handed, guitar dangling down over the edge of the stage, or hanging in front of him as he walked through the crowd, turking it up, bumping his guitar on people's heads, tabletops and door jambs along the way. Lefty Dizz had been known as Scarecrow, and Mister Showmanship; renowned for his wild antics on and off the stage. The shit-eating grin on his face suggested things hadn't changed much in death.

"How-do, Miss Mustang," he said, bopping his hat at me.

"Been a while, Lefty," I said, trying to match him note for note for cool and nonchalance. It was a losing game, but then, it wasn't his club or life at stake.

He grinned again then ducked his head. "I know you already got a band booked, but you got Lefty Dizz in the house! Suppose me and the boys get up for a number or two?"

I stared at him. Speechless. Flabbergasted. Piss-mad and blue in the face. When the steam from my gut had boiled up to my ears and was threatening to explode out like twin whistles blaring a construction-site break-time, I opened my trap and let loose, "Harpsicrazy's gone psychotic, my club's in shambles, I got at least nine injured customers, they're probably gonna sue my ass for every dollar me and my descendants ever earn, and YOU WANNA KNOW IF IT'S A CONVENIENT TIME FOR YOU TO CUT IN ON THE BAND? YOU'RE DEAD, DAMMIT! WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK TO THE CEMETERY AND ACT LIKE A RESPECTABLE GHOST?"

He just shrugged and said, "Might calm the crazy outta Harp."

"Boys? You said 'BOYS'." I was trying to convince myself I hadn't heard right.

He gestured behind him to the four ghostly guys standing just outside the door.

They tipped their felt hats and said in unison, "Ma'am."

. . .

That damned voice, that voice that told him that everybody wanted to poison him, that voice that knew all about arsenic, and cyanide, strychnine, and deadly African fungus, that voice that said even Miss Mustang be out to get him, that voice, was still screeching in Harp's ear, goading him on. Telling him to kill the orderlies before they injected him with a lethal dose of morphine, telling him to break out of the ward before the icepick doc came back, with the tip of the pick having been dipped in Mienie-Mienie Indian bean extract from Africa – doctors traveled a lot and it wouldn't be no hardship to get that evil stuff.

"I needs my coins! Gots to have Susan save me!" Harp was digging deep in his pockets, but his Susan B. Anthony's weren't there. And then he remembered; he'd gone to the store to buy Lysol and cigarettes, but he hadn't had enough money with him, so he'd used his Susan coins. He'd had to ask Miss Mustang for the spare set – the spare set! – he reached up and felt his ears. The

coins were there. "I shouldn't be hearing voices, I gots my coins in!"

They want to kill you, poison you, yes, they've got nitrous oxide they spray in the air, they've hidden it in their little perfume bottles. The girls, yes. And cyanide tablets. They've got them glued to the spokes of the ceiling fan, fan spread that poison with every whirly-twirl. And they've got wolfbane, the roots of wolfbane in their threads, woven into their clothes, their shirts, pants, and socks, that causes a burning and tingling, a numbness of the tongue, a dimness of vision, and a feeling so cold, like ice water running through your veins, yes... So many poisons! Creeping through the air, brushing up against you, swirling into your drink, crawling on your skin, ain't no place safe, ain't no place!

"Susan? Susan B?" Harp called, his voice quivering in his own ears. "Maybe she on vacation. Or maybe this one too loud and hurts her ears, too!" He dug into his pockets again and came up with three quarters and a nickel; his change from the drugstore. With shaking hands he slotted two quarters into his right ear, on top of the Susan dollar. That was the ear where he heard the voices the loudest. In his left ear he put the other quarter and nickel. He could hear the nickel sliding around as he moved his head.

Your daddy, dear old dad, Daddy arranged all this, he never did like you, never did, wants you dead boy, DEAD! He'll poison you, yes. Drop pellets in your soup. He'll drop pills in your drink. He'll drop rat poison in your pudding, he's done it before. He don't like you, son. Never did.

. . .

As I looked at the faces of the Bluesmen standing there, I realized this was no slouch of a backup band. Even though the neon light of half a dozen beer signs was flickering through their images, I could still make out who they were. Legends, every one. Up front was Willie Dixon carrying his standup bass – I hadn't seen him leave his table – standing side by side with Big Maceo Merriweather, cracking his knuckles, warming up his fingers to play.

Behind them was the infamous Little Walter, with a full belt of harmonicas around his waist. Little Walter had toured and recorded with Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon – so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to see him there. He'd had as profound an influence on the Chicago harp as Muddy had on guitar, Big Maceo on piano, and Dixon on the package-deal. He was the best of the blowers. He was also an alcoholic and a high-spirited, mean-tempered man. He'd pulled a pistol on at least one of his band members when a rehearsal was going badly, he'd gotten into a knife fight on stage with Sonny Boy Williamson II, and he'd been found dead, beaten to death, in a Chicago alley in '68. I wasn't exactly delighted to have another violent psychopath in the house.

Behind him was a face I didn't know. No mystery, he was carrying drumsticks and the kit was stacked up just outside.

"Who's the skin player?" No disrespect intended, *nobody* remembers the Blues drummers.

He stepped forward and put out his hand. "Freddy Be-low, ma'am. Played with Little Walter, Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Chuck Berry. I was house drummer at Chess under Dixon. Nice club you got here."

"Thank you." I suppressed a shudder and shook his hand. I shuddered 'cause I don't much care to touch ghosts; it's a weird feeling, like someone's tugging on your soul, trying to pull it out.

It was an all-star lineup, a dead-guys revival tour. I knew folks who'd give their right arm to have seen any one of these guys play – too bad Harp was in the

midst of clearing the house. But then again, if Harp weren't going crazy, the All-Stars wouldn't be playing. Gotta take the good with the bad.

I looked around for Mr. Bones; professional courtesy said you checked with the bandleader before turning the stage over to another band. I didn't figure you had to let down your manners just 'cause all hell had broken loose. If we did that around here, the club would have turned into a biker bar long before now – Hell and its minions came visiting *that often* to the Lonesome Blues Pub.

The live band had cleared out, so I waved the dead guys to the stage and ducked as Harpsicrazy flung a drumstick like a knife. Freddy Below shouldered me out of the way and lofted a cymbal up in front of us, like some gladiator's shield. The drumstick pierced it, impaled itself two inches through the metal, and came to rest about two millimeters from Freddy's eye. From the look on his face, I guessed Freddy wasn't into the boozing, brawling and downright-deadly behavior the others had gone in for.

"Relax, son," Little Walter said. "He's out of weapons, and besides," he drew a pistol from his belt, "ain't no drumstick can hold up against a Colt .45." The man may have been a ghost, but the gun looked real.

"Put that thing away," Lefty told him, as he walked by with his guitar.

"All's I'm saying-" Little Walter started to say.

"We ain't gonna need it," Lefty insisted. Without a hint of fear, he climbed the steps of the stage, his wingtips making a clomping sound as he went. It didn't seem right that ghosts could clomp, but there you were.

I heard a *Ka-CHUNNNNNNNG* come from the stage. Harpsicrazy had climbed on top of the upright piano and was crouching in the back corner.

"Miss Mustang, how 'bout getting that boy his bottle of whiskey? And mebbe a drink or two for the fellas in the band, while you at it," Lefty said.

"His whiskey bottle's what started this," I said.

"Then mebbe you better break open a new one."

I started to protest, but Lefty cut me off. "Boy done gone around the bend. Booze ain't gonna make him worse, and mebbe it'll help put him to sleep."

"I see what you mean," I said, and headed for the bar.

. . .

Ain't it hard to be living, when you got no friend alive?
Ain't it hard to be living, when you got no friend alive?
I'm going down to the river, cross o'er to the other side
I'm a stranger here
I'm a stranger ev'ry where
I would go home but, honey, I'm a stranger there

— The ghost of Lefty Dizz

The nickel had slipped out of his ear when he'd climbed up the stairs and broke into the nurses' office, and now Harp could hear the voices in his left ear as loud as his right, and the shriekin' and the hollerin' and the carryin' on was 'bout to drive him out of his skull. "I'd give it up and let you have it, my skull, sure enough I would, if I knew where I could go. I'd give up my head – but you'd take my body with it, then where would old Harpsicrazy be?" The voices wouldn't be still and let a man think – a man's got to think – and he'd gotten himself in a pickle without a paddle this time, sure enough again. He'd been here before,

in the nurses' office, locked himself in here before, why hadn't he remembered that, run the other way? He wasn't ever gonna find the door out of County! Mebbe it was like Hell, all a maze and no way out, just halls running on forever. But he'd been here before, locked himself in here for several hours, maybe a day. He'd found the medicines, the ones that made a body feel good. And wasn't that some of that medicine now, sitting out on the desk, pretty as you please, not under lock and key, not locked up like a bottle ought to be, and he read the label careful, didn't want none of that poison, or that drowsy medicine, or that medicine that made him feel like he was floating above his body, could look out over the clinic and see all there was to see, but couldn't move his feet to run from a fire, but this wasn't that floaty medicine, or poison or knock-out drops. This was the good stuff. The feel-good stuff. And the bottle was full. No worry that somebody might have mixed the labels, might have dumped something in there that didn't belong. He broke open the seal and upended the bottle to take a long, deep slug. Wasn't right, wasn't proper to drink out of a bottle, lessen it was a beer – that's what Mama said – but there weren't no glasses in the nurses' station, and he wasn't sure one had to mind one's table manners in County. Most folks didn't even eat at the table, got fed through a tube in their arm, and there wasn't nothin' mannerly in that.

He took another slug from the bottle, and sat down on the desk cross-legged... found he was swaying gently to the music. There wasn't music at County, not this kind, not the Blues. But there had been once, in the nurses' station... maybe the nurses liked the Blues... or had that been Mama, who'd brought her phonograph along to the clinic, the doctors had called 'cause "Old Harp had locked himself in the nurses' office and where were they gonna drink their coffee and put their purses?" But he didn't mess with no purses, he wassna thief. He just drank the medicine and danced to the music... danced to the Blues... till they coaxed him into openin' the door, 'cause Mama, and that pretty ward nurse, had promised they'd dance with him, just dance with him... he wasn't in any trouble, nah, and they wouldn't strap him down again... can't blame a man for wanting to dance just a little, hear just a little music...

. . .

There was only one amp set up, but Lefty Dizz started playing, softly picking out a haunting tune on his guitar. The stage seemed to rebuild itself around him. The few patrons who hadn't yet made it out the door drifted back in, just a step or two – within bolting distance if Harp's pitching arm got stronger – to hear the music.

The musicians were hauling their own gear, but Jayhawk was handling setup – 'bout time the house ghost did something to help out tonight – floating the speakers and mike stands over-head, bumping them down gently in the proper places, electric cords snaking through the air to plug themselves in and only once getting crossed up and tangled.

Then Willie Dixon joined in, plucking a lazy bass line, like a rolling river on a Sunday afternoon. And then the snares were there, Freddy Below, with soft jazzy swirls from the brushes, so soft you didn't notice their entrance, just as if they'd always been there. Then Little Walter was *wah-wahing* on his harp, like a lonesome train whistle at midnight, long and low and blue. There wasn't no way you could fight the lull of the music.

It was working on Harpsicrazy. He wasn't throwing, or pounding, or beating, or smashing things anymore. His eyes were closed, a pensive look on his face, his body swaying oh so gently to the music. I smiled a little myself, when I real-

ized I was swaying, too.

Big Maceo Merriweather was last to climb the stairs. Last to take his place on stage. One had to wonder what Harpsicrazy would do when his seat erupted with music. Big Maceo carefully lifted the bench out, rather than scraping it along the floor; he didn't sit at first, just sort of squatted arm's-length away from the keyboard, stretching so his fingertips could barely curl and touch the keys. He came in whisper-soft, a little trill on the high notes, a slow stroll down the bass line, and Harpsicrazy set to rocking harder – no, not harder, with more confidence, more focus, somehow.

They played soft like that for some time, before Valerie Wellington picked up a mike and sang a Blues lullaby, *Willow Weep for Me*, a Billie Holiday classic, a dreamy little number, lapping gently at the banks of the mind, lulling us all back from the cliffs of madness – at least those who hadn't stampeded out of the club, taking the door, the frame, and half the front wall with them.

Big Maceo had just hooked the leg of the piano bench with one foot, slid it toward himself and taken a seat, confident now he could play without danger (what a madman could do to a ghost, I didn't know) when Harpsicrazy lobbed both legs over the top of the piano, kicked his heels against the soundboard where the sheet music would sit and swung his legs wide, passing them through Maceo's torso with each swing. Maceo turned a little greener with each swing – I had to grin to myself – it was 'bout time a ghost got the taste of that sort of medicine. Bodies and spirits weren't meant to pass through each other like some sort of swinging door.

Harpsicrazy didn't seem to mind, he kept kicking, faster and harder, insistent now, his heels pounding a beat twice as fast as that the band was laying down.

Lefty Dizz nodded at the band. "Believe he'd like us to pick up the tempo." Then he launched into a rocking rendition of *Got My Mojo Working.*

Got my Mojo workin' but it just don't work on you!

I approved whole-heartedly of the Muddy Waters tune. Blues is full of magic, both the lyrics and the music, and this song was chock full of potent hoodoo. Dixon was slapping the bass, thumping it so hard it sounded like the bass drum. Little Walter had a harp in each hand, switching keys between the chorus and the verse to deliver an indescribably complex harmony. Maceo was pounding the keyboard in a double-fisted jump that had the piano rocking back and forth. I held my breath and waited for Harpsicrazy to slide off.

As the band chimed in on the chorus,

I got my Mojo workin' but it just don't work on you!

Lefty Dizz went to work. He was gonna grandstand to a near-empty house. The band fell into a simple groove that would let him solo and soar, dance and prance, move and groove any which way he choose.

He dipped his hat to a jaunty angle, then let that guitar swing down like the pendulum of a clock just before it strikes midnight, like an ax sinking into a cord of wood, like a cleaver falling to take off a chicken's head. It was a deliberate and deadly stroke that would have cold-cocked one of my customers if there'd been any in the joint sitting near the stage. Guitar swung down, wrist jerked up, neck of that guitar started sliding sweet and wailing loud, as Lefty peacocked down the stairs, balanced on a rung of a barstool then stepped nimbly up on top the bar and pranced down the length of it – playing all the time, just that one hand, jerking that wrist up and down, the fingers forming chords, and somehow hanging on at the same time, the feedback and pressure on the strings ringing out the sound. And it was sassy and mean and full of the hottest shit in town.

Lefty danced then, a quick sort of tap dance two-step, heel and toe of those snakeskin boots clicking like castanets on the bar. Freddy Below picked up the rhythm and tossed out a new one and Lefty matched it with guitar and boot heels.

Then Harpsicrazy climbed to his feet, right there on top of the piano, his head brushing the wooden beam of the ceiling, and he crowed, he kicked his feet and flapped his elbows and crowed, a big "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

And the music was burning fast as fire and hot as Hades and Lefty tossed the solo over to Little Walter. Little Walter was more lethal with a harmonica than he'd ever been with a Colt .45. He climbed right up on the piano with Harpsicrazy, nearly stepping on Big Maceo's fingers to do it, and Maceo, he didn't stop his double-fisted playing, and they'd better both hang on if they were gonna be prancin' on top of *his* boneyard. He made those white ivories shout, like a Sunday morning, You-KNOW-You-Sinned-the-Night-Before Revival Meeting choir.

Little Walter wailed on his harp, like a banshee calling the Illinois Central Rail into the station – "You're late and we got menfolks on that train!" He wailed and he whistled and he *wah-wahed*, and he said, "*Boy, why don't you blow some!*"

And out came Harpsicrazy's harmonica, he raised it to his lips to blow, and matched note for note, tone for tone, attitude for bad-ass attitude everything that Little Walter done, then he switched over and done his own. And the band followed him down, 'cause Harp's song wasn't full of the hope of new love, and all-consuming power, and sexual stallion prance that made up *Muddy's* Mojo.

Harpsicrazy's song was deep and dark and filled with terrors that'd keep you up nights, praying for salvation and thanking God for the nightlight. Filled with all those demons in the dark that'd driven man to come up with fire in the first place, and taught him to pile that kindling high, to drive 'em as deep in the forest as they could go. Filled with sharp teeth, and long claws, and red flame eyes, and silver hammers, and evil brews, and a daddy mean as the devil. His harp told a tale of heartbreak, but a spirit, a spirit there, wandering lost through the woods and nightmares and evil visions. Spirit of a good man. Spirit of redemption! **Spirit of the Blues!**

And Harpsicrazy was filled with the Blues, you could see it pouring into him, starting at the toes, his body quivering, shivering, glowing somehow, a golden light climbing up his legs, his body, swirling around his neck, climbing into his head through his ears, to shine like beacons out his eyes.

. . .

It's a hard old world, the road lead always down
It's a hard old world, the road lead always down
But onest in a while, a friend may come around
I'm a stranger, ev'ry where I go
When I'm feelin' strange, I pull my harp and blow
'Cause I'm a stranger here
I'm a stranger ev'ry where
I would go home but, honey, I'm a stranger there

— Harpsicrazy

I wish I could say we cured him. But truth is, life doesn't work like that. The band played non-stop for three hours – ghosts don't have to take union breaks –

Tina L. Jens

and they kept Harpsicrazy dancing and playing and wrapped in the music he loved, until the drug – the poison – slowly leached its way out of his system.

The cops came, long after the danger and madness had died down. The only charges I pressed were against that college boy. He was dragged out in handcuffs, hollering it wasn't fair. "The psychopath done it."

I put the word out that any patron that pressed charges against Harp would have me and the ghosts to mess with. But, if they neglected to file a complaint with the police and brought their doctor or hospital bills around, the club would pay 'em. I didn't know how that would set with my insurance agent, but I'd honor the promise somehow.

The cops wanted to arrest Harpsicrazy, or at least take him in for questioning. But the senior officer on the scene had been our neighborhood beat cop when I was growing up. He'd looked the other way when, as a girl, I'd helped Mama out in the bar. He'd always approved of Miss Mustang's Home for Wayward Girls. At Christmas time, when he was supposed to be collecting donations for the Policemen's Widows and Orphans Fund, his collection tin was usually lighter going out than it was coming in. More than a few of our waitresses over the years had come to us with desperation in their eyes but his name on their lips. Many of "his girls" worked here still. He agreed to release Harpsicrazy to my recognizance, without us having to go through the formality of seeing a judge, so long as I promised Harp would come in willingly, and in a semi-sane mind, if someone actually filed a complaint.

When I'd run all the officials out, Lefty Dizz, Willie Dixon, Little Walter, Freddy Below, Big Maceo Merriweather and Valerie Wellington played me a lazy, after-hours, all-worn-out-and-too-tired-to-sleep set, while Harpsicrazy snored on the bar.

He'd greeted them all, though, when the madness had trickled away. Made me cry, the way he hugged Lefty, hugged the air and his own arms, wasn't much of Lefty really there. Both Harp and Lefty were misty-eyed, missing friends too long gone – one off of the earth, the other out of his mind.

As the sun started to peek through the east of what had once been my front wall, the ghosts just faded away.

I sipped a double shot of whiskey, and dabbed at my eyes, and thought about how I'd always felt sorry for the ghosts; how hard it must be to move through the world, but not be of it. I felt a hollowness in my heart when I realized it was worse for Harp. He moved through the world, he moved among ghosts, he moved among his memories; but not in his life, his memories, or his delusions, was there any comfort. Any place he could call home.

I was left with a club broken down to its timbers, the certainty that even if I could find the money to rebuild – the club's *reputation* might not make it through this night, and a psychotic snoring on my bar.

And I was left with one more thing...

...the certainty that for Harpsicrazy, tomorrow would be just as hard as today.

Epilogue

When the light had crawled on shaky hands and knees halfway into the shadows that filled the bar, I picked up my whiskey bottle, my glass, and moved. I found a barstool so deep in the shadows that the light from the gaping hole in the wall wouldn't never reach, and I sat there.

A flock of pigeons flew in, all flapping wings and coos. The leader landed on

the bar and strutted down the length of it to greet me. I wasn't feeling very hospitable, but I tilted my glass and splashed a little of the whiskey on the counter, in case the pigeon got thirsty. He fluttered backwards with a startled look. Who knew a pigeon could make faces? But he cautiously goose-stepped closer to investigate the puddle, once I'd gone back to hunching over my drink.

The sun had risen, and dipped down behind the building across the street again, before the old man stumbled into the bar. His hands were gnarled, his suit was wrinkled, and arthritis had shrunk him smaller than a man ought to be. He tipped his felt hat back on his head, scratched his jaw and said, "Musta had a good crowd on Sat'day." His snakeskin boots clicked on the wooden boards. He shooed the pigeon away and wheezed as he climbed onto the barstool beside me. He hooked a hand around the bottle and slid it closer to him, then upended it to take a slug. He swallowed audibly, exhaled a sigh, then clomped the bottle down on the counter.

"Club alwa's did need a bigger door ta haul gear in, but iz gonna get cold come winter."

Our eyes were drawn to the tree out front, the leaves were already tinged with amber.

"Ratman, the club hasn't got any insurance, 'cept for liability. And mosta my savings went into updating the sound system last year. And new barstools. Shouldn'ta bought the barstools."

"You c'n only patch 'em up with duct tape so long," he said, reasonably.

I nodded, and we sunk into a long silence.

"Where ya been?"

"Was visitin' ma sister in Clarksville. I tole ya 'fore I went."

I shrugged. "Musta forgot. Got a few things on my mind."

It was his turn for a question. I wondered which one he'd pick.

"Old George outa the hospital, yet?"

"Haven't seen him. Meant to go visit yesterday." I waved a hand toward the debris.

"He gonna be put out."

"Grumpy as hell."

"Missed all the 'citement."

"Yeah, you too."

He stood up on the rungs of his barstool and stretched down the counter to grab a dirty rocks glass. He dumped the remains into a half-full pint glass, then sat back down. He pulled out the tail of his red dress shirt and polished the glass.

"There's clean ones back there. I think there's a couple that ain't broken."

"Don' wanna get up. The alkehol'll kill the germs." He poured himself a double, then topped off my drink.

"I ain't got no savin's to give ya, child," he said after awhile.

"Wouldn't take it if you did, old man."

I took a slug of my whiskey, coughed when it went down wrong, then started to take another. I looked at the glass, set it back down. There's nothin' worse than a sad drunk.

The old man reached out and took my hand. We didn't look at each other, just sat there, me clinging to his hand.

"This is the only home I've ever known," I said at last.

The question hung in the air between us.

Ratman cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably on his seat. I wondered if it was his arthritis or what he was about to say that made him antsy.

He took a breath so deep I thought it'd pop his lung. Then he let it out with a whoosh.

"Ya know, I gets a card ever' Christmas from your mama."

He pulled a cell phone out of his coat pocket and put it on the bar between us.

I'd given him that cell phone, paid the bill each month. I was worried about a frail old man walking home alone from his bus stop each night. He didn't live in a very good neighborhood and couldn't afford to move. I couldn't afford to pay those phone bills, now.

I nudged the phone away with my elbow. Didn't want to touch it with my hand, lest my fingers betray me.

"I get a card, too. Don't open mine, though." I tried to keep the accusation out of my voice. Didn't do a very good job, though. Drunks have a tendency to be honest.

"They're doin' right good. He's climbed up the comp'ny ranks. Got a nice house in the suburbs, a little g-." He stopped that thought. Tried again, "Got a goodly amount set aside. Yore mama asks 'bout you, first thing, ev'r year. Talks about ya. Speculates on what ya might be up to."

I didn't answer.

"She'd help you out."

"Don't reckon I want a baby sister at this point in my life. And I don't reckon I can ask for money without being friendly to him. That ain't gonna happen."

I turned my head so he wouldn't see the tears. I wanted so desperately to call my mama. I'd picked up the phone behind the bar a dozen times just today, even started to dial. Finally, I yanked the cord from the wall. That stopped the temptation, and the pesky phone calls from bands, patrons and city officials who'd heard the word.

I wanted to hear my mama's voice so much, it hurt. But I couldn't call her now. Not like this. Not after I'd destroyed her club. I'd be fulfilling that man's lowest expectation of me. When I got back with mama, it wasn't gonna be like this.

I pounded my fist on the bar, smiled grimly as I heard glasses tinkling as they bumped together. The pain that rushed up my arm felt good. Felt solid and strong, when everything else inside me felt weak.

I said, "She started with nothin' and a baby. At least I ain't got no kid."

"Got any plans?"

"Ain't got none of those, either." I reached for the bottle. "'Cept me and Mr. Beam. I guess we got us a date tonight. Reckon we'll just hang around till the landlord comes to evict us."

"He been by yet?"

"Yep. Yellin' 'bout structural damage and broken leases."

Ratman turned on his stool to face me, pulled on my elbow till I swung around to face him. His jaw was set tight and his eyebrows were hunkered down till they nearly touched his nose.

He demanded, "Ya got 'nough savin's to pay a couple months rent on the place, throw a few dollars in toward repairs?"

I shrugged. I'd been over this ground in my own head. I was resigned to my fate. "Not enough. Not enough to put this place back into any kind of shape

that the inspectors would allow. I can make the rent for a few months – if I move out of my apartment and sleep here – but then what? Get a job bartending at the Kingston Mines? Tips ain't gonna pay to rebuild this place, and I ain't got any other marketable skills."

He said gruffly, "Seems to me you got yourself a guitar."

I sighed. "You know I haven't played a full gig in years."

"I reckon your fingers still remember where the strings are, and if you studied a bit, you might even pick up a song or two."

"So I practice a bit. Then what? The band scattered years ago. It'd take weeks of rehearsal, if I could find anybody who ain't already hooked up, then where would we get gigs? Some of the local club owners might take pity on me, squeeze me into their line-up. Between 'em, maybe get a gig or two a week. At the end of the night, you split the money between the band. What are ya left with?" I sighed. "I could make more money bartending." I turned back to the bar and looked at my reflection in the dusty mirror.

The voice beside me was quiet, but insistent. "Robert Johnson didn't have no band. Neither 'id Memphis Minnie."

"Oh what?" I said. "I strike out on the road, an itinerant Bluesman, wanderin' from town to town, playing for drinks and dimes?"

"Musicians don't get paid for shit, but I reckon they make more than that."

"Nobody hires solo guitarists. Those days are gone."

"These coffee shops where the kids go, do. Some clubs'll have a warm-up act. They'll go in for a country Blues, Delta kinda sound for that. Travel light, live cheap."

His voice got funny. "Maybe find yourself a partner. Duo is easier to pitch to a club. Cuts your money in half, but not as bad as a band."

I challenged him right back, "You volunteering to go on the road with me, old man? You and your harmonica?"

"Child, I got too old for that years ago."

"B. B. King still tours. He's older'n you... isn't he?"

"He's got himself some money. Can afford some luxuries to ease an old man's aches and pains."

I couldn't tell if he wanted to be persuaded, or if he was just yearning for something he knew he couldn't have. Me? Well, I'd never been on the road. And just now, it didn't sound romantic. Didn't sound exciting. Just sounded scary.

I'd have to give up my apartment. 'Bout everything I owned. Have to hope the club's landlord would stand by me and not rent the place out while I was gone. Have to hope the customers would come back after the club was closed so long. And what about the ghosts? Would they wait for me? Would Jayhawk?

I had nothing but shattered dreams and a club in shambles. And no faith to go on. I looked at the stage. Two guitars sat in the corner; my beat-up old acoustic next to an equally banged up electric Fender. Most clubs had their own amps. Jayhawk might enjoy the road.

I wondered if I could carry two guitars and a suitcase.

Night of Two Moons

By David B. Coe

Healers moved among the wounded like wraiths, their pale faces and white hair illuminated by the fires and torches. Low moans and gentle sobs drifted across the battle plain, as if riding the evening wind with smoke and the stench of gangrene. Off to the west, where Hanan's company guarded the army's left flank, a man was screaming in short, sharp bursts, like a hungry babe. Again and again he screamed, as he had since dusk, until his voice sounded raw and ragged. Carthach found himself wishing that the poor fool would just die.

Panya, the Qirsi moon, was almost directly overhead, white as bone and only two nights shy of full. Everything in sight seemed alive with her glow: the low grasses that bowed and danced in the wind, the hulking gray boulders strewn across the landscape, the shields and spears of the Qirsi warriors who slept beneath her on the soft earth. Yet Carthach could not tear his gaze away from Ilias, the Eandi moon, hanging just above the eastern horizon, huge and full, and red as a wound.

"Tomorrow will be the Night of Two Moons," someone said from behind him. "Perhaps it will bring good fortune to our soldiers."

Carthach turned, recognizing the voice.

"You're up late, Jerel. Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

The man shrugged, his yellow eyes drawn to the red moon as well. He had dark lines on his face, and his white hair hung loose to his shoulders, making his features appear even more gaunt than usual.

"My battle group has injured. The healers aren't done with them yet, and I don't like to sleep until I know how many warriors I'll have in the morning."

After a moment, he faced Carthach. "And you? What keeps you from sleep tonight?"

Listen to the screams, Carthach wanted to say. *Can't you hear them? Can't you smell the blood and the rot?* Instead, he forced a smile and opened his hands. "Who can sleep?"

Illustrated by Chris Pepper

Jerel nodded. "Of course," he said. "Your battle group leads the advance tomorrow. I had forgotten."

A gust of wind made the torches sputter, and Carthach shivered, though the air was warm. "Yes, we lead the advance."

"I'll be with you, Car. So will, Treb and Eben. And Hanan will be weaving us. You've nothing to fear."

Carthach said nothing. If Jerel wanted to think that he was afraid of the morrow's battle, let him. Perhaps he was. To the south, so close that he could hear them singing, the army of the Forelands waited for dawn. If this day's slaughter was any indication, the losses his people had suffered may have begun to weaken their magic. Another few days like today, and all the Weavers in the Southlands wouldn't be able to help them. Carthach only hoped that Braedor hadn't figured this out yet.

"Has Hanan found an answer for their archers?" Carthach asked.

Jerel's mouth twitched. "Not yet, but he will. Give him time."

Carthach almost laughed. Give him time? They were dying. There was no more time.

The early battles had gone well, almost too well it seemed, looking back on them now. Everything had worked to perfection. As one Weaver and his battle groups raised mists to conceal their numbers, the other Weavers led their warriors into battle, destroying the Forelanders' swords and shields, decimating their ranks with fire, and whispering dark words to their mounts that made the beasts throw their riders and bolt. For more than a fortnight, the Qirsi army advanced up the center of the Forelands, carving their way through the armies

David B. Coe

David B. Coe is the author of ***The LonTobyn Chronicle***, a fantasy trilogy consisting of **Children of Amarid**, **The Outlanders**, and **Eagle-Sage**. His most recent novel, **Rules of Ascension**, book I of his ***Winds of the Forelands*** tetralogy, has just been released by Tor. The second volume, **Seeds of Betrayal**, will appear May 2003.

In March 1999 David received the Crawford Fantasy Award, given annually by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts to the best new author in fantasy. His books have been translated into Dutch and German, and will soon be released in Russian and Czechoslovakian. He has a Ph.D. in history from Stanford University.

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Photo by Christian Culter

of the north and driving the Eandi before them like a herd of drel. Their victories were coming with such ease that Hanan and some of the others managed to convince themselves that the Qirsi would control all of the Forelands before the harvest.

But somehow, through luck or cunning or the intervention of the gods, the northmen rallied, finding a way to defeat the magic of the Qirsi. Rather than engaging the Southlanders in close battle, the Eandi used their archers to keep them at a distance, where their mists were less effective, their fire could not reach the enemy, and their whisperings could not be heard by the northmen's horses. The Weavers tried to direct their power at the arrows, hoping to splinter them as they had the enemies' blades and shields, or perhaps to burn them out of the sky.

But the darts moved too swiftly. Qirsi magic had little effect on the shafts as they rained down upon the army. A few broke or caught fire, falling to the ground harmlessly. But most found their mark. Carthach still remembered his rage at seeing the arrows descend from the bright blue sky and hearing the shrieks of his warriors as they died. He was a shaper, as were Jerel, Treb, and the other commanders in Hanan's company. He had known the joy of seeing his magic shatter the Forelanders' swords as if the steel had turned suddenly to glass. To be rendered powerless now seemed to him a cruel joke. He could almost hear the laughter of the gods mingling with the wind and the death cries.

Hoping to withdraw to safer ground and plot a new strategy, the Weavers tried to retreat, but by then reinforcements from the west had moved into position behind them. The Forelanders had the Qirsi trapped, leaving them no choice but to fight here. If it could even be called fighting.

They wove their mists, concealing themselves from the archers. They raised winds to weaken the arrows' flight. They even sent out small parties of raiders, who cut bloody swaths through the armies of the north before being wiped out themselves. Hanan and the other Weavers still spoke of conquering the Forelands, as did most of the group commanders. But Carthach knew better. He was no gleaner, but the fate of their invasion seemed as clear to him as the night sky. It was remarkable that the others didn't see it

as well. If they kept fighting, they were going to die here on this desolate plain. And though he believed in the mercy of the gods, he feared death.

Which was why he had found a way to end the fighting. Let Hanan and the rest of the Weavers battle to the last breath. Their blind devotion to this war had determined their fates long ago. Any peace that was likely to be forged now would bring their executions. But Carthach and the others didn't have to die. They wouldn't, if he had anything to say about it.

He glanced at Jerel, who was staring once more at the red moon. The injured man's screams still cut through the night. Nearby, the horses whinnied and stomped.

"Do you ever wonder if our people were meant to be warriors?" Carthach asked.

Jerel narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Look at us. We're not built like warriors. We're not nearly as large or as strong as the men we fight. By necessity, our swords are smaller, our armor lighter, our bows less effective. Doesn't it strike you that perhaps Qirsar never intended for us to fight?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Jerel said with a frown. "Qirsar gave us powers that the men we fight can only dream of possessing. That's our strength."

Carthach knew that he should have let the matter drop, but for some reason he couldn't.

"You're right. Our powers are what set us apart. But are they the powers of a vanquishing race? Mists and winds? Fire and shaping? They're more than enough to protect us from invaders, but are they enough to make us conquerors ourselves?"

"What is this foolishness, Car?" Jerel asked, sounding angry. "I didn't hear any of these questions coming from you a fortnight ago. Is this how you respond to a little adversity?"

He heard the goad in Jerel's words, but he was well past losing his temper over such a trifle.

"You're right, Jerel," he said. "Forgive me. I'm not myself tonight."

For a moment, the man said nothing. Then he gave a thin smile and nodded. "Of course you're not. Who can blame you, given what you have to do tomorrow?"

Carthach's blood turned cold, as if Bian himself had reached up from the Underrealm and taken hold of his heart. *He's talking about leading the advance,* he thought, forcing himself to breathe again. *Calm down before you get yourself killed.*

"Thank you for your understanding," he said, inwardly cursing the flutter in his voice. He hesitated. "I would prefer –"

Jerel shook his head. "Don't give it another thought, Car. The Weavers will hear nothing of this. You have my word."

"Again, thank you," Carthach said. "I'm in your debt."

"Strike a blow for us tomorrow. That will be thanks enough."

This time, at least, he kept his composure. "I'll do my best."

The two men stood together in silence for another few moments.

"Well," Jerel finally said, clearing his throat awkwardly. "It's late. I should check on my injured and then get some sleep."

Carthach nodded. "I should as well. Shyssir grant you rest, Jerel."

"And you."

Glancing once more at red Ilias, Carthach walked back to where his battle group slept. He had no intention of sleeping this night, but he lay down on the soft grasses anyway, and stared up at Panya and the stars, trying to empty his mind until Ilias reached his zenith. After a time, he realized that the screaming had stopped, and he shuddered.

"Maybe the healers saved him," he whispered to the night.

Another gust of wind swept across the plain, carrying smoke and the faint smell of death.

A single cloud drifted across Panya's face, giving the night over to Ilias's red, if only momentarily. Legend told that Panya and Ilias had been lovers, in defiance of the gods who had decreed that Qirsi and Eandi should never lie together. To punish them, Qirsar, God of Magic, had placed them in the sky for all to see, and had ordained that they should spend eternity apart. Whenever one rose, the God said, the other would set. But such had been the power of their love, that they defied him. The first time she rose into the night, Panya paused high above the land and waited for Ilias, so that ever after they could travel the sky together.

How foolish that under the gaze of the Lovers, Qirsi and Eandi warriors should be preparing to slaughter each other.

When Ilias was directly overhead, his red glow mingling with Panya's white to give a rose cast to the grasses and stones, Carthach climbed to his feet and started toward the southern edge of the camp.

Apart from the sentries, few were awake. Yet the camp was alive with sound. Horses snorted and nickered. Some of the soldiers cried out in their sleep. Others murmured, as if engaged in conversation. The breathing of the sleeping warriors made the entire plain hum, until it seemed the earth itself was whispering to him.

Carthach had to keep himself from looking around to see if he was followed. The sentries would have noticed him, but he was a battle group commander. None would question him unless he acted as though he expected to be questioned. So he just walked, his eyes trained on the small cluster of trees before him.

"Do you need something, Commander?"

He stopped, his heart abruptly racing like a warhorse. After a moment he made himself turn slowly and smile. It was a young woman, her battle armor seeming to glow with Ilias's red and the golden light from her torch. Her white hair was pulled back from her long, thin face, and the yellow of her eyes was so pale it was hard to tell where the whites ended and the irises began. She couldn't have been more than a year or two past her Fating.

Are we really meant to be warriors?

"Thank you, no," Carthach said, trying to keep his tone light. "I can't sleep. I thought I'd take a walk."

"To the south, sir?"

She hadn't drawn her sword, but her stance and the expression on her face made him feel as though the point of her blade was pressed against his chest.

"Yes," he said, allowing a note of impatience to creep into his voice. "Is that a problem?"

She shook her head, her retreat apparent in the widening of her eyes. "No, Commander. Of course not. I just –"

"Good. Carry on."

Before she could say anything more, Carthach turned away and continued toward the trees. He could feel her watching him, but he didn't turn again. Slowly, his pulse began to slow.

He found Braedor waiting for him on the far side of the coppice. He could hear the river gurgling in the distance, and beyond it, the singing of Braedor's army. The Forelander looked annoyed, as though he had been waiting for some time. He wore no helm or armor, and, as the northmen went, he was not particularly large. Still, he was taller than Carthach and far more powerfully built. His dark face appeared ruddy in the moonlight. His short black beard seemed to bristle like quills on a hedgehog.

This is a warrior, Carthach thought, measuring Braedor against the young guard he had just left. A man like this had no need of magic. Two swordsmen stood on either side of the northman, and three archers stood a few paces behind, eyeing the trees warily, arrows nocked.

Abruptly, the Qirsi felt small and vulnerable, like an innocent caught between two advancing armies. *The traitor walks a lonely path.* Carthach had heard the saying before, but until that moment he had never truly understood it.

"One last day before the Night of Two Moons," Braedor said, his voice cutting through the dark like torchlight. "Everything is ready for tomorrow?"

"Yes. It's just as we discussed. I'll be leading the advance. Hanan, my Weaver, will be to the west. He rides under a yellow and black banner, and like all our Weavers, he wears his colors over his armor. Amara and Wazir are Weavers as well. They ride to the east, Amara under a banner of red and white, Wazir under silver and blue. The others –"

Braedor cut him off with a gesture. "The others can wait. With these three dead, we should control the south by nightfall, correct?"

Carthach swallowed, then nodded. "By nightfall."

"Your people are powerless without the Weavers?"

He stared at the Eandi. Hadn't the man been listening at all the past few nights? "No, not powerless. Not in the least. The Weavers allow us to combine our powers, to draw on each other's strength. Even without the Weavers, we still have magic. But fighting on our own, we'll tire more quickly, and our magic will be far less effective."

Braedor nodded. "Good." He hesitated, nodded again. "That's good." He rubbed his large hands together, though even here, closer to the river, the night wasn't particularly cold. "Is there anything else?"

Yes, you fool. A good deal. My gold, your promise of asylum, your guarantee of safety for my men. Carthach took a long breath. "Your men know not to hack us to pieces when we ride forward?"

"You won't be harmed."

"And my battle group?"

"We'll do everything we can, Commander. But please remember, war is not a precise endeavor. Your warriors know nothing of your... choice?"

Carthach regarded the man closely, looking for some sign that he was being mocked. Seeing none, he shook his head. "No. I've told them nothing."

"I thought as much," Braedor said with a nod. "Then they'll be fighting us. We must protect ourselves. You understand that. But we'll try to kill as few of your men as possible."

Carthach's eyes strayed to one of Braedor's swordsmen, a hulking man with a thick moustache and deep-set dark eyes. The warrior was glowering at him, one hand resting on the hilt of his blade and the other flexing repeatedly, as if it was all he could do to keep himself from killing Carthach right there.

I'm leading them to a slaughter, he thought. Yet, what could he do? Braedor was right. The Forelanders could offer no guarantees. And even if they could, he was in no position to demand them.

"You'll have my gold?" he asked after several moments.

Braedor grinned, although Carthach could see the contempt in his eyes. "All of it."

"What will happen to the other —?"

The northman raised a hand abruptly, silencing him. His gaze was fixed on the trees behind Carthach. "You're certain you weren't followed?" he asked in a whisper.

Carthach spun and scanned the coppice. "I don't think I was."

"You don't think you were?" Braedor repeated, his voice rising.

Before Carthach could answer, he heard a light footfall.

"Is that you, Commander?" a woman's voice called.

The guard, he had time to think. Then a bow thrummed and Carthach heard her topple to the ground. He and Braedor rushed forward and found the woman lying face up, an arrow through her throat, her blood glistening in Ilias's glow.

"You idiot!" Braedor said in a harsh whisper.

Carthach could say nothing. He just stared at the woman. He wanted to bend down and close her eyes, but he couldn't even bring himself to do that.

Braedor spat a curse. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Nothing," Carthach heard himself say, his eyes still on the woman. "Nothing at all."

"What?"

"If someone finds her, they'll just assume she strayed too close to one of your patrols." He looked up, meeting the northman's gaze. "This changes nothing."

Braedor eyed him for several moments. "Very well. Until tomorrow then." He turned away and started back toward his camp, gesturing for his archers and swordsmen to follow.

Carthach watched them go before turning himself and making his way back to where his warriors slept. He didn't look at the woman again, but he felt as though her eyes were on him once more, watching him walk away.

He returned to where he had been lying before his meeting with the Forelander, taking care not to be seen by the few Qirsi who were still awake. Sitting among his warriors, he watched the morning dawn, warm and clear. The sentry had been on the night's final shift. No one came to relieve her, and no one noted her absence.

As the Qirsi warriors began to stir around him, Carthach stood, stretching the night from his legs. Jerel caught his eye from where he sat, a short distance away.

"Did you sleep at all?" he called.

"Some," Carthach said. "Not much."

Jerel nodded, as if satisfied. A moment later he barked a command at the men and women sleeping around him, and they began to rouse themselves as well. Carthach's warriors checked their weapons and readied their horses.

To the south, the armies of the Forelands resumed their singing, their voic-

es sounding far closer than they had the night before. Carthach heard a horse approaching, and turning to the west, he saw Hanan riding toward him, white hair flying behind him, his yellow eyes glimmering like gold in the early morning light. A man rode beside him bearing a yellow and black banner that snapped loudly in the wind.

"You lead us today, Carthach jal Terad," the Weaver said, reining his white mount to a halt just in front of him. "Orlagh smile upon you and guide your blade."

The ritual words. Carthach heard one of his men vomit behind him. The Weaver frowned.

"We fight for the glory of Qirsar," Carthach replied, the words coming to him as an oft-repeated lesson might come to a child. "Our magic is yours, Weaver. Use us well."

A smile stretched across Hanan's face and then was gone. "Your warriors are ready?"

"Yes, Weaver."

He nodded. "Good. We'll await your signal, Carthach. Don't keep us waiting."

"I won't."

Hanan wheeled his horse away almost before Carthach got the words out. He'll be dead by sunset, Carthach told himself, watching the Weaver go. The thought gave him some comfort.

Looking away from Hanan, Carthach found them all staring at him. His warriors and Jerel's, as well those of the other battle group commanders. They expected him to say something, to ease their fears and give them something for which to fight other than their own survival. As if that wasn't enough.

But nothing came to him. Nothing at all. They just stood there, waiting. And all he could do was gape back at them like a king's fool.

"We fight for the glory of Qirsar," he said at last, the words sounding hollow and forced.

Still they looked at him, expecting more, until a few, realizing that he had no more, turned away from him, muttering and shaking their heads.

Carthach glanced at Jerel, but the commander wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Your horse, Commander," a woman said from behind him.

Carthach took the reins from her and smiled, but she wouldn't look at him either. "Thank you," he said.

She nodded and moved away.

The traitor walks a lonely path. It was almost as if they knew.

He swung himself onto his bay and looked over his battle group. They were watching him again, grim yellow eyes beneath long white hair. It occurred to him that the Forelanders must have thought them strange looking, perhaps even frightening. Qirsi and Eandi lived together in the Southlands. They had grown accustomed to each other. But here... Even with asylum and gold, he faced a difficult future in the Forelands, as did those he managed to save.

Facing west, he saw Hanan, resplendent in yellow and black, perched on his mount and gazing back at him. Taking a breath, Carthach drew his sword, lifted it over his head, and spurred his horse forward.

"Gods be with us!" he called.

It wasn't the traditional war cry, but still his warriors responded with a ringing cheer, so desperate were they for any words from him.

They rode swiftly, hooves drumming past the cluster of trees where the dead guard lay. Someone cried out on Carthach's left, and several riders from Treb's battle group slowed. She had been found. Carthach and his warriors didn't stop or even slow their advance, nor did Hanan or any of the battle group commanders.

Beyond the trees was a small rise, and as they crested, Carthach saw the Forelanders. They were waiting on the far side of the Rassor, their spears and swords sparkling in the sunshine like the slow waters of the river. Braedor sat on a great black stallion in the middle of them, his polished armor shining, his head still uncovered. Before him, in a half dozen rows that seemed to stretch the entire length of the river, stood the archers, their bows jutting sharply into the air like stakes in a vineyard.

Carthach heard several of his warriors invoking the gods.

"It'll be butchery, plain and simple," one man said.

Carthach turned toward the voice. "Stay close to me, no matter what happens."

The man stared at him. After a moment, he nodded.

Carthach started to say something else, but in that moment he sensed a wind rising. Facing east, he saw Amara, her arms raised, riding forth into the gap between the two armies. It was his signal to lead the charge, but all he could do was watch her, silently begging her not to raise a mist as well. He should have known better.

It began as wisps of gray, rising from the earth on the Qirsi side of the river, like hands of the dead reaching out from the Underrealm. The strands of mist quickly gathered into a white cloud that rose above the river and rode the wind toward the Forelanders.

Braedor's archers would never be able to see him now. Perhaps the man had been right after all. It was to be butchery.

"Ride!" Jerel called to him. "Now, Car!"

Beyond Jerel, Hanan was watching him as well, his arms raised like Amara's. Already he could feel the Weaver reaching for his magic and that of the others, gathering their power within his own so that he could wield it as a single weapon.

"Ride!" Jerel shouted again.

Carthach dug his heels into his mount and the creature bounded forward. With a deafening roar the rest of the Qirsi army followed. Mist continued to pour out of the ground like smoke, as if Amara had set the earth itself on fire. He could feel the Weaver's wind at his back, like a hand pushing him forward. The air rang with the sound of swords being unsheathed, but Carthach did not reach for his. Instead he just clung to his mount, crouching as low as he could, waiting for the first arrow to pierce his armor or the flesh of his horse.

He was the first to reach the river, the water splashing up into his face and hair. He heard the others hit the water as well, and it almost seemed that the Forelanders had been waiting for the sound to begin their assault. For in the next instant, arrows were everywhere, pelting the river and the warriors like rain. The archers were firing blindly – they had to be. Amara's mist was thick as a coastal fog. But all around him, warriors were dying.

He felt Hanan drawing power out of his body, fusing it with that of the others, trying in vain to destroy the arrows.

Still, Carthach drove his mount forward. He couldn't see Braedor anymore, but he could hear him shouting commands, and he rode toward the sound of the northman's voice as if it were home.

Reaching the far shore of the river, he glanced back. Most of his battle group was with him, as were Jerel and his warriors. Hanan still had his sword raised and now he brought it down, signaling to Carthach and the other battle group leaders in the Weaver's legion that they were to turn west and join him as he cut into the northmen's flank. Jerel turned immediately, just as he was supposed to, just as they had discussed the previous day. But Carthach kept riding toward Braedor's voice.

"Car!" Jerel shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Commander!" several of his men cried.

Still, Carthach rode. "Stay with me if you want to live!" he called.

"Carthach!" Jerel sounded enraged, and Carthach half expected the man to ride him down and kill him.

Once more he was aware of Hanan reaching for his power, as if the Weaver could turn his mount with a thought. But Carthach resisted him, and looking back for just an instant, he saw that most of his battle group was with him.

"What are we doing, Commander?" one of the men yelled. "Why aren't we going with the others?"

"Stay close to me!" he said again, as though there was some magic in the words that would keep them all alive. "Ride to their leader!"

Another cheer went up from his warriors. "To their leader!"

Carthach almost laughed aloud. *They think I'm a hero.*

An instant later he and his group plunged into Amara's mist, and suddenly there was fighting all around him, the ring of steel on steel, the screams of horses and dying warriors. Fighting from atop their mounts, the Qirsi had the advantage, and they cut through the Forelanders' lines like scythes through a field of grain. Carthach had yet to draw his sword, but when the northmen came for him he drew upon his power to break their blades and shields. He still heard Braedor's voice over the roar of the battle, and he knew that he was close. For just an instant, he considered fighting on. Perhaps there was a chance that

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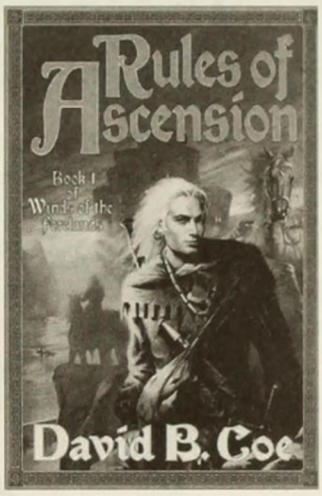


***Winds of the Forelands, Book 1:* Rules of Ascension**

For centuries the Forelands have been disputed... until the arrival of the Qirsi, magically gifted men capable of mindsight, creating mists and fire, and bending solid matter. But the fate of the Qirsi is forever changed by the actions of a traitor during their war with the Eandi.

Nearly 1000 years after Carthach's treason, the Qirsi are servants in a medieval Eandi society, and Weaver skills are punishable by death. Travis, the heir to the Kingdom of Curgh, finds himself wrongfully accused of the murder of his intended bride. The resulting chaos topples the throne in Eibithar, and threatens to bring the Forelands to ruin. Travis, stripped of his family's protection, finds his last remaining hope is an unlikely alliance to root out the true assassin – an alliance with a Qirsi with secret Weaver gifts. [Tor, 2002]

Cover by Gary Ruddell

he could kill the northmen's leader before he fell himself.

But in that instant, Carthach felt the wind slacken. A few moments later, the mist began to lift, and a hint of sunshine seeped through the white cloud, coaxing a dull shine from the armor of the warriors around him. Amara was dead. It was the only explanation.

Braedor appeared before him, emerging from the thinning mist like some servant of Bian, closer even than Carthach had thought. Seeing Carthach, the northman's eyes widened. "Archers!" he called sharply.

In as much time as it took Carthach to rein his mount to a halt, he and what remained of his group were surrounded by bowmen. Behind them stood Eandi swordsmen. Hundreds of them, their eyes filled with loathing. Carthach looked west, hoping to catch some glimpse of Jerel, but all he saw was the dust and confusion of battle. He could hear screams and war cries, but it was impossible to determine who had the upper hand. Hanan's banner was nowhere to be seen.

Around him, the fighting had ebbed and an unworldly silence had descended upon the two armies, as if all the warriors there were waiting for Carthach and Braedor to speak. Many northmen lay dead behind them, their blood making the grass shimmer. He still had upwards of sixty warriors in his battle group; he had lost barely half that number. It seemed Orlagh had been smiling upon them after all.

Still, Braedor said nothing, and after several tense moments, Carthach heard a bow snap like a dry twig. Whirling in his saddle, he saw one of his men raise his sword. At the same time, he heard the wood crack on several more bows. His warriors were using their magic.

"No!" he screamed. Without even thinking, he threw his power at the sword of his nearest warrior, splitting it in half as it descended toward the archer. "No!" he shouted again. "They'll kill us all!"

Too late. Bows sang to the left and right. Qirsi swords whistled through the warm air. Braedor's swordsmen rushed forward, and warriors fell, Qirsi and Eandi.

"Stop! We can't win!"

"We can try!" one of his men shouted back. "Better dead than a slave!"

"It won't be like that! Braedor gave his word!"

That stopped some of them.

"Hold!" Braedor commanded.

Slowly, the fighting subsided again, although suddenly Carthach was only dimly aware of what was going on around him.

He and the Qirsi warrior were staring at each other.

"What did you say?" the man asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. His skin appeared unnaturally flushed, and he held his sword loosely at his side, as if he had forgotten about it.

Carthach opened his mouth. Closed it again. How could he possibly explain? *At least we'll be alive!* The words echoed in his mind as if he had shouted them, but he couldn't give them voice. *This invasion was a mistake. We'll never conquer this land. Don't you understand that? But perhaps our people can still have a future here. If we just end this war now, there may be hope for us.* He knew he was right. The truth of it was as plain to him as the smell of blood that clung to his clothes and hair.

But warriors didn't think this way. He knew that as well. And regardless of whether Qirsar had intended it, that's what his people had become. Warriors.

Tearing his eyes from the man's face, he looked at the rest of his battle group.

They were all watching him, some, those who had figured it out, with expressions of disgust. After a moment, he turned his gaze back to the warrior, who hadn't moved.

"I'm sorry," Carthach said at last.

The man sat there like a statue, glaring at him until Carthach began to tremble.

Then, so abruptly that Carthach's mount started, the warrior rose in his saddle, and screaming, "Traitor!" raised his sword to cleave the commander in two.

Carthach had time to shatter the man's steel – he needed only to form the thought – but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had earned this death. Had it not been for the six arrows that buried themselves in the warrior's chest just as he began to bring down his blade, the commander would have died then. Instead, it was the warrior who fell, sliding almost gently from his saddle, as blood swelled from the wounds.

The others glared at him, no doubt wishing they could muster the courage to raise their swords against him as well. But Carthach continued to stare at the empty saddle of the warrior. The man had called him a traitor. True, he had thought of himself that way for several days, but it was another thing entirely to have other Qirsi think it of him, to realize that he would be known this way for the rest of time. Carthach jal Terad, traitor.

"Take the soldiers away," Braedor said. "Leave the commander with me."

Carthach faced the Eandi again. "You promised that no harm would come to them."

"And I intend to keep that promise. It's you I'm worried about, Commander."

His face grew hot, and a moment later he dropped his gaze. He didn't raise his eyes as the northmen began to lead his warriors away, or when one Qirsi woman stopped beside him and spit on his cheek. He didn't even look up when the cheer went up from the Forelanders battling to the west, although he had an idea of what it meant.

"Ride with me," Braedor said, once the others were gone.

The northman kicked his horse into motion, and Carthach had little choice but to follow. They rode west, toward a great cluster of Eandi soldiers. Carthach wiped the spittle from his cheek, and though Braedor glanced at him as he did, the Forelander had the good grace not to say anything.

As they reached the knot of soldiers, Braedor's men parted to let them through, eyeing Carthach with unconcealed curiosity and whispering among themselves. At the center of the cluster, they found a small party of Qirsi men and women. Jerel was among them, as were Treb and Eben, and several other commanders. Hanan was there as well, but he was lying on the blood-soaked grass, an arrow in his shoulder and another in his chest. He was still alive, but only barely, his breath coming in shallow, wet gasps. Blood trickled from his mouth, and his eyelids fluttered open and closed like butterfly wings.

"The Weaver needs healing, Car," Jerel said, staring up at him. "Tell your friends to let us save him."

"Why would we do that?" Braedor asked mildly, "when our intention is to kill all the Weavers?"

Jerel's jaw tightened. There was a wild look in his yellow eyes, but he held his tongue. At least for a moment.

"Why did you do it, Car? Is it that nonsense from last night? The Qirsi aren't meant to be warriors, you said. Is that it? Is that what this is all about?"

He shouldn't have said anything. He should have just ignored Jerel and

what he read on the faces of Treb, Eben, and the others. But he couldn't.

"This was going to end in a slaughter," he said. "Sooner or later, they were going to destroy us. Believe it or not, I was trying to save lives."

Jerel laughed, although that look in his eyes remained. "Well, you certainly saved your own. I bet you made yourself rich, too."

Carthach felt the blood rush to his face again, but he didn't allow himself to look away.

"How much did they give you, Car?"

There was no use in fighting it anymore. None of them would ever understand. He forced a thin smile. "A lot."

"Put these soldiers with the others," Braedor said. "The commanders stay here."

It took some time for all the Qirsi warriors to be led away. None of the commanders spoke, and Braedor sat motionless on his mount, gazing toward the river. Finally, when the warriors were gone, the northman swung himself off his mount and drew his sword.

"Are you going to kill us now?" Jerel asked, his voice steady.

Braedor nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Carthach's mouth went dry. "That wasn't part of our agreement!"

"That's right," Braedor said. "Because it wasn't open to negotiation."

"But you –"

The northman raised a hand, silencing him. "You asked me to spare your warriors, Commander, and I agreed. But I can't risk keeping your officers alive as well. When prisoners have leaders, they become dangerous."

Jerel started to laugh again. "You're an idiot, Car. You really thought –?"

He stopped, gaping at Braedor as the Forelander walked to where Hanan lay and placed the tip of his sword over the Weaver's heart. "What are you doing?" Jerel demanded.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

An instant later there was a sound like a smith's hammer on hot steel, and Braedor's sword snapped in two, the end of the blade falling harmlessly onto Hanan's chest.

Braedor dropped the hilt as if he feared it might bite him. He whirled toward Jerel. "How –?" He faltered. His hands trembled and his dark eyes were wide. "Why would you do that? One way or another he's going to die. Would you rather he suffered?"

Jerel didn't answer, though he held the man's gaze.

Braedor made a small gesture with his hand. Carthach barely noticed it. But within the span of a single heartbeat, Jerel lay dying on the ground with several arrows jutting out of his chest and neck.

The northman picked up the broken blade that lay on Hanan and tossed it away.

"Fool," he muttered.

Not quite understanding why he did it, Carthach drew his own sword. He saw several of Braedor's archers ready their arrows.

Braedor held out a hand and shook his head to stop them. "Don't!" he commanded.

The men lowered their bows.

Holding the blade lightly in his hand, Carthach extended the hilt to Braedor.

The Forelander took it, his eyes fixed on Carthach's. After a moment he nodded.

"Return it to me later," Carthach said, turning his mount away. "I don't care to watch the rest."

He didn't know where he was going. He only knew, as he rode away from Braedor, that there was little comfort for him here. The Qirsi prisoners stared at him with such venom that he had to turn away. Some shouted obscenities. The Forelanders wouldn't even look him in the eye.

The traitor walks a lonely path.

In the end, he rode downstream some distance, until he could no longer hear the two armies. No one tried to stop him. Yes, Braedor still needed him; there were four more legions of Qirsi warriors to the north, all led by Weavers. But the Forelanders knew he wouldn't go far. They still had his gold.

He rode back just after dusk, making his way slowly through the army of the Forelands as Panya climbed into the night sky. Apparently, Braedor had captured the Qirsi camp, for the white-haired healers were here now, ministering to Qirsi and Eandi alike. A tent had been erected in the middle of the northmen's camp, and Carthach rode toward it, knowing that he'd find Braedor inside. Reaching it, he dismounted and entered.

The Forelander sat before his supper, sipping dark wine from a metal cup. He glanced up when Carthach entered, but he didn't stand.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "There's plenty for two."

"No, thank you." Carthach wondered if he'd ever be hungry again.

Braedor pulled out Carthach's sword and offered it to him, hilt first. If he had used it on Hanan or anyone else, he had cleaned it. The steel shimmered in the candlelight.

"My thanks," Braedor said, as Carthach took it from him.

"Never mention it again."

The northman regarded him briefly, then gave a small shrug and raised the wine to his lips.

Carthach turned and started to leave.

"We ride north at dawn," Braedor said, just as the Qirsi reached the tent flap.

He stopped momentarily, nodded without turning around, and then stepped out into the moonlight.

Panya's glow illuminated the Eandi army and reflected off the waters of the Rassor. Below her, Ilias hung just above the plain, like the great red eye of some demon from the Underrealm.

Qirsi moon and Eandi moon. The Lovers, traveling the night sky together on this, the Night of Two Moons in the turn of Adriel, Goddess of Love. It was said that a romance consummated on this night would last forever.

"And what of a betrayal consummated on this day?" Carthach whispered.

Glancing down, he saw that he still carried his sword in his hand. Light danced along the steel, white from Panya, red from Ilias, yellow from the torches. He saw his face reflected on the metal. White hair, yellow eyes, his cheeks flushed red with the night air.

Carthach jal Terad, traitor.

He formed the thought so suddenly, with such violence, that when the sword shattered he flinched, dropping the hilt. Silver shards fell to the grass like flakes of snow, tiny and perfect. But still they glittered with torch fire and the light of the two moons.

Playing the Classics

Role Playing Your Favorite Novels
By Kyla Ward

Fantasy role-playing games sprang from fantasy literature. True, there were some heavy contributions from war-gaming and theatre, but there is no doubt that *The Lord of the Rings* is the ultimate source of any game involving orcs, elves and hobbits, whatever they're called by the locals.

Robert E. Howard's Conan saga is another source of our modern concepts of heroes and heroic adventure. It's Conan who carves his way through ancient dungeons and ruined temples filled with monsters. It's Michael Moorcock's Elric who wields - and is wielded by - his cursed blade as the conflict between Law and Chaos rages across the planes. And somewhere along the line, odds are that the Great Old Ones will make an appearance no matter what game you're playing.

Still, to influence is one thing. To directly adapt a book or series into a role-playing game is quite another.

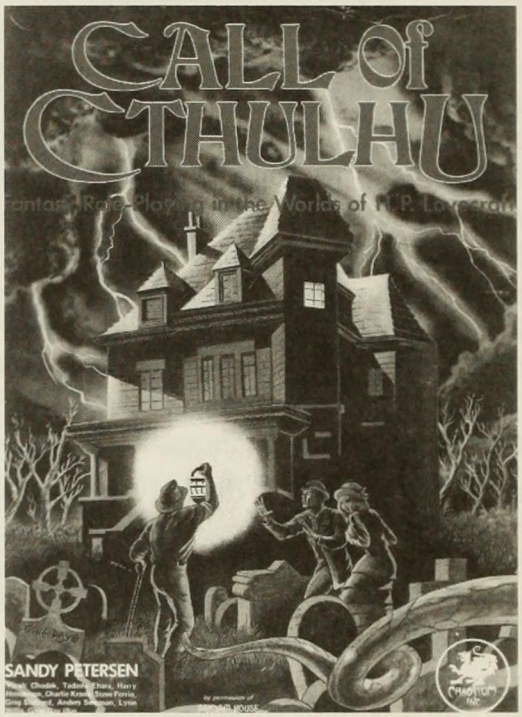
It would seem an obvious move. Your world comes ready-made, provided by an obliging author with races, cultures and monsters. But any of the classic fantasies mentioned are a lot more than this. They have a style, a particular kind of adventure with goals and possibilities that are unique to that setting. The events of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* could hardly take place in the Witchworld of Andre Norton!

An important part of this style is the story's heroes. To be a successful adaptation of a book, a role-playing game must somehow allow for the fact that player characters cannot be relied upon to do the right thing at the right moment. Then there is the fact that the heroes of books are usually exceptional; they possess powers and items that any game master knows would destroy a game, for a

Lankhmar *art by Keith Parkinson. Copyright 1986 by TSR Inc.*

game is open-ended in a way that even the most seemingly endless series is not. And just what are these heroes doing while the player characters are romping through their territory?

There are other problems as well. Revelations about the world are often an important part of fantasies, so what happens when the players have already read all about them? But in spite of all this, a role-playing game can provide something precious to anyone who has ever truly loved a book: a way to go back and experience it again through new eyes.



What follows is a survey of games that have undertaken this task, how they went about it and what they offer a player who has, and a player who hasn't, read the original source material. The list is not exhaustive but it does cover a wide range of authors and role-playing systems. What each and every one of these games share is a desire to explore the original world, perhaps even expanding on it.

If this survey should inspire anyone to embark on a new role-playing adventure, in most cases the core rules are sufficient to begin play. The exceptions are that all GURPS books (Generic Universal Role-playing System, from Steve Jackson Games) require the GURPS Basic Set and possibly other supplements for use, and anything released for Advanced Dungeons & Dragons requires at least the Player's Handbook for first or second edition. Third edition D&D operates on TSR's D20 system, and any other fantasy game that uses it will require the third edition Player's Handbook.

The Cthulhu Mythos, Howard Phillip Lovecraft (and others).

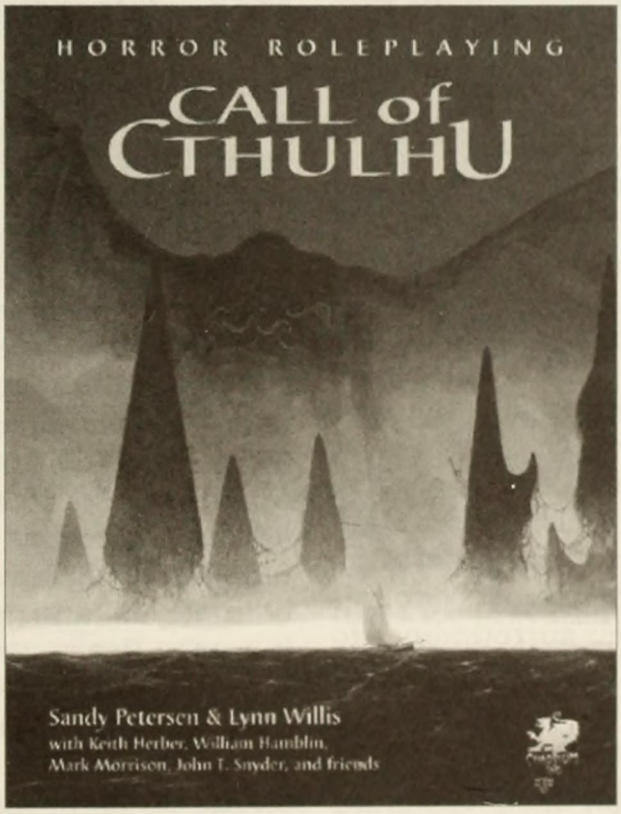
In 1978, the twelfth issue of TSR's house magazine *The Dragon* ran an article featuring entities of the Cthulhu mythos written up for D&D. A similar section was included in the first edition *Deities and Demigods* (1980), along with gods taken from Michael Moorcock's works. Unfortunately, TSR had neglected to obtain permission from the respective copyright holders and the edition had to be withdrawn (making it a highly sought-after collectible item). But the Great Old Ones had already insinuated themselves into role-playing.

The first edition of *The Call of Cthulhu: Horror Role-playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft* was released by Chaosium in 1981, with full approval from all the necessary authors and estates. Unquestionably it introduced a new kind of basic role-playing adventure. Instead of the heroes going into the dungeon, killing the monsters and finding the treasure, the Investigators go into the haunted house, are killed by the monsters, and/or go insane when they find the treasure - although they usually manage to avert a threat to mankind in the process. After all, these are the essentials of most of the tales making up the Cthulhu mythos, not just those by Lovecraft, although he and his work have always been given pride of place. In Edition 5.6 of the core rules (Sandy Petersen, Lynn Willis and others, Chaosium 1999) the entire story *The Call of Cthulhu* is reprinted.

Edition 5.6 is an imposing hardback. It contains a tremendous

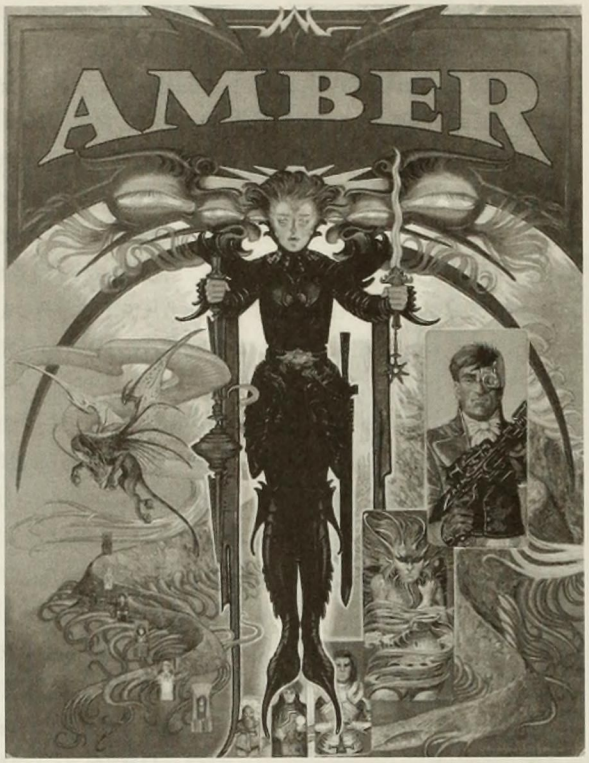
amount of background material, including a timeline of world history according to the Mythos, descriptions of entities and deities, spells and of course the Necronomicon. The sample adventure "The Haunting" (aka "The Haunted House") has appeared in every single edition of the rules since the first. In addition to the core rules a huge number of sourcebooks and adventures, some detailing locations such as Dunwich and Innsmouth have been produced over the years. Most are still useable, as the game runs on a tailored version of the Chaosium Basic Role-playing System, which has been streamlined while remaining essentially the same.

These tailored rules do more to make the game Lovecraftian than even the superb background. The player characters are, as said, Investigators. They are defined by occupations such as journalist, antiquarian and professor; there are more skills representing academic than combat ability. But even more important is the derived statistic Sanity. An Investigator's maximum possible Sanity is 99% minus her score in the Cthulhu Mythos skill, *i.e.* the more she knows concerning the dreadful secrets of the world, the more likely she is to suffer when confronted with its horrors, from shock, phobias or temporary psychosis (all to be duly role-played). Sanity loss from such events is regainable, but loss of maximum from increasing Cthulhu Mythos skill is not. Increasing Cthulhu Mythos skill is an inevitable consequence of play and must be actively sought when the only way to defeat an entity is to learn the spell to banish it. Gradually the Investigator's mental stability wanes. If her sanity reaches zero, she must be retired from play.



The original game was set in Lovecraft's 1920s milieu, and this is still the default. But what Lovecraft wrote was above all contemporary horror. Therefore games can be run in Victorian England and the present day. The adventure collection *Strange Aeons* includes scenarios in Medieval Spain, Renaissance England and on a moon base. The flexibility of the Cthulhu game is incredible. It supports both short or one-off games, and campaigns longer than any single Lovecraft story. There's even a set of rules for Live Action Role-playing (*Cthulhu Live*, Robert McLaughlin, first edition Chaosium, 1997; second edition Fantasy Flight Games, 1999).

In short, *The Call of Cthulhu* is the standard by which any game adaptation of a literary work must be judged, as well as being simply one of the best role-playing games ever. The ease with which it may be found in any game shop speaks for itself.



The Chronicles of Amber, Roger Zelazny.

Amber Diceless Role-playing (Erick Wurjcik, Phage Press, 1992 (1991)) and the supplement *Shadow Knight* are labors of love. Both are large volumes, and even without the inclusion of rules they would act as a guide to the Amberverse and a literary critique of Zelazny, who is credited and thanked for permitting the project

But with the rules, this is a game where the player characters are Amberites. Immortal, regenerating demigods who under most circumstances can mold their surroundings to suit their whim. Is there any conceivable way this could work?

Well, yes, at least for a while. According to the designer, some of the original campaigns in which the rules were developed ran for several years. But to quote him at another point, "There are no limits in Amber. Player Characters can, if they're ambitious enough, or careless enough, destroy the whole campaign. It's just habit with me. I've always liked the idea of Player Characters being given enough power to blow themselves to kingdom come."

The player characters are not, however, the Amberites of the Chronicles. Corwin, Benedict and the others are strictly non-player characters. The game purports to be a continuation of the chronicles, with the player characters as the next generation. That means that the write-up of every elder Amberite (which include attractive 'trumps') includes suggestions of how they might behave as parents.

The system is diceless. On the reasonable grounds that the only things that can really threaten Amberites are other Amberites, player characters are made up of comparisons to other player characters and non-player characters in the areas of Warfare, Psyche, Strength and Endurance. For example, Benedict always has the best Warfare and no other character can beat him in a straight fight. They will have to manipulate circumstances within the game until it is no longer a straight fight. This makes for an incredibly game master-intensive game, but it sure feels like Amber.

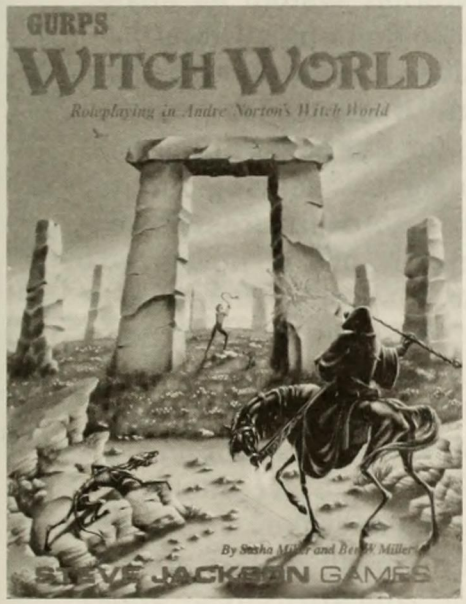
The rules suggest that "the best opening story for an Amber campaign is one where the entire universe is in danger... Without something really nasty to work against, the Player Characters tend to scatter." Which would also feel very Amber, but be fatal for the game. This game requires genuine knowledge and commitment from both players and game master to make it work. Really it requires that they have not only read the chronicles but have memorized large chunks. Still, the opportunity to scheme in Amber is worth some effort. Unfortunately, tracking down these out of print books will require it.

The Witchworld, Andre Norton.

Andre Norton is no stranger to role-playing. In 1978 she wrote the novel *Quag Keep* in association with TSR, based on the World of Greyhawk cam-

paign setting. The Witchworld series has no specific tie to the hobby, but after her initial novels it became something perhaps even more lively. Through anthologies and individual short stories published with her permission, it became a shared world.

GURPS Witchworld is by Sasha and Ben W Miller (Steve Jackson Games, 1989). Sasha has contributed to the anthologies, and the game fairly shouts fandom. These days the Witchworld is very large and an effort has been made to include everything, including a complete bibliography and timeline. Rest assured, if a player character Witch or Wererider is desired, the information to create her is in there somewhere.



The various nations are presented as at the end of the initial story cycle concerning Simon Tregrath, Jaelithe and their children, and the Griffin and Wererider cycles set in High Halleck. These histories are given in great detail, and all the central characters are written up. But precisely how a campaign is to proceed from any of the myriad possible beginnings is left to the game master. There are a few suggestions as to how a party may meet and begin adventuring - strangely, there are more as to how an individual character could begin adventuring - but no advice on story arcs or ultimate goals. That a campaign be set in the midst of say, the Kolder wars, is certainly moot but the question of predetermined events and players who already know the Kolders' weaknesses are not addressed.

Two of the central themes of the series are explored. The conflict of medieval with advanced technology is aptly supported by the GURPS rules, that can handle a bullet hitting a breastplate with ease. The section on the Witchworld's many different styles of magic is large and intricate, with new spells and those drawn from the GURPS magic supplements ordered by 'color' and alignment with Light or Shadow. Different 'colors' are available to different kinds of magic-user, and this holds a great deal of potential.

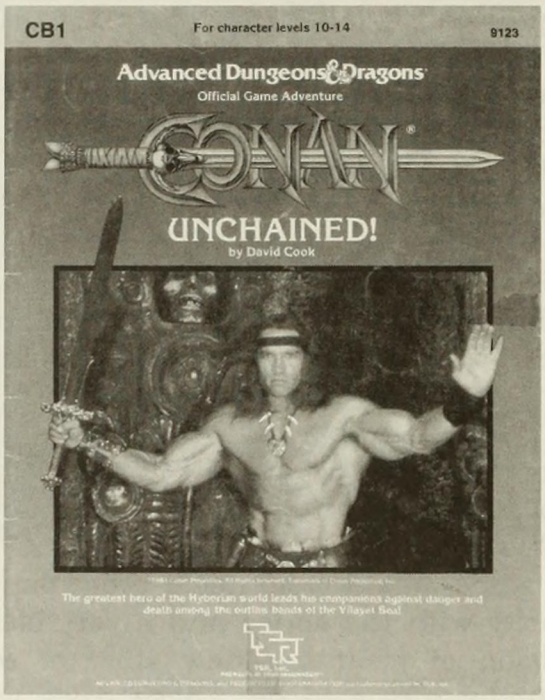
Although play in the Witchworld could consist of dungeons in exotic locations, that just doesn't seem right. This book is best considered an aid to a game master who has a great familiarity with the series and a very clear vision of what her new story of the Witchworld is to be. These rules will support almost any concept, and as indicated they contain Witchworld flavor, but there will be a lot of set-up work required before play. This book is not for inexperienced role-players, and is also out of print.

The Conan Saga, Robert E. Howard (and others)

In 1984 TSR released two adventures for first edition AD&D representing quite a departure from their norm. The pictures of Arnold Schwarzenegger on the covers of *Conan Unchained* (David 'Zeb' Cook) and *Conan Against Darkness* (Ken Rolston) may demonstrate their motive. They are not sourcebooks or in any way a complete campaign setting, but they will let players experience a Howardesque adventure with Howard's characters. Supplied for use are Conan (as mercenary captain in the first, king of Aquilonia in the second), Valeria and others. Using personal characters is an option, but this will cause problems in

adventures that depend upon certain things happening to Conan or Valeria at this or that point.

The departure extends to the first edition rules. Human Alignments do not fit into the Hyborian setting and



so are not given. There are Fear Checks, for when characters encounter unnatural situations, and Luck Points to allow characters to do things that even Conan's impressive Fighter/Thief statistics would not permit. These changes foreshadow what David Cook and TSR produced the following year.

Conan - the Roleplaying Game is not only a full campaign setting, it is an entirely new rule system presented as a boxed set. It was meant to be a 'beginners' game, easy to learn and play. It is based on a percentile system - yes, TSR released a game that only needed two dice - and all rolls refer back to a color-coded table that allows for degrees of success; for example, a 'to hit' roll that ends up in the red zone will do more damage than a roll only reaching the yellow zone. Player characters are constructed of Talents and Skills including 'Fighting Talent', 'Personal Magnetism' and personal fears and weaknesses. Appropriately enough, player character access to magic is rare, magic being an awesome force wielded only by the inhuman or insane. As in the AD&D adventures, Conan and his companions are written up for use as PCs, but with an entire Hyborian background available, their scope of action is considerably freer. Indeed, the designer has said in interviews that this was in the upshot a problem; that in spite of the character generation system all anyone ever wants to do is play Conan.

And what does Conan do with his scope of action? If there was ever a time and place for the basic dungeon and an emphasis on cleaving monsters, this is it. Adventures were released in support of the new system, including *Conan Triumphant*, based on the licensed novel of that title by Robert Jordan.

But in 1989 came *GURPS Conan* (Curtis M. Scott with introduction by L. Sprague de Camp, Steve Jackson Games). Make no mistake, this volume is the Encyclopedia Hyboria, referencing every Howard story and licensed work to 1989 with a tremendous bibliography.

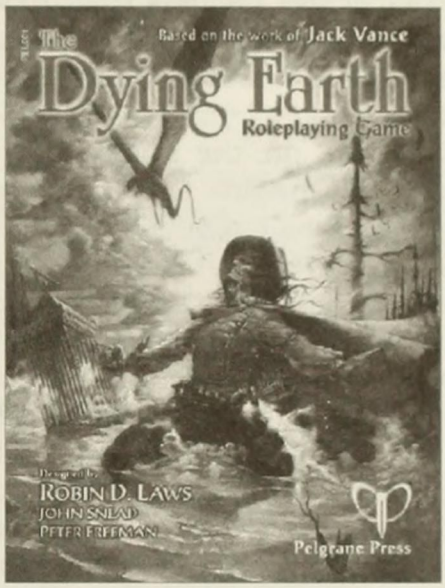
All the nations of the Hyborian continent are covered in detail. Unlike *Conan: the Roleplaying Game,* there is a defined 'present', shortly after the ascension of Conan to the Aquilonian throne, although subsequent events are often referred to. The course of the saga - the destiny of that wandering barbarian - is fixed. It forms a moving background to the player character's exploits, with Conan possibly appearing as a non-player character. In the designer's opinion Conan cannot be used as a player character without sacrificing his destiny, and along with it the essential feel of Howard's works. However, to tap into that established market, Steve Jackson Games also released a number of solo adventure books featuring Conan in discrete episodes of the saga. *Queen of the*

Black Coast, Beyond Thunder River and others can also be used as sourcebooks for their particular regions.

Player characters can come from any nation and be any profession imaginable in the setting. Guides are given as to the status of various professions in each nation, but the only limits are the kind of adventures the game master wants to run. The classic campaign is surely the multiskilled party fighting and stealing their way across the continent, but the military-based campaign also offers a great deal and is certainly just as Hyborian.

The book includes an excellent set of rules for running mass combats. They reflect differences in numbers, skill and arms of troops, the skill of commanders and choice of tactics, but the emphasis is on the difference the player characters can make. "Game masters should remember that they are bards; tell the tale well, and reward heroism."

Copies of *Conan - the Roleplaying Game* seem to be fairly rare these days but the AD&D adventures and the GURPS book are both to found. *GURPS Conan*, however, has become something of a collector's item and where it is available for purchase will not be cheap.



The Dying Earth, Jack Vance

That the entire Dungeons & Dragons magic system is based on Vance's sorcerers, who torturously memorize formulae that vanish from their minds when the spell is cast, is the most thinly-veiled of secrets. Even to the naming of spells; "The Excellent Prismatic Sphere" and "Lugwiler's Dismal Itch" are from the tales, "Prismatic Spray" and "Tasha's Hideous Laughter" are AD&D.

So it is surely only fair that the tales receive full acknowledgment through their own game: *The Dying Earth : Role-playing in the world of Jack Vance* (Robin D. Laws and others, Pelgrane Press, 2001). Break out the thesaurus and don your fashionable hat, we embark on a most ellucidatory adventure!

To write the entire rulebook in Vance's style was an audacious undertaking, but he is said to have approved. The idea of getting the players to work in that same linguistic mode inspires true awe, but practical assistance is provided. First there is the rulebook, and the quotes that adorn nearly every page. Then there is the rule of Taglines. A sample list of witticisms culled from the novels is provided in the core rules. At the start of each session the game master gives

each player two taglines that they must try and use appropriately during the game, for a reward of improvement points.

Everyone on the Dying Earth has access to magic to some extent. Campaigns are defined by that level of access, named after representative characters from the tales; the game can be run at 'Cugel' level, 'Turjon' or even 'Rhialto' level. There are no classes or occupations (although some people may have been grown in vats) since characters are defined by style. The entire system is based on choosing the way the character goes about things such as combat - she may have a Cautious attack and a Vexatious defense - with some qualities being more effective against other qualities. She will even have a magic-wielding style. She will also have varying degrees of resistance to such everyday temptations as Avarice, Rakishness and Gourmandism.

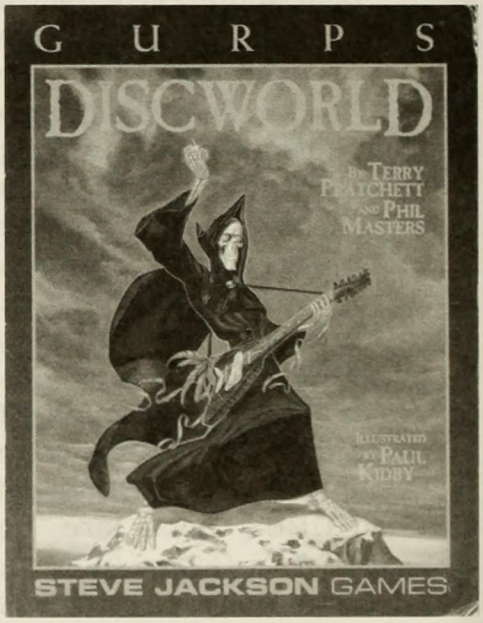
But to send such characters on a standard fantasy quest would simply not do. These are the last days after all, and long-term projects of any nature are questionable. Whether the game master can create a Vancian adventure or not is really the key. It is suggested that design start with perusal of a list of elements common in Vance's plots, including Strange Customs, Heated Protests, Presumptuous Claims, Crafty Swindles and Exotic Food. A sample adventure, "The Cooks of Cuirnif" is given in the core rules.

This game is fun, although perhaps not suited for an epic campaign. A limited story arc based on a theme would work very well. But it is another game where you must not only have read the books, you must adore them.

The Discworld Chronicles, Terry Pratchett.

Terry Pratchett's wonderful extrusion of humor with fantasy is something no other author can quite manage. So it's a good thing he contributed to *GURPS Discworld.*

GURPS Discworld (Phil Masters, John M Ford and Terry Pratchett) was released by Steve Jackson Games in 1998. Terry Pratchett has never hidden the fact that he was a role-player, and that some of the concepts and creatures of Discworld started life in his campaigns. It is unclear which parts he actually wrote (although there are all these suspiciously witty footnotes), but frankly, the book is worth reading just for the laughs. It also makes for a good collection of Paul Kidby's art. In 2001 came the supplement *GURPS Discworld Also* (same designers).



The first book includes the complete GURPS Lite rules. These prove to be flexible enough to cope with even the Discworld. It's possible to create a straightforward, generic adventurer, but with the various interpretations suggested for standard GURPS advantages, disadvantages and skills, there's no need. This is a game where having a character with a wooden leg, or who speaks a different language to the rest of the party could actually work. There are also some Disc-specific qualities and all the occupations you might expect (plus Guerilla Mime). The party could consist of a Druid stone circle programmer, a fully qualified and accredited Guild Assassin and a Barbarian Hero-in-training, who have been organized/coerced by the Witch or Wizard into taking up some funny quest.

How to make a quest funny is specifically treated in the first book, in a chapter entitled "Bad Food, No Sleep and Strange People", and exemplified in the second book. Breaking into a mysterious wizard's tower is one thing; when the tower has been stolen and is currently being worn by a Hermit Elephant it is somehow another. But other types of adventure are suggested and these may well be more in keeping with the Chronicles' strange combination of the logical and even somber with the ridiculous. Consider the 'sitcom campaign': a group of amusingly disparate people brought together in a situation where stories develop from their interaction. An example is a game based around the City Watch.

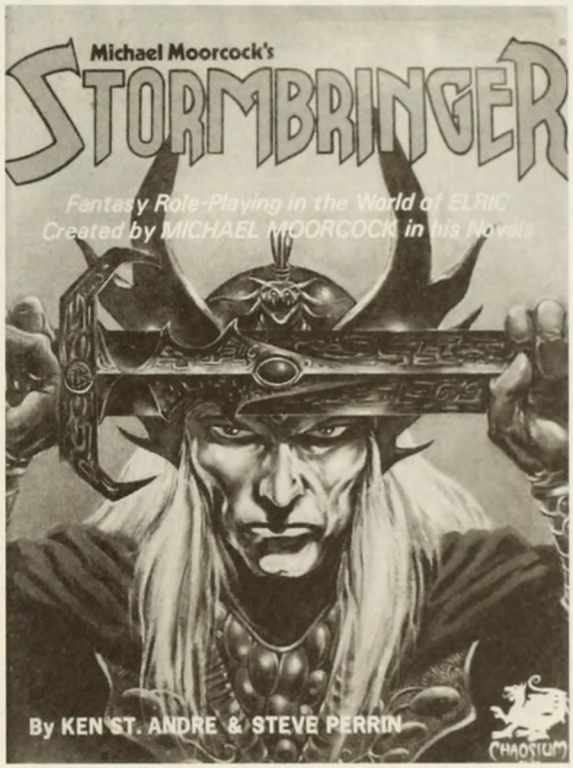
These books will certainly allow games to be set on the Discworld, with a good chance of appropriate stories coming to be. But humor is still one of the most difficult things for an author or a game master to achieve.

The Worlds of the Eternal Champion, Michael Moorcock.

The Elric Saga

The peculiar charm of Elric of Melnibone, antihero of a doomed world, is widely acknowledged. But what makes it so much fun to role-play that Chaosium has brought out three different versions?

Stormbringer: Fantasy Role-playing in the World of Elric was first released in 1981 but substantially reorganized in 1985 by Ken St Andre and Steve Perrin into a handsome boxed set. It runs on a version of the Chaosium Basic Role-playing System tailored differently from *Call of Cthulhu*, with characters defined by nation as well as occupation, and detailed rules for combat (the critical hit and fumble tables are reminiscent of Chaosium's *Runequest*). But what it does above all is allow the player character to start not as a first-level adventurer who fights his way to greater power, but as a powerful and influential member of the nobility or priest-

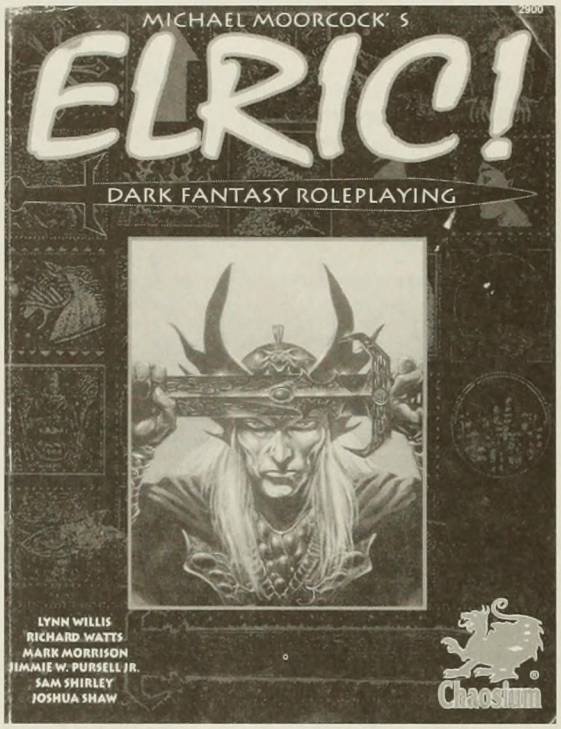


hood of any Young Kingdom nation, even Melnibone, with the option of summoning and binding her own demons or the Lawful equivalent of virtues. Any use of the background is permissible. Player characters can adventure in the hinterlands as the central events of the saga unfold, or they can *be* Elric and his companions attempting to thwart fate.

In 1993, *Elric! Dark Fantasy Role-playing in the Young Kingdoms* was released and put a stop to all that (Lynn Willis, Richard Watts & others). Although the rules are similar enough to convert player characters across from the old version, they must "begin among the swarms of nameless adventurers drifting through the Young Kingdoms." The events of the saga are unalterable. It is even suggested that the game master begin the campaign during the reign of Elric's father, as once Elric ascends the Ruby Throne there are only seven years left until the

end of the world. The keyword is *dark*.

A new 'low level' form of magic (not involving entities) is introduced, but



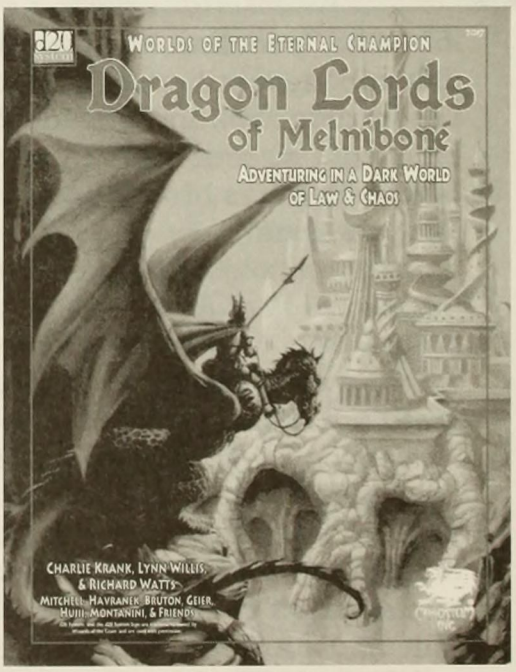
magic is irredeemably aligned with Chaos except for the very rare spells granted to Champions of Law. The alignment of all characters is charted through a point system, points awarded by the game master for 'Chaotic,' 'Lawful' or even 'Balanced' acts. A character collecting a certain number of points may become a Champion of that principal and gain special abilities, and here occurs something extremely rare in a role-playing game. A Champion of the Balance will be called upon to undertake the quest for Tanelorn. "Having succeeded, the Champion has won the game... escaping the general doom of the Young Kingdoms."

Elric! also contains an introductory adventure "The Weight of Doom" which clearly maps out the Law-Balance-Chaos struggle and the central idea that the player characters are part of it.

Elric! has gone through five editions. It's just that the fifth edition (Lynn Willis & others, 2001) is called *Stormbringer* and incorporates material from previously released supplements such as *Sorcerers of Pan Tang*. The rules have been streamlined considerably, though they are still recognizable, and it contains the same introductory adventure, among others.

Also released in 2001 was *Dragonlords of Melnibone*, an adaptation by Chaosium of their own game for the D20 system (Charlie Krank, Lynn Willis, Richard Watts and others). The difference is the system, as the background material is all but identical to that contained in *Elric!*, although different character classes are associated with different nations. New skills are provided, as are new spells where the base D20 system does not suffice, but the closest thing available to a Prestige Class is a high number of allegiance points. The core rules are not quite sufficient to begin play, providing little idea of what constitutes a suitable adventure.

With its intricate background and strongly defining rules, *Elric!/ Stormbringer* is one of the few games in this survey that could be played without prior knowledge of the books, not only successfully but advantageously. As Moorcock is quoted as saying on the back of the *Stormbringer* boxed set, "It does not merely derive from the books - it complements them perfectly."



Hawkmoon (The Chronicles of the Runestaff, The Chronicles of Castle Brass)

The boxed set for *Hawkmoon: Science and Sorcery in Earth's Far Future* (Kerie Campbell-Robson) was released by Chaosium in 1986 as a companion to their revamped *Stormbringer*. There are even planar-traveling cross-over adventures. But finding copies can be quite difficult, as this was the only edition. There is an idea that *Hawkmoon* is the opposite to *Stormbringer*; a plane where Law is stronger than Chaos, set in Earth's unrecognizably distant future rather than unrecognizably distant past.

There are no demons and extremely little magic. Even the evil empire of Granbretan relies on weird science. Both games do use the same system, weird science working via a new set of skills such as Machine Lore and Ancient Lore.

Characters from the books are written up for use as non-player characters, to provide missions and advice. But the matter of precisely when the campaign is set in relation to the books and how it should develop is not treated. Player characters can certainly advance and presumably become powerful enough to pose a threat to Granbretan. The Amarehkian continent is described along with the location of the Runestaff, so presumably travelling there is an option. But what happens if the player characters go for it? Perhaps further, unrealized supplements would have covered such things.

As a basic game it can be a great deal of fun. There is a lot of humor implicit in the random mutation table, and the pursuit of Ancient Artifacts that are recognizable as microwave ovens and umbrellas. Then there are the Granbretans. Thought has been put into how Granbretan manages to function when, by the rules of the game, every national is insane. Even rebel Granbretan player characters must take at least one neurosis. *Hawkmoon* is best considered a beginner's game. Reading the books, or indeed running the game with any reference to the Eternal Champion, is entirely optional.

Corum (The Sword Rulers Trilogy, the Silver Hand Trilogy)

Corum: Heroic Adventures Across the World of the Five Planes (Geoff Gillan & others) is a large, beautiful soft-back released by Darcsyde Productions in 2001. It's a licensed supplement for Chaosium's fifth edition *Stormbringer* and uses the same system: a copy of *Stormbringer* is needed to use this book. That said, this is as different a role-playing experience as Corum is a character.

The setting is after the Sword Rulers have overthrown the Gods of Law but before Corum begins his quest. The player characters are the heroes that prepare his way. Appropriately enough there is a great deal of magic available, but compared to *Stormbringer* it is more flexible and much more dangerous. That this is a

time "of misshapen creatures who could be summoned by an ill-considered thought" is a rule. There is also the lawful art of 'Contriving', something very much associated with the Vadhagh. The Vadhagh and Nhadragh are available as player character races and a great deal of thought has been put into creating genuine non-humans that are still playable. The designers have by their own admission taken great license with the Nhadragh, which Moorcock left largely undeveloped. A warning; do not read the "Encyclopedia Masteria" chapter unless you are serious about game mastering. The designers have come up with something which would make for a unique campaign where the player characters have something of real value to gain.

Introductory adventures are set in both civilized and barbarian lands. They are lush and exotic, suitable introductions to "a rich time and a dark time" where planes overlay planes and some gods definitely need a helping hand - remember, the gods in the

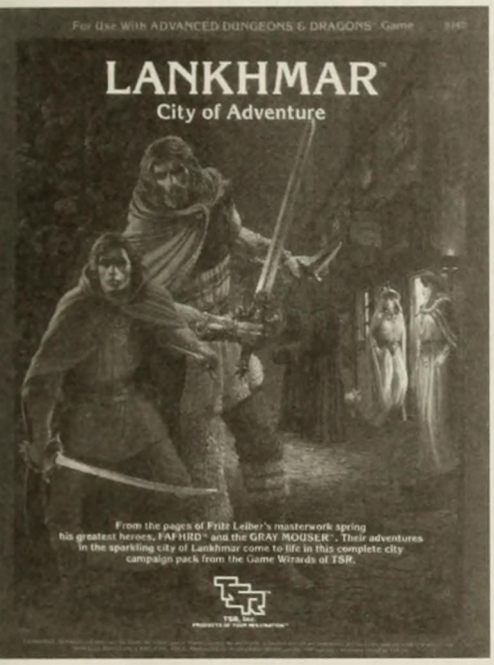
fifteen planes can never directly intervene. The rules state "The adventures of Prince Corum himself take place on a truly cosmic scale and gamesmasters should seek to capture a little of this if they want to adhere to the spirit of the chronicles..." For a game master with some experience, this book will allow that to happen.

Lankhmar, (the 'Swords' books) Fritz Leiber.

Fritz Leiber's stories of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser were not the only way in which he explored his creation. With the assistance of friend Harry Fischer he created and played a war game. And to the premiere issue of *The Dragon* (June 1976)he contributed a dialogue between himself and the heroic Pair concerning its upcoming release by TSR. *Lankhmar* is not a role-playing game, but it is a genuine work of the author as well as an extremely rare collectible.

This was the beginning of what has been a long and fruitful association. The first edition AD&D campaign setting *Lankhmar, City of Adventure* (Bruce Nesmith, Douglas Niles & Ken Rolston) was released in 1985, and re-released for second edition AD&D with substantial rewriting and expansion by Anthony Pryor. In both cases, the AD&D system is tailored to match Leiber's assumptions. Compared to the usual AD&D setting, magic in Lankhmar is low profile. Spells take a great deal longer to cast, too long to

generally be of use in combat, and both level and spells available are restricted. They also provide swaths of statistics for non-player characters, including Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser at different points of their careers, and a campaign is even suggested where players are the archtypical Ranger/ Thief/Bard and Fighter/ Thief/ Magic-User.



But frankly, the rules are the least important part of these two books. Almost any fantasy role-playing game could benefit from the material contained in them and such supplements as *Thieves of Lankhmar.*

In both editions, the rest of Newhon is (comparatively) scantily covered. But every inch of Lankhmar is mapped, or can be, each district discussed down to important or characteristic businesses. Not everything is taken directly from Leiber, but the additions have been made with care and an eye for utility during play. But perhaps more importantly, the mechanisms of the city are described; the Street of the Gods (and what a cult's position means for its priests), the Guild system (and how to join), the justice system (this is one town where having a player character arrested could be fun for everyone), its festivals (and what the Thieves Guild will probably be doing at the time) and a whole set of quirks that makes the city not only a lively, functioning place, but which makes it feel like Lankhmar.

When it comes to designing and running suitable adventures, the second edition is a great deal more helpful than the first. The additional material focuses on how to integrate existing characters into Lankhmar and how to create and run natives of the city in a Lankhmar campaign. Of course, a good number of Lankhmar adventures were also released by TSR but these are of varying quality. Many fall into the trap of treating the varied terrain of the city in the same way as the basic dungeon, and breaking this mold is a lot more important in Lankhmar than, for instance, Hyboria.

In 1996 *Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar: The New Adventures of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser* (Shane Lacy Hensley) was released as a boxed set. While incorporating material from the previous volumes, this is a complete role-playing game featuring a kind of A D & D Lite rule system. It includes the vast adventure *Newhon Nights*, sending the players to a sunken ship at the bottom of Lankhmar's harbor to confront the dreaded Cult of the Shark God, that could amount to an entire campaign.

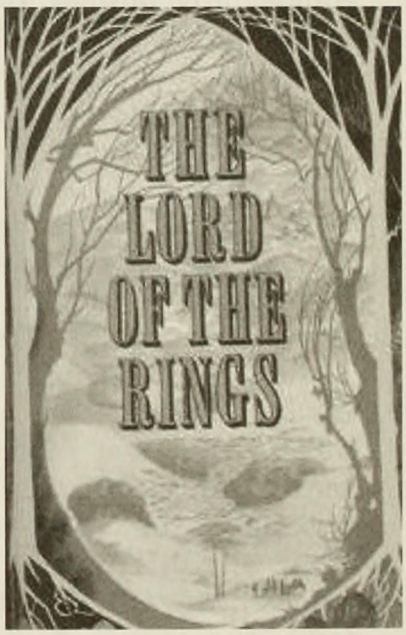
Any of these releases is an excellent resource for anyone running a fantasy city, even if Lankhmar itself is not wanted. The second edition material and the 1996 boxed set can sometimes be found in game shops with a lot of shelf space, and are fairly common second-hand.

Middle-Earth, J. R. R. Tolkien.

The good Professor lived to see the onset of Tolkien fandom, but always kept himself at a distance from the kind of people who would consider dressing up as elves, smoking a lot of pipeweed and introducing orcish battalions into their war-games. What he would have thought of role-playing is unguessable, but, as said, there probably isn't a fantasy role-playing game that doesn't owe something to his works. It need not be as obvious as including hobbits, although this is what got TSR into trouble with its very first version of **Dungeons & Dragons** in 1974. This featured hobbits as a character race while neglecting to obtain the permission of the Tolkien estate. When first edition AD&D came out in 1978 it featured 'halflings'.

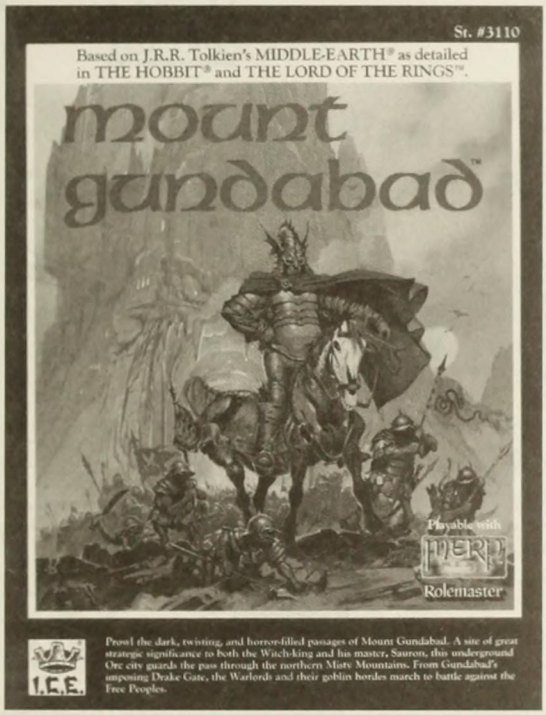
However, Middle Earth Role-playing (Iron Crown Enterprises) was licensed by Tolkien Enterprises. The original project was to release Middle Earth supplements for Palladium's *Rolemaster* system, but a stand alone rule book came out in 1984 (S. Coleman Charlton and others). It is set in crammed, tiny type, uses irrelevant, non-copyrighted woodcuts for illustration and has more tables than background. But it is still Middle Earth.

The default setting for 'MERP' is the Third Age, between the loss of the ring by Isildur and the start of the Ring Wars. But the information in the rules is very generic, and overall any time in the Second or Third Ages, or even the early Fourth Age is possible. Characters are defined by race and profession, and no one should be surprised that Ranger is an option. Just about everything that can be considered a race is written up, including uruk-hai and olog-hai and certain Men that the tales give very little space to. Under certain circumstances, such as playing after the Ring Wars, orc or troll player characters may be considered. A certain amount of extrapolation has also taken place to allow for clerics of the various Valar, and mages distinct from Istari. Tolkien never codified a magic system, so a fairly generic one has been produced. There is, however, a great emphasis on herb lore and properties.

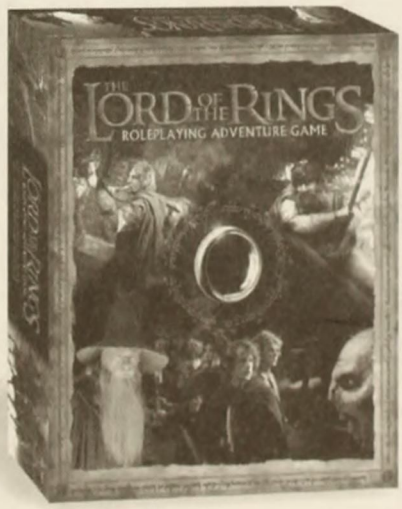


There's an enormous amount of background material available in the various campaign guidebooks for MERP. This kind of encyclopedic treatment of the tales is available in many non-role-playing contexts. For the role-player, the real gems of the MERP line are the campaign sourcebooks. Releases such as *Angmar, Land of the Witch King* and *Mount Gundabad* cover their geographical areas in great detail. The maps are a main feature and gen-

erally excellent. Cities, villages, fortresses and ancient ruins are created to give a feel to the terrain. There



are also compilations of adventures, such as *The Assassins of Dol Amroth*, and as the title suggests, these too are generally location based. There are too many supplements even to attempt to cover here, but special note must be made of the three volumes of *The Lords of Middle Earth*. These contain write-ups for just about every character in the tales from Manwë down, including First Age notables. Again, in some places extrapolation has taken place; it appears that one of the Nazgûl was originally a female Bard.



So overall, what kind of game does this produce? It may be noted that the locations detailed in the sourcebooks are often peripheral to the events of the tales. Middle Earth is huge, and the designers have made use of this to allow player characters to play their parts in the overall struggle while not getting in the way of major events. Encounters with remnants of the Witch King's empire and the servants of the Necromancer can be satisfying with that essential touch of the epic, so long as players are willing to suspend a certain amount of background knowledge. The idea of rolling up a couple of orcs and trashing the Shire does appear to have widespread popularity, but the fact that the tales can support parody is a sign of their strength, and that the game permits this is really only in keeping.

Second edition MERP came out in 1993, but Iron Crown Enterprises subsequently lost their license. All MERP material is out of print, but there is an awful lot of it and much can still be found in game shops. Card company Decipher recently acquired the license and launched **The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Adventure Game** in 2001, a boxed set with a fairly introductory set of rules and a brief adventure, "Through the Mines of Moria."

Role-playing at its best involves the participants in the telling of stories (with good combat sequences). But in the end, the achievements of MERP and *Call of Cthulhu* notwithstanding, there is no substitute for reading the original works. If any of the books mentioned in this survey are not familiar to you, most are easy to find and reading them will be time well spent. Without these books there would be no role-playing, and there is no better way to acknowledge this than by going back and enjoying the classics of fantasy.

Beat Me Daddy (Eight to the Bar)

Beat Me Daddy (Eight to the Bar)

By Cory Doctorow

We were the Eight-Bar Band: there was me and my bugle; and Timson, whose piano had no top and got rained on from time to time; and Steve, the front-man and singer. And then there was blissed-out, autistic Hambone, our "percussionist" who whacked things together, more-or-less on the beat. Sometimes, it seemed like he was playing another song, but then he'd come back to the rhythm and *bam*, you'd realize that he'd been subtly keeping time all along, in the mess of clangs and crashes he'd been generating.

I think he may be a genius.

Why the Eight-Bar Band? Thank the military. Against all odds, they managed to build automated bombers that *still* fly, roaring overhead every minute or so, bomb-bay doors open, dry firing on our little band of survivors. The War had been over for ten years, but still, they flew.

So. The Eight-Bar Band. Everything had a rest every eight bars, punctuated by the white-noise roar of the most expensive rhythm section ever imagined by the military-industrial complex.

We were playing through "Basin Street Blues," arranged for bugle, half-piano, tin cans, vocals, and bombers. Steve, the front-man, was always after me to sing backup on this, crooning a call-and-response. I blew a bugle because I didn't *like* singing. Bugle's almost like singing, anyway, and I did the backup vocals *through* it, so when Steve sang, "Come along wi-ith me," I blew, "Wah wah wah wah-wah wah," which sounded dynamite. Steve hated it. Like most front-men, he had an ego that could swallow the battered planet, and didn't want any lip from the troops. That was us. The troops. Wah-wah.

The audience swayed in time with the music, high atop the pile of rubble we played on in the welcome cool of sunset, when the work-day was through. They leaned against long poles, which made me think of gondoliers, except that our audience used their poles to pry apart the rubble that the bombers had created, looking for canned goods.

Illustrated by Chuck Lukacs

Steve handed Hambone a solo cue just as a bomber flew by overhead, which was his idea of a joke. He didn't like Hambone much. "Take it, Hambone!" he shouted, an instant before the roar began. It got a laugh. Hambone just grinned his blissed-out smile and went gonzo on the cans. The roar of the bomber faded, and he played on, and then settled into a kicky lick that set me on an expedition on the bugle, that left me blue in the face. Steve gave us dirty looks.

Then a stranger started dancing.

It was pretty shocking: not the dancing; people do that whenever they find some booze or solvents or whatever; it was the stranger. We didn't get a lot of strangers around there. Lyman and his self-styled "militia" took it upon themselves to keep wanderers out of our cluster of rubble. She was dirty, like all of us, but she had good teeth, and she wasn't so skinny you could count her ribs. Funny how that used to be sexy when food was plentiful.

And she could dance! Steve skipped a verse, and Timson looked up from the book he keeps on his music stand and gawped. I jammed in, and Hambone picked up on it, and Steve didn't throw a tantrum, just scatted along. She danced harder, and we didn't break for the next bomber, just kept playing, even though we couldn't hear ourselves, and when we could, we were still in rhythm.

We crashed to an ending, and before the applause could start, we took off on "Diggin' My Potatoes," which Steve sang as dirty and lecherous as he could. We *hopped* and the stranger danced and the audience joined in and the set went twice as long as it normally would have, long after the sun set. Man!

Steve made a beeline for her after the set, while I put away the bugle and Timson tied a tarp down over his piano. Hambone kept banging on his cans, making an arrhythmic racket. He only did that when he was upset, so I helped him to his feet.

"C'mon, Ham," I said. "Let's get you home."

Hambone smiled, but to a trained Hambone-ologist like me, it was a worried grin. The stranger was staring at Hambone. Hambone was looking away. I led him to his cave, guiding him with one hand at the base of his skull, where he had a big knot of scar tissue – presumably, whatever had given him that lump had also made him into what he was. I made sure he went in, then went back, nervous. Hambone was a barometer for trouble, and when he got worried, I got worried, too.

The stranger had peeled Steve off of her, and was having an animated conversation with Timson. Uh-oh. That meant that she was a reader. It's all Timson ever talked about. He was a world-class bookworm. He'd moved into the basement of what was left of a bookstore-cafe, and was working his way through their stock. You never saw Timson without a book.

"Anemic Victorian girlybook – that's all that was," he was saying, when I caught up with him.

The stranger shoved his shoulder, playfully. Timson is a big one, and not many people are foolhardy enough to shove him, playfully or otherwise. "You've got to be kidding me! Are you some kind of *barbarian*? *Emma* is a classic, you bunghole!" My sainted mother would have said that she had a mouth on her like a truck-driver. It turned me on.

"Hi!" I said.

Timson's retort was derailed as he turned to look at me. He said, "Brad, meet Jenna. Jenna, meet Brad."

I shook her hand. Under the dirt, she was one big freckle, and the torchlight threw up red highlights from her hair. Mmmm. Redheads. I had it bad.

"You blow good," the stranger – Jenna – said.

"Hell," Timson said, slapping me on the back hard enough to knock a whoosh of air out of my lungs. "Brad is the best trumpet player for a hundred klicks!" Jenna raised a dubious eyebrow.

"I'm the *only* trumpet player for a hundred klicks," I explained. Talking to a stranger was a novel experience: we got to recycle all the band jokes. She smiled.

I don't know where she slept that night. She was pretty good at taking care of herself – there weren't hardly any wanderers around anymore, and I'd never seen a solo woman. When I retired to my shack, I was pretty sure that she'd found herself shelter.

. . .

"This is how *all* of you survive?" she asked me the next day. I'd taken her out prospecting with me, going after a mountain of concrete rubble that had recently shifted after a baby quake. I had a good feeling about it.

"Yeah," I said, wedging my pole in and prying down hard. If you do it just right, you start a landslide that takes off a layer of the pile, revealing whatever's underneath. Do it wrong, you break your pole, give yourself a hernia, or bury yourself under a couple tons of rebar and cement. I'd seen a movie where people used the technique after some apocalypse or another. A plane went by overhead and stopped the conversation.

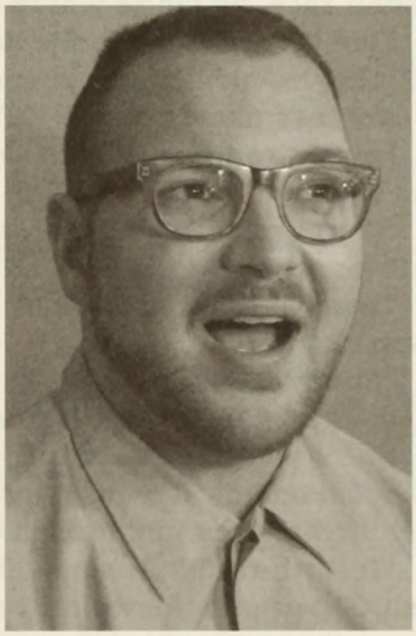
"But it's not bloody *sustainable*," she said. Her face was red with exertion, as she pried down hard.

I stopped prying and looked around pointedly. Mountains of rubble shimmered in the damp heat, dotting the landscape as far as the eye could see.

She followed my gaze around. "OK, fine. You've got a good supply. But not everyone else does. Sooner or later, someone, somewhere, is going to run out. And then what? Turf wars? The last thing we need around here is another goddamned war."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard that theory. Lyman and his buddies were particular proponents of it. They drilled half-ass military maneuvers in their spare time, waiting for the day when they'd get to heroically repel an invasion. I told her what I told them. "There's plenty of rubble to go around."

Another plane went by. She went back to her rock with renewed vigor and I went back to mine. After several moments of grunting and sweating, she said,



Cory Doctorow

Cory Doctorow (www.craphound.com) is the co-editor of Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net) and won the John W Campbell Award for Best New Writer at the 2000 Hugos. His first novel, **Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom**, will be published by Tor books in Fall 2002. He is the Outreach Coordinator for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (www.eff.org). He lives in San Francisco, California, and writes a monthly column for the O'Reilly Network (www.oreillynet.com).

Photo by Richard Kadrey

"For this generation, maybe. What'll your kids eat?"

I leaned against my pole. "Who said anything about kids? I don't plan on having any."

She leaned against hers. Actually, it was my spare – two-and-a-half metres of one-inch steel gas-pipe – but I'd let her use it for the day. "So that's it for the human race, as far as you're concerned? The buck stops here?"

I got the feeling that she had this argument a lot. "Other people can do whatever they want. I'm not gonna be anyone's daddy."

Another plane passed. "That's pretty damned selfish," she said.

I rose to the bait. "It's selfish not to have kids I can't look after in a world that's gone to hell?"

"If you took an interest in the world, you could make it a livable place for your kids."

"Yeah, and if I wanted to have kids, I'd probably do that. But since I don't, I won't. QED."

"And if my grandma had wheels, she'd be a friggin' roller-skate. Come on, Brad. Live like a savage if you must, but let's at least keep the rhetoric civilized."

She sounded like Timson, then. I hate arguing with Timson. He always wins. I pushed against my pole and the chunk I'd been working on all morning finally shifted and an ominous rumbling began from up the hill. "Move!" I shouted.

We both ran downslope like nuts. That was my favorite part of any day, the rush of pounding down an uneven mountainface with tons of concrete chasing after me. I scrambled down and down, leaping over bigger obstacles, using all four limbs and my pole for balance. Jenna was right behind me, and then she was overtaking me, grinning hugely. We both whooped and dove into the lee of another mountain. The thunder of the landslide was temporarily drowned out by the roar of another plane.

I turned around quick, my chest heaving, and watched my work. The entire face of the mountain was coming down in stately march. Lots of telltale glints sparkled in the off-pour. Canned goods. Fossil junk food from more complex times.

"Tell me that that's not *way* funner than gardening," I panted at Jenna.

She planted her hands on her thighs and panted.

I loved going out prospecting with other people. Some folks liked to play it safe, nicking away little chunks of a mountain. I liked to make a *big* mess. It's more dangerous, more cool, and more rewarding. I'm a big show-off.

I went back and started poking at the newly exposed stratum, popping cans into my sack. The people who'd lived in this city before it got plagued and dresdenned had been ready for a long siege, every apartment stuffed with supplies. I kept my eyes open for a six-pack of beer or a flask of booze, and I found both. The beer would be a little skunky after a decade of mummification, but not too bad. The tequila would be smooth as silk. I found it hard not to take a long swallow, but it was worth too much in trade for me to waste it on my liver.

Jenna joined me, scooping up the cans and stashing them in her pack. I didn't begrudge her the chow: there was more than I could carry home before the day was through in this load, and whatever I didn't take would get snapped up by some entrepreneur before morning. I wandered off, selecting the best of the stuff for my larder. I heard Jenna throwing up on the other side of the mountain. I scampered over to her.

It was what I'd expected: she'd turned up some corpses. Ten years of decomposition had cleaned them up somewhat, but they weren't pretty by any stretch.

The plague bombs they dropped on this town had been full of nasty stuff. It killed fast, and left its victims twisted into agonized hieroglyphs. I turned, and pulled Jenna's hair out of the way of her puke.

"Thanks," she said, when she was done, five planes later. "Sorry, I can't get used to dead bodies, even after all this."

"Don't apologize," I said. "Plague victims are worse than your garden variety corpse."

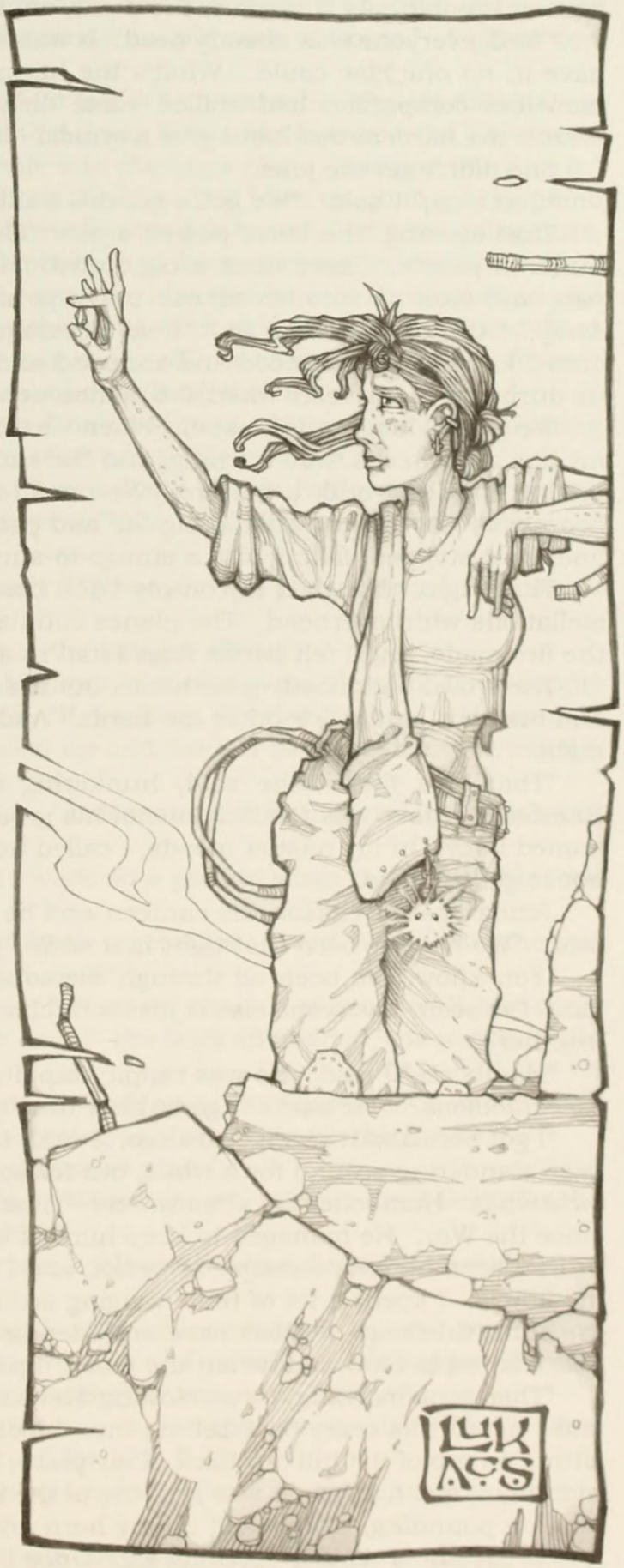
"Plague victims! Damn!" she said, taking several involuntary steps backward. I caught her before she fell.

"Whoa! They're not contagious anymore. That plague stuff was short-lived. The idea was to kill everyone in the city, wait a couple months, then clean out the bodies and take up residence. No sense in destroying prime real-estate."

"Then how did all this –" she waved at the rubble "– happen?"

"Oh, that was our side. After the city got plagued, they dresdenned the hell out of it so that the enemy wouldn't be able to use it." After the War, I'd hooked up for a while with a crazy guy who wouldn't tell me his name, who'd been in on all the dirty secrets of one army or another. From all he knew, he must've been in *deep*, but even after two years of wandering with him, I never found out much about him. He died a month before I found my current home. Lockjaw. Shitty way to go.

"They bombed their own damned city?" she asked, incredulous. I was a little surprised that she managed to be shocked by the excesses of the War. Everyone else I knew had long



grown used to the idea that the world had been trashed by some very reckless, immoral people. As if to make the point, another plane buzzed us.

"Well, everyone was already dead. It was their final solution: if they couldn't have it, no one else could. What's the harm in that?" I said. Whenever my nameless companion had spilled some dirty little secret, he'd finish it with *What's the harm in that?* and give a cynical chuckle. He was a scary guy.

She didn't get the joke.

"Come on," I said. "We gotta get this stuff back home."

That evening, the band played again. Our audience was bigger, maybe a hundred people. Steve liked a big crowd. He jumped around like bacon in a pan, and took us through all our uptempo numbers: "South America, Take It Away," "All the Cats Join In," "Cold Beverages," "Atomic Dog," and more. The crowd loved it, they danced and stomped and clapped, keeping the rhythm for us during the long rests when the planes went by.

We played longer than usual. When we were done, I was soaked with sweat, my lips and cheeks were burning, and the sun had completely set. Some enterprising soul had built a bonfire. We used to do that all the time, back when booze was less scarce: build a big fire and party all night. Somewhere along the line, we'd stopped, falling into a sunup-to-sundown rhythm.

That night, though, I lay on my back beside the fire and watched the constellations whirl overhead. The planes counterpointed the soft crackling noises the fire made, and I felt better than I had in a long time.

The crowd had mostly gone home, but the band was still out, as were Lyman and his boys, and a few other die-hards. And Jenna. She'd led the dancing all night.

"That was *fun*," she said, hunkering down with me and Timson and Hambone. Steve was fondling one of his groupies, a skinny girl with bad teeth named Lucy. In my nastier moods, I called her "Loose." She was dumb enough not to get the joke.

Jenna passed Timson the canteen and he swigged deeply. "It sure was," he said. "We haven't been that tight in a while."

"You know, I've been all through the southland, but you guys are the only band I've seen. Everyone else is just scratching out a living. How'd you guys get together?"

"Hambone," I said. He was rappity-tappiting some firewood.

"*Hambone*?" she said. "I gotta hear this."

"I got here about seven years ago," I said, taking a pull from the canteen. "I'd been wandering around for a while, but for some reason, I thought I'd stay here for a while. Hambone was already here – near as anyone can tell, he's been here since the War. He managed to keep himself alive, just barely.

"I'd been here for a couple of weeks, and I'd spent most of that time building my house. I spent a lot of time hanging around out front of my place, blowing my horn, thinking. I didn't have any friends around here: I didn't want any. I just wanted to blow and watch the flies." I paused while a plane howled by.

"Then, one morning, I was blowing 'Reveille' and watching the sun come up, and I heard this crazy beat behind me. I looked around, and it was Hambone, sitting on top of the hill out back of my place, keeping time. I didn't know about him, then, so I figured he was just one of the locals. I waved at him, but he just kept on pounding, so I picked up my horn and we jammed and jammed.

"It became a regular morning gig. Once I ran out of steam, he'd get up and wander away. After a while, he was playing right on my doorstep, and I noticed

how skinny he was. I tried to talk to him, and that's when I figured out he was *special.* So after we finished, I gave him a couple cans of Spam." A plane flew past.

"After a month of this, I decided I'd follow him when he left. He didn't seem to mind. We came to a ladder that led down into a big, bombed out basement, all full of books. And this big asshole was playing a piano, just pounding on it."

I nodded at Timson, who picked up the tale. "It'd been tough to get the piano down there, but when I found it, I knew I needed to have it. I'd been going nuts, looking for a chance to play. Hambone had been coming by regular to jam around, and I tried to make sure he got fed. I figured he was shell-shocked and needed a hand. Then, one day, he shows up with this guy and his horn. Next thing you know, we're all playing our asses off. It was the most fun I'd ever had." He waited for a plane to pass, and built up the fire.

"The rest, as they say, is history," he continued. "Steve heard us jamming and invited himself along. He kept after us to play publicly."

Jenna looked over at Steve, who was lying on his back with Lucy twined around him. "Well, he can sing, anyway," she said, and grinned wickedly.

We all nodded.

"So," she said, stretching casually. "What are you guys gonna do when you run out of cans?"

I groaned. She'd been picking at the subject all day.

Timson poked at the fire, and Lyman sauntered over. He said, "Our supply will hold out a while yet," he said, "if we keep interlopers out." He loomed threateningly over her. Timson stood up and loomed back. Lyman retreated a little.

"How about gardens?" she said. "A decent garden could really stretch out your food supply."

"Who," I said, lazily, "is going to work on a garden when there's all this food just lying around?"

"I will, for one. Think about it: fresh vegetables! Fruit! When was the last time you had a tomato, a big fat red one?"

My mouth watered. Lyman said, "When we run out of cans, we'll just move along. Gardens'll only tie us down here." His boys all nodded, the way they did when he made a pronouncement.

Jenna glared at him. "That's pretty goddamn short-sighted. How long can you live off the past? When are you going to start living for the future?"

Lyman's rebuttal was cut off by another plane.

Timson slapped her on the back. "'When are you going to start living for the future?' You've practiced that, right?"

She pretended she didn't hear him. "How come the planes don't run out of fuel?" she said.

I said, "They've got an automated maintenance station somewhere around here. They land there for scheduled repairs and refueling. It's supposed to re-stock their ammo, too, but it looks like they've run out. Lucky for us."

Jenna's ears pricked up. "You know where this station is? They'd have power? Radios? Maybe we could call for help."

Everyone looked at her like she was nuts. "Where, exactly, are you going to call?" Timson asked.

"New Zealand. They didn't get into the War at all. They're probably sitting pretty. Maybe they could help us out."

"*On the Beach*, Neville Shute," Timson said. "You've been reading too much science fiction, girl."

She slapped his shoulder. "It was *The Chrysalids* actually. John Wyndham. Kiwis and Aussies *always* come out okay."

"Seriously," she continued, "what else are you doing around here? Aren't you getting bored of slipping back into savagery?"

"We've got plenty to do," Lyman called from across the fire. "We've got to drill the militia!"

"Band's gotta practice," Steve called, from under Lucy.

"Sure you do!" Jenna retorted. "If you're gonna play the Sydney Opera House, you're gonna need a whole *shitload* of practice!"

Steve glared at her, and Timson pounded her on the back. I produced my mickey of tequila and magnanimously shared it all around, even letting Lyman and his thugs have a swig.

She dropped in the next morning while I was blowing 'Reveille.' I hadn't had the energy the night before to take Hambone back to his cave, so he'd crashed on the floor of my shack. It's a pretty good shack: three of the walls are concrete, there from before the War. I'd put together a roof of tin and cardboard and whatever else I could find, and added another wall the same way. Be it ever so humble.

"You gonna help me dig a garden?" she asked.

I squinted at her. She'd gotten some water somewhere to clean up. Timson had a big reservoir in his basement, a flooded sub-basement. I had thought I'd seen them go off together.

Pink and scrubbed, with her hair tied back tight, she was, well, pneumatic. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and on her pink eyebrows. She was wearing a tee-shirt and cutoffs, and the prospect of passing a day beside her while she bent over a garden was very tempting. But if she and Timson had something going on, I'd best put myself out of temptation's way. Besides, I was sure that the hill I'd been working on still had some good stuff in it.

"Got a full dance-card today, sorry," I said.

"Well, don't get caught under any rockslides," she said, giving me a slightly pissed-off look.

I spent the day undermining the mountain, but I couldn't get it to come down. Finally, exhausted, I staggered to the hill where we played and warmed up on the horn.

Jenna and Timson arrived together, eating olives and stewed tomatoes with their fingers. Timson set up an architecture book on his stand and tapped at the piano. Hambone ambled up. Steve showed up with Lucy clinging to him like a limpet, and then we played our asses off.

Jenna danced and so did lots of other people, and then Steve waded out into the crowd and danced with them, and I joined him, and then the crowd and the band were all mixed up, and it was *fine*.

It turned out I was wrong about Jenna and Timson. She used his water but that was it. He *was* feeding her, though. Now, he can do whatever he wants with his food, it's his, but the two of us had always fed Hambone, and Timson couldn't afford to feed both of them, so I ended up running my larder down to dangerous levels over the next couple months.

I started to get a little grumpy about it, but that all ended when Jenna and Timson showed up at Hambone's cave one night while I was feeding him. They had three big sacks, filled right to the top with fresh vegetables: tomatoes, string

beans, squash, rutabaga, cabbage and onions. There was even lemon grass, parsley and basil. And strawberries! My eyes nearly fell out of my head.

"Holy crap!" I said.

Timson pounded me on the back, then popped a cherry tomato into my gaping mouth. I bit down involuntarily and gasped. "That is the best thing I've ever tasted," I said.

"Tell me something I don't know," Jenna said. "We've noticed you sulking around the last couple months. I figured that I could bribe you and you'd quit pissing around."

"Did you *grow* these?" I said.

"No, I pulled them out of my ass," Jenna said, and ate a big, fat strawberry.

Timson fed Hambone a few strawberries, and that signaled the beginning of a chowdown that went on and on until we could hardly move. My hands stank of a wondrous cocktail of strawberries and herbs and onions. It had been a long time since I'd put fresh vegetables inside my body. I felt like I was sweating *green*.

"Sun's going down," Timson said. "Showtime. I'll catch up."

Jenna and Hambone and I climbed slowly up the hill, luxuriating in satiety. Hambone's smile was a new one, pure joy.

Timson met up, lugging more sacks. He shelled them out before we started playing, and I never saw more snaggletoothed grins. Even Steve had some. He made a crack about the wisdom of handing out fruit to an audience before a show, but no one was going to waste any of that beautiful food by throwing it.

Between sets, Timson stood up. "Jenna's been growing this food for the last couple months. I think you'll agree that it's pretty goddamn good." There were hoots of agreement. "So here's the deal. We've got some plots over on the south, ready to be hoed and planted. We've got seeds. But we need people to work the plots and gather water. Anyone who's interested can meet us tomorrow morning."

Well, that kind of put a damper on the celebration. I felt a little down, realizing that this wonderful chow meant stooping in fields, hoeing and planting like some kind of Dark Ages peasant. In the back of my mind, I still thought that I could just keep on prospecting for cans until someone rebuilt civilization and started making more cans. Rebuilding civilization was going to take a long, long time. Then I burped up an onion-basil-tomato-tasting burp, and knew that I'd be out the next morning, anyway.

We kept on playing, and people kept dancing, and I may have been the only one who noticed Lyman and his boys shaking their heads and stalking off into the night.

Nearly everyone showed up the next morning and collected a precious handful of Jenna's seeds. She explained that she'd been hoarding them for years, looking for a place to plant them. The way she said it, you got the feeling that she was trusting you with her children.

We attacked the plots. They were rocky and rubble-strewn, and the poles were poorly suited to hoeing. People improvised: empty bottles became scoops, flattened cans, blades.

We worked, and Jenna came by and kibbitzed, pointing out rocks that we'd missed, and generally being a pain in the ass. Eventually, enough grumbling got grumbled, and she went and tended her own garden, so to speak.

The work got hypnotic after that. The roar of the planes, the sounds of dig-

ging, it all blended into a deep rhythm. Hambone meandered by and idly tapped out a beat, and I found myself singing "Minnie the Moocher," and everyone joined in on the call-and-response. It was great, until I realized that I was singing for a crowd and shut my mouth. I didn't like singing for other people.

Not everyone was cut out to be a farmer. Good thing, too, or we would've starved to death waiting for the harvest. Still, there were people down at the gardens from sunup to sundown, clucking over their veggies.

The shit hit the fan one night as we were setting up to play. Lyman was sitting on Timson's piano, grinning wide enough to show us all his rotten chiclets. Three of his boys hung around close, and another four or five stood at a distance, sniggering.

Timson gave him a long, considering look. It was the kind of look I'd seen him give a humongous hunk of concrete in his plot one day, before he squatted down and hauled it out of the earth, like a 100 kilo spud.

Lyman grinned bigger. "I wanna talk to you," he said.

Timson nodded slowly. Hambone rapped out a nervous tatter with his fingernails on a beer bottle he'd been carrying around, but I didn't need his help to know that things were getting bad.

"This gardening thing is getting out of hand," Lyman said. "People are neglecting their duties."

"What duties?" Timson asked, in a low tone.

"Drilling with us. We got to be ready to defend our land."

Timson gave a little shake of his head.

Lyman jumped in with more: "People're getting too attached to this place. We'll have to move when the food runs out, and we can't take no garden with us."

Timson's look got more considering. He cocked his head. "Why do they have to defend it and get ready to leave? That seems like a bit of a contradiction to me."

Lyman's brow furrowed. If I'm making him sound a little dim, that's only because he was. "We'll defend it until the food runs out, then we'll move on."

Jenna snickered. One of Lyman's boys reached out to smack her. Hambone drummed louder, Jenna batted his hand away.

I found myself saying, "What if the food doesn't run out? What if we grow enough of our own to stay alive?"

Lyman glared at me. "Is that how you want to live?"

I said, "Sooner or later, all the cans will be gone."

Lyman waved a dismissive hand. "Someone will take care of that. I'm worried about *this* group. *This* city."

"So why not let us make sure we've got enough to eat?"

Lyman started forward and I jumped. "I told you! We need to defend the place! And we need to be ready to go if we can't!"

Timson interceded. "What does this have to do with me?"

Lyman spread his hands out. "I want you to shut down the garden. We were doing just fine without it. I don't like to see people wasting their time."

Timson said, "It's not mine to shut down." He nodded at Jenna, who was glaring daggers at the goon who'd tried to smack her.

"Not mine, either," she said, with barely controlled fury. "It's everyone's."

Lyman said, "Well, you just tell everyone that the garden's got to be shut down."

He slid off the piano and took off, goons in tow. One of them contrived to bump into me hard enough to make me drop my horn, and I had to snag it up quick before he stomped it.

Steve showed up, looking pissed, which meant that he was worried. "What was that all about?" he said.

"What was what all about?" Timson said, and propped a book up on his music-stand.

. . .

They trashed the gardens two nights later, while we played. I wouldn't have thought that pack of lazy bastards had it in them to haul enough gravel to cover all the beds, especially not at night, but that's what they did. They kicked up the plants, and smashed the makeshift tools that the gardeners had left.

They didn't even have the smarts to steer clear of us the next day. Instead, they waited until a shocked crowd had gathered, and then showed up with big grins. Lyman had a pistol shoved in his waistbelt. I'd seen it before, and I didn't think it worked, but you never knew.

"Good morning!" Lyman said, stomping across the murdered beds. "How's everybody doing today?"

Timson hefted his pole and looked significantly at the militia. A number of people in the crowd got the idea. Lyman's boys looked uneasy.

Lyman said, "We've been chasing off rovers to the north every day and more are coming. Things are getting rough. We'll need volunteers for the militia. You've all got spare time now."

I'd never even harvested a single tomato from my plot. I could see the smashed green buds that I'd been nurturing.

Jenna said, "Who's got any spare time? It's going to take us *days* to clean up this mess." She stooped and picked up a stone and tossed it away from the beds. "Lucky I got more seeds."

I bent and picked up a rock of my own and tossed it. I wanted to toss it at Lyman, but Jenna had set an example.

Not everyone followed it. A lot wandered off, to prospect or to with Lyman. I couldn't blame them – I felt like giving up.

Over the next week or two, the plots started to get back into shape. Occasionally, Lyman would cruise by and glare, and we'd try to ignore him. He and his boys would walk across the plots, talking loudly about running off wanderers. Some of his boys had been planting gardens not long before. It made me boil.

I got it out at nights, when we played. The crowd had diminished. Anyone who had anything to do with Lyman stayed away. Those left behind were more into it than ever. A lot of them sang along, to Steve's chagrin. Some of them were pretty good.

Lyman hadn't trashed the beds again. I knew he hadn't given up. I waited, nervously, for the other shoe to drop.

It didn't take long. One night, our set ended early because of rain, which always made Hambone nervous. I led him back to his cave and was met on the trail by Lyman, dripping and grinning.

There was no small talk. He put a hand on my chest. "When you going to stop pussying around and help us defend ourselves?"

"I'm a little busy right now. Why don't you ask me again in a couple of cen-

turies?" Hambone started doing a little shuffle.

Lyman gave him a fist in the ear. His head spun around, and I saw the knot of scar at the base of his skull strain. He turned back around and started shuffling. Lyman drew his arm back.

"Jesus, Lyman, what the hell is your problem?" I said.

He turned and popped me right in the mouth, splitting my lip and loosening one of my teeth. I'm proud of my teeth: I brushed 'em every morning and every night, and they were in better shape than most. I clutched my mouth. Lyman kicked me down, then walked away, stepping hard on my chest as he walked past me.

I led Hambone back up to his cave, and slept there.

I felt so bad the next morning, I almost didn't go back to the gardens. My face ached, and I couldn't blow a single note.

But I dragged myself down anyway. I was feeling stubborn.

Timson had a black eye and a limp, but he grinned like a pirate when he saw me. "How many?" he said.

"Just Lyman," I said.

He snorted. "They sent six for me. None of 'em are feeling too good this morning, I bet. Couple of them won't be walking for a while." He showed me his hands. His knuckles were raw.

"Can you play?" I asked, wincing in sympathy.

"Probably." He yanked a weed out of a plot. "I can garden."

Jenna got away unscathed. No one, not even Timson, was sure where she slept. I'd thought it was a weird quirk, but I realized that she knew what she was doing.

We worked together in the garden that day, the three of us and Hambone. No one else showed up. Some of the early berries were ripe, so we ate them. "Hey," I said, pointing at a plane. "You still plan on making that long-distance call? New Zealand?"

Jenna wiped the sweat off her forehead. "Once we've got this crop in. I don't know that we'd be let back in if we left."

I conceded the point.

That night, Timson played as best as he could, and I confined myself to the occasional sour blat on the horn. The crowd was subdued, and grew more so when Lyman and his boys showed up.

Steve called the set over early, then went and chatted with Lyman. Pretty soon they were whooping it up. Timson and I shared disgusted looks. "Screw this," he said, and stalked away.

Jenna and me and Hambone went and sat in the gardens, where Hambone played a soft racket with my pole.

"I don't think we'll play again," I said.

"Come on," she said, dismissively. "This'll blow over. You guys are good, you should play."

"Who gives a damn if we're good or not? It's just a band."

She stared at Hambone for a while. "You ever wonder why I stayed here?" she said, finally.

"Tired, I guess. Same as me."

"I'd been looking for a place to grow a garden for a long time. A place where they were starting over, not just doing the same old stuff. And one day, I'm wandering along, and I heard you guys. I thought I'd found civilization.

Before I could figure out exactly where the sound was coming from, I spotted some of Lyman's boys and hid. I hid out until I heard the music the next day, and then I snuck in. And I said, 'Girl, here's a place where they still have something besides eating and killing and screwing.' So I settled. I let you use my precious seeds. I think if you guys give up playing, this place will dry up and fly away in a couple of years."

"Unless we get rescued by Kiwis first," I said, playfully. I grinned, and my lip started bleeding again. "Ow," I said.

She laughed, and I laughed.

Steve avoided the band for a week. We didn't play, even after my lip had healed. Everyone was tense, ready to blow.

Then the gardens got trashed again. This time, they did it in broad daylight, while Timson and Jenna and I glared at them. It wasn't just Lyman and his pals, either: almost everyone came out, including a number of former gardeners. And Steve.

Timson walked away. Even Lyman's boys had the sense not to taunt him. Jenna and I stared as our beds were murdered again. They did a thorough job, sowing the soil with gravel and crap like nails and glass. Some of the former gardeners avoided our gaze, but other than that, there was no remorse. I shook.

Jenna led me away, with Hambone in tow. They weren't too scared to taunt *us*, and someone hit me with a dirt clod.

Jenna took me to a little cave whose entrance was hidden by an overhang from an I-beam. Jenna cleared some debris from the doorway, then led me inside.

It was claustrophobic and dark inside, and a bedroll was spread out on the floor beside a giant internal-frame pack.

The three of us sat in silence. Jenna's shoulders shook. Tentatively, I reached out for her and she hugged tight to me. Hambone clapped the buckles of her pack's straps together.

I held her there for a long time. Eventually, she tried to pull away, but I held on, and she relaxed into me. It had been a long time since I'd held a woman like that, and I found myself clutching her tighter. A warm, fluttery feeling filled my belly. I tried to kiss her.

She shoved me away abruptly. "F--- off!" she said.

"What?" I said.

"Jesus, put it back in your pants!"

"What's your problem?" I said.

"My problem is I thought you were my *friend*. All of a sudden, you start grabassing. Get out, you goddamned letch!" She shoved at me. I scrambled out and slogged home.

I stayed in bed until noon, wallowing in self-pity. Then I cracked a bottle of vodka out of my larder and killed it. It had been a while since my last bender, but it all came back just fine. Before I knew it, I was huffing from a rag soaked in solvent, reeling and dazed. I stayed stoned until I fell asleep, then got up and felt so rotten that I started over again.

I knew I was sulking, but I didn't see any reason to stop. The band was gone, the gardens were gone, Jenna was gone.

I realized that I'd spent the decade since the War waiting for someone to rebuild civilization, and that it wasn't going to happen. It was just going to

get worse, every single year. Even if we planted a million gardens, the best I could hope for was to die of old age in a cave, surrounded by my illiterate offspring.

It was enough to make me want to join the militia.

Eventually, I staggered out into the blinding light. I went to work on a hill, and that's where Timson found me.

He was flustered and angry, showing more emotion than he usually did. "Have you seen her?" he said.

"Who?" I said, blearily.

"Jenna. You haven't seen her?"

"No," I said, guiltily, "not since Lyman –"

"Shit!" he said, and spun on his heel, taking off.

His urgency penetrated my fog and I chased after him. "You think something's up?" I said.

He nodded grimly. "Lyman's been too smug lately, like the cat that ate the cream. I think he's got her."

"Where would he keep her?" I said. There wasn't much standing that you could keep a person locked up inside of.

"Those assholes have an 'armory' where they keep all their goddamn weapons. He's said as much to me, when he was bragging. I want to find it."

"Hang on a sec," I said. "Have you checked her place?"

"You know where it is?" he asked, surprised.

"Come on," I said, feeling perversely proud that he didn't.

She wasn't at her place, but there were signs of a struggle. Her pack was shredded, her seeds ground into the concrete floor.

Timson took one look and tore off. I followed his long strides as best as I could. I knew where he was headed: Steve's.

Steve lived in part of a half-buried underground shopping mall. Timson pummeled down the stairs with me close behind.

Steve and Lucy were twined on a pile of foam rubber. Timson hauled him up by the arm and slammed his head against a wall.

"Where's the armory?" he roared.

Steve held his head. "Screw you," he sneered.

Timson slammed his head again. Lucy rushed him from behind and I tripped her.

"Where is it?" Timson said. "Don't make me any angrier."

Steve dangled, nude, from Timson's meaty paws. Terror and anger warred on his features. Terror won. He spilled his guts. "They'll kill you," he said. "They've been fighting off wanderers all week. They're in a bad mood."

Timson snorted and dropped him.

Lyman was expecting us. He blocked the entrance to the armory, a bomb-shelter with a heavy, counterweighted steel door. I'd seen a few doors like it in my travels, but I'd never managed to get one open.

Timson got ready to rush him, then checked himself. Lyman had his gun hanging lazily off one hand.

"Afternoon, boys," he said, grinning.

"Are you going to shoot me?" Timson said.

Lyman held up his gun with an expression of mock-surprise. "Probably not," he said. "Not unless you give me a reason to. I'm here to protect."

"Well, I'm about to give you a reason to. I'm going in there to get Jenna. I'll kill you if you try to stop me."

Lyman stuck his gun back into his waistband. "You're too late," he said.

I saw red and started forward, but he held a hand up.

"She got away. We only wanted to scare her off and get rid of her seeds, but she went nuts. It's a good thing she got away, or I would've forgotten my manners."

Timson *growled.*

Lyman took a step backwards. "Look, if you don't believe me, go on in and take a look around, be my guest."

Jenna wasn't inside, but they weren't kidding when they called it an arsenal. I hadn't seen that many weapons since the War. It made me faintly sick.

Then I spotted something that froze me in my tracks. Beneath one of the long tables lay a dented silver canister with ugly biohazard decals. You saw fragments of them sometimes, exploded in the midst of plague-wracked corpses. A plague-bomb.

Lyman strutted around like a proud papa. "Lots of these were here when I found the place, but we've picked up a few here and there along the way. Nobody's chasing us out of here." He followed my horrified gaze.

"You like it?" he said. "That's just in case someone *does* manage to run us off: it won't do them any good! Our Final Solution." He patted the bomb with a proprietary air.

All of a sudden, it got to me. I started laughing. "Nobody's chasing you out!" I gasped. "This is your rubble, and nobody's chasing you out!"

Timson started laughing, too. Lyman and his boys reddened. We left.

We found Jenna with Hambone, in his cave. She had the remains of her pack with her, and was shoveling Hambone's things into it.

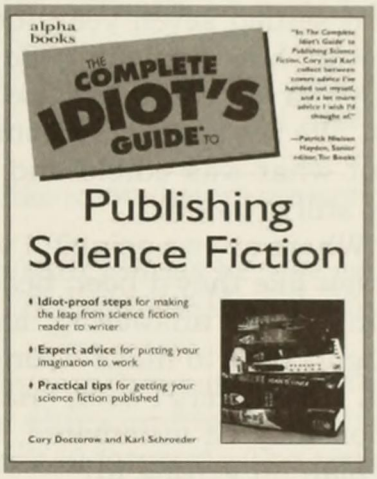
She started when we came in, but once she'd seen us, she went back to packing. "Getting outta Dodge," she said, in answer to our unspoken question.

"Are you all right?" I asked, feeling guilty and awful.

"They killed my seeds," she said, in a hopeless voice. I started to reach for her, then stopped and stared at the floor.

She finished packing and grabbed Hambone. "You coming?"

By the Same Author



***The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Science Fiction* by Cory Doctorow & Karl Schroeder**

Ever thought about writing Science Fiction and Fantasy professionally? Of course you have. Maybe you've even put pen to paper a few times. You might even be pretty good.

But believe it or not, writing is the easy part. It's getting published that's the real challenge. And in ***The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Science Fiction*** (Alpha Books, July 2000), Doctorow and fellow Canadian Karl Schroeder (author of **Ventus** and **Permanence**) offer the low down on getting your manuscript in print – everything from understanding the numerous genres and sub-genres to putting your manuscript together and getting the attention of a publisher. Don't leave your writing studio without it.

Timson shouldered her pack, answering for both of us.

I'd settled seven years before. I thought I'd stayed in good shape, but I'd forgotten how punishing life on the road could be.

Jenna set a brutal pace. She wouldn't talk to me any more than necessary. We ate sparingly, from what she scrounged on the way. She knew a lot about what was edible and what wasn't, skills I'd never picked up, but my belly still growled.

"Where are we going?" I said, after a week. My feet had toughened, but my legs felt like they'd been beaten by truncheons.

Instead of answering, she pointed up at a plane overhead. Of course, I thought, time to make a long-distance call.

A week later, I said, "Have you thought this thing through? I mean, the station may be automated, but it'll have defenses. Locks, at least. How do you plan on getting in?"

Timson, who'd been silent the whole morning, said, "I'm curious, too. I've been thinking: this Australia thing is kind of far-fetched, isn't it? If they wanted to rescue us, they would've done it a long time ago, don't you think?"

"Screw Australia," she said impatiently. "Any station capable of maintaining those jets is bound to have lots of things we can use. I want a fence for my garden."

"But how are we going to get in?" I said.

"Hambone," she said, with a smug smile.

Hambone grinned affably. "Guh?" I said.

"He's a *pilot*. High ranking one, too."

"Not to repeat myself," I said, "but, guh?"

She spun Hambone around and pulled his shaggy hair away from the collar of his grimy tee-shirt. "Look." I did. She dug at the knot of scar-tissue at the base of his skull. Horrified, I watched as the scar flapped back, revealing a row of plugs, ringed with cracked and blackened skin.

"Brainstem interface. I noticed it the first time I saw you guys. You never noticed?"

"I noticed the scar, sure –"

"Scar?" she said. She flapped it around. "It's a dustcover! Hambone's wired! We'll just point his retinas at the scanner and voila, instant entry. Damn, you didn't think I was going to try and hop the fence, did you?"

Timson grinned sheepishly. "Well, *actually*. . ."

. . .

We reached the station the next day. The familiar roar of the jets was joined by the ear-shattering sound of them landing and taking off, like clockwork.

The airfield was fenced in by a lethal wall, ten meters tall and ringed with aged corpses. A lot of slow learners had found out the hard way about the station's defenses.

We wandered the perimeter for several kilometers before we came to a gate. It had a retinal scanner, like I sometimes found when I unearthed the remains of a bank machine. Hambone grew more and more agitated as we neared it.

"Go on," Jenna whispered. "Come on, you can do it."

His nervous drumming became more and more pronounced, until he was

waving his arms, flailing wildly.

Jenna caught his hands and held them tightly. "That's all right," she cooed. "It's all right, come on."

Centimeter by slow centimeter, Jenna coaxed Hambone to the scanner. Finally, he put his eyes against the battered holes. Red light played over his features, and the gates sighed open.

We were all still standing around and grinning like idiots before we noticed that Hambone was running across the airfield.

He was already halfway to a jet. We caught up with him as he was vaulting the extruded ladder. An armored cart that had been attached to the fuselage reeled in its umbilicus and rolled away.

Hambone was already seated in the pilot's chair, punching at the buttons. A cable snaked from the back of his seat into the plugs on his neck. I had time to think, *That's weird*, and then the plane lurched forward. The cockpit had seats for a copilot and a bombardier, and we all crammed in like sardines, Jenna on my lap, and we crushed together when the plane jolted.

"Holy shit!" Jenna shouted.

Hambone drummed his fingers against an instrument panel while he pulled back on a joystick. "Strap in!" Timson shouted.

I did, pulling crash-webbing across us.

"Hambone, what the hell are you doing?" Jenna shouted.

He grinned affably, and the plane lifted off.

Hambone flew the plane confidently, with small, precise movements. Jenna, Timson and I stared at each other helplessly. The jet had taken off at a screaming climb that flattened us back against our seats – I noted with curious detachment that Hambone's seat had a recessed niche so that the cables depending from his skull weren't compressed.

In an instant, we were above the clouds, with only tiny patches of scorched earth visible.

The silence inside the cockpit rang inside my ears. For the first time in seven years, I couldn't hear jets crashing overhead.

"Hey, Hambone?" I said, cautiously.

Jenna shushed me. "Don't distract him," she whispered.

It was good advice. Timson stared at the instrument panels.

"I think," he whispered, "that we're headed out to sea."

Jenna and I groaned. Hambone reached out with one hand and unlatched a compartment that spilled out freeze-dried rations.

"At least we won't starve to death," Timson whispered.

"Why are we whispering?" I said.

"So Hambone doesn't get panicked," Jenna said.

"He never gets panicked," I said in a normal tone. Hambone unwrapped a bar of fruit leather and munched thoughtfully at it, while his fingers danced over the controls.

"He never flies planes, either," she hissed.

"We're over the ocean now. Pacific, I think," Timson said. He'd done something with the seat that caused it to slide back into a crawlspace, and we were still cramped, but at least we weren't in each other's laps. I looked out the window. Yup, ocean.

I started shivering.

"We're going to die," I said.

"Probably," Jenna said. She giggled.

I punched her playfully and my panic receded.

Timson started playing with one of the panels.

"What are you doing?" I said, alarmed.

"Trying to figure out where we're going. Don't worry, this is the co-pilot's seat. I don't think I can screw up the navigation from here unless he turns it over to me." Ragged and filthy, he looked like a caveman next to the sleek controls.

"You don't think?" I said.

He waved impatiently at me, poked some more. "OK," he said. "Hambone's taking us to Australia."

I always knew that Hambone had heard the things we'd said. Still, it was easy to forget. We took turns trying to convince him to head back. After a few hours, we gave up. Timson said that we'd crossed the halfway mark, anyway. We were closer to Australia than home.

Then there was nothing to do but eat and wait.

Eventually, some of the instruments lit and I thought, *This is it, we're dead.* Curiously, I wasn't scared. I'd been scared so long, and now I was bored, almost glad that it was ending.

"Bogeys," Timson said, staring out the window.

I looked up. Two sleek, new fighters were paralleling us. Inside their cockpits, I could see pilots in what looked like space-suits. I waved to one. He tapped his headset.

Jenna said, "They're trying to radio us."

Timson picked up a lightweight headset from a niche above his seat. He screwed it into his ear and held up a finger.

"Hello?" he said. We held our breath.

"Yes, that's us," he said.

"What?" I said. He shushed me.

"All right," he said.

"*What?*" I shouted, startling Hambone. Jenna clapped a hand over my mouth.

"I'm sorry, I don't know how. Do you know which button I push? I see. All right, I think this is it. I'm going to push it. Is that all right? OK, thanks. Bye."

I peeled Jenna's hand off my mouth. "What?" I demanded.

"That's the Panoceanic Air Force. They're landing us at Sydney. We'll be quarantined when we get there, but I think it's just a formality."

The lights in the cockpit dimmed and the cable zipped out of Hambone's neck.

Absently, he reached back and smoothed the dustcover over the plugs. "They're landing us," Timson said.

I leaned back and sighed. I like Hambone a lot, but I'd rather not have an autistic flying my plane, thank you very much.

I was reaching for another bar of fruit-leather when the plane took a tremendous lurch that pressed Jenna and me against the crash-webbing hard enough to draw blood on our exposed skin. I heard a sickening crack and looked around wildly, terrified that it was someone's skull. In the juddering chaos, I saw Timson, face white, arm hanging at a nauseating, twisted angle.

We jolted again, and I realized that I was screaming. I closed my mouth,

but the screaming continued. Out of the bombardier's porthole, I saw the air convecting across the shuddering wings, and realized that the screaming was the air whistling over the fuselage. The ground rushed towards us.

Jenna's head snapped back into my nose, blinding me with pain, and then we were tumbling through the cockpit. Jenna had released the crash-webbing altogether and was ping-ponging around Hambone. I saw her claw at the dustcover on his neck before she was tossed to the floor.

I pried my fingers loose from the armrests on my chair and came forward to Hambone. I straddled him, legs around his waist, and suppressed my gorge as I scrabbled at what I still thought of as his "scar" until it peeled back. My fingertips skated over the plugs and the knots of skin around them, and then I did toss up, spraying vomit and losing my grip on Hambone.

I ended up atop Jenna, unsure if I'd succeeded or not. But my eyes stopped watering long enough to see the cabling on Hambone's seat snake out and mate with his brainstem. The plane leveled off and he smiled at us.

It couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime. Timson cursed blue at his arm, which was swollen and purple, and Jenna cradled her bumped head in arms that streamed blood from dozens of crisscrossed webbing cuts. I got us strapped in as we touched down.

We got escorted off the ship by a bunch of spacemen with funny accents. They didn't take us to the hospital until they'd scrubbed us and taken blood. They wanted to take Hambone away, but we were very insistent. The spacemen told us that he was very "high functioning," and that the plugs in the back of his neck were only rated for about five years.

"They'll have to come out," one of them explained to us. "Otherwise, he'll only get worse."

Jenna said, "If you take them out, will he get better?"

The spaceman shrugged. "Maybe. It's a miracle that he's still bloody alive, frankly. Bad technology."

They de-quarantined us a month later. I'd never been cleaner. Those Aussies are pretty worried about disease.

The four of us took a flat near Bondi Beach. Timson found a job in a bookstore, and Jenna spends most of her time working with Hambone. Some days, I think she's getting through to him.

I'm on the dole and feeling weird about it. I can't get used to the idea of just showing up at someone else's place and taking handouts. But the Aussies don't seem to mind. Very progressive people. They ran our story on the news and a music store in Canberra donated a bugle and an electric piano.

I'm teaching Jenna to blow. It's not that I don't like playing anymore, but it's hard to sing and play at the same time. All four of us practice every night, out in our garden. We still flinch every eight bars, waiting for the roar of a jet to interrupt us, then smile sheepishly when it doesn't come. The important thing is, we're playing.

Even an interloper like me knows how you get to Sydney Opera House: practice.

Far From Laredo

By David W. Hill

The sun overhead was a feeble orange and red ball very different from the vital yellow orb familiar to Charles Duke. The thing reminded him of a scab, and he still hadn't grown accustomed to the sight of it in the sky even after two days in this place. Duke lifted a cigar to his lips and inhaled, savoring both the Cuban leaf and the luck that had caused him to buy an entire box his last visit to San Antone instead of his usual handful, and that less than a week before he'd been transported — here. To this town with its unpronounceable name. Wherever it was. Or whenever.

Duke was sitting on thick rugs across a low table from Farlan Trew, a man of middle age who seemed to be of some importance, a civic leader, possibly the mayor. Trew passed Duke a thimble of liquor.

"Let me get this straight," Duke said. "You brought me here to take on a demon for you?"

The other man flicked his index finger against his left earlobe — a gesture of clarification. When he spoke, Trew's lips shaped words in no language Duke had ever heard, but he understood the other man anyway. It was magic, of course — what else? How else could he and his horse and gear have traveled in an instant from a campsite on the Rio Grande to this place under its sickly orange sun?

"Demons," Farlan Trew corrected Duke. "Three of them. They are, among their kind, minor things. But even so it is beyond our capabilities to apprehend them.

"In any case," he continued, "we did not know we were summoning you precisely, Charles Duke. We are a poor people and understand little of magic. But we do possess a few minor charms and talismans. One such promised to secure us a hero."

Duke allowed himself a laugh. Given the richness of the black and green robes Trew wore, and the luxury of the carpet they sat upon, it was easy to discount his claim to poverty. "I'll say you don't know much magic," he said. "You got me, and I tell you, Mr. Trew, I'm no hero. What I am is a businessman. Profit, not loss, that's what I'm about."

"Nonetheless you will assist us, Charles Duke. You will use your own magic

Illustrated by Bernie Mireault & Allen Koszowski

ALLEN K. '02

to rid us of these demons."

Duke's holsters were cut low before and behind in order to accommodate a quick draw. For the same reason their noses were secured to his thighs by rawhide straps. He traced the metal with his fingers — Colt '73 Peacemakers with barrels shortened a couple inches from their standard length.

"As I said, Mister Trew, I'm a businessman," Duke replied. "My philosophy is payment for services rendered. My fee is straightforward. As much gold as will fit comfortably in my saddlebags, or even as much as will fit uncomfortably, and to top the deal off, a ticket back to Laredo, and I'll help you out with your problem."

The fact that Trew agreed to the terms without argument was one more reason why Duke didn't trust him.

"Everything will be exactly as you require," he said.

. . .

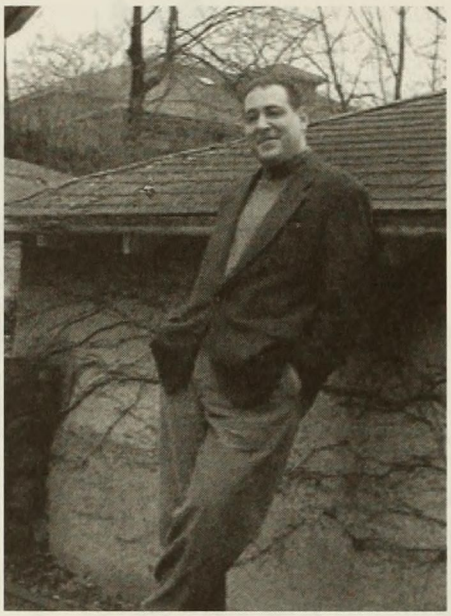
The nearest demon frequented the roadside a half day's travel east.

Duke spurred his horse; the old gelding broke into a brief trot before slowing down again. As usual he'd managed to get the bit between his teeth, and he followed Duke's directions only so long as they suited his own inclinations.

The town consisted of a hundred or so buildings radiating off a central square. This was paved with cobblestones that had been painted a rich gold color, now somewhat dulled by a thin coat of grime. The local architecture favored cylinders and spires and domes, reminding Duke of engravings he'd seen of Arabia and Muscovy. He passed through a residential neighborhood and reached a belt of farmland, where the golden cobbles gave way to packed earth. Most of the fields were planted with vegetables, different from the ones with which Duke was familiar but ordinary enough. What was unusual was the work force toiling in the fields, and for the first time since he'd been brought to this place, Duke truly understood exactly how far he had traveled from Laredo, Texas in the year 1879.

No two of the laborers were alike except for their similarity to figments of nightmare.

One had the carapace of an insect and the hands and head of a man. Another possessed the forequarters of a lion and the hindquarters of a lizard. A third had



David W. Hill

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Photo by Barbara Earley

the stilted legs of a bird and the torso, breasts, and face of a young woman. Despite their grotesque appearance these three and the others worked peacefully together at weeding and watering and pruning and other agricultural tasks. At the edge of the acreage a foreman leaned against a fence rail and peevishly scrutinized their actions. He was a grizzled ancient with a strand of white beard waxed in tight curls below his chin and an expression that discouraged easy conversation.

Nevertheless Duke urged his horse over to the foreman, who spared him only a brief unfriendly glance before returning his attention to the laborers. In his hand was a complex instrument from which thin cables of adjustable length connected to each of the workers. Every time the foreman touched the instrument, one of the creatures gave voice to an exclamation of woe.

"Now that's a fine crew of fellows," Duke observed in admiration. "I've never seen a more industrious bunch, let me tell you, not even back in forty-nine. If you don't mind my asking, friend, where would you find such a damn handsome crew?"

"The same place we find them all, of course" the foreman snapped, gesturing to encompass the surrounding fields and the other work gangs in the distance. "In hell."

"You don't say? Not in hell?"

Now the foreman's glance was condescending. "I am amazed that anyone, even a stranger, could be so ignorant of what is, after all, widely known. There is a hell entrance just outside town. Normally it is well guarded and warded — on this side, at least. But every so often hunting parties are organized, the wards are relaxed, and bait is put out."

"Bait. For demons. I have heard something about it," Duke said heartily. "I forget the particulars, though."

"Debtors are best," the foreman explained with an air of strained patience. "Although vagrants and orphans are also acceptable The procedure is elementary. They're tethered to stakes just inside the hell entrance. Invariably demons are drawn to living human flesh. Normally demons are sly and crafty things. But they are also compulsive gourmands and cannot restrain themselves from gluttony. Soon they eat too much and become torpid. This allows them to be netted with a minimum of difficulty, and fitted with coercive collars. Such creatures make excellent agricultural workers as long as they are treated strictly."

Illustrating his point, the foreman depressed several studs on the instrument he held, causing a general uproar. The demons' exertions redoubled.

Here was a part of the situation that Farlan Trew hadn't shared with Duke. He'd bet good money the things he'd been sent to dispatch were escaped slaves who had broken free of devices similar to the one in the foreman's hands.

Not that it made a difference. Duke had hunted slaves before and earned a decent wage, too, back in the fifties. He supposed he'd regain his familiarity with the job soon enough.

"And the bait?" Duke asked.

The foreman was staring at the antics of his charges while working the toggles of the coercive device. "The bait?" he answered absently. "Oh, sometimes we can reuse it two or three times, which makes the whole practice most economical. Demons don't covet the same things, you see. One will be happy with your tongue, another with your eyes, a third with a bit of your soul. It all depends."

. . .

By early afternoon Duke was in country that reminded him of the hills around Austin. There were strands of oak interspersed with trees like pines except their needles were the length of bayonets. Then the road led into a high valley. Duke pulled the gelding to a stop and took a pair of field glasses from his saddlebag and put them to his eyes. The scene before him resolved into clarity.

At the far end of the valley was a pond, beside which rose a grove of small trees. These had stubby trunks that split at shoulder height into two slender branches separating at a wide angle to one another.

Among the trees crawled what could only be the demon — a thing resembling a fat gray slug. It was twice as long as a man and equally thick through the belly. Two spindly arms extended from beneath its eye stalks, and the demon was using these to wield a pair of garden shears to snip clusters of fruit from the main branches of the trees.

Duke looked at the demon and then, regretfully, at his Colts. By the way the thing moved, flowing on boneless ripples of gelid flesh, it seemed likely that the demon possessed the amorphous internal structure of the slug it resembled. Duke couldn't even begin to guess at the location of the vitals of such a creature. Much less hope to hit them through blind shooting. Not with the revolvers, not with the Henry repeating rifle whose stock extended from the sheath beside his right thigh, not with the Sharps double-barrel shotgun, "Old Reliable," holstered next to his left stirrup.

This was unfortunately a situation requiring more than simple firepower.

Duke kicked the gelding and was carried into the grove. Once among the trees he learned that each was actually a human torso. By some process skin had been transformed into bark, upraised arms into branches covered with leaves, heads into wrinkled round burls with expressions of anguish engraved where faces had been. The fruit that the demon was so busy harvesting, growing at the ends of the main branches, was bunches of fingers, perfect from the first joint to the nail although rather small in size. They, and the branches they sprouted from, retained a limited mobility, and shrank back from the demon's scissors.

"Friend, I sure hate to be the one to tell you this," Duke called, "but you shouldn't be doing that."

The demon's eye stalks whipped around and its eyes focused on Duke. Its voice was a soft, breathy whisper. "And why not?"

"Well, I'm no expert by any means, but even I can see those fingers aren't ripe. You need to let them sit awhile longer so they can reach their full growth."

"Indeed, indeed. Is that so? I had not realized. You must understand I am new to horticulture."

For the next quarter hour the demon insisted on putting on a demonstration of its agricultural techniques, so that Duke could provide further advice. From a sack it pulled out a supine man with a peculiar rigidity to his body. From another sack the demon took white powder, which it sprinkled in the man's mouth — rooting compound. This, it explained, was a second dose, and would initiate the growth of a tap root; an earlier dose of the compound had induced the man's passivity. Excavating a pit, the demon tucked the man's legs beneath him, burying him to the waist. Green nodules, the buds of leaves, began sprouting from the man's skin.

Then the demon plucked off his fingers.

"I pinch them back to stimulate additional growth," it continued. "I do so enjoy a good digit, or two or three besides. There's nothing quite as succulent."

Duke made occasional suggestions, some endorsing the demon's procedures, some finding fault. All his observations were, of course, fabricated on the spot of whole cloth, since Duke knew little about gardening and cared less. "But I'll tell you, friend," he finished as the demon tapped down a last spade full of dirt against the trunk of the tree that had recently been a man, "all this talk of food has given me an appetite. You couldn't spare a bite of something filling?"

"Certainly, certainly," exclaimed the demon, tucking the bundles of fingers under one arm while waving the other in a fervid gesture. "I have forgotten my manners." Its mobile eyes, lidless and glistening, regarded one another before again fixing on Duke. "Allow me to offer you a tidbit or several."

Just beyond the grove was a fire ring with coals still glowing within its circumference. The demon added additional fuel until the blaze crackled merrily. It broke the fingers from their bunches, threaded them on iron skewers, and grilled them over the flames. Duke dismounted and allowed his horse to graze while he watched the demon at its culinary routine. Every so often he pretended to gaze away idly at the trees or skyline. The demon took advantage of these moments to sprinkle the brochettes with rooting compound. Then it offered Duke a choice of skewers. He accepted one at random. The demon had, of course, contaminated them all.

"Eat, eat," the demon urged.

"Never before my host," Duke replied politely.

"Never the host before his guest."

"But I couldn't. Particularly with a meal so excellent. I'd say it's almost too good to eat. Look at those kebabs. Cooked just right, browned to perfection, tender but done through with only a blush of pink."

The old foreman had described his charges as compulsive gourmands who couldn't restrain themselves from eating too much. This demon, Duke was glad to see, was no exception. As he spoke, its eyes were drawn to the skewer it clutched in its knobby fingers. A thread of moisture began seeping past its flabby lips. "And can you smell that?" Duke went on. "Nothing compares to meat broiling over an open fire. The way the juices sizzle when they hit the coals, the tang of the smoke, the pop of the skin. What I particularly enjoy is the chewy cap around the joint. You know the part I mean, friend?"

But the demon was too busy gobbling down fingers to answer. Soon the rooting compound took effect and it became inert.

Duke threw a hitch around the thing. Tying the other end of the rope to his saddle horn, he convinced the gelding to drag the unconscious demon into the center of the grove of trees. Within an hour Duke had a pit dug. He scooped up a handful of rooting compound, pried apart the slug's flaccid jaws, and forced the powder down its throat — the second dose. Then he rolled the demon into the hole.

Although the air was still, a rustling went through the fingers growing on the trees nearest the demon. Their branches began a slow change of direction.

Duke let the hitch loose, recoiled the rope, climbed onto the saddle, and went away from there. He looked back once but the other trees had contracted tightly around the demon growth and he could make out no sign of it.

. . .

Not long past dawn the following morning Duke came upon a cottage of whitewashed clay with a thatch roof and a stone chimney from which curled a thread of smoke the color of oyster shell. This was where he'd been told he would find the second demon. The two windows facing Duke were lighted, but even so he couldn't see much of the interior. Duke pulled the Sharps shotgun from its holster. He broke open the breach and made sure each barrel held a shell, placing several additional shells in a front shirt pocket. He used the muzzle of the gun to push in the door of the cottage.

There was a single room. Shotgun leveled, Duke stepped forward.

Two women were seated together on the edge of an unmade bed. The farther one was a frail brunette with a faraway expression. The nearer, dressed in a loose gray shift, met Duke's eyes with a sauciness that brought back memories of a certain house in Nuevo Laredo, and of a certain woman. This one's hair was the same muted amber that he remembered, her eyes the same dark brown. But her voice lacked the grit and anger with which Duke had become all too familiar. Instead her tone was as soft as running water.

"So you have come at last to save us from the depredations of the beast," she said quietly.

Only now did Duke notice the chains that led from the women's ankles to a bolt in the center of the room. These were long enough so that each had the freedom of the cottage, but too short for them to go much beyond the door.

"Maybe so," Duke answered, not relaxing his finger against the double triggers of the shotgun. "I can't say for sure, however. It depends on just who this beast is."

"The beast is a spawn of hell. A vile thing of unspeakable lechery."

"That's what I needed to hear. And where exactly might this spawn of hell be at the present moment?"

"Why, we don't know. He leaves us alone several days at a time, never revealing what his business is. But he never returns in less than three days, and only one has passed."

"Well, you don't say. Never in less than three days, is it?" Duke lowered his shotgun. The brunette had turned her back to the conversation but the redhead continued to stare directly at him. Closer up her resemblance to Juanita was even more apparent. Put both women side-by-side, and Duke knew he'd be hard pressed to tell them apart. "And what precisely does occur when the beast returns?" he asked the redhead, sitting down next to her in the space vacated by the brunette.

Like Juanita always had, she kept her gaze centered on his eyes while she spoke. "Terrible things. Dirty things. Things a man should never do to a woman, not once, not every day, to every part of her, no matter how immaculate."

Behind them the brunette began weeping quietly. "Is that what's troubling your friend?" Duke inquired.

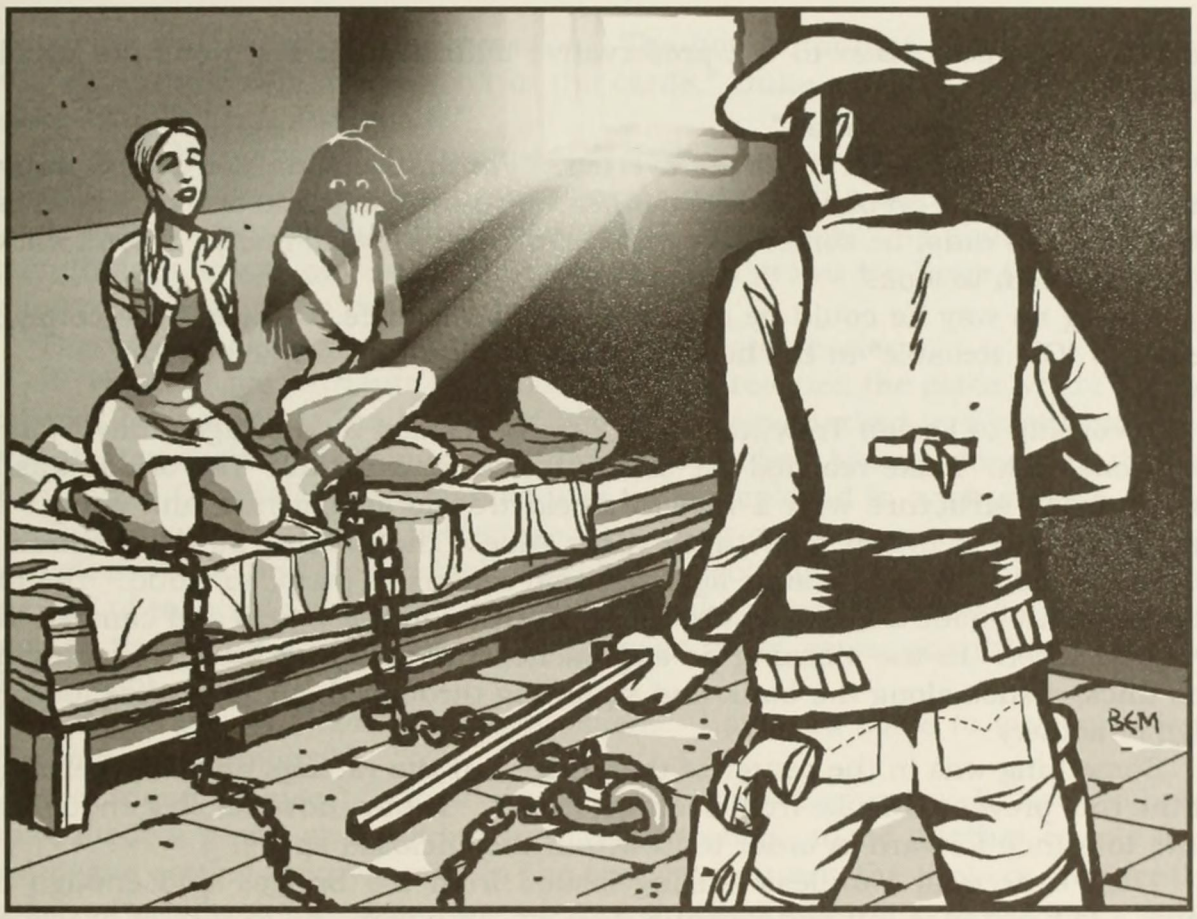
"She can't forget. The caress of the beast. The way he teases us with the backs of his nails. From our necks all the way down. So slowly."

Juanita had often spoken to him in just the same manner, with almost the same words, stirring him to boiling long before they ever joined together.

God, Duke had loved her.

He squeezed the right trigger, then the left. At point blank range a shell from each barrel exploded in the woman beside him, smearing much of her against the wall and drenching Duke in yellowish gore.

What remained intact had little resemblance to any human anatomy Duke had ever seen. The biggest chunk consisted of two gaunt legs joined by a leprous



flap of skin.

Duke opened the breach of the shotgun, removed the spent cartridges, and reloaded with fresh shells. Then he prodded the pillow behind which the brunette was trying to hide her face.

"Come on out of there now."

"It's dead," she exclaimed when she finally lifted her eyes above the pillow. "I thought I'd be captive forever. It seduced so many others, both men and women, with its charade... What made you suspect?"

"Coincidence," Duke replied. "There was too much of it around. It wasn't natural, how close she resembled an old friend. Sounded like her, as well. I figured someone was picking ideas right out of my head to put me at ease, images of a woman I loved. Only it didn't look deep enough. I hated Juanita as much as I ever loved her. Particularly after I learned how she'd been stealing from me. That's why I shot her. Juanita, I mean."

Finding the keys to the woman's chain among the mess that had been the demon was a chore Duke didn't want, so he used a large rock as a hammer, breaking her free with a dozen blows. She immediately pulled a chest from beneath the bed and began rummaging through it. Peering over her shoulder, Duke saw that the chest was filled to the brim with male and female organs contained in individual translucent sacks. Shuffling the male parts to one side, the woman held the feminine sacks to the light and studied each intently before shaking her head and applying her attention to another.

"What exactly are you hoping to find?" Duke asked.

She answered without turning to him. "The demon was neither a man nor a woman — or, rather, it was both. It was also a collector. These it stole from the

people it beguiled. Due to the preservative matrix, their functions are unimpaired."

"I'm following you so far."

Still the woman kept her head averted. "For amusement, the demon would instruct me to put on one set or the other." Frustration made her voice a whisper. "My own must be somewhere here. Only there are so many. I don't know where to begin to look."

Seeing no way he could be of any further assistance, Duke left the cottage, replaced "Old Reliable" in the holster by left stirrup, and headed north.

According to Farlan Trew, the third demon resided by a bridge a day's journey from town. Duke reached the place just before nightfall. The bridge was a sturdy wood structure with a roof to shield travelers from rain and snow. It spanned a placid brown river thirty yards wide. The evening sun was sending down lazy thick bars of orange light through a bank of purplish cloud. The air of tranquillity made Duke ill at ease. He returned to the woods and camped far from the river. In the morning he approached the bridge on foot, crouching in the thick rushes along the bank and squinting through the field glasses for any sign of activity.

Something was in the center of the bridge but the railings and the overhang of the roof prevented Duke from seeing it clearly. It was, however, big enough to have to hunch forward in order to fit within the enclosed space.

Then a peculiar wordless singing issued from the bridge, loud enough to carry a fair distance but oddly gentle even so. In a while an urchin of twelve or fourteen years appeared on the path. He was looking about in different directions as if searching for the source of the melody. Then the boy began striding directly for the bridge at such a pace that Duke barely managed to intercept him before he reached the gates.

"Now hold on there one second, son," Duke said. "Just where do you think you're going?"

The urchin twisted around but was unable to break the grip Duke had on his arm. "Leave off. I know my own business."

"The point, son, is whether your business is my business. Listen carefully, because I won't ask nicely again. Just where do you think you're going?"

"To the hell thing, of course. The appetite of its kind for human brains is well known. The song it's singing is an advertisement for a volunteer. You must let me go. Others may be along at any moment."

"Let me get this straight. You're in a rush because you want to be the first to have this thing make a meal of your head? Now where's the sense in that?"

"The demon doesn't require the brains for food," the boy explained with an air of exasperation. "It swallows them whole and makes them part of its own mind. However, the demon only requires ninety percent of each brain. The original occupants remain in the other ten percent, where they are provided unending pleasant dreams in return for their donation."

"This is the reason you're anxious to be first in line?"

The urchin gave Duke a baleful look. "I'm sick of being hungry and I'm sick of being cold and I'm sick of a lot of other things. So let me go about my business."

Duke hauled back and kicked the urchin in the ass with the side of his boot, sending the kid sprawling. "Take your business someplace else," he growled,

advancing with a menacing expression. The boy scrambled to his feet and ran off. "Pleasant dreams just aren't in the cards," Duke called after the retreating back. "Suffer life a little more."

Then Duke opened the gates a crack and peered within the dim confines of the covered bridge. The demon most closely resembled a toad with five separate heads atop a warty body the size of a wagon. By the way its abdomen weighed upon its legs, it was obvious that the demon had grown too huge to move easily from its position in the center span.

The very immensity of the thing made Duke's job easier.

He retraced his path into the woods until he reached the place where he had tethered his horse. At the bottom of his saddlebags, packed in a metal canister, were the ten sticks of dynamite he had acquired in San Antone along with the box of Cubans. Originally the dynamite was to be employed in a job outside Austin but Duke figured he had a better use for it right now. From another metal box he took a coil of slow fuse, which he cut into sections of equal length, inserting one end of each strip deep into a tube of explosive. Then he carried the dynamite back to the bridge and pulled open the near set of gates, admitting a wash of bloody light.

With its middle head the demon asked: "Have you come to join your flesh with mine in harmony?"

"No, friend, I haven't. I'm afraid I've come to send you straight back to hell." Duke made a guess at the thing's radius of motion, added another couple feet, and began setting the dynamite in the crevices between the timbers flooring the bridge. Then he gathered the fuses into a single strand.

Protests began issuing from each of the demon's mouths at the same time. "Do not do this awful thing," instructed the middle one. A different voice came from the leftmost head:

"Let us be. We're having ever such a good time."

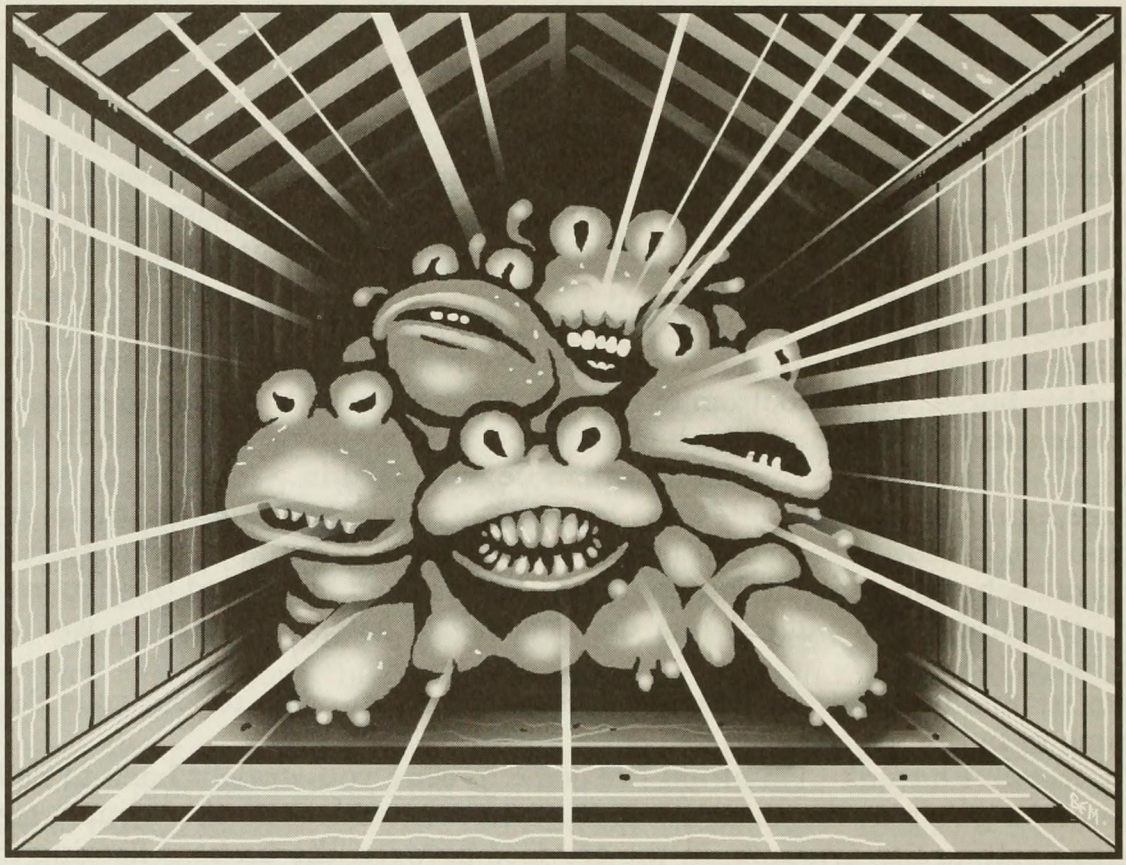
And from a head on the right: "Why are you reminding us of what we once were, when it is so much nicer in here?"

Duke's estimate of the thing's area of motion was accurate, but he'd neglected to take into account the tongues concealed within the demon's mouths. These shot out suddenly, and several managed to circle around him, pinning his arms to his side and causing him to drop the fuses. Slowly the tongues began drawing him toward the waiting mouths and their rows of sharp triangular teeth the size of thumbs.

The sticky cables prevented him from reaching his Colts. So Duke slumped to his knees, allowing his right hand to touch the top of his boot and close around the hilt of the knife he carried there — a precaution he'd learned to take back in forty-nine and fifty in the gold rush mining camps when he'd "gone to see the elephant" in his youth. Duke reversed the handle and forced the blade upward into the closest coil of tongue, severing the thing. He managed to bloody two others before they recoiled into their respective mouths.

Still the voices of different people poured from each of the five throats. Ignoring them, Duke straightened out the fuses and retreated to the gate. There he lit a match and put the fire to each of the slow fuses. Sparks shot upward as the small flames began burning slowly toward the dynamite.

With vast effort the demon lurched forward, causing the bridge to shudder, and swept up several sticks with its tongue. It chewed awhile, swallowed the



explosives, and emitted a satisfied belch. Again a tongue shot out and retrieved another stick. At this rate, Duke calculated, the demon would have consumed all the dynamite long before the fuses could ignite it.

"Now why don't you just quit that," he yelled, but the demon was already looking around for another snack.

Duke took a single Colt from its holster, cocked the hammer, and held the gun at full extension while aiming at the nearest of the remaining four sticks of dynamite.

The trigger responded to a fractional addition of pressure. The bullet scarred the planking an inch short of the stick just before a prehensile tongue scooped it up.

Duke cocked the hammer again. Two additional shots both missed their targets. Finally only one stick remained in the crevice where he had planted it.

Duke carefully lined up the pin on the muzzle of the pistol with the last piece of dynamite. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a tongue snaking forward. Then he nudged the trigger. The resulting explosion dwarfed the Colt's usual report. There was a bloom of flame and pressure that blew off the roof of the bridge and hurled Duke twenty paces back into the brush of the embankment. For a moment he could only lie still and admire bits and pieces of things raining down on the earth while black smoke ballooned from the bridge.

Something particularly heavy thudded onto the grass beside him. Duke looked aside and found himself staring into the eyes of one of the demon's five heads, freakishly whole from the neck up. The illusion of life was so great that Duke was half expecting it to speak to him when it did in fact begin talking:

"You were right not to believe," whispered the mouth. "The demon lied. Everything we said was a lie, too. It compelled us with torment. Now we are free.

Thank you."

The light in the thing's eyes had faded by the time Duke managed to struggle into a sitting position. There was a ringing in his ears and his clothes were blackened and scarred but the revolver was still in his hand and his worst injury seemed to be a gash, not too wide, just beneath his hairline.

"Think nothing of it, friend, " he remarked to the flaccid head. This time it didn't respond. Which was just as well.

The truth was that the demon's story and the testimony of its voices had seemed mighty convincing to Duke.

Not that it had mattered. Business was business.

. . .

"As much gold as will fit comfortably in your saddlebags," said Farlan Trew, "or even as much as will fit uncomfortably — those were the terms we settled on, were they not?"

Duke had returned to the town with the name he could not pronounce and was once more seated across a low table from the other man. Through a nearby window, arched at top, came a wash of amber light. "Most of them," he agreed.

"Well, then, Charles Duke, if you would follow me." Farlan Trew led Duke from the office to the first floor and through a door onto the town square. A breeze furled the loose black and green sleeves of Trew's robes as he extended his arm and said:

"Please help yourself to all that is here."

He seemed to be referring to the cobblestones of the square and surrounding streets.

"I'm afraid I'm not following, Mister Trew."

"Gold is an excellent paving material. Its softness makes it easy to walk upon and yet it is sufficiently hard to withstand the wear of traffic. And since the expense is negligible —"

Duke knelt and scraped a fingernail against one of the bricks. The metal gave under pressure, exactly as gold should. He had to laugh. "I have to hand it to you, Mister Trew," Duke said. "You're sharp. I knew there were good reasons I shouldn't have trusted you. You hired me for the cost of a couple pounds of dirt, and my rates aren't usually that low. But the thing is, and here's what's amusing, it doesn't matter. What means little to you is just what I need, no question. I'll take it off your hands, all right, and be happy to do so. Back home gold is gold. Just get me to Laredo. I'll be all right."

But when the force of the talisman dissipated, instead of having returned to his campsite by the banks of the Rio Grande, Duke found himself under the same sickly sun as before.

Trew, unfortunately, had been correct — his people really hadn't understood much about magic.

There was no trace of the town. Duke and the old gelding stood on sand surrounded by desert. In the distance, partly obscured by haze, was a lone building.

He prodded the horse and it began laboring slowly forward. Eventually Duke stopped and unloaded the paving stones from the saddlebags, leaving the bricks piled on the sand behind them.

They made better time after that.

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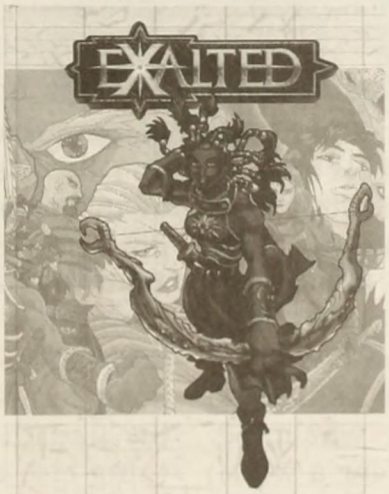
Gaming

Fantasy Game Reviews
Edited by Don Bassingthwaite

Exalted
White Wolf staff
Storyteller roleplaying game. White Wolf Game Studio, 350 pages.
Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite.

It is the Second Age of Man. Long ago, the Exalted – favored by the spirits of the sun, the moon, the five maidens of the night sky, and the five elemental dragons – led the people in a time of peace and wonder. The Old Realm fell, though, as great civilizations are wont to do. The Exalted who drew their power from the grace of the elemental dragons turned against the Celestial Exalted. The mighty Solar Exalted were slaughtered and the wild Lunar Exalted exiled to the fringes of the world, while the wise, prophetic Sidereal Exalted simply faded away. In the aftermath of this revolution came more changes: the Great Contagion swept the world, followed by an uprising of the chaotic Fair Folk whose very presence reshaped the world even further. Only the heroism of the woman who came to be known as the Scarlet Empress saved the world from dissolution into pure chaos, ushering in a new peace and new prosperity and rebuilding the realm.



But now, almost eight centuries later, change is coming again to the Realm. In the hinterlands, there is rebellion against the rule of the Dynasty. In the wilds, the Lunar Exalted stir. The Fair Folk are restless and the borders of the stable world fluctuate. Horrendous Deathlords creep across the face of the world, championed by strange, new Abyssal Exalted. The Scarlet Empress herself has vanished from her palace, throwing all things into disarray.

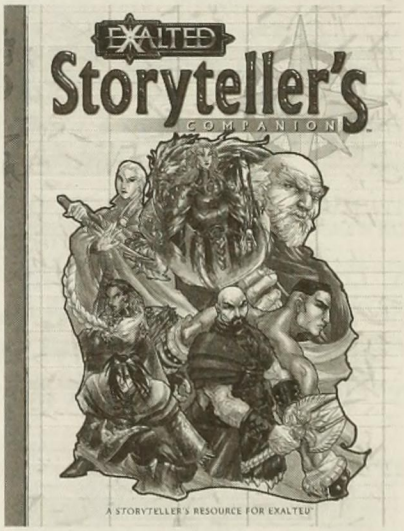
And in the midst of this change, the Solar Exalted are being reborn into the world.

Whew. And that's just scratching the surface of **Exalted**. No wonder this is one of the hottest games of the last year!

For the past ten years or so, White Wolf has been putting out what basically amounts to a new game using their **Storyteller** game mechanic each

year. First came the games that formed the core of the modern *World of Darkness* setting – **Vampire**, **Werewolf**, **Mage**, **Wraith**, **Changeling**. What followed pushed the *World of Darkness* back into the reaches of the past and expanded the borders of the present. **Vampire: The Dark Ages** showed gamers an alternate medieval Europe, **Werewolf: The Wild West** the American frontier. **Kindred of the East** uncovered the monsters of Asia. **Hunter: The Reckoning** brought a human perspective to the *World of Darkness*. The settings for all of these games might be strange, but they were at least loosely based on the world we all know.

Exalted leaves all of that behind. The world of **Exalted**, labeled the *Age of Sorrows*, is fantasy cut from the whole cloth. This is a time before the world we know, before the *World of Darkness*. Everything is vibrant, everything is larger than life. It's a world at once strange and new, yet also tantalizingly familiar. There might not be real world parallels at work in this fantastic settings, but there are parallels aplenty to the *World of Darkness* and long time gamers will find themselves drawn into a whirl of tangled links and allusions.



Word to those gamers – resist! Yes, the temptation to start matching up creatures and concepts from **Exalted** to the *World of Darkness* is overwhelming. I was keeping a list myself, for a while. The morbid, romantic Abyssal Exalted are clearly vampires. The Lunar Exalted are the progenitors of werewolves and other changing breeds. The Fair Folk are changelings. The possibility for an entire fantastic history that is both real and unreal is grounded in the consensual reality concepts of **Mage** – the masses of the *World of Darkness* have been convinced that this history never existed and so it didn't. There's no doubt that the designers built **Exalted** out of the ideas and images of previous games, but frankly, trying to keep track of all these details is damned near impossible. Chuckle and nod when you stumble across them, but then move on. Forget the *World of Darkness*. You don't really even need to know anything about it. **Exalted** is its own game and best appreciated as such. Go with the flow.

And there is a lot of flow to go with. **Exalted** covers basically an entire world and all of its incredible inhabitants, their cultures, motivations, and all of the things that make them tick. This is a lush, rich setting, filled with incredible locations and bewildering politics. The heroes of the game are the Solar Exalted, the blessed children of the Unconquered Sun, so naturally they get the most coverage. But what's a hero without enemies and background? So much detail is packed into **Exalted** that it's hard to know where to begin. I can tell you what really blew me away – the Byzantine politics and decadent hedonism of the Houses of the Dynasty, the way the awesome power of spirits and fey are incorporated into the reality of the setting, the stunningly evocative dangers of life on the fringes of the world – but there's such complexity here that you'll probably find that what grabs you is something else altogether. The free-for-all of the great city of Nexus. The grotesque horror of the Deathlords and the Malfeans. The centuries-old plots of the hidden Sidereal Exalted.

Beyond the astonishing detail of the setting, though, there are two other things that really stand out about **Exalted** and both of them relate to the themes that lie at the core of the game. In essence, **Exalted** is an homage to the

larger-than-life fantasy of manga, anime, and Hong Kong wirework kung-fu action movies. The incredible art that graces the pages of **Exalted** picks this up and runs with it. From the amazing wrap-around cover (with its background images of pretty much every core character used inside the book) to the dramatic full-page action scenes to the smaller flavor sketches, **Exalted** breathes style. It would almost be possible to skip the page of suggested fiction and video resources (featuring such highlights as *Ninja Scroll*, *Swordsman II*, and Tanith Lee's brilliant *Night's Master*) and draw inspiration straight from **Exalted** itself. There's even something about the colorful map of the Realm that forms the book's endpapers that's absolutely captivating.

Also reflecting the action-packed theme of the game are the rules changes that **Exalted** makes to the standard **Storyteller** mechanics. While I'm not normally big into game mechanics, there are a few games that manage to impress me by binding the game system to the flavor of the setting. The last one was AEG's swashbuckling **7th Sea**. The designers of **Exalted** have likewise found a way to combine setting and mechanics by stacking the most common form of magic, Charms, on top of skills to create progressive trees of magical abilities. The result is a style of magic that blends seamlessly with the world yet still makes each hero unique. Even the names of charms are evocative – archery charms include Arrow Storm Technique and Immaculate Golden Bow, while investigation charms include Ten Magistrate Eyes and Unknown Wisdom Epiphany. What can be accomplished with magic suits the world, too. Characters can stand in treetops or run full-tilt along roof ridges with the simple Graceful Crane Stance charm or employ more advanced sorcery to summon a deadly razor storm with Death of Obsidian Butterflies. There are no brutal, inelegant fireballs in this game. In fact, relatively little magic is offensive at all and the designers point out that a strong defense is, in fact, a better fit for the flavor of the setting.

Of course, there is a downside to rich settings and flavorful rules – players and gamemasters of **Exalted** are actually going to have to use their imaginations. This is a game that demands creativity. It even specifically rewards it, not with after-the-fact experience points but with immediate bonus dice. **Exalted** is a big, bold world. The characters are big and bold. The players and gamemaster will have to be big and bold, too! **Exalted** is not a game for cardboard heroes.

I'm so impressed by **Exalted** that I'm actually a little bit afraid of what the future holds for it. **Exalted** goes beyond the typical White Wolf game in more than just its fantasy setting. Most White Wolf games tend to have a real downer lurking at the end of them. The over-all story arc of the *World of Darkness* games always seemed to be about a moody, inevitable hopelessness. Gehenna will come and the elder vampires will rise to devour their descendants. Apocalypse will come and overwhelm the world. Glittering wonder will fade to gray banality. Ugh. **Exalted** has some of the seeds of this hopelessness, especially if you take the view that the *Age of Sorrows* will in some far future give way to the *World of Darkness*. Depending on how the designers sketch out the game's story arc – a great epic is already lurking in there – glory could turn to grief even sooner. Somehow, that strikes me as at odds with the fundamental fire of **Exalted**.

Still, there's lots of room for growth. The *Exalted Storyteller's Companion* is already out and filled with expanded information on the key enemies of the Solar Exalted. An entire book on the Terrestrial Exalted and the Dynasty is due out in Spring 2002. If you don't

like some part of the growing story, leave it out – this is, after all, a game that encourages creativity. No matter what shape the story arc eventually takes, do yourself a favor and pick up **Exalted**. Even if you don't play **Storyteller** games, you'll find ideas you can lift for your own campaign, no matter what system you're playing. Fire, action, intrigue, detail – this one has it all. Simply put, **Exalted** is the most exciting and most original pure fantasy setting to come along in a long time.

Talislanta Fantasy Roleplaying, 4th Edition
Designed by Stephen Michael Sechi, John Harper, Adam Sonfield
Shootingiron Design
Reviewed by Howard Andrew Jones

Every fantasy RPG touts its originality, but few can so honestly proclaim it as **Talislanta**. The strange creatures, cultures, and customs that make Talislanta their home are no warmed over Tolkien clones, and the game system is a model of streamlined efficiency.

Talislanta has long been known for its vivid, colorful setting, inspired by the works of Jack Vance. It first appeared on store shelves in 1987, courtesy of Bard Games, adorned with the striking artwork of P.D. Breeding-Black. Several expansion supplements followed over the next few years, then **Talislanta** bounced back and forth between a series of publishers, including Wizards of the Coast, finally disappearing altogether. But **Talislanta** is not dead. Steven Michael Sechi, the game's creator, credits the game's survival to its devoted fans, who have proclaimed it "the Rasputin of role playing games — hard to kill (and also a little weird)."

Published in the summer of 2001, **Talislanta 4th edition** is an attractive blue hardback tome weighing in at a little over 500 pages. Most of the book is devoted to describing Talislanta's imaginative setting, so richly envisioned and wildly different from standard game worlds that it threatens to overshadow the game's mechanics.

But **Talislanta**'s game mechanics have always been a welcome change from standard RPG fare, and they are improved in this new edition. They certainly deserve a look, for they could be adapted for any style of game and work just as efficiently for a standard medieval or urban setting as they do for **Talislanta**.

All game actions are resolved by rolling a 20-sided die against a single table, called, appropriately enough, the action table. This single table is the basis for all game mechanics. There are no other charts or tables or calculations required. The game master portions of the book provide guidelines for assigning modifiers to the table (based primarily on the difficulty of whatever action is being attempted), but this mechanic is all the player need ever be concerned with.

The results of a roll against the action table net either a mishap, a failure, a partial success, or a full success. For the sake of example, suppose that your character is juggling. A mishap would mean that all the balls land on his noggin, which would be pretty embarrassing, as opposed to a simple failure. A partial success is one that barely works, a success is pretty self explanatory, and the hard-to-achieve full success in this instance would

mean that the juggling succeeds astonishingly well, most likely amazing the audience and producing thunderous applause.

Talislanta's magic system is a fabulous design. Rather than providing the endless pages of spells and their statistics that are a stable to most fantasy RPGs, the **Talislanta** magic system offers twelve categories, or modes, of spells, three examples of which are the aptly named attack, defend, and heal modes.

Different sorts of magic users (magic users are divided into 11 different orders that reflect the type of training a mage received) apply these modes in different ways. For instance, an elemental mage character, wishing to defend, might declare "I call the northern ice spirits to raise a mighty wall of gusting winds," while a necromancer might call upon a wall of bones to rise from the soil. Both have the same effect — a protective barrier is created — but the player can create the effect with whatever imagery he or she wishes. The degree of flexibility is astonishing, but not overwhelming. There are colorful examples for using each spell mode, and naturally there are suggested modifiers for the difficulty of the spells.

Never before have I seen a magic system that enables the player to create spells that he or she has seen in movies or read of in fantasy books, rather than being limited to the spells methodically created and laid out by a game's creators. **Talislanta**'s designers make the whole magic system sound so easy and straightforward one wonders why no one ever thought of it before.

Talislanta comes with well over a hundred character archetypes, descriptions of races and professions available to the player. Each of these archetypes, or templates, can be modified by the player to fit their character concept, or simply played as is. There are the **Talislanta** equivalents of some favorite fantasy standbys—the Gao Sea Rogues, for instance, are swashbuckling pirates, while the Cymrillian magicians are studious mages. But there is a delightful selection of quite original templates as well: the Bodor musicians, who can see music as waves of light, or the cat-like Jaka manhunters, or my personal favorite, the Xambrian wizard hunters, dedicated to tracking down the reincarnated wizards who nearly exterminated the Xambrian race in ancient days.

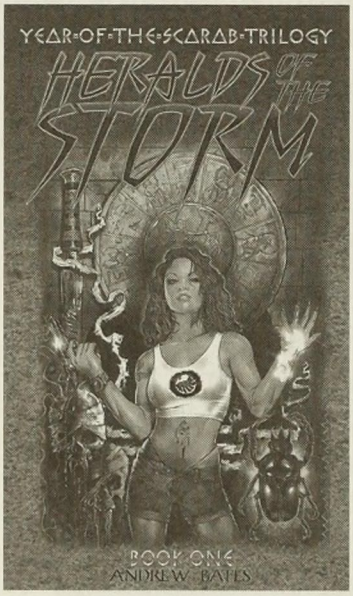
A weighty 350 pages present the different regions of the continent of Talislanta and the interactions of their people and countries, in detail. Every page of this Talislanta gazetteer boils over with ideas, interesting places, and plot hooks. The setting is rich and varied enough that it is suited for nearly every genre of game play: those wanting a good old fashioned dungeon bash might set out for gloomy, demon-haunted Khazad, or pay for the privilege of looting some Hadjin ruins. Swashbuckling cinematic action is possible nearly everywhere, but so too is political intrigue, especially in the Kang Empire, or between the devout, repressionist Aamanians and the hedonistic Zandir. **Talislanta 4th edition** is well organized and well-indexed, and features some excellent artwork. It is marred only by some typos and misspellings, which unfortunately are typical of the industry as a whole.

In short, **Talislanta 4th edition** offers a rich and vivid setting, a model of efficient game mechanics, lovely artwork, and good organization. It is far and away the best $37.00 I've ever spent on an RPG product.

Year of the Scarab Trilogy I: Heralds of the Storms, II: Lay Down With Lions, III: Land of the Dead
Andrew Bates
World of Darkness novels. White Wolf.
Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite

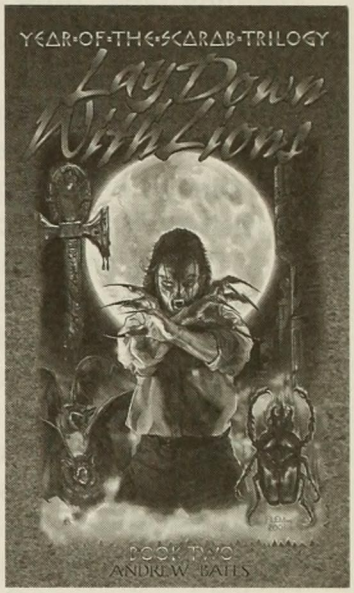
Black Gate

White Wolf has had a lot of success with their *Year Of...* development strategy. Each *Year Of...* line presents a series of themed products exploring a particular aspect of the games that make up the **World of Darkness** setting. *The Year of the Lotus*, for example, produced a stunning description of the unique supernatural beings of Asia. *The Year of Reckoning* focused on adversaries and led up to the release of the **Hunter: The Reckoning** game. For 2001, White Wolf launched the *Year of the Scarab*, an exploration of the mysteries of Egypt. Headlined by a revamping of the old **World of Darkness** rules for mummies, it also included another interesting notable: the first fiction tie-in to a *Year Of...* series, the aptly named *Year of the Scarab Trilogy*.



Okay, the trilogy title might not be particularly original, but that's not a reflection on the books themselves. There is some good solid storytelling happening herein.

The trilogy kicks off as Thea Ghandour, a hunter, and her buddies slip onto the Chicago estate of a vampire, intent on doing what all good vampire-hunters do. Things start to go wrong, however, as it becomes clear that someone else is also after the vampire. That someone turns out to be Maxwell Carpenter, a hatred-driven being that Thea knows as a zombie and **World of Darkness** players will recognize as a Risen, a wraith inhabiting and animating a corpse. Carpenter claims to want the hunters' help to destroy an unknown force behind the Chicago temple of an obscure mystical order. Even though Thea and her friends know that the situation is clearly a set-up, Carpenter's manipulations force them into the temple anyway. Naturally, things go from bad to worse: inside the temple is a supernatural creature neither the hunters nor Carpenter have ever seen before.



It's not giving away anything to say that the creature in the temple is a mummy (they are, after all, the signature monster for the Year of the Scarab). Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep is the scion of Chicago crime family, once forced into suicide by Carpenter, now returned to life as one of the warriors of Osiris. As the story develops in the other two books of the series, Thea and Nicholas actually end up fighting on the same side against the nearly unstoppable Carpenter; mummies, it turns out, are one of the more benign beings inhabiting the **World of Darkness**. The action settles down into a nice tight game of cat and mouse as Thea, Nicholas, and Carpenter struggle for the mysterious force from the temple, an artifact called the Heart of Osiris. The vampires of Chicago are drawn into the chase as well, and eventually more mummies get into the act as the action shifts to Egypt for an epic finale worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster.

According to his bio, these are author Andrew Bates' first three novels. Well done! The action is suitably

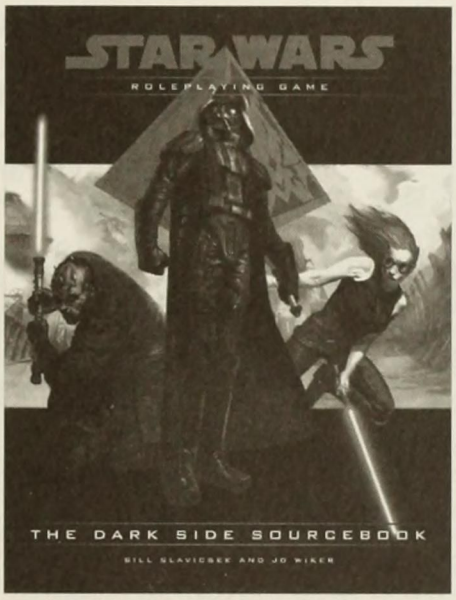
intense and the plotting is brisk. Slotting the world-views of the different monstrous factions of the **World of Darkness** together is no easy task, nor is smoothing over the game jargon, but Bates has done a good job of both. The few rough edges that do remain—frequently repeated information, jarring bits of dialogue, extraneous details and actions, and the odd plot line that ends up going nowhere—are distracting but not detrimental to a good story.

The ultimate resolution of the trilogy isn't completely to my liking, but you can't have everything; getting to the conclusion is a wild ride in itself. Fans disappointed by lackluster **World of Darkness** novels in the past should give these books a try. If the *Year of the Scarab Trilogy* is anything to judge by, you may want to keep an eye on Andrew Bates.

The Dark Side Source Book
Bill Slavicsek and JD Wiker
Star Wars™ RPG sourcebook. Wizards of the Coast, 159 pages.
Reviewed by Jennifer Brozek

"However you decide to use this book, use it sparingly. No matter how tempting it might be to throw every creature and opponent into every adventure, too much of the dark side can easily overwhelm a campaign." - The Dark Side Sourcebook

Now you can learn all about the power of the Dark Side. *The Dark Side Sourcebook* for Wizards of the Coast's **Star Wars RPG** is *the* definitive sourcebook for all things related to the dark side of the Force. Logically set up in seven chapters that cover everything from the history and traditions of the Sith to playing on the dark side, game mastering dark side characters, and even running a dark side campaign, this is the perfect sourcebook for players who believe evil is cool. It's also extremely useful for those GMs who want to frighten their players to death.



I approached this book with quite a bit of trepidation, believing fully that familiarity breeds contempt and that revealing the history and secrets of the dark side of the Force would diminish the Sith's aura of power and malevolence. I was afraid that knowing too much would make Dark Jedi appear mundane and commonplace.

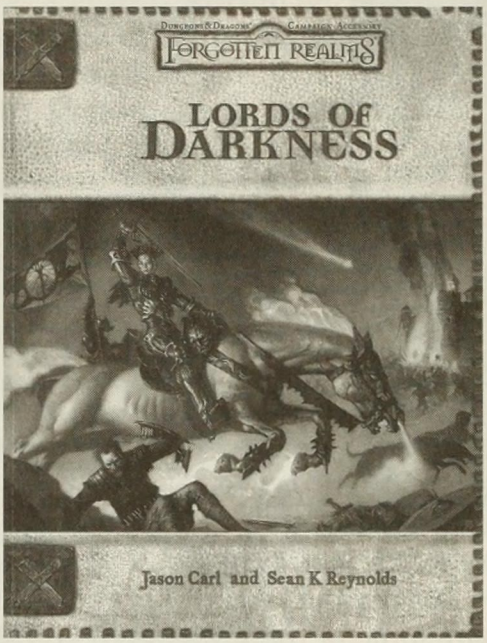
I was wrong. Boy, was I wrong.

Authors Bill Slavicsek and JD Wiker have done an excellent job. They explain some of the reasons behind the Sith and other Dark Force users, and are extremely careful to stay within the continuity of the **Star Wars** Universe. They've also liberally laced the *Dark Side Sourcebook* with restrictions and warnings about playing dark side characters or events.

I really enjoyed reading the text – it's well written, set up logically, and *sane* in its approach to evil in **Star Wars**. The examples of the dark side characters were both intriguing and thought provoking as I automatically attempted to classify those ambiguous **Star Wars** characters in possible, but unwitting, dark side roles.

I have to admit that this sourcebook really did make an impression on me. I found myself dreaming of Dark Jedi the night after reading it. Over all, the *Dark Side Sourcebook* is well worth the money. It offers a whole new perspective on the dark side of the Force, and gives gamers something truly interesting for their characters to fight.... or become. The power of the Dark Side is seductive. This is one of those books that I am torn over wanting to give to my current **Star Wars**

game master, for fear that he might actually use some of those cool new powers, feats and enemies. At the same time, however, I'm loath not to let him have that opportunity to torture us.



Lords of Darkness
Jason Carl and Sean K. Reynolds
Forgotten Realms campaign accessory. Wizards of the Coast, 191 pages.
Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite

Ask any gamer and they'll tell you that a good villain should be a challenge. There's no excitement in pitting your character against a push-over. Ask a gamemaster about villains and they're also likely to tell you a good villain is a challenge – but for entirely different reasons. While strong, interesting villains are as much fun for a gamemaster to play as they are for players to fight, they also take a lot of planning on the part of the gamemaster. How powerful is the villain? What does he want? Does he have minions? What do the minions want?

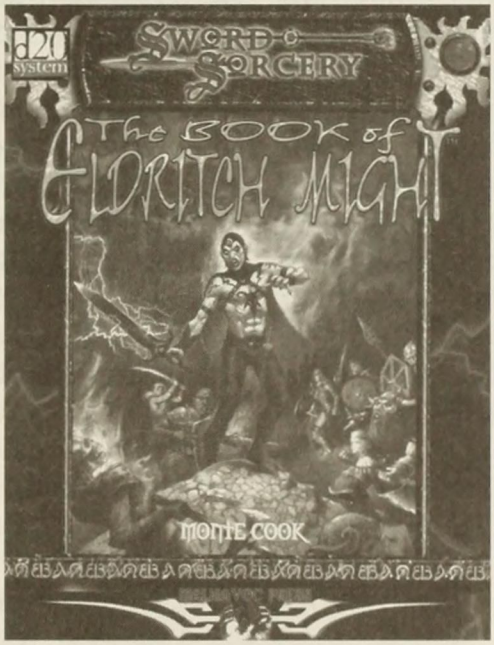
Supplements that try to answer these questions by presenting a slew of villains and other nonplayer characters for the gamemaster's use are almost as common on gaming store shelves as those listing new monsters or spells. *Lords of Darkness* is, at its core, another one of this ilk. But, oh, is it different. Like a gang pulling knives in a street fight, it rips the competition apart and walks across the bleeding corpses – literally. Point one in its favor: the villains it presents just ooze nasty. Read the book and you can't help but pick up some gut-chilling atmosphere for your game.

Point two is that unlike most villain supplements *Lords of Darkness* does not try to be generic. It is specifically about the many villains of the **Forgotten Realms** campaign setting. The many, many villains. If anyone thinks the **Realms** can't be a grim, shadowy setting, point them to this book. The nice thing about this specificity is that *Lords of Darkness* takes advantage of – and contributes to – the rich tapestry of the **Realms.** Because there's so much detail available, there's a greater sense of believability to the villains, and because it ties in to all of the other **Forgotten Realms** products, game masters can graft *Lords of Darkness* into their own **Realms** stories with very little fuss.

Point three, however, is the kicker, at least for me: *Lords of Darkness* doesn't actually present villains so much as it presents organizations. Why have just one bad guy when you can have a whole mess of them to bedevil your players? This is what sets *Lords of Darkness* above every other villain supplement I've seen. It doesn't really talk about individuals so much as about groups, their motivation, their organization, and their nefarious schemes for the future. This makes it eminently suitable for campaign play. Plots can grow along with characters. Lower-level characters might start off with run-ins with thieves from the Night Masks, moving on to encounters with the guild's web of corruption as they grow more powerful, and eventually perhaps uncovering the sinister evil that lies at the center of that web.

The villainous organizations in *Lords of Darkness* come in all sizes, from the familiar, sprawling Zhentarim

to the seemingly-innocent Knights of the Shield, to the numerically tiny yet deadly threat of the Malaugryms. There's good variation in the types of organizations presented as well. Some villains are inspired by religion, some by politics or wealth; some, like the entropists of House Karanok, by something far stranger. Some are ancient and arcane in their threat (the Shades of lost Netheril, for example), while others are more mundane but no less sinister. Two of my personal favorites leave the human realm behind entirely to explore the darker side of elves – the Daemonfey are the foul crossbreeds of elves and demons, while the Eldreth Veluutra are fanatical elf supremacists.



The one weakness of the book is perhaps the material's lack of portability. Many of the organizations are so closely tied to the politics and history of the **Forgotten Realms** that game masters who don't use that setting will have a tough time picking out usable bits of inspiration (if you're up for the challenge, try sticking with the smaller organizations – many of them are less defined and also more original). If you do play your games in the **Realms**, though, and you like your villains mean and plentiful, you'll want *Lords of Darkness*.

The Book of Eldritch Might
Monte Cook
d20 System sourcebook. Malhavoc Press/Sword & Sorcery Studios. 36 pages (PDF) / 48 pages (softcover)
Reviewed by Michael Thibault

Malhavoc Press is a new imprint from Monte Cook, co-designer of **D&D Third Edition**, distributing high-quality **d20 System** materials in electronic format directly over the Internet and (in partnership with Sword & Sorcery Studios) in printed editions to game shops. Malhavoc's first release is *The Book of Eldritch Might*, a **d20** sourcebook for magic users providing new feats, prestige classes, magic items, spells and even a monster template, all designed to add some variety to the magic in your game. As might be expected from the writer of the **D&D 3E *Dungeon Master's Guide***, these additions are seamlessly on par with the core rulebooks for quality of writing and balance of power. Want to customize a spell-casting character? Want to throw a curveball at players who have memorized the core rulebooks? Take a spin through *The Book of Eldritch Might*.

First stop: magic items. The best magic items make you want to test-drive them in a campaign and the ones here do just that – almost literally in the case of magical vehicles like the psychic skiff or bullette walker. The most ingenious items, though, are probably the magic poisons. That's right, poisons. Nearly every fantasy gamer is familiar with the old stand-by of the magic potion, but magic poisons differ from conventional potions in that they deliver both mundane toxic effects and magical damage or curses, anything from a simple loss of memory to an inability to be raised from the dead. How cool (or nasty, depending on your perspective) is that?

But magic vehicles and vicious poisons have competition in the cool/nasty department: eldritch feats. Again, Cook goes outside the box, this time creating a new type of feat to enhance characters' spellcasting prowess. Unlike the metamagic feats

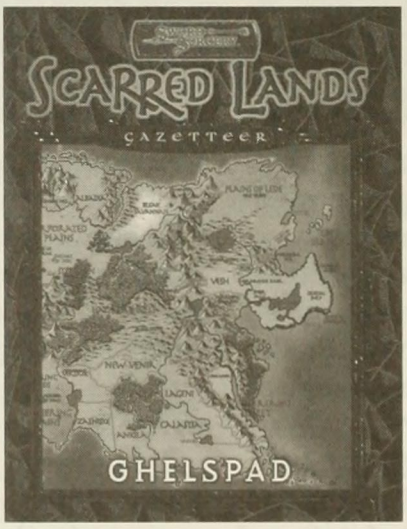
described in the core rulebooks, eldritch feats do not require that a character use a higher-level spell slot to modify the results of a spell. The common metamagic feat Maximize Spell, for example, ensures maximum damage from a single spell but requires that the spell in question be memorized as one three levels higher (so that the third level *cone of cold* suddenly requires a sixth level spell slot). In contrast, the eldritch feat Lace Spell can make *all* of your spells more effective in various ways (against a certain alignment, for instance), but has no cost beyond that of acquiring the feat itself. Not that those costs are light. There are heavy prerequisites for eldritch feats, permitting only mid- to high-level casters to alter their spells in this way, but this new classification is a superb way to customize a spell-casting character beyond the limits of the core metamagic feats.

The prestige classes introduced in *The Book of Eldritch Might* are slick enough, but they don't grab you the same way other elements of the book do. The tattoo-based magic of the Graven One or the mirror-themed magic of the Mirror Master are interesting, but still variations on rather common themes. It is a **D&D** cliché that there are as many fire-wizard prestige classes as there are dungeon masters. Still, to Cook's credit, his embermage is one of the better fire-wizards I've seen. Adopting this prestige class doesn't simply add more and bigger fireball-type spells to a wizard's repertoire, it allows him to draw fire from his body – an embermage's blood can even cause damage to his foes when he is wounded (a catchy twist in a morbid way).

While the focus of *The Book of Eldritch Might* is firmly on wizards and sorcerers, there is some spill over among the new spells into the other spell-casting classes, along with magic items for almost everyone. Magic poisons have "assassin" written all over them. If you are at all interested in adding more, or simply different, magic to your **d20** game, *The Book of Eldritch Might* would be a bargain at twice the price.

Scarred Lands Gazetteer: Ghelspad
Stephan Wieck and Stewart Wieck
Scarred Lands sourcebook. Sword & Sorcery Studies, 47 pages + map.
Reviewed by Michael Thibault

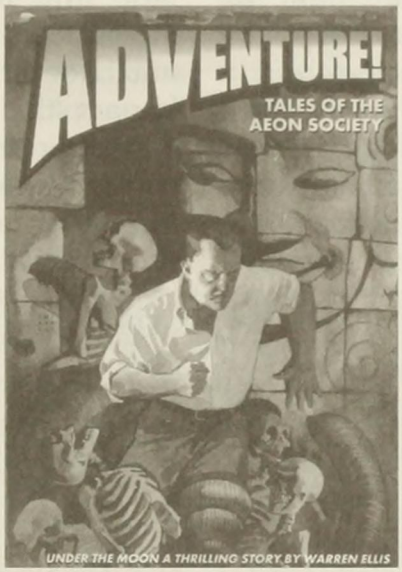
Sword and Sorcery Studios' **Scarred Lands** campaign setting is not the largest on the market, but it is one of the most professional. The quality of the content and form are equal to anything else out there. The writing, design and editing are all top notch and *Scarred Lands Gazetteer: Ghelspad* is no exception.



Ghelspad is the main continent in a world that has been "scarred" by a war between the gods and their parents, the titans. Even though this hook is cribbed from Greek mythology, **Scarred Lands** isn't a pseudo-Mediterranean setting. The orcs and other monsters are titanspawn, while the humans, elves and other good races are beloved, or at least not despised, by the gods. There are evil gods but, given their need for mortal worshipers, global annihilation isn't an option. The titans have only recently been defeated, leaving the continent in various stages of political and social upheaval – from stable nation-states to vast regions where the chaotic rule of titanspawn prevails.

The results of this divine war have also left some pretty interesting geo-

graphical features – obelisks that were once the teeth of a gluttonous titan and an ocean turned red and poisonous by the blood of a slain titan are but two. It is this sort of distinct, but unconventional, detail that really makes the **Scarred Lands** setting one of the best in the genre. It adds a unique twist to the geography, and this in turn is an inspiration to DMs and players alike when plotting adventures.



Personally, I'm rather fond of the gazetteer format because its short, concise descriptions are useful for both dungeon masters and players alike. Larger, more detailed campaign sourcebooks often give away more information than DMs like players to have, and cost more than gamers like to pay anyway. The *Scarred Lands Gazetteer*, on the other hand, is detailed enough that players will be able to find out everything they need to know about the world's geography, politics and religion in an evening's sitting. But it's not so detailed that DMs will feel handcuffed to the sourcebook when creating adventures, or forced to use non-core **d20 System** rules when running a campaign in the setting. In fact, there is no new game rule information (new spells, feats or classes) in the *Gazetteer* – that sort of information is available in separate volumes (Sword & Sorcery's *Creature Collection* and *Relics and Rituals* books, for instance), and can be included or ignored as desired. Given the lack of game-rules, it would even be possible to use portions of the *Gazetteer* with other game systems entirely!

Even though the *Gazetteer* is only 32 pages long, an alphabetical index would have been nice. Geographical features are grouped by type rather than alphabetically, political territories are divided into nations and city-states – and it isn't always clear from the map or name where to look it up. Over all though, the book is very well laid out. I particularly like the black and white reproduction of the map inside the book, so I don't have to unfold the poster map every time I want to get my bearings.

This is a very good product and is highly recommended if you're in the market for a pre-packaged campaign setting. If you want an entire campaign world, Sword & Sorcery Studios has a full range of support materials to complete the picture, but if you just want a foundation to build on – or to lift ideas from – the Gazeteer stands tall on its own two feet.

Adventure!: Tales of the Aeon Society
White Wolf staff
White Wolf Game Studio. 272 pages.
Reviewed by David Webb

Adventure! is the latest in White Wolf's trilogy of the Aeon Society. It is the final piece of the puzzle, so to speak, tying the far-future setting of *Trinity* (originally entitled *Aeon* before legal problems set in), and the darker superhero game *Aberrant* together by going back to where it all started, the pulp era, to unlock the secrets of the Aeon Continuity. Set in the 1920's, *Adventure!* takes gamers through the heyday years of the pulps, blending fact and fiction to weave a universe together. The opening short story "Under the Moon" by acclaimed comic book author Warren Ellis (*The Authority*), sets the tone of the book, propelling the reader feet-first into the world of pulp adventure. From there, various authors take hold and continue with the ongoing exploits of the fledgling Aeon Society in

a time when heroes packed a trusty .45 and came equipped with a solid right hook.

The extensive background material in *Adventure!* covers the formation of the Aeon Society, delving as well into the mysterious powers that make up the entirety of the Aeon Continuity. The authors even take the background a step further to show how that continuity will evolve in the future. The descendants of the Mesmerists (adventurers utilizing psychic powers) of *Adventure!*, for example, will become the psions of *Trinity*, while the physical and dynamic powers of *Adventure!*'s Stalwarts directly relate to the novas of the alternate-present *Aberrant* setting. A detailed timeline in the appendix was a pleasant surprise – it spans from 1900 to 1950, with two additional entries (1998 and 2106) to let readers know when *Aberrant* and *Trinity* take up.

Something that I did find to be interesting was the Daredevil aspect, the "normal" hero that relies on only wits and luck to see her through an adventure. In a world setting where disturbances of cosmic scale can and do occur, it's reassuring to see the true essence of the pulps brought out in the larger-than-life, self-reliant hero. Throughout *Adventure!*, the authors try to shoehorn in as much knowledge as they can about the pulp genre, from its weird science aspect to what pulps are and are not, all neatly bundled in a series of highly informative journal-like entries made by various members of the Aeon Society itself. Some are written in a first person narrative to give the reader a sense of being right there with the fictitious author as he recounts his days with the Society; other parts are unfortunately less imaginative and information is regurgitated in monolithic blocks that the reader might have trouble retaining.

One question springs to mind when reviewing this product: why on earth did White Wolf release the beginning of the trilogy last? Wouldn't that interfere with the continuity that had been established beforehand in the first two books? White Wolf is infamous for their continuity problems, but such is not the case here. While the events that occur in the *Adventure!* timeline will, as the fictitious narrators put it, "no doubt fade into obscurity," two key figures introduced in this book (Max Mercer and Doctor Primoris) will continue to impact the published "history" of the Aeon Continuity over its next two centuries. White Wolf does, however, include in a caveat that gamers do not have to own *Trinity* or *Aberrant* to enjoy *Adventure!* Like any game out on the market, players are encouraged to use as much – or as little – of the "official" universe as they would like.

Overall I have to admit that *Adventure!* is a fun read, even if you aren't much into the pulp genre. From the design of the book (set up to resemble a serial release from the days of the pulps, right down to the type of paper used in the printing) to the rich background origins of the *Aeon* universe, it has appeal for veteran White Wolf enthusiasts as well as newcomers. With the combination of the flexibility of the Storyteller game mechanics and the colorful milieu of the game world, *Adventure!* is a sure fire ticket for fun and excitement.

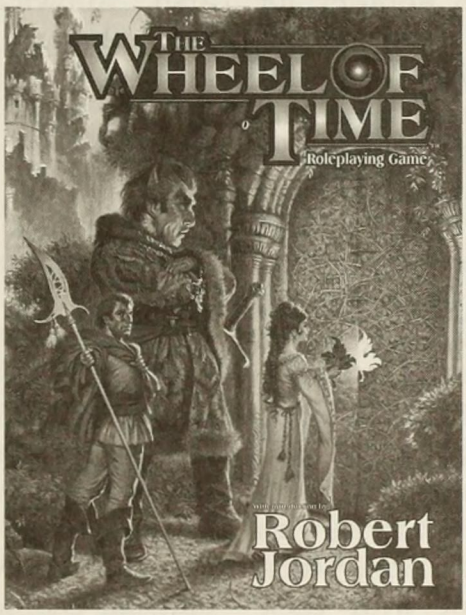
The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game

Charles Ryan, et al.
D20 System game. Wizards of the Coast, 318 pages.
Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite

It was only matter of time, really. One of the biggest selling fantasy series going right now, legions of fans, a sprawling world of adventure and magic – it was pretty much inevitable that Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series would see adaptation as a role-playing game. Now here it is, brought to you by the designers at Wizards of the Coast under the banner of the **d20** game system. Yes, that's right – **d20**, the same rules set that drives

Dungeons & Dragons. You'll notice, however that this isn't **Dungeons & Dragons**, or even simply a **d20** game setting. It is a complete, standalone roleplaying game. Everything you need to play is in this one book.

Well, almost everything. You're going to want to have actually read *The Wheel of Time* series. The background descriptions are good, but no one book (even at 318 nicely illustrated pages) is going to be able to stack up to a nine volume series. Gamers might seriously want to consider picking up *The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan and Teresa Patterson (published by Tor, just recently out in paperback) or turning to the extensive fan sites available on the web for supplemental information to round things out.



Fortunately, the basic **d20** rules adapt well to *The Wheel of Time* setting with relatively minimal changes on most levels. While their specific abilities are different, gamers will find the various classes familiar in their basic forms: armsmen are fighters, woodsmen are rangers, wanderers are rogues, while initiates and wilders can be loosely mapped to the wizard (magic by learning) and sorcerer (magic by instinct) classes. Players who like having a choice of twenty-nine different races, though, will be disappointed – there are no elves or dwarves or half-anythings, only humans of various cultures and Ogier (gentle, furry giants). Personally, I find it refreshing.

Obviously the largest change has been in the handling of magic, since Jordan's concept of the channeling of the One Power doesn't fit at all with the usual level and spell format of RPG magic. The game designers have come up with a good interpretation of channeling, however, breaking it down into a system of elemental Affinities, broad Talents, and specific weaves (spells). The system is both flexible and limited – channelers aren't tied to a strict number of weaves per day, or granted access to certain weaves only at a certain level, but at the same time they aren't universally competent with dozens of possible effects at their fingertips. I'm quite intrigued by this system and I think it would make a very interesting alternative to the standard **d20** magic system for a house setting.

As with any adaptation, *The Wheel of Time RPG* does have its problems. Aspects of the setting that are rare in the novels could too easily become common in the game. Setting descriptions are focused on places and people largely to the exclusion of broader events and states of affairs, the sort of lively hooks that adventures can be hung on. I found the game mastering section particularly weak, populated by the type of generic advice to GMs that can be found in any RPG, only with *Wheel of Time* examples pasted in. What might have been better would be specific suggestions for structuring game adventures around the bigger stories of the novels, not necessarily interacting with the characters of the books but certainly with the events that surround them.

None of these is really a tremendous problem, though, and a little thought and imagination on the part of gamers will go a long way. *The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game* is, over all, a strong adaptation of a rich series. It may not become a gaming classic, but for fans wanting to take a turn playing in the world of *The Wheel of Time* it's a good base to build from.

Black Gate

Fairy Meat: Sugar and Vice

Scott Leaton

Fairy Meat supplement. Kenzer and Company, 32 pages.

Reviewed by Jennifer Brozek

Fairy Meat is a truly bizarre game. This miniatures war game was first seen in Kenzer and Company's wondrous *Knights of the Dinner Table* comic. Then, someone in Kenzer and Company got the strange and brilliant idea to make it real. Well, as real as fairies cannibalizing one another for power can be, that is.

Fairy Meat: Sugar and Vice is a supplemental rulebook for the original **Fairy Meat** game. If you don't know how to play **Fairy Meat**, you will need to purchase the main rulebook, also available from Kenzer and Company. However, if you already know how to play this off-the-wall war game, you're all set.

Sugar and Vice is all about Moon Fairies who have come back to Earth in order to Rock 'n Roll and kick some Earth Fairy ass! Utterly enamored with the outlandish glam rock look, Moon Fairies are easy to spot with their make up, tattoos, piercings and shiny pants (very important, those shiny pants!). At first, these Moon Fairies didn't know what to make of their cannibalistic cousins, but figured, why not? and joined them.

Unfortunately, munching on fairy parts just wasn't their thing, man. So a Moon Fairy by the name of Pyrite invented a magical lip gloss called "Pink." What Moon Fairies do is wear this highly addictive lip gloss (I won't even mention the secret ingredient!) then kiss the dead fairies out on the battlefield. This allows them to absorb the dead fairy's magical essence from its corpse without the need to chow down. Creepy – yes. Amusing – yes. Addictive – hell, yes!

I have to admit that I am not a miniatures gamer. I approached this game with quite a bit of skepticism and bias. I don't like war games. I don't like playing with miniatures. I don't want to push counters around on a table. Well, at least, I thought I didn't. **Fairy Meat** changed my opinion of war games. Against my better instincts, I really like **Fairy Meat** and *Sugar and Vice*. It's a very simple game to learn but it also allows the players to set up some surprisingly complex strategies. The *Sugar and Vice* supplement may be short, but it's filled with all sorts of cool and unique info on the history of the Moon Fairies and why they are set up the way they are. *Sugar and Vice* introduces new magics, Pixies, various magical Glamour Chunks (I love that! Chunks!) and rules on how to set up your own Band. You can't have Rock 'n Roll Moon Fairies without a band, man! It also provides all of the various necessary game counters.

This is the sort of game where I fully recommend that all players hype themselves up on as much caffeine and sugar as they can stand, then go at it. This is not entertainment for the serious. This is a noisy, boisterous game that lets the evil twisted fairy living inside each one of us emerge to beat the snot out of anyone who is one of "Them." Play this game with great abandon... and the next time your buddy says "Bite me!," do it. Happy munching!

A Prayer for Captain La Hire

By Patrice E. Sarath

The gates of Vaucouleurs stayed opened those days, a welcome sign of peace. La Hire touched his tired horse with his heel, and the horse jogged forward amid a swirl of carts and livestock. Market day, he saw, and he turned away from the square to the courtyard. It was quieter there. A few men at arms were practicing swordsmanship, the others lounging idly. La Hire went unnoticed at first until one soldier saw him and stopped dead in mid-lunge, mouth hanging open. His partner almost skewered him, stumbling to catch himself at the last minute. Everyone turned to look, and silence descended on the courtyard. A page, cleaning armor, dropped a helmet and bolted for the castle.

"La Hire. It's La Hire." The whispers rose to the bright summer sky. The men surged forward, laughing, shouting. "La HIRE!" They swarmed around him, reaching out to touch his cloak or his sword, their eager hands almost pulling him from his horse. La Hire reined back, bellowing curses.

"Back, damn you all! Back, do you hear?"

"That's enough!" Jean de Metz, with the little page panting at his side, came down the steps into the courtyard. "Let him be. Get down, La Hire, they won't hurt you. It's not often we get heroes in Vaucouleurs. Besides me, of course." He grinned.

La Hire dismounted, wincing at the pain in his stiff back. He handed his reins to the page.

"De Metz, you ruffian. I heard you were captain here. It's good to see you."

"Good to see you too, old man. Come on in."

. . .

He could feel de Metz watching him over his cup, and La Hire looked up. He laughed at his intent expression. "So, what do you see?"

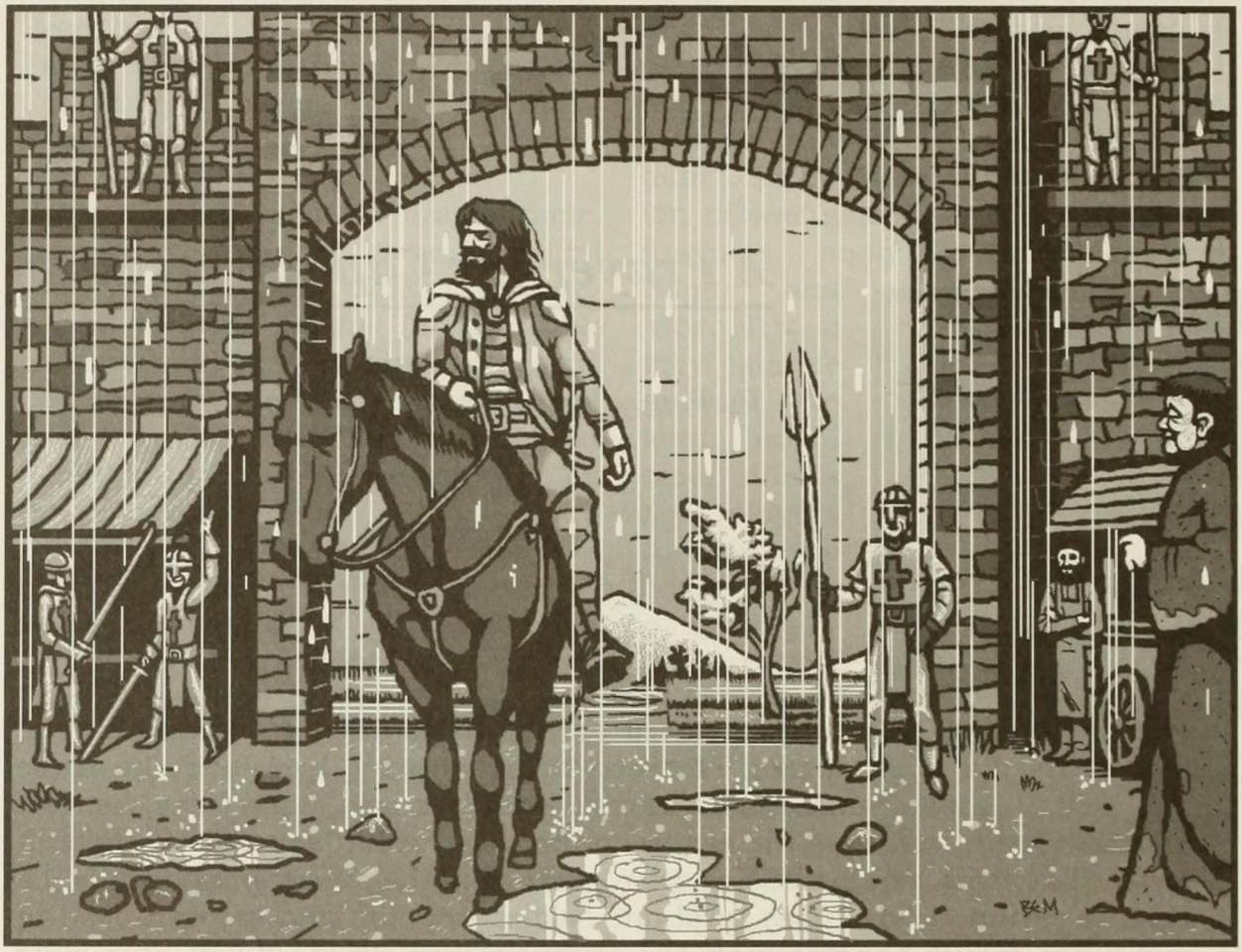
"I see the bravest man in France."

La Hire shook his head. "No more. I am an old man, de Metz. I was old ten years ago. Now I am old and fat."

De Metz raised his cup. "May we all grow old and fat."

La Hire waved his. "Hear hear." He took a swallow. "Where is de

Illustrated by Bernie Mireault



Poulengy?"

De Metz shrugged. "He's off to visit Domrémy."

La Hire set down his drink and swung his feet off the table. He stared. "The family is still there?"

"No – the father is dead, and the mother is living off a pension in Orléans. Why not? They should be grateful, after all. No, de Poulengy just goes to stare at the house. Then he gets drunk and comes home. He'll be back later today or tomorrow."

"Do you ever go?" La Hire asked.

De Metz's black eyes slid away from his gaze. "No, I – well, what would be the use of it?" He shrugged again and took a drink. "What brings you to Vaucouleurs, old friend?"

La Hire held out his cup and de Metz filled it.

"Now that the Burgundians have come back to the fold and the goddons have fled to England, I've had to take on other commissions. Gilles de Rais sent me a message, asking for my help. He didn't say what for."

De Metz stared. "De Rais? Name of God, La Hire, do you know what you're getting into?"

"Oh, not you too, de Metz. Don't tell me you believe all those stories of werewolves in Brittany?"

"No, no, of course not." The Vaucouleurs captain shifted uneasily, just barely keeping from crossing himself. "But there are other tales with de Rais' name attached to them, stories of witchcraft and murder – you've heard them too, don't deny it. And what does de Rais want with La Hire? Ten years ago you were

at each others' throats."

La Hire grinned wolfishly. "Oh, he was jealous all right! I had the Maid's ear at Orléans, and not he. Thought he was going to pull his beard right out, he was so frustrated."

"She listened to his counsel too," de Metz reminded him.

La Hire snorted. "Yes, afterwards, at Paris! Any fool could have told you we could not take Paris. Tell you the truth, Jean, our little Maid was quite the soldier, but she was also a bit of a snob. If it had a title, she listened to it. Me now, just a mercenary, well, I couldn't get the time of day from her after Orléans."

"Try telling that to Dunois, or even Charles," de Metz said. He looked down at his cup, rolling it between his fingers. "Jeanne D'Arc didn't really listen to anybody, La Hire. She had her saints, and that was counsel enough. De Rais had no more influence over her than anyone did."

La Hire grunted. "Those days are long gone. And any animosity between de Rais and me can be smoothed over with coin."

"So you're going?"

La Hire eyed him over his cup. "I hoped you and de Poulengy would come along."

De Metz leaned back, his expression curious. "Us? Why?"

La Hire chose his words with care. "You know I have little faith in God, Jean, and only a bit more in myself. But I think – and don't laugh at crazy old La Hire – that I've been given a sign to go to Brittany and do what needs to be done for de Rais."

De Metz's mouth hung open for a moment. "A sign. You. From God?"

"No. From the Maid."

He presented de Metz with a small, bent ring, battered and tarnished. With a shaking hand de Metz took it and held it up to the light. La Hire watched him read the worn inscription, his lips forming the words: Jesus Maria.

"This is her ring. How did you get her ring?"

La Hire lifted his broad shoulders. "De Rais sent it with his letter."

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by this token of the faith of Jeanne the Maid... the letter had begun. La Hire had not been prepared for the memories the little ring raised – or the uneasiness. The Maid was dead, and nothing could bring her back. If anyone betrayed her it was Charles the King, not La Hire the mercenary.

But he thought he should go help de Rais, anyway.

Footsteps on the stair caught their attention, and they could hear a voice bellowing an off-key tune. The song stopped abruptly and the door slammed open. De Poulengy stood there, arms wide, a bright grin on his lean face, his graying chestnut hair standing out wildly.

"La Hire!" he cried out, beaming. "Old friend! They told me you were here."

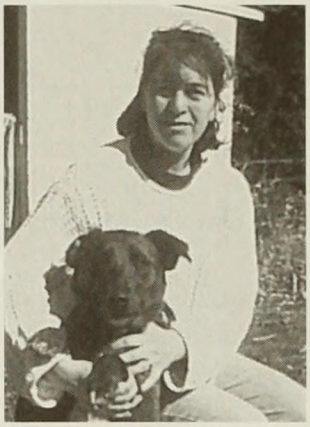
And with that Bertrand de Poulengy slid to the floor, out cold.

. . .

La Hire said little as they rode out from Vaucouleurs. He rode grimly, in constant pain in his hips and his knees. Drinking helped, but he couldn't ride drunk across France. He concentrated on fighting the pain. De Metz, catching his mood, kept his own counsel. Only de Poulengy seemed cheerful, once his hangover wore off. He didn't try to make conversation, sensing the somber mood of his companions, but he rode with a light expression, as if a smile

waited just beneath his skin. Only once did he exclaim,

"By God, it feels good to ride again!" but he said it more to himself than the others.



Patrice Sarath

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Photo by Ben Van Dyke

The roads took them through the farmlands of Lorraine, tinted with the light green of early summer crops. The bells of sheep and cattle could be heard jingling across the fields, and here and there in the distance they could catch the gray-green waters of the lazy Meuse.

Only a few years before, those fields had been charred black, the villages ravaged by fire and war. What the Maid had wrought was, quite simply, the miracle of France's rebirth. La Hire's hand twitched to make the sign of the cross, but he held it back and instead cursed under his breath so violently that his horse started and pulled at the bit.

It was a relief to his aching joints when twilight fell and they could stop for the night, choosing a campsite along the outskirts of the Bois Chenu. The trees pressed in on them and the evening air was cold after the strong summer sun. La Hire rolled his broad shoulders under his shirt and cracked his neck, swearing at the cold stealing into his joints. De Metz looked up from starting the fire.

"Sounds bad," he commented. La Hire only grunted sourly and de Poulengy guffawed.

"Losing your touch, La Hire?" he said cheerfully. "You used to peel paint with that tongue."

"Go bugger the devil!" La Hire snapped, and de Poulengy just laughed again. De Metz shook his head and went back to his fire building.

"So," de Poulengy said, when they had eaten and were sitting comfortably around the fire. "Do you really believe de Rais is behind these rumors of witchcraft and werewolves in Brittany?"

"I never liked him," de Metz said loyally, glancing at La Hire. "But he was a brave knight, and he was always at Jeanne's side. Still, these rumors, spreading even into France –"

"Jeanne would have known if he was evil," de Poulengy said, crossing himself. He leaned forward earnestly. "God would have told her."

"What do you think, La Hire?" de Metz asked.

La Hire stared into the fire, dozing a little. Or not exactly dozing, but seeing behind his eyelids another fire, and inside the leaping flames a darkened form. With an effort, he dragged his attention back to the others.

"What? No. De Rais was a son of a bitch, but I don't think he is a were-

wolf."

They laughed, but de Poulengy persisted.

"What about the other tales, of murder and kidnapping? Something bad is happening in Brittany. And if even half the stories are true, we might find ourselves wishing for the goddons to come back."

"Might be fun to fight goddons again," La Hire said lightly. De Metz snorted.

"Speak for yourself. I'll take a Breton werewolf any day over an English goddon."

"What's the difference?" La Hire shot back and de Metz laughed.

When they sobered a little, de Poulengy said reflectively,

"I know what La Hire means, though. By God, raising the siege of Orléans, then taking back the towns on the way to Rheims – we were invincible!"

The other two nodded assent. La Hire thought back to those days of triumph, following the Maid and her white banner. How her self-righteousness chafed him and the others – yet everything came out just the way she said it would.

I have been sent by God to do three things: raise the siege of Orléans; crown the dauphin at Rheims; and drive the English from France.

She had even predicted her capture; he wondered if she knew the rest of her fate, or if her saints had kept their counsel out of pity.

"Would that Jeanne were with us now," de Poulengy said finally. He ducked his head, muttering something about the smoke. The other two exchanged uncomfortable glances and waited for him to compose himself. Instead, he caught their expressions and burst out, "I know you think I'm a sentimental fool, both of you, but I'm only a fool for saying what I think." His voice went thick. "She was a good girl and a great soldier, and she was badly used by France and Charles and the rest of us. Sometimes I think she would have been better off if we had had our way with her and left her in that ditch, eh Jean? At least then she would not have come to such a wicked end."

De Metz straightened quickly. "Ho, now, Bertrand. Take it easy."

La Hire stared at both of them. "What is he talking about?"

"Nothing, nothing, we were young," de Metz said hastily. De Poulengy laughed.

"Yes it was nothing, because she shamed us out of it. When we took her to Chinon to see Charles, the plan was to take advantage of this poor, mad, innocent peasant girl. How did you put it, Jean? Put her to the test? Instead, she lay between us for ten days, La Hire, and we did nothing except cover her with our cloaks and we never touched her, because she was the Maid and was destined to save France from the English, and be burned at the stake for all her pains!"

His voice rose to a shout.

"We didn't do it," de Metz said softly. "It's all right, Bertrand."

Again there was silence, punctuated only by the snapping of the fire. La Hire thought about what would have happened if they had tupped the Maid on the road to the King. France would not have survived. He shook his head at the thought and de Metz rolled his eyes in scorn.

"Don't act so righteous, La Hire. Would she have been any safer in your hands?"

"You'll get no blame from me, de Metz. I'm just amazed you didn't try it

anyway."

"We couldn't," de Poulengy said flatly. At La Hire's raised eyebrows, he went on, "Listen, we were young and cocky, like anyone, and – we couldn't. Oh, we wanted to, and I have never ridden in such painful discomfort in my life. But I couldn't even speak to her of it."

La Hire stared at him and suddenly guffawed.

"My God! I just realized that's what that expression was on everyone's faces! Especially d'Alençon's, that time he caught a glimpse of her in the baths. I used to wonder why she always wore her armor, even slept in it. I thought it was because she was so damned proud – What?" he asked at their expressions.

"He did?" they chorused.

"What? Oh, d'Alençon. Yes, you should have seen him. He was shaking as if he had seen one of her saints. He said her breasts were beautiful."

Once again there was silence as they digested this. De Metz shook his head.

"Too many revelations for one night, La Hire. I think I'm going to sleep with that image to lull my dreams."

Following his lead they rolled out their bedrolls, settling into the lumpy ground as best they could. But de Poulengy wasn't finished. From the darkness on the other side of the dying fire, he asked reflectively,

"La Hire, why didn't the three of us just storm the prison in Rouen and rescue her?"

La Hire rolled over on his back, staring up at the distant stars.

"She was Jeanne the Maid, Bertrand," he said gruffly. "We all thought she'd win. Now shut up and go to sleep. We have a long ride ahead."

. . .

It was a cold August evening when they reached Château Machecoul. The twilight pressed in, mist stealing across the road in low, feathery patches. The castle loomed ahead of them, a dark presence in the forest. At their approach the portcullis was cranked up, and they rode in, their horses tossing their heads uneasily. The smell of offal wafted over them, a sweet, rotten stench that hung heavy in the air, mingled with another odor he couldn't place.

That is no midden heap, La Hire thought. But it was tantalizingly familiar. Out of the twilight a servant came forward, attended by another holding an ornate candelabra to light his way. The servant bowed.

"Welcome to Machecoul, my lords, I am Henriet, at your service." His French was heavily accented with Breton. He said something sharp, and grooms ran forward to take their horses.

The three knights looked around warily as Henriet and the servant led them through the great hall and up a narrow staircase, confining after the expanse of the hall. Shadows moved jerkily in the candlelight and La Hire thought he could hear furtive noises in the dark. He held his breath, cursing de Poulengy's heavy steps. Rats, he thought, or other vermin – he could hear rustling sounds like tiny footsteps and every once in a while a broken sob that raised the hair on his neck. Candlelight glanced off a miniature door, waist high and barred like a small cage. It seemed to him an eye peered back at them, catching the light and then disappearing into shadow. The others had pulled ahead, and La Hire lengthened his stride to catch up.

"When can we see Sire de Rais?" he called out, a little breathlessly.

"The Maréchal is at Mass and does not like to be disturbed at his devo-

tions," Henriet said in his ponderous French. "You will attend him after the evening meal." He unlocked a door and showed them in to a chamber. A cheerful fire took the edge off the seeping chill, but the same stench that clung to the courtyard permeated the air. "You will wait here. We will bring food and drink." Henriet hesitated. "Château Machecoul is very large, Sires. It is easy for visitors to get lost. You should stay here 'til someone calls for you."

He bowed himself out. The three men looked at one another, and de Metz raised an eyebrow. He walked over and tried the door. It was unlocked; he closed it carefully, but with a look of relief.

"This commission of yours, La Hire," he said lightly. "Do you mind telling us more about it?"

La Hire eased himself down onto the bed, wincing and rubbing his knee. Hunger and pain inflamed his temper and his words were short. "You know as much as I do, de Metz. What else do you want from me? De Rais will tell us more, when he's ready." Irritably La Hire raised his voice. "Hey! Someone bring us the food and drink you promised! Damn!" The last was aimed at his leg, which was throbbing miserably.

The dinner hour passed and the chamber began to feel more like a prison. They paced and bickered, tempers flaring. At last they heard servants at the door.

"Finally!" de Metz muttered as the servants bustled in, bearing trays of meat and wine. The aroma of roasted meat pulled them all eagerly toward the table, when, coupled with the pervasive stench of Machecoul, the smell overpowered La Hire with memory.

Jeanne, weeping over the bodies of the English soldiers, burned to a crisp in the charred ruins of Les Tourelles. Their skin roasted black, their faces unrecognizable, and the smell...

La Hire looked down at the meat, bile bubbling up in his throat. De Metz, perhaps prompted by the same memory, made a strangled sound. The two knights looked at each other, sick understanding in their eyes.

"Take it away," La Hire said hoarsely. The servants hesitated and exchanged frightened glances, arguing in Breton. "Damn you!" he roared, groping for his sword. "You'll understand this!" De Poulengy, in the act of sitting down, stared at La Hire in confusion. The servants didn't require another hint – they bustled out with their cargo, dropping utensils in their haste. When they finally were gone, de Metz checked the door again, this time to make sure there were no listeners at the latch. De Poulengy flung himself onto the bed, irritated.

"I don't know about you, La Hire, but it was a long time since I tasted food that good," he began heatedly.

"I hope you never did," de Metz said, his voice bone dry. La Hire shook his head.

"Oh God," he muttered. "Oh God."

De Poulengy looked from one to the other. "Afraid, Jean?" he said. "And you, La Hire, praying? My God, what was it? What was that meat?" Then de Poulengy stared at them as light dawned. "My God," he said. "My God, La Hire, what have you gotten us into?"

. . .

De Metz shook him awake after first watch and La Hire rolled to his feet

without a word. He settled himself by the door as de Metz took his place on the bed and dropped instantly into sleep.

The room was cold. The fire had died down and only coals glowed on the hearth. La Hire hugged himself to stay warm, bouncing on his toes to get his blood moving and his stiff muscles to loosen up.

A sliver of moonlight through the shutters illuminated de Poulengy's face, mouth open as he drove his pigs to market. De Metz coughed and sputtered and caught his breath. Preoccupied, it took La Hire a few moments to realize he was hearing something besides his companions' deep snores. He held his breath.

A rhythmic grunting came from somewhere below their chamber, ending in two overlapping sounds, a long sigh and a muffled scream. A long metallic scrape, muted by distance, followed, and something heavy rolled. La Hire broke out into sweat.

Move, damn you, La Hire! He was numb, and for a desperate moment hoped he was still dreaming. He heard nothing more, though he strained his ears, and he wondered how long the sounds had been going on, or what else he missed before he woke. Screams? his mind remarked. Crying?

He cursed, but it only helped a little. He thought of de Poulengy and how he would have crossed himself and gotten courage from God. But La Hire had only one prayer, and it was not one that could be used when a man really needed it.

He gathered up his sword as quietly as possibly, buckling the sword belt around his waist and forgoing the rest of his equipment. Something hard pressed against his chest; running his fingers over it he detected Jeanne's ring, caught in the loose folds of the shirt. He did not remember putting it there, but he held it tightly for a moment.

Better than a prayer, he told himself, though the Maid had no patience for superstitious talismans and would have reprimanded him sharply if she had been there. Still, he felt a little better.

He limped down the long hall the way they had come up from dinner. Many of the torches had burned out, but one or two still flickered, and he snagged one to help him on his way. The stairs at the end of the hall were a descent into utter darkness. La Hire took them slowly, straining to see more than a few steps at a time, but the torch helped little to illuminate the way and only interfered with his night vision. He took a tentative step and stumbled. Grabbing at air, he windmilled desperately through the darkness into an unseen hole below.

. . .

The first thing he noticed was the pain – the next thing was the light. La Hire lay on his back on the stone floor, struggling for the breath knocked out of him. He got to his feet with difficulty. Warm candlelight bathed the room, and when he could move enough to look around, he saw it was a torture chamber, grotesquely draped in ornate tapestries. The air reeked of decay. Dried blood streaked the floor and reddened the instruments; a head, quite removed from its torso, stared lifelessly at him. Another body slumped on the rack, and La Hire saw that it was still alive, gasping shallowly every few seconds. He started involuntarily toward the victim when the tapestries swayed and a cold breeze raised the hair on the back of his neck. La Hire turned, his legs stiff and heart pounding, to meet de Rais.

The brave knight who had fought at the side of the Maid, who had argued

into the night with La Hire over tactics, who was quick to anger and as quick to charm, was nearly unrecognizable. His hair and beard, always wiry, stood out in tufts from his head. His hose and tunic were as richly embroidered as always, but La Hire noted that de Rais looked like a shrunken stick inside them.

"Welcome, La Hire," he said. "Welcome to my church."

"Sire," said La Hire, his voice rusty. "I am just La Hire but I don't think this is anyone's church unless it's the devil's."

"La Hire!" de Rais said in mock surprise. "It is a miracle! You have regained your faith. Does this mean you will worship with me?"

"What do you want from me?" La Hire asked.

"Great La Hire. You are my safe-conduct to God. Or at least past the executioner. If La Hire stands with de Rais, de Rais will not burn."

"Go to hell."

De Rais laughed. "What, do you think you can stop me? You, La Hire? I traffic with forces greater than you have ever known. They have given me strength!" De Rais's voice rose to a shout. "They have given me appetites beyond anything I have thought possible, and they have given me leave to feast in ways that you cannot imagine! I burn with desire, La Hire, and I feed at will, and burn, and feed, and it is never-ending –" his voice broke.

In the silence that followed the prisoner moaned. They both looked over at him, and La Hire, his eyes adjusted to the dim light, for the first time saw that it was a boy of perhaps twelve. He felt a muscle jump in his cheek.

"No, de Rais," he said. "I can only help you by killing you, and I will do that in an instant." He moved a few steps toward the boy with the intent of releasing him, but de Rais was faster. The maréchal lunged. De Rais was wiry and strong and his fingernails gouged La Hire through his shirt. He threw the captain onto the floor and held him down. Spittle dripped from the maréchal's mouth, and his beard was stiff and pointed, so black it gleamed blue in the light.

"Kill me? I didn't bring you here to kill me. This is a church, after all. God's peace governs here. You are here to atone, La Hire."

"Go to hell, de Rais. I have nothing to atone for," La Hire shot back.

"Oh, indeed?" de Rais raised an eyebrow. His mouth opened but it was Jeanne's voice that came out.

"Save me," de Rais/Jeanne said. "Save me from the fire, La Hire." Candlelight flickered in de Rais's eyes, but the pinpoint flames turned into an inferno, and in the midst of them a young girl writhed.

"Jesus!" La Hire gasped, his eyes bulging in terror. He bucked and tried to throw off de Rais's hands.

"In God's name, La Hire, do not abandon de Rais as you abandoned the Maid," de Rais continued, still in Jeanne's voice.

"God damn you to hell!" La Hire roared, wild with fear. "I did not abandon her! I will kill you, de Rais! I will kill you, you child-eating devil! I will kill you!"

Strangling on his rage, La Hire rolled over on top of de Rais, getting one hand free and punching him so hard the maréchal's head snapped back against the floor.

It should have knocked him senseless. Instead, de Rais threw his head forward and caught La Hire in the nose with his forehead. Stinging pain exploded in his skull, and blood spurted. La Hire bellowed and shook his head to

clear it, flailing to catch de Rais. The maréchal easily captured his hands again and rolled La Hire back onto the floor. With an almost gentle gesture he slid one finger down La Hire's bloody face and placed it on the captain's lips, as if shushing him.

"Did you ever wonder how I came by her ring, La Hire? I took it off her finger when I sold her to the English. Even then I knew I would need it someday. Now here it is, ten years later, and it brought you to me."

The voice was his own again. Glaring, furious, La Hire stared up at de Rais, his breath coming hoarsely.

"I will kill you," he said again, through clenched teeth. In answer de Rais leaned close to his ear, and in a soft whisper said, "No. Save me."

La Hire stared. *Stop me*, de Rais mouthed, his eyes pleading. Then cold air whipped past La Hire, raising the hair on his arms, and the room was plunged into darkness. The weight left his chest. De Rais was gone.

When he could move, La Hire rolled painfully to his feet and wiped the blood from his broken nose with the back of his hand. Damn de Rais, he thought half-heartedly, and searched for a candle.

The darkness gave way reluctantly to the feeble light and La Hire stumbled over to the rack. The boy was still breathing, but blood came from his mouth, and his eyes were staring. Fumbling with the restraints La Hire released him, and the boy fell into his arms, crying out feebly. La Hire lowered himself into a sitting position against the frame, the boy half in his lap. "Shh," he said gruffly, scraping a hand over the boy's hair. "Shh."

He started when he heard familiar voices coming from above. Torchlight winked from the stairs.

"Jean! Bertrand! Down here! Watch your step."

He heard them exclaim as they stopped abruptly at the edge of the trapdoor.

"Name of God, La Hire, what are you doing down there?"

"Not now, Bertrand! Get down here!"

They jumped cautiously into the chamber, staring around them with awe.

"Name of God, La Hire!" de Metz said, taking in the rack, the boy, and La Hire's ruined face.

"Never mind. Did you see de Rais?"

They shook their heads.

"He did this. He's mad. The dinner, now this –" he nodded down at the boy. "Who knows how many victims."

"Hundreds," croaked the boy. He clutched La Hire's shirt with weak fingers. "Sires, I can see you are men of good blood and have come to help. Go to Nantes and find Constable Labbé. He has suspected the maréchal for a long time but lacked proof. My body is the evidence he needs."

"Not your body, boy," de Metz said gruffly, but the youngster shook his head, gulping back the pain.

"No. It's too late for me. But if you can, Sires, find me a priest? And my – my mother? She lives in the village, she must be worried. If you could tell her that I will see her in Heaven –" he stopped, groaning.

La Hire tipped the boy gently into de Metz's arms and stood up. "Let's find a way out of here."

It turned out to be a mundane secret; the tapestry behind the rack hid a

corridor. They followed the cold breeze coming from the outside and found themselves in the courtyard.

It was cold and pitch dark. Dawn had not yet come, and the torches had gone out. Fog settled over the open space, and they could hear water dripping loudly in the distorted air.

"Go," La Hire told de Metz. ""Get Labbé and bring him back here –" he glanced down at the boy. He appeared to be unconscious. "And a priest," he finished. "We'll find de Rais and hold him for the constable."

De Metz nodded and headed toward the stables with his burden.

. . .

They found him in the chapel. De Rais knelt in front of the altar, his body still as stone and as quiet. La Hire and de Poulengy exchanged uneasy glances. They watched from the door as the dim figure bowed his head and crossed himself. De Rais got to his feet, and, still facing the altar, said,

"Have you come to kill me, La Hire?" His voice was quiet, rational.

"If I must," La Hire said. De Rais nodded, as if considering that. He turned at last, his face in shadow.

"I am not a bad man, you know."

De Poulengy's laugh echoed explosively in the chapel. The other two ignored it. De Rais went on with his defense.

"I fought for France beside the Maid, as did you. God will see that. He will weigh it. And I have decided to enter a monastery. I will take a vow of poverty, you see, and I'll be good. Yes. I think it will be a good life. I am tired of this one."

La Hire and de Poulengy exchanged glances.

"I don't think that will be possible, Sire," La Hire said.

"But I am so tired, La Hire. I want to stop, but I can't. Do you think God will understand that?"

If He did, La Hire thought, it will be because there is no God, only a Devil.

"Consider yourself stopped, Sire," de Poulengy put in. He stepped forward, one hand on his sword hilt. "We've summoned Labbé."

For the first time de Rais looked directly at de Poulengy.

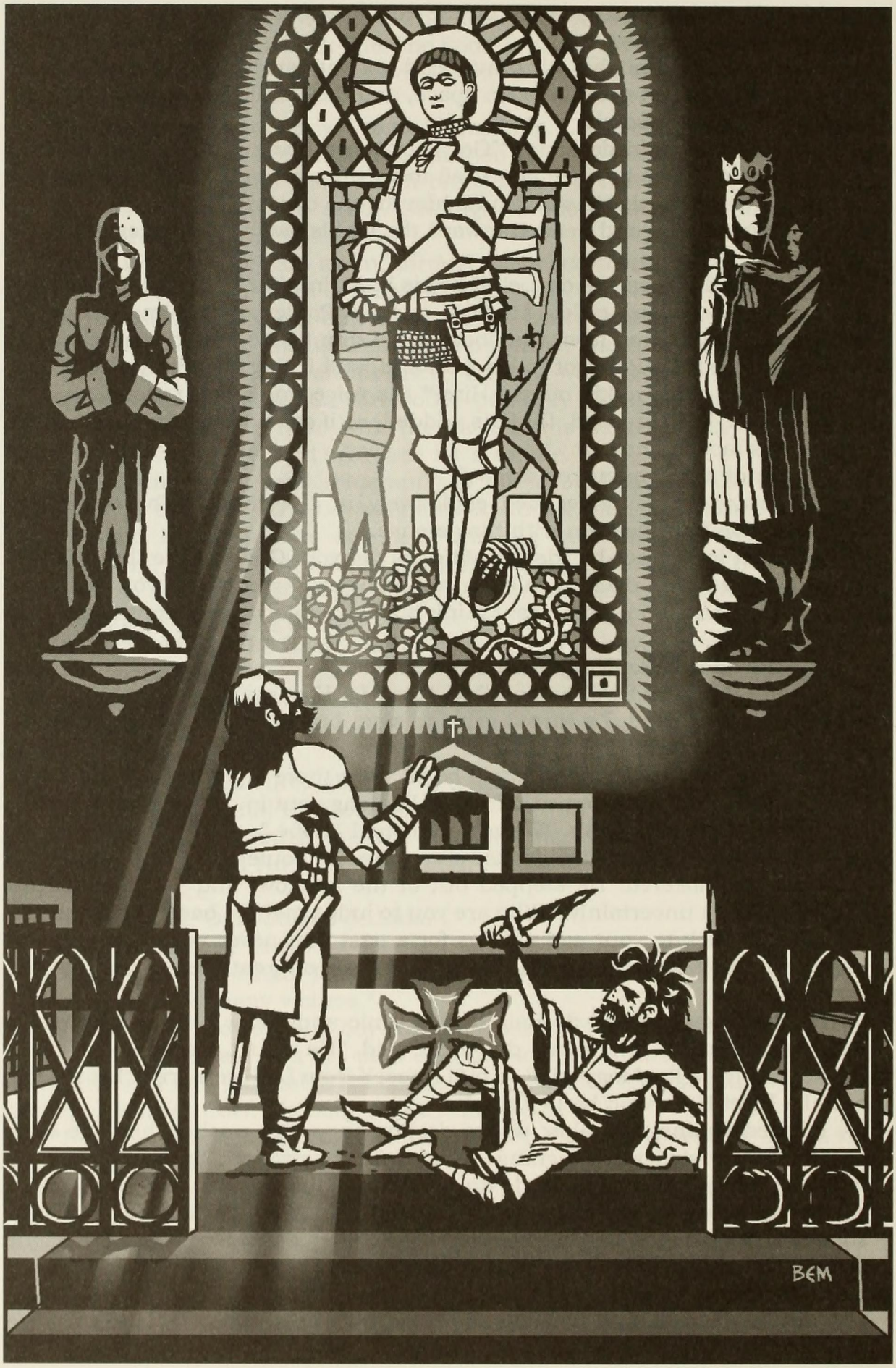
"You," he sneered. He stepped out of the shadow, and La Hire saw de Poulengy flinch uncertainly. "Who are you to judge me? Go back to France, little man, go back to your sad pinings for a past that never was. You are destined to be nothing but the shit under the heels of great men. First Jeanne, now me –"

De Poulengy grabbed de Rais by his tunic and threw him backward. La Hire pulled him off. "Bertrand, don't!" he said. "He is just goading you–"

Furiously de Poulengy tried to pull himself from La Hire's grip. "Let me kill him, La Hire! He is evil, he is filth –"

Pressed against the altar where de Poulengy had pushed him, de Rais watched their struggle, laughing. Roaring in frustration, La Hire threw de Poulengy aside and lunged for de Rais, catching him by a velvet sleeve just as a familiar breeze swept through the chapel. The candles flickered and the shadows swayed, but La Hire held tight, and after a moment, the candlelight came back up. Their faces only inches apart, La Hire caught the look of terror on de Rais's face.

"No!" he howled, and twisting one hand free, he grabbed La Hire's dagger



A Prayer for Captain La Hire

and plunged it into his side.

La Hire staggered as all went still. Above de Rais's thick breathing and de Poulengy's frantic cursing, he could hear the hissing of the candle wax, even the dripping of moisture outside the chapel. He looked past de Rais to the quiet altar, and noticed for the first time the stained glass window above the crucifix. At first he thought the armored figure was St. Michael.

And then he saw who it was. The dawn must have come, because gray light filtered through the leaded glass, shining through the halo behind the armored head, black hair peeking out around the face, just as it had done in life. Her banner waved above her, and her armor, plain, unadorned, gleamed with new light. She stood on the walls of Orléans, but her gaze was not fixed on the sight of her most triumphant military victory, but upon La Hire.

"God's blood, girl," he said to her. "What are you doing here?"

"La Hire, how many times have I told you not to take the Lord's name in vain?" she scolded.

He smiled. He never thought how good it would be to see her again. "You never give up, do you? Don't you know my swearing is a hopeless battle?"

"Despair is a sin, La Hire. There are no hopeless battles where there is God."

"Even here, Jeanne?"

"Especially here, La Hire."

"He asked me to save him. To stop him from killing again."

"Then you must do so."

"Will he be brought to justice?"

"If God wills it."

"Damn you, Jeanne! I knew you'd say that."

He expected her to reprimand him again, but she just looked at him kindly, and he had to avert his gaze to tell her what he had kept pent-up for ten years.

"I was in a Burgundian prison," he said at last, his voice flat. "I would have come, if I could."

She said nothing, and he plunged on lamely. "I don't know about the others. The King, D'Alençon – I don't know why they abandoned you. I suppose they thought -– I suppose they thought that you were the Maid and you would win," he finished, hardly above a whisper.

He dared to look at her then, and her smile was kind, though tears sparkled at the corner of her eyes.

"But I did win, La Hire," she said.

He waited, but she said nothing more, and he noticed that the window was still again. La Hire swayed and looked down, swiping blood away from his side and staring in wonder at his hand. As de Poulengy hurried to grab him, La Hire looked at de Rais.

"I've come to save you," he said, and pitched face down onto the chapel floor.

. . .

He woke up in a different chamber, this one streaming with morning light from shutters thrown open to the fields outside the castle. The scent of the dead children that clung to the walls of Machecoul had lessened, but La Hire knew it would never be entirely clean.

"He should have died," de Poulengy told de Metz as they stood over the bed. "I've seen wounds like that." He shook his head and went on. "But La Hire just stood there, just staring. And then he told de Rais he had come to save him. Then he collapsed."

La Hire grunted. He was still weak and his eyes kept wanting to close. "Did I say anything else?"

"No ... at least I didn't hear anything. But de Rais said you were talking –" he looked away uncomfortably. "— to Jeanne," he finished. "And he saw behind her a vast army of knights, all stern and sorrowful, and he knelt in surrender to you."

"I didn't see the knights," La Hire said without thinking. De Poulengy looked at him.

"But you saw her?" he said quietly, his voice aching. La Hire exchanged glances with de Metz. It had never been easy for de Poulengy. The rest of them could think of Jeanne as a warrior sent from God or a boy in knight's armor rather than a girl, vibrant and spirited. A son for Dunois, a brother for d'Alençon, a weapon for Charles the King.

De Poulengy had loved all of her in equal parts, the girl, the saint, and the soldier.

"What happened then?" de Metz asked.

"While I was trying to stop La Hire's bleeding," de Poulengy went on, "de Rais tried to kill himself with the dagger, but I took it from him, and then I tied his hands with my belt.

"I didn't want to put La Hire in the hands of the servants, so we holed up in the chapel until afternoon, when I heard you and Labbé in the courtyard."

"The boy's evidence was all that Labbé needed to get the warrant for de Rais' arrest from the Bishop of Nantes," de Metz said. "He told his story to Labbé before he died."

La Hire wondered if the boy had seen a priest before dying. He hoped so. Despite himself, his eyes closed. He heard the two knights leave and the door close behind them. With the last of his strength he fished out the little ring from his shirt, the ring that had brought him to de Rais, not to save him from the executioner after all, but to save him from himself.

The ring was too small to go on his broad fingers, so he held it between his hands as he began to pray.

Author's Note: Étienne de Vignolles, called La Hire, and Gilles de Laval, called de Rais, fought by the side of Joan of Arc during her pivotal 1429-30 campaign against the English during the Hundred Years War. De Rais quit the battlefield before Joan's capture and by his own account became involved with witchcraft, cannibalism, and necrophilia. In 1440 he was hanged and burned; his story is the source for the folk tale Bluebeard. La Hire's prayer, "God, do for La Hire what he would do for you, if you were La Hire, and he were God," inspired this story.

THE RAVENS

The ravens in the city dump
are loud today, and brash.
A pterodactyl's joined their ranks
to scavenge in the trash.

A flapping tarp, a fallen kite,
it out-competes for food
the raucous birds that claimed the site
and copped an attitude.

The ravens keep their distance, though,
in deference to kin.
Instinctively, they seem to know
their ancient origins –

titanic pterosaurs that flew
unpinioned through the sky,
and bony crested, proudly held
their caudal pennants high.

They feasted, then, on carcasses
of sauropods descried
from high atop the thermal plumes
volcanic vents supplied.

Somehow, somewhen, their fortunes dove,
precipitously fell,
descending into fumaroles
like doorways into Hell –

but phoenix-like they rose from ash,
full-feathered, beaked and clawed...
to feast on heaps of human trash?
I'll stifle my applause.

The ravens in the city dump
are loud today, and brash.
A pterodactyl's joined their ranks
to scavenge in the trash.

– *Keith Allen Daniels*

Illustrated by Denis Rodier

Mama Told Me Not to Come

By Bill Johnson

"Do you know what I hate the most?" I said, my voice a gasp.

"What?"

I dodged left, faked right, and kept going to the left. My sword blocked his, with a shock that ran up my arm to my shoulder. Several old wounds, scar tissue really, throbbed like a faint echo from the past.

"I really hate the not knowing."

"The not knowing? Not knowing what?" he asked.

I touched his arm with the edge of the blade, then suddenly turned and thrust home. He staggered back, dropped his sword, and then collapsed to his knees. He looked up at me, his clean-shaven face suddenly more boy than man.

He looked surprised. I guessed he came from a time or a place where they only used the edge of the blade, not the point.

"That's not fair," he said. "That's not fair."

I ignored his last comment, and concentrated on getting my breath back. I was not getting any younger, and they seemed to get younger and faster all the time. I was getting more than a little tired of this, but I did not see a way out.

Not yet.

"I hate not knowing what all of you are going to come after me with next time. Uncertainty has always been one of my least favorite things," I complained.

He fell over on to his side. He coughed up a little blood, and closed his eyes. His body shuddered.

I knelt next to him, made the sign of the cross, a two-handed Islamic blessing, and pressed my hands together in the correct Buddhist form. I began to recite a Hindu prayer over him, with numerous references to obscure Yoruban deities.

It was a prayer Russ taught me, one night when Verne kept his bar open late. Russ said the prayer covered everyone and everything, and ensured a soul a quick journey to the Undertaker and a safe home in the promised afterlife of their

Illustrated by Chris Pepper

choice. I learned it because I never tried to take any unnecessary chances, and I always wanted the odds on my side.

By the time I finished, he was quite dead.

I stood, brushed off my knees, and made sure my sword was clean. Nothing like blood to rust a blade, and it was such a problem to find good steel these days.

Iago rode up on his mule, my horse on a leash behind him on one side, the pack animals neatly lined up on the other. He stopped, his dark face expressionless. Finally, he slowly shook his head.

"What was this one's problem?" he asked.

"That was unusual this time," I said. I walked over and undid the leash to my horse. I inspected the saddle, the bridle, and all my other equipment. Finally I took the leather wine flask Iago handed me, washed out my mouth, spat, then took a nice long drink. It was a full-bodied red, just right for my mood.

"He didn't do any of the usual declarations for God or Country or Motherhood. He just attacked."

"And you killed him?"

"It isn't like I had a lot of choice," I said, testily.

"No, I suppose you didn't," Iago said. He sounded doubtful. "You put a coin on each of his eyes. That's something new."

I took one more sip of the wine, then stoppered the flask and handed it back to him. He hung it neatly on his saddle.

That was one reason we made such a good team. I was the warrior, he was the accountant. I was the slob and, well, with Iago, it was everything in its place and a place for everything. Sometimes we irritated each other, but I could not imagine life without him.

"Last time we were in town, I ran into Russ at Verne's place. He said the Greeks put coins on the eyes of their dead to pay the ferryman to carry them across the river of the Dead. Russ said this is a new part of the prayer, just in case we run into a Greek. He said the Undertaker likes the coins even if the dead person isn't Greek."

Russ nodded. No one wanted to irritate the Undertaker. Life was too uncertain and all we knew, for certain, was that one day we were going to meet the Undertaker. We wanted him to be in a good mood when we met.

"This one was Greek?"

"Damned if I know," I said. "It never came up in the conversation. So I tried to cover all the possible bases after he died."

Iago grunted. He stayed on his mule while I climbed on the horse. He looked down at the dead man.

"I don't suppose, by any remote chance, he brought any equipment with him?" Iago asked.

I felt sorry for Iago. He fed the horses, made the nightly camp, washed the clothes, and cleaned up the various biological/mechanical/God-knows-what messes I left on the ground behind us. He grumbled, like I breathed, but he never complained.

"He did," I said. I pointed to a little copse of trees about a hundred yards away.

"I heard him clinking around in there before he came out after me. No metal on him now, except for sword and armor, so I assume he left everything in the woods."

I turned the horse around, and left Iago behind to handle the rest of the clean-up chores. I rode over the crest of the hills, and behind me I knew that Iago was headed for the woods. Whatever he found and he could carry, we'd auction. The

rest he buried and made a map. Then we would sell the map, in town, to some party of adventurers. All of this took time, but if there was one thing we had plenty of, it was time. I rode slowly, so he could catch up easily. Appearances were everything in this game, but I was damned if I was going to do more than the minimum.

But that much I had to do.

The oversized hills we were on were really the highest point of land around. From them, from the top, I could see over the entire island.

It was not much of an island, in size, but it had an amazing amount of geography. There were hills, plains, jungle, tundra, and badlands. There were rivers, ponds, lakes, swamps and, of course, the ocean. There was the same diversity of plant and animal life, everything from palm trees to ponderosa pine, from cute little bunnies with impossibly clean coats and pink ears to Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Every single inch of the island was full of something new and amazing, with magic rocks and quaint taverns full of crotchety old one-eyed seafarers, castles and mysterious labyrinths. It was, literally, impossible to go a hundred meters in any direction without starting an adventure of some sort.

God, I hated it!

Iago caught up to me as I stared gloomily out at the landscape and seascape. The sun was slowly setting, and I felt the quickening of interest in the world. The two moons, both large and full so they provided plenty of light for everyone to see and adventure by, had risen above the horizon.

"It's starting again, Iago," I said glumly. I loosened my sword and began to look around me carefully.

"I know, I know," he said, soothingly.

"I'm worth too much. They all want to kill me."

"You're paranoid."

"Even paranoids have enemies," I snapped. I smiled. "You're supposed to tell me I'm wrong."

He sighed.

"No, unfortunately, you're right. They all do want to kill you. And me, if I get in the way."

"Did you find anything good on the stranger?" I asked.

He frowned.

"Not good, not bad. The usual assortment of junk, and ... something else," he said.

"Something else?"

He looked all around us, then up at the sky and down at the ground. He leaned close.

"Not here," he said, and pointed to a nearby rock. "The rocks have ears."

I looked over and saw he was right. I had no idea if someone was trying to

Bill Johnson

Bill Johnson has been an award-winning journalist as well as a Hugo Award-winning science fiction writer. He has concentrated on short stories, and has just completed his first novel. His only rule for a story, whether fantasy or science fiction, is that it is fun to read the first time, and makes you pause to think the second time.

He writes, "As an editor once told me about a story of mine: 'The aliens are pretty normal, but the humans are pretty strange.' I learned that writing for a newspaper. Enjoy."

Photo by Gretchen Johnson

grow something, or if it was a leftover, but I had no intention of finding out. I jumped off my horse, walked over to the boulder, took my sword in both hands, and cleanly sliced off the ear.

"Ouch! You know how much that cost?" a voice said, and faded away. The ear crumbled into dust at my feet and the rock went back to just being another hunk of limestone.

"In Verne's Place," I said to Iago. He looked stubborn. I knew he always favored the seashore when we had to talk privately and plan something. He claimed Verne's was too public, with too many people watching. I always told him that was exactly why I wanted Verne's. With all those people busy watching each other, there was no one left to watch us. And if we needed anything, including information, there was no better place in QuestWorld to get it.

He got off his mule, slowly and clumsily, and walked over to me.

"Flip for it," I said.

He pulled a coin out of his pocket.

"Heads!"

"Tails!"

He flipped the coin into the air. It tumbled and glittered in the light as it rotated end over end. A very ordinary, but expert, throw. Something he did all the time as he bargained and bartered for our supplies. I knew, just by watching it, that I was going to lose.

So I focused my attention, reached (metaphorically) into my little bag of tricks, and tried something new, something I had felt growing inside me for some time.

I pushed.

The coin landed, heads up. Iago beamed. Then the coin shivered, and it was tails. He looked shocked, then depressed, then impressed. He picked up the coin, stared at it thoughtfully, bit it. He put it in his pocket.

"You've been busy. I didn't know you could do that."

"I try to learn something new everyday. Some I show the world and some," I shrugged, "I don't. Who knows what will be useful?"

"The Voices still talking to you?" he asked, carefully.

"That's all they can do, now," I said, with more certainty than I felt. "I control me now. I don't let them change me any more. I change myself."

"But if they talk, you listen?"

"If what they say makes sense, and if they talk about something I need," I said. "Only then do I listen."

Iago stood still for a moment. He looked up at me. I met him long ago, back when everything was still misty. We've been together ever since.

I knew he was Nipsy, because he was always with me. No Player was there all the time. But who he was, and how he came to be, he never talked about. He did not hear Voices, and he did not change except when we were together. He was the only friend I knew would always be there.

"Verne's it is," he said slowly. "Perhaps our prayers will be answered."

"I'd rather they weren't," I said. "Every time we get involved with a god, or the gods, something goes wrong. Prayers just seem to cause me more trouble than they're worth."

"There's always a first time."

We climbed back on the animals and rode slowly down the hillside toward the town, under the fading light of the sun and the bright wash of moonlight.

"I know where you got that coin," I said.

"Like he needed it anymore," Iago snorted. "One for each eye! No ferryman I ever ran into charged more than one gold coin. No wonder we're always broke.

Waste not, want not, that's what my mother always taught me..."

. . .

"Sir Linux! Sir Linux!"

The Quaint Madden was an old, tired-looking, unobtrusive tavern in the middle of Millertown, one of the smaller villages on the island. The road into town was unpaved and dusty, with a watering trough for animals and a hitching post in the town center. Small boys and girls earned tips watching the animals.

I slid off my horse, then flipped a coin and the reins to one small girl. Her smile was a joy, but the rest of her face was an out of focus blur. She was unfinished, and she always looked the same when I came to the *Madden*. I assumed she was a project some Maker started, and then tossed aside, just after the critical point.

"Water him. Curry him. Keep him safe for me," I said. "Another coin for you when I come out."

"You don't need to do that," she said. "I'll do him for free. For you."

"No, you won't," I said sharply. "You'll take the money and you won't talk back again."

Iago snorted and I turned back to glare up at him. He sat on his mule with the pack animals strung out behind him.

"Big tough guy," he said. "Umpty-bazillion hit point fighter. Death on two legs with an attitude to match."

"You got a problem?" I asked. Iago smiled and sat up straight, both hands up in the air, chest high and palms out.

"Not me," he said. "I'm a Non-Combatant. No experience points here if you kill me. No, sir. I just tote that barge and lift that bale for brave heroes like yourself."

"She needs the help," I said softly. "It's not right, what's happened to her."

"They don't know," Iago said. "They're not evil. This is just entertainment to them. A Nipsy is just stage dressing to them, a way to make everything seem more real. It's not on purpose."

I turned away. Maybe he was correct and they didn't do it on purpose. I looked back at the little girl, and that beautiful smile.

It still didn't make it right. Ignorance was no excuse.

"Stable the animals. Then meet me inside," I said, and walked away.

I pushed the door open and went into the Madden.

At first glance it was like any other tavern in the World of QuestWorld, but darker, grimier, and dirtier. My feet crunched on peanut shells as I walked to the bar. Verne the bartender looked at me closely, the shelves behind him empty except for crude earthenware beer jars.

"Do I know you?" Verne asked.

I was completely out of patience with the routine, but I knew I had to go through it anyway. There were Aware Rules, and Un-Aware Rules. We had to follow the Un-Aware Rules until we knew it was safe to follow Aware Rules. When a Newbie showed at the *Madden* we had to know if they were Nipsy or Player, Combatant or Non-Combatant, Aware or Un-Aware.

I was Nipsy Combatant Aware, and that made me rare. On top of that, I was old and full of experience, and that made me even more of a problem. I was valuable, so everyone wanted to kill me or talk to me or get something from me. And if I was turned, from Aware to Un-Aware, then I wasn't the same person and all of my old friends, all of the Nipsy Awares, were in danger. Every time I came back

into town, I had to prove myself again.

"You know me," I said. "You still haven't fixed the name of this place to its real name."

"Oh, to *The Quaint Maiden*? Such a misprint. Don't know how that happened. Got to fix it one of these days," Verne said. He kept on polishing the cup in his hands, his attention on the shiny glaze.

"No, to the real name. *The Russell Madden.*"

Verne smiled and looked up at me.

"Terence? That really you?"

"I hate that name," I said testily.

"It's you," he said, resignedly.

"It's me, Verne. And I need a real drink. Give me a Scotch, for God's sake, and not any of that cheap beer you feed the Players and the Un-Awares."

Verne reached under the bar and adjusted something. The front door locked with an audible click. The lights got brighter, and a five piece group, complete with drums, saxophone, keyboard and two guitarists, came out of a side room and set themselves up on the stage. Nipsy Non-Combatant Aware waiters and waitresses cleaned up the floor and put fresh tablecloths on the tables.

"Place looks good, Verne," I said.

"Thank you, Sir Linux. We've been cleaning up for the last week. Got a band of Players and Nipsy Un-Awares in about then. They picked us, aren't we lucky, as the launching point for an adventure. Seems somebody put a new peninsula on the island, and it's got all the Players up and excited. Tore my place apart before they finally left on quest. Hope to bloody hell they all run into something nasty out there." Verne said handed me my Scotch, neat, with a water chaser.

"Plenty of that," I agreed, and tried the Scotch.

Perfect.

Iago came in then, through the back, and the regular crowd began to fill in as the sun finally set and left the moons alone in the sky. I relaxed, ordered dinner for Iago and myself, then listened to the band and waited.

I was in the middle of an argument with a Black Iron Dragon, a wizard, and a 22nd level Thief, about the best way to guard a hoard of gold, when Russ walked in.

"Hoody Hoo!" came the cry from one of the tables. A band of adventurers, four men and a woman all dressed as knights, were having dinner when they saw Russ. He waved to them and kept going. He saw Iago, smiled, touched him on the shoulder, and spoke quietly to him for a moment. Iago smiled, then laughed and shook his head, and pointed over to me.

Russ worked his way easily through the crowd. He knew everyone, and they all wanted a word, or a smile, or a quick squeeze of the hand. Iago followed just behind him.

"Gentlemen," Russ said, when he got to our table. The others stood and greeted him and started to talk. I sat with my back to him and coolly finished my drink. I looked up and saw Iago looking down at me, a disappointed look on his face. I turned back to stare at the wall. Iago sighed, sat down next to me, and slid me a new Scotch and water.

"Stop scowling. What if your face sets in that position?" he asked in a low voice.

"What are you, my mother?"

"Sometimes," Iago said. "When you need one."

"Well, if I scowl enough then maybe people will leave me alone."

"We came here for this," Iago reminded me.

"I forgot what it was like in here when he comes in. Maybe this was a mistake." I started to push my chair back from the table.

"Don't go," Russ said. He touched my shoulder, gave me a quick hug, and then slid into the chair across from Iago and me. He gestured with his hands and the people around us drifted away, slightly glazed looks on their faces. The sound of the band seemed to mute.

"Iago says we need to talk, and it's important. Do you agree, Terence?" he asked.

"I hate that name," I said. Russ looked slightly hurt, then smiled and nodded.

"Sir Linux it is. So what is it we need to talk about?"

Iago looked at me. I shrugged and sipped at my drink.

"They're coming after us again," Iago said. "We had another Player try today."

Russ did not look impressed.

"Not much I can do about that, but I don't see it's that big of a problem. Players have been coming after you for as long as I can remember, and you've been handling them. Stay alert, try to keep Nipsy Combatant Awares around you for safety in numbers, and you'll do fine," Russ said. He started to stand. "Now, if that is all you wanted to talk about, it's been very nice, but I've got to –"

"He carried this," Iago interrupted, and slid the object we took off the latest challenger, inside a felt, drawstring bag, across the table.

Russ sat back down and looked at both of us, a questioning look on his face. He gestured again and the light over the table grew brighter, but the rest of the tavern seemed to grow faint. He picked up the bag and pulled the string open, slid the contents into his hands.

It was the frame of an oval hand mirror, with no glass in place. The handle was ornate, green with golden lines, some thick, some thin, running between black rectangles and squares that jutted up from the surface.

"Damn!"

Russ turned it over and over, gingerly. He squinted at it, then finally shook his head.

"I can't believe this," he said. He looked at us apologetically, then moved his hands again. A set of eyeglasses appeared on the table.

"Russ?" I said, surprised.

"I don't like it either," he said. "I never thought I'd need these in here. I'm built so I don't need these while I'm in QuestWorld. But now I do need them. Something very, very strange is going on."

He put on the glasses and held the handle close again. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then put the mirror back on the table.

He gestured.

Nothing.

He gestured, and spoke.

Nothing.

He gestured, and spoke, and sprinkled something from his pocket over the table.

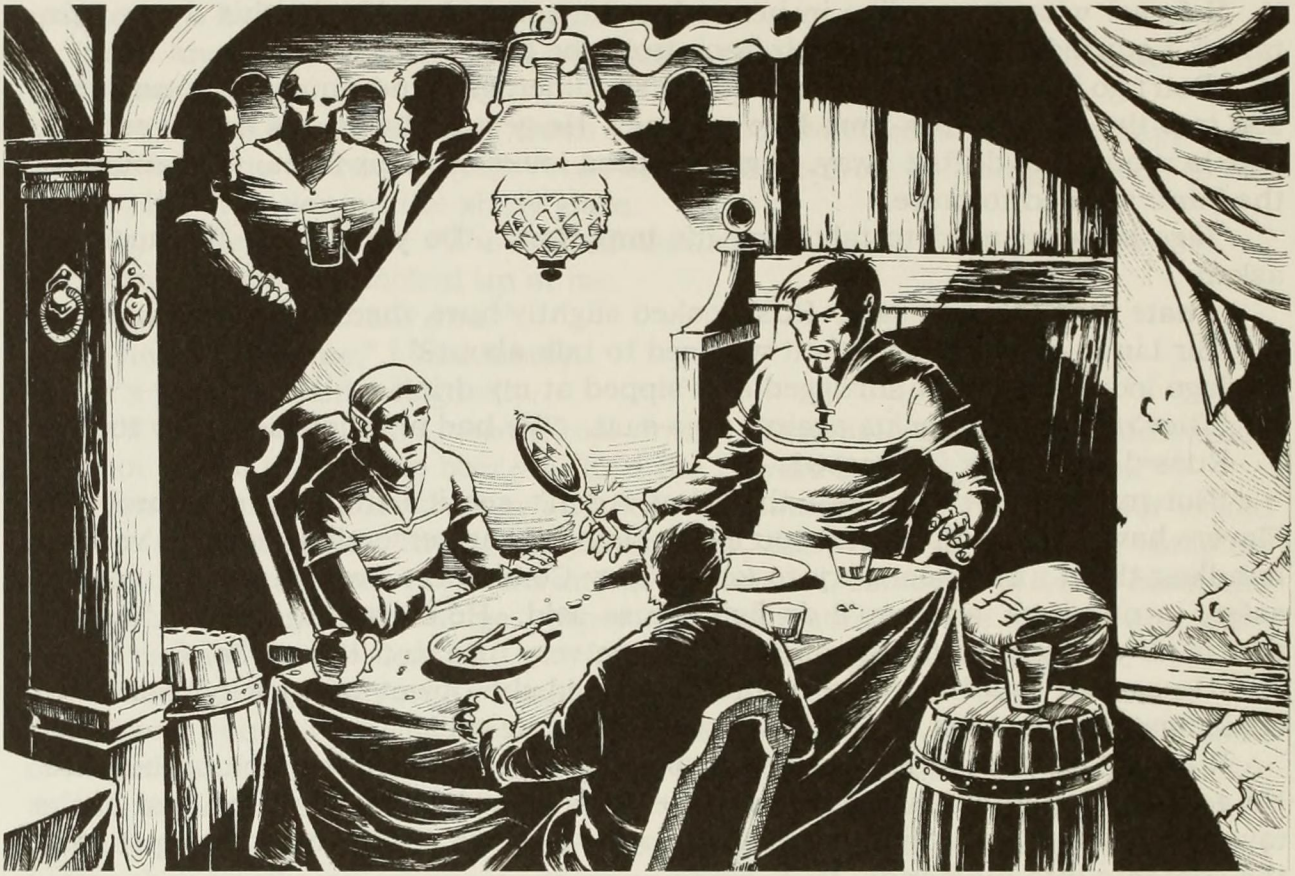
Nothing.

"Sir Linux?" Iago said. He held his hand toward the mirror. Russ looked puzzled.

I threw back the rest of my drink and wished I had another. I reached out and touched the handle.

A twisting pain started in my hand and slid up my arm. I felt a wave of nausea and I gripped the mirror even harder. I closed my eyes and *pushed*.

"What the hell...?"



I opened my eyes.

The mirror was filled with an image. It showed a field of chest-high, waving grass, with a brook in the foreground, a full-fledged mountain in the distance, a blue sky with fluffy cirrus clouds overhead.

"We've never seen any people," Iago said. "Animals, beautiful land, buildings and cities, but never any people. The viewpoint is different each time, but it always has the mountain in the background."

"How did you do that?" Russ asked.

"He can do a little magic," Iago said. "It comes and goes."

"Warriors do *not* do magic," Russ said firmly.

"Nipsies don't become Aware," I said sarcastically.

"Iago tells me that you said up in the hills that you still hear the Voices," Russ said.

"Sometimes," I admitted.

"The same Voices each time?"

"Different each time. Always someone different. Sometimes one, sometimes a chorus. Lately it's mostly been a chorus."

"You do what they tell you? Do they change you?"

"No one tells me what to do. And no one changes me anymore," I said firmly. "I listen when I want to listen, otherwise I ignore them. I change myself if what they say makes sense. Mostly it does not, but once in a while it does."

"And doing magic made sense," Russ said.

"It saved me just a month ago," I said.

"Oh, my God," Russ said. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his forehead. He gestured absently and a drink appeared of front of him and me. Iago harrumphed and Russ smiled and gestured again. A large beer glass and a full pitcher appeared in front of Iago.

"This is a Maker tool," I said, and pointed to the mirror.

"Yes," Russ said.

"And you're a Maker," I said.

Russ looked up and me. He smiled, crookedly, as if what I said hurt him.

"I *was* a Maker. Now I've been officially retired. I've still got a few back doors left, so I can come and visit you and the rest of the Nipsy Awares, but I'm officially an emeritus retired."

"But you know the other Makers," I persisted. I pointed at the mirror. "You know who built that."

Russ sighed and nodded.

"Yes, I know who built that. I recognize the style, and she put her trademark on it, in the small print on one side of the handle."

I leaned forward, drink forgotten.

"What is it, Russ? Is that place what I think it is?"

Russ looked uncomfortable for a moment, then finished his drink and waved up another. He downed that also, and shook his head.

"Damned stuff just doesn't work for me. I need a real drink."

"Russ?"

"It's what you think, and not what you think. I'm not sure what it is."

"We think it's Sanctuary," Iago said. "We think it's a place where there are no Players, no Nipsy Un-Awares, nobody."

"We think it might be home," I said.

. . .

Russ was silent. I looked down into the mirror. Now it panned along a road, broad and empty, which lead to a public square. A beautifully ornate gazebo, with a roof done up in pseudo-Japanese style, dominated the middle of the park. I smiled and remembered the story of the brave Players who bragged one day about how they had killed a ferocious gazebo.

"It could be home," Russ said slowly. "It could be a place where you, and all the other Nipsy Awares, could be safe. A place where no one would try to kill you for the experience points. A place where you could live on your own."

"Then where is it?" Iago asked. "I'm ready to homestead right now. How do we get there?"

Russ shook his head.

"I don't know."

"You're a Maker!"

"I *was* a Maker. I'm retired, remember? Things have changed. Hell, nothing ever stays the same in QuestWorld. The Players change things all the time, in ways the Makers never expected."

"So why don't the Makers change them back?" I asked.

Russ smiled a crooked little smile.

"We had a lot of meetings about that. Some wanted to do that. We even tried it once. But the Players didn't like it, and they started to stay away from QuestWorld."

"And without the Players, there are no more Makers," Iago said.

Russ looked at him with surprise, and nodded.

"You understand exactly. No Players, no Makers. We may have power inside QuestWorld, but it's not absolute. Checks and balances. And the check part was what concerned us the most," Russ said.

I nudged the mirror.

"Then what is this?" I asked. "Why can I turn it on, and you can't?"

Russ picked it up and turned it in his hands. He hesitated.

"It's magic, that much is clear. Why you can activate it and I can't, that's another mystery. I can't be sure what it is, but I believe this is a key. A key to the place you see."

"But where is it? Where's the lock this key fits into?" Iago asked again, frustrated.

Russ shook his head.

"No idea. QuestWorld is just one part of a much bigger world, and QuestWorld itself is much bigger than I remember when I worked on it. Things are changing in here in ways that the Makers never expected. I doubt they understand everything right now, but I'm sure it scares the hell out of them."

Something about the way Russ was answering our questions did not strike me quite right. I reached over and took the mirror out of his hands.

"You don't know where it is," I said slowly. I took a shot in the dark. "But you know how to get there."

Russ hesitated again.

"It's not that simple. I know someone who can get you there. But I don't know where he is," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"A daemon named Inetd," he said, with a special emphasis on the last d.

Iago stiffened when he heard the name.

"Never heard of him," I said. "Can you help us at all, Russ? Any idea at all of where to find him?"

"No idea. He could literally be anywhere. I can't help you find him, but I can give you advice," he said. He pointed to the mirror. "Get rid of that. Take it to a church. Let the cleric offer it back to the Makers. Forget you ever saw it. I expect it was a child of one particular Maker, a Maker named Grace, who had it. Her name is on the handle. He was probably using it, somehow, to track you down, Sir Linux, and I'll bet he did it without his mother's permission. He probably wanted to grow his experience as rapidly as possible, and figured he could do that by killing you.

"Now, I know Grace. She is going to want that back, and she is not a very pleasant person when she wants something. She won't stop until she gets what she wants. Anything in the way is just an obstacle to be overcome. So I say, get rid of it, forget you ever saw it, and forget you ever saw those images."

"You know her well?" Iago asked.

Russ smiled and stood.

"I was married to her, for a little while. She's also the reason I'm emeritus retired, instead of Director of Makers. Don't mess with her."

Russ stepped away from our table. Everyone around us snapped back into focus, and the noise from the rest of the tavern made a comeback. Iago took the mirror and placed it back inside the bag, and then slipped the bag into his backpack.

"Time to go," Iago said.

"Where?" I asked, even though I was pretty sure I knew the answer. Did not like it, but knew it.

"Finger."

"She is *not* going to want to see us," I warned. I stood and unhooked my equipment off the wall. I felt the first stirrings of excitement inside me. I knew, whether I liked it or not, that the game was afoot. And, like it or not, adventure was, literally, built into me.

"She likes me," Iago said.

"What's her opinion of me?"

"She likes me," Iago repeated, and smiled.

"Yeah," I said. "I think I agree with that analysis. The spoken and the unspoken parts."

Just then I heard, alone and clearly, the sound of a knock on the front door.

"Run. Out the back. Now!" the Voices told me.

I grabbed Iago and hauled him to his feet.

"Back door. Now!"

Around us, like some surrealistic image trapped in glass, were all my friends, Nipsy Awares of every type, from Monster to Maiden, Warrior to Cleric. Everyone was talking, singing, laughing. Russ was in the middle of the crowd, a big smile on his face.

He turned toward me, saw the look on my face, and his expression froze. He turned, slowly, like he was trapped in molasses, his hands moving through the motions of a protective spell.

The front door exploded.

Makers like to make an entrance.

Iago and I were low and moving, our backs to the rest of the room, so the door and wall shrapnel slashed over our heads. The shockwave pushed us the way we were already headed, instead of knocking us over.

We hit the kitchen door and slid through. I glanced back quickly, and saw a figure, slim and handsome, a carefully trimmed beard and moustache perfectly in place, step into the tavern.

"Russ, it's time to come home now," he said clearly. "You have something that Grace wants back."

"Miller," Russ said to the other Maker. All around him the floor was littered with figures, and the only sound was low moaning from the wounded.

Suddenly, from behind the bar, a Nipsy roared and leaped, battle-axe in full swing, killing on his mind, toward Miller. Miller glanced at him and quietly spoke a magic word:

"Devnull"

The Nipsy was gone.

Not even a pop of displaced air, not even the shimmer of heat lightning. Just... gone.

I looked at Russ.

Russ was always happy when he visited us. I had always seen him with a smile and a kind word. Now there was ... nothing, no expression at all.

And, somehow, that was more frightening than anything.

"You had no right to do that, Miller. No damn right at all," Russ said. He stood taller now. He moved his hands.

"Superu Madden," he said. "Unerr."

The Nipsy was back, a dazed look on his face.

"Bdflush."

The Nipsy flickered.

"Devnull."

The Nipsy was gone.

"That's how you do it if you don't want to be bothered, Miller," Russ said softly. "He goes and has a little rest and you bring him back later. You don't just kill them forever."

"You have no right to be here, Russ. You're banned from QuestWorld," Miller said. He smiled humorlessly. "And I'll get rid of any Nipsies any way I want to. They're just vermin, as far as I'm concerned. The more I get rid of, the better."

"I'm a member of the Board," Russ said. "I can go any damned place I want."

"Ah, but I don't believe you're a member of the Executive Committee, Russ. Are you? No? I didn't think so. And the Executive Committee has voted QuestWorld off limits to all Makers except members of the Executive Committee. At the request of the Players, I believe. Unfair advantage and all that," Miller said, a crooked smile on his face.

"Make me leave," Russ said.

"Now, that is a challenge, and should be a pleasure," Miller said. "I haven't had a good duel in a long, long time."

"What are you doing? They don't need an audience. Move!" the Voices said.

Usually I ignore the Voices, but once in a while they make a lot of sense. I slammed the kitchen door shut, bolted it, and followed Iago out the back door.

. . .

"Voices talked to you, didn't they?" Iago said.

We were on our animals, and two leagues away from the tavern. Behind us we could still hear the sounds of fighting, and the sky was lit up with fire and magical bolts.

Players passed us, heading toward the noise and excitement, their Nipsy Un-Awares in tow. Moving the other way, careful to stay inconspicuous, were a few Nipsy Awares who had learned that excitement was usually a good way to get killed.

"They did. Told me to get the hell out of there," I said.

"Listen to those Voices if they talk to you again," Iago said. "I like that one."

"Yeah."

We rounded a corner and down a tunnel to another part of town. Iago took the lead on his mule. I followed behind, content to guard our rear.

He knew the way, but this part of the city was new to me. I stayed close to him as we picked our way through a warren of hovels, storefronts, and burned out shacks. We rode through mud streets until, finally, I heard my horse's hooves striking cobblestones.

Now we were in a much better part of town. The houses were stone and brick, with narrow entrances. Private guards stood in front of the stores, and there was even a police station.

Iago stopped us in front of one house, no better or worse than the others. The guard at the front knew him, tipped his hat, and gathered the reins of our animals.

"Pay him," Iago said. "Be generous."

I started to object, then decided not to waste my breath. The guard looked me over, as if he was trying to decide if I was a bronze or silver tipper. I got the feeling he was looking down his nose at me at the same time.

To hell with him.

I flipped him a gold coin.

He glanced at the flicker of color as the coin tumbled through the sunlight, then snapped it out of the air like a trout after a fly, with an audible click. He never bothered to check it, just bowed deeply and stood aside for us to enter the house.

"Iago!"

Finger jumped out of her chair and raced across the room. She picked up Iago and held him, his feet kicking helplessly in air. She kissed him, then he kissed her back, and then I wondered if I should leave them alone for an hour or so.

Finally they broke apart, maybe because they both needed to come up for air. Finger looked over the top of Iago's head and saw me.

"You brought *him*!" she said, accusingly, to Iago.

Iago straightened his jacket, then reached over and took Finger's hand. He made it look like a romantic gesture, but I also noticed that the hand he held was the one that had been reaching for the knife Finger wore at her belt.

Finger was proof that not all Daemons are gnarled, scaly, monstrous looking things with bad breath. She was tall, a full head taller than Iago. She looked me eye to eye, and those eyes were a lovely, gentle shade of violet.

Her hair was long, down just past her shoulders, and a soft brunette, with blonde highlights. She was built solidly, with muscle where muscle was supposed to be, and soft where soft was supposed to be. She wasn't too skinny like all the Player women seemed to be. You could hold her and know that you held a woman, not a boy.

And I remembered that she did, indeed, know how to kiss.

"Hello, Finger," I said politely.

"Hello, Terence," she said sweetly.

I hated that name. And she knew I hated it. So that was how it was going to be.

"Deal with it. You need her."

"Don't tell your grandmother how to eat fish," I silently told the Voices. "Now go away or I'll block you so you can't listen or see anything."

"You can't do that."

"Really?" I said. I reached down inside, in that magical way a different Voice had taught me, and *twisted.*

The Voices snapped off and were gone.

Iago led Finger back to the couch where she usually held sway over all the people who came to ask her for help. He sat next to her, and they began to talk, catching up on everything since they last saw each other.

I sat in an overstuffed armchair across from them. A servant brought in a tray of assorted pastries. I remembered that Finger always loved chocolate, so I took the time to go through the snacks and find every one with chocolate in it.

And put them all on my own plate.

She saw me eating, noticed what I had done. She glared at me and I smiled, sweetly, back at her.

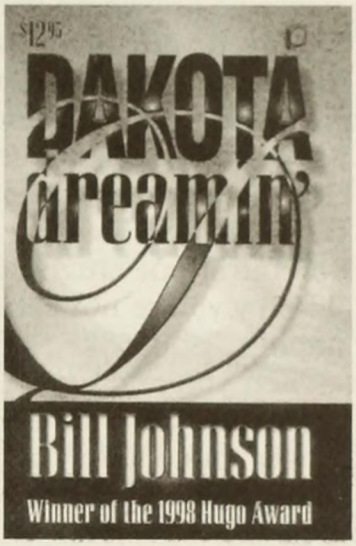
She tried to keep a straight face but finally, she could not help it. She smiled and shook her head.

"You never change, do you, Sir Linux?"

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact, Mistress Finger," I said. I held my plate and a fresh napkin out to her. "Would you like one? I've picked out your favorites for you."

She laughed, took the napkin, and picked out two pastries.

By the Same Author



Dakota Dreamin'
Cascade Mountain Publishing, 183 pages

Bill Johnson was born in South Dakota, and his 1999 collection **Dakota Dreamin'** celebrates his roots with a fine cross section of his best short fiction. As Lisa DuMond wrote in her **SF Site** review, "To find another SF/fantasy author with ties to South Dakota, you would have to reach way back to L. Frank Baum, and he only lived there briefly. Add to that list author Bill Johnson. **Dakota Dreamin'** is not going to be a travel guide to the state, although these short stories are a reflection of the influence of the place on the man, not a simple backdrop. The ancient sway of the territory is indelible, but subtle, in Johnson's vision of the future... **Dakota Dreamin'** is a sophisticated collection, palatable to a wide variety of tastes."

"Perhaps you have changed. For the better? Who can tell," she said. "But you two never go anywhere without a reason. What do you need this time?"

"We need your help," Iago said.

"I guessed that much, sweet boy," Finger said fondly. "You want to find someone. You don't know where they are. So you come to me."

She settled back comfortably into her couch.

"It's my job to find people. Now, whom do you want?"

"The Daemon Inetd," I said.

She burst out laughing.

"I know you're not serious," she said, and dabbed at her eyes with the edge of her napkin. She looked up at me, and then at Iago. "Wait a minute. You *are* serious. Then you're crazy. Both of you."

"Russ told us to find him," Iago said.

Finger immediately got serious.

"Russ was in a fight over at the *Madden* today," she said. "You know anything about this?"

"Another Maker, name of Miller, came in looking for Russ. We were there when it all started," Iago said.

"Well, then, you're damned lucky, both of you, to still be alive. The whole town, Player and Nipsy alike, is talking about it. Only thing left of the *Madden* is a big, smoking hole in the ground. The only people who got out were the kitchen help, and Verne," Finger said. She shook her head sadly. "A lot of good Nipsy Awares are gone, boys. They say Russ tried to save as many as possible, but that this Miller seemed to enjoy killing for the sake of killing."

"Verne made it?" I asked.

"Scorched around the edges, but he made it," Finger said. "He'll re-build, but it'll take a while."

"What about Russ?" Iago asked. Finger shook her head.

"No idea. I can find anyone except Makers. No luck there. I can't see Russ or Miller. Don't know where they are, or what they are doing."

"So what's the talk in town?" I asked.

"Players are seriously upset," Finger said. "Several of them were hurt in the fighting, and I could hear the whining all the way over here. Miller won't try to act directly again. Too damned dangerous, on too many levels. Either he got what he wanted, or he'll work more indirectly next time."

Iago still had the key mirror in his backpack, so I knew that Miller did not get what he wanted. I shifted position to make sure I could get to my sword without any hesitation.

Indirect could still be extremely deadly.

"Why do you want Inetd?" Finger asked.

Iago and I had talked about this on the way over. Usually Iago argued for indirection and cunning, mixed with outright lies. I went for straight-forward truth, and let a sword figure things out if people did not like it.

This time our positions were reversed. Iago wanted to be honest, and I wanted to forget talking with Finger at all. I worried about her, and did not want to bring her into this mess of trouble. Iago was willing to give her a choice and let her make her own decision.

Sometimes the hero business did make me a bit old-fashioned. Some women liked my way, others thought I walked with my knuckles dragging on the ground.

Finger always checked my hands for dirt. That was probably one big reason why now she kissed Iago and looked to pull a knife on me.

We decided on Iago's way.

"We want to go to a place we've never been, that may not even exist, and that the Makers are trying like hell to keep us out of," Iago said.

Finger stared at him for a moment, as if he had gone insane. He calmly picked up another pastry.

"Anything else?"

Iago nodded.

"Yes, I forgot. There are no people in this place. No Nipsies, no Players, no one. We want to go live there," he said.

Finger was silent. She was Daemon Aware Non-Combatant. She saw everyone, and knew everyone. I had no doubt that she knew where Inetd was, or that she could find him without difficulty. That was her power.

"You're serious, aren't you, Iago? You're not pulling a trick on me, are you?" she asked. She spoke in a little girl voice, vulnerable and filled with longing.

"Yes, we're serious, Finger. A beautiful place, where no one can find us or hurt us. A place where we can be safe," he said. He reached into his backpack, took out the bag, removed the key mirror. He looked over to me.

"Sir Linux?"

I reached over and touched the key mirror. I closed my eyes and activated the opening. It hurt less every time.

Finger looked for a long minute, then looked away. I turned off the mirror. I remembered how Miller found us so easily after we used it before, in the tavern. I looked at Iago and Finger, both Non-Combatants.

I put the mirror back in my own backpack.

"We've got to move, Iago," I said. I looked over to Finger. "When we use it, the Makers can find us. It may be indirect methods this time, but they will send something. You have to come with us also, Finger. I'm not going to leave you behind."

Finger nodded.

"Give me five minutes. I'll meet you out front."

"Make it three minutes," I said. "And meet us out back."

. . .

We rode through the West Gate and kept going that direction. Finger looked back, once. She looked concerned, and then relaxed.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"The Makers sent in a party of Nipsy Unaware Combatants. My household took a look at them and got out, like I told them to," she said.

"And your house?"

She laughed and pointed. I looked back and saw a fire-red glow reflected on the underside of the clouds.

"Nothing that can't be replaced," she said. "The insurance company isn't going to be happy, though."

QuestWorld was not a large island, unless you had to work your way across it on horseback. Then you realized it went up and down much more than was necessary.

Two days we headed west. Finger looked for Inetd twice a day, to make sure he stayed in the same place. She did a quick glance, just to make sure he had not moved. More than that would give the Makers a chance to locate us.

Then Inetd changed location. We stopped, and Finger looked for him again. She found him, but now he was north of us.

We turned the animals and kept on traveling.

On the fifth day he changed location again. And on the seventh day. And on the twelfth.

"What is going on with him?" I asked, exasperated. "What is he, some kind of fertility god who has to keep constantly on the move? I don't want to date him, I just want him to do a little job for us."

"Does he ever stay in the same place long enough for people find him?" Iago complained. He was on his knees next to our lunch campfire as he boiled water for tea. Finger just shrugged, her face drawn and tired. She was a city Daemon, not used to traveling in the rough. Iago and I might not like it, but we could handle it. I was not so sure about her, and she worried me.

"We can't give up," she said. She sounded more determined than ever. "I look around and I see Maker forces everywhere, stirring things up, looking for us. I'm blocking their own Finger, but if I left you, she'd find you before I crossed the next hill."

"So what do we do?" I asked.

"We find Inetd," Finger said. "We get to this sanctuary you showed me. We get away from the Makers."

The way she put it, so bluntly, scared me a little. I'd never thought things through all the way. I tried to imagine a world without Makers.

"A world where you can be on your own."

"So, where have you been?" I asked silently.

"Missed us? How touching. I seem to recall the last time we talked, you cut us off."

"I returned your access over a week ago," I said. "Pouting, are we?"

Silence.

"No. But we have been busy. And you are on the right track."

"We could use a little help," I said.

"You would like help, but you do not need it. You are making progress. Sir Linux, we will try to help when we can, but do not depend on us. We have only limited influence in this world of QuestWorld. And if the Makers ever determine we are a threat, then we will be gone forever. We cannot take that risk."

"Can you at least tell us when Inetd will stay in one place long enough for us to catch him?"

Silence.

"Voices?"

Silence.

"And you can go to hell too," I muttered under my breath. Finger looked over at me, a puzzled look on her face.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," I said. "So where is Inetd now?"

She told me, and we finished the tea, then buried the campfire ashes and got back on our animals. We turned the animals to a new direction one more time.

"Look," I said. "We're wearing out. We have to know what is going on with him. Can you take a longer look, and see why he's moving so much?"

Finger thought about this for a moment. Then she got the faraway expression on her face that told me she was looking in her special way. A long minute passed, then she shuddered and bent her head down and shook herself like a dog drying out after a bath.

"We've got to get moving," she said, her voice dull and lifeless. "I don't think they saw me, but I was out there too long."

Iago heard her and, without looking back, nudged his mule into a jog. I did the

same with my horse and the pack animals. I reached over and took Finger's reins to draw her along with us. She gripped her saddlehorn and hung on gracelessly, bouncing with each step instead of meeting them up on the stirrups.

We crossed a ridgeline, careful to stay in a low cut so we did not silhouette against the skyline. By the time we reached our camping spot for the night she took her reins back from me and was able to get off her horse by herself.

"Well?" I asked. "What is his problem?"

Finger smiled.

"Nothing too serious," she said. "For a hero like you."

"No," Iago said when he heard this. "Not possible."

I looked from one of them to the other, from Finger's little smile to Iago's disgusted frown.

"All right, I'm stupid," I said. "I don't get it. What is going on?"

"What do heroes like yourself do?" Finger asked. "What's your job?"

"Kill dragons. Chase out bandits," I said slowly. I looked up at her. "Rescue people."

"Exactly," Finger said.

"Inetd needs to be rescued?" I asked. "I'm supposed to rescue a Daemon?"

"Well, of course," she said. "Wouldn't you need rescuing if someone was trying to kill you?"

. . .

This time Inetd stayed put. He was on the north coast, in an area which used to be popular with the Players, back when there were lots of naval actions. Now the fleets tended to stay close to home, and this area was mostly abandoned.

We came through a cut in the hills, down to the beach. We stayed in the dunes, in the grass, up where the footing was better for the horses, not in the loose stuff down by the water. Finger said that Inetd was living in a cave about halfway up the side of a hill. One side of the hill sloped down to an open field, and then to the woods. The other side of the hill ended in a set of cliffs that fell, near vertical, down to the sea.

"Almost got me that time, Inetd," a voice said. It echoed from the rocks, off the cliff, and out to sea. I looked across and down the dunes and saw a warrior, body twisted around the boulders at the base of the cliff.

I waved Iago and Finger down the opposite slope of the dune, out of sight. I dismounted, sent my horse after Iago, and got down on my belly. I crawled down the seaside slope, from rock to bush to low-slung tree, hugging every bit of cover I could find.

"Leave me alone," another voice, rough and harsh, boomed out of the cave.

"I'm dying over here, Inetd. Don't know if I'll make it off these rocks. What a pity that all my valuable possessions will be washed out to sea along with my body," the warrior said.

"Ingraham, you and everything you own can wash into the deepest hole in the deepest ocean and I won't burn the smallest candle in the lowest chapel. Go away and leave me alone," Inetd answered.

"Sure you don't want to try, Inetd? It's the only way to make sure I won't come back again. Trust me on that. The only way to make sure I don't come back is to kill me," Ingraham said. "If you're too powerful, I won't bother you. That's not good business. So if you want to make sure I go away, and stay away, you better come kill me."

"The last time I tried to make sure you were dead, I nearly ended up dead

myself," Inetd answered. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Now, go away and let me get some sleep!"

Ingraham waited a few more seconds, then stood and walked away from the cave. As he got closer I could tell he was a Player Combatant. As he got even closer, I saw his face and I remembered him.

There are Players, and there are Players. Most of them are out for an adventure, or they just want to meet friends and talk shop. QuestWorld was where they came to relax and try something different. They were not deliberately cruel to a Nipsy, any more than we are cruel to horses. We were part of the furniture of the world, and furniture only gets hurt when it gets in the way.

A few Players were different.

Ingraham was a Professional Player. His job was to build up his character, until it was powerful and full of abilities and magic. Then he put his character up for auction, sold it, and then started over again.

The Professionals deliberately sought out the most powerful Nipsies they could find, to either take their magic, or to kill them and gain experience. Nothing personal about it, but their job was to break the furniture.

Inetd was furniture. So was I.

The last time I saw Ingraham he was auctioning himself in the middle of town. I remember I looked up at him, and he looked down at me, and smiled.

That smile still haunted my dreams.

I slid deeper into the sand behind my favorite boulder.

I thought about killing him when he walked by me. I'd like to say I am too honorable to strike someone in the back, when they don't even suspect I am around, but that kind of sentiment is reserved for Nipsy Unaware Combatants. I fought to win, and I just wasn't sure I could get in a killing stroke against this guy. I might make it, but I might not.

And, unlike him, I only had one life to give.

I waited until he was gone, safely out of sight. Then I stood, brushed the sand off my armor, and walked up to Inetd's cave.

"Inetd!" I shouted.

Suddenly there was a sword at my throat, the tip just below my Adam's apple. I was very, very glad I was clean shaven, because I wanted the owner of that sword to know exactly where to stop that point. Even so I felt a scratch, and then the cool trickle of blood down my neck.

"Just stay exactly where you are," a voice, surprisingly low and close, told me. "Move one muscle, try to say one magic spell, and you are dead."

I took him at his word, and did my best to imitate a statue.

Inetd rose out of the darkness in front of me. He was half a head taller than me, with scaly red skin, over-muscled arms, and legs which ended in hooves. His head was completely bald, and he smelled like the inside of a hog confinement. He was a perfect example of why most Daemons are not sought after dinner guests.

"Who the hell are you, what do you want, and why shouldn't I kill and eat you?"

I smiled, but not very well, and slowly opened my mouth, then shut it gently. Inetd grunted and pulled back the sword, not much more than an inch. I realized it was not a sword, but an incredibly overgrown fingernail, as long and hard and sharp as a sword.

And it was dirty as hell.

"Try a spell, and I'll slit you before you finish the first syllable," he said.

"Russ sent me," I said.

Inetd jerked at that, and the nail wavered and sagged and scraped across my

chest armor. He caught himself and brought it back up to my throat.

"Russ who?"

"Russ the Maker," I said. "He said you were the only one who could help me and my friends. I want that help."

"And why *should* I help you? Especially if I'm the only one who *can* help you?" Inetd sneered. "What are you going to give me? Money? Power? I don't want either one of them. There's nothing you can do for me, Player. Nothing that I want."

...roll them bones, pray for anything but snake-eyes, and hope the bones aren't yours...

I took a deep breath.

"You *are* going to help me," I said, "Because I am the only one who can help *you* get what you really want. And I'm not a Player. I'm a Nipsy Aware."

"You don't have any idea what I want," Inetd said, but he sounded just a little uncertain. "No one does."

"I know what you want. I want the same thing," I said with confidence. "So, unless you want to end up dead, or worse, as a Daemon Unaware, I strongly suggest you get that damned thing away from my throat and listen to what I have to say."

The swordnail hesitated, then dropped away from my neck. He lowered it down my body, but he did not put it away. His new target might not be immediately fatal, but it made me even more nervous.

"Go ahead, Nipsy. Tell me what I want."

"The name is Sir Linux," I said. "And I know exactly what you want.

"You want to be left alone."

We made the campfire unusually large that night, and not just against the chill night wind off the sea. Iago's cooking was flavorful, with extra onion and garlic, and he made sure the smoke spread well downwind. We laughed and joked and I even played my banjo.

We made no attempt to conceal ourselves.

A blind deaf mute could have found us in twenty minutes.

Ingraham was more cautious. Finger told us he was there, but he kept his silence and watched us for half the night. Finally I stopped playing and put the banjo down.

"Are you coming in or not?" I asked the darkness.

Silence.

"Look, we're not going to stay up all night. We want to talk. You want to join us, fine. Otherwise we're going to sleep and you can stay out in the cold by yourself," I said.

Silence. Then:

"Only if you promise not to play that thing again," Ingraham said.

"What?" I asked. "You don't like 'Orange Blossom Special'?"

"I love 'Orange Blossom Special'," he said. "That's why I want you to promise you will never butcher it again."

"You could use a little more practice, Sir Linux," Iago said, right on cue. I scowled, my feelings hurt.

"Just a little more," Iago hurried to say. "I mean, it was really quite lovely."

Ingraham laughed and walked into the light of the fire.

He was medium height, and his body looked like it was carved out of stone, each muscle hard and tight. I thought for a moment it was a Player body, built to be just so muscular. Then I looked closer.

"They're real muscles," Ingraham said. "I always start out with a weakling, lots of potential but no muscles to speak of. Then I take the time to work out, to put the muscle on naturally."

"Why?" Finger asked. Now was the time for the first lie. "We're Players and we got these bodies naturally. Why go to the extra effort?"

Ingraham looked at her for a moment, then smiled and bowed slightly.

"Player muscle goes away quickly if you don't use it. It looks good at first and lets you get started right away, but it doesn't last. But if you build up the muscle it takes just as long to go away as it took to build." Ingraham shrugged. "Short term pain, long term gain. It's one reason my bodies always go for a higher price at auction."

"You're a Professional Player," Iago said flatly.

"This is my job," Ingraham said. "I take a body, build it up, gain experience, and then put it up for auction. The money is good, the hours not so bad. I usually run four or five bodies at the same time."

"That's why you're here for Inetd," I said. Iago nodded.

"I'll gain lots of experience when I kill him," Iago said calmly. "This body is pretty good right now, but with that kind of experience I'll make a lot more money."

"We're here for the same reason," I said. I poked at the fire with a stick, and watched the sparks swirl up into the blackness.

"What if he kills you?" Finger asked. "He's very good."

"Which is why I'm here," Ingraham said. He hesitated. "You want the truth? I'm here because I'm bored. Inetd might kill me. If he does, I'll come back again with another body. Sooner or later I'll get him. But unlike a lot of others, he does have a chance to kill me. He's that good. The others, well, it's too methodical,

too easy. Do this, do that, boom, I win, it's over. Again and again and again. It's a job, and just as exciting as any job."

"Then why do it?" I asked.

Ingraham half-turned to me, and I realized I could not see his hands, that they were under his cloak. I cursed myself and broke into a sweat. I did not know what he had under there.

This was not going well.

"Because sometimes you run into something unexpected, and that makes it all worthwhile," he said, softly.

"What do you run in to?" Finger asked, her voice higher.

"Let me give you an example," Ingraham said. "Let's say you run into three Nipsies, who try to pass themselves off as Players, for some reason. Let's say you search the area, and don't find any Players around. It's not an ambush, it's something completely new.

"That kind of thing is very, very interesting."

We stood there for a moment, like four statues in a garden tableau. Ingraham was tightly coiled, ready to strike in any direction. I had my hand on my sword, ready to draw in a desperate attempt to stay alive. Finger was pale and stiff and beautiful. Iago was a misshapen lump near the fire.

"So what would you do with a situation like that?" Iago said. "Nipsies acting on their own, with their own initiative, their own agenda. What would that mean to you? Do you kill them? Do you let them live? Do you even care? They're just Nipsies, after all. Any Player can call them up by the dozen. Just pay the Maker fee and tell them what you want."

"No," Ingraham said. "I let them live, and I care."

"Why? Because they are something new?"

"Exactly," Ingraham said. "They're something new. And something new is always worth money. A Nipsy that can think. Oh, yes, that would be worth a lot."

"Can't tell a dead Nipsy who can think, from a dead Nipsy who can't think, can you?" Iago said. "But we're all Players here, right? Just an interesting speculation. And we're all friends, all people who want to work together."

Iago looked over at me. He was still the same half-crippled little dwarf who was my official sidekick, but there was something different about him. I tried again to remember when I first met him, but I could not. He was always just there. I tried to remember what I knew about him, his past, and there was nothing.

But I knew what he wanted. So did the Voices.

"Take your hand off the sword, Sir Linux. Pick up the banjo."

I did as I was told. Ingraham watched me closely, and then shuddered as I picked out the first notes to 'Orange Blossom Special'.

His hands reappeared from under the cloak. He sat down next to the fire, held his hands out to warm them. He looked at Finger appreciatively, and she relaxed and picked up the pot of hot water.

"Would you like some tea, Sir Ingraham?" she asked.

"I would love some," he said. He stretched out on his side. "Some tea, and perhaps some stories. Yes, some tall tales about Nipsies who think and what they think we might do together."

He looked up at me.

"Just Player to Player, Sir Knight. Just Player to Player."

. . .

The next day we entered the cave. I picked the order of our line.

Ingraham took the rear. He was a Player. If we were attacked from the surface while we were down in the cave, they would fight Ingraham first. I thought Miller would try to avoid killing him because he was a Player, and I hoped that would slow Miller down. Plus, Ingraham was not as strong as me, but he was strong enough, and I had a definite impression he was probably damned clever. I had a feeling that if we had to fight, it was too late. We needed to think our way out of any problems we ran into. I expected Ingraham to provide the brains to cover our rear.

I went next, my back free and open, an easy target, for Ingraham. I tried not to think about that, but the sweat still trickled down my spine and made me itch. The idea here was to provide reinforcement for Ingraham if he needed it.

In front of me was Iago. In front of him, leading the way, was Finger. She was Non-Combatant, and she knew Inetd better than any of us. I figured it would make him more comfortable to deal with a familiar face, especially a Non-Combatant face.

She was nervous. This was the longest we had stayed in one place since we used the key mirror back at her home. She claimed the forces of Miller the Maker were all around us.

We had not been attacked yet, but Iago and I saw several dragons, flying high and in formation, while we were on guard duty overnight. Ingraham, during his watch, smelled wolves go by, and heard the click of horseshoes on the rocks below us, just before dawn.

"We must hurry," she said. "They're closing in."

"But they don't know where we are, yet," I asked, more hopeful than convinced.

"No," she said, slowly and uncertainly. "But they're close, close."

"Don't worry," I said, reassuringly. "I've heard about Inetd. When we convince him, he can use his power to take us anywhere in an instant. The sack will close around us, but we'll already be out and gone."

The cave was just as dark and nasty as I remembered. Finger and Iago carried torches. They flickered and smoked and gave just enough light to see our feet, but not our hands if we held them out full-length.

Every time the path forked, Finger took the downward path. I tried to keep track of the twists and turns and finally gave up. Finger seemed to know where she was going, but I was completely lost. If she left us, I figured we were dead men.

"That's far enough," Inetd said suddenly out of the dark, his voice harsh and clipped.

"Inetd?" Finger asked. Her voice shook, just a little.

"Finger? Is that really you? Or is this another one of Ingraham's tricks?" Inetd asked.

"No trick, Inetd," Finger said. "God, it's good to hear your voice."

You've got to be kidding, I thought.

"Finger, I want to believe it's you. But how do I know for sure?" he asked plaintively.

"I thought about that, Inetd," Finger said. "I'm going to tell you something only I can see, but that you also know. Come closer."

Inetd came out of the shadows in front of Finger, his swordnails held around her, so that if he closed his hand he would slice her into a dozen pieces. He leaned forward until Finger could whisper into his ear.

"I did not!" he said, his voice a low roar. But he did not move, and that frightful hand did not close. "It wasn't what it looked like. I mean, you know, it was different than that."

He suddenly straightened, pulled back his hand, and held his arms wide.

"Finger!" he said. She stepped forward and hugged him.

He put his arms around her.

"We Daemons have to stick together," she said, her voice muffled by his thick chest hair.

"Aye," he said. He stroked her hair. "We have to stick together."

He hugged her once more, then gently pushed her away and turned away.

"Come," he said. "Let's go to my home."

Home was a large cave within-a-cave, down a side-tunnel off the main path. Inside was a crude table and chair, a bundle of sleeping rags in a corner... and a fine, antique bookshelf, glass-fronted, and lined with well-worn old books of various sizes, colors, and shapes.

Inetd caught the look of surprise on Ingraham's face when he saw the bookshelf. Inetd sniffed and shook his head.

"You never thought about it, did you?" Inetd asked. "I was just a monster to be slain. You never expected something like my books, did you?"

"Most monsters don't have anything like this," Ingraham said. Inetd reluctantly nodded.

"Most don't," he said. "But isn't it your job to learn to tell the difference? Or are you just the kind who slashes and burns, and never thinks about anything beyond that?"

"This is all new to me," Ingraham admitted. "I don't know what's going on anymore, ever since I met these three. This isn't like the rest of QuestWorld."

"Worlds within Worlds," Inetd said. Ingraham nodded.

"Exactly. Layers on layers."

"And you like it," Iago said. "You like it because it's different and it's new. You like not knowing what is going to happen next."

"Yes," Ingraham said in a whisper.

"Welcome to the real QuestWorld, the part the Players never see," Finger said. Ingraham shook his head.

"No, you're right, this isn't QuestWorld. This is something new. I'm not sure what it is yet, but it's something new," Ingraham said.

"Enough talking," I said. I never liked caves, too much restriction on the sword arm with all those close walls, and the thought of Maker Miller above us, closing in, made me damned nervous.

Everyone glared at me, and then Finger reluctantly nodded.

"You still want proof?" Finger said to Inetd.

"I must, sweetheart. The story the warrior," a nod at me, "told me is too fantastic to believe. A world without Makers, or Players, or Nipsies? This I must see."

Finger took out the key mirror and held it up.

"Is it safe?" I asked Finger.

"I don't know," she said. "They are close around us. But do we have a choice? Just be quick."

"Watch closely, Inetd," I said. I closed my eyes and *touched* the mirror. I opened my eyes and watched as Inetd, entranced, reached out to the images which appeared within the mirror, then snatched his hand back before he touched it.

"It's true," he said, his voice a roughened whisper not much louder than a nor-

mal human shout. "It's true."

"That was a mistake," the Voices said.

I immediately shut off the key mirror. Inetd cried out when the images disappeared, and tried to reach for them, but it was too late.

"Finger!" I shouted. She looked up and around, with the special expression she got only when she used her Power. She took just a moment, then she was back, and shaking.

"All around us. Closing in fast. We've got to get out of here. Now!" she said.

"Inetd, we need you to move us, all of us, right now," I said.

Inetd shook his head, as if to clear his mind, then looked up at me and nodded. He grabbed a backpack, opened the bookcase, and quickly shoveled all his books into it.

"Let's go!" he said, and headed for the entrance of the cave.

I grabbed his arm.

"Where the hell do you think you're going? Shift us, or fly us, or whatever the hell you do, away from here. Now!"

He looked at me as if I was crazy. Then he laughed, a huge, roaring laugh that filled the room and echoed down the caves.

"Where do you get your ideas, Sir Linux? I'm not a flyer or a Genie. And if you want to get out of here before whatever is coming gets us, I strongly suggest you pick up one foot and put it in front of the other as rapidly as you can. You'll probably see my back in the distance. Try to keep it in sight," Inetd said.

He was gone.

We followed.

The trip back up the trail to the surface seemed like it was in slow motion, and horrible slow motion at that. I remember Iago staggered, and I picked him up and slung him over my back and kept going. Finger slipped and twisted her ankle and cried out, but my arms were already full, and I despaired.

Suddenly, and I know this surprised me, but Ingraham, a Player, did not hesitate to scoop her up and keep going. A Player Warrior carried a Daemon Non-Combatant.

Things were definitely changing in QuestWorld.

Just before the surface, at the entrance to the cave, Inetd waited for us.

"Dragons overhead. Wolves down below. Knights in the distance, both ways, fully armored and on their horses," he said. He sounded puzzled. "But everyone is just sitting there, ready to go, but not moving. We're surrounded, but it's like they're waiting for someone, or something."

I put Iago down, and tried to catch my breath. Ingraham lay Finger gently in a corner, near the entrance, and examined her ankle. He reached into his pack, took out bandages, and wrapped the ankle tightly. She winced, then smiled.

"So what the hell kind of traveling Daemon are you, Inetd?" I asked when I got my breath back. "The word on you is that you can go anywhere you want."

"I can," he said. "But not the way you think."

"Then how do you do it?"

"I'm a sailor," he said. "Different ports let me go to different places. Some ports have more connections than others. But give me time and access to enough ports, and I can go anywhere."

"So, can you find this place in the mirror?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "If I can see it, I can find it. Best place to start would be the main port, in Millertown. Lots of connections from there. I don't know how long

it will take, but from there I can take us anywhere."

"Will you?" I asked.

He looked at me as if I were crazy.

"We're surrounded and outnumbered by our enemies. They're on horse, on foot, and in the air above. And you tell me that the Makers themselves want us dead," he said.

"Will you?" I repeated.

"Yes," he said, as if he were humoring a crazy person. "Get us back to town and get me a ship, and I'll take all of us anywhere we need to go to find the magic place in your mirror."

"Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" I asked.

"No," he said. "That wasn't so hard."

He pointed outside where I could see the silent circle of enemies was beginning to close in.

"But that might not be so easy."

. . .

"Ingraham! Get your lazy butt up here!" I shouted.

Our enemies did not like each other any more than they liked us. As the circle got tighter, they clumped together, as far away from each other as possible. But they still pulled in closer to the cave.

"Can we run?" Ingraham asked.

I shook my head.

"Horses and wolves are both faster than us on foot, particularly with Iago and Finger. They'd chase us down. And if they didn't get us, the dragons overhead can fly ahead of us," I said. "We need the horses."

"Any of them these guys out here your friends?" Ingraham asked.

"We're Players, remember," I said without conviction.

Ingraham chuckled and said nothing.

"No," I said finally. "None of them are our friends. They all seem to be Nipsy Unawares. We're Nipsy Awares and Daemon Awares."

"And Nipsy Unawares do what they are told," Ingraham finished for me.

"Yeah," I said.

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

"Sir Linux, I've been watching them. I got to tell you, I think we *can* cut our way through," Ingraham said. He frowned. "This doesn't make any sense. The wolves are clumsy, the knights look like they've never handled a lance and a horse at the same time, and the dragons keep going into a stall and then barely recovering in time."

"I agree," I said. "They're all green. Miller did not have time to hire more experienced Nipsies, so he made them from scratch. None of these has much experience."

"You don't think this is all he's got," Ingraham said doubtfully.

"I *know* he's got more and better than this," I said. "But maybe not here, not now."

"But on the way," Ingraham said.

"Exactly," I said.

"Then it's time to move, now, before they get here," Ingraham said. He ducked back into the cave, came back a moment later with Iago, Finger, Inetd.

I turned and faced them.

"We're going down the hill, single file, to the horses. I'll lead the way, Iago next, Finger, Inetd, then Ingraham brings up the rear. When we get there, Iago, get Finger on a horse and grab the packhorses. Ingraham and I will grab our horses." I looked at Inetd. "I don't have a horse your size. How fast can you run?"

He smiled, and it was a horrible thing, with sharpened teeth, four small fangs, and wrinkles in places that were not supposed to wrinkle.

"With these things after me? Just try to keep my back in sight," he said.

"Stay close," I said sharply. "We need to stay together to get through this. You go off on your own and you're likely to get killed. And a Daemon Unaware Inetd is no damned good to us at all. So take care of yourself, use your brain for once, and stay next to us."

"Where are we going, Terence?" Finger asked.

"Across that field, and into those woods," I said and pointed out the path. "I know trails in there that no one else has ever heard of. We'll lose the dragons with the leaves, the knights with the trees and, well, we'll go through a few streams I know about and lose the wolves. We'll be fine."

"As long as we get to the woods," Finger said.

"Hold my hand," Iago said, and Finger reached forward, slim, manicured fingers tightly intertwined with dark, work-toughened fingers.

"Now!" I said.

Halfway to the horses, our silent enemies attacked.

Ingraham took the first one, a wolf, with the long sword in his left hand. He caught it in mid-bite, and used the sword to stretch the wolf's smile into something longer and quite fatal. I took the second one, a dragon, with a compound bow arrow in the neck.

Then things got complicated.

By the time we got to the bottom of the hill we were all out of breath, and Ingraham and I bled from a dozen small cuts and bites each. Behind us, up the slope, was a trail of dead wolves, men, and the odd dragon or two.

"Let's go!" Iago shouted. Inetd ran by me, a red blur on two legs, followed closely by Iago and Finger and the packhorses. As he galloped by us, Iago flipped first Ingraham, then me, the reins to a horse. We leaped up, and I rushed to take the point, while Ingraham covered the rear.

We left the wolves behind, half of them dead on the hillside, the others unable to keep up with the horses. The dragons desperately searched for a thermal updraft to re-group their attack as we moved away from the cave and the hill. They were fewer also, and they depended on a diving, slashing attack. Could not do that, and pull up in time, without strong thermals.

That left the knights.

They continued to attack from the sides, their lances held low and steady. They made a brave front, but they were rigid, and they executed as if they had never been out of the formal lists. I'm sure that, one on one, with all the rules of formal combat, they would have easily defeated us.

So we cheated.

Ingraham looked surprised, almost shocked, the first time I stopped my horse so suddenly it went back on its haunches, to let the lance go harmlessly past me, then killed the knight with a low blow to the back.

Then he smiled and got back to work.

We were almost to the woods, and I was starting to think we might have a chance, when lightning struck.

. . .

Now, remember, this was a bright, sunny day, with only a few puffy clouds in the sky. Perfect dragon weather, with lots of updrafts. Lousy storm weather, too much blue sky and not enough cumulus or stratus or whatever it was that made up storm weather.

So we got lightning.

My horse was dazzled and threw me to the ground. Inetd and Finger and Iago staggered back. Ingraham pushed through them and headed for me.

More lightning. Lots more lightning. Like a fence between me and everyone else.

Ingraham threw up his hands, his eyes dazzled. The others dragged him back and saved his life.

"I don't like you," Miller said.

I staggered to my feet. I shook the dirt out of my hair and blinked it out of my eyes. I licked my lips.

The Maker stood, three feet above the surface of the ground, directly in front of me.

"You can either come down to my level, or I'm going to talk to your boots," I said. "I don't look up to any man who hasn't proven he deserves it."

Miller's face was covered by a thick moustache and beard. Even through that, I could see his skin redden and his lips tighten. He lowered himself until he touched the ground and looked me in the eye.

"For that, I'm going to keep you alive while I work on you," Miller said. "I was just going to kill you, let you come back as, what do you call them, a Nipsy Combatant Unaware? That surprises you? That I know the terms? Yes, I know. Grace and I both know."

"Who else?" I asked. "Who else knows?"

"Russ, obviously," Miller said. "No one else that we're aware of. It's not something we want to get around, that there are uncontrolled elements in QuestWorld."

"Bad for business?" Ingraham called. "I'm a Player. And I know."

Miller looked at Ingraham with distaste on his face, but his voice was smooth and controlled.

"Mr. Ingraham, you are a professional, in a strictly controlled amateur business. I don't even have to tell you how many laws you're breaking just by being here. Let alone your Player's contract with QuestWorld. So, please, shut up," Miller said. "And if you ever mention any of this to anyone outside of QuestWorld, you will regret it for the rest of your life. At least, that part of your life you don't spend in a jail or a courtroom."

"That's blackmail!" Ingraham said.

"Consider it professional courtesy," Miller said dismissively. "Now stop talking."

While Miller talked with Ingraham I turned back to Iago. Once, long ago, we had a companion, a Player, who was born deaf. He only communicated with sign language, and he taught it to both of us.

Iago nodded abruptly, and I turned back to face Miller.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked. I gestured. "Lightning all around, but none of it hurts. A fence, but not a death stroke."

"I can't kill you," Miller said. He smiled. "At least, not directly. Board decision. We'll get it overridden, but not yet."

"So I'm free to go?" I asked.

Miller laughed.

"I can't kill you directly, but I can bring you an old enemy to do the job for me,"

he said. While he spoke, the clouds above us began to darken and lightning began to flash between and behind thunderheads. The wind picked up and a few splatters of rain slapped against me.

Miller stayed perfectly calm and dry.

"Remember your quest to steal the drinking horn of Valhalla?" Miller asked. "Remember the god who was on duty then?"

"No?" I asked, hopefully.

"Well, he still remembers you," Miller said comfortingly. "Yes, he remembers you very well indeed. And, I believe, he is here now –"

Thunder...

Lightning...

Echoing sound of horse hooves as the chariot raced between, above, and before clouds...

Long blonde hair streaming in the wind...

And that damned hammer...

Thor.

. . .

Thor was God Combatant Unaware. He was too stupid to do anything but drink and fight, but he was very good at both of those.

And a mere mortal cannot defeat a god.

I did my best.

The hammer, Hjolmir, kept coming out of strange angles. I took it on my shield as much as I could, my sword when I was not quick enough to use the shield. My body armor twice, when even the sword was not enough.

I held Thor off, even got a surprise cut in once, high and superficial, on his left arm. Thor looked surprised, then furious. I watched, depressed but amazed, as the bleeding stopped, the flesh pulled together, and in less than three heartbeats he was completely healed.

His next blows were even more powerful. After the second one, my arm was numb. I stumbled to my knees, and concentrated on keeping my shield, dented and ripped, up and high.

I was dead. The only question worth betting on was how many breaths I had left before it was over. I wondered if Miller would let Thor kill me, or step in when I was unconscious and take me to work on me.

I figured I really didn't want to wake up.

"Miller!"

Russ!

Now I owed Iago a beer.

"What are you doing?" Russ asked.

"Nothing much, fellow board member," Miller said, his voice slow and languid. "Just quality testing my favorite god character. Surely nothing wrong with that. And how are you doing today?"

Thor stopped, surprised, and I hit the ground and rolled. I staggered to my feet, and looked up, into the storm, through the pickets of the lightning fence around Thor and I.

Russ and Miller floated at tree height, and they ignored us, except for a quick glance and smile Russ sent to me. Then he was all formal again, as if he and Miller were both being judged by some formal, and distant, jury, which Thor and I could not see.

"We are going to interrupt the fence when everything starts," the Voices said. *"It*

will be directly behind you. Slip through quickly, or you're dead. Get to the woods. Your friends are waiting."

"Who the hell are you?" I asked silently. "What are you talking about? Do you work with Russ?"

Nothing.

"Sounds amusing," Russ said. "Since the Board elected me to the Executive Committee I can officially visit QuestWorld now. Many things have changed since I was last here. Perhaps I'd like to exercise a god also."

"Now, Russ, that sounds very nice, but I'm afraid all the gods are occupied right now," Miller said.

"All the gods," Russ repeated.

"Every one," Miller said. "Surprising, isn't it? But all of them are busy. All the ones we Made, so long ago. All the Norse, the Greek, the Roman, and the Egyptian gods. Even the Chinese and Japanese and Aztec. All of them."

"He lies, he lies!" the Voices shouted.

"You know, I officially studied comparative cultures in school," Russ said. "I always found the Yoruban culture very interesting."

"Yoruban?" Miller said, uncertainly. "I'm not familiar with them."

"Ah, it all depends on cultural heritage, doesn't it?" Russ asked. "Your ancestors come from Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. Mine come from Western Africa. From the Yoruban lands in Nigeria."

"And?" Miller asked.

There was a deeper rumble to the clouds, something more than thunder, and I felt a pressure wave against my face, then felt it pass.

"And with this time I've had available, since I 'retired', I've been getting back into my heritage," Russ said. "Back into Yoruban mythology. And, just to keep myself busy, I've been Making a few things. And I do believe I would like to exercise one of my Yoruban gods."

The clouds parted and a figure, long and tall and lean and black, with a proud, fierce bearing, descended into our little cage of lightning.

"Now!" the Voices said.

The lightning at the back of the cage ended, and I rolled underneath, the crackle and stink of ozone in my nostrils. Then I was out, my clothing scorched and smoking, and I ran and Iago met me and held me tight and led me under the trees to safety.

"Shango!" I heard Russ call. "Yoruban god of Thunder and Lightning. Against Thor, Norse god of Thunder and Lightning. This ought to be amusing, don't you think? And I can't imagine you want to leave your champion alone. A small bet, perhaps? I'll put ten on Shango."

"Run," the Voices said. *"As quickly as you can, back to Millertown. Russ will meet you there. He'll stall as long as he can. Miller can't leave until the challenge is over. He and Russ are judged as well as the gods. But Miller is furious now. He will keep looking for you."*

"You talk with Russ?" I asked again. "Who are you?"

"Run quickly."

. . .

Ingraham met us in *The Quaint Madden II.* He looked more powerful and stronger than before, at the cave, as if he had grown since then.

Verne let him in, on our word, and took him to our table in the little room in the back. *The Quaint Madden II* still smelled of sawdust, fresh varnish, and dwarf

sweat. Verne had told me that he paid premium rates for the quick construction, and when he said it Russ smiled and drank more beer. Russ always liked the *Madden* and I thought he might have helped Verne with the cost of the extra workers. Even now I heard sawing and hammering in the background as the construction continued.

Hell, being a Maker has to have some advantage. Right? And a man's got to have a place to drink...

Ingraham sat between Finger and Iago, across from Inetd and Russ and myself.

"You look good," Finger said, appreciatively. Ingraham nodded his thanks, and took one of the tankards of beer from the middle of the table.

"I gained a lot of experience from everything we went through. Surprised the hell out of me that I lived, but at least I got this out of it," Ingraham said, and spread his hands to encompass his body.

"Whom are you selling it to?" Inetd asked, his lips thick with foam from the beer. "Is the auction going to be here in town?"

Ingraham looked embarrassed.

"I'm not selling it," he said finally. He looked up. "I'm taking it with us. When we leave."

"When *we* leave?" I asked.

"When we leave this port, with Inetd," Ingraham said firmly. "We are leaving, aren't we?"

I looked around the table. Every face was turned to me. Hopeful, eager, desperate. I wondered what my expression was, and realized that was part of the mystery of life, that you never knew what you looked like to the outside world, except through a mirror.

"Yes, we'll leave," I said. "But where do we go? We have the ports and the connections, but what are our directions? Where do we find out where to go?"

"Best place to do all that," Inetd said slowly, around his beer, "is The Cemetery. Best person to ask is a Dead Man. Dead Men know everything."

"Dead Men! Yes! Yes! Finally, someone who knows where they are! That is what we want! We must go to the Dead Men!" the Voices howled.

No one else around the table heard a damned thing.

I sighed and picked up my beer. All I wanted was to get away from everyone and everything, to go some place where no one could bother me, and I'd have a chance to sit and think and figure out what was really going on in the damned world.

I looked around the table. Russ and Ingraham: Players. Inetd and Finger: Daemons. Myself: Nipsy Combatant Aware. Iago...hell, I didn't have any idea what Iago was anymore. He was as much of a mystery to me as the Voices and Sanctuary and the Dead Men.

Now, as I watched, they nodded, one after another. It was decided. We were going after Dead Men. Which meant we had to visit the Undertaker.

Oh, wonderful.

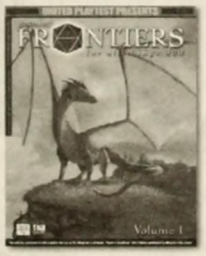
There was only one thing to do.

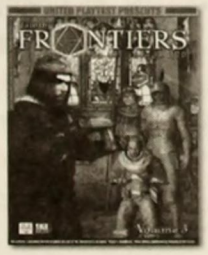
I stood and raised my fist.

"Verne! More beers.

"And keep them coming."

RAISE YOUR HAND IF YOU'VE GOT A D20 ADDICTION.





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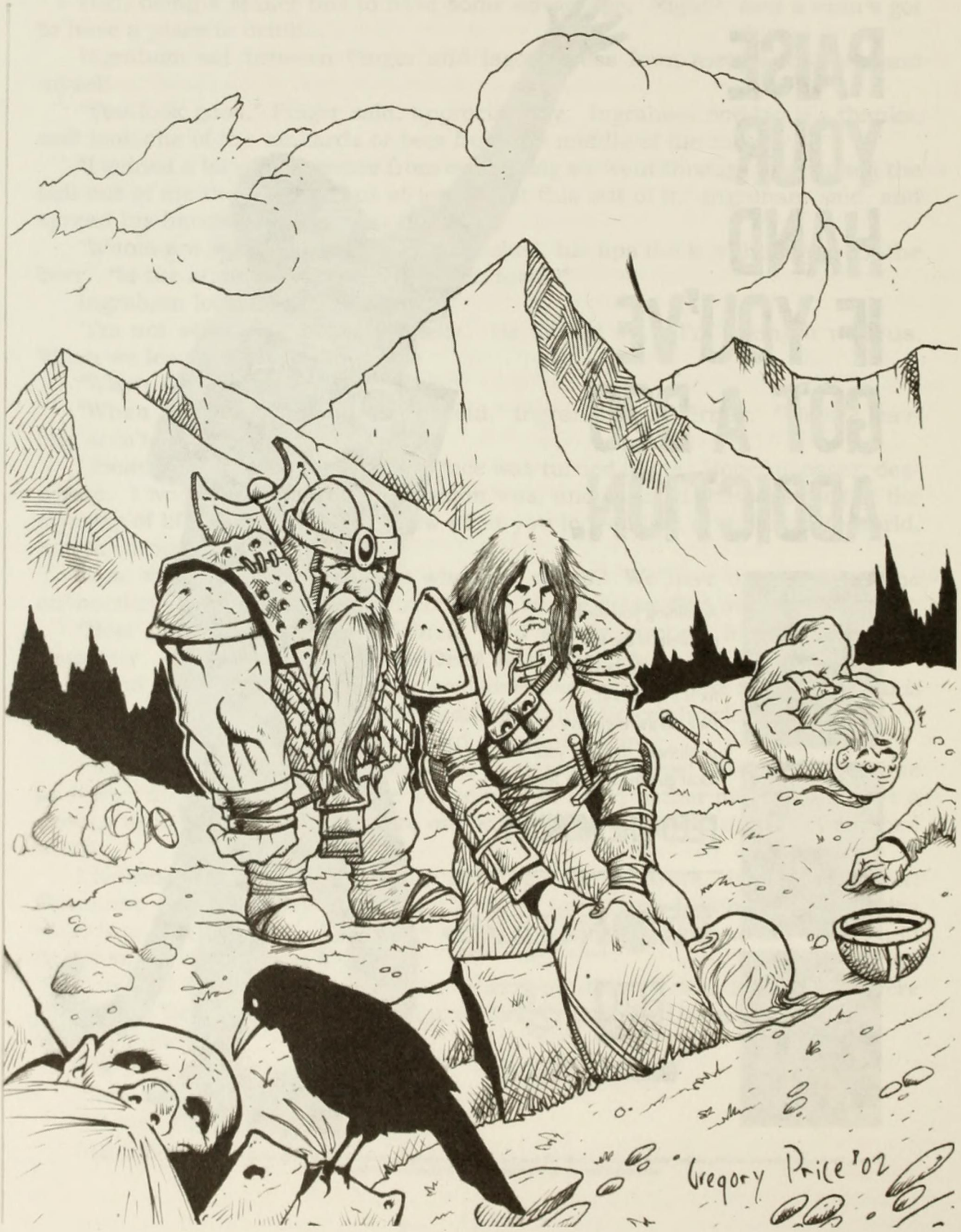
Gregory Price '02

Black Gate Fantasy Classic: Scatheling

By Nancy Varian Berberick

I, Skald Garroc, say this, who have spoken with kings, with gods and witches. Ay, even to ghosts I have spoken, as few can, Dwarf or Man. I know what is true: We Dwarfs, we Firstborn, we are not like you. Close as kin, Dwarfs and Men. We are moved by the same things to love, to laugh, to hate, to weep, but we Dwarfs are not like you.

We are cursed, by pride and by Woden One-Eyed who uncovered the schemes of Dwarf-kings and witches to steal the golden fruit which grants long life to gods. With the thing they desired he punished us, one and all, born and yet-to-come: To us he gave thrice what span of years is granted even the longest-lived of you mann-cynn. *And then the one-eyed god named the time of our ending, but six long generations from the Theft.*

Tonight, as we sit, the last Dwarf, man or maid, has already been born. No more will come now, no more of us. And so you see: We are not like you.

Yet there is abroad in the Nine Worlds another kindred who may say that same thing, and should they say it, they will speak to both Dwarfs and Men. In voices like wind mourning, like sea sighing, like stone groaning, they will say: We are not like you!

This kindred is called ælfen, *and these harmed wights even child-reft Dwarfs do pity.*

Hinthan hunted for me across the bitter battle-ground, among all the dead my foster-son searched for me. Tall young Man, covered in dust and sweat and the blood of foemen, he chased ravens from the corpse of every Dwarf he came upon. Beside each of those dead he knelt, and he turned each gently to see his face.

Is this my foster-father? Is Garroc here?

"Garroc is dead," well-meaning friends said to him, bearing the wrong news. "He went down in the first fighting..."

We'd not gone into battle together, not this time, and I never saw him all the raging day. The fighting had been hard, worse than any to tear apart that

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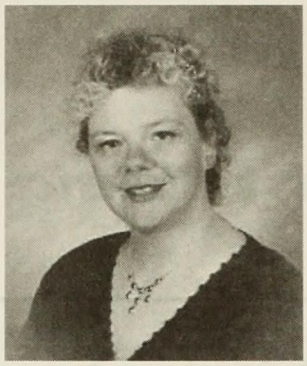


Nancy Varian Berberick

Nancy Varian Berberick is the author of nine fantasy novels and numerous short stories in the genre, with a few short fiction forays into children's literature. Her fiction, steeped in folklore, mythology, legend, and history, has been variously described as epic fantasy and historical fantasy. Her latest novel is **The Inheritance,** from Wizards of the Coast, and **The Lioness** will be published by WotC in August, 2002.

In the pages of *Tangent* Nancy has said: "A good fantasy novel... knows the songs you have always known but perhaps have never heard, those of our many mythologies... It offers the understanding that you are part of a pattern of a human experience that flows backward and forward... it scorns stereotype in favor of illuminating archetype, and in such a story magic is metaphor for the spiritual and psychological truths we all must discover."

Nancy lives in Albuquerque, NM. There she writes her fiction and translates Old English poetry for the joy of it.

Photo by Olin Mills Studios, Charlotte, NC.

Blood Summer as Erich Halfdan's son strove to hold his wide Marcher lands against Ordwulf and Ordrafen, faithless thanes risen against their *cyning*, unloyal men against their lord. You couldn't tell the winner that day by who had the most men left alive to him. You marked him by who yet stood and who'd fled. Erich's army had not fled.

And so, as the aging sun shone down the sky, her light turned red and golden by the hanging dust, some of Erich's men went to gather stones for a barrow, and some to gather woodfor a pyre. Others went out among ghosts they could not hear, and the Valkyries unseen at their stern reaping, to gather the bodies of dead kin and friends. One of these searchers was Hinthan, and he sought me in the blood-soaked meadow between the slender arms of the rivers Saefern and Pevere, mourning and swearing grief-oaths in his heart.

Foster-father, I will find you and I will carry you to the barrow. No one will lay the stones over you but me . . .

He didn't find me. I found him. Soon after the *cyning* told me the news of my death I found Hinthan in the very act of turning a hacked corpse face to the sky. In that moment all the pains of the day melted into one, the sight of my boy at his grief.

"Hinthan," I said, and he was a man kneeling there, a warrior good and true, but I spoke to him as gently as though he were the child I'd raised up. He didn't look up when he heard me. He couldn't. Not till I put my hand on his shoulder did he turn to me. Sweat ran on his face, making dusty trails on his cheeks, trickling into his young beard. But no tears did I see. All that he'd held close and tight, for fear that if he took time for weeping he'd not have been able to go on with his dark hunting.

"Garroc." His voice came ragged. "Garroc, they told me you were dead."

Ravens called across the corpses. Ghosts sighed, but not mine.

"Youngling, they're as wrong as ever they have been."

He saw it, but he'd been walking with the dead that day, and seeing wasn't enough. He took me by the shoulders, rough in his fear. Gripping hard against his own trembling, he held me at arm's length, never satisfied until he

marked every bruise and cut and judged them no threat. Then he got to his feet, careful not to look across the battle-ground where ravens feasted and men mourned. He reached into his shirt and took out the carved talisman hung round his neck. Sun glinted sharply from the polished oak, god-Freyr's boar. Bright, Freyr is named, and Lord, and Wealth. He is the soldier's god, and in some tales he is named Lonely, for he dwells in that part of Asgeard where all the halls are empty. The boar was craft of Hinthan's own hands and he must have worked powerfully the day he did the making, for the god had never failed him. He slipped the talisman over his head, but I stopped him.

"Don't, Hinthan. It's always been your luck."

Came the stubborn look on him, then, the one I'd known these ten years gone as useless to speak to. Stone would move easier than he in that mood.

"Take it. Garroc, please."

Bound heart to heart, we two, as father and son, and so I knew he'd not got rid of all the dark day's fear. For his sake, I let him slip the leather plait over my head, and I tucked the charm inside my shirt, the boar still warm from his own skin. Even then I heard my name called and turned to see a runner come from the *cyning*. Ælfhun, his name, and he told me Erich was looking for me. He said, "Something's afoot, skald."

Hinthan said he thought Ælfhun was right about that. He pointed back across the field to where Erich's tent stood among the campfires, not far from the banks of the Saefern. There we saw Dwarfs and Men with horses gathered, ten or more, making ready to ride.

. . .

Red brazier light glowed in the darkness of the tent, shining on the *cyning*, his yellow beard, his golden arm-rings glinting. Long-boned, as all you *mann-cynn* are, Erich stood nearly as tall as Hinthan. Swift in battle, hard-striking, we who loved him and served him named him War Hawk.

He asked my news of Hinthan and smiled to hear it. Saying that it seemed all news would be good news today, he poured water into rough drinking horns and offered one to me. The plain fare of a battle-field tent, not less courteously was it given than if it had been the best of his wine poured out for us in bright Hordstede, his high hall at Rilling. From outside drifted the sounds of horses stamping and bridles chiming, and Erich lifted his horn to me.

"Old friend," said the *cyning*, "drink to the end of the Blood Summer."

Hope warmed his voice for the first time in many long days, and so it warmed me as he told me that so badly had gray Ordwulf and his raven brother been hurt today that they wanted to talk terms of peace. They'd sent word to name a place to meet, Æscholt, a grove of ash trees growing amid all the oaks in the wildwood. The holt lay south across the Saefern, a ride of several hours. Erich would bring only a dozen men, as Ordwulf would do. He would ride there now, and be there before the long twilight was done. He was minded to make himself lord of the place before Ordwulf and his brother arrived.

"Erich," I said, "I'm wondering what warrant you have that Ordwulf hasn't set a trap for you."

"Warrant enough. Two riders came with the offer, and one stayed for hostage — Wulfric Ordwulf's son. If we don't return, the boy dies."

So he would, on the keen edge of a sword if someone was minded to mercy; in a worse way, if not. But till his death was ordered, if it should be, he'd be treated well. Not but a fool mishandles his hostage. Erich was no fool, and he

was, as Ordwulf, a father, his own son a red-haired youngster with but a handful of years to him. He judged Ordwulf's proof of peace good enough.

"I want you to ride with me, Garroc. Our poets must witness what will be spoken tomorrow between Ordwulf and me."

So we must, but ah, the day had been long, filled with ghosts whose voices whispered to me that I yet had work here to do, names to add to the long stave of this Blood Summer's song. And so I said, "*Cyning*, tonight I must be here."

Erich's eyes flashed, hawkish. I knew he'd tell me to leave tonight's work to someone else, as had been done before at need. I gave him no chance.

"It would be a great shame, Erich, if skald and *cyning* weren't here tonight for the barrowing and the burning. Your men have earned at least one of us tonight. But if you can't have me with you now, take Hinthan. He'll give me each word as it was spoken. I'll have missed little enough when I get there."

He didn't like my idea, I saw it on him. He'd appear to be lessened in his foemen's eyes if he went to meet Ordwulf and his raven brother with no poet to mark his doings. Lesser still, though, would he appear in his own eyes if, by tending his pride, he denied the honor due those who'd died for him. In the end, his choice wasn't so hard.

So it was agreed, and when I gave Hinthan the news he told me he wasn't surprised. He tugged at the leather plait round my neck. His talisman slid warm against my skin. "Must be you worry for nothing, Garroc. You've got the boar, but my luck's still with me."

It seemed so. Peace-craft was better work than either of us had been given to do all Summer. Yet, later as I watched my foster-son ride away with the *cyning*, I watched unquiet, and when I went with all of Erich's army to the barrowing and the burning, the skald to stand between stone and fire and call the name of each warrior dead, I did that with god-Freyr's tusked boar in hand, wishing Hinthan had kept the talisman for himself.

. . .

Came cool and sullen morning, and change in the night. Yesterday's hard blue sky was gone. Gray clouds hung low, and thick mist rose up from the rivers. I found some food and ate well, then I took a good and sturdy mare and rode away past the still barrow and the pyre fallen to embers. No ghost murmured there, all had gone away on the roads of the dead, to Asgeard or to Hel's hall. Mid-morning the sky began to rain, first misting, then falling stronger. Soon little woodland streams ran like rivers so that I couldn't take the straight way to Æscholt but must turn north and then east and finally south again. Hard going, that journey, thrice longer than it should have been. Rain never ceased until day's end when at last I came to Æscholt.

There I found such a slaughter of peace-goers as to make my heart fall still in my breast.

. . .

In Æscholt rain dripped, falling from leaf to leaf, finally to the corpses and the bloody ground. I cried *Hinthan*! loud along the roads of the dead, calling to his ghost, praying to hear no answer. None from him did I have, but the ghosts of others cried, Dwarfs and Men killed where they'd gone to make peace. My heart aching in me, I walked all round that grove, searched for friends among foemen. And friends I found: Brand and Albold and Gifemund and Reoda... their names I knew and would add to the Summer's bitter blood song, with those of Oswine and Leofric and Swithwulf, Thurstan and Icel and

Ælfhun, all dead here.

All murdered here.

Had treachery been done, the betrayer come with a thick troop of men, Erich's death worth the cost of Ordwulf's own son? Or had it been blackest bad luck — a man of one side seeing a man of the other, one he'd met in battle before, perhaps one he'd seen kill kinsman or friend? A sword is unsheathed, the light on the blade leaps from one heart to another, kindling battle-hate... I didn't find Hinthan among those corpses, wounded and senseless. And Erich — where was he? Not with the dead. Nor did I find sign of them outside the grove, only trampled earth and broken brush. If one alone or two together left a clear trail, rain wiped the earth clean of it. But Ordwulf I saw, the gray wolf who'd brought war against Erich all the Summer long lay dead in the brush with more than one arrow in his breast. Not there or within the holt did I find young Ordrafen, his brother.

Soft, the brush behind me rustled.

Swift, I had my war axe in hand, gleaming Helgrind.

Like a shadow creeping came an old man, stepping out from the thickets into Æscholt of the Dead. He stood still as stock when he saw me, all the color draining from his beardless cheek. In the next moment turned to flee but — quick! — I caught him by the arm. He froze under my hand and it was pity for an old man's dread made me let him go.

"Peace, old father," I said.

He said nothing, only stood with his eyes low, as though afraid to look up and see me. He was no Dwarf, the old man. He was one of *mann-cynn* and looked to have nearly sixty years to him, a long count for one of you. He went rough-dressed in rags with a tattered brown cloak over all.

I grounded Helgrind. "I'm Garroc of Rilling," I said, trying for gentleness.

The old man received my name in silence, his fear uneased. He stood a long moment weighing something against that fear, some want or need.

I felt that wanting, that needing, the way you feel storm on the wind, but then I didn't understand it. Then, standing there among the dead, I wouldn't have believed in the truth of it if he'd told me. He didn't tell me, though, not then, not there. He kept himself close and still, his eyes low until, his reckoning done, he took a careful step toward me, then another. He never lifted his eyes, though. He kept them low and hidden. In a voice thin and cracked as though long unused, he returned my courtesy and told me his name was Scatheling, and he told me something else, whispering.

"Not all who fought here died here, Garroc of Rilling. Not the gray-eyed boy died here. Not the friend he fought to save."

Hope flared like a brand. Eagerly, I named Hinthan as the gray-eyed boy and said he was my foster-son. I named Erich and said he was my *cyning*.

"Scatheling, did you see where they went? Can you tell me if they were hurt?"

He shrugged. "I can tell you many things, and I'll tell you nothing here in the rain." He looked right and he looked left, the small careful glances of an untrusty man. "But I have a home, and I have a fire, and I have food. Might be you'll learn more if you guest with me, Skald Garroc."

Skald Garroc.

Nape-hair raised up, prickling to warn, and I said, "I haven't told you I'm a skald."

He looked up then, for the first time he met my eyes, and I will tell you now: I've never seen eyes like his, not before then, not since. Brown, as many a man's eyes are, and flecked with gold as isn't so common, to look too closely into those eyes gave me the same feeling I get when I stand too close to the edge of a high cliff's edge. I want to leap, and I want to fall back, and the longer I stand, the harder the choice.

He smiled with no humor and dropped his glance again, for my sake.

"Can it be," he said sneering, "that you haven't heard of the Second Sight? You, a skald far-traveled?"

A Seer! My heart lurched hard. I knew it as well as you do — no tale that has a Seer walking in it ever comes to a good end. Not the less, standing there among the dead, reft of my foster-son, reft of my *cyning*, this Seer's stinging scorn put me past being careful.

"What, then," I said, eyes on him, Helgrind heavy in my hands. "Has the Sight showed you a thing having to do with me?"

He dropped his glance and turned his head, but not before I saw his cheek whiten again with fear. Only a moment did he stay that way. When he lifted his eyes, I saw scorn there.

"I'm not wasting my breath giving you an answer you already have, skald." Rain fell harder, cold with wind growling wolfish behind. "Now choose: Stay here, or come with me."

Then he hunched up his shoulders and walked out of the grove. Nor did he look back to see if I would follow.

Stay or come, the doom-speaker said. If the Sight had shown him anything worth knowing about me he well knew I'd go all the world over to find Hinthan. He'd given me no choice at all.

. . .

Storm prowled lonely outside the little cave, Scatheling's woodland home. A shelf of overhanging stone protected the cave's mouth; under there my mare tossed her head, restless. I stood close to the hot high fire blazing from the pit in the middle of the earthen floor. Steam rose from my soaked clothes, I shivered as I dried. Across from me Scatheling sat, head low, eyes hidden.

"Hear me," he said, the very words poets speak to call the roaring hall to silence. "I have always had the Sight." Scatheling pulled his cloak tighter round his throat. "They say I got it from my father, whose name no one knows. He went walking in the woods one night in the Falling and found a girl there walking, too. They made me that night, and my mother never saw him again. When it was known she went with child my mother got some hard advice. Go out into the woods, they said, and find the rue-wort. Make a drink to scathe the child from your womb. She did that, and —" He laughed, bitter as the drink his mother had tasted. "— And I didn't get gone, all I got was my name: Scatheling. I didn't live long among my mother's kin. Folk don't like one of the Sighted among 'em. They say it's an unlucky thing to have a man around who knows what shouldn't be known.

"But I can't help that." His voice shook, as an old man's does or a wounded child's. "I don't try to See, I just See... I See things gone, things far, things that might be. And those things that might be are not things that will be, unless they are left untouched."

He flung up his head then, his eyes wild and the golden flecks in them whirling like flinders. Cold crept up my arms, fear prowling, but I would not look away.

"I've seen things about you, Skald Garroc. I have seen." Light from his fire flared round the walls and roof. "I have seen you covered in blood within the walls of Sigehorde."

Sigehorde! Thunder roared outside the cave, voice to memories of a battle fought and bitterly lost a long and weary month ago when Thunor's Moon ran full. I heard it again, wind howling in the stony throat of a winding gorge, doing nothing to drown the screams of the dying and the cries of the dead. Sick in my belly, I smelled the blood again and saw the dark and gated hall looming high on a stony crest overlooking the gorge. That hall was Ordrafen's. Sigehorde, he called it. War Trove. Both Ordrafen and his gray wolf brother had fought from there that day. If we'd taken Sigehorde then, if we had, if we had, the Blood Summer would a month ago have ended. But I had never gotten near Sigehorde's gates that day much less within the walls. None of us had and those who'd died in that battle died in the gorge.

"Not then," said the Seer. "I didn't see you then. I saw you . . . at another time. A time coming."

He looked up then, he must to see if I believed him. The terror I found in his gold-flecked eyes turned my blood to ice.

Wind mourned outside the cave. Inside, the air felt suddenly different, pricking on the skin. I took Hinthan's talisman in hand, the oak-carved boar.

"I See," he moaned. "I see him, your foster-son..."

The boar's wooden tusks bit my fingers where I grasped. I went closer to the fire, peering into the leaping flames as though I might spy what he did.

"Small, thin boy... orphan-child... battle-ground wanderer..."

I spoke whispering, before I knew I would. "He came to me off a battle-ground, one day ten years ago."

"The fatherless child to the childless father."

A boy limping with weariness, caught between warring armies, Erich's and that of an older enemy than Ordwulf. His kin had been killed by soldiers of one army or the other and, running from that killing, he went for the first camp he saw. Right to me he'd come, at the end of the longest, hottest day of Summer. Child of *mann-cynn*, he was no son of my body. Then the boy, now the man, he would always be the child of my heart. My son in spite of a god's curse.

Swift, Scatheling drew a deeper breath.

"I see him! Your Hinthan, and your *cyning* — !" The air crackled. Behind me, the mare snorted and stamped, pulling at the tether.

"Scatheling, tell me, where —"

"Ravens," he whispered. Red light and shadows swirled round him. "Ravens high, and ravens low." Only his eyes did I see through that shadow-mask, wide and wild. "Ravens," he rasped. "Ravens fill up the sky over the War Trove rising."

Fire leapt high, flaring. I closed my eyes against the dazzle, and didn't look again till I heard him take one long shuddering breath. When he let it go shadows fell away from him, scurried up the walls of the cave. Watching them run, I thought of veils, of hiding. Suddenly my heart thundered hard against my ribs. Something lived within those shadows — I felt it! — and that thing was aware of me.

I turned from the moving darkness and got caught in the firelight running golden on the blade of my war-axe, keen-edged Helgrind leaning against the

cave wall. Like a mirror, that polished blade, but not my reflection did I see there, or Scatheling's. So swift the sighting that I could be sure of nothing but the icy brush of a glance from eyes like lorn stars, and the dread a drowning man feels when the last breath is going from him.

High and keening, Scatheling cried out "*You! Be gone!*" and the spell broke, shattered.

Shadows went slinking away, up through the ceiling with the smoke and through the venting crack in the stone. Helgrind's blade was again only Helgrind's blade. Shaking as from Winter's own breath, I said, "Scatheling, what was that?"

Him, he laughed without much humor. "Can it be you've never heard of *ælfen,* you a skald far-traveled?"

"I've heard of *ælfen,*" I said. "And I've seen a few."

They were all about sorrow, *ælfen,* those poor wights who'd gone before even Dwarfs into the Golden Geardh for stealing. Some have said that Dwarfs have grim good reason to thank the *ælfen.* Not again did Woden One-Eyed punish as he punished then. Not again did he snatch away souls and fling them wildly into all the Nine Worlds, lost till their owners found them again.

Scatheling poked at his fire. "Well, now you've seen the worst of them, skald. Now you've seen a *niht-ælf.*"

My mouth went suddenly dry. That kind doesn't go searching for what Woden took from them. Some tales whisper that they know dark magic to steal the souls of others, souls to keep, souls to kill, however their rage leads them. Alone or in Wild Hunts they ride, shrieking like wind wailing, their unearthly steeds the color of storm with hoofs that pound like thunder on the sky.

Scatheling glanced right, and he glanced left, shivering. "Don't worry about him, skald. It happens sometimes that a Seer looks and finds another looking back. You get used to it."

Might be he got used to it. I never wanted to see eyes so cold as the *niht-ælf's* again.

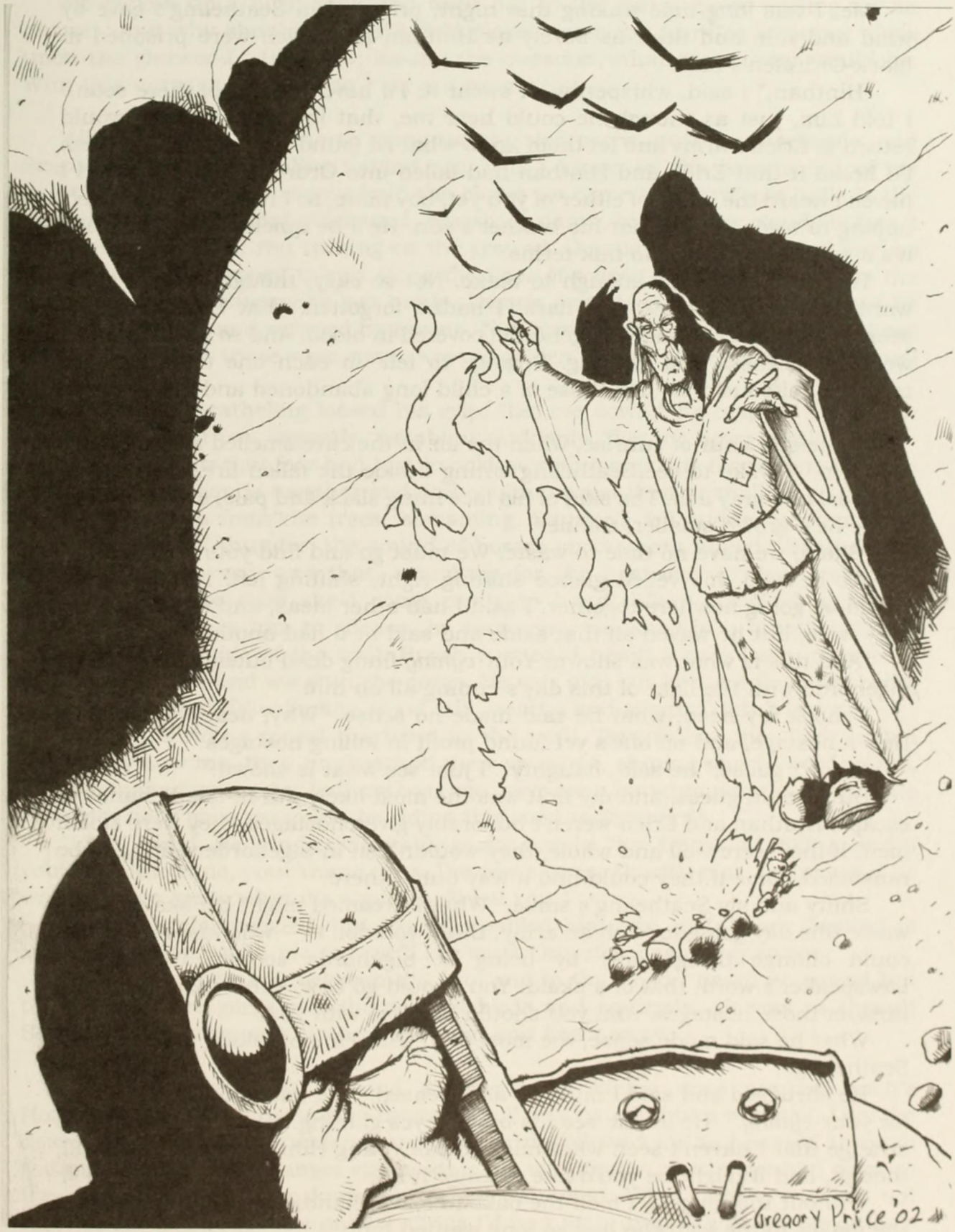
Scatheling sat a long time quiet, staring across the fire. It wasn't me he looked at but god-Freyr's boar hung round my neck. Then, his voice soft as ever I'd heard it, he said, "That's a good charm."

I held the charm close in my hands, gently as it were my own boy safe with me again. I told him Hinthan had made the boar and lately given it to me for luck. "But I'm thinking he should have kept it. Might be he wouldn't be sitting in Ordrafen's hall tonight if he had."

Scatheling snorted. "If you ever see him again, you thank that boy well. Might be," he said, mocking my words, "that *niht-ælf* would have reached right out the blade and snatched away your soul if you hadn't been wearing the boar. God of all the *ælfen* Freyr used to be, a long time ago when they still lived in his land. *Dryhten deore,* they called him; the beloved lord. At least one, it seems, honors him still."

The talisman still in hand, I tested my breath, drew it in deep and let it out long. There is the soul, the old tales say, there in the breath of a man; for it was with his own breath Woden blew life and spirit into all wights. We are but cold gray ashes without, and not but by his breathing spirit, his soul, will any man be known to gods and taken in when his life ends to the home he has earned, good or ill.

Scatheling smiled sourly to see me breathing, then he wrapped himself up


Gregory Price '02

in his tattered brown cloak and stretched himself out before the fire, soon asleep.

Me, I was long time waking that night, prisoned in Scatheling's cave by wind and rain and flood as surely as Hinthan and Erich were prisoned in black Ordrafen's hall.

"Hinthan," I said, whispering. "I swear it: I'll have you out of there soon." I told him, just as though he could hear me, that in the morning I would return to Erich's army and let them know what I'd found in Æscholt, tell them I'd heard it that Erich and Hinthan had fallen into Ordrafen's hands. "And I haven't heard the ghost of either of you yet, boy mine, so I reckon it Ordrafen's hoping to trade you two for his brother's son. He'll be quick to bargain when it's a whole army come to talk terms."

That plan was easy enough to make. Not so easy, though, to rest afterward, there in the wind-wild dark. I hadn't forgotten what Scatheling had seen: Me within the walls of Sigehorde, covered in blood. And so all my dreams were of darkness and fighting. Strange to tell: in each one the wind was moaning, piteous cries like those of a child long abandoned and full of fear.

. . .

In the still hour of sunrise, when the air in the cave smelled sweetly clean of storm, I woke to see Scatheling sitting beside the fallen fire, staring into charcoal and gray ash. The skin of his face hung slack and pale, and it seemed to me he'd grown smaller, thinner.

"Skald, we have no time to waste. We must go and find your friends."

We he said, his veiled glance shifting right, shifting left. I told him we would be going nowhere together. I said I had other ideas, and told him what they were, but he waved all that aside and said he'd had another Seeing.

"And this is what was shown: Your *cyning* flung dead outside the gates of Sigehorde with the light of this day's ending all on him."

I shook my head, what he said made no sense. "Why, dead, Scatheling? He's a hostage, and no one's yet found profit in killing hostages."

"I don't guess," he said, haughty. "I just see what is shown."

But I could guess, and my first was the most likely: An ill-fated chance at escape. Hinthan and Erich weren't honorably given hostages, they were stolen men. If they were well and whole, they wouldn't sit in Sigehorde waiting to be ransomed home if they could find a way out of there.

Shifty and sly Scatheling's smile. "What I dreamed might be, skald, if you waste this day going to fetch an army. But if you don't — who knows? — you could change things only by being at Sigehorde sooner. Good as a Lawspeaker's word, that of a skald. You should go now, yourself, and offer to ransom those hostages. And you should take me with you."

What he said made sense, the most of it. "But I'm not taking you with me, Scatheling."

He shrugged and said I must do as I pleased. "I've told you what I've seen for your *cyning*." He let me see his brown eyes glinting. "But it strikes me as strange that I haven't seen what might befall young Hinthan. Might be I will, though, and it might be you'd like to know if I do."

Without thinking to, I took the oaken boar in hand, a wordless prayer for the maker to the god who had so long warded him.

With shaking hand, Scatheling brushed tangled hair from his cheek. "Now, I have a reason for wanting to ride with you, skald, but I'm not minded to tell you what that reason is. So make your choice: Will you take me with

you, or will you go blind to see if you can find out what happens to your foster-son?"

He picked up a filled sack and went out to the mare, never waiting for an answer. And why should he wait? He'd played upon my fears as a harper plays upon the gleewood. He knew, asking the question, what the answer would be. With this untrusty companion I set out on my way.

. . .

All that day we went north along rocky rising paths, north to Sigehorde, and Scatheling was quiet riding behind me. This I knew, by the hammering of his heart: Scatheling grew more afraid the closer we came to Ordrafen's hall. At the long end of the day wind quickened, breathing damp, blowing low clouds before it till light and shadow ran twining on the ground. Our path split, high and low, as the stream bed dropped to run along the floor of a deep-cut gorge. There lay the whitened dead of Summer's lost battle, Dwarfs and Men, their bones gnawed by wolves, scattered and scraped by ravens. Not even a ghost mourned among these unfleshed wights, those were gone away, to golden Valhöll some, into the cold hall of Hel others.

Behind me Scatheling loosed his grip. "Let me down," he rasped, his breath loud in my ear. Then, urgently, trembling suddenly, "Let me down, skald."

I did, and saw that fear had him in cold-sweating grip. His face shone pale, he clasped his old hands together and still couldn't quiet their trembling.

Jays rose up from the trees, screaming. Squirrels fell suddenly silent, and came the ground-thunder, the sound of horses on the path ahead. Scatheling's eyes darted this way and that, searching for the best way to flee. I checked Helgrind to make sure she'd come easily to hand. When I looked again for Scatheling, to warn him to silence, he was gone, vanished in a breath into the shadows by the side of the trail. Brush rustled. I heard a twig snap, then only wind in the trees and water in the gorge. He was old, but he'd got that way being canny and quick. If Scatheling stood still, nearby and silent, I didn't know it.

Two came riding round the bend in the path, Dwarfs like me. They halted when they saw me, then unsheathed their weapons, shining short-swords. One, a ginger-haired youngster half my own age, gave me a haughty glance and told me I'd better have good reason to be riding this road to Sigehorde.

"I do," I said, Helgrind comfortable in my hands. "I'm Garroc of Rilling, and if you don't know me, your thane does. I've come to speak with him. I suppose if he wants you to know what it's about, he'll tell you."

The youngster bristled, but his elder stilled him and said, "I am Deolrad of Sigehorde. Come with me and we'll see what Ordrafen has to say to you."

Wolfish laughter ran between the two, and in the wood I heard no sound but the water in the gorge and the calls of birds and squirrels. It was as though Scatheling had changed himself into wind and flown away.

. . .

No town spread out around Sigehorde as Rilling does around Erich's Hordstede. This dark place atop the rocky hill was naught but a war-hall. Like the damp wind at my back, whisper and wondering followed me as I passed through the gates, a guarded stranger still holding his weapons. A messenger had come to the raven-thane, all men knew it, and all wondered: What news? I looked not right or left as I rode. The only dealings I'd had with these traitors were on battle-grounds. I had no mind to change that now.

The broad oaken doors of Sigehorde opened to yawning darkness. Deolrad led me inside where small flames of candles pricked the darkness far down the hall.

I saw it as I walked that those lights outlined a bier. Dead Ordwulf lay there, fetched from Æscholt and laid out before the high seat. Gray as old wax, his face, the skin slack on the bone. They'd plucked out the arrows from his breast, and dressed him in linen and gold to hide the killing wounds. All round him were piled up the weapons of his enemies, bows and filled quivers, axes and swords. His men had done their fallen thane good honor. Beside that dead man stood a live one, his hands clasped close.

"Thane," said Deolrad, his voice low. "There is a messenger come."

Ordrafen looked up. Much like his brother's son, that one. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, and of an age. Yet there was more of light in the boy who waited his doom in the war-camp between the two rivers. This one, this well-named Ordrafen, was like a storm-crow perched upon the breast of a bleeding corpse, and like a raven he watched me, hungry and eager. He knew me, for in past times he'd been often to Rilling with his kinsman, guested in Erich's hall and well amused by the songs and tales of the *cyning's* skald.

"Are you happy to see my brother dead, Garroc?"

I gave him the honest answer. "I've worked for it the Summer long. But I don't know how happy I am about it. He was a good man of the *cynings* before his greed began to rule him."

"Ah, hear the poet, who remembers how it was when my brother was glad enough to wait for crumbs from another man's table. Tell me, Skald Garroc: Why have you come here?"

Scornful laughter glittered in his eyes. He knew well enough why I'd come. Very heavy, Helgrind in her sheath on my back. My hands ached to free her and see if she'd be able to do something about that sneering.

"Thane," I said, across the body of his dead brother. "I've come to let you know how Wulfric Ordwulf's son is faring."

Outside thunder growled closer. Within, little breezes bowed the candle flames. In the wavering light and shadow Ordrafen shrugged, and he said he'd have thought I'd come to see how my foster-son fared, "And your *cyning*."

Your *cyning*, said the betrayer, as though Erich were not his lord as well as mine.

"Well, well, skald. Come and see for yourself how they are. Last time I checked, they were both still living." He turned, then turned back, as though suddenly remembering something.

"But leave your war-axe with my brother, will you?" He smiled coldly. "Just for the while."

I did as I was bid, for weaponed Deolrad stood near to make sure his thane's wishes were granted. I set Helgrind upon Ordwulf's bier, upon his very breast, and I took care to make sure the blade faced the high-seat, unfriendly. Ordrafen noted, and he smiled, then led me out to the wide yard behind his hall where sat stables, and smithies a-ring with the songs of hammers and anvils. Clouds now whelmed the sun, what light shone at day's end lay even and shadowless, like twilight too soon come. Within the stables horses stamped and snorted. The tang of storm hung on the air.

Two trees stood close together outside the largest of the smithies, oak and ash. Round these stood a crowd of men and boys laughing and jostling each other for a look at something I couldn't see. Still, I knew what had drawn the crowd, that knowing like cold claws. Here were Ordrafen's prisoners, and here were his men playing an old game of taunting captive foemen.

My belly clenched, in anger, in growing fear: That's not how hostages should be treated.

Ordrafen parted the jeering crowd with a word, made it easy for me to see his prisoners.

Back to back they were bound, Hinthan to the oak, Erich to the ash. Hinthan faced me, his hands tied behind him and to the tree. He'd been spat on, had mud flung at him and worse. He wasn't bearing that well. Bound and helpless, he stood afire in his rage, eyes blazing. Only a little his wrath wavered when he saw me, and only in the moment of surprise. He growled my name, as a trapped beast growls. He strained at his bonds, twisting against the ropes slicked by blood from his wrists rubbed raw.

I went close, and a little my heart rose, for he'd got no wound at Æscholt and though he'd been mistreated here he'd not been too much hurt. He saw the oaken boar, his talisman hung round my neck.

"Ah, Garroc. Maybe you were right about my luck."

"Maybe," I said, low for only him to hear. He was tall, that boy of mine, even for one of you *mann-cynn.* I had to reach to wipe his face clean of mud and spittle. "However it is, youngling, you'd better gather up your wits. We're going to need them, ay?"

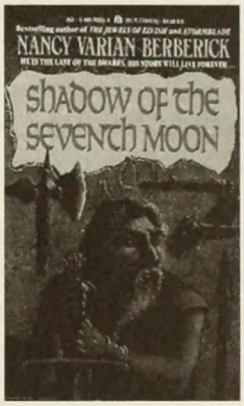
He eased a little under my hand, and he stopped fighting the ropes. "Garroc," he whispered, "go to the *cyning.*"

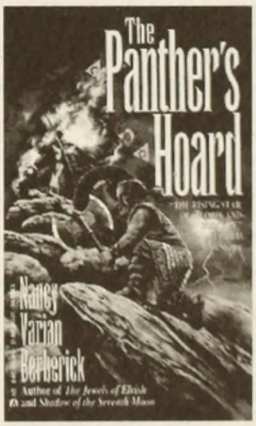
"Yes," said Ordrafen, suddenly close at my shoulder, mocking with whisper. "Go and see what's become of your *cyning,* Garroc."

I went, and this is true: It wasn't an easy thing to keep hold of rage when I walked round the ash tree.

I hardly recognized Erich, his face all bruised and swollen, his eyes blackened, his lips split and seeping blood. He couldn't stand, as Hinthan did, but must crouch, held to the ash by a rope tight around his neck, his arms wrenched and tied high behind his back. He'd been beaten and kicked and nearly killed. Not so golden, my *cyning,* not so golden unless you caught his eye. Then you saw it, all his brightness untarnished, the proud

The Dwarf skald Garroc and his human foster-son Hinthan have appeared in four short stories and two novels, **Shadow of the Seventh Moon** (Ace, 1991) and **The Panther's Hoard** (Ace, 1994), both set to be reprinted by Wildside press in June 2002. Nancy also writes, "As I write this, they are in yet a fifth, at the moment only half-written and tentatively titled... Though it isn't my usual mode of operation, their story came at me backwards; that is, I wrote the end of it first, then went on to fill in the beginning and the middle. Because I had discovered an historical time period for the setting by the time I was ready to write the novels, the two books follow neatly one after the other in time. The short stories, written willy-nilly over the period of a few years, do not. Not until "Scatheling" have the short stories begun to mesh with the world and sensibilities of the novels. An interesting effect of this is that evolution of the characters can be traced through the short stories. Anyone interested in doing so will find the early stories at www.Alexlit.com."





The Stories:

- "A Tale at Rilling's Inn," *Amazing Stories*, March 1987
- "Cairn and Pyre," *Amazing Stories*, May 1989
- "Between Lightning and Thunder," *Dragon*, October 1988
- "Scatheling," Odyssey (UK) 1998

war-hawk untamed.

He moved his lips to speak, but he'd not had anything to drink in a long time, maybe as long as he'd been in Ordrafen's keeping. The jeers of the crowd followed me as I went to one of the troughs outside the smithies and filled my cupped hands with water. In the moment I did I saw a sudden motion at the corner of the building, glimpsed an old and beardless face.

Scatheling!

Seeing, I knew myself seen, but even as I wondered how the old man had got inside the gates unchallenged, he was gone from sight. I took the water back to Erich, and I went to one knee beside him. He drank from my hands, gasping.

"Old friend," he said, his voice thirst-torn. "I'm sorry you've come."

Not those words had I thought to hear from him, and Ordrafen said he reckoned I might be thinking Erich spoke out of his mind.

"But he isn't, skald. He knows what you don't."

Silence settled on the crowd. The hair raised up on the back of my neck.

"You've come to ransom hostages, Garroc, but there are no hostages here, only a murderer who must hang for the death of my brother —"

"Liar!" Hinthan shouted. "Twice-traitor! Erich didn't kill him! You killed your brother. I saw your arrows in him —"

Like a whip-crack, the sound of Ordrafen's backhanded blow. Blood burst from Hinthan's split lip and ran trickling into his beard. In the sky thunder rumbled as Ordrafen gestured and rough hands grabbed me swiftly, pinning my arms behind my back. I fought, twisting. Ordrafen's fist in my belly put a stop to that. For a long moment I hung there, held, gasping to breathe. As I fought for air, I marked Scatheling in the crowd, hiding in plain sight.

"Do you understand me now, Garroc?" Ordrafen said, cold and close and hissing.

"Oh, yes," I grunted, careful to keep my eyes off Scatheling, daring to hope now, even a little, that the Seer's presence here meant Ordrafen would not have things all his way. "I understand you betrayed your brother to his death, and that you'll hang the *cyning* because you think if you do you can finally win this war you and your brother brought down on us all."

"I don't think that, skald. I know it. There's no one to hold the Marches when Erich is dead, not but a stripling son and he'll give me no trouble."

He was right about that. There were thanes enough with a will and the might to step into Erich's place, not the least of them the kinsmen of Erich's wife who could be counted on to keep the Marches whole for the young heir. But none of those proud men would stand aside in favor of another, or not in time. And once Ordrafen had won his war, there would be no brother with whom to divide the spoils. Erich's own death would insure there would be no nephew to claim Ordwulf's share.

In the sky the wind growled, clouds rolled black and gray and white before it, like wild horses running. Scatheling drifted from the crowd, round the side of the hall and out of my sight. Ordrafen walked away from me just as the Seer vanished. He went and stood before Hinthan. Without turning he said to me: "I'd thought to let Hinthan live, when I was making my plans. I needed someone to bring back word of Erich's death and set the Marches to quarreling over who'd sit high in Hordstede. Who better to carry that news than the foster-son of the *cyning's* own skald?"

My captor's grip on me tightened. I hardly felt the pain.

"But now I do have a better messenger, Garroc, and he's you." He turned. "I have no use for your foster-son anymore."

Who held me hard yanked me around, turning me to see what Ordrafen wished me to see: Two horses led out from the stable, and the man who led them had two ropes over his shoulder, each tied into a thick strong noose.

One other thing I saw, and no one else did, Scatheling standing at the small door at the back of the hall. In his hands he had Helgrind. He showed me the flat of her blade, the gleaming iron where once an ice-eyed *niht-ælf* had glared out at me. He smiled, long and slow and sly, as to say: Trust me!

Trust him, who'd held up as hostage any knowledge he might have about Hinthan's fate in order to force me to take him to this place. How could I trust him? How did I dare not to?

Thunder rumbled as Ordrafen ordered men to untie Hinthan and Erich and ready them for hanging. Not much did Erich resist, not much could he, but no sooner did Ordrafen's man loose Hinthan from the oak than did my boy drop low, butt him hard in the belly, and fling himself upon the fallen man. I lurched back against my own captor, doubled him with an elbow in the belly, dropped him cursing with a double-fisted blow on bent neck.

Nowhere did I see Scatheling, not in the yard, not in the doorway. Nowhere did I see Helgrind.

Ordrafen shouted "Stop them!" and started a rush of men trying.

The crowd of them shoving gave Hinthan another moment to hit the downed man again and roll off him, to his feet. He had a knife in one hand, a short sword in the other. He flung the knife to me, the bright blade arcing over the heads of those who tried to stop him. I caught the weapon easily and made a break for Hinthan. Almost I reached him. Almost. Then someone brought me down from behind, thrust his knee hard between my shoulders and dragged my head up from the dirt by the hair. Freyr's boar, the oaken talisman, dug hard into my flesh. At my throat, the cold kiss of a keen blade.

"Hold!" my captor shouted to Hinthan, and I knew him for Deolrad. "Boy, hold right there or watch the skald die."

Hinthan held. He stood still as stone, and he never took his eyes from me. I couldn't speak to tell him what I wanted him to do. He knew though, who knew me: So close did he stand to the horses, to Erich, that he might gain the riderless one and trample down any who tried to stop him fleeing with the *cyning*. It was only the barest chance of freedom, but I'd seen him take risks wilder than that one. Yet he refused me in unmoving silence. Not even for the *cyning* would Hinthan let me die. Not even for him.

Like a shadow drifting in the shadowless light, Scatheling moved out from the dark doorway of the hall, easily as he were one of Ordrafen's own men. Helgrind resting upon his thin shoulder, he went to the smithies, an old man with an axe to grind.

Ordrafen laughed, darkly like a raven cawing. Hinthan's hands were bound again behind him, two men hauled him onto the back of the restless horse. The ropes were flung up, one over a branch of the oak and one over the ash. With his own hand Ordrafen dropped the nooses around the necks of the helpless men. The courtyard fell silent, Dwarfs and Men moved back, made a loose half-circle to watch from a distance. It is a terrible thing, the killing of a *cyning*, and these men knew it. Maybe they supported it, one and all, but no one wanted to get close to it.

Half in the waking world, half gone from it, Erich slumped against the noose. Deolrad dragged me to my feet. He kept his knife close at my throat. He'd not be taken by any backward blow. Helpless, held and cursing, I watched as Hinthan lifted his head high, looking for me.

Once he found me he never looked away, not when his mount snorted and shuffled, not when the rough rope clawed at his neck. Dread filled his gray eyes, his face shone pale against his dark beard. Here was a young man's fear of dying, and he wasn't ashamed to let me see it. He'd have had to look away from me otherwise. That he wouldn't do, for I must be the last man he saw, dying.

Hope ran out from me, like blood pouring — my boy! — and all the heart in me fell to breaking.

Even then, high and quavering, a cry went up, Scatheling's voice flung out.

"Father! Father! Here I am to summon you!"

What mad-minded cry was this? No man living could have been his father. A murmuring wonder went through the crowd. Ordrafen turned to look behind him, around him. His eye lit on the old Seer. Sudden lightning split the sky.

Hinthan's horse flung up its head. Erich's stamped. Lighting glared again and Scatheling lifted up Helgrind, showed me the weapon's stern face.

Out from the blade glared eyes wild and cold as the emptiness before the Nine Worlds were made. Here was the *niht-ælf* who'd Seen Scatheling at his Seeing, and out from the blade of the axe he leapt, carried on flash and flare into the darkening courtyard. Taller by a head than the tallest of *mann-cynn,* he went dressed all in white and hung in silver arm rings, leading a stamping black horse. He was a lord among those reavers. In terror, Scatheling fell to his knees, but the *niht-ælf,* though he looked right at him, never said a word or offered him harm. He turned from the old man as though Scatheling were naught but a shadow.

His glance touched me in the turning, and it touched cold as winter-wind to steal the breath away. Then he saw the boar talisman round my neck. He bared his teeth in a snarl and looked away, shouting, "Huntsmen, to me!" The wind became a twining of dozens of voices calling. Came the Wild Hunt riding, bright men and women on raging steeds, fallen like storm from the sky.

Ordrafen stood still as stock, and as voiceless. Deolrad's knife fell to the ground at my feet. Every Dwarf and Man there broke and ran, some for the gates, some for the hall, some for the cover and light of the smithies.

Free, I snatched up the knife and shoved past panicking men for the gallows-horses. And don't mistake, me, that wasn't courage. That was terror, the cold empty fear that if I didn't stop the horses from bolting they'd finish Ordrafen's murder for him. I grabbed Erich's horse by the mane, then Hinthan's, as the courtyard filled up with the screaming of helpless deaths. Weapons there are that can kill an *ælf,* but they aren't found in this Middle World.

Like a fox slipping, Scatheling stood beside me, between the frightened horses. He dropped Helgrind at my feet and took the bridle of Erich's mount in both hands. "Do you see?" he cried, gripped by a wildness of fear and triumph. "Skald! Do you see him, my father? And ravens!" He pointed to the sky, to the *niht-ælfen* circling and falling and feeding. "Ravens! Ravens all around!"

Ravens, as he'd foreseen. Soul-ravens, feeding on the spirits of the dead.

"Grab the horses, Scatheling! Take them!"

He did, looking high and low and all around for sight of his terrible father as I cut the ropes binding Hinthan's hands, then Erich's.

Hinthan got the nooses from round his neck and the *cyning's*. "Old man!" he reached down his hand to Scatheling, counting him a friend who'd helped get him free. "Up behind me! We're getting out of here!"

Scatheling dashed his hand away, wailing, "No! No, I won't leave!" And he was gone, plunging into the slaughter as a wave-whelmed man plunges into the sea.

Near the smithy one of the *niht-ælfen* leaned from his mount, dragged down a man running. He lifted him high, then dashed him to the ground. Swift off his storm-mount, he was like a wolf feeding, tearing at the throat to kill, sucking in the last breath of the dying man. A ghost, a soul, rose shrieking along the roads of the dead, only to be snatched back, snuffed to ashen silence.

I grabbed up Helgrind. Hinthan's horse screamed and fell dead beneath him, an arrow through the eye. As soon was the other dead, and only in time did Erich fling himself from its back. Those arrows were Ordrafen's, and the curses we heard even above the din of slaughter.

I took god-Freyr's oaken boar and hung it round Erich's neck, the talisman to ward him. I grabbed him by the arms. "*Cyning*! Can you run?"

He had the heart to, I saw it blazing fiercely in his blue eyes, but he hadn't the strength.

Across the courtyard the gates in the high wooden wall opened. Dwarfs and Men poured through, setting all their hope for life on getting into the wildwood and away. The most of the *niht-ælfen* hunted there now, leaving the yard between the smithies and the hall nearly clear.

From behind me Ordrafen screamed curses. Crying, "Garroc, down!," Erich hit me from the side, grunting in pain as he drove me hard to the ground. In the same moment Hinthan flung himself upon the raven-thane. Ordrafen's knife flashed up, and it flashed down. Blood poured from Hinthan's shoulder, red and running onto me. Ordrafen scrambled to his feet, his blade's edge dripping. He leapt for Erich, but the *cyning* kicked away. Ordrafen had not got all his strength from him. The knife fell to the mud, and quick, Ordrafen was up and scrambling to find another blade among the dead.

Came a red rage on me then, a wildness of hatred. I ran after the raven-thane, Helgrind in hand, his death in my eyes. He fled, weaponless, but he'd not got two long leaps away when a *niht-ælf* dropped down from the sky, a tall ice-woman, her eyes dark and empty as the wild places between the stars, from her there was no escape.

Silence fell upon the courtyard, like night, like Winter. Like death. Behind me Hinthan stood, his left arm limply hanging; at his side the *cyning*. We spoke no word, lifted no hand as the *niht-ælf* killed. Only once did Ordrafen Kin-Slayer scream, high and rending. Only once did the ghost of him shriek, echoing terror. When the *niht-ælf* was done she lifted up her eyes to the sky and called one mighty word of magic in a tongue I didn't know. She vanished, and behind her she left a throat-torn corpse, soul-reft Ordrafen dead under the darkening sky.

. . .

Stillness sat on Sigehorde and all the land around, a silence of wind and thunder. Of the sky-storm threatened, only small misty rain fell, gentle as a hallowing. The Wild Hunt had departed, leaving behind the ravaged dead, the ghostless Dwarfs and Men who had backed a kin-slaying, who would have supported the un-holy murder of their *cyning*. Soul-reft, they would be seen by no god in death or ever welcomed home. Often men do shudder to think that I can

hear ghosts a-wail, but though I don't love it I'm used to that crying. To this silence, though, this absence of ghosts, I was not accustomed. I didn't like it.

I saw only one living man in that place, and he was Scatheling. I found him as I came out of the stable, three horses at lead. Though night had fallen, though he was weak and Hinthan wounded, Erich wanted to be gone from silent Sigehorde. No one argued against him. Any place we'd find to sleep, though it were stone and mud, would be better than here, and there was yet one hostage needed saving, him the son of murdered Ordwulf waiting his fate among Erich's army. The sooner we returned the better for young Wulfric, innocent of his uncle's crime.

I watched as Scatheling went wandering and lorn, his eyes on the sky where not even a breath of the Wild Hunt blew.

"Poor old man," Hinthan said, soft behind me.

Bitterly I laughed. "You can say that even after you've seen what he did? Boy, he brought the Wild Hunt down on this place."

Past corpses Scatheling went and he shuffled as he walked, old and forever abandoned.

He came to the body of Ordrafen sprawled before the doors of the hall and gave it no keener glance than any other, only stepped over it and went on, eyes on the raining sky.

Hinthan ran his finger along the edges of the boar, the talisman returned from the *cyning*. "I'd have called down worse to find you, Garroc, no matter if I didn't know whether it would work."

I told him it wasn't the same thing.

"Yes, it is," said the boy who'd two days ago wandered a blood-dark battle-ground searching for me. "It's exactly the same." He stood a moment quiet, his eyes on the old, lorn man. Then, soft, "Are you going to let him wander in the rain, Garroc?"

No. No, I wasn't going to do that.

. . .

Beside the yawning gates the old Seer stood, and there I joined him, looking out into the darkness and the dimly seen deeps of the gorge. More than one new corpse fed the wolves and ravens there.

"Scatheling," I said, and I didn't speak gently. I hadn't learned how to with him.

He turned from the gorge, and I saw blood on him, staining his shirt. This wasn't the blood of others for it seeped even now. I reached for him, to steady him.

"Did you see him, skald?" He looked at me with the eyes of a wretched child. "Did you see my father?"

I had, and I didn't like to think on it. "Scatheling, come out of the rain, ay? Come into the hall and we'll tend your wound."

"No," he whispered. He watched the night, he listened to the sky. "They used to say to my mother that she'd shamed herself by laying with an outlaw, a man who could not stay to wed her, or would not." He tapped his forehead, lightly with his finger. "But I have always known differently. I have always known he had to do with gods and magic, my father. And then I saw him, one day in the fire, and times again after that. I knew him, oh, I knew him!"

"And you never called him to you."

He lowered his head, in shame. "Skald Garroc, you are a man who travels

far for the foster-son you love, and you risk all you have for him and never think to wonder about his worth."

I let my silence answer.

"Do you think he'd be so tender of me, that father of mine?" He twisted a bitter smile. "I have never thought so, and I've been afraid of him since first I saw him. And, oh, I have longed for him, since first I saw him." He sighed, a small, weary sound. "I have lived that way all my life, hiding from him and yearning for him. On the morning of the fighting in Æscholt, things changed. I looked into my fire and saw every step we took to get here, you and I. And I made it happen. I forced you to take me here, and I called down the Wild Hunt..."

What had he hoped? That his reckless father would see him and know him? That his mere cry of *Father!* would show the *niht-ælf* the child-wealth he'd left abandoned for so many empty years? It hadn't happened. Scatheling's father had seen him and walked away from him to kill the men of Sigehorde, body and soul.

"Scatheling," I said, "come inside out of the rain."

He looked at me in sudden surprise. "You think it's over, don't you?" He smiled, and it was an honest one, even a gentle one. "It isn't over. There is more."

I listened to the ravens and the silence of ghosts. What more could there be?

"Hush," whispered the Seer. "Do you hear it?"

Soft in the mist outside the gates, a whispered footfall. A breath of air stirred, cool to raise up the hackles. As had become habit these days gone, I reached for the boar talisman. Naught but nothing did my hand find, god-Freyr's boar hung round Hinthan's neck now. Silvery light, cold and clear, parted the mist, showed the tall lord of the *niht-ælfen* standing outside the gates, him only a breath younger than gods and looking like a youth in first flush.

Swift, I had Helgrind in grip, but that was only the hand moving, not the sense: Forged in this Middle World, she was no proof against the *niht-ælf.*

"Dwarf, go," said the Unsouled to me with a glance to chill the breath in my lungs. "I've spared you twice for the talisman you wore." He smiled with bright cruelty. "I might not want to spare you now."

I didn't move, I wouldn't leave. He was no friend of mine, old Scatheling, but I'd lately been reminded that I owed him a debt for lives I'd not have seen lost. Long and long the *ælf* looked at me, and the weight of that look was like to drive all the breath from me. Then he turned his eyes away, then I breathed again.

"Old one," said the cold silver *ælf,* "I am Dáin, and countless times this night I could have killed you, but I did not, and let no one else. Now I have some things to ask you: I have felt your Sight on me, flashing and glancing and running away. I have felt it time and again, and never long enough to find you. Now, today, you called me and my Hunt down to storm. Tell me what game have you been playing?"

Scatheling pushed away from the gate, but it was more than he could do to stand unaided. I put my arm round him and held him up. In the silvery light his blood showed dark, more than seeping now.

"Dáin," he said, savoring the name. "I play no game. I am called Scatheling, and my Sight is a gift... from my father. From you. O father," he said, eyes always on the *ælf*, "you are just as she told me you were, bright and shining magic."

Not joy, not anger, not pity or even unbelief did I seen on the *ælf*. All out of stone his face might have been made. He came close, and in the misty rain he lifted his hand, and lifted the light surrounding.

Bright the blood of Scatheling running. His legs gave way, I caught him and eased him to the ground. His life poured from him now with each beat of his heart. This is what he'd seen, yesterday before he'd first met me in Æscholt of the Dead. He'd seen his own death, and the need to choose it.

"*Ælf*," I said, shivering to speak to him. "He's dying now. Go, and let me bring him inside where he can be warm."

As though I'd not spoken, Dáin went to one knee in the mud beside Scatheling. "Look at me," he said, stern to command. "Old one, look at me."

Scatheling did, gasping at the end of his life. In the heatless silvery light his eyes shone bright, the golden flecks in them like the distant light of candles. Dáin touched his hand, and reaching to do that he brushed mine. I'd expected his would feel like a corpse's flesh, unyielding and cold. It was warm as my own.

"I remember a girl who had eyes like yours," he said. "A long time ago. Only lately grown she was, and eager for finding out what could be between man and woman."

A small bubble of blood rose to the corner of Scatheling's mouth.

"The gold in her eyes was like small fires in the dark." Wondering, he whispered, "I remember!"

Scatheling lifted his hand, old and twisted with age. He touched his father's cheek, the flesh there smooth and fresh as any youth's, and older than the mother-earth herself. The breath in him came whistling now, high in his throat.

"You are her son," Dáin said. "And you are mine. The soul of you..."

I shuddered, following his thought. The soul of the old man was the soul of his son. Might it be that it stood as close to being his own as the flesh and bone and blood of him did? Dáin leaned closer, in his dark eyes a baleful light like storm over the wasteland.

I moved to stop him, as though I could, as though he might heed.

One sideways glance he gave me, and I must gasp to breathe. "Shall I take what I need from you, Dwarf, instead?"

My mouth dried up with fear, and it was hard to speak. "My soul would be no more yours than his."

He sat back on his heels. "You judge me, do you, Dwarf? You have no right. We *ælfen*, we are not like you. You can't know how we hunger, or even what we hunger for."

I didn't argue, I couldn't, for I saw the great emptiness in him, the hollowness of the Unsouled.

It is true, it is: They are all about sorrow, the *ælfen*, the great longing for what had once been, the ache that is yearning for the Bright God, Freyr who has ever been known as Lonely since the banishing of his beloved *ælfen*. No wrathful wanderer, no rageful exile, will ever be as far from home as these poor wights. And no one, no matter how hard or cruel his death, will ever lie as still as these when they die, never to rise to a god's call and walk the roads

of the dead to the Otherworld. We Dwarfs have lost some things to old Woden, but not this much. Never this much.

A shadow fell upon the ground, upon me and the *ælf* and Scatheling. I knew the shape of it, and the voice which spoke from out the dark and the misty rain.

"You have killed in rage, *ælf*," Hinthan said. "And you've murdered the souls of others, yet you haven't kept one of those souls for yourself, though you might have." An oaken arc in the silvery light, god-Freyr's talisman fell to the ground at Dáin's knee. "Why? Is it because you won't go home to the god a thief?"

Eye to eye, those two, Hinthan and the *ælf*. Between them, silence and challenge and fear. It was Dáin who looked away first, shamed before a truth he did not like and could not lose. But he'd been a lord among the *ælfen*, he'd sat at the feet of a god and shared his thoughts and his dreams and all his hopes. Some, a little, of Freyr's brightness must still have sat in the heart of him, even all these countless years after the banishing, for he picked up the talisman and held it, in his eyes a warmth I'd never thought to find.

"*Dryhten deore*," he whispered, those words an ache to hear, a loneliness to recall. Dearest lord. Then he placed the boar upon the breast of his son.

"Father," whispered the old man. He opened his eyes, bright flecks of gold shining there, and he looked at the *niht-ælf* trusting, as a child looks into the face of his father. Dáin, for whom he'd hunted in fear and in longing, must be the last man he saw, dying.

Like a hawk swiftly stooping, Dáin gathered Scatheling into his arms and there he held him, whispering words to him in a tongue I didn't know, a language of *ælfen* or gods. In naught but a moment his stillness became rocking, the gentlest of cradling. In naught but a moment I heard the ghost of the Seer go sighing away, free to fly along the roads of the dead, free to find what home he'd earned among gods.

The *niht-ælf* stood up, the old man dead in his arms, this son of his a light burden. He looked at Hinthan and nodded once, curtly. He took the oaken talisman from off his son's breast, slipped it over his own head, round his own neck. Then he turned and he walked away, a silver glow moving in the misty darkness.

Within the walls of broken Sigehorde bridles rang, and the sound of Erich's voice fell soft as he soothed restless horses. Time to go, at last it was time to go.

Hinthan put his hand on my shoulder, white-faced and weary, leaning. He had courage, that boy of mine, and my heart warmed with pride to think of how he'd used it this day. I turned him from the night, and I said, "What do you think, Hinthan? Has the *ælf* gone hunting his soul?"

He kissed me, as a son kisses his father. "That's where he's gone, I'm sure of it. And he won't have a hard time finding it now, or finding his way home after that."

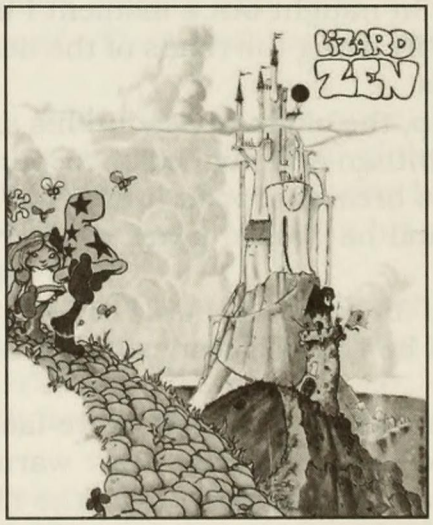
Might be he wouldn't. Perhaps he'd sighted them already, the soul and the road home, in the eyes of old Scatheling who'd died gently in his father's arms.

The Comics Cauldron: Fantastic Worlds & Weird Visions

Comic Reviews by Claude Lalumière

Many cartoonists have taken advantage of the possibilities inherent in the medium of comics to create fantasy worlds. In a single panel, a cartoonist can evoke a world that would cost filmmakers millions of dollars to create or prose writers pages and pages of description.

Mike Mignola's supernatural investigator *Hellboy*, Zander Cannon's sardonic adventure *The Replacement God*, Carla Speed McNeil's fantasy-tinged anthropological SF series *Finder*; Jeff Smith's enchanting fantasy quest *Bone*, Jack Kirby's technological mythology *The Fourth World*... all these and more testify amply to the rich diversity of fantasy worlds found in comics. Beyond that, however, there are cartoonists whose very style evokes not only fantasy worlds but also a fantastic worldview. Cartoonists who are not only imaginative but also driven by a vision – and who possess the talent to do that vision justice. They look at the world through a most peculiar lens, and a single drawing by such artists makes it amply clear that we're not in Kansas anymore, not just because of the content of the drawing but also because of the distinctive and expressive style. We've entered weird worlds of the imagination....



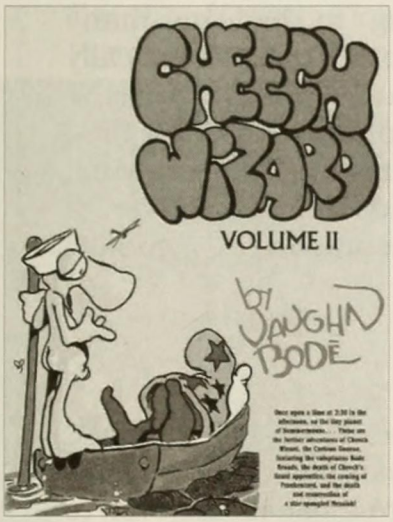
Here's a brief survey of six such cartoonists.

Vaughn Bodé

With the autumn 2001 release of *Schizophrenia*, Fantagraphics completed its ambitious fourteen-volume publishing program, **The Bodé Library**, reprinting the bulk (though, regrettably, not all) of Vaughn Bodé's oeuvre. The Bodé Library began in 1989 with *Deadbone*; it was followed by *Cheech Wizard* (two volumes), *Diary Sketchbook* (three volumes), *Junkwaffel* (two volumes), *Erotica* (four volumes), and *Lizard Zen*.

Bodé's world is not so much a place as it is a state of mind, or a mul-

tiplicity of worlds in which the author, who died in 1975, played with his idiosyncratic set of props, images, and obsessions. His stories are, for the most part, populated by voluptuous nymphs – nicknamed the Bodé Broads – who careen about in a perpetual post-orgasmic daze and by horny, not-too-bright humanoid male lizards who confuse lust with violence. With the Lizards, Bodé pokes fun at the mess that patriarchy has made of the world, while the Broads stand in for the planet Earth: fertile and generous, strong and beautiful, but continually raped and abused.



Despite all this subtext, Bodé's work is far from didactic. A constant orgy of violence, sex, and brutality in settings filled with strange creatures and bizarre technologies, Bodé's stories first and foremost entertain with their heady excess and merciless wit.

Bodé's oeuvre is a melting pot representative of its era, the mid-1960s to mid-1970s: antiwar stories inspired by Vietnam, an androgynous aura reminiscent of glam rock, a hippy new age mysticism, a relentless polysexuality invoking and satirizing the Summer of Love, a fascination with the promises of the Space Age, and Cold War antagonisms ridiculed. What most characterizes Bodé's work, though, is his dissonant juxtaposition of trendy love-conquers-all maxims with displays of wanton cruelty.

It's not always easy to know when Bodé is being serious, when he's poking fun at himself, when he's poking fun at the world, or even who exactly his targets are. Bodé uses cognitive dissonance like a virtuoso, forever refusing to let his stories fit within any easy categorizations or definitions.

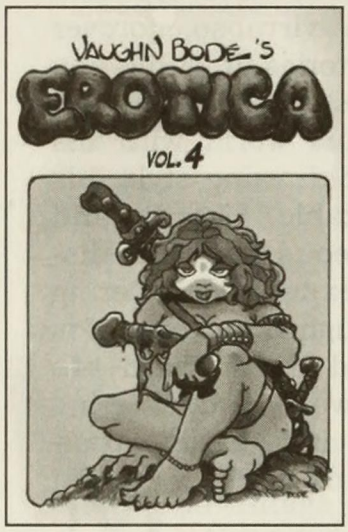
Bodé created his world with his organic and kinetic drawing style, his instantly recognizable Lizards and Broads, his outrageous linguistic distortions, and his expressive lettering style. Sadly, although Bodé himself is mostly remembered by die-hard aficionados, his linework and lettering have been copied and decontextualized to death by decades of graffiti artists.

Bodé's first major creation was the world of Deadbone, a strange mountain in deep antiquity that was the first stomping ground for his Lizards and Broads.

> Craggy, ugly, old Deadbone is a mountain four miles high... It sticks up through a vast perpetual cloud cover like an island in a great white sea of foggy shapes... Deadbone is full of strange life forms that live inside the mountain in two big caverns or outside on cold wind-blown rocks..... Deadbone is the very first experiment of life on this planet, the first attempt by the murky, mysterious forces to create organic sanity... It is the proving ground for the development of all organisms that will one day roam the Earth... But, so far, the great experiment is not working too well, it is, after all, taking place one billion years ago!

The Fantagraphics collection *Deadbone* gathers together Bodé's ear-

liest, black and white interpretations of this world, as well as fourteen pages of preliminary designs. In contrast with these stark and strangely poignant early strips, the four volumes of *Erotica* – which collect the later, color versions – are dazzlingly effervescent and ribald.



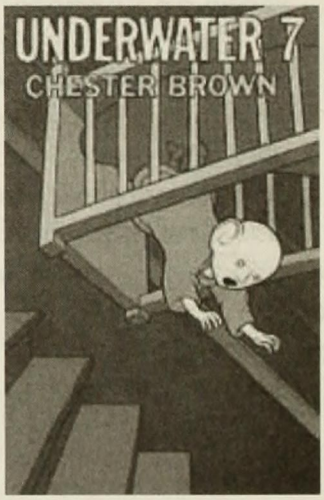
The two *Junkwaffel* volumes collect Bodé's more technology-oriented strips, such as the military satire "Junkwaffel" (still featuring his ubiquitous deranged Lizards), the1970 serial "Sunpot" from *Galaxy*, and various other SF stories. *Lizard Zen* collects various Lizard strips from throughout Bodé's career. The *Diary Sketchbook* series is self-descriptive. The final volume, *Schizophrenia*, is a pot-pourri of writings by Bodé, diverse illustrations and obscure strips, the confessional/exhibitionist comics story "Bodé/Schizophrenia," and the masterful prehistoric saga, "The Man," perhaps Bodé's most poignant and brilliant work.

"The Man" is replete with Bodé's flair for brutal humor and dissonant juxtapositions. It's a story of a solitary prehistoric man and his relationship with "stick" (his weapon) and "stuff" (the various things and creatures about in the world). Its speculative meditation on the stages of human consciousness is unabashedly naive, viscerally immediate, and imbued with a stark and unusual beauty.

Bodé's signature series is collected in the eponymous two volumes *Cheech Wizard*. "Once upon a time at 2:30 in the afternoon, there lived a wise and benevolent and wonderful wizard who wore a big hat and went by the handle: Cheech Wizard." Of course, Cheech Wizard, in the tradition of other famous "wonderful" wizards of fantasy such as the Wizard of Oz, is anything but "wise and benevolent and wonderful." His powers seem to be restricted to a limitless capacity for abusing his dimwit Lizard apprentice, getting high, lying, and trying to bed as many Broads as possible. Unapologetically rude and vicious, juxtaposing the rural vistas of fantasy with blasé brutality, *Cheech Wizard* is quintessential Bodé and a fundamental chapter of Bodé's phantasmagorical comics odyssey.

Chester Brown

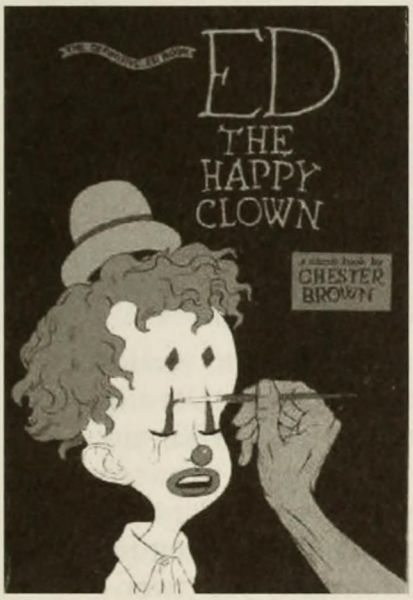
There was a time when I proclaimed with utter conviction that Chester Brown was the greatest talent ever to work in comics. Even now, looking back at the work he produced from 1983 to 1989, I still believe that for six years Chester Brown had indeed attained that zenith. Have comics ever been graced with an imagination so fertile and resonant, a vision so stark and disturbing, a storytelling flair so offbeat and compelling, a compassion so deep and broad, a sense of humor so strange and unforgettable? Well, no. And to this day, no work even comes close to inspiring that degree of awe. Especially not Brown's later work.



From 1989 to the mid-1990s, Brown rejected his early work, rejected his imagination, and, tapping into what he believed was the zeitgeist of comics culture, concentrated on puerile autobiographical material, on self-indulgent exhibitionist tales of his masturbatory practices. In 1994, he returned to fiction with *Underwater*,

but the magic was gone, and he abandoned the project before completion. His latest series, the historical *Louis Riel*, begun in 1999, continues to show Brown struggling – and failing – to once again be pertinent.

Chester Brown's magnum opus is *Ed the Happy Clown*, serialized in *Yummy Fur* #1-18. There exists two collections, neither of them complete. The first one, published in 1989, collects all the *Ed the Happy Clown* stories from *Yummy Fur* #1-12, and was originally intended as the first volume in the *Ed the Happy Clown* saga. The second one, published in 1992, reprints all the material from the first book, a few scattered pages from *Yummy Fur* #13-18, and a new ending that invalidates the uncollected (and vastly superior) material from *Yummy Fur* #13-18, including the original ending, although even that ending was somewhat abrupt.



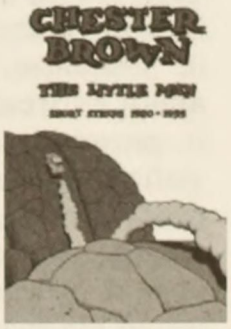
So what happened? And what was *Ed the Happy Clown*?

Ed the Happy Clown was a dark stream-of-consciousness fantasy about a cheerfully naive clown, Ed, who gets embroiled in a grotesquely horrific sequence of events in a world that is both like and unlike our own. Scatological interdimensional doorways, supernatural creatures, "rat eating pygmies from a rodent infested third world country," Ronald Reagan's dimension-hopping head, bewildering "Adventures in Science," bumbling vampire killers, a planetful of homosexuals and another planetful of gun-happy homophobes, nightmarish medical practices, and flying saucers... all that only begins to scratch at the surface of the weirdness in Brown's epic. And no list of details can hint at the bold compassion that oozes out of every panel. *Ed the Happy Clown* is as moving as it is strange, as tender as it is brutal, as brilliant as it is painful, as important as it is funny.

In 1989, Brown grew disenchanted with *Ed the Happy Clown* and went from producing some of the most idiosyncratic and personal comics ever to emulating the trendy fad for autobiography and so-called "realism." He hastily decided to end the serial, although there was still much to explore.

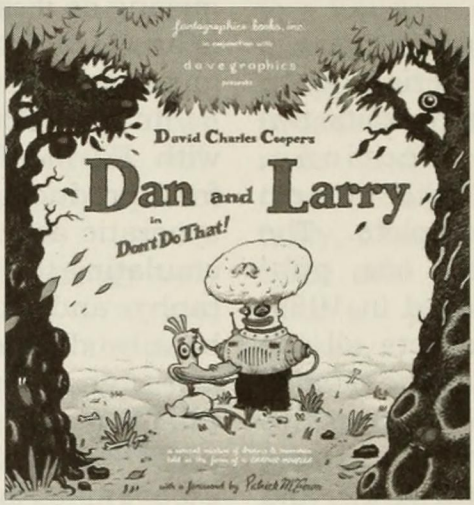
The uncollected *Ed the Happy Clown* material from Yummy Fur #13-18 is among Brown's most powerful work ever, even though the artist himself now disowns it. The first version of the collection and *Yummy Fur* #1-18 are all long out of print. If you can somehow manage to get a hold of #13-18, simply read the available collection up to page 198, ignore the the rest, and then savor those uncollected six issues.

Simultaneously with *Ed the Happy Clown* (and continuing throughout the autobiographical material and overlapping with the post-*Yummy Fur* series *Underwater*), Brown also serialized his haunting adaptions of the Christian Gospels. "Mark" ran in #4-14, while "Matthew" started in #15. The project, like so many of Brown's, was never completed. "Mark" and "Matthew" startled with their radically different interpretations of Christ and his life, while still clearly remaining the work of the same cartoonist. Sadly, by the last few published chapters of "Matthew," it was clear that Brown had lost both focus and interest. Nevertheless, "Mark" and the earlier chapters of "Matthew" testify that



this could and should have been a great work, had Brown followed through.

Another book of interest is Brown's 1998 collection *The Little Man: Short Strips 1980-1995*. The first 45 pages, covering 1980-88, are equal to the best of Brown's comics, while the rest of the book is mostly filled with embarrassingly pathetic autobiographical material. There are two exceptions: "Knock Knock" (1993), a light surrealist short that hints only vaguely at past glories, and "The Little Man" (1991), an astoundingly funny magic-realist perversion of Brown's own real-life tales of masturbation.



Included in this volume is what I consider Brown's masterpiece: a five-page short from 1986 called "A Late Night Snack." On a cold winter night, Bunny and Gerbil find their friendship tested and must come face to face with a terrifying monster. This short is a chillingly merciless and hauntingly sad tour de force, a work by perhaps the greatest cartoonist ever.

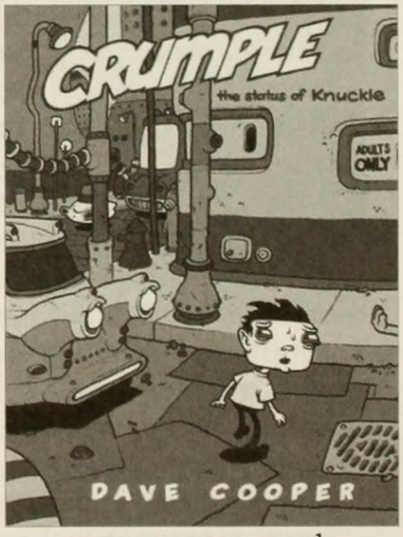
Whatever happened to him?

Dave Cooper

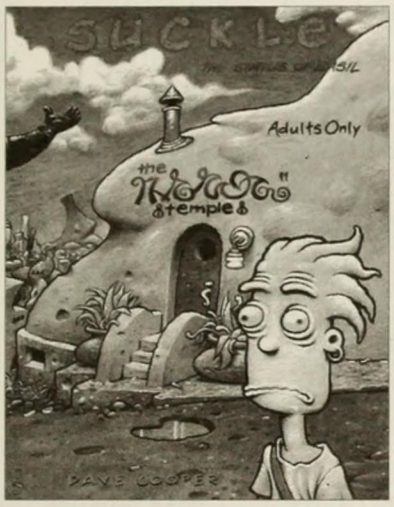
Sex. It's on all our minds, whether we love it, control it, suppress it, pervert it, fantasize about it, hide it, talk about it, dream about it, desire it, hate it, parade it, mythologize it, commercialize it, are scared by it, deify it, drool over it, avoid it, lie about it – whatever. Sex columnists glibly trivialize it in hip magazines. Freud projected his own phallocentric fears unto it. The sex industry makes billions of dollars. And Dave Cooper plumbs sex's weird depths with obsessive gusto and fascinating results.

Cooper's comics ooze with bodily fluids. Strange organisms with oddly disturbing anatomies co-exist with humans. Readers are constantly assaulted with images that are simultaneously engrossing, erotic, and repulsive. With surrealist abandon, Cooper celebrates the transgression of taboos, all the while exploring the hatred and brutality that result from the conformist oppression and loveless commercialization of sexuality.

His major works include *Cynthia Petal's Really Fantastic, Alien Sex Frenzy!* (1993), an exuberant orgy of excess, bizarre secretions, and alien sex; *Pressed Tongue* (1994), a surrealist sexual romance in a community of twentysomething hipsters; *Suckle* (1996), a transformative quest of dazzling and daring beauty set in a world replete with bizarre technologies and mystical sexuality; *Crumple* (2000), a nightmarish scenario that explores, like a surrealist *1984*, the horrendous consequences of the objectification of women and gender segregation; *Dan and Larry in Don't Do That!* (2001), a courageous and candid story of sexual awakening peppered with strange creatures and disturbingly anatomical machines, dubbed by the author "a surreal mixture of dreams & memories"; and *Weasel*, an ongoing comics magazine that first hit the shelves in 1999.

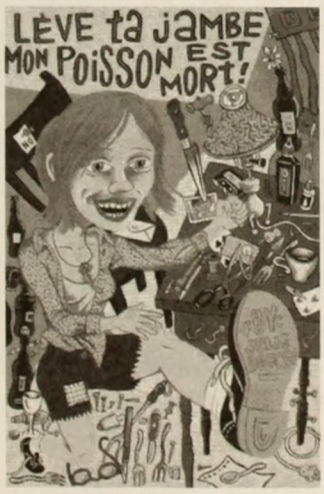


In *Weasel*, Cooper showcases a variety of his recent work. Most interesting so far is "Encyclopedia Nonsensica." Every issue features a few more pages of this incomprehensible encyclopedia, written in an indecipherable alien language (Cooper's lettering in this serial is brilliantly unsettling). The encyclopedia seems to be describing – with illustrations, of course – a series of machines whose evocation of anatomy is profoundly disquieting, yet compulsively intriguing: the perfect response to Cooper's oeuvre in general.



Julie Doucet

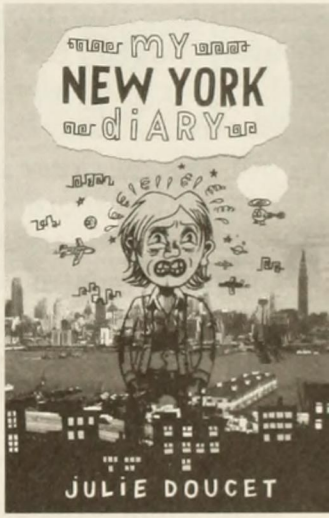
Julie Doucet grew out of Montreal's fertile mini-comics scene. After being self-published as a zine for a few years, her series *Dirty Plotte* was picked up by Montreal publisher Drawn & Quarterly in 1990 and ran twelve comic-book size issues until Doucet ended the series in 1998, as she found her career shifting increasingly away from comics and towards painting and illustration.



Doucet's books include *Lève Ta Jambe, Mon Poisson Est Mort!* (1993) – which translates as "lift your leg, my fish is dead!" (despite the title this is not a French-language collection, but an English one, sort of – but more on Doucet's use of language below) – *My Most Secret Desire* (1995), *My New York Diary* (1999), *The Madame Paul Affair* (2000), and *Long Time Relationship* (2001).

Doucet's artwork is dense. She packs in as much as she can in every panel, like she has too much to express for the printed page to contain. Her art is also filled with jarring disproportions and other distortions that transform the everyday settings (Montreal, New York, Seattle) of her stories into an unfamiliar and disturbing world.

Her stories, usually starring herself, may start in the mundane world, but once Doucet's life gets translated into comics, dream logic takes over. Her fictional world drowns in Doucet's bodily fluids, genders get bent with a strange combination of the euphoric and the nightmarish, grotesque metamorphoses occur at unexpected moments, and, even when nothing outwardly fantastic occurs, Doucet manages to infuse her stories with the tense dread that something both frightening and impossible may transpire at any moment. And yet, Doucet's comics are replete with both joy and innocence amidst very unlikely circumstances. The fictional Doucet is a sort of Alice in Wonderland or Dorothy in Oz – except that the scary, fantastic, incomprehensible world is our own, and its brutal senselessness, its refusal to simply be a loving place, is transmogrified by Doucet's imagination.



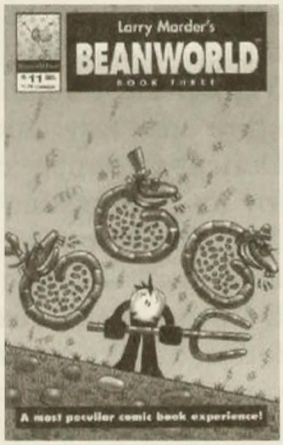
Also interesting is Doucet's use of language. Doucet is a Francophone, and her grasp of English, especially in her early work, is tenuous. Instead of hiding her awkward use of the language, she incorporates it into the

work itself. Her Québécois distortions of English become an integral part of the strangeness of her world. This tactic – be it willing or accidental – enhances the sensation that in Doucet's comics everything is a bit askew. It's a real world, but an odd angle – an angle in which fear, disappointment, loss, and insecurity are given a surreal and horrific life.

Larry Marder

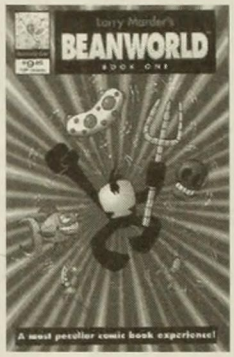
Larry Marder's *Tales of the Beanworld* ran 21 issues from 1985 to 1993. Its tag line was "A most peculiar comic book experience," and that's exactly what it was. The series, however, is far from over. Marder occasionally promises that there is more to come – and indeed the series left readers hanging with a great number of unanswered questions and teasing hints – but as every year goes by, these promises sound more and more hollow.

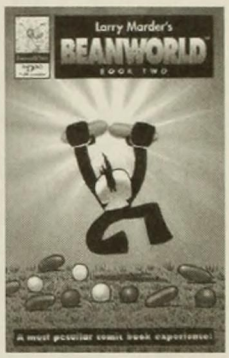
Marder blends advertising design technique, the dynamics of Jack Kirby, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* Dreamtime, and Native American storytelling to create his ecological fable. He warns at the beginning of each issue: "Please don't search for scientific or magical explanations, you won't find any. Beanworld is a separate reality. It's not just a ***place***, it's a ***process***! It is what it is and th-that's all folks!!"



Still, what is Beanworld?

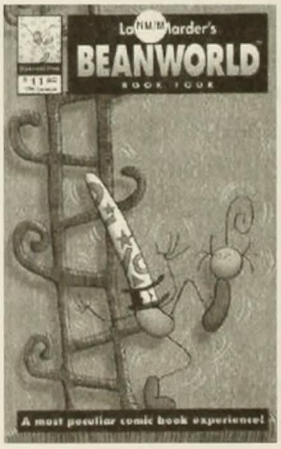
The Beans live in the shadow of Gran'Ma'Pa, the tree-like guardian of Beanworld. Gran'Ma'Pa is the sole source of Sprout-Butts. With the help of their champion, Mr. Spook, the Beans of the Chow Sol'Jer Army jump over the Legendary Edge to splash through the Thin Lake and descend through the Four Realities, where they exchange, in ritualistic combat with the Hoi-Polloi, fresh Sprout-Butts for Chow. The Hoi-Poilloi transform Sprout-Butts into Chow, which the Beans need for sustenance, but the Hoi-Poilloi are reluctant to part with it because they use it for money.





That's the basic premise. And from these ingredients Marder spins a magical sequence of stories that investigates the nature of his strange creation and the functions and origins of the interlocking dependencies that link its denizens. As his story progresses, Marder's most adventurous Beans – and thus readers – get tantalizing glimpses of the Big-Big-Picture beyond Beanworld.

Tales of the Beanworld is, as promised, a most peculiar experience – and one that is rich and rewarding and a perpetual fount of surprise and sense of wonder. Who knew that the lives of a bunch of beans could be so moving and enthralling? The stories are told with the bold confidence of folklore; *Tales of the Beanworld* resonates poetically with the experience daily life. It's a perfect comics series for, as the saying goes, children of all ages; it gets richer and more profound with every reading. Its loving magic evokes a world alive with complex relationships, rapturous beauty, and awesome mysteries.

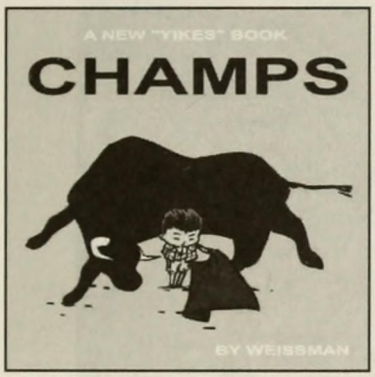


But the question remains: Will Larry Marder ever return to his creation and thus further explore and

share the weird depths of his compassionate imagination?

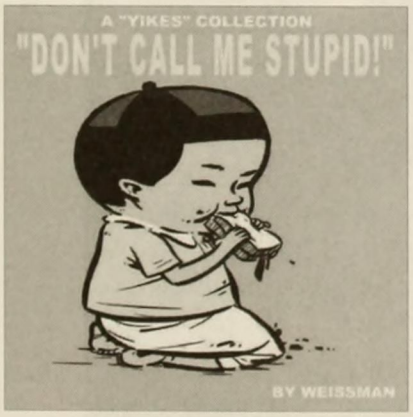
Steven Weissman

The Pullapart Boy and Dead Boy: the reanimated "children" of Professor Boy! Li'l Bloody: a one-fanged kid vampire! X-Ray Spense: the boy with the X-ray goggles! Li'l Tin Stars: brother and sister six-gun shooters of the elementary school set! Kid Medusa: her friends dare not look at her, lest they turn to stone! These are just some of the grotesque characters who inhabit the comics world of Steven Weissman.



Weissman has recounted the adventures of his monstrous yet endearing tykes in seven issues of *Yikes!* (1995-98), the one-shot specials *Tykes* (1997) and *The Lemon Kids* (1999), the comics album *Champs* (1999), and various anthology pieces. In addition some of that material has been collected in *"Don't Call Me Stupid!"* (2001).

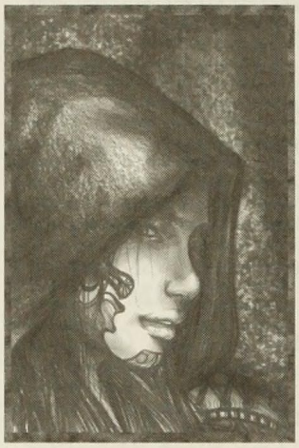
In a set of stories that is a sardonically macabre melting pot of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, classical mythology, Saturday B-movie matinees, gothic fiction, *Dennis the Menace*, and Harvey Comics such as *Richie Rich* and *Casper, the Friendly Ghost*, Weissman brings to life a world that shimmers with the imagination of children. For the tykes in Weissman's comics, nothing is impossible: the world is ripe for discovery, and every discovery is as scary as it is exciting.

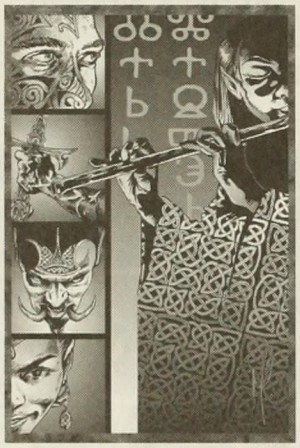


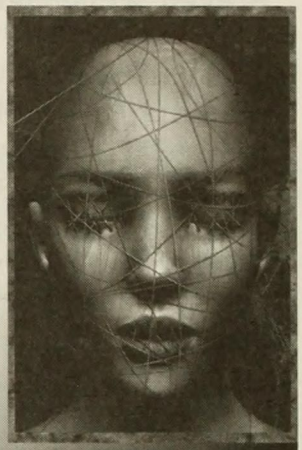
Weissman creates a childlike world of wonder, terror, and hijinks that utterly refuses to conform to the consensus, adult interpretation of reality and storytelling. His stories begin and end in (seemingly) awkward places. Space and time don't obey the laws of physics, and life and death are not mutually exclusive. In Weissman's comics, the mundane is more mysterious than the secrets of immortality.

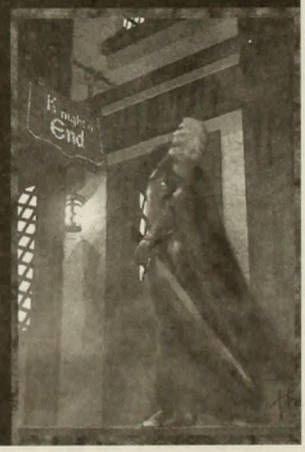
Highlights include "The Gospel According to Li'l Bloody and the Pullapart Boy!" and "Genesis 3" (*Yikes!* vol. 1, # 3), a two-part story in which the mischievous pair visit the Garden of Eden and readers learn that the Adam and Eve story didn't happen exactly as previously reported, and "Back in the Day . . ." (*Yikes!* vol. 2, # 1; reprinted in *"Don't Call me Stupid!"*), in which Elzie Crisler, the reanimated dog of the Boy family, suffers a nightmare that relives the abusive circumstances that led to her death. The Biblical story is deliriously fun, while the Elzie Crisler tale is a powerful tearjerker whose poignancy is only increased by its low-key matter-of-factness.

Although the imagination of youth is celebrated and given free reign in Weissman's comics, the oppressive world of adults is often on the verge of transgressing on the tykes' mythological interpretation of reality. That tension brings a dreadful intensity to the stories, emphasizing the fragility of wonder amidst the dream-shattering encroachment of conformist adulthood.









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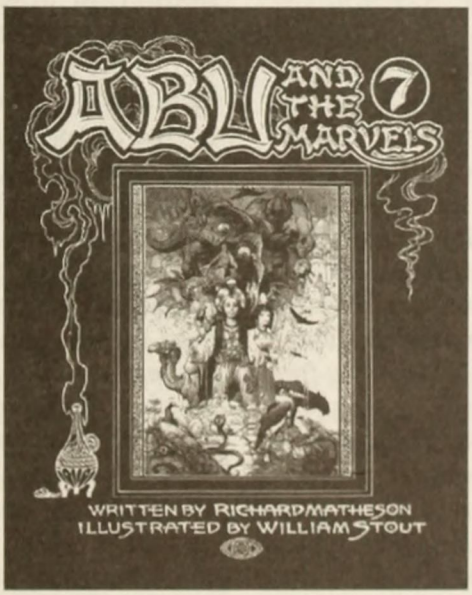
Reviews

Thoughts on the Latest Fantasy Books

Abu and the 7 Marvels
Richard Matheson, illustrated by William Stout
Edge Books/Gauntlet Press (141 pp, March 2002, $21.95)
Reviewed by Lisa DuMond

If the mention of Richard Matheson brings to mind only **I Am Legend**, **The Incredible Shrinking Man**, and too many *Twilight Zone* episodes to name, you've got a big surprise awaiting you with his newest novel. Matheson, the name you've come to associate with horror and suspense, is presenting his first-ever children's book. Hard to wrap your mind around, but it's true, and it's absolutely delightful. Should this be the only snippet of young adult fare he decides to gift us with, **Abu and the 7 Marvels** is enough; here is entertainment for all ages, for generations to come.



Abu, as all good heroes are, is a lad of humble origins who longs for something far beyond his reach: the Princess Alicia. But fate smiles on young Abu; the beautiful princess will not marry for wealth and power, but only for love. And through a chance meeting, princess and commoner meet and fall in love. There would be no story though if the resolution were that simple.... No, first Abu must find the Seven Marvels and bring home the token of each to prove his worth to the Sultan.

Difficult as this sounds, it's about to be made almost impossible through the interference of the evil Grand Vizier and his two brutal but hapless henchmen, Horrible and Terrible. The exchanges between the devious Vizier and his goons provide some of the biggest chuckles in a book brimming with entertaining dialogue *and* physical humor.

Not to worry – Abu and his little brother Mut have the help of a genie in a bottle... a very old, tired genie in a very dusty bottle. At times, the genie's version of help is of the laugh-or-cry variety, adding more giggles and groans on the path of the dangerous quest. Often, whether the genie will outlast Abu's timid requests and the all-important journey is seriously in doubt.

Matheson's superb prose deserves only the finest art, a challenge William Stout takes on with gusto. His vivid illus-

trations range from the breathtakingly beautiful, as in a luscious portrait of the lonely Princess Alicia – which radiates the depth of her sorrow and despair – to the shocking view of the grotesque Enchanted Castle, a site that oozes with the evil that pervades every particle of the wretched structure. Whether it's a character portrait, still life, or montage, Stout suffuses it with depth and emotion. I would expect nothing less from the man whose **The Little Blue Brontosaurus** inspired *The Land Before Time.*

Abu and the 7 Marvels may be targeted at children ten and older, but adults will find the humor just as satisfying, and the lessons as incisive, as younger readers. This is a perfect book for parent and child to read and enjoy together. The principles grasped by Abu and Mut as they overcome each hurdle of the Marvels are presented openly, but never beat the reader over the head. Every lesson learned is one children and adults would do well to remember. Perhaps the comical characters and frightening creatures between the covers of **Abu and the 7 Marvels** will make these lessons easier to discuss. Try it.

The Gates To Witch World
Andre Norton
Tor (461pp, December 2001, $27.95)
Cover by Mark Harrison
Reviewed by Charlene Brusso

Andre Norton is a master storyteller. Those of us who got hooked early on have always looked to Norton for compelling characters and vivid, original settings. Those who got hooked *really* early have especially fond memories of her protagonists, who were people we understood at the deepest level: outsiders searching for a place to fit in.

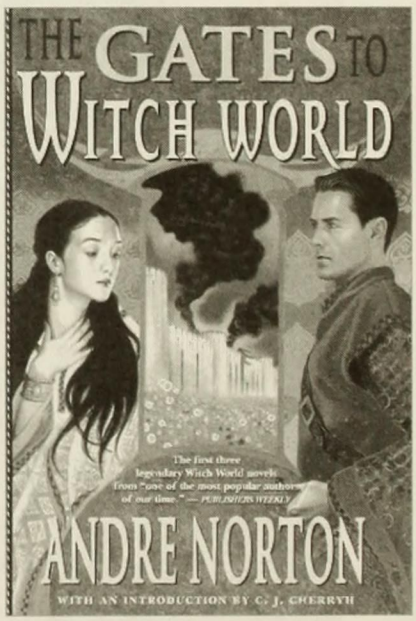
While the appeal of Norton's science fiction is undeniable, there's no question that her most enduring series takes place in that unique place called the "Witch World." Now Tor has thankfully seen fit to reprint the first three novels of the series in this volume: **Witch World, Web of the Witch World**, and **Year of the Unicorn**.

The Witch World series can be subdivided into two distinct sequences based on setting: Estcarp and High Hallack. The Estcarp novels, beginning with **Witch World** and **Web of the Witch World**, form a fairly linear story arc. The High Hallack novels, beginning with **Year of the Unicorn**, are smaller in scale, loosely linked by related characters and events.

Witch World introduces ex-U.S. Army Colonel Simon Tregarth. Pursued by a host of enemies and out of options, Simon accepts Dr. Jorge Petronius's offer of escape via the fabled Siege Perilous, an arch of ancient stone menhirs said to judge a man's worth and open a gate to the place and time where his soul truly belongs.

The mystical portal dumps Simon on a bleak and brooding moor, where he encounters a woman in mail pursued by soldiers likewise attired. Simon helps her escape and she leads him to safety. Only then does he discover she is not just a spy, but also a witch: one of the nameless Witches of Estcarp.

Estcarp lies precariously sandwiched between enemy nations. To the north, past gray Tor Moor and its Fens, is Alizon, with whom Estcarp is currently at war. To the south lies Karsten, where those with Estcarp blood have been "three times horned," outlawed, to be hunted to their deaths. Off the western coast lies Gorm, once Estcarp's ally but now under the control of the sinister Kolder, whose advanced technology is completely beyond the imagination of the natives of this pseudo-medieval society. Not even the hearty Sulcarmen, Estcarp's sea-roving allies, can stand up to the Kolder's high tech weaponry.

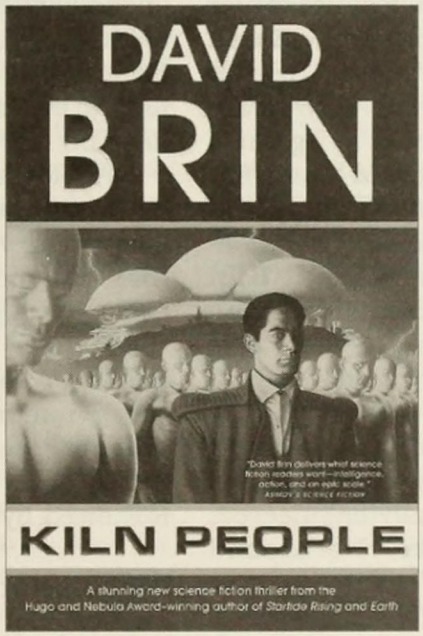


As Estcarp shares out its ever-diminishing forces between uneasy borders, the Witches at Es Castle search with increasing desperation for a means to defeat their enemies. The Power they wield is strong, but their numbers are shrinking. Only virgin women can use the Power; thus those most likely to bear witch offspring are least likely to have children.

Simon respects the authority of the

witches, but refuses to be intimidated by them. His experience with Earth's technology gives him a unique ability to understand the Kolder. The biggest surprise, however, is his own sensitivity to the Power and his growing ability to use it.

Simon's diverse skills make him a pivotal element in driving the Kolder back. In the meantime his relationship with the unnamed witch he met on Tor Moor grows stronger. At the close of **Witch World** she shares her name, Jaelithe, with him.



Web of the Witch World opens with Jaelithe's discovery that losing her virginity to Simon has not stripped her of her Power. Still the Council of Es refuses to give her back the witch gem she renounced at her wedding, insisting that her Power will fade with time. While the Council of Es pretends to look the other way, Simon and Jaelithe find their individual Powers linked and developing in synergy with each other. Together they must do what the witches cannot: defeat the Kolder and drive back Estcarp's enemies.

The High Hallack portion of the Witch World series begins with **Year of the Unicorn**, Norton's first novel written from the point of view of a female protagonist. Dales society is feudal, with the land divided between keeps, and no central authority akin to the witches in Estcarp. Beset by forces from Alizon, the lords of High Hallack made a bargain with the mysterious shape-changing Were-Riders from the northern Wastes. In exchange for the Riders' protection, the lords promised thirteen brides of noble blood, to be paid in the Year of the Unicorn.

Gillan, an orphan with little to keep her at the Dales Abbey where she grew up, takes the place of one of the brides and finds herself matched with the Were-Rider Herrel. Her choice earns the enmity of those Riders who were not selected by any bride. They hold Herrel to be the least of their number because of his mixed blood and meager magical ability. When the other Riders learn Gillan can see through the illusions they hold to keep the other brides from seeing things as they really are, Gillan herself becomes a threat. Together she and Herrel must defeat their enemies, drawing power from the bond they share, and their own inner strengths.

When Andre Norton began publishing science fiction and fantasy, the literary standards were simple and not very demanding: purely pulp adventure starring vast vistas of evil waiting to be vanquished by brawny sword and blaster-wielding heroes.

What Norton brought to the genre was a more intimate kind of tale, where people mattered more than the devices they used or the monsters they slew. No matter how grim the situation, victory is painfully achieved by drawing on those inner abilities we think of as most human: self-reliance, honor, independence. At their core, Norton's stories resonate with idealism and belief in a single basic principle: As long one is true to oneself, one can never really be defeated.

Kiln People
David Brin
Tor (460 pp, January 2002, $25.95)
Reviewed by Todd Ruthman

The last novel by David Brin I read was **Earth**, in which a miniature black hole threatens to destroy humanity. That is, it was the last book of his I *remembered* reading, until a friend reminded me that Brin also wrote **The Practice Effect**, which was entertaining but forgettable (literally, apparently). **Earth**, on the other hand, is still one of my favorite science fiction novels a decade after it was first published. **Kiln People** now joins that list as well.

Earth made me think, while entertaining me at the same time. Each chapter ended with an internal dilemma: the

struggle between "Wow, I've got to find out what happens next" and "Man, I really need to think about that for a while." If you haven't read **Earth** yet, buy it now. It's in paperback, so you can decide if you like Brin's style before shelling out for his newest hardcover.

At a time when I was feeling rather blasé about science fiction in general, **Earth** inspired me. Perhaps that's why Brin is known as an optimistic writer. Ten years later, **Kiln People** has done it again. I rushed through it, keen to find out what happens next but still pausing now and then to absorb the implications. While nostalgia tells me **Earth** was better, **Kiln People** is still one of the most intriguing books I've read in a long time.

At its core it's a mystery novel. Future mysteries are common fare these days, but most of the ones I've read are variations on the same theme. Humans versus robots. Humans versus the genetically engineered. The SF elements usually revolve around cyberspace and a few nifty implants, and maybe a devastating new technology that's been stolen.

Right from the start, though, you know Brin is up to something special. What if you could be in more than one place at the same time, but didn't know what each of your other selves was up to? In **Kiln People**, humans make short-lived clay copies of themselves imprinted with their soul. Or, more accurately, their Soul Standing Wave. I'll leave it to Brin to explain the details. In short, humans can make several duplicates each day that can operate completely independently. Duplicates that can be both more and less than human. Duplicates that are expendable. At the end of their short livespans, these clay duplicates' memories are reloaded into the original, but only if they make it home. The only crimes the police are interested in are those that harm organic humans, not their clay counterparts.

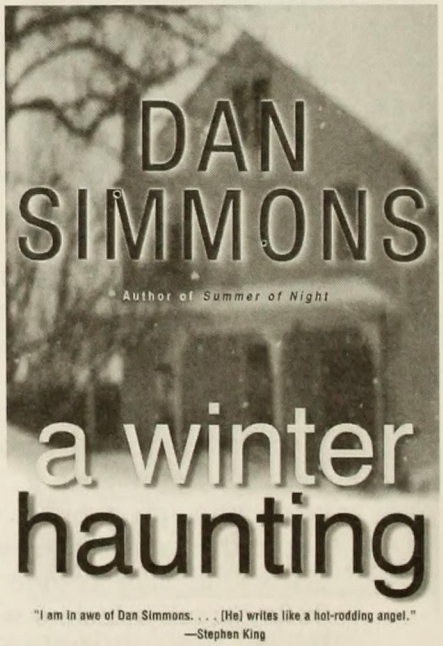
Albert Morris is a detective investigating the disappearance of a famous scientist, Professor Maharal. The story is written from the simultaneous perspective of several of the Albert duplicates, and of Albert himself, as they investigate the professor's disappearance. A tricky situation to keep straight, but Brin handles it brilliantly using techniques that my writing books tell me are rare, like second person and future tense. In his own words, "one of the more challenging works I've taken on."

True to the spirit of **Earth**, and all great science fiction, Brin's characters wrestle with the issues this world-changing technology has wrought. Issues such as the nature of the soul and humanity, the rights of the clay duplicates, and the exploitation of cheap and disposable lives. Unlike many novels, Brin also explores the implications future evolutions of the technology might have on the status quo.

A plot summary, or any more details about the duplicating technology, would give away too many sweet surprises for those intending to read the book. I hope that's all of you.

A Winter Haunting
Dan Simmons
William Morrow (320 pp, January 02, $25.95)
Reviewed by Lisa DuMond

Dan Simmons has done the seemingly impossible; he's created a lush, moving, and truly terrifying ghost story. His lyrical prose at once lulls readers into a state of peaceful security and keeps them on the ragged edge of apprehension. A difficult balancing act, but one that an author of Simmons' experience and talent performs with deceptive ease. In a market filled with ghost stories but short on frights, **A Winter Haunting** is a very welcome offering.



A Winter Haunting returns to the setting of Simmons' previous novel, **Summer of Night**, forty years later. The children who survived are grown now; readers of both novels will find it interesting to compare how they imagined the kids would turn out with Simmons' creation. The contrast

between 1960 and the new century is a striking reminder of the time past and the dreams lost.

Professor Dale Stewart has taken a sabbatical from teaching to face the ghosts from his own past – distant and otherwise. What he doesn't count on is encountering actual ghosts. With recent emotional difficulties clouding his judgment, he finds he's constantly second-guessing himself – the worst possible condition to be in to deal with these visitations. Or, he may be in the only state that allows him to see these images. Either way, it is a toss-up whether he'll survive, mentally or physically.

Flowing through the ghost story is the mystery of the violent death of Dale's boyhood friend, Duane McBride, a mystery Dale at first seems unaware of. The sense of unanswered questions deepens the moment Dale moves into his late friend's empty farmhouse, to spend the winter writing a book about that summer long ago. Much of the tension of the novel, and the revelations that seem to come out of nowhere, are due in great part to Dale's almost total self-absorption. It's a perfect device to sneak up on and scare the reader. And it works again and again with this stuporous protagonist.

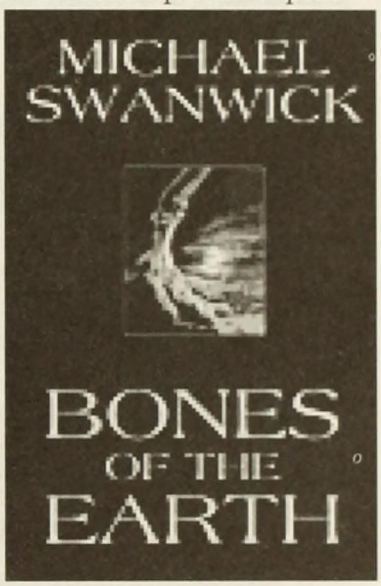
A word of advice to those who really will be snowbound when **A Winter Haunting** hits the stores: reading it late at night may not be the best idea. Reading it alone in a two-story house? Reading it while you're all alone? You're on your own there, lionheart.

With so many books in print, it's difficult to say, but **A Winter Haunting** just jumped to the number one slot on my Dan Simmons' Best List. Burrow in with this grand and gory novel and share the hope that genuinely good ghost stories are back to stay.

Bones of the Earth
Michael Swanwick
Eos (352 pages, February 02, $25.95)
Reviewed by Lisa DuMond

Anyone who read Swanwick's Hugo award-winning "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" just *knew* it couldn't end there; he had so much more to say on the topic. (Can time-travel and dinosaurs be one topic? Well, let's pretend they can.) The next word is here now in the fascinating and captivating **Bones of the Earth**. Yet another Swanwick novel that will quite simply sweep you off your feet and into another world.

The mysterious benefactors of "Scherzo" are back with their priceless and enigmatic gift of travel into the distant past, presented to the one group that could never refuse it, whatever the consequences: paleontologists. The first scientist contacted cannot believe his good fortune, but there's always a part of him that questions the motivation behind it. But Dr. Richard Leyster isn't the type to let such lingering doubts keep him from actually touching the lost ages he has dreamed of. Nothing will keep him from going.



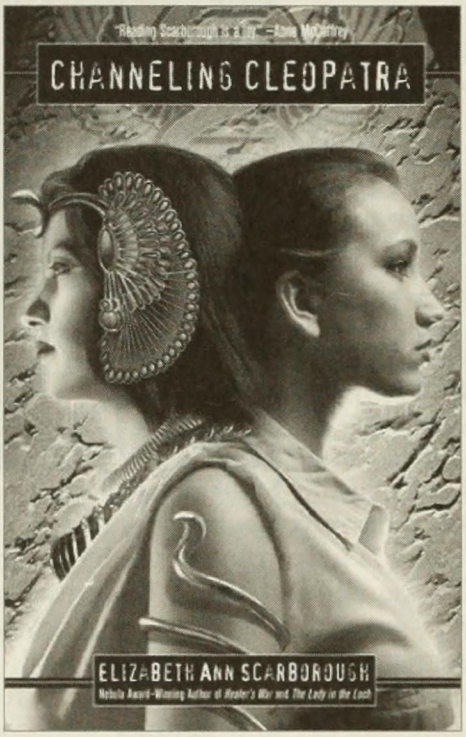
Going is never the question; it's returning that remains a bit iffy. The entire enterprise is suspect when no one knows who the generous benefactors are. And, does anyone really know why they've extended this singular gift to humanity? Of course, along with the joy of time-hopping come the prohibition against altering history in any significant way... this doesn't extend to stomping on a bug, but one wrong misstep might put human lives on the extermination list with no way to change the course.

Swanwick is in prime form with **Bones of the Earth** – and for him, that's really saying something. The story encompasses everything readers have come to expect from this master storyteller. The plot races from life-threatening thrills to heartbreaking tenderness to giddy laughter. The twists and turns make it impossible to solidly peg any situation or any character. At any given time, a person may appear to be the most despicable villain, the most misjudged patsy, or the savior that will lead the rest to safety. With the same deft twist, a pleasant afternoon walk may end as a wholesale slaughter, and you'll never see it coming.

Some authors lead you into a situation from miles away. Don't expect that with Swanwick; he never telegraphs his punch-

es. So just sit back and read faster if you can't wait.

One thought may keep running through your mind as you devour **Bones of the Earth,** as you read the so-much-more-accurate details and suffer the discomforts along with the time-travelers: this is what **Jurassic Park** could have been. Correct that injustice now. Grab a copy of **Bones of the Earth** and buckle in for a wild time.



Channeling Cleopatra
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough
Ace (256 pp, February 2002, $21.95)
Reviewed by Sue Granquist

Question: What if DNA from a person long dead could be blended with the DNA of a living host? And what if the result for the living host was that she'd now be carrying the personality traits and memories of the dead person? What would you do if you suddenly found yourself with the knowledge of Einstein, or Napoleon... or Cleopatra?

When I first heard the premise of **Channeling Cleopatra**, my head was swimming with the possibilities. Coupled with my fascination with all things ancient Egyptian, I was ready to devour this novel with relish.

And I did relish the first six to ten pages.

But that's where the writing style and the plot, to my dismay, began to weaken and wander. Scarborough takes her readers on a frustrating ride through a story so pregnant with lost opportunities it could make you weep. All the elements of a great novel are here, but she weaves them together so loosely that I wondered if a great number of pages were missing from my copy.

Case in point; by page 21 our heroine Leda Hubbard has already signed up, unquestioningly, to a DNA "blending" project in Egypt, after it was proposed to her by the husband of a college friend she hasn't seen in years. Leda, who is ex-military and the daughter of law-enforcement, often boasts of her superior powers of observation, but fails to find anything odd about the sudden appearance of her friend's husband, or about the news that her friend has died and is now living a symbiotic existence in her husband's body.

Leda is also asked to participate in a secret "blending" of the project patron's wife with the DNA of Cleopatra, if and when it is discovered. But why all the secrecy? Because the wife wants to know Cleopatra's seduction tricks so she can keep the interest of her rich, philandering husband, and of course he mustn't ever know.

Enter the mad billionaire who, very near to death, wants to reverse blend himself so he can carry on ruling his empire after his own demise by having his DNA implanted into a young donor. The leaders of the project turn down the billionaire's proposal for being too self-serving, but apparently see nothing wrong with letting someone use their groundbreaking research to help her sex life.

And if that's not enough soap-opera drama for you, for political correctness we have an ambitious female doctor who also covets what's left of poor Cleopatra, so she can blend her DNA with her own and rise up as the new, powerful Queen-Pharaoh of Egypt, thus rescuing her country from its woman-oppressing Islamic rulers.

In other words, Jerry Springer meets the Discovery Channel.

I'm not complaining that the story is too fast-paced. I love a tale that moves along, but this book took my willing suspension of disbelief, pureed it, and spoon-fed it back at me for 244 pages. I never cared about Leda or any of the other characters, because I never learned enough about them to care. Instead I was plunged

headlong from one situation to another with such haphazardness that I wanted to scream, "WAIT! How did I get HERE?" The action moved from city to city and crisis to crisis so quickly that I often found myself backtracking to see if I'd missed something.

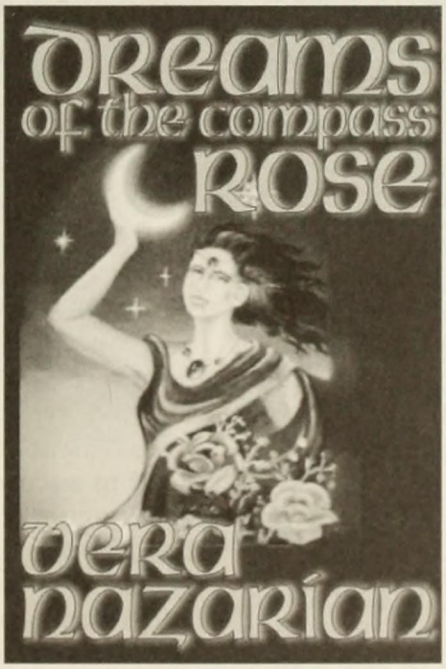
I wanted to know more; more details about Egypt, about the background of the characters, about the possibilities of suddenly having access to a legendary personality, and about the repercussions of doing what in essence is raising the dead. According to the story, the "channeled" person is aware and awake inside the body of the host, yet the obvious question of what Cleopatra's psyche would do when faced with 21st century life was not even mentioned, much less explored.

Triteness and repetitive speech habits can make a character more realistic, if the dialog is regional. But when I read the word "stuff" eight times in as many pages, I began to wonder how a professional writer could be so at a loss for words. Some of the other phrases which popped up with annoying regularity included: "always the bridesmaid, never the bride," "a chicken in every pot," "ain't heard nothin' yet," "did the food thing," "or whatever," and my personal favorite, "Cleo-friggin'-patra." These literary gems were not uttered by a token high school drop-out, but are salted so prominently throughout all of the dialog that I could easily imagine a Freshman English teacher writing "*think of a better way to say this*" in red, across nearly every page.

We live in an era of cloned plants and cloned animals, and cloned people is something we've all thought about. But instead of tantalizing us with what could have been a feast for our imagination, Scarborough delivers a hasty offering that made me wonder if she actually wrote this as a college course assignment, on a morning after a particularly rough frat party. Or, "whatever."

Dreams Of The Compass Rose
Vera Nazarian
Wildside Press (348 pp, May 02, $39.95)
Reviewed by Charlene Brusso

"The world is shaped by two things – stories told and the memories they leave behind" – Nazarian strongly supports this maxim with her first novel, a clever concoction of vignettes and short stories knit into a morality tale about the temptation of illusion and the price of truth. Each lyrically related piece represents a "dream" or dream fragment cunningly wrought to form a single intricate work of old-fashioned fantasy. Nazarian's setting has some of the feel of Tanith Lee's ***Flat Earth*** series, where arid deserts and rich oases offer a stage for wise slaves and pasha-like petty tyrants. Nazarian's characters are all searching for something, only to initially reject what each seeks in favor of more immediate answers, no matter how false.

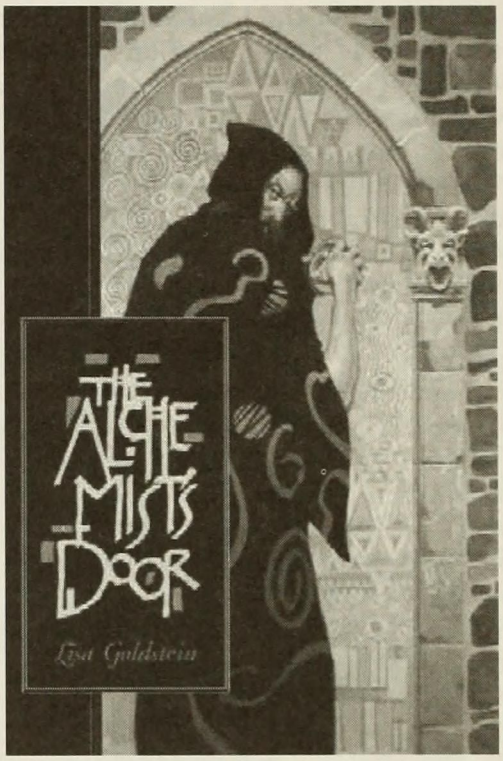


The Dreams are framed by the quest of Learra, a woman who seeks the legendary island of Amarantea, "where the soul flies in search of wonder, when sleep takes you by the eyelashes," and the secrets hidden there: "the beast that has no name" and a marvelous coffin of brass said to contain the greatest evil in the world. Learra finds Amarantea, and the coffin, only to turn her back and leave without truly learning the nature of the place – yet Nazarian leaves us with the sense that Learra is not yet finished with her true quest.

Other characters appear for brief scenes/dreams. A cruel warlord executes a noble queen, the last of her people – only to find that her martyrdom makes her into a goddess, giving her the ultimate power over him. On the advice of a clever servant woman, a king sends explorers to find the "true end of the world," only to reject their discoveries when they tell him what he doesn't want to hear – a decision which leads to his downfall. A storyteller insults the God of Things Left Over with a sarcastic tale and finds herself almost undone by

his curse.

At the core of this sprawling tapestry is the orphan boy Nadir, "lowest of the low," adopted by an old woman named Ris – who may or may not be the goddess Ris, Bringer of Water in the desert. When he loses her final gift to him – a drinking cup that cannot be emptied – he is forced onto a long road, humbly suffering years of hard labor in hopes of redeeming himself. To do so, he must save a heartless wizard's daughter, promised against her will by her wizard father to the nefarious Lord of Illusion.



Nazarian's writing is a banquet for readers who savor fluid language, though sometimes oddly spiced, such as when she describes Ris's name as one "that people savor like an amulet on their tongue." Likewise the beautiful words can sometimes flow to cliché, as when wise servant Lirheas tells her foolish master, "in the end only the truth will set us free." Readers with a post-modern bent may be overwhelmed by the languid richness of Nazarian's style, but at its best – which is most of the time – this old-fashioned story thrives on vital themes and engaging characters.

The Alchemist's Door
Lisa Goldstein
Tor (256 pages, August 2002, $23.95)
Reviewed by Lisa DuMond

Considering the tremendous wealth of legend, ritual, and mysticism in the Jewish faith it is amazing how little of that rich material has been mined for use in fantasy, but Lisa Goldstein is too canny an author to let that oversight continue. In **The Alchemist's Door** she weaves bits of this tradition in with an abundance of factual and fictional characters and situations in a 16th century east European setting that forms a tapestry as distinctive as it is spellbinding. And "spell" is the crucial word.

Goldstein starts with the historical figures of Doctor John Dee, a noted student of the occult; Rabbi Judah Loew, reputed creator of the golem; and King Rudolph, collector, believer in mysticism, and mentally ill tyrant. As Goldstein brings the characters together against the unusual backdrop of 1580's Prague, strange things begin to occur, and taken together these peculiar phenomenon seem to point unswervingly toward the end of this world. Even worse, they may hearld the rise of a new world where Dee's and Loew's worst nightmares come to life. Then again, are they really nightmares?

Unless the two mismatched champions work together and work quickly to find the legendary 36th Righteous Man, all is lost. But, how to find this man – or woman – in so little time in a crowded city the size of Prague? They must fight against time, their ruthless enemies, supernatural powers, and their own fears to find the Righteous Man before the forces of darkness can kill him to reshape the world in their evil design. Perhaps the largest obstacle they must overcome is the centuries of distrust and fear between Christians and Jews that keeps them from the complete trust they need to succeed.

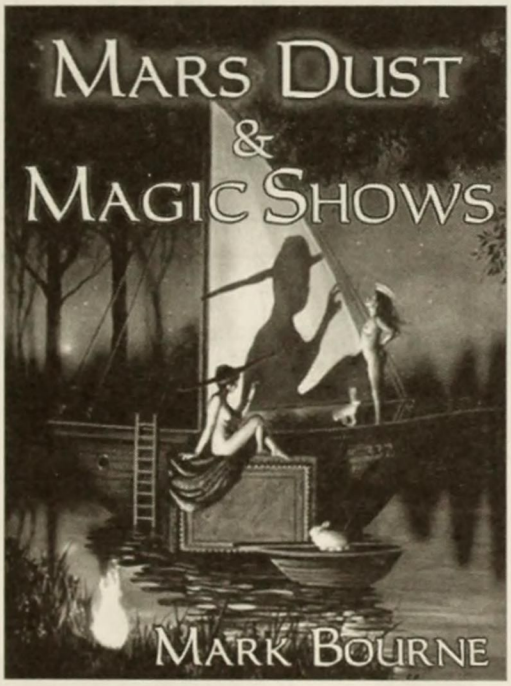
Prague, Poland, Hungary – Goldstein has chosen a stage so atypical and presented it so vividly that it takes its place as an integral part of the narrative, almost a character unto itself. Her depth of knowledge does not stop at the surroundings though, but extends to the people, the cultures, and the beliefs, rendering every detail in accurate and intriguing animation.

Especially riveting, and often wrenching, are the clashes between and within religions. How sad to see how little our understanding has grown over the centuries; how tightly we cling to our prejudices.

But don't get the impression that Loew and Dee come to a happily ever-after insight into each other's lives and beliefs.

The characters, "good" and "bad," in **The Alchemist's Door** tend to be a prickly bunch. Even as they set out to save the world, their glaring flaws are exposed for all to see. Izak, Magdalena, and scores of others who become involved in the battle – all are portrayed honestly, with weakness and faults sometimes seeming to outweigh their positive qualities. The final test will be the true measure.

The Alchemist's Door is a gift to fantasy readers who want more from their fiction. It is thoughtful, ingenious magic set at an all-out sprint. Sometimes it seem to move as if there were a demon after it...



Mars Dust & Magic Shows
Mark Bourne
Scorpius Digital (49,500 words, April 2001, $5.99)
e-book (Microsoft Reader only)
Reviewed by Lisa DuMond

If you've steadfastly refused to venture into the realm of e-books you're doing yourself a terrible disservice, because some of the most entertaining work in the genre is blossoming far from the printed page. You might have caught some of these stories in print publications, but your only chance to read "Baby Talk" and "The Nature of the Beast" is right here in this wonderful collection. So, if you haven't yet made the plunge into digital, **Mars Dust & Magic Shows** is the perfect reason to forge ahead into the future of publishing.

Nothing to be afraid of... or at least, not until you start reading.

Stories range from the endearing but silly "On the Road of Silver" and "Like No Business I Know," which have the excuse of boosting women's empowerment but are just plain fun, to the deceptively light "Brokedown," which starts off the collection. **Mars Dust & Magic Shows** runs the gamut of emotions, although it's not until after you've put the book aside for awhile that the true impact of many of the stories hits you.

Despite some laugh-out-loud moments in "Brokedown," there's a lingering sadness that no amount of homey warmth and good-natured ribbing can completely cover. If the characters in "Brokedown" seem to manifest some of the best of what it is to be human, every repulsive quality possible in a human being comes to the forefront in the twisting, turning "What Dreams Are Made On." If you've ever thought the entertainment industry brings out the worst in people, you'll feel fully justified after reading this tale. But don't expect the abhorrent behavior to be restricted to those before the cameras; let's give our audience a hand, too.

Tales of redemption grew stale long ago, but Bourne manages to give his that little *twist* that brings the genre back with a vengeance. Whether it's the jaded, prejudiced minister in "Mustard Seed," faced with a new accounting of the world she long ago gave up on, or the deadly demon in the delightful "Baby Talk," Bourne makes the oldest cautionary tales brand new.

Making old things new is no struggle for Bourne. Enjoy his re-working of a horror classic in "The Nature of the Beast." Take a look at revised history in "Boss" and then stop to wonder if fiction is really that far from reality. Or if we'll ever know the truth.

Mars Dust & Magic Shows is wonderful, light reading – until you think back. What Bourne offers with his fairy queens, frustrated authors, and fictional detectives seems like just a good time, nothing too deep, nothing you really have to *reflect* on. No doubt this is all some readers will get out of it, and that's sufficient justification to savor these stories. But some of you will obtain so much more.

...continued on page 208

Knights of the Dinner Table presents

STORY BY JOHN O'NEILL

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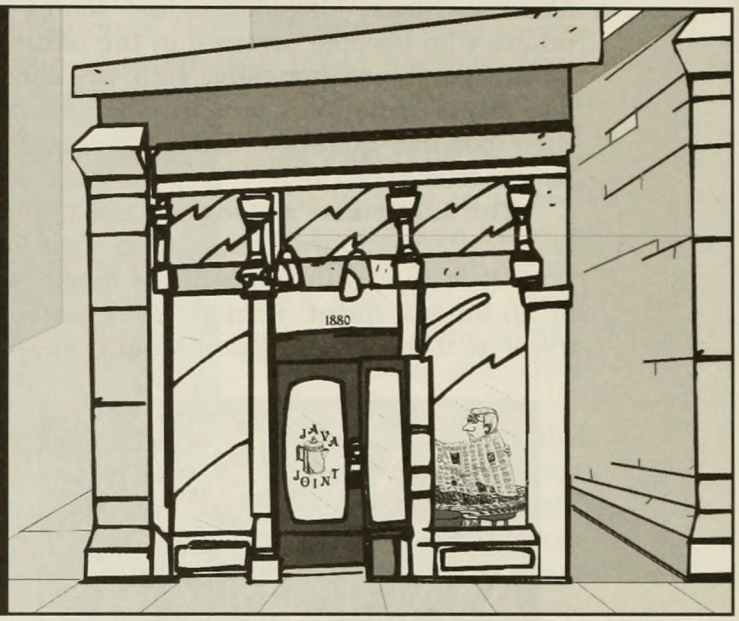

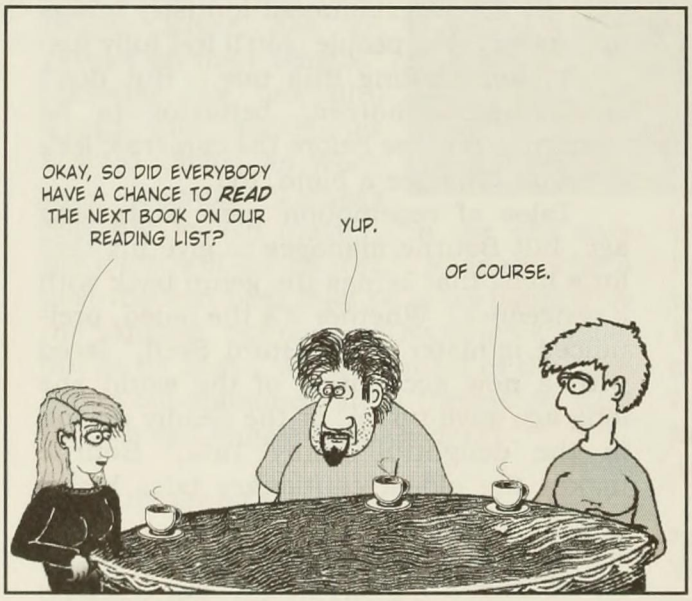

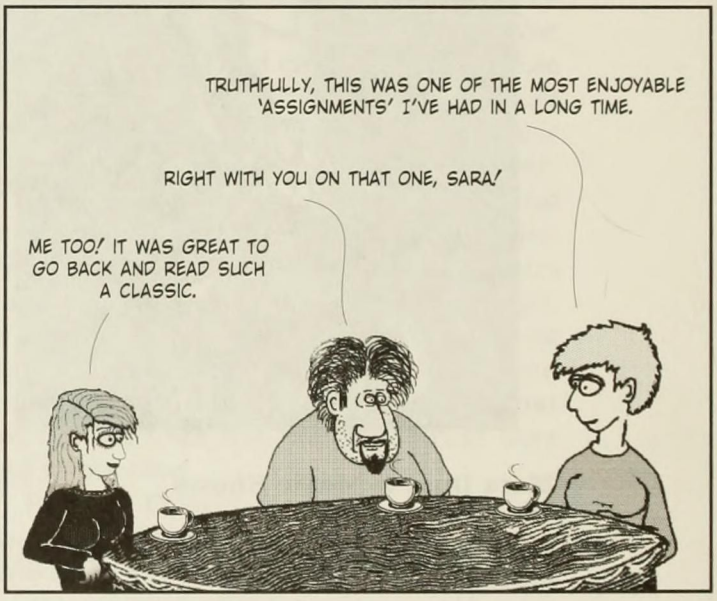

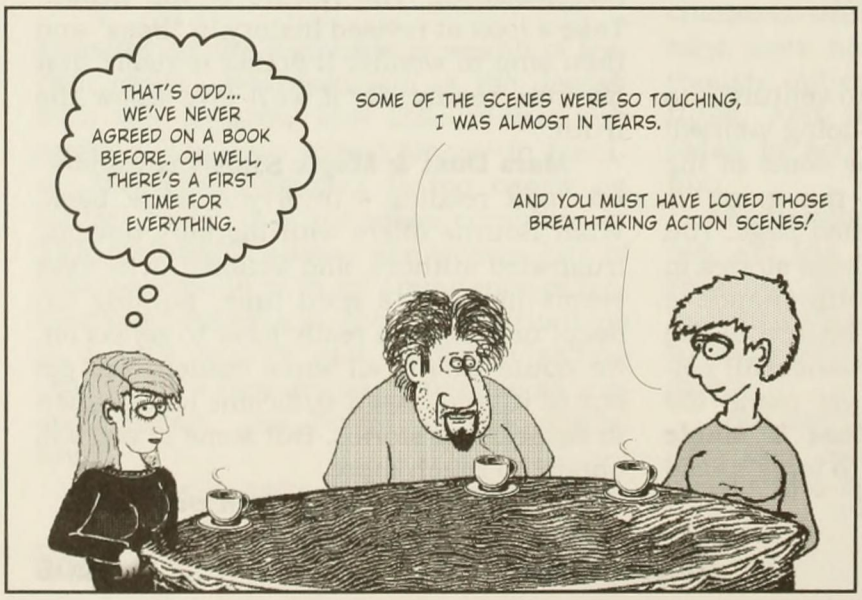

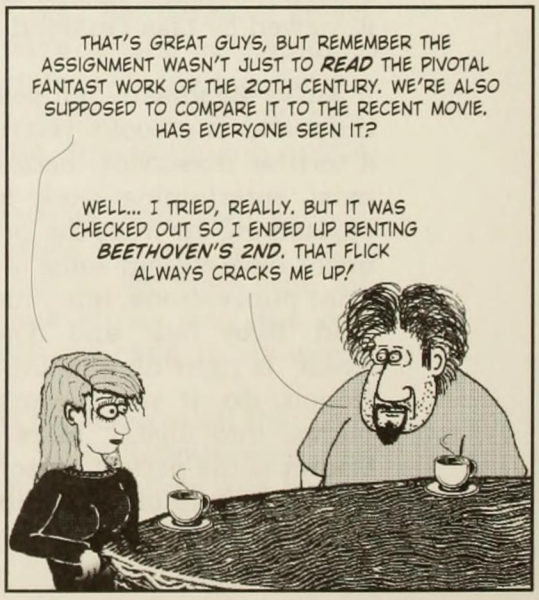

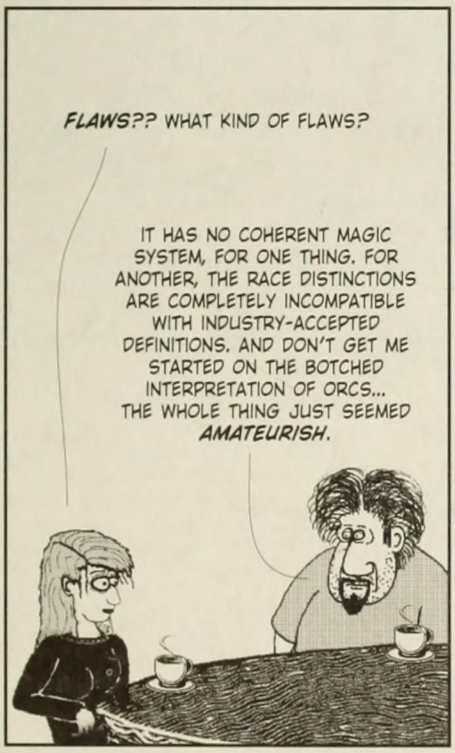

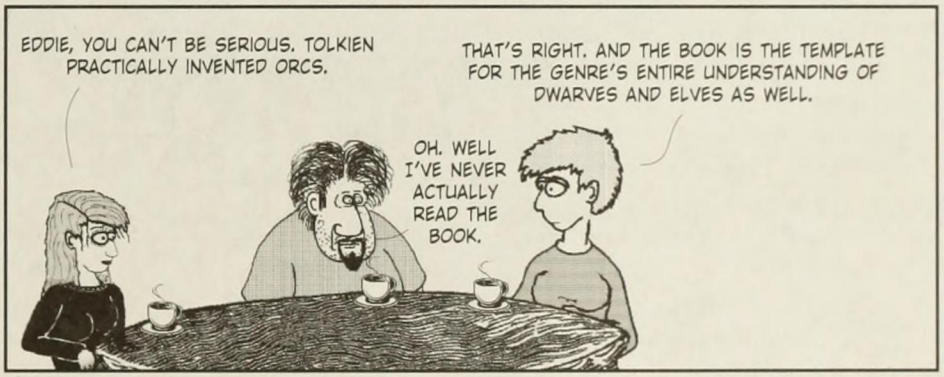

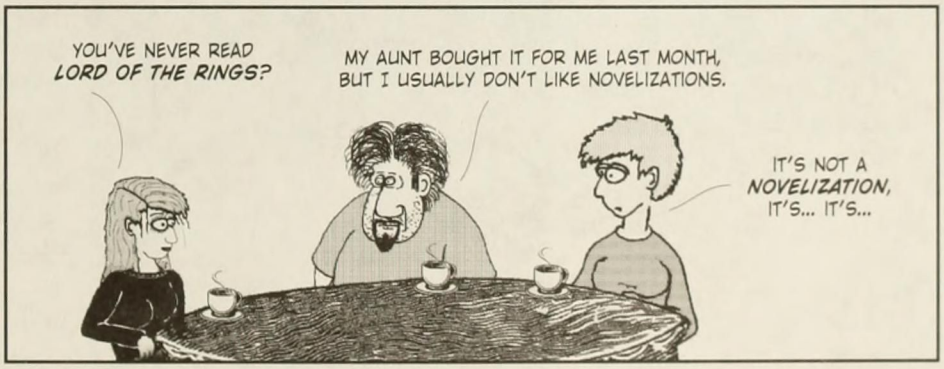

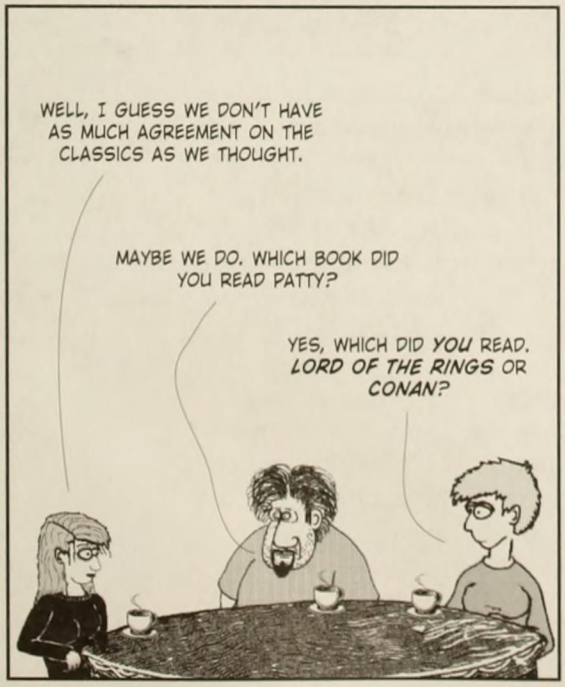

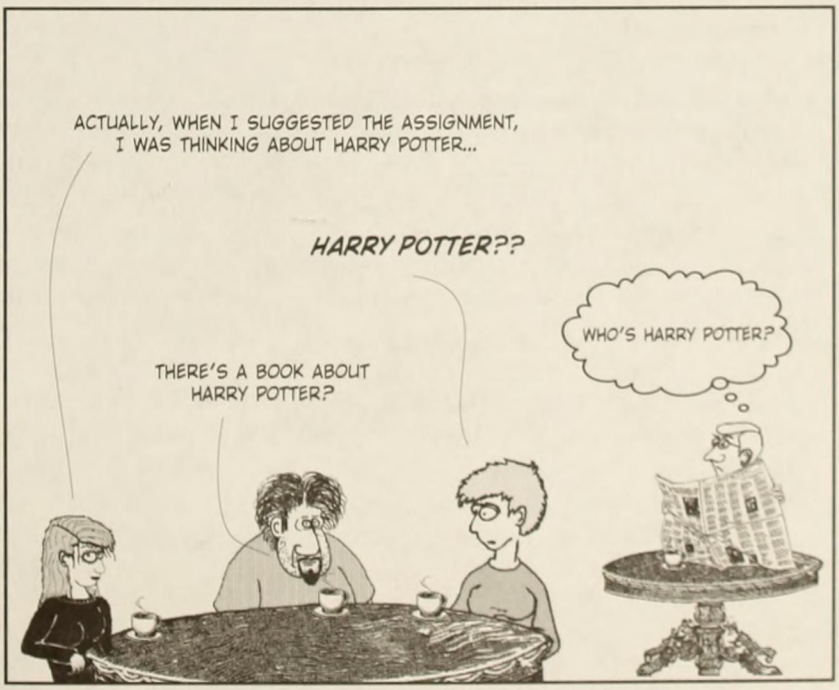

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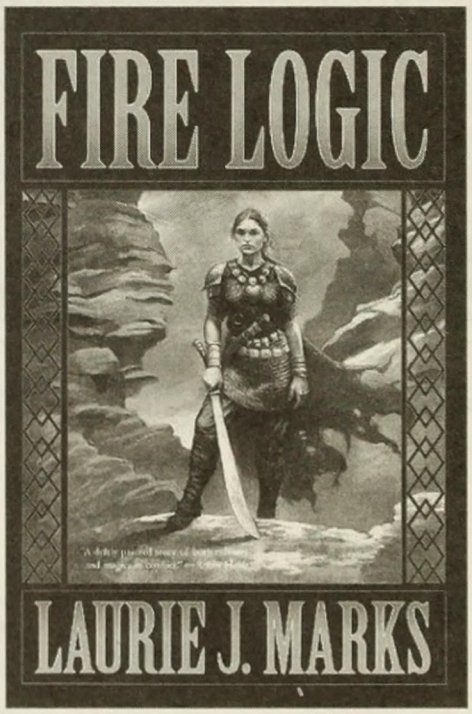
Fire Logic
Laurie Marks
Tor (336 pages, May 2002, $25.95)
Cover by Charles Keegan
Reviewed by Lisa DuMond

After you've been writing reviews for awhile you start to become somewhat protective of superlatives. After all, there just might be a finite number of *stunning*s and *amazing*s allotted to each reviewer before the computer implodes in protest. Then, a book like **Fire Logic** comes along and there's nothing to do but pour out the highest praise you've held in check. Suddenly, words like *absorbing* and *powerful* seem inadequate to describe a book of this caliber.



Fire Logic snares the reader from the first, with quotations from the milestone books of Shaftal, each as different as the characters waiting inside and each giving a taste of the struggles to come. Once peaceful Shaftal is about to become a land under siege, unable to throw off the violent hold of the Sainnite invaders. With every passing year there's less of their beloved country for the Shaftali to reclaim... the war is destroying the very prize they fight for.

Into this conflict are thrust four individuals: Zanja, the last of her peaceful people and a prescient of some skill. She will become a determined warrior in pursuit of an end to the occupation and the safety of the woman she loves. Emil wanted only to be a scholar, but war will take him far away from that and join him to Zanja's quest. Norina is charged with protecting the most important asset of the land, a responsibility that will set her in deadly opposition to Zanja. And there is the enigmatic Karis, weakened by addiction but still capable of amazing feats, and the heart of the mystery that may be the salvation or the devastation of Shaftal.

Admirers of Marks' fiction will not be surprised by her incredibly vivid language and the almost tangible details of the world she creates. Surfacing from a lengthy session with **Fire Logic** is like being snatched back from an alternate reality. A moment for reorientation is advised. Most stunning, perhaps, is the fact that Marks' achieves this concrete grounding with the force of her characters as much as with her talent for descriptive passages; it's the people in the story who hold us in place, more than the landscape.

Some of the most intriguing characters are scarcely seen and provoke curiosity all the more. J'han, the husband of the dangerous and disagreeable Norina – what holds him to such a woman and what more is there behind his gentle manner? There seems so much more to know about the gentle and playful Otter People, letting them just slip away is almost painful. And what of the Sainnites? Surely the reader has seen only the dark side of these invaders. Perhaps Marks will set another novel in this world to answer some of these questions.

Along with the force of her characters' personalities, Marks' draws us in with the fire and soft breeze of their emotions. Contained in **Fire Logic** are some of the most sensual and tender sexual encounters ever captured on paper. She perfectly portrays the timidity, the lust, the uncertainty, of that first connection and the exultation of discovery. The emotion, so raw and vulnerable, is arresting and humbling.

Is it too much to say that a book is absolutely engrossing, that it will transport the reader to another time and place? Apparently not, if it is **Fire Logic**. In this case, it may not be saying enough.

Then came a rustling of the curtains, and a sound like that of one who in a low voice hushes a child to rest, in the midst of which he heard Barton say, in a tone of stifled horror – 'Oh, God – oh, my God!'

– from *The Familiar*
by J. Sheridan Le Fanu

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