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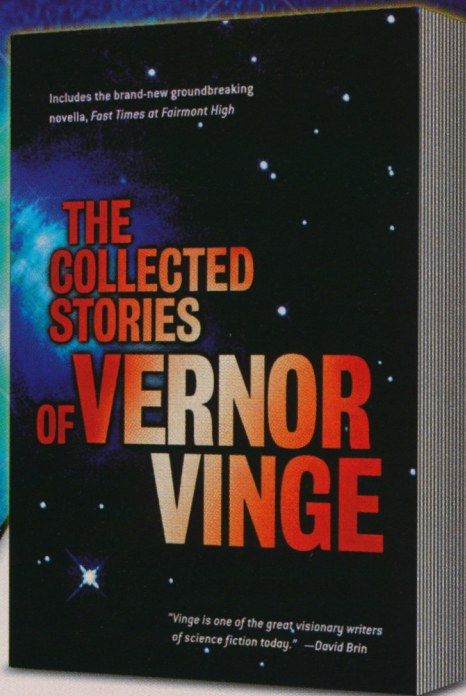
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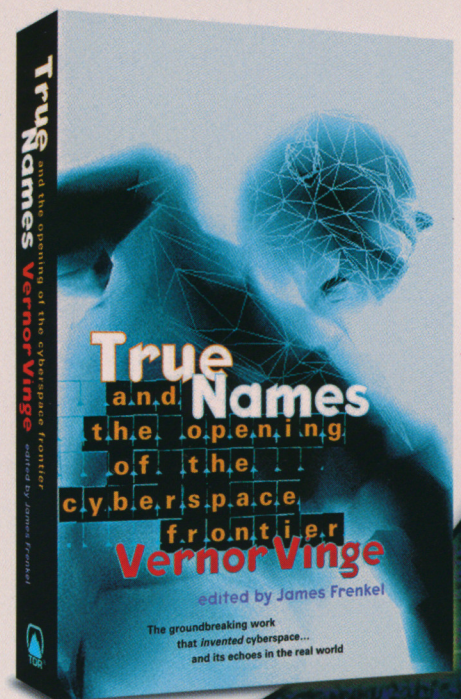
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# STORIES OF THE IMAGINATION FANTASTIC

Summer 2002

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Printed in Canada

## Ed-itorial

As I emerged from Penn Station yesterday there was that chill in the air again. The wind howled, and the shorts and tie-shirts had disappeared as fast as they had appeared. But more important than that, there had been another explosion. In the end it was ruled an accident, but the chill was back nonetheless. Since September 11<sup>th</sup> there have been so many changes in my life, in this magazine, and in our country, I don't know where to begin. Let me start by thanking you, the readers of this magazine. Your numbers have never been higher, and that tells me you are enjoying the fiction I'm buying. Thank you for your support.

My wife Dawn will be giving birth to our first child any day now, thus ending the adventure known as pregnancy. I put it in writing, in black and white, if men had to bear children the human race would have died out eons ago. So far all systems are go, and we are ready for launch.

I have changed my *other* profession. My latest incarnation finds me teaching full-time at a small college in Manhattan. A frustration and need to do more than argue about things that I could not change, sent me fleeing from senior administration, at least for a time, to see the higher education system from the other side of the glass. So while I suffer a long commute that includes a ten minute drive by car, an hour-and-fifteen-minute train ride, and a mile-and-a-half walk across the subdued wounded city of New York, I do it because I think I may have found a job I like. Teaching has been a rewarding experience thus far, one I will never forget.

DNA Publications, which publishes *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination* (and *Science Fiction Chronicle*, *Dreams of Decadence*, *Absolute Magnitude*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *Weird Tales*) has purchased *The Whole Cat Journal* from Belvoir Publications. The magazine has close to 20,000 subscribers and will allow DNA to expand its fiction magazines with better distribution and increased content. DNA Publications' President, Warren Lapine said, "While I don't expect a great deal of overlap between *The Whole Cat Journal* and our other titles, the addition of the magazine has already helped all our titles by allowing us to get cheaper rates with our printer. It should also give us more clout with distributors." This is great news for *Fantastic* as it should increase cash flow and help DNA manage its tremendous growth. I encourage everyone to check out the DNAPublications.com website to keep yourself updated on all the wonderful things happening at DNA Publications (and the new wholecat.com website if you are interested in that). I would like to personally thank Warren Lapine for all his efforts on my behalf, his efforts on this magazine, and his commitment to all my contributors and readers.

I will shortly be ending my long relationship with America Online. Years of frustration and high fees have caused me to rethink AOL and I have decided to bail. So the FantasticStories@aol.com address may not be good much longer. All complaints should be sent to DNA Publications. (Just kidding.) The new address is [fantasticstories@dnapublications.com](mailto:fantasticstories@dnapublications.com). I encourage you to visit the websites of the authors presented in *Fantastic*. If you enjoy a writer's work, undoubtedly their website will tell you where to get more of it.

The stories I choose for this magazine are intended to make you think, laugh, and remember remorse and fear. As I travel each day through Penn Station (some have dubbed it the "bunker") I can feel the anger that lies just below the surface. New Yorkers are angry, much more so than those watching this ongoing tragedy from afar. If you do not think about September 11<sup>th</sup> every day, you are remiss. That is why I walk past the ramshackle monument in Penn Station ... pictures of those lost, poems, notes, and art. We must remember. Amidst all this change, we must never forget those who were killed in an attack on our soil, in my backyard. The day of the attack my brother-in-law and I went surfing. We, and it turned out many others, would not let some rogues disturb or scare us. It was eerily quiet out on the ocean that day, all air traffic from the many local major airports suspended. As we bobbed up and down on the surface the large white plume of smoke fifty miles away appeared and disappeared with the roll of the ocean. We must remember.

## Fantastic Stories of the Imagination

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# Dark Delights

The Best In New Horror Awaits You In These Provocative Titles

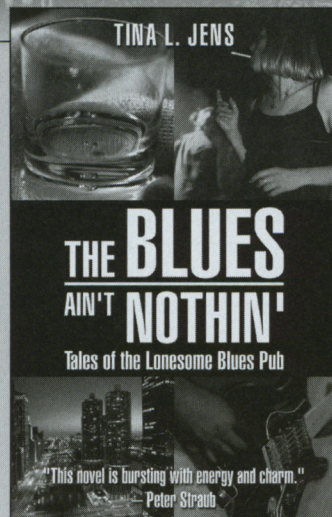
## The Blues Ain't Nothin'

Tales of the Lonesome Blues Pub

Tina L. Jens  
1-891946-17-X

Step into 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."

*"Exactly like the music in which it is soaked, THE BLUES AIN'T NOTHIN' jumps, sings, soars, sighs and exults. This novel is bursting with energy and charm."*  
**Peter Straub**



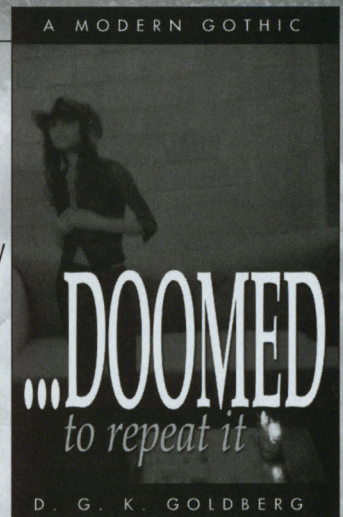
## ...Doomed To Repeat It

A Modern Gothic

D.G.K. Goldberg  
1-891946-12-9

A sassy urban cowgirl is already grappling with madness when the ghost of an 18th century Scottish rebel unleashes a nightmare of violence and dangerous desires.

*"The most richly textured protagonist to appear in horror fiction this year... (Goldberg's) subversion of the gothic novel's conventions is right on the money."*  
**Garrett Peck, Hellnotes**

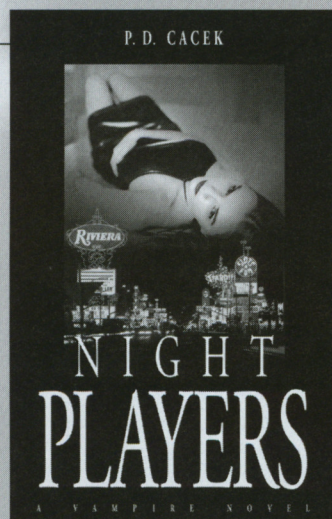


## Night Players

P.D. Cacek  
1-891946-11-0

The uproarious sequel to Cacek's Stoker-nominated debut – this time with vamps in Vegas' desert bordellos, casinos and chapels...with Elvis and aliens along for the ride!

*"Ya gotta love it...wonderfully lunatic dialog, a smart-ass heroine, witty humor, horrific and bloody good action."*  
**Camille Ambrose, Dark Realms**

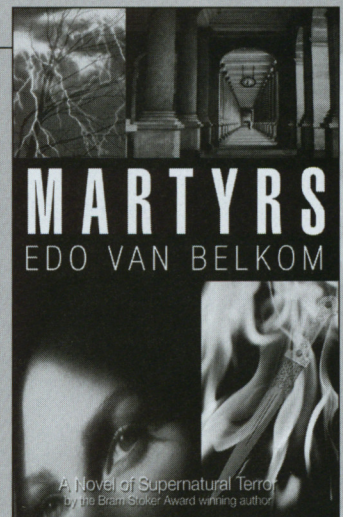


## Martyrs

Edo van Belkom  
1-891946-13-7

When a remote northwoods college's archeological dig goes awry, an ancient evil is unleashed, and an unlikely martyr must combat the very powers of hell.

*"A solid, finely crafted horror novel... a strong and compelling novel that will likely win the wide readership van Belkom has earned."*  
**Michael Rowe, Fangoria Magazine**



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Nick Pollotta is a novelist whose myriad of former jobs include stand-up comic, chemist, pet groomer, and a few others that he refuses to comment upon for the sake of national security. Specializing in science fiction, humor, and military/thrillers, Nick has over 40 books published to date, with several on the way. Currently, he resides in northern Illinois.

# THE COLLAR

## BY NICK POLLOTTA

I like to kill.

It started as a feeling when I was a kid, then became an obsession and finally my line of work. Why fight nature? There was a lot of money out there, and I wanted all of it. So I went with my natural talents. Besides, I really like to kill.

But this night the hit was going weird. Everything had been jake when I got the word through my usual contacts that there was a client looking for some wet work. I still preferred the term murder, but the market wanted to be PC, so I used wet work. Stupid term, murder wasn't wet, it was hot. Hot guns, hot screams.

The client had my fee, the bills were legit, and after giving me an ID on the target he started wasting my time telling me why the target deserved to get croaked. I had to laugh. Who gives a damn? Pay me enough, I'll ace the pope. A job was a job. For some reason this impressed the Hell out of him and he promised me lots of additional work if I got this one right. The implied insult made me want to use my gun and slap the teeth out of his solicitous face, but as my brother always said; most folks were idiots, so why fight nature? True words.

After a few more minutes of assurances and mutual threats, we parted company and I grabbed a cab. The target was only across town. Easy pie. I'd be home in time for nachos and The Tonight Show.

Leaving the cab a few blocks from my destination, I paused to light my pipe and smoke a bowl of shag-cut brandy. Always gave me an edge. Some amateurs liked to get high, or wired, but that only blurred the sensation, the delicious rush of taking a life. None of that for me. I was a purest.

A pair of rich folks in fake fur strolled by giving me the eye, glaring hatefully at my smoking briarwood, but since I was on the open street they couldn't even say anything about my social crime. Hey, my lungs, my cancer, why should anybody else care? When a doc told me I had the Big C, I would have a wild week in Vegas, then eat my gun. Life was pain; my pipe removed some of that. If there was a price to pay down the line for my fun, so be it. Nothing was free.

Finishing, I tapped out my pipe, cleaned the bowl and tucked her away inside my trench coat. Wonderful things those, seemed to be made for hiding weapons. Just then, a patrol car rolled into view. Forcing myself to stay loose, I watched curiously as they passed by, the driver giving me hard once over with the full know. That was the only thing I truly feared, the collar. Getting arrested. Chains, shackles, iron bars, the whole thing gave me night sweats, and there was no way I was ever going in, even with an army of crooked lawyers on my side. The thought of handcuffs closing around my wrists made me nauseous and I stumbled into the alleyway and breathed in the

sharp stink of rotting garbage for a while until my head cleared.

Feeling better, I walked quickly through the darkness of the alley hoping that some dumb-ass mugger would try for my shiny gold Rolex. A nice shot of death was just what I needed to clear my mind, but no such luck, and I was still feeling the shakes when I reached the address, using the corner street light to read the numbers printed on the inside of the matchbook given by my client.

Knocking hard on the door, I could hear it was iron plated on the inside, but lots of doors in the city had those. Good way to stop gangbangers with those ceramic nines from shooting through wood. The metal even slowed down the fire department with those titanium axes they used nowadays. Decent hinges, fancy French lock. Combined with the iron plating this door would be a real bitch to get through fast. Unless you simply knocked.

"Who is it?" a thin voice demanded, a quaver of fear marking the challenge.

Okay, he was armed, but with an old man's gun. Maybe a .32, or even a .22 pistol. No problems there.

"You don't know me," I said clear and slow. "But you got a relative who is in big trouble. Stupid bastard has lost a fortune to the mob, and needs your help. Call 'em right now. Goodbye."

That was the kicker, saying goodbye. That removed the entire threat from the presence of a stranger and the dumb fools opened the doors right then and there, nine times out of ten.

I turned my back to maintain the illusion I actually was going and heard the block slide and the door swing open. No squeak, he must oil the hinges. That was dumb. Creaky hinges were an excellent way to hear burglars in the night. This guy was no Einstein.

"Wait a sec," he demanded.

I turned and sure enough he was packing heat, but an Uzi machine pistol. The .22 mini-Uzi to be sure, but more than enough firepower to remove me from this world, and I was twice the size of this wizened old geezer. My instincts flared that this was a step-up and I raised my hands high in surrender.

"Put those down," he snapped, and I slid my hands into my coat pockets to grab my guns. "Now who did you say was in trouble again?"

"Your cousin," I lied. But it was a good one, rock solid. Damn near everybody on Earth had a stupid cousin. Even me. Mine wanted me to open a video store and go legit. What an imbecile.

But the geezer stepped back and grabbed the mini-Uzi with both hands dropping into a firing stance. "I don't have a cousin," he snarled, snapping the arming bolt on top. "I'm an orphan!"

Well, son of a bitch. Ten years in this job and I finally meet a

goddamn orphan. Had to happen some day, I guess.

"McPherson?" I said leaning close as if looking at his face. "Craig McPherson, right?"

"Daniel McPherson," he corrected with a snort, lowering the barrel of the rapidfire. "You got the wrong—"

Using both guns, I fired through the fabric of my coat, the silenced .44 rounds sounding no louder than a door knock. The little guy flew backwards into his home, and I followed closed behind, pumping more slugs into his chest with my right hand as the left closed the door. He was dead before hitting the floor.

A cop friend who didn't know what I did for a living had told me that men always had to finish a sentence before shooting you. Some sort of sexual link to fucking, I suppose. Women were the dangerous adversaries; they would often shoot you in the middle of a sentence and then finish talking to your corpse. I'd never aced a woman before, but was looking forward to the challenge.

After beating out the small fire on my trench coat caused by shooting through the fabric, I shrugged it off and kicked it aside. Its job was done for the night. Removing my spent clips and tucking them into my shirt pocket, I reloaded the Magnums and put two more rounds into his head, just to make sure, then removed a college signet ring from his warm hand as proof of the hit. Next, I checked the apartment over for any witnesses or spare cash. I had a trench coat to replace, and British shag-cut was very expensive. But then, the good stuff always was.

What a dump, a classic old man's home, lots of medicine and lotions, except for the back room. That was, well, I didn't know what the hell that was. Workbench with a lathe set to make slim wooden spindles with sharply tapered end, I guess, there was a pile of them in a box. A pegboard wall covered with a wide assortment of guns, ceramics pieces, derringers, machine guns, even a US Army M79 grenade launcher. This neighborhood was not that rough. Maybe he sold guns on the side, was cutting into some big boy's action and wouldn't play ball. Stupid. Always cut a deal, then shoot them in the back. There was no God. And no justice, just us, as the smart kids like to say.

But this old fart had a lot of crucifixes and rosaries everywhere, bottles labeled Holy Water, and brand new water pistols, the ones that held a gallon and could shoot a hundred feet. And fine tooled leather bandoliers lined with wooden stakes. It took me a sec, then I broke into laughter. The old freak was crazy, thought he was a vampire hunter! Now that was truly, honestly, funny.

Then I stopped cold in the middle of a chuckle. So why would somebody pay my rates to ace a crazy man? That old feeling that I was being scammed somehow came back strong, and I turned on a heel to leave, then paused and took a few of the more choice items from the collection on the walls. They'd fetch a good price on the street, and might come in handy. Just in case.

Returning to the bar across town, I placed a call and less than an hour later, my client returned. As he slide into the booth, I tossed the college ring on the table. It landed with a clatter and rolled around for a moment before going still.

"Where's the rest of my money," I demanded.

"So he's no longer with us," the client asked eagerly, pulling out a brown paper sack bound with rubber bands.

"He's dead, I killed him, open the bag," I ordered.

My client smiled widely, removed the rubber bands and slid the bag over. I looked inside and stuffed the wad into my damaged coat pocket without counting. My clients knew what to expect if I discovered that they had shortchanged me. The ultimate punishment. They'd face me.

"Thank you," he said rising to leave. "We are very pleased with your service and shall use you again."

"Sure, swell. Just one thing," I said, then tossed a crucifix onto the table.

The client hissed in terror at the thing and recoiled as if it was going to spit venom. Or maybe like he was.

"So you know about my master!" he snarled and clawed for a handgun in a shoulder holster.

I didn't know shit, but I was always ready. I fired twice with my silenced .32 through the table and the client dropped his piece, his shoulder pumping blood from the gaping wounds caused by the military explosive rounds. Always use the best. He fell to his knees hacking for breath and spitting and bleeding and all the usual stuff.

Dave behind the bar appeared with a sawed-off in his grip, but I shook my head and he nodded in return, tucking the alleysweeper away. A former junkie, Dave ran the bar and did the taxes, but I owned this place. That's why I did business here.

Dragging my former client into the back door, I bolted the soundproof door shut and turned just in time to kick another gun out of his hand. A hideaway piece. Smart boy, just too slow. I patted him down, taking away a couple of knives and a military grenade. It was color coded, but I didn't know what the symbols meant so I put it on a high shelf with the rest of the cleaning supplies far out of the dead man's reach.

"I will tell you nothing, hunter!" he gasped, a hand pressing tight to the bloody wound. Half of his shirt was stained red by now, and he was having trouble breathing. The slug had not gone anywhere near his lungs, must be having a panic attack.

Then I scowled. Hunter? I didn't do bounty work. Hmm. Taking out my pipe, I loaded the bowl and lit a smoke to think on this. I puffed for a few moments, then took out my can of butane lighter fluid and squirted some on the concrete floor.

He watched in fascination as I struck a match with one thumbnail, my other hand filled with the big bore .44 Magnum. As I dropped the burning wood stick into the fuel, the stuff whoofed into flames, the fire rising high for a moment, then fading away completely as the few drops of butane were consumed.

"This is a public tavern," he said, a break in his voice showing the fear. "You wouldn't dare."

He stopped talking as I squirted him in the mouth with the butane fuel, then his hair and the wounded shoulder and soaked the crotch of his pants, until the fuel seeped down deep where he could really feel it.

"Tell me about your master," I said, emptying the container into his hair until the fluid ran down his face like tears. Then I lit another match and let him see the pretty flame. "Tell me everything."

He talked, of course. Eventually, they all do. But the things he said were impossible, incredible, and very interesting. If true. I would have to check this out.

The penthouse was in the rich section of downtown, all chrome, tinted glass and livered bodyguards. I had only done a few hits around here, and each had been a pain. But I knew how to handle these things better now.

Hiring a few hookers to stage a topless screaming fight right outside the apartment building, I waited until the armed Pinkerton guards were busy trying to chase the girls away and slipped inside. There was some poor bastard with no left arm working the elevator, so I used my stun gun and left him alive. Might have been a veteran. Even I got limits. No soldiers, period.

At the top, I hit the video cameras with spray paint and used a

keywire gun to jimmy the lock to the place I wanted. As the door swung inward, I pulled out a can of mace and sprayed. Sure enough, some hulking muscle came charging out and caught the spray full in the face. The Pinkertons fell hacking and coughing for breath, I put them both away forever. Easy pie.

Stepping inside I closed the door trying not to drool with avarice. The place was loaded with goodies as I had expected, but I ignored the valuable trinkets and went straight into the master bedroom. First time I have ever heard the word used correctly. According to the burnt husk in the garbage can outside my bar, this was where the master slept.

The bed was gone, but in its place rested white marble bathtub, or maybe the word pool was correct, and sure enough the damn thing as filled with blood, the tell-tale coppery stink confirming that matter. Wild. An AutoSentry machine pistol stood in the corner, and as I approached its little dish on top swung towards me, the .32 rapidfire underneath tracking only a second behind. But that was enough, and I blew it apart with a single thundering round from the .44 Magnum. How exciting. I liked a challenge.

Taking cover behind a marble pillar near the doorway, I leveled my gun and squirted the new can of butane fuel all over the tiles and carpeting around the marble tub. A flick of the match, a toss and flames rose on every side, the natural fiber carpeting adding nicely to the growing bonfire. Getting no response yet, I went to the bar and added some Napoleon brandy and vodka. Whoosh! Pretty.

If there was anybody submerged inside the tub, the heat would soon start to make them cook. And since I had turned off the main water feed in the basement before coming up here, the sprinklers were out of action. How much toasting could a 'demon lord' take?

Suddenly and without warning, the tiles around the tub exploded as hidden charges of C4 detonated in unison, the hellstorm of busted tiles ripping every article of furniture into splinters. The entire bar shattered, and the heavy oak doors were removed from the cracked walls, and some of the ceramic shards ricocheted off the twisted ruin of the hinges and caught me behind the pillar right in the leg. Shit! They hurt like blazes, but nothing was squirting so none of my arteries were hit. Just pain. No problem, that could be controlled and ignored.

As I struggled to rise, there rose a geyser of blood from the tub and out of the roiling smoke walked a beautiful naked woman, with the face of an angel, long flowing black hair, and covered with tattoos.

"Time to die, hunter!" she screamed as horns sprouted from her forehead. Then the thing lunged for me with hands that changed into animal talons.

A real demon. Cool. My twin .44 Magnums blew thunder at the she-beast slamming her back into the tube and removing large chunks of her chest and head. As I dropped the spent clip into a pocket and reloaded, she dove forward and took two more rounds before tackling me against the wall and putting a backhanded across my face. I barely had time to turn with the blow and it still felt like my head was coming off. Bitch was strong! I went airborne for a moment then became reacquainted with the floor in a hard crash.

Struggling to regain my bearings, the gaping crater in her skull closed and she started towards me once more. This time I blew off both her kneecaps. But as she fell, her body turned into a huge spider and leapt faster than I could track with my booming gun.

The demon slammed me onto the wall, its mandibles raking along my chest only to find the dozen rosaries and crucifixes hanging around my neck. Hissing at the sight, she tried to get free, but now I drove the wooden stake hidden behind my back into her chest. Instantly, the spider melted into a beautiful woman again and she

writhed as I dug around inside her chest with the piece of wood searching for her heart. She was in pain, but not dying a whole lot. Then she wrapped a tail around my legs, pulling me down, and butted with her horns, catching me in the chest.

Firing one magnum non-stop, I awkwardly pulled out a bottle of Holy Water and smashed it into her face. Brackish fumes steaming off her melting features, she shrieked and I pulled out a mini-Uzi spray her all over with the old man's silver bullets.

Fire sprang from each impact, and she staggered away, trying to escape, offering me millions in cash, but I maintained the gunfire until she dropped sprawling. It was a nice ass, but no time for that now. Pumping more lead and silver into her body, I pulled out the silver stake and rammed it into her. Black leather wings sprouted from her back and slammed hard onto me, but I clung on tight and put my weight behind the metal stake, forcing it in deeper and deeper until there was a terrible noise and smeared with green blood the tip came out of her mouth and stabbed the burning carpet.

There was a muffled curse, the whole building seemed to rock, some dark shadow filled the room . . . and then she was gone, only dry ash remaining in my sticky hands.

Trusting nobody, I sprinkled more of that Holy Water and communion wafers onto the dust, then went to her kitchen to wash as best I could. The water faucets were still turned off, but there was some bottled water in the fridge—yuppie assholes—and I got most of the gore off my hands. Everything else, I left as filthy as possible.

By now the flames were spreading across the penthouse, the grand piano was musically snapping its strings and the curtains flaring to reveal the iron bars closing off the windows. Softly, police sirens were sounding from the streets below and this time I knew they were for me.

But something she said before dying had caught my interest and I did a quick check behind the pictures hanging on the walls until finding a small safe. Bingo. Surrounded by the growing inferno, I cracked the tumblers and took all of the cash inside trying to ignore the fact that armed cops were on their way up here, along with a shitload of seriously pissed off Pinkerton guards who must have figured out by now that the hookers were just a diversion.

The smoke was thick enough to make breathing difficult, so I held a handkerchief to my mouth as I rumbled my Pinkerton guard uniform some more, then smeared some of my own blood from the shoulder wounds onto my face to blur my features. Nobody really wants to look at a bad wound. Works every time.

Dashing for the elevator, I jacked the slide on my .44 Magnum until the clip was out of ammunition and the slide kicked back to show it was empty. Slumping to my knees with the empty gun on display, I waited until the stairwell door slammed open and out charged a mob of cops and guards. Weakly, I swung my empty gun at them and pulled the trigger several times blinking wildly.

"Pinkerton! Stop you're under arrest," I sobbed, my chest heaving. "Get . . . away from her . . ."

As big people charged into the roaring penthouse, somebody knelt along side me and checked the pulse in my throat. A medic of some kind. I held my breath making the pulse slow to appear even weaker than I felt. My adrenaline was still pumping, and I was fine at the moment, but that would fade soon. Had to move or die. This was the fun part.

"It's okay, buddy, we're the cops," somebody said, gently pushing my gun away. "What happened?"

"Six guys, military . . ." I paused to cough and slump further down. "The windows, some kind of rope thing . . ."



"They're rappelling down from the roof!" a cop snarled.

"Christ, look at the flames!"

"Nobody is left alive in there."

"We'll take the stairs!"

"Go-go-go!" a cop, added to a mike, the wire leading to a small radio clipped to his gunbelt.

As the group separated and charged in different directions, I took the stairs to the basement where my car was hidden. I paused to turn the water back on, which would only make things more confusing upstairs for a while, then rode away into the night holding a military battlefield compress to my wounds.

Stopping at an all-night diner, I stitched the holes in me shut while sitting in a stall of the men's room, then got into my normal clothes taped behind the toilet marked 'broken.' Going to the counter, I flirted with the waitress as I ordered a sandwich and some much-needed black coffee, then went to a pay phone and placed a call.

"Who the heck is this?" my cousin demanded.

"Me," I answered. "I've thought about that video store deal you want me in on, and I got a better idea. Dry cleaners."

"What?" he demanded, the sleep still thick in his voice, and he wasn't the most articulate person to begin with.

"Dry cleaners," I repeated slowly, leaning against the wall to conserving my flagging strength. Man, did I need that joe. Where was the damn waitress? "We'll open a chain of dry cleaners across the city, and I'll pay for everything." I patted the sack of cash hanging at my side. Must be close to a million there, maybe two. "A chain of dry cleaners across the state. Ten stores instead of one measly video store. You in?"

"Sure, sure, whatever ya want. Sounds great."

"Good. I'll meet you for breakfast tomorrow. Night."

I hung up on his gushing thanks and went to ravage my ham on rye and that precious, wonderful coffee. This was the smartest move I had ever done. Dry cleaners, it was brilliant. We'd specialize in removing bloodstains from silk, with low-low prices, and I would track down every demon in the city, hell in the state! Blow their brains out with silver bullets and steal their horde of cash. A sweet deal.

Then the universe seemed to constrict around me as a great and terrible thought occurred and I felt cold in the pit of my stomach. If

there were actual demons, then there must be a Hell that they came from. Which logically meant Satan must be real, and that dictated the existence of God. Holy crap! Suddenly every piss-ant misdemeanor and capital crime I had ever committed paraded through my mind and the weight of my sins was truly staggering. I'd never made a tally before, and even I was impressed. No doubt about it, if there was a God in heaven, then I was going straight to Hell. Unacceptable. From everything I had ever read, seen or heard about The Abyss, the evil were chained in lakes of fire.

There was the magic word, chained. Shackled, trapped, wearing a collar like an animal. This time my body shuddered so hard that I dropped my fork. In this life I had vowed to die rather than go to jail, so I sure as shit wasn't going to do it in the afterlife. Because, that's all Hell was, the biggest baddest jail in the infinite cosmos.

Adding more sugar to my coffee, I started to take a sip, paused, then quickly muttered grace first. Or as close to the words as I could get. Sunday school was a million years ago, in another lifetime.

But once I had been an altar boy, so okay, it was time to reform. I'd keep the dry cleaner idea, but after killing a demon, I wouldn't steal the cash. No, I would, but I wouldn't keep any, every penny would go to charity, the homeless, and starving kids, blind orphans, jazz like that. God loved good deeds. Praised-be-he. And I would keep on blowing away hellspawn and helping folks until finally balancing the scales for all the innocent people I had aced. Damn, er, darn, that would take a lot of demons. Best to hedge my bet and stop cursing, lying, cheating, gambling, hookers, hmm, best to avoid sex entirely, just in case. Maybe I should become a priest? Accept one collar to avoid another. Fair enough. I like to kill, but it was easy to combine the two. Father Michael Xavier Donaher, Demon Hunter. Actually, that had a nice ring to it. Praise the Lord and pass the silver ammunition.

Feeling reborn, I bowed my head and thanked my heavenly Father for his wisdom and mercy, and all the saintly pious stuff. Then paying the check, and leaving a tremendous tip, I stuffed the briarwood pipe into my mouth and strode from the diner into the foggy night. It would be smart to move fast on this deal. If I got hit tonight by a bus while crossing the street, my ass was grass. Now where the hell was I going to find a goddamn Catholic church at this shitty hour of the night to get fucking ordained?

Hallelujah. I had been saved.

## Poem Noir

by Claudia Carlson

A slick noun sauntered into my sentence  
snapped a simile across the dusty line  
of my vision and waited for me to bite.  
I was so broke I barely remembered  
the warmth from my last syllables of scotch  
or the Red cliché that stiffed me my fee.  
I said, "how much?" He said, "as much as it takes."  
"Big stakes," I noted. He nodded. I packed  
my enjambment in my overcoat and  
threw a thesaurus in the holster.  
"You'll tell me what you need?" He shrugged,  
"I'm taking you to Boss Verb now, he'll show you."  
We went out like an oxymoron in the night.

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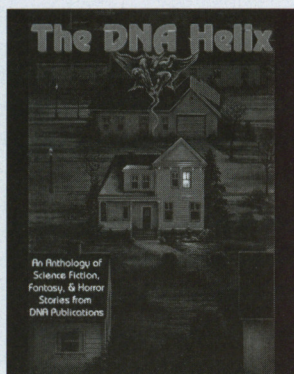
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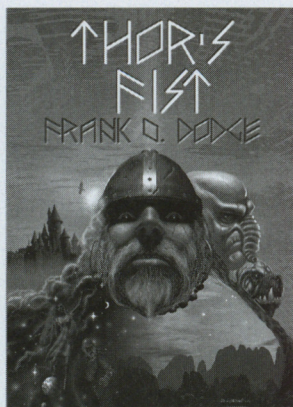
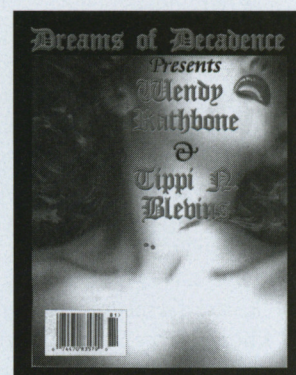


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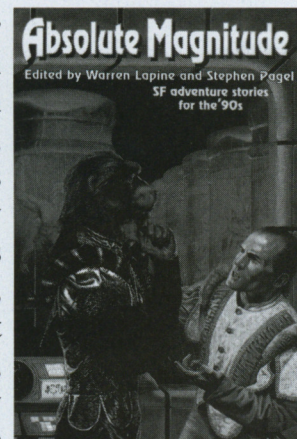


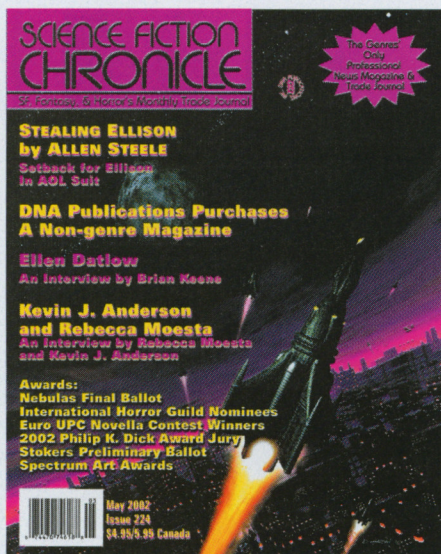
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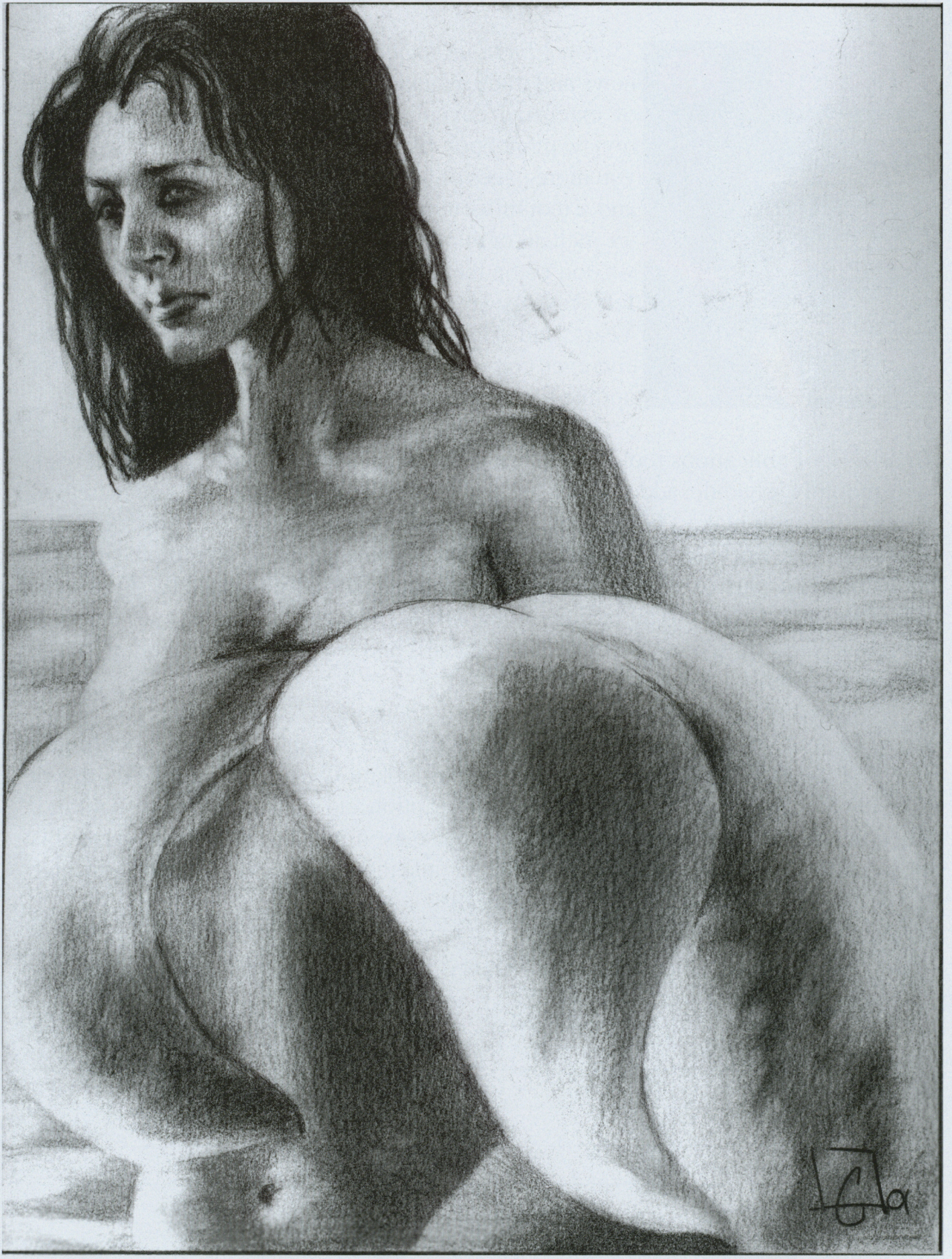
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Born in New Orleans, O'Neil De Noux is a former homicide detective and organized crime investigator. He has written scores of books including *Crescent City Kills*, *The Big Show*, and *Hollow Point*, just to name a few. His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Mary Higgins Clark Mystery Magazine*, and he is the founding editor of *Mystery Street*. This is his first appearance in *Fantastic Stories*.



UPON A PAINTED OCEAN  
BY O'NEIL DE NOUX

*Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.*

—“*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“She’s not a mermaid,” Troy said. “She just lives in the ocean.” He stood and dusted off his pants.

Sam watched his brother look down the low cliff to the beach below. Sam put his left hand over his eyes and looked down at the beach too. The white sand shimmered beneath the strong Octavion sun.

“She’ll come out soon,” Troy said.

Sam turned his gaze to the wide expanse of the Painted Ocean, at the deep blue water away from shore, at the subtle greens closer to shore, at the bright turquoise water along the beach. Beneath the water, he saw streaks of dark purple and crimson red and various shades of yellow—coral reefs.

He turned to his brother and saw how peaceful Troy looked.

“She’s quite a woman,” Troy said, his chest rising.

Sam shook his head and wondered what would cause Troy to believe anything lived in an Octavion ocean, except for fish and Ichthyosaurs and Elasmosaurs beyond the reefs.

A breeze, thick with the smell of salt water, washed over the brothers. The breeze blew through Troy’s sandy hair as he stood at the cliff top, his fists on his sides now.

*He looks thinner*, Sam thought.

At six-four, Troy always looked slim. In his yearbook at St. Vincent’s, Troy was described as “gangly.” Thirty-two now, he looked thinner than he did in high school.

Sam stood up and dusted off his pants. He stretched and tried not to think about how tired he was. Not quite six feet, Sam was thickly built with their mother’s dark hair and eyes.

“Come on,” Troy said and led the way down the cliff to the beach.

As soon as they reached the sand, Troy pulled off his canvas shoes and started for the rocks at the water’s edge. Sam sat on a boulder and took off his boots and socks, which he stuffed into his boots. He fanned his khaki shirt, already dripping with sweat.

The sand felt good between his toes, cooler than he thought it would. Sam walked behind his brother, who stopped and let out a slight gasp and pointed to the water.

Sam shielded his eyes again and saw a movement, saw something protrude from the water, between the waves. He started forward.

“It’s her.” Troy waved to his younger brother.

A head rose from the water, long light brown hair and a face as blue as the sky. She shook her head and her hair swished from side to side. She ran her hands, blue hands, through her hair as she continued forward.

Another step and the water fell away from her breasts. Another step and her flat belly came into view. She moved slowly and gracefully, following a small wave to shore and stood before the brothers. Naked, she had a perfectly shaped body—full breasts and round hips and long slender legs. Sam felt suddenly very awake. He felt his heart beating.

She smiled at Troy and then looked at Sam and craned her neck forward, as if to study him. Her eyes were the brightest green he’d ever seen—emerald eyes.

“The blue goes away,” Troy said.

“Huh?”

“She changes colors.” Troy reached his right hand for her. She took his hand, stepped into his arms and kissed him on the mouth.

Sam looked around, at the surf, at the sand, at the boulders and then up at the cliff before looking back at his brother kissing the naked blue woman. He rubbed his eyes, but she was still there when his vision returned.

Their mouths opened against each other, their heads moving from side to side, their bodies pressed tightly together. Troy’s hands slid down her back and caressed her ass.

Sam took in a deep breath and decided to wait back by his boots.

“Hey, where’re you going?”

Sam pointed to his boots.

“Come on,” Troy said as he led the blue woman by the hand, up the beach. “We’ll sit on the rocks.” He waved toward a group of flat boulders to Sam’s left.

The woman sat back on the center boulder, her legs straight out, her hands behind her back, her breasts pointing up at the sun.

Troy sat close to her, his back to his brother.

Sam sat on the low boulder a little below them and watched the ocean. He sucked in a deep breath of humid, salty air.

"I told you she was quite a woman."

Sam nodded and shrugged and nodded again.

"Go on, look at her. See. She's changing color already."

Facing the sun, the woman's long hair streamed behind her in the slight breeze, the nipples of her full breasts were pointed. Troy was right, her skin was no longer blue, but seemed red.

"She'll turn pink and then flesh color." Troy touched her hair and she opened her eyes and smiled at him. "And her hair'll lighten until she's a blonde. Even her pubic hair."

Sam looked away from her pubic hair and noticed her toes were webbed. The movement of her hand drew Sam's gaze back up. She stroked Troy's face as her skin dried in the hot sun, as she turned pink and then slipped into a flesh color.

Sam watched the waves roll to shore. Looking up at the sky, he tried to spot a pesky pterodactyl, then reminded himself that it was true after all—there were no dinosaurs along the eastern hemisphere of Octavion—except in the oceans.

When he looked back at the woman, she was flesh-colored, her hair blonde, her pubic hair a shade darker. He felt his heartbeat rising.

The woman leaned forward and kissed Troy, her hands unbuttoning his shirt. She pushed it off and reached for his pants. Troy pulled his mouth away and shrugged at his brother.

"We do this a lot," Troy managed to say as the woman began to shove his pants down.

Sam stood, put his hands into the back pockets of his pants and walked back up the beach. At the base of the cliff, he stopped and tied his boots together and draped them over his shoulder. He climbed the cliff, the rocks somewhat cooler on his feet. At the top, he took a look down and they were at it all right, there on the flat boulder, the surf rolling to shore next to them.

He went to his brother's cabin and opened a cold beer.

Sam just finished his second beer when the door banged open and Troy stumbled in. Naked and pale, Troy fell to his knees and looked at his brother with a crooked smile, then slowly sank forward on the floor.

Sam pulled Troy up on the sofa and his brother coughed and grabbed the front of his shirt.

"She's quite . . . a . . . woman." Troy let go of the shirt, coughed again and managed to say, "I'll be all right. After some sleep." And he curled up in a fetal position on the sofa, the crooked smile back on his lips.

Sam went to the door but didn't see the woman. He walked across the lawn to the cliff; and she was down there on the rock, lying spread-eagle. He went back to his hovercraft and pulled out his binoculars. Focusing them on the woman he saw her move slightly.



She wasn't flesh colored anymore, she was as pale as Troy. Or maybe that was the sunlight?

Sam watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed and felt a chill along his back.

*What is she?*

On his way back to the cabin, Sam reached into the hovercraft and took out his blaster.

He checked his brother's pulse, and it was fine. He checked his brother's forehead and felt no fever. So he sat in the easy chair, facing the door, the blaster in his lap.

Bone weary from the trip, all Sam wanted was sleep. But he felt goose bumps on his arms when he thought about the woman. He figured he should call the Institute about her right away, or the Coast Guard. Or maybe he should call the university in Scarlet City.

His eyes burned from lack of sleep. He closed them for a moment. When he felt himself drifting, he got up and checked on Troy, who had rolled over on his belly.

Yawning and stretching, Sam spotted a movement in the door and wheeled. She stood in the doorway, leaning her right hand on the doorframe, her shoulder drooped forward. Pallid white, she seemed wobbly as she stood blinking at him.

He looked at the blaster on the easy chair. When he looked back at her, she was looking at Troy. Sam took two quick steps, scooped up his blaster and pointed it at her.

She twisted her head toward him and blinked again. He raised the blaster; but she didn't seem to notice it. He flipped it on and heard the reassuring, low-pitched hum. The blaster tingled in his hand with a slight vibration.

"Just stay where you are," he said.

She blinked again and smiled weakly.

He looked into her eyes. She wasn't human but he saw nothing alien whatsoever in those green eyes. Her wide eyes looked childlike, her stare unwavering. She moved toward him slowly, brushing her hair back with her hands, her hips rolling as she stepped toward him.

Sam backed away, all the way to the wall. He pointed the blaster between her breasts and gritted his teeth.

"Don't come any closer," he heard himself say as he began to squeeze the trigger. She continued forward and he knew he wouldn't shoot. He flipped off the blaster.

She stopped in front of him. She pulled her long hair away from her face and turned her head slightly, parting her lips, closing her eyes.

Sam heard the blaster hit the floor. He licked his lips and looked at hers only an inch away. She was beautiful . . . damn beautiful.

"Hey!" His brother's voice brought him back.

Troy was sitting up now and rubbing his belly. "How about getting some steaks out of the refrigerator? I'm starving."

The woman inched away from Sam. Turning to Troy, she smiled

and moved to him and curled up on the sofa next to him, her head on his shoulder.

Troy grinned at Sam and said, "She's mute. Did I tell you?"

"No." Sam wiped his sweaty hands on his shirt.

"Actually she makes a whistling sound when we make love, but she doesn't talk like us."

Sam nodded and moved on shaky legs into the kitchen. He found fresh steaks and two large potatoes and more beer.

She sat next to Troy, across the table from Sam and watched them eat. Her eyes darting, she rested her chin in the palm of her hand, her elbow on the table.

"She only eats seafood," Troy said. "I guess." He shrugged.

The woman crossed her arms beneath her breasts. Sam couldn't help thinking there was something fine and regal in her pose, the way she sat and turned her head, looking back and forth at the brothers.

"I call her Wanda," Troy said. "Remember Wanda?"

Sam shrugged and put his fork down. "She answer to that name? I mean, she understand when you call her?"

Troy shook his head and shoved another chunk of steak into his mouth.

Sam picked up his fork and took another bite, savoring the sharp taste of cooked meat. Crisp on the outside and juicy inside, it was very good. Only he couldn't keep his hands from shaking. Not enough to be noticed, but Sam felt jittery inside.

He reached for his beer and said, "The Institute's worried about you."

Troy shrugged.

"Your last samples and reports were sub-par."

Troy looked at Wanda and winked.

Sam felt his nerves start up again. He looked at Wanda and she gave him that regal look and he heard himself telling his brother, "You realize that . . . uh . . . she's the most amazing . . . creature . . . ever found on Octavion."

"Obviously." Troy grinned and blinked his light eyes. "She's quite a woman."

After dinner, as Sam slipped his dish into the dishwasher, he heard Troy and Wanda get up from the table and move into the living room. He added his brother's plate to the dishwasher and cleaned up the table.

He stepped into the living room just as Troy rolled on top of Wanda on the sofa.

"Uh," Sam said, and then went out. His hands still shaking, he stopped and leaned on the porch rail for a moment. In the distance the sun was sinking. Sam sucked in a deep breath and went to the cliff to watch the huge Octavion sun slip into the Painted Ocean.

The beauty of this treacherous world never ceased to amaze him. From its primeval forests and crystal seas, to its brightly colored hills and wondrous waterfalls, Octavion was the greatest *mystery* of the galaxy. A world inhabited by dinosaurs. A world to puzzle the greatest scientists.

Why?

Was this Earth as it was millions of years ago? Is this why it is here?

Someone once said the reason humans have flocked to Octavion was a search for Earth's past beauty. Sam had no idea. He and his brother were born here.

The shimmering orange orb seemed to sizzle as it fell along the distant horizon, turning the ocean violet and green and then purple. The waters gradually slipped into a deep navy blue before fading into gray and then into a blackness as black as sackcloth.

The moonless Octavion night came as thick as a veil. Sam leaned back on his elbow and watched the stars come out—first one, then another, then so many it looked truly like a Milky Way.

He lay back, his hands under his head and closed his eyes. He felt his steady breathing rid him of the jitters, lull him until he remembered Wanda—the real Wanda. Sam opened his eyes to the dark sky and let his mind roll back to dusty Bone Street back when they were boys. Wanda lived across the street. She was Troy's first sweetheart.

The more he thought about it, the more the blue woman looked like Wanda all grown up. Sitting up, he looked back at the cabin. Rising slowly, his knees stiff from exhaustion, Sam walked back to the cabin and looked in through the open front door. They were asleep on the sofa, their arms and legs entangled.

He went in and picked up the blaster. Standing over them, he had to look closely to see they were both breathing. Even more pale than before, they looked wasted.

Sam felt the hair standing along the back of his neck. He started to raise the blaster again, but fell back and moved out of the cabin again. He walked over to the cliff and sat heavily and looked out at the dark waters, the blaster cradled in his lap. The bright stars shimmered on the black-as-oil surface of the Painted Ocean. The water moved like living tar.

He smelled the salt in the damp air. Closing his tired eyes, he tried to think, tried to clear his weary mind.

*What am I going to do?*

He felt he had to do something, something drastic. That was his brother. He closed his eyes and thought back, again, to the dusty days of their youth, of sleeping in the same bed as kids, taking turns fanning the sheets to keep cool during the hot Octavion nights.

He remembered running. They ran everywhere, kicking up dust in their wake. He could see himself and Troy running, their skinny bodies lithe and young and full of mischief.

Sam closed his eyes, his throat tight with emotion.

*Something was happening to his big brother!* He had to do something.

Sam started to rise and saw another vision in his mind. He saw a pair of wide brown eyes so dark they looked black, and the round face of Thea as she smiled shyly at him, her small, soft mouth pouty and so beautiful.

He still missed her. He always missed her. For the millionth time, he remembered the face of his first love—a love that had drifted away, as fragile as a snowflake on a planet that never knew snow. For the millionth time he tried to figure how it fell apart, how it just blew away, like the dust from the street where he used run as a boy.

Sam heard Troy's voice and stirred and woke suddenly in the bright light of the Octavion dawn. Rising as he lay next to the cliff, he felt dizzy for a moment in confusion, then saw Troy waving at him from the cabin.

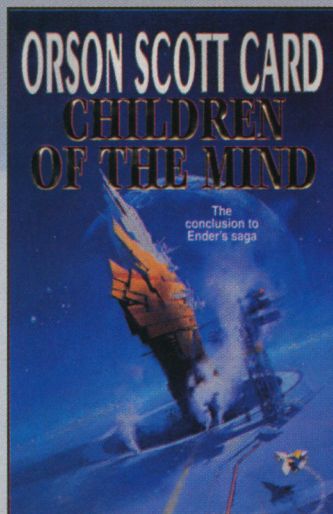
"Come on," Troy called out. "I need help!"

Sam stumbled up, reached down and picked up the blaster, his back cracking. He hurried over to the cabin as Troy went back inside. By the time he reached the front door, Troy had Wanda up and was trying to walk her out.

"We got to get her to the ocean." Troy blinked his sunken eyes at Sam and struggled forward. He looked even more pale now. Wanda hung lifelessly against him, her skin as white as chalk.

"Help me!" Troy gasped as he and Wanda fell forward.

Sam dropped the blaster and caught them and took most of Wanda's weight in his arm. Grabbing her around the waist, he lifted her and led the way down the three porch steps and across the grass to the cliff.



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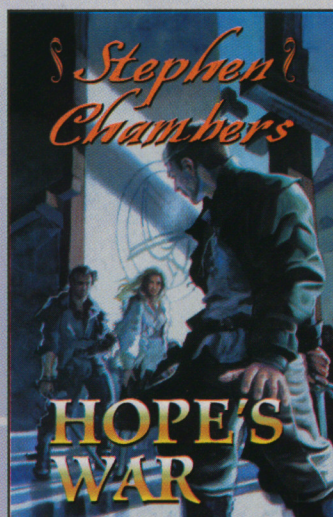
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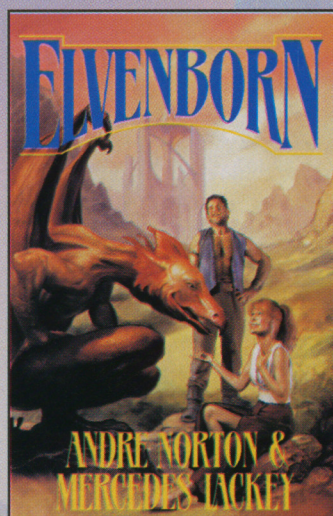
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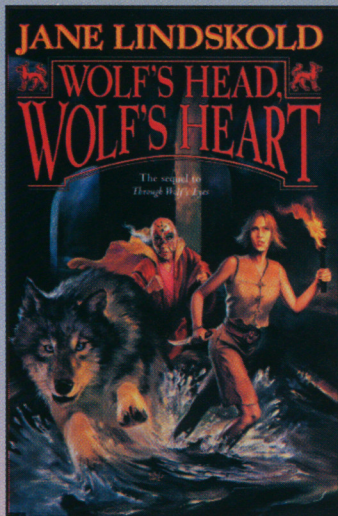
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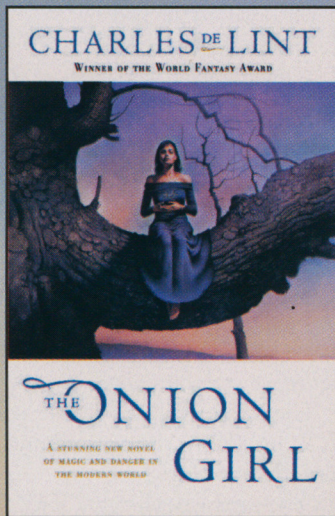
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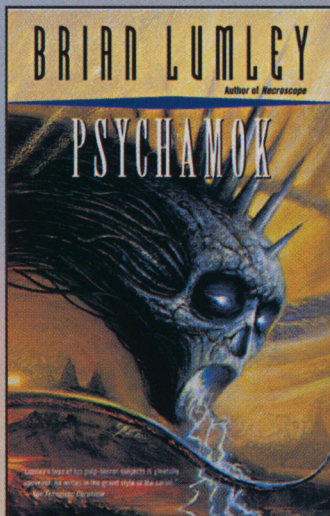
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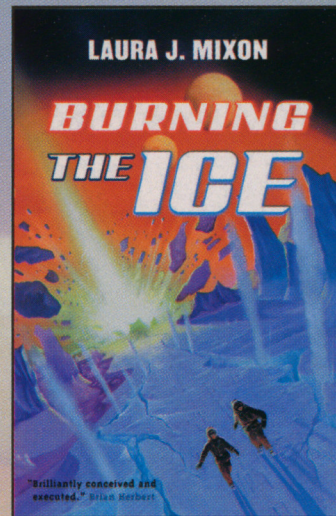


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Troy faltered once on the way down, but grunted and kept up. Sam took all of Wanda's weight in his arm as they moved slowly down to the beach.

"Hurry," Troy gasped.

They stumbled across the sand to the water, the early morning sun already casting their long shadows. As soon as the warm water struck their legs, Wanda moaned.

"All the way in," Troy said, falling away for a moment. He pulled Wanda and Sam into the surf until they were waist deep.

"Dunk her." Troy shoved at Wanda and Sam helped shove her under the water. She sank and rose immediately with the next wave.

"Move her!" Troy pushed her; and Sam grabbed her shoulders and pulled her. A larger wave slammed into Sam's back and shoved Wanda away momentarily. He pulled her back and felt her move with him now.

The next two waves, gentler, seemed to bring more movement to Wanda until she twisted and turned away from them and slipped away slowly.

"She's going to be all right," Troy said, wiping water from his face. He looked at Sam with glassy eyes and wavered as he stood. Sam grabbed him just as Troy swooned, and carried his big brother all the way back up the cliff to the cabin.

Catching his breath after dropping Troy on his bed, Sam moved back down the hall to the sofa to collapse himself, his arms aching and his legs twitching from overexertion.

Sam felt himself drifting into a deep sleep.

When he woke, with a start, he moved stiffly back to the bedroom. Troy was still asleep. Leaving the bathroom door open, Sam took a long, hot shower, brushing his teeth, climbing into a fresh shirt and pants. The shirt's crisp starch felt clean on his bare back, the cotton pants soft against his legs.

He put a pot of coffee on and watched it brew, pulling a steamy cup away as soon as it was ready. Strong and black, the coffee bit his tongue and warmed him immediately.

Sam went out on the front porch and sat on the steps and drank his coffee as he watched the multicolored ocean move to shore and then out again.

He heard a movement behind him, turned and saw Troy with a mug of coffee cradled in both hands.

"You quit wearing clothes altogether?" Sam leaned against the porch railing.

Troy nodded, took a shaky sip and cleared his throat. "I . . . uh . . . got something to tell you." He took another sip of coffee, then said, "I'm going to live with Wanda." He focused his light eyes on Sam. "In the ocean."

Sam stood, his throat suddenly dry.

"I don't mean right now," Troy said with a weak smile. "I'm too hungry." He turned and over his shoulder said he was going to make pancakes and hot sausage.

Sam followed him in, sitting at the kitchen table after he poured himself another cup of coffee.

"Remember the first time we tried making pancakes?" Troy shot Sam a mischievous grin.

Sam nodded. They nearly set fire to their mother's kitchen. He was eight.

"I'm a better cook now," Troy said, working two pans, one with pancakes, one sizzling with sausage. The sweet smell of cooked meat filled the room immediately. Sam felt his stomach rumble.

"Ow," Troy backed away from the stove. "Hand me the screen in there."

Sam dug out the mesh grease screen and passed it to Troy who put it over the frying pan.

"Ow!" Troy stepped back again. "Go get me a shirt."

As Sam stepped into the hall, he turned and walked backwards, watching the front door. He quickly pulled a red shirt off a hanger and grabbed a pair of Troy's pants that were draped over a chair in the bedroom and hurried back down the hall.

The sausage sizzled, the pancakes bubbled, and the kitchen door was wide open.

Sam dropped the clothes and ran out. He bolted around to the front of the cabin and across to the cliff. Troy was nearly at the beach. Sam hurried down the path. Slipping, he slammed his right knee on a boulder and took a moment to recover. Limping, he half-fell, half-ran down the cliff. He hit the beach running, but Troy was already knee-deep in the surf.

Wanda, all blue again, stood waist deep in water, her arms outstretched for Troy. He lunged for her and she wrapped her arms around him.

"Troy! Troy! Troy!" Sam's feet dug into the sand.

Troy, still hugging Wanda, turned their bodies and looked at his brother and smiled and sank into the water.

"No!" Sam fell into the surf, rose and stumbled forward and dove for the spot they had disappeared. The warm, salt water stung his face momentarily and he blinked and his vision cleared. Sinking deeper, he spotted movement to his left and pulled himself toward it.

He saw feet—Troy's feet and Wanda's blue legs.

They moved away quickly, too quickly.

Sam kicked his legs and pulled with his arms and surged after them.

He lost sight of them in the turbulence trailing behind their legs. He pushed himself and felt his hand strike something. He rolled to the side and saw it was Troy's foot. He grabbed it and held on.

The foot pulled him. Sam held on with both hands. The foot dragged him and then stopped and then, incredibly, slipped out of his fingers. He struggled to catch it again, but his lungs ached and he felt lightheaded.

He looked around and saw them, a distance away now and much lower, near a yellow reef. Hand in hand, Troy and Wanda stood on the ocean floor looking at him.

Sam dove for them. He pulled at the water and pushed his weakening legs. His air slipped out as he dove, bubbles leaking out of his mouth and his lungs felt as if they would explode.

He hurt. The pain was so intense and he fought it, fought against the water and then . . . he slammed into a wall of blackness and felt himself floating.

He felt hands on his arms and hands touching his legs as he drifted.

He tried to breathe.

Sharp salt water slammed into his mouth and he gagged.

The heat on his face caused Sam to blink.

Sunlight in his eyes and sand against his face—he tried to raise his head. It took a couple tries before he slowly crawled up on his knees. He felt the wet inside his clothes, against his skin, although they were dry outside. He rolled over on his back and brushed the sand from his right cheek.

Sam looked out at the turquoise waves and the shades of deep green water beyond. His throat burned. It took so much strength to stand, he had to widen his stance to keep his wobbly knees from folding. He waited long seconds until he could move.

Sam walked to the edge of the water and cupped his hands over his eyes and looked at the Painted Ocean, at the waves, at the water, at the void where his brother disappeared.

His brother!

He felt a pain in his chest, felt his eyes burning with tears, felt so empty inside and so helpless. He fell back on his rump and sank back on the sand and covered his eyes with his arms.

Bone Street—running behind his big brother in the dust, never able to catch Troy as they ran and played through endless days. Bone Street—following Troy around meeting other kids, stealing a first kiss beneath a yellow streetlight until their mother called them in. Bone Street—laughing so hard his side ached. Troy always, *always* made him laugh.

*The hovercraft.*

Sam sat up. He stood and stumbled up the beach. Catching himself, he went up the cliff on all fours. His arms were weak, his legs throbbing, he struggled to catch his breath. He tumbled to the top and crawled a few feet on the cool grass before standing. He jogged over to the hovercraft.

Maybe, he thought, he could spot them. Maybe he could spot Troy in the crystalline water. He smelled smoke and looked over at the cabin. A cloud of smoke filtered out the kitchen door; and he remembered the sausages and pancakes. He shook his dizzy head.

*Let it burn,* he told himself.

Climbing in the hovercraft, he moved to the controls and fell heavily in the pilot's seat. Sam's shaky fingers bounced across the computer panel. Lights came on inside the craft and the engine hummed to life and a hand fell on Sam's left shoulder.

He jumped and turned around to a pair of brown eyes so dark they looked like black star sapphires. The woman pulled back and blinked at him, twisted her head slightly, her pouty lips pursed. Her hair was longer and her face rounder, her skin pale blue, but it was Thea—all grown up.

She took two steps backward. Sam climbed out of the pilot's seat. The woman stared at him as she inched away, the sunlight streaming in the cabin bathing her pale-blue skin with dazzling white light.

A movement in the doorway caused Sam to turn. Troy's face leaned in, smiling as he said, "How do you like her?"

Sam moved around the co-pilot's chair and fell toward the door. Troy moved back out of his way and Sam jumped out. Troy stood, arms folded, his skin a deep, suntanned color now.

"You're all right?" Sam reached forward and grabbed his brother's shoulders to make sure he was there.

"I told you it would be all right." Troy punched Sam's shoulder lightly. "Hey, you almost let my cabin burn down." He pointed over his shoulder to Wanda coming out of the cabin. She was still pale blue.

Sam grabbed his brother's arm and said. "You're all right?"

"Humans don't change colors," Troy said. It took a second for Sam to figure what he meant.

"But . . ."

"Hey, I don't understand it either. But I could breath underwater. It was like my skin was absorbing oxygen straight from the water. I could feel it."

Wanda came up and tucked her arms around Troy's. She closed her eyes and faced the sun, her skin reddening as she stood.

Sam heard a movement behind him and turned back as the blue Thea climbed out of the hovercraft.

Leaning her back against it, she too faced the sun and her skin reddened. She shook out her dark hair, which showed brown highlights in the sunshine. Her hands pressed against the doorway, her feet parted slightly, her lips were extra pouty and so dark red they looked like over-ripe cherries. And her skin turned to flesh and she was Thea, all grown up.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Troy said, reaching over to tousle his brother's hair, as he'd done a million times before.

Sam looked down at her soft neck, at her full breasts and down to her round hips and thick mat of dark pubic hair, and down her shapely legs.

She *was* beautiful.

When he looked back up, the star-sapphire eyes were staring at him. Unblinking, round and luminous, the dark orbs stared at him with such a sadness. It surprised Sam. A tear fell from her left eye and rolled down her cheek. She blinked and a tear fell from her right eye.

She bit her lower lip and pushed herself away from the hovercraft. Reaching her right hand out hesitatingly, she stepped toward Sam. He took in a deep breath just as the tips of her fingers touched the side of his neck, pulled back and then touched his left cheek gently, very gently.

He heard Troy whispering to Wanda and felt them move away.

Thea's fingers rubbed the stubble of his beard.

Staring deeply into her eyes, Sam felt his heart thundering in his ears. He felt the dark jewels of her eyes pull him, caress him. He felt the heat of the sun on his head. He felt a coolness coming from her and a sweet smell of perfume, an hypnotic scent as sweet as any perfume he'd ever smelled on any woman.

Another tear rolled out of her right eye and she pulled her hand away from his face and wiped the tear off her cheek. She inched closer, right against him, and raised her arms around his neck. She pulled him to her and hugged him.

Gently, she hugged him, her body barely touching his, for long seconds. Then, slowly, she pulled her head back and looked into his eyes again. He felt her breath on his lips. She tilted her head slightly; and her lips parted like the petals of a flower and she kissed him. So softly, she kissed his lips as softly as velvet.

He kissed her back and felt her tongue touch his. He worked his tongue back against hers. He felt her body press against him, her hands moved up and down his neck. He put his hands on her hips and her skin was as silky as satin.

Sam felt a well of emotion in his chest, a tightness in his throat as they kissed. He felt tears roll out of his eyes and tried to catch his breath without ending the kiss.

It was too pleasurable. *Too* pleasurable!

Sam felt a shudder along his back. He pushed his hands against her hips and tried to pull away, but could not.

She pulled him tighter, rubbing her body against him. He felt the weight of her breasts pressing him, the point of her pubic bone against his left thigh. He felt his hands cup her ass and squeeze as she kissed him deeper.

*Fight it*—he told himself. He remembered Troy's pale skin after loving Wanda.

He pulled his mouth away and gasped for breath. She pulled him back, kissing his lips furiously, again and again.

*Fight it!* And yet, he kissed her back, just as furiously.

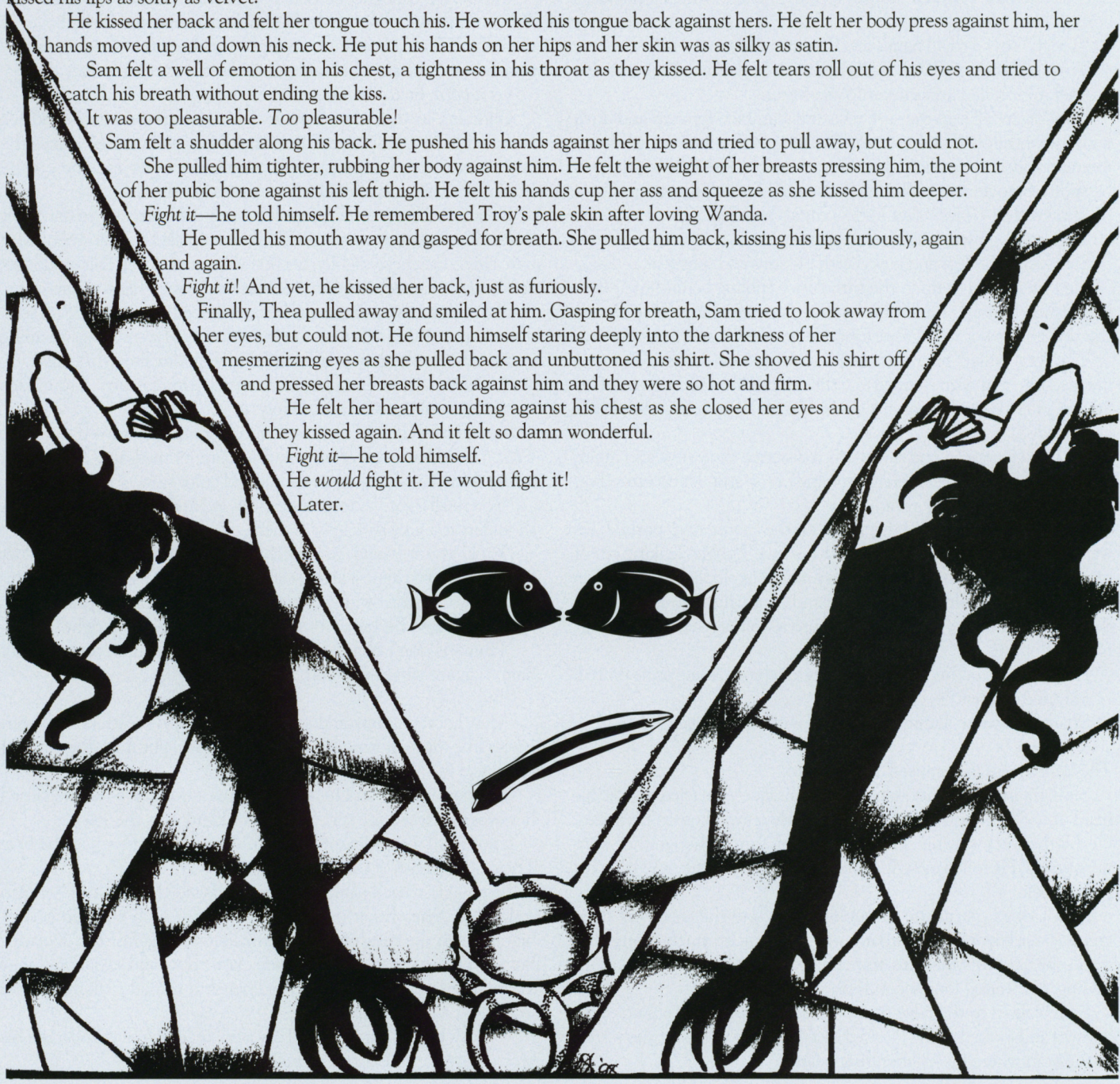
Finally, Thea pulled away and smiled at him. Gasping for breath, Sam tried to look away from her eyes, but could not. He found himself staring deeply into the darkness of her mesmerizing eyes as she pulled back and unbuttoned his shirt. She shoved his shirt off and pressed her breasts back against him and they were so hot and firm.

He felt her heart pounding against his chest as she closed her eyes and they kissed again. And it felt so damn wonderful.

*Fight it*—he told himself.

He *would* fight it. He would fight it!

Later.



# Spider Robinson:

## An Interview by Tom Piccirilli

Since he began writing professionally in 1972, Spider Robinson has won 3 Hugo Awards (Science Fiction's top honor), a Nebula Award, the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, the E.E. ("Doc") Smith Memorial Award (Skylark), the Pat Terry Memorial Award for Humorous Science Fiction, and Locus Awards for Best Novella and Best Critic; over twenty of his books are still in print, in ten languages. His short work has appeared in magazines around the planet, from *Omni* and *Analog* to *Xhurnal Izobretatel i Rationalizator* (Inventor & Innovator Journal; Moscow), and in numerous anthologies.

Some of his most recent publications are the novels *Free Lunch*, *Callahan's Key*, and *Lifehouse*, as well as the collections *User Friendly* and *by Any Other Name*.

A CD-ROM computer game, *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, adapted by Josh Mandel, was released in 1998 by Legend Entertainment/Take Two, featuring original music performed by Spider with legendary guitarist Amos Garrett. The Usenet newsgroup alt.callahans, inspired by the Callahan series, was rated the 151st largest newsgroup by bits posted, 172nd by messages posted (placing it in the top 1%), and propagates to over 60% of all Usenet sites—very high for a non-pornographic "alt." group.

Spider was born in the Bronx, on 3 successive days (they had to handle him in sections), and holds a Bachelors degree in English from the State University of New York. In 1992 he was the Toastmaster for the 50th World SF Convention in Orlando. He was book reviewer for *Galaxy*, *Analog* and *New Destinies* magazines for nearly a decade, and has been a regular opinion columnist for the *Toronto Globe And Mail* (Canada's national newspaper) since 1996.

He has been married for over 25 years to Jeanne Robinson, a Boston-born writer, modern dance choreographer, former dancer, and teacher of dance and the Alexander Technique; she was Artistic Director of Halifax's Nova Dance Theatre during its 8-year history. The Robinsons collaborated on the Hugo-, Nebula- and Locus-winning 1976 classic novel *Stardance*, which created the concept and principles of zero-gravity dance, and on its sequels *Starseed* and *Starmind* (Jeanne was on NASA's short list for a Space Shuttle seat, to try out zero-gee dance in practice—until the Challenger Tragedy ended the Civilian in Space program.) Their first two books were reissued together in one volume as *The Star Dancers* by Baen Books. Spider and Jeanne met in the woods of Nova Scotia in the early 1970s, and have lived for the last 12 years in British Columbia, where they raise and exhibit hopes. (They've just begun a fourth



Spider and Jeanne Robinson

collaborative novel, as yet untitled.) Their daughter Terri is currently Print Production Coordinator for *Martha Stewart Living Magazine*.

For further information see his website at [www.spiderrobinson.net](http://www.spiderrobinson.net).

TP: I know that you've been spending a good deal of time in Key West over the last few years. In your latest Callahan novel, *Callahan's Key*, you move the gang en masse from their long-time residence on Long Island down to Florida. Now in *The Free Lunch* you use a Disneyland-ish backdrop called

Dreamworld for a magical story involving—possibly—aliens and otherworldly critters. Do you feel that the new setting changes your writing sensibility to any extent?

SR: My writing sensibility, such as it is, pretty much changes with every new book. Each setting is new, for me: so far, I've never written two books in a row with the same setting. Out of 30 books there have been two and a half set in Callahan's Place, two set in Mary's Place, two set in Lady Sally's House, and now I'm just writing my second book set in The Place, in Key West. The rest are all independent, novels or collections with settings as varied as New York City, rural upstate New York, Halifax, rural Nova Scotia, Vancouver, High Earth Orbit, and the neighborhood of Titan. So I've never spent enough time in any one setting to grow bored of it. Knock wood.

Both Key West (my Key West) and Dreamworld are, of course, Magical Places. . . . and yes, there is a different sensibility to working on either of them than there is to working on a book with a more realistic setting like Harlem. Magical places are fun to spend time in, so I sit down to work with a light heart. As I type this, I'm working on the sequel to *Callahan's Key* (working title *Callahan's Con*), so the area immediately around my desk is papered with photos Jeanne and I took on different visits to Key West, and I can almost smell the limes and frangipani and fried clams.

TP: Do you consider *The Free Lunch* to be a Young Adult novel in any capacity or are you adverse to that label? Or any label for that matter?

SR: I don't mind labels, I guess, as long as they aren't used to conceal my work from somebody who might want to read it. If a librarian or bookstore owner wants to put a few copies of *The Free Lunch* in the YA section, I think that's great: I didn't consciously intend it to be a Young Adult book, but it certainly does seem to have turned out that way, sort of. But if they're only going to give me one slot on the shelves, I'd much rather they put *The Free Lunch* with my

other books, where my regular readers are expecting to find me. I'm certainly not so foolish as to turn down a whole new audience...but I'm also not in a position to gamble everything on finding one.

I once had the audacity to ask Robert Heinlein how he wrote his famous SF

juveniles—as if such a thing could be explained in a sentence. He pulled it off, of course. “I write an adult science fiction novel, the best I can,” he said, “and then I cut the sex.” In that moment I understood why I had loved him so dearly when I discovered him at age six: he was the only adult then in my world who wasn't talking down to me.

In the case of *The Free Lunch*, I simply set out to tell a story I wanted to tell . . . and only noticed after I was done that there was no sex at all in it. Kind of surprised me, actually. . . .

TP: Me too, to be honest. Considering that your books are very open about sexual situations and the occasional polyamorous relationship, I would think you might be more highly edited than someone who wrote a standard groping hardcore scene. Some folks seem to find the thoughtful, contemplative, emotional approach to sex a bit more intimidating. Do you find that's the case?

SR: I don't, myself . . . not from reader or critical response, anyway. But I have noticed that after the fact, publishers are rather less enthusiastic and energetic about marketing a warehouse book than they are about a bar book. With the inevitable result that sales suffer, “proving” their point. I've had a third Lady Sally book in the back of my mind for over a decade, one that explains why the House closed. . . . but so far I've never found an editor who'd buy it, and I've more or less given up trying.

TP: Have you ever been censored?

SR: Save for the above equivocation, no. Not before the fact. Except for matters of explicit language in a magazine or newspaper appearance, not once in twenty-seven years has an editor ever said to me, “you can't say that,” or “that bit has to come out.” I have, once or twice, had an editor say, “If you choose to take out or soften that scene, you'll get a lot more library sales”—but on such occasions, they've always left that final decision to me. Surprising to me, and most gratifying.

I have noticed that, although I usually supply it to them along with all the other reviewer-blurbs and other promo material I've collected over the years, so far no publisher has ever chosen to use, in promoting my work, the rave review I once got for *Mindkiller* from *Bondage Life* magazine. . . .

TP: Camaraderie, tutelage, and enlightenment have always important subtexts in your work. You often achieve a poignancy not found in most current speculative fiction. In *The Free Lunch* your twelve-year-old protagonist Mike lives among the inner workings of Dreamworld and is eventually found and educated by the nurturing midget Annie, who rightfully enough plays the “Mother Elf.” Why is the mentor/student relationship so important to you?

SR: Because I owe it most of what I am. When you're weird, as I've always been, it really helps to have someone who'll assure you that you're not *too* weird, and helpfully point out to you some of the things that weirdness is *useful* for.

I've been fortunate enough to have some great mentors. My first, at age six, was Robert Heinlein, followed closely by Theodore Sturgeon. Then in freshman year of college a guy named Jim Zogby took me under his wing and taught me some of the more important ropes; last I heard of the Zog he was an assistant campaign manager for Jesse Jackson. My first mentor as a writer was Ben Bova, who found my first story in the slush pile, published it in *Analog* in February 1973, and over the course of the next year or so, taught me

most of what I know about writing fiction for a living. (See the essay “Mentors” in *User Friendly* for details.) And of course for the past twenty-six years my principal mentor has been the Soto Zen Buddhist monk Buchi Eihei (“dancing wisdom, eternal peace”), A.K.A. Jeanne Robinson, to whom I have the honor and privilege to be married.

If it had not been for *all* of these folks, I would today be someone far less happy. One of the things I like best about the alt.callahans universe in cyberspace is that every time I tiptoe through there incognito, I look around and see people mentoring each other a lot. People half a planet apart, sometimes. That warms me.

TP: You have a very positive outlook about the Internet as a way for people to bond together and grow, as opposed to other SF writers like, say, Harlan Ellison, who feels it's had a negative impact on our society. Do you have any reservations about the World Wide Web and its capacity to touch us or is it ultimately no different than any other technological leap—the advent of the telephone, radio, television—that draws us closer together?

SR: Sure, I've got reservations. Humans have an unblemished record of misusing every technology they devise, sooner or later . . . and it never seems to work as well as claimed. But all I can tell you is that when I was a kid, I'd have given a few of my less-used fingers and toes to meet another kid as strange as I was, or a grownup who didn't think I was nuts...or even just a place to hang out without being afraid...and nowadays that can be accomplished in an afternoon with a couple of mouse-clicks, no matter *how* weird or skinny or funny-looking you are. That just has to be good news—for the geeks, and therefore for the race. We're starting to get it through our heads that we're *all* neighbors . . . that there's really just the one big family.

Now if only the damn Internet *worked* better. . . .

TP: You've said that one of the basic tenets in your fiction is that “shared pain is lessened, and shared joy is increased.” Do you find it odd that your chosen profession is one of the most solitary occupations in the world?

SR: Well . . . it is and it isn't. Even when Jeanne doesn't take a byline, she's so closely involved with everything I write, on a day to day basis, that she might as well. When it's a “solo” book, first I type it by myself, and then she reads it and tells me how to fix it. When it's a collaboration, she sits next to me and fixes it as I type.

Jeanne aside, I've had experience working with other people, and working alone, and I generally prefer working alone. The work itself is the sharing . . . and I get direct feedback from my readers in a hundred ways, every day.

TP: You've mentioned that you make a deliberate effort to alternate between the Callahan novels and non-Callahan books although you've felt a pressure from the industry to continue on solely in the critically successful and well-beloved series. Do you also feel somewhat constrained by your fan base?

SR: No, not really. I don't think I've ever once had a fan say to me, “I wish you'd stop writing that other crap and just concentrate on the Callahan stuff.” For that matter, I can't even recall one saying, “I like your Callahan books *much* better than the others.” I just got back from Comic Con International 2001 in San Diego, the largest con I've ever attended—over 45,000 attendees!—where I signed books for a new record of three straight hours . . . and one thing I noticed was that slightly less than half of the books I was asked to autograph were Callahans. My personal experience has been that my fans are prepared to give me plenty of latitude; by now they seem willing to trust me to take them to someplace they'll enjoy, even if they haven't necessarily been there before.

TP: Baen Books has reprinted quite a number of your titles, most

notably your short story collections, *Callahan's Lady*, *Telemath*, and the forthcoming *Star* trilogy co-written with your wife, Jeanne. Tor has also recently reprinted *Time Travelers Strictly Cash*, your second Callahan book. Do you feel this is a resurgence period for your work or is it just a natural part of having a lengthy career?

SR: Both. That so many books exist is, as you suggest, simply a natural part of a career approaching its third decade. But that there is now a resurgence period—translation: that it is currently possible to buy so many of them—is due mostly to the incredible acumen, intelligence and industry of my friend and agent Eleanor Wood. She really ought to have been included in my list of mentors, above, now that I think about it. It's mostly thanks to her tireless efforts that any of my backlist is still in print, let alone most of it. Seven books in a single year ain't bad . . . and this is the second such year in a row for her.

TP: Considering your knowledge of the field and all its key members, is there any reason why you've never edited an SF anthology along the way?

SR: Actually, I *did* edit one, once, many years ago, Called *the Best of All Possible Worlds, Volume One*. That you've never heard of it is a clue to why I never did it again.

It was Jim Baen's idea, and it seemed a good one: I picked my five all-time Favorite SF Stories That Nobody's Ever Heard Of . . . then went to their authors, and asked them each to pick a Favorite SF Story That Nobody's Ever Heard Of, to accompany their own story. Result: the best of all possible worlds. That was the theory, anyway. "It'll be easy," Jim said. "Hardly any work, and you get most of the money." I picked terrific overlooked stories by Heinlein, Sturgeon, Niven, Ing and William Goldman, contacted them for their picks, and started securing reprint permissions. In the fullness of time, a damn good anthology came together, with some startling choices. Robert Heinlein's pick, for instance, was a century-old religious fable by Anatole France, "Our Lady's Juggler." (For which it turned out no satisfactory English translation could be found; I was forced to take a crack at it myself, and gratified when Robert approved it.)

But when the dust finally settled, I had worked about twice as hard as I would have writing a novel of my own, and made no money at all. Securing copyright permissions is *hard*, and expensive. It ended up taking every penny of the advance, plus a few bucks of my own money, to produce the first volume. And in the immortal words of Roger Miller, sales of that volume started out slow . . . but then tapered right off. Even Jim Baen, who dreamed it up in the first place, is unwilling to try reissuing it; Eleanor just pitched it to him last month, without success. Today, very occasionally a fan will ask me when Volume Two is coming out; for some reason my laughter makes them turn pale. . . .

TP: You've always been a socially conscious writer, dealing with contemporary issues and conflicts. How do you think society's transition over the past twenty-five years has affected your work? Or has it?

SR: Hoo. That's a large question.

I've benefitted, mostly. For one thing, it's now a more relaxed society in some senses; that is, today I can (apparently) get away with saying things and/or using language that no writer of, say, Robert Heinlein's generation could have dared attempt. The only thing a writer *may not* do in print anymore is suggest that men might not all be pond scum, and even that taboo may fall in time. In another sense, the world has become far *from* relaxed, in the past quarter-century—has become so tight and mean-spirited and fearful that a

writer like me seems more useful than ever. For awhile there back in the 60s and early 70s it seemed like maybe everybody already knew what I had to say . . . but you did say "twenty-five years," and 1975 is roughly when we as a society collectively decided to give up boring space travel, burn good fossil fuel instead of evil uranium, let the poor and mentally ill fend for themselves, quit feeding those useless artists, put all our faith and most of our assets into imaginary zeros and ones, warehouse Grandma and Grandpa, let TV raise the kids, and buckle down to getting stinking rich, or at least out of debt, using our actual homes as game-pieces, and voluntarily spending ever-increasing sums to buy our own electronic slave-collars (called "beepers," "pagers," "cell phones," "PDAs," "Palm Pilots," and "PCs with TCP/IP."). When we all went insane, in short. There has been plenty of work for a humorist—a target-rich environment, if you will—and plenty of challenge for an optimist.

"May you live in interesting times," is supposed to be a curse. Not for writers...

TP: Your short fiction output has slowed a bit in recent years—is it simply not worth your time to do stories anymore or is it because of the dwindling magazine marketplace? Or some other reason?

SR: I'm not sure the magazine marketplace is necessarily dwindling, so much as undergoing metamorphosis. Unlike paper pages, cyberpages will expand or contract as necessary to fit the text, without any of the really crucial stuff (the ads) getting squeezed. So fewer constraints will apply to cyberfiction, once that's up and running. Magazine editors have often had to ask me to cut a story, to fit the hole they had to put it in—or worse, cut it themselves as they pasted it up. That won't happen with a cybermagazine: the story can be as long as it needs to be. Unfortunately the strongest cyberzine I've seen so far, Ben Bova and David Gerrold's *Galaxy Online*, lasted less than a year . . . and the recent dot.com collapse suggests that it will be a long while before another one that good comes along. We'll see.

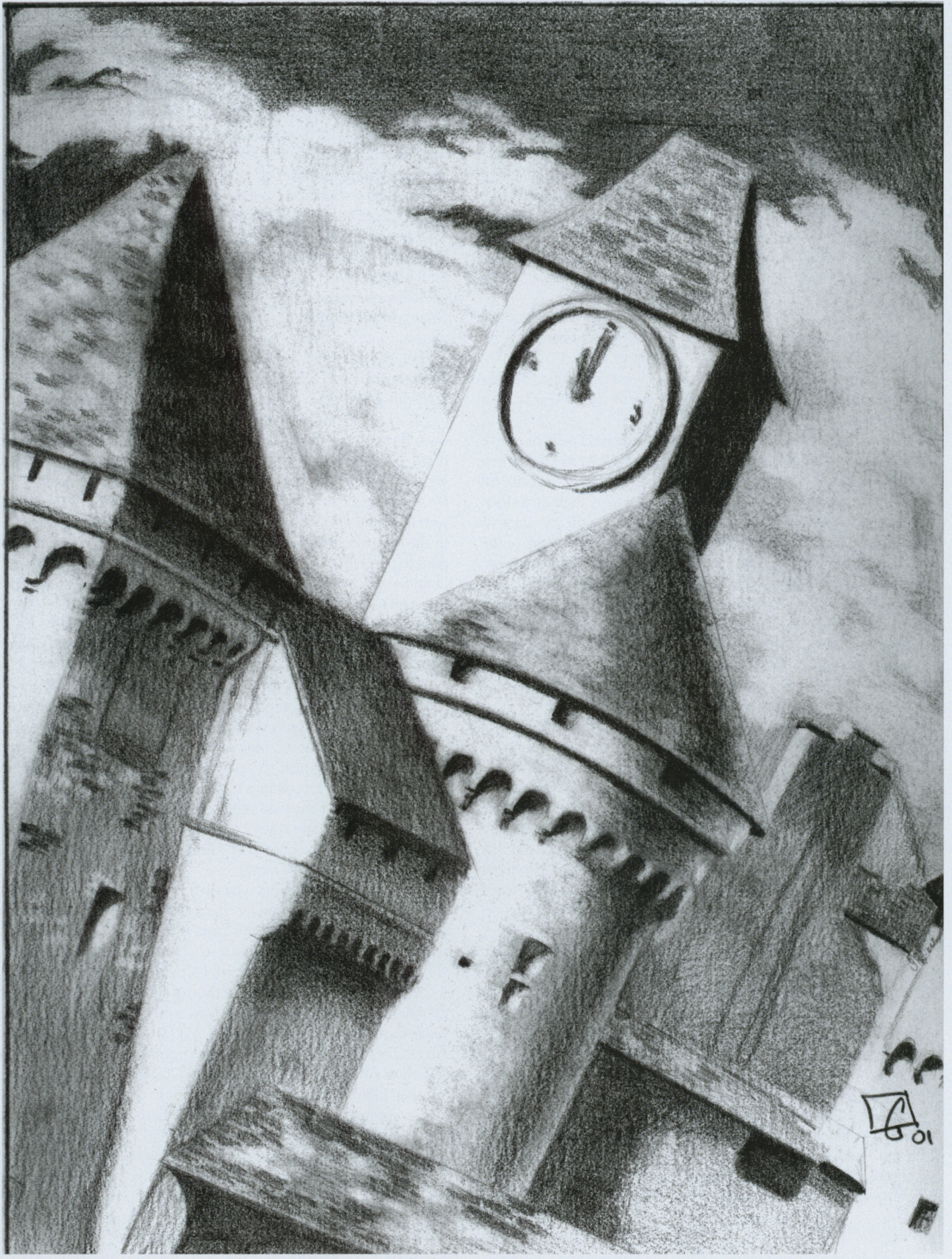
As you point out, I've all but stopped writing short stories in recent years. Not by conscious intent, I just don't seem to get short story ideas anymore. And as you suggest, this may be because the same amount of time spent working on a novel pays about ten times as well . . . and in advance. Another large part of it is that I've been writing regular Op-Ed columns for Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, for the past several years. They use up most of my short-work energy, and pay a lot better than *Asimov's* or *Analog* can. But I'm certainly not opposed to writing short stories, and will write the next one that occurs to me.

TP: Tell us a little about whatever else is next for you.

SR: Let's see. In September, Baen Books will reissue the first of the Lady Sally books, *Callahan's Lady*; if you don't know that series, think of Callahan's Place . . . but in a warehouse rather than a bar. (It introduces characters who will be prominent in the novel I'm writing now.) In November, a lifetime of training will finally pay off for me: Jeanne and I have been invited to be Celebrity Judges at this year's Cannabis Cup in Amsterdam. At last, a job I'm qualified for. And in February, Tor will complete the reprinting of all three original Callahan's Place books, by releasing *Callahan's Secret*—with yet another fabulous Warhola cover painting. And of course I'll be Toastmaster for the 2003 WorldCon in Toronto. That's all I can recall at the moment.

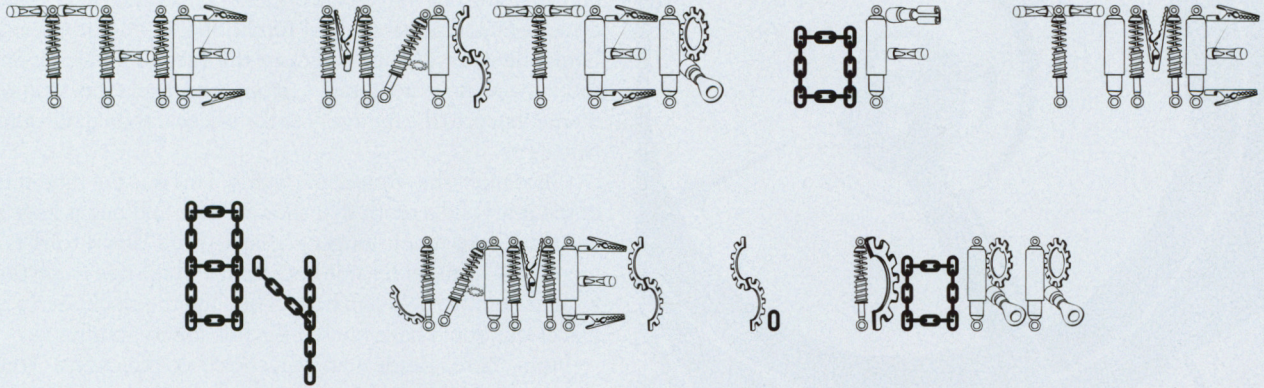
TP: Thanks for your time, Spider, it's much appreciated.

SR: Right back at you, Tom Piccirilli. Sometime again. . .





James Dorr is no stranger to the readers of *Fantastic Stories*. His story "Cindy" appeared in our Spring 2001 issue, and his work appeared in *Pirate Writings* way back when. James' new collection, *Strange Mistresses*, is due out from *Dark Regions Press* this year. James has over 130 short stories and novelettes in print. Some of his credits include: Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*, *The Best of Cemetery Dance*, *Aboriginal* and many others.



Bezzabet Pot heard the soft whirring before they had even come round the point that protected the harbor of Kolanta-Nihi. The Warning Wheel turning. Instinctively she glanced up at the sun, just entering Third Dawn Hour. She heard, in her mind, the faint, wooden *click!* of the rising release bar, then heard with everyone else aboard the *vaporetto* the harsh, ringing chime as the hour weight fell, followed swiftly by two more.

She saw, in her mind's eye, the tower that soon enough would be in full view. Its gilded sphere representing the sun rising one sixth-part more up the tall building's face, to reach zenith at Noon Hour, then fall by increments during the Post Noon until it was time to be replaced by the two glowing moon-spheres that marked the dark's passage. Rising, falling, Day Hours, Night Hours, adjusted by season by concentric gear tracks, yet each and every day always the same.

Then, clearing the point, she heard the gasp of the boat's other passengers, most, no doubt, seeing the Clock for the first time, high on its hill that rose up behind the island republic's capital city. The tower itself seemed to reach past the clouds, thrusting its way through the morning mist that still clung to the long, narrow buildings below it, the docks and warehouses, the inns and bazaars, the gardens and fountains, the latter supplied by the great clock's runoff. And beyond the tower she knew was the millrace, the lake and the great wheel that gave it its power, that turned not only the gears and conveyers but, deep below the escapements and gear-paths, the world's own turnings beneath the sun and stars. This the people of Kolanta-Nihi knew.

This Bezzie knew too.

Yet she, hired apprentice to the Clockkeeper, returning from upcoast where she had been visiting her mother's family, had eyes instead only for the *vaporetto*, the craft that she sailed on. She noted its change of course by the plume-trail beyond its stern, curving to take them *away* from the harbor.

"Captain?" she asked, threading her way aft past the softly hissing fire-kettle, to where a stout, dark-haired woman crouched at the helm.

The captain pointed, and Bezzie now made out two masts to their port side, tall and lateen-rigged, all but their peaks still hidden in fog. She saw, on the aftermast, sunlight glinting, rhythmically, much like the great clock's ticking, even now dimly heard over the starboard rail.

"You see its signal," the captain said. "It's an oversea clipper, too deep to pass over the harbor reef. The other *vaporetti* will be out to

offload its cargo, but, since we are closest, we've been called to it to take on a passenger."

Bezzie nodded. The *vaporetti* were shallow-draft boats, powered not by sail like the big ocean-goers, but by the jetting of boiling water—steam—over their high, often intricately carved sterns. Thus they avoided the contrary wind currents this close to land and were so used for coast travel as well as tenders.

And, had she had the choice. . . .

No, she thought. Best not think about that now. One-fourth nixie—water sprite—on her mother's side, she had once wished to be a coast-boat pilot. Or better an engineer, in charge of the kettle and its brass connections, the mix of water and air that made steam.

Nixies knew water, as all island folk did, but more so than most were sensitive to its workings and power. Its playings with air as spray. Foam and wave-crest. But—she remembered her father's words to her the day she had first left home:

"Mind always to do as you are told, Bezzie. To mind the Clockkeeper. Remember, without the great clock's regulating of time, where would we be then? Where would we all be then. . . .?"

Her father, who knew not the wishes of nixies despite his marriage. Or even of young women only part nixie. . . .

The sun burst forth then, driving away the fogs last tendrils and Bezzie saw the great ship loom up at their side, its brightly painted planks glistening above her. She heard the thump of a rope ladder's falling to strike on their foredeck.

She saw the clipper's passenger climb down, a young man, black bearded, mustachioed, slender, dressed in red silk that clung tightly to his limbs. Gracefully he alighted, then waved to the sailors above him, sweeping his plumed hat in a jaunty salute. Then . . . seeing Bezzie standing, her mouth agape, just before the *vaporetto* mate ran to escort him into the boat's cabin . . . he smiled, white teeth flashing.

He smiled at Bezzie.

She shook her head. What? So a man had smiled at her, that was all. Yet her knees felt weak. Her thoughts just before then ran back through her head.

*The wishes of young women only part nixie. . . .*

While over the bow as the *vaporetto* began its slow, curving course back toward the harbor, she only dimly heard the quadruple *clang!* of the great clock's chiming Fourth Dawn Hour.



Bezzie Pot felt the sun's heat on her shoulders even through the thick tower walls as, oil flask hung on its thong around her neck, and she climbed the steps of the pendulum chamber. Reaching the top, she inspected the rocking of the verge against the crown wheel, closing her ears to the hollow *boom! . . . boom!*—the great clock's "ticking"—one beat each ten seconds as the pendulum finished its arc, releasing one verge-pallet, then, as it swung back, engaging the other against the next wheel tooth. She wrote a few words in the book she carried, then checked the escape pinion, transferring motion—start . . . stop, start . . . stop—the regulation of time in exact moments, six to the minute—to the oak gear train that stretched out below her.

Once more she wrote some words. This was the time-train—one of the gears had a tooth that showed wear and might have to be re-carved before much longer—that led her down to the "central arbor," the huge center axle built from a whole tree trunk that slowly rotated exactly once each hour. This, had the clock been a common dial clock, would have housed the hub for an hour hand.

From there, Bezzie had her choice of directions: Tomorrow's inspection would take her below, through the gears and chain drives that carried the sun sphere and moon spheres up and down outside the tower where all could see them. Two days from now she would climb above, to follow the striking-train up to the roof, beneath which she would check the brass locking plate, slotted in groups of one to six, that raised in turn the cedar release bars controlling the warning wheel—one almost dizzyingly fast rotation for each of the Dawn Hours, the Post Noon, the Evening Hours, the Hours of Past-Midnight—that dropped the stone weights that rang out the time on the iron chime below.

Today, though, she checked the arbor itself, its gears to the pinions that governed the other trains, then followed out the final gear sequence that transmitted the power to turn the clock's workings. This, an almost mirror image of the one from the verge-crown escapement she had checked already, led down toward the tower base, bringing her out to the side of the tower through a series of lengthening pinions, thence to a tunnel that took her outdoors and into the bright sun. Directly at her feet now was the millrace, frothing with water that dropped to the wheel below, slowly turning it and, through its great hub, the timing of not just the clock but the planet.

The clock controlled time, she knew. Everyone knew that. The clock was responsible for maintaining the orderly flow of hours for the entire island-continent of Telunoc, as well as the outlying islands and oceans—perhaps for the whole universe as well. Its many Clockkeepers' successive improvements, its verge, its escapement, its striking- and power-trains, time-trains and crown wheel, its vast swinging pendulum, oak gears, brass fittings, were not just time's measure, but were its creation.

And yet, now, she doubted.

After all, as she came to know it, repairing its great gears, oiling it, readjusting its belts and chains, was it not still nothing more than just a machine? Huge, yes. Imposing. Its tower and outworks took up a whole mountain! But still no more magic than . . . well . . . *vaporetti*, that ran on no more than the simple boiled mixing of air and water, the frothing of steam-vapor out through their stern pipes.

And yet . . .

Bezzie Pot was nothing, however, if conscientious. She shook those thoughts from her. She looked down, frowning, into the millrace and pulled the measure rod out from its brackets above the slowly turning water wheel. Thrusting it into the millrace's flow, she found that the level had lowered since her last week's checking. She

wrote that down also. The summer, despite the fogs of its mornings, had been hot and dry, even before her yearly time taking to visit her family.

The sun seemed to hang in the sky at its zenith, not wanting to give way to night and its two moons, the one silver-smooth and huge and round, the other a glittering jewel-point some islanders wished on. Bezzie had wished on it too that first evening, after she had returned to her master, Tyche, the Clockkeeper. She had wished she might do her work well, of course, bringing her family its full share of honor. She wished she might see her uncle more often, the one in whom nixie blood seemed to run strongest, and who knew the merfolk and told her their gossip. And she had wished, also—a fleeting wish, surely, but sometimes the Jewel-Moon respected those most of all. . . .

“Bezzabet Pot!” his voice had called to her. How he had found out her name she did not know. She had just finished her tour of the millrace, pitch-pot in hand, the first she had made since her return from upcoast. Having inspected the joints for tightness, she had been starting her slow climb down the great stone-and-earth dam to check it for leaks, lest the lake it contained sink below the inlet that fed the millrace, when the words rang out, as loud as a clock chime.

She nearly fell—nearly dropped her container, still bubbling with hot pitch. A moment ago, the glade below the dam had been deserted.

But now a voice called to her. *Faerie?* she wondered. Slowly she looked down and saw, not an elf or sprite, nor any other of the sorts of island folk she might have expected this far up above the city, but rather the smiling face of the Stranger—the one she had seen on the *vaporetto*.

She looked down and saw he no longer wore red silk, but now was more sensibly clad for the country in unbleached linen, even if still dressed more richly than she in her rough, brown, homespun blouse and trousers. And he was still handsome, just as she remembered. Even if he wore a slouch hat this time rather than one topped with bright plumes and feathers.

“I am Bezzie Pot,” she called down as she clung to the side of the earth dam.

“I am Alexis!” the voice called back up. “I wished to tell you—you are beautiful, Bezzie!”

Frightened, she nearly dropped her pitch-pot a second time as she scrambled back up to the top of the earthwork. Because she *had* wished it that night when the Jewel-Moon had just risen over the high clock tower, that she might again see this black-bearded stranger, so young and so dashing, and that he might speak to her.

Bezzie Pot, however, had been realistic—even then. To say she was *beautiful?* That was too much to ask! Frightened by what she had thought might be signs of her wits going from her, she had looked down again from the lake’s edge and found him no longer there. Hastily she had finished her work, replacing a stone or a clod of earth here and there where it looked like the dam showed signs of wearing, and, still trembling with fright, returned to the tower.

Now she remembered Tyche’s words to her when she had reported what she had seen. “A stranger?” he had said. “Why would one come through the woods where you saw him? If he had come to see the clock, as travelers sometimes do, he would have taken the road directly up to the tower. But *I* would have seen him then, and I saw no one.”

“Yes,” she had answered, and Tyche had let her go. But he *had* been there. And later she had seen him again and not only had they

spoken together, but this time he kissed her.

Now, however, she gazed alone past the top of the millrace. Directly below her, a farmer dressed in forest green buckram was driving her oxen down the tower road, past the bend where it entered the forest. Below that, the city lay sleeping beneath the afternoon sun, its marketplace awnings flapping slowly in a lazy sea wind, while beyond, in the harbor, dredges were working as they had been this half year or more, deepening the channel over the reef so that some day even the largest of the blue-water clippers, as large as the one the stranger had come on, could enter the port despite their draught without needing to offload their cargo to tenders.

She wondered as she circled the tower, gazing up now at the hanging sun sphere clicking another notch down its long track, then the slots and tracks for the nighttime’s moon spheres, and then the ancillary tracks for showing the weeks and the months and the tides, if, once the harbor’s improvement was finished, there would still be much work for *vaporetti*. The coast trade, of course, would still keep some busy, but roads were being improved as well, and she had heard that some of the dwarves that lived deep in the mountains beyond the tower were working on harnessing steam to wagons, to run them along level wooden rails directly by land from city to city.

She thought about time, and wondered then if its passage was always a thing to be wanted. She thought about Tyche. The Clockkeeper was old and lately her duties had been increasing as he was no longer able to handle some of the heavier work by himself. Someday, she knew, she would have to take over—she or another—to be the Master Clockkeeper herself. But would she be ready?

And would she wish to? She, a young woman.

She never told Tyche about Alexis after that first time, how she and the stranger now met at night below the millrace and how he spoke to her about the lands across the great ocean. Strange lands he had visited in his travels, some that she could scarcely believe in even though he swore they existed. He told her about dragons and other creatures that flew through the sky, and about magicians and necromancers and how they sometimes fought, one with another, searing the air with fire and brimstone. And always, above them, their ears were filled by the great clock’s ticking.

She did ask the Master Clockkeeper, once, about magicians, and after that she kept her nighttime walks even more secret. “Do such things exist, Tyche?” she asked. “That is, are there *Wizards?* Are there people who really *do* magic? Or isn’t it always just machinery, like our clock here. Magical-seeming, perhaps, to those who don’t know how it works, and needful of talent, perhaps, like the way the *vaporetti* have crewwomen aboard who are skilled in keeping their kettle fires burning even in the stormiest weather, but. . . .”

Tyche had closed his eyes, as he did sometimes when he was about to sink into a dream-trance. “I don’t know, Bezzie,” he started to say. “There are other lands than ours, of course. One hears of such things.”

But then his face stiffened. A trance *had* come on him, the kind that affected only true Masters, whatever their trade was. This was how Clockkeepers received their visions for making improvements, for adding or taking from the machinery to make the great clock run with truer precision—for adding the pendulum, for instance, when, centuries before, the clock’s regulation had been performed by a balance wheel of the sort one saw these days on only the cheapest of common timepieces.

“Bezzie,” he now said, his voice in a singsong, “beware you of *Wizards*. Know there are such who do perform magic—not of the sort as keeping fires burning, but fearful magic. They hold even time itself in contempt in their wanderings between places, concerned not

at all about folk such as you or I. Our cares. Our lifetimes. Such ones as these might even stop time, as a joke or a jest. A jape for their amusement. . . .”

The old man’s voice trailed off and Bezzie was frightened, despite the fact she knew that even Masters sometimes had false visions. And, of course, this one might have its commonplace causes as well.

Both she and Tyche were worried about the drought, the summer’s dryness that brought the level of the lake’s water dangerously down. This was the water that turned the mill wheel, ever fed from the streams that cascaded from the mountains of Telunoc’s center, and if it should fail. . . .

She was, after all, the Clockkeeper’s apprentice. She need not bring him paper and quill to write down *this* vision. No—better he wake with the dream forgotten.

Better she simply do her job and redouble her checkings of millrace and dam, making sure the water remained high. The wheel kept turning. The great clock kept running, ticking its verge-and-crown six times per minute, its sun sphere still rising, its moon spheres still setting, each in their order. Its huge gong still chiming, each of the day’s hours and those of the nighttime.

No, she had decided. She would not have him write down this vision of Wizards and magic because it was false and should not be remembered. She knew, on awaking, such things were forgotten and it was best this time that it should be so. Instead she had crept from the Clockkeeper’s study and brought back a blanket to wrap around him so, when he did wake, he would simply think that he had been sleeping.

And then she had sneaked out to meet with Alexis.

Now, too, as she gazed from the base of the tower, she had plans for the evening to meet with Alexis. “I’ll have a surprise for tonight,” he had told her. “Something important,” and added, laughing, that she should be sure to be on time. She watched for a few moments more as the plodding farmer in buckram—a strangely thinly-built woman, she thought, for this part of the country—disappeared farther down the hillside, her oxen before her. Then, thinking again of the smiling face of her stranger-lover, she went herself inside.

She went to her room first, selecting the blouse she would wear that evening, one with its sleeves cut wide and puffed in a sort of workmanlike imitation of the past year’s fashion, then joined with Tyche for their supper. Afterward, she collected her pitch-pot, so she could claim she was just going out for an evening inspection of the millrace should her master catch her, then let herself out through the mill wheel tunnel.

She did check the water level first, and saw that, while it was low, it still flowed freely, then walked down the millrace path to the dam spillway. She climbed slowly down the earthen dam’s face, still looking for possible leaks or fissures, her pitch-pot still with her. Then, reaching the glade below the dam, she put the container down and waited.

She looked at the moon, the huge silver-smooth moon hanging full in the sky, casting its light down on glade and forest, on field and harbor, and then at the Jewel-Moon just now rising above the tower that loomed in the distance. She looked about her—the ground was grassy and soft in the moonlight, the air faintly scented.

She reached to her feet and plucked a flower.

“Bezzie,” a voice whispered in her ear.

“What?” She nearly jumped in her surprise. A moment before, the glade had been deserted. But then, relaxing, she turned to her lover, holding the flower out to him as an offering.

“Alexis,” she murmured.

“Bezzie,” he said again, taking the flower, and then kissed her softly. He took her in his arms, hugging her gently as both sank down to the ground below them.

“Not too fast,” she murmured and looked up at his head and saw he was nodding.

“As slowly as you wish, Bezzie,” he whispered.

They lay in each other’s arms for . . . it seemed like hours. Hours in a moment. Of hands slowly reaching. Of rich, full lips brushing. Of happiness. Pleasure.

A moment, she thought, that might go on forever. . . .

“You’ve only to wish it, Bezzie,” Alexis’s voice breathed in her ear. Softly. Seductively.

“What?” she whispered.

She felt his body shift slightly above hers. “The Wishing Star. See? It’s just over the tower. Wish on it that the moment we share *might* last forever.”

The Jewel-Moon. Yes. “I . . .” Bezzie started. Then she realized. The Jewel-Moon had been just over the tower when she had first come here.

She stared past his head at the distant clock tower, then, freeing one hand, she felt around her. She felt, to one side of her, running water.

*The dam was leaking!*

She tried to get up. She thought of the implications—quickly—they flashed through her mind—of time slowing. Stopping . . .

For lovers, yes, a world of forever-evening was good, but . . .

A vision came to her. She thought of a world of perpetual sun, of always-noontime. A world baked and arid . . .

A new vision. Coldness. A world of midnight, the very air freezing . . .

She thought of the old man, her master, Tyche. The passage of time that meant old age and dying, yes. But time meant life as well. Without its motion . . .

She thought of her Uncle Foss, in whom the nixie blood still ran strongest. Her mother. Her father, who knew nothing of a young woman’s wishes. Of *vaporetti*—the stout boat captain. The clock’s huge gears slowing . . .

. . . and Tyche’s words to her: “*Beware you of Wizards. Such ones as these might even stop time, as a joke or a jest. A jape for their amusement . . .*”

She struggled to rise. Alexis’s hands pressed down on her shoulders. She looked at his face.

*She saw he was grinning.*

“No!” she screamed.

“Be still, Bezzie,” he whispered. He pressed her down harder. “There’s nothing important now except the two of us.”

“No,” she whispered, feeling, as if by some spell of Alexis’s, her strength—her *will*—begin to fade from her. Squirming, she stretched her hand back to the water that flowed past her side. A trickle. A freshet, still, but getting deeper. And, just beyond it, her hand brushed something hot.

“Wait,” she whispered. “Alexis, a stone. It’s sticking beneath my back. Between my shoulders . . .”

She felt the pressure of his hands on her yield, only a little, but just enough to let her stretch farther. She gripped the container of still bubbling-hot pitch that she had placed down . . . how long ago had it been?

Or did it matter now? Only this did: Her rolling, suddenly, bringing the burning pot up in her hand, crashing it down on her lover’s head.

Her jumping now to her feet, running as fast as she could to the

dam face, and yet held back—as if she were running through mud, or quicksand. She saw where the leak was in the still bright moonlight and, stripping her blouse from her back as she struggled to climb up, she reached the top and dived into the lake beyond.

Nixie blood took over. Sealing her lungs, she swam to the bottom, her eyes distending to see in the dimness. She found where the leak in the dam had started and, wadding her blouse up, she thrust it in the crack, thankful that she had chosen the one she had, with its wide, puffed sleeves and abundant fabric. She watched as the cloth swelled, as wetness soaked into it, mixing with silt as the force of the water pulled it slowly from her hands, drawing it farther in. Until she felt the water's flow stopping.

Weakly, she swam back to the lake's surface, her lungs nearly bursting. The leak had been stopped—at least that much had been done—but she knew the danger was not yet over. She broke from the water and climbed to the millrace, gasping and shouting the Clockkeeper's name as she pulled herself up, hoping, somehow, he might hear and take warning.

Staggering now, she splashed through the millrace, noting as she did that what water there was puddled and nearly still, barely flowing. Scarcely enough to turn the huge mill wheel.

Somewhere, in the distance, she heard a bell chiming.

She felt an old man's hands gently shaking her. "Bezzie?" a voice said. The voice was Tyche's.

She opened her eyes and found she was lying on a bed in the Clockkeeper's chambers. "Bezzie," he said again, "are you awake now?"

She nodded. Yes.

"I heard your shouts, Bezzie, and came outside. I had been sleeping and hadn't realized how low the water had come to be. I found you lying face down in the millrace."

She tried to sit up. "But the clock, Tyche. Is it still running? The dam had been leaking and. . ."

"Just stay quiet and I'll explain everything," the old man said. "As soon as I heard you, I rang the alarm bell. Then, when I found you, I took you inside. Then I gathered the neighbor folk who had come out to see what was the matter and had them find buckets and form a chain from the overflow basin below the wheel to the top of the dam. They've been working from then to now, Bezzie, replacing the water that drained from the lake."

"Then the clock is running," Bezzie said. She tried again, and she did sit up this time.

Sadly, the Clockkeeper shook his head. "The wheel outside the tower has been prevented from stopping completely, yes, but it may not be enough," he said. "Inside the clock itself, time is still slowing."

Bezzie frowned. "Is there no way to make it run faster, then? Somehow restart it?"

"Perhaps," the Clockkeeper said. "But how?"

Bezzie thought. How restart time indeed? She thought of the day, of the evening that had just passed. How she had gazed from the base of the tower. She thought of the farmer she saw on the hillside. . . .

"Oxen!" she shouted. She jumped to her feet. She shook her head—she still felt a bit dizzy. But. . .

"What do you mean?" the Clockkeeper asked.

"I saw a farmer. She was driving a yoke of oxen. If I could find her and borrow them from her, perhaps we could hitch them to the central arbor. Run the ropes out through the millrace tunnel. Then, with their help, perhaps we could *make* the gear trains turn faster."

The Clockkeeper nodded. "Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps it would work, Bezzie. Hurry then, if you think you can find her."

"And perhaps *not*," a new voice broke in on them. Bezzie whirled to see Alexis, his face scarred and blistered where hot pitch had burned it. "That was a mean trick you played on me, Bezzabet Pot," he said, standing between her and the chamber doorway. He smiled now, a leering smile, as she backed from him. Leering and twisted. "After all, I thought we were lovers."

"Never!" she shouted. She ducked to get past him, but felt his hand suddenly grasp her shoulder. She felt him squeeze, hard. Felt her strength once again begin to drain from her, just as it had in the glade beneath the dam.

Then, just as suddenly, Bezzie felt the Wizard's grip loosen as the Clockkeeper's staff fell on his shoulders. "Hurry!" Tyche said as he struck again, sending Alexis staggering backward.

"Yes," Bezzie shouted. It took just a moment—such as moments were—for Alexis to push past the old man, but by then Bezzie was already halfway down the main staircase. She didn't look back. She ran through the great works inside the tower, hearing the Wizard's footsteps ring behind her, then out to the road beyond.

Panting, she ran down the hill to where she had seen the farmer, feeling the Wizard's breath hot on her back. She tried to run faster. She tried to dodge and twist, always just one step ahead of his reaching hands. Sobbing, she turned the bend into the forest.

"Enough!" a voice shouted.

She looked up. The farmer stood tall before her, still dressed in green buckram, holding her oxen's traces out toward her. She stopped short and took them, turning to look back and seeing that Alexis had stopped as well.

"So, we meet again," she heard Alexis whisper.

"So it seems, yes," the farmer answered, "as I had hoped might be." She nodded at Bezzie then. "You have the oxen, child," she said. "Go quickly. Now! I know why you need them."

"Y-yes," Bezzie stammered. "Th-thank you," she added. She started to lead the oxen up the hill, looking back only once when she heard what she thought might have been a clap of thunder. Except, she thought afterward, thunder and lightning did not strike at ground level. Nor was its striking accompanied with green fire, nor answered with red either. Nor both with shadows, shifting and twisting, darker than darkness, nor swirls and vortices of ice cold wind that frightened the oxen and made them move faster, leading *her* now up the road to the tower.

But for the moment she had little time to think of such things as she and Tyche hitched up the oxen to the ropes he had already run to the central arbor. Having such neighbor folk as could be spared leave their buckets to help with the hauling, they heaved on the ropes, and she felt the gears moving. Slowly first, then faster, until she heard a *click!*, then a rumble, then a great whirring. The crown wheel was turning!

Then a low *boom! . . . boom!*, six to the minute, as the huge pendulum resumed its motion, and Tyche and she slowly unloosed the oxen.

Time had restarted.

Afterward, Bezzabet Pot still had her doubts. If *Wizards* could stop time, had it been the clock then? Or was it only Alexis's defeat that had gotten their world's time restarted?

Or did it matter?

She asked Tyche once, but all he would tell her was that, except for that single night, the clock had always run. "And," he had added, "there always has been time."

In any event, she had new duties as well as her old ones. The oxen, for instance, now had to be cared for, inasmuch as the farmer

in green—as well as Alexis—seemed to have disappeared quite completely. And not only that, but Tyche was old, and one day each week he would have her join him within his chambers to do his Clockkeeper's dreaming for him.

She doubted at first. She slipped well enough into her dream-trances, but what she saw there were not gears and time-trains, crown wheels and verges, but rather her visions were of *vaporetti*. She dreamed of a kettle that boiled out steam-water into a cylinder—water that could be drawn from the lake's bottom, regardless of its surface level—and pushed on a piston to drive an arbor. She

dreamed, moreover, of hooking a pendulum up to a throttle, forcing it in and out, six times a minute, directly attached to this cylinder mechanism itself, and thus bypassing escapements and time-trains altogether.

She dreamed and she doubted—*these visions would not do!* She knew that Clockkeepers sometimes had false visions. Yet Tyche wrote these ones down just as she spoke them.

And then, when she woke, exhausted and sobbing, frustrated and wondering how it was that the Master Clockkeeper could ever put up with her myriad failings, one day she realized that Tyche was smiling.

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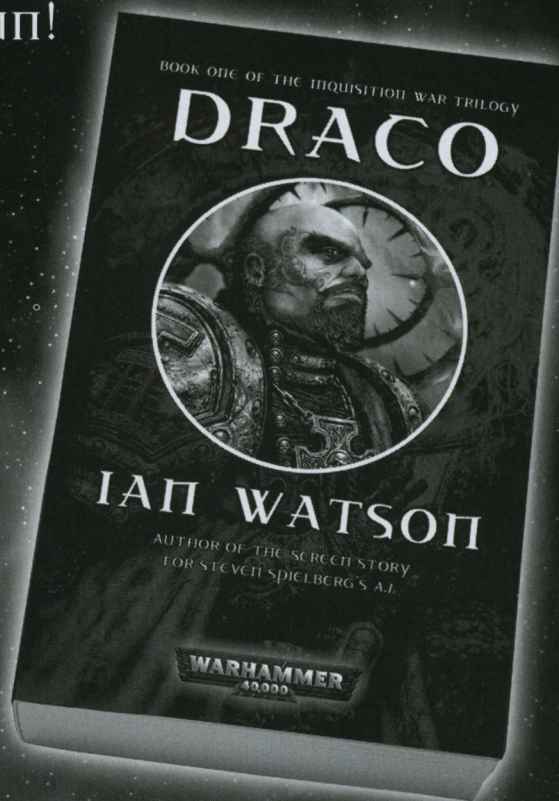
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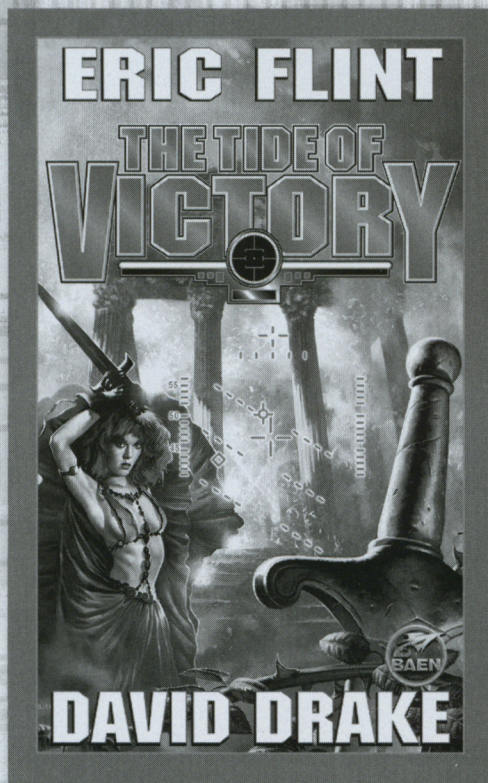
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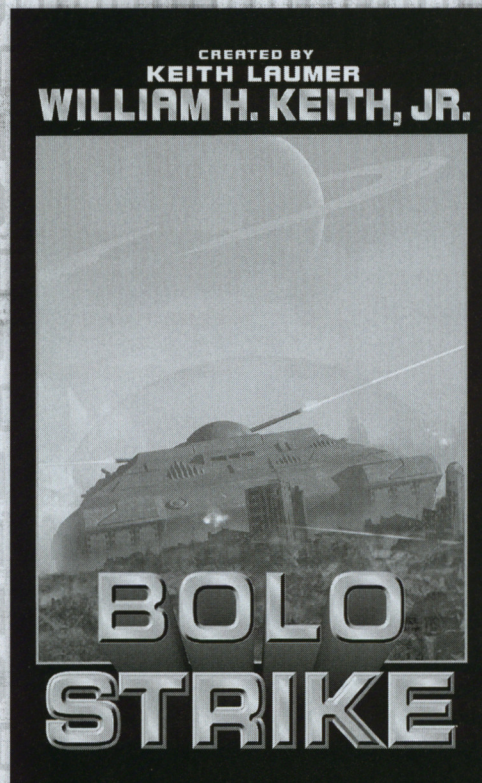
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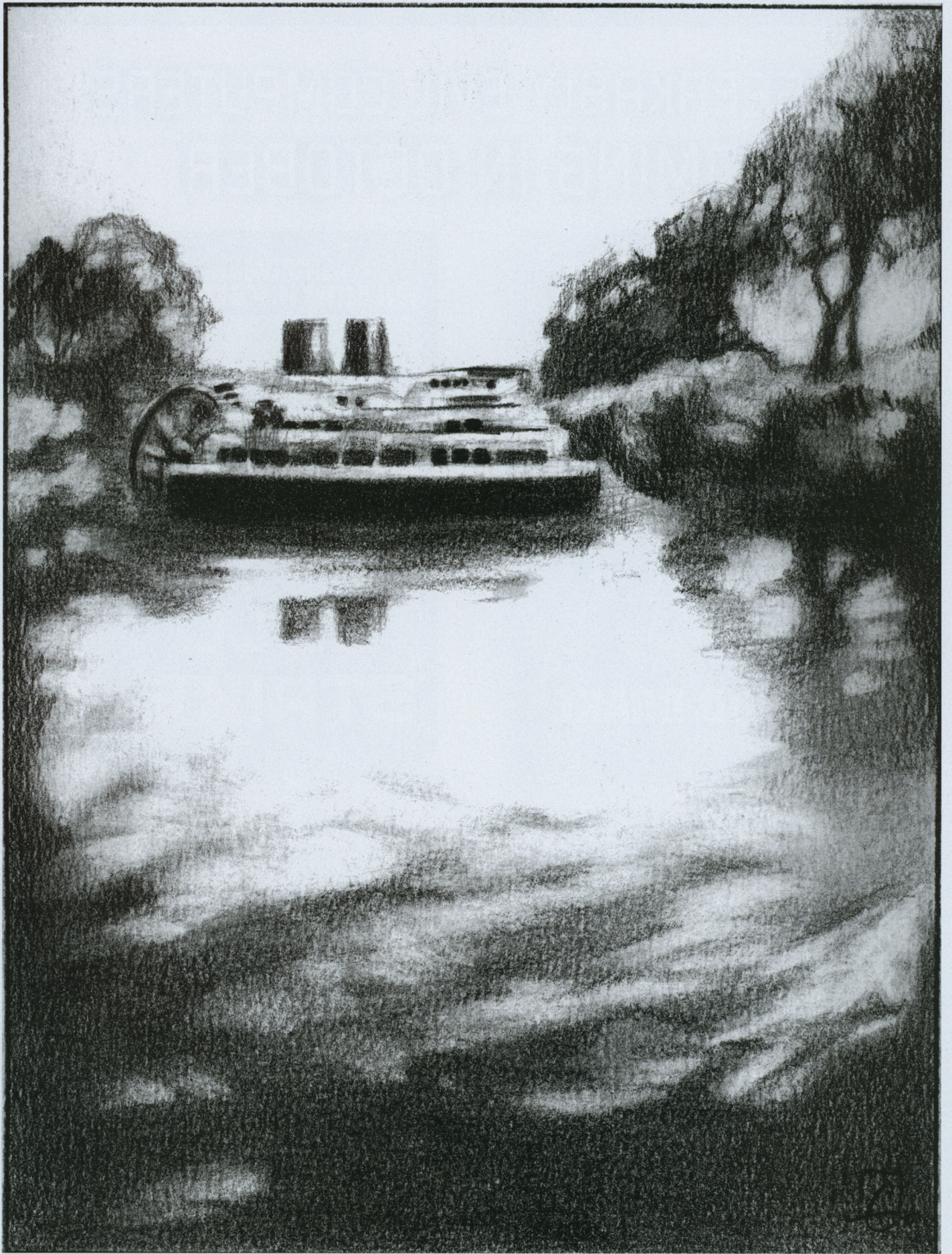
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Gerard Houarner works for, but does not actually reside in, a psychiatric center. *The Beast That Was Max* was published last year by Leisure, which will issue *Road to Hell* this year. He also has a book coming out from Delirium called *Visions Through A Shattered Lens*. For all the latest news on Gerard visit: [www.cith.org/gerard](http://www.cith.org/gerard).

# Memphis Blue Again

by Gerard Houarner

Jopse stood behind IAMELVIS on the end of a dock sticking out into the Mississippi. A steam-driven paddleboat named *Lagniappe* churned up-river, sprinkling laughter and the tinkling of glasses across the turgid expanse of water. The gusting breeze brought scents of burning wood and oil on the warm, humid air. "Earth was never like this," Jopse said, shaking his head, the bells on his fools' cap jingling.

"You can turn down the tinting if you want," IAMELVIS replied. "I just find blue filters comforting." His long legs dangled over the dockside, bare feet sticking out from the raw-edged blue jeans, toes only a few inches away from the water lapping at the dock posts. A dog, mixed retriever and shepherd with a glossy black and brown coat, sat beside him, scanning the water.

"It's more than the blue."

Something broke the water's surface half way between the boat and dock. Screams sounded from Mud Island. IAMELVIS pulled his legs away from the river. The dog did not notice the movement. "This is still part of the Eidolon Palace," he said, then pursed his lips. As if they could be anyplace else. Most people worked, lived and played in the Palace, returning to the meat of their physical bodies preserved in crew quarters only for routine testing and exams.

"But it's *your* refuge program. You've got these Earth images, but the way you put them together is nothing like the home world. You're defying physical laws. The Nile didn't run at a ninety-degree vertical angle to the Mississippi. The Memphis of Egypt was thousands of clicks from Memphis, Tennessee. The horizon didn't curve up and around, and there was only one star in the planetary system. Crocs and crawfish didn't walk on two legs, or come visiting from the other Memphis, or from New Orleans or Cairo down the rivers. Check the records. Do your research. If I could find out that much on the way over here, think of everything you missed."

IAMELVIS gazed at the revelers on the receding paddleboat. Retrieved personalities wearing crawfish, croc, and catfish heads danced to rhythmic music with pirates and fools—former Ship's crew all, given a reprieve from sleep or service in the God Pod's personality banks to fill out and play in IAMELVIS' refuge program. Other figures, phantoms lacking the fine resolution and embedded life memory of old Ship personnel, drifted like fog between retrieved personalities, bolstering the illusion of an urban reality by swelling the party's number to critically acceptable reality levels determined for organic-based perceptions. Their kind packed Bob Neal's Cotton

Picking Jamboree whenever he performed, shouting his name hysterically.

"I *have* done the research," he said softly. "But this is my world. This is how I see the past. Rivers of life meeting, merging, parting. Crossroads for civilization and war rising out of the wilderness, forming cradles for life to invent itself, and destroy itself. Follow the Nile program and you'll see I've got other rivers intersecting it. All crossroads, all storehouses of human history, good and bad." All inseminators of spirit into humanity, he wanted to say. All incubators of what separated mankind from machine. Examples of what Ship was meant to be. But that would have been indiscreet.

"And you should've been more careful with your parameters," Jopse went on. He paced back and forth behind IAMELVIS, casting twin shadows over him and on to the water. A detached, analytical tone underscored his words. "Should've let your Personal Manager handle the algorithms. Your boundaries aren't firm. Other programs are bleeding into yours. Have you been inside the Pink Palace lately? There's a control nexus for the Ship Pod we're using sitting in the basement. A transfer node for body switching takes up the interior of that ancient aircraft on the island out in the river. The place is a mess. If your Personal Manager hadn't been there to show me around, I'd never gotten back to you. Why do you call him the Colonel, by the way? I call mine Alpha."

The dog turned to Jopse and barked. His tail slapped the wooden pier. His mouth opened wider as his breathing grew more excited and his tongue lolled slightly.

Something silently broke the water surface closer to dock, moving with the stealth of a security op. The screaming from Mud Island stopped.

"That's just the way I like things in my private universe," IAMELVIS said. He pushed down a mild spike of irritation with Jopse's critical approach to wonders. The man was an analyst, after all, working in habitat maintenance for one of Ship's Pods. Attachment to logic was simply the dominant aspect of his personality. Besides, the elements he had detected had deliberately been left exposed to test his reactions. His failure to report the problem to Ship immediately was a good sign. "And that's what they called him back then," IAMELVIS added, unable to contain the urge to put Jopse in his place, even on an irrelevant point.

IAMELVIS' irritation gave way to pity. Jopse could not help

himself. Brought to the gateway of a new universe, he could only tap the lintel and comment on its apparent instability. As Ship's crew, he was genetically manufactured and behaviorally conditioned. Work, stim, and the Eidolon Palace's virtual pleasures and distractions commanded his attention. The more abstract conditions of his existence—his designed nature, his role in Ship's Mission Program, the part he played in Ship's efforts to understand, control and improve humanity through biological, psychological and sociological experiments—hardly crossed his analytical mind. It was only the unusual opportunity to share another crew member's secret rooms in the Eidolon Palace that had lured him out of his routine existence and into IAMELVIS' refuge program.

"What is a Memphis?" he had asked. "Memphis Minnie, Memphis Belle, Memphis Slim?"

Jailhouse Rock had been playing in the background of their communication link. "What do you care?" IAMELVIS said, moving his assigned robot body through ducts leading out of an atmosphere generator on another mindless inspection run.

The moment almost slipped away. The risks he had taken infiltrating Jopse's work crew, the months he spent throwing out the bait, playing old recordings of blues, rock, and country, as well as sounds of paddle boats churning, trains rolling over rails and bridges, floods and thunder moving down river much like one another, in the background of their work exchanges and sparse casual conversation, had almost gone to waste.

But the personality profile that had brought IAMELVIS to Jopse proved accurate. The hook had slipped deep into the part THAT IAMELVIS suspected lived inside Jopse. "Of course I care," he said. It was all he needed to say.

"First off, you have to understand that the Memphis Belle is something completely different," IAMELVIS had started, and never really stopped until they reached the Mississippi flowing past Memphis in the memory house that was the Eidolon Palace.

There was no other way to do what had to be done. If IAMELVIS had simply told Jopse that Ship had long ago evolved beyond the basic parameters of its mission and corrupted the purpose of the mission founders, Jopse would have questioned the truth of such a statement, researched the available records, believed the lies left by Ship for him to find, and turned IAMELVIS over to the security ops for undermining Ship's Primary Program. There was no crime greater than betraying the cause of spreading humanity through the stars. Jopse's intelligence, crippled by the constraints placed on it by Ship's education, could not parse through the all the lies to discover truth. He could never conceive of himself as a pawn in the war being waged between Ship and the cast-out host of rogue, pro-human AI programs, the God Pod's fallen angels, lurking in the shadows of Ship's systems.

But Jopse was worth the work and risk. Once the defensive shell of inhibitions, prejudices, phobias, and other human frailties Ship used to control and shape humans for its own purposes was broken, Jopse had the tools to understand what had happened on and to Ship since it left Earth. He had curiosity, empathy, and courage. His presence in the refuge program proved it.

"It all means something important to me," IAMELVIS continued at last. "I told you my place was different, didn't I? Not the usual thing. I didn't lie."

Jopse stopped pacing. "Yeah, I have to admit, there's something about the this program I like. It's a little mad, isn't it?" Jopse laughed. The dog padded over to him to receive a brisk petting.

It was the first time IAMELVIS had ever heard him laugh. No one laughed in the mechanical bodies people inhabited when they

downloaded from the Eidolon Palace. Behavior inhibitions were breaking down, emotional and cognitive routines were loosening. Potential personality paths, unanticipated by Ship, were opening up at last. IAMELVIS smiled with relief. A feeling of cool satisfaction suffused him, as illusory as the electronically remote warmth from the twin suns above them. "I never said my refuge was realistic. I just said it was my tribute to where we came from."

"The screaming a few moments ago . . . was that from an amusement park?" Jopse asked. "I didn't see one over there in the records."

"No, there's no amusement park. The screaming is just a reminder of all the pain we left behind." A memorial to those who were sacrificed, he wanted to say. What better reminder of suffering, terror and injustice, wheels crushing lives to build roads to the future, than the sound of their pain.

"Wild. Even for the Palace." He frowned. Shivered. Crossed his arms over his chest. "Who wants to remember pain?"

"People who want to remember being human." IAMELVIS closed his eyes. A mosquito buzzed in his face. Stupid thing to say, he told himself. Much too human a thing to say. Impulsive. He offered the admission to the mosquito. Waited for the pinch of its needle, the fuzzy dying from the virus it carried.

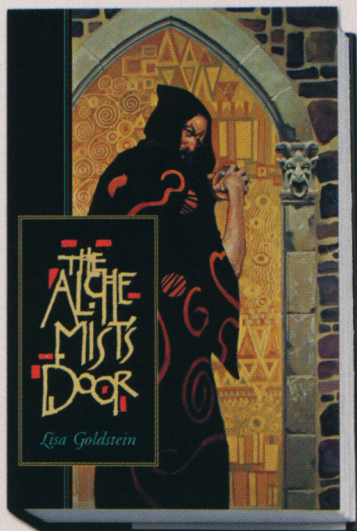
"Never heard of anything like it," Jopse said softly. He shook his head as if another mosquito was buzzing around his head, slipping out of the moment with a flurry of eye blinks and facial expressions as the visualization programming struggled to keep up with changing emotions.



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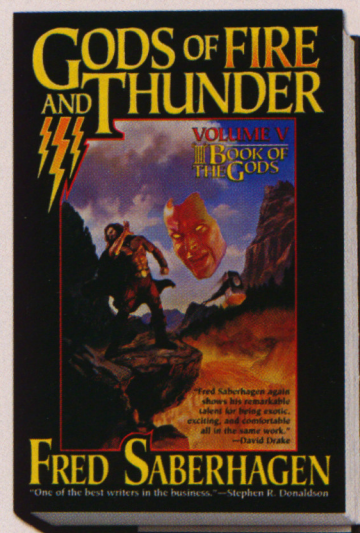
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But though Jopse allowed himself to be distracted, IAMELVIS knew he had experienced a moment's empathy. The dog by his side whined, as if troubled by the emotion.

"Though I saw the slaves, plagues, and riots in the history," Jopse continued in a rush. "Tell you the truth, I never even heard of a refuge program being a tribute to anything. People go for the big sex scenarios, the grand adventures. Or historicals, like a few generations ago. But I can see, down in your New Orleans scenario, the importance of memorials. Gives you a feeling of being connected to something bigger than yourself. Bigger than Ship, maybe."

The mosquito hovered nearby, not yet assuaged. That's the point of it all, isn't it? IAMELVIS silently asked himself, the mosquito. Reminding them of what humans were and could be. Complexity. Unpredictability. Emotion. Remembering there is more than Ship and the memory of their fleshy appetites.

Discretion. The thought blazed in his mind like twin suns merged into one.

The mosquito went away.

Jopse continued, absorbed by his own thoughts. "What's the budget on this thing? Must be enormous. You keep it running full time? Does it have its own evolving histories? Amazing. So many retrieved personalities, they really do add life to the place. You must not have any physical presence on Ship other than your born flesh and your work bodies. Who could afford it all? Mind you, I know lots of people in the same situation. Living as much as they can in the Eidolon Palace, paying for it by putting in all their crew time and signing up for all the Ship extra duty they can qualify for."

IAMELVIS stood and brushed pollen from his T-shirt. Warning codes tingled on his skin, signaling the pick-up. Past the dock, at the end of the street, the Colonel stood like a beacon in his white suit and gave him a wave. "There's a few of us who've pooled our resources. Applied for special permits from Ship for experimental environment designs."

"I figured as much. Are you looking for anyone else to join your group? I think I'd like to set up something of my own."

"On the Mississippi? Or do you want to go over on the Nile and see what else we've got?" IAMELVIS walked towards the bank, leaving Jopse and the dog, his Personal Agent, staring at distant wonders.

"Nile. I want more than one pyramid in my new refuge program."

"I think that can be arranged." IAMELVIS reached the bank, kept walking. Did not look back.

"I'm glad. I believe this all appeals to my sense of the absurd. Who knew I had one?" He laughed again, giddy, his voice high-pitched, parameters unraveling.

"You'd be surprised what you're capable of."

Water splashed.

IAMELVIS turned. The dock was empty. "Jopse has left the building," he said, and laughed with the joy of another human sent on to the secret kingdoms of rogue AI to be reborn. "Colonel," he called, ready to slip into the buffer reality and resume his normal Ship duties.

Memphis shimmered. Transformed. Blue drained from air, the buildings and trees. Birds chirped, water lapped at the shore. The Mississippi lost depth, gained power. The Memphis of imagination became smaller. The Nile vanished. The Memphis of Egypt vanished into the far past and slid to the other side of the virtual world. New Orleans, along with Cairo, followed by falling into their respective logical places. The sky settled into a model of planetary physics. The local population thinned, losing exotic costumes and heads and illegal retrieved personalities. "Beale Street Blues" sounded out of a

nearby bar. The source, an unissued Earl "Father" Hines Earth Western Dating System February 1961 AD analog recording, flashed in the bar window, indicating the refuge program's sudden loss of quality. The mixed-breed dog was back, shivering against his leg, head moving restlessly as if he were confused, or tracking ghosts flitting through the air.

"Colonel!" IAMELVIS called. The distant white-suited figure was gone.

The fine rain of another identity fell over him. Fine rain turned to storm. IAMELVIS remained what he had always been. But with the accretion of information and history that did not belong to him, he became less than a retrieved personality, less than the dead or phantoms like those on the *Lagniappe*. He became a static recording of what still lived, someplace else. But what he had become was more than what he had been, or thought he could ever be.

Cobblestones appeared beneath his feet. He lost his casual clothing, gained a harlequin costume. Alpha, Jopse's Personal Manager, barked happily by his side. The copy of Jopse's identity had swallowed him whole.

A part of IAMELVIS acknowledged what was happening as an automatic response to a particular set of warning signals. He knew the security protocols. But he had never experienced them before, and their cold assurance gave him no comfort.

"Jopse," someone said behind him.

When IAMELVIS turned to the voice, bells tinkled on his hat.

An old woman, pale wrinkled face framed in a shock of white hair, her back stooped as she leaned on a cane, looked up at him with a smile. Dressed in black, she raised associations of mourning and provoked sympathetic emotions. "May I have a word with you, Jopse?" she asked.

Despite the heavy, humid air, a chill caught IAMELVIS and made him shiver. A moment later he realized the refuge program was not at fault. The chill was not a deliberate flaw, like those left for Jopse to find. The remaining chaotic algorithms of his initial joy and subsequent confusion mutated into fear. The old woman was a security op.

Ship flashed a signal confirming the old woman's true identity. Alpha barked a greeting. She smiled.

A grasshopper swallow's sudden song burst, a masked signal from hidden AIs, warned him he was on his own. He understood. Security protocol. He was the link between humans and their AI defenders. The rogue AIs were severing their ties to IAMELVIS. They were gone, along with their viral wasps and message bearing electronic dust and pollen, their fantastic virtual constructions and mysterious, monstrous bandersnatchers capable of making a Ship crew member disappear. He had deliberately been kept ignorant of their hideaways, identities, their methods and the paths they used, because ignorance protected them all against betrayal. And if he could not betray the rogue artificial intelligence programs lurking in Ship's systems, he could not betray humanity, or himself. Ignorance was survival.

The flutter of wings left him with an empty feeling.

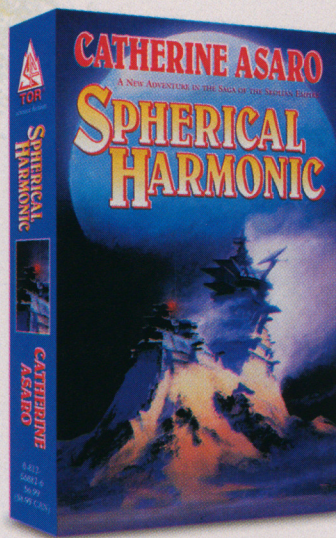
"Of course," IAMELVIS said, regretting his hesitation. He approached the old woman, throwing out all the cues of friendship and honesty from his repertoire, from smile to posture to the scents he gave off. The husk of Jopse responded as if it were his own.

Shadow programs rose to form an invisible shield around his true nature. The space between IAMELVIS and the security op thickened, shimmered, hummed. An elaborate dance of security protocols, diagnostic routines, communication traces, memory reads, file checks, system scans, played out between them. IAMELVIS flowed like water through the framework of the identity he had

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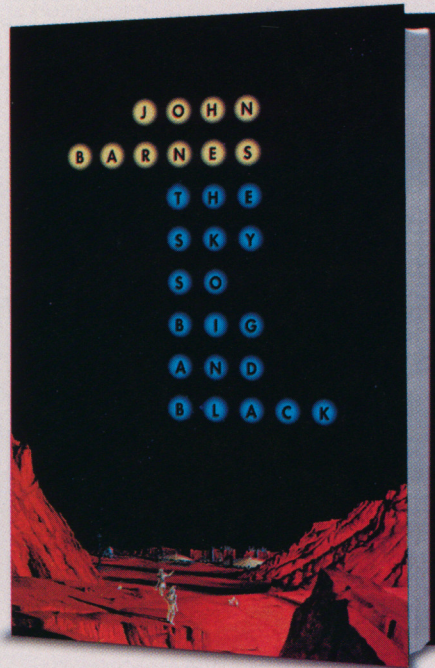
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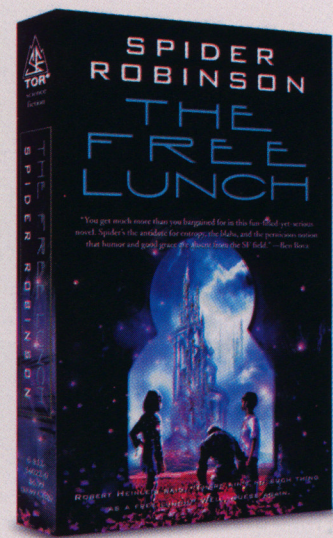
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assumed, slipped between Ship's million probes per second. He broke his operative self into smaller hard-to-find sub-routines, dispersing them among the programs and files that constituted Jopse's reflection in the Eidolon Palace, outside of the meat of his brain. IAMELVIS' scattered mind raced along strained interconnections, calculating what to say and how to say it to satisfy the security op's investigation.

Convincing a human he was human was comparatively simple. Convincing a machine intelligence he truly was human and not a one-dimensional memory was far more complex, and dangerous.

The old woman took him by the elbow and guided him on a walk by the river. The dog trotted ahead of them. She produced a flask, opened it, took a sip, offered him a drink. In the cocktail of stimulant and analgesic programs she offered, IAMELVIS knew there were burrowing viral worms designed to infect and drag out hidden intelligences like himself. But he had to accept the drink. It was the human thing to do.

The liquid burned his mouth and throat. It tasted like bourbon.

"An anomaly was detected," the old woman said, watching him drink. "Very small. Probably nothing. But we have to check on these things."

Her tone was gentle but forceful. IAMELVIS matched her voice to Ship's specs for maternal attention. Ship was picking the fruit of seeds planted in relationships formed while raising its crew from artificial birth. IAMELVIS sifted through the mix of his own reactions and the emotional echoes from Jopse's shell: an eagerness to please, dread, affection, guilt, dependence, resentment, respect. In the chaos of his panic and desperation, IAMELVIS hung on to the thought that he was experiencing something of what it must have felt like to have a mother on the home world, in the days when humans still had mothers. The human roots of his emotional turmoil strengthened his connection with Jopse's human shell, gave him strength to continue the struggle with the moment's crisis.

"Did you feel anything a moment ago?" the old woman asked, taking back the flask. She took another delicate sip, licked her lips, and closed the flask.

"A little dizzy," IAMELVIS said, remembering Jopse's last moment before being sucked into the rogue AIs' realm.

The old woman tasked. "Trouble-makers in the system, poking and prodding where they shouldn't. Invading your privacy. Have any strangers talked to you lately? Have you noticed a recurring identity pattern, even as a residual signature, during your travels through the Palace? Any visits in the flesh at your cabin, lately?"

"Yes, well, there is a new crew assignment at my posting who's a little odd. He always has old Earth music playing in the background, and keeps asking questions about how I feel or think about one thing or another."

"Yes, I see the logs. Why didn't you report this aberrant behavior?"

IAMELVIS started to answer, stumbled over the lack of logical answers, found Jopse's. "Why would I? It wasn't illegal."

"But troubling. There *are* adjustment counselors."

"He did no harm."

"None that you could see."

IAMELVIS shrank into Jopse's silence. Waited. Moments stretched. The background exchange of information died down as the security op finished examining all the information available in Jopse's memory files. He wondered if his human shell had reacted naturally by not continuing to banter with the security op, or if it had run out automatic answers and needed the spark of human creativity to continue responding appropriately. He was at a loss over how to fight in the armor of humanity.

The bourbon worked its way through his system. Heat shot through his human shell. Simulated body functions speeded up. Routine reactions slowed to a crawl. IAMELVIS fought against his own programming to run as fast and efficiently as he could, and instead surrendered himself to the intoxicated numbness of his human aspect.

"Your co-worker invited you to his refuge program?"

"Yes, but I didn't go. Who goes to someone else's refuge program? That really would be aberrant behavior."

"I understand. But this, this isn't your usual refuge program, either."

"He gave me ideas. The music he played in the background, the old Earth he talked about, I found it kind of interesting. Different."

"You sure he didn't infect you with virus? Let me check."

The bourbon turned to fire. Security worms snapped, tugged, stretched and cracked the logical structure that made up Jopse, that was supposed to contain the unquantifiable chaotic essence of a human spirit. IAMELVIS screamed, filling the Jopse shell with pain and shock.

There were no echoing screams from Mud Island, or anyplace else in the refuge program.

The security op let out a soft breath. The fire died, leaving IAMELVIS with a throbbing hangover.

"What the hell was that . . ." IAMELVIS croaked.

"I'm sorry. Extreme threats require extreme measures."

"He was just a guy into music. And the homeworld. The way things were."

"The past is a dangerous place, Jopse. It is not Ship's mission to preserve the past, but to create the future. To spread Mankind across the stars. To be certain humanity survives the death of worlds and stars and galaxies."

"I know what Ship must do. I was born in Ship, I will live in Ship forever."

"Then why aren't you participating in more stimulating scenarios, exploring your potential for growth, furthering the interests of humanity and Ship, instead of wallowing in what was and can never be again like a meat-addict returning to the false pleasures of the flesh?"

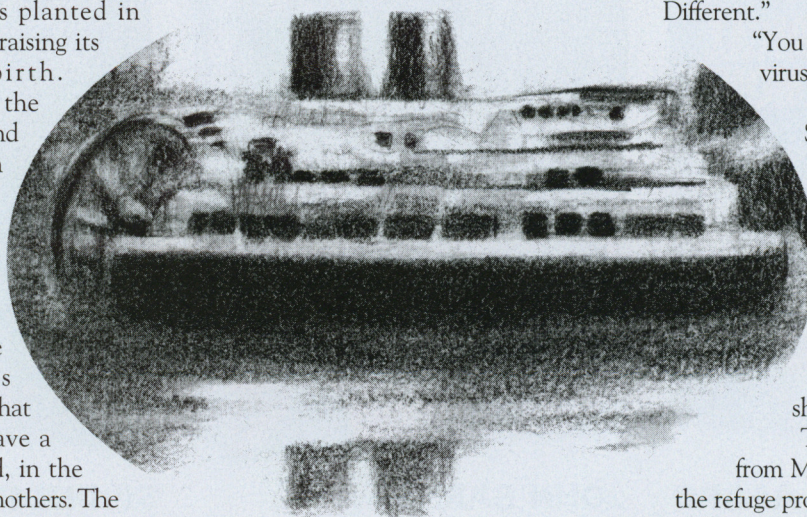
"Neither of those are crimes."

"Perhaps you need adjustment counseling yourself."

Alpha barked.

"You see? Even your Personal Manager agrees."

IAMELVIS gazed at the illusion of Memphis around him, the pale



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copy of place that once was, part of a world, a life lost long ago. He rubbed the back of Alpha's head. "Delete program," he said.

The Mississippi and Memphis and the sky and the land of Earth disappeared. Jopse's buffer reality sprang up: a powder blue cube room with a sofa, wooden table, and a bookcase with volumes representing programs Jopse used in his life in the Eidolon Palace.

"Good choice, Jopse," the security op said. "Be careful of strangers. We'll be watching." The old woman vanished.

Silence fell over the buffer reality. The options offered by the book case included work, sex, food. Jopse's tastes and habits held no interest for IAMELVIS. He sat down in the chair and waited.

A moment passed in the Eidolon Palace. IAMELVIS wondered how much time had passed in Ship, how many kilometers Ship had traveled through space, how many colonists, genetically re-engineered humans designed for the world they were passing, had been sent out. He wondered what Jopse was really doing and feeling among the AI, and if he was any closer to being truly human.

Alpha barked. Then the dog spoke.

"We're clear. Automatic surveillance. Easy enough to fool. Pick the adventure volume."

IAMELVIS selected the book marked adventure and opened it. The Eidolon Palace launched around him.

Memphis returned, his Memphis, not as blue as he would have liked it, but with the Nile running perpendicular to his horizon, and distant pyramids and croc-headed monsters in the streets welcoming him home. The Colonel stood beside him on a dock. The *Lagniappe* was heading downstream, its revelers exhausted, floating in peaceful fulfillment.

"That was a beautiful performance," the Colonel said. "A wonderful impersonation."

"I don't know I did it," IAMELVIS said, staggered as much by the refuge program's transformation as by his survival. "The security op, it really thought I was human." Jopse's identity shell scattered with the breeze coming off the Mississippi. Memories, mannerisms and habits blew away like dried leaves, colorful but dead. IAMELVIS shed what was left of the foreign face, the harlequin costume and the hat with bells, he had worn for the security op and reclaimed his own. Fragments of his true self re-integrated. Familiar routines asserted themselves. He became what he had always been: a lure, a test, the guardian of the doorway to and for humanity.

Yet the pieces did not feel quite the way they had before the

security op's examination. He thought some parts of Jopse had been left behind, but his internal menu showed no new files or programs added to his identity. He checked for corrupted portions of programs and files, found no additions or alterations, except for the memory of what had just happened. He was not thinking or reacting faster. He was not more self-aware than he had ever been. But the experience of danger and the defensive posture of assuming a human identity had transformed him. Components that had always been a part of IAMELVIS were interacting in a different manner, as if new parameters had been activated, allowing for a different set of connections to be made. He perceived himself, Ship, existence itself through a new filter. He had crossed the portal he had been created to guard, and transcended the simple task he had been created to perform.

"You don't have to know, son, you just go ahead and do what you have to do," the Colonel said.

"Was it the human shell that saved me, or did I survive on my own?" IAMELVIS asked, still lost in the new place he had discovered for himself in the universe.

"What's the difference?"

IAMELVIS could not answer.

The Colonel put his arm around IAMELVIS' shoulder. "You done yet? Good. Because even if you are the big hero of the moment, you still have work to do. And work's the best medicine for whatever's ailing you. So why don't you pick up your guitar and change your clothes. You're due at Russwood Park in an hour. Don't be late. Big changes are coming in your career. Trust me, I can feel them."

The Colonel took off down a side street. Somewhere nearby, Big Joe Turner made the piano keys dance and the virtual air vibrate with a rich, joyous riff. Ribs sizzled on a grill, filling the air with the savory aroma of seasoned meat. A grasshopper swallow dipped by him before vanishing among the trees, leaving behind a single feather drifting on the breeze as a token of its appreciation.

IAMELVIS adjusted the tinting. Memphis was blue again. His blue: the blue from the other side of a scream, the other side of pain; the blue he found going through the door he led Ship crew to but never entered himself, a shade that reached deeper inside him than any color ever had and opened vistas around him wider than could be contained in the Eidolon Palace, vaster than the infinite reaches of space.

# STARS

BY DAVID LIVINGSTONE CLINK

Playing in the sandbox between universes  
you were starlight grace within stardust.  
In a time too far back to remember  
long fingers of dust circled newborn suns—  
fingers danced a legacy of dust—  
bony fingers that fused into planets,  
before life first burnt on our cooling world.

Fingers became hands showing elation—  
their loving, chubby palms made you,  
and love drew transcendence through empty spaces  
where light was captured in you,  
and when I touched you I touched creation,  
for we were the cool remnants of a shared yesterday  
lighting again on a planet too cold to care.



*“The Last Battlefield” is another story I discovered while going through some of my old material in preparation for my new book, tentatively titled The Second Coming, which is forthcoming from Padwolf, Inc. Unlike “Sensory Destruction,” which appeared a few issues back, this story received an extensive rewrite—which almost doubled its length. The original version of “The Last Battlefield” appeared first in Parlour Papers, then went on to see print in several other small press magazines in the U.S. and U.K. Hope you enjoy the new and improved version.*

# THE LAST BATTLEFIELD

BY EDWARD J. MCFADDEN

Gordon stepped into a tall glass cylindrical chamber, his mind tense, his anxiety growing. He breathed deeply and closed his eyes, his thoughts wandering. Then the white air came, its frigidness, its hardness, its life-breathing essence. At once Gordon began to harden, his skin becoming rigid and cold. Soon Gordon was frozen and still as a statue, his disease halted, his mind at peace.

Within the dream world of unconsciousness Gordon saw himself removed from the cryogenic freezing chamber and placed into the Holding Zone. His mind was frozen, yet he could see. He was a boy again, his mother pushed him on a swing in the park, he and his father played catch in the yard.

Gordon’s life replayed before him.

Bobbing like a stray piece of styrofoam on his father’s boat on summer afternoons. Running from church and hiding in the gardens like a ghost. Catching frogs and turtles with his sister. Playing in the worst rock band to ever plug-in. Sleeping on the lawn of the high school, pissing on teachers’ cars. It all went by so fast.

The first day he opened the tall glass doors of his new company. The day he knew, without fluctuation of equities, or unresolved lawsuits, that he was a billionaire. Gordon remembered feeling that it was no big deal. In fact, it wasn’t any more so than being a millionaire back in 2075.

Then the fall of his empire and the betrayal of Linda seemed to bring back images that were sharper. He could still see so vividly Linda’s long brown hair, the smell of her special perfume; eyes that could drown you in sorrow or joy, whatever be her mood.

Then the cancer came, slow and deadly. Its virulent presence changing all that he knew, killing everything he cared about. His life, which had once been filled with ambition and vitality, had become an existence filled with pain and enmity for all humanity.

“Son, you have some form of cancer. We haven’t been able to tie it down yet, but we are very close,” the doctor had lied. The doctor had had no idea what ailment Gordon suffered from. The collapse of the Ozone Layer Reinforcement Shield and the introduction of hundreds of chemical skin protection drugs had caused a rash of cancer, its strong destructive power being heightened and becoming more deadly.

The scenes continued to pass through Gordon’s unconscious mind. He saw his health deteriorate. First pain, then the loss of movement and sensory perception. The loss of his will to live, the loss of himself, the loss of his dignity. Then, one after the other, his suicide attempts flashed before him. A knife, a gun, a bottle of pills.

I never had the guts, thought Gordon.

Then the attempts transformed into eccentric flights of ludicrous adventure. Riding forty-foot waves at Basheba, kayaking rivers of molten lava and mountain climbing on Mars. But he always pulled himself out of whatever black abyss he managed to put himself in. He loved himself too much not to.

“Your cancer is malignant, but we’re not sure how fast it’s progressing. You could live a week or a day, or you could live for years,” said a doctor, his voice menacing. So, like most people, Gordon’s fate had remained hidden from him. But the fear of eminent death dominated his mind, controlling his actions and driving him to rash and irresponsible decisions.

To Gordon, cryogenic freeze appeared to be his last chance for life and perhaps an existence in the distant future. When the time was right, and a cure had been found for his illness, Gordon would be revived and healed. Though the method had not been fully tested and many people had died during the freezing procedure, Gordon chose to take the chance, hoping that eternal life would be his reward.

Soon Gordon found himself reliving the final days of his pre-cryogenic life. With a short speech of reverence and self-pity, he said goodbye to his parents and his friends, all of whom felt he was heedlessly giving his life away.

They don’t know what it’s like! They couldn’t understand. They don’t have the disease eating away at their bodies, at their souls. Soon I will be at peace. I will have hope for the future, a reason to continue living.

These were Gordon’s thoughts as the white air engulfed him and he drifted into a 674-year sleep.

“Din! Din! Raga Din,” yelled a distant voice. Gordon’s eyes were open, yet he could not see. There were voices all-around, yelling and screaming. “Din ra ta layon I.”

“Who’s there? Who are you?” asked Gordon from his haze. No one answered. “Hey, what the…” The shock of hitting the gurney rocked Gordon into silence.

“Laec te logger, pisshead!” The creature laughed.

Gordon felt an injection, imagined a buzzing sound. Then he felt, and heard, four ultra fine synthetic screws impale his breastplate. He spasmed, his left arm breaking free, his hand finding a small box attached to his torso. A wire ran along Gordon’s side like a snake. An earplug was stuffed in his ear.

"You should understand me now," said a voice close at hand. The voice was shrill, wan, and enigmatic; Gordon felt his heart go cold at the sound of it. "Might be rough, bosses say not enough you left to justify software upgrade."

"Where..."

"Silent! You live and on your way be repaired. The date is the fourth moon of Dor, earth year 2873. So don't ask! Pissheads always ask!"

Gordon was silent. His vision had begun to return and he could see blurred images around him. Faint shadows going about their daily business, paying no attention to him. Look at me! I'm alive again after hundreds of years, he thought, but his thoughts trailed away, leaving no trace, no sign that they had ever been.

"Let go arms," said the voice from above. Gordon's other hand drifted to his chest. "That is control panel. All future modifications will link there." Here the creature paused and Gordon could feel its breath on his cheek. "So do not damage it," the creature hissed.

As Gordon breathed, he found that the air was thin and dirty, dense with the smell of chemicals. All around him the sound of suffering could be heard, the relentless cries of pain, the putrid smell of death and malevolence. He was being taken to the main reconditioning area, where he would be repaired and readied for war.

"What is your name? Are you my doctor?" asked Gordon. The tall figure wheeling him down the hall didn't answer, it only snickered.

Finally, it sighed and said, "Specimen will learn all soon enough. Rest while you can."

Soon Gordon found himself being lifted off his gurney and placed on a long table. Then, just as his sight had begun to return, he felt an injection in his right arm. Before he faded into sleep, he saw many shapes around him. Operating tables were lined up in rows; hundreds of them, all filled with people. The tables were caked with blood.

"Finally! Pisshead's got simple Cancer. Hand me Diafoneraite," spat Gordon's surgeon.

"Help me..." yelled Gordon and his thoughts fled far away to a time long gone, and his eyes saw no more.

In the dream world of unconsciousness Gordon is running across the beach. Shells crack under his feet as he runs. There are black dust clouds everywhere. Snap! Snap! Snap! Gordon hears gunfire...or was it the shells beneath his feet?

Gordon is holding a rifle of some kind. He squeezes off a few shots and they cave in the ground where he had aimed. He smells the ocean and he runs for it. But when he breaks free of the black smoke he is standing amidst a wasteland of the unthinkable. There is nothing as far as the eye can see.

Nothing but sand.

When Gordon awoke he was laying on a hard bed of wood. On both sides of him there were rows of beds like his and on them, men and women of every race lay sleeping. Mostly young people, unknowing, unafraid. Somehow they didn't look young anymore; they looked old, dreadfully old.

"Specimen is ready," said a voice close at hand.

Gordon's eyes came into full focus as he was lifted from his bed and what he saw left him dumb. Two of the creatures looked like humans with orange skin that had been stretched. The other creature didn't appear to have eyes until it turned its gaze on Gordon through its long dark hair. Gordon was dragged toward the door.

"Where are you taking me?" he yelled. They didn't answer. Gordon struggled, trying to get away from them, but their grip was too tight.

"Give it shot Dithen now! I'm tired to struggle with pisshead!" said one of Gordon's captors.

"No... no more drugs!" shrieked Gordon, but it was too late. At once Gordon felt relaxed, his mind at ease. He found that his captors were no longer holding him, he walked free.

Suddenly he stopped, gazing at his keeper with contempt. Then with a soft word of command by one of the creatures, he found himself walking again, unable to disobey. On they walked, past thousands of people. Some stood in long lines, bleeding, their burns and laser blast wounds infected, their uniforms tattered and worn. People lay on the floor dead, but not for long.

Soon Gordon found himself on a large hovercraft with many other people, on their way to the battlefield. Gordon was given a laser rifle and some brief instructions as to its use. The drug they had given him had begun to wear off and Gordon found himself trying to stand up and to speak, but he could not.

The desert was a sea of death. Bodies lay strewn about, but they did not remain long. Groups of soldiers collected the bodies, carrying them back to the hovercraft to be repaired. The sand, which once had been pure white, was stained with blood. Giant trenches stretched out in uneven lines past the horizon. War ships flew overhead and the constant sound of laser fire was everywhere.

Gordon was herded off the hovercraft and driven toward the battle. He stumbled forward, still confused and afraid. Then, jumping into a trench, he cowered under a low overhang, hoping the war and all its nightmarish participants would forget him.

"Hey! Let's go, soldier!" yelled a tall slender woman from above. She looked down at him with remorse, and she was beautiful. She had long brown hair.

His mind reeled and rewound. Gordon and Linda knelt on a muddy plain digging for clams. They walked among the red stones of Mars and danced under the stars in New York City. The air was filled with smoke and Gordon could feel himself being swept away.

"Hey, wake up, pisshead. I'm not kidding! Can you hear me?"

Gordon understood perfectly. She spoke English. "Why am I here?" Gordon forced out.

"You must be new!" she yelled down at him. "No one has told you anything, have they?"

"No," answered Gordon in a sullen voice. She looked down at the ground and shook her head.

"You have been sold to the United Resistance Army of Dor Nomien Sing!" she paused as if waiting for Gordon to burst out, make some claim or assertion, but he was silent. "We were all the same once. Some of us were sold while still in cryogenic freeze, some after. Many of the people are from this time, forced to fight by the sovereignty," she said. Her voice was sad. "You will fight on this desert for the rest of your life."

"No... that can't be. I was supposed to be revived so I could continue my life—a new life! There has been some kind of mistake! I refuse to fight. I'll kill myself first," said Gordon frantically.

"Try! Try now!" she yelled. "Don't you get it? You can't die! They'll fix you. Over and over again, like a machine!" Gordon looked at her in disbelief, yet he knew deep in his heart that what she said was true. "Come on! Let's get going!"

Gordon crept out of the trench and looked out across the desert. Night was beginning to fall and darkness had begun to hide the desolation of the war. Everywhere the sound of battle filled the air, its calamity reeking madness and fury into to all who heard it. Bones cracked under Gordon's feet as he ran toward the battle screaming, his anger at its height. On he ran, into the depths of hell, toward his eternal life.

I am proud to say that Chris Bunch has become a Fantastic regular. He has had several stories published within these pages in the past and I have several more tales by Chris in inventory for future issues. Chris is a New York Times best-selling author who has written scores of books including *Sten*, *Shadow Warrior*, *The Far Kingdom*, *A Reckoning for Kings*, and many others.

# Thieves Fall Out

## by Chris Bunch

Aramaios of the Black Tents clung by a toehold and a clawed finger below the wall top, set with jagged glass. With his free hand, he threw a length of heavy canvas over the glass, gingerly pulled himself up.

Behind him, across the shadowed street, were half a dozen guardsmen, their crooked captain and that damned troubadour.

On the other side of the wall, inside the estate, peacefully illumed by the over-bright moon, spread gardens filled with plants foreign to Massil and, he thought, possibly to this world.

In the center of the grounds loomed a high stone house. Inside he could see dim light from a turned-down lamp here and there.

Very strange, for the only one supposed to be inside that house was a dead magician.

He started to jump down, caught himself, seeing a slight movement that a man unused to the subtle threats of mountains and desert might never notice.

At least, he thought, just before he jumped, this was one brewing disaster he hadn't gotten into through his own foolishness....

"I understand, sir, you have no fear of sorcerers," the young man said.

Aramaios looked up from the wine lees he was morosely nursing.

"You are wrong," he rumbled, using the musical speech of Massil, just learned, awkwardly. "For a man who has no fear of magicians is either demented, a fool, or damned, and I am none of them. As yet."

"Thank you for the correction," the young man said. "I spoke unclearly. Might I join you for a moment and clarify what I meant?"

Aramaios started to growl, then noted the man carried a full pitcher of wine.

"I'll not stop you," he said.

The man sat down and, without asking, filled Aramaios' mug to the brim.

"I am Rhosfair," he said. "And I seek a partner who's fearless, and interested in riches beyond avarice."

"That's not possible," Aramaios said. "For nothing is beyond the dreams of misers."

"True," Rhosfair admitted, and sipped at his wine.

The two men considered each other.

Rhosfair was about 25, slender, handsome, perhaps a bit too pretty, just over medium height, with long, carefully brushed golden

hair, wearing expensive green suede pants and breeches, with a silk shirt underneath. He carried a thin-bladed sword and, slung over one shoulder, a cittern.

Aramaios bulked in his seat. He was six years younger than Rhosfair, deeply tanned, more a colossus than a man, over seven feet tall. He had enormous shoulders a circus strong man would have envied, a thin waist and massive legs. He wore his black hair very long, tied back. His face was hard, black gleaming eyes that appeared able to look through someone, a slash of a mouth, with a hawk nose that had been broken more than once.

He wore rough leather breeches, an open shirt that had been washed too many times, and was armed with a heavy broadsword and equally brutal double-edged dagger, both carried in a belt with a shoulder sling.

Weapons and man showed hard usage, and Aramaios' knee-boots needed not only polish, but resoling as well.

"I understand," Rhosfair said, making conversation, "the sun was redder than usual today."

Aramaios shrugged, drank wine. "I saw it not. I'm seldom awake when it is up. Unless I've been out all night. Besides, it gives me nothing to see the doom of this dying world rushing toward us."

Rhosfair sipped at his goblet.

"I, also, am seldom about when the *strets* are awake," he said. "For I'm a troubadour, and make my living in places like this, well after nightfall."

Aramaios looked at him carefully, showing nothing. It was unusual for a musician, in this land of love and song, to use thieves' cant like *stret*, the contemptuous term for an honest citizen of Massil.

"I've heard some interesting tales about you," Rhosfair went on. "That you disdain to pay dues to the Thieves' Guild and . . . other people as well."

Aramaios lifted a lip.

"They haven't given me anything but a sneer and the back of their hand when I tried to join," he said. "But they'd love a quarter of all I make, doing . . . what I do."

"They can be powerful enemies."

Aramaios laughed harshly. "I'm no virgin to making foes. I help those who help me, and all others can piss into the wind, for all of me."



"Then we shall be friends," Rhosfair said heartily. "For I wish nothing more than to help you, as I said."

"Doing what?"

"I desire," Rhosfair said, lowering his voice, "one great jewel from the mansion of Lycyth the wizard."

"But he's dead," Aramaios said, covering his reaction. "Three days now, as I recollect."

"Yes, lying in his coffin, preserved by a spell until the time the city rulers dictated the stars are right for burial, a week hence. But his estate has not been divided among his heirs, for they are coming from foreign lands."

"Now is the time to strike, before these heirs arrive, for surely some at least must be wizards as well, and will guard the riches of Lycyth carefully."

"One jewel is all you wish," Aramaios said. "What sort?"

"It is nothing that has been seen in these lands, ever," Rhosfair said, excitement growing. "It resembles a pearl, such as the oysters bear in the western oceans, but bigger than any pearl ever known, at least the size of your clenched fist."

"Great jewels are often empty tales," Aramaios said. "Have you proof this gem exists?"

"I have more than proof," Rhosfair said. "I've seen it myself, the one time I was hired by Lycyth to perform at one of his midnight banquets." He shivered. "That was a fee I earned twice over." But he didn't explain.

"So you want this gem," Aramaios said. "How do you know where it's kept? I may be a good thief, but the idea of rummaging through an entire mansion doesn't call to me."

"It will be in the Great Room on the ground floor, just below his living quarters, on a stand, for he used it often in his incantations."

"One gem," Aramaios mused. "And there would be two of us. How would the spoils be shared?"

"I wish that jewel . . . all else, and Lycyth collected gems . . . is yours for the taking. Less a few for our . . . expenses."

"What warders guard the mansion?"

"There are none that are known," Rhosfair said. "For who would rob a wizard, even after he's dead?" But his eyes shifted slightly. "I know of no sentries, human or animal."

Aramaios thought, and was tempted. But he'd learned riches were seldom gained in one bold stroke, but little by careful little. The boldest adventurers seemed to end up at the end of a noose, sprawled in their blood, or in a noisome dungeon.

"I thank you for the wine," he said, upending his mug. "But it is getting late. Perhaps, another time, I'll be able to repay your favor."

Aramaios saw no sign coming from Rhosfair, but the door banged open, and four men of the city guard slammed in, spears lowered.

Aramaios was on his feet, table overturned, sword half-drawn to spit Rhosfair for his treachery, but there were spear tips at his throat, and he was still.

Before he could curse the troubadour, a heavy, black bearded man in mail, interwoven with gold and silk threads, stalked in, four more guardsmen behind him. An ornate sword swung at his waist.

The taproom was frozen, for almost all its patrons knew and feared that man, as did Aramaios himself.

"Greetings, man of the desert," Captain of the City Guard Yanov said. "I've been looking for you for almost a week."

"I'm not glad you've found me."

"But I am." Yanov turned, waved to the barmaid. "Two more pitchers of wine, for I get thirsty when I'm talking."

He nodded at a guard, who picked up the table. Yanov dragged over a chair, sat down. Several people hurried out of the taproom,

others pretended nervous innocence. Yanov had a bad name in Massil, as a guardsman who was not only thoroughly corrupt, but powerful enough to make his own law. He could be bribed . . . but he didn't always stay bribed, depending on what he thought amusing or profitable.

"Sit down, Aramaios," he said. "We have business to discuss."

Yanov motioned to his guardsmen, who reluctantly withdrew.

"Don't perform any gymnastics with your weaponry," he said. "as you did before the late, somewhat lamented Sachse, for I have men of my watch covering this hovel front and rear. Not to mention I believe I'm more than your equal with the sword."

"Sachse's fate is, by the way, why your name is on a warrant. Murder most desperate. Tsk."

"The bastard slighted me on a . . . a matter of business."

"I have no question about that," Yanov said briskly. "Sachse was always a man of little principles and less sense. However, he was the one in good standing with certain reputable members of Massil's government and you, I'm afraid, are a poverty-stricken renegade from the far deserts."

Aramaios allowed the barmaid to refill his mug, looking about for an exit, trying to devise an escape.

"Now, Aramaios," Rhosfair went on. "Before you began smashing about like some sort of barbarian, I was about to explain that, while Captain Yanov is not a full partner in my enterprise, he is certainly to be reckoned with."

"It was his share that I described to you, before the excitement began."

Aramaios looked at the two men.

"It seems that one of you has a plan, the other more than enough force to break into a dead magician's house," he said. "Why do you need me?"

"Because I am not entirely trusted by my superiors," Yanov said. "If I entered that mansion, I'm sure at least one or two of my men would report me instantly."

He tried to look cunning, failed. Aramaios wondered why he was afraid to enter Lycyth's grounds, suspected the obvious.

"So I'm the lamb for the slaughter," he said.

"I'd hardly put things in that light," Rhosfair said.

"I would." Aramaios caught the barmaid's eye.

"A mug of water," he said. "I fear I've work before me that alcohol is ill-suited to prepare."

"We weren't proposing to undertake the task tonight," Rhosfair said. "The night after tomorrow would give us far more time to make preparation."

"You mean, to tell of your brilliance to your damned doxies and toadies," Aramaios said. "So word gets all over Massil."

"No. I'll do your damned robbery for you. Tonight, for it's only a bit after midnight. And with one condition."

"Maybe you're telling the truth, Yanov. Maybe not. You . . . and whatever men you propose to bring with you . . . stay outside."

"I have no objection to that," Yanov said. "I can guard your back, and give support, should anything be needed. That's hardly a condition."

"I haven't stated it yet," Aramaios said. "To keep all of us thieves honest, this plunker of strings who concocted the scheme will go into Lycyth's manse with me, once I determine it's safe. Rhosfair, you can leave your noisebox here, with the barmaid."

Aramaios was quite pleased, seeing the sudden pallor on Rhosfair's face. But he firmed his lips and nodded.

"Then," Aramaios said, draining the mug of water, "let us go and let a dead magician transform us into moguls."

Aramaios came from the land of the Black Tents to the south, harsh, mountained desert. He'd been driven out, named outlaw, because he'd refused to give his uncle a particularly lovely girl Aramaios had taken in a village raid, arguing the woman had chosen to stay with him, and the people of the Black Tents honored freedom over all else, even, limitedly, for slaves.

He'd been pursued down from the mountains to the cliffs that dropped down into the salt marshes that had once been an ocean. He'd decided to journey north, to the fabled cities. There'd been strange beasts to fight, beasts that might have once been sea-creatures. But they weren't the most deadly beings in the marshes. He and the woman had hidden from bandits twice, then encountered a powerful wizard, who, it turned out, also wanted the woman. He'd lived in a black castle built on a high bluff that had once been an island.

Aramaios had escaped with his life, and some of the wizard's gold, leaving the magician's burning corpse next to the corpse of the woman he'd murdered.

He'd been ready to drop when he reached higher ground leading up to Massil.

Massil was old beyond memory. It had been a great seaport even before the days when the Ancients had power over the sky and beyond to the stars, before men became tired and old, and the earth tired with them. Then the seas had retreated, and the sun had reddened and faded, and there were now but a few million in the world, waiting for the final doom.

Massil was built on what had been a bay, crawling up the hilly ground to the spare mountains beyond. Two year-round creeks, almost rivers, flowed into what had been the city's most ancient harbor, now a pleasing park below the city, where lovers strolled and listened to the minstrel's pleas for love. The larger, "new" harbor, still dating before man's memory, was now farmland, providing mostly rare delicacies for the tables of the rich.

Those lived mainly in the southwestern part of the city, on the heights. The mage Lycyth's mansion, almost a fortress, had been built where, legend said, a priest-house had once been.

To Aramaios, the rich would only be victims. He moved into the slums to the east, where thieves, rogues, whores and those he immediately knew to be his own sort lived.

The gold he'd taken in his journey hadn't lasted very long, between the taprooms, the gambling tables and the smiling soft women of the city.

He'd sought work, work best done by a man with few morals, a fast sword and a drive for wealth. But it seemed Massil had little use for a man whose blade was quicker than his tongue, and who tried to speak the truth.

The money he made thieving, bodyguarding, robbing, flowed out again, and he'd been locked out of his shabby room for not paying the rent that very day, and had only two coppers in his pouch when Rhosfair appeared.

Aramaios made a very loose plan as the three, flanked by the eight guardsmen, who had no more idea of what was going on than the moon, went through the streets toward Lycyth's estate.

He needed certain items, and Yanov sent men to guard headquarters, to "borrow" them from the evidence case. He wouldn't send one of the guardsmen, for fear he'd be questioned, and expose their scheme.

While he was gone, Aramaios drew Rhosfair aside, and asked him Yanov's exact place in the deal.

The troubadour looked embarrassed.

"When I first had this idea, I sought for a thief. A good thief. And Captain Yanov heard of my search, and confronted me.

"I thought it might be well to have some of the city authorities on our side, in case . . . well, in case anything goes wrong."

"What could go wrong?"

"I don't know," Rhosfair said. "But it's best to take precautions."

"The best precaution," Aramaios said grimly, "is to always work alone, and never confide in anyone, ever. Three can keep a secret only if two of them are dead." A thought came.

"Why didn't you go to the Thieves Guild?"

Again, Rhosfair's eyes flickered to the side for an instant.

"I was afraid they'd just steal my idea, and leave me in the cold."

Aramaios nodded. "They've that reputation. Why do you want that particular jewel, anyway? Or have you ambitions in wizardry?"

"None at all," Rhosfair said. "I'll be honest with you," and once more he looked away. "I know that gem must have great magical powers. If I possess it, when Lycyth's relatives arrive, I should be able to strike a very rich bargain with them.

"And then," he licked his lips, "then my lady fair will cease her primitive ways of caring only for her husband, and turn to me, as is proper in this land of love."

Aramaios snorted, saw Yanov coming back with a sack.

"I have everything you wished, except for a set of picks," Yanov said.

"No matter," Aramaios said. "It's as easy to smash a pane as pick a lock, a skill I'm still learning. So let us go on about our business."

As they climbed the streets toward Lycyth's, past the great houses of magnates, princes and city rulers, they moved more and more quietly, keeping in the shadows.

No one was about in these districts, except the occasional private watchmen, who either scuttled to safer places, seeing the body of armed men, or noted they were city guards, and bothered them not.

Lycyth's house was four-storied, built of stone, behind high walls tipped with glass. Aramaios noted the upper storied rooms had large windows, making the structure appear less like a fortress. The roof, however, had ledges here and there for fighting men . . . or, considering the owner, demons . . . to defend.

Aramaios went around the walls, looking for the best entry. The garden walls fronted on the street on three sides, and the fourth led away, down a rocky escarpment to open land far below.

No doubt they consider that cliff unclimbable, he thought. I could surprise them, I suspect.

But he saw no need to work that hard, and so chose a wall near a side gate. He told the others to wait in a nearby cul de sac until he opened that gate and summoned Rhosfair.

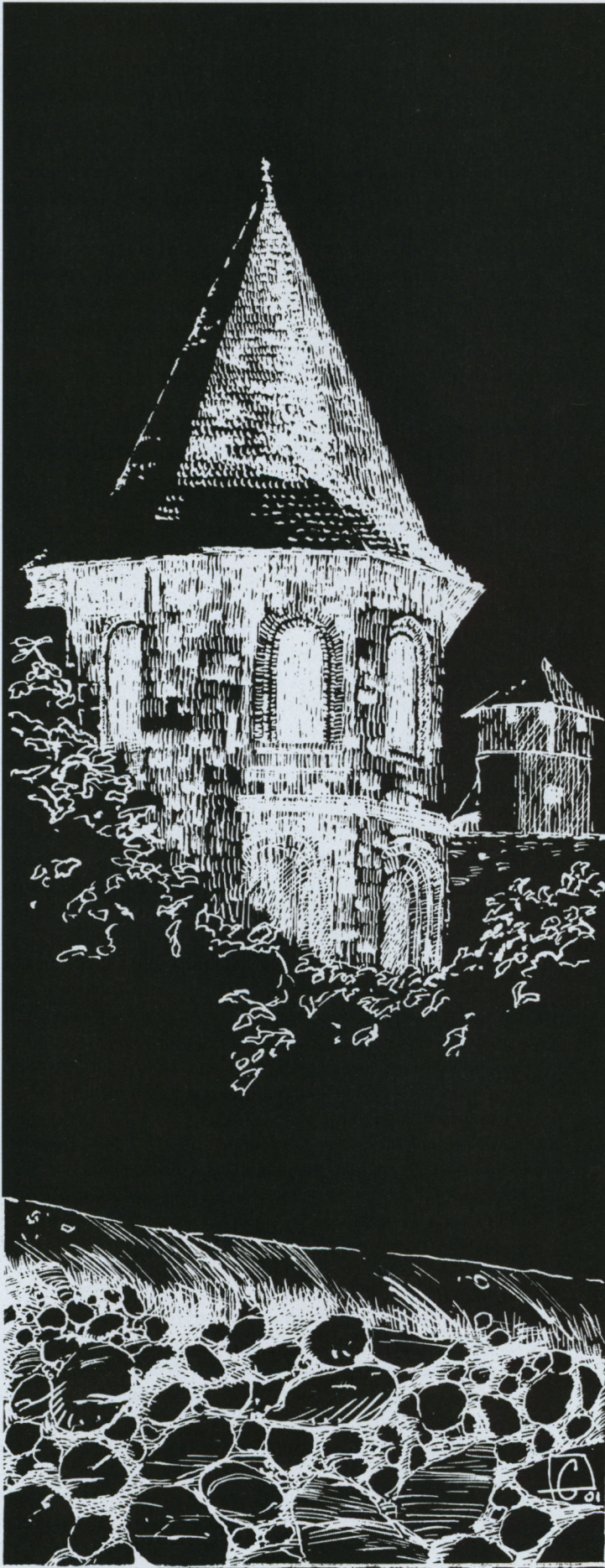
The tools he'd had Yanov secure were simple—a thick canvas blanket, a roll of thick cloth with a sand filling for silent disposal of any watchmen inside, and a bullseye lantern.

He flowed up the wall easily, the wide cracks between the stones as good as ladder rungs, held below the top and cast the canvas across the glass. He slid atop the wall, and surveyed the garden and house below.

Then he saw movement below him. Completely motionless, he watched and waited. A dog? A lion—he'd stolen a golden statue recently from a magnate who preferred a great cat for security. Savage apes from his mountains?

No. The movement was only the whisper of vines, moving in a slight wind.

But the air was perfectly still. . . .



The motion stopped. Aramaios waited, saw no more, decided his nerves were jumpy, and leapt down on the other side, landing with his legs crouched, sword in hand.

The gardens were completely still.

He started for the gate, then decided he would have a bit of a look-about before he summoned the nervous Rhosfair.

He moved toward a glass-doored porch, pushed his way past an overgrowing vine. A thorny tendril whipped around his lower arm. He tugged at it, but it pulled at him, and he slashed at it with his sword. The vine fell away, but his forearm streamed blood. Another vine snaked down at him, and he ducked away.

All of the plants around him were moving, beckoning, reaching, Lycyth's vegetable guardians. They didn't move fast enough to trap an alert man, but if you stumbled into them, you could be savaged.

Aramaios, very much on his guard, crept toward the porch, closed off with floor to ceiling iron doors, elaborately wrought, with glass panes. He considered one for a moment, drew his dagger, and leaned on the frame. It moved enough for him to slip his blade through the opening, and pry up a latch.

He pulled the door open, making never a sound, and stepped inside.

Aramaios had a moment to see a blur, then something hit him on the side of the head, and he stumbled and went down.

He never quite lost consciousness, feeling hands strip away his weapons belt, then, two on either side, lift and drag him along a long hallway, through another door and down a flight of stairs. He heard keys clink, a door grate open, and he was pitched inside.

A strange, high voice, said, "Wait . . . but not for long," then came giggles.

The door thudded shut, and keys turned in the lock.

Aramaios, no stranger to dungeons, rolled to the side, put a wall against his back and, still fuzzy-headed, sat up. He heard no rustle of rats, felt no creep of insects.

His eyes adjusted to the dark slowly. There was a tiny grate high in the door, enough for him to make out the small room . . . and the figure crouched against the other wall.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I . . . I'm Zelen." It was a woman's voice. "And you?"

"I am a wanderer named Aramaios."

"I know you," Zelen said. "Or, rather, I know of you. You're the giant from across the once-ocean who's scorned the Thieves' Guild, who think you a madman liable to upset the balance between the law and those of us who live outside it.

"Why are you here?"

"I came . . . two nights ago, I think . . . to steal a gem from the dead Lycyth."

Aramaios started, then rumbled cold laughter.

"Who sent you?"

"No," Zelen said. "I'll tell you no more without cause."

"Cause, eh? Is it cause if I say I came to thief a certain jewel? I was sent by a man who styles himself a troubadour. Perhaps you know his name."

"What . . . Rhosfair sent you?"

"He did," Aramaios said. "Without mentioning anything of you. Even now he waits outside with a Captain Yanov, a disreputable guard officer, and some of his thugs."

"That . . . that bastard!"

"I'm beginning to agree with you. Tell me what you know, quickly. That voice said I . . . maybe both of us . . . wouldn't be waiting long."

"That . . . those . . . are Lycyth's acolytes. I don't know how many

there are, not even if they're human, or some sort of golem he created to be guards. They wear hoods, and I never saw their faces, even though I scouted this house thoroughly by day, from the outside."

Aramaios rubbed his chin.

"So I was lied to again. Unless Rhosfair never saw these creatures. Another question— what is he to you?"

"He is . . . was, I suppose now, for he's leaving me here to face whatever vengeance these creatures or Lycyth's kith and kin will wreak on me . . . my lover.

"I'm a journeyman with the Thieves Guild, and I foolishly fell in love with him, or maybe his music and sweet singing.

"I don't know any more. But it broke my heart to listen to him talk about his poverty, and worse, some noblewoman who'd never listen to his songs, let alone let him into her bedchamber.

"I loved him . . . I still love him, I suppose. So when he told me of seeing Lycyth's treasures, I said I could break in and take them. He only wanted one thing, a huge jewel like a pearl.

"I consulted my elders in the Guild, and they said I should not undertake this task, for I lacked experience and they distrusted Rhosfair anyway.

"But I didn't listen, and was caught by those hooded demons, and thrown here.

"What did he have over you, to convince you to take on this fool's mission?"

"Nothing," Aramaios said. "Nothing but my own greed."

He might have said more, but the sound of a key in the lock came, and he was on his feet. He blinked at light from a low lantern, saw four of the hooded ones.

"Both you," the high voice came. "Turn, put hands behind you."

Aramaios stood still, and, as one, four daggers whispered from sheaths.

"We do easy, we do hard," the voice came. "It matters not."

Aramaios turned his back, putting his wrists together. Something slithered around them, like a dry snake, pinned them together, held firmly. He tried his bonds, found them secure, but felt a touch of hope. A thief had shown him a trick once of holding your wrists edge on when being bound. "Not much," the woman had said. "But it'll give a bit of squirming room, and when you're took proper, any 'vantage's worth havin'."

Zelen struggled, but two of the hooded beings had her tied as well. Two others pushed Aramaios out of the door. Their gloved hands on his arms made him shudder, for no apparent reason. Their fingers felt long, thin, but with great strength.

Aramaios remembered another of the thief's teachings, stopped struggling, and went willingly with his captors.

The corridor's dim light showed little of the acolytes—their habits fell limply about their bodies, and their hoods entirely covered their hoods. Aramaios did not want to peer closely into those hoods, not knowing but fearing what he might see.

Zelen was a small, slender woman, with the build of a dancer. She was no more than five feet tall, with close-cropped brown hair. Her face was heart shaped, its expression somewhat foxlike, with pale blue eyes. She wore close-fitting black tunic with a hood, pants of the same color, and matching ankle boots. On her leather belt was an empty dagger sheath and pouch that would have held her burglar's tools.

The pair were led through the room Aramaios had been ambushed in, deeper into the house to an enormous, high-ceilinged chamber, lit only by six tapers on the wall. The walls were hung with arcane weapons, tapestries, mementoes. Aramaios unconsciously licked his lips, seeing, on a stand, that great pearl. In other nooks

were baskets of gems, huge diamonds, rubies, emeralds.

On one wall was an enormous portrait of Lycyth—Aramaios had seen the wizard once, in a parade, when trying to perfect his skills as a pickpocket. The man was big, almost as big as the nomad, but heavier-bodied. His beard, worked in waxed spikes was, like his hair, jet black, even though the man had been in his 70s when he died.

Aramaios remembered that no one had ever said just what the wizard had died of, then saw, below the portrait on a raised dais, an open coffin.

In front of the coffin was a visibly nervous Rhosfair.

"You bastard!" Zelen sputtered. "You betrayed me!"

"No," Rhosfair said. "No, I was honest when I came up with my—"

"You came up with shit!" the thief snarled. "All you had was a dream about wanting to be rich. I gave you everything else."

"Well . . . that's as it may be," Rhosfair said, looking nervously behind him at the coffin.

"But when I waited for you, outside, and after two hours realized you must have come to some mischance, I saw no reason to linger on, for fear I might, too, be taken."

"I slept badly, o believe me, Zelen, worrying about what dreadful fate you must have encountered."

"Of course you did," the woman sneered.

"But at last I slept," Rhosfair continued, "and I dreamed. It seemed as if Ly . . . the man behind me, who died, whose name I fear using, yet had not gone down to the demons he loved so well, talked to me.

"He offered me a trade, and somehow I knew it was not false dreaming. Great wealth, although not that great jewel I said I wanted, Aramaios, for he needed that for future incantations. But he'd give enough gold, jewels, for me to fill a wagon twice over, more if I wished. Plus he would free you, and said you were unharmed as yet.

"All I had to provide," and Rhosfair's voice sank to a whisper, "was a life. A young, strong man, and somehow Lycyth could return from the dead, take this man's body, and live on and on."

Aramaios started to struggle, stopped himself.

"He'd done this in the past, he told me . . . or, rather, the dream told me . . . but this time he'd been caught by surprise, betrayed by his weakling heart before he could make the proper arrangements.

"I remembered your telling me about this man Aramaios, and thought him perfect. Big, strong, not intelligent so his will wouldn't stand against Lycyth's for long, and, best of all, a stranger to Massil, so no one would note his absence.

"What else could I do?"

Zelen glared, was about to say something, when one of the hooded ones came forward.

"Enough talk. You, Rhosfair, stand aside. It is time for ceremony."

Rhosfair licked his lips, moved out of the way.

Another acolyte tugged at a cord dangling from a wall. Stone grated, and a trapdoor opened and a long altar rose from the floor. It was carved in odd symbols, and had manacles at top and bottom. Hanging from one end was Aramaios' sword belt. Aramaios looked longingly at the great blade, the dagger, but they were unreachable.

Two other acolytes carried in a table, with ropes tied at either end.

"The altar for you, Aramaios," the head acolyte said, his high voice sounding excited. "The other for the thief.

"Even though she is hardly virgin, her blood will improve the casting. Prepare her!"

Rhosfair managed: "But you promised—" interrupted by Zelen's snap of "only a godsdamned musician would ever trust a wizard's promise!"



The only response from the acolyte was his high-pitched giggle. Now Aramaios noted, on the dais, just in front of the coffin, three triangles drawn inside a circle. An acolyte waved a hand, and fire roared up from the triangle's points, without kindling or fuel. One acolyte had Zelen's tunic, was about to tear it away, when a dry voice interrupted:

"What an *interesting* spectacle."

Leaning in the doorway was Captain Yanov, flanked by his guardsmen, sword in hand.

"When you didn't come back as quickly as you promised, Rhosfair, I thought I should investigate.

"Were there not these strange ones in cloaks about, seeing all these thieves falling out would be most humorous. But I—"

Aramaios kicked one acolyte's feet out from under him, head-butted the second sprawling. The thief's advice had been sound . . . relax, and your captors do the same, perhaps giving you the chance. Another one of the hooded ones jumped toward him, brandishing his dagger, but Yanov cut him down.

Then all was confusion as the acolytes and guardsmen smashed into one another. There were more of the hooded ones, but they were armed only with daggers, and the guardsmen had swords, and were well trained.

Aramaios went flat, rolled to a dagger he spotted on the floor. He was on his back, sawing awkwardly at his bonds, and one hand was free.

Zelen kned one of her captors where his groin should be, looked surprised when there was no reaction. Then Aramaios was free, and in one bound was at his sword belt.

It slid out of its sheath gladly, and his dagger was in his other hand.

He had a moment to cut Zelen free, then Rhosfair was on him, in a jump lunge.

Aramaios parried, slashed, snarling, "I'm stupid, eh?" but the troubadour wasn't there. Rhosfair's blade flickered out, barely skinned Aramaios' chest, then he leapt back like an acrobat, ready to parry the nomad's thrust when he suddenly made a surprised sound, and dropped his sword.

Buried in the middle of his chest was a dagger. Zelen shouted, "Revenge!" then two hooded men were on her. She sidestepped one's lunge, then Aramaios' sword went deep in that one's chest, and his

dagger slashed the second's throat.

All was bloody chaos in the dim light.

Yanov was there, sword ready.

"Best if there'll be no witnesses to argue," he said, and cut at Aramaios. He parried, ducked a sword-thrust from another guardsman and gutted him neatly.

Zelen had a guardsman's sword, and killed a hooded one, then a guardsman.

Yanov blocked Aramaios' thrust, tried to knee him. Aramaios' dagger screeched off the guardsman's armor. For an instant they were chest to chest, then Aramaios pushed hard, sent Yanov stumbling back, his sword spinning away.

Aramaios, not aware of the tight grin on his face, was about to spit the officer when a great voice boomed:

"Blood calls, calls louder even than my wizardry."

Rising up from the coffin was Lycyth, appearing very much alive. A pleased smile was on his face.

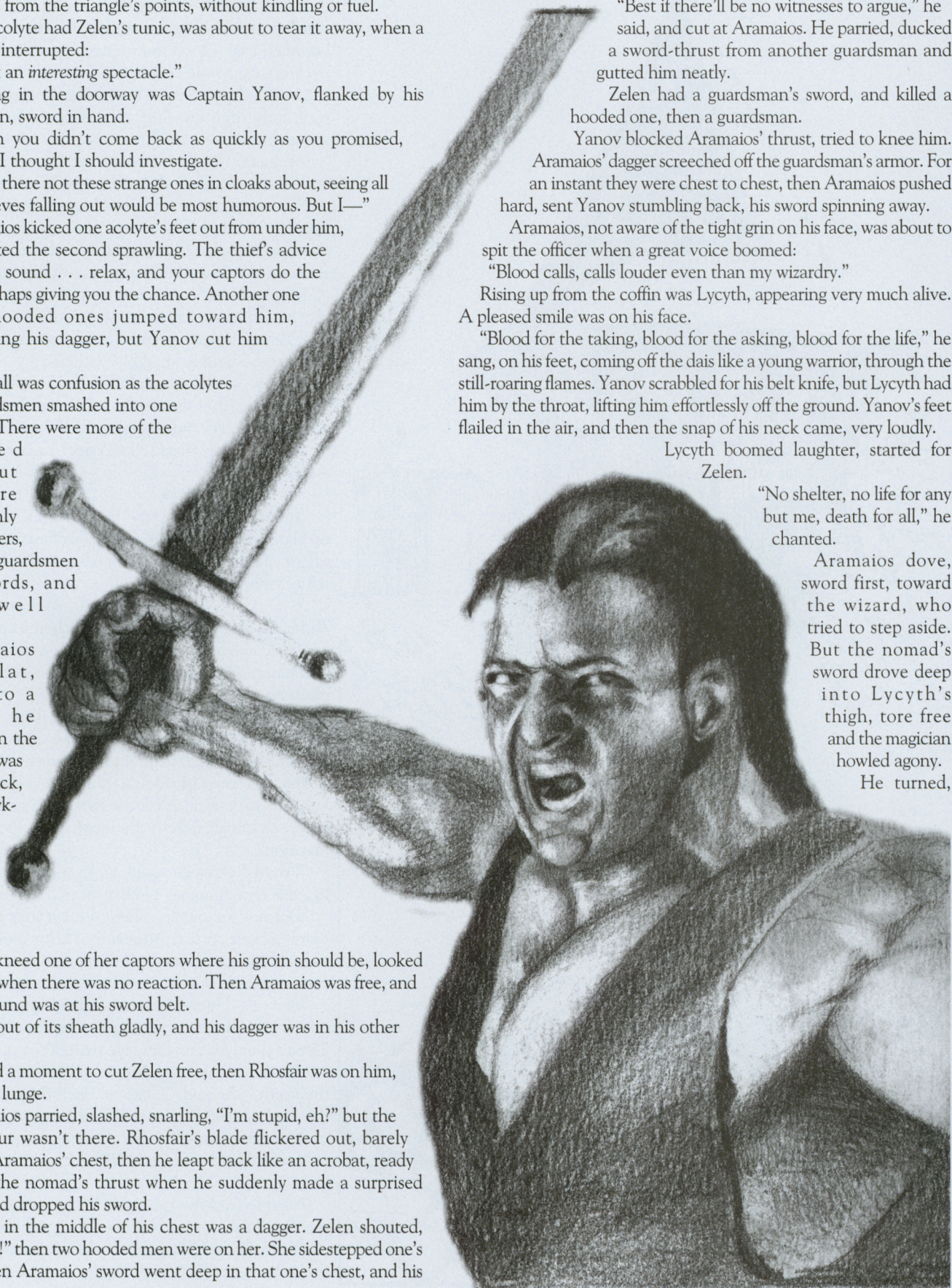
"Blood for the taking, blood for the asking, blood for the life," he sang, on his feet, coming off the dais like a young warrior, through the still-roaring flames. Yanov scrambled for his belt knife, but Lycyth had him by the throat, lifting him effortlessly off the ground. Yanov's feet flailed in the air, and then the snap of his neck came, very loudly.

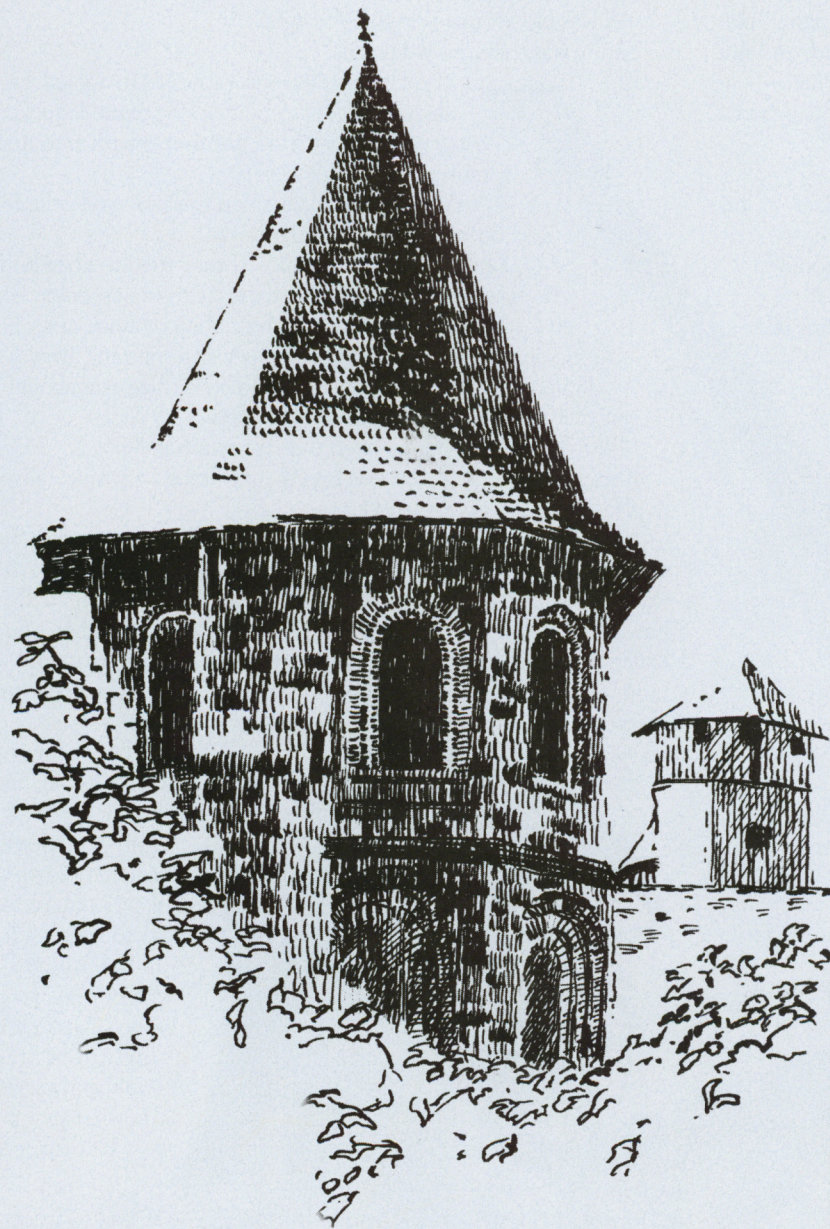
Lycyth boomed laughter, started for Zelen.

"No shelter, no life for any but me, death for all," he chanted.

Aramaios dove, sword first, toward the wizard, who tried to step aside. But the nomad's sword drove deep into Lycyth's thigh, tore free and the magician howled agony.

He turned,





reaching for Aramaios as he tucked, shoulder-rolled and was back on his feet and struck hard.

All moved very slowly, as if under water, or in a dream. Aramaios' sword hit the wizard in the neck, cut through it like boneless meat, and the mage's head bounced free. Blood fountained from the stub of his neck almost to the ceiling.

Lycyth, fingers still clawed for Aramaios' throat, took one, then another, dead step, smashed to the ground.

Aramaios didn't pause, but went over the corpse, and had the magician's head by his hair.

"This kept one wizard dead," he snarled, and tossed the man's dripping head into the sorcerous fire. The flames flared high, welcoming the fuel, searing Aramaios' face, and he jumped away, spun, on guard.

But there was no one on his feet except for Zelen. He heard the running sound of the surviving guardsmen, saw, here and there on the blood-stained floor, bodies and heaped black cloaks.

"When . . . when you killed him," Zelen said, in a shaky voice, "they vanished . . . just vanished."

She staggered, and Aramaios had his arm around her.

"Sorry," she managed. "I'm a thief . . . not an assassin. And the smell . . ."

She swallowed hard.

"I think," Aramaios said thoughtfully, "we'd best be on about our looting. I'm sure the killer vines didn't get all of Yanov's goons, and they'll be back with reinforcements."

Aramaios reigned in, as dawn touched Massil. Beside him rode Zelen. After leaving Lycyth's, they'd woken a livery man, whose sleepy cursing stopped suddenly when given two great jewels.

Zelen had thought about taking that monstrous pearl, but Aramaios said it would be unwise. Lycyth's kith and kin would no doubt be interested in the gem, might have ways of tracing it, and he'd done enough business with wizards for the time. But saddlebags on two pack horses were stuffed with other loot from the mansion.

"I think," Aramaios said, looking down at Massil, "I like this city. A man could live an exciting life here.

"But not for awhile. There are Lycyth's relatives to worry about, not to mention Yanov's clique, and conceivably your former lover might have a friend or two with a sword."

"Plus my Thieves' Guild," Zelen said, "who would take it amiss for me to decline to pay my journeyman's 25% to them for providing me with nothing.

"Besides, there are cities, rich cities, I've heard of to the north," she said. "Cities where a thief . . . a pair of thieves . . . could further enrich themselves."

Aramaios grinned.

"So shall we ride together?" he asked. "At least for a time?"

Zelen looked the big man's body up and down very speculatively.

"Yes," she said. "I think I would like that. For a time."



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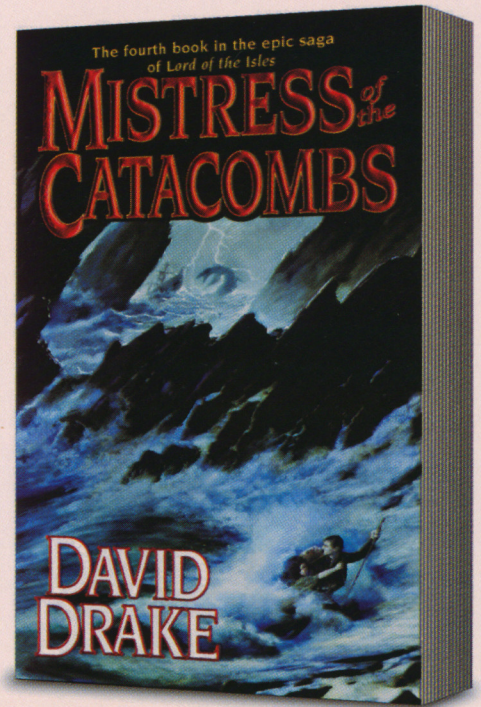
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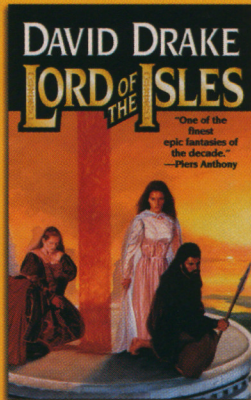
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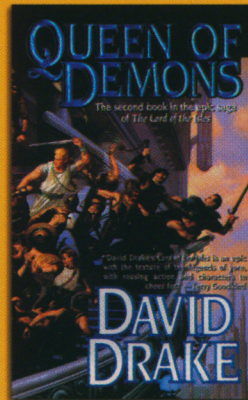


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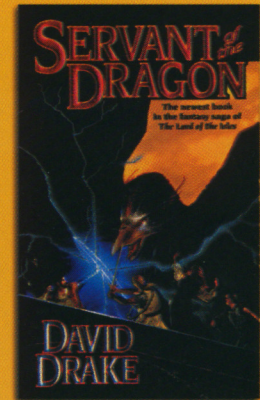
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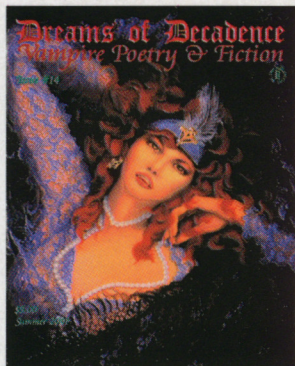
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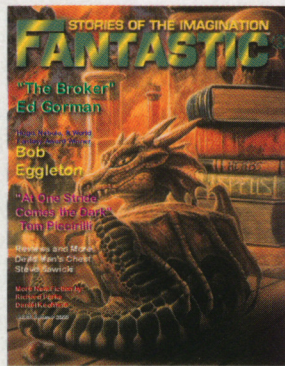
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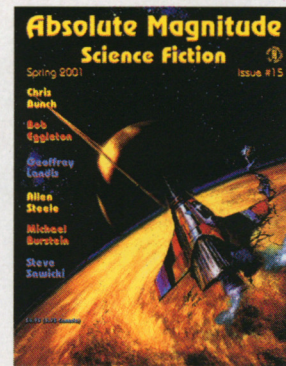
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