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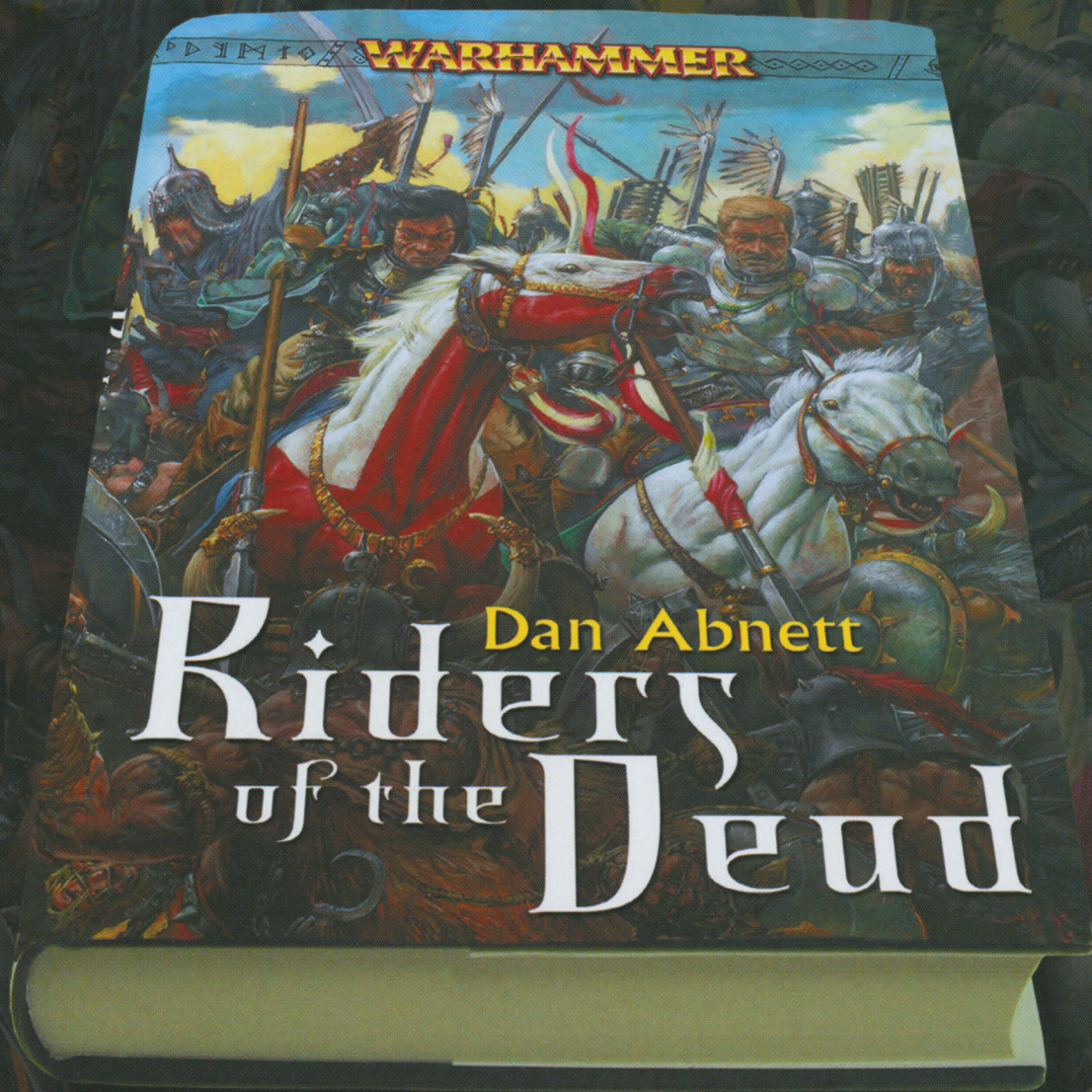
Prolog to
Roger Zelazny's
Dawn of Amber
by John Gregory Betancourt



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Tom is no stranger to the readers of *Fantastic Stories*. He is the author of scores of books, most recently *The Night Class*, *Mean Sheep* and *This Cape Is Red Because I've Been Bleeding*. His short fiction has appeared in most of the fiction magazines and he appears regularly in major anthologies. *Gravesend* is a story that I pushed Tom to write/edit. I love good traditional fantasy but felt that I had already published the gamut of wizards and dragons—so how better to put a new spin on the fantastic? Be sure to check-out Tom's website at <http://www.mikeoliveri.com/piccirilli/>

Gravesend

by Tom Piccirilli

Here, these children born of madness. The urchin called Ever grabbed her brother by a lock of his white hair and hauled him down behind the fish-strewn dock to a stack of crates. A coming storm raged above, and they both felt it burning in them as well. The other two children in their running pack dropped to their knees beside her as she gestured with her chin. "Over there."

The lamps on the wharf cast pale orange carpets across the stone walkways and alleys. Torchlight flashed at the edges of the nearest crate. Ever pulled her foot out of the glow as if she'd been singed. "Is that him, Asher?" she asked her twin.

"Let go of my hair."

"Quiet. Is that him?"

"I can't see anything until you let go of my hair."

She released him, and Asher turned to face the busy street. Carriages and riders filled the darkened avenue as fog drifted in off the ocean. He strained to see beyond the harlots and the eager merchants, their false jewelry and strained smiles reflecting in the dim light. Shopkeepers appraised the merchandise, a hand testing the flesh, shaking their heads either yes or no. Fat noblemen dressed in gaudy robes bustled by surrounded by private squads of mercenary soldiers.

"Are you blind?" Ever pointed to the cloaked, scarred wolf walking at the far end of the street, his shambling awkward gait mimicking a man's.

"He's the one named Lon."

Featherfeet Leah swiped a hand against her throat and killed a sluggish wasp hovering near the grime on her neck. "What happened to him? He looks like he's been carved for a feast."

"No wonder," mused Zepho, the youngest at ten-years-old, in his squeaking voice. "He survived the Rellinite torture cages. No one who lived through that returned to the cities without disfigurement."

Piercing laughter on the street made Ever wince. "You're certain it's this wolf, Asher?"

"I've already said yes."

The wolf continued his loping path, claws hidden beneath his blue cloak. Waves lapped against the dock and boat lines snapped in the rising wind. Scale and ringed mail chimed faintly out of harmony. The running pack followed as the wolf loped towards the canal to the east, carefully stepped over a drunk or dead man curled in the gutter. Each morning the city watch of Tempertown cleaned the bodies of vagabonds, heavy-footed thieves, and bad minstrels out of the sewer drains. Few of the corpses remained fallen long enough to be carted to the municipal morgue. Most were stolen by the devil scientists or Yod-god mages for purposes that went unnamed.

Iron bells that hadn't yet had their clappers stolen clanked out the closing notes for the night's final masses.

"Damn the lice." Zepho scratched himself into a fit. "We should've bathed in the river when we had a chance."

"At least he won't be able to smell us," Leah said. "A wolf without a nose. It must drive him half-crazy."

Ever managed a bitter smile, and with her usual angry hiss of a voice said, "Better to be introduced covered in the filth we were born to."

"Oh, stop."

It had always been like this, the bitterness coming and going in starts. Asher paused and took his sister's hand. A tight grip was as close as he could come to a caress, but it was enough, or should have been. Ever turned and glared, her wild hair whirling, matted and chunked with tree sap and grease. They all smelled of fish.

Rats skittered around their feet as the four crept through alleys without any mistaken or wasted motion. They maneuvered through the mists of the boardwalk, instinctively taking lighter steps as they came to cobblestone. Passing the Tavern of the Twice-damned Leah glanced in. Sergeant Sham sat with a flagon of ale in each hand, his buckler and spike-topped helmet resting at his feet. A barmaiden tugged his great snaking mustache and cooed in his ear. Featherfeet Leah moved on, keeping her shoulder close to the alley wall.

In this quarter called Tempertown, the future was less important than the discarded past, and destiny, which some aspired to fulfill, remained only a deceptive word. The cooling streets of Kadesh spread before them as the clouds roiled. Zepho surveyed the area, calling up maps of the sprawling city in his memory. "Beyond the burned out framehouse."

"I'm... apprehensive," Asher said, sounding anything but afraid.

The muscles of Ever's face tightened, and the bones of her jaw crackled. "Imagine that, coming from a poet." Lips crushed together in a practiced scowl, her anxiety was finally let loose as anger. "If not for me, you'd have died of plague years ago. Sometimes I regret saving you."

His eyes reflected a much deeper wrath than his sister's. It had been a long while since he'd risen to her barbs, but some things he would not put up with. He said, quite calmly, "Revoke that, Ever."

Unlike all the tunes of his songs and poems, now his tone was soft but final. Zepho often got a thrill at times like these, when Ever the Unenchanted would actually shiver before the blazing eyes of her brother. He actually found himself quivering. "All right, I revoke it," she said.

Leah stepped between the twins and whispered, "Enough, you two. A fat lot of good this sneaking about has done with your squawking. A rogue just peered down at us from his window."

"We've sent more than one to hell."

"I'd rather not push the point. I'll have tits in another year and things will be rough enough then."

"It's that one, I believe," Zepho announced, pointing to a walled home on the canal. "There, at the end, on the right. The surrounding apartments should be empty."

The wolf's house was the opposite of what Ever had been expecting. She'd imagined a dozen different strongholds for the wolf, perhaps a small fortress with ten-foot-high walls, bits of sharpened metal added to the brickwork, mystical flames burning overhead in a serpent-shaped brazier. But this: a plain cottage etched with flower boxes, and a yard dappled by a large and varied gardens. How could a survivor of the Ten Million Man War grow roses—or anything red—ever again?

Asher crouched in the shadows with a slightly amused, puzzled grin on his face. "An assassin, warrior, and a fine gardener too."

"Okay then," Ever said, "Let's go talk to this strange wolf." She drew her knife and crept to the border of the garden, glancing down for steel-sprunged traps. The wonderful scents and perfumes shook loose some of her well-fueled hostility, and she pondered if this was a snare of some kind, an odor meant to enslave the spirit.

But they were only roses. She thought of her dead mother and walked forward, aware of the others moving silently behind her. She decided this was better than trying to burgle their way inside, only to be murdered as a thief. She raised her fist and pounded on the door, surprised to find it swinging open at her touch.

"I think we've been expected," Asher said.

Leah's face tightened. "Small wonder. The two of you could have raised the ghosts of kings with your squabbling."

"We should've bathed," Zepho moaned.

Asher took the lead, stepping inside, and saw the wolf crouched before his hearth, beckoning them. "Hello," he said. "Come in."

Lon was well-dressed, wearing a black vest of tooled leather, silver-threaded at the collar and epaulets, and his trousers matched with a pattern of glyphs weaving down the outer seams. Two silver bands gleamed on his wrists, and at his waist a black sash was tied loosely. His grayish-white fur shined, and those pointed ears dropped back for a moment. The four urchins saw that his paws did not have terrible claws, but instead were tipped with clean nails only slightly longer than a man's.

"I was about to have supper. Would you care for stew?" His voice, too, was surprisingly soft. Ever did not know wolves could smile without looking hungry. She moved aside a step and hung closely to her brother's shoulder.

"Thank you for your welcome, Master Lon, but no," Asher said.

The wolf tittered, an eerie noise sounding like a cross between a mewl and a cough. "I am no one's master, my friend. Lon will suffice."

Asher blushed and swallowed thickly. He recalled now that 'master' was how prisoner soldiers had been forced to answer the Rellinite torturers. "I am Asher," he said, then waved his hand to introduce the others. "My sister, Ever the Unenchanted. She is Featherfeet Leah, and the fourth of our pack is Zepho."

Lon inclined his head slightly. He pulled out an oddly-shaped wolves' stool and sat. "It is a pleasure to meet you all, children. Come join me."

Ever watched as Asher, without fear—she didn't understand why he was never afraid—went and sat. The walls were lined with books, rows stacked three deep in places. After a lengthening moment, Leah and Zepho drew near as well and seated themselves at a bench on the other side of the table. Ever came closer but did not sit.

The wolf ate happily with a wooden spoon. None of the pack were aware wolves used utensils. "If any of you change your mind there are other bowls in the cupboard." He pointed with his oddly human nails. "And there is berry juice in this jug, fresh goat's milk in that one, and a small amount of last year's wine remains in the barrel. Don't be shy."

Lon continued eating, loudly, making noises of contentment. Leah and Zepho shifted uneasily on the bench, bumping shoulders. Their stomachs grumbled, and the thought of turning down warm food was unnatural to an urchin. Leah finally went to the cupboard and removed four bowls, spoons, and finely-crafted metal cups. Zepho helped and together they went to the pot and dished out enough for everyone. They left one before Asher and another at the end of the table for Ever. Leah and Zepho ate in silence, and still Ever would not sit.

This was not the way it was supposed to be, she thought. This was not why blind Nabath sent her this way into the darkness. Her breathing became ragged. The smell of the boiling stew grew overpowering, and her mouth watered. Coming here was meant to be a recovery of debts.

Asher eyed the wolf's silver bracelets for a time. "Did you get them from the court of Ilycium?"

"No, these were given to me by a friend. On the last day of my being a cub."

"Dovekill?"

Lon's ears pricked up briefly and he smirked. "Yes."

Ever felt frozen, impatient and wanting. A thousand thoughts had rushed through her since blind Nabath the Truthsayer had whispered to her in the marketplace. Whenever she'd crossed his alley he would turn and gaze on her with his empty sockets. After a few weeks of this curiously growing apprehension she grabbed him by his walking stick and asked, "Why are you always looking at me?" He, of all people, had raised a hand to the gods and made an ancient sign to ward away evil. He'd said, "Child of shadows, find the wolf of the tombs and you find your father," then fell to speaking in a tongue she did not know.

She knew it was probably a trap, but that hardly mattered. One's course must be followed. Since their mother's death four years ago they had been street-thieves like hundreds of other orphans in Kadesh. Ever glanced uncertainly from her brother to the wolf and back again, grappling with fear and half-conceived aspirations. Damn Asher, he always remained so unruffled. Something like a whine began to escape her throat and she stifled it with great resolve. Steam billowed from the iron pot in the fireplace, dancing listlessly in the air. There she saw the face of her mother, the promise of her father.

"You knew the Shadowlord," Asher said. "You befriended him, you survived the cages with him."

"That's true."

"They say he's mad."

"He is, in his odd fashion. Quite so."

"Nabath the Truthsayer named my sister and I as children of shadows. We did not know our father. Is it possible that—?"

The wolf clambered to his feet. Neither standing upright nor stooping but something in the middle, crouching so he appeared ready to pounce. Lon scratched his maimed snout, eyeing the children closely. Asher leaned forward. To be the son of—him—was to be what?... a demi-demon of the pit, the son of a madman warrior?

Lon drew the top of his vest down and pulled free a thong from around his neck. "Do any of you know what this is?"

Zepho squeaked, "A man spiked to a cross?"

The wolf nodded and tapped his finger along the necklace as if seeking to wake the tiny man. "It is a symbol. They crucified some of the captured during the war but this is older, from elsewhere. I hate wearing it, but it was a gift too. We are bound by that which we receive as much as by what we bestow."

Lon moved to the mantle and took down the cutlass perched above it. He swung the sword in rhythmic passes and lunged in careful stabs, with almost hypnotizing, perfect actions. "I always feel

odd looking at this thing without a good piece of tempered steel in my hand."

"Is it a Yod-god mage?" Asher asked.

"No no, nothing like that. There are tales passed from ear to ear, on nights when the musicians play at the autumn carnivals and fairs. Many are romantic accounts, some meant to thicken the blood. Stories of fights and failure. Some are told about me and Dovekill, some of the lord of Shadows."

"Tell us," Asher said.

"You know them already." Lon replaced the cutlass and stalked to a trunk beneath numerous shelves of leather-bound volumes shut with metal clasps. "Do not trust this so-called Truthsayer. Even in a city filled with such evil sorceries as Kadesh, he crawls lower than most. And he's not blind. That's a trick he uses to make others underestimate him."

"But he has no eyes," Ever said. "I looked into his face."

Lon took something from the trunk. "He has another set in his brain. I'd bet the rest of my nose that he plucked his own black orbs out."

"Gah!" Zepho cried.

Lon returned to his stool and set a deck of large cards on the table. "Rarely can good come from divination. The gods are jealous when the living dare step beyond their own time and place. Yet knowledge can come from prophecy and be used to counter other magics. Touch these, Asher."

Asher took the deck and spread the five cards before him. They were all blank. "There are no markings."

"Not yet." The wolf scooped the cards up and ran his hands over their edges until they were in line again, like a solid object. He put the deck back down in front of the boy. "Simply pat them. They'll become painted with your presence."

Asher did so.

"Now you, Mistress Ever."

"Ever will suffice," she said, placing her palm to the cards.

"Now you, little Zepho."

"I'm not one of their family, nor is Leah."

"You are a running pack, and that makes you closer than most blood."

"Touch them, Zepho," Leah urged, and he did. Leah tapped the deck as well.

Taking the cards back, gently, like touching a maiden's soft cheek, the wolf held them to his chest, allowing himself to go to a point farther than most men could go into their own spirits, then further. His hand began to glow with a weak yellow light.

Lon turned the first card over to show a picture of wolfsbane in bloom. He snorted and glanced at the windowsill behind him, where the same flower blossomed. "So, it is to be tonight."

The second picture was of Asher, expressionless, face strong but extremely pale. Standing beside him was Ever in a way she had never been. Smiling brightly, happy, hair golden white in sunlight. She had womanly curves and was dressed in saffron robes, with flecks of diamond glittering in a diadem nearly hidden by her locks. "No," she said, "that's not me."

"Perhaps not. Or perhaps some changes lays in wait for you. A journey is at hand."

"Frag it, I don't want to go on any damn journey."

"Neither do I," Lon said, chuckling.

But the third card was of the wolf himself, standing between Leah and Zepho, hands draped around their shoulders in a protective manner. Behind all three, and far larger than the three together, stood a giant with curly brown hair and a thick, reddish beard, his muscles bulging as he smiled broadly.

"Oh hells," Leah said. "Looks like we're going as well."

Lon said, "I am to become acquainted with an old friend. That is Dovekill."

The fourth card was completely red, except for flecks of white and black that seemed to vanish even as one watched. "What's it mean?" Zepho asked, but Lon did not answer.

The fifth card showed a face that caused Ever to gasp. There, down on the table, yet also directly before her in a myriad of ways, was a visage similar to Asher, this man with black hair and crows' feet about the eyes, white of premature gray streaking his temples. Inherent was grace and dignity, as well as wrath and sorrow. Ever saw herself there too, and groaned because Nabath the liar had not lied. At the hollow of the lord of shadows' throat sat an emerald burning brightly with mystic force that she could feel right through the very card itself.

As they watched, the picture turned black, and then white again as all the cards were erased. The wolf shrugged his shoulders heavily, showing some dread but even more acceptance. "How the gods work their ways on us. The circle turns not at all for years, and then all at once the wheel spins and spins."

Fog rolled heavily against the windowpanes. Embers in the fireplace popped and crackled, and the remainder of the stew boiled over. Outside, a horse whinnied. Lon quietly said, "We speed into night."

A sudden, awful clamor in the yard as events unfolded rapidly, everyone knowing a new beginning had been thrust upon them. Ever shifted and pressed hard against her brother as he glowered. Leah and Zepho cowered and threw their arms around each other. No one spoke. Something scratched at the door. The wolf rose and put his hand to the knob. "Well, this might prove an end to my infernal boredom."

"Master Lon, no!" Ever shouted too late. She suddenly very much wished that she had never approached Nabath the Seer.

A small blob of brown ran inside.

"Augh! A demon!" Leah shrieked. The children screamed, even Asher to his own dismay, but there was nothing else to be done. Ever leaped and drew her knife, but Lon plucked it from her hand with a tender touch. The demon barked and reared on its stubby legs and tried to lick at the children's filthy faces.

Lon wandered out into the garden. The wind was so fierce that that the entire sky had become a sea of turmoil. His ears perked up as he smiled. "Welcome back. You've a son and daughter to meet."

In the dark, the figure of a man dropped from his horse. He stood tall, with flowers waving against his legs as he came forward through the yard. Moonlight splashed against his hood and, it seemed, trickled aside. Cross-laces at the neck of his black leather jerkin were untied. An emerald there at his throat blazed with arcane sparks, and his face was formed of shadow.

There was a man coming after him, again. It happened like this often, when the lightning bugs swarmed against the window, the heat and the rain stifling the city. There was the sound of breaking glass, occasional shrieks and grunts, a woman sobbing as she was struck. The man was large and wore a ring on his pinkie. He wished the man would die, and when that failed to pass, he wished himself dead instead.

He had been Thame Gravesend, the Shadowlord, for all of his life, in this place. And except for when he thrashed, cornered by nightmares, he rarely thought of the other region on the far side of his skull.

Now, as he looked upon these children—his own, the wolf said—the muscles in his back and shoulders corded. Fragments of an insane past returned to him, his chest heaving. Veins bulged along his forearms. His legs and arms tightened into things of stone.

"Thame?" Lon called, as if from a great distance.

The emerald burned even brighter, until Lon had to shield his eyes. Green flame curled and struck out but gave off no heat.

Hidden by his cowl, his eyes could not be seen at all, and yet in that vanished face one could still feel an ineffable loss.

Cringing in the corner near the wolf's trunk of paraphernalia, the pack defended itself and fought off the barking demon with books, powder-filled pouches and whatever else they could get their hands on. Only Asher hesitated, saying, "Leave it alone!"

"Look out for its tongue!" Zepho cried, leaping onto the table. Leah kept ahead of the circling, slobbering creature, just barely.

Rose petals wafted across the floor. Mist played about the Shadowlord's heels as he entered. A moonstone hilt of a dagger was sheathed in his left boot, and the sword hanging from his belt, rumored to be the blade of the lunatic prince, the Crying King, appeared to have not been sharpened in ages. The Yod-god mages used to whisper passages from their grimoires when he passed, and the scientists one fantasized about vivisectioning his cadaver. The emerald light seemed to twine around him like a lover, holding tight, unwilling to let go. The firelight could not pierce the darkness that composed his visage.

"Agh," the wolf snorted, shutting the door behind his guest. "Call the beast away from them before my home becomes a shambles."

Thame Gravesend, the Shadowlord, in this place, slapped a fist against his thigh and the demon ran to sit at his side. It gazed up fondly, then leaned aside to sniff at Lon's furry feet, tongue lolling.

The atmosphere grew even more thick with unspoken questions, fear and faith. The circle of fate had revolved, upending each of them, and they knew this with a certainty most people did not. Lon said, "I am proud to make these introductions. Thame, meet your son, Asher, and daughter, Ever the most enchanting. Gods grant me the chance to one day—"

Gravesend drew his hand down, cleaving off further talk, and took a step closer. The twins held their ground. Their father, if so he was, had always been a wisp of dream, and even less since their mother had died. Ever stared at the sheen of smoky dark, wondering if he would look like the man in the card Lon had turned over, or be something altogether different, wrong, vicious, or regal. Although she could not see his face, she felt his eyes on her.

"Children?" he said.

The Shadowlord's voice, like his presence, was almost like that of a man, and yet oddly not. Asher wasn't quite sure yet if he actually heard the resonance or only imagined it, something like the peal of a tolling bell. As though that word had been said in a large cave.

The edge's of Lon's mouth arched over his fangs. "I've read the cards tonight and divined we are to travel again."

"You don't need cards for that. We've always been on a journey."

"Forces and enemies draw near again."

"They're never far off. But that will hold." His sentence came to an abrupt halt, echoing faintly.

Thame pulled back his cowl, and Ever saw that her father's eyes weren't black but blue, the same sapphire as her own. The furrows of his brow loosened, and the barest hint of a smile tugged at his mouth. Though his face was youthful, his beard stubble, like the streaks at his temples, was white, and the curls of his hair flowed not unlike her own. The shine of the emerald died out until it was merely another jewel about a throat. That too was strange, since in a city of thieves no one dared exhibit any wealth without guards and escorts.

She watched him warily. Thame reached out to stroke her knotted hair but she dodged his hand. She saw an older version of her brother there, accented by the wearing of years. The same laugh lines and worry tracks around the eyes. Softly he asked, "Who is your mother?"

"Autumn," she said. "Dead of plague for over four years."

"Autumn?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No," he said, blandly, but somehow still with pain. "Not by that name."

Asher moved to stand before him, acting neither intimidated nor arrogant. He was truly curious. "Should I take that as a sign of disrespect?"

"No."

"As a child she was known as Jeseleth."

Tongues of green flame licked out from the Shadowlord's gem, reflected in and blanketing Thame's eyes. "Jes. My god, Jes." He intoned her name with devotion.

The wolf had seen this happen many times before in the cages. "A fine woman, we first met her in the city of Ilycium, beyond the rim of the wastes. She ran the king's stables. Then the war fell upon us."

"Jeseleth," Thame repeated, the name almost inaudibly ringing. That demon at his feet sneezed, slumped to the floor and began nibbling its hindquarters. Thame shook once, as if a great shiver had worked through him, and the gem waned once again as he focused on the twins. "I never knew what happened to her. I searched for months, afterwards, but—"

"Be grateful she bore you such fine children," Lon said.

"I am," he answered, and the shadows spoke the words. He dropped to one knee before the twins and grinned as disarmingly as possible, beaming a peculiar mix of happiness and regret. He tried to say something more and nothing came.

"This is no stranger for you than for us," Asher said, adding in a cracked whisper, "Father."

Thame nodded, and his eyes sparkled. "Do you think it is too much to ask to give your old man a hug?"

To her own great surprise Ever realized she was crying. She had never wept for a stranger, much less for a dream. Asher held her in the crook of one arm and reached for their father with the other, unsure of just what it was they might be embracing.

"I don't believe it," Featherfeet Leah said. "Ever, you're smiling."

The lord of shadows hugged them both tightly, these children born of his own madness.

Demon shrieking, head thrown back in a howl.

Zepho remained ready to run in any direction. He eyed the beast that sniffed the air with wet, quivering nostrils. It cocked its head, rising to its four short legs and waddling forward while Zepho retreated. Leah backed up too and said, "Master Lon, it bears a resemblance to you."

Smoothing the fur of his face, Lon huffed. "A slim one, I'll thank you to notice. Even with only half a snout I think the ladies of the Blue Bordello would find me much more attractive than he."

"But what is it?"

"A dog," Thame replied.

"Adogg?"

"He is an animal—a pet—not a demon. His name is Buddha."

Zepho knew that bizarre creatures roamed the desert wastes. "From the south?"

"From a place so far away it cannot be gotten to." Buddha twitched and rolled, scratching its scruffy fat behind, face near. Its long pink tongue unrolled and flicked out to lick its black lips.

"Does it make off with many children?" Leah asked.

With that in mind—wondering about a place that cannot be traveled to, a safeguard for devils—the twins sat and ate, favoring wine, as did their father. Lon had placed pillows and throw rugs upon the floor for the children to sleep upon. When Asher had finished his food he tried to match Thame's relaxed pose, fighting down his trepidation and weariness, and asked, "Is what they say about you true?"

"Not everything," Thame said. "No one knows it all, not even myself." He straightened and tightened his scabbard, then tied the cross-threads at his throat together, hiding the gem beneath the flaps.

of his collar. He raised his cowl until his face could no longer be seen, no matter how close some stood. "You're tired."

"But—"

"Sleep now, and in the morning we'll talk."

Buddha rose and walked to him. Thame patted the animal's back. His gold armband caught the last vestiges of light thrown from the dying fire as the children watched him. Thame and the wolf slipped from the house, shutting the door behind. Their quiet voices could still be heard briefly.

Within moments the sound of his trotting horse receded down the canal. Lon returned and retired to his bed. Buddha panted, tail twitching back and forth. He whined once, a brief longing sigh, then trudged to where the pack gathered to lay beneath the covers, nosed into Ever's tangled hair, and snuggled up beside the warm brickwork of the fireplace.

"We speed into night?" Asher muttered. Ever nodded, knowing it was now true.

Kenez the beggar deserved little in this life, but not his fate. He was too stupid to have been a shopkeeper, too clumsy to be adept as a thief, and too short to take up arms and join the army. He didn't make a very good beggar either, having good eyes and working legs. He couldn't sing for coins or entertain with juggling or acrobatics. He was a decent enough sort, and a few friendly compliments to the proper older ladies was enough to get him through the day.

From across the sorcerer's room, the eunuchs smiled at him.

Kenez struggled with his bonds, but the ropes tying his wrists to his ankles had cut off circulation a while ago. "I've not much, it's true," he coughed to them. "But at least I've my balls left."

The eunuchs' tongues had been removed along with other accessories, so he was spared any reply.

With a great deal of difficulty, Kenez twisted to look about the room once again. Stones painted with glyphs and symbols of the most malicious gods adorned the walls, alongside circles and spirals splashed with crimson stains he knew to be blood. A wizard's dungeon and a scientist's laboratory were similar in many respects, he understood now, differing only when it came to interests in various human liquids. Sorcerers seemed to relish great gouts of blood spraying about, while scientists caught every drop in well-polished tracks running from their lab tables to shining drains.

Kenez swallowed as he recalled a night two years ago when he'd been caught by the scientist's guild. They'd set upon him shouting, "Pancreas!" and before he could scream, they clouted him and dragged him to their blasphemous work station. If not for the keen eye of a sympathetic tailor and the well-timed intervention of the city guard, Kenez knew he would have lost his pancreas. And he wanted to keep it, whatever it was.

Not especially bright, no, but Kenez did have a lifetime of pragmatism, and so didn't expect to be saved twice. Rolling onto his side he tried to find relief from the agonizing ropes. Vapors from blank candles made him sneeze, and the obese eunuchs watched his predicament with glee, their massive arms crossed over bulging stomachs. Kenez had turned a kind word to a few plump women in his time, but he never would have believed a human could become so incredibly fat and still remain agile and quiet enough to sneak up on him. Hanging from their belts, their battle axes were nearly hidden by their distended bellies.

A door slammed somewhere above him. There were many doors in this structure. Nabath the Liar was home.

Kenez slumped forward, sweat dripping into the corners of his mouth. It wasn't long before the wizard came to check on him. Nabath entered the room with his garments whipping behind like unfolded wings. Empty sockets still oozed an evil glare, and if Kenez hadn't been struck while relieving himself in an alley, he would have

found great difficulty holding himself in check right then. Nabath stared without an eye in his head. Even the eunuchs averted their gazes from his face as he stalked across the floor painted with unholy sigils.

"What is it you want of me?" the beggar begged.

"From you, nothing, gutter trash," Nabath answered, leering. "Unfortunately I do need something from my gods, and that requires payment."

"You're not much good at bartering."

"Oh, but I am."

Kenez tried to spit at the wizard but his mouth was too dry. "At least all the scientists wanted was my pancreas."

"Kind men, they," Nabath turned and addressed his slaves, who would not face him. "Melch. Ched. Tie him to the stakes there, in the center of the largest circle."

The eunuchs obeyed. They approached Kenez and grabbed him by the knot of his ankles and wrists, dragging him across the rough stone floor. The skin was torn from his left cheek as they hauled him face down through the signs of his own doom. At last the behemoths released him and wrenched his arms and legs apart, tying him spread-eagled to the stakes set in mortar. Ched leaned too far, kneeling his quarter ton of bulk atop the beggar's right arm, which broke with a loud crack. Kenez screeched and blacked out.

He regained consciousness within seconds, the agony awakening him and driving howls from his throat. He screamed long and hard in his anguish, and when he inhaled to shriek again he heard Nabath laughing.

The wizard began to recite unintelligible phrases from long dead languages, standing with his hands raised high over the circle. Candles flickered around the damp cell, releasing noxious fumes. The wizard's palms were intricately scarred, his mottled skin spelling out heinous oaths to the nether-worlds. His robes swirled as though buffeted by the breath of deities. The eunuchs squatted on either side of their master, their bloated bodies motionless as hideous statues.

As Nabath continued his incantation, the ancient runes beneath Kenez's body began to writhe like serpents. A strange glow of non-color outlined these patterns, throwing off white sparks. Kenez moaned and tried to draw away as best he could, hiding his face against his shoulder. Nabath's intonations boomed and grew louder still, until he was shouting. A mass of red mist gathered at the edge of the circle, the drawn lines throbbing with energy. Without shame, Kenez began to scream again.

Shadows surged, and a voice spoke within them.

"*You still know how to throw a wild party, Nabath.*"

The Liar whirled, a fearful expression squeezing his countenance, his invocation halted before completion. The echoing words nettled him. Crimson fog wavered in the air, undispelled, as though waiting, lost without proper guidance. Snarling, the wizard spun, the eunuchs wheeling as well, searching the corners of the dungeon.

"Ho!" the Liar called heartily. "Gravesend! That you? You've returned to play more games!"

"*Not quite.*" The Shadowlord's voice seemed to come from everywhere, and nowhere, at once.

Kenez sobbed in pain, his doom surely falling on him no matter what the end product of this interruption. The wizard let loose with a snicker. "Some things have changed more than others, you'll find. A pact here and there has added new blessings." Gesturing in front of himself, hands working furiously in the air, fiery charms floated before him as he motioned outwards and sent them spinning across the dungeon. Blue flame dashed against all four walls with a thunderclap.

"Nice try," the Shadowlord said.

"Son of a whore!"

Thame dropped from the rafters, cowl obliterating any sign of his visage, the moonstone hilt of his dagger clenched tightly in his fist. "You're going to tell me what I want to know."

The wizard faced the man who had no face. "Which is?"

"Who are you in league with? You're foolish and a coward, that's the only reason I let you live the last time you dipped your nose in my business. This stinks of greater malice. Someone is holding your reins."

Both eunuchs stood in wrestler's stance beside their master, battle axes in hand, waiting for the order to strike. Kenez hoped they would do him the kindness of one well-placed stroke, accidental or not. He did not know many prayers, but the two or three bits he remembered he repeated between his groans.

Nabath's hands went to work once more. The Liar struck his wrists together the way a king might slap gold bracelets to call dancing girls to perform. His scars began to move on their own accord, forming pledges to the unnamed. The crimson smoke dangling in the air wavered and drifted, encircling the wizard's fingers. He manipulated the smoke as though it were tangible as clay, shaping it.

More like a challenge to himself than the lord of shadows he waived, "I can destroy you!"

"We'll see."

Moving, alive with malignancy, the vapors surged and took on contours. The head and torso of a great ape sprang forth and defined themselves in the reeking murk. Thick arms became animated and rose. Darting to the left and right, the smoke moved with only a trailing of cumulus for its base. It lashed out and continued to shift shape, its body billowing. Within its core a sorcerous blue fire glinted.

Scorching the floor, the looming anthropoid shape wafted on its wisping keel and rushed towards the Shadowlord. Its jaws dripped a smoky haze, its red eyes burning with mindless rage.

Thame stepped free from the shadows and backhanded the cloud. It burst in an explosion of light and ash, then vanished, leaving behind only a fading heat ripple in the air.

"You're going to tell me what I want to know."

Nabath threw his hands up in disgust. "Damn, it was worth a try." He shoved at his slaves. "Go. Kill him!"

Ched and Melch, whether brothers or not, exacted their movements in perfect coordination, no mean feat considering their size. With a speed he shouldn't have been capable of, Ched pivoted to the left, leaping and slicing his double-edged ax down with all his strength. Thame dodged sideways, closer to Melch, knowing Ched would stop the arc of his ax stroke in order not to hit his brother. Melch was unprepared to discover the Shadowlord so near, and barely managed to parry Thame's sword thrust with the handle of his ax.

But now Thame found himself stationed between both ogre-like men, with little room to move. Melch stomped forward, gaping in silence, an eerie smirk fastened to the mutilated mouth. At once, Ched swung again, this time aiming for the Shadowlord's groin. It was the giant's mistake. Thame didn't need to defend himself from such a low strike. Already crouching, he merely jumped, raising his knees high as Ched sought to castrate him. Melch lumbered behind Thame's back, raising his weapon, readying to cleave the intruder in half. Ched's ax swept under Thame's feet as he leaped and spun, slashing with his dagger and cutting deeply across Ched's flabby, womanly breasts.

Thame came down facing the second eunuch, who again found the Shadowlord to close to attack. He over-swung so that the momentum of his strike brought him directly onto Thame's sword point, the steel entering his belly on a downward angle.

There was not much more to do. Thame positioned himself on the far side of Ched, who regained some composure. The blade

grated against Melch's thigh bone, and with a great effort Thame drove his sword further in until it exited the behemoth's hip. Melch's lips parted to unleash silence. Blood poured out both sides of the wound but the Shadowlord's sword plugged it for only an instant longer. When he yanked the blade free, Melch sank to his knees and let loose with a tongueless bleat as the blood geysered.

Ched mewled at the sight of his dying brother, who struggled on the floor with his viscera uncoiling into his lap. The moonstone dagger flashed again as Ched looked up from the sight of his dying brother's life seeping across the stones. The strike was clean, and the giant lasted only a few seconds without a windpipe.

The battle took less than two minutes. Thame reared, glancing back to the groaning Kenez. He cut the ropes binding the beggar and said, "Can you walk?"

Kenez nodded, wondering if the Shadowlord was going to cut his head off. "Yes," he said struggling to stand. He took two faltering steps and passed out.

Thame ran down the corridors of the wizard's stronghold, following the sounds of heavy doors closing in the distance. Oil lamps built into the slimy walls flared as the air currents spurted through the hallways. Sprinting, Thame caught sight of those swirling garments, could hear the heavy breathing and weakness of the Liar's lungs. He pounced and tackled Nabath just as they reached the slopes of the front lawns.

To his astonishment, Thame watched the blind soothsayer grin wanly and hold his scarred hands up, not in attack but as a signal of surrender. "It appears you are the victor, Gravesend."

"You shouldn't be so happy."

"Oh, but I am!" Sure enough, he was, roaring with laughter.

Thame ignored his jeers. "Why did you involve my son and daughter? Who told you of them?"

The sun rose over Nabath's shoulder, but the streaming light couldn't penetrate the sheen of shadow comprising Thame's face. The Liar tried to reach within, to touch the man if a man truly was there, but Thame smacked his hand away.

Giggling, the wizard certainly thought something was funny. "Your daughter has quite the nice bottom. When I catch her on the street next, I'm going to tan it, then bring her back—"

This was not soothe saying. Thame slapped Nabath three times hard, until the blood seeped over the wizard's chin. "If you think I'm going to mistake this bravado for nerve, you'll have to try a more subtle approach. You can't incite me to kill you quickly."

"You understand nothing, maniac. You've no idea what's truly happening."

Thame dropped his hood and undid the cross-threads at his throat. Motes of unearthly green light spilled from the emerald, and for the first time and the last, Nabath the Liar gazed without eyes upon the bitter, ravaged smile of the Shadowlord.

After depositing Kenez on the stairs of the local magistrate's office, and filling the beggar's pockets with more silver than he'd ever earn himself, Thame continued on through the streets re-familiarizing himself with Tempertown. Snatches of conversation informed him of disloyalties, cuckolds, thefts and poisonings over the night. The stench of cooking meat, decaying teeth, and awful perfumes assailed him.

"Ho!" A blacksmith called to him. "Your horse could use a re-shoeing or he'll dump you on your head."

"Unlikely, Smith."

True that after so long in the desert his horse was distracted by the sights and din: polished mail and helmets, the morning clattering of carriages, and the frantic shouting of merchants in the marketplace.

He'd learned little from Nabath before breaking his neck, and nothing that made sense. Nabath cared little except for the chance

to work mischief and so was easily used by others. Before dying, the Liar had only told him only that Jeseleth yet lived, and dwelled in the house of the Painmaker.

Shouts rose from a maze of side-streets, and from the winding alleys he heard more cries and havoc. A rush of fishermen raced back from the wharves, making signs to the heavens, calling on newborn and ancient gods, holding sea-charms to their foreheads. Thame spurred his horse in the direction of the uproar while the citizens ran into and rebounded off the horse's flanks. City guardsmen were already at the docks, knee-deep in the squirming contents of the falling skies.

Thousands of frogs continued to drop from clouds overhead. Toads came down spinning, croaking, dying as they struck the ground with bursts of pond-scum and gore. The impact drove their guts from their mouths until a soft dead layer of crushed bodies cushioned the fall for the rest. Noises grew to a crescendo of croaking, webbed-feet and hind legs climbing over the mounds of muck, kicking at the semi-conscious fishermen who'd been caught in the stampeded and now lay with wrenched backs or broken legs beneath hundreds of pounds of oozing frogs.

"Mystery!" a seaman cried. "We are paid in punishment!"

One wolf had somehow gotten a toad wedged in his throat, and writhed with a paw worked into his mouth until a guard managed to help dislodge the obstruction. Slimy tadpoles continued to fall upon barges and vessels. At last the sky cleared, the cloud dissipating rather than pressed on by the wind, leaving behind cairns of wide-eyed frogs. The staccato of croaking was a dire warning.

Old women peeked out from behind their shutters and fishermen cautiously returned to their places. Shovels were brought out in an effort to clean up the remnants of the gods' displeasure.

Thame said, "Jes."

Shadows whispered back.

The children slept on through the early morning—well-fed, warm, comfortable, and safe for the first time in however long. Sitting in his garden on a marble bench he'd sculpted himself, Lon watched insects darting among the stalks of his flowers. Thame was stretched out above him on the lowest branch of an elm, cleaning his sword with an oily rag. Curled in Lon's lap, Buddha snored loudly while the wolf gently stroked the dog's back.

"So you had no trouble with either the two gargantuas or Nabath's spells?" Lon shook his head and snorted. "Too easy, even for you."

Thame raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

"A trial do you suppose? And if so, from whence?"

"I don't think it was a test," Thame said. "Too simple even for that. I was merely used to tie up someone else's loose end. The children were bait. Once I'd taken it, and hooked myself, the wizard was no longer needed."

"And he called this new master the Painmaker?"

"Absurd, isn't it?"

Always with his odd titter, Lon spoke without a hint of dread. "Not so ridiculous, really. This infestation of frogs worries me some. Strange. Unless you've gotten about to riling the heavens already?"

"Perhaps," Thame admitted. "After I killed Nabath I laid him within his own sacrificial altar."

"Agh, you didn't tell me that. Thumbing your nose at the divinities again." Tilting his head, Lon sighed. "How well affiliated do you think this... Painmaker... is? Could he be a god?"

"He's a gamesman."

"So what is our course?" the wolf asked, knowing already. Thame caught his eye and Lon groaned, still chuckling. "Do you think she might possibly still be alive? Jeseleth of the Red Autumn Wind?"

"I don't know."

"To the Crypts then? If what Nabath told you wasn't merely more of his lies then it seems we're duty-bound again."

"He wasn't lying. Last night Asher and Ever told me Jes had been struck down with disease four years ago and carted away, presumably by the devil scientists."

"The last plague was the worst in a century, so most wrinkled sorcerers said. Pyres burned night and day. The kindling of corpses grew higher than the steeples you see."

"But I have to make sure."

The wolf nodded, and split a gnat bothering Buddha. "You still feel love for her? Even after being consort to the Crying Queen?"

Thame glanced at himself in the shining flat of his sword. "Love," he said. "We only knew each other a short time, so long ago. Maybe it was love."

"The first week you met you nearly strangled an emperor for laying the whip to her. The song of that bold act is still sung on the streets of Kadesh."

"Am I hero or the villain?"

"Both," the wolf answered truthfully. "It's been too long since we've fought alongside one another, and I enjoy having a quest to set my days in order. It will be lifesaving for us to be journeying together again."

Re-sheathing his sword, Thame went to work on cleaning his dagger. "It may prove terminal."

"So will boredom! There's only so much of the arts a wolf can swallow, and I've had my fill of sculpture and sapling. Besides, Dovekill and I are yet two more game pieces being shuffled about by these forces. I wonder if he knows? Last I heard he was wandering between the bordertowns of Pethuel and Alus."

"We'll get him on the way to Ilycium. There are some matters I left half-done when I left the citadel. It's time I got back and finished them."

"Will you tell the children there's a possibility that their mother yet lives?"

"No, I won't raise their hopes until I'm sure what this venture is about. We need more time to adjust to each other."

Lon asked, "Will you do me a favor? Read the cards yourself."

The wolf removed the deck from the folds of his vest and shifted Buddha off his lap. He held the cards out. Thame barely touched them before he flipped each to the ground. Then he went back to scraping gritty blood off the tip of his dagger.

"This has never happened before," Lon said. "They're all the same."

"Yes," Thame answered without looking.

"A man's face."

"Yes, my father."

Echoes of the Shadowlord's eldritch voice repeated around the garden, *my father, my father*, and the wolf moved uneasily in his seat. "So that's where you've been these years. You've returned to your homeland?"

"No, I can never go back there," Thame replied, replacing the dagger in his boot and leaping from the branch. "I only wish I knew why."

Sergeant Sham sat in the Tavern of the Twice-damned, drinking the same stale ale that had soured his stomach last night. He let a deep breath out through his nose, blowing foam from his flagon onto the floor near his buckler. His belly twisted again. Last night the girl he'd laid with had smeared his loins with violent-scented oils, worked him into exhaustion, cut his money purse, and left him moaning under the bed. And now there were frogs falling from the sky.

Guardsmen Adah sat at the table, kicked his feet up onto the empty chair and rubbed his eyes. "You have as bad a night as I?"

"Worse."

"I'm the one covered in toad shit." Adah drew back, sniffing. "But I think I smell violets. Do you smell violets?"

"No," Sham said. "Give me a report. Was there any reason you could find for this phenomenon?"

"Perhaps. At dawn the beggar Kenez was discovered unconscious on the magistrate's doorstep, pockets heavy with silver coins and his arm crushed. The healers fixed him up and put him to bed. Of all the guttersnipes, he seems to be one of the more decent sort. Anyway, Kenez awoke before long and bore his pain well as he told me how he'd been captured again—"

"Again?"

"The devil scientists wanted his pancreas a couple of years back."

"That's right, I forgot. Continue."

"So he said that blind Nabath the Truthsayer had kidnapped him as a sacrifice to black magics. A man with no face saved him after battling Nabath's eunuchs and some sort of smoke creature the wizard conjured."

"Man with no face?"

Adah shrugged, his muscular shoulders riding high. "That's what he said. I took a few men to check it out. Nabath's dead all right, strangled in his cellar. His eunuchs were gutted by somebody damn good in a fight. I don't know if this was a spell that went awry or something more sinister."

"I hated Nabath more than I do most magicians. There's a few who say he pulled his own eyes out of his head."

"I know. Do you believe it?"

"Yes," Sham said, reaching for his helmet and buckler.

"So what do you think?" Adah asked. "Are the gods angry with anyone in particular or are they just being fickle again?"

"Who am I to say? But I do think we've got big trouble if the Shadowlord is back in the city again."

Adah sniffed again and rose from his seat. "Are you sure you don't smell violets?"

Humming a song he'd composed last summer, Asher the poet stood before his newly found father. All morning long he and his sister had been telling the man of their lives, before the plague when things were good, and afterwards when they were darker. It had not taken that long, considering their travails. Thame Gravesend had listened with interest and asked the appropriate questions, showing real concern, but he had offered no confessions of his own. Now they all sat comfortably in each other's presence, and as the notes floated from his throat, borne on the breeze, Ever whistled with him for a moment before asking, "How did you meet our mother?"

Thame looked away, watching Buddha chase Leah and Zepho about the yard, Lon tumbling with them. There was no way he could speak of Jeseleth singularly, for she was the hub of the wheel upon which he'd turned, from there to here. His old life, the roaring agony of it, awoke once more.

"Sometimes there aren't enough words to explain or answer even the simplest questions," he said.

This man grinned a fair amount of time, Asher noticed, but he seldom actually smiled, and the boy was taken aback by the sight of his father's white teeth flashing. It reminded him so much of his sister's own rarely seen smile.

"I met Jeseleth after Lon, Dovekill and I escaped the Rellinite prison camp." Thame fingered the thongs that kept the collar of his jerkin closed. Shadows on the ground seemed to draw towards him, even as the sun beat down. "The three of us were in bad shape by then, but we managed to survive crossing the mountains and fighting the few soldiers who came upon us. Lon was in the worst shape, with an infection raging through his face, making him feverish for weeks. Buddha sniffed out trails for us through the dense woodland and we—"

"Adogg was with you in the cages?" Ever asked.

"The Rellinites, like everyone, considered him a demon. Since they were a people who worshipped the evil spirits and incubi, they treated him well. Within a month we made our way to the palace of the Crying King in Ilycium. Your mother was my nurse. She bathed my wounds and sat and spoke with me while I recovered."

"She was a slave there," Asher said flatly.

"Yes."

He'd learned much from the songs on the streets of Kadesh. "And you fell in love. And nearly killed the king because you found him beating her."

"Yes," Thame said. He looked levelly at the children. "Your mother was a proud woman, and she never let her gaze fall to the ground no matter who addressed her. Remember that."

"We will," the twins answered in unison. Together, like echoes, their voices seemed similar to that of the Shadowlord.

"I remember her eyes when she spoke of her kidnapping from her family clan by the slave traders," Ever said, gritting her teeth. "You should have truly made him weep, that Crying King."

"There were tens of thousands who would've liked to see that happen. He was a tyrant, and many hated and feared him. He was also emperor and a paternal figure to the people, and they respected and fought his wars. Ten Million Men battled, and none of them knew why. They loved and respected him too, though he was often egotistical and immature. He had already taken his third cousin to be his queen, a pale girl with scarlet hair. Semera. He was only a year older than me, and I was eighteen. We were both too brash."

"Why didn't he have you executed?" asked Asher. "After you struck him."

"Because he knew he was wrong, and he was man enough to admit it afterwards. That's a rarity."

Ever stiffened and frowned. "He was your friend?"

Thame thought about it. "He was my benefactor."

"Then why—"

"That's enough for now. I want us to go into the city this afternoon and see about getting you two some new clothes."

"What's wrong with my clothes!" Ever said. "I feel comfortable in my clothes!"

"And you need a bath too."

"Bath!" Her bottom lip was only a fraction of an inch from pouting. Asher followed his sister as she walked across the yard to the trough where the desert horse drank. She cupped her hands, dipped them into the water and splashed her face.

"Not in the trough!" Thame shouted, shaking his head.

Ever nudged the horse aside and washed herself haphazardly, dipping the corner of her tunic in the water and squishing it about inside her ears, casually rubbing at the grime on her forehead, leaving a hodgepodge of streaks and smudges. She smoothed her filthy ragged tunic, afraid that her father would judge and somehow want to change her. Even if it was for the better, she deeply feared it, unsure if she could still be herself any longer. She started to say something to her brother when she felt the knife at her throat.

Sergeant Sham hated holding his blade to the girl's neck, but if this situation proved to be as volatile as he thought it might become he'd need an edge, and this urchin just might be it. He knew Ever the unenchanted and her poet brother, the boy glaring at him now on from the other side of the trough. Sham liked the twins and their running pack, but his years on the city guard had taught him to make use of all possible weapons available. He signaled his men and nine other soldiers burst from their hiding places in the thickets surrounding the canal, swords held out in two-fisted grips.

"I must be getting old," Lon said casually, as he stepped from his garden with Leah and Zepho. "Or this life of inactivity has addled my senses."

"Sham, you squarehead!" Leah shouted. "What are you doing?"

Sham ignored the girl and raised his free arm in a salute, calling to the wolf. "Lon, know that I wish no quarrel with you or any of your guests, but if that man over there is, in fact, he who is called the Shadowlord, then I'm afraid we've some problems to iron out. He caused some trouble the last time he was in town, and I've heard plenty of rumors since then. Now I've got a dead wizard, two gutted eunuchs, several hurt fishermen and a wharf full of frogs. And I suspect that man is the cause."

Lon wiggled his finger at Thame and said, "Shame, shame."

Arms crossed, his thin lips hardly moving, Thame said, "Let go of the girl." The resonance actually clarified his hissed statement. *Let go. Let go.*

Adah and the other guardsmen grew agitated by this, glancing around to reassure themselves of what ten city soldiers looked like in full battle gear.

"I remember tales of death and curses and plagues," Sham said, "that swept through Kadesh because of the Shadowlord. Perhaps they're not true, but in any case, I want my city to come under the scrutiny of the gods, we have enough troubles as it is. Give me your solemn word that you'll pack up and leave or this urchin will forfeit her life."

"You play a game of high stakes," said Thame. "It so happens I plan on leaving immediately. Let me buy some horses and provisions and we'll all be gone by nightfall."

"Head north and you can be in Moab in a day and a half. You can buy whatever you need there."

"Uh, Sergeant," Adah muttered, "maybe we ought to—"

The emerald at Thame's throat began to spark and spit fire. "You've threatened my daughter, Sham, and for that you're going to apologize. I'll forgive you this once because I sense your heart isn't into hurting a child. Sheathe your knife now or I'll be forced to kill you and your men."

"You're insane."

"Yes," Thame agreed, "but the wolf is at your throat."

Adah spun, fearing an attack from behind. Sham wheeled as well, too late, as Lon gripped his windpipe in one hand and held a skewer to his jugular in the other. "Sergeant Sham," Lon said. "Please remove the knife from Ever's throat or I will remove the head from the rest of your body."

Sham did as he was told.

"Apologize now, sergeant," Thame said.

"Oh hell," Adah groaned, lowering his sword.

"I am most sorry, Ever," Sham said, careful of how thickly he swallowed.

"Frag you, squarehead!"

Lon remarked, "I'm going to release you now. If you have any notion of attacking or returning with reinforcements, I strongly recommend you reconsider. I may have been out of action for a time, and I admit the ten of you might wind me a bit before I carve you into pieces."

Adah frowned. "I told you this was a dumb idea."

"Adah, you little bastard, say another word and I'll break your nose."

Lon released the sergeant and stepped back easily. Sham had barely begun to bring his hand to his throat, to be certain it had been left uncut, when he felt something cold and wet at his ankle. He looked down to see a demon nosing at his cuff, and for a moment was so struck by the sight that he didn't move. Then, pulling away with a tiny cry, he backpedaled as the demon bounded and followed. "Come on, you squareheads!" he shouted. "Move it!" He fled with

his soldiers, racing through the brush, marginally ahead of the small growling demon that chased after them.

Lon sighed and said, "Silly man smelled like violets."

Breaking through the black clouds, shards of moonlight scattered across the dark road leading into the border town of Pethuel. Far off lightning erupted in the dry skies to the south, tracing the burning outlines of angry features. The horses were bothered.

"There's trouble here too," Thame announced.

"I perceive it as well," Lon said. "A refreshing feeling compared to the numbness of safety."

From behind Leah's back, Zepho shifted in the saddle they shared and glanced at the large satchel hooked to Thame's pack. He watched as the flap rose and Buddha poked his head out for a view. "Everyone senses it."

Asher nodded noncommittally and looked about at the steeples and strangely-fashioned brickwork of the buildings. Less than three days ride from the only city he'd ever known, and already he felt as if they were traveling to distant lands. The excitement and tension continued to well inside him. "Sorcery? And does it involve Dovekill?"

"He isn't well-known for his love of the stuff," Thame said. "In fact, he's downright stupid when dealing with magic."

Tittering, Lon loosened his sword at his waist. "Agh. I suppose he's gone and won a cursed trinket in a poker game, and now teases some nubile barmaid with the bauble."

"Come on," Thame said, "we'd better hurry." Corners of the street urged him on with his own voice. *Hurry, hurry.*

"Where to?" Ever asked. "Do we know where we're going?"

"Well," Lon said. "I suppose we start in the nearest tavern and try them all until we find the great oaf."

From the aeries of the East to the caves of Yalday, never had I seen so beautiful a woman before—until tonight, of course." A goblet of wine slammed from Dovekill's massive fist and the woman across the table jumped, giggling. "There she was, shackled—" His black mane shook as he nodded grimly, curls flowing about his colossal shoulders. "Chained to a bloodstained stake as the seven-legged melgromp stomped forth from the mouth of its lair."

"What did you do?" she asked, tiny red mouth agape.

"Well, dearest, I—"

"Ho, Dovekill," a herdsman with only one arm called from the bar. "Methinks the last time you told this tale the killer melgromp was only six-legged."

Another reveler tipped his chair back and said gruffly, "And it's I who thought you plainly said 'twas the caves of the East and the aeries of Yalday."

Laughter broke out in the barroom, but the young lady across the table hadn't lost interest yet. She couldn't keep from wringing her hands in her lap. "And of this woman?"

Dovekill eyed the others somberly, then stroked his thick black beard and looked at the girl with a woeful gaze. "I tested her chains but there was no time for me to hack at them, for soon as I was at her side the fierce melgromp was upon me!"

"No!" she cried.

"Yes!"

Everyone on the coast had heard of Dovekill for one reason or another: legends stretched the mind, but most were true, or not entirely false, anyhow. Dovekill needed no sobriquet to amplify his strength or to instill fear. He was nearly as wide as he was tall, or seemed to be, layered and bulked with great cords of muscle that were sometimes mistaken for fat because of his ponderous size. At his side lay a sword that outweighed at least half the patrons drinking

at the bar. On his right wrist he wore an elaborately designed brace of bronze from where his hand had nearly been severed during the war. It was rumored he never took off his vest because of the matted, puckered scars he'd received in the cages. On his left forearm a dagger was sheathed, and another stuck hilt-high out of his boot. He rarely used knives but found that a blatant show of arms kept him out of more fights than forced him into challenge. It had been almost a week since anyone had tried to kill him.

The girl made as if to touch his shirt sleeve, but her motion fell short of his giant arm. "Sir, please answer. I would know the end of your story."

Beneath his beard Dovekill's grin had dropped a notch or so the instant a youth barely out of his teenage years entered the tavern. Though the lad wore no weapons, he had the smell of malefactory about him. "It's been a short week."

"Pardon?" the girl asked.

"My dear, would you go order us another round of the tea this establishment passes for liquor?"

"But you still have a goblet full of wine."

He quaffed it in one gulp without losing eye contact with the youth. He produced some coins and gave them to the girl, who at last took the hint and left the table.

The boy had learned all the wrong lessons. He approached from the front with an obvious squint of fury, yet hadn't drawn a weapon before entering the room. He stopped six feet from the now unoccupied chair of the lady, easily within range of Dovekill's killing stroke. "Speak your grief."

To be sure, the youth was no coward. "I am Mar-Tam, the vengeful."

"What were you called before you renamed yourself?"

"I was born into vengeance."

Dovekill shrugged. "As are we all. Some die before they should because of foolhardy notions and blundered attempts to even the scales of fate."

Mar-Tam stepped closer. "You murdered my father years ago. Or perhaps it is not in your witness to recall?"

He didn't have to think on it. "Yes, it's true I killed Sleth from the family of Tam years ago," Dovekill admitted. "While you were in your mother's womb, for I remember she was pregnant. Of course I knew your father, we grew together in the same village."

"You claim to have been his comrade?"

"No, but it wasn't murder. At the time he was attempting to force himself on a girl behind the granary."

Mar-tam must've heard this tale before because he snapped his head violently, once, as if to shake away any doubts. "No, you knifed him in the back!"

"He died from a knife wound in the back only after he drew on me and I bent his fist behind him and he toppled backwards onto it. He stumbled over his britches because he was in the middle of raping the daughter of his employer, the silversmith. A rogue he was, but I won't speak ill of the dead."

The lad's lips screwed into a sneer. "How polite of you not to insult the men you slay."

"Don't let your grief or pride get the best of you, lad, else you'll follow in your father's footsteps. It's a short walk to the grave. Who set you on this course?"

"My mother."

Dovekill doubted that very much. From what he recalled, Sleth-Tam's wife had been a melancholy girl with bad bruises. "That's not the truth."

"You've no need of anything now but to die."

A low keening accompanied the swing of Mar-Tam's arm, and Dovekill raised his own fist to counter. He was much faster and knew he would crush the boy's breast. Yet in the same instant, as Dovekill saw something like an insect unraveling in the youth's

palm, several occurrences were executed at once. The gods decree such moments to be accompanied by coincidence. His beard stood on end and itched as a wave of energy hit; the wide-eyed girl screamed his name and dropped his ale, dammit; church bell of a thief's god rang a tinny note; and there, entering the bar, was a man with no face.

He managed to pull his blow in time to keep from touching the flaming locust, which grew brighter and larger, wings unfolding, crackling as it prepared to leap.

"Oh piss and gizzards," Dovekill said.

Turning, Thame stiff-armed Lon and the children from the door. Ever fell over and rolled to her feet in one motion, whirling the blade into her hand, ready to fight. She liked barrooms. Thame pointed at the wolf and ordered, "Find cover and protect the kids."

He heard Ever say, "But—" as he moved through the place, fighting the tide of fleeing patrons. A girl shrieked without really seeing him, too frightened to move out from beneath the table where she sobbed, clutching herself. The emerald threw a halo of green light over her hair.

The Shadowlord watched as Dovekill used an overturned table like a shield to battle back some mystical cicada. With a mighty effort the warrior shoved the legs of the table into the insect's face, which chirped and burned, seeking to behead him. Dovekill's thews strained and bulged, the bronze wrist-band keeping his hand steady. A smile broke through his shaggy beard and Dovekill guffawed in disbelief. "Timely arrival!"

"I do my best," Thame said. Concentrating, the unrecognizable words came to him unbidden, whispering some kind of chant that incited the gem to an even greater brightness. He could see the pattern of the locust now and recognized it as a mindless demon dragged up from the lower depths. Whatever could enslave a demon wouldn't really need one. Thame hated being toyed with.

He attacked, grabbed the flaming giant cicada from behind and tried to pin its quivering wings. The bug didn't seem to be able to fly. Thame felt nothing as the energy rode up his arms and across his throat. An inexplicable wind threw back his hood. He expected heat but a searing cold lashed his muscles instead. Dovekill continued stabbing at the contorting insect with the table, but soon the wood began to smoke, its legs on fire.

"Shoddy carpentry."

Thame felt another presence here, a greater evil pulling strings. "I really..." he muttered, "...hate this." The cold intensified, and he tasted blood. Dovekill drew his sword, ready to impale the arcane insect.

Fierce wailing from the fiend filled the room. It emitted a buzzing that was much more like mocking laughter, legs cutting through the air. Its antennae lashed out, swirling wildly as it reared and gazed back at Mar-Tam. The youth had slumped into a corner, in a trance of some kind, sitting there with an empty expression. The locust's wings spread fully open and lashed against Thame's face, throwing him backward. The wide-eyed girl who had listened to the windy stories of Dovekill muffled a heavy sob where she lay weeping. The locust heard, its insect eyes now shifting. It scuttled towards the girl, chirruping madly.

"It seeks the lady!" Dovekill cried, getting to his feet.

Already in motion, Thame rushed to the girl as the air charged with an insane force. Painmaker. The stench of whiskey surrounded him. This way lay a different type of madness, he knew, but so be it. Thame managed to get the girl about the waist and toss her sideways into Dovekill's arms before mystical fire spewed from the insect again. Flames surged up his chest, the emerald's light rising to protect him. Like twisting serpents, the occult energies raged and entangled. The cicada bit for Thame's throat with its

snapping mandibles, until with one intense effort, he reached out, and heaving managed to tear off both the locust's antennae. He thrust forward into its opened mouth and jammed them down the fiend's throat. A brilliant white explosion threw Thame across the room, and the insect shrank, curling, frying in its own energies.

Dovekill rushed over and lifted the Shadowlord by the shoulders, dusting him off like a child. "I can use an ale!" he roared. "And yourself?"

They were still a half day's ride outside of Ilycium, relaxing at a pond, their company formed, and already the palace could be seen. Stones contain histories, and upon the rock were blood and dreams. The citadel of the Crying Queen held more stones than most, and more lives had gone into the cutting and placing of that rock than anyone could know. Thame said, "We should get moving soon."

"In a hurry, are you?" the wolf asked, floating on his back in the waters, clawed feet popping up.

"To get away from your stinking wet fur!"

"I'll second that!" Ever shouted, laughing, on the far side of the pond.

Dovekill called from the shallows, his brawny barrel-chest and mane dripping. Even swimming he wore his vest. "You've collected a good many canal odors, Lon!"

"Pfah!"

Stepping from the water, Dovekill climbed the boulders above and sat with Thame, who as usual watched yet never joined in. The weight of shadow always encircled him, and to walk beside that was to be a part to the disheartening sense of burden. It had been there from the first, back in the cages. He minced no words, "Lon told me of Nabath the sneak and the reading of your cards. Can this new enemy, the..."

"Painmaker."

"...yes, this Painmaker, can he be, well, ah..."

"My father?"

"I should think your sire to be a warlock the highest learnings, perched in some invisible castle with all sorts of toady-things to hid bidding. I've never been sure, you've never said. Over these years you've spoken little of your homeland and family."

"He was a drunkard."

Dovekill scratched at his head for a while. "The heavens are not in the habit of asking mortals their wishes." He let his breath out in a sad groan.

The pond quivered with reflections. Swallows flew overhead and skimmed the pond's surface with the tips of their wings. Ever and Asher talked quietly, Zepho swam beside Buddha, and Leah and Lon appeared to now be sleeping on the shore.

Dovekill said, "Tell me of him."

Drawing his moonstone dagger, Thame toyed with the blade, as if his old man might be near. The Shadowlord's voice became a sharpened edge, tight and ugly, that hollow resonance adding false timbre. "Not much to tell. He was like many of the men we've met in Tempertown, Alus, Moab, Barachel. A drunkard and a bully, a wife-beater. Rogue, and not even a dashing one at that. No wit or mercy."

"Similar to my own, though he was dashing, of course. Do you believe your children can work magic?"

Thame flipped the dagger high and caught the knife sideways on his fingers, along the inner ridges of his first knuckled. Buddha pranced from the water and watched the moonstone hilt, fascinated, licking his lips. Tossing the blade once again, Thame spoke a word he did know and left the dagger spinning in the air a full half minute before releasing the spell. "Anyone can do sorcery, even those who are not trained for it." The gem glimmered and bled green fire then, as if vying for attention, moderately insulted by insinuations. Black

motes of energy rose to outline his eyes, gathering there. The jewel reacted like a lover: protective, easy to anger, needy, restless, and unrelenting. Buddha sniffed at the sparks and wagged his tail.

"Maybe the carrion gods of the Crypts will explain when we call upon them," Dovekill said. "If we ask nicely. They're a garrulous breed, what with being gods and being dead and all. They don't rest."

"No," Thame said. "They never do."

There was a man coming after him. He could smell his own fear, as he lay curled under blankets on a burning summer night, pretending to be dead. The man would find him—under the bed, in the closet, even up on the roof a couple of times. It didn't matter. The man had a pinkie ring. The beatings would sometimes last a while, and sometimes they'd be over quickly. It made him weak in one way and very strong in another. Once the man fell asleep in the middle of smacking him around. An hour or so had passed and he hadn't felt a single blow.

The naked woman sat with her feet on the chopping block, head lowered, hair dripping with rotten fruit. Her lover, a wolf with rich gray fur, lay chained and bent over a large stone, with his broken paws on the same block. The girl's thighs were bleeding and horribly bruised, proving that bigots will dispute types of tenderness but find no fault in rape so long as it's human to human. The public executioner yanked her head back so the crowd gathered in the plaza could see her face. Wolves along the rim of the horde howled in retort to the heckles of the jeering aristocracy.

The gray wolf mouthed something to the girl, and even from afar the words seemed soft and comforting, perhaps a bit frivolous. The executioner, garbed in the traditional mask, chest naked but for a strap of pelts hanging across one shoulder—tugged her head back again and gripped her throat. He laid the sharpened edge of his scimitar against her neck a moment, teasingly, almost lovingly, pressing just hard enough for beads of blood to well. The wolf stared, neither incensed nor vindictive, but something deeper than that.

Lon, through all of this, fought the urge to snarl, though growling was not part of his nature. He looked down at the crowd from his horse and quietly breathed, "Vermin."

Zepho spouted, "What's going on?"

So disgusted he could hardly find the words, Asher said, "They stand in the square raging as if from fever."

"These fat-ass nobles always show their true colors when a gallows is near," Ever said.

Dovekill rode closer to a witch who stood with her staff laid out in her arms. By sheer force of presence, he made it known that he wanted the crone to explain the proceedings. With something of a formal bow she stated, "No love shall be shared by werewolf and woman."

"That wasn't the case some ten years back."

"You're mistaken. This is not a newborn bias. However, it has recently become mandate."

"Queen Semera decreed it so?" Lon asked.

"Of course, for how else do we come by our laws?"

Some moments—like stone—contain blood and belief, on their way to becoming history. When the witch noted the fury in Thame's azure eyes she retreated from him so abruptly she fell over into the dirt, where she sat and rapidly scrawled signs. Moving towards the steps of the gallows he lifted his cowl and hissed, "This is wrong."

The shadows responded and agreed.

Thame mounted the gallows, and the executioner shouted, "Another step and you join them on the block!" He held the wide, curved edge of the scimitar centered directly over Thame's heart. "You dare disrupt the Queen's affairs?"

"Yes," Thame said. "I dare. Now leave." He reached for his dagger without appearing to actually move, simply sliding wickedly with speed, grasping the blade by its point and driving the pommel into the executioner's face, splitting the mask apart. Blood spurted from the shattered nose and the executioner grasped his smashed face, sobbing with cub-like whines.

"Holy frag!" Leah said, astonished.

The Shadowlord yanked the pelts from the executioner's shoulder and threw them onto the block. He drew and raised his sword above his faceless head and brought it down against the chains and the trophies of the murdered. A collective gasp worked through the crowd as the wolves cheered.

From across the square, a woman with billowing scarlet hair, surrounded by her knights, stared up at Thame Gravesend. The sheen of his endlessly dark cowl looked back.

Thame and Queen Semera continued to regard one another in very much that same manner, all the way through the banquet.

Silence became brittle as her family, officers, multitudes of servants and pages and couriers all waited for apologies to be made. There was little social banter and no laughter. Only Dovekill was able to act jovial without playing a false role, bellowing and pinching the rumps of serving girls as they fed him beef, wine and mead. Asher remained quiet yet polite, dressed in fine new clothes that itched him badly. He handled the annoying questions of the Queen's sisters and cousins with a refined dignity. More than once he glanced up to note his father's gaze upon him from across the long table, wearing a wry grin.

Ever, though, was not mollified as she fidgeted beside her brother. She glared at her reflection in the gold rim of her crystal chalice, staring at the face which had appeared on Master Lon's mystic card. It was unfamiliar: the flaxen hair silky soft and clean, coursing over the high-collared neck with ornate necklaces of silver and pearls.

"You get the feeling we shouldn't have left the docks?" Zepho whispered.

Leah nodded, her new garb too tight in the waist. "I've had that feeling since our run to the canal, but at least the food's been damned good."

"They seem to think we're drinking too much wine."

"A querulous bunch, these nobles." She prodded Ever in the side. "You can buy half the bazaar with those pearls."

"The marketeers can have them," she said.

"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself much."

"I can't stand all their empty gazing, like a roomful of fish."

Lon looked ready to dismember someone. His gaze, in this candlelight, glowed red. His scars were all the more apparent, bloodless and ugly. He smirked continuously though, as much as a wolf can, which made his appearance even more feral.

"More roast!" Dovekill shouted, though his plate was heaping. "Will none of you girls be happy till I've starved to death before your eyes?"

Thame folded his arms over his chest and slowly appraised the attendants of this dinner, waiting for someone to make a move. General Kret, who'd led the armies of the Crying King during the Ten Million Man War, now sipped from a flagon of ale, glaring, filled with jealousy. Thame knew this meant that Kret was now the Queen's consort though the relationship must have remained hidden within the courts. He could empathize with the general. He could guess what it might be like to see an old friend reappear as a possible adversary, perhaps seeking to reclaim a title he did not deserve.

In the war, Kret had lost both legs, but the Rellinites found him and sold his body pieces to the scientists, who in turn experimented on Kret for more than a year. Despite the torment of scalpels and

bone cutters, he escaped under his own power, on his own two legs again.

Residing at Semera's left hand, now carefully slicing through his steak and doing his best not to tremble, sat Jonah the court sorcerer. He might have been an entertainer of children. The middle-aged man was both knock-kneed and pigeon-toed, with a clean shaven crown on a noticeably oblong head. He wore an ill-fitting violet robe that sparkled with sequins and pearlescent shells. Glancing up from his plate Jonah said, "Lord Gravesend, is everything to your satisfaction?"

"An enjoyable meal, at least," Thame told him.

Jonah was one of the realm's greatest wizards and rightfully deserved to be the court's master-sorcerer. Being without a patron god or devil proved he was more powerful still. His magic came from spirit and skill, and for the most part, he still preferred the solace of grimoires and ghosts to the bustle of city life.

Thame's gaze fell upon his queen.

Semera in silhouette. Moonlight streamed in through the vast window behind, throwing a milky curtain against her pale face, outlining her fiery hair in a way that brightened to crimson until she appeared to burn. He'd spent nights lost in her wild tresses, breathing in red waves. Catching his eye, Semera returned a look just short of hostile. "There will be a ball tomorrow night in celebration of your return. Our guests are eager to speak with you of your travels."

"And better than two dozen minstrels," Jonah added politely, "to orchestrate their favorite folklore ballads."

Asher said, "If possible, I'd like to rehearse with them, and possibly sit in on the event?"

"Of course," Queen Semera responded kindly, "we'd love to hear your songs. Members of our court who have journeyed through Kadesh mention that you're already quite an established voice of the city."

"Thank you, your highness."

Reaching for a plate of dried apricots, Zepho said, "Sing something now, Asher. The one about—" He accidentally knocked over Dovekill's mead, spilling the dark liquid across the ornate centerpiece of orchids. A serving girl rushed forward from the corner and began dabbing at the running puddle. When she'd finished she refilled the warrior's flagon, smiling meekly as Dovekill winked at her.

In his honesty, Zepho squeaked at the girl hovering beside and asked, "Are you a slave?" The high-pitched word hung in the air. Slave. It flew this way and that, and cast a pall over nearly everyone in the room. Considering the actions of the Shadowlord this afternoon, there was much to be answered for. Zepho sank lower in his seat. "Forget I said anything."

Dovekill gave a beaming broad smile mounted atop his beard. He'd once sworn an oath seven times over his soul to pay allegiance to his king and queen, but he did not mind this new tension taking root in the room. "It was my thinking that slavery had been abolished in the kingdom for more than a decade."

"Apparently there have been some changes in our absence," Lon said.

General Kret fumed in his seat, features contorted, teeth tearing at his tongue. He spun to Semera, ready to argue or do battle at her command, but she stopped the beginning of contention with a touch to his hand.

"I am not a slave," the girl responded.

"You willingly serve the palace in this capacity?" Dovekill asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Then why do you cower?" Lon asked.

"I am in the presence of three legendary heroes," she responded. "I did not mean to offend, but neither do I cower."

Lon bowed his head, suddenly frustrated with himself. "No, you do not, and please forgive me for suggesting you might hold yourself with anything but grace and integrity. You do not cower, and neither did the lovers this afternoon."

"And what difference if she were a slave?" the queen's youngest sister, Tavy, said. "She is fed and clothed and should be honored to sleep within the walls of the citadel. She is taken care of in every way."

Having already noted how Tavy regarded him with an odd lift of her lip, Asher looked at a princess little older than himself. "We're all thankful for food and shelter, but loss of freedom can't be honored."

"And it isn't, now is it?" Tavy responded.

Kret eyed the Shadowlord. Somehow it was natural to blame him for such troubles as these.

Standing now, arms downturned in a calming gesture, Queen Semera spoke. Her voice, like her stance and beauty, had a lilt that added a new dimension to all she said and did. Not merely regal, but attendant as well. Still in silhouette, as she moved, the moonlight broke against her like the surf. "You questioned the girl well, my friends, but not one of you bothered to ask her name. Not even you, proud Dovekill, who no doubt already plans her seduction. For the sake of reference, her name is Shawn."

Dovekill showed no emotion at that, but smoothed the edges of his mustache.

"My queen, please..." Jonah implored, but she waved him off.

"And you, Master Lon, who were struck dumb before our dinner but now sees his way clearly to spout about honor and bravery and changes in our city, you who saw fit to leave the court without so much as an occasional message on parchment these last several years. Who are you to doubt the laws of the Crying Queen without first addressing she who is the sovereign ruler of the realm?"

"I am now and forever one in your service, my queen," Lon said in redress. "Yes, also a free and thinking wolf."

Ever stared at the queen's older sister, Duchess Darath, thinking of all the other pudgy women like her the running pack had seen over the years. A noblewoman in silken garments, riding in carriages with an escort of a dozen knights, noses upturned as if the air itself wasn't good enough for them. Ever felt her street instincts rush back like fire across spilled liquor. "It's not as though the idea of slavery were entirely unknown to the palace," she said, glowering at the pixie-faced Tavy. "In fact, someone I loved greatly once lived among you as a slave. She was expected to jump whenever any of you called—" She regarded the queen. "—or hop in bed with your husbands!"

There were cries of outrage from the court. Both Asher and Jonah groaned. Thame's eyebrows arched. Kret leaped to his feet and brandished a fist at the Shadowlord. "Truly I listen to treason! I can no longer abide this sedition, Gravesend. Why, this little imp you call your offspring dares dishonor the memory of our great dead king!"

"Call my daughter an imp again, General Kret, and I'll forget we're comrades and hit you very hard in the face."

Tavy shouted something but was drowned out by Ever's shrieking foul language. Queen Semera only nodded in understanding, her ashen face and eyes evoking some settlement. "Enough," she said, bearing a sorrowful half-smile. "This is a banquet held in respect for those friends who've been away too long. I'll not have us all quarreling over past events or the empire's current state of affairs. Those discussions shall be held off until a more appropriate time." She turned to her former lover. "And you, quiet Shadowlord, what is it you seek here?"

"I want to speak to you alone, Semera," Thame said.

He followed her up stone stairways through the winding halls of the citadel, back to her luxurious apartments. All without a word,

and not so much as an accidental touch of fingers or a brushing of bare arms. Once in her chambers, Semera lit several oil lamps and bolted the ancient, ornate brass doors carved into the shape of a weeping woman's face. Metal tears hung before them, fixed in the same sadness for thirteen generations.

"Semera..." he began.

"Hush, not just yet."

His heart bucked beneath his jerkin, and again the jewel spit green fire. A curse half-formed in his mind, but he thought better than to swear against spying gods now when there were already enough problems to deal with. Struggling with sentimentality, ill-defined duty, and a growing sense of lack of purpose, Thame stepped across the carpets. He brushed against the strap of a shield hanging on the wall between two unlit torches. It bore a coat of arms, though not many alive knew it on sight. The shield was pure umbra, cast of an impenetrable black. His own coat of arms.

"Currents and whirlpools," he whispered. Semera came up from behind and placed a hand on his arm. He met her eyes. Some emotion, possessiveness perhaps, welled inside. "Kret allows my shield to remain facing the bed?"

She grimaced, frowning so that a wrinkle appeared between her brows. "He has never entered my personal chambers," she told him quietly. "It's been more than five years since we last held each other. Much has transpired."

"On that we all agree."

"Do not mock me!"

"I don't. But tell me about the wolves first."

She stalked from him. "You are still a stranger to our lands and our mandates. Love between human and wolf, beautiful as it may be for the two, is a dangerous communion. Inter-breeding over the past several years has led to horrible mutations, deformities, and deaths. Have you ever heard a woman screaming while the lining of her uterus was ripped by the claws of her own wolf-child?"

"I've seen plenty of mutilated children, as you well know, and I have yet to hear of any reason for the brutality of that indecent public display of humiliation and torment."

"I do not answer to you."

"No," he agreed. "You don't."

The pause lengthened, dragging on like a poisoned animal. He lifted his outstretched hand to her. She took it tentatively. "You are a strange and melancholy man. Why are you here?"

He told her everything then, explaining his feelings without emotion or expression, the echoing like a reaffirmation of all he said. The foolish name of the villain sounded like something a child would say, Painmaker, the Painmaker. But which child? Who had named him? He continued to speak, his voice following, telling Semera about his first sight of his own son and daughter, the fulfillment of a vague dream.

She tilted her head towards him, and Thame, drawing back, recalled it was the exact same motion she made when she'd learned her husband was dead in a field of battle. She moved to the window and pulled the curtains aside, staring into the night sky. The acrid yet somehow pleasant scent of the blooming flamingo trees came in gusts. "There is a storm approaching from the east, our weather witches predict."

"Yes. It follows me."

Semera, queen of the Ilycium, lover of darkness, struck him then, as he knew she would. She slapped him again, backhanding him, and once more until she realized she couldn't make him hurt this way. She fell against his chest, or perhaps he against hers. Her hair spread over them like a blaze, much hotter than he remembered. Desire wrenched his body roughly against hers, muscles unwinding like water, her palms soft against his skin. He hadn't thought of making love to her because he was so full of his own fate, but before

her lips found him Thame stirred in her arms as they fell back into the famished, consuming shadows.

Kret drove his fists against the brass doors of his woman's bedroom, listening to her cries. The sound of his muscles tightening was like the twisting of a hangman's rope, threatening to snap. A growl escaped Kret as he pressed his cheek to the metal tears of the weeping woman. He slipped to his knees like a penitent. The flickering glow of candlelight and arcane green flame eased free from beneath the door, bathing him in the aura of another's passion.

He'd never been inside. A courtesan of the queen must at once be discreet and willing to sacrifice in the name of propriety. They met in unused bedroom chambers, and only during the hours before dawn, as if her were a sneak-thief plying flesh, a reaper to steal her sex.

From some inner vantage point General Kret, son of Bara-Kett-Ef, champion of Tenfields, caught sight of himself, and the image sickened him. Here he lay stricken, lips crushed against cold brass. In an instant he was standing, growing icy between the shoulder blades. He reached and touched his kneecaps, digging fingers into flesh that had been amputated and reattached, feeling the solidity of muscle, tendon and bone. Something too awful to be bliss uncoiled over his face.

Tavy screeched and ran about the room, her tiara askew and fancy tresses unwinding. "Away, I beg of you!" She tripped over the length of her dress and tore the golden-thread stitches from the hem. Pages and servants followed trying to calm her, but they refused to get any closer to her demonic pursuer. Tavy cried out in a frenzy, grabbing hold of several other patrons before diving towards the silken lap of her sister, Duchess Darath.

"Tavy, foolish girl!"

Witnesses gasped and gaped as Darath's chair overturned and both Tavy and the Duchess somersaulted backwards, rolling like lopped heads to lie sprawled beneath the dining table. Buddha circled and snorted, sniffing at bottoms before finally leaping upon the perfumed Darath, who shrieked beneath its wet nose.

"Uh oh," Zepho said. "This isn't so funny anymore, Ever."

"Are you kidding? When was the last time you saw such acrobatics and didn't need to sneak into carnival?" Her laughter ran throughout the room as royalty looked on and even the pages grinned a little. Asher shook his head, eyes an unreadable blue. He'd seen her steal a knife from the table, and watched as Zepho and Leah followed suit.

"Call the guard if need be," Darath ordered, her intricately woven hairpiece unraveling into her mouth and nearly sliding off her head. "But get this damnable beastie off me!"

"I think you'd better stop this, Ever," Featherfeet Leah said. "I jumped twice my height when adogg first nosed against me. It's not smart to let Buddha romp so excitedly with others." She drained a stolen wineskin. "I can understand your feelings about your mother and the slave-trade, but these ninnies are hardly worth the fury. This isn't Kadash."

"In some ways it's worse. They all hide behind painted-face masks of culture and manners. Besides, since when did you become best friends with the fat-asses and high-chins who used to wave us off for begging coppers?"

"I haven't," Leah hiccuped.

Ever began gleefully chiding Tavy as the girl scrambled behind Shawn, the serving girl, sobbing wildly. "Has our maiden found the idea of slavery so enticing she prefers to crawl on her knees now?"

"You rotten girl!"

"Me, eh?"

"That's enough," Asher said. With a firm hand he pulled his sister aside, glad that Lon and Dovekill had retired to a common sitting room across the hall. "Considering how you nearly started a battle during dinner, humiliated our father and insulted the queen, couldn't you let these petty jealousies go for the night?"

"No."

With a scowl he whistled sharply the way his father did. Buddha quit his cavorting and froze, then raced to the boy's side and immediately sat. Jonah stepped forward and comforted Tavy while the stewards saw to the duchess. She was nearly as bald as Jonah himself under her wig. Suppressing the urge to give Tavy a shaking, he consoled the girl by saying, "There, child, it is not a demon you've been fleeing from."

"Only hell itself could have spawned such a creature!"

"It is merely an animal unfamiliar to our lands."

"Surely you understand that those...those..."—she strained to find the correct word, pointing directly at Ever—"those *mongers* who have dealing with demons belong imprisoned, with priests incanting to save our souls."

"Mongers!" Ever shouted. "She called us mongers!"

"What's a monger?" Leah asked, and Zepho shrugged.

"I'm going to kick her."

Kret's second-in-command, Racnor, stood dressed full-at-arms with several other guardsmen behind him, apparently moody and ready for a fight. Racnor glanced about with his hand on his sword, looking mildly puzzled when he saw no one but members of the court, servants and children. "What's all the commotion?" he asked, addressing Jonah. "You can hear shrieking all the way to the battlement towers."

Darath, who had been swooning in the arms of a handsome steward, the candlelight glaring off her shiny head, stood as though brushed with a barbed lance and yelled, "Where is the queen and that necromancer Thame Gravesend? Where is General Kret?"

"How should I know?" Racnor shouted back. "I thought you were all dining together. Weren't you? Has everyone gone crazy?"

Tavy began whining again. "Mongers! Mongers running freely in our palace alongside unholy yowling things!"

"What's a monger?" Racnor asked.

Ever thought about pulling her knife. "You know nothing about us, you pimple-faced snob!"

"Arrest that wicked girl!" Tavy ordered. "And those other smelly children as well."

"Like hell," Featherfeet Leah said. "Try it and somebody's blood ruins the carpet."

With a snarl Ever did start to draw her blade from within the folds of her gown, but her brother was faster. Asher bent her wrist back with one hand, then clawed through her skirts with the other until he found and plucked the carving knife away. "You really are getting stupid, Ever."

Buddha cocked his head as if hearing a signal elsewhere, and ran from the room.

Frowning wearily, Racnor addressed Jonah. "If you've loosed some wizardry gone wrong, magician, you'd better confess it now before the queen discovers a giant spider or some other damn thing clambering about the citadel."

"Nothing of the sort, guardsman," said Jonah. "It is only the Shadowlord's pet play-acting again."

"Oh, that freakish beastie. It just rushed out. What should we do?"

"I suggest we all retire for the night in the hopes of some clarity in the morning."

"A damn fine idea," Racnor agreed. "Except General Kret left word that the guardsmen must do maneuvers in the court all night long, and I'd best get back to it."

Jonah raised a hand to ask, *Now why is that?* but Racnor and his men were already gone.

Shadows wept. He awoke and realized it was not Semera crying beside him. He knew that sound only too well. Raising his palms to his cheeks he checked to see if he'd been sobbing in his sleep, as sometimes happened. "Are you here, Painmaker?"

Another name beat at him mercilessly, from the inside wanting out, but he still didn't know who it was supposed to be. Voices like overprotective mothers and deranged fathers buzzed, bringing a terrible aching. Semera's arm lay across his chest, her nose nuzzled against his side. He disengaged himself and dressed quickly, watching her as she slept, then retrieved his shield from the wall. No one could aid him in the coming battle. He'd finally realized that he must go to the Crypts alone, to face not only the dead deities, but a murdered past he did not want to remember.

When he unbolted the brass doors to her chambers he discovered Buddha sitting in the hall waiting for him. Together they left to find a god. Perhaps even the nailed man himself.

Ever the unenchanted coughed and turned over on her side, an itch at her throat and a sour taste fouling her mouth. Tentatively she opened one eye to see a tight circle of dark faces peering down at her. A thickly-matted, gravy-flecked beard; a strangely-warped bald head; a scar-choked furry snout; and her brother poring over her with such a look of concern in his azure eyes that she was immediately frightened. "What are all you squareheads gawking at?"

They continued to loom, silently, almost accusingly, and that somehow made her feel ashamed. "What the hell's the matter? Don't tell me Tavy's actually having me executed! Someone answer me!"

"Calm down, Ever," Asher said, as always, forever imploring her to stay calm. "It's all right."

"Well, at least you haven't been struck mute."

Dovekill stood with his arms crossed over his massive chest, gaze affixed to her, scrutinizing and inspecting her. The creases in his forehead were like folds in parchment. Lon stood beside the giant, swaying low in a werewolf's crouch, fingering a thong around his neck. His eyes, while troubled, were curious and sympathetic, which further incensed her. Cold sweat broke out beneath her arms and chin. Her skin felt sticky, and she realized she was lying on the floor. "The hell happened?"

Leah poked her head out from around Jonah's robes and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Help me up."

"No, lie still a while longer. It was like last winter when you caught the white fever. You were about to kick Tavy's ass and then you keeled over. Jonah fixed you some kind of grog. We managed to get you to drink some and it finally brought you around."

"Really? How long was I out?"

"Only a few minutes. You didn't miss much, except for the priss finally running off. We were about to all go to bed anyway."

Lon turned to Dovekill and said, "I believe it's time we spoke to Gravesend on certain matters."

Dovekill rested his fists on his hips. "Amazing how our thoughts coincide from time to time, wolf."

Ever got up, nearly launching herself at her brother. Dizziness swept over her, and she felt him grab and ease her back onto a nearby couch. "Asher, what did I do?"

He grinned. "Just seems that we speed a little more quickly into night."

"The hell does that mean?"

Asher pursed his lips. Something appeared to have been badly wrenched deep inside of him. He kneeled beside her, patting her hand like some old maid. Reflected in his eyes was the glow of green sparks shooting forth from an emerald, now somehow embedded in the flesh of her throat.

Asher understood that his father had been right about the heavens toying with men like spoiled children shuffling gamespieces. Semera had now rejoined them, alone, talking of the Shadowlord's destiny, slipping away in the night. Asher realized that they must go as well. The feeling of an impending and irrevocable change screwed through his guts. He knew his fate was even now being molded by unseen hands.

Ever remained upon the queen's divan in the exact same position, flanked by Leah and Zepho, growing increasingly desperate to speak with her father, hoping Dovekill and Lon would decide to track him to the Crypts because she didn't want the pack to travel alone. "Are you worried?" she asked her brother.

He grinned easily. "Things have certainly changed for us of late."

Zepho stared over at the adults, in conference. "What do you think they're saying?"

"Whether we should follow him."

"Is it even possible?"

"They say it is, just listen. They no longer whisper."

The court sorcerer was speaking animatedly. "And you say you have been there? I was not aware of this! Why was I not told? The two of you have actually witnessed the wonders of the Crypts?"

"There was not much to see," Dovekill said.

"But—!"

Lon scratched at his furry chin. "Thame brought us there shortly after the war. Our parts in that journey were incidental. It was a rather boring trip."

Jonah was dumbfounded by these claims, and rubbed at his oblong head. "The Tombs of the Gods are on no map, and only certain great men of magic are capable of making the crossing without going mad. And even most of them were not whole upon their return."

"It helps if one is insane to start with," said Dovekill. "Who else would dare to speak to dead gods? Who would want to?"

"In the grimoires of Andra-Velta it states the heavens will not tolerate the questions of mortals."

Lon offered a smile. "Who is to say that he is mortal?"

This talk of mysticism was nothing new. No longer in silhouette, Semera said, "Please, warrior, we have enough troubles as mortals. Let's not bandy with semantics."

"But what did the gods say to him?" Jonah prodded.

"We were not party to that," Lon answered.

"At least tell me, my friends...what do the Crypts look like?"

"Like any dead city. Ruins, mostly."

"And shadows," Dovekill added. "And don't ask where they may be, for he brought us there through a greater dark than you've ever known, and the trek passed as a drunken night passes."

"Jabber," Ever growled, and immediately she was off the divan and on her feet. Asher hurried to her side, and Leah and Zepho rose too. "Jabber, jabber, like a troupe of mongers, maybe. I thought you were men of action, but all you do is talk like aged ladies. I have a single course to pursue. I've need to find my father now that I've got hellflames popping about." She stormed around the room. "Will you accompany me or not? I leave tonight, make up your minds this minute."

Dovekill guffawed, his bellowing laughter reaching all corners of the castle. "Belittled by a girl! And she's right as blue skies for chastening us like a group of goat-herders!"

Ever rushed down the hallway followed by the rest of the pack. Asher reached her first, and she spun to face him. "Don't try to stop me!"

"I won't," he said. "I happen to agree with you, but we won't get anywhere fast if you blindly scurry about the palace. We have friends here. We need them." He took a breath to say more but was interrupted by a sudden clatter at both ends of the corridor.

"Frag," Leah said. "Now what?"

General Kret, son of Barag-Kett-Ef, the champion of Tenfields, leader of the armies of Ilycium, raged with a burning venom of ardor inside him. Other men closed in each end of the hall, a dozen or more devil scientists swarming about. They each carried a curious array of dissecting tools. The white tunics they wore were partially covered by odd leather aprons. It was obvious the scientists dressed in preparation for gouts of blood and splashes of fluids and organs.

Smiling, Dovekill moved before the children and hefted his broadsword. Lon, without having seemed to draw either his dagger or sword, now held both.

"Ho, Kret," Dovekill called. "A traitor now?"

"It's you who've betrayed the court."

"And this has nothing to do with your heart, I suppose?"

Kret could do little besides glare at Semera, his lost love, who spoke his name, but not with fondness. "Kret, you must—"

"I know what I must do, my queen."

Now from behind them the hallway was entirely blocked, floor to ceiling, by a mammoth figure. Whatever the hulk had once been, it was a long ways off from being human now. This monstrosity was composed of too many pieces, none fitting precisely where they should. Elbows and fingertips jutted from below a vertically curved ribcage. It waved its multiple-jointed arms, other claw-like appendages gripping enormous curved blades. Its skeletal frame, large as it was, still did not appear strong enough to adequately hold all its extra limbs and thrashing ropy tendrils. For additional support, it wore immense leather straps and chains which locked to a metal girdle of sorts. An exo-skeleton needed to hold up the strung-together abomination.

And at its side stood its father.

"That's Pallor," Zepho said. "The Scientist Prime. He and his men steal corpses from the river. They lay siege to the city morgue."

Featherfeet Leah remembered. "And kidnapped Kenez the beggar some years back."

Ancient and infamous, this devil, first of his kind, hobbled along. His wrinkles told more tales of agony inflicted than wisdom learned. Skin dry and cracked as the pages of an ancient medical tome. Simply known as Pallor, it was an apt description of the elderly, corrupt sage. It was a name murmured in circles of medical men, for he was indeed as brilliant as he was without conscience.

"Are there no secret doors or concealed passages into which we might slip?" Ever asked.

"Many," mumbled Jonah. "None in this particular hall though."

"Fat lot of good that does us! Use some sorcery!"

"I only know ways to heal, not to battle!"

"Oh well," Leah sighed, drawing her stolen blade.

Asher, who'd kept the carving knife he'd snatched from his sister, now tossed it back to her. She deftly plucked it spinning from the air. "Aim high, sixth rib and up. Those aprons protect their lower quarters."

Queen Semera, knowing she was the cause for her consort's treachery, called to him. "I understand your reasons, and for my poor judgment I alone am to blame. There is no need for wasted life."

"No?"

"Forgive me, and allow me to forgive you."

He shook his head as if bitten by serpents. "Too late, my love. Look upon what I've become, I can hardly recognize myself anymore. You'll have proof of my commitment, leastways!"

Dovekill was never one to strike the first blow if there was any recourse left to him, and by the same code he never allowed himself to be drawn on the defensive if it could be helped. His vision began to grow red at the edges. "It feels good to wear the blood lust again, wolf, though I never expected to hold arms against any general of Ilycium."

"Yes," Lon agreed. "It's a shame, really."

With a nerve-numbing shriek Dovekill rushed towards Pallor and the monstrosity while Lon charged the devil scientists at the other end of the hall. The wolf was accompanied closely by the running pack, who reacted as one. Jonah and Semera watched in horror, back to back. His gaze remained on the monster while her eyes strayed to the man she had almost loved, watching him battle Lon and a group of children bearing silverware. Lon was already drenched in blood by the time his sword clanged against Kret's. At their feet lay scientists with their entrails coursing through their apparel.

Kret's madness, though, had somehow increased his skill with a sword. Lon kept his guard up, parried and riposted again and again, but could find no opening in Kret's incredible offensive maneuvers. "General, you've chosen a poor road."

"As I know, wolf. Gut me if you can, and so much the better for one whose passion is not acknowledged."

Dovekill laughed, parrying simultaneous blows from the monstrosity's many appendages. He leaped and battered aside arms thicker than his own, legs too, and tentacles and other things he could not name. "Ho! Another happy romantic!"

"Laugh if you will, warrior!" Kret shouted. "There are no barbs that can cut me anymore."

"We'll see," Lon told him, stabbing.

The pack knew how to fight and kill as well as run. Leah slit open the throat of a scientist ear to ear, who vomited through his own gaping wound and died second later. Jonah rushed forward and tried to help Zepho fight off yet another scientist, but being as clumsy as a pigeon-toed, knock-kneed wizard could be, he tripped as he stepped between the boy and his opponent. A wild slash caught the sorcerer across the chest, flinging him back against the far wall.

Without a knife, Asher hung close to his sister, wrestling those who attacked her from behind. "Here, another one," he said, driving a foe directly in line with Ever's blade. "Nice move. Another." Asher stayed low then, and struck at knees and ribs, allowing the others to slash away. Good, this might work. The tactic was a fine one with overconfident rogues in Tempertown. "One more."

Hands grabbed at Dovekill. The ropy appendages of the monstrosity continued to whip at him. He hacked at the buckles which held the creature's exo-skeleton in place, but the chains were strong. As he fought, Dovekill felt he'd become a part of those various pieces of men that composed the abomination. Sparks from their clashing weapons flashed against the stones. "I've put more men than compose you in their many coffins," he bellowed. "Separately or fused into one, have at you!"

Its face was its most hideous aspect, features running and melting together. Five or six eyes, at least three wide mouths and dangling tongues, ruby red nostrils flaring near its flat ears. Dovekill had heard of certain drugs that could change flesh into something like wax, whereby it could be molded. Such chemicals and surgery were a blessing to those severely deformed, but this was unholy. Countenances had been skinned from skulls, then merged to form that which stared back at him.

Pallor stood in the recesses of the corridor, grinning. The monstrosity struck several more blows, but the warrior managed to raise his sword enough to divert the brunt of each strike. Still, his arm ached, and the old, nearly debilitating wound to his wrist began to reawaken beneath his brace. The creature punched and kicked at him with its extra limbs. Ancient Pallor giggled madly.

"I'll cut that laughter from your chest, devil!"

The abomination moved again and Dovekill, an instant faster, leaped high, even higher than he thought he could manage, as the creature drew all its blades down in a single strike for Dovekill's legs, only to discover the warrior in mid-air. Dovekill brought his weight crashing down against the appendages, heaving back his broadsword and slashing mightily. Tough as hardwood, the tendrils did not cut cleanly but instead ripped away amidst torrents of brownish liquid. The monstrosity screamed as Dovekill's sword impaled one of its several arms. He worked the blade free and chopped again, missing what appeared to be the abomination's squat neck but wounding its shoulder. The chains rattled and the monster screeched in fury. Perhaps within at least one of those mouths resided the power of speech, but even Dovekill couldn't articulate well now with the blood lust fully upon him.

The same berserk fury didn't infect Lon though the craving was in him too. He wheeled and slid in circles around Kret, parrying over and over again but not hurried in his actions. Even now the unbalanced general went on about the queen's slights and supposed infidelities. Foam flecked his lips and a terribly unbalanced gleam stained his glare. "Tell me, wolf, how much would your own spirit crack to know your woman had lain beneath the touch of the lord of shadows?"

"I probably would not like that," Lon answered truthfully.

"I love her, damn it!"

"I still don't know why you're telling me."

"Semera!" Kret chopped at the wolf, driving him back and gaining a slight advantage, then quickly losing ground, forced to retreat one step, then two, three. Her name became a morbid chant which urged him into an even greater frenzy. "Semera! Semera!"

The queen spun. She would throw herself at his boots if she thought it might stop this carnage, or heal his wracked soul. But she knew it would not, nothing could halt this turning of the wheel. A brief meeting of their eyes showed her that at some point after dinner, this very night, her courtier had gone insane. Neglect had caused this atrocity. A wail began to break free from her as Asher defended her from yet another scientist.

"Semera!"

"Kret, you fool!" Pallor shouted. "You'll ruin everything with these adolescent antics. You'll have your lady in hell if you don't stick to our plan!"

"So be it!" The General forced the wolf against the wall, parrying a dagger thrust with too wide a sweep of his arm. "As long as she's mine!"

Lon's sword point plucked out Kret's heart, and Semera fainted.

The grotesque monstrosity shambled forward. Dovekill had already succeeded in hammering two of its three scimitars free from its claw-like fists, but his last blow shattered his own sword. Multi-colored fluids poured forth from the creature's wounds, yet it showed no sign of slowing. Howling in frustration, Dovekill bounded onto the abomination's exo-skeleton and began to climb the chains. The warrior planted the heels of his feet on the creature's chest and pulled at its brace, hoping to break it open like a shell. He was too close to the monstrosity's body for it to use its remaining blades to its advantage. Though it battered at him with its extra hands, Dovekill continued yanking at the buckles. His shoulder muscles bulged beneath his vest, threatening to break seams. He strained further, pulling, pulling, arching backwards,

planting his boots upon the monster's breast and heaving until he thought his arms might snap free from their sockets.

Pallor's infuriating giggles echoed through the corridor. On too many unsure legs, the creature veered to the left and stumbled to the right, harmlessly cleaving through air. With one colossal protest of metal, the body-brace finally split and exploded open in a burst of body parts, gelatinous masses, and torn leather. Dovekill fell to the floor with a painful thump, and the monstrosity toppled over in the other direction.

Lon now raced up the corridor to aid his comrade, rushing straight atop the abomination and digging his sword into the expiring thing's mid-section. In its death throes the creature lashed out in a storm of furiously whipping tentacles, including several that had been hidden within the framework of the exo-skeleton. Lon moved but not quickly enough as two of the tendrils came down viciously across the his snout. With a cry the wolf went down.

After watching his sister kill the last devil scientists, save for Pallor, Asher dizzily glanced at his few small wounds believing he'd been poisoned. He wavered and dropped to his knees as the rest of the pack surrounded him. They all seemed fine, and he was grateful that Leah and Zepho would be able to help his sister through whatever travail lay ahead. Then he watched as they too, with only scratches, dropped beside him. Only Zepho had gone untouched. That was good, he was young but smart, and they might still get out of this yet if Zepho used his brain. Asher tried to tell him not to screw up, but already he was falling. He landed on his face as the raving shadows devoured him.

"They are only small wounds," Pallor told Dovekill, "but ones that shall prove fatal if an antidote is not administered within minutes."

Dovekill seethed, staring at the fallen bodies of the children and Lon, watching as Zepho did his best to aid his pack. "Old man, I'll..."

"No melodramatics, sir. I know your reputation and am quite certain you'll not allow harm to come to your comrades, at the cost of your own deference. Kret has shown me ways in and out of the citadel, but I doubt Racnor will oblige our flight. The knights maneuvers in the quarter should almost be at an end. If the Shadowlord does not come to me now, the rest are sacrificed."

"All this for him? Then it's been in vain. Thame Gravesend is on a quest."

"Where?"

"To pursue the carrion gods."

Pallor shook his head. "These so-called Crypts again, nothing but superstitious lies and bunk!" The knuckles of his bony fist appeared ready to break from the bleached flesh of his hand. "This is a delaying tactic!"

Zepho cried, "He's telling the truth!"

Dovekill wanted to crush Pallor's skull to dust almost more than he'd wanted anything else in life. "Save the children now, Pallor, or I'll lead you into hell where we can personally discuss the gods at length."

"You'll do nothing but carry the wolf and these children back to my headquarters. You'll obey every order, for there isn't much time left to save them. Leave the queen, I've no use for her. You and the boy will do as I command or the others' lives will flicker out before your eyes. Do we understand one another?"

The warrior hefted Lon onto his shoulder and felt the blood of his friend leaking over his vest. He stooped and managed to grasp both Asher and Ever under his giant arms. Zepho drew Leah onto his back, grunting and praying.

"Lead the way," Dovekill snorted.

Except for the steady clapping of the desert horse's hooves there was only a canopy of unearthly silence and gloom settled upon the darkness. Lightning flared in the distance from the ground to sky, illuminating nothing. Thame was not completely aware of when the night of Ilycium had become this night, in this region, but some time ago he'd crossed from the cobbled streets of the city into shadow. The transition had been too subtle to discern, like trying to know the exact moment when one falls asleep. Breath by breath, there was only this engulfing near-total blackness, and the rhythm of the horse's canter stepping in time.

Miles back he had passed some of the ruined spires and monuments that comprised this nether-territory. Heaven's crumbling towers and turrets were much the same as any great city where war had been waged. Temples lay wasted in the dust, sanctuaries violated. *Was it pride?* he wondered. *Were the gods too proud or not enough?* The terrain grew rocky, strewn with gnarled woods, relics, and ceremonial cairns. *Did they worship themselves?*

Mist carpeted the ground, flowing and rising about the stallion's powerful legs. The horse whinnied nervously on occasion. Thame caressed and patted its mane. Trees huddled in their masses seemed to crouch tensely on all sides, fat and twisted trunks abounding. Buddha rustled inside the satchel, lifted his head out and gave Thame a mournful look.

Anxiety knotted in Thame's chest. If Jeseleth suffered even now he'd punish all those responsible, mortal or immortal. Tangled memories tried to draw him backwards into another existence, one that terrified him. Glimpses, pieces, contortions were all he could make out when he put his mind to it. The nailed man was something ghastly and imposing. *Who are you really, and why were you about my neck?*

In the cages there had been nothing to do but hate. Prayer had not been a virtue. It took the power out of one's own hands and placed it among the fickle gods. Acolytes and priests were always the first to die in the Rellinite torture camps. Followed by pudgy merchants, minstrels, farmers, fools, and soldiers.

In the next cell over from the one he shared with Dovekill and Lon was the cage of a clown who'd traveled with a caravan from another nation. Lon knew some of his language and would translate jokes and bawdy lyrics. The harlequin kept their hate alive. The little dancing fool lasted more than a month even with two un-set broken arms.

Stringy trails of mist floated over the stallion's flanks, dipping at Buddha's nose until he sneezed. Buddha sighed and rearranged himself within the sack. Tension mounted. The desert horse felt it. It was taking much longer to reach the Crypts this time than when he'd first entered this place. He should have been there by now, wherever it was. Thame stopped the horse, stretched his legs and let the dog roam freely.

He waited, but not for long. There was the noise of something scampering by in the fog.

Buddha sat up immediately, searching. The sounds played off to the left, the right, quiet but distinct in the stillness. A chill ran against Thame's nape, but he found it oddly comforting. At last, there was activity.

"Why don't we get this over with?" he called. The jewel splashed a rain of green fire. "I don't want to be here any more than you want me here, so let's clear some things up and I'll be on my way." he retrieved his shield from the saddle and drew his sword from its scabbard. "All right, come on."

The blade cleared the sheathe just as a number of inhumanly swift forms rushed over the ridge beyond and dropped on top of him. Rolling and swinging in the same motion, Thame missed hitting the shapes but forced them back. Buddha's tail whipped the mist as he growled and bayed. Thame regained his balance, spinning abruptly on the balls of his feet, lifted his shield higher and eyed the figures.

The sheen of their muscle-plated torsos glistened in the glow of the gem, inordinately pointed ears sharper than dirks. Their flesh was like seal skin, slick and gleaming, lithe bodies naked and without visible genitalia. They stood slightly bent, resting at perfect ease, clicking claws together in the way a man snaps his fingers for attention. Alien contours distorted their gaunt drawn faces, adding to the effect that their narrow skulls were out of proportion to their stout necks. They looked like grave-robbing ghouls, which might feast on even the dead gods.

"You guys are the welcome wagon?"

"To thread your intestines through your eye sockets," one answered nonchalantly.

"Chew on your brain," the second said. "I am partial to brains." It grinned, licking its incisors with a wide, forked tongue.

The third snarled, "The divinities do not wish to confer with you."

That stopped him. "How do you know?"

"Why are you so adamant in your quest?"

"Because it's time I got to the bottom of this."

"It is only time for you to get to the bottom of your grave and finally stay there."

"Try and put me there."

Two of the nimble flesh-eaters went for Thame's legs, but the curling mists confused them. They slashed out for his legs and came up short, clutching fistfuls of fog. The third made a grab for his neck, hoping to cut his throat with one competent slice of his claws, but Thame ducked left, his sword arching high. He accelerated his swing but wasn't quite fast enough to strike the ghoul in front of him before it hastened back out of range. Thame held the other two off with his shield, dodging while trying not to fall over the precarious bank of rocks. They converged again in triangular fashion, hoping to draw his guard to two of the adversaries, leaving room for the last to pull him down. Thame knew the ploy and feigned to his right, closing the distance on his agile foes in three swift steps. He waited until two had bounded forward, taunting in their approach, then wheeled at the confused third standing alone, and drove his sword into its forehead.

Buddha barked and ran in circles. Thame withdrew his blade, now covered with the ghoul's viscera. "Here!" He flicked the gore into the others' faces. "Which of you has a taste for brains?"

"The Painmaker bends your woman to his every whim. In bed, in life, twisting her into whatever position suits his vile pleasure. In death, in all ways imaginable."

Thame quit fighting. Then, with a movement so fast even the ghouls couldn't combat it, Thame's sword slashed and gutted the flesh-eater that hadn't spoken.

"Okay," the Shadowlord said, "let's hear more of this."

The remaining ghoul broke into a run, fleeing into the haze. Thame threw down his shield and chased after it, his adrenaline driving him into a cold rage as he closed the gap between them. He hurled himself at the back of its legs, the tactic leaving him open to its teeth and claws. He took several gashes upon his back before he managed to straddle the mocking eater-of-men, his knees pressing into its shoulders, sword poised. "What do you know of the Painmaker?"

"What's happened inside of you, lord of shadows? How is it you've killed our deities? What is it you seek? Who are you?"

"Tell me."

"Tell us. We need to know. You do not belong here! You are not supposed to be here!"

"Oh damn it." Thame brought his sword down and cleaved the ghoul's body in half, and when he stood, he turned and faced yet another mystery.

The little dancing fool from the cages stood there holding the Shadowlord's shield. The clown's arms bent at all the wrong places from where the Rellinite racks had broken his bones sideways. His grinning face, which had brought some comfort to other men in their cells, shone down on Thame with gleaming yellow teeth of lunacy and malice.

"It's about damn time," Thame said.

The fool did a shuffling two-step, leering.

"Terrific, you're a mime. I guess you just had to be a mime."

Hands clasped to his chest, flicking that tongue, the fool mimicked a recital. Yes, they were two fools in the land of the dead. *Are they mocking me or themselves?*

Thame Gravesend, who couldn't remember the name of his father or the voice of his mother, gazing now upon the umbra shield bearing his non-existent symbol, shivered as the shards of memory began to stir in his mind. "Are you one of the gods?" he asked the harlequin. "Are you the Painmaker?" His heart battered against his ribs. "Tell me, damn you, did you follow me even here? Are you my father?"

The fool tore off its face and solemnly gazed back. Thame dropped to his knees, clutching the back of his skull, wavering as he spun in this mist and crumpled to the ground. A shadow draped across his throat and kissed him.

Featherfeet Leah awoke without twitching a muscle. On the docks she'd discovered how to take account of her body without moving. To yawn or groan might give away a secret hidey-hole or alert lurking enemies to her presence. Leah listened, biding seconds. She ran a checklist for broken bones, deep cuts or other wounds she may have gotten in the castle battle. Her arms were covered with small welts and there was an annoying gash along her stomach that tickled like hell. At the small of her back, stuffed inside her belt, someone had replaced the stolen carving knife she'd dropped in the palace hallway just before passing out. Why would they do that? Faint traces of vomit filled her mouth. So she had thrown up sometime while unconscious, an after-effect of the devil scientists' poison.

The smell of wet fur and blood wafted along with other pungent stenches. She nearly flinched, but didn't, when she heard a savage howl in the distance. At first she thought it was Buddha, for it was a strange keening roar she'd never heard before. Perhaps a wolf then, in great pain or bordering madness, for even wolves didn't bellow like that.

Ten seconds after she'd awakened, Featherfeet Leah opened her eyes and knew exactly where she was. In Tempertown there had been rumors of such places existing, tucked back in the condemned quarters and sprawling underground, but it had never been proven until last summer when Sergeant Sham and the city guard raided a scientist lab. The harbormaster passed the information on to captains from the islands, talking of drugged men who'd been run through immense mazes in order to test them. The maze-rats were no longer quite sane enough to speak coherently of their trials, their brains destroyed by dire surgery and elixirs.

Getting to her feet, Leah looked at the twelve-foot high brick walls. She was trapped in a roofless passageway about eight feet wide, with bracketed torches that blazed in the mortar. The night had cleared. Stars glimmered overhead, but the moon had set. It was nearing dawn. This must be the ghetto zone of Ilycium, similar to Tempertown. No one would care if she screamed.

At one end of the passage was a sharp right turn, while the other opened into a T. She walked towards the T since it would give her two choices on where to go after that. As she proceeded through the labyrinth, she could glimpse beyond the narrow brickwork corridors and see that she was actually in a small coliseum of some sort. Memorizing her route, she gazed up and caught eyes upon her.

Craning her neck, she saw that the scientists were sitting above on stone steps, regarding her with looks of detachment while jotting notes. Pallor stood staring while one of the others whispered in his ear.

What made no sense to Leah was why they let her keep the knife. Her squint narrowed even more, and her lips set in a thin line. *Pallor's a taunter. Taunters talk too much. Perhaps he'll give away a vital clue.* Smiling, Pallor turned his full attention to Leah. She could feel the warmth escape her skin as his dead-fish face edged forward in her direction. "Welcome, child." His voice was melodic and almost youthful compared to his brittle, hunched stature. "I would have you know from the beginning of our experiment that I, of all the guild, did not mean for this to happen. I only desired Thame Gravesend for my studies. But unfortunately, he fouled my plans by being unavailable. And I was never one to go away empty-fisted. Surely you can understand that?"

Leah made no response. Clearing his throat, Pallor continued in what seemed to be more of a lecture to the other sages. "Before his unnecessary demise, the soul-stricken General Kret informed me that you and your guttersnipe pack hail from Kadesh. Kret reminded me of a running pack's tenacity for survival, and I received a first-hand introduction to your skill and speed with a blade."

"Where are the others?"

"Yes, well, they too have purposes they are best suited for, different in nature from yours. It is my understanding that the twins are the children of this Shadowlord. Fine, fine."

Gooseflesh sprang across the bottoms of her arms as another shrieking howl split the night behind her. A hint of fright whetted the taste for more terror in such men as these scientists. Pallor was the true enemy, made more dangerous because he was so interested in her. The howl died abruptly, cut off before peaking, yet ending with a groaning gurgle. Leah drew her knife and shifted her stance in the soft dirt.

"My, what a charming little creature you are," Pallor cackled. He rocked excited, snapping back and forth the way a nobleman's son might while waiting to unwrap presents. Watching one so old and evil acting like a child made her stomach turn.

As the cool pre-dawn breeze blew, the sky began to lighten. The crackling of the torches sounded like Pallor's white, creviced flesh breaking apart. He steeped his hands and pressed them to his bleached chin. "A synthetic, hallucinogenic drug has been administered to the great assassin Lon. Those are his howls you hear at the other end of the maze."

"No," she whispered, though she'd already guessed.

"He is screaming, you see, because he is being driven into the most primitive stages of his dual lycanthropic nature. A very messy business, this, but well worth the effort in the end."

"Why?" she asked, frightened for the first time since she awoke. She gripped the carving blade lightly, trying to decide whether or not she ought to chance a knife throw to his eye.

"The assassin has indeed been forced out of his head, or rather, out of his own humanity, which is threadbare at best. We wish to see just how far he is capable of resisting and keeping his intellectual traits in the face of his basest instincts."

"So it's his test, not mine."

"Well, we do like to be entertained while we study." Others scrawled faster with their quill pens, hoping not to miss a single word of their master. "Now, would you like to hear what we have in store or would you rather run headlong through the maze seeking escape relying upon your own wits?"

Leah sighed without appearing as if she'd done so. She swore she'd make a necklace of his rotted teeth before this was all over. "Tell me your game."

He carefully straightened his leather apron over his tunic, looking very pleased with himself. "At the end of the labyrinth, what we

distinguish as the finishing line, you'll find two doorways leading into two enclosed courtyards. In the center of each is a stool with a small vial of liquid in it. One is an antidote, the other is more of the drug that has already set the assassin's heart afire. One will calm him, one drive him further into his bestial nature. When you've made your choice, I suggest you cover your blade with the solution and stab as close to his heart as you can. If you manage to get a fluid quarter ounce into his bloodstream, it may be enough for him to return him to his normal state. That is a theory which has never been tested."

Pallor stood, proceeded to his students and said, "Make sure you take meticulous records. I shall rejoin you shortly after visiting with our other guests."

Leah stared after him for a few seconds more, waiting for the dawn to break. She could not afford to let herself tremble, though it took all her will. She could hear the other members of the guild transcribing the final words of Pallor's oratory, preparing themselves to watch for the most minute details of this maze run. Another quavering shriek erupted behind as she listened to the noise of a rusted gate sliding open. Leah turned and fled through the labyrinth, as she saw at the far end of the passageway Lon come loping after her. Death and something worse flared in his feral eyes, slather drooling from his snapping jaws. He howled, and Leah whimpered.

Bodies, like trapped flies, dangling in mid-air. Zepho stared at them in the dim light, swaying slightly, but he couldn't be certain about what he was watching. Only bodies, and still more beyond them, and over and under them, swinging, waving. Hundreds of people, hanging upside down, sideways, atop one another, twisted and moaning, entangled somehow and jerking in spasms. Zepho couldn't believe they were alive, and yet they were. They were lashed together with wires or ropes or pipes, and each time he tried to move in any direction, the wires pulled taut against him and the screams stopped his progress. Beside him, in a small space of relative safety, lay the unconscious form of Dovekill. None of his efforts could rouse the warrior.

The devil scientists had brought them here, though Zepho couldn't exactly remember. He felt certain he had not blacked out for any length of time, unless for only a minute or two from pure exhaustion from carrying Leah on his back along the dark streets of Ilycium. Twinges still shot through his shoulders.

He glanced into obscurity, listening to the mewling cries and trying to plan, but his brain seemed lazy and clouded. *Perhaps one of the poisoned blades got a tiny scratch at me, after all.* This was like no prison he'd ever heard of in his life. The walls could barely be made out in the distance. Perhaps they were limestone, so it was a good bet they were underground.

"Asher?" he called quietly. "Ever? Leah, you in there?" Again he took a cautious step forward, this time more careful of the wires and flesh. Before he could go far, Dovekill muttered an obscenity in his sleep. "Master Dovekill, it's me, Zepho."

Dovekill struggled to sit up, as in the background he heard his name murmured over and over by hushed voices, like the rustling of leaves. It was an ugly chant that met his ears, the kind that occasionally was taken up when he first stepped foot into a tavern, a prelude to pain. When they spoke his name in such whispers it meant they wanted something from him. "Where are we, Zepho, and who are they that so woefully call me?"

"I don't know. They're bound together in a horrible manner, we have to be careful."

Dovekill started to stand, and the screams began. His barrel chest shoved against something thin. At first he thought it was the ropy tendrils of the abomination, for his sight hadn't grown accustomed enough yet to see the dangling bodies about him. His immediate reaction was to tear the rope away, but as he set his massive hands

to the task a trembling voice from near the ground cried out, "*For the love of our children, no!*"

"Who are you, lady?" he asked, careful not to move his bulk. "Explain this place." But the woman said no more.

Another voice cried out, "*Help us.*"

"How? Answer me and I shall get on with it!"

They moaned on, renewing their tormented chant. In his frustration the giant gritted his teeth and dropped his empty scabbard to the floor, endeavoring to keep his self-control. Fires had now been lighted inside the cave, and the depraved scene was fully illuminated.

Knitted together in a grisly display, the warrior saw hundreds of pierced bodies hanging about, melded and meshed one to another with miles of thin tubing. "By my fathers," he breathed. These prisoners were as one, their blood transfused from man to woman to more, dozens of scattered families tied into a single system, hearts pulsing in synch as their shared veins pumped and pumped out and back into each of them. This, the blood web.

"Yes," Pallor's familiar and hated voice echoed in the cavern. "For the love of children. Although a warrior such as you, large one, must surely have murdered some innocent youths in your time, no? How many daggers have you plunged into pregnant women's breasts?" Pallor's laughter brought on a throng of lamentation. Above Dovekill's head, a girl of no older than twenty beginning to weep. "The Painmaker told me to kill you outright, but I find this more fitting. Your strength will not aid you in these surroundings, nor will your natural tendencies to go hacking and chopping away. This shall be a test of prowess."

"Where are my friends?" Zepho asked.

"Comfortable. Now I believe it is time for the two of you to begin."

"Begin what? What could this experiment prove?"

"Correct, boy. This is no longer a viable effort. The blood web taught me a bit about the pulmonary system, but now I am done with it. I wish to enjoy your discomfort as you traipse along, trying to save these already lost miscreants. It is payment for killing my pet and my students. Now I am going to turn off the heart."

Dovekill's massive hands opened and closed. "What?"

"The web itself cannot possibly pump all the thousands of gallons of plasma it requires to keep itself alive. Two hundred thirteen people share the vital fluid of more than four hundred donors—the extra quantities allow for the great distance between the ongoing transfusions. Therefore, I constructed a mechanical heart that keeps the process ongoing, the web alive. I am now turning it off. You've limited time to reach and reengage the machinery before these miserable shells die. Their brains first, their bodies a little while after. And please, warrior, don't think of sending the boy through alone, for only your strength could turn the wheels of the machine again."

Dovekill whispered then, no louder than the victims around him, yet he was certain the Scientist Prime could hear him. "Old man, by the seven oaths of my soul I swear you won't live to see the sun rise this day."

"Indeed," Pallor said. "Goodbye."

Asher sat on the straw of the cell and watched his sister thrash in her sleep, the sparks of the emerald at her throat throwing treacherous shadows against the dungeon walls behind him. Vaguely he wondered if the arcane flames might not set the hay on fire. It was a stupid thought—he was having a lot of them.

He moved to his sister, who kept calling on the red autumn wind and mumbling about their mother. He gently gripped her by the shoulders and laid her head in his lap. That quieted her some.

Their cell was perhaps ten feet by ten feet, with a stout wooden door bound with strips of iron, and a small grate at the bottom for

tossing in food. He knew he and his sister were to be the subjects for some kind of worthless experimentation, and then vivisected, with their guts dumped into buckets and put away in closets. Ever's newly acquired jewel would be tested for its properties and probably traded away to the Yod-god mages.

She threw a hand back over her head, twisting awkwardly. He used his sleeve to wipe her forehead and whispered, "It's okay. I'm with you."

His words slowly worked her from her stupor. She furrowed her brow, fluttered her eyes open and stared at him. "It's mother," she said. "Asher, she's in front of me. Like I remember. Before the plagues. She's either here, or I'm there. I don't know which. She wants something from m."

"We'll get out, I promise. We've always slinked away from our troubles before."

"It's like I'm supposed to know, but I really don't, and everyone is waiting for me to figure it out. Only I'm not smart enough. You've got to help."

"I will."

"You'd better," she said faintly, closing her eyes. "Is this a dream? Is this someone's dream?"

He shook her violently. Too much had happened so quickly in these recent days. "Stay awake, Ever! Don't fall back asleep!"

But she was already away from him. He stared down at his sister, her face so much like his own, and Asher believed he could almost remember being dead, back when the fever had gotten him. Spiders crawled in the straw, clambering up his leg. They gaped at him and snapped their pincers defiantly, ready to chew. He smacked them off and held Ever tighter, rocking her in his arms and singing a melody of her favorite ballad. He had not written a new poem or song since Nabath had approached with the truth behind their heritage.

He touched her gem. If the emerald could read his thoughts it made no response. He stared into its brightness without blinking. It was beautiful in its own right, although he wished it didn't add to the sensation of being watched. He pulled up the collar of Ever's gown and covered the fiery jewel, then resettled himself in the hay, still humming. In the stones of the cell, he could imagine the devil scientists watching and chuckling.

Footsteps pounded loudly down the hall outside the prison. Bolts were dawn back and the heavy door creaked open. Pallor stepped inside, holding the hem of his tunic high so as not to dirty it on the filthy stone floor. Behind him were five more sages carrying their odd assortment of honed slicers and cutters over the creases of their aprons.

"Hello, my boy," said Pallor, the veins in his bone white hands standing out like garden snakes. "You're ready to begin?"

"Oh to hell with it," Asher said. "I am Asher the poet. I am the Shadowlord's son."

Green fire leaped, and the tightening shadows were upon him.

The stench of whiskey burned his nostrils, as his old name fought for purchase in the back of his mind. The battering in his head was like the beatings he had suffered at the hands of his father. Those fists had been endless and hard and unmerciful as rock. Those hands had slowly killed his mother, he knew, after years of torment where nothing was ever good enough. The pinkie ring left behind tiny nicks that often got infected.

He had spent nights searching for his old man along the barren streets. The drunkards would wave him inside and tell him stories of how courageous his father had been during the war. In the dim light they showed him their stumps and scabs and blind eyes and scars. They would point him to another bar where his search would continue, sometimes until dawn, until he found his father passed out in the gutter, in the shadow. "Stay away," his old man would beg. "Keep away."

His father died that way, cringing in darkness, drunk and cursing, hating, condemning. Bitterness like that does not rest easily, if at all, and

the house was forever filled with the stink of whiskey and bile. Even as a puppy Buddha sensed the undying hatred, and the dog would whine at the end of the bed, staring out the window as if the ghost of his father stood there in the back yard, looking up at his bedroom, waiting. Forever waiting, and undying.

Shame was embedded in the Shadowlord's throat, sifting through his soul. Failure—the word was a hammer blow to the heart. Fleeting images swirled like the waves of fog sweeping across the stone. Strangling heat in his neck, sloppy licking at his leg. Apparitions and anger dwelled within him, clutching at his belly, yanking him inside-out. All this bitterness was like a double-edged blade in the stomach, sawing upwards and over with a hesitating tug, cutting out jagged bits of his life.

There was a cold prodding again, shoving ice into the base of his spine. The frenzied barking began and it refused to ease up. He felt a weight shoved against his back as Buddha's rump pressed solidly against his own. His fingers reflexively closed on the pommel of his sword. The fetid stink of whiskey brought tears to his eyes. His arms and legs quivered as the brilliance of the gem bathed him in its light, black and green motes rising to outline his body. The Shadowlord's eyes opened.

Buddha yawned and cocked his head, and with a great effort got up and lazily lapped a few times at Thame's chin, giving him a kind look in the gloomy twilight.

The fool with the smashed arms danced around the Shadowlord, smiling.

Thame stood and saw that towering before him less than a quarter mile away, where only minutes ago had been nothing but desolate ground, now rose the bastion of the carrion gods. The horse was gone. He started forward through the mist, lightning erupting closer, with Buddha running at his side. Raising his cowl, the aura of the jewel rose to ignite the hellish glint in his gaze. For as he raced to the Crypts he watched as Asher and Ever were led through the open portal by their mother, Jeseleth of the Red Autumn Wind.

A troupe of white tunics peered over the rim of the arena maze, staring down at Leah as she ran the course. They stood writing, quills speeding, madmen of science gathered around like crows. Time and direction didn't have much meaning in the labyrinth, as the wolf trailed her into these bends and dead ends. Her footfalls kicked up clouds of dust.

She could hear the panting snarls of the Master Lon, now left worse than dead as a mindless beast, behind her by only three or four turns. She dashed off through an entryway leading to the right and had to back up again, losing a handful of precious seconds. She dug in her heels and kicked with a new burst of speed. The flames of torches flapped in the wind, flaunting piles of gnawed bones. The wolf continued to howl, which slowed his pace, she hoped. Early in the run she'd afforded herself a single glimpse back, looking down the lengthy passage, and she watched as the drug-ravaged Lon broke into garbled wolfspcak and threw his head back in a roar.

Sweat trickled into her eyes as she pounded across the slightly springy earth. The scientists must have expected her to be able to outrun the encumbered wolf, or why bother with the entire ordeal? The purpose of the test was not the endeavor through the maze, but the ultimate conflict between Leah, Lon and madness. More corridors loomed ahead.

She braked and turned hard, momentum dragging her to the right though she wished to charge into a brick alley arching to the left, opening into a profusion of separate channels. The bracketed torches were set perfectly, allowing for neither too much light to filter into the alcoves nor making it so dark that she couldn't see where she was going. The rays of dawn were still too far off to be any good. This would be over before the sun fully broke the horizon.

Sitting high on the stone steps at the edge of the arena two scientists conversed in hushed tones while gazing at her. "Drezzar," one said, "I'll bet a cask of wine that the snipe lives no more than another ninety seconds."

"I'm not sure, Morlle—"

"Take it!" Leah shouted as she passed beneath them, working the words through her ragged gasps. "It's thirsty work I do, and I'll want something cold when I cut your throats!"

"Taken," Drezzar sighed, jotting.

Leah couldn't help but feel that the others might have come up with a plan of action by now, anything but this running like a rat. There must be some way to change the rules, if only—

The wolf growled excitedly behind her, the savagery in his snarl urging her on even faster, and yet she knew he was closing in. Leah yelped, racing harder, but Lon was much nearer now, a turn or two away, twelve steps at most. Her legs were ready to falter, arms like barge anchors. A dead-end now would end the game forever. She tightened her grasp on the knife, feeling how truly ineffectual it was. She couldn't combat an assassin such as Lon, even if he was overcome with drugs. She's only had to defend herself against werewolves twice in her life, and those two had both been drunk and stupid.

Ten steps. The wolf snarled insanely, powerful jaws snapping hard enough to take her entire face off with one bite. She imagined his hands stretching to snag hold of her hair, slather dripping onto his fur. The sounds he was making loosened her bladder, and the fear threatened to overtake her once again. Indignation was all but gone. If she made one mistake he'd rip through her in an instant.

Eight, and there she was at the end of the maze. Two wooden doors stood open in the last wall, leading into different courtyards down this final brick alleyway. Though the haze of her tears and sweat Featherfeet Leah could see bottles filled with yellowish liquid placed on stools beyond the passages. Above on the stone seats of the amphitheater sat a group of devils watching and waiting for her to choose one or the other. A shriek clambered up her throat.

It didn't matter which vial she chose for she would never trust a scientist. The liquid in both bottles was more of the chemical that had driven Lon out of his head. There was no antidote. Men like these did not care for curing those they inflicted their evil upon.

Leah was now six steps in front of Lon. That wasn't going to be enough, she realized coldly. Iciness blanketed her whole body. She needed to buy herself more time, just a few more seconds, and she could only think of one trick to pull.

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to face the wolf, shifting her center of gravity, planting herself firmly and bending low. Lon rushed forward and, as he ran into her, Leah flexed all her corded muscles and stood straight up, flipping the wolf over her back. Lon somersaulted through the air with a guttural cry and bounced against the bricks, rebounding and falling to the earth on his scarred snout.

Quills continued to flutter and scrape parchment, but for the first time Leah detected a real response from the devils. She stuffed her blade in her belt, wheeled and ran for the doorway closest to her. The wolf got to his feet as she rushed into the middle of the courtyard and kicked over the bottled liquid, grabbing the stool. Racing to the end of the yard, Leah dropped the stool before her, leaped, and thrust up off it, springing for the top of the bricks.

Her vault fell short and she barely managed to reach the metal bracket of a torch. Her hands burned as she grasped on to it, but she refused to let go. She hung there, getting ready to lift and climb. If she didn't coordinate her movements carefully she might set herself on fire.

With a growl, Lon launched himself forward and grabbed her foot. Leah screeched in rage more than terror. She'd survived the odds too long to falter in the end. She kicked and kicked, crying and

heaving while the wolf struggled to hold her. Finally, surprisingly, she snaked her foot free and scaled further up her perch. Lon, huddled in a heap below her, began to retch and dig his claws into the ground.

Precariously, Leah placed her foot on the bracket. The metal protested but she rose and managed to reach back down to gather the torch, then haul herself up the remaining couple of feet until she stood at the top of the wall surrounding the arena maze.

The first scientist approached cautiously, hopping from the rim of coliseum seats. His strange medical instruments rang together in his hands as he moved towards her. With her grin widening, Featherfeet Leah saw it was the same devil who'd bet against her in the labyrinth.

"You owe your friend a cask of wine," she told him. "And you owe me the remainder of your vile life."

"Come collect it, girl!"

Leah raised the torch as Morlle closed the gap between them. She was amazed that the other scientists around continued to scratch at their parchment, noting even this. Morlle appeared talented with his razored devices. Slicers spun before Leah's chest, whistling through the air. He came in low, yet too hesitant in his approach. He slashed high and missed, and Leah dropped her shoulder and dropped, rolled towards him whipping the torch behind her, came up in front and stabbed him in the groin.

Morlle screamed and reached for Leah to steady himself. She slapped his hands away with the burning torch and watched as he slipped backwards, his apron on fire, and fell over the edge down into the maze.

He managed to grab hold of the same bracket below and hang on. Below, Lon hugged his stomach, snarling and staring up as blood splattered into his face.

Leah glanced down at the devil. "How long will the wolf remain like this?"

"Please!" Morlle shouted, slapping at the flames rising from his garments, his face going white with pain and fright. "Pull me up!"

"How long?"

"The effects should be wearing off soon, but I can't be certain. Please!"

Leah spit in his eye and kicked him off the wall.

The wolf charged him, drool splashing. Morlle tried to drag himself off but Lon grabbed him easily and drew the scientist up until his fangs was only inches away from Morlle's tear-streaked face. Then a perceptible change came over the assassin as Lon grabbed the sobbing devil and slew him in a very human way, chopping the sage in the throat with the heel of his paw, instantly crushing the trachea. Lon dropped the corpse and rested on his knees, doubled-over. He gazed up at Leah and though painful groans spoke her name.

"Fight it, Master Lon!" she shouted. "You've gone through lots worse than this!"

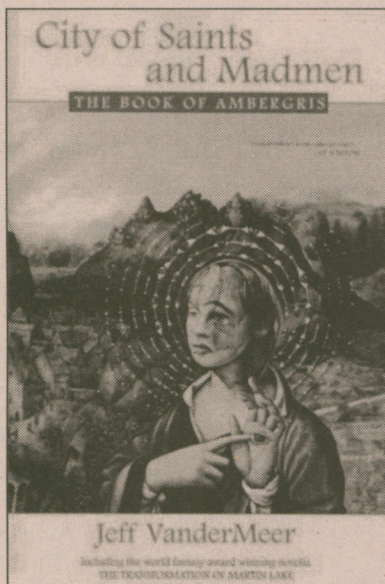
Other scientists yelled and began to rush forward from the coliseum. Leah was exhausted but had little choice in the matter but to fight. She'd take at least a half dozen of these tubby bastards with her. The flames of the torch were dwindling but she was still strong enough to fry a few noses. Her bloody knife warmed her hand.

Lon scrambled and retrieved Morlle's weapons from the dirt, then leaped from the stool, lunging for the top of the wall as Leah had done. He made it easily though he fell to his knees when he touched down on the stone. Lon stood and gave a gods-be-damned look, most of the savagery gone from his eyes but not all. Together they faced twenty from the guild of scientists. The wolf rushed past her, with a titter, and the rest was slaughter.

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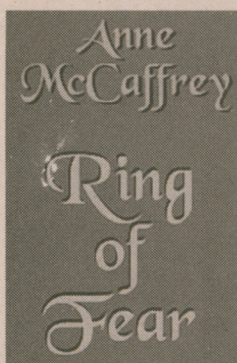
Together with her dog, Merlin, Carla must make a new start and face demons within and without—for her father's killer is now on her trail, too!

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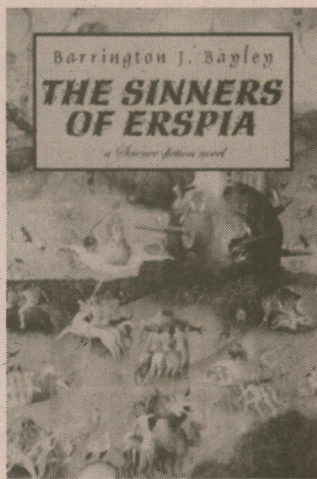
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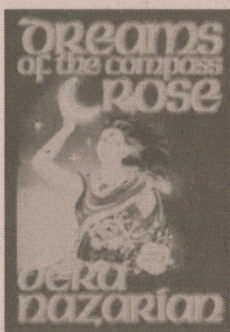
The Sinners of Erspia are the inhabitants of a bizarre world, ruled and guided by the hands of Ormazd and Ahriman, twin gods of good and evil. Histrina, a child of Ormazd, is taken by the evil hordes to a world of terror where she meets Laedo, a man stranded far from his home. Together they start on a hallucinatory journey to understand and to escape from the surreal world that holds them prisoner. This is a novel about the susceptibility of the human mind and how it adapts to the extremes of terror and delight . . . A novel that could only have been written by Barrington Bayley!

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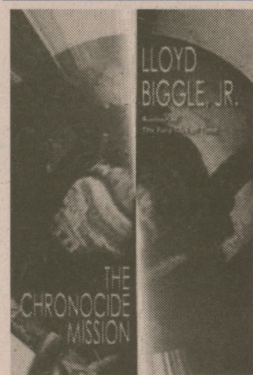
DREAMS OF THE COMPASS ROSE, by Vera Nazarian



"In an exotic setting reminiscent of Tanith Lee's Flat Earth series, Nazarian introduces a cast of characters all in search of something. Learra quests for the legendary island of Amarantea, 'where the soul flies in search of wonder, when sleep takes you by the eyelashes,' only to turn her back on it in the end. Cruel Lord Cireive executes Ailsan, Queen of Risei, the last of her people, only to find that her death gives her the power to defeat him. A king determined to find the 'true End of the World' sends off teams of explorers, only to reject their discovery and suffer the consequences. Storyteller Annaelit insults the god of Things Left Over and finds herself at odds with her own counsel: 'the world is shaped by two things stories told and the memories they leave behind.' At the core of this sprawling saga is Nadir, 'lowest of the low,' whose only chance at redemption lies in saving the soul of a heartless wizard's daughter from the Lord of Illusion. The author's sumptuous language will resonate with Lord Dunsany and Clark Ashton Smith fans . . . Nazarian's vital themes and engaging characters are sure to entertain."

—Publishers Weekly

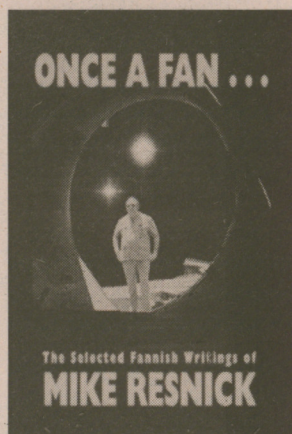
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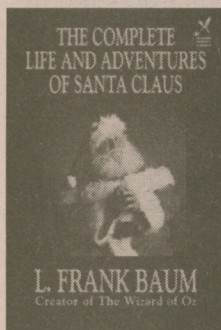
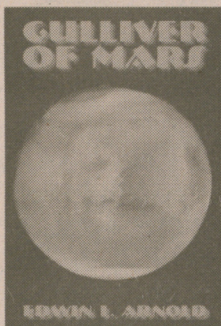
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ERNEST BRAMAH

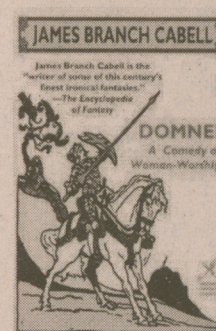
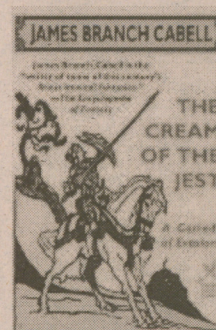
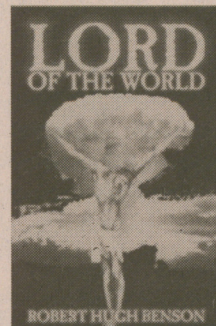
Bramah became equally famous as a fantasy writer and a mystery writer (he created blind detective Max Carrados). His elegant Chinese fantasies of storyteller Kai Lung gained him lasting fame in the fantasy field.

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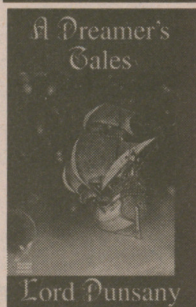
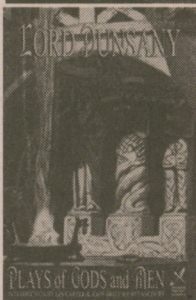




Some Chinese Ghosts



Lafcadio Hearn



Lord Dunsany

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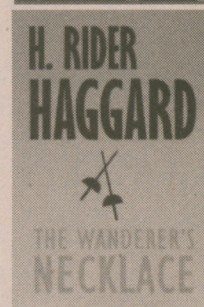
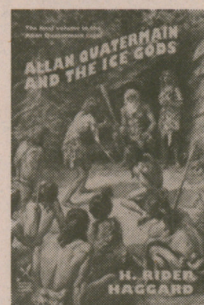
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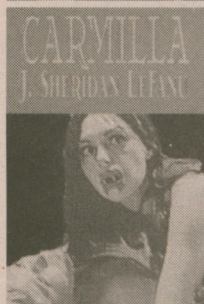
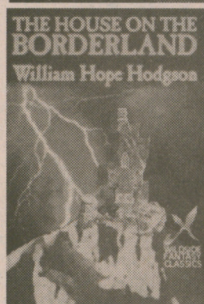
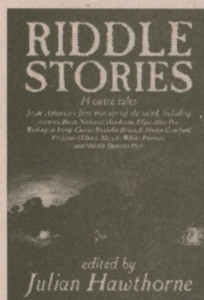
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WILLIAM MORRIS

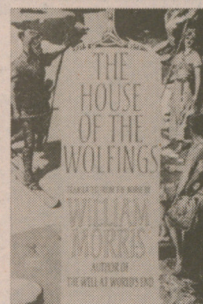
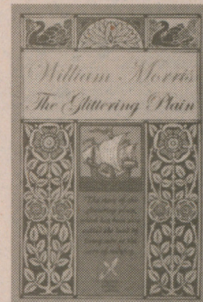
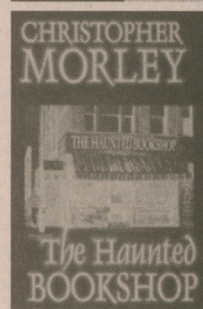
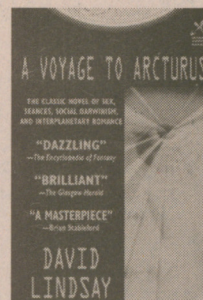
William Morris (1834-1896) is the man generally credited with originating the genre of modern heroic fantasy. A man of many achievements—poet, novelist, artist, designer, and printer of fine books—he is chiefly remembered as a designer of furniture, tapestries, wallpaper, and other decorative objects, and as the author of a number of novels set in almost-medieval but imaginary worlds of great beauty. These prose romances have influenced many writers of fantasy, such as Lord Dunsany, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and continue to delight new generations of readers with their flights of high adventure in strange lands, their beautiful maidens, and stalwart heroes.

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TALBOT MUNDY

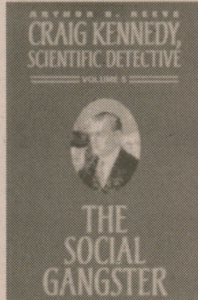
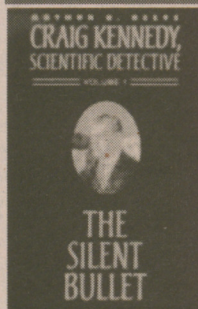
Mundy, best remembered as the author of the exciting *King of the Khyber Rifles*, wrote many fine adventure novels at the turn of the 20th century.

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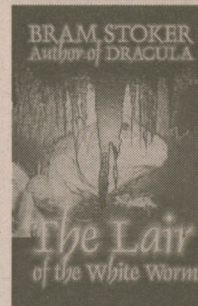
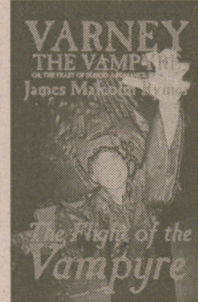
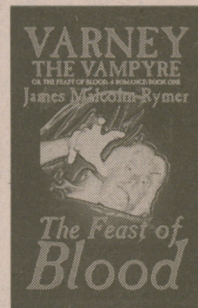
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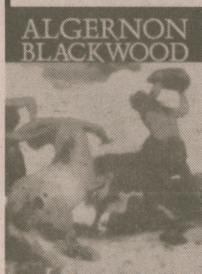
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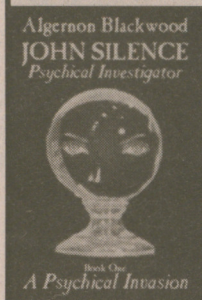


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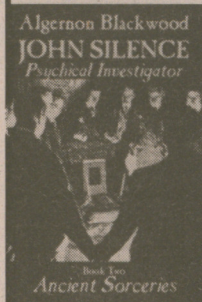
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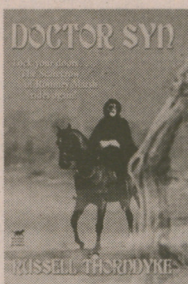
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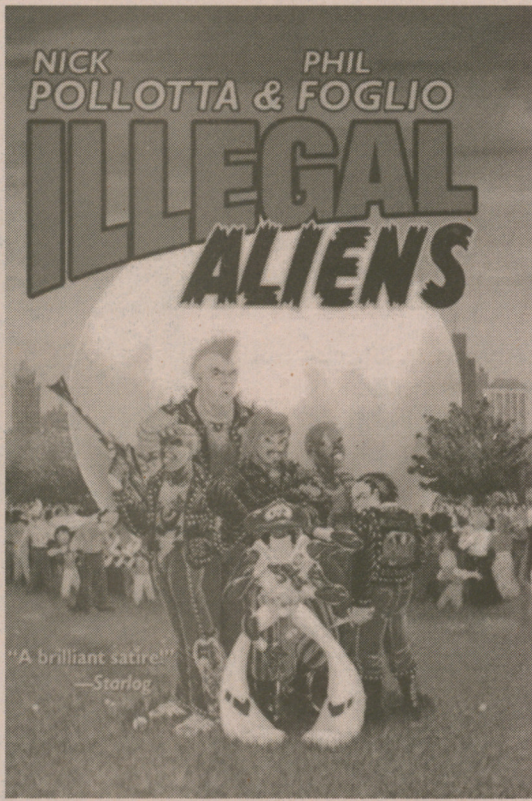
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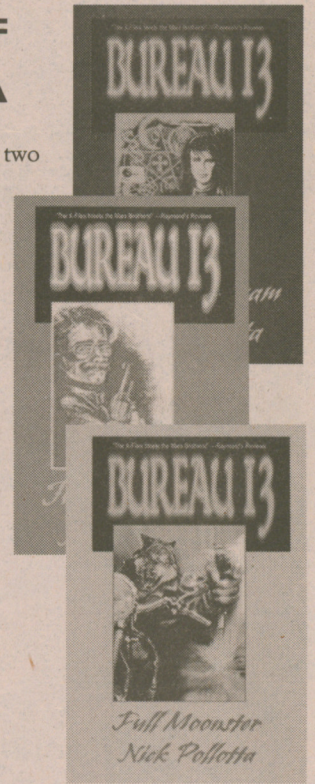


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They dangled, spread-eagled in mid-air, backs arched like birds in updrafts, as their family members were also suspended and trapped above them in the system.

"Let them die," Dovekill said scornfully, massive arms held safely at his sides as if in surrender. He looked neither left nor right, but stared into the thatch of bodies without apparently seeing them. His eyes seethed and his sinews gave shape to his fury. In his impotence his rage fed on itself.

"No!" Zepho cried, his voice carrying far into the cave. "We can't just leave them to this."

But Dovekill was stolid, features etched in granite, and there was no hope. Even in the cages one could fight, but here, in the web, this was not life. "Yes, and then we shall avenge their passing and allow them to rest with honor." One shrug from his powerful shoulders would read an entire section of the web, shattering the bizarre tubing that was neither glass nor metal, spilling hundreds of gallons of blood across the floor.

Ten-years-old and puny for his age, Zepho was cut of similar obstinacy as that of the giant before him. He persisted, blocking out the chilling sounds of the dying above him, and said, "The dead don't rest." This was the truth, Zepho believed. "There's no honor in letting people die without putting up a struggle. We owe them the effort."

Nameless and faceless, the human voices of the web no longer pleaded or asked for retribution as the flow in their veins slowed, the mechanical heart having stopped according to Pallor's whim.

Dovekill felt a twinge of regret. Better to leave the mostly-dead to die and allow them some small chance at peace. "No."

"Was there honor in the cages? Would it have been more merciful if somebody had shoved a spike through your head instead of trying to free you?"

"Look about you, boy."

The great pulse of the cavern began to slow. The warrior's frame was rigid, his tremendous fists clenching and unclenching. Zepho said, "Ask them. Let them choose. Isn't that fair?"

A maelstrom of murmurs and pained whispers rose from the floor and dropped from above, half-spoken words trailing like gurgled moans. Seconds fell away, and Dovekill's own pulse pounded until the veins had risen along his mighty forearms in mockery of the web enveloping him. The boy stepped high on his toes, swaying slightly before the giant.

"Yes, that's fitting." Dovekill recalled days in the cages when he'd contemplated taking his own life, fearing himself crippled beyond hope. He yelled out, "What is your desire? Do you wish to live on? Have you any hope?"

Only silence at first, as if the dying needed more time to meditate on their existence. Another slow throb of blood beat through the tubing. Agonized efforts at speech forced Zepho to turn to one of the nearest speakers, a boy no older than himself draped in the air, and below the lad an elderly lady curled at eye-level, stretched and swinging by the wrists, mumbling. Men coughed out the names of their wives. Women gasped and one touched Zepho's hair. He drew away, wide-eyed, and the web did not answer the question.

"I want mother," a girl sobbed.

At the sound of the child's voice, Dovekill winced. He could see no way to release over two hundred from this structure, but he would fight for life and honor, if nothing else. "Perhaps there is a chance. Forgive whatever woe I cause you!"

Zepho took a calculated step into the system, placing his feet wide apart in order to pass prostrate victims held in place by the crimson tubing. He contorted, twisting and slinking through the living net before him, passing one victim, then two. His stomach lurched and the queasiness made him falter. Dovekill followed to the sound of screams. There was no way through the cavern without causing agony to the innocent. He lay on his belly and crawled.

It took almost three minutes for them to cross the entire cave, as the groans and weeping grew weaker around them. By the end, as they stepped into a polished stone passage, both knew they had been changed. Zepho was trembling and vomit-strewn, knowing that several of them hanging behind him had collapsed unconscious, perhaps died, from the pain of his movements. The warrior was more soul-stricken. Dovekill had failed the test of prowess as Pallor had known he would, and the echoes of those shrieks would haunt him forever. But now he finally stood before the mechanism.

The thin tubing fed into larger lengths of the same substance, then into pipes and enormous wheels that plunged into another machine that could only be the heart. In its side was one immense lever standing out among the rest of the contrivances, designed to be worked by three men. Dovekill supposed this was what would set the mechanism beating again. A series of weights and pulleys and counterweights held the wheels securely in place. The complexities of the apparatus were far beyond his soldier's knowledge. The smell of oil and grease was prevalent beneath the blood sink, and he placed his hands against its unmoving metal, feeling the warmth fading from the blood congealing within.

Dovekill's grunt became a roar as he grasped the lever and lifted with all his immense strength, releasing his frustration and humility, yet finding no end to it. The bar moved an inch and the huge wheel began to turn.

But something caught Zepho's prudent eye, a reflection of light there in the machine. He'd been watching for traps. He ducked below the contraption and saw that, hidden within the pulleys, was another contraption. It vibrated as the bar moved another inch, and another. It took him a moment to find its shape, until he realized there was a spike set upon a concealed device, ready to drive into Dovekill's abdomen when the lever moved beyond a certain point.

Already the bar lifted another inch as Dovekill bellowed. Zepho knew there was no time for a warning, Dovekill wouldn't hear above the sound of his own roar. The ambush was already in motion. Zepho reached out with both hands and caught hold of the pulley as the wires snapped loose, grabbing them as they let fly and bracing his feet against the metal bolts below. It hurt like hell but he held on as the warrior strained above him. The shaft with the ugly spike had started to lash forward and Zepho over-extended himself as something popped in his lower back. He saw stars but held on, wires cutting into his hands. The spike had stopped inches away from skewering Dovekill.

At last the mechanism began to give all the way, and with a sudden release of tension the counter-weights snapped up with a grinding of metal. The pulse of the blood-web picked up speed immediately and resumed its former throbbing. The tormented would live on. From the cave came shrieking and sobbing again, and the warrior was hard pressed to understand what he'd accomplished. Perhaps they would beg him to stop the contrivance again.

Zepho still held on, face screwed up in pain, and Dovekill had to tap the boy's shoulder before he'd let go of the wires. The spike pounded forward with a terrible sound. Dovekill cocked his head and decided to play his role. He shrieked as loud as he could and held it for a time. Then he turned and whispered, "I am thankful, Zepho. You're a soldier to count on."

"Someone's coming," the boy said.

"Yes," Dovekill said.

At the end of the passage, Pallor stood with several of his men, gesturing haphazardly. "The shadow-brats may have escaped, but you large one...!" The Prime Scientist stopped short, his wrinkles smoothing uncannily as his face dropped. Pallor retreated among the other devils, and Dovekill smiled and began to laugh heartily, starting forward.

The scientists attacked and skulls were crushed. Zepho wove through the troupe looking for Pallor, but somehow, as Dovekill hurled bodies over his head, he found himself being chased. Never much for speed, the two men caught up easily. As one hauled Zepho into the air, the other prepared to open the boy's throat with a sharp and shining implement. The sage's arm was poised but he never finished his attack. A dead member of his guild suddenly flew down the hall to land atop the sage's head and break his neck with a crunch. The other devil ducked and the boy fell hard. Cursing, Zepho rolled, squirming away. He twisted aside, prepared to fight again, but the second devil had blood bubbling from his lips as he fell aside. Zepho noted the hilt of a carving knife protruding from the scientist's back.

Zepho stood and saw Featherfeet Leah smirking at him from down the hall, and he rushed into her arms. "Hey, what's this?" she chastened him.

"Oh shut up," he told her, hugging harder. "We've got to help Master Dovekill."

"As if he needed any aid at all, he's got the best. You missed Master Lon racing by. I think they really enjoy this."

"Not me."

"Nor me either, really. Not much anyhow."

"Where are Ever and Asher?" Zepho asked.

"Haven't found them yet. Come on. I've got some wine to drink and a score to settle with that fish-skinned son of a bitch. I'm going to make a necklace with his teeth."

Lon flung two blades high and spinning at the shape down the great channel. The wolf didn't need to see the inhumanly wrinkled features or whiteness of flesh to know it was Pallor hobbling off. Lon once again knew himself, and knew his own hate.

Though Pallor moved to a secret exit in the stones, both knives seemed to alter course to follow, so perfectly had they been thrown. With two bone-shearing thuds, the blades struck the Scientist Prime directly in the back of his legs and drove forward through his kneecaps, sending him screaming to the ground.

"You've not lost your touch, wolf," said Dovekill, dumping the last two broken devils at his feet.

"For a while I did," Lon answered, his voice with more of a growl in it than normally, as they strode down the hall together, "but no lasting harm there, I think."

"In your whole life, did you ever think you and I would be so pressed by a guild such as this? Remember the years when we could raze a sect to the ground before noon and spend a night carousing with no less than a score of ladies?"

"We're getting old."

"Maybe it's time for me to tend flowers?"

In a spreading pool of fluid that was not blood, the ancient and horrified Pallor cringed.

"Save his teeth!" Leah called, delighted.

Dovekill's voice became sugary, though his glare was inflamed. "Hell, friend scientist. You look somewhat distressed. Anything the matter?" He smiled sincerely. "Now, if you would be so kind as to tell us of this Painmaker. You mentioned the villain in your taunts."

Pallor sobbed, blubbing. "A dream...it happened as in a dream and makes no sense, I can say no more...do not, please...don't—"

"Anything to add?" Lon asked.

But the Prime Scientist only wept, looking from face to face and back to the fragments of his knees. And since he was already nearly dead from shock and loss of whatever liquid ran in

his veins, he could do nothing but sit still as Dovekill's hand covered Pallor's entire head, closing over and crushing it completely.

"Master Dovekill, you brute!" Leah shouted. "You've broken all his teeth!"

The warrior stared down at the indefinable red mess in his fist.

"Apologies," he said.

Thame sprinted after his children, rushing for the ruined bastion. The dog followed close at his heels. Spires of the destroyed divine architecture rose into the sable sky. The fortress was empty, hollow, simply a marker placed over a vast descending set of concentric steps.

He watched as Jes, or perhaps only the ghost of Jes, led their son and daughter to the Crypts. The gem lit his way until he finally reached the tower, and as he glanced down the Hellwell of innumerable stairs he saw two other glowing circles of green rapidly winding further down to the base of this world.

The gem has taken them too, for reasons of its own.

Was Jeseleth alive or was this another trick of the Painmaker? As Thame made his way down the Hellwell he was keenly aware that he was somehow shedding layers of himself. He felt very much the way he thought his father must've felt on the night he died, alone, frightened, and yet still demanding.

Buddha noticed too and stayed close. Now he could no longer even see the light of the other jewels below, only menacing darkness. Buddha barked as something crept up the side of the well and grabbed Thame's leg and said, almost in a friendly manner, "You should have stayed dead."

He tripped and rolled, tumbling, weapons flying. He reached to control his fall before going over the edge, desperately leaning backwards trying to regain his feet. The broken-armed clown from the cages crept up against him, and breathed happily in his ear, "Why in Christ's name are you here? Don't you know where this leads?"

Thame thought he might have an answer but wasn't able to speak it as the fool grasped hold of him and drew Thame over the rim of the well, shadows swarming madly everywhere.

Jeseleth of the Red Autumn Wind, dead these past four years, held Ever's hand tightly.

Ever wondered if she was a walking corpse, and if her mother was leading her into hell. "Asher?"

"I'm here."

He sounded odd, yet in command of his faculties, wary and sure of himself. "Sing me a song. One of your early ones."

"Not at the moment." Asher remembered what it was to be lying on the cushions, dying of fever, he felt no remorse or anger as they drew closer to the bottom. He had a jewel as well now, in the hollow of his throat, and knew the acceptance of his father meant an acceptance of something he couldn't name or understand. Looking down, he saw Buddha staring at him as they descended, adogg licking his lips anxiously, backside wriggling. Ever's eyes flitted as well, and she almost grinned. The glow of both their gems faded for an instant before spewing a shower of green flame.

Finally, as they came to the last step of the pit, hearing sounds like waves lapping on an ocean, the sprawling vista of hell welcomed them.

They stood before another roofless realm as the ground beneath their feet actually moved, stirring like the surface of a sea. Jeseleth released her children and wandered off ahead of them. "Mother?" Ever called.

"It's not our mother," Asher said.

"I feel turned inside out, like I'm not real anymore, like—"

"So do I. Hold on. That's not Mother, it's not even her spirit." He held his sister, as he'd done in the cell before giving himself completely to shadow. "Listen, I'm not sure what's happened, but if Buddha is here then father must be as well."

"Fat lot of good that does us now."

"We'll see."

The graves of the carrion gods continued to roil, as though arguing or making love, there where they lay. Buddha rushed by, enjoying the movement of the ground. His red, sleepy eyes scanned the horizon, ears dipping.

Atop the trouncing dirt, sitting upon ruins, was a clown like none ever seen at carnival, with its arms broken. Jeseleth, or whatever appeared like Jeseleth, moved to the fool. When she reached it, the harlequin leaped down and spun, grabbing her and waltzing while she hung limply in his grip. Even with the snapped bones jutting through his flesh, the little fool was an excellent dancer.

"What is happening now?" Ever asked.

"They're toys...dolls...being used to—"

"Drive us crazy?"

"Maybe."

Without any sign of intelligence, that which appeared to be their mother spun in awkward ellipses, whirling with the clown. They hung upon one another for support, sluggishly twirling. Watching them together was almost as bad as having seen their mother die the first time. The twins rushed at the phantoms as the soil shuddered, unsure of just what they would do when they reached her. The laughing harlequin wheeled as the twins lunged for him, batting the husk of Jeseleth into her own children. Ever and Asher sprawled backwards into quaking graves. Jes lay on her belly with her mouth and eyelids flapping open and shut as she quickly sank into the dirt and vanished.

A blackness gathered in the air before them, and a hand emerged from the black sheen. It reached out and took the clown almost gently by the neck, pulling him from the boy. Asher watched as his father, Thame Gravesend, lord of shadows, emerged from the dark.

"Father?" Ever called. "Is it you?"

"Take your sister out of here, Asher," Thame said. "I'll join you shortly."

"Out of here? How does one leave hell?"

Thame hurled the Painmaker—the fool, his father—to the writhing earth. The ocean of soil rippled under Thame's feet wherever he moved, but this was a ground he could hold. He kicked something made of glass aside and knew the sound of it. The clown picked up the bottle of whiskey and took a long, breathless swig.

He raised his collar against the cold and dug his hands into the pockets. He made his way across town, regarding groups of costumed children parading through the neighborhood. The winds billowed capes, tousled rainbow-colored wigs, and blew witches hats and rabbit ears into nearby yards. Jogging now, he took a short-cut through the park and came out near the house. He emerged from a thicket and wiped clusters of leaves and thorns from him. Inside, he fed the puppy and hooked him on the leash, and they headed to the cemetery.

It was near, and only took ten minutes to get there. The chain on the gates were slack enough to slip through, defeating the purpose of having locked them in the first place. He stopped at his mother's grave first, side by side with his father's, watching as the silk petals of fake flowers spun by in the wind. Kneeling, he tore at a carpet of grass and weeds and cleared the headstone.

Weakness hit and he sat heavily on his father's grave, bewildered. Back when he could cry he'd been ashamed of his tears, and now

when he needed to weep it was impossible for him. The irony was appealing, in a way. Without his father's rage to give his life meaning, he found no definition for himself, no context.

The pinkie ring was buried with the old man, though the emerald chip that had once been set in it had long since been lost. Perhaps it had been left behind in one of his mother's scars, or one of his own.

He pressed his cheek against the carved name of his father—his name as well—and was surprised that the stone contained a soft warmth. The wind grew worse, and the puppy chewed at a plastic wreath on the grass, tail thumping. The headstone grew hotter, until it was close to burning. He frowned but didn't move, not even when steam rose around him, like the breath of an angry drunk in the night. He could go to places where no one could ever touch him. The puppy trotted over and sat in his lap. The winds continued to grow more furious, whirling the mist, this fog, against him, as he thought of a dead god and the ghosts guzzled what was left of his soul and mind.

What do you want from me, you drunken bastard?" The harlequin laughed, spewing whiskey, the stench everywhere again. memories surged, and Buddha dug holes in the grave of a god. Thame could not get far enough away from his own childhood agony. Flashes of another life passed in his mind—his mother cleaning the kitchen, the yelling, the broken furniture. The man, the failure, and his own irretrievable love for his own father. The clown gestured, as if Thame should follow his own thoughts, everything all angles.

The fool finally spoke. "Aren't you going to ask how I became so powerful?"

"I already know. I gave you the strength."

"As I gave it to you."

"It's me down there, buried, in my own head. You're me."

"Yes."

"The real and insane me, whoever I am." *Insane, insane.* "But that doesn't matter any. I'm alive." The words echoed, shadows heaping and groveling before their lord. "Thame Gravesend. I live. And you're the one who's finally dead."

The emerald exploded, and he screamed his own name.

The rains lasted more than a month. A squad of twelve guardsmen dismantled the gallows in the square and tacked amendments up for all to see. After a tentative period of forgiveness, the population of wolves grew closer to men, sewing certain rifts.

In the course of those wet weeks it was observed by a fair share of crystal-viewing witches that a number of taverns had been brought low by a ruckus-causing pair, that of a bearded giant and a tittering wolf. Several bragging soldiers with heavy chips on their shoulders, surrounded by friends too drunk to discern faces, made the mistake of picking arguments with the duo across their tankards.

Also during these days, it was reported that the newly promoted General Racnor of the palace guard had rooted and obliterated several nests of devil scientists. Victims of experimentation needed immediate attention from magicians and healers of the highest caliber. Most of them were saved, including many from a grotesque and diabolical experiment called the blood web.

As noted by the court sorcerer Jonah, the atmosphere of the palace itself had drifted through a number of milieus during the month-long storm. At first, following the night of shadow, the days had melded one into another with little or no difference. It was as if the entire castle held its breath. But then, as Thame Gravesend recovered, and even learned to laugh a bit, the days turned brighter even while the rains continued to sweep against the buttresses and towers.

Having become interested in Lon's cards and other arcane talismans, Zepho discovered he was quite naturally adept at sorcery. At once frightened and exhilarated, he found himself becoming more devoted to magic. Jonah allowed him to peruse the court's private collection of grimoires and tomes, and the boy began spending most of his time there in the library, even while Featherfeet Leah took to being the first city guardswoman. She trained in the courtyard with Racnor and his men, and often put them to shame in their own maneuvers, with their own weapons.

New chapters had ended and begun. The world went on. Poems were written, songs sung on corners and beneath tents in the marketplace. Perhaps the finest of these were performed by a pair of twins who seemed familiar with the alleys and yet were made of finer mettle.

Although he boy's voice was lovely and moving, he was often outdone by the girl who danced beside him. Lithe and growing more beautiful every day, the stories circulated. Few from the city recognized them to be residents of the palace, though there was some talk. Gossip to be ignored and heeded, one ear open and the other shut. Tales were whispered by the storytellers. Some said they were prince and princess, and some even said they were accompanied by a small demon that pranced at their feet.

The rains came to an end.

Semera walked throughout the citadel searching for Thame. Her capabilities as a nurse were lacking to an extent, but she felt the need to stay close to her lover while his wounds healed, if they ever would. She had stitched some of them herself, but that did not concern her. It was his constant laughter that she found off-putting. It did not fit him, at least not the man she had known. He seemed at once carefree and burdened by this light-heartedness, as if it anguished him in some way.

His children, as well, tended to him, and although there were times when the Crying Queen felt pangs of jealousy and a need to become a mother herself soon, now she was merely glad for his recovery.

Still, Thame was weak, and cried out in his sleep. He once awoke in the night and lay entranced, staring at her, saying, "It's someone else's dream, only my dream." She did not argue with him because she sometimes thought the same thing.

Now she came to the top of the east tower, and found him eating grapes, sipping a cup of wine. He looked to her and said, "How's Tavy?"

Goddess, his voice. She was still unfamiliar with hearing him speak without his words echoing about in the corners. "Better since Jonah placed a poultice on her bruises. Our young Ever may need a bit more schooling in the art of social graces."

"Our young Tavy too."

She nodded at that, eyes steadily upon his. His half-grin turned upon his lips, and she asked, "How are your own injuries?"

"Better. I don't heal as fast as I used to, but the wounds no longer run quite as deep."

Perhaps that was true, perhaps not. She reached out and stroked the scar at his throat where the jewel had been. Ever and Asher wore their collars high now in order to cover similar scars. They were not ugly, she thought, and in time they would fade. "It is strange to see you without the gem."

"I understand."

They were quiet several minutes while the breeze whisked about them. In a tone that did not hint at the nervousness she felt, Semera asked, "How will the gods treat us now?"

"Better than we've treated ourselves these last years, I suspect. The gods need us down here as much as we need them up there.

Probably more. I've got a feeling things will settle down now. For a while anyway."

"I am curious though. Why did the Painmaker lead you to the Crypts?"

"He didn't. I led him there. That place existed well beyond this one."

"Is he gone from your heart?"

"Mostly."

Her scarlet hair wafted through the air, a thousand lovely flames billowing towards him. Semera could not fathom the concept of how a man could be a god, even a dead man playing at being a dead god, but she didn't question any more. "Are we prepared to change as we must?"

The wind tousled his hair. "We've already started, I think."

She swept the curls from his eyes, and he placed his arms around her, taking her close. "Are you still lord of shadows?"

"I don't know," he said, and yet when he turned to look at her, his eyes no longer azure but appearing endlessly black, she knew he still had his measureless secrets, even if this all was only another madman's nightmare.

SEARCH DUST FOR THE HERMIT

Light seekers pass the astronomer,
Caverns of infinite universe measured
nightly, his old Buick the only car
on the desert road towards cloudless dusk
and against the rays of each dawn.
The seekers call him blind, so narrow
the path, so fast the speed.
They swerve to pitch tents against
the shift from hot to black cold.

The astronomer wakes them with news
of a dying galaxy's weight.
They ask where the hermit
might pray. He warns them
"Those drawn to her wells receive
mail bombs stuffed with explosive seed
pods
from idiot's clover, triggered
by the humanity of a breath."

Seekers hike up a path of needless
humility, like to a sin trapped hotel
for battalions of ruleless marines
at a resort of unwatered scenery.
By stobepipe trickles never tasted twice,
they notice the hermit. Waves of peace
hook, the shade over her immodest,
no chance to grasp the flesh colored
vacuum she traded to the astronomer
for her piece of earth refused sky.

- Nathan Whiting

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. Chris has appeared in these pages many times and I look forward to showcasing him here again in the future.

City of Fire

by Chris Bunch

Aramaios of the Black Tents pulled his horse in, sat motionless, listening. He'd heard a scream.

A woman's scream.

It came from ahead, on up the forest track that led to the wizard's solitary house.

That was not good, not good at all, for he'd hoped the magician named Aloy would be able to help him allay his precarious financial situation, and he didn't want to get involved, even casually, in the wizard's love life.

Aramaios had no idea why he couldn't seem to keep gold about him, although he grudged that a willingness to buy the tavern a round of wine, to predict what numbers the dice might roll, and a liking to buy a woman a pretty might have something to do with it.

He'd been in Itten, a decaying town in the heart of this land of silence and forests, which a man of the deserts liked but little, when he heard first about the great haunted city of Byrl, miles north and east of Itten.

Byrl, the tale went, had been the capital of the land he was traveling through, back before the sun began its slow dying, and too many people stopped breeding. The city had been abandoned, but no one knew just why. Perhaps a plague, or attack by one of the terrible armies from the East.

But the people had left great riches behind.

Aramaios scarcely believed that. He'd known madman in his travels since being outlawed and driven north from his native lands, but none so mad they'd run without their silver and gold.

The man who'd artfully told him the story in a tavern, looking about for eavesdroppers, dropping his voice to a whisper when it seemed appropriate, appearing to show fear at the very mention of the city, said he could prove his story.

"Demons overtook the city," he said.

"Ah," Aramaios said. "That is certainly believable. Demons do things like that."

There was a wizard, not far from the city, who'd spent ten years collecting tales and casting spells about Byrl.

"And who has ever heard of a sorcerer chasing a wisp?" the man had said. "Even more, this wizard has even taken on the name of the lead demon, Aloy. And the man is not considered mad, although in this country we give wizards considerable rein in that direction."

Aramaios nodded reluctantly. That did add credence, so he got instructions on where he might find this Aloy's lonely quarters. But it was not enough for him to ride north.

That had been provided a few days later.

Two rather charming girls he'd met in one of the riverfront taverns had sought his protection, promising him half of all they earned. Their previous guardian had not only been a drunkard and one who liked to chew the mushrooms of the forest, but who beat them without reason. And how could women whose income was dependent on their looks work their trade with a black eye or a puffy lip?

To Aramaios, that sounded ideal, and would keep him solvent, and not having to wander on, at least through the summer.

Unfortunately, he'd neglected to ask just who a protector should be paying off, which the previous guardian had taken care of.

The second problem arose when that guardian confronted Aramaios in a crowded gambling hall, with two toughs, and told him he was under the protection of the city watch, and Aramaios was to leave his whores alone or else.

Aramaios was still young, less than twenty years, and perhaps the pimp thought a youth would be easily dissuaded.

But Aramaios was more than seven feet tall, most familiar with the dagger and broadsword he wore in a shoulder-slung belt, and had a short temper. His beak nose had already been broken two or three times, and he had no intention of letting it happen a fourth.

Assuming that was the worst the pimp and his friends planned.

Never a man of repartee, Aramaios had answered their threats by throwing one thug through a rather ornate stained glass window over the gaming table, which revealed, to Aramaios's considerable surprise a lookout who must've been signaling the cards the desert wanderer held.

While the first man hung impaled on the thick glass, bleeding profusely from the throat, the second goon pulled a dagger from his sleeve, just in time to absorb a thrust from Aramaios's broadsword. He clutched the blade, sagged down, and it took Aramaios a moment to pull his sword free.

The pimp was running for the door. Aramaios, moving like a great cat, caught him at the casino's steps, and, feeling somewhat angry, lashed out.

The man's head lofted a good ten feet in the air, bounced on the steps, and thunked rather liquidly across the bosom of a woman who happened to be one of the mistresses of an Itten magistrate.

Aramaios, no fool, decided he had best leave the city at once, or sooner.

He woke a grocer, who did some fencing on the side, and bought dry supplies and one of the country's prime smoked hams, got his horse from the stable, bought grain and a mule to carry his supplies, and rode out the city gates before the alarm had been given.

He'd gone from a broad highway now cracked in slabs from the earthquakes that roiled across this country, that supposedly lead straight to Byrl, turned off on a once-paved road, through a village so ruined there was nothing but three or four square cement outlines that had been foundations.

Three lanes later, he rode up one, hoping he'd chosen right.

He saw a farmer, working a rather dank spread, waved to him.

The man looked at him, saw the sword, noted Aramaios's direction of travel, ran for the woods.

Aramaios loosened his blade in his sheath, rode on.

It was growing late, and fog was floating in from the forest. Aramaios shivered. He little liked this land of silence, dark forests

with who knew what lurking inside, cold waters, and earthquake-torn land.

He stopped when the scream came, then listened to silence for a time. He continued up the track.

He rode into a clearing, and clearly had found his wizard.

Aramaios had expected a hovel of some sort, no doubt scratched with magical symbols.

There were magical symbols in this clearing, but they were cleverly done in vari-colored stone. The hovel would have done well for a baron's manse, if there'd been a protective wall around it, and watchful sentries guarding against the monsters of the deep forests around.

But magicians don't need high walls, nor are their sentries necessarily visible.

The scream came again, and this time, Aramaios could see where it came from.

The house was semi-circular, and in the center of the circle was a tall iron triangle. From this dangled a naked woman. Her back was striped with whip marks, and there was a brazier burning nearby, with instruments of torture heating in it.

There were other braziers about, these emitting smoke in colors Aramaios had never seen.

Next to the triangle stood a man who had to be Aloy. He was tall, built heavy, like most of the men in this land, and his long gray hair hung about his shoulders. He was clean-shaven, and his face was cruel, his eyes like lance thrusts.

He wore leather breeches, a leather vest, and a puffed-sleeve shirt in black with white symbols on it.

A thin sword and dagger hung beside each other at his waist.

The woman, almost still a girl was quite small, with a pug nose and long brown hair, dangling almost to her waist. She had pert breasts and a slender waist.

"Who the hells are you?" Aloy shouted. "And what are you doing on my land?"

"I came to consult you about Byrl," Aramaios said.

Surprisingly, both the girl and Aloy started.

"I have no time for ragged adventurers," Aloy snarled. "Now, get the hells away, or I'll set demons or wolves on you!"

Aramaios, being a sensible sort, wanted to obey, and perhaps seek shelter with that farmer down the road and come back at a more appropriate time.

But the woman gave him a pleading look, and Aramaios's common sense whispered away into the fog.

"No," he said. "I think I'll not do that."

"Then prepare yourself for a ghastly death!" the wizard shouted, and picked up an ornately carved staff propped against the triangle.

Aramaios had his sword out, but was yards away from the man.

Aloy began chanting, waving the head of the wand in elaborate figures in the air.

Aramaios felt his spine crawl and the hair on his neck prickle as he damned himself for a fool.

Then the girl swung in her chains, and, at the height of a swing, kicked Aloy in the balls.

He howled, and the staff spun away.

Aramaios had his sword out, and was running toward the wizard. Aloy staggered erect, and his sword and dagger whipped into his hands.

Aramaios lunged toward him, and the wizard made a clever parry. But the man of the desert had been expecting something like that, and his lunge became a stop-thrust, then a full thrust.

Aloy was overreached, and Aramaios's stroke seared across the man's back. Aloy shouted in pain, spun away, and struck back.

Aramaios's heavy broadsword took the sorcerer's blade flat on, and snapped it in three pieces. The magician had but a moment to gape at his suddenly shortened weapon before Aramaios's sword drove into his throat, and out the back of his neck.

The man sagged, and Aramaios kicked the corpse off his blade.

"Make...make sure..." the girl said.

Aramaios nodded, and thrust the sword into the magician's heart, then cut his head off.

"He's dead," he said, announcing the obvious.

Panting, he eyed the girl's body. Her eyes widened in alarm, realizing a new threat.

The wanderer grunted, reached up, and unhooked the chains.

The woman went to her knees.

"Get up," Aramaios growled. "Find some clothes...and some traveling gear. We'd best be out of here. The bastard might really have demons. Or wolves."

"Listen," the young woman said.

Aramaios obeyed, half-closing his eyes, letting his consciousness move out from the safe nook of the cave, beyond the comfortable flames.

He, too, heard the howling, and his hand, unconsciously, went for his sword.

"No," the woman said. "They're just wolves. I grew up listening to them in the forests around my village. I know."

"Mmmh," Aramaios said, cut himself another slice of the ham.

They'd found salve in a cupboard, and Aramaios had smoothed it on the woman's back. She said her name was Leah.

Her clothes were stacked in the bedroom Aloy had given her, when he welcomed her two days ago as a guest, then savagely turned. They were fur-in pants and coat, knee-high boots, and a furry bonnet. Beside the bed was her pack with dried grains, some strange looking pickles in a metal jar, undergarments, and lighter clothes for better weather.

Leah's horse was in Aloy's barn, and they'd saddled it and ridden south. At first, considering Leah's injuries, Aramaios had thought of finding shelter with the farmer, but he reconsidered. That was too close to Aloy's house.

Instead, they'd continued on to the ruined highway.

"North to the unknown, or south to Itten?" Aramaios asked. "There'll be chiurgeons and witches to tend your wounds there. I'm for the north."

"As am I," she said firmly.

They'd gone on until dusk, and then Aramaios had spotted a promising cliff face that, indeed, was pocked with caves. There was a small creek curling at its foot.

They'd dragged enough broken limbs up to last the winter, and Aramaios had found dry firestarter in the rotting pulp under a log.

It was, he thought, passing cozy.

"You sure?" he asked, waving his dagger, with a slice of ham impaled on it.

"I'm sure," she said firmly. "It's forbidden to my people."

"Why?" Aramaios said. "I've never heard of anyone whose totem is a pig."

"I'm not sure," Leah said. "But it's an order from our God, who must not be named."

"Almost the best kind," Aramaios said. "Better if you did not even acknowledge him."

"What is your God, if I may ask?"

"My people had one, centuries gone," Aramaios said. "He was strong, and gave us power through half the world. But those who followed him never grew, never changed, and so they were driven back into their deserts by the powerful gods of these lands, and of lands across the ocean.

"Most of us abandoned him, and some of us cursed his memory.

"As for me," he said, feeling his voice dry in his throat after all these words, since he seldom spoke this much, least about things like gods, "I do not seem to need a god. And if there is one...or many...I

doubt if they look on me with favor, considering how my life has run thus far.”

He told her about being named outlaw and driven out from his tribe by his uncle, of crossing the great swamp that had been a sea north, into these foreign lands, and his further wanderings.

“And what do you seek?” Leah asked.

“Gold,” Aramaios said. “Adventure, too, I suppose. But mainly gold.”

“And that was why you came to Aloy, looking for the lost city of Byrl?”

“Surely. For what man goes to a sorcerer except when he needs something?”

“True enough,” Leah said.

“Might I ask what you needed?”

Leah laughed bitterly.

“I’m the exception, I guess. I didn’t look for Aloy. His spell drew me.” Aramaios waited.

“Centuries ago,” Leah said, “there were many people in Byrl. It was the center of art, music, culture, like another forgotten place, Pars, especially for my people, who lived in villages here and to the east. But one day things changed, and demons in the shape of men took the throne in Byrl.

“They said my people were the cause of all evil, and so they murdered us, men, women, children.

“Not content with ravaging their own country, they formed armies, and marched east, and everywhere they found my people, they butchered them.

“They were trying to exterminate us from the earth, and they almost succeeded.

“But this wasn’t the first time my people had been made a scapegoat, and so we hid, changed our names, and waited.

“Eventually, reckoning came for these demons, and they were slaughtered by men from across the western ocean, men who lived in the air, with their allies who were ant-like hordes of men from the east, not of my people.

“Some of my people went to a new land, and strong-willed that there should never be another disaster like the one a few of us had lived through, made a new country. There are those who say it is still there, south, across the swamp that was an ocean.”

“That is where I come from,” Aramaios said. “And I know of no strong country. All that I’ve encountered is like it is here, with clusters of men and women who wait for the sun to blink red and then go out.

“In the meantime, they do as we all must, and fight for life, and what passing pleasures we can find.”

“Some of us,” Leah went on, as if Aramaios hadn’t spoken, “returned to the northern lands we’d lived in for thousands of years, and life went on.

“That was my family. They were scholars, men and women who studied our religion, and the magic of words and numbers. I am one of those.”

“You’re a wizard, like Aloy?” Aramaios said, slightly alarmed.

“No, silly. I was studying the history of my people, and wanted to find all I could about Byrl.

“Aloy told me that he has...had...spells sweeping across the world, like nets, seeking those who know, or want to know, about Byrl, as he did.

“As I studied old volumes, listened to legends, the idea grew that I must look for Byrl.

“Or rather, its ruins, because it was rebuilt after that great war, rose to new heights, then was destroyed again by demons, for what reason, I know not.”

“My interest, my thoughts, were, I guess, enough to draw Aloy’s magical attention, or so he told me. I determined to travel, to find what I could in the lands of the west, and then, when I was armed with knowledge, I would seek out Byrl.

“That drew me to Aloy. At first, he thought I knew things, things that would help him in his quest for the riches of Byrl. But I knew far less than he did, and so, enraged, he decided he would sacrifice me to his own demons, so they would grant him further wisdom.

“He said I would be very long in the dying, and he had barely begun to torture me when you arrived. I owe you my life, and will repay you in any manner you choose.”

Aramaios grunted.

“You can tell me what you know about the treasures of Byrl, and where they can be found.”

“I know very little, and Aloy knew little more. Supposedly, in the center of the city, there is treasure, hidden underground.”

“That’s of small help.”

“There is one thing more that might interest you. In late spring, this time of year, the legends go, those demons who were men are permitted a time of revelry, a night or a week, the tales are uncertain.

“Perhaps, if there was a way to avoid these demons’ attention, a brave man might get information that would lead him to this treasure.”

“This story sounds entirely fantastical,” Aramaios said.

“I don’t know,” Leah said. “For *something* destroyed Byrl again, if there’s any truth to the tales.”

“I’ve found,” Aramaios said, “there’s little, if any truth anywhere in this dying world.”

“Perhaps,” Leah said. “But I must know for sure.”

“So you journey to Byrl?”

“I must.”

“Then,” Aramaios said, “I suppose I must travel with you, having no other goals that draw me at the moment.”

The next morning they rode north and east, following the ancient highway where they could.

Earthquakes had ripped the land, and Aramaios was uncomfortable in a place where the gods could reach up and tear what they chose.

“Not gods,” Leah said patiently. “Great forces exist underground, and there are pressures pushing here and there, enough to move mountains.”

“Like I said,” Aramaios said. “Gods. Or demons.”

The weather was growing milder, but there was still snow under the trees.

They had to ford a roaring river that had torn the land after man, for there was no sign of bridges anywhere. They had to go downstream, to where the river broadened after roaring through a canyon, and here it was shallow enough, though the river was beginning to build into a torrent with the spring melt.

“We’ll not come back this way,” Aramaios said. “Not unless we wait until fall when the waters fall.”

“Or find demons in Byrl we can enslave,” Leah said.

“More likely the other way around.”

One night, they became lovers, as much by accident as design.

Aramaios wondered if Leah thought she was repaying the debt she’d proclaimed, disliked the idea. Sex was complicated enough without putting reasons to it.

He had to admit that Leah made him a bit uncomfortable.

He thought, at first, it was because she was a student of wizardry, in spite of her disclaimers. But that was not it.

There was something unsettling about her expression when she didn’t think he was looking at her. But he couldn’t identify it, and therefore tried to put it out of mind.

They traveled on, the land around them increasingly marshy, with lakes scattered here and there.

There were few men in this wilderness, a scatter of poor farmers, once a fortified manor house, almost a castle, that housed priests, or some people who wore common garb. Neither Leah nor Aramaios wanted anything to do with them.

They lived on game, and once found an abandoned farm, with an intact root cellar.

Twice they saw riders watching them from hilltops, bandits most likely.

But the brigands must have thought a man and a woman, not richly garbed, would hardly be worth the fight, and left them alone.

Then ruins grew about them, and they had reached the outskirts of Byrl.

The city was utterly destroyed. Aramaios couldn't tell whether it'd been done by the storied demons, armies or by time, eventually decided if a thousand years or more passed, what remained of any city might look like Byrl.

The streets were now grassy lanes. Buildings had crumbled, blocking their way, and they frequently had to detour, looking for a clear route.

In its day, Byrl must have been wondrous, Aramaios thought, far greater than any city he'd seen or heard of.

But now it was dying, perhaps dead, just like the rest of Earth.

"How will we know when we reach the center of the city?" Leah asked.

Aramaios had been wondering the same thing, when a thought came.

"Look how the buildings have been getting taller," he hazarded.

"We'll strike for the tallest."

"That sounds like a plan," Leah said. Her voice was strange, not much more than a low monotone.

"Is something the matter?"

She shook her head.

The buildings did get taller, or rather the stubs of buildings, for storms and the weather had toppled many of them. Even ruined, they were still impressive, mostly clean, simple structures of steel and concrete.

One building had been built by magic, Aramaios thought, for it was no more than panes of glass, with a thin steel framework behind them.

One of the panes was still unbroken.

Aramaios stared at it, then took his great bow from the mule, strung it, and sent a war shaft arcing up. The window shattered and glass cascaded down. The sound was very loud — there was no noise, no sign of life, except the moan of the wind, and the drip of the rain.

"Satisfied?" Leah asked.

Aramaios decided he should be ashamed, but wasn't, shrugged, put the bow away.

Deeper into the city, Aramaios saw a building with a sign overhead, incised metal. The words were long gone, but he could still make out the indentation of a ring with a jewel atop it.

He reined in, dismounted, went through the door.

There was a large vault, its door hanging open, its elaborate lock of brass and steel tarnished. Inside were row after row of file boxes.

Aramaios went in, opened one of them at random.

He jumped.

"What in the name of whatever are you doing?" Leah asked from the doorway, her voice impatient.

"Look," Aramaios said, scooping up a handful of gems. "Look at what somebody just walked away and left."

"What of it?" Leah asked. "There'll be greater riches in the city center."

"Now is for certain," Aramaios said, going to his horse and taking out two sturdy leather bags. "Being sensible people, we could load up with riches here, and ride back out, never chancing whatever demons might or might not show themselves."

"I'm going on," Leah said. "I've not come this far to be satisfied with a few baubles."

"Baubles?" Aramaios said. "These baubles could buy a kingdom."

"Take what you want," she said indifferently. "I'll save my treasure lust for later."

"I shall. And also some of this silver that might be of use."

They rode on, two bulging bags on the mule's back.

The buildings grew still taller, and they were forced to swim across a couple of slow-flowing rivers, their stone bridges long collapsed.

They reached what had been a broad thoroughfare. There was a stone marker at one crossroads. Aramaios looked closely, made out the letters "ICHSTRA," no more.

They found the center of the city, a broad square, with ruins of what Aramaios thought to be palaces around it.

"I see no flaming signs saying RICHES FOUND HERE," Aramaios said.

"Of course not," Leah said. "We'll have to search."

A sound came down the boulevard, a howling of wolves.

But there was something strange about the cry.

Leah shuddered.

"Do wolves of the east sound like this?" Aramaios asked.

She shook her head.

"Nor do my creatures of the desert. It's getting dark," he said. "Best we find shelter, and wait for tomorrow's sunlight."

She nodded, eyes frightened.

Aramaios looked carefully, found a sturdy building that once had housed a tavern, some blocks from the city center, with cell-like windows. A metal-topped bar still stood against one wall.

The horses and mule seemed glad to be off the street, twitching every time that long howl sounded. Now the cries came from all around them.

A pack, hunting early, Aramaios decided.

Aramaios put muscle against the bar, and its bolts tore out of the wall.

"Help me block the door with this," he said, and Leah obeyed.

"Now we'll tear down some of those panels, and build a fire," Aramaios said.

"Is that wise? Won't they see it?"

"We'll only have it for a few moments."

The tiny blaze roared into life, and Aramaios blew hard on it.

"I wish I had a bellows," he said.

He decided it was hot enough, and, using a steel cup with a handle, probably used to mix drinks, he melted some of the silver coins he'd taken from the jeweler's.

Then he dipped his arrowheads in the silver, set them to dry.

"If there are demons, and they attack us," Leah said skeptically, "do you think that will help?"

"It can't hurt," Aramaios said, putting a bowl over the fire to smother it.

They fed the animals from the grain they carried in their saddlebags, had fire-baked bread and smoked venison, carried their blankets upstairs to the upper deck.

Aramaios made sure his weapons were close at hand while Leah spread the blankets.

"Come here," she whispered. "Make love to me."

Aramaios obeyed, and she savaged his body fiercely, as if this were the first, or the last, time she would make love.

Then they slept.

Aramaios woke to the sound of chanting. He sat up, and found Leah was gone, and somehow that heavy block in front of the door had been moved.

He went to one of the barred windows, and saw men wearing uniforms running through the streets, chanting, carrying torches. As they ran, they smashed windows, looted storefronts.

Aramaios saw then the city itself had changed. Now it was whole, but the buildings weren't steel and concrete, but brick and wood.

A child ran across the street, and one of the uniformed men smashed her down with a club.

Aramaios growled anger, knowing he should hide, and look for Leah when the sun rose.

Instead, he took his bow, slung his quiver over his shoulder, and stepped out into the street.

The people had changed in the few seconds he was away from the window. Now huge steel boxes, with long tubes atop them and men riding aboard, rumbled past. There were crowds lining the sidewalks, cheering.

The men in the boxes wore black uniforms, and arrogance was stamped on their faces.

No one noticed Aramaios at all. He was invisible to the throng. He hesitated, then went on, toward the city center.

A strange sound came, building. It was a roar, and it came from the dark skies. Fingers of light came from nowhere, as the roaring grew louder.

Metallic whistling grew, and the ground rolled around him, and the old buildings shook, and broke. Men and women ran past, screaming in panic, but again none noticed him.

There were explosions about him, and fireclouds balling up into the heavens.

Flames grew to his side, and the buildings were taken by fire, which built, searing along the entire block. There were other fires growing down other streets he passed.

Yet Aramaios felt no heat.

He wanted to flee, but kept moving, and then he entered the great square.

The remains of the steel palaces were gone, replaced by bigger ones of stone and brick. Some were burning, some already ruined, some still stood tall.

In the center of the square, he saw Leah's naked body, ripped and torn. She lay quite still, and suddenly Aramaios knew what her expression had been like, the one that had upset him.

It was the placid, accepting look of a sheep, being led to the altar for sacrifice, where his uncle waited with a bloody knife.

There must have been another spell cast, besides Aloy's, that had brought her to Byrl, to be a sacrifice.

But cast by whom?

It could only be these demons in the shape of men that held their revels, if that was what they were.

There were men, and women in the square, dancing as the screaming from the sky built.

Then they started changing, kneeling, and their bodies shrank, changed, growing mangy dark fur, and then their chanting was the baying of wolves.

But they were not quite wolves, but had the faces of men, skin stretched over lupine skulls.

Yet they bayed and bobbed, leaping up, as flames flicked out, here and there, taking them, and the wolfish men and women danced and burnt.

There were four great wolves in the center of the square, baying loud over Leah's body. Behind them was the entrance to an underground bunker that hadn't been there in the daylight.

Aramaios's rage broke, and his bow was in his hand, drawn, and the shaft whipped across the square.

He was aiming for one wolf with a stubbier snout, that appeared to be the leader, its whiskers dark and gathered.

But another wolf, one who'd been cowering behind the leader, limped forward, and the arrow buried itself in his chest.

He spun, died, and then the three others saw Aramaios.

The leader bayed orders, just as Aramaios fired again, and this time his shot took another, smaller wolf with patchy fur.

There were only two wolves left around Leah's body. Aramaios took out one of them, a fat, lumbering creature, and there was only the leader still in the square.

A pair of wolves leapt toward him, and he dropped his bow, had sword and dagger out. One took his blade through the chest. Aramaios ducked the second's leap, came up under it, and his dagger ripped the guts out of the animal.

Both shuddered, were motionless. Aramaios had the flashing thought that perhaps just steel was enough to kill these creatures, whatever they were.

But still, around him, flames built and the ground shook.

Aramaios found his bow, an arrow, and aimed.

For one second, his eyes found the pack's leader, saw mad yellow eyes. His bowstring twanged, and the shaft took the wolf in its open mouth, spitting its skull.

Flame and black smoke gouted where Leah's body lay, and blast rocked the square.

Aramaios stumbled, was knocked back against a wall, slid down it, stunned.

He came back to his senses, saw the wolves around him, holding him embayed, but in shock at the death of their leaders. He shouted, and they fell back, and Aramaios turned and ran, hard.

There was a baying from behind, but the flames were all around him, sheltering him, and the pack's roar was dying.

He came on the tavern, ducked inside, pushed the door closed, and dragged the bar across it.

Something slammed against the door, again, and again. But the block held.

The horses and the mule were milling about the floor, panicked. Aramaios knew better than to try to sooth them, to get near their smashing hooves.

Then the wolf-hovels were gone, and the flames went out as abruptly as a candle is snuffed, and there was silence.

He looked out the window, and saw the familiar ruins of the night again.

The animals eventually quieted, and Aramaios fed them again.

At dawn, a gray, misty beginning, he went out, into the streets.

He saw no wolves about, dead or alive.

Aramaios made his way to the main square.

In its center, was Leah's body, unscarred.

He found four arrows lying nearby.

There was nothing else, no bodies of wolves or men to be seen. But there was blood on the arrowheads.

He saw, in the square's center, a yawning passage, leading down.

Down there might be the riches Leah had spoken of. Or not.

He wondered what Leah had sought, and if it was in fact at the bottom of those stairs.

He considered, while he collected wood for a funeral pyre, lit it.

He wished he knew some of the prayers of Leah's people, to send her soul, if there was such a thing, on its journey.

But he knew none, and had forgotten, if he'd ever known, the prayers of his own people for their abandoned god.

Aramaios decided he would not go down those stairs into the bunker, went back to the tavern, saddled up, and started west.

He still had no idea why the wolves hadn't torn him.

Aramaios wondered if his silvered arrows had killed those demons who were men, then wolves, had given them the real death, or if they'd come back for their strange remembrance of the past next spring.

Not that he would ever to return to Byrl and see.

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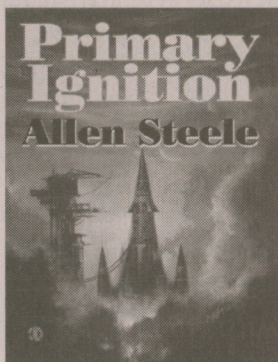
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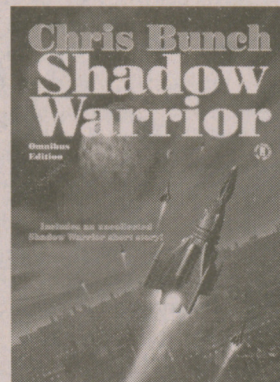
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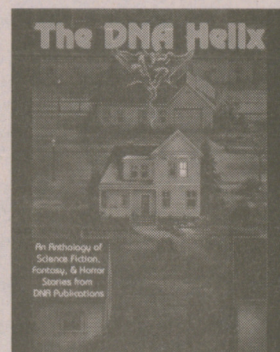
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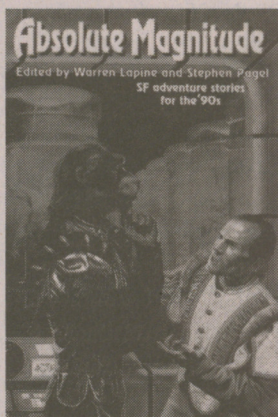
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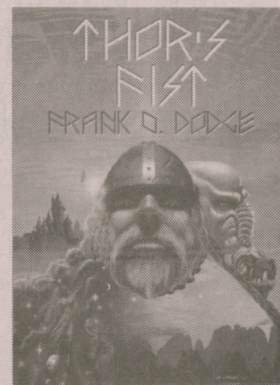
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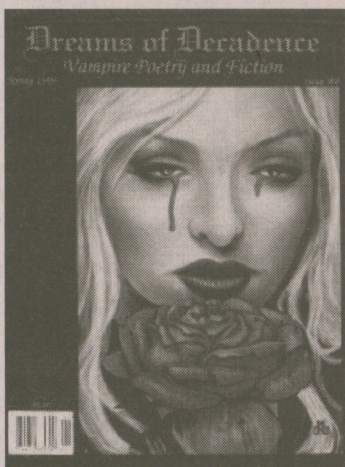
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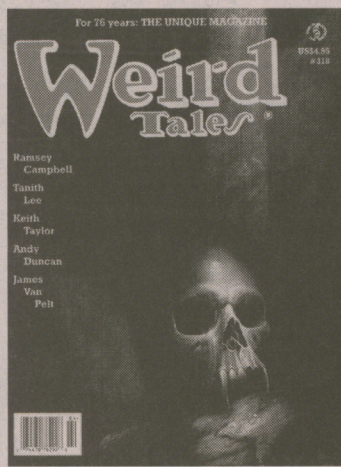
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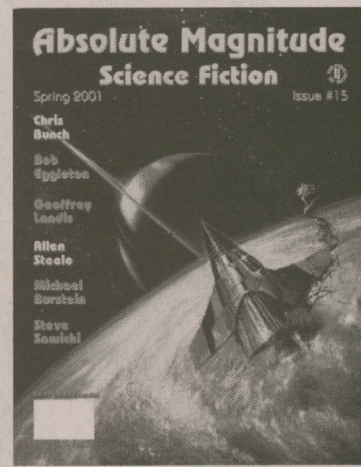
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Stored Dreams

by Mark Fewell

I had never seen the place, though I drove the stretch of road it was on every day, going to my job in the candy factory, packaging chocolate bars. I had been in this nowhere job so long I practically ran the company. Not that it mattered with my wife leaving, and my two sons... I'm not sure what they thought of me; we hadn't talked in years, even though we lived together.

A huge wooden sign announced the presence of the place. BOOKSTORE OF DREAMS, it read in red letters. I had intended to drive past it, possibly checking it out on my way back from work. Somehow the shop drew me in; I didn't care that I would be late for work, even though I knew the place had to be closed at this early hour.

I climbed out of the car and headed for the door of what looked to be a deserted two-story farmhouse. No lights were on, but I saw a red-and-white OPEN sign in one of the windows to the right of the door.

I jogged up to the door and reached for the knob. The wind started to blow my hair in front of my face and cut through my skin. The door didn't want to open. I was about to give up on the place when the knob turned; I stepped inside away from the breeze. "Hello. Is anybody here?" Nobody answered. I didn't see anybody either, or any place where one would pay for his purchases. All I saw were shelves upon towering shelves filled with books. They reached all the way to the ceiling, twenty feet above my head. I moved farther inside to get a closer look at my surroundings. I studied the labels at the end of the shelves. DREAMS OF YOUTH. DREAMS OF OLD AGE. DREAMS OF SUCCESS. DREAMS OF ROMANCE.

Interesting. I decided that since I was here, and already late for work, I might as well look around. I headed for the row of books labeled DREAMS OF YOUTH, thinking that I would find one of the books I had read as a child. I randomly pulled one from the shelf and looked at the title, *WANTING TO BE A FIREMAN*.

I cracked open the cover and began to read. Somehow the plot seemed familiar, though I couldn't remember reading the book. It was all about a five-year-old boy who wanted to grow up to be a fireman.

"That's a very popular dream when one's that age."

I turned around to see who had spoken to me.

The man stood a fraction over five feet, had short gray hair, and wire-rimmed glasses. "Boys do seem to be fascinated by fire at the age. It's not surprising you have regrets, never having reached that dream."

"What are you talking about?" I put the book back on the shelf.

"Your dreams, of course. What else would I be talking about?"

"These aren't my dreams."

"But they are. You're my first customer so far today so they have to be your dreams, nobody else's. Though I'm sure other customers will be here soon. Go ahead and feel free to browse. I'll be back if you need anything, Jonathon."

I put the fireman book back on the shelf. "How did you know..." I turned around, but the gentleman had vanished.

I hiked my way through the books until I came to the shelf DREAMS OF MARRIAGE. The shelf seemed out of place, being there was only one book in the middle of it while all the surrounding shelves were overflowing.

I picked up the heavy book, opening the cover. The title page contained a picture of Maria the way she looked when we first met. I flipped through the pages. All of the pages contained pictures of Maria. Was she the only woman I had ever dreamed of marrying? She must have been.

"She's very beautiful," said a woman's voice.

I turned around and found myself staring into the bluest eyes I had ever seen. "Yes, she is."

"Who is she?"

"She used to be my wife."

"It's good to see her pictures have made it into a book."

"Don't you work here?" I had been told other customers would be showing up soon, but I hadn't heard any doors open.

"I just came in from that door over there." She turned, but there wasn't any door in the direction she pointed. "I take it you don't work here either."

"No, I don't. Maybe we should get out of here. I'm not sure I like it here anymore."

"I'm Jill." She held out her hand and I shook it.

"Jonathon. Which way do you think we should go?"

"That way seems appropriate." I looked. The sign said THIS WAY TO DREAMS OF FREEDOM. Jill and I began to follow it. We stopped when we saw that we had go through DREAMS OF MADNESS. I grabbed Jill's hand. "Come on. They're only books. They can't hurt us."

"Are you sure about that? I was sure about the door I came through, but it disappeared."

"I'm not going to disappear."

"I never said you were."

The two of us stepped into DREAMS OF MADNESS. This area of the store was dirtier than the rest. Layers of dust covered everything. I guess it's a good thing that not too many people dreamed of madness.

"There you are." The bookstore's proprietor appeared in front of us. "I've been looking all over for you." He looked at the shelves around him as if he had suddenly realized where he was. "But you shouldn't be here at all. This section of the store is very dangerous." Just then we heard something fall. "See what I mean."

"Show us the way out. That way you won't have to worry about us getting lost," I said.

"You haven't found your stored dream," said the man.

"What do you mean?" Jill asked.

"Everybody who comes here has lost a dream. One that they never knew they had, and that dream is stored somewhere in the bookstore."

"Who are you?" I asked. "Better yet, what are you?"

"I'm a man. An extraordinary man, but still a man."

We heard another crash, and loud deep voice shout, "Yeaaaaaaaah!"

"What was that?" Jill whispered.

"That was William Benjamin. He's been searching for a dream of madness for a very long time."

"Are you trying to tell me we may not get out of here?" I said.

"You'll get out of here when you both find your dream. If you would follow me, I'm here to lead you out of this section."

A large bearded man jumped in front of us, wielding a knife. "You're all gonna die now. What you think about that?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? No weapons on the premises. Give me the knife, William." The man reached out his hand for the weapon.

William gave it to him, all right. Right into the middle of his chest.

"Oh, my god, he killed him! He--he--he..." Jill started to hyperventilate.

"Let's get out of here before he kills us." I grabbed her hand and dragged us deeper into DREAMS OF MADNESS. I looked around for THIS WAY TO DREAMS OF FREEDOM, but had lost sight of the sign.

Jill stopped moving; I tried to pull her forward, but she wouldn't budge. "We need to get out of here before that madman shows back up."

"What for? We might as well stay here and die."

"I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

I wanted to tell her she had too much to live for, but maybe she didn't. Hell, the only thing I had were two sons who wouldn't speak to me. "Because I can't."

"Do you know where my husband is right now?" she asked.

I looked at her left hand and saw the ring. "I can't say that I do."

"He's with a coworker of his. I'm sure that they're having sex in a cheap motel."

"Children?" I asked.

"No. You?"

"Two sons who don't care for me."

"I guess neither of us has anything to live for."

"I'm not going to let you die," I said. "I'm going to get the two of us out of here."

I grabbed her hand and we ran through DREAMS OF MADNESS towards the section of the bookstore that had shelves labeled DREAMS OF LOVE, DREAMS OF ROMANCE. I stopped when it seemed that we were heading for a dead-end.

We heard William shout, "Where did you go?"

I put my fingers in front of my lip, signaling Jill to remain quiet. It didn't do any good, not because Jill spoke, but two books fell off the shelf.

Jill bent down to pick up the books. She opened one of them up.

"What are you doing?" I said. "We have to get out of here before we're found."

She handed one of them to me. "I believe this belongs to you."

How the hell could she be so calm? Did she really want to die?

The page she held out to me had a picture of her naked. A few extra pounds, but still a nice body. I closed the book and looked at the cover. DREAMS OF JILL. But these weren't Jill's dreams, they were other people's dreams of Jill, presumably mine. I handed the book back to her.

She picked up the other book and held the cover out to me. DREAMS OF JONATHON. "Do you think that these could be the dreams we lost?"

I heard a shelf crash to the floor a couple of rows over. "I want to get out of here alive. Let's go."

Jill didn't let go of the books as we headed back the way we came, looking for a way out. We didn't get far before William blocked our path.

"I think my dream is to kill you," he said.

Jill threw a book at him--I don't know which one--hitting squarely between the eyes. William toppled over backwards, falling onto his butt.

Jill started rushing towards him, but I grabbed her by the sleeve.

"What are you doing? Don't go near him."

"I got to get the book back," she said.

"I'll get it for you." I tiptoed past her toward William. I reached down to pick up the book, and William grabbed my arm, pulling me towards him. "Let me go!"

Jill threw the remaining book, hitting him between the legs. He let me go; he needed his hands to protect his privates. I carried one of the books and Jill the other.

Once we felt we were safely away from William, we both stopped to catch our breath. "Where to now?" I asked.

"I guess we go that way." She pointed up at DREAMS OF DARKNESS.

"Do we want to go that way with a lunatic following us?"

"Do we have a choice?"

I looked around. Going any other way would lead us back to William, and neither of us wanted that.

The lights above us began to flicker on and off. The books in the shelves were covered with cobwebs, and spiders and scorpions crawled all over the covers. Jill moved closer to me. We listened for William, but didn't hear anything. "Do you think we'll get out of here?"

"Of course, we will. It's not that big a place," I said.

We traveled deeper into darkness. "Why do you insist on rescuing me?"

"It's the right thing to do."

"Why do you feel this way?"

I didn't know how to answer her. Fortunately I didn't have to since I saw the sign DREAMS OF HAPPINESS. "That looks like a safe place."

We hurried towards DREAMS OF HAPPINESS. We had almost made it when William cut us off at the pass. "I'll be very happy if I get to kill both of you."

"I've had enough of this. Shouldn't you be chasing your dream of madness? You're not going to find it if you're trying to kill us," said Jill.

William seemed to be confused by this, and shook his head before saying, "Maybe my dream is to kill you. Maybe your living is causing my madness."

"How can that be when we're not in that section of the bookstore?"

"Quit trying to reason with him," I mumbled, "and let's get out of here."

"Maybe you're right. If I have a dream of going mad, I'm looking in the wrong place."

Jill and I moved out of his way as he headed back towards DREAMS OF MADNESS. "If you really feel that you have nothing to live for, you could have let him kill you."

"A woman has the right to change her mind. Besides maybe I do have something to live for now." She held DREAMS OF JONATHON facing me.

"You don't think we belong together just because it says in that book, do you?"

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me on the cheek. "How can you say what's in this book isn't real, or that it isn't meant to be?"

"I can't, but right now I want to find my way out of here. We can talk about our future if and when we find the exit."

"Fine with me. Should we try going that way?" Jill pointed toward DREAMS OF SUCCESS.

It had always seemed to me that success would lead to happiness, not the other way around. Jill and I headed for DREAMS OF SUCCESS.

As we got closer to it, we saw light coming through spaces between the shelves, and headed that way.

We found ourselves in front of what looked to be a checkout counter. We could see the door leading to the outside and freedom. "I guess this is it," said Jill.

"Shouldn't we find a phone and call the police?" I said. "There has been a murder here."

Jill waved her hands at the bookshelves. "Do you think we could lead them back to the body?"

"No, I guess we couldn't."

I started to walk out the door with DREAMS OF JILL cradled in my arm. "Aren't you going to pay for that book before you leave?"

"She's right, you know. You shouldn't leave without paying for your merchandise."

I looked at the bookstore's owner. "We thought he killed you. We thought you were dead."

"Oh, that. William murders me at least once a week. It's nothing to worry about, though I do wish he'd find his dream."

I set the book down, and it flipped open to a page showing Jill and me standing behind the counter holding hands. Jill came over to see what I was looking at. "Maybe that's the way it's suppose to be."

That's when we heard voices in the bookstore. Jill headed towards them.

"You should go after your young lady. She may need help with her first customer."

I took one last look at the man before following Jill.

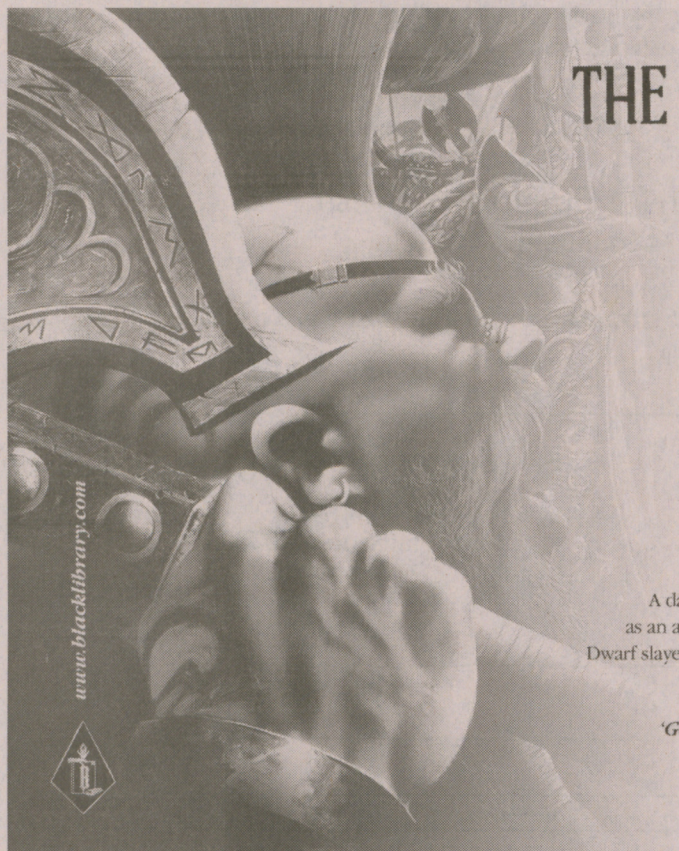
IF THEY COME

Aliens surround us:
Leering from movie screens,
Flaunting flying saucers,
Abducting our citizens,
Taking Elvis to the Moon,
Carving faces on Mars.

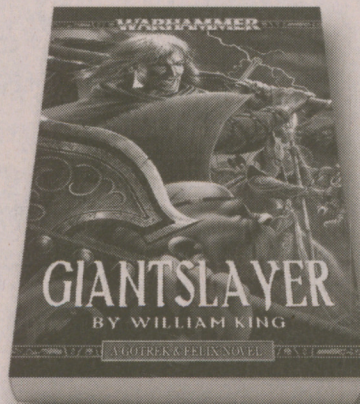
But if one night they appear
On my living-room sofa
And ask me to come with them,
What will I say?
"Sorry, friends coming for
dinner.
Try asking the neighbors."

Or will I, too scared to speak,
Balancing my own desire
Against jobs, responsibilities,
Worry for my family,
Take one look around the room,
An nod my head?

- Mary Soon Lee



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Charlene Babb Knadle hails from Dix Hills, NY. "Running Out" was inspired by a magazine advertisement featuring a parking meter in a company cafeteria. The words indicated that its purpose was to sell a product designed to help companies increase productivity," writes Charlene. Running Out is Charlene's first published short story.

Running Out

by Charlene Babb Knadle

I stop into a checkpoint reluctantly, slipping between people to gain a few places in line. I hate the impersonal crowds and always ask myself why I do things this way, rather than check in online. As I ease closer and closer to the table with the meter in the middle, I study the man whose job it is to question me and see that I am adhering to my schedule. When I have sat down, I see that he is different. Overweight and nearsighted, he registers something like interest, looking at my records. As he questions me, I see in his eyes a glimmer of fellow feeling, a rare glimpse. Most of the workers I deal with are as impassive as the machines that surround us, despite my efforts. I wonder if he feels rebellious, as I do. There will not be time to find out; that I know.

"Ok, Jerold Grant, What time are you due home?" he asks me.

"Nine," I answer. "But a friend is scheduled to visit me then, so I'll leave a little early."

"From where?" he asks.

The question irritates me even though I know it is legitimate. Partly I am irritated because it seems to infringe on my time. It is only seven; I have sat for a mere five minutes, and the yellow edge of the expiration flag is already appearing in the meter's window.

I have park privileges for half an hour," I say. "And then a pass for dinner at the Roundup. It's on my way home." I want to lie, for no other reason than to defy so much control, but experience has shown me it is of no use.

"Flying or walking?" he asks. I actually catch a glimmer of envy, but I can not see what he envies.

"Walking."

He speaks it into his hand held. The meter's yellow flag pops up with a click. He rips of the top sheet of his pad of papers and puts it into the slot on the floor beside him. I have the illusion that he is staring at me, but I know his gaze runs over my ear and behind me, where his next client is preparing to take my place. I take my time getting up, and when I see how hard he is working to avoid looking at me, I settle back into my seat.

"You are using meter delay," he says, looking at the meter in the middle of the table rather than at me. Its yellow flag is quivering.

I do not answer, even knowing I will be billed for this trouble.

He does it, then. He makes eye contact, only for a second, but it is real.

I smile and say, "I'm off."

Eye contact is considered not rude, but painful. It is a reminder of an intimacy in human interaction that belongs to the past, when the pace was slow enough to permit it and there was enough space to accommodate as many as wanted to use it. Most people, including me, would give their right arms to be living in the past.

I slide off the chair and squeeze past elbows and knees to the door, where people are standing to one side voluntarily, happy to see others leave. My profile passes muster with the robotic guard, and I exit.

The outdoor air is crisp and free. Sunlight peeks from the horizon, reluctant to rest; even old Sol is on duty overtime, it seems. I wait for the current liftoff and then cross the heliport pad to the park. It is dotted with trees that subdue the light. Because I've secured clearance, I get through the invisible fence as though it is not there. Faces nearby register envy. I feel sorry for them in the abstract, knowing nothing of what obligates them and deprives them of their leisure. I do not mean to rub it in when I find myself doing cartwheels in the rare open space; it is merely the joy of physical movement that I feel. But the crowd at the perimeter has turned away from me, and that's when I know I have offended them. Only a few very young faces are turned my way. I wave at them. One smiles and waves back. Another is yanked by an adult hand and moves away, staring in a way that would be rude in an adult, but I take to be confusion in a child, one who is receiving double messages.

This reminds me of my own childhood, and I seek the nearest bench, which is beside a small lake on which swans and ducks swim. I do not care that the lake is not natural; very little is, after all. I watch the amber light from the setting sun shimmer on the rippling water and remember the year I was ten. I was already registered—that occurs at birth—but it was time to decide my future, and I was taken by both parents—a rare convergence—to City Hall. All my school reports, both personal and standardized, preceded us, and between them and the observations made during my timed interview with an expert, the great machinery produced a profile. This was intended to decide definitively what my life's work would be, where I would live, what sort of profiled person I would be permitted to marry, and how many children it would be my privilege to have. I turned out to be one in a thousand.

"He's one in a thousand," the mechanical voice said. I can hear it today. Sometimes I hear it in my dreams. After all, I am scheduled to hear it again. The one-in-a-thousands are too evenly distributed over all the interest areas, all the areas of native ability, and all the areas of developmental accomplishment for even the world's powerful technology to be able to distinguish the areas of society's need they might most profitably be made to fill. A one-in-a-thousand has to wait for a second evaluation.

I remember that my mother smiled, but I was not happy. Nor was my father. I wailed, "Why, Mom—why can't I know what I will be when I grow up? It's not fair!" But now, on the verge of my second and final test, at nineteen, I feel differently. How dare the powers that be take charge of my life, my future? What about me? Have I no say?

As I watch the ducks and swans and become lost in the water with them, those insecure feelings of my youth come back to me. I realize that most people are glad to adapt, to have something concrete to latch onto. I ponder the waterfowl. They are not forced, like me, to live in limbo for a while; limbo is their constant state. They have no assignment, other than to be themselves. They do not seem unhappy, not knowing what their future will be. They lack the security of definite plans, yet they exist in what looks like a happy state. I do not think they know the keepers will provide for them what nature does not. But the question occurs to me—why are they here? Are they for my benefit, or for their own? Do they in some way contribute to the workings of the universe? I have not encountered a description of their usefulness. No one has explained the justification for their existence. For that matter, what is the justification for my own—or anyone's?

Suddenly my arms feel prickly, and then my whole body begins to pulse uncomfortably. My skin is on fire. Of course! I have overstayed my time, and the sensors have sought me out. I jump up from the bench and dash towards the exit. Two mechanical Flight-patrols come at me from the treetops as I approach the perimeter. They surround me with their overlapping fields just at the place the invisible fence has also stopped me.

"Your time was up five minutes ago!" one yells at me from its hover position.

"Thirty points!" the other declares.

"Give agreement!" the first demands.

"I agree!" I say with the little breath I have. I stand still while one scans my hands and the other records my eyes. Disagreement is impossible. I will be charged for my overuse of time, but somehow I do not care.

I run rather than walk to the Roundup, and I am almost on time. My slot at the table is still open; no invisible has taken it, but I must eat fast to keep up with the others. I do not quite finish my plate when the centerboard moves through with dessert. I take a piece of apple pie and ignore the fact that it costs extra because of the leftover beef and potatoes still on my plate. Coffee, at least, is free.

At home, I find my friend Brandy sitting on my doorstep. I scan for our entry, apologizing, telling her I regret every minute of lost time with her.

She looks at me askance, and I am amused to think that she might believe I have eyes for any other woman but her. The truth is I rely on her completely; she is much more capable in the world than I. She has known her occupation since age ten; she is to be a podiatrist as soon as she completes her training. This is an occupation garnering high points, and she will want for nothing in her life.

We walk together to the elevator and find ourselves alone in the small cube. It ascends rapidly, and we do not talk but only look into each other's eyes, an act which makes me hungry for her. The strange thought crosses my mind that scanners such as those that guard the park might also feel such a thing—and how could such hunger be satisfied for them?

I laugh at myself and Brandy laughs too, perhaps thinking she knows my thoughts.

We step out of the door before it is completely open, and move rapidly to my quarters, which belong to my parents as well as to me. They are still at their jobs.

Brandy steps into my arms, and for a time I am almost lost to myself.

She is gone before I am satisfied. I am left to reflect that she is right when she tells me, as she frequently does, that I am never satisfied. "You are one whom life will never satisfy," she sometimes says. I do not take this as ominous because it is she who says it.

But on my way to be retested, a few days later, I am bothered by her comment. What if it is so? What if I am still not found to

be well suited for something I can love to do? I want more than anything to belong, in some way, to the life I live.

This time the testing is grueling. I am handed from tester to tester, each of whom is armed with my previous profiles and individual commentaries. A large array of robotics and digital electronics is in evidence, and I can tell there is more which cannot be seen. I am impressed.

"It is important to be entirely honest," the intake tester says—as if I could be anything else, with the polyplot program registering the veracity of my answers.

The testers take turns sitting opposite me at the table. One of them is the scheduler I'd seen most recently, the fat official at the site near the park. This time it is the testers who must adhere to the meter, not I.

When they are finished—a dozen or so testers, total—I am allowed to indulge myself at a snack room, which includes lounge chairs and couches. I drink some juice and then lie down. In the meantime, I know, the machines and personnel are deliberating together over my fate. It is not a time to be calm, and I cannot truly rest.

Finally I go back to the testing room, thinking I will wait at the side while they test others. To my surprise, no other citizen is there being tested. The table is empty. The machines are purring, buzzing and clicking. Heads are bowed in small circles that break up and reform differently. Deliberations are intense.

I look around at the machines and wonder which one contains the booth they will put me into for initiation. Brandy and others have described the process to me, where more than fingerprints, iris, and DNA are recorded, to enter each citizen into the great roll of worldwide society—to make us one with the workings of the planet. I am looking forward to it; it has been so long delayed.

I hear the machines taper off and gradually diminish their sound and motion. Finally everything is still. The heads rise and look expectant. Something will happen, but what?

A screen lights up and, simultaneously, paper eases out of a slot. A collective sigh—more like a gasp—emanates from the group of personnel, and they turn and look at me. The fat one I remember wears that expression I saw fleetingly—a look of envy. This time it does not fade, but again I do not understand it.

I look at the screen. I shows a halo of some sort.

The group retrieve the paper and look at it; one after the other, they all shake their heads. Finally they walk towards me.

A dark-haired woman in her nineties—she was a kind questioner—smiles at me. "You are a zero," she says.

The fat man takes a step closer to me. "It happens only rarely," he says. "Maybe one in a million, possibly less often."

He still wears his look of envy, which tells me he would gladly change places with me, but I do not know why. To be a zero....

"In other words," says a mesomorph who looks more suited to carpentry than office work, "the robots cannot recognize you. With no recognizable profile, you are expunged from the records, yet you are given passage."

"You mean I'm—" I say, but I cannot complete it.

"You are an invisible," the dark-haired woman says, confirming my fears.

"Meaning," says the mesomorph, "you're free. You can go anywhere you want, do anything you want to do, take anything you want to take. There are no restrictions."

"But the world registry—" I say feebly.

"You will not be in it," the woman says.

I put both hands on my chest. "But I am here," I say. I want to be in the registry. I want to be part of the world."

"This does not mean you cannot contribute," the woman says. "Help out anywhere you see a need; work wherever you wish to join in. Receive any training you want."

Behind her, I see a look of relief and then a self-satisfied smirk on the face of the fat one. In that instant I am envious, and I see that he knows it. He has lost whatever wish he had to be like me.

The group hold out their hands to shake mine. It is the ending ritual. I am to go, without ever entering the initiation machine. "Congratulations," they say. "Make a good life for yourself."

One of them cups my elbow in his hand and propels me to the door. It is as though I have been pushed off the face of the Earth. Outside, I notice the moon and Venus in proximity, low in the sky. I feel disoriented and for a long time I merely walk. I have no awareness of how long I walk or where I am going. Somehow, I find myself at the perimeter of the park.

No entry to the park is allowed after dark, but I do not care. I walk across the fence area almost welcoming the pain to come. I have almost reached the bench by the lake before I realize there is no pain. Nothing has happened. I turn and look back, wondering if the system has somehow failed, but I see that someone has noticed me and followed, only to be detained and surrounded. He is obviously in pain. Everything is working as usual.

I sit down and look for the ducks and swans. They have gone somewhere for the night and are not there. But moonlight lies in silver streaks on the water, and it is beautiful. I contemplate it for a long while.

When finally I walk home, I almost expect to be stopped at the entry, but I am not. The door swings open even before I am scanned. This happens again at the elevator, and when I reach my floor I decide to try an experiment. I walk down a corridor I normally ignore and stop at an unfamiliar door. It opens. I step away quickly, hoping as it closes that no one has noticed. I try another door, which also opens. I cross the hall and open another door, and another. A voice shouts, "Hey!" but I am gone.

I return to my own wing, my own door. When I enter, my mother says, "Oh, there you are!"

"What's the verdict?" my father asks.

I am too full of questions to give answers. My mind races with vocabulary I do not wish to use. Words such as empty, expunged, zero, and invisible do not seem right. Finally I know how to describe myself, and suddenly I am filled with the joy of what I have only this moment realized. I smile at my father. "I am to be everything," I tell him. "The world is mine. All of it."

"How can that be?" my father asks.

"I am exempt," I say. "I am free to make any choice I wish, forever"

"You are a zero?" my father says, looking confused.

"I am given a halo," I say, "—a wide circle, as wide as the circumference of the Earth. I have all there is. Nothing can stop me."

My mother puts her hand to her mouth. "You are an invisible."

"Yes," I say. "But not to you, not to Brandy, not to anybody. Only to the machines. Only to the robots and the restrictive forces. I am free. There is no schedule for me, no required occupation. All doors open to me. Isn't it wonderful?"

Riddle Poem

I have scavenged energy
 From the heartbeats of alien bivalves
 On ocean worlds which orbit red-dwarf stars
 In distant galaxies beyond the reach of any radio-
 telescope
 made by man—
 Who am I?

ANSWER: I am man's imagination

By Kendall Evans

In Amber

Wings furled, these ancient pests
 made holy and beautiful
 by their captivity,
 wait out the eons. Their cages
 made of stone the color of morning light,
 a trap for those who only meant
 to take a moment's rest
 on branch or rough bark. One foot placed wrong
 and time swallowed them whole,
 leaving only a shell on display.

You made a bauble of death,
 hung it like a gold shadow
 at your throat. Warmed by your skin
 it pulses against the air, and tangled wings
 within flicker and beat as light moves
 across its surface. Every jewel
 has a tale, and this one speaks
 of betrayal, of a haven
 that became a prison, and a marriage
 of the fragile and the eternal
 that preserves what it destroyed.

By Jennifer Crow

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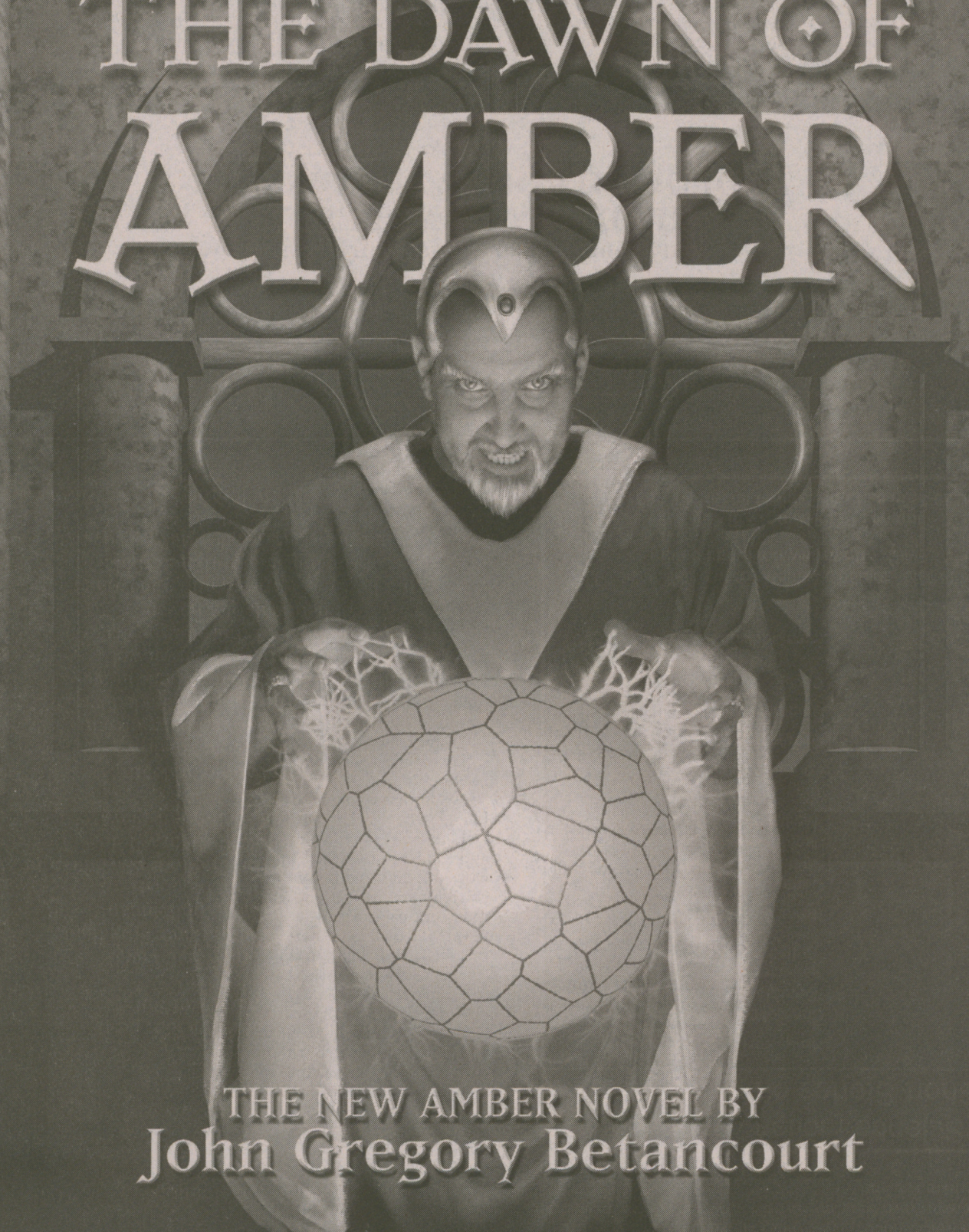
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ROGER ZELAZNY'S
THE DAWN OF
AMBER



THE NEW AMBER NOVEL BY
John Gregory Betancourt

Roger Zelazny's Amber short story Coming To A Cord was featured in Pirate Writings #7 (PW was the title of this magazine prior to Fantastic)—unfortunately Roger never saw the issue as he died two days prior to its release. Since then, PW#7 has become one of the most requested PW back issues. I only have 20 or so left and they have sold for as much as \$75 each. So when I was approached about publishing another Amber story, I became intrigued. The Dawn of Amber is the origin story of the Amber universe. John Bentancourt, an Amber scholar, has been chosen to write a trilogy of books in the Amber universe utilizing Roger's characters and landscape. John Gregory Betancourt is an editor, publisher, and best-selling author of science fiction and fantasy novels and short stories. He has had 36 books published, including the best-selling Star Trek novel, Infection, and three other Star Trek novels; a trilogy of mythic novels starring Hercules; the critically acclaimed Born of Elven Blood; Rememory; Johnny Zed; The Blind Archer; and many others. Roger Zelazny is one of the most heralded fiction writers of all time.

PROLOG TO ROGER ZELAZNY'S THE DAWN OF AMBER by John Gregory Betancourt

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PROLOG

ONE YEAR AGO

I felt the world around me bend and sway like the branches of a willow in a storm. Strange colors turned, misshapen geometries that couldn't possibly exist but somehow did, drifting like snowflakes, patterns within patterns within patterns. My vision brightened then dimmed, repeatedly, and in no perceptible rhythm.

Come . . .

A voice . . . where? I turned, the world kaleidoscoping.

Come to me . . .

The voice pulled me on.

Come to me, sons of Chaos . . .

I followed the sound across a land of ever-changing design and color to a tower made of skulls, some human and some clearly not. I stretched out my hand to touch its walls, but my fingers passed through the bones as though through fog.

Not real.

A vision? A dream?

A nightmare, more like it. The thought came from deep inside.

Come . . . the voice called to me.

I gave in to the sound and drifted forward, through the wall of skulls and into the heart of the tower.

Shadows flickered within. As my eyes began to adjust to the gloom, I could make out a stairway of arm and leg bones that circled the inside wall, climbing into a deeper darkness, descending into murky, pulsating redness.

I drifted down, and the redness resolved into a circle of torches and five men. Four of them wore finely wrought silvered chain mail of a design I had never seen before. They held down the limbs of the fifth man, who lay spread-eagled on a huge sacrificial altar, a single immense slab of gray marble threaded with intricate patterns of gold. His chest and stomach had been opened and his entrails spread across the altar as though some augur had been reading the future from them. When the victim shuddered suddenly, I realized the men were holding him down because he was still alive.

I reached instinctively for my sword. In any other time or place I would have rushed them, decency and honor commanding me to try to rescue this poor victim. *Only he isn't real*, I told myself. This was some sort of vision, some kind of fever dream or premonition.

I forced myself closer, staring at the dying man, trying to see his face. Was it mine? Did this vision predict my fate?

No, I saw with some relief, it wasn't me on the altar. His eyes were a muddy brown; mine are blue as the sea. His hair was lighter than mine, his skin smoother. He was little more than a boy, I thought, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old.

"Who are you?" I whispered, half to myself.

The suffering victim turned his head in my direction.

"Help me," he mouthed. He seemed to be staring straight at me, as though he could see me.

I reached out for him, but my hand passed through his body and into the stone of the altar. Had I become some sort of ghost? A powerless creature forced to watch atrocities unfold around me, with no power to act?

I pulled my hand free. A mild tingling, like the return of blood after circulation had been cut off, shot through my fingers, but nothing else. I couldn't help him.

The young man turned his head away. He shuddered again, but though tears rolled down his cheeks, he did not cry out. Brave and strong, I gave him that.

"Have courage," I whispered.

He did not reply, but his body began to shake and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Again that wild, uncontrollable rage surged inside me. Why was I here? Why was I having this vision? What could it possibly mean?

I looked at the soldiers, searching their faces for an explanation, and suddenly I realized they were not human. Their slitted eyes glowed a faint red behind their helms. Nasals and cheek guards concealed most of their features, but could not hide the faintly iridescent pattern of scales around their mouths and chins. I had never seen their like before. They must have the blood of serpents in their veins, I thought, to kill one so young in such a horrible manner.

The victim on the slab gave one last convulsive shudder, then lay still. They released him.

"Lord Zon," one of the soldiers croaked.

Something stirred in the darker shadows by the far wall. Slitted eyes, much larger than the soldiers' and set a foot apart, opened, then blinked twice. As the creature shifted, torchlight glinted off its metallic-gray scales and the sharp talons of its four spindly limbs.

I felt a sudden chill, a blind panic that made me want to run screaming from this tower. Yet I steeled myself and held firm in my place, facing it, knowing this to be a true enemy—the enemy of all men.

Yes, it said. The creature did not speak, but I heard the rumble of its words clearly in my head.

"He is dead."

Bring me the other son of Dworkin.

A shock of recognition went through me. *Dworkin!* I knew that name. But it had been such a very long time since I had seen him. . . .

Calmly, two of the serpent-soldiers turned and left the tower through a doorway set deep in the shadows. The remaining pair pulled the young man off the slab and dragged him to a small hole in the floor. They rolled him into it, and he plunged into darkness. I did not hear him hit the bottom.

A moment later the other two returned, half carrying, half dragging another man between them, this one older than the one who had just died. He wore the tattered remains of a military uniform, but I did not recognize the design, and his face and hands were bruised and dirty. Still he bucked and fought, kicking and biting, struggling frantically to free himself. He almost threw off the serpent-soldiers several times; he was strong and determined not to be taken easily.

Instinctively, my hand sought my sword again. I wished I had the power to help him. But I remembered how my hand had passed through the body of the last victim and knew I could do nothing but watch.

The two soldiers who had disposed of the young man's body rushed forward, and together the four of them managed to heave the newcomer up onto the altar's slab. All four leaned on his limbs heavily, holding him down despite his valiant efforts to free himself.

The serpent-beast in the shadows stirred, immense scales sliding across the floor's stones. I heard a laugh that chilled my heart.

Son of Dworkin. You will help me now.

"Never!" the young man yelled. "You'll pay for this!" And he followed with a string of obscenities.

Then he raised his head defiantly, staring at the giant serpent, and the flickering torches revealed his features for the first time.

My features. For he had my face.

I could only gape. How was it possible? Was this nightmare some premonition of things to come? Would this Lord Zon capture me, drag me here, too, and read the future from my guts?

Drifting closer, like a phantom, I peered down at the man. I had to get a better look, had to know more about who he was and how he had gotten into this situation. If this really *was* some future vision of myself—

Fortunately neither the soldiers nor their serpent-master seemed aware of me. I might have been some spectral figure wandering through their nightmare world, unseen and unheard, forced to witness atrocities beyond all human suffering but unable to stop them.

And yet, I reminded myself, before his death, the first victim had seen me. How? What did it all mean?

As I continued to study the man with my face, I began to notice small differences between us. Like the boy before him, he had brown eyes to my blue. But despite our eye colors, there were many uncanny similarities between us. The high rise of our cheekbones, the shape of our noses and our ears . . . we could have been brothers.

Or father and son.

My father is already dead, I told myself. This cannot possibly be him. Could it?

No, my father would have been much, much older. This man looked about my own age.

Tell me of Dworkin, the voice in my head commanded. Where is he hiding? Where else has he spread his tainted blood?

I felt my heart leap. *Dworkin again.* What did my former teacher have to do with all of this?

The man on the slab spat at the creature, then declared, "I have never heard of Dworkin. Kill me and be done with it!"

Let him go, I thought desperately, dreading what might come next. Whatever you are, you're looking for me, not him. I'm the one who knows Dworkin!

The serpent-creature didn't hear me. Talons lashed out from the darkness, seized the man, and ripped his chest and stomach open like cheesecloth. I gasped, stunned. The prisoner screamed and kept screaming. With a quick motion, the creature pulled his entrails across the altar's slab like an offering to the dark gods.

Blood sprayed in the air and hung there, forming a cloud, a shifting pattern like the snowflakes of color outside the tower. But this pattern was different, somehow—I could see holes where it was incomplete, jagged, and somehow wrong.

Come to me . . .

The serpent-creature writhed, body undulating before the pattern in the air, working its foul sorcery. Rings of light burst from the floating droplets of blood, spreading out through the walls of the tower, disappearing into the greater void outside.

Come to me, sons of Dworkin . . .

The air over the altar filled with a spinning lacework design, with strange turns and angles. The hanging drops of blood flattened, rippled like waves of the sea, then grew clear. Each one offered a tiny window into what must have been hundreds of different worlds. I stared at them, the breath catching in my throat. Some had red skies; some had the familiar blue one. Oceans raged in one; mountains moved like sheep in a pasture in another; fires rained down from the sky in a third. In still others I saw towns of strangely dressed people, or what might have been people. Still more showed virgin forests, others empty expanses of desert, or grassland, or thundering rivers.

Come to me, princes of Chaos . . .

Like bubbles bursting, the windows began to disappear. The pattern that held them together was breaking apart. I realized the man on the altar slab was nearing death.

Suddenly the last of the tiny windows vanished and beads of red spattered onto the floor, an unholy rain. Coughing, spitting blood, the young man on the altar began to jerk and spasm uncontrollably. Finally, he lay still. It hadn't taken him more than a minute or two to die.

The serpent-creature hissed in anger and disappointment.

Continue searching.

"Yes, Lord Zon," said the soldier who had spoken before.

I moved closer, peering into the shadows, trying to see this Lord Zon more clearly. Somehow, I knew the creature was my enemy. It wanted *me* spread on its slab, my blood sprayed into the air and held up in that strange, flawed pattern that offered glimpses of other worlds.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

Like the first victim, Zon seemed to hear me—or sensed my presence. Eyes glinting like ruby chips, it turned, peering this way and that.

Who is there? it demanded. Speak!

I remained silent, drifting backward, willing myself invisible. Zon's slitted eyes suddenly focused on me. It gave a hiss, and a forked tongue flickering from its lipless, scaled mouth.

You. You are the one.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "What do you want of me?"

Death!

Its talons reached for me—

—and suddenly I sat up in my bed, drenched in sweat, heart pounding like a hammer in my chest, shaking all over but unable to recall what had terrified me so. A dream—a nightmare—some sort of horror . . .

I sucked in a deep breath, held it, listening beyond the canvas walls of my tent to the nighttime sounds of a military camp. Boots on gravel, soft whinnies of horses, the *scritch-scritch-scritch* of whetstones sharpening steel knives and swords, a distant "All's well!" call from sentries on patrol.

Home.

Safe.

Everything seemed normal.

And yet . . . and yet, everything had changed, though I did not know how or why.

Reaching out in the darkness, I wrapped my fingers around the cool, smooth hilt of my sword. Tonight, for no reason I could name, I wanted it close at hand.

(Continued from Table of Contents)

There have been many science fiction stories written about the end of the world and these days I feel like I'm living the pre-history of an apocalyptic SF novel. As I write this the U.S. is on the brink of war with Iraq, N. Korea is firing missiles into the sea, the French are being French and once again the American

people are poised to sacrifice life and money to protect people who would shoot us dead if they had the opportunity. On the subject of war I am somewhat conflicted, being affected by living fifty miles from the large crater in Manhattan and the basic principle of human existence that killing innocent people as retribution for the killing of innocent people doesn't seem right somehow.

John McCain, senator from Arizona, a politician embraced by both sides of the isle, wrote in the *New York Times*, "These critics [of war] also object because our weapons do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. Did the much less discriminating bombs dropped on Berlin and Tokyo in World War II make that conflict unjust? Despite advances in our weaponry intended to minimize the loss of innocent life, some civilian casualties are inevitable. But far fewer will perish than in past wars. Far fewer will perish than are killed every year by an Iraqi regime that keeps power through the constant use of lethal violence. Far fewer will perish than might otherwise because American combatants will accept greater risk to their own lives to prevent civilian deaths."

The Canadian Prime Minister, following the 9/11 attacks, made a telling observation. While the U.S. is always the first nation to offer aid and assistance, we, the U.S., do not receive the same courtesy. When the earthquake in CA a few years back did massive damage not one country offered it's support and help. With our economy faltering I would be hard pressed, if I were in President Bush's shoes, to allocate one penny to any foreign program. Yes this is extreme, but war is extreme, 9/11 was extreme.

And just when we thought we had been hit from everywhere possible, mankind's greatest achievement, the space shuttle, disintegrates on reentry leaving Americans asking what will be next. I awoke that Saturday morning, like I had on 9/11, to a normal day. As I sat and watched the coverage of the Columbia disaster I could not find sorrow within me. It was gone, used up. The terrorists are winning. They have scared U.S. citizens, caused some to modify their behavior and live in fear...this is terrorism's goal.

When my wife and I considered having children I had a real fear of bringing children into the world. Some of my apprehension was fear of being a parent, but more than that was the feeling that things are going to get much worse on this planet before they get better. We take a step forward, then two steps back. How do we change this? Can we? As I get older I am beginning to doubt our ability as a race to withstand the struggles ahead. These are dark words, but these are dark times.

To me that's why fiction is more important than ever. Regular Fantastic readers know that I have been a big Tolkien fan since childhood (see my pre-view and predictions in **The Lord of the Rings Cometh!** in *Fantastic's* Spring 2001 issue) and were surprised I have not commented on **The Lord of the Rings** films. My first article had high ambitions, but even I underestimated the media hype and success. So when the Fall issue went to press, I decided the column was not needed.

As I predicted, **The LOTR** films have eclipsed **Star Wars**. Myself, **Star Wars** is my film preference. I know how **The Return of the King** is going to end...I didn't know how **Star Wars** was going to end. My basement wall is lined with movie posters, the top ten films of all time, as per my bean. **The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring** is number uno.

"Then why is **LOTR** first if you like **Star Wars** better?" asked a friend.

"Because, in most cases, the films were selected for cinematic greatness as well as literary prowess," I answered. And cinematically and literally, **LOTR** rules all.

Peter has created two films that leave the audience almost as desperate and begging for the end of the story as when you read the books. I feel the films do justice to Tolkien's vision, maintained the basic story line and suspended disbelief. The very first scenes in *Hobbiton* are believable, visually and literally. I enjoyed the theatrical release cut beginning more than the extended version, but all the rest goes to the extended version. Suspend disbelief, that was the key and Peter pulled it off with grace, talent and a commitment to J.R.R. Tolkien's vision—not some bonehead Hollywood film executives.

Going into the December 2003 release of **The Return of the King**, Peter Jackson finds himself in the unique position of being a favorite to win Oscars for Best Film and Best Director for **The Return of the King**...long before the film even comes out. I predict he wins both, unless some totally breakaway film beats him. A film so good it tops **The Godfather**, **Raiders of the Lost Ark** and **Animal House**. Jackson saved the ending of **The Two Towers** for the beginning of the third installment, leaving a roller coaster ride to the finish. As was predicted, Peter has not adhered to the breaks of the books. While **Fellowship** followed the book break exactly, **Towers** totally disregards it. For the theatrical cut of **The Return of the King** to stay under three hours we are looking at huge cuts in plot and characterization. Let's see if Peter can hold it together at the finish. There are many scenes that beg cutting, but can not be cut. The climax of **LOTR** occurs with 100 pages left in the main text. But things aren't truly wrapped-up until the very last page. Peter, good luck.

Samantha, my daughter, has been a pleasure to watch grow the last ten months and I look forward to meeting the woman she will become. It's scary to see, even at her young age, that she has my impatience and abruptness. But I also see how she is quick to laugh and stare in wonder. It is my hope that some day she will look upon my writings with a smile and that they will provide inspiration for her. For I find, already, that I am not going to be able to protect her from the world, so I do not intend to try. While it will hurt me greatly to see her fall, I will let her fall. Thus the greater the satisfaction when she picks herself up. Thank you to everyone for the kind e-mails and notes about her birth. It is a good feeling to know that supporters of this magazine are also supporters of me.

Plug time: I would like to announce the release of my new book, **The Second Coming: The Best of Pirate Writings Vol. II** will be released this July from Padwolf books. Padwolf is accepting pre-orders at their website (Padwolf.com) or you can order through your local bookstore or via Amazon.com or Barnes&Noble.com. I am proud of the collection and am happy to say that Padwolf will be selling Vol. I with Vol. II at a greatly discounted rate. Those of you reading this who are new to the magazine should check-out the books. They contain some great stories that I'm sure the readers of this magazine will enjoy.

I would like to thank Warran Lapine again for his efforts on this magazine. Recently DNA Publications celebrated it's ten year anniversary. **Chronicle**, the professional trade journal of the science fiction industry, celebrated the event with a full cover shot of the DNA magazines which include **Fantastic Stories**. Also included was an article written by Warran detailing the creation and growth of DNA. I am proud to say that Warren mentions me several times and it felt good to finally, after ten years of plugging away, to get a little recognition for my efforts. If you are interested you can read Warran's article on DNAPublications.com.

I don't know in what state the world will be in when I next pen this editorial, but I can only hope that aliens land, take over the world, and impose some orderly rule to the chaos we have created. With that said, read on and enjoy...

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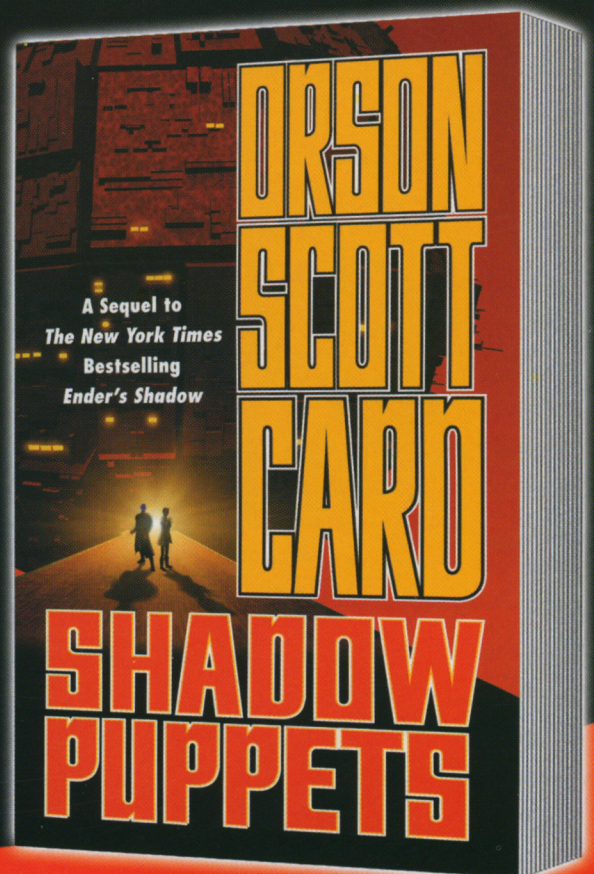


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